

Locke William John

The Belovéd Vagabond



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CHAPTER I

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

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

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

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

It fell out thus.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Sir," said I, confused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Can you cook a herring?" he shouted.

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

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

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

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

And I was to breakfast with him!

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

Since then I have breakfasted in the houses of the wealthy, I have lunched at the Café Anglais, I have dined at the Savoy but never have I eaten, never till they give me a welcoming banquet in the Elysian fields, shall I eat so ambrosial a meal as that first herring with Paragot.

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

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

I was too full of food and adoration to reply. I gazed at him dumbly worshipping and choked over a cup of tea. When I recovered he questioned me as to my home life, my schooling, my ideas of a future state and my notions of a career in this world. The height of my then ambition was to keep a fried-fish shop. The restaurateur with whom my good mother dealt used to sit for hours in his doorway in Drury Lane reading a book, and I considered this a most dignified and scholarly avocation. When I made this naïve avowal to Paragot, he looked at me with a queer pity in his eyes, and muttered an exclamation in a foreign tongue. I have never met anyone so full of strange oaths as Paragot. As to my religious convictions, they were chiefly limited to a terrifying conception of the hell to which my mother daily consigned me. In devils, fires, chains and pitchforks its establishment was as complete as any *inferno* depicted by Orcagna. I used to wake up of nights in a cold sweat through dreaming of it.

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

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

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

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

"What is your name?" asked Paragot.

"Augustus, Sir."

"Augustus, what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I may as well remark here that Paragot was not his real name; neither was Josiah Henkedyke by which he was then known to me. He had a harmless mania for names, and I have known him use half a dozen. But that of Paragot which he assumed later as his final alias is the one with which he is most associated in my mind, and to avoid confusion I must call him that from the start. Indeed, looking backward down the years, I wonder how he could ever have been anything else than Paragot. That Phœbus Apollo could once have borne the name of John Jones is unimaginable.

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

"Yes, Sir," said I.

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

"Yes, Master," said I.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

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

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

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

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

In the morning, at about eleven, I rose and prepared breakfast for Paragot and myself, which we ate together in his room. For a couple of hours he instructed me in what he was pleased to call the humanities. Then he sent me out into the street for air and exercise, with instructions to walk to Hyde Park, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, Whiteley's – he always had a fresh objective for me – and to bring him back my views thereon and an account of what I had noticed on the way. When I came home I delivered myself into the hands of Mrs. Housekeeper and turned scullion again. The plates, glasses, knives and forks of the previous evening's orgy were washed and cleaned, the room swept and aired, and a meal cooked for Mrs. Housekeeper and myself which we ate at a corner of the long table. Paragot himself dined out.

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

I mention this, not because it is of any great interest, but because it exhibits a certain side of Paragot's character. In those early days I was not critical. I lived in a maze of delight. Paragot was

the Wonder of the Earth, my bedroom a palace chamber, and the abominable Sunday night smell pervaded my senses like the perfumes of all the Arabies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He caught up his hat and threw me my cap, and we went out. He had a sudden, breathless way of doing things. I am sure thirty seconds had not elapsed between the idea of the National Gallery entering his head and our finding ourselves on the stairs.

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

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

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

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

"Draw it?" he echoed incredulously.

"Yes, Master."

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

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

He walked swiftly up and down the room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Does anyone know what that is?"

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

"You are right, sir," said Paragot, threading his fingers through his long black hair. "They tell of my predecessor in office, the first President of this Club, who was a man of many wanderings and

many sufferings and had seen many cities and knew the hearts of men. I, gentlemen, have had my Odyssey, and I have been to Warsaw, and," with a rapier flash of a glance at the gentleman who had accused him of leading bears, "I know the miserable hearts of men." He rapped on the table with his hammer. "Asticot, come here," he shouted.

I obeyed trembling.

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

I felt shrivelled to the size of a pea. Beneath Paragot's grotesqueness ran an unprecedented severity. I was conscious of the accusing glare of every eye. In my blind bolt to the door I had the good fortune to run headlong into a tray of drinks which Cherubino was carrying.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why, Master?" I asked.

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

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

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

"And not London?"

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

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

At the Board School I had bolted enough indigestible historical facts to know that the English had always beaten the French, and I had drawn the natural conclusion that the French were a vastly inferior race of beings. It was, I verily believe, the first step in my spiritual education to realise that the god of my idolatry suffered no diminution of grandeur by reason of his nationality. Indeed he

gained accession, for after this he talked often to me of France in his magniloquent way, until I began secretly to be ashamed of being English. This had one advantage, in that I set myself with redoubled vigour to learn his language.

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

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

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

It runs:

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

"What are they, Lord?"

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

"Beware, therefore, lest thou strive too earnestly after some desire which thou hast conceived, without taking counsel of me: lest haply it repent thee afterwards, and that displease thee which before pleased, and for which thou didst long as for a great good. For not every affection which seemeth good is to be forthwith followed: neither is every opposite affection to be immediately avoided. Sometimes it is expedient to use restraint even in good desires and wishes, lest through importunity thou fall into distraction of mind, lest through want of discipline thou become a stumbling-block to others, or lest by the resistance of others thou be suddenly disturbed and brought to confusion."

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

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

memorable night in the Club? Ought I not to be content with everything Paragot should ordain? And was it not my duty to murmur at no inconvenience?

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

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

CHAPTER III

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

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

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

I had many pictures of my hero in those strange letter days, so remote to my childish mind. He crosses the Channel in December, just to skulk for one dark night against the railings of the London Square where she dwelt, in the hope of seeing her shadow on the blind. For some reason which I could not comprehend, the lovers were forbidden to meet. It rains, he sees nothing, but he returns to Paris with contentment in his heart and a terrible cold in his head. But, "I have seen the doorstep," he writes, "*qu'effleurent tous les jours ces petits pieds si adorés*."

I hate your modern manner of wooing. A few weeks ago a young woman in need of my elderly counsel showed me a letter from her betrothed. He had been educated at Oxford University and possessed a motor-car, and yet he addressed her as "old girl" and alluded to "the regular beanfeast" they would have when they were married; and the damsel not only found nothing wanting in the missive, but treasured it as if it had been an impapyrated kiss. "*Joie de mon âme*," wrote Paragot, "I have seen the doorstep which your little feet so adored touch lightly every day." I like that better. But this is the opinion of the Asticot of a hundred and fifty. The Asticot of fourteen could not contrast: for him sufficed the Absolute of the romance of Paragot's love-making. Yet I did have a standard of comparison – Ferdinand, whom till then I had regarded as the Prince of Lovers. But he paled into the most prosaic young man before the newly illuminated Paragot, and as for Miranda I sent her packing from her throne in my heart and Joanna reigned in her stead. Little idiot that I was, I set to dreaming of Joanna. You may not like the name, but to me it held and still holds unspeakable music.

The other papers, as I have said, were records of travel, and I instinctively recognized that they referred to subsequent Joanna-less days. They were written on the backs of bills in outlandish languages, leaves torn from greasy note-books, waste stuff exhaling exotic odours, and odds and scraps of paper indescribable. In after years in Paris I besought Paragot, almost on my knees, to write an account of the years of vagabondage to which these papers refer. It would make, I told him, a *picaresque* romance compared with which that of Gil Bias de Santillane were the tale of wanderings round a village pump. Such, said I, is given to few men to produce. But Paragot only smiled, and sipped his absinthe. It was against his principles, he said. The world would be a gentler habitat if there had never been written or graven record of a human action, and he refused to pander to the obscene curiosity of the multitude as to the thoughts and doings of an entire stranger. Besides, literary composition was beset with too many difficulties. One's method of expression had always to be in evening dress which he abhorred, and he could not abide the violet ink and pin-pointed pens supplied in cafés and places where one writes. So the world has lost a new Odyssey.

The notes formed reading as disconnected as a dictionary. They were so abrupt. Incidents were noted which stimulated my young imagination like stinging-nettles; and then nothing more.

"As soon as Hedwige had taught me German, she grew sick and tired of me; and when she wanted to marry an under-officer of cavalry with moustaches reaching to the top of his *Pikelhaube*, who tried to run me through the body when he saw such a scarecrow walking out with her, I left Cassel."

