

Three Reflections

By Stanley V. Makower

I—The Actor

THE dominoes clattered upon the marble tables of the Café Royal, and the steady brilliance of the lights shed a glow over the cloud-girt goddesses that grinned and beckoned in bewildering *deshabille* from the ceiling. The long, gilded room was crowded with people and with the images of people reflected in its numerous glass panels.

My companion and I sat without speaking, satisfied to rest ; for the day had been tiring, and outside the wind was cold, and the rain had beat upon our faces like little cold pellets of lead.

Directly behind us sat a young man who was swaying his body to and fro in so strange a manner that I shuddered, as if in a nightmare, when we are oppressed with the continuous fear that a calamity must happen . . . in a moment, . . . at this moment . . . now . . . and that calamity never happens. Finally the young man lay half across the velvet-cushioned seat, motionless. A glass of coffee stood before him on the table, untasted, with the spoon in it.

Suddenly the head waiter came up, shook him roughly by the shoulders, and said :

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"You mustn't do that."

"Do what?" he asked, wearily.

"Lie about the seats here," replied the other gruffly, and he moved away, perplexed by the sobriety of the speaker's voice, and the strangeness of his conduct. I heard the young man grumble something, and then he put his arms on the table, and his head fell into his hands. So he remained motionless throughout the evening, while the steam rose quickly from the coffee before him, almost as if it were in a hurry to leave the glass.

Satisfied that this was not the moment for the arrival of the catastrophe with which the air seemed pregnant, I dismissed the young man from my thoughts with the meditation that he might either have shot himself, or had a death struggle with the head waiter, but that as he had done neither he was there, just as they so often are in nightmares, to put me off the scent. When you have dreamed much you become wary, and acquire skill in detecting the sham bogies with which a nightmare is peopled, until the figure-head appears, unmistakable, indomitable, malignant, insolent, because clothed with the irresistible power to terrify. You are swiftly conscious that *this* is the director and controller of catastrophes, and that the time for contemptuous ridicule and laughter is over. You break into a low propitiatory prayer. The figure raises a gigantic arm, . . . and then, if Heaven is merciful, you wake in a cold perspiration.

The young man, then, was a sham bogey, and I looked round me to detect the figure-head among the assembled company.

Opposite us sat a middle-aged man with a sandy moustache, who was eating ravenously, fiercely. He chased the pieces over his plate with his fork, and swallowed without masticating. Occasionally he glanced round, and pulled the salt or mustard towards his plate with a brusque, almost angry gesture. At the
table

table next to him sat an older man, with grey head and beard, and thick eyebrows under which were handsome grey eyes. He was glancing casually at a newspaper.

I began to marvel at the contrast between the two men, to picture to myself a thousand scenes to illustrate the calm, placid temperament of the one, the nervous irritability of the other. I let the two figures wander down the vistas of my imagination, and stared blankly in front of me, till the whole scene of the crowded room with its glare of light faded away, and I saw the grey-headed man seated in an armchair in a comfortable, ugly house, telling a fairy tale to three or four little children, whose mother was knitting by the fireside. She was rather pretty, but very frail, and there were light silken curls over her pale forehead. And just when the grey-headed man had reached the climax of his story, I thought, Heaven knows why, that he stopped short, and fixed his eyes upon one of the children, and, amidst cries of "Go on, daddy, do go on," said: "The good fairy never goes on telling stories to little boys whose finger-nails are dirty," and I saw a little boy look sheepishly at his little hands; but before I could go on constructing my picture I was seized with a doubt as to what had made the grey-headed man suddenly so severe, and I came to the conclusion that it was probably because he did not know how the story ended that he suddenly noticed the little boy's dirty finger-nails. And the thought of this amused me so much, that my fancy stopped, and I found myself looking again at the two men before me in the long, bright café, and the smoke of a cigarette, which the grey-headed man was smoking, floated under my nostrils, and the dominoes clattered again in various parts of the room, and I heard the babble of innumerable voices.

By this time the nightmare had passed from me, and I felt much surprise and curiosity when I observed that the two men

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were talking to each other. The grey-headed man was holding the newspaper a little way from him as he listened to the other, who, while diligently pursuing his food across his plate, threw out a sentence here and there with the same irregular brusquerie as he had displayed when he pulled the salt or mustard towards him. When he had ejaculated a few words he seemed to return to his food with greater voracity than ever, and cut it about savagely.

