

Baring Maurice

Overlooked



Maurice Baring

Overlooked

«Public Domain»

Baring M.

Overlooked / M. Baring — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

PART I	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	11
CHAPTER IV	14
CHAPTER V	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Baring Maurice Overlooked

PART I THE PAPERS OF ANTHONY KAY

CHAPTER I

When my old friend and trusted adviser, Doctor Kennaway, told me that I must go to Haréville and stay there a month or, still better, two months, I asked him what I could possibly do there. The only possible pastime at a watering-place is to watch. A blind man is debarred from that pastime.

He said to me: "Why don't you write a novel?"

I said that I had never written anything in my life. He then said that a famous editor, of the *Figaro*, I think, had once said that every man had one newspaper article in him. Novel could be substituted for newspaper article. I objected that, although I found writing on my typewriter a soothing occupation, I had always been given to understand by authors that correcting proofs was the only real fun in writing a book. I was debarred from that. We talked of other things and I thought no more about this till after I had been at Haréville a week.

When I arrived there, although the season had scarcely begun, I made acquaintances more rapidly than I had expected, and most of my time was taken up in idle conversation.

After I had been drinking the waters for a week, I made the acquaintance of James Rudd, the novelist. I had never met him before. I have, indeed, rarely met a novelist. When I have done so they have either been elderly ladies who specialized in the life of the Quartier-Latin, or country gentlemen who kept out all romance from their general conversation, which they confined to the crops and the misdeeds of the Government.

James Rudd did not certainly belong to either of these categories. He was passionately interested in his own business. He did not seem in the least inclined to talk about anything else. He took for granted I had read all his works. I think he supposed that even the blind could hardly have failed to do that. Some of his works have been read to me. I did not like to put it in this way, lest he should think I was calling attention to the absence of his books in the series which have been transcribed in the Braille language. But he was evidently satisfied that I knew his work. I enjoyed the books of his which were read to me, but then, I enjoy any novel. I did not tell him that. I let him take for granted that I had taken for granted all there was to be taken for granted. I imagine him to wear a faded Venetian-red tie, a low collar, and loose blue clothes (I shall find out whether this is true later), to be a non-smoker – I am, in fact, sure of that – a practical teetotaler, not without a nice discrimination based on the imagination rather than on experience, of French vintage wines, and a fine appreciation of all the arts. He is certainly not young, and I think rather weary, but still passionately interested in the only thing which he thinks worthy of any interest. I found him an entertaining companion, easy and stimulating. He had been sent to Haréville by Kennaway, which gave us a link. Kennaway had told him to leave off writing novels for five weeks if he possibly could. He was finding it difficult. He told me he was longing to write, but could think of no subject.

I suggested to him that he should write a novel about the people at Haréville. I said I could introduce him to three ladies and that they could form the nucleus of the story. He was delighted with the idea, and that same evening I introduced him to Princess Kouragine, who is not, as her name sounds, a Russian, but a French lady, *née* Robert, who married a Prince Serge Kouragine. He died

some years ago. She is a lady of so much sense, and so ripe in wisdom and experience, that I felt her acquaintance must do any novelist good. I also introduced him to Mrs. Lennox, who is here with her niece, Miss Jean Brandon. Mrs. Lennox, I knew, would enjoy meeting a celebrity; she sacrificed an evening's gambling for the sake of his society, and the next day, she asked him to luncheon. In the evening he told me that Miss Brandon would be a suitable heroine for his novel.

I asked him if he had begun it. He said he was planning it, but as it was a holiday novel, and as he had been forbidden to work, he was not going to make it a real book. He was going to write this novel for his own enjoyment, and not for the public. He would never publish it. He would be very grateful, all the same, if I allowed him to discuss it with me, as he could not write a story without discussing it with someone.

I said I would willingly discuss the story with him, and I have determined to keep a record of our conversations, and indeed of everything that affects this matter, in case he one day publishes the novel, or publishes what the novel may turn into; for I feel that it will not remain unpublished, even though it turns into something quite different. I shall thus have all the fun of seeing a novel planned without the trouble of writing one myself.

"Of course you have the advantage of knowing these people quite well," he said. I told him that he was mistaken. I had never met any of them, except Princess Kouragine, before. And it was years since I had seen her.

"The first problem is," he said, "Why is Miss Brandon not married? She must be getting on for thirty, if she is not thirty yet, and it is strange that a person with her looks – "

"I have often wondered what she looks like," I said, "and I have made my picture of her. Shall I tell it you, and you can tell me whether it is at all like the reality?"

He was most anxious to hear my description. I said that I imagined Miss Brandon to be as changeable in appearance as the sky. I explained to him that I had not always been blind, that my blindness had come comparatively late in life from a shooting accident, in which I lost one eye – the sight of the other I lost gradually afterwards. I had imagined her as the lady who walked in the garden in Shelley's *Sensitive Plant* (I could not remember all the quotation):

"A sea-flower unfolded beneath the ocean."

