

HE was a little, wizened-up old thing, his face a network of wrinkles. Seventy I put his age at—perhaps more: though in his eyes there still dwelt something of the fire of youth, and the hand that lifted the glass of vermouth to his lips was steady. It was the choice of that drink as an *aperitif* that had started the conversation, for our own countrymen of the class to which he obviously belonged do not, as a rule, indulge in vermouth.

He was French, of course, though for the last twenty years he had lived in London, and save for a few little mannerisms of speech he might have been English. He kept a barber's shop, and every night when business was over he came to the Dubonnet for his glass of vermouth.

Georges Pitou was his name; possibly Monsieur had observed his shop in Wardour Street? I fenced delicately, but the matter was dismissed with a wave of the hand. There were two assistants.

“And Madame”—I put in thoughtlessly.

“No, Monsieur,” he said gravely. “I am not married.”

He signed to the waiter to refill his glass.

"And Monsieur is what? I have not seen you here before."

I broke the news of my trade to him gently.

"Then," he said quickly, "you are here in search of copy?"

"Principally, Monsieur Pitou," I laughed, "I am here in search of a cheap dinner. It is one thing to write, and quite another to be read."

He nodded sympathetically.

"I know, Monsieur; sometimes one works one's very best and yet one is not appreciated. Even in my saloon I have known it to happen."

"Indeed," I murmured politely.

"Yes," he went on after a few moments, "it is an unpleasant thing not to be appreciated. Though good for a man, Monsieur, when he is young. Always there lies in front of him the goal of success, and so he is spurred on. It is when a man is old—when a man who has once been appreciated and made much of begins to lose his hold—it is then that it becomes a terrible thing. You think not, perhaps; you say that he has had his day, and that it is time he made way for someone else. Listen, Monsieur, and I will tell you a story. And you shall write it down, and send it to a magazine. Listen—for I am in the mood this evening."

He lit a cigarette and in the light of the

match his face seemed even more amazingly wrinkled than before.

“Do not imagine, Monsieur,” he began, “that I was always a barber. For twenty years, true, I have cut hair—and twenty years is a long time. So long that sometimes I think that I have cut hair all my life—but that is only when the black dog is about. And then I remember that there is always a bottle of wine and that life is what we make of it ourselves.

“Have you ever heard, Monsieur, of Blom’s Celebrated Circus. It was before your time, I know, and yet I thought everyone must have heard of it. For never was there a circus quite like it. In every corner of France—from Perpignan to Rheims, from the Gironde to the Vosges, Blom’s Circus was a household word. To welcome it villages would hang out their flags, and towns declare a general holiday.

“It was superb, magnificent. There was a giraffe, and a tiger in a cage; there was a pig with five feet and a bearded woman. And, *mon Dieu!* what a woman. Never shall I forget the blow she gave me when I trimmed that beard one day in a manner that was—how do you say it?—lopsided. But I was young, Monsieur: to me it was but a jest until she hit me.”

He sighed reminiscently and indicated his empty glass to the waiter.

“As you will have guessed I, too, was of the circus; I might almost say I was the circus. I can still hear those bursts of laughter, those shouts of applause as Pitou the clown darted into the ring. But it is not of myself that I would speak: merely is it necessary for Monsieur to grasp my position, and to realise that I am well qualified to tell the story by which Monsieur will make his name. For it is the story of Henri Dardot—the conjurer—and of Marie—his wife.

“It is not too much to say that the name of Henri Dardot was almost as well known as that of Pitou the clown. The amazing things he could do—with cards and rabbits and things in a hat. Once I remember there was a slight accident with regard to a top-hat he had borrowed, and in which he had promised to make an omelette. You will understand that he had in reality two top-hats, which he substituted from time to time. Behold then Henri breaking eggs gaily into the second top-hat. The omelette *aux fines herbes*—cooked to a turn—was all ready on its plate waiting to be slipped into the hat he had borrowed. He laughed and jested, and the crowd laughed too. And then suddenly the laughter froze on his lips; his face turned white under his make-up. Inadvertently he had mixed the two hats. And the hat of Monsieur le Maire, instead of containing a delicious omelette on a plate, was half full of raw eggs.



