

**THE LOVES OF
PELLEAS AND
ETARRE**

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To
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

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The Loves of Pelleas and Etarre

I

THE ODOUR OF THE OINTMENT

Ascension lilies were everywhere in our shabby drawing-room. They crowded two tables and filled a corner and rose, slim and white, atop a Sheraton cabinet. Every one had sent Pelleas and me a sheaf of the flowers—the Chartres, the Cleatams, Miss Willie Lillieblade, Enid, Lisa and dear Hobart Eddy had all remembered us on Easter eve, and we entered our drawing-room after breakfast on Easter morning to be all but greeted with a winding of the white trumpets. The sun smote them and they were a kind of candle, their light secretly diffused, premonitory of Spring, of some resurrection of light as a new element. It was a wonderful Easter day, and in spite of our sad gray hair Pelleas and I were never in fairer health; yet for the first time in our fifty years together Easter found us close prisoners. Easter morning, and we were forbidden to leave the house!

“Etarre,” Pelleas said, with some show of firmness, “there is no reason in the world why we should not go.”

“Ah, well now,” I said with a sigh, “I wish you could prove that to Nichola. Do I not know it perfectly already?”

It is one sign of our advancing years, we must suppose, that we are prone to predicate of each other the trifles which heaven sends. The sterner things we long ago learned to accept with our hands clasped in each other’s; but when the postman is late or the hot water is cold or we miss our paper we have a way of looking solemnly sidewise.

We had gone upstairs the night before in the best of humours, Pelleas carrying an Ascension lily to stand in the moonlight of our window, for it always seems to us the saddest injustice to set the sullen extinguisher of lowered lights on the brief life of a flower. And we had been looking forward happily to Easter morning when the service is always inseparable from a festival of Spring. Then, lo! when we were awakened there was the treacherous world one glitter of ice. Branches sparkled against the blue, the wall of the park was a rampart of silver and the faithless sidewalks were mockeries of thoroughfare. But the grave significance of this did not come to us until Nichola entered the dining-room with the griddle-cakes and found me dressed in my gray silk and Pelleas in broadcloth.

“Is it,” asked our old serving-woman, who rules us as if she had brought us from Italy and we had not, more than forty years before, tempted her from her native Capri, “is it that you are mad, with this ice everywhere, everywhere?”

“It is Easter morning, Nichola,” I said, with the mildness of one who supports a perfect cause.

“Our Lady knows it is so,” Nichola said, setting down her smoking burden, “but the streets are so thick with ice that one breaks one’s head a thousand times. You must not think of so much as stepping in the ar-y.”

She left the room, and the honey-brown cakes cooled while Pelleas and I looked at each other aghast. To miss our Easter service for the first time in our life together! The thought was hardly to be borne. We reasoned with Nichola when she came back and I think that Pelleas even stamped his foot under the table; but she only

brought more cakes and shook her head, the impertinent old woman who has conceived that she must take care of us.

“One breaks one’s head a thousand times,” she obstinately repeated. “Our Lady would not wish it. Danger is not holy.”

To tell the truth, as Pelleas and I looked sorrowfully from the window above the Ascension lilies we knew that there was reason in the situation, for the streets were perilous even to see. None the less we were frankly resentful, for it is bad enough to have a disagreeable matter occur without having reason on its side. As for our carriage, that went long ago together with the days when Pelleas could model and I could write so that a few were deceived; and as for a cab to our far downtown church and back, that was not to be considered. For several years now we have stepped, as Nichola would say, softly, softly from one security to another so that we need not give up our house; and even now we are seldom sure that one month’s comfort will keep its troth with the next. Since it was too icy to walk to the car we must needs remain where we were.

“I suppose,” said I, as if it were a matter of opinion, “that it is really Easter uptown too. But some way—”

“I know,” Pelleas said. Really, of all the pleasures of this world I think that the “I know” of Pelleas in answer to something I have left unsaid is the last to be foregone. I hope that there is no one who does not have this delight.

“Pelleas—” I began tremblingly to suggest.

“Ah, well now,” Pelleas cried, resolutely, “let us go anyway. We can walk beside the curb slowly. And after all, we do not belong to

Nichola.” Really, of all the pleasures of this world I think that the daring of Pelleas in moments when I am cowardly is quite the last to be renounced. I hope that there is no one who has not the delight of living near some one a bit braver than himself.

