

# The Good Uncles

by Perceval Gibbon

Illustrated by W. Smithson Broadhead

"I LEARNED how it was that you English won Waterloo," said the Frenchman, when his attempted suicide by drowning was frustrated by the boy who could not swim

THE Parc Monceau, that dainty pleasaunce of be-ribboned *bonnes* and be-frilled children, showed at its best upon that Spring morning; a timid generosity of sun shone upon its young green, the white of its marble and the mirrors of its pools; and there was a tinkle of children's voices and the joyousness of their movement. And here, through the gentle and pretty pageantry of it all, went Maurice Bertholet, moving as in an aimless saunter, his hands clasped behind him, his cane slanting under his arm, his face composed and inexpressive. "Tiens!" murmured one white-and-blue linen nurse to another as he passed. "Voilà un monsieur vraiment comme-il-faut!"

Their eyes followed his tall spare figure with real appreciation. He was one of those perfect products of life who are the bloom upon the social surface of Paris, complete both inwardly and outwardly—from the soul to the fit of the coat—to satisfy its exigencies and its taste. At forty, or thereabout, he had yet the figure and the carriage of the athlete; there was a sophisticated mastery of grace in his every movement; and his face, demurely handsome, was keen without being sharp and self-possessed without arrogance. His accoutrement, black tie, dark grey gloves, grey felt hat with a deep black band, was more than merely quiet; it was even a little noticeably sombre in that *bonbonnière* of a Paris play-ground; but one felt, on viewing him, that there must be a reason for that; it must be right or he would not be wearing it.

His saunter brought him about a bend in the way; he caught his hands from behind his back to raise his hat to a lady who was coming towards him.

"Good morning!" he greeted, with the cordial little smile he had. "You are doing your *footing*?"

She smiled back and gave him her hand. "Tiens!" she exclaimed. "You here? No, I have done my *footing*. And you—you were meditating, I suppose."

"It may be!" He accepted her little gesture of invitation and turned to stroll at her side. Nurses watching in the offing smiled meaningly; they knew an assignation when they saw one, they considered; but nurses can be wrong as easily as other juries.

The two chatted awhile trivially as they went; but Madame de Leyle glanced from time to time at her companion consideringly; she had not missed the sombre note in his effect.

"The voice is the voice of a bachelor," she ventured at last, in reply to some small jest of his; "but the costume is the costume of a widower. There is nothing wrong, I hope, Maurice."

He turned his face towards her, yet smiling with that manner of schooled courtesy which was implicit in him; but for an instant or two his eyes were grave and pained.

"I have lost a relative," he said. "You would scarcely have heard."

"Oh, I am sorry," she said. "Who was it, Maurice? Not—"

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "It was my uncle."

She frowned thoughtfully, and stole another glance at him. Insensibly they had slowed in their stroll; they came to a stop beside a marble basin whose surface was yet strewn with the dead leaves of last year's water-lilies.

"I am very sorry indeed!" she said.

"You are kind," he replied, quietly. "He

was practically my only relative; he was very good to me always. But, you know, I had not seen him for years?"

He had one smartly-shod foot on the low parapet of the basin and leaned forward staring for a while at the water. She had leisure to survey him again, in profile, the keen quiet lines of the face, its breeding, its humour and its restraint, and once more her delicate blonde brows knitted in thought. She was a woman of the perfect age, somewhere between twenty-seven and thirty-two, slim, nearly as tall as he and brilliantly fair, with that shining quality of fairness which gives to face and neck the effect of a golden flush. Before she married the French military attaché at Washington she had been Irma Redden; she had been a widow since the great battles around Verdun; and there were moments yet, plenty of them, when the vivid American fires flashed through the social armour of the Parisienne.

"Tell me something more, Maurice," she said. "You see—we've been friends. Just what does this mean to you?"

