**Gigolo and Gigolette**

W. Somerset Maugham

The bar was crowded. Sandy Westcott had had a couple of cocktails, and he was beginning to feel hungry. He looked at his watch. He had been asked to dinner at half past nine, and it was nearly ten. Eva Barrett was always late, and he would be lucky if he got anything to eat by ten-thirty. He turned to the barman to order another cocktail and caught sight of a man who at that moment came up to the bar.

“Hullo, Cotman,” he said. “Have a drink.”

“I don’t mind if I do, sir.”

Cotman was a nice-looking fellow, of thirty per­haps, short, but with so good a figure that he did not look it, very smartly dressed in a double-breasted dinner jacket, a little too much waisted, and a butter­fly tie a good deal too large. He had a thick mat of black, wavy hair, very sleek and shiny, brushed straight back from his forehead, and large flashing eyes. He spoke with great refinement, but with a Cockney accent.

“How’s Stella?” asked Sandy.

“Oh, she’s all right. Likes to have a lay-down before the show, you know. Steadies the old nerves, she says.”

“I wouldn’t do that stunt of hers for a thousand pounds.”

“I don’t suppose you would. No one can do it but her, not from that height, I mean, and only five foot of water.”

“It’s the most sick-making thing I’ve ever seen.”

Cotman gave a little laugh. He took this as a compli­ment. Stella was his wife. Of course she did the trick and took the risk, but it was he who had thought of the flames, and it was the flames that had taken the public fancy and made the turn the huge success it was. Stella dived into a tank from the top *of* a ladder sixty feet high, and, as he said, there were only five feet of water in the tank. Just before she dived they poured enough petrol on to cover the surface and he set it alight; the flames soared up and she dived straight into them.

“Paco Espinel tells me it’s the biggest draw the Casino has ever had,” said Sandy.

“I know, he told me they’d served as many dinners in July as they generally do in August. ‘And that’s you,’ he says to me.”

“Well, I hope you’re making a packet.”

“Well, I can’t exactly say that. You see, we’ve got our contract, and naturally we didn’t know it was going to be a riot, but Mr. Espinel’s talking of book­ing us for next month, and I don’t mind telling you he’s not going to get us on the same terms or anything like it. Why, I had a letter from an agent only this morning saying they wanted us to go to Deauville.”

“Here are my people,” said Sandy.

He nodded to Cotman and left him. Eva Barrett sailed in with the rest of her guests. She had gathered them together downstairs. It was a party of eight.

“I knew we should find you here, Sandy,” she said. “I’m not late, am I?”

“Only half an hour.”

“Ask them what cocktails they want, and then we’ll dine.”

While they were standing at the bar, emptying now, for nearly everyone had gone down to the ter­race for dinner, Paco Espinel passed through and stopped to shake hands with Eva Barrett. Paco Espinel was a young man who had run through his money and now made his living by arranging the turns with which the Casino sought to attract visitors. It was his duty to be civil to the rich and great. Mrs. Chaloner Barrett was an American widow of vast wealth; she not only entertained expensively, but also gambled. And after all, the dinners and suppers and the two cabaret shows that accompanied them were provided only to induce people to lose their money at the tables.

“Got a good table for me, Paco?” said Eva Barrett.

“The best.” His eyes, fine, dark Argentine eyes, expressed his admiration of Mrs. Barrett’s opulent, ageing charms. This also was business. “You’ve seen Stella?”

“Of course. Three times. It’s the most terrifying thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Sandy comes every night.”

“I want to be in at the death. She’s bound to kill herself one of these nights, and I don’t want to miss that if I can help it.”

Paco laughed.

“She’s been such a success, we’re going to keep her on another month. All I ask is that she shouldn’t kill herself till the end of August. After that she can do as she likes.”

“Oh, God, have I got to go on eating trout and roast chicken every night till the end of August?” cried Sandy.

“You brute, Sandy,” said Eva Barrett. “Come on, let’s go in to dinner. I’m starving.”

Paco Espinel asked the barman if he’d seen Cotman. The barman said he’d had a drink with Mr. Westcott.

