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THE
DESTROYING
ANGEL

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

The Project Gutenberg eBook, The Destroying Angel, by Louis Joseph Vance,
Illustrated by Arthur I. Keller

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THE DESTROYING ANGEL

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

**Author of "The Brass Bowl," "The Bronze Bell," "The
Bandbox," "Cynthia of the Minute," Etc.**

**WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS
BY ARTHUR I. KELLER**

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Published, October, 1912.

TO

ROBERT HOBART DAVIS

Whitaker's jaw dropped and his eyes widened with wonder and

pity



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Whitaker's jaw dropped and his eyes widened with wonder and pity

Her eyes fastened dilating, upon his. The scene faltered perceptibly

Whitaker felt land beneath his feet

"I do not love you. You are mad to think it"



THE DESTROYING ANGEL



I

DOOM

"Then I'm to understand there's no hope for me?"

"I'm afraid not..." Greyerson said reluctantly, sympathy in his eyes.

"None whatever." The verdict was thus brusquely emphasized by Hartt, one of the two consulting specialists.

Having spoken, he glanced at his watch, then at the face of his colleague, Bushnell, who contented himself with a tolerant waggle of his head, apparently meant to imply that the subject of their deliberations really must be reasonable: anybody who wilfully insists on footing the measures of life with a defective constitution for a partner has no logical excuse for being reluctant to pay the Piper.

Whitaker looked quickly from one to the other of his three judges, acutely sensitive to the dread significance to be detected in the expression of each. He found only one kind and pitiful: no more than might have been expected of Greyerson, who was his friend. Of the others, Hartt had assumed a stony glare to mask the nervousness so plainly betrayed by his staccato accents; it hurt him to inflict pain, and he was horribly afraid lest the patient break down and "make a scene." Bushnell, on the other hand, was imperturbable by nature: a man to whom all men were simply "cases"; he sat stroking his long chin and hoping that Whitaker would have the decency soon to go and leave them free to talk shop—his pet dissipation.

Failing to extract the least glimmering of hope from the attitude of any one of them, Whitaker drew a long breath, unconsciously bracing himself in his chair.

"It's funny," he said with his nervous smile—"hard to realize, I mean. You see, I *feel* so fit—"

"Between attacks," Hartt interjected quickly.

"Yes," Whitaker had to admit, dashed.

"Attacks," said Bushnell, heavily, "recurrent at intervals constantly more brief, each a trifle more severe than its predecessor."

He shut his thin lips tight, as one who has consciously pronounced the last word.

Greyerson sighed.

"But I don't understand," argued the prisoner at the bar, plaintively bewildered. "Why, I rowed with the Crew three years hand-running—not a sign of anything wrong with me!"

"If you had then had proper professional advice, you would have spared yourself such strains. But it's too late now; the mischief can't be undone."

Evidently Bushnell considered the last word his prerogative. Whitaker turned from him impatiently.

"What about an operation?" he demanded of Greyerson.

The latter looked away, making only a slight negative motion with his head.

"The knife?" observed Hartt. "That would merely hasten matters."

"Yes," Bushnell affirmed....

There was a brief uneasy silence in the gloomy consulting room. Then Whitaker rose.

"Well, how long will you give me?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Six months," said Greyerson, miserably avoiding his eye.

"Three," Hartt corrected jerkily.

"Perhaps...." The proprietor of the last word stroked his chin with a contemplative air.

"Thanks," said Whitaker, without irony. He stood for an instant with his head bowed in thought. "What a damned outrage," he observed thoughtfully. And suddenly he turned and flung out of the room.

Greyerson jumped to follow him, but paused as he heard the crash of the street door. He turned back with a twitching, apologetic smile.

"Poor devil!" he said, sitting down at his desk and fishing a box of cigars from

one of the drawers.

"Takes it hard," commented Hartt.

"You would, too, at his age; he's barely twenty-five."

"Must feel more or less like a fellow whose wife has run off with his best friend."

"No comparison," said Bushnell bluntly. "Go out, get yourself arrested for a brutal murder you didn't commit, get tried and sentenced to death within six months, the precise date being left to the discretion of the executioner—*then* you'll know how he feels."

"If you ask me"—Greyerson handed round the box—"he feels pretty shaky and abused, and he wants a drink badly—the same as me."

He unlocked a cellaret.

"Married?" Hartt inquired.

"No. That's the only mitigating circumstance," said Greyerson, distributing glasses. "He's quite alone in the world, as far as I know—no near relatives, at least."

"Well off?"

"Tolerably. Comes of good people. Believe his family had a lot of money at one time. Don't know how much of it there was left for Whitaker. He's junior partner in a young law firm down-town—senior a friend or classmate of his, I understand: Drummond & Whitaker. Moves with the right sort of people. Young Stark—Peter Stark—is his closest friend.... Well.... Say when."



II

THE LAST STRAW

Greyerson was right in his surmise as to Hugh Whitaker's emotions. His soul still numb with shock, his mind was altogether preoccupied with petulant resentment of the unfairness of it all; on the surface of the stunning knowledge that he might count on no more than six months of life, floated this thin film of sensation of personal grievance. He had done nothing to deserve this. The sheer brutality of it....

He felt very shaky indeed.

He stood for a long time—how long he never knew—bareheaded on a corner, just as he had left Greyerson's office: scowling at nothing, considering the enormity of the wrong that had been put upon him. Later, realizing that people were staring, he clapped on his hat to satisfy them and strode aimlessly down Sixth Avenue. It was five o'clock in the afternoon of a day late in April—a raw, chilly, dark, unseasonable brute of a day. He found himself walking fast, instinctively, to keep his blood in warm circulation, and this struck him as so inconsistent that presently he stopped short and snarled at himself:

"You blithering fool, what difference does it make whether you're warm or cold? Don't you understand you're going to die within half a year?"

He strove manfully to grapple with this hideous fact. He felt so well, so strong and efficient; and yet he walked in the black shadow of death, a shadow from which there was for him no escape.

He thought it the damnedest sensation imaginable!

On top of this reflection came the third clause of Greyerson's analysis: he made the discovery that he wanted a drink—a lot of drinks: in point of fact, more than he had ever had before, enough to make him forget.

He turned across-town toward Fifth Avenue, came to his club, and went in. Passing through the office, force of habit swung his gaze to the letter-rack. There was a square white envelope in the W pigeonhole, and it proved to be addressed

to him. He knew the handwriting very well—too well; his heart gave a great jump as he recognized it, and then sank like a stone; for not only must he die, but he must give up the girl he loved and had planned to marry. The first thing he meant to do (after getting that drink) was to write to her and explain and release her from her promise. The next thing....

He refused to let the idea of the next step form in his mind. But he knew very well what it would be. In the backwards of his understanding it lurked—a gray, grisly, shameful shadow.

"Anyhow," he muttered, "I'm not going to stick round here, dying by inches, wearing the sympathy of my friends to tatters."

But as yet he dared not name the alternative.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket, and passed on to the elevator gates, meaning to go up to the library and there have his drink and read his letter and write the answer, in peace and quiet. The problem of that answer obsessed his thoughts. It would be hard—hard to write—that letter that meant the breaking of a woman's faithful heart.

The elevator kept him waiting a moment or two, just round the corner from the grill-room door, whence came a sound of voices talking and laughing. One was Billy Hamilton's unmistakable semi-jocular drawl. Whitaker knew it without thinking of it, even as he heard what was being said without, at first, comprehending—heard and afterwards remembered in vivid detail.

"Seems to be the open season for runaways," Hamilton was saying. "It's only a few days since Thurlow Ladislas's daughter—what's her name?—Mary—took the bit between her teeth and bolted with the old man's chauffeur."

Somebody asked: "How far did they get before old Ladislas caught up?"

"He didn't give chase. He's not that kind. If he was put to it, old Thurlow could play the unforgiving parent in a melodrama without any make-up whatever."

"That's right," little Fiske's voice put in. "Chap I know on the *Herald*—reporter—was sent to interview him, but old Ladislas told him quite civilly that he'd been misinformed—he hadn't any daughter named Mary. Meaning, of course, that the girl had defied him, and that his doors were thenceforth barred to her."

"He's just like that," said Hamilton. "Remember his other daughter, Grace,

eloping with young Pettit a few years ago? Old Ladislas had a down on Pettit—who's a decent enough kid, notwithstanding—so Grace was promptly disowned and cast into the outer darkness, where there's weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, because Pettit's only something-on-a-small-salary in the diplomatic service, and they've no hope of ever touching a penny of the Ladislas coin."

"But what became of them—Mary and the stoker-person?"

"Nobody knows, except possibly themselves. They're laying low and—probably—getting first-hand information as to the quantity of cheese and kisses they can afford on chauffeur's pay."

"What's she like, this Mary-quite-contrary?" inquired George Brenton's voice. "Anybody ever see her?"

"Oh, nothing but a kid," said little Fiske. "I used to see her often, last summer, kiting round Southampton on a bike. The old man's so mean he wouldn't let her use the car alone.... Weedy little beggar, all legs and eyes—skirts to her shoe-tops and hair to her waist."

"Not over eighteen, I gather?"

"Oh, not a day," little Fiske affirmed.

The elevator was waiting by this time, but Whitaker paused an instant before taking it, chiefly because the sound of his own name, uttered by Hamilton, had roused him out of the abstraction in which he had overheard the preceding conversation.

"Anyhow, I'm sorry for Hugh Whitaker. He's going to take this hard, mighty hard."

George Brenton asked, as if surprised: "What? I didn't know he was interested in that quarter."

"You must be blind. Alice Carstairs has had him going for a year. Everybody thought she was only waiting for him to make some big money—he as much as anybody, I fancy."

Brenton added the last straw. "That's tough," he said soberly. "Whitaker's a white man, and Alice Carstairs didn't deserve him. But I wouldn't blame any man for feeling cut-up to be thrown over for an out-and-out rotter like Percy

Grimshaw...."

Whitaker heard no more. At the first mention of the name of Alice Carstairs he had snatched her letter from his pocket and thrust his thumb beneath the flap. Now he had withdrawn the enclosure and was reading.

When a mean-spirited, selfish woman starts in to justify herself (especially, on paper) for doing something thoroughly contemptible, the result is apt to be bitterly unfair to everybody involved—except herself. Nobody will ever know just what Alice Carstairs saw fit to write to Hugh Whitaker when she made up her mind to run away with another man; but there can be little doubt that they were venomous words he read, standing there under the curious eyes of the elevator boy and the pages. The blood ebbed from his face and left it ghastly, and when he had torn the paper to shreds and let them flutter about his feet, he swayed perceptibly—so much so that one of the pages took alarm and jumped to his side.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Whitaker—did you call me?"

Whitaker steadied himself and stared until he recognized the boy. "No," he said thickly, "but I want you. Give me a bar order."

The boy produced the printed form and Whitaker hastily scribbled his order on it. "Bring that up to the library," he said, "and be quick about it."

He stumbled into the elevator, and presently found himself in the library. There was no one else about, and Whitaker was as glad of that as it was in him to be glad of anything just then. He dropped heavily into a big arm-chair and waited, his brain whirling and seething, his nerves on edge and screeching. In this state Peter Stark found him.

Peter sauntered into the room with a manner elaborately careless. Beneath that mask he was anything but indifferent, just as his appearance was anything but fortuitous. It happened that the page who had taken Whitaker's order, knowing that Peter and Hugh were close friends, and suspecting that something was wrong with the latter, had sought out Peter before going to get the order filled. Moreover, Peter had already heard about Alice Carstairs and Percy Grimshaw.

"Hel-lo!" he said, contriving by mere accident to catch sight of Whitaker, who was almost invisible in the big chair with its back to the body of the room. "What you doing up here, Hugh? What's up?"

"It's all up," said Whitaker, trying to pull himself together. "Everything's up!"

"Don't believe it," said Stark, coolly. "My feet are on the ground; but you look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I have—my own," said Whitaker. The page now stood beside him with a tray. "Open it," he told the boy, indicating a half-bottle of champagne; and then to Peter: "I'm having a bath. Won't you jump in?"

Peter whistled, watching the wine cream over the brandy in the long glass. "King's peg, eh?" he said, with a lift of disapproving eyebrows. "Here, boy, bring me some Scotch and plain water for common people."

The boy disappeared as Whitaker lifted his glass.

"I'm not waiting," he said bluntly. "I need this now."

"That's a question, in my mind, at least. Don't you think you've had about enough for one day?"

"I leave it to your superior knowledge of my capacity," said Whitaker, putting aside the empty glass. "That's my first to-day."

Peter saw that he was telling the truth, but the edge of his disapproval remained keen.

"I hope," he said thoughtfully, "that the man who started that lie about drink making a fellow forget died the death of a dog. He deserved to, anyway, because it's one of the cruellest practical jokes ever perpetrated on the human race. I know, because I've tried it on, hard—and waked up sick to my marrow to remember what a disgusting ass I'd made of myself for all to behold." He stopped at Whitaker's side and dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Hugh," he said, "you're one of the best. Don't..."

Whatever he had meant to say, he left unfinished because of the return of the page with his Scotch; but he had said enough to let Whitaker understand that he knew about the Carstairs affair.

"That's all right," said Whitaker; "I'm not going to make a damn' fool of myself, but I am in a pretty bad way. Boy—"

"Hold on!" Peter interrupted. "You're not going to order another? What you've had is enough to galvanize a corpse."

"Barring the negligible difference of a few minutes or months, that's me," returned Whitaker. "But never mind, boy—run along."

"I'd like to know what you mean by that," Peter remarked, obviously worried.

"I mean that I'm practically a dead man—so near it that it makes no difference."

"The devil you say! What's the matter with you?"

"Ask Greyerson. I can't remember the name—it's too long—and I couldn't pronounce it if I did."

Peter's eyes narrowed. "What foolishness has Greyerson been putting into your head?" he demanded. "I've a good mind to go punch his—"

"It isn't his fault," Whitaker asserted. "It's my own—or rather, it's something in the nature of a posthumous gift from my progenitors; several of 'em died of it, and now it seems I must. Greyerson says so, at least, and when I didn't believe him he called in Hartt and Bushnell to hold my ante-mortem. They made it unanimous. If I'm uncommonly lucky I may live to see next Thanksgiving."

"Oh, shut up!" Peter exploded viciously. "You make me tired—you and your bone-headed M.D.'s!"

He worked himself into a comforting rage, damning the medical fraternity liberally for a gang of bloodthirsty assassins and threatening to commit assault and battery upon the person of Greyerson, though Whitaker did his best to make him understand that matters were what they were—irremediable.

"You won't find any higher authorities than Hartt and Bushnell," he said. "They are the court of last resort in such cases. When they hand down a decision, there's no come-back."

"You can't make me believe that," Peter insisted. "It just can't be so. A man like you, who's always lived clean.... Why, look at your athletic record! Do you mean to tell me a fellow could hold a job as undisputed best all-round man in his class for four years, and all the time handicapped by a constitutional...? Oh, get out! Don't talk to me. I'm far more likely to be doing my bit beneath the daisies six months from now.... I won't believe it!"

His big, red, generous fist described a large and inconclusive gesture of violence.

"Well," he growled finally, "grant all this—which I don't, not for one little

minute—what do you mean to do?"

"I don't mind telling you," said Whitaker: "I don't know. Wish I did. Up to within the last few minutes I fully intended to cut the knot with my own knife. It's not reasonable to ask a man to sit still and watch himself go slowly to pieces...."

"No," said Stark, sitting down. "No," he admitted grudgingly; "but I'm glad you've given that up, because I'm right and all these fool doctors are wrong. You'll see. But...." He couldn't help being curious. "But why?"

"Well," Whitaker considered slowly—"it's Alice Carstairs. You know what she's done."

"You don't mean to say you're going—that you think there's any consideration due her?"

"Don't you?" Whitaker smiled wearily. "Perhaps you're right. I don't know. We won't discuss the ethics of the situation; right or wrong, I don't mean to shadow whatever happiness she has in store for her by ostentatiously snuffing myself out just now."

Peter gulped and succeeded in saying nothing. But he stared.

"At the same time," Whitaker resumed, "I don't think I can stand this sort of thing. I can't go round with my flesh creeping to hear the whisperings behind my back. I've got to do something—get away somewhere."

Abrupt inspiration sparked the imagination of Peter Stark, and he began to sputter with enthusiasm.

"I've got it!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "A sea trip's just the thing. Chances are, it'll turn the trick—bring you round all right-O, and prove what asses doctors are. What d'you say? Are you game for a sail? The *Adventuress* is laid up at New Bedford now, but I can have her put in commission within three days. We'll do it—we'll just light out, old man! We'll try that South Seas thing we've talked about so long. What d'you say?"

A warm light glowed in Whitaker's sunken eyes. He nodded slowly.

III

"MRS. MORTEN"

It was three in the morning before Peter Stark, having to the best of his endurance and judgment tired Whitaker out with talking, took his hat and his departure from Whitaker's bachelor rooms. He went with little misgiving; Whitaker was so weary that he would have to sleep before he could think and again realize his terror; and everything was arranged. Peter had telegraphed to have the *Adventuress* rushed into commission; they were to go aboard her the third day following. In the meantime, Whitaker would have little leisure in which to brood, the winding up of his affairs being counted upon to occupy him. Peter had his own affairs to look to, for that matter, but he was prepared to slight them if necessary, in order that Whitaker might not be left too much to himself....

Whitaker shut the hall door, when the elevator had taken Peter away, and turned back wearily into his living-room. It was three in the morning; his body ached with fatigue, his eyes were hot and aching in their sockets, and his mouth hot and parched with excess of smoking; yet he made no move toward his bedchamber. Insomnia was a diagnostic of his malady: a fact he hadn't mentioned to his friend. He had little wish to surrender his mind to the devils that haunt a wakeful pillow, especially now when he could feel the reaction setting in from the anodyne excitement of the last few hours. Peter Stark's whirlwind enthusiasm had temporarily swept him off his feet, and he had yielded to it, unresisting, selfish enough to want to be carried away against the wiser counsels of his intuition.

But now, alone, doubts beset him.

Picking his way across a floor littered with atlases, charts, maps and guide-books, he resumed his chair and pipe and with the aid of a copy of "The Wrecker" and a nightcap, strove to drug himself again with the fascination of the projected voyage. But the savour had gone out of it all. An hour before he had been able to distil a potent magic, thought obliterating, by sheer force of repetition of the names, Apia, Hawaii, Tahiti, Samoa.... Now all their promise was an emptiness and a mockery. The book slipped unheeded from his grasp; his pipe grew cold between his teeth; his eyes burned like lamps in their deep

hollows, with their steady and undeviating glare....

Dawn-dusk filled the high windows with violet light before he moved.

He rose, went to the bath-room and took a bottle of chloral from the medicine-closet. He wondered at the steadiness of the hand that measured out the prescribed dose—no more, no less. He wondered at the strength of will which enabled him to take no more. There was enough in the bottle to purchase him eternity.

What he took bought him three hours of oblivion. He rose at eight, ordered his breakfast up by telephone, bathed and dressed. When the tray came up, his mail came with it. Among others there was one letter in a woman's hand which he left till the last, amusing himself by trying to guess the identity of the writer, the writing being not altogether strange to him. When at length he gave over this profitless employment, he read:

"DEAR HUGH: I can call you that, now, because you're Peter's dearest friend and therefore mine, and the proof of that is that I'm telling you first of all of our great happiness. Peter and I found out that we loved one another only yesterday, so we're going to be married the first of June and...."

Whitaker read no more. He could guess the rest, and for the moment he felt too sick a man to go through to the end. Indeed, the words were blurring and running together beneath his gaze.

After a long time he put the letter aside, absent-mindedly swallowed a cup of lukewarm coffee and rose from an otherwise untasted meal.

"That settles that, of course," he said quietly. "And it means I've got to hustle to get ahead of Peter."

He set busily about his preparations, thinking quickly while he packed. It occurred to him that he had, after all, several hours in which to catch together the loose ends of things and make an exit without leaving the businesses of his clients in a hopeless snarl; Peter Stark would sleep till eleven, at least, and it would be late in the afternoon before the young man could see his fiancée and find out from her that Whitaker knew of the sacrifice Peter contemplated for friendship's sake.

Whitaker packed a hand-bag with a few essentials, not forgetting the bottle of

chloral. He was not yet quite sure what he meant to do after he had definitely put himself out of Peter Stark's sphere of influence, but he hadn't much doubt that the drug was destined to play a most important part in the ultimate solution, and would as readily have thought of leaving it behind as of going without a toothbrush or railway fare.

Leaving the bag in the parcels-room at the Grand Central Station, he went downtown to his office and put in a busy morning. Happily his partner, Drummond, was out of town for the day; so he was able to put his desk in order unhindered by awkward questionings. He worked expeditiously, having no callers until just before he was ready to leave. Then he was obliged to admit one who desired to make a settlement in an action brought against him by Messrs. Drummond & Whitaker. He took Whitaker's receipt for the payment in cash, leaving behind him fifteen one-hundred-dollar notes. Whitaker regarded this circumstance as a special dispensation of Providence to save him the bother of stopping at the bank on his way up-town; drew his personal check for the right amount and left it with a memorandum under the paper-weight on Drummond's desk; put a match to a shredded pile of personal correspondence in the fireplace; and caught a train at the Grand Central at one-three.

Not until the cars were in motion did he experience any sense of security from Peter Stark. He had been apprehensive until that moment of some unforeseen move on the part of his friend; Peter was capable of wide but sure casts of intuition on occasion, especially where his affections were touched. But now Whitaker felt free, free to abandon himself to meditative despair; and he did it, as he did most things, thoroughly. He plunged headlong into an everlasting black pit of terror. He considered the world through the eyes of a man sick unto death, and found it without health. Behind him lay his home, a city without a heart, a place of pointing fingers and poisoned tongues; before him the brief path of Fear that he must tread: his broken, sword-wide span leaping out over the Abyss....

He was anything but a patient man at all times, and anything but sane in that dark hour. Cold horror crawled in his brain like a delirium—horror of himself, of his morbid flesh, of that moribund body unfit to sheathe the clean fire of life. The thought of struggling to keep animate that corrupt Self, tainted by the breath of Death, was invincibly terrible to him. All sense of human obligation disappeared from his cosmos; remained only the biting hunger for eternal peace, rest, freedom from the bondage of existence....

At about four o'clock the train stopped to drop the dining-car. Wholly swayed by

blind impulse, Whitaker got up, took his hand-bag and left the car.

On the station platform he found himself pelted by a pouring rain. He had left Town in a sodden drizzle, dull and dismal enough in all conscience; here was a downpour out of a sky three shades lighter than India ink—a steadfast, grim rain that sluiced the streets like a gigantic fire-hose, brimming the gutters with boiling, muddy torrents.

The last to leave the train, he found himself without a choice of conveyances; but one remained at the edge of the platform, an aged and decrepit four-wheeler whose patriarchal driver upon the box might have been Death himself masquerading in dripping black oilskins. To Whitaker's inquiry he recommended the C'mercial House. Whitaker agreed and imprisoned himself in the body of the vehicle, sitting on stained and faded, threadbare cushions, in company with two distinct odours, of dank and musty upholstery and of stale tuberoses. As they rocked and crawled away, the blind windows wept unceasingly, and unceasingly the rain drummed the long roll on the roof.

In time they stopped before a rambling structure whose weather-boarded façade, white with flaking paint, bore the legend: COMMERCIAL HOUSE. Whitaker paid his fare and, unassisted, carried his hand-bag up the steps and across the rain-swept veranda into a dim, cavernous hall whose walls were lined with cane-seated arm-chairs punctuated at every second chair by a commodious brown-fibre cuspidor. A cubicle fenced off in one corner formed the office proper—for the time being untenanted. There was, indeed, no one in sight but a dejected hall-boy, innocent of any sort of livery. On demand he accommodatingly disentangled himself from a chair, a cigarette and a paper-backed novel, and wandered off down a corridor, ostensibly to unearth the boss.

Whitaker waited by the desk, a gaunt, weary man, hag-ridden by fear. There was in his mind a desolate picture of the room up-stairs when he—his soul: the imperishable essence of himself—should have finished with it...

At his elbow lay the hotel register, open at a page neatly headed with a date in red ink. An absence of entries beneath the date-line seemed to indicate that he was the first guest of the day. Near the book was a small wooden corral neatly partitioned into stalls wherein were herded an ink-well, toothpicks, matches, some stationery, and—severely by itself—a grim-looking raw potato of uncertain age, splotched with ink and wearing like horns two impaled penholders.

Laboriously prying loose one of the latter, Whitaker registered; but two-thirds of his name was all he entered; when it came to "Whitaker," his pen paused and passed on to write "Philadelphia" in the residence column.

The thought came to him that he must be careful to obliterate all laundry marks on his clothing.

In his own good time the clerk appeared: a surly, heavy-eyed, loutish creature in clothing that suggested he had been grievously misled by pictures in the advertising pages of magazines. Whitaker noted, with insensate irritation, that he wore his hair long over one eye, his mouth ajar, his trousers high enough to disclose bony purple ankles. His welcome to the incoming guest was comprised in an indifferent nod as their eyes met, and a subsequent glance at the register which seemed unaccountably to moderate his apathy.

"Mr. Morton—uh?" he inquired.

Whitaker nodded without words.

The youth shrugged and scrawled an hieroglyph after the name. "Here, Sammy," he said to the boy—"Forty-three." To Whitaker he addressed the further remark: "Trunks?"

"No."

The youth seemed about to expostulate, but checked when Whitaker placed one of his hundred-dollar notes on the counter.

"I think that'll cover my liability," he said with a significance misinterpreted by the other.

"I ain't got enough change—"

"That's all right; I'm in no hurry."

The eyes of the lout followed him as he ascended the stairs in the path of Sammy, who had already disappeared. Annoyed, Whitaker quickened his pace to escape the stare. On the second floor he discovered the bell-boy waiting some distance down a long, darksome corridor, indifferently lighted by a single window at its far end. As Whitaker came into view, the boy thrust open the door, disappeared for an instant, and came out minus the bag. Whitaker gave him a coin in passing—an attention which he acknowledged by pulling the door to

with a bang the moment the guest had entered the room. At the same time Whitaker became aware of a contretemps.

The room was of fair size, lighted by two windows overlooking the tin roof of the front veranda. It was furnished with a large double bed in the corner nearest the door a wash-stand, two or three chairs, a bandy-legged table with a marble top; and it was tenanted by a woman in street dress.

She stood by the wash-stand, with her back to the light, her attitude one of tense expectancy: hardly more than a silhouette of a figure moderately tall and very slight, almost angular in its slenderness. She had been holding a tumbler in one hand, but as Whitaker appeared this slipped from her fingers; there followed a thud and a sound of spilt liquid at her feet. Simultaneously she cried out inarticulately in a voice at once harsh and tremulous; the cry might have been "*You!*" or "*Hugh!*" Whitaker took it for the latter, and momentarily imagined that he had stumbled into the presence of an acquaintance. He was pulling off his hat and peering at her shadowed face in an effort to distinguish features possibly familiar to him, when she moved forward a pace or two, her hands fluttering out toward him, then stopped as though halted by a force implacable and overpowering.

"I thought," she quavered in a stricken voice—"I thought ... you ... my husband ... Mr. Morton ... the boy said...."

Then her knees buckled under her, and she plunged forward and fell with a thump that shook the walls.

"I'm sorry—I beg pardon," Whitaker stammered stupidly to ears that couldn't hear. He swore softly with exasperation, threw his hat to a chair and dropped to his knees beside the woman. It seemed as if the high gods were hardly playing fair, to throw a fainting woman on his hands just then, at a time when he was all preoccupied with his own absorbing tragedy.

She lay with her head naturally pillowed on the arm she had instinctively thrown out to protect her face. He could see now that her slenderness was that of youth, of a figure undeveloped and immature. Her profile, too, was young, though it stood out against the dark background of the carpet as set and white as a death-mask. Indeed, her pallor was so intense that a fear touched his heart, of an accident more serious than a simple fainting spell. Her respiration seemed entirely suspended, and it might have been merely his fancy that detected the least conceivable syncopated pulsation in the icy wrist beneath his fingers.

He weighed quickly half a dozen suggestions. His fundamental impulse, to call in feminine aid from the staff of the hotel, was promptly relegated to the status of a last resort, as involving explanations which might not seem adequate to the singular circumstances; besides, he entertained a dim, searching, intuitive suspicion that possibly the girl herself would more cheerfully dispense with explanations—though he hardly knew why... He remembered that people burned feathers in such emergencies, or else loosened the lady's stays (corsets plus a fainting fit equal stays, invariably, it seems). But there weren't any feathers handy, and—well, anyway, neither expedient made any real appeal to his intelligence. Besides, there were sensible things he could do to make her more comfortable—chafe her hands and administer stimulants: things like that.

Even while these thoughts were running through his mind, he was gathering the slight young body into his arms; and he found it really astonishingly easy to rise and bear her to the bed, where he put her down flat on her back, without a pillow. Then turning to his hand-bag, he opened it and produced a small, leather-bound flask of brandy; a little of which would go far toward shattering her syncope, he fancied.

It did, in fact; a few drops between her half-parted lips, and she came to with disconcerting rapidity, opening dazed eyes in the middle of a spasm of coughing. He stepped back, stoppering the flask.

"That's better," he said pleasantly. "Now lie still while I fetch you a drink of water."

As he turned to the wash-stand his foot struck the tumbler she had dropped. He stopped short, frowning down at the great, staring, wet, yellow stain on the dingy and threadbare carpet. Together with this discovery he got a whiff of an acrid-sweet effluvium that spelled "*Oxalic Acid—Poison*" as unmistakably as did the druggist's label on the empty packet on the wash-stand....

In another moment he was back at the bedside with a clean glass of water, which he offered to the girl's lips, passing his arm beneath her shoulders and lifting her head so that she might drink.

She emptied the glass thirstily.

"Look here," he said almost roughly under the lash of this new fear—"you didn't really drink any of that stuff, did you?"

Her eyes met his with a look of negation clouded by fear and bewilderment. Then she turned her head away. Dragging a pillow beneath it, he let her down again.

"Good," he said in accents meant to be enheartening; "you'll be all right in a moment or two."

Her colourless lips moved in a whisper he had to bend close to distinguish.

"Please...."

"Yes?"

"Please don't ... call anybody...."

"I won't. Don't worry."

The lids quivered down over her eyes, and her mouth was wrung with anguish. He stared, perplexed. He wanted to go away quickly, but couldn't gain his own consent to do so. She was in no condition to be left alone, this delicate and fragile child, defenceless and beset. It wasn't hard to conjecture the hell of suffering she must have endured before coming to a pass of such desperation. There were dull blue shadows beneath eyes red with weeping, a forlorn twist to her thin, bloodless lips, a pinched look of wretchedness like a glaze over her unhappy face, that told too plain a story. A strange girl, to find in a plight like hers, he thought: not pretty, but quite unusual: delicate, sensitive, high-strung, bred to the finer things of life—this last was self-evident in the fine simplicity of her severely plain attire. Over her hair, drawn tight down round her head, she wore one of those knitted motor caps which were the fashion of that day. Her shoes were still wet and a trifle muddy, her coat and skirt more than a trifle damp, indicating that she had returned from a dash to the drug store not long before Whitaker arrived.

A variety of impressions, these with others less significant, crowded upon his perceptions in little more than a glance. For suddenly Nature took her in hand; she twisted upon her side, as if to escape his regard, and covered her face, her palms muffling deep tearing sobs while waves of pent-up misery racked her slender little body.

Whitaker moved softly away....

Difficult, he found it, to guess what to do; more difficult still to do nothing. His

nerves were badly jangled; light-footed, he wandered restlessly to and fro, half distracted between the storm of weeping that beat gustily within the room and the deadly blind drum of the downpour on the tin roof beyond the windows. Since that twilight hour in that tawdry hotel chamber, no one has ever been able to counterfeit sorrow and remorse to Whitaker; he listened then to the very voice of utter Woe.

Once, pausing by the centre-table, he happened to look down. He saw a little heap of the hotel writing-paper, together with envelopes, a pen, a bottle of ink. Three of the envelopes were sealed and superscribed, and two were stamped. The unstamped letter was addressed to the Proprietor of the Commercial House.

Of the others, one was directed to a Mr. C. W. Morton in care of another person at a number on lower Sixth Avenue, New York; and from this Whitaker began to understand the singular manner of his introduction to the wrong room; there's no great difference between *Morton* and *Morten*, especially when written carelessly.

But the third letter caused his eyes to widen considerably. It bore the name of Thurlow Ladislas, Esq., and a Wall Street address.

Whitaker's mouth shaped a still-born whistle. He was recalling with surprising distinctness the fragment of dialogue he had overheard at his club the previous afternoon.



IV

MRS. WHITAKER

He lived through a long, bad quarter hour, his own tensed nerves twanging in sympathy with the girl's sobbing—like telegraph wires singing in a gale—his mind busy with many thoughts, thoughts strangely new and compelling, wearing a fresh complexion that lacked altogether the colouring of self-interest.

He mixed a weak draught of brandy and water and returned to the bedside. The storm was passing in convulsive gasps ever more widely spaced, but still the girl lay with her back to him.

"If you'll sit up and try to drink this," he suggested quietly, "I think you'll feel a good deal better."

Her shoulders moved spasmodically; otherwise he saw no sign that she heard.

"Come—please," he begged gently.

She made an effort to rise, sat up on the bed, dabbed at her eyes with a sodden wisp of handkerchief, and groped blindly for the glass. He offered it to her lips.

"What is it?" she whispered hoarsely.

He spoke of the mixture in disparaging terms as to its potency, until at length she consented to swallow it—teeth chattering on the rim of the tumbler. The effect was quickly apparent in the colour that came into her cheeks, faint but warm. He avoided looking directly at her, however, and cast round for the bell-push, which he presently found near the head of the bed.

She moved quickly with alarm.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded in a stronger voice.

"Order you something to eat," he said. "No—please don't object. You need food, and I mean to see you get it before I leave."

If she thought of protesting, the measured determination in his manner deterred her. After a moment she asked:

"Please—who are you?"

"My name is Whitaker," he said—"Hugh Morten Whitaker."

She repeated the name aloud. "Haven't I heard of you? Aren't you engaged to Alice Carstairs?"

"I'm the man you mean," he said quietly; "but I'm not engaged to Alice Carstairs."

"Oh..." Perplexity clouded the eyes that followed closely his every movement. "How did you happen to—to find me here?"

"Quite by accident," he replied. "I didn't want to be known, so registered as Hugh Morten. They mistook me for your husband. Do you mind telling me how long it is since you've had anything to eat?"

She told him: "Last night."

He suffered a sense of shame only second to her own, to see the dull flush that accompanied her reply. His fingers itched for the throat of Mr. C. W. Morton, chauffeur. Happily a knock at the door distracted him. Opening it no wider than necessary to communicate with the bell-boy, he gave him an order for the kitchen, together with an incentive to speed the service.

Closing the door, he swung round to find that the girl had got to her feet.

"He won't be long—" Whitaker began vaguely.

"I want to tell you something." She faced him bravely, though he refused the challenge of her tormented eyes. "I ... I have no husband."

He bowed gravely.

"You're so good to me—" she faltered.

"O—nothing! Let's not talk about that now."

"I must talk—you must let me. You're so kind, I've got to tell you. Won't you listen?"

He had crossed to a window, where he stood staring out. "I'd rather not," he said softly, "but if you prefer—"

"I do prefer," said the voice behind him. "I—I'm Mary Ladislas."

"Yes," said Whitaker.

"I ... I ran away from home last week—five days ago—to get married to our chauffeur, Charles Morton...."

She stammered.

"Please don't go on, if it hurts," he begged without looking round.

"I've got to—I've got to get it over with.... We were at Southampton, at my father's summer home—I mean, that's where I ran away from. He—Charley—drove me over to Greenport and I took the ferry there and came here to wait for him. He went back to New York in the car, promising to join me here as soon as possible...."

"And he didn't come," Whitaker wound up for her, when she faltered.

"No."

"And you wrote and telegraphed, and he didn't answer."

"Yes—"

"How much money of yours did he take with him?" Whitaker pursued.

There was a brief pause of astonishment. "What do you know about that?" she demanded.

"I know a good deal about that type of man," he said grimly.

"I didn't have any money to speak of, but I had some jewellery—my mother's—and he was to take that and pawn it for money to get married with."

"I see."

To his infinite relief the waiter interrupted them. The girl in her turn went to one of the windows, standing with her back to the room, while Whitaker admitted the man with his tray. When they were alone once more, he fixed the place and drew a chair for her.

"Everything's ready," he said—and had the sense not to try to make his tone too cheerful.

"I hadn't finished what I wanted to tell you," said the girl, coming back to him.

"Will you do me the favour to wait," he pleaded. "I think things will seem—well, otherwise—when you've had some food."

"But I—"

"Oh, please!" he begged with his odd, twisted smile.

She submitted, head drooping and eyes downcast. He returned to his window, rather wishing that he had thought to order for himself as well as for the girl; for it was suddenly borne strongly in upon him that he himself had had little enough to eat since dinner with Peter Stark. He lighted a cigarette, by way of dulling his appetite, and then let it smoulder to ashes between his fingers, while he lost himself in profound speculations, in painstaking analysis of the girl's position.

Subconsciously he grew aware that the storm was moderating perceptibly, the sky breaking....

"I've finished," the girl announced at length.

"You're feeling better?"

"Stronger, I think."

"Is there anything more—?"

"If you wouldn't mind sitting down—"

She had twisted her arm-chair away from the table. Whitaker took a seat a little distance from her, with a keen glance appraising the change in her condition and finding it not so marked as he had hoped. Still, she seemed measurably more composed and mistress of her emotions, though he had to judge mostly by her voice and manner, so dark was the room. Through the shadows he could see little more than masses of light and shade blocking in the slender figure huddled in a big, dilapidated chair—the pallid oval of her face, and the darkness of her wide, intent, young eyes.

"Don't!" she cried sharply. "Please don't look at me so—"

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to—"

"It's only—only that you make me think of what you must be thinking about me —"

"I think you're rather fortunate," he said slowly.

"Fortunate!"

He shivered a little with the chill bitterness of that cry.

"You've had a narrow but a wonderfully lucky escape."

"Oh! ... But I'm not glad ... I was desperate—"

"I mean," he interrupted coolly, "from Mr. Morton. The silver lining is, you're not married to a blackguard."

"Oh, yes, yes!" she agreed passionately.

"And you have youth, health, years of life before you!"

He sighed inaudibly....

"You wouldn't say that, if you understood."

"There are worse things to put up with than youth and health and the right to live."

"But—how can I live? What am I to do?"

"Have you thought of going home?"

"It isn't possible."

"Have you made sure of that? Have you written to your father—explained?"

"I sent him a special delivery three days ago, and—and yesterday a telegram. I knew it wouldn't do any good, but I ... I told him everything. He didn't answer. He won't, ever."

From what Whitaker knew of Thurlow Ladislas, he felt this to be too cruelly true to admit of further argument. At a loss, he fell silent, knitting his hands together as he strove to find other words wherewith to comfort and reassure the girl.

She bent forward, elbows on knees, head and shoulders cringing.

"It hurts so!" she wailed ... "what people will think ... the shame, the bitter, bitter shame of this! And yet I haven't any right to complain. I deserve it all; I've

earned my punishment."

"Oh, I say—!"

"But I have, because—because I didn't love him. I didn't love him at all, and I knew it, even though I meant to marry him...."

"But, why—in Heaven's name?"

"Because I was so lonely and ... misunderstood and unhappy at home. You don't know how desperately unhappy.... No mother, never daring to see my sister (she ran away, too) ... my friendships at school discouraged ... nothing in life but a great, empty, lonesome house and my father to bully me and make cruel fun of me because I'm not pretty.... That's why I ran away with a man I didn't love—because I wanted freedom and a little happiness."

"Good Lord!" he murmured beneath his breath, awed by the pitiful, childish simplicity of her confession and the deep damnation that had waited upon her.

"So it's over!" she cried—"over, and I've learned my lesson, and I'm disgraced forever, and friendless and—"

"Stop right there!" he checked her roughly. "You're not friendless yet, and that nullifies all the rest. Be glad you've had your romance and learned your lesson —"

"Please don't think I'm not grateful for your kindness," she interrupted. "But the disgrace—that can't be blotted out!"

"Oh, yes, it can," he insisted bluntly. "There's a way I know—"

A glimmering of that way had only that instant let a little light in upon the darkness of his solicitous distress for her. He rose and began to walk and think, hands clasped behind him, trying to make what he had in mind seem right and reasonable.

"You mean beg my father to take me back. I'll die first!"

"There mustn't be any more talk, or even any thought, of anything like that. I understand too well to ask the impossible of you. But there is one way out—a perfectly right way—if you're willing and brave enough to take a chance—a long chance."

Somehow she seemed to gain hope of his tone. She sat up, following him with eyes that sought incredulously to believe.

"Have I any choice?" she asked. "I'm desperate enough...."

"God knows," he said, "you'll have to be!"

"Try me."

He paused, standing over her.

"Desperate enough to marry a man who's bound to die within six months and leave you free? I'm that man: the doctors give me six months more of life. I'm alone in the world, with no one dependent upon me, nothing to look forward to but a death that will benefit nobody—a useless end to a useless life.... Will you take my name to free yourself? Heaven my witness, you're welcome to it."

"Oh," she breathed, aghast, "what are you saying?"

"I'm proposing marriage," he said, with his quaint, one-sided smile. "Please listen: I came to this place to make a quick end to my troubles—but I've changed my mind about that, now. What's happened in this room has made me see that nobody has any right to—hasten things. But I mean to leave the country—immediately—and let death find me where it will. I shall leave behind me a name and a little money, neither of any conceivable use to me. Will you take them, employ them to make your life what it was meant to be? It's a little thing, but it will make me feel a lot more fit to go out of this world—to know I've left at least one decent act to mark my memory. There's only this far-fetched chance—I *may* live. It's a million-to-one shot, but you've got to bear it in mind. But really you can't lose—"

"Oh, stop, stop!" she implored him, half hysterical. "To think of marrying to benefit by the death of a man like you—!"

"You've no right to look at it that way." He had a wry, secret smile for his specious sophistry. "You're being asked to confer, not to accept, a favour. It's just an act of kindness to a hopeless man. I'd go mad if I didn't know you were safe from a recurrence of the folly of this afternoon."

"Don't!" she cried—"don't tempt me. You've no right.... You don't know how frantic I am...."

"I do," he countered frankly. "I'm depending on just that to swing you to my point of view. You've got to come to it. I mean you shall marry me."

She stared up at him, spell-bound, insensibly yielding to the domination of his will. It was inevitable. He was scarcely less desperate than she—and no less overwrought and unstrung; and he was the stronger; in the natural course of things his will could not but prevail. She was little more than a child, accustomed to yield and go where others led or pointed out the path. What resistance could she offer to the domineering importunity of a man of full stature, arrogant in his strength and—hounded by devils? And he in the fatuity of his soul believed that he was right, that he was fighting for the girl's best interests, fighting—and not ungenerously—to save her from the ravening consequences of her indiscretion!

The bald truth is, he was hardly a responsible agent: distracted by the ravings of an ego mutinous in the shadow of annihilation, as well as by contemplation of the girl's wretched plight, he saw all things in distorted perspective. He had his being in a nightmare world of frightful, insane realities. He could have conceived of nothing too terrible and preposterous to seem reasonable and right....

The last trace of evening light had faded out of the world before they were agreed. Darkness wrapped them in its folds; they were but as voices warring in a black and boundless void.

Whitaker struck a match and applied it to the solitary gas-jet. A thin, blue, sputtering tongue of flame revealed them to one another. The girl still crouched in her arm-chair, weary and spent, her powers of contention all vitiated by the losing struggle. Whitaker was trembling with nervous fatigue.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Oh, have your own way," she said drearily. "If it must be...."

"It's for the best," he insisted obstinately. "You'll never regret it."

"One of us will—either you or I," she said quietly. "It's too one-sided. You want to give all and ask nothing in return. It's a fool's bargain."

He hesitated, stammering with surprise. She had a habit of saying the unexpected. "A fool's bargain"—the wisdom of the sage from the lips of a child....

"Then it's settled," he said, business-like, offering his hand. "Fool's bargain or not—it's a bargain."

She rose unassisted, then trusted her slender fingers to his palm. She said nothing. The steady gaze of her extraordinary eyes abashed him.

"Come along and let's get it over," he muttered clumsily. "It's late, and there's a train to New York at half-past ten, you might as well catch."

She withdrew her hand, but continued to regard him steadfastly with her enigmatic, strange stare. "So," she said coolly, "that's settled too, I presume."

"I'm afraid you couldn't catch an earlier one," he evaded. "Have you any baggage?"

"Only my suit-case. It won't take a minute to pack that."

"No hurry," he mumbled...

They left the hotel together. Whitaker got his change of a hundred dollars at the desk—"Mrs. Morten's" bill, of course, included with his—and bribed the bell-boy to take the suit-case to the railway station and leave it there, together with his own hand-bag. Since he had unaccountably conceived a determination to continue living for a time, he meant to seek out more pleasant accommodations for the night.

The rain had ceased, leaving a ragged sky of clouds and stars in patches. The air was warm and heavy with wetness. Sidewalks glistened like black watered silk; street lights mirrored themselves in fugitive puddles in the roadways; limbs of trees overhanging the sidewalks shivered now and again in a half-hearted breeze, pelting the wayfarers with miniature showers of lukewarm, scented drops.

