WILLIAM JOHN LOCKE

THE MOUNTEBANK

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EAN 8596547177678

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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Chapter I

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In the month of June, 1919, I received a long letter from Brigadier-General Andrew Lackaday together with a bulky manuscript.

The letter, addressed from an obscure hotel in Marseilles, ran as follows:--

MY DEAR FRIEND,

On the occasion of our last meeting when I kept you up to an ungodly hour of the morning with the story of my wretched affairs to which you patiently listened without seeming bored, you were good enough to suggest that I might write a book about myself, not for the sake of vulgar advertisement, but in order to interest, perhaps to encourage, at any rate to stimulate the thoughts of many of my old comrades who have been placed in the same predicament as myself. Well, I can't do it. You're a professional man of letters and don't appreciate the extraordinary difficulty a layman has, not only in writing a coherent narrative, but in composing the very sentences which express the things that he wants to convey. Add to this that English is to me, if not a foreign, at any rate, a secondary language--I have thought all my life in French, so that to express myself clearly on any except the humdrum affairs of life is always a conscious effort. Even this little prelude, in my best style, has taken me nearly two cigarettes to write; so I gave up an impossible task.

But I thought to myself that perhaps you might have the time or the interest to put into shape a whole mass of raw material which I have slung together--from memory (I have a good one), and from my diary. It may seem odd that a homeless Bohemian like myself should have kept a diary; but I was born methodical. I believe my mastery of Army Forms gained me my promotion! Anyhow you will find in it a pretty complete history of my career up to date. I have cut out the war----"

Is there a *lusus naturæ* of any nationality but English, who rising from Private to Brigadier-General, could write six hundred and seventy-three sprawling foolscap pages purporting to contain the story of his life from eighteen-eighty something to June nineteen hundred and nineteen and deliberately omit, as if it were neither here nor there, its four and a half years' glorious and astounding episode?

"*I have cut out the war!*"

On looking through the MS. I found that he had cut out the war, in so far as his military experiences were concerned. In khaki he showed himself to be as English and John Bull as you please; and how the deuce his meteoric promotion occurred and what various splendid services compelled the exhibition on his breast of a rainbow row of ribbons, are matters known only to the War Office, Andrew Lackaday and his Maker. Well--that is perhaps an exaggeration of secrecy. The newspapers have published their official paragraphs. Officers who served under him have given me interesting information. But from the spoken or written word of Andrew Lackaday I have not been able to glean a grain of knowledge. That, I say, is where the intensely English side of him manifested itself. But, on the other hand, the private life that he led during the four and a half years of war, and that which he lived before and after, was revealed with a

refreshing Gallic lack of reticence which could only proceed from his French upbringing.

To return to his letter:--

I have cut out the war. Thousands of brainy people will be spending the next few years of their lives telling you all about it. But I should rather like to treat it as a blank, a period of penal servitude, a drugged sleep afflicted with nightmare, a bit of metempsychosis in the middle of normal life--you know what I mean. The thing that is *I* is not General Lackaday. It is Somebody Else. So I have given you, for what it is worth, the story of Somebody Else. The MS. is in a beast of a muddle like the earth before the Bon Dieu came in and made His little arrangements. Do with it what you like. At the present moment I am between the Devil and the Deep Sea. I am hoping that the latter will be the solution of my difficulties. (By the way, I'm not contemplating suicide.) In either case it doesn't matter.… If you are interested in the doings of a spent meteor, I shall be delighted to write to you from time to time. As you said, you are the oldest friend I have. You are almost the only living creature who knows the real identity of Andrew Lackaday. You have been charming enough to give me not only the benefit of your experience, riper than mine, of a man of the world, but also such a very human sympathy that I shall always think of you with sentiments of affectionate esteem.

Yours sincerely,

ANDREW LACKADAY

Well. There was the letter, curiously composed; half French, half English in the turning of the phrase. The last sentence was sheer translation. But it was sincere. I need not say that

I sent a cordial reply. Our correspondence thenceforward became intimate and regular.

In his estimate of his manuscript from a literary point of view the poor General did not exaggerate. Anything more hopeless as a continuous narrative I have never read. But it supplied facts, hit off odds and ends of character, and--what the autobiography seldom does--it gave the *ipsissima verba* of conversations written in helter-skelter fashion with flowing pen, sometimes in excellent French, sometimes in English, which beginning in the elaborate style of his letter broke down into queer vernacular; it was charmingly devoid of self-consciousness, so that the man as he was, and not as he imagined himself to be or would like others to imagine him, stood ingenuously disclosed.