And that was all I learned with regard to Cassel, Hedwige, (save from two other notes) or his learning the German tongue.

The following note is the only one he thought worth while to make of a journey through Russia.

"Novotorshakaya is a beastly hole (*un trou infect*). The bugs are the most companionable creatures in it, and they are the cleanest."

"At Prague," he scribbles on a sheet of paper stained with coffee-cup rings, "I made the acquaintance of a polite burglar, who introduced me to his lady wife, and to other courteous criminals, their spouses and families. My slight knowledge of Czech, which I had by this time acquired, enabled me to take vast pleasure in their society. Granted their sociological premises, based on Proudhon, they are too logical. The lack of imaginative power to break away from convention, *their convention*, is a serious defect in their character. They take their gospel of *tuum est meum* too seriously. I do not inordinately sympathise with people who get themselves hanged for a principle. And that is what my friend Mysdrizin did. An old lady of Prague, obstinate as the old sometimes are, on whom he called professionally, disputed his theories; whereupon, instead of smiling with the indulgence of one who knows the art of living, and letting her have her own way, he convinced her with a life-preserver. His widow, like her predecessor of Ephesus, desiring speedy consolation, I fled the city. My Epicureanism and her iron-bound individualism would have clashed. I had played the Battle of Prague *à quatre mains* sufficiently in my tender childhood. I had no wild yearning to recommence."

Here is another:

"Verona – "

There is no date. None of these jottings bear a date, and when I last saw Paragot he had not the patience to arrange these far off memories. Verona! To me the word recalls immemorable associations – vistas of narrow old streets redolent of the Renaissance, echoing still with brawl and clash of arms, and haunted by the general stock in trade of the artist's historical fancy. But did Verona appeal to Paragot's romantic sense? Not a bit of it.

"At Verona," runs the jotting, "I lodged with the cheeriest little undertaker in the world, who had a capital low-class practice. His wife, four children, and whoever happened to be the lodger, were all pressed into the merry service. We sang *Funiculi funiculà* as we drove in the nails. When I make coffins again I shall sing that refrain. It has an unisonal value that is positively captivating. Had it not been that a diet of spaghetti and anæmic wine, a *tord-boyau* (intestine-twister) of unparalleled

virulence undermined my constitution, and that the four children, whose bedroom I shared, all took whooping-cough at once and thus robbed me of sleep, I might have been coffin-making to the tune of *Funiculi, Funiculà* to the present day."

Here and there were jottings of figures. I know now they refer to Paragot's tiny patrimony on which he – and I, in after years – subsisted. It was so small that no wonder he worked now and then for a living wage.

I also see now, as of course I could not be expected to see then, that Paragot, being a creature of extremes, would either have the highest or the lowest. In these travel-sketches, as he cannot go to Grand Hotels, I find him avoiding like lazar-houses the commercial or family hostelrys where he will foregather with the half-educated, the half-bred, the half-souled; the offence of them is too rank for his spirit. The pretending simian class, aping the vices of the rich and instinct with the vices of the low, and frank in neither, moves the man's furious scorn. He will have realities at any cost. All said and done, the bugs of Novortovshakaya did not masquerade as hummingbirds, nor merry Giuseppi Sacconi of Verona as a critic of Girolami dai Libri.

"I don't mind," he writes on a loose sheet, apropos of nothing, "the frank dunghill outside a German peasant's kitchen window. It is a matter of family pride. The higher it can be piled the greater his consideration. But what I loathe and abominate is the dungheap hidden beneath Hedwige's draper papa's parlour floor."

When I came to this in my wrongful search through Paragot's papers, I felt greatly relieved. I thought Hedwige had seduced him from his allegiance to Joanna, and that he was sorry she had married the sergeant with moustaches reaching to his *Pikelhaube*, though what part of his person his *Pikelhaube* was, I could not for the life of me imagine. I pictured Hedwige as a gigantic awe-compelling lady. The name somehow conveyed the idea to me. It was peculiarly comforting to learn that she was a horrid girl whose papa had a draper's shop over a dunghill. I no longer bothered my head concerning her, for soon I came across a reference to Joanna.

"I was lounging one day in the Puerta del Sol, that swarming central parallelogram of Madrid, and musing on the possibilities of progress in a nation which contents itself with ox-transport in the heart of its capital, when a carriage drove past me in which I can almost still swear I saw Joanna. It entered the Calle de San Hieronimo. I started in racing pursuit and fell into the arms of a green-gloved soldier. To avoid arrest as a madman or a murderer, for no sane man runs in Spain, I leaped into a fiacre and gave such chase as tomorrow's victim of the bull-ring would allow. We came up with the carriage on the Prado, just in time to see the skirts of a lady vanish through the door of a house. I dismissed my cab and waited. I waited two solid hours. That attracted no attention. Everyone waits in Spain. To stand interminably at a street corner is to take out a patent of respectability. But my confounded heart beat wildly. I had an *agonized desire* to see her again. I addressed the liveried coachman in my best Spanish, taking off my hat and bowing low.

"Señor, will you have the great goodness to tell me who is that lady?"

"Señor," he replied with equal urbanity, 'it is not correct for coachmen to give rapscallions information as to their employers.'

"When your Señora bids the rapscallion sit beside her in the carriage and orders you to drive, you will regret your insolence," said I.

"I turned a haughty back on him; but I felt his lackey's eye fixed disapprovingly on my rags.

"I will hear the sound," said I to myself, 'of her silvery English voice, or I will die.'

"Then the door opened, and the beautiful lady entered the carriage; *and it was not Joanna*.

"The gods were without bowels of compassion for me that day."

Another scrap contains the following:

"Thus have I come to the end of a five years' vagabondage. I started out as a Pilgrim to the Inner Shrine of Truth which I have sought from St. Petersburg to Lisbon, from Taormina to Christiania. I have lived in a spiritual shadowland, dreaming elusive dreams, my better part stayed by the fitful

vision of things unseen. Such an exquisite wild-goose-chase has never man undertaken before or since the dear Knight of La Mancha. And now I come to think of it, I don't know what the deuce I have been after, save that instead of pursuing I have all the time been running away.

"In my next quest I must not proclaim my Dulcinea too loudly. When Hedwige's little sister came to me with a doll into which Hedwige had savagely run hatpins so that the stuffing came out, I consoled the weeping infant with a new doll and the assurance that Hedwige was the spitefullest cat as yet evolved from a feline sex. I had no notion at the time of the reason for Hedwige's viciousness. But now I fancy she must have acted according to mediæval superstition and used the doll as Joanna's hated effigy. I remember that the next time I saw her I criticised her straight Teutonic fringe and fanfaronaded on the captivating frizziness of Joanna's hair. The wonder is that Hedwige did not run hatpins into *me*. The murderer's widow of Prague was built of sterner stuff; she cared not a hempen strand for Joanna, a pale consumptive doxy, according to her picturing, who had jilted me for an eminent swell-mobsman in London."

I spent many happy hours over these scraps, building up the fantastic fairy tale of Paragot's antecedents, and should have gone on reading them for an indefinite time had not Paragot one day discovered me. It was then that I learned the sacrosanctity of private papers.

"I thought, my little Asticot," said he, bending his blue eyes on me, "I thought you were a gentleman."

Only Paragot could have had so crazy a thought. I could not be a gentleman, I reflected, till I had a gold watch-chain. However Paragot expected me to be one without the seal and token of outward adornments, and I promised faithfully to mould myself according to his expectations.

"How much of this nightmare farrago have you read?"

"I know it all by heart, Master," said I.

He took off his old hat and threw it on the bed, and ran his fingers through his hair perplexedly.

"My son," said he at last, "if you were just a common boy I should make you go on your bended knees and lift up your hand and swear that you would not reveal to a living soul the mysteries which these papers contain, and then I should send you to dwell for ever among the tripe-plates. But I see before me a gentleman, a scholar and an artist and I will not submit him to such an indignity."

He put his hand on my head and looked at me in kind irony.

"I will never tell no one, Master," I promised.

