

THE OLD CARD

BY
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TO
MY SON
AND HIS GODFATHER
HENRY AINLEY

FOREWORD

A visit to any modern French Art Gallery will reveal a number of canvases daubed all over with little patches of primary colours, almost as though the picture had been painted with confetti. Assuming you are unaccustomed to this form of application, you will declare against it with insular promptitude. But give the picture a chance—step back and view it from the far wall, and like as not you will find that these chaotic colours have blended and commingled, have ceased to exist as individual items and become merged in a single statement of meaning the artist intended to convey.

It is not always want of a single material that persuades the fashioning of a patchwork quilt. Patchwork, in its way, is as complete as are the green plush curtains that hang so soberly from the lacquered pole in your neighbour's parlour.

There is a motive in this preamble; I did not leap from a canvas to a patchwork quilt without purpose. When you have read these pages, if so be you have the patience and inclination, you will perceive what that motive is. Let me then forestall the inevitable criticism, "Why, this is but a series of events strung together by a mere thread of personality," and say at once, "Agreed; but that was the intention." And I would ask you to hold out the book at arm's length, get a fair perspective, and admit that it was not possible to deal with the subject otherwise, and that these disjointed clippings tumble together in a kind of united whole.

The life of a touring actor is as no other man's. It is a series of ever-changing pictures connected only by the Sunday train-journey. The most we can do is to catch a glimpse here and there as he halts upon the Road.

Here, then, are a few such glimpses for your approval or contempt.

ROLAND PERTWEE.

B.E.F.,
France, 1917.

THE OLD CARD

PART I. A FEW ELEMENTS

CHAPTER I

THE BIG CHANCE

Eliphalet Cardomay stepped from his first-class compartment to the platform. Potter, his dresser, having descended from the train while it was still in motion, respectfully held open the carriage door lest his august master should soil his beautiful wash-leather gloves.

It was gratifying to observe how the station porters touched their caps.

On the seat of the compartment he had vacated lay an open suit-case, several brown-paper-covered plays, copies of the *Era* and the *Referee*, an umbrella and a travelling cap. It was part of the dresser's duties to clear up the débris occasioned by Mr. Cardomay. A man who carries in his head all the emotions and all the lines—*Hamlet*, *Richard III.*, *The Silver King*, and countless other rôles of lesser importance—could hardly be expected to give attention to such a trifling matter as his own personal property.

Eliphalet accepted a bundle of letters from an obsequious advance agent, returned, with condescension, the tentative salutes of several members of his company, and passed down the long grey platform with springing step. The yellow smoke of the Midlands was as violets to his nostrils and as balm to his eyes.

With quiet satisfaction he noted how the ticket-collector at the barrier, instead of demanding his ticket, allowed him to pass with a polite "Good morning, Sir." After all, it is something to be known.

Mr. Cardomay invariably walked to his lodging, thereby giving a large section of his future public the opportunity of studying his features at close range, unadorned by the artifices of the make-up box or the beneficent influences of limelight. This walk also gave him a chance of seeing whether the effect of his billing justified the cost.

For twenty-five years had Eliphalet Cardomay "featured on the road," and there was little left for him to learn about Provincial Theatrical Management.

The poster which preceded him to town displayed a well-proportioned man, whose head tilted fearlessly upon broad shoulders, and whose eyes shone as with a smouldering fire. A full growth of hair projected from under the curving brim of a Trilby hat. He wore a flowing tie, a fur-collared coat, and in his right hand carried an ivory-topped Malacca cane of original design. It was a striking poster, executed many years before, and everyone who knew it, and knew Eliphalet, marvelled how the original still continued to realise the picture in every detail.

The reader will have judged, and judged rightly, that our hero is one of the Old School—the school of graceful calisthenics, and meticulous elocution—but let him beware of anticipating too far; for, although Eliphalet Cardomay's histrionics might savour of the obsolete, he will not find in the man himself those traits usually allied to actors of this calibre.

In all his long career no one had ever heard Eliphalet address a fellow-performer as "laddie," nor a theatrical landlady as "Ma." Neither did he borrow half-crowns at the Bodega, nor absorb tankards of Guinness's stout in the wings. In fact, Eliphalet Cardomay was a very estimable fellow, hedged about and wing-clipped by stale conventions of his calling, which, in spite of his bitterly-learnt knowledge of their existence, he was never able to supersede by modern methods.

The almost impertinent disregard for old stage processes and old accepted technique which brings notoriety and admiration to the actor of to-day was as unattainable to Eliphalet as the peak of Mount Parnassus.

Twenty-five years before, a London newspaper had prophesied that he would mature and become big. He did mature, but on the lines of his beginning, and when at last he returned to London—the Mecca of his dreams—he was driven by laughter back to the provinces whence he had come.

