



A Night In Whitechapel

by GUY DE MAUPASSANT



EDANTEC and I were twenty-five, and we had come to London for the first time in our lives. It was a cold, foggy Saturday evening in December, and I think that is more than enough to explain why my friend and I were most abominably drunk, though, to tell the truth, we did not feel any discomfort from it. On the contrary, we were floating in an atmosphere of perfect bliss. We did not talk, certainly, for we were incapable of doing so, but then we had no inclination for conversation. What would be the good of it? We could so easily read all our thoughts in each other's eyes! And our thoughts consisted in the sweet and unique knowledge that we were thinking about nothing whatever.

It was not, however, in order to arrive at that state of delicious, intellectual inanity that we had gone to mysterious Whitechapel. We had gone into

the first public house we saw, with the firm intention of studying manners and customs—not to mention morals—as spectators, artists, and philosophers; but in the second public house we entered we ourselves became like the objects of our investigations, that is to say, sponges soaked in alcohol. Between one public house and the other the outer

air seemed to squeeze those sponges, which then got just as dry as before, and thus we rolled from public house to public house, until at last the sponges could not hold any more.

Consequently, we had for some time bidden farewell to our study of morals,

and our outlook was more limited to two impressions: zigzagging through the darkness outside, and the gleam of light inside the public houses. As to the imbibing of brandies, whiskies, and gins, that was done mechanically, and our stomachs scarcely noticed it.

But what strange beings we had elbowed against during our long halts! What a number of faces to be remembered, what clothes, what attitudes, what talk, and what rags!



At first we tried to note them exactly in our memory, but there were so many of them, and our brain got muddled so quickly, that at present we had no very clear recollection of anything or anybody. Even objects that were immediately before us appeared to us in a vague, dusky phantasmagoria and became confounded with precious objects in an inextricable manner. The world became to us a sort of kaleidoscope, seen in a dream through the penumbra of an aquarium.

Suddenly we were aroused from this state of somnolence, awakened as if by a blow on the chest, and imperiously forced to fix our attention on what we saw, for amid this whirl of strange sights, one stranger than all attracted our eyes and seemed to say to us: "Look at me."

It was at the open door of a public house. A ray of light streamed into the street through the half-open door, and that brutal ray fell right on the specter that had just risen up there, dumb and motionless.

For it was indeed a specter, pitiful and terrible, and, above all, most real as it stood out boldly against the dark background of the street, which seemed still darker behind it!

Young, yes; the woman was certainly young; there could be no doubt about that, when one looked at her smooth skin, her smiling mouth which showed her white teeth, and her firm bust, which could be plainly noted under her thin dress.

But then how explain her perfectly white hair, not gray or growing gray, but absolutely white, as white as any octogenarian's?

And then her eyes, her eyes beneath her smooth brow, were surely the eyes of an old woman? Cer-

tainly they were, and of a woman one could not tell how old, for it must have taken years of trouble and sorrow, of tears and of sleepless nights, and a whole long existence, thus to dull, to wear out, and to spoil those glassy orbs.

Glassy? Not exactly that. For granulated glass still retains a dull and milky brightness, a recollection, as it were, of its former transparency. But her eyes seemed rather to have been made of metal which had turned rusty, and really if pewter could rust I should have compared them to pewter covered with rust. They had the dead color of pewter, and at the same time they emitted a glance which was the color of reddish water.

But it was not until some time later that I tried to define them thus approximately by retrospective analysis. At that moment, being altogether incapable of such an effort, I could only establish in my own mind the idea of extreme decrepitude and horrible old age which they produced in my imagination.

Have I said that they were set in very puffy eyelids, which had no lashes whatever, and on her forehead without wrinkles there was not a vestige of eyebrow? When I tell you this, and considering their dull look beneath the hair of an octogenarian, it is not surprising that Ledantec and I said in a low voice at the sight of this woman, who was evidently young:

“ Oh! poor, poor old woman!”

Her great age was further accentuated by the terrible poverty that was revealed by her dress. If she had been better dressed, her youthful looks would, perhaps, have struck us more, but her thin shawl, which was all that she had over her chemise,

her single petticoat, which was full of holes and almost in rags, and which did not nearly reach to her bare feet, her straw hat with ragged feathers and with ribbons of no particular color through age, it all seemed so ancient, so prodigiously antique!

From what remote, superannuated, abolished period did they all spring? One did not venture to guess, and by a perfectly natural association of ideas, one seemed to infer that the unfortunate creature herself was as old as her clothes were. Now, by *one* I mean Ledantec and myself; that is to say, two men who were abominably drunk, and who were arguing with the special logic of intoxication.

It was also under the softening influence of alcohol that we looked at the vague smile on those lips, revealing the teeth of a child, without stopping to reflect on the beauty of those youthful teeth, and seeing nothing except her fixed and almost idiotic smile, which no longer contrasted with the dull expression of her looks, but, on the contrary, accentuated it. For, in spite of her teeth, it was the smile of an old woman in our imagination, and as for me, I was really pleased at the thought of being so acute when I inferred that this grandmother with such pale lips had a set of teeth of a young girl, and still, thanks to the softening influence of alcohol, I was not angry with her for this artifice. I even thought it particularly praiseworthy, since, after all, the poor creature thus carried out her calling conscientiously, which was to seduce us. For there was no possible doubt about the matter, that this grandmother was nothing more nor less than a prostitute.

