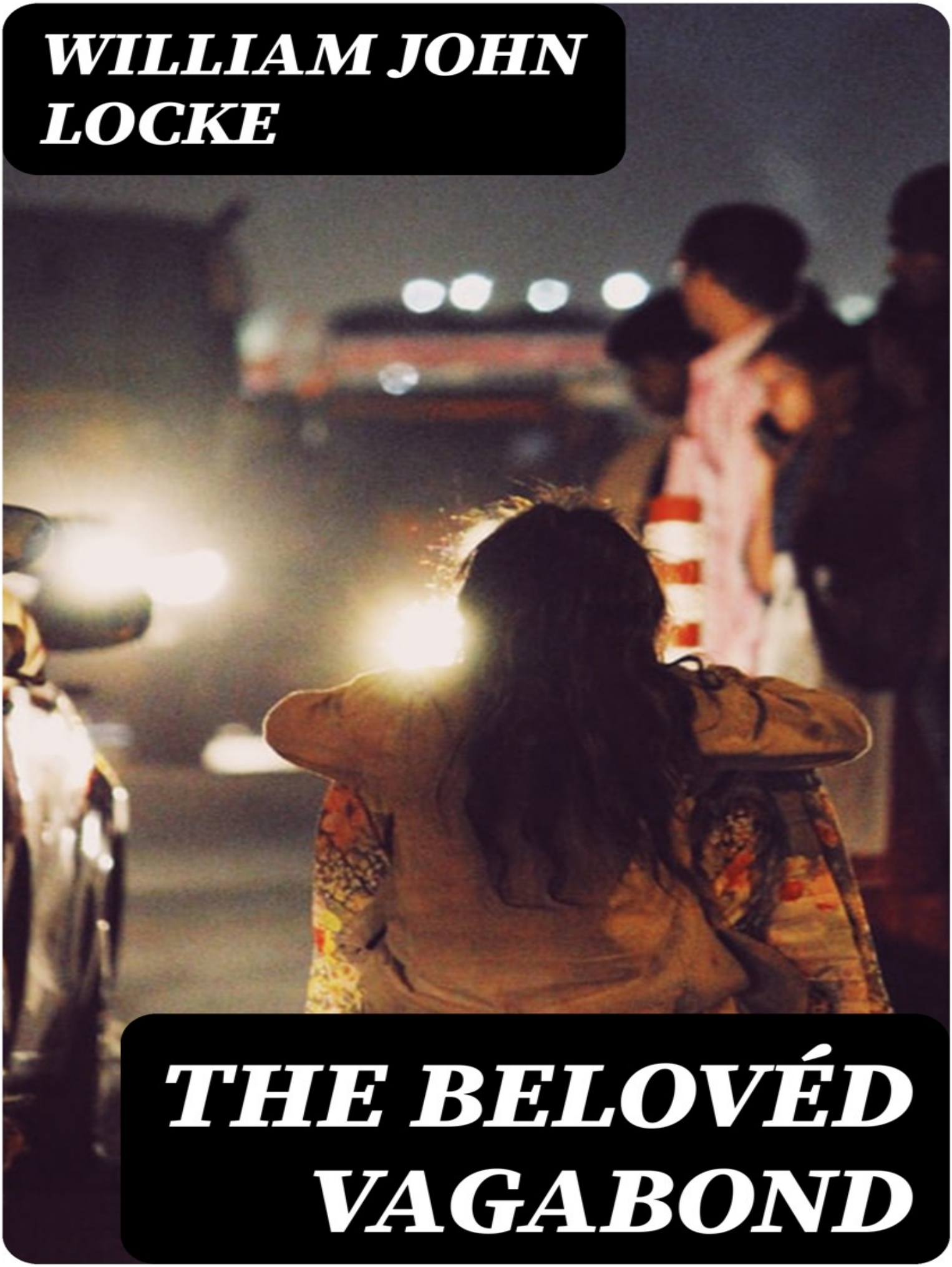
WILLIAM JOHN LOCKE
THE BELOVÉD VAGABOND

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CHAPTER I

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THIS is not a story about myself. Like Canning's organ-grinder I have none to tell. It is the story of Paragot, the belovéd vagabond—please pronounce his name French-fashion—and if I obtrude myself on your notice it is because I was so much involved in the medley of farce and tragedy which made up some years of his life, that I don't know how to tell the story otherwise. To Paragot I owe everything. He is at once my benefactor, my venerated master, my beloved friend, my creator. Clay in his hands, he moulded me according to his caprice, and inspired me with the breath of life. My existence is drenched with the colour of Paragot. I lay claim to no personality of my own, and any *obiter dicta* that may fall from my pen in the course of the ensuing narrative are but reflections of Paragot's philosophy. Men have spoken evil of him. He snapped his fingers at calumny, but I winced, never having reached the calm altitudes of scorn wherein his soul has its habitation. I burned to defend him, and I burn now; and that is why I propose to write his *apologia*, his justification.

