

## A Responsibility

By Henry Harland

IT has been an episode like a German sentence, with its predicate at the end. Trifling incidents occurred at haphazard, as it seemed, and I never guessed they were by way of making sense. Then, this morning, somewhat of the suddenest, came the verb and the full stop.

Yesterday I should have said there was nothing to tell ; to-day there is too much. The announcement of his death has caused me to review our relations, with the result of discovering my own part to have been that of an accessory before the fact. I did not kill him (though, even there, I'm not sure I didn't lend a hand), but I might have saved his life. It is certain that he made me signals of distress—faint, shy, tentative, but unmistakable—and that I pretended not to understand : just barely dipped my colours, and kept my course. Oh, if I had dreamed that his distress was extreme—that he was on the point of foundering and going down ! However, that doesn't exonerate me : I ought to have turned aside to find out. It was a case of criminal negligence. That he, poor man, probably never blamed me, only adds to the burden on my conscience. He had got past blaming people, I dare say, and doubtless merely lumped me with the rest—with the sum-total of things that made life unsupportable. Yet, for a moment, when  
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we first met, his face showed a distinct glimmering of hope ; so perhaps there was a distinct disappointment. He must have had so many disappointments, before it came to—what it came to ; but it wouldn't have come to that if he had got hardened to them. Possibly they had lost their outlines, and merged into one dull general disappointment that was too hard to bear. I wonder whether the Priest and the Levite were smitten with remorse after they had passed on. Unfortunately, in this instance, no Good Samaritan followed.

The bottom of our long *table d'hôte* was held by a Frenchman, a Normand, a giant, but a pallid and rather flabby giant, whose name, if he had another than Monsieur, I never heard. He professed to be a painter, used to sketch birds and profiles on the back of his menu-card between the courses, wore shamelessly the multi-coloured rosette of a foreign order in his buttonhole, and talked with a good deal of physiognomy. I had the corner seat at his right, and was flanked in turn by Miss Etta J. Hicks, a bouncing young person from Chicago, beyond whom, like rabbits in a company of foxes, cowered Mr. and Mrs. Jordan P. Hicks, two broken-spirited American parents. At Monsieur's left, and facing me, sat Colonel Escott, very red and cheerful ; then a young man who called the Colonel Cornel, and came from Dublin, proclaiming himself a barr'ster, and giving his name as Flarty, though on his card it was written Flaherty ; and then Sir Richard Maistre. After him, a diminishing perspective of busy diners—for purposes of conversation, so far as we were concerned, inhabitants of the Fourth Dimension.

Of our immediate constellation Sir Richard Maistre was the only member on whom the eye was tempted to linger. The others were obvious—simple equations, soluble "in the head." But he called for slate and pencil, offered materials for doubt and speculation,

tion, though it would not have been easy to tell wherein they lay. What displayed itself to a cursory inspection was quite unremarkable: simply a decent-looking young Englishman, of medium stature, with square-cut plain features, reddish-brown hair, grey eyes, and clothes and manners of the usual pattern. Yet, showing through this ordinary surface, there was something cryptic. For me, at any rate, it required a constant effort not to stare at him. I felt it from the beginning, and I felt it till the end: a teasing curiosity, a sort of magnetism that drew my eyes in his direction. I was always on my guard to resist it, and that was really the inception of my neglect of him. From I don't know what stupid motive of pride, I was anxious that he shouldn't discern the interest he had excited in me; so I paid less ostensible attention to him than to the others, who excited none at all. I tried to appear unconscious of him as a detached personality, to treat him as merely a part of the group as a whole. Then I improved such occasions as presented themselves to steal glances at him, to study him *à la dérobée*—groping after the quality, whatever it was, that made him a puzzle—seeking to formulate, to classify him.