"I never read a newspaper," he said; it's such a damn waste of time. One might be eating or drinking all the while."

The other murmured a feeble protest. He looked as if he were absolutely incapable of understanding that sort of man. His face expressed a disapproval which was at once polite, tolerant, and perplexed.

"Waste of time," repeated the fierce man; and then rather louder, "Waste of time!" and he subsided into his plate, which clinked with the blows of his knife and fork. When he had swept it absolutely bare he threw them both into it, pushed it from him, and said: "The food's beastly."

The old man smiled pleasantly.

"You can get a good dinner at about two places in London, and I'm sick of both of them. Here it's beastly, I tell you."

"Why come here?" asked the other mildly.

"Why come here?" he retorted quickly. "Why? Ha! ha! Why, indeed! A very good question."

But he made no attempt to answer it.

"You can't get a decent La Rose here," he went on, and there was an almost piteous ring in his voice. "Their wines taste as if they'd been bottled in a sewer. I had a wine last week at the Café Rouge. That was a queenly wine, sir, queenly," he said, as if you could not find a more beautifully appropriate epithet. "I say it was queenly, and I think I know a good wine. I was
once

once wine-taster to our club, the Corsican, sir—and they had a devilish good cook, I may tell you. Well, sir, I tasted twenty-two glasses of champagne in the dark, and they didn't stump me over a single vintage. What's more, just before they turned up the gas Tommy Webster gave me a mixed glass, sir, and I told him the three different years of which it was made up," and he thumped the table so that the plates and glasses jumped and shivered. Then he looked defiantly at his neighbour, who, somewhat confused, murmured: "Dear, dear, you surprise me."

"When I was acting in Hull, sir," he went on, suddenly, "there was a devilish pretty girl in our company. Her name was Tremaine, sir—Kitty Tremaine. We used to act together twenty years ago." He passed his hand over his face. "Do you know the Golden Mermaid?" he continued. "No, I suppose you don't. It's the oldest hotel in Hull. We all went there one summer afternoon after we'd given a morning performance of Hamlet, and in the garden of that hotel, sir, I drank the finest champagne I ever tasted in my life. We sat round a table under a large tree. We were all very tired. I had been playing Polonius, a Captain, and most of the Prince of Denmark; and Kitty Tremaine was Ophelia, sir. I'm spinning you no yarn. I remember how many of us there were; just eight. And the Queen kept on her stage dress, as it was cooler for her, and we had to play again in the evening. Ophelia had left some flowers in her hair, too," and his voice grew thick with emotion.

"Well, we drank four bottles of that champagne, sir," he added, with the air of a man who has been led into a pleasing digression and returns to his subject with a wrench. "And in between the bottles we danced round the tree. We got a fiddler to fiddle for us, and we brought out the hostess, and we sang a chorus."

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He was growing more and more excited, and, as he spoke, waved his arms in imitation of a dance.

"And I made it up with the Queen, sir, over a glaas of that champagne. She said she knew I never meant badly all the time. No more I did. I never could see what there was against the Queen. And so we kissed while we were dancing and made friends, although in a couple of hours we had to begin quarrelling again to please the people. And when the others were tired I did my great speech at the end of the second act, and everybody clapped, and said I was sure to make a fortune. Sure to make a fortune," he repeated, contemptuously, piteously, with a little laugh at himself.

The grey-headed man sat listening now without venturing to interrupt the speaker with any remarks of his own.

"What a beautiful Ophelia she was, sir. You never saw a finer arm. It reminded one of Siddons'. Only it was finer, sir, I say finer," he went on, as if fearing a protest. "Ophelia, I did love you once," he added, more calmly, as he made a mock gesture of devotion to his neighbour.

"I always considered the conduct of the Prince most reprehensible. Perhaps you won't believe me when I tell you that it was with great difficulty, very great difficulty, that I could ever be persuaded to act that part."

He pronounced the word "very" impressively, and as if it were spelt *vai-ree*.

"You have no idea what unfeeling people managers are, and my nature has always been a sensitive one. Redmayne, our manager, was as cold as a stone, sir. No more humanity than a rock, sir, or—or the leg of this table," he added, trying to enforce the truth of his statement by the use of an illustration close to hand from which the other could not escape.

