

THE WOODCUTTER

PLACIDE GERVEZ was a woodcutter, like his father and grandfather before him. It is to be supposed that Nature was weary of the procession, for Placide had never married, but lived alone in his hut in the forest of Fontainebleau, just too far from the borders for it ever to be worth his while to go into a village for a drink except on very special occasions. He had even been overlooked for military service; and the Prussians had come and gone without interfering with his chopping. He could not read or write, and his language had many less than half a thousand words.

In such conditions he deserved his Christian name. In the forest even an hour calms the most turbulent spirit; a day will cure most worries; and a week with an axe may be recommended to neurasthenics as more than the equivalent of the most expensive Weir-Mitchell treatment and rest-cures. If fashionable doctors could afford to be honest, they would order work-cures for nine-tenths of their patients.

Forty-eight years with an axe in the forest had turned Placide Gervez into a mixture of Stoic, Cynic, and Epicurean; he boasted the simplicity and fortitude of each in respect of pain, propriety, and pleasure.

The droning hum of the forest, broken rarely by the birds—magpie, crow, cuckoo, and nightingale—meant nothing to him in the summer; nor did the monotonous drip depress him in the winter. The ringing thud of his axe and the crash of the murdered tree were neither history nor tragedy to him; the comic and the pastoral were equally sealed books, for the forest has neither satyrs nor shepherds. He had no sport, since in his boyhood his father had thrashed him for throwing his axe at a stag; and no society, for the nearest forester thought him a boor. He chopped to live, and lived to chop.

It was the philosopher of the Rue de Chevreuse who cast the grain of sand into the wheels of this approximation to the solution of the problem of perpetual motion. The philosopher was really a painter, but so bad a painter that he was only known as a theorist in the cafe which supplied his *crème de menthe*. There he would hold forth interminably on God and man.

Blessed with such means as a mediocre father's devotion to cutlery and an only son had supplied, it was his habit on occasion to descend into the country. Picture him, if you please, as very short and moderately fat, middle-aged at thirty-two, clad in a bourgeois suit and an artist's tie, a red handkerchief under a black felt hat upon a bushy head garnished with a little beard and moustache, perspiring in a sandy and interminable bridle-path leading from the Long Rocher to nowhere in particular.

These walks he would undertake (a) for his health, (b) to absorb the beauties of nature—as he would often demonstrate. Yet the greatest of philosophers are not always logical, and he would have been compelled to discover other reasons for his choice of company. This consisted of a lady whose age was rendered only more uncertain by her efforts to nail conjecture to the number 25. Her hair paled visibly from the scalp, and her neck darkened visibly from the chin. She had made the fortune of India in rice powder, and of China in vermilion. The extravagance of her person and attire, exaggerated even for the Café d'Harcourt, the fortress whence her sallies, was in Fontainebleau a thing to make earth's guardian angels throw up the sponge.

This was a summer's afternoon; and the strange pair, encountering Placide Gervez as he chopped, accosted him. The philosopher, whose irrelevant name was Théophraste Goulet, drew out a cigarette and offered it to his intended victim. It is impossible in a polite nation to leave a man until you have finished the cigarette he gives you—a man, if he was a man, once gave me an Irish cigarette, but that story is a separate cheque—and Placide could not have cut that knot save with his axe. However, in the first pause of the voluble ass for breath, he pointed to his work, uttered the adjective "Hard," and continued to chop.

However, the purport of the discourse—in a highly condensed form—was as follows.

God is good, was the First Postulate of Theophrastus. Hence, all God does is good. Hence, since God made man, He meant man to do good. Hence, man should do good. Agreed. Then, what is good? The necessities of life are good, for otherwise no other good were possible without them. Food is good, shelter is good, all that tends to the health of the individual and the reproduction of the species is good. For

