

Merely Players

By Henry Harland

I

"**M**y dear," said the elder man, "as I've told you a thousand times, what you need is a love-affair with a red-haired woman."

"Bother women," said the younger man, "and hang love-affairs. Women are a pack of samenesses, and love-affairs are damnable iterations."

They were seated at a round table, gay with glass and silver, fruit and wine, in a pretty, rather high-ceiled little grey-and-gold breakfast-room. The French window stood wide open to the soft June day. From the window you could step out upon a small balcony ; the balcony overhung a terrace ; and a broad flight of steps from the terrace led down into a garden. You could not perceive the boundaries of the garden ; in all directions it offered an indefinite perspective, a landscape of green lawns and shadowy alleys, bright parterres of flowers, fountains, and tall, bending trees.

I have spoken of the elder man and the younger, though really there could have been but a trifling disparity in their ages : the elder was perhaps thirty, the younger seven or eight and twenty.

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In other respects, however, they were as unlike as unlike may be. Thirty was plump and rosy and full-blown, with a laughing good-humoured face, and merry big blue eyes ; eight and twenty, thin, tall, and listless-looking, his face pale and aquiline, his eyes dark, morose. They had finished their coffee, and now the plump man was nibbling sweetmeats, which he selected with much careful discrimination from an assortment in a porcelain dish. The thin man was drinking something green, possibly chartreuse.

"Women are a pack of samenesses," he grumbled, "and love-affairs are damnable iterations."

"Oh," cried out his comrade, in a tone of plaintive protest, "I said red-haired. You can't pretend that red-haired women are the same."

"The same, with the addition of a little henna," the pale young man argued wearily.

"It may surprise you to learn that I was thinking of red-haired women who are born red-haired," his friend remarked, from an altitude.

"In that case," said he, "I admit there is a difference—they have white eyelashes." And he emptied his glass of green stuff. "Is all this apropos of boots?" he questioned.

The other regarded him solemnly. "It's apropos of your immortal soul," he answered, nodding his head. "It's medicine for a mind diseased. The only thing that will wake you up, and put a little life and human nature in you, is a love-affair with a red-haired woman. Red in the hair means fire in the heart. It means all sorts of things. If you really wish to please me, Uncle, you'll go and fall in love with a red-haired woman."

The younger man, whom the elder addressed as Uncle, shrugged his shoulders, and gave a little sniff. Then he lighted a cigarette.

The elder man left the table, and went to the open window.

"Heavens,

"Heavens, what weather!" he exclaimed fervently. "The day is made of perfumed velvet. The air is a love-philtre. The whole world sings romance. And yet you—insensible monster!—you can sit there torpidly——" But abruptly he fell silent. His attention had been caught by something below, in the garden. He watched it for an instant from his place by the window; then he stepped forth upon the balcony, still watching. Suddenly, facing half-way round, "By my bauble, Nunký," he called to his companion, and his voice was tense with surprised exultancy, "she's got red hair!"

The younger man looked up with vague eyes. "Who? What?" he asked languidly.

"Come here, come here," his friend urged, beckoning him. "There," he indicated, when the pale man had joined him, "below there—to the right—picking roses. She's got red hair. She's sent by Providence."

A woman in a white frock was picking roses, in one of the alleys of the garden; rather a tall woman. Her back was turned towards her observers; but she wore only a light scarf of lace over her head, and her hair—soft-brown, fawn-colour, in its shadows—where the sun touched it, showed a soul of red.

The younger man frowned, and asked sharply, "Who the devil is she?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied the other. "One of the Queen's women, probably. But whoever she is, she's got red hair."

The younger man frowned more fiercely still. "What is she doing in the King's private garden? This is a pretty state of things." He stamped his foot angrily. "Go down and turn her out. And I wish measures to be taken, that such trespassing may not occur again."

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But the elder man laughed. "Hoity-toity! Calm yourself, Uncle. What would you have? The King is at a safe distance, hiding in one of his northern hunting-boxes, sulking, and nursing his spleen, as is his wont. When the King's away, the palace mice will play—at *lèse majesté*, the thrilling game. If you wish to stop them, persuade the King to come home and show his face. Otherwise, we'll gather our rosebuds while we may; and I'm not the man to cross a red-haired woman."

"You're the Constable of Bellefontaine," retorted his friend, "and it's your business to see that the King's orders are respected."

"The King's orders are so seldom respectable; and then, I've a grand talent for neglecting my business. I'm trying to elevate the Constablership of Bellefontaine into a sinecure," the plump man explained genially. "But I'm pained to see that your sense of humour is not escaping the general decay of your faculties. What you need is a love-affair with a red-haired woman; and yonder's a red-haired woman, dropped from the skies for your salvation. Go—engage her in talk—and fall in love with her. There's a dear," he pleaded.

"Dropped from the skies," the pale man repeated, with mild scorn. "As if I didn't know my Hilary! Of course, you've had her up your sleeve the whole time."

"Upon my soul and honour, you are utterly mistaken. Upon my soul and honour, I've never set eyes on her before," Hilary asseverated warmly.

"Ah, well, if that's the case," suggested the pale man, turning back into the room, "let us make an earnest endeavour to talk of something else."

II

The next afternoon they were walking in the park, at some distance from the palace, when they came to a bridge over a bit of artificial water ; and there was the woman of yesterday, leaning on the parapet, throwing bread-crumbs to the carp. She looked up, as they passed, and bowed, with a little smile, in acknowledgement of their raised hats.

When they were out of ear-shot, "H'm," muttered Hilary, "viewed at close quarters, she's a trifle disenchanting."