Why he singled me out for adoption from among the unwashed urchins of London I never could conjecture. Once I asked him.

"Because," said he, "you were ugly, dirty, ricketty, under-sized, underfed and wholly uninteresting. Also because your mother was the very worst washer-woman that ever breathed gin into a shirt-front."

I did not resent these charges, direct and implied, against my mother. She did launder villainously, and she did drink gin, and of the nine uncared-for gutter-snipes she brought into the world, I think I was the most unkempt and neglected. I know that Sunday-school books tell you to love your mother; but if the only maternal caresses you could remember were administered by means of a wet pair of woollen drawers or the edge of a hot flat-iron, you would find filial piety a virtue somewhat abstract. Verily do earwigs care more for their progeny than did my mother. She sold me body and soul to Paragot for half-a-crown.

It fell out thus.

One morning, laden with his—technically speaking—clean linen, I knocked at the door of Paragot's chambers. He called them chambers, for he was nothing if not grandiloquent, but really they consisted in an attic in Tavistock Street, Covent Garden, above the curious club over which he presided. I knocked, then, at the door. A sonorous voice bade me enter. Paragot lay in bed, smoking a huge pipe with a porcelain bowl and reading a book. The fact of one individual having a room all to himself impressed me so greatly with a sense of luxury, refinement and power, that I neglected to observe its pitifulness and squalor. Nor of Paragot's personal appearance was I critical. He had long black hair, and a long black beard, and long black finger-nails. The last were so long and commanding that I thought ashamedly of my own bitten fingertips, and vowed that when I too became a great man, able to smoke a porcelain pipe of mornings in my own room, my nails should equal his in splendour.

"I have brought the washing, Sir," I announced, "and, please, Sir, mother says I'm not to let you have it unless you settle up for the last three weeks."

I had a transient vision of swarthy, hairy legs, as Paragot leaped out of bed. He stood over me, man of all the luxuries that he was, in his nightshirt. Fancy having a shirt for the day and a shirt for the night!

"Do you mean that you will dispute possession of it with me, *vi et armis?*"

"Yes, Sir," said I, confused.

He laughed, clapped me on the shoulder, called me David, Jack the Giant-Killer, and bade me deliver the washing-book. I fumbled in the pocket of my torn jacket and handed him a greasy, dog's-eared mass of paper. As soon as his eyes fell on it, I realised my mistake, and produced the washing book from the other pocket.

"I've given you the wrong one, Sir," said I, reaching for the treasure I had surrendered.

But he threw himself on his bed and dived his legs beneath the clothes.

"Wonderful!" he cried. "He is four foot nothing, he looks like a yard of pack-thread, he would fight me for an ill-washed shirt and a pair of holes with bits of sock round them, and he reads 'Paradise Lost'!"

He made a gesture of throwing the disreputable epic at my head, and I curved my arm in an attitude only too familiarly defensive.

"I found it in a bundle of washing, Sir," I cried apologetically.

At home reading was the unforgivable sin. Had my mother discovered me poring over the half intelligible but wholly fascinating story of Adam and Eve and the Devil, she would have beaten me with the first implement to her hand. I had a moment's terror lest the possession of a work of literature should be so horrible a crime that even Paragot would chastise me.

To my consternation he thrust the tattered thing—it was an antiquated sixpenny edition—under my nose and commanded me to read.

"'Of Man's first disobedience'—Go on. If you can read it intelligently I'll pay your mother. If you can't I'll write to her politely to say that I resent having my washing sent home by persons of no education."

I began in great fear, but having, I suppose, an instinctive appreciation of letters, I mouthed the rolling lines not too brokenly.

"What's a Heavenly Muse?" asked Paragot, as soon as I paused. I had not the faintest idea.

"Do you think it's a Paradisiacal back yard where they keep the Horse of the Apocalypse?"

I caught a twinkle in the blue eyes which he bent fiercely upon me.

"If you please, Sir," said I, "I think it is the Bird of Paradise."

Then we both laughed; and Paragot bidding me sit on the wreck of a cane-bottomed chair, gave me my first lesson in Greek Mythology. He talked for nearly an hour, and I, ragged urchin of the London streets, my wits sharpened by hunger and ill-usage, sat spell-bound on my comfortless perch,

while he unfolded the tale of Gods and Goddesses, and unveiled Olympus before my enraptured vision.

"Boy," said he suddenly, "can you cook a herring?"