"Anyone," he corrected.

"Anyone, Master," I repeated meekly.

"You will wipe it all out of your memory."

I was habitually truthful with Paragot, because he never gave me cause to lie.

"I can't, Master," said I, thinking of my dreams of Joanna.

The seriousness of my tone amused him.

"What has made such an indelible impression on your mind?"

"I can't forget – " I blurted out, moved both by reluctance to yield over my dreams of Joanna and by a desire to show off my familiarity with French, "I can't forget about *ces petits pieds si adorés*."

The smile died from his face, which assumed a queer, scared expression. He went to the window and stood there so long, that I, in my turn grew scared. I realised dimly what I had done, and I could have bitten my tongue out. I drew near him.

"Master," said I timidly.

He did not seem to hear; presently he picked up his hat from the bed and walked out without taking any notice of me.

We did not refer to the papers again until long afterwards, and though they lay unguarded as before in the old stocking, never till this present day have I set my eyes on them.

CHAPTER IV

One May morning a year after my surprising of Paragot's secret, I awoke later than usual, the three-and-sixpenny clock on the mantelpiece marking eleven, and huddling on my clothes in alarm I left the foul smelling Club room, and ran upstairs to arouse my master.

To my astonishment he was not alone. A stout florid man, wearing a white waistcoat which bellied out like the sail of a racing yacht, a frock coat and general resplendency of garb, stood planted in the middle of the room, while Paragot still in nightshirt but trousered, sat swinging his leg on a corner of the deal table. I noticed the fiddle which Paragot had evidently been playing before his visitor's arrival, lying on the disordered bed.

"Who the devil is this?" cried the fat man angrily.

"This is Mr. Asticot, my private secretary, who cooks my herrings and attends to my correspondence. Usually he cooks two, but if you will join us at breakfast Mr. Hogson – "

"Pogson," bawled the fat man.

"I beg your pardon," said my master sweetly. "If you will join us at breakfast he will cook three."

"Damn your breakfast," said Mr. Pogson.

"Only two then, Asticot. This gentleman has already breakfasted. You will forgive us for not treating you as a stranger."

Mr. Pogson, who was in a rage, thumped the table with his hand.

"I'll give you to understand Mr. Henkedyke, that I am the proprietor of this club. I have bought it with my money, and I'm not going to see it go to eternal glory as it's doing under your management. I'm not like that old ass Ballantyne. I'm a business man and I'm going to run this club for a profit, and if you continue to be manager you'll jolly well have to turn over a new leaf."

"My good friend," said my master, rising and thrusting his hands in his pockets, "you have told me that about ten times; it is getting monotonous."

"The way this place is run," continued Mr. Pogson, unheeding, "is scandalous. Not a blessed account kept. No check on provisions or drink. Every night your servants are drunk."

"As owls," said Paragot.

"And what the dickens do you do?"

"I give the Lotus Club the prestige of my presidency. I accept a salary and this presidential residence as my remuneration. You do not expect a man like me to keep ledgers and check butcher's bills like a twopennyhalfpenny clerk in the City. It is you, my dear Mr. Pogson, who have curious ideas of club management. You should put this sort of thing into the hands of some arithmetical hireling. I – " he waved his long fingers tipped with their long nails, magnificently – "am the picturesque, the intellectual, the spiritual guide of the club."

"You are a – fraud," cried Mr. Pogson, using so dreadful an adjective that I dropped the gridiron. Paragot had trained me to a distaste of foul language. "You are a drunken incompetent thief."

Paragot took his guest's glossy silk hat and gold mounted cane from the table and put them into his hands. He pointed to the door.

"Get out – quickly," said he.

He turned on his heel and sitting on the bed began to play the fiddle. Mr. Pogson instead of getting out stood in front of him quivering like an infuriated jelly, and informed him that it was his blooming club and his blooming room, that he would choose the moment of exit most convenient to his own blooming self; also that Paragot's speedy exit was a matter for his decision. In a dancing fury he heaped abuse on Paragot who played "The Last Rose of Summer," with rather more tremolo than usual. Even I saw that he was dangerous. Mr. Pogson did not heed. Suddenly Paragot sprang to his feet towering over the fat man and swung his fiddle on high like Thor's hammer. With a splitting

crash it came down on Mr. Pogson's head. Then Paragot gripped him and running with him to the door, shot him down the stairs.

"That, my little Asticot," said he, "is the present proprietor of the Lotus Club, and this is the late manager."

I ran to the door for the purpose of locking it. Paragot smiled.

"He will not come back. When he has mended what Fluellen calls his 'bloody coxcomb,' he will take out a summons against me for assault."

He threw himself on the bed, while I, in trembling bewilderment, prepared the breakfast. Presently he broke into a loud laugh.

"The fool! The mammonite fool, Asticot! Does he think that Mr. Ulysses-es are picked up by the hundred among the smug young men of the Polytechnic who add up figures, and keep books by double entry? Do you know what double entry is?"

"No, Master," said I from my squatting seat on the floor by the gas stove.

"Thank the gods for your ignorance. It is a nescience whereby human aspirations are cribbed within ruled lines and made to balance on the opposite side. Would you like to see me obey Mr. Mammon's behest and crib my aspirations within ruled lines?"

"No, Master," said I.

"The gods have given you understanding," said he, "which is better than book-keeping by double entry."

At the time I thought my master's attitude magnificent and I despised Mr. Pogson from the bottom of my heart. But since then I have wondered how the deuce the Lotus Club survived a month of Paragot's management. In after years when I questioned him, he said airily that he left all financial questions to Ballantyne, the old actor proprietor, who had grown infirm, and that he was president and not manager. Yet to my certain knowledge he paid wages to Mrs. Housekeeper, Cherubino and myself, and as for tradesmen's bills they were strewn about Paragot's bedchamber like the autumn leaves of Vallombrosa, in greater numbers than the articles of his attire. On the other hand, I have no recollection of moneys coming in. There must have been some loose unbusinesslike arrangement between Ballantyne and himself which most justifiably shocked the business instincts of Mr. Pogson. There I sympathise with the latter. But I must admit that he showed a want of tact in dealing with Paragot.

My master was in gay spirits during breakfast. When he had finished, he declared the meal to be the most enjoyable he had eaten in Tavistock Street. My insensate conceit regarded the statement as a tribute to my culinary skill and I glowed with pride. I informed him that my herring cookery was nothing to what I could do with sprats.

"My little Asticot," said he, filling his porcelain pipe, "I have to offer you my joint congratulation and commiseration. I congratulate you on your being no longer a scullion. I commiserate with you on the loss of your salary of eighteen pence a week. Your sensitive spirit would revolt against taking service under anyone of Mr. Mammon's myrmidons, and even if it didn't, I am sure he would not employ you. Like Caliban no longer will you 'scrape trencher nor wash dish' – at least in the Lotus Club – for from this hour I dismiss you from its service."

He smoked silently in his wicker chair, giving me time to realise the sudden change in my fortunes. Then only did I understand. I saw myself for a desolate moment, cast motherless, rudderless on the wide world where art and scholarship met with contumely and undergrown youth was buffeted and despised. My gorgeous dreams were at an end. The blighting commonplace overspread my soul.

"What would you like to do, my little Asticot?" he asked.

I pulled myself together and looked at him heroically.

"I could be a butcher's boy."

The corners of my mouth twitched. It was a shuddersome avocation, and the prospect of the companionship of other butcher boys who could not draw, did not know French, and had never heard of Joanna filled me with a horrible sense of doom.

Suddenly Paragot leaped up in his wild way to his feet and clapped me so heartily on the shoulder that I staggered.

"My son," cried he, "I have an inspiration. It is spring, and the hedgerows are greener than the pavement, and the high roads of Europe are wider than Tavistock Street. We will seek them to-day, Asticot *de mon cœur*; I'll be Don Quixote and you'll be my Sancho, and we'll go again in quest of adventures." He laughed aloud, and shook me like a little rat. "*Cela te tape dans l'œil, mon petit Asticot?*"

Without waiting for me to reply, he rushed to the rickety washstand, poured out water from the broken ewer, and after washing, began to dress in feverish haste, talking all the time. Used as I was to his suddenness my wits could not move fast enough to follow him.

