Louquier's Third Act

Katharine Fullerton Gerould

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LOUQUIER had been crossed in love. The old phrase covers his case. The girl does not matter, the circumstances do not matter; nothing matters except that Louquier had fallen in love, and that the lady had not reciprocated—not at least effectively, to the point of marrying Louquier. She does not come into the story in her own person; only as a cause. She affected Louquier; and his state is responsible for what happened. Of course Louquier's own temperament counts largely; other men might have been affected differently. Louquier, crossed in love, was a very special human formula.

Louquier was cursed with a small patrimony that made it entirely unnecessary for him to work, so long as his tastes remained simple. The lady apart, he had no ambitions; he was, I regret to say the sort of obsolescent fool who thinks that it is more lovely to be than to do, and that your most serious task in life is to adorn and beautify your personality. If he had been up to it, he would have been a first−class dilettante. He would have loved rejecting (like Walter Pater) exquisite cinerarias of the wrong color, or leaving a concert−hall because Beethoven was too vulgarly romantic. But he could never have done either, for the simple reason that his good, garish taste would never have given him the tip. His way did not lie through Art. He was too easily pleased. He loved Beauty even when it was merely pretty. No, his way did not lie through Art.

Louquier knew something of all this and wisely did not try for instincts that he did not possess. But he had his own way of being a highbrow. He could first isolate and then appreciate an emotion or a sensation—either in himself or in others. He loved the quiet dramas that take place within an individual nature; he could scent psychologic moments from afar. The twist of a mouth or the lift of an eyebrow meant to him unutterable things. He would carry home with him a gesture, a phrase, a twitch of the mask, and before his comfortable fire sit as in a parquet−box watching a gorgeous third act of his own creation. It should be said here that Louquier was usually right about his third acts and seldom mistook a curtain−raiser for a play. He had a flair. He rejected, at sight, the kind of human being to whom no spiritual adventures come; and could reconcile hysterical imitation a mile away. He despised emotion for emotion's sake. It might be as slight as you liked, but it must be the real thing. He was perfectly sincere in his own amorous misadventure; he suffered as naïvely as a boy of eighteen. His heart was veritably broken, and when he withdrew from the world it was to nurse a real wound.

Louquier had brown eyes, brown hair brown skin, the lean figure that best sorts with that general brownness and half presupposes an eye−glass. He did not, however, wear an eye−glass; and he had large, white, tombstone teeth—not the teeth of his type. He was a good fellow, and popular with men. You see, he never told any one about his passion for other people's crises; he kept it very shyly and decently to himself. Moreover, no one ever brought first−aid to the emotionally injured more promptly than Louquier, so people told him things. Yet as he had no business, and had wandered a good deal (in the most conventional ways), he had no fixed circle of friends. At any given moment, in any given place, he was apt to be rather solitary.

That is enough about Louquier's personality. If you can't "get" him, I can hardly give him to you.

Louquier withdrew, as I say, into himself—retreated to a house that, by accident of a cousin's investment, now the cousin being dead, belonged to him. He had hitherto rented it, for the few years that he had owned it; but the lease had expired, and it struck Louquier that he had never lived in a house of his own. That in itself might give him a sensation—a conventional one, but worth experiencing. As he couldn't marry and had no religion, perhaps it was as near as he would ever come to feeling like a pillar of society. It was really that sense of the curious value of living under one's own vine and fig−tree which drew him. His natural instinct would have been to retire to mountain fastnesses, or discover some Ravenswoodish ruin in which to shiver. You can see that he was very hard hit, and that he was not a subtle person.

The villa was at least remote from the scene of his discomfiture. It was a smallish, comfortable, rather ugly mansion on the bank of the Assiniboine, one of the older houses on Wellington Crescent, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Girdled by a high wall, its best rooms arranged at the back, facing the river, to which its tangled garden sloped negligently down, "Whitewood" had a wholly English flavor of privacy and comfort. It was at once modest and sturdy; it lived to itself, and asked favors of no one—least of all the favor of looking into its neighbors' premises. That suited Louquier perfectly; he saw at once that a British tradition was there to offset the newness of Winnipeg. Of course, being officially an American, he couldn't well taste the essence of being "Colonial," but he thought he could be secluded and guindé and "middle" with the best. It quite suited his present temper, and he established himself. Good servants sprang miraculously into being on the spot—probably because he was a bachelor. The Assiniboine was a noble stream; the wall round his garden was very high; it was delightfully incongruous of him to be there at all; he was pleased with himself for having had the courage to come. He felt more steeped in foreignness than if he had done something more exotic. He saw no one, except for necessary business. He did not wish to force the note. He rather liked subjecting his dramatic sense to local color. Still, he never forgot the girl, for he had been very hard hit. At this stage of Louquier's life he even shrank a little from encountering a woman.

