

P'tit-Bleu

By Henry Harland

P'TIT-BLEU, poor P'tit-Bleu ! I can't name her without a sigh ; I can't think of her without a kind of heart-ache. Yet, all things considered, I wonder whether hers was really a destiny to sorrow over. True, she has disappeared ; and it is not pleasant to conjecture what she may have to come to, what may have befallen her, in the flesh, since her disappearance. But when I remember those beautiful preceding years of self-abnegation, of great love, and pain, and devotion, I find myself instinctively believing that something good she must have permanently gained ; some treasure that nothing, not the worst imaginable subsequent disaster, can quite have taken from her. It is not pleasant to conjecture what she may have done or suffered in the flesh ; but in the spirit, one may hope, she cannot have gone altogether to the bad, nor fared altogether ill.

In the spirit ! Dear me, there was a time when it would have seemed derisory to speak of the spirit in the same breath with P'tit-Bleu. In the early days of my acquaintance with her, for example, I should have stared if anybody had spoken of her spirit. If anybody had asked me to describe her, I should have said, " She is a captivating little animal, pretty and sprightly, but as soulless— as soulless as a squirrel." Oh, a warm-blooded little animal, good-natured,

natured, quick-witted, full of life and the joy of life ; a delightful little animal to play with, to fondle ; but just a little animal, none the less : a little mass of soft, rosy, jocund, sensual, soulless matter. And in her full red lips, her roguish black eyes, her plump little hands, her trim, tight little figure—in her smile, her laugh—in the toss of her head—in her saucy, slightly swaggering carriage—I fancy you would have read my appreciation justified. No doubt there must have been the spark of a soul smouldering somewhere in her (how, otherwise, account for what happened later on ?), but it was far too tiny a spark to be perceptible to the casual observer. Soul, however, I need hardly add, was the last thing we of the University were accustomed to look for in our feminine companions ; I must not for an instant seem to imply that the lack of a soul in P'tit-Bleu was a subject of mourning with any of us. That a Latin Quarter girl should be soulless was as much a part of the natural order of creation, as that she should be beardless. They were all of them little animals, and P'tit-Bleu diverged from the type principally in this, that where the others, in most instances, were stupid, objectionable little animals, she was a diverting one. She was made of sugar and spice and a hundred nice ingredients, whilst they were made of the dullest, vulgarest clay.

In my own case, P'tit-Bleu was the object, not indeed of love, but of a violent infatuation, at first sight.

At Bullier's, one evening, a chain of students, some twenty linked hand in hand, were chasing her round and round the hall, shouting after her, in rough staccato, something that sounded like, "Ti-bab! Ti-bab! Ti-bab!"—while she, a sprite-like little form, in a black skirt and a scarlet bodice, fled before them with leaps and bounds, and laughed defiantly.

I hadn't

I hadn't the vaguest notion what "Ti-bab! Ti-bab! Ti-bab!" meant, but that laughing face, with the red lips and the roguish eyes, seemed to me immensely fascinating. Among the faces of the other young ladies present—faces of dough, faces of tallow, faces all weariness, staleness, and banality, common, coarse, pointless, insipid faces—it shone like an epigram amongst platitudes, a thing of fire amongst things of dust. I turned to some one near me, and asked who she was.

"It's P'tit-Bleu, the dancing-girl. She's going to do a quadrille."

P'tit-Bleu. . . . It's the fashion, you know, in Paris, for the girls who "do quadrilles" to adopt unlikely nicknames: aren't the reigning favourites at this moment Chapeau-Mou and Fifi-la-Galette? P'tit-Bleu had derived hers from that vehement little "wine of the barrier," which, the song declares, "vous met la tête en feu." It was the tune of the same song, that, in another minute, I heard the band strike up, in the balcony over our heads. P'tit-Bleu came to a standstill in the middle of the floor, where she was joined by three minor dancing-girls, to make two couples. The chain of students closed in a circle round her. And the rest of us thronged behind them, pressing forward, and craning our necks. Then, as the band played, everybody sang, in noisy chorus:

"P'tit-Bleu, P'tit-Bleu, P'tit-Bleu-eu,
 Ça vous met la tête en feu!
 Ça vous ra-ra-ra-ra-ra,
 Ça vous ra-ra-ravigotte!"

P'tit-Bleu stood with her hands on her hips, her arms a-kimbo, her head thrown impudently back, her eyes sparkling mischievously, her lips curling in a perpetual play of smiles, while her three subalterns accomplished their tame preliminary measures; and then

P'tit-Bleu

P'tit-Bleu pirouetted forward, and began her own indescribable pas-seul—oh, indescribable for a hundred reasons. She wore scarlet satin slippers, embroidered with black beads, and black silk stockings with scarlet clocks, and simply cataracts and cataracts of white diaphanous frills under her demure black skirt. And she danced with constantly increasing fervour, kicked higher and higher, ever more boldly and more bravely. Presently her hat fell off, and she tossed it from her, calling to the member of the crowd who had the luck to catch it, “Tiens, mon chapeau !” And then her waving black hair flowed down her back, and flew loose about her face and shoulders. And the whole time, she laughed—laughed—laughed. With her swift whirlings, her astonishing undulations, and the flashing of the red and black and white, one's eyes were dazzled. “Ça vous met la tête en feu !” My head burned and reeled, as I watched her, and I thought, “What a delicious, bewitching little creature ! What wouldn't I give to know her !” My head burned, and my heart yearned covetously ; but I was a new-comer in the Quarter, and ignorant of its easy etiquette, and terribly young and timid, and I should never have dared to speak to her without a proper introduction. She danced with constantly increasing fervour, faster, faster, furiously fast : till, suddenly—*zip !*—down she slid upon the floor, in the *grand écart*, and sat there (if one may call that posture sitting), smiling calmly up at us, whilst everybody thundered, “Bravo ! Bravo ! Bravo !”