If the manuscript had been that of a total stranger I could not have undertaken the task of the Bon Dieu making His little arrangements to shape the earth out of chaos. An elderly literary dilettante, who is not a rabid archæologist, has an indolent way of demanding documents clear and precise. As a matter of fact, it was some months before I felt the courage to tackle the business. But knowing the man, knowing also Lady Auriol and having in the meantime made the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Elodie Figasso and Horatio Bakkus, playing, in fact, a minor rôle, say, that of Charles, his friend, in the little drama of his life, I eventually decided to carry out my good friend's wishes. The major part of my task has been a matter of arrangement, of joining up flats, as they say in the theatre, of translation, of editing, of winnowing, as far as my fallible judgment can decide, the chaff from the grain in his narrative, and of relating facts which have come within the horizon of my own personal experience.

I begin therefore at the very beginning.

Many a year ago, when the world, myself included, was young, I knew a circus. This does not mean that I knew it from the wooden benches outside the ring. I knew it behind the scenes. I was on terms of intimacy with the most motley crowd it has been my good fortune to meet. It was a famous French circus of the classical type that has by now, I fear me, passed away. Its *hautè école* was its pride, and it demanded for its *première équestrienne* the homage due to the great artists of the world. Bernhardt of the Comédie Francaise--I think she was still there in those far-off days, Patti of the Opera and Mlle. Renée Saint-Maur of the Cirque Rocambeau were three stars of equal magnitude. The circus toured through France from year's end to year's end. It pitched its tent--what else could it do, seeing that municipal ineptitude provided no building wherein could be run chariot races of six horses abreast? But the tent, in my youthful eyes, confused by the naphtha glares and the violent shadows cast on the many tiers of pink faces, loomed as vast as a Roman amphitheatre. It was a noble tent, a palace of a tent, the auditorium being but an inconsiderable section. There was stabling for fifty horses. There were decent dressing-rooms. There was a green-room, with a wooden, practicable bar running along one end, and a wizened, grizzled, old barman behind it who supplied your wants from the contents of a myriad bottles ranged in perfect order in some obscure nook beneath the counter. They did things in the great manner in the Cirque Rocambeau. It visited none but first-class towns which had open spaces worthy of its magnificence. It despised one or two night stands. The Cirque Rocambeau had a way of imposing itself upon a town as an illusory permanent institution, a week being its shortest and almost contemptuous sojourn. The Cirque Rocambeau maintained the stateliness of the old world.

Now the Cirque Rocambeau fades out of this story almost as soon as it enters it. But it affords the coincidence which enables this story to be written. For if I had not known the Cirque Rocambeau, I should never have won the confidence of Andrew Lackaday and I should have remained as ignorant, as you are, at the present moment, of the vicissitudes of that worthy man's career.

You see, we met as strangers at a country house towards the end of the war. Chance turned the conversation to France, where he had lived most of his life, to the France of former days, to my own early wanderings about that delectable land, to my boastful accounts of my two or three months' vagabondage with the Cirque Rocambeau. He jumped as if I had thrown a bomb instead of a name at him. In fact the bomb would have startled him less.

"The Cirque Rocambeau?"

"Yes."

He looked at me narrowly. "What year was that?"

I told him.

"Lord Almighty," said he, with a gasp. "Lord Almighty!" He stared for a long time in front of him without speaking. Then to my amazement he said deliberately: "I remember you! You were a sort of a young English god in a straw hat and beautiful clothes, and you used to take me for rides on the clown's pig. The clown was my foster father. And now I'm commanding a battalion in the British Army. By Gum! It's a damn funny world!"

Memory flashed back with almost a spasm of joy.

"'By Gum!'" I repeated. "Why, that was what my old friend Ben Flint used to say twenty times an hour!"

It was a shibboleth proving his story true. And I remembered the weedy, ugly, precocious infant who was the pride and spoiled darling of that circus crowd.

Why I, a young gentleman of leisure, fresh from Cambridge, chose to go round France with a circus, is neither here nor there. For one thing, I assure you it was not for the bright eyes of Mlle. Renée Saint-Maur or her lesser sister luminaries. Ben Flint, the English clown, classically styled "Auguste" in the arena, and his performing pig, Billy, somehow held the secret of my fascination. Ben Flint mystified me. He was a man of remarkable cultivation; save for a lapse here and there into North Country idiom, and for a trace now and then of North Country burr, his English was pure and refined. In ordinary life, too, he spoke excellent French, although in the ring he had to follow the classical tradition of the English clown, and pronounce his patter with a nerve-rasping Britannic accent. He never told me his history. But there he was, the principal clown, and as perfect a clown as clown could be, with every bit of his business at his fingers' ends, in a great and important circus. Like most of his colleagues, he knew the wide world from Tokio to Christiania; but, unlike the rest of the crowd, whose life seemed to be bounded by the canvas walls of the circus, and who differentiated their impressions of Singapore and Moscow mainly in terms of climate and alcohol, Ben Flint had observed men and things and had recorded and analysed his experiences, so that, meeting a more or less educated youth like myself--perhaps a rare bird in the circus world--standing on the brink of life, thirsting for the knowledge that is not supplied by lectures at the Universities, he must have felt some kind of satisfaction in pouring out, for my benefit, the full vintage of his wisdom.

