

JOHN BARRY

MADemoiselle
BLANCHE

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Mademoiselle Blanche

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John David Barry

Mademoiselle Blanche / A Novel

I

"André!"

"Yes, monsieur."

The little waiter, with anxiety in his smooth, blond face, hurried to the table.

"Bring me the *Soir*."

André shot away, and presently returned, paper in hand.

"What is there good at the theatres, André?"

André wiped his hands in his soiled apron, and looked thoughtful.

"There's the *Folies Bergères*, monsieur. Dumont sings to-night."

"Oh, she tires me. Her voice is cracked."

"There's Madame Judic at the *Variétés*," André suggested, tentatively.

"I saw her in the last piece."

André scratched his head, and stared at the figure at the table.

"Monsieur likes the *Cirque*, does he not?"

Monsieur did not look up from the paper. "What's at the *Cirque* now, André?"

"At the *Cirque Parisien*? There's Mademoiselle Blanche, the acrobat. They say she's a marvel, monsieur, – and beautiful, – the most beautiful woman in Paris. She dives from the top of the building backwards – hundreds of feet."

"So you think it's really good, André?"

André nodded. Monsieur dropped the paper, paid his bill, left a little fee for the *garçon*, and took himself off. At the entrance he stopped and surveyed the surging crowd in the *Boulevard Montmartre*. He had just finished an excellent dinner with a glass of *chartreuse verte*; so he felt particularly complacent. As he prodded his teeth with the easy grace of the Frenchman who knows no shame of the toothpick, he tried to think out a plan for the evening. Nothing better occurred to him than André's suggestion. He was not in the mood for the *Casino de Paris*, nor for any of the other concert halls, nor even for the theatres. Yes, he would go to the Circus. He hadn't been there for ten days.

For years Jules Le Baron had attended the *Cirque Parisien* at least once a fortnight; his friends used to chaff him for his fondness for it. Those who had known him from a boy liked to remind him of his first great ambition – to be a performer on the trapeze. Though this amused him now, he had never lost his love for feats of daring and skill. Whenever he felt particularly tired from his work at the wool-house, he would go to the Circus; it refreshed him, and he fancied that it made him sleep well afterwards. His first love had been a beautiful Roumanian, who jumped through hoops of fire, landing on her velvet-caparisoned horse, without even singeing her long, blond hair. He was fifteen then, and he discovered that the lady was forty-five, though he could have sworn there was not a difference of more than three years in their ages. Since that time he had become enamoured of many of the glittering amazons of the arena, who shot through the air, or through hoops, or out of the mouths of cannons, or crossed dizzy heights on the tight-rope, or juggled with long, villainous-looking knives falling in showers into their hands.

Those episodes, however, brightened Jules Le Baron's life long before he was twenty-five. He had since had many similar experiences in the larger arena of the world. Indeed, he gloried in his susceptibility; he used to give people to understand that, though fairly successful in business, he had a very keen appreciation of the sentiments, and of all the refinements of life. To a foreigner he would have expressed this complication by saying that he was Parisian to his finger-tips. In America, where,

at the age of twenty-six, he passed three wretched months, he had been appalled by the lack of sentiment among the people. Of course, as he represented there the wool-house with which he had been connected since his sixteenth year, he met chiefly business men; but even these ought to have displayed an interest in something outside their commercial routine.

It was those three months in America that gave Jules Le Baron his zest for Paris. Of course, he had always loved it; but till he left it, his love had not become self-conscious. America taught him what he had only dimly known before, that for him Paris was the only city in the world worth living in. He knew that people born away from Paris liked other cities; secretly, however, this amused him. He believed that no one, after living in Paris, could find any other place habitable. Indeed, any places, any people, any customs foreign to Paris seemed to him so droll that at the thought of some of them he often laughed aloud. America had given him things to laugh at for the rest of his life.

Of course, Jules was proud of having visited America; it gave him a delightful feeling of superiority to his friends and acquaintances at home. He always felt pleased when the English and Americans that he met in business complimented him on his English; it enabled him to say carelessly: "Oh, I just picked it up when I was in America." He really had learned very little English there; nearly all he knew had been taught him by his father, a professor of chemistry in a small school in Paris, who had spent six months in England during the siege. He had acquired there, however, a smattering of American slang; on his lips it sounded delicious. His friends in Paris thought he spoke English beautifully, and frequently referred to his talent for languages. He had given them glowing accounts of his adventures in America, and said nothing of his desolate loneliness there; so they looked upon him as a born traveller, – as, altogether, a man of remarkable qualities. But for his English and his travels, they would merely have shrugged their shoulders at the mention of his name, and dismissed him with a "*Bon garçon!*"

Jules Le Baron knew that he was much more than a *bon garçon*. His attitude toward the world expressed this; he always acted as if he felt the world had been made exclusively for him. After losing his father at fourteen, he promptly proceeded to link his mother in the closest bonds of slavery. Yet he was kind to her, too, and, in his way, he loved her, for she was made to obey, just as he had been born to command. When she died and left him alone at the age of twenty with a small property, he took a miniature apartment in the *rue de Lisbonne*, and adjusted himself to his new life. His salary at the wool-house, where his English helped to make him valuable, together with the property, gave him an income of ten thousand francs a year. He considered himself rich, a personage, one who ought to marry well.

Jules had thought so much about marriage that, at thirty, it was surprising he should have remained unwedded. Every young woman he met he regarded as a candidate for his hand, and he spent a large part of his leisure in rejecting these innocent suitors. Even now, as he slowly made his way up the *Boulevard*, he fancied that the girls he passed were looking at him admiringly and enviously. He often smiled back at them, for he was rarely unkind and he never gratuitously wounded any one's feelings. With his mother, it is true, he had been occasionally severe, but merely to discipline her, to make her see things as he saw them. At this moment he felt particularly amiable. He was in Paris, on the *Boulevard* that he loved, surrounded by the people that he loved, in the atmosphere which, as he had discovered in America, was as the very breath to his being. The spectacle was all for him! Paris, had been created that he might enjoy it!

II

Saturday was the fashionable night at the *Cirque Parisien*, and the night when Jules usually attended it. This was Tuesday, however, and Jules decided not to be fashionable, but simply to amuse himself. As he approached the letters of light that flashed the name of the *Cirque* into the eyes of the *boulevardiers*, he suddenly remembered that he had promised to meet two of his comrades of the wool-house in the evening. He turned into the *rue Taitbout*, and as he was walking slowly through the long passageway leading into one of the large apartment-houses there, he felt himself suddenly seized in the darkness by two pairs of hands. He looked quickly around, and dimly recognized Dufresne and Leroux, who had come up from behind him. They were both types, short and swarthy, with oily faces, thick black moustaches, and pointed beards.

"Why didn't you come before?" and "We've been waiting an hour," they cried together.

"He's been up to some adventure, I'll wager," said Leroux.

"Answer! The truth! No lies!" Dufresne exclaimed, shaking him by one shoulder.

Jules pulled away with an effort.

"I thought you were going to rob me!" he laughed.

"You see, he doesn't answer," said Dufresne. "I told you he was up to some adventure."

"Up to some adventure!" Jules repeated. "I've just been taking dinner, and I forgot I'd promised to meet you to-night. Where are you going?"

"We're going to the *Folies Bergères*, and then to a masked ball in Montmartre," Leroux answered, resuming his grip. "Come along."

Jules pulled away with a laugh.

"Thanks. Not to-night. I don't feel like it. Besides, I'm not dressed."

"But *we're* not dressed," they cried together, throwing open their coats. "You won't have to dress. Come on."

Jules shook his head decidedly.

"No," he insisted, "it's all very well for you young bucks. I'm too old. It tires me out for the next day; can't do my work. I think I'll look in at the Circus. Come along with me."

They scoffed at the idea of going to the Circus, and tried to persuade him to accompany them, since he had kept them waiting so long. But he resisted, and, as he turned away from them, they clutched at him again, but he escaped, laughing, into the street, and he saw them shaking their fists after him. Those two "boys," as he called them, were always trying to drag him into their escapades. They looked so much alike that at the office they were called "the twins," and they were always getting into scrapes and into debt together.

