

**The Providential Preservation  
of  
The Universal Bibliographic Repository**

‘Loads of cows!’ exclaimed Henri.

Matilde was mortified. She felt obliged to withdraw her eyes from the passing rural scene. Large ruminants there were in considerable numbers, certainly. But there was no reason to call attention to them. Not now. Not in the presence of these fellow-travellers.

There was the priest who sat opposite her and who had already, although they were quite unacquainted, spoken to her. And if she did not care to look at the priest, then neither did she care to look at the man seated next to him, a smooth-looking individual in a pale raincoat - some sort of commercial traveller, she did not doubt, of the sort that her mama had been obliged to take in as lodgers when papa had passed away. Those sort were Pests. Next to him, by the far window, sat a man noisily flapping a newspaper. The headlines were large and gloomy, proclaiming war. War? Matilde thought not. She shook her head firmly, and then realised what she was doing. She flushed and stared out of her window again as if deeply annoyed by something she had seen outside. No, there could be no war. It was quite inconceivable, after all the effort that brilliant men had put into preventing it. There was too much to be lost in a war.

To her right sprawled young Henri, of a stocky disposition, uncomfortably close, filling out more than his fair share of the bench. A quick side-glance confirmed her worst fears. The foolish youth was gaping, with both mouth and eyes, not to mention legs. He goggled over her bosom at the passing countryside, now that they had left Brussels behind. Swiftly, she jerked her right hand out and closed his mouth with a reverse pincer-movement of her new gloves. Henri ceased gaping, began gasping. The commercial traveller laughed.

She frowned at The Pest and then deliberately cleared her face. This was no way for a lady to behave. She reminded herself sternly that she was on Important Business, and that the safety of the Condensed Corpus of Universal Knowledge was, for several hours at least, in her care, and her care alone. She must act responsibly.

She was aware that the eyes of the three men in the carriage were now upon her. She had no intention of showing herself up as a flustered female, unable to cope with the novelties of railway travel. It was best to look steadily out of the window. The countryside! She loved the countryside. Once or twice a year, she and mama would take a trip out to the countryside, usually with Uncle Albert who visited from Liège, and they would have such a lovely time! Uncle Albert was not really an uncle - he was a dear old friend of papa’s: but he was most kind to mama. Matilde smiled at the memory of some delightful country-walks they had taken together. Then she became aware of her smile and desisted straight away.

Alas! The priest now encouraged, bent towards Matilde. ‘Your son, madame, is surely on his first trip out of the big city?’ he asked.

Her son? Goodness gracious, how was she to respond? That this myopian should think her married! And with a son like that! Which was worse? She pursed her lips and gripped her document bag more tightly.

It was Henri who completed her mortification by announcing in a very loud voice - the boy could never speak quietly - such a bad example to colleagues at the Universal Bibliographic Repository: ‘That’s not my mam,’ he bellowed, as if everyone wished to know his family circumstances. ‘My mam’s at home with my sisters. They’re called

Thérèse, Marie, Dominique and Jeanne. Dominique's the babby. That is Mademoiselle Poels, Father.'

'Oh,' said the priest, raising a soft hand to his mouth, in apology no doubt. 'I am so sorry, mademoiselle. Do forgive me.'

Matilde merely nodded, once, stiffly. If this religious simpleton was going to pester her all the way to Paris, she would not be able to control herself. She would say, or do, something she would later regret. Mama had warned her, but she would cause a scandal, she knew she would.

The individual who considered himself God's gift to women was enjoying all this. 'Of course this is not her son, Father,' he said, addressing the priest with a laugh, 'how could you suppose that such a pretty young woman was mother to this strapping youth? You priests,' he added, rolling his eyes towards Matilde in a most provocative and offensive manner, 'you have absolutely no idea about the weaker sex, do you?' To cap his insolence, he bowed forwards in his seat, straight at her. The Pest was clearly prowling. She knew how to deal with that.

She reached in her case and pulled out a scholarly volume. Her mama had advised her that ladies do not read books in public, and certainly not in a railway-carriage. But mama had probably never had to deal with an idiot boy, an unobservant priest and a drooling lecher, all together in one railway-compartment. She opened her book and poked her head down into the pages. Only a fool would dare interrupt her now.

And, naturally, a fool obliged.

'Ah,' said the priest who had, as soon as the book appeared, hauled out of his own bag a pair of spectacles and placed them on his nose, preparatory to spying on her reading, 'Paul Otlet's *Collected Bibliographical Essays*, I see. Well, well! Most fascinating, and, if I may say so, most curious reading for a young woman. Do you,' he proceeded to insult her, 'grasp what the man is trying to say?'

Matilde looked up from her book. The seducer to the priest's left sported a fixed grin. She would wipe that smile off his face soon enough.