He rose upright and dropped his foot from the parapet. His uncle had been a wealthy ship-builder and ship-owner; the allowance he conferred upon Maurice had been the latter's entire livelihood—and Irma de Leyle knew that. Maurice, his place in a fastidious world, his undeniable taste in pictures, in furniture, in frocks, in all the apparatus of elegance—these were a mere by-product of the daily work in the old-fashioned offices in Marseilles. She had not seen and therefore could not remember, as he had been doing all the morning, the figure of the old merchant-prince, gross of girth, uproarious of voice, white-bearded and bald but swarthy yet, flamboyant as the South which bore him and made him—labouring happily, living with gusto, and merely exuding Maurice, his position and his positionities as a man exudes sweat from his body.

"Tell me," insisted Madame de Leyle, gently. "You remember—I know! Let us walk back and you can tell me."

They moved away again, side by side. "Well?" she asked.

Once more he smiled at her. "He has left me ten thousand francs," he replied.

She stared. "Ten thousand francs—a year?"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "Not ten thousand a year, but ten thousand—*pour tout potage*! It is one quarter's instalment of my old allowance. And"—he ceased to smile and made it apparent that he spoke in all sincerity—"it is very good of him! There was no reason why he should leave me anything. I was his wife's nephew, really—his first wife's; and he had since married again and there is a son of the second

marriage, you know. No, really; it was good of him; he was always good!"

"But," objected Madame de Leyle, "after all these years! Still, the son, your cousin, of course he will—"

She ceased to speak before the amusement that lit in his face.

"Shall I really ask him?" he suggested, holding her eyes with his. "Shall I appeal to him—'Since you succeed to your father's wealth, succeed also to his parasite'? He is twelve years younger than I; do you think such an appeal would move him?"

She flushed faintly. "What will you do, then?"

His shoulder moved in a restrained little shrug. "Oh, something assuredly. I do not think I shall be reduced to the husks, exactly. You must not think nor look as if you were in the presence of a tragedy."

"You have many friends," she said slowly.

"Many," he agreed. "Many good friends, thank God!"

They walked for a while in silence. He seemed to be reflecting, with a grave gladness, upon his last words, but the thought of Irma de Leyle touched the matter in hand from another angle. His "good friends" included many men of wealth and influence; there would be no difficulty in finding him a dignified and comfortable employment; but even so, the Maurice Bertholet she knew, that consummate work of delicate art and generous Nature, must be shattered. An office, hours of routine, days abstracted from the life of ease at no profit to the life of labour! He had called himself a parasite, but Irma knew wealthier parasites than he with less of his gift for beautifying the rôle. To harness him now would be a kind of murder.

"You have rather startled me," she said, presently. "I don't know what to say for the moment. But I am horribly distressed, Maurice!"

He turned to her at once, with a quick spontaneous gaiety of remonstrance. He was about to laugh and chaff her from her concern for him and his fortunes. But her face showed real pain and sympathy and he fell serious in immediate compliance with her mood.

"But you must not be distressed," he said. "I would not have told you, but you claimed a right to know. And I granted your right—I would never deny it. And but for that, please believe I would have said nothing."

She did not answer, and he went on upon a lighter note.

"And really, there is nothing to distress you! *Voyons*—I am not a hero; I should hate to be one! When one is expelled from one niche one finds another—not? And for-

unately, saints are so scarce that there are always vacant niches!"

He rattled on and she listened unsmiling, watching him. There had been a time when their friendly intimacy had tended to ripen into something more, but at the time she had shrunk from it. And he, with his singular adroitness and a tact that seemed to her the essence of kindness and consideration, had forthwith fallen back to his position of familiar and endearing friendship. It was in the possibilities that she had declined that lay the right of which he had spoken.

"Do not do anything hurriedly," she said. "I must think about this."

"You must not, indeed!" he smiled. "I will do all the thinking. In fact I am going away to-morrow to find thinking-space."

"Where are you going?"