“ A mistake, Monsieur—but the greatest men have made mistakes. And natural, too, at the time. For Henri was in love—in love with the most adorable girl. You have seen the field of waving corn ; you have seen the scarlet poppies peeping out from between the stalks ; you have seen the blue of the southern seas. Even so was the gold of her hair, and the scarlet of her lips, and the wonder of her eyes. I, too, was in love with her—we all were, but we soon saw that Henri was her choice. At the time I thought it strange, for though Henri was a superb conjurer and could juggle with soup plates, such qualifications seemed unnecessary in a husband. After all, in a happy marriage one does not make omelettes in top-hats, and the dinner service reposes on the dresser. Whereas a sunny disposition and a pretty wit, such as is vital to a clown, must be great assets in the home. .

“ However, it became evident that Marie had eyes for none but Henri. With her own handkerchief she wiped the inside of Monsieur le Maire’s hat ; with her own hands she cooked the second omelette with the eggs she had so carefully saved out of the hat and shared it with Henri. And a few days later they were married. .

“ Monsieur is married himself ? When success comes, as it will when he writes this story, he hopes to be ? I see. Well, if I tried to I

can think of no better wish to offer to Monsieur than that his marriage will be as the marriage of Henri and Marie was during the first nine or ten years.

“ It is incredible, but it is the truth. Never for one moment did Marie look at another man ; never for one moment did Henri look at another woman. Monsieur may think now that it is not at all incredible. I can only hope that he will always be of the same opinion. And yet—who knows ? There is happiness in this world too great to last ; even as the happiness of those two. Fate—Nature—call it what you will, is hard and stern. If she sees us too happy, she steps in and cries ‘ Halt ! ’ She keeps a book and she adds things up. And if the total is too big she gets angry. Sometimes you pay in instalments, Monsieur, and sometimes in a lump sum down. And so, though I wish you the happiness of those two during the first years of their married life, I hope at the end that the total will not be too big. Because they paid. *Mon Dieu !* how they paid !

“ There was one child—a boy, and naturally his name also was Henri. And as the years passed by he became the pet of us all. He alone was allowed to pull the beard of the show lady : he alone was allowed to undo the waistcoat buttons of Monsieur Blom himself. Everywhere we went he went with us, and sometimes, as a treat, I would make him up

as a clown and he would pretend that he was the great Georges Pitou. We would watch him capering round the ring turning somersaults, and Marie would laugh and clap her hands and say that he was better than his instructor.

“And then when the boy was about nine years old, there came a day when I found Marie in tears. She was sitting upon an old packing case, and standing by her knee was little Henri. And Henri the big—her husband—was walking up and down blowing his nose and muttering to himself.

“‘It is imbecile, Marie,’ I heard him cry. ‘You do not understand what the good Abbé has offered. Why, name of a name, he will make a gentleman of the boy. An *avocat*, or maybe a doctor. Does he not say that the boy has the bump of much knowledge upon his head?’

“‘But I don’t want him to be a gentleman,’ cried Marie. ‘I want him just as he is—my little boy.’

“And the boy clutched her knees and cried too, for he loved the circus and didn’t want to go away. Was not the dream of the young rascal’s life to be the second Georges Pitou?

“They asked me my opinion, and I—what could I say? It was a ‘big question to decide, Monsieur—the future of little Henri. On the one hand the convent school of the Abbé, where the boy could be educated at no great

cost : on the other the circus with its free and easy life. And for two days I thought it over, while they naturally waited for my advice.