'Father,' she said firmly to the priest, 'I work at Monsieur Otlet's "Mundaneum". The ideas which the Director propounds in this volume are put into practice by none other than myself, on a daily basis. Such ideas are no harder for me to understand than the contents of your Breviary are for you. Or,' she added pointedly, but without adjusting her gaze, 'than the bill of fare in a house of ill-repute for a commercial traveller.'

Before the priest could answer, his neighbour positively guffawed with laughter, opening his depraved mouth ever so wide. 'That's a good one, eh, Father?' he exclaimed. 'A real cracker, I'd say. Mademoiselle,' he added sagely, but with sparkling eyes that Matilde feared to catch, 'a house of ill-repute has no bill of fare. You see the meal in front of you, and you just choose the dish that tempts you most. And then you gobble it all up!' Incredibly, he began to make bestial gobbling noises. Henri, to his discredit, sniggered and reddened. The commercial traveller winked broadly at the young man, then produced, of all things, a cheap pewter flask containing - almost without the trace of a doubt - aqua vitae. He passed it over to Henri who, after merely a moment of hesitation, slurped at it, then handed it back, wiping his lips.

The priest had at least the decency to offer his apologies.

'You are of course quite right to correct my misunderstanding, mademoiselle. I merely conjectured that the subject-matter of the essays might prove too difficult or dry a subject for a young woman such as yourself. I care for several young ladies back in my parish, and, alas, there is not one among them who does not prefer a few verses of poetry or a novel to works of a - shall we say? - more elevating nature.'

Matilde was in no mood to be categorised with some flighty girls whose range of interest extended from fatuous fiction to faithless young men and straight back again.

'Father,' she said, tapping the cover of the book to emphasise her points, 'there is nothing more elevating than, 1, the condensing of all information into one scheme of classification. Accordingly, 1.1, we have created the Universal Decimal Classification for this purpose and, 1.2, we have greatly extended the schema to allow for new discoveries and to permit easy cross-referencing. 2, we have invited all academics, all bibliographers, all readers, to record each and every printed work under this new classification. 3, we will make all of this condensed documentation available to any man or woman, who wishes to extend his or her understanding of the material world.'

'And what of the Other World, of God?' asked the priest mildly.

'Be assured that it has been categorised,' she replied shortly, then continued. '4.1, in the "Mundaneum", we have already gathered more than eleven million - eleven,' she repeated, for emphasis, looking hard at the lascivious individual, 'million index-cards containing the exact details and categories of every single publication held in Belgium, and we are making, 4.2, rapid advances in the classification of every book held in the eleven major libraries of Germany, building on the foundation-stones of the Prussian *Gesamtkatalog*.'

'Germany, madame!' exclaimed the man brandishing the newspaper, appalled. 'Do you not realise that Germany has this very day -' He got no further. Matilde Poels was in her element.

'5, it is our plan to record every single page of every single document in microphotographic form, which, as you will doubtless be aware, monsieur,' she addressed the patriotic newspaper-reader, 'uses a method developed by our genial colleague M. Goldschmidt to photograph and reduce to microscopic size the pages of a book, and store these images on chemically-treated film. 6, it will be possible, in a very short time, to offer to all the clients of the "Mundaneum" a service which permits them to, 6.1, search for material related to a topic of interest and, 6.2, view all books, periodicals, journals and papers - pictures and text - which are related to the topic. That prospect is, monsieur, the most elevating prospect of all.

'7,' continued Matilde, seeing her enemy retreating in disarray before her, 'I have in the luggage-van of this very train, thirty-five crates indexing almost all of the known facts of the universe. It is my responsibility to accompany these precious crates to, 7.1, Paris, where they will be stored safely in the vaults of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. We have already sent copies to, 7.2, Washington in America, and to, 7.3, Rio de Janeiro in the far distant land of Brazil. In the present times of danger, M. Otlet believes that they would be safer abroad.'

'Thirty-five crates, mademoiselle?' queried the man behind the newspaper. 'And you are all alone against the invading enemy. How will you manage?'

Matilde bridled. 'I am a woman who takes her responsibilities very seriously, sir,' she said angrily. 'I have besides, 7.11, a porter to assist me.' She did not deign to look at Henri who, on hearing his honourable profession mentioned in a discussion of which he had lost the thread long ago, sat up suddenly and blushed. The commercial traveller winked over at him again, and very coarsely bent his arm and clenched his fist in imitation of the strong-man at a fair.

'You would do well, sir,' Matilde continued addressing her new interrogator, quite unable to stop herself now that she had started, 'to read another book by M. Otlet, rather than that foolish newspaper!'

‘And what would you recommend, young lady?’ asked the reader of news, raising his eyebrows in mock surprise. ‘This Otlet is, I must suppose, a Pacifist?’ He spoke the word with some distaste, much as he might have said “German”.

