

# The Cigarette Case

By Oliver Onions

“A cigarette, Loder?” I said, offering my case. For the moment Loder was not smoking; for long enough he had not been talking.

“Thanks,” he replied, taking not only the cigarette, but the case also. The others went on talking; Loder became silent again; but I noticed that he kept my cigarette case in his hand, and looked at it from time to time with an interest that neither its design nor its costliness seemed to explain. Presently I caught his eye.

“A pretty case,” he remarked, putting it down on the table. “I once had one exactly like it.”

I answered that they were in every shop window. “Oh yes,” he said, putting aside any question of rarity. . . . “I lost mine.”

“Oh? . . .”

He laughed. “Oh, that’s all right—I got it back again—don’t be afraid I’m going to claim yours. But the way I lost it—found it—the whole thing—was rather curious. I’ve never been able to explain it. I wonder if you could?”

I answered that I certainly couldn’t till I’d heard it, whereupon Loder, taking up the silver case again and holding it in his hand as he talked, began:

“This happened in Provence, when I was about as old as Marsham there—and every bit as romantic. I was there with Carroll—you remember poor old Carroll and what a blade of a boy he was—as romantic as four Marshams rolled into one. (Excuse me, Marsham, won’t you? It’s a romantic tale, you see, or at least the setting is.) . . . We were in Provence, Carroll and I; twenty-four or thereabouts; romantic, as I say; and—and this happened.

“And it happened on the top of a whole lot of other things, you must understand, the things that do happen when you’re twenty-four. If it hadn’t been Provence, it would have been somewhere else, I suppose, nearly, if not quite as good; but this was Provence, that smells (as you might say) of twenty-four as it smells of argelasse and wild lavender and broom. . . .”

“We’d had the dickens of a walk of it, just with knapsacks—had started somewhere in the Ardèche and tramped south through the vines and almonds and olives—Montélimar, Orange, Avignon, and a fortnight at that blanched skeleton of a town, Les Baux. We’d nothing to do, and had gone just where we liked, or rather just where Carroll had liked; and Carroll had had the *De Bello Gallico* in his pocket, and had had a notion, I fancy, of taking in the whole ground of the Roman conquest—I remember he lugged me off to some place or other, Pourrières I believe its name was, because—I forget how many thousands—were killed in a river-bed there, and they stove in the water-casks so that if the men wanted water they’d have to go forward and fight for it. And then we’d gone on to Aries, where Carroll had fallen in love with everything that had a bow of black velvet in her hair, and after that Tarascon, Nîmes, and so on, the usual round—I won’t bother you with that. In a word, we’d had two months of it, eating almonds and apricots from the trees, watching the women at the communal washing-fountains under the dark plane-trees, singing *Magali* and the *Qué Cantes*, and Carroll yarning away all the time about Cæsar and Vercingetorix and Dante, and trying to learn Provençal so that he could read the stuff in the *Journal des Félibriges* that he’d never have looked at if it had been in English. . . .”

“Well, we got to Darbisson. We’d run across some young chap or other—Rangon his name was—who was a vine-planter in those parts, and Rangon had asked us to spend a couple of days

with him, with him and his mother, if we happened to be in the neighbourhood. So as we might as well happen to be there as anywhere else, we sent him a postcard and went. This would be in June or early in July. All day we walked across a plain of vines, past hurdles of wattled *cannes* and great wind-screens of velvety cypresses, sixty feet high, all white with dust on the north side of 'em, for the mistral was having its three-days' revel, and it whistled and roared through the *cannes* till scores of yards of 'em at a time were bowed nearly to the earth. A roaring day it was, I remember. . . . But the wind fell a little late in the afternoon, and we were poring over what it had left of our Ordnance Survey—like fools, we'd got the unmounted paper maps instead of the linen ones—when Rangon himself found us, coming out to meet us in a very badly turned-out trap. He drove us back himself, through Darbisson, to the house, a mile and a half beyond it, where he lived with his mother.