With one accord we slipped from the drawing-room and toiled up the stairs. I think, although we would not for the world have said so, that there may have been in our minds the fear that this might be our last Easter together and, if it was to be so, then to run away to Easter service would be a fitting memory, a little delicious human thing to recall among austerer glories. Out of its box in a twinkling came my violet bonnet and I hardly looked in a mirror as I put it on. I fastened my cloak wrong from top to bottom and seized two right-hand gloves and thrust them in my muff. Then we opened the door and listened. There was not a sound in the house. We ventured into the passage and down the stairs, and I think we did not breathe until the outer door closed softly upon us. For Nichola, we have come to believe, is a mystic and thinks other people’s thoughts. At all events, she finds us out so often that we prefer to theorize that it is her penetration and not our clumsiness which betrays us.

Nichola had already swept the steps with hot water and salt and ashes and sawdust combined; Nichola is so thorough that I am astonished she has not corrupted me with the quality. Yet no sooner was I beyond the pale of her friendly care than I overestimated thoroughness, like the weak character that I am, and wished that the whole street had practiced it. I took three steps on that icy surface and stood still, desperately.

“Pelleas,” I said, weakly, “I feel—I feel like a little nut on top of a big, frosted, indigestible cake.”

I laughed a bit hysterically and Pelleas slipped my arm more firmly in his and we crept forward like the hands of a clock, Pelleas a little the faster, as became the tall minute hand. We turned the corner safely and had one interminable block to traverse before we reached the haven of the car. I looked down that long expanse of slippery gray, unbroken save where a divine janitor or two had interposed, and my courage failed me. And Pelleas rashly ventured on advice.

“You walk too stiffly, *Etarre*,” he explained. “Relax, relax! Step along slowly but easily, as I do. Then, if you fall, you fall like a child—no jar, no shock, no broken bones. Now relax—”

And Pelleas did so. Before I could shape my answer Pelleas had relaxed. He lay in a limp little heap on the ice beside me, and I shall never forget my moment of despair.

I do not know where she came from, but while I stood there hopelessly reiterating, “Pelleas—why, Pelleas!” on the verge of tears, she stepped from some door of the air to my assistance. She wore a little crimson hat and a crimson collar, but her poor coat, I afterward noted, was sadly worn. At the moment of her coming it was her clear, pale face that fixed itself in my grateful memory. She darted forward, stepped down from the curb and held out two hands to Pelleas.

“Oh, sir,” she said, “I can help you. I have on rubber boots.”

Surely no interfering goddess ever arrived in a more practical frame of mind.

When Pelleas was on his feet, looking about him in a dazed and rather unforgiving fashion, the little maid caught off her crimson

muffler and brushed his coat. Pelleas, with bared head, made her as courtly a bow as his foothold permitted, and she continued to stand somewhat shyly before us with the prettiest anxiety on her face, shaking the snow from her crimson muffler.

“You are not hurt, sir?” she asked, and seemed so vastly relieved at his reassurance that she quite won our hearts. “Now,” she said, “won’t you let me walk with you? My rubber boots will do for all three.”

We each accepted her arm without the smallest protest. I will hazard that no shipwrecked sailor ever inquired of the rescuing sail whether he was inconveniencing it. Once safely aboard, however, and well under way, he may have symbolized his breeding to the extent of offering a faint, polite resistance.

As “Shall we not be putting you out?” Pelleas inquired, never offering to release her arm.

And “I’m afraid we are,” I ventured, pressing to her all the closer. She was frail as I, too, and it was not the rubber boots to which I pinned my faith; she was young, and you can hardly know what safety that bespeaks until you are seventy, on ice.

“It’s just there, on the south corner of the avenue,” Pelleas explained apologetically, and for the first time I perceived that by common consent we had turned back toward home. But neither of us mentioned that.

Then, as we stepped forward, with beautiful nicety rounding the corner to come upon our entrance, suddenly, without a moment’s warning, our blackest fears were fulfilled. We ran full upon Nichola.

“Ah, I told you, Pelleas!” I murmured; which I had not, but one has to take some comfort in crises.

Without a word Nichola wheeled solemnly, grasped my other arm and made herself fourth in our singular party. Her gray head was unprotected and her hair stood out all about it. She had thrown her apron across her shoulders and great patches in her print gown were visible to all the world. When Nichola’s sleeves wear out she always cuts a piece from the front breadth of her skirt to mend them, trusting to her aprons to conceal the lack. She was a sorry old figure indeed, out there on the avenue in the Easter sunshine, and I inclined bitterly to resent her interference.

