## CHARLES AND CHARLEMAGNE

" What has not fired her bosom or her brain ?
Cæsar and Tall-boy, Charles and Charlemagne ? "

ABOUT a month ago it must be now, since I was sitting in the glassed-in cage at the top of a motor omnibus which had settled down amid an inanimate fleet of similar conveyances. It had sidled itself along and was anchored, apparently for all eternity, against the pavement in Park Lane. Only the gentle purring that pervaded the whole vast machine communicated any hope, announced to the passengers a mechanic conviction that sooner or later this stagnation would thaw, and it would be able again to roar its way along the streets like a red, armoured lion. The present passive state in which we found ourselves was rendered the more irritating because the other side of the road, by the Park railings, was completely unencumbered, and large, gondola-like cars were gliding, vans and omnibuses thundering, along its smooth water-coloured surface. Beyond, over the railings that divided up the green grass into rectangular, coffin-like compartments, I watched the listless afternoon life of the park. The trees looked metallic as the green tin trees of a

toyshop, and under them a few weary individuals rested on green tin seats. One or two crouching, whiskered horsemen, crowned with grey bowler-hats, and conscious enough of their obsoleteness to assume an air of defiant importance, trotted slowly along: and I reflected that in all probability the whole of this traffic block, in which we found ourselves thus frozen, was due to one solitary horse with a van, happily lumbering its way along somewhere in the heart of the City. Now there was a slight jolt: we moved on for a few yards, and then, tantalizingly enough, stopped again. My eye turned from the Park to the buildings which overshadowed it. Huge edifices were being improvised . . . buildings that resembled impregnable cliffs, full of luxurious caves in which the rich middle classes were encouraged to hide themselves before the coming of that Day of Judgment, so often invoked by communist orators nearby at Hyde Park Corner, when with a loud-mouthed bellow of trumpets and running of blood the virtue of the workers would be recognized and rewarded. Sprinkled among these rocks, however, are still a few old-fashioned, bow-fronted houses: and suddenly I found myself looking down into one . . . staring down into the familiar, but now derelict, dining-room of Lady de Montfort's house. Above the window, standing on a gibbet-like framework, two large black and white placards, that resembled in their angles the jutting-out prow of a ship, announced the sale of a 999-years' lease.

The room was, as I had last seen it, decorated as a grotto; but now that it was empty of furniture, now

that dust had formed the thickest possible carpet and the windows were already dim from Time's hands, it was more realistic, seemed a cavern, crumbling and forgotten, from which the sea had receded and withdrawn its life. And I wondered whether her impersonal, lacquered but vivacious ghost—a ghost that would never, one felt certain, be clad in any of the multitudinous styles that had pertained to its lifetime, but would always be robed in the latest creation of the moment in which it materialized—did not sometimes roam among these artificial ruins of her earthly past? And then I thought of a cage built of steel and crystal, borne on the deep currents of a tropic sea, bumping and turning over and over, with a rattling of dry bones midway between air and ocean-bottom, an anonymous yet unique end from an anonymous beginning . . . and meditated how strange it was that a life which belonged essentially to its own day, which was responsible for some of the stir and gaiety, and much of the gossip of those hours, should, soonest of all, sink into oblivion: for that which is the most typical is often the most transitory. Herself, I felt, albeit she had cared little enough for public interest, would have been surprised at so evident a lack of it in so short a space. How strange, again I reflected. The travellers on each omnibus will look down into this empty room, and will consider it a grotesque and useless piece of decoration, nothing more; will entirely miss its significance, its very actual foundation in life. And I recalled the time, not so many months ago, when one glance from a passing omnibus at the

decoration of Lady de Montfort's dining-room (the easiest room in the house to overlook) would reveal to the initiated a whole section of her life and the progress of a passionate and inquiring physical love.

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Almost the first thing I can remember is one of my parents remarking to the other how astonishingly young Lady de Montfort looked. And if it was astonishing in 1896, it must have been very much more so in 1930. For though the art of looking young has in the meantime become a vocation like conjuring, and by that degree less rare, nevertheless when I saw her for the last time, it was clear that she remained at the top of a difficult, and even upon occasion dangerous, profession. In a sense, however, it still remains in the hands of the amateur, for though every suburb now has its beauty-parlour, yet only the rich can afford to indulge in the very real physical torture that beauty-worship imposes on its devotees.

Lady de Montfort, then, had been one of the pioneers of the Peter Pan movement; for that play, I fancy, popularized the notion that there was something glorious in never growing up. Peter Pan in fact was the child-father of face-lifting. The ethical side of the wish to remain young out of season is not easy to grasp, any more than is the practical. Alas, life must end in the same way for all. The full stop closes every sentence, whatever the joy or agony of its meaning. The anonymous death, the death of the rich, well-preserved nomad in a richly-appointed hotel, for example, has the same pathos as that of a wrinkled

old woman of the same age in some pauper institution, and more, it seems to me, than the death of an old, rheumatic crone in a cottage. Much better is it to pass through the seven allotted stages, much better even to be cut off, as the phrase is, "in the flower of her youth" than in the artificial flower of a deceptive youth. Yet the sums of money spent on this pitiful aim are prodigious, while hints on the subject—(combined with details of free-insurance schemes and lists of the sums paid out, which point to a very regrettable mortality among the registered readers of daily newspapers; a mortality, indeed, so remarkable that it seems almost perilous to subscribe to these journals)—compose much of the Press to-day, so there must be an appeal in it to our natures.

But if Beauty is Truth (which, incidentally, it is not), certainly the results of beauty culture are a lie, and should therefore be recognized as ugly. To all those who can afford the best advice, false youth, when attained, imparts an identical appearance: the same corn-gold hair, the same angular, fashion-plate eyes, raised upward at the corner, the same straight nose and lips carved into a double curve, the same strained mouth, slightly open like the mouth of a Roman Mask of Tragedy, that the knife of the plastic surgeon dictates. They have the same figures, the same hands and finger-nails, more or less the same dresses, and the same impersonal, cosmopolitan accent, with, rising and falling smoothly within it, the concealed sound of an American elevator. They do not look young, except by convention, but, instead, they all look the same age: almost, indeed, the

same person. And of these Adèle de Montfort was not the least.

But let not the reader conclude that Lady de Montfort's character was after a similar standardized pattern. It was not. For notwithstanding that most of the Regiment who adopt the uniform and faith we have described, do so from a quite genuine desire to resemble one another, Lady de Montfort elected it as a deliberate disguise for a very natural, if rather varied, character. We must, then, lift up the mask, and peer for a little underneath, if only to understand the mask's significance.

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Originally, it must be assumed, she had been small and pretty and golden-haired, with a fair, almost pallid skin, behind which roses blushed from time to time, and the tiny hands and feet that are the birthright of every American woman. "Fresh" was the epithet often used to describe her, for in those days a naïve lack of artifice was much admired, and she was without any of the elegance which she ultimately evolved round herself. Somewhere in the early 'eighties this girl had materialized herself out of what was then the misty void of the great American Republic. She did not belong to any of the few families who at that time floated garishly on this dull, nebulous surface: but she was distantly related to various American women, well married in England, and her fortune, which was adequate to the game she meant to play, was all the more respectable for not being unwieldy. But of her parentage and upbringing,

people in England knew nothing, while she speedily contrived to forget more about herself than others had ever known. Outwardly she bore no labels except a slight accent, which only manifested itself in moments of anger or excitement, when suddenly, too, she would fall back into the use of transatlantic idiom: inwardly none except a secret, and, in those days, most rare, lack of them, combined with an adventurous spirit. Indeed her own mind was so free of conventional prejudices that in others they positively attracted her. Thus she set out, like a female Dick Whittington, to seek her destiny: thus, like Venus fair and pale, she had risen from the billows. In fact, if it had not been for the anchor of her independent fortune, she might have passed as that free spirit of the air, an adventuress: and so by nature, and at heart, she was. For all adventuresses are not bold-looking and hard-mouthed. And a quiet adventuress is the one whom the world should fear.