"Then I needn't be a butcher's boy?" I said at last.

He paused in the act of drawing on a boot.

"Butcher's boy? Do you want to be a butcher's boy?"

"No, Master," said I fervently.

"Then what are you talking of?" He had evidently not heard my answer to his question. "I am going to educate you in the High School of the Earth, the University of the Universe, and to-morrow you shall see a cow and a dandelion. And before then you will be disastrously seasick."

"The sea!" I cried in delirious amazement. "We are going on the sea? Where are we going?"

"To France, *petit imbécile*," he cried. "Why are you not getting ready to go there?"

I might have answered that I had no personal preparations to make; but feeling rebuked for idleness while he was so busy, I began to clear away the breakfast things. He stopped me.

"*Nom de Dieu*, we are not going to travel with cups and saucers!"

He dragged from the top of the cupboard an incredibly dirty carpet bag of huge dimensions and decayed antiquity, and bade me pack therein our belongings. The process was not a lengthy one; we had so few. When we had little more than half filled the bag with articles of attire and the toilette stuffed in pell-mell, we looked around for ballast.

"The books, Master," said I.

"We will take the immortal works of Maître François Rabelais, and the dirty little edition of 'David Copperfield.' The remainder of the library we will sell in Holywell Street."

"And the violin?"

He picked up the maimed instrument and, after looking at it critically, threw it into a corner.

"For Pogson," said he.

When we had tied up the books with a piece of stout string providentially lying at the bottom of the cupboard, our preparations were complete. Paragot donned his cap and a storm-stained Inverness cape, grasped the carpet bag and looked round the room.

"*En route*," said he, and I followed with the books. We gained the street and left the Lotus Club behind us for ever.

What Mrs. Housekeeper said, what Cherubino said, what the members said when they found no Mr. Ulysses presiding at the supper table that evening, what Mr. Pogson said when he learned that his assailant had shaken the dust of the Lotus Club from off his feet and strolled into the wide world without giving him the opportunity of serving a summons for assault, I have never been able to discover. Nor have I learned who succeeded Paragot as president and occupied the palatial chamber of all the harmonies that was Paragot's squalid attic. When, in after years, I returned to London the Lotus Club had passed from human memory, and at the present day a perky set of office premises stands on its site. The morality of Paragot's precipitate exodus I am not in a position to discuss. From

his point of view the fact of having disliked the new proprietor from their first interview, and broken a fiddle over his head, rendered his position as president untenable. Paragot walked out.

After having sold the books for a few shillings in Holywell Street, we marched up Fleet Street into the City, and entered a stupendous, unimagined building which Paragot informed me was his bank. Elegant gentlemen behind the counter shovelled gold to and fro with the same casual indifference as I had seen grocers' assistants shovel tea. One of them, a gorgeous fellow wearing a white piqué tie and a horse-shoe pin, paid such deference to Paragot that I went out prodigiously impressed by my master's importance. I was convinced that he owned the establishment, and during the next quarter of an hour I could not speak to him for awe.

It was about two o'clock when we reached Victoria Station. There Paragot discovered, for the first time, that there was not a train till nine in the evening. It had not occurred to him that trains did not start for Paris at quarter of an hour intervals during the day.

"My son," said he, "now is the time to make practical use of our philosophy. Instead of heaping vain maledictions on the Railway Company, let us deposit our luggage in the cloak room and take a walk on the Thames Embankment."

We walked thither and sat on a vacant bench beside the Cleopatra's Needle. It was a warm May afternoon. My young mind and body fired by the excitements of the day found rest in the sunny idleness. It was delicious to be here, instead of washing up plates and dishes with Mrs. Housekeeper. Paragot took off his old slouch hat, stretched himself easefully and sighed.

"I am anxious to get to Paris to consult Henri Quatre."

"Who is Henri Quatre, Master?" I asked.

"Henri Quatre is on the Pont Neuf. That is a French saying which means that Queen Anne is dead. He was a great King of France and his statue on horseback is in the middle of a great bridge across the Seine called the Pont Neuf. He is a great friend of mine. I will tell you a story. Once upon a time there lived in Paris a magnificent young man who thought himself a genius. He *was* a genius, my little Asticot. A genius is a man who writes immortal books, paints immortal pictures, rears immortal buildings and commits immortal follies. Don't be a genius, my son, it isn't good for anybody. Well, this young man was clad in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. He also had valuable furniture. One evening something happened to annoy him."

Paragot paused.

"What annoyed him?" I asked.

"A flaw in what he had conceived to be the scheme of the universe," replied my master. "It annoys many people. The young man being annoyed, cast the fruits of his genius into the fire, tore up his purple and fine linen and smashed his furniture with a Crusader's mace which happened to be hanging by way of an ornament on the wall. It's made of steel with a knob full of spikes, and weighs about nine pounds. I know nothing like it for destroying a Louis Quinze table, or for knocking the works out of a clock. If you're good, my son, you shall have one when you grow up."

I looked gratefully at him. Not content with his kindness to me then, he would be my benefactor still when I reached manhood.

"The young man then packed a valise full of necessities and went out into the street. It was a rainy November evening. He walked along the quays through the lamp-lit drizzle till he came to the statue of Henri Quatre. The Pont Neuf was alive with traffic and the swiftly passing lights of vehicles threw conflicting gleams over the wet statue. The gas-lamps flickered in the wind." Paragot flickered his long fingers dramatically, to illustrate the gas-lamps. "On all sides rose vague masses of building – the Louvre away beyond the bridge, the frowning mass of the Conciergerie – the towering turrets of Notre Dame – swelling like billows against the sky. Pale reflections came from the river. Do you see the picture, my little Asticot? And the young man clutched the railings that surround the plinth of the statue, and caught sight of the face of Henri Quatre, and Henri Quatre looked at him so kindly that he said: '*Mon bon roi*, you are of the South like myself: I am leaving Paris to go into

the wide world, but I don't know where in the wide world to go to.' *And the King nodded his head and pointed to the Gare de Lyon.* And the young man took off his hat and said, '*Mon bon roi*, I thank you!' He went to the Gare de Lyon and found a train just starting for Italy. So he went to Italy. I have a great respect for Henri Quatre."

"And what happened to him then, Master?" I asked, after a breathless pause.

"He became a vagabond philosopher," replied Paragot, refilling his porcelain pipe.

No argument has ever been able to convince Paragot that the statue did not nod its head and point the way to Italy. For some years I myself believed it; but at last it became obvious that the flashing gleams of light over the wet statue had made him the victim of a trick of the eyes. I think the only serious offence I ever gave Paragot was when I presented to him this solution of the mystery.

Varied discourse and a meal in a Strand eating-house filled up the hours till nine o'clock. And then I started for Wonderland with Paragot.

We stayed in Paris but two days. When I asked my master why our sojourn was not longer, he said something about the "bitter-sweet" of it, which I could not understand. I have only two clear memories of Paris. He took me to see Henri Quatre, and explained how the statue nodded and how the hand which held the reins lifted and pointed to the Gare de Lyon. What more conclusive proof of his veracity need I have than actual confrontation with Henri Quatre? The other scene fixed on my mind is a narrow dark street with tall houses on either side; an awning outside a humble café; a little table beneath it at which Paragot and myself were seated. I sipped luxuriously a celestial liquor which I have since learned was grenadine syrup and water; in front of Paragot was a curious opalescent milky fluid of which he drank great quantities during those two days and ever afterwards.

"The time has come," said he, rolling his eyes at me with an awful solemnity and speaking in a thick voice, "the time has come to talk of affairs. First let me impress on you that Henkedyke is an appellation offensive to French ears. Henceforward my name is Pradel – Polydore Pradel. And as it is necessary for you to have an *état civil*, I hereby adopt you as my son. Your name is therefore Asticot Pradel. I hope you like it. You have never known what it is to have a father. Now the possession of a father is a privilege to which every human being has a right. I, Polydore Pradel, confer on you that privilege. My son – "

He raised his glass, clinked it against mine and pledged me.