Then—it was hard to say just when, for his experience was very gradual—he began to be uncomfortable; he could not precisely say how or why. He had mapped out for himself a course of reading that included some notorious modern Frenchmen. (This was all before the war.) He hoped, I fancy, to get a sensation out of reading Huysmans on the banks of the Assiniboine. Certainly any effect that Huysmans and Catulle Mendès could succeed in producing, in Winnipeg, would be a real effect, not meretriciously aided. The long evenings were a good time to read. During the day, he wandered about out of doors or went about the slow business of regenerating the interior of the house. One of his concessions had been to buy furniture in bulk, on the spot; but there were still gaps to be filled and rearranging to be done. His library was disfigured by a hideous stained−glass window. He was always planning to have it replaced; but in the end he kept it because he thought the Indians would have liked it. You can see how unworthily Louquier amused himself. The fact is that he was very tired of it all—"it all" being life. He was bored with his own depression; but he simply could not bestir himself for an antidote. For a long time he felt, peevishly, that it was up to Wellington Crescent to be the antidote.

The spring came early that year, and, as I said, Louquier spent a good deal of time out of doors. Once, driven forth by this curious mental discomfort which had begun in the late winter, he took a train to Calgary. He returned almost immediately, and while he found that he was glad to get back, still, Calgary had not done for him what he hoped. Calgary was nauseous in retrospect without making him feel that Winnipeg was heaven. The fact is, Winnipeg was no place for Louquier. But his discomfort was of that peculiar kind which one does not run away from. At first it showed itself in mere inability to keep his mind on his book or on anything else. Louquier took a blue−pill and hired a horse to ride. But still he could not, in the evenings, keep his mind on anything. Then he wondered if the stained−glass window were not responsible: he hated it so. Even with the curtain drawn across it at night, he was conscious of it behind his back. The stained glass was not a picture, and was a design only by courtesy. It looked like what one used to see through an old−fashioned kaleidoscope; or, rather, it looked like circumstantial evidence of a lunatic's having been turned loose in a kindergarten. Yet the weeks went by, and he did not replace it. A morbid indolence was gaining the secret channels of his soul. His mind seemed as complicated an organism as the body, and it felt as your body feels when you have a bad case of grippe—he seemed to have mental hands and feet and vital organs, all of which ached and were tired. Yet he was still perfectly capable of admiring the technique of "En Ménage"—when he could pay attention to it. That was the trouble: he could not concentrate. Each thing refused to hold him and passed him on to another. He was a shuttlecock among a thousand battledores. He was not consciously averse to any of the physical facts of his life, except the stained−glass window. Finally he took to keeping the curtain drawn across it all day; but when the sun struck it, it spotted and dashed and figured the pale silk curtain. That was dreadful—to think that it had power to make over something else in its own indecent likeness. Louquier did rouse himself to act a heavy drapery of red rep hung over it. He felt that life would be better after that; but then the almond−smell began.

Louquier was never able positively to account for the odor of bitter almonds that beset him in the late spring. It had nothing to do with the vegetation at "Whitewood." He sniffed every flower, shrub, and tree to find out. It was not merely in Louquier's mind, for when he went in to town or rode about the environs of Winnipeg he escaped it utterly. Nor was it the natural effluvium of the Assiniboine River. Besides, it was noticeable only in the house. He remarked it at first without suspicion, with a languid curiosity. He was almost happy, the one or two days that he spent sniffing. It gave him something to think about, for a few hours; something to do for its own sake. When he had proved the innocence of nature, he investigated the house. He crept down into the kitchen one afternoon when both the servants were safe elsewhere, opened canisters, and peeped into cupboards. He could find no source for the odor. The almond−smell surrounded him faintly in the kitchen as it did everywhere else, but there was no sharp increase of it in any corner to guide him. So he eliminated the kitchen from his conjectures, but he did not get rid of the smell. It was not unpleasant in itself, but it was too constant. To sit in the library day after day beside the red rep curtain and smell bitter almonds was too much—just too much.

Louquier had, of course, questioned the cook in the beginning; but she had disavowed completely all culinary use of almonds. At last, however—he had sniffed all the furniture by this time, and he was convinced that no upholstery or varnish was responsible—he decided to get rid of the cook. The odor had not been there when he settled in the villa, and that he did not carry the scent upon himself was proved by the fact that only in his own house were his nostrils oppressed by it. Of course he had sniffed through his whole wardrobe. It might be that his cook was an almond−carrier, as some people are typhoid−carriers. Getting rid of her meant getting rid also of his capable man−servant, for the two were united in the bonds of matrimony. It was a great nuisance, for they served him well; but in the end he did it. Louquier could not bring himself to put to the woman a straight question as to whether any of her toilet accessories were almond−scented. He had attested the fact of the pervasive odor and shown that he objected to it; if she used almond soap or anything of the kind,it was up to her, on that hint, to change her cosmetic habit. But there was no sign of her making any such concession to his prejudices. He shrank from active discussion of so personal a matter. He had given hints enough, and his hints were disregarded. Either the woman wasn't responsible, or, being responsible she chose not to reform. There was only one way out: he sacked them both.

