

James Pethel

Max Beerbohm

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by Max Beerbohm

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James Pethel

By MAX BEERBOHM

I WAS shocked this morning when I saw in my newspaper a paragraph announcing his sudden death. I do not say that the shock was very disagreeable. One reads a newspaper for the sake of news. Had I never met James Pethel, belike I should never have heard of him: and my knowledge of his death, coincident with my knowledge that he had existed, would have meant nothing at all to me. If you learn suddenly that one of your friends is dead, you are wholly distressed. If the death is that of a mere acquaintance whom you have recently seen, you are

disconcerted, pricked is your sense of mortality; but you do find great solace in telling other people that you met "the poor fellow" only the other day, and that he was "so full of life and spirits," and that you remember he said--whatever you may remember of his sayings. If the death is that of a mere acquaintance whom you have not seen for years, you are touched so lightly as to find solace enough in even such faded reminiscence as is yours to offer. Seven years have passed since the day when last I saw James Pethel, and that day was the morrow of my first meeting with him.

I had formed the habit of spending August in Dieppe. The place was then less overrun by trippers than it is now. Some pleasant English people shared it with some pleasant French people. We used rather to resent the race-week--the third week of the month--as an intrusion on our privacy. We sneered as we read in the Paris edition of "The New York Herald" the names of the intruders, though by some of these we were secretly impressed. We disliked the nightly crush in the baccarat-room of the casino, and the croupiers' obvious excitement at the high play. I made a point of avoiding that room during that week, for the special reason that the sight of serious, habitual gamblers has always filled me with a depression bordering on disgust. Most of the men, by some subtle stress of their ruling passion, have grown so monstrously fat, and most of the women so harrowingly thin. The rest of the women seem to be marked out for apoplexy, and the rest of the men to be wasting away. One feels that anything thrown at them would be either embedded or shattered, and looks vainly among them for one person furnished with a normal amount of flesh. Monsters they are, all of them, to the eye, though I believe that many of them have excellent moral qualities in private life; but just as in an American town one goes sooner or later--goes against one's finer judgment, but somehow goes--into the dime-museum, so year by year, in Dieppe's race-week, there would be always one evening when I drifted into the baccarat-room. It was on such an evening that I first saw the man whose memory I here celebrate. My gaze was held by him for the very reason that he would have passed unnoticed elsewhere. He was conspicuous not in virtue of the mere fact that he was taking the bank at the principal table, but because there was nothing at all odd about him.

He alone, among his fellow-players, looked as if he were not to die before the year was out. Of him alone I said to myself that he was destined to die normally at a ripe old age. Next day, certainly, I would not have made this prediction, would not have "given" him the seven years that were still in store for him, nor the comparatively normal death that has been his. But now, as I stood opposite to him, behind the croupier, I was refreshed by my sense of his wholesome durability. Everything about him, except the amount of money he had been winning, seemed moderate. Just as he was neither fat nor thin, so had his face neither that extreme pallor nor that extreme redness which belongs to the faces of seasoned gamblers: it was just a clear pink. And his eyes had neither the unnatural brightness nor the unnatural dullness of the eyes about him: they were ordinarily clear eyes, of an ordinary gray. His very age was moderate: a putative thirty-six, not more. ("Not less," I would have said in those days.) He assumed no air of nonchalance. He did not deal out the cards as though they bored him, but he had no look of grim concentration. I noticed that the removal of his cigar from his mouth made never the least difference to his face, for he kept his lips pursed out as steadily as ever when he was not smoking. And this constant pursing

of his lips seemed to denote just a pensive interest.

His bank was nearly done now; there were only a few cards left. Opposite to him was a welter of party-colored counters that the croupier had not yet had time to sort out and add to the rouleaux already made; there were also a fair accumulation of notes and several little stacks of gold--in all, not less than five-hundred pounds, certainly. Happy banker! How easily had he won in a few minutes more than I, with utmost pains, could win in many months! I wished I were he. His lucre seemed to insult me personally. I disliked him, and yet I hoped he would not take another bank. I hoped he would have the good sense to pocket his winnings and go home. Deliberately to risk the loss of all those riches would intensify the insult to me.

"Messieurs, la banque est aux encheres." There was some brisk bidding while the croupier tore open and shuffled two new packs. But it was as I feared: the gentleman whom I resented kept his place.