Before buying his ticket for the Circus, Jules looked carefully over the program on the posters in the long entrance. Some of the performers he had already seen and the names of a few of them were unfamiliar to him. One name was printed in larger letters than the others – Mademoiselle Blanche. Jules read the paragraph printed below, announcing Mademoiselle Blanche as the most marvellous acrobat in the world, and proclaiming that, in addition to giving her act on the trapeze, she would plunge backward from the top of the theatre, a height of more than seventy-five feet, into a net below. Jules smiled, and felt a thrill of his old boyish excitement at the prospect of seeing the feat performed.

When he turned to buy his ticket, he noticed a large photograph on an easel, standing near the box-office. The name of Mademoiselle Blanche, printed under it, attracted him. The acrobat, her long sinuous limbs encased in white tights, was suspended in mid-air, one arm bent at the elbow, clinging to a trapeze. The tense muscles of the arm made a curious contrast with the expression of the face, which was marked by unusual simplicity and gentleness. The profile was clear, the curving eyelashes were delicately outlined, and the eyes were large and dark. Something about the lines of the small mouth attracted Jules. He studied the picture carefully to discover what it was. The whole expression

of the face seemed to him to be concentrated in the mouth; he felt sure that the teeth were small and very white, and the woman's voice was soft and musical. The face differed from the ordinary types of performers he had seen; it reminded him of the faces of some of the girls in the convent of Beauvais, where his mother had once taken him to visit his cousin. The woman must be clever to make herself up so attractively. He wondered if the appearance of youth that she presented was also due to her cleverness. She might easily pass for twenty. Her figure looked marvellously supple; she had probably been trained for the circus from infancy, and she might be fifty years old.

He decided not to buy a seat, but to go into the balcony where he could walk about and look down at the performance. If it bored him, he could rest on one of the velvet-cushioned seats till a new "turn" began. He found more people in the balcony than he had ever seen there before; as a rule they made only a thin fringe around the railing; now they were five and six deep. He established himself beside a post where he could catch glimpses of the arena and get a support, and there he remained for half an hour.

To-night, however, the antics of the clown, the phenomenal intelligence of the performing dogs, even the agility of the Schaeffer family of acrobats, did not interest him. He was impatient to see Mademoiselle Blanche. Her name stood last on the program; she was probably reserved for a crowning attraction. Jules dropped on one of the velvet cushions, and rested there for another half-hour. Then some knife-throwing attracted him, and he slowly worked his way through the crowd to a place where he could look down at the performers. The knife-throwing was followed by an exhibition of trick-riding, which preceded the acrobat's appearance.

Before this appearance took place, however, there was a long wait caused by the preparations made for the great plunge. A thick rope was suspended from one of the beams that supported the roof of the building, and under it a net was spread. Then the half-dozen trapezes that had been tied to the walls, were loosened, and as they swung in the air and the band played, Mademoiselle Blanche, in white silk tights, with two long strips of white satin ribbon dangling from her throat, ran into the ring, and bowed in response to the applause of the crowd.

Jules Le Baron drew a long breath. The long supple limbs, the firm white arms and throat, the pale oval face, framed in dark hair that curled around the forehead, created a kind of beauty that seemed almost ethereal. The glamour of youth was over her, too; she could not be, at most, more than twenty. As she ran up the little rope ladder to the net and climbed hand over hand along the rope to one of the trapezes, Jules thought he had never seen such grace, such exquisite sureness of movement and agility. After reaching the trapeze, she sat there for a moment, smiling and rubbing her hands. Then she began to swing gently, and a moment later she shot through the air to another trapeze several feet away, and from that she passed on to the others with a bewildering swiftness.

Jules had never seen a woman perform alone on the trapeze before, and this exhibition of skill and resource fascinated him. The feats were nearly all new, and some of them of unusual difficulty. When the girl had finished her performance on the trapeze she returned to the rope, and began to pose on it, twisting it around her waist, and hanging suspended with her arms in the air. In this way she rolled gently down to the net.

The event of the evening was yet to come, however. After resting for a moment, Mademoiselle Blanche seized the rope again, and, hand over hand, she climbed to the top of the building; there she sat on a beam, so far from the audience that she seemed much smaller than she really was. The ring-master, a greasy-looking Frenchman in evening dress, appeared in the arena and commanded silence.

"Mademoiselle Blanche must have perfect quiet," he cried, "in order to perform her great feat. The least noise might disturb her, and cause her death."

Jules smiled at this speech; it was very clever, he thought. Of course, it was made merely to impress the audience. He wondered how Mademoiselle Blanche felt at that moment, perched up there so quietly, ready to hurl herself into the air. He did not have time to think much about this, for as he strained his eyes toward her, the signal for the fall was given, the white figure plunged backward,

spun to earth, landed with a tremendous thump in the padded net, bounded into the air again, and Mademoiselle Blanche was bowing and kissing her fingers.

For a moment not a sound was heard. Then the audience burst into applause, and Jules Le Baron breathed. He felt as if his heart had stopped beating. He had never seen such a thrilling exhibition before. All his old delight in the circus had come back to him. As he walked out with the crowd, he congratulated himself on not having gone with Dufresne and Leroux. He would not have missed his evening for a dozen balls in Montmartre!

At the door he met Roger Durand, dramatic critic of the *Jour*. He had known Durand as a boy, and they had continued on a footing of half-hostile friendship.

"So you've come to see the new sensation?" said the journalist, as they shook hands.

"Just by chance," Jules replied. "I've never been more surprised in my life. Who is she?"

"That's just what I haven't been able to find out. I've been talking about her tonight with old Réju – he's the man who makes the engagements – but he didn't seem to know much more about her than I did. He said he first heard of her in Bucharest. She made a hit there, too, some time last year."

"But she's French, isn't she? Parisian?"

"She's French, but Réju says she isn't Parisian – comes from the provinces somewhere. There's a woman goes about with her, her mother, I suppose. Réju says mamma keeps her down here," the journalist added with a smile, making a significant gesture with his thumb. "Mamma gets all the money, and Mademoiselle does all the work."

Jules shrugged his shoulders. "Going to your office?" he said. "You have to turn night into day, haven't you?"

"My dear fellow, night is the best part of life. Days were made for sleep. We've got mixed up, that's all, and only a few of us are clever enough to find it out. Come and have a glass of absinthe with me before I go back."

Jules shook his head.

"Some other time. A glass of absinthe would spoil me for to-morrow. *Au revoir*."

He was glad to be alone again so that he might think over the evening. The beautiful figure whirling through the air still haunted him. "Mademoiselle Blanche!" The name seemed to sing in his mind. He wondered what her real name was. So she had a mother who kept her under her thumb! Then he wondered what she was like out of the circus – ignorant and vulgar, probably, like the rest of them. Yet in her looks she was certainly different from the rest. At any rate, he must go and see her performance again. He would go several times.

III

When Jules arrived home he found supper on the table of his little dining-room. Madeleine, the old woman who had served his mother for years and remained with him after his mother's death, always left something for him at night. Now he turned away from it in disgust. His face was burning; he felt nervous, excited. After going to bed, he was unable to sleep. He kept seeing Mademoiselle Blanche tumbling through the air! He could not think of her except as in motion. He tried to recall her as she stood in the net, just before climbing the rope to the trapeze, but her figure was vague and shadowy. Then he tried to think out her features as he had observed them, and he found that he had quite forgotten her face; all that remained was an impression of sweetness, of a ravishing smile.

When, finally, he fell asleep, he dreamed of her, still flashing through the air, striking with a thud the padded net, and bouncing to her feet again. He woke several times and felt impatient with himself for not being able to drive the thought away; yet when he sank again into sleep, the dream came back persistently.