The almond episode had no real sequel, but it had two important results. In the first place, the servants were not easily replaced. They left their "situation," undoubtedly spreading tales. Louquier was probably the victim of a servile boycott. At all events, he could not find their equivalents, and he had no friend among the Winnipeg ladies to turn to for counsel. It reduced itself to his getting on with a charwoman who came to get his breakfast and departed after cooking him an early and unspeakably English dinner. An old Scotchman pottered about the garden for a few hours each day. This domestic discomfort was one result of the almond nuisance. The other was a serious impairment of Louquier's nervous condition. The mental discomfort became acute. That he was not the easy prey of obsessions is shown by the fact that he really did, within a week or so after the servants' departure, cease to notice the almond−smell. Had he been a nervous wreck, it would have been only too easy for him to invent the odor for himself; and that he did not do. It was really gone, and his nostrils bore unimpeachable witness to the fact. I do not offer Louquier's refusal to shut up the villa and leave Winnipeg as an evidence of sanity. To leave would have been the most sensible thing he could do. But there his mortal indolence came in. He could go about sniffing, but he could not go about packing. He simply stuck on, the worse for wear. Louquier also, of course, had the universal male illusion: namely, that he was a practical person. It was much more sensible to stay on a few months more and rent, if he could, in the autumn; no one would rent in the spring, anyhow; it would be a bad advertisement to leave so soon; and, besides, he was saving money. Everything you see, combined to keep him there. Early in May he heard from a kind friend that the lady had announced her engagement. That disposed of any wandering notions he might have had of departure. It would be to insult his own heart to pretend it was a casino when it was really a tomb. Meanwhile the mental discomfort grew and grew like a secret malady. 'It is only fair to say that Louquier did not in the least enjoy his own drama. He would have given the world and all to be happy.

By mid−May, Huysmans, Catulle Mendès et Cie. were flung aside. Louquier simply could not stand literature. He took to American fiction, which again shows his sanity. The novels disgusted him, but for a time they worked; even the love−making did not depress him, for it was very badly done. But after a fortnight the charm failed. He found himself idly inverting all the situations—making the characters (when they were any) sardonically and plausibly do something quite different. His running marginal gloss turned the most ridiculous and optimistic plots into the most logical and depressing horrors. The hero ceased, for Louquier, to rescue the heroine; the heroine walked not unscathed through her vicious context; the villains flourished like the green bay−tree, refusing either to reform or to perish. He stopped reading our serious contemporaries and took to the humorists. But he soon found that one cannot laugh indefinitely alone.

By June Louquier was really in a bad way. If he had not tried to be sensible, he would have done much better; but he was busy adorning his personality with an iron will. At that stage of the game an iron will was about as useful to him as the red curtain over the stained−glass window. He ought, in the interests of health and happiness, to have wobbled a little; to have seized on Falstaffian wisdom and run away. His brown face was growing white with his effort. But Louquier was perfectly sincere in not seeing it that way. Remember, too, that his chosen diversion was failing him. A recluse on the banks of the Assiniboine, he had no third acts to divine. His flair disused, became temporarily lost to him, and he found the Winnipeg streets barren of drama. He could not even reconstruct the tragedy of his own charwoman, though obviously every charwoman must have had one. The Scotch gardener was as impenetrable as a Scotch mist. Louquier gave up riding; he gave up his blue−pills; he stuck to his own vine and upas−tree. If he had not always expected to leave Winnipeg in the autumn, I think he would have gone under. But he did not—quite.

By June Louquier was afraid. Up to that time he had not experienced fear; his condition had stopped at acute discomfort. It was very like a bodily ailment, not serious, for which people try home remedies. The home remedies had not worked, but he was not going to a specialist for a malady that seemed to attack him in one spot as much as, and no more than in another. He would, you might say, hardly know whether to choose an aurist or an orthopedist. His broken heart, his indolence, and his iron will combined to keep him passive; and he called it being sensible. Thanks to the girl, flavor had gone out of life like the taste out of honey; it was a thick, insipid glue. It was wearing; it was disagreeable; but it could be borne, since other men had borne it. Then, as I say, fear came.

Louquier was sitting alone in his library—the time was June—trying to read. The charwoman had left a few hours since; the gardener, of course, long before that. Quite suddenly he realized that he had a new fact to reckon with. He laid his book down very softly on the table, rose, by the aid of his iron will, from his chair, and walked slowly across to the corner of the room between the fireplace and the built−in book−shelves. A light chair that stood in his way he moved, first passing his hand across its satin seat. Then he took his stand in the exact corner of the room, facing outward, arms truculently folded. He stood there for about five minutes, his eyes glancing hither and yon. Then he walked back, lugged his easy−chair over by the fireplace and set it with its back to the wall. Before leaving it, he passed his hand carefully down the wall behind it. Then he moved the table, with the lamp, over beside the arm−chair. Thus the chair was hemmed in between the square table on one side and the jutting chimney−breast on the other. Behind it was a windowless wall. Louquier then sat down and took up his book again. He knew as well as if he had seen it with his eyes or heard it with his ears, where the thing was that disturbed him, but he refused to treat it as anything more than a manifestation of impudence. He trusted that by, putting it, as it were, in its place, he could teach it manners—perhaps discourage it final!y. The presence was perceptible to no sense; it flowed from spot to spot as quietly as air; but Louquier knew at any given moment where it was. He knew, too, whether it faced him or turned away; and he was more comfortable when it turned away. He kept his eyes on his book; he turned over pages; he even lighted and smoked a cigarette. He put up a brave front to the beastly thing. All the same, he knew that if it did not go away he should to sit there all night. He was not going to turn his back to it, to pass through the door; and he would not, positively would not (here was the iron will), back out of the room. Besides, if the thing followed him up−stairs, it would be worse. He could not switch on the up−stairs lights from below. It was very curious, how much he seemed to know about the thing—its size, for example, and the measure of its gait as it moved. He had even a vague impression of its shape, though his eye could not detect the faintest alteration in the look of the spot where it so definitely stood. He had as yet no means of knowing whether it was malevolent or not, but he loathed it. Occasionally he looked up from his hook, oriented the presence, and looked directly at it with bored and scornful eyes. That was all he could do—get up again he would not. Nor would he speak to it. He had a curious conviction that that way lay madness. No; he would meet it on its own ground. It moved, and he might move; it directed itself in some unnamable way toward him, and he would stare at it insolently; it occupied its place, and he would defiantly occupy his own. But he would not speak; he would not probe the laws of its being further than itself announced them. The merest visual sign would have been an immense relief to him—a devil with cloven hoof, a ghost draped in white, would have been child's play. Then he could have trusted his eye or his ear; as it was, he had to depend wholly on this nameless sense which placed his enemy for him. That nameless sense must not get blunted. He must keep very wide awake lest his enemy steal a march on him. Above all, he must not pretend to be unaware, and at the same time must pretend not to be frightened. How much intelligence the thing had, of course he did not know. It might be laughing at his bluff, but at least he would keep it up. He hoped he should not grow sleepy. He had long since given up coffee and other stimulants. Louquier had become a man for whom there is absolutely no sense in keeping awake.