"Henceforward," said Paragot, "what is good enough for me will I hope not be good enough for you, and what is too bad for me shall never be your portion. I swear it by the devil that dwells in this entrancing but execrated form of alcohol."

He finished his drink and called for another. As soon as the absinthe had curdled with the dropping water, he filled up the glass and drank it off. Then he sat for a long time in bemused silence, while I, perched on my chair, reflected on his great goodness and wondered how I should help him up the darksome stairs of our hotel without the aid of Cherubino.

The next day we started on our pilgrimage. Why we went in one direction more than another, why we went to one place rather than to another, neither he nor I could tell. I never questioned. Sometimes we wandered for days on foot, sleeping in village inns or farm-houses – occasionally under a hedge when the nights were warm. Sometimes we spent two or three days in an old world town, and Paragot would show me cathedrals and churches and lecture me on the history of the place, and set me to sketch bits of the picturesque that took his fancy. In the cool, exquisite cloister of the Chateau of Jacques Cœur at Bourges I learned more of the history of Charles VII than any English boy of my generation. In the Chateau of Blois, the salamanders of François Premier, the statue of Diane de Poitiers, the poison cabinet of Catherine de Medici, the dungeons of the Cardinal de Lorraine, became living testimonies of the past under Paragot's imaginative teaching. He had set his heart on educating me; suddenly as the original impulse had seized him, yet it lasted strong and became the object of his disordered and otherwise aimless life. Books we always had in plenty. Tattered classics are cheap enough in France, and what mattered it if pages were missing? When done with we threw

them away. We might have been tracked through the country, like the hares in a paper chase, by the trail of literature we left behind us.

In spite of his unmethodical temperament Paragot made one fixed rule for my habits. In towns and larger villages, I went to bed at nine o'clock. What he did with himself by way of amusement in the evenings I never knew. Nor did it occur to me to conjecture. Healthily tired after a happy day I was only too glad to crawl to whatever queer resting place chance provided, and to sleep the sound sleep of boyhood. To be for ever moving amid a fairyland of novelty, to have no care for the morrow, to have no tasks save those that were a delight, to be under the protecting guidance of a godlike being whose very reproofs were couched in terms of humorous kindness, to eat strange unexpected things, to fraternise in a new tongue, which daily grew more familiar, with any urchin on the high-road or city byway, to pass wondering days among country sights and country sounds – to be in short the perfect vagabond, could boy dream of a more glorious life?

Now and again a whimsy seized my master and he declared that we must work and earn our daily bread by the sweat of our brows. At a farm near Chartres we hired ourselves out to an elderly couple, Monsieur and Madame Dubosc, and spent toilsome but healthy days carting manure. Although Paragot wrought miracles with his pitchfork, I don't think Monsieur Dubosc took him seriously. Peasant shrewdness penetrated to the gentleman beneath Paragot's blouse, and peasant ignorance attributed to him the riches which he did not possess. They became great friends, however, and before we left he succeeded in establishing himself as a kind of oracle by curing a pig of some mysterious disease by means of a remedy which he said he had learned in Dalmatia. Old Madame Dubosc shed tears when we left La Haye.

Sometimes Paragot grew tired of tramping, and we travelled by rail, in the wooden third class compartments of omnibus trains that stopped at every station. Now and then pure chance took us to any particular town. It was at Nancy that Paragot went to the ticket office and said with the utmost politeness: —

"Monsieur, will you have the kindness to give me a ticket?"

"To what destination?" asked the clerk peering through his pigeon hole.

"*Parbleu*," said Paragot, "to any destination you like provided it is not too expensive."

The clerk called him a *farceur* and would have nothing to do with him, but Paragot protested.

"Pardon, Monsieur, I have but one wish, to get away from Nancy. I have seen the Episcopal Palace on the Place Stanislas, the Cathedral, and I have viewed but I have not read the seventy-five thousand volumes in the University Library. You know the places one gets to from Nancy, which I do not. I am a stranger, in your hands. If you could suggest to me a town about 100 kilometres distant – "

"There is Longwy," said the haughty official.

"Then have the kindness to give me two third class tickets to Longwy," said Paragot.

And to Longwy we went. Paragot contemplated the lack of interest in the smug little town.

"To hold out Longwy as a goal to the enthusiastic Pilgrim to the Shrine of Truth," said he, "could only enter the timber-built mind of a French railway official."

The record of our wanderings would mark the stages of my own development, but would be of little count as a history of Paragot. We tramped and trained south through Italy and spent the winter in Rome. Then it entered his head to obtain employment for both of us, as workman and boy, on the excavations of the Forum. We lived in the slums with our brother excavators, and were completely happy. So happy that though we wandered the next year over France and part of Germany the winter again found us working in Rome. In the following Spring we set our faces northward, and in July Destiny overtook us in Savoy.

CHAPTER V

It was the late afternoon of a sweltering July day. The near hills slumbered in the sunshine. Far away beyond them grey peaks of Alpine spurs, patched with snow, rose in faint outline against the sky. The valley lay in rich idleness, green and gold and fruitful, yielding itself with a maternal largeness to the white fifteenth century château on the hillside. A long white road stretched away to the left following the convolutions of the valley, until it became a thread; on the right it turned sharply by a clump of trees which marked a farm. In the middle of it all, in the grateful shadow cast by a wayside café, sat Paragot and myself, watching with thirsty eyes the buxom but slatternly *patronne* pour out beer from a bottle. A dirty, long-haired mongrel terrier lapped water from an earthenware bowl, at the foot of the wooden table at which we sat. This was Narcisse, a recent member of our vagabond family, whom my master had casually adopted some weeks before and had christened according to some *lucus a non lucendo* principle of his own. I think he was the least beautiful dog I have ever met; but I loved him dearly.

Paragot drained his tumbler, handed it back to be refilled, drained it again and cleared his throat with the contentment of a man whose thirst has been slaked.

"Now one can spit," he exclaimed heartily.

"That is always a comfort to a man," remarked the *patronne*.

"It is the potentiality that is the comfort. Have you apartments for the night, Madame?"

"They are for *des messieurs*— for gentlemen," said the *patronne* diffidently.

Narcisse having also finished his draught stretched himself out on the ground, his chin on his fore paws, and glanced furtively upwards at the disparaging lady.

"*Tron de l'air!*" cried Paragot, "are we not gentlemen?"

"*Tiens*, you are of the Midi," cried the woman, recognising the expletive – for no one born north of Avignon says "*Tron de l'air*" – "I too am from Marseilles. My husband was a Savoyard. That is why I am here."

"I am a gentleman of Gascony," said my master, "and this is my son Asticot."

"It is a droll name," said the *patronne*.

"We are commercial travellers on our rounds with samples of philosophy."

"It is a droll trade," said the *patronne*.

We were greasy and dirty, sunburnt to the colour of Egyptian felaheen and dressed in the peasant's blue blouse. Creatures more unlike professors of philosophy could not be conceived. But the *patronne* seemed to be impressed – as who was not? – by Paragot.

"The rooms will be three francs, Monsieur," she said after a calculating pause.

"I engage them," said my master. "Asticot, aid Madame to take our luggage up to our bedchambers." I grasped my bundle and handed Paragot's dilapidated canvas gripsack to the *patronne*. He arrested her.

"One moment, Madame. As you see, my portmanteau contains a shirt, a pair of socks, a comb and a toothbrush. Also a copy of the works of the divine vagrant Maître François Villon, which I will take out at once. He was a thief and a reprobate and got nearer hanged than any man who ever lived, and he is the dearest friend I have."

"You have droll friends," remarked the *patronne* continuing her litany.

"And to think that he died four hundred years ago," sighed my master. "Isn't it strange, Madame, that all the bravest men and most beautiful women are those that are dead?"

The landlady laughed. "You talk like a true Gascon, Monsieur. In this country people are so silent that one loses the use of one's tongue."

I departed with her to see after domestic arrangements and when I returned I found Paragot smoking his porcelain pipe, and talking to a dusty child in charge of a goat. Having, at that period,

a soul above dusty children in charge of goats. I sprawled on the ground beside Narcisse, and being tired by the day's tramp fell into a doze. The good earth, when you have a casing of it already on clothes and person, is a comfortable couch; but I think you must be in your teens to enjoy it.

