

## An Idyll in Millinery

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### I

THE actual reason why Liphook was there does not matter : he was there, and he was there for the second time within a fortnight, and on each occasion, as it happened, he was the only man in the place—the only man-customer in the place. A pale, shaven young Jew passed sometimes about the rooms, in the background.

Liphook could not stand still ; the earliest sign of mental excitement, this ; if he paused for a moment in front of one of the two console tables and glanced into the big mirror, it was only to turn the next second and make a step or two this way or that upon the spacious-sized, vicious-patterned Axminster carpet. His eye wandered, but not without a mark of resolution in its wandering—resolution not to wander persistently in one direction. First the partings in the curtains which ran before the windows seemed to attract him, and he glanced into the gay grove of millinery that blossomed before the hungry eyes of female passers-by in the street. Sometimes he looked through the archways that led upon each hand to further salons in which little groups of women, customers and saleswomen, were collected. Sometimes

Sometimes his eye rested upon the seven or eight unemployed shop-ladies who stood behind the curtains, like spiders, and looked with an almost malevolent contemptuousness upon the street starers who came not in to buy, but lingered long, and seemed to con the details of attractive models. More than once, a group in either of the rooms fascinated him for full a minute. One particularly, because its component parts declared themselves so quickly to his apprehension.

A young woman, with fringe carefully ordered to complete formlessness and fuzz, who now sat upon a chair and now rose to regard herself in a glass as she poised a confection of the *toque* breed upon her head. With her, a friend, older, of identical type, but less serious mien, whose face pringled into vivacious comment upon each venture ; comment which of course Liphook could not overhear. With them both, an elder lady, to whom the shopwoman, a person of clever *dégagé* manner and primrose hair, principally addressed herself ; appealingly, confirmatively, rapturously, critically—according to her ideas upon the hat in question. In and out of their neighbourhood moved a middle-aged woman of French appearance, short-necked, square-shouldered, high-busted, with a keen face of chamois leather colour and a head to which the black hair seemed to have been permanently glued—Madame Félise herself. When she threw a word into the momentous discussion the eyes of the party turned respectfully upon her ; each woman hearkened. Even Liphook divined that the girl was buying her trousseau millinery ; the older sister, or married friend, advising in crisp, humorous fashion, the elder lady controlling, deciding, voicing the great essential laws of order, obligation and convention ; the shopwoman playing the pipes, the dulcimer, the sackbut, the tabor or the viol—Madame Félise the while commanding with invisible bâton

bâton her intangible orchestra; directing distantly, but with ineludable authority, the very players upon the stage. At this moment She turned to him and his attention necessarily left the group. How did he find this? Did he care for the immense breadth in front? Every one in Paris was doing it. Wasn't he on the whole a little bit sick of hydrangeas—every one, positively every one, had hydrangeas just now, and hydrangeas the size of cauliflowers. He made replies; he assumed a quiet interest, not too strong to be in character; he steered her away from the Parisian breadth in front, away from the hydrangeas, into a consideration of something that rose very originally at the back and had a *ruche* of watercresses to lie upon the hair, and three dahlias, and four distinct colours of tulle in aniline shades, one over the other, and an osprey, and a bird of Paradise, and a few paste ornaments; and a convincing degree of *chic* in its abandoned hideousness. Then he took a turn down the room towards the group aforesaid.

“It looks so *fearfully* married to have that tinsel crown, don't you know!” the elder sister or youthful matron was saying. “I mean, it suggests dull calls, doesn't it? Dull people *always* have tinsel crowns, haven't you noticed? I don't want to influence you, but as I said before, I liked you in the Paris model.”

Every hat over which you conspicuously hover at Félise's, becomes, on the instant, a Paris model.

“So smart, Madam,” cut in the shop-lady. “And you can't have anything newer than that rustic brim in shot straw with just the little knot of gardenias at the side. Oh I *do* think it suits you!”

Liphook turned away. After all, he didn't want to hear what these poor, silly, feeble people were saying; he wanted to look. . . .

“But

“But Jim always likes me so much in pale blue, that I think ——” began the girl.

“Why not have just a little tiny knot of forget-me nots *with* the gardenia. Oh, I’m shaw you’d like it.”

Thus flowed the oily current of the shop-lady, reaching his ear as Liphook returned down the room. He could look again in the only direction that won his eyes and his thoughts; five minutes had been killed; there was time left him yet, for She had just been seized with the idea that something with a little more brim was really her style. After all, She craved no more than to be loose at Félice’s, amid the Spring models lit by a palely ardent town sun, and Harold’s cheque-book looming in the comfortable shadow of his pocket.

At the back of each gilt and mirrored saloon was placed a work-table—in the manner of all hat-shops—surrounded by chairs in which, mostly with their backs to the shops sat the girls who were making up millinery; their ages anywhere from sixteen to twenty-one. Seldom did the construction of a masterpiece appear to concern them; but they were spangling things; deftly turning loops into bows, curling feathers, binding ospreys into close sheaves; their heads all bent over their work, their neat aprons tied with tape bows at the back, their dull hair half flowing and half coiled—the inimitable manner of the London work girl—their pale faces dimly perceived as they turned and whispered not too noisily: the whole thing recalling the soft, quietly murmurous groups of pigeons in the streets gathered about the scatterings of a cab-horse’s nose-bag. Sometimes shop-girls with elaborately distorted hair came up and gave them disdainful-seeming orders; but the flock of sober little pigeons murmured and pecked at its work and ruffled no plumage of tan-colour or slate. And one of them, different from the others—how Liphook’s eyes, in the brief looks  
he