Still, and rather mysterious, elusive and rare. He said I was right about the variability, but that he saw her differently. It was true she was pale, delicate, and extremely refined, but her eyes were the interesting thing about her. She was like a sapphire. She looked better in the daytime than in the evening. By candle-light she seemed to fade. She did not remind him of Shelley at all. She was not ethereal nor diaphanous. She was a sapphire, not a moonstone. She belonged to the world of romance, not to the world of lyric poetry. Something had been left out when she had been created. She was unfinished. What had been left out? Was it her soul? Was it her heart? Was she Undine? No. Was she Lilith? No. All the same she belonged to the fairy-tale world; to the Hans Andersen world, or to Perrault. The Princess without ... without what? She was the Sleeping Beauty in the wood, who had woken up and remembered nothing, and could never recover from the long trance. She would never be the same again. Never really awake in the world. And yet she had brought nothing back from fairyland except her looks.

"She reminds me," he said, "of a line of Robert Lytton's: 'All her looks are poetry and all her thoughts are prose.' It is not that she is prosaic, but she is muffled. You see, during that long slumber which lasted a hundred years – " Rudd had now quite forgotten my presence and was talking or, rather, murmuring to himself. He was composing aloud. "During that long exile which lasted a hundred years, and passed in a flash, she had no dreams."

"You mean she has no heart," I said.

"No, not that," he answered, "heart as much as you like. She is kind. She is affectionate. But no passion, no dreams. Above all, no dreams. That is what she is. The Princess without any dreams."

Do you think that would do as a title? No, it is not quite right. *The Sleeping Beauty in the World*? No. Why did Rostand use the title, *La Princesse Lointaine*? That would have done. No, that is not quite right either. She is not far away. She is here. She looks far away and isn't. I must think about it. It will come."

Then, quite abruptly, he asked me what I imagined the garden of the hotel looked like. I said that I had never been here before and that I had only heard descriptions of the place from my acquaintances and from my servant, but I imagined the end of the garden, where I had often walked, to be rather like a Russian landscape. I had never been to Russia, but I had read Russian books, and what I imagined to be a rather untidy piece of long grass, fringed with a few birch trees and some firs, the whole rather baked and dry, reminded me of the descriptions in Tourgeniev's books.

Rudd said it was not like Russia. Russia had so much more space. So much more atmosphere. This little garden might be a piece of Scotland, might be a piece of Denmark, but it was not Russian.

I asked him whether he had been to Russia. Not in the flesh, he said, but in the spirit he had lived there for years.

Perhaps he wanted to see how much the second-hand impressions of a blind man were worth. He soon reverted to the original subject of our talk.

"Why is Miss Brandon not married?" he said.

I said I knew nothing about her, nothing about her life. I presumed her parents were dead. She was travelling with her aunt. They came here every year for her aunt's rheumatism. Mrs. Lennox had a house in London. She was a widow, not very well off, I thought. I told him I knew nothing of London life. I have lived in Italy for the last twenty years. I very seldom went to London, only, in fact, to see Kennaway. I told him he must find out about Miss Brandon's early history himself.

"She is very silent," he said.

"Mrs. Lennox is very talkative," I told him.

"What can I call it?" he asked, in an agony of impatience. "She has every beauty, every grace, except that of expression."

"*The Dumb Belle*?" The words escaped me and I immediately regretted them.

"No," he said, quite seriously, "she is not dumb, that is just the point. She talks, but she cannot express herself. Or rather, she has nothing to express. At least, I think she has nothing to express: or what she has got to express is not what we think it is. I imagine a story like *Pygmalion* and *Galatea*. Somebody waking her to life and then finding her quite different from what the stone image seemed to promise, from what it *did* promise. At any rate I have got my subject and I am extremely grateful. It is a wonderful subject."

"Henry James," I ventured.

"Ah, James," said Rudd, "yes, James, a wonderful intellect, but a critic, not a novelist. The French could do it. What would they have called it? *La Princesse désenchantée*, or *La Belle revenue du Bois*? You can't say that in English."

"Nor in French either," I thought to myself, but I said aloud, "*Out of the Wood* would suggest quite a different kind of book."

"A very different kind of book," said Rudd, quite gravely. "The kind of book that sells by the million."

Rudd then left me. He was enchanted with the idea of having something to write about. I felt that a good title for his novel would be *Eurydice Half-regained*, but I was diffident about suggesting a title to him, besides which I felt he would not like it. Miss Brandon, he would explain, was not like Eurydice, and if she was, she had forgotten her experiences beyond the Styx.

