



*'Yes, the conception was a rose,
but the achievement is a rose
grown grey.'* —PARASCHKINE



CONTENTS

- THE BOHEMIAN GIRL
- MERCEDES
- A BROKEN LOOKING-GLASS
- THE REWARD OF VIRTUE
- A RE-INCARNATION
- FLOWER O' THE QUINCE
- WHEN I AM KING
- A RESPONSIBILITY
- CASTLES NEAR SPAIN

THE BOHEMIAN GIRL

I.

I woke up very gradually this morning, and it took me a little while to bethink myself where I had slept—that it had not been in my own room in the Cromwell Road. I lay a-bed, with eyes half-closed, drowsily look looking forward to the usual procession of sober-hued London hours, and, for the moment, quite forgot the journey of yesterday, and how it had left me in Paris, a guest in the smart new house of my old friend, Nina Childe. Indeed, it was not until somebody tapped on my door, and I roused myself to call out 'Come in,' that I noticed the strangeness of the wall-paper, and then, after an instant of perplexity, suddenly remembered. Oh, with a wonderful lightening of the spirit, I can tell you.

A white-capped, brisk young woman, with a fresh-coloured, wholesome peasant face, came in, bearing a tray—Jeanne, Nina's *femme-de-chambre*.

'Bonjour, monsieur,' she cried cheerily. 'I bring monsieur his coffee.' And her announcement was followed by a fragrance—the softly-sung response of the coffee-sprite. Her tray, with its pretty freight of silver and linen, primrose butter, and gently-browned *pain-de-gruau*, she set down on the table at my elbow; then she crossed the room and drew back the window-curtains, making the rings tinkle crisply on the metal rods, and letting in a gush of dazzling sunshine. From where I lay I could see the house-fronts opposite glow pearly-grey in shadow, and the crest of the slate roofs sharply print itself on the sky, like a black line on a sheet of scintillant blue velvet. Yet, a few minutes ago, I had been fancying myself in the Cromwell Road.

Jeanne, gathering up my scattered garments, to take them off and brush them, inquired, by the way, if monsieur had passed a comfortable night.

'As the chambermaid makes your bed, so must you lie in it,' I answered. 'And you know whether my bed was smoothly made.'

Jeanne smiled indulgently. But her next remark — did it imply that she found me rusty? 'Here's a long time that you haven't been in Paris.'

'Yes,' I admitted; 'not since May, and now we're in November.'

'We have changed things a little, have we not?' she demanded, with a gesture that left the room, and included the house, the street, the quarter.

'In effect,' assented I.

'Monsieur desires his hot water?' she asked, abruptly irrelevant.

But I could be, or at least seem, abruptly irrelevant too. 'Mademoiselle — is she up?'

'Ah, yes, monsieur. Mademoiselle has been up since eight. She awaits you in the salon. La voilà qui joue,' she added, pointing to the floor.

Nina had begun to play scales in the room below.

'Then you may bring me my hot water,' I said.

II.

The scales continued while I was dressing, and many desultory reminiscences of the player, and vague reflections upon the unlikelihood of her adventures, went flitting through my mind to their rhythm. Here she was, scarcely turned thirty, beautiful, brilliant, rich in her own right, as free in all respects to follow her own will as any man could be, with Camille happily at her side, a well grown, rosy, merry miss of twelve, — here was Nina, thus, to-day; and yet, a mere little ten years ago, I remembered her ... ah, in a very different plight indeed. True, she has got no more than her deserts; she has paid for her success, every pennyweight of it, in hard work and self-denial. But one is so expectant, here below, to see Fortune capricious, that, when for once in a way she bestows her favours where they are merited, one can't help feeling rather dazed. One is so inured to seeing honest Effort turn empty-handed from her door.

Ten little years ago — but no. I must begin further back. I must tell you something about Nina's father.

III.