In the hearts of provincial playgoers there were still warm places for Eliphalet Cardomay, and the rich cadences of his voice never failed to arouse strange emotions and irrepressible yearnings in the bosoms of impressionable young ladies, who wrote and confided their admiration with surpassing regularity and singular lack of reserve.

To his own company he was always courteous and considerate, but a trifle remote. He wrapped himself about in mystery, and as no one knew exactly how to take him very few made the attempt.

“The public man should always be an enigma.”

He addressed this statement to a very voluble young member of his company, who frequented bars and lavished cigarettes upon total strangers.

“Be mysterious if you wish to succeed,” he continued, developing the theme. “Your never-ceasing ‘Have a spot,’ and your ever-open cigarette-case, are the most obvious things that ever happened.”

Naturally Eliphalet Cardomay was looked upon as something of a joke. A man with a name like that could hardly expect anything else. Yet to him the name Eliphalet, which his sire, a once-distinguished tragedian, had borne before him, was one of his most cherished possessions. Like a blare of trumpets it rang out from a hundred hoardings. It was electric—original—arresting. A title to juggle with; and yet, so strange is the human mind, so averse to aught but the copper coinage of the language, that his few intimate friends and the inner circles of all provincial Green Rooms knew, spoke and thought of him by no other appellation than “The Old Card.”

Let it be clearly understood that no one called him the Old Card to his face; for, although regarded as a joke, Eliphalet was clearly loved by his fellows, and if at times they indulged in the gentlest of leg-pulling there was not one amongst them who would willingly have caused him the slightest pain or distress.

But to return to our hero, striding briskly over the cobble streets on the particular Sunday morning on which our narrative opens. Every feature of the ugly midland town was

familiar to him and every feature good. Taking a turning to the right, he pursued his way through a narrow and deserted alley between two factories. There was an acute angle a little further down, and here on a wall facing him a full-length prototype of himself had been posted.

Eliphalet stopped and saluted his printed image.

“Old boy,” he said, “we are back—back home again. I deserted you for a while—a little while—but I’ve learnt my lesson, old friend, and we will see the rest of the show out together.”

There was a tremor in his voice as he spoke the words and an unnatural mist before his eyes. It was this same mist, perhaps, that delayed his noticing that the billsticker had applied the last sheet of the poster at least ten inches too high, with the result that the feet were practically attached to the knees. Mr. Cardomay made a note of the fact in a small book he carried for the purpose and continued his walk.

Two factory girls nudged each other as he passed them by.

“See who it was? Mister What-you-call Cardomay.”

“Oh, I like ’im. ’E’s good! When’ll we go?”

The rest of their remarks drifted out of earshot, but Eliphalet Cardomay felt a tinge of pride warming his bosom. He was back again—back home.

The excellent Mrs. Booker, best of landladies, greeted him with every indication of respectful devotion.

“It’s a treat to see you again, sir, it is indeed,” she said, opening the door of the comfortable little parlour, where a jolly fire was burning in the grate and reflecting its rays on many framed and autographed photographs of the celebrated artists the room at one time or another had accommodated.

“When I heard you’d gorn to London, I said to Booker, ‘There! we’ve lorst ‘im,’ and ‘e says, ‘I believe we ‘ave,’ and I says, ‘That’s what we ‘ave done; for, depend on it, if London gets hold of ‘im, it’ll claim ‘im as their own and never let ‘im go.’ ”

Eliphalet’s lips tightened a little. He drew off his gloves and cast them on the embossed green plush sofa, and quoted:

“The clinging magic runs,
They will return as strangers,
They will remain as sons.”

“I returned as a son—and could not remain as a stranger.” Then, observing that his remarks were entirely lost upon his audience, he concluded:

“Did you get me a small leg of lamb, Mrs. Booker?”

She nodded gravely.

“A beautiful leg,” she replied; “with a black-currant tart to follow. I ‘aven’t forgotten your little likes, sir.”

Eliphalet smiled beatifically.

“You are an excellent good woman,” he said. Then, stretching himself luxuriously, “Yes, there is no doubt at all—it is very good to be back again.”

He cast a loving and possessive eye over the homely surroundings, shook out his table napkin, and drew up a chair to the table, as a king might sit at a banquet.

Probably the reader is wondering what this story is all about, and certainly it might have been a distinct advantage to have begun at the beginning rather than the end. Having committed ourselves so far, however, there is no option but to retrace our steps to a period some three months prior to the foregoing incident.

It was at the conclusion of a long tour that Eliphalet Cardomay received a startling proposal from London that he should appear in the title-part in Oscar Raven's dramatisation of the Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini.

For weeks past the production had been boomed in all the dramatic columns, and the advertised cast practically made a corner in the biggest stage stars of the day.