Turning away from the centre of the town, they traversed slowly long streets of residences set well back behind decent lawns. Warm lamplight mocked them from a hundred homely windows. They passed few people—a pair of lovers; three bareheaded giggling girls in short, light frocks strolling with their arms round one another; a scattering of men hurrying home to belated suppers.

The girl lagged with weariness. Awakened to this fact, Whitaker slackened his impatient stride and quietly slipped her arm through his.

"Is it much farther?" she asked.

"No—not now," he assured her with a confidence he by no means felt.

He was beginning to realize the tremendous difficulties to be overcome. It bothered him to scheme a way to bring about the marriage without attracting an appalling amount of gratuitous publicity, in a community as staid and sober as this. He who would marry secretly should not select a half-grown New England city for his enterprise....

However, one rarely finds any really insuperable obstacles in the way of an especially wrong-headed project.

Whitaker, taking his heart and his fate in his hands, accosted a venerable gentleman whom they encountered as he was on the point of turning off the sidewalk to private grounds.

"I beg your pardon," he began.

The man paused and turned upon them a saintly countenance framed in hair like snow.

"There is something I can do for you?" he inquired with punctilious courtesy.

"If you will be kind enough to direct me to a minister...."

"I am one."

"I thought so," said Whitaker. "We wish to get married."

The gentleman looked from his face to the girl's, then moved aside from the gate. "This is my home," he explained. "Will you be good enough to come in?"

Conducting them to his private study, he subjected them to a kindly catechism. The girl said little, Whitaker taking upon himself the brunt of the examination. Absolutely straightforward and intensely sincere, he came through the ordeal well, without being obliged to disclose what he preferred to keep secret. The minister, satisfied, at length called in the town clerk by telephone; who issued the license, pocketed his fee, and, in company with the minister's wife, acted as witness....

Whitaker found himself on his feet beside Mary Ladislas. They were being married. He was shaken by a profound amazement. The incredible was happening—with his assistance. He heard his voice uttering responses; it seemed something as foreign to him as the voice of the girl at his side. He wondered

stupidly at her calm—and later, at his own. It was all preposterously matter-of-fact and, at the same time, stupidly romantic. He divined obscurely that this thing was happening in obedience to forces nameless and unknown to them, strange and terrific forces that worked mysteriously beyond their mortal ken. He seemed to hear the droning of the loom of the Fates....

And they were man and wife. The door had closed, the gate-latch clicked behind them. They were walking quietly side by side through the scented night, they whom God had joined together.

Man and wife! Bride and groom, already started on the strangest, shortest of wedding journeys—from the parsonage to the railroad station!

Neither found anything to say. They walked on, heels in unison pounding the wet flagstones. The night was sweet with the scent of wet grass and shrubbery. The sidewalks were boldly patterned with a stencilling of black leaves and a milky dappling of electric light. At every corner high-swung arcs shot vivid slants of silver-blue radiance through the black and green of trees.

These things all printed themselves indelibly upon the tablets of his memory....

They arrived at the station. Whitaker bought his wife a ticket to New York and secured for her solitary use a drawing-room in the sleeper. When that was accomplished, they had still a good part of an hour to wait. They found a bench on the station platform, and sat down. Whitaker possessed himself of his wife's hand-bag long enough to furnish it with a sum of money and an old envelope bearing the name and address of his law partner. He explained that he would write to Drummond, who would see to her welfare as far as she would permit—issue her an adequate monthly allowance and advise her when she should have become her own mistress once more: in a word, a widow.

She thanked him briefly, quietly, with a constraint he understood too well to resent.

People began to gather upon the platform, to loiter about and pass up and down. Further conversation would have been difficult, even if they had found much to say to one another. Curiously or not, they didn't. They sat on in thoughtful silence.

Both, perhaps, were sensible of some relief when at length the train thundered in from the East, breathing smoke and flame. Whitaker helped his wife aboard and interviewed the porter in her behalf. Then they had a moment or two alone in the drawing-room, in which to consummate what was meant to be their first and last parting.

"You'll get in about two," said Whitaker. "Better just slip across the street to the Belmont for to-night. To-morrow—or the day after—whenever you feel rested—you can find yourself more quiet quarters."

"Yes," she said....

He comprehended something of the struggle she was having with herself, and respected it. If he had consulted his own inclinations, he would have turned and marched off without another word. But for her sake he lingered. Let her have the satisfaction (he bade himself) of knowing that she had done her duty at their leave-taking.

She caught him suddenly by the shoulders with both her hands. Her eyes sought his with a wistful courage he could not but admire.

"You know I'm grateful...."

"Don't think of it that way—though I'm glad you are."

"You're a good man," she said brokenly.

He knew himself too well to be able to reply.

"You mustn't worry about me, now. You've made things easy for me. I can take care of myself, and ... I shan't forget whose name I bear."

He muttered something to the effect that he was sure of that.

She released his shoulders and stood back, searching his face with tormented

eyes. Abruptly she offered him her hand.

"Good-by," she said, her lips quivering—"Good-by, good friend!"

He caught the hand, wrung it clumsily and painfully and ... realized that the train was in motion. He had barely time to get away....

He found himself on the station platform, stupidly watching the rear lights dwindle down the tracks and wondering whether or not hallucinations were a phase of his malady. A sick man often dreams strange dreams....

A voice behind him, cool with a trace of irony, observed:

"I'd give a good deal to know just what particular brand of damn' foolishness you've been indulging in, this time."

He whirled around to face Peter Stark—Peter quietly amused and very much the master of the situation.

"You needn't think," said he, "that you have any chance on earth of escaping my fond attentions, Hugh. I'll go to the ends of the earth after you, if you won't let me go with you. I've fixed it up with Nelly to wait until I bring you home, a well man, before we get married; and if you refuse to be my best man—well, there won't be any party. You can make up your mind to that."



V

WILFUL MISSING

It was one o'clock in the morning before Whitaker allowed himself to be persuaded; fatigue reënforced every stubborn argument of Peter Stark's to overcome his resistance. It was a repetition of the episode of Mary Ladislas recast and rewritten: the stronger will overcame the admonitions of a saner judgment. Whitaker gave in. "Oh, have your own way," he said at length, unconsciously iterating the words that had won him a bride. "If it must be...."

Peter put him to bed, watched over him through the night, and the next morning carried him on to New Bedford, where they superintended the outfitting of Peter's yacht, the *Adventuress*. Beyond drawing heavily on his bank and sending Drummond a brief note, Whitaker failed to renew communication with his home. He sank into a state of semi-apathetic content; he thought little of anything beyond the business of the moment; the preparations for what he was pleased to term his funeral cruise absorbed him to the exclusion of vain repinings or anxiety for the welfare of his adventitious wife. Apparently his sudden disappearance had not caused the least ripple on the surface of life in New York; the newspapers, at all events, slighted the circumstance unanimously: to his complete satisfaction.

Within the week the *Adventuress* sailed.

She was five months out of port before Whitaker began to be conscious that he was truly accursed. There came a gradual thickening of the shadows that threatened to eclipse his existence. And then, one day as they dined with the lonely trader of an isolated station in the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, he fell from his chair as if poleaxed. He regained consciousness only to shiver with the chill of the wind that's fanned by the wings of death. It was impossible to move him. The agonies of the damned were his when, with exquisite gentleness, they lifted him to a bed....

Stark sailed in the *Adventuress* before sundown of the same day, purposing to fetch a surgeon from Port Moresby. Whitaker said a last farewell to his friend, knowing in his soul that they would never meet again. Then he composed

himself to die quietly. But the following morning brought a hapchance trading schooner to the island, and with it, in the estate of supercargo, a crapulous Scotch gentleman who had been a famous specialist of London before drink laid him by the heels. He performed an heroic operation upon Whitaker within an hour, announced by nightfall that the patient would recover, and the next day sailed with his ship to end his days in some abandoned Australian boozing-ken—as Whitaker learned in Sydney several months later.

In the same place, and at the same time, he received his first authentic news of the fate of the *Adventuress*. The yacht had struck on an uncharted reef, in heavy weather, and had foundered almost immediately. Of her entire company, a solitary sailor managed to cling to a life-raft until picked up, a week after the wreck, by a tramp steamship on whose decks he gasped out his news and his life in the same breaths.

Whitaker hunted up an account of the disaster in the files of a local newspaper. He read that the owner, Peter Stark, Esq., and his guest, H. M. Whitaker, Esq., both of New York, had gone down with the vessel. There was also a cable despatch from New York detailing Peter Stark's social and financial prominence—evidence that the news had been cabled Home. To all who knew him Whitaker was as dead as Peter Stark.

Sardonic irony of circumstance, that had robbed the sound man of life and bestowed life upon the moribund! Contemplation wrought like a toxic drug upon Whitaker's temper, until he was raving drunk with the black draught of mutiny against the dictates of an Omnipotence capable of such hideous mockeries of justice. The iron bit deep into his soul and left corrosion there....

"There is a world outside the one you know
To which for curiousness 'Ell can't compare;
It is the place where wilful missings go,
As we can testify, for we are there."

Kipling's lines buzzed through his head more than once in the course of the next few years; for he was "there." They were years of such vagabondage as only the South Seas countenance: neither unhappy nor very strenuous, not yet scarred by the tooth of poverty. Whitaker had between four and five thousand dollars in traveller's checks which he converted into cash while in Sydney. Memory of the wreck of the *Adventuress* was already fading from the Australian mind; no one dreamed of challenging the signature of a man seven months dead. And as

certainly and as quietly as the memory, Whitaker faded away; Hugh Morten took his place, and Sydney knew him no more, nor did any other parts wherein he had answered to his rightful name.

The money stayed by him handsomely. Thanks to a strong constitution in a tough body (now that its malignant demon was exorcised) he found it easy to pick up a living by one means or another. Indeed, he played many parts in as many fields before joining hands with a young Englishman he had grown to like and entering upon what seemed a forlorn bid for fortune. Thereafter he prospered amazingly.

In those days his anomalous position in the world troubled him very little. He was a Wilful Missing and a willing. The new life intrigued him amazingly; he lived in open air, in virgin country, wresting a fortune by main strength from the reluctant grasp of Nature. He was one of the first two men to find and mine gold in paying quantities in the Owen Stanley country.... Now that Peter Stark was dead, the ties of interest and affection binding him to America were both few and slender. His wife was too abstract a concept, a shadow too vague in his memory, to obtrude often upon his reveries. Indeed, as time went on, he found it anything but easy to recall much about the physical appearance of the woman he had married; he remembered chiefly her eyes; she moved mistily across the stage of a single scene in his history, an awkward, self-conscious, unhappy, childish phantasm.

Even the consideration that, fortified by the report of his death, she might have married again, failed to disturb either his slumbers or his digestion. If that had happened, he had no objection; the tie that bound them was the emptiest of forms—in his understanding as meaningless and as powerless to make them one as the printed license form they had been forced to procure of the State of Connecticut. There had been neither love nor true union—merely pity on one side, apathy of despair on the other. Two souls had met in the valley of the great shadow, had paused a moment to touch hands, had passed onward, forever out of one another's ken; and that was all. His "death" should have put her in command of a fair competence. If she had since sought and found happiness with another man, was there any logical reason, or even excuse, for Whitaker to abandon his new and pleasant ways of life in order to return and shatter hers?

He was self-persuaded of his generosity toward the girl.

Casuistry of the Wilful Missing!...

It's to be feared he had always a hard-headed way of considering matters in the light of equity as distinguished from the light of ethical or legal morality. This is not to be taken as an attempt to defend the man, but rather as a statement of fact: even as the context is to be read as an account of some things that happened rather than as a morality....

When at length he did make up his mind to go Home, it wasn't because he felt that duty called him; plain, everyday, human curiosity had something to do with his determination—a desire to see how New York was managing to get along without him—together with a dawning apprehension that there was an uncomfortable amount of truth in the antiquated bromidiom about the surprising littleness of the world.

He was in Melbourne at that time, with Lynch, his partner. Having prospered and laid by a lump of money, they had planned to finance their holdings in the traditional fashion—that is, to let in other people's money to do the work, while they rested and possessed their souls and drew dividends on a controlling interest. Capital in Melbourne had proved eager and approachable; the arrangement they desired was quickly consummated; the day the papers were signed, Whitaker passed old friends in the street. They were George Presbury and his wife—Anne Forsythe that was—self-evident tourists, looking the town over between steamers. Presbury, with no thought in his bumptious head of meeting Hugh Whitaker before the Day of Judgment, looked at and through him without a hint of recognition; but his wife was another person altogether. Whitaker could not be blind to the surprise and perplexity that shone in her eyes, even though he pretended to be blind to her uncertain nod; long after his back alone was visible to her he could feel her inquiring stare boring into it.

The incident made him think; and he remembered that he was now a man of independent fortune and of newly idle hands as well. After prolonged consideration he suddenly decided, told Lynch to look out for his interests and expect him back when he should see him, and booked for London by a Royal Mail boat—all in half a day. From London Mr. Hugh Morten crossed immediately to New York on the *Olympic*, landing in the month of April—nearly six years to a day from the time he had left his native land.

He discovered a New York almost wholly new—an experience almost inevitable, if one insists on absenting one's self even for as little as half a decade. Intimations of immense changes were borne in upon Whitaker while the steamer worked up the Bay. The Singer Building was an unfamiliar sky-mark, but not

more so than the Metropolitan Tower and the Woolworth. The *Olympic* docked at an impressive steel-and-concrete structure, new since his day; and Whitaker narrowly escaped a row with a taxicab chauffeur because the fellow smiled impertinently when directed to drive to the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

A very few hours added amazingly to the catalogue of things that were not as they had been: a list so extensive and impressive that he made up his mind to maintain his incognito for a few days, until familiar with the ways of his home. He was quick to perceive that he would even have to forget most of the slang that had been current in his time, in addition to unlearning all he had picked up abroad, and set himself with attentive ears pricked forward and an open mind to master the new, strange tongue his countrymen were speaking, if he were to make himself intelligible to them—and them to him, for that matter.

So he put up at the Ritz-Carlton, precisely as any foreigner might be expected to do, and remained Hugh Morten while he prowled around the city and found himself. Now and again in the course of his wanderings he encountered well-remembered faces, but always without eliciting the slightest gleam of recognition: circumstances that only went to prove how thoroughly dead and buried he was in the estimation of his day and generation.

Nothing, indeed, seemed as he remembered it except the offerings in the theatres. He sat through plays on three successive nights that sent him back to his hotel saddened by the conviction that the tastes of his fellow-countrymen in the matter of amusements were as enduring as adamant—as long-enduring. Some day (he prophesied) New York would be finished and complete; then would come the final change—its name—because it wouldn't be New York unless ever changing; and when that was settled, the city would know ease and, for want of something less material to occupy it, begin to develop a soul of its own—together with an inclination for something different in the way of theatrical entertainment.

But his ultimate and utter awakening to the truth that his home had outgrown him fell upon the fourth afternoon following his return, when a total but most affable gentleman presented himself to Whitaker's consideration with a bogus name and a genuine offer to purchase him a drink, and promptly attempted to enmesh him in a confidence game that had degenerated into a vaudeville joke in the days when both of them had worn knickerbockers. Gently but firmly entrusting the stranger to the care of a convenient policeman, Whitaker privately admitted that he was outclassed, that it was time for him to seek the protection of

his friends.

He began with Drummond. The latter, of course, had moved his offices; no doubt he had moved them several times; however that may be, Whitaker had left him in quiet and contracted quarters in Pine Street; he found him independently established in an imposing suite in the Woolworth Building.

Whitaker gave one of Mr. Hugh Morten's cards to a subdued office-boy. "Tell him," he requested, "that I want to see him about a matter relating to the estate of Mr. Whitaker."

The boy dived through one partition-door and reappeared by way of another with the deft certainty of a trained pantomime.

"Says t' come in."

Whitaker found himself in the presence of an ashen-faced man of thirty-five, who clutched the side of his roll-top desk as if to save himself from falling.

"Whitaker!" he gasped. "My God!"

"Flattered," said Whitaker, "I'm sure."

He derived considerable mischievous amusement from Drummond's patent stupefaction. It was all so right and proper—as it should have been. He considered his an highly satisfactory resurrection, the sensation it created as complete, considered in the relation of anticipation to fulfilment, as anything he had ever experienced. Seldom does a scene pass off as one plans it; the other parties thereto are apt to spoil things by spouting spontaneously their own original lines, thus cheating one out of a crushing retort or cherished epigram. But Drummond played up his part in a most public-spirited fashion—gratifying, to say the least.

It took him some minutes to recover, Whitaker standing by and beaming.

He remarked changes, changes as striking as the improvement in Drummond's fortunes. Physically his ex-partner had gone off a bit; the sedentary life led by the average successful man of business in New York had marked his person unmistakably. Much heavier than the man Whitaker remembered, he wore a thick and solid air of good-natured prosperity. The hair had receded an inch or so from his forehead. Only his face seemed as it had always been—sharply handsome and strong. Whitaker remembered that he had always somewhat

meanly envied Drummond his good looks; he himself had been fashioned after the new order of architecture—with a steel frame; but for some reason Nature, the master builder, had neglected sufficiently to wall in and conceal the skeleton. Admitting the economy of the method, Whitaker was inclined to believe that the effect must be surprising, especially if encountered without warning....

He discovered that they were both talking at once—furiously—and, not without surprise, that he had a great deal more enlightenment to impart to Drummond than he had foreseen.

"You've got an economical streak in you when it comes to correspondence," Drummond commented, offering Whitaker a sheet of paper he had just taken from a tin document-box. "That's Exhibit A."

Whitaker read aloud:

"DEAR D., I'm not feeling well, so off for a vacation. Burke has just been in and paid \$1500 in settlement of our claim. I'm enclosing herewith my check for your share. Yours, H. M. W."

"Far be it from me to cast up," said Drummond; "but I'd like to know why the deuce you couldn't let a fellow know how ill you were."

Whitaker frowned over his dereliction. "Don't remember," he confessed. "I was hardly right, you know—and I presume I must have counted on Greyerson telling."

"But I don't know Greyerson...."

"That's so. And you never heard—?"

"Merely a rumour ran round. Some one—I forget who—told me that you and Stark had gone sailing in Stark's boat—to cruise in the West Indies, according to my informant. And somebody else mentioned that he'd heard you were seriously ill. More than that nothing—until we heard that the *Adventuress* had been lost, half a year later."

"I'm sorry," said Whitaker contritely. "It was thoughtless...."

"But that isn't all," Drummond objected, flourishing another paper. "See here—Exhibit B—came in a day or so later."

"Yes." Whitaker recognized the document. "I remember insisting on writing to

you before we turned in that night."

He ran through the following communication:

"DEAR DRUMMOND: I married here, to-night, Mary Ladislas. Please look out for her while I'm away. Make her an allowance out of my money—five hundred a month ought to be enough. I shall die intestate, and she'll get everything then, of course. She has your address and will communicate with you as soon as she gets settled down in Town.

"Faithfully—

"HUGH MORTEN WHITAKER."

"If it hadn't been so much in character," commented Drummond, "I'd've thought the thing a forgery—or a poor joke. Knowing you as well as I did, however ... I just sat back to wait for word from Mrs. Whitaker."

"And you never heard, except that once!" said Whitaker thoughtfully.

"Here's the sole and only evidence I ever got to prove that you had told the truth."

Drummond handed Whitaker a single, folded sheet of note-paper stamped with the name of the Waldorf-Astoria.

"CARTER S. DRUMMOND, Esq., 27 Pine Street, City.

"DEAR SIR: I inclose herewith a bank-note for \$500, which you will be kind enough to credit to the estate of your late partner and my late husband, Mr. Hugh Morten Whitaker.

"Very truly yours,

"MARY LADISLAS WHITAKER."

"Dated, you see, the day after the report of your death was published here."

"But why?" demanded Whitaker, dumfounded. "Why?"

"I infer she felt herself somehow honour-bound by the monetary obligation," said the lawyer. "In her understanding your marriage of convenience was nothing more—a one-sided bargain, I think you said she called it. She couldn't consider

herself wholly free, even though you were dead, until she had repaid this loan which you, a stranger, had practically forced upon her—if not to you, to your estate."

"But death cancels everything—"

"Not," Drummond reminded him with a slow smile, "the obligation of a period of decent mourning that devolves upon a widow. Mrs. Whitaker may have desired to marry again immediately. If I'm any judge of human nature, she argued that repayment of the loan wiped out every obligation. Feminine logic, perhaps, but—"

"Good Lord!" Whitaker breathed, appalled in the face of this contingency which had seemed so remote and immaterial when he was merely Hugh Morten, bachelor-nomad, to all who knew him on the far side of the world.

Drummond dropped his head upon his hand and regarded his friend with inquisitive eyes.

"Looks as though you may have gummed things up neatly—doesn't it?"

Whitaker nodded in sombre abstraction.

"You may not," continued Drummond with light malice, "have been so generous, so considerate and chivalric, after all."

"Oh, cut that!" growled Whitaker, unhappily. "I never meant to come back."

"Then why did you?"

"Oh ... I don't know. Chiefly because I caught Anne Presbury's sharp eyes on me in Melbourne—as I said a while ago. I knew she'd talk—as she surely will the minute she gets back—and I thought I might as well get ahead of her, come home and face the music before anybody got a chance to expose me. At the worst—if what you suggest has really happened—it's an open-and-shut case; no one's going to blame the woman; and it ought to be easy enough to secure a separation or divorce—"

"You'd consent to that?" inquired Drummond intently.

"I'm ready to do anything she wishes, within the law."

"You leave it to her, then?"

"If I ever find her—yes. It's the only decent thing I can do."

"How do you figure that?"

"I went away a sick man and a poor one; I come back as sound as a bell, and if not exactly a plutocrat, at least better off than I ever expected to be in this life.... To all intents and purposes I *made* her a partner to a bargain she disliked; well, I'll be hanged if I'm going to hedge now, when I look a better matrimonial risk, perhaps: if she still wants my name, she can have it."

Drummond laughed quietly. "If that's how you feel," he said, "I can only give you one piece of professional advice."

"What's that?"

"Find your wife."

After a moment of puzzled thought, Whitaker admitted ruefully: "You're right. There's the rub."

"I'm afraid you won't find it an easy job. I did my best without uncovering a trace of her."

"You followed up that letter, of course?"

"I did my best; but, my dear fellow, almost anybody with a decent appearance can manage to write a note on Waldorf stationery. I made sure of one thing—the management knew nothing of the writer under either her maiden name or yours."

"Did you try old Thurlow?"

"Her father died within eight weeks from the time you ran away. He left everything to charity, by the way. Unforgiving blighter."

"Well, there's her sister, Mrs. Pettit."

"She heard of the marriage first through me," asserted Drummond. "Your wife had never come near her—nor even sent her a line. She could give me no information whatever."

"You don't think she purposely misled you—?"

"Frankly I don't. She seemed sincerely worried, when we talked the matter over, and spoke in a most convincing way of her fruitless attempts to trace the young

woman through a private detective agency."

"Still, she may know now," Whitaker said doubtfully. "She may have heard something since. I'll have a word with her myself."

"Address," observed Drummond, dryly: "the American Embassy, Berlin.... Pettit's got some sort of a minor diplomatic berth over there."

"O the devil!... But, anyway, I can write."

"Think it over," Drummond advised. "Maybe it might be kinder not to."

"Oh, I don't know—"

"You've given me to understand you were pretty comfy on the other side of the globe. Why not let sleeping dogs lie?"

"It's the lie that bothers me—the living lie. It isn't fair to her."

"Rather sudden, this solicitude—what?" Drummond asked with open sarcasm.

"I daresay it does look that way. But I can't see that it's the decent thing for me to let things slide any longer. I've got to try to find her. She may be ill—destitute—in desperate trouble again—"

Drummond's eyebrows went up whimsically. "You surely don't mean me to infer that your affections are involved?"

This brought Whitaker up standing. "Good heavens—no!" he cried. He moved to a window and stared rudely at the Post Office Building for a time. "I'm going to find her just the same—if she still lives," he announced, turning back.

"Would you know her if you saw her?"

"I don't know." Whitaker frowned with annoyance. "She's six years older—"

"A woman often develops and changes amazingly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four."

"I know," Whitaker acknowledged with dejection.

"Well, but what was she like?" Drummond pursued curiously.

Whitaker shook his head. "It's not easy to remember. Matter of fact, I don't believe I ever got one good square look at her. It was twilight in the hotel, when

I found her; we sat talking in absolute darkness, toward the end; even in the minister's study there was only a green-shaded lamp on the table; and on the train—well, we were both too much worked up, I fancy, to pay much attention to details."

"Then you really haven't any idea—?"

"Oh, hardly." Whitaker's thin brown hand gesticulated vaguely. "She was tall, slender, pale, at the awkward age...."

"Blonde or brune?"

"I swear I don't know. She wore one of those funny knitted caps, tight down over her hair, all the time."

Drummond laughed quietly. "Rather an inconclusive description, especially if you advertise. 'Wanted: the wife I married six years ago and haven't seen since; tall, slender, pale, at the awkward age; wore one of those funny knit—'"

"I don't feel in a joking humour," Whitaker interrupted roughly. "It's a serious matter and wants serious treatment.... What else have we got to mull over?"

Drummond shrugged suavely. "There's enough to keep us busy for several hours," he said. "For instance, there's my stewardship."

"Your which?"

"My care of your property. You left a good deal of money and securities lying round loose, you know; naturally I felt obliged to look after 'em. There was no telling when Widow Whitaker might walk in and demand an accounting. I presume we might as well run over the account—though it is getting late."

"Half-past four," Whitaker informed him, consulting his watch. "Take too long for to-day. Some other time."

"To-morrow suit you?"

"To-morrow's Sunday," Whitaker objected. "But there's no hurry at all."

Drummond's reply was postponed by the office boy, who popped in on the heels of a light knock.

"Mr. Max's outside," he announced.

"O the deuce!" The exclamation seemed to escape Drummond's lips involuntarily. He tightened them angrily, as though regretting the lapse of self-control, and glanced hurriedly askance to see if Whitaker had noticed. "I'm busy," he added, a trace sullenly. "Tell him I've gone out."

"But he's got 'nappointment," the boy protested. "And besides, I told him you was in."

"You needn't fob him off on my account," Whitaker interposed. "We can finish our confab later—Monday—any time. It's time for me to be getting up-town, anyway."

"It isn't that," Drummond explained doggedly. "Only—the man's a bore, and—"

"It isn't Jules Max?" Whitaker demanded excitedly. "Not little Jules Max, who used to stage manage our amateur shows?"

"That's the man," Drummond admitted with plain reluctance.

"Then have him in, by all means. I want to say howdy to him, if nothing more. And then I'll clear out and leave you to his troubles."

Drummond hesitated; whereupon the office boy, interpreting assent, precipitately vanished to usher in the client. His employer laughed a trifle sourly.

"Ben's a little too keen about pleasing Max," he said. "I think he looks on him as the fountainhead of free seats. Max has developed into a heavy-weight entrepreneur, you know."

"Meaning theatrical manager? Then why not say so? But I might've guessed he'd drift into something of the sort."

A moment later Whitaker was vigorously pumping the unresisting—indeed the apparently boneless—hand of a visibly flabbergasted gentleman, who suffered him for the moment solely upon suspicion, if his expression were a reliable index of his emotion.

In the heyday of his career as a cunning and successful promoter of plays and players, Jules Max indulged a hankering for the picturesquely eccentric that sat oddly upon his commonplace personality. The hat that had made Hammerstein famous Max had appropriated—straight crown, flat brim and immaculate gloss—bodily. Beneath it his face was small of feature, and fat. Its trim little mustache

lent it an air of conventionality curiously at war with a pince-nez which sheltered his near-sighted eyes, its enormous, round, horn-rimmed lenses sagging to one side with the weight of a wide black ribbon. His nose was insignificant, his mouth small and pussy. His short, round little body was invariably by day dressed in a dark gray morning-coat, white-edged waistcoat, assertively-striped trousers, and patent-leather shoes with white spats. He had a passion for lemon-coloured gloves of thinnest kid and slender malacca walking-sticks. His dignity was an awful thing, as ingrained as his strut.

He reasserted the dignity now with a jerk of his maltreated hand, as well as with an appreciable effort betrayed by his resentful glare.

"Do I know you?" he demanded haughtily. "If not, what the devil do you mean by such conduct, sir?"

With a laugh, Whitaker took him by the shoulders and spun him round smartly into a convenient chair.

"Sit still and let me get a *good* look," he implored. "Think of it! Juley Max daring to put on side with me! The impudence of you, Juley! I've a great mind to play horse with you. How dare you go round the streets looking like that, anyway?"

Max recovered his breath, readjusted his glasses, and resumed his stare.

"Either," he observed, "you're Hugh Whitaker come to life or a damned outrage."

"Both, if you like."

"You sound like both," complained the little man. "Anyway, you were drowned in the Philippines or somewhere long ago, and I never waste time on a dead one.... Drummond—" He turned to the lawyer with a vastly business-like air.

"No, you don't!" Whitaker insisted, putting himself between the two men. "I admit that you're a great man; you might at least admit that I'm a live one."

A mollified smile moderated the small man's manner. "That's a bargain," he said, extending a pale yellow paw; "I'm glad to see you again, Hugh. When did you recrudescence?"

"An hour ago," Drummond answered for him; "blew in here as large as life and twice as important. He's been running a gold farm out in New Guinea. What do

you know about that?"

"It's very interesting," Max conceded. "I shall have to cultivate him; I never neglect a man with money. If you'll stick around a few minutes, Hugh, I'll take you up-town in my car." He turned to Drummond, completely ignoring Whitaker while he went into the details of some action he desired the lawyer to undertake on his behalf. Then, having talked steadily for upwards of ten minutes, he rose and prepared to go.

"You've asked him, of course?" he demanded of Drummond, nodding toward Whitaker.

Drummond flushed slightly. "No chance," he said. "I was on the point of doing it when you butted in."

"What's this?" inquired Whitaker.

Max delivered himself of a startling bit of information: "He's going to get married."

Whitaker stared. "Drummond? Not really?"

Drummond acknowledged his guilt brazenly: "Next week, in fact."

"But why didn't you say anything about it?"

"You didn't give me an opening. Besides, to welcome a deserter from the Great Beyond is enough to drive all other thoughts from a man's mind."

"There's to be a supper in honour of the circumstances, at the Beaux Arts to-night," supplemented Max. "You'll come, of course."

"Do you think you could keep me away with a dog?"

"Wouldn't risk spoiling the dog," said Drummond. He added with a tentative, questioning air: "There'll be a lot of old-time acquaintances of yours there, you know."

"So much the better," Whitaker declared with spirit. "I've played dead long enough."

"As you think best," the lawyer acceded. "Midnight, then—the Beaux Arts."

"I'll be there—and furthermore, I'll be waiting at the church a week hence—or

whenever it's to come off. And now I want to congratulate you." Whitaker held Drummond's hand in one of those long, hard grips that mean much between men. "But mostly I want to congratulate her. Who is she?"

"Sara Law," said Drummond, with pride in his quick color and the lift of his chin.

"Sara Law?" The name had a familiar ring, yet Whitaker failed to recognize it promptly.

"The greatest living actress on the English-speaking stage," Max announced, preening himself importantly. "My own discovery."

"You don't mean to say you haven't heard of her. Is New Guinea, then, so utterly abandoned to the march of civilization?"

"Of course I've heard—but I have been out of touch with such things," Whitaker apologized. "When shall I see her?"

"At supper, to-night," said the man of law. "It's really in her honour—"

"In honour of her retirement," Max interrupted, fussing with a gardenia on his lapel. "She retires from the stage finally, and forever—she says—when the curtain falls to-night."

"Then I've got to be in the theatre to-night—if that's the case," said Whitaker. "It isn't my notion of an occasion to miss."

"You're right there," Max told him bluntly. "It's no small matter to me—losing such a star; but the world's loss of its greatest artist—*ah!*" He kissed his fingertips and ecstatically flirted the caress afar.

"Fraid you won't get in, though," Drummond doubted darkly. "Everything in the house for this final week was sold out a month ago. Even the speculators are cleaned out."

"*Tut!*" the manager reproved him loftily. "Hugh is going to see Sara Law act for the last time from my personal box—aren't you, Hugh?"

"You bet I am!" Whitaker asserted with conviction.

"Then come along." Max caught him by the arm and started for the door. "So long, Drummond...."



VI

CURTAIN

Nothing would satisfy Max but that Whitaker should dine with him. He consented to drop him at the Ritz-Carlton, in order that he might dress, only on the condition that Whitaker would meet him at seven, in the white room at the Knickerbocker.

"Just mention my name to the head waiter," he said with magnificence; "or if I'm there first, you can't help seeing me. Everybody knows my table—the little one in the southeast corner."

Whitaker promised, suppressing a smile; evidently the hat was not the only peculiarity of Mr. Hammerstein's that Max had boldly made his own.

Max surprised him by a shrewd divination of his thoughts. "I know what you're thinking," he volunteered with an intensely serious expression shadowing his pudgy countenance; "but really, my dear fellow, it's good business. You get people into the habit of saying, 'There's Max's table,' and you likewise get them into the habit of thinking of Max's theatre and Max's stars. As a matter of fact, I'm merely running an immense advertising plant with a dramatic annex."

"You are an immense advertisement all by your lonesome," Whitaker agreed with a tolerant laugh, rising as the car paused at the entrance of the Ritz.

"Seven o'clock—you won't fail me?" Max persisted. "Really, you know, I'm doing you an immense favour—dinner—a seat in my private box at Sara Law's farewell performance—"

"Oh, I'm thoroughly impressed," Whitaker assured him, stepping out of the car. "But tell me—on the level, now—why this staggering condescension?"

Max looked him over as he paused on the sidewalk, a tall, loosely built figure attired impeccably yet with an elusive sense of carelessness, his head on one side and a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. The twinkle was momentarily reflected in the managerial gaze as he replied with an air of impulsive candour: "One never can tell when the most unlikely-looking material may prove useful. I may

want to borrow money from you before long. If I put you under sufficient obligation to me, you can't well refuse.... Shoot, James!"

The latter phrase was Max's way of ordering the driver to move on. The car snorted resentfully, then pulled smoothly and swiftly away. Max waved a jaunty farewell with a lemon-coloured hand, over the back of the tonneau.

Whitaker went up to his room in a reflective mood in which the theatrical man had little place, and began leisurely to prepare his person for ceremonious clothing—preparations which, at first, consisted in nothing more strenuous than finding a pipe and sitting down to stare out of the window. He was in no hurry—he had still an hour and a half before he was due at the Knickerbocker—and the afternoon's employment had furnished him with a great deal of material to stimulate his thoughts.

Since his arrival in New York he had fallen into the habit of seeking the view from his window when in meditative humour. The vast sweep of gullied roofs exerted an almost hypnotic attraction for his eyes. They ranged southward to the point where vision failed against the false horizon of dull amber haze. Late sunlight threw level rays athwart the town, gilding towering westerly walls and striking fire from all their windows. Between them like deep blue crevasses ran the gridironed streets. The air was moveless, yet sonorously thrilled with the measured movement of the city's symphonic roar. Above the golden haze a drift of light cloud was burning an ever deeper pink against the vault of robin's-egg blue.

A view of ten thousand roofs, inexpressibly enchaining.... Somewhere—perhaps—in that welter of steel and stone, as eternal and as restless as the sea, was the woman Whitaker had married, working out her lonely destiny. A haphazard biscuit tossed from his window might fall upon the very roof that sheltered her: he might search for a hundred years and never cross her path.

He wondered....

More practically he reminded himself not to forget to write to Mrs. Pettit. He must try to get the name of the firm of private detectives she had employed, and her permission to pump them; it might help him, to learn the quarters wherein they had failed.

And he must make an early opportunity to question Drummond more closely; not that he anticipated that Drummond knew anything more than he had already

disclosed—anything really helpful at all events.

His thoughts shifted to dwell temporarily on the two personalities newly introduced into his cosmos, strikingly new, in spite of the fact that they had been so well known to him of old. He wondered if it were possible that he seemed to them as singularly metamorphosed as they seemed to him—superficially if not integrally. He had lost altogether the trick of thinking in their grooves, and yet they seemed very human to him. He thought they supplemented one another somewhat weirdly: each was at bottom what the other seemed to be. Beneath his assumption, for purposes of revenue only, of outrageous eccentricities, Jules Max was as bourgeois as César Birotteau; beneath his assumption of the steady-going, keen, alert and conservative man of affairs, Drummond was as romantic as D'Artagnan. But Max had this advantage of Drummond: he was not his own dupe; whereas Drummond would go to his grave believing himself bored to extinction by the commonplaceness of his fantastical self....

Irresponsibly, his reverie reëmbred the memory he had of the woman who alone held the key to his matrimonial entanglement. The business bound his imagination with an ineluctable fascination. No matter how far his thoughts wandered, they were sure to return to beat themselves to weariness against that hard-faced mystery, like moths bewitched by the light behind a clouded window-glass. It was very curious (he thought) that he could be so indifferent and so interested at one and the same time. The possibility that she might have married a second time did not disturb his pulse by the least fraction of a beat. He even contemplated the chance that she might be dead with normal equanimity. Fortunate, that he didn't love her. More fortunate still, that he loved no one else.

It occurred to him suddenly that it would take a long time for a letter to elicit information from Berlin.

Incontinently he wrote and despatched a long, extravagant cablegram to Mrs. Pettit in care of the American Embassy, little doubting that she would immediately answer.

Then he set whole-heartedly about the business of making himself presentable for the evening.

When eventually he strode into the white room, Max was already established at the famous little table in the southeast corner. Whitaker was conscious of turning heads and guarded comment as he took his place opposite the little fat man.

"Make you famous in a night," Max assured him importantly. "Don't happen to need any notoriety, do you?"

"No, thanks."

"Dine with me here three nights hand-running and they'll let you into the Syndicate by the back door without even asking your name. P.T.A.'s one grand little motto, my boy."

"P.T.A.?"

"Pays to advertise. Paste that in your hat, keep your head small enough to wear it, and don't givadam if folks do think you're an addle-pated village cut-up, and you'll have this town at heel like a good dog as long as—well," Max wound up with a short laugh, "as long as your luck lasts."

"Yours seems to be pretty healthy—no signs of going into a premature decline."

"Ah!" said Max gloomily. "Seems!"

With a morose manner he devoted himself to his soup.

"Look me over," he requested abruptly, leaning back. "I guess I'm some giddy young buck, what?"

Whitaker reviewed the striking effect Max had created by encasing his brief neck and double chin in an old-fashioned high collar and black silk stock, beneath which his important chest was protected by an elaborately frilled shirt decorated with black pearl studs. His waist was strapped in by a pique waistcoat edged with black, and there was a distinctly perceptible "invisible" stripe in the material of his evening coat and trousers.

"Dressed up like a fool," Max summed up the ensemble before his guest could speak. "Would you believe that despair could gnaw at the vitals of any one as wonderfully arrayed?"

"I would not," Whitaker asserted.

"Nobody would," said Max mournfully. "And yet, 'tis true."

"Meaning—?"

"Oh, I'm just down in the mouth because this is Sara's last appearance." Max motioned the waiter to remove the débris of a course. "I'm as superstitious as any

trouper in the profession. I've got it in my knob that she's my mascot. If she leaves me, my luck goes with her. I never had any luck until she came under my management, and I don't expect to have any after she retires. I made her, all right, but she made me, too; and it sprains my sense of good business to break up a paying combination like that."

"Nonsense," Whitaker contended warmly. "If I'm not mistaken, you were telling me this afternoon that you stand next to Belasco as a producing manager. The loss of one star isn't going to rob you of that prestige, is it?"

"You never can tell," the little man contended darkly; "I wouldn't bet thirty cents my next production would turn out a hit."

"What will it cost—your next production?"

"The show I have in mind—" Max considered a moment then announced positively: "between eighteen and twenty thousand."

"I call that big gambling."

"Gambling? Oh, that's just part of the game. I meant a side bet. If the production flivvers, I'll need that thirty cents for coffee and sinkers at Dennett's. So I won't bet.... But," he volunteered brightly, "I'll sell you a half interest in the show for twelve thousand."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"I mean it," Max insisted seriously; "though I'll admit I'm not crazy about your accepting—yet. I've had several close calls with Sara—she's threatened to chuck the stage often before this; but every time something happened to make her change her mind. I've got a hunch maybe something will happen this time, too. If it does, I won't want any partners."

Whitaker laughed quietly and turned the conversation, accepting the manager's pseudo-confidences at their face value—that is, as pure bluff, quite consistent with the managerial pose.

They rose presently and made their way out into the crowded, blatant night of Broadway.

"We'll walk, if you don't mind," Max suggested. "It isn't far, and I'd like to get a line on the house as it goes in." He sighed affectedly. "Heaven knows when I'll

see another swell audience mobbing one of my attractions!"

His companion raised no objection. This phase of the life of New York exerted an attraction for his imagination of unfailing potency. He was more willing to view it afoot than from the windows of a cab.

They pushed forward slowly through the eddying tides, elbowed by a matchless motley of humanity, deafened by its thousand tongues, dazzled to blindness by walls of living light. Whitaker experienced a sensation of participating in a royal progress: Max was plainly a man of mark; he left a wake of rippling interest. At every third step somebody hailed him, as a rule by his first name; generally he responded by a curt nod and a tightening of his teeth upon his cigar.

They turned east through Forty-sixth Street, shouldered by a denser rabble whose faces, all turned in one direction, shone livid with the glare of a gigantic electric sign, midway down the block:

**THEATRE MAX
SARA LAW'S
FAREWELL**

It was nearly half-past eight; the house had been open since seven; and still a queue ran from the gallery doors to Broadway, while still an apparently interminable string of vehicles writhed from one corner to the lobby entrance, paused to deposit its perishable freight, and streaked away to Sixth Avenue. The lobby itself was crowded to suffocation with an Occidental durbar of barbaric magnificence, the city's supreme manifestation of its religion, the ultimate rite in the worship of the pomps of the flesh.

"Look at that," Max grumbled through his cigar. "Ain't it a shame?"

"What?" Whitaker had to lift his voice to make it carry above the buzzing of the throng.

"The money I'm losing," returned the manager, vividly disgusted. "I could've filled the Metropolitan Opera House three times over!"

He swung on his heel and began to push his way out of the lobby. "Come along—no use trying to get in this way."

Whitaker followed, to be led down a blind alley between the theatre and the

adjoining hotel. An illuminated sign advertised the stage door, through which, *via* a brief hallway, they entered the postscenium—a vast, cavernous, cluttered, shadowy and draughty place, made visible for the most part by an unnatural glow filtering from the footlights through the canvas walls of an interior set. Whitaker caught hasty glimpses of stage-hands idling about; heard a woman's voice declaiming loudly from within the set; saw a middle-aged actor waiting for his cue beside a substantial wooden door in the canvas walls; and—Max dragging him by the arm—passed through a small door into the gangway behind the boxes.

"Curtain's just up," Max told him; "Sara doesn't come on till near the middle of the act. Make yourself comfortable; I'll be back before long."

He drew aside a curtain and ushered his guest into the right-hand stage-box, then vanished. Whitaker, finding himself the sole occupant of the box, established himself in desolate grandeur as far out of sight as he could arrange his chair, without losing command of the stage. A single glance over the body of the house showed him tier upon tier of dead-white shirt-bosoms framed in black, alternating with bare gleaming shoulders and dazzling, exquisite gowns. The few empty stalls were rapidly filling up. There was a fluent movement through the aisles. A subdued hum and rustle rose from that portion of the audience which was already seated. The business going on upon the stage was receiving little attention—from Whitaker as little as from any one. He was vaguely conscious only of a scene suggesting with cruel cleverness the interior of a shabby-genteel New York flat and of a few figures peopling it, all dominated by a heavy-limbed, harsh-voiced termagant. That to which he was most sensitive was a purely psychological feeling of suspense and excitement, a semi-hysterical, high-strung, emotional state which he knew he shared with the audience, its source in fact. The opening scene in the development of the drama interested the gathering little or not at all; it was hanging in suspense upon the unfolding of some extraordinary development, something unprecedented and extraneous, foreign to the play.

Was it due simply to the fact that all these people were present at the last public appearance—as advertised—of a star of unusual popularity? Whitaker wondered. Or was there something else in their minds, something deeper and more profoundly significant?

Max slipped quietly into the box and handed his guest a programme. "Better get over here," he suggested in a hoarse whisper, indicating a chair near the rail.

"You may never have another chance to see the greatest living actress."

Whitaker thanked him and adopted the suggestion, albeit with reluctance. The manager remained standing for a moment, quick eyes ranging over the house. By this time the aisles were all clear, the rows of seats presenting an almost unbroken array of upturned faces.

Max combined a nod denoting satisfaction with a slight frown.

"Wonderful house," he whispered, sitting down behind Whitaker. "Drummond hasn't shown up yet, though."

"That so?" Whitaker returned over his shoulder.

"Yes; it's funny; never knew him to be so late. He always has the aisle seat, fourth row, centre. But he'll be along presently."

Whitaker noted that the designated stall was vacant, then tried to fix his attention upon the stage; but without much success; after a few moments he became aware that he had missed something important; the scene was meaningless to him, lacking what had gone before.

