

# A Relic

BY MAX BEERBOHM



YESTERDAY I found in a cupboard an old, small, battered port-manteau which, by the initials on it, I recognized as my own property. The lock appeared to have been forced. I dimly remembered having forced it myself, with a poker, in my hot youth, after some journey in which I had lost the key; and this act of violence was probably the reason why the trunk had so long ago ceased to travel. I unstrapped it, not without dust; it exhaled the faint scent of its long closure; it contained a tweed suit of late-Victorian pattern, some bills, some letters, a collar-stud, and—something which, after I had wondered for a moment or two what on earth it was, caused me suddenly to murmur, “Down below, the sea rustled to and fro over the shingle.”

Strange that these words had, year after long year, been existing in some obscure cell at the back of my brain!—forgotten but all the while existing, like the trunk in that cupboard. What released them, what threw open the cell door, was nothing but the fragment of a fan; just the butt-end of an inexpensive fan. The sticks are of white bone, clipped together with a semicircular ring that is not silver. Ring and all, they have no market value; for a farthing is the least coin in our currency. And yet, though I had so long forgotten them, for me they are not worthless. They touch a chord. . . . Lest this confession raise false hopes in you, I add that I did not know their owner.

I did once see her, and in Normandy, and by moonlight, and her name was Angélique. She was graceful, she was even beautiful. I was but nineteen years old. Yet even so I cannot say that she impressed me favorably. I was seated at a table of a café on the terrace of a casino. I sat facing the sea, with my back

to the casino. The hour was late, there were few people about. I heard the swing-door behind me flap open, and was aware of a sharp snapping and crackling sound as a lady in white passed quickly by me. I stared at her erect, thin back and her agitated elbows. A short fat man passed in pursuit of her—an elderly man in a black alpaca jacket that billowed. I saw that she had left a trail of little white things on the asphalt. I watched the efforts of the agonized short, fat man to overtake her as she swept wraith-like away to the distant end of the terrace. What was the matter? What had made her so spectacularly angry with him? The three or four waiters of the café were exchanging cynical smiles and shrugs, as waiters will. I tried to feel cynical, but was thrilled with excitement, with wonder and curiosity. The woman out yonder had doubled on her tracks. She had not slackened her furious speed, but the man waddlingly contrived to keep pace with her now. With every moment they became more distinct, and the prospect that they would presently pass by me, back into the casino, gave me that physical tension which one feels on a wayside platform at the imminent passing of an express. In the rushingly enlarged vision I had of them, the wrath on the woman's face was even more saliently the main thing than I had supposed it would be. That very hard Parisian face must have been as white as the powder that coated it. “*Écoute, Angélique,*” gasped the perspiring bourgeois, “*écoute, je te supplie—*” The swing-door received them. I wanted to follow, but had not paid for my bock. I beckoned my waiter. On his way to me he stooped and picked up something which, with a smile and a shrug, he laid on my table: “*Il semble que Mademoiselle ne s'en servira plus.*” This was the thing I now write of, and at sight of it I understood why there had been that snapping and crackling, and

what the white fragments on the ground were.

I hurried through the rooms, hoping to see a continuation of that drama—a scene of appeasement, perhaps, or of fury still implacable. But the two oddly assorted players were not performing there. My waiter had told me he had not seen either of them before. I suppose they had arrived that day. But I was not destined to see either of them again. They went away, I suppose, next morning, jointly or singly; singly, I imagine.

They made, however, a prolonged stay in my young memory, and would have done so even had I not had that tangible memento of them. Who were they, those two of whom that one strange glimpse had befallen me? What had all that tragic pother been about? Mlle. Angélique I guessed to be thirty years old, her friend perhaps fifty-five. Each of their faces was as clear to me as in the moment of actual vision—the man's fat, shiny, bewildered face; the taut white face of the woman, the hard red line of her mouth, the eyes that were not flashing, but positively dull, with rage. I presumed that the fan had been a present from him, and a recent present—bought perhaps that very day, after their arrival in the town. But what, *what* had he done that she should break it between her hands, scattering the splinters as who should sow dragon's-teeth? I could not believe he had done anything much amiss. I imagined her grievance a trivial one. But this did not make the case less engrossing. Again and again I would take the fan-stump from my pocket, hoping to read the mystery it had been mixed up in, so that I might reveal that mystery to the world. To the world, yes; nothing less than that. I was determined to make a story of what I had seen—a *conte* in the manner of great Guy de Maupassant. Now and again, in the course of the past year or so, it had occurred to me that I might be a writer. But I had not felt the impulse to sit down and write something. I did feel that impulse now. It would indeed have been an irresistible impulse if I had known just what to write.