He was an Englishman who lived for the greater part of his life in Paris. I would say he was a painter, if he had not been equally a sculptor, a musician, an architect, a writer of verse, and a university coach. A doer of so many things is inevitably suspect; you will imagine that he must have bungled them all. On the contrary, whatever he did, he did with a considerable degree of accomplishment. The landscapes he painted were very fresh and pleasing, delicately coloured, with lots of air in them, and a dreamy, suggestive sentiment. His brother sculptors declared that his statuettes were modelled with exceeding dash and directness; they were certainly fanciful and amusing. I remember one that I used to like immensely—Titania driving to a tryst with Bottom, her chariot a lily, daisies for wheels, and for steeds a pair of mettlesome field-mice. I doubt if he ever got a commission for a complete house; but the staircases he designed, the fire-places, and other bits of buildings, everybody thought original and graceful. The tunes he wrote were lively and catching, the words never stupid, sometimes even strikingly happy, epigrammatic; and he sang them delightfully, in a robust, hearty baritone. He coached the youth of France, for their examinations, in Latin and Greek, in history, mathematics, general literature—in goodness knows what not; and his pupils failed so rarely that, when one did, the circumstance became a nine days' wonder. The world beyond the Students' Quarter had never heard of him, but there he was a celebrity and a favourite; and, strangely enough for a man with so many strings to his bow, he contrived to pick up a sufficient living.

He was a splendid creature to look at, tall, stalwart, full-blooded, with a ruddy open-air complexion; a fine bold brow and nose; brown eyes, humorous, intelligent, kindly, that always brightened flatteringly when they met you; and a vast quantity of bluish-grey hair and beard. In his dress he affected (very wisely, for they became him excellently) velvet jackets, flannel shirts, loosely-knotted ties, and wide-brimmed soft felt hats. Marching down the Boulevard St. Michel, his broad shoulders well thrown back, his head erect, chin high in air, his whole person radiating health, power, contentment, and the pride of them: he was a sight worth seeing, spirited, picturesque, prepossessing. You could not have passed

him without noticing him—without wondering who he was, confident he was somebody—without admiring him, and feeling that there went a man it would be interesting to know.

He was, indeed, charming to know; he was the hero, the idol, of a little sect of worshippers, young fellows who loved nothing better than to sit at his feet. On the Rive Gauche, to be sure, we are, for the most part, birds of passage; a student arrives, tarries a little, then departs. So, with the exits and entrances of seniors and *nouveaux*, the personnel of old Childe's following varied from season to season; but numerically it remained pretty much the same. He had a studio, with a few living-rooms attached, somewhere up in the fastnesses of Montparnasse, though it was seldom thither that one went to seek him. He received at his café, the Café Bleu—the Café Bleu which has since blown into the monster café of the Quarter, the noisiest, the rowdiest, the most flamboyant. But I am writing (alas) of twelve, thirteen, fifteen years ago; in those days the Café Bleu consisted of a single oblong room—with a sanded floor, a dozen tables, and two waiters, Eugène and Hippolyte—where Madame Chanve, the *patronne*, in lofty insulation behind her counter, reigned, if you please, but where Childe, her principal client, governed. The bottom of the shop, at any rate, was reserved exclusively to his use. There he dined, wrote his letters, dispensed his hospitalities; he had his own piano there, if you can believe me, his foils and boxing-gloves; from the absinthe hour till bed-time there was his habitat, his den. And woe to the passing stranger who, mistaking the Café Bleu for an ordinary house of call, ventured, during that consecrated period, to drop in. Nothing would be said, nothing done; we would not even trouble to stare at the intruder. Yet he would seldom stop to finish his consommation, or he would bolt it. He would feel something in the air; he would know he was out of place. He would fidget a little, frown a little, and get up meekly, and slink into the street. Human magnetism is such a subtle force. And Madame Chanve didn't mind in the least; she preferred a bird in the hand to a brace in the bush. From half a dozen to a score of us dined at her long table every evening; as many more drank her appetisers in the afternoon, and came again at night for grog or coffee. You see, it was a sort of club, a club of which Childe was at once the chairman and the object. If we had had a written constitu-

tion, it must have begun: 'The purpose of this association is the enjoyment of the society of Alfred Childe.'