Arrived in London, she sought the protection of her American relatives (who were then much older than she was, though forty years later all of them looked more or less the same age), and under their tutelage made an appearance in the world. They formed at once the guarantee of her character and the guardians of her secret; the almost sordid respectability of her origin. For, though each of these ladies allowed it to be known that in the land of her birth her own "social standing" had been exceptional, there was yet between them all a tacit, undefined agreement that no home secrets should be revealed. Adèle

served her apprenticeship to this guild and learnt much that was of use to her: that, for example, although before marriage it was wise to dress as simply as possible, and look exactly like an English girl, after marriage she could reap the advantage of being an American. For while English women, with a singular obstinacy, persisted in buying their clothes in London, or even in the provinces, she, being of a less insular outlook, could obtain them from any of the great dressmaking houses in Paris: nor would she look *odd* in them. Paris clothes were in the American blood. At the worst, people would say she looked "rather foreign." And the men liked it.

Adèle proved clever and adaptable. She was presented at Court, danced, hunted, played tennis, did all the right things and triumphantly concealed her possession of a sensuous intelligence, modern and acute, if rather apt to swing at random. This was a secret, too, which her preceptors respected. Apart, however, from a quiet but continual attendance at concerts, and a constant but hidden reading of poetry and novels—habits which, in her native country, she would have been forced to parade—her general behaviour undoubtedly entitled her to an honorary place among the English ruling class of that epoch. Yet she did not marry for several years: and when she did, though it was a sound marriage, it was scarcely as brilliant a one as her chaperons had hoped. Like her fortune, it was nevertheless all the more respectable for not being of a sensational order. A title was a title, even if it were only a baronetcy: and it attracted her by its strangeness, would add to life the zest and

romance (until she became used to it) of a perpetual masquerade.

The name of Sir Simon de Montfort sounds almost too good to be true, and, in fact, was so. Old Solomon Mondfeldt, grandfather of the present baronet, had 'crept out of a German ghetto about ten years before the Battle of Waterloo, and, looking round, had very wisely decided to settle in the city of London. There he had established himself as a merchant and banker: more, he helped to found the whole edifice of international finance. For he, and a few friends in other countries, maintained at their own expense a reliable news-service, and whenever they heard of a victory for any country in which they were operating, they first announced a defeat, and then bought up all the shares that would be affected. Subsequently the news of the victory would be made public, the shares would rise, and they would sell out. Peace consolidated their efforts, and now he adhered to the more strictly legitimate side of his business, in which, as his obituary notice proclaimed many years later, "his native shrewdness and foresight, swiftly won him recognition." (It was, perhaps, easier to have foresight then, when there were no possible dangers to foresee.) He was, in fact, a clever, vulgar, grasping, kindly old ruffian, very religious withal; a pillar of the Synagogue, always willing to help his co-religionists—even with large sums of money.

Despite a certain pride in his race—or, at any rate, a loud insistence on it—it was not long before the rough, Saxon syllables of Solomon Mondfeldt had melted into the chivalric enchantment of Simon de

Montfort. Moreover, his eldest son, another Simon, was smuggled somehow or other into Eton without protest; though at that time it was a difficult school for a boy to enter if he did not conform to the nationality or religion of his comrades. Once installed at Eton, he was popular, for, since he was the only little Jew there, his schoolfellows did not recognize the genus, but appreciated that in the understanding of life in some aspects he was their superior. He bought more and better strawberries than they did, and paid less for them: and on them he forcibly fed his friends. How intelligent in reality he was, who can tell? But it is certain that he very quickly seized on the principles of English public-school education, for he openly refused to learn anything, became maniac about cricket, exulted in the correct shibboleths of dress, speech and deportment and adopted ostentatiously the public-school-boy-code-of-honour; which, summed up, encourages bullying, but forbids "sneaking"—thereby assuring the bully of an absolute impunity. And a jolly good code it is, too, if you mean to be a bully.

By this time the family were in possession of a castle in Scotland, and a fine old "place" in the "Shires," with all its furniture, portraits, silver and tapestries intact, and its own chapel. A baronetcy followed. He had married at an advanced age, but even before the old man died the Christmas parties, when the house abounded with bounding young de Montforts, solidly eating their way through the week, were models of what such gatherings should be. And after his death, the young baronet quietly slipped into

the Christian faith. He put up several new armorial windows in the chapel, and it made one almost cry to hear him read the lessons every Sunday. Soon he married into an impoverished aristocratic family, so that his children were well-connected. And, indeed, by the third generation, the conventional, unquestioning stupidity of the children was as genuine as formerly it had been assumed: one symptom of which was that themselves were entirely taken-in by their own faked pedigree, and were even apt. when they talked about a cousin, to say of him, "Oh, of course he has the de Montfort eyes," or, worse, "he has the de Montfort nose." Entire books, connecting them with the ancient de Montforts, were written under the supervision of the elder members of the family, by specialist authors who found in it their living. Innocent outsiders, withal, were beginning to believe. Thus in two generations was built up a feudal house.

When the third Sir Simon, Adèle's husband, succeeded, the elder branch of the family had become, like so many great families, convincingly impoverished. The business had been allowed to pass into the hands of cadets, because they were more interested in it, and so that the Sir Simon of the day should always be free for country pursuits, engaged as he was, would and should be, in shootin', huntin' and fishin'. Our Sir Simon, therefore, spent the greater part of his young bachelordom, either in these sports, or in sitting, as befitted an English sportsman, in the smallest, ugliest room of a large, rather beautiful but very cold house, surrounded by stags' heads, an

imported bison or two, fish in glass cases, fossils, pipes and cigar-boxes: and, in order to keep warm, even in this den, he had to drink a great quantity of port, which gradually undermined his constitution.

Brought into this, for her exotic, environment, Adèle was an undoubted success. Her husband was devoted to her, while her fortune, too, was most welcome: since the prize-pigs and potatoes, the model dairies and cattle-breeding that were incumbent on the head of a historic family, combined with an iniquitous income-tax of a shilling or so in the pound, had made dreadful inroads into the estate. For Sir Simon, Lady de Montfort completed life: and for her, brought up as she had been, it must have been an experience that transcended reality. Nor was it, in any case at first, monotonous: for there were two sides to it. One was a miniature Royal-Family existence, spent in opening bazaars, sales of work and jumble-sales, mouthing at unknown and indistinguishable babies, and in giving or receiving prizes (it seemed to her afterwards that a large part of her early married life had been spent in giving or receiving prizes) for fruit, flowers, potatoes, onions, shorthorns and agriculture generally: while the other unfolded the whole pageant of a barbarous society. There were family parties and shooting parties; there were the "bloodings" and the "rattings" ("No fun like rattin'," Sir Simon used to say), and innumerable other forms of well-meant cruelty to animals, which must have satisfied some primordial female instinct in her; and, best of all, there were the hunt-balls. Even now, reading over the lists

of "those present," in some newspaper of the day, one can comprehend a little the ecstasy into which these festivities threw her. For far more than the Roll of Domesday do they sum up, by the very sound and rhythm of the names, the life of that time, and, even, the queer results of the Norman Conquest: moreover, apart from the odd juxtaposition of names essentially matter-of-fact with others so unusual as to be romantic, the lilt and rhythm is in itself fascinating, there are unexpected trills, and the vagaries of fortune are reflected in the inexplicable runs on names beginning with the same letter, the long and the short runs, comparable to those unexpected runs on one number or colour that are encountered on the gaming-tables. For example, on Jan. 18, 1888, we read in one of the leading London papers:

"About 350 guests attended the Hunminster Hunt ball, held at the Queen's Hotel, Hunminster, last night. Godefroy's Pink Hungarian Band, of Hunminster, supplied the music.

"In addition to the Master and Lady de Montfort, those present included the Earl and Countess of Hunminster, Viscount Humble, Miss Mowker, Miss Marcia Mowker, F.M. Lord Cummerbund and the Honble. Cycely Cuddle, Miss Moocombe, Miss Malcolm, Miss Mink, Miss Denyse Malpigian, Miss Myrtle Malpigian, Major McCorquodale, Lady Cundle, Miss Coote, Mr. Hartopp Hayter, Miss Hunt, Miss Handle, Mr. Handcock, Mrs. Haviour and Miss B. Haviour, Mrs. Bullamy, Miss Heather Helleborc, Major Colin Coldharbour and Lady Isabel Hamil'on-Hoc'ar.

"The Earl of Dunbobbin, the Honble. Doughty Dullwater, Miss Daphne Diddle, Colonel Haggas, Lady Hootman, Dr. Prettygole, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Plummer, Miss Plummer, Mr. Plymsoll, Captain Pymm, Miss Penelope

Pitt-Pitts, Mr. Percy Pitman, Miss Frolick, Mr. Fumble, Miss Rowena Rowbotham, Miss Donkyn, Miss Dunderhead, Mr. Roger Randcock, Major Minney, Miss Dingle, Mr. Malcolm de Montmorency, Mrs. Slinkworthy, Captain Hercules Slowcoach, Lady Slaunder, Miss Slowcombe, Mr. Sleek, Miss Eager, Mrs. Stanley Stobart, Miss Serpent, Colonel Cooper-Copeland, Sir Joseph Slump, Miss Eileen Shrivel, Major Spiridion and Lady Muriel Portal-Pooter."

