

Pourquoipas

By Richard Marsh

I. THE TALKING HORSE

“But, madame, I do not understand you!”

“It is a mystery!”

“A mystery!” Mr. Fletcher felt that the word inadequately described the situation. “Do you mean to say—I hardly know whether to take you seriously—that you have been having a conversation with—a horse?”

“That is to say, with my husband—with Ernest.”

“I thought you said that he was dead?”

“It is certain. Did I not see him die? I will show you the bed upon which we laid him out. Did I not shed upon his corpse my tears? What would you have?”

“Then how about the conversation?”

“It is metempsychosis.”

Mr. Fletcher began to be amused.

“Metempsychosis?”

“It is a theory of which I know but little. Is it an article of faith with which monsieur is acquainted?”

“Not much—personally.”

“I? I am a Catholic. Ernest? He was I know not what! These men! Never shall I forget my feelings when—when I suggested sending for a priest; he said that it was not worth while to trouble the good man, for when he died his soul would pass into a horse.”

“A horse?”

“A horse! He even named the horse! It is incredible!”

Mr. Fletcher thought it was—almost.

“Monsieur must know that my husband—he is dead, what does it matter?—was not to me a good husband. I did my best to bring him to a sense of what was right, of what was proper; but, after all, it is little that a wife can do, is it not so? He had his little fortune, I had mine. Puff! before I knew it, his was gone. Do not ask me how. He would have sent mine with it; I said no. He was a great horseman. He used to keep horses to run at races, and to sell—that was his business; the hotel was mine—and among them was the famous Pourquoipas—all the world has heard of Pourquoipas.”

All the world might have done. Mr. Fletcher had not. He said so.

“Monsieur has not heard of Pourquoipas! It is extraordinary! He is the greatest trotting horse in the world. It is little I know of these things, but I do know that Pourquoipas is indeed a marvel. He was my horse, as indeed, when you have the truth, were all the others. Judge, then, of my surprise when, as I told monsieur, I said to Ernest, ‘shall I send for a priest?’ he replied, ‘Of what use? When I die my soul will pass into Pourquoipas.’ ‘What nonsense are you talking?’ I demanded. ‘Agnes,’ he said, ‘you have often accused me of having no religion. I have a religion. I believe in the doctrine of metempsychosis.’ ‘What horror is that?’ I cried. ‘It is the doctrine of transmigration of souls. I am now about to die. I believe that when I am dead my soul will pass into the body of Pourquoipas. It is as I say. Those who live longest will see most.’ He looked at

me with his glassy eyes. He turned over on his side. Before I knew it he was dead. Those were nice last words for a wife to hear from a husband as he was entering the grave.

"I said nothing to anyone. I was too much ashamed. The day before yesterday he was buried. Yesterday morning I entered the stable to see that all was well. I was looking at Pourquoipas. I was wondering what I should do with him. He is entered for half a dozen races—and what do I know of racing?—and suddenly Pourquoipas turned and looked at me. 'Agnes,' he said, 'good-day.' Monsieur, it was my husband's voice. I fell to the ground. They found me in a fit. They carried me to the house. Oh, mon Dieu!"

The lady applied her handkerchief to her eyes. Apparently she wept.

"Don't you think it possible," suggested Mr. Fletcher mildly, "that you were the victim of a delusion?"

"Possible. When I returned to consciousness I said to myself, 'It is sure! I am no fool—I!' The more I thought of it the more I said to myself it was a trick my fancy played me. Last night when I went to bed this idea was clearly presented to my mind."

Madame Peltier paused. She glanced round the room with what was very like a glance of apprehension. "Monsieur, last night I had no doubt upon the matter. This morning I found, pinned to my pillow, a piece of paper, on which was written the words, 'Come to the stable.' They were in my husband's handwriting. I have the piece of paper in my pocket."

She rummaged in a pocket, which seemed as remarkable for the variety of its contents as any schoolboy's could possibly have been. Finally she produced a scrap of paper; this she placed upon the table with a flourish which was essentially dramatic.

"There it is; monsieur may see it for himself."

It was a quarter-sheet of dirty note-paper, on which was written, in a cramped French handwriting, the words, "Come to the stable."

"It is my husband's handwriting; there are a hundred persons who can swear to it. I said, 'It is another trick.' But, in spite of myself, I went to the stable. Scarcely had I put my foot inside the door than Pourquoipas looked round to me with this remark, 'You see, my wife, it is as I said.'

"Did you have another fit?"

"Would that I had! It was not all he said, not by a great deal. He advised me to commit suicide."