At half-past seven he rose, tired from his broken rest. He went at once to the long mirror that covered the door of his wardrobe, expecting to be confronted with the face of an invalid. His gray eyes were slightly inflamed and his cheeks had more than their usual color; otherwise his appearance was normal. For several moments he surveyed himself. As a rule he did not think much about his looks; he knew that he was considered handsome, and this gave him a half-unconscious gratification. When he wanted to please a woman he seldom failed. Now he had a distinct pleasure at the sight of the aristocratic curve of his nose, the strong outline of his chin, the full red lips under his thick brown moustache. Jules wished that he could keep from growing fat; but after all, he reflected philosophically, there was a difference in fatness; some men it made gross and vulgar; his own complexion, however, was so fair that he could never look gross. Even now there was a suggestion about him of the sleekness of a well-kept pigeon.

When he went out to breakfast he found Madeleine looking doleful. Madeleine had known Jules from birth and considered herself a second mother to him. She was short and stout, with a mouthful of very bad teeth, some of which rattled when she spoke, as if they were about to fall out.

"Monsieur Jules did not eat last night," she said as she poured his coffee and pushed his rolls into the centre of the little table.

"No, Madeleine, I wasn't hungry." Jules took up the *Figaro* that was lying on the table and began to look for a reference to Mademoiselle Blanche.

"The coffee will grow cold, Monsieur Jules."

Jules did not hear her. When preoccupied, he had a habit of ignoring Madeleine. Yet, in his way, he liked her; he often wondered what he would do without her; she was docile and attentive to his wants as his mother had been, and she was very inexpensive. For five minutes he read; then, when he found no reference to the acrobat, he threw down the paper with an exclamation of impatience, and seized his cup and sipped his coffee.

"It's cold!" he cried.

Madeleine's look of distress deepened.

"Let me take that away," she said. "I'll get another cup."

When she brought the cup and poured some of the hot coffee into it, Jules drained it, and pushed his chair away from the table.

"But you have eaten nothing, Monsieur Jules!"

"I'm not hungry this morning."

"And you didn't eat anything last night," the old woman repeated, following him with her eyes. "Are you sick?"

"No, no!" Jules replied, impatiently. "I don't feel like eating, that's all. Give me my hat and coat, Madeleine; I shall be late if I don't hurry."

"Monsieur Jules doesn't look well," said Madeleine timidly, as she helped him on with his coat.

"Oh, don't worry about me." At the door Jules turned. "I shall be out late again to-night, Madeleine. You needn't leave the light burning."

The wool-house of Ballou, Mercier & Co., where Jules worked, was only ten minutes' walk from the *rue de Lisbonne*. On his way there, Jules resolved to say nothing to the twins about Mademoiselle Blanche. Of course, Leroux would ask him about the evening, and he would say simply that he had been rather bored. He wanted to keep Mademoiselle Blanche to himself. He even hoped that her performance would not be noised abroad, that she would not become one of those women whom all Paris went to see and every one talked glibly about. But she must be well-known already; it was evidently her performance that had crowded the Circus.

At the office the twins had a great deal to say about the masked ball of the previous night, but Jules hardly heard them. He was still so haunted by the thought of Mademoiselle Blanche that he made several mistakes in his letters; since his return from America he had been placed in charge of all the English correspondence, and it was important that he should be exact. The day had never seemed so long to him, nor his work, in which he usually took pride, so dull. He was impatient for the evening. When six o'clock came, he hurried away without bidding the twins good-night.

Jules walked toward the little restaurant in the *Boulevard* where he had dined the night before. He wanted to see André again, to talk over Mademoiselle Blanche with him. He felt almost a personal affection for André now. The little *garçon* was bewildered by Jules' affability, and overcome by the generous tip which he received as Jules left the place. Indeed, freed from the labors of the day, Jules felt buoyant and happy. But when he reached the Circus, his spirits sank; he had forgotten that Mademoiselle Blanche did not appear till nearly eleven. He would have to wait for her at least three hours!

He felt so vexed that he turned away from the theatre and walked along the *Boulevard*. It was late in October, and a light rain was falling, mixed with snow. The *Boulevard* was crowded with people, hurrying under umbrellas. Jules turned up the collar of his overcoat, and shivered. What was he to do till eleven? He might go to one of the theatres, but he would not enjoy it. When he reached the *Opéra*, he had not made up his mind what to do, and he walked on as far as the Madeleine. He entered a *café* opposite the church, and called for a bock and one of the illustrated papers. For an hour he sat there, sipping the beer and pretending to read. The jokes, however, which he usually enjoyed, seemed to him vulgar. He was thinking of the figure in white silk tights, shooting through the air. A score of times he called himself a fool for not being able to put that thought out of his mind; yet he felt nervous and irritable, simply because he was impatient to see the spectacle again. At last he became so uneasy that he looked for the waiter to pay his bill and leave. Then he felt a slap on the shoulder, and Durand's smiling face confronted him.

There was no reason why Jules should have been displeased at seeing Durand; yet at that moment he felt resentful. The journalist was small and dapper, with the ends of his black moustache carefully waxed. His little black eyes were always sparkling with humor, and when he smiled he showed two rows of regular white teeth. Yet, in spite of the care of himself which he seemed to take, he never looked quite clean; his thick black hair was always dusty with dandruff, which fell on the shoulders of his coat. He spoke in a high thin voice and with a patronizing air that exasperated Jules.

"I thought I recognized your back," he said, when Jules had turned his face toward him.

Jules grunted and pointed to a chair at the little table. He wanted to show by his manner that he didn't like that familiar slap. Durand, however, was unruffled.

"What are you doing here, anyway? Why aren't you at the theatre or one of the *cafés chantants*?"

Jules took a puff of his cigarette, and then looked down at the little figure.

"I might ask you the same question."

"Oh, I'm working. This is a busy night for me." Then Durand's face lighted. "What do you suppose I've got to do to-night?"

Jules knocked the ashes of his cigarette against the edge of the table. "Now, do you mean? I can't imagine. You're always doing impossible things."

"I'm going to interview the little acrobat."

Jules came very near jumping. He controlled himself, however, and carelessly lifted the cigarette to his lips again.

"What little acrobat?" he asked, screwing his eyes.

"The one you saw last night – at the *Cirque*– the *Cirque Parisien*."

"Oh, Mademoiselle – Mademoiselle – what's her name – the one who dives from the top of the building?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle Blanche. When I went back to the office last night, I told old Bargy about her – cracked her up to the skies, and he swallowed the bait, and sent me round to interview her to-night. Ah, my dear boy, that's one of the advantages of being a newspaper man. It opens every door to you. Whenever I want to get acquainted with a pretty actress, I simply go and interview her."

He sat back in his seat and smiled and hummed a popular song, rapping the table with his fingers. The waiter came up and asked for his order.

"Two bocks!" said Durand, looking at Jules.

"No, no more for me. I haven't finished this yet." When the waiter went away, Jules glanced sleepily at the journalist. "You're a very lucky fellow, it seems to me. I should think it would be rather agreeable to know the pretty actresses."

Durand shrugged his shoulders. "Sometimes, yes – sometimes, no. Usually it spoils the illusion."

Jules stared thoughtfully at his bock. "Aren't you afraid you'll be disillusioned by Mademoiselle Blanche?"

"Oh, probably. They're all alike – when you come to know them. But there's something about her that made me think she might be a little different from the rest. At any rate, she's dev'lish pretty, isn't she?"

"Do you think so?" Jules asked, with a deprecating lift of the eyebrows.

"Think so! I know so! If you don't think so you must be hard to please."

"Oh, I thought she was pretty in her circus rig. I should like to see her out of the ring. They make up so, those women. You can't tell whether they're really pretty or not."

"Well, come around with me, and I'll introduce you. Then you can see for yourself."

Jules nearly jumped again, but his cigarette helped him to disguise the impulse. "I'm afraid I shall be in the way," he said, after a meditative puff.

Durand had seized the bock left on the table by the waiter, and was holding it over his head. When half the contents had disappeared, he smacked his lips and wiped them with his handkerchief. "Not at all. You'll help me draw her out. They say she does the shy-young-girl act; so she's hard to talk with. That seems to be a favorite pose of actresses nowadays."