“Oh, well, if he comes in here again, tell him I want a word with him.”

Mrs. Barrett paused at the top of the steps that led down to the terrace long enough for the press repre­sentative, a little haggard woman with an untidy head, to come up with her notebook. Sandy whispered the names of the guests. It was a representative Riviera party. There was an English lord and his lady, long and lean both of them, who were prepared to dine with anyone who would give them a free meal. They were certain to be as tight as drums before midnight. There was a gaunt Scotch woman, with a face like a Peruvian mask that has been battered by the storms of ten centuries, and her English husband. Though a broker by profession, he was bluff, military and hearty. He gave you an impression of such in­tegrity that you were almost more sorry for him than for yourself when the good thing he had put you onto as a special favour turned out to be a dud. There was an Italian countess who was neither Italian nor a countess, but played a beautiful game of bridge, and there was a Russian prince who was ready to make Mrs. Barrett a princess and in the meantime sold champagne, motor cars and Old Masters on com­mission. A dance was in progress, and Mrs. Barrett, waiting for it to end, surveyed, with a look which her short upper lip made scornful, the serried throng on the dance floor. It was a gala night, and the dining tables were crowded together. Beyond the terrace the sea was calm and silent. The music stopped, and the head waiter, affably smiling, came up to guide her to her table. She swept down the steps with majestic gait.

“We shall have quite a good view of the dive,” she said as she sat down.

“I like to be next door to the tank,” said Sandy, “so that I can see her face.”

“Is she pretty?” asked the Countess.

“It’s not that. It’s the expression of her eyes. She’s scared to death every time she does it.”

“Oh, I don’t believe that,” said the City gentle­man, Colonel Goodhart by name, though no one had ever discovered how he came by the title. “I mean, the whole bally stunt’s only a trick. There’s no danger really, I mean.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Diving from that height in as little water as that, she’s got to turn like a flash the moment she touches the water. And if she doesn’t do it right she’s bound to bash her head against the bottom and break her back.”

“That’s just what I’m telling you, old boy,” said the Colonel, “it’s a trick. I mean, there’s no argument.”

“If there’s no danger there’s nothing to it, any­way,” said Eva Barrett. “It’s over in a minute. Un­less she’s risking her life it’s the biggest fraud of modern times. Don’t say we’ve come to see this over and over again and it’s only a fake.”

“Pretty well everything is. You can take my word for that.”

“Well, you ought to know,” said Sandy.

If it occurred to the Colonel that this might be a nasty dig, he admirably concealed it. He laughed.

“I don’t mind saying I know a thing or two,” he admitted. “I mean, I’ve got my eyes peeled all right. You can’t put much over on me.”

The tank was on the far left of the terrace, and behind it, supported by stays, was an immensely tall ladder at the top of which was a tiny platform. After two or three dances more, when Eva Barrett’s party were eating asparagus, the music stopped and the lights were lowered. A spot was turned on the tank. Cotman was visible in the brilliance. He ascended half a dozen steps so that he was on a level with the top of the tank.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he cried out, in a loud clear voice, “you are now going to see the most marvellous feat of the century. Madam Stella, the greatest diver in the world, is about to dive from a height of sixty feet into a lake of flames five foot deep. This is a feat that has never been performed before, and Madam Stella is prepared to give one hundred pounds to anyone who will attempt it. Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honour to present Madam Stella.”

A little figure appeared at the top of the steps that led onto the terrace, ran quickly up to the tank, and bowed to the applauding audience. She wore a man’s silk dressing gown and on her head a bathing cap. Her thin face was made up as if for the stage. The Italian countess looked at her through *face-à-main.*

“Not pretty,” she said.

“Good figure,” said Eva Barrett. “You’ll see.”

Stella slipped out of her dressing gown and gave it to Cotman. He went down the steps. She stood for a moment and looked at the crowd. They were in dark­ness and she could only see vague white faces and white shirt fronts. She was small, beautifully made, with legs long for her body and slim hips. Her bathing costume was very scanty.

“You’re quite right about the figure, Eva,” said the Colonel. “Bit undeveloped, of course, but I know you girls think that’s quite the thing.”