I awoke to the sound of Paragot's voice talking to Narcisse. The goat child had slipped away. An ox cart laden with hay lumbered past. The mellowness of late afternoon lay over the land. The shadow cast by the little white café had deepened gradually far beyond the table. From within the house came the faint clatter of footsteps and cooking utensils. Paragot was still smoking. Narcisse sat on his haunches, his ill shaped head to one side and his ears cocked. After making a vicious dig at a flea, he yawned and trotted about after the manner of his kind in search of adventure. Paragot summoned him back.

"My good Narcisse, every spot on the earth has its essential quality which the wise man or dog knows how to enjoy in its entirety. In great cities where life is pulsating around you, you are alert for the unexpected. The underlying principle of a world's backwater like this is restful stagnation. Here you must wallow in the uneventful. In vain you sniff around in quest of the exciting, mistaking like your fellow in the fable the shadow for the substance. The substance here is rest. Here nothing ever happens."

"Pardon, Monsieur," said a voice close upon us. "Is it very far to Chambéry?"

"It does not matter," said a second voice following hard on the first, "for I can go no further."

I jumped to my feet and my master started round in his chair. The first speaker was a girl, the second an old man. She had merely the comeliness of tanned and hair-bleached peasant youth; he was wizened, lined, browned and bent. A cotton umbrella shaded the girl's bare head and she carried in her hand a cane valise covered with grey canvas. The old man was burdened with two ancient shabby cases, one evidently containing a violin and the other some queerly shaped musical instrument. Both the new comers were wayworn and dirty, and my master seeing suffering on the old man's face rose and courteously offered him a chair.

"Sit down and rest," said he, "and Mademoiselle, you are thinking of going to Chambéry? But it is nearly a day's journey on foot."

"We have to play at a wedding tomorrow, Monsieur," said the girl piteously. "It was arranged two months ago, and we must get there in some manner."

"There is a railway station not far off," said I.

"Alas! we have only ten sous in the world, which is not enough to pay for our tickets," she answered. "Imagine, Monsieur, I had a piece of twenty francs in my pocket this morning, and I went to the station to get a ticket, for I had counted on going by railway, as my grandfather is so ill, and when I came to pay, I found I had lost my louis. How, the *bon Dieu* only knows. It is desolating, Monsieur; we had to walk so as to keep our engagement at Chambéry. If we miss it, *nous sommes dans la purée pour tout de bon*."

To be in the *purée* is to be in a very bad mess indeed. The prospect of abject pennilessness filled the damsel's eyes with woe.

"You earn your living by playing at weddings for folks to dance?" asked my master.

"Yes, Monsieur. My grandfather plays the violin and I the zither – we also go to fairs. In the winter we play at cafés in large towns. Life is hard, Monsieur, is it not?"

She closed her umbrella and laid it on the valise. The old man sat by the table, his head resting on his hands, saying nothing.

"When I think of my good louis that is gone!" she added tragically.

The only feature making for charm in a coarse homely face was a set of white even teeth. I found her singularly unattractive. A tear rolled down her cheek and its course was that of a rill in a dusty plain.

"Suppose I lend you the money for the railway tickets?" said my master kindly.

"O Monsieur," she cried, "I should thank you from the depths of my heart. *Grandpère*," she turned to the old man who, ashen faced, was staring in front of him, "Monsieur will lend us enough money to get to Chambéry."

"I can go no further," he murmured.

Then his eyelids quivered, his body moved spasmodically, and he swayed sideways off the chair on to the ground.

We rushed to aid him. The girl put his head on her lap. My master bade me run into the café for brandy. When I returned the old man was dead.

Narcisse sat placidly by, with his tongue out, eyeing his master ironically.

"You are the man," his glance implied, "who said that nothing happens here."

I have known many dogs in my life, but never so mocking and cynical a dog as Narcisse.

It was nearly midnight before my master and I sat down again outside the café. The intervening hours had been spent in journeying to and from the nearest village, and obtaining the necessary services of doctor and curé. My master was smoking his porcelain pipe, as usual, but strangely silent. A faint circle of light came from the open ground-floor window of the café. The white road gleamed dimly, and beyond the hushed valley the hills loomed vague against a black, starlit sky. In the lighted room a few peasants from neighbouring farms drank their sour white wine and discussed the death in low voices. In other circumstances my master would have joined them under pretext of getting nearer the Heart of Life, and would have told them amazing tales of Ekaterinoslav or Valladolid till they reeled home drunk with wine and wonder. And I should have been abed. But to-night Paragot seemed to prefer the silent company of Narcisse and myself.

"What do you think of it all, Asticot?" he asked at length.

"Of what, master?"

"Death."

"It frightens me," was all I could answer.

"What I resent about it," said my master reflectively, "is that one is not able to have any personal concern in the most interesting event in one's career. If you could even follow your own funeral and have a chance of weeping for yourself! You are never so important as when you are a corpse – and you miss it all. I have a good mind not to die. It is either the silliest or the wisest action of one's life; I wonder which."

Presently the girl came down the passage of the café, stood for a moment in the doorway, and seeing Paragot advanced to the table.

"You are very kind, Monsieur," she said, "and for what you have done I thank you from my heart."

"It was very little," said my master. "Asticot, why do you not give Mademoiselle your chair? Your manners are worse than those of Narcisse. Mademoiselle, do me the pleasure of being seated."

She sat down, her feet apart, peasant fashion, her hands in her lap.

"If I had not lost the twenty francs he would not have died," she said dejectedly.

"He would have died if you had brought him here in a carriage. He had aneurism of the heart, the doctor says. He might have died any moment the last ten years. How old was he?"

"Seventy, eighty, ninety – how should I know?"

"But he was your grandfather."

"Ah, no, indeed, Monsieur," she replied in a more animated manner. "He was not a relative. My mother was poor and she sold me to him three years ago."

"Why that is like me, Master!" I cried, vastly interested.

"My son," said he in English, "that is one of the things that must be forgotten. And then, Mademoiselle?" he asked in French.

"Then he taught me to play the zither and to dance. I am sorry he is dead. *Dame, oui, par exemple!* But I do not weep for him as for a grandfather. Oh, no!"

"And your mother?"

"She died last year. So I am all alone."

He asked her what she thought of doing for her livelihood. She shrugged her shoulders with the resignation of her class.

"I can always earn my living. There are brasseries, cafés-concerts in all the towns – I am fairly well known. They will give me an engagement. *Il faut passer par là comme les autres.*"

"You must go through it like the others?" repeated my master. "But you are very young, my poor child."

"I am eighteen, Monsieur, I know I shall not make a fortune. I am not pretty enough even when I paint, and my figure is heavy. That is what Père Paragot used to complain of."

"What was his name?" asked my master, pricking up his ears.

"Berzélius Paragot – and he took the name of Nibbidard, which means 'no luck' – so he loved to call himself Berzélius Nibbidard Paragot."

"Berzélius Nibbidard Paragot," mouthed my master joyously. "I would give anything for a name like that!"

"It is yours if you like to take it," she said quite seriously. "No one will want it any more."

"Little Asticot of my heart," said he, "what do you think of it?"

It struck me as a most aristocratically romantic appellation. I was used to his aliases by this time. He had long ceased to call himself "Pradel," and what was our surname for the moment I am now unable to recollect.

"You look like 'Paragot,' Master," said I, and, in an inexplicable way, he did – as I have before remarked. He called me a psychometrical genius and enquired the name of the young lady.

"Amélie Duprat, Monsieur," she said. "But *pour le métier*— we must have professional names for the cafés – Père Paragot called me 'Blanquette de Veau.'"

"Delicious!" cried he.

"So everyone calls me Blanquette," she explained gravely. There was a silence. Paragot – he really assumed the name from this moment – refilled his pipe. The belated peasants, having finished their wine, clattered out of the café, and took off their hats as they passed us.

"Life is very hard, is it not, Messieurs?" remarked Blanquette. It seemed to be her favourite philosophic proposition. She sighed. "If Père Paragot had only lived to play at the wedding tomorrow!"