"In order to join him in the bosom of Pourquoipas?"

"Not actually, but in effect. He desired, the vagabond! that I should ruin myself. He said that I was to send all the horses and a sum of money—ah! what a sum!—to an address at Morlaix. I was to ask no questions as to their destination; I was to dismiss them from my mind as though they had never been."

Mr. Fletcher rose from his seat.

"You don't mean that he said all that?"

"It is the truth. All the horses and ten thousand francs—all to be sent to a man at Morlaix, of whom I had never heard. It would be my ruin; as well commit suicide at once."

"This gets interesting."

"He said that if I did not do it he would haunt me by day and by night; he would make my life a burden; he would make me wish that I was never born."

"Seriously, madame, are you quite sure that you were not again the victim of your own imagination?"

“I have no imagination; I know not what it is. When I hear a thing, I hear a thing; and when I hear my husband’s voice I know it, monsieur may rest assured of that. Besides, there is the paper.”

There was the paper, but Mr. Fletcher did not see that there was much in that. Oddly enough, he had been routing out materials for an article on Breton superstitions, when he stumbled on this find at Plestin. He had not been in the place half a dozen hours when the landlady of his hotel, “La Boule d’Or,” thrust on him her confidence. She said—he had never had such an accusation hurled at him before—that “monsieur looked so sympathetic.”

On the shore he found the stables. They were built within a stone’s-throw of the sea. Outwardly, they had not the appearance of a typical training stable—of a training stable, that is, as it is known in England. A lank, knock-kneed individual was lounging in front of the door, who was the typical English jockey as he is found in fifth-rate racing establishments in “foreign parts.” Him Mr. Fletcher accosted.

“Got some decent horses, I hear.”

The “jockey” looked him up and down.

“They’ve got four legs—most on ’em.”

Mr. Fletcher knew that the speaker had already read his inmost soul, and was aware that his equine knowledge extended no further than the capability of being able to draw a distinction between a horse and an ass.

“Four good legs some of them, I understand.”

“About as good as yours and mine.”

Mr. Fletcher felt that this language, in one in the position of the speaker, was out of place.

“Can I have a peep at them?”

“There’s no law again’ it, as I knows on.”

The stable door was open; Mr. Fletcher entered. The jockey slouched in after him. The arrangements were primitive, but the building was of considerable size, and some eight or nine animals were in the boxes.

“Which is Pourquoipas?”

“That is Pourquoipas.” On Mr. Fletcher moving towards the animal indicated the jockey was moved to further eloquence. “He is a ’orse, he is.” Pause. “He is a ’orse.” Another pause. “There ain’t no trotter like him, not in Europe, there ain’t. I ought to know.” Pause. “And I says so.” Pause. “That ’orse can do his mile inside of two-eleven.” The speaker glanced at Mr. Fletcher, as if challenging contradiction; but as that gentleman was unaware of there being anything remarkable in a horse “doing his mile inside of two-eleven” his countenance was blank. “Yes, and inside of two-ten, if he’s fairly on the job.”

Again a look in the nature of a challenge; still no reply. In possible disgust the jockey did what Mr. Fletcher was hoping he would do—he turned on his heels and left the stable. He seemed to see nothing surprising in leaving a perfect stranger to examine the stud at his leisure.

Mr. Fletcher was content, however, to confine his attention to one member of the stud—to Pourquoipas.

“So you’re Pourquoipas, are you? I don’t know much about the genus trotting horse, but if you’re a fair example of the rest of your tribe you’re not a handsome family. Big, gawky, leggy brute! You look to me more like a cart-horse gone wrong than any other kind of quadruped I’ve seen!” Pourquoipas looked round with sullen eyes, as though he resented these observations of a too candid critic.

“A nice sort of man the late Peltier must have been to have wished to transfer his soul to such a thing of beauty as yourself.”

The creature made a movement with his hind legs, which caused Mr. Fletcher to nimbly step aside.

“Now then, whose toes are you trying to step upon? A pretty mean sort of scamp your master must have been.”

There ensued an interval of silence. Mr. Fletcher stared at the horse, and the horse at him. It was a stare, perhaps, of mutual admiration.

“Fat English pig!”

It was these words, spoken in French, which broke that interval of silence. Mr. Fletcher started back in so much haste as to come into sudden and unexpected contact with the stable wall. It seemed that this flattering address proceeded from Pourquoipas! For some seconds he gazed at the animal with an astonishment which was altogether unequivocal.

“I’m not surprised that it frightened the woman! The thing was uncommonly well done. Now, my ventriloquial friend, where are you?”