He glanced idly at his programme, indifferently absorbing the information that "Jules Max has the honour to present Miss Sara Law in her first and greatest success entitled JOAN THURSDAY—a play in three acts—"

The audience stirred expectantly; a movement ran through it like the movement of waters, murmurous, upon a shore. Whitaker's gaze was drawn to the stage as if by an implacable force. Max shifted on the chair behind him and said something indistinguishable, in an unnatural tone.

A woman had come upon the stage, suddenly and tempestuously, banging a door behind her. The audience got the barest glimpse of her profile as, pausing momentarily, she eyed the other actors. Then, without speaking, she turned and walked up-stage, her back to the footlights.

Applause broke out like a thunderclap, pealing heavily through the big auditorium, but the actress showed no consciousness of it. She was standing before a cheap mirror, removing her hat, arranging her hair with the typical, unconscious gestures of a weary shop-girl; she was acting—living the scene, with no time to waste in pandering to her popularity by bows and set smiles; she remained before the glass, prolonging the business, until the applause subsided.

Whitaker received an impression as of a tremendous force at work across the footlights. The woman diffused an effect as of a terrible and boundless energy under positive control. She was not merely an actress, not even merely a great actress; she was the very soul of the drama of to-day.

Beyond this he knew in his heart that she was his wife. Sara Law was the woman he had married in that sleepy Connecticut town, six years before that night. He had not yet seen her face clearly, but he *knew*. To find himself mistaken would have shaken the foundations of his understanding.

Under cover of the applause, he turned to Max.

"Who is that? What is her name?"

"The divine Sara," Max answered, his eyes shining.

"I mean, what is her name off the stage, in private life?"

"The same," Max nodded with conviction; "Sara Law's the only name she's ever worn in my acquaintance with her."

At that moment, the applause having subsided to such an extent that it was possible for her to make herself heard, the actress swung round from the mirror and addressed one of the other players. Her voice was clear, strong and vibrant, yet sweet; but Whitaker paid no heed to the lines she spoke. He was staring, fascinated, at her face.

Sight of it set the seal of certainty upon conviction: she was one with Mary Ladislas. He had forgotten her so completely in the lapse of years as to have been unable to recall her features and colouring, yet he had needed only to see to recognize her beyond any possibility of doubt. Those big, intensely burning eyes, that drawn and pallid face, the quick, nervous movements of her thin white hands, the slenderness of her tall, awkward, immature figure—in every line and contour, in every gesture and inflection, she reproduced the Mary Ladislas whom he had married.

And yet ... Max was whispering over his shoulder:

"Wonderful make-up—what?"

"Make-up!" Whitaker retorted. "She's not made up—she's herself to the last detail."

Amusement glimmered in the manager's round little eyes: "You don't know her. Wait till you get a pipe at her off the stage." Then he checked the reply that was shaping on Whitaker's lips, with a warning lift of his hand and brows: "Ssh! Catch this, now. She's a wonder in this scene."

The superb actress behind the counterfeit of the hunted and hungry shop-girl was holding spell-bound with her inevitable witchery the most sophisticated audience in the world; like wheat in a windstorm it swayed to the modulations of her marvellous voice as it ran through a passage-at-arms with the termagant. Suddenly ceasing to speak, she turned down to a chair near the footlights, followed by a torrent of shrill vituperation under the lash of which she quivered like a whipped thoroughbred.

Abruptly, pausing with her hands on the back of the chair, there came a change. The actress had glanced across the footlights; Whitaker could not but follow the direction of her gaze; the eyes of both focussed for a brief instant on the empty aisle-seat in the fourth row. A shade of additional pallor showed on the woman's face. She looked quickly, questioningly, toward the box of her manager.

Seated as he was so near the stage, Whitaker's face stood out in rugged relief, illumined by the glow reflected from the footlights. It was inevitable that she should see him. Her eyes fastened, dilating, upon his. The scene faltered perceptibly. She stood transfixed....



Her eyes fastened, dilating, upon his. The scene faltered perceptibly

In the hush Max cried impatiently: "What the devil!" The words broke the spell of amazement upon the actress. In a twinkling the pitiful counterfeit of the shop-girl was rent and torn away; it hung only in shreds and tatters upon an individuality wholly strange to Whitaker: a larger, stronger woman seemed to have started out of the mask.

She turned, calling imperatively into the wings: "*Ring down!*"

Followed a pause of dumb amazement. In all the house, during the space of thirty pulse-beats, no one moved. Then Max rapped out an oath and slipped like quicksilver from the box.

Simultaneously the woman's foot stamped an echo from the boards.

"Ring down!" she cried. "Do you hear? Ring down!"

With a rush the curtain descended as pandemonium broke out on both sides of it.

VII

THE LATE EXTRA

Impulsively Whitaker got up to follow Max, then hesitated and sank back in doubt, his head awlirl. He was for the time being shocked out of all capacity for clear reasoning or right thinking. Uppermost in his consciousness he had a half-formed notion that it wouldn't help matters if he were to force himself in upon the crisis behind the scenes.

Beyond all question his wife had recognized in him the man whom she had been given every reason to believe dead: a discovery so unnerving as to render her temporarily unable to continue. But if theatrical precedent were a reliable guide, she would presently pull herself together and go on; people of the stage seldom forget that their first duty is to the audience. If he sat tight and waited, all might yet be well—as well as any such hideous coil could be hoped ever to be....

As has been indicated, he arrived at his conclusion through no such detailed argument; his mind leaped to it, and he rested upon it while still beset by a half-score of tormenting considerations.

This, then, explained Drummond's reluctance to have him bidden to the supper party; whatever ultimate course of action he planned to pursue, Drummond had been unwilling, perhaps pardonably so, to have his romance overthrown and altogether shattered in a single day.

And Drummond, too, must have known who Sara Law was, even while denying knowledge of the existence of Mary Ladislas Whitaker. He had lied, lied desperately, doubtless meaning to encompass a marriage before Whitaker could find his wife, and so furnish him with every reason that could influence an honourable man to disappear a second time.

Herein, moreover, lay the reason for the lawyer's failure to occupy his stall on that farewell night. It was just possible that Whitaker would not recognize his wife; and *vice versa*; but it was a chance that Drummond hadn't the courage to face. Even so, he might have hidden himself somewhere in the house, waiting and watching to see what would happen.

On the other hand, Max to a certainty was ignorant of the relationship between his star and his old-time friend, just as he must have been ignorant of her identity with the one-time Mary Ladislas. For that matter, Whitaker had to admit that, damning as was the evidence to controvert the theory, Drummond might be just as much in the dark as Max was. There was always the chance that the girl had kept her secret to herself, inviolate, informing neither her manager nor the man she had covenanted to wed. Drummond's absence from the house might be due to any one of a hundred reasons other than that to which Whitaker inclined to assign it. It was only fair to suspend judgment. In the meantime....

The audience was getting beyond control. The clamour of comment and questioning which had broken loose when the curtain fell was waxing and gaining a high querulous note of impatience. In the gallery the gods were beginning to testify to their normal intolerance with shrill whistles, cat-calls, sporadic bursts of hand-clapping and a steady, sinister rumble of stamping feet. In the orchestra and dress-circle people were moving about restlessly and talking at the top of their voices in order to make themselves heard above the growing din. Had there been music to fill the interval, they might have been more calm; but Max had fallen in with the theatrical *dernier cri* and had eliminated orchestras from his houses, employing only a peal of gongs to insure silence and attention before each curtain.

Abruptly Max himself appeared at one side of the proscenium arch. It was plain to those nearest the stage that he was seriously disturbed. There was a noticeable hesitancy in his manner, a pathetic frenzy in his habitually mild and lustrous eyes. Advancing halfway to the middle of the apron, he paused, begging attention with a pudgy hand. It was a full minute before the gallery would let him be heard.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced plaintively, "I much regret to inform you that Miss Law has suffered a severe nervous shock"—his gaze wandered in perplexed inquiry toward the right-hand stage-box, then was hastily averted—"and will not be able to continue for a few moments. If you will kindly grant us your patience for a very few minutes...." He backed precipitately from view, hounded by mocking applause.

A lull fell, but only temporarily. As the minutes lengthened, the gallery grew more and more obstreperous and turbulent. Wave upon wave of sound swept through the auditorium to break, roaring, against the obdurate curtain. When eventually a second figure appeared before the footlights, the audience seemed

to understand that Max dared not show himself again, and why. It was with difficulty that the man—evidently the stage-manager—contrived to make himself disconnectedly audible.

"Ladies and ..." he shouted, sweat beading his perturbed forehead ... "regret ... impossible to continue ... money ... box-office...."

An angry howl drowned him out. He retreated at accelerated discretion.

Whitaker, slipping through the stage-door behind the boxes, ran into the last speaker standing beside the first entrance, heatedly explaining to any one who would listen the utter futility of offering box-office prices in return for seat checks which in the majority of instances had cost their holders top-notch speculator prices.

"They'll wreck the theatre," he shouted excitedly, mopping his brow with his coat sleeve, "and damned if I blame 'em! What t'ell'd she wana pull a raw one like this for?"

Whitaker caught his arm in a grasp compelling attention.

"Where's Miss Law?" he asked.

"You tell me and I'll make you a handsome present," retorted the man.

"What's happened to her? Can't you find her?"

"I dunno—go ask Max."

"Where is *he*?"

"You can search me; last I saw of him he was tearing the star dressin'-room up by the roots."

Whitaker hurried on just in time to see Max disappearing in the direction of the stage-door, at which point he caught up with him, and from the manager's disjointed catechism of the doorkeeper garnered the information that the star had hurried out of the building while Max was making his announcement before the curtain.

Max swung angrily upon Whitaker.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Perhaps you can explain what this means? She was looking straight at you when she dried up! I saw her—"

"Perhaps you'd better find Miss Law and ask her," Whitaker interrupted. "Have you any idea where she's gone?"

"Home, probably," Max snapped in return.

"Where's that?"

"Fifty-seventh Street—house of her own—just bought it."

"Come on, then." Passing his arm through the manager's, Whitaker drew him out into the alley. "We'll get a taxi before this mob—"

"But, look here—what business've *you* got mixing in?"

"Ask Miss Law," said Whitaker, shortly. It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell the man flatly: "I'm her husband." But he retained wit enough to deny himself the satisfaction of this shattering rejoinder. "I know her," he added; "that's enough for the present."

"If you knew her all the time, why didn't you say so?" Max expostulated with passion.

"I didn't know I knew her—by that name," said Whitaker lamely.

At the entrance to the alley Max paused to listen to the uproar within his well-beloved theatre.

"I'd give five thousand gold dollars if I hadn't met you this afternoon!" he groaned.

"It's too late, now," Whitaker mentioned the obvious. "But if I'd understood, I promise you I wouldn't have come—at least to sit where she could see me."

He began gently to urge Max toward Broadway, but the manager hung back like a sulky child.

"Hell!" he grumbled. "I always knew that woman was a Jonah!"

"You were calling her your mascot two hours ago."

"She'll be the death of me, yet," the little man insisted gloomily. He stopped short, jerking his arm free. "Look here, I'm not going. What's the use? We'd only row. And I've got my work cut out for me back there"—with a jerk of his head

toward the theatre.

Whitaker hesitated, then without regret decided to lose him. It would be as well to get over the impending interview without a third factor.

"Very well," he said, beckoning a taxicab in to the curb. "What's the address?"

Max gave it sullenly.

"So long," he added morosely as Whitaker opened the cab door; "sorry I ever laid eyes on you."

Whitaker hesitated. "How about that supper?" he inquired. "Is it still on?"

"How in blazes do I know? Come round to the Beaux Arts and find out for yourself—same's I'll have to."

"All right," said Whitaker doubtfully. He nodded to the chauffeur, and jumped into the cab. As they swung away he received a parting impression of Max, his pose modelled on the popular conception of Napoleon at Waterloo: hands clasped behind his back, hair in disorder, chin on his chest, a puzzled frown shadowing his face as he stared sombrely after his departing guest.

Whitaker settled back and, oblivious to the lights of Broadway streaming past, tried to think—tried with indifferent success to prepare himself against the unhappy conference he had to anticipate. It suddenly presented itself to his reason, with shocking force, that his attitude must be humbly and wholly apologetic. It was a singular case: he had come home to find his wife on the point of marrying another man—and *she* was the one entitled to feel aggrieved! Strange twist of the eternal triangle!...

He tried desperately, and with equal futility, to frame some excuse for his fault.

Far too soon the machine swerved into Fifty-seventh Street, slipped halfway down the block, described a wide arc to the northern curb and pulled up, trembling, before a modest modern residence between Sixth and Seventh avenues.

Reluctantly Whitaker got out and, on suspicion, told the chauffeur to wait. Then, with all the alacrity of a condemned man ascending the scaffold, he ran up the steps to the front door.

A man-servant answered his ring without undue delay.

Was Miss Law at home? He would see.

This indicated that she was at home. Whitaker tendered a card with his surname pencilled after that of *Mr. Hugh Morten* in engraved script. He was suffered to enter and wait in the hallway.

He stared round him with pardonable wonder. If this were truly the home of Mary Ladislas Whitaker—her property—he had builded far better than he could possibly have foreseen with that investment of five hundred dollars six years since. But who, remembering the tortured, half-starved child of the Commercial House, could have prefigured the Sara Law of to-day—the woman who, before his eyes, within that hour, had burst through the counterfeit of herself of yesterday like some splendid creature emerging from its chrysalis?

Soft, shaded lights, rare furnishings, the rich yet delicate atmosphere of exquisite taste, the hush and orderly perfection of a home made and maintained with consummate art: these furnished him with dim, provoking intimations of an individuality to which he was a stranger—less than a stranger—nothing....

The man-servant brought his dignity down-stairs again.

Would Mr. Whitaker be pleased to wait in the drawing-room?

Mr. Whitaker surrendered top-coat and hat and was shown into the designated apartment. Almost immediately he became aware of feminine footsteps on the staircase—tapping heels, the faint murmuring of skirts. He faced the doorway, indefinably thrilled, the blood quickening in throat and temples.

To his intense disappointment there entered to him a woman impossible to confuse with her whom he sought: a lady well past middle-age, with the dignity and poise consistent with her years, her manifest breeding and her iron-gray hair.

"Mr. Whitaker?"

He bowed, conscious that he was being narrowly scrutinized, nicely weighed in the scales of a judgment prejudiced, if at all, not in his favor.

"I am Mrs. Secretan, a friend of Miss Law's. She has asked me to say that she begs to be excused, at least for to-night. She has suffered a severe shock and is able to see nobody."

"I understand—and I'm sorry," said Whitaker, swallowing his chagrin.

"And I am further instructed to ask if you will be good enough to leave your address."

"Certainly: I'm stopping at the Ritz-Carlton; but"—he demurred—"I should like to leave a note, if I may—?"

Mrs. Secretan nodded an assent. "You will find materials in the desk there," she added, indicating an *escritoire*.

Thanking her, Whitaker sat down, and, after some hesitation, wrote a few lines:

"Please don't think I mean to cause you the slightest inconvenience or distress. I shall be glad to further your wishes in any way you may care to designate. Please believe in my sincere regret...."

Signing and folding this, he rose and delivered it to Mrs. Secretan.

"Thank you," he said with a ceremonious bow.

The customary civilities were scrupulously observed.

He found himself in the street, with his trouble for all reward for his pains. He wondered what to do, where to go, next. There was in his mind a nagging thought that he ought to do something or other, somehow or other, to find Drummond and make him understand that he, Whitaker, had no desire or inclination to stand in his light; only, let the thing be consummated decently, as privately as possible, with due deference to the law...

The driver of the taxicab was holding the door for him, head bent to catch the address of the next stop. But his fare lingered still in doubt.

Dimly he became aware of the violent bawlings of a brace of news-vendors who were ramping through the street, one on either sidewalk. Beyond two words which seemed to be intended for "extra" and "tragedy" their cries were as inarticulate as they were deafening.

At the spur of a vague impulse, bred of an incredulous wonder if the papers were already noising abroad the news of the fiasco at the Theatre Max, Whitaker stopped one of the men and purchased a paper. It was delivered into his hands roughly folded so that a section of the front page which blazed with crimson ink was uppermost—and indicated, moreover, by a ridiculously dirty thumb.

"Ther'y'are, sir. 'Orrible moider.... Thanky...."

The man galloped on, howling. But Whitaker stood with his gaze riveted in horror. The news item so pointedly offered to his attention was clearly legible in the light of the cab lamps.

LATEST EXTRA

TRAGIC SUICIDE IN HARLEM RIVER

Stopping his automobile in the middle of Washington Bridge at 7.30 P.M., Carter S. Drummond, the lawyer and fiancé of Sara Law the actress, threw himself to his death in the Harlem River. The body has not as yet been recovered.



VIII

A HISTORY

Whitaker returned at once to the Theatre Max, but only to find the front of the house dark, Forty-sixth Street gradually reassuming its normal nocturnal aspect.

At the stage-door he discovered that no one knew what had become of the manager. He might possibly be at home.... It appeared that Max occupied exclusive quarters especially designed for him in the theatre building itself: an amiable idiosyncrasy not wholly lacking in advertising value, if one chose to consider it in that light.

His body-servant, a prematurely sour Japanese, suggested grudgingly that his employer might not improbably be found at Rector's or Louis Martin's. But he wasn't; not by Whitaker, at least.

Eventually the latter realized that it wasn't absolutely essential to his peace of mind or material welfare to find Max that night. He had been, as a matter of fact, seeking him in thoughtless humour—moved solely by the gregarious instinct in man, which made him want to discuss the amazing events of the evening with the one who, next to himself and Sara Law, was most vitally concerned with them.

He consulted a telephone book without finding that Drummond had any private residence connection, and then tried at random one of the clubs of which they had been members in common in the days when Hugh Whitaker was a human entity in the knowledge of the town. Here he had better luck—luck, that is, in as far as it put an end to his wanderings for the night; he found a clerk who remembered his face without remembering his name, and who, consequently, was not unwilling to talk. Drummond, it seemed, had lived at the club; he had dined alone, that evening, in his room; had ordered his motor car from the adjacent garage for seven o'clock; and had left at about that hour with a small hand-bag and no companion. Nothing further was known of his actions save the police report. The car had been found stationary on Washington Bridge, and deserted, Drummond's motor coat and cap on the driver's seat. Bystanders averred that a man had been seen to leave the car and precipitate himself from

the bridge to the stream below. The body was still unrecovered. The club had notified by telegraph a brother in San Francisco, the only member of Drummond's family of whom it had any record. Friends, fellow-members of the club, were looking after things—doing all that could and properly ought to be done under the circumstances.

Whitaker walked back to his hotel. There was no other place to go: no place, that is, that wooed his humour in that hour. He could call to mind, of course, names of friends and acquaintances of the old days to whom there was no reason why he shouldn't turn, now that he had elected to rediscover himself to the world; but there was none of them all that he really wanted to see before he had regained complete control of his emotions.

He was, indeed, profoundly shocked. He held himself measurably responsible for Drummond's act of desperation. If he had not wilfully sought to evade the burden of his duty to Mary Ladislas, when he found that he was to live rather than die—if he had been honest and generous instead of allowing himself to drift into cowardly defalcation to her trust—Drummond, doubtless, would still be alive. Or even if, having chosen the recreant way, he had had the strength to stick to it, to stay buried....

Next to poor Peter Stark, whom his heart mourned without ceasing, he had cared most for Drummond of all the men he had known and liked in the old life. Now ... he felt alone and very lonely, sick of heart and forlorn. There was, of course, Lynch, his partner in the Antipodes; Whitaker was fond of Lynch, but not with the affection that a generous-spirited youth had accorded Peter Stark and Drummond—a blind and unreasoning affection that asked no questions and made nothing of faults. The capacity for such sentiment was dead in him, as dead as Peter Stark, as dead as Drummond....

It was nearly midnight, but the hour found Whitaker in no humour for bed or the emptiness of his room. He strolled into the lounge, sat down at a detached table in a corner, and ordered something to drink. There were not many others in the room, but still enough to mitigate to some extent his temporary horror of utter loneliness.

He felt painfully the heaviness of his debt to the woman he had married. He who had promised her new life and the rich fulfilment thereof had accomplished only its waste and desolation. He had thrust upon her the chance to find happiness, and as rudely had snatched it away from her. Nor could he imagine any way in

which he might be able to expiate his breach of trust—his sins of omission and commission, alike deadly and unpardonable!

Unless ... He caught eagerly at the thought: he might "die" again—go away once more, and forever; bury himself deep beyond the groping tentacles of civilization; disappear finally, notifying her of his intention, so that she might seek legal freedom from his name. It only needed Max's silence, which could unquestionably be secured, to insure her against the least breath of scandal, the faintest whisper of gossip.... Not that Max really knew anything; but the name of Whitaker, as identified with Hugh Morten, might better be permitted to pass unechoed into oblivion....

And with this very thought in mind he became aware of the echo of that name in his hearing.

A page, bearing something on a salver, ambled through the lounge, now and again opening his mouth to bleat, dispassionately: "Mista Whitaker, Mista Whitaker!"

The owner of that name experienced a flush of exasperation. What right had the management to cause him to be advertised in every public room of the establishment?... But the next instant his resentment evaporated, when he remembered that he remained Mr. Hugh Morten in the managerial comprehension.

He lifted a finger; the boy swerved toward him, tendered a blue envelope, accepted a gratuity and departed.

It was a cable message: very probably an answer to his to Grace Pettit. Whitaker tore the envelope and unfolded the enclosure, glancing first at the signature to verify his surmise. As he did so, he heard his name a second time.

"Pardon me; this is Mr. Whitaker?"

A man stood beside the little table—one whom Whitaker had indifferently noticed on entering as an equally lonely loungee at another table.

Though he frowned involuntarily with annoyance, he couldn't well deny his identity.

"Yes," he said shortly, looking the man up and down with a captious eye.

Yet it was hard to find much fault with this invader of his preoccupation. He had the poise and the dress of a gentleman: dignity without aggressiveness, completeness without ostentation. He had a spare, not ungraceful body, a plain, dark face, a humorous mouth, steady eyes: a man easily forgotten or overlooked unless he willed it otherwise.

"My name is Ember," he said quietly. "If you'll permit me—my card." He offered a slip of pasteboard engraved with the name of Martin Ember. "And I'll sit down, because I want to talk to you for a few minutes."

Accordingly he sat down. Whitaker glanced at the card, and questioningly back at Mr. Ember's face.

"I don't know you, but ... What are we to talk about, please?"

The man smiled, not unpleasingly.

"Mrs. Whitaker," he said.

Whitaker stared, frowned, and jumped at a conclusion.

"You represent Mrs. Whitaker?"

Mr. Ember shook his head. "I'm no lawyer, thank God! But I happen to know a good deal it would be to your advantage to know; so I've taken this liberty."

"Mrs. Whitaker didn't send you to me? Then how—? What the deuce—!"

"I happened to have a seat near your box at the theatre to-night," Mr. Ember explained coolly. "From—what I saw there, I inferred that you must be—yourself. Afterwards I got hold of Max, confirmed my suspicion, and extracted your address from him."

"I see," said Whitaker, slowly—not comprehending the main issue at all. "But I'm not known here by the name of Whitaker."

"So I discovered," said Ember, with his quiet, engaging smile. "If I hadn't remembered that you sometimes registered as Hugh Morten—as, for instance, at the Commercial House six years ago—"

"You were there!"

"A considerable time after the event—yes." The man nodded, his eyes glimmering.

Whitaker shot a quick glance round the room, and was relieved to find they were not within earshot of any of the other occupied tables.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded bluntly.

"I was," said the other slowly, "once, a private detective. Now—I'm a person of no particular employment, of independent means, with a penchant—you're at liberty to assume—for poking my nose into other people's business."

"Oh...."

A word, "blackmail," leapt into Whitaker's consciousness, and served to harden the hostility in his attitude.

"Mrs. George Pettit once employed me to find her sister, Miss Mary Ladislas, who had run away with a chauffeur named Morton," pursued the man, evenly. "That was about the time—shortly after—the death of Thurlow Ladislas; say, two months after the so-called elopement."

"Just a minute," said Whitaker suddenly—"by your leave—"

Ember bowed gravely. For a thought longer Whitaker's gaze bored into his eyes in vain effort to fathom what was going on behind them, the animus undiscovered by his words; then, remembering, he looked down at the cable message in his hand.

"Martin Ember (it ran) private agency 1435 Broadway Grace Pettit."

Whitaker folded the paper and put it away in a pocket.

"Go on, please," he said quietly.

"In those days," Mr. Ember resumed, "I did such things indifferently well. I had little trouble in following the runaways from Southampton to Greenport. There they parted. The girl crossed to the Connecticut shore, while the man went back to New York with the automobile. He turned the machine in at the Ladislas garage, by the way, and promptly fell into the hands of the police. He was wanted for theft in a former position, was arrested, convicted and sent to Sing Sing; where he presently died, I'm glad to say.... I thought this information might interest you."

Whitaker nodded grimly.

"Can I order you something to drink?"

"No, thank you—and I'm already smoking." Mr. Ember dropped the ash from a cigar. "On the Connecticut side (because it was my business to find out things) I discovered that Miss Ladislas had registered at the Commercial House as Mrs. Morton. She was there, alone, under that name, for nearly a week before you registered as Hugh Morten, and in the space of a few hours married her, under your true name, and shipped her off to New York."

"Right," Whitaker agreed steadily. "And then—?"

"I traced her to the Hotel Belmont, where she stopped overnight, then lost her completely; and so reported to Mrs. Pettit. I must mention here, in confidence, in order that you may understand my subsequent action, that my bill for the investigation was never paid. Mr. Pettit was not in very comfortable circumstances at the time.... No matter. I didn't press him, and later was glad of it, for it left me a free agent—under no obligation to make further report."

"I don't understand you."

"In a moment.... I came into a little money about that time, and gave up my business: gave it up, that is, as far as placing myself at the service of the public was concerned. I retained my devouring curiosity about things that didn't concern me personally, although they were often matters of extreme interest to the general public. In other words, I continued to employ my time professionally, but only for my private amusement or in the interests of my friends.... After some time Mr. Drummond sought me out and begged me to renew my search for Mrs. Whitaker; you were dead, he told me; she was due to come into your estate—a comfortable living for an independent woman."

"And you found her and told Drummond—?"

Whitaker leaned over the table, studying the man's face with intense interest.

"No—and yes. I found Mrs. Whitaker. I didn't report to Drummond."

"But why—in Heaven's name?"

Ember smiled sombrely at the drooping ash of his cigar. "There were several reasons. In the first place I didn't have to: I had asked no retainer from Drummond, and I rendered no bill: what I had found out was mine, to keep or to sell, as I chose. I chose not to sell because—well, because Mrs. Whitaker begged

me not to."

"Ah!" Whitaker breathed, sitting back. "Why?"

"This was all of a year, I think, after your marriage. Mrs. Whitaker had tasted the sweets of independence and—got the habit. She had adopted a profession looked upon with abhorrence by her family; she was succeeding in it; I may say her work was foreshadowing that extraordinary power which made her the Sara Law whom you saw to-night. If she came forward as the widow of Hugh Whitaker, it meant renunciation of the stage; it meant painful scenes with her family if she refused to abandon her profession; it meant the loss of liberty, of freedom of action and development, which was hers in her decent obscurity. She was already successful in a small way, had little need of the money she would get as claimant of your estate. She enlisted my sympathy, and—I held my tongue."

"That was decent of you."

The man bowed a quiet acknowledgment. "I thought you'd think so.... There was a third reason."

He paused, until Whitaker encouraged him with a "Yes—?"

"Mr. Whitaker"—the query came point-blank—"do you love your wife?"

Whitaker caught his breath. "What right—!" he began, and checked abruptly. The blood darkened his lean cheeks.

"Mrs. Whitaker gave me to understand that you didn't. It wasn't hard to perceive, everything considered, that your motive was pure chivalry—Quixotism. I should like to go to my grave with anything half as honourable and unselfish to my credit."

"I beg your pardon," Whitaker muttered thickly.

"You don't, then?"

"Love her? No."

There was a slight pause. Then, "I do," said this extraordinary man, meeting Whitaker's gaze openly. "I do," he repeated, flushing in his turn, "but ... hopelessly.... However, that was the third reason," he pursued in a more level voice—"I thought you ought to know about it—that induced me to keep Sara Law's secret.... I loved her from the day I found her. She has never looked twice

at me.... But that's why I never lost interest."

"You mean," Whitaker took him up diffidently—"you continued to—ah—?"

"Court her—as we say? No." Ember's shoulders, lifting, emphasized the disclaimer. "I'm no fool: I mean I'm able to recognize a hopeless case when it's as intimate to me as mine was—and is. Doubtless Mrs. Whitaker understands—if she hasn't forgotten me by this time—but, if so, wholly through intuition. I have had the sense not to invite the thunderbolt. I've sat quietly in the background, watching her work out her destiny—feeling a good deal like a god in the machine. She doesn't know it, unless Max told her against my wish; but it was I who induced him to take her from the ranks of a provincial stock company and bring her before the public, four years ago, as *Joan Thursday*. Since then her destiny has been rather too big a thing for me to tamper with; but I've watched and wondered, sensing forces at work about her of which even she was unsuspecting."

"What in blazes do you mean?" Whitaker demanded, mystified.

"Did it strike you to wonder at the extraordinary mob her farewell performance attracted to-night—the rabble that packed the street, though quite hopeless of even seeing the inside of the theatre?"

"Why—yes. It struck me as rather unusual. But then, Max had done nothing but tell me of her tremendous popularity."

"That alone, great as it is, wouldn't have brought so many people together to stare at the outside of a theatre. The magnet was something stronger—the morbid curiosity of New York. Those people were waiting, thrilled with expectancy, on tiptoe for—what do you think?"

"I shall think you mad in another moment, if you don't explain yourself," Whitaker told him candidly.

Ember's smile flashed and vanished. "They were waiting for the sensation that presently came to them: the report of Drummond's death."

"What the devil—!"

"Patience!... It had been discounted: if something of the sort hadn't happened, New York would have gone to bed disappointed. The reason? This is the third time it has happened—the same thing, practically: Sara Law on the verge of

leaving the stage to marry, a fatal accident intervening. Did Max by any chance mention the nickname New York has bestowed on Sara Law?"

"Nickname? No!"

"They call her 'The Destroying Angel.'"

"What damnable rot!"

"Yes; but what damnable coincidence. Three men loved her—and one by one they died. And now the fourth. Do you wonder...?"

"Oh, but—"The Destroying Angel"—!" Whitaker cried indignantly. "How can they blame her?"

"It isn't blame—it's superstition. Listen...."

Ember bent forward, holding Whitaker's gaze with intent, grave eyes. "The first time," he said in a rapid undertone, "was a year or so after her triumph as *Joan Thursday*. There were then two men openly infatuated with her, a boy named Custer, and a man I believe you knew—William Hamilton."

"I knew them both."

"Custer was making the pace; the announcement of his engagement to Sara Law was confidently anticipated. He died suddenly; the coroner's jury decided that he had misjudged the intentions of a loaded revolver. People whispered of suicide, but it didn't look quite like that to me. However ... Hamilton stepped into his place. Presently we heard that Sara Law was to marry him and leave the stage. Hamilton had to go abroad on business; on the return trip—the wedding was set for the day after he landed here—he disappeared, no one knew how. Presumably he fell overboard by accident one night; sane men with everything in the world to live for do such things, you know—according to the newspapers."

"I understand you. Please go on."

"Approximately eighteen months later a man named Thurston—Mitchell Thurston—was considered a dangerous aspirant for the hand of Sara Law. He was exceedingly well fixed in a money way—a sort of dilettantish architect, with offices in the Metropolitan Tower. One day at high noon he left his desk to go to lunch at Martin's; crossing Madison Square, he suddenly fell dead, with a bullet in his brain. It was a rifle bullet, but though the square was crowded, no one had

heard the report of the shot, and no one was seen carrying a rifle. The conclusion was that he had been shot down by somebody using a gun with a Maxim silencer, from a window on the south side of the square. There were no clues."

"And now Drummond!" Whitaker exclaimed in horror. "Poor fellow! Poor woman!"

A slightly sardonic expression modified the lines of Ember's mouth. "So far as Mrs. Whitaker is concerned," he said with the somewhat pedantic mode of speech which Whitaker was to learn to associate with his moments of most serious concentration—"I echo the sentiment. But let us suspend judgment on Drummond's case until we know more. It is not as yet an established fact that he is dead."

"You mean there's hope—?"

"There's doubt," Ember corrected acidly—"doubt, at least, in my mind. You see, I saw Drummond in the flesh, alive and vigorous, a good half hour after he is reported to have leaped to his death."

"Where?"

"Coming up the stairs from the down-town Subway station in front of the Park Avenue Hotel. He wore a hat pulled down over his eyes and an old overcoat buttoned tight up to his chin. He was carrying a satchel bearing the initials C. S. D., but was otherwise pretty thoroughly disguised, and, I fancied, anxious enough to escape recognition."

"You're positive about this?"

"My dear man," said Ember with an air, "I saw his ear distinctly."

"His ear!"

"I never forget an ear; I've made a special study of them. They're the last parts of the human anatomy that criminals ever think to disguise; and, to the trained eye, as infallible a means of identification—nearly—as thumb-prints. The man I saw coming up from the Subway kept as much as possible away from the light; he had successfully hidden most of his face; but he wore the inches, the hand-bag, and the ear of Carter S. Drummond. I don't think I can be mistaken."

"Did you stop him—speak to him?"

Ember shook his head. "No. I doubt if he would have remembered me. Our acquaintance has been of the slightest, limited to a couple of meetings. Besides, I was in a hurry to get to the theatre, and at that time had heard nothing of this reputed suicide."

"Which way did he go?"

"Toward the Pennsylvania station, I fancy; that is, he turned west through Thirty-third Street. I didn't follow—I was getting into a taxi when I caught sight of him."

"But what did you think to see him disguised? Didn't it strike you as curious?"

"Very," said Ember dryly. "At the same time, it was none of my affair—then. Nor did it present itself to me as a matter worth meddling with until, later, my suspicions were aroused by the scene in the theatre—obviously the result of your appearance there—and still later, when I heard the suicide report."

"But—good Lord!" Whitaker passed a hand across his dazed eyes. "What can it mean? Why should he do this thing?"

"There are several possible explanations.... How long has Drummond known that you were alive?"

"Since noon to-day."

"Not before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Still, it's possible. If he has a sensitive nature—I think he hasn't—the shame of being found out, caught trying to marry your wife when he had positive knowledge you still lived, may have driven him to drop out of sight. Again.... May I ask, what was the extent of your property in his trust?"

"A couple of hundred-thousands."

"And he believed you dead and was unable to find your widow ..."

"Oh, I don't think *that!*" Whitaker expostulated.

"Nor do I. We're merely considering possible explanations. There's a third ..."

"Well?"

"He may have received a strong hint that he was nominated for the fate that overtook young Custer, Hamilton and Thurston; and so planned to give his disappearance the colour of a similar end."

"You don't mean to say *you* think there was any method in that train of tragedies?"

"I'm not in the least superstitious, my dear man. I don't for an instant believe, as some people claim to, that Sara Law is a destroying angel, hounded by a tragic fate: that her love is equivalent to the death warrant of the man who wins it."

"But what do you think, then?"

"I think," said Ember, slowly, his gaze on the table, "that some one with a very strong interest in keeping the young woman single—and on the stage—"

"Max! Impossible!"

Ember shrugged. "In human nature, no madness is impossible. There's not a shred of evidence against Jules Max. And yet—he's a gambler. All theatrical managers are, of course; but Max is a card-fiend. The tale of his plunging runs like wild-fire up and down Broadway, day by day. A dozen times he's been on the verge of ruin, yet always he has had Sara Law to rely upon; always he's been able to fall back upon that asset, sure that her popularity would stave off bankruptcy. And he's superstitious: he believes she is his mascot. I don't accuse him—I suspect him, knowing him to be capable of many weird extravagances.... Furthermore, it's a fact that Max was a fellow-passenger with Billy Hamilton when the latter disappeared in mid-ocean."

Ember paused and sat up, preparatory to rising. "All of which," he concluded, "explains why I have trespassed upon your patience and your privacy. It seemed only right that you should get the straight, undistorted story from an unprejudiced onlooker. May I venture to add a word of advice?"

"By all means."

"Have you told Max of your relations with Sara Law?"

"No."

"Or anybody else?"

"No."

"Then keep the truth to yourself—at least until this coil is straightened out."

Ember got up. "Good night," he said pleasantly.

Whitaker took his hand, staring. "Good night," he echoed blankly. "But—I say—why keep it quiet?"

Ember, turning to go, paused, his glance quietly quizzical. "You don't mean to claim your wife?"

"On the contrary, I expect to offer no defence to her action for divorce."

"Grounds of desertion?"

"I presume so."

"Just the same, keep it as quiet as possible until the divorce is granted. If you live till then ... you may possibly continue to live thereafter."



IX

ENTR'ACTE

Dawn of Sunday found Whitaker still awake. Alone in his uncheerful hotel bedchamber, his chair tilted back against the wall, he sat smoking and thinking, reviewing again and again every consideration growing out of his matrimonial entanglement.

He turned in at length to the dreamless slumbers of mental exhaustion.

The morning introduced him to a world of newspapers gone mad and garrulous with accounts of the sensation of the preceding night. What they told him only confirmed the history of his wife's career as detailed by the gratuitous Mr. Ember. There was, however, no suggestion in any report that Drummond had not in fact committed suicide—this, despite the total disappearance of the hypothetical corpse. No doubts seemed to have arisen from the circumstance that there had been, apparently, but a single witness of the *felo de se*. A man, breathless with excitement, had run up to the nearest policeman with word of what he claimed to have seen. In the subsequent confusion he had vanished. And so thoroughly, it seemed, had the mind of New York been prepared for some fatal accident to this latest lover of Sara Law that no one dreamed of questioning the authenticity of the report.

Several sensational sheets ran exhaustive résumés, elaborately illustrated, of the public life of "The Destroying Angel."

Some remarked the fact that little or nothing was known of the history of Sara Law prior to her appearance, under the management of Jules Max, as *Joan Thursday*.

Whitaker learned that she had refused herself to the reporters who besieged her residence.

It seemed to be an unanimous assumption that the news of Drummond's suicide had in some manner been conveyed to the woman while on the stage.

No paper mentioned the name of Whitaker...

In the course of the forenoon a note for Whitaker was delivered at the hotel.

The heavy sheet of white paper, stamped with the address in Fifty-seventh Street, bore this message in a strong but nervous hand:

"I rely upon the generosity you promise me. This marriage of ours, that is no marriage, must be dissolved. Please let my attorneys—Landers, Grimshaw & Clark, 149 Broadway—know when and where you will accept service. Forgive me if I seem ungrateful and unfeeling. I am hardly myself. And please do not try to see me now. Some day I hope to see and thank you; to-day—it's impossible. I am going away to forget, if I can.

"MARY LADISLAS WHITAKER."

Before nightfall Whitaker had satisfied himself that his wife had, in truth, left her town house. The servants there informed all who inquired that they had been told to report and to forward all letters to Messrs. Landers, Grimshaw & Clark.

Whitaker promptly notified those attorneys that he was ready to be served at their convenience. He further desired them to inform their client that her suit would be uncontested. But beyond their brief and business-like acknowledgment, he heard nothing more of the action for divorce.

He sought Max several times without success. When at length run to ground in the roulette room of a Forty-fourth Street gambling-house, the manager was grimly reticent. He professed complete ignorance of his star's welfare and whereabouts. He advised Whitaker to consult the newspapers, if his interest was so insatiable.

Warned by the manager's truculent and suspicious tone that his secret was, after all, buried no more than skin-deep, Whitaker dissembled artfully his anxiety, and abandoned Max to his pet vices.

The newspapers reported Sara Law as being in retirement in several widely separated sections of the country. She was also said to have gone abroad, sailing incognito by a second-class steamship from Philadelphia.

The nine-days' wonder disintegrated naturally. The sobriquet of "The Destroying Angel" disappeared from the newspaper scare-heads. So also the name of Drummond. Hugh Morten Whitaker, the dead man come to life, occupied public interest for a brief half-day. By the time that the executors of Carter Drummond and the attorneys representing his clients began to make sense of his estate and interests, their discoveries failed to command newspaper space.

This phenomenon was chiefly due to the fact that Whitaker didn't care to raise an

outcry about his loss. Ember, it seemed, had guessed shrewdly: Drummond had appropriated to his own uses every dollar of the small fortune left in his care by his erstwhile partner. No other client of his had suffered, however. His speculations had been confined wholly to the one quarter whence he had had every reason to anticipate neither protest nor exposure. In Whitaker's too-magnanimous opinion, the man had not been so much a thief as one who yielded to the temptation to convert to his own needs and uses a property against which, it appeared, no other living being cared to enter a claim.

Whether or not he had ever learned or guessed that Sara Law was the wife of Whitaker, remained problematic. Whitaker inclined to believe that Drummond had known—that he had learned the truth from the lips of his betrothed wife. But this could not be determined save through her. And she kept close hidden.

The monetary loss was an inconsiderable thing to a man with an interest in mines in the Owen Stanley country. He said nothing. Drummond's name remained untarnished, save in the knowledge of a few.

Of these, Martin Ember was one. Whitaker made a point of hunting him up. The retired detective received confirmation of his surmise without any amazement.

"You still believe that he's alive?"

"Implicitly," Ember asserted with conviction.

"Could you find him, if necessary?"

"Within a day, I think. Do you wish me to?"

"I don't know..."

Ember permitted Whitaker to consider the matter in silence for some moments. Then, "Do you want advice?" he inquired.

"Well?"

"Hunt him down and put him behind the bars," said Ember instantly.

"What's the good of that?"

"Your personal safety."

"How?"

"Don't you suppose he misses all he's been accustomed to?—living as he does in constant terror of being discovered, the life of a hunted thing, one of the underworld, an enemy of society! Don't you suppose he'd be glad to regain all he's lost—business, social position, the esteem of his friends, the love of a woman who will soon be free to marry him?"

"Well?"

"With you out of the way, he could come back without fear."

"Oh—preposterous!"

"Is it?"

"Drummond's not that sort. He's weak, perhaps, but no criminal."

"A criminal is the creature of a warped judgment. There'd be no criminals if every one were able to attain his desires within the law. Misfortunes breed weird maggots in a man's brain. Drummond's dragging out a wretched existence in a world of false perspectives; he's not to be blamed if he presently begins to see things as they are not."

Ember permitted another pause to lengthen, unbroken by Whitaker.

"Shall I try to find him for you?" he asked quietly, in the end.

"No," Whitaker decided. "No. Let him alone—poor devil!"

Ember disclaimed further responsibility with a movement of his shoulders.

"But my wife? Could you find her as readily?"

"Possibly," the detective admitted cautiously. "But I don't mean to."

"Why not?"

"Because you don't want me to. Do you?"

"No..."

"But principally because she doesn't want me to. Otherwise she'd let you know where to look for her."

"True."

These fragments of dialogue are from a conversation that took place in the month of June, nearly seven weeks after the farewell performance at the Theatre Max. Interim, Whitaker had quietly resumed his place in the life of the town, regaining old friendships, renewing old associations. Save for the fact that he pursued no gainful occupation, all with him was much as it had been: as if the intervening six years of exile had been blotted out, or had never been. The mild excitement occasioned by his reappearance had already subsided; he was again an accepted and substantial factor in the society of his kind.

He had abandoned all thought of returning to New Guinea, entertained, indeed, no inclination whatever to do so. The life he now led was more or less normal to him. Yet he was sensible of a growing restlessness. He had nothing to busy himself with: this was the unguessed secret of his unsettled temper. And the approach of hot weather was narrowing the circle of his acquaintances. People were leaving town daily, for Europe, for the seashore, for the mountains.

He began to receive invitations for week-ends and longer visits out of town. A few of the former he accepted—always, however, returning to New York with a sense of necessity strong upon his spirit. Something held him there, some influence elusive of analysis. He was discontented, but felt that he could not find content elsewhere.

Gradually he began to know more hours of loneliness than suited his tastes. His rooms—the old rooms overlooking Bryant Park, regained and refurnished much as they had been six years before—knew his solitary presence through many a long evening. July came with blistering breath, and he took to the Adirondacks, meaning to be gone a month. Within ten days he was home again, drawn back irresistibly by that strange insatiable craving of unformulated desire. Town bored him, yet he could not seem to rest away from it.

He wandered in and out, up and down, an unquiet, irresolute soul, tremendously perplexed....

There came one dark and sultry night, heavy beneath skies overcast, in August. Whitaker left a roof-garden in the middle of a stupid performance, and walked the streets till long after midnight, courting the fatigue that alone could bestow untroubled sleep. On his return, a sleepy hall-boy with a wilted collar ran the elevator up to his tenth-floor landing and, leaving him fumbling at the lock of his door, dropped clankingly out of sight. Whitaker entered and shut himself in with the pitch-blackness of his private hall.

He groped along the wall for the electric switch, and found only the shank of it—the hard-rubber button having disappeared. And then, while still he was trying to think how this could have happened, he sustained a murderous assault.

A miscalculation on the part of the marauder alone saved him. The black-jack (or whatever the weapon was) missing his head by the narrowest shave, descended upon his left shoulder with numbing force. Notwithstanding his pain and surprise, Whitaker rallied and grappled, thus escaping a second and possibly more deadly blow.

But his shoulder was almost useless, and the pain of it began to sicken him, while the man in his grip fought like a devil unchained. He found himself wedged back into a corner, brutal fingers digging deep into the flesh round his windpipe. He fought desperately to escape strangulation. Eventually he struggled out of the corner and gave ground through the doorway into his sitting-room.