"Messieurs, la banque est faite. Quinze-mille francs a la banque. Messieurs, les cartes passent. Messieurs, les cartes passent."

Turning to go, I encountered a friend, one of the race-weekers, but in a sense a friend.

"Going to play?" I asked.

"Not while Jimmy Pethel's taking the bank," he answered, with a laugh.

"Is that the man's name?"

"Yes. Don't you know him? I thought every one knew old Jimmy Pethel."

I asked what there was so wonderful about "old Jimmy Pethel" that every one should be supposed to know him.

"Oh, he's a great character. Has extraordinary luck--always."

I do not think my friend was versed in the pretty theory that good luck is the subconscious wisdom of them who in previous incarnations have been consciously wise. He was a member of the stock exchange, and I smiled as at a certain quaintness in his remark. I asked in what ways besides luck the "great character" was manifested. Oh, well, Pethel had made a huge "scoop" on the stock exchange when he was only twenty-three, and very soon had doubled that and doubled it again; then retired. He wasn't more than thirty-five now, And then? Oh, well, he was a regular all-round sportsman; had gone after big game all over the world and had a good many narrow shaves. Great steeple-chaser, too. Rather settled down now. Lived in Leicestershire mostly. Had a big place there. Hunted five times a week. Still did an occasional flutter, though. Cleared eighty-thousand in Mexicans last February. Wife had been a barmaid at Cambridge; married her when he was nineteen. Thing seemed to have turned out quite well. Altogether, a great character.

Possibly, thought I. But my cursory friend, accustomed to quick

transactions and to things accepted "on the nod," had not proved his case to my slower, more literary intelligence. It was to him, though, that I owed, some minutes later, a chance of testing his opinion. At the cry of "Messieurs, la banque est aux encheres," we looked round and saw that the subject of our talk was preparing to rise from his place. "Now one can punt," said Grierson (this was my friend's name), and turned to the bureau at which counters are for sale. "If old Jimmy Pethel punts," he added, "I shall just follow his luck." But this lode-star was not to be. While my friend was buying his counters, and I was wondering whether I, too, could buy some, Pethel himself came up to the bureau. With his lips no longer pursed, he had lost his air of gravity, and looked younger. Behind him was an attendant bearing a big wooden bowl--that plain, but romantic, bowl supplied by the establishment to a banker whose gains are too great to be pocketed. He and Grierson greeted each other. He said he had arrived in Dieppe this afternoon, was here for a day or two. We were introduced. He spoke to me with emprossement, saying he was a "very great admirer" of my work. I no longer disliked him. Grierson, armed with counters, had now darted away to secure a place that had just been vacated. Pethel, with a wave of his hand toward the tables, said:

"I suppose you never condescend to this sort of thing."

"Well--" I smiled indulgently.

"Awful waste of time," he admitted.

I glanced down at the splendid mess of counters and gold and notes that were now becoming, under the swift fingers of the little man at the bureau, an orderly array. I did not say aloud that it pleased me to be, and to be seen, talking on terms of equality to a man who had won so much. I did not say how wonderful it seemed to me that he, whom I had watched just now with awe and with aversion, had all the while been a great admirer of my work. I did but say, again indulgently, that I supposed baccarat to be as good a way of wasting time as another.

"Ah, but you despise us all the same." He added that he always envied men who had resources within themselves. I laughed lightly, to imply that it WAS very pleasant to have such resources, but that I didn't want to boast. And, indeed, I had never felt humbler, flimsier, than when the little man at the bureau, naming a fabulous sum, asked its owner whether he would take the main part in notes of mille francs, cinq-mille, dix-mille--quoi? Had it been mine, I should have asked to have it all in five-franc pieces. Pethel took it in the most compendious form, and crumpled it into his pocket. I asked if he were going to play any more to-night.

"Oh, later on," he said. "I want to get a little sea air into my lungs now." He asked, with a sort of breezy diffidence, if I would go with him. I was glad to do so. It flashed across my mind that yonder on the terrace he might suddenly blurt out: "I say, look here, don't think me awfully impertinent, but this money's no earthly use to me. I do wish you'd accept it as a very small return for all the pleasure your work has given me, and-- There, PLEASE! Not another word!"--all with such candor, delicacy, and genuine zeal that I should be unable to refuse. But I must not raise false hopes in my reader. Nothing of the sort happened. Nothing of that sort ever does happen.