"Oh?" questioned his friend. "I thought her very good-looking."

"She has too short a nose," Hilary complained.

"What's the good of criticising particular features? The general effect of her face was highly pleasing. She looked intelligent, interesting ; she looked as if she would have something to say," the younger man insisted.

"It's very possible she has a tongue in her head," admitted Hilary ; "but we were judging her by the rules of beauty. For my fancy, she's too tall."

"She's tall, but she's well-proportioned. Indeed, her figure struck me as exceptionally fine. There was something sumptuous and noble about it," declared the other.

"There are scores of women with fine figures in this world," said Hilary. "But I'm sorely disappointed in her hair. Her hair is nothing like so red as I'd imagined."

"You're daft on the subject of red hair. Her hair's not carrot-colour, if you come to that. But there's plenty of red in it. It's brown, with red burning through. The red is managed with discretion—suggestively. And did you notice her eyes? She

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has remarkably nice eyes—eyes with an expression. I thought her eyes and mouth were charming when she smiled," the pale man affirmed.

"When she smiled? I didn't see her smile," reflected Hilary.

"Of course she smiled—when we bowed," his friend reminded him.

"Oh, Ferdinand Augustus," Hilary remonstrated, "will you never learn to treat words with some consideration? You call that smiling! Two men take off their hats, and a woman gives them just a look of bare acknowledgment; and Ferdinand Augustus calls it smiling!"

"Would you have wished for a broad grin?" asked Ferdinand Augustus. "Her face lighted up most graciously. I thought her eyes were charming. Oh, she's certainly a good-looking woman, a distinctly handsome woman."

"Handsome is that handsome does," said Hilary.

"I miss the relevancy of that," said Ferdinand Augustus.

"She's a trespasser. 'Twas you yourself flew in a passion about it yesterday. Yesterday she was plucking the King's roses: to-day she's feeding the King's carp."

"'When the King's away, the palace mice will play.' I venture to recall your own words to you," Ferdinand remarked.

"That's all very well. Besides, I spoke in jest. But there are limits. And it's I who am responsible. I'm the Constable of Bellefontaine. Her trespassing appears to be habitual. We've caught her at it ourselves, two days in succession. I shall give instructions to the keepers, to warn her not to touch a flower, nor feed a bird, beast, or fish, in the whole of this demesne. Really, I admire the cool way in which she went on tossing bread-crumbs to the King's carp under my very beard!" exclaimed Hilary, working himself into a fine state of indignation.

"Very

"Very likely she didn't know who you were," his friend reasoned. "And anyhow, your zeal is mighty sudden. You appear to have been letting things go at loose ends for I don't know how long ; and all at once you take fire like tinder because a poor woman amuses herself by throwing bread to the carp. It's simply spite : you're disappointed in the colour of her hair. I shall esteem it a favour if you'll leave the keepers' instructions as they are. She's a damned good-looking woman ; and I'll beg you not to interfere with her diversions."

"I can deny you nothing, Uncle," said Hilary, by this time restored to his accustomed easy temper ; "and therefore she may make hay of the whole blessed establishment, if she pleases. But as for her good looks—that, you'll admit, is entirely a question of taste."

"Ah, well, then the conclusion is that your taste needs cultivation," laughed Ferdinand. "By-the-bye, I shall be glad if you will find out who she is."

"Thank you very much," cried Hilary. "I have a reputation to safeguard. Do you think I'm going to compromise myself, and set all my underlings a-sniggling, by making inquiries about the identity of a woman ?"

"But," persisted Ferdinand, "if I ask you to do so, as your——"

"What ?" was Hilary's brusque interruption.

"As your guest," said Ferdinand.

"*Mille regrets, impossible*, as the French have it," Hilary returned. "But as your host, I give you carte-blanche to make your own inquiries for yourself—if you think she's worth the trouble. Being a stranger here, you have, as it were, no character to lose."

"After all, it doesn't matter," said Ferdinand Augustus, with resignation.

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III

But the next afternoon, at about the same hour, Ferdinand Augustus found himself alone, strolling in the direction of the little stone bridge over the artificial lakelet ; and there again was the woman, leaning upon the parapet, dropping bread-crumbs to the carp. Ferdinand Augustus raised his hat ; the woman bowed and smiled.

“It’s a fine day,” said Ferdinand Augustus.

“It’s a fine day—but a weary one,” the woman responded, with an odd little movement of the head.

Ferdinand Augustus was perhaps too shy to pursue the conversation ; perhaps he wanted but little here below, nor wanted that little long. At any rate, he passed on. There could be no question about her smile this time, he reflected ; it had been bright, spontaneous, friendly. But what did she mean, he wondered, by adding to his general panegyric of the day as fine, that special qualification of it as a weary one ? It was astonishing that any man should dispute her claim to beauty. She had really a splendid figure ; and her face was more than pretty, it was distinguished. Her eyes and her mouth, her clear-grey sparkling eyes, her softly curved red mouth, suggested many agreeable possibilities—possibilities of wit, and of something else. It was not till four hours later that he noticed the sound of her voice. At dinner, in the midst of a discussion with Hilary about a subject in no obvious way connected with her (about the Orient Express, indeed—its safety, speed, and comfort), it suddenly came back to him, and he checked a remark upon the advantages of the corridor-carriage, to exclaim in his soul, “She’s got a delicious voice. If she sang, it would be a mezzo.”

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The consequence was that the following day he again bent his footsteps in the direction of the bridge.

"It's a lovely afternoon," he said, lifting his hat.