Ah, those afternoons, those dinners, those ambrosial nights! If the weather was kind, of course, we would begin our session on the *terrasse*, sipping our vermouth, puffing our cigarettes, laughing our laughs, tossing hither and thither our light ball of gossip, vaguely conscious of the perpetual ebb and flow and murmur of people in the Boulevard, while the setting sun turned Paris to a marvellous water-colour, all pale lucent tints, amber and alabaster and mother-of-pearl, with amethystine shadows. Then, one by one, those of us who were dining elsewhere would slip away; and at a sign from Hippolyte the others would move indoors, and take their places down either side of the long narrow table, Childe at the head, his daughter Nina next him. And presently with what a clatter of knives and forks, clinking of glasses, and babble of human voices the Café Bleu would echo. Madame Chanve's kitchen was not a thing to boast of, and her price, for the Latin Quarter, was rather high—I think we paid three francs, wine included, which would be for most of us distinctly a *prix-de-luxe*. But oh, it was such fun; we were so young; Childe was so delightful. The fun was best, of course, when we were few, and could all sit up near to him, and none need lose a word. When we were many there would be something like a scramble for good seats.

I ask myself whether, if I could hear him again to-day, I should think his talk as wondrous as I thought it then. Then I could thrill at the verse of Musset, and linger lovingly over the prose of Théophile, I could laugh at the wit of Gustave Droz, and weep at the pathos ... it costs me a pang to own it, but yes, I'm afraid ... I could weep at the pathos of Henry Mürger; and these have all suffered such a sad sea-change since. So I could sit, hour after hour, in a sort of ecstasy, listening to the talk of Nina's father. It flowed from him like wine from a full measure, easily, smoothly, abundantly. He had a ripe, genial voice, and an enunciation that made crystals of his words; whilst his range of subjects was as wide as the earth and the sky. He would talk to you of God and man, of metaphysics, ethics, the last new play, murder, or change of ministry; of books, of pictures, specifically, or of the general principles of literature and painting; of people, of sunsets, of Italy, of the high seas, of the Paris streets—of

what, in fine, you pleased. Or he would spin you yarns, sober, farcical, veridical, or invented. And, with transitions infinitely rapid, he would be serious, jocose—solemn, ribald—earnest, flippant—logical, whimsical, turn and turn about. And in every sentence, in its form or in its substance, he would wrap a surprise for you—it was the unexpected word, the unexpected assertion, sentiment, conclusion, that constantly arrived. Meanwhile it would enhance your enjoyment mightily to watch his physiognomy, the movements of his great, grey, shaggy head, the lightening and darkening of his eyes, his smile, his frown, his occasional slight shrug or gesture. But the oddest thing was this, that he could take as well as give; he could listen—surely a rare talent in a monologist. Indeed, I have never known a man who could make *you* feel so interesting.

After dinner he would light an immense brown meerschaum pipe, and smoke for a quarter-hour or so in silence; then he would play a game or two of chess with some one; and by and by he would open his piano, and sing to us till midnight.

IV.

I speak of him as old, and indeed we always called him Old Childe among ourselves; yet he was barely fifty. Nina, when I first made her acquaintance, must have been a girl of sixteen or seventeen; though—tall, with an amply-rounded, mature-seeming figure—if one had judged from her appearance, one would have fancied her three or four years older. For that matter, she looked then very much as she looks now; I can perceive scarcely any alteration. She had the same dark hair, gathered up in a big smooth knot behind, and breaking into a tumult of little ringlets over her forehead; the same clear, sensitive complexion; the same rather large, full-lipped mouth, tip-tilted nose, soft chin, and merry mischievous eyes. She moved in the same way, with the same leisurely, almost lazy grace, that could, however, on occasions, quicken to an alert, elastic vivacity; she had the same voice, a trifle deeper than most women's, and of a quality never so delicately nasal, which made it racy and characteristic; the same fresh ready laughter. There was something arch, something a little sceptical, a little quizzical in her expression, as if, perhaps, she were disposed to take the world, more or less, with a grain of salt; at the same time there was some-

