

PART I

CHAPTER I

STEIN

IN the smoking room beer-hall of the Hotel de L'Europe, Serajevo, Jean Matisse had placed his hat on the rack beside him, ordered Pilsener, and was in the act of rolling a cigarette when Stein, a German whom he had met the night before, came along and took his seat at the same table.

Jean, born of an English mother, and with a father who was a naturalised Englishman, was twenty-two, gay and good looking, slight, and with hazel eyes that in moments of reverie seemed swimming towards great distances. The German was a heavy man of forty or more, with a clipped beard, very serious, a baron, in fact, and chairman of the Junker Iron Trust, just come from Belgrade, where he had been on business, and travelling to Ragusa, where he had a house outside the fortifications of that fairy city.

There has been a lot of nonsense talked about the Prussian; yes, no doubt he was hatched from a cannon ball, but at least the bird that hatched him had some feathers of romance in her tail.

There were quotations from Goethe scribbled in that well-kept account book, the mind of Stein; and between the leaves, coloured pictures picked up in the warm lands. They don't grow palm trees in

Berlin, that is perhaps why Berlin in its sleep sometimes dreams of palm trees; opposites attract opposites, and that is why perhaps the solid Baron Stein had chummed up, as the English say, with the irresponsible Frenchman, Matisse, artist, who knew nothing of steel or trusts or combines, travelling with a rucksack and a sketch book in search of the Beautiful and the New.

Last night they had talked and talked. The Baron was of no interest to Jean, but Jean was of great interest to himself and also to the Baron, who was an amateur of people and never happier than when adding a character to his collection—and Jean was a character. A person as open as the day, as simple seeming as the dawn, yet exhibiting in his talk a mind not so simple. This young man had ideas of his own, the rarest thing to find in a young man, yet, despite that originality, it seemed to the Baron that this young man reacted overmuch to environment. This afternoon he was different from what he had been last night, and it was easy to see that from moment to moment his mind colour altered.

The German, used to men and steel (and steel has many of the properties of man), would have preferred, had he been choosing Jean for an office position, a mind less attuned to its surroundings, less impressionable, heavier.

But he wasn't, and for a casual acquaintance, a momentary companionship, Jean was very well; in fact, could not have been better.

"Well," said Stein, "and what have you been doing with yourself to-day?"

"I have been out to the sulphur baths and beyond," said Jean. "Met an avenue and fell in love with it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Trees. I am not a landscape painter or only just so-so, else I would stay in Serajevo to pay my attentions to her. Then people might say, talking of the avenue near Middelharnis, 'Ah, yes! but you should see the avenue near Serajevo—it is hanging in the Luxembourg.'"

"That is a bold statement."

"I said if I was a landscape painter. Well, well, I must not grumble, for in that avenue I met something more surprising, more strange—how shall I put it? I will tell you. There was a tree fallen, and I had taken my seat on it to rest. I was hot and a bit tired and a bit sleepy, and for a moment I was in Paris in Julian's studio. I must have dropped off for a moment, and then I awoke to the sound of a drum. Just an occasional tap like that you hear before the band of a regiment strikes up.

"I turned, and there quite close to me coming along the road I saw an old soldier of days long gone by; a grenadier, in fact, of Napoleon's army, and with him walking by his side a young girl. She had a little drum slung from her shoulder, and as they came along she tapped it—so."

He tapped with the point of his finger on the table.

"The old man had a little plaque on his breast, and on it was written 'Cavani, Old Soldier of Napoleon; Moscow, 1812.'"

"I beg your pardon," said Stein; "but was this a reality or a——"

"Dream. No, it was real. The old man was blind. I expect the thing was a lie. He'd have to be a hundred and twenty or so if it was the truth."

"There is a Turk still living at Constantinople

older than that," said Stein. "If this man had been a drummer boy, he would be, say, a hundred and fifteen—the thing is not impossible."