After an hour, during, which Louquier turned over just forty pages—he kept careful track of his intervals—the thing departed by the door open into the hall. Louquier felt it go. He had a very pretty problem to face then: whether to follow it or not. If he did not, it meant sitting all night in his library—a great nuisance and a craven act. It would prove to the thing that he was afraid of it, and that would be exceedingly unfortunate. He ought, of course, to pretend that he was tired and wanted to go to bed—and to go. On the other hand, it was going to be a difficult business to blow out the lamp, walk into a dark hall, and mount the dark stairs to his bedroom. True, he could not see the thing, even in the lighted room; but he doubted if, in the dark, he could place it at all. It could be lived with only if it could he placed—delimited, as it were. He would not answer for his perfect conduct if the thing turned out to be lurking in the hall. He had no clue whatever to the intelligence of this besetting presence; but he felt, somehow, that it gauged him by the visual signs he gave. It might, if he stayed there, know that he was afraid of it; still, it might not be clever enough to make that inference. Whereas if he rushed out into the darkness, he could not answer for what he should do—something, very likely, that would show beyond question how terrified he was. He might even blunder into the thing itself, in the dark. He was by no means sure that it was perceptible even to the touch, yet he dreaded the thought of such an impact as though it had been certain death. There was nothing for him to do but stay—though, for all he knew, the thing might already have wandered out into the night. He would not even get up and shut the door. How did he know whether doors were an obstacle to it? And if it should elect to come back, through the closed door, he would be more mocked than ever to say nothing of the sense he would have of being shut in with it, without redress. No, there was nothing for it but for him to stay—and to fend off sleep somehow. If he should drowse and it should return, he would be left to its unclean mercy. Louquier was angry. First, the girl; then the stained−glass and the bitter almonds; then the recognized but unadmitted stupidity of his whole Winnipeg idea; the acute discomfort—and now this.

Louquier got through the night without mischance. Toward dawn he grew so sleepy that nothing but sleep seemed to matter; his stupor blunted all his nerves. He fell asleep in his chair, indeed, and woke up with the streaming light of morning. The room was clear and free; you would never have guessed that anything save the commonplace had inhabited it. Naturally, Louquier took the line of wondering if he had not eaten something that oppressed him; though why boiled lettuce should introduce you to the supernatural—! The memory was vivid, however, and he saw a man about installing electric switches below−stairs—one inside the library door, and one in the hall outside. The business took a day or two, and until it was done Louquier went straight from his dining−room to his bedroom, locked the door, and read there. He did not sleep very well on these nights. For one thing, he was acutely ashamed of being up−stairs behind a locked door; for another, he had a very definite conception—though he had no corroborative "sense" of it—of the thing's ranging about below in unholy and unlawful occupation of his, Louquier's, premises. No man really likes to pull the bedclothes over his head while the burglar is frankly stealing the plate below even though he may wisely choose to do so; and that is precisely what it seemed to Louquier that he was doing. Still he was not going, for any consideration of mere dignity, to risk another encounter until he had guarded his exit with electricity. With the lights properly installed, electric switches marking his natural line of progress from after−dinner coffee to bed, he returned to his habit of spending the evening in the library. The fact that there was nothing he really wanted to read—ergo, no joy to be had in sitting there, anyhow—tipped all his plans and precautions with irony. Still, a man has to assume that his routine—whatever it may be—has an unimpeachable reason for being or he has given up the game completely. Louquier was not ready to destroy his convention and let life depart.

The next fortnight, to Louquier, was a long, cumulative agony. There would be no point in making a diary of it; given the initial facts, psychic and physical, which I have tried to make clear, one has only to let logic deal with the situation. Each day became, in its turn, a new irritation as well as a fresh irritant. Night after night he faced the thing in his library. Its hours of appearing and disappearing differed slightly, from evening to evening; it chose, apparently, not to work like an automaton or a mechanism, but to create to the end its impression of individuality, of volition. It kept its appointment irregularly, as though it had other engagements; but it always kept it.

