

MADemoiselle FIFI

MAJOR GRAF VON FARLSBERG, the Prussian Commanding Officer, was finishing reading his correspondence, lolling in an upholstered arm-chair with his field boots on the elegant marble mantelpiece, in which, during the three months that he had been in occupation of the Château d'Uville, his spurs had dug two holes which grew deeper every day.

A cup of coffee was steaming on a round marquetry table, stained with liqueurs, charred by cigars and hacked by the penknife of the victorious officer, who would often stop sharpening a pencil to scratch figures or patterns according to the whim of the moment on the polished surface.

When he had finished his letters and glanced through the German newspapers which the quartermaster had just brought in, he got up and went over to the window after throwing three or four huge green logs on the fire, for these gentry were gradually denuding the park of its trees in order to keep warm.

The rain was coming down in sheets, as it only rains in Normandy, just as if an angry god had turned on a tap; the thick curtain of driving rain formed an oblique wall of water, lashing, splashing, drowning everything, the sort of downpour common round Rouen, the shower-bath of France.

The officer looked out for some time over the park, flooded from the swollen Andelle in the distance which had burst its banks. He was drumming a German waltz on the window-pane, when a sound made him turn round; it was his second-in-command, Acting-Captain Baron von Kelweingstein.

The Major was a broad-shouldered giant, with a long full beard flowing over his chest; his whole appearance suggested a martial peacock with the tail on his chin. His eyes were blue and his expression was placid and unemotional; one cheek bore the scar of a sword-cut received in the Austrian War. He had the reputation of being a goodsort as well as a good officer.

The Captain, a stout, red-faced little man, bursting out of his uniform, wore his flaming red hair closely trimmed, so that in certain lights his face seemed to give off a phosphorescent glow. Owing to the loss of two teeth, which had been knocked out one festive evening – he could never remember exactly how it happened – he hissed his words thickly, so that sometimes he was hard to understand; and he had a bald patch just on the top of his head, like a monk's tonsure, with a fringe of little light auburn curls round a circle of bare skull.

The Major shook hands and swallowed his cup of coffee – the sixth since the morning – at one gulp, as he listened to his subordinate's report on routine matters; then they both went over to the window, declaring that things were pretty grim. The Major, who was placid by nature and had a wife at home, took life as it came; but Captain Baron von Kelweingstein, a confirmed Don Juan, who frequented brothels and was mad on girls, was furious at being cooped up in compulsory chastity for three months in this remote spot.

In answer to a timid knock on the door the Major barked: 'Come in!' and one of the robot batmen appeared in the open door, indicating merely by his presence that lunch was ready.

In the dining-room they found the three subalterns, Lieutenant Otto von Grossling and two Second-Lieutenants, Fritz Scheunau-bourg and Marquis Wilhelm von Eyrik, a very short fair young man, overbearing and harsh with the men, hard on the defeated French and explosive as a firearm.

Since he had been in France his friends had always called him Mademoiselle Fifi. This nickname was the result of his ladylike appearance, his slim figure – he looked as though he wore corsets – his pale face with only the suggestion of a sprouting moustache and also the habit he had acquired of expressing his sovereign contempt for people and things by using on every possible occasion the French expression 'Fi, fi donc!' which he articulated with a slight hiss.

The dining-room of the Château d'Uville was a magnificent long room: the antique cut-glass chandeliers, now starred with bullet

marks, and tall Flemish tapestries, now slashed with sword-cuts and hanging in rags, revealed the way Mademoiselle Fifi spent his time, when he had nothing to do.

On the walls three family portraits, a knight in armour, a cardinal and a president, had now been given long porcelain pipes, while in a frame whose gold had faded with the years a noble lady in a tight-fitting gown proudly sported a huge moustache in charcoal.

There was little conversation during the officers' lunch in this wrecked room which was darkened by the rain and had a depressing air of defeat about it and an old oak floor as solid as the boards of an inn.

When the pipes were lit and they began to drink after the meal, the talk as usual turned on their boredom. Brandy and liqueurs were passed round and they all tilted back their chairs, sipping their drinks and keeping all the time in the corner of their mouth the long curved stem, which ended in a porcelain bowl painted in a style calculated to please a Hottentot.

As soon as their glasses were empty, they refilled them with an air of weary resignation. But Mademoiselle Fifi always broke his, whereupon a soldier immediately placed another before him.

