

I. *The Star of the Ballet Nègre*

Folies Bergère, Casino de Paris and Moulin Rouge: those three dazzling beacons fascinate Parisian and foreign moths, irresistibly attracted by the incandescence of the artificial light in which they flutter madly, without caring whether they burn their wings. Casino de Paris, Folies Bergère, Moulin Rouge! Ambiance of luxury and lust! All races are encountered there; the most various situations and the most abnormal milieux rub shoulders there, with the most disparate mentalities mixed in. Moulin Rouge, Casino de Paris, Folies Bergère! Factories of excitement! Marvelous antechambers of gallant shocks and spasms in which one dies, drowned in a minute! Pagan temples where the drugs and incense of voluptuousness burn! The most dissimilar objectives lead the two sexes there, moved by an avid desire for the noise, glare and hectic agitation favored by the sparkling décor, the magicality of the spectacle and the radiance of electricity.

In the blackness of day at the end of December, heavy low clouds have poured rain persistently over the saddened city. With nightfall, the lights come on, and Paris is reborn. Finished, the day of labor for some, of bitter hunting for others, and sinister ennui for the majority. Now is the hour of dance-halls, theaters and music halls! The men don their smoking jackets, the women make up a savant beauty; all of them rush toward the places of pleasure, the factories of stupor, the department stores of worse-than-naked—in order, at the end of the day, to distract themselves, to relax, to forget cares, to silence, sometimes, the inhibiting voice of conscience and, in a general fashion, to escape from oneself for a few hours.

That evening, at the music hall of the Folies Bergères, the première of a new revue, with *ballet nègre*, was attracting All Paris and the birds of passage, cleverly lured by intensive publicity. A hint of mystery, relative to an unknown star, was exciting curiosity. Brought to Paris by the celebrated actress Cécile Borel, who had discovered her during her last tour of North America, the young half-caste was, according to the press, exceptionally original, and promised the public the revelation of an unusual talent, or, at any rate, a strange, disconcerting beauty.

It did not require anything more to fill the hall to bursting, and there was everything in that gathering: aristocrats, clubmen, politicians, well-known doctors, rich manufacturers, artists, rich foreigners, resident aliens sparkling with jewelry, and the nouveau riche, arrogant in order to seem distinguished. On the feminine side there were renowned actress in the theater and on the screen, sacred or consecrated prostitutes, trendy socialites and good-time girls in search of lucrative adventures. Figures of luxury, lust and the all-too-necessary superfluous: a bizarre crowd, very mixed, emanating the special magnetism of places of amusement.

In one front-of-stage box: Cécile Borel. Her imposing beauty is enlivened by a gleam of triumph; she is the focal point of the audience's gaze; is it not to her that that the alluring promise of the unusual—ardently sought but rarely encountered—is owed?

By her side, another beauty, much younger and less made-up: Miss Maud Macfield, an American billionaire of fantastic caprices, a frantic tourist for whom the small globe no longer has any secrets. By yacht, airplane, auto and sleeping-car, she has gone twice round the world, leaving memories of an exaggerated whimsy everywhere. She was at the gala première at the Folies Bergère that evening in order to support, with Cécile Borel, the Parisian debut of the bronzed dancer Nora, whom both of them were pushing hard, with their money and their connections.

Behind the two women, slightly dissimulated, Monsieur Ernest Paris of the Académie Française, the celebrated litterateur of the genre and the genius—is it necessary to spell it out?—admired by all: Ernest Paris, the king of the audience, at least in the domain of letters. The witty malice of his eyes, the final youth in that antique man, attenuates the sensuality expressed by his equine and faunesque mask, the heavy gourmand mouth and the long prominent nose.

The opposite front-of-stage box is occupied by four men, three of whom, at least, are “aces” of science: Dr. Jean Fortin, the high-browed image of the seeker, whose audacious and disconcerting discoveries have rendered him popular. By his side Dr. Serge Voronoff, the Agni of extinct virility.¹ In rear, a tall dark-haired fellow, well-balanced, with extraordinarily beautiful eyes, most impressive, above all, because of their metallic and hypnotic gleam: Dr. Marc Vanel, Homo-Deus, the mysterious individual around whom strange and fantastic legends circulate, who has studied psychic sciences in the hermetic realm. Further back, an unexpected and discreet fourth occupant: Georges Clemenceau, whose presence the public explains by virtue of his well-known long friendship with Dr. Fortin.²

Then, at hazard, the roaming opera-glasses of a spectator might discover a hundred other faces more-or-less notorious and transitory; there is an entire top drawer at the Folies Bergère this evening.