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"I was nearly turned out of that company, sir, because I refused to spout some lines that were brutal, and that no gentleman could allow himself to use. I never could play a villain. It cut me to the quick, sir."

The actor was growing tired with his own loquacity, and the grey-headed man was drawing more and more into his shell. He was attempting, ineffectually, to slip the newspaper between himself and the speaker without attracting his notice. But every time that he made an advance of a few inches in lifting the paper from the table the other gave a fresh emphasis to what he was saying, and fixed the offender with his sharp, restless eyes.

In the middle of a long speech about a play called "Vendetta," in which he had acted the part of the King of Naples for fourteen hundred nights until he "really felt the part so much, sir, that it was a struggle for me to leave my palace on the stage, and climb up five flights of stairs to my humble lodging in the town——" He broke off abruptly, and then, waving his hand theatrically, began to declaim with an abundance of false emphasis :

" Indeed this counsellor
Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,
Who always was a foolish prating knave.
Come sir, to draw toward an end with you."

I had risen to go, but stood irresolutely watching the stagey magnificence of his address to the grey-headed man, and enjoying the grand ineptitude with which he delivered the last line, with its absurd pause on the word "end," which he almost shouted across the table.

He turned aside to wave his hand in parting salutation to the Queen, and closed the scene with the words "Good-night, mother," in the accents of which lingered the tone of false tragedy
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in which he had recited the lines. But before the last syllable had fallen from his lips a change came over his face, one of those changes that reveal the intrusion of an unexpected emotion into the mind of the speaker, an emotion that sweeps everything before it.

The wave of the hand died away, and the arm fell a little helplessly to his side. All the fierceness fled from his face, and into his eyes came an almost despairing look mingled with one of fear, as if a shadow had suddenly risen by his side. With the articulation of those two words some undercurrent of his life rose to the top and drowned his self-assurance so that he sat there broken, transfigured, silent. And whereas before he had seemed only sordid, tawdry, fugitive, he was now exalted, inexplicable, eternal, touched to beauty by the stroke of humanity which had felled him.

As we made our way to the street I could scarcely believe that this was the same man. Behind the seat which we had left sat the young man, motionless as before, with his head in his hands, conspicuous amid the bustle and movement that was round him. In the corner of the room two Spaniards were quarrelling over a game of chess.

Who shall guess what chained the youth's head to his hands? Shall a man presume to explain what made the Spaniards to quarrel, or why that garrulous actor was struck dumb? And how came it that for many days and nights I was haunted by this fragment of the actor's rambling speech, "Ophelia had left some flowers in her hair too"?

II—The Countess

Do you know these moments? When you have come home from a dance, or a dinner, at some house where there have been crowds of people, and much talk and laughter and noise. You enter your solitary room and all is perfectly still and dark, and it seems to you that the rest of the world are moving, growing older, suffering the pain of life to eat them up slowly but surely. Men whom you have known as boys are grey-headed, and talk of their youth as a thing divine, lighted by the halo of a dead past. Women whom you have seen young and fair and merry are old and unlovely: the light of romance has died from their eyes, and their vanity sits upon their faces like a scar.

It was at such a moment as this that I stood lost in a melancholy wonder with the match against the matchbox, hesitating to strike, reluctant to dissipate the sweet pain of the emotion by the flare of the tiny torch which should reveal with dim certainty the familiar objects in my sitting-room, when I heard a prolonged trumpeting sound from the floor below which it was impossible to mistake. For it was the sound of somebody blowing a nose.

However disposed I might have been to ignore the origin of such a sound, to clothe it in a fancy more in accordance with the poetry of my mood, I was not permitted to indulge in any such alluring illusion, for the sound was twice reiterated, each time with growing emphasis and sonority, and with the irresistible conviction that it came from a nose, and a very powerful nose too, I lighted my candle, hurried into the next room and went to bed.

The next morning being anxious to know who occupied the floor below I inquired of the servant, and was told that it was

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"the Countess." When I went on to ask what her name was my curiosity met with a check, for the girl answered, "Oh, she 'ave a lot of names she do," which I took as a well-merited rebuke for the impertinence of the question.

