

THE VITRIOL-THROWER

THE Boulevard Edgar Quinet is convenient for life and death. There is a squalid toil and squalid pleasure, represented by the Gare Montparnasse and the Rue de la Gaïeté; at the other end is the exotic struggle of the quaint little colony of English artists. The boulevard itself hangs between these extremes; but, sinister and terrible omen! the whole of one side is occupied by that vast cemetery of Montparnasse which Charles Baudelaire has honoured by his bones.

I like to think that Baudelaire, brooding like an unquiet fiend above his carrion, may laugh, though it be but the laugh of hell, at this my tale.

A man who has deliberately taken human life on no responsibility but his own enjoys some of the immunities of a God. The habit acting first and thinking afterwards is surely divine, or how can we explain the universe? Among civilized people few such men are to be found; they may be known by the grave courage of their steadfast eyes. Would you like to meet one! The first place to search is most certainly the Boulevard Edgar Quinet.

At least this is certain, that if you had been strolling down by the cemetery on Monday night before Mardi-Gras, twelve years ago, you would have had your opportunity.

Clement Seton was a tiny little man with a pale face. One would have said that he suffered from a wasting illness. On his finger flashed a single ruby. Very unwise of you, young man! for the boulevard, deserted and leading no whither in particular, is the haunt of the greatest ruffians in Paris.

The two Apaches in the shadow laughed. Silent and swift, they leapt. But the Scot was swifter yet. Ten feet away he stood with a Colt levelled in the gloom, demanding "Your pleasure, gentlemen?"

They began some stammering excuse; the boy's light laugh trilled out, and he lightly replaced his weapon, turned on his heel, and left them to follow if they dared.

There is almost opposite the end of the boulevard an impasse miscalled the Rue Boissonade. A road it would have been, save for the obstinate leases in the midst thereof. A road it one day surely will be, but at present it is certainly trying that from No. N. to No. N + 1 is a circuitous journey of nearly upon half a mile. On the right as you enter is a small low house, roofed for a studio, old-fashioned, with its ugly modern neighbours sneering over it. It had a bad name, too, even among the easy-going folk of Bohemian Paris.

Is your face the face of a cat or of a pig, strange dweller in that desolate house? Where did you get that shaggy mane of fire? Your face is covered with fine down, every tip whereof stings like a nettle. You have eyes that must devour the soul of a man ere they can sleep. You have long and heavy lips ever twitching; one thinks of an octopus waiting for its prey. Is that your blood that makes them scarlet, or the blood of all those who would not be warned in time?

How is it, too, that all men own you beautiful? How, surer test! that all women deny you beauty?

For beautiful you are. Your face is the face of some divine beast, adored of the Egyptians or the Mexicans.

What of your soul? Is that, too, the soul of a God and a beast? Does your face that warns us, and in vain, tell truth? People are afraid of you, Mirabelle! they cross the road to avoid passing over the pavements you have trod.

Who was that poor Hungarian boy that men cut down one morning from your gate? and the pianist who poisoned himself in Vienna?

What did the painter see in your eyes that he slashed your finished face from his canvas, and drew the second stroke across his throat?

Is there any gate of death, Mirabelle, that some man has not passed—for you?

Why, too, do you tie your hair so carefully to-night? You only lift your finger, and they die for you. Why, then, do you struggle? There is anxiety, not only pride, in the thrice-gazed-on mirror. You have swathed yourself close like a corpse; the amber silk clings to your beautiful body. After all, you have

taken down your hair; it flows over your breasts like a river of hell.

How is it that you are waiting? Others should wait, surely; it is not for you to wait. You are in danger, Mirabelle; there is a God in heaven after all.

Yes, and you will have him in your arms.

II

Clement Seton shrugged his shoulders and threw his cigar away with a gesture of weariness. Life in Paris seemed tame after his exploits in Somaliland, where he had won the Victoria Cross standing over a wounded comrade half the day, while the survivors of what had been a very smart little outpost scrimmage tried in vain to come to terms with that waterless warrior.