They were enveloped in a cloud of acrid smoke and seemed to be sinking into a depressed state of alcoholic somnolence, the sullen intoxication of people with nothing to do.

But suddenly the Baron sat up. He could stand it no longer; he swore: 'Damn it all! This can't go on; we must think of something amusing.'

Lieutenant Otto and Second Lieutenant Fritz, who both had typically German heavy features and no sense of humour, replied in unison: 'What, Sir?'

He thought for a moment and then answered: 'What? Well, with the C.O.'s permission, we'll organize a party.'

The Major took his pipe out of his mouth: 'What sort of a party, Captain?'

The Baron went over to him: 'I'll make all the arrangements, Sir. I'll send the Factotum into Rouen to collect ladies; I know where

to find them. We'll have the dinner here; we've got everything we want and at least we'll make a night of it.'

The Graf von Farlsberg shrugged his shoulders with a smile: 'You're crazy, old man!'

But all the officers had got up and crowded round the C.O., urging him to agree:

'Do let Captain Kelweingstein fix it up; it's so depressing here.'

At last the Major gave way: 'All right!' he said, and immediately the Baron sent for the Factotum; he was an old N.C.O., who had never been known to laugh but who always carried out his superior officers' orders to the letter, whatever they were.

Standing to attention with an expressionless face, he took the Baron's orders; then he went out and five minutes later a big four-horsed waggon from the baggage train, covered with a miller's dome-shaped tilt, was being driven at full gallop through the pelting rain.

Immediately everyone seemed to wake up; they no longer lolled sleepily in their chairs; the universal look of boredom disappeared and conversation became general.

Although the storm showed no sign of abating, the Major declared that it was getting lighter and Lieutenant Otto stated categorically that the sky was on the point of clearing. Even Mademoiselle Fifi could not sit still, continually getting up and sitting down again. His steely blue eye looked round for something to break. Suddenly his glance fell upon the moustached lady and the blond young beast drew his revolver. 'Anyhow, you shan't see our party,' he cried and without getting up he took aim. Two successive shots pierced the eyes of the portrait.

Then he cried: 'Let's lay a mine!' And there was a sudden silence as if some exciting new interest was occupying the attention of the whole company.

Laying a mine was his own invention, his pet way of breaking things for fun.

On leaving the Château, its lawful owner, Count Fernand d'Amoys d'Uville, had not had time to take away or hide anything, except the silver, which he had buried in a hole in the wall. As he

was very rich and lived in princely style, the great drawing-room, which opened out of the dining-room, had looked like a museum gallery before its master's precipitate flight.

There were pictures on the walls, drawings and valuable water-colours, while cabinets on the tables and glass-fronted cases, with countless nicknacks, statuettes, Dresden figures, Chinese grotesques, old ivories and Venetian glass, filled the huge room with a priceless accumulation of collector's pieces.

Now there were hardly any left. Not that they had been looted; that Major Graf von Farsberg would never have allowed, but from time to time Mademoiselle Fifi used to lay a mine; when that happened, all the officers had five minutes of real fun.

The little Marquis went into the drawing-room to get the materials. He brought back an egg-shell teapot, Chinese 'famille rose', which he filled with gunpowder, delicately inserting a long fuse through the spout; after putting a match to it, he ran back with the infernal machine into the adjoining room.

He was back in a few seconds, shutting the door behind him. All the Germans stood up and waited with an inane smile of childish expectation. As soon as the detonation had shaken the Château, they rushed in together.

Mademoiselle Fifi, who led the rush, clapped his hands in an ecstasy of delight before a terra-cotta Venus, whose head had at last been blown off; and everyone picked up bits of china, studying with interest the strange shapes of the jagged fragments, examining the fresh damage done, disqualifying some pieces as the remains of the previous explosion. The Major cast a fatherly eye over the huge salon littered with broken artistic treasures, as if some Nero had turned a machine-gun on to the room. He went out first, saying good-humouredly: 'To-day's mine has been a great success.'

But such a cloud of smoke had belched into the dining-room, mingling with the tobacco smoke, that no one could breathe. The Major opened the window and all the officers, who had come back for a last glass of brandy, crowded round it.

A gust of damp air came in, bringing with it the dank smell of flooded fields and a mist of moisture which settled on their beards.

