

VIEILLE FILLE

Ce matin, pendant un quart d'heure, le soleil a traversé des nuées grises de l'automne, et il a brillé sur Paris, semblable à ces rougeurs soudaines qui éclaircissent et rendent momentanément l'apparence de la santé au visage d'un poitrinaire. Mais c'est déjà fini, et, pour toute la journée le ciel morne, couleur de plomb. Qu'ils sont tristes, ces mots : Novembre, Toussaint, Jour des Morts !

Mlle Tardif—qu'on appelle dans la maison, la vieille fille du cinquième—est cependant contente, à son réveil de voir ce rayon fugitif pénétrer entre les deux rideaux de la fenêtre.

« Il ne fera pas trop mauvais temps aujourd'hui, a-t-elle pensé, pour aller au cimetière. »

En bonnet de nuit, jupon et camisole, elle fait son petit ménage. Du feu, d'abord. Et voici que le poêle de faïence le poêle de blanchisseuse, que, par économie, elle a mis devant la cheminée, commence à ronfler confortablement. Avant tout, Mlle Tardif était allée prendre dehors sur le paillason, la boîte au lait que la concierge y dépose tous les matins; et maintenant Ratapoil, le vieux chat gris, assis sur son derrière et la queue enroulée proprement sur le cuissot, fixe ses yeux verts, avec un puissant intérêt, sur la petite casserole où se ride la crème qui chauffe.

Mais, avant de déjeuner, Mlle Tardif, fidèle à ses habitudes, donne un coup de balai, fait son lit. Certes, elle est décente, l'unique chambre de la vieille fille; et il y a même, ici, par hasard, quelques meubles qu'un amateur "pousse-rait", à l'Hôtel des Ventes. Par exemple, cet étroit et raid-canapé à deux places, en velours verdâtre, se recommande par ses ornements de bronze—griffes et têtes de sphinx—fort à la mode après la campagne d'Égypte; et de ce bonheur-du-jour en bois, des îles, est, du "Louis XVI" authentique. Mlle Tardif, n'en sait rien. Ce la lui vient "de famille". Sans doute, elle tient à ces folies objets, parce qu'ils lui rappellent le passé, mais pas plus qu'un tableau ridicule où les cheveux blonds d'une de ses tantes, morte toute jeune, et qu'elle n'a jamais connue s'échevèrent sous un verre et ont la prétention de représenter un seul-pleureur.

D'ailleurs bien des détails trahissent dans cet humble logis, le renoncement à toute coquetterie, l'insouciant désordre de la célibataire. Des tiroirs bâillement, à moitié trécs, qu'encombrent mille chiffons; et le "devant" de cheveux gris, dont tout à l'heure Mlle Tardif, ornera son front ridé, repose sur sur le globe de la pendule.

Elle n'a pourtant que cinquante ans, la bonne demoiselle; mais petite, maigre sèche comme un fagot, le teint rance, les dents, jaunes, les lèvres flétries, elle est déjà tout à fait une vieille femme. Seuls, les grands et tristes yeux, d'un bleu si clair, du ton de la fleur de lin, ont encore un charme, émeuvent par leur doux résigné, révèlent une beauté disparue, une sensibilité délicate, disent que cette pauvre créature a souffert.

Hélas ! oui, et beaucoup. Jusqu'à l'âge de vingt-quatre ans, elle avait vécu pour-tant une existence heureuse et paisible, dans sa famille. On aidait maman au ménage on ne sortait qu'avec elle, jupe contre jupe, et l'on baissait les yeux—flattée tout de même—devant les regards reçus au passage, qui prouvaient qu'on était jolie. Le père, bonhomme de sous-chefs était tout fier de sa gran-

de fille. Il menait au théâtre, grâce à un camarade de bureau qui faisait des vaude-villes et lui donnait des billets de faveur; et quelquefois aussi, dans des soirées à verres d'orgeat, dans des bals de petits bourgeois, où la bonne en tablier blanc tenait le vestiaire sur l'escalier, où l'on sautait au piano, dans trois pièces du logement démenblé, où les danseurs de trop haute taille se cognaien la tête à la "suspension" de la salle à manger.

Ce fut dans une de ces modestes fêtes que les beaux yeux de Mlle Blanche Tardif, alors menacée de coiffes Sainte-Catherine, atteignirent, à travers la tunique à jupe et à petits boutons, le cœur de M. Lucien Barreau, lieutenant aux zouaves de la garde. C'était un bon et simple garçon, ayant passé la trentaine, un officier sorti du rang, mais bien noté, et certain d'obtenir bientôt le grade supérieur. Il plut tout de suite à Blanche par son air de bravoure et de franchise, et, après une assez courte idylle de polkas et de quadrilles, il fut admis chez les Tardif en qualité de fiancé. L'officier n'avait que sa solde; le vieux sous-chef devait se seigner aux quatre membres pour réunir la petite dot exigée par les règlements militaires. Il fallait être raisonnable, attendre que le lieutenant passât capitaine. On se résigna, et les promis eurent quand même de bien douces heures, le soir autour de la lampe. Le père s'absorbait dans son journal; et, un peu dans l'ombre, assis sur l'étréot canapé à têtes et à griffes de sphinx, les deux amoureux se tenaient la main silencieusement.

