

THE GUEST OF OUSENAY

By BOOTH TARKINGTON
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CHAPTER III.

ONE evening I returned to the inn to find a big van from Lyons, the nearest railway station, drawn up in the courtyard at the foot of the stairs leading to the gallery, and all the people of the inn, from Mme. Brossard (who directed, to Glouglou (who muddled) attempted the heaviest pieces, busily installing trunks, bags and packing cases in the suit engaged for the "great man of science" on the second floor of the east wing of the building. Neither the great man nor his companion was to be seen, however, both having retired to their rooms immediately upon their arrival, so Amedee informed me.

I made my evening ablutions, removing a Joseph's coat of dust and paint, and came forth from my pavilion, hoping that Professor Keredec and his friend would not mind eating in the same garden with a man in a corduroy jacket and suitcase, but the gentlemen continued invisible to the public eye, and mine was the only table set for dinner in the garden. Upstairs the curtains were carefully drawn across all the windows of the east wing, little leaks of orange here and there betraying the lights within.

"It is to be supposed that Professor Keredec and his friend are fatigued with their journey from Paris," I began a little later.

"Monsieur," they did not seem fatigued," said Amedee.

"But they dine in their own rooms tonight."

"Every night, monsieur. It is the order of Professor Keredec. And with their own valet de chambre to serve them. But," he poured my coffee solemnly, "that is mysterious, to say the least, isn't it?"

"To say the very least," I agreed.

"Monsieur the professor is a man of secrets, it appears," continued Amedee.

"When he wrote to Mme. Brossard, engaging his rooms, he instructed her to be careful that none of us should mention even his name, and today when he came he spoke of his anxiety on that point."

"But you did mention it."

"To whom, monsieur?" asked the old fellow blankly.

"To me."

"But I told him I had not," said Amedee placidly. "It is the same thing."

"I wonder," I began, struck with a sudden thought, "if it will prove quite the same thing in my own case. I suppose you have not mentioned the circumstance of my being here to your friend Jean Perret of Quenay?"

"He looked at me reproachfully. 'Has monsieur been troubled by the people of the chateau? Have they done anything whatever to show that they have heard monsieur is here?'"

"No, certainly they haven't," I was obliged to retract at once. "I beg your pardon, Amedee."

"Ah, monsieur!" He made a deprecatory bow, which plunged me still deeper in shame. "All the same," he pursued, "it seems very mysterious—this Keredec affair."

The reports were voluminous, the details few. Professor Keredec's voice could often be heard in every part of the inn, at times holding forth with such protracted vehemence that only one explanation would suffice—the learned man was delivering a lecture to his companion.

Amedee brushed away my suggestion that the auditor might be a stenographer to whom the professor was dictating chapters for a new book. The relation between the two men, he contended, was more like that between teacher and pupil. "But a pupil with grey hair," he finished, raising his fat hands to heaven, "for that other monsieur has hair as gray as mine."

"That other monsieur" was further described as a thin man, handsome, but with a "singular air," nor could my colleague more satisfactorily define this air.

I ascertained that, although "that other monsieur" had gray hair, he was by no means a person of great age. Indeed, Glouglou, who had seen him oftener than any other of the staff, maintained that he was quite young. Nevertheless, Amedee remarked, it was certain that Professor Keredec's friend was neither an American nor an Englishman.

"Why is it certain?" I asked.

"Monsieur, he drinks nothing but water, he does not smoke, and Glouglou says he eats his soup silently."

"Glouglou is an authority who resolves the difficulty. That other monsieur is a Frenchman."

"I can find no levity in the deduction," I said, rising to go to bed. "We must leave it there for tonight."

The next evening Amedee allowed me to perceive that he was concealing something under his arm as he stalked the coffee machine.

"What is that?" I said.

"It is a book."

"But why do you bring it to me?"

"Monsieur," he replied in the tones of an old conspirator, "this afternoon the professor and that other monsieur went, as usual, to walk in the forest. When they returned this book fell from the pocket of that other monsieur's coat as he ascended the stair, and he did not notice."

The book was Wentworth's algebra—elementary principles. Painful recollections of my boyhood and the nihilist theorem rose in my mind as I let the leaves turn under my fingers.