"He looked it, anyhow," said Jean. "His face was like a mask. No expression, or, at least, it was a face that seemed to have lost all connection with ordinary things; the blindness of course helped. You said to yourself you might beat that man or crown him with roses, it would be all the same. Oh, yes, he was an old soldier of Napoleon—at least I choose to believe so. Do you mind?"

"You have my permission," said Stein, "and my benediction. Disbelief is the dung of the world, the residuum of daisies, meadow flowers, and the grass the fairies dance on. No, keep your beliefs, add to them if possible. Well, this old scoundrel—the old soldiers of the Emperor were all scoundrels to a man—did he speak to you?"

"No, a voice came out of him in answer to my questions, but I could not say that it spoke to me. It said, 'I am Cavani; my brother was the Emperor's courier. I have seen the Emperor.' Then he saluted and fell silent; it was his little speech, repeated who knows how often and when it was done the girl held out a shell for money.

"The girl was a gipsy. Very clean and neat, but the gipsy type." Jean paused for a moment and looked before him as if looking at this gipsy, and the Baron watched Jean over the cigar he was lighting.

"They were making for Mostar," Jean went on, "walking part of the way, picking up lifts, and taking their luck that way; sleeping sometimes in the open if the weather is fine or at some peasant's house. They seem to go all over Europe wherever fancy takes them. Brunn and Vienna and along down here, and

after Mostar they are going to the coast and up to Venice."

"Who told you all that?" asked Stein.

"The girl," replied the painter. "I had a long talk with her, for I wished to make a sketch of her, and I talked to her whilst I was at work. I always make my sitters talk to me. If I don't do that the picture never seems to come alive."

"There are two things I can't make out," said the Baron. "One is why a singer on a public platform chooses an unworthy song; the other, why a portrait painter chooses, or rather permits himself to be cajoled into painting, an unworthy face."

"A painter must live," said Jean, "and after all there are not many worthy faces—I mean faces worth painting for their ugliness or beauty."

"Have you the sketch you did of her?" asked the Baron.

Jean produced his pocket sketch book, strapped to a tiny box of water colours. He opened the book and handed it to the Baron, who put on his glasses. The last rays of the evening sun shining through the broad window lit the picture.

It astonished him. He was an amateur of pictures as well as people. In fact, he was a first-class critic, and he had not seen Jean's work before.

This picture of a girl, wild and strange and beautiful, living and touched with colour, pleased him. He did not hear the clatter of beer mugs, or the drums of an Austrian regiment marching along the river bank outside, or Jean's voice saying, "Of course it is only a sketch."

He was held from everything by the fact that he fancied he had discovered an artist, individual as Greuze, and with that curious quality which proclaims a portrait to be not a portrait of the sitter,

as perceived by the retina of the artist, but a portrait of the sitter as perceived by the artist's mind.

Here alone is revelation and in this way the great Sargent, in painting the portrait of Miss X, revealed to her physician her disease—madness.

And in this way Max Liebermann showed death in his famous portrait, "Burgomaster Dr. Burchard of Hamburg."

It seemed to Stein that this girl with the dark and fateful eyes—well, what was it? What was it about her that made him wish to close the book holding her and give it back to the young man opposite to him, yet held him gazing and wondering.

A hint of fatality? There are women like that. Women who attract or repel nearly all men.

"A strange face," said Stein, handing the book back after another glance, this time a retaking in of the excellence exhibited by the artist.

"A strange face." Not a word of praise, for Stein was a business man and he had in view a deal.

The work of this young man was, in his opinion, stamped. He might be wrong, but in his opinion the work of this young man would appreciate in value. There are two very good investments for the connoisseur. The work of old masters, to be found sometimes amidst the dusty canvases of old shops; and the work of young masters, to be found sometimes, but, oh, how rarely, amongst the "crusts" and canvases of the ateliers.

Stein was always open to buy when he chanced on things of this sort, or to commission.

"Your work appeals to me," said he. "Of course, I am judging only by that sketch, but without seeing more I should be glad to commission a picture in oils."