"You would not know it," he told her. "It is a little place on the Breton coast—Le Robain, they call it. Twenty cottages, an inn of sorts, an occasional Englishman on a cheap holiday, a few stray artists—and for the rest, dull green rocks, dull green country and a sea that snarls when it does not sob and always sobs when it does not snarl. One must think there; there is nothing else to do."

"Le Robain," she repeated. "I will write—perhaps! And now, I must go. My car is on the Avenue."

They walked thither, saying little. But when she was seated in the car, while the chauffeur awaited the order to drive on, she leaned forward suddenly to the window, and the gold-and-rose of her face appeared suddenly as in a frame.

"Maurice!"

"What, then?" he asked.

"Maurice, you have told me everything? All that was in your mind when you came to the Parc to meet me?"

He smiled. "*Touché!*" he admitted in the swordsman's phrase. "I did come to meet you. And I have told you all."

"Well"—her eyes searched his face in vain—"perhaps I will write," she said and sank back in her seat as the great car slid away.

He met a friend upon the boulevard and they lunched together. The friend was anxious, of course, for the news of the uncle's will was already abroad, and there came duly the question: "And what will you do?" Maurice was ready for it; he had practised his answer.

"I assure you," reported his lunch-companion to other friends that afternoon—"I assure you, he mocks himself of the matter. He is at his ease. So, either the uncle made him a handsome settlement in his life-time; or the cousin has declared himself willing to continue the allowance; or——"

He shrugged and did not compete the sentence. His hearers shrugged likewise; they understood the third alternative so completely and unanimously that none ever spoke the word "marriage."

Even alone in his rooms that afternoon with no eye to mark him, Maurice Bertholet did not relax his composure. They were charming rooms; Maurice's home fitted him as accurately and becomingly as his clothes. His five or six pictures, his five or six hundred books, his two or three bronzes, his china, his rugs, his furniture—the choice of them and their arrangement were as characteristic of him as his smile or his epigrams. As he sat with his cigar in his smoking-room, he looked about him, taking in the sum and detail and significance of his environment. It would remain his for a space of days that he could number on his fingers.

He made no movement nor grimace of anger or regret. His mind was made up; his purpose was like a binding document, completed, signed and made effective, filed away in his clear and steady brain, not to be amended or tampered with. His life, the only life for which he was equipped, was at an end. Then it was time for death. He had selected death as the least of the evils among which he might choose, and it only remained to end up in decency.

The single inn at Le Robain—an old straggling stone farmhouse converted to hospitable uses—is accustomed to artists and economical tourists; it can even rise to the exploring or strayed motorist and the occasional weather-bound yachtsman. But it was all too frankly puzzled and awed by M. Maurice Bertholet of Paris. It gave him a vast bedroom with a tangle of beams criss-crossed on its ceiling and a curtained bed that looked like a travelling theatre and smelt like a circus. The inn had been sworn at for that in its time; but M. Bertholet only smiled delightedly and delightfully and murmured words of praise. He unlocked a suit-case and set forth toilet gear of ivory and silver, pyjamas and a dressing-gown of silk, and descended later to the table-d'hôte dinner in the likeness of one who has just come out of a comfortable band-box.

There were already a couple of elderly artists in residence; they, with M. Bertholet and a lanky diffident English youth in hairy tweed clothes, had the long table to themselves. The youth had the place opposite to him and several times Maurice marked his shy eyes nervously reconnoitring him. He smiled inwardly; there had never been a time when he suffered from that lack of address and self-possession, and it struck him now as childlike and pathetic. He was in the mood to be gentle with all mankind.

He looked up and caught the youth staring.

The latter dropped his eyes at once and reddened hotly.

"An Englishman, is it not?" inquired Maurice pleasantly in English.

"Ye-yes, sir," hesitated the boy. He could not have been more than twenty-one.

"You are an early visitor to Brittany," went on Maurice. "Especially to Le Robain. Do you stay here long?"

The lad explained eagerly. Plainly he had been miserably lonely till now and was famished for want of talk and company. "A fellow in our office" had told him about Brittany, and he had never been out of England before.

