

The Bohemian Girl

By Henry Harland

I

I WOKE up very gradually this morning, and it took me a little while to bethink myself where I had slept—that it had not been in my own room in the Cromwell Road. I lay a-bed, with eyes half-closed, drowsily looking forward to the usual procession of sober-hued London hours, and, for the moment, quite forgot the journey of yesterday, and how it had left me in Paris, a guest in the smart new house of my old friend, Nina Childe. Indeed, it was not until somebody tapped on my door, and I roused myself to call out, "Come in," that I noticed the strangeness of the wall-paper, and then, after an instant of perplexity, suddenly remembered. Oh, with a wonderful lightening of the spirit, I can tell you.

A white-capped, brisk young woman, with a fresh-coloured, wholesome peasant face, came in, bearing a tray—Jeanne, Nina's *femme-de-chambre*.

"Bonjour, monsieur," she cried cheerily. "I bring monsieur his coffee." And her announcement was followed by a fragrance—the softly-sung response of the coffee-sprite. Her tray, with its pretty freight of silver and linen, primrose butter, and gently-browned

browned pain-de-gruau, she set down on the table at my elbow ; then she crossed the room and drew back the window-curtains, making the rings tinkle crisply on the metal rods, and letting in a gush of dazzling sunshine. From where I lay I could see the house-fronts opposite glow pearly-grey in shadow, and the crest of the slate roofs sharply print itself on the sky, like a black line on a sheet of scintillant blue velvet. Yet, a few minutes ago, I had been fancying myself in the Cromwell Road.

Jeanne, gathering up my scattered garments, to take them off and brush them, inquired, by the way, if monsieur had passed a comfortable night.

“As the chambermaid makes your bed, so must you lie in it,” I answered. “And you know whether my bed was smoothly made.”

Jeanne smiled indulgently. But her next remark—did it imply that she found me rusty? “Here’s a long time that you haven’t been in Paris.”

“Yes,” I admitted; “not since May, and now we’re in November.”

“We have changed things a little, have we not?” she demanded, with a gesture that left the room, and included the house, the street, the quarter.

“In effect,” assented I.

“Monsieur desires his hot water?” she asked, abruptly irrelevant.

But I could be, or at least seem, abruptly irrelevant too. “Mademoiselle—is she up?”

“Ah, yes, monsieur. Mademoiselle has been up since eight. She awaits you in the salon. *La voilà qui joue,*” she added, pointing to the floor.

Nina had begun to play scales in the room below.

“Then you may bring me my hot water,” I said.

The

II

The scales continued while I was dressing, and many desultory reminiscences of the player, and vague reflections upon the unlikelihood of her adventures, went flitting through my mind to their rhythm. Here she was, scarcely turned thirty, beautiful, brilliant, rich in her own right, as free in all respects to follow her own will as any man could be, with Camille happily at her side, a well-grown, rosy, merry miss of twelve,—here was Nina, thus, to-day ; and yet, a mere little ten years ago, I remembered her . . . ah, in a very different plight indeed. True, she has got no more than her deserts ; she has paid for her success, every pennyweight of it, in hard work and self-denial. But one is so expectant, here below, to see Fortune capricious, that, when for once in a way she bestows her favours where they are merited, one can't help feeling rather dazed. One is so inured to seeing honest Effort turn empty-handed from her door.

Ten little years ago—but no. I must begin further back. I must tell you something about Nina's father.

III

He was an Englishman who lived for the greater part of his life in Paris. I would say he was a painter, if he had not been equally a sculptor, a musician, an architect, a writer of verse, and a university coach. A doer of so many things is inevitably suspect ; you will imagine that he must have bungled them all. On the
contrary,

contrary, whatever he did, he did with a considerable degree of accomplishment. The landscapes he painted were very fresh and pleasing, delicately coloured, with lots of air in them, and a dreamy, suggestive sentiment. His brother sculptors declared that his statuettes were modelled with exceeding dash and directness; they were certainly fanciful and amusing. I remember one that I used to like immensely—Titania driving to a tryst with Bottom, her chariot a lily, daisies for wheels, and for steeds a pair of mettlesome field-mice. I doubt if he ever got a commission for a complete house; but the staircases he designed, the fireplaces, and other bits of buildings, everybody thought original and graceful. The tunes he wrote were lively and catching, the words never stupid, sometimes even strikingly happy, epigrammatic; and he sang them delightfully, in a robust, hearty baritone. He coached the youth of France, for their examinations, in Latin and Greek, in history, mathematics, general literature—in goodness knows what not; and his pupils failed so rarely that, when one did, the circumstance became a nine days' wonder. The world beyond the Students' Quarter had never heard of him, but there he was a celebrity and a favourite; and, strangely enough for a man with so many strings to his bow, he contrived to pick up a sufficient living.

He was a splendid creature to look at, tall, stalwart, full-blooded, with a ruddy open-air complexion; a fine bold brow and nose; brown eyes, humorous, intelligent, kindly, that always brightened flatteringly when they met you; and a vast quantity of bluish-grey hair and beard. In his dress he affected (very wisely, for they became him excellently) velvet jackets, flannel shirts, loosely-knotted ties, and wide-brimmed soft felt hats. Marching down the Boulevard St. Michel, his broad shoulders well thrown back, his head erect, chin high in air, his whole
person

person radiating health, power, contentment, and the pride of them: he was a sight worth seeing, spirited, picturesque, prepossessing. You could not have passed him without noticing him—without wondering who he was, confident he was somebody—without admiring him, and feeling that there went a man it would be interesting to know.

