Memoirs of My Dead Life — Chapter 4

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IV — The End of Marie Pellegrin

Octave Barrès liked his friends to come to his studio, and a few of us who believed in his talent used to drop in during the afternoon, and little by little I got to know every picture, every sketch; but one never knows everything that a painter has done, and one day, coming into the studio, I caught sight of a full-length portrait I had never seen before on the easel.

'It was in the back room turned to the wall,' he said. 'I took it out thinking that the Russian prince who ordered the Pegasus decoration might buy it,' and he turned away not liking to hear my praise of it; for it neither pleases a painter to hear his early works praised nor abused. 'I painted it before I knew how to paint,' and standing before me, his palette in his hand, he expounded his new aestheticism: that up to the beginning of the nineteenth century all painting had been done first in monochrome and then glazed, and what we know as solid painting had been invented by Greuze. One day in the Louvre he had perceived something in Delacroix, something not wholly satisfactory; this something had set him thinking. It was Rubens, however, who had revealed the secret! It was Rubens who had taught him how to paint! He admitted that there was danger in retracing one's steps, in beginning one's education over again; but what help was there for it, since painting was not taught in the schools.

I had heard all he had to say before, and could not change my belief that every man must live in the ideas of his time, be they good or bad. It is easy to say that we must only adopt Rubens' method and jealously guard against any infringement on our personality; but in art our personality is determined by the methods we employ, and Octave's portrait interested me more than the Pegasus decoration, or the three pink Venuses holding a basket of flowers above their heads. The portrait was crude and violent, but so was the man that had painted it; he had painted it when he was a disciple of Manet's, and the methods of Manet were in agreement with my friend's temperament. We are all impressionists to-day, we are eager to note down what we feel and see, and the carefully prepared rhetorical manner of Rubens was as incompatible with Octave's temperament as the manner of John Milton is with mine. There was a thought of Goya in the background, in the contrast between the grey and the black, and there was something of Manet's simplifications in the face, but these echoes were faint, nor did they matter, for they were of our time. In looking at his model he had seen and felt something; he had noted this harshly, crudely, but he noted it; and to do this is after all the main thing. His sitter had inspired him. The word 'inspired' offended him; I withdrew it; I said that he had been fortunate in his model, and he admitted that: to see that thin, olive-complexioned girl with fine delicate features and blue-black hair lying close about her head like feathers — she wore her hair as a blackbird wears his wing — compelled one to paint; and after admiring the face I admired the black silk dress he had painted her in, a black silk dress covered with black lace. She wore grey pearls in her ears, and pearls upon her neck.

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I was interested in the quality of the painting, so different from Octave's present painting, but I was more interested in the woman herself. The picture revealed to me something in human nature that I had never seen before, something that I had never thought of. The soul in this picture was so intense that I forgot the painting, and began to think of her. She was unlike any one I had ever met in Octave Barrès' studio; a studio beloved of women; the women one met there seemed to be of all sorts, but in truth they were all of a sort. They began to arrive about four o'clock in the afternoon, and they stayed on until they were sent away. He allowed them to play the piano and sing to him; he allowed them, as he would phrase it, to *grouiller* about the place, and they talked of the painters they had sat to, of their gowns, and they showed us their shoes and their garters. He heeded them hardly at all, walking to and fro thinking of his painting, of his archaic painting. I often wondered if his appearance counted for anything in his renunciation of modern methods, and certainly his appearance was a link of association; he did not look like a modern man, but like a sixteenth-century baron; his beard and his broken nose and his hierarchial air contributed to the resemblance; the jersey he wore reminded one of a cuirass, a coat of mail. Even in his choice of a dwelling-place he seemed instinctively to avoid the modern; he had found a studio in the street, the name of which no one had ever heard before; it was found with difficulty. And the studio, too, it was hidden behind great crumbling walls, in the middle of a plot of ground in which someone was growing cabbages. Octave was always, as he would phrase it, *dans une dèche épouvantable*, but he managed to keep a thoroughbred horse in the stable at the end of the garden, and this horse was ordered as soon as the light failed. He would say, *Mes amis et mes amies, je regrette, mais mon cheval m'attend*. And the women liked to see him mount, and many thought, I am sure, that he looked like a Centaur as he rode away.