I felt I might know at any moment, and had but to give my mind to it.

Maupassant was an impeccable artist, yet I think the secret of the hold he had on the young men of my day was not that we discerned his cunning, but that we delighted in the simplicity which his cunning achieved. I had read a great number of his short stories, but none that had made me feel as though I, if I were a writer, mightn't have written it myself. Maupassant had an European reputation. It was pleasing, it was soothing and gratifying, to feel that one could at any time win an equal fame if one chose to set pen to paper. And now, suddenly, the spring had been touched in me, the time was come. I was grateful for the fluke by which I had witnessed on the terrace that evocative scene. I looked forward to reading the MS. of "The Fan"—to-morrow, at latest. I was not wildly ambitious. I was not inordinately vain. I knew I couldn't ever, with the best will in the world, write like George Meredith. Those wondrous works of his, seething with wit, with poetry and philosophy and what not, never had beguiled me with the sense that I might do something similar. I had full consciousness of not being a philosopher, of not being a poet, and of not being a wit. Well, Maupassant was none of these things. He was just an observer, like me. Of course he was a good deal older than I, and had observed a good deal more. But it seemed to me that he was not my superior in knowledge of life. I knew all about life through *him*.

Dimly, the initial paragraph of my tale floated in my mind. I—not exactly I myself, but rather that impersonal *je* familiar to me through Maupassant—was to be sitting at that table, with a book before me, just as I *had* sat. Four or five sentences would give the whole scene. One of these I had quite definitely composed. You have already heard it. "Down below, the sea rustled to and fro over the shingle."

These words, which pleased me much, were to do double duty. They were to recur. They were to be, by a fine stroke, the very last words of my tale, their tranquillity striking a sharp ironic contrast with the stress of what had just been narrated. I had, you see, advanced farther in the form of my tale than in

the matter. But even the form was as yet vague. What, exactly, was to happen after Mlle. Angélique and M. Joumand (as I provisionally called him) had rushed back past me into the casino? It was clear that I must hear the whole inner history from the lips of one or the other of them. Which? Should M. Joumand stagger out on to the terrace, sit down heavily at the table next to mine, bury his head in his hands, and presently, in broken words, blurt out to me all that might be of interest? "And I tell you I gave up everything for her—everything!" He stared at me with his old hopeless eyes. 'She is more than the fiend I have described to you. Yet I swear to you, monsieur, that if I had anything left to give, it should be hers.'

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Or should the lady herself be my informant? For a while, I rather leaned to this alternative. It was more exciting, it seemed to make the writer more signally a man of the world. On the other hand, it was less simple to manage. Wronged persons might be ever so communicative, but I surmised that persons in the wrong were reticent. Mlle. Angélique, therefore, would have to be modified by me in appearance and behavior, toned down, touched up; and poor M. Joumand must look like a man of whom one could believe anything. . . . "She ceased speaking. She gazed down at the fragments of her fan, and then, as though finding in them an image of her own life, whispered, 'To think what I once was, monsieur!—what, but for him, I might be, even now!' She buried her face in her hands, then stared out into the night. Suddenly she uttered a short, harsh laugh.

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I decided that I must choose the first of these two ways. It was the less chivalrous as well as the less lurid way, but clearly it was the more artistic as well as the easier. The "*chose vue*," the "*tranche de la vie*"—this was the thing to aim at. Honesty was the best policy. I must be nothing if not merciless. Maupassant was nothing if not merciless. He would not have spared Mlle. Angélique. Besides, why should I libel

M. Joumand? Poor—no, not *poor* M. Joumand! I warned myself against pitying him. One touch of "sentimentality," and I should be lost. M. Joumand was ridiculous. I must keep him so. But—what was his position in life? I toyed with the possibility that he kept a fan-shop—that the business had once been a prosperous one, but had gone down, down, because of his infatuation for this woman to whom he was always giving fans—which she *always* smashed. . . . "Ah, monsieur, cruel and ungrateful to me though she is, I swear to you that if I had anything left to give, it should be hers; but"—he stared at me with his old, hopeless eyes—"the fan she broke to-night was the last—the last, monsieur—of my stock." Down below,"—but I pulled myself together, and asked pardon of my Muse.