During the week, however, I learned two important facts. One was that the name of the Countess was Cunégonde de Blum de Cavagnac, by which she was addressed in full on the envelopes of all her letters, which sometimes lay on the hall table, sometimes on the top of a coal scuttle that had strayed into the staircase, and sometimes on a plaster statue of the Queen, which stands on a bracket on the first floor landing, and seems to me to look particularly peevish and ill-tempered whenever it is crowned with a letter addressed to the Countess. On most of the envelopes the name took up two lines, and I can only remember one in which the Cavagnac was included in the first line, and then it wriggled down the side in lame, helpless fashion.

The other fact that I learned was that the Countess had large feet, for on coming home rather late one evening I passed her shoes which keep sentinel at her door, and observed that they gaped a good deal, and that they were larger than my own.

Apart from the fact that she would blow her nose in an aggressive way, there was only one trick of the Countess which stirred in me a feeling of animosity. This was her habit of retiring punctually at eleven o'clock, and slamming her door violently and then locking it with as much noise as she could. This conduct seemed to me defiant, almost polemical. An ill-natured person might go further and stigmatise it as forward.

But I had my revenge, for one evening at five minutes to eleven I went into my bedroom and slammed my door and locked it and unlocked it and relocked it some six or seven times, then waited breathlessly to see what she would do, and on the whole I
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am disposed to look upon what followed as an apology. At a few minutes past eleven o'clock she retired, slamming her door rather less violently, I thought, than usual, and it was quite a quarter of an hour before the door was locked, and then it was locked very gently. On the other hand she must have blown her nose at least seven or eight times, for many times when I was just dropping to sleep I was awakened by the stern notes.

The next evening, as I returned late, she had already retired, and finding a dead narcissus on the staircase I dropped it into the gulf of one of her shoes on my way to the top floor, hoping that she might look upon the offering as a sign of peace between us.

At about this time I noticed that the servant began to allude very frequently, and always in a tone of irony, to the Countess, and from her manner I perceived that unless I myself were to invite her confidence, the day would come when she would no longer be able to contain herself, and a storm of communications would rain upon my head. Knowing from former experience of lodging-house servants that the storm, when it burst, would be a fierce one, I thought it wise to ask a few questions about the Countess before the store of the girl's information should become too vast to be any longer contained.

I was not mistaken in my surmise of the situation ; for I had barely opened my mouth upon the subject when Sarah (for of course the servant's name was Sarah) declared first that the Countess was a funny woman, and before I could remember any instances of wittiness in her conduct, that she was a beastly woman. She went on to explain, with masterly inconsequence, that she was very rich, a Roman *Catholic*, only ate bread and butter for dinner, and without a shadow of a doubt was wrong in her head. When I asked what led to her belief, she replied that

he Countess rose at unearthly hours in the morning to go and pray, and that she always insisted on having a jug of hot water before leaving the house ; which of course necessitated Sarah's rising at unearthly hours, though I should not think that it caused her to pray, to judge from the language in which she alluded to the matter when we were talking it over together.

She admitted that the Countess gave heaps of money to the poor, but very rightly observed that before indulging in luxuries of this kind it was only a duty to "live decent yourself." She said that she had no patience with such a woman, and at the same time gave me to understand that she was putting the Countess through a course of training by which she might with time acquire that virtue herself, for she made it a rule never to answer her bell until it had rung half-a-dozen times or more.

This was information which I might have assumed from my own experience of Sarah's character ; so I hastened to lead her to a department of the matter which should be more fruitful of interest to me. I asked her whether the Countess was really a religious woman, and was told with many contemptuous comments that she mumbled and muttered about her room a great deal, and spent a great deal of her time with a certain Father Sebastian, also that she "made up something dreadful, which I'd be ashamed to do if I called myself a Christian." The final taunt, for which I had been waiting, consisted in the remark that she was only a foreign woman after all, and what could you expect ?

I was glad of the enlightened view which I was thus enabled to take of the Countess, and after ascertaining that she might be fifty, but that she heaped such clouds of powder upon her face that it was impossible to tell what she really looked like, my curiosity was appeased, and I resolved to banish the Countess from my thoughts. Taking everything into consideration, I was glad that

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it had not yet fallen to my lot to look upon her. I had come to regard her as one of the innumerable fragments of life with which our minds are peopled: she was a lodging-house myth, and I was not going to seek behind appearances for a meaning which might turn the myth into a mere sordid piece of actuality.