“ ‘ *Mes amis,*’ I said, ‘ it is thus that I see it. Incredible though it may seem to us now, there may come a day when Blom’s Celebrated Circus will no longer draw the public as it does at present. True—you cannot believe me : to you such a thing is inconceivable. And yet the day must come when Henri Dardot can no longer produce omelettes from top-hats. Another will take his place, you say. Perhaps so—perhaps not. But what will happen when I—Georges Pitou—wish to retire ? For no man goes on for ever. What will happen then, *mes amis ?* ’

“ The argument impressed them, M’sieur : for the idea of Blom’s Celebrated Circus without Georges Pitou was frankly absurd.

“ ‘ But that is many years away, M’sieur Pitou,’ said the bearded woman.

“ ‘ Who knows ? ’ I said easily. ‘ I have my eye on a little café not far from Avignon. And when M’sieur Blom sees fit to reward me as I deserve—— But, enough. It is not of myself I would speak. It is of little Henri, and what it is best to do for the boy. What, then, will happen to him if in ten years from now the circus is no more ? Ten years is a long time, and many things may take place. The good Monsieur Blom may be dead : I,

Georges Pitou, may have had an accident—or I may have retired. And if that is so what will the boy do? For what training he has had will be of no use to him if there is no circus.”

“Common sense, M’sieur, you will agree. From every point of view it was better that the boy should go to a good school: from every point of view, that is, save one.”

Monsieur Pitou drained his glass and stared over my shoulder into space. A strange rapt look was in his eyes, and I think he was back again at the council of war where the fate of little Henri was being discussed, with the bearded lady gazing at him with suitable reverence, and Marie holding her son tightly, fiercely, as she realised that opinion was against her.

“Yes, M’sieur, from every point of view save one—his mother’s. What fools we men are—weighing up the points for and against: treating a soul as if it was a mathematical problem. For laws must conform to the soul: not the soul to laws. M’sieur perhaps may regard that as dangerous philosophy: nevertheless it is the truth. And that is why women drive men to the verge of insanity when they argue. For argument is based on law, and women know better than the law. At least they do on some things.

“Marie knew better than the law. I see it

now, though at the time, I didn't. Point by point I showed her the advantages that little Henri would gain by going to school. And when I'd finished, and her husband was nodding in agreement, and Alphonse, who trained the performing fleas and was always losing them—*mon Dieu!* every day, and he slept next to me: when all of us, as I say, had shown Marie clearly and logically that we were right, she just shook her head and whispered, 'You're wrong.' And then the Abbé himself interfered, and he was as big a fool as the rest of us. But he went on a different line, and so he was more successful.

" 'My child,' he said to her, 'are you quite sure you are thinking of the boy and not of yourself?'

" M'sieur, it was a devilish question. Even now I can see the dawning look of terror in those wonderful blue eyes as she stared at him. For she realised she was beaten. With her woman's intuition she knew, at once, that he had penetrated her defences, and that she had lost. For she understood the hopelessness of explaining to men that if she thought of the boy she must be thinking of herself too. You can't divide a good mother and her son and treat them as two beings. A father and his child—yes: but not a mother.

" She walked away, I remember, and as she passed me I caught my breath at the look on

her face. And when she'd gone we talked foolishly together, as is the way with men at such times, of the crops and politics and things that didn't matter, until Alphonse lost another of his cursed fleas, and praise be to God the Abbé went off with it. At least he swore it was on him, and he was searching for it angrily when Marie returned. She went straight up to little Henri, and picked him up, and though thirty-five years have gone by since that day, the picture she made is as clear in my mind as ever. Their two heads were together, and the little chap's arms were round her neck. And for a while she stared at the Abbé in silence, till at length he gave up the search and contented himself with an occasional scratch.

" 'Monsieur l'Abbé,' she said quietly, 'take him. Take him now before I change my mind.'

" 'You have decided well, my daughter,' he answered gravely, and then he muttered maledictions under his breath, for Alphonse never overfed his pets. 'You will not regret it.'

" 'I will come and see him before we leave to-morrow,' said Marie, and I saw her arms tighten round her baby. And then she started to whisper in his ear, and I—I am not ashamed to confess it—I blew my nose with violence. There are moments, M'sieur, when the strongest of us find it difficult to speak.