They watched the tall trees bending before the storm, the broad valley shrouded in fog, as the dark low clouds discharged their burden, and in the far distance the church spire standing up in the torrential rain like a grey needle.

Its bell had not rung since their arrival; the silence of the bell-tower was the only resistance the invaders had met. The curé had made no difficulty about billeting and feeding the Prussian soldiers; indeed he had several times accepted an invitation to join him over a bottle of beer or claret from the enemy commander, who often used him as a friendly liaison agent. But he refused to allow any ringing of his bell; he would have let himself be shot sooner. It was his form of protest against the invasion, a passive silent protest, the only one a priest could make, being a man of peace and not of blood, as he put it. And everybody for thirty miles round was proud of the heroic stand made by the Abbé Chantavoine, who had the courage to emphasize and proclaim the public mourning by the obstinate silence of his church bell.

The whole village, inspired by this passive resistance, was ready to support their priest to the full and face the consequences, considering this mute protest as a vindication of the national honour. The peasants felt that they had deserved better of their country than Belfort and Strasbourg, that they had set as noble an example and that the name of their hamlet would be immortalized. Apart from this they complied with all the demands of the Prussian conquerors.

The Major and his officers used to laugh together over this innocuous exhibition of defiance; and, as the whole countryside proved amenable and obedient, they made no bones about putting up with this conspiracy of patriotic silence.

The little Marquis Wilhelm was the only one who would have liked to insist on the bell being rung. He was furious at the politic consideration of his superior officer for the priest's feelings; and every day he begged the Major to let him ring the bell just once, only just once, for fun. He made his request with the insinuating appeal of a cat and with all the wiles of a woman and the persuasive soft-voiced insistence of a mistress determined to get her way.

But the Major stuck to his guns and Mademoiselle Fifi had to lay mines in the Château d'Uville to console himself.

The five men stood close together by the open window for several minutes, breathing the damp air. At last Lieutenant Fritz remarked with a hoarse laugh: 'The ladies won't have nice weather for their drive!'

Then the party broke up, each one going on duty, while the Captain had a great deal to see to in preparation for the dinner.

When they met again at nightfall, they all laughed at the general smartness; their buttons were polished as if for a ceremonial parade, their hair was oiled and scented, and they had all had a bath. The Major's hair seemed less grey than in the morning and the Captain had shaved, only keeping his moustache like a line of fire on his upper lip.

They left the window open in spite of the rain; and from time to time someone would go and listen. At ten minutes past six the Baron reported a rumbling in the distance. They all crowded to the window; and soon the heavy waggon drove up at full gallop, the four horses plastered with mud, steaming and panting.

Five women got out on the terrace, five good-looking girls carefully picked by one of the Captain's friends, to whom the Factotum had delivered his officer's card.

They had made no difficulties about coming, sure of being well paid; moreover, they had got to know the Prussians during the three months that they had had dealings with them, putting up with the men as they put up with the general situation. 'It's all in the day's work,' they had told each other, as they drove out, no doubt in order to stifle any qualms of conscience that remained.

They went straight to the dining-room. With the lamps lit, its dilapidated appearance was even more depressing than usual; the table loaded with food and the expensive china and silver, which had been found in the wall where the owner had hidden it, made the place look like a robbers' den prepared for supper with the loot from a successful raid. The Captain, beaming, took charge of the girls with an expert's assurance, appraising them, kissing them, sniffing them, assessing their value from a professional point of

view. And, when the three younger officers were anxious to choose one each, he refused firmly to allow it, insisting on allotting them fairly according to rank, so as to preserve official army precedence.

In order to avoid all discussion or dispute and all suspicion of favouritism, he sized them as if on parade, and addressing the tallest barked: 'Your name?'

She answered, raising her voice: 'Pamela.'

He announced: 'Number one, by name Pamela, allotted to the Commanding Officer.'

Next, after kissing the second one, Blondine, to indicate that she was his property, he offered Lieutenant Otto the stout Amanda; he gave Eva, the Tomato, to Second Lieutenant Fritz, and Rachel, the shortest of all, who was very young and dark, with coal-black eyes, a Jewess, whose snub nose was the exception that proves the rule that all the Chosen Race have hooked noses, he assigned to the most junior officer, the slim Marquis Wilhelm von Eyrik.