His tone became even more confidential. "Part of it, monsieur, is in English. That is plain. I have found an English word in it that I know—the word 'O.' But much of the printing is also in Arabic. Yes, monsieur, took there." He laid a fat forefinger on "a+b"—"a-2ab+2b." "That is Arabic. Old Gaston has been to Algeria. He looked at the book and told me it was Arabic."

I shed no light upon him. The book had been Greek to me in my tender years. It was a pleasure now to leave a fellow being under the impression that it was Arabic.

But the volume took its little revenge upon me, for it increased my curiosity about Professor Keredec and "that other monsieur." Why were two grown men—one an eminent psychologist and the other a gray haired youth with a singular air—carrying about on their walks a text book for the instruction of boys of thirteen or fourteen?

The next day that curiosity of mine was piqued in earnest. It rained and I did not leave the inn, but sat under the great archway and took notes in color of the shining road and bright drenched fields. My back was toward the courtyard, and about noon I became conscious of my work by a strong self-consciousness which came upon me without any visible or audible cause. Obeying an impulse, I swung round on my camp stool and looked up directly at the gallery window of the salon of the "grande suite." A man with a great white beard was standing at the window, half hidden by the curtain, watching me intently. He perceived that I saw him and dropped the curtain immediately.

The spy was Professor Keredec.

The next day I painted in various parts of the forest, studying the early morning along the eastern fringe and moving deeper in as the day advanced.

The path debouched abruptly on the glade and was so narrow that when I leaned back my elbows were in the bushes. I had the ambition to paint a picture here—to do the whole thing in the woods from day to day, instead of taking notes for the studio, but when I rose from my camp stool and stepped back into the path to get more distance for my canvas I saw what a mess I was making of it. At the same time my hand, falling into the capacious pocket of my jacket, encountered a package—my lunch, which I had forgotten to eat. Whereupon, becoming suddenly aware that I was very hungry, I began to eat Amedee's good sandwiches without moving from where I stood.

Absorbed, gazing with abysmal disgust at my canvas, I was eating absently and with all the restraint and dignity of a Georgia dandy attacking a watermelon when a pleasant voice spoke in French from just behind me:

"Pardon, monsieur. Permit me to pass, if you please."

I turned in confusion to behold a dark eyed lady, charmingly dressed in lilac and white, waiting for me to make way so that she could pass.

I have just said that I "turned in confusion." The truth is that I jumped like a kangaroo, but with infinitely less grace. And in my nervous haste to clear the way, meaning only to push the camp stool out of the path with my foot, I put too much valor into the push, and with horror saw the camp stool rise in the air and drop to the ground again nearly a third of the distance across the glade. Upon that

and boyishly healthy that, except for his gray hair, he might have passed for twenty-two or twenty-three, and even as it was I guessed his years short of thirty. But there are plenty of handsome young fellows with prematurely gray hair, and, as Amedee said, though out of the world we were near it. It was the newcomer's "singular air" which established his identity. Amedee's vagueness had irked me, but the thing itself—the "singular air"—was not at all vague. Instantly perceptible, it was an investiture, marked, definite and intangible. My interrogator was "that other monsieur."

In response to his question I asked him another:

"Were the roses real or artificial?"

"I don't know," he answered, with what I took to be a whimsical assumption of gravity. "It wouldn't matter, would it? Have you seen her?"

"Isn't your description," I said gravely, thinking to suit my humor to his own, "somewhat too general? A great many white hats trimmed with roses might come for a stroll in these woods."

"I have seen her only once before," he responded promptly, with a seriousness apparently quite genuine. "That was from my window at an inn three days ago. She drove by in an open carriage."

"A little while ago," he went on, "I was up in the branches of a tree over yonder, and I caught a glimpse of a lady in a light dress and a white hat, and I thought it might be the same. She wore a dress like that and a white hat with roses when she drove by the inn. I am very anxious to see her again."

"You seem to be?"

"And haven't you seen her? Haven't she passed this way?"

"I think that I may have seen her," I began slowly, "but if you do not know her I should not advise."

I was interrupted by a shout and the sound of a large body plunging in the thicket. Professor Keredec bounded out through the last row of saplings and bushes, his beard embellished with a broken twig, his big face red and perspiring. "He was a fine, a mighty man, ponderous of shoulder, monumental of height, stupendous of girth. He seized the young man by the arm."