Stella began to climb the ladder, and the spotlight followed her. It seemed an incredible height. An attendant poured petrol on the surface of the water. Cotman was handed a flaming torch. He watched Stella reach the top of the ladder and settle herself on the platform.

“Ready?” he cried.

“Yes.”

“Go,” he shouted.

And as he shouted he seemed to plunge the burning torch into the water. The flames sprang up, leaping high, and really terrifying to look at. At the same moment Stella dived. She came down like a streak of lightning and plunged through the flames, which subsided a moment after she had reached the water. A second later she was at the surface and jumped out to a roar, a storm of applause. Cotman wrapped the dressing gown round her. She bowed and bowed. The applause went on. Music struck up. With a final wave of the hand she ran down the steps and between the tables to the door. The lights went up, and the wait­ers hurried along with their neglected service.

Sandy Westcott gave a sigh. He did not know whether he was disappointed or relieved.

“Top-hole,” said the English peer.

“It’s a bally fake,” said the Colonel, with his British pertinacity. “I bet you anything you like.”

“It’s over so quickly,” said her English ladyship. “I mean, you don’t get your money’s worth really.”

Anyhow, it wasn’t her money. That it never was. The Italian countess leaned forward. She spoke fluent English, but with a strong accent.

“Eva, my darling, who are those extraordinary people at the table near the door under the balcony?”

“Packet of fun, aren’t they?” said Sandy. “I simply haven’t been able to take my eyes off them.”

Eva Barrett glanced at the table the Countess indi­cated, and the Prince, who sat with his back to it, turned round to look.

“They can’t be true,” cried Eva. “I must ask Angelo who they are.”

Mrs. Barrett was the sort of woman who knew the head waiters of all the principal restaurants in Europe by their first names. She told the waiter who was at that moment filling her glass to send Angelo to her.

It was certainly an odd pair. They were sitting by themselves at a small table. They were very old. The man was big and stout, with a mass of white hair, great bushy white eyebrows and an enormous white moustache. He looked like the late King Humbert of Italy, but much more like a king. He sat bolt up­right. He wore full evening dress, with a white tie and a collar that has been out of fashion for hard on thirty years. His companion was a little old lady in a black satin ball dress, cut very low and tight at the waist. Round her neck were several chains of coloured beads. She wore what was obviously a wig, and a very ill-fitting one at that; it was very elaborate, all curls and sausages, and raven black. She was outrageously made up, bright blue under the eyes and on the eye­lids, the eyebrows heavily black, a great patch of very pink rouge on each cheek and the lips a livid scarlet. The skin hung loosely on her face in deep wrinkles. She had large bold eyes, and they darted eagerly from table to table. She was taking every­thing in, and every other minute called the old man’s attention to someone or other. The appearance of the couple was so fantastic in that fashionable crowd, the men in dinner jackets, the women in thin, pale­coloured frocks, that many eyes were turned on them. The staring did not seem to incommode the old lady. When she felt certain persons were looking at her she raised her eyebrows archly, smiled and rolled her eyes. She seemed on the point of acknowledg­ing applause.

Angelo hurried up to the good customer that Eva Barrett was.

“You wished to see me, my lady?”

“Oh, Angelo, we’re simply dying to know who those absolutely marvellous people are at the table next to the door.”

Angelo gave a look and then assumed a deprecating air. The expression of his face, the movement of his shoulders, the turn of his spine, the gesture of his hands, probably even the twiddle of his toes, all indi­cated a half-humorous apology.

“You must overlook them, my lady.” He knew of course that Mrs. Barrett had no right to be thus addressed, just as he knew that the Italian countess was neither Italian nor a countess and that the Eng­lish lord never paid for a drink if anyone else would pay for it, but he also knew that to be thus addressed did not displease her. “They begged me to give them a table because they wanted to see Madame Stella do her dive. They were in the profession themselves once. I know they’re not the sort of people one ex­pects to see dining here, but they made such a point of it I simply hadn’t the heart to refuse.”

“But I think they’re a perfect scream. I adore them.”