"Most cowardly thing I ever did," he would explain. "The poor beggars couldn't get at us for the rocks. When a head appeared one put a bullet through it. Like bally clay pigeons, by Jove!" and then he would go on, in his talkative nonsensical way, with some absurd paradox in ethics or metaphysics.

Yet what good was to come of Paris? Bitter scorn of the sneaking Apaches ate up his soul. To come to grips with a devil were worth the pains. Murderers, he mused, are the salt of the earth. And lo! the salt hath lost its savour. And he laughed sourly.

At the gate of the lonely house he flung away his cigar, and his hand was on the latch.

Suddenly, a noiseless touch upon the arm, and a low, hurried pleading voice. "Clement, my old friend, listen a moment." He turned, and saw dear, fat, good-natured old Miss Aitken. What was there in this woman to make her (as she had been) the friend of Swinburne, Carrière, and Verlaine?

Artists hate artists, not for envy, but because there can be no companionships among the Gods. Eternally silent in himself, a God sees all, knows all; yet nothing touches him. He can learn nothing from another such, while his study is mankind. So true friendship is their prize; Miss Aitken could not guess their detachment; she thought them human. Maybe this flattered the poor Gods. In their weak hours they accept devotion gladly. Miss Aitken stood, white to the lips; her terror shining about her visibly. "That house is fatal, Clement," she moaned. "Go anywhere but there!" Patient and smiling, Clement heard her out. Half was he fain to put her off with a lie—some folly about God in heaven.

Then truth urged him to sing the song he had made of Mirabelle—

"The world for a whore!
The sky for a harlot!
All life—at your door—
For a Woman of Scarlet!
A bitter exchange?
A bad bargain to strike?
It May seem to you strange—
The fact is—I like it!

You offer me gold,
Place, power, and pleasure
To have and to hold—
Inexhaustible treasure!
I'll give it and more
In this planet of boredom
For a girl that's a whore
And is proud of her whoredom."

He reflected that such truth might seem to her but a sneer. So in the end he pressed her hand, thanked her, bade her be of good cheer, passed in.

III

Like a frail ghost, poor worn-out Sylvie glided from the graveyard, and confronted Clement Seton.

Three months had passed since his first visit to Mirabelle the wonderful and beautiful, and still daily he strolled down the boulevard to his destiny. Thin and pale are you growing, my fine fool? Is it the air of Paris that robs you of your blood? We know better. Are you quite besotted? Or would you rather die thus than live otherwise?

This we cannot think; he cannot be absorbed body and soul in the contemplation of Mirabelle's perfections; for when poor worn-out Sylvie, with her harsh cough and hectic cheek, addresses him, he hears.

She took him to a corner of the graveyard, eagerly, with her worn face all fire, ever looking back. For he followed sedately. Clement would run nor to nor fro.

She paused by a low grave. "Here," she said, "lies Sergius, whom I loved—ah God! She took him from me; she threw him away, and laughed when he pistolled himself at her doorstep. You are her lover, monsieur. She will serve you so. I swear it. She lives for nothing else. God! God! to have these fingers but one moment at her throat."

She burst into a passion of weeping anger.

Seton lit a pipe. This Mirabelle! he mused. She leads me to Pisgah, he thought, she feeds me with milk and honey from the Promised Land. But to enter in and to possess it? No. She knows possession is but the prelude to the Captivity, the Exile to great Babylon. But who am I, to waste the months? I have said: Easy to write the curtain-raiser, but few who can pen five pungent acts. Yet, why should I wait? Why not make drama myself? Tragedy, no! for I am God, and must laugh at everything. Well! Well!

"I will kill her, kill her," sobbed the girl, kissing the cross upon the tomb.

Seton smiled, bent down caressingly, and whispered in her ear. Then swiftly turning he bent no undecided step towards the Gardens of his Armida.