he allowed himself, ate up the details of her guise. Dressed in something—dark-blue, it might have been—that fitted with a difference over her plump little figure; a fine and wide lawn collar spread over breast and shoulders; a smooth head, with no tags and ends upon the pale, yellow-tinted brow; a head as sleek and as sweetly-coloured as the coat of the cupboard-mouse; a face so softly indented by its features, so fleckless, so *mat* in its flat tones, so mignon in its delicate lack of prettiness as to be irresistible. Lips, a dull greyish-pink, but tenderly curved at the pouting bow and faithfully compressed at the dusk-downy corners — terribly conscientious little lips that seemed as if never could they be kissed to lighter humour. Eyes, with pale ash-coloured fringes, neither long nor greatly curved, but so shy-shaped as ever eyes were; eyes that could only be imagined by Liphook, and he was sometimes of mind that they were that vaporous Autumn blue; and at other times that they were liquid, brook-coloured hazel.

But this was the maddest obsession that was riding him! A London workgirl in a West-end hat shop, a girl whose voice he had never heard, near whom he had never, could never, come. And Heaven forbid he should come near her; what did he want with her? Before Heaven, and all these hats and mirrors, Viscount Liphook could have sworn he wanted nothing of her. Yet he loved her completely, desperately, exclusively. What name was there for this feeling other than the name of love? Soiled with all ignoble use, this name of love; though to do him justice, Liphook was not greatly to blame in that matter. He was but little acquainted with the word; he left it out of his *affaires de cœur*, and very properly, for it did not enter into them. Still, his feeling for this girl, his craving for the sound of her voice, his eye fascinated by her smallest movement, his yearning for the sense of her nearer presence—novel, inexplicable as this all was, might it not be love?

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He stood there ; quiet, inexpressive of face, in jealous hope of—what next? And then She claimed his attention—in a whisper which brought her head with its mahogany hair, and her face with its ground-rice surface, close to his ear. She said :

“ You don’t mind five, eh? It’s a model—and—don’t you think it becomes me? I do think this mushroom-coloured velvet and just the three green orchids divine—and it’s really very quiet ! ”

He assented, careful to look critically at the hat—a clever mass of evilly-imagined, ill-assorted absurdities. He had looked too long at that work-table, at that figure, at that face—he dropped into a chair—let his stick fall between his knees and cast his eyes to the mirror-empannelled ceiling ; there the heads, and feet of the passers-by were seething grotesquely in a fashion that recalled the *Inferno* of an old engraving.

Well, it would be time to look again soon—ah ! she had risen ; thank goodness, not a tall woman—(She was five foot nine)—small, and indolent of outline.

“ I’ll take it to the French milliner now, Madam, and she’ll pin a pink rose in for you to see ! ”

It was a shop-woman speaking to some customer, who with a hat in her hand, approached the work-table.

“ If you please, Mam’zelle Mélanie,” she began, in a voice meant to impress the customer, “ would you pin in a rose for Madam to try? Madam thinks the pansy rather old-looking—” &c., &c., &c.”

The French milliner ; French, then ! And what a dear innocent, young, crusty little face ! what delicious surliness : the little brown bear that she was, growling and grumbling to do a favour. Well, bless that woman—and the pansy that looked old—he knew her name ; enough to recognise her by, enough to address

a note

a note to her—and it should be a note! A note that would bring out a star in each grey eye—they were grey—after all. (The grey of a lingering, promising, but unbestowing twilight.) Reflecting, but unobservant, his glance left her face and focussed the pale, fair, young Jew, who was seated, in frock coat and hat, gloating over a pocket-book that had scraps of coloured silk and velvet pinned in it. He recalled his wandering senses.

“How much? Eight ten?”

“Well, I’ve taken a little black thing as well; it happens to be very reasonable. There, you don’t mind?” Mrs. Percival always went upon the principle of appearing to be careful of other people’s money; she found she got more of it that way.

“My dear!—as long as you are pleased!” It was weeks since this tone had been possible to him. He scribbled a cheque and they got away.

“I know I’ve been an awful time, old boy,” said the mahogany-haired one, with rough good humour—the good humour of a vain woman whose vanity has been fed. “Are you coming?”

“Er—no; in fact, I’m going out of town, I shan’t see you for a bit—Oh, I wasn’t very badly bored, thanks.”

She made no comment on his reply to her question; her coarsely pretty face hardly showed lines of relief, for it was not a mobile face; but she was pleased.

“Glad you didn’t fret. I’d never dreamt you’d be so good about shopping. Yes, I’ll take a cab. There is a call for 12.30, and I see it is nearly one now.”

He put her into a nice-looking hansom, lifted his hat and watched her drive away. Then he turned and looked into the gaudy windows. His feelings were his own somehow, now that She had left him. He smiled; love warmed in him. Was the old pansy gone and the pink rose in its place? Had she pricked those

those creamy yellow fingers in the doing of it? No, she was too deft. Tired, flaccid little fingers! Was he never to think of anything or anyone again, except Mam'zelle Mélanie?