"So as soon as I could get away from the office I started off. But I haven't seen much yet. Still, it's better than the office."

Maurice nodded, with a full sense that what Le Robain held for him, too, was "better than the office."

"I can easily believe it," he said. "You will be sorry to go back."

"Aha!" The youth laughed nervously. "But I'm not going back to it—not ever. I'm my own master now. No more office for me."

"Really!"

"You see"—the boy was gluttonous for a listener—"on my twenty-first birthday I came in for my money. My father wanted me to keep on at the office——"

"Then your father is still alive? It was not his money?"

"Oh, Lord, no!" The boy laughed. "I'm richer than him now. It was an uncle of mine—Uncle Charles, my mother's brother—that left it to me."

Maurice poured himself a glass of wine and drank it slowly. He relapsed into French for one instant. "*Tiens!*" he said, and resumed his English forthwith. "I, too, had a good uncle," he remarked, looking at the youth with a smile. "Like you I am the son of my uncle. Two of us, and we meet at Le Robain. It is as impossible as it is true."

The young fellow gaped uncomprehendingly. "Did—did your uncle leave you money?" he asked stupidly.

"He did," replied Maurice. "You have no monopoly in that kind of uncle. He left me all I have. And like you, it is because of my uncle that I am here. One might almost guess that the two of them scraped acquaintance in Paradise and arranged this meeting for us. I wonder how your uncle likes my uncle!"

The youth grinned. He conceived he was getting the measure of his *vis-à-vis*—a rich and witty French gentleman, a nobleman, perhaps—a count. He talked and listened greedily throughout the meal and when afterwards Maurice strolled forth from the inn

door, cigar in mouth, to the rough road that dipped to the little harbour, his dinner-companion made occasion to join him.

"I was going down to look at the sea," said Maurice. "That, and the wine when it is red, are the only things to look upon here. And there are times when it is superb."

They passed among the sullen-fronted stone cottages and so down to the little "hard" of stone revetment that sloped to the inward surging tide. To either side of it, perhaps two hundred yards apart, a concrete arm of harbour wall ran seaward, uselessly, for no anchor could hold on that iron bottom in the great inward running swell and sag of the seas. Maurice led the way out upon the eastern arm, and the rising wind lifted feathers of spray that stung their faces as they leaned against it.

"Well?" said Maurice as they came to a halt half-way along the wall.

"Eh?" The young fellow did not understand.

"Look, my friend!" Maurice waved his cigar at the seaward distances. "These are the waves that Britannia rules. What do you think of your subjects?"

It was something more than dusk by now. Below them, prisoned in their channel, the great black swells roared shorewards like gigantic boulders cascading down a mountainside. They came out of the deepening night, and to east and west, outside the channel, there stretched away beyond eye-range the white of tumbling breakers upon the coast-wise rock barrier of Brittany.