‘M. Otlet is no mere Pacifist,’ she retorted. ‘He is an Internationalist. All of his life has been devoted to the establishment of international co-operative bodies. And obviously I would recommend to you his most recent work “*La Fin de la Guerre*”. If I had thought I would be in debate with a warmonger, I would have brought a copy along. It would make you think twice about senseless death and destruction.’

‘But as you have not brought a copy,’ replied the unpleasant gentleman, ‘I shall make do with “*Le Commencement de la Guerre*”.’ He smiled smugly round the compartment and then turned to the financial pages with considerable noise and show.

Conversation petered out. Outside, the late afternoon shadows were growing longer and the countryside of Flanders rocked past. Small farms, pastures with larger ruminants, smaller ruminants, anseriforms, now and then flowing water. The hot month of July had just ended, today was the second day of August. According to the railway timetable which Matilde had studied - as she studied all things, for she never let a single fact pass her by, conscious that facts alone drive the wheel of the world - the border into France would be reached at six o’clock precisely. It was close to five now.

At the border there would be passport-control, possibly searches for contraband: aliens and smugglers, she thought with a secret shiver. The train would halt, there might be time to consume some of the sustenance which mama had kindly prepared and packed in a little basket. Would the customs officials demand to open the crates and inspect the contents? Would they get everything out of order, all the beautifully copied index-cards? Monsieur Otlet had advised her that this would not happen, for she had in her case all the necessary documents. “With documentation,” he had once famously lectured, “the world cannot resort to violence.” How true that was! So: she need not feel nervous about the border, although she determined that she would be quite on her guard.

Matilde tried to read her book, but the text simply danced around before her eyes. Her mind turned again and again to those thirty-five carefully-packed crates that were rocking along in the luggage-van at the head of the train. Were they safely stacked and tied down? What if one of them fell and cracked open? There would be cards everywhere, facts all up in the air and quite out of order.

Thank goodness for the Universal Decimal Classification scheme! She calmed herself momentarily. If the worst should happen, and the cards did spill all over the floor of the luggage-van, one would merely need to take note of the classification-number written so neatly on each card, and they could readily be put back in order. Those cards, simple, yet so powerful: together they comprised the Universal Book, endlessly re-writing itself. How many times had she told herself that, and how well did she know it! Oh! - but what if the door to the wagon suddenly banged open, while the cards lay about inside? In a trice, they would be blown all over the countryside, down leafy lanes, into ponds and rivers and the four stomachs of the larger ruminants. That would be a catastrophe!

Matilde struggled to maintain her peace of mind. She peered ever more desperately into M. Otlet’s *Collected Essays*, clenching her fists and curling her toes. As soon as the train stopped at the border, she would go forwards to the luggage-van and see for herself that all was well. Yes, that would do it. And then, if the customs-officials wished to inspect her documentation, what better place to do it? Certainly, she would not wish to be questioned in front of these charlatans here.

At last, the train slowed, whistled and came to a grinding halt. Matilde put away her book, rose to her feet with dignity and peered out of the window. The train stood in a desolate place, clearly not a station. Some men in uniform were marching with intent towards the train. She turned to her young colleague.

‘This is the border, Henri. You have your passport?’

Henri felt in all his pockets, panicked, and finally located the document. He had been sitting on it. He waved it triumphantly. The Pest applauded enthusiastically.

‘Excellent,’ said Matilde drily. ‘Now, I am going to inspect the luggage-van. You will stay here. I will be back shortly. Do not disgrace me.’

Before Henri could protest, she had opened the door, stepped carefully down the side of the carriage and found herself standing amidst clouds of steam on a cinder path. Looking neither right nor left, nor indeed upwards to where each window had an idle head poking out, she strode forwards clasp her document-case. She remembered that the Prussian State Railways had introduced a system of classification for their railway wagons in 1902: she wished to establish whether the Belgian or French railways had followed suit and peered at the numbers painted on each wagon that she passed, analysing them as she went. There were two luggage-vans: it was a very important train, the express from Brussels to Paris. Her crates - her very own crates - were in the van closest to the vast locomotive. Two customs-officials were idling next to it, engaged in wasting time: clearly, they were French, not Belgian. As she approached, they saluted smartly and stroked their moustaches with white gloves.

‘How can we help mademoiselle?’ asked the taller of the two, a man with sleepy brown eyes. He showed many strong teeth. Matilde ignored the teeth and the eyes and explained that she was the authorised and certified owner of thirty-five crates in the van and that she wished to have her documents controlled. Wished also - no: demanded - to see that the crates had not been tampered with.

The taller man bowed facetiously and then with great athleticism which a flightier woman might have admired, leaped up to the door of the van, flung it open and held out his hand to Matilde. She closed her eyes and raised her arm. With quite astonishing strength, the man pulled her up. So swift was her passage through the air that she almost did not notice the outrage perpetrated upon her person by the man left on the ground, who assisted her vertical trajectory with a push on a convenient anatomical part.