Sir Owen Frazer, Actor-Manager and Knight (with danger of becoming a baronet), was to have appeared as Cellini, and had favoured several reporters with extensive interviews in which he sought to convey to the public mind the depths of his research into Cellini's character. He had even gone to the length of growing a real beard for the part, rather than relying on the good offices of Mr. Clarkson. Therefore, when at the eleventh hour his voice entirely forsook him, and Harley Street unanimously declared that it would forsake him altogether unless he gave it a rest for a month, consternation in dramatic circles ran very high indeed.

Eight days existed before the much-advertised first night, and the finding of a fitting successor was at once the most baffling and the most urgent affair.

After an all-night sitting, in which the name of every prominent male member of the profession was suggested, and in which Mr. Oscar Raven and his part collaborator, Julian Franks, nearly came to blows with every member of the Syndicate, each other included, the producer, a young man whose youth was only exceeded by his brilliance, rose and standing, flamingo-like, on one leg, addressed the meeting.

“For God’s sake, get to bed,” he said. “You are talking bilge, the whole lot of you. I’ll find someone—in fact, I have already. You will say I am mad,” he continued, in response to a chorus of inquiries which greeted his statement, “but even at so great a risk I will tell you his name. It is Eliphalet Cardomay.”

Raymond Wakefield was quite right when saying they would accuse him of madness. Sir Owen Frazer wrote on a piece of paper the opinion that he was probably dangerous as well. But Wakefield only laughed.

“Commend me to authors for stupidity and to syndicates for lack of intelligence,” he observed. “It is evident none of you have the smallest acquaintance with the character of Cellini or the art of Eliphalet.”

“But the man can’t act.”

“My dear Raven!” expostulated Wakefield. “The man never ceases to act.”

“But not the kind we want,” from Franks.

“It will be my duty to stop him acting.”

“He has no brains,” contributed Sir Owen, more by gesture than sound.

“I, on the other hand, have plenty,” the producer modestly remarked. “Just consider the character of Cellini, and what do we find? Conceit, bombast. Probably he had a beautiful voice, certainly a chivalrous manner, unquestionably an incapacity to realise his own ineffability. Turn to Eliphalet and you find the exact prototype. *Compris?*”

“By George, yes!” said Julian Franks.

But Oscar Raven stretched out a silencing hand.

“Does this man Cardomay strike you as the kind of personality that could ever have achieved the masterpieces which came from the hand of Cellini?”

“Well, of course, that is pure rot,” returned Wakefield. “That was where Frazer was all over the place in the part. Trying to convey an undercurrent of massive brain-power. Believe me, the work of great artists is entirely spontaneous—they carry no stamp of genius. Look at Raven, for instance! He has written quite a remarkably good play. Does his exterior suggest it? No. Anyone’d mistake him for a haberdasher’s assistant. But I’m off to bed. Fix it up amongst yourselves.”

And that was how Eliphalet Cardomay was dragged from the provinces and hurled into the forefront of the London stage, with a great part and eight days in which to study it.

As the train bore him towards the Metropolis, he repeated over and over to himself:

“It has come at last. They want me.”

His mind flew back to the old press-cutting of twenty-five years ago. “One day this young man will mature and become big.”

“We’ll show ’em, old boy!” he said. Yet behind it all was a strange fear—a queer, nervous doubt—the same doubt which had ever stood between him and his cherished dreams of appearing in the West End with a production of his own. He had never taken the plunge—he had never swum across the Thames from the Surrey side, and it is probable he never would have done. But now the great ones had stretched out their hands and said, “Come over.”

London is a chilling place to the stranger, and Eliphalet felt the chill almost before his foot touched the platform. There was no genial cap-touching from the porters—no polite salutation from the official at the ticket-barrier. He took a cab. There was no particular point in walking—he could scarcely expect to be recognised.

Fur-coated and Trilby-hatted, Eliphalet Cardomay entered the stage-door of the Duke of Connaught’s and mixed with the company. It was curious what little notice was taken of him. He might have been nobody. Presently a business-manager came and asked if he were Mr. Cardomay, and, learning this was the case, carried him off to an office near the roof to sign contracts and discuss details.

“I shall require my own poster to be used,” said Eliphalet.

The business manager shook his head. "Sorry," was all he said. Then added, "Reiter is doing the posters, you see." It was said so conclusively that argument was out of the question.

Eliphalet fell back on his second line of defences.

"I take it that my name will come first on the bills."

"No. Characters in order of their appearance is the way we are working it. Shall we get back to the stage?"

He was led down through countless corridors until they arrived at their destination. Here Oscar Raven came forward and introduced him to several of his fellow-players.

"Let's get at it," came a voice from the stalls. "How de do, Mr. Cardomay. You've read the part, I suppose?"

"I have not only read the part," he replied, "I have studied the first act."

"Sorry to hear that," Wakefield cheerfully replied. "You may have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. Here, wait a bit. I'll come up."

Eliphalet turned in surprise to the author.

"Who is that very young man?" he demanded.

"Raymond Wakefield—our producer," replied Raven, as one who spoke of the gods.

"Indeed?" with raised eyebrows.

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