"But a weary one," said she, smiling, with a little pensive movement of the head.

"Not a weary one for the carp," he hinted, glancing down at the water, which boiled and bubbled with a greedy multitude.

"Oh, they have no human feelings," said she.

"Don't you call hunger a human feeling?" he inquired.

"They have no human feelings; but I never said we hadn't plenty of carp feelings," she answered him.

He laughed. "At all events, I'm pleased to find that we're or the same way of thinking."

"Are we?" asked she, raising surprised eyebrows.

"You take a healthy pessimistic view of things," he submitted.

"I? Oh, dear, no. I have never taken a pessimistic view of anything in my life."

"Except of this poor summer's afternoon, which has the fatal gift of beauty. You said it was a weary one."

"People have sympathies," she explained; "and besides, that is a watchword." And she scattered a handful of crumbs, thereby exciting a new commotion among the carp.

Her explanation no doubt struck Ferdinand Augustus as obscure; but perhaps he felt that he scarcely knew her well enough to press for enlightenment. "Let us hope that the fine weather will last," he said, with a polite salutation, and resumed his walk.

But, on the morrow, "You make a daily practice of casting your bread upon the waters," was his greeting to her. "Do you expect to find it at the season's end?"

"I find

"I find it at once," was her response, "in entertainment."

"It entertains you to see those shameless little gluttons making an exhibition of themselves!" he cried out.

"You must not speak disrespectfully of them," she reproved him. "Some of them are very old. Carp often live to be two hundred, and they grow grey, for all the world like men."

"They're like men in twenty particulars," asserted he, "though you, yesterday, denied it. See how the big ones elbow the little ones aside; see how fierce they all are in the scramble for your bounty. You wake their most evil passions. But the spectacle is instructive. It's a miniature presentment of civilisation. Oh, carp are simply brimful of human nature. You mentioned yesterday that they have no human feelings. You put your finger on the chief point of resemblance. It's the absence of human feeling that makes them so hideously human."

She looked at him with eyes that were interested, amused, yet not altogether without a shade of raillery in their depths. "That is what you call a healthy pessimistic view of things?" she questioned.

"It is an inevitable view if one honestly uses one's sight, or reads one's newspaper."

"Oh, then I would rather not honestly use my sight," said she; "and as for the newspaper, I only read the fashions. Your healthy pessimistic view of things can hardly add much to the joy of life."

"The joy of life!" he expostulated. "There's no joy in life. Life is one fabric of hardship, peril, and insipidity."

"Oh, how can you say that," cried she, "in the face of such beauty as we have about us here? With the pure sky and the sunshine, and the wonderful peace of the day; and then these lawns and glades, and the great green trees; and the sweet air, and the singing birds! No joy in life!"

"This

"This isn't life," he answered. "People who shut themselves up in an artificial park are fugitives from life. Life begins at the park gates with the natural countryside, and the squalid peasantry, and the sordid farmers, and the Jew money-lenders, and the uncertain crops."

"Oh, it's all life," insisted she, "the park and the countryside, and the virgin forest and the deep sea, with all things in them. It's all life. I'm alive, and I daresay you are. You would exclude from life all that is nice in life, and then say of the remainder, that only is life. You're not logical."

"Heaven forbid," he murmured devoutly. "I'm sure you're not either. Only stupid people are logical."

She laughed lightly. "My poor carp little dream to what far paradoxes they have led," she mused, looking into the water, which was now quite tranquil. "They have sailed away to their mysterious affairs among the lily-roots. I should like to be a carp for a few minutes, to see what it is like in those cool, dark places under the water. I am sure there are all sorts of strange things and treasures. Do you believe there are really water-maidens, like Undine?"

"Not nowadays," he informed her, with the confident fluency of one who knew. "There used to be; but, like so many other charming things, they disappeared with the invention of printing, the discovery of America, and the rise of the Lutheran heresy. Their prophetic souls——"

"Oh, but they had no souls, you remember," she corrected him.

"I beg your pardon; that was the belief that prevailed among their mortal contemporaries, but it has since been ascertained that they had souls, and very good ones. Their prophetic souls warned them what a dreary, dried-up planet the earth was destined to become,

become, with the steam-engine, the electric telegraph, compulsory education (falsely so-called), constitutional government, and the supremacy of commerce. So the elder ones died, dissolved in tears ; and the younger ones migrated by evaporation to Neptune."

"Dear me, dear me," she marvelled. "How extraordinary that we should just have happened to light upon a topic about which you appear to have such a quantity of special knowledge ! And now," she added, bending her head by way of valediction, "I must be returning to my duties."

And she moved off, towards the palace.

IV

And then, for three or four days, he did not see her, though he paid frequent enough visits to the feeding-place of the carp.

"I wish it would rain," he confessed to Hilary. "I hate the derisive cheerfulness of this weather. The birds sing, and the flowers smile, and every prospect breathes sodden satisfaction ; and only man is bored."

"Yes, I own I find you dull company," Hilary responded, "and if I thought it would brisk you up, I'd pray with all my heart for rain. But what you need, as I've told you a thousand times, is a love-affair with a red-haired woman."

"Love-affairs are tedious repetitions," said Ferdinand. "You play with your new partner precisely the same game you played with the old : the same preliminary skirmishes, the same assault, the same feints of resistance, the same surrender, the same subsequent disenchantment. They're all the same, down to the very same scenes, words, gestures, suspicions, vows, exactions, recriminations, and

and final break-ups. It's a delusion of inexperience to suppose that in changing your mistress you change the sport. It's the same trite old book, that you've read and read in different editions, until you're sick of the very mention of it. To the deuce with love-affairs. But there's such a thing as rational conversation, with no sentimental nonsense. Now, I'll not deny that I should rather like to have an occasional bit of rational conversation with that red-haired woman we met the other day in the park. Only, the devil of it is, she never appears."