"Yes?" said Jean.

He reckoned the other to be a well-off man and a man of intelligence, but he could not place him. He was a German, and the social structure of Germany was outside Jean's ambitus and the characteristics of the different classes.

Stein took out his pocket-book and handed his card.

Ah! a Baron. Well, it was all the same to Jean. The commission was the thing if it were within reason.

Jean was not a starving artist. He had a few thousand francs a year derivable from a father now dead—enough to allow him to break free from Julians to see what sort of world it was in which he was painting.

If the State were to spend more for this purpose, how different might be the yearly exhibition of the Salon, that home of stuffy ideas all stamped like shop goods with the word "Paris." All the same, and although our artist had money in his pocket as well as a letter of credit, this Baron bearing sudden fruit in a commission was in the nature of a pleasant miracle; the last thing expected to be met with in this wilderness of Bosnia.

"A commission," said he. "Does M. le Baron remember what I said just now?"

"Yes," said Stein, "if you mean about not being a landscape painter. As a matter of fact I am commissioning a portrait. To be quite frank, a lady relative of mine was painted last year by Lorillard; at least a thing was painted that was supposed to represent her. He is a great artist, but as a matter of fact he is not a portrait painter."

Jean fell into a taking.

Lorillard condemned! Himself chosen!

"But," he said, "Monsieur le Baron, who, then, is a portrait painter?"

"There is none," replied Stein. "They come centuries apart. Sometimes they come in a cluster so that you get three or four in one decade all flourishing together. At present there is no one but Sargent, and I do not care for his work. He can show you the mind of the sitter, but all his sitters are sitting for their portraits. It may be that your work will have this defect in the large. It may be that your work will prove to be—well, well, let's dismiss all this. I will gamble on the red which has turned up, hoping it will turn up again. Now, shall we say five thousand marks for a Kit Cat portrait, the portrait of a lady?"

"M. le Baron," said Jean, "the price is of less importance to me than the sitter. You remember what you said just now about the singer choosing an unworthy song?"

"Rest content," said Stein, "you will not find my cousin the Baroness Hauptmarch unworthy of your brush."

The words were uttered coldly. Under the ice Jean fancied he could detect a sneer covering himself and his brush, and his position in the social scheme of things.

After all it was his own fault, he had committed a *gaucherie* and deserved the snub.

"Pardon," said he, "of that I am very sure. And I must thank you, M. le Baron, for your generous offer. I can only say that five thousand marks is a considerable sum to me, as, in fact, up to this I have not made a single franc by the work of my brush. I think I ought to tell you this. I am quite unknown except at Julians and the Café François. As a matter of fact, I have a small income that has

permitted me to live without pot-boiling, but my private affairs, of course, are not of any interest to you."

"Well," said the Baron, "as a matter of fact whether you are known or unknown does not matter to me. Let us say then that the price is settled. There is only one provision. The picture would have to be painted at Ragusa. You told me you were making south, visiting Mostar. Ragusa is not so very far from there. Can you take it in your itinerary?"

"Oh, yes," said Jean. "In some weeks——"

"A fortnight or three weeks would do," said the Baron. "You are making a walking tour?"

"Yes, most of the way. I find this country more and more interesting, and the only way you can see a country properly is by walking through it, seems to me."

"Well, perhaps," said the Baron, "and should you by any chance pick up again your old soldier and the girl you might make a sketch of him. Why did you not do that to-day?"

"I found the girl more interesting."

The Baron laughed. Then he rose for he had to dress, being due to dine with the Austrian commandant.

"Ragusa," said he. "The Villa Majiola—but you need not bother to remember that. Any one will tell you where I live, and don't bother about the canvas and all that, colours and so forth, I will have them sent from Agram." Then he went off, and they did not meet again in Serajevo, as Jean took his departure next morning early, striking out of the town past the great military barracks, beneath a cloudless sky and towards a green land flooded with sunshine.