In an instant, though, she was on her feet again, and had darted out of the circle to the side of the youth who had caught her hat. He offered it to her with a bow, but his pulses were thumping tempestuously, and no doubt she could read his envy in his eyes. Anyhow, all at once, she put her arm through his, and said—oh, thrills and wonders !—“Allons, mon petit, I authorise you to treat me to a bock.”

It seemed as if impossible heavens had opened to me ; yet there she was, clinging to my arm, and drawing me towards the platform under the musicians' gallery, where there are tables for the thirsty. Her little plump white hand lay on my coat-sleeve ; the air was heady with the perfume of her garments ; her roguish black eyes were smiling encouragement into mine ; and her red lips were so near, so near, I had to fight down a wild impulse to stoop and snatch a kiss. She drew me towards the tables, and, on the way, she stopped before a mirror fixed on the wall and rearranged her hair ; while I stood close to her, still holding her hat, and waited, feeling the most exquisite proud swelling of the heart, as if I owned her. Her hair put right, she searched in her pocket and produced a small round ivory box, from which—having unscrewed its cover and handed it to me with a "Tiens ça"—she extracted a powder-puff ; and therewith she proceeded gently, daintily, to dust her face and throat, examining the effect critically in the glass the while. In the end she said, "Voilà, that's better," and turned her face to me for corroboration. "That's better, isn't it?" "It's perfect. But—but you were perfect before, too," asseverated I. Oh, what a joy beyond measure thus to be singled out and made her confidant and adviser in these intimate affairs. . . . At our table, leaning back nonchalantly in her chair, as she quaffed her bock and puffed her cigarette, she looked like a bright-eyed, red-lipped bacchante.

I gazed at her in a quite unutterable ecstasy of admiration. My conscience told me that I ought to pay her a compliment upon her dancing ; but I couldn't shape one : my wits were paralysed by my emotions. I could only gaze, and gaze, and revel in my unexpected fortune. At last, however, the truth burst from me in a sort of involuntary gasp.

"But you are adorable—adorable."

She

She gave a quick smile of intelligence, of sympathy, and, with a knowing toss of the head and a provoking glance, suggested, "Je te mets la tête en feu, quoi!"

She, you perceive, was entirely at her ease, mistress of the situation. It is conceivable that she had met neophytes before—that I was by no means to her the unprecedented experience she was to me. At any rate, she understood my agitation and sought to reassure me.

"Don't be afraid; I'll not eat you," she promised.

I, in the depths of my mind, had been meditating what I could not but deem an excessively audacious proposal. Her last speech gave me my cue, and I risked it.

"Perhaps you would like to eat something else? If—if we should go somewhere and sup?"

"Monsieur thinks he will be safer to take precautions," she laughed. "Well—I submit."

So we removed ourselves to the *vestiaire*, where she put on her cloak, and exchanged her slippers for a pair of boots (you can guess, perhaps, who enjoyed the beatific privilege of buttoning them for her); and then we left the Closerie des Lilas, falsely so called, with its flaring gas, its stifling atmosphere, its boisterous merry-makers, and walked arm in arm—only this time it was *my* arm that was within *hers*—down the Boul' Miche, past the Luxembourg gardens, where sweet airs blew in our faces, to the Gambrinus restaurant, in the Rue de Médicis. And there you should have seen P'tit-Bleu devouring *écrevisses*. Whatsoever this young woman's hand found to do, she did it with her might. She attacked her *écrevisses* with the same jubilant abandon with which she had executed her bewildering single-step. She devoured them with an energy, an enthusiasm, a thoroughness, that it was invigorating to witness; smacking her lips, and smiling, and, from time to time, between

between the mouthfuls, breathing soft little interjections of content. When the last pink shell was emptied, she threw herself back, and sighed, and explained, with delectable unconsciousness, "I was hungry." But at my venturing to protest, "Not really," she broke into mirthful laughter, and added, "At least, I had the appearance." Meanwhile, I must not fail to mention, she had done abundant honour to her share of a bottle of chablis. Don't be horrified—haven't the Germans, who ought to know, a proverb that recommends it? "Wein auf Bier, das rath' ich Dir."

I have said that none of us mourned the absence of a soul in P'tit-Bleu. Nevertheless, as I looked at her to-night, and realised what a bright, joyous, good-humoured little thing she was, how healthy, and natural, and even, in a way, innocent she was, I suddenly felt a curious depression. She was all this, and yet . . . For just a moment, perhaps, I did vaguely mourn the lack of something. Oh, she was well enough for the present; she was joyous, and good-humoured, and innocent in a way; she was young and pretty, and the world smiled upon her. But—for the future? When it occurred to me to think of her future—of what it must almost certainly be like, of what she must almost inevitably become—I confess my jaw dropped and the salt of our banquet lost its savour.

"What's the matter? Why do you look at me like that?" P'tit-Bleu demanded.

So I had to pull myself up and be jolly again. It was not altogether difficult. In the early twenties, troublesome reflections are easily banished, I believe; and I had a lively comrade.

