

Rien Ne Va Plus

Alexander Woollcott

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We were sitting under the midsummer stars in Monte Carlo, eating a soufflé and talking about suicide, when a passing newsmonger stopped at our table all aglow with the tidings that that young American with the white forelock had just been found crumpled on the beach, a bullet-hole in his heart. Earlier in the evening—it was shortly before we came out of the Casino in quest of dinner—we had all seen him wiped out by a final disastrous turn of the wheel. And now he lay dead on the shore.

I shall have to admit that the news gave a fillip to the occasion. It came towards the end of a long, luscious dinner on the terrace opposite the Casino. We were a casually assembled carful, who had driven over from Antibes in the late afternoon, planning to play a little roulette as an appetizer and then to dine interminably.

When we had arrived in the Salles Privées a few hours before, there was only standing room around our table at first. In this rapt fringe, I encountered Sam Fletcher, a dawdling journalist who lived on occasional assignments from the Paris offices of American newspapers. He pointed out the notables to me. There was Mary Garden, for instance, playing intently, losing and winning, losing and winning, with that economy of emotional expenditure which one usually reserves for setting-up exercises. Then there was an English dowager who looked as though she were held together by adhesive tape. She was betting parsimoniously, but Fletcher whispered to me that she lived in Monte Carlo on an ample allowance provided by her son-in-law, with the sole stipulation that she never embarrass the family by coming home. A moribund remittance woman. Next to her sat a pallid old gentleman whose hands, as they caressed his stack of counters, were conspicuously encased in braided gloves of gray silk. It seems that in his youth, he had been a wastrel, and, on her deathbed, his mother had squeezed from him a solemn promise never to touch card or chip again as long as he lived.

As for young White Lock, there was, until his final bet, nothing else noticeable about him except that he was the only man then at the table wearing a dinner coat. We heard later that at first he had lost heavily and had had to make several trips to the caisse to replenish his supply of plaques. By the time I came along he had settled to a more cautious play but finally, as if from boredom, he took all his plaques and counters and stacked them on the red. To this pile he added, just as the wheel began to turn, the

contents of his wallet—emptying out a small cascade of thousand-franc notes, with a single hundred-franc note among them. But this one he retrieved at the last moment as if to be sure of carfare home.

There was that breathless spinning moment, then the fateful “Rien ne va plus,” issuing in the same dead voice with which the intoning of the mass falls on infidel ears. Then the decision. “Noir.” Around that table you could hear the word for black being exhaled in every language the world has known since Babel.

The young man gave a little laugh as the croupier called the turn. He sat quite still as his last gauge was raked into the bank. With all eyes on him, he shoved his chair back from the table, reached for his wallet, took out the aforesaid hundred-franc note and pushed it, with white, fastidious fingers, toward the center of the patterned baize. “Pour le personnel,” he said, with a kind of wry grandeur which hushed the usual twitter of thanks from the croupiers. “And that,” he added, “is that.” So saying, he got to his feet, yawned a little, and sauntered out of the room. I remember thinking, at the time, that he was behaving rather like any desperate young man in any Zoé Akins play. But it was a good performance. And now, it seems, he lay dead by the water’s edge.

It was Fletcher himself who brought the news. It came, I say, just as we were eating soufflé and talking of suicide. This, of course, was no obliging coincidence. One always tells tall tales of self-slaughter at Monte Carlo. It is part of the legend of the principality—as strong in its force of suggestion, I suppose, as the legend of Lourdes is strong in its hint to hysterics that the time has come to cast away their crutches. Fletcher told us that the sound of the shot had brought a watchman running. The youth lay on his back, his chin tilted to the stars, one outstretched hand limply holding the revolver, a dark stain on the pleated whiteness of his breast.

Before Fletcher could wire his report to Paris, he would have to await certain—well—formalities. In a conspiratorial whisper, he explained there had been so many such suicides of late that a new rule was but recently put into effect. Whenever any client of the Casino was found self-slain with empty pockets, it was customary for the Casino to rush a bankroll to the spot before notifying the police, so that the victim would seem to have ended it all from Weltschmerz. Even now, Fletcher said, this trick must be in progress, and in the meantime he ought to be seeking such obituary data as might be gleaned in the registry office.