## II

Now the mahogany-haired lady was not an actress: she was nothing so common as an actress; she belonged to a mysterious class, but little understood, even if clearly realised, by the public. It was not because she could not that she did not act; she had never tried to, there had been no question of capability—but she consented to appear at a famous West-end burlesque theatre, to oblige the manager who was a personal friend of long-standing. She “went on” in the ball-room scene of a hoary but ever-popular “musical comedy,” because there was—not a part—but a pretty gown to be filled, and because she was surprisingly handsome, and of very fine figure, and filled that gown amazingly well. The two guineas a week that came her way at “Treasury” went a certain distance in gloves and cab-fares, and the necessities of life she had a different means of supplying. Let her position be understood: she was a very respectable person: there are degrees in respectability as in other things; there was no fear of vulgar unpleasantnesses with her and her admirers—if she had them. Mr. John Holditch, the popular manager of several theatres had a real regard for her; in private she called him “Jock, old boy,” and he called her “Mill”—because he recollected her *début*; but the public knew her as Miss Mildred Metcalf, and her lady comrades in the dressing-room as Mrs. Percival, and it was generally admitted by all concerned that she was equally satisfactory under any of these styles. Oh, it will have been  
noticed

noticed and need not be insisted on, that Liphook called her "my dear," and if it be not pushing the thing too far, I may add that her mother spoke of her as "our Florrie."

Liphook was a rich man whose occupation, when he was in town, was the dividing of days between the club, his rooms in Half Moon Street, his mother's house in Belgrave Square, and Mrs. Percival's abode in Manfield Gardens, Kensington. The only respect in which he differed from a thousand men of his class was, that he had visited the hat shop of Madame Félice, in the company of Mrs. Percival, and had conceived a genuine passion for a little French milliner who sewed spangles on to snippets of nothingness at a table in the back of the shop.

The note had been written, had been answered. This answer, in fine, sloping, uneducated French handwriting, upon thin, lined, pink paper of the foreign character, had given Liphook a ridiculous amount of pleasure. The club waiters, his mother's butler, his man in Half Moon Street, these unimportant people chiefly noted the uncontrollable bubbles of happiness that floated to the surface of his impassive English face during the days that followed the arrival of that answer. He didn't think anything in particular about it; few men so open to the attractions of women as this incident proves him, think anything in particular at all, least of all, at so early a stage. He was not—for the sake of his judges it must be urged—meaning badly any more than he was definitely meaning well. He wasn't meaning at all. He cannot be blamed, either. The world is responsible for this sense of irresponsibility in men of the world—who are the world's sole making. Herein he was true to type; in so far as he did not think what the girl meant by her answer, type was supported by individual character. Liphook was not clever, and did not think much or with any success, on any subject. And if he had he  
wouldn't

wouldn't have hit the real reason ; only experience would have told him that a French workgirl, from a love of pleasure and the national measure of shrewd practicality combined, never refuses the chance of a nice outing. She does not, like her English sister, drag her virtue into the question at all.

Never in his life, so it chanced, had Liphook gone forth to an interview in such a frame of mind as on the day he was to meet Mélanie outside the Argyll Baths in Great Marlboro' Street at ten minutes past seven. Apart from the intoxicating perfume that London seemed to breathe for him, and the gold motes that danced in the dull air, there was the unmistakable resistant pressure of the pavement against his feet (thus it seemed) which is seldom experienced twice in a lifetime ; in the lifetime of such a man as Liphook, usually never. The Argyll Baths, Great Marlboro' Street : what a curious place for the child to have chosen, and she would be standing there, pretending to look into a shop window. Oh, of course, there were no shop windows to speak of in Great Marlboro' Street. (He had paced its whole length several times since the arrival of the pink glazed note). What would she say ? What would she look like ? Her eyes, drooped or raised frankly to his, for instance ? That she would not greet him with bold, meaning smile and common phrase he knew—he felt. Dreaming and speculating, but wearing the calm leisured air of a gentleman walking from one point to another, he approached and—yes ! there she was ! A scoop-shaped hat rose above the cream-yellow brow ; a big dotted veil was loosely—was wonderfully—bound about it ; a little black cape covered the demure lawn collar ; quite French *bottines* peeped below the dark-blue skirt. But—she was not alone, a man was with her. A man whom, even at some distance, he could discern to be unwelcome and unexpected, the pale fair young Jew  
in

in dapper frock-coat and extravagantly curved over-shiny hat. Loathsome-looking reptile he was, too, so thought Liphook as he turned abruptly with savage scrape of his veering foot upon the pavement, up Argyll Street. Perhaps she was getting rid of him; it was only nine minutes past seven, anyhow; perhaps he would be gone in a moment. Odious beast! In love with her, no doubt; how came it he had the wit to recognise her indescribable charm? (Liphook never paused to wonder how himself had recognised it, though this was, in the circumstances, even more remarkable). Anyway, judging by that look he remembered, she would not be unequal to rebuffing unwelcome attention.

Liphook walked as far as Hengler's Circus and read the bills; the place was in occupation, it being early in March. He studied the bill from top to bottom, then he turned slowly and retraced his steps to the corner. Joy! she was there and alone. His pace quickened, his heart rose; his face, a handsome face, was strung to lines of pride, of passionate anticipation.

He had greeted her; he had heard her voice; so soft—dear Heaven! so soft—in reply; they had turned and were walking towards Soho, and he knew no word of what had passed.

“We will have a cab; you will give me the pleasure of dining with me. I have arranged it. Allow me.” Perhaps these were the first coherent words that he said. Then they drove along and he said inevitable, valueless things in quick order, conscious of the lovely interludes when her smooth tones, now wood-sweet, now with a harp-like thrilling *timbre* in them, again with the viol—or was it the lute-note?—a sharp dulcidity that made answer in him as certainly as the tuning-fork compels its octave from the rosewood board. The folds of the blue gown fell beside him; the French pointed feet, miraculously short-toed, rested on the atrocious straw mat of the wretched hansom his blindness had brought him; the  
scoop-hat

scoop-hat knocked the wicked reeking lamp in the centre of the cab ; the dotted veil, tied as only a French hand can tie a veil, made more delectable the creams and twine-shades of the monotonous-coloured kitten face. They drove, they arrived somewhere, they dined, and then of all things, they went into a church, which being open and permitting organ music to exude from its smut-blackened walls, seemed less like London than any place they might have sought.