Business was soon completed. Her passport was stamped. The customs-official satisfied himself, with much displeasing chaff, that Mlle. Poels was indeed the documented owner of the crates, and that there were thirty-five crates loaded. ‘And what is this “Index”?’ he insisted on knowing. Matilde gave him as short an answer as she deemed fit: ‘An encyclopaedic table of contents of the subject-matter of Knowledge, collected on cards and cross-referenced by a faceted scheme of bibliographical classification, known as the Universal Decimal Classification.’ The male appeared more than satisfied with that reply, stamped the papers and saluted languidly. He held out his arms to help her down; his impudent colleague stood below in an attitude that promised unforgivable outrage.

It was at that moment that Matilde decided that she would stay with her crates all the way to Paris. The idea was brilliant. She would not have to listen to any more nonsense from a priest, a rake and a chauvinist; neither would she have to put up with the uncouth habits of Henri, who was, quite frankly, unfit for polite society; finally, she would not be obliged to swing in the arms of two Frenchmen, a matter on which mama had given her much cautionary instruction on the previous evening. She announced her decision in the clearest possible terms.

The customs-official tried at first to dissuade her, then shrugged rudely, muttered '*Eh bien, bon!*' and launched himself to ground. The door was rolled shut. The sound of masculine laughter ensued and some doubtless ribald discussion. After a brief pause, the door was tapped four times by a hammer - doubtless some certificate being attached for the clarification of officials down the line. Documentation: that, at least, was acceptable.

Matilde was now left in almost total darkness, for there were, it seemed, no windows in a luggage-van. She much regretted having left mama's basket of provisions in the compartment. But at least she had her index-cards under direct supervision. She stood holding her document-case close to her chest.

A few minutes passed and then the locomotive whistled shrilly, very close at hand. Matilde positively jumped, her heart fluttering. 'Goodness!' she murmured, and sat down on one of the packing-cases. She knew, from the recent inspection, that it was the one which contained classifications from 510 through to 519.6 - covering all of "Mathematics", inclusive of number theory, combinational analysis, statistical theory etc (not forgetting of course that the "Statistics" cards should cross-reference another crate, containing the "Social Sciences" index). Dear friends indeed! The train began to pull forwards, slowly at first and with a great deal of shrieking, then faster until it settled into a comfortable rhythm. They were now in France, and Paris was barely a couple of hours away. The hotel was booked, and the crates would be put into secure storage overnight. And tomorrow she would have the great pleasure, and unimaginable honour, of presenting the Index into the safekeeping of France's own national library. Not a patch, of course on the Universal Repository in Brussels - as far as bibliographical classification went, France was still in the Dark Ages.

The train rattled on. To lighten the darkness, Matilde reminded herself of the many things she had discussed with M. Otlet in the past few months - his vision of the future, the new services that the repository would be able to offer to its clients.

It was no longer enough that the many clients of the "Mundaneum" should send in a letter asking for information on - let us say - the religious architecture in the Russian town of Novgorod the Great in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Naturally, under the new bibliographical discipline established by M. Otlet, the relevant card or cards would be located without difficulty (she traced the poetical formula (47) 2.523:72.7 «16» on the rough wood), and the details copied out neatly on to a blank set of cards which would be returned by post to the enquirer. Most efficiently done, and clients were quite satisfied with that.

But how would it be, M. Otlet had proposed recently, if we could offer a service by which the client received, for a small consideration, a microphotographic film containing the actual pages of all the works referenced? Not merely the Index, but also the Information itself? No heavy books to consult: one simply needed a blank wall on to which the magic lantern could project the miniaturised pages.

And how would it be further, if somehow telegraphic wires could be used to send in the request and return the results? Some form, perhaps, of typewriter that was actuated by the telegraph? A client need not move from his study or his office, and make the exhausting journey to Brussels - a real service if the journey was in unpleasant company.

And what if, considered M. Otlet's genius, what if human ingenuity could build a machine, much like the invention of the American statistician Mr. Hollerith, which mechanically sought out the relevant cards and then copied them, and what if this machine could be instructed to receive and send *via* the telegraph or telephone? All that the regular client might require would be a smaller version of a photographic printing machine, or a portable magic lantern.

Yes: the concepts of *telereading* and *telenwriting* had been outlined and they would surely be more than just the matter of dreams!

After some time had passed contemplating this very pleasant vision of the future, Matilde felt the train slowing and finally pulling into a station. The lights shining outside illuminated for her a very dim and dirty window that she had not noticed before. It was let into the wall of the carriage, to one side of the door, barely two hands' breadth across. When the train had lurched to a halt, she stood up and went to the window. With her handkerchief, she wiped a small corner clean. Peering out, she saw that the platform outside was busy with station-staff and with soldiers. Anxious not to be seen, she pulled away from the window and sat down again. The first place after the border where the train was scheduled to stop was St Quentin. Famed for its linen cloth and a remarkable collegiate church, some 48,000 inhabitants: somewhere, in the crate containing cards for 911.3:316 (44), the geography of France, there would be a factual distillation of the place. The train was due to halt for five minutes only, before starting on the last leg to Paris and the *Gare du Nord*.