Already, at the end of my first dinner, he had singled himself out and left an impression. I went into the smoking-room, and began to wonder, over a cup of coffee and a cigarette, who he was. I had not heard his voice; he hadn't talked much, and his few observations had been murmured into the ears of his next neighbours. All the same, he had left an impression, and I found myself wondering who he was, the young man with the square-cut features and the reddish-brown hair. I have said that his features were square-cut and plain, but they were small and carefully finished, and as far as possible from being common. And his grey eyes, though not conspicuous for size or beauty, had a character, an expression. They *said* something, something I couldn't

couldn't perfectly translate, something shrewd, humorous, even perhaps a little caustic, and yet sad ; not violently, not rebelliously sad (I should never have dreamed that it was a sadness which would drive him to desperate remedies), but rather resignedly, submissively sad, as if he had made up his mind to put the best face on a sorry business. This was carried out by a certain abruptness, a slight lack of suavity, in his movements, in his manner of turning his head, of using his hands. It hinted a degree of determination which, in the circumstances, seemed superfluous. He had unfolded his napkin and attacked his dinner with an air of resolution, like a man with a task before him, who mutters, "Well, it's got to be done, and I'll do it." At a hazard, he was two- or three-and-thirty, but below his neck he looked older. He was dressed like everybody, but his costume had, somehow, an effect of soberness beyond his years. It was decidedly not smart, and smartness was the dominant note at the Hôtel d'Angleterre.

I was still more or less vaguely ruminating him, in a corner of the smoking-room, on that first evening, when I became aware that he was standing near me. As I looked up, our eyes met, and for the fraction of a second fixed each other. It was barely the fraction of a second, but it was time enough for the transmission of a message. I knew as certainly as if he had said so that he wanted to speak, to break the ice, to scrape an acquaintance ; I knew that he had approached me and was loitering in my neighbourhood for that specific purpose. I *don't* know, I have studied the psychology of the moment in vain to understand, why I felt a perverse impulse to put him off. I was interested in him, I was curious about him ; and there he stood, testifying that the interest was reciprocal, ready to make the advances, only waiting for a glance or a motion of encouragement ; and I deliberately secluded myself

myself behind my coffee-cup and my cigarette smoke. I suppose it was the working of some obscure mannish vanity—of what in a woman would have defined itself as coyness and coquetry. If he wanted to speak—well, let him speak; I wouldn't help him. I could realise the processes of *his* mind even more clearly than those of my own—his desire, his hesitancy. He was too timid to leap the barriers; I must open a gate for him. He hovered near me for a minute longer, and then drifted away. I felt his disappointment, his spiritual shrug of the shoulders; and I perceived rather suddenly that I was disappointed myself. I must have been hoping all along that he would speak *quand même*, and now I was moved to run after him, to call him back. That, however, would imply a consciousness of guilt, an admission that my attitude had been intentional; so I kept my seat, making a mental rendezvous with him for the morrow.

Between my Irish *vis-à-vis* Flaherty and myself there existed no such strain. He presently sauntered up to me, and dropped into conversation as easily as if we had been old friends.

“Well, and are you here for your health or your entertainment?” he began. “But I don't need to ask that of a man who's drinking black coffee and smoking tobacco at this hour of the night. I'm the only invalid at our end of the table, and I'm no better than an amateur meself. It's a barrister's throat I have—I caught it waiting for briefs in me chambers at Doblin.”

We chatted together for a half-hour or so, and before we parted he had given me a good deal of general information—about the town, the natives, the visitors, the sands, the golf-links, the hunting, and, with the rest, about our neighbours at table.

“Did ye notice the pink-faced bald little man at me right? That's Cornel Escott, C.B., retired. He takes a sea-bath every morning, to live up to the letters; and faith, it's an act of heroism,

heroism, no less, in weather the like of this. Three weeks have I been here, and but wan day of sunshine, and the mercury never above fifty. The other fellow, him at me left, is what you'd be slow to suspect by the look of him, I'll go bail; and that's a bar'net, Sir Richard Maistre, with a place in Hampshire, and ten thousand a year if he's a penny. The young lady beside yourself rejoices in the euphonious name of Hicks, and trains her Popper and Mommer behind her like slaves in a Roman triumph. They're Americans, if you must have the truth, though I oughtn't to tell it on them, for I'm an Irishman myself, and its not for the pot to be bearing tales of the kettle. However, their tongues bewray them; so I've violated no confidence."