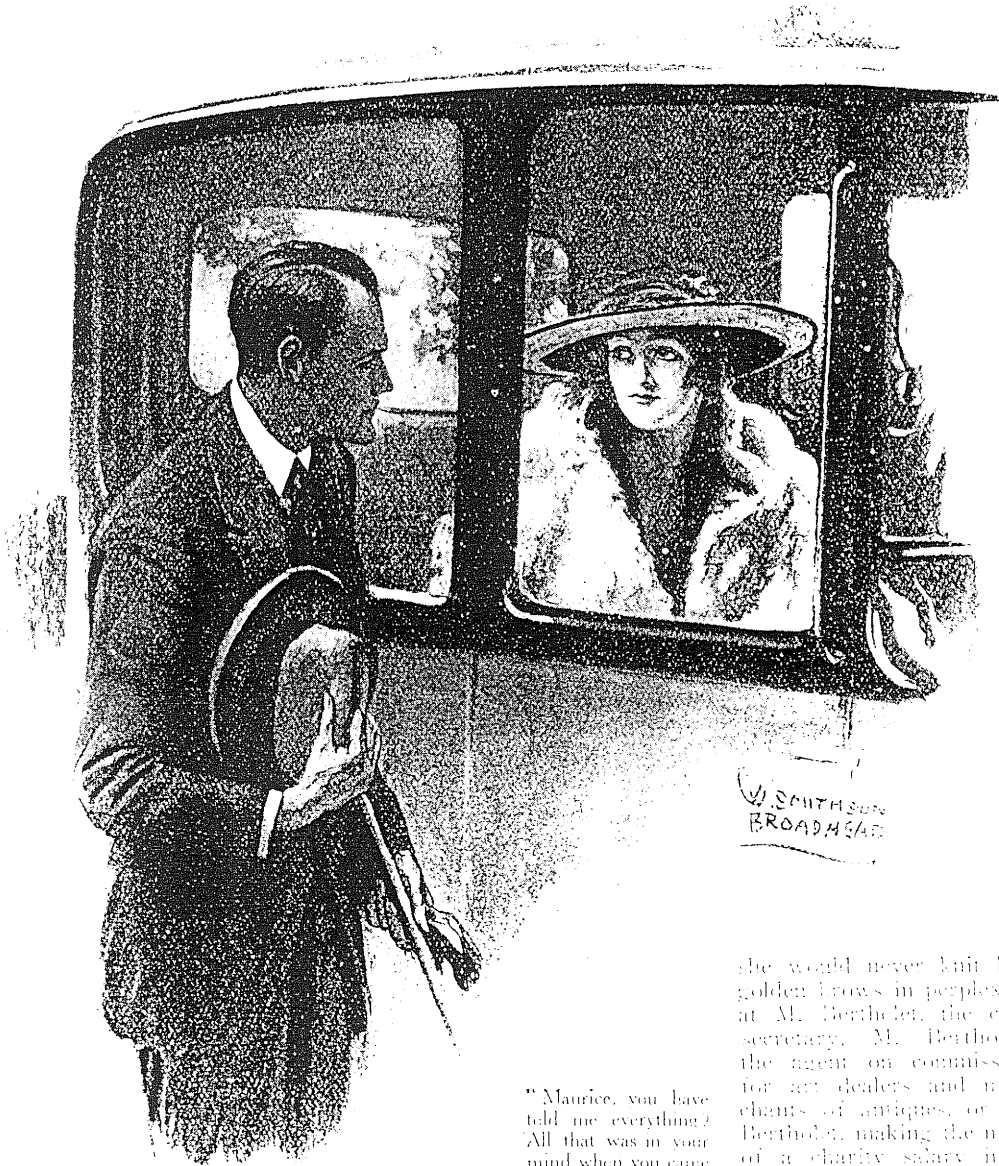
"Shouldn't care to fall in just now," said the young man.

"Not want to meet your uncle?" laughed Maurice. "Now, I, when I was twenty-five, I swum that for a bet. That is my one accomplishment—swimming! Don't you swim?"

"Well!" The youth hesitated. "I've swum, of course—a little. Swimming-baths and the seaside—that kind of thing. But I'm not what you'd call a swimmer. I say, it's getting cold out here, isn't it?"

They turned and went back. Maurice made an early excuse and retired to his bedroom. He had reconnoitred his ground; Le Robain had justified his memories of it.