“Nichola,” said I, haughtily, “one would think that we were obliged to be wheeled about on casters.”

Nichola made but brief reply.

“Our Lady knows you’d be better so,” she said.

So that was how, on Easter morning, with the bells pealing like a softer silver across the silver of the city, Pelleas and I found ourselves back in our lonely drawing-room considerably shaken and hovering before the fire which Nichola stirred to a leaping blaze. And with us, since we had insisted on her coming, was our new little friend, fluttering about us with the prettiest concern, taking away my cloak, untying my bonnet and wheeling an arm-chair for Pelleas, quite as if she were the responsible little hostess and we her upset guests. Presently, the bright hat and worn coat laid aside, she sat on a hassock before the blaze and looked up at us, like a little finch that had alighted at our casement and had been coaxed within. I think that I love best these little bird-women

whom one expects at any moment to hear thrilling with a lilt of unreasonable song.

“My dear,” said I, on a sudden, “how selfish of us. I dare say you will have been going to church?”

She hesitated briefly.

“I might ’a’ gone to the mission,” she explained, unaccountably colouring, “but I don’t know if I would. On Easter.”

“But I should have thought,” I cried, “that this is the day of days to go.”

“It would be,” she assented, “it would be—” she went on, hesitating, “but, ma’am, I can’t bear to go,” she burst out, “because they don’t have no flowers. We go to the mission,” she added, “and not to the grand churches. And it seems—it seems—don’t you think God must be where the most flowers are? An’ last Easter we only had one geranium.”

Bless the child. I must be a kind of pagan, for I understood.

“Your flowers are beau-tiful,” she said, shyly, with a breath of content. “Are they real? I’ve been wantin’ to ask you. I never saw so many without the glass in front. But they don’t smell much,” she added, wistfully; “I wonder why that is?”

Pelleas and I had been wondering that very morning. They looked so sweet-scented and yet were barren of fragrance; and we had told ourselves that perhaps they were lilies of symbol without mission or message beyond the symbol, without hue or passion or, so to say, experience.

“Perhaps if one were to make some one happy with them or to put them in a bride’s bouquet they would no longer be scentless,” Pelleas quaintly said.

But now my mind was busy with other problems than those of such fragrance.

“Where do you go to church, my dear?” I asked, not daring to glance at Pelleas.

“To the mission,” she said, “over—” and she named one of the poorest of the struggling East Side chapels. “It’s just started,” she explained, “an’ the lady that give most, she died, and the money don’t come. And poor Mr. Lovelow, he’s the minister and he’s sick—but he preaches, anyhow. And pretty near nobody comes to hear him,” she added, with a curious, half-defiant emotion, her cheeks still glowing. It was strange that I who am such a busybody of romance was so slow to comprehend that betraying colour.

Pelleas and I knew where the mission was. We had even peeped into it one Sunday when, though it was not quite finished, they were trying to hold service from the unpainted pulpit. I remembered the ugly walls covered with the lead-pencil calculations of the builders, the forlorn reed organ, the pushing feet upon the floor. And now “the lady who give most” had died.

“Last Easter,” our little friend was reiterating, “we had one geranium that the minister brought. But now his mother is dead and I guess he won’t be keeping plants. Men always lets ’em freeze. Mis’ Sledge, she’s got a cactus, but it hasn’t bloomed yet. Maybe she’ll take that. And they said they was going to hang up the letters left from last Christmas, for the green. They don’t say nothing but ‘Welcome’ and ‘Star of Bethlehem,’ but I s’pose the

‘Welcome’ is always nice for a church, and I s’pose the star shines all year round, if you look. But they don’t much of anybody come. Mr. Lovelow, he’s too sick to visit round much. Last Sunday they was only ’leven in the whole room.”

“Only ’leven in the whole room.” It hardly seemed credible in New York. But I knew the poverty of some of the smaller missions, especially in a case where “the lady that give most” has died. And this poor young minister, this young Mr. Lovelow whose mother had died and who was too sick to “visit round much,” and doubtless had an indifferent, poverty-ridden parish which no other pastor wanted—I knew in an instant the whole story of the struggle. I looked over at our pots of Ascension lilies and I found myself unreasonably angry with the dear Cleatams and Chartres and Hobart Eddy and the rest for the self-indulgence of having given them to us.

