



EDITH DALE
(Mabel Dodge Luhan)

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P E T E R  
W H I F F L E

HIS LIFE AND WORKS

(1922)

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Carl Van Vechten

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Preface

So few people were acquainted with Peter Whiffle that the announcement, on that page of the New York Times consecrated to wedding, birth, and obituary notices, of his death in New York on December 15, 1919, awakened no comment. Those of my friends who knew something of the relationship between Peter and myself, probably did not see the slender paragraph at all. At any rate none of them mentioned it, save, of course, Edith Dale, whose interest, in a sense, was as special as my own. Her loss was not so personal, however, nor her grief so deep. It was strange and curious to remember that however infrequently we had met, and the chronicle which follows will give evidence of the comparative infrequency of these meetings, yet some indestructible bond, a firm determining girdle of intimate understanding, over which Time and Space had no power, held us together. I had become to Peter something of a necessity, in that through me he found the proper outlet for his artistic explosions. I was present, indeed, at the bombing of more than one discarded theory. It was under the spell of such apparently trivial and external matters that our friendship developed and, while my own interests often flew in other direc-

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tions, Peter certainly occupied as important a place in my heart as I did in his, probably, in some respects, more important. Nevertheless, when I received a notification from his lawyer that I had been mentioned in Peter's will, I was considerably astonished. My astonishment increased when I was informed of the nature of the bequest. Peter Whiffle had appointed me to serve as his literary executor.

Now Peter Whiffle was not, in any accepted sense of the epithet, an author. He had never published a book; he had never, indeed, written a book. In the end he had come to hold a somewhat mystic theory in regard to such matters, which he had only explained to me a few moments before he died. I was, however, aware, more aware than any one else could possibly have been, that from time to time he had been accustomed to take notes. I was as familiar, I suppose, as any one could be, with the trend of his later ideas, and with some of the major incidents in his earlier life he had acquainted me, although, here, I must confess, there were lacunæ in my knowledge. Still, his testamentary request, unless I might choose to accept it in a sense, I am convinced, entirely too flattering to my slender talents, seemed to be inconsistent with the speculative idea which haunted him, at least towards the end of his life. This contradiction and an enlarging sense of the mysterious character of the assignment were somewhat dispelled by a letter, dated June 17,

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1917, which, a few days after the reading of the will, his lawyer placed in my hands and which indicated plainly enough that Peter had decided upon my appointment at least two years and a half before he died. This letter not only confirmed the strange clause in the will but also, to some extent, explained it and, as the letter is an essential part of my narrative, I offer it in evidence at once.

Dear Carl—so it read:

I suppose that some day I shall die; people do die. If there has been one set purpose in my life, it has been not to have a purpose. That, you alone, perhaps, understand. You know how I have always hesitated to express myself definitely, you know how I have refrained from writing, and you also know, perhaps, that I can write; indeed, until recently, you thought I was writing, or would write. But I think you realize now what writing has come to mean to me, definition, constant definition, although it is as apparent as anything can be that life, nature, art, whatever one writes about, are fluid and mutable things, perpetually undergoing change and, even when they assume some semblance of permanence, always presenting two or more faces. There are those who are not appalled by these conditions, those who confront them with bravery and even with impertinence. You have been courageous. You have published several books which I have read with varying shades of pleasure, and you have not

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hesitated to define, or at any rate discuss, even that intangible, invisible, and noisy art called Music.

I have begun many things but nothing have I ever completed. It has always seemed unnecessary or impossible, although at times I have tried to carry a piece of work through. On these occasions a restraining angel has held me firmly back. It might be better if what I have written, what I have said, were permitted to pass into oblivion with me, to become a part of scoriac chaos. It may not mean anything in particular; if it means too much, to that extent I have failed.

