

Ashes of Empire.

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

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“What are you doing?”

Bourke and Harwood walked out to the front door and sat down on the step.

After a short period of meditation Bourke said: “Jim, do you agree with me in saying that our hostesses are as innocent as two white kittens?”

“Why white kittens?” asked Harwood argumentatively, and added, “of course they are.”

“Well,” continued Bourke, “because they are so innocent it would be a shame to hurt them—I mean to attempt any fool flirtation. Wouldn't it?”

“I don't see why you say that to me,” said Harwood, sharply.

“I only meant for myself as well as you—that we've got to be careful. You know as well as I do that what is called flirtation in America is not understood in France. They would take anything like that seriously.”

Harwood was silent.

“Of course, I'm more or less susceptible to a pretty face,” continued Bourke; “so are you if your reputation is as delicate as—”

“Let my reputation alone,” interrupted Harwood.

“Yes, it's not a subject for analytical discussion. As I say, I'm not insensible to beauty; but in this case we're in—well, we're absolutely must make asses of ourselves.”

“What's the matter with you?” inquired Harwood crossly.

“The matter is that I think we had better be clear about this situation from the beginning. Heaven knows we shall be busy enough with our own affairs—and they will be with theirs—and as for our leisure hours, if we have any, don't you think we can employ them more safely than in hanging around two dangerously pretty girls?”

“Can't a man talk to them without making love to them?” demanded Harwood bluntly.

“Can you?” asked Bourke in his turn.

Harwood shrugged his shoulders. “I can behave myself,” he observed, “if I try.”

“You never have,” retorted Bourke. “It's as natural to you to make love as it is to breathe. You never are serious and you usually make mischief some way or other.”

“You can't say I ever interfered before, but I tell you, Jim, I think it would be a d-d shame to trouble the peace of mind of Hilde Chalais.”

“So do I,” said Harwood. “Let's drop the subject.”

They stood up, looking at each other. Harwood colored and laughed.

“I can't help it,” he said. “I've gone too far already, Cecil.”

“Already?” cried Bourke, incredulously.

“Yes.”

“Good heavens,” groaned Bourke, “you don't mean to say you've been already?”

“Yes, I'm sorry. It was my fault.”

“You—you haven't made love to her in these few minutes? Jim, it's impossible!”

Harwood moved uneasily.

“Have you?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Not very?”

“You—you didn't kiss her?”

Harwood was silent.

Bourke looked at him in amazement.

“Not Hilde?”

Harwood didn't answer.

After a moment's silence Bourke sat down on the step and swore under his breath.

Harwood stood by, restless and ashamed.

“You understand, Cecil,” he said, in a low voice, “that was a confession—not a boast. I'm d-d sorry she looked so dainty and sweet—you know how thoughtless I am about such things.”

“No,” interrupted Bourke, “I don't think you're a blackguard, Jim, but it's a selfish pestime, this useless awakening of a woman's heart. What I fear is that you and Hilde will get into a desperate love affair, and it will perhaps leave one of you unhappy. And that won't be you, you know.”

“I don't know,” said the other. A queer light flashed in his eyes for a moment, then he laughed. “Anyway, don't take it seriously. We were standing close together when you put that monkey bit me. Hilde cried, ‘Oh, so pretty,’ and looked so grieved—and I—I just put my arm around her waist; then she looked at me so—well—so—Oh, the devil! how do I know; let's forget it, won't you? There are some things a man ought to shut up about.”

“I don't ask your confidence,” said Cecil, morosely.

“You're the only man who has ever had it. As for this child—the whole incident was innocent and harmless enough. I've half forgotten it, and she will completely in no time at all.”

“All right,” said Bourke; “here comes Winston and Sutherland. They're on time; it's just 10.”

Chapter V.

The household duties finished, the birds regaled with seed and water, Yvette went out, as she always did, into the tangled garden for a room with Scheherazade, calling Hilde to follow. But Hilde had slipped away to her own silent chamber, where, in the half light, pale sun spots moved on the lowered curtains and one dusty sunbeam slanted through the dusk.