Echo answered where. Mr. Fletcher treated Pourquoipas with very little ceremony. He drove him from side to side of his box, so that no corner of it was hidden. He peered into his manger; he routed among the straw; he looked up at the ceiling; he examined the other boxes— there was nothing there but horses. He returned to stare at Pourquoipas; and the more he stared the more the wonder grew.

“Blockhead.”

The same voice; and again it seemed to proceed from Pourquoipas.

“So there was something in it after all. I thought the woman was romancing. Well, this is something new in travellers’ tales. I wonder, my friend, just where you are?”

While he wondered the voice went on—

“You think, you English, that you are wise. Bah! You are a nation of fools! Go back to your land of fogs; there you will be more at home than here.”

“Is that all?” asked Mr. Fletcher, when the voice was still.

It seemed that it was. All efforts on his part to provoke a continuation of the conversation proved futile. His language was not exactly choice, his allusions were not entirely civil; but nothing he could say had any effect upon the quadruped, or upon the gentleman behind the scenes who had endowed the quadruped, *pro tem.*, with the faculty of speech.

“If the séance is concluded I suppose I’d better go.”

As he left the stable he told himself— “Unless I am mistaken, our friend the jockey has a finger in this pie.” When he got into the open air the first thing he saw was the jockey, walking beside a horse which a lad was exercising on the sands a good three-quarters of a mile away.

Later on Mr. Fletcher, having returned to the hotel for dinner, noticed above the mantelpiece of the *salle-à-manger* the picture of a man. The portrait was in oils, and life-size. The man was leaning over a table, staring the spectator in the face. It was in the modern style of French sensation— the man seemed actually alive! But, in its way, it was distinctly a work of art. Mr. Fletcher asked the Breton maid, who brought in his soup, who the original was.

“It is the patron—the husband of madame. It is a good likeness. But, for me, I do not like it. Whenever I look at it I think that he is going to leap at me across the table.”

The idea was not inapt; he did look as though he were about to spring.

“Wasn’t he a little man?”

“But a dwarf. That is how he was so good a rider.”

The face in the picture was not an evil face. It seemed to Mr. Fletcher that it was rather the face of a fool than a knave. But about the whole portrait there was a curious appearance of life—one momentarily expected the man to spring.

That night Mr. Fletcher was aroused from his first sleep by a tapping at his bedroom door. At first—as we are apt to do—he wondered what it was that had disturbed his slumber. Tap, tap, tap! As he listened there came a further tapping at the panel of the door. He started up in bed.

“Who’s there?”

“Open, monsieur, for the love of heaven.” It was a woman’s voice.

“Is that you, madame?”

“Open, monsieur. I pray you, open.”

“What’s the matter?”

Slipping into a pair of trousers, Mr. Fletcher went to see. Outside the door was Madame Peltier in a costume of the most amazing scantiness.

She had a lighted candle in her hand. Without waiting for an invitation, pushing past the gentleman, she entered his room. Putting her candle on the table, herself she placed upon a chair. Mr. Fletcher felt that this behaviour of his landlady’s required an explanation, even in the wilds of Côtes du Nord!

“May I ask, madame, what is wrong?”

Now that she had gained admittance, the lady appeared to be in a state of speechless agitation; it was plain that there was something wrong.

“Ernest!” she gasped. “Ernest! I have seen him.”

“Ernest?” For a moment the name conveyed no significance to Mr. Fletcher’s bewildered brain. “You mean your husband?”

“My husband! I have seen his ghost!”

“His ghost?”

Mr. Fletcher was becoming conscious that there might be more excitement in the country than in the town.

“I have seen his ghost; oh, mon Dieu! I was asleep. Suddenly I awoke. Someone was leaning over me, having a tight hold of my arm. It was Ernest. Oh, mon Dieu!”

“You were dreaming.”

“Dreaming! I wish I had been dreaming. Is that a dream?” The lady pulled up the sleeve of her single garment. An ugly bruise showed on the skin of her plump, white arm. “Ernest was a little man, but he had a wrist like steel. That is where he gripped me. Is that a dream?”

“How do you know it was your husband?”

“Do I not know my husband? He whispered in my ear—oh, the horror! ‘You see, my wire, it is as I said.’ I was too frightened to speak. ‘I will haunt you by day and night until you do my bidding.’ Then he began again about the horses and the ten thousand francs which I am to send to a Monsieur Quelquechose at Morlaix—just as I heard it, every word, from Pourquoipas. It will be my ruin!”

While the lady sobbed, Mr. Fletcher, in his unstockinged feet, paced to and fro.

