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FLECKER'S MAGIC

Norman Matson

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Chapter I

Spike Flecker, who was going to be a great painter, walked slowly along the boulevards, his uncovered red head bowed to the cold drizzle that now succeeded several days of rain. There were puddles gray with looking at a morose sky and trees standing miserably in a row.

The terrace of the Café of the Lilacs was deserted. Flecker peered in the door and saw a fat man laughing. It was warm in there. Madame, sipping a glass of steaming coffee at her high desk, gave him a cheerful smile but Flecker returned only a sober nod. Because he was cold and sad he would not go in and be comfortable. He chose a chair here on the pavement at the café entrance.

The top of the iron table was like ice to his hands and a wet, penetrating breath blew against him from the trees.

The waiter, who was very tall and thin and quite bald, came out reluctantly, twisting his face in an expression that plainly said it was unpleasant to have his scalp drizzled on. What does m'sieu desire? he asked reproachfully, stroking a long black whisker.

"*Vin blanc*," Flecker said, shivering. "*Vin blanc*—with ice!"

For a minute the waiter looked at him, his mouth opening to exclaim a protest, but he only said, "*Trés bien, m'sieu!*"

Flecker looked between dripping trees at a procession of umbrellas and gleaming raincoats. The sting of his sour, cold drink added to his misery. He was filled with sympathy for himself as with sad music.

"I've got a cold already, and my feet are soaking wet," he brooded. "Nobody would care if I got influenza."

For more than a month Flecker had received no letter from his uncle in Waterville, Minn., and nobody would buy his pictures. It had rained for days; the soles of his shoes had worn through; the still life he had done yesterday proved once and for all that he had no talent whatever. The memory of this canvas standing undestroyed in his room where somebody might see it made him blush and rub his hands together in painful confusion.

Flecker was about twenty-one. He had long, thin arms and legs. His hair was not really red but of the shade of orange, generally called red. His eyes were a clear blue and the lashes were black. His hands were long, graceful artist's hands. The much worn corduroy of jacket and trousers lay loosely on his long body. His cravat was broad, reaching down to his belt and was apple green.

You would have rightly guessed him the kind of student who has too many ideas, drinks too much wine, talks too much, dreams too much, sleeps not enough, and with it all—works too hard.

Pressing his white chin down on his green tie, Flecker shuddered with the damp cold and hid his hands in his pockets. He could not even build an heroic dream under the suffering trees. His vivid and unusually obedient imagination refused to do it—instead it dwelt upon the mechanics of hanging.

He considered a stout, hempen rope—no mere clothes line would do!—about ten feet long, felt its disagreeable rasp around his throat. It might be difficult to get such a rope. One would

go down to the shop of the *Trois Quartiers* and the clerk would say: “Ah, a good, *strong* rope, about three meters long, you said. Um-m-m-m.” Then gayly: “I suppose you plan to hang yourself?”

“Never mind what I am going to do with it! You *individu!* You specimen of a black beetle!” ... Flecker felt a little cheered, cursing the impudent clerk. “Just you run along and find it.”

The clerk disappeared and returned panting.

Voilà!—flexible and strong! He measured and cut.

“*Dix francs, m’sieu!*”

Flecker did not have ten francs! There he stood, stuttering and blushing like a fool while he pulled from his pocket four half-franc notes, very torn, and twenty copper sous!

The clerk opened his great mouth in a braying laugh....

Flecker squirmed with humiliation because the clerk he had conjured in his own brain was laughing at him!...

With an effort he destroyed the shop of the *Trois Quartiers*, the big-mouthed clerk and all other rope difficulties.... Now he had the rope. He tied it with three knots to the leg of his narrow iron bed. The other end he tied around his neck, placed the knot carefully under his right—left ear, opened his long window and leaped!

A pretty, dark-eyed girl in a tight-fitting black coat with a high collar and a round hat of black feathers, sat down at a near table, glancing with interest into Flecker’s somber face. He did not see her....

It felt as if some one had hit him on the neck with a club. He was lying in the garden, the severed leg of his bed buried in the soft earth beside him. He untied the noose, and looked up to his window, gasping for breath. It had been smashed by the end of the bed which hung out over the sill. While he looked, out popped the scared and sympathetic face of Berthe, the fat chambermaid....

Flecker seemed to be watching the traffic of the boulevards but he was really busy with itemized bills of damages. There would be fifty francs for the window, one hundred for the bed, and doubtless Madame would tell everybody that the young American, jilted by Berthe (a statement in which there was no truth whatever) had tried in a bungling way to kill himself.... One couldn’t even hang oneself decently. He sighed. There was nowhere any dignity for him.

Looking up his glance plunged directly into the dark eyes of the little girl in black. She was almost shabby. There was mud on her high-heeled slippers.

“Sitting out here in this draft,” she said in a deep voice, “you’ll catch a cold that’ll kill you!”

“And much I’d care,” replied Flecker.

“You might better hang yourself! It would be quicker.”

Flecker regarded her darkly. Was she a mind reader?

Her black eyebrows arched above narrow, slanting eyes, and her mouth was wide, the lips thin and bright red. The bridge of her nose was high, the nostrils pointed down. Perhaps this does not sound like beauty, but she was beautiful. She rubbed her pointed chin with a forefinger and smiled uncertainly, a little humbly, waiting. When he did not ask her to sit at his table, she got up and came over anyway.

“What is the matter?” Her deep voice was sympathetic.

She sat down next him. “You seemed lonely sitting here all by yourself.”

“Well, I wasn’t. I was thinking.”

She put her hands on the table to rise and leave him.

“No, don’t go. Don’t go!”

They were silent, waiting for the *garçon*, who was a long time coming.

Flecker moved in his chair and his foot found a puddle. The water ran in through the hole in his shoe. The chill shock of this made him think of four torn half-franc notes and the fact that there had been no letter from Minnesota for weeks. He groaned and rubbing his flaming hair said half to himself: “Oh, I wish ... I *wish*....”

“*What?*” cried the girl, gripping his arm with her two hands at once.

“I don’t know,” he confessed after a moment, looking into her face, fascinated. “You’ve got queer eyes,” he said.

She widened her eyes. It seemed to Flecker that light rays came from them.

“I am a witch,” she told him quietly.

“*Tu parles!*”

“No, I mean a real one.”

Something vague and gray rose up in Flecker’s mind and whirled round and sank down. His heart thumped loudly. Her palms were hot on his arm. He could no longer look into her eyes.

“I don’t understand you,” he said.

Chapter II

She pointed past the trees at a *Parc Montsouris* motor bus standing against the curb. Two fat women and a black-skirted priest were climbing aboard.

“See the *Montsouris* bus there?” Yes, he saw it. “Close your eyes.” He obeyed. “Now open them!” With her forefinger she was slowly describing a circle in the air. “Watch that bus turn over,” said the witch.

And that, as Flecker watched, is what the motor bus did. It took the air slowly like something in a slow-motion cinema, hung in the air for a moment then turned over backwards and lit again on its four wheels in the exact spot it had left.

The faces of the two fat women and the priest were turned towards them. It seemed from their expressions they were pretending they had noticed nothing unusual. They sat properly, hands folded, looking straight ahead of them.

On the sidewalk a pompous fellow in a silk hat had watched with his mouth open. Now he hurried away, saying with the tilt of his nose that he had experienced no such silly delusion, and never would!

The driver of the bus, however, did not pretend. He climbed down from his seat and, leaning against a tree, gazed at his vehicle, holding his head in his hands.

Flecker and the witch burst into wild laughter. They laughed so loudly the waiter thrust his pallid head out the door. They laughed louder to see his bewilderment. And as if their laughing did it something began to happen to the trees. A darkness lifted from them. Jewels gleamed from all their leaves. The gray pavement was washed with a golden light. Beyond the low roof of the *Bal Bullier* appeared the beginning of a rainbow.

“Look, the sun is out!”

The witch said yes, complacently dabbing tears of laughter from her eyes.

The sun gathered confidence. It poured a clear, warm light over everything. A red taxi-cab scampered across car tracks flinging its hind wheels in the air.

“You started to make a wish,” the witch said. “I am interested because I have magic. I can grant your wish.”

Flecker stared.

“There are hardly any conditions to my magic. You must wish whole-heartedly and of course you must know what sort of thing it is you are wishing for.... Do you know what you want?”

“Of course.” He thought for a moment and added: “Well, I’d have to think about it. Anything?”

“Oh, yes! Money, fame, power.”

“Happiness?”

“Do you know what it is?”

“Yes!”

“Then you could.”

Spike was confused. His mind was not made to accept magic, but his eyes had seen it! Why should seeing something impossible that really doesn't happen be less impossible than seeing something impossible that really does happen? He did not know.

“What do I do, rub a lamp?”

“You place my ring on your left ring-finger and you go off by yourself, and when you have decided what it is you want most of all you turn it three times and say your wish aloud.”

She took his hand. It was cold, her soft palm burned against it. Flecker raised his blue eyes to meet hers. Imagine feeling a movie fade out instead of seeing it. That was the sensation he had inside him. The witch's red lips were parted, her teeth were shining white.

Flecker smiled shyly. “I like you,” he said.

Her pale cheeks were suddenly rosy. She covered them with her hands.

Chapter III

It was a silver ring with a curiously shaped cornelian, carved with hieroglyphics. It slipped easily on his finger.

“There,” said the witch. “Now don’t for pity sake wish for a trained elephant while you are in your room. It would be hard to get out.”

“I won’t.” He held his hand up to look at the ring.

“You must act quickly.”

“I see.”

“Before noon Saturday next!”

This was Monday. Saturday seemed far away. Flecker smiled. “That will give me plenty of time!”

She smiled back. Perhaps she did not agree.

“At noon Saturday, then. Shall we meet here?”...

Walking slowly along the tall iron fence of the Luxembourg Gardens he scratched his red head and said words to himself. He did not remember until he stood before the door of his *pension* that he had forgotten to pay the check!

His room, up three twisting flights, was small and triangular. In one corner stood an easel, up to its thin knees in a disorder of canvas, paper, color-boxes. In another corner a small iron stove, in the third a narrow green bed. Here Flecker flung himself prone and let his thoughts go.

The motor bus rose high in the air and turned backwards slowly like something in an unpleasant dream. The mist lifted before a quick flood of sunlight. The witch placed her hand on his ... and laughed that strange, tender laugh because he said “I like you.”

It would be simple enough, he thought, to decide what he wanted most in the world. He was careful at first, however, not to be serious, and he played with ideas of ridiculous, mad things he might do if the ring were as she said, imbued with magic.

Suppose he wished for a Rolls-Royce? Flecker’s imagination worked like a cinema lantern. He inserted the beginning of an idea, any idea at all, and watched it flicker—close-up, flash-back, fade-out, sub-title.

The Rolls-Royce was at the curb, huge and bright, waiting. He looked it all over, a little nervously, having never driven anything but a Ford.

“Very *chic*, isn’t it?” commented the knock-kneed fellow who was the *pension’s concierge*, shuffling out the door.

“It is mine,” Spike said. “No, truly it is mine, *sans blague!*”

“*You* bought such a car!”

“A friend, a dear, very rich friend, gave it to me. I just this minute drove it up from the garage.”

The *concierge* stole a suspicious glance at him out of red-rimmed eyes. “H-m-m.”

A *gendarme* with square moustaches came up through the pavement.

“Do you know whose car this is?”

The *concierge* indicated Spike with his thumb. “M’sieu says it is his.”

“Yes, it is mine.”

“Well,” said the *gendarme*, “you have no license plate, you’re parked before a fire-hydrant, this is a south-bound one-way street and you are pointed north....”

“Drive out of here!”

“I can’t drive.”

The *concierge* and the *gendarme* exchanged glances.

“How did you get it here?”

“Well,” in desperation, “I wished for it. I turned a ring on my finger three times and wished!”

The *gendarme* took him firmly by the arm....

All right, Spike let the Rolls-Royce go. Suppose he turned the Eiffel Tower upside down?

... “Last night, Professor M-m-m-mb, the Eiffel Tower reversed its usual position and now stands upon its head!”

“Impossible!”

“It is not impossible. It is a fact. Look, here from your window!”

The Professor of physics looked, wiped his glasses, looked again and leaped from his chair, crying: “*Nom de nom de nom de dieu!*” banged his silk hat on his head and rushed out the door to call a Conference.

Spike felt sorry for the professor. What a useless hullabaloo, to be sure, what ugly confusion in the minds of people!

Spike began to wonder about disentangling from things an isolated thing. Wouldn’t there nearly always be an afterward, a result, something incalculable for which he would be responsible? If he mischievously used black magic to turn the tower upside down the whole world might in some strange way be different—forever....

He thought of wishing for a journey to strange countries and sounded their romantic names in his imagination, but they did not stir his longing.

Stretched out on his narrow green bed he decided he preferred Paris. Water from his muddy shoes dripped into two little puddles on the red tile floor.

He considered a wine bottle that would never run dry, and was glad—having imaginatively gone adventuring with it—that he need not possess such a thing. He thought of a thousand other fantastic wishes. But he was careful not to be serious—yet. There was time to choose from among his real desires. Saturday noon was a long time away.

His room was filling with shadows. Holding his hand up before him he saw a strange thing. A white glow rayed out from the ring’s cornelian. It dimmed and brightened in the rhythm of a heart beating.

He stood up and looked in his long mirror and saw the glow of the ring on his face. Until this moment he had not believed profoundly in the magic of the witch. He fumbled around for his brush and comb whispering expletives. “Oh, my gosh! Oh, gee whiz! Oh, gosh a’ mighty.”

His hair combed he peered out the window to see the clock on the School of St. Sulpice. It was after six. Flecker strained his eyes to read, as he had often read before, the inscription on the school's façade.

“Qui a Jesus a Tout.”

The words now had for him a sad, lonely sound.

On the twisting stairs Flecker wondered if the witch might not be from Satan.

Chapter IV

The *salle à manger* had once been used as a shop and its street wall was a broad window and a glass door, both curtained thinly with ruffled white. There was a dark triangle where the curtains fell apart in the middle. Here appeared now and again the peering face of a passerby. Flecker took his place at the corner of a long table. Opposite him a priest in a dirty cassock, a thin priest with many red lines in his cheeks, and silver spectacles on his long red nose, wished him good evening.

“If you could have the one thing you most wanted,” Flecker asked him presently, “what would it be?”

The Priest looked up from *Le Courier de Tulle*. “M’sieu,” biting noisily into a radish, “if I knew what I wanted I’d not be what I am.”

With both hands he made a magnificent gesture to offer himself as an example. “I don’t know. Who does? A starving man. A man born a poet. A crazy man. Not Clemenceau. Men are busy all their lives because if they stopped and wondered what they wanted they wouldn’t know.”

He held Spike with a glare from under bushy eyebrows. “You ought to know—you are an American!”

Flecker was startled but he nodded. “I would have to think about it carefully for a time,” he conceded, politely modest.

The Priest smiled sarcastically. Plainly he held another opinion; but at this moment Berthe came through the kitchen door bearing a tray so high that no one could see what was today’s *pièce de résistance*, and the Priest’s curiosity about this, as well as the disappointment at what his curiosity discovered, changed the course of his thoughts.

At one corner of the table sat two Polish students in identical suits of gray. Their faces were smooth, monotoned, uninteresting. They talked *sotto voce* in their own language. Next to them the fat boy from Luxembourg, just arrived to seek his fortune in the great city, read picture postcards from his brother in Toledo, Ohio. Opposite him the other American looked dreamily at nothing through black rimmed spectacles and exchanged an occasional word of German with the enormous Swedish painter next him. The Swede, whose heavy face and close-cropped hair were of the same buff color, kept his eyes on his plate. Yesterday his mistress had taken arsenic and he seemed to feel the others were shocked at his early return to meals.

There were radishes and butter; a clear golden soup in which slivers of ruddy carrot floated, calves’ liver with an aromatic sauce (it was the liver disappointed the Priest)—*pommes frits* and spinach. Flecker stoked himself absently, insulated from his surroundings, thinking.

That night he lay awake in his bed for an eternity. The witch’s dark beauty was alight in his memory. She looked at him, finger on pointed chin, smiling uncertainly. The ring glowed on his hand. He covered it with the palm of the other hand, and the white radiance went through and made a round spot on the ceiling. Deep down, controlled, there was a sensation of fear in him. It was close in the room and ominously silent. *Something was going to happen.*

He imagined having wine with the witch in a certain village inn. He remembered that she was a witch, a queer, dangerous creature. Well, was he in love with a monster? And what then? There was no answer on the dark ceiling.

A cautious, scraping noise startled him. He listened, staring toward the dimness of his window. Now it was repeated, a dragging sound as if some one were crawling toward that window.

Silence, heavy and complete. Nobody could crawl toward the window. It was up three flights from the street. The wind had been blowing a shutter, perhaps. But he would not for anything leave his bed to look out the window. That would confess his terror and it would be stronger than he. He waited under the heavy silence. The light of the magic ring flitted about the room as he moved, now on the ceiling, now finding a picture on the wall, or the square leg of the old table.

From outside came a noise of vast whispering. The street was filled with a multitude of people wearing bedroom slippers, advancing step by step, trying to make no noise, whispering, whispering.

It was rain coming across the city in the dead, hot night. Now it was dancing with tiny feet on the roof above his head. Far in the rear, someone grumbled an order, then was suddenly nearer, his voice raised.

Boom! said the thunder.

The breath of the rain came through the window, cool and clean. Flecker hunched his shoulders, his hands clinched under his chin. The all-surrounding swish of the rain and the thunder made him smile. For a flash the window was a square white flame. Thunder crashed nearby, and nearer, striking down into roofs with its fist.

Though he smiled, Flecker was afraid. His thoughts were racing—*don't, don't strike here!* but this was fear belonging to his world, and left no sediment of horror in his spirit as the rain and the thunder ran on, and away.... The beating radiance of the magic ring, against the memory of the lightning, seemed weak and unreal.

There were footsteps of several people in the passage. A knock at his door.

"Entrez donc!" At the clear, unrestrained tone of his own voice, the last clinging shadow of the supernatural sank out of the room. The boy from Luxembourg thrust his round baby face through the partly opened door.

"Oh, Jesus, what a storm!" said he. "You are all right?"

"We have much worse in Minnesota," Spike rose on his elbow, glad to talk. "Hailstones big as oranges, and such a fierce wind you hide down in the cellar. Sometimes while you're hiding in the cellar the wind picks the house up and there you are standing in the rain! Sure, I am all right."

"It struck the School. Madame says it smashed the front windows. That's all. Close enough!... But—tell me, what is that strange light?"

"Oh, nothing," said Spike, guiltily. "Reflection from the window or something. Queer, isn't it? Yes. Well, I want to get to sleep."

When Spike woke next morning the sun slanted through two of his three windows. His whistling ceased only when he splashed water into his face. As he stood, stark naked, scrubbing his red hair with the towel, he thought of something and went to the window. He looked out. It was true there was no ledge, no possible foothold, and the street was a sheer drop three stories down. That strange noise must have been a shutter. A terra cotta pipe ran up past the window. It was fastened to the wall by metal bands. Something was caught on one of these. He leaned his naked body out the window.

Spike stood straight, the sun shining golden on his white skin, one arm raised, his eyes fixed in fearful curiosity on four long black hairs!

“They’re Berthe’s,” he said to himself. “She was shaking rugs or something and leaned way out the window...”

But Berthe’s hair was brown, not black.

Chapter V

He went to the *Café de Lilas* and again sat at a table out in front. He wanted to see the witch approach, walking quickly on her clicking heels like a little white goat. She did not come.

The waiter, unobtrusively sympathetic, told him Madame had paid the check the day before.

“Who is she? Does she come here often?”

The waiter shook his head slowly.

“I never even saw her before,” he said. “She said to me that in the *Café Tout Va Mieux*—what a name, m’sieu, for a café!—one pays one franc and not one franc twenty-five for a large *vin blanc*!” He pulled down the corners of his mouth and hunched his shoulders—Had he aught to do with the fixing of prices? Perhaps Madame might be found at the *Tout Va Mieux*! “Tell me,” said the waiter, almost with impatience, “where the devil is your hat?”

Flecker put his hand on his hair. “I lost it. I had a good hat and I left it I forget where.”

“You forget in which boudoir!” An astonishingly wide smile split the waiter’s pallid head, and he wagged a forefinger in mock rebuke.

Flecker said nothing to this worldly fooling but it did not offend him. On the contrary as he made his way toward the Boulevard Raspail he swaggered a little and smiled a knowing smile at himself.

In his life class in the *Rue de la Grande Chaumiere* Flecker neglected his study of the male model to sketch his memory of the witch’s face. The sketch was very like her. He looked at it and a pleasant pain touched him and faded.

A little silver-blond English girl whose eyes were as blue as the pigment she now laid on with a palette knife next a blare of the usual orange, exclaimed in a high, sweet voice: “Hello, Yank!”

“Hello.” Flecker barely turned his head. The day before yesterday he had been interested, but now his imagination was filled with the dark beauty of the witch of the *Café de Lilas*.

“What’s the *Tout Va Mieux*?” he asked.

“A chauffeurs’ *bistro*. Good onion soup!” the girl told him. “We’ll go there this afternoon.”

Flecker studied his sketch, one eye closed, for a minute before he looked around. “Sorry,” he said. “There’s *quelque* other *chose* I must do.”

He put up his easel and went to the *Tout Va Mieux*. The afternoon waned as he sat in this miserable little café. The witch did not come. When he asked, the *patron*, a hairy old fellow who walked around behind the bar in his undershirt, said he had never seen such a girl.

After dinner Flecker went to a café where the walls were covered with paintings of its customers. An American named Rosenberg, from Memphis, Tenn., and Belash, an English-speaking student from Budapesth, joined him. Rosenberg was growing a curly black beard. He wore a velvet jacket and khaki breeches stuffed into patent leather puttees, and never explained why he chose so horsey a costume for a life lived exclusively in cafés and studios. Nobody ever asked him to explain. Belash, who was short and broad shouldered, had sad eyes and long teeth. A wild bang of black hair fringed over his eyes. He looked like a pony.

When three small glasses of *calvados* had been placed before them, Belash talked of the comical, brown-eyed bitch pup he had with him in the Carpathians. Day after day the Russian artillery rumbled and pounded beyond the hill; and if it changed the slightest in rhythm or tone, the pup ran into the dugout whimpering with excitement. She would note the change before he did.

“We lost her in retreat,” Belash told them. “There was a lot of confusion. I wonder what happened to her. I wish she would come running along the *trottoir* now.” He yawned and looked sad.

They had more drinks.

“Rosie,” said Flecker, “what do you want most in the world?”