For some minutes the night in that quiet room, high above the city, was rendered wild and violent with the crashes of overthrown furniture and the thud and thump of struggling bodies. Then by some accident little short of miraculous, Whitaker broke free and plunged across the room in what he imagined to be the direction of a dresser in which he kept a revolver. His foot slipped on the hardwood floor, the ankle twisted, and he fell awkwardly, striking his head against a table-leg with such force that he lay half-stunned. An instant later his assailant emptied five chambers of a revolver into the darkness about him, and then, alarmed by a racket of pounding on the hall door, fled successfully by way of the fire-escape to adjoining roofs and neighbouring back-yards.

By the time Whitaker was able to pull himself together and hobble to the door, a brace of intelligent policemen who had been summoned by the hall-boy were threatening to break it down. Admitted, they took his safety into their care and, simultaneously, the revolver which he incautiously admitted possessing. Later they departed, obviously disgruntled by the unprofessional conduct of the "crook" who had left no "clues," with a warning to the house-holder that he might expect to be summoned to court, as soon as he was able to move, to answer for the crime of keeping a weapon of defence.

Whitaker took to his bed in company with a black temper and the aroma of arnica.

He entertained, the next day, several persons: reporters; a physician; a futile, superfluous, unornamental creature misleadingly designated a plain-clothes man;

finally his friend (by now their acquaintance had warmed to real friendship) Ember.

The retired investigator found Whitaker getting into his clothes: a ceremony distinguished by some profanity and numerous grunts.

"Afternoon," he said, taking a chair and surveying the sufferer with slightly masked amusement. "Having a good time?"

"You go to thunder!" said Whitaker in disgust.

"Glad to see you're not hurt much," pursued the other, unabashed.

Whitaker withered him with a glare. "I suppose it's nothing to have a shoulder and arm black-and-blue to the elbow! a bump on the side of my head as big as a hard-boiled egg! a bruised throat and an ankle next door to sprained! Oh, no—I'm not much hurt!"

"You're lucky to be alive," observed Ember, exasperatingly philosophic.

"A lot you know about it!"

"I'm a canny little guesser," Ember admitted modestly.

"Where'd you get your information, then?"

Ember waved a non-committal hand. "I hear things...."

"Oh, yes—you know a lot. I suppose you could lay this thug by the heels in a brace of shakes?"

"Just about," Ember admitted placidly. "I wouldn't mind trying."

"Then why don't you?" Whitaker demanded heatedly.

"I had a notion you wouldn't want me to."

Whitaker stared aggressively. "You mean ... Drummond?"

The answer was a nod.

"I don't believe it."

"You'll at all events do me the credit to recall that I warned you two months ago."

"All the same, I don't believe it was Drummond."

"You haven't missed any property, I believe?"

"No."

"So presumably the fellow had some motive other than a desire to thieve. Besides, if he'd been on the loot he might much more easily have tried one of the lower floors—and more sensibly."

"It would seem so," Whitaker admitted sulkily.

"And that missing switch-button—"

"What do *you* know about that?"

"My sources of information.... It strikes me that a man who took that much trouble to prevent your turning on the light must have been rather anxious to avoid recognition. I shed the inference for its intrinsic worth, merely."

"Well...." Whitaker temporized.

"And I'd like to know what you mean to do."

"About what?"

"With the understanding that you're content to leave the case of burglary and assault to the mercies of the police: what do you mean to do with yourself?"

"I don't know—hadn't thought."

"Unless you're hell-bent on sticking around here to get your head bashed in—I venture respectfully to suggest that you consign yourself to my competent care."

"Meaning—?"

"I've got a bungalow down on Long Island—a one-horse sort of a bachelor affair—and I'm going to run down there this evening and stay awhile. There's quiet, no society and good swimming. Will you come along and be my guest until you grow tired of it?"

Whitaker looked his prospective host over with a calculating, suspicious eye.

"I ought to be able to take care of myself," he grumbled childishly.

"Granted."

"But I've a great mind to take you up."

"Sensibly spoken. Can you be ready by three? I'll call with the car then, if you can."

"Done with you!" declared Whitaker with a strong sense of relief.

As a matter of fact, he was far less incredulous of Ember's theory than he chose to admit.



X

THE WINDOW

Though they left New York not long after three in the afternoon, twilight was fast ebbing into night when the motor-car—the owner driving, Whitaker, invalided to the lonely grandeur of the tonneau—swept up from a long waste of semi-wooded countryside, sparsely populated, bumped over railroad tracks, purred softly at sedate pace through the single street of a drowsy village, and then struck away from the main country road.

Once clear of the village bounds, as if assured of an unobstructed way, Ember gave the motor its head; with a long, keen whine of delight it took the bit between its teeth and flung away like a thoroughbred romping down the home-stretch. Its headlights clove a path through darkness, like a splendid sword; a pale shining ribbon of road seemed to run to the wheels as if eager to be devoured; on either hand woodlands and desolate clearings blurred into dark and rushing walls; the wind buffeted the faces of the travellers like a soft and tender hand, seeking vainly if with all its strength to withstand their impetus: only the wonderful wilderness of stars remained imperturbable.

Whitaker, braced against the jolting, snatched begrudged mouthfuls of air strong of the sea. From time to time he caught fugitive glimpses of what seemed to be water, far in the distances to the right. He had no very definite idea of their whereabouts, having neglected through sheer indifference to question Ember, but he knew that they were drawing minute by minute closer to the Atlantic. And the knowledge was soothing to the unquiet of his soul, who loved the sea. He dreamed vaguely, with yearning, of wave-swept shores and their sonorous silences.

After some time the car slowed to a palpitant pause at a spot where the road was bordered on one hand by a woods, on the other by meadow-lands running down to an arm of a bay, on whose gently undulant surface the flame-tipped finger of a distant lighthouse drew an undulant path of radiance.

Ember jumped out to open a barred gate, then returning swung the car into a clear but narrow woodland road. "Mine own domain," he informed Whitaker

with a laugh, as he stopped a second time to go back and close the gate. "Now we're shut of the world, entirely."

The car crawled cautiously on, following a path that, in the searching glare of headlights, showed as two parallel tracks of white set apart by a strip of livid green and walled in by a dense tangle of scrub-oak and pine and second growth. Underbrush rasped and rattled against the guards. Outside the lighted way arose strange sounds audible above even the purring of the motor—vast mysterious whisperings and rustlings: stealthy and murmurous protests against this startling trespass.

Whitaker bent forward, inquiring: "Where are we?"

"Almost there. Patience."

Whitaker sat back again, content to await enlightenment at the pleasure of his host. Really, he didn't much care where they were: the sense of isolation, strong upon his spirit, numbed all his curiosity.

He reckoned idly that they must have threaded a good two miles of woodland, when at length the car emerged upon a clearing and immediately turned aside to the open doorway of a miniature garage.

For the first time in five hours he was aware of the hush of Nature; the motor's song was ended for the night.

The clearing seemed no more than a fair two acres in extent; the forest hemmed it in on three sides; on the fourth lay water. Nor was it an unqualified clearing; a hundred yards distant the lighted windows of a one-story structure shone pleasantly through a scattering plantation of pine.

Linking arms the better to guide his guest, Ember drew him toward the lights.

"Bungalow," he explained, sententious, flourishing his free hand: "hermitage—retreat."

"Paradise," Whitaker summed up, in the same humour.

"Still-water swimming at the front door; surf bathing on the beach across the bay; sailing, if you care for it; fishing, if you don't care what you say; all sorts of civilized loafing and no society except our own."

"No women?"

"Not a petticoat."

"No neighbours?"

"Oh"—Ember motioned to his left as they faced the water—"there's a married establishment over there somewhere, but we don't bother one another. Fellow by the name of Fiske. I understand the place is shut up—Fiske not coming down this year."

"So much the better. I've been wanting just this all summer, without realizing it."

"Welcome, then, to Half-a-loaf Lodge!"

Skirting the edges of the plantation, they had come round to the front of the house. An open door, warm with light, welcomed them. They entered a long and deep living-room with walls of peeled logs and, at one end, a stone fireplace wherein a wood fire blazed heartily. Two score candles in sconces furnished an illumination mellow and benign. At a comfortable distance from the hearth stood a table bright with linen, silver and crystal—covers for two. The rear wall was broken by three doors, in one of which a rotund Chinaman beamed oleagiously. Ember hailed him by the title of Sum Fat, explaining that it wasn't his name, but claiming for it the virtue of exquisite felicity.

"My servant in town, here man-of-all-work; I've had him for years; faithful and indispensable...."

Toward the end of an excellent dinner, Whitaker caught himself nodding and blinking with drowsiness. The fatigue of their long ride, added to the nervous strain and excitement of the previous night, was proving more than he had strength to struggle against. Ember took laughing compassion upon him and led him forthwith to a bedroom furnished with the rigid simplicity of a summer camp. Once abed he lay awake only long enough to recognize, in the pulsating quiet, the restless thunder of surf on the beach across the bay. Then he slept round the clock.

He recovered consciousness to lie luxuriating in the sensation of delicious and complete repose, and to listen lazily to the drum of raindrops on the low roof—too lazy, indeed, to turn his head and consult his watch. Yet he knew it must be late in the morning, for the light was broad, if gray.

The shrill, imperative rattle of a telephone bell roused him more thoroughly. Lifting on his elbow, he eyed his watch, then hastily swung his legs out of bed;

for it was nearly ten o'clock.

As he dressed he could hear the voice of Ember in the living-room talking over the telephone. Presently there came a tap at his door, and his host entered.

"Up, eh?" he said cheerfully. "I was afraid I'd have to wake you. You're surely a sincere young sleeper.... I say!" His smile vanished beneath the clouds of an impatient frown. "This is the devil of a note: I've got to leave you."

"What's the trouble?"

"That's what I'm called upon to find out. A friend of mine's in a tight place, and I've got to go and help pull him through. He just called me up—and I can't refuse. D'you mind being left alone for a day or so?"

"Certainly not—only I'm sorry."

"No more than I. But I'll try to get back to-morrow. If I don't, the next day—or as soon as I possibly can. Meanwhile, please consider yourself lord and master here. Sum Fat will take good care of you. Anything you want, just ask him. Now I've got to get into waterproofs: it's raining like all get-out, but I can't wait for a let-up."

By the time Whitaker was ready for breakfast, his host had splashed off to his motor car.

Later, while Sum Fat crooned to himself over the dish-pan in the kitchen, Whitaker explored his quarters; to begin with, not in the least disconsolate to be left alone. The place had for his imagination the zest of novelty and isolation. He rather enjoyed the sensation of complete dissociation from the rest of the world, of freedom to humour his idlest whim without reference to the prejudices of any neighbour.

Within-doors there was every comfort conceivably to be desired by any other than a sybarite; without—viewed from the shelter of a wide veranda—a vague world of sweeping mist and driving rain; pine trees Japanesque against the mist, as if etched in bronze-green on frosted silver; a breadth of rough, hummocky ground sloping down to the water's edge, with a private landing-stage and, farther out, a courtesying cat-boat barely discernible.

The wind, freshening and driving very respectable if miniature rollers against the beach, came in heavy gusts, alternating with periods of steady, strong blowing.

At times the shining lances of the rain seemed to drive almost horizontally. Whitaker shivered a little, not unpleasantly, and went indoors.

He poked his head into the kitchen. In that immaculate place, from which every hint of breakfast had disappeared as if by magic, Sum Fat was religiously cleaning his teeth—for the third time that morning, to Whitaker's certain knowledge.

When he had finished, Whitaker put a question:

"Sum Fat, which way does the wind blow—do you know?"

Sum Fat flashed him a dazzling smile.

"East'ly," he said in a cheerful, clucking voice. "I think very fine damn three-day blow."

"At least," said Whitaker, "you're a high-spirited prophet of evil. I thank you."

He selected a book from several shelves stocked with a discriminating taste, and settled himself before the fire.

The day wore out before his patience did, and with every indication of fulfilling the prognosis of Sum Fat; by nightfall the wind had developed into an enthusiastic gale, driving before it sheeted rain and great ragged wastes of mist. Whitaker absolutely enjoyed the sensation of renewed intimacy with the weather, from which his life in New York had of late divorced him so completely. He read, dozed, did full justice to the admirable cuisine of Sum Fat, and between whiles considered the state of his soul, the cycle of the suns, his personal marital entanglement, and the further preservation, intact, of his bruised mortal body.

The ceaseless pattering on the shingled roof reminded him very strongly of that dark hour, long gone, when he had made up his mind to wed a strange woman. He marvelled at that madness with an inexhaustible wonder and with an equally vast, desolate, poignant regret.

He considered faithfully what he had gained by reasserting his identity, and found it an empty thing. He had been happier when a Wilful Missing, unmissed, unmourned. It seemed as if it might be best to go away again, to eliminate Hugh Whitaker from the coil his reappearance had created. Then his wife could gain her freedom—and incidentally free him—and marry as she willed. And

Drummond would be free to come to life—with hands unstained, his honour besmirched only in the knowledge of a few who would not tell.

Did he remain, Drummond, he feared, would prove a troublesome problem. Whitaker was, in the light of sober after-thought, more than half convinced that Ember had guessed cunningly at the identity of his assailant. The thing was conceivable, at least, of Drummond: the hedonist and egoist seeking to regain his forfeited world in one murderous cast. And it was hardly conceivable that he would hesitate to make a second attempt whenever opportunity offered. New York, Whitaker saw clearly, was far too small to contain them both while Drummond remained at liberty. By attempting to stay there he would simply invite a second attempt upon his life, merely strengthen Drummond's temptation.

He thought it very curious that he had heard nothing more of the proposed action for divorce. It might be well to communicate again with his wife's attorneys.

He went to bed with a mind unsettled, still curious, speculative, unable to fix upon any definite course of conduct.

And the second day was like unto the first: a day of rain and wind and fog periodically punctuated by black squalls that tore shrieking across the bay with the blind fury of spirits of destruction gone stark, raving mad.

The third day broke full of the spirit of the second; but toward noon the rain ceased, and by mid-afternoon the violence of the wind had moderated perceptibly to a stiffish but failing breeze beneath a breaking cloud-rack. With the disappearance of fog, for the first time since Whitaker's arrival the neighbourhood discovered perspectives. By evening, when the wind went down with the sun, leaving absolute calm, the barrier beach far across the quiet waters of the shallow, landlocked bay shone like a bar of ruddy gold against a horizon of melting mauve.

In the evening, too, a telegram from Ember was transmitted by telephone to the bungalow, advising Whitaker of his host's intention to return by the following night at the latest.

This communication worked with the turn of the weather to effect a change in the temper of Whitaker, who by this time had managed to fret himself to the verge of incontinent departure for Australia *via* New York. He decided, however, to wait and thank Ember for his hospitality, and thought seriously of consulting him as to the wisest and fairest course to pursue.

None the less, the restlessness and impatience bred of nearly three days of enforced inaction possessed him like a devil. After another of Sum Fat's admirable dinners, his craving for open air and exercise drove him out, despite the failing light, to explore the clearing rather thoroughly, and to some extent the surrounding woodlands. At one time, indeed, he caught sight, through thinning trees, of a summer home somewhat more pretentious than Half-a-loaf Lodge—evidently the property termed by Ember "the Fiske place." But it was then so nearly dark that he didn't pause to investigate an impression that the place was tenanted, contradictory to his host's casual statement; and he was back on the bungalow porch in time to see the moon lift up like a great shield of brass through the haze beyond the barrier beach.

Sounds of splashings and of song drew him down to the water's edge, to find that Sum Fat had rowed out to the anchored cat-boat and, almost as naked as industrious, was bailing it clear of the three days' accumulation of rain-water. He came in, presently, and having performed what was probably at least the eighth cleaning of his teeth since morning, went to bed.

Wearying at length of the lunar spectacle, and quite as weary of the sedulous attentions of a cloud of famished mosquitoes, Whitaker lounged disconsolately indoors to a pipe and a book by candle-light. But the one needed cleaning, and the other was out of tune with his temper, and the flame of the candle excited the amorous interest of a great fluttering fool of a moth until Whitaker blew it out and sat on in darkness, not tired enough to go to bed, too tired to bestir himself and seek distraction from a tormenting train of thought.

A pool of limpid moonlight lay like milk upon the floor beneath a window and held his dreaming gaze while memory marshalled for his delectation a pageant of wasted years, infinitely desolate and dreary in his vision. A life without profit, as he saw it: an existence rendered meaningless by a nameless want—a lack he had not wit to name.... The romance of his life enchanted him, its futility furnished him a vast and profound perplexity. To what end?—this was the haunting burden of his complaint....

How long he sat unstirring, preoccupied with fruitless inquiry, he did not guess. But later he reckoned it could not have been long after ten o'clock when he was disturbed. The sound of a footfall, hushed and stealthy on the veranda, roused him with a start, and almost at the same instant he became aware of a shadow that troubled the pool of moonlight, the foreshortened shadow of a man's head and shoulders. He sat up, tense, rigid with surprise and wonder, and stared at the

silhouetted body at pause just outside the window. The fellow was stooping to peer in. Whether he could distinguish Whitaker in the shadows was debatable, but he remained motionless through a long minute, as if fascinated by the undeviating regard returned by Whitaker. Then the latter broke the spell with a hasty movement. Through the feeling of surprised resentment there had filtered a gnawing suspicion that he was acquainted with the pose of that head and the set of those shoulders. Had Drummond hunted him down to this isolate hiding-place? On the thought he leaped up, in two strides slammed out through the door.

"I say!" he cried loudly. But he cried, apparently, to empty air. The man was gone—vanished as strangely and as quietly as he had appeared.

Whitaker shut teeth on an oath and, jumping down from the veranda, cast wildly about the bungalow without uncovering a single sign of the trespasser. In transit from his chair to the door, he had lost sight of the fellow for no more, certainly, than half a second; and yet, in that absurdly scanty space of time, the trespasser had managed to effect an absolute disappearance. No conjuring trick was ever turned more neatly. There one instant, gone the next!—the mystery of it irritated and perplexed more than did the question of identity. It was all very plausible to suspect Drummond—but whither could Drummond have juggled himself in the twinkling of an eyelash? That it was no trick of an idle imagination, Whitaker was prepared to swear: he was positive he had seen what he had seen. And yet.... It was, on the other hand, impossible to say where in the plantation of pines the man might not then be skulking. Whitaker instituted a narrow search, but fruitless.

Eventually pausing and glaring round the clearing in complete bewilderment, he detected or else fancied a slight movement in the shadows on the edge of the encompassing woodland. Instantly, heedless of the risk he ran if the man were indeed Drummond and if Drummond were indeed guilty of the assault now four nights old, Whitaker broke for the spot. It proved to be the entrance to one of the woodland paths, and naturally—whether or no his imagination were in fault—there was nobody waiting there to be caught.

But if any one had been there, he had unquestionably fled along the trail. Whitaker in a rage set himself to follow, sticking to the path partly through instinct, mainly thanks to a spectral twilight manufactured in the forest by moonbeams filtered thin through innumerable leaves and branches. Once or twice he paused to listen, then again plunged on: misled perhaps by the mysterious but inevitable noises of the nocturnal woodland. Before he realized he could have

covered half the distance, he emerged abruptly into the clearing of the Fiske place.

Here he pulled up, for the first time alive to the intrinsic idiocy of his conduct, and diverted besides by the discovery that his impression of the early evening, that the cottage was tenanted, had been well founded.

The ground floor windows shone with a dim but warm illumination. There was one quite near him, a long window opening upon the railed veranda, through which he could see distinctly part of a living-room rather charmingly furnished in a summery way. At its farther end a dark-haired woman in a plain black dress with a short apron and lace cap sat reading by lamplight: evidently a maid. Her mistress—judged by appearances—was outside on the lawn below the veranda, strolling to and fro in company with a somewhat short and heavy man who wore an automobile duster and visored cap. By contrast, her white-clad figure, invested with the illusion of moonlight, seemed unusually tall. Her hair was fair, shining like a head-dress of palest gold as she bent her head, attentive to her companion. And Whitaker thought to discern an unusual quality in her movements, a quality of charm and a graciousness of mien rarely to be noticed even in the most beautiful of the women he had known.

Of a sudden the man paused, produced a watch from beneath his duster, consulted it briefly and shut the case with a snap. He said something in a brusque tone, and was answered by what sounded like a pleasant negative. Promptly, as if annoyed, he turned and strode hastily away, disappearing round the house.

Alone, the woman watched him as long as he was in sight, her head to one side with an effect of critical amusement. Then with a low laugh she crossed the veranda and entered the lighted room. At the same time, Whitaker, lingering and watching without in the least understanding or even questioning why he was doing this thing so contrary to his instincts, heard the heavy rumble of a motor-car on the far side of the house and saw the machine swing off across the clearing and into the woods.

In the living-room the woman was saying: "You may go now, Elise. I'll be ready for bed before long."

"Yes, madam." The maid rose and moved briskly out of sight.

Her mistress, casting aside a scarf of embroidered Chinese brocade, moved about the room with an air at once languid and distrait. Pausing beside a table,

she took up a book, opened it, shut it smartly, discarding it as if hopeless of finding therein any sort of diversion. She stood for a moment in deep thought, her head bowed, the knuckle of a slender forefinger tapping her chin—charmingly posed. Whitaker abruptly understood why it was he loitered, peeping: she was absolutely beautiful, a creature both exquisite and superb, a matchless portrait for the galleries of his memory.

With a sigh and a quick movement of impatience, seating herself at a cottage piano she ran her fingers over the keys. Whitaker recognized the opening bars of something or other of Beethoven's—he couldn't say precisely what, at the instant; and even as he tried a thing happened which drove the music altogether from his mind: in short, he discovered that he was not the only watcher below the window.

Something—a movement or perhaps a slight sound—had drawn his attention from the woman. He saw the other man standing boldly in full moonlight, all his attention concentrated on the brilliant picture framed by the window. He was unquestionably without knowledge of the nearness of the other—of Whitaker in the shadows. And though his back was to the moon and his face further shadowed by a peaked cap, Whitaker was absolutely sure of the man: he was certainly Drummond.

Without pause for thought he sprang toward him, in a guarded voice uttering his name—"Drummond!" But the fellow proved too alert and quick for him. Whitaker's hands closed on nothing more substantial than thin air; at the same time he received a blow upon his bruised shoulder smart and forcible enough to stagger him and evoke an involuntary grunt of pain. And before he could regain his balance the fellow was thrashing noisily away through the woodland underbrush.

Involuntarily Whitaker glanced through the window to see if the woman had been alarmed. But apparently a succession of sonorous chords from the piano had deafened her to all other sounds. She played on with every sign of total unconsciousness.

Forthwith he struck off and blundered senselessly through the forest, misled by its elusive phantasmagoria, until, realizing at length he did but duplicate an earlier folly, he gave up the chase in disgust and slowly made his way back to the bungalow.

And yet (for all the mystery and the wonder of his experience) it was with a

somewhat sheepish feeling that he took the precaution of locking the doors and windows before turning in. After all, what grounds had he for his suspicions? Merely a hasty guess at the identity of one who might turn out to be nothing more than a hapchance tramp—a skulking vagabond on the watch for a chance to pilfer and fly.

If he were Drummond and as murderous-minded as Ember claimed, why had he neglected his dozen opportunities to ambush his prey in the woods?

A shade of incredulity insensibly began to color Whitaker's apprehensions. In time, with impatience, he dismissed them altogether from his mind.

He dozed off while dwelling upon the vision of a fair-haired woman idling over a piano, swaying slightly as she played.



XI

THE SPY

Whitaker slept soundly but lightly: the adventures of the evening had not been so fatiguing as to render his slumbers profound, after three days of sheer loafing. And he awoke early, roused by a level beam of blood-red light thrown full upon his face by the rising sun.

He lay for a time languid, watching the incarnadined walls and lazily examining the curious thrill of interest with which he found himself anticipating the day to come. It seemed a long time since he had looked forward to the mere routine of existence with so strong an assurance of emotional diversion. He idled in whimsical humour with an odd conceit to the effect that the roots of his soul had somehow been mysteriously watered, so that it was about to burgeon like a green bay tree—whatever that might mean. And with this he experienced an exhilarating glow of well-being that had of late been more a stranger to his body than he liked to admit.

He wondered why. Was the change in the weather responsible? Or had the mere act of withdrawing from the world for a little time wrought some esoteric change in the inscrutable chemistry of his sentiments? Had the recent innocuous waste of time somehow awakened him to the value of the mere act of living? Or, again—absurd surmise!—was all this due simply to the instinct of sex: was it merely the man in him quickening to the knowledge that a pretty woman existed in his neighbourhood?

At this last he laughed openly, and jumped out of bed. At all events, no healthy man had any business dawdling away a single minute of so rare a morning.

Already the sun was warm, the faint breeze bland. Standing at the window and shading his eyes against the glare, he surveyed a world new-washed and radiant: the sun majestically climbing up and away from the purple lattice-work of cloud that barred the nitid mauve horizon; the distant beach, a violet-tinted barrier between the firmament and sea; the landlocked bay dimpled with vagrant catspaws and smitten with sunlight as with a scimitar of fire; the earth fresh and fragrant, steaming faintly in the ardent glow of dawn.

In another moment he was at the kitchen door, interrupting Sum Fat's first matutinal attentions to his teeth with a demand for a bathing-suit. One of Ember's was promptly forthcoming, and by happy accident fitted him indifferently well; so that three minutes later found him poised on the end of the small dock, above fifteen feet of water so limpid bright that he could easily discern the shapes of pebbles on the bottom.

He dived neatly, coming to the surface with his flesh tingling with delight of the cool water; then with the deliberate and powerful movements of an experienced swimmer, struck away from the land.

Two hundred yards out he paused, rolled over on his back and, hands clasped beneath his head, floated serenely, sunlight warming his upturned face, his body rejoicing in the suave, clean, fluid embrace, an almost overpowering sense of physical sanity and boundless strength rioting through him. Quietly, intimately, he smiled at the sound, good old world, athrill with the wonder and beauty of life.

Then something disturbed him: a dull fluttering, vibrant upon his submerged eardrums. Extending his arms and moving his hands gently to preserve his poise, he lifted his head from the water. The neighbouring shore-line leaped flashing to his vision like an exquisite disclosure of jewelled marquetry. His vision ranged quickly from Ember's landing-stage to that on the water-front of the Fiske place, and verified a surmise with the discovery of a motor-boat standing out from the latter. The churning of its propeller had roused him.

Holding its present course, the boat would clear him by several hundred yards. He lay quiet, watching. Despite its generous proportions—it was a fair-sized cabin cruiser, deep-seaworthy in any ordinary weather—he could see but a single person for all its crew. Seated astern, dividing her attention between the side steering-wheel and the engine, she was altogether ignorant of the onlooker. Only her head and shoulders showed above the coaming: her head with its shining golden crown, her shoulders cloaked with a light wrap gathered at the throat.

Whitaker, admiring, wondered....

Sweeping in a wide arc as it gathered speed, the boat presently shot out smartly on a straight course for the barrier beach.

Why? What business had she there? And at an hour so early?

No affair of his: Whitaker admitted as much, freely. And yet, no reason existed why he should not likewise take an impersonal interest in the distant ocean beach. As a matter of fact (he discovered upon examination) he was vastly concerned in that quarter. Already he was beginning his fourth day on the Great West Bay without having set foot upon its Great South Beach! Ridiculous oversight! And one to be remedied without another hour's delay.

Grinning with amused toleration of his own perverse sophistry, he turned over on his side and struck out in the wake of the motor-boat. He had over a mile to go; but such a distance was nothing dismaying to a swimmer of Whitaker's quality, who had all his life been on very friendly terms with the sea.

No one held a watch on him; but when at length he waded ashore he was complacent in the knowledge that he had made very good time.

He found the motor-boat moored in shallow water at the end of a long and substantial dock. The name displayed in letters of brass on its stern was, frankly, *Trouble*. He paused waist-deep to lean over the side and inspect the cockpit; the survey drew from him an expression of approval. The boat seemed to be handsomely appointed, and the motor exposed by the open hatch of the engine pit was of a make synonymous with speed and reliability. He patted the flanks of the vessel as he waded on.

"Good little boat!" said he.

A weather-beaten sign-board on the dock advertised a surf-bathing station. Ashore a plank walk crossed first a breadth of sedge marsh and then penetrated a tumbled waste of dunes. Where the summits of the latter met the sky, there were visible a series of angular and unlovely wooden edifices.

Whitaker climbed up on the walk and made seawards. He saw nothing of the lady of the motor-boat.

In fact, for some time he saw nothing in human guise; from other indications he was inclined to conclude that the bathing station was either closed for the season or else had been permanently abandoned within a year or so. There was a notable absence of rowboats and sailing craft about the dock, with, as he drew nearer to the shuttered and desolate cluster of bath-houses, an equally remarkable lack of garments and towels hanging out to dry.

Walking rapidly, he wasn't long in covering the distance from shore to shore.

Very soon he stood at the head of a rude flight of wooden steps which ran down from the top of a wave-eaten sand bluff, some ten or twelve feet in height, to the broad and gently shelving ocean beach. Whipping in from the sea, a brisk breeze, from which the dunes had heretofore sheltered him, now cooled his dripping bathing-suit not altogether pleasantly. But he didn't mind. The sight of the surf compensated.

He had long since been aware of its resonant diapason, betokening a heavy sea; but the spectacle of it was one ever beautiful in his sight. Whitecaps broke the lustrous blue, clear to its serrated horizon. Inshore the tide was low; the broad and glistening expanse of naked wet sand mirrored the tender blueness of the skies far out to where the breakers weltered in confusion of sapphire, emerald and snow. A mile offshore a fishing smack with a close-reefed, purple patch of sail was making heavy weather of it; miles beyond it, again, an inward-bound ocean steamship shouldered along contemptuously; and a little way eastwards a multitude of gulls with flashing pinions were wheeling and darting and screaming above something in the sea—presumably a school of fish.

Midway between the sand bluff and the breaking waters stood the woman Whitaker had followed. (There wasn't any use mincing terms: he *had* followed her in his confounded, fatuous curiosity!) Her face was to the sea, her hands clasped behind her. Now the wind modelled her cloak sweetly to her body, now whipped its skirts away, disclosing legs straight and slender and graciously modelled. She was dressed, it seemed, for bathing; she had crossed the bay for a lonely bout with the surf, and having found it dangerously heavy, now lingered, disappointed but fascinated by the majestic beauty of its fury.

Whitaker turned to go, his inquisitiveness appeased; but he was aware of an annoying sense of shame, which he considered rather low on the part of his conscience. True, he had followed her; true, he had watched her at a moment when she had every reason to believe herself alone with the sky, the sand, the sea and the squabbling gulls. But—the beach was free to all; there was no harm done; he hadn't really meant to spy upon her, and he had not the slightest intention of forcing himself upon her consciousness.

Intentions, however, are one thing; accidents, another entirely. History is mainly fashioned of intentions that have met with accidents.

Whitaker turned to go, and turning let his gaze sweep up from the beach and along the brow of the bluff. He paused, frowning. Some twenty feet or so distant

the legs of a man, trousered and booted, protruded from a hollow between two hummocks of sand. And the toes of the boots were digging into the sand, indicating that the man was lying prone; and that meant (if he were neither dead nor sleeping) that he was watching the woman on the beach.

Indignation, righteous indignation, warmed Whitaker's bosom. It was all very well for him to catch sight of the woman through her cottage window, by night, and to swim over to the beach in her wake the next morning, but what right had anybody else to constitute himself her shadow?... All this on the mute evidence of the boots and trousers: Whitaker to his knowledge had never seen them before, but he had so little doubt they belonged to the other watcher by the window last night that he readily persuaded himself that this must be so.

Besides, it was possible that the man was Drummond.

Anyway, nobody was licensed to skulk among sand-dunes and spy upon unescorted females!

Instantly Whitaker resolved himself into a select joint committee for the Promulgation of the Principles of Modern Chivalry and the Elucidation of the Truth.

He strode forward and stood over the man, looking down at his back. It was true, as he had assumed: the fellow was watching the woman. Chin in hands, elbows half-buried in sand, he seemed to be following her with an undeviating regard. And his back was very like Drummond's; at least, in height and general proportion his figure resembled Drummond's closely enough to leave Whitaker without any deterring doubt.

A little quiver of excitement mingled with anticipative satisfaction ran through him. Now, at last, the mystery was to be cleared up, his future relations with the pseudo suicide defined and established.

Deliberately he extended his bare foot and nudged the man's ribs.

"Drummond...." he said in a clear voice, decided but unaggressive.

With an oath and what seemed a single, quick motion, the man jumped to his feet and turned to Whitaker a startled and inflamed countenance.

"What the devil!" he cried angrily. "Who are you? What do you want? What d'you mean by coming round here and calling me Drummond?"

He was no more Drummond than he was Whitaker himself.

Whitaker retreated a step, nonplussed. "I beg pardon," he stammered civilly, in his confusion; "I took you for a fr—a man I know."

"Well, I ain't, see!" For a moment the man glowered at Whitaker, his features twitching. Apparently the shock of surprise had temporarily dislocated his sense of proportion. Rage blazed from his bloodshot, sunken eyes, and rage was eloquent in the set of his rusty, square-hewn chin and the working of his heavy and begrimed hands.

"Damn you!" he exploded suddenly. "What d'you mean by butting in—"

"For that matter"—something clicked in Whitaker's brain and subconsciously he knew that his temper was about to take the bridge—"what the devil do *you* mean by spying on that lady yonder?"

It being indisputably none of his concern, the unfairness of the question only lent it offensive force. It was quite evidently more than the man could or would bear from any officious stranger. He made this painfully clear through the medium of an intolerable epithet and an attempt to land his right fist on Whitaker's face.

The face, however, was elsewhere when the fist reached the point for which it had been aimed; and Whitaker closed in promptly as the fellow's body followed his arm, thrown off balance by the momentum of the unobstructed blow. Thoroughly angered, he had now every intention of administering a sound and salutary lesson.

In pursuance with this design, he grappled and put forth his strength to throw the man.

What followed had entered into the calculations of neither. Whitaker felt himself suddenly falling through air thick with a blinding, choking cloud of dust and sand. The body of the other was simultaneously wrenched violently from his grasp. Then he brought up against solidity with a bump that seemed to expel every cubic inch of air from his lungs. And he heard himself cry out sharply with the pain of his weak ankle newly twisted....

He sat up, gasping for breath, brushed the sand from his face and eyes, and as soon as his whirling wits settled a little, comprehended what had happened.

Half buried in the débris of a miniature landslide, he sat at the foot of the bluff,

which reared its convex face behind and over him. Immediately above his head a ragged break in its profile showed where the sand, held together solely by beach grass, had given way beneath the weight of the antagonists.

A little distance from him the other man was picking himself up, apparently unhurt but completely surfeited. Without delay, with not even so much as a glance at Whitaker, he staggered off for a few paces, then settled into a heavy, lumbering trot westward along the beach.

This conduct was so inconsistent with his late belligerent humour that Whitaker felt inclined to rub his eyes a second time. He had anticipated—as soon as in condition to reason at all—nothing less than an immediate resumption of hostilities. Yet here was the fellow running away. Incomprehensible!

And yet, save at the first blush, not so incomprehensible: the chief of the man's desire had been unquestionably to see without being seen; his rage at being detected had led him to a misstep; now he was reverting to his original plan with all possible expedition. He did not wish the woman to recognize him; therefore he was putting himself out of her way. For she was approaching.

When Whitaker caught sight of her, she was already close at hand. She had been running. Now as their glances met, hers keenly inquiring of Whitaker's still bewildered eyes, she pulled up abruptly and stood astare. He saw, or fancied, something closely akin to fright and consternation in her look. The flush in her cheeks gave way to a swift pallor. The hands trembled that drew her beach-cloak close about her. She seemed to make an ineffectual effort to speak.

On his part, Whitaker tried to get up. A keen twinge in his ankle, however, wrung an involuntary grunt from him, and with a wry grimace he sank back.

"Oh!" cried the woman, impulsively. "You're hurt!" She advanced a pace, solicitous and sympathetic.

"Oh, not much," Whitaker replied in a tone more of hope than of assurance. He felt tenderly of the injured member. "Only my ankle—twisted it a few days ago, and now again. It'll be all right in a moment or two."

Her gaze travelled from him to the edge of the bluff.

"I didn't see—I mean, I heard something, and turned, and saw you trying to sit up and the other man rising."

"Sorry we startled you," Whitaker mumbled, wondering how the deuce he was going to get home. His examination of the ankle hadn't proved greatly encouraging.

"But I—ah—how did it happen?"

"A mere misunderstanding," he said lightly. "I mistook the gentleman for some one I knew. He resented it, so we started to scrap like a couple of schoolboys. Then ... I wish to Heaven it had been his leg instead of mine!"

"But still I hardly understand...."

She was now more composed. The colour had returned to her face. She stood with head inclined a trifle forward, gaze intent beneath delicate brows; most distractingly pretty, he thought, in spite of the ankle—which really didn't hurt much unless moved.

"Well, you see, I—ah—I'm visiting Ember—the cottage next to yours, I believe. That is, if I'm not mistaken, you have the Fiske place?"

She nodded.

"And so, this morning, it struck me as a fine young idea to swim over here and have a look at the beach. I—ah—you rather showed me the way, with your motor-boat. I mean I saw you start out."

He felt better after that: open confession is a great help when one feels senselessly guilty. He ventured an engaging smile and noted with relief that it failed either to terrify or to enrage the young woman.

On the other hand, she said encouragingly: "I see."

"And then I found that chap watching you—"

That startled her. "How do you mean—watching me?"

"Why—ah—that's what he seemed to be doing. He was lying at full length up there, half hidden—to all appearances watching you from behind a screen of beach grass."

"But—I don't understand—why should he have been watching me?"

"I'm sure I don't know, if you don't."

She shook her head: "You must be mistaken."

"Daresay. I generally am when I jump at conclusions. Anyway, he didn't like it much when I called him out of his name. I gathered, in fact, that he was considerably put out. Silly, wasn't it?"

"Rather!" she agreed gravely.

For a moment or two they eyed one another in silence, Whitaker wondering just how much of a fool she was thinking him and dubiously considering various expedients to ingratiate himself. She was really quite too charming to be neglected, after so auspicious an inauguration of their acquaintance. Momentarily he was becoming more convinced that she was exceptional. Certain he was he had never met any woman quite like her—not even the fair but false Miss Carstairs of whom he had once fancied himself so hopelessly enamoured. Here he divined an uncommon intelligence conjoined with matchless loveliness. Testimony to the former quality he acquired from eyes serenely violet and thoughtful. As for the latter, he reflected that few professional beauties could have stood, as this woman did, the acid test of that mercilessly brilliant morning.

"I don't seem to think of anything useful to say," he ventured. "Can you help me out? Unless you'd be interested to know that my name's Whitaker—Hugh Whitaker—?"

She acknowledged the information merely by a brief nod. "It seems to me," she said seriously, "that the pressing question is, what are you going to do about that ankle? Shall you be able to walk?"

"Hard to say," he grumbled, a trifle dashed. He experimented gingerly, moving his foot this way and that and shutting his teeth on groans that the test would surely have evoked had he been alone. "'Fraid not. Still, one can try."

"It isn't sprained?"

"Oh, no—just badly wrenched. And, as I said, this is the second time within a week."

With infinite pains and the aid of both hands and his sound foot, he lifted himself and contrived to stand erect for an instant, then bore a little weight on the hurt ankle—and blenched, paling visibly beneath his ineradicable tan.

"I don't suppose," he said with effort—"they grow—crutches—on this neck of land?"

And he was about to collapse again upon the sands when, without warning, he found the woman had moved to his side and caught his hand, almost brusquely passing his arm across her shoulders, so that she received no little of his weight.

"Oh, I say—!" he protested feebly.

"Don't say anything," she replied shortly. "I'm very strong—quite able to help you to the boat. Please don't consider me at all; just see if we can't manage this way."

"But I've no right to impose—"

"Don't be silly! Please do as I say. Won't you try to walk?"

He endeavoured to withdraw his arm, an effort rendered futile by her cool, firm grasp on his fingers.

"Please!" she said—not altogether patiently.

He eyed her askance. There was in this incredible situation a certain piquancy, definitely provocative, transcending the claims his injury made upon his interest. Last night for the first time he had seen this woman and from a distance had thought her desirable; now, within twelve hours, he found himself with an arm round her neck!

He thought it a tremendously interesting neck, slender, not thin, and straight and strong, a milk-white column from the frilled collar of her bathing-cloak to the shimmering tendrils that clustered behind her ears. Nor was the ear she presented to his inspection an everyday ear, lacking its individual allure. He considered that it owned its distinctive personality, not unworthy of any man's studious attention.

He saw her face, of course, en profile: her head bowed, downcast lashes long upon her cheeks, her mouth set in a mould of gravity, her brows seriously contracted—signifying preoccupation with the problem of the moment.

And then suddenly she turned her head and intercepted his whole-hearted stare. For a thought wonder glimmered in the violet eyes; then they flashed disconcertingly; finally they became utterly cold and disdainful.

"Well?" she demanded in a frigid voice.

He looked away in complete confusion, and felt his face burning to the temples.

"I beg your pardon," he mumbled unhappily.

He essayed to walk. Twenty feet and more of treacherous, dry, yielding sand separated them from the flight of steps that ascended the bluff. It proved no easy journey; and its difficulty was complicated by his determination to spare the woman as much as he could. Gritting his teeth, he grinned and bore without a murmur until, the first stage of the journey accomplished, he was able to grasp a handrail at the bottom of the stairs and breathe devout thanks through the medium of a gasp.

"Shall we rest a bit?" the woman asked, compassionate, ignoring now the impertinence she had chosen to resent a few moments ago.

"Think I can manage—thanks," he said, panting a little. "It'll be easier now—going up. I shan't need help."

He withdrew his arm, perhaps not without regret, but assuredly with a comforting sense of decent consideration for her, as well as with some slight and intrinsically masculine satisfaction in the knowledge that he was overcoming her will and her resistance.

"No—honestly!" he insisted. "These handrails make it easy."

"But please be sure," she begged. "Don't take any chances. *I don't mind....*"

"Let me demonstrate, then."

The stairway was comfortably narrow; he had only to grasp a rail with either hand, and half lift himself, half hop up step by step. In this manner he accomplished the ascent in excellent, if hopelessly ungraceful, style. At the top he limped to a wooden seat beside one of the bath-houses and sat down with so much grim decision in his manner that it was evident to the woman the moment she rejoined him. But he mustered a smile to meet her look of concern, and shook his head.

"Thus far and no farther."

"Oh, but you must not be stubborn!"

"I mean to be—horrid stubborn. In fact, I don't mind warning you that there's a famous strain of mule in the Whitaker make-up."

She was, however, not to be diverted; and her fugitive frown bespoke impatience, if he were any judge.

"But seriously, you must—"

"Believe me," he interrupted, "if I am to retain any vestige of self-respect, I must no longer make a crutch of you."

"But, really, I don't see why—!"

"Need I remind you I am a man?" he argued lightly. "Even as you are a very charming woman...."

The frown deepened while she conned this utterance over.

"How do you mean me to interpret that?" she demanded, straightforward.

"The intention was not uncomplimentary, perhaps," he said gravely; "though the clumsiness is incontestable. As for the rest of it—I'm not trying to flirt with you, if that's what *you* mean—yet. What I wished to convey was simply my intention no longer to bear my masculine weight upon a woman—either you or any other woman."

A smile contended momentarily with the frown, and triumphed brilliantly.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure. But do you mind telling me what you do mean to do?"

"No."

"Well, then—?" The smile was deepening very pleasantly.

"I mean to ask you," he said deliberately, taking heart of this favourable manifestation: "to whom am I indebted—?"

To his consternation the smile vanished, as though a cloud had sailed before the sun. Doubt and something strongly resembling incredulity informed her glance.

"Do you mean to say you don't *know*?" she demanded after a moment.

"Believe me, I've no least idea—"

"But surely Mr. Ember must have told you?"

"Ember seemed to be labouring under the misapprehension that the Fiske place was without a tenant."

"Oh!"

"And I'm sure he was sincere. Otherwise it's certain wild horses couldn't have dragged him back to New York."

"Oh!" Her tone was thoughtful. "So he has gone back to town?"

"Business called him. At least such was the plausible excuse he advanced for depriving himself of my exclusive society."

"I see," she nodded—"I see...."

"But aren't you going to tell me? Or ought I to prove my human intelligence by assuming on logical grounds that you're Miss Fiske?"

"If you please," she murmured absently, her intent gaze seeking the distances of the sea.

"Then that's settled," he pursued in accents of satisfaction. "You are Miss Fiske—Christian name at present unknown to deponent. I am one Whitaker, as already deposed—baptized Hugh. And we are neighbours. Do you know, I think this a very decent sort of a world after all?"

"And still"—she returned to the charge—"you haven't told me what you mean to do, since you refuse my help."

"I mean," he asserted cheerfully, "to sit here, aping Patience on a monument, until some kind-hearted person fetches me a stick or other suitable piece of wood to serve as emergency staff. Then I shall make shift to hobble to your motor-boat and thank you very kindly for ferrying me home."

"Very well," she said with a business-like air. "Now we understand one another, I'll see what I can find."

Reviewing their surroundings with a swift and comprehensive glance, she shook her head in dainty annoyance, stood for an instant plunged in speculation, then, light-footed, darted from sight round the side of the bath-house.