"And then, besides, her hair isn't red," added Hilary.

"I wonder how you can talk such folly," said Ferdinand.

"*C'est mon métier*, Uncle. You should answer me according to it. Her hair's not red. What little red there's in it, it requires strong sunlight to bring out. In shadow her hair's a sort of dull brownish-yellow," Hilary persisted.

"You're colour-blind," retorted Ferdinand. "But I won't quarrel with you. The point is, she never appears. So how can I have my bits of rational conversation with her?"

"How indeed?" echoed Hilary, with pathos. "And therefore you're invoking storm and whirlwind. But hang a horseshoe over your bed to-night, turn round three times as you extinguish your candle, and let your last thought before you fall asleep be the thought of a newt's liver and a blind man's dog; and it's highly possible she will appear to-morrow."

I don't know whether Ferdinand Augustus accomplished the rites that Hilary prescribed, but it is certain that she did appear on the morrow: not by the pool or the carp, but in quite another region of Bellefontaine, where Ferdinand Augustus was wandering at hazard, somewhat disconsolately. There was a wide green meadow, sprinkled with buttercups and daisies; and under a great tree, at this end of it, he suddenly espied her. She was seated on

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the moss, stroking with one finger-tip a cockchafer that was perched upon another, and regarding the little monster with intent, meditative eyes. She wore a frock the bodice part of which was all drooping creamy lace ; she had thrown her hat and gloves aside ; her hair was in some slight, soft disarray ; her loose sleeve had fallen back, disclosing a very perfect wrist, and the beginning of a smooth white arm. Altogether she made an extremely pleasing picture, sweetly, warmly feminine. Ferdinand Augustus stood still, and watched her for an instant, before he spoke. Then—

"I have come to intercede with you on behalf of your carp," he announced. "They are rending heaven with complaints of your desertion."

She looked up, with a whimsical, languid little smile. "Are they?" she asked lightly. "I'm rather tired of carp."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "You will permit me to admire your fine, frank disregard of *their* feelings."

"Oh, they have the past to remember," she said. "And perhaps some day I shall go back to them. For the moment I amuse myself very well with cockchafers. They're less tumultuous. And then carp won't come and perch on your finger. And then, one likes a change.—Now fly away, fly away, fly away home ; your house is on fire, and your children will burn," she crooned to the cockchafer, giving it never so gentle a push. But instead of flying away, it dropped upon the moss, and thence began to stumble, clumsily, blunderingly, towards the open meadow.

"You shouldn't have caused the poor beast such a panic," he reproached her. "You should have broken the dreadful news gradually. As you see, your sudden blurting of it out has deprived him of the use of his faculties. Don't believe her," he called

called after the cockchafer. "She's practising upon your credulity. Your house isn't on fire, and your children are all safe at school."

"Your consideration is entirely misplaced," she assured him, with the same slight whimsical smile. "The cockchafer knows perfectly well that his house isn't on fire, because he hasn't got any house. Cockchafers never have houses. His apparent concern is sheer affectation. He's an exceedingly hypocritical little cockchafer."

"I should call him an exceedingly polite little cockchafer. Hypocrisy is the compliment courtesy owes to falsehood. He pretended to believe you. He would not have the air of doubting a lady's word."

"You came as the emissary of the carp," she said ; "and now you stay to defend the character of their rival."

"To be candid, I don't care a hang for the carp," he confessed brazenly. "The unadorned fact is that I am immensely glad to see you."

She gave a little laugh, and bowed with exaggerated ceremony "*Grand merci, Monsieur ; vous me faites trop d'honneur,*" she murmured.

"Oh, no, not more than you deserve. I'm a just man, and I give you your due. I was boring myself into melancholy madness. The afternoon lay before me like a bumper of dust and ashes, that I must somehow empty. And then I saw you, and you dashed the goblet from my lips. Thank goodness (I said to myself), at last there's a human soul to talk with ; the very thing I was pining for, a clever and sympathetic woman."

"You take a great deal for granted," laughed she.

"Oh, I know you're clever, and it pleases me to fancy that you're sympathetic. If you're not," he pleaded, "don't tell me so. Let me cherish my illusion."

She

She shook her head doubtfully. "I'm a poor hand at dissembling."

"It's an art you should study," said he. "If we begin by feigning an emotion, we're as like as not to end by genuinely feeling it."

"I've observed for myself," she informed him, "that if we begin by genuinely feeling an emotion, but rigorously conceal it, we're as like as not to end by feeling it no longer. It dies of suffocation. I've had that experience quite lately. There was a certain person whom I heartily despised and hated; and then, as chance would have it, I was thrown two or three times into his company; and for motives of expediency I disguised my antagonism. In the end, do you know, I found myself rather liking him?"

"Oh, women are fearfully and wonderfully made," he said.

"And so are some men," said she. "Could you oblige me with the name and address of a competent witch or warlock?" she added irrelevantly.

"What under the sun can you want with such an unholy thing?" he exclaimed.

"I want a hate-charm—something that I can take at night to revive my hatred of the man I was speaking of."

"Look here," he warned her, "I've not come all this distance under a scorching sun, to stand here now and talk of another man. Cultivate a contemptuous indifference towards him. Banish him from your mind and conversation."