Jules' heart was throbbing. He was afraid that Durand would discover his elation. So he tried to appear indifferent and cynical. Durand's cynicism amused him; yet in the journalist's presence he was always trying to imitate it.

When he had drained his bock, Durand stood up, surveyed with a professional eye the crowd at the tables, nodded to a few acquaintances, and made a sign to Jules that he was ready to go. It had ceased raining, but the sky was still leaden. The splendid portico of the Madeleine loomed out of the darkness, and the lights in the *Boulevard des Capucines* were gleaming faintly in the mist. They met few people as they walked toward the *Opéra*, but there was plenty of life around the theatres in the *Boulevard des Italiens*. When they reached the *Cirque*, Durand had a whispered consultation with the *Control* who sat in self-conscious dignity and evening dress at the desk near the main door. He referred the journalist to a short fat man with a white beard, lounging a few feet away, and Jules

stood apart while the two had an animated talk. After a few moments, Durand made a sign to Jules to come up, and Jules found himself presented to Réju as "my *confrère*, Monsieur Jules Le Baron, of the Marseilles *Gazette*." Réju was very amiable, and Jules felt angry, though he could not help being amused by Durand's serene impudence.

They were conducted at once into the theatre, under the great arch, draped with French flags, where the performers made their exits and their entrances. Then they found themselves in a large bare room, with several passages radiating from it.

"The dressing-rooms are here," Réju explained, pointing to the passages. "Mademoiselle Blanche's room is number 5. I don't know whether she has come yet or not. Her act doesn't begin till ten minutes of eleven. Wait here, and I'll see if she can receive you."

Durand smiled at Jules, and as soon as Réju was out of hearing, he whispered: "I hope you didn't mind that little fairy-tale of mine. I had to pass you off as one of the fraternity. If I hadn't they wouldn't have let you come in. Now, don't forget your part, the Marseilles *Gazette*. It's a good republican paper. The editor's a great friend of mine."

"I'm afraid I sha'n't be a credit to the profession. I've never seen any one interviewed in my life."

"Then it'll be an education to you." Durand laughed. "Look out. Here he comes!"

The fat little manager approached them with a smiling face; he evidently had in mind two free advertisements for the theatre.

"Mademoiselle Blanche," he said impressively, "arrived five minutes ago, and she hasn't begun to dress yet. If you'll have the kindness to follow me, messieurs" – he concluded with a bow and a wave of the hand.

Jules' body was tingling, and his heart beat violently. Durand, on the contrary, seemed more debonair than ever; with an air of importance, he strutted behind the manager, as if conferring an honor on the performer by his call. Réju rapped on the door, and after a moment a shrill voice piped:

"*Entrez!*"

IV

Durand made a bold entrance, and Jules followed sheepishly. The room was small and uncarpeted; on one side stood a wardrobe and a table, and on the opposite wall hung a large mirror that reflected nearly the whole of the apartment. The rest of the furniture consisted of two wooden chairs and a large trunk. Jules did not realize that he had observed these details till afterward, for his glance was bent on the face of Mademoiselle Blanche, who stood beside the trunk, surveying her callers with apprehension in her big eyes. On one of the chairs sat a woman of fifty, tall and thin, with strands of flesh hanging at her neck, her eyes bright, her lips aglow with a false bloom, and her cheeks pallid with powder. Jules recognized her at once as the acrobat's mother, and he had a shock of surprise and revulsion.

The manager, after presenting the callers to Madame Perrault, and then to her daughter, excused himself with a flourish, and left the room. Madame Perrault was smiling and chattering at Durand, and Mademoiselle Blanche was flushed and confused.

"I think we must be the first of the Parisian journalists to interview Mademoiselle," said Durand to the mother, letting his eyes turn vaguely to the acrobat for information.

Madame Perrault gave a little jump, and glanced hastily at her daughter's face.

"Yes, you are," she replied. "We did have – that is, there was a gentleman of the press who wanted to interview Blanche, but she – she was a little timid about it. Blanche is very timid; so we – we put it off. But interviewers are very – Ah, you will sit down, will you not?" she said to Jules, who had remained standing with his eyes fixed on the girl.

Mademoiselle Blanche had taken a seat on the trunk, and her mother sat beside her so that Jules might occupy her chair. When they were all adjusted, Madame Perrault resumed, turning to Jules, whose embarrassment she had observed.

"Monsieur Réju told me yesterday interviews were so important. They make people interested. They – "

"But the people are already interested in Mademoiselle Blanche," Durand interposed, gallantly. "That's why my *confrère* and I have come here. The Parisians want to know all about Mademoiselle. She's the sensation of the hour. Her name is on everybody's lips."

He glanced at Mademoiselle Blanche with his most languishing smile, and Jules felt a sudden desire to kick him. The acrobat tried to look pleased, but she succeeded only in appearing more confused. Jules was surprised to see how frail she was. Her figure, full and vigorous in the ring, seemed so thin in her plain, tight-fitting gray dress, that he felt sure she must have been padded for her performance.

"I'm going to ask Mademoiselle a great many questions," Durand resumed, still leering at the acrobat.

"But I have nothing to tell," she replied, speaking for the first time.

"But you must have been born, and grown up, and done a great many things besides, that the rest of us don't do," the journalist laughed, growing more familiar. Jules' dislike for him was rapidly developing into hatred.

Durand's familiarity, however, seemed to please the acrobat's mother.

"Blanche is too modest," she said. "She's had a great many things happen to her."

"Have you always been in the circus, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes, ever since she was a child," her mother answered. "Her father was an acrobat."

"So it's in the family. And were you in the circus too, Madame?"

Madame Perrault shook her head, and Jules thought he saw her blush under the powder. "No, I have never been in public life. My husband's family lived in Boulogne, where I lived too. They were

all acrobats. After my marriage I used to travel with the circus, and when Blanche was born, Monsieur Perrault wanted her to perform, too. When she was only five years old, they used to appear together."

"Then you have travelled a great deal, Mademoiselle?" Durand turned his fascinating glance on the girl. She looked at her mother, and as she was about to reply, Madame Perrault resumed: "Ah, my daughter has been over nearly the whole world, – in England, in Germany, in Russia – "

"Have you ever been in America?" Jules asked quickly.

The acrobat shook her head.

"But she has had such offers – such splendid – such magnificent offers to go there," the mother cried, clasping her hands.

"But I'm afraid," the girl murmured, glancing at Jules with her big timid eyes.

"Afraid of the voyage?" Jules asked. Her eyes were still fixed upon him, and he felt as if every nerve in his body were vibrating. "That's nothing. I have made it twice, and I wasn't sick a day."

This was not true, for on each trip Jules had been sick for several days; but he made the remark with such ease, that for the moment he felt convinced himself of its truth. Mademoiselle Blanche looked at him admiringly, and he saw that he had made an impression on the mother, too, established himself in her regard as a travelled person, a man of importance.

"Then Monsieur has been in America?" said Madame Perrault.

"Oh, yes," Jules replied, carelessly. "All over it. It's a wonderful country."

Mademoiselle Blanche sighed, and her mother glanced at her wistfully.

"But it's too far," Madame resumed with a shake of the head. "We could not go so far from the children."

"Then you have other children?" said the journalist. "Are they in the circus, too?"

For the first time, the girl's face brightened. "Oh, no!" she replied, with a suggestion of horror in her tone.

"They are very young," the mother explained. "Jeanne is only fourteen and Louise will be eleven next month. They are with my sister in Boulogne."

Durand made a little sign of impatience which indicated to Jules that he was not getting the information he wanted. Besides, he was evidently displeased by the failure of his leers to produce any apparent effect upon the girl; she seemed to be unconscious of them.

"And Monsieur Perrault," he said, "he is still performing?"

An expression of pain appeared in the mother's face, and Mademoiselle dropped her eyes.

"No, he died three years ago," Madame Perrault replied. "He was killed at Monte Carlo. He fell from the trapeze."

There was silence for a moment, and the journalist tried to infuse into his insipid little face a look of sympathy. Just how much sympathy he felt was shown by his next remark.

