

The Airy Prince

Arthur Beverley Baxter

Illustrated by

E. J. Dinsmore

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The AIRY PRINCE

A Novelette Complete in This Issue

By ARTHUR BEVERLEY BAXTER

Author of "The Blower of Bubbles"; "Mr. Cradhamer
of New York, Satirist," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY E. J. DINSMORE

On a hillock that overlooked a mill-stream in Picardy, a girl of sixteen was lying, face downwards, reading a book. The noise of the water tumbling over the chute was a song to which her ears had grown accustomed, but more than once she looked up as the October wind rose and fell in a chromatic whine. A dark, thickening cloud crept sullenly towards the earth, throwing its shadow on her book.

She gazed up at it and sighed.

A black cat, his green eyes glowing suspiciously in the fading light, stalked from the mill-house and furtively watched a wanton leaf that was flirting hilariously with the autumn breeze, until, still coquetting, it was caught by the stream and carried to destruction.

The cat's teeth showed for a moment in a sinister grin. Cautiously measuring each step, he climbed to the top of the hillock, crouched suspiciously as a blade of grass moved in the wind, then scampered boldly up to the girl and settled ostentatiously upon the open pages of the book, for a siesta.

"*Tiens!*" The girl started, laughingly caught the offender by the ear, and pulled him to one side. "Louis, you have very bad manners," she said, speaking in French. "You come so, without asking permission, and you go to sleep on *The Fairy Prince*. Wake up, Louis! To you I am speaking."

The cat opened his eyes, bent them on her with a reproving look, and slowly closed them once more.

"Louis! Wake up—listen! I will read to you *The Fairy Prince*, and if you go to sleep I'll have you gr-r-r-ound into black flour. See there now!"



Louis scratched his ear with a hind paw. . . “Now then, my friend, attention! This is all about a little girl—like me, Louis, only she was pretty.” . . . The feline culprit stretched his paws and sat up rigidly.

Louis scratched his ear with a hind paw, rubbed his nose with a fore one, sneezed, opened his eyes to their widest, and generally indicated that he was thoroughly awake—in fact, was not likely ever to sleep again in this world. His little mistress gathered her shawl more tightly about her shoulders, and, crossing one foot over the other, shifted her position to secure the acme of comfort.

“Now then, my friend, attention! This is all about a little girl—like me, Louis, only she was pretty. Tell me, Louis, am I pretty, eh? Stop yawning when I ask you a question. You sleep almost all day and all night, and when you do wake up—you yawn. Pouf! Such laziness! So—this is the story. This little girl she lived like me in a house away, ever so far away from everything, and she was very unhappy. You understand, Louis, she was *so* lonesome. And every night she would cry herself to sleep—as I do sometimes, because—because—— Wake up, you wicked cat!”

The feline culprit stretched his paws and sat up rigidly like a slumbering worshipper in church who has been detected in the act, but tries to indicate that he has merely been lost in contemplation of the preacher’s theme. The girl frowned at Louis, and, laughing gaily, rubbed her cheek against his head.

Her laugh had hardly ended when, as her ear caught the note of melancholy in the wind, she looked up, and her face, which had hovered a moment before between a frown and a smile, was shadowed

by a musing expression that left her eyes dreamy and her lips drooping in the slightest and most sensitive of curves. Her dark hair, rippling into curls, fell back from a forehead whose fullness and whiteness added to the spiritual innocence of her countenance. Without being faultless, her face had an elusive mobility of expression that altered with each mood as swiftly as the surface of a pool lying exposed to the caprices of an April morning.

“Is it not a pretty story, Louis?” Of a sudden the filmy dreaminess of her eyes had lifted, and their dark-brown depths sparkled with life. “I am so glad at the convent they made me learn to read. But it is dreadfully difficult, my friend—there are such big words, you see. Well, Louis, this little girl went one day for a walk to the top of the hill—but you shall hear exactly how it is.”

She carefully found the place in the book, and, with a finger following each line in case she should miss any of it, proceeded to read in that ecstatic and unreal style of voice inevitable to young people when uttering other thoughts than their own.

“‘. . . Reaching the top of the hill, the most beautiful little girl in the world, whose eyes were brighter than stars, and whose lips were redder than the heart of a rose’ (like me, Louis—yes?) ‘sat down on a fallen tree and started to sing a song which she had learned from a solitary shepherd near her home.’—It does not say, Louis, but I think, perhaps, the music goes like this:

“ ‘Maman, dites moi ce qu’on sent quand on aime.
Est-ce plaisir, est-ce tourment?
Je suis tout le jour dans une peine extrême,
Et la nuit, je ne sais comment.
Si quelqu’un près. . . .’

“ ‘And just then she saw a handsome cavalier approaching on foot.’ (Is it not exciting, Louis?) ‘He was tall and young, and was the bravest soldier in all France. He was so brave and handsome that every one called him “The Fairy Prince.”’—Listen, Louis, to the wind.”

The lowering clouds threw black shadows over the fields; the hurrying water of the mill-stream turned the color of ink as it made, shudderingly, for the fall of the chute. Through the ominous rise and fall of the October wind came the sound of an aeroplane in the clouds, to be lost a moment later in a boisterous rush of wind that swept the girl’s tresses.

“Come, Louis, under my shawl—so! It is cold, is it not? As soon as we finish this part of the story, we shall go in by the stove and work until bedtime, then . . . Do you ever dream, Louis?”

The black cat opened one green eye and closed it with the solemnity of an all-understanding wink.

“I often dream, my cat,”—again the wistfulness lingered about her face—“and always it is of the world that is past the village. . . . Is it that I must stay here and never, never, see that world but when I dream? *Voyons*—what has all this to do with the Fairy Prince? I continue, Louis: ‘As soon as the handsome cavalier saw the loveliest little girl in all the country, he came towards her. . . .’”

The droning sound grew louder. She looked up and watched the dark billow’s of clouds hovering over the fields, when, suddenly, through the heavy, underhanging mist, an aeroplane appeared, descended swiftly towards the earth, straightened out its course, and soared into the clouds again.

She could hear the whirring of the machine as it circled round and round, like an angry hornet outside its nest that has been entered by an invader.

The sound of the engine grew increasingly loud; again the mists parted as foam from the prow of a ship, and again the aeroplane swooped towards the earth. She could almost make out the features of the helmeted occupant, when, with a deafening roar, the machine checked its downward flight, and rose once more until the clouds took it to their bosom and hid it from sight.

“Louis!” Her voice shook. “I am frightened. Louis, we will go in and pray to the Virgin, you and I. It may be an *Allemand*, and, so ’tis said, they eat little girls—and black cats too.”

The whirr of the engines grew angry with intensity, then fainter as the machine rose to a greater height. Suddenly the droning ceased. The tumbling waters of the chute seemed instantly loud, as though jealous of the brawling monster that had dared to challenge its incessant song. The girl had just stooped to resume her book when, above the whining breeze, there was a sound like that of a saw-mill she had once heard in Etrun—but it came from the air—far over by the village road.

With a catch of her breath, she saw the aeroplane pierce the mists once more, and realized that it was pointing towards her as it descended. Rising to her feet, she pressed her hand against her mouth to keep from screaming,

while ominously, noiselessly (but for an occasional hum such as wires give on a frosty night), the giant bird sped lower and nearer.

“Louis,” she cried. “Louis!”

Weak with terror, she grasped for the cat, to find that that ungallant protector had bolted ingloriously to the mill-house. Unable to move, she watched the monster as it touched the earth, bounded lightly, felt the ground a second time, and staggered unevenly over a rise in the ground. There was a final Wagnerian crescendo of the engines, and the aeroplane stopped, motionless, less than fifty yards from her.

The aviator climbed from the pilot’s seat and looked about with a puzzled air. He was dressed in a leather coat which reached to the top of his riding-boots, and his head was encased in a leather helmet. Raising his goggles, he looked toward the mill-house, and, for the first time, caught sight of the girl.

For a moment he hesitated, then made towards her, taking an extraordinarily length of pace for one of his medium build, and raising his knees, as a bather will do when wading through surf. He paused, irresolute, about five yards from her, saluted, unbuckled a strap, and removed his helmet with a carelessness that left his generous supply of light-brown hair standing straight up like the quills of a porcupine. His face was rather long, and, except for his eyes, which twinkled humorously, bore a look of exaggerated solemnity. Constant exposure to the sun had tanned his face a vigorous brown, but his moustache and eyebrows, which were of a size, appeared to have completely faded, and stood out, glow-worm like, against the background of tan.

For a full minute they gazed at each other, the girl with parted lips and heightened color, the new-comer’s gravity slowly giving way to the good-humored persistence of the light-blue eyes, until with a smile he ran his fingers through his rumpled hair.

“Phew!” he said.

With something between a sob and an exclamation of delight, she clapped her hands together twice. “*Ciel!*” she cried, “but I am so happy!”

The mill-stream had ceased to shudder and had resumed its song. . . . With an air of furtive preoccupation, Louis emerged from concealment and proceeded towards them after the manner of an unpopular Mexican President walking down the main street of an unfriendly city. . . . The

darkening shadows blended with the early approach of night. . . . And her heart was beating wildly, joyously.

Adventure had come to the lonely mill-house in Picardy—and, after all, one is not always sixteen.

II

“Will you please tell me where I am?”

The young man spoke in French with ease, but more than a trace of an English accent.

“This is my uncle’s mill.”

“Of course. And that road?”——

“But the village road, monsieur—what else?”

“And, Mademoiselle Elusive, what village may it be?”

“ ’Tis where the church is, monsieur; and every Sunday I go there to mass.”

The pilot produced a pipe and, extracting a pouch, proceeded to fill it with tobacco.

“I am lost,” he said complacently. “My compass was shot away, and the clouds are hanging too low for me to follow any landmarks.”

He looked about at the steadily thickening twilight. “How far is it to the village?” he asked.

“Five kilometres—and a little better.”

“The Devil!” He made a screen from the wind with the flap of his coat, and lighting his pipe, puffed it with evident satisfaction. “I shall have to leave the old ‘bus’ here. As a matter of fact, she’s so nearly ‘napoo’ that I rather expected to come riding home on one plane, like the old woman with the broom. But mademoiselle”——

“Monsieur?”