The knowledge that my young man was a baronet with a place in Hampshire somewhat disenchanted me. A baronet with a place in Hampshire left too little to the imagination. The description seemed to curtail his potentialities, to prescribe his orbit, to connote turnip-fields, house-parties, and a whole system of British commonplace. Yet, when, the next day at luncheon, I again had him before me in the flesh, my interest revived. Its lapse had been due to an association of ideas which I now recognised as unscientific. A baronet with twenty places in Hampshire would remain at the end of them all a human being; and no human being could be finished off in a formula of half a dozen words. Sir Richard Maistre, anyhow, couldn't be. He was enigmatic, and his effect upon me was enigmatic too. Why did I feel that tantalising inclination to stare at him, coupled with that reluctance frankly to engage in talk with him? Why did he attack his luncheon with that appearance of grim resolution? For a minute, after he had taken his seat, he eyed his knife, fork, and napkin, as a labourer might a load that he had to lift, measuring the difficulties he must cope with; then he gave his head a  
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resolute nod, and set to work. To-day, as yesterday, he said very little, murmured an occasional remark into the ear of Flaherty, accompanying it usually with a sudden short smile : but he listened to everything, and did so with apparent appreciation.

Our proceedings were opened by Miss Hicks, who asked Colonel Escott, "Well, Colonel, have you had your bath this morning?"

The Colonel chuckled, and answered, "Oh, yes—yes, yes—couldn't forego my bath, you know—couldn't possibly forego my bath."

"And what was the temperature of the water?" she continued.

"Fifty-two—fifty-two—three degrees warmer than the air—three degrees," responded the Colonel, still chuckling, as if the whole affair had been extremely funny.

"And you, Mr. Flaherty, I suppose you've been to Bayonne?"

"No, I've broken me habit, and not left the hotel."

Subsequent experience taught me that these were conventional modes by which the conversation was launched every day, like the preliminary moves in chess. We had another ritual for dinner : Miss Hicks then inquired if the Colonel had taken his ride, and Flaherty played his game of golf. The next inevitable step was common to both meals. Colonel Escott would pour himself a glass of the *vin ordinaire*, a jug of which was set by every plate, and holding it up to the light, exclaim with simulated gusto, "Ah! Fine old wine! Remarkably full rich flavour!" At this pleasantry we would all gently laugh; and the word was free.

Sir Richard, as I have said, appeared to be an attentive and appreciative listener, not above smiling at our mildest sallies; but watching him out of the corner of an eye, I noticed that my own observations seemed to strike him with peculiar force—which led me to talk *at* him. Why not to him, with him? The interest

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was reciprocal ; he would have liked a dialogue ; he would have welcomed a chance to commence one ; and I could at any instant have given him such a chance. I talked *at* him, it is true ; but I talked *with* Flaherty or Miss Hicks, or *to* the company at large. Of his separate identity he had no reason to believe me conscious. From a mixture of motives, in which I'm not sure that a certain heathenish enjoyment of his embarrassment didn't count for something, I was determined that if he wanted to know me he must come the whole distance ; I wouldn't meet him half-way. Of course I had no idea that it could be a matter of the faintest real importance to the man. I judged his feelings by my own ; and though I was interested in him, I shall have conveyed an altogether exaggerated notion of my interest if you fancy it kept me awake at night. How was I to guess that *his* case was more serious—that he was not simply desirous of a little amusing talk, but starving, starving for a little human sympathy, a little brotherly love and comradeship ?—that he was in an abnormally sensitive condition of mind, where mere-negative unresponsiveness could hurt him like a slight or a rebuff ?