CHAPTER II

I am going to divide my record into chapters just as if I were writing a novel. The length of the chapters will be entirely determined by my inclination at the moment of writing. When I am tired the chapter will end. I don't know if this is what novelists do. It does not matter, as I am not writing a novel. I know it is not what Rudd does. He told me he planned out his novel before writing a line, and decided beforehand on the length of each chapter, but that he often made them longer in the first draft, and then eliminated. If you want to be terse, he said, you must not start by trying to be terse, by leaving out. You must say everything *first*. You can rub out afterwards. He told me he worked in charcoal, as it were, at first.

I shall not work in charcoal. I have no plan.

I asked Princess Kouragine what Rudd was like. She said he had something rather prim and dapper about him. I was quite wrong about his appearance. He wears a black tie. Princess Kouragine said, "*Il a l'air comme tout le monde, plutôt comme un médecin de campagne.*"

I asked her if she liked him. She said she did not know. She said he was agreeable, but she found no real pleasure in his society.

"You see," she said, "I like the society of my equals, I hate being with my superiors; that is why I hate being with royalties, authors and artists. Mr. Rudd can talk of nothing except his art, and I like Tauchnitz novels that one can read without any trouble. I hate realistic novels, especially in English."

I told her his novels were more often fantastic, with a certain amount of psychology in them.

"That is worse," she said, "I am old-fashioned. It is no use to try and convert me. I like Trollope and Ouida."

I offered to lend her a novel by Rudd, but she refused.

"I would rather not have read it," she said. "It would make me uncomfortable when I talked to him. As it is, as the idiot who has read nothing newer than Ouida, I am quite comfortable."

I said he was writing something now which I thought would interest her. I told her how Rudd was making Miss Brandon the pivot of a story.

"Ah!" she said. "He told me he was writing something for his own pleasure. I will read *that* book."

I said he did not intend to publish it.

"He will publish it," she said. "It will be very interesting. I wonder what he will make of Jean Brandon. I know her well. I have known her for five years. They come here every year. They stay a long time. It is economical. She is a good girl. I like her. *Elle me plaît.*"

I asked whether she was pretty.

The Princess said she was changeable —*journalière*, "*Elle a souvent mauvaise mine.*" Not tall enough. A beautiful skin like ivory, but too pale. Eyes. Yes, she had eyes. Most remarkable eyes. You could not tell whether they were blue or grey. Graceful. Pretty hands. Badly dressed, but from poverty and economy more than from *mauvais goût*. A very *English* beauty. "You will probably tell me she is Scotch or Irish. I don't care. I don't mean Keapsake or Gainsborough, nor Burne-Jones, but English all the same. But I can't describe her. She has charm and it escapes one. She has beauty, but it doesn't fit into any of the categories.

"One feels there is a lamp inside her which has gone out, for the time being, at any rate. She reminds me of some lines of Victor Hugo:

"Et les plus sombres d'entre nous
Ont eu leur aube éblouissante."

"I can imagine her having been quite dazzling when she was a young girl. I can imagine her still being dazzling now if someone were to light the lamp. It could be lit, I know. Once, two years ago, at the races here at Bavigny, I saw her excited. She wanted a friend to win a steeplechase and he won. She was transfigured. At that moment I thought I had seldom seen anyone more *éblouissante*. Her face shone as though it had been transparent."

Of course the poor girl was unhappy, and why was she unhappy? The reason was a simple one, she was poor, and Mrs. Lennox economized and used her as an economy.

"You see that the poor girl is obliged to make *de petites économies* in her clothes. She suffers from it I'm sure. Who wouldn't? This all comes from your silly system of marriage in England. You let two totally inexperienced beings with nothing to help them settle the question on which the whole of their lives is to depend. You let a girl marry her first love. It is too absurd. It never lasts. I do not say that marriages in our country do not often turn out very badly. No one knows that better than I do, Heaven knows; but I say that at least we give the poor children a chance. We at least do not build marriages on a foundation which we know to be unsound beforehand, or not there at all. We do not let two people marry when we know that the circumstances cannot help leading to disaster."

I said I did not think there was much to choose between the two systems. In France the young people had the chance of making a satisfactory marriage; in our country the young people had the chance of marrying whom they chose, of making the right choice. It was sometimes successful. Besides, when there were real obstacles the marriages did not as a rule come off. Mrs. Lennox had told me that Miss Brandon had been engaged when she was nineteen to a man in the army. He was too poor. The engagement had been broken off. The man had left the army and gone to the colonies, and there the matter had remained. I didn't think she would have been happier if she had been married off to a *parti*.

"She would not have been poor," said Princess Kouragine. "And she would have been more independent. She would have had a home."

She said she did not attach an enormous importance to riches, but she did attach great importance to real poverty, especially to poverty in the class of people with whom Miss Brandon lived. She said the worst kind of poverty was to live with people richer than yourself. It was a continual strain, she knew it from experience. She had been through it herself soon after she was married, after the first time her husband had been ruined. And nobody who had not been through it knew what it meant, the constant daily fret.