Rosenberg thought. “A schooner yacht, all fitted up, with a studio, and a good north light... I’d go cruising in the Mediterranean. Then I’d be far away from people and could work.”

“Who ever heard of a north light on a yacht,” Belash scoffed. “If you wanted a north light you’d just turn the boat around.” He and Flecker laughed immoderately. They didn’t believe Rosenberg would do much work on his yacht.

“What’s your wish?” Flecker asked Belash.

“I don’t know,” said the Hungarian. “Maybe to forget the war.... No, not if I had only one wish. To live a hundred years, I think.” He was six or seven years older than his companions.

Flecker looked his surprise.

“Oh, I wouldn’t,” he exclaimed. “I want to stay young for a long time, but when I am old I won’t want to live any more.

“Look, I ought to have about forty more years of activity—maybe fifty. Even if I did no more than fifty pictures a year—less than one a week—at the end of forty years I would have two thousand heaped up.... Enough to fill the whole ground floor of the Louvre.” He suddenly heard himself filling the Louvre with his own work, and laughed. “Well, of course, nobody works so steadily; but gosh! forty years seems plenty long enough—they stretch on and on ahead of me, room enough to do what I came for. Anyway, if you wished for a hundred years—there’s an end to a hundred years, too; and when they had ended they’d be ended.”

Belash scraped his feet and looked away. Rosie nodded. Spike felt he had almost said something, but that it had not been understood.

“You may not have forty, or even one, for that matter,” said Belash, yawning again. “It would be something to be sure! Life is a little too much like sitting under artillery fire.... You may live through the day and you may not. One manages to forget.... But it’s exhausting!... Ho ... hum!” He stretched and wiped tears of weariness from his eyes. “Another drink! *Garçon!*”

“I’ll say this is a gay party!” offered the disheartened Rosie.

“Just one hundred years more! That’s all I’d ask for,” added Belash. “One hundred fearless years!”

Spike did not reply. He was thinking.

Chapter VI

When with repeated drinks the dimensions of the room became vast—when the priestly face of Rosie and the equine face of Belash swam in and out of his vision like big fish in a glass tank, Flecker told them about the witch.

“That is not all!” he cried. “Now I find I am in love with her and must go seeking her everywhere. Yet she is a witch. Were she my sweetheart she might use black magic on me!”

“Oh, Gee!” softly said the boy from Memphis, Tenn., looking two ways at once and hiccoughing behind his hand, “The *calvados* has gone to his head.”

They went out from the brightness of the café. Belash said to Rosie as if Spike were not there: “He is pretty bad. He must stop drinking. He sees things. He hears noises in his head.”

“Do you recognize me?” Rosie thrust his face before Flecker’s. “It’s your old friend Rosie Rosenberg, ‘s all ri’. Everything’s all ri’. We’ll get you right home, safe and sound, Spike, ol’ boy.”

They walked him the length of the Luxembourg. There was no light in the sky. From the gardens came the perfume of wet flowers. His friends patted his back and made sympathetic noises. He was not angry. He was astounded, recognizing the impossibility of sharing his experience. It were better to say no more, to let his story of the witch pass as a drunken vagary.

“Goo’ ni’,” said Rosie, swaying forward and back, his hands in his khaki breeches. “Goo’ ni’, ol’ boy! See you firsh thing tomorr. Forget abou’ witches, ol’ boy. You been seein’ things, see? You been *dring*. You be’er *stop dring!*”

“Hadn’t we better stay with him all night, Rosie?” asked Belash.

“I’m all right,” Flecker repeated. While they sadly looked at him, he went in and closed the door.

The clock of the *concierge* struck twelve as he made his way slowly up the twisting stairs....

In bed he gazed at the ring. Its glow dimmed and brightened in a slow rhythm of life.

One hundred fearless years?

What good would anything be if he were to die tomorrow? His mother had died when she was twenty-two—less than a year older than he; and his father at thirty-five! His belief that he would live for many years was made of hope and willful ignorance. Perhaps even now he had in him the germ that was to cause his death. Perhaps it would kill him in agony on the eve of his day of triumph! How simple, then, to choose his wish! Man alive, what do you wish?... I wish to live!... It was easy when one could think straight. If the witch had doubted his ability to decide quickly, *she* was wrong!

He could not sleep.

“I wonder what date it is. Let’s see.... Yesterday—no the day before was.... It’s May twentieth, nineteen hundred and twenty-three,” he whispered to the darkness.

MAY TWENTIETH, TWO THOUSAND AND TWENTY-THREE!

On that day he was condemned to die! What matter that death be one hundred years away, or ninety—it was certain. It would come upon a day that would surely come, and upon that day,

what matter that in the past were one hundred years of living? Over that day, over the days, the weeks, the months, aye, the years before that day, the shadow of the expectance of death!

He cowered before the thoughts he had dared to awaken. Fearless years? They would be utterly hopeless years. He only of all men would be certain of death, for, he said to himself, even the man condemned to hang did not believe in his death, hoping that reprieve would come at the last moment. To the old man, no less than to the boy, life spread on ahead endlessly. An insurance clerk of eighty must know his chance of living another year was one in a thousand and prove it by statistics, still his fears were soothed by knowledge that some men did live to be one hundred! To remove Chance would make death master of all the days of life!

He might wish for a long life, and so remain friends with Chance!... But, alas, what was a long life?... Or he might wish to live forever! Did he know what forever was? Was forever the name of something or of nothing? But the thought of living without hope of death was a horror! Without inevitable tragedy life was incomplete—it had no form! It had lost its mystery, its significance....

In his imagination Spike found torture....

He sat in a rocker, an old man. His beard rested upon his breast, his gnarled hands trembled on his lap, palm to palm. From his waist down he was paralyzed, thanks to that motor-car accident back in 1942, and frequent headaches prevented painting. His uncle and his aunt hobbled by. She said: "It would be better if Spike could pass on ... but the wish will keep him alive until May twentieth, two thousand and twenty-three!" They went away and presently died. Waterville was a strange town full of strangers. Spike was alone, a sick man in a rocker, waiting for the interminable years to pass so that he might die.... Supposing *that!*

"Belash is a fool!" thought Spike.

The decision which had seemed as definite as a pebble in his hand had dissolved to nothing!

Spike remembered that a night and a day and part of another night were gone. Already it was Wednesday!

There was dark all around him but the hollow of his mind was filled with a clear light. It was like a house in the midst of darkened houses having a party.

The party was too grotesque. The white light was too intense. The guests ran madly from room to room. They did painful, ugly, illogical things. Flecker turned out the lights, but his guests turned them on again. He lay on his left side and on his right. He pulled his knees up to his chin, stared into the dark. Once he coughed, sending a helpless, lonely sound running down the passage.

To forget his thought of death Flecker thought of the witch. Her dark face under the round hat of black feathers was as distinct in the blazing light in the hollow of his mind as if she were outside him. He mingled his tender thoughts of her with an impersonal wonder that he could make so clear an image.

Spike knew the chemical analysis of the red he painted with. He even knew its wave-length in the hierarchy of the spectrum. Seeing plainly the red of the witch's lips he wondered how come he made it. With what? But the image did not really exist. It was a thought, only. A thought did not exist. Oh, didn't it? Could he, then, see red when there was no red to be seen?

He closed his eyes to look inward at the witch's blue-black hair, but her image had gone. Perhaps he did not see colors in his memory but lived over the feeling aroused by them. Did

he get anywhere by changing the word for red from “red” to “feeling aroused by red?” What was the feeling?

The thought that perhaps no one in the world could answer startled him. If there were not somewhere quiet, dignified men who knew surely about things, Spike was loose in space, helpless indeed. If men did not know what thoughts and things were how could they bear to go on living? There was something profoundly dishonest and ignoble about being willing to live in ignorance—to go on working and walking and eating, eyes carefully front lest one see, and by seeing confess the Mystery always there at one’s elbow, awaiting, demanding solution. If this were an accurate picture of Man, Spike wondered what did people mean when they talked of wise men and wiser men. A wise man was, perhaps, one who concealed his bewilderment with impressive words, a wiser man one who impressively described his bewilderment.

From a wondering thought at his clear image of the witch his thinking had run on to a consideration of the Whole World. He saw it, a dimly luminous globe, revolving slowly in darkness. He, Spike Flecker, stood upright on it, his legs spread wide to keep his balance. The sun looked into his face while yet his feet were hidden below the curve. The sun beat upon his shoulders. He went down into the night. He saw the stars in the endless dark; and underneath the turning world there was nothing—a sheer drop down, forever! But the sensation of forever, Spike remembered before his spirit went whimpering into the Abyss, the sensation of forever was also within his own red head. Perhaps it was not outside it!

He felt a relaxing weariness making its way slowly through him. His mind had been a house giving a party to a ghastly company, but the glaring white light had not penetrated to the cellar, and there through it all, some one had sat holding four black hairs in his fingers, pondering. The memory-thought of the witch’s black hair did not run down the cellar stair. But perhaps it waited at the door....

“... you turn the ring three times and say your wish aloud,” said the witch’s deep voice in Spike’s memory. He loved the sound of her voice. Sinking toward sleep Flecker smiled in the darkness.

“Tomorrow,” he told himself, “tomorrow I will turn the ring three times and wish for happiness.”

The word was a crisp refreshing sound, and left a feeling somehow of bright water, sunlight ... a far clear ringing.

The three walls of the room listened to Spike’s regular breathing. His hands opened and lay relaxed. Carelessly, unquestioningly, as one would like to know one could die, he let go consciousness, and the tension of consciousness. The light of the magic ring went out. His thoughts swooned obliquely and wavered like things under water too heavy to rise—except only the memory-thought of the witch’s long, black hair and this now opened the door and ran down the cellar stair, and it and the one that pondered made together a nightmare like a monstrous hairy toad with the witch’s face, and set it crawling through Spike’s window.

Spike writhed under the covers and woke. It seemed to him there was a sound outside his window as of some one crawling along the wall. It was his awful dream, he told himself hopefully. He remembered he had found no tenable explanation for the black hairs.

It was dawn before the fears that rose terribly in his imagination permitted him to go to sleep, again.

Chapter VII

Berthe woke him bringing a great bowl of chocolate, two golden *croissants* and a *brioche*. She pulled out the little cupboard in which the *pot au chambre* lived, placed the tray on its top, smiled at him, her red cheeks bulging, and could not help glancing at the *brioche*.

Had he slept well?

Very well, thank you. And he had dreamed.

Berthe leaned over the foot of his narrow green bed. She put her two hands over her breasts swelling out roundly under her white waist and took a deep breath.

One dreamed of one's girl friend, doubtless?

Flecker broke a *croissant* in two and plunged one blunt end into the chocolate. He took a hungry bite, scratching among his wild red locks.

"I dreamed of you." When he smiled one corner of his mouth went up higher than the other, and his eyes became black slits. "I couldn't tell you what it was I dreamed," he added, looking in his bowl.

The radiance on Berthe's round face suggested that he did not need to tell her. She squeezed his foot, which stuck up naked from the edge of the covers.

"Be still!" she rebuked him, "you are crazy!"

Even after she had gone Flecker felt her eyes on him, it had been such a tropic glance.... He came leisurely to the *brioche*.

Now a *croissant* is something like a crescent of rolled pie crust, but a *brioche* is brown on the outside and yellow inside. It is not a cake, though the French act as if it were, but a very nice bun. It has a toppled over appearance.

When one is living in the *Quartier* on the ten-dollar bills occasionally sent by one's uncle in Waterville, Minn., one may have *croissants* for breakfast and sometimes *brioche*s but never both at once.

Flecker broke his *brioche* and ate, refilled his cup from the chocolate pitcher. He felt lazy and warm and almost full. When he had finished the second half of the *brioche* he was full. He sighed. What was his nightmare about? Something ugly and familiar crawling through his window.... He had forgotten the face was that of the witch!

As he pulled on his corduroy pants he decided the lie he had told Berthe was white enough. It made her happy, gave her something to think about—it would fill him another time with *brioche*s, and his virtue, such as it was, remained, corporeally, at least, none the worse....

Here was Wednesday going fast. There were only Thursday, Friday and Saturday forenoon left!

The morning he spent at the *atelier* next the skinny little English girl who looked too often at him with her blue eyes; lunched alone, dismally, expensively, at the *Café de Lilas*, hoping there to see the witch; in the afternoon played pool with a Peruvian wood engraver and made a sketch in the gardens; dined at his *pension*, opposite the red-nosed priest,—in the evening spent two borrowed francs to see a Hollywood comedy in a theater near the *Gare de Montparnasse*.

He saw Rosie in the café and Belash in the life class. Both were cordial, both obviously abstained from mention of the witch story. They looked at Flecker with a sad, doubtful expression that profoundly irritated him.

In between and during the apparent activities of the day he thought about the witch, and about wanting to be happy forever....

Happiness, he decided, did not mean content, or glee, or merriment, or satisfaction. It did not mean joy. It might include any or all of these, but it meant more than each and more than all....

Flecker played pool with the Peruvian. Red ball into the corner pocket. Click. Roll on. Roll ON. If it had hit the cushion just a bit harder, he said to himself, it would have gone pop into the pocket and then the blue ball over there, and the yellow, and—well, sweep the table, everybody in the *Café du Dome* clustered around looking, mouths open, eyebrows up in unanimous awe.

Play another game? There, he won the break. He moved around the table with stiff, short steps, pulling his chin up from his collar, yawning. Click. Click. Click!! While the Peruvian nervously watched, passing his palm over and over his shining black hair, Flecker went on without a miss.

The last was a long shot. Flecker drove his cue ball hard. It hopped the cushion, shot through the air and struck the *patron* (whom Flecker owed thirty francs) on the head. He fell without genuflexion like a tree, or a tower. Around him formed a crowd, from the dark mass of which white faces turned to stare at Flecker. A *gendarme* shouldered his way through the door....

Having scored six the Peruvian grounded his cue. It was Flecker's turn again. He did not notice but stood staring into space, his blue eyes wide open, fixed.

“*Assassin!*” shouted the imaginary *gendarme*.

“*Jouez!*” shouted the real Peruvian.

Flecker started awake and played and missed. The game bored him suddenly.

Lighting a limp cigarette, salvaged from a corner of his pocket, he puffed a cloud and asked: “What would you do if you were happy all the time?”

“Smile,” said the Peruvian. “But,” he added cleverly, after a moment, “a persistent smile is a grin.”

“What would you say happiness is?”

“*Comment?* I haven't even had my lunch and already you start talk like that? How should I know?” He shot and missed. “I'll tell you what it isn't! It isn't an onion!”

The game was on Flecker. When he smiled at the *patron* for still another extension of credit, and got it, he remembered how he had imaginatively killed the generous fellow with the cue ball, and was ashamed.

The sun was too bright. The noise of motor traffic in the boulevard was deafening. They stopped at the curb under a young tree with leaves like emeralds.

“Happiness,” shouted the Peruvian wood engraver, as if the question had just been put, “is having hope, and no pain, and hardly any——”

A taxi hooted in front of them and Flecker lost the word.

“What?” he yelled, “hardly any what?”

“Fear!”

Happiness is more than *that*, thought Flecker, walking away toward the Gardens.

Setting his easel near a blossoming pear tree which stood crucified fanwise against a lattice, Flecker’s mind found and turned over a strange idea.

Was *he* happy?

With all his unfulfilled desires?

With holes in his shoes?

No hat?

No letter from Waterville?

Of course he was not. And yet there was something about his feeling of being *in*, being a part of this high, wide, golden day.... He bent his flaming head over his color-box, holding his breath, trying to be and to realize in the same moment.

It would be strange if one wished for happiness and so remained as one was! That would be a curious sort of disappointment!

Chapter VIII

He began to paint the pear tree and a woman in a yellow dress sitting on a bench. Thin sunlight poured over leaves and blossoms and fabric. The intense color set going a complication of feelings. He felt a scratchy, prickly sensation on his back, a stretching under his skin right down to his finger tips and his toes; he felt warm inside, and strong, and healthy in his bowels. He wanted to spit. He did, raising his chin, aiming at a sparrow in the path. Then he kicked the gravel with his heavy shoes, and scratched his nose, and set to work.

There is no telling what he thought while painting. He did not know himself. The words got out of the way so he might see. But after an hour, for no thought-out reason, he stopped and printed the word happiness in neat green letters in one corner of his canvas. He looked at this with something like surprise.

Should Flecker become famous and a collector find the unfinished sketch of the Luxembourg pear tree and the woman in yellow, he must not suppose the word to be the picture's title. Flecker put it there, outside his head, so he might look at it a moment, thus obeying an obscure impulse. Perhaps he wondered if happiness might not be a name for something that cannot be confined in a name....

The sketch was never finished because Flecker looked up and saw the witch walking toward the *rue d'Assas*. He flung down his brushes and ran after. The path turns sharply just before it reaches the tall gate and the witch was cut off from his vision for a moment—but he was close behind and it was only for a moment. Still she was gone when, quite breathless, he reached the gate. He looked all around him, surveyed the *rue d'Assas* and *rue Vavin* and even looked in back of the placarded *kiosk* that stands just beyond the gate. She had disappeared as completely as if she had leaped into the blue sky.

He went slowly back to his easel. He was sure it was the witch he had seen. There could be no mistake—the face he glimpsed was hers. She had magically disappeared on him. Spike shuddered. This magic was unlovely.

She must have known he was there. Why did she show herself only to disappear? Doubtless to remind him his time was dwindling. The sketch had gone dead. He could work no more.

On the *rue d'Assas* a poet he knew, a young man in a black shirt and baggy trousers, was chaining a bow-legged armchair to an iron hitching post. The post was in front of an antique shop, in which the poet was employed, and the bow-legged chair was, with proper precaution, being displayed for sale. That was all. But it looked, standing there at the extreme end of its tether, as if it were trying to run into the gardens across the street.

“Hello, Marius,” said Flecker. “Mind its hind legs!”

“Hello, Spike.” The poet snapped the padlock and stood up.

“I have been thinking about a certain thing,” Spike began without preface. “And I want to know, are you happy?”

“No, I am not happy,” the poet answered, after looking inside of himself. “Once I was happy, I think. Tomorrow I expect to be happy. Now I am not.” He thrust his hands inside his belt and looked gratefully at Spike for having asked such a serious, meaty question.

“In the center of the sensation of living there is pain. When I smell the pear blossoms over there I have joy in them, *tu comprends*, and I do not feel this pain; but it is there, and it deepens the color of the joy.”

He went on, seeing that Flecker still listened: “When I look down on the river at dusk I want to weep. But I love the river then. I was in love once, and that was when I was happy. But I have forgotten. There was such a flare of agony at the end that I cannot remember back of it.”

“Will you have a drink?” asked the poet, a light in his eye for more talk.

“I will not,” said Flecker. “I have work that must be done this afternoon.”

Nevertheless they went straight into the *bistro* there on the corner of the *rue Vavin* and drank *bordeaux blanc* out of round, thin-glass goblets.

“Once back in America,” Flecker remembered, “I wrote down things in a note-book. I wrote, ‘This week I have been almost happy.’ A few months later I read this over and remembered that I had not been happy at all.

“Again I wrote: ‘How sad and lonely I am,’ and when I read this long afterward I remembered clearly that I was not sad. That was strange.”

The poet’s face was lean and pale; his eyes the color of dark mahogany. Eagerness widened his eyes and vibrated in his gesture. Such conversation as this was sustenance to him.

“*Alors*,” he exclaimed before the first drink was quite gone, “the next one is for me to pay.”

“So is this one,” Flecker said, gently as he could. “Unless you could loan me something. I haven’t got a *sou*!”

The poet waved away this sad news. They drank.

“It is perfect balance, and maybe there is no such thing.” Marius was thinking aloud.

“*Attends*, I had a gray book, a red and yellow apple and a white bowl with black figures on it. They were all on my table. But it bothered me. It made something dead in the room. From being balanced and dead in the center the room became dead all over.

“I took the apple and put it closer to the book, and the spirit of the room flowed again. Now that they were off balance they pulled at each other, striving, do you see? The relation between them lived. It was beautiful.... But not happy.”

The glasses were refilled and they drank.

“Sounds silly,” said Marius.

“Oh, no!” Spike was emphatic. He was thinking he would borrow the book, the bowl and the apple and paint them. Arranging them in his mind, the red of the apple burned as a light, and he had a momentary impulse to get away home and paint an apple of such color and of such a down-pressing, significant *weight*, of such an inner, mysterious vitality as had never been painted before ... an apple and a bowl and a book that would sit in a square picture, alive forever!

He raised his goblet to the fading light in the window. (“It is already dusk. My time is dwindling!”) The wine in the glasses was golden. Closing one eye Flecker quite unnecessarily looked for sediment in its clear perfection.

They raised their glasses together, and drank, their eyes wandering thoughtfully over the edges.

Spike turned round the painting of the pear tree and the woman in yellow. He was warm with courage concocted by sun and grape vine two summers before and dared to find his picture good.

“Damn it!” he exclaimed, hitting the bar with his fist so hard the fat black-moustached woman behind it jumped and put her hand on her extraordinary bosom. “Damn it! I can *see!*”

Marius looked.

“*Mais oui, c’est bein fait ça!*” Holding to the edge of the bar, he searched the ceiling for words. “With a clarity, *mon ami*——You take me before mystery of the tree blossoming in the sun and say look! and blow from between us the mist. There is nothing between me and the tree,” said the poet.

“Nothing but me!” Spike put in with a strange grin.

“There is joy of life in that picture,” added Marius.

Flecker laughed an abrupt, realizing laugh. Well, there was!

Chapter IX

“How is Adele?” asked Flecker.

The poet put a suspicious question with a glance of his dark eyes. He shrugged and after a pause, in which they were separated and thought their own secret thoughts, he went on with the discussion. “Take love, for instance. When you are in your sweetheart’s arms—in the sweet moment, aren’t we happy then?”

“I wouldn’t call it sweet,” Spike put in at right angles to the discussion. “You know what it is like? It is like hunting around eagerly, yet apprehensively, for contact with the—um—life current itself. And when you get down to it—smash! a million volts run through you, a white light flares behind your eyes; your body is burnt and thrown and you sink down dying, as if you had taken hold of a live wire or been struck by lightning.... Then you feel better, as if all your veins were placid brooks, as the fellow says.”

The poet smiled as if with an effort. Before he could say what he thought, Flecker hurried on: “That’s not so good, I know. Now let me try saying it. An arched way under the darkness. Me, I always start up a long hill slowly. There’s a silken wind; a vast dark loneliness; and a thought, like a flickering light, apart, untouched. Who am I towering above the sea of dark? One expects so much and experiences so little.... But the pounding is my heart! There is an upward rush, as of wind and sea. The little flickering thought swoons, unformed lightning fills the void....

