THE PECULIAR ADVENTURES OF THE LAXWORTHY TRIO

The Secret of the Magnifique—By E. Phillips Oppenheim

THE man was awaiting the service of his dinner in the magnificent buffet of the Gare de Lyon. He sat at a table laid for three, on the right hand side of the entrance and close to the window. From below came the turmoil of the trains.

In appearance he was of somewhat less than medium height, of unathletic, almost frail, physique. His head was thrust a little forward, as though he were afflicted with a chronic stoop. He wore steel rimmed spectacles with the air of one who has taken to them too late in life to have escaped the constant habit of peering, which had given to his neck an almost storklike appearance.

A maître d'hotel, who was passing, paused and looked at the two as yet unoccupied places.

"Monsieur desires the service of his dinner?" he inquired.

John T. Laxworthy glanced up at the clock.

"In five minutes," he declared, "my friends will have arrived. The service of dinner can then proceed."

The man bowed and withdrew. Almost as he left the table the swinging doors opened once more to admit another traveller. His eyes fell upon the solitary figure, now deep in a book, seated at the table on his right. With the pleased smile of one who greets an old friend he approached the table at which Mr. John T. Laxworthy sat waiting.

The idiosyncrasies of great men are always worth noting, and Mr. John T. Laxworthy was, without a doubt, foredoomed from the cradle to a certain measure of celebrity. Even now, when his friend stood by his side, he did not at once look up. Slowly, and with his eyes still riveted upon the pages he was studying, he held out his left hand.

"I am glad to see you, Anderson," he said. "Shall it be white or red?"

Mr. John T. Laxworthy closed his book with a little sigh of regret and placed a marker within it. He then carefully adjusted his spectacles and made a deliberate survey of his companion. Finally he nodded, slowly and approvingly.

A young man who had just completed a leisurely survey of the room dropped his monocle and came toward them. He was young, he was English, he was well bred, he was an athlete. He beamed upon the two men.

"How are you, Forrest? How do you do, Laxworthy?" he exclaimed. "Looking jolly fit, both of you," he went on amiably. "What a necktie, chief! You ought to let me choose 'em for you."

Mr. Laxworthy raised his glass. Then he inclined his head in turn to each of his companions.

"I am glad to see you both," he said. "On the whole, I think that I may congratulate you. You have done well. I drink to our success."

There was a short pause. Presently Mr. Laxworthy commenced to peel an apple.

"A great portion of this last year," he said, "which you two have spent apparently with profit in carrying out my instructions, I have given to the perfection of a certain scholarly tone which I feel convinced is my proper environment. Incidentally I have devoted myself to the study of various schools of philosophy. I have emerged from my studies with a clearer and more decisive outlook upon the general scheme of life.

"In one very interesting treatise I found several obvious truths ingeniously put. A certain decadence in the material prosperity of an imaginary state is clearly proved to be due to a too blind following of the tenets of what is known as the hysterical morality, as against the decrees of what we might call expediency. A little sentiment, like garlic in cookery, is a good thing. Too much is fatal. A little—sufficient—morality is excellent; a superabundance disastrous.

"Society is divided into two classes, those who have and those who have desire to have. The one must always prey upon the other. They are therefore always changing places. It is this continued movement which lends energy to the human race. As soon as it is suspended, degeneration must follow as a matter of course. It is for those who recognize this great truth to follow and obey its tenets."

Mr. Laxworthy was silent for several moments. He was glancing in meditative fashion through the pages of the book in which he had been engrossed before the arrival of his friends. Finally he closed it.

"There are some sentences there," he remarked, "wonderfully illustrative of my meaning. Briefly the situation is this:

"Here am I, a man of singular intelligence and much energy, willing to associate myself with you two in any enterprise likely to lead us out of the common ruck of life, adventurous or mercenary, which may commend itself to us. For that purpose I have trained you both according to your capacities. What you are you owe, in some measure, to me; in a lesser degree to yourselves. In any case you are now fit to take the floor."

"May we not hear more definitely what it is that you propose?" Anderson asked.

"We stand," Mr. Laxworthy replied, "always upon the threshold of the land of adventure. At no place are we nearer to it than in this room. It is our duty to use our energies to assist in the great principles of movement to which I have referred. We must take our part in the struggle.

