

THE SCRUTINIES OF SIMON IFF

BY EDWARD KELLY.

No. 2—The Artistic Temperament

I.

Jack Flynn was the centre of a happy group of artists. They were seated upon the terrace of the Café d'Alençon to drink the apéritif; for although November was upon Paris, the Sun still remembered his beloved city, and fed it with light and warmth.

Flynn had come over from London for a week to see the Autumn Salon, and to gossip with his old friends. The conversation was naturally of Art, and, like the universe itself, had neither beginning nor end, being self-created by its own energy, so rolled easily through the Aeon in every combination of beauty.

But half of beauty is melancholy, a subtle sub-current of sadness; and on this particular occasion it was visible, giving a grey tone to the most buoyant rhapsodies. The talkers were in fact subdued and restrained; each spoke gaily, yet stood upon his guard, as if there were some subject near his consciousness which he must be careful not to broach.

It was a curiously distinguished group. Two of the men wore the Légion d'Honneur; the elder of the two, who looked more like a soldier or a diplomat than a painter, seemed to be the object of constant solicitude on the part of the younger, whose ruddy, cheerful, ironic face was like a picture by Franz Hals—but a Frank Hals in the mood of Rabelais. He seemed particularly anxious lest the other should say something unfortunate, but he should really have been looking round the corner, for there was where the danger lay.

Round that corner, all arms and legs, came swinging the agile body of no less a person than the mystic, Simon Iff.

His first greeting was the bombshell! "Ah ha!" he cried, grasping the hand of the elder of the two décorés, "and how's the dear old Sea?" For the person addressed happened to be famous all over the world as a marine painter. The younger man sprang to his feet. "Just don't mention the sea, please, for a few months!" he said in Simon's ear. It was unnecessary. Even in the general joy at the return of an old friend, Iff's quick apprehension could not fail to detect a suppressed spasm of pain on every face.

The mystic turned and greeted the man who had interrupted him with honest gladness; then his other hand shot out to Flynn. "I've been out of the world all summer," he cried, shaking hands all round, "in a hermitage after my own heart. Fancy a castle dating from the crusades, on the very edge of a glacier, and every practicable route barred against the world, the flesh, and the devil, in the shape of tourists, tables d'hôte, and newspapers!" "You look thirty!" declared one of the men. "And I feel twenty," laughed the magician; "what do you say to a little dinner at Lapérouse? I want to walk across the Luxembourg to a feast, as I've done any time these fifty years!"

As it happened, only two of the party were free; Major, the young man with the button, and Jack Flynn.

After some quiet chat the three strolled off together, arm in arm, down the Boulevard Montparnasse.

When they reached the Avenue de l'Observatoire, they turned down that noble grove. Here, at all hours of day and night, is a stately solitude.

Intended for gaiety, devised as a symbol of gaiety by the most frivolous age of all time, it has become by virtue of age the very incarnation of melancholy grandeur. It seems almost to lament that eighteenth century which fathered it.

Before they had passed into this majesty more than an hundred yards, the mystic said abruptly: "What's the trouble?"

"Haven't you really seen a paper for six months?" countered Flynn.

"Of course I haven't. You know my life; you know that I retire, whenever I am able, from this nightmare illusion of matter to a world of reality. So tell me your latest evil dream!"

"Evil enough!" said Major, "it doesn't actually touch us, but it's a narrow escape. We only heard the climax three days ago; so it's a green wound, you see."

"Yet it doesn't touch you."

"No; but it touches Art, and that's me, all right!"

"Will you tell me the story?"

"I'll leave that to Flynn. He's been on the trail all the time."

"I was even at the trial," said Flynn.

"Come, come," laughed Iff, "all these be riddles."

"I'll make them clear enough—all but the one. Now, no interruptions! I have the thing orderly in my mind."

"Five: four: three: two: one: gun!"

"The place is a small rocky islet off the west coast of Scotland, by name Dubhbheagg. A few fisher-folk live there; nobody else. There is one landing-place, and one only, even in calm weather; in a storm it is inaccessible altogether. Overlooking this quay is a house perched on the cliff; an old stone mansion. The proprietor is one of our sacred guild, and spends most of his time in Central Asia or Central Africa or Central America or Central Australia—anything to be central!—and he lets the house to any one who is fool enough to pay the price.

"This summer it was rented by the president of the Royal Academy."

"What's that?" said Iff, sharply.

"The Royal Academy," explained Flynn, "is an institution devised by divine Providence for the detection of British Artists. It brings them into notice by ostentatiously rejecting their works. The president is Lord Cudlipp."

"Wasn't he a Joseph Thorne, or some such name?" asked Simon Iff.

"Thornton, I think. Ennobled thirteen years ago," corrected Flynn.

"It was Thornley," insisted the sculptor, Major.

"Yes, Thornley; I remember now. I know him slightly; and I knew his father before him; an M. P. and a biscuit manufacturer," exclaimed the mystic.

"A pity the son didn't follow the father," murmured Major. "I feel sure that his biscuits would have been delightful!"

"You're interrupting the court," protested the editor. "To proceed. Here we have Cudlipp in the Big House of Dubhbheagg, with a man and wife to cook for him, both old servants, with him thirty years. There are also his son Harry his daughter Eleanor, her companion-maid, and—a man from the Quarter!"

"This Quarter?"

"Up in Montrouge his studio is, I think, one of