He waited, a tender nurse to his ankle, smiling vaguely at the benign sky.

Presently she reappeared, dragging an eight-foot pole, which, from certain indications, seemed to have been formerly dedicated to the office of clothes-line prop.

"Will this do?"

Whitaker took it from her and weighed it with anxious judgment.

"A trifle tall, even for me," he allowed. "Still...."

He rose on one foot and tested the staff with his weight. "'Twill do," he decided. "And thank you very much."

But even with its aid, his progress toward the boat necessarily consumed a tedious time. It was impossible to favour the injured foot to any great extent. Between occasional halts for rest, Whitaker hobbled with grim determination, suffering exquisitely but privately. The girl considerately schooled her pace to his, subjecting him to covert scrutiny when, as they moved on, his injury interested him exclusively.

He made little or no attempt to converse while in motion; a spirit of bravado alone, indeed, would have enabled him to pay attention to anything aside from the problem of the next step; and bravado was a stranger to his cosmos then, if ever. So she had plenty of opportunity to make up her mind about him.

If her eyes were a reliable index, she found him at least interesting. At times their expression was enigmatic beyond any rendering. Again they seemed openly perplexed. At all times they were warily regardful.

Once she sighed quietly with a passing look of sadness of which he was wholly unaware....

"Odd—about that fellow," he observed during a halt. "I was sure I knew him, both times—last night as well as to-day."

"Last night?" she queried with patent interest.

"Oh, yes: I meant to tell you. He was prowling round the bungalow—Ember's, I mean—when I first saw him. I chased him off, lost him in the woods, and later picked him up again just at the edge of your grounds. That's why I thought it funny that he should be over here this morning, shadowing you—as they say in detective stories."

"No wonder!" she commented sympathetically.

"And the oddest thing of all was that I should be so sure he was Drummond—
until I saw—"

"Drummond!"

"Friend of mine.... You don't by any chance know Drummond, do you?"

"I've heard the name."

"You must have. The papers were full of his case for a while. Man supposed to have committed suicide—jumped off Washington Bridge a week before he was to marry Sara Law, the actress?"

"Why ... yes. Yes, I remember. But.... 'Supposed to have committed suicide'—did you say?"

He nodded. "He may have got away with it, at that. Only, I've good reason to believe he didn't.... I may as well tell you: it's no secret, although only a few people know it: Ember saw Drummond, or thinks he did, alive, in the flesh, a good half-hour after the time of his reported suicide."

"Really!" the girl commented in a stifled voice.

"Oh, for all that, there's no proof Ember wasn't misled by an accidental resemblance—no real proof—merely circumstantial evidence. Though for my part, I'm quite convinced Drummond still lives."

"How very curious!" There was nothing more than civil but perfunctory interest in the comment. "Are you ready to go on?"

And another time, when they were near the boat:

"When do you expect Mr. Ember?" asked the girl.

"To-night, probably. At least, he wired yesterday to say he'd be down to-night. But from what little I've seen of him, you can never be sure of Ember. He seems to lead the sedentary and uneventful life of a flea on a hot griddle."

"I shall be glad to see him," said the girl in what Whitaker thought a curious tone. "Please tell him, will you? Don't forget."

"If that's the way you feel about him, I shall be tempted to wire him not to come."

"Just what do you mean by that?" asked the woman sharply, a glint of indignation in her level, challenging stare.

"Merely that your tone sounded a bit vindictive. I thought possibly you might

want to have it out with him, for the sin of permitting me to infest this neck o' the woods."

"Absurd!" she laughed, placated.

When finally they came to the end of the dock, he paused, considering the three-foot drop to the deck of the motor-boat with a dubious look that but half expressed his consternation. It would be practically impossible to lower himself without employing the painful member to an extent he didn't like to anticipate. He met the girl's inquiring glance with one wholly rueful.

"If it weren't low tide...." he explained, crest-fallen.

She laughed lightly. "But, since it is low tide, you'll have to let me help you again."

Cautiously lowering himself to a sitting position on the dock, feet overhanging the boat, he nodded. "Fraid so. Sorry to be a nuisance."

"You're not a nuisance. You're merely masculine," the girl retorted, jumping lightly but surely to the cockpit.

She turned and offered him a hand, eyes dancing with gay malice.

Whitaker delayed, considering her gravely.

"Meaning—?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Like all men you must turn to a woman in the end—however brave your strut."

"Oh, it's that way, is it? Thank you, but I fancy I can manage."

And with the aid of the clothes-prop he did manage to make the descent without her hand and without disaster.

"Pure *blague!*" the girl taunted.

"That's French for I-think-I'm-smart-don't-I—isn't it?" he inquired with an innocent stare. "If so, the answer is: I do."

Her lips and eyes were eloquent of laughter repressed.

"But now?" she argued, sure of triumph. "You've got to admit you couldn't do without me now!"

"Oh, I can manage a motor, if that's what you mean," he retorted serenely; "though I confess there are a few new kinks to this one that might puzzle me a bit at the start. That chain-and-cogwheel affair to turn the flywheel with, for instance—that's a new one. The last time I ran a marine motor in this country we had to break our backs and run chances of breaking our arms as well, turning up by hand."

The girl had gone forward, over the cabin roof, to cast off. She returned along the outboard, pushing the boat clear, then, jumping back into the cockpit, started the engine with a single, almost effortless turn of the crank which Whitaker had mentioned, and took the wheel as the boat swung droning away from the dock. Not until she had once or twice advanced the spark and made other minor adjustments, did she return attention to her passenger.

Then, in a casual voice, she inquired: "You've been out of the country for some time, I think you said?"

"Almost six years on the other side of the world—got back only last spring."

"What," she asked, eyes averted, spying out the channel—"what does one do on the other side of the world?"

"This one knocked about, mostly, for his health's sake. That is, I went away expecting to die before long, was disappointed, got well and strong and—took to drifting.... I beg your pardon," he broke off hastily; "a civil answer to a civil question needn't necessarily be the history of one's life."

The girl put the wheel down slowly, swinging the boat upon a course direct to the landing-stage at Half-a-loaf Lodge.

"But surely you didn't waste six years simply 'drifting'?"

"Well, I did drift into a sort of business, after a bit—gold mining in a haphazard, happy-go-lucky fashion—did pretty well at it and came home to astonish the natives."

"Was it a success?"

"Rather," he replied dryly.

"I meant your plan to astonish the natives."

"So did I."

"You find things—New York—disappointing?" she analyzed his tone.

"I find it overpowering—and lonely. Nobody sent a brass band to greet me at the dock; and all the people I used to know are either married and devoted to brats, or divorced and devoted to bridge; and my game has gone off so badly in six years that I don't belong any more."

She smiled, shaping her scarlet lips deliciously. The soft, warm wind whipped stray strands of hair, like cords of gold, about her face. Her eyelids were half lowered against the intolerable splendour of the day. The waters of the bay, wind-blurred and dark, seemed a shield of sapphire fashioned by nature solely to set off in clear relief her ardent loveliness.

Whitaker, noting how swiftly the mainland shores were disclosing the finer details of their beauty, could have wished the bay ten times as wide.



XII

THE MOUSE-TRAP

Late in the afternoon of the same day, Ember, appearing suddenly in front of the bungalow, discovered Whitaker sitting up in state; a comfortable wicker chair supported his body and a canvas-seated camp stool one of his feet; which last was discreetly veiled in a dripping bath-towel. Otherwise he was fastidiously arrayed in white flannels and, by his seraphic smile and guileless expression, seemed abnormally at peace with his circumstances.

Halting, Ember surveyed the spectacle with mocking disfavour, as though he felt himself slightly at a disadvantage. He was, indeed, in a state that furnished an admirable contrast to that of the elegant if disabled idler. His face was scarcely whiter with the impalpable souvenirs of the road than was his slate-coloured mohair duster. The former, indeed, suffered by comparison, its personal coat of dust being deep-rutted with muddy paths of perspiration; beneath all lay the dull flush of flesh scorched by continuous exposure to sunlight and the swift rush of superheated air. None the less, his eyes, gleaming bright as through a mask, were not unamiable.

"Hel-lo!" he observed, beginning to draw off his gauntlets as he ascended the veranda steps and dropped into another wicker chair.

"How *do* you do?" returned Whitaker agreeably.

"I'm all right; but what the deuce's the matter with you?"

"Game leg, thanks. Twisted my ankle again, this morning. Sum Fat has been doctoring it with intense enthusiasm, horse liniment and chopped ice."

"That's the only proper treatment for sprains. Bad, is it?"

"Not very—not half as bad as I thought it would be at first. Coming on top of the other wrench made it extra painful for a while—that's all. By to-morrow morning I'll be skipping like the silly old hills in the Scriptures."

"Hope so; but you don't want to overdo the imitation, you know. Give nature a chance to make the cure complete. Otherwise—well, you must've had a pretty

rotten stupid time of it, with that storm."

"Oh, not at all. I really enjoyed it," Whitaker protested.

"Like this place, eh?"

"Heavenly!" asserted the invalid with enthusiasm. "I can't thank you enough."

"Oh, if you forgive me for leaving you alone so much, we'll call it square." Ember lifted his voice: "Sum Fat, ahoy!"

The Chinaman appeared in the doorway, as suddenly and silently as if magically materialized by the sound of his name. He bore with circumspection a large tray decorated with glasses, siphons, decanters and a bowl of cracked ice.

"I make very remarkable damn fine quick guess what you want first," he observed suavely, placing the tray on a small table convenient to Ember's hand. "That all now?"

"You're a sulphur-coloured wizard with pigeon-toed eyes," replied Ember severely. "Go away from here instantly and prepare me all the dinner in the establishment, lest an evil fate overtake you."

"It is written," returned Sum Fat, "that I die after eight-seven years of honourable life from heart-failure on receiving long-deferred raise in wages."

He shuffled off, chuckling.

"Scotch or Irish?" demanded Ember, clinking glasses.

"Irish, please. How's your friend's case?"

"Coming along. You don't seem surprised to see me."

"I had your telegram, and besides I heard your car, just now."

"Oh!" There was a significance in the ejaculation which Whitaker chose to ignore as he blandly accepted his frosted glass. "You weren't—ah—lonely?" Ember persisted.

"Not in the least."

"I fancied I saw the flutter of a petticoat through the trees, as I came up to the house."

"You did."

"Found a—ah—friend down here?"

"Acquaintance of yours, I believe: Miss Fiske."

"Miss Fiske!" There was unfeigned amazement in the echo.

"Anything wonderful about that?" inquired Whitaker, sharply. "I fancied from what she said that you two were rather good friends."

"Just surprised—that's all," said Ember, recovering. "You see, I didn't think the Fiske place was open this year."

He stared suspiciously at Whitaker, but the latter was transparently ingenuous.

"She expressed an unaccountable desire to see you—told me to tell you."

"Oh? Such being the case, one would think she might've waited."

"She had just started home when you drove in," Whitaker explained with elaborate ease. "She'd merely run over for a moment to inquire after my ankle, and couldn't wait."

"Thoughtful of her."

"Wasn't it?" To this Whitaker added with less complacency: "You'll have to call after dinner, I suppose."

"Sorry," said Ember, hastily, "but shan't be able to. Fact is, I only ran in to see if you were comfortable—must get back to town immediately after dinner—friend's case at a critical stage."

"Everybody loves me and worries about my interesting condition—even you, wretched host that you are."

"I apologize."

"Don't; you needn't. I wouldn't for the world interfere with your desperate business. I'm really quite happy here—alone."

"Alone—I think you said?" Ember inquired after a brief pause.

"Alone," Whitaker reiterated firmly.

"I'm glad you like the place."

"It's most attractive, really.... I say, who are the Fiskes, anyway?"

"Well ... the Fiskes are the people who own the next cottage."

"I know, but—"

"Oh, I never troubled to inquire; have a hazy notion Fiske does something in Wall Street." Ember passed smoothly over this flaw in his professional omniscience. "How did you happen to meet her?"

"Oh, mere accident. Over on the beach this morning. I slipped and hurt my ankle. She—ah—happened along and brought me home in her motor-boat."

On mature reflection, Whitaker had decided that it would be as well to edit his already sketchy explanation of all reference to the putative spy who wasn't Drummond; in other words, to let Ember's sleeping detective instincts lie. And with this private understanding with himself, he felt a little aggrieved because of the quarter toward which Ember presently saw fit to swing their talk.

"You haven't seen Drummond—or any signs of him, have you?"

"Eh—what?" Whitaker sat up, startled. "No, I ... er ... how should I?"

"I merely wondered. You see, I... Well, to tell the truth, I took the liberty of camping on his trail, while in town, with the idea of serving him with notice to behave. But he'd anticipated me, apparently; he'd cleared out of his accustomed haunts—got away clean. I couldn't find any trace of him."

"You're a swell sleuth," Whitaker commented critically.

"You be damn'.... That's the true reason why I ran down to-day, when I really couldn't spare the time; I was a bit worried—afraid he'd maybe doped out my little scheme for keeping you out of harm's way."

"Oh, I say!" Whitaker expostulated, touched by this evidence of disinterested thoughtfulness. "You don't mean—"

"On the contrary, I firmly believe him responsible for that attack on you the other night. The man's a dangerous monomaniac; brooding over his self-wrought wrongs has made him such."

"You persuade yourself too much, old man. You set up an inference and idolize it

as an immortal truth. Why, you had me going for a while. Only last night there was a fellow skulking round here, and I was just dippy enough, thanks to your influence, to think he resembled Drummond. But this morning I got a good look at him, and he's no more Drummond than you are."

"The hell you say!" Ember sat up, eyes snapping. "Who was he then?"

"Simply a good-for-nothing vagabond—tramp."

"What'd he want?"

"Search me."

"But why the devil didn't you tell me this before?"

"You don't mean to say you attach any importance to the mere fact that an ordinary tramp—"

"I attach importance to many things that other people overlook. That's my artfulness. I don't suppose it has occurred to you that tramps follow the railroads, and that Long Island is free of the vermin for the simple reason that the Long Island Railroad doesn't lead anywhere any self-respecting tramp would care to go?"

"It's true—I hadn't thought of that. So that makes the appearance of a tramp in these parts a cir-spicious sus-cumstance?"

"It does. Now tell me about him—everything."

So the truth would out, after all. Whitaker resignedly delivered himself of the tale of the mare's-nest—as he still regarded it. When he had come to the lame conclusion thereof, Ember yawned and rose.

"What are you going to do about it?" Whitaker inquired with irony.

"Wash and make myself fit to eat food," was the response. "I may possibly think a little. It's an exhilarating exercise which I don't hesitate to recommend to your distinguished consideration."

He was out of earshot, within the bungalow, before Whitaker could think up an adequately insolent retort. He could, however, do no less than smile incredulously at the beautiful world: so much, at least, he owed his self-respect.

He lolled comfortably, dreaming, forgetful of his cold-storage foot, serene in the

assurance that Ember was an alarmist, Drummond (if alive) to a degree hand-bound by his own misconduct, a wretched creature self-doomed to haunt the under-world, little potent either for good or for evil; while it was a certainty, Whitaker believed, that to-morrow's sun would find him able to be up and about—able to hobble, even if with difficulty, at least as much as the eighth of a mile.

Long shadows darkened athwart the clearing. The bay was quick with moving water, its wonderful deep blue shading to violet in the distant reaches. Beyond the golden arm of the barrier beach drifted the lazy purple sails of coastwise schooners. Gradually these blushed red, the golden arm took on a ruddy tinge, the bosom of the waters a translucent pink, mirroring the vast conflagration in the western skies.

Somewhere—not far away—a whippoorwill whistled with plaintive insistence.

In the deepening twilight a mental shadow came to cloud the brightness of Whitaker's confident contentment. He sat brooding and mumbling curses on the ache in his frost-bitten foot, and was more than slightly relieved when Sum Fat lighted the candles in the living-room and summoned Ember to help the invalid indoors.

Neither good food nor good company seemed able to mitigate this sudden seizure of despondency. He sat glooming over his plate and glass, the burden of his conversation *yea, yea* and *nay, nay*; nor was anything of Ember's intermittent banter apparently able to educe the spirited retorts ordinarily to be expected of him.

His host diagnosed his complaint from beneath shrewd eyebrows.

"Whitaker," he said at length, "a pessimist has been defined as a dog that won't scratch."

"Well?" said the other sourly.

"Come on. Be a sport. Have a good scratch on me."

Whitaker grinned reluctantly and briefly.

"Where's my wife?" he demanded abruptly.

"How in blazes—!"

"There you are!" Whitaker complained. "You make great pretensions, and yet

you fall down flat on your foolish face three times in less than as many hours. You don't know who the Fiskes are, you've lost track of your pet myth, Drummond, and you don't know where I can find my wife. And yet I'm expected to stand round with my mouth open, playing Dr. Watson to your Sherlock Holmes. I could go to that telephone and consult 'Information' to better advantage!"

"What you need," retorted the other, unmoved, "is a clairvoyant, not a detective. If you can't keep track of your trial marriages yourself...!"

He shrugged.

"Then you don't know—haven't the least idea where she is?"

"My dear man, I myself am beginning to doubt her existence."

"I don't see why the dickens she doesn't go ahead with those divorce proceedings!" Whitaker remarked morosely.

"I've met few men so eager for full membership in the Alimony Club. What's your hurry?"

"Oh, I don't know." Which was largely truth unveneered. "I'd like to get it over and done with."

"You might advertise—offer a suitable reward for information concerning the whereabouts of one docile and dormant divorce suit—"

"I might, but you'd never earn it."

"Doubtless. I've long since learned never to expect any reward commensurate with my merits."

Ember pushed back his chair and, rising, strolled to the door. "Moonrise and a fine, clear night," he said, staring through the wire mesh of the screen. "Wish you were well enough to go riding with me. However, you won't be laid up long, I fancy. And I'll be back day after to-morrow. Now I must cut along."

And within ten minutes Whitaker heard the motor-car rumble off on the woodland road.

He wasn't altogether sorry to be left to his own society. He was, in fact, rather sharp-set for the freedom of solitude, that he might pursue one or two self-

appointed tasks without interruption.

For one of these Sum Fat, not without wonder, furnished him materials: canvas, stout thread, scissors, a heavy needle, a bit of beeswax: with which Whitaker purposed manufacturing an emergency ankle-strap. And at this task he laboured diligently and patiently for the better part of two hours, with a result less creditable to his workmanship than to a nature integrally sunny and prone to see the bright side of things. Whitaker himself, examining the finished product with a prejudiced eye, was fain to concede its crudity. It was not pretty, but he believed fatuously in its efficiency.

His other task was purely one of self-examination. Since afternoon he had found reason gravely to doubt the stability of his emotional poise. He had of late been in the habit of regarding himself as one whose mind retained no illusions; a bit prematurely aged, perhaps, but wise with a wisdom beyond his years; no misogynist, but comfortably woman-proof; a settled body and a sedate, contemplating with an indulgent smile the futile antics of a mad, mad world. But now he was being reminded that no man is older than his heart, and that the heart is a headstrong member, apt to mutiny without warning and proclaim a youth quite inconsistent with the years and the mentality of its possessor. In fine, he could not be blind to the fact that he was in grave danger of making an ass of himself if he failed to guide himself with unwonted circumspection.

And all because he had an eye and a weakness for fair women, a lonely path to tread through life, and a gregarious tendency, a humorous faculty and a keen appreciation of a mind responsive to it....

And all in the face of the fact that he was not at liberty to make love....

And all this problem the result of a single day of propinquity!

He went to bed, finally, far less content with himself than with the crazy issue of his handicraft. The latter might possibly serve its purpose; but Hugh Whitaker seemed a hopeless sort of a proposition, not in the least amenable to the admonitions of common sense. If he were, indeed, he would have already been planning an abrupt escape to Town. As matters stood with him, he knew he had not the least intention of doing anything one-half so sensible.

But in spite of his half-hearted perturbation and dissatisfaction, the weariness of a long, full day was so heavy upon him that he went to sleep almost before Sum Fat had finished making him comfortable.

Extinguishing the candle, the Chinaman, moving with the silent assurance of a cat in the dark, closed and latched the shutters, then sat down just outside the living-room door, to wait and watch, sleeplessly alert.

An hour passed in silence, and another, and yet another: Sum Fat sat moveless in the shadow, which blended so perfectly with his dark blue-silk garments as to render him almost indistinguishable: a figure as patient and imperturbable as any bland, stout, graven god of his religion. Slowly the moonlight shifted over the floor, lengthened until it almost touched the toe of one of his felt-soled shoes, and imperceptibly withdrew. The wind had fallen, and the night was very quiet; few sounds disturbed the stillness, and those inconsiderable: the steady respiration of the sleeping man; such faint, stealthy creakings as seemingly infest every human habitation through the night; the dull lisp and murmur of the tide groping its way along the shore; the muted grumble of the distant surf; hushed whisperings of leaves disturbed by wandering airs.

Sum Fat heard all and held impassive. But in time there fell upon his ears another sound, to which he stirred, if imperceptibly—drawing himself together, tensing and flexing his tired muscles while his eyes shifted quickly from one quarter to another of the darkened living-room and the still more dark bedchamber.

And yet, apparently all that had aroused him was the drowsy whistle of a whippoorwill.

Then, with no other presage, a shadow flitted past one of the side windows, and in another reappeared more substantially on the veranda. Sum Fat grew altogether tense, his gaze fixed and exclusively focussed upon that apparition.

Cautiously, noiselessly, edging inch by inch across the veranda, the man approached the door. It was open, hooked back against the wall; only the wire screen was in his way. Against this he flattened his face; and a full, long minute elapsed while he carefully surveyed what was visible of the interior. Even Sum Fat held his breath throughout that interminable reconnoissance.

At length, reassured, the man laid hold of the screen and drew it open. It complained a little, and he started violently and waited another minute for the alarm which did not ensue. Then abruptly he slipped into the room and slowly drew the screen shut behind him. Another minute: no sound detectable more untoward than that of steady respiration in the bedroom; with a movement as swift and sinister as the swoop of a vulture the man sprang toward the bedroom

door.

Leaping from a sitting position, with a bound that was little less than a flight through the air, the Chinaman caught him halfway. There followed a shriek, a heavy fall that shook the bungalow, the report of a revolver, sounds of scuffling....

Whitaker, half dazed, found himself standing in the doorway, regardless of his injury.

He saw, as one who dreams and yet is conscious that he does but dream, Ember lighting candles—calmly applying the flame of a taper to one after another as he made a round of the sconces. The moonlight paled and the windows turned black as the mellow radiance brightened.

Then a slight movement in the shadow of the table drew his attention to the floor. Sum Fat was kneeling there, on all fours, above something that breathed heavily and struggled without avail.

Whitaker's sleep-numbed faculties cleared.

"Ember!" he cried. "What in the name of all things strange—!"

Ember threw him a flickering smile. "Oh, there you are?" he said cheerfully. "I've got something interesting to show you. Sum Fat"—he stooped and picked up a revolver—"you may let him up, now, if you think he's safe."

"Safe enough." Sum Fat rose, grinning. "Had damn plenty."

He mounted guard beside the door.

For an instant his captive seemed reluctant to rise; free, he lay without moving, getting his breath in great heaving sobs; only his gaze ranged ceaselessly from Ember's face to Whitaker's and back again, and his hands opened and closed convulsively.

Ember moved to his side and stood over him, balancing the revolver in his palm.

"Come," he said impatiently. "Up with you!"

The man sat up as if galvanized by fear, got more slowly to his knees, then, grasping the edge of the table, dragged himself laboriously to a standing position. He passed a hand uncertainly across his mouth, brushed the hair out of

his eyes and tried to steady himself, attempting to infuse defiance into his air, even though cornered, beaten and helpless.

Whitaker's jaw dropped and his eyes widened with wonder and pity. He couldn't deny the man, yet he found it hard to believe that this quivering, shaken creature, with his lean and pasty face and desperate, glaring eyes, this man in rough, stained, soiled and shapeless garments, could be identical with the well set-up, prosperous and confident man of affairs he remembered as Drummond. And yet they were one. Appalling to contemplate the swift devastating course of moral degeneration, that had spread like gangrene through all the man's physical and mental fibre....

"Take a good look," Ember advised grimly. "How about that pet myth thing, now? What price the astute sleuth—eh? Perhaps you'd like to take a few more funny cracks at my simple faith in hallucinations."

"Good God!" said Whitaker in a low voice, unable to remove his gaze from Drummond.

"I had a notion he'd be hanging round," Ember went on; "I thought I saw somebody hiding in the woods this afternoon; and then I was sure I saw him skulking round the edges of the clearing, after dinner. So I set Sum Fat to watch, drove back to the village to mislead him, left my car there and walked back. And sure enough—!"

Without comment, Whitaker, unable to stand any longer without discomfort, hobbled to a chair and sat down.

"Well?" Drummond demanded harshly in a quavering snarl. "Now that you've got me, what're you going to do with me?"

There was a high, hysterical accent in his voice that struck unpleasantly on Ember's ear. He cocked his head to one side, studying the man intently.

Drummond flung himself a step away from the table, paused, and again faced his captors with bravado.

"Well?" he cried again. "Well?"

Ember nodded toward Whitaker. "Ask him," he said briefly.

Whitaker shook his head. It was difficult to think how to deal with this trapped

animal, so wildly different from the cultivated gentleman he always had in mind when he thought of Drummond. The futility of attempting to deal with him according to any code recognized by men of honour was wretchedly apparent.

"Drummond," he said slowly, "I wish to God you hadn't done this thing."

Drummond laughed discordantly. "Keep your mealy-mouthed compassion for yourself," he retorted, sneering. "I'm no worse than you, only I got caught." He added in a low tone, quivering with uncontrollable hatred: "Damn you!"

Whitaker gave a gesture of despair. "If you'd only been content to keep out of the way...! If only you'd let me alone—"

"Then *you* let Sara Law alone, d'you hear?"

Surprised, Whitaker paused before replying. "Please understand," he said quietly, "that Mrs. Whitaker is seeking a divorce from me. After that, if she has any use for you, I have no objection to her marrying you. And as for the money you stole, I have said nothing about that—intend to say nothing. If you'd had the sense to explain things to me—if I could count on you to leave me alone and not try again to murder me—"

"Oh, go to hell!"

The interruption was little short of a shriek. Ember motioned to Sum Fat, who quietly drew nearer.

"I swear I don't know what to do or say—"

"Then shut up—"

"That'll be about all," Ember interposed quietly. At a glance from him, Sum Fat closed in swiftly and caught and pinioned Drummond's arms from behind.

A disgusting change took place in Drummond. In an instant he was struggling, screaming, slaving: his face congested, eyes starting, features working wildly as he turned and twisted in his efforts to free himself.

Sum Fat held him as he would have held an unruly child. Whitaker looked away, feeling faint and sick. Ember looked on with shrewd and penetrating interest, biding the time when a break in Drummond's ravings would let him be heard. When it came at length, together with a gradual weakening of the man's struggles, the detective turned to Whitaker.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't dare take any further chances. He'd've been at your throat in another minute. I could see him working himself up to a frenzy. If Sum Fat hadn't grabbed him in time, there's no telling what might not have happened."

Whitaker nodded.

"It isn't as if we had simply an everyday crook to deal with," Ember went on, approaching the man. "He's not to be trusted or reasoned with. He's just short of a raving morphomaniac, or I miss my guess."

With a quick movement he caught Drummond's left arm, pulled the sleeve of his coat back to the elbow, unbuttoned and turned back his cuff. "*Hmm—yes,*" he continued bending over to inspect the exposed forearm, in spite of Drummond's efforts to twist away. "Deadly work of the busy little needle. Good Lord, he's fairly riddled with punctures!"

"That explains...." Whitaker muttered, sickened.

"It explains a lot." Ember readjusted the sleeve and turned away. "And it shows us our path of duty, clear," he continued, despite interruptions from the maddened drug fiend. "I think a nice little sojourn in a sanatorium—what?"

"Right," Whitaker agreed, relieved.

"We'll see what a cure does for him before we indulge in criminal proceedings—shall we?"

"By all means."

"Good." Ember glanced at his watch. "I'll have to hurry along now—must be in town not later than nine o'clock this morning. I'll take him with me. No, don't worry—I can handle him easily. It's a bit of a walk to the village, but that will only help to quiet him down. I'll be back to-morrow; meanwhile you'll be able to sleep soundly unless—"

He checked, frowning thoughtfully.

"Unless what?"

Ember jerked his head to indicate the prisoner. "Of course, this isn't by any chance the fellow you mixed it up with over on the beach—and so forth?"

"Nothing like him."

"Queer. I can't find any trace of him—the other one—nor can I account for him. He doesn't seem to fit in anywhere. However"—his expression lightened—"I daresay you were right; he's probably only some idle, light-fingered prowler. I'd keep my eyes open for him, but I don't really believe you need worry much."

Within ten minutes he was off on his lonely tramp through two miles of woodland and as many more of little travelled country road, at dead of night, with a madman in handcuffs for sole company.



XIII

OFFSHORE

"You ask me, I think very excellent damn quick cure."

Sum Fat having for the third time since morning anointed with liniment and massaged Whitaker's ankle, tenderly adjusted and laced the makeshift canvas brace, drew a sock over it, and then with infinite care inserted the foot in a high-cut canvas tennis shoe.

He stood up, beaming.

Whitaker extended his leg and cast a critical eye over the heavily bandaged ankle.

"Anyway," he observed, "the effect is arresting. I look like a half Clydesdale."

Sum Fat's eyes clouded, then again gleamed with benevolent interest. "You take it easy one day or two—no walk much—just loaf—no go see pretty ladies—"

"Go 'way, you heathen—go clean your teeth!" cried Whitaker, indignantly.

"—and I think be all well and sound," concluded Sum Fat.

He waddled away, chuckling.

Waiting till he was well out of sight, Whitaker got up, and with the aid of a cane made a number of tentative experiments in the gentle art of short-distance pedestrianism. The results were highly satisfactory: he felt little or no pain, thanks to Sum Fat's ice-packs and assiduous attentions in general; and was hampered in free movement solely by the stiff brace and high-laced shoe.

On the other hand, he felt that the advice to which he had just listened was sound; it would be unwise to attempt a neighbourly call within at least another twenty-four hours.

He resumed his chair on the veranda, and sighed. It was late afternoon, and he was lonely. After the interest and excitement of the preceding day and night, today seemed very dull and uneventful; it had been, in truth, nothing less than

stupid—a mere routine of meals and pipes interrupted by no communication from the outer world more blood-stirring than the daily calls of the village grocer and butcher. Ember had not telephoned, as Whitaker had hoped he would; and the chatelaine of the neighbouring cottage had not manifested any interest whatever in the well-being of the damaged amateur squire of dames.

Whitaker felt himself neglected and abused. He inclined to sulks. The loveliness of a day of unbroken calm offered him no consolation. Solitude in a lonely lodge is all very well, if one cares for that sort of thing; but it takes two properly to appreciate the beauties of the wilderness.

The trouble with him was (he began to realize) that he had lived too long a hermit. For six years he had been practically isolated and cut off from the better half of existence; femininity had formed no factor in his cosmos. Even since his return to America his associations had been almost exclusively confined to the wives and daughters of old friends, the former favouring him only with a calm maternal patronage, the daughters obviously regarding him as a sort of human curio old enough to be entitled to a certain amount of respectful consideration, but not to be taken seriously—"like a mummy," Whitaker told himself, not without sympathy for the view-point of the younger generation.

But now, of a sudden, he had been granted a flash of insight into the true significance of companionship between a man and a woman who had something in common aside from community in their generation. Not two hours altogether of such intercourse had been his, but it had been enough to infuse all his consciousness with a vague but irking discontent. He wanted more, and wanted it ardently; and what Whitaker desired he generally set himself to gain with a single-hearted earnestness of purpose calculated to compass the end in view with the least possible waste of time.

In this instance, however, he was handicapped to exasperation by that confounded ankle!

Besides, he couldn't in decency pursue the woman; she was entitled to a certain amount of privacy, of freedom from his attentions.

Furthermore, he had no right as yet to offer her attentions. It seemed necessary frequently to remind himself of that fact, in spite of the vile humour such reminders as a rule aroused.

He passed into one such now, scowling darkly in the face of an exquisite,

flawless day.

One thing was settled, he assured himself: as soon as he was able to get about with comfort, he would lose no time in hunting up his wife's attorneys and finding out why they were slow about prosecuting her case. Failing satisfaction in that quarter—well, he would find some way to make things move. It wasn't fair to him to keep him bound to the vows of a farcical union. He was not prepared to submit to such injustice. He would, if needs must, hire detectives to find him his wife, that he might see and in person urge upon her his equal right to release from an unnatural bondage!

He had lashed himself into a very respectable transport of resentful rage before he realized what way his thoughts were leading him; but he calmed down as quickly when, chancing to lift his eyes from their absorbed study of the planks composing the veranda floor, he discovered a motor-boat drawing in toward the landing-stage.

At once a smile of childlike serenity displaced the scowl. Instinctively he gathered himself together to rise, but on reconsideration retained his seat, gallantry yielding to an intuitive sense of dramatic values; a chair-bound invalid is a much more sympathetic object than a man demonstrating a surprisingly quick recovery from an incapacitating accident.

Nevertheless, there seemed no objection to his returning a cheerful flourish to the salute of a slender arm, brown and bare to the point where a turned-back shirtwaist sleeve met a rounded elbow.

At precisely the proper distance from the dock, the motor ceased its purring; the boat swept on, white water crisping beneath its stem, ripples widening fanlike from its flanks and sketching sweeping plumes of purple on the calm ultramarine surface—its speed at first not perceptibly moderated. Gradually, then, it yielded to the passive resistance of the waters, moving slower and more slow until at length it nosed the landing-stage with a touch well-nigh as gentle as a caress.

Poised lightly over the bows, the woman waited, her figure all in white sharp-cut against the blue of sky and water, with an effect as vital as it was graceful. Then at the right instant leaping to the dock with the headwarp, she made the little vessel fast with two deft half-hitches round the out-most pile, and turning came swinging to dry land and up the gentle slope to the veranda, ease and strength and joy of living inherent in every flowing movement, matching well the bright

comeliness of her countenance and the shining splendour of her friendly eyes.

No imaginable consideration, however selfish, could have kept Whitaker any longer in his chair.

"The most amiable person I know!" he cried, elated. "Greetings!"

She paused by the steps, looking up, a fascinating vision.

"No—please! I've only stopped for an instant. Do sit down."

"Shan't—until you do."

"But I really can't stop."

She ascended the steps and dropped coolly into a chair, laughing at her own lack of consistency. Whitaker resumed his seat.

"You're really able to stand without assistance?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it. Between you and me—a dead secret—there's nothing really the matter with me any more. Sum Fat's a famous physician. I could run a race—only it's pleasanter to pretend I mustn't."

"Very well. Then I shan't waste any more sympathy on you."

"As a matter of fact, I can move only at the cost of excruciating agony."

She considered him with a sober face and smiling eyes. "I don't believe you. You're a fraud. Besides, I didn't come to see you at all; I came to find out why Mr. Ember dares so to neglect me. Did you deliver my invitation?"

"I did, unwillingly. He was desolated, but he couldn't accept—had to run back to town immediately after dinner."

"He's as great a fraud as you. But since he isn't here, I shall go."

She got up with a very evident intention of being as good as her word. Whitaker in despair sought wildly for an excuse to detain her.

"Please—I'm famished for human society. Have pity. Sit down. Tell me where you've been with the boat."

"Merely to the head of the bay to have the gasoline tanks filled. A most boresome errand. They've no proper facilities for taking care of motor-boats.

Imagine having to sit with your hands folded while garrulous natives fill a sixty-gallon tank by hand."

"Expressions of profound sympathy. Tell me some more. See, I even consent not to talk about myself as an extra inducement—if you'll only stay."

"No—really—unique though the prospect be! I left Elise and the cook alone, two poor defenceless women; the gardener is taking his weekly day-off in the village. We won't see anything of him till morning, probably—when he'll show up very meek and damp about the head."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"I? Nonsense! I'm shamelessly able-bodied—and not afraid to pull a trigger, besides. Moreover, there aren't any dangerous characters in this neighbourhood."

"Then I presume it's useless for me to offer my services as watch-dog?"

"Entirely so. And when I choose a protector, I shall pick out one sound of limb as well as wind."

"Snubbed," he said mournfully. "And me that lonesome.... Think of the long, dull evening I've got to live through somehow."

"I have already thought of it. And being kind-hearted, it occurred to me that you might be one of those mean-spirited creatures who can enjoy double-dummy."

"It's the only game I really care for with a deathless passion."

"Then, if I promise to come over this evening and play you a rubber or two—will you permit me to go home now?"

"On such terms I'll do anything you can possibly suggest," he declared, enchanted. "You mean it—honest Injun?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die—"

"But ... how will you get here? Not alone, through the woods! I can't permit that."

"Elise shall row me down the shore and then go back to keep cook company. Sum Fat can see me home—if you find it still necessary to keep up the invalid pose."

"I'm afraid," he laughed, "I shall call my own bluff.... Must you really go so soon?"

"Good afternoon," she returned demurely; and ran down the steps and off to her boat.

Smiling quietly to himself, Whitaker watched her cast the boat off, get under way, and swing it out of sight behind the trees. Then his smile wavered and faded and gave place to a look of acute discontent.

He rose and limped indoors to ransack Ember's wardrobe for evening clothes—which he failed, perhaps fortunately, to find.

He regarded with an overwhelming sense of desolation the tremendous arid waste of time which must intervene before he dared expect her: a good four hours—no, four and a half, since she would in all likelihood dine at a sensible hour, say about eight o'clock. By half-past eight, then, he might begin to look for her; but, since she was indisputably no woman to cheapen herself, she would probably keep him waiting till nearly nine.

Colossal waste of time, impossible to contemplate without exacerbation...!

To make matters worse, Sum Fat innocently enough served Whitaker's dinner promptly at six, under the misapprehension that a decent consideration for his foot would induce the young man to seek his bed something earlier than usual.

Three mortal hours to fritter away in profitless anticipation ...

At seven Whitaker was merely nervous.

By eight he was unable to sit still.

Half an hour later the house was too small to contain him. He found his cane and took to the veranda, but only to be driven from its shelter by a swarm of mosquitoes attracted by the illuminated windows. Not in the least resentful, since his ankle was occasioning him no pain whatever, he strolled down toward the shore: not a bad idea at all—to be there to welcome her.

The night was loud and dark. The moon was not to rise for another half-hour, and since sundown the wind had come in from the southwest to dissipate the immaculate day-long calm and set the waters and the trees in motion with its urgent, animating breath. Blowing at first fitfully, it was settling momentarily

down into a steady, league-devouring stride, strong with the promise of greater strength to come.

Whitaker reflected: "If she doesn't hurry, she won't come by boat at all, for fear of a wetting."

He thought again: "And of course—I might've known—she won't start till moonrise, on account of the light."

And again, analyzing the soft, warm rush of air: "We'll have rain before morning."

He found himself at the end of the dock, tingling with impatience, but finding some little consolation in the restless sweep of the wind against his face and body. He stood peering up along the curve of the shore toward the other landing-stage. He could see little—a mere impressionistic suggestion of the shore-line picked out with the dim, semi-phosphorescent glow of breaking wavelets. The night was musical with the clash of rushing waters, crisp and lively above the long, souging drone of the wind in the trees. Eastward the barrier beach was looming stark and black against a growing greenish pallor in the sky. A mile to the westward, down the shore, the landlocked lighthouse reared its tower, so obscure in gloom that the lamp had an effect of hanging without support, like a dim yellow Japanese lantern afloat in mid-air.

Some minutes elapsed. The pallor of the east grew more marked. Whitaker fancied he could detect a figure moving on the Fiske dock.

Then, startled, he grew conscious of the thick drone of a heavily-powered motor boat near inshore. Turning quickly, he discovered it almost at once: a black, vague shape not twenty yards from where he stood, showing neither bow nor side-lights: a stealthy and mysterious apparition creeping toward the dock with something of the effect of an animal about to spring.

And immediately he heard a man's voice from the boat, abrupt with anger:

"Not this place, you ass—the next."

"Shut up," another voice replied. "There's somebody on that dock."

At the same time the bows of the boat swung off and the shadow slipped away to westward—toward the Fiske place.

A wondering apprehension of some nameless and desperate enterprise, somehow involving the woman who obsessed his thoughts, crawled in Whitaker's mind. The boat—running without cruising lights!—was seeking the next landing-stage. Those in charge of it had certainly some reason for wishing to escape observation.

Automatically Whitaker turned back, let himself down to the beach, and began to pick his way toward the Fiske dock, half running despite his stiff ankle and following a course at once more direct and more difficult than the way through the woods. That last would have afforded him sure footing, but he would have lost much time seeking and sticking to its meanderings, in the uncertain light. As it was, he had on one hand a low, concave wall of earth, on the other the wash of crisping wavelets; and between the two a yard-wide track with a treacherous surface of wave-smoothed pebbles largely encumbered with heavy bolster-like rolls of seaweed, springy and slippery, washed up by the recent gale.

But in the dark and formless alarm that possessed him, he did not stop to choose between the ways. He had no time. As it was, if there were anything evil afoot, no earthly power could help him cover the distance in time to be of any aid. Indeed, he had not gone half the way before he pulled up with a thumping heart, startled beyond expression by a cry in the night—a cry of wild appeal and protest thrown out violently into the turbulent night, and abruptly arrested in full peal as if a hand had closed the mouth that uttered it.

And then ringing clear down the wind, a voice whose timbre was unmistakably that of a woman: "*Aux secours! Aux secours!*"

Twice it cried out, and then was hushed as grimly as the first incoherent scream. No need now to guess at what was towards: Whitaker could see it all as clearly as though he were already there; the power-boat at the dock, two women attacked as they were on the point of entering their rowboat, the cry of the mistress suddenly cut short by her assailant, the maid taking up the appeal, in her fright unconsciously reverting to her native tongue, in her turn being forcibly silenced....

All the while he was running, heedless of his injured foot—pitching, slipping, stumbling, leaping—somehow making progress.

By now the moon had lifted above the beach high enough to aid him somewhat with its waxing light; and, looking ahead, he could distinguish dimly shapes about the dock and upon it that seemed to bear out his most cruel fears. The

power-boat was passably distinct, her white side showing plainly through the tempered darkness. Midway down the dock he made out struggling figures—two of them, he judged: a man at close grips with a frantic woman. And where the structure joined the land, a second pair, again a man and a woman, strove and swayed....

And always the night grew brighter with the spectral glow of the moon and the mirroring waters.

For all his haste, he was too slow; he was still a fair thirty yards away when the struggle on the dock ended abruptly with the collapse of the woman; it was as if, he thought, her strength had failed all in an instant—as if she had fainted. He saw the man catch her up in his arms, where she lay limp and unresisting, and with this burden step from the stage to the boat and disappear from sight beneath the coaming. An instant later he reappeared, standing at full height in the cockpit. Without warning his arm straightened out and a tongue of flame jetted from his hand; there was a report; in the same breath a bullet buried itself in the low earth bank on Whitaker's right. Heedless, he pelted on.

The shot seemed to signal the end of the other struggle at the landing-stage. Scarcely had it rung out ere Whitaker saw the man lift a fist and dash it brutally into the woman's face. Without a sound audible at that distance she reeled and fell away; while the man turned, ran swiftly out to the end of the dock, cast off the headwarp and jumped aboard the boat.

She began to sheer off as Whitaker set foot upon the stage. She was twenty feet distant when he found himself both at its end and at the end of his resource. He was too late. Already he could hear the deeper resonance of the engine as the spark was advanced and the throttle opened. In another moment she would be heading away at full tilt.

Frantic with despair, he thrashed the air with impotent arms: a fair mark, his white garments shining bright against the dark background of the land. Aboard the moving boat an automatic fluttered, spitting ten shots in as many seconds. The thud and splash of bullets all round him brought him to his senses. Choking with rage, he stumbled back to the land.

On the narrow beach, near the dock, a small flat-bottomed rowboat lay, its stern afloat, its bows aground—as it had been left by the women surprised in the act of launching it. Jumping down, Whitaker put his shoulder to the stem.

As he did so, the other woman roused, got unsteadily to her feet, screamed, then catching sight of him staggered to his side. It was—as he had assumed—the maid, Elise.

"*M'sieur!*" she shrieked, thrusting a tragic face with bruised and blood-stained mouth close to his. "*Ah, m'sieur—madame—ces canailles-là—!*"

"Yes, I know," he said brusquely. "Get out of the way—don't hinder me!"

The boat was now all afloat. He jumped in, dropped upon the middle thwart, and fitted the oars in the rowlocks.

"But, m'sieur, what mean you to do?"

"Don't know yet," he panted—"follow—keep them in sight—"

The blades dipped; he bent his back to them; the rowboat shot away.

A glance over his shoulder showed him the boat of the marauders already well away. She now wore running lights; the red lamp swung into view as he glanced, like an obscene and sardonic eye. They were, then, making eastwards. He wrought only the more lustily with the oars.

Happily the Fiske motor-boat swung at a mooring not a great distance from the shore. Surprisingly soon he had the small boat alongside. Dropping the oars, he rose, grasped the coaming and lifted himself into the cockpit. Then scrambling hastily forward to the bows, he disengaged the mooring hook and let it splash. As soon as this happened, the liberated *Trouble* began to drift sluggishly shoreward, swinging broadside to the wind.