Thinking, however, of death, as I sometimes do, I have wondered if, after all, behind the vapoury curtain of my fluctuating purpose, behind the orphic wall of my indecision, there did not lurk some vague shadow of intention. Not on my part, perhaps, but on the part of that being, or that condition, which is reported to be interested in such matters. This doubt, I confess, I owe to you. Sometimes, in those extraordinary moments between sleeping and awakening—and once in the dentist's chair, after I had taken gas—the knots seemed to unravel, the problem seemed as naked as Istar at the seventh gate. But these moments are difficult, or impossible, to recapture. To recapture them I should have been compelled to invent a new style, a style as capricious and vibratory as the moments themselves. In this, however, as you know, I have failed, while you have succeeded. It is to your success, modest

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as it may appear to you, that I turn in my dilemma. To come to the point, cannot you explain, make out some kind of case for me, put me on my feet (or in a book), and thereby prove or disprove something? Shameless as I am, it would be inconceivable, absurd, for me to ask you to do this while I am yet living and I have, therefore, put my request into a formal clause in my will. After I am dead, you may search your memory, which I know to be very good, for such examples of our conversations as will best be fitted to illuminate your subject, which I must insist—you, yourself, will understand this, too, sooner or later—*is not me at all.*

When your book is published, I shall be dead and perhaps unconscious. If, however, as I strongly suspect, some current connects the life to be with the life that is, I can enjoy what you have done. At the best, you may give others a slight intimation of the meaning of inspiration or furnish guideposts, lighthouses, and bell-buoys to the poet who intends to march singing along the highroad or bravely to embark on the ships at sea; at the worst, I have furnished you with a subject for another book, and I am well aware that subjects even for bad books are difficult to light upon.

Salve atque Vale,

Peter.

This letter, I may say, astonished me. I think it would astonish anybody. A profound and enveloping

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melancholy succeeded to this feeling of astonishment. At the time, I was engaged in putting the finishing touches to *The Tiger in the House* and I postponed meditation on Peter's affair until that bulky volume could be dispatched to the printer. That happy event fell on March 15, 1920, but my anthology, *Lords of The Husetops*, next claimed my attention, and then the new edition of *Interpreters*, for which I had agreed to furnish a new paper, and the writing of this new paper amused me very much, carrying my mind not only far away from cats, which had been occupying it for a twelvemonth, but also away from Peter's request. At last, *Interpreters* was ready for the printer, but now the proofs of *The Tiger* began to come in, and I may say that for the next three months my days were fully occupied in the correction of proofs, for those of *Lords of The Husetops* and *Interpreters* were in my garret when the proofs of *The Tiger* were not. Never have I corrected proofs with so much concentrated attention as that which I devoted to the proofs of *The Tiger*, and yet there were errors. In regard to some of these, I was not the collaborator. On Page 240, for instance, one may read, There are many females in the novels of Emile Zola. My intention was to have the fourth word read, felines, and so it stood in the final proof, but my ambition to surmount the initial letter of Zola's Christian name with an acute accent (an ambition I shall forswear on this present page) compelled the

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printer to reset the line, so that subsequently, when I opened the book at this page, I read with amazement that there are many females in the novels of Emile Zola, a statement that cannot be readily denied, to be sure, but still it is no discovery of which to boast.

It was not until September, 1920, that I had an opportunity to seriously consider Peter's request and when I did begin to consider it, I thought of it at first only as a duty to be accomplished. But when I began searching my memory for details of the conversations between us and had perused certain notes I had made on various occasions, visited his house on Beekman Place to look over his effects and talk with his mother, the feeling of the artist for *inevitable* material came over me and I knew that whether Peter had written me that letter or not, I should sooner or later have written this book about him.

There was another struggle over the eventual form, a question concerning which Peter had made no suggestions. It seemed to me, at first, that a sort of haphazard collection of his ideas and pronunciamientos, somewhat in the manner of Samuel Butler's *Note-Books*, would meet the case, but after a little reflection I rejected this idea. Light on the man was needed for a complete understanding of his ideas, or lack of them, for they shifted like the waves of the sea. I can never tell why, but it was while I was reading William Dean Howells's *Familiar Spanish Studies* one day in

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the New York Public Library that I suddenly decided on a sort of loose biographical form, a free fantasia in the manner of a Liszt Rhapsody. This settled, I literally swam ahead and scarcely found it necessary to examine many papers (which was fortunate as few exist) or to consult anything but my memory, which lighted up the subject from obscure angles, as a search-light illuminates the spaces of the sea, once I had learned to decipher the meaning of the problem. What it is all about, or whether it is about anything at all, you, the reader, of course, must decide for yourself. To me, the moral, if I may use a conventional word to express an unconventional idea, is plain, and if I have not succeeded in making it appear so, then I must to some extent blame you, the reader, for what is true of all books, is perhaps truest of this, that you will carry away from it only what you are able to bring to it.