And it happened to be a Catholic Church, and he—yes, he actually followed the pretty ways of her, near the grease-smear'd pecten shell with its holy water, that stuck from a pillar : some Church oyster not uprooted from its ancient bed. And they sat on *prie-dieus*, in the dim incense-savoured gloom ; little un-aspiring lights seemed to be burning in dim places beyond ; and sometimes there were voices, and sometimes these ceased again and music filled the dream-swept world in which Liphook was wrapped and veiled away. And they talked—at least she talked, low murmurous recital about herself and her life, and every detail sunk and expanded wondrously in the hot-bed of Liphook's abnormally affected mind. The evening passed to night, and people stepped about, and doors closed with a hollow warning sound that hinted at the end of lovely things, and they went out and he left her at a door which was the back entrance to Madame Félice's establishment ; but he had rolled back a grey lisle-thread glove, and gathered an inexpressibly precious memory from the touch of that small hand that posed roses instead of pansies all the day.

And of course he was to see her again. He had heard all about her. How a year since she had been fetched from Paris at the instance of Goldenmuth. Goldenmuth was the fair young Jewish man in the frock-coat and supremely curved hat. He was

a "relative" of Madame Félice, and travelled for her, in a certain sense, in Paris. He had seen Mélanie in an obscure corner of the *Petit St. Thomas* when paying an airy visit to a lady in charge of some department there. An idea had occurred to him ; in three days he arrived and made a proposition. He had conceived the plan of transplanting this ideally French work-flower to the London shop, and his plan had been a success. Her simple, shrewd, much-defined little character clung to Mélanie in London, as in Paris ; she had clever fingers, but beyond all, her appearance which Goldenmuth had the art to appreciate, soft but marked and unassailable by influence, told infinitely at that unobtrusive but conspicuous work-table.

Half mouse, half dove ; never to be vulgarised, never to be destroyed.

Mélanie had a family, worthy *épicier* of Nantes, her father ; her mother, his invaluable book-keeper. Her sister Hortense, cashier at the Restaurant des Trois Epées ; her sister Albertine, in the millinery like herself. Every detail delighted Liphook, every word of her rapid incorrect London English sank into his mind ; in the extraordinarily narrow circumscribed life that Liphook had lived—that all the Liphooks of the world usually do live—a little, naïvely-simple description of some quite different life is apt to sound surprisingly interesting, and if it comes from the lips of your Mélanie, why . . . . .

But previous to the glazed pink note, if Liphook had crystalised any floating ideas he might have had as to the nature of the intimacy he expected, they would have tallied in no particular with the reality. In his first letter had been certain warmly-worded sentences ; at their first interview when he had interred two kisses below the lisle-thread glove, he had incoherently murmured something lover-like. It had been too dark to

see

see Mélanie's face at the moment ; but when since, more than once, he had attempted similar avowals she had put her head on one side, raised her face, crinkled up the corners of the grey eyes, and twisted quite alarmingly the lilac-pink lips. So there wasn't much said about love or any such thing. After all, he could see her three or four times a week ; on Sunday they often spent the whole day together ; he could listen to her prattle ; he was a silent fellow himself, having never learnt to talk and having nothing to talk about ; he could, in hansoms and quiet places, tuck her hand within his arm and beam affectionately into her face, and they grew always closer and closer to each other ; as *camarades*, still only as *camarades*. She never spoke of Goldenmuth except incidentally, and then very briefly ; and Liphook, who had since seen the man with her in the street on two occasions, felt very unanxious to introduce the subject ; after all he knew more than he wanted to about it, he said to himself. It was obvious enough. He had bought her two hats at Félise's ; he had begged to do as much, and she had advised him which he should purchase, and on evenings together she had looked ravishing beneath them. He knew many secrets of the hat trade ; he knew and delightedly laughed over half a hundred fictions Mélanie exploded ; he was in a fair way to become a man-milliner ; even Goldenmuth could not have talked more trippingly of the concomitants of capotes.

One Sunday, when the sunniest of days had tempted them down the river, he came suddenly into the private room where they were to lunch and found her coquetting with her veil in front of a big ugly mirror ; a mad sort of impulse took him, he gripped her arms to her side, nipped her easily off the floor, bent his head round the prickly fence of hat-brim and kissed her several times ; she laughed with the low, fluent gurgle of water pushing through a narrow passage. She said nothing, she only laughed.

Somehow,

Somehow, it disorganised Liphook.

"Do you love me? Do you love me?" he asked rapidly, even roughly, in the only voice he could command, and he shook her a little.

She put her head on one side and made that same sweet crinkled-up kind of *moue moquante*, then she spread her palms out and shook them and laughed and ran away round the table. "Est-ce que je sais, moi?" she cried in French. Liphook didn't speak. Oh, he understood her all right, but he was getting himself a little in hand first. A man like Liphook has none of the art of life; he can't do figure-skating among his emotions like your nervous, artistic-minded, intellectually trained man. After that one outburst and the puzzlement that succeeded it, he was silent, until he remarked upon the waiter's slowness in bringing up luncheon. But he had one thing quite clear in his thick English head, through which the blood was still whizzing and singing. He wanted to kiss her again badly; he was going to kiss her again at the first opportunity.