He was, indeed, charming to know; he was the hero, the idol, of a little sect of worshippers, young fellows who loved nothing better than to sit at his feet. On the Rive Gauche, to be sure, we are, for the most part, birds of passage; a student arrives, carries a little, then departs. So, with the exits and entrances of seniors and *nouveaux*, the personnel of old Childe's following varied from season to season; but numerically it remained pretty much the same. He had a studio, with a few living-rooms attached, somewhere up in the fastnesses of Montparnasse, though it was seldom thither that one went to seek him. He received at his café, the Café Bleu—the Café Bleu which has since blown into the monster café of the Quarter, the noisiest, the rowdiest, the most flamboyant. But I am writing (alas) of twelve, thirteen, fifteen years ago; in those days the Café Bleu consisted of a single oblong room—with a sanded floor, a dozen tables, and two waiters, Eugène and Hippolyte—where Madame Chanve, the *patronne*, in lofty insulation behind her counter, reigned, if you please, but where Childe, her principal client, governed. The bottom of the shop, at any rate, was reserved exclusively to his use. There he dined, wrote his letters, dispensed his hospitalities; he had his own piano there, if you can believe me, his foils and boxing-gloves; from the absinthe hour till bed-time there was his habitat, his den. And woe to the passing stranger who, mistaking the Café Bleu for an ordinary house of call, ventured, during that consecrated period, to drop in. Nothing would be
said,

said, nothing done ; we would not even trouble to stare at the intruder. Yet he would seldom stop to finish his consummation, or he would bolt it. He would feel something in the air ; he would know he was out of place. He would fidget a little, frown a little, and get up meekly, and slink into the street. Human magnetism is such a subtle force. And Madame Chanve didn't mind in the least ; she preferred a bird in the hand to a brace in the bush. From half a dozen to a score of us dined at her long table every evening ; as many more drank her appetisers in the afternoon, and came again at night for grog or coffee. You see, it was a sort of club, a club of which Childe was at once the chairman and the object. If we had had a written constitution, it must have begun : "The purpose of this association is the enjoyment of the society of Alfred Childe."

Ah, those afternoons, those dinners, those ambrosial nights ! If the weather was kind, of course, we would begin our session on the *terrasse*, sipping our vermouth, puffing our cigarettes, laughing our laughs, tossing hither and thither our light ball of gossip, vaguely conscious of the perpetual ebb and flow and murmur of people in the Boulevard, while the setting sun turned Paris to a marvellous water-colour, all pale lucent tints, amber and alabaster and mother-of-pearl, with amethystine shadows. Then, one by one, those of us who were dining elsewhere would slip away ; and at a sign from Hippolyte the others would move indoors, and take their places down either side of the long narrow table, Childe at the head, his daughter Nina next him. And presently with what a clatter of knives and forks, clinking of glasses, and babble of human voices, the Café Bleu would echo. Madame Chanve's kitchen was not a thing to boast of, and her price, for the Latin Quarter, was rather high—I think we paid three francs, wine included, which would be for most of us distinctly a *prix-de-luxe*.

de-luxe. But oh, it was such fun ; we were so young ; Childe was so delightful. The fun was best, of course, when we were few, and could all sit up near to him, and none need lose a word. When we were many there would be something like a scramble for good seats.

I ask myself whether, if I could hear him again to-day, I should think his talk as wondrous as I thought it then. Then I could thrill at the verse of Musset, and linger lovingly over the prose of Théophile, I could laugh at the wit of Gustave Droz, and weep at the pathos . . . it costs me a pang to own it, but yes, I'm afraid . . . I could weep at the pathos of Henry Mürger ; and these have all suffered such a sad sea-change since. So I could sit, hour after hour, in a sort of ecstasy, listening to the talk of Nina's father. It flowed from him like wine from a full measure, easily, smoothly, abundantly. He had a ripe, genial voice, and an enunciation that made crystals of his words ; whilst his range of subjects was as wide as the earth and the sky. He would talk to you of God and man, of metaphysics, ethics, the last new play, murder, or change of ministry ; of books, of pictures, specifically, or of the general principles of literature and painting ; of people, of sunsets, of Italy, of the high seas, of the Paris streets—of what, in fine, you pleased. Or he would spin you yarns, sober, farcical, veridical, or invented. And, with transitions infinitely rapid, he would be serious, jocose—solemn, ribald—earnest, flippant—logical, whimsical, turn and turn about. And in every sentence, in its form or in its substance, he would wrap a surprise for you—it was the unexpected word, the unexpected assertion, sentiment, conclusion, that constantly arrived. Meanwhile it would enhance your enjoyment mightily to watch his physiognomy, the movements of his great, grey, shaggy head, the lightening and darkening of his eyes, his smile, his frown,
his

his occasional slight shrug or gesture. But the oddest thing was this, that he could take as well as give; he could listen—surely a rare talent in a monologist. Indeed, I have never known a man who could make *you* feel so interesting.

After dinner he would light an immense brown meerschaum pipe, and smoke for a quarter-hour or so in silence; then he would play a game or two of chess with some one; and by and by he would open his piano, and sing to us till midnight.

IV

I speak of him as old, and indeed we always called him Old Childe among ourselves; yet he was barely fifty. Nina, when I first made their acquaintance, must have been a girl of sixteen or seventeen; though—tall, with an amply rounded, mature-seeming figure—if one had judged from her appearance, one would have fancied her three or four years older. For that matter, she looked then very much as she looks now; I can perceive scarcely any alteration. She had the same dark hair, gathered up in a big smooth knot behind, and breaking into a tumult of little ringlets over her forehead; the same clear, sensitive complexion; the same rather large, full-lipped mouth, tip-tilted nose, soft chin, and merry, mischievous eyes. She moved in the same way, with the same leisurely, almost lazy grace, that could, however, on occasions, quicken to an alert, elastic vivacity; she had the same voice, a trifle deeper than most women's, and of a quality never so delicately nasal, which made it racy and characteristic; the same fresh, ready laughter. There was something arch, something a little sceptical, a little quizzical, in her expression, as if, perhaps,

she were disposed to take the world, more or less, with a grain of salt ; at the same time there was something rich, warm-blooded, luxurious, suggesting that she would know how to savour its pleasantnesses with complete enjoyment. But if you felt that she was by way of being the least bit satirical in her view of things, you felt too that she was altogether good-natured, and even that, at need, she could show herself spontaneously kind, generous, devoted. And if you inferred that her temperament inclined rather towards the sensuous than the ascetic, believe me, it did not lessen her attractiveness.