After her crayfish were disposed of, P'tit-Bleu called for coffee and lit a cigarette. And then, between whiffs and sips, she prattled gaily of the subject which, of all subjects, she was probably best qualified to treat, and which assuredly, for the time being, possessed

possessed most interest for her listener—herself. She told me, as it were, the story of her birth, parentage, life, and exploits. It was the simplest story, the commonest story. Her mother (*la recherche de la paternité est interdite*), her mother had died when she was sixteen, and Jeanne (that was her baptismal name, Jeanne Mérois) had gone to work in the shop of a dressmaker, where, sewing hard from eight in the morning till seven at night, with an hour's intermission at noon, she could earn, in good seasons, as much as two-francs-fifty a day. Two and a half francs a day—say twelve shillings a week—in good seasons; and one must eat, and lodge, and clothe one's body, and pay one's laundress, in good seasons and in bad. It scarcely satisfied her aspirations, and she took to dancing. Now she danced three nights a week at Bullier's, and during the day gave lessons in her art to a score of pupils, by which means she contrived to keep the wolf at a respectful distance from her door. "Tiens, here's my card," she concluded, and handed me an oblong bit of pasteboard, on which was printed, "P'tit-Bleu, Professeur de Danse, 22, Rue Monsieur le Prince."

"Et tu n'as pas d'amoureux?" questioned I.

She flashed a look upon me that was quite inexpressibly arch, and responded instantly, with the charmingest little pout, "But yes—since I'm supping with him."

During the winter that followed, P'tit-Bleu and I supped together rather frequently. She was a mere little animal, she had no soul; but she was the nicest little animal, and she had instincts. She was more than good-natured, she was kind-hearted; and, according to her unconventional standards, she was conscientious. It would have amused and touched you, for example, if you had been taking her about, to notice her intense solicitude lest you should conduct her entertainment upon a scale too lavish, her deprecating

deprecating frowns, her expostulations, her restraining hand laid on your arm. And the ordinary run of Latin Quarter girls derive an incommunicable rapture from seeing their cavaliers wantonly, purposelessly prodigal. With her own funds, on the contrary, P'tit-Bleu was free-handed to a fault: Mimi and Zizette knew whom to go to, when they were hard-up. Neither did she confine her benefactions to gifts of money, nor limit their operation to her particular sex. More than one impecunious student owed it to her skilful needle that his clothes were whole, and his linen maintained in a habitable state. "Fie, Chalks! Your coat is torn, there are three buttons off your waistcoat, and your cuffs are frayed to a point that is disgraceful. I'll come round to-morrow afternoon, and mend them for you." And when poor Berthe Dumours was turned out of the hospital, in the dead of winter, half-cured, and without a penny in her purse, who took her in, and nursed her, and provided for her during her convalescence?

Oh, she was a good little thing. "P'tit-Bleu's all right. There's nothing the matter with P'tit-Bleu," was Chalk's method of phrasing it.

At the same time, she could be trying, she could be exasperating. And she had a temper—a temper. What she made me suffer in the way of jealousy, during that winter, it would be gruesome to recount. She enjoyed an exceeding great popularity in the Quarter; she was much run after. It were futile to pretend that she hadn't her caprices. And she held herself free as air. She would call no man master. You might take what she would give, and welcome; but you must claim nothing as your due. You mustn't assume airs of proprietorship; you mustn't presume upon the fact that she was supping with you to-night, to complain if she should sup to-morrow with another. Her concession of a privilege did not by any means imply that it was exclusive. She

would endure no exactions, no control or interference, no surveillance, above all, no reproaches. Mercy, how angry she would become if I ventured any, how houghty-toighty and unapproachable.

“ You imagine that I am your property ? Did you invent me ? One would say you held a Government patent. All rights reserved ! Thank you. You fancy perhaps that Paris is Constantinople ? Ah, mais non ! ”

She had a temper and a flow of language. There were points you couldn't touch without precipitating hail and lightning.

Thus my winter was far from a tranquil one, and before it was half over I had three grey hairs. Honey and wormwood, happiness and heartburn, reconciliations and frantic little tiffs, carried us blithely on to Mi-Carême, when things reached a crisis. . . .

Mi-Carême fell midway in March that year : a velvety, sweet, sunlit day, Spring stirring in her sleep. P'tit-Bleu and I had spent the day together, in the crowded, crowded streets. We had visited the Boulevards, of course, to watch the triumph of the Queen of Washerwomen ; we had pelted everybody with confetti ; and we had been pelted so profusely in return, that there were confetti in our boots, in our pockets, down our necks, and numberless confetti clung in the black meshes of P'tit-Bleu's hair, like little pink, blue, and yellow stars. But all day long something in P'tit-Bleu's manner, something in her voice, her smile, her carriage, had obscurely troubled me ; something not easy to take hold of, something elusive, unformulable, but disquieting. A certain indefinite aloofness, perhaps ; an accentuated independence ; as if she were preoccupied with secret thoughts, with intentions, feelings, that she would not let me share.

And

And then, at night, we went to the Opera Ball.

P'tit-Bleu was dressed as an Odalisque : a tiny round Turkish cap, set jauntily sidewise on her head, a short Turkish jacket, both cap and jacket jingling and glittering with sequins ; a long veil of gauze, wreathed like a scarf round her shoulders ; then baggy Turkish trousers of blue silk, and scarlet Turkish slippers. Oh, she was worth seeing ; I was proud to have her on my arm. Her black crinkling hair, her dancing eyes, her eager face and red smiling mouth—the Sultan himself might have envied me such a *houri*. And many, in effect, were the envious glances that we encountered, as we made our way into the great brilliantly lighted ball-room, and moved hither and thither amongst the Harlequins and Columbines, the Pierrots, the *Toréadors*, the Shepherdesses and *Vivandières*, the countless fantastic masks, by whom the place was peopled. P'tit-Bleu had a *loup* of black velvet, which sometimes she wore, and sometimes gave to me to carry for her. I don't know when she looked the more dangerous, when she had it on, and her eyes glimmered mysteriously through its peep-holes, or when she had it off.

