MARIE BELLOC LOWNDES

THE END OF HER HONEYMOON

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CHAPTER I

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"Cocher? l'Hôtel Saint Ange, Rue Saint Ange!"

The voice of John Dampier, Nancy's three-weeks bridegroom, rang out strongly, joyously, on this the last evening of their honeymoon. And before the lightly hung open carriage had time to move, Dampier added something quickly, at which both he and the driver laughed in unison.

Nancy crept nearer to her husband. It was tiresome that she knew so little
French.

"I'm telling the man we're not in any hurry, and that he can take us round by the Boulevards. I won't have you seeing Paris from an ugly angle the first time—darling!"

"But Jack? It's nearly midnight! Surely there'll be nothing to see on the
Boulevards now?"

"Won't there? You wait and see—Paris never goes to sleep!"

And then—Nancy remembered it long, long afterwards—something very odd and disconcerting happened in the big station yard of the Gare de Lyon. The horse stopped—

stopped dead. If it hadn't been that the bridegroom's arm enclosed her slender, rounded waist, the bride might have been thrown out.

The cabman stood up in his seat and gave his horse a vicious blow across the back.

"Oh, Jack!" Nancy shrank and hid her face in her husband's arm. "Don't let him do that! I can't bear it!"

Dampier shouted out something roughly, angrily, and the man jumped off the box, and taking hold of the rein gave it a sharp pull. He led his unwilling horse through the big iron gates, and then the little open carriage rolled on smoothly.

How enchanting to be driving under the stars in the city which hails in every artist—Jack Dampier was an artist—a beloved son!

In the clear June atmosphere, under the great arc-lamps which seemed suspended in the mild lambent air, the branches of the trees lining the Boulevards showed brightly, delicately green; and the tints of the dresses worn by the women walking up and down outside the cafés and still brilliantly lighted shops mingled luminously, as on a magic palette.

Nancy withdrew herself gently from her husband's arm. It seemed to her that every one in that merry, slowly moving crowd on either side must see that he was holding her to him. She was a shy, sensitive little creature, this three-weeks-old bride, whose honeymoon was now about to merge into happy every-day life.

Dampier divined something of what she was feeling. He put out his hand and clasped hers. "Silly sweetheart," he

whispered. "All these merry, chattering people are far too full of themselves to be thinking of us!"

As she made no answer, bewildered, a little oppressed by the brilliance, the strangeness of everything about them, he added a little anxiously, "Darling, are you tired? Would you rather go straight to the hotel?"

But pressing closer to him, Nancy shook her head. "No, no, Jack! I'm not a bit tired. It was you who were tired to-day, not I!"

"I didn't feel well in the train, 'tis true. But now that I'm in Paris I could stay out all night! I suppose you've never read George Moore's description of this very drive we're taking, little girl?"

And again Nancy shook her head, and smiled in the darkness. In the world where she had lived her short life, in the comfortable, unimaginative world in which Nancy Tremain, the delightfully pretty, fairly well-dowered, orphan, had drifted about since she had been "grown-up," no one had ever heard of George Moore.

Strange, even in some ways amazing, their marriage—hers and Jack Dampier's—had been! He, the clever, devil-may-care artist, unconventional in all his ways, very much a Bohemian, knowing little of his native country, England, for he had lived all his youth and working life in France—and she, in everything, save an instinctive love of beauty, which, oddly yet naturally enough, only betrayed itself in her dress, the exact opposite!

A commission from an English country gentleman who had fancied a portrait shown by Dampier in the Salon, had brought the artist, rather reluctantly, across the Channel,

and an accident—sometimes it made them both shiver to realise how slight an accident—had led to their first and decisive meeting.

Nancy Tremain had been brought over to tea, one cold, snowy afternoon, at the house where Dampier was painting. She had been dressed all in grey, and the graceful velvet gown and furry cap-like toque had made her look, in his eyes, like an exquisite Eighteenth Century pastel.

One glance—so Dampier had often since assured her and she never grew tired of hearing it—had been enough. They had scarcely spoken the one to the other, but he had found out her name, and, writing, cajoled her into seeing him again. Very soon he had captured her in the good old way, as women—or so men like to think—prefer to be wooed, by right of conquest.

There had been no one to say them nay, no one to comment unkindly over so strange and sudden a betrothal. On the contrary, Nancy's considerable circle of acquaintances had smilingly approved.