I see him now, squat, clean-shaven, with merry blue eyes in a mug of a face, sitting in a deck chair, on a scrap of ragged ground forming the angle between the row of canvas stables and the great tent, a cob pipe in his humorous mouth, a thick half litre glass of beer with a handle to it on the earth beside him, and I hear his shrewd talk of far-away and mysterious lands. His pretty French wife, who knows no English, charmingly dishevelled, uncorseted, free, in a dubious *peignoir* trimmed with artificial lace--she who moulded in mirific tights, sea-green with reflections of mother-of-pearl, like Venus Anadyomene, does the tight rope act every afternoon and evening--sits a little way apart, busy with needle and thread repairing a sorry handful of garments which to-night will be tense with some portion of her shapely body. Between them sprawls on his side Billy, the great brown pig whom Ben has trained to stand on his hind legs, to jump through hoops, to die for his country.…

"They don't applaud. They don't appreciate you, Billy," the clown would say, choosing his time when applause was scant. "Show them what you think of them."

And then Billy would deliberately turn round and, moving in a semicircle, present his stern to the delighted audience.…

There lies Billy, the pig, the most human pig that ever breathed, adored by Ben Flint, who, not having given the beast one second's pain in all its beatific life, was, in his turn, loved by the pig as only a few men are loved by a dog--and there, sitting on the pig's powerful withers, his blue smock full of wilted daisies, is little eight-year-old tow-headed Andrew Lackaday making a daisy chain, which eventually he twines round the animal's semi-protesting snout.

Yes. There is the picture. It is full summer. We have lunched, Madame and Ben and Andrew and I, at the little café restaurant at the near-by straggling end of the town. At other tables, other aristocratic members of the troupe. The humbler have cooked their food in the vague precincts of the circus. We have returned to all that Ben and his wife know as home. It is one o'clock. At two, matinee. An hour of blissful ease. We are in the shade of the great tent; but the air is full of the heavy odour of the dust and the flowers and the herbs of the South, and of the pungent smell of the long row of canvas stables.

I call little Andrew. He dismounts from Billy the pig, and, insolent brat, screws an imaginary eyeglass into his eye, which he contrives to keep contorted, and assuming a supercilious expression and a languid manner, struts leisurely towards us, with his hands in his pockets, thereby giving what I am forced to admit is an imitation of myself perfect in its burlesque. Ben Flint roars with laughter. I clutch the imp and throw him across knee and pretend to spank him. We struggle lustily till Madame cries out:

"But cease, André. You are making Monsieur too hot."

And Andrew, docile, ceased at once; but standing in front of me, his back to Madame, he noiselessly mimicked Madame's speech with his lips, so drolly, so exquisitely, that Ben Flint's hearty laugh broke out again.

"Just look at the little devil! By Gum! He has a fortune in him."

I learned in the circus as much about Andrew as he knew himself. Perhaps more; for a child of eight has lost all recollection of parents who died before he was two. They were circus folk, English, trapeze artists, come, they said,

from a long tour in Australia, where Andrew was born, and their first European engagement was in the Cirque Rocambeau. Their stay was brief; their end tragic. Lackaday *Père* took to drink, which is the last thing a trapeze artist should do. Brain and hand at rehearsal one day lost co-ordination by the thousandth part of a second and Lackaday *Mère*, swinging from her feet upwards, missed the anticipated grip, and fell with a thud on the ground, breaking her spine. Whereupon Lackaday *Père* went out and hanged himself from a cross-beam in an empty stable.