“He spoke no English, Rangon didn't, though, of course, both French and Provençal; and as he drove us, there was Carroll, using him as a Franco-Provençal dictionary, peppering him with questions about the names of things in the patois—I beg its pardon, the language—though there's a good deal of my eye and Betty Martin about that, and I fancy this Félibrige business will be in a good many pieces when Frédéric Mistral is under that Court-of-Love pavilion arrangement he's had put up for himself in the graveyard at Maillanne. If the language has got to go, well, it's got to go, I suppose; and while I personally don't want to give it a kick, I rather sympathise with the Government. Those jaunts of a Sunday out to Les Baux, for instance, with paper lanterns and Bengal fire and a fellow spouting *O blanche Venus d'Arles*—they're well enough, and compare favourably with our Bank Holidays and Sunday League picnics, but . . . but that's nothing to do with my tale after all. . . . So he drove on, and by the time we got to Rangon's house Carroll had learned the greater part of *Magali*. . . .

“As you, no doubt, know, it's a restricted sort of life in some respects that a young *vigneron* lives in those parts, and it was as we reached the house that Rangon remembered something—or he might have been trying to tell us as we came along for all I know, and not been able to get a word in edgeways for Carroll and his Provençal. It seemed that his mother was away from home for some days—apologies of the most profound, of course; our host was the soul of courtesy, though he did try to get at us a bit later. . . . We expressed our polite regrets, naturally; but I didn't quite see at first what difference it made. I only began to see when Rangon, with more apologies, told us that we should have to go back to Darbisson for dinner. It appeared that when Madame Rangon went away for a few days she dispersed the whole of the female side of her establishment also, and she'd left her son with nobody to look after him except an old man we'd seen in the yard mending one of these doublecylindered sulphur-sprinklers they clap across the horse's back and drive between the rows of vines. . . . Rangon explained all this as we stood in the hall drinking an *apéritif*—a hall crowded with oak furniture and photographs and a cradle-like bread-crib and doors opening to right and left to the other rooms of the ground floor. He had also, it seemed, to ask us to be so infinitely obliging as to excuse him for one hour after dinner—our postcard had come unexpectedly, he said, and already he had made an appointment with his agent about the *vendange* for the coming autumn. . . . We, begged him, of course, not to allow us to interfere with his business in the slightest degree. He thanked us a thousand times.

“ ‘But though we dine in the village, we will take our own wine with us,’ he said, ‘a wine *surfin*—one of my wines—you shall see—’

“Then he showed us round his place—I forget how many hundreds of acres of vines, and into the great building with the presses and pumps and casks and the huge barrel they call the thunderbolt—and about seven o'clock we walked back to Darbisson to dinner, carrying our wine

with us. I think the restaurant we dined in was the only one in the place, and our gaillard of a host—he was a straight-backed, well-set-up chap, with rather fine eyes—did us on the whole pretty well. His wine certainly was good stuff, and set our tongues going. . . .

“A moment ago I said a fellow like Rangon leads a restricted sort of life in those parts. I saw this more clearly as dinner went on. We dined by an open window, from which we could see the stream with the planks across it where the women washed clothes during the day and assembled in the evening for gossip. There were a dozen or so of them there as we dined, laughing and chatting in low tones—they all seemed pretty—it was quickly, falling dusk—all the girls are pretty then, and are quite conscious of it—you know, Marsham. Behind them, at the end of the street, one of these great cypress wind-screens showed black against the sky, a ragged edge something like the line the needle draws on a rainfall chart; and you could only tell whether they were men or women under the plantains by their voices rippling and chattering and suddenly a deeper note. . . . Once I heard a muffled scuffle and a sound like a kiss. . . . It was then that Rangon’s little trouble came out. . . .

“It seemed that he didn’t know any girls—wasn’t allowed to know any girls. The girls of the village were pretty enough, but you see how it was—he’d a position to keep up—appearances to maintain—couldn’t be familiar during the year with the girls who gathered his grapes for him in the autumn. . . . And as soon as Carroll gave him a chance, *he* began to ask *us* questions, about England, English girls, the liberty they had, and so on.

