

## THE PAGANS.

### A MEMORY.

*"Ma contrée de dilection n'existe pour aucun  
touriste et jamais guide ou médecin ne la  
recommandera."*

GEO. EECKHOUD. *Kermesses.*

*"Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the  
fields; let us lodge in the villages."*

*Song of Solomon.*

*" . . . . . lo! with a little rod  
I did but touch the honey of romance—  
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?"*

OSCAR WILDE.

### BOOK I.

#### I.

The wind and the sunshine. I think of them always when I whisper to myself her name—the name I loved best to call her by. To others she was Claire Auriol; to a privileged few she was Sans-Souci. To myself, and myself only, she was—ah, Sweet-Heart, no, the word is ours, and ours only, for ever.

We ought to have been born gipsies. Certainly we both loved the sunshine, and the blithe freedom of nature, with a passion. It was under the trees, under the deep blue wind-swept sky, that we first realised each had won from the other a lifetime of joy. True, it was still winter. The snow lay deep by the hedges, and we had to slip through many a drift before we reached the lonely woodland height whither we were bound. But was there ever snow so livingly white, so lit with golden glow? Was ever summer sky more gloriously blue? Was ever spring music sweeter than that exquisite midwinter hush, than that deep suspension of breath before the flood of our joy?

How poignantly bitter-sweet was our separation so soon thereafter! You had to rejoin your brother in Paris, and resume your painting in his studio; and I had to go to the London I hated so much, there to write concerning things about which I cared not a straw, while my heart was full of you, and my eyes saw you everywhere, and my ears were haunted day and night by echoes of your voice.

And oh, what joy it was when at last I had enough money in hand to be independent of London, if not for good, at least for a year or so; and when once more I found myself in Paris. What joy to meet you again: to find that we had not changed: that it was not all a dream: that we loved each other more than ever.

## II.

What happy days those were in that bygone spring! I wonder if ever two people were happier? Yes; we were, when we left Paris behind us, and went away together, as light-hearted as the April birds, as free as the wind itself. But even in Paris, what glad hours we had! Ah, those Sunday breakfasts at Suresnes, by the riverside: those idle mornings on the sunlit grass at Longchamp, or amid the elms and chestnuts of St. Cloud: those happy days at Fontainebleau or Rambouillet: those hours on the river when even forlorn Ivry seemed a lovely and desirable place: those hours, at twilight, in the Luxembourg Gardens, when the thrush would sing as, we were sure, never nightingale sang in forest-glade, or Wood of Broceliande: those hours in the galleries, above all before our beloved Venus in the Louvre: ah, beautiful hours, gone for ever, and yet immortal, because of the joy that they knew and whereby they live and are even now fresh and young and sweet with their exquisite romance.

## III.

And that day, that golden day, when we said that we would waste no more of the happy time of youth, but go away together, and live our life as seemed to us best!

Can I ever forget how I came round to the studio in the little Hôtel Soleil du Midi, shining white in the

sunshine as a chalk cliff, but dappled and splashed all over with bluish shadows from the great chestnuts of the Luxembourg Gardens: and how I found you alone, and in tears, before that too flattering portrait of me which you had painted so lovingly, through such joyous hours, with beneath it, in fantastic letters which you would persist were Old German, but bore no resemblance to any known caligraphy, the blithe couplet—

*“ Douce nuit et joyeux jour,  
O Chevalier de bel amour.”*

How angry you were with your brother Raoul because he had told you he did not approve of your free Bohemian life—because he had mocked your “douces nuits” and “joyeux jours”—and had told you at last that you must choose between him and your “chevalier de bel amour:” the real, not the painted, one.

#### IV.

Is it all a dream? How well I remember how beautiful she looked, as she stood before the easel which held my portrait, her palette and brushes lying on a low paint-daubed table beside her, her hands clasped as they hung despondingly before her. Let me essay *her* portrait, though there is no fear that I can flatter *her*, dear heart, as she flattered me. Tall she was, and graceful as a mountain-ash, or as a wild deer, or as a wave upon the sea, or any other beautiful thing that one loves to look upon for its exquisiteness of poise and movement. It was this characteristic, I think, that first made me liken her in my mind to a flower; and that was the origin of a name I often called her by, and that she loved to hear, White Flower. Not that, in a sense, the word “white” was literally apt. She was not blonde, and her skin, though fair and soft, was in keeping with the rich dark of her hair and sweeping eyebrows and long lashes. Paler than ivory, it was touched with a delicious brown, the kiss of sunshine and fresh air; and yet was so sensitive that it would redden at a moment—a flush so lovely and blossom-like that her beauty became at once bewilderingly enhanced by it. White, certainly, were the teeth that gleamed like hawthorn-

