



THE GUEST OF QUESNAY

By Booth Tarkington

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CHAPTER II.

SWINGING out to pass us and then sweeping in upon the reverse curve to clear the narrow arch of the culvert were too much for the white car. In the middle of the road, ten feet from the culvert, the old woman struggled frantically to get her car out of the way. The howl of the siren frightened her perhaps, for she went to the wrong side. Then the shriek of the machine drowned the human scream as the automobile struck.

The great machine left the road for the fields on the right, reared, fell, leaped against the stone side of the culvert, apparently trying to climb it, stood straight on end, whirled backward in a half somersault, crashed over on its side, flashed with flame and explosion and lay hidden under a cloud of dust and smoke.

The peasant's cart, tossed into a clump of weeds, rested on its side. A



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pair of smashed goggles crunched beneath my foot as I sprang out of Ward's car, and a big brass lamp had fallen in the middle of the road, crumpled like waste paper. Beside it lay a gold rouse box.

The old woman had somehow saved herself, or perhaps her saint had helped her, for she was sitting in the grass by the roadside wailing hysterically and quite unburied. The body of a man lay in a heap beneath the stone archway, and from his clothes I guessed that he had been the driver of the white car. I say "had been" because there were reasons for needing no second glance to comprehend that the man was dead.

Ward meanwhile was dragging a woman out of the wreck, and after a moment I went to help him carry her into the fresh air. She pushed our hands angrily aside and completed the untangling herself, revealing the scratched and smeared face of Marianne, the dancer.

"Oh, the pain!" she cried. "That lurcher! If he has let me break my leg! A pretty dancer I should be! I hope he is killed!"

Another automobile had already come up, and the occupants were hastily alighting. Ward shouted to the foremost to go for a doctor.

"I am a doctor," the man answered, advancing and kneeling quickly by the dancer. "And you—you may be of help yonder."

We turned toward the ruined car, where Ward's driver was shouting to us.

"What is it?" called Ward as we ran toward him.

"Monsieur," he replied, "there is some one under the tonneau here!"

From beneath the overturned tonneau projected the lower part of a man's leg clad in a brown puttee and a russet shoe. Ward's driver had brought his tools, had jacked up the car as high as possible, but was still unable to release the imprisoned body.

After considerable effort we rescued the imprisoned body, which stirred in pain.

I found that I was looking almost straight down into the upturned face of Larrabee Harman, and I cannot better express what this man had come to be and what the degradation of his life had written upon him than by saying that the dreadful thing I looked upon now was no more horrible a sight than the face I had seen, fresh from the valet and smiling in ugly pride at the stars, as he passed the terrace of Larrabee on the day before the Grand Prix.

We helped to carry him to the doctor's car and to lift the dancer into Ward's and to get both of them out again at the hospital at Versailles, where they were taken.

"Did it seem to you," said George finally, "that a man so frightfully injured could have any chance of getting well?"

"No," I answered. "I thought it

was dying as we carried him into the hospital.

"So did I. The top of his head seemed all crushed in. Whew!" After a pause he added thoughtfully, "It will be a great thing for Louise."

Louise was the name of his second cousin, the girl who had done battle with all her family and then run away from them to be Larrabee Harman's wife. Remembering the stir that her application for divorce had made, I did not understand how Harman's death could benefit her, unless George had some reason to believe that he had made a will in her favor. However, the remark had been made more to himself than to me, and I did not respond.

The morning papers flared once more with the name of Larrabee Harman, and we read that he was lingering. And the dancer had been right. One of her legs was badly broken. She would never dance again.

A great many people keep their friends in mind by writing to them, but more do not, and Ward and I belong to the majority. After my departure from Paris I had but one missive from him, a short note written at the request of his sister, asking me to be on the lookout for Italian earrings to add to her collection of old jewels. So from time to time I sent her what I could find about Capri or in Naples, and she responded with neat little letters of acknowledgment.