Many were the envious glances that we encountered, and presently I became aware that one individual was following us about : a horrid, glossy creature, in a dress suit, with a top-hat that was much too shiny, and a huge waxed moustache that he kept twirling invidiously : an undersized, dark, Hebraic-featured man, screamingly “*rasta*’.” Whithersoever we turned, he hovered annoyingly near to us, and ogled P'tit-Bleu under my very beard. This was bad enough ; but—do sorrows ever come as single spies ?—conceive my emotions, if you please, when, by-and-by, suspicion hardened into certitude that P'tit-Bleu was not merely getting a vainglorious gratification from his attentions, but that she was positively playing up to them, encouraging him to persevere !

She

She chattered—to me, indeed, but at him—with a vivacity there was no misconstruing; laughed noisily, fluttered her fan, flirted her veil, donned and doffed her loup, and, I daresay, when my back was turned, exchanged actual eye-shots with the brute. . . . In due time quadrilles were organised, and P'tit-Bleu led a set. The glossy interloper was one of the admiring circle that surrounded her. Ugh! his complacent, insinuating smile, the conquering air with which he twirled his moustachios! And P'tit-Bleu. . . . When, at the finish, she sprang up, after her *grand écart*, what do you suppose she did? . . . The brazen little minx, instead of rejoining *me*, slipped her arm through *his*, and went tripping off with him to the supper-room.

Oh, the night I passed, the night of anguish! The visions that tortured me, as I tramped my floor! The delirious revenges that I plotted, and gloated over in anticipation! She had left me—the mockery of it!—she had left me her loup, her little black velvet loup, with its empty eye-holes, and its horribly reminiscent smell. Everything P'tit-Bleu owned was scented with *peaud'Espagne*. I wreaked my fury upon that loup, I promise you. I smote it with my palm, I ground it under my heel, I tore it limb from limb, I called it all manner of abusive names. Early in the morning I was at P'tit-Bleu's house; but the concierge grunted, “*Pas rentrée.*” Oh, the coals thereof are coals of fire. I returned to her house a dozen times that day, and at length, towards night-fall, found her in. We had a stormy session, but of course, the last word of it was hers: still, for all slips, she was one of Eve's family. Of course she justified herself, and put me in the wrong. I went away, vowing I would never, never, never see her again. “*Va! Ça m'est bien égal,*” she capped the climax by calling after me. Oh, youth! Oh, storm and stress! And to think that one lives to laugh at its memory.

For the rest of that season, P'tit-Bleu and I remained at daggers drawn. In June I left town for the summer; and then one thing and another happened, and kept me away till after Christmas.

When I got back, amongst the many pieces of news that I found waiting for me, there was one that affected P'tit-Bleu.

"P'tit-Bleu," I was told, "is 'collée' with an Englishman—but a grey-beard, mon cher—a gaga—an Englishman old enough to be her grandfather."

A stolid, implicit cynicism, I must warn you, was the mode of the Quarter. The student who did not wish to be contemned for a sentimentalist, dared never hesitate to believe an evil report, nor to put the worst possible construction upon all human actions. Therefore, when I was apprised by common rumour that during the dead season P'tit-Bleu (for considerations fiscal, *bien entendu*) had gone to live "collée" with an Englishman old enough to be her grandfather—though, as it turned out, the story was the sheerest fabrication—it never entered my head to doubt it.

At the same time, I confess, I could not quite share the humour of my compeers, who regarded the circumstance as a stupendous joke. On the contrary, I was shocked and sickened. I shouldn't have imagined her capable of that. She was a mere little animal; she had no soul; she was bound, in the nature of things, to go from bad to worse, as I had permitted myself, indeed, to admonish her, in the last conversation we had had. "Mark my words, you will go from bad to worse." But I had thought her such a nice little animal; in my secret heart, I had hoped that her progress would be slow—even, faintly, that Providence might let something happen to arrest it, to divert it. And now. . . !

As a matter of fact, Providence *had* let something happen to divert it; and that something was this very relation of hers with

an old Englishman, in which the scandal-lovers of the Latin Quarter were determined to see neither more nor less than a mercenary "collage." The diversion in question, however, was an extremely gradual process. As yet, it is pretty certain, P'tit-Bleu herself had never so much as dreamed that any diversion was impending.

But she knew that her relation with the Englishman was an innocent relation; and of its innocence, I am glad to be able to record, she succeeded in convincing one, at least, of her friends, tolerably early in the game. In the teeth of my opposition, and at the expense of her own pride, she forced an explanation, which, I am glad to say, convinced me.

I had just passed her and her Englishman in the street. They were crossing the Boulevard St. Michel, and she was hanging on his arm, looking up into his face, and laughing. She wore a broad-brimmed black hat, with a red ribbon in it, and a knot of red ribbon at her throat; there was a lovely suggestion of the same colour in her cheeks; and never had her eyes gleamed with sincerer fun.

I assure you, the sensation this spectacle afforded me amounted to a physical pain—the disgust, the anger. If she could laugh like that, how little could she feel her position! The hardened shamelessness of it!

Turning from her to her companion, I own I was surprised and puzzled. He was a tall, spare old man, not a grey-beard, but a white-beard, and he had thin snow-white hair. He was dressed neatly indeed, but the very reverse of sumptuously. His black overcoat was threadbare, his carefully polished boots were patched. Yet, everybody averred, it was his affluence that had attracted her; she had taken up with him during the dead season, because she had been "à sec." A detail that did nothing to relieve my
perplexity

perplexity was the character of his face. Instead of the florid concupiscent face, with coarse lips and fiery eye-balls, I had instinctively expected, I saw a thin, pale face, with mild, melancholy eyes, a gentle face, a refined face, rather a weak face, certainly the very last face the situation called for. He *was* a beast of course, but he didn't look like a beast. He looked like a gentleman, a broken-down, forlorn old gentleman, singularly astray from his proper orbit.