"I couldn't help wondering last night," he said briskly, "when I saw Mademoiselle perform, how she felt just before she took that plunge. How do you feel, Mademoiselle? Aren't you frightened, just a little?"

The girl shook her head. "I have done it for so many years, I don't think of being afraid. My father taught me never to have the least fear. He wouldn't have been killed if the trapeze hadn't broken."

"And we take every precaution," Madame Perrault quickly explained.

Durand began to ask questions about the various cities Mademoiselle had visited. Most of the replies came from Madame Perrault, who seemed to have constituted herself her daughter's mouthpiece. Which audiences did she like best to play to? The Germans! Durand shook his head. He wouldn't dare to say that in a French paper. It might make Mademoiselle unpopular with the Parisians. Ah, but Mademoiselle liked the Parisians, too. Didn't she find them very enthusiastic? No? That was simply because they were thrilled, overcome, silenced by her performance. Durand grew excited in extolling the merits of Parisian audiences. For their favorites they would do anything, and

Mademoiselle was fast becoming one of the most popular of their favorites. Of course they had their peculiarities. When a performer vexed them, there were no limits to their wrath. Had Mademoiselle heard of the attack on Sophie Lenoir at the *Ambassadeurs*? The audience had thrown at her everything they could lay hands on, and she had fainted, or pretended to faint, on the stage.

Indeed, much of the conversation was supplied by the journalist himself. He had apparently abandoned hope of making the acrobat talk; so he addressed most of his speeches to the mother, whom he drew out by many artful devices. Mademoiselle Blanche sat looking on in open-eyed surprise, as if she did not have a share in the matters under discussion. Occasionally she would glance appealingly at Jules; when he looked back, she would blush and turn her head away.

While Durand was in the middle of one of his stories, Madame Perrault drew a small gold watch from her pocket. The journalist jumped from his chair.

"We are keeping Mademoiselle from dressing," he said, as Jules rose, too. "A thousand pardons. We will go in just a moment. There's only one more question. That is about your presents, Mademoiselle, your gifts."

"My gifts?" the acrobat repeated vaguely.

"Yes, from the princes, the crowned heads you've appeared before."

"Ah!" the mother exclaimed, in a long breath, "Blanche has received so many! There was the brooch from the Emperor of Russia, and the ring from the Prince of Roumania, a costly diamond, monsieur, so clear and beautiful, and the little gold watch studded with pearls from the King of Bavaria, the 'mad King' they call him, you know – and then – then the bracelet set with rubies from the Duchess of Merlino, when Blanche was in Bucharest. Ah, but we have none of these here. They are all at home, they – "

"Here in Paris?" Durand asked, impatiently.

"No, monsieur, in Boulogne," Madame Perrault answered, and Jules saw an expression of wonder and pain cross her daughter's face.

Durand was rubbing his silk hat with his glove, and regarding it intently.

"Then," he said, looking up quickly, "there must have been some adventures – some admirers, that have followed Mademoiselle, perhaps, eh?" he added, leering insinuatingly at the mother.

Madame smiled, and the face of the acrobat turned pink. Jules wanted to seize the little journalist by the neck, and throw him out of the door.

"Ah, in Bucharest," cried Madame, "the young – "

"Mamma!"

Madame Perrault shrugged her shoulders, and smiled suggestively. "Perhaps we'd better not speak of that. Blanche is a good girl," she added, patting her daughter on the back. "She's good to her mother, and she's good to her sisters. Ah, *ma chère!*"

The girl had turned her head away. Durand offered her his hand gallantly, and then beamed on the mother. "I will come and see you some time, if you will give me permission," he said condescendingly.

"Some Sunday," Madame Perrault replied. "It's the only day when Blanche is free. And you will bring your friend, perhaps, if he is still in Paris," she added amiably, with a quick glance and smile at the journalist from Marseilles. Then she produced two cards and passed them to the callers.

Jules murmured a civil response to the invitation, and, after bowing low to the ladies, he followed Durand and closed the door behind him. The expression of languishing pleasure in the journalist's face had given place to a look of hilarious merriment.

"Did you ever see such a block? She didn't have a word to say. I don't believe she has an idea. And she thought she was impressing me with her modesty! And the gifts from the crowned heads – wasn't that droll? Of course, the old lady made up every one of those stories. She's a sharp one, with her painted lips and her powdered cheeks. Her little game is to get a rich husband for the girl, and I'll wager a week's salary she'll succeed."

Jules said nothing. He knew it would be useless to argue with Durand. If he were to give his opinion of Mademoiselle Blanche, the journalist would laugh, and say he didn't understand women, especially actresses. So, when Durand suddenly asked him what he thought of the girl, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

As they passed out they met Réju, who offered them seats if they cared to remain for the rest of the performance. Durand explained that he must return at once to the office, and urged Jules to accept the invitation. When Jules found himself alone in the first row of the orchestra he breathed with relief. He had never before realized what an odious little creature Durand was. For the moment he forgot even to feel gratitude for the introduction to the acrobat.

He was unable to take an interest in the performance, and he looked at his watch to see how long he would have to wait for the appearance of Mademoiselle Blanche. It was just twenty minutes past ten. Suddenly it occurred to him that he would have time to go out and buy some flowers for her. He left his seat, and hurried to the nearest shop in the *Boulevard*. There he bought the finest bunch of white roses he could find, went back to the theatre, and sent them to the acrobat with his card. When at last Mademoiselle Blanche ran into the arena, he was thrilled with joy. She wore his flowers in her belt.

V

That night Jules Le Baron knew that for the first time in his life he was really in love. He had often fancied himself in love before, and he had enjoyed the experience; now he discovered his mistake. Love was not the pure delight he had imagined it to be. It is true, he had moments of ecstasy, of sublime self-congratulation, when he felt with stronger conviction that the world was made for him and he had been created to conquer the world; but during the next few days these were followed by long periods of depression, of abject despair.

At times, too, the grotesqueness of this infatuation appalled him. To be in love with an acrobat, a woman who earned her bread by hurling herself from the top of a building, who risked her life every day, sometimes twice a day, that she might live! Then, at the thought of her amazing courage, Jules would be overcome, and if alone in his room at home, he would throw himself on the bed, bury his head in the pillow and groan. Indeed, at this period he went through many strange and violent performances. Madeleine became alarmed for his health, and thought of sending for a doctor.

He could not apply himself to his work; he made so many mistakes in his English correspondence that Monsieur Mercier had to ask him to be more careful. The twins noticed his condition and chaffed him, and insisted on knowing "her name"; in secret they decided that Jules had been investing his money badly; he had often boasted to them about his little property. They tried to cheer him by urging him to join them in their nocturnal expeditions, but he always replied that he was staying at home in the evening now. As a matter of fact, he spent every night or a portion of every night at the *Cirque Parisien*, and at each appearance of Mademoiselle Blanche, he was gratified to see that she wore his nightly offering of roses in her belt. He never received an acknowledgment of these tributes, for he did not dare write his address on the cards he sent with them. Once, as she stood in the net, just before climbing the rope to make her great plunge, he fancied that his eye caught hers, and she smiled at him. He decided afterward that he had been mistaken; but the thought of that smile prevented him from sleeping half the night.

Jules was keeping his courage alive in the hope of seeing her at her apartment on Sunday. His only fear was that Durand would be there. Durand's published interview with Mademoiselle Blanche was so flippant that it deepened the hatred Jules had already conceived for the journalist. He resolved on Sunday to explain to Madame Perrault that he was not what Durand had represented him to be and to appear in his own character; he was conceited enough to believe that in his own character he could make quite as good an impression as in any other. Besides, had not Mademoiselle Blanche been impressed by the fact that he had visited America?

