THE GUEST OF QUESNAY

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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CHAPTER V.

MY ankle had taken its wonted time to recover. I was on my feet again and into the woods.

July came, and one afternoon I sat in the mouth of the path just where I had played the bounding harlequin for the benefit of the lovely visitor at Quesnay.

I heard the light snapping of a twig and a swish of branches from the direction in which I faced. Evidently some one was approaching the glade, though concealed from me for the moment by the winding of the path. Taking it for Saffren as a matter of course—for we had arranged to meet at that time and place—I raised my voice in what I intended for a merry yodel of greeting.

I yodeled loud, I yodeled long, and my best performance was not unsuggestive of calamity in the poultry yard. And when my mouth was at its widest in the production of these shocking ulla bootings the person approaching came round a turn in the path and within full sight of me. To my horror it was Mme. d'Armand.

I grew so furiously red that it burned me. I was plainly a lunatic, whooping the lonely peace of the woods into pandemonium. She kept straight on. Then suddenly, while I waited in sizzling shame, a clear voice rang out from a distance in an answering yodel to mine. There was a final call, clear and loud as a bugle, and she turned to the direction whence it came. Then Oliver Saffren came running lightly round the turn of the path. He stopped short.

Her hand pressed against her side. He lifted his hat and spoke to her, and I thought she made some quick reply in a low voice, though I could not be sure.

She held that startled attitude a moment longer, then turned and crossed the glade so hurriedly that it was almost as if she ran away from him. She did not seem to see me. Her dark eyes stared widely straight ahead, her lips were parted, and she looked white and frightened.

I stepped out to meet him, indignant upon several counts, most of all upon his own.

"You spoke to that lady?" And my voice sounded unexpectedly harsh and sharp to my own ears, for I had meant to speak quietly.

"I know—I know. It—it was wrong," he stammered. "I knew I shouldn't—and I couldn't help it."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth. I couldn't!"

I laughed skeptically. "I don't understand. It was all beyond me," he added huskily.

"What was it you said to her?"

"I spoke her name—'Mme. d'Armand.'"

"You said more than that!"

"I asked her if she would let me see her again."

"What else?"

"Nothing," he answered humbly. "And then she—then for a moment it seemed—for a moment she didn't seem to be able to speak"—

"I should think not!" I shouted and burst out at him with satirical laughter. He stood patiently enduring it, his lowered eyes following the aimless movements of his hands, which were twisting and untwisting his flexible straw hat.

"But she did say something to you, didn't she?" I asked finally.

"She said, 'Not now!' That was all."

"I suppose that was all she had breath for! It was just the inconsequent and meaningless thing a frightened woman would say!"

"Meaningless?" he repeated and looked up wonderingly.

"Did you take it for an appointment?" I roared.

"No, no, no! She said only that and then"—

"Then she turned and ran away from you!"

"Yes," he said, swallowing painfully.

"That pleased you," I stormed, "to frighten a woman in the woods!"

I set about packing my traps, grumbling various sarcasms, the last mutterings of a departed storm, for already I realized that I had taken out my own mortification upon him, and I was stricken with remorse.

"I wouldn't have frightened her for the world," he finally said, and his voice and his body shook with a strange violence. "I wouldn't have frightened her to please the angels in heaven!"

I stared at him helplessly, nor could I find words to answer or control the passion that my imbecile scolding had evoked.

"You think I told a lie!" he cried. "You think I lied when I said I could not help speaking to her!"

"No, no," I said earnestly. "I didn't mean"—

"Words!" He swept the feeble protest away, drowned in a whirling vehemence. "And what does it matter? You can't understand. When you want to know what to do you look back into your life and it tells you, and I look back—ah!" He cried out, uttering a half choked, incoherent syllable. "I look back and it's all—*blind*! All these things you *can* do and *can't* do—all these infinite little things! You know, and Keredec knows, and Glouglou knows, and every mortal soul on earth knows, but I don't know! Your life has taught you, and you know, but I don't know. I haven't had my life. It's gone! All I have is words that Keredec has said to me. I would burn my hand from my arm and my arm from my body rather than trouble her or frighten her, but I couldn't help speaking to her any more than I can help wanting to see her again."

