

THE GINGERBREAD FAIR AT VINCENNES

A COLOUR-STUDY

I



THE tram rolls heavily through the sunshine, on the way to Vincennes. The sun beats on one's head like the glow of a furnace; we are in the second week of May, and the hour is between one and two in the afternoon. From the Place Voltaire, all along the dingy boulevard, there are signs of the fair: first, little stalls, with the refuse of ironmonger and pastry-cook, then little booths, then a few roundabouts, the wooden horses standing motionless. At the Place de la Nation we have reached the fair itself. Already the roundabouts swarm in gorgeous inactivity; shooting-galleries with lofty names—Tir Metropolitain, Tir de Lutèce—lead on to the establishments of *cochonnerie*, the gingerbread pigs, which have given its name to the *Foire au pain d'épice*. From between the two pillars, each with its airy statue, we can look right on, through lanes of stalls and alleys of dusty trees, to the railway bridge which crosses the other end of the Cours de Vincennes, just before it subsides into the desolate boulevard Soult and the impoverished grass of the ramparts. Hardly anyone passes: the fair, which is up late, sleeps till three. I saunter slowly along, watching the drowsy attitudes of the women behind their stalls, the men who lounge beside their booths. Only the photographer is in activity, and as you pause a moment to note his collection of grimacing and lachrymose likenesses (probably very like), a framed horror is thrust into your hand, and a voice insinuates: "Six pour un sou, Monsieur!"

To stroll through the fair just now is to have a sort of "Private View." The hour of disguises has not yet begun. The heavy girl who, in an hour's time, will pose in rosy tights and cerulean tunic on those trestles yonder in front of the theatre, sits on the ladder-staircase of her "jivin wardo," her "living

waggon," as the gipsies call it, diligently mending, with the help of scissors and thread, a piece of canvas which is soon to be a castle or a lake. A lion-tamer, in his shirt-sleeves is chatting with the proprietress of a collection of waxworks. A fairy queen is washing last week's tights in a great tub. And booths and theatres seem to lounge in the same *déshabille*. With their vacant platforms, their closed doors, their too visible masterpieces of coloured canvas, they stand, ugly and dusty, every crack and patch exposed by the pitiless downpour of the sunlight. Here is the show of Pezon, the old lion-tamer, who is now assisted by his son; opposite, his rival and constant neighbour, Bidel. The Grand Théâtre Cocherie announces its "grande féerie" in three acts and twenty tableaux. A "concert international" succeeds a very dismal-looking "Temple de la Gaieté." Here is the Théâtre Macketti; here the "Grande Musée Vivant"; here a "Galerie artistique" at one sou. "Laurent, inimitable dompteur (pour la première fois à Paris)," has for companion "Juliano et ses fauves: Fosse aux Lions." There is a very large picture of a Soudanese giant—"il est ici, le géant Soudanais: 2^m 20 de hauteur"—outside a very small tent; the giant, very black in the face, and very red as to his habiliments, holds a little black infant in the palm of his hand, and by his side, carefully avoiding (by a delicacy of the painter) a too direct inspection, stands a gendarme, who extends five fingers in a gesture of astonishment, somewhat out of keeping with the perfect placidity of his face. "Théâtres des Illusions" flourish side by side with "Musées artistiques," in which the latest explosive Anarchist, or "le double crime du boulevard du Temple," is the "great attraction" of the moment. Highly coloured and freely designed pictures of nymphs and naiads are accompanied by such seductive and ingenuous recommendations as this, which I copy textually: I cannot reproduce the emphasis of the lettering: "Etoiles Animées. Filles de l'Air. Nouvelle attraction par le professeur Julius. Pourquoi Mlle. Isaure est-elle appelée Déesse des Eaux? C'est par sa Grâce et son pouvoir mystérieux de paraître au milieu des Eaux limpides, devant tous les spectateurs qui deviendront ses Admirateurs. En Plein Théâtre la belle Isaure devient Syrène et Nayade! charme par ses jeux sveltes et souples, apparaît en Plein Mer, et présentée par le professeur Julius à chaque représentation. Plusieurs pâles imitateurs essayent de copier la belle Isaure, mais le vrai Public, amateur du Vrai et du Beau, dira que la Copie ne vaut pas l'original." And there is a "Jardin mystérieux" which represents an improbable harem, with an undesirable accompaniment of performing reptiles. Before this tent I pause, but not for the sake of its announcements. In the doorway sits a beautiful young girl of about sixteen, a Jewess, with a face that

Leonardo might have painted. A red frock reaches to her knees, her thin legs, in white tights, are crossed nonchalantly ; in her black hair there is the sparkle of false diamonds, ranged in a tiara above the gracious contour of her forehead ; and she sits there, motionless, looking straight before her with eyes that see nothing, absorbed in some vague reverie, the Monna Lisa of the Gingerbread Fair.

