



THE EASTER WIDOWER

BY PIERRE VEBER

NO one ever knew how it happened that Paul Humblevault was always dressed in the latest fashion. Maître Jessmar, in whose legal office he exercised the functions of head clerk, even conceived some uneasiness about the matter. It seemed impossible that an employee of 8,000f. a year could dress so elegantly without dipping into his employer's strong box.

Often he put the query to him: "Mr. Humblevault, might one ask you the address of your tailor?" And the clerk would name a modest Polish tailor who repaired the breeches of the good people that colonize the neighborhood of Porte St. Denis.

At the end of several months, when Maître Jessmar had decided that he was certainly not being robbed, when he had calculated that not a centime was missing from his strong box, he conceded that Paul Humblevault must be obtaining his resources by some more or less legitimate method. Further than this, he began to show a kindly feeling for this clerk, whose appearance and bearing did honor to the office; he confided to him the reading of wills in titled families and the proclamation of contracts among the leading financiers. And everywhere the impeccable exterior of the clerk produced a lively impression.

The most contradictory rumors about the matter were circulated around the office. Some said that Paul Humblevault was protected by a banker who could not acknowledge himself as the clerk's father, and who had had an intrigue with a personage of royal blood; thus it was that Humblevault was marked with the sign of the cross on his forehead, a great part in the world. The sign in question, was really the scar left by a burn from an alcohol lamp which an awkward nurse had inflicted of yore upon little Humblevault.

Other companions, less romantic, insinuated that the head clerk had established himself in the good graces of an old lady, immensely rich, who loved this mysterious young man with an altogether platonic affection.

Now it happens that we are in position to unveil the truth. Here it is:

You know that Count de Perrault was the most accomplished gentleman of his period. From 1902 to '12 he was the model of all the elites; he dressed with a taste, a finesse, that were unique, and he set the newest fashion. All this was because he knew

how to stop at the right time. The moment that a mode was in danger of exaggeration the Count found something that would replace it. He never wore the same suit more than a fortnight. At the end of two weeks he would abandon it to Francis, his valet. Francis would sell the clothes to a second hand dealer, Father Gustave, and Father Gustave would hang them among those cost of garments of officers, academicians and ushers that bear witness in shops of this sort to the annihilation of all social distinctions.

Now, Paul Humblevault, happening to pass Father Gustave's establishment, had remarked the spoils won from Count de Perrault. These garments, of unique cut and style, fashioned from the richest sort of material, attracted his attention. He entered Father Gustave's store and bargained for them. Then he tried them on; they fitted him to perfection; they seemed as if they were made for him; this coat, this waistcoat, these pantaloons suited him to a T. As he paid over the 50f. demanded by the dealer the latter said to him: "If you like those clothes you might subscribe for them regularly. The owner sells me his wardrobe every month, and I will give you the preference whenever I have them for reselling."

Lawyer Jessmar's clerk accepted the bargain. Every month he came to Father Gustave's shop and purchased the cast off clothes of Count Perrault. A brush with the wind and a touch with the flatiron and they reassumed an air of absolute newness. For the price of one ordinary suit this astute young man secured four of exquisite cut. He cared little whence these clothes originated, and he sold them very soon, at no loss, to another second hand dealer, for the elegance of Count Perrault imposed similar elegance upon himself, and he had to "follow suit." In fact, he monopolized the Perrault wardrobe, not wishing to give anybody else the opportunity of profiting by the harvest.

And, to sum up, he had his reward. In his own circle he enjoyed the consideration that attaches itself to young people of good family who know how to dress. He even had considerable success among women. A star of the music halls and a very famous person in the demi-monde gave him the opportunity to visit their apartments. But lest you pass on.

Young Humblevault had only one ambition—to marry a rich girl—and

this he deemed quite possible. For rich girls appreciate all that is chic. Poor girls also appreciate it, but they do not figure in the calculations of young lawyers' clerks who wish to become lawyers in their turn. And Paul Humblevault dreamed of the day when some young person with expectations would offer him the means for purchasing the Jessmar office. French lawyers still have the means for purchasing the Jessmar office. French lawyers still have the means for purchasing the Jessmar office.