"Ha, my friend!" he exclaimed in a base voice of astounding power and depth, "that is one way to study botany—to jump out of the middle of a high tree and to run like a crazy man!"

"I saw a lady I wished to follow," the other answered promptly.

"A lady! What lady?"

"The lady who passed the inn three days ago. I spoke of her then, you remember?"

"Tonnerre de Dieu!" Keredec slapped his thigh violently. "Have I never told you that to follow strange ladies is one of the things you cannot do?"

"That other monsieur" shook his head. "No, you have never told me that. I do not understand it," he said, adding irrelevantly, "I believe this gentleman knows her. He says he thinks he has seen her."

"If you please, we must not trouble this gentleman about it," said the professor hastily.

"But I wish to ask him her name," urged the other.

"No, no," Keredec took him by the arm. "We must go."

"But why?" persisted the young man.

"Not now!" The professor removed his broad felt hat and hurriedly wiped

his eyes with the back of his hand. "I have never seen her until this afternoon."

Upon this "that other monsieur" astonished me in good earnest. Searching my eyes eagerly with his clear, inquisitive gaze, he took a step toward me and said:

"You are sure you are telling the truth?"

The professor uttered an exclamation of horror, sprang forward and clutched his friend's arm again. "Malheureux!" he cried, and then to me: "Sir, you will give him pardon if you can. He has no meaning to be rude."

"Rude!" The young man's voice showed both astonishment and pain. "Was that rude? I didn't know. I didn't mean to be rude, God knows! Ah," he said sadly, "I do nothing but make mistakes. I hope you will forgive me."

"Ha, that is better!" shouted the great man. "We shall go home now and eat a good dinner. But first—his silver rimmed spectacles twinkled upon me, and he beat his Brobdingnagian back in a bow which, against my will, reminded me of the courtesies performed by Orloff's dancing bears—

"First let me speak some word for myself. My dear sir," he addressed himself to me with grave formality, "do not suppose I have no realization that other excuses should be made to you. Believe me, they shall be. It is now round and round and round until I get dizzy looking for some fish I could pronounce, but I couldn't find any. I guess they don't allow haddock or any of the fishes I know to stop there. One of the names was 'encoriynchus' and another 'scomberomorus maculatus.' There's jawbreakers for you, Ma. Imagine picking the bones out of them and trying to eat them. I didn't see any canned fish."

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then, discovering that I still held the horrid remains of a sausage sandwich in my hand, I threw it into the underbrush with unnecessary force and, recovering my camp stool, sat down to work. I did not immediately begin. At thought of the jig I had danced to it my face burned again.

Suddenly a snapping of twigs underfoot and a swishing of branches in the thicket warned me of a second intruder forcing a way toward the path through the underbrush, and very briskly, too, judging by the sounds.

He burst out into the glade a few paces from me, a tall man in white flannels, liberally decorated with brandies and clinging shreds of underbrush. The youthful sprightliness of his light figure and the naive activity of his approach gave me a very favorable first impression of him.

"Have you seen a lady in a white and lilac dress and with roses in her hat?" he demanded eagerly.

"What surprised me was the instantaneous certainty with which I recognized the speaker from Amedee's description."

My sudden gentleman was strikingly good looking, his complexion so clear

and boyishly healthy that, except for his gray hair, he might have passed for twenty-two or twenty-three, and even as it was I guessed his years short of thirty. But there are plenty of handsome young fellows with prematurely gray hair, and, as Amedee said, though out of the world we were near it. It was the newcomer's "singular air" which established his identity. Amedee's vagueness had irked me, but the thing itself—the "singular air"—was not at all vague. Instantly perceptible, it was an investiture, marked, definite and intangible. My interrogator was "that other monsieur."

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his vast and steaming brow. "It is better if we do not discuss it now."

"But I might not meet him again."

"I do not know the lady," I said, with some sharpness. "I have never seen her until this afternoon."

Upon this "that other monsieur" astonished me in good earnest. Searching my eyes eagerly with his clear, inquisitive gaze, he took a step toward me and said:

"You are sure you are telling the truth?"

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