“It strikes me that there is some plot on foot to deprive you of your property. Do you know anything about that jockey of yours?”

“Sam Tucker? He is a fool, and a knave. What then?”

“Do you think him capable of originating an elaborate scheme of robbery?”

“He is capable of anything; he is always robbing me. What has that to do with my husband?”

“That, at present, is more than I can tell you. Of course, the ghostly visitation was a trick.”

“Is that a trick?”

The lady pointed to the bruise upon her arm.

“That is part of the trick. But I will talk the matter over with you in the morning, and we will see what can be done. You had better return to your room. You are hardly likely to receive another visit from that very versatile husband of yours to-night.”

“I would not return to my room—not for ten thousand horses and a million francs.”

“Then you had better go to your maid. I suppose that you hardly propose remaining here?”

The lady went to her maid. Immediately on her departure the gentleman turned into bed. But he could not sleep; he turned, and tossed, and tumbled; the lady’s visit had banished slumber. *Pourquoipas*, the words which had fallen—or which had seemed to fall—from the creature’s lips, the lady’s story—half a dozen things were jumbled together in his mind.

Perhaps some twenty minutes or half an hour had elapsed since the lady had gone. He was lying on his left side, with his face turned towards the wall. His eyes were closed, in the forlorn hope that sleep would come upon them unawares. But as he lay, and no sleep came, and, instead, phantoms of thought persisted in chasing each other across his brain, in weariness of spirit he opened them to look out upon the world. As he did so he was surprised to see that a light—a faint light—was shining on the wall. His first impression was that it was later than he had imagined, and that the first glimmerings of daylight were finding their way into the room. Something, however, in the colour of the light suggested that it certainly was not daylight. And, as he lay in a sort of drowsy stupor, his eyes still fixed on the dimly illuminated wall, he began to fear that that absurd woman had returned, to outrage the proprieties, and to seek shelter from her fears.

“Confound her! If this isn’t something like an hotel, I never knew one yet! Talk about travellers being taken in and done for!”

This he muttered beneath his breath. Then he turned lazily in bed, intending, with as much politeness as circumstances would permit, to call down execrations on his hostess. But he did not call down execrations on his hostess, because his hostess was not there.

When he turned in bed he perceived that the room was lighted, but from what source there was no evidence to show. The light was, so to speak, just enough to cast the room in shadow; just enough to make things visible, and yet not plain. It was a dim and a ghostly light.

While Mr. Fletcher was wondering to what unseen friend he was indebted for this genteel illumination, all at once his eyes fell upon a man, who was standing on the other side of the table, leaning over the board. He could have sworn that he was not there when he first had turned, a second ago, for his glance had travelled all round the room, in search of his landlady, and he had seen that it was empty. Yet it was equally certain that now the man was there, unless, that is, he was the victim of an hallucination. When one is awake, and in one’s right mind, one does not, as a general rule, see things which are non-existent; and now he saw that man.

He was a very little man, if that was any consolation, and he was a curious-looking-little man. As he leaned across the table his attitude conveyed an odd and slightly uncanny impression of his being about to spring. There was silence. The visitor made no remark. Mr. Fletcher, on his part, made none. The man was a stranger to him, and yet—where had he seen him before? Suddenly he remembered—in the picture over the mantelpiece in the *salle-à-manger*. He was the patron—the husband of madame! Either the artist had caught, in a marvellous and prophetic manner, his sitter’s pose, or the sitter had caught the artist’s inspiration. Mr. Fletcher saw the picture reproduced before his eyes, as in the portrait—the little man looked as though he were going to leap at him across the table!

“Monsieur, a little of your attention.”

The visitor opened the ball of conversation—the voice was the voice which had seemed to proceed from Pourquoipas.

“You are an Englishman? Very good. Confine yourself to your own affairs. Return to your own country.”

The visitor’s manner was distinctly acid. As he listened, Mr. Fletcher became very certain that the man in front of him was neither a spectre of his own imagination, nor a visitant from shadowland.

“You hear? I say, return to your own country.”

Mr. Fletcher heard, and, as he heard, he sat up in bed and contemplated the speaker at his leisure.

“You’re a nice young man, upon my word!”

This form of reply seemed to take the visitor aback. He seemed to think that he had not created a sufficient impression.

“You do not know who I am?”

“Oh, yes I do, thanks.”

“You think I am alive?”

“I don’t think you are.”

“Very good. Try and see.” The speaker raised his hand, with a little mocking gesture. “But I warn you to take care. Above all, I warn you not to meddle in affairs which are no concern of yours. Go away from here, or—you will regret it.”