They were crossing the Boulevard St. Michel as I was leaving the Café Vachette ; and at the corner of the Rue des Ecoles we came front to front. P'tit-Bleu glanced up ; her eyes brightened, she gave a little start, and was plainly for stopping to shake hands. I cut her dead. . . .

I cut her dead, and held my course serenely down the Boulevard—though I'm not sure my heart wasn't pounding. But I could lay as unction to my soul the consciousness of having done the appropriate thing, of having marked my righteous indignation.

In a minute, however, I heard the pat-pat of rapid footsteps on the pavement behind me, and my name being called. I hurried on, careful not to turn my head. But, at Cluny, P'tit-Bleu arrived abreast of me.

"I want to speak to you," she gasped, out of breath from running.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Will you tell me why you cut me like that just now ?"

"If you don't know, I doubt if I could make you understand," I answered, with an air of imperial disdain.

"You bear me a grudge, hein ? For what I did last March ? Well, then, you are right. There. I was abominable. But I have been sorry, and I ask your pardon. Now will you let bygones be bygones ? Will you forgive me ?"

"Oh,"

"Oh," I said, "don't try to play the simpleton with me. You are perfectly well aware that isn't why I cut you."

"But why, then?" cried she, admirably counterfeiting (as I took for granted) a look and accent of bewilderment.

I walked on without speaking. She kept beside me.

"But why, then? If it isn't that, what is it?"

"Oh, bah!"

"I insist upon your telling me. Tell me."

"Very good, then. I don't care to know a girl who lives 'collée' with a gaga," I said, brutally.

P'tit-Bleu flushed suddenly, and faced me with blazing eyes.

"Comment! You believe that?" she cried.

"Pooh!" said I.

"Oh, mais non, mais non, mais non, alors! You don't believe that?"

"You pay me a poor compliment. Why should you expect me to be ignorant of a thing the whole Quarter knows?"

"Oh, the whole Quarter! What does that matter to me, your Quarter? Those nasty little students! C'est de la crasse, quoi! They may believe—they may say—what they like. Oh, ça m'est bien égal!" with a shake of the head and a skyward gesture. "But you—but my friends! Am I that sort of girl? Answer."

"There's only one sort of girl in the precincts of this University," declared her disenchanted interlocutor. "You're all of one pattern. The man's an ass who expects any good from any of you. Don't pose as better than the others. You're all a—un tas de saletés. I'm sick and tired of the whole sordid, squalid lot of you. I should be greatly obliged, now, if you would have the kindness to leave me. Go back to your gaga. He'll be impatient waiting."

That speech, I fancied, would rid me of her. But no.

"You

“ You are trying to make me angry, aren't you ? But I refuse to leave you till you have admitted that you are wrong,” she persisted. “ It's an outrageous slander. Monsieur Long (that is his name, Monsieur Long), he lives in the same house with me, on the same landing ; et voilà tout. Dame ! Can I prevent him ? Am I the landlord ? And, for that, they say I'm ‘ collée ’ with him. I don't care what they say. But you ! I swear to you it is an infamous lie. Will you come home with me now, and see ? ”

“ Oh, that's mere quibbling. You go with him everywhere, you dine with him, you are never seen without him.”

“ Dieu de Dieu ! ” wailed P'tit-Bleu. “ How shall I convince you ? He is my neighbour. Is it forbidden to know one's neighbours ? I swear to you, I give you my word of honour, it is nothing else. How to make you believe me ? ”

“ Well, my dear,” said I, “ if you wish me to believe you, break with him. Chuck him up. Drop his acquaintance. Nobody in his senses will believe you so long as you go trapesing about the Quarter with him.”

“ Oh, but no,” she cried, “ I can't drop his acquaintance.”

“ Ah, there it is,” cried I.

“ There are reasons. There are reasons why I can't, why I mustn't.”

“ I thought so.”

“ Ah, voyons ! ” she broke out, losing patience. “ Will you not believe my word of honour ? Will you force me to tell you things that don't concern you—that I have no right to tell ? Well, then, listen. I cannot drop his acquaintance, because—this is a secret—he would die of shame if he thought I had betrayed it—you will never breathe it to a soul—because I have discovered that he has a—a vice, a weakness. No—but listen. He is an
Englishman,

Englishman, a painter. Oh, a painter of great talent ; a painter who has exposed at the Salon—quoi ! A painter who is known in his country. On a même parlé de lui dans les journaux ; voilà. But look. He has a vice. He has half ruined, half killed himself with a drug. Yes—opium. Oh, but wait, wait. I will tell you. He came to live in our house last July, in the room opposite mine. When we met, on the landing, in the staircase, he took off his hat, and we passed the bonjour. Oh, he is a gentleman ; he has been well brought up. From that we arrived at speaking together a little, and then at visiting. It was the dead season, I had no affairs. I would sit in his room in the afternoon, and we would chat. Oh, he is a fine talker. But, though he had canvases, colours, all that is needed for painting, he never painted. He would only talk, talk. I said, ‘But you ought to paint.’ He said always, ‘Yes, I must begin something to-morrow.’ Always to-morrow. And then I discovered what it was. He took opium. He spent all his money for opium. And when he had taken his opium he would not work, he would only talk, talk, talk, and then sleep, sleep. You think that is well—hein ? That a painter of talent should do no work, but spend all his money for a drug, for a poison, and then say ‘To-morrow’ ? You think I could sit still and see him commit these follies under my eyes and say nothing, do nothing ? Ruin his brain, his health, his career, and waste all his money, for that drug ? Oh, mais non. I made him the sermon. I said, ‘You know it is very bad, that which you are doing there.’ I scolded him. I said, ‘But I forbid you to do that—do you understand ? I forbid it.’ I went with him everywhere, I gave him all my time ; and when he would take his drug I would annoy him, I would make a scene, I would shame him. Well, in the end, I have acquired an influence over him. He has submitted