Chapter I

One of my friends, a lady, visited Venice alone in her middle age. It was late at night when the train drew into the station, and it was raining, a drizzly, chilling rain. The porter pushed her, with her bag, into a damp gondola and the dismal voyage to the hotel began. There were a few lights here and there but she had the impression that she was floating down the Chicago River in a wash-tub. Once she had reached her destination, she clambered unsteadily out of the black barge, wobbled through a dark passageway, inhaling great whiffs of masticated garlic, and finally emerged in a dimly lighted lobby. At the desk, a sleepy clerk yawned as she spoke of her reservation. Tired, rather cross, and wholly disappointed, she muttered, I don't like Venice at all. I wish I hadn't come. The clerk was unsympathetically explanatory, Signora should have visited Venice when she was younger.

A day or so later, the lady recovered her spirits and even her sense of humour for she told me the story herself and I have always remembered it. The moment it passed her lips, indeed, I began to reflect that I had been lucky to encounter the Bride of the Adriatic in my youth. Paris, too, especially Paris, for there is a

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melancholy pleasure to be derived from Venice. It is a suitable environment for grief; there is a certain superior relish to suffering there. Paris, I sometimes think, smiles only on the very young and it is not a city I should care to approach for the first time after I had passed forty.

I was, as a matter of fact, in my twenties when I first went to Paris—my happiness might have been even greater had I been nineteen—and I was alone. The trip across England—I had landed at Liverpool—and the horrid channel, I will not describe, although both made sufficient impression on me, but the French houses at Dieppe awakened my first deep emotion and then, and so many times since, the Normandy cider, quaffed in a little café, conterminous to the railroad, and the journey through France, alive in the sunlight, for it was May, the fields dancing with the green grain spattered with vermilion poppies and cerulean cornflowers, the white roads, flying like ribbons between the stately poplars, leading away over the charming hills past the red-brick villas, completed the siege of my not too easily given heart. There was the stately and romantic interruption of Rouen, which at that period suggested nothing in the world to me but Emma Bovary. Then more fields, more roads, more towns, and at last, towards twilight, Paris.

Railroads have a fancy for entering cities stealthily through backyards and the first glimpses of Paris,

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achieved from a car-window, were not overpleasant but the posters on the hoardings, advertising beer and automobile tires, particularly that of the Michelin Tire Company, with the picture of the pinguid gentleman, constructed of a series of pneumatic circles, seemed characteristic enough. Chéret was dead but something of his spirit seemed to glow in these intensely coloured affiches and I was young. Even the dank Gare Saint Lazare did not dismay me, and I entered into the novel baggage hunt with something of zest, while other busy passengers and the blue porters rushed hither and thither in a complicated but well-ordered maze. Naturally, however, I was the last to leave the station; as the light outside deepened to a rich warm blue, I wandered into the street, my porter bearing my trunk, to find there a solitary cocher mounted on the box of his carious fiacre.

An artist friend, Albert Worcester, had already determined my destination and so I gave commands, Hôtel de la Place de l'Odéon, the cocher cracked his whip, probably adding a Hue cocotte! and we were under way. The drive through the streets that evening seemed like a dream and, even later, when the streets of Paris had become more familiar to me than those of any other city, I could occasionally recapture the mood of this first vision. For Paris in the May twilight is very soft and exquisite, the grey buildings swathed in a bland blue light and the air redolent with a strange