He paused, wiping from his brow a heavy dew, not of the heat, but like that on the forehead of a man in crucial pain. I made nervous haste to seize the opportunity and said gently, almost timidly:

"But if it should distress the lady?"

"Yes—then I could keep away. But I must know that."

"I think you might know it by her running away—and by her look," I said mildly. "Didn't you?"

"No!" And his eyes flashed an added emphasis.

"Well, well," I said, "let's be on our way."

"I don't believe she was distressed," he went on. "There was something, but it wasn't trouble. We looked straight at each other. I saw her eyes plainly, and it was"—he paused and sighed, a sudden, brilliant smile upon his lips—"it was very—it was very strange!"

There was something so glad and different in his look that, like any other dried up old blunderer in my place, I felt an instant tendency to laugh. It was that heathenish possession, the old insanity of the risibles, which makes a man think it a humorous thing that his friend should be discovered in love.

"But if you were wrong," I said, "if it did trouble her, and if it happened that she has already had too much that was distressing in her life"—

"You know something about her!" he exclaimed. "You know"—

"I do not." I interrupted in turn. "I have only a vague guess. I may be altogether mistaken."

"What is it that you guess?" he demanded abruptly. "Who made her suffer?"

"I think it was her husband," I said, with a lack of discretion for which I was instantly sorry, fearing with reason that I had added a final blunder to the long list of the afternoon—"that is," I added, "if my guess is right."

"Is he alive?" he cried sharply.

"I don't know!" I returned emphatically. "Probably I am entirely mistaken in thinking that I know anything of her whatever. I'd rather not say any more until I do know."

"Very well," he said quickly. "Will you tell me then?"

"Yes—if you will let it go at that."

"Thank you," he said and, with an impulse which was but too plainly one of gratitude, offered me his hand. I took it, and my soul was disquieted within me, for it was no purpose of mine to set inquiries on foot in regard to the affairs of Mme. d'Armand.

It was early dusk. From the courtyard of the inn came the sounds of laughter and chattering voices. Before the entrance stood a couple of open touring cars, the chauffeurs engaged in cooling the rear tires with buckets of water brought by a personage ordinarily known as Glouglou, whose look and manner as he performed this office for the leathern dignitaries so awed me that I wondered I had ever dared address him with any presumption of intimacy.

As we turned to enter the archway we almost ran into a tall man who was coming out, evidently intending to speak to one of the drivers.

The stranger stepped back with a word of apology, and I took note of him for a fellow countryman and a worldly buck of fashion indeed.

We were passing him when he uttered an ejaculation of surprise and stepped forward again, holding out his hand to my companion and exclaiming:

"Where did you come from? I'd hardly have known you."

Oliver seemed unconscious of the proffered hand. He stiffened visibly and said:

"I think there must be some mistake."

"So there is," said the other promptly. "I have been misled by a resemblance. I beg your pardon."

He lifted his cap slightly, going on, and we entered the courtyard to find a cheerful party of nine or ten men and women seated about a couple of tables.

I went almost as quickly to my pavilion and without lighting my lamp set about my preparations for dinner. The party outside, breaking up presently, could be heard moving toward the archway with increased noise and laughter. A girl's voice (a very attractive voice) called, "Oh, Cressie, aren't you coming?" and a man's replied from near my veranda, "Only stopping to light a cigar."

A flutter of skirts and a patter of feet betokened that the girl came running back to join the smoker. "Cressie," I heard her say in an eager, lowered tone, "who was that devastating creature in white flannels?"

The man chuckled. "Matinee sort of devastator—what? Monte Cristo hair, noble profile"—

"You'd better tell me," she interrupted earnestly, "if you don't want me to ask the waiter."

"But I don't know him."

"I saw you speak to him."

"I thought it was a man I met three years ago out in San Francisco, but I was mistaken. There was a slight resemblance. This fellow might have been a rather decent younger brother of the man I knew. He was the"—

My strong impression was that if the speaker had not been interrupted at this point he would have said something very unfavorable to the character of the man he had met in San Francisco.

I caught a last word from the girl as the pair moved away.

"I'll come back here with a band tomorrow night and serenade the beautiful one."

"Monsieur is served," said Amedee, looking in at my door five minutes later.

"You have passed a great hour just now, Amedee."

"It was like the old days, truly!"

"They are off for Trouville, I suppose?"