if not, let food be bad, let art be good. Then, since artists need food, good is based on bad, which is absurd. Agreed, then, that necessary things are good. Yes; but are these the only good? No; for these benefits absorb only part of the time and energy of man. Is it good to chop wood? Yes, undoubtedly; but it is also good to render woodcutting in art. Then why should not the woodcutter be an artist? Why should he not chop miracles of carving? The Michael Angelo of Fontainebleau? Why not? What does Browning say? "I want to know the butcher paints, the baker rhymes for his pursuit," and so on. Very well; then what do you do that is truly good? That is, unnecessarily, supererogatively, and therefore superlatively good? You, my friend! You chop wood. Good. You cherish a fair wife; you have strong children to defend the fatherland. Good again. You eat, you drink, you make merry: all good. But do you achieve fame? No. Glory? No. Are you a great saint? No. A great artist? No. A great sinner? No. Nothing great? No. Very well, then: not good. Rise up, man! (the peroration) Be not slothful, be ambitious! Be statesman, artist, divine, strategist, inventor; nay, thief or murderer, if you will! But do not be content to chop wood!

During this quarter of an hour of eloquence his was not the only discourse. The fair friend of the philosopher, eager to impress men in her way as he in his, and equally omnivorous, was busy with Placide Gervez. First a sidelong glance struck armour quite impenetrable to such assault, quickly followed by smiles first secret and then open, gestures at first subtle and at last unmistakable, finally by the unspeakable grimace of the tongue which she had learnt in her time at the red-shuttered convent in the Rue des Quatre Vents. Her triumph was that once the woodcutter struck aslant, and swore.

Théophraste ended his discourse, and, pleasantly parting, sauntered off with his mistress, arm-in-arm. Neither of them give their victim another thought. Out of the wood they went, and (thank God!) out of the story.

But Placide leant upon his axe and stared after them. In his brain one thought only remained, which Théophraste might have formulated logically as "Some men do not chop wood." And in his heart and eye was a dull animal lust. Two strangers had come to his soul's Inn. There being only one room, he put them to bed together, in this form of something like it: "Chop—chop—chop—chop; I'm sick of it. Even if I had a fine girl from Paris like that, what could I do but chop—chop—chop—chop?"

For the first time in his life he went home half an hour earlier than his custom, to the accompaniment of a terrific thunderstorm that rolled up from the valley of the Loing and fell like night upon the forest, like a dark winter's night that afternoon of May.

He was wet to the skin before he reached his hut. Opening the door, he glowered with dull surprise. Equally wet, standing in one corner and wringing out a blouse, was a girl of about twenty years old, an Amazon maid. He could see that she was a lady—that is, that she was not a villager; but he had no means of knowing that she was the Honourable Diana Villiers-Jernyngham-Ketteringham.

Placide spoke a patois that a Parisian might have surmised to be Cherokee, and Diana's boarding-school French would have been given up by that Parisian as no earthly language at all.

She told him that she was staying at the Savoy Hotel at Fontainebleau, and had gone for a walk and lost her way in the forest; and she asked him how far was it to the nearest village, and would he please take her there, and she would give him money.

All this while Placide lit his fire, and proceeded to cook beans. He did not understand her, or try to understand her. There was a strange animal in his hut, possibly a human animal; it might like beans; he would offer it beans. It was not his affair; his affair was to chop—chop—chop—chop.

Diana was a little afraid of this silent beast at first. But the offer of food seemed kindly, and she ate some beans lest he should take offence, found them surprisingly good, nodded satisfaction, and even asked for more.

This part concluded, she went to the door. The rain poured unceasingly; the forest stood in pools; and it was too dark to tell one tree from another. The woodcutter joined her, shook his head, said "far" and "to-morrow," and pointed to a heap of straw.

This strong-minded young lady knew when to bow to the inevitable; she took an armful of the straw, and retiring with it to the other end of the hut, made the sleep sign which every savage understands, and lay down.

Placide Gervez grunted assent, and lying down with a surly "Bon soir" dropped instantly to sleep. How was he to know what dreams would echo his quarter of an hour with the two philosophers of Paris?

About eleven o'clock the next morning some the well-horsed search-party from Fontainebleau reached the hut.

At the door, as carefully stacked as the rest, they found the severed limbs of the Honourable Diana. And in the forest the cheery, ringing thud of his axe led them to Placide Gervez, quietly, manfully chopping.

They told him of a Widow Lady in Paris who could beat him at his own game.

ALEISTER CROWLEY.