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fragrance, the ingredients of which have never been satisfactorily identified in my nasal imagination, although Huysmans, Zola, Symons, and Cunninghame Graham have all attempted to separate and describe them. Presently we crossed the boulevards and I saw for the first time the rows of blooming chestnut trees, the kiosques where newsdealers dispensed their wares, the brilliantly lighted theatres, the sidewalk cafés, sprinkled with human figures, typical enough, doubtless, but who all seemed as unreal to me at the time as if they had been Brobdingnags, Centaurs, Griffins, or Mermaids. Other fiacres, private carriages, taxi-autos, carrying French men and French ladies, passed us. I saw *Bel Ami*, *Nana*, *Liane de Pougy*, or *Otero* in every one of them. As we drove by the *Opéra*, I am certain that *Cléo de Mérode* and *Leopold* of Belgium descended the steps. Even the buses assumed the appearance of gorgeous chariots, bearing perfumed Watteauesque ladies on their journey to *Cythera*. As we drove through the *Tuileries Gardens*, the mood snapped for an instant as I viewed the statue of *Gambetta*, which, I thought at the time, and have always thought since, was amazingly like the portrait of a gentleman hailing a cab. What could more completely symbolize Paris than the statue of a gentleman perpetually hailing a cab and never getting one?

We drove on through the *Louvre* and now the *Seine* was under us, lying black in the twilight, reviving dark

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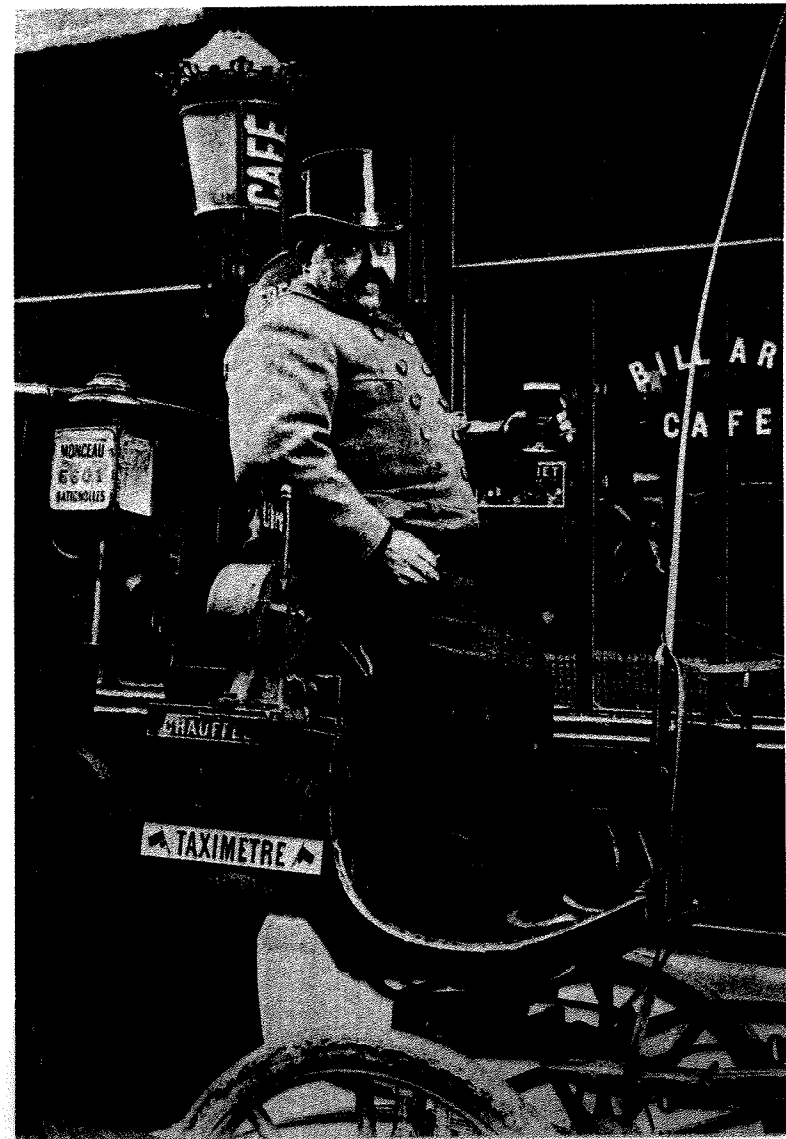
memories of crime and murder, on across the *Pont du Carrousel*, and up the narrow *Rue de Seine*. The *Quartier Latin*! I must have cried aloud, for the cocher looked a trifle suspicious, his head turned the fraction of an inch. Later, of course, I said, the left bank, as casually as any one. It was almost dark when we drove into the open *Place*, flanked by the *Odéon*, a great Roman temple, with my little hotel tucked into one corner, as unostentatiously as possible, being exactly similar to every other structure, save the central one, in the *Place*. I shall stop tonight, I said to myself, in the hotel where *Little Billee* lived, for, when one first goes to Paris when one is young, Paris is either the Paris of *Murger*, *du Maurier*, or the *George Moore* of the *Confessions*, perhaps the Paris of all three. In my bag these three books lay, and I had already begun to live one of them.