“As I was saying, I climb a hill slowly, and now I pause. From another world I hear a murmuring, a Klaxon in a deserted street, far away.... In space a clock strikes two!... And when I pause again”—Spike rubbed his red hair and looked into his wine,—“I feel like a continent! Can you imagine that? My arm is a peninsula. I think a little thought and it flows out into a white road, miles long. I sway above an abyss, and I look backward through a tunnel of time....”

“To two o’clock, I suppose,” quietly remarked the poet.

“And ahead to—something, to Fate. As I said at first I climb a hill slowly. I pause to look about, to listen to the thunder of my heart. Higher, higher.... Far off a clock strikes three. The little flickering thought clinches tight its conscious eyes and dives. A gale on the top of the long hill; a moment of suspended death, and *down* into the abyss, down and down, into a sea of light, turning over and over—the flickering thought now balanced on my head, now whirling after me....

“I hear my own voice. I am tired in every part of me, and I want to be alone; but being an understanding man, I know this is an impulse of a moment only. I hear someone weeping softly; a cart rattles in the street. A rooster crows. Sometimes I smoke a cigarette, and sometimes I start very brilliant conversation—witty, you know—ironical. I feel that every time I open my mouth a shining word will fall out. I feel comfort singing in all my joints. In the darkness I smile slowly, pull down the corners of my mouth—proud!”

“First you heard two o’clock, then three,” murmured Marius, the Poet, “Hm-m-m!”

“Nowadays,” added Spike, “there’s a lot of novelists who take you along to show you how they yawn! They say: ‘O woe! O disillusion’ and think they’re describing something. But it’s only themselves they describe. When they call on Venus they see boredom in her eyes and

rush away to tell the world. If the world were as clever as I myself, it would blush with shame for their unconscious, un-invited confessions.”

Marius, himself, yawned. “*C’est Ça!*... But I must get back to the shop. Good-by!”

“Good-by! Pay you tomorrow!”

It was nearing dinner time. A bearded guard in a blue jacket clanged the tall gates of the Gardens. Crowds flowed homeward in the pearl gray dusk. The great motor buses were jammed. Clerks and stenographers, fathers in tail coats and *pince nez*, slim, homely little girls painted like toys, quick as birds and as attractive; workmen collapsed in on themselves, weary, eyes down, as if there had never been a barricade. Tired, intent women in black. A round-shouldered lad darted from the shadow of a doorway to grasp the hands of a girl in a blue serge, knee-length skirt and white stockings. Her face was as pinched as his. They went off, arm in arm, without smiling. The unhappiness of the homeward crowd immersed Flecker as he stood at the entrance of the wine shop, his cheeks and his spirit warm with the wine he had drunk. He saw a man of his own age moving painfully on a peg leg too short for him. Prodded by the thought of a life imprisoned in lonely suffering, Flecker moved impatiently away from the shop door, mixing up his thoughts. Perhaps one got “used to it.” For him it was still intolerable to believe that there are men who hopefully live unhappy, painful lives and are rewarded by a final suffering as meaningless to them as the first. And so he didn’t believe it!

He stood a moment on the curb. Down that way was his *pension* and if he went there he would eat his dinner sensibly, and keep control of the day. Down this other way was the *Café du Dome*, and if he went there, anything might happen. He decided to go to the *pension*....

Well, thinking back across the talk and the thoughts of the day—was he any nearer decision? If happiness were joy, or contentment, or anything he could name with a name, he did not want it. He did not want to imprison himself for life in an unchanging condition. Still, he did want to be happy. Should he hurry to his room now and make the wish, and then go out on a tear?

Next him a woman hesitated to ford the traffic stream. Her gray skirt and cloak hung loosely about a slight figure. One arm was doubled back, the scrawny hand picked nervously at her shoulder, an unlovely gesture. Her soft shoes were heelless, and as she stepped, hesitating, off the curb and back on, her feet seemed limber as hands. Flecker moved a step away. Her bent arm, her feet, her slight body under the voluminous gray, were too scrawny and too limber.

Growing curiosity made him examine her from head to foot. Her hat startled him for it was like a turban of black feathers, identical with that of the witch in the café. Watching her nervous hand he realized suddenly that one eye, like a round, black spot in an oyster, stared at him from her profile. She smiled, showing long, gray teeth.

“Yes!” she said, nodding.

He walked quickly toward his *pension*. From the door he looked back and saw her coming on her limber feet, her head up as if she thought herself divinely beautiful, her face gashed with that arch smile.

Spike slammed the entrance door and stood leaning against it. He heard soft footsteps outside drawing nearer quickly. Would the doorknob move? Her footsteps did not pause but went on. On the stair Flecker felt the strength had drained from his knees. Why had she so frightened him? She was a monster. Her smile had touched him, made him share in her monstrosity. But the horror was that she had said “Yes,” as if she had heard his thought.

Spike sat on the edge of his green, iron bed, his head in his hands. He must decide. He must decide. He had omnipotence, and yet he had been wasting his days facetiously. The encounter with the old woman, the disappearance of the witch, and the four black hairs, confirmed his faith in the magic ring. His world had changed. The supernatural moved in it now. Thursday, Friday, Saturday and then he would be Spike Flecker again. He could endure it. What had the hideous old woman to do with the witch? Spike got up and stood a long time at the one window that gave on the street.... His fear had been ridiculous, he told himself.

The priest was also late for dinner and they had the dining room to themselves for the last course. Spike wanted to tell him everything. The priest was wise. He read *Le Temps* and the *Manchester Guardian* and sometimes even the *Berliner Tageblatt*. He had a deep appreciation of sound cooking, and talked of how the southern provinces would vote in the spring elections. He was experienced enough, doubtless, to believe anything, Flecker thought—but, alas, he was a priest. He might report to the Pope Flecker's traffic with a witch, and the Pope, as any one knows, has Pull.

Spike suspected that there was no such thing as a Christian witch; and while the government was not a churchly one, still you couldn't tell what might happen. He saw himself in *Le Matin*:

American Art Student Makes Compact With Witch; Officials Move to Deport

Looking at the comedy five-reeler that night in the *rue de la Gaitie* theater, he held his right hand down near the floor lest the usher see the light of the magic ring and investigate.

The picture was not interesting. He sat in the warm, rhythmical dark, pressed between a bearded *bourgeois* and a pale, homely girl, and dreamed....

He and the witch walked on a smooth hill under a tremendous summer sky. He put his hand in her jacket pocket and found her hand there. She looked into his face and smiled....

Chapter X

He did not like going into his room, dreading that window, but once in bed he slept almost immediately and did not waken till morning. Thus strengthened with rest he embarked on Thursday, and wasted it, entire.

He knew that today, tomorrow or Saturday morning he must make the crucial decision. He knew that it would be more difficult to face tomorrow than today—yet he flung the day away aimlessly, dodging his thoughts by not putting them into words.

This is exactly how he felt: He, himself, was a frightened specter running through the caverns of his own mind, pursued by a suffocating something that he pretended was not pursuing him!

In the morning he took this feeling with him on a walk down the *Boul' Mich'* to the book stalls on the *quais* where he poked amongst worthless old books until he was so bored it seemed his veins were full of gray dust and his belly full of nothing.

He had luncheon in the Thin Cat, which stands where one cobbled street meets another. Horse-drawn trucks, motor trucks, hand-carts, passenger buses like mastodons, taxis, struggled by in a gasoline haze and each with engine, wheel, horn or voice seemed to be trying to make the most possible noise.

Inside the waiters slammed doors, plates, bottles, chairs, and shouted orders. Patrons banged dishes with knives and forks and screamed in passionate conversation. A thousand sounds made one ear-splitting blare of racket. Luncheon in the *Chat Maigre* would be plainly heard in London were there no intervening noises. But luncheon in the *Chat Maigre* cost three francs twenty-five centimes—or about fourteen and four-sixteenths cents, American, as Flecker figured it at the day's exchange. He chose a table in a corner not far from the entrance.

As he was finishing his meal the witch sat down opposite him. For a minute Flecker did not dare to look at her, but in the first glance he had seen she wore a black jacket and the same black hat. When he heard her speak to the waiter he looked up quickly.

She was not the witch. She was the old woman in gray. Her hooked nose stuck out above her wrinkled mouth. She leered and screamed at him.

"*Comment?*" Flecker's teeth chattered.

She screamed even louder, asking for the menu. With a trembling hand he passed it.

"*Merci!*" She opened her jaws in that terrible smile, and ogled him from the wrinkled corners of her eyes.

"Listen!" She leaned across the table. Flecker jerked back his head as if she were a snake. Seeing this she could not speak.

"Listen!" she repeated, recovering her grin. "Dear boy, darling boy! Wish for happiness!"

Flecker wanted only to get away from her.

He scraped back his chair and stumbled away. The waiter took his three francs, twenty-five, at the entrance. Spike looked over his shoulder at the old woman. She smiled and waved her napkin. Spike fled into the street.

As in a nightmare when one is the only reality in a world of shadows, a focused figure against a fade-out background, Flecker ran from the café. He did not know the impact of his running feet against the pavement; the traffic flowed by him in silence; the tall, leaning houses of gray plaster were no more substantial than curling smoke. His harsh fear held him in its clutch as he ran. He did not know where he was running. His long legs whisked him under the heads of running horses, scraped him against the headlights of motors, sitting back on their screaming brakes, got him out of reach of an agitated *gendarme* who was too fat to run far.

Chapter XI

In a steep, narrow alley Spike stopped, exhausted, and leaned against a spindly tree that stood solitary by the curb. Nearby a woman in a ragged brown shawl tended a two-wheeled cart heaped high with oranges and tangerines. She examined with sympathetic curiosity the slim, red-headed youth who mopped his forehead and looked fearfully over his shoulder. She said softly, as in occult greeting:

“*Mort au vaches!*”

Spike stared.

“Dirty lackeys of the dirty *bourgeoisie!*” said the orange woman in her hushed voice. “I, myself, when I was younger, hit one with a brick! *Voilà!* Have a tangerine!” She thrust a glowing fruit into Spike’s hands. He held it near his face, gazed at it in amazement as if he had never seen a tangerine before. Its bright color was a lighter shade of the color of his bristling hair.... His eyes in contrast were blue as the clear sky.

“*Merci!*” he said.

“It is nothing! Down with the police!”

“I am not running from the police!” Spike said, sitting down on the curb. He was breathing more easily now. He was calm enough to peel the tangerine and eat it slowly. “I am an artist,” he added, as if this explained something. “I was in a restaurant eating lunch when I met an old woman who knew what I was thinking. It scared me.”

“You came up this hill like the cavalry were after you! Who was chasing you?”

“I don’t know that anybody was chasing me. I had seen that old woman before. She acted as if I belonged to her. She knew about me. She knew what I was thinking. Suppose you were wondering in your mind, ‘Shall I go home now or wait until I sell a dozen more tangerines?’ and a man came up and poked his face up to yours and said: ‘Better wait till you sell a dozen more!’ Wouldn’t you be frightened?”

She looked at him, apparently bewildered.

Spike went on, rubbing his hair: “Maybe she is a witch, and maybe she is only a friend of a witch. She seems to want to be friendly, but she is so ugly!”

Rosie Rosenberg came down the alley, carrying a canvas and his color-box. “Hello, Spike Flecker! What are you doing here?”

“Resting,” said Spike.

The orange woman spoke up maliciously: “He came running up the hill like a crazy man. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked him, ‘I just saw a witch,’ he told me, his eyes popping out of his head.”

She put her hands to the handle of her cart and walked deliberately away from them. Her skirt hiked up in back. Flecker gazed fascinated at her limber feet. Could it be? Anything could be! He shuddered, feeling utterly defenseless, and alone.

“Spike!” Rosie’s voice was melodious with condescending pity. “Look at me, Spike!”

Spike shouted frantically, “Oh, shut up, Rosie. I’m in trouble!”

Rosie started again.

“Say another word,” Spike shouted, getting quickly on his feet, “say another word to me and I’ll sock you one!”

Rosie jumped back, startled. Three brushes fell from his pocket and he stooped to pick them up, looking up under his wrinkled forehead at Spike.

“Rosie!” Spike pleaded, “I need help. I am sorry I got angry, but I need help. I don’t want your pity.”

They walked toward the *Boul’ Mich’* together.

“I have seen things,” Spike said, “that probably no American ever saw before. Witches. Magic. Disappearing acts to make your hair curl. When I go walking it seems as if the whole world watches me, holding its breath, waiting. Powers move around me; something is happening; there is a struggle somewhere.... I met a pretty girl in a café and she gave me power of magic.... When I pass a general with red-and-gold ribbons on him, or see a train pull out from the *Gare*, I smile, thinking how I could smash ‘em to nothing by saying a word.”

Spike’s talk was jarred loose by his fright. And he was grateful (after his first irritation) to have the company of even so matter-of-fact and unimaginative a fellow as Rosenberg.

“I got power,” he went on, heedlessly. “The feel of it is with me always. It scares me a little. Things and people aren’t what they seem. An old woman comes up to me and knows what I am thinking. You know, Rosie, I’m in danger all the time now.”

“Is that so?” said Rosie politely.

Spike knew his friend thought him mad. A feeling that suddenly found words told him Rosie’s opinion was of no moment whatever. Let him think he was crazy as a coot,—that did not make him crazy. Spike felt he had grown older in a jerk. He laughed with a new sensation of freedom.

“Don’t worry, Rosie,” he cried—and hearing the confident ring in his voice, Rosie visibly shriveled. “The ordeal ends Saturday noon. We shall see what we shall see. I’ll tell you about it, Rosie.”

His friend said “All right!” shortly. Plainly he could sympathize only if Spike were decently ashamed of his madness.

“All right!” he said. “Well, so long. I’ve lost enough hours of sunlight.”

In the evening Spike walked out almost to the *Porte Versailles* and back, thinking of the witch as his legs passed and repassed each other and the soles of his feet shoved the pavement backwards. He talked to her of his troubles and she replied intelligently, gayly made whole the funny half-thoughts he offered her.

Who was the ugly, dangerous,—pathetic, impotent old woman in gray? What was her place in the drama of his omnipotent wish? What was her relation to the beautiful, young witch in the *Café de Lilas*?

The young witch was a lovely girl in little, high-heeled shoes, a chic black hat, and small hands that clutched his forearm. He would not think of her as a witch! He wanted to see her because her beauty touched him deeply, because he loved her.

Chapter XII

Now on the fourth day—Friday—he could not even pretend to continue the normal routine of meals and friendly talk and painting. At some moment in the next forty-eight hours, he must say crucial words and turn the ring. His life, in a very real sense, was in his own hands. Tomorrow noon his time was up.

It seemed an inspiration when he thought to seek guidance in the old tales of magic. He found several volumes of them in Madame's meager library in the chilly, unused room beyond the *pension salon*. But in a whole morning of reading he could find no instance of hesitation! The lucky one always wished some simple thing immediately.

A man in long hose and leather jacket sat under a tree pondering the wish granted him by a magician, and decided for a bag of gold pieces and a black horse. The road which led to a tavern, a day's ride away, was muddy. There were wolves in the dark forest. Flecker made a sunset like a great fire behind bare trees and set his man upon the horse, watched him gallop away westward, splashing through puddles that blazed with reflections,—listened to his exultant shout without envy, but with contempt for his little, difficult, unrealized world....

Perhaps Flecker was the first modern man to find himself in his predicament? The people of the old world had so little they knew surely what they wanted. They knew about Almighty God, who wore a beard and sat in an armchair about a mile above the fields, and life was very short and very long, too, for the days were so full of unthinking effort.

The people of the recorded olden times wished for a beautiful castle on a high hill and lived therein until death. But the hill was not so high one might see from the windows back along thirty centuries,—as one may from a bungalow,—nor forward even one. In the castle there were no great volumes filled with words and pictures of things dug up by man's relentless curiosity from sand and soil in all corners of the world; there was a sentimental half-belief in dragons, but no knowledge that once upon a time only dragons had lived on the earth,—that man's grandfather and grandmother were dragons; there were no movies flickering like thoughts against a white wall, no phonograph, no machinery with which to achieve the sensation of speed; no diagrams of the fourth dimension, no contrasts to life like that of Waterville, Minn., and Paris, France. In the castle the light was weak and flickering, hallways were dark, rooms deeply shadowed. The little outside world was full of shadow, and on the very top of the mind of him who lived in the castle played a dim light—underneath were shadows, fear, ignorance, will-to-ignorance. Most of all there was not in the castle on the hill the breathless sense of imminent revelation—that today or surely tomorrow Man would at a stroke double his power and change the world again.

The ancient tales of magic were the mumbling thoughts of a distant, shabby little world—so thought Flecker, offended. The tales gave him no guidance. There was too much difference between his world and theirs.

He lay fully dressed upon his green bed. Sunlight poured into the triangular room through two windows. His head throbbed with the effort of making a truth.

He wondered if he hadn't dismissed the wish for happiness rather heedlessly? He seemed to get nowhere thinking about it. He was not wise enough. In the old tales a wish for happiness was never made! He wondered why.

He might chance it—just to see what would happen. The thought made him tremble. He leaped from his bed and paced the red-tiled floor, rubbing his hands together.

Yes. *No*. NO! He flung himself prone again, feeling as if he had been saved from the edge of an abyss. It was strange that he should feel so apprehensive. His room seemed deadly quiet, waiting. Everything waited, breathless.

“I want to be ‘happy forever,’” he whispered, to hear the words, careful not to touch the ring. “*Happy ... forever*”—the two syllables of the first word, like little hard pebbles, struck musically against the bell of his imagination, but the second was a sigh. *Forever*—his spirit sank under the soft, heavy impact of it. Held in his thought the word made a dreary music, fading. “*Happy ... forever*”—NO!!

Spike twisted as if a hand had clutched into his stomach. He dragged his pillow from under his head and threw it across the narrow room, striking a white bowl from the bureau to the floor where it smashed with a sharp, pleasing sound.

Chapter XIII

Had you before this time asked Flecker if he wanted to become famous, he might have replied that he pursued art for its own sake, but he really thought he wanted fame very much.

In a favorite day dream he bought Kellogg's woods and the meadows beyond and presented them to the town of Waterville as Flecker Park. He made a modest speech of appreciation when the Mayor unveiled the statue of the boy painter! Many an actual painting had waited while Flecker dreamed of a canvas that would draw hordes to its corner in the *Salle d'Autonne*.

Yes, he had dreamed often of fame. Now he could have it for the asking. When he thought to turn the ring in the necessary ritual it seemed that to wish for fame was to wish for nothing. He did not want it most. Perhaps he did not want it at all.

What he wanted most was to paint tremendous, significant pictures that would completely say what he saw standing in a sunny field, what he saw while watching the day burn out behind trees, or walking in the night past the blinded, hunch-backed houses, or looking from a dark hallway into a room filled with people whose faces shone in lamplight.

He was aware of the feeling of life as if it were something by itself, apart from things and events. It was like music, slow—not sad, but not gay,—it beat with a somber joy. When he saw with a certain, peculiar kind of clarity things or people—a tree, for instance, or a bowl, or a fat woman sitting wearily, or, indeed, a pair of white under-drawers on a line dancing in a clear wind, something came alive between him and what he saw, and the feeling of life vibrated in him. Then he wanted to paint so that his sense of well-being, of belonging, might be prolonged in the painting, and intensified in the completion of a picture that would make others feel what he had felt. When things were beautiful for him he repaid them by painting them.

He almost knew what he wanted to say in paint but as yet the pictures fell far short.... Here his queer mind permitted itself to leap upon the idea of wishing for consummate talent, for the ability to paint immediately the tremendous pictures.

“Thank Heaven!” Flecker said aloud, as if interrupting some one. “Thank Heaven, I have settled it!”

The room became a solid triangle of silence.

Flecker's lips moved. He frowned. His expression of concern intensified and faded. He sighed as a man who fails and starts at a puzzle from a new tack. Silence. An auto horn, hoof-beats in the street. Flecker turned on his side and, like an invalid, looked wistfully at the white curtains.

There was no way of saying it! When he tried he said something else.

Here in his hands the power—here in his head and heart the desire, and between a barrier that he could not surmount.

He could not wish to paint “beautiful” pictures because he meant his own “beautiful” when he said the word, and he had not yet made it. Plainly he could not wish for that which had not yet become. His “beautiful” was growing inside of him. When achieved it would be the sum of what he had thought and felt and could think and feel. He could not wish it, nor did

he *want* to possess it now any more than he could wish to spend next Sunday during this Friday, or to be his mature self and his growing youthful self at once.

“I want to be a great artist.” Spike made a wry face. The phrase meant nothing. The wish must be expressed relatively.

He tried to think of an artist he wanted to be like. He thought of the living men whose work he admired. His mind swooped back along the centuries. He did not want to paint like any one.

The realization surprised him and he turned it over skeptically. He tried saying that he wanted to paint like this one and that—Cimabue, Cezanne, Michael Angelo, Matisse, and found by saying the words he did not mean them. He wanted to paint his own stuff, in his own way. Not that it would be better. (It might be!) For an imperative, mystic, sacred reason. *Because he wanted to*. Because he was born Spike Flecker and *was* Spike Flecker and not someone else. He could not betray the Spike Flecker of tomorrow—the Spike made of the unfulfilled hopes of his father and mother, and the forefathers who followed the plow on a Bavarian hillside and tended machinery in factories of dark Scotch towns,—the forefathers who disappeared into the anonymous mist of the past almost immediately after one went searching beyond great-grand-fathers—he was their culmination, their explanation, their immortality....

A bell rang deep in the house, joyful tidings that the women who had been striving to prepare food for him all morning, while he explored the world, had not failed.

Chapter XIV

His meditations had not made him averse to food. It would be pleasant to get into communication with the kind of reality that could be chewed with the teeth. Spike reflected as he slowly descended the stairs that Belash, who could prove the world was an illusion, never missed a meal. There was something profoundly unconvincing about Belash when he sat mathematically proving the world a hoax and at the same time ate a *Chateaubriand* running over with butter and red juice.

In the dining room were only the priest, reading the London *Times*, the big Swede, whose tragedy was now so far away he could permit himself a smile and an appetite, the other American who sat polishing black-rimmed glasses, preparing to read a letter. Flecker felt that they all glanced dubiously at him.

Hors d'œuvre, to Flecker's surprise, was one shirred egg in a little frying pan of its own. Its Cyclopean regard, yellow as a sunset, fixed him steadily. He sprinkled it with black pepper, stuck it with the sharp edge of bread crust. The egg taste was smooth and non-exclamatory and healthy; the butter's was cold, rich, suave. The bread crust had a noisy, scratchy, autumnal taste. He wondered could he paint a picture of a flavor?