Jumping back into the cockpit, Whitaker located the switch and closed the battery circuit. An angry buzzing broke out beneath the engine-pit hatch, but was almost instantly drowned out by the response of the motor to a single turn of the new-fangled starting-crank which Whitaker had approved on the previous morning.

He went at once to the wheel. Half a mile away the red light was slipping swiftly eastward over silvered waters. He steadied the bows toward it, listening to the regular and business-like *chug-chug* of the motor with the concentrated intentness of a physician with an ear over the heart of a patient. But the throbbing he heard was true if slow; already the boat was responding to the propeller, resisting the action of wind and water, even beginning to surge heavily

forward.

Hastily kicking the hatch cover out of the way, he bent over the open engine-pit, quickly solved the puzzle of the controlling levers, accelerated the ignition and opened the throttle wide. The motor answered this manipulation with an instantaneous change of tune; the staccato drumming of the slow speed merged into a long, incessant rumble like the roll of a dozen muffled snare-drums. The *Trouble* leaped out like a live thing, settling to its course with the fleet precision of an arrow truly loosed.

With a brief exclamation of satisfaction, Whitaker went back to the wheel, shifted the ignition from batteries to magneto; and for the first time since he had appreciated the magnitude of the outrage found himself with time to think, to take stock of his position, to consider what he had already accomplished and what he must henceforward hold himself prepared to attempt. Up to that moment he had acted almost blindly, swayed by impulse as a tree by the wind, guided by unquestioning instinct in every action. Now...

He had got the boat under way with what in retrospect appealed to him as amazing celerity, bearing in mind his unfamiliarity with its equipment. The other boat had a lead of little if any more than half a mile; or so he gauged the distance that separated them, making due allowance for the illusion of the moon-smitten night. Whether that gap was to diminish or to widen would develop before many minutes had passed. The *Trouble* was making a fair pace: roughly reckoned, between fourteen and sixteen miles an hour. He suspected the other boat of having more power, but this did not necessarily imply greater speed. At all events (he concluded) twenty minutes at the outside would see the end of the chase—however it was to end: the eastern head of the bay was not over five miles away; they could not long hold to their present course without running aground.

He hazarded wild guesses as to their plans: of which the least implausible was that they were making for some out-of-the-way landing, intending there to transfer to a motor-car. At least, this would presumably prove to be the case, if the outrage were what, at first blush, it gave evidence of being: a kidnapping uncomplicated by any fouler motive.... And what else could it be?... But who was he to say? What did he know of the woman, of her antecedents and circumstances? Nothing more than her name, that she had attracted him—as any handsome woman might have—that she had been spied upon within his personal knowledge and had now been set upon and carried off by *force majeure*.

And knowing no more than this, he had without an instant's thought of consequences elected himself her champion! O headlong and infatuate!

Probably no more severe critic of his own chivalric foolishness ever set himself to succour a damsel in distress. Withal he entertained not the shadow of a thought of drawing back. As long as the other boat remained in sight; as long as the gasoline and his strength held out; as long as the *Trouble* held together and he retained the wit to guide her—so long was Whitaker determined to stick to the wake of the kidnappers.

A little more than halfway between their starting-point and the head of the bay, the leading boat swung sharply in toward the shore, then shot into the mouth of a narrow indentation. Whitaker found that he was catching up quickly, showing that speed had been slackened for this man[oe]uvre. But the advantage was merely momentary, soon lost. The boat slipped out of sight between high banks. And he, imitating faithfully its course, was himself compelled to throttle down the engine, lest he run aground.

For two or three minutes he could see nothing of the other. Then he emerged from a tortuous and constricted channel into a deep cut, perhaps fifty feet in width and spanned by a draw-bridge and a railroad trestle. At the farther end of this tide-gate canal connecting the Great West Bay with the Great Peconic, the leading power boat was visible, heading out at full speed. And by the time he had thrown the motor of the *Trouble* back into its full stride, the half-mile lead was fully reestablished, if not improved upon.

The tide was setting in through the canal—otherwise the gates had been closed—with a strength that taxed the *Trouble* to surpass. It seemed an interminable time before the banks slipped behind and the boat picked up her heels anew and swept out over the broad reaches of the Peconic like a hound on the trail. The starboard light of the leader was slowly becoming more and more distinct as she swung again to the eastward. That way, Whitaker figured, with his brows perplexed, lay Shelter Island, Greenport, Sag Harbor (names only in his understanding) and what else he could not say. Here he found himself in strange waters, knowing no more than that the chase seemed about to penetrate a tangled maze of islands and distorted channels, in whose intricacies it should prove a matter of facility to lose a pursuer already well distanced.

Abandoning the forward wheel in favour of that at the side, near the engine pit, for a time he divided his attention between steering and tinkering with the motor,

with the result that the *Trouble* began presently to develop more speed. Slowly she crept up on the leader, until, with Robins Island abeam (though he knew it not by name) the distance between them had been abridged by half. But more than that she seemed unable to accomplish. He surmised shrewdly that the others, tardily observing his gain, had met it with an equalizing demand upon their motor—that both boats were now running at the extreme of their power. The *Trouble*, at least, could do no better. To this he must be resigned.

Empty of all other craft, weird and desolate in moonlight, the Little Peconic waters widened and then narrowed about the flying vessels. Shore lights watched them, now dim and far, now bright and near at hand. Shelter Island Sound received them, slapped their flanks encouragingly with its racing waves, sped them with an ebbing tide that tore seawards between constricted shores, carried them past high-wooded bluffs and low wastes of sedge, past simple cottage and pretentious country home, past bobbing buoys—nun and can and spar—and moored flotillas of small pleasure craft, past Sag Harbor and past Cedar Island Light, delivering them at length into the lonelier wastes of Gardiner's Bay. Their relative positions were unchanged: still the *Trouble* retained her hard-won advantage.

But it was little comfort that Whitaker derived from contemplation of this fact. He was beginning to be more definitely perplexed and distressed. He had no watch with him, no means of ascertaining the time even roughly; but unquestionably they had been upwards of two hours if not more at full tilt, and now were braving wilder waters; and still he saw no sign of anything resembling a termination of the adventure. In fact, they were leaving behind them every likely landing place.

"Damn it!" he grumbled. "What are they aiming at—Boston?"

Near the forward wheel a miniature binnacle housing a compass with phosphorescent card, advised him from time to time, as he consulted it, of the lay of their course. They were just then ploughing almost due northeast over a broad expanse, beckoned on by the distant flicker of a gas-buoy. But the information was less than worthless, and every reasonable guess he might have made as to their next move would have proved even more futile than merely idle; for when they had rounded the buoy, instead of standing, as any reasonable beings might have been expected to, on to Fisher's Island or at a tangent north toward the Connecticut littoral, they swung off something south of east—a course that could lead them nowhere but to the immensities of the sea itself.

Whitaker's breath caught in his throat as he examined this startling prospect. The Atlantic was something a trifle bigger than he had bargained for. To dare its temper, with a southwester brewing (by every weather sign he knew) in what was to all intents an open boat, since he would never be able to leave the cockpit for an instant's shelter in the cabin in any sort of a seaway—!

He shook a dubious, vastly troubled head. But he held on grimly in the face of dire forebodings.

Once out from under the lee of Gardiner's Island, a heavier run of waves beset them, catching the boats almost squarely on the beam: fortunately a sea of long, smooth, slow shouldering rollers, as yet not angry. Now and again, for all that, one would favour the *Trouble* with a quartering slap that sent a shower of spray aboard her to drench Whitaker and swash noisily round the cockpit ere the self-bailing channels could carry it off. He was quickly wet to the skin and shivering. The hour was past midnight, and the strong air whipping in from the open sea had a bitter edge. His only consolation inhered in the reflection that he had companions in his misery: those who drove the leading boat could hardly escape what he must suffer; though he hoped and believed that the woman was shut below, warm and dry in the cabin.

Out over the dark waste to starboard a white light lifted, flashing. For a while a red eye showed beneath it, staring unwinkingly with a steadfast and sardonic glare, then disappeared completely, leaving only the blinking white. Far ahead another light, fixed white, hung steadily over the port counter, and so remained for over an hour.

Then most gradually the latter wore round upon the beam and dropped astern. Whitaker guessed at random, but none the less rightly, that they were weathering Block Island to the south with a leeway of several miles. Indisputably the Atlantic held them in the hollow of its tremendous hand. The slow, eternal deep-sea swell was most perceptible: a ceaseless impulse of infinite power running through the pettier, if more threatening, drive of waves kicked up by the wind. Fortunately the course, shifting to northeast by east, presently took them out of the swinging trough of the sea. The rollers now led them on, an endless herd, one after another falling sullenly behind as the two boats shot down into their shallow intervals and began to creep slowly up over the long gray backs of those that ran before.

It was after three in the morning, and, though Whitaker had no means of

knowing it, they were on the last and longest leg of the cruise. They still had moonlight, but it was more wan and ghastly and threatened presently to fail them altogether, blotted out by the thickening weather. The wind was blowing with an insistent, unintermittent force it had not before developed. A haze, vaguely opalescent, encircled the horizon like a ghost of absinthe. The cold, formless, wavering dusk of dawn in time lent it a sickly hue of gray together with a seeming more substantial. Swathed in its smothering folds, the moon faded to the semblance of a plaque of dull silver, then vanished altogether. By four-thirty, when the twilight was moderately bright, Whitaker was barely able to distinguish the leading boat. The two seemed as if suspended, struggling like impaled insects, the one in the midst, the other near the edge, of a watery pit walled in by vapours.

He recognized in this phenomenon of the weather an exceptionally striking variation of what his sea-going experience had taught him to term a smoky sou'wester.

That hour found him on the verge of the admission that he was, as he would have said, about all in: the limit of endurance nearly approached. He was half-dazed with fatigue; his wet skin crawled with goose-flesh; his flesh itself was cold as stone. In the pit of his stomach lurked an indefinite, sickening sensation of chilled emptiness. His throat was sore and parched, his limbs stiff and aching, his face crusted with stinging particles of salt, his eyes red, sore and smarting. If his ankle troubled him, he was not aware of it; it would need sharp agony to penetrate the aura of dull, interminable misery that benumbed his consciousness.

With all this, he tormented himself with worry lest the tanks run dry. Though they had been filled only the day before, he had no clear notion of the horsepower of the motor or its hourly consumption of gasoline; and the drain upon the supply could not have been anything but extraordinary. If it were to run out before they made a landing or safe anchorage, he would find himself in ticklish straits; but this troubled him less than the fear that he might be obliged to give up the chase to which he had stuck so long and with a pertinacity which somewhat surprised even his own wonder.

And to give up now, when he had fought so far ... it was an intolerable thought. He protested against it with a vain, bitter violence void of any personal feeling or any pride of purpose and endurance. It was his solicitude for the woman alone that racked him. Whatever the enigmatic animus responsible for this outrage, it seemed most undeniable that none but men of the most desperate calibre would

have undertaken it—men in whose sight no crime would be abominable, however hideous. To contemplate her fate, if abandoned to their mercies...!

The end came just before dawn, with a swiftness that stunned the faculties—as though one saw the naked wrath of God leap like lightning from the sky.

They were precisely as they had been, within a certain distance of one another, toiling on and ever on like strange misshapen spirits doomed to run an endless race. The harsh, shapeless light of imminent day alone manufactured a colour of difference: Whitaker now was able to see as two dark shapes the men in the body of the leading boat. The woman was not visible, but the doors to the cabin were closed, confirming his surmise that she at least had been sheltered through the night. One of the men was standing by the wheel, forward, staring ahead. The other occupied a seat in the cockpit, head and shoulders alone visible above the coaming. For the most part he seemed sunk in lethargy, head fallen forward, chin on chest; but now and then he looked up and back at the pursuing boat, his face a featureless patch of bleached pink.

Now suddenly the man at the wheel cried out something in a terrible voice of fright, so high and vehement that it even carried back against the booming gale for Whitaker to hear. Simultaneously he put the wheel over, with all his might. The other jumped from his seat, only to be thrown back as the little vessel swung broadside to the sea, heeling until she lay almost on her beam ends. The next instant she ceased, incredibly, to move—hung motionless in that resistless surge, an amazing, stupefying spectacle. It seemed minutes before Whitaker could force his wits to comprehend that she had struck and lay transfixed upon some submerged rock or reef.

A long, gray roller swept upon and over her, brimming her cockpit with foaming water. As it passed he saw the half-drowned men release the coamings, to which they had clung on involuntary impulse to escape being swept away, scramble upon the cabin roof, and with one accord abandon themselves to the will of the next wave to follow. As it broke over the boat and passed, he caught an instantaneous glimpse of their heads and arms bobbing and beating frantically as they whirled off through the yeasty welter.

But he saw this without pity or compassion. If he had been able to have his will with them, he would have sunk both ten fathoms deep without an instant's respite. His throat was choked with curses that welled up from a heart wrenched and raging at this discovery of cowardice unparalleled.

They had done what they could for themselves without even hesitating to release the woman imprisoned in the cabin.



XIV

DÉBÂCLE

The *Trouble*, meantime, was closing in upon the scene of tragedy with little less than locomotive speed. Yet, however suddenly disaster had overtaken the other vessel, Whitaker saw what he saw and had time to take measures to avoid collision, if what he did was accomplished wholly without conscious thought or premeditation. He had applied the reversing gear to the motor before he knew it. Then, while the engine choked, coughing angrily, and reversed with a heavy and resentful pounding in the cylinder-heads, he began to strip off his coat. He was within ten yards of the wreck when a wave overtook the *Trouble* and sent a sheet of water sprawling over her stern to fill the cockpit ankle-deep. The next instant he swung the wheel over; the boat, moving forward despite the resistance of the propeller, drove heavily against the wreck, broadside to its stern. As this happened Whitaker leaped from one to the other, went to his knees in the cockpit of the wreck, and rose just in time to grasp the coaming and hold on against the onslaught of a hurtling comber.

It came down, an avalanche, crashing and bellowing, burying him deep in green. Thunderings benumbed him, and he began to strangle before it passed....

He found himself filling his lungs with free air and fighting his way toward the cabin doors through water waist-deep. Then he had won to them, had found and was tearing frantically at the solid brass bolt that held them shut. In another breath he had torn them open, wide, discovering the woman, her head and shoulders showing above the flood as she stood upon a transom, near the doorway, grasping a stanchion for support. Her eyes met his, black and blank with terror. He snatched through sheer instinct at a circular life-preserver that floated out toward him, and simultaneously managed to crook an arm round her neck.

Again the sea buried them beneath tons of raging dark water. Green lightnings flashed before his eyes, and in his ears there was a crashing like the crack of doom. His head was splitting, his heart on the point of breaking. The wave passed on, roaring. He could breathe. Now if ever....

As if stupefied beyond sensibility, the woman was passive to his handling. If she had struggled, if she had caught at and clung to him, or even if she had tried to help herself, he would in all likelihood have failed to cheat destruction. But she did none of these things, and he managed somehow to drag her from the cabin to the cockpit and to jam the life ring over her head and under one arm before the next wave bore down upon them.

As the wall of living green water drew near, he twisted one hand into the life-line of the cork ring and lifted the woman to the seat of the cockpit.

They were borne down, brutally buffeted, smothered and swept away. They came to the surface in the hollow of a deep, gray swale, fully fifty feet from the wreck. Whitaker retained his grasp of the life-preserver line. The woman floated easily in the support. He fancied a gleam of livelier consciousness in her staring eyes, and noticed with a curiously keen feeling of satisfaction that she was not only keeping her mouth closed, but had done so, apparently, while under water.

Relieved from danger of further submersion, at all events for the time being, he took occasion to rally his wits and look about him as well as he was able. It was easy, now, to understand how the kidnappers had come to their disaster; at this distance he could see plainly, despite the scudding haze, the profile of a high bluff of wave-channelled and bitten earth rising from a boulder-strewn beach, upon which the surf broke with a roar deafening and affrighting. Even a hardy swimmer might be pardoned for looking askance at such a landing. And Whitaker had a woman to think of and care for. Difficult to imagine how he was to drag her, and himself, through that vicious, pounding surf, without being beaten to jelly against the boulders....

As the next billow swung them high on its racing crest, he, gaining a broader field of vision, caught an instantaneous impression of a stark shoulder of the land bulking out through the mists several hundred yards to the left; suggesting that the shore curved inward at that spot. The thought came to him that if he could but weather that point, he might possibly find on the other side a better landing-place, out of the more forcible, direct drive of surf. It would be next to an impossibility to make it by swimming, with but one arm free, and further handicapped by the dead weight of the woman. And yet that way lay his only hope.

In that same survey he saw the *Trouble*, riding so low, with only bow and coamings awash, that he knew she must be waterlogged, rolling beam-on in to

the beach. Of the two men from the other boat he saw nothing whatever. And when again he had a similar chance to look, the hapless power-boat was being battered to pieces between the boulders. Even such would be their fate unless....

He put forth every ounce of strength and summoned to his aid all his water wisdom and skill. But he fought against terrible odds, and there was no hope in him as he fought.

Then suddenly, to his utter amazement, the lift of a wave discovered to him a different contour of the shore; not that the shore had changed, but his position with regard to it had shifted materially and in precisely the way that he had wished for and struggled to bring about. Instead of being carried in to the rock-strewn beach, they were in the grip of a backwash which was bearing them not only out of immediate danger, but at the same time alongshore toward the point under whose lee he hoped to find less turbulent conditions.

It was quite half the battle—more than half; he had now merely to see that the set of this backward flow did not drag them too far from shore. Renewed faith in his star, a sense of possible salvation, lent strength to his flagging efforts. Slowly, methodically, he worked with his charge toward the landward limits of the current, cunningly biding the time to abandon it. And very soon that time came; they were abreast the point; he could see something of a broad, shelving beach, backed by lesser bluffs, to leeward of it. He worked free of the set with a mighty expenditure of force, nervous and physical, and then for a time, rested, limiting his exertion strictly to the degree requisite to keep him afloat, while the waves rocked him landwards with the woman. He found leisure even to give her a glance to see whether she still lived, was conscious or comatose.

He found her not only fully aware of her position, but actually swimming a little—striking out with more freedom than might have been expected, considering how her arms and shoulders were hampered by the life-ring. A suspicion crossed his mind that most probably she had been doing as much for a considerable time, that to her as much as to himself their escape from the offshore drift had been due. Certainly he could not doubt that her energies had been subjected to a drain no less severe than he had suffered. Her face was bloodless to the lips, pale with the pallor of snow; deep bluish shadows ringed eyes that had darkened strangely, so that they seemed black rather than violet; her features were so drawn and pinched that he almost wondered how he could have thought her beautiful beyond all living women. And her wondrous hair, broken from its fastenings, undulated about her like a tangled web of sodden sunbeams.

Three times he essayed to speak before he could wring articulate sounds from his cracked lips and burning throat.

"You ... all right?"

She replied with as much difficulty:

"Yes ... you may ... let go...."

To relax the swollen fingers that grasped the life-line was pure torture.

He attempted no further communication. None, indeed, was needed. It was plain that she understood their situation.

Some minutes passed before he became aware that they were closing in quickly to the shelving beach—so swiftly, indeed, that there was reason to believe the onward urge of the waves measurably reënforced by a shoreward set of current. But if they had managed to escape the greater fury on the weather side of the point, they had still a strong and angry surf to reckon with. Only a little way ahead, breakers were flaunting their white manes, while the thunder of their breaking was as the thundering of ten thousand hoofs.

Whitaker looked fearfully again at the woman. But she was unquestionably competent to care for herself. Proof of this he had in the fact that she had contrived to slip the life-preserver up over her head and discard it altogether. Thus disencumbered, she had more freedom for the impending struggle.

He glanced over his shoulder. They were on the line of breakers. Behind them a heavy comber was surging in, crested with snow, its concave belly resembling a vast sheet of emerald. In another moment it would be upon them. It was the moment a seasoned swimmer would seize.

Whitaker felt land beneath his feet

His eye sought the girl's. In hers he read understanding and assent. Of one mind, they struck out with all their strength. The comber overtook them, clasped them

to its bosom, tossed them high upon its great glassy shoulder. They fought madly to retain that place, and to such purpose that they rode it over a dozen yards before it crashed upon the beach, annihilating itself in a furious welter of creaming waters. Whitaker felt land beneath his feet....

The rest was like the crisis of a nightmare drawn out to the limit of human endurance. Conscious thought ceased: terror and panic and the blind instinct of self-preservation—these alone remained. The undertow tore at Whitaker's legs as with a hundred murderous hands. He fought his way forward a few paces—or yard or two—only to be overwhelmed, ground down into the gravel. He rose through some superhuman effort and lunged on, like a blind, hunted thing.... He came out of it eventually to find himself well up on the beach, out of the reach of the waves. But the very earth seemed to billow about him, and he could hardly keep his feet. A numbing faintness with a painful retching at once assailed him. He was but vaguely aware of the woman reeling not far from him, but saved....

Later he found that something of the worst effects had worn away. His scattered wits were reestablishing intercommunication. The earth was once more passably firm beneath him. He was leaning against the careened hulk of a dismantled cat-boat with a gaping rent in its side. At a little distance the woman was sitting in the sands, bosom and shoulders heaving convulsively, damp, matted hair veiling her like a curtain of sunlit seaweed.

He moved with painful effort toward her. She turned up to him her pitiful, writhen face, white as parchment.

"Are you—hurt?" he managed to ask. "I mean—injured?"

She moved her head from side to side, as if she could not speak for panting.

"I'm—glad," he said dully. "You stay—here.... I'll go get help."

He raised his eyes, peering inland.

Back of the beach the land rose in long, sweeping hillocks, treeless but green. His curiously befogged vision made out a number of shapes that resembled dwellings.

"Go ... get ... help ..." he repeated thickly.

He started off with a brave, staggering rush that carried him a dozen feet inland. Then his knees turned to water, and the blackness of night shut down upon his

senses.



XV

DISCLOSURES

Sleep is a potent medicine for the mind; but sometimes the potion is compounded with somewhat too heavy a proportion of dreams and nonsense; when it's apt to play curious tricks with returning consciousness. When Whitaker awoke he was on the sands of Narragansett, and the afternoon was cloudy-warm and bright, so that his eyes were grateful for the shade of a white parasol that a girl he knew was holding over him; and his age was eighteen and his cares they were none; and the girl was saying in a lazy, laughing voice: "I love my love with a P because he's Perfectly Pulchritudinous and Possesses the Power of Pleasing, and because he Prattles Prettily and his socks are Peculiarly Purple—"

"And," the man who'd regained his youth put in, "his name is Peter and he's Positively a Pest...."

But the voice in which he said this was quite out of the picture—less a voice than a croak out of a throat kiln-dry and burning. So he grew suspicious of his senses; and when the parasol was transformed into the shape of a woman wearing a clumsy jacket of soiled covert-cloth over a non-descript garment of weirdly printed calico—then he was sure that something was wrong with him.

Besides, the woman who wasn't a parasol suddenly turned and bent over him an anxious face, exclaiming in accents of consternation: "O dear! If he's delirious—!"

His voice, when he strove to answer, rustled and rattled rather than enunciated, surprising him so that he barely managed to say: "What nonsense! I'm just thirsty!" Then the circuit of returning consciousness closed and his lost youth slipped forever from his grasp.

"I thought you would be," said the woman, calmly; "so I brought water. Here...."

She offered a tin vessel to his lips, as he lay supine, spilling a quantity of its contents on his face and neck and a very little into his mouth, if enough to make him choke and splutter. He sat up suddenly, seized the vessel—a two-quart milk-pail—and buried his face in it, gradually tilting it, while its cool, delicious

sweetness irrigated his arid tissues, until every blessed drop was drained. Then, and not till then, he lowered the pail and with sane vision began to renew acquaintance with the world.

He was sitting a trifle out of the shallow imprint of his body in the sands, in the lee of the beached cat-boat he now recalled as one might the features of an incubus. The woman he had rescued sat quite near him. The gale was still booming overhead, but now with less force (or so he fancied); and the surf still crashed in thunders on the beach a hundred feet or more away; but the haze was lighter, and the blue of the sky was visible, if tarnished.

Looking straight ahead from where he sat, the sands curved off in a wide crescent, ending in a long, sandy spit. Beyond this lay a broad expanse of maddened water, blue and white, backed by the empurpled loom of a lofty headland, dim in the smoky distance.

On his right lay the green landscape, reminiscent even as the boat was reminiscent in whose shadow he found himself: both fragments of the fugitive impressions gathered in that nightmare time of landing. There was a low, ragged earth-bank rising from the sands to a clutter of ramshackle, unpainted, hideous wooden buildings—some hardly more than sheds; back of these and stretching away on either hand, a spreading vista of treeless uplands, gently undulant and richly carpeted with grass and under-growth in a melting scheme of tender browns and greens and yellows, with here and there a trace of dusky red. Midway between the beach and where the hazy uplands lifted their blurred profile against the faded sky, set some distance apart from the community of dilapidated structures, stood a commonplace farm-house, in good repair, strongly constructed and neatly painted; with a brood of out buildings. Low stone fences lined the uplands with wandering streaks of gray. Here and there, in scattered groups and singly, sheep foraged. But they were lonely evidences of life. No human being was visible in any quarter.

With puzzled eyes Whitaker sought counsel and enlightenment of the woman, and found in her appearance quite as much to confound anticipation and deepen perplexity. She was hardly to be identified with the delightfully normal, essentially well-groomed creature he remembered. What she had worn when setting forth to call on him, accompanied by her maid, the night before, he could not say; but it certainly could have had nothing in common with her present dress—the worn, stained, misshapen jacket covering her shoulders, beneath it the calico wrapper scant and crude beyond belief, upon her feet the rusty wrecks

that once had been shoes.

As for himself, a casual examination proved that the rags and tatters adorning him were at least to be recognized as the remains of his own clothing. His coat was lost, of course, and his collar he had torn away, together with a portion of his shirt, while in the water after the disaster; but his once white flannel trousers were precious souvenirs, even if one leg was ripped open to the knee, and even though the cloth as a whole had contracted to an alarming extent—uncomfortable as well; while his tennis shoes remained tolerably intact, and the canvas brace had shrunk upon his ankle until it gripped it like a vise.

But all these details he absorbed rather than studied, in the first few moments subsequent to his awakening. His chiefest and most direct interest centred upon the woman; and he showed it clearly in the downright, straightforward sincerity of his solicitous scrutiny. And, for all the handicap of her outlandish dress, she bore inspection wonderfully well.

Marvellously recuperative, as many women are, she had regained all her ardent loveliness; or, if any trace remained of the wear and tear of her fearful experience, he was in no condition to know it, much less to carp. There was warm color in the cheeks that he had last seen livid, there was the wonted play of light and shadow in her fascinating eyes; there were gracious rounded curves where had been sunken surfaces, hollowed out by fatigue and strain; and there remained the ineluctable allurements of her tremendous vitality....

"You are not hurt?" he demanded. "You are—all right?"

"Quite," she told him with a smile significant of her appreciation of his generous feeling. "I wasn't hurt, and I've recovered from my shock and fright—only I'm still a little tired. But you?"

"Oh, I ... never better. That is, I'm rested; and there was nothing else for me to get over."

"But your ankle—?"

"I've forgotten it ever bothered me.... Haven't you slept at all?"

"Oh, surely—a great deal. But I've been awake for some time—a few hours."

"A few hours!" His stare widened with wonder. "How long have I—?"

"All day—like a log."

"But I—! What time is it?"

"I haven't a watch, but late afternoon, I should think—going by the sun. It's nearly down."

"Good heavens!" he muttered, dashed. "I *have* slept!"

"You earned your right to.... You needed it far more than I." Her eyes shone, warm with kindness.

She swayed almost imperceptibly toward him. Her voice was low pitched and a trifle broken with emotion:

"You saved my life—"

"I—? Oh, that was only what any other man—"

"None other did!"

"Please don't speak of it—I mean, consider it that way," he stammered. "What I want to know is, where are we?"

Her reply was more distant. "On an island, somewhere. It's uninhabited, I think."

He could only echo in bewilderment: "An island...! Uninhabited...!" Dismay assailed him. He got up, after a little struggle overcoming the resistance of stiff and sore limbs, and stood with a hand on the coaming of the dismantled cat-boat, raking the island with an incredulous stare.

"But those houses—?"

"There's no one in any of them, that I could find." She stirred from her place and offered him a hand. "Please help me up."

He turned eagerly, with a feeling of chagrin that she had needed to ask him. For an instant he had both her hands, warm and womanly, in his grasp, while she rose by his aid, and for an instant longer—possibly by way of reward. Then she disengaged them with gentle firmness.

She stood beside him so tall and fair, so serenely invested with the flawless dignity of her womanhood that he no longer thought of the incongruity of her grotesque garb.

"You've been up there?" he asked, far too keenly interested to scorn the self-evident.

She gave a comprehensive gesture, embracing the visible prospect. "All over.... When I woke, I thought surely ... I went to see, found nothing living except the sheep and some chickens and turkeys in the farmyard. Those nearer buildings—nothing there except desolation, ruin, and the smell of last year's fish. I think fishermen camp out here at times. And the farm-house—apparently it's ordinarily inhabited. Evidently the people have gone away for a visit somewhere. It gives the impression of being a home the year round. There isn't any boat—"

"No boat!"

"Not a sign of one, that I can find—except this wreck." She indicated the cat-boat.

"But we can't do anything with this," he expostulated.

The deep, wide break in its side placed it beyond consideration, even if it should prove possible to remedy its many other lacks.

"No. The people who live here must have a boat—I saw a mooring-buoy out there"—with a gesture toward the water. "Of course. How else could they get away?"

"The question is, how we are to get away," he grumbled, morose.

"You'll find the way," she told him with quiet confidence.

"I! I'll find the way? How?"

"I don't know—only you must. There must be some way of signalling the mainland, some means of communication. Surely people wouldn't live here, cut off from all the World.... Perhaps we'll find something in the farm-house to tell us what to do. I didn't have much time to look round. I wanted clothing, mostly—and found these awful things hanging behind the kitchen door. And then I wanted something to eat, and I found that—some bread, not too stale, and plenty of eggs in the hen-house.... And you—you must be famished!"

The reminder had an effect singularly distressing. Till then he had been much too thunderstruck by comprehension of their anomalous plight to think of himself.

Now suddenly he was stabbed through and through with pangs of desperate hunger. He turned a little faint, was seized with a slight sensation of giddiness, at the thought of food, so that he was glad of the cat-boat for support.

"Oh, you are!" Compassion thrilled her tone. "I'm so sorry. Forgive me for not thinking of it at once. Come—if you can walk." She caught his hand as if to help him onward. "It's not far, and I can fix you something quickly. Do come."

"Oh, surely," he assented, recovering. "I am half starving—and then some. Only I didn't know it until you mentioned the fact."

The girl relinquished his hand, but they were almost shoulder to shoulder as they plodded through the dry, yielding sand toward firmer ground.

"We can build a fire and have something hot," she said; "there's plenty of fuel."

"But—what did you do?"

"I—oh, I took my eggs *au naturel*—barring some salt and pepper. I was in too much of a hurry to bother with a stove—"

"Why in a hurry?"

She made no answer for an instant. He turned to look at her, wondering. To his unutterable astonishment she not only failed to meet his glance, but tried to seem unconscious of it.

The admirable ease and gracious self-possession which he had learned to associate with her personality as inalienable traits were altogether gone, just then—obliterated by a singular, exotic attitude of constraint and diffidence, of self-consciousness. She seemed almost to shrink from his regard, and held her face a little averted from him, the full lips tense, lashes low and trembling upon her cheeks.

"I was ... afraid to leave you," she said in a faltering voice, under the spell of this extraordinary mood. "I was afraid something might happen to you, if I were long away."

"But what *could* happen to me, here—on this uninhabited island?"

"I don't know.... It was silly of me, of course." With an evident exertion of will power she threw off this perplexing mood of shyness, and became more like herself, as he knew her. "Really, I presume, it was mostly that I was afraid for

myself—frightened of the loneliness, fearful lest it be made more lonely for me by some accident—"

"Of course," he assented, puzzled beyond expression, cudgelling his wits for some solution of a riddle sealed to his masculine obtuseness.

What could have happened to influence her so strangely? Could he have said or done—anything—?

The problem held him in abstraction throughout the greater part of their walk to the farm-house, though he heard and with ostensible intelligence responded to her running accompaniment of comment and suggestion....

They threaded the cluster of buildings that, their usefulness outlived, still encumbered the bluff bordering upon the beach. The most careless and superficial glance bore out the impression conveyed by the girl's description of the spot. Doorless doorways and windows with shattered sashes disclosed glimpses of interiors fallen into a state of ruin defying renovation. What remained intact of walls and roofs were mere shells half filled with an agglomeration of worthlessness—mounds of crumbled, mouldering plaster, shards, rust-eaten tins, broken bottles, shreds of what had once been garments: the whole perhaps threatened by the overhanging skeleton of a crazy staircase.... An evil, disturbing spot, exhaling an atmosphere more melancholy and disheartening than that of a rain-sodden November woodland: a haunted place, where the hand of Time had wrought devastation with the wanton efficacy of a destructive child: a good place to pass through quickly and ever thereafter to avoid.

In relief against it the uplands seemed the brighter, stretching away in the soft golden light of the descending sun. The wind sang over them a boisterous song of strength and the sweep of open spaces. The air was damp and soft and sweet with the scent of heather. Straggling sheep suspended for a moment their meditative cropping and lifted their heads to watch the strangers with timorous, stupid eyes. A flock of young turkeys fled in discordant agitation from their path.

Halfway up to the farm-house a memory shot through Whitaker's mind as startling as lightning streaking athwart a peaceful evening sky. He stopped with an exclamation that brought the girl beside him to a standstill with questioning eyes.

"But the others—!" he stammered.

"The others?" she repeated blankly.

"They—the men who brought you here—?"

Her lips tightened. She moved her head in slow negation.

"I have seen nothing of either of them."

Horror and pity filled him, conjuring up a vision of wild, raving waters, mad with blood-lust, and in their jaws, arms and heads helplessly whirling and tossing.

"Poor devils!" he muttered.

She said nothing. When he looked for sympathy in her face, he found it set and inscrutable.

He delayed another moment, thinking that soon she must speak, offer him some sort of explanation. But she remained uncommunicative. And he could not bring himself to seem anxious to pry into her affairs.

He took a tentative step onward. She responded instantly to the suggestion, but in silence.

The farm-house stood on high ground, commanding an uninterrupted sweep of the horizon. As they drew near it, Whitaker paused and turned, narrowing his eyes as he attempted to read the riddle of the enigmatic, amber-tinted distances.

To north and east the island fell away in irregular terraces to wide, crescent beaches whose horns, joining in the northeast, formed the sandy spit. To west and south the moorlands billowed up to the brink of a precipitous bluff. In the west, Whitaker noted absently, a great congregation of gulls were milling amid a cacophony of screams, just beyond the declivity. Far over the northern water the dark promontory was blending into violet shadows which, in turn, blended imperceptibly with the more sombre shade of the sea. Beyond it nothing was discernable. Southeast from it the coast, backed by dusky highlands, ran on for several miles to another, but less impressive, headland; its line, at an angle to that of the deserted island, forming a funnel-like tideway for the intervening waters fully six miles at its broadest in the north, narrowing in the east to something over three miles.

There was not a sail visible in all the blue cup of the sea.

"I don't know," said Whitaker slowly, as much to himself as to his companion. "It's odd ... it passes me...."

"Can't you tell where we are?" she inquired anxiously.

"Not definitely. I know, of course, we must be somewhere off the south coast of New England: somewhere between Cape Cod and Block Island. But I've never sailed up this way—never east of Orient Point; my boating has been altogether confined to Long Island Sound... And my geographical memory is as hazy as the day. There *are* islands off the south coast of Massachusetts—a number of them: Nantucket, you know, and Martha's Vineyard. This might be either—only it isn't, because they're summer resorts. That"—he swept his hand toward the land in the northeast—"might be either, and probably is one of 'em. At the same time, it may be the mainland. I don't know."

"Then ... then what are we to do?"

"I should say, possess our souls in patience, since we have no boat. At least, until we can signal some passing vessel. There aren't any in sight just now, but there must be some—many—in decent weather."

"How—signal?"

He looked round, shaking a dubious head. "Of course there's nothing like a flagpole here—but me, and I'm not quite long enough. Perhaps I can find something to serve as well. We might nail a plank to the corner of the roof and a table-cloth to that, I suppose."

"And build fires, by night?"

He nodded. "Best suggestion yet. I'll do that very thing to-night—after I've had a bite to eat."

She started impatiently away. "Oh, come, come! What am I thinking of, to let you stand there, starving by inches?"

They entered the house by the back door, finding themselves in the kitchen—that mean and commonplace assembly-room of narrow and pinched lives. The immaculate cleanliness of decent, close poverty lay over it all like a blight. And despite the warmth of the air outside, within it was chill—bleak with an aura of discontent bred of the incessant struggle against crushing odds which went on within those walls from year's end to year's end....

Whitaker busied himself immediately with the stove. There was a full wood-box near by; and within a very few minutes he had a brisk fire going. The woman had disappeared in the direction of the barn. She returned in good time with half a dozen eggs. Foraging in the pantry and cupboards, she brought to light a quantity of supplies: a side of bacon, flour, potatoes, sugar, tea, small stores of edibles in tins.

"I'm hungry again, myself," she declared, attacking the problem of simple cookery with a will and a confident air that promised much.

The aroma of frying bacon, the steam of brewing tea, were all but intolerable to an empty stomach. Whitaker left the kitchen hurriedly and, in an endeavour to control himself, made a round of the other rooms. There were two others on the ground floor: a "parlour," a bedroom; in the upper story, four small bedchambers; above them an attic, gloomy and echoing. Nowhere did he discover anything to moderate the impression made by the kitchen: it was all impeccably neat, desperately bare.

Depressed, he turned toward the head of the stairs. Below a door whined on its hinges, and the woman called him, her voice ringing through the hallway with an effect of richness, deep-toned and bell-true, that somehow made him think of sunlight flinging an arm of gold athwart the dusk of a darkened room. He felt his being thrill responsive to it, as fine glass sings its answer to the note truly pitched. More than all this, he was staggered by something in the quality of that full-throated cry, something that smote his memory until it was quick and vibrant, like a harp swept by an old familiar hand.

"Hugh?" she called; and again: "Hugh! Where are you?"

He paused, grasping the balustrade, and with some difficulty managed to articulate:

"Here ... coming...."

"Hurry. Everything's ready."

Waiting an instant to steady his nerves, he descended and reëntered the kitchen.

The meal was waiting—on the table. The woman, too, faced him as he entered, waiting in the chair nearest the stove. But, once within the room, he paused so long beside the door, his hand upon the knob, and stared so strangely at her, that she moved uneasily, grew restless and disturbed. A gleam of apprehension

flickered in her eyes.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked with forced lightness. "Why don't you come in and sit down?"

He said abruptly: "You called me Hugh!"

She inclined her head, smiling mischievously. "I admit it. Do you mind?"

"Mind? No!" He shut the door, advanced and dropped into his chair, still searching her face with his troubled gaze. "Only," he said—"you startled me. I didn't think—expect—hope—"

"On so short an acquaintance?" she suggested archly. "Perhaps you're right. I didn't think.... And yet—I do think—with the man who risked his life for me—I'm a little justified in forgetting even that we've never met through the medium of a conventional introduction."

"It isn't that, but...." He hesitated, trying to formulate phrases to explain the singular sensation that had assailed him when she called him: a sensation the precise nature of which he himself did not as yet understand.

She interrupted brusquely: "Don't let's waste time talking. I can't wait another instant."

Silently submissive, he took up his knife and fork and fell to.

XVI

THE BEACON

Through the meal, neither spoke; and if there were any serious thinking in process, Whitaker was not only ignorant of it, but innocent of participation therein. With the first taste of food, he passed into a state of abject surrender to sheer brutish hunger. It was not easily that he restrained himself, schooled his desires to decent expression. The smell, the taste, the sight of food: he fairly quivered like a ravenous animal under the influence of their sensual promise. He was sensible of a dull, carking shame, and yet was shameless.

The girl was the first to finish. She had eaten little in comparison; chiefly, perhaps, because she required less than he. Putting aside her knife and fork, she rested her elbows easily on the table, cradled her chin between her half-closed hands. Her eyes grew dark with speculation, and oddly lambent. He ate on, unconscious of her attitude. When he had finished, it was as if a swarm of locusts had passed that way. Of the more than plentiful meal she had prepared, there remained but a beggarly array of empty dishes to testify to his appreciation.

He leaned back a little in his chair, surprised her intent gaze, laughed sheepishly, and laughing, sighed with repletion.

A smile of sympathetic understanding darkened the corners of her lips.

"Milord is satisfied?"

"Milord," he said with an apologetic laugh, "is on the point of passing into a state of torpor. He begins to understand the inclination of the boa-constrictor—or whatever beast it is that feeds once every six months—to torp a little, gently, after its semi-annual gorge."

"Then there's nothing else...?"

"For a pipe and tobacco I would give you half my kingdom!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be. It won't harm me to do without nicotine for a day or two." But his sigh

belied the statement. "Anyway, I'll forget all about it presently. I'll be too busy."

"How?"

"It's coming on night. You haven't forgotten our signal fires?"

"Oh, no—and we must not forget!"

"Then I've got my work cut out for me, to forage for fuel. I must get right at it."

The girl rose quickly. "Do you mind waiting a little? I mustn't neglect my dishes, and—if you don't mind—I'd rather not be left alone any longer than necessary. You know...."

She ended with a nervous laugh, depreciatory.

"Why, surely. And I'll help with the dish-cloth."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. I'd rather do it all myself. Please." She waved him back to his chair with a commanding gesture. "I mean it—really."

"Well," he consented, doubtful, "if you insist...."

She worked rapidly above the steaming dish-pan, heedless of the effects upon her hands and bared arms: busy and intent upon her business, the fair head bowed, the cheeks faintly flushed.

Whitaker lounged, profoundly intrigued, watching her with sober and studious eyes, asking himself questions he found for the present unanswerable. What did she mean to him? Was what he had been at first disposed to consider a mere, light-hearted, fugitive infatuation, developing into something else, something stronger and more enduring? And what did it mean, this impression that had come to him so suddenly, within the hour, and that persisted with so much force in the face of its manifest impossibility, that he had known her, or some one strangely like her, at some forgotten time—as in some previous existence?

It was her voice that had made him think that, her voice of marvellous allure, crystal-pure, as flexible as tempered steel, strong, tender, rich, compassionate, compelling.... Where had he heard it before, and when?

And who was she, this Miss Fiske? This self-reliant and self-sufficient woman who chose to spend her summer in seclusion, with none but servants for companions; who had comprehension of machinery and ran her motor-boat

alone; who went for lonely swims in the surf at dawn; who treated men as her peers—neither more nor less; who was spied upon, shadowed, attacked, kidnapped by men of unparalleled desperation and daring; who had retained her self-possession under stress of circumstance that would have driven strong men into pseudo-hysteria; who now found herself in a position to the last degree ambiguous and anomalous, cooped up, for God only knew how long, upon a lonely hand's-breadth of land in company with a man of whom she knew little more than nothing; and who accepted it all without protest, with a serene and flawless courage, uncomplaining, displaying an implicit and unquestioning faith in her companion: what manner of woman was this?

At least one to marvel over and admire without reserve; to rejoice in and, if it could not be otherwise, to desire in silence and in pride that it should be given to one so unworthy the privileges of desiring and of service and mute adoration....

"It's almost dark," her pleasant accents broke in upon his revery. "Would you mind lighting the lamp? My hands are all wet and sticky."

"Assuredly."

Whitaker got up, found matches, and lighted a tin kerosene lamp in a bracket on the wall. The windows darkened and the walls took on a sombre yellow as the flame grew strong and steady.

"I'm quite finished." The girl scrubbed her arms and hands briskly with a dry towel and turned down her sleeves, facing him with her fine, frank, friendly smile. "If you're ready...."

"Whenever you are," he said with an oddly ceremonious bow.

To his surprise she drew back, her brows and lips contracting to level lines, her eyes informed with the light of wonder shot through with the flashings of a resentful temper.

"Why do you look at me so?" she demanded sharply. "What are you thinking...?" She checked, her frown relaxed, her smile flickered softly. "Am I such a fright—?"

"I beg your pardon," he said hastily. "I was merely thinking, wondering...."

She seemed about to speak, but said nothing. He did not round out his apology. A little distance apart, they stood staring at one another in that weird, unnatural

light, wherein the glow from the lamp contended garishly with the ebbing flush of day. And again he was mute in bewildered inquiry before that puzzling phenomenon of inscrutable emotion which once before, since his awakening, had been disclosed to him in her mantling colour, in the quickening of her breath, and the agitation of her bosom, in the timid, dumb questioning of eyes grown strangely shy and frightened.

And then, in a twinkling, an impatient gesture exorcised the inexplicable mood that had possessed her, and she regained her normal, self-reliant poise as if by witchcraft.

"What a quaint creature you are, Hugh," she cried, her smile whimsical. "You've a way of looking at one that gives me the creeps. I see things—things that aren't so, and never were. If you don't stop it, I swear I shall think you're the devil! Stop it—do you hear me, sir? And come build our bonfire."

She swung lithely away and was out of the house before he could regain his wits and follow.

"I noticed a lot of old lumber around the barn," she announced, when he joined her in the dooryard—"old boxes and barrels and rubbish. And a wheelbarrow. So you won't have far to go for fuel. Now where do you purpose building the beacon?"