"What then?"

"I should have had ten francs."

"Ah!" said my master.

"First I lose my louis, and now I lose my ten francs! ah! *Sainte Vierge de Miséricorde!*"

It was heart-rending. Sometimes they received more than the stipulated fee at these village weddings. They passed the hat round. If the guests were mellow with good wine, which makes folks generous, they often earned double the amount. And they always had as much as they liked to eat, and could take away scraps in a handkerchief.

"And good wholesome nourishment, Monsieur. Once it was half a goose."

And now there was nothing, nothing. Blanquette did not believe in the *bon Dieu* any longer. She buried her face in her arms and wept. Paragot smoked helplessly for a few moments. I, unused to women's tears, felt the desolation of the race of Blanquette de Veau overspread me. But that I considered it to be beneath my dignity as a man, I should have wept too.

Suddenly Paragot brought his fist down on the table and started to his feet. Blanquette lifted a scared wet face, dimly seen in the half light.

"*Tonnerre de Dieu!*" cried he, "If you hold so much to your ten francs and half a goose, I myself will come with you to Chambéry tomorrow and fiddle at the wedding."

"You, Monsieur?" she gasped.

"Yes, I. Why not? Do you think I can't scrape catgut as well as Père Paragot?"

He walked to and fro declaring his musical powers in his boastful way. If he chose he could rip out the hearts of a dead Municipal Council with a violin, and could set a hospital for paralytics a-dancing. He would have fiddled the children of Hamelin away from the Pied Piper. Didn't Blanquette believe him?

"But yes, Monsieur," she said fervently.

"Ask Asticot."

My faith in him was absolute. To my mind he had even understated his abilities. The experience of the disillusioning years has since caused me to modify my opinions; but Paragot's boastfulness has not lessened him in my eyes. And this leads to a curious reflection. When a Gascon boasts, you love him for it; when a Prussian does it, your toes tingle to kick him to Berlin. His very whimsical braggadocio made Paragot adorable, and I am at a loss to think what he would have been without it.

"Of course," said he, "if you are proud, if you don't want to be seen in the company of a scarecrow like me, there is nothing more to be said."

Blanquette humbly repudiated the charge of pride. Her soul was set on her ten francs and she didn't care how she got them. She accepted Monsieur's generous offer out of a full heart.

"That's sense," said my master. "We shall rehearse at daybreak."

CHAPTER VI

Dawn found us all in a field some distance from the café – Paragot, Blanquette, Narcisse, the zither, the fiddle and I, and while the two musicians rehearsed the jingly waltzes and polkas that made up the old man's répertoire, I tried to explain the situation to Narcisse who sat with his ears cocked wondering what the deuce all the noise was about.

"Ah, Monsieur," said Blanquette, during a pause, "you play like a great artist."

"Didn't I tell you so?" he cried triumphantly.

"You must have studied much."

"Prodigiously," said he.

"Père Paragot had played the violin for sixty years, but he could not make it sing like that."

"You would not compare Père Paragot with my master?" I exclaimed by way of rebuke.

Blanquette acquiesced humbly.

"When one hears Monsieur, one has the devil in one's body."

"Listen to this," said the delighted Paragot jumping on to his feet and tucking the fiddle beneath his chin.

And there in the pure dawn with nothing but God's sky and green fields around us, he played Gounod's "Ave Maria," putting into his execution all his imaginative fervour, and accentuating the tremolo passages in a vibrating ecstasy which to Blanquette's uncultured soul was the very passion of music. I have since learned that the greatest violinists do not overemphasise the tremolo.

"Ah Dieu! it is beautiful," she murmured.

"Isn't it?" cried Paragot. "And it touches your heart, my little Blanquette, eh? We are all artists together."

"I, Monsieur?"

She laughed and ran her hands over the zither strings.

"I ought to be at work in the fields. So Père Paragot used to say. I make no progress – I am as stupid as a goose."

Two hours afterwards we started for Chambéry, as odd a procession as ever gave food for a high-road's gaiety. From the old grey valise carried the previous day by Blanquette she had produced much property finery. A black velveteen jacket resplendent with pearl-buttons, velveteen knee-breeches tied with ribbons at the knees, and a rakish Alpine hat with a feather adorned my master's person. His own disreputable heavy boots and a pair of grey worsted stockings may not have formed a fastidious finish to the costume; but in my eyes he looked magnificent. Towards the transfiguration of Blanquette a Pandora box could not have effected more. She was attired in a short skirt, a white *fichu* moderately fresh, a kind of Italian head-dress and scarlet stockings. Enormous gilt ear-rings swung from her ears; a cable of blue beads encircled her neck; her lips were dyed pomegranate, her eyes darkened and her cheeks touched with rouge. A pair of substantial gilt shoes slung over her shoulders clinked their heels together as she walked. Narcisse barked his ecstatic admiration around this beauteous creature, and had I been a dog I should have barked mine too. My dignity as a man only allowed me to cast sidelong glances at her and hope that she would soon put on the gilt shoes. As for my master, on beholding her, he doffed his hat and saluted her with a fantastic compliment, whereat the girl blushed brick-red and turned her head away.

"Motley's the only wear, my son," he cried gaily. "In this cap and bells, I see life under a different aspect. Never has it appeared to me sweeter and more irresponsible. Don't you feel it? But I forgot. You haven't any motley. I apologise for my want of tact. Blanquette," he added in French, "why haven't you found a costume for Asticot?"

Blanquette replied in her matter-of-fact way that she hadn't any. They walked on together, and I dropped behind suddenly realising my pariahdom. I wondered whether these magnificent beings

would be ashamed of my company when we arrived at Chambéry. I pictured myself sitting lonesome with Narcisse in the market-place while they revelled in their splendour, and the self-pity of the child overcame me.

"Master," said I dismally, "what shall Narcisse and I do while you are at the wedding?"

He wheeled round and regarded me, and I knew by the light in his eyes that an inspiration was taking shape behind them.

"I'll buy you a red shirt and pomade your hair, and you shall be one of us, my son, and go round with the hat."

I exulted obviously.

"Now the dog will feel out of it," said he, perplexed. "I will consult Blanquette. Do you think we could shave Narcisse and make him think he's a poodle?"

"That would be impossible, Monsieur," replied Blanquette gravely.

As Narcisse was enjoying himself to his heart's content, darting from side to side of the road and sniffing for the smells his soul delighted in, I did not concern myself about his feelings.

For Paragot's suggestion which I knew was ironically directed against myself, I did not care. So long as I was to be with my companions and of them, irony did not matter. I caught the twinkle in his eye and laughed. He was as joyous as Narcisse. The gladness of the July morning danced in his veins. He pulled the violin and bow out of the old baize bag and fiddled as we walked. It must have been an amazing procession.

And the old man whose clothes and functions we had assumed lay cold and stiff in the little lonely room with candles at his head and his feet. During our railway journey to Chambéry Blanquette told us in her artless way what she knew of his history. In the flesh he had been a crabbed and crotchety ancient addicted to drink. He had passed some years of his middle life in prison for petty thefts. In his youth – Blanquette's mind could not grasp the idea of Père Paragot having once been young – he must have been an astonishing blackguard. He had been wont to beat Blanquette, until one day realising her young strength she held him firm in her grip and threatened to throw him into a pond if he persisted in his attempted chastisement. Since then he had respected her person, but to the day of his death he had cursed her for anserine stupidity. An unlovely, loveless and unloved old man. Why should Blanquette have wept over him? She had not the Parisian's highly strung temperament and capacity for facile emotion. She was peasant to the core, slow to rejoice, and slow to grieve, and she had the peasant's remorseless logic in envisaging the elemental facts of existence. Père Paragot was wicked. He was dead. *Tant mieux.*

Blanquette had not the divine sense of humour which rainbows the tears of the world. That was my dear master's possession. But at the obvious she could laugh like any child of unsophistication. In the long shaded avenue of Chambéry, with its crowded market-stalls on either side – stalls where you saw displayed for sale rolls of calico and boots and gauffrettes and rusty locks and melons and rosaries and flyblown books – Paragot bought me my red shirt (which —*mirabile dictu!*— had tasselled cords to tie the collar) and pomade for my hair. He also purchased a yard of blue chiffon which he tied in an artistic bow round Narcisse's neck, whereat Blanquette laughed heartily; and when Narcisse bolted beneath a flower-stall and growling dispossessed himself of the adornment, and set to with tooth and claw to rend it into fragments, she threw herself on a bench convulsed with mirth. As Paragot had spent fifty centimes on the chiffon I thought this hilarity exceedingly ill-natured; but when another and a larger dog came up to see what Narcisse was doing and in half a minute was whirling about with Narcisse in a death grapple, and Blanquette sprang forward, separated the two dogs at some risk and took our bleeding mongrel to her bosom, consoling him with womanly words of pity, I saw there was something tender in Blanquette which mitigated my resentment.