Berthe took the *débris* of the first course away, nudging him with her knee as she reached over his shoulder. The sour, dark wine puckered his mouth. It exploded all recollection of the *hors d'œuvre*, and made his teeth hungry for what might come next.

On a blue plate the hearts of three artichoke, baked in a golden batter. They were crisp on the outside, soft in the center; their perfume, winged with a memory of garlic, sent Flecker's rapturous blue eyes to the ceiling. Coming down they met the eyes of the priest also suffused with emotion. Flecker swerved his glance quickly to the window; the priest, as politely, looked at the kitchen door. They began almost shyly to eat.

And after this came a little hill of cold *haricots verts* with oil and vinegar and, *comme decor*, a disk or two of sliced carrots, glowing like coral against the solemn green of the beans. And then there was a wait. Finally a heavy, aromatic, dark red perfume swirled into the dining room ahead of Berthe.

"*Fraises des bois*," sighed the priest.

Flecker inhaled slowly, the aroma of the first wild strawberries of the season. He heaped them up and put a cap of sugar on them. Why, he wondered, was *nature mort* so often bowls, napkins, cups, bottles, newspapers, shoes, furniture, fruit—and so seldom *food*—never a shirred egg! And why not a shirred egg? Why not a bowl of French fried potatoes with a stalk of celery standing up in a glass?

He directed his thoughts to lima beans, considered the unctuous curve of their fat bodies, their honest flavor. There was a way of eating them with olive oil and a drop of vinegar and pepper, and things. It would be good to paint a round cream-and-gilt plate with lima beans and, in a background of dark color, a slender glinting bottle of green-gold oil and a silver vinegar cruet.... He would try for the spirit of the bean. Those with palates and eyes capable of profound experience would look with wonder. His portrait of the beans would provide a fleeting glimpse of the One, of beauty,—for edible lima beans, *qua* edible lima beans, are themselves a manifestation of reality and should therefore be reverently painted in their mysterious lima-beanness. People would look at his lima beans and see not only "significant

form,” but catch a glimpse of the significance; they would think of the nameless mystery of flavor, of human desire, famine and plenty, of farmers, of soldiers, of the world turning in the dark heavens! Spike could never understand why those who talked so much of “significant form” were so averse to having form mean something.... “Black coffee,” bitter, redolent of the pot—disgusting. He drank his tiny cupful. It was like the moral tacked on to a beautiful story.

As he left the dining room, he winked at Berthe who stood beaming at him from the kitchen door.

The *concierge* said, “*Y a rien pour vous!*”

No letter, no money from Waterville! He wondered if his uncle’s grocery store had gone into bankruptcy!

In the street the sun was again too bright, the trees too green. Tomorrow he must go back to the witch in the *Café de Lilas*.

Chapter XV

Before the *Boul' Mich'* entrance of the *Jardins de Luxembourg*, he stood thinking,—tall and thin in his old corduroys, his orange hair bare to the breeze. Under the trees it was dark. Looking through the dark and beyond, small and clear like something seen through a reversed telescope, he saw children in bright clothing launching sailboats in the fountain pond.

An old woman cried in a high desperate voice: "*L'Intransigeant. L'Intransigeant. L'Intrans.... L'Intrans. Paris Midi. L'Information. Paris Sport. L'Intrans.*"

She brushed against him.

Spike looked down into the face of the monstrous woman. His heart stopped and a shudder ran up his spine into his hair.

"*L'Intrans!*" she shouted, thrusting a paper at him, and added in a low tone: "Good day, my friend!"

Spike walked quickly into the Gardens. When he branched off the broad main path she was at his elbow.

"You walk so fast," said the old woman.

He looked straight ahead. He was trembling. There was a vacant, fainting feeling in his knees. She was unclean. Her wrinkled gray face, with bluish lips, and slow, dead eyes, was too ugly in the keen sunlight.

"You walk so fast," she complained softly. "You should be home thinking!"

"Who are you?"

"Wish for happiness," pleaded the old woman. "Go back to your room and wish for happiness." She grasped his arm.

He could not draw away, and stood still feeling his hair moving on his head. The horror of her knowing his thoughts was intolerable.

"What do you want?" he asked, facing her. "Who are you?"

She opened her lips in a cackling laugh. She dropped her bundle of papers into her hand and flung them with a long sweep of her arm higher than a tree. They made a fluttering and a crackling; sunlight touched them brilliantly and they were white doves, wheeling down and away in a rush of beating wings.

A witch! She watched the birds a moment, then turned her face quickly toward him, expecting approbation. He could not look at her.

"You have one day left!" She glared. "One day only!" The glare became an ingratiating smile and this was more terrible.

"Wish for happiness," she repeated. "That's best! Easiest! Biggest!" He tried to pull his arm away.

"Or a beautiful woman," she added, lewdly tightening her grasp. "Or a beautiful woman."

He held himself rigid, his face averted. The old woman sighed. She stroked his arm and let it go.

"Or gold!" she said, resignedly.

She went quickly down the path.

Flecker stood in a daze watching her move swiftly among the trees, her limber feet grasping, pressing down against the earth, her loose gray skirt waving behind her. Because she had touched it he hated his own arm. His horror had changed the Gardens. Trees leaned toward him, their trunks like bodies straining to escape the imprisonment of earth, people passing smiled and frowned, moved their arms and legs like goblins. The white clouds in the blue sky were bright and terrifying.

Flecker's hands shook as he felt for his cigarettes. His hair settled down slowly.

Back in his room he thought of her bewildering words, but could reach no decision. She was a witch.... The dark, beautiful girl in the *Café de Lilas* was also a witch. Were they perhaps the same witch? The thought made him sad. His sweetheart was gone. Now he knew his days had run forward only in hope of seeing her.

Now, indeed, he had need of his wish for happiness! The old woman was right. But there was not the will in him to make the wish. The beating glow of the magic ring grew as night came. Spike watched its trembling reflection for a long, silent time.

Chapter XVI

He went out from the *pension* and walked down narrow streets, a feeling of nightmare touching him all over. At corners women stepped out of shadows and greeted him, calling him dear as if he were their expected lover, asking him to come with them for a little price. A girl in a white dress and white shoes walked toward him, smiling. She saw he meant not to slacken his stride, and let her smile go and went on by.

There was a crescent moon above tall buildings that leaned into the street. A drunken man clutched the railing of a subway entrance, muttering. He raised his face and howled. The little part of life that abode in him, awakened by drink, seemed to struggle for release. He vomited down the subway stairs and hung on the rail, groaning.

A tugboat passed under the bridge. Sparks sprayed up from its stack. Shining black limousines moved smoothly, swiftly across the glaring expanse of the *Place de la Concorde*. Spike worked his way through the dense crowd near the Madeleine, past the Opera and so into the hubbub of the boulevards out between the *Porte St. Denis* and *Porte St. Martin*.

He stood in the crowd surrounding a man whose gaunt face was made demoniac by the harsh light of a kerosene flare. He was bawling the virtues of an “American” dentifrice. When he paused for breath he grinned to show the whiteness of his own teeth.

A young man with rouge on his cheeks smiled at Flecker. At a corner café a pretty woman looked up from her table, made a gesture of delighted surprise, and pretended to warm her hands in the radiance of his hair.

Flecker walked alone and sad in the multitude, thinking,—the pictures flashing endlessly in his mind. Tomorrow was Saturday. Saturday noon his time was up.

He went underground at the station *Chateau d’Eau*. The cement steps gleamed with a myriad little points of reflected light. Rails of steel, doors of steel—streaks of light lay on the rails, swerving into the tunnel. There was a smell of cellar. Against the curved wall hung a newspaper poster, a woman opening a red curtain to “*L’Avenir!*” The future! One meant that now life was a certain thing, that the curtain into the shining future would be drawn and life would be quite another thing. *Oh no, it won’t*, thought Flecker. It will be steel ... speed ... slaves underground. He had a sense of knowing something new, but had no words for it. The voice of tragedy thundered in him for a moment. He walked with conscious dignity to the ticket window....

The ticket woman heard him muttering. “A million! I’ll wish for a sacred million—American!”

Fame he had already rejected. Happiness he could not say. Genius he felt was potentially his and he would not barter this promise for a genius that would not be his.

A beautiful woman opened a vista of complications. He had thought, first, of course, of her *carte d’identité*.

She was tall. Her hair was golden, coiled round and round her head, and her face was so bright with beauty that people stopped in the street to stare. Every clerk in the passport office abandoned work when they entered the door.

The Commissar asked: “What nationality is the lady?”

She looked at Flecker. Flecker said: “I don’t know. I wished for her, and there she was, and the first thing I did was to bring her down here for her papers so that everything would be regular.”

The Commissar ran the back of his hand under his square black beard.

“Yes. Yes,” patiently. “But at what port did she enter France?”

“I don’t know. There was a kind of light in the sky, and then she was here.”

“How old is she?”

“I don’t know. You see, a witch I met in the *Café de Lilas* said I could have the one thing I wanted most, and I wished for beauty. Here she is. I don’t know her age, what her name is, or where she came from, and neither does she. Nobody knows....”

Flecker hastened away from there. He could never acceptably word an explanation. Police papers, moreover, would likely be one of the smaller complications.... In the midst of the dialogue with the Commissar his thoughts went flying to the dark face of the witch of the café.

Well, then, the simplest of all, the most specific, the easiest to say, the eternally necessary—Gold! He saw a perspective of zeros in columns, three abreast.

“I’ll wish for a million!”

Chapter XVII

Spike sat wearily on the edge of the green iron bed under the unshaded glare of a single electric bulb. The moment had come at last.

Thumb and forefinger carefully on the magic ring he took a deep breath and opened his mouth to say slowly, "One mil-lion dol-lars!"

The clock of the *Ecole de St. Sulpice* started slowly tolling midnight. Flecker relaxed and waited.

Again he set himself. This time he said aloud, "I wish for one mil—" and there was a muffled knock at his door. It was the fat boy from Luxembourg who could not sleep and wanted to borrow a book.

Again Spike took a deep breath, and—decided to wish for two millions!...

The clock of St. Sulpice tolled the hour. Flecker straightened his back with a grin of weariness. His head ached.

He could not believe the bell as it counted one, two, three—the hours had gone so swiftly. When he decided to wish for two millions of dollars, instead of one million, another thought came running, frantic lest it be ignored, and this thought was:

Why Not Wish for Ten Millions? *Why not one hundred millions?*

He walked the *rue Vavin* past the *escargots* place knowing he had great wealth. In the Dome he ordered champagne and his friends grouped around him—Rosie Rosenberg, Belash, the French poet, the engraver from Peru. They exclaimed and he ordered another bottle!

"Rosie thought I was crazy," Flecker said, laughing good-naturedly at the bearded lad from Tennessee. "You don't think so now, do you? Well, it's all right...." Spike looked at Belash. "I've staked Rosie to a year's rent of that big studio in the *rue de Lambre*," he said gayly. "Let's all go to *Montmartre* for dinner!" Before nightfall the entire *Quartier* knew of his good fortune.

The *concierge* complained that his mail over-flowed the *pension* postbox. Madame urged him to buy the building. Bond salesmen lounged all day in the entry.... Oh, he had to give up the little triangular room after a day or two and take an apartment on the *Avenue President Wilson*. The man he hired as secretary was so awed by Spike's great wealth that he bowed every time Spike said anything. "Yes, yes, yes!" murmured the secretary. "Certainly. Immediately, m'sieu, this very instant." There were a dozen servants, dependents with whom he must deal justly, and whose presence denied him the right to conduct himself as he pleased.

When he ate in student *table d'hôtes* on the *Boul' Mich'*, hoping thus to stay in the world of his friends, he was uncomfortable, feeling that they thought he was being ostentatiously democratic. When he went to the restaurants of the rich they would rarely accompany him. With a chemical accuracy his money separated him from the friends he wanted to keep, and brought closer those he would have preferred to lose.

On *Montparnasse* he was a wealthy visitor. If he lost himself in an interesting conversation with a former comrade he was almost certain to be shocked into recollection of his new position by some such phrase as, "My rent is two months' over-due," or "I can't work because I have no money for materials," or "My old aunt died, and now I don't know how the

devil I am going to stick it out....” Presently when men cordially shook his hand, he looked at them coldly and thought—”If you want to borrow money to go South, you’re using the wrong technic, old chap!”

When he went to Nice he traveled incognito, and spent a dull week playing roulette and talking to strangers. He was suspicious of every one. People only pretended to like him. They wanted his money. Candid equality was gone. He gave generously, and with every gift generosity dwindled from his life. It was hard to achieve a mood for painting, the hundred million weighed so heavily. Like bees his thoughts swarmed around his possessions.

He was constantly discovering that his money had trickled into some enterprise of brutal exploitation of his fellows. His hundred million insisted on working, and what was far more serious they forced him to work. Because his money was invested in them he had to learn about tobacco and oil and explosives and newspapers and banks and governments. Fat, oratorical persons with political schemes bothered him daily.

Spike was relieved to remember that he had yet to make the wish. One hundred million was a fantastic sum.... He might better wish for ten thousand! He could hide ten thousand and it would give him security for five years of Paris. It was not too much, and it was not too—well, he thought it might be just a mite too little to ask when one could have exactly as much as one wanted.

He said aloud in a coaxing voice: “Well, then, twenty thousand!”

Again he tried to turn the ring. His mind filled with a rush of protective, greedy thoughts. How he would regret not wishing for more! How ill he was treating his future self, robbing it of wealth! He raised the figure to a hundred thousand, and the weary cycle began turning again, round and round and round.

Chapter XVIII

He strove with such intense effort to halt his turning thoughts that he became feverish. His intelligence swiftly shaped decisions, but greed smashed them. "More, more, more!" When his thought mounted to a sum fantastically large Spike became calm again. "Now, in a second," he would whisper to himself, "I'll decide. Any respectable sum will do.... Better a little hundred thousand than nothing.... That is to say five hundred thousand—or—at—most—a—million—or—" And up it shot again. No matter what amount he finally chose, he would forever regret he had not taken more!

He jeered at himself, remembering that there were holes in his only pair of shoes, that he had no hat, that he owed a board bill, and that he had not for weeks heard from his uncle in Waterville. Perhaps the grocery store was in bankruptcy, and there would never be another affectionate note enclosing a ten-dollar bill! Yet he could not decide whether to take one million or ten, and risked getting nothing by his indecision.

His head throbbed painfully. Why not put it off till tomorrow! Tomorrow he would have a long forenoon in which to decide, and it would be easier. This night of thinking had cleared away barriers. After he had slept on it, and the daylight returned he would even laugh, and wish in confident, simple words for a sum perfectly satisfactory.

Alas, he could not fool himself again. Tomorrow it would be even more difficult; tomorrow he might even put it off hour by hour until his time was up! Flecker knew he had made his last postponement.

The clock in the school tower struck four. It struck five. Rods of pain struck back into his brain from his eyes. He had gashed one hand with his teeth and the blood was on his pillow in a round stain.

"O God," he cried out in his delirium. "O God! I wish I were dead!" and turned the magic ring three times.

Suddenly aware, stabbed in the bowels with fear, he waited for death, his heart pounding in his ears.

This was the end, this the culmination of his life, of his long dreams, of all self-denial, all indulgence. His life was a long, winding time of waiting, expecting, hoping. Now he knew hope led to Nowhere, to Now, to Death. He remembered chopping wood for his uncle on a clear morning. The ax made a pleasant definite sound, his breath blew from his mouth like smoke; beyond the dark shed a little white tree stood. He remembered when he had typhoid and a bowl of oranges stood on his bureau. He remembered that Christmas Day he squeezed real, oil color from a tube for the first time.

His right foot was numb. This was the beginning of the end. It would spread slowly through his body. Fear swept him. He wanted to run screaming into the hall. Despair held him. What was the good? Who could help him now? He was alone, beyond help.... He could not run. There was no place to run....

The three walls of his room leaned backwards from the harsh electric light and from a strange sound that began like a smothered laugh. The bureau and the chair and the little stove listened aghast to a sound made for the ears of no one. Spike was weeping. The palms of his hands covered his streaming eyes. "Mother," he whispered, "I want my mother!"

Under the window there was a cautious scraping and a murmur like the echo of his weeping. The curtain swung forward gently and held, as if some one's head were there in the shadow, peering in.

Chapter XIX

Spike awoke and his breakfast tray was on the table beside his bed. Then he was alive. Then he had slept. Then this was Saturday morning. His chair stood on all four legs as if it were ready to spring at him. The windows laughed. Spike looked at his chocolate pitcher. It had a fat belly, stained with a brown dripping of chocolate and stood jauntily, arm akimbo. Spike reached out and tenderly touched the handle. Beside the blue saucer bearing *croissants* was another bearing two *brioches*, and beside this a letter Spike knew immediately was from Waterville, Minn.

He tore open the envelope and found three green bills folded square—thirty dollars—446 francs. His uncle wrote in lead pencil on ruled paper torn from a ledger ... “been feeling a little poorly, but am all right now. Very sorry for this delay but it could not be helped. The two landscapes came and are hung up here in the store by the cash register and everybody says how wonderful they are. Mrs. Twirlingkrautz fell down and broke her wrist. Selma Olson has gone to Minneapolis to bus. college....” Gossip of people in a little town that seemed far away.

“I guess Paris is still proving pretty interesting and I guess you are not spending too much time in drinking places like you shouldn’t but you should drink a big glass of real beer for me.... Everybody liked your last letter especially the undersigned....” Bless his uncle! Spike saw him standing before the tiers of cookie tins, his white apron tied under his armpits, reading the letter from “gay Patee.” He was good. He never said, “Pretty soft for you, out looking at the big world, while I am tied to this store in a hole of a town....” Waterville was a hole of a town. Flecker half knew that now he would be a stranger in Waterville. And his uncle, extracting big ten-dollar bills from his scanty profits, sort of knew this too.

Spike went slowly downstairs, holding to the balustrade, feeling wan, as if he had been very sick. In the *salon* crowded with ragged brown furniture there was no one. Spike picked up *Le Rire* from the plush-covered table and leafed through it without seeing a picture or taking in a word. He looked round vaguely and slowly went out the front door whistling a song his uncle liked. The words popped into his mind, one by one, as he whistled:

Showers of blessings,
Showers of blessings we need—
Mercy drops round us are faw-waw-ling
But for thy blessings we plead!

Spike went slowly toward the Gardens. The day had a poignant clarity. With their upraised arms the motionless tall trees asked nothing from the clear sky. They stood in a gesture of ecstasy, complete, fearless, hopeless, living in a growing memory. Spike did not find the word, but in drawing he would have shown you tall, disillusioned trees.

“I feel,” he exclaimed to himself, “as if I could paint like hell.”

Not that he felt strong. A pale but exultant flame burned in him. He walked slowly because it seemed he must be careful of his legs. He felt innocent and frail, as if he had been born again, converted, cleansed, or as if he had been extremely drunk.... For a long moment in the deep dark of the night he had expected death. Now it was light. He was alive. He even had 446 francs in his pocket!

He would go to the Dome and pay the good *patron* the thirty francs he owed him.

Chapter XX

When the thirty dollars had been changed and the *patron* given his due, Spike stood for a moment at the zinc-covered bar. Rosie Rosenberg and Belash passed the window and nodded, rather coldly. When the waiter offered it Spike took *Le Journal* and sat down at a table in the window to read of the current *crime passionel*. The words did not make sense. A vague interior yawn that wouldn't close diverted his attention. He could only think that presently he must meet the witch at the *Café de Lilas*. He dreaded the meeting. The clock above the cashier's desk pointed eleven thirty. It would be better to get there early.

His legs took him along the *Boulevard Montparnasse*. After longing for days to see her, he now wished the meeting might be postponed till tomorrow. What would she say, what would she do when he told her his decision?

Sunlight, strained through foliage, mottled the round tops of a double row of tables in front of the café's broad windows.

She was at a corner table. Bent over some task of manicuring she seemed slender and small.

She did not look up. Flecker hesitated.

"*Bon jour!*"

"Oh!"

She raised her hands, startled. She was probably not as startled as Flecker. It was a shock to see closely the arching black brows, the dark and lustrous eyes, the slender hooked nose, her mouth, so brightly red and white. Was this, indeed, the dark beauty that had burned in his imagination for so long? He had a quick, sharp sensation that her skin was whiter, her brows not so black as he had thought, that one white tooth was crooked and from a small mole on her cheek two curved hairs grew. The broad green hat was a shock. It was hard to accept her in a green hat when he had found her perfect in black feathers.

She was not, in fact, changed since last they sat together at this same table. It was only that day and night Flecker had remembered her and his imagination had been as busy as his memory. It had disembodied her beauty.... Had she been as radiant as in his dreaming, she could have moved like a saint at the center of her own light. Spike did not know what to think, or say.

"It is warm today," she said slowly in her deep voice, not looking up at him, tapping the edge of the table with her forefinger.

"It *is* warm," Spike agreed.

"It seems a long time," he added.

"*Oui*, long enough...." She understood what he meant. They both spoke with difficulty. They were waiting for something to happen—for the decisive words from him. They would not come.

"The *garçon* is there," she told him....

"I feel," Spike explained, "as if last night I had been drunk. But I was not."

"Your hat is *chic*," said Spike. She only smiled. Until they talked of what filled their minds they could not talk.

“How have you been?” she asked.

He looked back over his shoulder at the clock within the café. It was eleven forty-five. “I have had a bad time.”

Her eyes widened, then he saw the smooth lids and long lashes as her glance traveled down from his face to his nervous hands on the table.

“At first you were not sure?”

“It was difficult to decide!”

“But, tell me.... But you decided, finally.”

Spike nodded. “Yes,” he said, bravely. “I decided.”

Beyond the trees was the crowded boulevard. High, two-wheeled coal carts, drawn by horses fit for knights; trolleys, taxis, trucks, bicycles, went by in a constant stream—a student from the Sorbonne wearing his round cap, an artist in a smock, an hospital nurse in a stiff white gown, workmen in visored caps and peg-top corduroys, a carpenter carrying a long ladder, women in mourning, shawled women with market baskets, little companies of slim girls in close, plain hats and skirts like sheaths, a priest reading a newspaper as he walked, small white-faced boys in black sateen aprons, carrying school books, exchanging shrill talk.

“Tell me.... Please tell me, what did you decide?”

Spike took a deep breath.

“I decided that I could never decide,” he said.

He looked without wonder at the world and there seemed to be no light in it. The surface of things was true. The world was a procession of suffering and boredom.

He was filled with a sense of irreparable loss, and of shame. He had awakened knowing he would never be able to decide, and had lived through the half day without admitting it to himself. But when he said “I could not decide,” he knew it was all over. He had let go the world’s greatest opportunity.

