

XI. A SCANDAL IN THE VILLAGE

In the little hamlet of Haroc, in the Isle of St. Loup, there lived a man who-- though living under the English flag--was absolutely untypical of the French tradition. He was quite unnoticeable, but that was exactly where he was quite himself. He was not even extraordinarily French; but then it is against the French tradition to be extraordinarily French. Ordinary Englishmen would only have thought him a little old-fashioned; imperialistic Englishmen would really have mistaken him for the old John Bull of the caricatures. He was stout; he was quite undistinguished; and he had side-whiskers, worn just a little longer than John Bull's. He was by name Pierre Durand; he was by trade a wine merchant; he was by politics a conservative republican; he had been brought up a Catholic, had always thought and acted as an agnostic, and was very mildly returning to the Church in his later years. He had a genius (if one can even use so wild a word in connexion with so tame a person) a genius for saying the conventional thing on every conceivable subject; or rather what we in England would call the conventional thing. For it was not convention with him, but solid and manly conviction. Convention implies cant or affectation, and he had not the faintest smell of either. He was simply an ordinary citizen with ordinary views; and if you had told him so he would have taken it as an ordinary compliment. If you had asked him about women, he would have said that one must preserve their domesticity and decorum; he would have used the stalest words, but he would have in reserve the strongest arguments. If you had asked him about government, he would have said that all citizens were free and equal, but he would have meant what he said. If you had asked him about education, he would have said that the young must be trained up in habits of industry and of respect for their parents. Still he would have set them the example of industry, and he would have been one of the parents whom they could respect. A state of mind so hopelessly central is depressing to the English instinct. But then in England a man announcing these platitudes is generally a fool and a frightened fool, announcing them out of mere social servility. But Durand was anything but a fool; he had read all the eighteenth century, and could have defended his platitudes round every angle of eighteenth-century argument. And certainly he was anything but a coward: swollen and sedentary as he was, he could have hit any man back who touched him with the instant violence of an automatic machine; and dying in a uniform would have seemed to him only the sort of thing that sometimes happens. I am afraid it is impossible to explain this monster amid the exaggerative sects and the eccentric clubs of my country. He was merely a man.

He lived in a little villa which was furnished well with comfortable chairs and tables and highly uncomfortable classical pictures and medallions. The art in his

home contained nothing between the two extremes of hard, meagre designs of Greek heads and Roman togas, and on the other side a few very vulgar Catholic images in the crudest colours; these were mostly in his daughter's room. He had recently lost his wife, whom he had loved heartily and rather heavily in complete silence, and upon whose grave he was constantly in the habit of placing hideous little wreaths, made out of a sort of black-and-white beads. To his only daughter he was equally devoted, though he restricted her a good deal under a sort of theoretic alarm about her innocence; an alarm which was peculiarly unnecessary, first, because she was an exceptionally reticent and religious girl, and secondly, because there was hardly anybody else in the place.

Madeleine Durand was physically a sleepy young woman, and might easily have been supposed to be morally a lazy one. It is, however, certain that the work of her house was done somehow, and it is even more rapidly ascertainable that nobody else did it. The logician is, therefore, driven back upon the assumption that she did it; and that lends a sort of mysterious interest to her personality at the beginning. She had very broad, low, and level brows, which seemed even lower because her warm yellow hair clustered down to her eyebrows; and she had a face just plump enough not to look as powerful as it was. Anything that was heavy in all this was abruptly lightened by two large, light china-blue eyes, lightened all of a sudden as if it had been lifted into the air by two big blue butterflies. The rest of her was less than middle-sized, and was of a casual and comfortable sort; and she had this difference from such girls as the girl in the motor-car, that one did not incline to take in her figure at all, but only her broad and leonine and innocent head.

Both the father and the daughter were of the sort that would normally have avoided all observation; that is, all observation in that extraordinary modern world which calls out everything except strength. Both of them had strength below the surface; they were like quiet peasants owning enormous and unquarried mines. The father with his square face and grey side whiskers, the daughter with her square face and golden fringe of hair, were both stronger than they know; stronger than anyone knew. The father believed in civilization, in the storied tower we have erected to affront nature; that is, the father believed in Man. The daughter believed in God; and was even stronger. They neither of them believed in themselves; for that is a decadent weakness.