While I was resting in the enjoyment of this belief, I had occasion to seek an interview with the landlady on the subject of my weekly bill, and in the course of conversation we chanced upon the topic of servants. To my surprise, for in my mind I had always bestowed upon Sarah the sole virtue of honesty, she informed me that the girl was a most unscrupulous liar, of whom she hoped very shortly to be rid. The statement troubled me, because my myth was in danger. What after all if the Countess Cunégonde de Blum de Cavagnac were really a perfectly ordinary intelligible person? What if the allegation that she made up was untrue? What if she really did pray earnestly and devoutly, and denied herself the bare necessities of life to benefit the poor? What if the time spent with Father Sebastian was all devoted to pious confession?

No doubt I had wronged her, mentally only—but still. . . . Ought I not to have taken care to prevent my imagination running away with me? After all, could you not hear from her long imperious knock at the door that she belonged to an old and aristocratic French family? How could I have been so blind as to be misled by the chatter of a servant, whose honesty I was foolish enough never to suspect? But then, what if the landlady lied? That was also possible, and yet

I was in an agony of suspense over the matter, when a new episode occurred. One evening there was much confusion on the floor below: the opening and shutting of innumerable doors, the sound of voices, and of hurrying footsteps. On inquiring the
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cause of the disturbance the next morning, I was told that the Countess was taken ill, and Sarah added, by way of contemptuous explanation, that she had "under eaten herself."

I remained silent, not knowing how much to believe, and how much to disbelieve. "Cruel liar," I thought to myself. "Perhaps the poor lady is dying, while you are rending her character," and I felt half inclined to send in some jelly from Gunter's with my compliments. But I refrained, thinking it wiser to allow events to shape themselves.

On the third day after the Countess was taken ill, as I sat writing at my window one morning, a handsome phaeton and pair drove up our humble street and stopped at our door. It was driven by a tall, well-dressed man of about thirty, by whose side sat a pretty little girl of thirteen or fourteen.

I heard the window below mine opened, and the gentleman who was driving shouted in a clear, pleasant voice, "*Ça va mieux ?*" And then I heard the reply from below, "*Mieux, merci,*" and the window was closed again, and the phaeton drove off.

"She does belong to an old and aristocratic French family," I thought to myself, remorsefully, and I tried to remember some historical peg upon which to hang the Cavagnacs; but though I was quite certain I had come across the name in my journeys through the French historians, I could not place it, and sat wondering, cursing my own forgetfulness.

The morning was fair and clear, and the sun shone peacefully upon the opposite houses, with their tufts of trees and shrubs beginning to sprout. But the dismal succession of five notes on a harmonium which had gone on droning ever since eight o'clock drew nearer, and I laid down my pen in despair to wait till the noise had passed. The fairness of the weather tempted me to open the window.

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I leaned out, and watched the characteristic movement of the street, the handful of tiny boys playing and squabbling among each other, the girl wandering about idly in the large garden opposite my window, now disappearing, now emerging from behind a screen of trees. Then my eye fell below upon the balcony beneath my window, and I saw a very strange sight.

A lady with bare arms, and a loose black gauze thrown round her shoulders, was standing with her head bent forward and all her hair down. It hung in loose, damp strips from round a bald patch in the middle of her head, upon which it was my ill fortune to gaze. While she held the gauze across her shoulders with one hand, with the other she was frantically waving a bright scarlet Japanese fan backwards and forwards against her wet hair.

The strangeness of the sight restored my temper, and I blessed the harmonium that had disturbed me in my work. Had it not been for those five dismal notes, I should never have opened the window, never have been permitted to enjoy the novelty of beholding my *Cunégonde* for the first time in so grotesque a situation. My wounded conscience was healed. I could now from personal observation take my own view of the Countess, and dispense with the second-hand versions of the landlady and Sarah.

My first feelings were those of gratitude to the Countess for providing me with so unexpected an apparition. I then began to reason with myself as to what might be inferred from it. Obviously there was nothing abnormal in even a Countess washing her head and drying her hair in the sun, nor was it a very profound guide to her character.