And then the rollicking aspect of the festivities captivated Adèle. She loved to watch the huge, thumping dowagers romping round in their bustles, covered from head to foot with jewels like Hindu idols and whirling round in the figures of the Lancers until they seemed to have as many vast, red arms as those deities. She liked to talk, or be silent, with these long-legged and languid men, with their drawling yet clipped talk and military moustaches. Certainly, then, she enjoyed herself at first. And all these people liked her, though, of course, to begin with they had thought the Parisian clothes, which she had now adopted, "quaint." But soon they became accustomed to her, and would remark enthusiastically, "Nobody would ever take her for an American."

So the first years passed . . . and then there were her children, three of them, born within the first seven years of their marriage. In her later period, one was astonished that anything as elemental as child-bearing should ever have formed part of Lady de Montfort's life: but so it was. And there were short visits to London. She had never renounced her Guild, and corresponded regularly with her early preceptors, though seldom asking them to visit her.

But she saw them in London, and this made the atmosphere different for her. She seemed contented enough, they thought: but she never really talked to them, never said anything except what the world expected of her. But in about 1890 a change came.

Being clever, as well as pretty, her ascendancy over her husband was complete. Now, suddenly, she insisted on spending half the year in London. He was in no position to object: she had taken an infinity of trouble with his friends and relatives, while much of the money was her own. But for him the reality was to be worse than the anticipation. His wife for the first time revealed an intense, American interest in the arts notwithstanding that Sir Simon had a wholly British prejudice against artists. The species positively invaded his London house at this period; but it never actually descended to blows. As he said about the matter to his friends, "After all, one must live and let live . . ." and so, when it became too much for him, he would instinctively go back to the country and kill a fish or a bird instead. . . . Alas, there was worse to come. He could not be away from her always. And now there were—musicians in the house! She had always been musical; he had been forced in secret to recognize this—musical in a passive sense. But this was different, this was monstrous; amounted almost, he said, to deception, so little had he suspected it. . . . For all at once she produced a certain, if limited, executant ability; that is to say she installed two pianos, side by side, in the drawing-room, and upon

them she loved to play duets with eminent musicians. This she did well and gracefully. On one piano, however, and, as it were, by herself, she floundered hopelessly and was lost; a dangerous symptom—if her husband had identified it—the symptom of a temperament that in spite of its native, American independence demanded, and relied on, continual masculine assistance. Notwithstanding, at present her behaviour grew no less conventional, her conversation not a whit more individual.

Sir Simon's troubles, if he had known it, were but beginning. Now was the first time she indulged a repressed desire for house-decoration; one which later, as we shall see, became unconsciously entangled with sex-expression, and almost developed into a mania. And innocent as it seems from this distance, her initial attempt annoyed Sir Simon quite as much as any of her subsequent ones. The Louis Quinze salons of the de Montfort mansion in Park Lane were scrapped from top to bottom; and, instead, oak beams squared white ceilings, Morris chintzes enwrapped the chairs and sofas, and a gothic wall-paper supplied a background of dim, golden nebulosity. The two pianos were draped in faded Japanese kimonos, but this could not muffle the thousand minute, clear-throated songs called out from countless blue-and-white china bowls and plates when any note was struck; for the whole room was a-clatter with willow-pattern porcelain. On the top of the wainscoting, even, fragile objects were perilously balanced. Then there were drawings by Simeon Solomon, and, in the place of honour, two large

portraits of the master and mistress of the house, by Godwyn. (Poor de Montfort had particularly objected to sitting for his portrait, but had been forced into it by Adèle.) Lacquer was there too, of the Oriental, not the European variety, and many Oriental screens crept like angular, gigantic caterpillars across the floors. Oscar Wilde sometimes attended the musical parties which Lady de Montfort had now inaugurated, and these screens were the subject of a famous telegram. She had written to him, saying that she had received from the East a consignment of lacquer screens, and hoped he would give her the benefit of his advice as to their arrangement.. In answer, she received a telegram: "Do not arrange them. Let them occur.—Oscar."*

Yet, though her parties became celebrated, the character of the hostess still seemed vague and diaphanous. At what precise age her appearance of youth first called for comment, I am unaware; but at these entertainments, I apprehend, guests were already saying to one another, "How wonderfully young our hostess looks to-night." After a few years, however, these gatherings came to an abrupt end. Sir Simon did not enjoy them, though he talked loudly, and without a moment's pause for breath, throughout every evening of music. But even

* Great letter-writers have been plentiful, but, as far as one can judge, Wilde was the only great telegram-writer that the world has seen as yet. A volume of his collected telegrams would make very good reading. And who, one may wonder, is the master of the long-distance spoken-word, the telephone —short, concise witty?

when there was no music, he felt out of it, and as if they did not want to listen to him. The Wilde scandal occurred, and Sir Simon, who, furthermore, was aware of having sat, as it were, for one of that author's most applauded jokes,* insisted on having the decorations torn down. The house, as he said, must be "decently furnished again."

The change that took place was just as startling in its way as any of those subsequently organized by Adèle. The Godwyn portraits were removed, but preserved in a lumber-room in case they might some day become valuable, and hastily improvised likenesses by Herkomer were substituted. Armchairs in flowery chintzes, little gilded chairs, eighteenth-century footstools which tripped up every visitor who walked into the room, and Dutch, brass chandeliers soon restored the house to its accustomed worthiness; while to add a special touch of incontrovertible respectability, Sir Simon transported from the country several stags' heads and pike and salmon in long, glass-fronted cases, and personally superintended the sprinkling of these about the house. In all this, he was successful. Yet it was the cause of the first quarrel between Lady de Montfort and himself, and it is to be doubted whether she ever forgave him.

At the time, though, he scored a point. Visits to

* One day Sir Simon had led the esthete up to his portrait by Godwyn, and had said to him, "I don't like that: my wife made me sit for it. But you're supposed to know about that sort of thing. What do you think of it?"—And the author had replied, "Sir Simon, it is a speaking likeness . . . but there are occasions when silence is more welcome."

London were few, and Adèle relapsed from a metropolitan into a provincial life. In England, of course, this last is more exclusive, more difficult to enter, more the "right thing": but now it had lost for her its fascination. It must be remembered that by type she was an adventuress. And, having established one method of life so thoroughly and completely, the adventure was over, should be disposed of.

In the few years that were to pass before she was free, something happened to Lady de Montfort. Books no longer lent her their support, and though music retained its purely sensual attraction for her, she lost now the magic key which had enabled her in a moment to enter other worlds. Novels and poetry no longer disclosed enchanted avenues along which she might wander, and, instead, she welcomed romance on a more material plane. Presently, and for the first time in their married life of nearly fifteen years, Sir Simon had cause for jealousy. She was always to be seen in the company of a neighbouring, notoriously unfaithful peer. Sir Simon, with a touching ancestral belief in the word of a Gentile, made his wife sign a paper in which she undertook never to see Lord Dunbobbin again. Why she signed it, I do not know: but she did. Alas, she broke her promise.

Bicycling was now the rage, and strange as it may seem, though there were no motor-cars, people contrived to have serious accidents. Clad, therefore, in those peculiar clothes immortalized by the painter Seurat, those clothes which seem specially designed to bring out the miracle of the bicycle's spider-like feats of balance, for, regarded from the back, the

whole line, from shoulder to wheel, forms an inverted pyramid, Lady de Montfort and her lover would speed down lanes that have never since been so leafy; propel themselves down the centre of these green tunnels at such a prodigious rate, as it seemed, that the little nuzzling winds of the spring would attack the mesh of her green, pointillist veil, and even push her round straw hat to the back of her formalized, fringed head. Such happiness could not endure. A governess-car was the machine planned by the gods for its destruction. The physical damage was not severe, but a lawsuit was threatened. The case would be reported, and Sir Simon must be told. He lost his temper, created a scene: tactics which, for the last year or two, had ever crowned him with success. But this time Lady de Montfort joined battle. At every point, he was defeated. He shouted "Divorce" at her. She replied that he had no evidence, but should her own action, based on his prolonged cruelty, fail, she should be delighted to supply it. But neither of them wished it in reality, for divorce was then, even so short a time ago, a step down into obscurity rather than up into fame. "For the sake of the children," they decided, "it must not be." So, for a year or two longer, the children were forced to know them together and quarrelsome rather than amiable and apart. During these months, though she lived in his house, Adèle behaved as she wished.