buds behind the wild roses of her curved lips, and pink and white the small sensitive ears that clung like swallows under the eaves of her shadowy hair: but lovely as dusk was she otherwise. Her lustrous dark hair, that looked quite black at night, had a crisp and a wave in it that caught all manner of wandering lights; so that, in full sunlight, and sometimes by firelight or even lamplight, it seemed as though shot with bronze. It rose in an upward wave from her broad white brow, and was gathered together in a bewitching mass behind in a way that I am sure was hers only. Her features were more southern than northern in their classic sweep and cut, and yet, northerner that I am, I loved them the more for certain delicious inconsistencies and irregularities. Her face, indeed, might almost have been thought too square-set about the lower part but for the loveliness of the general contour and the redeeming sweetness and beauty of the mouth. Her eyes—those eyes which have so often thrilled me beyond words, those deep lustrous springs into which I have gazed so often, fascinated by the strange joy, the strange longing, a longing that was often pathos, and by the still stranger melancholy that I could never quite divine, and of which Claire herself was mostly unconscious—her eyes are indescribable. They varied from a rich velvety darkness, like the colour of midsummer twilight on cloudless eyes, when the hour is still what in the north they call “the edge o’ dark,” to a clear brown-grey or grey-brown, of that indeterminate light and sparkle one sees in mountain streams that wimple over sunny shallows of moss and pebbles. In certain lights they had that lustrous green ray which has ever been beloved by poets and painters. Lovely, mysterious eyes they were at all times; though possibly none felt their mystery save myself, for they were clear and fresh as the sunlit sea, as daring as a flashing sword, as dauntless as a martyr’s before the affront of death. Even in the drawing, even in the photograph of her that I have before me now, I find this quality of mysterious unfathomableness. It is, indeed, more obvious there—in the photograph pre-eminently—than it was in life. Even a stranger looking upon this phantom-face might wonder what manner

of girl, or woman, the original actually was ; whether a bright or a sombre spirit dwelt in those darkly reticent eyes.

The poise of her head, the rhythmic sway and carriage of her body, every motion, every gesture, made a fresh delight for all who looked at her. I have travelled much, and seen the peasant-women of Italy and Greece, but have never elsewhere so realised the poetry of human motion. Claire might have served a sculptor as an ideal model of Youth. She was slight in figure, and yet so lithe and strong that she could outwalk and even out-climb many a robust man. Whether we tramped many miles together, or rambled through woods or by riversides, we never seemed to tire, till all at once we felt the wish or need of rest. Certainly we never tired each other. I think this was due to our absolute fitness for each other. All lovers say that each was made for the other, but in the nature of things there must be few who are such counterparts as Claire and I were. In everything, from temperament to height, she was to me all that the eyes of the soul and the eyes of the body desired in deep comradeship and love.

Then the charm of her blithe, brave spirit ! How often have I called her Sunshine ; how often Dawn, and Morning ? For she was ever to me the living symbol, nay, the perfect incarnation of the joy and beauty of life. I have never met any woman so fearless ; few so self-reliant, so sunnily joyous while so easily wrought to intense feeling.

We were happy in our recognition of the fact that we could be, as we latterly were, all in all to each other ; that each was for the other the supreme lure, the summoning joy, in the maze of life.

## V.

When I entered the little studio that day, in the forsaken but sunny and charming old hotel where Claire and Victor Auriol lived, I knew at once that something was far wrong ; for Sans-Souci, as she was called by intimate acquaintances among her artist friends, was the last person to give way to tears on a slight excuse. For tears there were in those beautiful eyes, though

but one or two had fallen from the long lashes. In a few words she told me all.

Victor was tired of living with her, and had sought many excuses recently to justify his ill-mannered hints. Though both were artists, no two persons could be more unlike. He was rigid, formal, conventional; without intellectual breadth or even sympathy; with coarse, if not actually depraved, tastes, which he possessed and tantalised rather than gratified. When, a year or two before I first met them, during what I called my literary apprenticeship in Paris (though I am afraid I haunted the book-shelves on the left bank of the Seine, and, above all, the *librairie* of Léon Vanier, that literary sponsor of so many of *les jeunes*, much more than more academic resorts), their father had followed to the grave their Irish mother—and Marcel Auriol was himself, I should add, half English, or rather Scottish, despite his French name—and left his two children a moderate competency. But the conditions of the heritage were unfair; for while the annual income of six thousand francs was to be looked upon as equally between Victor and Claire so long as they lived together, Claire was to have but two thousand if she married, and only one thousand if this marriage were not one approved of by her brother, or if she voluntarily lived apart from him. Now, as it happened, Victor had a lust of gold that blunted his sense of honour, and he was eager to part from his sister, in whose company he was ever uneasy, and to appropriate the lion's share of the inheritance. To do him justice, he might have acted otherwise if Claire had been different from what he knew her. He comforted his conscience with the sophistries that Claire's drawings were more saleable than his own, and that therefore she did not need the money so much as he did; that she was beautiful, and would certainly make a good match; that he was really meeting her half-way, since her great craving was for independence.