"No, monsieur; they are on their way to visit the chateau and stopped here only because the run from Paris had made the tires too hot."

"To visit Quesnay, you mean?"

"Truly. But monsieur need give himself no uneasiness. I did not mention to any one that monsieur is here. His name was not spoken. Mlle. Ward returned to the chateau today," he added. "She has been in England."

"Quesnay will be gay," I said, coming out to the table.

CHAPTER VI.

I HAD finished dressing next morning and was strapping my things together for the day's campaign when I heard a shuffling step upon the porch and the door opened gently without any previous ceremony of knocking, admitting Amedee with a breakfast tray.

"Monsieur," he said, nodding in a panic toward the courtyard, "Mlle. Ward is out there!"

"What!" But I did not shout the word.

"Probably Mlle. Ward has only come to talk with Mme. Brossard."

"I fear some of those people may have told her you were here," he ventured insinuatingly.

"What people?" I asked, drinking my coffee calmly, yet, it must be confessed, without quite the deliberation I could have wished.

"Those who stopped yesterday evening on the way to the chateau. They might have recognized"—

"Impossible. I knew none of them."

"But Mlle. Ward knows that you are here without doubt."

"Why do you say so?"

"Because she has inquired for you."

"So!" I rose at once and went toward the door. "Why didn't you tell me at once?"

He saw the menace coiling in my eye and hurriedly retreated.

"Monsieur!" he gasped, backing away from me, and as his hand, fumbling behind him, found the latch of the door, he opened it and scrambled out by a sort of spiral movement round the casing. When I followed a moment later, with my traps on my shoulder and the packet of sandwiches in my pocket, he was out of sight.

Miss Elizabeth sat beneath the arbor at the other end of the courtyard, and beside her stood the trim and glossy bay saddle horse that she had ridden from Quesnay, his head outstretched above his mistress to paddle at the vine leaves with a tremulous upper lip.

An expression in the lady's attitude and air which I instinctively construed as histrionic seemed intended to convey that she had been kept waiting, yet had waited without reproach, and, although she must have heard me coming, she did not look toward me until I was quite near and spoke her

Miss Elizabeth sat beneath the arbor, and beside her stood the saddle horse.

name. At that she sprang up quickly enough and stretched out her hand to me.

"Run to earth!" she cried, advancing a step to meet me.

"A pretty poor trophy of the chase," said I, "but proud that you are its killer."

To my surprise and mystification her cheeks and brow flushed rosily. She was obviously conscious of it and laughed.

"Don't be embarrassed," she said.

"I!"

"Yes, you, poor man! I suppose I couldn't have more thoroughly compromised you. Mme. Brossard will never believe in your respectability again."

"Oh, yes, she will," said I.

"What! A lodger who has ladies calling upon him at 5 o'clock in the morning! But your bundle's on your shoulder," she rattled on, laughing, "though there's many could be bolder, and perhaps you'd let me walk a bit of the way with you if you're for the road."

"Perhaps I will," said I. She caught up her riding skirt, fastening it by a clasp at her side, and we passed out through the archway and went slowly along the road bordering the forest, her horse following obediently at half rein's length.

"When did you hear that I was at Mme. Brossard's?" I asked.

"Ten minutes after I returned to Quesnay late yesterday afternoon."

"Who told you?"

"Louise."

I repeated the name questioningly. "You mean Mrs. Larrabee Harman?"

"Louise Harman," she corrected. "Didn't you know she was staying at Quesnay?"

"I guessed it, though Amedee got the name confused."

"Yes; she's been kind enough to look after the place for us while we were away. George won't be back for another ten days, and I've been overseeing an exhibition for him in London. Afterward I did a round of visits—tiresome enough, but among people it's well to keep in touch with on George's account."

"I see," I said, with a grimness which probably escaped her. "But how did Mrs. Harman know that I was at Les Trois Pigeons?"

"She met you once in the forest"—

"Twice," I interrupted.

"She mentioned only once. Of course she'd often heard both George and me speak of you."

"But how did she know it was I and where I was staying?"

"Oh, that!" Her smile changed to a laugh. "Your maitre d'hotel told Ferret, a gardener at Quesnay, that you were at the inn."

"He did!"

"Oh, but you mustn't be angry with him. He made it quite all right."