“*Mon dieu*, have you everything you desire?”

“I have nothing,” Spike told her. His eyes gleamed with resentful, ironic humor. “I have nothing but desires for what I haven’t got.”

He heard her deep breath and looked around to see her smiling!

“Finally I wished I was dead! But nothing happened!”

She touched his arm. “Nothing happened because you didn’t really wish to die. You only said words!”

The touch on his arm was so gentle he sat feeling nothing else.

Chapter XXI

“An old woman spoke to me in a restaurant,” said Spike, “and again in the Luxembourg Gardens. She said, ‘Wish for happiness.’ She had on a black hat and she was a witch!” He looked slyly across the table. “I thought maybe it was you being an old woman, or being your real self...”

The girl’s calm eyes met his.

“The black hat was mine. I let her wear it once. Yes, she is a witch. She is an old witch. She is probably around here now.” The girl looked about, stretching her white neck to see over Spike’s head. “There she is, there at the farthest table.”

Her arms folded on the table the old woman gazed at them. She seemed lonely. When Spike turned his head toward her she got up from her chair and hurried away, her voluminous skirts streaming out behind.

“She is ugly,” Spike said. “Even, her loneliness is ugly.” He hunched his shoulders. “Why is she unhappy if she has Magic?”

The girl’s conflicting thoughts hid in her dark eyes. She was glad that Spike did not like this other woman (his dislike of any other woman, no matter who, no matter how old, would have touched her as a tribute to herself)—and she was, in the middle of this thought of victory, sorry for the old woman.

“You ought to know,” said the girl with a half smile. “You had Magic for five days and a half!... The ring is hers.”

“Well, here it is!” Spike exclaimed, taking the ring from his finger.

“It is not mine!”

“You gave it to me!”

“I need not take it back.” She laughed aloud and slid down in her chair, thrusting her feet out.

“The time is up,” said Spike doggedly. “Now take back the ring!”

“But I shall not. It is not mine. It is for you to keep,” she put her hands behind her. In a reassuring voice she added, “You must know about the ring. Let me tell you.”

“I’ll not keep it!”

“Nor will I!” She laughed again.

“Why do you laugh?”

“We had an argument about you. She said you would have desires fit to tear open the starry heavens! She has been watching the moon, expecting that something strange and magnificent might happen to it!...”

“And you argued I wouldn’t have sense enough to wish for anything!”

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed. “I said you would be serious and try to think it out.”

“I concentrated on money!” Spike made a wry face. “But I was so greedy I couldn’t decide.”

“Or not greedy enough...!”

This was a comforting thought. “The witch will laugh when she hears I threw my chance away!”

“No, she won’t laugh.”

“I don’t care what she does. I don’t like her!”

“She knows that.” The girl’s deep voice was kind. She watched his face and there was a dark, brooding light in her eyes. “You are cruel,” she told him, out of her security.

“No, I am not,” contradicted Spike, surprised. For a minute he looked at the trees, thinking.... “I watched for you every day,” he went on. “Were you in the Luxembourg Tuesday?”

She nodded.

“Then it was magic and you disappeared....”

She shook her head. “Oh, no!”

“Where did you go? Into the wine shop there?”

“Oh, no. You were so close behind.”

“If it wasn’t magic, what was it?”

She was embarrassed. “You see I popped into the place *pour femmes* right there at the entrance!”

Spike laughed. “I am stupid! I should have waited had I known.... Why did you run away—you must have known I was coming after you.”

She shrugged. “You had much to think about.”

“I was thinking about you, and then I saw you coming along the path!”

She looked at him quickly.

“I like you,” Spike said, one hand in his orange hair. “Even in the worst times when it seemed you must be just one phase of the terrible old woman, even then I went on thinking about you.... I drew a picture of my memory of you. It wasn’t good, but I liked it.”

“I have thought about you,” she said quietly.

“I am glad you did not disappear magically.”

“Are you? Well——” She let it go. There was something she concealed—carelessly, as if she knew it must soon cease to be a secret.

The bald-headed waiter came silently and filled their glasses. Spike drank slowly, then turned the goblet, thumb and forefinger on the slender stem. The noon sun poured in a hot white flood beyond the trees. The traffic torrent swept by in a ceaseless rain of sharp sounds; farther away encircling them the city in full voice roared like the sea.

“Why do you think you couldn’t decide?” she asked, to hear his voice.

“There’s the old woman again!” Spike pointed. “There at the edge of the trees.” When they both turned to look, the old witch hurried away.

Chapter XXII

Trying to explain why he couldn't decide, Spike told a little of what had happened during the five days. As the girl listened her dark eyes did not leave his face. She seemed to lose herself in his story, frowning when it was painful, laughing as quickly as he when it was comic. In his words they lived the days over together.

When he came to tell of his decision to wish for happiness her interest became more intense....

"What did he mean, it was not an onion?"

Spike sipped his wine. "Oh, he meant you couldn't take happiness and boil it and eat it. Or put it in a cupboard for a rainy day. Or plant it. He meant it was not a something.... It was not to be managed and used.... You know."

"The old woman told me theories about that." The waiter put before her a second glass, the *crème de menthe* bottle, a bowl of ice, a carafe of water. She daintily made her drink, under Spike's admiring eyes, and for a minute of silence gazed at the clear green color. Her pointed tongue, shining, moved along her lower lip in a gesture of reflection.

"The old woman said in all the annals of black magic happiness has never been wished for. Happiness, complete and permanent, is something people wish for when they know they won't get it. When an authentic witch comes asking them what they will, they ask for something more like your friend's onion.

"The old woman said nobody knows what would happen should some one turn the ring three times and wish for happiness. They would get it of course! But how would it affect the rest of the world? It might end it, you know!"

And now Spike listened with his whole attention, looking from her eyes to her moving lips, leaning near to her....

"End it?" he echoed in amazement.

"She said if you were happy you would be balanced. If you walk from here to the *Avenue de l'Opera* it is because you would rather be there than here, or because if you didn't go you would lose your job and so have no money and so be unhappily hungry, or because you want the exercise and would be less happy without it but when you got there, or even before, there would be something else you would feel you had to do. She says if you think about it you will see that every thing you do, every movement you make, is a reaching for happiness, for a balance of desire and realization."

"But what has the world got to do with it?"

"Well," she went on, as if saying something she had learned by heart, "if you were happy you wouldn't want anything, would you? If you did you wouldn't be completely happy! You are made up of a great number of constantly moving things—organs, atoms that make the organs, mathematical theories that make the atoms (the relation of all these things to each other)—thoughts and desires and memories—and if this bunch of things that make you were perfectly happy, they could just *be*, couldn't they?—and not have to move!

"Well, the old woman says everything moves, every blessed thing in the world moves constantly. How could the things of which you are made be balanced—motionless—in happiness without the things that make the surrounding world being balanced, too? On every

side the moving outer things would bump into the motionless inner things. But the motionless inner things, being held by absolute Magic, would not budge. Suppose you had a close file of cardboard soldiers a million miles long! Suppose you knocked the first one down so it struck down the next and the next, wouldn't it knock down all the soldiers clear to the end? Suppose they began to slide downhill and the first stopped dead—the whole file would stop, wouldn't it? If everything moves and everything touches, and your wish brought you absolute happiness so the need for aspiration was removed from you, and from all of you, and therefore the whirlpool of things that are you suddenly stopped, what would happen?"

"I don't know," said Spike. "Do you? I thought if I could be happy it would be nobody's business but my own!"

"Perhaps it would be everybody's. First of all, the atoms near to you would begin to slow down. That is to say the atoms in the shape of taxis would come to a stop, gradually. The whirling atoms in the drivers would begin to get congested. The drivers would fiddle with spark and gas, wondering; but the movements of their fingers and their wondering thoughts would be slow, and slower. The rhythm of their hearts would lengthen even as their engines died. The underground trains would go gradually slower as if they were driving into drifts. The steps of pedestrians would drag; those nearest you would soon find they couldn't move. The air would stand still. In gradually widening circles all things would get caught in the jam around your completed desires, and cease to move!

"The Seine would stop flowing to the sea, the tides of the sea would diminish until they ceased. Wheels and atoms, and the turning world would slow down. The sun would stop dead in the heavens.

"There's no telling how far the effects might be felt. If you had wished for happiness you might now be sitting with a blissful smile at the center of the universe, radiating into infinity a creeping paralysis of perfect balance, of happiness, of death!"

Spike sat back as she finished and closed his mouth, which had been opened as wide as his eyes. She kicked the pavement with her heels—*clickety-click*—and laughed.

"The old woman said maybe it would be quicker. Maybe you would get your happiness in a blaze like an explosion and the next second what was left of the world would be smoke drifting across the face of the moon. She said the explosion might go rolling like a terrible storm through the universe, wrecking whole systems of worlds in its vast undulation, rolling on and on forever! But, being happy, where would you be?

"You see even she doesn't know. She can only make theories, and wonder. She has not been able to sleep she has been so excited hoping that through you, she could put over some supreme change.... She's sick of the world!"

The girl looked lovingly at Spike.

"Oh," she said, wagging her head. "She hoped for a lot from you! You looked so reckless and proud."

Spike covered his face, reliving the terrible moment in his room when he almost made the wish. He remembered a great stillness as if the world waited in fear.

"The point is," the girl remarked reassuringly, "you couldn't persuade yourself to make the wish!"

Chapter XXIII

“Who is the old woman?” Spike asked. “Where did she come from? Where did she get the ring? Why did she let you have it? Why did you...?”

“Not so fast!”

Spike covered her hand with his in an impulsive gesture of contrition. For a moment the touch of her hand made his heart beat so furiously he could not speak.

“You don’t mind telling me?”

She shook her head.

“Tell me first who is the old woman and where did she come from.” He passed her his *packet bleu*. They both took cigarettes, and when he had lit hers she blew out the match so that he might light his from hers. The tousled red head leaned to the sleek dark one. Their eyes met and it was as if they had embraced.

“Let me tell it from the beginning,” she said. “It began with you coming along with no hat... Tell me, where *is* your hat, anyway?”

Spike put both hands on his head as if, indeed, he did not know it was bare. “I lost it,” he said. “I had a good hat I bought from Marshall Field’s in Chicago, and I lost it I forget where. I guess I better buy a new one!”

She laughed at him, but her eyes were adoring. “You forget where!” she mocked and laughed again, reaching back to rap on the window for the *garçon*. “You’ll want another glass of wine,” she told Spike. When this was poured she began

The Story of the Old Witch

The White Hen is a good café. The coffee is strong and cheaper than in the big cafés nearby. The walls are covered with assertive, noisy paintings—work of the young men who frequent the place. They are not as quarrelsome as their pictures and they drink together and with their girls, and laugh. They play piquet, checkers, write letters, sketch the waiters and madame at her high desk near the entrance.

In the front windows of the White Hen is a permanent display of plaster confectionery—pink cakes, green cakes, pink, green and yellow striped cakes—wedding cakes of several stories, tiny little cakes, smothered in whipped cream. By pointing at a plaster imitation one may order the real cake from madame, who is interested in a nearby bakery.

When I first saw you you were standing, hands in your pockets, gazing at a pink plaster cake. You seemed very tall. As you turned I saw your pale face and wild blue eyes. The color of your hair and the way it stood on end amazed me. As I stood watching you go down the boulevard an old woman hurried by in the same direction. Her gray skirts were very wide and her shoes flat, her step quick and uneven.

The next night I saw you come into the café alone. The following night you sat till late with two friends, a bearded fellow who dresses like a cowboy and a Hungarian. Both times the old woman followed you.

She watched you and when you nodded your head and smiled or frowned, a reflection of your expression changed hers. She seemed fascinated by you.

You had a reckless, eager manner. You watched everything. You always smelled your wine. Sometimes I heard you talk and you said Life and Death and Love as if you had just discovered them. When you laughed every man and woman in the café would look at your table. Not because your laugh was so loud but because it was different. The waiter told me: “That American with the red hair!—when he gets drunk he weeps and laughs and runs down the street. He does not sleep enough. He has two gold teeth in back!”

One night the old woman came up to my table.

“Would you mind if an old woman sat down with you?” she asked.

She lounged in a limp sort of way, elbows on the table, her scrawny hands in her hair. She kept moving her lips nervously. I was frightened.

“You are young and pretty,” she said. Her eyes were slate-color and there was no living light behind them. “Very soon you will be old.” She smiled. I could not smile in return, and I said:

“Yes, but now I am young, and I do not want to be old and young at the same time!”

Her eyes came to life, glittering. “Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Marie,” I told her.

She waited for more, studying my face, but I kept silent.

“Who are *you*?”

Her fingers twisted together nervously. “Poor old thing!” I said to myself.

As if she had heard my thought, she said: “You may well pity me!” With the heel of her hand she scrubbed a tear from the corner of her eye. “I am the oldest woman in Paris.”

You had been sitting alone at the other side of the room. Now you got up to go and before you turned toward the door you nodded in my direction. Your nod was for a thin English girl in back of me, but the witch thought it was for me.

“Oh, you know that boy!”

It was pleasant that she thought of me in connection with you, and I lied. But in the beginning it was a small lie. I merely nodded my head, really meaning no more than that I had seen you before, and had heard talk of you.

“Then you can help me! I have known many men in my time, but none who seemed more greedy for wisdom and for living than that red-headed Yankee with the loud voice. I want to give him power,” the old woman dropped her voice to a whisper, “unlimited power.” Her eyes stuck out.

“Don’t be frightened,” she told me, seeing me shrink away. “I will not hurt you. In this you will be my ally, my good friend, and I yours!” She strained her head across the table. “*I have a Plan!*”

She was not like other women. I made the sign of the cross under the table.

“Ah, you do not believe me!”

“Madame,” I said, “why should I disbelieve you? If I can help you and you can help me, *tant mieux!*”

“Shall I tell you who I am?” she asked politely.

“Please do!”

But she was silent.

“Tell me why you are sad,” I said.

“I am the last witch!”

Chapter XXIV

“Let me tell you about the witches!” she began.

“For generations we had fared constantly worse. It was not too well with us on the eve of the French Revolution; when the industrial revolution got its stride we perished as men perished in the Black Plague. Some of us fled to Africa; a few held on in Ireland and in the mountains of Norway; more flew across the ocean to join the men and women who were widening the American frontiers.

“But the greatest number magically killed themselves. What else was there for them to do? Men paid less and less attention to us, and we live by human attention.

“The idea that two and two make four, and even the later idea that two and two unless, traveling parallel and at the same speed, make only approximately four, worked havoc with us. Electric lighting dispelled dark corners. The noisy suburbs spread over lonely fields and dark woods. But the chief cause of our *débâcle* was the growth of the belief that the ‘*universe* is not many things, but an absolute One, of infinite aspects, but fundamentally, eternally the same’—the monstrous, paralyzing magic of this drove the witches from the earth.

“I did not know that I was alone until the middle of the last century. I wept for years.

“Hope was born when I felt I had the concentrated power of the Magical Black Hundreds who perished. Perhaps I could reshape the hateful, new world—or smash it!

“Instead of weeping I read science and philosophy. I realized I was not only magically stronger than ever before, but that in my spirit might reside the Essential Fallacy! Do you understand that?” asked the old witch, and I said Yes, I understood, but I didn’t.

Chapter XXV

“You *don't* understand!” she said irritably. “I mean I felt my spirit reflected, the hypostatized nothing!”

“Over my head,” I admitted, gently. The big words meant something to her.

She gnawed her knuckles, thinking. “Well, you know,” she began again, “there is no such thing as a real thing in the world, don't you? You know that everything—a frying pan, a café table, an atom—is merely a make-believe. It's simple! If you divide a thing into the things that make it, and then divide them into the things that make them, and so on, and so on, you find whenever you want to stop that you've got down to Nothing! At the center of a thing sleeps a word. And what is a word?... A word is the spirit of a witch.” She looked at me. “She doesn't understand,” she muttered sadly. “She doesn't understand!”

Suddenly the witch reached forward and grabbed my empty coffee cup. “You think this is a coffee cup, don't you? You think it is a scientific fact that it is a coffee cup!”

She was talking loudly and men near us began to smile. Our kind of talk was not unusual in the White Hen; but it had never before been heard from two women! I said, “Sh-h-h, please not so loud,” for I felt shy, and then I was very sorry I had spoken. The witch covered her face. “Oh, I am so sorry!” she said, “I am so sorry.”

After a minute she began again in a low voice. “You say it is a cup, but what is it made of?”

“Atoms!” I said, quickly.

“What are atoms made of?”

“The scientists know.” It was fantastic—two women unaccompanied by men whispering across the table about atoms!

“They say the atom consists of protons and electrons! Now, ask me what protons and electrons are!”

“*Bien!* I am asking you, what are they?”

“Two fictions!” exclaimed the witch triumphantly. “Two big lies!”

She leaned back in her chair and smiled at me. But as my thoughts groped around in a fog of her words, the smile faded. “Then I'll tell you a true fable,” she said patiently.

“Once upon a time there was a scientist who wore glasses and used his brains all day long. One morning his wife brought him his coffee in a pretty blue cup. Instead of drinking the coffee he thought about the cup.

“‘What is my cup made of?’ he asked his wife and she said she didn't know but would go fetch the potter.

“‘Clay,’ said the potter, wiping his dirty hands on his leather apron.

“‘What is clay made of?’ asked the scientist, polishing his glasses and putting them back on his nose.

“‘Clay,’ said the potter, ‘is made of clay we dig from a clay bank!’

“‘That is not an answer,’ objected the scientist.

“‘It is, too,’ the potter said, ‘it is the best kind of an answer—clay is made of clay from the clay bank!’

“‘It is not!’ shouted the scientist, pounding on the table so all the dishes in the house rattled and his wife went running out into the barnyard because she felt more natural with the cows and horses during such arguments. ‘It is not!’ shouted the scientist again. ‘If it is the best kind of answer why didn’t you answer that the cup was made of cup!’

“‘I am an ignorant man,’ the potter admitted in a trembling voice for no one could deny the good sense of the scientist’s retort. ‘Tell me, what is clay made of?’

“‘I don’t quite know,’ the scientist replied.

“‘You don’t know!’ yelled the potter. ‘You don’t know! and you go and upset me for life? Now when I make pots I’ll always have to be wondering what are they made of!’

“‘You’ll probably make better pots,’ the scientist said. ‘They have been too heavy—round with roundness of stones and zeros; now perhaps they will be round with the roundness of birds and clouds and your whirling thoughts, and the wind swishing by your house!’

“‘They’ll be fancy and mixed up and much worse,’ moaned the potter.

“‘Bring me some clay!’ ordered the scientist, and the potter ran to get him some.

“The scientist looked at the clay with his microscope, he worked at it with his spectroscope. He decided it was made of atoms. He listened to the clay through an enormous loud-speaker and he heard the atoms moving around. They made a rustling noise ... s-s-s-w-s—w-sss.

“‘Clay is made of atoms,’ he declared.

“‘What is an atom made of?’ asked the potter.

“The scientist set to work to separate one atom from all the other atoms, and he worked at it with his biggest spectroscope, listened to it with his biggest loud-speaker, and looked at it through a microscope as big around and as deep as a well. After a long time he straightened his back and said: ‘The atom is made of nothing!’

“‘Then the cup is made of nothing!’ cried the potter.

“‘Then all things are at base nothing at all, and the world isn’t real, because it can’t be real, it is based on nothing,’ cried the scientist, and they both took turns looking at and listening to the insides of the atom, and heard nothing and saw nothing! At least, in their ears there was naught but the beating of their own hearts; and when they peered down at the heart of the atom they saw on the curving lens away at the end of the tunnel of the enormous microscope only the reflection of their own, peering, frightened faces!

“‘My pretty blue coffee cup is nothing,’ the scientist moaned. ‘It is not made of cup, nor of clay, nor of atoms—it is made of nothing!’

“‘I have a magical idea,’ declared the potter. ‘Let us split the nothing we have brought into the world into twins and call one Electron and the other Proton, and hereafter let’s make believe everything is made of electrons and protons, and let it go at that. We have to do something.’

“Well, right then in came the scientist’s wife, smelling of the cows and horses, and she said: ‘I’ll fill your pretty blue cup with hot coffee,’ and did so, and the cup held the coffee.

“‘We are saved!’ shouted the scientist.

“‘We are saved!’ shouted the potter—‘The world is saved!’ And they embraced each other. But the wife, when told of the narrow escape of the cup (and the world) from utter annihilation, was not greatly impressed.

“‘If the cup were not a cup it would never have held coffee,’ she asserted stupidly, ‘and it would not get dirty and I would not have to wash it!’”

Chapter XXVI

“My people had fled in terror from the scientific world, thinking it was all-powerful, and complete!” went on the witch, getting back to the main stream of her confession, satisfied that she had made me understand.

“But I held on alone, and read learned books, and I saw that the scientific pursuit of reality was leading men back to things I could understand. Philosophers based their truths upon Something-out-of-Nothing, even chemists had to make things real by wishing they were real.

“Like its predecessor, the plural world in which we witches could live, the scientific singular world was based on Fallacy. For all its accuracy and machinery, its unimaginative and feverish routine, its electric light—the scientific world had no bottom! Try to explain this world and you must begin with a lie, and no matter how carefully, how minutely you proceed, your explanation will always end by contradicting itself. Try it some day and see for yourself. You will find if this fundamental thing is true this other cannot be true, but unless both are true the world does not exist! The Contradiction, the Impossible, is the most important element in the world.

“The world rests upon magic, plain, old-fashioned, my kind of Magic—upon Just-Suppose, Error, Contradiction, on the As-If. After my long lonely time I saw that I was a Has-Been only theologically. As the doors of the church were being barred against me I walked into the laboratory of the physicist.

“I said to myself, In my magic resides the Erroneous Nothing, the Essential Fallacy! Without my unreasonable magic the reasonable world can’t go on!”

Here she put down my coffee cup which she had been holding all this time and shoved it toward me. “There,” she cried triumphantly, “there’s your illusion—coffee cup by grace of MY intervention!—The last witch is the foremost defender of common sense! But for my reality your cup and your world would be only the apparent relation of non-existent things!”

“What foolishness!” I interrupted, for it seemed to me she was going too far. “My world is what I feel. If I am a mistake, my feeling, which is part of me, is a mistake, being part of a mistake, and how can I feel with my mistaken feeling that my feeling is a mistake? My feeling that my feeling is a mistake is itself a mistake being simply my feeling, which is mistaken in feeling that it is a feeling; or a mistake or a mistaken feeling! I have heard a lot of your kind of talk! You are just a cloud of words.”

There were flames in her eyes. “True!” she cried so loudly her harsh voice cracked and she ducked her head, in embarrassment. She went on in a hissing whisper: “In the beginning there was the Word....”