We were not long on the terrace. It was not a night on which you could stroll and talk; there was a wind against which you had to stagger, holding your hat on tightly, and shouting such remarks as might occur to you. Against that wind acquaintance could make no headway. Yet I see now that despite that wind, or, rather, because of it, I ought already to have known Pethel a little better than I did when we presently sat down together inside the cafe of the casino. There had been a point in our walk, or our stagger, when we paused to lean over the parapet, looking down at the black and driven sea. And Pethel had shouted that it would be great fun to be out in a sailing-boat to-night, and that at one time he had been very fond of sailing.

As we took our seats in the cafe, he looked about him with boyish interest and pleasure; then squaring his arms on the little table, he asked me what I would drink. I protested that I was the host, a position which he, with the quick courtesy of the very rich, yielded to me at once. I feared he would ask for champagne, and was gladdened by his demand for water.

"Apollinaris, St. Galmier, or what?" I asked. He preferred plain water. I ventured to warn him that such water was never "safe" in these places. He said he had often heard that, but would risk it. I remonstrated, but he was firm. "Alors," I told the waiter, "pour Monsieur un verre de l'eau fraiche, et pour moi un demi blonde."

Pethel asked me to tell him who every one was. I told him no one was any one in particular, and suggested that we should talk about ourselves.

"You mean," he laughed, "that you want to know who the devil I am?"

I assured him that I had often heard of him. At this he was unaffectedly pleased.

"But," I added, "it's always more interesting to hear a man talked about by himself." And indeed, since he had NOT handed his winnings over to me, I did hope he would at any rate give me some glimpses into that "great character" of his. Full though his life had been, he seemed but like a rather clever schoolboy out on a holiday. I wanted to know more.

"That beer looks good," he admitted when the waiter came back. I asked him to change his mind, but he shook his head, raised to his lips the tumbler of water that had been placed before him, and meditatively drank a deep draft. "I never," he then said, "touch alcohol of any sort." He looked solemn; but all men do look solemn when they speak of their own habits, whether positive or negative, and no matter how trivial; and so, though I had really no warrant for not supposing him a reclaimed drunkard, I dared ask him for what reason he abstained.

"When I say I NEVER touch alcohol," he said hastily, in a tone as of self-defense, "I mean that I don't touch it often, or, at any rate--well, I never touch it when I'm gambling, you know. It--it takes the edge off."

His tone did make me suspicious. For a moment I wondered whether he had married the barmaid rather for what she symbolized than for what in herself she was. But no, surely not; he had been only nineteen years old. Nor in any way had he now, this steady, brisk, clear-eyed fellow, the aspect of one who had since fallen.

"The edge off the excitement?" I asked.

"Rather. Of course that sort of excitement seems awfully stupid to YOU; but--no use denying it--I do like a bit of a flutter, just occasionally, you know. And one has to be in trim for it. Suppose a man sat down dead-drunk to a game of chance, what fun would it be for him? None. And it's only a question of degree. Soothe yourself ever so little with alcohol, and you don't get QUITE the full sensation of gambling. You do lose just a little something of the proper tremors before a coup, the proper throes during a coup, the proper thrill of joy or anguish after a coup. You're bound to, you know," he added, purposely making this bathos when he saw me smiling at the heights to which he had risen.

"And to-night," I asked, remembering his prosaically pensive demeanor in taking the bank, "were you feeling these throes and thrills to the utmost?"

He nodded.

"And you'll feel them again to-night?"

"I hope so."

"I wonder you can stay away."

"Oh, one gets a bit deadened after an hour or so. One needs to be freshened up. So long as I don't bore you--"

I laughed, and held out my cigarette-case.

"I rather wonder you smoke," I murmured, after giving him a light. "Nicotine's a sort of drug. Doesn't it soothe you? Don't you lose just a little something of the tremors and things?"

He looked at me gravely.

"By Jove!" he ejaculated, "I never thought of that. Perhaps you're right. 'Pon my word, I must think that over."

I wondered whether he were secretly laughing at me. Here was a man to whom--so I conceived, with an effort of the imagination--the loss or gain of a few hundred pounds could hardly matter. I told him I had spoken in jest. "To give up tobacco might," I said, "intensify the pleasant agonies of a gambler staking his little all. But in your case--well, I don't see where the pleasant agonies come in."

"You mean because I'm beastly rich?"

"Rich," I amended.