“Of course, we couldn’t tell him much he hadn’t heard already, but that made no difference; he could stand any amount of that, our strapping young *vigneron*; and he asked us questions by the dozen, that we both tried to answer at once. And his delight and envy! . . . What! In England did the young men see the young women of their own class without restraint—the sisters of their friends *même*—even at the house? Was it permitted that they drank tea with them in the afternoon, or went without invitation to pass the *soirée*? . . . He had all the later Prévosts in his room, he told us (I don’t doubt he had the earlier ones also); Prévost and the Disestablishment between them must be playing the mischief with the convent system of education for young girls; and our young man was—what d’you call it?—‘Co-ed’—co-educationalist—by Jove, yes! . . . He seemed to marvel that we should have left a country so blessed as England to visit his dusty, wild-lavender-smelling, girl-less Provence. . . . You don’t know half your luck, Marsham.

“Well, we talked after this fashion—we’d left the dining-room of the restaurant and had planted ourselves on a bench outside with Rangon between us—when Rangon suddenly looked at his watch and said it was time he was off to see this agent of his. Would we take a walk, he asked us, and meet him again there? he said. . . . But as his agent lived in the direction of his own home, we said we’d meet him at the house in an hour or so. Off he went, envying every Englishman who stepped, I don’t doubt. . . . I told you how old—how young—we were. . . . Heigho! . . .

“Well, off goes Rangon, and Carroll and I got up, stretched ourselves, and took a walk. We walked a mile or so, until it began to get pretty dark, and then turned; and it was as we came into the blackness of one of these cypress hedges that the thing I’m telling you of happened. The hedge took a sharp turn at that point; as we came round the angle we saw a couple of women’s figures hardly more than twenty yards ahead—don’t know how they got there so suddenly, I’m sure; and that same moment I found my foot on something small and white and glimmering on the grass.

“I picked it up. It was a handkerchief—a woman’s—embroidered—

“The two figures ahead of us were walking in our direction; there was every probability that the handkerchief belonged to one of them; so we stepped out. . . .

“At my ‘Pardon, madame,’ and lifted hat one of the figures turned her head; then, to my surprise, she spoke in English-cultivated English. I held out the handkerchief. It belonged to the elder lady of the two, the one who had spoken, a very gentle-voiced old lady, older by very many years than her companion. She took the handkerchief and thanked me. . . .

“Somebody—Sterne, isn’t it?—says that Englishmen don’t travel to see Englishmen. I don’t know whether he’d stand to that in the case of Englishwomen; Carroll and I didn’t. . . . We were walking rather slowly along, four abreast across the road; we asked permission to introduce ourselves, did so, and received some name in return which, strangely enough, I’ve entirely forgotten—I only remember that the ladies were aunt and niece, and lived at Darbisson. They shook their heads when I mentioned M. Rangon’s name and said we were visiting him. They didn’t know him. . . .

“I’d never been in Darbisson before, and I haven’t been since, so I don’t know the map of the village very well. But the place isn’t very big, and the house at which we stopped in twenty minutes or so is probably there yet. It had a large double door—a double door in two senses, for it was a big *porte-cochère* with a smaller door inside it, and an iron grille shutting in the whole. The gentle-voiced old lady had already taken a key from her reticule and was thanking us again for the little service of the handkerchief; then, with the little gesture one makes when one has found oneself on the point of omitting a courtesy, she gave a little musical laugh.

“‘But,’ she said with a little movement of invitation, ‘one sees so few compatriots here—if you have the time to come in and smoke a cigarette . . . also the cigarette,’ she added, with another rippling laugh, ‘for we have few callers, and live alone—’

“Hastily as I was about to accept, Carroll was before me, professing a nostalgia for the sound of the English tongue that made his recent protestations about Provençal a shameless hypocrisy. Persuasive young rascal, Carroll was—poor chap. . . . So the elder lady opened the grille and the wooden door beyond it, and we entered.

“By the light of the candle which the younger lady took from a bracket just within the door we saw that we were in a handsome hall or vestibule; and my wonder that Rangon had made no mention of what was apparently a considerable establishment was increased by the fact that its tenants must be known to be English and could be seen to be entirely charming. I couldn’t understand it, and I’m afraid hypotheses rushed into my head that cast doubts on the Rangons—you know—whether *they* were all right. We knew nothing about our young planter, you see. . . .