" Ten minutes later we stood at the door of

the tent watching the little figure trotting gravely along the dusty road at the side of Monsieur l'Abbé. Was he not going to something new, where he would play with other little boys? And is not the world very good when we are nine years old, and a funny man is beside us making sudden darts at various parts of his anatomy? Is not such a performance expressly intended for the purpose of making little boys laugh? And so we watched them till a turn in the road hid them from sight.

" 'He never even waved,' whispered Marie, half to herself. 'He never even turned round once.'

" Ah! Marie, my dear, little boys don't turn round and wave when they are laughing. And little boys should always be laughing. It is the only way to balance the world's tears. They look so intently at the present—and surely an Abbé with a flea is good enough for anyone. It's not the past or the future that matters: they leave uninteresting things like that to the grown-ups. Which is why, perhaps, Marie wiped the tears from her eyes, as she thought of the last nine years, and then turned on us like a tigress.

" 'Oh, you fools!' she stormed. 'You miserable fools!'

" And there was fear as well as anger in her voice as she thought of the years to come."



The wizened-up little man drained his vermouth and lit a cigarette.

“ M’sieur can perhaps picture those years,” he continued after a while. “ From Perpignan to Rheims, from the Gironde to the Vosges, Blom’s Celebrated Circus continued its triumphant career. And once every year we performed at the town where little Henri was at school. Ah! The first of those occasions: it was unforgettable. The excitement, and the laughing, and the kissing that went on! Henri and all his little friends came and sat in the front row, and cheered and talked all through the performance; never did Georges Pitou provoke such amusement. Never did Henri the elder produce his omelette so superbly.

“ ‘ That is my father,’ came the proud voice of little Henri, ‘ and if you’re good he will give you the omelette to eat.’

“ But naturally: who else would have that honour on such a day? And after it was over they all came and stared at the bearded woman, and the fleas of Alphonse, until Marie caught up her boy and carried him away from the others. Was he happy? Were his socks mended? *Parbleu!*—at ten years of age one is always happy, and what is a hole in a sock, more or less?

“ M’sieur—he fidgeted. Out of the corner of my eye—was I not doing one of my tricks for the others?—I could see that his eyes were

fixed on me. He did not want to sit with Marie in a corner and talk of his socks: he wanted to show the others that he could jump through a hoop. And Marie wished for nothing but that he should sit on her knee with his arms round her neck, and pretend that he was her baby again.

"It was the Abbé himself who came to fetch them, and he said nothing but good of little Henri. His father was delighted, and Monsieur Blom himself presented the boy with a silver franc.

"'He will make his name, that boy,' said Henri to me that night. 'Truly we did wisely in giving him his chance.'

"And Marie, who was sewing, said nothing, though we didn't notice it at the time. She knew, M'sieur—she knew even then: women are like that. And there was nothing she could do: the matter was out of her hands.

"It came little by little—almost imperceptibly at first, the—how do you say it?—the crack in the violin. And with it there came another thing, which again was almost imperceptible at first—the waning popularity of Blom's Celebrated Circus.

"I think it was little Henri who first put it into words with the brutal frankness of the young. He was twelve then, and for the last two years none of his school friends had turned up to see the circus.

“ ‘ It is so dull, maman,’ he said. ‘ Always you do the same tricks. And one gets bored with seeing the same tricks.’

“ ‘ But there are always new people to see them,’ cried his father. ‘ And an old trick is new to those who have not seen it. What, for example, of the boy—the new boy of whom you wrote—Jean ? He has not seen the tricks. Why did you not bring him ? ’

“ ‘ And little Henri turned red and stammered.

“ ‘ Jean,’ he said, ‘ does not like circuses.’

“ ‘ Ho, ho ! cried his father, ‘ and who is this strange fellow who does not like seeing an omelette produced from a hat ? ’

“ ‘ He is the son of the Comte d’Albuisse,’ answered the boy.

