



IX

ON the afternoon of the same Sunday, Podler, smoothing down his champagne-coloured silk coat, left his cottage to pay a call on Mrs. Sheepshanks. He was suffering; somehow he managed to be suffering more often than not, thereby resembling in some measure the heroic characters of fiction, Mr. Tietjens or Mr. Sabre, though altogether deficient in their saintly qualities; or at least he thought so. He would have been highly offended if anyone had suggested that he was 'fundamentally virtuous'. 'A dangerous devil, that Podler', should be the acceptable verdict. But no one seemed to be saying so, no opportunity for asserting his manhood presented itself. And so Mr. Podler suffered in silence.

He slid back the wooden grille of the Sheepshanks's vestibule, setting by this action a small bell to demand with glassy tinkling the attention of the servants.

A shuffling, pigeon-toed maid prostrated herself before him expressing doubt as to whether her mistress was receiving, but, bearing his name, vanished noiselessly into the interior penumbra. A silence, as of eternal sleep, ensued, through which could be distantly perceived—from the kitchen, doubtless—the intermittent drip-drop of water, and nearer, the harsh, rattling anxiety of a dragon-fly vainly seeking egress through a paper pane. And then once more the servant appeared, now wreathed in smiles, and invited him to enter, placing at his disposal two shoe-covers of drab

canvas. Ushered into a cool, verandahed room, whither a green twilight strained itself through fleshy creeping plants, he noted how even the split bamboo and wicker furniture of a temporary residence was transformed by the artistic awareness of the Sheepshankses and several pieces of 'obi' brocade, depicting cranes, dragons, tortoises and such wildfowl; they must have money, these people. A blue cat was washing itself with gusto and entire absence of false or other modesty, one hind leg thrown stiffly into the middle air, quite unconcerned with its edible rival, the parrot, which, roosting in its ring on the verandah, retracted one thick membranous eyelid to cast a reproachful glance at the interrupter of its repose.

At this moment, a paper door shot back with an arid whisper, and Alba, wonderfully clad in China-rose netting, a pair of delightfully vulgar diamond drops in her ears, perfumed with something that had an amber and sandal-wood base, advanced smiling and looking perfectly comfortable. The mask of lines and incipient pouches of weariness that had disfigured her that morning was now fallen as cleanly as in the illustrations to advertisements for face massage. Surely, mused Podler, this beautiful woman, so cool and self-possessed, could not be guilty of vocal indecorum in the public street; it was quite unthinkable.

The air trembled with her sweet but rather hoarse contralto. 'So you've come to enquire after the interesting invalid? Well, I'm very glad; I thought you might be shocked; as a matter of fact, I always felt you were a little prudish, if you don't mind my saying so. Do sit down and have some tea'.

'Why did you think I was prudish?' He felt hurt, even though the impression were rectified.

'Well, to be quite plain, because you looked it'. Her

laugh mitigated the sting. 'Last night you looked as though you thought singing in the street was the prerogative of your conceited sex. Now tell me honestly, didn't you?' Repentance was evidently not included in her moral equipment.

'Well, I was a bit surprised, I admit; but not because I'm narrow-minded. . . .'

They were both so anxious to tell each other that they, personally, were broad-minded and Bohemian, that there was a conversational clash at this point, from which Alba got away first.

'Of course things don't shock me that shock other people. I've always lived in Bohemian circles and I'm never surprised at anything. You oughtn't to be either after all your experience out East. You know . . .'

'But I wasn't *shocked*. What I meant to say was . . .'

'You know how different English people become when they've been out here for a time; freer, and so forth'.

'Yes, I know; everyone gets more passionate and, more—how shall I put it?—impatient of restraint out here. You notice it in a ship leaving Europe as soon as it's well into the Red Sea; the atmosphere becomes more and more erotic and that sort of thing; the consumption of alcohol increases daily'. He went hot; what a dam-fool thing to say! He hurried on: 'What I was surprised at was not that a woman should sing in the street—I'm perfectly used to things like that, you know; when I was at Munich we were much wickeder than that—no, I was surprised that it should be you. I always thought you were a very reticent sort of person'.

