

The Blue Cockroach

By Christopher Blayre

Dora was responsible—the Dora who punctuated her name after the manner of the plural of Mouse as affected by Civil Engineers. D.O.R.A. Primarily responsible that is to say; for this is a story of one of the very few instances of that *Ersatz*, which devastated Germany during the Late Unpleasantness, but of which our more favoured Nation suffered but few aggressions.

From another point of view perhaps the responsibility lies with Itha and Armorel. They are the imperious nieces of the Professor of Applied Chemistry in the University of Cosmopoli. Itha was twelve at the time, and Armorel eight, but, having no wife to rule him with a rod of iron, the Professor had, by the dire progression of a process for which he was unable to account, gradually become as a slave beneath their ferule, and in the most meagre days of Dora's sumptuary regulations Itha and Armorel had demanded Bananas.

Well, Bananas were at that moment as Snakes in Iceland—apparently, and many a rebuff did the Professor endure from 'proud young Porters' at Stores whence of old he had been accustomed to supply his nieces' demands.

Of course the Professor ought to have been married. So ought Pamela, but the youth of the Professor had been spent, not only in consuming the midnight oil and other illuminants, but in abstract researches into their nature, composition, and adaptations. He was an acknowledged authority on Coal-tar Products, Inverted Sugars, and their derivatives commercial and prophylactic. Pamela had waited; and she had waited too long. By the time the Professor had become a Member of Council of the Chemical, and a Fellow of the Royal Societies he was a confirmed bachelor, and Pamela had reached the age which used to be labeled in their series of photographs of Celebrities (female) by the *Strand Magazine* as 'Present Day.' They corresponded at long, and met at longer, intervals, when Pamela, growing fragrant with the fire of forgotten suns, like a Winter Pear, came up from Wiltshire in a spirit of revolt against the limitations of the Provincial Milliner.

In the meagre days above referred to, Pamela was in town, and the Professor, rather grudging the expenditure of time involved, had bidden her to lunch with him at the Imperial. A visit to Kings-way, in search of chemical glass, had the result that his way back to the Imperial lay through Covent Garden Market, at that time a dreary vista of empty windows and derelict packing cases, where erstwhile the fruits of distant lands had been wont to overflow in polychromatic luxuriance. But in one of the windows lay a small bunch—a 'hand' they call it—of home-sick and weary Bananas, and the Professor remembered the grey reproachful eyes of Itha and Armorel, who could never believe that he could possibly fail them if he really made an effort.

He went in. An adolescent representative of an Ancient Race—who had escaped conscription—received him with scarcely inquisitive apathy.

"Are those the only Bananas you have?" asked the Professor.

"And all we are likely to," replied the Merchant elliptically.

"I am in trouble," said the Professor. "I have a little niece who is eagerly desirous of Bananas—and she is very delicate," he added as a mendacious afterthought, blushing as he thought of Itha in a dilapidated Scout uniform perched in the highest branches of a tree, or

careering along the sands 'bareback' on a repatriated Army remount. "Do you think you could help me?"

The Adolescent Oriental looked him over with a scrutiny which became, in the end, sympathetic. Perhaps he had a niece—or something—and understood.

"Bill!"

A subterranean noise as though the dirty floor were in labour, and from a square hole in the planks at their feet half a human being emerged. This was evidently part of Bill—a sinister figure, mid-way between Phil Squod and Quilp. A vision of strabismus and a fustian cap.

"Could you find this gentleman a hand or two of Bananas out of that case?—you know."

Disappearance of the upper half of Bill, a sound of rending timbers, and presently his reappearance with two 'hands'—beautiful golden Bananas, and the nether portion of his person.

"Beauties," remarked Bill, "come yesterday."

"How much?" inquired the Professor.

When he recovered he saw himself, mentally, a poorer, but a better man. The Merchant was delivering a lecture upon the economics of War, and the iniquities of Dora. And as he turned the 'hand' over, that its excellence might act as an anaesthetic to the operation of extraction, there ran out upon the counter the Blue Cockroach.

Unconsciously the Professor—like the Poet in the Den of the Scarabee—recoiled, but no Scarabee was there to murmur without emotion '*Blatta*.' But Bill was there.

"Ah!" said he, "I've seen *him* before—queer things we get sometimes in the cases—lizards—snakes—and whatnot. Once I found a Monkey. Jolly little beggar—he was all right, lived on the fruit. We used to take them to the live-beast place at the end. Shut up now."

"Don't you ever get bitten—or stung?"

"No—we're careful. This fellow's harmless."

It was a most lovely beast. In shape and size identical with the cockroaches which stray among one's brushes on board ship, and architecturally indistinguishable from the larger members of the Kitchen family, the Blue Cockroach was clad in a pure, pale azure, as if a cunning artificer in enamels had fashioned it, and had given to its surface a texture of the finest smooth velvet. Its long antennæ waved inquiringly back and forth, its tiny eyes sparkled black with crimson points, and then it began to run. The Professor caught it in his hand as it toppled from the edge of the counter.

It bit him.

A curious sickening little puncture like the nip of an earwig. A sensation of heat, and then of cold that ran all over him, and Bill and the Merchant grew nebulous—and waved about. The Professor had never fainted in his life, but he said to himself 'This is how they must feel.' In a moment it was over. He had shaken off the insect, and true to the scientific instinct he took out of his pocket one of the corked tubes he had just acquired, and drove the Blue Cockroach into it.

"One of the fellows at the Museum may like to have it," he said.

The Merchant shrugged his shoulders. A boot-heel, not a corked tube, seemed to him to be the appropriate climax to the Odyssey of the Blue Cockroach. For some inexplicable reason, however, he reduced the price he had quoted from the limits of Chimaera to within the bounds of Extravagance, and the Professor went upon his way, the Bananas in his hand and the Blue Cockroach in his pocket.

