The Collected Works of James Branch Cabell
The Eagle's Shadow, Jurgen, The Cords of Vanity, The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck and others
Illustrated

The Eagle's Shadow (1904)

To Martha Louise Branch
In trust that the enterprise may be judged less by the merits of its factor than by those of its patron

THE CHARACTERS

COLONEL THOMAS HUGONIN, formerly in the service of Her Majesty the Empress of India, Margaret Hugonin's father.

Frederick R. Woods, the founder of Selwoode, Margaret's uncle by marriage.

Billy Woods, his nephew, Margaret's quondam fiancé.

Hugh Van Orden, a rather young young man,

Margaret's adorer.

Martin Jeal, M.D., of Fairhaven, Margaret's family physician.

Cock-Eye Flinks, a gentleman of leisure, Margaret's chance acquaintance.

Petheridge Jukesbury, president of the Society for the Suppression of Nicotine and the Nude, Margaret's almoner in furthering the cause of education and temperance.

Felix Kennaston, a minor poet, Margaret's almoner in furthering the cause of literature and art.

Sarah Ellen Haggage, Madame President of the Ladies' League for the Edification of the Impecunious, Margaret's almoner in furthering the cause of charity and philanthropy. Kathleen Eppes Saumarez, a lecturer before women's clubs, Margaret's almoner in furthering the cause of theosophy, nature study, and rational dress.

Adèle Haggage, Mrs. Haggage's daughter, Margaret's rival with Hugh Van Orden.

And Margaret Hugonin.

The other participants in the story are Wilkins, Célestine, The Spring Moon and The Eagle.

I

THIS IS THE story of Margaret Hugonin and of the Eagle. And with your permission, we will for the present defer all consideration of the bird, and devote our unqualified attention to Margaret.

I have always esteemed Margaret the obvious, sensible, most appropriate name that can be bestowed upon a girl-child, for it is a name that fits a woman — any woman — as neatly as her proper size in gloves.

Yes, the first point I wish to make is that a woman-child, once baptised Margaret, is thereby insured of a suitable name. Be she grave or gay in after-life, wanton or pious or sullen, comely or otherwise, there will be no possible chance of incongruity; whether she develop a taste for winter-gardens or the higher mathematics, whether she take to golf or clinging organdies, the event is provided for. One has only to consider for a moment, and if among a choice of Madge, Marjorie, Meta, Maggie, Margherita, Peggy, and Gretchen, and countless others — if among all these he cannot find a name that suits her to a T — why, then, the case is indeed desperate and he may permissibly fall back upon Madam or — if the cat jump propitiously, and at his own peril — on Darling or Sweetheart.

The second proof that this name must be the best of all possible names is that Margaret Hugonin bore it. And so the murder is out. You may suspect what you

choose. I warn you in advance that I have no part whatever in her story; and if my admiration for her given name appear somewhat excessive, I can only protest that in this dissentient world every one has a right to his own taste. I knew Margaret. I admired her. And if in some unguarded moment I may have carried my admiration to the point of indiscretion, her husband most assuredly knows all about it, by this, and he and I are still the best of friends. So you perceive that if I ever did so far forget myself it could scarcely have amounted to a hanging matter.

I am doubly sure that Margaret Hugonin was beautiful, for the reason that I have never found a woman under forty-five who shared my opinion. If you clap a Testament into my hand, I cannot affirm that women are eager to recognise beauty in one another; at the utmost they concede that this or that particular feature is well enough. But when a woman is clean-eyed and straight-limbed, and has a cheery heart, she really cannot help being beautiful; and when Nature accords her a sufficiency of dimples and an infectious laugh, I protest she is well-nigh irresistible. And all these Margaret Hugonin had.

And surely that is enough.

I shall not endeavour, then, to picture her features to you in any nicely picked words. Her chief charm was that she was Margaret.

And besides that, mere carnal vanities are trivial

things; a gray eye or so is not in the least to the purpose. Yet since it is the immemorial custom of writer-folk to inventory such possessions of their heroines, here you have a catalogue of her personal attractions. Launce's method will serve our turn.

Imprimis, there was not very much of her — five feet three, at the most; and hers was the well-groomed modern type that implies a grandfather or two and is in every respect the antithesis of that hulking Venus of the Louvre whom people pretend to admire. Item, she had blue eyes; and when she talked with you, her head drooped forward a little. The frank, intent gaze of these eyes was very flattering and, in its ultimate effect, perilous, since it led you fatuously to believe that she had forgotten there were any other trousered beings extant. Later on you found this a decided error. Item, she had a quite incredible amount of yellow hair, that was not in the least like gold or copper or bronze — I scorn the hackneyed similes of metallurgical poets — but a straightforward yellow, darkening at the roots; and she wore it low down on her neck in great coils that were held in place by a multitude of little golden hair-pins and divers corpulent tortoise-shell ones. Item, her nose was a tiny miracle of perfection; and this was noteworthy, for you will observe that Nature, who is an adept at eyes and hair and mouths, very rarely achieves a creditable nose. Item, she had a mouth; and if you are a Gradgrindian with a taste for hairsplitting, I cannot swear that it was a

particularly small mouth. The lips were rather full than otherwise; one saw in them potentialities of heroic passion, and tenderness, and generosity, and, if you will, temper. No, her mouth was not in the least like the pink shoe-button of romance and sugared portraiture; it was manifestly designed less for simpering out of a gilt frame or the dribbling of stock phrases over three hundred pages than for gibes and laughter and cheery gossip and honest, unromantic eating, as well as another purpose, which, as a highly dangerous topic, I decline even to mention.