mited himself to me. He is really trying to break the habit. I keep all his money. I give him his doses. I regulate them, I diminish them. The consequence is, I make him work. I give him one very small dose in the morning to begin the day. Then I will give him no more till he has done so much work. You see? Tu te figures que je suis sa maîtresse? Je suis plutôt sa nounou—va! Je suis sa caissière. And he is painting a great picture—you will see. Eh bien, how can I give up his acquaintance? Can I let him relapse, as he would do to-morrow without me, into his bad habit?”

I was walking with long strides, P'tit-Bleu tripping at my elbow; and before her story was finished we had left the Boulevard behind us, and reached the middle of the Pont St. Michel. There, I don't know why, we halted, and stood looking off towards Notre-Dame. The grim grey front of the Cathedral glowed softly amethystine in the afternoon sun, and the sky was infinitely deep and blue above it. One could be intensely conscious of the splendid penetrating beauty of this picture, without, somehow, giving the less attention to what P'tit-Bleu was saying. She talked swiftly, eagerly, with constantly changing, persuasive intonations, with little brief pauses, hesitations, with many gestures, with much play of eyes and face. When she had done, I waited a moment. Then, grudgingly, “Well,” I began, “if what you tell me is true——”

“*If it is true!*” P'tit-Bleu cried, with sudden fierceness. “Do you dare to say you doubt it?”

And she gazed intently, fiercely, into my eyes, challenging me, as it were, to give her the lie.

Before that gaze my eyes dropped, abashed.

“No—I don't doubt it,” I faltered, “I believe you. And— and allow me to say that you are a—a damned decent little girl.”

Poor

Poor P'tit-Bleu ! How shall I tell you the rest of her story—the story of those long years of love and sacrifice and devotion, and of continual discouragement, disappointment, with his death at the end of them, and her disappearance ?

In the beginning she herself was very far from realising what she had undertaken, what had befallen her. To exercise a little friendly supervision over her neighbour's addiction to opium, to husband his money for him, and spur him on to work—it seemed a mere incident in her life, an affair by the way. But it became her exclusive occupation, her whole life's chief concern. Little by little, one after the other, she put aside all her former interests, thoughts, associations, dropped all her former engagements, to give herself as completely to caring for, guarding, guiding poor old Edward Long, as if she had been a mother, and he her helpless child.

Throughout that first winter, indeed, she continued to dance at Bullier's, continued to instruct her corps of pupils, and continued even occasionally, though much less frequently than of old time, to be seen at the Vachette, or to sup with a friend at the Gambrinus. But from day to day Monsieur Edouard (he had soon ceased to be Monsieur Long, and become Monsieur Edouard) absorbed more and more of her time and attention ; and when the spring came she suddenly burned her ships.

You must understand that she had one pertinacious adversary in her efforts to wean him of his vice. Not an avowed adversary, for he professed the most earnest wish that she might be successful ; but an adversary who was eternally putting spokes in her wheel, all the same. Yes, Monsieur Edouard himself. Never content with the short rations to which she had condemned him, he was perpetually on the watch for a chance to elude her vigilance ; she was perpetually discovering that he had somehow contrived

trived to lay in secret supplies. And every now and again, openly defying her authority, he would go off for a grand debauch. Then her task of reducing his daily portion to a minimum must needs be begun anew. Well, when the spring came, and the Salon opened, where his picture (*her* picture ?) had been received and very fairly hung, they went together to the Vernissage. And there he met a whole flock of English folk—artists and critics, who had “just run over for the show, you know”—with whom he was acquainted; and they insisted on carrying him away with them to lunch at the Ambassadeurs.

I, too, had assisted at the Vernissage; and when I left it, I found P'tit-Bleu seated alone under the trees in the Champs-Élysées. She had on a brilliant spring toilette, with a hat and a sunshade. . . . Oh, my dear! It is not to be denied that P'tit-Bleu had the courage of her tastes. But her face was pale, and her lips were drawn down, and her eyes looked strained and anxious.

“What's the row?” I asked.

And she told me how she had been abandoned—“*plantée là*” was her expression—and of course I invited her to lunch with me. But she scarce relished the repast. “*Pourvu qu'il ne fasse pas de bêtises!*” was her refrain.

She returned rather early to the Rue Monsieur le Prince, to see if he had come home; but he hadn't. Nor did he come home that night, nor the next day, nor the next. At the week's end, though, he came: dirty, haggard, tremulous, with red eyes, and nude—yes, nude—of everything save his shirt and trousers! He had borrowed a sovereign from one of his London friends, and when that was gone, he had pledged or sold everything but his shirt and trousers—hat, boots, coat, everything. It was an equally haggard and red-eyed P'tit-Bleu who faced him on his reappearance.

ance. And I've no doubt she gave him a specimen of her eloquence. "You figure to yourself that this sort of thing amuses me, hein? Here are six good days and nights that I haven't been able to sleep or rest."