At the time of which I am writing now, the sentiment that reigned between Nina and Old Childe's retinue of young men was chiefly an *esprit-de-corps*. Later on we all fell in love with her ; but for the present we were simply amiably fraternal. We were united to her by a common enthusiasm ; we were fellow-celebrants at her ancestral altar—or, rather, she was the high priestess there, we were her acolytes. For, with her, filial piety did in very truth partake of the nature of religion ; she really, literally, idolised her father. One only needed to watch her for three minutes, as she sat beside him, to understand the depth and ardour of her emotion : how she adored him, how she admired him and believed in him, how proud of him she was, how she rejoiced in him. "Oh, you think you know my father," I remember her saying to us once. "Nobody knows him. Nobody is great enough to know him. If people knew him they would fall down and kiss the ground he walks on." It is certain she deemed him the wisest, the noblest, the handsomest, the most gifted, of human kind. That little gleam of mockery in her eye died out instantly when she looked at him, when she spoke of him or listened to him ; instead, there came a tender light of love, and her face grew pale with the fervour of her affection. Yet, when
he

he jested, no one laughed more promptly or more heartily than she. In those days I was perpetually trying to write fiction ; and Old Childe was my inveterate hero. I forget in how many ineffectual manuscripts, under what various dread disguises, he was afterwards reduced to ashes ; I am afraid, in one case, a scandalous distortion of him got abroad in print. Publishers are sometimes ill-advised ; and thus the indiscretions of our youth may become the confusions of our age. The thing was in three volumes, and called itself a novel ; and of course the fatuous author had to make a bad business worse by presenting a copy to his victim. I shall never forget the look Nina gave me when I asked her if she had read it ; I grow hot even now as I recall it. I had waited and waited, expecting her compliments ; and at last I could wait no longer, and so asked her ; and she answered me with a look ! It was weeks, I am not sure it wasn't months, before she took me back to her good graces. But Old Childe was magnanimous ; he sent me a little pencil-drawing of his head, inscribed in the corner, "To Frankenstein from his Monster."

V

It was a queer life for a girl to live, that happy-go-lucky life of the Latin Quarter, lawless and unpremeditated, with a café for her school-room, and none but men for comrades ; but Nina liked it ; and her father had a theory in his madness. He was a Bohemian, not in practice only, but in principle ; he preached Bohemianism as the most rational manner of existence, maintaining that it developed what was intrinsic and authentic in one's character, saved one from the artificial, and brought one into immediate
contact

contact with the realities of the world ; and he protested he could see no reason why a human being should be "cloistered and contracted" because of her sex. "What would not hurt my son, if I had one, will not hurt my daughter. It will make a man of her—without making her the less a woman." So he took her with him to the Café Bleu, and talked in her presence quite as freely as he might have talked had she been absent. As, in the greater number of his theological, political, and social convictions, he was exceedingly unorthodox, she heard a good deal, no doubt, that most of us would scarcely consider edifying for our daughters' ears ; but he had his system, he knew what he was about. "The question whether you can touch pitch and remain undefiled," he said, "depends altogether upon the spirit in which you approach it. The realities of the world, the realities of life, the real things of God's universe—what have we eyes for, if not to envisage them ? Do so fearlessly, honestly, with a clean heart, and, man or woman, you can only be the better for it." Perhaps his system was a shade too simple, a shade too obvious, for this complicated planet ; but he held to it in all sincerity. It was in pursuance of the same system, I daresay, that he taught Nina to fence, and to read Latin and Greek, as well as to play the piano, and turn an omelette. She could ply a foil against the best of us.

And then, quite suddenly, he died.

I think it was in March, or April ; anyhow, it was a premature spring-like day, and he had left off his overcoat. That evening he went to the Odéon, and when, after the play, he joined us for supper at the Bleu, he said he thought he had caught a cold, and ordered hot grog. The next day he did not turn up at all ; so several of us, after dinner, presented ourselves at his lodgings in Montparnasse. We found him in bed, with Nina reading to him.

He

He was feverish, and Nina had insisted that he should stop at home. He would be all right to-morrow. He scoffed at our suggestion that he should see a doctor; he was one of those men who affect to despise the medical profession. But early on the following morning a commissionnaire brought me a note from Nina. "My father is very much worse. Can you come at once?" He was delirious. Poor Nina, white, with frightened eyes, moved about like one distracted. We sent off for Dr. Rénoult, we had in a Sister of Charity. Everything that could be done was done. Till the very end, none of us for a moment doubted he would recover. It was impossible to conceive that that strong, affirmative life could be extinguished. And even after the end had come, the end with its ugly suite of material circumstances, I don't think any of us realised what it meant. It was as if we had been told that one of the forces of Nature had become inoperative. And Nina, through it all, was like some pale thing in marble, that breathed and moved: white, dazed, helpless, with aching, incredulous eyes, suffering everything, understanding nothing.

When it came to the worst of the dreadful necessary businesses that followed, some of us, somehow, managed to draw her from the death-chamber into another room, and to keep her there, while others of us got it over. It was snowing that afternoon, I remember, a melancholy, hesitating snowstorm, with large moist flakes, that fluttered down irresolutely, and presently disintegrated into rain; but we had not far to go. Then we returned to Nina, and for many days and nights we never dared to leave her. You will guess whether the question of her future, especially of her immediate future, weighed heavily upon our minds. In the end, however, it appeared to have solved itself—though I can't pretend that the solution was exactly all we could have wished.

Her

Her father had a half-brother (we learned this from his papers), incumbent of rather an important living in the north of England. We also learned that the brothers had scarcely seen each other twice in a score of years, and had kept up only the most fitful correspondence. Nevertheless, we wrote to the clergyman, describing the sad case of his niece; and in reply we got a letter, addressed to Nina herself, saying that of course she must come at once to Yorkshire, and consider the rectory her home. I don't need to recount the difficulties we had in explaining to her, in persuading her. I have known few more painful moments than that when, at the Gare du Nord, half a dozen of us established the poor, benumbed, bewildered child in her compartment, and sent her, with our godspeed, alone upon her long journey—to her strange kindred, and the strange conditions of life she would have to encounter among them. From the Café Bleu to a Yorkshire parsonage! And Nina's was not by any means a neutral personality, nor her mind a blank sheet of paper. She had a will of her own; she had convictions, aspirations, traditions, prejudices, which she would hold to with enthusiasm because they had been her father's, because her father had taught them to her; and she had manners, habits, tastes. She would be sure to horrify the people she was going to; she would be sure to resent their criticism, their slightest attempt at interference. Oh, my heart was full of misgivings; yet—she had no money, she was eighteen years old—what else could we advise her to do? All the same, her face, as it looked down upon us from the window of her railway carriage, white, with big terrified eyes fixed in a gaze of blank uncomprehending anguish, kept rising up to reproach me for weeks afterwards. I had her on my conscience as if I had personally wronged her.