All the world loves a masterful lover, and Nancy Tremain was far too pretty, far too singular and charming, to become engaged in the course of nature to some commonplace young man. This big, ugly, clever, amusing artist was just the contrast which was needed for romance.

And he seemed by his own account to be making a very good income, too! Yet, artists being such eccentric, extravagant fellows, doubtless Nancy's modest little fortune would come in useful—so those about them argued carelessly.

Then one of her acquaintances, a thought more good-natured than the rest, arranged that lovely, happy Nancy should be married from a pleasant country house, in a dear little country church. Braving superstition, the wedding took place in the last week of May, and bride and bridegroom had gone to Italy—though, to be sure, it was rather late for Italy—for three happy weeks.

Now they were about to settle down in Dampier's Paris studio.

Unluckily it was an Exhibition Year, one of those years, that is, which, hateful as they may be to your true Parisian, pour steady streams of gold into the pockets of fortunate hotel and shop keepers, and which bring a great many foreigners to Paris who otherwise might never have come. Quite a number of such comfortable English folk were now looking forward to going and seeing Nancy Dampier in her new home—of which the very address was quaint and unusual, for Dampier's studio was situated Impasse des Nonnes.

They were now speeding under and across the vast embracing shadow of the Opera House. And again Dampier slipped his arm round his young wife. It seemed to this happy man as if Paris to-night had put on her gala dress to welcome him, devout lover and maker of beauty, back to her bosom.

"Isn't it pleasant to think," he whispered, "that Paris is the more beautiful because you now are in it and of it, Nancy?"

And Nancy smiled, well pleased at the fantastic compliment.

She pressed more closely to him.

"I wish—I wish—" and then she stopped, for she was unselfish, shy of expressing her wishes, but that made Dampier ever the more eager to hear, and, if possible, to gratify them.

"What is it that you wish, dear heart?" he asked.

"I wish, Jack, that we were going straight home to the studio now—instead of to an hotel."

"We'll get in very soon," he answered quickly. "Believe me, darling, you wouldn't like going in before everything is ready for you. Mère Bideau has her good points, but she could never make the place look as I want it to look when you first see it. I'll get up early to-morrow morning and go and see to it all. I wouldn't for the world you saw our home as it must look now—the poor little living rooms dusty and shabby, and our boxes sitting sadly in the middle of the studio itself!"

They had sent their heavy luggage on from England, and for the honeymoon Nancy had contented herself with one modest little trunk, while Dampier had taken the large portmanteau which had been the useful wedding present of the new friend and patron in whose house he had first seen his wife.

Swiftly they shot through the triple arch which leads from the Rue de Rivoli to the Carousel. How splendid and solitary was the vast dimly-lit space. "I like this," whispered Nancy dreamily, gazing up at the dark, star-powdered sky.

And then Dampier turned and caught her, this time unresisting, yielding joyfully, to his breast. "Nancy?" he murmured thickly. "Nancy? I'm afraid!"

"Afraid?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, horribly afraid! Pray, my pure angel, pray that the gods may indulge their cruel sport elsewhere. I haven't always been happy, Nancy."

And she clung to him, full of vague, unsubstantial fears. "Don't talk like that," she murmured. "It—it isn't right to make fun of such things."

"Make fun? Good God!" was all he said.

And then his mood changed. They were now being shaken across the huge, uneven paving stones of the quays, and so on to a bridge. "I never really feel at home in Paris till I've crossed the Seine," he cried joyously. "Cheer up, darling, we shall soon be at the Hôtel Saint Ange!"

"Have you ever stayed in the Hôtel Saint Ange?" she said, with a touch of curiosity in her voice.

"I used to know a fellow who lived there," he said carelessly. "But what made me pick it out was the fact that it's such a queer, beautiful old house, and with a delightful garden. Also we shall meet no English there."

"Don't you like English people?" she asked, a little protestingly.

And Dampier laughed. "I like them everywhere but in Paris," he said: and then, "But you won't be quite lonely, little lady, for a good many Americans go to the Hôtel Saint Ange. And for such a funny reason—"

"What reason?"

"It was there that Edgar Allan Poe stayed when he was in Paris."

Their carriage was now engaged in threading narrow, shadowed thoroughfares which wound through what might

have been a city of the dead. From midnight till cock-crow old-world Paris sleeps, and the windows of the high houses on either side of the deserted streets through which they were now driving were all closely shuttered.