The three younger officers were eager to take their girls off upstairs at once, on the pretext of offering them brushes and soap, to repair the ravages of the drive. But the Captain wisely refused to allow this, saying that they were tidy enough to sit down and that those who went up would want to change partners, when they came down, and that would upset the pairing. They bowed to his superior experience and contented themselves with plenty of anticipatory kisses.

Suddenly Rachel choked, coughing till she cried and blowing smoke out of her nose. The Marquis, pretending to kiss her, had blown a puff of smoke into her mouth. She did not protest and said nothing, but she glared at her partner with a glint of anger in her dark eyes.

They all sat down; even the Major seemed to be enjoying himself thoroughly; he put Pamela on his right and Blondine on his left, saying as he unfolded his napkin: 'This was a capital idea of yours, Captain Kelweingstein.'

Lieutenants Otto and Fritz made their partners quite nervous with their society manners; but the Baron von Kelweingstein, with the assurance of his wide experience of women, was in great form,

using obscene words, as if lit up by his mop of flaming hair. He made love in his guttural French, and his coarse compliments, hissed through the hole where his two teeth were missing, reached the girls in a cloud of saliva.

Anyhow they didn't follow what he said; they only showed a flash of comprehension when he spat out some obscenity or some coarse vulgarism, mutilated by his accent. Then suddenly, with one consent, in a burst of wild laughter, they collapsed into their partner's arms, repeating the words which the Baron went on mispronouncing intentionally, in order to make them repeat the obscenities. The first few bottles of wine had gone to their heads and they shouted out the bawdy phrases with gusto; and, dropping into their normal behaviour by force of habit, they kissed the moustaches of their neighbours to right and left, pinched their arms and uttered shrill screams. They drank out of anyone's glass, singing French catches and bits of German songs which they had picked up in the course of their daily dealings with the enemy.

Soon the men themselves, intoxicated by all these women's bodies exposed to their gaze, asking to be pawed, lost all control, shouting and breaking the crockery, while behind their chairs the soldiers waited on them with expressionless faces.

The Major was the only one who behaved like a gentleman.

Mademoiselle Fifi had taken Rachel on his knee and with cold passion first of all kissed madly the ebony curls on the back of her neck, savouring the exciting warmth and scent of her body in the opening between her dress and her skin; after that he pinched her hard through her clothes till she screamed, with sadistic pleasure, unable to resist the urge to hurt something. Often, too, throwing his arms round her, he crushed her body to his own, pressing his mouth on the moist lips of the Jewess and kissing her till he had to stop for want of breath; suddenly he bit her so hard that blood ran down the girl's chin and dropped on to her frock.

Again she looked him straight in the eyes and, mopping the place, she murmured 'I'll make you pay for this.' He laughed a cruel laugh: 'I'll pay all right!'

They reached dessert and champagne was served. The Major

rose and, with the solemnity with which he would have proposed the health of the Empress Augusta, he gave the toast: 'To our ladies!' This was the first of a series of toasts, given in the language of drunken soldiers, full of bawdy jokes, that sounded even worse in their bad French. They got up one after the other, making great efforts to be witty and amusing; the girls, now so drunk that they could not stand, their eyes misty and their lips slobbering, applauded each sally vigorously. The Captain, wishing, no doubt, to give the drunken orgy an air of gallantry, raised his glass again and cried: 'To our conquest of hearts!'

After that Lieutenant Otto, a regular Black Forest bear, rose to his feet, excited and hopelessly drunk, and, in a sudden fit of alcoholic patriotism, shouted: 'To our conquest of France!'

Intoxicated as they were, the girls received this toast in dead silence and Rachel turned to him, quivering with anger: 'Look here, I know some Frenchmen before whom you wouldn't say that!'

But the little Marquis, who still had her on his knee, laughed with drunken cheerfulness: 'Well, anyway, I've never seen them; as soon as we appear, they clear out.'

The girl in her fury hissed: 'You're a dirty liar!'

For a second he fixed his blue eyes on her as he fixed them on the pictures, when he was shooting holes in the canvas, and began to laugh: 'Well, let's discuss the point, darling; after all, should we be here if they could fight?' And, warming to his subject, he went on: 'We are their masters; France is ours.'

She jumped up from his knee and collapsed on to her own chair; he got up, raised his glass and, leaning forward over the table, repeated: 'France is ours, with the people, the woods, the fields and the houses.'