VI

It was characteristic of her that, during her absence, she hardly wrote to us. She is of far too hasty and impetuous a nature to take kindly to the task of letter-writing ; her moods are too inconstant ; her thoughts, her fancies, supersede one another too rapidly. Anyhow, beyond the telegram we had made her promise to send, announcing her safe arrival, the most favoured of us got nothing more than an occasional scrappy note, if he got so much ; while the greater number of the long epistles some of us felt in duty bound to address to her, elicited not even the semblance of an acknowledgment. Hence, about the particulars of her experience we were quite in the dark, though of its general features we were informed, succinctly, in a big, dashing, uncompromising hand, that she "hated" them.

VII

I am not sure whether it was late in April or early in May that Nina left us. But one day towards the middle of October, coming home from the restaurant where I had lunched, I found in my letter-box in the concierge's room two half-sheets of paper, folded, with the corners turned down, and my name superscribed in pencil. The handwriting startled me a little—and yet, no, it was impossible. Then I hastened to unfold and read, and of course it was the impossible which had happened.

"Mon cher, I am sorry not to find you at home, but I'll wait at the café at the corner till half-past twelve. It is now *midi juste*."

That

That was the first. The second ran: "I have waited till a quarter to one. Now I am going to the Bleu for luncheon. I shall be there till three." And each was signed with the initials, N. C.

It was not yet two, so I had plenty of time. But you will believe that I didn't loiter on that account. I dashed out of the *loge*—into the street—down the Boulevard St. Michel—into the Bleu, breathlessly. At the far end Nina was seated before a marble table, with Madame Chanve in smiles and tears beside her. I heard a little cry; I felt myself seized and enveloped for a moment by something like a whirlwind—oh, but a very pleasant whirlwind, warm and fresh, and fragrant of violets; I received two vigorous kisses, one on either cheek; and then I was held off at arm's length, and examined by a pair of laughing eyes.

And at last a voice—rather a deep voice for a woman's, with just a crisp edge to it, that might have been called slightly nasal, but was agreeable and individual—a voice said: "En voilà assez. Come and sit down."

She had finished her luncheon, and was taking coffee; and if the whole truth must be told, I'm afraid she was taking it with a *petit-verre* and a cigarette. She wore an exceedingly simple black frock, with a bunch of violets in her breast, and a hat with a sweeping black feather and a daring brim. Her dark luxurious hair broke into a riot of fluffy little curls about her forehead, and thence waved richly away to where it was massed behind; her cheeks glowed with a lovely colour (thanks, doubtless, to Yorkshire breezes; sweet are the uses of adversity); her eyes sparkled; her lips curved in a perpetual play of smiles, letting her delicate little teeth show themselves furtively; and suddenly I realised that this girl, whom I had never thought of save as one might think of one's younger sister, suddenly I realised that she was a woman,
and

and a radiantly, perhaps even a dangerously handsome woman. I saw suddenly that she was not merely an attribute, an aspect of another, not merely Alfred Childe's daughter; she was a personage in herself, a personage to be reckoned with.

This sufficiently obvious perception came upon me with such force, and brought me such emotion, that I dare say for a little while I sat vacantly staring at her, with an air of preoccupation. Anyhow, all at once she laughed, and cried out, "Well, when you get back . . .?" and, "Perhaps," she questioned, "perhaps you think it polite to go off wool-gathering like that?" Whereupon I recovered myself with a start, and laughed too.

"But say that you are surprised, say that you are glad, at least," she went on.

Surprised! glad! But what did it mean? What was it all about?

"I couldn't stand it any longer, that's all. I have come home. Oh, que c'est bon, que c'est bon, que c'est bon!"

"And—England?—Yorkshire?—your people?"

"Don't speak of it. It was a bad dream. It is over. It brings bad luck to speak of bad dreams. I have forgotten it. I am here—in Paris—at home. Oh, que c'est bon!" And she smiled blissfully through eyes filled with tears.

Don't tell me that happiness is an illusion. It is her habit, if you will, to flee before us and elude us; but sometimes, sometimes we catch up with her, and can hold her for long moments warm against our hearts.

"Oh, mon père! It is enough—to be here, where he lived, where he worked, where he was happy," Nina murmured afterwards.

She had arrived the night before; she had taken a room in the Hôtel d'Espagne, in the Rue de Médicis, opposite the Luxembourg Garden. I was as yet the only member of the old set she

had

had looked up. Of course I knew where she had gone first—but not to cry—to kiss it—to place flowers on it. She could not cry—not now. She was too happy, happy, happy. Oh, to be back in Paris, her home, where she had lived with him, where every stick and stone was dear to her because of him!

Then, glancing up at the clock, with an abrupt change of key, “*Mais allons donc, paresseux!*—You must take me to see the camarades. You must take me to see Chalks.”