“But it doesn’t say, ‘In the beginning, ...’ now wait a minute,” I told her sharply, and I didn’t care if the whole café heard me—I was excited—I wasn’t going to let her get away with everything!—“It doesn’t say, ‘In the beginning there were a lot of words....’ The meaning is different.”

An impudent fellow at the next table clapped his hands, applauding me, another made a low whistle.

But the witch acted as if I hadn’t said a word! “Now, do you see what I mean?” she said gently.

Chapter XXVII

“Have you any reason to love mankind?”

I did not know what kind of an answer she wanted, so I had to think it out. “I do not love mankind, but I have loved a man. I don’t have to think about mankind.”

“Do you approve of this world?”

“If I worry about the World, will that get me two eggs for my *dejeuner*? I don’t love mankind and I don’t love the World. When I think I like to think about something real. And you don’t need to look as if you didn’t understand when I say ‘real,’ you know exactly what I mean. And you can spell the name of some big nothing with a capital letter if you want, that doesn’t give it any claim on me!”

“Would you object to changing everything?”

I wondered what was the object of her questioning.

“I would object if it were just for the sake of changing it!” I told her. “But if it would rid me of my headaches and bring me a lover, I would not object! But you are a witch. You say you have great Power. Why don’t you use it? You say you decided years ago to change the world! It has not been changed, unless...” A great suspicion opened in me and I could not go on.

“No,” said the old witch after a minute, although I had not spoken further. “No, I didn’t make the War. It was a logical, reasonable war!” She smiled her ugly, wistful smile.

I was sorry. She suffered when I shrank away. For years all men and women had been repelled by her and she had been lonely. “But why have you not acted?”

“Because I cannot decide,” she whimpered. “I try and try; and when it comes to the point of turning the ring, I always have another idea. You see, anything that I can think I can have. I cannot choose because there is so much to choose from. Every day for years I have been tortured with indecision. I have several times given the ring to men, but none could decide. The ring always came back.” She dried her eyes and noisily sipped some coffee. “I am not very imaginative,” she said. “One needs a great imagination!”

“Maybe you can help me decide.”

“Aha!” I thought. “Now we begin to get down to business!”

Chapter XXVIII

“Do you like that tall boy with the wild red hair?”

“Yes, I like him,” and this time, m’sieu, I told her the truth.

“He has imagination,” the witch whispered. “Many big words are intimate realities to him. He has capacity for a greater hunger than you and me. In him live powerful resentments. He does not like his own Government; he does not like this one. I have heard him talk so passionately of the world’s injustice, as if he had just discovered it—and I believe he has!

“He met a girl who was hungry—a little whore of the streets, merely—and he was pitying, and then angry, as if she were the first ever known.... Oh, Marie, one thinks of the girls who have suffered hunger and grief in the streets of the cities of the world, not only this week, but the past year and the years before—I see the vast army of them, wide as the very heavens, spirits made wholly of memories of grief and hunger, and shame ... and thinking of them one goes on, m’amselle, one drinks one’s coffee. But he finds one, and cannot himself eat or sleep.

“I heard him say to that horse-faced Hungarian—’But I say she alone is enough to damn us all.... I say we deserve fire and pestilence for letting her go alone in the streets, hungry and sad....

“‘Damn you,’ he said to the Hungarian, who looked away and sort of yawned, ‘you have never been hungry, or ashamed. Even at the front an orderly made your bed for you and you knew you were better than he!’”

The witch went on: “He has imagination—he has passion and faith.... And, Marie”—the witch brought her gray, wrinkled face near mine—”Marie, he has nothing else. Even the few dollars due from his uncle”—she closed her eyes and smiled, “are slightly delayed!

“He has much of what I have little, but materially, he has nothing. He is a walking aspiration, a dynamo running on hope alone.... I think I shall give the Magic Ring to him,” the witch looked at me as if she expected me to exclaim my admiration of her wisdom.

“He could make himself the richest, the most powerful man in the world,” she added.

“And how can I help you in this plan?” I asked.

“You can give him the ring!”

I was excited, thinking of being the one to bring you great riches, and power!

“But, Madame! why do you yourself not give him the ring?”

“You know why! You are young and pretty. If I offered him the ring he would be afraid of it. When he came to turn the ring in the ritual of the wish, he might remember me, and fear my magic.

“Here in the White Hen he tries not to look at me, though he looks at everyone else. He sees in me the reflection of the chaos he would eliminate! He has made a pattern that he calls truth and he will not let me into it. It is with me as with the little hungry whore of the streets. We do not belong. If we are true his plan of perfection, his brave Faith, are maladjusted, and too simply stated. He can see me, my dear, but he tries not to see me.... I could not myself give him the ring. Will you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.” I wondered what would come of my rashness. “Tomorrow is Monday. He will be here, doubtless.”

The witch smiled knowingly. “Tomorrow he has an engagement at the *Café de Lilas* at about noon with another painter, who will not be there. You go to the *Lilas* a few minutes after noon.... Tell him that you are the witch! I will be in the shadow in the entrance of the *Bal Bullier* across the boulevard!”

Chapter XXIX

Flecker had listened to the amazing tale silent but for an occasional exclamation. The music of her deep clear voice, no less than the tale, filled him with wonder. When she had told an incident she closed her red lips tightly, and looked down, thinking what came next. Her long lashes made line shadows on the whites of her eyes. She was profoundly interested in her story. She was alert, and brave, aware that the present was life. He forgot himself, listening, watching her.

But now he brought the telling to a full stop by reaching across the table and catching her wrist. He looked boldly into her eyes. She looked down, suddenly uncertain, fearful that she had said too much, or said something wrong. She wanted to be as modest as he expected her to be.

“You are not a witch!” cried Spike.

She shook her head.

“I am so glad!” Spike tightened his grip on her wrist, laughing.

“You hurt!” she tried to loosen his taut fingers. Her face was serious and dark. “Don’t hurt me!” she said, resentfully. He let go quickly. For a moment he did not know whether his sudden sense of strength was to dissolve into painful confusion or not. She smiled.

“You are nice!” he said, inadequately, and they both laughed.

“Ever since the first day,” he told her, humbly, “I have thought about you and wanted you. Every time I went into the street I looked for you—I would imagine meeting you—what you would say and what I would say; and always right in the middle of it I would remember you were a witch and that would spoil everything.” A memory made him chuckle. “You didn’t disappear into the sky that Tuesday in the Luxembourg because you *couldn’t*!”

“You are strange!” she looked at him doubtfully. “Wouldn’t it have been beautiful—my flying up into a clear summer sky? Haven’t you any poetic feeling?”

“I think it’s because I *am* a sort of poet that it seemed hideous! I tried so hard not to remember you were a witch!”

Marie put her hands to her face as if she were ashamed of her smile. “What if I *were* a witch?” she asked.

“If one loved a witch one would be so in her power. No, that isn’t the reason. I did not want you to be a monster. The old woman is a *monster*. I want you to be natural. You know what I mean. Like other people. I don’t mean that, either,” he rubbed his nose. “I want you to be Marie, different from everybody, but in a way like everybody. It is hard to put in words. I mean I want you to be here on the earth in the same fix I am in... Do you see?”

Spike’s thought rayed out from the point of the moment into the infinite, into chaos that he saw in his mind as black night, hideous with aimlessly moving sparks. “And we are marooned here on the world together,” said Spike. “Life is short.”

“It is not!” declared Marie. “Short compared to what? I’ve lived so long already that I have *forgotten* the beginning. Life is long!” She smiled to make him smile. “And let’s not be marooned; let’s just be here!”

“What are you thinking about now?” she asked when Spike did not answer.

“I was trying to have your kind of face and be looking in the mirror. I wonder what it would feel like to have beautiful dark eyes like yours and a great lot of glossy black hair. It is very black, isn't it?” She thrust a strand under her hat, with an expression of mild surprise. “I was thinking,” Spike went on, “suppose I had a soft white throat like yours, and was looking in the mirror ... what sort of things would I be thinking? There's something soft and unprotected about you. You are surrounded by sharp dangers, and have no armor against them.... You hold up your head and go sailing down the street.... I am much stronger than you but you are not afraid of me! I was thinking about being like you, with your lack of weapons, and wondering what I would be like; and it seemed to me I would be very different. There is a great distance between us. What do you think?”

“I don't know!” Marie wondered what was under his words. Nothing but a search for wisdom was under them. “Why, I suppose so. I am hungry,” she added, without a pause between ideas.

Spike called the waiter.

Could they eat there at the little iron table? “We serve *dejeuner* inside!” said the waiter sadly. They pleaded. He would ask madame. Obviously there was no hope.

“It is expensive to eat here,” Marie whispered when the waiter had gone inside.

“I have money.” The way Spike said “money” suggested a great deal more than twenty-eight dollars!

Behold; for them madame broke the rules and they had lunch there under the dusty trees—an excellent lunch beginning with—but there's no point in describing the lunch. They ate little of it, and did not taste it at all. They were not only too excited, but they felt, when food was placed before them, that eating together was somehow immodest. Spike blushed to insert a spoonful of creamed spinach into his mouth. He refused even a taste of the *brie* cheese though usually the perfume of a good *brie*—and this one was very good!—ran through him pleasantly like a mild electric shock, making him sit up straight, tense and eager. When man's imagination—striving always to imprison (and kill) because it will not and perhaps cannot realize that the sensation of chaos, imperfection, the inappropriate and unexpected, is inevitably the perfume of life itself—has, in a measure at least, accepted the characteristic imperfection of the loved one as a beloved characteristic, or at least as a fact—when, in a word, the dream begins to dissolve into the reality, then (and before the thrust of the racial will-to-life, this is of course normally not long delayed)—then comes the new pleasure of openly, immodestly sharing the bestial joys of the dining room!—as Spike Flecker could not!

In the melody of that bright hour food was discord. When the last plate was removed he was relieved of a burdening constraint. They lit cigarettes. These were not so inappropriate. Marie blew two triangular clouds like snorts of Pegasus from her nose.

“I am sitting here, looking at you, thinking that I love you,” he told her, calmly. Suddenly he could not look at her. “I do, you know.”

“Do you?” she asked, solemnly.

The waiter brought *chartreuse*. There was a distant look in his sad eyes, as he waited, his tray poised high, until Spike's red head, bowed over Marie's hand, raised up.

“*Voilà! m'sieu et 'dame!*” the waiter said gently and poured the *liqueur*. He sighed. Before re-entering the café, he stood at the entrance, looking up to the trees—or the sky—The sunlight gleamed on his bald head for a moment, then he slapped a table with his napkin, and hurried in.

Chapter XXX

“When I told you I would turn the bus over, I signaled to the old witch with my handkerchief... I was as surprised as you were,” said Marie. “The driver climbed off and held his head, and the two fat women pretended it didn’t happen at all! I laugh whenever I think of it.

“After you had gone the witch came over here. She was excited. Were you interested? Did you believe? What did you say? I told her how you said five days and a half was a long time. ‘They all say that,’ the witch said. ‘But I know *he* will decide. When he realizes he has the omnipotent wish, he will use it to realize his greatest desire and then we shall see what we shall see!

“He will make a mad wish. He will wish for an end of suffering!’—she shivered as if this frightened her—and then ... God knows! Or he will wish for justice; Or he will wish to be the richest man in the world!... He is so young, so American!”

Spike moved in his chair as an idea stirred uneasily in him.

“That night there was thunder and lightning and heavy rain!” Marie continued.

“I should say there was! The lightning struck the School of St. Sulpice, almost next door to my *pension*, and broke some windows.”

“... But only shook the dust off the words carved on the stones!” Marie put in. “The witch worried because you looked out your window and read them the first night. She kept saying, ‘I wish he hadn’t said them over! I wish he hadn’t looked out the window just then, before it was dark.’ She was afraid the words would have an effect on you.”

“How could they have an effect on me?”

“They are sacred—’*Qui a Jesus a Tout!*’ What did you think when you read them that first night?”

“I forget. They had a brave, lonely sound. They were friendly and sort of sad. I was scared about something for a minute. Then I forgot the words.”

“I think the lightning was hers,” Marie said. “But it didn’t work. I think she ought to leave Parochial Schools alone!”

“I’m no Catholic!” Spike put in cautiously. “I’m not even a Lutheran. I’m a Lutheran atheist, if you get what I mean!”

They were religiously silent for a moment.

“*Dites!*” Spike exclaimed suddenly. “How did you know I looked out my window; who told you what I saw out my window?”

“The *witch* told me!” Marie seemed surprised at his question. “We had long talks every day. That first day after I had given you the ring she said, ‘Come and see me this afternoon—*Numero une, Place des Vosges*. The *concierge* sleeps in the afternoon, so don’t ring. You’ll find the outer door unlocked. Walk right in and climb two flights of stairs, then turn to your right and go up the narrow half flight that branches off from the second floor landing. Knock at the little door. About four-thirty,’ she said. ‘We’ll have tea *à l’Anglaise*’ and giving me one of her make-believe smiles, she went running down the *Boulevard Montparnasse*.

“I did some things and then walked across the river and it was five when I opened the door of *Numero une*. You know the *Place des Vosges*, m’sieu, old buildings around a public garden—the side streets enter through tunnel-passages under the buildings. A thousand children squeal in the garden.

“I could hear the snores of the *concierge* as I went tip-toe past her door. The stair was very dark and I went one step at a time, feeling along the rail. But there was no rail on the witch’s own stairs, and before her door, no landing—only the top step. I was frightened, even a little dizzy. I knocked and waited for a long time in the dark, hearing nothing.

“There was the sound of breathing, and a metallic click. Some one was looking at me through a slot in the door.

“*Alors?*” in a whisper.

“It is Marie,” I said, feeling like a conspirator. She opened the door wide.

“*Bon soir! Marie. Entrez. Entrez!*”

“I had to lower my head to get in and her dark hallway was as low as the entrance. Beyond were two rooms connected by an arched doorway. In the first room I could stand erect, but the second was low like a cave—the floor was two steps nearer the ceiling and it was more than half filled with piles of papers and brown note-books. The two windows in the larger room were half circles. They began at the floor so that one had to stoop to look out into the square.

“I had a feeling of being pressed up against the roof. Everything was out of proportion—the carving of the ceiling, the enormous chandelier, the windows, the dusty furniture. After a while I realized the rooms were the top half of an old high-ceilinged drawing room.

“Under the arch of the doorway stood a low black desk, piled with dusty papers. I counted five ink bottles, and six quill pens, one of them broken in half. All around the desk were piles of dusty papers. They seemed to flow out from the cave-room. Every chair was covered with them.

“The witch sat down at the desk, resting her elbows on it, her claws in her hair. She studied some papers and seemed to forget me. I picked a note-book off a stool and sat down.”

Chapter XXXI

“The tea will be ready in a minute,’ said the witch, yawning. ‘Flecker has a curious little triangular room in a *pension* on the *rue d’Assas*.’ She began telling me a lot of things about you.

“Finally she brought tea and cakes from some place in the note-book room and filled her cup, forgetting mine.

“‘You are wondering about these documents,’ she said. ‘I have more than ten thousand note-books. I am writing a history of the world.’ She sipped her tea and began on her second cake.

“When it is finished it will fill about 550 quarto volumes. Unlike the scientists I postulate no magical beginnings.... ‘Lo, there was life upon the Earth!’—that’s the way other histories begin. But for me, poor old witch though I am, this is too unreasonable.... Napoleon’s great-great-grandparent was, so to speak, a jelly fish, languid in a warm sea, and Napoleon was the flower and the fruit of the jelly fish’s dreams! *N’est ce pas?*”

She laughed loudly. “Therefore a Ford is more beautiful than a horse!... Oh, dear!”

“Please may I have some tea?’ I asked.

“‘Oh! I am so sorry!’ She was embarrassed. ‘What *will* you think of me?’

“Life comes from life,” she went on, pouring me half a cup of tea. “Life is continuous. ‘Progress,’ my dear, is an idea invented by a clock in collaboration with an engine. In the beginning the world was part of another world, as that had been a part of another, as a son was once part of his mother.

“After the beginning there were no animals upon the earth.... They came from a world which was over-crowded, pacified, complete. Five hundred and fifty set forth when the time came. They lounged in deep armchairs, glancing through round windows at this constellation and that, wondering with no great interest, what earth they’d find.

“The men were six feet, the women five feet five. All dressed alike; all talked alike; and every thirty minutes throughout that long journey five different newspapers were published. They were called *The Darkness*, *The Light*, *The Down*, *The Up*—and *The Sideways*, but every one printed exactly the same news, the same pictures, the same jokes and puzzles. Life had become secure, regular, comfortable. And if you imagine the spectacle was ugly, you are wrong. To see them in their perfection, moving with the perfect grace of a wheel turning slowly, you would have seen Beauty. At least, in that they were so soon to change, you would have remembered Beauty, and that is the same thing.

“The ship swung by Saturn. What do you suppose makes the rings of Saturn?”

I looked interested.

“The Midnight Express makes them. On Saturn they had first a machine, then ever more and more machines. The more you have the more and faster you make them, and the more sure, the more independent they become. It was some millions of years before the machines could repair themselves, before the automatic process was unbroken from the first click of the first thermostatic valve warning of a hot bearing, right up to the mine where the iron for the steel for the bearing was obtained. But then, the men were gone. The Midnight Express, always on time, wholly automatic, survived.

“You stand alone in darkness under a starry sky. In the silence of a man-less world, the distant shriek of a whistle. The earth shakes. Like the rising of the sun the headlight breasts the planet’s curve. The train roars by, its whistle incessant, sparks flying back; the lighted windows of fifty cars are empty every one. Hoo-o-ot! The Midnight Express speeds round and round the world—perfect, unchanging, held prisoner on an empty planet. The trees far off tremble as it passes.

“It happened before,” the witch continued, yawning, showing her long gray teeth. “And ended as it will end on Saturn, I make no doubt. Round went the Midnight Express, round and round and round, for millions of years repairing itself, digging iron and coal for itself,—self-starting engines joined in an endless chain from the train and back, cog to cog, valve to wire to valve, to switch, feeding itself, cleaning itself. And round it went until one day came a gleam of consciousness. And then what happened?

“What happened! What happens when life comes into the world? A long-drawn cry of protest; a scream of pain! Feeling weary in axle and wheel; its headlight aching, its whistle rasped and sore, the Midnight Express neglected a warning from a thermostatic valve. (Was it suicide?) Bearings melted. A spread rail pitched the Midnight Express into a ravine.

“Through the trees ran a breath and a trembling. Soon they were growing over the streaks of rust that had been the perfect rails. They stood in the sunlight, bowed to wind and rain, lived and died—immune to the temptation of speed, careless of schedules....

Chapter XXXII

“The first men landed,” continued the witch, “where great rocks were strewn beside a steaming sea. The sky was red. Emerging from standardized comfort volcano smoke made them cough. Torrents crashed down the sides of black mountains. The newcomers decided that this was no place to live. But ere they could re-embark a landslide smashed their car. It burst into flames. One man watched the 4.30 P. M. edition of *The Daily Up* curl into black ash, wondering how many millions of years it might be before this difficult world were so standardized and safe that puzzles would again be published hourly.”

The witch poured more tea for herself.

“Conditions were difficult. Those who didn’t die were those who most quickly changed. Their children changed. The agile and imitative turned into monkeys after a million years. Poets voted for the ecstatic present, for song, for Dionysius—and turned towards the birds.

“I’ve sat in my study” the witch said, “and seen a thrush wing by the window, glancing with one bright eye into the gray room, and his face told me that he almost remembered when he, too, lived in a room, believed in past and future, and ached with a desire to MAKE something, as if that were possible. And a goat—is not a goat more like a man than a goat?”

“What do you feel when you look into the eyes of a sheep? Is he your brother or is he not? Have you ever heard the song of an ass? An ass thinks himself a tragic philosopher. He cries: ‘O Time! O death! O weary world!’, thinking this is wisdom. Accordingly in all lands he is beaten with clubs.

“Taking on the form of their own nightmares and lusts men became dinosaurs.” The witch shuddered and was silent in respect for the dead. “One sees an ape in a cage, a horse, or an alligator and says: ‘There but for Chance go I, imprisoned in the form of the forgotten, unconscious aspirations of my standardized forefathers!...

“‘My history is a history of chaos,’ she went on. ‘All patterns are lies, all selection a compromise that distorts the truth. If you understand Life you know that no one life is more important than another.... In my history I want to achieve a selection that will in its pattern have the authentic angles of infinite chaos. This is very difficult, especially for me because it is hard for me to make decisions.’

“When she squats at her low desk, head down, her hands on her papers, her elbows pointing toward the ceiling—she looks like a spider. She writes thousands of words in her note-books, muttering as her pen moves back and forth; but she makes no real headway because after two or three pages she gets stuck and can’t decide whether to leave some event in or drop it out. Then she whimpers and twists her hands and runs to the window. She has to bend double to see out into the gardens; and stands there, her chin touching her knees, until she gets a new idea and runs back to her desk to begin her history of the world all over again.

“It seemed nothing could stop her talking. She hurried on: ‘My explanation explains everything. In the course of an endless migration across infinity man arrived by airship on the earth, and there he changed.... A jelly fish turned into Napoleon because he wanted to? My hind leg!’ said the witch. ‘A man turned into a jelly fish, precisely because he wanted to—because he did not want to think nor talk nor walk nor work. And so now he lies in a warm tide, beyond memory. You see, in my science there is no magic. I hold to but one dogma, which is, Nothing comes from Nothing. Life is continuous; man evolves in all directions at

once—up, down, sideways. Life is chaos, except when, as now, it is momentarily pressed into words.’

“‘You have a wonderful memory!’ I said.

“‘I forget everything!’ she replied sadly. ‘Having seen the Beginning, I must make up a theory about it, for the memory is gone. Somebody wanted to live 300 years. Would that defeat memory? How much do you remember of your childhood? One thinks to defeat death with longer life? But death is not of the last moment alone. One dies every moment ... forgets ... forgets....’

“The witch began to weep. Tears dripped through her fingers into her tea.... ‘You have completed the book you dreamed of in your youth, Oh, happy man!’, the witch said, as if quoting someone,—and the man replied: ‘Yes, but I have lost my Youth!’

“The witch wiped her eyes and her long nose.

“‘I am alone,’ she complained. ‘I have work enough for fifty. History is getting farther and farther ahead of me. What’ll I do?’ Her voice rose to a wail. ‘What’ll I do? What’ll I....’

“I reached for the cakes. She watched my hand and forgot what she was saying. As I took a bite she glanced suspiciously into my eyes.

“‘*You* don’t know what he thought in his tent that night!’ she said, writing as she talked.