The patron and a servant in a long white apron were waiting, standing in the doorway. The servant hoisted my trunk to his shoulder and bore it away. I paid the cocher's reckoning, not without difficulty for, although I was not ignorant of the language, I was unaccustomed to the simplicity of French coinage. There were also the mysteries of the *pourboire* to compute—ten per cent, I had been told; who has not been told this?—and besides, as always happens when one is travelling, I had no little money. But at length the negotiations were terminated, not to the displeasure of the cocher,

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I feel certain, since he condescended to smile pleasantly. Then, with a crack of his whip, this enormous fellow with his black moustaches, his glazed top-hat, and his long coat, drove away. I cast a long lingering look after him, apparently quite unaware that many another such teratological specimen existed on every hand. Now I followed the patron into a dark hallway and new strata of delight. He gave me a lighted candle and, behind him, I mounted the winding stairway to the first floor, where I was deposited in a chamber with dark red walls, heavy dark red curtains at the windows, which looked out over the Place, a black walnut wash-handstand with pitcher and basin, a huge black walnut wardrobe, two or three chairs of the same wood, upholstered with faded brocade, and a most luxuriose bed, so high from the floor that one had to climb into it, hung with curtains like those at the window, and surmounted by a featherbed. There was also another article of furniture, indispensable to any French bedroom.

I gave Joseph (all men servants in small hotels in Paris are named Joseph, perhaps to warn off prospective Potiphar's wives) his vail, asked for hot water, which he bore up promptly in a small can, washed myself, did a little unpacking, humming the *Mattchiche* the while, changed my shirt, my collar and my necktie, demanded another bougie, lighted it, and under the humble illumination afforded by it and its companion, I began to read again *The Confessions* of a



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Young Man. It was not very long before I was interrupted in the midst of an absorbing passage descriptive of the circle at the Nouvelle Athènes by the arrival of Albert Worcester, who had arranged for my reception, and right here I may say that I was lodged in the Hôtel de la Place de l'Odéon for fifty francs a month. Albert's arrival, although unannounced, was not unexpected, as he had promised to take me to dinner.

I was sufficiently emphatic. Paris! I cried. Paris! Good God!

I see you are not disappointed. But Albert permitted a trace of cynicism to flavour his smile.

It's too perfect, too wonderful. It is more than I felt or imagined. I'm moving in.

But you haven't seen it. . . .

I've seen enough. I don't mean that. I mean I've seen enough to know. But I want to see it all, everything, Saint Sulpice, the Folies-Bergère, the Musée de Cluny, the Nouvelle Athènes, the Comédie Française, the Bal Bullier, the Arc de Triomphe, the Luxembourg Gardens. . . .

They close at sundown. My expression was the cue for him to continue, They'll be open tomorrow and any other day. They're just around the corner. You can go there when you get up in the morning, if you do get up in the morning. But what do you want to do tonight?