"How did he do that?" I asked, trying to speak calmly, though there was that in my mind which might have blanched the parchment cheek of a grand inquisitor.

"He told Ferret that you were very anxious not to have it known— You think Louise very lovely to look at, don't you?" she asked.

"Exquisite," I answered.

"Every one does."

"I suppose she told you"—and now I felt myself growing red—"that I behaved like a drunken acrobat when she came upon me in the path?"

"No. Did you?" cried Miss Elizabeth, with a ready credulity which I thought by no means pretty. "Louise said that she wished she could have had a better look at what you were painting."

"Heaven bless her!" I exclaimed. "Her reticence was angelic."

"Yes, she has reticence," said my companion, with enough of the same quality to make me look at her quickly. A thin line had been drawn across her forehead.

"You mean she's still reticent with George?" I ventured.

"Yes," she answered sadly. "Poor George always hopes, of course, in the silent way of his kind when they suffer from such unfortunate passions, and he waits."

"I suppose that former husband of hers recovered."

"I believe he's still alive somewhere. Locked up, I hope!" she finished crisply.

"She retained his name," I observed.

"Harman? Yes; she retained it. At all events she's rid of him."

"It's hard," I reflected aloud—"hard to understand her making that mistake, young as she was. Even in the glimpse of her I've had it was easy to see something of what she's like—a fine, rare, high type."

"But you didn't know him, did you?" Miss Elizabeth asked, with some dryness.

"No," I answered. "I saw him twice—once at the time of his accident—that was only a nightmare, his face covered with"— I shivered. "But I had caught a glimpse of him on the boulevard, and of all the dreadful"—

"Oh, but he wasn't always dreadful," she interposed quickly. "He was a fascinating sort of person, quite charming and good looking, when she ran away with him, though he was horribly dissipated even then. He always had been that. Of course she thought she'd be able to straighten him out, poor girl! She tried for three years—three years it hurts one to think of! You see, it must have been something very like a 'grand passion' to hold her through a pain three years long."

"Or tremendous pride," said I. "Women make an odd world of it for the rest of us. There was good old George, as true and straight a man as ever lived"—

"And she took the other! Yes." George's sister laughed sorrowfully.

"But George and she have both survived the mistake," I went on, with confidence. "Her tragedy must have taught her some important differences. Haven't you a notion she'll be tremendously glad to see him when he comes back from America?"

"Ah, I do hope so!" she cried. "You see, I'm fearing that he hopes so, too—to the degree of counting on it."

"You don't count on it yourself?"

She shook her head. "With any other woman I should."

"Why not with Mrs. Harman?"

"Cousin Louise has her ways," said Miss Elizabeth slowly, and, whether she could not further explain her doubts or whether she would not, that was all I got out of her on the subject at the time. I asked one or two more questions, but my companion merely shook her head again, alluding vaguely to her cousin's "ways." Then she brightened suddenly and inquired when I would have my things sent up to the chateau from the inn.

At the risk of a misunderstanding which I felt I could ill afford I resigned her kind hospitality, and the outcome of it was that there should be a kind of armistice, to begin with my dining at the chateau that evening.

"Did anybody ever tell you," was her surprising inquiry, "that you are the queerest man of these times?"

"No," I answered. "Don't you think you're a queerer woman?"

"Footle!" she cried scornfully. "Be off to your woods and your woodscaping!"

Her bay horse departed at a smart gait.

My work was accomplished after a fashion more or less desultory that day. I had many absent moments, was restless and walked more than I painted and returned to the inn earlier than usual.

While dressing I sent word to Professor Keredec that I should not be able to join him at dinner that evening.

Miss Elizabeth had the courage to take me under her wings when I arrived in acceptance of her invitation, placing me upon her left at dinner, but sprightlier calls than mine demanded and occupied her attention. At my other side sat a magnificently upholstered lady who offered a fine shoulder and the rear wall of a collar of pearls for my observation throughout the evening as she leaned forward talking eagerly with a male personage across the table. This was a prince ending in "ski." He permitted himself the slight vagary of wearing a gold bracelet, and perhaps this flavor of romance drew the lady.

The banquet was drawing to a close when Miss Elizabeth leaned toward me and spoke.