“I’ve known them for many years. The man in­deed is a compatriot of mine.” The head waiter gave a condescending little laugh. “I told them I’d give them a table on the condition that they didn’t dance. I wasn’t taking any risks, my lady.”

“Oh, but I should have loved to see them dance.”

“One has to draw the line somewhere, my lady,” said Angelo gravely.

He smiled, bowed again and withdrew.

“Look,” cried Sandy, “they’re going.”

The funny old couple were paying their bill. The old man got up and put round his wife’s neck a large white, but not too clean, feather boa. She rose. He gave her his arm, holding himself very erect, and she, small in comparison, tripped out beside him. Her black satin dress had a long train, and Eva Barrett (who was well over fifty) screamed with joy.

“Look, I remember my mother wearing a dress like that when I was in the schoolroom.”

The comic pair walked, still arm in arm, through the spacious rooms of the Casino till they came to the door. The old man addressed a commissionaire.

“Be so good as to direct me to the artistes’ dressing rooms. We wish to pay our respects to Madame Stella.” The commissionaire gave them a look and summed them up. They were not people with whom it was necessary to be very polite.

“You won’t find her there.”

“She has not gone? I thought she gave a second performance at two.”

“That’s true. They might be in the bar.”

“It wron’t ’urt us just to go an’ ’ave a look, Carlo,” said the old lady.

“Right-o, my love,” he answered with a great roll of the R.

They walked slowly up the great stairs and entered the bar. It was empty but for the deputy barman and a couple sitting in two armchairs in the corner. The old lady released her husband’s arm and tripped up with outstretched hands.

“’Ow are you, dear? I felt I just ’ad to come and congratulate you, bein’ English same as you are. And in the profession meself. It’s a grand turn, my dear, it deserves to be a success.” She turned to Cotman. “And is this your ’usband?”

Stella got out of her armchair and a shy smile broke on her lips as she listened with some confusion to the voluble old lady.

“Yes, that’s Syd.”

“Pleased to meet you,” he said.

“And this is mine,” said the old lady, with a little dig of the elbow in the direction of the tall, white-haired man. “Mr. Penezzi. ’E’s a count really, and I’m the Countess Penezzi by rights, but when we retired from the profession we dropped the title.”

“Will you have a drink?” said Cotman.

“No, you ’ave one with us,” said Mrs. Penezzi, sinking into an armchair. “Carlo, you order.”

The barman came, and after some discussion three bottles of beer were ordered. Stella would not have anything.

“She never has anything till after the second show,” explained Cotman.

Stella was slight and small, about twenty-six, with light brown hair, cut short and waved, and grey eyes. She had reddened her lips, but wore little rouge on her face. Her skin was pale. She was not very pretty, but she had a neat little face. She wore a very simple evening frock of white silk. The beer was brought, and Mr. Penezzi, evidently not very talkative, took a long swig.

“What was your line?” asked Syd Cotman politely.

Mrs. Penezzi gave him a rolling glance of her flash­ing, made-up eyes and turned to her husband.

“Tell ’em who I am, Carlo,” she said.

“The ’uman cannon ball,” he announced.

Mrs. Penezzi smiled brightly and with a quick, birdlike glance looked from one to the other. They stared at her in dismay.

“Flora,” she said. “The ’uman cannon ball.”

She so obviously expected them to be impressed that they did not quite know what to do. Stella gave her Syd a puzzled look. He came to the rescue.

“It must have been before our time.”

“Naturally it was before your time. Why, we re­tired from the profession definitely the year poor Queen Victoria died. It made quite a sensation when we did, too. But you’ve ’eard of me, of course.” She saw the blank look on their faces; her tone changed a little. “But I was the biggest draw in London. At the Old Aquarium, that was. All the swells came to see me. The Prince of Wales and I don’t know who all. I was the talk of the town. Isn’t that true, Carlo?”

“She crowded the Aquarium for a year.”

“It was the most spectacular turn they’d ever ’ad there. Why, only a few years ago I went up and introduced meself to Lady de Bathe. Lily Langtry, you know. She used to live down ’ere. She remembered me perfectly. She told me she’d seen me ten times.”