Not for an instant did he falter in his purpose. The thing was ordained to be done; remained only to stage it so that scandal should gain no foothold, so that Irma de Leyle should not be shocked and frightened. It was to be an accident, his luggage and his belongings would remain as they were; he would write to a friend in Paris making an appointment for that day week; he would leave his pocket-book with his money in a drawer of the dressing-



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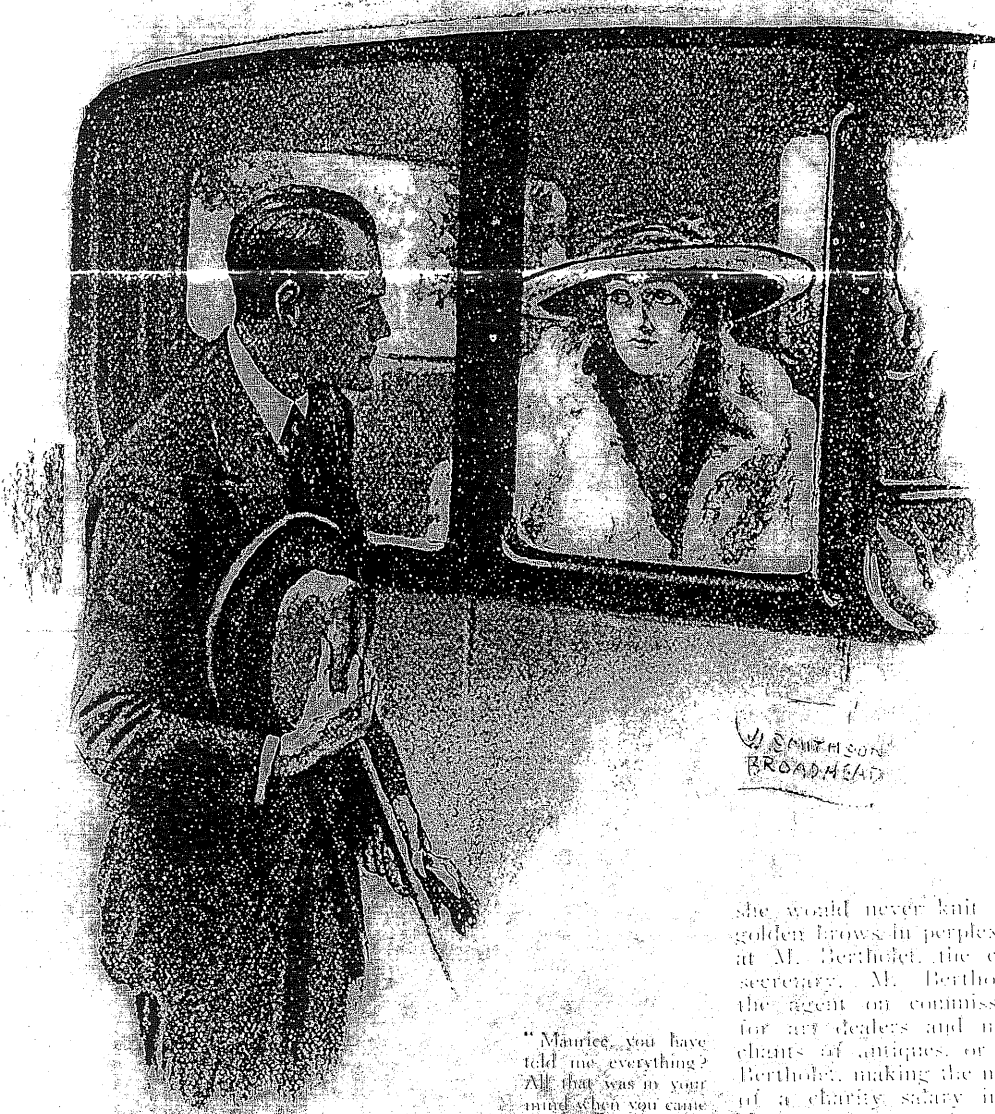
table. And the lad he had met at dinner should accompany him to the harbour and witness the stumble and the fall into the water. He could count, he thought, on him to run yelling for help and meantime he, the strong swimmer, the practised companion of the waves, would strike seawards, away from the compulsions of life, to the final infinite mercy of the great waters.

And Irma would never know. At any rate

she would never knit her golden brows in perplexity at M. Bertholet, the club secretary, M. Bertholet, the agent on commission for art dealers and merchants of antiques, or M. Bertholet, making the most of a charity salary in a sinecure.