Paul Humblevault in his dreams saw himself dressed in this black suit with a large cape. And every time that he went out to officiate in the great world, on evenings when marriage contracts were read, he expected that some one of the young ladies seated behind attentive grandpères might be struck as with a thunderbolt. Then after the reading he would, of course, be invited to dance. But up to the time when our story opens his manoeuvres had resulted in nothing. Paul did not allow himself to become discouraged. Did not Napoleon say something like this:—"If you wish to be right you must deceive yourself, with an immediate recovery of your mental balance?"

The smiling calm of Paul Humblevault's life was suddenly troubled. It seemed to him that he was growing fat! The Count's clothes were apparently getting to fit him too snugly. This greatly disquieted him. He can in fact, change to your own measure clothes that are too big for you but clothes that are too small can not easily be enlarged.

And already uneasy clerks were beginning to tell their associates:—"Humblevault, take care; you are becoming too stout!"

Humblevault glanced over himself. "He who often weighs himself knows himself well," says the proverb. He did often weigh himself. His weight never varied. And none the less his clothes grew tighter and tighter. The clerk put himself on a diet. He lost five ounces, then ten! He forced himself to walk at every opportunity. Thus he lost a pound more. He heroically renounced the eating of meat, he left off drinking at meals. He even went without breakfast! A useless ordeal! And at last Humblevault was driven to accept the awful truth. It was not that he was gaining flesh! It was that the first proprietor of his clothes was losing it!

He was losing flesh with astounding rapidity. From fortnight to fortnight his clothes shrank steadily. Undoubtedly some catastrophe was overturning the universe of the unknown, and Paul Humblevault fell into the deepest perplexity. Either he must renounce the elegance which had won him so much esteem, which promised him so bright a future, or else he must learn what it was that was melting away in this fashion the brilliant personage whose clothes he wore.

So the clerk called on Father Gustave and asked him for the name of the gentleman to whom the said clothes belonged. "I do not know his name," said the dealer. "Everything that could give any clue as to the proprietor is always carefully removed from the clothes. The tailor's hand on pantaloons and waistcoat and on the inner pocket of the coat, initials or name elsewhere—all these, you understand, have disappeared when the clothes are disposed of to me. I know only one thing, and that is that the valet who brings them to me is one Francis, and that every evening, from ten to eleven, he plays billiards at the Café of the Two Sisters, in Messina avenue."

Armed with these directions, the clerk that same evening made his appearance at the Café of the Two Sisters. In the rear room two men were playing billiards—a chauffeur and an old man, clean shaven and bald. At the end of some minutes Paul ascertained that the bald man was probably Francis.

He at once conquered the good will of his play fellow in a low voice. "Well played!"

"Just a little more and it would have been a hit!"

"Ah, that's not so bad!"

The chauffeur having easily won the game, took his departure, and Mr. Francis proposed to play a game with the sympathetic onlooker, whose admiration had mollified the bitterness of his defeat. Paul Humblevault accepted the challenge, though he trembled at the thought of being seen playing with a simple valet. Despite the fact that he possessed remarkable skill and had won the prize at many an amateur tournament, he was careful to yield the advantage to his adversary. Thus Francis had the happiness to win from a much superior player. Between two games while they were discussing their mazarin, Francis said to the clerk:—"You have a good style."

"Oh, yes," was Humblevault's modest answer. "I have style, but that is all. As to you, you play with a mastery."

"I have practised a great deal. There is a billiard table in my master's house, the Count de Perrault."

"The Count de Perrault?" asked the clerk. "I know the name very well."

"Why of course you know it. His name is always in the papers. At least it used to be. But now, since the illness of the Countess, the Count doesn't go out any more."

Paul Humblevault dissimulated his joy. Now at last he knew why the original proprietor of his clothes was thinning down. A heartache was the reason. Paul was adroit enough

not to provoke any further confidences from Francis, who, on his part, had no hesitation in telling all that went on at his master's home.