A tiny point on his right palm showed where the insect had attacked him, but beyond that the incident was closed.

As he proceeded along Coventry Street, the Professor became aware of a great calm—an undefined happiness. He had regarded his appointment with Pamela more in the light of a kindly duty than as an occasion for pleasurable anticipation, but now he suddenly found himself looking forward to their meeting with a keen sense of curiosity and satisfaction. It was too long since they met last. He felt sure she would have come to town sooner had he expressed a wish in that direction in his letters. What a handsome creature she had been when he was a student! What a shame it was that she had never married. The Professor found himself quietly wondering why—if—whether?

“I am fifty-four,” said he to himself. But he smiled frowningly—or frowned smilingly.

* * *

‘She’s a wonderful woman!’ was his first thought as she rose to greet him from the big chair in the vestibule. Indeed Pamela seemed younger than he remembered her to have looked a year ago. She seemed to radiate that impression of delicate strength and ultra-feminine self-reliance which constitutes the undefinable charm of many middle-aged spinsters.

Their lunch was delightful. Pamela seemed as though she were starting fresh. The Professor seemed to have shed his professorial armour, and to have become once more a human being. He entertained her with descriptions of his war activities, no longer as of yore skimming over the subject, but letting her into the secret chamber of his ambitions, his aspirations, his work. When a man of the Professor’s intellectual eminence exerts himself to charm, the charm is dangerously subtle. An element of flattery pervades the exercise, which is—or should be—irresistible. Pamela did not resist—she had never been called upon to resist, and was not going to begin now. Thirty years fell away, as time wasted in sleep. It is not a disagreeable admission—indeed there is a curious emotional joy predominant, when two people who should have been lovers find themselves saying in their hearts ‘What fools we have been!’

By the time that the arrival of coffee and cigarettes had cleared away the last barriers which had erected themselves upon their voyage of re-discovery, the Professor was virtually identifying Pamela with his life-work.

“It is not all explosives and bacteriology,” he confided to her. “I have been at work upon substitutes for sugar, and I have found one which will be a god-send to the people who properly detest saccharine. I have brought here a little tube of my finished article. It has all the sweetening properties of the finest cane sugar. Will you try it?”

Of course she would. If it had been a dangerous poison she would have gladly offered herself as a martyr to Science—his Science.

“You need not be afraid of it. It is not only a wonderful sweetener—it is also a powerful prophylactic. It acts like an atoxyl that would kill with extraordinary rapidity any pathogenic organisms in the system. I look forward to trying it as a remedy for Sleeping Sickness, Yellow Fever—any of the tropical diseases carried by insects which inject death-dealing bacteria—trypanosomes—into our blood by their bites. My dear”—she quivered—“I believe I hold here one of the greatest discoveries that has ever been made in prophylactic medicine!”

They sweetened their coffee—each with a tiny pellucid crystal.

“It is just like real sugar,” she said dreamily, “not harsh like saccharine. My dear”—his eyes grew narrower—“I do believe you are right. I am so proud of you.” She ended with a little contented sigh which was half a laugh, and looked round the restaurant, which was by this time gradually becoming empty, and wondered whether anyone else there looked out upon their

worlds with so supreme a sensation of satisfaction and fulfilment as she. What fools they had been!

* * *

The Professor also finished his coffee and leaned back in his chair, looking round the room with a sudden sensation of discomfort. He had just thought again of the Blue Cockroach—the reason he had thought of it was that he had suddenly experienced, as it were, a return of the sensation which came over him at the moment it bit him. It was, however, only momentary, though, casually glancing at his hand, it seemed as if the little puncture were more visible than it had been.

And then a remarkable thing happened. He turned again to Pamela and saw her with new—or rather with old—eyes. He found her eyes fastened upon him with a mingled expression of apprehension and curiosity—and as he returned her gaze—she blushed vividly. He felt strangely uncomfortable, and without any conscious volition on his part he found himself going rapidly over in his mind their conversation of the previous hour. It was surely waste of time to orate for an hour to this dull but worthy person, upon a subject which could have no interest for her and of which she could not possibly understand a single word. He was dissatisfied with himself, and naturally blamed her vaguely for his dissatisfaction and discomfort.

“Well!” he said, “it has been very pleasant seeing you again, Pamela. We must—er—not let it be so long again—before—” His stereotyped phrases lost themselves in embarrassed silence.

He asked for the bill. It seemed to him rather excessive. However, just for once . . .

Pamela had not ceased looking at him. She was puzzled; it seemed to her as if a newly opened door had been quietly but relentlessly shut in her face. The Professor certainly had aged a good deal since she saw him last; she had not noticed it before. An uncomfortable sensation crept over her that she had been expansive beyond warrantable limits with this grave grey man, and she felt a little hot under an impression that she had allowed the conversation to stray beyond what was quite seemly and decorous—at her age. She was rather relieved that he seemed in a hurry to get away. She had all an intelligent woman’s horror of an anti-climax.

An hour later she was in the train. At that moment the Professor laid down his pen in his study and looked before him out of the window. The same thought struck both of them simultaneously.

“What fools we were!”

* * *

‘Now whether there be truth or no in that which the native Priests do aver, I know not, nor may I make more curious enquiry, but if it be indeed the fact that the sting of divers of their Flyes do engender Passions as of Love, Hate, and the like, then the matter is curious and worthy of enquiry, but such as I did make enquiry of did postpone me with shrewd cunning and avoiding answer, nor would they be come at to speak further upon it at that or any other time.’¹

¹ “ ‘The True Account of the Travels into Distant Lands of the learned Doctor Franzelius Bott, wherein many curious Customs and Wisdom of the Inhabitants are truly set down.’ (Leyden: 1614, p. 117.)