"Here we have the ceremonious, the well-bred, the tactful Paris of other days," exclaimed Dampier whimsically. "This Paris understands without any words that what we now want is to be quiet, and by ourselves, little girl!"

A gas lamp, burning feebly in a corner wine shop, lit up his exultant face for a flashing moment.

"You don't look well, Jack," Nancy said suddenly. "It was awfully hot in
Lyons this morning—"

"We stayed just a thought too long in that carpet warehouse," he said gaily,—"And then—and then that prayer carpet, which might have belonged to Ali Baba of Ispahan, has made me feel ill with envy ever since! But joy! Here we are at last!"

After emerging into a square of which one side was formed by an old Gothic church, they had engaged in a dark and narrow street the further end of which was bastioned by one of the flying buttresses of the church they had just passed.

The cab drew up with a jerk. "C'est ici, monsieur."

The man had drawn up before a broad oak porte cochère which, sunk far back into a thick wall, was now inhospitably shut.

"They go to bed betimes this side of the river!" exclaimed Dampier ruefully.

Nancy felt a little troubled. The hotel people knew they were coming, for
Jack had written from Marseilles: it was odd no one had sat up for them.

But their driver gave the wrought-iron bell-handle a mighty pull, and after what seemed to the two travellers a very long pause the great doors swung slowly back on their hinges, while a hearty voice called out, "C'est vous, Monsieur Gerald? C'est vous, mademoiselle?"

And Dampier shouted back in French, "It's Mr. and Mrs. Dampier. Surely you expect us? I wrote from Marseilles three days ago!"

He helped his wife out of the cab, and they passed through into the broad, vaulted passage which connected the street with the courtyard of the hotel. By the dim light afforded by an old-fashioned hanging lamp Nancy Dampier saw that three people had answered the bell; they were a middle-aged man (evidently mine host), his stout better half, and a youth who rubbed his eyes as if sleepy, and who stared at the newcomers with a dull, ruminating stare.

As is generally the case in a French hotel, it was Madame who took command. She poured forth a torrent of eager, excited words, and at last Dampier turned to his wife: —"They got my letter, but of course had no address to which they could answer, and—and it's rather a bore, darling—but they don't seem to have any rooms vacant."

But even as he spoke the fat, cheerful-looking Frenchwoman put her hand on the young Englishman's arm. She had seen the smart-looking box of the bride, the handsome crocodile skin bag of the bridegroom, and again

she burst forth, uttering again and again the word "arranger."

Dampier turned once more, this time much relieved, to his wife: "Madame Poulain (that's her name, it seems) thinks she can manage to put us up all right to-night, if we don't mind two very small rooms—unluckily not on the same floor. But some people are going away to-morrow and then she'll have free some charming rooms overlooking the garden."

He took a ten-franc piece out of his pocket as he spoke, and handed it to the gratified cabman:—"It doesn't seem too much for a drive through fairyland"—he said aside to his wife.

And Nancy nodded contentedly. It pleased her that her Jack should be generous—the more that she had found out in the last three weeks that if generous, he was by no means a spendthrift. He had longed to buy a couple of Persian prayer carpets in that queer little warehouse where a French friend of his had taken them in Lyons, but he had resisted the temptation—nobly.

Meanwhile Madame Poulain was talking, talking, talking—emphasising all she said with quick, eager gestures.

"They are going to put you in their own daughter's room, darling. She's luckily away just now. So I think you will be all right. I, it seems, must put up with a garret!"

"Oh, must you be far away from me?" she asked a little plaintively.

"Only for to-night, only till to-morrow, sweetheart."

And then they all began going up a winding staircase which started flush from the wall to the left.

First came Madame Poulain, carrying a candle, then Monsieur Poulain with his new English clients, and, last of all, the loutish lad carrying Nancy's trunk. They had but a little way to go up the shallow slippery stairs, for when they reached the first tiny landing Madame Poulain opened a curious, narrow slit of a door which seemed, when shut, to be actually part of the finely panelled walls.

"Here's my daughter's room," said the landlady proudly. "It is very comfortable and charming."

"What an extraordinary little room!" whispered Nancy.

And Dampier, looking round him with a good deal of curiosity, agreed.