"All depends on what you call rich. Besides, I'm not the sort of fellow who's content with three per cent. A couple of months ago--I tell you this in confidence--I risked virtually all I had in an Argentine deal."

"And lost it?"

"No; as a matter of fact, I made rather a good thing out of it. I did rather well last February, too. But there's no knowing the future. A few errors of judgment, a war here, a revolution there, a big strike somewhere else, and--" He blew a jet of smoke from his lips, and then looked at me as at one whom he could trust to feel for him in a crash already come.

My sympathy lagged, and I stuck to the point of my inquiry.

"Meanwhile," I suggested, "and all the more because you aren't merely a rich man, but also an active taker of big risks, how can these tiny little baccarat risks give you so much emotion?"

"There you rather have me," he laughed. "I've often wondered at that myself. I suppose," he puzzled it out, "I do a good lot of make-believe. While I'm playing a game like this game to-night, I IMAGINE the stakes are huge. And I IMAGINE I haven't another penny in the world."

"Ah, so that with you it's always a life-and-death affair?"

He looked away.

"Oh, no, I don't say that."

"Stupid phrase," I admitted. "But"--there was yet one point I would put to him--"if you have extraordinary luck always--"

"There's no such thing as luck."

"No, strictly, I suppose, there isn't. But if in point of fact you always do win, then--well, surely, perfect luck driveth out fear."

"Who ever said I always won?" he asked sharply.

I waved my hands and said, "Oh, you have the reputation, you know, for extraordinary luck."

"That isn't the same thing as always winning. Besides, I HAVEN'T extraordinary luck, never HAVE had. Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "if I thought I had any more chance of winning than of losing, I'd--I'd--"

"Never again set foot in that baccarat-room to-night," I soothingly suggested.

"Oh, baccarat be blowed! I wasn't thinking of baccarat. I was thinking of--oh, lots of things; baccarat included, yes."

"What things?" I ventured to ask.

"What things?" He pushed back his chair. "Look here," he said with a laugh, "don't pretend I haven't been boring your head off with all this talk about myself. You've been too patient. I'm off. Shall I see you to-morrow? Perhaps you'd lunch with us to-morrow? It would be a great pleasure for my wife. We're at the Grand Hotel."

I said I should be most happy, and called the waiter; at sight of whom my friend said he had talked himself thirsty, and asked for another glass of water. He mentioned that he had brought his car over with him: his little daughter (by the news of whose existence I felt idiotically surprised) was very keen on motoring, and they were all three starting the day after to-morrow on a little tour through France. Afterward they were going on to Switzerland "for some climbing." Did I care about motoring? If so, we might go for a spin after luncheon, to Rouen or somewhere. He drank his glass of water, and, linking a friendly arm in mine, passed out with me into the corridor. He asked what I was writing now, and said that he looked to me to "do something big one of these days," and that he was sure I had it in me. This remark, though of course I pretended to be pleased by it, irritated me very much. It was destined, as you shall see, to irritate me very much more in recollection.

Yet I was glad he had asked me to luncheon--glad because I liked him and glad because I dislike mysteries. Though you may think me very dense for not having thoroughly understood Pethel in the course of my first meeting with him, the fact is that I was only aware, and that dimly, of something more in him than he had cared to reveal--some veil behind which perhaps lurked his right to the title so airily bestowed on him by Grierson. I assured myself, as I walked home, that if veil there was, I should to-morrow find an eyelet. But one's intuition when it is off duty seems always a much more powerful engine than it does on active service; and next day, at sight of Pethel awaiting me outside his hotel, I became less confident. His, thought I, was a face which, for all its animation, would tell nothing--nothing, at any rate, that mattered. It expressed well enough that he was pleased to see me; but for the rest I was reminded that it had a sort of frank inscrutability. Besides, it was at all points so very usual a face--a face that couldn't (so I then thought), even if it had leave to, betray connection with a "great character." It was a strong face, certainly; but so are yours and mine.

And very fresh it looked, though, as he confessed, Pethel had sat up in "that beastly baccarat-room" till five A.M. I asked, had he lost? Yes, he had lost steadily for four hours (proudly he laid stress on this), but in the end--well, he had won it all back "and a bit more." "By the way," he murmured as we were about to enter the hall, "don't ever happen to mention to my wife what I told you about that Argentine deal. She's always rather nervous about--investments. I don't tell her about them. She's rather a nervous woman altogether, I'm sorry to say."