"The little subterfuges. Having to think of every cab and every box of cigarettes. Not that I thought of those," she said. "But it was clothes which were the trouble. I can see that that poor Jean suffers in the same way. And then, what a life! To spend all one's time with that Mrs. Lennox, who is as hard as a stone and ruthlessly selfish. She does not want Jean to marry. Jean is too useful to her."

I said I wondered why she had not married. Surely lots of men must have wanted to marry her.

Princess Kouragine said that Mrs. Lennox was quite capable of preventing it. She rarely took her out in London. She brought her to Haréville when the London season began and they stayed here two months. It was cheaper. In the winter they went to Florence or Nice.

I said I wondered whether she was still faithful to the man she had been engaged to, and what he was like.

Princess Kouragine said she did not know him. She had never seen him, but she had heard he was charming, *très bien*, but he hadn't a penny. It appeared, however, that he had a relation, possibly an uncle, who was well off, and who would probably leave him money. But he was not an old man and might live for years.

I said that perhaps Miss Brandon was waiting for him.

"Perhaps," said Princess Kouragine, "but she was only nineteen when they were engaged, and he has been away for the last five years. People change. She is no longer now what she was then, nor he, probably."

She did not think this episode was a real obstacle; she was convinced Miss Brandon did not feel bound, but she thought she had not yet met anyone whom she felt she would like to marry. Nor was it likely for her to do so considering the *milieu* in which she lived, in which she was obliged to live.

Mrs. Lennox liked the continental, international world. The world in which everyone spoke English and hardly anyone was English. It was not even the best side of the continental world she liked. She did not mean it was the shady side, not the world of adventurers and gamblers, but the world of international "culture." All the intellectual snobs were drawn instinctively to Mrs. Lennox. People who discovered new musicians, new novelists, and new painters, who suddenly pronounced as a dogma that Beethoven couldn't compose and that the old masters did not know how to draw, and that there was a new music, a new science, and, above all, a new religion.

"She is always surrounded just by those one or two men and women '*qui rendent l'Europe insupportable et qui la gobent*,' they swallow everything in her, her views on art, her dyed hair, and her ridiculous hats. Is it likely that Miss Brandon, the daughter of an old general, brought up in the Highlands of Scotland, and passionately fond of outdoor life, would find a husband among people who were discussing all day long whether Wagner was not better as a writer than a musician? She never complains of it, poor child, but I know quite well that she is *écoeurée*. She has had five years of it. Her father died five years ago. Till he died she used to look after him and that was probably not an easy life, either, as I believe he was a very exacting old man. Her mother had died years before, and she had no brothers and no sisters. No relations who were friends, and few women friends. She is alone in a world she hates."

I said I wondered that she had not left it. Girls often struck out a line for themselves now and found occupations.

Princess Kouragine said that Miss Brandon was not that sort of girl. She was shy and apathetic as far as that kind of thing was concerned, apathetic now about everything. She had just given in. What else could she do? Where could she live? She had not a penny.

"You see if a sensible marriage had been arranged for her, all this would not have happened. She would have now had a home and children."

I said that perhaps she was being faithful to the young man.

Princess Kouragine said I could take it from her that she had never loved, "*elle n'a jamais aimé*" She had never had a *grande passion*.

I asked the Princess whether she thought her capable of such a thing. She seemed so quiet.

"You have never seen the lamp lit," said the Princess, "but I have; only for one moment, it is true, but I shall never forget it."

She wondered what Rudd would make of the character. He hardly knew her. Did he seem to understand her?

I said I thought he spun people out of his own inner consciousness. A face gave him an idea and he made his own character, but he thought he was being very analytical, and that all he created was based on observation.

"He certainly observes nothing," said the Princess.

She asked who would be the hero. I said we had not got as far as the hero when he had discussed it with me.

"And what will he call the novel?" she asked.

Ah, that was just the question. He had discussed that at length. He had not found a title that satisfied him. He had got so far as "*The Princess without any Dreams*."

"*Dieu qu'il est bête*," she said. "*Cette enfant ne fait que rêver*."

She told me I must get Rudd to discuss it with me again.

"Perhaps he will talk to me about it, too. I will make him do so, in fact. It will not be difficult. Then we will compare notes. It will be most amusing. The Princess without any dreams, indeed! He might just as well call her the Princess without any eyes!"

CHAPTER III

This afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the most secluded part of the park when I heard someone approach, and Miss Brandon asked if she might sit down near me and talk a little. Mrs. Lennox had gone for a motor drive with Mr. Rudd.

"He is our new friend," she explained. "That is to say, more Aunt Netty's friend than mine."

I asked her whether she liked him.