Quand la guerre fut déclarée, un frisson, de terreur—elle en a froid encore—passa dans le cœur de Blanche. Mais, intré-pide, l'officier, après le baiser du départ sur le front de sa fiancée, lui dit à l'oreille: "Je vais chercher à Berlin mon troisième galon". C'était l'adieu. On ne devait même pas retrouver son nom parmi ceux des morts. Disparu, à tout jamais!

Blanche attendit, pleura, espéra, désespéra. Pas de nouvelles. Rien, toujours rien! Le soldat avait été tué, certainement, et son cadavre était enfoui quelque part avec d'autres cadavres. Mais où?

Riche, mondaine, distraite, embellie en quelque sorte et distinguée par son malheur romanesque, Blanche aurait peut-être oublié et—que sait-on?—elle eût recommencé sa vie. Mais les petites gens savent instinctivement que le bonheur ne se rencontre pas deux fois en chemin. Elle se serra, douloureuse, apeurée, tout près de ses pères et mères, vieillit avec eux, les vit mourir l'un après l'autre, enfin se trouva toute seule, avec de très maigres ressources et l'inoubliable souvenir dans le cœur.

Telle est "la vieille fille du cinquième", qui, par cette triste matinée de Toussaint, a partagé une tasse de lait chaud avec son chat, mis des faux cheveux revêtus ses vêtements de deuil éternel, si usés que le noir en paraît roux et qui s'en maintenant, maigre et frieuse, le long des boulevards excentriques, sous les arbres dépouillés, vers le cimetière Montparnasse, où reposent les siens.

Dans la lugubre rue Delambre, Mlle Tardif s'arrête devant une boutique d'objets funéraires, dont, pour la circonstance, l'étalage envahit la moitié du trottoir et d'où s'exhale l'odeur amère des buis et des chrysan-thèmes. Mais Mlle Tardif ne veut pas de ces verdure qui se-

font au bout de peu de jours. Les couronnes en perles de verre, les pensées en zinc peint, durables hommages, qui semblent déposés sur les tombes une fois pour toutes, déplaient aussi à la vieille fille. Elle a le goût classique. Après avoir beaucoup marchandé.—excusez-la, elle n'est pas riche,—elle achète donc deux couronnes d'immortelles jaunes, de médiocre dimension, où la marchande pique les deux inscriptions: "A mon Père, à ma Mère"; elle les enfle à son bras gauche, les cache sous son vieux châle, continue sa route, entre dans le cimetière qui sent la feuille morte, se glisse à travers la foule endeuillée se glisse parmi les tombes, arrive enfin devant celle de ses parents et là, après un peu de jardinage, elle s'agenouille, fait le signe de la croix et dit les prières qu'on lui enseigna quand elle était toute petite.

Elle ne les comprend guère, étant peu mystique. Cependant elle prie ingénument, par tradition, et s'adresse avec confiance à seul Bon Dieu qu'elle connaisse, au Manitou de papa et de maman.

Mais au retour, petite vieille, perdu au milieu de toutes ces gens chargés de bouquets et de couronnes: voila qu'elle songe à son fiancé, mort depuis vingt-cinq. Hélas! elle ignore le lieu de la sépulture; elle ne peut y porter quelques fleurs il y a bien là, au milieu du cimetière, une colonne tronquée, pompeusement appelée "Monument de souvenir"; mais ce symbolisme administratif, cette poésie de Conseil municipale sont sans attrait pour le cœur sentimental de la bonne demoiselle.

A pas menus, un peu courbée déjà sous ses haillons noirs, elle regagna alors son quartier, par les avenues mélancoliques. Arrivée près de sa maison, elle prend, chez le charcutier, pour quelque sous de galantine, une poire chez la fruitière, chez le tripiier un sou de mou pour Ratapoil. Enfin avant de gravir ses cinq étages, elle achète—quelle prodigalité!—un bouquet de violettes de cinquante centimes. Et tout à l'heure, dans le fouillis et parmi les meubles surannées de sa chambre haute, après avoir déjeuné avec son chat, Mlle Tardif mettra les violettes dans un verre d'eau; elle regardera, elle respirera, pendant toute cette journée de Toussaint, ces fleurs qu'elle ne peut porter sur la tombe de l'homme qu'elle a aimé, et elle célébrera, l'innocente vieille fille, ses noces d'argent avec le chagrin.