The daughter was called a devotee. She left upon ordinary people the impression--the somewhat irritating impression--produced by such a person; it can only be described as the sense of strong water being perpetually poured into some abyss. She did her housework easily; she achieved her social relations sweetly; she was never neglectful and never unkind. This accounted for all that was soft in her, but not for all that was hard. She trod firmly as if going somewhere; she flung her

face back as if defying something; she hardly spoke a cross word, yet there was often battle in her eyes. The modern man asked doubtfully where all this silent energy went to. He would have stared still more doubtfully if he had been told that it all went into her prayers.

The conventions of the Isle of St. Loup were necessarily a compromise or confusion between those of France and England; and it was vaguely possible for a respectable young lady to have half-attached lovers, in a way that would be impossible to the bourgeoisie of France. One man in particular had made himself an unmistakable figure in the track of this girl as she went to church. He was a short, prosperous-looking man, whose long, bushy black beard and clumsy black umbrella made him seem both shorter and older than he really was; but whose big, bold eyes, and step that spurned the ground, gave him an instant character of youth.

His name was Camille Bert, and he was a commercial traveller who had only been in the island an idle week before he began to hover in the tracks of Madeleine Durand. Since everyone knows everyone in so small a place, Madeleine certainly knew him to speak to; but it is not very evident that she ever spoke. He haunted her, however; especially at church, which was, indeed, one of the few certain places for finding her. In her home she had a habit of being invisible, sometimes through insatiable domesticity, sometimes through an equally insatiable solitude. M. Bert did not give the impression of a pious man, though he did give, especially with his eyes, the impression of an honest one. But he went to Mass with a simple exactitude that could not be mistaken for a pose, or even for a vulgar fascination. It was perhaps this religious regularity which eventually drew Madeleine into recognition of him. At least it is certain that she twice spoke to him with her square and open smile in the porch of the church; and there was human nature enough in the hamlet to turn even that into gossip.

But the real interest arose suddenly as a squall arises with the extraordinary affair that occurred about five days after. There was about a third of a mile beyond the village of Haroc a large but lonely hotel upon the London or Paris model, but commonly almost entirely empty. Among the accidental group of guests who had come to it at this season was a man whose nationality no one could fix and who bore the non-committal name of Count Gregory. He treated everybody with complete civility and almost in complete silence. On the few occasions when he spoke, he spoke either French, English, or once (to the priest) Latin; and the general opinion was that he spoke them all wrong. He was a large, lean man, with the stoop of an aged eagle, and even the eagle's nose to complete it; he had old-fashioned military whiskers and moustache dyed with a garish and highly incredible yellow. He had the dress of a showy gentleman and the manners of a decayed gentleman; he seemed (as with a sort of simplicity) to be trying to be

a dandy when he was too old even to know that he was old. Ye he was decidedly a handsome figure with his curled yellow hair and lean fastidious face; and he wore a peculiar frock-coat of bright turquoise blue, with an unknown order pinned to it, and he carried a huge and heavy cane. Despite his silence and his dandified dress and whiskers, the island might never have heard of him but for the extraordinary event of which I have spoken, which fell about in the following way:

In such casual atmospheres only the enthusiastic go to Benediction; and as the warm blue twilight closed over the little candle-lit church and village, the line of worshippers who went home from the former to the latter thinned out until it broke. On one such evening at least no one was in church except the quiet, unconquerable Madeleine, four old women, one fisherman, and, of course, the irrepressible M. Camille Bert. The others seemed to melt away afterwards into the peacock colours of the dim green grass and the dark blue sky. Even Durand was invisible instead of being merely reverentially remote; and Madeleine set forth through the patch of black forest alone. She was not in the least afraid of loneliness, because she was not afraid of devils. I think they were afraid of her.

In a clearing of the wood, however, which was lit up with a last patch of the perishing sunlight, there advanced upon her suddenly one who was more startling than a devil. The incomprehensible Count Gregory, with his yellow hair like flame and his face like the white ashes of the flame, was advancing bareheaded towards her, flinging out his arms and his long fingers with a frantic gesture.

"We are alone here," he cried, "and you would be at my mercy, only that I am at yours."

Then his frantic hands fell by his sides and he looked up under his brows with an expression that went well with his hard breathing. Madeleine Durand had come to a halt at first in childish wonder, and now, with more than masculine self-control, "I fancy I know your face, sir," she said, as if to gain time.