“I assure you, honestly, that I shall not regret it if remaining here will afford me an opportunity of having frequent interviews with you. You are the sort of man, I should say, who improves upon acquaintance.”

“You laugh at me? Well, you will not laugh long. I warn you to go away from here before to-morrow night, or you will be sorry.”

“Sorry? Not at all! You little brute!” As Mr. Fletcher uttered this last exclamation, springing out of bed, he bounded towards the little man behind the table. He moved with great agility, but if he expected to take the other by surprise he failed. No sooner did his feet touch the floor than the mysterious light vanished, and, despite his haste, all that he succeeded in doing was to come in violent contact with the table.

Some strongish language escaped his lips as, in the pitchy darkness, he went rushing round the table. He succeeded in reaching the other side of it; he also succeeded, when he reached it, in finding nothing there.

“Where are you, you hound?”

No voice replied. He stood a moment, listening. There was not a sound.

“I know you’re somewhere in the room. Only wait until I lay my hands on you!”

Even as he spoke someone laid a hand on him, lightly, on his arm; and a voice—a well-known voice—observed—

“Good-night, dear friend—until tomorrow!”

Mr. Fletcher sprang round with an agility which was really marvellous, grasping wildly at the speaker. He grasped, however, nothing but the air. When he realised that there was nothing there to grasp, Mr. Fletcher’s language was quite unprintable. At last he lit the candle. By its glimmer he examined the room—there was nothing but the room to examine. All traces of his visitor had disappeared. Nor could he find anything which went to show the means by which that disappearance had been effected. The door was locked, so was the window.

“Where has the little beggar gone? It strikes me that this is quite a model thing in hotels. It dates from before the flood; and I’ll stake a pound it’s honeycombed with sliding doors and secret passages, like the hotels used to be in the good old-fashioned tales of my boyhood.”

As he came to this conclusion he returned to the table behind which the little man had stood. His eyes fell upon a piece of paper which was lying in its centre.

“What is that? I didn’t notice anything there when I lit the candle.”

It was a quarter-sheet of dirty notepaper—own brother to the scrap which Madame had shown him. It contained two words, written in the same cramped handwriting as the words upon her piece—

“Until to-morrow.”

“That’s odd. How came that there? There can be no doubt that the thing’s well done.”

He thought so when, having put out the candle and returned into bed, on laying his head on the pillow, his cheek came into contact with another scrap of paper.

“What the—!”

He sprang out of bed as though a serpent had stung him. With hands which actually trembled he once more caused light to shine upon the scene. He bore the candle to the bed—sure enough there was a piece of paper on the pillow.

“How in thunder did that get there?”

As gingerly as though it were some precious—or, perhaps, some deadly—thing, he picked it up between his finger and his thumb. It was the third of the series— another dirty quarter-sheet; and on it, in the old, familiar hand, was this excellent advice: “Do not meddle with the affairs of others.” The advice was excellent; there could be no doubt of that. But still Mr. Fletcher felt that its excellence did not sufficiently account for its presence on his pillow. This time, when he returned into bed, he did not put the candle out. He left it burning.

Sleep has been compared to a woman—“uncertain, coy, and hard to please.” When we seek for slumber it eludes us; when we least expect it, behold, it comes! It came to Mr. Fletcher then. Hardly was he once more between the sheets before he was sleeping softly as a child.

II. THE LIVING PICTURE

When Mr. Fletcher awoke—there was no mistake about it this time—it was broad day. He lay for some moments revelling in the first joy of waking. When he thought of the events of the night he laughed aloud; they were so utterly absurd. Remembering the scraps of paper he sat up in bed to look for them. In rising his glance fell upon his pillow; there, on the snowy linen, within half an inch of where his cheek had just been resting, branded, as it seemed, in blood, was the impress of a horse’s hoof.

Mr. Fletcher managed, during the early portion of that day, to avoid his hostess. He went out into the village. There appeared to be only one shop in the place; at the door of that establishment stood a man. He was a big, burly fellow in blouse and sabots; he looked a companionable soul. Mr. Fletcher found him what he looked—a gossip. Mr. Fletcher began by alluding to the natural beauties of the neighbourhood; he then remarked that he was staying at “La Boule d’Or,” the landlord of which, he understood, had lately died.

“It was time he did.”

“Such a scamp, was he?”

“As honest a man as ever lived.”

Mr. Fletcher pricked up his ears at this.

“Rather wild, wasn’t he?”

“There never was a quieter soul.”

“But wasn’t he extravagant?”

“Extravagant! For example, he had never a sou to spend.”