“I looked about me. There were tubs here and there against the walls, gaily painted, with glossy-leaved aloes and palms in them—one of the aloes, I remember, was flowering; a little fountain in the middle made a tinkling noise; we put our caps on a carved and gilt console table; and before us rose a broad staircase with shallow steps of spotless stone and a beautiful wrought-iron handrail. At the top of the staircase were more palms and aloes, and double doors painted in a clear grey.

“We followed our hostesses up the staircase. I can hear yet the sharp clean click our boots made on that hard shiny stone—see the lights of the candle gleaming on the handrail. . . . The young girl—she was not much more than a girl—pushed at the doors, and we went in.

“The room we entered was all of a piece with the rest for rather old-fashioned fineness. It was large, lofty, beautifully kept. Carroll went round for Miss . . . whatever her name was . . . lighting candles in sconces; and as the flames crept up they glimmered on a beautifully polished floor, which was bare except for an Eastern rug here and there. The elder lady had sat down in a gilt

chair, Louis Fourteenth I should say, with a striped rep of the colour of a petunia; and I really don't know—don't smile, Smith—what induced me to lead her to it by the finger-tips, bending over her hand for a moment as she sat down. There was an old tambour-frame behind her chair, I remember, and a vast oval mirror with clustered candle-brackets filled the greater part of the farther wall, the brightest and clearest glass I've ever seen. . . .”

He paused, looking at my cigarette case, which he had taken into his hand again. He smiled at some recollection or other, and it was a minute or so before he continued.

“I must admit that I found it a little annoying, after what we'd been talking about at dinner an hour before, that Rangon wasn't with us. I still couldn't understand how he could have neighbours so charming without knowing about them, but I didn't care to insist on this to the old lady, who for all I knew might have her own reasons for keeping to herself. And, after all, it was our place to return Rangon's hospitality in London if he ever came there, not, so to speak, on his own doorstep. . . . So presently I forgot all about Rangon, and I'm pretty sure that Carroll, who was talking to his companion of some Félibrige junketing or other and having the air of Gounod's *Mireille* hummed softly over to him, didn't waste a thought on him either. Soon Carroll—you remember what a pretty crooning, humming voice he had—soon Carroll was murmuring what they call 'seconds,' but so low that the sound hardly came across the room; and I came in with a soft bass note from time to time. No instrument, you know; just an unaccompanied murmur no louder than an Æolian harp; and it sounded infinitely sweet and plaintive and—what shall I say?—weak—attenuated—faint—'pale' you might almost say—in that formal, rather old-fashioned *salon*, with that great clear oval mirror throwing back the still flames of the candles in the sconces on the walls. Outside the wind had now fallen completely; all was very quiet; and suddenly in a voice not much louder than a sigh, Carroll's companion was singing *Oft in the Stilly Night*—you know it. . . .”

He broke off again to murmur the beginning of the air. Then, with a little laugh for which we saw no reason, he went on again:

“Well, I'm not going to try to convince you of such a special and delicate thing as the charm of that hour—it wasn't more than an hour—it would be all about an hour we stayed. Things like that just have to be said and left; you destroy them the moment you begin to insist on them; we've every one of us bad experiences like that, and don't say much about them. I was as much in love with my old lady as Carroll evidently was with his young one—I can't tell you why—being in love has just to be taken for granted too, I suppose . . . Marsham understands . . . We smoked our cigarettes, and sang again, once more filling that clear-painted, quiet apartment with a murmuring no louder than if a light breeze found that the bells of a bed of flowers were really bells and played on 'em. The old lady moved her fingers gently on the round table by the side of her chair . . . oh, infinitely pretty it was. . .

Then Carroll wandered off into the *Qué Cantes*—awfully pretty—'It is not for myself I sing, but for my friend who is near me'—and I can't tell you how like four old friends we were, those two so oddly met ladies and Carroll and myself. . . . And so to *Oft in the Stilly Night* again.

“But for all the sweetness and the glamour of it, we couldn't stay on indefinitely, and I wondered what time it was, but didn't ask—anything to do with clocks and watches would have seemed a cold and mechanical sort of thing just then. . . . And when presently we both got up neither Carroll nor I asked to be allowed to call again in the morning to thank them for a charming hour. . . . And they seemed to feel the same as we did about it. There was no 'hoping that we should meet again in London'—neither an *au revoir* nor a good-bye—just a tacit understanding that that hour should remain isolated, accepted like a good gift without looking the

gift-horse in the mouth, single, unattached to any hours before or after—I don't know whether you see what I mean. . . . Give me a match somebody. . . .