And then the complexity of my thought grew clear, and all my difficulties melted away as a breath from a glass. My landlady's view and Sarah's view were only charming irrelevancies, which
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had momentarily obscured my view of the Countess as a lodging-house myth. The vision on the balcony restored my Cunégonde to the proper place in my mind. And I trust that no future view of her will ever again tempt me to build an incomplete whole out of a complete fragment, nor can any one persuade me that real people, and especially Countesses, ever dry their hair with Japanese fans upon balconies in the early morning of a fine spring day.

III—The General

(Dedicated to H—)

How I first saw him it would be impossible to tell, because by this time he has become a sacred institution; nor is it possible to imagine a period of my life when the General did not exist.

All the foundations of the Constitution might be done away, Empires might crumble, and Monarchs topple on their thrones, but so long as I was left in undisturbed possession of my General, I do sincerely believe that I should remain calm, because as I never read a newspaper, and have not gone out for the last ten years there is no reason to suppose that these events should come to my knowledge; and my friends have too much respect for my view of life ever to communicate to me news which I am bound to regard as irrelevant.

When I say that I never read a newspaper, I am not speaking the truth, because I do read a newspaper every morning of my life; but it is always the same newspaper, and I never read more than half a column, and it is always the same half-column. I
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have had that newspaper on my table ever since I took possession of my house, and it has turned to quite a rich yellow colour.

Nothing has ever been written in a daily newspaper that was not written in another daily newspaper of an earlier date. Cards were invented to amuse a mad king, and newspapers to amuse his mad subjects, because no sane person can want to go on reading a daily record of the universal imbecilities of people in office and people just out of office, people married and people divorced, of performances that are going to take place and performances that have taken place, weather that was wet and is going to be fine.

But I telescope from one digression into another, and so will seek to trace my way back through the half-column of the newspaper that I do read to the General who is a sacred institution.

It is now many years since I lived in a lodging. My mode of life has changed. Fate has cast me into a house in the Cromwell Road, and I have become so incorporate with this house that it seems to me as if I had never lived anywhere else, and the experiences of my past life are no more to me than a string of pretty tales. I have developed a kind of long religion for myself within the walls of my house, and the General is a kind of high priest.

Every morning, as soon as I have breakfasted, I read my little half-column earnestly, devoutly, and with a fresh sense of gratitude. It is headed "Singular Affair in the Caucasus," and is an account of a small Russian peasant woman who climbed upon the roof of a very tall church with three little children. When she had reached the highest part of the building, she proceeded to carefully undress each child in the full light of the sun, and threw them one by one on to the sharp spires that rose below her. Of course they were instantly killed, and when she had thus used all the pieces

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in her game, she proceeded to undress herself, and then jumped after her children, and was killed too.

With the exception of the heading, and the observation that there was a growing population of insane people in these districts who were constantly acting in this fashion, there is no further comment on the occurrence.

To me this has always seemed the noblest conception of destruction that a human creature has ever devised, and the madness of this Russian peasant woman seems to have had something in it akin to the divine. Her selection of the church suggests that she carried out her intention with the earnestness and solemnity of purpose of one celebrating a religious rite. Her undressing her children and herself before dying, seems to me to have been a kind of symbolical renunciation of the things of the world. Then comes the violent, self-imposed destruction—death in an act of calm, deliberate revolt. All the tiny chains that hold man to life are flooded and wrecked by an ocean of desire for an annihilation of self. Could anything be nobler, simpler?

To read this account, then, is one of the daily tasks of my life and to ponder and gather fresh truths from it. What has it to do with the General? Why, only this: that when I look up from my newspaper across the road, my eye always falls, and has fallen ever since I can remember, upon the bay window of a tall, grey, corner house, and more often than not, I have seen an old, white-haired, purple-faced man standing by a wire cage with a parrot in it, and fiercely stroking a long white moustache.

As I have already said, I can remain perfectly calm under a change of Government, or a war in China, or a sensational murder outside the radius of the parish, but I confess that life would be robbed of one of its few attractions for me were that corner house to change hands. More than that, the alteration of a single piece
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of furniture in his room would be sufficient to cause me serious discomfort.

When I am in a depressed state of mind, I always begin to think what on earth I should do if, for instance, the parrot were to die. That the General should die, is, of course, a wild impossibility, which I have never seriously contemplated. But it might easily happen that the parrot should catch a chill, or, what is more likely, that a new servant should come and displace the furniture.