II

It is half-past three, and the Cours de Vincennes is a carnival of colours, sounds, and movements. Looking from the Place de la Nation, one sees a long thin line of customers along the stalls of bonbons and gingerbread, and the boulevard has the air of a black-edged sheet of paper, until the eye reaches the point where the shows begin. Then the crowd is seen in black patches, sometimes large, extending half across the road, sometimes small ; every now and then, one of the black patches thins rapidly, as the people mount the platform, or as there is a simultaneous movement from one point of attraction to another. At one's back the roundabouts are squealing the "répertoire Paulus," in front there is a continuous, deafening rumble of drums, with an inextricable jangle and jumble of brass bands, each playing a different tune, all at once, and all close together. Shrill or hoarse voices are heard for a moment, to be drowned the next by the intolerable drums and cornets. As one moves slowly down the long avenue, distracted by the cries, the sounds, coming from both sides at once, it is quite another aspect that is presented by those dingy platforms, those gaping canvases, of but an hour ago. Every platform is alive with human frippery. A clown in reds and yellows, with a floured and rouged face, bangs a big drum, an orchestra (sometimes of one, sometimes of fifteen) "blows through brass" with the full power of its lungs ; fulgently and scantily attired ladies throng the foreground, a man in plain clothes squanders the remains of a voice in howling the attractions of the interior, and in the background, at a little table, an opulent lady sits at the receipt of custom, with the business-like solemnity of the *dame du comptoir* of a superior restaurant. Occasionally there is a *pas seul*, more often an indifferent waltz, at times an impromptu comedy. Outside Bidel's establishment a tired and gentle dromedary rubs its nose against the pole to which it is tied ; elsewhere a monkey swings on a trapeze ; a man with a snake about his shoulders addresses the crowd, and my Monna Lisa, too, has twined a snake around her, and stands holding the little malevolent head in her fingers, like an exquisite and harmless Medusa.

Under the keen sunlight every tint stands out sharply, and to pass between those two long lines of gesticulating figures is to plunge into an orgy of clashing colours. All the women wear the coarsest of worsted tights, meant, for the most part, to be flesh-colour, but it varies, through all the shades, from the palest of pink to the brightest of red. Often the tights are patched, sometimes they are not even patched. The tunic may be mauve, or orange, or purple, or blue; it is generally open in front, showing a close-fitting jersey of the same colour as the tights. The arms are bare, the faces, as a rule, made up with discretion and restraint. There is one woman (she must once have been very beautiful) who appears in ballet skirts; there is a man in blue-grey cloak and hood, warriors in plumes and cuirass; but for the most part it is the damsels in flesh-coloured tights and jerseys who parade on the platforms outside the theatres. When they break into a waltz it is always the most dissonant of mauves and pinks and purples that choose one another as partners. As the girls move carelessly and clumsily round in the dance, they continue the absorbing conversations in which they are mostly engaged. Rarely does anyone show the slightest interest in the crowd whose eyes are all fixed—so thirstingly!—upon them. They stand or move as they are told, mechanically, indifferently, and that is all. Often, but not always, well-formed, they have occasionally pretty faces as well. There is a brilliant little creature, one of the crowd of warriors outside the Théâtre Cocherie, who has quite an individual type of charm and intelligence. She has a boyish face, little black curls on her forehead, a proud, sensitive mouth, and black eyes full of wit and defiance. As Miss Angelina, "artiste gymnasiarque, équilibriste et danseuse," goes through a very ordinary selection of steps ("rocks," "scissors," and the like, as they are called in the profession), Julienne's eyes devour every movement: she is learning how to do it, and will practise it herself, without telling anyone, until she can surprise them some day by taking Miss Angelina's place.