“ ‘ *Mon Dieu !*’ chuckled his father, ‘ but we have swagger friends. Tell him that if he should come to-night, I will show him a new and wonderful card trick.’

“ ‘ And the boy turned redder than ever.

“ ‘ He does not know that I am here, papa,’ he muttered. ‘ And anyway, he would not be allowed to come to-night : Monsieur le Comte d’Albuisse is very particular. He fears the—the measles for Jean.’

“ ‘ And that is why you have kept silent,’ cried his father. ‘ Good boy. Otherwise the little Jean would be jealous, *n’est-ce-pas ?* ’

“ ‘ Yes—he would be jealous,’ repeated the boy.

“ ‘Considerate, you see,’ cried his father when he had gone. ‘A good trait which I am well pleased with. *Mais, mon Dieu*, Marie—you are crying. Was there ever such a woman? What is the matter?’

“ ‘Nothing, Henri, that matters,’ she said quietly, but to me, later, she told the truth.

“ ‘It is not the measles, Georges,’ she said sadly, ‘that has kept him away. It is that my little Henri is ashamed of us. He does not want his friends to know that his parents are in a circus.’

“ And though I told her that she was wrong, I knew that she was right. And I realised that it was what she had feared and dreaded all the time, and now it had come. To her husband she said nothing, and she made me promise that I, too, would keep silence.

“ ‘It is done now, Georges,’ she said. ‘My little boy has been taken away from me, and now we can only hinder him. But I wonder if he’s really any happier than he was when he was here with us in the circus.’

“ ‘He had to have his chance, Marie,’ I answered. ‘And look how well he is doing.’

She nodded her head a little wearily, and went on with her sewing.

“ ‘Georges,’ she said, ‘there was a time many years ago when I used to dream of the future when we had left the circus. Henri and I would have saved a little money—enough to

buy a cottage somewhere and grow vegetables, and keep some hens and a pig. And in the next cottage would have been little Henri and his wife and babies. And we would have been all together—and so happy. But now—what is going to happen? He would not be happy in a cottage, and the money that we might be saving goes in his schooling and his clothes. He must be dressed better there than if he was still with us here, and it is terrible how much it costs. And what is going to be the end of it all, Georges? If only I could be sure he was going to be happy. Nothing else would matter at all then.'

"That was all she seemed to think about, M'sieur: was her boy going to be happy? Her own dreams had vanished; she was trying to find others to replace them. Sometimes when I painted for her pictures of her boy as a great man—as a deputy, nay, as the President himself—her eyes would sparkle and she would nod her head and laugh. And then the joy would fade from her face, and the life die out, until I grew almost angry with her. But she knew, M'sieur; she knew.

"It was when the boy was eighteen that the crisis came. For a long time we had seen it coming, but, as is the way with true artistes, we had hoped against hope. Business was going from bad to worse, and Monsieur Blom grew more worried every day. No longer did

the people flock to see us: in fact there were performances when the only spectators were people who had been given their seats free. And the most worried of all of us were Henri Dardot and Marie. The boy's expenses were increasing, and whereas the rest of us had saved a little, they had saved nothing at all. In fact, they were in debt. They had struggled and struggled to make both ends meet, but you cannot get a quart out of a pint pot. And now the last premium of their insurance was due, for when the boy had gone to school they had insured their lives so that in case anything happened to them his education should not be interfered with.

“And then came the final blow. Never shall I forget that afternoon to my dying day—the afternoon that Monsieur Blom called us all together to tell us the news. We had known things were bad, but we had not realised that they were as bad as they were. A man was with him, a nasty-looking man smoking a large cigar. He had on a fur coat, and Monsieur Blom seemed very much afraid of him.

“‘*Mes enfants,*’ he said, and his voice was trembling, ‘we are in a bad way. For twenty-five years we have been together all over France, and now——’

“‘The show is broke,’ put in the man with the cigar. ‘Cut the cackle, Blom. It’s not to be wondered at. It’s rotten. I watched it

last night. It's as dull as ditchwater. You're doing the same futile tricks that you did ten years ago. Why, I saw the conjurer—what's his name, Dardot—do that fool stunt with an omelette when I was a boy.'