But who was this refined girl? this — a painting tells things that cannot be translated into words — this olive-skinned girl who might have sat to Raphael for a Virgin, so different from Octave's usual women? They were of the Montmartre kin; but this woman might be a Spanish princess. And remembering that Octave had said he had taken out the portrait hoping that the Russian who had ordered the Pegasus might buy it, the thought struck me that she might be the prince's mistress. His mistress! Oh, what fabulous fortune! What might her history be? I burned to hear it, and wearied of Octave's seemingly endless chatter about his method of painting; I had heard all he was saying many times before, but I listened to it all again, and to propitiate him I regretted that the picture was not painted in his present manner, 'for there are good things in the picture,' I said, 'and the model — you seem to have been lucky with your model.'

Yes, she was nice to paint from, but it was difficult to get her to sit. A *concierge's* daughter — you wouldn't think it, would you?' My astonishment amused him, and he began to laugh. 'You don't know her?' he said. 'That is Marie Pellegrin,' and when I asked him where he had met her he told me, at Alphonsine's; but I did not know where Alphonsine's was.

'I'm going to dine there to-night. I'm going to meet her; she's going back to Russia with the Prince; she has been staying in the Quartier Bréda on her holiday. *Sacré nom!* half-past five, and I haven't washed my brushes yet!'

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In answer to my question, what he meant by going to the Quartier Bréda for a holiday, he said —

'I'll tell you all about that in the carriage."

But no sooner had we got into the carriage than he remembered that he must leave word for a woman who had promised to sit to him, and swearing that a message would not delay us for more than a few minutes he directed the coachman. We were shown into a drawing-room, and the lady ran out of her bedroom, wrapping herself as she ran in a peignoir, and the sitting was discussed in the middle of a polished *parquet* floor. We at last returned to the carriage, but we were hardly seated when he remembered another appointment. He scribbled notes in the lodges of the *concierges*, and between-whiles told me all he knew of the story of Marie Pellegrin. This delicate woman that I had felt could not be of the Montmartre kin was the daughter of a *concierge* on the Boulevard Extérieur. She had run away from home at fifteen, had danced at the Elysée Montmartre.

> Sa jupe avait des trous,
> Elle aimait des voyous,
> Ils ont des yeux si doux.

But one day a Russian prince had caught sight of her, and had built her a palace in the Champs Elysées; but the Russian prince and his palace bored her.

The stopping of the carriage interrupted Octave's narrative. 'Here we are,' he said, seizing a bell hanging on a jangling wire, and the green door in the crumbling wall opened, and I saw an undersized woman — I saw Alphonsine! And her portrait, a life-sized caricature drawn by Octave, faced me from the whitewashed wall of the hencoop. He had drawn her two cats purring about her legs, and had written under it, *Ils viennent après le mou*. Her garden was a gravelled space; I think there was one tree in it. A tent had been stretched from wall to wall; and a seedy-looking waiter laid the tables (there were two), placing bottles of wine in front of each knife and fork, and bread in long sticks at regular intervals. He was constantly disturbed by the ringing of the bell, and had to run to the door to admit the company. Here and there I recognised faces that I had already seen in the studio; Clementine, who last year was studying the part of Elsa and this year was singing, *La femme de feu, la cui, la cui, la cuisinière*, in a café chantant; and Margaret Byron who had just retreated from Russia — a disastrous campaign hers was said to have been. The greater number were *hors concours*, for Alphonsine's was to the aged courtesan what Chelsea Hospital is to the aged soldier. It was a sort of human garden full of the sound and colour of October.