I came down to earth with a bang. Stunned I stared at him. I distinctly remember wondering where I was.

"Can you cook a herring?" he shouted.

"Yes, Sir," I cried, jumping to my feet.

"Then cook two—one for you and one for me. You'll find them somewhere about the room, also tea and bread and butter and a gas-stove, and when all is ready let me know."

He settled himself comfortably in bed and went on reading his book. It was Hegel's Philosophy of History. I tried to read it afterwards and found that it passed my understanding.

In a confused dream of gods and herrings, I set about my task. Heaven only knows how I managed to succeed. In my childish imagination Jupiter was clothed in the hirsute majesty of Paragot.

And I was to breakfast with him!

The herrings and a half-smoked pipe shared a plate on the top of the ricketty chest of drawers. I had to blow the ash off the fish. A paper of tea and a loaf of bread I found in a higgledy-piggledy mixture of clothes, books and papers. My godlike friend had carelessly put his hair-brush into the butter. The condition of the sole cooking utensil warred even against my sense of the fitness of gridirons, and I cleansed it with his towel.

Since then I have breakfasted in the houses of the wealthy, I have lunched at the Café Anglais, I have dined at the Savoy but never have I eaten, never till they give me a

welcoming banquet in the Elysian fields, shall I eat so ambrosial a meal as that first herring with Paragot.

When I had set it on the little deal table, he deigned to remember my existence, and closing his book, rose, donned a pair of trousers and sat down. He gave me my first lesson in table-manners.

"Boy," said he, "if you wish to adorn the high social spheres for which you are destined, you must learn the value of convention. Bread and cheese-straws and asparagus and the leaves of an artichoke are eaten with the fingers; but not herrings or sweetbreads or ice cream. As regards the last you are doubtless in the habit of extracting it from a disappointing wine-glass with your tongue. This in *notre monde* is regarded as bad form. '*Notre Monde*' is French, a language which you will have to learn. Its great use is in talking to English people when you don't want them to understand what you say. They pretend they do, for they are too vain to admit their ignorance. The wise man profits by the vanity of his fellow-creatures. If I were not wise after this manner, should I be here eating herrings in Tavistock Street, Covent Garden?"

I was too full of food and adoration to reply. I gazed at him dumbly worshipping and choked over a cup of tea. When I recovered he questioned me as to my home life, my schooling, my ideas of a future state and my notions of a career in this world. The height of my then ambition was to keep a fried-fish shop. The restaurateur with whom my good mother dealt used to sit for hours in his doorway in Drury Lane reading a book, and I considered this a most dignified and scholarly avocation. When I made this naïve avowal to

Paragot, he looked at me with a queer pity in his eyes, and muttered an exclamation in a foreign tongue. I have never met anyone so full of strange oaths as Paragot. As to my religious convictions, they were chiefly limited to a terrifying conception of the hell to which my mother daily consigned me. In devils, fires, chains and pitchforks its establishment was as complete as any *inferno* depicted by Orcagna. I used to wake up of nights in a cold sweat through dreaming of it.

"My son," said Paragot, "the most eminent divines of the Church of England will tell you that a material hell with consuming flames is an exploded fallacy. I can tell you the same without being an eminent divine. The wicked carry their own hell about with them during life—here, somewhere between the gullet and the pit of the stomach, and it prevents their enjoyment of herrings which smell vilely of gas."

"There ain't no devils, then?" I asked.

"*Sacré mille diables*, No!" he shouted. "Haven't I been exhausting myself with telling you so?"

I said little, but to this day I remember the thrilling sense of deliverance from a horror which had gone far to crush the little childish joy allowed me by circumstance. There was no fiery hell, no red-hot pincers, no eternal frizzling and sizzling of the flesh, like unto that of the fish in Mr. Samuel's fish-shop. Paragot had transformed me by a word into a happy young pagan. My eyes swam as I swallowed my last bit of bread and butter.

"What is your name?" asked Paragot.

"Augustus, Sir."

"Augustus, what?"

"Smith," I murmured. "Same as mother's."

"I was forgetting," said he. "Now if there is one name I dislike more than Smith it is Augustus. I have been thinking of a very nice name for you. It is Asticot. It expresses you better than Augustus Smith."

"It is a very good name, Sir," said I politely.

I learned soon after that it is a French word meaning the little grey worms which fishermen call "gentles," and that it was not such a complimentary appellation as I had imagined; but Asticot I became, and Asticot I remained for many a year.

"Wash up the things, my little Asticot," said he, "and afterwards we will discuss future arrangements."

