

Old Man's Fond Delusion

We were sitting on the terrace of the old French chateau, sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes. It was an autumn afternoon. The tapers of the woods were worked in faded colors of decay; they rustled with the sentiment of the lost, the past, and the dead. The warm had raised a wavering veil of mist about them, and in allowing for its influence one was inclined to exaggerate the definition of leaf-underside—that delicate definition on the sparseness of autumn, which charges the smiling landscape of summer with the first tentative thinness of renunciation, to sweep later into the hard features of winter asceticism.

Smothered the tobacco smoke my old friend's face showed shriveling and wrinkling with a like delicacy of line. The sentiment of expression was almost one with the sentiment of this essentially French moment of the past. The woods were sad, but they were more happy than sad; with them it was the time of dreams, and they were haunted by the fragile presence of a vanished spring. The sorrow that was in them was plaintive, almost—a almost a tender impersonation—their was the sentiment of youth, its iridescence and play, unattainable of any depth or darkness of shading.

It was forty years since I had met Louis de Brissac. In Paris, as young men, we had been close friends and gone over to study in the French capital, and from the very first Louis had won me to him by his charming romance of his friendship for me. Since that time, during the long years in India, men had been near to the fibre and core of life through mutual danger and mutual endurance; I had felt the stir of those silent friendships whose open manifestation is a firmer grip, an understanding eye, a sense. Beside these hidden vital emotions the memories of my Paris days were as pale-colored as his faraway memories, but yet in these faraway memories there was a sweet fragrance which the robust attachments lacked. Louis had written to me regularly for years and years. I had whole boxes of letters in his pointed handwriting. He was responsive, and thought no detail too trivial for my interest, not only was familiar with the administration of the estate down to the minutest particular, but also his whole mental life, with all its philosophic doubts and conjectures, was laid open before me. The letters were written with care and lucidity; they were full of observation and admirable criticism of life and books. But partly through lack of time, partly through difficulty of composition in the French language, and mostly through constitutional self-repression, my replies were, I fear, somewhat bald and brief. Then, during a period of travel, I missed several of his letters, and, having no incentive to write him, I let the correspondence drop.

On my return from India the London doctors advised me to try the waters at Vichy, and thither I repaired, intending to find out if my friend still lived in the neighborhood. On the very first evening I came across him unexpectedly. I had stepped into the Cercle Prive to watch the gambling, and amid the clapping and repulsive faces of those whom my attention was attracted to an old man of great benevolence and respect. I could not be mistaken. I knew him at once, in spite of his white hair and his wrinkles. The familiar charm, the dash of melancholy happiness, that had always belonged to Louis were there still, more marked than ever. He was playing a game with a childish pleasure—making deliberately, but not high. He had evidently set a limit to his losses, for presently he came over, with a pleasant word to a friend or toward the window where I was standing.

"Louis!" I said, touching his arm. He looked at me for a moment quite blankly. Then his face grew radiant. "Richard!" he said, announcing the name French fashion. "It is Richard—my friend Richard! My poor Richard, but how have you changed!"

I smiled. "Well, it is forty years," I replied.

"And to meet you here!" he continued. "I always dine here when I come to Vichy on business. And I am a little. It is excitement. If you win, excitement; if you lose, excitement. My friend Richard, what a sight! I am overwhelmed! You must come home with me tonight. Why, I insist—absolutely insist. My carriage is here. There is a room ready for you. It is too great happiness to have you with me at the Chateau de La Tour."

There was no resisting the pressure of his invitation, his faithfulness of

friendship. I consented, though quizzically, half doubtful what manner of welcome I should receive from Madame or Mademoiselle de Brissac. I supposed, of course, that Louis had married in the long interval since he had ceased to correspond—that he had children. But I was wrong. I found the chateau presided over by an old butler and his wife, who superintended the servants.

And so, on the next day, looking out on that delicate autumn landscape, so full of vague and lovely regrets, I felt impelled to break our silence with the remark, "So there never was a woman in your life?"

A greater sweetness came into my friend's face. "Yes, Richard, there was—and is," he replied. "I will tell you about her when we go in. You will think it—you may think it—rather a delightful story. Perhaps you will only laugh at me. And you, my friend—you have never married, either? No, no; do not answer me. I see I have touched pain. I would not have you speak out of a sore wound. I want to know no more. Forgive me—forgive me!"

"You are—happy in her?" I asked in a low voice.

"But you must hear the beginning—you must see," said Louis. "Tell me, did my last letter make mention of any hobby of mine?"

I reflected a moment. "A hobby?" I repeated, a little puzzled.

"Why, yes; one must have a hobby—birds' eggs," said Louis. "It is a hobby full of poetry, of romance, of sentiment. When I was young, it took me out into the open woods, out in the springtime, out in the early morning. Every specimen I collected made me more exquisitely aware of the marvels of creation, and awoke in me new wonder for nature's supreme artistry of color and curve. Have you ever pondered over a bird's egg, Richard—over the frail brittleness that encloses the germ of sublime music? As the crinkled shell is characteristic of the crisp ocean—so it is thin, but of infinite resistance, and shaded mainly with the yellow and red hues of sand—so the bird's egg is characteristic of the softer contours of the land, and memories of leaves and skies are blended in the greens and blues of its shell."

"That seems to me—just a little fanciful," I protested, "but to tell the truth, I have not given the subject any attention."