"I'll try," she consented; "though if you were familiar with the circumstances, you'd recognise a certain difficulty in doing that." She reached for her gloves, and began to put one on. "Will you be so good as to tell me the time of day?"

He looked at his watch. "It's nowhere near time for you to be moving yet."

"You must not trifle about affairs of state," she said. "At a definite hour I have business at the palace."

"Oh, for that matter, so have I. But it's half-past four. To call half-past four a definite hour would be to do a violence to the language."

"It is earlier than I thought," she admitted, discontinuing her operation with the glove.

He smiled approval. "Your heart is in the right place, after all. It would have been inhuman to abandon me. Oh, yes, pleasantry apart, I am in a condition of mind in which solitude spells misery. And yet I am on speaking terms with but three living people whose society I prefer to it."

"You are indeed in sad case, then," she compassionated him. "But why should solitude spell misery? A man of wit like you should have plenty of resources within himself."

"Am I a man of wit?" he asked innocently.

Her eyes gleamed mischievously. "What is your opinion?"

"I don't know," he reflected. "Perhaps I might have been, if I had met a woman like you earlier in life."

"At all events," she laughed, "if you are not a man of wit, it is not for lack of courage. But why does solitude spell misery? Have you great crimes upon your conscience?"

"No, nothing so amusing. But when one is alone, one thinks; and when one thinks—that way madness lies."

"Then do you never think when you are engaged in conversation?" She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"You should be able to judge of that by the quality of my remarks. At any rate, I feel."

"What do you feel?"

"When

"When I am engaged in conversation with you, I feel a general sense of agreeable stimulation ; and, in addition to that, at this particular moment—— But are you sure you really wish to know ? " he broke off.

"Yes, tell me," she said, with curiosity.

"Well, then, a furious desire to smoke a cigarette."

She laughed merrily. "I am so sorry I have no cigarettes to offer you."

"My pockets happen to be stuffed with them."

"Then, do, please, light one."

He produced his cigarette-case, but he seemed to hesitate about lighting a cigarette.

"Have you no matches ? " she inquired.

"Yes, thank you, I have matches. I was only thinking."

"It has become a solitude, then ? " she cried.

"It is a case of conscience, it is an ethical dilemma. How do I know—the modern woman is capable of anything—how do I know that you may not yourself be a smoker ? But if you are, it will give you pain to see me enjoying my cigarette, while you are without one."

"It would be civil to begin by offering me one," she suggested.

"That is exactly the liberty I dared not take—oh, there are limits to my boldness. But you have saved the situation." And he offered her his cigarette-case.

She shook her head. "Thank you, I don't smoke." And her eyes were full of teasing laughter, so that he laughed too, as he finally applied a match-flame to his cigarette. "But you may allow me to examine your cigarette-case," she went on. "It looks like a pretty bit of silver." And when he had handed it to her, she exclaimed, "It is engraved with the royal arms."

"Yes. Why not ? " said he.

"Does

"Does it belong to the King?"

"It was a present from the King."

"To you? You are a friend of the King?" she asked, with some eagerness.

"I will not deceive you," he replied. "No, not to me. The King gave it to Hilary Clairevoix, the Constable of Bellefontaine; and Hilary, who's a careless fellow, left it lying about in his music-room; and I came along and pocketed it. It *is* a pretty bit of silver, and I shall never restore it to its rightful owner, if I can help it."

"But you are a friend of the King's," she repeated, with insistence.

"I have not that honour. Indeed, I have never seen him. I am a friend of Hilary's; I am his guest. He has stayed with me in England—I am an Englishman—and now I am returning his visit."

"That is well," said she. "If you were a friend of the King, you would be an enemy of mine."

"Oh?" he wondered. "Why is that?"

"I hate the King," she answered simply.

"Dear me, what a capacity you have for hating! This is the second hatred you have avowed within the hour. What has the King done to displease you?"

"You are an Englishman. Has our King's reputation not reached England yet? He is the scandal of Europe. What has he done? But no—do not encourage me to speak of him. I should grow too heated," she said strenuously.

"On the contrary, I pray of you, go on," urged Ferdinand Augustus. "Your King is a character that interests me more than you can think. His reputation has indeed reached England, and I have conceived a great curiosity about him. One only
hears

hears vague rumours, to be sure, nothing specific ; but one has learned to think of him as original and romantic. You know him. Tell me a lot about him."

"Oh, I do not know him personally. That is an affliction I have as yet been spared." Then, suddenly, "Mercy upon me, what have I said !" she cried. "I must 'knock wood,' or the evil spirits will bring me that mischance to-morrow." And she fervently tapped the bark of the tree beside her with her knuckles.

Ferdinand Augustus laughed. "But if you do not know him personally, why do you hate him ?"

"I know him very well by reputation. I know how he lives, I know what he does and leaves undone. If you are curious about him, ask your friend Hilary. He is the King's foster-brother. *He* could tell you stories," she said meaningfully.

"I have asked him. But Hilary's lips are sealed. He depends upon the King's protection for his fortune, and the palace-walls (I suppose he fears) have ears. But you can speak without danger. He is the scandal of Europe ? There's nothing I love like scandal. Tell me all about him."

"You have not come all this distance under a scorching sun, to stand here now and talk of another man," she reminded him.

"Oh, but kings are different," he argued. "Tell me about your King."