thing rich, warm-blooded, luxurious, suggesting that she would know how to savour its pleasantnesses with complete enjoyment. But if you felt that she was by way of being the least bit satirical in her view of things, you felt too that she was altogether good-natured, and even that, at need, she could show herself spontaneously kind, generous, devoted. And if you inferred that her temperament inclined rather towards the sensuous than the ascetic, believe me, it did not lessen her attractiveness.

At the time of which I am writing now, the sentiment that reigned between Nina and Old Childe's retinue of young men was chiefly an *esprit-de-corps*. Later on we all fell in love with her; but for the present we were simply amiably fraternal. We were united to her by a common enthusiasm; we were fellow-celebrants at her ancestral altar—or, rather, she was the high priestess there, we were her acolytes. For, with her, filial piety did in very truth partake of the nature of religion; she really, literally, idolised her father. One only needed to watch her for three minutes, as she sat beside him, to understand the depth and ardour of her emotion: how she adored him, how she admired him and believed in him, how proud of him she was, how she rejoiced in him. 'Oh, you think you know my father,' I remember her saying to us once. 'Nobody knows him. Nobody is great enough to know him. If people knew him they would fall down and kiss the ground he walks on.' It is certain she deemed him the wisest, the noblest, the handsomest, the most gifted, of human kind. That little gleam of mockery in her eye died out instantly when she looked at him, when she spoke of him or listened to him; instead, there came a tender light of love, and her face grew pale with the fervour of her affection. Yet, when he jested, no one laughed more promptly or more heartily than she. In those days I was perpetually trying to write fiction; and Old Childe was my inveterate hero. I forget in how many ineffectual manuscripts, under what various dread disguises, he was afterwards reduced to ashes; I am afraid, in one case, a scandalous distortion of him got abroad in print. Publishers are sometimes ill-advised; and thus the indiscretions of our youth may become the confusions of our age. The thing was in three volumes, and called itself a novel; and of course the fatuous author had to make a bad business worse by presenting a copy to his victim. I shall never forget the look Nina

gave me when I asked her if she had read it; I grow hot even now as I recall it. I had waited and waited expecting her compliments; and at last I could wait no longer, and so asked her; and she answered me with a look! It was weeks, I am not sure it wasn't months, before she took me back to her good graces. But Old Childe was magnanimous; he sent me a little pencil-drawing of his head, inscribed in the corner, 'To Frankenstein from his Monster.'

V.

It was a queer life for a girl to live, that happy-go-lucky life of the Latin Quarter, lawless and unpremeditated, with a café for her school-room, and none but men for comrades; but Nina liked it; and her father had a theory in his madness. He was a Bohemian, not in practice only, but in principle; he preached Bohemianism as the most rational manner of existence, maintaining that it developed what was intrinsic and authentic in one's character, saved one from the artificial, and brought one into immediate contact with the realities of the world; and he protested he could see no reason why a human being should be 'cloistered and contracted' because of her sex. 'What would not hurt my son, if I had one, will not hurt my daughter. It will make a man of her — without making her the less a woman.' So he took her with him to the Café Bleu, and talked in her presence quite as freely as he might have talked had she been absent. As, in the greater number of his theological, political, and social convictions, he was exceedingly unorthodox, she heard a good deal, no doubt, that most of us would scarcely consider edifying for our daughters' ears; but he had his system, he knew what he was about. 'The question whether you can touch pitch and remain undefiled,' he said, 'depends altogether upon the spirit in which you approach it. The realities of the world, the realities of life, the real things of God's universe — what have we eyes for, if not to envisage them? Do so fearlessly, honestly, with a clean heart, and, man or woman, you can only be the better for it.' Perhaps his system was a shade too simple, a shade too obvious, for this complicated planet; but he held to it in all sincerity. It was in pursuance of the same system, I daresay, that he taught Nina to fence, and to read Latin and Greek, as well as to play the piano, and turn an omelette. She could ply a foil against the best of us.