"Yes, but he doesn't take much notice of me. He asks me questions, but never waits for the answer. I feel he has made up his mind about me, that I am labelled and pigeon-holed. He loves Aunt Netty."

I asked what they talked about.

"Books," she said.

"His books, I suppose," I said.

I wondered whether Mrs. Lennox had read them. I could feel Miss Brandon guessing my inward question.

"Aunt Netty *is* very clever," she said. "She makes people enjoy themselves, especially those kind of people... Last night he dined at our table, and so did Mabel Summer. You don't know her? You must know her, you would like her. She is going away to-morrow, for a fortnight to the Lakes, but she is coming back then. We nearly laughed at one moment. It was awful. They were discussing Balzac, and Aunt Netty said that Balzac was a snob like all – and she was just going to say like all novelists, when she caught herself up and said: 'like Thackeray.' Mr. Rudd said that Balzac and Thackeray had nothing in common, and Mabel, who had caught my eye, and I, were speechless. Just for a moment I was shaking, and Mr. Rudd looked at us. It was awful, but Mabel recovered and said she didn't think we could realize now the kind of atmosphere that Thackeray lived in."

I said I didn't suppose that Rudd had noticed anything. He didn't seem to me to notice that kind of thing.

She agreed, but said he had moments of lucidity which were unexpected and disconcerting. "For one second," she said, "he suspected we were laughing at him. Aunt Netty manages him perfectly. He loves her. She knows exactly what to say to him. He knows she is not critical. I think he is rather suspicious. How funny clever men are!" she said, after a pause.

I said she really meant to say, "How stupid clever men are!" I reminded her of the profound saying of one of Kipling's women, that the stupidest woman could manage a clever man, but it took a very clever woman to manage a fool.

She said she had always found the most disconcerting element in stupid people – or people who were thought to be stupid – was their sudden flashes of lucidity, when they saw things quite plainly. Clever men didn't have these flashes, but the curious thing was that Rudd did.

I said I thought this was because, apart from his literary talent, which was an accomplishment like conjuring or acting, quite separate from the rest of his personality, Rudd was not a clever man. All his cleverness went into his books. I said I thought there were two kinds of writers: those who were better than their books, and of whom the books were only the overflow, and those who put every drop of their being into the books and were left with a dry and uninteresting shell.

She said she thought she had only met that kind.

"Aunt Netty," she said, "loves all authors and it's odd considering –"

She stopped, but I ended her sentence: "She has never read a book in her life."

Miss Brandon laughed and said I was unfair.

"Reading tires her. I don't think anyone has time to read a book after they are eighteen. I haven't. But I feel I am a terrible wet blanket to all Aunt Netty's friends. I can't even pretend to be enthusiastic. You see I like the other sort of people so much better."

I said I was afraid the other sort of people were poorly represented here just now.

"We have another friend," she said, "at least, I have."

"Also a new friend?" I asked.

"I have known him in a way a long time," she said. "He is a Russian called Kranitski. We met him first two years ago at Florence. He was looking after his mother, who was ill and who lived at Florence. We used to meet him often, but I never got to know him. We never spoke to each other. We saw him, too, in the distance once on the Riviera."

I asked what he was like.

"He is all lucid intervals," she said, "it is frightening. But he is very easy to get on with. Of course I don't know him at all really. I have only seen him twice. But one didn't have to plough through the usual commonplaces. He began at once as if we had known each other for years, and I felt myself doing the same thing."

I asked what he was.

She didn't quite know.

I said I thought I knew the name. It reminded me of something, but I certainly did not know him. Miss Brandon said she would introduce me to him. I asked what he looked like.

"Oh, an untidy, comfortable face," she said. "He is always smiling. He is not at all international. He is like a dog. The kind of dog that understands you in a minute. The extraordinary thing is that after the first time we had a talk I felt as if I knew him intimately, as if I had met him on some other planet, as if we were going on, not as if we were beginning. I suddenly found myself telling him things I had never told anyone. Of course, this does happen to one sometimes with perfect strangers, at least it does to me. Don't you think it easy sometimes to pour out confidences to a perfect stranger? But I don't expect people give you the opportunity. They tell you things."

I said this did happen sometimes, probably because people thought I didn't count, and that as I couldn't see their faces they needn't tell the truth.

"I would find it as difficult to tell you a lie," she said, "as to tell a lie on the telephone. You know how difficult that is. I should think people tell you the truth as they do in the Confessional. The priest shuts his eyes, doesn't he?"

I said I believed this was the case.

"This Russian is a Catholic," she said. "Isn't that rare for a Russian?"

I said he was, perhaps, a Pole. The name sounded Polish.

No, he had told her he was not a Pole. He was not a man who explained. Explanations evidently bored him. He was not a soldier, but he had been to the Manchurian War. He had lived in the Far East a great deal, and in Italy. Very little in Russia apparently. He had come to Haréville for a rest cure.