III

But it is at night, towards nine o'clock, that the fair is at its best. The painted faces, the crude colours, assume their right aspect, become harmonious, under the artificial light. The dancing pinks and reds whirl on the platforms, flash into the gas-light, disappear for an instant into a solid shadow, against the light, emerge vividly. The moving black masses surge to and fro before the booths; from the side one sees lines of rigid figures, faces that the light shows in eager profile. Outside the Théâtre Cocherie there is a shifting light

which turns a dazzling glitter, moment by moment, across the road ; it plunges like a sword into one of the trees opposite, casts a glow as of white fire over the transfigured green of leaves and branches, and then falls off, baffled by the impenetrable leafage. As the light drops suddenly on the crowd, an instant before only dimly visible, it throws into fierce relief the intent eyes, the gaping mouths, the unshaven cheeks, darting into the hollows of broken teeth, pointing cruelly at every scar and wrinkle. As it swings round in the return, it dazzles the eyes of one tall girl at the end of the platform, among the warriors : she turns away her head, or grimaces. In the middle of the platform there is a violent episode of horse-play : a man in plain clothes belabours two clowns with a sounding lath, and is in turn belaboured ; then the three rush together, pell-mell, roll over one another, bump down the steps to the ground, return, recommence, with the vigour and gusto of schoolboys in a scrimmage. Further on a white clown tumbles on a stage, girls in pink and black and white move vaguely before a dark red curtain, brilliant red breeches sparkle, a girl *en garçon*, standing at one side in a graceful pose which reveals her fine outlines, shows a motionless silhouette, cut out sharply against the light ; the bell rings, the drum beats, a large blonde-wigged woman, dressed in Louis XIV., cries her wares and holds up placards, white linen with irregular black lettering. Outside a boxing booth a melancholy lean man blows inaudibly into a horn ; his cheeks puff, his fingers move, but not a sound can be heard above the thunder of the band of Laurent le Dompteur. Before the *ombres chinoises* a lamp hanging to a tree sheds its light on a dark red background, on the gendarme who moves across the platform, on the pink and green hat of Madame, and her plump hand supporting her chin, on Monsieur's irreproachable silk hat and white whiskers. Near by is a theatre where they are giving the "Cloches de Corneville," and the platform is thronged with lounging girls in tights. They turn their backs unconcernedly to the crowd, and the light falls on pointed shoulder-blades, one distinguishes the higher vertebrae of the spine. A man dressed in a burlesque female costume kicks a print dress extravagantly into the air, flutters a ridiculous fan, with mincing airs, with turns and somersaults. People begin to enter, and the platform clears ; a line of figures marches along the narrow footway running the length of the building, to a curtained entrance at the end. The crowd in front melts away, straggles across the road to another show, straggling back again as the drum begins to beat and the line of figures marches back to the stage.

In front, at the outskirts of the crowd, two youngsters in blouses have begun to dance, kicking their legs in the air, to the strains of a mazurka ; and

now two women circle. A blind man, in the space between two booths, sits holding a candle in his hand, a pitiful object ; the light falls on his straw hat, the white placard on his breast, his face is in shadow. As I pause before a booth where a fat woman in tights flourishes a pair of boxing gloves, I find myself by the side of my Monna Lisa of the enchanted garden. Her show is over, and she is watching the others. She wears a simple black dress and a dark blue apron ; her hair is neatly tied back with a ribbon. She is quite ready to be amused, and it is not only I, but the little professional lady, who laughs at the farce which begins on a neighbouring stage, where a patch-work clown comes out arm in arm with a nightmare of a pelican, the brown legs very human, the white body and monstrous orange bill very fearsome and fantastic. A pale Pierrot languishes against a tree : I see him as I turn to go, and, looking back, I can still distinguish the melancholy figure above the waltz of the red and pink and purple under the lights, the ceaseless turning of those human dolls, with their fixed smile, their painted colours.

IV

It is half-past eleven, and the fair is over for the night. One by one the lights are extinguished ; faint glimmers appear in the little square windows of dressing-rooms and sleeping-rooms ; silhouettes cross and re-cross the drawn blinds, with lifted arms and huddled draperies. The gods of *tableaux vivants*, negligently modern in attire, stroll off across the road to find a comrade, rolling a cigarette between their fingers. Monna Lisa passes rapidly, with her brother, carrying a marketing basket. And it is a steady movement townwards ; the very stragglers prepare to go, stopping, from time to time, to buy a great gingerbread pig with Jean or Suzanne scrawled in great white letters across it. Outside one booth, not yet closed, I am arrested by the desolation of a little frail creature, with a thin, suffering, painted face, his pink legs crossed, who sits motionless by the side of the great drum, looking down wearily at the cymbals that he still holds in his hands. In the open spaces roundabouts turn, turn, a circle of moving lights, encircled by a thin line of black shadows. The sky darkens, a little wind is rising ; the night, after this day of heat, will be stormy. And still, to the waltz measure of the roundabouts, turning, turning frantically, the last lingerers defy the midnight, a dance of shadows.

ARTHUR SYMONS.