Still, it was with a certain bitterness, perhaps even a certain clinging regret, that Sans-Souci (a name, by the way, her brother hated) had listened to him that morning, when he had given his *ultimatum*. She was, he demanded, to go with him to the little house at Sceaux

he thought of taking, and there to act as housekeeper ; to be content with this life, and to give up once and for all her Bohemian ways ; and, above all, to see no more, and to have no further communication with, "that arrogant and offensive Scot, Wilfrid Traquair, kinsman though he be"—in other words, the present writer ! All this was but a mean way of forcing Claire's hand. Victor Auriol knew well that she would refuse to accede to his demands ; and though she was not blind to his intent she disdainfully refused to plead or argue for her rights.

And the end of it was that they had agreed to part. Victor had, with convenient suddenness, decided to give up the Sceaux house and to remain in the Hôtel Soleil du Midi. With a promptness that betrayed how calculated everything had been, he explained to his sister that by her own folly she would henceforth be entitled to but one thousand francs annually ; and that, in view of all the circumstances, the separation must be a complete one. In other words, Claire was to go ; with the consciousness that the manner of her going, her immediate destination, and her future movements were alike matters of indifferent moment to her brother.

It was then and there, in that sunny studio, with the white doves fluttering their wings on the wide green sill beside the open window, that Sans-Souci and I decided to fulfil one of our happy dreams and go away together.

It was on the morrow following this decision of ours that Sans-Souci said good-bye (and, as it happened, a lifelong farewell) to her brother. She had packed up all her few belongings that she cared to keep, and sent them to the care of a friend in the Rue Grégoire de Tours, that narrow, inconspicuous byway from the great Boulevard St. Germain, so well known to the poorer students and artists of the neighbourhood. When I reached the court of the Hôtel Soleil du Midi I saw her standing there, talking quietly to the concierge as if she were about to go forth only to return again, as of yore.

I was too glad, too wildly elated, to express anything of the overmastering happiness that I felt in seeing her there, alone, and ready to go forth with me—in the

recognition that the past night, so interminable in its sleepless anxiety, was not a fantastic dream.

"Where are your things, Claire?" was all that I said, in a low and somewhat constrained voice: "I mean your bag, or whatever you have."

She looked at me half surprisedly with her clear, steadfast eyes, as she replied, quite simply and naturally, and as though the concierge were not beside us:

"Why, Will, dear, I did as we arranged, and sent them to Pierre Vicaire's, near the Pont des Arts. You said you would do the same, and that we would call there on our way to the *hirondelle* for Charenton."

"Of course, of course," I muttered confusedly, and half turned as if eager to go—as indeed I was, particularly as I had just caught sight of Victor Auriol's dark, forbidding face behind a thin lace curtain at one of the windows.

With a low laugh, sweet as the sound of rain after a drought, Sans-Souci slipped her hand into mine.

"At last—at last," she breathed in a thrilling whisper, while her dear eyes shone with a strange light. Then, turning, and waving her hand to the concierge, she bade him a blithe good-bye.

"*Au révoir—adieu—adieu*, M. Bonnard. Do not wait too long before thou takest that little inn in Barbizon that you dream of! Adieu!

"Aha!" cried the man, with a roguish smile: "*mon-sieur et madame contemplant une mariage au treizième arrondissement!*"

But just as by a side glance I noticed the slight flush in Claire's face, M. Bonnard's wife handed me a note on my passing her open doorway. I guessed rather than knew that it was from Victor Auriol. It was addressed in the following fantastic fashion:—

*À Monsieur Wilfrid Traquair,  
Vagrant,  
of God-knows-Where.*

A hearty shout of laughter from Sans-Souci and myself must have reached his ears. Just before we emerged upon the street, I glanced back and saw him abruptly

withdraw his face from behind the lace curtain at the open window. The contents of the note ran thus:

“MONSIEUR: That my sister has chosen to unite herself with a beggarly Scot is her pitiable misfortune: that she has done so without even the decent veil of marriage is her enormity and my disgrace. Henceforth I know as little of the one as of the other, and I beg you to understand that neither you nor the young woman need ever expect the slightest tolerance, much less practical countenance, from me. You are both at liberty to hold, and carry out, the atrocious opinions (for I will not flatter you by calling them convictions) upon marriage which you entertain or profess to entertain: I, equally, am at liberty to abstain from the contagion of such unpleasant company, and to insist henceforth upon an insurmountable barrier between it and myself.

“VICTOR MARIE AURIOL.”

The next moment we had hailed and sprung into a little open *voiture*, and in another minute had lost sight of the Hôtel Soleil du Midi. Outcasts we were, but two more joyous pagans never laughed in the sunlight, two happier waifs never more fearlessly and blithely went forth into the green world.

WILLAND DREEME.

(To be continued.)