There you have the best description of Margaret Hugonin that I am capable of giving you. No one realises its glaring inadequacy more acutely than I.

Furthermore, I stipulate that if in the progress of our comedy she appear to act with an utter lack of reason or even common-sense — as every woman worth the winning must do once or twice in a lifetime — that I be permitted to record the fact, to set it down in all its ugliness, nay, even to exaggerate it a little — all to the end that I may eventually exasperate you and goad you into crying out, “Come, come, you are not treating the girl with common justice!”

For, if such a thing were possible, I should desire you to rival even me in a liking for Margaret Hugonin. And speaking for myself, I can assure you that I have come long ago to regard her faults with the same leniency that I accord my own.

II

WE BEGIN ON a fine May morning in Colonel Hugonin's rooms at Selwoode, which is, as you may or may not know, the Hugonins' country-place. And there we discover the Colonel dawdling over his breakfast, in an intermediate stage of that careful toilet which enables him later in the day to pass casual inspection as turning forty-nine.

At present the old gentleman is discussing the members of his daughter's house-party. We will omit, by your leave, a number of picturesque descriptive passages — for the Colonel is, on occasion, a man of unfettered speech — and come hastily to the conclusion, to the summing-up of the whole matter.

"Altogether," says Colonel Hugonin, "they strike me as being the most ungodly menagerie ever gotten together under one roof since Noah landed on Ararat."

Now, I am sorry that veracity compels me to present the Colonel in this particular state of mind, for ordinarily he was as pleasant-spoken a gentleman as you will be apt to meet on the longest summer day.

You must make allowances for the fact that, on this especial morning, he was still suffering from a recent twinge of the gout, and that his toast was somewhat dryer than he liked it; and, most potent of all, that the foreign mail, just in, had caused him to rebel anew against the proprieties and his daughter's inclinations, which chained him to Selwoode, in the height of the full London season, to preside over a house-party every member of which he cordially disliked. Therefore, the Colonel having glanced through the well-known names of those at Lady Pevensey's last cotillion, groaned and glared at his daughter, who sat opposite him, and reviled his daughter's friends with point and fluency, and characterised them as above, for the reason that he was

hungered at heart for the shady side of Pall Mall, and that their presence at Selwoode prevented his attaining this Elysium. For, I am sorry to say that the Colonel loathed all things American, saving his daughter, whom he worshipped.

And, I think, no one who could have seen her preparing his second cup of tea would have disputed that in making this exception he acted with a show of reason. For Margaret Hugonin — but, as you know, she is our heroine, and, as I fear you have already learned, words are very paltry makeshifts when it comes to describing her. Let us simply say, then, that Margaret, his daughter, began to make him a cup of tea, and add that she laughed.

Not unkindly; no, for at bottom she adored her father — a comely Englishman of some sixty-odd, who had run through his wife's fortune and his own, in the most gallant fashion — and she accorded his opinions a conscientious, but at times, a sorely taxed, tolerance. That very month she had reached twenty-three, the age of omniscience, when the fallacies and general obtuseness of older people become dishearteningly apparent.

"It's nonsense," pursued the old gentleman, "utter, bedlamite nonsense, filling Selwoode up with writing people! Never heard of such a thing. Gad, I do remember, as a young man, meeting Thackeray at a garden-party at Orleans House — gentlemanly fellow with a broken nose — and Browning went about a bit,

too, now I think of it. People had 'em one at a time to lend flavour to a dinner — like an olive; we didn't dine on olives, though. You have 'em for breakfast, luncheon, dinner, and everything! I'm sick of olives, I tell you, Margaret!" Margaret pouted.

"They ain't even good olives. I looked into one of that fellow Charteris's books the other day — that chap you had here last week. It was bally rot — proverbs standing on their heads and grinning like dwarfs in a condemned street-fair! Who wants to be told that impropriety is the spice of life and that a roving eye gathers remorse? *You* may call that sort of thing cleverness, if you like; I call it damn' foolishness." And the emphasis with which he said this left no doubt that the Colonel spoke his honest opinion.

"Attractive," said his daughter patiently, "Mr. Charteris is very, very clever. Mr. Kennaston says literature suffered a considerable loss when he began to write for the magazines."

And now that Margaret has spoken, permit me to call your attention to her voice. Mellow and suave and of astonishing volume was Margaret's voice; it came not from the back of her throat, as most of our women's voices do, but from her chest; and I protest it had the timbre of a violin. Men, hearing her voice for the first time, were wont to stare at her a little and afterward to close their hands slowly, for always its modulations had the tonic sadness of distant music, and it thrilled you to