"I can tell you at once," said she, "that our King is the frankest egotist in two hemispheres. You have learned to think of him as original and romantic ? No ; he is simply intensely selfish and intensely silly. He is a King Do-Nothing, a Roi Fainéant, who shirks and evades all the duties and responsibilities of his position ; who builds extravagant châteaux in remote

remote parts of the country, and hides in them, alone with a few obscure companions ; who will never visit his capital, never show his face to his subjects ; who takes no sort of interest in public business or the welfare of his kingdom, and leaves the entire government to his ministers ; who will not even hold a court, or give balls or banquets ; who, in short, does nothing that a king ought to do, and might, for all the good we get of him, be a mere stranger in the land, a mere visitor, like yourself. So closely does he seclude himself, that I doubt if there be a hundred people in the whole country who have ever seen him, to know him. If he travels from one place to another, it is always in the strictest incognito, and those who then chance to meet him never have any reason to suspect that he is not a private person. His very effigy on the coin of the realm is reputed to be false, resembling him in no wise. But I could go on for ever," she said, bringing her indictment to a termination.

"Really," said Ferdinand Augustus, "I cannot see that you have alleged anything very damaging. A *Roi Fainéant*? But every king of a modern constitutional state is, willy-nilly, that. He can do nothing but sign bills which he generally disapproves of, lay foundation-stones, set the fashion in hats, and bow and look pleasant as he drives through the streets. He has no power for good, and mighty little for evil. He is just a State Prisoner. It seems to me that your particular King has shown some sense in trying to escape so much as he may of the prison's irksomeness. I should call it rare bad luck to be born a king. Either you've got to shirk your kingship, and then fair ladies dub you the scandal of Europe ; or else you've got to accept it, and then you're as happy as a man in a strait-waistcoat. And then, and then ! Oh, I can think of a thousand unpleasantnesses attendant upon the condition of a king. Your King, as I understand it, has said to

himself, ‘Hang it all, I didn’t ask to be born a king, but since that is my misfortune, I will seek to mitigate it as much as I am able. I am, on the whole, a human being, with a human life to live, and only, probably, three-score-and-ten years in which to live it. Very good; I will live my life. I will lay no foundation-stones, nor drive about the streets bowing and looking pleasant. I will live my life, alone with the few people I find to my liking. I will take the cash and let the credit go.’ I am bound to say,” concluded Ferdinand Augustus, “that your King has done exactly what I should have done in his place.”

“You will never, at least,” said she, “defend the shameful manner in which he has behaved towards the Queen. It is for that, I hate him. It is for that, that we, the Queen’s gentlewomen, have adopted *Tis a weary day* as a watchword. It will be a weary day until we see the King on his knees at the Queen’s feet, craving her forgiveness.”

“Oh? What has he done to the Queen?” asked Ferdinand.

“What has he done! Humiliated her as never woman was humiliated before. He married her by proxy at her father’s court; and she was conducted with great pomp and circumstance into his kingdom—to find what? That he had fled to one of his absurd castles in the north, and refused to see her! He has remained there ever since, hiding like—but there is nothing in created space to compare him to. Is it the behaviour of a gentleman, of a gallant man, not to say a king?” she cried warmly, looking up at him with shining eyes, her cheeks faintly flushed.

Ferdinand Augustus bowed. “The Queen is fortunate in her advocate. I have not heard the King’s side of the story. I can, however, imagine excuses for him. Suppose that his ministers, for reasons of policy, importuned and importuned him to marry a certain princess, until he yielded in mere fatigue. In that case,

why

why should he be bothered further? Why should he add one to the tedious complications of existence by meeting the bride he never desired? Is it not sufficient that, by his complaisance, she should have gained the rank and title of a queen? Besides, he may be in love with another woman. Or perhaps—but who can tell? He may have twenty reasons. And anyhow, you cannot deny to the situation the merit of being highly ridiculous. A husband and wife who are not personally acquainted! It is a delicious commentary upon the whole system of marriages by proxy. You confirm my notion that your King is original."

"He may have twenty reasons," answered she, "but he had better have twenty terrors. It is perfectly certain that the Queen will be revenged."

"How so?" asked Ferdinand Augustus.

"The Queen is young, high-spirited, moderately good-looking, and unspeakably incensed. Trust a young, high-spirited, and handsome woman, outraged by her husband, to know how to avenge herself. Oh, some day he will see."

"Ah, well, he must take his chances," Ferdinand sighed. "Perhaps he is liberal minded enough not to care."

"I am far from meaning the vulgar revenge you fancy," she put in quickly. "The Queen's revenge will be subtle and unexpected. She is no fool, and she will not rest until she has achieved it. Oh, he will see!"

"I had imagined it was the curse of royalty to be without true friends," said Ferdinand Augustus. "The Queen has a very ardent one in you."

"I am afraid I cannot altogether acquit myself of interested motives," she disclaimed modestly. "I am of her Majesty's household, and my fortunes must rise and fall with hers. But I am honestly indignantly with the King."

"The

"The poor King! Upon my soul, he has my sympathy," said Ferdinand.

"You are terribly ironical," said she.

"Irony was ten thousand leagues from my intention," he protested. "In all sincerity the object of your indignation has my sympathy. I trust you will not consider it an impertinence if I say that I already count you among the few people I have met whose good opinion is a matter to be coveted."

She had risen while he was speaking, and now she bobbed him a little courtesy. "I will show my appreciation of yours by taking flight before anything can happen to alter it," she laughed, moving away.

V

"You are singularly animated to-night," said Hilary, contemplating him across the dinner-table; "yet, at the same time, singularly abstracted. You have the air of a man who is rolling something pleasant under his tongue, something sweet and secret; it might be a hope, it might be a recollection. Where have you passed the afternoon? You've been about some mischief, I'll warrant. By Jove, you set me thinking. I'll wager a penny you've been having a bit of rational conversation with that brown-haired woman."