With King Edward on the throne, the whole atmosphere had changed, and now the relaxation began to be felt even in these fastnesses of an almost palaeolithic Society. In about 1906 a separation was

arranged, and she took over the Park Lane mansion, while he continued to live in the country. From time to time, after this, they would meet pleasantly and without reproach, each delighted to be independent. nor did either strive to prevent the children from seeing the other parent, but, with good sense, encouraged it. And here, having mentioned the children, we can dispose of them. They grew up, as they should, into rich but deserving men and women. When with their mother in London, they spent as much time as they could out of it, on golf-course or tennis-court—in the evenings attended the right sort of musical comedy or revue, and could soon whistle every tune out of every "show," as they called it, with the ease and accuracy of an errand-boy. Moreover they could banter one another with a thousand memorable clichés culled from the repertory of their favourite comedians, enjoyed "fizz" and "bubbly," and believed, generally, in "having a good time."

Meanwhile their mother's life was assuming a new texture. This was a second, but transitional, period for her. The last adventure was over and complete. The next one must be to smash it and conquer a new world. Her pioneer blood was still in the ascendant. Edwardian days were in full, overfull, bloom: now she could avow her artistic proclivities, consort with people of her own type Many of them, like herself, were American. She became a mote in new sunshine, whirled in a gilded, pointless activity, organized balls or tableaux in aid of any charity that asked her help, displayed real ability in selling the

tickets. Her appearance in one of these enterprises, as Penelope spinning, will long be remembered. She dressed now in the exuberance of fashion, and created a stir—unrivalled by any horse—in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. Sheathed in a mauve Directoire dress, with a large silver bangle on one ankle, where the split in the dress revealed it, and balancing a vast picture-hat on her head, she attracted the Royal attention, as much by her clothes as by the well-enamelled spring of her complexion.

She prospered, achieved a reputation for beauty as much as for youth, and became sufficiently friendly with King Edward to ask for that signed photograph, which afterwards remained the one fixed star in an ever-changing sky: for, whatever the wild revolutions of her house which I shall describe later, this royal, bearded geniality continued to authorize her indiscretions. She gave musical parties, played duets with all the leading pianists. From having been unlabelled, a person, indeed, to whom it was impossible to attach a label, she now manufactured for herself a very recognizable one: so that it was easy for her many new friends to foretell exactly what she would say in any given circumstances. Thus they were enabled to mimic and, by so doing, to advertise her. She became, and remained for many years, a familiar, and therefore popular, landmark of London life. And the fox-hunting squires, as they looked at the weekly illustrated papers, would gulp their port, gape and roar with surprise as they gazed upon the likeness of this very young-looking, elegant spectre of the world of fashion, who, even then celebrated for her youth,

had once moved so unostentatiously through their midst.

But her triumph was so quick, so easy in the more cosmopolitan life of the city, that for Lady de Montfort it lost its savour. Her next adventure must be to break this too; break it, if she could. But her popularity was almost too strong.

King Edward died, and there were many who would have liked, many more than one would have imagined, to move back the hands of the clock. People began to look forward with pleasure to a renewal of the Victorian era. But Adèle was not among them. Her heart had never accepted the Victorian fog of morality. Indeed had she been able to diagnose her misfortune, she would have known that she had been born thirty or forty years too early. She was a post-European-War type. Moreover, the predilection for monogamy, so strong a trait of many characters, was lacking in hers. To be true to one man was against her nature: but this very deprivation, which for so long she had undergone in order to play her part, full of the lure of the unknown, in the primitive society of the Shires, had, in fact, communicated to her for a time a rather perverse sensual enjoyment. But those days were finished.

Perhaps her attitude to love was rooted in her blood. The Americans run to extremes, oscillate violently, for instance, between Total Prohibition and Total Inebriation (and each makes the other an inevitable reaction). The Pilgrim Fathers, when they left England, were most surely essaying to run away from themselves, to elude the strength of their

own passions, that, pent up, had distilled them into so gloomily bitter and cantankerous a minority, quite as much as to escape a problematic religious persecution. As well attempt to avoid your own shadow.

And when they reached the Land of Promise and had set up their rigid little gods, planted the altars firmly in this alien soil, perhaps they found it already possessed. It was almost as though the native gods of this continent, hidden far away under vast, dreary plains and huge, rocky mountains, had laid on this race that was to come a peculiar curse, had decreed that the descendants of these seekers after an iron-bound truth, these people who sought so hardly the things of the spirit, and despised the flesh and the fleshpots, should be endowed with every material blessing, every comfort that wealth and prosperity could give, and yet should always be restless, unable to achieve a spiritual consolation or any balance between the body and the spirit. The fruits have been twofold; one exemplified by Purity Leagues and book-bannings, the other by the enormous quantity of divorces in America, and the very free codes of behaviour that characterize life in the American (Bohemian) quarter of Paris. And it may be that Adèle was now unconsciously bent on exacting in one lifetime—rather late in it, too—an adequate compensation for all the repressions of her ancestors.

She began then—at first, quietly—to indulge in affairs of the heart. But, however discreet, she always loved with fervour. Meanwhile her mind, small, free, erratic, and original within the compass of its power, roamed at ease in the upper air, released

from those dungeons of despair guarded by the twin Freudian ogres of Inhibition and Complex.

Soon she paraded her lovers a little more openly: and it was now that a second passion, to become inextricably entangled with the first, definitely manifested itself.

In the days of her tableaux, her home had been comfortable, exotic, full of incense, cushions, orchids and tuberoses. One room alone in all the house had been permeated by a gentle, phthisic pre-Raphaelitism: monochrome cartoons by Burne-Jones and a large painted cupboard by the same wistful hand figured in it. But the rest of the house had been conceived purely as an impersonal background, adjunct of scents, dresses, flowers. Little tables swarmed with the precious inutilities of Fabergé; miniature trees in gold and silver, flowers made of the wings of butterflies with emerald calyxes, jade toads, with ruby eyes, holding a lapis ash-tray, pink quartz rabbits, nibbling green blades of chrysoprase, that proved to be bells, crystal owls that were inkpots.

But now decoration obsessed her, though at first she exhibited no symptom of the virtuosity—for virtuosity, however ludicrous, it was—that she later displayed. Perhaps she did not personally supervise, left it to others in this first instance. Indeed it lacked the charm, even, of the house as she had dramatized it twenty years previously; seemed a pitiful example of that period-furnishing which was already laying waste her native land. A Mermaid Tavern ensued. There was much expensive German-oak panelling, while upon every ceiling, very obviously put up in

squares, mermaids played their lutes, and the plaster roses of secrecy bloomed in the least expected places. Old oak settees, cupboards, dressers filled every room with a creaking, numskull woodenness, and there were oak armchairs, built up entirely of a sequence of hard, wooden protuberances, electric, unflickering candles, iron bolts of a truly lockjaw rustiness upon oak doors, wooden latches with strings attached and many other of the cruel, catch-finger devices of the Tudors: last, but not least, there was an Elizabethan lover. He was a pioneer of the waste-places (or is it spaces?), a man as much given to climbing mountains as any schoolmaster during his summer vacation, an explorer, a poet; but, like all his type, alas! his exploring was better than his poetry. The Elizabethan phase lasted for a year or so. But one day the lover left—or was dismissed—the house was dismantled, refurnished, and a Roman Prince reigned in his stead.