According to his directions I took the tray down to a kind of scullery on the floor below. The wet plates and cups I dried on a greasy rag which I found lying on the sink; and this seemed to me a refinement of luxurious living; for at home, when we did wash plates, we merely held them under the tap till the remains of food ran off, and we never thought of drying them. When I returned to the bedroom Paragot was dressed for the day. His long lean wrists and hands protruded far through the sleeves of an old brown jacket. He wore a grey flannel shirt and an old bit of black ribbon done up in a bow by way of a tie; his slouch hat, once black, was now green with age, and his boots were innocent of blacking. But my eyes were dazzled by a heavy gold watch chain across his waistcoat and I thought him the most glorious of betailored beings.

"My little Asticot," said he, "would you like to forsake your gentle mother's wash-tub and your dreams of a fried-

fish shop and enter my service? I, the heir of all the ages, am driven by Destiny to running The Lotus Club downstairs. We call it 'Lotus' because we eat tripe to banish memory. The members meet together in order to eat tripe, drink beer and hear me talk. You can eat tripe and hear me talk too, and that will improve both your mind and your body. While Cherubino, the waiter, teaches you how to be a scullion, I will instruct you in philosophy. The sofa in the Club will make an excellent bed for you, and your wages will be eighteen pence a week."

He thrust his hands in his trouser pockets, and rattling his money looked at me with an enquiring air. I returned his gaze for a while, lost in a delirious wonder. I tried to speak. Something stuck in my throat. I broke into a blubber and dried my eyes with my knuckles.

It was an intoxicated little Asticot that trotted by his side to my mother's residence. There over gin-and-water the bargain was struck. My mother pocketed half-a-crown and with shaky unaccustomed fingers signed her name across a penny-stamp at the foot of a document which Paragot had drawn up. I believe each of them was convinced that they had executed a legal deed. My mother after inspecting me critically for a moment wiped my nose with the piece of sacking that served as her apron and handed me over to Paragot, who marched away with his purchase as proud as if I had been a piece of second-hand furniture picked up cheap.

I may as well remark here that Paragot was not his real name; neither was Josiah Henkendyke by which he was then known to me. He had a harmless mania for names, and I

have known him use half a dozen. But that of Paragot which he assumed later as his final alias is the one with which he is most associated in my mind, and to avoid confusion I must call him that from the start. Indeed, looking backward down the years, I wonder how he could ever have been anything else than Paragot. That Phœbus Apollo could once have borne the name of John Jones is unimaginable.

"Boy," said he, as we retraced our steps to Tavistock Street, "you are my thing, my chattel, my *famulus*. No slave of old belonged more completely to a free-born citizen. You will address me as 'master'!"

"Yes, Sir," said I.

"Master!" he shouted. "*Master* or *maître* or *maestro* or *magister* according to the language you are speaking. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," said I.

He nodded approval. At the corner of a by-street he stopped short and held me at arm's length.

"You are a horrible object, my little Asticot," said he. "I must clothe you in a manner befitting the Lotus Club."

He ran me into a slop-dealer's and fitted me out in sundry garments in which, although they were several sizes too large for me, I felt myself clad like Solomon in all his glory. Then we went home. On the way up to his room he paused at the scullery. A dishevelled woman was tidying up.

"Mrs. Housekeeper," said he, "allow me to present you our new scullion pupil. Kindly instruct him in his duties, feed him and wash his head. Also please remember that he answers to the name of Asticot."

He swung on his heel and went downstairs humming a tune. I remained with Mrs. Housekeeper who carried out his instructions zealously. I can feel the soreness on my scalp to this day.

Thus it fell out that I quitted the maternal roof and entered the service of Paragot. I never saw my mother again, as she died soon afterwards; and as my brood of brothers and sisters vanished down the diverse gutters of London, I found myself with Paragot for all my family; and now that I have arrived at an age when a man can look back dispassionately on his past, it is my pride that I can lay my hand on my heart and avow him to be the best family that boy ever had.

CHAPTER II

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The Lotus Club was the oddest society I have met. The premises consisted of one long dingy room with two dingy windows: the furniture of a long table covered with dirty American cloth, a multitude of wooden chairs, an old sofa, two dilapidated dinner-waggons, and a frame against the wall from which, by means of clips, churchwarden pipes depended stem downwards; and by each clip was a label bearing a name. On the table stood an enormous jar of tobacco. A number of ill-washed glasses decorated the dinner-waggons. There was not a curtain, not a blind, not a picture. The further end of the room away from the door contained a huge fireplace, and on the wooden mantelpiece ticked a three-and-sixpenny clock.