On Saturday night he sent his silk hat to be blocked, and his frock-coat to be pressed, and he bought a pair of white gloves. Madeleine found him much more agreeable on Sunday morning than he had been during the week; but, though he seemed to be recovering his spirits, she still felt worried. In the afternoon he presented himself before her for inspection, asked if his coat set well, if she liked the colour of his gloves, what she thought of the violets that he wore. She became enraptured over his appearance, told him that he had never looked so beautiful, and saw him go away with a radiant face. Then, as the door closed behind him, she went into her little chamber and wept. The truth had flashed upon her! Her Jules was in love! Some one else was going to take his mother's place and hers. She felt all the jealousy and misery that his own mother might have felt at the moment, combined with a pathetic consciousness that she had no right to grieve. Jules was everything in the world to her, she said to herself, and she was nothing to him. She was an old broken woman, and for the rest of her days she should have to live alone.

Jules had become her pride and the source of her happiness. Yet she really saw very little of him – the only meal he took at home was his breakfast – but she really existed for the pleasure of serving him and looking at his face in the morning. Now, in spite of her misery, she knelt before the

statue of the Blessed Virgin that stood on a little table beside her bed, and prayed that the woman who was going to take her place might be a good woman, and worthy of her boy. In her simple affection for Jules she believed that he had only to show that he cared for a woman to have her throw herself into his arms.

It was hardly three o'clock, too early for a call, Jules thought, as he walked toward the *rue St. Honoré*; but he was so impatient to see Mademoiselle Blanche again that he could not wait till later in the afternoon. During the week the sun had hardly appeared, and the succession of leaden skies had helped to depress his spirits. To-day, however, the sky was blue and the sun shone so brightly that it seemed almost like spring. He was in one of his buoyant moods, when he felt sure of his ability to conquer. In his fine clothes and with his confident manner, he looked very handsome; several pretty girls gratified him by staring at him as he passed. If he impressed people he didn't know, why couldn't he impress Mademoiselle Blanche? He planned a great many things to say to her. He would be particularly amiable to the mother, too, and tell her all about America.

The number in the *rue St. Honoré* that Madame Perrault had given corresponded with one of the great white stucco apartment houses abounding in Paris. He passed under the wide vaulted entrance, and asked the wife of the *concierge* if Madame Perrault lived there. "*Au sixième*," was the shrill reply, and he started up the narrow stairs. When he reached the *sixième*, the top floor of the house, he panted and waited for a moment before ringing, to catch his breath. Then he carefully arranged his cuffs, touched with his gloved hand his silk cravat and his flowers and, with a sigh of anticipation, he rang the bell.

A trim little servant of not more than fifteen opened the door. When Jules asked for Madame Perrault, she shook her head.

"She went out an hour ago, monsieur, and she won't be back till four."

Jules' heart sank. Of course, mother and daughter were out together. He was about to turn away despairingly, but he suddenly thought of inquiring if Mademoiselle were at home. The maid nodded.

"Shall I say that monsieur wishes to see her?" she asked, stepping back that he might enter.

"If you please," he replied, as he followed the girl into the little *salon*. It was furnished wholly in Japanese fashion; the walls were hung with Japanese draperies, and a large thick rug covered the floor. On the mantel, prettily draped with a wide piece of flowered silk, stood a number of photographs, one of them a duplicate of the portrait of Mademoiselle Blanche that he had seen in the entrance of the Circus. As Jules glanced at this, he heard a light step in the adjoining room, and when he turned, Mademoiselle Blanche herself was looking at him out of her dark eyes. She walked toward him, flushing a little, and extended her hand.

"I am sorry mamma is not here," she said. "She went out only a few minutes ago, and she'll be back soon. But we –"

"You didn't expect any one so early. I ought to apologize, but I was impatient to come. Then – I – I hoped to find you alone."

"So you have," she laughed, pointing to a chair near the grate-fire. She wore a dress of dark silk with little white spots in it that became her wonderfully, Jules thought. Around her neck was a piece of muslin, open at the throat, and muslin encircled her wrists. Once again Jules was impressed by the delicacy of her appearance; her skin had an almost transparent whiteness, and there was no colour in her cheeks, save when she flushed, which she did at the least cause.

"How pleasantly you are lodged here," said Jules, looking around the room. The apartment was as small as his own, which he had considered one of the smallest in Paris.

"Yes, we were fortunate to get it. And it seems so odd – it belongs to an actress who's spending the winter in the South of France. We have taken it furnished."

"Then you're to be here all the winter?" said Jules, feasting his eyes on the clear white forehead, the white neck that he could see beneath the muslin. How beautiful she was! His surmise about the teeth had been correct; they were small and white, with little bits of red between them.

"No," she replied, "I've been engaged at the *Cirque* until the first of January. Then I shall go to Vienna, and appear there for several months."

"Ah!" For a moment Jules was silent. "But you will take a rest before you go to Vienna?"

She shook her head.

"No. I should like to go home for Christmas to be with my sisters. But they will come to Paris instead."

"But doesn't it tire you?"

"No. It isn't hard. And I never like to stop. I must keep in practice."

For an instant Jules was touched by a curious sympathy. There certainly was something pathetic, even abnormal, in the thought that this frail woman hurled herself six days in the week from the top of a building. Then he was thrilled again by the marvel of it, by the consciousness that he was sitting opposite the phenomenon, gazing into her eyes, hearing her voice, receiving her smiles. He could think of nothing to say, but he felt quite happy; he would have liked to sit there for hours in mute admiration. Mademoiselle Blanche, however, looked confused; she seemed to be shaping something in her mind.

"It was very kind of you to send the flowers," she said at last. "I would have thanked you before if I had known where you lived. They were very lovely."

His face shone with pleasure at the thought that she had recognized him as the sender, and he leaned toward her. "You needn't thank me," he said. "I felt repaid when I saw them in your belt."

Then he told her how he had gone to the circus every night just to see her; how he admired her performance, her grace and skill on the trapeze, her courage in making the great plunge. As he spoke, her face kept changing colour. She seemed to him like a bashful child, and he marvelled at her ingenuousness, for surely she must be used to praise. Then he recalled what Durand had said about her affectation of modesty, and he wondered if the journalist could have been right; but when he looked into the girl's clear eyes he saw nothing but beauty and truth.

When he had finished speaking of her performance, he began to talk about himself, his favourite topic with women. He told her about his visit in the United States, and he made fun of the Americans for drinking water instead of wine at table, and for many other customs that had amused him because they were so unlike the ways of Parisians. He also imitated the speech of some of the Americans he had known, and he was surprised to find that she understood what he said. She had learned English from her father, she explained; he had often performed in London, and she had been there with him twice. Then he began to speak with her in English to display his accomplishment, and he felt disappointed on discovering that she could converse quite as fluently, and with a better accent. So he returned to French, and told her about his life in Paris, his dear old Madeleine who kept him so comfortable in his little apartment, his work at the office, and about Dufresne and Leroux. She showed no surprise when he revealed Durand's duplicity; she merely said that she hadn't liked the journalist, and her mother had been vexed by the article. She seemed so interested that he went back to his early days, before the death of his father and mother, described his life at the *lycée*, his love of sport, his passion for the circus, his boyish adventures at Montmartre, his happy days in summer at Compiègne, his mother's goodness and her foolish pride in him. He was so unconscious in his egotism that it was touching to hear him; Mademoiselle Blanche seemed to be unconscious of it, too, for she listened with a serious, absorbed attention. While he was in the midst of an analysis of his own qualities, the little clock on the mantel struck four and Mademoiselle Blanche looked up quickly.

"Mamma will be here very soon now," she said.

Jules felt a sudden irritation. At that moment the coming of Madame Perrault seemed like an intrusion. The reference to it had the effect of stopping his confidences; it was as if she had already appeared in the room. He rose from his seat, and began to examine the photographs on the mantel. Then he took up one of them, a large photograph of a man of more than fifty, with a white pointed beard, a shock of iron-grey hair, and laughing eyes.

"Is this your father, mademoiselle?"

She shook her head.

"That is my mother's *fiancé*."

He turned to her quickly. "Your mother's *fiancé*!"

"Yes. My mother has been engaged a long time. She would have been married a year ago but for me."

"Ah, then you don't like it – you don't want her to marry again?"

"I should not care – that is, I should be glad for Jeanne and Louise. Monsieur Berthier is very rich, and he has been kind to the girls. He has offered to give them a home."