Far from wishing to drop her because of this indiscretion, people now gave her an instance of how staunch friends can be (for there is only one unforgivable sin in the eyes of such loyal, worldly friends, and that is loss of money). They flocked round her, eager to see every detail of the palace that had been born within this bellying, yellow-fronted Regency house. And they admired the Ispahan carpets and Genoese velvets, the tall, gilded chairs, the Venetian brocades, the hooded mantelpieces and torchieri, the bronzes on tables of Italian walnut, painted balustrades from churches, and fine pictures. It was effectively scenic. From a decorative, as probably from an

amorous point of view, this was a successful moment in her life. The house looked well, had developed airy vistas, seemed bigger: the Prince was large, handsome, cultivated and attentive. Then, after many months, there was a sudden reversal. The Prince went back to Rome, and, as if by magic, an over-elegant young German, like a too-willowy, canary-coloured bulldog, was found in his place. Within a week or two, the de Montfort house had turned München, 1914. Its shiny black walls were now splashed with rich orange and pale yellow, there were divans of red and purple, black-glass bathrooms with sunk baths of malachite, and the whole place was filled with very excitable Munich glass and groups of Nymphenburg china; for the Germans are a patriotic race, and German trade followed German love. Her friends had noticed, too, that the food varied with each *régime*, in accordance with style and lover. Plain Elizabethan fare of an overwhelming abundance, pies and puddings and oyster-and-lark patties, had given way to more elaborate and Machiavellian dishes, to ducks, for example, that were assassinated, torn limb from limb before your eyes, then pounded and boiled in brandy, and now yielded again to over-rich, German dishes. It seemed as if everything was stuffed with lobster and truffles, and served up with cream.

The young German staved, month after month. But now the two processes, which were starting to work together, though not yet at an excessive rate, were arrested by the "Great" War. Upon the outbreak of it, Lady de Montfort was, I think, glad to

intern her lover. At any rate, she "did up" her house as a hospital at great personal expense. She had forgotten, however, to consult the War Office before putting the work in hand, and when, now that it was completed, she offered it to them, coupled with an intimation that she did not desire rent for the premises, technical difficulties ensued. Various War Office departments played battledore and shuttlecock with the question for several years, but since the war ended before they were ready for its beginning, nothing was ever decided. And so Lady de Montfort had to be content with living there herself (as she said, it brought the war home to one) and with doing her own modest bit, by "giving the boys on leave a good time": though for this she was unrewarded, and received no recognition from an ungrateful country. The war stopped at last—and the next time I saw the house, the white paint, the white enamel furniture, the iron-rations laid by the place of each guest, as graceful, picturesque adjunct to a rationed diet and as remembrancer of mortality, the smell of chloroform with which during those years she had so modishly invested it, were gone, gone for ever: and the sober Park Lane shell now contained a Petit Trianon.

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It was with this Petit Trianon period, I consider that Lady de Montfort entered on her grand period of beauty, youth and fame, and that the processes, which we have watched at work, grew together like two trees and culminated in monstrous blossom

after monstrous blossom. From now onward, until she disappears out of this story—and it ends—the mask is the same, even though the clothes vary: the manifestations are, to all purposes, identical, and the flowering is mechanical. We have lifted up the mask a little, in order to understand how human features have grown into it. Just as in Soviet Russia it has recently been discovered that under the varnished ikons, which are so alike as to be indistinguishable, an original art and form lies hidden; and that to see them the restorer is forced, so thick and deep are the later coatings of paint with which the personal delineation of a true artist has been covered up year after year, to attack the outer surface with a chisel, so here we have attempted some such rather rough operation. But now it is finished. We must accept the appearance —and replace the mask.

Let the reader at this very moment picture Adèle for himself, but do not let him place this lacquered apparition in the dress of any one period: rather let him, instead, animate for himself a fashion-plate, the most fashionable fashion-plate he can find, from the illustrated papers of whatever week in whatever month of whatever year it may be in which he reads this story. Thus will he see for himself our heroine, as she looked, wished to look, would look—if she were alive. For, however different, the heights of fashion in a way resemble one another. It is the intensity of it that matters. We realize that this is the "latest thing." Even though she be dead, we must take her embalmed corpse and clothe it in the dress of the actual moment. In this manner she will

most assuredly come to life . . . only the reader, for his part, must always remember to make her look "astonishingly young."

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Whether I was the first, the only one at the moment, to watch the development of these strange traits, to comprehend the unfolding of these curious and perverse flowers, I do not know. Certainly myself discovered, quite by chance, how it was possible by riding past the front of Lady de Montfort's house on the top of a motor-omnibus to deduce the main outlines of the drama that was taking place within it. Just a glance from above through the dining-room window, as one was whirled along, and I could divine with tolerable precision, if not the name, at least the nature, of the favourite of the minute: notwithstanding, of course, there were moments of bewilderment, as the kaleidoscope revolved with ever-increasing swiftness. Still, as a rule, a single glance would be enough. "Hullo," one would exclaim, "the Spanish attaché has been dismissed, and by the look of the walls, it must be a Russian refugee now." Or, again, "So the Austrian dramatist has gone—I thought so. I imagine that macaw in the cage must mean a South American of some sort." And I found, even in these most transient attempts at decoration, a quality that was a little touching; the revolving of a primitive machinery, very unexpected in one so modern and removed from nature, which love alone can set into action . . . the instinct of a bird to build a nest. And this perpetual building and

rebuilding of a nest that served no purpose was to me rather pitiful.

And now, lest it should be thought that this was the interfering, salacious curiosity of a stranger, let me try to explain the peculiar nature of the link that subsisted between Lady de Montfort and myself. It must be clearly understood that, while never familiar with her in the sense of an intimate exchange of sentiments, I was yet a certain amount in her company: that albeit rather seldom bidden to her house, except for large parties to which all the world was asked, yet from time to time I was, though not one of her very definite "set," so invited. Perhaps she felt obliged thus silently to enable me to watch her, thus tacitly to let me into her secrets, since doubtless she was aware, as I was, of an indissoluble tie.—Everybody is somebody's bore. (Nor need this for an instant be taken as a reflection on anybody's particular bore, for the boredom is contained, not in him, but in the relationship between him and the person he bores. In fact, with very few exceptions, it takes two to make a bore.) Moreover this relationship is a thing preordained by an inscrutable Providence. I, then, was Lady de Montfort's bore; recognized it, made the most of it—nay! gloried in it. To be, after this manner, a specially appointed bore by divine warrant, carries with it its duties as much as its privileges. In this story we are not dealing with her voyages. They pertain to one that is yet to be written. But she belonged to the floating pleasure-seekers of Europe. I travelled too. So that, whether I saw her in a London ball-room, in a Berlin concert-hall,

at the Opera in Vienna, at the "Ritz" in Paris, bathing at Antibes, or whatever the fashionable beach of the moment might be, sitting at a table in the Piazza at Venice, at a dance in New York, or in Fez, Cairo, Leningrad or Seville, I made a point of talking to her . . . or, if not talking, of remaining a little by her side. For what God hath joined together, let no man tear asunder: and we were, as it seemed through all eternity, bound helplessly together in the coils of an intolerable, though on my part interested and admiring, ennui.

I observed Lady de Montfort with care, but there was no longer any actual need for it. The world now knew everything about her, except her age and the means by which she kept it secret. At first her friends, again, were startled by the quite brazen parade of her lovers which she affected, for she would never lunch or dine with them unless she were allowed to bring with her the man of the moment. (She always had a delightfully inappropriate phrase to explain the appeal he made to her.) And sometimes, as though by a feat of prestidigitation, a new man would appear without warning in place of the one who had been expected, and a new phrase would surely be found ready to describe him. For, since her war experiences, another strongly racial quality had grown to inspire her passions; an insatiable demand for novelty. But she loved with an equal ferocity, with her body and her soul, whether it was for a year or a night. And her love affairs were very defined: the next began where, and when, the last had ended.

Yet, notwithstanding their infinite variety, there

was at the same time now visible in her lovers—with one or two notable exceptions to which we shall revert—a quite evident line of descent. Heretofore they had not resembled one another; but now, of whatever shade, colour, creed or disposition, it was possible to reduce the majority of them to a common denominator, so that they ought perhaps to be considered, either as manifold expressions of some ideal lover, or as the persistent, identical expression which she called out from any miscellaneous sequence of men. Her lovers must amuse, as well as love her: they must learn to laugh, act, and "do stunts" in much the same manner, they must be able to mimic her friends. Above all, they must take as much interest in decoration as herself, and, finally, must play the piano sufficiently well for them to form a rock to which the delicate tendrils of her duets could cling: for now she had discarded the eminent musicians, and only desired to play duets with her lovers. But however much approximation to type there was in these men, yet, as one succeeded another, the spiritual differences remained so marked that her friends never lost their curiosity about them.

As for herself, Lady de Montfort had become a more amusing character than one would, twenty years before, have deemed possible. It would, perhaps, be incorrect to describe her mind as being fashioned on unconventional lines, since this would impute to it too much importance. But if on the whole conventional, there were yet ominous gaps that could never be filled, depths that it was impossible to plumb, unexpected corners of knowledge, and hidden

trap-doors from which the most personal, puck-like of harlequins would leap out on a sudden and rap you with his baton.