“And so we left, with no more than looks exchanged and finger-tips resting between the back of our hands and our lips for a moment. We found our way out by ourselves, down that shallow-stepped staircase with the handsome handrail, and let ourselves out of the double door and grille, closing it softly. We made for the village without speaking a word. . . . Heigho! . . .”

Loder had picked up the cigarette case again, but for all the way his eyes rested on it I doubt whether he really saw it. I'm pretty sure he didn't; I knew when he did by the glance he shot at me, as much as to say “I see you're wondering where the cigarette case comes in.” . . . He resumed with another little laugh.

“Well,” he continued, “we got back to Rangon's house. I really don't blame Rangon for the way he took it when we told him, you know—he thought we were pulling his leg, of course, and he wasn't having any; not he! There were no English ladies in Darbisson, he said. . . . We told him as nearly as we could just where the house was—we weren't very precise, I'm afraid, for the village had been in darkness as we had come through it, and I had to admit that the cypress hedge I tried to describe where we'd met our friends was a good deal like other cypress hedges—and, as I say, Rangon wasn't taking any. I myself was rather annoyed that he should think we were returning his hospitality by trying to get at him, and it wasn't very easy either to explain in my French and Carroll's Provençal that we were going to let the thing stand as it was and weren't going to call on our charming friends again. . . . The end of it was that Rangon just laughed and yawned. . . .

“‘I knew it was good, my wine,’ he said, ‘but—’ a shrug said the rest. ‘Not so good as all that,’ he meant. . . .

“Then he gave us our candles, showed us to our rooms, shook hands, and marched off to his own room and the Prévosts.

“I dreamed of my old lady half the night.

“After coffee the next morning I put my hand into my pocket for my cigarette case and didn't find it. I went through all my pockets, and then I asked Carroll if he'd got it.

“‘No,’ he replied. . . . ‘Think you left it behind at that place last night?’

“‘Yes; did you?’ Rangon popped in with a twinkle.

“I went through all my pockets again. No cigarette case. . . .

“Of course, it was possible that I'd left it behind, and I was annoyed again. I didn't want to go back, you see. . . . But, on the other hand, I didn't want to lose the case—it was a present—and Rangon's smile nettled me a good deal, too. It was both a challenge to our truthfulness and a testimonial to that very good wine of his. . . .

“‘Might have done,’ I grunted. . . . ‘Well, in that case we'll go and get it.’

“‘If one tried the restaurant first—?’ Rangon suggested, smiling again.

“‘By all means,’ said I stuffily, though I remembered having the case after we'd left the restaurant.

“We were round at the restaurant by half-past nine. The case wasn't there. I'd known jolly well beforehand it wasn't, and I saw Rangon's mouth twitching with amusement.

“‘So we now seek the abode of these English ladies, *hein?*’ he said.

“‘Yes,’ said I; and we left the restaurant and strode through the village by the way we'd taken the evening before. . . .

“That *vigneron's* smile became more and more irritating to me. . . . ‘It is then the *next* village?’ he said presently, as we left the last house and came out into the open plain.

“We went back. . . .

“I was irritated because we were two to one, you see, and Carroll backed me up. ‘A double door, with a grille in front of it,’ he repeated for the fiftieth time. . . . Rangon merely replied that it wasn’t our good faith he doubted. He didn’t actually use the word ‘drunk.’

“‘*Mais tiens,*’ he said suddenly, trying to conceal his mirth. ‘*Si c’est possible . . . si c’est possible . . .* a double door with a grille? But perhaps that I know it, the domicile of these so elusive ladies. . . . Come this way.’

“He took us back along a plantain-groved street, and suddenly turned up an alley that was little more than two gutters and a crack of sky overhead between two broken-tiled roofs. It was a dilapidated, deserted *ruelle*, and I was positively angry when Rangon pointed to a blistered old *porte-cochère* with a half-unhinged railing in front of it.

