

Two Sketches

By Henry Harland

I—Mercedes

WHEN I was a child some one gave me a family of white mice. I don't remember how old I was, I think about ten or eleven; but I remember very clearly the day I received them. It must have been a Thursday, a half-holiday, for I had come home from school rather early in the afternoon. Alexandre, dear old ruddy round-faced Alexandre, who opened the door for me, smiled in a way that seemed to announce, "There's a surprise in store for you, sir." Then my mother smiled too, a smile, I thought, of peculiar promise and interest. After I had kissed her she said, "Come into the dining-room. There's something you will like." Perhaps I concluded it would be something to eat. Anyhow, all agog with curiosity, I followed her into the dining-room—and Alexandre followed *me*, anxious to take part in the rejoicing. In the window stood a big cage, enclosing the family of white mice.

I remember it as a very big cage indeed; no doubt I should find it shrunken to quite moderate dimensions if I could see it again. There were three generations of mice in it: a fat old couple, the founders of the race, dozing phlegmatically on their laurels

laurels in a corner ; then a dozen medium-sized, slender mice, trim and youthful-looking, rushing irrelevantly hither and thither, with funny inquisitive little faces ; and then a squirming mass of pink things, like caterpillars, that were really infant mice, newborn. They didn't remain infants long, though. In a few days they had put on virile togas of white fur, and were scrambling about the cage and nibbling their food as independently as their elders. The rapidity with which my mice multiplied and grew to maturity was a constant source of astonishment to me. It seemed as if every morning I found a new litter of young mice in the cage—though how they had effected an entrance through the wire gauze that lined it was a hopeless puzzle—and these would have become responsible, self-supporting mice in no time.

My mother told me that somebody had sent me this soul-stirring present from the country, and I dare say I was made to sit down and write a letter of thanks. But I'm ashamed to own I can't remember who the giver was. I have a vague notion that it was a lady, an elderly maiden-lady—Mademoiselle something that began with P— who lived near Tours, and who used to come to Paris once or twice a year, and always brought me a box of prunes.

Alexandre carried the cage into my play-room, and set it up against the wall. I stationed myself in front of it, and remained there all the rest of the afternoon, gazing in, entranced. To watch their antics, their comings and goings, their labours and amusements, to study their shrewd, alert physiognomies, to wonder about their feelings, thoughts, intentions, to try to divine the meaning of their busy twittering language—it was such keen, deep delight. Of course I was an anthropomorphist, and read a great deal of human nature into them ; otherwise it wouldn't have been such fun. I dragged myself reluctantly away when I was
called

called to dinner. It was hard that evening to apply myself to my school-books. Before I went to bed I paid them a parting visit; they were huddled together in their nest of cotton-wool, sleeping soundly. And I was up at an unheard-of hour next morning, to have a bout with them before going to school. I found Alexandre, in his nightcap and long white apron, occupied with the *soins de propreté*, as he said. He cleaned out the cage, put in fresh food and water, and then, pointing to the fat old couple, the grandparents, who stopped lazily abed, sitting up and rubbing their noses together, whilst their juniors scampered merrily about their affairs, "Tiens! On dirait Monsieur et Madame Denis," he cried. I felt the appositeness of his allusion; and the old couple were forthwith officially denominated Monsieur and Madame Denis, for their resemblance to the hero and heroine of the song—though which was Monsieur, and which Madame, I'm not sure that I ever clearly knew.

It was a little after this that I was taken for the first time in my life to the play. I fancy the theatre must have been the Porte St. Martin; at any rate, it was a theatre in the Boulevard, and towards the East, for I remember the long drive we had to reach it. And the piece was *The Count of Monte Cristo*. In my memory the adventure shines, of course, as a vague blur of light and joy; a child's first visit to the play, and that play *The Count of Monte Cristo!* It was all the breath-taking pleasantness of romance made visible, audible, actual. A vague blur of light and joy, from which only two details separate themselves. First, the prison scene, and an aged man, with a long white beard, moving a great stone from the wall; then—the figure of Mercedes. I went home terribly in love with Mercedes. Surely there are no such *grandes passions* in maturer life as those helpless, inarticulate ones we burn in secret with before our teens; surely we never love
again

again so violently, desperately, consumedly. Anyhow, I went home terribly in love with Mercedes. And—do all children lack humour?—I picked out the prettiest young ladyish-looking mouse in my collection, cut off her moustaches, adopted her as my especial pet, and called her by the name of my *dea certè*.