“‘Who?’ I asked.

“‘Napoleon! Nobody knows but me. I’ll tell you.

“‘It was getting on toward night and he was resting in his tent. Some one threw a pine bough on a fire burning nearby. When the smell of it reached him he looked around quickly, rising on his elbow. Then he sighed.

“‘He remembered suddenly how it felt to be a boy, filled with dreams. He remembered some of the dreams, and tried to be exalted with pride of having turned the boy into the Emperor, but he could not.... Without the dreams, being Emperor was only hard work. It seemed that he had taken young Napoleon and imprisoned him in a situation that was a dungeon. He saw a slovenly boy tramping a dusty French road, felt the pain of his blistered heel; he saw the boy sit by a stream and take off his heavy boots and felt the cool, refreshing shock of the water. In a game they had laughed at him for his accent. All right, he was just a little undersized alien! He’d get even with all of them! He splashed his feet. What came next? The Emperor could not remember! What happened next was utterly lost! Had the Emperor, he asked himself, avenged the lonely boy? No, because he could not! *The Emperor was the Emperor*. He saw suddenly as in a clear vision the simple fact that the boy Napoleon was lost forever—and somehow he never had thought of this before. It reminded him that Emperor Napoleon would presently be gone, also. The Emperor who would live in the minds of men would not be this man lying in his tent, wondering why he had worked so hard, defeated because the dreams were dying—not he, but a creature made of the fine phrases and the dreams of lesser men! He would strut in his victories as the little men who wrote the histories would have strutted! With such thoughts as these he could not get back into a mood for effective work. His officers, seeing him silent, thought he meditated some stupendous strategy.... Well, he should have been doing so! These were the crucial days,’ said the old witch, still writing frantically.”

Chapter XXXIII

The witch's room was dark now. There was no sound but the creak of her stubby pen. Sometimes she watched the page, sometimes she looked at me, or at the ceiling, her hand going without a stop.

"I am a witch," she said, presently, "but I can't bear to admit that yesterday is dead. Do you suppose that it is alive somewhere?... Perhaps there isn't any past. How can there have been anything that isn't? I am a witch but this ceaseless change terrifies me. One day I climb down at the Porte St. Martin from the mail coach. There are three other passengers. The fields spread away from the city wall. Next moment I am standing at the Gare de l'Est, and it is not a coach that draws up before me, but the coach suddenly multiplied.... Here are fifty coaches, end to end, and fifty side doors open, and a multitude steps down. It is as if all in a second the coach had stretched in two directions at once. And the green fields? Brawling streets.

"You know, when you are living forever, you often sit quite still all year long and then under your eyes the city expands, fields giving up to suburbs, quiet to noise, the stars to electric light! You see the motors going just a little faster every day, every hour. I don't like it," said the Witch.

In the street taxicabs made a horrid clangor.

"Once only the king and his brother had a carriage," the witch said. "Now everybody has one. The people saw the king in his carriage and thought he was happy. But he was not. For him there was no happy mystery in a carriage, and the wheels bumping over cobbles gave him a headache. The people, however, rode in their dream carriages, which were perfect.

"Now a Ford is for taking you somewhere, *n'est ce pas?* But if you travel because you hate yourself, there is no place to go. *Pas? Bon!* You always go along with you."

The witch helped herself to more cake. "I had a vision of the Sacrifice of the Fords. You have heard of the Grand Canyon? At the edge of it is a prophet on a temporary wooden platform, exhorting a vast multitude to repent. It is hot. There are clouds of dust and gasoline smoke from a million Fords.

"Oh, ye Americans, ye have seen Florida and California and Maine and the Great Lakes. But is not Pasadena made in the image of Miami, and Port Arthur the twin of Kalamazoo? Ye have sold your souls for a ride and having ridden—where are you now? What do ye seek, O my brethren...."

"Somebody called out: 'Home, for we are lonely.'

"Aye, ye are seeking your own souls.'

"The seventy-five-piece orchestra at the Evangelical Jazz Babies, forced a geyser of exultant melody high into the air. It echoed against the crimson-and-yellow cliffs of the Canyon. 'Hallaluya ... Praise God.' Shouting ran through the multitude. Faintly from miles away, came a wave of singing. 'Repent ye! Turn back while yet there is time!' One hundred radio loud-speakers distributed the orator's voice to the million. 'Glory.... Glory....'

"A thin man in overalls ran to the platform. 'I give my Ford to God!' he cried, and while they watched, he shoved it over the cliff into the Grand Canyon. It fell four hundred feet. 'And I... And I... To God the Father,' said one. 'To the Unknown God,' said another. 'To the heroic Human Spirit!' said a newspaper reporter, who had only a motorcycle.

“For days the sacrifice continued—the rumble of automobiles tumbling to destruction was steady as the voice of a waterfall. Orators, stripped to the waist, waved their thin arms. Flags moved in a breeze. Uniformed boys cried sandwiches and ginger ale. A million people wept for joy. The Evangelical Jazz Babies played on. An occasional sound of firing came from down at the bottom of the Canyon where sentries repelled an attacking mob of dealers in spare parts and junk.

“You think that couldn’t happen?” cried the witch. “That’s exactly the sort of thing that could—in America.”

The witch began to weep again. “Have some tea,” she said, speaking with difficulty. It was pitch dark now. Her fingernails glowed like phosphorus.

“But it could be so different. Anything can happen. Some men learn that in the brief years of human life. When you are living forever it is what you know best.... I had another dream of the future. At midnight the glare of electricity in Coney Island gives way in one wink to darkness. A spotlight is trained on a steel catapult in an open space. All around the multitude in tiers on tiers of seats. A man in a silk hat winds a lever; yawning. Here and there in the audience the sound of snores. An atmosphere of boredom, oppressive as summer heat, though the evening is cool. A slim youth in shirt sleeves, his collar open poetically, stands beside the machine. He begins to read in a low, nervous voice some words written on a bit of paper.

“‘Louder! Louder!’ from the crowd.

“‘... new generation! Life is empty. Life is unreal. Life is....’

“Groans from the crowd. ‘Old stuff! Hurry up! Take him away!’

“The youth, trembling, folds up his paper. ‘You will not permit me even to finish?’

“‘We’ve heard it all before!’

“‘You deny me my one moment of importance.’

“‘Who cares?’ bawls the crowd.

“He clammers into a metal cup on the raised end of the machine; the silk-hatted man, still yawning, winds tighter the spring, the cup approaches the earth slowly. It leaps into the air. The crowd watches listlessly as the pale youth, streaming sparks from rockets attached to his feet, goes high and higher, far out over the sea, until the bomb explodes and he is distributed to the winds.

“After him another, with a shorter statement. It is standardized suicide for the obscure, you see. ‘I am bored,’ says one; and the crowd answers, ‘So are we!’ ‘I go to God,’ says another. The crowd lifts a harsh laugh into the empty dark. A fat man, who thumbs his nose, and is silent, except for one audible yawn.... ‘Oh, hum!’ is cheered, and goes to his aerial death with a conceited smile....”

“Have some more cake,” said the witch.

“You’ve eaten it all!” I replied.

She smiled politely in the pale radiance of her phosphorescent nails.

Chapter XXXIV

“How did she *know*?” asked Spike.

“Know what—about Napoleon? Maybe she made it up!”

“No, about my looking out the window at the sacred inscription.”

“Oh!” Marie had forgotten this was the original question. “Oh, she watched you!”

Spike’s face lengthened with amazement.

“Through your window. She would climb up....”

“*What!*” exclaimed Spike.

“... up the drain pipe,” Marie assured him. “She is a wonderful climber—holds on with her claws and walks up the wall on her limber feet. She would hang from your window sill like a bat!”

Spike sat up and clutched his hair with both hands.

“What?” he cried. “She didn’t! Did she really? Oh, my God!”

He remembered lying in his bed listening fearfully to a series of cautious, scraping noises. Suppose he had gone to the window—as he almost had!—and seen that hideous old woman hanging from his window sill. She would have looked up into his face and grinned!... Then the four black hairs had been hers!

“Oh, my God,” repeated Spike. “How often did she come?”

“Every night! She would wait until you had gone to sleep and then she would climb over the sill and sit on your bed and look at your face with the light of the magic ring on it!

“She thought of suggesting a decision to you while you slept. But here again she could not decide. She would whisper into your ear, ‘Wish for gold!’ and then thinking this a stupid decision to reach after centuries of meditation, she would whisper, ‘Wish for happiness!’ and then she would sit there gnawing her knuckles, and finally make still another suggestion, so that one canceled the other and none had any effect on you.

“She longed to wake you so that you two could talk together about things like reality—and time, and distance. But she was afraid if she shook you awake you might scream and then she would have been as frightened as you.... She would have sat in a corner, whimpering. I have seen her when she was frightened....”

“Holy Gosh!” breathed Spike. His head ached with a confusion of thoughts and images growing from Marie’s story.

“After a while,” Marie continued, “she would get up and slip out the window—down the drain pipe, three stories to the garden, climb the stone wall, run along it like a cat and drop down into an alley leading into the *rue Notre Dame des Champs*.”

“She would not face the fact that when you met her in the street, you did not want to talk to her. She said you acted queerly but that your manner was brusque to every one. She said you were so deeply occupied with reaching a decision that you did not want to speak to anybody. ‘Don’t you think so?’ she would ask me. And I would say, ‘Yes, he is worried and nervous!’

“She finally did speak to you,” Marie added.

“And *scared* me! All of a sudden somebody comes up and does something impossible! I wasn’t afraid of what she could do to me, but what my imagination would do to me after she got through!”

Chapter XXXV

“I sell hats,” Marie said, “in a *boutique* on the *rue d’Antin*—the second shop from the avenue, an exclusive little place. But I haven’t worked for three weeks. Business was bad. This is why I have had so much time for the witch. But I never work very steadily, even when Americans are thick. I don’t like to work. Do you know what I like to do?”

“I like to get up in the morning about ten, after I have had a nice little breakfast in bed. I don’t like to stand up in a café bar gulping a cup of chocolate in a half minute and then go running to catch the next underground train for the *Madeleine* station! I don’t like to stand jammed between a fat *bourgeois* and a *charbonnier* who has had *soupe à l’oignon* for breakfast, while some skinny little clerk winks at me over his tooth-pick, and maybe pinches my *derrière*. I don’t like that. I like to get up, as I said, about ten o’clock and not get dressed, but just throw my *peignoire* over my shoulders, and look out the window. My room is not large, but it has this about it—one can see from its window the tops of trees growing in the *Parc Montsouris*. I look at the trees, and then if I stick my head out I can see the corner of the street and people passing.

“I like it sunny so that when I sit near the window the sunshine warms my knees; and then I like to look over my clothes and do a little mending, but not very much mending. And when it is very sunny I like to wash my hair. I go into the hall to get water from the faucet, and, m’sieu, it is very strange, as soon as the water begins to splash I begin to sing. Or if I pour water in the—in any other place I begin to sing just the same. I sing while I am washing my hair, and soap gets into my mouth.

“The songs I sing are the doodily-woodily-wuppity-wox kind. I make them up as I go along.

“I like to go out about one o’clock and have a nice little lunch in a restaurant run by an Alsatian woman, and then I like to buy two little pastries with cream in them at a bakeshop and carry them to the café on the corner. I like to have the same table always. Before I sit down I get a paper off the rack, and then I drink my coffee and read and watch people going by.

“In the afternoons I like to look in the windows of shops and maybe talk to a blonde girl named Anne who is my friend. Or walk in the Gardens. And pretty soon it is time for dinner. That’s what I like to do instead of selling hats!

“And I like it much better when—I would like it much better if there was some reason to go through the day to the night-time. Then it would all be better. Then I would mend my clothes and wash my hair not just for myself; sitting in the café would be a time for remembering and thinking; and when I talked to Anne I would have something to talk about. Do you see? It’s like having some kind of sickness to do everything you do just for yourself. I don’t like it!

“I was not working and so I liked calling on the witch in the afternoon, only it was so far, and sometimes I would have to walk. I could see she was crazy to have me come. She is very lonely.

“Sometimes she would tell me stories, but the conversation always came round to you. She told me about your room and your clothes and what you did before you went to bed,—what kind of pajamas you wore—Wednesday night, remember, you didn’t wear any because it was so hot!...”

Spike’s neck and face turned red. He watched an aproned grocer’s boy pedal by on a tricycle.

“... She told me what books you read; how you stood at your window and looked at the roofs. How you would suddenly get ideas and run to your easel to make a sketch, how long you looked at yourself in the mirror.”

Spike emptied his glass. He started to hum a tune. But Marie serenely continued.

“The witch noticed a strange thing you did with your shoes. If you took the left one off first on Monday, on Tuesday you would take the right one off first. She rubbed her hands together and said, ‘Oh, I like that little ritual of justice. Oh, he is so nice. He wants definition, justice, balance. He wants to change everything. He is like me—he is alone, he is filled with divine discontent. This world is not his home!’”

Marie moved in her chair, stretched her arms, and looked back at the clock inside the café. She drank to Spike with a bow of mock reverence. For a moment she watched the rising bubbles in the wine.... Then burst out laughing.

“Tuesday the witch solemnly said to me: ‘I will be frank with you, my friend!... Watching him through his window, following him in the street—listening to his talk in the White Hen, but most of all sitting on his little green bed in the night gazing upon his sleeping face—I have fallen in love with Spike Flecker!’”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Spike. “She didn’t say that!”

“Of course she did! But I knew it before she told me.

“‘Now at last,’ the witch added solemnly, ‘at last I have a beginning and an ending! Toward this, toward the conjunction of all-power with an absolute passion for an absolute, everything in history has tended and contributed.’

“The old witch stood up beside her desk and stabbed her pen down in the middle of a notebook.

“‘I shall write my history of the world,’ she said in a loud voice, ‘with everything leading up to Spike Flecker’s birth in Waterville, Minnesota!’”

“Jesus!” breathed Spike.

Chapter XXXVI

“Perhaps you think he is too young for me?” the witch asked.

“But you have the magic ring!”

“Do I look so old?”

“No, not old!” I saw she was angry.

“Perhaps I am not a flapper. But I am not decrepit. I can still get around. Ha, ha, ha, ha!” Her laugh scares me. It is make-believe. She never feels like laughing.

“Wouldn’t you rather appear young and pretty?”

“Pretty! Pretty, pretty, pretty! Suppose I was! The last witch would look out through a girl’s eyes.... Once I became a pretty girl and went among people. Girls felt I was different; men feared me. Oh! It was worse being a pretty girl mysteriously repellent, than a lonely old woman....

“But Spike Flecker is also different. He knows true values. Do you think Flecker would notice you? Your eyes are empty. You have a flat little face covered with paint!”

“I did not say a word.

“There is true beauty in my face,” said the witch. “You can’t see it because you don’t know what beauty is!” She looked in the mirror, holding her chin up. “I even look rather young!”

“I said I was sorry I had spoken and pulled on my gloves. She followed me down the passage. When I touched the doorknob she put her hand over mine.

“Let’s not be silly!” she said. “Let’s be friends. You won’t fling insults at me again, will you? I am so tired, so incapable of defending myself!”

“Her smile was wistful and patient. I had been very angry, but now I was sorry for her.

“She has no imagination about the feeling of others. She can only pretend to be kind to others, she feels so sorry for herself all the time. Sometimes I couldn’t believe even in her self-pity. I would think she didn’t feel anything. She was pretty bad when she pretended to be humble—when she wept with pity for herself—but worse when she was gay and started a sort of jig, kicking her feet up, and looking out of the corner of her eye. She was all right when she told stories, and I did not mind when she talked about you.

“I was sorry for her because she was so mean. Mean people have feelings. They sit around thinking and thinking how much they suffer and so their suffering grows bigger than other people’s.

“She got so arrogant and insulting I could hardly stand it. She laughed at my ignorance of history. She even asked me why was I coming each day—to get free tea and cakes?

“Her friends have always dropped her after a day or two and she was afraid I would stop coming so she tried to beat me to it by insulting me. But I had to hear about you! When I came next day as if nothing had happened, she was surprised and suspicious. Then she was almost cheerful. But she could not help being a little condescending.

“She decided I had come back because she was so charming.

“‘I am not young,’ she said. ‘I suppose I am not very careful of my appearance sometimes. I am not witty. I wonder why I wield such a powerful influence over my friends!’

“‘You and I have had a very pleasant time in my simple little house.’ She smiled modestly. ‘It is such a neat and cozy home, isn’t it?’

“‘Yes, it is!’ I said, though her house is dirty and bleak.”

Spike whispered: “There she is now! Oh, my God, she is coming right here!”

The witch stood on the sidewalk beyond the trees. The light was in her eyes and she squinted. She took a step toward them and halted, resting first on one foot, then on the other. Strands of hair blew across her face.

“What does she want?” whispered Spike.

“Perhaps she is coming for the ring.”

Spike slipped it off and held it in the palm of his right hand. “You give it to her! Please, you give it to her.” The witch came toward them, step by step. Spike’s fist nudged Marie’s knee. “Take it!” he commanded in a whisper. “Take the *ring!*”

Her hand accepted it under the table. “*Bon jour, madame!*” she exclaimed, raising her voice so that the witch, still some distance away, would hear.

The witch bobbed her head. Her dead eyes were fixed on Flecker.

Chapter XXXVII

“*Bon jour*” Marie repeated when the witch stood beside the table. “You two have met before, I believe?”

Spike did not rise. He held his head down and looked up at the witch from under his brows. Her gray old face was lined more deeply than usual. The rims of her lashless eyes were pink as if she had been weeping.

Her voluminous dress was of gray and the skirt hung in its many folds almost gracefully; but she had put over the dress a sort of dingy smock, over this a man’s velvet jacket, over this a short gray cape with arm-holes. She looked as if she had wrapped herself in blankets. Her black hair—she wore no hat—was parted in the middle and pulled tightly over her long skull and wound on each side in an untidy roll. Her glance struck quickly into Marie’s eyes and then back into Flecker’s. She seemed frightened and at the same time angry, as if here were something she feared, but must know.

“He does not want to remember,” the witch answered Marie.

Spike turned his head away.

“When you wept I wept,” the witch said. “When you struggled with indecision I was with you in spirit. Ah, Spike Flecker, in me you have made a good friend!”

“Won’t you sit down?” urged Marie. “Do sit down with us!”

The witch leaned against the table. She lifted her free arm and aimed a long finger at Spike.

“Your decision! Tell me now!”

“He could not decide. You know that perfectly well!” the girl put in calmly.

“Let him speak for himself!”

“I could not decide,” Spike confessed. “But it was not so much that I could not decide. I found when I might have anything, I had everything!”

“What a lie!”

“I don’t think it is a lie,” Spike told her humbly. “It has a sort of truth. I have a feeling that life is narrow and not very long. When I tried to reach out of it, I found it was full.... I don’t know how to say it. I am all bewildered. It seems there is a reason in my life’s lack of reason.... I don’t know how to think any more. I had made a kind of world and now it is gone and I have to start over.”

Marie put her hand on his arm in sympathy. The witch looked into Marie’s face and for a moment her eyes were the eyes of an old beggar.

“I mean,” Spike said, “that in a sort of way I had everything.... I had life and life is what it is.... I had this and I had that and also I had the lack of things.... If I had everything I would not have this lack of things.... And yet it is an important something—this lack of something! And so if I had everything I would not, of course, have everything. It is hard to say. I had life and life is what it is.... And I think it is life I want.”

“I thought you were different! In spite of your powerful imagination you are at bottom like all the others!”

“I *hope* so!” said Spike.

Chapter XXXVIII

“He tried hard to decide,” Marie put in. “He thought of almost every kind of thing there is to think about!”

“I thought of every kind of thing,” Spike corrected her.

“Beginning with a Rolls-Royce,” said the witch.

Spike looked at her in surprise.

“The policeman told me how he found it standing in front of the *pension*.”

“There was only an imaginary policeman.”

“Yes, I know!”

“But he did not exist!”

“How can you say that? Are we or are we not talking about him? We have opinions and memories of him. You must admit there is more of him left than of most men.”

Spike said angrily: “I made him up out of a memory of the real policeman who walks on the *rue Vavin*!”

“But he was on the *rue Vavin* when your imaginary policeman was talking to you in front of the *pension*!”

The witch stood stiffly erect, victorious.

“Monday evening, just before dinner,” she declared, “I went out with Marie here after having tea in my apartment. We said good-by on the *quai* in the midst of the crowd. I stood looking at the dark water. The Eiffel Tower was black against the yellow sky.

“For me it is always unfamiliar. Its ugliness is portentous—a promise of a dreadful and alien future. But in the mind of the common man everywhere the tower is the emblem of Paris. An obvious target, I said to myself, and in that moment the tower was standing on its peak. Radio lines and supporting cables went whipping down.... I knew it was your work, and waited.

“Would you throw your omnipotent wish away for the sake of a jest—to express a splendid contempt for life? Would you so quickly choose unselfish destruction?”

“I was excited. ‘Last night’—thus the news would be flashed to the world—‘Last night for an unknown reason the Eiffel Tower stood upon its head and in this position now stands!’

“I saw an army of newsmen hunting facts—interviewing cabinet ministers and engineers, importuning a thousand eye-witnesses, consulting their own imaginations, their own interests—inflating the simple unreasonable fact with opinion, rumor, lie and propaganda!

“They said the Germans did it! It was the moon! Madmen boasted they had used secret engines. In all countries men blind to beauty saw God Almighty in the ugly miracle of the Eiffel Tower!

“Exaltation thrilled me at the thought of worldwide confusion, the tragic bewilderment of philosopher, scientist and artist. I saw a vast terror of the unknown, and heard the shouting of the clergy, the gleeful whispering of the goblins of superstition!

“For a moment I anticipated triumph!” The witch raised her hands, fingers stiffly clutching, as if she would tear at Flecker’s throat.... “And while I stood there deep in pleasant thoughts,”

she hissed, “the tower was back on its feet, and I knew what I had seen was only a reflection of your powerful imagination!”

The witch bowed her head. “I wept,” she whispered.

Chapter XXXIX

Flecker had quailed when first the witch began to talk, but now he was more sure of himself. He saw why he had not seriously considered the miracle of the Eiffel Tower. It was no sort of a joke for an artist to play upon the world. He looked up into the witch's face. She touched his hair gently.

"You are a fool, an ordinary sort of fool!"

"He is not," declared Marie.

Flecker tried to smile.

"You wished for every kind of thing!" scoffed the witch. "A machine in which to parade your vanity! A beautiful woman! Wine for yourself! A journey to a far place for yourself... Supreme talent—for yourself. Fame for yourself. Happiness for yourself, a long life—for yourself. Wealth for yourself.