In the days when the Hôtel Saint Ange belonged to the great soldier whose name it still bears, this strange little apartment had surely been, so the English artist told himself, a powdering closet. Even now the only outside light and air came from a small square window which had evidently only recently been cut through the thick wall. In front of this aperture fluttered a bright pink curtain.

Covering three of the walls as well as the low ceiling, was a paper simulating white satin powdered with rose-buds, and the bed, draped with virginal muslin curtains, was a child's rather than a woman's bed.

"What's that?" asked Dampier suddenly. "A cupboard?"

He had noticed that wide double doors, painted in the pale brownish grey called grisaille, formed the further side of the tiny apartment.

Madame Poulain, turning a key, revealed a large roomy space now fitted up as a cupboard. "It's a way through into

our bedroom, monsieur," she said smiling. "We could not of course allow our daughter to be far from ourselves."

And Dampier nodded. He knew the ways of French people and sympathised with those ways.

He stepped up into the cupboard, curious to see if this too had been a powdering closet, and if that were so if the old panelling and ornamentation had remained in their original condition.

Thus for a moment was Dampier concealed from those in the room. And during that moment there came the sound of footsteps on the staircase, followed by the sudden appearance on the landing outside the open door of the curious little apartment of two tall figures—a girl in a lace opera cloak, and a young man in evening dress.

Nancy Dampier, gazing at them, a little surprised at the abrupt apparition, told herself that they must be brother and sister, so striking was their resemblance to one another.

"We found the porte cochère open, Madame Poulain, so we just came straight in. Good night!"

The young lady spoke excellent French, but as she swept on up the staircase out of sight there came a quick low interchange of English words between herself and the man with her.

"Daisy? Did you notice that beautiful young woman? A regular stunner! She must be that daughter the Poulains are always talking about."

And then "Daisy's" answer floated down. "Yes, I noticed her—she is certainly very pretty. But do be careful, Gerald, I expect she knows a little English—"

Dampier stepped down out of the cupboard.

"That American cub ought to be put in his place!" he muttered heatedly.

Nancy turned her face away to hide a little smile. Jack was so funny! He delighted in her beauty—he was always telling her so, and yet it annoyed him if other people thought her pretty too. This young American had looked at her quite pleasantly, quite respectfully; he hadn't meant to be offensive—of that Nancy felt sure.

"I suppose you have a good many Americans this year?" went on Dampier in
French, turning to Monsieur Poulain.

"No, monsieur, no. Our clientèle is mostly French. We have only this young lady, her brother, and their father, monsieur. The father is a Senator in his own country—Senator Burton. They are very charming people, and have stayed with us often before. All our other guests are French. We have never had such a splendid season: and all because of the Exhibition!"

"I'm glad you are doing well," said Dampier courteously. "But for my part"—he shrugged his shoulders—"I'm too much of a Parisian to like the Exhibition."

Then he turned to Nancy: "Well, you'll be quite safe, my darling. Monsieur and Madame Poulain are only just through here, so you needn't feel lonely."

And then there came a chorus of bonsoirs from host, from hostess, and from the lad who now stood waiting with the Englishman's large portmanteau hitched up on his shoulder.

Dampier bent and kissed his wife very tenderly: then he followed Monsieur Poulain and the latter's nephew up the

stairs, while Madame Poulain stayed behind and helped Mrs. Dampier to unpack the few things she required for the night.

And Nancy, though she felt just a little bewildered to find herself alone in this strange house, was yet amused and cheered by the older woman's lively chatter, and that although she only understood one word in ten.

Madame Poulain talked of her daughter, Virginie, now in the country well away from the holiday crowds brought by the Exhibition, and also of her nephew, Jules, the lad who had carried up the luggage, and who knew—so Madame Poulain went to some pains to make Nancy understand—a little English.

Late though it was, the worthy woman did not seem in any hurry to go away, but at last came the kindly words which even Nancy, slight as was her knowledge of French, understood: "Bonsoir, madame. Dormez bien."

CHAPTER II

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Nancy Dampier sat up in bed.

Through the curtain covering the square aperture in the wall which did duty for a window the strong morning light streamed in, casting a pink glow over the peculiar little room.

She drew the pearl-circled watch, which had been one of Jack's first gifts to her, from under the big, square pillow.

It was already half-past nine. How very tiresome and strange that she should have overslept herself on this, her first morning in Paris! And yet—and yet not so very strange after all, for her night had been curiously and disagreeably disturbed.