She had, of course, long ago given up reading novels or poetry, things which had once supplied an element of beauty in her life: consequently, her thoughts were more original, in the sense that they were less borrowed, while at the same time the discovery that many years ago she had read this or that book, and that it had left this or that impress on her memory, brought into her conversation all the elements of surprise, pleasant surprise. And just as she had speeded up the tempo of her life, so had she allowed the engine of her mind to race. She had, in fact, torn off her label. Far from being able to predict, as in her middle period, exactly what she would say, now her friends never knew what she would say next: or, again, it would be more accurate to state that they knew now that they never knew what she would say next, so that after all, and despite herself, this very absence of labels amounted to a new one. She had wanted to smash her former mode of life, but all these things meant that her friends remained as much her friends as ever. She could not shock, she could only amuse them.

And then she was so energetic that, however much she had longed to destroy her creation, she did not want to give up her activities, being content to outrage the conventions without forgoing the pleasures they sheltered. She lived always in a whirl of activity. Even the ease, one suspected, with which she looked "astonishingly young" must have consumed an ever increasing portion of those years left to her. For

she who wishes to remain young out of season must now submit her body to an iron discipline, must be ready when least disposed for it—when, for example, still sleeping from the ball of a few hours before—to contort herself into the most unusual and ungraceful of postures, to be flung round and round her trainer's head like a lasso, to roll, undulate and writhe on the floor, to forfeit for ever the solace of good food and good drink, to go for days with nothing but half a cup of *consommé* to support the flesh, to sit through long and exquisite meals, eat nothing, and show no symptom of torture, to stand up for hours against a wall daily, while an attendant turns on her naked body a hose of battering, pommelling water, alternately ice-cold and boiling-hot, and finally at intervals to be carved about like a fowl, and without complaint or any reception of sympathy: because she must never admit how her days are engrossed, and least of all may she confess to the brutal knife of the "plastic surgeon." Suttee would teach these ladies nothing. But then women are more single-minded than men, and, though uncontrolled and uncontrollable, it was extraordinary to observe how serenely Adèle had disciplined herself in some directions, how, furthermore, she was willing to subordinate everything to one purpose, use everything she possessed toward an intensification of love.

And in addition to love, there was the rival passion, decoration; which, as we have said, now even extended to the food. She was at heart eclectic, I fancy, with no particular sympathy in her own mind for any one period. Out of each one she adopted, she brought

very easily, very cleverly, its particular characteristics, and also added to it, perhaps, something of her own. And with the full flowering of this talent, however absurd, it was as though she furnished a house with such skilful understanding that it actually materialized for her some ghost of the time she aimed at, or conjured up for her some daemon of the element or machine, or whatever it might be, that at the moment she was attempting to paraphrase. For now she was no longer content with period-furnishing, but essayed things more difficult, elusive. And, incidentally, she showed real genius in the continual, recurrent disposal of the furniture. Expensive as the habit sounds, she often made, rather than lost, considerable sums of money over each unfurnishing. But then, she attended to it personally, bought the things herself. And often I would meet her in auction-rooms, bidding feverishly for her fetish of the hour, or would see her returning home, her smart, lacquered car loaded very inappropriately with all this new fuel for a new fire.

It is, indeed, impossible to say where love began and decoration ended. Did the man dictate the style, or the style the man? For ever could this point be argued, since it is comparable to the old question, not nearly so silly as it sounds, as to whether the hen lays the egg, or the egg the hen. Did the man keep pace with the house, or the house with the man: or did they keep pace together? It is a sequel impossible to drag apart. Sometimes there would be a lull of a few months, and then change would succeed change with an inconceivable, a stupefying,

rapidity. Some of the men and houses, it may be, promised well, but were, in one way or another, in practice disappointing: or, again, it might be merely that she was in a fickle, uncertain mood. Then the Park Lane mansion would break into short, syncopated fits of decoration, that would serve to put anyone save a great detective on the wrong track. One day it would begin to assume a grand, *settecento* Italian air, on the second a prudent Biedemeyer, the third an elegant Chippendale, the fourth a fiery Magyar, the fifth a frigid Norwegian, full of painted furniture and Viking designs, the sixth it would be School of Fontainebleau, the seventh a solid Queen Anne. The alteration wrought within each of the earth's short transits would seem almost a miracle in its abrupt completeness.

During those frenetic hours of preparing, in which the work gathered momentum like a boulder rolling down a hill, Lady de Montfort would be present, in order personally to cheer the workmen on, or would occasionally herself mount a ladder and join in with a paint-brush: for the house must be finished before she wearied of the man . . . was that it? And I wondered if the honest British workmen to whom she gave such constant and diversified employment had formed any just idea as to the nature of the intrigues which they were thus called upon to assist? But Adèle herself had developed such a truly amazing technique of arranging her house, that it was quite possible that soon she would be able to dispense with their services altogether. One touch from her long fingers enabled even the most cumbrous objects to move as though affected

by some occult process of levitation. Huge pianos, enormous cupboards, vast tables, all slid, ran or leapt upstairs with scarcely any assistance.

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It is, of course, impossible to remember all the changes. The Petit-Trianon period endured for some little time. The cause of it was a young French diplomat of good but boring family, who was a skilful, rather skittish writer upon the gallantries of the period. He told amusing little stories, and played the piano well. Panels of old *toile-de-jour* lined the walls, the chairs and sofas were exquisite with their slight, gilded frames and *petit-point*, while tall, specially designed vitrines exhibited arrangements of pastoral skirts, shoes, shepherds' crooks and flat, ribboned hats of straw, and in smaller glass cases stood painted fans and snuff-boxes. The food was delicious, simple French food. But now there intervened a rather bad, late-Léon-Bakst fortnight of oriental lampshades, cushions covered with tassels, poppy-heads treated with gold paint, and arranged in wide, glass bowls, luxurious divans, incense of an oriental, unecclesiastical variety, while kebabs, yaghourt, and Turkish-delight were the only refreshments supplied. Sherbet was served with the coffee after dinner. This proved to be the necessary dramatization for a young Jewish musician. Then, suddenly, all such trumpery was swept away by a breeze from the great, open spaces of Empire. A rough lover from New Zealand (though he, too, adhered to type, played the piano and sang a little) succeeded, during which the

high, plaster ceilings were hidden by wattle roofs, supported on carved totem-poles, and guests at luncheon and dinner openly complained that their salmon was tinned, their mutton frozen: but this fortunately for them proved as mutable an affair as the decoration indicated. A relapse into a Queen Anne style followed. This was occasioned by a young literary critic, who enjoyed excavating that period. Together Adèle and he played the composers of the time, and she offered to her guests good, plain, substantial English fare. But a surprise was in store. Without any warning the house in Park Lane broke out into the most complete and fantastic Chinoiserie; old Chinese papers, lacquer furniture, dragon tables and gold temple flowers. Adèle's old friends were really alarmed, for a rich young Chinese Prince had just arrived in London to be educated. Nevertheless, their fears proved groundless, and (did they feel rather disappointed?) the man who had inspired the decoration turned out to be a young German writer on art, a specialist in this style: but the chop-suey, the pickled shark's fins, bamboo shoots, lily-of-the valley and narcissus bulbs soaked in white wine, the hundred-year-old eggs, so beautiful to look at when cut in slices, with their malachite-green yolks and polished, deep black, outer rings, and with their curious taste of all things buried in the earth, of truffles, mushrooms and their like, did not tend to make him popular with those who frequented the de Montfort house. This lover lapsed, and a young Frenchman succeeded to the position: a Frenchman whose family had sprung up under the shielding wings of

the Imperial eagles. An airy Empire style, therefore, with plenty of gilded caryatids supporting branched candelabras, ensued. The walls were painted in bright colours, and the beautifully-made furniture of simple line suited the proportions of the rooms. A French chef was encouraged to do his best, and was not restricted by any fantastic rules. But there followed a reversion to Charles II., though on this occasion, without any Italian influence: a dignified, gilded Charles II.