"Ah, I see you know what I am going to say!" she exclaimed. "Did you wish for anybody but yourself? Why didn't you work a miracle for others?"

"I did not think of them!" Spike was amazed that he had not.

"It is a great sin! When others suffer now aren't you responsible?"

"If he could not decide to meddle with his own life how dared he meddle with the lives of others?" asked Marie, but the witch ignored her.

"You did not even think of your uncle. He would have wished: 'Make my Spike successful!——'"

"I should not have thanked him! He is kind and good but he does not know what I mean by success!"

"My words are severe," the witch pretended to smile, "but my feeling is not! Ah, you do not know how warm my feeling is!"

"Go away!" said Spike.

The pretended smile did not change. "The world is filled with injustice! Some men get a fair chance, some do not, yet all are held equally responsible for failure. Sin goes unpunished—virtue unrewarded. Fools lead, and wise men are forced to follow.

"You wanted to change the world, but when the power was yours you thought only of how to change yourself!"

"I know it," cried Spike. "Don't stand there repeating it over and over. I have to think it out."

"Perhaps you could decide next week," said the witch.

Spike leaped to his feet. "No! No! *No!* I'll not take another week. Go away from here!"

The bald-headed waiter, prepared to stop a fight, leisurely circled their table, looking suspiciously at the witch.

"I will give you a little time to think it over. But you cannot have more than a week——" the witch smiled kindly, as if Flecker had been pleading with her. "There is so much that can be done for society if one has Power to give away. Or, you could keep the power in your own hands in the form of money!"

“I said No!” Spike sat down. All three waited. The witch hid her face in her hands.

“There, there!” said Marie. “There, there! Don’t cry!”

“Farewell!” The witch looked a moment at Spike’s profile. “Farewell!” She turned and hurried away. In the echo of her farewell was a sneer.

Chapter XL

“She is a fool. I feel sorry for her.” Marie looked again at the café clock. “*It is after three!* We have been sitting here almost four hours!”

Spike frowned at his feet. “Well,” he remarked, “at last we are free of her....” He became lost in thought. “What did you say? *Three* o’clock!...

“Marie!” he exclaimed, so seriously she started and became pale, “Tell me, Marie, will you... What would you think if... I just had the idea ... perhaps one could ... ah...!”

“*Mais, oui!* What is it you wish to say?”

“You wouldn’t ... that is, you would rather stay in the city than go out in the country now, wouldn’t you? I know a place....”

“Now?” cried Marie, relieved. “But it is too late to go into the country! It is after three!”

“Well, I didn’t think we could, really....” In a moment of silence his courage grew. “Look!” he said, “at 3:35 a train leaves from the *Gare de Seaux* and before half-past four we would be there.”

“But it will take time to get to the station!”

“Not more than a minute. It is across the street!” He pointed to the other side of the intersection of *boulevards* to the entrance of an underground station. “That little *gare*.”

“Then we’ll go, and we’ll have supper in the country!” Marie drummed gleefully on the table. Suddenly the noise of the streets was unendurable. They would watch the sunset from a smooth hilltop he knew. It would be pleasant to hire a carriage and take a drive uphill to *Cernay* in the dusk.

Spike pulled a roll of dirty paper from his pocket and put it on the table. “There it is—twenty-eight dollars worth of francs.

“One hundred million, American, was not enough!” Spike added ironically. He looked at his money and his imagination flamed. He saw what this little jaunt into the country might have been. He had been the richest man in the world—now he must ride third class! What an idiot he was!... But it was not too late! They still had the ring! His cheeks were flushed.

“Look here! When we get there we’ll have to walk. Suppose we could go all the way in a limousine! *Speed!* The roads are smooth and we would sit together so comfortably, and not have to think about anything.”

“You are mad. It would cost three or four hundred francs!”

Spike’s eyes blazed. He reached toward Marie with greedy hands. “But the witch said....”

Marie drew back, stared at him as if he had become a stranger.

“Now, if I wish for just a few thousands,” Spike said softly. “Or maybe a million.... We could go in the best car in Paris! We might even have supper in the *Bois*.”

“Don’t stop me now! Give me back the ring. Give me back the ring!”

“But, my dear——!”

“It’s my ring. Give it back!”

“Spike, you have forgotten! You are going to spoil everything!”

Spike sat up straight with an effort. He tried but could not speak. He struck the table a smashing blow with his fist.

“No! No! I’ll not!” he gasped. “I’ll not try again. Marie let me have it!... Let’s throw it away!”

Frightened she kept her hands behind her. “Wait! Not now! Spike! *Don’t hurt me!*”

She snatched her hand from his grasp and threw the ring under the trees. Flecker shouted with pain and surprise. As it struck, the ring released from the earth an explosion of white smoke.

The earth shook!

The water carafe clattered on its side. Trees bowed with a loud whisper of terror as before a gale. A plate-glass window crashed to splinters. From all about came the moaning sound of things falling. Sidewalks were instantly crowded. Heads thrust out from every window amidst a hubbub of cries and questions. The waiter shuffled out, paler than ever. Madame panted at his side, her chins trembling.

“What was it?” she cried. “Was it a German bomb?”

“It was an earthquake!” said the waiter.

Spike found himself clutching Marie’s hand, his shoulders hunched about his ears as if he expected the blue of the heavenly arch to fall upon him. Marie was praying, half crying, half laughing.

“Will there be another shock?” asked the waiter of anybody.

Spike looked at Marie. “Oh, no! I think not!”

His confident tone impressed men and women standing near. They looked around respectfully. The waiter was glad to believe him.

“*Mon Dieu!*” sighed Marie. “How frightened I was. It surprised me!”

Spike laughed aloud. She was amazed and then because he did not stop she laughed with him. The fright, so quickly replaced by knowledge of safety, shocked them into a reckless, delicious gaiety.

“*L’addition!*”

The waiter hurried to serve them. Spike paid a big bill with a flourish.

Chapter XLI

At exactly 3:41 a little sheet-iron engine drawing a string of green wooden boxes with small windows entered the *Gare de Seaux* in a cloud of black smoke.

The cushions were light blue. Marie sat against the window and Spike sat very close against her. They had the compartment to themselves.

“Our earthquake didn’t upset the railroads!” she observed.

The train moved through its tunnel no faster than a man can walk. The tiny lamp burned at the center of a yellow halo. Coal smoke came through all the crevices of window frames and made their throats burn.

“I hope nobody was killed. Why did it make such an explosion, I wonder?”

Marie frowned, catching a memory. “The ring has never been rejected before. The witch said if it were ever deliberately thrown away, its power would be broken.... It got stronger and stronger because nobody could ever use it, and nobody would ever give up hoping that they could. The witch always had to steal it back! But we threw it away. And that ended the ring!”

“It is a wonder the quake did not level all Paris. My chair felt as if somebody were shaking it with his hands!” Spike was not so gay as Marie.

“Paris shook when Magic left the world.... It’s a relative world now....” Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. Again life was different and the past was dead. The world changed so incessantly. Yesterday, yesterhour would never return.... Hope of Magic, Something-out-of-Nothing, had perished from the earth!

Marie was patting his arm. “Well, the ring is gone.” She seemed not to blame him.

“Marie, wouldn’t you like to be rich?”

“I should say I would! Maybe I will be some day. It was too bad we could not make the ring work!” He noticed the pronoun.

Marie shook his arm, coaxing his gayety. “You can’t trim a hat with remorse!” she told him. “That’s a proverb I just made up.... Look here’s where we come to the surface.”

Gasping, but triumphant, the train crawled out into the daylight.

Marie looked for her gloves. “Oh, I left them at the café!”

“We’ve been excited!” They laughed. “And no wonder!”

The train stopped often; but, mysteriously, nobody seemed to get on or off. It was an enchanted train. It’s very slowness was part of the enchantment.

“Why do they run this train?” Spike wondered. “Nobody knows. Nobody ever rides in it, yet it leaves the *Gare de Luxembourg* every afternoon at 3:20. It is bewildering.”

“Of course people ride on it! People missed it today because everybody is talking about the earthquake!”

The *Parc Montsouris* and the green mound of the city wall were soon left behind. Sunlight shone brightly on dismal suburban villages of “villas” so decorated with colored tile, turrets and fancy windows as to seem monuments made of poisonous candy. They seemed newer and far uglier than anything in Minnesota.... But the locomotive persevered, and Spike looked

up from a silent game of making other words from the letters in “*C’est Dangereux de se Pencher,*” to see woods and a long smooth wave of meadow land beyond them.

“When we get to St. Remy we’ll walk to a hill I know and when it is twilight we’ll have supper in the *bosquet* of an inn near the crossroads.”

“That’ll be gay. The sunshine is bright. And look, how green the little hill is!”

They talked of things momentous for the moment. Spike said her broad-brimmed hat was chic.

“I know about hats,” Marie admitted.

He said he liked her black jacket with its checked collar and pointed cuffs. He liked her full checked skirt, and her gray silk stockings and gray shoes.

She saw the dress in a window near the *rue de Rivoli* and went right home and made herself this good copy. “I am glad that you like it,” she said. “You have beautiful hair, and blue eyes. Do many men in Minnesota have your kind of hair?”

“Oh, no! I am sort of different. I think I am about the only one with hair just this color. I get it from my mother. She was Scotch. We have a picture of her at home. She looks like me. My father was a sort of lump. She was the handsome one of the family!”

“I see!”

“There! Hold your hand just that way! You have lovely hands. During those five days I used to close my eyes and see your finger tips ... because they are pink and bend back.”

Marie looked at them, seriously—from delicacy suppressing a delighted smile. “Oh, you are so sweet,” she said. “If I had not lied to the witch, I would not have met you, and things would be as they always were and now I would be in my room, hoping that maybe something nice would happen tomorrow, and it wouldn’t!”

The train stopped. Here was a dusty station—an autobus, two or three *barouches*, a *gendarme* walking with his hands behind his back. A youth in a black jacket, a narrow straw hat, pointed collar, and general imperfect imitation of a big city clerk, opened the door of the compartment and stumbled over their feet. He shrank into the farthest corner and unrolled the *Petit Parisien*.

“Spike, will you tell me something?”

“If I know it!”

“*Alors...*” Marie went no further.

“Yes?”

“Oh, another time, perhaps. Not now.” She flushed as she looked at him. “It might spoil things!”

“Nothing could! Ask it!” She would not.

They passed low hills and fields of wheat. Spike’s arm was around her.

“Spike...”

“Yes?”

“When do we get to St. Remy?”

The man in the straw hat, who had several times stared at them curiously over the top of his newspaper, now looked again.

“Any time now,” said Spike easily.

“I beg your p-pardon,” their fellow passenger leaned forward, nervous with embarrassment, stuttering. “I—I—I b-b-b-beg your p-pardon, d-do you wish to descend at S-s-s-s-....”

They waited politely while he hissed. Spike came to his aid. “St. Remy. Yes, m’sieu!”

The fellow looked greatly concerned. He opened his mouth, but no sound came.

“Well?”

“Well?”

“I g-g-g-got on at St. Remy!”

Chapter XLII

The train lurched to an uncertain halt. From one window they saw an empty field, from the other a hillside checkered with vegetable gardens.

“We had better descend here. Thank you, m’sieu. We are not very aware of our surroundings.” Spike added with characteristic frankness, “We are very happy!”

The stranger smiled. “You can get a b-b-bus here,” he said. When they had climbed out, he stood at the door and waved his paper.

They didn’t even know where they were! It seemed to be no place. A small yellow shed, a shabby phaeton, already rolling away, and all around the smooth hills, a great silence, under the blue arch of the sky. But when they started to walk to the lane that curved away over the fields, they found the space before the shed was roped off and at a sort of imaginary gate, like something in a pantomime, two bearded men in blue uniforms awaited them.

The guards wanted tickets. When they got them they looked even more suspicious than at first.

“*Encore huit sous!*”

Spike sighed with relief that they were not to be arrested for passing their station! “Where are we?” he asked courteously.

“Limours!”

“And what is Limours?”

“Limours!” Shrugs. A knitting of black brows.

“Certainly!” said Marie. She touched Spike’s elbow and they passed through to the lane, he a little reluctant to abandon the discussion.

Marie excused herself and when she came running back she had thrust a poppy in her blouse. Her cheeks were as red.

She shoved Spike so that he stumbled. He turned to retaliate and she stood in mock fear, her hands thrust out before her.

“No. No. No!” They were laughing hard. Spike caught her wrists, but dropped them quickly. She turned to see what he was staring at.

An old woman bent over a crooked stick came toward them. She wore rusty black and a lacy cap. From a little wizened face she wished them *Bon jour!*

“*Bon jour!*”

“*Bon jour!*”

She beat at the hedge with her stick.

“What are you hunting for?” Marie asked.

“My pig.” She did not stop.

“I thought it was the old witch!”

“Don’t you know we are through with her?” Marie exclaimed. “You silly!”

They could smell flowers. The silence was an amazement, and they heard that their footsteps made no sound. They stopped and stood together to listen to the silence. A cloud, like an island of cotton wool, drifted in the sky.

The lane brought them to a crossroads where there were a general store, a smithy, and what seemed to be a farm house.

Spike touched his hat to a little man with pointed moustaches and a plum-colored waistcoat over a stomach round as a ball.

“Could you tell us what is the best restaurant in this land?”

“Mine, I think,” said he, pointing to the house with his head.

Spike bowed. “Then after we walk along the road a little we shall return to dine here!”

That would be delightful. The little man twirled his moustaches and looked at Marie.

The footpath writhed at the side of a road covered with white dust. A bearded goat watched them pass. Next they met a priest with a red and sweaty face under his broad hat.

“*Bon jour!*” they said respectfully.

“*Bon soir!*” he replied. So the afternoon was drawing to its close.

The white road turned and here unexpectedly was a fussy, crowded village—one curving street, a line of shop windows, carriages at the curb, a Ford or two, a youth starting a motorcycle.

Spike exclaimed to see the roof of the high old church. But the square spire was an ugly nineteenth century alteration. They stood, heads tilted in the sun, their mingled shadows measuring the width of the square. It was hot.

“Shall we go in?”

Inside was spicy coolness. Through gray dusk a shaft of sunlight sloped down from a high, peaked window. The altar was snowy white, white marble, white silk, rank upon rank of slender white candles. The church had been quite empty.

Spike let the hush enclose him. One minute before his ears had endured the warring sounds of Paris—his lungs had accepted the stifling fumes of its atmosphere. Now it was far away. The church waited, watching them. Spike felt that Marie shared his feeling of a mysterious, reverent, listening silence. He looked down to find her clear dark eyes speaking to him.

He put his arm around her and kissed her on the lips. For a still minute they held each other.

Chapter XLIII

The white road turned from the church, flowed by a regiment of peaked cottages, and found the open again. Meadow and grain field sank in a silent wave to a broad valley and rose to slumbering hilltops where dark trees stood sentry. On the other side their road touched an embankment of yellow clay, crowned by a wire fence. Above the fence rose a steep, wooded slope.

“... In the church! I think maybe it was a sin!” Marie held to his arm with both hands and leaned against him as she had not before.

“That? No, it was not a sin!”

Before they saw it they heard the metallic voice of a giant windmill. It stood on its slender legs as if it might stalk across the hills home once the day’s whirling were done; and around on the slope of another hill stood its brother, fencing the spears of the sun with its turning silver arms.

“There is a path in the wood.”

“And up there a gate,” Spike pointed. The embankment was not steep here. “We’ll walk around to the top of the hill if you want and sit down and rest.”

The path in the wood was bordered with low purple flowers, thick as moss. In the swarthy company of dwarf pines, underbrush and little twisted oaks stood a group of slender birch trees leaning away from their center—girls dancing in a ring, hands clasped. Deeper in the wood the path became a dark tunnel but in a grassy place, near a tree that mixed low branches with its muscular roots, they found sunlight and silence waiting them.

Marie slipped off her jacket and smoothed the collar of her waist. She fanned hot cheeks with her hat, patted her thick black hair with palms and outspread fingers.

She sat facing the path, feet in front of her, hands in her lap. Spike hugged his knees and looked down through trees to the open valley. White clouds sailed in a sky of deepening blue, and their shadows moved across the green-and-yellow squares of the fields.

“Suppose we hadn’t come,” Marie said. “Is it as nice as the place you planned to go?”

“Nicer, because it happened by itself.”

“Listen! A woman’s voice! Coming this way! Sh-h-h!”

“I wonder...?” Spike’s fear awoke in him. But it was only an old peasant woman talking to her red cow as she led it around the curve below them, and passed.

“I don’t suppose we need to whisper.”

“Of course not!” said Spike aloud. But the quiet wood was affronted. “We must talk *low*.”

Marie nodded. The silent trees and the clouds and the ferns and they themselves were in a pause of waiting.

“Marie ... I love you.”

“My dear ... I love you so much!!”

“We’ll be happy together.”

“Oh, yes.” Marie looked up seriously. Her eyes closed as his arms went round her.

Now one might hear the distant chatter of the windmill. A bird with a sound of flutter darted low across the clearing....

The sun was gone from their place but on the hills beyond the valley it shone with a light of fire. Before they reached the highroad Spike brushed burrs and pine needles from Marie's skirt. They walked hand in hand toward the village. Marie swung her hat.

"We'll remember the purple flowers, and the old tree; and when we return we'll always know where the path is by the windmills." Marie looked back to the wood. "The quiet and the sunlight would have stood under the trees by themselves if we hadn't come."

Chapter XLIV

The “*bosquet*” of the little roadside restaurant proved to be an untidy backyard, enclosed on one side by a row of whitewashed sheds and separated on two sides from a wheatfield by a row of low apple trees and a white fence. The wheat was calm in the light of the sunset and broad as a sea.

A cheerful, homely girl in a spotted apron spread a cloth over a square table under an apple tree. Marie found a combination basin-mirror-watertank hanging against the white wall of the house and here she made her toilet while Spike, smoking a cigarette at the table, looked on. A dove in a cage made a mournful sound.

The homely girl, who seemed glad to serve lovers, brought a disappointing supper. The house afforded only—pork chops, and lettuce, and a long loaf, and—bananas! Spike decided on a half carafe of *rosée*, a wine that bored him. He chose it now because the meal was a disappointment!

“If I had my way,” he told Marie, “I would have maybe little scallops, made with crumbs, and with them I would have a plate of mayonnaise—the scallops would be hot and the mayonnaise cold; the thin slices of rye bread with sweet butter, and for dessert—I wouldn’t have any dessert. I’d have some more scallops. And the wine would be champagne, I think.”

Marie said the chops were very good. She was hungry, and so, indeed, was Spike; but he continued with his talk. “Once I had a supper with beans—beans baked for hours in a crockery pot with a handle, and in the pot besides beans were some onions and molasses and pork. I ate the beans with a salad of endive with green peppers; and little round rolls, brown on the top and the bottom and fluffy white inside. At the end I had apricot compote with cream, and little hard, salty crackers with a kind of lovely yellow cheese we have in Minnesota! I drank hard cider that fizzed.... That was a good supper. Everything had a beautiful, contrasting flavor. I think apricots when they are cooked right are marvelous. You eat the thin salty crackers at the same time, you know—you put butter on them and then a little piece of cheese and you eat a little cracker and then a little compote....”

It was quiet in the “*bosquet*” and cool. A black hen came begging. The great clouds were ruddy, and the horizon flamed. At the far edge of the wheatfield a man with a scythe walked slowly, the only moving figure in a vast world. Marie dreamed.

“I started to ask you on the train—now I’ll ask again....” She smiled withholding her approval. “Did you think of wishing for me, when you were trying to decide what you wanted most?”

Spike was surprised. He hadn’t! She was asking, “Were you sure of me?” What should he say? He thought of several lies but none was any good.

“No, not once!”

Marie flushed and looked down. “I wonder why?”

“I wonder, too.... Perhaps because I wouldn’t want you if you didn’t love me, and if you did, I needed no help!”

“But didn’t you think to wish that I would love you!”

“No,” he confessed. “I did not know it in words, but my loving you and you loving me was the same thing.... If I loved you but you didn’t love me I wouldn’t love you. Your love and

my love are one living thing. I wanted to find you again because I loved you, and my love grew every day ... and that is all I could think about.”

She tipped back in her chair, holding on the table, looking at him gravely. Spike got up and stood by her. “You are so beautiful, Marie. And you’re so funny!” He said in English: “I love you!”

Marie repeated it humbly. “What does that mean?”

Spike bent down and kissed her. She touched his cheek with her palm. Then he brought his chair next to hers.

“I like the way you move,” she said. “I like everything about you, the way you use your knife and fork, the way your hair grows on your neck.... It’s a little too long now.” She leaned against him. “Don’t you feel happy? I do—all over me.”

“We’ll walk in the woods at Barbizon. We’ll go to the movie on the *rue de la Gaitie*, and we’ll dance at the *Bal Bullier*. I’ll show you the Swedish foxtrot they do in Minnesota.”

“We’ll be happy. It seems all impossible. I say to myself this isn’t really happening. We really didn’t meet the old woman in the lane, nor find the purple flowers. There isn’t any such sky! I am so happy that it can’t be true.... Can you sing, Spike?... I suppose I’ll have to return to the shop Monday.... Was that a drop of rain?”

The sky was darkening. Spike felt a drop on his hand. Well, it was almost time for the train. They went back along the lane to the station. “Here,” Spike said, “we met the old woman with a stick!” So it was already history!

A train apparently as empty as the one that brought them took them back. As it found its way through the first shadows of night, showers ran across the fields and beat against the window of their compartment. Spike held Marie in his arms and they said very little.

They climbed the steps of the *Gare de Seaux* and knew they were tired. “Your gloves,” Spike remembered. She sat at their table while he went to interview the *patron*. A boy brought an evening paper filled with news of the earthquake. For a long time she waited patiently. Night came and the sky was a deep purple. The street lights were shining gold.

In the cavernous shadows under the trees Marie saw a crouching figure.

“Spike!” she called softly. “Spike!”

The pale oval of his face moved upward in the dark.

“It is not there!” she said, going quickly to him. “Oh, it isn’t there!”

He went on searching.

“I want it back for just a minute,” he protested in a weary voice.

“Spike, dear!” Her voice and his voice made a sad bewildered music under the trees. “My dear, the ring is gone!” But he went on, moving back and forth, his hands feeling over the ground.

“You threw it away!” he muttered.

“But, dear, if we knew we could find it we would not dare to look!”

He moved toward her as if to strike her with his fist.

He dropped his arm. “Maybe,” he sighed. “Maybe, I am so tired!” He reached out for her as if all his life she had been near to help him.

They walked down the *rue d'Assas*. The golden reflections of the street lamps wriggled deep into the pavement which the rain had left like polished ebony.

THE END

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