The tea-tray entered, supporting a very small pot and hot-water jug and an imposing decanter of whisky, flanked by two bottles of Tansan and a jar of ice.

'Well, we understand each other better now. Whisky

or tea?’ Her eye gleamed; there was only one possible answer.

‘Just a little whisky; thanks, that’s plenty’. The decanter flamed prismatically.

‘Ah!’ she breathed, setting down an empty tumbler, ‘I needed that badly. Now tell me, Mr. Podler, what do you think of my husband, as you know him so well—better than I do perhaps’, with a touch of pathos.

This was bringing him up to the scratch with a vengeance.

‘Well, do you want me to be really frank, or not?’

‘Of course; I shouldn’t ask you otherwise; but I’m sure you’re one of those people with insight’.

He tried to look like a person with insight.

‘Well, he’s very enigmatic. One would have thought he was the sort of person who was, well, too unobtrusive to be popular, and yet he’s everywhere and knows everybody in a quiet way. I think mild little men go down more than one suspects’.

‘Yes, they do for a time. But has he any real flavour, do you think?’

‘Flavour, flavour?’ Now he might be witty and retrieve his conversational past. ‘I should say coffee—breakfast coffee. Wholesome and stimulating but not extremely sapid’. That wasn’t so bad.

‘But he lacks romance’, she pursued. ‘What is life without it?’

‘Ah what, indeed. . . .’

He was beginning to learn to expect at any time her sudden ebullitions of soul, abruptly cracking through the surface of her more frequently used brusque manner. Both wondered how far they might reveal those self-committing nudities that peopled, an unquiet crowd, the thoroughfares of their brains. ‘Without romance, life is nothing—nothing’.

Moodily she inspected the toe of her Chinese slipper. Podler feared all sorts of things he dared not define if this tenseness was maintained. It was high time to get snugly back to platitudinous common-sense.

‘ Yet there are plenty of women and men, too, who manage to be happy without it ’. A paradox, if he was not mistaken.

‘ I can’t respect a man when he’s so utterly devoid of inspiration. Why do other people respect him, I wonder ? ’

‘ Oh, his professional judgment’s pretty sound, there’s no doubt about that ’.

‘ Ah, if they only knew ! He lacks more than romance. He’s too cold to love as men should love ; he’s a machine, not a man ’.

Podler couldn’t abide the platitudes of other people. But Alba was fairly launched. Eschewing discretion, she leant dramatically forward, her fore-arms lying along her thighs, her hands clasped.

‘ You may wonder why I drink ; but I’m not happy in my married life. Now you know ’.

Was this the truth or merely an excuse ? On the whole Podler was at first inclined to the latter view, chiefly because he believed that women of Alba’s type were always hypnotising themselves into some belief or other. But in the other scale must be placed Tristram’s curious behaviour yester-night—a concrete fact that could not be glossed over. Then, although he had sworn to himself five minutes ago that he would say nothing compromising, but merely elicit from Alba as much as he could, he was overcome by his eagerness to discover what she knew ; if anything ; her whole demeanour suggested that further confessions might be forthcoming though she was reluctant and required encouragement. He encouraged her in the broad manner.

'Do you know, I wonder whether he's incapable of love as you say?'

'Oh, I know he is. What makes you ask?'

'Well', he temporised, 'I'm sure he's got an affectionate nature for one thing'.

'Oh, nonsense; you wouldn't have said what you did just for that, now, would you?'

'Well, no. . . .'

'You know something about him. Go on; tell me quite frankly; you do, don't you?' Her intimate little laugh assisted him. There was no help for it; the cat must issue wholly from the bag.

'Well, I do, if you want to know'.

'Something you saw, or something you heard?'

'Saw, I'm afraid'.

'When?'

'Last night, as a matter of fact. I was at Kurrie-Lewer's party, and when I was in the garden Takamatsu told me to look at something funny. So I— so I looked over into the Miles' garden and saw . . .'