We were still lingering over our coffee when he came hurrying back to us, all bristling with the end of the story. Notified in due course, the gendarmerie had repaired to the beach in quest of the body. But there was none. Not at the indicated spot, nor anywhere

else on the shore. After further search, the minor chieftain from the Casino, who had himself tucked ten thousand francs into the pocket of the now missing suicide and was still lurking, much puzzled, in the middle-distance, returned at last to the Salles Privées, only to find them humming with a new chapter. It seems that that young American with the white forelock—the one somebody or other had inaccurately reported as killed—had reappeared apparently restored in spirits, and certainly restored in funds. He had bet tremendously, lingered for only three turns of the wheel, and departed with a hundred thousand francs. The attendants assumed he had merely been out to dinner. At least the careless fellow had spilled some tomato sauce on his shirt-front.

Footnote: In this same tradition is the tale of the New York matron who, oppressed by her losses in the Salles Privées, felt the first throb of a blinding headache. White-faced and tottery, she went to the restroom to take an aspirin, and was seen by a vigilant attendant drawing the pellet from her handbag and slipping it into her mouth. In less than another minute, strong, official hands had been laid upon her, she had been thrown, squawking, into an automobile and was being whirled at law-defying speed to Monaco's hospital, where nurses and internes were waiting with a stomach pump. The ensuing treatment was probably beneficial, at that.

One's insignificant intentions are so often misread in the heightened expectancy of that principality. I recall a night when I was apprehensively watching Miss Beatrice Lillie (Lady Peel, to you) risking her all on a game of pitch-and-toss. It was chemin de fer, and, as my neighbor Robert E. Sherwood once bitterly observed, none but the brave chemin de fer. On this Riviera occasion, Miss Lillie was suffering from the hiccups, and one spasm of them was misread by the banker as a hoarse cry of "Banquo!" A hundred thousand francs of unearned increment was being pushed towards her before she, in her pretty confusion, could explain his mistake. Afterwards, it seemed better not to embarrass him by mentioning it.

I was reminded of a day when our Miss Ferber had a rendezvous with her mother at an auction room. Arriving first, she saved a seat next hers, and, during a desultory sale of unpleasing objets d'art, she kept one filial eye always on the entrance to the hall. At last she was rewarded by the sight of her mother pausing myopically on the threshold, and she made the mistake of hailing her by an uplifted hand. There was a crash of the hammer. "Sold! And, Miss F., I congratulate you!" She had acquired a grandfather's clock.

"Rien Ne Va Plus" is a masterclass in the **urbane anecdote**, a genre Alexander Woollcott perfected as a central figure of the Algonquin Round Table. The story functions as a cynical, witty exploration of "The Monte Carlo Legend," where the line between high drama and low comedy is blurred by the sheer absurdity of extreme wealth and gambling superstition.

The story's brilliance lies in its "double-twist" structure. Woollcott sets the stage with a classic tragic trope—the ruined gambler—only to subvert it twice. First, the tragedy is revealed to be a performance (the "tomato sauce" on the shirt-front replacing the "dark stain" of blood).

Second, the Casino's attempt to protect its reputation through a cynical PR move (planting money on the "corpse") becomes the very tool the protagonist uses to fleece them. The "wry grandeur" the narrator initially admires in the young man is revealed to be the calculated poise of a grifter.

Woollcott uses the setting of Monte Carlo to examine how expectations shape perception. He compares the "Monte Carlo Legend" to the "Legend of Lourdes," suggesting that both places operate on a form of mass hysteria. In Monte Carlo, people *expect* suicide, so they see a suicide even when there is only a stain of tomato sauce. This theme is reinforced by the concluding anecdotes (the aspirin, the hiccups, the auction), which serve as a humorous coda to the main narrative, illustrating how "insignificant intentions are so often misread" in high-stakes environments.

Woollcott's prose is characterized by an "effortless" sophistication. He employs a vocabulary that is both precise and slightly archaic ("parsimoniously," "fillip," "remittance woman"), which elevates the gossip to the level of literature. His character sketches are remarkably economical; for example, describing a woman as looking "as though she were held together by adhesive tape" provides a vivid visual and psychological profile in a single sentence.

The story is a time capsule of the interwar "Lost Generation" aesthetic—wealthy Americans drifting through the French Riviera, name-dropping celebrities like Mary Garden and Beatrice Lillie, and treating potential tragedy as a "fillip" to a dinner conversation. Woollcott captures the profound ennui of this class, where a man's death is merely a topic to be discussed over a soufflé.

"Rien Ne Va Plus" is more than a clever short story; it is a satirical critique of the performative nature of the upper class. It suggests that in a world built on luck, artifice, and "wry grandeur," the best gambler is not the one who knows the wheel, but the one who knows how to manipulate the audience.