"Her hair is red," Ferdinand Augustus rejoined, with firmness. "And her conversation," he added sadly, "is anything you please but rational. She spent her whole time picking flaws in the character of the King. She talked downright treason. She said he was the scandal of Europe and the frankest egotist in two hemispheres."

"Ah? She appears to have some instinct for the correct use of language," commented Hilary.

"All

"All the same, I rather like her," Ferdinand went on, "and I'm half inclined to undertake her conversion. She has a gorgeous figure—there's something rich and voluptuous about it. And there are depths of promise in her eyes; there are worlds of humour and of passion. And she has a mouth—oh, of a fulness, of a softness, of a warmth! And a chin, and a throat, and hands! And then, her voice. There's a mellowness yet a crispness, there's a vibration, there's a something in her voice that assures you of a golden temperament beneath it. In short, I'm half inclined to follow your advice, and go in for a love-adventure with her."

"Oh, but love-adventures—I have it on high authority—are damnable iterations," objected Hilary.

"That is very true; they are," Ferdinand agreed. "But the life of man is woven of damnable iterations. Tell me of any single thing that isn't a damnable iteration, and I'll give you a quarter of my fortune. The day and the night, the seasons and the years, the fair weather and the foul, breakfast and luncheon and dinner—all are damnable iterations. If there's any reality behind the doctrine of metempsychosis, death, too, is a damnable iteration. There's no escaping damnable iterations: there's nothing new under the sun. But as long as one is alive, one must do something. It's sure to be something in its essence identical with something one has done before; but one must do something. Why not, then, a love-adventure with a woman that attracts you?"

"Women are a pack of samenesses," said Hilary despondently.

"Quite so," assented Ferdinand. "Women, and men too, are a pack of samenesses. We're all struck with the same die, of the same metal, at the same mint. Our resemblance is intrinsic, fundamental; our differences are accidental and skin-deep. We have

have the same features, organs, dimensions, with but a hair's-breadth variation ; the same needs, instincts, propensities ; the same hopes, fears, ideas. One man's meat is another man's meat ; one man's poison is another man's poison. We are as like to one another as the leaves on the same tree. Skin us, and (save for your fat) the most skilled anatomist could never distinguish you from me. Women are a pack of samenesses ; but, hang it all, one has got to make the best of a monotonous universe. And this particular woman, with her red hair and her eyes, strikes me as attractive. She has some fire in her composition, some fire and flavour. Anyhow, she attracts me ; and—I think I shall try my luck."

"Oh, Nunký, Nunký," murmured Hilary, shaking his head, "I am shocked by your lack of principle. Have you forgotten that you are a married man ?"

"That will be my safeguard. I can make love to her with a clear conscience. If I were single, she might, justifiably enough, form matrimonial expectations for herself."

"Not if she knew you," said Hilary.

"Ah, but she doesn't know me—and shan't," said Ferdinand Augustus. "I will take care of that."

VI

And then, for what seemed to him an eternity, he never once encountered her. Morning and afternoon, day after day, he roamed the park of Bellefontaine from end to end, in all directions, but never once caught sight of so much as the flutter of her garments. And the result was that he began to grow seriously sentimental. "*Im wunderschönen Monat Mai !*" It was June,

to

to be sure ; but the meteorological influences were, for that, only the more potent. He remembered her shining eyes now as not merely whimsical and ardent, but as pensive, appealing, tender ; he remembered her face as a face seen in starlight, ethereal and mystic ; and her voice as low music, far away. He recalled their last meeting as a treasure he had possessed and lost ; he blamed himself for the frivolity of his talk and manner, and for the ineffectual impression of him this must have left upon her. Perpetually thinking of her, he was perpetually sighing, perpetually suffering strange, sudden, half painful, half delicious commotions in the tissues of his heart. Every morning he rose with a replenished fund of hope : this day at last would produce her. Every night he went to bed pitying himself as bankrupt of hope. And all the while, though he pined to talk of her, a curious bashfulness withheld him ; so that, between him and Hilary, for quite a fortnight she was not mentioned. It was Hilary who broke the silence.

"Why so pale and wan ?" Hilary asked him. "Will, when looking well won't move her, looking ill prevail ?"

"Oh, I am seriously love-sick," cried Ferdinand Augustus, welcoming the subject. "I went in for a sensation, and I've got a real emotion."

"Poor youth ! And she won't look at you, I suppose ?" was Hilary's method of commiseration.

"I have not seen her for a mortal tortnight. She has completely vanished. And for the first time in my life I'm seriously in love."

"You're incapable of being seriously in love," said Hilary.

"I had always thought so myself," admitted Ferdinand Augustus. "The most I had ever felt for any woman was a sort of mere lukewarm desire, a sort of mere meaningless titillation.