And in the street she put her arm through mine, laughing and saying, “*On nous croira fiancés.*” She did not walk, she tripped, she all but danced beside me, chattering joyously in alternate French and English. “I could stop and kiss them all—the men, the women, the very pavement. Oh, Paris! Oh, these good, gay, kind Parisians! Look at the sky! look at the view—down that impasse—the sunlight and shadows on the houses, the doorways, the people. Oh, the air! Oh, the smells! *Que c’est bon—que je suis contente! Et dire que j’ai passé cinq mois, mais cinq grands mois, en Angleterre. Ah, veinard, you—you don’t know how you’re blessed.*” Presently we found ourselves labouring knee-deep in a wave of black pinafores, and Nina had plucked her bunch of violets from her breast, and was dropping them amongst eager fingers and rosy cherubic smiles. And it was constantly, “*Tiens, there’s Madame Chose in her kiosque. Bonjour, madame. Vous allez toujours bien?*” and “Oh, look! old Perronet standing before his shop in his shirt-sleeves, exactly as he has stood at this hour every day, winter or summer, these ten years. *Bonjour, M’sieu Perronet.*” And you may be sure that the kindly French Choses and Perronets returned her greetings with beaming faces. “*Ah, mademoiselle, que c’est bon de vous revoir ainsi. Que vous avez bonne mine!*” “It is so strange,” she

she said, "to find nothing changed. To think that everything has gone on quietly in the usual way. As if I hadn't spent an eternity in exile!" And at the corner of one street, before a vast flaunting "bazaar," with a prodigality of tawdry Oriental wares exhibited on the pavement, and little black shopmen trailing like beetles in and out amongst them, "Oh," she cried, "the 'Mecque du Quartier'! To think that I could weep for joy at seeing the 'Mecque du Quartier'!"

By and by we plunged into a dark hallway, climbed a long, unsavoury corkscrew staircase, and knocked at a door. A gruff voice having answered, "'Trez!" we entered Chalks's bare, bleak, paint-smelling studio. He was working (from a lay-figure) with his back towards us; and he went on working for a minute or two after our arrival, without speaking. Then he demanded, in a sort of grunt, "Eh bien, qu'est ce que c'est?" always without pausing in his work or looking round. Nina gave two little *ahems*, tense with suppressed mirth; and slowly, indifferently, Chalks turned an absent-minded face in our direction. But, next instant, there was a shout—a rush—a confusion of forms in the middle of the floor—and I realised that I was not the only one to be honoured by a kiss and an embrace. "Oh, you're covering me with paint," Nina protested suddenly; and indeed he had forgotten to drop his brush and palette, and great dabs of colour were clinging to her cloak. While he was doing penance, scrubbing the garment with rags soaked in turpentine, he kept shaking his head, and murmuring, from time to time, as he glanced up at her, "Well, I'll be dumned."

"It's very nice and polite of you, Chalks," she said, by and by, "a very graceful concession to my sex. But, if you think it would relieve you once for all, you have my full permission to pronounce it —amned."

Chalks

Chalks did no more work that afternoon ; and that evening quite twenty of us dined at Madame Chanve's ; and it was almost like old times.

VIII

"Oh, yes," she explained to me afterwards, "my uncle is a good man. My aunt and cousins are very good women. But for me, to live with them—*pas possible, mon cher*. Their thoughts were not my thoughts, we could not speak the same language. They disapproved of me unutterably. They suffered agonies, poor things. Oh, they were very kind, very patient. But——! My gods were their devils. My father—my great, grand, splendid father—was 'poor Alfred,' 'poor uncle Alfred.' *Que voulez-vous ?* And then—the life, the society ! The parishioners—the people who came to tea—the houses where we sometimes dined ! Are you interested in crops ? In the preservation of game ? In the diseases of cattle ? *Olàlà ! (C'est bien le cas de s'en servir, de cette expression-là.) Olàlà, làlà !* And then—have you ever been homesick ? Oh, I longed, I pined, for Paris, as one suffocating would long, would die, for air. Enfin, I could not stand it any longer. They thought it wicked to smoke cigarettes. My poor aunt—when she smelt cigarette-smoke in my bed-room ! Oh, her face ! I had to sneak away, behind the shrubbery at the end of the garden, for stealthy whiffs. And it was impossible to get French tobacco. At last I took the bull by the horns, and fled. It will have been a terrible shock for them. But better one good blow than endless little ones ; better a lump-sum, than instalments with interest."

But what was she going to do ? How was she going to live ?
For,

For, after all, much as she loved Paris, she couldn't subsist on its air and sunshine.

"Oh, never fear! I'll manage somehow. I'll not die of hunger," she said confidently.

IX

And, sure enough, she managed very well. She gave music lessons to the children of the Quarter, and English lessons to clerks and shop-girls; she did a little translating; she would pose now and then for a painter friend—she was the original, for instance, of Norton's "Woman Dancing," which you know. She even—thanks to the employment by Chalks of what he called his "*infloence*"—she even contributed a weekly column of Paris gossip to the *Palladium*, a newspaper published at Battle Creek, Michigan, U.S.A., Chalks's native town. "Put in lots about me, and talk as if there were only two important centres of civilisation on earth, Battle Crick and Parus, and it'll be a boom," Chalks said. We used to have great fun, concocting those columns of Paris gossip. Nina, indeed, held the pen and cast a deciding vote; but we all collaborated. And we put in lots about Chalks—perhaps rather more than he had bargained for. With an irony (we trusted) too subtle to be suspected by the good people of Battle Creek, we would introduce their illustrious fellow-citizen, casually, between the Pope and the President of the Republic; we would sketch him as he strolled in the Boulevard arm-in-arm with Monsieur Meissonier, as he dined with the Perpetual Secretary of the French Academy, or drank his bock in the afternoon with the Grand Chancellor of the Legion of Honour;

we

we would compose solemn descriptive criticisms of his works, which almost made us die of laughing ; we would interview him—at length—about any subject ; we would give elaborate bulletins of his health, and brilliant pen-pictures of his toilets. Sometimes we would betroth him, marry him, divorce him ; sometimes, when our muse impelled us to a particularly daring flight, we would insinuate, darkly, sorrowfully, that perhaps the great man's morals—— But no ! We were persuaded that rumour accused him falsely. The story that he had been seen dancing at Bullier's with the notorious Duchesse de Z—— was a baseless fabrication. Unprincipled ? Oh, we were nothing if *not* unprincipled. And our pleasure was so exquisite, and it worried our victim so. “ I suppose you think it's funny, don't you ? ” he used to ask, with a feint of superior scorn which put its fine flower to our hilarity. “ Look out, or you'll bust,” he would warn us, the only uncon-vulsed member present. “ By gum, you're easily amused.” We always wrote of him respectfully as Mr. Charles K. Smith ; we never faintly hinted at his sobriquet. We would have rewarded liberally, at that time, any one who could have told us what the K stood for. We yearned to unite the cryptic word to his surname by a hyphen ; the mere abstract notion of doing so filled us with fearful joy. Chalks was right, I dare say ; we were easily amused. And Nina, at these moments of literary frenzy—I can see her now : her head bent over the manuscript, her hair in some disarray, a spiral of cigarette-smoke winding ceilingward from between the fingers of her idle hand, her lips parted, her eyes gleaming with mischievous inspirations, her face pale with the intensity of her glee. I can see her as she would look up, eagerly, to listen to somebody's suggestion, or as she would motion to us to be silent, crying, “ Attendez—I've got an idea.” Then her pen would dash swiftly, noisily, over her paper for a little, whilst
we

we all waited expectantly; and at last she would lean back, drawing a long breath, and tossing the pen aside, to read her paragraph out to us.