“What did you do?” asked Stella.

“I was fired out of a cannon. Believe me, it was a sensation. And after London I went all over the world with it. Yes, my dear, I’m an old woman now and I won’t deny it. Seventy-eight Mr. Penezzi is, and I shall never see seventy again, but I’ve ’ad me portrait on every ’oardin’ in London. Lady de Bathe said to me: ‘My dear, you was as celebrated as I was.’ But you know what the public is, give ’em a good thing and they go mad over it, only they want change; ’owever good it is, they get sick of it, and then they won’t go and see it any more. It’ll ’appen to you, my dear, same as it ’appened to me. It comes to all of us. But Mr. Penezzi always ’ad ’is ’ead screwed on ’is shoulders the right way. Been in the business since ’e was so ’igh. Circus, you know. Ringmaster. That’s ’ow I first knew ’im. I was in a troupe of acrobacks. Trapeze act, you know. ’E’s a fine-lookin’ man now, but you should ’ave seen ’im then, in ’is Russian boots, and ridin’ breeches, and a tight-fittin’ coat with frogs all down the front of it, crackin’ ’is long whip as ’is ’orses galloped round the ring, the ’and- somest man I ever see in my life.”

Mr. Penezzi did not make any remark, but thought­fully twisted his immense white moustache.

“Well, as I was tellin’ you, ’e was never one to throw money about and when the agents couldn’t get us bookin’s any more ’e said, ‘Let’s retire.’ And ’e was quite right, after ’avin’ been the biggest star in London, we couldn’t go back to circus work any more, I mean, Mr. Penezzi bein’ a count really, ’e ’ad ’is dignity to think of, so we come down ’ere and we bought a ’ouse and started a pension. It always ’ad been Mr. Penezzi’s ambition to do something like that. Thirty-five years we been ’ere now. We ’aven’t done so badly, not until the last two or three years, and the slump came, though visitors are very differ­ent from what they was when we first started, the things they want, electric light and runnin’ water in their bedrooms and I don’t know what all. Give them a card, Carlo. Mr. Penezzi does the cookin’ ’imself, and if ever you want a real ’ome from ’ome, you’ll know where to find it. I like professional people, and we’d ’ave a rare lot to talk about, you and me, dearie. Once a professional always a professional, I say.”

At that moment the head barman came back from his supper. He caught sight of Syd.

“Oh, Mr. Cotman, Mr. Espinel was looking for you, wants to see you particularly.”

“Oh, where is he?”

“You’ll find him around somewhere.”

“We’ll be going,” said Mrs. Penezzi, getting up. “Come and ’ave lunch with us one day, will you? I’d like to show you my old photographs and me press cuttin’s. Fancy you not ’avin’ ’card of the ’uman cannon ball. Why, I was as well known as the Tower of London.”

Mrs. Penezzi was not vexed at finding that these young people had never even heard *of* her. She was simply amused.

They bade one another good-bye, and Stella sank back again into her chair.

“I’ll just finish my beer,” said Syd, “and then I’ll go and see what Paco wants. Will you stay here, ducky, or would you like to go to your dressing room?”

Stella’s hands were tightly clenched. She did not answer. Syd gave her a look and then quickly glanced away.

“Perfect riot, that old girl,” he went on, in his hearty way. “Real figure of fun. I suppose it’s true what she said. It’s difficult to believe, I must say. Fancy ’er drawing all London, what, forty years ago? And the funny thing is, her thinking anybody re­membered. Seemed as though she simply couldn’t understand us not having heard of her even.”

He gave Stella another glance, from the corner of his eye so that she should not see he was looking at her, and he saw she was crying. He faltered. The tears were rolling down her pale face. She made no sound.

“What’s the matter, darling?”

“Syd, I can’t do it again tonight,” she sobbed.

“Why on earth not?”

“I’m afraid.”

He took her hand.

“I know you better than that,” he said. “You’re the bravest little woman in the world. Have a brandy, that’ll pull you together.”

“No, that’d only make it worse.”

“You can’t disappoint your public like that.”