Jules came near laughing. It seemed to him ridiculous that the old powdered woman he had seen in the dressing-room of the Circus should marry again.

"Then how have you prevented the marriage?" he asked.

"Because I must work," she replied simply, "and mamma cannot leave me. If mamma married Monsieur Berthier, she would have to stay in Boulogne."

"Ah!" A light broke on Jules. The mother would not marry until her eldest daughter was married. So, of course, she must be anxious to find a husband for Mademoiselle Blanche. He felt as if Providence were paving the way toward happiness for him. For a moment he did not speak again. Then he said: "But you will marry some day, and then your mother won't have to travel with you."

She flushed, and made a deprecating gesture. "I shall always stay in the circus," she said. "It's my life. I can't think of any other."

Then he gradually drew her out. She surprised him by telling him of the monotony of her life. With most of the other performers she had merely a slight acquaintance; the coarseness of the women and the vulgarity of the men shocked her. Her only companion in her travels was her mother. Yes, it was lonely sometimes not to know other girls of her own age, and it was very hard to be separated from Jeanne and Louise. She worried a great deal about Jeanne, who had shown a fondness for the circus. She thought if her mother married, Jeanne would give up all thought of becoming a performer. Of course, it was different with herself; she had been bred to the circus, but she couldn't bear the thought of Jeanne's being there, too. Jeanne was very pretty and lively; Aunt Sophie was obliged to be strict with her. Louise was so different, so quiet and simple, and religious, almost a *dévoté*. As she spoke of her sisters, Mademoiselle Blanche grew very animated. Jules blamed himself for the momentary doubt he had felt about her. If Durand could only hear her now! But Durand doubted every woman.

It was nearly five o'clock when Madame Perrault returned. When she saw Jules, she showed no surprise, but smiled upon him broadly and extended her hand. Mademoiselle Blanche lapsed into silence and, as her mother talked, with a superabundance of gesture and with tireless vivacity, she could feel Jules' eyes fixed upon her. She knew that Jules hardly heard what was being said, and when he rose to take his departure, she made no effort to detain him.

"I should like to come again," he said to the girl.

"Some afternoon, perhaps," Madame Perrault suggested amiably. "Blanche always rests between three and four, but after that she could see you."

"But I am at my office till six."

"Ah, yes!" Madame Perrault exclaimed with a smile. "That wicked journalist! You must tell him we were vexed with his article."

"Then may I come in the evening? Perhaps you'll let me take you to the theatre some night?"

Madame Perrault clapped her hands. "That would be perfect!"

Mademoiselle Blanche said nothing, but it was to her that Jules directed his next remark.

"Perhaps to-morrow night; I will come at eight o'clock."

Madame Perrault displayed her gleaming teeth patched with gold, and her daughter merely bowed and said, "Thank you."

As Jules was putting on his overcoat in the little hall, he heard a voice say:

"*Il est très gentil, ce monsieur,*" but though he listened he could not catch the reply. He was radiantly happy, however. When he reached the street, he felt like running; with an effort he controlled himself, and walked buoyantly home with a smile on his face. He would take Madeleine out to dinner, as he used to take his mother when they celebrated his holidays!

VI

The next night, promptly at eight o'clock, Jules appeared in the little *salon* in the *rue St. Honoré*, bearing his offering of flowers to Mademoiselle Blanche. Madame Perrault gave him the quiet reception of an old friend, and he felt as if he had long been in the habit of calling at the apartment. Madame Perrault informed him that she had just risen from dinner, and asked him to drink a cup of coffee. Then the three figures sat in the dimly-lighted room and talked; that is, Jules and Madame Perrault talked, for Blanche ventured a remark only when a question was put to her.

A few moments later, Madame Perrault went into the next room where she was occupied with the little maid in making a dress; so Jules was left alone with her daughter. They had very little to say to each other, and Jules was content to sit in silence and rapt adoration. As he looked at her, her name kept singing in his mind: Blanche! He wondered if he should ever dare to address her in this way. How beautiful she was as she sat there, the soft light of the fire falling on her face and hands, and on the folds of her gown! He was glad she was so quiet; he hated women that talked all the time. That was the great fault with Madame Perrault; if she said less, he would like her, in spite of her powder and paint. Since hearing that she was engaged, and wanted to get her daughter married, Jules' feelings toward her had softened.

It was nearly ten o'clock before they left for the theatre. Jules called a cab, and all three squeezed into it with a great deal of laughter on the part of Madame Perrault. As they rattled over the rough pavement, the noise was so great that they could not talk, and Jules gave himself up to contemplating the serious face of Mademoiselle Blanche. The thought that he was riding with her to the scene of her triumphs thrilled him. He felt as if he were having a share in her performance, as if her glory were reflected on him. Ah, if Dufresne and Leroux could see him now! How they would be impressed, and how they would envy him!

Before bidding his friends good-night, he asked if he might not take them home; he would remain till the end of the performance, anyway, he said. Instead of entering the theatre at once, he sauntered along the *Boulevard* toward the *place de la Bastille*. What were the other performers to him? Without Mademoiselle Blanche the *Cirque Parisien* would not be worth visiting. He did not return to the theatre till it was nearly time for her to appear. Réju was standing at the door, and made a sign for him to pass in without paying. Jules accepted the invitation with a twinge of conscience. He wondered what Réju would think if he discovered Durand's imposition.

After the performance, Jules waited at the stage-door for half an hour till Mademoiselle Blanche appeared again. Then he asked her and her mother to take supper with him at one of the restaurants in the *Boulevard*. Madame Perrault consented amiably, and they entered a little *café*, where a half-dozen young men and girls were sitting round a table, playing cards. Jules wanted to order a bottle of champagne; but Mademoiselle Blanche objected; he could scarcely keep from smiling when she said she would much rather have beer. So he called for three bocks and some cheese sandwiches, and over this simple repast they became very gay. Madame Perrault was the liveliest of the three, and she amused Jules by a description of her *fiancé*, who had been in love with her, she said, long before her marriage with Blanche's father. She seemed to think it was very droll that he should want to marry her now; she had told him he would do much better to marry Blanche, or to wait till Jeanne grew up. Under the warmth of her humor, Jules' prejudices against her disappeared, and he found himself growing fond of her. At that moment he longed to confide in her, to tell her all about his infatuation for her daughter, and to ask her advice about the best way of pleasing the girl.

When they had left the *café*, and Jules had taken his friends home and dismissed the cab, he fell again into the depression of the week before. As he walked to the *rue de Lisbonne* in the damp night, he blamed Durand for having introduced him to the Perraults. If he hadn't met Mademoiselle Blanche he might have gone on living comfortably, enjoyed his daily work, his little dinners, his visits

to the theatre, his comfortable apartment, with Madeleine to look after his wants. Now he was upset, at sea. He hated the routine of the office; the vulgar stories of Dufresne and Leroux disgusted him; the apartment was cold and lonely; Madeleine was always interfering with him. He resolved not to go to the *Cirque* again; he would try to forget Mademoiselle Blanche and her mother's chatter. But when he went to bed it was of her that he thought, and he dreamed that he saw her again, in her white silk tights, climbing hand over hand to the top of the Circus, tumbling through the air, and bouncing with a thud to her feet on the padded net.

The next morning he felt better, and he called himself a fool for his misery of the night before. As he looked back on the evening, he decided that, of course, if they hadn't liked him, they would not have allowed him to take them to the theatre and back, and to a *café* for supper. He wondered what they would think if he called for them again that night. Perhaps it would be better to wait for two or three days. But at the end of the afternoon he felt so impatient to see Mademoiselle Blanche that he determined to risk seeming intrusive. So he bought another bunch of white roses, and at eight o'clock he reappeared in the apartment. Madame Perrault greeted him just as she had done the night before, without a suggestion of surprise in her manner. This made him feel so bold that he did not apologize, as he had intended to do, but took his place by the fire as if he had a right to be there.