Thus, at two years old, Andrew Lackaday started life on his own account. From that day, he was alone in the world. Nothing in his parents' modest luggage gave clue to kith or kin. Ben Flint who, as a fellow-countryman, went through their effects, found not even one letter addressed to them, found no sign of their contact with any human being living or dead. They called themselves professionally "The Lackadays." Whether it was their real name or not, no one in the world which narrowed itself within the limits of the Cirque Rocambeau, could possibly tell. But it was the only name that Andrew had, and as good as any other. It was part of his inheritance, the remainder being ninety-five francs in cash, some cheap trinkets, a couple of boxes of fripperies which were sold for a song, a tattered copy of Longfellow's Poems, and a brand new gilt-edged Bible, carefully covered in brown paper, with "For Fanny from Jim" inscribed on the flyleaf. From which Andrew Lackaday, as soon as his mind could grasp such things, deduced that his mother's name was Fanny, and his father's James. But Ben Flint assured me that Lackaday called his wife Myra, while she called him Alf, by which names they were familiarly known by their colleagues. So who were Fanny and Jim, if not Andrew's parents, remained a mystery.

Meanwhile there was the orphan Andrew Lackaday rich in his extreme youth and the fortune above specified, and violently asserting his right to live and enjoy. Meanwhile, too, Ben Flint and his wife had lost their pig Bob, Billy's predecessor. Bob had grown old and past his job and become afflicted with an obscure porcine disease, possibly senile decay, for which there was no remedy but merciful euthanasia. The Flints mourned him, desolate. They had not the heart to buy another. They were childless, pigless. But behold! There, to their hand was Andrew, fatherless, motherless. On an occasion, just after the funeral, for which Ben Flint paid, when Madame was mothering the tiny Andrew in her arms, and Ben stood staring, lost in yearning for the lost and beloved pig, she glanced up and said:

"*Tiens*, why should he not replace Bob, *ce petit cochon?*"

Ben Flint slapped his thigh.

"By Gum!" said he, and the thing was done. The responsibility of self dependence for life and enjoyment was removed from the shoulders of young Andrew Lackaday for many years to come.

In the course of time, when the child's *état civil*, as a resident in France, had to be declared, and this question of nationality became of great importance in after years--Madame said:

"Since we have adopted him, why not give him our name?"

But Ben, with the romanticism of Bohemia, replied:

"No. His name belongs to him. If he keeps it, he may be able to find out something about his family. He might be the heir to great possessions. One never knows. It's a clue anyway. Besides," he added, the sturdy North countryman asserting

itself, "I'm not giving my name to any man save the son of my loins. It's a name where I come from that has never been dishonoured for a couple of hundred years."

"But it is just as you like, *mon chéri*," said Madame, who was the placidest thing in France.

For thirty years I had forgotten all this; but the "By Gum!" of Colonel Lackaday wiped out the superscription over the palimpsest of memory and revealed in startling clearness all these impressions of the past.

"Of course we're fond of the kid," said Ben Flint. "He's free from vice and as clever as paint. He's a born acrobat. Might as well try to teach a duck to swim. It comes natural. Heredity of course. There's nothing he won't be able to do when I'm finished with him. Yet there are some things which lick me altogether. He's an ugly son of a gun. His father and mother, by the way, were a damn good-looking pair. But their hands were the thick spread muscular hands of the acrobat. Where the deuce did he get his long, thin delicate fingers from? Already he can pass a coin from back to front----" he flicked an illustrative conjuror's hand--"at eight years old. To teach him was as easy as falling off a log. Still, that's mechanical. What I want to know is, where did he get his power of mimicry? That artistic sense of expressing personality? 'Pon my soul, he's damn well nearly as clever as Billy."

During the talk which followed the discovery of our former meeting, I reported to Colonel Lackaday these encomiums of years ago. He smiled wistfully.

"Most of the dear old fellow's swans were geese, I'm afraid," said he. "And I was the awkwardest gosling of them all. They

tried for years to teach me the acrobat's business; but it was no good. They might just as well have spent their pains on a rheumatic young giraffe."

I looked at him and smiled. The simile was not inapposite. How, I asked myself, could the man into which he had developed, ever have become an acrobat? He was the leanest, scraggiest long thing I have ever seen. Six foot four of stringy sinew and bone, with inordinately long legs, around which his khaki slacks flapped, as though they hid stilts instead of human limbs. His arms swung long and ungainly, the sleeves of his tunic far above the bony wrist, as though his tailor in cutting the garment had repudiated as fantastic the evidence of his measurements. Yet, when one might have expected to find hands of a talon-like knottiness, to correspond with the sparse rugosity of his person, one found to one's astonishment the most delicately shaped hands in the world, with long, sensitive, nervous fingers, like those of the thousands of artists who have lived and died without being able to express themselves in any artistic medium. In a word, the fingers of the artiste manqué. I have told you what Ben Flint, shrewd observer, said about his hands, as a child of eight. They were the same hands thirty years after. To me, elderly observer of human things, they seemed, as he moved them so gracefully--the only touch of physical grace about him--to confer an air of pathos on the ungainly man, to serve as an index to a soul which otherwise could not be divined.