I scrutinised the crowd. How could any one of these women interest the woman whose portrait I had seen in Barrès' studio? That one, for instance, whom I saw every morning in the Rue des Martyres, in a greasy peignoir, going marketing, a basket on her arm. Search as I would I could not find a friend for Marie among the women nor a lover among the men — neither of those two

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stout middle-aged men with large whiskers, who had probably once been stockbrokers, nor the withered journalist whom I heard speaking to Octave about a duel he had fought recently; nor the little sandy Scotchman whose French was not understood by the women and whose English was nearly unintelligible to me; nor the man who looked like a head-waiter — Alphonsine's lover; he had been a waiter, and he told you with the air of Napoleon describing Waterloo that he had 'created' a certain fashionable café on the Boulevard. I could not attribute any one of these men to Marie; and Octave spoke of her with indifference; she had interested him to paint, and now he hoped she would get the Russian to buy her picture.

'But she's not here,' I said.

'She'll be here presently,' Octave answered, and he went on talking to Clementine, a fair, pretty woman whom one saw every night at the *Rat Mort*. It was when the soup-plates were being taken away that I saw a young woman dressed in black coming across the garden.

It was she, Marie Pellegrin.

She wore a dress similar to the one she wore in her portrait, a black silk covered with lace, and her black hair was swathed about her shapely little head. She was her portrait and something more. Her smile was her own, a sad little smile that seemed to come out of a depth of her being, and her voice was a little musical voice, irresponsible as a bird's, and during dinner I noticed how she broke into speech abruptly as a bird breaks into song, and she stopped as abruptly. I never saw a woman so like herself, and sometimes her beauty brought a little mist into my eyes, and I lost sight of her, or very nearly, and I went on eating mechanically. Dinner seemed to end suddenly, and before I knew that it was over we were getting up from table.

As we went towards the house where coffee was being served, Marie asked me if I played cards, but I excused myself, saying that I would prefer to sit and look at her; and just then a thin woman with red hair, who had arrived at the same time as Marie, and who had sat next her at dinner, was introduced to me, and I was told that she was Marie's intimate friend, and that the two lived together whenever Marie returned to Montmartre. She was known as *La Glue*; her real name was Victorine. She had sat for Manet's picture of Olympe, but that was years ago. The face was thinner, but I recognised the red hair and the brown eyes, small eyes set closely, reminding one of *des petits verres de cognac*. Her sketch-book was being passed round, and as it came into my hands I noticed that she did not wear stays and was dressed in old grey woollen. She lit cigarette after cigarette, and leaned over Marie with her arm about her shoulder, advising her what cards to play. The game was baccarat, and in a little while I saw that Marie was losing a great deal of money, and a little later I saw *La Glue* trying to persuade her away from the card-table.

'One more deal.' That deal lost her the last louis she had placed on the table. 'Some one will have to pay my cab,' she said.

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We were going to the Elysée Montmartre, and Alphonsine lent her a couple of louis, *pour passer sa soirée*, and we all went away in carriages, the little horses straining up the steep streets; the plumes of the women's hats floating over the carriage hoods. Marie was in one of the front carriages, and was waiting for us on the high steps leading from the street to the *bal*.

'It's my last night,' she said, 'the last night I shall see the Elysée for many a month.'

' You'll soon be back again?'

'You see, I have been offered five hundred thousand francs to go to Russia for three years. Fancy, three years without seeing the Elysée,' and she looked round as an angel might look upon Paradise out of which she is about to be driven. 'The trees are beautiful,' she said, 'they're like a fairy tale'; and that is exactly what they were like, rising into the summer darkness, unnaturally green above the electric lights. In the middle of a circle of white globes the orchestra played upon an *estrade*, and every one whirled his partner as if she were a top. 'I always sit over there under the trees in the angle,' she said; and she was about to invite me to come and sit with her, when her attention was distracted from me; for the people had drawn together into groups, and I heard everybody whispering, 'That's Marie Pellegrin.' Seeing her coming, her waiter with much ostentation began to draw aside tables and chairs, and in a few minutes she was sitting under her tree, she and *La Glue* together, their friends about them, Marie distributing absinthe, brandy, and cigarettes. A little procession suddenly formed under the trees and came towards her, and Marie was presented with a great basket of flowers, and all her company with bouquets; and a little cheer went up from different parts of the *bal*, *Vive Marie Pellegrin, la reine de l' Elysée*.