The young Englishman enjoyed a day of sheer charat the following day. Maurice joined him at breakfast and took him for a walk, lunched with him, and loathed with him throughout the afternoon. He had a feeling that he must pay in advance for the service he was about to exact and he gave himself trouble to be utterly delightful. He incurred a smashing compliment.

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The young Englishman enjoyed a day of sheer charm the following day. Maurice joined him at breakfast and took him for a walk, lunched with him and lounged with him throughout the afternoon. He had a feeling that he must pay in advance for the service he was about to exact and he gave himself trouble to be utterly delightful. He incurred a smashing compliment.

"I didn't know Frenchmen were like you," said the boy, as they sat in the pale afternoon

sunshine in the inn garden. "I'm an Englishman, of course," he went on; "an' proud of it!" he added hastily; "but you do make me wonder how we ever won Waterloo."

Maurice raised his hat in salute, smiling. "You ought to be Ambassador to France," he said lightly.

The evening came up squally, and when, after dinner, they set forth upon their stroll to the harbour, they wore rain-coats. Maurice, as usual, had his cigar. He was satisfied with himself; there had not been one tragic word to cite against him, not one heroic gesture.

"It should be a splendid sight to-night," he said. "Britannia's subjects in rebellion! Once, when I was here before, I saw a ship drive straight on to the rocks under the windows of the village and melt—literally dissolve into her elements—while I watched. And of the bodies that came ashore, not a single one was recognisable. Ah, here we are."

They had rounded a row of cottages to the top of the hard and the low thunder of the sea swelled at them as through a trumpet. There was a sliver of moon aloft with ravelled cloud-scud pouring across it, and the water came shooting to their feet up the slope.

"It's a rotten night to go out on that wall," shivered the boy.

"A glorious night, you mean," said Maurice. "But don't come if you don't feel like it. I shan't be long."

The boy said something inarticulate, but followed at his heels. But for the need of a witness for Irma's sake, he would have spared him. He had come to the point when the thing must be done and it was too late to tinker with his plans.

The great rollers bowling in along the channel lipped the edge of the wall, and once an ankle-deep swirl of water foamed across it. The spray drove like shot and the wind pulled and thrust like a wrestler. When they reached the point at which they had stood the previous evening, Maurice had to shout to make himself heard.

"Not nervous, I hope?"

He caught but one word—"heastly"—of the reply, as the wind whipped the sound from the lad's lips. He looked about him at that tremendous theatre of vast forces and great voices in which he was to be an actor. The terrifying pomp of night and chaos were to be his. His resolution was perfect. Now was the time. He moved to step nearer the edge as though to peer intrepidly over. That was the instant chosen for accident by the freakish Fate that had brought the two "uncle sons" together at Le Robain.

As Maurice moved, the lad made to move after him, a hand outstretched to draw him

back. The slightly sloping top of the wall was shiny as a half-tide rock, and when he shifted his feet, he sat down with a stunning jolt. His feet shot forward and took Maurice at the back of the ankles, driving them from under him. Ere he knew what was happening he was overboard, and a great, smooth-bosomed silver-crested roller reached up to his falling body, gathered him in as a dog catches a thrown biscuit and sucked him down.

"It is done, then!" was his single thought as the water churned him under and shouted in his ears. He thought he touched the rocky bottom of the channel; mere instinct and unbreakable habit held his breath for him; and, raincoat and all, he shot upwards and found his face in the air on the reverse slope of a great wave. Over him was the side of the wall and he could see the edge of it against the sky.

He had, perhaps, five seconds in which to see that and the contorted figure that poised and swayed over him on the brink, with tossing arms of anguish and a something in all its attitude that suggested it was screaming. And in the last two of those five seconds it ceased to wave and sway; a hand came stiffly forward, pointing at his face. The boy had seen him. And ere the next wave gulped him, Maurice had a strange view of the figure on the wall, as it gathered itself to the conventional posture of a diver, hands joined and arms outstretched, swayed forward and came plunging down to him.