"I asked him," she said, "if he had been ill, and he said something had been cut out of his life. He had been pruned. The rest of him went on sprouting just the same."

I said I supposed he spoke English.

Yes, he had had an English nurse and an English governess. He had once been to England as a child for a few weeks to the Isle of Wight. He knew no English people. He liked English books.

"Byron, and Jerome K. Jerome?" I suggested.

"No," she said, "Miss Austen."

I asked whether he had made Mrs. Lennox's acquaintance. Yes, they had talked a little.

"Aunt Netty talked to him about Tolstoi. Tolstoi is one of Mr. Rudd's stock topics."

I said I supposed she had retailed Rudd's views on the Russian. Was he astonished?

"Not a bit. I could see he had heard it all before," she said. "He was angelic. He shook his ears now and then like an Airedale terrier. Aunt Netty doesn't want him. Mr. Rudd is enough for her and she is enjoying herself. She always finds someone here. Last year it was a composer."

"Does Princess Kouragine know him?" I asked.

No, she didn't. She had never met him, but she knew of him.

I asked what Mr. Rudd thought about Princess Kouragine.

"Mr. Rudd and Aunt Netty discuss her for hours. He has theories about her. He began by saying she had the Slav indifference. Then Aunt Netty said she was French. But Mr. Rudd said it was catching. People who lived in Ireland became Irish, and people who lived in Russia became Russian. Then Aunt Netty said Princess Kouragine had lived in France and Italy. Mr. Rudd said she had caught the microbe, and that she was a woman who lived only by half-hours. He meant she was only alive for half-an-hour at a time."

At that moment someone walked up the path.

"Here is Monsieur Kranitski," she said. She introduced us.

"I have been walking to the end of the park," he said. "It is curious, but that side of the park with the dry lawn-tennis court, those birch trees and some straggling fir trees on the hill and the long grass, reminds me of a Russian garden which I used to know very well."

I said that when people had described that same spot to me I had imagined it like the descriptions of places in Tourgenyev's books.

He said I was quite right.

I said it was a wonderful tribute to an author's powers that he could make the character of a landscape plain, not only to a person who had never been in his country, but even to a blind man.

Kranitski said that Tourgenyev described gardens very well, and a particular kind of Russian landscape. "What I call the orthodox kind. I hear James Rudd, the writer, is staying here. He has a gift for describing places: Italian villages, journeys in France, little canals at Venice, the Campagna."

"You like his books?" I asked.

"Some of them; when they are fantastic, yes. When he is psychological I find them annoying, but one says I am wrong."

"He is too complicated," Miss Brandon said. "He spoils things by seeing too much, by explaining too much."

I asked Kranitski if he was a great novel reader. He said he liked novels if they were very good, like Miss Austen and Henry James, or else very, very bad ones. He could not read any novel because it was a novel. On the other hand he could read any detective story, good, bad or middling.

Miss Brandon asked him if he would like to know Rudd.

"Is he very frightful?" he asked.

I said I did not think he was at all alarming.

Yes, he said, he would like to make his acquaintance. He had never met an English author.

"You won't mind his explaining the Russian character to you?" I said.

Kranitski said he would not mind that, and that as his mother was Italian, and as he had lived very little in Russia and spoke Russian badly, perhaps Mr. Rudd would not count him as a Russian.

Miss Brandon said that would make the explanation more complicated still.

CHAPTER IV

Life begins very early in the morning here. The water-drinkers and the bathers begin their day at half-past six. My day does not begin till half-past seven, as I don't drink many glasses of the water.

At seven o'clock the village bell rings for Mass.

It was some days after the conversations I recorded in my last chapter I woke one morning early at half-past six and got up. I asked my servant, Henry, to lead me to the village church. I went in and sat down at the bottom of the aisle. Early Mass had not yet begun. The church seemed to me empty. But from a corner I heard the whispered mutter of a confession. Presently two people walked past me, the priest and the penitent, I surmised. Someone walked upstairs. A boy's footsteps then clattered past me. The church bell was rung. Someone walked downstairs and up the aisle; the priest again, I thought. Then Mass began. Towards the end someone again walked up the aisle. I remained sitting till the end.

At the door, outside the church, someone greeted me. It was Kranitski. He walked back with me to the hotel. He asked me whether I was a Catholic. I told him that Catholic churches attracted me, but that I was an agnostic. He seemed slightly astonished at this; astonished at the attraction in my case, I supposed. He said something which indicated surprise.

I told him I could not explain it. It was certainly not the exterior panoply and trappings of the church which attracted me, for of those I saw nothing. Nor was it the music, for although I was not a musician, my long blindness had made me acutely sensitive to sound, and the sounds in churches were often, I found, painful.