The others, all quite drunk, in a sudden fit of the brutal enthusiasm of soldiers, seized their glasses and shouted: 'Long live Prussia!' and emptied them at one gulp.

The girls did not protest, silent now and terrified. Even Rachel said nothing, not knowing what to say.

Next the little Marquis balanced his champagne glass, refilled, on

the Jewess' head: 'All the women in France are ours, too,' he shouted.

She leapt to her feet, so that the glass upset and poured the golden wine over her black hair, like the water at a baptism; it fell to the floor and broke. With trembling lips she glared at the officer, who was still laughing, and stammered, her voice hoarse with anger: 'That's a lie! By God, you'll never have the women of France.'

He sat down in order to laugh more at his ease and with an attempt at a Parisian accent said: 'That's good, very good; in that case, why are you here, darling?'

She was silenced for a minute, not understanding, for her brain was clouded with the wine; but, as his meaning dawned on her, she flung at him in a fury of indignation: 'Me, me, I'm not a woman, I'm a whore; that's good enough for Prussians!'

She had hardly got the words out, when he boxed her ears soundly, but, as he raised his hand to do it again, mad with rage, she seized a little silver dessert knife off the table and, so quickly that no one saw what she was doing, plunged it into his neck in the hollow just by the collar-bone.

The word that he was uttering was cut short in his throat and he remained with his mouth open, staring horribly.

There was a general uproar as everybody sprang to their feet; but, thrusting her chair between Lieutenant Otto's legs so that he measured his length on the floor, she dashed to the window, flung it open before anyone could get to her and disappeared in the darkness through the rain, which was still falling.

In two minutes Mademoiselle Fifi was dead. Fritz and Otto drew their swords and wanted to kill the girls, who were clinging to their knees. The Major prevented the massacre with some difficulty and had the girls shut up in a room guarded by two soldiers; next, as if he was deploying his troops in battle, he organized the pursuit of the fugitive, having no doubt that she would be caught.

Fifty men combed the park, under threats, if they didn't find her; two hundred others searched the woods and the houses in the valley.

The dinner-table was immediately cleared and the body laid out upon it; the four officers, sobered by the shock, stood stiffly near the window with the stern expression of soldiers on duty, peering into the darkness.

The torrential downpour went on. The night was full of the gurgle of water falling and water flowing, pouring down and splashing up.

Suddenly a shot rang out, followed by a second a long way off; for four hours shots were heard at intervals, sometimes close, sometimes far away, and shouts as the sections rallied, strange words shouted by guttural voices as passwords.

In the morning all the soldiers returned. Two men had been killed and three others wounded by their comrades in the excitement of the chase and the confusion of pursuit in the darkness.

Rachel had not been found.

Stern measures were taken against the inhabitants; houses were searched, the whole countryside was combed, gone through, turned upside down. The Jewess seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

The General on being informed gave instructions that the affair must be hushed up to avoid giving a bad example to the army, and he took disciplinary measures against the Major, who passed them on to his subordinates. The General had said: 'One doesn't make war in order to have a good time and make love to prostitutes.' And the Graf von Farsberg in his annoyance determined to have his revenge on the local inhabitants.

As he wanted a pretext to justify severity, he sent for the priest and ordered him to have the church bell rung at the funeral of the Marquis von Eyrik.

Quite unexpectedly the priest raised no objection and obeyed the order humbly. And, as the body of Mademoiselle Fifi left the Château on the way to the cemetery, borne by soldiers with an escort marching with rifles loaded before, behind and on both sides of the coffin, for the first time the church bell rang a funeral peal quite cheerfully, as if a friendly hand was caressing it.

It rang again in the evening, and next day, too, and every day; it seemed to enjoy ringing. Sometimes it rang even at night, all by

itself, sending out two or three soft notes in the darkness, as if waking up and chuckling to itself at some mysterious joke.

All the peasants thought it was bewitched and no one except the priest and the sexton would go near the belfry.

Actually, a poor prostitute was living up in the tower, all by herself, in constant fear, being fed secretly by the two men.

She stayed there till the Germans left. Then one evening the priest borrowed the baker's cart and himself drove his prisoner to the gate of Rouen. There he kissed her; she got out and hurried back on foot to the brothel, whose owner had given her up for dead.

Some time afterwards she was taken out by a patriot, who had no prejudices and loved her for her brave deed; later he became fond of her for herself and married her, making an honest woman of her, as good as many another.