In this way, Jules Le Baron's courtship began. It seemed to him a strange courtship. It taught him a great many things, – among others, how little he knew about women. As he had lived in Paris all of his thirty years, with the exception of his three memorable months in America, he thought he understood women; now he saw his mistake. He had not led a particularly good life, though it was so much better than the lives of most of his acquaintances that he considered himself a man of rather superior character. If he had studied his character more carefully, he would have discovered that his superiority was not a matter of morals, but of taste and temperament. Vice seemed to him vulgar, and it made him uncomfortable; so in its grosser forms he had always avoided it. He had, however, the Parisian's frank, ingenuous, almost innocent fondness for the humorously indecent, and his attitude toward life was wholly French. The mention of virtue made him laugh and shrug his shoulders. Most women, he thought, were naturally the inferiors of men; so the better he understood the character of Mademoiselle Blanche, the more surprised he grew. Indeed, there were times when he felt awed in her presence and ashamed of himself. She seemed to know the world and yet to be untainted by it, to turn away instinctively from its evil phases. If her innocence had been ignorant, he could not have respected it; the knowledge that she had lived in the midst of temptation made her goodness seem almost sublime.

Jules fell into the habit of calling for the Perraults in the evening, and he soon became recognized at the *Cirque* as their escort. Réju, who still showed respect for him as a journalist, admitted him to the theatre every night without charge, and he was also permitted to enter the sacred precincts beyond the stage-door, where, instead of waiting on the sidewalk, he stood in a cold corridor, dimly lighted by sputtering lamps. After the performance, he sometimes took his friends into the little *café* for beer and sandwiches, and occasionally Madame Perrault would prepare a supper at home.

Jules' equilibrium became restored again; he made fewer mistakes at the office and he even deceived the twins, who had come to the conclusion that he must be in love. With Madeleine, in spite of his first confidences, he had little to say about Mademoiselle Blanche, and she did not dare ask him questions. His silence and his improved appetite, together with his renewed amiability, made her hope that he had recovered from his infatuation, and she felt easier in mind.

On the Saturday evening following his first call on Mademoiselle Blanche, while Jules was sitting in the little apartment, he asked the girl if they might not pass Sunday together. "We might drive through the *Bois* into the country," he suggested.

She had been looking into the fire, and she glanced at him hesitatingly. "We always go to mass on Sunday morning," she said.

For a moment Jules appeared confused. "But can't you go to early mass?"

Madame Perrault, who was in the next room, called out: "It's no use trying to persuade her not to go to high mass, monsieur. She'd think something terrible was going to happen to her if she didn't go. Now, I go at eight o'clock; so I have the rest of the day free."

Jules looked at Mademoiselle Blanche and smiled, and she smiled back.

"I like to hear the music," she explained apologetically.

"Oh, she's too religious for *this* world," Madame Perrault laughed. "I believe she'd go to mass every morning of her life if she didn't have to stay up so late at night. She ought to be in a convent instead of a circus."

"In a convent!" Jules exclaimed, in mock alarm.

"Don't you ever go to church?" the girl asked, turning to Jules.

He looked confused again. "I? Well, no. To tell the truth, I haven't been in a church for nearly ten years. Oh, yes I have. I went to a funeral two years ago at the Trinity."

"But weren't you – weren't you brought up to go to church?"

"Brought up to go to church? Oh, yes; my mother went to church every Sunday of her life. I used to go with her after my father died."

A long silence followed. Mademoiselle Blanche turned again to the fire, and Jules had a sensation of extreme unpleasantness. Like many Parisians, he never thought about religion. He had been so affected by the skepticism of his associates that he had no real belief in any doctrine. He saw now for the first time that serious complications might arise from his religious indifference. It was very disagreeable, he thought, to be confronted with it in this way. Indeed, the more he thought about it, the more annoyed he became. He felt that he must justify himself in some way. So at last he spoke up: "I suppose you're shocked because I don't go to church, aren't you, mademoiselle?"

Mademoiselle Blanche looked down at her hands lying folded in her lap.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" he repeated, trying to laugh. "Why are you sorry? I rather like it. I never did enjoy going to church."

"We don't go to church to enjoy it, do we?" she asked gently.

He sank back in his seat, and looked at her. "No, I suppose not." Then, after a moment, he suddenly leaned forward. "We can't all be good like you, mademoiselle. Perhaps if I had known you always, I should go to church. I'd do anything to please you."

"But you ought not to go to please me. You ought to go for your own good."

"So you think it does good, then – going to church?"

"I'm sure of it," she replied, gazing into the fire. "Sometimes, – when I feel unhappy because I haven't seen the girls for so long, and because I must be separated from them so much, or when Aunt Sophie complains about Jeanne, or Jeanne has been unkind to Louise, or disobedient, then, after I've been to church, I feel better."

"Why do you feel better?" he asked, more to keep her talking than because he cared for her answer.

"Because I feel sure," she went on, holding her head down, "I feel sure it will all come out right – if I only have faith. Jeanne is a good girl; she's never disobedient or unkind with me."

"Then you worry about Jeanne?"

"Yes – sometimes."

"But you don't worry so much after you've been at church?"

"No."

"And that is why you like to go to church?"

"That's one reason. But there are others – a great many others."

He felt like laughing at the simplicity of her reasoning, and yet he was touched. He had a sudden desire to take her in his arms and stroke her soft hair and tell her he loved her. Then he heard her mother's step in the next room, and this roused him.

"I should like to go to church with you sometimes," he said. "May I?"

"Take him to-morrow, Blanche," cried Madame Perrault, and at that moment Jules could have kissed her, too. "There's going to be a special service at *St. Philippe de Roule* at ten o'clock. The music will be good."

That was how Jules first happened to go to church with Mademoiselle Blanche. After mass they walked up the *Champs Élysées* and then along the *avenue du Bois de Boulogne*, in the midst of the multitude of promenaders. A few of the men recognized the girl, and turned to look after her. She seemed not to see them, but Jules did, and he felt very proud to be her escort. She looked very pretty in her tight-fitting black jacket and little hat tipped with fur, her cheeks scarlet with the early frost. She was the last person in the crowd, Jules thought, who would be taken for an acrobat. It seemed to him wonderful that she should appear so unlike the marvel that she was, and this lack of resemblance to herself made her the more attractive to him.

After that day, Jules went to church with Mademoiselle Blanche every Sunday. At first the sight of the priests in their vestments, of the altar-boys in their white surplices, of the white altar gleaming with candles and plate and enshrouded in incense, and the reverberation of the organ, mingled with the voices singing the music of the mass, all reminded him so strongly of his mother, that his old affection for her swept over him, and brought tears to his eyes.

His own disbelief had made him doubt even the faith of others. It had also inspired him with the hatred for priests, so common even among Parisians of traditions like his own. Now, as he watched them, chanting at the altar, they seemed harmless as other men. He tried, as he went mechanically through the service, to count the men he knew who went to church. Nearly all of his acquaintances, he found, scoffed at it. Then gradually the service became subtly mingled with his love for the girl beside him, and for her sake he loved it. The organ seemed to sing her praise exultingly. He would have liked to tell her of this fancy, but he did not dare; he knew it would shock her. In a short time, going through the mass with her grew to mean to him an expression of his love, a spiritual exaltation which he offered as a tribute, not to God, but to her.

VII

By the month of November, Jules had identified himself with Madame Perrault and her daughter. He took his position as their friend and recognized escort so quickly and so quietly that he was himself surprised by it. There were moments when he had a fear that it was all an illusion, that some night he should find the stage-door of the *Cirque* slammed in his face.

It was while watching Mademoiselle Blanche in the ring that he found it most difficult to realize his happiness. He actually *knew* this wonderful creature in white tights who darted from trapeze to trapeze, who posed like a marble statue on the rope, who shot through the air like a thunderbolt! He saw her every day; he loved her, and she knew that he loved her. Sometimes he fancied that she loved him in return – from an expression in her face, a glance of her eyes, a blush, a tremor when his hand touched hers. He did not dare speak to her about his love; he doubted if he should ever dare to speak; at a word he feared his happiness might be shattered.

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