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Trembling in each other's arms with the violence of their repressed passion, Clement and Mirabelle still lay. Now he put forth all his force; always she easily eluded it.

"For your sake, O goddess!" he exclaimed. "You are not utterly high, because you have not touched humanity. I sacrifice the splendour of our passion to initiate you."

"Not you then, but another!" she laughed wildly. "You are the only one that can play the Game; I will not use you up."

He looked at her doubtfully; then he knew she lied. Hers was a real prudery.

"Galilean!" he cried, "thou hast conquered!"

But so shocking was the irony of his voice that for a moment she feared him.

Then, rising up, they talked of many indifferent things; yet, being gods, all language was hieroglyphic to their intimacy; so that she marked a change.

"Am I adream?" she said; "did not I win the bout?"

"At the odds," he said.

And again a chill passed over her.

Some premonition of things utterly forlorn?

Some intimate fear of the soul, struck bare and cold in the presence of its God?

"Tire yourself carefully to-night," wooed Clement in his velvet voice.

She thought of Jezebel, and a third time she shuddered.

Nevertheless, right comely was she, and golden in sheen of gossamer silk.

In the Boulevard Edgar Quinet the wear is not silk, O Mirabelle the beautiful! Rather a shroud. The desolate trees of the boulevard do not rustle like silk; rather do they whisper like murderers in league. The stones of the boulevard do not rustle like silk; they clatter foolishly. It is not as the tears of your false passion on the adamantine hearts of men?

Mystic and doubtful, from behind a tree leaps out a ghost. With one hoarse word, poor worn-out Sylvie flings her vitriol, and speeds laughing down the boulevard.

Full in the face it splashed her; the great curse rose to a shriek and sank to a moan.

Clement Seton carried her back to the studio.

IV

Jolly fat old Miss Aitken! What treasure you are in a world of sorrow!

Mirabelle's sins, which were many, were forgiven; especially as she could sin no more, thought she.

So she and Clement nursed her back to life; the face no more a face. One blind scar, more fearful to look upon than death. Her hands had escaped; one could judge by her hands what her beauty must have been.

But we are interested in her soul. In her weakness she grew human; and Clement, loving her through the flesh, loved her yet more. Why did he make her his mistress? You shall judge. But why did she comply? Who shall judge that? Judge not too easily; I myself, who am the great God who made these, dare not say.

So in the closest intimacy for more than a year they lived; and good-natured Miss Aitken like a mother to them.

Now was a new life stirred in Mirabelle; when Seton heard it, he called Miss Aitken aside privily, and said to her: "Dear friend, you may guess what she and I have always known: Love at its climax must decay thence. Such is the common lot; nothing escapes. I have given Mirabelle a child; let her seek the for new worlds to conquer. For me, I have studied her enough. Sylvie is dying; her consumption draws her to a close. I shall go live with her, and feast upon her end.

"She loves me, since I helped her vengeance; and hates me, since I have lifted her victim to such heights of joy. You never guessed? Yes, Sylvie loved Sergius, whom Mirabelle stole from her. 'Twas I that bade her throw the acid. Anon."

And he went whistling off. But to Miss Aitken, whose excellent memory broke this atrocious speech to Mirabelle, replied that expressionless mask of horror: "I knew it. I went to the death of myself that night; I went willingly, wittingly. It was Ananke and the Moirai. Moreover, I have had much joy of Clement; I leap with joy, breeding this child to him.

"Let him go to Sylvie: it is a woman's part to see her husband go away on strange errands. Was not Juno foolish, with her gadfly?"

In fact, when Sylvie died, Clement came back to her, brotherly. He had chosen the right moment to break off the tie; Socrates suicide is finer than Socrates turned dotard. So they remained fast friends.

The child was twelve years old last week. In him we see the seeds of miraculous thoughts, things to transcend all limitations mortal and immortal, common to man.

The Overman is surely come; in the second generation is he established.