From this lean length of body rose a long stringy neck carrying a small head surmounted by closely cropped carotty thatch. His skin was drawn tight over the framework of his face, as though his Maker had been forced to observe the strictest economy in material. His complexion was brick red over a myriad freckles. His features preserved the irregular ugliness of the child I half remembered, but it was

redeemed by light blue candid eyes set in a tight net of humorous lines, and by a large, mobile mouth, which, though it could shut grimly on occasions, yet, when relaxed in a smile, disarmed you by its ear-to-ear kindliness, and fascinated you by the disclosure of two rows of white teeth perfectly set in the healthy pink streaks of gum. He had the air of a man physically fit, inured to hardship; the air, too, in spite of his gentleness, of a man accustomed to command. In the country house at which we met it had not occurred to me to speculate on his social standing, as human frailty determined that one should do in the case of so many splendid and gallant officers of the New Army. His manners were marked by shy simplicity and quiet reserve. It was a shock to preconceived ideas to find him bred in a circus, even in so magnificent a circus as the Cirque Rocambeau, and brought up by a clown, even by such a superior clown as Ben Flint,

"And my old friend?" I asked. For I had lost knowledge of Ben practically from the time I ended my happy vagabondage. *Maxima mea culpa*.

"He died when I was about sixteen," replied Colonel Lackaday, "and his wife a year or so later."

"And then?" I queried, eager for autobiographical revelations.

"Then," said he, "I was a grown up man, able to fend for myself."

That was all I could get out of him, without allowing natural curiosity to outrun discretion. He changed the conversation to the war, to the France about which I, a very elderly Captain--have I not confessed to early twenties thirty years before?--was travelling most uncomfortably, doing queer

odd jobs as a nominal liaison officer on the Quartermaster-General's staff. His intimacy with the country was amazing. Multiply Sam Weller's extensive and peculiar knowledge of London by a thousand, and you shall form some idea of Colonel Lackaday's acquaintance with the inns of provincial France. He could even trot out the family skeletons of the innkeepers. In this he became animated and amusing. His features assumed an actor's mobility foreign to their previous military sedateness, and he used his delicate hands in expressive gestures. In parenthesis I may say we had left the week-end party at their bridge or flirtation (according to age) in the drawing-room, neither pursuits having for us great attraction, in spite of Lady Auriol Dayne, of whom more hereafter, and we had found our way to cooling drinks and excellent cigars in our host's library. It was the first time we had exchanged more than a dozen words, for we had only arrived that Saturday afternoon. But after the amazing mutual recognition, we sat luxuriously chaired, excellent friends, and I, for my part, enjoying his society.

"Ah!" said he, "Montélimar. I know that hotel. *Infect*. And the *patron*, eh? You remember him. Forty stone. Phoo!"

The gaunt man sat up in his chair and by what mesmeric magic it happened I know not, but before my eyes grew the living image of the gross, shapeless creature who had put me to bed in wringing wet sheets.

"And when you complained, he looked like this--eh?"

He did look like that. Bleary-eyed, drooping-mouthed, vacant. I recollected that the fat miscreant had the middle of his upper lip curiously sunken into the space of two missing front teeth. The middle of Colonel Lackaday's upper lip was sucked in.

"And he said: 'What would you have, Monsieur? *C'est la guerre?*'"

The horrible fat man, hundreds of miles away from the front, with every convenience for drying sheets, had said those identical words. And in the same greasy, gasping tone.

I gaped at the mimetic miracle. It was then that the memory of the eight-year-old child's travesty of myself flashed through my mind.

"Pardon me," said I, "but haven't you turned this marvellous gift of yours to--well to practical use?"

He grinned in his honest, wide-mouthed way, showing his incomparable teeth.

"Don't you think," said he, "I'm the model of a Colonel of the Rifles?"

He grinned again at the cloud of puzzlement on my face, and rose holding out his hand.

"Time for turning in. Will you do me a favour? Don't give me away about the circus."

Somehow my esteem for him sank like thermometer mercury plunged into ice. I had thought him, with the blazing record of achievement across his chest, a man above such petty solicitude. His mild blue eyes searched my thoughts.

"I don't care a damn, Captain Hylton," said he, in a tone singularly different from any that he had used in our pleasant talk--"if anybody knows I was born in a stable. A far better man than I once had that privilege. But as it happens that I am going out to command a brigade next week, it

would be to the interest of my authority and therefore to that of the army, if no gossip led to the establishment of my identity."