“I am very tired and distinctly hungry, and I know of a mill-house with a cosy fire in the kitchen, where a pretty little fairy that”——

“There is no fairy—only Louis.”

“And who the deuce may he be?”

“The cat—*Le voici!*”

He surveyed the feline with an air of tolerant gravity. “Do you think Louis may object if I remain for supper?”

“Ah, but no!” She laughed gaily, then a look of doubt changed the expression of her features in a moment. “But my uncle—he never has anyone in the house. For many years I have lived alone with him. Only when the curé comes, perhaps once a month, does any one visit the mill. My uncle is very surly, a perfect bear, and often he gets drunk as well.”

The young man raised his absurdly light eyebrows. “A pleasant relative, mademoiselle. And, pray, what is his grievance against his fellow-men?”

“I know not, monsieur. All week he works alone, except when he takes the flour to sell, but on Sundays he always goes to church and leads the chanting. He was taught Latin by his father, who was a gravedigger in Paris and learned it from the tombstones. So on Sundays my uncle, from his seat in the chancel, performs the chants in such a terrible voice that almost always some children scream with terror, and once Madame La Comtesse fainted.”

The aviator relit his pipe, which had gone out, but did not remove his eyes from hers.

“Once,” went on the girl, plucking a blade of grass and making a knot with it about her finger, “two villagers, Simon Barit and Armand Cartier, were requested by the curé, who is very small and weak, to tell my uncle to sing no more. Ah monsieur, it was terrible!”

“Yes?”

“My uncle he is a very strong man; he threw Simon Barit into the stream, and the other he chased almost to the village.”

“And so, like the mill-stream, he goes on for ever?”

“Ah yes, monsieur, like the war—for ever. Listen?”

A great voice, sonorous as that of the fabled giant calling for his evening meal of an Englishman, rent the air. The October wind seemed to quiver to its lowest note, and the water racing over the chute was quieter than it had been for hours.

“I must go, monsieur. It is his supper he wants.”

“And may I not come too?”

“Ah, but no! I am frightened.”

“Of me?”

She raised her wide brown eyes to his, and her eyelashes, which so jealously guarded those guileless depths, parted grudgingly, revealing to him their full beauty. . . . Another roar shattered the air, and she laid her hand upon his wrist. “You must not come,” she said earnestly. “He would throw you into the stream.”

His melancholy face gave way to a boyish grin. “If he did, mademoiselle, my ghost would haunt him for ever. All night it would sing outside his window—and, in truth, my singing is no less terrible than his.”

There was another roar, followed by a reference to the untimely decease of ten thousand devils.

Without a word, she reached for her book, and, throwing her shawl over her left shoulder, hurried away. The aviator watched her girlish figure with its unconscious grace, then, turning about, he strolled to the machine, and, sitting on the side of the fuselage, surveyed its bullet-punctured carcass.

“Five kilometres and a little better,” he soliloquized in English, “and a doubtful prospect of a meal. . . . Contrast that with what the gods offer here—a cosy fire, coffee, eggs and chips, I warrant, and the daintiest of little maids—to say nothing of a musical uncle with an amiable propensity for throwing visitors into the stream. By Jove, it is chilly. . . . Over in dear old England they’ll be roasting nuts and telling ghost-stories to-night.”

The fast-thickening shadows deepened into the blackness of an October night; the wind grew quieter, but there was a bite in the air that made him draw his fur collar about his ears.

“What excellent French the little lady uses,” he went on. “I wonder who her parents were, and why the deuce she has to live with this ogre. And what eyes! Enough to make one invent new songs of Araby just to see them sparkle and soften. . . . One moment sad, another tender—and always lovely. Steady, the Air Force—you’re becoming sentimental.”

He looked at the battered machine and shook his head; a solitary raindrop lit on his face and slid down its surface like a tear.

A belated gust of wind smote his face and left it moist. He rose in a determined manner and adjusted his helmet.

“*Adieu, my Camel!*” He took a last survey of the machine. “The kitchen is calling to my appetite; a storm is brewing in the heavens; a pair of dark eyes is urging all the romance within me; so—mill-stream or no mill-stream—*mon oncle*, I come.”

He squared his shoulders and, with the rather absurd long stride and the odd raising of the knee, made for the cottage door, from underneath which a faint glow of light was timidly emerging.

III

In response to his knock there was a roar from within, and the door opened enough to show the young lady in the doorway.

“Good-evening,” he said gravely. “I saw the light in here and decided to accept its kindly invitation.”

She glanced over her shoulder; but the airman, gently putting her to one side, entered and looked serenely about the room, which appeared to be kitchen, dining-room, and parlor in one. Beside the stove he noticed the stooped figure of a man, whose huge black beard straggled over a suit of overalls that had once been dark blue, but had become a dirty white from constant association with flour.

“Good-evening, monsieur.” The airman handed his helmet to the girl and proceeded to unbutton his coat. The miller’s blotched eyes rose sulkily to the visitor’s face.

“What do you want here?” His voice was nasal and slovenly, and there was a hoarse growl in the words, as though his throat was parched and rusted.

“I am doing myself the honor of taking supper with you, monsieur.” The airman’s face was full of melancholy dignity as he divested himself of his coat.

The miller’s mouth opened, and a rasping, deep snarl resonated disagreeably. “There is the village, five kilometres that way.”

“Ah—but that is five kilometres too far.”

“You cannot stay here”—the miller’s voice rose angrily—“there is but food for two.”

The Englishman tapped his pipe against his heel, and blew through it to ensure its being empty. “Then, monsieur,” he said, “you must go hungry.”

The Frenchman rose to his feet and brandished both arms above his head. "Go!" he bellowed, and swore an oath that comprised a reference to the sacred name of one dog and the sudden demise of the aforementioned ten thousand devils, who, it appeared, rested heavily on his conscience.

"Mademoiselle"—the young man turned politely to the girl—"I apologize for this gentleman. Shall I throw him into the stream, or would a cleansing spoil his particular style of mottled beauty?"

The miller became eloquent. His language was threatening, blasphemous, and deafening. His whole ungainly body vibrated with a fury which, at certain moments, grew to such a pitch that he would raise his chin upwards until all that could be seen was a forest of beard, the while he emitted an unearthly roar that could have been clearly heard on the village road. The girl, who had been making preparations for supper, glanced timidly at him, but continued her work. The cat, slumbering by the stove, opened his eyes dreamily as if some sweet strain had come to his ears, then settled to slumber once more.

And the whole room resounded and quivered to the hurricane of sound.

With an air of complete imperturbability, the intruding guest slowly backed towards the table and became engrossed in the task of refilling his pipe, though beneath the glow-worm eyebrows his eyes (which were very clear and blue, as though his excursions into the last free element of nature had blown all the dust and grime away) held the orator in a steady look.

"Fill your pipe?" he said cryptically, choosing a moment when his host was filling up with a breath that promised to burst his ribs.

The response was startling.

Exhausting the air from his lungs with the noise of steam escaping from an overcharged boiler, the miller rushed blindly forward, crouching so low that his beard against his discolored clothes suggested an ugly bush against a background of slushy snow.

With the precision of a guardsman forming fours, the airman took one pace to the rear with his left foot and one to the right with his right foot. This manoeuvre, successfully completed, placed the table between himself and his assailant, and, tilting it dexterously, he swiftly thrust that article of furniture forward, where it came into violent contact with the irate miller's knees and shins. With an indescribable howl the worthy man fell back in a

paroxysm of agony, grasping his knees with both hands, and rocking to and fro like a demented dervish.

The airman bowed gravely to the girl. "I learned that," he said, "from a gentleman by name Charlie Chaplin. If you can oblige me with a custard pie, I shall hurl it at your uncle and thus complete the Chaplinesque method of discounting violence."

The young woman's brows puckered. The spectacle of her uncle's discomfiture had not disturbed her so much as this new kind of a person who could bow so courteously, whose eyes twinkled humorously, and whose words were full of gravity on the subject of custard pies. She came of a race that co-ordinated gestures and the play of features with speech; but this stranger of the air—*Sapristi!*

The moaning of the uncle grew less and his figure stopped its rocking; but his red, blotchy eyes looked furtively at the young man, biding their owner's time for a renewal of hostilities.

With an air of deep dejection the airman gazed at the unlovely spectacle, then, very slowly, unfastened his holster and drew a revolver.

"Monsieur," he said, "I offer peace. The alternative is—that I fill you full of holes—which would interfere with your singing. I intend to have supper here, because I saw hens outside. If they have given no eggs, we shall eat the hens themselves as a punishment. We are allies, you and I; let us be friends as well. Monsieur"—he struck a Napoleonic attitude—"Vive l' Entente!"

The swarthy face of the miller, who had retained his posture on the floor throughout, wrinkled hideously into a grin, which developed into a roaring laugh that set a solitary vase jingling.

With a doubtful air of appreciation, the airman surveyed him, his head inclining dubiously to one side. "Come, monsieur," he said, after the miller's unpleasant mirth had subsided, "you sit there—at the far end of the table; mademoiselle—when you have given us the supper things—here; and I, at this end. Just to show how completely I trust you, my host, I will keep my revolver beside my plate; and should it be necessary for me to blow your brains out during the meal, it will be with the very keenest regret that I lose a friend for whom I have acquired such an instantaneous and profound affection."

Thus the young lady with the guileless eyes, the youth who had descended from the clouds, and the stentorian miller with the painful knees,

sat down together for their evening repast.

And the mill-stream, chuckling as it sportively tumbled over the chute, made a pleasant serenade.

IV

The airman glanced at his wrist-watch; it was half-past nine. The miller slept by the side of the stove, his chin crushing his beard against his chest. Louis also slept, having curled himself in a black, furry ball, apparently possessed of neither head nor tail. A clock, brazenly stating the time to be five-thirty, ticked lazily as though, finding itself four hours behind the correct hour, there was no chance of its ever catching up, and it only kept going because it was the sporting thing to do. Just over the clock a picture of Marshal Joffre gazed paternally on the quiet scene.



Seated at the table . . . the girl and the airman sat. . . . To her romance had come.