The five minutes lasted a long time. There was at first a great hubbub of raised voices, a wave of noise which gradually receded. There followed a long period of absolute silence, finally shattered by great clanking noises and monstrous jerks, as if the train was being pulled apart. Matilde estimated that perhaps twenty minutes had elapsed before she heard the sound of whistles - a guard's, followed by a locomotive's. Strangely, the train did not move, although there was the sound of an engine pulling away.

A great silence fell upon the station. She looked out of the grimy window again. The platform was now deserted. Matilde turned her attention to the heavy door, but could not move it. At length, she resorted to what mama had indicated that a lady should do under no circumstances. She screamed loudly for help.

There was no response.

She kicked at the door and screamed again and again. At length, she heard the sound of footsteps on the platform. She cleared her throat and called in a less hysterical manner, demanding assistance. A handle clattered and then the door slowly rumbled open. A gentleman stood outside, looking in with curiosity. A gentleman, surely, for he was well-dressed in an overcoat with a fur-collar, a respectable hat and clean footwear; he carried a good quality leather briefcase.

'Madame,' said the gentleman raising his hat. And then, disturbingly, he climbed aboard.

Matilde had not been prepared for this. She remembered mama's advice concerning Frenchmen. Her first precaution to evade a fate worse than death was to retreat to the neat pile of crates and step behind the one that contained classification 2.34 - Religion: Persons: Martyrs.

'Do not be alarmed, madame,' said the gentleman easily. 'I will keep my distance. But,' he added, pulling out a watch and consulting it, 'we really must be on our way.' With which words, he rolled the door shut and settled himself comfortably on a small folding stool which he had brought along with him.

This was extraordinary. Matilde no longer knew what to do. The more so when the train gave a great shudder and, without the slightest whistle or other auditory signal, began to move.

Backwards.

'Monsieur,' asked Matilde after a minute, in as strong a voice as she could muster, 'is this train still on its way to Paris?'

'Ah, *mais non*,' said the Frenchman, apparently puzzled by her question, spreading his hands out apologetically. 'We are, as you must know, on our way to Belgium.'

‘To Belgium? But I have just come from there. The train is scheduled to reach Paris at ten minutes to eight.’

‘It seems that schedules are subject to change,’ was his answer.

‘Then - ?’ Matilde sat down suddenly, her knees weak. She felt quite flustered. Mama had not warned her of the propensity of trains to suddenly reverse direction. This behaviour did not fit the facts at all.

‘I should introduce myself,’ said the gentleman at length, seeing his travelling-companion’s discomfort. He raised his hat once more. ‘My name is Louis-Philippe Vergnot. I am the owner of several manufactories in St Quentin, that town which we have just left. My intention is to travel to the port of Ostend, and there take ship for England. As you are probably aware, war has broken out, and my fear is that France will be overrun shortly. I have therefore hired this portion of the train to take myself and my few belongings to Ostend as swiftly as possible. I regret, madame, my unexpected invasion of your carriage. But I can assure you,’ he went on, ‘that the disturbance to the plans of your fellow-passengers in the rest of the train is even greater.’

Matilde could think of nothing to say. She found herself, like foolish Henri, gaping. ‘Even greater?’ she managed to repeat.

‘Yes, indeed. The rest of the train has been commandeered by the French Army for the war-effort. The train is now on its way, I believe, to the Lorraine region.’

‘But Henri is on that train!’ she exclaimed.

‘Henri?’ queried M. Vergnot, with a look of concern. ‘Your husband perhaps? Or pet dog?’

‘Certainly not, monsieur! Henri is a just a young, and very naive, colleague. My name, sir, is Mademoiselle Poels, of Brussels.’

‘*Eh bien*, Mademoiselle Poels, of Brussels,’ said the other in a placatory manner, ‘all the passengers were placed aboard the slow train for Amiens, from where they might change for Rouen and then Paris; Henri will doubtless be there in a day or two.’

Matilde thought immediately of how M. Otlet would receive the news that his young porter had been whisked off amidst preparations for war. It scarcely fitted well with the ethos of Internationalism which drove every action at the *Palais Mondiale*. How was she to break the news? And what of mama’s little basket of food - was it now provisioning the Front?

The train rattled on over points in a leisurely manner. Matilde considered matters for some time. M. Vergnot, after asking permission, lit up a cigar and calmly puffed away at it, as gentlemen do. At last she spoke up.

‘Monsieur, have you considered how I am to extricate myself from this awkward situation? I have no desire to travel to Ostend. And if I am not permitted to reach Paris, I must be permitted to return to Brussels and consult with the Director of my Institute.’