"'On which side?' you naturally ask. 'Are we to be among those who have, and who, through weakness or desire, must yield to others? Or shall we take our place among the more intellectual, the more highly gifted minority, those who assist the progress of the world by helping toward the redistribution of its wealth?' Sydney, how much money have you?"

"Three hundred and ninety-five francs and a few coppers."

"And you, Anderson?"

"With the exception of a five franc piece," he admitted, "I am worth exactly as much as I shall be able to borrow from you presently."

"In that case," Mr. Laxworthy said dryly, "your position is preordained. We take our place among the aggressors.

"Our plans," he announced abruptly, "are not yet wholly made. We wait here for—shall we call it an inspiration? Perhaps, even at this moment, it is not far from us."

Forrest Anderson and his vis-a-vis turned, as though instinctively, toward the door. At that moment two men who had just passed through were standing upon the threshold.

One was rather past middle age, corpulent, with red features of a coarse type. His companion, who was leaning upon his arm, was much younger and a very different sort of person. He was tall and exceedingly thin. His features were wasted almost to emaciation, his complexion was ghastly.

Slowly the two men came down the room. They took possession of an empty table close at hand. The young man sank into his chair with a little sigh of exhaustion.

"A liqueur brandy, quick," the older man ordered. "My friend is fatigued."

Sydney took the bottle which stood upon their table, poured out a wineglassful and stepped across and accosted the young man.

"Do me the favor of drinking this, sir," he begged. "I can see that you are in need of it."

The young man accepted it with a smile of gratitude. His companion echoed his thanks.

Sydney stepped back and resumed his seat. In a few minutes he leaned across the table.

"The Paradise Hotel, Hyeres," he said under his breath.

Mr. Laxworthy shrugged his shoulders.

"Even you, my friends, are not wholly deceived, I presume, by the young man's appearance."

They evidently were. Mr. Laxworthy sighed.

"Your powers of observation are, without doubt, exceedingly stunted. Let me assure you that your sympathy for that young man is entirely wasted."

"You know who he is?" Sydney asked.

"I believe so," Laxworthy admitted. "I can hazard a guess even as to his companion's identity. But—the Paradise Hotel, Hyeres! Anderson, watch the door. Sydney, watch your friends there."

A tall, broad shouldered man, with fair mustache and wearing a long travelling coat, had entered the buffet. The majority of those present suffered his scrutiny unnoticing, indifferent. Not so these two men who had last entered.

Every nerve of the young man's body seemed to have become tense. His hand had stolen into the pocket of his travelling coat, and with a little thrill Sidney saw the glitter of steel half shown for a moment between his interlocked fingers. No longer was this young man's countenance the countenance of an invalid. It had become, instead, like the face of a wolf.

The man came slowly down the room. Laxworthy and his two associates watched. Their two neighbors at the next table sat in well simulated indifference. The newcomer made no secret of his destination. He advanced straight to their table and came to a standstill immediately in front of them.

Of all the words which passed between those three men, not one was audible. Only at the last the elder man touched the label attached to his bag, and they heard his words:

"The Paradise Hotel, Hyeres. We shall be there for at least a month."

The newcomer stood perfectly still for several moments, as though deliberating. Then this stranger raised his hat slightly and turned away.

"The Paradise Hotel at Hyeres," he repeated. "I shall know, then, where to find you."

"One might be interested to know the meaning of these things," Sydney murmured softly.

A woman, wrapped in magnificent furs, who was passing their table, was run into by a clumsy waiter and dropped a satchel from her finger. Sydney hastened to restore it to her and was rewarded by a gracious smile.

"You seem fated to be my good Samaritan to-day," she remarked. "Perhaps we shall meet in the Luxe, if you are going south. I am going to Hyeres—to the Paradise Hotel. Why do you smile?"

"My friends and I," he explained, "were at that moment discussing a suggestion to proceed to the same place."

"I congratulate you," Laxworthy remarked dryly as Sydney resumed his seat. "A most interesting acquaintance, yours."

"Do you know who she is?" the young man asked. "I only met her on the train."

"She is Madame Bertrand. Her husband at one time held a post in the Foreign Office under Faure. For some

Lefant stood as though turned to stone. "Am I in command or you?" said Laxworthy.

reason or other, he was discredited, and since then he has died. There was some scandal about Madame Bertrand herself, but nothing definite ever came to light."