In the course of the week I ran over to Pau, to pass a day with the Winchfields, who had a villa there. When I came back I brought with me all that they (who knew everybody) could tell about Sir Richard Maistre. He was intelligent and amiable, but the shyest of shy men. He avoided general society, frightened away perhaps by the British Mamma, and spent a good part of each year abroad, wandering rather listlessly from town to town. Though young and rich, he was neither fast nor ambitious : the Members' entrance to the House of Commons, the stage-doors of the music halls, were equally without glamour for him ; and if he was a Justice of the Peace and a Deputy Lieutenant, he had become so through the tacit operation of his stake in the country. He had

had chambers in St. James's Street, was a member of the Travellers Club, and played the violin—for an amateur rather well. His brother, Mortimer Maistre, was in diplomacy—at Rio Janeiro or somewhere. His sister had married an Australian, and lived in Melbourne.

At the Hôtel d'Angleterre I found his shyness was mistaken for indifference. He was civil to everybody, but intimate with none. He attached himself to no party, paired off with no individuals. He sought nobody. On the other hand, the persons who went out of their way to seek him, came back, as they felt, repulsed. He had been polite but languid. These, however, were not the sort of persons he would be likely to care for. There prevailed a general conception of him as cold, unsociable. He certainly walked about a good deal alone—you met him on the sands, on the cliffs, in the stiff little streets, rambling aimlessly, seldom with a companion. But to me it was patent that he played the solitary from necessity, not from choice—from the necessity of his temperament. A companion was precisely that which above all things his heart coveted; only he didn't know how to set about annexing one. If he sought nobody, it was because he didn't know how. This was a part of what his eyes said; they bespoke his desire, his perplexity, his lack of nerve. Of the people who put themselves out to seek him, there was Miss Hicks; there were a family from Leeds, named Bunn, a father, mother, son, and two redoubtable daughters, who drank champagne with every meal, dressed in the height of fashion, said their say at the tops of their voices, and were understood to be auctioneers; a family from Bayswater named Krausskopf. I was among those whom he had marked as men he would like to fraternise with. As often as our paths crossed, his eyes told me that he longed to stop and speak, and continue the promenade abreast. I was under the  
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control of a demon of mischief; I took a malicious pleasure in eluding and baffling him—in passing on with a nod. It had become a kind of game; I was curious to see whether he would ever develop sufficient hardihood to take the bull by the horns. After all, from a conventional point of view, my conduct was quite justifiable. I always meant to do better by him next time, and then I always deferred it to the next. But from a conventional point of view my conduct was quite unassailable. I said this to myself when I had momentary qualms of conscience. Now, rather late in the day, it strikes me that the conventional point of view should have been re-adjusted to the special case. I should have allowed for his personal equation.

My cousin Wilford came to Biarritz about this time, stopping for a week, on his way home from a tour in Spain. I couldn't find a room for him at the Hôtel d'Angleterre, so he put up at a rival hostelry over the way; but he dined with me on the evening of his arrival, a place being made for him between mine and Monsieur's. He hadn't been at the table five minutes before the rumour went abroad who he was—somebody had recognised him. Then those who were within reach of his voice listened with all their ears—Colonel Escott, Flaherty, Maistre, and Miss Hicks, of course, who even called him by name: "Oh, Mr. Wilford." "Now, Mr. Wilford," &c. After dinner, in the smoking-room, a cluster of people hung round us; men with whom I had no acquaintance came merrily up and asked to be introduced. Colonel Escott and Flaherty joined us. At the outskirts of the group I beheld Sir Richard Maistre. His eyes (without his realising it perhaps) begged me to invite him, to present him, and I affected not to understand! This is one of the little things I find hardest to forgive myself. My whole behaviour towards the young man is now a subject of self-reproach;

reproach : if it had been different, who knows that the tragedy of yesterday would ever have happened? If I had answered his timid overtures, walked with him, talked with him, cultivated his friendship, given him mine, established a kindly human relation with him, I can't help feeling that he might not have got to such a desperate pass, that I might have cheered him, helped him, saved him. I feel it especially when I think of Wilford. His eyes attested so much ; he would have enjoyed meeting him so keenly. No doubt he was already fond of the man, had loved him through his books, like so many others. If I had introduced him? If we had taken him with us the next morning, on our excursion to Cambo? Included him occasionally in our smokes and parleys?