In a word, she managed very well, and by no means died of hunger. She could scarcely afford Madame Chanve's three-franc table d'hôte, it is true; but we could dine modestly at Léon's, over the way, and return the Bleu for coffee,—though, it must be added, that establishment no longer enjoyed a monopoly of our custom. We patronised it and the Vachette, the Source, the Ecoles, the Souris, indifferently. Or we would sometimes spend our evenings in Nina's rooms. She lived in a tremendously swagger house in the Avenue de l'Observatoire—on the sixth floor, to be sure, but “there was a carpet all the way up.” She had a charming little salon, with her own furniture and piano (the same that had formerly embellished our café), and no end of books, pictures, draperies, and pretty things, inherited from her father or presented by her friends.

By this time the inevitable had happened, and we were all in love with her—hopelessly, resignedly so, and without internecine rancour, for she treated us, indiscriminately, with a serene, impartial, tolerant derision; but we were savagely, luridly, jealous and suspicious of all new-comers and of all outsiders. If *we* could not win her, no one else should; and we formed ourselves round her in a ring of fire. Oh, the maddening mock-sentimental, mock-sympathetic face she would pull, when one of us ventured to sigh to her of his passion! The way she would lift her eyebrows, and gaze at you with a travesty of pity, shaking her head pensively, and murmuring, “Mon pauvre ami! Only fancy!” And then how the imp, lurking in the corners of her eyes, with only the barest pretence of trying to conceal himself, would suddenly leap forth in a peal of laughter! She had lately read
Mr. Howells's

Mr. Howells's "Undiscovered Country," and had adopted the Shakers' paraphrase for love: "Feeling foolish."—"Feeling pretty foolish to-day, air ye, gentlemen?" she inquired, mimicking the dialect of Chalks. "Well, I guess you just ain't feeling any more foolish than you look!"—If she would but have taken us seriously! And the worst of it was that we knew she was anything but temperamentally cold. Chalks formulated the potentialities we divined in her, when he remarked, regretfully, wistfully, as he often did, "She could love like Hell." Once, in a reckless moment, he even went so far as to tell her this point-blank. "Oh, naughty Chalks!" she remonstrated, shaking her finger at him. "Do you think that's a pretty word? But—I dare say I could."

"All the same, Lord help the man you marry," Chalks continued gloomily.

"Oh, I shall never marry," Nina cried. "Because, first, I don't approve of matrimony as an institution. And then—as you say—Lord help my husband. I should be such an uncomfortable wife. So capricious, and flighty, and tantalising, and unsettling, and disobedient, and exacting, and everything. Oh, but a horrid wife! No, I shall never marry. Marriage is quite too out-of-date. I shan't marry; but, if I ever meet a man and love him—ah!" She placed two fingers upon her lips, and kissed them, and waved the kiss to the skies.

This fragment of conversation passed in the Luxembourg Garden; and the three or four of us by whom she was accompanied glared threateningly at our mental image of that not-impossible upstart whom she might some day meet and love. We were sure, of course, that he would be a beast; we hated him not merely because he would have cut us out with her, but because he would be so distinctly our inferior, so hopelessly unworthy

unworthy of her, so helplessly incapable of appreciating her. I think we conceived of him as tall, with drooping fair moustaches, and contemptibly meticulous in his dress. He would probably not be of the Quarter ; he would sneer at *us*.

“He’ll not understand her, he’ll not respect her. Take her peculiar views. We know where she gets them. But he—he’ll despise her for them, at the very time he’s profiting by ’em,” some one said.

Her peculiar views of the institution of matrimony, the speaker meant. She had got them from her father. “The relations of the sexes should be as free as friendship,” he had taught. “If a man and a woman love each other, it is nobody’s business but their own. Neither the Law nor Society can, with any show of justice, interfere. That they do interfere, is a survival of feudalism, a survival of the system under which the individual, the subject, had no liberty, no rights. If a man and a woman love each other, they should be as free to determine for themselves the character, extent, and duration of their intercourse, as two friends should be. If they wish to live together under the same roof, let them. If they wish to retain their separate domiciles, let them. If they wish to cleave to each other till death severs them—if they wish to part on the morrow of their union—let them, by heaven. But the couple who go before a priest or a magistrate, and bind themselves in ceremonial marriage, are serving to perpetuate tyranny, are insulting the dignity of human nature.” Such was the gospel which Nina had absorbed (don’t, for goodness’ sake, imagine that I approve of it because I cite it), and which she professed in entire good faith. We felt that the coming man would misapprehend both it and her—though he would not hesitate to make a convenience of it. Ugh, the cynic !

We formed ourselves round her in a ring of fire, hoping to frighten the beast away. But we were miserably, fiercely anxious, suspicious, jealous. We were jealous of everything in the shape of a man that came into any sort of contact with her : of the men who passed her in the street or rode with her in the omnibus ; of the little *employés de commerce* to whom she gave English lessons ; of everybody. I fancy we were always more or less uneasy in our minds when she was out of our sight. Who could tell what might be happening ? With those lips of hers, those eyes of hers—oh, we knew how she could love : Chalks had said it. Who could tell what might already have happened ? Who could tell that the coming man had not already come ? She was entirely capable of concealing him from us. Sometimes, in the evening, she would seem absent, preoccupied. How could we be sure that she wasn't thinking of him ? Savouring anew the hours she had passed with him that very day ? Or dreaming of those she had promised him for to-morrow ? If she took leave of us—might he not be waiting to join her round the corner ? If she spent an evening away from us. . . .