The daemon of this transformation was a writer, again: a writer, moreover, upon gallantries, but of course upon those of the Stuart period. Nevertheless, he used for his work the same "devil" formerly employed by the Petit-Trianon lover; a poor, half-starved, religious, mild, grey-haired, Church-of-England, spectacled little woman, named Miss Teresa Tibbits, who was the last surviving descendant of a thousand curates, and who now, rigged-out with a green shade over her eyes, like a pirate with a bandaged forehead, was forced by her poverty thus for ever to grub away among the most intimate possible details of the love-affairs of dead Duchesses in the Reading Room of the British Museum. And since she must be acquainted with the most scabrous minutiæ, she was continually forced to blush for herself by having to ask the attendants for the most daring and unexpected books; the most lurid of which, she was informed by them, with a look of intense disapprobation, could only be seen by someone duly armed with a certificate, which guaranteed moral rectitude and the fact that the bearer was a responsible person, autographed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and

witnessed by all the trustees of the Museum. Miss Tibbits occasionally visited the house in Park Lane on business, and I wondered whether her trained eye observed the living material that waited for some unborn Miss Tibbits of the future.

The luxury, the gilding, the soft carpets of this Charles II. epoch suddenly went, as the hair of someone struck with an appalling sorrow is said to turn, white in one night. Everything was painted white. The furniture was stripped; beautiful old gilding and old paint were torn remorselessly from the objects to which they belonged; and ash-colour and mouse-colour were the only tints, however faint, grilled bones and peeled oranges the only food, however monotonous, that were permitted. This, again, was mysterious, seemed to her friends to indicate some fresh aberration. Lady de Montfort's phrase, to explain this favourite, too, was embarrassing. She would say, "Why, he's wonderful. One glance from him strips you bare." But, in the end, it was discovered that this denudation portended nothing more exciting than the fact that the new favourite was a psycho-analyst, who boasted that he could unravel and strip the soul. . .

Life never stops still, and soon colour came back to the house—rich, abundant colour. It was transformed into a Spanish palace. The 18th Duque de Bobadilla, 10th Grandee of the First Class, the 17th Duque de Miraflores e Mirador, the 15th Duque de Salamandar, the 12th Duque de los Nuevos Mondos, the 10th Duque de Alcama Alcarbareo, the 20th Marques de Carabas Viego, the 19th Marques de Guadalagahara, the 18th Marques de Rosina Media,

the 28th Visconde de Nuestro Salvator, and 42nd Conde del Estramaduna Esta, reigned over it in perfect unity, for they were one person. There were Sevillian, white-flashing patios with white flower-pots and the inevitable jasmine and orange-blossom, and out of them led the saloons furnished with Spanish rugs and tapestries, Mudejar plates of a strange, gold bronze and cream intricacy, lovely cabinets of tortoise-shell, ivory and gilded wood, and deep sombre velvets. Pictures by Goya and Velasquez hung on the walls. And the food was tinged, too, with the prevailing fashion: there were such stuffed and pungent dishes as Huevos à la Flamenco, Arrozo Valenciana, Olla Podrida, Tortillas, Pollo Cubana, such soft melting sweets as Turron and Membrilla. And it was in this period that there took place an unfortunate incident which occasioned a lot of talk at the time, and even found its way into the press: for example, "Dragoman" of the *Daily Express* reported it in full.

It is, of course, impossible for us to be certain whether the face-lifting operation of that summer—it would be about August, 1924—was the first that she had undergone, but, at any rate, if not the first, it was the most noticeable, tightening, as it did, all the lines of the face, and imparting to the mouth a strained pursing of the lips that prevented her from closing her mouth. The healing occupied some weeks, and she was ordered to go abroad in order to recuperate. Filled with enthusiasm for all things Spanish, she set out in September to visit Spain with Lady Robert Chickmuster, daughter of Mr. Silas Minkin, Third. This

fascinating woman had recently suffered the same treatment at the hands of her plastic-surgeon. Conversation cannot have been easy, for the actual muscular movement of the lips, which talking induces, still occasioned both of them great anguish, and, in addition, each was aware of, but must not mention, the fact of this identical agony. They motored to many places, including Seville, where they stayed with the Duque de Bobadilla. One morning the two ladies wanted to see the Cathedral, and while standing in the Capella Major, a verger approached them. This unfortunate man was afflicted with deafness and, looking at their faces, very naturally concluded from the shape of the sewn-up mouths that they were whistling. Explanation was impossible, and they were turned out of the Cathedral for sacrilege. . . . A most painful scene ensued. Tension mounted for weeks. The British Embassy made representations to the Spanish Government and the Vatican: but the deaf verger stuck to his guns, and no apology to the two ladies was ever forthcoming.

Nor was this all the harm that so small an unpleasantness engendered. The Andalusian peace of the Casa de Bobadilla was shattered by a most bitter quarrel which broke out between Lady de Montfort and Lady Robert; a quarrel which rent London for more than six months. It must be remembered that both of them were doubtless much tired after several weeks of arduous sight-seeing, a very fruitful begetter of trouble, and that Lady Robert had in the near past been exacerbated by various matrimonial difficulties which had culminated in an annulment.

But such sudden tempests always arise out of a trifle. Lady de Montfort had said, "I think, dear, you should be more careful. Of course, knowing you as I do, the old man's suggestion is absurd. But since that last little illness of yours, before you came abroad, you do shape your mouth in a peculiar way, as though you were whistling."

"Is it *likely* I should whistle, Adèle? *I* can get all the attention I need without that sort of thing, thank you. *I* don't have to whistle, I assure you. I'm not as old as all that."

"I don't quite see, dear, what 'being old' has got to do with it? We're all as old as we look, they say."

"Well, I don't think what *you* did made *you* look any younger. You mustn't mind. Of course everybody knows you look 'astonishingly young,' Adèle. The papers are always telling us so."

"Well, I thought by the way you were talking to me you must be older than me. I don't know, I'm sure."

"But I wasn't whistling, and I saw no one."

"And if you had been whistling, nobody would have looked. . . . But I wish you'd stop lecturing."

"Well, dear, then that's all right, but—How do you mean, 'looked'?"

"Anyhow, Boo-boo, if you didn't whistle *then*, you needn't shout at me *now*."

"Shouting at you would be no use. It would be like shouting at an *image*. I don't know what's the matter with you. Your expression never changes."

"Well, yours is quite different, Boo-boo, to what it used to be. You used to look so smiling and

good-tempered. All I meant was that it seemed kind of silly to whistle at that foolish verger."

"Verger yourself, Adèle. What d'you mean, 'verger'? I'd like to know. And if I am, is there anything wrong in it?"

"No, my dear, I didn't say that—you know I didn't. It's a misunderstanding. I said 'verger'—you know . . . the man in the Cathedral."

"Oh, then there *was* a man in the Cathedral, was there? I didn't see him, but I'm not a bit surprised. . . . I suppose now you'll have that house of yours done up as a Cathedral, won't you? . . . I can just see the gargoyles."

"Well, if I do, dear, I shall ask you to come and whistle in it."

At this moment, fortunately, the Duke de Bobadilla, his attention attracted by the noise, entered, and the ladies melted into tears.

Possibly this unpleasantness embittered Lady de Montfort against all things Spanish. In any case, on her return to England, the Spanish background was swept away, and there ensued, for a time, a quick, rattling succession of styles, culminating in an African house of little wooden stools and rice-bowls. "Queer . . ." people said, and personally, I received a shock, for one day I visited an auction-room, and was much perturbed to see Lady de Montfort, obviously in high spirits, herself openly bidding for negro fetishes, for ivory masks from Nigeria and wooden ones from Dahomey, for tusks of carved ivory and bronzes from Benin: while the fact which lent colour, if one may use the expression, to these black

innuendoes was that the man of the moment now never appeared at luncheon or dinner, though everyone knew that a man there must be and was, and even as they wondered, the sound of a gurgling, jungle-like song would be heard from an upper storey. Relief, therefore, was general when before six weeks had elapsed Lady de Montfort fell in love with a hunting-man. This was a break-away from her usual type, for, unlike even the last invisible and anonymous ghost, he was unmusical: no jungle-song rolled deeply from under the roof-tops, and, only very occasionally, a fragment of "D'ye ken John Peel" would break what seemed almost the dumb silence of the animal world. But the foundations of this new affection must have been well and truly laid, for it endured six months. And though he seldom spoke, he had side-whiskers and a handsome face, and was quite happy for hours sucking a straw. Moreover, if he was not altogether at home in the world of men and women, Adèle found the means whereby he might feel less strange. Promptly she had her bedroom done up as a stable. All the chairs, even the bed itself, were re-stuffed—with horsehair. The curtains, too, were of box-cloth. The dining-room became an ostler's room, with bits and harness, and such other things, hanging from wooden pegs. Roast mutton, toasted cheese and ale were the order of the day for guests.