"I assure you, sir----" I began stiffly--I was only a Captain, he, but for a formality or two, a Brigadier-General.

He clapped his hands on my shoulders--and I swear his ugly, smiling face was that of an angel.

"My dear fellow," said he, "so long as you regard me as an honest cuss, nothing matters in the world."

I went to bed with the conviction that he was as honest a cuss as I had ever met.

Chapter II

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Our hosts, the Verity-Stewarts, were pleasant people, old friends of mine, inhabiting a Somerset manor-house which had belonged to their family since the days of Charles the Second. They were proud of their descent; the Stewart being hyphenated to the first name by a genealogically enthusiastic Verity of a hundred years ago; but the alternative to their motto suggested by the son of the house, Captain Charles Verity-Stewart, "The King can do no wrong," found no favour in the eyes of his parents, who had lived remote from the democratic humour of the officers of the New Army.

It was to this irreverent Cavalier, convalescent at home from a machine-gun bullet through his shoulder, and hero-worshipper of his Colonel, that Andrew Lackaday owed his shy appearance at Mansfield Court. He was proud of the boy, a gallant and efficient soldier; Lady Verity-Stewart had couched her invitation in such cordial terms that a refusal would have been curmudgeonly; and the Colonel was heartily tired of spending his hard-won leave horribly alone in London.

Perhaps I may seem to be explaining that which needs no explanation. It is not so. In England Colonel Lackaday found himself in the position of many an officer from the Dominions overseas. He had barely an acquaintance. Hitherto his leave had been spent in France. But one does not take a holiday in France when the War Officer

commands attention at Whitehall. He was very glad to go to the War Office, suspecting the agreeable issue of his visit. Yet all the same he was a stranger in a strange land, living on the sawdust and warmed-up soda-water of unutterable boredom. He had spent--so he said--his happiest hours in London, at the Holborn Empire. Three evenings had he devoted to its excellent but not soul-enthralling entertainment.

"In the name of goodness, why?" I asked puzzled.

"There was a troupe of Japanese acrobats," said he. "In the course of a roving life one picks up picturesque acquaintances. Hosimura, the head of them, is a capital fellow."

This he told me later, for our friendship, begun when he was eight years old, had leaped into sudden renewal; but without any idea of exciting my commiseration. Yet it made me think.

That a prospective Brigadier-General should find his sole relief from solitude in the fugitive companionship of a Japanese acrobat seemed to me pathetic.

Meanwhile there he was at Mansfield Court, lean and unlovely, but, as I divined, lovable in his unaffected simplicity, the very model of a British field-officer. At dinner on Saturday evening, he had sat between his hostess and Lady Auriol Dayne. To the former he had talked of the things she most loved to hear, the manifold virtues of her son. There were fallings away from the strict standards of military excellence, of course; but he touched upon them with his wide, charming smile, condoned them with the indulgence of the man prematurely mellowed who has kept his hold on youth, so that Lady Verity-Stewart felt herself in

full sympathy with Charles's chief, and bored the good man considerably with accounts of the boy's earlier escapades. To Lady Auriol he talked mainly about the war, of which she appeared to have more complete information than he himself.

"I suppose you think," she said at last with a swift side glance, "that I'm laying down the law about things I'm quite ignorant of."

He said: "Not at all. You're in a position to judge much better than I. You people outside the wood can see it, in its entirety. We who are in the middle of the horrid thing can't see it for the trees."

It was this little speech so simple, so courteous and yet not lacking a touch of irony, that first made Lady Auriol, in the words which she used when telling me of it afterwards, sit up and take notice.

Bridge, the monomania which tainted Sir Julius Verity-Stewart's courtly soul, pinned Lady Auriol down to the green-covered table for the rest of the evening. But the next day she set herself to satisfy her entirely unreprehensible curiosity concerning Colonel Lackaday.

Lady Auriol, born with even more curiosities than are the ordinary birthright of a daughter of Eve, had spent most of her life in trying to satisfy them. In most cases she had been successful. Here be it said that Lady Auriol was twenty-eight, unmarried, and almost beautiful when she took the trouble to do her hair and array herself in becoming costume. As to maiden's greatest and shyest curiosity, well--as a child of her epoch--she knew so much about the theory of it that it ceased to be a curiosity at all. Besides, love--she had preserved a girl's faith in beauty--was a psychological

mystery not to be solved by the cold empirical methods which could be employed in the solution of other problems. I must ask you to bear this in mind when judging Lady Auriol. She had once fancied herself in love with an Italian poet, an Antinous-like young man of impeccable manners, boasting an authentic pedigree which lost itself in the wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus. None of your vagabond ballad-mongers. A guest when she first met him of the Italian Ambassador. To him, Prince Charming, knight and troubadour, she surrendered. He told her many wonders of fairy things. He led her into lands where woman's soul is free and dances on buttercups. He made exquisite verses to her auburn hair. But when she learned that these same verses were composed in a flat in Milan which he shared with a naughty little opera singer of no account, she dismissed Prince Charming offhand, and betook herself alone to the middle of Abyssinia to satisfy her curiosity as to the existence there of dulcimer-playing maidens singing of Mount Abora to whom Coleridge in his poem assigns such haunting attributes.