It may be that I had offended her by my fooling. Or it may be that she had a sisterly desire to shield Mlle. Angélique from my mordant art. Or it may be that she was bent on saving M. de Maupassant from a dangerous rivalry. Anyway, she withheld from me the inspiration I had so confidently solicited. I *could not* think what had led up to that scene on the terrace. I tried hard and soberly. I turned the "*chose vue*" over and over in my mind, day by day, and the fan-stump over and over in my hand. But the "*chose à figurer*"—what, oh what, was that? Nightly I revisited the café, and sat there with an open mind—a mind wide open to catch the idea that should drop into it like a ripe golden plum. The plum did not ripen. The mind remained wide open for a week or more, but nothing except that phrase about the sea rustled to and fro in it.

A full quarter of a century has gone by. M. Joumand's death, so far too fat was he all those years ago, may be presumed. A temper so violent as Mlle. Angélique's must surely have brought its owner to the grave, long since. But here, all unchanged, the stump of her fan is; and once more I turn it over and over in my hand. The chord this relic strikes in me is not one of curiosity as to that old quarrel, but (if you will forgive me) one of tenderness for my first effort to write and for my first hopes of excellence.

# By Inland Waters

BY WALTER PRICHARD EATON



It was the terrific winter of 1917-18, which will live in many a memory like a nightmare, with our soldiers sailing away to France, our coal-supply almost gone, and such cold wrapping the land as the oldest inhabitant had reluctantly to confess he couldn't remember. In my corner of New England we had nearly three feet of snow on the level, and for a week at a time in January and February the thermometer would barely reach up to zero at noon. At times it went to thirty below. It was in such weather that Walter Stone telephoned to me one day to come down to his village in Connecticut, bringing my snow-shoes. He met me at the end of the trolley, and together we started out along a back road which roughly parallels the Housatonic River. The river here, for the most part, flows with a slow, steady pull, and does not readily freeze, but now it was frozen solid from bank to bank and the ice was covered with snow, making a white, winding driveway, as it were, between the steep banks and the overhanging willows. Cresting a sharp rise, which shut the river from view, we climbed a fence and moved softly across a little field. A moment later we were looking down upon the river from an elevation of forty or fifty feet, at a point where it has bitten its way through a hill, forming a narrow gorge where it flows so rapidly that even this arctic weather could not entirely freeze it. There was, perhaps, three hundred feet of open water in midstream, a slash of black velvet in the white, of black velvet fringed with a green watered silk as the sun flashed on the exposed edges of the ice.

His finger on his lips, my companion pointed down to this scar of open water, and, following his gesture, I saw first two, then three, then five American mer-

gansers, quietly and busily engaged in the pursuit of a livelihood in this chill element.

We watched them, fascinated, for a considerable time. Their methods of fishing seemed to be varied, but that most employed was to work up to the head of the open water, either by swimming close to the edge of the ice and taking advantage of all the back-waters, or else by climbing out and waddling up on the ice itself, and then swimming down with the current, head bent close to the water, eyes alert. The ducks would make the three-hundred foot trip time and time again without results, till you might have supposed they were merely playing a game—coasting down the swift current. But now and then one would suddenly tip forward and under, completely disappearing, to emerge again near the edge of the ice, lower down, perhaps to climb out and swallow what he had caught. We were not near enough, unfortunately, to see what the food was. Occasionally a duck would fish by squatting patiently on the edge of the ice, neck and head out over the water, suddenly to dive in like a small boy at the old swimming-hole when a carryall comes by on the road, while others swam about in a back-water, revolving with the eddy.

Presently we made either some noise or motion which alarmed them, or else they agreed among themselves that the fishing was getting poor here (as indeed it was), for one by one they suddenly rose and flew northward, carefully following, at a height of about seventy-five feet, the curves of the river, no doubt seeking other spots of open water. It was interesting to see them take the air. The mergansers cannot rise instantaneously from a standing start. Their first motions are clumsy. Facing against the current, each one seemed to heave himself up till it stood on the water, wings out, and then it ran up-stream, its feet