And then, drunk! Horribly drunk, much more drunk than Ledantec and I were, for we really could

manage to say: "Oh! Pity the poor, poor old woman!" while she was incapable of articulating a single syllable, of making a gesture, or even of imparting a gleam of promise, a furtive flash of allurements to her eyes. With her hands crossed on her stomach, and leaning against the front of the public house, with her whole body as stiff as if she had been in a state of catalepsy, she had nothing alluring about her, except her sad smile, and that inspired us with all the more pity because she was even more drunk than we were; and so, by an identical, spontaneous movement, we each of us seized her by an arm, to take her into the public house with us.

To our great astonishment, she resisted, sprang back, and so was in the shadow again, out of the ray of light which came through the door, while at the same time she began to walk through the darkness and to drag us with her, for she was clinging to our arms. We followed her without speaking and without knowing where we were going, but without the least uneasiness on that score. Only, when she suddenly burst into violent sobs as she walked, Ledantec and I began to sob in unison.

The cold and the fog had suddenly congested our brains again, and we had again lost all precise consciousness of our acts, of our thoughts, and of our sensations. Our sobs had nothing of grief in them, but we were floating in an atmosphere of perfect bliss, and I can remember that at that moment it was no longer the exterior world which seemed to me as if I were looking at it through the penumbra of an aquarium; it was I myself, an *I* composed of three, which was changing into something that was floating adrift in something, though what it was I

did not know, composed of palpable fog and intangible water, and it was exquisitely delightful.

From that moment I remember nothing more until what follows, which had the effect of a clap of thunder on me, and made me rise up from the bottom of the depth to which I had descended.

Ledantec was standing in front of me, his face convulsed with horror, his hair standing on end, and his eyes staring out of his head, as he shouted to me:

“Let us escape! Let us escape!” Whereupon I opened my eyes wide, and found myself lying on the floor in a room into which the daylight was shining. I saw some rags hanging against the wall, two chairs, a broken jug lying on the floor by my side, and in a corner a wretched bed, on which a woman was lying. She was doubtless dead, for her head was hanging over the side, and her long, white hair reached almost to my feet.

With a bound I was on my feet, like Ledantec.

“What!” I said to him, while my teeth chattered: “Did you kill her?”

“No, no,” he replied. “But that makes no difference; let us be off.”

I felt completely sober by this time, but I did think that he was still suffering somewhat from the effects of last night’s drunk; otherwise, why should he wish to escape? Some remains of pity for the unfortunate woman forced me to say:

“What is the matter with her? If she is ill, we must look after her.”

And I went to the wretched bed, in order to put her head back on the pillow, but I discovered that she was neither dead nor ill, but only sound asleep, and I also noticed that she was quite young.

She still wore that idiotic smile, but her teeth were her own and those of a girl. Her smooth skin and her firm bust showed that she was not more than sixteen, perhaps not so much.

“ There! You see it, you can see it! ” Ledantec said. “ Let us be off.”

He tried to drag me out, and he was still drunk; I could see it by his feverish movements, his trembling hands, and his nervous looks. Then he implored me, and said:

“ I slept beside the old woman; but she is not old. Look at her; look at her; yes, she is old, after all! ”

And he lifted up her long hair by handfuls; it was like handfuls of white silk, and then he added, evidently in a sort of delirium, which made me fear an attack of delirium tremens: “ To think that I have begotten children, three, four children, who knows how many children, all in one night! And they were born immediately, and have grown up already! Let us be off.”

Decidedly it was an attack of madness. Poor Ledantec! What could I do for him? I took his arm and tried to calm him, but he thought that I was going to try and make him go to bed with her again, and he pushed me away and exclaimed with tears in his voice: “ If you do not believe me, look under the bed; the children are there; they are there, I tell you. Look here, just look here.”

He threw himself down, flat on his stomach, and actually pulled out one, two, three, four children, who had hidden under the bed. I do not exactly know whether they were boys or girls, but all, like the sleeping woman, had white hair, the hair of an octogenarian.

Was I still drunk, like Ledantec, or was I mad? What was the meaning of this strange hallucination? I hesitated a moment, and shook myself to be sure that it was I.

No, no, I had all my wits about me, and I in reality saw that bunch of horrible little brats; they were all covering their faces with their hands, and were crying and squalling, and then, suddenly, one of them jumped on the bed; all the others followed his example, and the woman woke up.

And then we stood, while those five pairs of eyes, without eyebrows or eyelashes, eyes the dull color of pewter, with irises the color of red water, were steadily fixed on us.

“Let us be off! Let us be off!” Ledantec repeated, letting go of me, and this time I paid attention to what he said, and, after throwing some small change on the floor, I followed him, to make him understand, when he should be quite sober, that he saw before him a poor Albino prostitute, who had several brothers and sisters.