Explaining the case to me, she said, "Ah, what I suffered! I could never have believed that I cared so much for him. But—what would you?—one attaches oneself, you know. Ah, what I suffered! The anxiety, the terrors! I expected to hear of him run over in the streets. Well, now, I must make an end of this business. I'm going to take him away. So long as he remains in Paris, where there are chemists who will sell him that filthiness (*cette crasse*) it is hopeless. No sooner do I get my house of cards nicely built up, than—piff!—something happens to knock it over. I am going to take him down into the country, far from any town, far from the railway, where I can guard him better. I know a place, a farm-house, near Villiers-St.-Jacques, where we can get board. He has a little income, which reaches him every three months from England. Oh, very little, but if I am careful of it, it will pay our way. And then—I will make him work."

"Oh, no," I protested. "You're not going to leave the Quarter." And I'm ashamed to acknowledge, I laboured hard to dissuade her. "Think of how we'll miss you. Think of how you'll bore yourself. And anyhow, he's not worth it. And besides, you won't succeed. A man who has an appetite for opium will get it, *coûte que coûte*. He'd walk twenty miles in bare feet to get it." This was the argument that I repeated in a dozen different paraphrases. You see, I hadn't realised yet that it didn't matter an atom whether she succeeded, or whether he was worth it. He was a mere instrument in the hands of Providence. Let her succeed or let her fail in keeping him from opium: the
important

important thing . . . how shall I put it ? This little Undine had risen out of the black waters of the Latin Quarter and attached herself to a mortal. What is it that love gains for Undines ?

“Que veux-tu ?” cried P’tit-Bleu. “I am fond of him. I can’t bear to see him ruining himself. I must do what I can.”

And the Quarter said, “Ho-ho ! You chaps who didn’t believe it was a ‘collage’ ! He-he ! What do you say now ? She’s chucked up everything, to go and live in the country with him.”

In August or September I ran down to the farm-house near Villiers-St.-Jacques, and passed a week with them. I found a mightily changed Monsieur Edouard, and a curiously changed P’tit-Bleu, as well. He was fat and rosy, he who had been so thin and white. And she—she was *grave*. Yes, P’tit-Bleu was grave : sober, staid, serious. And her impish, mocking black eyes shone with a strange, serious, calm light.

Monsieur Edouard (with whom my relations had long before this become confidential) drew me apart, and told me he was having an exceedingly bad time of it.

“She’s really too absurd, you know. She’s a martinet, a tyrant. Opium is to me what tobacco is to you, and does me no more harm. I need it for my work. Oh, in moderation ; of course one can be excessive. Yet she refuses to let me have a tenth of my proper quantity. And besides, how utterly senseless it is, keeping me down here in the country. I’m dying of ennui. There’s not a person I can have any sort of intellectual sympathy with, for miles in every direction. An artist needs the stimulus of contact with his fellows. It’s indispensable. If she’d only let me run up
to

to Paris for a day or two at a time, once a month say. Couldn't you persuade her to let me go back with you? She's the most awful screw, you know. It's the French lower middle class parsimony. I'm never allowed to have twopence in my pocket. Yet whose money is it? Where does it come from? I really can't think why I submit, why I don't break away from her, and follow my own wishes. But the poor little thing is fond of me; she's attached herself to me. I don't know what would become of her if I cast her off. Oh, don't fancy that I don't appreciate her. Her intentions are excellent. But she lacks wisdom, and she enjoys the exercise of power. I wish you'd speak with her."

P'tit-Bleu also drew me apart.

"Please don't call me P'tit-Bleu any more. Call me Jeanne. I have put all that behind me—all that P'tit-Bleu signifies. I hate to think of it, to be reminded of it. I should like to forget it."

When I had promised not to call her P'tit-Bleu any more, she went on, replying to my questions, to tell me of their life.

"Of course, everybody thinks I am his mistress. You can't convince them I'm not. But that's got to be endured. For the rest, all is going well. You see how he is improved. I give him fifteen drops of laudanum, morning, noon, and night. Fifteen drops—it is nothing. I could take it myself, and never know it. And he used to drink off an ounce—an ounce, *mon cher*—at a time, and then want more at the end of an hour. Yes! Oh, he complains, he complains of everything, he frets, he is not contented. But he has not walked twenty miles in bare feet, as you said he would. And he is working. You will see his pictures."

"And you—how do you pass your time? What do you do?"

"I pose

“I pose for him a good deal. And then I have much sewing to do. I take in sewing for Madame Deschamps, the deputy’s wife, to help to make the ends meet. And then I read. Madame Deschamps lends me books.”

“And I suppose you’re bored to death?”

“Oh, no, I am not bored. I am happy. I never was really happy—dans le temps.”

They were living in a very plain way indeed. You know what French farmhouses are apt to be. His whole income was under a hundred pounds a year; and out of that (and the trifle she earned by needlework) his canvases, colours, brushes, frames, had to be paid for, as well as his opium, and their food, clothing, everything. But P’tit-Bleu—Jeanne—with that “lower-middle-class parsimony” of hers, managed somehow. Jeanne! In putting off the name, she had put off also, in great measure, the attributes of P’tit-Bleu; she had become Jeanne in nature. She was grave, she was quiet. She wore the severest black frocks—she made them herself. And I never once noticed the odour of *peau-d’Espagne*, from the beginning to the end of my visit. But—shall I own it? Jeanne was certainly the more estimable of the two women, but shall I own that I found her far less exciting as a comrade than P’tit-Bleu had been? She was good, but she wasn’t very lively or very amusing.