"I will show you my collection presently," said Louis. "I am arranging and classifying it now. Of course I am too old to get any more specimens myself, and I fear to employ the village lads, least they should be lacking in wise discretion. But believe me, Richard, on the most bitter winter's day my birds' eggs are potent to bring the spring vividly before me. Within these fragile cases, I whisper to myself, there lives in essence the whole magic of spring—its crystal-clear calls, its high and liquid notes, its flash of lark mounting into the sky, all its varieties of faint flutterings among new leaves. I touch my eggs and say, 'Through, finch, wood-dove,' and the pressure of woven nests grows round me, and I see the green-cradled babyhood of birds."

"I wonder," I said, "that you ever found the will to take and blow the eggs?"

"Ah," Louis replied, "you are too prosaic. I take but one egg of many; with us scientific interest does not necessarily kill sentiment. And the birds do not resent it; they have been kind to me, kind beyond expression. They have given me a gift. I have told you this that you may be in the right mood to understand. Come in, now; I will show you."

Together we went into the chateau. It seemed to me charged with an atmosphere of old-world sentiment, conventionalized by the lines of ancient perpendicular wall papers, of panels and parquets of oak—dim hand-worked tapestries reproduced within the rapture of autumnal decay. A sombre richness had grown about the greens and blues of the threads, like an emergent shadow; there was the pallor of exhaustion in the blanched yellows and waning whites. Everywhere huge pot-pourri of roses reproduced about the corridors the sentiment of the lost, the past, the dead; giving for the passionate beauty of June an attenuated sweetness, grown a little sickly in heavy confinement. Louis led me up the stone staircase to a long, bare room, arranged as a museum, with a number of cases containing birds' eggs. It was inconceivable to me how anyone could extract a dream of sprightliness from so arid a spectacle. Louis drew me over to a table upon which stood a casket jeweled with small turquoises. This he opened with a key. Within lay a curl of golden hair tied with a piece of faded blue ribbon.

"She is with me always," he said dreamily; "her sunny presence pervades the house; I almost think, at times, I see her fitting up and down the staircase. Before, I was lonely—lonely and often bitter—but since she came all has been changed."

"Your dead wife?" I said reverently, for the moment forgetting.

"No, no; I was never married. I told you that. But I did not tell you why. There was consumption in our family. I consulted a doctor after you left Paris. I did not think I was justified."

I grasped Louis' hand. "My friend—my friend, how could I guess at so deep a tragedy?" I exclaimed, deeply moved. Here indeed was courage, heroism. "I fancied—forgive me—I fancied you had not known real suffering. My own case—I have loved, too."

"But—let me finish. I think you mistake. I never loved—in the flesh," he interrupted hastily. "That would have been terrible, terrible. I could not have conquered a great passion. I think I should have killed myself." He touched the curl. "I never saw her," he went on. "I found this—just as it is now—tied up with blue ribbon—in the nest of a bird. That is my romance, Richard—the whole of my romance."

"But—I don't understand!" I gasped.

"It gave me something tangible to build upon—a lock of hair, brought me in that tender way by the bill of a bird, associated with all that is dear and beautiful and wonderful to me. I think—this bit of sunshine in the soft moss of a nest, a golden pillow for wee feathered things. She would be pretty with such hair! She has blue eyes and gentle ways; she has changed a little during the long years she has been with me, but always she is young, always she is sweet and lovable, with golden hair. Her gentle companionship has grown dearer to me, and dearer; her voice is the blended voice of all birds, and the lightness of the birds is in her step, and their timidity, and soft, nestling ways."

"But it is a dream!" I exclaimed.

"Perhaps. Still, there is the curl," he said. Then he put his hand on my arm. "It puzzles you," he continued, with a whimsical smile. "No Englishman is like that; you are material, and must have the substance; you do not understand that a dream has as actual an existence as a reality. We have the better of you, dear Richard, in this—we have found one secret of happiness."

"If there had ever really been a woman," I began.

"I know. This could not have happened," he said gravely, "it could never have happened—in that case, and I should have suffered like you."

I took up the curl, examining it curiously. At one time I had given some study to physiology. "But this is not woman's hair," I remarked, without thought.

Louis grew pale. "Not woman's hair!"

Then I realized the mischief I had done. I cursed myself inwardly that in a moment of recklessness I had shattered the whole fabric of his life's dream. It is, of course, easy enough to tell from a lock of hair the age and sex of the owner when it was cut off, and it was quite evident that this curl had been taken from the head of a young child. But why had I not had the wit to keep the discovery to myself? Why must I burst in with my crude science upon this delicate, incomprehensible romance?

"Not woman's hair!" repeated Louis.

"It is the hair of a child—of a young child—about seven years old," I said dully. "Oh, Louis, I should not have spoken."

He looked dazed, bewildered. The next moment he was wringing my hand ecstatically. There were tears in his eyes. "Richard, Richard," he cried, "I had never thought of that—a child! We pass the time for loving women, and sometimes I have felt, lately, that an old gray-haired curmudgeon like myself has no right to let his fancies run forever on golden-gaired maidens. But a child, a little girl—one is never too old to love a child! It is what the chateau wants beyond all else—childish laughter, the patter of childish feet. Oh, Richard, think what you have given me—a little child, to be with me always till I die! It is good—it is good that you came!"

He leaned on me, almost overcome. But I—I could not understand. Only in my heart was a great, pitiful cry for that childish laughter, the patter of childish feet, which I should never hear.

It was twilight, when we reached the staircase. The wind was in the tapestries on the walls. They rustled like a shower of falling leaves. Suddenly Louis touched my arm. And down at the bottom of the stairs, amid the fantastic movements of the hangings, I thought for one moment I saw a brief vision of a little, golden-haired child—Atlantic Monthly.

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