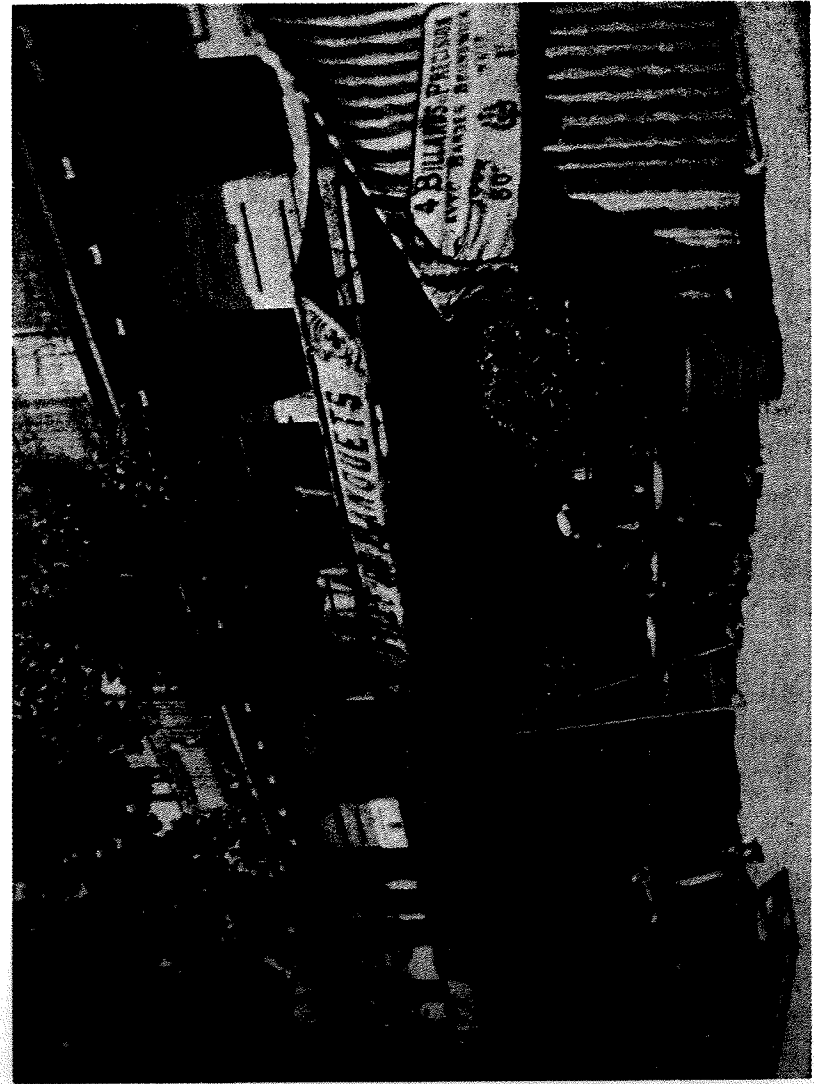
Anything! Everything! I cried.

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Well, we'll eat first.

So we blew out the candles, floated down the dark stairs—I didn't really walk for a week, I am sure—, brushing on our way against a bearded student and a girl, fragrant and warm in the semi-blackness, out into the delicious night, with the fascinating indescribable odour of Paris, which ran the gamut from the fragrance of lilac and mimosa to the aroma of horse-dung; with the sound of horses' hoofs and rolling wheels beating and revolving on the cobble-stones, we made our way—I swear my feet never touched the ground—through the narrow, crooked, constantly turning, bewildering streets, until we came out on a broad boulevard before the Café d'Harcourt, where I was to eat my first Paris dinner.

The Café d'Harcourt is situated near the Church of the Sorbonne on the Boulevard Saint Michel, which you are more accustomed to see spelled Boul' Mich'. It is a big, brightly lighted café, with a broad terrasse, partially enclosed by a hedge of green bushes in boxes. The hands of the clock pointed to the hour of eight when we arrived and the tables all appeared to be occupied. Inside, groups of men were engaged in games of checkers, while the orchestra was performing selections from Louis Ganne's operetta, *Les Saltimbanques*. On the terrasse, each little table, covered with its white cloth, was lighted by a tiny lamp with a roseate shade, over which faces glowed. The bottles and dishes and



THE CAFÉ D'HARCOURT
from a photograph by Carl Van Vechten

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silver all contributed their share to the warmth of the scene, and heaping bowls of peaches and pears and apples and little wood strawberries, ornamenting the sideboards, gave the place an almost sumptuous appearance. Later I learned that fruit was expensive in Paris and not to be tasted lightly. Victor Maurel has told me how, dining one night with the composer of *The Barber*, he was about to help himself to a peach from a silver platter in the centre of the table when the frugal Madame Rossini expostulated, Those are to look at, not to eat!

While we lingered on the outer sidewalk, a little comedy was enacted, through the dénouement of which we secured places. A youth, with wine in his head and love in his eyes, caressed the warm lips of an adorable girl. Save for the glasses of apéritifs from which they had been drinking, their table was bare. They had not yet dined. He clasped her tightly in his arms and kissed her, kissed her for what seemed to be a very long time but no one, except me, appeared to take any notice.

Look! I whispered to Albert. Look!