Seated at the table, which was covered by a geranium-shaded cloth, the girl and the airman sat silent, while a shaded lamp lent a crimson glow through which her deep eyes gleamed, like the first stars of a summer evening.

To her romance had come.

She was no longer the miller's niece, but the girl who had seen the Fairy Prince. All the sighs, all the questionings, all the longings of her girlhood had culminated in this amazing adventure of a fair-haired knight who, descending from the clouds, had proceeded to terrorize her uncle, who was feared for miles around. It was wonderful. And he was so droll, this young man; and his voice had a little soothing drop in it, at times, that left a fluttering echo in her heart.

She had left the convent when ten years of age, on the death of her mother. Her father—but then gossip was never kind. He was an officer who had deserted his pretty little wife for another woman—or so rumor had it; and her mother had died, a flower stricken by a frost. The daughter had been taken by a relative, the owner of a lonely mill, and for six years had lived in solitude, her horizon of life limited to the adjacent village, her knowledge of women gained from the memory of a sad, yearning face, paler than the pillow on which it rested, and an occasional visit to the curé's sister. Of men she knew only her uncle and the few villagers that had not gone to fight for La Belle France.

From unquestioning childhood she had passed to that stage in a girl's life when the emotions leap past the brain, fretful of the latter's plodding pace. Her mind untutored, unsharpened by contact with other minds, left her the language and the reasonings of a child; but her imagination, feeding on the strange longings and dreams which permeated her life, pictured its own world where romance held sway over all the creatures that inhabited its realm.

It is the instinct of a little child to picture unreal things—the unconscious protest of immaturity against the common-placeness of life. But with the education of to-day and the labyrinth of artificiality which characterizes modern living, the imaginativeness of childhood disappears, except in a few great minds who, retaining it, are hailed by the world as possessors of genius.

Unhampered (or unhelped, as the case may be) by association with the patchwork pattern of society, the miller's niece had retained her gift of imagination, without which the solitude and the monotony of her days would have been unendurable; until, blending it with the budding flower of womanhood, she found mystery in the moaning of the wind. When the sun danced upon the grass her spirit mingled with the sunlight; and when the

moon exercised her suzerainty of the heavens the poetry in her soul thrilled to sweet dreams of lovers' wooings (though her unreasoned rapture often ended in unreasoned tears upon the pillow). . . . She found melancholy in the coloring of an autumn leaf, and laughter in the music of the mill-stream. . . . There were smugglers' tales in a northeast gale, and fairy stories in a summer's shower.

The doctrine of pleasure so feverishly followed by her sisters to-day was unknown to her—as was its insidious reaction which comes to so many women, with the dulling of the perceptions, the blinding of eyes to the colors of life, the deadening of ears to the music of nature, until, they cannot hear the subtle melody of happiness itself, so closely allied to the sombre beauty of sorrow.

“Little one”—the aviator's voice was very soft, so that the ticking of the clock sounded clearly above it—“in a few minutes I must go. It is a dark night, and of a necessity I must get to the village to-night, and be on my way before dawn.”

Her eyes were hidden by her drooping eyelashes. “You will return—yes?” she asked, without looking up.

He smiled rather wistfully. “When the red-breasted robins are nesting,” he quoted slowly, “I shall come.” The clock ticked wearily on. . . . A few drops of rain fell upon the roof.

“Monsieur”—the crimson in her cheeks deepened—“you must not smile; but it is in my book, here.”

She took from the table *The Fairy Prince*, and handed it to him. He gazed at it with a seriousness he might have shown towards a book of Scottish theology.

“You know, monsieur”—she appeared deeply concerned in the design of the geranium table-cover—“I never leave the mill-house unless to attend mass, and sometimes—perhaps you would think so too—it is very lonesome; no brother, no sister, just Louis and my uncle.”

He nodded, and, with an air of abstraction, his brow wrinkled sympathetically, and his fingers strummed five-finger exercises on the table.

“It must be very dull,” he said.

“But no, monsieur”—her eyes looked up in protest—“not dull—just lonesome.”

He sustained an imaginary note with his little finger, frowned thoughtfully until his eyebrows almost obscured his eyes, then came down the scale with a slow and measured pace.

“Well, little lady who is never dull, and what has all this to do with *The Fairy Prince*?”

“It is because I have no sisters, no friends, that—that I pretend. But you do not understand.”

He played some chord with both hands.

“Very young people and very old ones pretend,” he said, with dreamy sentimentousness; “pretending is what makes them happy. But the Prince?”——

She smiled deprecatingly. “When I read, monsieur, then I think that the girl—there is always a girl, is there not?” He nodded gravely. “I do not think it is she,” she went on, “but myself; and when the book is finished, and she marries her lover, then I am happy and dream”

“‘We are such stuff as dreams are made of,’” he murmured, and trilled with his first and second fingers.

“So, monsieur,” she continued, glancing shyly at him, “in that book”——

“There is a girl.”

“Yes. And a Fairy Prince who was very handsome.”

“Like me?”

“It does not say, monsieur.”

“Ah!”

“But I think so,” she said earnestly, “for he was the handsomest man in all France.”

“It said nothing of England?”

“No, monsieur, only France.”

He nodded with great dignity, and motioned her to proceed. She leaned forward with her elbows on the table, and rested her chin on her interlocked fingers.

“To-day I was reading it to Louis,” she said, “when, just at that moment that they met—*vous voilà!*—you came. Monsieur,” she said naively, “are

you a fairy prince?”

He considered, with his head characteristically on one side.

“N-no,” he said, “I cannot claim that, but”——

“Ah yes?” Her face lit up with delighted anticipation.

“I am a prince of the air.” He struck an attitude and held it.

“Oh!” her lips parted in ecstasy and her cheeks, which had been crimson, became scarlet. “You—are really a prince?”

Of the air, mademoiselle.” He folded his arms and tilted his chair back. His face was still grave, but his voice had a sense of distance in it, and his light eyes widened, as though they saw the world his words were picturing. “My kingdom is greater than all the kingdoms of the earth, and when I ride, my steed with wings takes me towards the stars. For sport I play with clouds and race the wind; at night the moon gives me light; and when I travel there are no mountains to climb, no lakes to cross. I go faster than the swiftest horse, and ride from villages to cities, out into the country, and over the sea with a steed that never tires.”

“But, monsieur,” she cried, “this is wonderful!”

He looked frankly into her eyes. “It *is* wonderful,” he said.

For a few minutes neither spoke, and the soft symphony of raindrops played through the quietness of the night.

“Your Majesty,” she said timorously, “are you very brave? You understand,” she hurried on as a slight blush darkened the tan of his cheeks, “in fairy books the prince always fights a dragon or a wicked giant.”

“Don’t uncles count?”

She made a pretty *moue*.

“As a matter of fact,” he said slowly, “there was a wicked Emperor—a blustering popinjay with a madman’s vanity—who decreed that all the world should be his slaves, and sent his armies into France and Belgium to enforce his will. My brothers heard of this, and came from countries and dominions thousands of miles away. Across great continents of water they sailed, and with their brothers from the little Islands of the North Sea, came to France”

“Your voice is very sad,” she said tenderly. Her nature, that knew every mood of a summer breeze, had caught the inflection of his words, understanding by their tone what the vagueness of his words hid from her mind.

“So many have died,” he said, looking away from her. “Almost every day someone rides out into the sunlight to his death, young, brave, and smiling. . . . Mademoiselle, it is wonderful how they smile.”

Tick—tick—tick.

For more than a minute neither spoke, then, with a smile that was strangely boyish, he squared his shoulders and ran his fingers through his rumpled hair.

“Ha!” he laughed; “what fancies get into a scatterbrain like mine when the rain’s a-pattering on the roof. If you will allow me, little Pippa, I shall smoke.”

“Little Peepa?” she laughed delightedly.

“Pippa,” he assented, puffing smoke as he lighted his pipe. “I think I shall call you that. You see, according to her biographer, Mr. Browning, she worked in the silk-mills all the year, but one day she had to herself, from dawn to midnight, and so as to enjoy it to the full she—well, she pretended, like you.”

“But that is droll,” she said eagerly, “for every Easter after Sunday, my uncle, who is fatigued from so much chanting in the church, always goes to Boulogne and becomes drunk for one whole day. On Wednesday he returns. These six years he has done it always the same; and on the Tuesday it is wonderful. I am alone with Louis, and we ask all the people in our books to visit us.”

A sudden gleam of excitement lit his eyes.

“The Tuesday after Easter?”

“Always it is so.”

“Pippa,” he said—then checked the remainder of his words. He placed the pipe in his mouth and ran five-finger exercises at a terrific speed.

“Pippa,” he said again, then, ceasing his display of virtuosity, leaned back and gazed at her from beneath his eyebrows. “Next spring, on the Tuesday after Easter, I will come for you.”

She caught her breath deliriously.

“Beyond the village road,” he went on, speaking slowly and distinctly, “I saw a big pasture-field at the top of the hill. Be there as the sun is just above the horizon, and I will come in an aeroplane.”

“And, your Majesty, you will take me to your kingdom?”

“For one day, Pippa, to the great city of London—the city that is open to all who possess a golden key. We shall return by the stars at night.”

“Then”—her voice shook, and the brilliancy of her eyes were softened by sudden tears, as the rays of an August sun are sometimes tempered by a shower, “then—at last—I am to see the world?—boys and girls and palaces and”——

“To say nothing of prunes and potentates.”

“Oh but, your Majesty, it is too wonderful. I am certain it will not come true.”

He rose and quietly placed his chair against the wall. “Pippa,” he said, “there are only two things that could prevent it. One, if there is a storm and—the other”—— he shook his head impatiently.

The girl took down a work-basket, and after searching its contents extracted a tiny trinket.

“You mean,” she said, stepping lightly over to him, “that you might go to join your brothers—those who smiled so bravely?”

“We never know, Pippa,” he answered.

She reached for the lapel of his coat and pinned the little keepsake on it. “’Tis a black cat,” she said. “I saw it in the village store, so small and funny, like Louis. It is a gift from little Pippa, and who will pray to the Virgin every night that her Prince may not be killed—unless”——

He looked at the little mascot, which dangled above a couple of ribbons.