Curiously enough, I have never seen a servant in the room during the whole course of my observation. In fact, the only woman who occasionally lightens the dingy, dusty-looking room with her presence is a relation of the General, a sallow-faced, tired-looking young woman of about thirty, who comes to stay with him from time to time for periods of a week.

I believe she is his daughter, the only one of his children with whom he has not finally quarrelled, because, from a general impression which some years' observation has enabled me to gather of the household, I am quite convinced that he had many children, and that he never could get on with any of them. Even the girl who takes pity on him now that he is old, though by no means infirm, as I shall soon show, must have married against his wishes, for she never comes with her husband, as you might expect, and she never stays for more than a week.

The General stays all day in the front room, except when he eats, and then he retires to a room at the back of the house, where my eyes are prevented from following him.

The General does read the newspaper, and a different one every morning, because he betrays emotions which vary according to the news. He sits at the back of the room in a large armchair, smoking and reading.

Once

Once I saw him crunch up the newspaper in a paroxysm of rage, and jump up out of his chair, knocking over a photograph on the table to my infinite distress, for, from my side of the way, I had studied that photograph for years, and it had become as much one of my household gods as I knew it was one of his.

What it was that annoyed him I don't know, but he strode about the room, and at last came to the window, and his eyes looked as if they would hop out of their sockets right over the way to where I sat in a condition of abject terror.

He pulled his moustache so fiercely that any other moustache would have come off under the tension, and to my disordered imagination his moustache seemed to grow in length, so as to sweep two-thirds of the way round the bay window.

Every now and then he cast a savage side-glance at the parrot, which was swinging impertinently within its cage and winking; yes, I declare that I saw it myself, winking at him.

I saw his lips move quickly and both his arms wrathfully raised, and I shuddered and turned quite sick with fear. A mist came over my eyes. I could look no more: in another instant the cage would lie in twisted fragments on the floor and the bird's brains would bespatter the ceiling. . . .

When I had recovered myself sufficiently to look again I found he was at the other end of the room, reverently setting the photograph in its old place upon the table, and spasmodically shaking his head, which glowed like a hot coal.

Thank Heaven! the parrot was comfortably crawling up his cage upside down, and the photograph was intact, and so I could once more look upon the little picture which did not look larger than a five-shilling piece from my window. It was the half-length portrait of a young lady in evening dress, cut square, with a feather trimming running round the edge of the bodice, and she had
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had a fuzzy head of hair ; to all of which details, though I suppose I must have guessed at them, I am ready to swear.

Who the lady was of course I do not know, but that she was a person much adored by the General is obvious from his conduct on the occasion to which I have alluded, and she certainly was not in the least like the daughter whom he hated less cordially than his other children, and who came from time to time to stay with him.

She looked a long-suffering young woman, and had a very hard time of it whenever she stayed with her father, because of his ungovernable temper. For instance, I would dimly discern the two figures seated at the back of the room, apparently engaged in conversation, when there would suddenly be an upheaval of the furniture, a tumultuous confusion, of which I was vaguely aware from my place of observation, and then the girl would wander away from him to the window and look out ruefully upon the row of dull grey houses opposite, with their uniform air of sordid respectability. She would stand and watch the people pass under the window, the carts and carriages roll by, and sometimes she would rub her finger upon the dust-covered glass and make patterns on it.

But she was never allowed to indulge her resentment for long, for out of the darkness would emerge the prancing figure of the General, who would bear swiftly down upon her and re-open the argument until she fled into another part of the room.

Not very long ago I observed with great anxiety that the General did not appear as usual in his sitting-room, and I had to content myself with watching the parrot, whose gymnastics and whose cold insolent yellow eye began to wear sadly upon my nerves. Evidently the General was in bed, and, curiously enough, his bedroom was not on the floor above his sitting-room, but at the top of his house.

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I have often fancied him climbing up, and puffing at each step, damning those infernal staircases, and asking questions which he did not intend to be answered, then mildly subsiding into a growl of "puffickly redicklerse."