She sank into an easy chair, head thrown back, eyes wide open, gazing at nothing—the notes sifting through the bands of sunlight—at the tracery of a vine outside the window sill, shadowed on the lowered curtain, that moved when breezes swept the leaves. But she saw neither shadow nor sunlight, nor the white walls of the room, nor the white curtains of the bed. There was but one thing before her eyes—Harwood's face, bending close to hers—close still—and she lay back in the chair, breathless, fascinated.

Contemplation for what she had done gave place to wonder. She strove to understand why she attempted to begin at the beginning of things. The beginning of things, for her, was not far away—scarcely an hour back. And yet it was no use—no use to try to remember how it had happened.

A passing cloud blotted the dappled sunshine from the curtains; the room grew very dim and still. An apathy, mental and physical, fell upon her; her eyes drooped until the dark lashes rested on her cheeks; her limbs seemed heavy and numb.

Presently the shaft of sunlight stole across the dusk again; she raised one hand, touching her face with listless fingers. Her eyes and cheeks were wet with tears.

There was a niche in the wall over the

tion. He even risked it needlessly, for sheer perverseness, and his reputation for recklessness was a proverb among his fellows. He had been known to bring a stricken comrade in from the fighting line. Thinking over the episode later he knew that he had been actuated by no high motives of self-sacrifice; he had done it simply as part of the circus. He was rather surprised when they praised him, for everybody else was under fire at the same time, and he knew that if he had not been there in the line of his own profession, and any one had asked him to go out and risk his life in that way, he would have indignantly refused.

At times his recklessness amounted to imbecility in the eyes of his conferees. Sutherland, commenting on it one evening, observed that Harwood was troubled with an annoying malady called “youth.” But this recklessness, when he showed it, was not ignorance of fear. It was self-disgust. There were many other occasions when, being on good terms with himself, he had taken the tenderest care of his precious person. This self-solicitude was not normal prudence—it was a form of fierce selfishness that attacked him like an intermittent disease. Some day, he was thinking now, it might attack him at the wrong moment, and at such moments the hesitation of selfishness is known as cowardice.

As he leaned there before the mirror, looking blankly into his own handsome eyes, something of this came to him in a sudden flash that shocked him; for the idea of personal cowardice had never entered his mind.

The bare possibility of such a thing made him loathe himself. He gazed, startled, at that other face in the mirror as though he had detected a criminal—a secret assassin of himself who had fawned and flattered him

with a bright smile, “because you see we are twins. Only,” she added, “I feel millions of years older than Yvette.”

Yvette protested indignantly and for a moment they all three chattered like sparrows in April, laughing, appealing to each other until Yvette fled to the garden again, her hands pressed over both ears.

“Well,” said Harwood, “nobody has answered my question after all.”

Harwood looked brilliant and her cheeks aglow as she watched Yvette through the window.

“Perhaps it would be simpler,” said Hilde, “to call us both by our first names.” She rose and opened the window that faced the garden.

“Yvette,” she called, softly.

“What, dear?”

“Shall M. Harwood call us both by our first names?”

“Yes,” laughed Yvette, “but he must be very formal with Scheherazade.”

Yvette looked around at the girl beside him, at her brilliant color, at her eyes vague and sweet under their silken fringe.

“Then I am to call you ‘Hilde,’” he said. He had not meant to speak tenderly.

“Oh,” stammered Hilde, “it is merely a

matter of convenience, isn't it?” She had not meant to say that, either.

“Of course,” he replied.

They closed the window and stepped back into the room. After a moment's silence, Hilde said: “If you are going into the city will you do something for me?”

“Indeed I will,” he answered quickly, touched by the sudden confidence. She handed him a coin—a silver franc. Her face grew serious.

“It is for the ambulance,” she said. “We could not give it last week. The bureau is opposite the Luxembourg palace. Will you drop it into the box?”

“Yes,” he replied, gravely.

“Thank you. Shall you come back to dinner?”

He said “yes,” lingering at the door. Suddenly that same impulse seized him to take her in his arms again. The blood stung his cheeks as his eyes met hers. Her head dropped a little. He knew she would not resist. He knew already she felt the caress

of his eyes. The color deepened and paled in her cheeks, but he did not stir.

Presently he heard a voice—his own voice—saying: “Then—adieu, Mlle. Hilde.”

She answered, with an effort: “Adieu, monsieur.”