The Restaurant du Soleil, where the marriage feast was held, was an earwiggy hostelry on the outskirts of the town, sheltered from the prying roadway by a screen of green lattice and a series of *tonnelles*, the dusty arbours, each furnished with table and chairs, beloved of French revellers. Above

the entrance gate stretched the semi-circular sign-board bearing in addition to the name, the legend "Jardin. Noces. Fêtes." Within, a few lime-trees closely planted threw deep shadow over the grassless garden; shrubs and flowers wilted in a neglected bed.

Usually the forlorn demesne was supervised by a mangy waiter brooding over mangy tables and by a mangier cat who kept a furtive eye on the placarded list of each day's *plat du jour* and wondered when her turn would come for Thursday's *Sauté de lapin*. But tables, cat and waiter cast manginess aside when *we* (the pride of that day still remains and makes me italicise the word) came down to play at the wedding of Adolphe Querlat and Léontine Bringuet.

"*Tiens!* where is Père Paragot?" asked fat Madame Bringuet – perspiring in unaccustomed corset and black bombazine.

"Alas! he is no longer, Madame," explained Blanquette. "He had a seizure yesterday. He fell off his chair, and we picked him up stone dead."

"*Tiens, tiens*, but it is sad."

"But no. It does not matter. This gentleman will make you dance much better than Père Paragot," and she whispered encomiums into Madame's ear.

"Enchanted, Monsieur. And your name?"

My master swept a courtly bow with his feathered hat – no one ever bowed so magnificently as he.

"Berzélius Nibbidard Paragot, *cadet*, at your service."

"You must be hungry, Monsieur Paragot – and Mademoiselle and this little monsieur," said Madame Bringuet hospitably. "We are at table in the *salle à manger*. You will join us."

We entered the long narrow room and sat down to the banquet. Heavens! what a feast! There were omelettes and geese and eels and duck and tripe and onion soup and sausages and succulences inconceivable. Accustomed to the Spartan fare of vagabondage I plunged into the dishes head foremost like a hungry puppy. Should I eat such a meal as that to-day it would be my death. Hey for the light heart and elastic stomach of youth! Some fifty persons, the *ban and arrière ban* of the relations of the young couple, guzzled in a wedged and weltering mass. Wizenéd grandfathers and stolid large-eyed children ate and panted in the suffocating heat, and gorged again. Not till half way through the repast did tongues begin to wag freely. At last the tisane of champagne – syrupy paradise to my uncultivated palate – was handed round and the toasts were drunk. The bride's garter was secured amid boisterous shouts and innuendos, and then we left the stifling room and entered the garden, the elders to smoke and drink and gossip at the little tables beneath the verandah, the younger folk to dance on the uneven gravel. Young as I was, I felt grateful that no physical exercise was required of me for some hours to come. Even Narcisse and the cat (which followed him) waddled heavily to the verandah where we were to play.

The signal to start was soon given. Paragot tucked his violin under his chin, tuned up, waved one, two, three with his bow; Blanquette struck a cord on her zither and the dance began. At first all was desperately correct. The men in their ill-fitting broadcloth and white ties and enormous wedding favours, the women in their tight and decent finery, gyrated with solemn circumspection. But by degrees the music and the good Savoy wines and the abominable cognac flushed faces and set heads a-swimming. The sweltering heat caused a gradual discarding of garments. Arms took a closer grip of waists. Loud laughter and free jests replaced formal conversation; steps were performed of Southern fantasy; the dust rose in clouds; throats were choked though countenances streamed; the consumption of wine was Rabelaisian. And all through the orgy Paragot fiddled with strenuous light-heartedness, and Blanquette thrummed her zither with the awful earnestness of a woman on whose efforts ten francs and perhaps half a goose depended. But it was Paragot who made the people dance. To me, sitting in red shirt and pomaded hair at his feet, it seemed as if he were a magician. He threw his bow across the strings and compelled them to do his bidding. He was the great, the omnipotent personage of the feast. I sunned myself in his glory.

Indeed, he had the incommunicable gift of setting his soul a-dancing as he played, of putting the devil into the feet of those who danced. The wedding party were enraptured. If he had consumed all the bumpers he was offered, he would have been as drunk as a fiddler at an Irish wake. During a much needed interval in the dancing he advanced to the edge of the verandah and as a solo played Stephen Heller's "Tarantella," which crowned his triumph. With his unkempt beard and swarthy face and ridiculous pearl-buttoned velveteens, there was an air of rakish picturesqueness about Paragot, and he retained, what indeed he never quite lost, a certain aristocracy of demeanour. Wild cries of "*Bis!*" saluted him when he stopped. Men clapped each other on the shoulder uttering clumsy oaths, women smiled at him largely. Madame Bringuet, reeking in her tight gown, held up to him a brimming glass of champagne; the bride threw him a rose. He kissed the flower, put it in his button-hole and after bowing low drank to her health. I recalled my childish ambition to keep a fried fish shop and despised it heartily. If I only could play the violin like Paragot, thought I, and win the plaudits of the multitude, what greater glory could the earth hold? The practical Blanquette woke me from my dreams. Now was the moment, said she, to go round with the hat. I swung myself down from the verandah, the traditional shell (in lieu of a hat) in my hand, and went my round. Money was poured into it. Time after time I emptied it into my bulging pockets. When I returned to the verandah, Blanquette's eyes distended strangely. She glanced at Paragot, who smiled at her in an absent manner. For the moment the artist in him was predominant. He was the centre of his little world, and its adulation was as breath to his nostrils.

This is what I, the mature man, know to be the case. To me, then, he was but the King receiving tribute from his subjects. When Paragot with a flourish of his bow responded to the encore, I found my hand slip into Blanquette's and there it remained in a tight grip till flushed and triumphant he again acknowledged the applause. Nothing was said between Blanquette and myself, but she became my sworn sister from that moment. And Narcisse sat at our feet looking down on the crowd, his tongue lolling out mockingly and a satiric leer on his face.

"My children," said Paragot, on our return journey in the close, ill-lighted, wooden-seated third-class compartment, "we have had a glorious day. One of those sun-kissed, snow-capped peaks that rise here and there in the monotonous range of life. It fills the soul with poetry and makes one talk in metaphor. In such moments as these we are all metaphors, my son. We are illuminated expressions of the divine standing for the commonplace things of yesterday and tomorrow. We have accomplished what millions and millions are striving and struggling and failing to do at this very hour. We have achieved *success!* We have left on human souls the impress of our mastery! We are also all of us dog-tired and, I perceive, disinclined to listen to transcendental conversation."

"I'm not tired, master," I declared as stoutly as the effort of keeping open two leaden eyelids would allow.

"And you?" he asked turning to Blanquette by his side – I occupied the opposite corner.

She confessed. A very little. But she had listened to all Monsieur had said, and if he continued to talk she would not think of going to sleep. Whereupon she closed her eyes, and when I opened mine I saw that her head had slipped along the smooth wooden back of the carriage and rested on Paragot's shoulder. Through sheer kindness and pity he had put his arm around her so as to settle her comfortably as she slept. I envied her.

When she awoke at the first stoppage of the train, she started away from him with a little gasp.

"O Monsieur! I did not know. You should have told me."

"I am only Père Paragot," said he. "You must often have had your head against this mountebank jacket of mine."

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