“That, I suppose, was after he had spent all he had to spend?”

Monsieur Bonchard—the name was painted on the little window over his door—cast at Mr. Fletcher a contemplative glance; he placed his hands on the upper portion of his capacious stomach.

“I see.”

“What do you see?”

“You have been listening to Madame Peltier.”

“Madame Peltier certainly gave me to understand that he was not all a husband should have been.”

“Marie!” Monsieur Bonchard called into the shop. A feminine reproduction of himself came towards the front. “What sort of a husband was Peltier up at the ‘Hotel de la Boule d’Or’?”

“A model husband—a true model.”

“As for his wife—”

The lady interposed.

“It is not for us to say anything.”

“I was his friend; it is for me to say the truth. She murdered him!”

“Murdered him!”

Mr. Fletcher felt that the authorities were too conflicting.

“Not with a pistol and a knife, but with her cruelty. She led him the life of a dog! She did not let him have enough to eat; she would not let him have a sou to call his own; she would not let him have his liberty; she used to lock him up in a room for days; she beat him.”

“Beat him!”

“Never shall I forget one night he came to me; he was crying—ah! like my little baby. ‘Bonchard,’ he said, ‘it is finished. She has beaten me!’”

“With her shoe,” explained the lady, “as though he were a little child.”

“He was a very little man; she was a big woman; he was as nothing in her hands. She used to say she would show him as a dwarf. Ah, what he suffered! He had a spirit which was too large for his body. After that beating—monsieur, he was black and, blue, with my own eyes I saw the bruises!—within a week he was no more—he was dead. That is why I say she murdered him.”

“One tale is good,” reflected Mr. Fletcher, “until another is told. The fault does not appear to have been all upon one side. If she beat him with her shoe—degradation not to be surpassed—I don’t wonder that he preferred the bosom of Pourquoiipas.”

Corroboration of Monsieur Bonchard’s story was obtained from another quarter— from the Breton maid who waited upon him at his midday meal.

“What sort of man was the late Monsieur Peltier?”

“An angel.”

Mr. Fletcher felt that this was strong. The maid did not look as though she was an enthusiastic damsel. On the other hand, still less did Monsieur Peltier—in his portrait—look as though he were an angel.

“What was there angelic about him?”

“He was so good; that was his fault—he was too good. He was a little man—such a little man—one could have nursed him like a baby.”

Mr. Fletcher was conscious that there might be drawbacks in being nursed like a baby.

“I suppose, then, that he and his wife lived happily together?”

“Happily! Ah, for example!” The damsel was standing by his chair. Stooping, she whispered in his ear: “Madame has a tongue!” Standing up, she looked about her, possibly to see if the coast was clear: “And madame has an arm! You see that?” She pointed to a red mark upon her cheek. “She has just done it. She may be big, but I will let her know that next time she slaps me it shall not be for nothing.”

It was possible that the damsel’s evidence was prejudiced. When one has just been slapped, one does not necessarily have a high opinion of the slapper. Still, straws show which way the wind is blowing. It was evident that public opinion was not unanimous in reprobating Monsieur Peltier.

Mr. Fletcher did not see his hostess until after supper. He was quitting the *salle-à-manger* when he heard the sound of sobbing. The sound proceeded from a little room at the foot of the stairs. The door of the room was open. In it was Madame Peltier.

“Monsieur, I entreat you, enter.”

Mr. Fletcher entered.

“It is all over. It is done. It is finished.”

Mr. Fletcher inquired what was finished.

“I am ruined. It is of no consequence to anyone—that I know very well—but it is all the world to me.”

Mr. Fletcher asked—being driven upon the paths of cross-examination—in what way she was ruined.

“I have just given orders that all my horses—Pourquoipas alone is worth five-and-twenty thousand francs—and all the money I have in the world are to be sent to a man in Morlaix, of whom I have not even heard the name.

“You are not serious?”

“Do I look as though I were not serious, monsieur? What would you have? Ask Sam Tucker. He is going to take both the money and the horses.”

“If you really have given such an order I would earnestly advise you to countermand it. You don’t mean to say, now you have had an opportunity for quiet thought, that you are not yourself persuaded that you have been the victim of a trick?”

“What do you call a trick? Was that a trick last night? Do not tell me I do not know my own husband, if you please. All this morning I say to myself, ‘I will go into the stable. No, no, no!’ This afternoon I find upon my table a piece of paper—‘Come!’ Who put it there? It is in my husband’s writing. I went to the stable, although I said to myself I would not go. I have heard there from Pourquoipas—ah! what I have heard! Never was I spoken to in such a way before; and by a horse! Ciel! It is a wonder I am not dead! It is enough that I promised to send the horses and the money, by Sam Tucker, to a man at Morlaix, whose name even I do not know.”