"Madame seems to survive the loss of her husband," Forrest Anderson remarked.

Laxworthy held up his hand.

"We have finished, for the moment, with the Madame Bertrands of the world," he announced. "After all, they are for the pygmies. Here comes food for giants. You can both look. They are probably used to it. You will see the two greatest personages on earth."

His companions gazed eagerly toward the door. Two men were standing there. One was middle aged, gray headed, with somewhat worn, but keen face. The other was taller, with black hair streaked with gray, a face half Jewish, half romantic, a skin like ivory.

"The one nearest you," Laxworthy announced, "is Freeling Poignton. The newspapers will tell you that his fortune exceeds the national debt of any country in the world. He is, without doubt, the richest man that was ever born. There has never yet breathed an emperor whose upraised finger could provoke or stop a war, whose careless word could check the prosperity of the proudest nation that ever breathed. These things Freeling Poignton can do."

"And the other?" Anderson whispered.

"It is chance," Mr. Laxworthy said, "which placed a sceptre of unlimited power in the hands of Richard Freeling Poignton. It is his own genius which has made the Marquis Lefant the greatest power in the diplomatic world."

"I never even heard of him," Sydney admitted.

"These things are new to you," Mr. Laxworthy continued. "The world's history is marked for you by what you read in the daily papers. For every great happening there must be an obvious cause. You are one of the vast public, an acceptor of obvious causes.

"Yet look at that man. It was his decision which brought about war between Russia and Japan. It was he who stopped the declaration of war against Germany by our own Prime Minister at the time of the Algeciras difficulty. There is little that he cannot do."

A maître d'hotel paused and whispered confidentially in Mr. Laxworthy's ear:

"The gray gentleman down there, sir," he announced, "is Mr. Freeling Poignton, the great American multi-millionaire."

Laxworthy nodded slowly. "Is he going to Monte Carlo?"

The attendant shook his head.

"I was speaking to them a moment ago, sir. Mr. Poignton and his friend are going for a fortnight's quiet to the Paradise Hotel at Hyeres."

A black cloud, long and with jagged edges, passed away from the face of the moon. The plain of Hyeres was gradually revealed, and beyond the phalanx of lights on the warships lying in the bay. The hotel on the hillside stood sharply out against the dark background.

Upon the balcony of one of the rooms upon the second floor a man was standing with his back to the wall. He looked around at the flooding moonlight. From the adjoining balcony a thin rope was hanging. The young man gazed helplessly at the end, which had slipped from his fingers. He was face to face with the almost insoluble problem of how to regain the shelter of his own room.

The man looked back into the room from which he had escaped and down at the end of the swinging rope. To return into the room was insanity. To stay where he was was to risk being seen by the earliest passerby or the first person who chanced to look out from his window. To try to pass to his own veranda without the aid of that rope which he had lost was an impossibility.

The silence of the night was strangely, almost harshly broken from the interior of the hotel. An alarm bell, harsh and discordant, rang out a brazen note of terror. Lights suddenly flashed in the windows, footsteps hurried along the corridor. The man outside upon the balcony set his teeth and cursed.

The room behind him was speedily invaded. Mme. Bertrand, her beautiful hair tied up only with pink ribbon, her eyes kindling with excitement, received a stream of agitated callers.

"It was I who rang the danger bell," madame declared indignantly. "There has been a man in my room. Not two minutes since I opened my eyes, and he disappeared into my sitting room. I saw him distinctly. I could not recognize him, for he kept his face turned away. Either he has escaped through the sitting room door and down the corridor, or he is still there, or he is hiding in this room."

"The jewels of madame!" the manager gasped. "The pearls of madame, the string of pearls?"

"Their is safe," madame admitted. "My diamond collar too is in its place."

The manager and two of the guests searched the sitting room, which opened to the left from the bedroom. The search was of necessity not a long one; there was no one in the sitting room.

"Then the burglar has escaped!" Mme. Bertrand cried. "Be so good, Monsieur Helder, as to at once examine the wardrobe and to look underneath my bed. I shall never sleep soundly again in this hotel."

M. Helder dived under the valance. It was just at that moment that Mme. Bertrand, gazing into the plate glass mirror of the wardrobe, received a shock. Distinctly she saw a man's face reflected there.

