

IV

OFF with the pack—down with it, down with hat and stick on the table under the dome of chestnut leaves—down with himself on the bench in the open, in the green shadow, in the cool! The inn looks clean, the trees about it cast shade upon the brilliant road—a dog comes wagging welcome—a round little hostess emerges, smiling and tidy—“Stunning! Perfectly topping, this!” Dick Stewart thinks, as he rests and respires, forgetting the boy and the signpost. “Bon-jour, Madame!” he says joyously. “Glad to see you, Madame! I’m hungry, Madame! I could eat *you*, Madame! Something else good, as quick as you can. And meantime your coldest drink!”

“Bon!” the round little woman said, showing smiling teeth. “Bien, M’sieur! Certainly, yes!” Deftly she spread and served the table. And presently, when an omelette, a ragoût, and a salad had come and gone, when grapes and pears and walnuts had succeeded them, when coffee fumed on the table, and the woman sat near him knitting, while the grey-blue breath of a cigar went wavering up into the whispering green dome, Dick Stewart spoke again, in high content.

“Madame is a wonderful cook,” he said. “For one so young and fair. Madame is very young, by-the-by?”

“Certainly not!” she said, regarding him doubtfully.

“And very charming, too!”

“Certainly not!” she said again, but she smiled.

He put four francs on the edge of the table. “Mere silver, only,” he said. “Madame wears gold. On her finger. Ah, if Madame were not already married!”

“M’sieur is one of those flatterers!” she said, as she took up the money. “M’sieur is like all the Messieurs!”