But, of course, when he wasn't with her his mind varied in its reflections. For instance, he had come home one night from dining at Aldershot—a farewell dinner to his Colonel it was—and he had actually caught himself saying: "I must get out of it," meaning his affair with Mélanie. That was pretty early on, when it had still seemed, particularly after being in the society of worldly-wise friends who rarely, if ever, did anything foolish, much less emotional, that he was making an ass of himself, or was likely to if he didn't "get out of it." Now the thing had assumed a different aspect. He could not give her up; under no circumstances could he contemplate giving her up; well then, why give her up? She was only a little thing in a hat shop, she would do very much better—yes, but, somehow he had a certain feeling

feeling about her, he couldn't—well, in point of fact, he loved her ; hang it, he respected her ; he'd sooner be kicked out of his Club than say one word to her that he'd mind a fellow saying to his sister.

Thus the Liphook of March, '95, argued with the Liphook of the past two and thirty years !

### III

Liphook's position was awkward—all the other Liphooks in the world have said it was beastly awkward, supposing they could have been made to understand it. To many another kind of man this little love story might not have been inappropriate ; occurring in the case of Liphook it was nothing less than melancholy. Not that he felt melancholy about it, no indeed ; just sometimes, when he happened to think how it was all going to end, he had rather a bad moment, but thanks to his nature and training he did not think often.

Meantime, he had sent a diamond heart to Mrs. Percival ; there was more sentiment about a heart than a horse-shoe ; women looked at that kind of thing, and she would feel that he wasn't cooling off ; so it had been a heart. That secured him several more weeks of freedom at any rate, and he wouldn't have the trouble of putting notes in the fire. For on receiving the diamond heart Mrs. Percival behaved like a python after swallowing an antelope ; she was torpid in satiety, and no sign came from her.

But one morning Liphook got home to Half Moon Street after his Turkish bath, and heard that a gentleman was waiting to see him.

“ At least, hardly a gentleman, my lord ; I didn't put him in the library,” explained the intuitive Sims.

Some

Some one from his tailor's with so-called "new" patterns, no doubt ; well——

He walked straight into the room, never thinking, and he saw Goldenmuth. The man had an offensive orchid in his buttonhole. To say that Liphook was surprised is nothing ; he was astounded, and too angry to call up any expression whatever to his face ; he was rigid with rage. What in hell had Sims let the fellow in for ? However, this was the last of Sims ; Sims would go.

The oily little brute, with his odious hat in his hand, was speaking ; was saying something about being fortunate in finding his lordship, &c.

"Be good enough to tell me your business with me," said Liphook, with undisguised savagery. Though he had asked him to speak, he thought that when her name was mentioned he would have to choke him. His rival—by gad, this little Jew beggar was Liphook's rival. Goldenmuth hitched his sallow neck, as leathery as a turtle's, in his high, burnished collar, and took his pocket-book from his breast pocket—which meant that he was nervous, and forgot that he was not calling upon a "wholesale buyer," to whom he would presently show a pattern. He pressed the book in both hands, and swayed forward on his toes—swayed into hurried speech.

"Being interested in a young lady whom your lordship has honoured with your attentions lately, I called to 'ave a little talk." The man had an indescribable accent, a detestable fluency, a smile which nearly warranted you in poisoning him, a manner——! There was silence. Liphook waited ; the snap with which he bit off four tough orange-coloured hairs from his moustache, sounded to him like the stroke of a hammer in the street. Then an idea struck him. He put a question :

"What has it got to do with you ?"

"I am

“I am interested——”

“So am I. But I fail to see why you should mix yourself up with my affairs.”

“Madame Félice feels——”

“What’s she got to do with it?” Liphook tossed out his remarks with the nakedest brutality.

“The lady is in her employment and——”

“Look here ; say what you’ve got to say, or go,” burst from Liphook, with the rough bark of passion. He had his hands behind his back ; he was holding one with the other in the fear that they might get away from him, as it were. His face was still immobile, but the crooks of two veins between the temples and the eye corners stood up upon the skin ; his impassive blue eyes harboured sullen hatred. He saw the whole thing. That old woman had sent her dirty messenger to corner him, to “ask his intentions,” to get him to give himself away, to make some promise. It was a kind of blackmail they had in view. The very idea of such creatures about Mélanie would have made him sick at another time ; now he felt only disgust, and the rising obstinacy about committing himself at the unsavory instance of Goldenmuth. After all, they couldn’t take Mélanie from him ; she was free, she could go into another shop ; he could marry . . . . Stop—madness!

“Mademoiselle Mélanie is admitted to be most attractive—others have observed it——”

“You mean you have,” sneered Liphook ; in the most ungentlemanly manner, it must be allowed.

“I must bring to the notice of your lordship,” said the Jew, with the deference of a man who knows he is getting his point, “that so young as Mademoiselle is, and so innocent, she is not fitted to understand business questions ; and her parents being at  
a distance

a distance it falls to Madame Félice and myself to see that—excuse me, my lord, but we know what London is!—that her youth is not misled.”

“Who’s misleading her youth?” Liphook burst out; and his schoolboy language detracted nothing from the energy with which he spoke. “You can take my word here and now that she is in every respect as innocent as I found her. And now,” with a sudden reining in of his voice, “we have had enough of this talk. If you are the lady’s guardians you may reassure yourselves: I am no more to her than a friend: I have not sought to be any more.” Liphook moved in conclusion of the interview.