This did not square with my preconception of her. Slave that I am to traditional imagery, I had figured her as "flaunting," as golden-haired, as haughty to most men, but with a provocative smile across the shoulder for some. Nor, indeed, did her husband's words save me the suspicion that my eyes deceived me when anon I was presented to a very pale, small lady whose hair was rather white than gray. And the "little daughter!" This prodigy's hair was as yet "down," but looked as if it might be up at any moment: she was nearly as tall as her father, whom

she very much resembled in face and figure and heartiness of hand-shake. Only after a rapid mental calculation could I account for her.

"I must warn you, she's in a great rage this morning," said her father. "Do try to soothe her." She blushed, laughed, and bade her father not be so silly. I asked her the cause of her great rage. She said:

"He only means I was disappointed. And he was just as disappointed as I was. WEREN'T you, now, Father?"

"I suppose they meant well, Peggy," he laughed.

"They were QUITE right," said Mrs. Pethel, evidently not for the first time.

"They," as I presently learned, were the authorities of the bathing-establishment. Pethel had promised his daughter he would take her for a swim; but on their arrival at the bathing-cabins they were ruthlessly told that bathing was *defendu a cause du mauvais temps*. This embargo was our theme as we sat down to luncheon. Miss Peggy was of opinion that the French were cowards. I pleaded for them that even in English watering-places bathing was forbidden when the sea was VERY rough. She did not admit that the sea was very rough to-day. Besides, she appealed to me, where was the fun of swimming in absolutely calm water? I dared not say that this was the only sort of water I liked to swim in.

"They were QUITE right," said Mrs. Pethel again.

"Yes, but, darling Mother, you can't swim. Father and I are both splendid swimmers."

To gloss over the mother's disability, I looked brightly at Pethel, as though in ardent recognition of his prowess among waves. With a movement of his head he indicated his daughter--indicated that there was no one like her in the whole world. I beamed agreement. Indeed, I did think her rather nice. If one liked the father (and I liked Pethel all the more in that capacity), one couldn't help liking the daughter, the two were so absurdly alike. Whenever he was looking at her (and it was seldom that he looked away from her), the effect, if you cared to be fantastic, was that of a very vain man before a mirror. It might have occurred to me that, if there was any mystery in him, I could solve it through her. But, in point of fact, I had forgotten all about that possible mystery. The amateur detective was lost in the sympathetic observer of a father's love. That Pethel did love his daughter I have never doubted. One passion is not less true because another predominates. No one who ever saw that father with that daughter could doubt that he loved her intensely. And this intensity gages for me the strength of what else was in him.

Mrs. Pethel's love, though less explicit, was not less evidently profound. But the maternal instinct is less attractive to an onlooker, because he takes it more for granted than the paternal. What endeared poor Mrs. Pethel to me was--well, the inevitability of the epithet I give her. She seemed, poor thing, so essentially out of it; and by "it" is meant the glowing mutual affinity of husband and child. Not that she didn't, in

her little way, assert herself during the meal. But she did so, I thought, with the knowledge that she didn't count, and never would count. I wondered how it was that she had, in that Cambridge bar-room long ago, counted for Pethel to the extent of matrimony. But from any such room she seemed so utterly remote that she might well be in all respects now an utterly changed woman. She did preeminently look as if much had by some means been taken out of her, with no compensatory process of putting in. Pethel looked so very young for his age, whereas she would have had to be really old to look young for hers. I pitied her as one might a governess with two charges who were hopelessly out of hand. But a governess, I reflected, can always give notice. Love tied poor Mrs. Pethel fast to her present situation.

As the three of them were to start next day on their tour through France, and as the four of us were to make a tour to Rouen this afternoon, the talk was much about motoring, a theme which Miss Peggy's enthusiasm made almost tolerable. I said to Mrs. Pethel, with more good-will than truth, that I supposed she was "very keen on it." She replied that she was.

"But, darling Mother, you aren't. I believe you hate it. You're ALWAYS asking father to go slower. And what IS the fun of just crawling along?"

"Oh, come, Peggy, we never crawl!" said her father.

"No, indeed," said her mother in a tone of which Pethel laughingly said it would put me off coming out with them this afternoon. I said, with an expert air to reassure Mrs. Pethel, that it wasn't fast driving, but only bad driving, that was a danger.

"There, Mother!" cried Peggy. "Isn't that what we're always telling you?"