Henri Dardot's lips trembled, and Marie put her hand on his arm.

" 'It wants freshening up,' went on the man. 'And if I'm to take over the goodwill in exchange for the money you owe me, all these people will have to go. This show as it stands at present is enough to make a deaf mute sob like a child.'

" ' *Mon Dieu!* M'sieur—it was terrible! We knew, as I said, that things were bad, but this news overwhelmed us. Go—be sacked after twenty-five years! What was to become of us? Above all—what was to become of Henri Dardot and Marie? We, as I told you, had saved something: they had nothing at all.

" 'I saw them after we had left Monsieur Blom sitting together in a dark corner, and this time it was he who was crying, whilst she had her arms round his neck as in the days when they first married.

" 'My dear,' she said tenderly, 'we shall manage: somehow we shall manage.'

" 'It is little Henri,' he sobbed. 'For how are we to send him to the *avocat's* office, if we are turned away?'

“ Then he got up and dashed away his tears : evidently a great idea had come to him.

“ ‘ I will learn new tricks,’ he cried magnificently. ‘ Now, this minute—I will think out something fresh and original.’

“ And Marie clapped her hands together.

“ ‘ I will go and tell that pig with a cigar,’ she cried, ‘ that you are perfecting a new wonder.’

“ ‘ Then he will not sack us. Though I wish we had the money for the insurance.’

“ Monsieur—had I any alternative? You who are an artist will know how a paltry trifle like that will prevent a man from giving of his best. He is worried: he cannot concentrate. Assuredly we would show this pig in the fur coat what we could do: I myself had already sketched out some new turns. And Henri Dardot also.

“ ‘ *Mes amis*,’ I cried. ‘ Do not worry about that insurance. Are we not friends, and what is mine is thine. I will pay it.’

“ We embraced, M’sieur; I would brook no refusal. And then we concentrated on our new tricks. The accursed man with the cigar was persuaded at length into giving us all a week’s further trial: principally, as he said, because it would take him a week to replace us. And for three days Henri Dardot thought and thought, whilst we all tried to help him. But it was hard: for undoubtedly his hand had lost its cunning.



“ And then when we were almost in despair there came the great idea. M'sieur, it was a masterpiece: it was the idea of genius. At once we knew that it would make the name of Henri Dardot famous throughout Europe, and that any thought of their being sacked was now gone. It would be the making of the circus, and in my joy and excitement I told the pigdog who smoked cigars as much. And he laughed.

“ ‘ We'll see,’ he said. ‘ Anyway, it couldn't be worse than their present show.’

“ For two more days we worked out the trick, and assuredly it was a creation of genius. At least so it seemed to us. I will not weary you, M'sieur, with the details of it: enough to say that at the great culminating moment a box which the audience thought to be empty was opened and revealed Marie dressed in her most beautiful clothes standing in a blaze of light. It was done by electricity: little bulbs were sewn into her frock and into her hair, and the good-God alone knows how much Henri had had to pay the local electrician to do it. I know he had obtained his week's salary in advance, and there was nothing of it left. But what did it matter: success and fame were his at last.

“ ‘ It is true, Georges,’ he said to me; ‘ that man is correct, I have been lazy. I should have used my great skill before to perfect

other masterpieces. Then we should not be in the position we are. But there is still time : this is but the first of many by which we will save Monsieur Blom.' "

The wizened-up little man paused and lit another cigarette.

" The circus was fuller that evening, M'sieur," he went on after a while. " Almost as it had been in days gone by. And we performed superbly. Were we not all worked up at the thought of Henri Dardot's masterpiece that was to come ? And at length the moment arrived. I stood, M'sieur, in the wings and I trembled with excitement. At my side was the accursed one with the cigar, and over and over again I said to him : ' Now you will see, my friend—see and understand the genius whom you thought to sack.' And he only smiled, and dug his hands deeper in the pockets of his coat.

