

# Beautiful Jaconette

By CLIVE HOLLAND

Author of "My Japanese Wife," "An Egyptian Coquette," "The Seed of the Poppy,"  
"Marcelle of the Latin Quarter," etc.

ALL the habitués of the old Cafe des Lilas, which stands just beyond Fremiet's Fountain at the top of the Boulevard St. Michel opposite Bullier, called her Jaconette, and none seemed to know her other name, if she had one.

Jaconette was young, pretty, and charming, and it is needless to say that she had many friends and admirers, not only among the habitués of the Cafe des Lilas, but also down at Colorossi's in the Rue de la Grande Chaumiere, where she posed.

Jaconette seemed like some gay butterfly let out upon the world of the Quartier Latin when she entered the smoke-begrimed room of the old Cafe des Lilas, which its frequenters loved so well, and for them had so many tragic, comic, and interesting memories.

Jaconette, we have said, was young. At the time she got to know John Bettany, the young poet-painter of whom Colorossi Pere thought so much, and from whom great things were expected, she was hardly twenty, although she looked more. But the Quartier is a school in which experience of life is soon gained, and with experience often comes the look of age, even upon young faces.

Tradition said that Jaconette had come a few years before from a little Normandy village on the coast near Cancale. And some of the blue of the sea which washes that favoured coast seemed to have crept into her eyes, as did also some of the sunshine appear to have entangled itself in her brown hair.

As Jules la Fontaine said one day, as he, Bettany, and little Giles Smethwick, the American, sat smoking, drinking coffee, and discussing Jaconette, after a hard morning's work down at Colorossi's, "she was more than a peasant and less than a lady." And perhaps this strange characteristic of Jaconette's gave her half her charm.

It was not easy to shock Jaconette; and she would talk of any subject that the mind of the student could invent—and the inventions sometimes were very daring—and yet never did coarseness creep into her eyes or speech.

She was so different from the other girls of the Quartier. Marie Dercourt, for instance, who with a good heart beating beneath her bodice, was yet coarse enough to shock at any rate a nouveau, and to cause even the hardened sinner amongst the habitués of the Cafe des Lilas or the Cafe d'Harcourt further down the Boulevard qualms of apprehension when she talked in mixed society.

So many would have been friends with Jaconette, but although when the daily sitting was finished at Colorossi's, or she had spare time upon her hands, she was willing to pose for anyone whom she liked, and who could paint, no one as yet had captured her affections. And so she lived alone in her little fifth-floor mansarde, situated in one of the crooked little streets which run out of the Rue de Seine.

If she favoured anyone, it was admitted by most of the little group of artistic souls, which included Jules la Fontaine, Giles Smethwick, Phillipe Delapre, the journalist, and Henry Comstock, an American medical student, that the lucky fellow was Bettany. There was something about Bettany that would naturally take the fancy of women. He was not exactly handsome; but in his thin face, with its clear-cut features, and his deep, unfathomable, grey-blue eyes, there lurked just that element of mystery that would stir the curiosity of a woman, and probably lead on to love. Then he was blessed with a singularly flexible voice, which took on at times, when he was in earnest conversation, a musical cadence, which, as Jaconette at once said, "Went right to the heart."

When first Jaconette's liking for Bettany became apparent, the matter was freely discussed in that special far corner of the Cafe des Lilas, away from the billiard tables, and near the windows which opened out on to the "terrasse," where stood the famous oleanders in green tubs. The conclusions arrived at were two. Firstly, that Bettany was a lucky fellow; and, secondly, that Jaconette was throwing herself away.

Marie Dercourt, who at five-and-twenty had played the game of life in the Quartier with boldness, though with varying success, who had at one time possessed a flat of four rooms in a huge block along the new Boulevard Raspail, and at another

had occupied a single tiny room in a by-street half-way down the toilsomely long Rue de Vaugirard, said: "Jaconette is a fool. She is too pretty for a poet, whose dreams seldom materialize into twenty-franc pieces, and who probably will soon tire of her, as poets usually do."

But those who knew Jaconette did not believe it was possible for anyone to tire of her, and thought that bold, handsome Marie Dercourt might possibly even be jealous.

Few, however, realized that beneath the laughing face of Jaconette, all her gaiety and apparently butterfly ways, which, after all, were a great protection in a community where it was dangerous to be sad, possessed a depth of character that lifted her as far above the girls of the Quartier morally as she was above most of them by reason of physical charm.

It was the custom of the little coterie which had named itself in satirical glee "The Liars," because, as Smethwick asserted, "they always spoke the truth," to meet every day, at the end of the seance at Colorossi's, where all of them save Comstock and Delapre worked. Generally Jaconette was there, the life and soul of the party, able to hold her own against the sometimes savagely jealous onslaughts of the other girls, by reason of that strain of good breeding which seemed to have crept somehow into her peasant blood.

ON a fine morning in June, just after the excitement of the opening of the Salon, of the distribution of the green tickets and the white, Jules la Fontaine, Smethwick, and Jaconette came along up the Boulevard to the rendezvous at the Cafe des Lilas. Jaconette looked charming in the sunlight. She had a fresher natural colour than most Frenchwomen, her sea-blue eyes were dancing with the joy of life, and in her hair still more sunbeams seemed to be entrapped than usual. Her frock, too, fitted her like that of a great lady, and her shoes were above reproach—a sure sign of thriftiness in a model; and if her cotton gloves were darned, the work was so neat that no one save a woman would have suspected the fact. On her arm hung a pink cotton parasol, which gave just that delicate rose-leaf tint to her face when she sheltered herself under it from the sunshine that Bettany had more than once declared was like nothing he had ever seen before, and had caused Smethwick to insist upon painting her so "en plein air" in a corner of the Luxembourg Gardens.