“‘Is it that, your house?’ he asked.

“‘No,’ says I, and ‘No,’ says Carroll . . . and off we started again...

“But another half-hour brought us back to the same place, and Carroll scratched his head.

“‘Who lives there, anyway?’ he said, glowering at the *porte-cochère*, chin forward, hands in pockets.

“‘Nobody,’ says Rangon, as much as to say ‘look at it!’ ‘M’sieu then meditates taking it?’ . . .

“Then I struck in, quite out of temper by this time.

“‘How much would the rent be?’ I asked, as if I really thought of taking the place just to get back at him.

“He mentioned something ridiculously small in the way of francs.

“‘One might at least see the place,’ says I. ‘Can the key be got?’

“He bowed. The key was at the baker’s, not a hundred yards away, he said. . .

“We got the key. It was the key of the inner wooden door—that grid of rusty iron didn’t need one—it came clean off its single hinge when Carroll touched it. Carroll opened, and we stood for a moment motioning to one another to step in. Then Rangon went in first, and I heard him murmur ‘Pardon, Mesdames.’ . . .

“Now this is the odd part. We passed into a sort of vestibule or hall, with a burst lead pipe in the middle of a dry tank in the centre of it. There was a broad staircase rising in front of us to the first floor, and double doors just seen in the half-light at the head of the stairs. Old tubs stood against the walls, but the palms and aloes in them were dead—only a cabbage-stalk or two—and the rusty hoops lay on the ground about them. One tub had come to pieces entirely and was no more than a heap of staves on a pile of spilt earth. And everywhere, everywhere was dust—the floor was an inch deep in dust and old plaster that muffled our footsteps, cobwebs hung like old dusters on the walls, a regular goblin’s tatter of cobwebs draped the little bracket inside the door, and the wrought-iron of the hand-rail was closed up with webs in which not even a spider moved. The whole thing was preposterous. . . .

“‘It is possible that for even a less rental—’ Rangon murmured, dragging his forefinger across the hand-rail and leaving an inch-deep furrow. . . .

“‘Come upstairs,’ said I suddenly. . . .

“Up we went. All was in the same state there. A clutter of stuff came down as I pushed at the double doors of the *salon*, and I had to strike a stinking French sulphur match to see into the room at all. Underfoot was like walking on thicknesses of flannel, and except where we put our feet the place was as printless as a snowfield—dust, dust, unbroken grey dust. My match burned down. . . .

“‘Wait a minute—I’ve a *bougie*,’ said Carroll, and struck the wax match. . . .

“There were the old sconces, with never a candle-end in them. There was the large oval mirror, but hardly reflecting Carroll’s match for the dust on it. And the broken chairs were there, all giltless, and the rickety old round table. . . .

“But suddenly I darted forward. Something new and bright on the table twinkled with the light of Carroll’s match. The match went out, and by the time Carroll had lighted another I had stopped. I wanted Rangon to see what was on the table. . . .

“‘You’ll see by my footprints how far from that table *I’ve* been,’ I said. ‘Will you pick it up?’

“And Rangon, stepping forward, picked up from the middle of the table—my cigarette case.”

Loder had finished. Nobody spoke. For quite a minute nobody spoke, and then Loder himself broke the silence, turning to me.

“Make anything of it?” he said.

I lifted my eyebrows. “Only your *vigneron’s* explanation—” I began, but stopped again, seeing that wouldn’t do.

“*Anybody* make anything of it?” said Loder, turning from one to another.

I gathered from Smith’s face that he thought *one* thing might be made of it—namely, that Loder had invented the whole tale. But even Smith didn’t speak.

“Were any English ladies ever found to have lived in the place—murdered, you know—bodies found and all that?” young Marsham asked diffidently, yearning for an obvious completeness.

“Not that we could ever learn,” Loder replied.

“We made inquiries too. . . . So you all give it up? Well, so do I . . . .”

And he rose. As he walked to the door, myself following him to get his hat and stick, I heard him humming softly the lines—they are from *Oft in the Stilly Night*—

“*I seem like one who treads alone  
Some banquet-hall deserted,  
Whose guests are fled, whose garlands dead,  
And all but he—departed!*”