A moment later he was in his own room, standing before the mirror, facing his own reflection with a lighter heart than he had carried for many a day. “D—n it!” he said, shaking his fist at the mirrored face. “I'll show you who is master!” The form in the glass smiled back, shaking a clenched hand.

Chapter VI.

In the City.

As Harwood crossed the rue d'Ypres and passed along the facade of the barracks opposite the rue Malaise, he met the Mouse face to face.

“Oh!” he cried, “so you're the gentleman who broke my head! Now—do you know—I think I'll break yours!”

The Mouse's face not only expressed genuine amazement, but righteous indignation, and his protestations of innocence appeared in his eyes so sincere, so unfeigned, that Harwood, the other hand twisted in the fellow's collar, the one drawn back for a hearty cuff.

“Monsieur,” moaned the Mouse in accents of pained astonishment, “what is it to you? Would you assassinate a stranger? Help!”

“Didn't you crack my head last night on the Rue d'Ypres?” demanded Harwood.

“I, monsieur?” exclaimed the Mouse, overcome at the enormity of such an accusation. “I—a father of a family! Do you take me for some profligate of the outer boulevards—because my clothes are old and stained by the sweat of labor—?”

Here he relaxed into a snivel.

Harwood's hand fell from the Mouse's throat. He looked at the fellow, puzzled and undecided, but not convinced. The Mouse's right hand, however, committed very slowly, almost imperceptibly, toward his tattered pocket.

“Monsieur,” he whined, “I am overcome—I am hurt—I am—”

Harwood swung back in the nick of time as a knife flashed close to his eyes.

“Tiens pour toi! Va donc, erotin!” muttered the Mouse, darting at him again, and again Harwood leaped back before the broad glitter of the knife.

In a moment, the Mouse turned, scuttled across the street, and fled down the Rue Malaise; after him sped two noble agents, flourishing their short swords and filling the silent street with cries of “A l'assassin! A l'assassin!”

Harwood, much interested and excited, watched the flight of the Mouse with mingled feelings of uneasiness and admiration. The scanty crowd that gathered along the line of pursuit took up the cry like a pack of lank hounds, and Harwood, whose character was composed of contradictions—and whose string instinct had been always with the under dog, found himself watching the Mouse's flight with a sudden sympathy for the tattered creature. The Mouse ran, doubled, twisted and wriggled into the Passage de l'Ombre, the pack at his heels, and Harwood hastened back toward the Rue d'Ypres, knowing that the Mouse must pass there again.

As Harwood stood at the head of the street, suddenly the Mouse rounded the corner and to Harwood's surprise came straight toward him. His face was haggard and dusty, his legs dragging, his single eye bloodshot and sunken. He had thrown away the knife, his cap was gone and his greasy coat streamed out behind him, laying bare a bony throat. When he saw Harwood there came over his face such a look of blank despair that the young fellow's heart melted. At the same moment they both caught the roar of the crowd sweeping through the Rue d'Ypres.

That the Mouse expected Harwood to trip him up as he passed was evident, for he swung out to the street on the right.

“Turn to the left!” shouted Harwood; “I'll not stop you!”

The ragged fellow hesitated, panting, his solitary eye burning in his socket.

“That way!” muttered Harwood, and he waved him toward a narrow alley separating the Rue d'Ypres from the barracks of the Prince Murat barracks. It was a cul-de-sac—a trap—and the Mouse knew it.

“Run, you fool!” urged Harwood, seizing the Mouse's arm; “here, throw me your coat, quick! Don't be afraid; I'll not hurt you. Sit still!” He stripped off the tattered coat from the Mouse's back, flung it into the Rue Malaise, then shoved the Mouse into the impasse Murat.

Crouching there close to the parade grille, the Mouse heard the chase pass at full speed, heard a yell as the crowd found his coat in the Rue d'Ypres, and then the clatter and trample of feet, which died away down the Passage de l'Ombre. Harwood laughed.

“Au revoir, my innocent friend,” he said. “If you can't get away now, your hide's not worth saving.”

The Mouse gazed at him with a face absolutely devoid of expression; then, without a word, he crept out of the impasse and glided away toward the city.