Two years I stayed on Capri, eating the lotus which grows on that happy island and painting very little. But even on Capri people sometimes hear the call of Paris, so there came at last a fine day when I, knowing that the horse chestnuts were in bloom along the Champs Elysees, threw my rope-soled shoes to a beggar, packed a rusty trunk and was off for the banks of the Seine.

At the end of a fortnight I went over into Normandy and deposited that rusty trunk of mine in a corner of the summer pavilion in the courtyard of Mme. Brossard's inn, Les Trois Pigeons, in a woodland neighborhood that is there. Here I had palmed through a prolific summer of my youth, and I was glad to find, as I had hoped, nothing changed, for the place was dear to me. Mme. Brossard, dark, thin, demure as of yore, a fine looking woman with a fine manner and much the flavor of old Norman portraits; gave me a pleasant welcome, remembering me readily, but without surprise, while Amedee, the antique servant, cackled over me and was as proud of my advent as if I had been a new egg and he had laid me. The smile is grotesque, but Amedee is the most benighted waiter in France.

He is a white haired, fat old fellow, always well shaved, as neat as a billiard ball. In the daytime, when he is partly porter, he wears a black tie, a gray waistcoat broadly striped with scarlet, and from waist to feet a white apron like a skirt and so competently encircling that his trousers are of mere conventionality and no real necessity, but after 6 o'clock (becoming altogether a maitre d'hotel) he is clad as any other formal gentleman.

Amedee's suggestions as to my repast were deferential, but insistent. His manner was that of a prime minister who goes through the form of convincing the sovereign. He grieved each of his own decisions with a very loud "Bien!" as if startled by the brilliancy of my selections, and the menu being concluded, exploded a whole volley of "Bieus" and set off violently to instruct old Gaston, the cook.

The inn itself is gray with age, the roof sagging pleasantly here and there, and an old wooden gallery runs the length of each wing, the guest chambers of the upper story opening upon it like the deck rooms of a steamer, with boxes of tulips and hyacinths along the gallery railings and window ledges for the gayest of border lines.

In the course of time and well within the bright twilight Amedee spread the crisp white cloth and served me at a table on my pavilion porch. He feigned anxiety lest I should find certain dishes (those which he knew were most delectable) not to my taste, but was obviously so distended with fatuous pride over the whole meal that it became a temptation to denounce at least some trifling sauce or garnishment. Nevertheless so much meekly proved beyond me, and I spared him and my own conscience. The salad prepared and the water bubbling in the coffee machine, he favored me with a discourse on the decline in glory of Les Trois Pigeons.

"Monsieur, it is the automobiles. They have done it. Formerly, as when monsieur was here, the painters came from Paris. What way times and what drooleries! Ah, it was gay in those days! Monsieur remembers well, ha, ha! But now, I think, the automobiles have frightened away the painters."

"I should have said that we should be happier if we had many like monsieur," went on Amedee. "But it is early in the season to despair. Then, too, our best suit is already engaged."

"By whom?"

"Two men of science who arrive next week. One is a great man, M. de

Brossard is pleased that he is coming to Les Trois Pigeons, but I tell her it is only natural. He comes now for the first time because he likes the quiet."

"Who is the great man, Amedee?"

"Ah! A distinguished professor of science, truly. He is a member of the Institute. Monsieur must have heard of that great Professor Kerdec?"

"The name is known. Who is the other?"

"A friend of his. I do not know. All the upper floor of the east wing they have taken—the grand suit—those two and their valet de chambre. That is truly the way in modern times—the philosophers are rich men."

"Yes," I sighed. "Only the painters are poor nowadays."

"Ha, ha, monsieur!" Amedee laughed cunningly. "It was always easy to see that monsieur amuses himself only with his painting."

"Thank you, Amedee," I responded. "I have amused other people with it, too, I fear."

"Monsieur remembers the Chateau de Quesnay, at the crest of the hill on the road north of Dives?"

"I remember."

"It is occupied this season by some rich Americans."