“Unless?” he said.

For a moment there was a flash in her eyes and a sudden crimson flush in her cheeks that startled him. For the first time in her life she had felt the instinct of a tigress; that strange fusion of passion and timidity that comes to women of her kind when it seems they may lose the object of their love.

“Unless he—forgets.” The words were spoken between lips that hardly moved.

“By the sacred bones of my ancestors,” he said, with a sort of sincere grandiloquence, “I promise to come. So that I shall always think of you, my Pippa, I will paint a black cat upon the machine, and woe to the Hun who dares to sing its whiskers!”

A few minutes later the heavily coated figure of an aviator was ploughing its way, through a drizzling rain, along a dark and solitary road. His pace was extraordinarily long for his height, and he appeared to be stepping over a perpetual array of obstacles at least one foot high.

By a casement window a girl, with hair like the dusk, stood gazing towards the road that was hidden in darkness. Silently and motionless she watched the melancholy drops of rain as they fell upon the glass, until, unconsciously, her lips parted and she sang, very softly, the little song taught to the maiden in the story by the lonely shepherd:

“Maman, dites moi se qu’on sent quand on aime.
Est-ce plaisir, est-ce tourment?”

She paused in the improvised melody, and repeated the words slowly.

“Est-ce plaisir, est-ce tourment?”

And then the little mistress of the mill laid herself upon her bed and wept profusely; but whether it was because she was happy or because she was sorrowful, let those explain who understand the psychology of a woman’s tears.

Downstairs, Louis and the miller slept profoundly.

V

It was several months later that an airman emerged from his hut into the chilly air of an April night that was lingering grudgingly over its last hour of darkness. There was a sullen rumble of guns borne on a restless breeze that stirred the long grass of the fields and set the leaves in the trees whispering and quivering. The drone could be heard of a lonely aeroplane returning from its night-ride over the enemy lines. . . . Above the distant roll of the artillery, one gun stood out like a pizzicato note on a giant bass violin.

The airman passed the silent aerodrome, and, with difficulty accustoming himself to the darkness, made out the shadow of a machine in the adjoining field. He heard the sigh of cylinders sucking in the petrol as

the mechanics warmed the machine, and walked over to it. For a moment he spoke to the men before climbing into the pilot's seat. There followed the incisive monotone of the flier's incantation between himself and the non-commissioned officer:

"Petrol on: switch off, sir."

"Petrol on: switch off."

"Contact, sir."

"Contact."

The propellers were swung into action, hesitated for a moment, then wheezily subsided.

The incantation was repeated; the propeller blades coughed, and leaped into a deafening roar. The mechanics sprang aside, and the machine, stumbling forward for a few yards, turned into the wind. There was a sudden acceleration of the propeller, crescendo from the engines, and the machine made swiftly across the field, rising as it attained flying speed, and disappearing into the night.

A few moments later its light was mixing with the dulling stars, and the drone of its engine could be heard only at the whim of the breeze.

"I wonder what the Black Cat's up to now," said mechanic No. 1, rubbing his hands together for warmth. "Rum beggar, isn't he?"

His companion slapped his breast with his arms and blew on his fingers. "Mad as a March hare," he growled; "takes a two-seater out at this time of night."

"And did you notice the extra outfit?"

"He's mad," repeated the before-dawn psychologist, "mad as a rabbit."

"But he's a mighty stout boy," interposed the N.C.O., who was torn between his duty of keeping discipline and his love of character study; "and he sure puts the wind up Fritz when he takes off with his Black Cat Bristol fighter."

The blackness of night was beginning to give way to a dull and sullen gray as the solitary pilot made a detour over the lines. In the gloom beneath he could see a long crescent of orange-colored flashes where the British guns were maintaining their endless pounding of the enemy. Farther east was a large patch of winking, yellow lights, giving to his eye the same effect as flakes of gunpowder dropped upon a heated stove: it was the bursting of

the British shells. Beyond that field of death he could see other and larger flashes, and knew the Hun was replying in kind.

Everywhere the darkness was being penetrated by long, rocketlike lights with a white starry burst at the end, and, as though to give variety to the scene, a few red and green bursts mingled garishly with them.

To the airman, from his refuge of height, it all combined in an uncanny pageant of fireworks—a weird spectacle of death, as though hell had opened and the passions of men were feeding the flames to make a devil’s holiday.

A searchlight woke him from his reverie. A couple of anti-aircraft guns barked at him. With a smile he noticed the rapid approach of morning’s light, and, turning to the west, he set his course by the compass and made for the lonely mill-house of Picardy.

VI

From a meadow at the top of a hill a girl watched the horizon of the east as the first glow of daylight heralded the arrival of Aurora’s chariot. The hurried walk from the mill-house and the climbing of the hill had set her pulses throbbing with vitality, and as she watched the dull gray give way with the promise of dawn, a wild, unthinking spirit of exaltation seized her. Like the Pippa of Browning’s song, she felt her spirit rise with the triumph of nature.

Day!
Faster and more fast,
O’er night’s brim, day boils at last:
Boils, pure gold, o’er the cloud-cup’s brim
Where spurting and suppressed it lay,
For not a froth-flake touched the rim
Of yonder gap in the solid gray
Of the eastern cloud, an hour away;
But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,
Till the whole sunrise, not to be suppressed,
Rose, reddened, and its seething breast
Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed the world.

But he had not come—her Prince with the solemn face and the laughing eyes. Day after day, through the long winter, she had lived for this hour, thrilling over it, picturing it, dreaming of it—both awake and asleep. . . . And he had not come.

Supposing—supposing——

Her heart leaped painfully. She had heard a sound, like the humming of an insect—faint—then more clear. The hum became a drone, and in sheer intoxication she reached her hands towards the east as the sun, well above the horizon, illumined the sky with gold-red flames. Blinded by its brilliancy, she turned away; but her ear heard the cessation of the engine as the pilot brought his machine towards the earth. She knew that he must be approaching her; yet she kept her face averted, on some caprice of sixteen years, until she heard his voice calling, a few yards off.

He bowed very low as, with lowered eyes, she gave him her hand; then, indicating a coat on his arm, he leant towards her, with some effort making his voice heard above the impatient throbbing of the aeroplane's engine.

“Take off your hat,” he cried, noticing with quick approval the pretty costume she wore (for however poor she may be, no French girl is without one becoming frock), “and slip your curls into this helmet. It's the largest I could find.”

She did as she was bidden, laughing delightedly.

“Now then, youngster, climb into this.”



Then, picking her up in his arms, he carried her over to the machine and deposited her in the observer's seat.

He wrapped her in a fur-lined leather coat, and after buttoning it securely lingered for a moment over the amusing and dainty picture she presented. Then, picking her up in his arms, he carried her over to the machine and deposited her in the observer's seat, fastening the belt. He was just about to climb into his place in front, when, changing his mind, he leaned over to her and placed both hands on her shoulders.

"Frightened?" he smiled, speaking so close to her ear that a truant curl brushed against his cheek.

She shook her head decisively—for a considerable period she had been beyond the power of speech.

He looked into her eyes, which seemed to have borrowed something of the sunlight, and patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. . . . And Mademoiselle Pippa, niece of the absent miller, would have gone straight to the moon with him had it been his wish and in his power.

She watched him wonderingly as he lifted a heavy sand-bag, used as ballast, and dropped it on the ground. The next moment he was in the pilot's seat, there was the crescendo of the engine, a waddling sensation as the aeroplane went forward, the sudden development of the crescendo, the burst of speed, and

The earth was receding!

She caught her breath, and hid her face in her hands to stifle a cry and keep the sight from her eyes. She had been afraid that she would faint with dizziness, and for a full minute sat, terror-stricken, until, gaining courage, she tremblingly parted two fingers and cast a timorous glance below. A cry escaped from her—but it was not one of fear.

Beneath her, though she was not conscious of height, the countryside spread, a great masterpiece of color, the light brown of ploughed fields standing out vividly against the green of meadows where sheep (she laughed out at the thought) were huddled in little groups like peanuts; roads had become paths, and cottages were dwarfed to miniature dwellings for the tiniest dolls.

But—she felt no height.

Only, the landscape, refreshed after its long winter repose, kept closing in—closing in, displaying new beauties every minute, as though she were in real truth a Fairy Princess summoning villages and rivers and farms into one vast tapestry of nature.

And this was France! As far as the eye could see, it was France, the mother of greatness. For the first time she pictured the wide, charred plains where the Hun had been, and scalding tears hid everything from her sight.

Several times her cavalier of the clouds had turned around to see that she was not frightened, and, as often as he did so, she nodded excitedly, and waved both hands after the manner of an orchestral conductor calling for a fortissimo. Once he shut off the engines, and they seemed to lie in the wind, a becalmed ship of the air.

“All right?” he queried inelegantly.

She tried to think of some word to summarize her emotions, but, failing utterly, raised her goggles and thanked him with her eyes. A woman’s methods are not affected by altitude.

It seemed to her that they had flown for an hour, when, in her tapestry of landscape, she found the gradual inclusion of the steeples and the rooftops of a city, the streets of which gave the impression of having been drawn with a brown crayon with the aid of a ruler. The aeroplane appeared to be turning with the wind, and she grasped the side of the fuselage, when the whole scene was obliterated by a sea of billowy foam that left her cheek wet. She laughed with delight, and reached out with her hands, as though she would grasp the foam and compress it like snow in her fingers. She sang and clapped her hands in sheer joyousness. She was alone with the Prince in a world of dreams. The billows of foam grew less dense, became a mist through which light gleamed, and they emerged once more. Beneath them lay the Channel, shimmering in the April sun. The magic wand drew the Straits to her gaze as it had done the fields of France. . . . Suddenly there was no throbbing of the engine, and they seemed to float, motionless, in space.

He turned around and pointed to a border of white that lay against the blue of the water.

“*Enfin!*” he cried. “England!”

VII

There was a knock at the door of “The Plough and Crown,” which, in spite of its similarity to the title of a treatise, is the name of an exceedingly cosy little inn less than twenty miles from the outskirts of London. The landlady answered in person, presenting just the stout, apple-cheeked,

buxom appearance that any one would expect from the owner of so cheery a hostelry.

