ДЖОН ГОЛСУЪРТИ
COURAGE

At that time (said Ferrand) I was in poverty. Not the kind of poverty that goes without dinner, but the sort that goes without breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and exists as it can on bread and tobacco. I lived in one of those fourpenny lodging-houses, Westminster way. Three, five, seven beds in a room; if you pay regularly, you keep your own bed; if not, they put some one else there who will certainly leave you a memento of himself. It's not the foreigners' quarter; they are nearly all English, and drunkards. Three-quarters of them don't eat—can't; they have no capacity for solid food. They drink and drink. They're not worth wasting your money on—cab-runners, newspaper-boys, sellers of laces, and what you call sandwichmen; three-fourths of them brutalised beyond the power of recovery. What can you expect? They just live to scrape enough together to keep their souls in their bodies; they have no time or strength to think of anything but that. They come back at night and fall asleep—and how dead that sleep is! No, they never eat—just a bit of bread; the rest is drink!

There used to come to that house a little Frenchman, with a yellow, crow's-footed face; not old either, about thirty. But his life had been hard—no one comes to these houses if life is soft; especially no Frenchman; a Frenchman hates to leave his country. He came to shave us—charged a penny; most of us forgot to pay him, so that in all he shaved about three for a penny. He went to others of these houses—this gave him his income—he kept the little shop next door, too, but he never sold anything. How he worked! He also went to one of your Public Institutions; this was not so profitable, for there he was paid a penny for ten shaves. He used to say to me, moving his tired fingers like little yellow sticks: "Pff! I slave! To gain a penny, friend, I'm spending fourpence. What would you have? One must nourish oneself to have the strength to shave ten people for a penny."

He was like an ant, running round and round in his little hole, without any chance but just to live; and always in hopes of saving enough to take him back to France, and set him up there. We had a liking for each other. He was the only one, in fact—except a sandwich-man who had been an actor, and was very intelligent, when he wasn't drunk—the only one in all that warren who had ideas. He was fond of pleasure and loved his music-hall—must have gone at least twice a year, and was always talking of it. He had little knowledge of its joys, it's true—hadn't the money for that, but his intentions were good. He used to keep me till the last, and shave me slowly.

“This rests me,” he would say. It was amusement for me, too, for I had got into the habit of going for days without opening my lips. It’s only a man here and there one can talk with; the rest only laugh; you seem to them a fool, a freak—something that should be put into a cage or tied by the leg.

“Yes,” the little man would say, “when I came here first I thought I should soon go back, but now I’m not so sure. I’m losing my illusions. Money has wings, but it’s not to me it flies. Believe me, friend, I am shaving my soul into these specimens. And how unhappy they are, poor creatures; how they must suffer! Drink! you say. Yes, that saves them—they get a little happiness from that. Unfortunately, I haven’t the constitution for it—here.” And he would show me where he had no constitution. “You, too, comrade, you don’t seem to be in luck; but then, you’re young. Ah, well, faut être philosophe—but imagine what kind of a game it is in this climate, especially if you come from the South!”

When I went away, which was as soon as I had nothing left to pawn, he gave me money—there’s no question of lending in those houses: if a man parts with money he gives it; and lucky if he’s not robbed into the bargain. There are fellows there who watch for a new pair of shoes, or a good overcoat, profit by their wakefulness as soon as the other is asleep, and promptly disappear. There’s no morality in the face of destitution—it needs a man of iron, and these are men of straw. But one thing I will say of the low English—they are not bloodthirsty, like the low French and Italians.

Well, I got a job as fireman on a steamer, made a tour tramping, and six months later I was back again. The first morning I saw the Frenchman. It was shaving-day; he was more like an ant than ever, working away with all his legs and arms; a little yellower, and perhaps more wrinkled.

“Ah!” he called out to me in French, “there you are—back again. I knew you’d come. Wait till I’ve finished with this specimen—I’ve a lot to talk about.”

We went into the kitchen, a big stone-floored room, with tables for eating—and sat down by the fire. It was January, but, summer or winter, there’s always a fire burning in that kitchen.

“So,” he said, “you have come back? No luck? Eh! Patience! A few more days won’t kill you at your age. What fogs, though! You see, I’m still here, but my comrade, Pigon, is dead. You remember him—the big man with black hair who had the shop down the street. Amiable fellow, good friend to me; and married. Fine woman his wife—a little ripe, seeing she

has had children, but of good family. He died suddenly of heart disease. Wait a bit; I'll tell you about that....

"It was not long after you went away, one fine day in October, when I had just finished with these specimens here, and was taking my coffee in the shop, and thinking of that poor Pigon—dead then just three days—when pom! comes a knock, and there is Madame Pigon! Very calm—a woman of good family, well brought up, well made—fine woman. But the cheeks pale, and the eyes so red, poor soul.