“Your lordship is very obliging; but I must point out that a young and ardent girl is likely, in the warmth of her affection, to be precipitate—that we would protect her from herself.”

“About this I have nothing to say, and will hear nothing,” exclaimed Liphook, hurriedly.

Goldenmuth used the national gesture; he bent his right elbow, turned his right hand palm upwards and shook it softly to and fro.

“Perhaps even I have noticed it. I am not insensible!”

Liphook had never heard a famous passage—he neither read nor looked at Shakespeare, so this remark merely incensed him. “But,” went on the Jew, “since she came to England—for I brought her—I have made myself her protector——”

“You’re a liar!” said Liphook, who was a very literal person.

“Oh, my lord!—I mean in the sense of being kind to her and looking after her, with Madame Félice’s entire approval; so when I noticed the marked attentions of a gentleman like your lordship——”

“You’re jealous,” put in Liphook, again quite inexcusably. But it would be impossible to over-estimate his contempt for this  
man.

man. Belonging to the uneducated section of the upper class he was a man of the toughest prejudices on some points. One of these was that all Jews were mean, scurvy devils at bottom and that no kind of consideration need be shown them. Avoid them as you would a serpent ; when you meet them, crush them as you would a serpent. He'd never put it into words ; but that is actually what poor Liphook thought, or at any rate it was the dim idea on which he acted.

"Your lordship is making a mistake," said Goldenmuth with a flush. "I am not here in my own interest ; I am here to act on behalf of the young lady." Had the heavens fallen ? In *her* interest ? Then M<sup>é</sup>lanie ? Never ! As if a Thing like this could speak the truth !

"Who sent you ?" Liphook always went to the point.

"Madame F<sup>é</sup>lise and I talked it over and agreed that I should make it convenient to call. We have both a great regard for Mademoiselle ; we feel a responsibility—a responsibility to her parents."

What was all this about ? Liphook was too bewildered to interrupt even.

"Naturally, we should like to see Mademoiselle in a position, an assured position for which she is every way suited."

So it was as he thought. They wanted to rush a proposal. *Must* he chaffer with them at all ?

"I can tell you that if I had anything to propose I should write it to the lady herself," he said.

"We are not anxious to come between you. I may say I have enquired—my interest in Mademoiselle has led me to enquire—and Madame F<sup>é</sup>lise and I think it would be in every way a suitable connection for her. Your lordship must feel that we regard her as no common girl ; she deserves to be *lançée* in the  
right

right manner ; a settlement—an establishment—some indication that the connection will be fairly permanent, or if not, that suitable——”

“Is *that* what you are driving at, you dog, you?” cried Liphook, illuminated at length and boiling with passion. “So you want to sell her to me and take your blasted commission? Get out of my house!” He grew suddenly quiet ; it was an ominous change. “Get out, this instant, before ——”

Goldenmuth was gone, the street door banged.

“God ! God !” breathed Liphook with his hand to his wet brow, “what a hellish business !”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was nine o'clock when Liphook came in that night. He did not know where he had been, he believed he had had something in the nature of dinner, but he could not have said exactly where he had had it.

Sims handed him a note.

He recognised a friend's hand and read the four lines it contained.

“When did Captain Throgmorton come, then ?”

“Came in about three to 'alf past, my lord ; he asked me if your lordship had any engagement to-night, and said he would wait at the Club till quarter past eight and that he should dine at the Blue Posts after that.”

“I see ; well,” he reflected a moment, “Sims, pack my hunting things, have everything at St. Pancras in time for the ten o'clock express, and,” he reflected again, “Sims, I want you to take a note—no, never mind. That'll do.”

“V'ry good, my lord.”

Yes, he'd go. Jack Throgmorton was the most companionable man in the world—he was so silent. Liphook and he had been

at

at Sandhurst together, they had joined the same regiment. Liphook had sent in his papers rather than stand the fag of India; Throgmorton had "taken his twelve hundred" rather than stand the fag of anywhere. He was a big heavy fellow with a marked difficulty in breathing, also there was fifteen stone of him. His round eyes, like "bulls'-eyes," the village children's best-loved goodies, stuck out of a face rased to an even red resentment. He had the hounds somewhere in Bedfordshire. His friends liked him enormously, so did his enemies. To say that he was stupid does not touch the fringe of a description of him. He had never had a thought of his own, nor an idea; all the same, in any Club quarrel, or in regard to a point of procedure, his was an opinion other men would willingly stand by. At this moment in his life, a blind instinct taught Liphook to seek such society; no one could be said to sum up more completely—perhaps because so unconsciously—the outlook of Liphook's world, which of late he had positively begun to forget. The thing was bred into Throgmorton by sheer, persistent sticking to the strain, and it came out of him again mechanically, automatically, distilled through his dim brain a triple essence. The kind of man clever people have found it quite useless to run down, for it has been proved again and again that if he can only be propped up in the right place at the right moment, you'll never find his equal *in* that place. Altogether, a handsome share in "the secret of England's greatness" belongs to him. The two men met on the platform beside a pile of kit-bags and suit cases, all with Viscount Liphook's name upon them in careful uniformity. Sims might have had the administration of an empire's affairs upon his mind, whereas he was merely chaperoning more boots and shirts than any one man has a right to possess.