“That filthy public. Swine who eat too much and drink too much. A pack of chattering fools with more money than they know what to do with. I can’t stick them. What do they care if I risk my life?”

“Of course it’s the thrill they come for, there’s no denying that,” he replied uneasily. “But you know and I know, there’s no risk, not if you keep your nerve.”

“But I’ve lost my nerve, Syd. I shall kill myself.”

She had raised her voice a little, and he looked round quickly at the barman. But the barman was reading the *Eclaireur de Nice* and paying no at­tention.

“You don’t know what it looks like from up there, the top of the ladder, when I look down at the tank. I give you my word, tonight I thought I was going to faint. I tell you I can’t do it again tonight, you’ve got to get me out of it, Syd.”

“If you funk it tonight it’ll be worse tomorrow.”

“No, it won’t. It’s having to do it twice kills me. The long wait and all that. You go and see Mr. Espinel and tell him I can’t give two shows a night. It’s more than my nerves’ll stand.”

“He’ll never stand for that. The whole supper trade depends on you. It’s only to see you they come in then at all.”

“I can’t help it, I tell you I can’t go on.”

He was silent for a moment. The tears still streamed down her pale little face, and he saw that she was quickly losing control of herself. He had felt for some days that something was up, and he had been anxious. He had tried not to give her an opportunity to talk. He knew obscurely that it was better for her not to put into words what she felt. But he had been worried. For he loved her.

“Anyhow, Espinel wants to see me,” he said.

“What about?”

“I don’t know. I’ll tell him you can’t give the show more than once a night and see what he says. Will you wait here?”

“No, I’ll go along to the dressing room.”

Ten minutes later he found her there. He was in great spirits and his step was jaunty. He burst open the door.

“I’ve got grand news for you, honey. They’re keeping us on next month at twice the money.”

He sprang forward to take her in his arms and kiss her, but she pushed him away.

“Have I got to go on again tonight?”

“I’m afraid you must. I tried to make it only one show a night, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He says it’s quite essential you should do the supper turn. And after all, for double the money, it’s worth it.”

She flung herself down on the floor and this time burst into a storm of tears.

“I can’t, Syd, I can’t. I shall kill myself.”

He sat down on the floor and raised her head and took her in his arms and petted her.

“Buck up, darling. You can’t refuse a sum like that. Why, it’ll keep us all the winter, and we shan’t have to do a thing. After all there are only four more days to the end of July, and then it’s only August.”

“No, no, no. I’m frightened. I don’t want to die, Syd. I love you.”

“I know you do, darling, and I love you. Why, since we married I’ve never looked at another woman. We’ve never had money like this before, and we shall never get it again. You know what these things are, we’re a riot now, but we can’t expect it to go on for­ever. We’ve got to strike while the iron’s hot.”

“D’you want me to die, Syd?”

“Don’t talk so silly. Why, where should I be with­out you? You mustn’t give way like this. You’ve got your self-respect to think of. You’re famous all over the world.”

“Like the human cannon ball was,” she cried with a laugh of fury.

“That damned old woman,” he thought.

He knew that was the last straw. Bad luck, Stella taking it like that.

“That was an eye-opener to me,” she went on. “What do they come and see me over and over again for? On the chance they’ll see me kill myself. And a week after I’m dead they’ll have forgotten even my name. That’s what the public is. When I looked at that painted old hag I saw it all. Oh, Syd, I’m so miserable.” She threw her arms round his neck and pressed her face to his. “Syd, it’s no good, I can’t do it again.”

“Tonight, d’you mean? If you really feel like that about it, I’ll tell Espinel you’ve had a fainting fit. I daresay it’ll be all right just for once.”

“I don’t mean tonight, I mean never.”

She felt him stiffen a little.

“Syd dear, don’t think I’m being silly. It’s not just today, it’s been growing on me. I can’t sleep at night thinking of it, and when I do drop off I see myself standing at the top of the ladder and looking down. Tonight I could hardly get up it, I was trembling so, and when you lit the flames and said go, something seemed to be holding me back. I didn’t even know I’d jumped. My mind was a blank till I found myself on the platform and heard them clapping. Syd, if you loved me you wouldn’t want me to go through such torture.”