I felt that they were always either telling Mrs. Pethel something or, as in the matter of that intended bath, not telling her something. It seemed to me possible that Peggy advised her father about his "investments." I wondered whether they had yet told Mrs. Pethel of their intention to go on to Switzerland for some climbing.

Of his secretiveness for his wife's sake I had a touching little instance after luncheon. We had adjourned to have coffee in front of the hotel. The car was already in attendance, and Peggy had darted off to make her daily inspection of it. Pethel had given me a cigar, and his wife presently noticed that he himself was not smoking. He explained to her that he thought he had smoked too much lately, and that he was going to "knock it off" for a while. I would not have smiled if he had met my eye, but his avoidance of it made me quite sure that he really had been "thinking over" what I had said last night about nicotine and its possibly deleterious action on the gambling thrill.

Mrs. Pethel saw the smile that I could not repress. I explained that I was wishing _I_ could knock off tobacco, and envying her husband's strength of character. She smiled, too, but wanly, with her eyes on him.

"Nobody has so much strength of character as he has," she said.

"Nonsense!" he laughed. "I'm the weakest of men."

"Yes," she said quietly; "that's true, too, James."

Again he laughed, but he flushed. I saw that Mrs. Pethel also had faintly flushed, and I became horribly aware of following suit. In the sudden glow and silence created by Mrs. Pethel's paradox, I was grateful to the daughter for bouncing back among us, and asking how soon we should be ready to start.

Pethel looked at his wife, who looked at me and rather strangely asked if I was sure I wanted to go with them. I protested that of course I did. Pethel asked her if SHE really wanted to come.

"You see, dear, there was the run yesterday from Calais. And to-morrow you'll be on the road again, and all the days after."

"Yes," said Peggy; "I'm SURE you'd much rather stay at home, darling Mother, and have a good rest."

"Shall we go and put on our things, Peggy?" replied Mrs. Pethel, rising from her chair. She asked her husband whether he was taking the chauffeur with him. He said he thought not.

"Oh, hurrah!" cried Peggy. "Then I can be on the front seat!"

"No, dear," said her mother. "I am sure Mr. Beerbohms would like to be on the front seat."

"You'd like to be with mother, wouldn't you?" the girl appealed. I replied with all possible emphasis that I should like to be with Mrs. Pethel. But presently, when the mother and daughter reappeared in the guise of motorists, it became clear that my aspiration had been set aside. "I am to be with mother," said Peggy.

I was inwardly glad that Mrs. Pethel could, after all, assert herself to some purpose. Had I thought she disliked me, I should have been hurt; but I was sure her desire that I should not sit with her was due merely to a belief that, in case of accident, a person on the front seat was less safe than a person behind. And of course I did not expect her to prefer my life to her daughter's. Poor lady! My heart was with her. As the car glided along the sea-front and then under the Norman archway, through the town, and past the environs, I wished that her husband inspired in her as much confidence as he did in me. For me the sight of his clear, firm profile (he did not wear motor-goggles) was an assurance in itself. From time to time (for I, too, was ungoggled) I looked round to nod and smile cheerfully at his wife. She always returned the nod, but left the smile to be returned by the daughter.

Pethel, like the good driver he was, did not talk; just drove. But as we came out on to the Rouen road he did say that in France he always rather missed the British police-traps. "Not," he added, "that I've ever fallen into one. But the chance that a policeman MAY at any moment dart out, and land you in a bit of a scrape does rather add to the excitement, don't you think?" Though I answered in the tone of one to whom the chance of a police-trap is the very salt of life, I did not inwardly

like the spirit of his remark. However, I dismissed it from my mind. The sun was shining, and the wind had dropped: it was an ideal day for motoring, and the Norman landscape had never looked lovelier to me in its width of sober and silvery grace.

*The other names in this memoir are, for good reason, pseudonyms.