He cast round, peering through the thickening shades of dusk, and eventually settled upon a little knoll a moderate distance to leeward of the farm-house. Such a location would be safest, even though the wind was falling steadily with the flight of the hours; and the fire would be conspicuously placed for observation from any point in the north and east.

Off in the north, where Whitaker had marked down the empurpled headland during the afternoon, a white light lanced the gloom thrice with a sweeping blade, vanished, and was replaced by a glare of angry red, which in its turn winked out.

Whitaker watched it briefly with the finger-tips of his right hand resting lightly on the pulse in his left wrist. Then turning away, he announced:

"Three white flashes followed by a red at intervals of about ten seconds. Wonder what *that* stands for!"

"What is it?" the girl asked. "A ship signalling?"

"No; a lighthouse—probably a first-order light—with its characteristic flash, not duplicated anywhere along this section of the Atlantic coast. If I knew anything of such matters, it would be easy enough to tell from that just about where we are. *If* that information would help us."

"But, if we can see their light, they'll see ours,—won't they?—and send to find out what's the matter."

"Perhaps. At least—let's hope so. They're pretty sure to see it, but as to their attaching sufficient importance to it to investigate—that's a question. They may not know that the people who live here are away. They may think the natives here are merely celebrating their silver wedding, or Roosevelt's refusal of a third term, or the accession of Edward the Seventh—or anything."

"Please don't be silly—and discouraging. Do get to work and build the fire."

He obeyed with humility and expedition.

As she had said, there was no lack of fodder for the flames. By dint of several wheelbarrow trips between the knoll and the farmyard, he had presently constructed a pyre of impressive proportions; and by that time it was quite dark—so dark, indeed, that he had been forced to hunt up a yard lantern, carrying the which the girl had accompanied him on his two final trips.

"Here," he said clumsily, when all was ready, offering her matches. "You light it, please—for luck."

Their fingers touched as she took the matches. Something thumped in his breast, and a door opened in the chambers of his understanding, letting in light.

Kneeling at the base of the pyre, she struck a match and applied it to a quantity of tinder-dry excelsior. The stuff caught instantly, puffing into a brilliant patch of blaze; she rose and stood back, *en silhouette*, delicately poised at attention, waiting to see that her work was well done. He could not take his gaze from her.

So what he had trifled and toyed with, fought with and prayed against, doubted and questioned, laughed at and cried down, was sober, painful fact. Truth, heart-rending to behold in her stark, shining beauty, had been revealed to him in that moment of brushing finger-tips, and he had looked in her face and known his unworthiness; and he trembled and was afraid and ashamed....

Spreading swiftly near the ground, the flames mounted as quickly, with

snappings and cracklings, excavating in the darkness an arena of reddish radiance.

The girl retreated to his side, returning the matches.

A tongue of flame shot up from the peak of the pyre, and a column of smoke surpassed it, swinging off to leeward in great, red-bosomed volutes and whorls picked out with flying regiments of sparks.

"You'd think they couldn't help understanding that it's a signal of distress."

"You would think so. I hope so. God knows I hope so!"

There was a passion in his tones to make her lift wondering eyes to his.

"Why do you say that—that way? We should be thankful to be safe—alive. And we're certain to get away before long."

"I know—yes, I know."

"But you spoke so strangely!"

"I'm sorry. I'd been thinking clearly; for the first time, I believe, since I woke up."

"About what? Us? Or merely me?"

"You. I was considering you alone. It isn't right that you should be in this fix. I'd give my right hand to remedy it!"

"But I'm not distressed. It isn't altogether pleasant, but it can't be helped and might easily have been worse."

"And still I can't help feeling, somehow, the wretched injustice of it to you. I want to protest—to do something to mend matters."

"But since you can't"—she laughed in light mockery, innocent of malice—"since we're doing our best, let's be philosophical and sit down over there and watch to see if there's any answer to our signal."

"There won't be."

"You *are* a difficult body. Never mind. Come along!" she insisted with pretty imperiousness.

They seated themselves with their backs to the fire and at a respectful distance from it, where they could watch the jetting blades of light that ringed the far-off headland. Whitaker reclined on an elbow, relapsing into moody contemplation. The girl drew up her knees, clasped her arms about them, and stared thoughtfully into the night.

Behind them the fire flamed and roared, volcanic. All round it in a radius of many yards the earth glowed red, while, to one side, the grim, homely façade of the farm-house edged blushing out of the ambient night, all its staring windows bloodshot and sinister.

The girl stirred uneasily, turning her head to look at Whitaker.

"You know," she said with a confused attempt to laugh: "this is really no canny, this place. Or else I'm balmy. I'm seeing things—shapes that stir against the blackness, off there beyond the light, moving, halting, staring, hating us for butchering their age-old peace and quiet. Maybe I'll forget to see them, if you'll talk to me a little."

"I can't talk to you," he said, ungracious in his distress.

"You can't? It's the first time it's been noticeable, then. What's responsible for this all-of-a-sudden change of heart?"

"That's what's responsible." The words spoke themselves almost against his will.

"What—change of heart?"

"Yes," he said sullenly.

"You're very obscure. Am I to understand that you've taken a sudden dislike to me, so that you can't treat me with decent civility?"

"You know that isn't so."

"Surely"—she caught her breath sharply, paused for an instant, then went on—"surely you don't mean the converse!"

"I've always understood women knew what men meant before the men did, themselves." His voice broke a little. "Oh, can't you see how it is with me? Can't you see?" he cried. "God forgive me! I never meant to inflict this on you, at such a time! I don't know why I have...."

"You mean," she stammered in a voice of amaze—"you mean—love?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"No ... not after what's happened, I presume. You wouldn't have followed—you wouldn't have fought so to save me from drowning—I *suppose*—if you hadn't—cared.... But I didn't know."

She sighed, a sigh plaintive and perturbed, then resumed: "A woman never knows, really. She may suspect; in fact, she almost always does; she is obliged to be so continually on guard that suspicion is ingrained in her nature; but...."

"Then you're not—offended?" he asked, sitting up.

"Why should I be?" The firelight momentarily outlined the smiling, half wistful countenance she turned to him.

"But"—he exploded with righteous wrath, self-centred—"only a scoundrel would force his attentions upon a woman, in such circumstances! You can't get away from me—I may be utterly hateful to you—"

"Oh, you're not." She laughed quietly. "You're not; nor am I distressed—because of the circumstances that distress you, at least. What woman would be who received as great and honourable a compliment—from you, Hugh? Only"—again the whimsical little laugh that merged into a smothered sigh—"I wish I knew!"

"Wish you knew what?"

"What's going on inside that extraordinary head of yours: what's in the mind behind the eyes that I so often find staring at me so curiously."

He bowed that head between hands that compressed cruelly his temples. "I wish *I* knew!" he groaned in protest. "It's a mystery to me, the spell you've laid upon my thoughts. Ever since we met you've haunted me with a weird suggestion of some elusive relationship, some entanglement—intimacy—gone, perished, forgotten.... But since you called me to supper, a while ago, by name—I don't know why—your voice, as you used it then, has run through my head and through, teasing my memory like a strain of music from some half-remembered song. It half-maddens me; I feel so strongly that everything would be so straight and plain and clear between us, if I could only fasten upon that fugitive, indefinable something that's always fluttering just beyond my grasp!"

"You mean all that—honestly?" she demanded in an oddly startled voice.

"Most honestly." He looked up in excitement. "You don't mean *you've* felt anything of the sort?"

"No, I"—her voice broke as if with weariness—"I don't mean that, precisely. I mean.... Probably I don't know what I do mean. I'm really very tired, too tired to go on, just now—to sit here with you, badgering our poor wits with esoteric subtleties. I think—do you mind?—I'd better go in."

She rose quickly, without waiting for his hand. Whitaker straightened out his long body with more deliberation, standing finally at full height, his grave and moody countenance strongly relieved in the ruddy glow, while her face was all in shadow.

"One moment," he begged humbly—"before we go in. I ... I've something else to say to you, if I may."

She waited, seriously attentive.

"I haven't played fair, I'm afraid," he said, lowering his head to escape her steadfast gaze. "I've just told you that I love you, but...."

"Well?" she demanded in an odd, ringing voice. "Isn't it true?"

"True?" He laughed unnaturally. "It's so true I—wish I had died before I told you!"

"Why?"

"Because ... because you didn't resent my telling you...."

It seemed impossible for him to speak connectedly or at any length, impossible to overcome his distaste for the hateful confession he must make. And she was intolerably patient with him; he resented her quiet, contained patience; while he feared, yet he was relieved when she at length insisted: "Well?"

"Since you didn't resent that confession, I am led to believe you don't—exactly—dislike me. That makes it just so much the harder to forfeit your regard."

"But must you?"

"Yes."

"Please explain," she urged, a trace wearily.

"I who love you with all my heart and mind and soul—I am not free to love you."

"You aren't free—!"

"I... No."

After several moments, during which he fought vainly with his inability to go on, she resumed her examination with a manner aloof and yet determined:

"You've told me so much, I think you can hardly refuse to tell more."

"I," he stammered—"I am already married."

She gave a little, stifled cry—whether of pain or horror or of indignation he could not tell.

"I'm sorry—I—" he began.

"Don't you think you might have thought of this before?"

"I ... you don't understand—"

"Are you in the habit of declaring yourself first and confessing later?... Don't answer, if you don't want to. I've no real right to know. I asked out of simple curiosity."

"If you'd only listen to me!" he broke out suddenly. "The thing's so strange, so far off—dreamlike—that I forget it easily."

"So it would seem," she put in cruelly.

"Please hear me!"

"Surely you must see I am listening, Mr. Whitaker."

"It was several years ago—nearly seven. I was on the point of death—had been told to expect death within a few months.... In a moment of sentimental sympathy—I wasn't at all myself—I married a girl I'd never seen before, to help her out of a desperate scrape she'd got into—meaning simply to give her the protection of my name. She was in bad trouble.... We never lived together, never even saw one another after that hour. She had every reason to think me dead—as

I should have been, by rights. But now she knows that I'm alive—is about to sue for a divorce.... Now you know just what sort of a contemptible hound I am, and why it was so hard to tell you."

After a long pause, during which neither stirred, she told him, in a faint voice: "Thank you."

She moved toward the house.

"I throw myself upon your mercy—"

"Do you?" she said coolly, pausing.

"If you will forgive me—"

"Oh, I forgive you, Mr. Whitaker. My heart is really not quite so fragile as all this implies."

"I didn't mean that—you know I didn't. I'm only trying to assure you that I won't bother you—with this trouble of mine—again. I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"I am not."

The words were terse and brusque enough; the accompanying swift gesture, in which her hand rested momentarily on his arm as if in confidence approaching affection, he found oddly contradictory.

"You don't see—anything?" she said with an abrupt change of manner, swinging to the north.

He shaded his eyes, peering intently through the night, closely sweeping its encompassing obscurity from northwest to southeast.

"Nothing," he said, dropping his hand. "If there were a boat heading this way, we couldn't help seeing her lights."

"Then there's no use waiting?"

"I'm afraid not. They'd hardly come to-night, anyway; more likely by daylight, if they should happen to grow suspicious of our beacon."

"Then I think I'll go to bed. I'm very, very tired, in spite of my sleep on the sands. That didn't rest me, really."

"Of course."

"And you—?"

"Oh, I'm all right."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Why—keep the fire going, I presume."

"Is it necessary, do you think? Or even worth while?"

He made a doubtful gesture.

"I wish," she continued—"I wish you'd stay in the house. I—I'm really a bit timid: unnerved, I presume. It's been, you know, rather a harrowing experience. Anything might happen in a place like this...."

"Oh, certainly," he agreed, something constrained. "I'd feel more content, myself, to know I was within call if anything should alarm you."

They returned to the kitchen.

In silence, while Whitaker fidgeted about the room, awkward and unhappy, the girl removed a glass lamp from the shelf above the sink, assured herself that it was filled, and lighted it. Then, over her shoulder:

"I hope you don't mean to stay up all night."

"I—well, I'm really not sleepy."

"Oh, but you are," she contradicted calmly.

"Honestly; I slept so long down there on the beach—"

"Please don't try to deceive me. I know that slumbers like those—of exhaustion—don't rest one as they should. Besides, you show how tired you are in every gesture, in the way you carry yourself, in your very eyes."

"You're mistaken," he contended, looking away for fear lest his eyes were indeed betraying him. "Besides, I mean merely to sit up here, to see that everything is all right."

"How should it be otherwise?" She laughed the thought away, yet not unkindly. "This island is as empty as a last-year's bird's-nest. What could happen to harm,

or even alarm us—or me?"

"You never can tell—"

"Nonsense! I'm not in the least frightened. And furthermore I shan't sleep a wink—shan't even try to sleep unless you promise me not to be silly. There's a comfortable room right at the foot of the stairs. If you sleep there, I shall feel more than secure. Will you promise?"

He gave in at discretion: "Yes; I promise."

"As soon as you feel the least need of sleep, you'll go to bed?"

"I promise."

"Very well, then."

The insistent note faded from her tones. She moved toward the table, put the lamp down, and hesitated in one of her strange, unpresaged moods of diffidence, looking down at the finger-tips with which she traced a meaningless pattern on the oil-cloth.

"You are kind," she said abruptly, her head bowed, her face hidden from him.

"Kind!" he echoed, dumfounded.

"You are kind and sweet and generous to me," she insisted in a level voice. "You have shown me your heart—the heart of a gentleman—without reserve; but of me you have asked nothing."

"I don't understand—"

"I mean, you haven't once referred to what happened last night. You've been content to let me preserve my confidence, to remain secretive and mysterious in your sight.... That is how I seem to you—isn't it?"

"Secretive and mysterious? But I have no right to your confidence; your affairs are yours, inviolable, unless you choose to discuss them."

"You would think that way—of course!" Suddenly she showed him her face illumined with its frank, shadowy smile, her sweet eyes, kind and as fearless as the eyes of a child. "Other men would not, I know. And you have every right to know."

"I—!"

"You; and I shall tell you.... But not now; there's too much to tell, to explain and make understandable; and I'm too terribly tired. To-morrow, perhaps—or when we escape from this weird place, when I've had time to think things out—"

"At your pleasure," he assented gently. "Only—don't let anything worry you."

Impulsively she caught both his hands in a clasp at once soft and strong, wholly straightforward and friendly.

"Do you know," she said in a laughing voice, her head thrown back, soft shadows darkening her mystical eyes, the lamplight caressing her hair until it was as if her head were framed in a halo of pure gold, bright against the sombre background of that mean, bare room—"Do you know, dear man, that you are quite, quite blind?"

"I think," he said with his twisted smile, "it would be well for me if I were physically blind at this instant!"

She shook her head in light reproof.

"Blind, quite blind!" she repeated. "And yet—I'm glad it's so with you. I wouldn't have you otherwise for worlds."

She withdrew her hand, took up the lamp, moved a little away from him, and paused, holding his eyes.

"For Love, too, is blind," she said softly, with a quaint little nod of affirmation. "Good night."

He started forward, eyes aflame; took a single pace after her; paused as if against an unseen barrier. His hands dropped by his sides; his chin to his chest; the light died out of his face and left it gray and deeply lined.

In the hallway the lamp's glow receded, hesitated, began to ascend, throwing upon the unpapered walls a distorted silhouette of the rude balustrade; then disappeared, leaving the hall cold with empty darkness.

An inexplicable fit of trembling seized Whitaker. Dropping into a chair, he pillowed his head on his folded arms. Presently the seizure passed, but he remained moveless. With the drift of minutes, insensibly his taut muscles relaxed. Odd visions painted the dark tapestries of his closed eyes: a fragment of

swinging seas shining in moonlight; white swords of light slashing the dark night round their unseen eyrie; the throat of a woman swelling firm and strong as a tower of ivory, tense from the collar of her cheap gown to the point of her tilted chin; a shrieking, swirling rabble of gulls seen against the fading sky, over the edge of a cliff....

He slept.

Through the open doorway behind him and through the windows on either hand drifted the sonorous song of the surf, a muted burden for the stealthy disturbances of the night in being.



XVII

DISCOVERY

In time the discomfort of his posture wore through the wrappings of slumber. He stirred drowsily, shifted, and discovered a cramp in his legs, the pain of which more effectually aroused him. He rose, yawned, stretched, grimaced with the ache in his stiffened limbs, and went to the kitchen door.

There was no way to tell how long he had slept. The night held black—the moon not yet up. The bonfire had burned down to a great glowing heap of embers. The wind was faint, a mere whisper in the void. There was a famous show of stars, clear, bright, cold and distant.

Closing and locking the door, he found another lamp, lighted it, and took it with him to the corner bedchamber, where he lay down without undressing. He had, indeed, nothing to change to.

A heavy lethargy weighed upon his faculties. No longer desperately sleepy, he was yet far from rested. His body continued to demand repose, but his mind was ill at ease.

He napped uneasily throughout the night, sleeping and waking by fits and starts, his brain insatiably occupied with an interminable succession of wretched dreams. The mad, distorted face of Drummond, bleached and degraded by his slavery to morphine, haunted Whitaker's consciousness like some frightful and hideous Chinese mask. He saw it in a dozen guises, each more pitiful and terrible than the last. It pursued him through eons of endless night, forever at his shoulder, blind and weeping. Thrice he started from his bed, wide awake and glaring, positive that Drummond had been in the room but the moment gone.... And each time that he lay back and sleep stole in numbing waves through his brain, he passed into subconsciousness with the picture before his eyes of a seething cloud of gulls seen against the sky, over the edge of a cliff.

He was up and out in the cool of dawn, before sunrise, delaying to listen for some minutes at the foot of the stairway. But he heard no sound in that still house, and there was no longer the night to affright the woman with hinted threats of nameless horrors lurking beneath its impenetrable cloak. He felt no

longer bound to stand sentinel on the threshold of her apprehensions. He went out.

The day would be clear: he drew promise of this from the gray bowl of the sky, cloudless, touched with spreading scarlet only on its eastern rim. There was no wind; from the cooling ashes of yesternight's beacon-fire a slim stalk of smoke grew straight and tall before it wavered and broke. The voice of the sea had fallen to a muffled throbbing.

In the white magic of air like crystal translucent and motionless, the world seemed more close-knitted and sane. What yesterday's veiling of haze had concealed was now bold and near. In the north the lighthouse stood like a horn on the brow of the headland, the lamp continuing to flash even though its light was darkened, its beams out-stripped by the radiant forerunners of the sun. Beyond it, over a breadth of water populated by an ocean-going tug with three barges in tow and a becalmed lumber schooner, a low-lying point of land (perhaps an island) thrust out into the west. On the nearer land human life was quickening: here and there pale streamers of smoke swung up from hidden chimneys on its wooded rises.

Whitaker eyed them with longing. But they were distant from attainment by at the least three miles of tideway through which strong waters raced—as he could plainly see from his elevation, in the pale, streaked and wrinkled surface of the channel.

He wagged a doubtful head, and scowled: no sign in any quarter of a boat heading for the island, no telling when they'd be taken off the cursed place!

In his mutinous irritation, the screaming of the gulls, over in the west, seemed to add the final touch of annoyance, a superfluous addition to the sum of his trials. Why need they have selected that island for their insane parliament? Why must his nerves be racked forever by their incessant bickering? He had dreamed of them all night; must he endure a day made similarly distressing?

What *was* the matter with the addle-pated things, anyway?

There was nothing to hinder him from investigating for himself. The girl would probably sleep another hour or two.

He went forthwith, dulling the keen edge of his exasperation with a rapid tramp of half a mile or so over the uneven uplands.

The screaming was well-nigh deafening by the time he stood upon the verge of the bluff; beneath him gulls clouded the air like bees swarming. And yet he experienced no difficulty in locating the cause of their excitement.

Below, a slow tide crawled, slaving, up over the boulder-strewn sands. In a wave-scooped depression between two of the larger boulders, the receding waters had left a little, limpid pool. In the pool lay the body of a man, face downward, limbs frightfully sprawling. Gulls fought for place upon his back.

The discovery brought with it no shock of surprise to the man on the bluff: horror alone. He seemed to have known all along that such would be the cause. Yet he had never consciously acknowledged the thought. It had lain sluggish in the deeps beneath surfaces agitated by emotions more poignant and immediate. Still, it had been there—that understanding. That, and that only, had so poisoned his rest...

But he shrank shuddering from the thought of the work that lay to his hand—work that must be accomplished at once and completely; for she must know nothing of it. She had suffered enough, as it was.

Hastening back to the farmstead, he secured a spade from the barn and made his way quickly down to the beach by way of the road through the cluster of deserted fishermen's huts.

Fifteen minutes' walk brought him to the pool. Ten minutes' hard work with the spade sufficed to excavate a shallow trench in the sands above high-water mark. He required as much time again to nerve himself to the point of driving off the gulls and moving the body. There were likewise crabs to be dealt with....

When it was accomplished, and he had lifted the last heavy stone into place above the grave, he dragged himself back along the beach and round a shoulder of the bluff to a spot warmed by the rays of the rising sun. There, stripping off his rags, he waded out into the sea and cleansed himself as best he might, scrubbing sand into his flesh until it was scored and angry; then crawled back, resumed his garments, and lay down for a time in the strength-giving light, feeling giddy and faint with the after-effects of the insuppressible nausea which had prolonged intolerably his loathsome task.

Very gradually the bluish shadows faded from about his mouth and eyes, and natural colour replaced his pallor. And presently he rose and went slowly up to the house, all his being in a state of violent rebellion against the terror and

mystery of life.

What the gulls and the crabs and the shattering surf had left had been little, but enough for indisputable identification.

Whitaker had buried Drummond.



XVIII

BLIGHT

By the time he got back to the farm-house, the woman was up, dressed in the rent and stained but dry remnants of her own clothing (for all their defects, infinitely more becoming than the garments to which she had been obliged to resort the previous day) and busy preparing breakfast.

There was no question but that her rest had been sound and undisturbed. If her recuperative powers had won his envy before, now she was wholly marvellous in his eyes. Her radiant freshness dazzled, her elusive but absolute quality of charm bewitched—and her high spirits dismayed him. He entered her presence reluctantly, yielding alone to the spur of necessity. To keep out of her way was not only an impossibility, but would have served to rouse her suspicions; and she must not know: however difficult the task, he must dissemble, keep her in ignorance of his discovery. On that point he was resolved.

"Well, sir!" she called heartily over her shoulder. "And where, pray, have you been all this long time?"

"I went for a swim," he said evasively—"thought it might do me good."

"You're not feeling well?" She turned to look him over.

He avoided her eye. "I had a bad night—probably because I had too much sleep during the day. I got up feeling pretty rusty—the weight of my years. Cold water's ordinarily a specific for that sort of thing, but it didn't seem to work this time."

"Still got the hump, eh?"

"Still got the hump," he assented, glad thus to mask his unhappiness.

"Breakfast and a strong cup of tea or two will fix that," she announced with confidence. "It's too bad there's no coffee."

"Yes," he said—"sorry!"

"No signs of a response to our C. Q. D.?"

"None as yet. Of course, it's early."

He lounged out of the kitchen with a tin bowl, a towel and a bar of yellow soap, and splashed conscientiously at the pump in the dooryard, taking more time for the job than was really necessary.

From her place by the stove, she watched him through a window, her eyes like a sunlit sea dappled with shadows of clouds speeding before the wind.

He lingered outside until she called him to breakfast.

His stout attempts to match her cheerfulness during the meal fell dismally short of conviction. After two or three false starts he gave it up and took refuge in his plea of indisposition. She humoured him with a covert understanding that surmised more in a second than he could have compressed into a ten-minute confession.

The meal over, he rose and sidled awkwardly toward the door.

"You'll be busy for a while with the dishes and things, won't you?" he asked with an air meant to seem guileless.

"Oh, yes; for some time," she replied quickly.

"I—I think I'll take a stroll round the island. There might be something like a boat hidden away somewhere along the beach."

"You prefer to go alone?"

"If you don't mind."

"Not in the least. I've plenty to occupy my idle hands. If I can find needle and thread, for instance...." She indicated her clothing with a humorously rueful gesture.

"To be sure," he agreed, far too visibly relieved. Then his wits stumbled. "I want to think out some things," he added most superfluously.

"You won't go out of sight?" she pleaded through the window.

"It can't be done," he called back, strolling out of the dooryard with much show of idle indecision.

His real purpose was, in fact, definite. There was another body to be accounted for. It was quite possible that the sea might have given it up at some other point along the island coast. True: there was no second gathering of gulls to lend colour to this grisly theory; yet the danger was one to be provided against, since she was not to know.

Starting from its northwestern extreme, he made a complete circuit of the island, spending the greater part of the time along the edges of the western and southern bluffs, where he had not seldom to pause and scrutinize carefully the beach below, to make sure he had been deceived by some half-buried rock or curiously shaped boulder.

To his intense relief, he made no further discovery other than a scattering drift of wreckage from the motor-boats.

By the time he had finished, the morning was well advanced. He turned at length and trudged wearily up from the northern beach, through the community of desolation, back toward the farm-house.

Since breakfast he had seen nothing of the girl; none of the elaborately casual glances which he had from time to time cast inland had discovered any sign of her. But now she appeared in the doorway, and after a slight pause, as of indecision, moved down the path to meet him.

He was conscious that, at sight of her, his pulses quickened. Something swelled in his breast, something tightened the muscles of his throat. The way of her body in action, the way of the sun with her hair...!

Dismay shook him like an ague; he felt his heart divided against itself; he was so glad of her, and so afraid... He could not keep his eyes from her, nor could he make his desire be still; and yet ... and yet....

Walking the faster of the two, she met him midway between the house and the beach.

"You've taken your time, Mr. Whitaker," said she.

"It was a bit of a walk," he contended, endeavouring to imitate her lightness of manner.

They paused beside one of the low stone walls that meandered in a meaningless fashion this way and that over the uplands. With a satisfied manner that

suggested she had been seeking just that very spot, the girl sat down upon the lichened stones, then looked up to him with a smile and a slight movement of the head that plainly invited him to a place beside her.

He towered above her, darkly reluctant.

"Do sit down. You must be tired."

"I am."

Dubiously he seated himself at a little distance.

"And only your pains for your trouble?"

He nodded.

"I watched you, off and on, from the windows. You might have been looking for a pin, from your painstaking air, off there along the cliffs."

He nodded again, gloomily. Her comment seemed to admit of no more compromising method of reply.

"Then you've nothing to tell me?"

He pursed his lips, depreciatory, lifted his shoulders not quite happily, and swung one lanky leg across the other as he slouched, morosely eyeing the sheets of sapphire that made their prison walls.

"No. There's no good news yet."

"And you've no inclination to talk to me, either?"

"I've told you I don't feel—well—exactly light-hearted this morning."

There was a little silence. She watched him askance with her fugitive, shadowy, sympathetic and shrewd smile.

"Must I make talk, then?" she demanded at length.

"If we must, I suppose—you'll have to show the way. My mind's hardly equal to trail-breaking to-day."

"So I shall, then. Hugh..." She leaned toward him, dropping her hand over his own with an effect of infinite comprehension. "Hugh," she repeated, meeting his gaze squarely as he looked up, startled—"what's the good of keeping up the

make-believe? You *know!*"

The breath clicked in his throat, and his glance wavered uneasily, then steadied again to hers. And through a long moment neither stirred, but sat so, eye to eye, searching each the other's mind and heart.

At length he confessed it with an uncertain, shamefaced nod.

"That's right," he said: "I do know—now."

She removed her hand and sat back without lessening the fixity of her regard.

"When did you find it out?"

"This morning. That is, it came to me all of a sudden—" His gaze fell; he stammered and felt his face burning.

"Hugh, that's not quite honest. I know you hadn't guessed, last night—I *know* it. How did you come to find it out this morning? Tell me!"

He persisted, as unconvincing as an unimaginative child trying to explain away a mischief:

"It was just a little while ago. I was thinking things over—"

"Hugh!"

He shrugged sulkily.

"Hugh, look at me!"

Unwillingly he met her eyes.

"How did you find out?"

He was an inexpert liar. Under the witchery of her eyes, his resource failed him absolutely. He started to repeat, stammered, fell still, and then in a breath capitulated.

"Before you were up—I meant to keep this from you—down there on the beach—I found Drummond."

"Drummond!"

It was a cry of terror. She started back from him, eyes wide, cheeks whitening.

"I'm sorry.... But I presume you ought to know.... His body ... I buried it...."

She gave a little smothered cry, and seemed to shrink in upon herself, burying her face in her hands—an incongruous, huddled shape of grief, there upon the gray stone wall, set against all the radiant beauty of the exquisite, sun-gladdened world.

He was patient with her, though the slow-dragging minutes during which she neither moved nor made any sound brought him inexpressible distress, and he seemed to age visibly, his face, settling in iron lines, gray with suffering.

At length a moan—rather, a wail—came from the stricken figure beside him:

"Ah, the pity of it! the pity of it!... What have I done that this should come to me!"

He ventured to touch her hand in gentle sympathy.

"Mary," he said, and hesitated with a little wonder, remembering that this was the first time he had ever called her by that name—"Mary, did you care for him so much?"

She sat, mute, her face averted and hidden.

"I'd give everything if I could have mended matters. I was fond of Drummond—poor soul! If he'd only been frank with me from the start, all this could have been avoided. As soon as I knew—that night when I recognized you on the stage—I went at once to you to say I would clear out—not stand in the way of your happiness. I would have said as much to him, but he gave me no chance."

"Don't blame him," she said softly. "He wasn't responsible."

"I know."

"How long have you known?" She swung suddenly to face him.

"For some time—definitely, for two or three days. He tried twice to murder me. The first time he must have thought he'd done it.... Then he tried again, the night before you were carried off. Ember suspected, watched for him, and caught him. He took him away, meaning to put him in a sanitarium. I don't understand how he got away—from Ember. It worries me—on Ember's account. I hope nothing has happened to him."

"Oh, I hope not!"

"You knew—I mean about the cause—the morphine?"

"I never guessed until that night. Then, as soon as I got over the first awful shock, I realized he was a madman. He talked incoherently—raved—shouted—threatened me with horrible things. I can't speak of them. Later, he quieted down a little, but that was after he had come down into the cabin to—to drug himself.... It was very terrible—that tiny, pitching cabin, with the swinging, smoking lamp, and the madman sitting there, muttering to himself over the glass in which the morphine was dissolving.... It happened three times before the wreck; I thought I should go out of my own mind."

She shuddered, her face tragic and pitiful.

"Poor girl!" he murmured inadequately.

"And that—that was why you were searching the beach so closely!"

"Yes—for the other fellow. I—didn't find him."

A moment later she said thoughtfully: "It was the man you saw watching me on the beach, I think."

"I assumed as much. Drummond had a lot of money, I fancy—enough to hire a desperate man to do almost anything.... The wages of sin—"

"Don't!" she begged. "Don't make me think of that!"

"Forgive me," he said.

For a little she sat, head bowed, brooding.

"Hugh!" she cried, looking up to search his face narrowly—"Hugh, you've not been pretending—?"

"Pretending?" he repeated, thick-witted.

"Hugh, I could never forgive you if you'd been pretending. It would be too cruel.... Ah, but you haven't been! Tell me you haven't!"

"I don't understand.... Pretending what?"

"Pretending you didn't know who I was—pretending to fall in love with me just

because you were sorry for me, to make me think it was *me* you loved and not the woman you felt bound to take care of, because you'd—you had—"

"Mary, listen to me," he interrupted. "I swear I didn't know you. Perhaps you don't understand how wonderfully you've changed. It's hard for me to believe you can be one with the timid and distracted little girl I married that rainy night. You're nothing like.... Only, that night on the stage, as *Joan Thursday*, you were that girl again. Max told me it was make-up; I wouldn't believe him; to me you hadn't changed at all; you hadn't aged a day.... But that morning when I saw you first on the Great South Beach—I never dreamed of associating you with my wife. Do you realize I had never seen you in full light—never knew the colour of your hair?... Dear, I didn't know, believe me. It was you who bewitched me—not the wife for whose sake I fought against what I thought infatuation for you. I loved—I love you only, you as you are—not the poor little girl of the Commercial House."

"Is it true?" she questioned sadly, incredulous.

"It is true, Mary. I love you."

"I have loved you always," she said softly between barely parted lips—"always, Hugh. Even when I thought you dead.... I did believe that you were drowned out there, Hugh! You know that, don't you?"

"I have never for an instant questioned it."

"It wouldn't be like you to, my dear; it wouldn't be you, my Hugh.... But even then I loved the memory of you.... You don't know what you have meant in my life, Hugh. Always, always you have stood for all that was fine and strong and good and generous—my gentlest man, my knight *sans peur et sans reproche*.... No other man I ever knew—no, let me say it!—ever measured up to the standard you had set for me to worship. But, Hugh—you'll understand, won't you?—about the others—?"

"Please," he begged—"please don't harrow yourself so, Mary!"

"No; I must tell you.... The world seemed so empty and so lonely, Hugh: my Galahad gone, never to return to me.... I tried to lose myself in my work, but it wasn't enough. And those others came, beseeching me, and—and I liked them. There was none like you, but they were all good men of their kind, and I liked them. They made love to me and—I was starving for affection, Hugh. I was

made to love and to be loved. Each time I thought to myself: 'Surely this time it is true; now at last am I come into my kingdom. It can't fulfil my dreams, for I have known the bravest man, but'—"

Her voice broke and fell. Her eyes grew dull and vacant; her vision passed through and beyond him, as if he had not been there; the bitter desolation of all the widowed generations clouded her golden face. Her lips barely moved, almost inaudibly enunciating the words that were shaken from her as if by some occult force, ruthless and inexorable:

"Each time, Hugh, it was the same. One by one they were taken from me, strangely, terribly... Poor Tom Custer, first; he was a dear boy, but I didn't love him and couldn't marry him. I had to tell him so. He killed himself... Then Billy Hamilton; I became engaged to him; but he was taken mysteriously from a crowded ship in mid-ocean... A man named Mitchell Thurston loved me. I liked him; perhaps I might have consented to marry him. He was assassinated—shot down like a mad dog in broad daylight—no one ever knew by whom, or why. He hadn't an enemy in the world we knew of... And now Drummond...!"

"Mary, Mary!" he pleaded. "Don't—don't—those things were all accidents—"

She paid him no heed. She didn't seem to hear. He tried to take her hand, with a man's dull, witless notion of the way to comfort a distraught woman; but she snatched it from his touch.

"And now"—her voice pealed out like a great bell tolling over the magnificent solitude of the forsaken island—"and now I have it to live through once again: the wonder and terror and beauty of love, the agony and passion of having you torn from me!... Hugh!... I don't believe I can endure it again. I can't *bear* this exquisite torture. I'm afraid I shall go mad!... Unless ... unless"—her voice shuddered—"I have the strength, the strength to—"

"Good God!" he cried in desperation. "You must not go on like this! Mary! Listen to me!"

This time he succeeded in imprisoning her hand. "Mary," he said gently, drawing closer to her, "listen to me; understand what I say. I love you; I am your husband; nothing can possibly come between us. All these other things can be explained. Don't let yourself think for another instant—"

Her eyes, fixed upon the two hands in which he clasped her own, had grown

wide and staring with dread. Momentarily she seemed stunned. Then she wrenched it from him, at the same time jumping up and away.

"No!" she cried, fending him from her with shaking arms. "No! Don't touch me! Don't come near me, Hugh! It's ... it's death! My touch is death! I know it now—I had begun to suspect, now I *know*! I am accursed—doomed to go through life like pestilence, leaving sorrow and death in my wake.... Hugh!" She controlled herself a trifle: "Hugh, I love you more than life; I love you more than love itself. But you must not come near me. Love me if you must, but, O my dear one! keep away from me; avoid me, forget me if you can, but at all cost shun me as you would the plague! I will not give myself to you to be your death!"

Before he could utter a syllable in reply, she turned and fled from him, wildly, blindly stumbling, like a hunted thing back up the ascent to the farm-house. He followed, vainly calling on her to stop and listen to him. But she outdistanced him, and by the time he had entered the house was in her room, behind a locked door.



XIX

CAPITULATION

Grimly Whitaker sat himself down in the kitchen and prepared to wait the reappearance of his wife—prepared to wait as long as life was in him, so that he were there to welcome her when, her paroxysm over, she would come to him to be comforted, soothed and reasoned out of her distorted conception of her destiny.

Not that he had the heart to blame or to pity her for that terrified vision of life. Her history was her excuse. Nor was his altogether a blameless figure in that history. At least it was not so in his sight. Though unwittingly, he had blundered cruelly in all his relations with the life of that sad little child of the Commercial House.

Like sunlight penetrating storm wrack, all the dark disarray of his reverie was shot through and through by the golden splendour of the knowledge that she loved him....

As for this black, deadly shadow that had darkened her life—already he could see her emerging from it, radiant and wonderful. But it was not to be disregarded or as yet ignored, its baleful record considered closed and relegated to the pages of the past. Its movement had been too rhythmic altogether to lack a reason. His very present task was to read its riddle and exorcise it altogether.

For hours he pondered it there in the sunlit kitchen of the silent house—waiting, wondering, deep in thought. Time stole away without his knowledge. Not until late in the afternoon did the shifted position of the sun catch his attention and arouse him in alarm. Not a sound from above...!

He rose, ascended the stairs, tapped gently on the locked door.

"Mary," he called, with his heart in his mouth—"Mary!"

Her answer was instant, in accents sweet, calm and clear:

"I am all right. I'm resting, dear, and thinking. Don't fret about me. When I feel able, I will come down to you."

"As you will," he assented, unspeakably relieved; and returned to the kitchen.

The diversion of thought reminded him of their helpless and forlorn condition. He went out and swept the horizon with an eager and hopeful gaze that soon drooped in disappointment. The day had worn on in unbroken calm: not a sail stirred within the immense radius of the waters. Ships he saw in plenty—a number of them moving under power east and west beyond the headland with its crowning lighthouse; others—a few—left shining wakes upon the burnished expanse beyond the farthest land visible in the north. Unquestionably main-travelled roads of the sea, these, so clear to the sight, so heartbreakingly unattainable....

And then his conscience turned upon him, reminding him of the promise (completely driven out of his mind by his grim adventure before dawn, together with the emotional crisis of mid-morning) to display some sort of a day-signal of distress.

For something like half an hour he was busy with the task of nailing a turkey-red table-cloth to a pole, and the pole in turn (with the assistance of a ladder) to the peak of the gabled barn. But when this was accomplished, and he stood aside and contemplated the drooping, shapeless flag, realizing that without a wind it was quite meaningless, the thought came to him that the very elements seemed leagued together in a conspiracy to keep them prisoners, and he began to nurse a superstitious notion that, if anything were ever to be done toward winning their freedom, it would be only through his own endeavour, unassisted.

Thereafter for a considerable time he loitered up and down the dooryard, with all his interest focussed upon the tidal strait, measuring its greatest and its narrowest breadth with his eye, making shrewd guesses at the strength and the occasions of the tides.

If the calm held on and the sky remained unobscured by cloud, by eleven there would be clear moonlight and, if he guessed aright, the beginning of a period of slack water.

Sunset interrupted his calculations—sunset and his wife. Sounds of some one moving quietly round the kitchen, a soft clash of dishes, the rattling of the grate, drew him back to the door.

She showed him a face of calm restraint and implacable resolve, if scored and flushed with weeping. And her habit matched it: she had overcome her passion;

her eyes were glorious with peace.

"Hugh"—her voice had found a new, sweet level of gentleness and strength—"I was wondering where you were."

"Can I do anything?"

"No, thank you. I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am."

"For what, in Heaven's name?"

She smiled.... "For neglecting you so long. I really didn't think of it until the sunlight began to redden. I've let you go without your lunch."

"It didn't matter—"

"I don't agree. Man must be fed—and so must woman. I'm famished!"

"Well," he admitted with a short laugh—"so am I."

She paused, regarding him with her whimsical, indulgent smile. "You strange creature!" she said softly. "Are you angry with me—impatient—for this too facile descent from heroics to the commonplace? But, Hugh"—she touched his arm with a gentle and persuasive hand—"it *must* be commonplace. We're just mortals, after all, you know, no matter how imperishable our egos make us feel: and the air of the heights is too fine and rare for mortals to breathe long at a time. Life is, after all, an everyday affair. We've just got to blunder through it from day to day—mostly on the low levels. Be patient with me, dear."

But, alarmed by his expression, her words stumbled and ran out. She stepped back a pace, a little flushed and tremulous.

"Hugh! No, Hugh, no!"

"Don't be afraid of me," he said, turning away. "I don't mean to bother. Only—at times—"

"I know, dear; but it must *not* be." She had recovered; there was cool decision in her accents. She began to move briskly round the kitchen, setting the table, preparing the meal.

He made no attempt to reason with her, but sat quietly waiting. His rôle was patience, tolerance, strength restrained in waiting....

"Shall you make a fire again to-night?" she asked, when they had concluded the meal.

"In three places," he said. "We'll not stay another day for want of letting people know we're here."

She looked down, shyly. Coquetry with her was instinctive, irrepressible. Her vague, provoking smile edged her lips:

"You—you want to be rid of me again, so soon, Hugh?"

He bent over the table with a set face, silent until his undeviating gaze caught and held her eyes.

"Mary," he said slowly, "I want *you*. I mean to have you. Only by getting away from this place will that be possible. You must come to me of your own will."

She made the faintest negative motion of her head, her eyes fixed to his in fascination.

"You will," he insisted, in the same level tone. "If you love me, as you say, you must.... No—that's nonsense I won't listen to! Renunciation is a magnificent and noble thing, but it must have a sane excuse.... You said a while ago, this was a commonplace world, life an everyday affair. It is. The only thing that lifts it out of the deadly, intolerable rut is this wonderful thing man has invented and named Love. Without it we are as Nature made us—brute things crawling and squabbling in blind squalor. But love lifts us a little above that: love *is* supernatural, the only thing in all creation that rises superior to nature. There's no such thing as a life accursed; no such thing as a life that blights; there are no malign and vicious forces operating outside the realm of natural forces: love alone is supreme, subject to no known laws. I mean to prove it to you; I mean to show you how little responsible you have been in any way for the misfortunes that have overtaken men who loved you; I shall show you that I am far more blameworthy than you.... And when I have done that, you will come to me."

"I am afraid," she whispered breathlessly—"I am afraid I shall."

He rose. "Till then, my dearest girl, don't, please don't ever shrink from me again. I may not be able to dissemble my love, but until your fears are done away with, your mind at rest, no act of mine, within my control, shall ever cause you even so much as an instant's annoyance or distress."

His tone changed. "I'll go now and build my fires. When you are ready—?"

"I shan't be long," she said.

But for long after he had left her, she lingered moveless by a window, her gaze following him as he moved to and fro: her face now wistful, now torn by distress, now bright with longing. Strong passions contended within her—love and fear, joy and regret; at times crushing apprehensions of evil darkened her musings, until she could have cried out with the torment of her fears; and again intimations possessed her of exquisite beauty, warming and ennobling her heart, all but persuading her.

At length, sighing, she lighted the lamp and went about her tasks, with a bended head, wondering and frightened, fearfully questioning her own inscrutable heart. Was it for this only that she had fought herself all through that day: that she should attain an outward semblance of calm so complete as to deceive even herself, so frail as to be rent away and banished completely by the mere tones of his mastering voice? Was she to know no rest? Was it to be her fate to live out her days in yearning, eating her heart alone, feeding with sighs the passing winds? Or was she too weary to hold by her vows? Was she to yield and, winning happiness, in that same instant encompass its destruction?...

When it was quite dark, Whitaker brought a lantern to the door and called her, and they went forth together.

As he had promised, he had built up three towering pyres, widely apart. When all three were in full roaring flame, their illumination was hot and glowing over all the upland. It seemed impossible that the world should not now become cognizant of their distress.

At some distance to the north of the greatest fire—that nearest the farm-house—they sat as on the previous night, looking out over the black and unresponsive waters, communing together in undertones.

In that hour they learned much of one another: much that had seemed strange and questionable assumed, in the understanding of each, the complexion of the normal and right. Whitaker spoke at length and in much detail of his Wilful Missing years without seeking to excuse the wrong-minded reasoning which had won him his own consent to live under the mask of death. He told of the motives that had prompted his return, of all that had happened since in which she had had no part—with a single reservation. One thing he kept back: the time for that was

not yet.

A listener in his turn, he heard the history of the little girl of the Commercial House breaking her heart against the hardness of life in what at first seemed utterly futile endeavour to live by her own efforts, asking nothing more of the man who had given her his name. To make herself worthy of that name, so that, living or dead, he might have no cause to be ashamed of her or to regret the burden he had assumed: this was the explanation of her fierce striving, her undaunted renewal of the struggle in the face of each successive defeat, her renunciation of the competence his forethought had provided for her. So also—since she would take nothing from her husband—pride withheld her from asking anything of her family or her friends. She cut herself off utterly from them all, fought her fight alone.

He learned of the lean years of drifting from one theatrical organization to another, forced to leave them one by one by conditions impossible and intolerable, until Ember found her playing ingenue parts in a mean provincial stock company; of the coming of Max, his interest in her, the indefatigable pains he had expended coaching her to bring out the latent ability his own genius divined; of the initial performance of "Joan Thursday" before a meagre and indifferent audience, her instant triumph and subsequent conquest of the country in half a dozen widely dissimilar rôles; finally of her decision to leave the stage when she married, for reasons comprehensible, demanding neither exposition nor defence.