And she—she only laughed ; laughed at our jealousy, our fears, our precautions, as she laughed at our hankering flame. Not a laugh that reassured us, though ; an inscrutable, enigmatic laugh, that might have covered a multitude of sins. She had taken to calling us collectively *Loulou* “Ah, le pauv' Loulou—so now he has the pretension to be jealous.” Then she would be interrupted by a paroxysm of laughter ; after which, “Oh, qu'il est drôle,” she would gasp. “Pourvu qu'il ne devienne pas gênant !”

It was all very well to laugh ; but some of us, our personal equation quite apart, could not help feeling that the joke was of a precarious quality, that the situation held tragic possibilities. A
young

young and attractive girl, by no means constitutionally insusceptible, and imbued with heterodox ideas of marriage—alone in the Latin Quarter.

X

I have heard it maintained that the man has yet to be born, who, in his heart of hearts, if he comes to think the matter over, won't find himself at something of a loss to conceive why any given woman should experience the passion of love for any other man ; that a woman's choice, to all men save the chosen, is, by its very nature, as incomprehensible as the postulates of Hegel. But, in Nina's case, even when I regard it from this distance of time, I still feel, as we all felt then, that the mystery was more than ordinarily obscure. We had fancied ourselves prepared for anything ; the only thing we weren't prepared for was the thing that befell. We had expected "him" to be offensive, and he wasn't. He was, quite simply, insignificant. He was a South American, a Brazilian, a member of the School of Mines : a poor, undersized, pale, spiritless, apologetic creature, with rather a Teutonic-looking name, Ernest Mayer. His father, or uncle, was Minister of Agriculture, or Commerce, or something, in his native land ; and he himself was attached in some nominal capacity to the Brazilian Legation, in the Rue de Téhéran, whence, on State occasions, he enjoyed the privilege of enveloping his meagre little person in a very gorgeous diplomatic uniform. He was beardless, with vague features, timid light-blue eyes, and a bluish anæmic skin. In manner he was nervous, tremulous, deprecatory—perpetually bowing, wriggling, stepping back to let you pass, waving his hands, palms outward, as if to protest against giving you trouble.

And

And in speech—upon my word, I don't think I ever heard him compromise himself by any more dangerous assertion than that the weather was fine, or he wished you good-day. For the most part he listened mutely, with a flickering, perfunctory smile. From time to time, with an air of casting fear behind him and dashing into the imminent deadly breach, he would hazard an "Ah, oui," or a "Pas mal." For the rest, he played the piano prettily enough, wrote colourless, correct French verse, and was reputed to be an industrious if not a brilliant student—what we called *un sérieux*.

It was hard to believe that beautiful, sumptuous Nina Childe, with her wit, her humour, her imagination, loved this neutral little fellow; yet she made no secret of doing so. We tried to frame a theory that would account for it. "It's the maternal instinct," suggested one. "It's her chivalry," said another; "she's the sort of woman who could never be very violently interested by a man of her own size. She would need one she could look up to, or else one she could protect and pat on the head." "God be thanked, the meanest of His creatures boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with, one to show a woman when he loves her," quoted a third. "Perhaps Coco"—we had nicknamed him Coco—"has luminous qualities that we don't dream of, to which he gives the rein when they're *à deux*."

Anyhow, if we were mortified that she should have preferred such a one to us, we were relieved to think that she hadn't fallen into the clutches of a blackguard, as we had feared she would. That Coco was a blackguard we never guessed. We made the best of him, because we had to choose between doing that and seeing less of Nina; in time, I am afraid—such is the influence of habit—we rather got to like him, as one gets to like any innocuous, customary thing. And if we did not like the situation

—for

—for none of us, whatever may have been our practice, shared Nina's hereditary theories anent the sexual conventions—we recognised that we couldn't alter it, and we shrugged our shoulders resignedly, trusting it might be no worse.

And then, one day, she announced, "Ernest and I are going to be married." And when we cried out why, she explained that—despite her own conviction that marriage was a barbarous institution—she felt, in the present state of public opinion, people owed legitimacy to their children. So Ernest, who, according to both French and Brazilian law, could not, at his age, marry without his parents' consent, was going home to procure it. He would sail next week; he would be back before three months. Ernest sailed from Lisbon; and the post, a day or two after he was safe at sea, brought Nina a letter from him. It was a wild, hysterical, remorseful letter, in which he called himself every sort of name. He said his parents would never dream of letting him marry her. They were Catholics, they were very devout, they had prejudices, they had old-fashioned notions. Besides, he had been as good as affianced to a lady of their election ever since he was born. He was going home to marry his second cousin.

XI

Shortly after the birth of Camille I had to go to London, and it was nearly a year before I came back to Paris. Nina was looking better than when I had left, but still in nowise like her old self—pale and worn and worried, with a smile that was the ghost of her former one. She had been waiting for my return, she said, to have a long talk with me. "I have made a little plan.

I want

I want you to advise me. Of course you must advise me to stick to it."

And when we had reached her lodgings, and were alone in the salon, "It is about Camille, it is about her bringing-up," she explained. "The Latin Quarter? It is all very well for you, for me; but for a growing child? Oh, my case was different; I had my father. But Camille? Restaurants, cafés, studios, the Boul' Miche, and this little garret—do they form a wholesome environment? Oh, no, no—I am not a renegade. I am a Bohemian; I shall always be; it is bred in the bone. But my daughter—ought she not to have the opportunity, at least, of being different, of being like other girls? You see, I had my father; she will have only me. And I distrust myself; I have no 'system.' Shall I not do better, then, to adopt the system of the world? To give her the conventional education, the conventional 'advantages'? A home, what they call home influences. Then, when she has grown up, she can choose for herself. Besides, there is the question of francs and centimes. I have been able to earn a living for myself, it is true. But even that is more difficult now; I can give less time to work; I am in debt. And we are two; and our expenses must naturally increase from year to year. And I should like to be able to put something aside. Hand-to-mouth is a bad principle when you have a growing child."