I presently felt that this landscape was not, after all, doing itself full justice. Was it not rushing rather too quickly past? "James!" said a shrill, faint voice from behind, and gradually--"Oh, darling Mother, really!" protested another voice--the landscape slackened pace. But after a while, little by little, the landscape lost patience, forgot its good manners, and flew faster and faster than before. The road rushed furiously beneath us, like a river in spate. Avenues of poplars flashed past us, every tree of them on each side hissing and swishing angrily in the draft we made. Motors going Rouen-ward seemed to be past as quickly as motors that bore down on us. Hardly had I espied in the landscape ahead a chateau or other object of interest before I was craning my neck round for a final glimpse of it as it faded on the backward horizon. An endless uphill road was breasted and crested in a twinkling and transformed into a decline near the end of which our car leaped straight across to the opposite ascent, and--"James!" again, and again by degrees the laws of nature were reestablished, but again by degrees revoked. I did not doubt that speed in itself was no danger; but, when the road was about to make a sharp curve, why shouldn't Pethel, just as a matter of form, slow down slightly, and sound a note or two of the hooter? Suppose another car were--well, that was all right: the road was clear; but at the next turning, when our car neither slackened nor hooted and WAS for an instant full on the wrong side of the road, I had within me a contraction which (at thought of what must have been if--) lasted though all was well. Loath to betray fear, I hadn't turned my face to Pethel. Eyes front! And how about that wagon ahead, huge hay-wagon plodding with its back to us, seeming to occupy whole road? Surely Pethel would slacken, hoot. No. Imagine a needle threaded with one swift gesture from afar. Even so was it that we shot, between wagon and road's-edge, through; whereon, confronting us within a few yards--inches now, but we swerved--was a cart that incredibly we grazed not as we rushed on, on. Now indeed I had turned my eyes on Pethel's profile; and my eyes saw there that which stilled, with a greater emotion, all fear and wonder in me.

I think that for the first instant, oddly, what I felt was merely satisfaction, not hatred; for I all but asked him whether, by not smoking to-day, he had got a keener edge to his thrills. I understood him, and for an instant this sufficed me. Those pursed-out lips, so queerly different from the compressed lips of the normal motorist, and seeming, as elsewhere last night, to denote no more than pensive interest, had told me suddenly all that I needed to know about Pethel. Here, as there,--and, oh, ever so much better here than there!--he could gratify the passion that was in him. No need of any "make-believe" here. I remembered the queer look he had given when I asked if his gambling were always "a life-and-death affair." Here was the real thing, the authentic game, for the highest stakes. And here was I, a little extra stake tossed on to the board. He had vowed I had it in me to do "something big." Perhaps, though, there had been a touch of make-believe about that. I am afraid it

was not before my thought about myself that my moral sense began to operate and my hatred of Pethel set in. Put it to my credit that I did see myself as a mere detail in his villainy. You deprecate the word "villainy"? Understand all, forgive all? No doubt. But between the acts of understanding and forgiving an interval may sometimes be condoned. Condone it in this instance. Even at the time I gave Pethel due credit for risking his own life, for having doubtless risked it--it and none other--again and again in the course of his adventurous (and abstemious) life by field and flood. I was even rather touched by memory of his insistence last night on another glass of that water which just MIGHT give him typhoid; rather touched by memory of his unsaying that he "never" touched alcohol--he who, in point of fact, had to be ALWAYS gambling on something or other. I gave him due credit, too, for his devotion to his daughter. But his use of that devotion, his cold use of it to secure for himself the utmost thrill of hazard, did seem utterly abominable to me.

And it was even more for the mother than for the daughter that I was incensed. That daughter did not know him, did but innocently share his damnable love of chances; but that wife had for years known him at least as well as I knew him now. Here again I gave him credit for wishing, though he didn't love her, to spare her what he could. That he didn't love her I presumed from his indubitable willingness not to stake her in this afternoon's game. That he never had loved her--had taken her in his precocious youth simply as a gigantic chance against him, was likely enough. So much the more credit to him for such consideration as he showed her, though this was little enough. He could wish to save her from being a looker-on at his game, but he could--he couldn't not--go on playing. Assuredly she was right in deeming him at once the strongest and the weakest of men. "Rather a nervous woman!" I remembered an engraving that had hung in my room at Oxford, and in scores of other rooms there: a presentment by Sir Marcus (then Mr.) Stone of a very pretty young person in a Gainsborough hat, seated beneath an ancestral elm, looking as though she were about to cry, and entitled "A Gambler's Wife." Mrs. Pethel was not like that. Of her there were no engravings for undergraduate hearts to melt at. But there was one man, certainly, whose compassion was very much at her service. How was he going to help her?