All of my mice by this time had become quite tame. They had plenty to eat and drink, and a comfortable home, and not a care in the world; and familiarity with their master had bred assurance; and so they had become quite tame and shamefully, abominably lazy. Luxury, we are taught, was ever the mother of sloth. I could put my hand in amongst them, and not one would bestir himself the littlest bit to escape me. Mercedes and I were inseparable. I used to take her to school with me every day; she could be more conveniently and privately transported than a lamb. Each *lycèen* had a desk in front of his form, and she would spend the school-hours in mine, I leaving the lid raised a little, that she might have light and air. One day, the usher having left the room for a moment, I put her down on the floor, thereby creating a great excitement amongst my fellow-pupils, who got up from their places and formed an eager circle round her. Then suddenly the usher came back, and we all hurried to our seats, while he, catching sight of Mercedes, cried out, "A mouse! A white mouse! Who dares to bring a white mouse to the class?" And he made a dash for her. But she was too quick, too 'cute, for "the likes of" Monsieur le Pion. She gave a jump, and in the twinkling of an eye had disappeared up my leg, under my trousers. The usher searched high and low for her, but she prudently remained in her hiding-place; and thus her life was saved, for when he had abandoned his ineffectual chase, he announced, "I should have wrung her neck." I turned pale to imagine the doom she had escaped as by a hair's breadth. "It is useless to ask which
of

of you brought her here," he continued. "But mark my words : if ever I find a mouse again in the class *I will wring her neck!*" And yet, in private life, this bloodthirsty *pion* was a quite gentle, kindly, underfed, underpaid, shabby, struggling fellow, with literary aspirations, who would not have hurt a fly.

The secrets of a schoolboy's pocket! I once saw a boy surreptitiously angling in Kensington Gardens, with a string and a bent pin. Presently he landed a fish, a fish no bigger than your thumb, perhaps, but still a fish. Alive and wet and flopping as it was, he slipped it into his pocket. I used to carry Mercedes about in mine. One evening, when I put in my hand to take her out, I discovered to my bewilderment that she was not alone. There were four little pink mites of infant mice clinging to her.

I had enjoyed my visit to the theatre so much that at the *jour de l'an* my father included a toy-theatre among my presents. It had a real curtain of green baize, that would roll up and down, and beautiful coloured scenery that you could shift, and footlights, and a trap-door in the middle of the stage ; and indeed it would have been altogether perfect, except for the Company. I have since learned that this is not infrequently the case with theatres. My company consisted of pasteboard men and women who, as artists, struck me as eminently unsatisfactory. They couldn't move their arms or legs, and they had such stolid, uninteresting faces. I don't know how it first occurred to me to turn them all off, and fill their places with my mice. Mercedes, of course, was leading lady ; Monsieur and Madame Denis were the heavy parents ; and a gentlemanlike young mouse named Leander was *jeune premier*. Then, in my leisure, they used to act the most tremendous plays. I was stage-manager, prompter, playwright, chorus, and audience, placing the theatre before a looking-glass, so that, though my duties kept me behind, I could peer round the
edge,

edge, and watch the spectacle as from the front. I would invent the lines and deliver them, but, that my illusion might be the more complete, I would change my voice for each personage. The lines tried hard to be verses; no doubt they were *vers libres*. At any rate, they were mouth-filling and sonorous. The first play we attempted, I need hardly say, was *Le Comte de Monte Cristo*, such version of it as I could reconstruct from memory. That had rather a long run. Then I dramatised *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, *Paul et Virginie*, *Quentin Durward*, and *La Dame de Monsoreau*. Mercedes made a charming Diane, Leander a brilliant and dashing Bussy; Monsieur Denis was cast for the rôle of Frère Gorenflot; and a long, thin, cadaverous-looking mouse, Don Quichotte by name, somewhat inadequately represented Chicot. We began, as you see, with melodrama; presently we descended to light comedy, playing *Les Mémoires d'un Ane*, *Jean qui rit*, and other works of the immortal Madame de Ségur. And then at last we turned a new leaf, and became naturalistic. We had never heard of the naturalist school, though Monsieur Zola had already published some volumes of the *Rougon-Macquart*; but ideas are in the air; and we, for ourselves, discovered the possibilities of naturalism simultaneously, as it were, with the acknowledged apostle of that form of art. We would impersonate the characters of our own world—our schoolfellows and masters, our parents, servants, friends—and carry them through experiences and situations derived from our impressions of real life. Perhaps we rather led them a dance; and I dare say those we didn't like came in for a good deal of retributive justice. It was a little universe, of which we were the arch-arbiters, our will the final law.