'Oh, him and Lulu together. Pooff! that's nothing, I know *her*'.

Disgusted at having his theory 'squashed' so dogmatically, he strengthened his case with a little local colour.

'I'm certain there was more in it than that—so was Takamatsu: the way he was bending over her, the emotional way he was talking. And then she looked so languid, so mesmerised. Haven't you ever been struck by the way they carry on?'

'No, I haven't. They've been a lot together and she likes him. She's a sport that woman; she likes men very much in the way that she likes dogs'.

'Well, in that case. . . .'

'How silly. Ah well, I don't know what to think. . . .'

Perhaps after all. . . . Anyhow, he hasn't talked emotionally to *me* for donkey's years'.

'I'm afraid you think I'm one of the Totsuka busybodies; but I'm not, honestly. I told you all this because I'm really very interested in you, and feel that there may be some sort of more or less unconscious misunderstanding on both sides which will be adjusted by a little careful analysis of the situation, if you take me. I feel we're good friends enough to discuss things quite openly and so on. Sorry I'm talking like a parson. Of course it's supposed to be the sporting thing 'not to tell'—and I didn't mean to, as a matter of fact, but somehow you forced it out of me. Still, if there is anything between them—well, it looks to me as though he is genuinely capable of love, but that is simply owing to this misunderstanding, whatever it is, that he's lavishing it on the wrong person. I hope you'll look at it in that light and be kind to him instead of reproaching him'.

'Win back the erring husband by patience; the Griselda touch, you mean?'

'Something of the sort, if you like to put it that way'.

'Now, I wonder'. At the moment she wondered simultaneously so many things that she was unable to express even one.

Mr. Podler, though he shrank from talking sentimentally, just as he aimed at a bluff ingenuousness, felt nevertheless that it was likely to go down with her.

He selected a piece of cake with the air of one who has done his duty, quite persuaded that he had.

'No, I won't say a word to him; there isn't enough evidence, anyhow. But thanks very much for telling me'.

Was this *bona fide*, or sarcastic? Did she, after all, number him among the purveyors of scandal? Or did

she find him to be one of those presumptuous cretins who blunder in between man and wife ?

‘ I wish I knew ’, he ventured, ‘ whether you’re really annoyed with me or not. If I felt I’d offended you I should be simply miserable ’.

‘ Oh no, I’m not offended with you ’. This was not wholly satisfactory either ; it might indicate his own significance ; that he was not worth even resentment. He would not have been Podler if he had not put the worst construction on anything in the nature of a dubious statement.

‘ Well then, to show you’re not offended will you come and play tennis with a crowd of us to-morrow as a sign that I’m forgiven ? ’

‘ Tennis ? Rath-er ; you bet your boots I will ’. These unpleasant slang clichés of a past era ! How they jarred on him. ‘ I’ve got a new racket, but I’m rather out of condition—you know why ’.

The droop of her voice reassured him ; they would part on good terms. He ceased even to regret that, as a mission of espionage, the visit had failed. The Miles-Sheepshanks affair was more enigmatic than ever.

‘ Baka ! Yaro ! Chikusho ! ’ * exclaimed the macaw with unusual mildness, coming to from its prolonged trance. In dismay Mr. Podler rose.

‘ On the whole I think I’d better be going ’.

‘ On the whole I think—yes ’. A sphinx-like utterance best interpreted, perhaps, in the good humour of her smile.

‘ Well, I’ll see you to-morrow evening. Kurrie-Lewr and one or two others’ll be there ’.

Looking back on his way down the little paved path, he saw her framed in the crazy wooden porch, continuing to smile good-humouredly, and yet—but it might be his

* Fool ! Boor ! Animal !

pessimistic imagination—with the faintest irony. She was a very puzzling woman, as much so as her husband. By the way, he should be prepared for the shock of meeting him at any moment ; there must be no recoil, no fleeting gaucherie. The encounter took place within a few yards from the spot upon which he had set his mind in order.