"I know I shall not forget yours," said the other, and extended once more his ungainly arms in an unnatural gesture. Then of a sudden there came out of him a spout of wild and yet pompous phrases. "It is as well that you should know the worst and the best. I am a man who knows no limit; I am the most callous of criminals, the most unrepentant of sinners. There is no man in my dominions so vile as I. But my dominions stretch from the olives of Italy to the fir-woods of Denmark, and there is no nook of all of them in which I have not done a sin. But when I bear you away I shall be doing my first sacrilege, and also my first act of virtue." He seized her suddenly by the elbow; and she did not scream but only pulled and tugged. Yet though she had not screamed, someone astray in the

woods seemed to have heard the struggle. A short but nimble figure came along the woodland path like a humming bullet and had caught Count Gregory a crack across the face before his own could be recognized. When it was recognized it was that of Camille, with the black elderly beard and the young ardent eyes.

Up to the moment when Camille had hit the Count, Madeleine had entertained no doubt that the Count was merely a madman. Now she was startled with a new sanity; for the tall man in the yellow whiskers and yellow moustache first returned the blow of Bert, as if it were a sort of duty, and then stepped back with a slight bow and an easy smile.

"This need go no further here, M. Bert," he said. "I need not remind you how far it should go elsewhere."

"Certainly, you need remind me of nothing," answered Camille, stolidly. "I am glad that you are just not too much of a scoundrel for a gentleman to fight."

"We are detaining the lady," said Count Gregory, with politeness; and, making a gesture suggesting that he would have taken off his hat if he had had one, he strode away up the avenue of trees and eventually disappeared. He was so complete an aristocrat that he could offer his back to them all the way up that avenue; and his back never once looked uncomfortable.

"You must allow me to see you home," said Bert to the girl, in a gruff and almost stifled voice; "I think we have only a little way to go."

"Only a little way," she said, and smiled once more that night, in spite of fatigue and fear and the world and the flesh and the devil. The glowing and transparent blue of twilight had long been covered by the opaque and slatelike blue of night, when he handed her into the lamp-lit interior of her home. He went out himself into the darkness, walking sturdily, but tearing at his black beard.

All the French or semi-French gentry of the district considered this a case in which a duel was natural and inevitable, and neither party had any difficulty in finding seconds, strangers as they were in the place. Two small landowners, who were careful, practising Catholics, willingly undertook to represent that strict church-goer Camille Burt; while the profligate but apparently powerful Count Gregory found friends in an energetic local doctor who was ready for social promotion and an accidental Californian tourist who was ready for anything. As no particular purpose could be served by delay, it was arranged that the affair should fall out three days afterwards. And when this was settled the whole community, as it were, turned over again in bed and thought no more about the matter. At least there was only one member of it who seemed to be restless, and

that was she who was commonly most restful. On the next night Madeleine Durand went to church as usual; and as usual the stricken Camille was there also. What was not so usual was that when they were a bow-shot from the church Madeleine turned round and walked back to him. "Sir," she began, "it is not wrong of me to speak to you," and the very words gave him a jar of unexpected truth; for in all the novels he had ever read she would have begun: "It is wrong of me to speak to you." She went on with wide and serious eyes like an animal's: "It is not wrong of me to speak to you, because your soul, or anybody's soul, matters so much more than what the world says about anybody. I want to talk to you about what you are going to do."

Bert saw in front of him the inevitable heroine of the novels trying to prevent bloodshed; and his pale firm face became implacable.

"I would do anything but that for you," he said; "but no man can be called less than a man."

She looked at him for a moment with a face openly puzzled, and then broke into an odd and beautiful half-smile.

"Oh, I don't mean that," she said; "I don't talk about what I don't understand. No one has ever hit me; and if they had I should not feel as a man may. I am sure it is not the best thing to fight. It would be better to forgive--if one could really forgive. But when people dine with my father and say that fighting a duel is mere murder--of course I can see that is not just. It's all so different--having a reason--and letting the other man know--and using the same guns and things--and doing it in front of your friends. I'm awfully stupid, but I know that men like you aren't murderers. But it wasn't that that I meant."

"What did you mean?" asked the other, looking broodingly at the earth.

"Don't you know," she said, "there is only one more celebration? I thought that as you always go to church--I thought you would communicate this morning."

Bert stepped backward with a sort of action she had never seen in him before. It seemed to alter his whole body.

"You may be right or wrong to risk dying," said the girl, simply; "the poor women in our village risk it whenever they have a baby. You men are the other half of the world. I know nothing about when you ought to die. But surely if you are daring to try and find God beyond the grave and appeal to Him--you ought to let Him find you when He comes and stands there every morning in our little church."

And placid as she was, she made a little gesture of argument, of which the pathos wrung the heart.