The Count de Perrault had made a love match with one of his cousins, a very pretty girl, who, like him, had a taste for the elegancies of life. For several months the life of the young couple had been a series of parties, of social gayeties. Then, with the beginning of winter, the Countess had been seized with a lingering illness. Immediately the Count, renouncing the worldly life, had installed himself at the bedside of his wife. Little by little the beloved patient had wasted away and the Count had wasted away with her.

"Don't you think we can save her?" cried the clerk, betrayed into an excess of interest. "No," said Francis. "She is lost. And if you care for my opinion, I do not think the Count will survive her. It's too bad, for the place is a very good one. In perquisites alone I can make a hundred francs a month out of it."

When Paul left his new friend he was fully acquainted with everything that concerned the Count and the Countess of Perrault. The old servant had hidden nothing from him, and he foresaw a denouement to which everything pointed. In fact, one month later, when he presented himself at Father Gustave's shop, the latter offered him a suit of black cloth. According to agreement Paul was forced to acquire it, and, as he was an economical lad, to wear it. Whereupon all the people he knew accosted him with an air of sympathy, saying:—"My poor friend, I didn't know you were mourning. I received no announcement from you. Whom have you lost?"

At about the same time Paul observed that the Count no longer had the same taste in dress. He who had once set the fashions seemed to renounce all interest in the matter. He wore his clothes for a longer time and did not exact so rigid a standard from his tailor. His grief absorbed him. Furthermore, he continued losing flesh. This thing could not last.

Paul Humblevault once more went round to the little café in Messina avenue. He again found Francis there, who, like himself, was wearing mourning for Mme. de Perrault. He proposed a game of billiards, which he lost with the same adroitness as before. Since the death in the family Francis had had no opportunity of playing. The game absorbed him so that it was difficult to draw any confidences from him. At last he told him the Countess of Perrault had left this world for a better one.

"The Count, my master, is in a state of mind. He no longer goes in to society. He remains at home, shut up. He weeps. He doesn't eat any more, he doesn't sleep any more. I think he will not last long in resigning Madame!"

"Spare me!" cried Paul. "He must be made to brace up."

"And how, sir?"

"Well, he should remarry. There you are!"

Francis shook his head with an air of pity. "The Count will never again find a Countess de Perrault."

"Was she so beautiful as all that?"

"Beautiful? She was more than beautiful! She was a stunner!"

And when Paul inquired for the details that Francis summed up in the epithet of stunner he learned that Mme. de Perrault was, while living, a large young woman, neither too fat nor too slim, with a well turned figure and a face showing decision of very soft blue eyes. She was a good musician and sang a little; she rode a horse well; she liked travel, movement, people; she knew how to dress; she had intellect.

"A stunner?"

"No. Hardly any. The Count is very rich."

"Noble?"

"No. She was born a Radot."

By midnight the clerk had lost three hundred points, but he was marvellously well equipped with information about the late Countess. And he had arrived at a great decision—he was going to remarry the Count! It was necessary, indeed, to make him remarry before Easter; that is to say, before the end of ten months, so as to renew at a very useful season his light weight clothes.

Next morning Paul hunted up at the office the list of clients—widows, old maids, divorced women. After severe examination he retained three names—Mme. de Franchel, Miss Decevant and Mme. Amusson.

All three were tall, brunette, pretty and rich.

The widow of the Baron de Franchel, however, gave herself up exclusively to good works—there was no chance there. As to Miss Decevant, she was too intelligent, too much interested in questions of hygiene, in medicine; she was fond of sociology. There was no chance either with a woman who thinks. Mme. de Franchel and Mlle. Decevant must be eliminated. Mme. Amusson remained. And it was this name that the clerk kept.

Mme. Amusson, in fact, was the divorced wife of a pretty bad lot, whom she had married for love and who had introduced her to all sorts of trouble! This gentleman has taken it upon himself to destroy, one by one, the illusions she had formed about him, and it had taken him no less than ten years to give his wife a more realistic impression of the truth. But that was not his fault. It must be conceded that he applied himself to the task with a strength and a persistence which would have appeared highly praiseworthy if expended in other channels. Finally he had proved himself to be of such virtuosity in vice and in infamy that his wife had resigned herself to the necessity of procuring a divorce, and the Count in granting it had complied with her upon having succeeded in living ten years with such a person. The president had even added:—"I couldn't have done it myself!"