Wilford left for England without dining again at the Hôtel d'Angleterre. We were busy "doing" the country, and never chanced to be at Biarritz at the dinner-hour. During that week I scarcely saw Sir Richard Maistre.

Another little circumstance that rankles especially now would have been ridiculous, except for the way things have ended. It isn't easy to tell—it was so petty, and I am so ashamed. Colonel Escott had been abusing London, describing it as the least beautiful of the capitals of Europe, comparing it unfavourably to Paris, Vienna, and St. Petersburg. I took up the cudgels in its defence, mentioned its atmosphere, its tone ; Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg were lyric, London was epic ; and so forth and so forth. Then, shifting from the æsthetic to the utilitarian, I argued that of all great towns it was the healthiest, its death-rate was lowest. Sir Richard Maistre had followed my dissertation attentively, and with a countenance that signified approval ; and when, with my reference to the death-rate, I paused, he suddenly burned his ships. He looked me full in the eye, and said, "Thirty-seven, I believe?" His heightened colour, a nervous

movement of the lip, betrayed the effort it had cost him ; but at last he had *done* it—screwed his courage to the sticking-place, and spoken. And I—I can never forget it—I grow hot when I think of it—but I was possessed by a devil. His eyes hung on my face, awaiting my response, pleading for a cue. “Go on,” they urged. “I have taken the first, the difficult step—make the next smoother for me.” And I—I answered lackadaisically, with just a casual glance at him, “I don’t know the figures,” and absorbed myself in my viands.

Two or three days later his place was filled by a stranger, and Flaherty told me that he had left for the Riviera.

All this happened last March at Biarritz. I never saw him again till three weeks ago. It was one of those frightfully hot afternoons in July ; I had come out of my club, and was walking up St. James’s Street, towards Piccadilly ; he was moving in an opposite sense ; and thus we approached each other. He didn’t see me, however, till we had drawn rather near to a conjunction : then he gave a little start of recognition, his eyes brightened, his pace slackened, his right hand prepared to advance itself—and I bowed slightly, and pursued my way ! Don’t ask why I did it. It is enough to confess it, without having to explain it. I glanced backwards, by and by, over my shoulder. He was standing where I had met him, half turned round, and looking after me. But when he saw that I was observing him, he hastily shifted about, and continued his descent of the street.

That was only three weeks ago. Only three weeks ago I still had it in my power to act. I am sure—I don’t know why I am sure, but I *am* sure—that I could have deterred him. For all that one can gather from the brief note he left behind, it seems he had no special, definite motive ; he had met with no losses, got into no scrape ; he was simply tired and sick of life and of himself.

“I have

“I have no friends,” he wrote. “Nobody will care. People don’t like me; people avoid me. I have wondered why; I have tried to watch myself, and discover; I have tried to be decent. I suppose it must be that I emit a repellent fluid; I suppose I am a ‘bad sort.’” He had a morbid notion that people didn’t like him, that people avoided him! Oh, to be sure, there were the Bunns and the Krausskops and their ilk, plentiful enough: but he understood what it was that attracted *them*. Other people, the people *he* could have liked, kept their distance—were civil, indeed, but reserved. He wanted bread, and they gave him a stone. It never struck him, I suppose, that they attributed the reserve to him. But I—I knew that his reserve was only an effect of his shyness; I *knew* that he wanted bread: and that knowledge constituted my moral responsibility. I didn’t know that his need was extreme; but I have tried in vain to absolve myself with the reflection. I ought to have made inquiries. When I think of that afternoon in St. James’s Street—only three weeks ago—I feel like an assassin. The vision of him, as he stopped and looked after me—I can’t banish it. Why didn’t some good spirit move me to turn back and overtake him?

It is so hard for the mind to reconcile itself to the ir retrievable. I can’t shake off a sense that there is something to be done. I can’t realise that it is too late.