The curtain has just fallen on the first act, and the star, Nora, so widely and well advertised, has not yet appeared. The revue, exempt from banality, justifies its success. The exotic rutilant scenery, the artistically-contrived costumes, the joyful types of the actors, the frenetic or soothing music, form an ensemble evoking, in an agreeable and nostalgic manner, those mysterious lands of perfume, sunlight and dream, of which those who have visited them retain the charmed memory, like delicious vanished kisses.

Interval chatter. People are talking almost everywhere, not about what they have just seen but the *ballet nègre*, and the surprise, Nora, who is discussed in more than one conversation in complete ignorance.

In the front-of-stage box, Ernest Paris comments on the desire of that public, ready to give the ovation of its applause to a new idol.

“Fortunate women! Not twenty years old, they only have to appear to plunder success. We poor men of letters only reach it after a great deal of hard work, when we can do no more with it.”

“You have glory, Master, and the world salutes your genius. How many yearn to match you?”

The white-haired old man with the equine profile smiles. “Nothing is worth as much as being twenty years old, an aviator and beloved by women.”

“What!” says Cécile Borel, laughing. “You’d still like to steal hearts?”

“No need to steal them when your name is Ernest Paris. They come to you.”

“If I took you at your word, Miss Maud,” says the old man, “you’d be trapped.”

“How long this entr’acte is,” interject the actress. “I’m in haste to see my Nora make her entrance.”

“Hey!” says Ernest Paris, “I can see ‘the Tiger’ sitting opposite, behind our mutual friend Dr. Jean Fortin—yes, the former President of the Council, Georges Clemenceau.”

“Oh, I’d like to be introduced to him. Can you do that, my dear?”

“Perhaps...some time...but not here.”

In the gallery, Patrice Montclar, the dramatic author, runs into an old comrade of his generation, Maurice de Fédraudy.

“What is the doyen of the Comédie-Française doing at the Folies Bergère?”

“Learning his métier ape-fashion,” says the actor, laughing. “And I’m not alone here. Who among us isn’t more or less an ape? Humans will always have something of the ancestral in them. We’re all apes, from the artist like me, a grimacer of passions, to the parliamentarian who earnestly repeats the same hollow phrases at the tribune, heard all the way from Mirabeau to Jaurès. Other apes march in line, head to the right, head to the left. And those same apes kill one another with enthusiasm, as their forefathers have always done. Mussolini apes Napoléon.”

¹ Agni is the Hindu god of fire, acceptor of sacrifices, eternally young because his fire is reignited every day. He has two heads, one symbolizing immortality and the other the mystery of life.

² Georges Clemenceau (a.k.a. the “Tiger”) died on 24 November 1929, which might have been before the publication date of the novel, but it must have been written while he was still alive. Champsaur had known him for a long time, and thought highly of him. There is no way of knowing for sure whether he obtained Clemenceau’s formal permission to employ him as a character (Clemenceau burned all his private correspondence before his death) but it is probable that the great man was aware of his employment, and approved of it; it is possible that it arose from a conversation between the two men.

“You’re forgetting the best: the pope and his cardinals.

“Let’s not touch on those. They teach us the first grimaces, and we only let loose the last.

A young actress who was with Montclar: “You haven’t dared to compare our smiles with your grimaces.”

The doyen continues: “Because I’ve only been talking about males. But she-apes play artfully with the human heart: it makes one afraid. The most beautiful grimaces, truly, are those that we command.”

“You’re not very amiable today, Master Ape. Has someone trodden on your tail?”

“It’s starting again. I love the harmoniously cacophonous and scatterbrained sounds of that jazz overture that’s beginning. Let’s get back to our seats.”

The curtain rises on the second act, especially contrived, it appears, for the unknown star. On the edge of a tropical forest, an inviolate refuge of wild beasts, negroes of both sexes are crouched, singing to the accompaniment of an unfamiliar music: first a grave and monotonous chant; then a frenzy of rage makes them rise to their feet and gesticulate savagely, only, without transition, for them to resume their heart-rending plaint and fall back into their weary poses. Fatalistic resignation after impotent revolt! A moving symbol of a race that has groaned under slavery and whose suffering and rancor are expressed in those old songs, devoid of rhythm but poignant, which only negroes, perhaps by atavism, are capable of singing without the emotive character being diminished.

Suddenly, arriving like those magical characters who surge forth from a trap-door, a bizarre individual whom the troop of negroes surround and welcome, is quivering on the stage.