P’tit-Bleu, the heroine of Bullier’s, that lover of noisy pleasure, of daring toilettes, of risky perfumes, of *écrevisses* and *chablis*, of all the rush and dissipation of the Boul’ Miche and the Luxembourg, quietly settling down into Jeanne of the home-made frocks, in a rough French farmhouse, to a diet of veal and lentils, lentils and veal, seven times a week, and no other pastime in life than the devoted, untiring nursing of an ungrateful old English opium-eater—here was variation under domestication with a vengeance.

And on Sunday . . . P'tit-Bleu went twice to church !

About ten days after my return to Paris, there came a rat-ta-tat at my door, and P'tit-Bleu walked in—pale, with wide eyes. “ I don't know how he has contrived it, but he must have got some money somewhere, and walked to the railway, and come to town. Anyhow, here are three days that he has disappeared. What to do ? What to do ? ” She was in a deplorable state of mind, poor thing, and I scarcely knew how to help her. I proposed that we should take counsel with a Commissary of Police. But when that functionary discovered that she was neither the wife nor daughter of the missing man, he smiled, and remarked, “ It is not our business to recover ladies' protectors for them.” P'tit-Bleu walked the streets in quest of him, all day long and very nearly all night long too, for close upon a fortnight. In the end, she met him on the quays—dazed, half-imbecile, and again nude of everything save his shirt and trousers. So, again, having nicely built up her house of cards—piff !—something had happened to topple it over.

“ Let him go to the devil his own way,” said I. “ Really, he's unworthy of your pains.”

“ No, I can't leave him. You see, I'm fond of him,” said she.

He, however, positively refused to return to the country. “ The fact is,” he explained, “ I ought to go to London. Yes, it will be well for me to pass the winter in London. I should like to have a show there, a one-man show, you know. I dare say I could sell a good many pictures, and get orders for portraits.” So they went to London. In the spring I received a letter from P'tit-Bleu—a letter full of orthographic faults, if you like—but a letter that I treasure. Here's a translation of it :

“ My

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“I have hesitated much before taking my pen in hand to write to you. But I have no one else to turn to. We have had a dreadful winter. Owing to my ignorance of the language one speaks in this dirty town, I have not been able to exercise over Monsieur Edouard that supervision of which he has need. In consequence, he has given himself up to the evil habit which you know, as never before. Every penny, every last sou, which he could command, has been spent for that detestable filth. Many times we have passed whole days without eating, no, not the end of a crust. He has no desire to eat when he has had his dose. We are living in a slum of the most disgusting, in the quarter of London they call Soho. Everything we have, save the bare necessary of covering, has been put with the lender-on-pledges. Yesterday I found a piece of one shilling in the street. That, however, I have been forced to dispense for opium, because, when he has had such large quantities, he would die or go mad if suddenly deprived.

“I have addressed myself to his family, but without effect. They refuse to recognise me. Everybody here, of course, figures to himself that I am his mistress. He has two brothers, one of the army, one an advocate. I have besieged them in vain. They say, ‘We have done for him all that is possible. We can do no more. He has exhausted our patience. Now that he has gone a step farther, and, in his age, disgraced himself by living with a mistress, as well as besotting himself with opium, we wash our hands of him for good.’ And yet, I cannot leave him, because I know, without me, he would kill himself within the month, by his excesses. To his sisters, both of whom are married and ladies of the world, I have appealed with equal results. They refuse to regard me otherwise than as his mistress.

“But I cannot bear to see that great man, with that mind, that talent, doing himself to death. And when he is not under the influence of his drug, who is so great? Who has the wit, the wisdom, the heart, the charm, of Monsieur Edouard? Who can paint like him?

“My

"My dear, as a last resource, I take up my pen to ask you for assistance. If you could see him your heart would be moved. He is so thin, so thin, and his face has become *blue*, yes, blue, like the face of a dead man. Help me to save him from himself. If you can send me a note of five hundred francs, I can pay off our indebtedness here, and bring him back to France, where, in a sane country, far from a town, again I can reduce him to a few drops of laudanum a day, and again see him in health and at work. That which it costs me to make this request of you, I have not the words to tell you. But, at the end of my forces, having no other means, no other support, I confide myself to your well-tried amity.

"I give you a good kiss.

"JEANNE."

If the reading of this letter brought a lump into my throat and something like tears into my eyes—if I hastened to a banker's, and sent P'tit-Bleu the money she asked for, by telegraph—if I reproached her bitterly and sincerely for not having applied to me long before,—I hope you will believe that it wasn't for the sake of Monsieur Edouard.

They established themselves at St.-Etienne, a hamlet on the coast of Normandy, to be further from Paris. Dieppe was their nearest town. They lived at St.-Etienne for nearly three years. But, periodically, when she had got her house of cards nicely built up—piff!—he would walk into Dieppe.

He walked into Dieppe one day in the autumn of 1885, and it took her a week to find him. He was always ill, after one of his grand debauches. This time he was worse than he had ever been before. I can imagine the care with which she nursed him, her anxious watching by his bedside, her prayers, her hope, the blankness when he died.

She came back to Paris, and called three times at my lodgings.

But

But I was in England, and didn't receive the notes she left till nearly six months afterwards. I have never seen her since, never heard from her.

What has become of her ? It is not pleasant to conjecture. Of course, after his death, she ought to have died too. But the Angel of this Life,

“Whose care is lest men see too much at once,”

couldn't permit any such satisfying termination. So she has simply disappeared, and, in the flesh, may have come to . . . one would rather not conjecture. All the same, I can't believe that in the spirit she will have made utter shipwreck. I can't believe that nothing permanent was won by those long years of love and pain. Her house of cards was toppled over, as often as she built it up ; but perhaps she was all the while building another house, a house not made with hands, a house, a temple, indestructible.

Poor P'tit Bleu !