Why he slept at the top of the house I cannot for the life of me imagine, and what he did with so large a house all by himself was another mystery. The drawing-room floor was shut up and the blinds all drawn, and so it has been ever since I can remember, so that the outside of the house presents a very strange appearance. There is the basement and ground-floor, in which is the sitting-room, with the parrot in the window, round which are tall, dirty, bedraggled muslin curtains; then comes the blind-drawn array of windows in the next three floors, that seem to shroud from my vision some ghost which the General has locked out of sight; and then, right at the top, comes an array of smaller windows, hung with little frilled curtains of spotted muslin that was once white, but has never been anything but a faint grey as far back as my memory will take me. These must be the windows of his bedroom, and I cannot help thinking that those intermediate floors were used in the time of his wife, and that they contained a nursery for the children, all of which are such disagreeable associations to the old man, that he shut up the whole three floors as soon as his wife had died, which I imagine to have been pretty soon; for I have never set eyes on her or on any young children, ever since I have lived in the opposite house.

What the General was like when he was ill I shiver to think; how he must have heaved under the bed clothes in those waves of passion that came over him, how impatient he must have been, and how rude to the doctors.

Not long ago he appeared in the sitting-room again, and I saw him go through a set of manœuvres all by himself one afternoon.

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He marched up and down the room with a very warlike air and brandished a stick at the pictures and ornaments, which he was treating as a substitute for the regiments he had once commanded. All the time that he moved he was issuing orders, and his moustache grew more pointed as he roared out the words of command. At last he charged against the mantelpiece, broke a vase, the fragments of which he flung all over the room, and then sank exhausted into a chair.

Even the parrot was frightened out of his customary insolence and folded himself into quite a small heap at the corner of the cage, and the General never moved for the rest of the afternoon. There he sat until the invading darkness of the winter day crept into the room, blotting the picture on the table from my sight, and wrapping the warrior in an impenetrable gloom. I suppose he imagined himself wounded in the battlefield, trampled to death by horses, with the noise of the cannon and the smell of powder all round him.

The next day the sky went through every shade of grey from early morning to evening. The street looked so mournful that I had to read my half-column about the mad Russian peasant several times before I could make up my mind not to follow her example. Perhaps my chief reasons for refraining from doing so lay in the facts that I knew of no church that would be sufficiently high, that had I known of one I should never guess how to get to the top of it, that, to accomplish my purpose, I should have had to go out and so violate the fundamental dogma of my religion, and lastly, that I had no children to destroy.

I looked over the way for consolation, looked to a quarter which has never disappointed me yet, and saw that the General and his daughter were moving restlessly about the room oppressed by the same sense of desolation as that from which I myself was suffering.

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The girl wandered to the window as usual, and began to play with the parrot. She took him out of the cage and he walked up her arm bobbing his head majestically at each step. A moment afterwards, the General also came to the window, and their lips moved in conversation while through the gathering darkness I saw the General scratch first the parrot's head, and then his own in a soft, undecided way, that made me think that somehow he must have confused himself with the bird.

A milk-boy ran along the street with a cart full of clattering cans, of which the dimly reflected image passed, like a film, across the pane of glass behind which the two figures stood playing near the cage. The General was engaging the parrot's attention, and the girl was gazing again mournfully into the street, deprived of the distraction which, in an inspired moment of an afternoon spent in waiting wearily for tea-time, she had discovered in the caressing of the bird.

Suddenly, just as the milk-boy echoed his dismal cry down the street, the General tossed the bird off his hand into the cage, shook the clenched fist of his other hand at it in his most violent manner, and stalked up and down in the full enjoyment of the greatest rage I had ever seen him indulge.

What the bird had done to this other hand I cannot say, but he held it away from him suspended in the air, and through the fierce anger which burned in his eyes I fancied I read a look of inexpressible wonder at the enormity of the offence which the bird had committed. His daughter, meanwhile, hurried about the room in a flustered condition, and the General once more approached the window, and stroked his moustache with the hand which was still undesecrated. Nor could the maimed Nelson himself have put more grandeur into the gesture.

We met the General at the window. At the window let us
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take our leave of him, and if you are not satisfied after all that I have said that he is a General I may tell you that I do not think I only dreamed that one afternoon I saw the General ride off to a *levée*, his moustaches drooping nobly in two directions out of a hansom. He was dressed in a uniform the colour of which was scarcely to be distinguished from that of his face, and on his knees lay a magnificent black-plumed hat which was so high that, had he put it on his head, it must inevitably have stuck out at the top of the cab and looked ridiculous.