Of course, in the long irrelevant, sunlit hours, he balanced in his mind the possibilities of the thing's getting at his sanity. But he took his sanity objectively, too. If his body was the citadel that must not crumble, his healthy mind was the garrison within that must, if possible, live on, and live on without surrendering. He did not want to crawl out by any subterranean passage, and then make a hopeless running fight of it. Not he! He stood on his rights; but he stood even more, soldier−fashion, on his counted ammunition and the state of his supplies. You could not truthfully say, however, that the wall was unbreached. There were some nasty little breaks in it here and there—as if the girl, the stained−glass, and the almond−smell, the unaccountable discomfort of all the months, had been spies doing effective work within while awaiting the real coup. Louquier was not, nervously, all that he might have been. Already, after a fortnight, he felt less able to combat the thing. If it had appeared irregularly, so that Louquier could have held it, to any extent, dependent on outside causes—the weather, his digestion, anything—it would have been easier. But whatever else might come or go, and though it chose its precise hour to suit itself, it never failed him "Old Faithful," he jeered silently to himself once. Sometime between dusk and dawn he could be sure of it. In the third week of his siege he began definitely to fear that he could not keep up his bluff much longer. He had a horrid vision of some surrendering gesture—of his speaking to it, or going on his knees to it. He loathed it almost more than he feared it. It seemed a dishonorable enemy for a man to be up against. He would not be treated like a soldier and a gentlemen, if he did surrender.

Then came a night when Louquier walked from dining−room to library, preternaturally grave. He felt so sapped and shrunken that he wasted no gestures in bravado. He let himself walk like a tired man—which he was. He put his tobacco beside him; he piled up his books; he passed his hand over the hollow of the chair before seating himself; he shook the lamp a little to see if there was oil enough to last out the night, if, need be. All that was mere ritual—and how tired he was of it! If the thing would only let up on him for once give him a rest, a chance to revictual himself and bury his dead! This inevitable vigilance was like a cancer, eating daily further into his vital tissue. Should he never again be able to live carelessly, as other men do? In an hour, or two hours, or three, he would look up from his book and be aware of its entrance; would diagnose its actual mood and select his mask accordingly; would go through the same difficult and wearisome ordeal. When, its whim was spent, and it took leave of him, he would go up−stairs to bed. Toward morning he would sleep. He had never shut the door against it, judging that his state of mind would be worse if, to his knowledge, it came through a closed door. He left the portal hospitably open, and it entered like any human through the passage provided. Good God! how bored he was!

He did not have to wait long to−night. It came as early as if it had rushed straight from dinner. Immediately he knew how it placed itself—in a Morris−chair opposite him, beside a French window that led into the garden. There was something jaunty and flippant in its manner. Absurd though it may sound to speak of the thing's manner, it is quite within the facts as Louquier's mind registered them. He was aware, as I have said, of its gait; some stir of the displaced air where it moved informed him. He perceived, though by none of the five senses, mass and coherence in this creature, just as some hitherto useless convolution of his brain registered its temper. It breathed its humor to him to−night in some exact, unnamable way. Louquier leaned his head back and waited. Perhaps it would go early; perhaps it had merely looked in to remind him, and would presently be off, having other Stygian fish to fry. He hoped so, for he was very tired. He even felt drowsiness coming on before its time, and Louquier had no spur to prick him awake. None but fear; and its sharp edge was blunted with much roweling of his own flesh. He closed his eyes occasionally for an instant, as one does to push sleep out with the firm, sudden gesture of opening the eyelids. And at last, in one of those lightning brief intervals, the thing moved toward him. The event was all too quick for Louquier to think, to diagnose afresh its mood. He knew only, as he had never known before, that he must have done with it. He had reached the point known to all of us—though, thank Heaven, in other contexts—when ennui becomes a passion like hatred or blood−lust, when weariness turns from a sigh to a shriek. And with that sense he knew that the enemy was at last in the citadel. His sanity was threatened. He dared wait no longer for its moment. Louquier caught up a light chair that stood near and brought it heavily down on the spot where the thing stood. The slim chair rocked on its broken legs, and sank down in a mass of splinters. For the first time Louquier turned his back on the presence and fled from the room. He did not care; he was not afraid any more as he rushed up the stairs; he was only passionately excited and conscious of relief at having at last acted, in however mad a way. All his sanity had gone into the blow; it was Louquier's protest, the protest of the whole of him, of the integral man, against the sly and foul attack on his integrity. That was what the thing had desired—to resolve his integrity, to riddle his ego, and shred up his very soul; to leave him incapable of saying "I" with conviction. It had wanted to disintegrate Louquier, to smash his singleness into bits, to turn him to a loose agglomeration of mental dust—so that no man again should be able to say, "This is Louquier." Louquier knew as well as any of us that you do not combat the psychic fact with physical weapons, yet the violent gesture had seemed his only way out. Though he could not hope to destroy the thing, he could perhaps prove to it that he was not a mere puddle of fear. Practically, it was as silly as trying to stab a ghost; yet it had counted to Louquier himself. He had no notion that he had hurt the thing, but he had shown that his muscles were still at the service of his hatreds. Just before he rose, he had felt himself going; the,very marrow of his nature oozing away through unguessed channels. By that one gesture the faithful flesh had saved him.