Whatever was capricious and contrary in Harwood's nature was now in the ascendant. He chuckled to himself over the evasion of the Mouse and the paradoxical, if not unjustifiable part he himself had played in it. Why he had done it he did not stop to inquire—whether from pure perversity, or from a nobler, if equally misguided motive—or was it the impulse of a gentleman sportsman, whose duty it is to save the quarry from the hands of a sportsman? It is hard to say for another man? He did not trouble to ask himself. He walked on toward the boulevard Montparnasse, pleased with the memory of the exciting spectacle he had witnessed, laughing to himself now and then, until he remembered the mission and he had intrusted to him.

He felt in his pocket for the silver franc, drew it out, and examined it. His face was sober now. He held the coin a moment, turning it over between his fingers, then dropped it into the other pocket, along with his key and knife. And, as he had decided to keep it for himself, in its place he dropped another coin into the ambulance box, opposite the Luxembourg palace, a coin of gold instead of silver—for Hilde's sake.

The streets of Paris presented a curious spectacle to the eyes that were on the eve of investment by a victorious foreign army—because they appeared to be so absolutely normal. Omnibuses and cabs were running as usual, the terraces of the cafe were crowded with gaily dressed people, all the shops were open, children romped and played in the Luxembourg gardens, exactly as though the emperor still sat in the Tuilleries.

In the Rue de Tournon an organ grinder filled the street with the strains of “Deux Aveugles” and “Migou.” Along the Rue de la Harpe double lines of cabs stood, the cabbies yawning on their seats, while on every side street fakirs cried their wares, marchands de plaisir, vendors of ballads, lemonade sellers with their wooden clappers moved along the sidewalks, and the strains of the Locomotive and the shade of the chestnut trees.

On the Boulevard St. Michel, however, the backwater of the human tide that ebbed and surged ceaselessly across the right bank of the Seine bore on its surface some indications that the nation was at war. Here and there flame-colored posters clung to kiosks and dead walls; proclamations, calls to arms, notices to the national guard, and now and then an insulting placard directed against the emperor. Here, too, some fakirs were trying to sell scandalous pamphlets attacking the imperial family, alleged exposures of the secrets of the Tuilleries, and even backwardly verses directed against the emperor and her child. To the credit of the Latin quarter, these creatures foundered in the streets, were finally hustled out of the streets, even before the ordinance of the police directing the confiscation of such literature and the proper punishment for the offenders. But these posters and appeals

were not the only signs of war visible along the Boulevard St. Michel. Battalions of the national guard were making an unusually noisy exhibition of themselves, parading in front of the Sorbonne, drums and bugles drawing the rear of traffic on the boulevard. In the cafes, too, strangely weird uniforms began to appear—uniforms as ridiculous, for the most part, as the people who wore them—indecent companies organizing for the defense of the city, styling themselves “Brisants de Montrouge,” “Vagabonds de Montparnasse,” “Scouts of St. Sulpire”—all equally vociferous and unanimously thirsty.

As for the city itself, it was strangely tranquil after a night of celebration over the safe return of Vinoy's Thirtieth corps, and a morning of rejoicing at the news that the United States had instructed its minister, Mr. Washburne, to recognize the fait accompli and consider himself in future an accredited minister to the republic of France. In the Cafe Cardinal a few cohorts still wore miniature American flags in their buttonholes, and here and there, over the entrances to cafes and concert halls, the stars and stripes waved brightly in the September sun.

As for a very serious comprehension of the situation, so far as the public went, there was none. On the 3d of September, after the news of the emperor's capture at Sedan had been confirmed by the Comte de Platon, the Parisians occupied themselves with an amusement always congenial to the true Parisian—a riot. This riot, which passed into history as the revolution of the 4th of September, was refreshingly bloodless and amazingly direct. It swept the dynasty of Napoleon III from France, it made the emperor a legend and it proclaimed the republic through the medium of M. Gambetta's lusty lungs. In other words, the French people committed the enormous folly of swapping horses while crossing a stream, and when in the face of an enemy flushed with victory, the Parisians laid violent hands on the throat of their own government and strangled it.

Even Moltke must have relaxed his stern visage at the hopeless absurdity of such a people. For, if the government had erred, was that the time to reckon with it? An established government represents, at least theoretically, a basis and security that a revolutionary government cannot have in times of invasion and instant need. And, after all, what right had the republic proclaimed? There had been no appeal, no plebiscite, no majority had exercised the right of suffrage, not a vote had been cast. Violence alone had decided the fate of a government which also had been founded upon violence.