“Good-morning to you, sir—and to you, miss,” said the estimable woman, as the unlocked door revealed an airman of solemn mien, and a blushing young lady whose hair had been blown into utter and captivating disorder.

A very small dog appeared, irritably, from some subterranean passage, and, taking in the sight of strangers, proceeded to bark with such energy that, with each effort, he was shunted several inches to the rear, like a gun recoiling after discharge, until from very ill-temper he barked himself completely off the scene and out of this history.

“Good-morning, madam,” said the aviator. “This young lady and myself would like to have breakfast at your house.”

The girl glanced furtively at him. It was the first time she had heard him speak in English.

“Bless your baby faces!” cried the good woman. “Come in out of the chilly morning, though what you be doing at this hour is beyond the likes o’ me to fathomate” (a word which performed its function by being thoroughly understood).

She led them into the coffee-room, where he removed his coat and helmet, and threw them, together with the girl’s flying costume, over a chair. A sleepy-eyed and slovenly young woman-of-all-work appeared on the scene and proceeded to build a wood fire in the grate, while the landlady, after the manner of her kind, bustled about, shifting chairs, colliding with the fire-making girl, removing glasses from the bar to the table, from the table to the shelf, and back to the bar again, all the while talking incessantly, or making comfortable noises when words failed her (which was very seldom), and, in short, giving that feeling of hospitable activity handed down from the good old days when passengers used to arrive by coach at “The Plough and Crown.”

“Madam,” said the flying-man, seizing a moment when a more than usually severe jolt against her assistant had deprived the good woman of breath, “I must telephone the aerodrome at Hounslow to send for my machine, so I shall stroll to the post-office down the road. In the meantime—this young lady speaks no English”——

“Bless her heart! What heathen country”——

“—— speaks no English,” he persisted, “and has traveled a long distance in the air”——

“Well, I’ve often said that”——

“In the air,” he repeated, stifling her philosophy in its birth, “and I shall be grateful if you will give her any attentions that your kind heart may suggest. She is cold, and I suppose she wants to make herself look pretty.”

“Leave her to me, the sweet innocent. If she were my own daughter, me not having any, but”——

“When I return, may we have breakfast?”

“A simple breakfast ’twill have to be,” said the hostess, emitting the words with a forcefulness reminiscent of a geyser that has been supporting on its chest a mountain which has obligingly shifted its position. “Things is awful bad, and the Government don’t trust no one these days. But I’ll see what I can get for you two children, for you’re an officer gentleman, and my own good man’s in the army—London Scottish he is, though he aint any more Scottish than the Pope of Rome; but he always had a fine figure, had my man—Jacob Wilson is his name, for thirty year owner of ‘The Plough and Crown,’ which always is welcome to them as wants a pint o’ bitter or a bed for the night, and always will be as long as Jacob Wilson or me is to be found in the taproom when opening-time arrives.”

After this announcement of the past and future policy of “The Plough and Crown,” the worthy woman seized a chair that was innocently gazing out of the window, and placed it directly opposite a highly colored picture of a young lady in pink, talking to a blue young gentleman, while a yellow horse, in proportion a little larger than the horse of Troy, looked soulfully at them over a hedge.

Having done this, she rested her hands on her hips and sighed like a woman who knows she is overworked but is resigned to her fate.

“Excuse me,” said the airman politely, then turned to his companion, who had been staring in wide-eyed bewilderment at the activities of Mrs. Jacob Wilson. . . . Frowning heavily at his young passenger, he inserted his pipe into his mouth, and left the inn without another word, sauntering along the roadway, where hedges and meadowlarks and cosy thatched cottages were combining in the merriest of madrigals on the beauty of Old England.

Upstairs, in “The Plough and Crown,” Pippa’s toilet was being superintended by the estimable proprietress, whose hospitality, surmounting the difficulty of language, poured out in a stream of garrulity.

She described to her little guest how Mr. Jacob Wilson first appeared in kilts, causing her (Mrs. Jacob Wilson) to throw her apron over her face and bid her lord and master go upstairs and clothe himself in propriety. She further confessed that he was a poor correspondent (though a man of deep intellect, for he was given to long spasms of silence); but every time he wrote from the trenches, which was once a month (though one month he had written twice, but in September—or was it October?—he had not written at all)—at any rate he always said that he had a cold in his head and would she send his medicine, which he had used for eight-and-twenty years, and which had never failed to cure him.

After this testimony to Mr. Jacob Wilson’s recuperative powers, despite his susceptibility to colds, his wife became confidential, and told the girl of the adoration showered on her during her honeymoon by the aforesaid absent gentleman, together with other and romantic details which, being told in the strictest confidence, naturally have no place in these pages.

And the little girl from the Picardy mill-house listened. She may have understood that somewhere in the landlady’s bountiful breast a noble heart was beating; that behind her cheerfulness lay the shadow of the trenches: and that any moment “The Plough and Crown” might be robbed of the good man who had marched away with the London Scottish.

She may have understood less than that—or more. Who knows?

Half-an-hour later the Airy Prince returned, and they sat down together to a breakfast served to the tune of chortling fowls and the neighing of a near-by horse, while the fire chuckled and crackled in enjoyment of some joke of its own.

“Well, Pippa,” said the Black Cat, seizing a moment when Mrs. Jacob Wilson had absented herself from the room, “and what do you think of the English?”

The girl of the mill-house pictured the only two she had met.

“I think,” she said timidly, “that you are—how say you it?—great talkers, yes?”

“Bless my soul,” said he, cutting a loaf of bread with the melancholy of an executioner beheading an esteemed relative, “aren’t we?”

VIII

The train for London came round the bend and drew up, panting, beside the platform. The airman and his little companion glanced into four compartments which were completely filled, and, hearing the admonition of the guard, were forced to enter a first-class carriage containing five occupants, who glared at the intruders with that triumph of rudeness found only on an English railroad.

“Sorry,” murmured the airman, and added something unintelligible about the train being full. A fierce-looking gentleman looked up from the *Morning Post* and lowered the window to its fullest extent. An anæmic woman opposite sneezed and fixed a devastating stare on the fierce gentleman. A very young officer of the Guards felt his lip, and stroked that portion of it which was pregnant with promise of moustache, while his mind wandered into the future. Would he cut Lady Dazzrymple’s beastly dance, and content himself with only three that evening? Or, dash it all, should he go the whole works? What a bore! . . . A young woman with a face of deep intensity read the *New Statesman*, every now and then looking up from its pages (as a horse, drinking at a trough, will raise its head between draughts), apparently defying any one to challenge her on anything.

With his hands lazily in his coat-pockets, an Australian captain leant back in his corner and took in the freshness and winsomeness of the French girl, with an admiring frankness that inspired sudden doubt in the airman’s mind whether it was really desirable to maintain a huge empire.

For ten minutes, in a funeral silence, the train hurried towards the Metropolis, while the temperature of the compartment, both actually and temperamentally, dropped to freezing-point. Once, as an unusually pretty meadow met her eye (and where are there such meadows as one sees in England?), Pippa emitted an exclamation of delight and clapped her hands.

A look of horror from the fierce gentleman caromed off the *Morning Post* to the face of the offender. The anæmic woman stopped blowing her nose, and concentrated all her energies on a disdainful sniff. The very young guardsman brought his eyes out of the future, and stared right through the girl—rotten form, what? The intense young woman frowned and made a mental note that she would write an article on “The Girl of To-day”—or, perhaps, a letter to the *New Statesman* would be more effective. . . . One

never knew, these degenerate times, if an author was writing from conviction or merely writing for a living.

The Australian smiled generously, and burrowed his hands deeper into his capacious pockets.

Very timidly the erring daughter of France shifted closer to her protector, and her hand reached appealingly for his, which caused all eyes but the Australian's to disappear like the legs of a troupe of Japanese acrobats from a cross-bar.

“Your Majesty”——she said.

“Hush, Pippa; you must call me just ‘Monsieur.’ ”

“But why?”

“Well—you see a Prince is very important, and”——

“Then that is why these people are so solemn? They know you are a Prince, yes?”

The airman tapped the bridge of his nose meditatively. “N-not exactly,” he said.

“But they are so sad.”

“They are,” he agreed; “but my countrymen sink to their greatest melancholy when they travel.”

“But why, monsieur?”

“That,” he said, “I cannot tell you. Perhaps travelling on a train reminds them of the brief journey of life itself. At any rate, all really well-bred people who travel resent others doing the same thing.”

“What are well-bred people?”

He gazed at an advertisement for pyjamas.

“Well-bred people,” he said sententiously, “are those who base their superiority on such intangible things that they leave nothing on which one can contest it. Do you understand me?”

“No,” said Pippa, frankly; “but I like your voice.”

“Thank you, little one. It was one of the first things I learned at Harrow—to say something well rather than something worth hearing.”

“I wonder if Louis had his breakfast,” said she, at a tangent.

“I think so,” he said, with a man’s vagueness towards domestic economy; “but to finish my definition of well-bred people”——

“Louis will be angry at my leaving him,” she said musingly.

“Pippa, you must listen to me,” he said gravely.

“But may I not talk as well?”

“Really charming women only listen.”

“*Tiens!* What a droll country. Do these people understand what we say?”

“I don’t think so, youngster. Most Britishers look on foreign languages as immoral.”

The fierce gentleman, who had been growing bluer with cold every minute, suddenly endeavored to suppress a sneeze by smothering his face in a large handkerchief, with the result that he produced a combustive cohesion of sounds, which caused a gurgle of delight from the miller’s niece. Violently blowing his nose, the irate one resumed his newspaper, first turning his coat-collar about his ears as the bracing April air blew full against him, and looking as genuinely bad-tempered as his somewhat immobile features would permit.

“But he is amusing, is he not?” cried the little French girl, then shrank back as the New Statesmanist fixed her with a look of ineffable and disapproving intellectuality. “Monsieur, why it is she looks at me so?”

The aviator transferred his scrutiny from pyjamas to a picture of Canterbury Cathedral.

“She is the New Woman,” he said; “and all New Women resent the Old.”

“I am old?—but no!”