M. Camille Bert was by no means placid. Before that incomplete gesture and frankly pleading face he retreated as if from the jaws of a dragon. His dark black hair and beard looked utterly unnatural against the startling pallor of his face. When at last he said something it was: "O God! I can't stand this!" He did not say it in French. Nor did he, strictly speaking, say it in English. The truth (interesting only to anthropologists) is that he said it in Scotch.

"There will be another mass in a matter of eight hours," said Madeleine, with a sort of business eagerness and energy, "and you can do it then before the fighting. You must forgive me, but I was so frightened that you would not do it at all."

Bert seemed to crush his teeth together until they broke, and managed to say between them: "And why should you suppose that I shouldn't do as you say--I mean not to do it at all?"

"You always go to Mass," answered the girl, opening her wide blue eyes, "and the Mass is very long and tiresome unless one loves God."

Then it was that Bert exploded with a brutality which might have come from Count Gregory, his criminal opponent. He advanced upon Madeleine with flaming eyes, and almost took her by the two shoulders. "I do not love God," he cried, speaking French with the broadest Scotch accent; "I do not want to find Him; I do not think He is there to be found. I must burst up the show; I must and will say everything. You are the happiest and honestest thing I ever saw in this godless universe. And I am the dirtiest and most dishonest."

Madeleine looked at him doubtfully for an instant, and then said with a sudden simplicity and cheerfulness: "Oh, but if you are really sorry it is all right. If you are horribly sorry it is all the better. You have only to go and tell the priest so and he will give you God out of his own hands."

"I hate your priest and I deny your God!" cried the man, "and I tell you God is a lie and a fable and a mask. And for the first time in my life I do not feel superior to God."

"What can it all mean?" said Madeleine, in massive wonder.

"Because I am a fable also and a mask," said the man. He had been plucking fiercely at his black beard and hair all the time; now he suddenly plucked them

off and flung them like moulted feathers in the mire. This extraordinary spoliation left in the sunlight the same face, but a much younger head--a head with close chestnut curls and a short chestnut beard.

"Now you know the truth," he answered, with hard eyes. "I am a cad who has played a crooked trick on a quiet village and a decent woman for a private reason of his own. I might have played it successfully on any other woman; I have hit the one woman on whom it cannot be played. It's just like my damned luck. The plain truth is," and here when he came to the plain truth he boggled and blundered as Evan had done in telling it to the girl in the motor-car.

"The plain truth is," he said at last, "that I am James Turnbull the atheist. The police are after me; not for atheism but for being ready to fight for it."

"I saw something about you in a newspaper," said the girl, with a simplicity which even surprise could never throw off its balance.

"Evan MacIan said there was a God," went on the other, stubbornly, "and I say there isn't. And I have come to fight for the fact that there is no God; it is for that that I have seen this cursed island and your blessed face."

"You want me really to believe," said Madeleine, with parted lips, "that you think--"

"I want you to hate me!" cried Turnbull, in agony. "I want you to be sick when you think of my name. I am sure there is no God."

"But there is," said Madeleine, quite quietly, and rather with the air of one telling children about an elephant. "Why, I touched His body only this morning."

"You touched a bit of bread," said Turnbull, biting his knuckles. "Oh, I will say anything that can madden you!"

"You think it is only a bit of bread," said the girl, and her lips tightened ever so little.

"I know it is only a bit of bread," said Turnbull, with violence.

She flung back her open face and smiled. "Then why did you refuse to eat it?" she said.

James Turnbull made a little step backward, and for the first time in his life there seemed to break out and blaze in his head thoughts that were not his own.

"Why, how silly of them," cried out Madeleine, with quite a schoolgirl gaiety, "why, how silly of them to call you a blasphemer! Why, you have wrecked your whole business because you would not commit blasphemy."

The man stood, a somewhat comic figure in his tragic bewilderment, with the honest red head of James Turnbull sticking out of the rich and fictitious garments of Camille Bert. But the startled pain of his face was strong enough to obliterate the oddity.

"You come down here," continued the lady, with that female emphasis which is so pulverizing in conversation and so feeble at a public meeting, "you and your Maclan come down here and put on false beards or noses in order to fight. You pretend to be a Catholic commercial traveller from France. Poor Mr. Maclan has to pretend to be a dissolute nobleman from nowhere. Your scheme succeeds; you pick a quite convincing quarrel; you arrange a quite respectable duel; the duel you have planned so long will come off tomorrow with absolute certainty and safety. And then you throw off your wig and throw up your scheme and throw over your colleague, because I ask you to go into a building and eat a bit of bread. And then you dare to tell me that you are sure there is nothing watching us. Then you say you know there is nothing on the very altar you run away from. You know----"

"I only know," said Turnbull, "that I must run away from you. This has got beyond any talking." And he plunged along into the village, leaving his black wig and beard lying behind him on the road.

