**THE SILHOUETTES**

**By A. T. QUILLER-COUCH**

The small round gentleman who had come all the way to Gantick village from the extreme south of France, and had blown his flageolet all day in Gantick street without exciting its population in the least, was disgusted. Toward dusk he crossed the stile which divides Sanctuary Lane from the churchyard and pausing, with a leg on each side of the bar, shook his fist back at the village, which lay below, its gray roofs and red chimneys just distinguishable here and there, between a foamy sea of apple-blossom and a haze of bluish smoke. He could not very well shake its dust off his feet, for this was hardly separable from the dust of many other places on his boots, and also it was mostly mud. But his gesture betokened extreme malevolence.

"These Cor-rnishmen," he said, "are pigs all. There is not a Cor-rnishman that is not a big pig."

He lifted the second leg wearily over the bar.

"As for Art—phit! Moreover, they shut up their churches."

This was really a serious matter for he had not a penny-piece in his pocket, the last had gone to buy a loaf—and there was no lodging to be had in the village. The month was April, a bad time to sleep in the open; and though the night drew in tranquilly upon a day of broad sunshine, the earth had by no means sucked in the late heavy rains. The church-porch, however, had a broad bench on either side and faced the south, away from the prevailing wind. He had made a mental note of this early in the day, being schooled to anticipate such straits as the present. As he passed up the narrow path between the graves, with a gait like a limping hare's, he scanned his surroundings carefully.

The churchyard was narrow and surrounded by a high gray wall, mostly hidden by an inner belt of well-grown cypresses. At one point the ranks of these trees were broken for some forty feet, and here the back of a small dwelling-house abutted on the cemetery. There was one window only in the yellow-washed wall, and this window looked straight on the church-porch. The flageolet-player regarded it with suspicion; but the casement was shut and the blind drawn down. The aspect of the cottage, too, proclaimed that its inhabitants were very poor folk—not at all the sort to tell tales upon a casual tramp if they spied him bivouacking upon holy ground.

He limped into the porch and cast off the blue bag that was strapped upon his shoulders. Out of it he drew a sheep's-wool cape, worn very thin, and then turned the bag inside out, on the chance of discovering a forgotten crust. The search disappointed him, but he took it calmly—being on the whole a sweet-tempered man and not easily angered, except by an affront to his vanity. His violent indignation against the people of Gantick arose from their indifference to his playing. Had they even run out at their doors to listen and stare, he would not have minded their stinginess.

He that cannot eat had best sleep. The little man passed the flat of his hand, in the dusky light, over the two benches, and having chosen the one with fewest asperities on its surface, tossed his bag and flageolet upon the other, pulled off his boots, folded his cape to make a pillow, and stretched himself at length. In less than ten minutes he was sleeping dreamlessly.

Over his head there hung a board containing a list or two of the parish ratepayers, and the usual notice of the spring training of the Royal Cornwall Rangers' militia. This last placard had broken from two of its fastenings, and, toward midnight was rustled by an eddy of the light wind so loudly as to wake the sleeper.

He sat upright and lowered his bare feet upon the pavement. Outside, the blue firmament was full of stars, sparkling unevenly, as though the wind was trying in sport to extinguish them. In the eaves of the porch he could hear the martins rustling in the crevices that they had come back, but a few days since, to warm again. But what drew the man to the entrance was the window in the cottage over the wall.

The lattice was pushed back and the room inside was brightly lit. But a white sheet had been stretched right across the window between him and the lamp. And on this sheet two quick hands were waving all kinds of clever shadows, shaping them, moving them and reshaping them with the speed of lightning.

It was certainly a remarkable performance. The shadows took the form of rabbits, swans, foxes, elephants, fairies, sailors with wooden legs, old women who smoked pipes, ballet-girls who pirouetted, twirling harlequins and the profiles of eminent statesmen—and all made with two hands and, at the most, the help of a tiny stick or piece of string. They danced and capered, grew large and then small, with such odd turns and changes that the flageolet-player could hardly hold his laughter. He remarked that the hands, whenever they were disentwined for a moment, appeared to be very small and plump.