I asked him if he was a Catholic.

"I was born a Catholic," he said, "but for years I have not been *pratiquant*, until I came here. Not for seven years."

"You have not been inside a church for seven years?" I said.

"Oh yes," he said, "inside a church very often."

I said most people lost their faith as young men. Sometimes it came back.

"I was not like that," he said, "I never lost my faith, not for a day, not for an hour."

I said I didn't understand.

"There were reasons – an obstacle," he said. "But now they are not there any more. Now I am once more inside."

"Inside what?" I asked.

"The church. During those seven years I was outside."

"But as you went to church when you liked," I said, "I do not see the difference."

"I cannot explain it to you," he said. "You would not understand. At least, you would understand if you knew and I could explain, only it would be too long. But as it was it was like knowing you couldn't have a bath if you wanted one – like feeling always starved. You see I am naturally believing. If I had not been, it would have been no matter. I cannot help believing. Many times I should have liked not to believe. Many times I was envying people who feel you go out like a candle when you die. I am not *mystique* or anything like that; but something at the back of my mind is keeping on saying to me: 'You know it *is* true,' just as in some people there is something inside them which is keeping on saying: 'You know it is *not* true.' And yet I couldn't do otherwise. That is to say, I resolved not to do otherwise. Life is complicated. Things are so mixed up sometimes. One has to sacrifice what one most cares for. At least, I had to. I was caring for my religion more than I can describe, but I had to give it up. No, that is wrong, I didn't *have to*, but I gave it up. It was all very embarrassing. But now the obstacle is not there. I am free. It is a relief."

"But if you never lost your faith and went on going to church, and *could* go to church whenever you liked, I cannot see what you had to give up. I don't see what the obstacle prevented."

"To explain you that I should have to tell too long a story," he said. "I will tell you some day if you have patience to listen. Not now."

We had got back to the park. I went into the pavilion to drink the water. I asked Kranitski if he was going to have a glass.

"No," he said, "I do not need any waters or any cure. I am cured already, but I need a long rest to forget it all. You know sometimes after illness you regret the *maladie*, and I am still a little bit dizzy. After you have had a tooth out, in spite of the relief from pain you mind the hole."

He went into the hotel.

Later in the morning I met Princess Kouragine.

She asked me how Rudd's novel was getting on. I said I had not seen him, and had had no talk with him about it. I told her I had made the acquaintance of Kranitski.

"I too," she said. "I like him. I never knew him before, but I know a little of his history. He has been in love a very long time with someone I knew – and still know, I won't say her name. I don't want to rake up old scandals, but she was Russian, and she lived, a long time ago, in Rome, and she was unhappy with her husband, whom I always liked, and thought extremely *comme il faut*, but they were not suited."

"Why didn't she divorce him?" I asked.

"The children," she said; "three children, two boys and a girl, and she adored them, so did the father, and he would never have let them go, nor would she have left them for anyone in the world."

"If she lived at Rome, I may have met her," I said.

"It is quite possible," said the Princess. "My friend was a charming person, a little vague, very gentle, very graceful, very musical, very attractive."

"Is the husband still alive?" I asked.

"Yes, he is alive. They do not live at Rome any more, but in the Caucasus, and at Paris in the winter. I saw them both in Paris this winter."

I asked if the Kranitski episode was still going on.

"It is evidently over," said Princess Kouragine.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he is happy. *Il n'a plus des yeux qui regardent au delà.*"

"Was he very much in love with her?" I asked.

"Yes, very much. And she too. He will be a character for Mr. Rudd," she went on, "I saw him talking to him yesterday, with Mrs. Lennox and Jean. Jean likes him. She looks better these last two days."

I said I had noticed she seemed more lively.

"Ah, but physically she looks different. That child wants admiration and love."

"Love?" I said. "Won't it be rather unfortunate if she looks for love in that quarter? He won't love again, will he? Or not so soon as this."

"You are like the people who think one can only have measles once," she said. "One can have it over and over again, and the worse you have it once, the worse you may get it again. He is just in the most susceptible state of all."

I said they both seemed to me in the same position. They were both of them bound by old ties.

"That is just what will make it easier."

I asked whether there would be any other obstacles to a marriage between them, such as money. Princess Kouragine said that Kranitski ought to be quite well off.

"There was no obstacle of that kind," she said. "He is a Catholic, but I do not suppose that will make any difference."

"Not to Miss Brandon," I said, "nor really to her aunt: Mrs. Lennox might, I think, look upon it as a kind of obstacle; but a little more an obstacle than if he was a radical and a little less of one than if he was socialist."

She said she did not think that Mrs. Lennox would like her niece to marry anyone.

"But if they want to get married nothing will stop them. That girl has a character of iron."

"And he?" I asked.

"He has got some character."

"Would the other person mind – the lady at Rome?"