Or, at least, so he thought, standing in his bedroom, erect and panting, facing the door with clenched hands. A trickle of blood across one knuckle elated−him; it showed that he had put forth strength, that the chair had really crashed and splintered under his hands. Within him, the blood pumped through his heart; he felt its healthy, impatient motions through his body. Would the thing rush up the stairs to avenge itself? He did not care. Let it come. It might kill him, but not, now, before he had made his gesture; not before he had let it know how he loathed it, and how little it had mesmerized his spirit. He could at least die a free man, overmatched, but not cowed. For the; first time in months Louquier felt genial, like a man playing an honest part in a world of other men. All the last weeks he had seemed to himself isolated, shamefully as a criminal is isolated, because he is not worthy to associate with others. All the things that had happened to him had seemed chosen and selected for the purpose of showing him that he was small game of a very dirty sort.

Louquier, standing there, triumphant over the unreal, with blood on his knuckles from a smashed and splintered chair, is an absurd figure to the inward eye. He was more like a silly and complacent drunken gentleman than a hero who has fought with the powers of darkness. I am aware of that. But Louquier, to whom, aforetime, a lifted hand or a révérence de la cour could seem, for reasons, an epic gesture, did not see himself in that light. He was conscious only that for the first time since he had said good−by to the girl, he had expressed himself. Hanging the red rep curtain, for example, had been the mere pout of the esthete. Sacking the cook was a weak artificial gesture. But now he walked into his dressing−room and washed the blood—it was only a drop or two—off his knuckle with the beautiful physical simplicity of a navvy. It was an honorable wound; and honorable wounds got in the day's work you stanch as quickly as you can.

Louquier's sense of the presence had never worked, away from it. He did not know whether it remained below or had departed from his house. It had not followed him, and after half an hour he realized that it did not mean to leap to its revenge. he mused a little, strategically. It seemed possible that his enemy, insulted by a mere thing of flesh, might bide its time—wait for him to sleep and then pursue him. He fancied it very angry; so angry, perhaps, that it would not leave his roof before it had struck back. Note that Louquier, on reaffirming his independence, in defying his terror, had no sense whatever of stepping out from under an obsession. The thing was not an obsession; it was real, and it had been—perhaps still was—there. His conception of facts had not been false; his attitude to them, only, had been wrong. He realized, for example, that he must watch until morning, for he still did not wish to be helpless in sleep before his enemy. So far as he knew, the only power that could prevail against it was the sovereign sun. Still the practical man, he made with alert and vivid gestures his preparations for the night: drew an easy−chair under the light, put on a comfortable dressing−gown, set a pitcher of cold water on the table beside him, and took up one of the humorists. Tobacco was not forgotten. It was an hour or more, though, before he either smoked or read; for quite that length of time he waited for a sign. The silence of night ebbed and flowed around him. External sounds—a voice, carriage wheels, the stir of an animal in the shrubbery—fell across it occasionally; but every now and then he would seem to reach some central pool of stillness, and then that sense in him which perceived the presence would be strainingly on its guard. No sign came, however—none at all; and after an hour he relaxed a little and lighted a pipe.

The hours that followed were singularly monotonous. Suspicion, reassurance, false alarms and quick reactions followed one another interminably. Louquier was perfectly sure that something would happen before morning; that his enemy, having perfected its plan, would mount in search of him. Thence resulted a curious ignorance of how time was passing. He had covered his watch with a cushion so as not to hear its ticking, for though the straining of the sense was not listening, it was more like a listening than anything else. The dawn, when it came, was incredible to him; it seemed impossible that the thing should not have struck before fleeing, though the dim light on the waters of the Assiniboine proved to him that he was safe. Louquier, still half−dressed, threw himself on his bed and slept. He dreamed, a chain of dreams, about the girl, and woke jaded.

The disapproving charwoman had set out his breakfast in response to his ring from above−stairs. Louquier went straight to the dining−room and ate. His first cigarette he took outside in the garden; there was time enough, in all conscience, to revisit the battle−field. To him, among the flower−beds, appeared the charwoman, twisting her apron in red, wet hands. She had found the heap of broken wood, and all the self−righteousness of her clan was in arms. She had not touched nothing, so help her; she had looked in with her mop and all, before breakfast, and—she had seen what she had seen. She had not gone in; she had left things as they was for the master to see with his own eyes. Louquier, standing on the threshold of the garden door, his back to the light, realized swiftly that there were three possibilities—to affect not to believe her, to admit that he had done it himself, or to say that it was very curious and perfectly incomprehensible. It does not matter which one he chose, for it is plain to see that with charring easy come by, to say nothing of plenty of places nearer 'ome, and her with three children to leave all day by theirselves—it is plain to see that all three must inevitably have led to the same conclusion. Either she had been called a liar, or Louquier drank, or he couldn't keep other people from playing the monkey with his property. The charwoman, of course, gave notice, to take effect after dinner that evening. Louquier thought for a moment of asking the gardener if he could cook; but what ever the gardener could have cooked, Louquier knew certainly he could not have eaten. Nor would he for the twentieth time consult an employment agency in vain. It was a dog's life, and he wouldn't live it. He would go to a hotel.