A black bird, a sylph or a woman?

She dances, bounds, spins, capers with vertiginous rapidity, followed in her evolutions by a hallucinating jazz. Then, suddenly, that Beast—pink, yellow, brown, blue...yes, blue—is immobile, in the hieratic pose of an idol, in the center of the other prostrate, adoring negroes.

And the opera-glasses are focused: it’s evidently a woman, but how original! She is naked, save for a string of bananas that girdle her, an ivory necklace circling several times, falls beneath her young breasts; long pendants hang tremulously from her ear-lobes, refining the face, which is illuminated by two beautiful, keen and mobile eyes, and the white, sharp teeth of a wolf-cub. The body is svelte and graceful, an admirable living statue—disquieting too, because an indefinable but undeniable animality emanates from it, which is slightly disconcerting. She astonishes, charms, galvanizes.

The idol has resumed her dancing, furiously. Is it dancing or acrobatics, which the most skilful fairground performers could not contrive but which she executes with the ease of a frightful flexibility? Her blue, maroon body, with unexpected movements of the hips, writhes in a thousand fantasies rich in sensations, which suggest a versatile spirit and strike the most unexpected, the most grotesque and the most vivid—and perhaps, sometimes, the most obscene—poses. But of that has nothing learned, nothing imposed, and seems instead to be the frolicking of a young animal amusing herself, without worrying about anything whatsoever—and giving the audience imperishable moments, with the bronzed gleam of her agile and sensual person, which overturns the traditional esthetic installed thus far in the minds of spectators of civilized dancing.

One is no longer in the theater but in the most secret and the most distant nature, in the mysterious bush, and the virgin forest, where that woman was dancing as a young wild animal bounds.

Dr. Jean Fortin said to his neighbors, Clemenceau, Mark Vanel and Voronoff: “We did well to come; I believe that’s our girl.”

Where does that black bird come from? From what primitive hut lost in the tropics? Hidden in the leafy branches of a fallen tree that garnished almost one entire side of the stage, an enormous orangutan, with a abrupt leap, falls alongside the dancer, and seizes her in its arms, while the horrified negroes, with irresistible expressions, run away howling.

A struggle is engaged between the jungle monster with its partner, until the latter escapes, leaps, grips the rim of Cécile Borel’s box, and with surprising agility, aiding herself with her undulous hands and her intelligent feet, she turns, almost falls, catches herself magically by one foot, and arrives thus,

bimane, quadrumane, in front of the box where doctors Jean Fortin and Marc Vanel, on their feet, wonderstruck, have followed the extraordinary acrobatics.

But the huge orangutan has hurled itself on its prey, who struggles and recommences her frantic writhing, hectically. Then, holding her at arm's length and making use of the fallen tree like a trampoline, it carries her away—and disappears, superb and victorious, into the profound forest.

And there was delirium in the hall. Never had such an ovation been seen before. The star unknown twenty minutes before was now famous; and Cecile Borel was exultant. When, in response to frenetic recalls, Nora returned to the stage, she turned toward the associate of the Comédie-Française. On a whim, Nora had adorned her young nudity with a girdle of multicolored feathers, which undulated gently at each of her acrobatic gestures; but her skin appeared troubling, strange, pink, bronzed, all caressed with somber azure, like that of a blue dancer. In that fashion, she appeared as a great bird of prismatic adornment, whom a malicious enchantress had transformed part-way into a woman. A charming spontaneity caused her to prostrate herself, hands extended, palms open, as if she desired to offer to Cécile Borel and the American woman the homage of the victory that she had just carried off.

“My dear friends, it's a real find you've made there,” Ernest Paris said to them. “But fundamentally, what is this Nora? Woman or ape? I haven't yet made up my mind.”

“Me neither,” replied the actress, smiling.

Meanwhile, on the other side, in the doctors' box, a veritable emotion was added to the enthusiasm that was transporting the hall.

“Dr. Goldry will be glad to know that we've found 'his' girl—who's also a little ours.”

“All that remains now to marry her off,” said Clemenceau. “It won't be very easy, in that naked profession.”

“Perhaps we can utilize her for further experiments,” said Marc Vanel.

“When one creates a new plaything,” said the facetious Jean Fortin, “it's necessary to amuse oneself with it or break it to see what there is inside.” He turned to Clemenceau. “How do you find the new star, Georges?”

“Disconcerting. Is she a woman or an animal?”

“Say: a she-ape who has become a woman, and you'll have the truth of it.”