"'Well, Madame,' I asked her, 'what can I do for you?'

"It seems this poor Pigon died bankrupt; there was not a cent in the shop. He was two days in his grave, and the bailiffs in already.

"'Ah, Monsieur!' she says to me, 'what am I to do?'

"'Wait a bit, Madame!' I get my hat and go back to the shop with her.

"What a scene! Two bailiffs, who would have been the better for a shave, sitting in a shop before the basins; and everywhere, ma foi, everywhere, children! Tk! Tk! A little girl of ten, very like her mother; two little boys with little trousers, and one with nothing but a chemise; and others—two, quite small, all rolling on the floor; and what a horrible noise! —all crying, all but the little girl, fit to break themselves in two. The bailiffs seemed perplexed. It was enough to make one weep! Seven! and some quite small! That poor Pigon, I had no idea!

"The bailiffs behaved very well.

"'Well,' said the biggest, 'you can have four-and-twenty hours to find this money; my mate can camp out here in the shop—we don't want to be hard on you!'

"I helped Madame to soothe the children.

"'If I had the money,' I said, 'it should be at your service, Madame—in each well-born heart there should exist humanity; but I have no money. Try and think whether you have no friends to help you.'

"'Monsieur,' she answered, 'I have none. Have I had time to make friends—I, with seven children?'

"'But in France, Madame?'

"'None, Monsieur. I have quarrelled with my family; and reflect—it is now seven years since we came to England, and then only because no one would help us,' That seemed to me bad, but what could I do? I could only say —

"'Hope always, Madame—trust in me!'

“I went away. All day long I thought how calm she was—magnificent! And I kept saying to myself: ‘Come, tap your head! tap your head! Something must be done!’ But nothing came.

“The next morning it was my day to go to that sacred Institution, and I started off still thinking what on earth could be done for the poor woman; it was as if the little ones had got hold of my legs and were dragging at me. I arrived late, and, to make up time, I shaved them as I have never shaved them; a hot morning—I perspired! Ten for a penny! Ten for a penny! I thought of that, and of the poor woman. At last I finished and sat down. I thought to myself: ‘It’s too strong! Why do you do it? It’s stupid! You are wasting yourself!’ And then, my idea came to me! I asked for the manager.

“‘Monsieur,’ I said, ‘it is impossible for me to come here again.’

“‘What do you mean?’ says he.

“‘I have had enough of your—“ten for a penny”—I am going to get married; I can’t afford to come here any longer. I lose too much flesh for the money.’

“‘What?’ he says, ‘you’re a lucky man if you can afford to throw away your money like this!’

“‘Throw away my money! Pardon, Monsieur, but look at me’—I was still very hot—‘for every penny I make I lose threepence, not counting the boot leather to and fro. While I was still a bachelor, Monsieur, it was my own affair—I could afford these extravagances; but now—it must finish—I have the honour, Monsieur!’

“I left him, and walked away. I went to the Pigons’ shop. The bailiff was still there—Pfui! He must have been smoking all the time.

“‘I can’t give them much longer,’ he said to me.

“‘It is of no importance,’ I replied; and I knocked, and went in to the back room.

“The children were playing in the corner, that little girl, a heart of gold, watching them like a mother; and Madame at the table with a pair of old black gloves on her hands. My friend, I have never seen such a face-calm, but so pale, so frightfully discouraged, so overwhelmed. One would say she was waiting for her death. It was bad, it was bad—with the winter coming on!

“‘Good morning, Madame,’ I said. ‘What news? Have you been able to arrange anything?’

“‘No, Monsieur. And you?’

“‘No!’ And I looked at her again—a fine woman; ah! a fine woman.

“‘But,’ I said, ‘an idea has come to me this morning. Now, what would you say if I asked you to marry me? It might possibly be better than nothing.’

“She regarded me with her black eyes, and answered —

“‘But willingly, Monsieur!’ and then, comrade, but not till then, she cried.”

The little Frenchman stopped, and stared at me hard.

“H’m!” I said at last, “you have courage!”

He looked at me again; his eyes were troubled, as if I had paid him a bad compliment.

“You think so?” he said at last, and I saw that the thought was gnawing at him, as if I had turned the light on some desperate, dark feeling in his heart.

“Yes!” he said, taking his time, while his good yellow face wrinkled and wrinkled, and each wrinkle seemed to darken: “I was afraid of it even when I did it. Seven children!” Once more he looked at me: “And since!—sometimes—sometimes—I could—” he broke off, then burst out again:

“Life is hard! What would you have? I knew her husband. Could I leave her to the streets?”

1904.

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