At that moment my eyes met those of Pelleas. He was leaning forward, looking at me with an expression of both daring, and doubt of my approval, and I saw his eyes go swiftly to the lilies. What was he contriving, I wondered, my heart beating. He was surely not thinking of sending our lilies over to the mission, for we could never get them all there in time and Nichola—

“Etarre!” said Pelleas—and showed me in a moment heights of resourcefulness to which I can never attain—“Etarre! It is only half after ten. We can’t go out to service—and the mission is not four blocks from us. Why not have our little friend run over there and, if there are only two dozen or so in the chapel, have that young Mr. Lovelow bring them all over here, and let it be Easter in this room?”

He waved his hand toward the lilies waiting there all about the walls and doing no good to any save a selfish old man and woman. He looked at me, almost abashed at his own impulse. Was ever such a practical Mahomet, proposing to bring to himself some Mountain Delectable?

“Do you mean,” I asked breathlessly, “to let them have services in this—”

“Here with us, in the drawing-room,” Pelleas explained. “Why not? There were fifty in the room for that Lenten morning musicale. There’s the piano for the music. And the lilies—the lilies—”

“Of course we will,” I cried. “But, O, will they come? Do you think they will come?”

I turned to our little friend, and she had risen and was waiting with shining eyes.

“O, ma’am,” she said, trembling, “why, ma’am! O, yes’m, they’ll come. I’ll get ’em here myself. O, Mr. Lovelow, he’ll be so glad....”

She flew to her bright hat and worn coat and crimson muffler.

“Mr. Lovelow says,” she cried, “that a shabby church is just as much a holy temple as the ark of the gover’nment—but he was so glad when we dyed the spread for the orgin—O, ma’am,” she broke off, knotting the crimson scarf about her throat, “do you really want ’em? They ain’t—you know they don’t look—”

“Hurry, child,” said Pelleas, “and mind you don’t let one of them escape!”

When she was gone we looked at each other in panic.

“Pelleas,” I cried, trembling, “think of all there is to be done in ten minutes.”

Pelleas brushed this aside as a mere straw in the wind.

“Think of Nichola,” he portentously amended.

In all our flurry we could not help laughing at the frenzy of our old servant when we told her. Old Nichola was born upon the other side of every argument. In her we can see the history of all the world working out in a miniature of wrinkles. For Nichola would have cut off her gray hair with Sparta, hurled herself fanatically abroad on St. Bartholomew’s day, borne a pike before the Bastille, broken and burned the first threshing-machine in England, stoned Luther, and helped to sew the stars upon striped cloth in the kitchen of Betsy Ross.

“For the love of heaven,” cried Nichola, “church in the best room! It is not holy. Whoever heard o’ church in a private house, like a spiritualist seance or whatever they are. An’ me with a sponge-cake in the oven,” she concluded fervently. “Heaven be helpful, mem, I wish’t you’d ’a’ went to church yourselves.”

Chairs were drawn from the library and dining-room and from above-stairs, and frantically dusted with Nichola’s apron. The lilies were turned from the windows to look inward on the room and a little table for the Bible was laid with a white cloth and set with a vase of lilies. And in spite of Nichola, who every moment scolded and prophesied and nodded her head in the certainty that all the thunders of the church would descend upon us, we were ready when the door-bell rang. I peeped from the drawing-room window and saw that our steps were filled!

“Nichola,” said I, trembling, “you will come up to the service, will you not?”

Nichola shook her old gray head.

“It’s a nonsense,” she shrilly proclaimed. “It will not be civilized. It will not be religious. I’ll open the door on ’em, but I won’t do nothink elst, mem.”

When we heard their garments in the hall and the voice of Little Friend, Pelleas pushed back the curtains and there was our Easter, come to us upon the threshold.

I shall not soon forget the fragile, gentle figure who led them. The Reverend Stephen Lovelow came in with outstretched hand, and I have forgotten what he said or indeed whether he spoke at all. But he took our hands and greeted us as the disciple must have greeted the host of that House of the Upper Room. We led the way to the table where he laid his worn Bible and he stood in silence while the others found their places, marshaled briskly by Little Friend who as captain was no less efficient than as deliverer. There were chairs to spare, and when every one was seated, in perfect quiet, the young clergyman bowed his head:—

“Lord, thou hast made thy face to shine upon us—” he prayed, and it seemed to me that our shabby drawing-room was suddenly quick with a presence more intimate than that of the lilies.

When the hymn was given out and there was a fluttering of leaves of the hymn-books they had brought, five of our guests at a nod from Mr. Lovelow made their way forward. One was a young woman with a ruddy face, but ruddy with that strange, wrinkled ruddiness of age rather than youth, who wore a huge felt hat laden

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