During the daytime it was an abode of abominable desolation. No one came near it until nine o'clock in the evening, when one or two members straggled in, took down their long pipes and called for whisky or beer, the only alcoholic beverages the club provided. These were kept in great barrels in the scullery, presided over by Mrs. Housekeeper until it was time to prepare the supper, when Cherubino and I helped ourselves. At eleven the cloth was laid. From then till half past members came in considerable numbers. At half past supper was served. A steaming dish of tripe furnished the head of the table in front of Paragot, and a cut of cold beef the foot.

There were generally from fifteen to thirty present; men of all classes: Journalists, actors, lawyers, out-at-elbows

nondescripts. I have seen one of Her Majesty's Judges and a prizefighter exchanging views across the table. A few attended regularly; but the majority seemed to be always new-comers. They supped, talked, smoked, and drank whisky until two or three o'clock in the morning and appeared to enjoy themselves prodigiously. I noticed that on departing they wrung Paragot fervently by the hand and thanked him for their delightful evening. I remembered his telling me that they came to hear him talk. He did talk: sometimes so compellingly that I would stand stock-still rapt in reverential ecstasy: once to the point of letting the potatoes I was handing round roll off the dish on to the floor. I never was so rapt again; for Cherubino picking up the potatoes and following my frightened exit, broke them over my head on the landing, by way of chastisement. The best barbers do not use hot mealy potatoes for the hair.

When the last guest had departed, Paragot mounted to his attic, Mrs. Housekeeper and Cherubino went their several ways—each went several ways, I think, for they had unchecked command during the evening over the whisky and beer barrels—and I, dragging a bundle of bedclothes from beneath the sofa, went to bed amid the fumes of tripe, gas, tobacco, alcohol and humanity, and slept the sleep of perfect happiness.

In the morning, at about eleven, I rose and prepared breakfast for Paragot and myself, which we ate together in his room. For a couple of hours he instructed me in what he was pleased to call the humanities. Then he sent me out into the street for air and exercise, with instructions to walk to Hyde Park, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral,

Whiteley's—he always had a fresh objective for me—and to bring him back my views thereon and an account of what I had noticed on the way. When I came home I delivered myself into the hands of Mrs. Housekeeper and turned scullion again. The plates, glasses, knives and forks of the previous evening's orgy were washed and cleaned, the room swept and aired, and a meal cooked for Mrs. Housekeeper and myself which we ate at a corner of the long table. Paragot himself dined out.

On Sunday evenings the Club was shut, and as Mrs. Housekeeper did not make her appearance on the Sabbath, the remains of Saturday night's supper stayed on the table till Monday afternoon. Imagine remains of tripe thirty six hours old!

I mention this, not because it is of any great interest, but because it exhibits a certain side of Paragot's character. In those early days I was not critical. I lived in a maze of delight. Paragot was the Wonder of the Earth, my bedroom a palace chamber, and the abominable Sunday night smell pervaded my senses like the perfumes of all the Arabies.

"My son," said Paragot one morning, in the middle of a French lesson—from the first he was bent on my learning the language—"My son, I wonder whether you are going to turn out a young Caliban, and after I have shewn you the True Divinity of Things, return to your dam's god Setebos?"

He regarded me earnestly with his light blue eyes which looked so odd in his swarthy black-bearded face.

"Is there any hope for the race of Sycorax?"

As we had read "The Tempest" the day before, I understood the allusions.

"I would sooner be Ariel, Master," said I, by way of showing off my learning.

"He was an ungrateful beggar too," said Paragot. He went on talking, but I heard him not; for my childish mind quickly associated him with Prospero, and I wondered where lay his magic staff with which he could split pines and liberate tricksy spirits, and whether he had a beautiful daughter hidden in some bower of Tavistock Street, and whether the cadaverous Cherubino might not be a metamorphosed Ferdinand. He appeared the embodiment of all wisdom and power, and yet he had the air of one cheated of his kingdom. He seemed also to be of reverential age. As a matter of fact he was not yet forty.

My attention was recalled by his rising and walking about the room.

"I am making this experiment on your vile body, my little Asticot," said he, "to prove my Theory of Education. You have had, so far as it goes, what is called an excellent Board School Training. You can read and write and multiply sixty-four by thirty-seven in your head, and you can repeat the Kings of England. If you had been fortunate and gone to a Public school they would have stuffed your brain full of Greek verbs and damned facts about triangles. But of the meaning of life, the value of life, the art of life, you would never have had a glimmering perception. I am going to educate you, my little Asticot, through the imagination. The intellect can look after itself. We will go now to the National Gallery."

He caught up his hat and threw me my cap, and we went out. He had a sudden, breathless way of doing things. I am

sure thirty seconds had not elapsed between the idea of the National Gallery entering his head and our finding ourselves on the stairs.