"How do you know they are rich?"

"Dieu de Dieu!" The old fellow appealed to heaven. "But they are Americans!"

"And therefore millionaires. Perfectly, Amedee."

"Perfectly, monsieur. Perhaps monsieur knows them."

"Yes, I know them."

"Truly?" He affected dejection. "And poor Mme. Brossard thought monsieur had returned to our old hotel because he liked it and remembered our wine of Beauce and the good beds and old Gaston's cooking!"

"Do not weep, Amedee," I said. "I have come to paint, not because I know the people who have taken Quesnay." And I added, "I may not see them at all."

Miss Elizabeth had mentioned in one of her notes that Ward had leased Quesnay, but I had not sought quarters at Les Trois Pigeons because it stood within walking distance of the chateau. In my industrious frame of mind that circumstance seemed almost a drawback. Miss Elizabeth, ever hospitable to those whom she noticed at all, would be doubly so in the country, and I wanted all my time to myself since my time was not conceivably of value to any one else. I thought it wise to leave any encounter with the lady to chance. George himself had just sailed on a business trip to America, and until his return I should put in all my time at painting and nothing else, though I liked his sister, as I have said, and thought of her often.

Amedee laughed incredulously. "But monsieur will call at the chateau in the morning," the complacent valet prophesied. "Monsieur is not at all an old man—no, not yet. Even if he were—aha—no one could possess the friendship of that wonderful Mme. d'Armand and remain away from the chateau."

"Mme. d'Armand?" I said. "That is not the name. You mean Mlle. Ward."

"No, no!" His fat cheeks bulged with a smile. "Mlle. Ward"—he pronounced it "Ware"—"is magnificent. Every one must try to obey when she opens her mouth. It needs only a glance to perceive that Mlle. Ward is a great lady, but Mme. d'Armand—aha!" He rolled his round eyes to an effect of unpeppable admiration. "But monsieur knows very well for himself."

"We were speaking of the present chateau of Quesnay, Mlle. Ward. I have never heard of Mme. d'Armand."

"Monsieur is serious?"

"Truly," I answered, making bold to quote his shibboleth.

"Then monsieur has truly much to live for. Truly!" he chuckled openly. He had cleared the table.

"Amedee," I said, "who is Mme. d'Armand?"

"A guest of Mlle. Ward at Quesnay. In fact, she is in charge of the chateau."



Then monsieur has truly much to live for. Truly!

ton, since Mlle. Ward is, for the time, away."

"Is she a Frenchwoman?"

"It seems not. In fact, she is an American, though she dresses with so much of taste. Ah, Mme. Brossard admires it, and Mme. Brossard knows the art of dressing."

"Mme. d'Armand's name is French," I asserted.

"Yes, that is true," said Amedee thoughtfully. "No one can deny it; it is a French name." He rested the tip of a stump near by and searched his head. "I do not understand how that can be," he continued slowly. "Jean Ferret, who is chief painter of the chateau, is an American, and of

mine, and Jean Ferret has told me that she is an American."

"I believe," said I, "that if I struggled a few days over this puzzle I might come to the conclusion that Mme. d'Armand is an American lady who has married a Frenchman."

The old man uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"Ha! Without doubt! Truly she must be an American lady who has married a Frenchman. Monsieur has already solved the puzzle. Truly, truly!" And he betook himself across the darkness to emerge in the light of the open door of the kitchen with the word still rumbling in his throat.

I rose from the chair on my little porch to go to bed, but I was reminded of something and called to him.

"Monsieur?" his voice came briskly. "How often do you see your friend, Jean Ferret, the gardener of Quesnay?"

"Frequently, monsieur. Tomorrow morning I could easily carry a message if—"

"That is precisely what I do not wish. And you may as well not mention me at all when you meet him."

"It is understood—perfectly."

"If it is well understood there will be a beautiful present for a good maitre d'hotel some day."

"Thank you, monsieur."

(To be continued.)

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