You are not to think that Louquier intended even then to run away. He formed, during the day, a somewhat complicated plan. Mingled with the relief of his decision to sleep and eat elsewhere—the charwoman, showing a proper pride to the last, burned everything she cooked for him that day—was the annoyance of realizing that he must also stick by. He must not really leave the house; he must spend much of his day there. Also—and this was most important of all—he must be at his post during the long evening. If the thing returned, it must find him on the spot. His relation to it had become to Louquier the most important present fact of life, the fact he could least ignore. If it did not come—well, after, say, three nights, he might honorably assume that it did not intend to return. Then he could shut up the villa and leave Winnipeg, if he liked. The practical man could no longer insist that he was saving money by living in his own house if he was sleeping and eating at an inn. He could tell the agent that he found it hard to get satisfactory servants; that wouldn't give the house a black eye. The practical man, absolved and justified, could go anywhere he liked, having done, in perfect dignity, with his Winnipeg adventure. You may infer from all this that Louquier was a different man after dealing, in however absurd a way, with his enemy. But he was not precisely different; he had merely, as it were, rearranged the furniture; a number of things had gone into the attic. His mind was in no sense a new house, or even a refurnished one. To prove this, I have only to tell you that Louquier felt his enemy, if anything more actual, more dangerous, than during the long vigil in his bedroom the night before. It had not perished. Was a mock−Sheraton chair ever known to destroy an elemental being? The fact that it had delayed its revenge seemed to Louquier significant and appalling, and reinforced his conception of it as a creature of complicated intelligence. It was not a mere evil impulse itself in windy, ungoverned ways. It could control itself, hold off, plan—achieve, probably. It is no exaggeration to say that Louquier looked forward to the evening as being very probably fatal to him. If his will had not already been made, he would, I fancy, have made it that day. You are to realize that Louquier did not feel himself strong; he only felt himself decent. He had hit back and proved himself normal. What gesture he should find to meet it with again, he did not know—perhaps none. For that matter, it might bring seven other devils with it when it came again. Louquier was very tired, and his domestic arrangements and disarrangements did not make him less so. At the end of the afternoon he flung himself down in his hotel bedroom and slept, waking only in time for a late and hasty dinner. He dressed for dinner, too, which cut his margin down. As he got into a cab and gave his own address to the driver, he had all the sense of being late for an important engagement. He distinctly wanted to be first on the ground. Besides, he had to light up the house and fling open the windows—to say nothing of arranging the library, as usual, for the encounter.

First on the ground he was. He had plenty of time to make his preparations to the last detail. He was more tired than he remembered having been at all; but he had taken coffee and did not fear sleep. He thought with irritation of the tourist crowd he had left in the hotel—a mob with suit−cases, ready to go on to Banff and Lake Louise. They had been very irrelevant to his own situation—or was he merely irrelevant to theirs? Sitting in his library, he recalled their fantastic hats and voices. Suppose he had kidnapped one or two of them, and chucked them into his library there above the Assiniboine! He felt injured; he almost wished he could have.

The evening lengthened; and still Louquier sat there, back against the wall, flimsily barricaded as usual. The thing was late, very late. Ten o'clock, and still it had not come. He read a little, or pretended to, then at last lit a cigarette. And as if the striking of the match had been a signal, his enemy entered. Louquier's heart sank; he knew then that all day, beneath his certainty, he had nursed a frail hope that it would not return; that it had had enough of him. Just as always, his sense placed it for him, showed him here it moved and how it felt. It moved haltingly, jerking from corner to corner, as if the anger in his famous gesture had maimed it. But it did not sit down. It moved about the room in odd curves and tangents, limping ever a little nearer to Louquier. Louquier could not stir; he could not even, this time, rise. Never had the thing so concentrated its emotion on him; it focused him as with straight glances from its invisible eyes. He had not dreamed that he, that any man, could be hated like that. The thing was hate, as God is love. It came swerving toward him like a drunken doom. Louquier sat braced in his chair, his right hand, with the lighted cigarette, shaking. There was no redress for this; the thing had stripped itself of manner and of all hypocrisy. It was coming; it was on him. Intenser than a physical touch, it covered him, pushing him back against the cushions until the chair strained and it creaked. His head bent backward over the rim of the chair—his neck felt like to break. Had it been human, its breath would have suffocated him, so close was its invisible countenance to his. He could not move his legs or feet, or his left arm, but his right elbow, pushed out across the wideish arm of the char, had a little margin still. He drove his elbow out farther, then strained up a tense forearm and dug the lighted cigarette into the air directly in front of his own face. So complete was his consciousness of this terrible imponderable thing that he expected it to feel pain. He held the cigarette there implacably, not three inches from his own nose. In about ten seconds the lighted end went out. Yet he held it there, as if the dead cigarette could still brand his enemy. Slowly, very slowly, he got the sense of the thing's slipping from him, of its weakly pulling away. It seemed to withdraw, a loose and diminished being, out into the room. He could lift his head again; he could lean forward, could stir his legs and feet. It was still there, but its hatred seemed weaker, like the hatred of a sick man. Louquier's eyes never left it, but he threw away the cigarette stub and reached out to the box at his left for another, which he lighted and began to smoke. His neck and ached shockingly, and he was limp from the pressure of his antagonist—that curious, weightless pressure on his body, as of air on the lungs. As he smoked, he watched it. It drew farther and farther away, proceeding now with indecision, different indeed from the angry lurches by which it had approached him. It seemed vaguer, weaker, almost helpless. For an instant it seemed to Louquier that the thing was groping for the door and could not find it—as if he had blinded it. Then it disappeared utterly, flowing aimlessly, feebly, across the threshold. He was aware of it to the last—knowing even the moment of its crossing the threshold and, the instant when there was no vestige left of it.