We went to the National Gallery. I came away with a reeling undistinguishable mass of form and colour before my eyes. I felt sick. Only one single picture stood out clear. Paragot talked Italian art to my uncomprehending ears all the way home.

"Now," said he, when he had settled himself comfortably in his old wicker-work chair again, "which of the pictures did you like best?"

Why that particular picture (save that it is the supreme art of a supreme genius) should have alone fixed itself on my mind, I do not know. It has been one of the psychological puzzles of my life.

"A man's head, master," said I; "I can't describe it, but I think I could draw it."

"Draw it?" he echoed incredulously.

"Yes, Master."

He pulled a stump of pencil from his pocket and threw it to me. I felt luminously certain I could draw the head. A curious exaltation filled me as I sat at a corner of the table before a flattened-out piece of paper that had wrapped up tea. Paragot stood over me, as I drew.

"*Nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu!*" cried he. "It is Gian Bellini's Doge Loredano. But what made you remember that picture, and how in the name of Board schools could you manage to draw it?"

He walked swiftly up and down the room.

"*Nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu!*"

"I used to draw horses and men on my slate at school," said I modestly.

Paragot filled his porcelain pipe and walked about strangely excited. Suddenly he stopped.

"My little Asticot," said he, "you had better go down and help Mrs. Housekeeper to wash up the dirty plates and dishes, for your soul's sake."

What my soul had to do with greasy crockery I could not in the least fathom; but the next morning Paragot gave me a drawing lesson. It would be false modesty for me to say that I did not show talent, since the making of pictures is the means whereby I earn my living at the present moment. The gift once discovered, I exercised it in and out of season.

"My son," said Paragot, when I showed him a sketch of Mrs. Housekeeper as she lay on the scullery floor one Saturday night, unable to go any one of her several ways, "I am afraid you are an artist. Do you know what an artist is?"

I didn't. He pronounced the word in tones of such deep melancholy that I felt it must denote something particularly depraved.

"It is the man who has the power of doing up his soul in whitey-brown paper parcels and selling them at three halfpence apiece."

This was at breakfast one morning while he was chipping an egg. Only two eggs furnished forth our repast, and I was already deep in mine. He scooped off the top of the shell, regarded it for a second and then rose with the egg and went to the window.

"Since you have wings you had better fly," said he, and he threw it into the street.

"My little Asticot," he added, resuming his seat. "I myself was once an artist: now I am a philosopher: it is much better."

He cheerfully attacked his bread and butter. Whether it was a sense of his goodness or my own greediness that prompted me I know not, but I pushed my half eaten egg across to him and begged him to finish it. He looked queerly at me for a moment.

"I accept it," said he, "in the spirit in which it is offered."

The great man solemnly ate my egg, and pride so filled my heart that I could scarcely swallow. A smaller man than Paragot would have refused.

From what I gathered from conversations overheard whilst I was serving members with tripe and alcohol, it appeared that my revered master was a mysterious personage. About eight months before, he had entered the then unprosperous Club for the first time as a guest of the founder and proprietor, an old actor who was growing infirm. He talked vehemently. The next night he took the presidential chair which he since occupied, to the Club's greater glory. But whence he came, who and what he was, no one seemed to know. One fat man whose air of portentous wisdom (and insatiable appetite) caused me much annoyance, proclaimed him a Russian Nihilist and asked me whether there were any bombs in his bedroom. Another man declared that he had seen him leading a bear in the streets of Warsaw. His manner offended me.

"Have you ever been to Warsaw, Mr. Ulysses?" asked the fat man. Mr. Ulysses was the traditional title of the head of the Lotus Club.

"This gentleman says he saw you leading a bear there, Master," I piped, wrathfully, in my shrill treble.

There was the sudden silence of consternation. All, some five and twenty, laid down their knives and forks and looked at Paragot, who rose from his seat. Throwing out his right hand he declaimed:

> "Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
> πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν·
> πολλῶν δ᾽ ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω.

"Does anyone know what that is?"

A young fellow at the end of the table said it was the opening lines of the Odyssey.

"You are right, sir," said Paragot, threading his fingers through his long black hair. "They tell of my predecessor in office, the first President of this Club, who was a man of many wanderings and many sufferings and had seen many cities and knew the hearts of men. I, gentlemen, have had my Odyssey, and I have been to Warsaw, and," with a rapier flash of a glance at the gentleman who had accused him of leading bears, "I know the miserable hearts of men." He rapped on the table with his hammer. "Asticot, come here," he shouted.

I obeyed trembling.

"If ever you lift up your voice again in this assembly, I will have you boiled and served up with onion sauce, second-hand tripe that you are, and you shall be eaten underdone. Now go."