Oh, that's all right. You'll get used to that, he replied negligently.

Now the kiss was over and the two began to talk, very excitedly and rapidly, as French people are wont to talk. Then, impulsively, they rose from their chairs. The man threw a coin down on his napkin. I caught the glint of gold. He gathered his arms about the

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woman, a lovely pale blue creature, with torrid orange hair and a hat abloom with striated petunias. They were in the middle of the street when the waiter appeared, bearing a tray, laden with plates of sliced cucumbers, radishes and butter, tiny crayfish, and a bottle of white wine. He stared in mute astonishment at the empty table, and then picked up the coin. Finally, he glanced towards the street and, observing the retreating pair, called after them :

Mais vous n'avez pas diné!

The man turned and shot his reply over his shoulder, *Nous rentrons!*

The crowd on the terrasse shrieked with delight. They applauded. Some even tossed flowers from the tables after the happy couple and we . . . we sat down in the chairs they had relinquished. I am not certain that we did not eat the dinner they had ordered. At any rate we began with the cucumbers and radishes and *écrevisses* and a bottle of *Graves Supérieur*.

That night in Paris I saw no Americans, at least no one seemed to be an American, and I heard no English spoken. How this came about I have no idea because it never occurred again. In fact, one meets more Americans in Paris than one does in New York and most of the French that I manage to speak I have picked up on the Island of Manhattan. During dinner I began to suspect a man without a beard, in a far corner, but Albert reassured me.

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He is surely French, he said, because he is buttering his radishes.

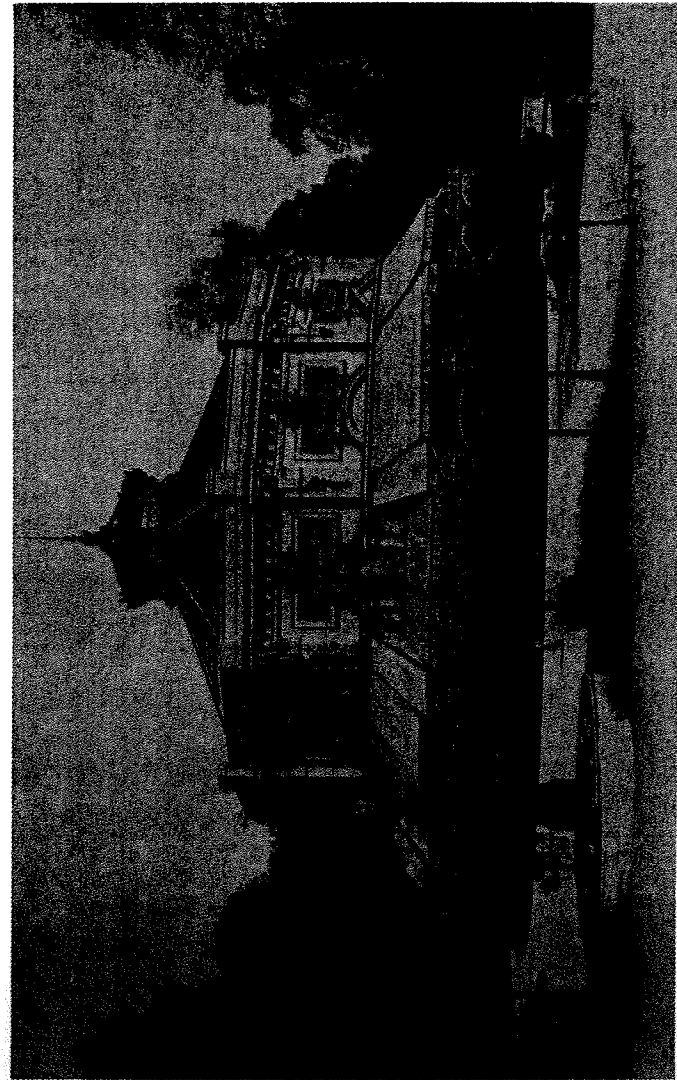
It would be difficult to exaggerate my emotion: the white wine, the bearded French students, the exquisite women, all young and smiling and gay, all *organdie* and lace and sweet-peas, went to my head. I have spent many happy evenings in the *Café d'Harcourt* since that night. I have been there with Olive Fremstad when she told me how, dressed as a serpent in be-spangled Nile green, she had sung the finale of *Salome* to Edward VII in London, and one memorable *Mardi-Gras* night with Jane Noria when, in a long raincoat which covered me from head to foot, standing on our table from time to time, I shouted, *C'est l'heure fatale!* and made as if to throw the raincoat aside but Noria, as if dreading the exposure, always dragged me down from the table, crying, *No! No!* until the carnival crowd, consumed with curiosity, pulled me into a corner, tore the raincoat away, and everything else too! There was another night, before the *Bal des Quat'z Arts*, when the café was filled with students and models in costume, and costume for the *Quat'z Arts* in those days, whatever it may be now, did not require the cutting out of many handkerchiefs. But the first night was the best and every other night a more or less pale reflection of that, always, indeed, coloured a little by the memory of it. So that today, when sometimes I am asked what café I prefer in Paris and I reply, the