"She probably will mind, but she would not prevent it. *Elle est foncièrement bonne*. Besides which she knows that it is over, there is nothing more to be said or done. She is *philosophe* too. A sensible woman. She insisted on marrying her husband. She was in love with him directly she came out, and they were married at once. He would have been an excellent husband for almost anyone else except for her, and if she had only waited two years she would have known this herself. As it was, she married him, and found she had married someone else. The inevitable happened. She is far too sensible to complain now. She knows she has made a *gâchis* of her life, and that she only has herself to thank. As it is, she has her children and she is devoted to them. She will not want to make a *gâchis* of Kranitski's life as well as of her own, and she nearly did that too. If he marries and is happy she ought to be pleased, and she will be."

"And what about the young man who was engaged to Miss Brandon?" I asked.

"I do not give that story a thought," said the Princess. "They were probably in the same situation towards each other as the Russian couple I told you of were before they were married, only Jean had the good fortune to do nothing in a hurry. She is probably now profoundly grateful. How can a girl of eighteen know life? How can she even know her own mind?"

"It depends on the young man," I said. "We know nothing about him."

"Yes, we know nothing about him; but that probably shows there is nothing to know. If there were something to know we should know it by now. It was all so long ago. They are both different people now, and they probably know it."

I said I would not like to speculate or even hazard a guess on such a matter. It might be as she said, but the contrary might just as well be true. I did not think Miss Brandon was a person who would change her mind in a hurry. I thought she was one of the rare people who did know her own mind. I could imagine her waiting for years if it was necessary.

As I was saying this, Princess Kouragine said to me:

"She is walking across the park now with Kranitski. They have sat down on a seat near the music kiosk. They are talking hard. The lamp is being lit – she looks ten years younger than she did last week, and she has got on a new hat."

CHAPTER V

During the rest of that day I saw nobody. I gathered there were races somewhere, and Mrs. Lennox had taken a large party. Just before dinner I got a message from Rudd asking whether he might dine at my table.

I do not dine in the big dining-room, as I find the noise and the bustle trying, but in a smaller room where some of the visitors have their *petit déjeuner*.

So we were alone and had the room to ourselves. I asked him if he had been working.

He said he had been making notes, plans and sketches, but he could not get on unless he could discuss his work with someone.

"The story is gradually taking shape," he said. "I haven't made up my mind what the setting is to be. But I have got the kernel. My story is what I told you it would be. The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, but when the Prince wakes her up she is no longer the same person as she was when she went to sleep. The enchantment has numbed her. She will have none of the Fairy Prince; she doesn't recognize him as a Fairy Prince, and she lets him go away. As soon as he is gone she regrets what she has done and begins to hope he will come back some day. Time passes and he does come back, but he has forgotten her and he does not recognize her. Someone else falls in love with her, and she thinks she loves him; but, at the first kiss he gives her, the forest closes round her and she falls asleep again."

I asked him if it was going to be a fairy-tale.

He said, No, a modern story with perhaps a mysterious lining to it.

He imagined this kind of story. A girl brought up in romantic surroundings. She meets a boy who falls in love with her. This, in a way, wakens her to life, but she will not marry him; and he goes away for years. Time passes. She leads a numbed existence. She travels, and somewhere abroad she meets the love of her youth again. He has forgotten her and loves someone else. Someone else wants to marry her. They are engaged to be married. But as soon as things get as far as this the man finds that in some inexplicable way she is different, and *he* breaks off the engagement, and she goes on living as she did before, apparently the same, but in reality dead.

"Then," I said, "she always loves the Fairy Prince of her youth."

He said: "She thinks she loves him when it is too late, but in reality she never loves anyone. She is only half-awake in life. She never gets over the enchantment which numbs her for life."

I asked what would correspond to the enchantment in real life.

He said perhaps the romantic surroundings of her childhood.

I said I thought he had not meant her to be a romantic character.

"No more she is," he explained. "The romance is all from outside. She looks romantic, but she isn't. She is like a person who has been bewitched. She always thinks she is going to behave like an ordinary person, but she can't. She has no dreams. She would like to marry, to have a home, to be comfortable and free, but something prevents it. When the young man proposes to her she feels she can never marry him. As soon as he is gone, she regrets having done this, and imagines that if he came back she would love him."

"And when he does come back, does she love him?" I asked.

"She thinks she does, but that is only because he has forgotten her. If he hadn't forgotten her, and had asked her to marry him, she would have said 'No' a second time. Then when the other person who is in love with her wants to marry her, she *thinks* she is in love with him; she thinks *he* is the Fairy Prince; but as soon as they are engaged, *he* feels that his love has gone. It has faded from the want of something in *her* which he discovers at the very first kiss; he breaks off the engagement, and she is grateful at being set free, and glad to go back to her forest."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.