For a half−hour Louquier sat on in his library, smoking but not pretending to read. The thing would not come back that night, he knew; it had gone with all the gestures of defeat. He left the house then, though he took the precaution of leaving the light in the hall to burn on until daylight. He wanted no ambushes. Walking through the garden to the street was perhaps the worst moment Louquier had ever had, for the night was at his back. Safe in his bed at the hotel; he fell instantly asleep, and did not wake until the sun was high.

Louquier had been tired many times in Winnipeg—during the last month almost continuously so. But his weariness on this day was such a weariness of the body as he had not hitherto known. He felt sick, as if he had drunk deep the night before; he had all the sensations of recovering from orgy. His face in the mirror frightened him. Positively, it was a marvel that he had stood out against his enemy as he had. He had a desperate desire to send the keys to his agent and to fling himself into a train; but after a day of conflict, during which all his food tasted fever−soaked, and his feet seemed cunningly wrapped in lead, he decided that he must go back once more to Wellington Crescent. After that, he would be free. Louquier's ardor had ebbed; the magnificent physical rage that had enabled him to smash the chair down upon his enemy, and then rush past it up the stairs, even the tense and quiet determination with which he had pushed the lighted cigarette into its face, were gone. He was very clear as to what had happened. The thing had nearly had him; his mind was just on the point of surrendering before its advance, and the stupid, loyal flesh had stepped in and saved him. Twice his arm had been lifted, by no conscious volition of his own, when his brain had accepted defeat. What he had feared the first time was madness; the second time he had feared only death. Still, even from that lesser catastrophe it was his body that had defended him, and with no orders from him. The body had done enough; he ought to give it rest, let its noble instincts relax and recuperate. Suppose he went again: would it not be too much to ask of the taxed flesh? He had no reason to suppose that if he spent another evening in his unloved library, anything whatever would "happen." He fancied the thing was tired of the game. Yet he could not promise that; and he knew that, should it reappear, he could not combat it with mind alone. Never, for example, could he focus his weary emotions sufficiently to meet its hatred with like hatred—if, indeed, anything human could. This thing carried no useless baggage; it could give itself entirely to its business of hating; and its capacity was one of the well−kept secrets of the universe. No; if he met it again, he would have simply to hope that his body would make another effort. He had done nothing, really, except register his attitude to the presence; but that only his body had been capable of doing. He had expressed himself to it only in two wild, instinctive gestures. Would there be strength enough there for another, if another were needed? How could he go?

Yet, in the end, Louquier went. He could never have done with the enemy until he had passed an evening in his library unvisited by it. He longed passionately to ask someone to go with him. A bell−boy from the hotel would do. But he knew such an evening would be no test. He ordered a cab to come for him at eleven, and told the driver not to ring the bell, but to whistle outside. When he reached the gate, it seemed to him that he could not enter; but something—the rusted remnant of his iron will, perhaps—carried him in. In his pocket he had a loaded pistol—a quaint notion, which none the less gave him some comfort. Completely uncorporeal as the thing was, it seemed to understand his motions. He could not speak to it; his silent spirit could not communicate with its silence; he could make it know what he felt about it, apparently, only by the gestures of some low fellow in a rage. Oh, it was a vulgar beast!

Pistol cocked in his hand, Louquier sat through his first half−hour, waiting. There was no sign of its approach. Then, little by little, he became aware that it was not going to come. So slowly did this assurance gain on him that he knew it only as a deepening peace, gradual as the long Northern twilight. The room was splendidly empty of the presence—empty of it to all eternity. He could fling his keys at the agent, and take a train to−morrow. He had the definite sense of having crossed something; of being on the other side of a gulf; of having emerged from a region of horror and having left a big neutral space between it and him. It even came over him as he sat there, healthily lulled, that he had, without knowing it, experienced a third act of his own. Louquier's enemy was at last, for him, behind foot−lights. He had got his grip, and could now deal with the episode as drama. It "composed" for him: clear proof that he was blessedly outside it; and that he was again (as it had intended he never should be) Louquier. His weariness became pleasant, turned to a velvet drowsiness. Not once, since the girl had rejected him, had he known such peace. He could almost, with half−shut eyes, envisage a future—a happy future that he could build with patience and delight. Louquier drowsed, sunk in his chair. He knew now that it would not come, and he felt safe as a child in its cradle. He was too dog−tired to mind the discomfort of his position. Presently he slept profoundly, his head on his curled arm.

The cabman's whistle sounded in the late evening and Louquier came up through layers of sleep to greet it. In that waking instant before the pattern of life is wholly clear, he jumped, startled. His cramped, unconscious, fingers closed tight on the trigger of the pistol, and he fired, as neatly as if he had meant to. Louquier was even spared the knowledge of what he had done, for the bullet, knowing what it was made for and knowing nothing else, went straight. For he had won his moral victory; and there was nothing left his baffled enemy but to stoop to physical accident. At last the impatient cabman's ring peeled through the house, but no one answered it.