The music began again, the people rushed to see a quadrille where two women, with ease, were kicking off men's hats; and while watching them I heard that a special display of fireworks had been arranged in Marie's honour, the news having got about that this was her last night at the Elysée. A swishing sound was heard; the rocket rose to its height high up in the thick sky. Then it dipped over, the star fell a little way and burst: it melted into turquoise blue, and changed to ruby red, beautiful as the colour of flowers, roses or tulips. The falling fire changed again and again. And Marie stood on a chair and watched till the last sparks vanished.

'Doesn't she look like my picture now?' said Octave.

'You seemed to have divined her soul.'

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. 'I'm not a psychologist, I am a painter. But I must get a word with her,' and with a carelessness that was almost insolence, he pushed his way into the crowd and called her, saying he wanted to speak to her; and they walked round the *bal* together. I could not understand his indifference to her charm, and asked myself if he had always been so indifferent. In a little while they returned.

'I'll do my best,' I heard her say, and she ran back to join her companions.

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'I suppose you've seen enough of the Elysée?'

'Ah! *qu'elle est jolie ce soir; et elle ferait joliment marcher le Russe.'*

We walked on in silence. Octave did not notice that he had said anything to jar my feelings; he was thinking of his portrait, and presently he said that he was sorry she was going to Russia.

'I should like to begin another portrait, now that I have learned to paint.'

'Do you think she'll go to Russia?'

'Yes, she'll go there; but she'll come back one of these days, and I'll get her to sit again. It is extraordinary how little is known of the art of painting; the art is forgotten. The old masters did perfectly in two days what we spend weeks fumbling at. In two days Rubens finished his *grisaille*, and the glazing was done with certainty, with skill, with ease in half an hour! He could get more depth of colour with a glaze than any one can to-day, however much paint is put on the canvas. The old masters had method, now there 's none. One brush as well as another, rub the paint up or down, it doesn't matter so long as the canvas is covered. Manet began it, and Cezanne has — well, filed the petition: painting is bankrupt.'

I listened to him a little wearily, for I had heard all he was saying many times before, but Octave always talked as he wanted to talk, and this evening he wanted to talk of painting, not of Marie, and I was glad when we came to the spot where our ways parted.

'You know that the Russian is coming to the studio to-morrow; I hope he'll buy the portrait.'

'I hope he will,' I said. 'I'd buy it myself if I could afford it.'

'I'd prefer you to have something I have done since, unless it be the woman you're after… but one minute. You're coming to sit to me the day after to-morrow?'

'Yes,' I said, ' I'll come.'

'And then I'll be able to tell you if he has bought the picture.'

Three days afterwards I asked Octave on the threshold if the Russian had bought the portrait, and he told me nothing had been definitely settled yet.

Marie had gone to St. Petersburg with the prince, and this was the last news I had of her for many months. But a week rarely passed without something happening to remind me of her. One day a book of travels in Siberia opened at a passage telling how a boy belonging to a tribe of Asiatic savages had been taken from his deserts, where he had been found deserted and dying, and brought to Moscow. The gentleman who had found him adopted and educated him, and the

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reclaimed savage became in time a fashionable young man about town, betraying no trace of his origin until one day he happened to meet one of his tribe. The man had come to Moscow to sell skins; and the smell of the skins awoke a longing for the desert. The reclaimed savage grew melancholy; his adopted father tried in vain to overcome the original instinct; presents of money did not soothe his homesickness. He disappeared, and was not heard of for years until one day a caravan came back with the news of a man among the savages who had betrayed himself by speaking French. On being questioned he denied any knowledge of French; he said he had never been to St. Petersburg, nor did he wish to go there. And what was this story but the story of Marie Pellegrin, who, when weary of Russian princes and palaces, returned for her holiday to the Quartier Bréda?