As the market-place opened before him he saw Count Gregory, that distinguished foreigner, standing and smoking in elegant meditation at the corner of the local café. He immediately made his way rapidly towards him, considering that a consultation was urgent. But he had hardly crossed half of that stony quadrangle when a window burst open above him and a head was thrust out, shouting. The man was in his woollen undershirt, but Turnbull knew the energetic, apologetic head of the sergeant of police. He pointed furiously at Turnbull and shouted his name. A policeman ran excitedly from under an archway and tried to collar him. Two men selling vegetables dropped their baskets and joined in the chase. Turnbull dodged the constable, upset one of the men into his own basket, and bounding towards the distinguished foreign Count, called to him clamorously: "Come on, Maclan, the hunt is up again."

The prompt reply of Count Gregory was to pull off his large yellow whiskers and scatter them on the breeze with an air of considerable relief. Then he joined the flight of Turnbull, and even as he did so, with one wrench of his powerful hands

rent and split the strange, thick stick that he carried. Inside it was a naked old-fashioned rapier. The two got a good start up the road before the whole town was awakened behind them; and half-way up it a similar transformation was seen to take place in Mr. Turnbull's singular umbrella.

The two had a long race for the harbour; but the English police were heavy and the French inhabitants were indifferent. In any case, they got used to the notion of the road being clear; and just as they had come to the cliffs MacIan banged into another gentleman with unmistakable surprise. How he knew he was another gentleman merely by banging into him, must remain a mystery. MacIan was a very poor and very sober Scotch gentleman. The other was a very drunk and very wealthy English gentleman. But there was something in the staggered and openly embarrassed apologies that made them understand each other as readily and as quickly and as much as two men talking French in the middle of China. The nearest expression of the type is that it either hits or apologizes; and in this case both apologized.

"You seem to be in a hurry," said the unknown Englishman, falling back a step or two in order to laugh with an unnatural heartiness. "What's it all about, eh?" Then before MacIan could get past his sprawling and staggering figure he ran forward again and said with a sort of shouting and ear-shattering whisper: "I say, my name is Wilkinson. You know--Wilkinson's Entire was my grandfather. Can't drink beer myself. Liver." And he shook his head with extraordinary sagacity.

"We really are in a hurry, as you say," said MacIan, summoning a sufficiently pleasant smile, "so if you will let us pass----"

"I'll tell you what, you fellows," said the sprawling gentleman, confidentially, while Evan's agonized ears heard behind him the first paces of the pursuit, "if you really are, as you say, in a hurry, I know what it is to be in a hurry--Lord, what a hurry I was in when we all came out of Cartwright's rooms--if you really are in a hurry"--and he seemed to steady his voice into a sort of solemnity--"if you are in a hurry, there's nothing like a good yacht for a man in a hurry."

"No doubt you're right," said MacIan, and dashed past him in despair. The head of the pursuing host was just showing over the top of the hill behind him. Turnbull had already ducked under the intoxicated gentleman's elbow and fled far in front.

"No, but look here," said Mr. Wilkinson, enthusiastically running after MacIan and catching him by the sleeve of his coat. "If you want to hurry you should take a yacht, and if"--he said, with a burst of rationality, like one leaping to a further point in logic--"if you want a yacht--you can have mine."

Evan pulled up abruptly and looked back at him. "We are really in the devil of a hurry," he said, "and if you really have a yacht, the truth is that we would give our ears for it."

"You'll find it in harbour," said Wilkinson, struggling with his speech. "Left side of harbour--called Gibson Girl--can't think why, old fellow, I never lent it you before."

With these words the benevolent Mr. Wilkinson fell flat on his face in the road, but continued to laugh softly, and turned towards his flying companion a face of peculiar peace and benignity. Evan's mind went through a crisis of instantaneous casuistry, in which it may be that he decided wrongly; but about how he decided his biographer can profess no doubt. Two minutes afterwards he had overtaken Turnbull and told the tale; ten minutes afterwards he and Turnbull had somehow tumbled into the yacht called the Gibson Girl and had somehow pushed off from the Isle of St. Loup.