Vergnot savoured his cigar before replying.

‘Mademoiselle, it was my honest understanding that this luggage-van was in any case on its way back to Belgium. Even if I have been misled, I have paid good money to hire this part of the train, which was not immediately required for the War Effort. A great deal of money indeed. You can scarcely ask me to risk my investment with any sort of detour? We are heading by indirect route to Ostend, *via* Douai and Lens, avoiding Lille where there will be far too much activity. Should you not wish to travel to Ostend, you may step down at any station after we have crossed the border. To stop before the border would merely jeopardise my plan. Once in Belgium, my dear lady, you may return to Brussels by the most direct route.’

‘That, monsieur,’ replied Matilde, now annoyed, ‘is the most ridiculous thing I have heard today. How can you, a self-professed gentleman, propose to abandon me in the

countryside, with all my precious crates, without any means of transport or safety? Have you no shame at all? Have you any idea at all how valuable this collection is to Europe in the Twentieth Century?

Vergnot was unmoved by this appeal to Internationalism and the Future. 'Precious crates, mademoiselle?' he said politely. 'But the official documentation describes the contents as spoiled dry goods, to be returned to the country of origin? Why do you describe them as precious?'

'What documentation?' demanded Matilde, disconcerted.

Vergnot pointed at the closed door. 'Why, the customs certificate attached to the door,' he replied.

Matilde paused. Dry goods? Spoiled? What was this - some vulgar joke?

While she tried to unravel this mystery, her companion dropped his cigar butt elegantly on the floor, and ground it under his left foot.

Matilde glared at him. This was really too much. 'Do you wish to cause a conflagration, monsieur?' she demanded. 'Do you mean to set us both alight without hope of escape? And have you no idea at all what treasure is contained within these crates?' Dramatically - perhaps too dramatically, she thought, but no matter - she indicated with a sweep of her arm the entire collection of index cards destined for the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. 'This is the unique French abstract of the Universal Bibliographic Repository! A gift between neighbours.'

Vergnot appeared disappointed. 'Such neighbours, I fear, as now require more than a mere Bibliography. We live in times of war.'

'All the more reason, one would argue, for preserving the gift,' Matilde retorted triumphantly. 'With ready access to the facts, men will be less hasty to grasp after the sword!' She knew it; it had to happen; she had climbed on her High Horse, as dear papa used to say. She felt herself hot and bothered, rage swirled around in her nostrils; but she did not care. 'You will not, monsieur, play fast and loose with this collection, nor with my own person. You will set me down, in Belgium if it must be so, but you will take steps to ensure the safe return of every single one of these crates, and myself, to Brussels. If you have an ounce of decency in your breast, you will do this. And if,' she added to kill stone dead any excuses the industrialist might dream up, 'if you have so much money to spend on your journey, you will spend just a little more on this reparation!'

Vergnot eyed her for some time. At length, he lit himself another cigar.

'Mademoiselle Poels,' he said slowly, 'I see that you are a woman of strict principles. I can permit myself to admire a woman like that. Very deeply. So I will make you two propositions. You may choose the one that suits you best. I will not be offended by your choice, and you may count on it, my dear mademoiselle, that I will carry out your wishes to the letter. Do you agree?'

'I agree to nothing, Monsieur Vergnot, until I have heard what you have to say.'

'Let it be so, then. My first proposition is this: that I set you down at the first convenient stop after we have crossed the border. At that place I will arrange for your crates to be shipped to Brussels, or, if that is not immediately possible, to be stored safely until shipment can be arranged. I will also pay for your ticket back to Brussels.'

Matilde nodded politely at this generous suggestion.

'My second proposition is that you accompany me to Ostend, and travel across the sea with me to England, you and your Universal Index. When we reach London, you shall donate your collection to the Reading Room of the famous British Museum, and then we shall live as man and wife. For, Mademoiselle Poels, I am much attracted to your spirit and your appearance.'

Matilde could not believe her ears. Had this man just made the most improper suggestion that she had ever heard? Or was she deceived by exhaustion? It had been a long day. She studied his face very closely indeed, looking for signs of mockery, or debauchery, or embarrassment. But he looked very serious. She must have misheard. The silence extended itself. The train clattered slowly through the evening. The bibliographer had lost all her bearings. She thought of asking the Frenchman to repeat his second proposition; and then she thought it best that he did not. Although mama had warned her of many an outrage that a lady might expect at the hands of males, she had most certainly not prepared her for this kind. The silence extended itself some more. Vergnot sat calmly, waiting for her answer.

After careful consideration and cross-referential analysis, Matilde made up her mind. 'I thank you, monsieur, for your offer of extending the collections held in the British Museum. But I must return to Brussels at the earliest opportunity. My responsibility is to the Universal Bibliographic Repository.'