A few days afterwards I heard in Barrès' studio that she had escaped from Russia; and that evening I went to Alphonsine's to dinner, hoping to see her there. But she was not there. There was no one there except Clementine and the two stockbrokers; and I waited eagerly for news of her. I did not like to mention her name, and the dreary dinner was nearly over before her name was mentioned. I heard that she was ill; no, not dying, but very ill. Alphonsine gave me her address; a little higher up on the same side as the Cirque Fernando, nearly facing the Elysée Montmartre. The number I could inquire out, she said, and I went away in a cab up the steep and stony Rue des Martyres, noticing the café and then the *brasserie* and a little higher up the fruit-seller and the photographer. When the mind is at stress one notices the casual, and mine was at stress, and too agitated to think. The first house we stopped at happened to be the right one, and the *concierge* said, 'the fourth floor.' As I went upstairs I thought of *La Glue*, of her untidy dress and her red hair, and it was she who answered the bell and asked me into an unfurnished drawing-room, and we stood by the chimney-piece.

'She's talking of going to the Elysée to-night. Won't you come in? She'd like to see you. There are three or four of us here. You know them. Clementine, Margaret Byron?' And she mentioned some other names that I did not remember, and opening a door, she cried, 'Marie,' here's a visitor for you, a gentleman from Alphonsine's. You know, dear, the Englishman, Octave Barrès' friend.

She gave me her hand, and I held it a long while.

'*Comme les Anglais sont gentils. Dès qu'on est malade* — '

I don't think Marie finished the sentence, if she did I did not hear her; but I remember quite well that she spoke of my distaste for cards.

'You didn't play that night at Alphonsine's when I lost all my money. You preferred to look at Victorine's drawings. She has done some better ones. Go and look at them, and let's finish our game. Then I'll talk to you. So you heard about me at Alphonsine's? They say I'm very ill, don't they? But now that I 've come back I'll soon get well. I'm always well at Montmartre, amn't I, Victorine?' '*Nous ne sommes pas installés encore*,' Marie said, referring to the scarcity of furniture, and to the clock and candelabra which stood on the floor. But if there were too few

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chairs, there was a good deal of money and jewellery among the bed-clothes; and Marie toyed with this jewellery during the games. She wore large lace sleeves, and the thin arms showed delicate and slight when she raised them to change her ear-rings. Her small beauty, fashioned like an ivory, contrasted with the coarse features about her, and the little nose with beautifully shaped nostrils, above all the mouth, fading at the ends into faint indecisions. Every now and then a tenderness came over her face; Octave had seen the essential in her, whatever he might say; he had painted herself — her soul; and Marie's soul rose up like a water-flower in her eyes, and then the soul sank out of sight, and I saw another Marie, *une grue*, playing cards with five others from Alphonsine's, losing her money and her health. A bottle of absinthe stood on a beautiful empire table that her prince had given her, and Bijou, Clementine's little dog, slept on an embroidered cushion. Bijou was one of those dear little Japanese or Chinese spaniels, those dogs that are like the King Charles. She was going to have puppies, and I was stroking her silky coat thinking of her coming trouble, when I suddenly heard Clementine's voice raised above the others, and looking up I saw a great animation in her face. I heard that the cards had not been fairly dealt, and then the women threw their cards aside, and *La Glue* told Clementine that she was not wanted — that *elle ferait bien de débarrasser les planches*, that was the expression she used. I heard further accusations, and among them the plaintive voice of Marie begging of me not to believe what they said. The women caught each other by the hair, and tore at each other's faces, and Marie raised herself up in bed and implored them to cease; and then she fell back crying. For a moment it seemed as if they were going to sit down to cards again, but suddenly everybody snatched her own money and then every body snatched at the money within her reach; and, calling each other thieves, they struggled through the door, and I heard them quarrelling all the way down the staircase. Bijou jumped from her chair and followed her mistress.