Lady Auriol, in fact, was a great traveller. She had not only gone all over the world--anybody can do that--but she had gone all through the world. Alone, she had taken her fate in her hands. In comparison with other geographical exploits, her journey through Abyssinia was but a trip to Margate. She had wandered about Turkestan. She had crossed China. She had fooled about Saghalien.… In her schooldays, hearing of the Sanjak of Novi Bazar, she had imagined the Sanjak to be a funny little man in a red cap. Riper knowledge, after its dull exasperating way, had brought disillusion; but like Mount Abora the name haunted her until she explored it for herself. When she came back, she knew the Sanjak of Novi Bazar like her pocket.

Needless to say that Lady Auriol had thrown all her curiosities, her illusions--they were hydra-headed--her enthusiasms and her splendid vitality into the war. She had organized and directed as Commandant a great hospital in the region of Boulogne. "I'm a woman of business," she told Lackaday and myself, "not a ministering angel with open-worked stockings and a Red Cross of rubies dangling in front of me. Most of the day I sit in a beastly office and work at potatoes and beef and army-forms. I can't nurse, though I daresay I could if I tried; but I hate amateurs. No amateurs in my show, I assure you. For my job I flatter myself I'm trained. A woman can't knock about the waste spaces of the earth by herself, head a rabble of pack-carrying savages, without gaining some experience in organization. In fact, when I'm not at my own hospital, which now runs on wheels, I'm employed as a sort of organizing expert--any old where they choose to send me. Do you think I'm talking swollen-headedly, Colonel Lackaday?"

She turned suddenly round on him, with a defiant flash of her brown eyes, which was one of her characteristics---the woman, for all her capable modernity, instinctively on the defensive.

"It's only a fool who apologizes for doing a thing well," said Lackaday.

"He couldn't do it well if he was a fool," Lady Auriol retorted.

"You never know what a fool can do till you try him," said Lackaday.

It was a summer morning. Nearly all the house-party had gone to church. Lady Auriol, Colonel Lackaday and I, smitten with pagan revolt, lounged on the shady lawn in front of the red-brick, gabled manor house. The air was full of the scent

of roses from border beds and of the song of thrushes and the busy chitter-chatter of starlings in the old walnut trees of the further garden. It was the restful England which the exiled and the war-weary used so often to conjure up in their dreams.

"You mean a fool can be egged on to do great things and still remain a fool?" asked Lady Auriol lazily.

Lackaday smiled--or grinned--it is all the same--a weaver of fairy nothings could write a delicious thesis on the question; is Lackaday's smile a grin or is his grin a smile? Anyhow, whatever may be the definition of the special ear-to-ear white-teeth-revealing contortion of his visage, it had in it something wistful, irresistible. You will find it in the face of a tickled baby six months old. He touched his row of ribbons.

"*Voilà*," said he.

"It's polite to say I don't believe it," she said, regarding him beneath her long lashes. "But, supposing it true for the sake of argument, I should very much like to know what kind of a fool you are."

Lying back in her long cane chair, an incarnation of the summer morning, fresh as the air in her white blouse and skirt, daintily white hosed and shod, her auburn hair faultlessly dressed sweeping from the side parting in two waves, one bold from right to left, the other with coquettish grace, from left to right, the swiftness of her face calmed into lazy contours, the magnificent full physique of her body relaxed as she lay with her silken ankles crossed on the nether chair support, her hands fingering a long necklace of jade, she appealed to me as the most marvellous example I had ever come across of the woman's power of self-transmogrification.

The last time I had seen her was in France, wet through in old short-skirted kit, with badly rolled muddy puttees, muddier heavy boots, a beast of a dripping hat pinned through rain-sodden strands of hair, streaks of mud over her face, ploughing through mud to a British Field Ambulance, yet erect, hawk-eyed, with the air of a General of Division. There sex was wiped out. During our chance meeting, one of the many queer chance meetings of the war, a meeting which lasted five minutes while I accompanied her to her destination, we spoke as man to man. She took a swig out of my brandy flask. She asked me for a cigarette--smoked out, she said. I was in nearly the same predicament, having only, at the moment, for all tobacco, the pipe I was then smoking. "For God's sake, like a good chap, give me a puff or two," she pleaded. And so we walked on through the rain and mud, she pipe in mouth, her shoulders hunched, her hands, under the scornfully hitched up skirt, deep in her breeches pockets. And now, this summer morning, there she lay, all woman, insidiously, devilishly alluring woman, almost voluptuous in her self-confident abandonment to the fundamental conception of feminine existence.