Next, as far as I can remember, came a famous Russian singer. Now she reverted to type. But, nevertheless, Lady de Montfort suffered a great shock. There is no doubt, I think, that they loved with

passion. Moreover, each of these two, who in spite of certain tastes in common, appeared to be so different, idealized the other. In Lady de Montfort, he saw the perfect, English, liberty-loving aristocrat: when she looked into his eyes, it seemed to her as though she were gazing down into the dark depths of the Slav soul. He was, for her, the Slav soul personified. And when by chance they found that in reality they both hailed from the same home-town in the Middle West, on each side the disillusionment was utter, the upbraiding acrimonious. Each felt as though caught in the revolving, circular movement of maelstrom or whirlwind. However far we travel, we come back to our starting-point, whether we wish it or not.

Next morning the blood-red domes of the Kremlin faded out from every wall, and Park Lane went Mexican. High plumes, jade masks, crystal skulls, silver ornaments of a later period, and a young Mexican oil magnate of musical and artistic tastes, completed the effect. Followed soon a Charles X. period; romantic, redolent of Balzac and Chopin. Fans, once more, littered the tables, and there were small walnuts, with white kid gloves folded up in them, to show how tiny the dead hand had been. Miss Tibbits re-appeared from her lair in the British Museum, for, again, it was a young French writer who had evoked this change.

So the days passed. Take, for example, the chart for just a month or two from one of the later years. Where facts are uncertain, the space is left blank: where one must deduce one's own conclusions, a question mark is substituted.

STYLE OF DECORATION AT PARK LANE
(and, where details are remembered, of food offered to guests).

| 1928 | | *Description of Man.* |
|---|---|---|
| Jan. 1–22 | German Baroque—silvered tables and chairs. Wiener Schnitzel and Moselle. | German Baroque Baron with grey hair. |
| Jan. 22–25 | Roumanian. Painted boxes and painted clothes. Caviare and Roumanian sweets with every meal. | Roumanian Pianist. |
| Jan. 25 to March 3 | Ceilings painted light blue or dark blue, with appropriate sun or stars. Furniture made of broken propellers, curtains of grey balloon silk. | Musical young Airman. |
| March 3–13 | Moghul. Curries served with "Bombay duck." | ? |
| March 13–26 | Portuguese 18th-century. | Dwarf Diplomat. |
| March 26 to April 28 | Cinquecento Italian. | Italian Count. |
| April 28–30 | Gypsy Caravan. Hedgehogs baked in clay. | ? |
| May 1–10 | Czecho-Slovak. | |
| May 10 to June 2 | Toucan and parrots' feathers. | Peruvian Diplomat. |
| June 2–18 | Dutch pictures and furniture. Tulips in bowls. | Dutch Novelist. |
| June 18–19 | Norwegian painted furniture installed. Smoked salmon. | ? |
| June 19–23 | Mid-Victorian. Very long meals. "Roasts" of every description. | Young Photographer, English. |
| June 23–29 | Persian 18th century. Tiles, carpets and silks. Two cypress trees in tubs outside the front door. Lamb served with almonds and roots of lily-of-the-valley. | Young Persian Prince. |

It was in 1932 that Adèle branched off very sensationally from the type she generally cultivated. She

fell in love, desperately in love, with Thomas Cruikshank McFlecker, the famous deep-sea fisher; a man who for his own pleasure moved through the dangerous, undulating vegetation of tropic waters. Sometimes he would descend just for a few hours, in the outfit of a diver—that rare, armoured robot of the seas, attached by so slender an umbilical cord to his mother, Earth; or, perhaps, he would instead be lowered down into the depths in a device of his own invention, a large steel and glass cradle, and would there remain for days or weeks, dangling in front of the tantalized but ogling sharks and giant cuttle-fish, until they gradually lost their appetites and wilted. Actually McFlecker had come to England on business, for he had placed the contract for one of these new and improved cradles (this one was to be as big as a small room) with a firm of shipbuilders, and was waiting until it was finished, and he could return to his work. Meanwhile he needed recreation.

Adèle let herself go thoroughly in every direction. She bought eight new ropes of pearls (for now, since the war, she was a very rich woman), and filled the house with dolphins, mermaids and seaweed; that is to say, chair and table assumed marine shapes, being supported by silver dolphins or mermaids, or a bearded Italian Neptune, with a rakish crown and a trident like a gigantic toasting-fork. The armchairs were all of them restuffed for the second time—on this occasion with seaweed, which, she said, was much more healthy, she was certain, than feathers, wool or horsehair. The mattress of her bed, of course, was filled with seaweed and

enclosed in a gigantic shell; a real, not artificial one, from the South Seas. In all these rooms there were flat glass bowls in which were arranged shells, pearls and sharks' teeth under shallow, flickering surfaces of water. Chinese goldfish, with three tails, goggled and performed their crinolined tangos up and down the length of their narrow, oblong tanks. The dining-room was now a grotto, a beautiful imaginative grotto, in which the chairs were modelled after open scallop-shells, and the table itself was made of nacre, while above it, over the heads of the guests, was suspended a vast sunfish which concealed a light. Here, during the whole of the season, she gave a series of fish-lunches and fish-dinners, which she would preface, when she sat down, with one of her explanatory phrases. Pointing at the deep-sea fisher, she would say in her voice, with its slightly rising inflection: "That is a very remarkable man. He teaches one all that there is to know about the ocean bed." In the drawing-room she had installed a sizzling machine that shot out sparks at unwary guests and filled the house with ozone, until, in consequence, it smelt like a night-club or tube-station (the only places in which ozone is ever consciously encountered). Furthermore, her face had again been lifted that spring, and the fresh tightening of the mouth had made it assume a very piscine expression.

* * * * * *

The end was drawing near. . . . He must return to the islands. New and interesting studies awaited him there. The steel and crystal cradle was ready.

She determined, which was unlike her, to accompany him. So, early in October, they set out, sailing first to the West Indies.

I met her the day before she left England, and never had she looked younger or more radiant. She was now a famous beauty, whose photograph, taken upside down from an airplane or from below by the photographer—who must lie flat on the floor while she was suspended head downwards, like the sunfish, from the ceiling—appeared in every week's illustrated papers, a renowned forcible-feeder whose food no one was enduring enough to refuse, a figure in the land, in spite of every mitigating circumstance, and one felt that her absence, even for a time, would make a gap, would sadden, not only her friends, but every gossip-writer in this country—of which gossip, gramophones and biscuits at the time seemed the only flourishing industries.

My readers know the rest. Arrived at the ocean-gardens of the Southern Seas, the cradle, which, like a submarine, manufactured its own air, was let down by steel cables. A terrible storm, unexpected by the Weather Bureau, and of an unequalled severity, blew up without warning. Something, we know not what, occurred to break the metal ropes. And so, deep-down, turning over and over, bumping on every current, the steel and crystal cage, devoid of any decoration, essentially stark in outline, now floats along with its two skeletons. She is still dressed in the fashions of 1932, and wears eight rows of pearls; a grotesque exhibit for the fishes that peer and point their cruel, sneering or sworded beaks at it, or lash at

it in fury with their tails. Or, again, as though in mockery of an idyll that is over and yet is thus forced for ever to parade its continuance, the cradle settles for a while in some leafy, spring-like glade of the ocean bed, some watery glade that resembles a grove in England, with little flowers blowing from the rocks, and small highly-coloured fishes moving through the foliage, as birds move through the branches of the trees on land, and over all the refracted light plays in an illusional splendour of sunrise, patches falling here and there: and, sometimes, the light hits the glass of the cabin, and reveals within it the terrible white-fingered figures, knocked together by the rolling, until, as it were embracing, their mouths meet in a double, lipless grin. Then the swell comes, and the figures fall apart: and so for countless ages, these figures, in their barnacled hut, moving and tumbling on every tide, will dwell in a semi-eternity of endless green-water, alone, and now forgotten. For though, at the time of their deaths, people could, as the phrase goes, talk of nothing else: though the memorial-service was very largely attended, and letters and telegrams of condolence reached Sir Simon from all quarters and from every class, yet now, and after so long, there has come a generation that knew her not. The gossip-writers have passed to other and newer topics, and the house in Park Lane—that seems with its grottos, though emptied of its painted fish and oceanic effects, to mock her end—is dusty. And even at this very moment the vans may be calling to remove the furniture from the piled up lumber-rooms . . . as they called so often in her lifetime.