'Admirable - just like a Vestal Virgin,' murmured the industrialist, possibly imagining that her ears were not sharp. Mama always said her daughter had the sharpest ears in Brussels. More loudly, he said: 'So be it, mademoiselle. When we cross the border, I shall consult with the engineer on a suitable town at which you may disembark. I have in any case some other arrangements to make at the border. These may detain me away from this comfortable carriage for several hours. You need not be alarmed. I am a man of my word.' M. Vergnot inclined forwards in a polite bow.

Matilde acknowledged his avowal with a gracious nod of the head, and retired to sit on her packing-cases, her head awhirl with the most strange fancies. A Vestal Virgin? What did this man know about her that she perhaps did not? To begin with, there had been four, or in some accounts six, Vestal Virgins: at the *Palais Mondiale* she was, barring perhaps Mme. de Bauche, the only one who was dedicated to the cause of the accumulation of all information. Heavens! she did so in her sleep. Every fact was eagerly embraced, lovingly caressed, and added to the great canon. Already, she had learned much about the Brussels to Paris express that had never before been recorded and cross-referenced. She would rectify this omission, just as soon as she returned to the safety of the "Mundaneum". Facts, facts, facts: a mountain, a fortress of facts, a Chinese Wall of facts which would pose the greatest obstacle to war-mongering, to impertinent seducers, to obscurantist priests and the insolence of French customs-officers. Although she had not quite reached Paris with her precious cargo, neither had she, in this world of fantasists and deniers, mislaid it. True, she had misplaced Henri: but she could explain that with the bare facts. Henri was not important - he would, she had no doubt, be put on a train home from Amiens, with a fine brioche or two to sustain him.

Fortified by such thoughts, Matilde relaxed. A safe distance away from her, M. Vergnot puffed at his cigars, and considered his watch from time to time. Once, he lifted his expensive briefcase on to his knees, opened it and checked some papers and what appeared to be large piles of bank-notes. At that sight, Matilde respectfully averted her eyes. A gentleman's money, as mama always said, is his own affair and need not concern a lady.

When the train at last halted, M. Vergnot stood up. He looked at his watch. 'A quarter past ten, mademoiselle,' he announced. As if the time of night could be of any interest to a lady in this situation. 'I will return before dawn. I leave you my coat as a blanket, for it will grow cold.' With which enigmatic words, he slid open the door and jumped elegantly into darkness, his briefcase swinging in his right hand. Matilde Poels gladly took up the warm overcoat. She had been shivering for some time, but had been

sure to give no sign of it. The coat was heavy, warm, and smelled comfortingly of cigar smoke. Curiously, it did not smell of its owner. Matilde considered this: Uncle Albert's coat always smelled of the man himself. But he did not smoke filthy cigars - perhaps that was it? Somewhere, in the crate containing the range of cards from 573 to 579, there was a section of the Repository which dealt with the Human Senses. In there, almost certainly, the matter would be explained. She regretted having no illumination. A long night stretched ahead of her, and she could read neither M. Otlet's collected papers for the *Institut International de Bibliographie* nor could she browse among the two hundred and ten thousand index-cards which formed this initial batch - this "seed harvest", as M. Otlet described it - bound for France. What a missed opportunity!

Matilde lay down. Under her head was a crate containing all the known facts concerning The General Organization of Statistics; under her feet, a crate with every possible reference to The Earth and Geology; under her hips, a crate that contained the absolute factual essence of Animal Husbandry and Breeding in General. With this firm mattress below, and M. Vergnot's coat above, she settled with a sigh and fell instantly asleep.

She was awoken by the opening of the door. She looked up startled, saw the industrialist from St Quentin, and clutched his coat tightly about her person. Certainly, a lady should not be found tumbled in her sleep by a man who was not of the family. She sat up very quickly.

'You have returned?' she said needlessly. It was growing light outside.

'I have, Mlle. Poels,' he replied. 'I have had a long night of it, and some difficulty with the officials in this place. But my papers are now in order and we may proceed.'

'I will not,' replied Matilde swiftly, to forestall any unpleasant revelation, 'ask why it took you so long, nor what means you have used to ease our way across the border.'

'You are very wise not to,' replied M. Vergnot gravely. 'You would be, I think, disappointed in me. Now, mademoiselle, I must request that we share my coat, for I am chilled by the cold morning.'

Hastily, Matilde surrendered the coat. 'You may have it all, monsieur, for I am in truth over-heated.' This was not a fact, but a fiction. Matilde had suddenly discovered that a Fiction weighed more in the balance of Chastity than did Fact. It was quite astonishing. She blushed, and shivered as she blushed.

'Very well,' said Vergnot, offering no argument. He took back his coat, draped it over his shoulders and resumed his seat. 'I have arranged with the engineer to stop at a small town not far into Belgium, where, he assures me, your crates will be stored securely and from where you may return at once to Brussels. The man is familiar with this part of the world.'