I don't know whether all children lack humour; but I'm sure no grown-up author-manager can take his business more seriously than

than I took mine. Oh, I enjoyed it hugely ; the hours I spent at it were enraptured hours ; but it was grim, grim earnest. After a while I began to long for a less subjective public, a more various audience. I would summon the servants, range them in chairs at one end of the room, conceal myself behind the theatre, and spout the play with fervid solemnity. And they would giggle, and make flippant commentaries, and at my most impassioned climaxes burst into guffaws. My mice, as has been said, were overfed and lazy, and I used to have to poke them through their parts with sticks from the wings ; but this was a detail which a superior imagination should have accepted as one of the conventions of the art. It made the servants laugh, however ; and when I would step to the front in person, and, with tears in my eyes, beseech them to be sober, they would but laugh the louder. " Bless you, sir, they're only mice—*ce ne sont que des souris*," the cook called out on one such occasion. She meant it as an apology and a consolation, but it was the unkindest cut of all. Only mice, indeed ! To me they had been a young gentleman and lady lost in the Desert of Sahara, near to die for the want of water, and about to be attacked, captured, and sold into slavery, by a band of Bedouin Arabs. Ah, well, the artist must steel himself to meet with indifference or derision from the public, to be ignored, misunderstood, or jeered at ; and to rely for his real, his legitimate, reward on the pleasure he finds in his work.

And now there befell a great change in my life. Our home in Paris was broken up, and we moved to St. Petersburg. It was impossible to take my mice with us ; their cage would have hopelessly complicated our impedimenta. So we gave them to the children of our concierge. Mercedes, however, I was resolved I would not part with, and I carried her all the way to the Russian capital by hand. In my heart I was looking to her to found
another

another family—she had so frequently become a mother in the past. But month succeeded month, and she forever disappointed me, and at last I abandoned hope. In solitude and exile Mercedes degenerated sadly ; got monstrously fat ; too indolent to gnaw, let her teeth grow to a preposterous length ; and in the end died of a surfeit of *smetana*.

When I returned to Paris, at the age of twenty, to *faire mon droit* in the Latin Quarter, I paid a visit to our old house, and discovered the same old concierge in the *loge*. I asked her about the mice, and she told me her children had found the care of them such a bother that at first they had neglected them, and at last allowed them to escape. “They took to the walls, and for a long time afterwards, Monsieur, the mice of this neighbourhood were pied. To this day they are of a paler hue than elsewhere.”

II—A Broken Looking-Glass

HE climbed the three flights of stone stairs, and put his key into the lock ; but before he turned it, he stopped—to rest, to take breath. On the door his name was painted in big white letters, Mr. Richard Dane. It is always silent in the Temple at midnight ; to-night the silence was dense, like a fog. It was Sunday night ; and on Sunday night, even within the hushed precincts of the Temple, one is conscious of a deeper hush.

When he had lighted the lamp in his sitting-room, he let himself drop into an arm-chair before the empty fireplace. He was tired, he was exhausted. Yet nothing had happened to tire him. He had dined, as he always dined on Sundays, with the Rodericks, in Cheyne Walk ; he had driven home in a hansom. There was

no reason why he should be tired. But he was tired. A deadly lassitude penetrated his body and his spirit, like a fluid. He was too tired to go to bed.

"I suppose I am getting old," he thought.

To a second person the matter would have appeared one not of supposition but of certainty, not of progression but of accomplishment. Getting old indeed? But he *was* old. It was an old man, grey and wrinkled and wasted, who sat there, limp, sunken upon himself, in his easy-chair. In years, to be sure, he was under sixty; but he looked like a man of seventy-five.