'Help me to look,' Marie said, and looking I saw her faint hands seeking through the bed-clothes. Some jewellery was missing, a bracelet and some pearls as well as all her money. Marie fell back among the pillows unable to speak, and every moment I dreaded a flow of blood. She began to cry, and the little lace handkerchief was soon soaking. I had to find her another. The money that had been taken had been paid her by a *fournisseur* in the Quartier, who had given her two thousand francs for her *garniture de cheminée*. A few francs were found among the bed-clothes, and these few francs, she said, were sufficient *pour passer sa soirée*, and she begged me to go to the dressmaker to inquire for the gown that had been promised for ten o'clock.

'I shall be at the Elysée by eleven. *Au revoir, au revoir!* Let me rest a little now. I shall see you to-night. You know where I always sit, in the left-hand corner, they always keep those seats for me.'

Her eyes closed, I could see that she was already asleep, and her calm and reasonable sleep reminded me of her agitated and unreasonable life; and I stood looking at her, at this poor butterfly who was lying here all alone, robbed by her friends and associates. But she slept contentedly, having found a few francs that they had overlooked amid the bed-clothes, enough to enable her to pass her evening at the Elysée! The prince might be written to; but he, no

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doubt, was weary of her inability to lead a respectable life, and knew, no doubt, that if he were to send her money, it would go as his last gift had gone. If she lived, Marie would one day be selling fried potatoes on the streets. And this decadence — was it her fault? Octave would say, '*Qu'est ce que cela peut nous faire, une fille plus ou moins fichue… si je pouvais réussir un peu dans ce sacré métier!*' This was how he talked, but he thought more profoundly in his painting; his picture of her was something more than mere sarcasm.

She was going to the Elysée to-night. It was just six o'clock, so she wanted her dress by ten. I must hasten away to the dressmaker at once; it might be wiser not — she lay in bed peaceful and beautiful; at the Elysée she would be drinking absinthe and smoking cigarettes until three in the morning. But I had promised: she wouldn't forgive me if I didn't, and I went.

The dressmaker said that Madame Pellegrin would have her dress by nine, and at half-past ten I was at the Elysée waiting for her.

How many times did I walk round the gravel path, wearying of the unnatural green of the chestnut leaves and of the high kicking in the quadrilles? Now and then there would be a rush of people, and then the human tide would disperse again under the trees among the zinc chairs and tables, for the enjoyment of bocks and cigars. I noticed that Marie's friends spent their evening in the left-hand corner; but they did not call me to drink with them, knowing well that I knew the money they were spending was stolen money.

I left the place discontented and weary, glad in a way that Marie had not come. No doubt the dressmaker had disappointed her, or maybe she had felt too ill. There was no time to go to inquire in the morning, for I was breakfasting with Octave, and in the afternoon sitting to him.

We were in the middle of the sitting, he had just sketched in my head, when we heard footsteps on the stairs.

'Only some women,' he said; 'I've a mind not to open the door.'

'But do,' I said, feeling sure the women were Marie's friends bringing news of her. And it was so. She had been found dead on her balcony dressed in the gown that had just come home from the dressmaker.

I hoped that Octave would not try to pass the matter off with some ribald jest, and I was surprised at his gravity. 'Even Octave,' I said, 'refrains, *on ne blague pas la mort*.'

'But what was she doing on the balcony?' he asked. 'What I don't understand is the balcony.'

We all stood looking at her picture trying to read the face.

'I suppose she went out to look at the fireworks; they begin about eleven.'

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It was one of the women who had spoken, and her remark seemed to explain the picture.

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