After about ten minutes the display ceased and the shadow of a woman's head and neck crossed the sheet, which was presently drawn back at one corner.

"Is that any better?" asked a woman's voice, low but distinct.

The flageolet-player started and bent his eyes lower across the graves and into the shadow beneath the window. For the first time he grew aware that a figure stood there, a little way out from the wall. As well as he could see, it was a young boy.

"That was beautiful, mother. You can't think how you've improved at it this week."

"Any mistakes?"

"The harlequin and columbine seemed a little stiff; but that's the hardest of all, I know."

"Never mind; they've got to be perfect. We'll try them again."

She was about to drop the corner of the sheet when the listener sprang out toward the window, leaping with bare feet over the graves and waving his flageolet madly.

"Ah, no—no, madame!" he cried. "Wait one moment, the tiniest, and I shall inspire you!"

"Whoever is that?" cried the voice at the window, rising almost to a scream.

The youth beneath the wall faced round on the intruder. He had turned white and wanted to run, but mastered his voice to inquire gruffly:

"Who the devil are you?"

"I? I am an artist, and as such I salute madame and monsieur, her son. She is greater artist than I, but I shall help her. Her harlequin and columbine shall dance better this time. Why? Because they shall dance to my music, the music that I shall make, here, on this spot, under the stars. I shall play as if possessed—I feel that. I bet you. It is because I have found an artist—an artist in Gantick! O—my—good—Lor!"

He had pulled off his greasy hat, and stood bowing and smiling, showing his white teeth, and holding up his flageolet for the woman to see and convince herself.

"That's all very well," said the boy: "but my mother doesn't want it known yet that she practices, at these shadows."

"Ha? It is perhaps forbidden by law."

"Since you have found us out, sir," said the woman, "I will tell you why we are behaving like this, and trust you to tell nobody. I have been left a widow, in great poverty and with this one son, who must be educated as well as his father was. Six months ago, when sadly perplexed, I found out by chance that this small gift of mine might earn me a good income at a—a music hall. Richard, of course, doesn't like my performing at such places, but agrees with me that he must be educated. So we are hiding it from everybody in the village, because we have always been respected here; and, as soon as I have practiced enough, we mean to travel up to London. Of course I shall change my name, and nobody will——"

But the flageolet-player sat suddenly down upon a grave and broke into hysterical laughter.

"Oh—oh—oh! Quick, madame! dance your pretty figures while yet I laugh and before I curse. O stars and planets, look down on this mad world and help me play! And, O monsieur, pardon me if I laugh; for that either you or I are mad is a cock-sure. Dance, madame——"

He put the flageolet to his lips and blew. In a moment or two harlequin and columbine appeared on the screen and began to caper nimbly, naturally, with the wildest grace. The tune was a merry reel and soon began to inspire the performer above. Her small dancers in a twinkling turned into a gamboling elephant, then to a couple of tripping fairies. A moment after, they were flower and butterfly, then a jigging donkey; then harlequin and columbine again. With each fantastic change the tune quickened and the dance grew wilder, till, tired out, the woman spread her hands wide against the sheet, as if imploring mercy.

The player tossed his flageolet over a headstone and rolled back on the grave in a paroxysm of laughter. Above him the rooks had poured out of their nests and were calling to each other.

"Monsieur," he gasped at last, sitting up and wiping his eyes, "was it good this time?"

"It was quite different, I'll own."

"Then could you spare from the house one little crust of bread? For I am famished."

The youth returned, in a couple of minutes, with some bread and cold bacon.

"Of course," he said, "if you should meet either of us in the village to-morrow you will not recognize us."

The little man bowed. "I agree," said he, "with your mother, monsieur, that you must be educated at all costs."

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