She stood for a moment quite still, her hand pressed to her side. Then she turned her head and looked out of the French windows which led onto the balcony. There was nothing to be seen. She looked across at M. Helder, whose head had disappeared inside the wardrobe. Then she stole up to the window and glanced once onto the balcony.

"Madame," M. Helder declared, "the room is empty. Your sitting room also is empty. There remains," he added, "only the balcony."

He advanced a step. Mme. Bertrand was standing in front of the window.

"The balcony I have examined myself," she said quietly. "There is no one there."

"In that case, madame," M. Helder declared, "we must conclude that the intruder escaped through your sitting room door into the corridor. Madame can at least assure me that nothing of great value is missing?"

Mme. Bertrand, though pale, was graciously pleased to reassure the inquirer.

M. Helder drew himself up on the threshold and permitted himself a bow.

"Madame," he said, "will accept this expression of my infinite regret that her slumbers should have been so disturbed."

"I thank you very much, Monsieur Helder," she answered graciously. "Good night."

Madame paused for a moment to listen to his footsteps down the corridor. Then she moved forward to the door and locked it. Then she walked deliberately to the French windows, threw them open and stepped onto the balcony.

"Good evening, Monsieur Sydney Wing; or, rather, good morning."

The young man gripped for a moment the frail balustrade.

"Madame!" he faltered.

"Inside!" she whispered imperatively. "You do not think of my reputation, monsieur, that you show yourself so clearly here. In an hour the dawn will come."

The young man stepped only too willingly inside the room. She followed him and closed the windows.

"You will gather, M. Sidney Wing," she said, "that I am disposed to spare you. I knew that you were outside, even while my room was being searched. I preferred first to hear your explanation before I gave you up to be treated as a common burglar."

The young man's courage was returning fast. He lifted his head.

"Oh, madame," he murmured, "you are too gracious."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"You will come this way," she said, leading him into the sitting room and turning on the electric light. "Now tell me, monsieur, and tell me the truth if you would leave this room a free man and without scandal. When I saw you first you were bending over that table. Upon it was my necklace, my earrings, a lace scarf, my chatelaine and vanity box, a few of my rings, perhaps a jewelled pin or two. Now tell me exactly what you came for, what you have taken, and why?"

The young man held himself upright.

"Madame," he said, "think. Was there nothing else upon that table?"

"I can think of nothing."

"To-night," he continued, "you were scarcely so kind to me. We danced together, it is true, but there were many others. There was the French Admiral, for instance."

She was a coquette, and she shrugged her shoulders as she smiled.

"And you, M. Sydney Wing, what have you to say that I should not dance and be friendly with this gentleman?"

"Alas!" he said. "I have no right to find fault. Yet two nights ago madame gave me the rose I asked for. To-night—you remember?"

She looked at him softly yet steadily.

"You told me," he continued, "that the rose belonged to him who dared to pluck it."

"It is a saying," she murmured. "I was not in earnest."

Sydney Wing sighed deeply.

"Madame," he declared, "I come of a literal nation. When we love, the word of a woman means much to us. To-night there seemed nothing dearer to me in life than the possession of that rose. I told myself that your challenge was accepted. I told myself that to-night I would sleep with that rose on the pillow by my side."

Slowly he unbuttoned his coat. From the breast pocket he drew out a handkerchief and unfolded it. In the centre, crushed, lay a dark red rose.

"Monsieur!" she cried incredulously, "monsieur, you mean to tell me that for the sake of that rose you climbed from your balcony to mine—you ran these risks?"

"For the sake of this rose, madame, and all that it means to me," he answered.

She drew a long sigh.

"Monsieur Sydney," she said, "I am very glad indeed that when I saw your face reflected in the mirror of my wardrobe something urged me to send Monsieur Helder away. I am very glad."

"Madame!"

She held up her finger.

"Monsieur," she whispered, "not another word. I have risked my reputation to save you. See, the door is before you. Unlock it softly. Be sure there is no one in the corridor when you leave. Do not attempt to close it. I myself in a few minutes time will return and do that."

"But, madame——" he began.

She pointed imploringly toward the door.

Very noiselessly the young man opened the door of the sitting room, glanced up and down, and with swift, silent footsteps made his way to his own apartment. There were drops of perspiration still upon his forehead as he stepped out onto the balcony and wound up his rope.