" *Mon Dieu !* M'sieur, even now I can hardly bear to think of the next few minutes. For it failed : it was a ghastly, miserable failure. Everything went wrong. Marie was not in the box at the right moment ; the fool of an electrician had bungled with the lights. And, what was worse, I realised that even if it had come off as Henri intended, it was not a masterpiece at all. It had all seemed so different when we planned and rehearsed it : now it was just a silly stupid thing.

" The audience giggled and somebody hissed,

and I dashed on to try and save the situation. I passed Henri and his face was grey, whilst Marie was sobbing under her breath. To have one's most magnificent hopes dashed to the ground is a terrible thing, M'sieur. And they had built so much on it.

"I darted off again as the next turn started, to find them both talking to the man with the cigar.

" 'If possible, Dardot,' he was saying, 'your show this evening is more utterly futile than when you produce that damned omelette out of a hat.'

" 'But, M'sieur,' stammered Henri desperately, 'it went wrong. 'To-morrow night——'

" 'There will be no to-morrow night,' answered the other. 'You're sacked now.'

"And Henri gave a little gasping cry as if he had been struck in the face. They were standing side by side, he and Marie, and for a moment or two they clung together like children: then Marie with a sudden strange look on her face stepped forward.

" 'You engaged us for a week, M'sieur,' she said quietly. 'To-morrow is the last night. Give us that one chance.'

"For a few seconds he looked at her—did the man with the cigar. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

" 'All right,' he said gruffly. 'But I warn you that your show is no good. And I'm not going to take you on again.'

“ To Henri it was a reprieve : the next night all would be well. He slaved and worked at his trick all through the following day, and I, though my heart was heavy with misgivings, helped him. Only Marie seemed strangely silent, so much so that I tried to cheer her up. Henri was busy with the electrician, and we were standing alone. She listened to me with a little sad smile on her lips and when I'd finished she laid her hand on my arm.

“ ‘ Dear Georges,’ she said, ‘ it's no good, and you know it. The trick is a failure. We're too old, Henri and I, for new things. To-night is the last night, *mon ami*,’ and she seemed to be looking at something I couldn't see.

“ ‘ Funny how the shadows play tricks, Georges,’ she went on. ‘ I thought I saw little Henri playing with his hoop over in that corner, as he used to—years ago.’

“ ‘ Marie,’ I cried, and I was almost in tears, ‘ what are you going to do when you go ? For you must have half of my money. I insist.’

“ And then, M'sieur, she kissed me on the lips for the first and last time.”

He paused—that wizened-up little man—and there was such a wonderful light in his eyes that I understood why he was not married.

“ It came at last,” he went on gravely, “ that final performance. And Henri was trembling like a child, whilst I was no better. Only Marie was calm, with the same strange, inscrutable

look in her lovely blue eyes that had been there all the day. You see, she knew, M'sieur: all along she had known. I can't tell you how it happened—it was all so quick. The electrician swore it was no fault of his: maybe he was right. Maybe, on the other hand, it was an accident, and the fool was to blame. For suddenly without warning, Marie—my beautiful Marie—was just a sheet of flame, and Henri's agonised cry rang through the tent. We darted to her, whilst the audience screamed in terror, but it was too late. We could do nothing; her flimsy dress had blazed too fiercely. The flames, it is true, were out, but they had done their deed.

"She never whimpered, nor cried, though she must have been in agony. Only once did she speak, and then she just whispered: 'Lift me up, my husband.'

"And Henri, who was sobbing pitifully, lifted her up. I was watching her, M'sieur, through my tears and her poor glazing eyes turned to the corner of the tent which had been little Henri's playground. For a while she stared across at it and a faint smile crossed her lips. Then she died.

"You see, M'sieur," said the wizened-up little man gravely, "now that the premium was met the insurance money would be paid. And that was enough for her two Henris—the big and the little."

And a moment later I was alone.