I felt shrivelled to the size of a pea. Beneath Paragot's grotesqueness ran an unprecedented severity. I was

conscious of the accusing glare of every eye. In my blind bolt to the door I had the good fortune to run headlong into a tray of drinks which Cherubino was carrying.

The disaster saved the situation. Laughter rang out loud and the talk became general. The interlude was forgotten; but the man who said he had seen my master leading bears in Warsaw vanished from the Club for ever after.

The next morning when I entered Paragot's room to wake him I found him reading in bed. He looked up from his book.

"My little Asticot," said he, "leading bears is better than calumny, but indiscretion is worse than both."

And that is all I heard of the matter. I never lifted up my voice in the Club again.

There was a curious black case on the top of a cupboard in his room which for some time aroused my curiosity. It was like no box I had seen before. But one afternoon Paragot took it down and extracted therefrom a violin which after tuning he began to play. Now although fond of music I have never been able to learn any instrument save the tambourine—my highest success otherwise has been to finger out "God save the Queen" and "We won't go home till morning" on the ocarina—and to this day a person able to play the piano or the fiddle seems possessed of an uncanny gift; but in that remote period of my fresh rescue from the gutter, an executant appeared something superhuman. I stared at him with stupid open mouth. He played what I afterwards learned was one of Brahms's Hungarian dances. His lank figure and long hair worked in unison with the music which filled the room with a wild tumult of movement. I had not heard anything like it in my life. It set every nerve

of me dancing. I suppose Paragot found his interest in me because I was such an impressionable youngster. When, at the abrupt finale, he asked me what I thought of it, I could scarce stammer a word.

He gave me one of his queer kind looks while he tuned a string.

"I still wonder, my son, whether it would not be better for your soul that you should go on scullioning to the end of time."

"Why, Master?" I asked.

"*Sacré mille diables*," he cried, "do you think I am going to give you a reason for everything? You'll learn fast enough."

He laughed and went on playing, and, as I listened, the more godlike he grew.

"The streets of Paris," said he, returning the fiddle to its case, "are strewn with the wrecked souls of artists."

"And not London?"

"My little Asticot," he replied, "I am a Frenchman, and it is our fondest illusion that no art can possibly exist out of Paris."

I discovered later that he was the son of a Gascon father and an Irish mother, which accounted for his being absolutely bilingual and, indeed, for many oddities of temperament. But now he proclaimed himself a Frenchman, and for a time I was oppressed with a sense of disappointment.

At the Board School I had bolted enough indigestible historical facts to know that the English had always beaten the French, and I had drawn the natural conclusion that the

French were a vastly inferior race of beings. It was, I verily believe, the first step in my spiritual education to realise that the god of my idolatry suffered no diminution of grandeur by reason of his nationality. Indeed he gained accession, for after this he talked often to me of France in his magniloquent way, until I began secretly to be ashamed of being English. This had one advantage, in that I set myself with redoubled vigour to learn his language.

So extraordinary was the veneration I had for the man who had transplanted me from the kicks and soapsuds of my former life into this bewildering land of Greek gods and Ariels and pictures and music; for the man who spoke many unknown tongues, wore a gold watch chain, had been to Warsaw and every city mentioned in my school geography, and presided like a king over an assembly of those whom as a gutter urchin I had been wont to designate "toffs"; for the beneficent being who had provided me, Gus Smith alias Asticot, with a nightshirt, condescended to eat half my egg and to allow me to supervise his bedchamber and maintain it in an orderly state of disintegration, hair-brushes from butter and tobacco-ash from fish; for the man who, God knows, was the first of human creatures to awaken the emotion of love within my child's breast—so extraordinary was the veneration I had for him, that although I started out on this narrative by saying it was Paragot's story and not my own I proposed to tell, I hope to be pardoned for a brief egotistical excursion.

Like the gentleman in Chaucer, Paragot had over "his beddes hedde" a shelf of books to which, careless creature that he was, he did not dream of denying me access. In that

attic in Tavistock Street I read Smollett and Byron and somehow spelt through "Nana." I also found there the *De Imitatione Christi*, which I read with much the same enjoyment as I did the others. You must not think this priggish of me. The impressionable child of starved imagination will read anything that is printed. In my mother's house I used to purloin the squares of newspaper in which the fried fish from Mr. Samuel's had been wrapped, and surreptitiously read them. Why not Saint Thomas à Kempis?

I have in my possession now a filthy piece of paper, dropping to bits, on which is copied, in my round Board School boy handwriting, the eleventh chapter of the *De Imitatione*.