But

But this woman is different. She's as different to other women as wine is different to toast-and-water. She has the *feu-sacré*. She's done something to the very inmost soul of me ; she's laid it bare, and set it quivering and yearning. She's made herself indispensable to me ; I can't live without her. Ah, you don't know what she's like. She's like some strange, beautiful, burning spirit. Oh, for an hour with her, I'd give my kingdom. To touch her hand—to look into those eyes of hers—to hear her speak to me ! I tell you squarely, if she'd have me, I'd throw up the whole scheme of my existence, I'd fly with her to the uttermost ends of the earth. But she has totally disappeared, and I can do nothing to recover her without betraying my identity ; and that would spoil everything. I want her to love me for myself, believing me to be a plain man, like you or anybody. If she knew who I am, how could I ever be sure ? ”

“ You *are* in a bad way,” said Hilary, looking at him with amusement. “ And yet, I'm gratified to see it. Her hair is not so red as I could wish, but, after all, it's reddish ; and you appear to be genuinely aflame. It will do you no end of good ; it will make a man of you—a plain man, like me or anybody. But your impatience is not reasoned. A fortnight ? You have not met her for a fortnight ? My dear, to a plain man a fortnight's nothing. It's just an appetiser. Watch and wait, and you'll meet her before you know it. And now, if you will excuse me, I have business in another quarter of the palace.”

Ferdinand Augustus, left to himself, went down into the garden. It was a wonderful summer's evening, made indeed (if I may steal a phrase from Hilary) of perfumed velvet. The sun had set an hour since, but the western sky was still splendid, like a dark

a dark tapestry, with sombre reds and purples ; and in the east hung the full moon, so brilliant, so apposite, as to seem somehow almost like a piece of premeditated decoration. The waters of the fountains flashed silverly in its light ; glossy leaves gave back dim reflections ; here and there, embowered among the trees, white statues gleamed ghost-like. Away in the park somewhere, innumerable frogs were croaking, croaking ; subdued by distance, the sound gained a quality that was plaintive and unearthly. The long façade of the palace lay obscure in shadow ; only at the far end, in the Queen's apartments, were the windows alight. But, quite close at hand, the moon caught a corner of the terrace ; and here, presently, Ferdinand Augustus became aware of a human figure. A woman was standing alone by the balustrade, gazing out into the wondrous night. Ferdinand Augustus's heart began to pound ; and it was a full minute before he could command himself sufficiently to move or speak.

At last, however, he approached her. "Good evening," he said, looking up from the pathway.

She glanced down at him, leaning upon the balustrade. "Oh, how do you do ?" She smiled her surprise. She was in evening dress, a white robe embroidered with pearls, and she wore a tiara of pearls in her hair. She had a light cloak thrown over her shoulders, a little cape trimmed with swan's-down. "Heavens !" thought Ferdinand Augustus. "How magnificent she is !"

"It's a hundred years since I have seen you," he said.

"Oh, is it so long as that ? I should have imagined it was something like a fortnight. Time passes quickly."

"That is a question of psychology. But now at last I find you when I least expect you."

"I have slipped out for a moment," she explained, "to enjoy this

this beautiful prospect. One has no such view from the Queen's end of the terrace. One cannot see the moon."

"I cannot see the moon from where I am standing," said he.

"No because you have turned your back upon it," said she.

"I have chosen between two visions. If you were to authorise me to join you, aloft there, I could see both."

"I have no power to authorise you," she laughed, "the terrace is not my property. But if you choose to take the risks——"

"Oh," he cried, "you are good, you are kind." And in an instant he had joined her on the terrace, and his heart was fluttering wildly with its sense of her nearness to him. He could not speak.

"Well, now you can see the moon. Is it all your fancy painted?" she asked, with her whimsical smile. Her face was exquisitely pale in the moonlight, her eyes glowed. Her voice was very soft.

His heart was fluttering wildly, poignantly. "Oh," he began—but broke off. His breath trembled. "I cannot speak," he said.

She arched her eyebrows. "Then we have made some mistake. This will never be you, in that case."

"Oh, yes, it is I. It is the other fellow, the gabbler, who is not myself," he contrived to tell her.

"You lead a double life, like the villain in the play?" she suggested.

"You must have your laugh at my expense; have it, and welcome. But I know what I know," he said.

"What do you know?" she asked quickly.

"I know that I am in love with you," he answered.

"Oh, only that," she said, with an air of relief.

"Only that. But that is a great deal. I know that I love you—oh, yes, unutterably. If you could see yourself! You are absolutely

absolutely unique among women. I would never have believed it possible for any woman to make me feel what you have made me feel. I have never spoken like this to any woman in all my life. Oh, you may laugh. It is the truth, upon my word of honour. If you could look into your eyes,—yes, even when you are laughing at me ! I can see your wonderful burning spirit shining deep, deep in your eyes. You do not dream how different you are to other women. You are a wonderful burning poem. They are platitudes. Oh, I love you unutterably. There has not been an hour since I last saw you that I have not thought of you, loved you, longed for you. And now here you stand, you yourself, beside me ! If you could see into my heart, if you could see what I feel ! ”

She looked at the moon, with a strange little smile, and was silent.

“ Will you not speak to me ? ” he cried.

“ What would you have me say ? ” she asked still looking away.

“ Oh, you know, you know what I would have you say.”

“ I am afraid you will not like the only thing I can say.” She turned, and met his eyes. “ I am a married woman, and—I am in love with my husband.”

Ferdinand Augustus stood aghast. “ Oh, my God ! ” he groaned.

“ Yes, though he has given me little enough reason to do so, I have fallen in love with him,” she went on pitilessly. “ So you must get over your fancy for me. After all, I am a total stranger to you. You do not even know my name.”

“ Will you tell me your name ? ” asked Ferdinand humbly. “ It will be something to remember.”

“ My name is Marguerite.”

“ Marguerite !

"Marguerite! Marguerite!" He repeated it caressingly. "It is a beautiful name. But it is also the name of the Queen."

"I am the only person named Marguerite in the Queen's court," said she.

"What!" cried Ferdinand Augustus.

"Oh, it is a wise husband who knows his own wife," laughed she.

And then— But I think I have told enough.