'And, mademoiselle, here is the notice which was attached to the door. It has no further currency.' Vergnot passed her a rather tattered piece of stiff paper, whose four corners had been torn off. Matilde examined it. It bore the crest of the French Customs Service. In the centre, written boldly, clearly and neatly, were the words: "Dry goods. Spoiled. Useless. Return to Country of Origin." There was an indecipherable signature underneath, and yesterday's date, the 2<sup>nd</sup> August. At the foot was a huge and very official stamp.

Matilde retired to the crate containing Index entries for 2.34, mortified.

At around seven in the morning, the train slowed to a halt once more, and when M. Vergnot pulled open the door, a most delightful late summer morning met their eyes. A neat and capacious railway-station, well-tended, pots of bright red geraniums, white-

washed station-buildings. Towering into the sky above a line of houses, Matilde could see a lovely old cathedral. Great old bells rang out and out. Vergnot and Matilde stood at the open door and enjoyed the scene.

‘My only regret,’ said the man, ‘is that I will leave all this behind in two or three hours, perhaps forever. England has nothing to compare to this.’

Matilde thought to argue with him, for she had made a close study of the national characteristics, etiquette and customs of England - 390 (42); but decided against a confrontation. In any case, the station-master came marching up, brimming with importance and wishing to know how he could be of assistance to this unexpected arrival. M. Vergnot jumped down, there was a brief conversation; an envelope slipped from one hand to another. In moments, two porters had arrived at the station-master’s dictatorial summons, and under Matilde’s watchful eye, unloaded the crates on to the empty platform. With extraordinary speed, they were then whisked off to a brick-built outhouse within the station grounds from which, the official proclaimed proudly, only the Count of Monte Cristo might escape.

As Matilde pondered the demonstrability of this boast, Vergnot announced that he had to take his leave. Elegantly he brushed his lips over Matilde’s outstretched hand, gazed one last time into her eyes, then leaped aboard his train. Matilde noticed now that it comprised only the one luggage-van and a small engine. The locomotive whistled then chugged off towards the north.

‘And now, mademoiselle,’ said the station-master, ‘please install yourself in our comfortable ladies’ waiting-room. I am advised that it is the best waiting-room in all of Western Flanders. The train for Ghent, from where you will connect for Brussels, will depart in precisely -’ he consulted his watch, ‘- one hour and forty-seven minutes. A boy will bring you a tray with hot coffee and some warm rolls. And here, of course, is your ticket, paid for by your - *ahem* - your good friend.’ These last words were uttered with the very slightest hint of doubt. Matilde chose to ignore the salacious tone. She thanked the railway official in a manner of which her mama would have been proud, retreated into the ladies’ waiting-room, and sank down on to a padded bench. At last, she could breathe again. The index was once more safe on Belgian soil. Her own person was out of the clutches of desperate males. And she had a ticket for Brussels.

At a quarter past five, Matilde entered the “Mundaneum” and headed smartly for the Director’s office. When she reached the door, she took a deep breath, then knocked.

‘Enter,’ called a familiar voice.

She did so.

Monsieur Otlet looked up and sat back in astonishment.

‘Mademoiselle Poels!’ he exclaimed. ‘What has happened? You are supposed to be in Paris. Dear God, don’t tell me that something has happened to the Repository?’ He ran round the desk in agitation and seized her hands.

Matilde shook her head and, feeling of a sudden faint after all her exertions, seated herself. M. Otlet poured her a cup of tea. He always had a pot of tea at his elbow. At length, she was able to explain the whole story.

‘Well,’ said the Director, when he had heard every detail that Matilde cared to reveal. ‘This is all very peculiar. They detached only your wagon, you say? With no explanation? I suppose there is merit in that, for otherwise the Repository might have ended up in the thick of war!’ He shook his head.

‘And,’ Matilde reminded him, ‘I have mislaid Henri.’

‘These are wicked times,’ said Otlet, sitting down behind his desk. He had been pacing the floor restlessly as Matilde told her tale. ‘I am told that Germany has now

invaded our country, that their armies have surrounded Liège and are heading for Brussels. Perhaps Henri is much safer away from all the fighting.’ He shook his head hopelessly. ‘But my own sons...’ He stopped and blew his nose, a sure sign that he was deeply worried. ‘And now this. Whatever will become of our enterprise?’

‘I think,’ said Matilde cautiously, ‘the crates will be safe enough where they are. The town is very quiet. The Germans will have no interest in such a small place.’

Paul Otlet brightened up. ‘Yes, yes, you are probably correct. We must leave them there for just now, until all this blows over. It surely cannot last long - a few months at the most. It is for the best. I will write to the station-master myself. The building is secure, you say?’

‘He assured me that it is both fast against robbers and impervious to rain, *Monsieur le Directeur*,’ replied Matilde.

‘Excellent. Then we shall leave them there in - in - what was the name of the town?’

‘Ypres.’