It runs:

"*My Son, thou hast still many things to learn, which thou hast not well learned yet.*"

"*What are they, Lord?*"

"*To place thy desire altogether in subjection to my good pleasure and not to be a lover of thyself, but an earnest seeker of my will. Thy desires often excite and urge thee forward: but consider with thyself whether thou art not more moved for thine own objects than for my honour. If it is myself that thou seekest thou shalt be well content with whatsoever I shall ordain; but if any pursuit of thine own lieth hidden within thee, behold it is this which hindreth and weigheth thee down.*

"*Beware, therefore, lest thou strive too earnestly after some desire which thou hast conceived, without taking counsel of me: lest haply it repent thee afterwards, and that*

displease thee which before pleased, and for which thou didst long as for a great good. For not every affection which seemeth good is to be forthwith followed: neither is every opposite affection to be immediately avoided. Sometimes it is expedient to use restraint even in good desires and wishes, lest through importunity thou fall into distraction of mind, lest through want of discipline thou become a stumbling-block to others, or lest by the resistance of others thou be suddenly disturbed and brought to confusion.

"*Sometimes indeed it is needful to use violence, and manfully to strive against the sensual appetite, and not to consider what the flesh may or not will; but rather to strive after this, that it may become subject, however unwillingly, to the spirit. And for so long it ought to be chastised and compelled to undergo slavery, even until it be ready for all things; and learn to be contented with little, to be delighted with things simple, and never to murmur at any inconvenience.*"

Let no one be shocked. It was one of the great acts of devotion of my life. I copied this out as a boy, not because it counselled me in my duty towards God, but because it summed up my whole duty to Paragot. Paragot was "Me." I saw the relation between Paragot and myself in every line. Had not I often fallen into distraction of mind over my drawing and books when I ought to have been helping Mrs. Housekeeper downstairs? Was it not want of discipline that made me a stumbling-block that memorable night in the Club? Ought I not to be content with everything Paragot should ordain? And was it not my duty to murmur at no inconvenience?

Years afterwards I showed this paper to Paragot. He wept. Alas! I had not well chosen my opportunity.

I remember, the night after I copied the chapter, Cherubino and I helped Paragot up the stairs and put him to bed. It was the first time I had seen him the worse for liquor. But when one has been accustomed to see one's mother and all her adult acquaintances dead drunk, the spectacle of a god slightly overcome with wine is neither here nor there.

CHAPTER III

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THERE was one merit (if merit it was) of my mother's establishment. No skeletons lurked in cupboards. They flaunted their grimness all over the place. Such letters as she received trailed about the kitchen, for all who chose to read, until they were caught up to cleanse a frying-pan. As she possessed no private papers their sanctity was never inculcated; and I could have rummaged, had I so desired, in every drawer or box in the house without fear of correction. When I took up my abode with Paragot, he laid no embargo on any of his belongings. The attic, except for sleeping purposes, was as much mine as his, and it did not occur to me that anything it contained could not be at my disposal.

This must be my apologia for reading, in all innocence, but with much enjoyment, some documents of a private nature which I discovered one day, about a year after I had entered Paragot's service, stuffed by way of keeping them together in an old woollen stocking. They have been put into my possession now for the purpose of writing this narrative, so my original offence having been purged, I need offer no apology for referring to them. There was no sort of order in the bundle of documents; you might as well look for the quality of humour in a dromedary, or of mercy in a pianist, as that of method in Paragot. I managed however to disentangle two main sets, one a series of love letters and the other disconnected notes of travel. In both was I mightily interested.

The love-letters, some of which were written in English and some in French, were addressed to a beautiful lady named Joanna. I knew she was beautiful because Paragot himself said so. "*Pure et ravissante comme une aube d'avril*," "My dear dream of English loveliness," "the fair flower of my life" and remarks such as these were proof positive. The odd part of it was that they seemed not to have been posted. He wrote: "not till my arms are again around you will your beloved eyes behold these outpourings of my heart." The paper heading bore the word "Paris." Allusions to a great artistic project on which he was working baffled my young and ignorant curiosity. "I have Love, Youth, Genius, Beauty on my side," he wrote, "and I shall conquer. We shall be irresistible. Fame will attend my genius, homage your Beauty; we shall walk on roses and dwell in the Palaces of the Earth." My heart thrilled when I read these lines. *I knew* that Paragot was a great man. Here, again, was proof. I did not reflect that this vision splendid of earth's palaces had faded into the twilight of the Tavistock Street garret. Thank heaven we have had years of remembered life before we learned to reason.

I had many pictures of my hero in those strange letter days, so remote to my childish mind. He crosses the Channel in December, just to skulk for one dark night against the railings of the London Square where she dwelt, in the hope of seeing her shadow on the blind. For some reason which I could not comprehend, the lovers were forbidden to meet. It rains, he sees nothing, but he returns to Paris with contentment in his heart and a terrible cold in