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d'Harcourt, there are those who look at me a little pityingly and some even go so far as to ejaculate, Oh, that! but I know why it is my favourite.

Even a leisurely dinner ends at last, and I knew, as we sipped our coffee and green chartreuse and smoked our cigarettes, that this one must be over. After paying our very moderate addition, we strolled slowly away, to hop into an empty fiacre which stood on the corner a block down the boulevard. I lay back against the seat and gazed at the stars for a moment as the drive began through the warm, fragrant Paris air, the drive back to the right bank, this time across the Pont Neuf, down the Rue de Rivoli, through the Place de la Concorde, where the fountains were playing, and up the Champs-Élysées. The aroma of the chestnuts, the melting grey of the buildings, the legions of carriages and buses, filled with happy, chattering people, the glitter of electricity, all the mystic wonder of this enchanting night will always stay with me.

We drove to the Théâtre Marigny where we saw a revue; at least we were present at a revue; I do not remember to have seen or heard anything on the stage. Between the acts, we walked in the open foyer, at this theatre a sort of garden, and admired the cocottes, great ladies of some distant epoch; they seemed to me, in their toilets from Redfern and Doucet and Chéruit and Callot Sœurs, their hats from the Rue de la Paix and the Place Vendôme, their exceedingly elabo-



THE MARIGNY THEATRE

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rate and decoratively artificial complexions. Later, we sipped cassis on the balcony. It was Spring in Paris and I was young! The chestnut trees were heavy with white blossoms and the air was laden with their perfume. I gazed down the Champs-Élysées, surely the true Elysian Fields, a myriad of lights shining through the dark green, the black, leaved branches. I do not think I spoke many words and I know that Albert did not. He may have been bored, but I think he derived some slight pleasure from my juvenile enthusiasm for, although Paris was old hat to him, he loved this particular old hat.

We must have stopped somewhere for more drinks on the way home, perhaps at Weber's in the Rue Royale, where there was a gipsy band. I do not remember, but I am sure that it was nearly four in the morning when we drove up before the little hotel in the Place de l'Odéon and when, after we had paid the driver and dismissed him, I discovered to my astonishment that the door was locked. Albert assured me that this was the custom and that I must ring for the concierge. So I pulled the knob, and even outside we could hear the distant reverberations of the bell, but no reply came, and the door remained closed. It was Joseph's job to open the door and Joseph was asleep and refused to awaken. Again and again we pulled the cord, the bell tinkling in the vast silence, for the street was utterly deserted, but still no one came. At last we desisted, Albert suggesting that I

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go home with him. We walked a few paces until we came to the iron fence surrounding the Luxembourg Gardens and there, lying beside it, I espied a ladder, left by some negligent workman.

But my room is on the first floor. The window is open; it looks over the Place. I can enter with the ladder, I cried.

Albert, amused, helped me carry it back. Set up, it just reached the window and I swiftly scaled it and clambered into the room, waving my hand back to Albert, who hoisted the ladder to his shoulder as he started up the street trying to whistle, *Viens Poupoule!* but laughing to himself all the time, so that the tune cracked. As for me, I lighted one of my candles, undressed, threw the featherbed off to the floor, and climbed into bed. Then I blew out the candle and soon fell asleep. It was the tenth of May, 1907, that I spent my first night in Paris.