

## A SPRING IDYLL

From *Punch*, Volume 156, May 28, 1919

If wound stripes were given to soldiers on becoming casualties to Cupid's archery barrage, Ronnie Morgan's sleeve would be stiff with gilt embroidery. The spring offensive claimed him as an early victim. When he became an extensive purchaser of drab segments of fossilized soap, bottles of sticky brilliantine with a chemical odour, and postcards worked with polychromatic silk, the billet began to make inquiries.

"It's that little mam'zelle at the shop in the Rue de la République," reported Jim Brown. "He spends all his pay and as much as he can borrow of mine to get excuses for speaking to her."

There was a period of regular visits and intense literary activity on the part of Ronnie, followed by the sudden disappearance of Mam'zelle and an endeavour by the disconsolate swain to liquidate his debts in kind.

"I owe you seven francs, Jim," said he. "If you give me another three francs and I give you two bottles of brilliantine and a cake of vanilla-flavoured soap we'll be straight."

"Not me!" said Jim firmly. "I've no wish to be a scented fly-paper. Have you frightened her away?"

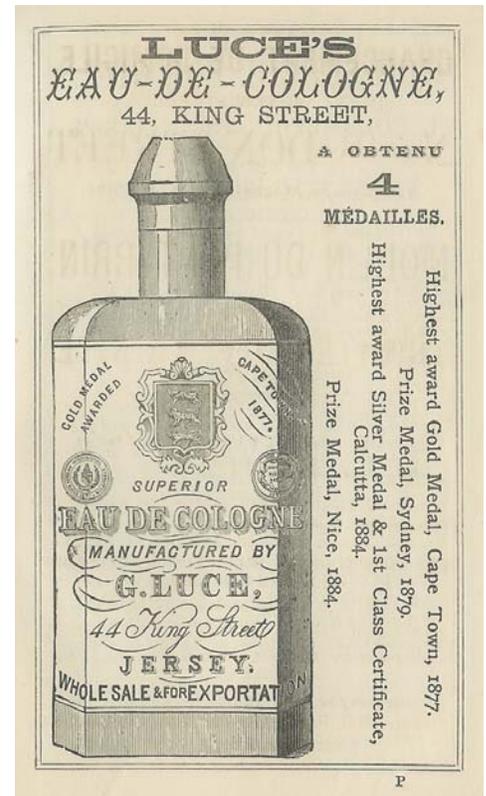
"She's been *swept* away on a flood of my eloquence," said Ronnie sadly. "But in the wrong direction; and after I'd bought enough pomatum from her to grease the keel of a battleship, and enough soap to wash it all off again. Good soap it is too, me lad; lathers well if you soak it in hot water overnight."

"How did you come to lose her?" asked Jim, steering the conversation out of commercial channels.

"The loss is hers," said Ronnie; "I wore holes in my tunic leaning over the counter talking to her, and I made about as much progress as a Peace Conference. I got soap instead of sympathy and scent instead of sentiment. However, she must have got used to me, because one day she asked if I would translate an English letter she'd received into French."

"Now's your chance to make good," I thought, language being my strong suit; but I felt sick when I found it was a love-letter from a presumptuous blighter at Calais, who signed himself 'Your devoted Horace.' Still, to make another opportunity of talking to her, I offered to write it out in French. She sold me a block of letter-paper for the purpose, and I went home and wrote a lifelike translation.

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*"I owe you seven francs, Jim," said he.*

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we'll be straight."*

“She gave me a dazzling smile and warm welcome when I took it in, but on the balance I didn’t feel that I’d done myself much good. And next day I’m dashed if she didn’t give me another letter to translate, this time signed ‘Your loving Herbert.’ Herbert, I discovered, was a sapper who’d been transferred to Boulogne and, judging by his hand, was better with a shovel than a pen. As an amateur in style I couldn’t translate his drivel word for word. Like Cyrano, the artist in me rose supreme, and I manicured and curled his letter, painted and embroidered it, and nearly finished by signing ‘Ronnie’ instead of ‘Herbert.’

“She was quite surprised when she read the translation.

“*C’est gentil, n’est-ce-pas?*” said she, kissing it and stuffing it away in her belt. ‘I did not think,’ she went on in French, ‘that the dear stupid ‘Erbert had so much eloquence.’ I saw my error. I had made a probable of a horse that hadn’t previously got an earthly. So, to adjust things, I refrigerated the next letter—which happened to be from ‘Orace—to the temperature of codfish on an ice block. And the consequence was that Georgette sulked and would scarcely speak to me for three whole days.

“The situation, coldly reviewed, appeared to be like this. When ‘Orace or ‘Erbert pleased her I got a share of the sunshine, but when their love-making cooled her displeasure was visited on poor Ronnie. Any advances on my own part were countered with sales of soap, customers apparently being rarer than lovers. So I had to bide my time.

“But one day letters from ‘Orace and ‘Erbert arrived simultaneously, and were duly handed to the fourth party for necessary action. It occurred to me that when the time came for me to enter the race on my own behalf I need have little fear of ‘Erbert as a rival, so I determined to cut ‘Orace out of the running.

“I translated his letter first. I censored the tender parts, spun out the padding and served it up like cold-hash. Then I set to work on ‘Erbert. I got the tremolo stop out and the soft pedal on and made a symphony of it. I made it a stream of trickling melody—blue skies, yellow sunshine and scent of roses, with Georgette perched like a sugar goddess on a silver cloud and ‘Erbert trying to clamber up to her on a silk ladder. To read it would have made a Frenchman proud of his own language. Then, for dramatic effect, I took the letters, put

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them on the counter and walked out without a word. ‘That,’ thought I, ‘will do ‘Orace’s business—and then for ‘Erbert!’

“Next day, when I went to see the result, to my surprise I found that her place behind the counter was taken by that little red-haired Celestine.

“‘Where’s Georgette?’ said I.

“‘Ah, M’sieur, she has gone,’ said Celestine. ‘Figure to yourself, this ‘Orace, who used to write with ardour and spirit, sent her yesterday a poor pitiful note. It made one’s heart bleed to read it, such halting appeal, such inarticulate sentiment. *“Le pauvre garçon!”* cried Georgette, “his passion is so strong he cannot find words for it. He is stricken dumb with excess of feeling. I must be at his side to comfort him.” And she has flown like the wind to Calais, that she may be affianced to him. But if M’sieur desires to buy the soap I know the kind you prefer.’

“So you see me,” concluded Ronnie plaintively, “bankrupt in love and money. Three francs, Jim, and I’ll chuck in a packet of post-cards.”

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*This story was published as Classic Flash #15 on Flash Fiction Online ([flashfictiononline.com](http://flashfictiononline.com)).*