"You didn't come last night," said Captain Throgmorton, as  
though

though he had only just realised the fact. He prefaced the remark by his favourite ejaculation which was "Harr-rr"—he prefaced every remark with "Harr-rr"—on a cold day it was not uninspiring if accompanied by a sharp stroke of the palms; in April it was felt to be somewhat out of season. But Captain Throgmorton merely used it as a means of getting his breath and his voice under way. "Pity," he went on, without noticing Liphook's silence; "good bone." This summed up the dinner with its famous marrow-bones, at the Blue Posts.

They got in. Each opened a *Morning Post*. Over the top of this fascinating sheet they flung friendly brevities from time to time.

"Shan't have more than a couple more days to rattle 'em about," Captain Throgmorton remarked, after half an hour's silence, and a glance at the flying hedges.

Liphook began to come back into his world. After all it was a comfortable world. Yet had an angel for a time transfigured it, ah dear! how soft that angel's wings, if he might be folded within them . . . old world, dear, bad old world, you might roll by.

They were coming home from hunting next day. Each man bent ungainly in his saddle; their cords were splashed; the going had been heavy, and once it had been hot as well, but only for a while. Then they had hung about a lot, and though they found three times, they hadn't killed. Liphook was weary. When Throgmorton stuck his crop under his thigh, hung his reins on it, and lit a cigar, Liphook was looking up at the sky, where dolorous clouds of solid purple splotched a background of orange, flame-colour and rose. Throgmorton's peppermint eye rolled slowly round when it left his cigar-tip; he knew that when a man—that is, a man of Liphook's sort—is found staring at a thing like the sunset there is a screw loose somewhere.

"Wha'

"Wha' is it, Harold?" he said, on one side of his cigar.

Liphook made frank answer.

"What's she done then?"

"Oh, Lord, it isn't *ber*."

"'Nother?" said Jack, without any show of surprise, and got his answer again.

"What sort?" This was very difficult, but Liphook shut his eyes and flew it.

"How old?"

"Twenty," said Liphook, and felt a rapture rising.

"Jack, man," he exclaimed, under the influence of the flame and rose, no doubt, "what if I were to marry?"

Throgmorton was not, as has been indicated, a person of fine fibre. "Do, and be done with 'em," said he. And after all, as far as it went, it was sound enough advice.

"I mean marry her," Liphook explained, and the explanation cost him a considerable expenditure of pluck.

An emotional man would have fallen off his horse—if the horse would have let him. Jack's horse never would have let him. Jack said nothing for a moment; his eye merely seemed to swell; then he put another question:

"Earl know about it?"

"By George, I should say not!"

"Harr-rr."

That meant that the point would be resolved in the curiously composed brain of Captain Throgmorton, and by common consent not another word was said on the matter.

## IV

Two days had gone by. Liphook's comfortable sense of having acted wisely in coming out of town to think the thing over still supported him, ridiculous though it seems. For of course he was no more able to think anything over than a Hottentot. Thinking is not a natural process at all; savage men never knew of it, and many people think it quite as dangerous as it is unnatural. It has become fashionable to learn thinking, and some forms of education undertake to teach it; but Liphook had never gone through those forms of education. After all, to understand Liphook, one must admit that he approximated quite as nearly to the savage as to the civilised and thinking man, if not more nearly. His appetites and his habits were mainly savage, and had he lived in savage times he would not have been touched by a kind of love for which he was never intended, and his trouble would not have existed. However, he was as he was, and he was thinking things over; that is, he was waiting and listening for the most forceful of his instincts to make itself heard, and he had crept like a dumb unreasoning animal into the burrow of his kind, making one last effort to be of them. At the end of the week his loudest instinct was setting up a roar; there could be no mistaking it. He loved her. He could not part from her; he must get back to her; he must make her his and carry her off.

"Sorry to be leaving you, Jack," he said one morning at the end of the week. They were standing looking out of the hall door together and it was raining. "But I find I must go up this morning."

Throgmorton rolled a glance at him, then armed him into the library and shut the door.

"What

“What are you going to do?”

“Marry her.”

There was a silence. They stood there, the closest feeling of friendship between them, not saying a word.

“My dear Harold,” said Throgmorton at length, with much visible and more invisible effort; he put a hand heavily on Liphook’s shoulder and blew hard in his mute emotion. Then he put his other hand on Liphook’s other shoulder. Liphook kept his eyes down; he was richly conscious of all Jack was mutely saying; he felt the weight of every unspoken argument; the moment was a long one, but for both these slow-moving minds a very crowded moment.

“Come to the Big Horn Mountains with me,” Throgmorton remarked suddenly, “——and——har-rr write to her from there.”

He was proud of this suggestion; he knew the value of a really remote point to write from. It was always one of the first things to give your mind to, the choice of a geographically well-nigh inaccessible point to write from. First you found it, then you went to it, and when you got there, by Jove, you didn’t need to write at all. Liphook smiled in impartial recognition of his friend’s wisdom, but shook his head.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ve thought it all over”— he genuinely believed he had—“and I’m going to marry her. Jack, old man, I love her like the very devil!”

In spite of the grotesqueness of the phrase, the spirit in it was worth having.

Throgmorton’s hands came slowly off his friend’s shoulders. He walked to the window, took out a very big handkerchief and dried his head. He seemed to look out at the dull rain battering on the gravel and digging yellow holes.

"I'll drive you to meet the 11.15," he said at last and went out of the room.

Liphook put up his arms and drew a deep breath ; it had been a stiff engagement. He felt tired. But no, not tired. Roll by, O bad old world—he has chosen the angel's wing !