"Anne Elliott, yonder, is asking you a question," she repeated, nodding at

"Who and what is the glorious stranger?" she asked.

a very pretty girl down and across the table from me. Miss Anne Elliott's attractive voice had previously enabled me to recognize her as the young woman who had threatened to serenade Les Trois Pigeons.

"I beg your pardon," I said, addressing her.

"I hear you're at Les Trois Pigeons," said Miss Elliott.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind telling us something of the mysterious Narcissus?"

"If you'll be more definite," I returned in the tone of a question.

"I mean a recklessly charming vision with a white tie and white hair and white flannels," she said.

"Oh," said I, "he's not mysterious."

"But he is," she returned. "I insist on his being mysterious, rarely, grandly, strangely mysterious! You will let me think so?" This young lady had a whimsical manner of emphasizing words unexpectedly, with a breathless intensity that approached violence, a habit dangerously contagious among nervous persons, so that I answered slowly out of a fear that I might echo it.

"He's a young American, very attractive, very simple."

"But he's mad!" she interrupted.

"Oh, no!" I said hastily.

"But he is! A person told me so in a garden this very afternoon," she went on eagerly—"a person with a rake and ever so many moles on his chin. This person told me all about him. His name is Oliver Saffren, and he's in the charge of a very large doctor and quite, quite mad!"

"Jean Ferret, the gardener," I said deliberately and with venom, "is fast acquiring notoriety in these parts as an idiot of purest ray, and he had his information from another whose continuance unhanged is every hour more miraculous."

"How ruthless of you," cried Miss Elliott, with exaggerated reproach, "when I have had such a thrilling happiness all day in believing that riotously beautiful creature mad! If he isn't, why does he have an enormous doctor with him?"

"This is romance!" I retorted. "The doctor is Professor Keredec, illustriously known in this country, but not as a physician, and they are following some form of scientific research together."

The windows had been thrown open, allowing passage to a veranda. Miss Elizabeth led the way outdoors with the prince. I caught a final glimpse of Mrs. Harman, which revealed that she was looking at me with tensity, but with the movement of intervening groups I lost her. Miss Elliott pointedly waited for me until I came round the table, then attached me definitely by taking my arm, accompanying the action with a dazzling smile.

Tables and coffee were waiting on the broad terrace below, with a big moon rising in the sky. I descended the steps in charge of this pretty cavalier, allowed her to seat me at the most remote of the tables and accepted without unwillingness other gallantries of hers in the matter of coffee and cigarettes. "And now," she said—"now that I've done so much for your dearest hopes and comfort, look up at the milky moon and tell me all."

She leaned an elbow on the marble railing that protected the terrace and, shielding her eyes from the moonlight with her hand, affected to gaze at me dramatically. "Who and what is the glorious stranger?" she asked.

Resisting an impulse to chime in with her humor, I gave her so dry and commonplace an account of my young friend at the inn that I presently found myself abandoned to solitude again.

"I don't know where to go," she complained as she rose. "These other people are most painful to a girl of my intelligence, but I cannot linger by your side. Untruth long ago lost its interest for me, and I prefer to believe Mr. Jean Ferret, if that is the gentleman's name. I'd join Miss Ward and Cressie Ingle yonder, but Cressie would be indignant. I shall soothe my hurt with sweetest airs. Adieu."

With that she made me a solemn courtesy and departed, a pretty little figure, not little in attractiveness, the strong moonlight, tinged with blue, shimmering over her blond hair and splashing brightly among the ripples of her silks and laces. A moment later some chords were sounded upon a piano, which ran on into "La Vie de Boheme" and out of that into something else. I was floated off into a reverie that was like a prelude for the person who broke it. She came so quietly that I did not hear her until she was almost beside me and spoke to me. It was the second time that had happened.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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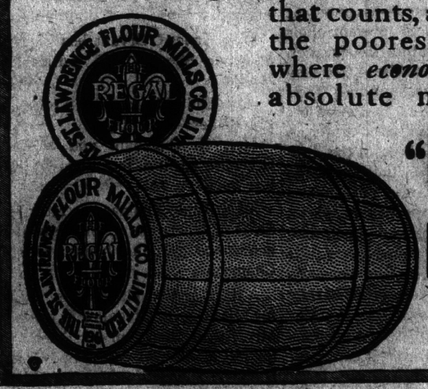

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