On the fatal 3d of September Paris was still quiet, perhaps stunned, by the news of the frightful disaster at Sedan, but, in the minds of the people, the revolution was already a thing accomplished. Nevertheless, there was still time left to save the republic from the hands of a mob.

The right of national representation was merely necessary that the Deputies should frankly accept the proposition advanced:

First—Announcement of the abdication of the executive.

Second—Nomination by the Chamber of a government for the national defense.

Third—Convocation of a constituent assembly as soon as circumstances permitted.

(To Be Continued.)

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“But, monsieur, you have forgotten your hat!” cried Hilde.

In the absurdity of the situation his dignity collapsed and he turned around hot with blushing. Hilde stood in the doorway, scarlet with confusion; for a second they faced each other, then gravity fled and a gale of laughter swept the last traces of embarrassment away.

“Is luncheon ready?” asked Harwood, re-ascending the steps. “My feelings are hurt,” he insisted; “an omelette is the only thing I will consider.” Hilde smiled a little and took courage.

“The balm is ready,” she said; “Yvette and I have finished luncheon. Will you come into the dining room?”

The luncheon was a modest affair; a bottle of white wine, a frothy omelette, a bit of rye bread, nothing more. But to Harwood, sitting there opposite Hilde, it was enough.

If Hilde appeared charming in embarrassment, she was delightful in her shy mirth. Moreover, he had never believed that he could be so witty—for surely he must have been exceedingly witty to stir Hilde to laughter as capricious and sweet as the melody of a nestling thrush.

Yvette came in from the garden smiling and wondering a little.

“Hilde,” she exclaimed, “what is so funny?”

“I suppose I am,” said Harwood, “the laughing of Mlle. Chalais is as melodious as it is disrespectful. Ah, but now I must ask your advice on a very grave question. How are we to address you—which is Mlle. Chalais and which is Mlle. Yvette or Mlle. Hilde?”

“You may take your choice,” said Hilde



DIDN'T YOU CRACK MY HEAD LAST NIGHT ON THE RUE D'YPRES?"

through all those years—a treacherous thing that now suddenly leered at him, unmasked, malignant, triumphant.

In that bitter moment, as he stared back at the face in the mirror, he realized for the first time in his life that he had detected himself. Hitherto his fits of depression and repentance had been followed by nothing but self-contentment, which led to recklessness. Now he saw more; he saw his own soul, warped and twisted with egotism; he saw the danger of the future, the possibilities of ruin and disgrace, the end of everything for a man in this world—detected cowardice.

And he realized something else, something still more amazing; he realized that for the last ten minutes there had been two faces in the mirror before him—one the image of himself as he was, the other a vaguer face, a face of shadows faintly tinged with color—a dim, wistful face, pure and sensitive as a child's—a face whose wide, brown eyes were fixed on his, asking a question that his soul alone could answer.

He straightened up with an effort. Presently he began to pace the room. Who was this girl—this child that haunted the solitude of his egotism—whose memory persisted among all other memories? Had he harmed her? Had the idle caress of a moment left him responsible for it? He tried to answer this he turned to cynicism for aid, but it gave him no aid, and when he tried to understand why this thought should occupy him it suddenly occurred to him that there existed such a thing as moral obligation. When he had clearly established this in his mind he went further and found that he himself was amenable to the moral law—and this surprised and attracted him. A girl, then, had certain moral rights which a man was bound to respect? The proposition was novel and interesting. “Life is not an impromptu performance, but a devilish serious rehearsal!”

He lighted a cigarette and walked to the door. “If that is the proper solution of life,” he thought, “it's not as amusing as my solution, but perhaps it wasn't meant to be.” He blew a succession of smoke rings toward the ceiling. “Anyway, feeling that light there does not appear to be much opportunity for introducing side steps of one's own.”

By this time he had reached the head of the stairs outside the landing. “No side steps,” he repeated, “no gas, no specialties. I'm to keep time to the fiddle. That's my business.”

His mind was clear now—his heart lighter than the zephyrs that blew fitfully through the open shop-door. Life in earnest should begin for him—a life of renunciation, self-suppression, an even, equitable life, orderly, decent, and, above all, in his own way, feeling that light there does not appear to be much opportunity for introducing side steps of one's own.”

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