He sighed. His own eyes were wet with tears. For he loved her devotedly.

“You know what it means,” he said. “The old life. Marathons and all.”

“Anything’s better than this.”

The old life. They both remembered it. Syd had been a dancing gigolo since he was eighteen. He was very good-looking in his dark Spanish way and full of life. Old women and middle-aged women were glad to pay to dance with him, and he was never out of work. He had drifted from England to the Continent, and there he had stayed, going from hotel to hotel, to the Riviera in the winter, to watering places in France in the summer. It wasn’t a bad life they led. There were generally two or three of them together, the men, and they shared a room in cheap lodgings. They didn’t have to get up till late, and they only dressed in time to go to the hotel at twelve to dance with stout women who wanted to get their weight down. Then they were free till five, when they went to the hotel again and sat at a table, the three of them together, keeping a sharp eye open for anyone who looked a likely client. They had their regular custom­ers. At night they went to the restaurant, and the house provided them with quite a decent meal.

Between the courses they danced. It was good money. They generally got fifty or a hundred francs from anyone they danced with. Sometimes a rich woman, after dancing a good deal with one of them for two or three nights, would give him as much as a thousand francs. Sometimes a middle-aged woman would ask one to spend a night with her, and he would get two hundred and fifty francs for that. There was always the chance of a silly old fool losing her head, and then there were platinum and sapphire rings, cigarette cases, clothes and a wrist watch to be got. One of Syd’s friends had married one of them who was old enough to be his mother, but she gave him a car and money to gamble with, and they lived in a beautiful villa at Biarritz. Those were the good days when everybody had money to burn. The slump came and hit the gigolos hard. The hotels were empty, and the clients didn’t seem to want to pay for the pleasure of dancing with a nice-looking young fellow. Often and often Syd passed a whole day without earning the price of a drink, and more than once a fat old girl who weighed a ton had had the nerve to give him ten francs. His expenses didn’t go down, for he had to be smartly dressed or the manager of the hotel made remarks, washing cost a packet, and you’d be surprised the amount of linen he needed; then shoes, those floors were terribly hard on shoes, and they had to look new. He had his room to pay for and his lunch.

It was then he met Stella. It was at Evian, and the season was disastrous. She was a swimming instruc­tress. She was Australian and a beautiful diver. She gave exhibitions every morning and afternoon. At night she was engaged to dance at the hotel. They dined together at a little table in the restaurant apart from the guests, and when the band began to play they danced together to induce the customers to come onto the floor. But often no one followed them and they danced by themselves. Neither of them got anything much in the way of paying partners. They fell in love with one another, and at the end of the season got married.

They had never regretted it. They had gone through hard times. Even though for business reasons (elderly ladies didn’t so much like the idea of dancing with a married man when his wife was there), they con­cealed their marriage, it was not so easy to get a hotel job for the pair of them, and Syd was far from being able to earn enough to keep Stella, even in the most modest pension, without working. The gigolo business had gone to pot. They went to Paris and learnt a dancing act, but the competition was fearful and cabaret engagements were very hard to get. Stella was a good ballroom dancer, but the rage was for acrobatics, and however much they practised she never managed to do anything startling. The public was sick *of* the apache turn. They were out of a job for weeks at a time. Syd’s wrist watch, his gold cigarette case, his platinum ring, all went up the spout. At last they found themselves in Nice reduced to such straits that Syd had to pawn his evening clothes. It was a catastrophe. They were forced to enter for the Marathon that an enterprising manager was starting. Twenty-four hours a day they danced, resting every hour for fifteen minutes. It was fright­ful. Their legs ached, their feet were numb. For long periods they were unconscious of what they were doing. They just kept time to the music, exerting themselves as little as possible. They made a little money, people gave them sums of a hundred francs, or two hundred, to encourage them, and sometimes to attract attention they roused themselves to give an exhibition dance. If the public was in a good hu­mour, this might bring in a decent sum. They grew terribly tired. On the eleventh day Stella fainted and had to give up. Syd went on by himself, moving, moving without pause, grotesquely, without a part­ner. That was the worst time they had ever had. It was the final degradation. It had left with them a recollection of horror and misery.