And then, quite suddenly, he died.

I think it was in March, or April; anyhow it was a premature spring-like day, and he had left off his overcoat. That evening he went to the Odéon, and when, after the play he joined us for supper at the Bleu, he said he thought he had caught a cold, and ordered hot grog. The next day he did not turn up at all; so several of us, after dinner, presented ourselves at his lodgings in Montparnasse. We found him in bed, with Nina reading to him. He was feverish, and Nina had insisted that he should stop at home. He would be all right to-morrow. He scoffed at our suggestion that he should see a doctor; he was one of those men who affect to despise the medical profession. But early on the following morning a commissionaire brought me a note from Nina. 'My father is very much worse. Can you come at once?' He was delirious. Poor Nina, white, with frightened eyes, moved about like one distracted. We sent off for Dr. Ré-noult, we had in a Sister of Charity. Everything that could be done was done. Till the very end, none of us for a moment doubted that he would recover. It was impossible to conceive that that strong, affirmative life could be extinguished. And even after the end had come, the end with its ugly suite of material circumstances, I don't think any of us realised what it meant. It was as if we had been told that one of the forces of Nature had become inoperative. And Nina, through it all, was like some pale thing in marble, that breathed and moved: white, dazed, helpless, with aching, incredulous eyes, suffering everything, understanding nothing.

When it came to the worst of the dreadful necessary businesses that followed, some of us somehow, managed to draw her from the death-chamber into another room, and to keep her there, while others of us got it over. It was snowing that afternoon, I remember, a melancholy, hesitating snowstorm, with large moist flakes that fluttered down irresolutely, and presently disintegrated into rain; but we had not far to go. Then we returned to Nina, and for many days and nights we never dared to leave her. You will guess whether the question of her future, especially of her immediate future, weighed heavily upon our minds. In the end, however, it appeared to have solved itself—though I can't pretend that the solution was exactly all we could have wished.

Her father had a half-brother (we learned this from his papers), incumbent of rather an important living in the north of England. We also learned that the brothers had scarcely seen each other twice in a score of years, and had kept up only the most fitful correspondence. Nevertheless, we wrote to the clergyman, describing the sad case of his niece, and in reply we got a letter, addressed to Nina herself, saying that of course she must come at once to Yorkshire, and consider the rectory her home. I don't need to recount the difficulties we had in explaining to her, in persuading her. I have known few more painful moments than that when, at the Gare du Nord, half a dozen of us established the poor, benumbed, bewildered child in her compartment, and sent her, with our godspeed, alone upon her long journey—to her strange kindred, and the strange conditions of life she would have to encounter among them. From the Café Bleu to a Yorkshire parsonage! And Nina's was not by any means a neutral personality, nor her mind a blank sheet of paper. She had a will of her own; she had convictions, aspirations, traditions, prejudices, which she would hold to with enthusiasm because they had been her father's, because her father had taught them to her; and she had manners, habits, tastes. She would be sure to horrify the people she was going to; she would be sure to resent their criticism, their slightest attempt at interference. Oh, my heart was full of misgivings; yet—she had no money, she was eighteen years old—what else could we advise her to do? All the same, her face, as it looked down upon us from the window of her railway carriage, white, with big terrified eyes fixed in a gaze of blank uncomprehending anguish, kept rising up to reproach me for weeks afterwards. I had her on my conscience as if I had personally wronged her.

VI.

It was characteristic of her that, during her absence, she hardly wrote to us. She is of far too hasty and impetuous a nature to take kindly to the task of letter-writing; her moods are too inconstant; her thoughts, her fancies, supersede one another too rapidly. Anyhow, beyond the telegram we had made her promise to send, announcing her safe arrival, the most favoured of us got nothing more than an occasional scrappy note, if he got so much; while the greater number of the long epistles some of us felt in duty bound to address