He felt the other's body collide with his own, desperate hands clawed over, got a grip on his rain-coat and tore a double handful of it away. Then it was borne off, and he was free to go his path again. He came once more to the surface, and saw, a few yards away, the floating face of the boy opened up from the depths and hands that grasped at the air. His would-be rescuer.

Maurice could still think and he swore. He could no more leave the lad, than he could murder him in cold blood. He struck out and got the other by the collar just as another roller tumbled down upon them.

There was none to time nor mark the stages of that struggle. There was nothing in favour of the two men in the water, no chance that offered itself, save the fact that each sea as it lifted them and then whelmed them bore them a little nearer the hard. The boy struggled feebly throughout; striving for the drowning man's deadly grapple; the high impulse that had nerved him to dive to the aid of Maurice had passed; twice Maurice had to let him go and recover him. The waters beat the reason from him; nothing remained but the will; he did not remember afterwards how men with life-lines battled forth and dragged them to the stones of

the slope. He recalled only lanterns and voices and rough hands that worked upon his wrists to loosen his grip on the boy and then the sting of brandy in his throat and the birth-pains of returning life.

It was when he lay in bed in the inn—dosed with the frightful French conception of that rare medicine, tea, and fortified with brandy—that the inwardness of the matter was plain to him. He sat up to give it voice.

"He has spoilt Le Robain for me! One cannot fall in twice. Confound him and his fool of an uncle!"

But his struggle—and the brandy perhaps—had numbed him. Serious thought must be for the morning. The inn-keeper and his family and a delegation of neighbours, tip-toeing into his room, found him sleeping profoundly, inelegantly even, for he was snoring healthfully.

"Un rude gaillard!" was their verdict.

He awoke to a day of balm. The wind had gone down, and beyond the shadow of the house the road and the village were bright with sunlight, while beyond the sea sulked and chafed like a beast beaten to submission. The inn-keeper in person—a sea-salty person, smelling of fish—was at his bedside with his coffee. There were a couple of letters on the tray.

The inn-keeper was avid to gossip, to question, to prescribe; but Maurice had torn open the first of the letters.

"Presently, presently," he said impatiently; and as the host withdrew, baffled, he read:

"MAURICE,

"I have thought. Come to me. I want you. Have I the right?"

"IRMA."

The second letter was never opened. But ten minutes later a tall figure in a silk dressing-gown entered the room of the other victim of the night's adventure and found that hero sitting up against his pillows eating an egg.

"Well, my preserver!" greeted Maurice cheerily, taking a seat on the foot of the bed.

"Don't!" The boy reddened passionately. "I knocked you in, and you saved my life."

Maurice laughed. "Bosh!" he said. "Thank our interfering old uncles for that. But I ought to tell you that there is one thing I learned from you last night."

The boy blushed again. "Don't rot!" he said.

"Ah, but I did," said Maurice. "You see I knew you were no swimmer and that you were afraid of the water. But when you dived all the same, I learned one thing of value."

"What?"

Maurice took him by the hand. "I learned how it was that you English won Waterloo!"

## To My Pipe

by M. A. van Hulsteyn

SWEET friend unsullied, comforter profound,  
Thy breath and fiery eye my fancies mould.  
When crystal lay the sparkling dewdrops round  
Like sheep dawn-fed in Sunshine's glittering fold  
Upon the Summer's rich moss-quilted ground,  
I loved thee. Time was sandalled then in gold  
And sleepy days slept softly, summer-bound.

Glass-footed Winter lashed from out his lair—  
O'er Summer's grave shrieked grim his growl unkind.  
Black clouds, jet lined with Hatred, rode the air  
On frosty carrion steed of icebound wind.  
Still drowned thou that gad-fly, Lead-feathered Care.  
At white-winged Courtship's warm meek-eyed behest,  
My mouth to thine dove-lipped in love I pressed.