But it was then that Syd had his inspiration. It had come to him while he was slowly going round the hall by himself. Stella always said she could dive in a saucer. It was just a trick.

“Funny how ideas come,” he said afterwards. “Like a flash of lightning.”

He suddenly remembered having seen a boy set fire to some petrol that had been spilt on the pave­ment, and the sudden blaze-up. For of course it was the flames on the water and the spectacular dive into them that had caught the public fancy. He stopped dancing there and then; he was too excited to go on. He talked it over with Stella, and she was enthusi­astic. He wrote to an agent who was a friend of his— everyone liked Syd, he was a nice little man—and the agent put up the money for the apparatus. He got them an engagement at a circus in Paris, and the turn was a success. They were made. Engagements fol­lowed here and there. Syd bought himself an entire outfit of new clothes, and the climax came when they got a booking for the summer casino on the coast. It was no exaggeration of Syd’s when he said that Stella was a riot.

“All our troubles are over, old girl,” he said fondly. “We can put a bit by now for a rainy day, and when the public’s sick of this I’ll just think of something else.”

And now, without warning, at the top of their boom, Stella wanted to chuck it. He didn’t know what to say to her. It broke his heart to see her so unhappy. He loved her more now even than when he had married her. He loved her because of all they’d gone through together—after all, for five days once they’d had nothing to eat but a hunk of bread each and a glass of milk—and he loved her because she’d taken him out of all that; he had good clothes to wear again and his three meals a day. He couldn’t look at her; the anguish in her dear grey eyes was more than he could bear. Timidly she stretched out her hand and touched his. He gave a deep sigh.

“You know what it means, honey. Our connection in the hotels has gone west, and the business is fin­ished, anyway. What there is’ll go to people younger than us. You know what these old women are as welt as I do, it’s a boy they want, and besides, I’m not tall enough really. It didn’t matter so much when I was a kid. It’s no good saying I don’t look my age, because I do.”

“Perhaps we can get into pictures.”

He shrugged his shoulders. They’d tried that before when they were down and out.

“I wouldn’t mind what I did. I’d serve in a shop.”

“D’you think jobs can be had for the asking?” She began to cry again.

“Don’t, honey. It breaks my heart.”

“We’ve got a bit put by.”

“I know we have. Enough to last us six months. And then it’ll mean starvation. First popping the bits and pieces, and then the clothes’ll have to go, same as they did before. And then dancing in low- down joints for our supper and fifty francs a night. Out of a job for weeks together. And Marathons whenever we hear of one. And how long will the pub­lic stand for them?”

“I know you think I’m unreasonable, Syd.”

He turned and looked at her now. There were tears in her eyes. He smiled, and the smile he gave her was charming and tender.

“No, I don’t, ducky. I want to make you happy. After all, you’re all I’ve got. I love you.”

He took her in his arms and held her. He could feel the beating of her heart. If Stella felt like that about it, well, he must just make the best of it. After all, supposing she were killed? No, no, let her chuck it and be damned to the money. She made a little movement.

“What is it, honey?”

She released herself and stood up. She went over to the dressing table.

“I expect it’s about time for me to be getting ready,” she said.

He started to his feet.

“You’re not going to do a show tonight?”

“Tonight, and every night till I kill myself. What else is there? I know you’re right, Syd. I can’t go back to all that other, stinking rooms in fifth-rate hotels and not enough to eat. Oh, that Marathon. Why did you bring that up? Being tired and dirty for days at a time and then having to give up because flesh and blood just couldn’t stand it. Perhaps I can go on an­other month and then there’ll be enough to give you a chance of looking round.”

“No, darling, I can’t stand for that. Chuck it. We’ll manage somehow. We starved before; we can starve again.”

She slipped out of her clothes, and for a moment stood naked but for her stockings, looking at herself in the glass. She gave her reflection a hard smile.

“I mustn’t disappoint my public,” she sniggered.