Not one word had passed about Goldenmuth, Madame Félice, or the astounding interview ; a man like Liphook can always hold his tongue ; one of his greatest virtues. Besides, why should he ever think or breathe the names of those wretches again ? Jack Throgmorton, in his splendid ignorance, would have been unable to throw light upon the real motive of these simple, practical French people. Liphook to his dying day would believe they had given proof of hideous iniquity, while in reality they were actuated by a very general belief of the *bourgeoise*, that to be "established," with settlements, as the mistress of a viscount, is quite as good as becoming the wife of a grocer. They had been, perhaps, wicked, but innocently wicked ; for they acted according to their belief, in the girl's best interest. Unfortunately they had had an impracticable Anglais to deal with and had had to submit to insult ; in their first encounter, they had been worsted by British brute stupidity.

With a constant dull seething of impulses that quite possessed him, he got through the time that had to elapse before he could hear from her in reply to his short letter. He had done with thinking. A chance meeting with his father on the sunny side of Pall Mall one morning did not even disquiet him. His every faculty, every fibre was in thrall to his great passion. The rest of life seemed minute, unimportant, fatuous, a mass of trivial futilities.

There were two things in the world, and two only. There was Melanie, and there was love. Ah, yes, and there was time !

Why

Why did she not answer ?

A note from the bonnet-shop, re-enclosing his own, offered an explanation that entered like a frozen knife-blade into Liphook's heart. She had left. She was gone. Gone altogether, for good.

Absurd ! Did they suppose they could—oh, a higher price was what they wanted. He'd go ; by God he'd give it. Was he not going to marry her ? He hurried to the hat-shop ; he dropped into the chair he had occupied when last in the shop, let his stick fall between his knees and stared before him into the mirrored walls. All the same tangled scene of passing people, customers, shop-women and brilliant millinery was reflected in them ; only the bright hats islanded and steady among this ugly fluctuation. Pools of fretful life, these circular mirrors ; garish, discomfiting to gaze at ; stirred surely by no angel unless the reflection of the mouse-maiden should ever cross their surfaces.

Fifteen minutes later he was standing gazing at the horrid clock and ornaments in ormolu that stood on the mantel-piece of the red velvet salon where he waited for Madame Félice.

She came. Her bow was admirable.

"I wrote to Mademoiselle, and my letter has been returned. The note says she has gone." Liphook's schoolboy bluntness came out most when he was angry. "Where has she gone ? And why ?"

"Aha ! Little Mademoiselle ! Yes, indeed, she has left us and how sorry we are ! *Chère petite !* But what could we do ? We would have kept her, but her parents——" A shrug and a smile punctuated the sentence.

"What about her parents ?"

"They had arranged for her an alliance—what would you have ?—we had to let her go. And the *rézponsibility*—after all——"

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"What

“What sort of an alliance?” The dog-like note was in his voice again.

“But—an alliance! I believe very good; a *charpentier*—a *charcutier*, I forget—but *bien solide!*”

“Do you mean you have sold her to some French——”

“Ah, my lord! how can you speak such things? Her parents are most respectable, she has always been most respectable—naturally we had more than once felt anxious here in London——”

“I wish to marry her,” said Liphook curtly, and he said it still, though he believed her to have been thrust upon a less reputable road. It was his last, his greatest triumph over his world. It fitted him nobly for the shelter of the angel’s wing. He had learned the worst—and——

“I wish to marry her,” said Liphook.

“Hélas!—but she is married!” shrieked Madame Félice in a mock agony of regret, but with surprise twinkling in her little black eyes.

“Married!” shouted Liphook. “Impossible!”

“Ask Mr. Goldenmuth, he was at the wedding.” Madame laughed; the true explanation of my lord’s remarkable statement had just struck her. It was a *ruse*; an English *ruse*. She laughed very much, and it sounded and looked most unpleasant.

“His lordship was—a *little* unfriendly—a little too—too reserved—not to tell us, not even to tell Mademoiselle herself that he desired to *marry her*,” she said with villainous archness.

Liphook strode to the door. Yes, why, why had he not?

“I will find her; I know where her relatives live. “If it is a lie—I’ll make you sorry——”

“*Fi donc*, what a word! The ceremony at the *Mairie* was on Thursday last.”

They

They were going downstairs and had to pass through the showrooms—quite near—ah, quite near—the table where the little grey and brown pigeons sat clustered, where the one ring-dove had sat too.

“It is sometimes the fate of a lover who thinks too long,” Madame was saying, with an air of much philosophy. “But see now, if my lord would care to send a little souvenir”—Madame reached hastily to a model on a stand—“*comme cadeau de noce* here is something quite *exquis!*” She kissed the tips of her brown fingers—inimitably, it must be allowed. “So simple, so young, so innocent—I could pose a little *nœud of myosotis*. Coming from my lord, it would be so delicate!”

Liphook was in a shop. There were people about. He was a lover, he was a fool, he was a gentleman.

“Er—thank you—not to-day,” he said; the air of the world he had repudiated came back to him. And a man like Liphook doesn’t let you see when he is hit. That is the beauty of him. He knew it was true, but he would go to Paris; yes, though he knew it was true. He would not, could not see her. But he would go.

He stood a moment in the sun outside the shop, its windows like gardens behind him; its shop-ladies like evil-eyed reptiles in these gardens. The carpets, the mirrors on the wall, the tables at the back—and it was here he had first seen the tip and heard the flutter of an angel’s wing!

“Lord Liphook,” said a voice, “what an age . . . .”

He turned and lifted his hat.

His world had claimed him.