I know not how many hair's-breadth escapes we may have had while these thoughts passed through my brain. I had closed my eyes. So preoccupied was I that but for the constant rush of air against my face I might, for aught I knew, have been sitting ensconced in an armchair at home. After a while I was aware that this rush had abated; I opened my eyes to the old familiar streets of Rouen. We were to have tea at the Hotel d'Angleterre. What was to be my line of action? Should I take Pethel aside and say: "Swear to me, on your word of honor as a gentleman, that you will never again touch the driving-gear, or whatever you call it, of a motor-car. Otherwise, I shall expose you to the world. Meanwhile, we shall return to Dieppe by train"? He might flush (for I knew him capable of flushing) as he asked me to explain. And after? He would laugh in my face. He would advise me not to go motoring any more. He might even warn me not to go back to Dieppe in one of those dangerous railway-trains. He might even urge me to wait until a nice Bath chair had been sent out for me from England.

I heard a voice (mine, alas!) saying brightly, "Well, here we are!" I

helped the ladies to descend. Tea was ordered. Pethel refused that stimulant and had a glass of water. I had a liqueur brandy. It was evident to me that tea meant much to Mrs. Pethel. She looked stronger after her second cup, and younger after her third. Still, it was my duty to help her if I could. While I talked and laughed, I did not forget that. But what on earth was I to do? I am no hero. I hate to be ridiculous. I am inveterately averse to any sort of fuss. Besides, how was I to be sure that my own personal dread of the return journey hadn't something to do with my intention of tackling Pethel? I rather thought it had. What this woman would dare daily because she was a mother could not I dare once? I reminded myself of this man's reputation for invariable luck. I reminded myself that he was an extraordinarily skilful driver. To that skill and luck I would pin my faith.

What I seem to myself, do you ask of me?

But I answered your question a few lines back. Enough that my faith was rewarded: we did arrive safely in Dieppe. I still marvel that we did.

That evening, in the vestibule of the casino, Grierson came up to me.

"Seen Jimmy Pethel?" he asked. "He was asking for you. Wants to see you particularly. He's in the baccarat-room, punting, winning hand over fist, OF course. Said he'd seldom met a man he liked more than you. Great character, what?"

One is always glad to be liked, and I pleaded guilty to a moment's gratification at the announcement that Pethel liked me. But I did not go and seek him in the baccarat-room. A great character assuredly he was, but of a kind with which (I say it at the risk of seeming priggish) I prefer not to associate.

Why he had particularly wanted to see me was made clear in a note sent by him to my room early next morning. He wondered if I could be induced to join them in their little tour. He hoped I wouldn't think it great cheek, his asking me. He thought it might rather amuse me to come. It would be a very great pleasure to his wife. He hoped I wouldn't say no. Would I send a line by bearer? They would be starting at three o'clock. He was mine sincerely.

It was not too late to tackle him even now. Should I go round to his hotel? I hesitated and--well, I told you at the outset that my last meeting with him was on the morrow of my first. I forget what I wrote to him, but am sure that the excuse I made for myself was a good and graceful one, and that I sent my kindest regards to Mrs. Pethel. She had not (I am sure of that, too) authorized her husband to say she would like me to come with them. Else would not the thought of her, the pity of her, have haunted me, as it did for a very long time. I do not know whether she is still alive. No mention is made of her in the obituary notice which awoke these memories in me. This notice I will, however, transcribe, because it is, for all its crudeness of phraseology, rather interesting both as an echo and as an amplification. Its title is "Death of Wealthy Aviator," and its text is:

Wide-spread regret will be felt in Leicestershire at the tragic death of Mr. James Pethel, who had long resided there and was very popular as an all-round sportsman. In recent years he had been much interested in aviation, and had had a private aerodrome erected on his property. Yesterday afternoon he fell down dead quite suddenly as he was returning to his house, apparently in his usual health and spirits, after descending from a short flight which despite a strong wind he had made on a new type of aeroplane, and on which he was accompanied by his married daughter and her infant son. It is not expected that an inquest will be necessary, as his physician, Dr. Saunders, has certified death to be due to heart-disease, from which, it appears, the deceased gentleman had been suffering for many years. Dr. Saunders adds that he had repeatedly warned deceased that any strain on the nervous system might prove fatal.

Thus--for I presume that his ailment had its origin in his habits--James Pethel did not, despite that merely pensive look of his, live

his life with impunity. And by reason of that life he died. As for the manner of his death, enough that he did die. Let not our hearts be vexed that his great luck was with him to the end.

End of The Project Gutenberg Etext of James Pethel, by Max Beerbohm

Note: I have closed contractions in the text; e.g., "does n't" has become "doesn't" etc.

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