Mme. Amusson, who had now been divorced for a year, was wearing herself to death. She was chic, she was fascinating. She dressed in black by way of defiance, because it is said not to be becoming to brunettes, and because she imagined herself to be disgusted with life. Paul decided that she should be, with the briefest possible delay, the Countess of Perrault.

And this is the stratagem that he imagined and that he had the audacity to put into execution.—"He wrote to Mme. Amusson:—"Madame, a gentleman suffers; you alone can rescue him from the black trouble that gnaws at his heart. He does not know that I am writing to you, but on Monday morning, between eleven and twelve, he will be at the Avenue du Blois. He will have a dark pink in his buttonhole. Hold a New York Herald in your hand."

Next he wrote to Monsieur le Comte de Perrault:—"Dear Sir—A young woman suffers. You alone can rescue her from the black trouble that gnaws at her heart. She does not know that I am writing to you, but on Monday morning, between eleven and twelve,

she will be at the Avenue du Blois. She will hold a New York Herald in her hand. Put, without affectation, a dark pink in your buttonhole."

When they received these letters the two interested parties shrugged their shoulders. "What sort of idiot is it who is trying this hoax upon me?" Nevertheless the letters set their imagination working. "After all, how can one tell?"

On Monday morning the Count and Mme. Amusson were in the Avenue du Blois. They did not, indeed, dare to carry the signs of recognition. That would have prevented them from denying that they had been caught by a trick. They promenade up and down the avenue several times, examining all the passers-by. Several times they met. The Count remarked Mme. Amusson who was of the type he preferred.

Mme. Amusson asked herself if this gentleman, so black, so distinguished, who had looked at her so steadfastly, might not be the man of sorrow. Paul from a distance had observed them. Consequently both received a letter that evening.

"Why did you not carry the sign which was to serve as a signal? On Wednesday he at the same place, and this time have no faith! Shame! The matter is a serious one."

On Wednesday the Count wore in deal like a chrysanthemum, and Mme his buttonhole an enormous pink of the darkest hue, which looked a good Autumn bore a copy of the Herald in each hand, so that it might the better be seen.

She recognized the Count; the Count recognized her. He even dared to accost her. "Madame, are you the lady of whom the letter speaks?"

"Sir," said she in wrath, "I do not understand any of this jesting."

"Nor I either, Madame. And I would like to help you save the imbecile who has dared!"

They did not seek long. After ten minutes of conversation their thoughts passed to quite other things; they had exchanged confidences about their sorrows and they were astonished that they had talked so much upon these matters, seeing that they did not know each other.

To whom would they not communicate their most secret thoughts if they did so to the first comers?

And it came about that Paul had imagined it would. These two great sorrows proved a solace for each other. The Count of Perrault forgot the unfortunate Countess with a rapidity that savored of miracle, while Mme. Amusson ceased of a sudden to speak of men in general. And the clothes of the Count de Perrault ceased to shrink any further.

On the contrary, they resumed with their customary light tints a more comfortable measure. For a moment Paul feared that the Count might exaggerate. On the day when the marriage contract was read Maître Humblevault, chief clerk of Maître Jessmar, acting for Mme. Amusson, the wife of Perrault, read there were men there of the great the document in the Perrault mansion before a brilliant assembly.

red and powdered women, financiers, diplomats, military men and a good third of the Academy. And while Paul Humblevault read with measured voice the list of the goods and chattels of the newly united couple he thought to himself:—"To think that those people have no idea that it is to me, Paul Humblevault, they owe their happiness!"

They never knew it. All the same, on this night of the contract Mlle. Blanche Vertout, daughter of Tapioca Vertout, was seized with a sudden passion for this elegant clerk who read so nicely, and immediately on her return home she demanded that her parents should at once obtain for this distinguished young man, as a consequence of which the office of Maître Jessmar passed a few months afterward into the hands of Maître Humblevault.

But that, as Rudyard Kipling says is another story.



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