It was the most cheerful hour of the day at the Paradise Hotel—the hour before luncheon. Every one seemed to be out of doors. Mr. Laxworthy and Mr. Forrest Anderson had just passed along the front and were threading their way up the winding path which led through the pine woods at the back of the hotel. Mr. Freeling Poignton and the Marquis Lefant were sitting a little way up among the pine trees. Lefant was leaning forward, his eyes fixed steadily upon that streak of blue Mediterranean.

"I am quite sure," he said, "that I can rely upon my information. At a quarter past twelve precisely the torpedo is to be fired."

"Which is the Magnifique, anyway?" Mr. Freeling Poignton inquired.

Lefant pointed to the largest of the gray battleships which were riding at anchor. Then his finger slowly traversed the blue space until it paused at a black object set out very near the Island of Hyeres. He glanced at his watch.

"A quarter past," he muttered. "Look! Look!"

The black object had disappeared. A column of white water rose gracefully into the air and descended. It was finished. Lefant leaned toward his companion.

"You and I," he said, "have seen a thing which is going to change the naval history of the future. You and I alone can understand why the French admiralty have given up building battleships; why, even their target practice here and at Cherbourg continues as a matter of form only."

Freeling Poignton withdrew his cigar from his mouth.

"I can't say," he admitted, "that I have ever given any particular attention to these implements of warfare, because I hate them all; but there's nothing new, anyway, in a torpedo. What's the difference between this one and the ordinary sort?"

"This one," Lefant answered, "can be fired at a range of five miles and relied upon to hit a mark little larger than the plate of a battleship with absolutely scientific accuracy. There is no question of aim at all. Just as you work out an exact spot in a surveying expedition by scientific instruments, so you can decide precisely the spot which that torpedo shall hit. It travels at the pace of ten miles a minute, and it has a penetration which has never been equalled."

Freeling Poignton shivered a little.

"I'd like to electrocute the man who invented it," he declared tersely.

"You are wrong," Lefant replied. "The man who invented that torpedo is the friend of your scheme and not the enemy. It is your desire, is it not—the great ambition of your life—to secure for the world universal peace?"

"Marquis," was the reply, "there is no man breathing who could say how much I am worth. Capitalize my present income, and you might call it five hundred million pounds. Put a quarter of a million somewhere in the bank for me, and I'd give the rest to see every army in Europe disbanded, every warship turned into a trading vessel."

"Just so," Lefant assented. "Now listen. The surest of all ways to prevent war is to reduce the art of killing to such a certainty that it becomes an absurdity even to take the field. What nation will build battleships which can be destroyed with the touch of a finger at any time from practically any distance?

"I tell you that this invention, which only one or two people in the world outside of that battleship yonder know of at present, is the beginning of the end of all naval warfare. There is only one thing to be done—to drive this home. No nation must be allowed to keep that secret for her own. It must belong to all."

"I begin to understand," Mr. Freeling Poignton remarked. "Guess that's where you come in, isn't it?"

"I hope so," Lefant assented. "I have already spent a hundred thousand dol-

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First Futurist House and Garden Finished for Inspection of a Bewildered Public

JUST when every one thought the Cubist fancy had received a body blow through the action of the directors of the Paris Salon in refusing to give a place to the weird productions of the Post-Impressionist painters a new phase of the cult crops up in the shape of one of the most amazing private residences ever conceived by human ingenuity gone wrong.

The new futurist residence is to be seen at Chester, Pa. Visitors are flocking there from near and far to inspect it, and the proudest man in Pennsylvania is the creator of the Cubist structure, Edward Dickerson. Mr. Dickerson is a business man of Chester, and his new residence thrusts its unconventional architecture on the passerby in one of the most classy neighborhoods of the town. As the pedestrian approaches the new house and grounds he sees what appears to be a handsome wall of stucco surrounding a substantial residence with columns of the same material. When he gets sufficiently near to dissect the material used in the building the result is amazing.

With sufficient means to gratify his whim, Mr. Dickerson decided that his new residence should be constructed of the most original material to be found in the building business or out of it, and so be in harmony with the Futurist plan of his house. He looked around the extensive estate that he owns at Chester and gathered the material from the collection of odds and ends he had acqured in a lifetime in the contracting business.