Lackaday's eyes rested on her admiringly. He did not reply to her remark, until she added in a bantering tone:

"Tell me."

Then he said, with an air of significance: "The most genuine brand you can imagine, I assure you."

"A motley fool," she suggested idly.

At that moment, Evadne, the thirteen-year-old daughter of the house, who, as she told me soon afterwards, in the idiom of her generation, had given the divine-services a miss, carried me off to see a litter of Sealyham puppies.

That inspection over, we reviewed rabbits and fetched a compass round about the pigsties and crossed the orchard to the chicken's parade, and passed on to her own allotment in the kitchen garden, where a few moth-eaten cabbages and a wilting tomato in a planted pot seemed to hang degraded heads at our approach, and, lingering through the rose garden, we eventually emerged on the further side of the lawn.

"I suppose you want to go and join them," she said with a jerk of her bobbed head in the direction of Lady Auriol and Colonel Lackaday.

"Perhaps we ought," said I.

"They don't want us--you can bet your boots," said she.

"How do you know that, young woman of wisdom?"

She sniffed. "Look at 'em."

I looked at 'em; mole-visioned masculine fifty seeing through the eyes of feminine thirteen; and, seeing very distinctly indeed, I said:

"What would you like to do?"

"If you wouldn't mind very much," she replied eagerly, her interest in, or her scorn of, elderly romance instantly vanishing, "let us go back to the peaches. That's the beauty of Sundays. That silly old ass Jenkins"--Jenkins was the head gardener--"is giving his family a treat, instead of coming down on me. See?"

Evadne linked her arm in mine. Again I saw. She had already eaten two peaches. Who was I to stand in the way of her eating a third or a fourth or a fifth? With the after

consequences of her crime against Jenkins, physical and otherwise, I had nothing to do. It was the affair of her parents, her doctor, her Creator. But the sight of the rapturous enjoyment on her face when her white teeth bit into the velvet bloom of the fruit sped one back to one's own youth and procured a delight not the less intense because it was vicarious.

"Come along," said I.

"You're a perfect lamb," said she.

Before the perfect lamb was led to the peach slaughter, he looked again across the lawn. Colonel Lackaday had moved his chair very close to Lady Auriol's wicker lounge, so that facing her, his head was but a couple of feet from hers. They talked not so much animatedly as intimately. Lackaday's face I could not see, his back being turned to me; I saw Lady Auriol's eyes wide, full of earnest interest, and compassionate admiration. I had no idea that her eyes could melt to such softness. It was a revelation. No woman ever looked at a man like that, unless she was an accomplished syren, without some soul-betrayal. I am a *vieux routier*, an old campaigner in this world of men and women. Time was when--but that has nothing to do with this story. At any rate I think I ought to know something about women's eyes.

"Did you ever see anything so idiotic?" asked Evadne, dragging me round.

"I think I did once," said I.

"When was that?"

"Ah!" said I.

"Do tell me, Uncle Tony."

I, who have seen things far more idiotic a thousand times, racked my brain for an answer that would satisfy the child.

"Well, my dear," I began, "your father and mother, when they were engaged----"

She burst out: "But they were young. It isn't the same thing. Aunt Auriol's as old as anything. And Colonel Lackaday's about sixty."

"My dear Evadne," said I. "I happen to know that Colonel Lackaday is thirty-eight."

Thirteen shrugged its slim shoulders. "It's all the same," it said.

We went to the net-covered wall of ripe and beauteous temptation, trampling over Jenkins's beds of I know not what, and ate forbidden fruit. At least Evadne did, until, son of Adam, I fell.

"Do have a bite. It's lovely. And I've left you the blushy side."

What could I do? There she stood, fair, slim, bobbed-haired, green-kirtled, serious-eyed, carelessly juicy-lipped, holding up the peach. I, to whom all wall-fruit is death, bit into the side that blushed. She anxiously watched my expression.

"Topping, isn't it?"

"Yum, yum," said I.

"Isn't it?" she said, taking back the peach.

That's the beauty of childhood. It demands no elaborate expression. Simplicity is its only coinage. A rhapsody on the