He lowered his eyes from the cathedral to her happy, flushed face.

“Pippa,” he said, “you are as old as Cleopatra.”

“Cleo-patra. How many years has she?”

“Oh, about two thousand.”

She pretended to be offended, and ended by looking such a thoroughly engaging little figure, with her dark hair and innocently intriguing eyes, that the airman resumed his study of architecture from sheer self-defence, and

the Australian contemplated the odds against his knocking the student of cathedrals on the head, and, *à la* caveman of old, eloping forcibly with the damsel.

Chimney-pots! Hundreds of them—thousands of them.

Chimney-pots! Standing like regiments in stiff and orderly array, awaiting for a review that never took place.

Chimney-pots! Short ones, stout ones, crumbling ones; gray, blue, and indigo ones; pots of no color at all, and just as little character.

Chimney-pots! Racing by, mile after mile; industrious fellows, some of them, puffing out black smoke as though the mist over London were their private and personal concern.

Chimney-pots!

“Waterloo!” yelled a dozen voices, and the bewildered Pippa heard a stamping of feet, a rattling of trucks, the din of two porters in a semi-religious discussion concerning the right of way, the din being aided and abetted by a young gentleman possessed of a voice which had recently broken, who howled, alternately in a deep bass and a shrill treble (giving the general effect of a Swiss yodler running amok) that, in exchange for coin of the realm, he was willing to barter light refreshment—very light refreshment indeed—in the shape of small biscuits or popular magazines. A slim girl porter, far too weak for her task, dragged a trunk from the van for a vigorous indispensable, who stood by with sixpence in his hand. A sailor kissed a rosy-cheeked woman with moist heartiness. . . . A taxi-driver, outside the station, took a sudden and violent dislike to a horse-cabby, casting loud aspersions on the latter’s respectability, and hinting at a doubtful pedigree; to which the other replied simultaneously, his remarks being quite unintelligible, but apparently giving himself the greatest personal satisfaction. Down the road a street-piano burst forth into “The Lost Chord.”

“Pippa,” said the airman, opening the door, “we have arrived. The Prince with the Golden Key welcomes you to London.”

“*Mon Dieu*,” said that young person, “what a noise!”

IX

It was nearing the middle of the afternoon when the airman succeeded, after some difficulty, in piloting his little companion across Piccadilly Circus to Regent Street. It is something to be noticed in that most cosmopolitan of districts, but more than one turned to watch the solemn officer of the

formidable stride and the French girl, whose wealth of hair and length of dress (barely revealing her ankles) made her seem a vignette from some past century novel.

It had been, for her, a day of wonders.

From her lonely little world, peopled with make-believe inhabitants, she had been transported through the air to the centre of reality. London, the “Baghdad of the West,” huge, monotonous, garish, beautiful—what term is there in language that could not be applied to that great gathering of human souls?—London sprawled before her gaze in a yellow sunlight which played such tricks with its tired buildings that age-old stone looked bright and cheerful, and the very dust seemed like the coating of frost when a thaw succeeds a freezing night.

Before her eyes the pageant of passions passed in endless array. Poverty and hypocrisy rubbed shoulders with ostentation, greed, and lust. Streets, crowded with a suffocating similarity of stodgy dwelling-places, gave way to parks, fragrant with the atmosphere of romance. Vice stalked unashamed through the thronged streets, and dull, tired faces, leaving monotony in their trail, passed their next of kin without a glance, those to whom discouragement had come as some incurable disease. Sinister, sensuous eyes looked into hers, and children pure in mind as snowflakes laughed as they walked beside their nurses.

For the sun was in the heavens . . . and the same warmth that brings the beauty of a narcissus into being gives life to the noisome, crawling things that feed on decay.

London’s costume drama was at its height; uniformed men and girls paraded in their thousands. There were loose-limbed Colonials, slouchily-smart British Tommies, amazingly serious Americans—bus-girls, land-girls, girls on motor-cycles, and girls driving ambulances—graceful French officers, swarthy Italians, impassive Japanese, and ruddy-faced British sailors seeking a day’s diversion from the sentry-go of the sea.

From the great, throbbing city a babel of voices rose, like the sound from a gigantic mart; hurrying, restless vehicles worried their way through the maze of traffic; Youth with its carelessness of years elbowed Age, waiting with weakening tread the call of the Reaper to whom all men’s lives are but sands that run their brief course. Over the whole city brooded the Past.

Take all the comedies of the centuries; gather the tragedies of history; piece them together with all the fancies of a madman's brain—and what could they offer in the play of human emotions that would compare with one hour of London's life?

They had gone a little way down Regent Street when an exclamation of delight escaped from the girl.

"Tiens!" She caught the airman by the arm. "Papa Joffre!"

A one-legged man with outstretched cap was seated on the pavement, and beside him were five colored drawings vaguely suggesting men of the times.

"But he is wonderful," cried the girl. "See—it is Papa Joffre himself. Monsieur, you will give him a little present?"

The airman presented the art-exhibitor with half-a-crown, receiving a gin-and-watery blessing in return, as they strolled on their way.

"She's the fust one," muttered the cripple, preparing to close business for the day, "as 'as recognized that there dial of Juff's this last four month. It were a rotten drawing and no mistake. Blime, I'll give that cove this 'arf-crown to draw me a picter of this 'ere General Fush as what is getting hisself talked abaht."

He saw a shadow on the pavement and held out his cap. A Jewish rabbi, with sallow brow and spiritual face, passed without a glance, his flowing robes oddly reminiscent of the Levite in that Past to which the age of London is mere immaturity.

The wanderers turned into Pall Mall, and, traversing it, reached the Strand, where the meeting of human currents forms a whirlpool. Threading their way with difficulty, he felt the restraining hand on his arm, as he had done two hundred times that day. The girl had stopped opposite a hollow-eyed old woman offering violets, from her seat on a box, to the thousands who cared as little for her flowers as for her.

Once more he produced the inevitable coin and again received a blessing, as trembling, unlovely fingers clutched it. He was about to turn away, when something almost attractive in the wrinkled face held his attention. The woman had looked searchingly at the girl, then into his eyes, and, touched by sudden sympathy, there was a faded echo of comeliness in her features that came and went, like a glow caused by a breath of air on ashes that seemed dead.

“What is it, mother?” he asked, holding the girl’s arm. “Business bad?”

“Yes—yes,” answered the woman in a low, weak voice; “but it’s her I’m thinking of. Take care of her, laddie, won’t you?”

The girl unable to understand them, leaned over and smiled into the wrinkled face. With a little air of embarrassment Pippa picked half-a-dozen violets from her cluster, holding them out to the woman, who took them with strangely twitching features, just as an encircling current of the Strand caught them in its grip and carried them away.

Although they had rested at noon in a quiet hostelry in Oxford Street, near that part of the park where the delightful statue of Peter Pan pleads for belief in fairies, it was obvious that the strain of countless impressions was beginning to bring fatigue to his charge. Accordingly the airman paused in the doorway of a theatre and drew her away from the traffic turmoil.

“It is three-thirty,” he said, “and there is a performance inside.”

Her eyes, which still held their tenderness for the woman of the flowers, sparkled happily.

“That is delightful, monsieur. Is it a play as I read in my books?”

“Alas, Pippa, there are no more plays—only revues!”

“But there is music?”

“There is an orchestra.”

“It will be droll, monsieur?”

“I doubt it, little one; but we shall see.”

Purchasing tickets from a lordly being in a cage, they entered the theatre, where a huge audience was rocking with laughter at the three hundred and sixteenth performance of “Oh Aunt!” They took their seats, just in time to hear the best of a scene between two comedians who, lest the subtlety of their wit be lost, were talking at the top of their lung-power, pulling chairs from underneath one another, colliding frequently, and every now and then, to emphasize some point, kicking each other.

Several minutes passed, and wonderingly the French girl gazed at the pair, while the melancholy of her escort’s face reached an intensity that threatened tears.

“Monsieur.”

He inclined his face towards hers.

“Monsieur—they are?”—— She did not complete the sentence, but her shoulders conveyed her meaning.

He smiled sadly. “They are,” he said.

She sighed sympathetically. “Poor gentlemen!” she murmured.

After that the comedians sang a duet, the words of which dealt with marital infidelity, that screamingly funny subject on which the stage of to-day builds its humorous efforts. Once the verse ended with an innuendo so crude that a gathering of navvies might have resented it.

There was a laugh and a gasp from the audience—then wild applause; the song could not go on for the riot of appreciation. One of the comedians (who had sung it only three hundred and fifteen times) tried to commence the next verse, but was suddenly overcome with laughter himself. The guffaws became a barrage—then, as the other singer turned abruptly about, his shoulders heaving convulsively, the din grew to drum-fire and was deafening. How richly humorous! It was really too much! People held their sides and gasped for breath.—“Have you seen ‘Oh Aunt!’? My dear, it is *too* killing for words.”

Up in the gallery one man sat with an unsmiling face. He was a wounded Tommy who had been blown from a ditch to the top of a barn, and from the barn to another ditch. He had had his fill of slapstick comedy.

When the song was over there were shrieks of forced, girlish laughter, and nearly forty young women in various stages of deshabille rushed on the stage, exhibiting to a critical audience the charms and the defects of their forty individual forms. The producer had been both daring and sparing. He was a second-rate burlesque manager in New York, but London, the great haven for American mediocrity, recognized his genius and gave him a chance. He knew the value of a chorus and how to get the best out of them—oh, he knew!

“Monsieur.”

The officer turned slowly and looked at the girl beside him. Her face was flushed and her eyes stared at the ground.

“Yes, little one?”

“Please take me away.”

Without questioning her further, he reached for his cap, and amid the wondering glances of the people around, they left the theatre. He paused in the foyer and put on his gloves.

“I am sorry, Pippa,” he said gravely.

Her hand stole soothingly into his arm, both of them, unknown to each other, experienced a feeling that he was the younger of the two. After all, every woman is a potential mother, and men are only boys grown serious, and she comforted him with the touch of her hand, and—perhaps it was the natural contraction in putting on the glove—his arm pressed hers tight to his side.