At first she had slept the deep, dreamless sleep of happy youth, and then, in a moment, she had suddenly sat up, wide awake.

The murmur of talking had roused her—of eager, low talking in the room which lay the other side of the deep cupboard. When the murmur had at last ceased she had dozed off, only to be waked again by the sound of the porte cochère swinging back on its huge hinges.

It was evidently quite true—as Jack had said—that Paris never goes to sleep.

Jack had declared he would get up and go over to the studio early, so there was nothing for it but to get up, and wait patiently till he came back. Nancy knew that her

husband wouldn't like her to venture out into the streets alone. He was extraordinarily careful of her—careful and thoughtful for her comfort.

What an angel he was—her great strong, clever Jack!

A girl who goes about by herself as much as Nancy Tremain had gone about alone during the three years which had elapsed betwixt her leaving school and her marriage, obtains a considerable knowledge of men, and not of the nicest kind of men. But Jack was an angel—she repeated the rather absurdly incongruous word to herself with a very tender feeling in her heart. He always treated her not only as if she were something beautiful and rare, but something fragile, to be respected as well as adored….

He had left her so little during the last three weeks that she had never had time to think about him as she was thinking of him now; "counting up her mercies," as an old-fashioned lady she had known as a child was wont to advise those about her to do.

At last she looked round her for a bell. No, there was nothing of the sort in the tiny room. But Nancy Dampier had already learned to do without all sorts of things which she had regarded as absolute necessities of life when she was Nancy Tremain. In some of the humbler Italian inns in which she and Jack had been so happy, the people had never even heard of a bell!

She jumped out of bed, put on her pretty, pale blue dressing-gown—it was a fancy of Jack's that she should wear a great deal of pale blue and white—and then she opened the door a little way.

"Madame!" she called out gaily. "Madame Poulain?" and wondered whether her French would run to the words "hot water"—yes, she thought it would. "Eau chaude"—that was hot water.

But there came no answering cry, and again, this time rather impatiently, she called out, "Madame Poulain?"

And then the shuffling sounds of heavy footsteps made Nancy shoot back from the open door.

"Yuss?" muttered a hoarse voice.

This surely must be the loutish-looking youth who, so Nancy suddenly remembered, knew a little English.

"I want some hot water," she called out through the door. "And will you please ask your aunt to come here for a moment?"

"Yuss," he said, in that queer hoarse voice, and shuffled downstairs again. And there followed, floating up from below, one of those quick, gabbling interchanges of French words which Nancy, try as she might, could not understand.

She got into bed again. Perhaps after all it would be better to allow them to bring up her "little breakfast" in the foreign fashion. She would still be in plenty of time for Jack. Once in the studio he would be in no hurry, or so she feared, to come back—especially if on his way out he had opened her door and seen how soundly she was sleeping.

She waited some time, and then, as no one came, grew what she so seldom was, impatient and annoyed. What an odd hotel, and what dilatory, disagreeable ways! But just as she was thinking of getting up again she heard a hesitating knock.

It was Madame Poulain, and suddenly Nancy—though unobservant as is youth, and especially happy youth—noticed that mine hostess looked far less well in the daytime than by candle-light.

Madame Poulain's stout, sallow face was pale, her cheeks puffy; there were rings round the black eyes which had sparkled so brightly the night before. But then she too must have had a disturbed night.

In her halting French Mrs. Dampier explained that she would like coffee and rolls, and then some hot water.

"C'est bien, mademoiselle!"

And Nancy blushed rosy-red. "Mademoiselle?" How odd to hear herself so addressed! But Madame Poulain did not give her time to say anything, even if she had wished to do so, for, before Mrs. Dampier could speak again, the hotel-keeper had shut the door and gone downstairs.

And then, after a long, long wait, far longer than Nancy had ever been made to wait in any of the foreign hotels in which she and her husband had stayed during the last three weeks, Madame Poulain reappeared, bearing a tray in her large, powerful hands.

She put the tray down on the bed, and she was already making her way quickly, silently to the door, when Nancy called out urgently, "Madame? Madame Poulain! Has my husband gone out!"

And then she checked herself, and tried to convey the same question in her difficult French—"Mon mari?" she said haltingly. "Mon mari?"

But Madame Poulain only shook her head, and hurried out of the room, leaving the young Englishwoman oddly