"I am getting old, I suppose I am getting old."

And vaguely, dully, he contemplated his life, spread out behind him like a misty landscape, and thought what a failure it had been. What had it come to? What had it brought him? What had he done or won? Nothing, nothing. It had brought him nothing but old age, solitude, disappointment, and, to-night especially, a sense of fatigue and apathy that weighed upon him like a suffocating blanket. On a table, a yard or two away, stood a decanter of whisky, with some soda-water bottles and tumblers; he looked at it with heavy eyes, and he knew that there was what he needed. A little whisky would strengthen him, revive him, and make it possible for him to bestir himself and undress and go to bed. But when he thought of rising and moving to pour the whisky out, he shrunk from that effort as from an Herculean labour; no—he was too tired. Then his mind went back to the friends he had left in Chelsea half an hour ago; it seemed an indefinitely long time ago, years and years ago; they were like blurred phantoms, dimly remembered from a remote past.

Yes, his life had been a failure; total, miserable, abject. It had come to nothing; its harvest was a harvest of ashes. If it had been a useful life, he could have accepted its unhappiness; if it

had been a happy life, he could have forgotten its uselessness ; but it had been both useless and unhappy. He had done nothing for others, he had won nothing for himself. Oh, but he had tried, he had tried. When he had left Oxford people expected great things of him ; he had expected great things of himself. He was admitted to be clever, to be gifted ; he was ambitious, he was in earnest. He wished to make a name, he wished to justify his existence by fruitful work. And he had worked hard. He had put all his knowledge, all his talent, all his energy, into his work ; he had not spared himself ; he had passed laborious days and studious nights. And what remained to show for it ? Three or four volumes upon Political Economy, that had been read in their day a little, discussed a little, and then quite forgotten—super-seded by the books of newer men. “Pulped, pulped,” he reflected bitterly. Except for a stray dozen of copies scattered here and there—in the British Museum, in his College library, on his own bookshelves—his published writings had by this time (he could not doubt) met with the common fate of unsuccessful literature, and been “pulped.”

“Pulped—pulped ; pulped—pulped.” The hateful word beat rhythmically again and again in his tired brain ; and for a little while that was all he was conscious of.

So much for the work of his life. And for the rest ? The play ? The living ? Oh, he had nothing to recall but failure. It had sufficed that he should desire a thing, for him to miss it ; that he should set his heart upon a thing, for it to be removed beyond the sphere of his possible acquisition. It had been so from the beginning ; it had been so always. He sat motionless as a stone, and allowed his thoughts to drift listlessly hither and thither in the current of memory. Everywhere they encountered wreckage, derelicts : defeated aspirations, broken hopes. Languidly
he

he envisaged these He was too tired to resent, to rebel. He even found a certain sluggish satisfaction in recognising with what unvarying harshness destiny had treated him, in resigning himself to the unmerited.

He caught sight of his hand, lying flat and inert upon the brown leather arm of his chair. His eyes rested on it, and for the moment he forgot everything else in a sort of torpid study of it. How white it was, how thin, how withered; the nails were parched into minute corrugations; the veins stood out like dark wires; the skin hung loosely on it, and had a dry lustre: an old man's hand. He gazed at it fixedly, till his eyes closed and his head fell forward. But he was not sleepy, he was only tired and weak.

He raised his head with a start, and changed his position. He felt cold; but to endure the cold was easier than to get up, and put something on, or go to bed.

How silent the world was; how empty his room. An immense feeling of solitude, of isolation, fell upon him. He was quite cut off from the rest of humanity here. If anything should happen to him, if he should need help of any sort, what could he do? Call out? But who would hear? At nine in the morning the porter's wife would come with his tea. But if anything should happen to him in the meantime? There would be nothing for it but to wait till nine o'clock.

Ah, if he had married, if he had had children, a wife, a home of his own, instead of these desolate bachelor chambers!

If he had married, indeed! It was his sorrow's crown of sorrow that he had not married, that he had not been able to marry, that the girl he had wished to marry wouldn't have him. Failure? Success? He could have accounted failure in other things a trifle, he could have laughed at what the world calls failure, if Elinor

Lynd

Lynd had been his wife. But that was the heart of his misfortune, she wouldn't have him.