After a little pause she went on: "So my problem is, first, how to earn our livelihood, and, secondly, how to make something like a home for Camille, something better than this tobacco-smoky, absinthe-scented atmosphere of the Latin Quarter. And I can see only one way of accomplishing the two things. You will smile—but I have considered it from every point of view. I have examined myself, my own capabilities. I have weighed all the chances.

chances. I wish to take a flat, in another quarter of the town, near the Etoile or the Parc Monceau, and—open a *pension*. There is my plan.”

I had a much simpler and pleasanter plan of my own, but of that, as I knew, she would hear nothing. I did not smile at hers, however; though I confess it was not easy to imagine madcap Nina in the rôle of a landlady, regulating the accounts and presiding at the table of a boarding-house. I can't pretend that I believed there was the slightest likelihood of her filling it with success. But I said nothing to discourage her; and the fact that she is rich to-day proves how little I divined the resources of her character. For the boarding-house she kept was an exceedingly good boarding-house; she showed herself the most practical of mistresses; and she prospered amazingly. Jeanselme, whose father had recently died, leaving him a fortune, lent her what money she needed to begin with; she took and furnished a flat in the Avenue de l'Alma; and I—I feel quite like an historical personage when I remember that I was her first boarder. Others soon followed me, though, for she had friends amongst all the peoples of the earth—English and Americans, Russians, Italians, Austrians, even Roumanians and Servians, as well as French; and each did what he could to help. At the end of a year she overflowed into the flat above; then into that below; then she acquired the lease of the entire house. She worked tremendously, she was at it early and late, her eyes were everywhere; she set an excellent table; she employed admirable servants; and if her prices were a bit stiff, she gave you your money's worth, and there were no “surprises.” It was comfortable and quiet; the street was bright, the neighbourhood convenient. You could dine in the common *salle-à-manger* if you liked, or in your private sitting-room. And you never saw your landlady except
for

for purposes of business. She lived apart, in the entresol, alone with Camille and her body-servant Jeanne. There was the "home" she had set out to make.

Meanwhile another sort of success was steadily thrusting itself upon her—she certainly never went out of her way to seek it; she was much too busy to do that. Such of her old friends as remained in Paris came frequently to see her, and new friends gathered round her. She was beautiful, she was intelligent, responsive, entertaining. In her salon, on a Friday evening, you would meet half the lions that were at large in the town—authors, painters, actors, actresses, deputies, even an occasional Cabinet minister. Red ribbons and red rosettes shone from every corner of the room. She had become one of the oligarchs of *la haute Bohème*, she had become one of the celebrities of Paris. It would be tiresome to count the novels, poems, songs, that were dedicated to her, the portraits of her, painted or sculptured, that appeared at the Mirlitons or the Palais de l'Industrie. Numberless were the *partis* who asked her to marry them (I know one, at least, who has returned to the charge again and again), but she only laughed, and vowed she would never marry. I don't say that she has never had her fancies, her experiences; but she has consistently scoffed at marriage. At any rate, she has never affected the least repentance for what some people would call her "fault." Her ideas of right and wrong have undergone very little modification. She was deceived in her estimate of the character of Ernest Mayer, if you please; but she would indignantly deny that there was anything sinful, anything to be ashamed of, in her relations with him. And if, by reason of them, she at one time suffered a good deal of pain, I am sure she accounts Camille an exceeding great compensation. That Camille is her child she would scorn to make a secret. She has scorned to assume the conciliatory title
of

of Madame. As plain Mademoiselle, with a daughter, you must take her or leave her. And, somehow, all this has not seemed to make the faintest difference to her *clientèle*, not even to the primmest of the English. I can't think of one of them who did not treat her with deference, like her, and recommend her house.

But *her* house they need recommend no more, for she has sold it. Last spring, when I was in Paris, she told me she was about to do so. "Ouf! I have lived with my nose to the grindstone long enough. I am going to 'retire.'" What money she had saved from season to season, she explained, she had entrusted to her friend Baron C * * * * * for speculation. "He is a wizard, and so I am a rich woman. I shall have an income of something like three thousand pounds, *mon cher*! Oh, we will roll in it. I have had ten bad years—ten hateful years. You don't know how I have hated it all, this business, this drudgery, this cut-and-dried, methodical existence—*moi, enfant de Bohème*! But, enfin, it was obligatory. Now we will change all that. *Nous reviendrons à nos premières amours*. I shall have ten good years—ten years of barefaced pleasure. Then—I will range myself—perhaps. There is the darlingest little house for sale, a sort of *châlet*, built of red brick, with pointed windows and things, in the *Rue de Lisbonne*. I shall buy it—furnish it—decorate it. Oh, you will see. I shall have my carriage, I shall have toilets, I shall entertain, I shall give dinners—*olà!* No more boarders, no more bores, cares, responsibilities. Only, my friends and—*life*! I feel like one emerging from ten years in the galleys, ten years of penal servitude. To the Pension Childe—*bonsoir*!"

"That's all very well for you," her listener complained sombrely. "But for me? Where shall I stop when I come to Paris?"

"With me. You shall be my guest. I will kill you if you
ever

ever go elsewhere. You shall pass your old age in a big chair in the best room, and Camille and I will nurse your gout and make herb-tea for you."

"And I shall sit and think of what might have been."

"Yes, we'll indulge all your little foibles. You shall sit and 'feel foolish'—from dawn to dewy eve."

XII

If you had chanced to be walking in the Bois-de-Boulogne this afternoon, you might have seen a smart little basket-phaeton flash past, drawn by two glossy bays, and driven by a woman—a woman with sparkling eyes, a lovely colour, great quantities of soft dark hair, and a figure—

"Hélas, mon père, la taille d'une déesse"—

a smiling woman, in a wonderful blue-grey toilet, grey driving-gloves, and a bold-brimmed grey-felt hat with waving plumes. And in the man beside her you would have recognised your servant. You would have thought me in great luck, perhaps you would have envied me. But—*esse, quam videri!*—I would I were as enviable as I looked.