And though he was a man, he understood. It is not precept or preaching that teaches it. Modesty in a girl is instinctive; and the little lady from the mill-house had known no other teacher than instinct.

Outside the theatre an attendant was changing the performance number of “Oh Aunt!” from 316 to 317.

X

Twenty minutes later, in the large tea-rooms of a fashionable hotel just off the Strand, there was a murmur of interest as a flying-officer, quizzically dejected of countenance, entered with a young lady, who glanced shyly about, and whose fingers held his, timidly but confidently.

He secured a table and ordered tea from a pleasant waitress. This accomplished, he said something to his companion, who was sitting bolt upright, keeping a steady gaze on her hands crossed on her lap. Smiling a little, she slowly raised her face and looked into his. A young Canadian subaltern, seated at a table with a woman whose over-powdered, meaningless beauty was only too eloquent, stopped in some remark he was making. Something in the French girl’s face had sent his mind, smitten with loneliness, speeding across the Atlantic to a home whence a mother and a sister had sent the finest thing they had across the seas.

Near them, two girls, fresh of face, tittered and posed, challenging the eyes of every man who entered, with a brazen immodesty strangely at variance with their appearance of decent breeding. At a further table a young woman, with a beauty that was marred by too hard a mouth, sat with her mother and listened to that woman’s urging that she should marry a wealthy Jew who had asked for her hand. Was it not her duty to herself and to her

mother? Besides, even if that young fellow did come back uncrippled from the trenches, which was unlikely, he would have to begin all over again. Alone, a good-looking artist, discharged from the army with wounds, sat with an insouciant, mocking eye, searching for types and adventure, round him women of all ages, some of them with men, smoked, while their chatter mixed discordantly with the orchestra playing some negroid ragtime piece, and with the sound of rattling tea-cups.

“Your Majesty,” said the miller’s niece, relapsing into her former style of address, “there is so much I cannot understand.”

“Such as what, youngster?”

“These ladies here.—Some are so pretty and so nice.—Others are pretty and. . . .” Again she shrugged her shoulders as only a French woman can. “I am so young, it is true—but see that lady there.”

“With the young Canadian, yes?”

“Somehow, monsieur, she frightens me. I did not know that women ever looked that way—like Louis when he catches a mouse.”

“The simile is very apt, Pippa.”

“But then”—her brows puckered with a first endeavor to harness language to her psychology—“you can see that nice girl there, so fair and pink.”

“I prefer them dark,” said he seriously; “but what of her?”

The expounder of philosophy breathed deeply, but stuck to her task.

“I think,” she said, “that the fair girl is nice, but this one is . . .” (shrug) “Then why, monsieur, does the nice one try to look just like the other?—*Regardez-moi ça*—see her now.”

He poured out the tea which had just arrived.

“Shall I tell you a story?” he asked.

She sighed happily. “Tell me a true story,” she said with that insistence of the young on making all things believable. He sipped his tea and frowned meditatively.

“Not long ago, my dear, there lived a stupid king.”

“Your father?”

“In any one but you, Pippa, that would be pert. No, he was not my father.”

“I wonder if Louis”—— she began, but he checked her with a portentous frown.

“Once,” he began again, “there lived a stupid king named Convention.”

“What a silly name!”

“Pippa!” he admonished her with a warning finger. She tried to look serious, but ended by laughing mischievously.

“There was a stupid king with a silly name?” she said encouragingly.

“This king,” he said, “was very wise in some things and often kind, but his courtiers were a poor lot—Hypocrisy, Snobbery, Good and Bad Form, and a lot of others. Now the king used to favor the men among his subjects.”

“You mean, he liked men?”

“Yes.”

“So do I,” she said in an outburst of frankness. “They are so droll.”

He poured some fresh tea into the cups.

“This King Convention,” he said, after a thoughtful pause, “said that men could do a lot of things that women could not, which made the women very angry. Now the king had a jester named Shaw.”

“What is a jester?”

“A man who makes jokes that people may laugh.”

“Why do they laugh at jokes?”

“Well, in England—especially on the stage—it is from the pleasure of meeting old friends. As a race, we are rather sentimental about our jests, and don’t take kindly to new ones.”

She sipped some tea, holding the cup in both hands, but with considerable daintiness.

“Tell me an English joke,” she said.

He stroked his faded little moustache.

“The House of Lords,” he ventured, after some thought.

“*Hé!* Is that funny?”

“Very.”

“I do not laugh. Tell me another.”

He broke a corner off a piece of toast.

“One of the richest bits of humor in England,” he said, “is the idea that children born into wealthy or titled families are superior clay to their fellows.”

Pippa thought tremendously.

“I think, monsieur, I know why you look so sad. It is because of what you have to laugh at in your country. . . . But please go on and tell me what happened to—how say you it?—the jester.”

“Ah yes. Well, G. B. Shaw”——

“What is this—G. B.?”

“Those are his names—Gor’ Blime Shaw.”

Pippa sighed. It was very difficult to become interested in people of such strange nomenclature.

“What did he, then, this Gor Shaw?” she asked, feeling that the story must end some time.

“Well, as a matter of fact, he was rather a poor jester, because his only joke was to stand on his head. At first everyone laughed, but after a while they thought that it was his natural position and paid no attention to him. It was really pretty hard on the poor chap, because he was too old to learn any new tricks, and he used to become dizzy from being upside down so much. Finally he grew furious at the king for not laughing, and urged all the women who did not like Convention to murder him. When the war came along, they saw their chance. The men went away, and the real women of England were too busy helping them to bother about anything else. You see, Pippa, in our country we have the noisy, chattering, selfish women who do good by limelight and find their reward in the illustrated journals. But there are also those, the unrecognized and unthanked ones, who share others’ griefs but suffer alone. It is the unseen, unheard women of Britain who are really wonderful.”

The girl said nothing, but her face, so suggestive of color in its elusive change of expression, softened to a tender mood that left her eyes very

dark and sombre, and her lips curved slightly into a smile that was full of sympathy.

The young Canadian subaltern looked directly at her and compressed his lower lip with his teeth.

“What’s the matter, dearie?” croaked the woman beside him; but he returned no answer.

The two tittering girls stopped their staccato giggling for a moment, then resumed with a steadfastness of purpose that somewhat robbed the effect of spontaneity. The young woman with the over-firm mouth took in the tableau of the airman and his little charge, and turned to her mother with some sarcastic comment that was strangely belied by the look of hunger in her eyes. The artist, still with his air of graceful insouciance, sat with half-closed eyelids and visualized Pippa as a subject for canvas. “What a Psyché she would make!” he muttered. The orchestra was just going to play, when the leader, who had been idly gazing at the throng of guests, made a gesture of dissent.

“We shall not do ‘Oh that Opium Rag,’” he said. “You see that girl there, with the dark curls and the sweet little face? For her let us play Mendelssohn’s ‘Spring Song.’”

Quite unaware of their interested audience, the flying-man and his companion continued their excursion into the realm of fables, while untouched toast and half emptied cups stood by in neglected array.

“That is practically all the story,” he said. “When the war came on, they murdered poor old Convention.”

“Oh!”

“Slaughtered him,” he said gloomily, “though all his bad courtiers escaped. For a long time it was feared that the King’s son, Courtesy, and his niece, Charm (who were very much in love with each other), had also been done to death, but there are rumors that they have been seen in remote parts of England. So, Pippa, that is why these young women look and act alike. They are the murderers of Convention.”

But she was not listening to him. She was silently enjoying, for the first time, the fragrance of Mendelssohn’s Melody of Spring, which found immediate response in her nature, so attuned to the delicate things of life.

“Tell me,” she whispered, vastly puzzled, “why do they talk so loud when there is music?”

He shook his head. "I don't know," he answered. "It is said that music soothes the savage breast—it certainly loosens the civilized tongue."

The charming setting to the happiness of Springtime, written by a composer who really never grew up, came to an end, and in sheer delight the French girl clapped her hands twice. The leader acknowledged the compliment by bowing. She did not know that it was for her alone he had chosen it.

The airman examined his watch. "Little one," he said, "I am afraid our day is nearly over. In half-an-hour we must catch a train back to 'The Plough and Crown,' where we shall have dinner and a little rest. At eight o'clock, two friends of mine from the aerodrome here will bring the machine—you understand that taking young ladies from France to England has not yet been officially authorized by the Air Ministry. As soon as the stars are out we shall start for home."

They rose to go.

She smiled shyly at the orchestra and once more the leader bowed. With the daintiest of gestures she raised her hand and waved to him; then, feeling for her protector's arm, she started for the door, her eyes timidly glancing about her from beneath sheltering, downcast eyelashes. Without the least embarrassment, the tanned airman with the strangely light moustache and eyebrows walked beside her, experiencing an indefinite sense of possession that proved most agreeable.

The young woman with the over-firm mouth drew back as they passed her table, but her eyes clung to the French girl's face as though its winsomeness and purity held the answer to her troubles. Swift as imagination itself, her mind leaped to France, picturing a young fellow who, if he did come back unmaimed, would have to begin all over again.

"Mother," she said, with hot resentment in her voice, "I am entitled to my own life. I have seen too many tragedies in material marriages to dread one of love."

"You are a fool," said the other; and because she was the stronger of the two, she prevailed.

The woman who looked as Louis did when he caught a mouse turned on the Canadian boy, who had followed Pippa with a far-away, dreamy stare.

“What’s the matter, dearie?” she queried, with the tedious endearment of her class.

He brought himself from the reverie that had strangely blended the French girl’s face with the faces of two other women across the sea—then he looked into his companion’s with its leering comeliness. With a quick, decisive movement he rose to his feet and, feeling for his pocket-book, placed a pound note on the table.

“Pay for what we’ve had,” he said, his jaw stiffening, but his voice shaking oddly.

“What—aren’t I going to see you again?”

He was going to speak, but changed his mind and, turning on his heel, strode from the place, his spurs jingling with each step. . . . and there was something in his face that made people keep silent as he passed.

XI

It lacked two hours of midnight when an aeroplane crossed the Channel.

With his hands automatically guiding the rudder and his eyes keeping incessant watch on his compass and the pulsating lights of landing points showing like lighthouses at sea, the Black Cat brought all his conscious mind to bear on the events of the day.