As the three crossed the carrefour and entered the cafe, they nodded to madame, who sat on her high stool at the receipt of custom, and who knew almost everyone in the Quartier both by sight and name with the easy familiarity of those to whom the Cafe des Lilas had become a home and an anchorage.

In the far corner of the billiard-room, the low ceiling of which was so begrimed with the smoke of many pipes of caporal that instead of reflecting it seemed to sop up the light on the brightest of summer days, all the other members of the little coterie were gathered save Bettany.

When Jaconette appeared, all save Comstock hammered upon the top of the table, the marble of which was no longer white, but yellow and somewhat streaky from stains of coffee and much ingrained lead pencil from the many sketches that had been made upon it.

"Jaconette," they called, "come here." "Sit next to me." "What will you have?" "It is my turn to pay for Jaconette," and other exclamations as they all rose and made way for the girl to pass to the padded settle which ran along the wall.

Jaconette smiled at them, but her eyes sought one who was not there. At last she said: "Where is Monsieur Bettany?" and all save Comstock laughed.

Smethwick exclaimed: "Oh, Bettany is dreaming, as usual. He will be here soon. Mademoiselle"—pinching her arm—"you must not expect a poet to be punctual. Poets never are, and if they were, would probably not be poets."

But Jaconette was ill at ease. Something seemed to tell her that Bettany would not come, and then she turned to Comstock and said quickly: "Monsieur Comstock, you know why Monsieur Bettany is not here?"

A shadow went over Comstock's face, and for a moment he did not reply to the girl's question,

but seemed to regard her almost unseeingly.

"What is the matter with Bettany, anyway?" said Giles Smethwick.

"Yes, what is the matter with him—anyhow, old sawbones?" said Jules la Fontaine. And then the whole of them fired off questions simply because Comstock answered none of them.

At last the latter, driven in a corner by the cross-fire of inquiries, said, slowly: "Bettany is very sick, I am afraid. I do not know what it is, but, anyway, it is serious. He was taken ill quite suddenly. I was with him the best part of the night, and I only left this morning to go to the Clinique after I had found one of the Little Sisters to look after him. He did not know anyone in the early morning hours, and I'm afraid he'll have a tough fight to pull through."

While Comstock was speaking Jaconette sat with her hands clenched and resting on the edge of the table, and her face almost as white as a sheet. Marie Dercourt noticed it and smiled. It was so like Jaconette to take things to heart, thought the other girl, who had a reputation for being brilliantly heartless.

Then, as Comstock refused to say any more, Jaconette suddenly rose.

"Hullo," said La Fontaine. "What is the matter? Where are you off to?" and he laid his hand on her arm as though to detain her.

Quite roughly she threw the engaging clasp off, and pushed her way from behind the table past the knees of Smethwick.

"I am going to the Rue Monsieur Le Prince," she said. "I am going to Monsieur Bettany."

Marie Dercourt laughed. The others of the group, with the exception of Comstock, said either, "Don't be a fool, Jaconette," or "Plenty of time; the Sister is with him, and he will be well looked after. Just stay for a book"; or merely, "I should not go if I were you."

It was not that the men were heartless, or that they wished to desert Bettany. But something in Comstock's face had told them that it would be better for Jaconette's own sake not to go. But in the heart of the girl there stirred a wonderful pity, bred of love, which seemed to draw her feet towards the studio at the top of the house where Bettany lay.

So she simply said, "My friends, I am going," and, gathering her skirts in one hand as she crossed the sanded floor, she passed out into the sunshine and sped away down the Boulevard.

When she had gone Comstock said very slowly: "It does not matter now she has gone, but I fear that Bettany is down with smallpox. Where he can have got it heaven only knows, but I have never seen the symptoms if I am mistaken this time."

"You should have told her," said Jules la Fontaine, slowly. "It would be ruin to her if she caught it, for her good looks are her stock-in-trade. You should not have forgotten that."

"Maybe I shouldn't," said Comstock, slowly, after a moment's pause. "But Jules, my friend, it would have made no difference. The girl was bound to go, and I knew it."

"Ah," said Marie, "we women are fools where you men are concerned, if only you have crept or fought your way into our hearts."

But nobody felt like arguing the point with Marie, for the gloom of a personal calamity seemed to enwrap the little party in the Cafe des Lilas.

JACONETTE'S feet hurried as they had scarcely ever hurried before. She had never hastened to a rendezvous for pleasure as she hastened to this rendezvous—it might be with Death. Over the cobblestones of the narrow street, which took her by a short cut to the Rue Monsieur Le Prince, there went the click, click of her high-heeled shoes as she hastened along. People, as she sped by, turned to watch her, wondering what could cause her to be hurrying at such a pace. Several of the workgirls smiled, and more than one whispered to her companion slyly, "Surely she goes to meet a lover."

At last Jaconette reached the shabby doorway, off which many winters' frosts had peeled most of the original paint, that led into the courtyard and to the staircase by which Bettany's studio was reached. It was a long climb up, for Bettany, who was not rich although he had a small private income, used to say, with a smile, "I like to live as near the stars as possible." And when at last she reached the well-known door and rapped upon it, she was breathless from the five long flights of stairs which she had climbed and the excitement under which she was labouring.

She rapped twice before the door was opened by a white-coiffed Sister of Charity, whose sweet, sad face was scarcely less colourless than the spotless

(Continued on page 25.)