He had met her for the first time when he was a lad of twenty, and she a girl of eighteen. He could see her palpable before him now: her slender girlish figure, her bright eyes, her laughing mouth, her warm brown hair curling round her forehead. Oh, how he had loved her. For twelve years he had waited upon her, wooed her, hoped to win her. But she had always said, "No—I don't love you. I am very fond of you; I love you as a friend; we all love you that way—my mother, my father, my sisters. But I can't marry you." However, she married no one else, she loved no one else; and for twelve years he was an ever-welcome guest in her father's house; and she would talk with him, play to him, pity him; and he could hope. Then she died. He called one day, and they said she was ill. After that there came a blank in his memory—a gulf, full of blackness and redness, anguish and confusion; and then a sort of dreadful sudden calm, when they told him she was dead.

He remembered standing in her room, after the funeral, with her father, her mother, her sister Elizabeth. He remembered the pale daylight that filled it, and how orderly and cold and forsaken it all looked. And there was her bed, the bed she had died in; and there her dressing-table, with her combs and brushes; and there her writing-desk, her bookcase. He remembered a row of medicine bottles on the mantelpiece; he remembered the fierce anger, the hatred of them, as if they were animate, that had welled up in his heart as he looked at them, because they had failed to do their work.

"You will wish to have something that was hers, Richard," her mother said. "What would you like?"

On her dressing-table there was a small looking-glass in an
ivory

ivory frame. He asked if he might have that, and carried it away with him. She had looked into it a thousand times, no doubt ; she had done her hair in it ; it had reflected her, enclosed her, contained her. He could almost persuade himself that something of her must remain in it. To own it was like owning something of herself. He carried it home with him, hugging it to his side with a kind of passion.

He had prized it, he prized it still, as his dearest treasure ; the looking-glass in which her face had been reflected a thousand times ; the glass that had contained her, known her ; in which something of herself, he felt, must linger. To handle it, look at it, into it, behind it, was like holding a mystic communion with her ; it gave him an emotion that was infinitely sweet and bitter, a pain that was dissolved in joy.

The glass lay now, folded in its ivory case, on the chimney-shelf in front of him. That was its place ; he always kept it on his chimney-shelf, so that he could see it whenever he glanced round his room. He leaned back in his chair, and looked at it ; for a long time his eyes remained fixed upon it. "If she had married me, she wouldn't have died. My love, my care, would have healed her. She could not have died." Monotonously, automatically, the phrase repeated itself over and over again in his mind, while his eyes remained fixed on the ivory case into which her looking-glass was folded. It was an effect of his fatigue, no doubt, that his eyes, once directed upon an object, were slow to leave it for another ; that a phrase once pronounced in his thought had this tendency to repeat itself over and over again.

But at last he roused himself a little, and leaning forward, put his hand out and up, to take the glass from the shelf. He wished to hold it, to touch it and look into it. As he lifted it towards him, it fell open, the mirror proper being fastened to a leather back,

back, which was glued to the ivory, and formed a hinge. It fell open ; and his gasp had been insecure ; and the jerk as it opened was enough. It slipped from his fingers, and dropped with a crash upon the hearthstone.

The sound went through him like a physical pain. He sank back into his chair, and closed his eyes. His heart was beating as after a mighty physical exertion. He knew vaguely that a calamity had befallen him ; he could vaguely imagine the splinters of shattered glass at his feet. But his physical prostration was so great as to obliterate, to neutralise, emotion. He felt very cold. He felt that he was being hurried along with terrible speed through darkness and cold air. There was the continuous roar of rapid motion in his ears, a faint, dizzy bewilderment in his head. He felt that he was trying to catch hold of things, to stop his progress, but his hands closed upon emptiness ; that he was trying to call out for help, but he could make no sound. On—on—on, he was being whirled through some immeasurable abyss of space.

* * * * *

“Ah, yes, he’s dead, quite dead,” the doctor said. “He has been dead some hours. He must have passed away peacefully sitting here in his chair.”

“Poor gentleman,” said the porter’s wife. “And a broken looking-glass beside him. Oh, it’s a sure sign, a broken looking-glass.”