His mind relapsed into a musing mood that got him no further in his introspective analysis; and his eyes, which had always been a reliable pair, commenced playing odd tricks with him. Though in the daytime he was used to seeing the earth and the horizon, and thus establishing his estimate of distance, he was relying that night almost entirely on his sense of equilibrium, glancing only occasionally at the instruments which would tell him if he were not flying level.

It was the compass that first surprised him.

He was studying its sensitive needle when he noted with some astonishment that the dial had taken on the addition of two dark and most expressive eyes, which proceeded to surround themselves with the delicate features of a girl’s face, possessed of a brow that was spiritually white, and dark hair that melted into the blackness of the night.

He shook his head and sought a light on the ground, which, after the manner of “Winking Willies,” was showing long and short flashes like Morse. To his amazement the light became a smile, which gradually

developed into a most alluring female face. If he had been in possession of his usual sense of the humorous, he would have recalled that Lewis Carroll's cat appeared to Alice in much the same way; but his mind and body were both in the clouds, a realm where cats and humor are uninvited guests.

He next tried a star, which underwent the same evolution. Even the moon was not proof against the phenomenon. Once he half-closed his eyes, but that was worse than ever. Everywhere he looked, there was the same face—smiling, pouting, coquetting, sympathizing, commiserating.

He tried whistling, but it offered no relief.

Behind him, nearly asleep, Pippa sat with closed eyes. To her the solution was much more simple. All day she had had her Prince by her side, her arm in his, her fingers locked with his. Therefore she was happy; also she was tired.

Not having any tiresome masculine mental gyrations to perform in discovering a truth that was so easily apparent, she accepted the situation with sentimental nonchalance, and falling asleep, dreamed that the statue of Peter Pan in the park had changed to that of the Airy Prince (who, she thought, was ever so much more handsome), and that she was sitting on the grass admiring him, while rabbits played about his feet. She was awakened from this delightful dream by a sensation similar to that of falling off a ladder in one's sleep; but such is the penalty of those who travel at night by air.

And applying the laws of logic to the case, when a young gentleman sees dark eyes and curved lips in a compass, and a young woman dreams that the citizens of London have erected a monument to a young gentleman with a long face and glow-worm eyebrows, it is reasonable to suppose that they have fallen in love with each other.

But strange things happen in the month of April.

XII

She had just fallen asleep for the second time, when the cessation of the engines woke her, and a few moments later they had descended in a field adjoining his aerodrome.

He jumped from the pilot's seat and lifted her out. "Quick, Pippa," he said. "They'll be here in a few minutes for the machine. I had to land her because that light was my only guide. Do you see that heavy tree over there

by the road? Wait by it until I return with a motor-cycle. Hurry, youngster; they're coming."

Ten minutes later she heard him coming with a motor-cycle, to which a sidecar was attached. She took her seat in the car, and he fastened the rubber cover over her knees. Then, opening the throttle, they sped through the night towards her home.

It was just twenty minutes to twelve when they reached the mill. Hurrying across the foot-bridge which spanned the chute, she entered the cottage and lit the lamp.

"Louis!" she cried. "Louis!"

That patient feline awoke from slumber and stretched in the most blasé manner; but his little mistress, gathering him in her arms, pressed her cheek against his head, asking a dozen questions at once, to which he deigned no reply other than blinking into space and licking his chops, as though the ways of women were beyond him, but 'twere best to let them have their own way.

The airman followed her in. . . . The prevaricating clock continued its dilatory march of time. Marshal Joffre was, if anything, more paternal than before, and the geranium-colored table-cover lent its unsubtle glow to the scene.

"Good-bye, Pippa," he said.

The girl stood motionless, and there was a quick stab in her heart. She had known that this moment would come, but had kept her thoughts from it . . . and now . . . he was going. . . . Once more she would have only her little world of make-believe. She released the cat from her arms and turned her eyes away.

"You have been very kind, monsieur," she said.

He fingered his helmet absent-mindedly. "Did you enjoy it?" he asked aimlessly.

"It was wonderful," she said quietly, still looking into distance; "I have seen so much. This morning I was just a little girl, but now"——

His fingers ceased turning the helmet, and he frowned at it intently. "We do not grow old with years but by moments," he said. "For a long time one

is a child; then there comes an instant of suffering, or of love. . . and one is no longer a child. That is all.”

She slowly sank into a chair by the table, and, folding her hands, appeared engrossed in the table-cover. “Your Majesty,” she said, “do you remember the poor lady with the violets?”

“Yes, Pippa.”

“What did she say to you?”

He smiled awkwardly. “It—it is rather hard to explain, little one. She told me to—to take care of you.”

“Why did she say that?” she asked, without removing her eyes for a moment from the table.

“Well—perhaps you do not know this—but men are often very unkind to women.”

“I know, monsieur. Simon Barit, he often beats his wife.”

He sat down on a chair opposite her. “There are many more ways of being cruel than that,” he said. “Sometimes a kiss, or the gift of a flower, is worse than a blow. Often, Pippa, men play with women’s hearts as—well, as Louis does with a spool.”

A shadow fell on her face. “I think I understand, monsieur. That poor lady was afraid I should fall in love with you, but that you would not love me.”

“That is partly what she meant.”

Pippa rose and walked to the window. “To-night I think,” she said, after a minute’s silence, “that women have the most sorrow in life.”

“They do, little one.”

“But also the most joy, monsieur.”

He rested his chin on his hand, but said nothing.

“All to-day,” resumed the girl, “when men seemed happiest it was because they were with women. Also when they looked most cruel—you perhaps know what I mean—there were women there too with the faces that frightened me. And all those lovely children playing in the park—always they seemed so merry because their mothers were near them. But also, you remember the poor soldier in the chair?—no legs and but one arm. His face was so sad until once the lady with him—a nurse, you said—spoke to him

and he looked at her and smiled. It was lovely, monsieur. I think I wept a little.”

He made no comment, but his left hand ran slow arpeggios on the table. From the window she could see the water of the chute, all silvery in the moonlight.

“So to-night, monsieur,” she went on, “I am not the same as this morning. Then I thought that we who are women are the happiest; but now I think, in the real world, it is we who give pleasure or unhappiness. Perhaps, monsieur”—she turned around and faced him—“perhaps a woman finds joy only when she gives it to others.”

He looked at her, and his eyebrows were raised in wonder. When he had said we grow old by moments, was it more than just a well-turned phrase?

She returned to her chair by the table.

“When Louis and I are alone,” she murmured, “I shall not dream the same as before. Then we had only young people, brave and handsome, but now I shall pretend that there are many old and sad ones, who perhaps will be glad if I am with them. And”——

“Pippa, my dear”—he looked into her eyes that met his without timidity, and there was a pleading note in his voice—“you may be lonely here, but you saw to-day how many discouraged, unhappy people there are—how much sickness and unkindness there is. Keep to your little world here with its Fairy Princes and the music of the wind. It is better, Pippa. . . . Perhaps it is even more real than the other.”

She smiled, patiently, and, for the second time that day, felt a motherly pity for his youthfulness.

“Your Majesty,” she said, “in my book, *The Fairy Prince*, the girl sings a song about love, and she asks her mother, ‘*Est-ce plaisir, est-ce tourment?*’ I know now that it is both. Ah! I think it is too wonderful to be a woman; for some day, perhaps yes, perhaps no, I shall have my own children and a husband and friends. And sometimes, when my husband, he is much discouraged if the mill makes no money, though he work so hard, or if my children are perhaps sick and cry—then it is I who smile and say: “*Mes enfants*”—for he, too, will be only a big child—“*Mes enfants*, can you see the sunshine? Do you hear the birds? Can you smell these flowers?—So!” *Et alors*—perhaps they smile too. So I sing a pretty song and say to my husband, “*Courage, mon ami!* Have you not your little wife?” And after that

we are all happy. . . . And now, that is why I think it is so wonderful to be a woman.”

The clock hiccupped, and struck eight.

The airman looked at his watch. “By Jove, it is midnight!” he said. “Pippa, our day is over”——

Tears sprang to her eyes, and her hands groped for his. “But no, monsieur,” she cried, “you must not go. It will be so lonely.”

He leaned over and covered her little hands with his large, tanned ones. “It will be lonely for me as well,” he said.

“But you will come back, Your Majesty? Perhaps—next Easter?”

He gently stroked her hand. “On my honor,” he said, “I will come on the Tuesday at dawn. You will be there?”

He released her hands as she slowly rose and crossed once more to the window.

“At daybreak,” she said very quietly, gazing at the steely brilliance of the running water, “I will watch from the hill. And if you do not come, though I shall weep a little, I shall say ‘He is fighting, and could not leave for little Pippa. Next year he will come.’ ”

“And supposing, little one, he does not come the next year either?”

She leaned her arm against the window-pane and rested her cheek on it. “I shall watch again at dawn, monsieur”——the words were spoken very slowly——“and I shall say, ‘He is not coming. . . He has gone to be with his brothers who went out into the sunlight, smiling so bravely’ ”——

Her words ended in a half-sob, and she pressed her face with both hands.

“But every Easter,” she said, her voice very soft and trembling, “on the Tuesday I will watch the dawn from the hill, and perhaps, monsieur, you will see me.”

He stood motionless for a moment, slowly reached for his leather coat and helmet, and placed them over his arm. “Good-bye, Pippa,” he said, and he held out his hands.

Timidly, and with cheeks that went all white, then crimson, she came towards him and raised her face for him to kiss. For a moment he held her in his arms, which quivered oddly. . . . Then, stooping, he gently kissed her—not on the upturned, trembling lips, but on the cheek, just beside her mouth.

Without a word he gently released her from his arms, flung the door open and went out into the night.

Motionless, with the burning memory of his hot lips upon her cheek, she stood until the sound of his footsteps was lost in the song of the chute. Slowly her hands dropped to her sides and she sank into the chair by the table. The cat looked up from the task of licking his paws, and sprang upon her lap.

“Louis!” she cried, smothering him in an embrace that threatened to snuff out his nine lives prematurely, while tears from her eyes fell glistening on his fur. “Louis!”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Airy Prince* by Arthur Beverley Baxter]