“I would strongly advise you to put off the fulfilment of your promise—at any rate, until the morning.”

“It is impossible! I am not a woman without courage, but I do not dare.”

She did dare. Mr. Fletcher persuaded her. The sacrifice was postponed.

“Now,” the gentleman told himself, “unless I am greatly mistaken, to-night I shall have another visitor as the consequence of meddling with the affairs of others!”

His forebodings were realised—he had a visitor! He put off retiring to the latest possible moment. When he did seek the privacy of his own apartment, he still postponed the act of going to bed.

“I think I remember seeing somewhere a little play called *Diamond Cut Diamond*. If I am to receive a visit I think I’ll receive him sitting up. I shall be able to offer him more courtesy than I should if I were in bed.”

He put out the candle, taking care to have it within easy reach. He put a box of matches in his pocket, only regretting that there was no lantern handy. Taking off his boots, he sat down in a chair and waited. He waited hours. Nothing broke the silence of the night; no church clock told of the flight of time.

“One might almost think that someone had told my friend that I had a six-shooter in my pocket, the better to do him honour. If something doesn’t happen soon I shall either have to walk about or else go to sleep in my chair; and if it comes to that, I’d better go to bed.”

The night stole on. Still nothing to break the monotony of waiting in the dark. More than once Mr. Fletcher had caught his chin in the act of falling forward on to his chest—his yawns became prodigious!

“It begins to occur to me that, at my time of life, nothing and no one is worth sitting up for all night. I’m off to bed.”

He was about to go to bed, and, for that purpose, had already risen from his seat, when—he heard a sound!

“What’s that?”

It might have been the creaking of a board; it might have been the movement of a mouse; it might have been any of the trifling noises of which we are conscious in the silence of the night. Of one thing only he was certain—he had heard a sound! He listened, his sense of hearing almost unnaturally alert. A sound again!

“Perhaps, after all, it’s nothing but a mouse.

If it was a mouse, it was a curious one. The sound became plainer. It seemed to Mr. Fletcher that it was coming nearer.

“It’s someone moving. I hope to goodness it isn’t that old idiot, madame.”

But it did not seem as if it proceeded from the stairs. Surely, if she came at all, she would come that way.

“It strikes me that it is someone in the other room. For all I know there may be someone sleeping there. Halloo! what’s that?”

It was a ray of light—the merest pencil; it gleamed, like a streak of molten metal, across~, the floor.

“As I’m a Dutchman it’s shining through the wall!”

It was, there could be no doubt of it; it came through a crevice in the wains cot.

“I have it! I spot it all! Now for the next card in the game—it’ll be a call for trumps. I rather fancy, too, that I shall be able to trump this little trick.”

The pencil of light grew wider.

“They’re slipping a panel in the wainscot—just behind the head of my bed! This thing gets beautifully plain.”

With a cat-like step Mr. Fletcher moved towards the bed. The pencil of light was ceasing to be a pencil—it began to illuminate the room.

“Steady, my friend, that panel distinctly creaked; you must oil it next time before you play this game. In delicate operations of this kind ‘trifles light as air’ are apt to spoil the full effect.”

The room was in that state of semi-radiance which had puzzled Mr. Fletcher on the previous night.

“Now, my friend, is it now? It is! He’s coming. Trumped! Good-evening, dear friend, good-evening.”

With one hand he had someone by the collar of his coat, with the other he pointed a revolver into someone’s face.”

“Good-evening, dear friend, good-evening.”

There ensued an interval for reflection. The captive seemed momentarily paralysed; the captor was taking stock. The prisoner was a little man—a very little man, scarcely reaching above Mr. Fletcher’s waist.

“After all!”

The words proceeded from the little man in something between a moan and a gasp.

“As you say, my friend, ‘after all’—after all we meet again. Perhaps you will permit me to strike a light—my light? Your light we will examine later on.”

The little man offered no resistance when his captor drew him towards the table. He stood in silence while the candle was being lit, nor did he flinch when Mr. Fletcher held it in front of his face, the better to see what manner of man he was.

“From the look of you I should say you were the late Peltier’s Corsican brother.”

“You have a revolver; shoot me, it is better so.”

“It may be better so—a little later in the evening; at the present it seems to me that it would be a pity. Let me place you on the table.”

Lifting him in his arms Mr. Fletcher seated him on the edge of the table, the little man remaining as docile as a child. When, however, he had gained that post of vantage, “What it is to have been born a little man!” he groaned.