FRANCOIS COPPEE

VARIETES

Les ivrognes trouvent mille raisons pour justifier, soi disant leur abrutissante passion. En voici un qui s'attira une bonne réplique; son curé lui disait:

—Michel, l'eau-de-vie est ton plus grand ennemi.

—Ah! Monsieur le curé, je vous y prends! est-ce que l'Écriture ne dit pas qu'on doit aimer ses ennemis? répond l'ivrogne.

—C'est vrai, répliqua le pasteur; mais elle ne dit pas qu'on doive les avaler.

—Et vous docteur croyez-vous aux revenants?

—Comment pouvez-vous me demander cela? Mais si je croyais aux revenants, je changerais de profession.

Petit Bob n'a pas été sage. Et il a été fotté.

—Pourquoi as-tu reçu le fouet? lui demande-t-on?

—Papa dit que c'est parce

que j'ai été mauvaise tête? Comme si ça guérissait la tête de me fouetter par là!

On parle de choses lugubres et on arrive au passage du Nouveau Testament: "Un esprit malin s'est emparé d'un homme et l'a rendu muet"

- S'il pouvait en faire autant pour ma femme! s'écri un mari qui est, ou se croit affligé d'une compagne bavarde.

L'esprit d'autrefois: Un prince d'Italie, à qui les saillies ne réussissaient jamais, parce qu'il y mettait plus d'agrément que d'esprit, était un jour sur un balcon avec un ministre français qu'il cherchait à humilier, lui dit:

—C'est de ce balcon qu'un de mes aïeux fit sauter un ambassadeur.

—Apparemment, répondit le ministre, que dans ce temps-là les ambassadeurs ne portaient point d'épée.

La petite Jeanne, une eune fillette de huit ans, est assise à table à côté d'un gros monsieur dont elle suit anxieusement tous les mouvements. A un moment où ce dernier se dispose à vider son verre, elle lui touche discrètement le bras:

—M'sieu, lui demande-t-elle avec cette gentillesse charmante et naturelle dont seuls les enfants possèdent le secret, M'sieu, si j'osais vous demander...

—Quoi, Mademoiselle?

—De me laisser voir comment vous buvez. Maman dit toujours à papa que, quand vous venez à la maison, vous buvez comme un phoque.

UNEHEROINE DE 1870

Dépêche de Brest au "Petit Journal": Hier est décédée à Brest, presque subitement, Mme Tollet en religio... sœur Jeanne de Chantal, supérieure des religieuses de la Providence. Mme Tollet était âgée de soixante ans.

Sœur Jeanne de Chantal était supérieure de la communauté de Chateaudun pendant la guerre de 1870.

Quand les Prussiens s'emparèrent de la ville après une résistance acharnée, sœur Jeanne de Chantal cacha un grand nombre de soldats et de francs tireurs dans les caves de la communauté.

Un franc-tireur, qui avait été pris, allait être fusillé quand sœur de Chantal accourt, demande sa grâce qu'on lui refuse.

Alors sœur Jeanne de Chantal se place entre le franc-tireur et le peloton d'exécution et s'écrie: "Fusillez-le si vous voulez, mais vous me fusillerez avant lui!"

Le franc-tireur était sauvé. Quelques jours après, un convoi de prisonniers français blessés va être emmené en Allemagne.

Sœur Jeanne de Chantal accourt de nouveau, arrête elle-même le convoi et fait retourner les blessés à l'ambulance. Cette scène héroïque a été immortalisée par la peinture.

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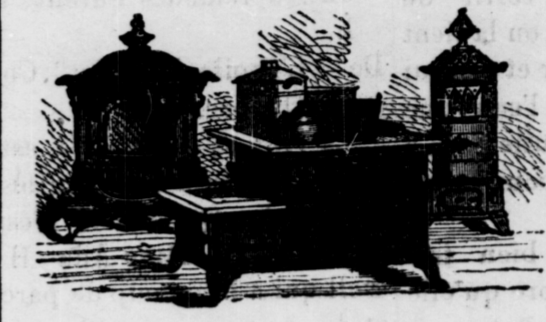
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A. J. BERNARD

Tignish

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The Reliable Coin and Stamp Guide gives accurate information, and you may depend upon it. While a great many people collect old coins, there is more demand for rare postage and revenue stamps, and some comparatively recent stamps are now scarce. Collections of stamps often sell as high as A THOUSAND DOLLARS. Stamps from letters sent during the war, revenue stamps, etc. are in great demand, some being worth \$50.00 A PIECE. Look over your old letters in the corner and elsewhere; perhaps \$50.00 A PIECE, you may find some rare things. This book gives all particulars, with prices, postage, etc., and gives addresses of reliable firms who buy them for you. No matter if you handle but few cents a day you should have this book. EVERYBODY NEEDS IT. Lawyers, in fact it will be found more than necessary. It is worth its weight in gold to any write-averse person. Boys and girls should send for it and explore attic and cellars in search of old letters, which may contain rare stamps. Who knows? 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