Old sewer pipes, cobblestones, odd bricks, paving stones, old bottles, remnants of doorsteps, stone jars, broken crockery, a heterogeneous collection of second hand building material and even remnants of iron and steel work were gathered together to build the house. All were wedded by means of a mass of concrete, without much care being taken as to the juxtaposition of one odd piece to any other odd piece. The result can best be judged by reference to the pictures. As was said, at a distance it isn't so bad, but a close inspection causes astonishment to give place to amazement and amazement to amusement.

But Mr. Dickerson is very proud of his creation and the number of visitors that the place has attracted tickles him. He has a story to tell concerning the manner in which he conceived and constructed the house.

"I met a chap in Chicago who annoyed me considerably," said the originator of the Futurist house. "He was from New York and I took a dislike to him from the start because of the way he referred to that village as the only place worth thinking about. I was also annoyed by the way he pronounced New York; but let that pass.

"This man was the centre of crowd at the convention I was attending. He was telling all who cared to listen to him that his designs for an original looking bungalow had won him various prizes. He had photographs with him and was showing these in corroboration of his claim to be the biggest man in he bungalow architecture field.

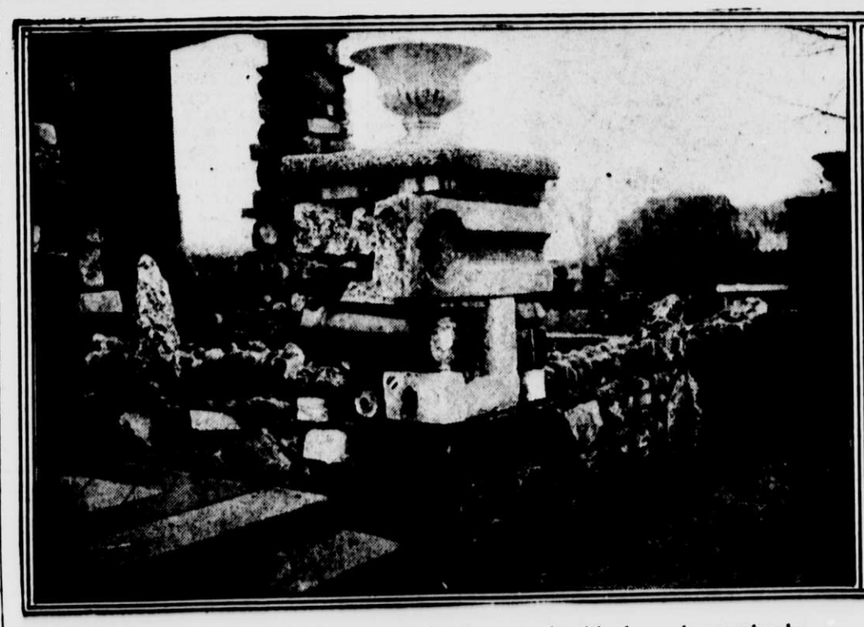
"When I got home I set about building the house and wall that you see. I thought it quite fine when it was finished, and I waited anxiously for my Chicago friend from Noo Yawk to come along. He didn't come and I had about forgotten the incident when one day, while out driving, a policeman stopped me and told me some one wanted to see me at police headquarters.

"I drove there, and sure enough it was my architectural acquaintance. I drove him out to the house and never enjoyed anything so much in my life as I did his wonder and astonishment when he saw my modest attempt at originality in the building line. He had to admit that I had gone him many better in originality. He asked me how much I thought he could duplicate the material for, and I told him $5,000.

"I had no set design in putting up the columns and walls. Those demijohns—yes, they happened to be empty, so I stuck them in with the rest. Then those old stone doorsteps—they were lying around, doing no good, so I put them together to make an archway effect, as you see.

"The cobblestones fitted in anywhere and the drain pipes and various specimens of bricks added to the color scheme, which is rather fine, don't you think? Nothing came amiss.

"I found an old broken down plough around the place and added that to the collection. The maker of that plough came all the way from Massachusetts to see the wall that contained the relic. He was as much interested in my new place as the Chicago chap from Noo Yawk."



Illustrating the possibilities of old drain pipes, paving blocks and cart wheels.

An interesting detail of the wall—odd piece in centre is remains of a plough.