“The situation is not without its compensations. Women, mistaking your age, may bestow on you their caresses as generously as though you were a little boy. Now, may I ask—I trust you will not deem the question an impertinence—who you are and what’s your little game?”

“Do you not know me?”

“Unless you are the ghost of the late lamented Peltier, I am afraid I don’t.”

“I am Peltier himself.”

“Peltier! Ernest! Whew!” Mr. Fletcher whistled. “But I thought that you were dead.”

“In the morning I shall be dead.” The little man spoke with an air of tragic gloom.

“But so far as I understand the right of the matter you are, or you ought to be, stone dead now. You are buried.”

“My coffin is buried.”

The little man was still. Looking at him, marking his air of extreme depression, Mr. Fletcher began, faintly, to realise the situation.

“You do not understand?”

“Not yet—exactly.”

“Although you do not understand, you have ruined me. It seems to me that that is well. Is it because you love my wife?”

“Your wife! Well, not precisely.”

“What is it, then? You think, no doubt, you have done a brave and clever thing—you, a stranger, who came into this country for the first time yesterday. You are mistaken. You see, I am a small man. My wife, she is as big as a house. Ever since the day I married her she made my life no life at all. I could do nothing against her; she did with me as she pleased. Once I ran away.

I did not go far; I had only three francs in my pocket. Those I had to steal. Sometimes—two, three times a day—she would look to see if there was any money in my pockets. She found me, she brought me back; she locked me up for three whole weeks in this very room. She took away my clothes. She left me but my drawers, my slippers, and my shirt. That was very funny, was it not? For you, but not for me. Oh, mon Dieu! After all, I am a man.”

In the uncertain light Mr. Fletcher saw that the tears were rolling down the speaker’s cheeks.

“I was ashamed to complain to people of the treatment I received, though I do not doubt it was plain enough to all the world. I thought once or twice of killing her, but it seemed to me that it would be better that I should kill myself rather than her. This reflection put into my head the beginning of a scheme. At last things came to a crisis. She—she beat me. She beat me as though I were a child—me, a man of honour—with a slipper upon her knee! It is incredible, but it is none the less the truth, she beat me until I cried with pain! That was enough. I arranged my scheme. I pretended to be ill. I knew that she was very superstitious. I told her that, when I was dead, my soul would pass into the body of a horse.”

“Pourquoipas?”

“Into the body of Pourquoipas. No sooner had I said it than I seemed to die.”

“How did you manage that?”

“I swallowed a draught which made it seem—to her—that I was dead.”

“But how about the doctor? Aren’t such things as certificates of death known in this part of the world?”

“Sam Tucker saw to that.”

“I thought our friend the jockey had a finger in the pie.”

“He has been a good friend to me, Sam Tucker. She lost no time in putting me into a coffin. Dead, she feared me more than living. Sam Tucker fastened down the lid.”

“Having first, I suppose, taken care to see that you were out of it?”

“That is so. When the coffin had been buried we got her down to the stable. I spoke to her, as she thought, out of the mouth of Pourquoipas.”

“And, pray, how was that edifying performance arranged? You spoke to me, you must remember, out of the mouth of Pourquoipas.”

“It was very simple. There is a cellar underneath the stable. A small grating opens into the box of Pourquoipas. I spoke through the grating. You were easily deceived.”

“You think so, do you? It seems to me, my friend, that you’re a past master in deception.”

“My idea was to frighten my wife into sending the horses—which, after all, are my own property—and a sum of money to an address in Morlaix. Then I should be able to start the world afresh, freed from the chains of slavery. There can be no doubt she would have sent them. You came upon the scene. By meddling in the affairs of others you have ruined all. It seems that I must starve, and, after all—”

“Hist! What’s that?” Mr. Fletcher caught Monsieur Peltier by the arm. “There’s someone coming up the stairs, and I’ll bet a dollar it’s your wife. Hide behind the curtains of the bed.”

There came a tapping at the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Open, monsieur, open!” When the door was opened Madame Peltier stood without, in the airy costume of the night before. “Monsieur, I cannot sleep; it is no good. All the night I think that I hear voices——”

A figure advanced into the centre of the room, the figure of a very little man.

“Agnes!”

The lady fainted. Sixteen solid stone fell with a thud upon the ground. Mr. Fletcher brought her round in course of time.

“It was Ernest!”

“Upon my word,” said Mr. Fletcher, “I believe it was.”

“It is enough. Better to be ruined than to die. I will send the money and the horses in the morning.”

And she sent them!