"It doesn't matter any longer," she commented, concluding: "I loved and I hated it. It was deadly and it was glorious. But it no longer matters. It is finished: Sara Law is no more."

"You mean never to go back to the stage?"

"Never."

"And yet—" he mused craftily.

"Never!" She fell blindly into his trap. "I promised myself long ago that if ever I became a wife—"

"But you are no wife," he countered.

"Hugh!"

"You are Mrs. Whitaker—yes; but—"

"Dear, you are cruel to me!"

"I think it's you who would be cruel to yourself, dear heart."

She found no ready answer; was quiet for a space; then stirred, shivering. Behind them the fires were dying; by contrast a touch of chill seemed to pervade in the motionless air.

"I think," she announced, "we'd better go in."

She rose without assistance, moved away toward the house, paused and returned.

"Hugh," she said gently, with a quaver in her voice that wounded his conceit in himself; for he was sure it spelled laughter at his expense and well-merited—"Hugh, you big sulky boy! get up this instant and come back to the house with me. You know I'm timid. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"I suppose so," he grumbled, rising. "I presume it's childish to want the moon—and sulk when you find you can't have it."

"Or a star?"

He made no reply; but his very silence was eloquent. She attempted a shrug of indifference to his disapproval, but didn't convince even herself; and when he paused before entering the house for one final look into the north, she waited on the steps above him.

"Nothing, Hugh?" she asked in a softened voice.

"Nothing," he affirmed dully.

"It's strange," she sighed.

"Lights enough off beyond the lighthouse yonder," he complained: "red lights and green, bound east and west. But you'd think this place was invisible, from the way we're ignored. However...."

They entered the kitchen.

"Well—however?" she prompted, studying his lowering face by lamplight.

"Something'll have to be done; if they won't help us, we'll have to help

ourselves."

"Hugh!" There was alarm in her tone. He looked up quickly. "Hugh, what are you thinking of?"

"Oh—nothing. But I've got to think of something."

She came nearer, intuitively alarmed and pleading. "Hugh, you wouldn't leave me here alone?"

"What nonsense!"

"Promise me you won't."

"Don't be afraid," he said evasively. "I'll be here—as always—when you wake up."

She drew a deep breath, stepped back without removing her gaze from his face, then with a gesture of helplessness took up her lamp.

"Good night, Hugh."

"Good night," he replied, casting about for his own lamp.

But when he turned back, she was still hesitating in the doorway. He lifted inquiring brows.

"Hugh...."

"Yes?"

"I trust you. Be faithful, dear."

"Thank you," he returned, not without flavour of bitterness. "I'll try to be. Good night."

She disappeared; the light of her lamp faded, flickering in the draught of the hall, stencilled the wall with its evanescent caricature of the balustrade, and was no longer visible.

"Hugh!" her voice rang from the upper floor.

He started violently out of deep abstraction, and replied inquiringly.

"You won't forget to lock the door?"

He swore violently beneath his breath; controlled his temper and responded pleasantly: "Certainly not."

Then he shut the outside door with a convincing bang.

"If this be marriage...!" He smiled his twisted smile, laughed a little quietly, and became again his normal, good-natured self, if a little unusually preoccupied.

Leaving the kitchen light turned low, he went to his own room and, as on the previous night, threw himself upon the bed without undressing; but this time with no thought of sleep. Indeed, he had no expectation of closing his eyes in slumber before the next night, at the earliest; he had no intention other than to attempt to swim to the nearest land. In the illusion of night, his judgment worked upon by his emotions, that plan which had during the afternoon suggested itself, been thoroughly considered, rejected as too desperately dangerous, and then reconsidered in the guise of their only possible chance of escape at any reasonably early date, began to assume a deceptive semblance of feasibility.

He did not try to depreciate its perils: the tides that swept through that funnel-shaped channel were unquestionably heavy: heavier than even so strong a swimmer as he should be called upon to engage; the chances of being swept out to sea were appallingly heavy. The slightest error in judgment, the least miscalculation of the turn of the tide, and he was as good as lost.

On the other hand, with a little good luck, by leaving the house shortly after moonrise, he should be able to catch the tide just as it was nearing high water. Allowing it to swing him northwest until it fullied, he ought to be a third of the way across by the time it slackened, and two-thirds of the distance before it turned seawards again. And the distance was only three miles or so.

And the situation on the island had grown unendurable. He doubted his strength to stand the torment and the provocation of another day.

Allow an hour and a half for the swim—say, two; another hour in which to find a boat; and another to row or sail back: four hours. He should be back upon the island long before dawn, even if delayed. Surely no harm could come to her in that time; surely he ought to be able to reckon on her sleeping through his absence—worn down by the stress of the day's emotions as she must certainly be. True, he had given her to understand he would not leave her; but she need not know until his return; and then his success would have earned him forgiveness.

An hour dragged out its weary length, and the half of another while he reasoned with himself, drugging his conscience and his judgment alike with trust in his lucky star. In all that time he heard no sound from the room above him; and for his part he lay quite unstirring, his whole body relaxed, resting against the trial of strength to come.

Insensibly the windows of his room, that looked eastward, filled with the pale spectral promise of the waning moon. He rose, with infinite precaution against making any noise, and looked out. The night was no less placid than the day had been. The ruins of his three beacons shone like red winking eyes in the black face of night. Beyond them the sky was like a dome of crystal, silvery green. And as he looked, an edge of silver shone on the distant rim of the waters; and then the moon, misshapen, wizened and darkling, heaved sluggishly up from the deeps.

Slowly, on tiptoes, Whitaker stole toward the door, out into the hall; at the foot of the stairs he paused, listening with every nerve tense and straining; he fancied he could just barely detect the slow, regular respiration of the sleeping woman. And he could see that the upper hallway was faintly aglow. She had left her lamp burning, the door open. Last night, though the lamp had burned till dawn, that door had been closed....

He gathered himself together again, took a single step on toward the kitchen; and then, piercing suddenly the absolute stillness within the house, a board squealed like an animal beneath his tread.

In an instant he heard the thud and patter of her footsteps above, her loud, quickened breathing as she leaned over the balustrade, looking down, and her cry of dismay: "Hugh! Hugh!"

He halted, saying in an even voice: "Yes; it is I." She had already seen him; there was no use trying to get away without her knowledge now; besides, he was no sneak-thief to fly from a cry. He burned with resentment, impatience and indignation, but he waited stolidly enough while the woman flew down the stairs to his side.

"Hugh," she demanded, white-faced and trembling, "what is the matter? Where are you going?"

He moved his shoulders uneasily, forcing a short laugh. "I daresay you've guessed it. Undoubtedly you have. Else why—" He didn't finish save by a

gesture of resignation.

"You mean you were going—going to try to swim to the mainland?"

"I meant to try it," he confessed.

"But, Hugh—your promise?"

"I'm sorry, Mary; I didn't want to promise. But you see ... this state of things cannot go on. Something has got to be done. It's the only way I know of. I—I can't trust myself—"

"You'd leave me here while you went to seek death—!"

"Oh, it isn't as dangerous as all that. If you'd only been asleep, as I thought you were, I'd've been back before you knew anything about it."

"I should have known!" she declared passionately. "I *was* asleep, but I knew the instant you stirred. Tell me; how long did you stand listening here, to learn if I was awake or not?"

"Several minutes."

"I knew it, though I was asleep, and didn't waken till the board squeaked. I knew you would try it—knew it from the time when you quibbled and evaded and wouldn't give me a straight promise. Oh, Hugh, my Hugh, if you had gone and left me...!"

Her voice shook and broke. She swayed imperceptibly toward him, then away, resting a shoulder against the wall and quivering as though she would have fallen but for that support. He found himself unable to endure the reproach of those dark and luminous eyes set in the mask of pallor that was her face in the half-light of the hallway. He looked away, humbled, miserable, pained.

"It's too bad," he mumbled. "I'm sorry you had to know anything about it. But ... it can't be helped, Mary. You've got to brace up. I won't be gone four hours at the longest."

"Four hours!" She stood away from the wall, trembling in every limb. "Hugh, you—you don't mean—you're not going—*now*?"

He nodded a wretched, makeshift affirmation.

"It must be done," he muttered. "Please—"

"But it must not be done! Hugh!" Her voice ascended "I—I can't let you. I won't let you! You ... It'll be your death—you'll drown. I shall have let you go to your death—"

"Oh, now, really—" he protested.

"But, Hugh, I *know* it! I feel it here." A hand strayed to rest, fluttering, above her heart. "If I should let you go ... Oh, my dear one, don't, don't go!"

"Mary," he began hoarsely, "I tell you—"

"You're only going, Hugh, because ... because I love you so I ... I am afraid to let you love me. That's true, isn't it? Hugh—it's true?"

"I can't stay ..." he muttered with a hang-dog air.

She sought support of the wall again, her body shaken by dry sobbing that it tore his heart to hear. "You—you're really going—?"

He mumbled an almost inaudible avowal of his intention.

"Hugh, you're killing me! If you leave me—"

He gave a gesture of despair and capitulation.

"I've done my best, Mary. I meant to do the right thing. I—"

"Hugh, you mean you won't go?" Joy from a surcharged heart rang vibrant in every syllable uttered in that marvellous voice.

But now he dared meet her eyes. "Yes," he said, "I won't go"—nodding, with an apologetic shadow of his twisted smile. "I can't if ... if it distresses you."

"Oh, my dear, my dear!"

Whitaker started, staggered with amaze, and the burden of his wife in his arms. Her own arms clipped him close. Her fragrant tear-gemmed face brushed his. He knew at last the warmth of her sweet mouth, the dear madness of that first caress.

The breathless seconds spun their golden web of minutes. They did not move. Round them the silence sang like the choring seraphim....

Then through the magical hush of that time when the world stood still, the thin,

clear vibrations of a distant hail:

"*Aho-oy!*"

In his embrace his wife stiffened and lifted her head to listen like a startled fawn. As one their hearts checked, paused, then hammered wildly. With a common impulse they started apart.

"You heard—?"

"Listen!" He held up a hand.

This time it rang out more near and most unmistakable:

"Ahoy! The house, ahoy!"

With the frenzied leap of a madman, Whitaker gained the kitchen door, shook it, controlled himself long enough to draw the bolt, and flung out into the dim silvery witchery of the night. He stood staring, while the girl stole to his side and caught his arm. He passed it round her, lifted the other hand, dumbly pointed toward the northern beach. For the moment he could not trust himself to speak.

In the sweep of the anchorage a small white yacht hovered ghostlike, broadside to the island, her glowing ports and green starboard lamp painting the polished ebony of the still waters with the images of many burning candles.

On the beach itself a small boat was drawn up. A figure in white waited near it. Issuing from the deserted fishing settlement, rising over the brow of the uplands, moved two other figures in white and one in darker clothing, the latter leading the way at a rapid pace.

With one accord Whitaker and his wife moved down to meet them. As they drew together, the leader of the landing party checked his pace and called:

"Hello there! Who are you? What's the meaning of your fires—?"

Mechanically Whitaker's lips uttered the beginning of the response: "Shipwrecked—signalling for help—"

"Whitaker!" the voice of the other interrupted with a jubilant shout. "Thank God we've found you!"

It was Ember.



XX

TEMPERAMENTAL

Seldom, perhaps, has an habitation been so unceremoniously vacated as was the solitary farm-house on that isolated island. Whitaker delayed only long enough to place a bill, borrowed from Ember, on the kitchen table, in payment for what provisions they had consumed, and to extinguish the lamps and shut the door.

Ten minutes later he occupied a chair beneath an awning on the after deck of the yacht, and, with an empty glass waiting to be refilled between his fingers and a blessed cigar fuming in the grip of his teeth, stared back to where their rock of refuge rested, brooding over its desolation, losing bulk and conformation and swiftly blending into a small dark blur upon the face of the waters.

"Ember," he demanded querulously, "what the devil is that place?"

"You didn't know?" Ember asked, amused.

"Not the smell of a suspicion. This is the first pleasure, in a manner of speaking, cruise I've taken up along this coast. I'm a bit weak on its hydrography."

"Well, if that's the case, I don't mind admitting that it is No Man's Land."

"I'm strong for its sponsors in baptism. They were equipped with a strong sense of the everlasting fitness of things. And the other—?"

"Martha's Vineyard. That's Gay Head—the headland with the lighthouse. Off to the north of it, the Elizabeth Islands. Beyond them, Buzzards Bay. This neat little vessel is now standing about west-no'th-west to pick up Point Judith light—if you'll stand for the nautical patois. After that, barring a mutiny on the part of the passengers, she'll swing on to Long Island Sound. If we're lucky, we'll be at anchor off East Twenty-fourth Street by nine o'clock to-morrow morning. Any kick coming?"

"Not from me. You might better consult—my wife," said Whitaker with an embarrassed laugh.

"Thanks, no: if it's all the same to you. Besides, I've turned her over to the

stewardess, and I daresay she won't care to be interrupted. She's had a pretty tough time of it: I judge from your rather disreputable appearance. Really, you're cutting a most romantical, shocking figger."

"Glad of that," Whitaker remarked serenely. "Give me another drink.... I like to be consistent—wouldn't care to emerge from a personally conducted tour of all hell looking like a George Cohan chorus-boy.... Lord! how good tobacco does taste after you've gone without it a few days!... Look here: I've told you how things were with us, in brief; but I'm hanged if you've disgorged a single word of explanation as to how you came to let Drummond slip through your fingers, to say nothing of how you managed to find us."

"He didn't slip through my fingers," Ember retorted. "He launched a young earthquake at my devoted head and disappeared before the dust settled. More explicitly: I had got him to the edge of the woods, that night, when something hit me from behind and my light went out in a blaze of red fire. I came to some time later with a tasty little gag in my mouth and the latest thing in handcuffs on my wrists, behind my back—the same handcuffs that I'd decorated Drummond with—and several fathoms of rope wound round my legs. I lay there—it was a sort of open work barn—until nearly midnight the following night. Then the owner happened along, looking for something he'd missed—another ass, I believe—and let me loose. By the time I'd pulled myself together, from what you tell me, you were piling up on the rocks back there."

"Just before dawn, yesterday."

"Precisely. Finding you'd vacated the bungalow, I interviewed Sum Fat and Elise, and pieced together a working hypothesis. It was easy enough to surmise Drummond had some pal or other working with him: *I* was slung-shotted from behind, while Drummond was walking ahead. And two men had worked in the kidnapping of Mrs. Whitaker. So I went sleuthing; traced you through the canal to Peconic; found eye-witnesses of your race as far as Sag Harbor. There I lost you—and there I borrowed this outfit from a friend, an old-time client of mine. Meanwhile I'd had a general alarm sent out to the police authorities all along the coast—clear to Boston. No one had seen anything of you anywhere. It was heavy odds-on, that you'd gone to the bottom in that blow, all of you; but I couldn't give up. We kept cruising, looking up unlikely places. And, at that, we were on the point of throwing up the sponge when I picked up a schooner that reported signal fires on No Man's Land.... I think that clears everything up."

"Yes," said Whitaker, sleepily. "And now, without ingratitude, may I ask you to lead me to a bath and my bunk. I have just about fifteen minutes of semi-consciousness to go on."

Nor was this exaggeration; it was hard upon midnight, and he had been awake since before dawn of a day whose course had been marked by a succession of increasingly exhaustive emotional crises, following a night of interrupted and abbreviated rest; add to this the inevitable reaction from high nervous tension. His reserve vitality seemed barely sufficient to enable him to keep his eyes open through the rite of the hot salt-water bath. After that he gave himself blindly into Ember's guidance, and with a mumbled, vague good night, tumbled into the berth assigned him. And so strong was his need of sleep that it was not until ten o'clock the following morning, when the yacht lay at her mooring in the East River, that Ember succeeded in rousing him by main strength and good-will.

This having been accomplished, he was left to dress and digest the fact that his wife had gone ashore an hour ago, after refusing to listen to a suggestion that Whitaker be disturbed. The note Ember handed him purported to explain what at first blush seemed a singularly ungrateful and ungracious freak. It was brief, but in Whitaker's sight eminently adequate and compensating.

"DEAREST BOY: I won't let them wake you, but I must run away. It's early and I *must* do some shopping before people are about. My house here is closed; Mrs. Secretan is in Maine with the only keys aside from those at Great West Bay; and I'm a *positive fright* in a coat and skirt borrowed from the stewardess. I don't want even you to see me until I'm decently dressed. I shall put up at the Waldorf; come there to-night, and we will dine together. Every fibre of my being loves you.

"MARY."

Obviously not a note to be cavilled at. Whitaker took a serene and shining face to breakfast in the saloon, under the eyes of Ember.

Veins of optimism and of gratulation like threads of gold ran through the texture of their talk. There seemed to exist a tacit understanding that, with the death of Drummond, the cloud that had shadowed the career of Sara Law had lifted, while her renunciation of her public career had left her with a future of glorified serenity and assured happiness. By common consent, with an almost superstitious awe, they begged the question of the shadowed and inexplicable past—left the dead past to bury itself, bestowing all their fatuous concern with the to-day of rejoicing and the to-morrow of splendid promise.

Toward noon they parted ashore, each taking a taxicab to his lodgings. The understanding was that they were to dine together—all three, Whitaker promising for his wife—upon the morrow.

At six that evening, returning to his rooms to dress, Whitaker found another note awaiting him, in a handwriting that his heart recognized with a sensation of wretched apprehension.

He dared not trust himself to read it in the public hall. It was agony to wait through the maddeningly deliberate upward flight of the elevator. When he at length attained to the privacy of his own apartment, he was sweating like a panic-stricken horse. He could hardly control his fingers to open the envelope. He comprehended its contents with difficulty, half blinded by a swimming mist of foreboding.

"MY DEAR: I find my strength unequal to the strain of seeing you to-night. Indeed, I am so worn out and nerve-racked that I have had to

consult my physician. He orders me immediately to a sanatorium, to rest for a week or two. Don't worry about me. I shan't fail to let you know as soon as I feel strong enough to see you. Forgive me. I love you dearly.

"MARY."

The paper slipped from Whitaker's trembling hand and fluttered unheeded to the floor. He sprang to the telephone and presently had the Waldorf on the wire; it was true, he learned: Mrs. Whitaker had registered at the hotel in the morning, and had left at four in the afternoon. He was refused information as to whether she had left a forwarding address for her mail.

He wrote her immediately, and perhaps not altogether wisely, under stress of distraction, sending the letter by special delivery in care of the hotel. It was returned him in due course of time, embellished with a pencilled memorandum to the effect that Mrs. Whitaker had left no address.

He communicated at once with Ember, promptly enlisting his willing services. But after several days of earnest investigation the detective confessed himself baffled.

"If you ask me," he commented at the conclusion of his report, "the answer is: she means to be let alone until she's quite ready to see you again. I don't pin any medals on myself for this demonstration of extraordinary penetration; I merely point out the obvious for your own good. Contain yourself, my dear man—and stop gnawing your knuckles like the heavy man in a Third Avenue melodrama. It won't do any good; your wife promised to communicate with you as soon as her health was restored. And not only is she a woman who keeps her promise, but it is quite comprehensible that she should have been shaken up by her extraordinary experience to an extent we can hardly appreciate who haven't the highly sensitive organization of a woman to contend with. Give her time."

"I don't believe it!" Whitaker raged. "She—she loved me there on the island. She couldn't change so quickly, bring herself to treat me so cruelly, unless some infernal influence had been brought to bear upon her."

"It's possible, but I—"

"Oh, I don't mean that foolishness about her love being a man's death-warrant. That may have something to do with it, but—but, damn it!—I conquered that

once. She promised ... was in my arms ... I'd won her.... She loved me; there wasn't any make-believe about it. If there were any foundation for that poppycock, I'd be a dead man now—instead of a man damnably ill-used!... No: somebody has got hold of her, worked on her sympathies, maligned me...."

"Do you object to telling me whom you have in mind?"

"The man you suspect as well as I—the one man to whom her allegiance means everything: the man you named to me the night we met for the first time, as the one who'd profit the most by keeping her from leaving the stage!"

"Well, if it's Max, you'll know in time. It won't profit him to hide the light of his star under a bushel; he can only make money by displaying it."

"I'll know before long. As soon as he gets back in town—"

"So you've been after him?"

"Why not? But he's out on the Pacific coast; or so they tell me at the theatre."

"And expected back—when?"

"Soon."

"Do you know when he left?"

"About the middle of July—they say in his office."

"Then that lets him out."

"But it's a lie."

"Well—?"

"I've just remembered: Max was at the Fiske place, urging her to return, the night before you caught Drummond at the bungalow. I saw them, walking up and down in front of the cottage, arguing earnestly: I could tell by her bearing she was refusing whatever he proposed. But I didn't know her then, and naturally I never connected Max with the fellow I saw, disguised in a motoring coat and cap. Neither of 'em had any place in my thoughts that night."

Ember uttered a thoughtful "Oh?" adding: "Did you find out at all definitely when Max is expected back?"

"Two or three weeks now, they say. He's got his winter productions to get under way. As a matter of fact, it looks to me as if he must be neglecting 'em strangely; it's my impression that the late summer is a producing manager's busiest time."

"Max runs himself by his own original code, I'm afraid. The chances are he's trying to raise money out on the Coast. No money, no productions—in other words."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"But there may be something in what you say—suspect, that is. If I agree to keep an eye on him, will you promise to give me a free hand?"

"Meaning—?"

"Keep out of Max's way: don't risk a wrangle with him."

"Why the devil should I be afraid of Max?"

"I know of no reason—as yet. But I prefer to work unhampered by the indiscretions of my principals."

"Oh—go ahead—to blazes—as far as you like."

"Thanks," Ember dryly wound up the conference; "but these passing flirtations with your present-day temper leave me with no hankering for greater warmth...."

Days ran stolidly on into weeks, and these into a month. Nothing happened. Max did not return; the whispered rumour played wild-fire in theatrical circles that the eccentric manager had encountered financial difficulties insuperable. The billboards flanking the entrance to the Theatre Max continued to display posters announcing the reopening early in September with a musical comedy by Tynan Dodd; but the comedy was not even in rehearsal by September fifteenth.

Ember went darkly about his various businesses, taciturn—even a trace more than ever reserved in his communication with Whitaker—preoccupied, but constant in his endeavour to enhearten the desponding husband. He refused to hazard any surmises whatever until the return of Max or the reappearance of Mary Whitaker.

She made no sign. Now and then Whitaker would lose patience and write to her: desperate letters, fond and endearing, passionate and insistent, wistful and pleading, strung upon a single theme. Despatched under the address of her town

house, they vanished from his ken as mysteriously and completely as she herself had vanished. He received not a line of acknowledgment.

Day by day he made up his mind finally and definitely to give it up, to make an end of waiting, to accept the harsh cruelty of her treatment of him as an absolute definition of her wishes—to sever his renewed life in New York and return once and for all to the Antipodes. And day by day he paltered, doubted, put off going to the steamship office to engage passage. The memory of that last day on the lonely island would not down. Surely she dared not deny the self she had then revealed to him! Surely she must be desperately ill and unable to write, rather than ignoring him so heartlessly and intentionally. Surely the morrow would bring word of her!

Sometimes, fretted to a frenzy, he sought out Ember and made wild and unreasonable demands upon him. These failing of any effect other than the resigned retort, "I am a detective, not a miracle-monger," he would fly into desperate, gnawing, black rages that made Ember fear for his sanity and self-control and caused him to be haunted by that gentleman for hours—once or twice for days—until he resumed his normal poise of a sober and civilized man. He was, however, not often aware of this sedulous espionage.

September waned and October dawned in grateful coolness: an exquisite month of crisp nights and enlivening days, of mellowing sunlight and early gloamings tenderly coloured. Country houses were closed and theatres reopened. Fifth Avenue after four in the afternoon became thronged with an ever thickening army—horse, foot and motor-car. Several main-travelled thoroughfares were promptly torn to pieces and set up on end by municipal authorities with a keen eye for the discomfort of the public. A fresh electric sign blazed on Broadway every evening, and from Thirty-fourth Street to Columbus Circle the first nights crackled, detonated, sputtered and fizzled like a string of cheap Chinese firecrackers. One after another the most exorbitant restaurants advanced their prices and decreased their portions to the prompt and extraordinary multiplication of their clientèle: restaurant French for a species of citizen whose birth-rate is said to be steadfast to the ratio of sixty to the hour. Wall Street wailed loudly of its poverty and hurled bitter anathemas at the President, the business interest of the country continued to suffer excruciating agonies, and the proprietors of leading hotels continued to add odd thousands of acres to their game preserves.

Then suddenly the town blossomed overnight with huge eight-sheet posters on

every available hoarding, blazoning the news:

JULES MAX
begs to announce the return of
SARA LAW
in a new Comedy entitled FAITH
by JULES MAX
Theatre MAX—Friday October 15th

But Whitaker had the information before he saw the broad-sides in the streets. The morning paper propped up on his breakfast table contained the illuminating note under the caption, "News of Plays and Players":

"Jules Max has sprung another and perhaps his greatest surprise on the theatre-going public of this city. In the face of the rumor that he was in dire financial straits and would make no productions whatever this year, the astute manager has been out of town for two months secretly rehearsing the new comedy entitled 'Faith' of which he is the author and in which Sara Law will return finally to the stage.

"Additional interest attaches to this announcement in view of the fact that Miss Law has authorized the publication of her intention never again to retire from the stage. Miss Law is said to have expressed herself as follows: 'It is my dearest wish to die in harness. I have come to realize that a great artiste has no duty greater than her duty to her art. I dedicate my life and artistry to the American Public.'

"The opening performance of 'Faith' will take place at the Theatre Max to-morrow evening, Friday, October 15. The sale of seats opens at the box-office this morning. Despite the short notice, a bumper house is confidently expected to welcome back this justly popular and most charming American actress in the first play of which Mr. Max has confessed being the author."

Whitaker glanced up incredulously at the date-line of the sheet. Short notice, indeed: the date was Thursday, October fourteenth. Max had planned his game and had played his cards cunningly, in withholding this announcement until the last moment. So much was very clear to him whose eyes had wit to read between

those lines of trite press-agent phraseology.

After a pause Whitaker rose and began to walk the length of the room, hands in his pockets, head bowed in thought. He was telling himself that he was not greatly surprised, after all; he was wondering at his coolness; and he was conning over, with a grim, sardonic kink in his twisted smile, the needless precautions taken by the dapper little manager in his fear of Whitaker's righteous wrath. For Whitaker had no intention of interfering in any way. He conceived it a possibility that his congé might have been more kindly given him, but ... he had received it, and he was not slow to recognize it as absolute and without appeal. The thing was finished. The play was over, so far as concerned his part therein. He had no doubt played it poorly; but at least his exit would not lack a certain quality of dignity. Whitaker promised himself that.

He thought it really astonishing, his coolness. He analyzed his psychological processes with a growing wonder and with as much, if less definite, resentment. He would not have thought it credible of himself. Search as he would, he could discover no rankling indignation, no smouldering rage threatening to flame at the least breath of provocation, not even what he might have most confidently looked forward to—the sickening writhings of self-love mortally wounded and impotent to avenge itself: nothing but some self-contempt, that he had allowed himself to be so carried away by infatuation for an ignoble woman, and a cynic humour that made it possible for him to derive a certain satisfaction from contemplating the completeness of this final revelation of herself.

However, he had more important things to claim his attention than the spectacle of a degraded soul making public show of its dishonour.

He halted by the window to look out. Over the withered tree-tops of Bryant Square, set against the rich turquoise of that late autumnal sky, a gigantic sign-board heralded the news of perfidy to an unperceptive world that bustled on, heedless of Jules Max, ignorant (largely) of the existence of Hugh Whitaker, unconcerned with Sara Law save as she employed herself for its amusement.

After all, the truth was secret and like to stay so, jealously husbanded in four bosoms at most. Max would guard it as he would a system for winning at roulette; Mary Whitaker might well be trusted never to declare herself; Ember was as secret as the grave....

Returning to the breakfast table, he took up the paper, turned to the shipping news and ran his eye down the list of scheduled sailings: nothing for Friday; his

pick of half a dozen boats listed to sail Saturday.

The telephone enabled him to make a hasty reservation on the biggest and fastest of them all.

He had just concluded that business and was waiting with his hand on the receiver to call up Ember and announce his departure, when the door-bell interrupted. Expecting the waiter to remove the breakfast things, he went to the door, threw it open, and turned back instantly to the telephone. As his fingers closed round the receiver a second time, he looked round and saw his wife....

His hand fell to his side. Otherwise he did not move. But his glance was that of one incuriously comprehending the existence of a stranger.

The woman met it fairly and fearlessly, with her head high and her lips touched with a trace of her shadowy, illegible smile. She was dressed for walking, very prettily and perfectly. There were roses in her cheeks: a healthful glow distinguishable even in the tempered light of the hallway. Her self-possession was faultless.

After a moment she inclined her head slightly. "The hall-boys said you were busy on the telephone. I insisted on coming directly up. I wish very much to see you for a few moments. Do you mind?"

"By no means," he said, a little stiffly but quite calmly. "If you will be good enough to come in—"

He stood against the wall to let her pass. For a breath she was too close to him: he felt his pulses quicken faintly to the delicate and indefinite perfume of her person. But it was over in an instant: she had passed into the living-room. He followed, grave, collected, aloof.

"I had to come this morning," she explained, turning. "This afternoon we have a rehearsal...."

He bowed an acknowledgment. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." Seated, she subjected him to a quick, open appraisal, disarming in its naïve honesty.

"Hugh ... aren't you a bit thinner?"

"I believe so." He had a match for that impertinence: "But you, I see, have come

off without a blemish."

"I am very well," she admitted, unperturbed. Her glance embraced the room. "You're very comfortable here."

"I have been."

"I hope that doesn't mean I'm in the way."

"To the contrary; but I sail day after to-morrow for Australia."

"Oh? That's very sudden, isn't it? You don't seem to have done any packing. Or perhaps you mean to come back before a great while?"

"I shan't come back, ever."

"Must I believe you made up your mind this morning?"

"I have only just read the announcement of your opening to-morrow night."

"Then ... I am driving you out of the country?"

Her look was impersonal and curious. He prided himself that he was managing his temper admirably—at least until he discovered that he had, inexplicably, no temper to speak of; that he, in fact, suffered mostly from what seemed to be nothing more than annoyance at being hindered in making the necessary arrangements against his departure.

His shoulders moved negligently. "Not to rant about it," he replied: "I find I am not needed here."

"Oh, dear!" Her lips formed a fugitive, petulant moue: "And it's my fault?"

"There's no use mincing matters, is there? I am not heartbroken, and if I am bitterly disappointed I don't care to—in fact, I lack the ability—to dramatize it."

"You are taking it well, Hugh," said she, critical.

Expressionless, he waited an instant before inquiring pointedly: "Well...?"

Deliberately laying aside her light muff, her scarf and hand-bag, she rose: equality of poise was impossible if he would persist in standing. She moved a little nearer, examining his face closely, shook her head, smiled almost diffidently, and gave a helpless gesture.

"Hugh," she said in a voice of sincerity, "I'm awfully sorry—truly I am!"

He made no reply; waited.

"Perhaps I'm wrong," she went on, "but I think most women would have spared themselves this meeting—"

"Themselves and the man," he interjected dryly.

"Don't be cross, Hugh.... I had to come. I had to explain myself. I wanted you to understand. Hugh, I—" She was twisting her hands together with a manner denoting great mental strain. Of a sudden she checked and dropped them, limp and open by her sides. "You see," she said with the apologetic smile, "I'm *trying* not to act."

"Oh," he said in a tone of dawning comprehension—"so that's it!"

"I'm afraid so, Hugh.... I'm dreadfully sorry for you—poor boy!—but I'm afraid that's the trouble with me, and it can never be helped. I was born with a talent for acting; life has made me an actress. Hugh ... I've found out something." Her eyes appealed wistfully. "I'm not genuine."

He nodded interestedly.

"I'm just an actress, an instrument for the music of emotions. I've been trained to respond, until now I respond without knowing it, when there's no true response here." She touched the bosom of her frock.

He said nothing.

With a half sigh she moved away to the window, and before she spoke again posed herself very effectively there, looking out over the park while she cleared her mind.

"Of course, you despise me. I despise myself—I mean, the self that was me before I turned from a woman into an actress. But it's the truth: I have no longer any real capacity for emotion, merely an infinite capacity for appreciation of the artistic delineation of emotion, true or feigned. That ... that is why, when you showed me you had grown to love me so, I responded so quickly. You *were* in love—more honestly than I had ever seen love revealed. It touched me. I was proud to have inspired such a love. I wanted, for the time being, to have you with me always, that I might always study the wonderful, the beautiful

manifestations of your love. Why, Hugh, you even managed to make me believe I was worth it—that my response was sufficient repayment for your adoration...."

He said nothing. She glanced furtively at him and continued:

"I meant to be sweet and faithful when I left that note for you on the yacht, Hugh; I was grateful, and I meant to be generous.... But when I went to the Waldorf, the first person I met was Max. Of course I had to tell him what had happened. And then he threw himself upon my compassion. It seems that losing me had put him in the most terrible trouble about money. He was short, and he couldn't get the backing he needed without me, his call upon my services, by way of assurance to his backers. And I began to think. I knew I didn't love you honestly, Hugh, and that life with you would be a living lie. What right had I to deceive you that way, just to gratify my love of being loved? And especially if by doing that I ruined Max, the man to whom, next to you, I owed everything? I couldn't do it. But I took time to think it over—truly I did. I really did go to a sanatorium, and rested there while I turned the whole matter over carefully in my mind, and at length reached my decision to stick by Max and let you go, free to win the heart of a woman worthy of you."

She paused again, but still he was mute and immobile.

"So now you know me—what I am. No other man has ever known or ever will. But I had to tell you the truth. It seems that the only thing my career had left uncalloused was my fundamental sense of honesty. So I had to come and tell you."

And still he held silence, attentive, but with a set face that betrayed nothing of the tenor of his thoughts.

Almost timidly, with nervously fumbling fingers, she extracted from her pocket-book a small ticket envelope.

"Max was afraid you might upset the performance again, as you did on my last appearance, Hugh," she said; "but I assured him it was just the shock of recognizing you that bowled me over. So I've bought you a box for to-morrow night. I want you to use it—you and Mr. Ember."

He broke in with a curt monosyllable: "Why?"

"Why—why because—because I want you—I suppose it's simply my vanity—to

see me act. Perhaps you'll feel a little less hardly toward me if you see that I am really a great actress, that I give you up for something bigger than just love—"

"What rot!" he said with an odd, short laugh. "Besides, I harbour no resentment."

She stared, losing a little colour, eyes darkening with apprehension.

"I did hope you'd come," she murmured.

"Oh, I'll come," he said with spirit. "Wild horses couldn't keep me away."

"Really, Hugh? And you don't mind? Oh, I'm *glad!*"

"I really don't mind," he assured her with a strange smile. "But ... would you mind excusing me one moment? I've forgotten something very important."

"Why, certainly...."

He was already at the telephone in the hallway, just beyond the living-room door. It was impossible to escape overhearing his words. The woman listened perforce with, in the beginning, a little visible wonder, then with astonishment, ultimately with a consternation that shook her with violent tremblings.

"Hello," said Whitaker; "get me Rector two-two-hundred...."

"Hello? Rector two-two-hundred? North German Lloyd?... This is Mr. H. M. Whitaker. I telephoned you fifteen minutes ago about a reservation on the *George Washington*, sailing Saturday ... Yes.... Yes.... Yes, I promised to call for the ticket before noon, but I now find I shan't be able to go. Will you be kind enough to cancel it, if you please.... Thank you.... Good-by."

But when he turned back into the living-room he found awaiting him a quiet and collected woman, perhaps a thought more pale than when she had entered and with eyes that seemed a trifle darker; but on the whole positively the mistress of herself.

"Why did you do that?" she asked evenly.

"Because," said Whitaker, "I've had my eyes opened. I've been watching the finest living actress play a carefully rehearsed rôle, one that she had given long study and all her heart to—but her interpretation didn't ring true. Mary, I admit, at first you got me: I believed you meant what you said. But only my mind believed it; my heart knew better, just as it has always known better, all through

this wretched time of doubt and misery and separation you've subjected us both to. And that was why I couldn't trust myself to answer you; for if I had, I should have laughed for joy. O Mary, Mary!" he cried, his voice softening, "my dear, dear woman, you can't lie to love! You betray yourself in every dear word that would be heartless, in every adorable gesture that would seem final! And love knows better always.... Of course I shall be in that box to-morrow night; of course I shall be there to witness your triumph! And after you've won it, dear, I shall carry you off with me...."

He opened his arms wide, but with a smothered cry she backed away, placing the table between them.

"No!" she protested; and the words were almost sobs—"No!"

"Yes!" he exclaimed exultantly. "Yes! A thousand times yes! It must be so!"

With a swift movement she seized her muff and scarf from the chair and fled to the door. There pausing, she turned, her face white and blazing.

"It is not true!" she cried. "You are mistaken. Do you hear me? You are utterly mistaken. I do not love you. You are mad to think it. I have just told you I don't love you. I am afraid of you; I daren't stay with you for fear of you. I—I despise you!"

"I do not love you. You are mad to think it"

"I don't believe it!" he cried, advancing.

But she was gone. The hall door slammed before he could reach it.

He halted, turned back, his whole long body shaking, his face wrung with fear and uncertainty.

"Good God!" he cried—"which of us is right—she or I?"

XXI

BLACK OUT

Toward eight in the evening, after a day-long search through all his accustomed haunts, Ember ran Whitaker to earth in the dining-room of the Primordial. The young man, alone at table, was in the act of topping off an excellent dinner with a still more excellent cordial and a super-excellent cigar. His person seemed to diffuse a generous atmosphere of contentment and satisfaction, no less mental than physical and singularly at variance with his appearance, which, moreover, was singularly out of keeping not only with his surroundings but also with his normal aspect.

He wore rough tweeds, and they were damp and baggy; his boots were muddy; his hair was a trifle disorderly. The ensemble made a figure wildly incongruous to the soberly splendid and stately dining-hall of the Primordial Club, with its sparse patronage of members in evening-dress.

Ember, himself as severely beautiful in black and white as the ceremonious livery of to-day permits a man to be, was wonder-struck at sight of Whitaker in such unconventional guise, at such a time, in such a place. With neither invitation nor salutation, he slipped into a chair on the other side of the table, and stared.

Whitaker smiled benignantly upon him, and called a waiter.

Ember, always abstemious, lifted his hand and smiled a negative smile.

Whitaker dismissed the waiter.

"Well...?" he inquired cheerfully.

"What right have you got to look like that?" Ember demanded.

"The right of every free-born American citizen to make an ass of himself according to the dictates of his conscience. I've been exploring the dark backwards and abysm of the Bronx—afoot. Got caught in the rain on the way home. Was late getting back, and dropped in here to celebrate."

"I've been looking for you everywhere, since morning."

"I suspected you would be. That's why I went walking—to be lonesome and thoughtful for once in a way."

Ember stroked his chin with thoughtful fingers.

"You've heard the news, then?"

"In three ways," Whitaker returned, with calm.

"How's that—three ways?"

"Through the newspapers, the billboards, and—from the lips of my wife."

Ember opened his eyes wide.

"You've been to see her?"

"On the contrary."

"The devil you say!"

"She called this morning—"

But Ember interrupted, thrusting a ready and generous hand across the table:

"My dear man, I *am* glad!"

Whitaker took the proffered hand readily and firmly. "Thank you.... I was saying: she called this morning to inform me that, though wedded once, we must be strangers now—and evermore!"

"But you—of course—you argued that nonsense out of her head."

"To the contrary—again."

"But—my dear man!—you said you were celebrating; you permitted me to congratulate you just now—"

"The point is," said Whitaker, with a bland and confident grin; "I've succeeded in arguing that nonsense out of my head—not hers—*mine*."

Ember gave a helpless gesture. "I'm afraid this is one of my stupid nights...."

"I mean that, though Mary ran away from me, wouldn't listen to reason, I have,

in the course of an afternoon's hard tramping, come to the conclusion that there is nothing under the sun which binds me to sit back and accept whatever treatment she purposes according me by courtesy of Jules Max."

Whitaker bent forward, his countenance discovering a phase of seriousness hitherto masked by his twisted smile. He emphasized his points with a stiff, tapping forefinger on the cloth.

"I mean, I'm tired of all this poppycock. Unless I'm an infatuated ass, Mary loves me with all her heart. She has made up her mind to renounce me partly because Max has worked upon her feelings by painting some lurid picture of his imminent artistic and financial damnation if she leaves him, partly because she believes, or has been led to believe, in this 'destroying angel' moonshine. Now she's got to listen to reason. So, likewise, Max."

"You're becoming more human word by word," commented Ember with open approval. "Continue; elucidate; I can understand how a fairly resolute lover with the gift of gab can talk a weak-minded, fond female into denying her pet superstition; but how you're going to get round Max passes my comprehension. The man unquestionably has her under contract—"

"But you forgot his god is Mammon," Whitaker put in. "Max will do anything in the world for money. Therein resides the kernel of my plan. It's simplicity itself: I'm going to buy him."

"Buy Max!"

"Body—artistic soul—and breeches," Whitaker affirmed confidently.

"Impossible!"

"You forget how well fixed I am. What's the use of my owning half the gold in New Guinea if it won't buy me what I already own by every moral and legal right?"

"He won't listen to you; you don't know Max."

"I'm willing to lay you a small bet that there will be no first performance at the Theatre Max to-morrow night."

"You'll never persuade him—"

"I'll buy the show outright and my wife's freedom to boot—or else Max will

begin to accumulate the local colour of a hospital ward."

Ember smiled grimly. "You're beginning to convince even me. When, may I ask, do you propose to pull off this sporting proposition?"

"Do you know where Max can be found to-night?"

"At the theatre—"

"Then the matter will be arranged at the theatre between this hour and midnight."

"I doubt if you succeed in getting the ear of the great man before midnight; however, I'm not disposed to quibble about a few hours."

"But why shouldn't I?"

"Because Max is going to be the busiest young person in town to-night. And that is why I've been looking for you.... Conforming to his custom, he's giving an advance glimpse of the production to the critics and a few friends in the form of a final grand dress-rehearsal to-night. Again, in conformance with his custom, he has honoured me with a bid. I've been chasing you all day to find out if you'd care to go—"

"Eight o'clock and a bit after," Whitaker interrupted briskly, consulting his watch. "Here, boy," he hailed a passing page; "call a taxicab for me." And then, rising alertly: "Come along; I've got to hustle home and make myself look respectable enough for the occasion; but at that, with luck, I fancy we'll be there before the first curtain."

This mood of faith, of self-reliance and assured optimism held unruffled throughout the dash homewards, his hurried change of clothing and the ride to the theatre. Nothing that Ember, purposely pessimistic, could say or do availed to diminish the high buoyancy of his humour. He maintained a serene faith in his star, a spirited temper that refused to recognize obstacles in the way of his desire.

In the taxicab, en route to the Theatre Max, he contrived even to distil a good omen from the driving autumnal downpour itself.... The rain-swept pavements, their polished blackness shot with a thousand strands of golden brilliance; the painted bosom of the lowering, heavy sky; the tear-drenched window-panes; even the incessant crepitation on the roof of the scurrying, skidding cab seemed to lend a colour of assurance to his thoughts.

"On such a day as this," he told his doubting friend, "I won her first; on such a day I shall win her anew, finally and for all time!..."

From Broadway to Sixth Avenue, Forty-sixth Street was bright with the yellow glare of the huge sign in front of the Theatre Max. But this night, unlike that other night when he had approached the stage of his wife's triumphs, there was no crawling rank of cabs, no eager and curious press of people in the street; but few vehicles disputed their way; otherwise the rain and the hurrying, rain-coated wayfarers had the thoroughfare to themselves.... And even this he chose to consider a favourable omen: there was not now a public to come between him and his love—only Max and her frightened fancies.

The man at the door recognized Ember with a cheerful nod; Whitaker he did not know.

"Just in time, Mr. Ember; curtain's been up about ten minutes...."

The auditorium was in almost total darkness. A single voice was audible from the stage that confronted it like some tremendous, moonlight canvas in a huge frame of tarnished gold. They stole silently round the orchestra seats to the stage-box—the same box that Whitaker had on the former occasion occupied in company with Max.

They succeeded in taking possession without attracting attention, either from the owners of that scanty scattering of shirt-bosoms in the orchestra—the critical fraternity and those intimates bidden by the manager to the first glimpse of his new revelation in stage-craft—or from those occupying the stage.

The latter were but two. Evidently, though the curtain had been up for some minutes, the action of the piece had not yet been permitted to begin to unfold. Whitaker inferred that Max had been dissatisfied with something about the lighting of the scene. The manager was standing in mid-stage, staring up at the borders: a stout and pompous figure, tenacious to every detail of that public self which he had striven so successfully to make unforgettably individual; a figure quaintly incongruous in his impeccable morning-coat and striped trousers and flat-brimmed silk hat, perched well back on his head, with his malacca stick and lemon-coloured gloves and small and excessively glossy patent-leather shoes, posed against the counterfeit of a moonlit formal garden.

Aside from him, the only other occupant of the stage was Sara Law. She sat on a stone bench with her profile to the audience, her back to the right of the

proscenium arch; so that she could not, without turning, have noticed the entrance of Ember and her husband. A shy, slight, deathlessly youthful figure in pale and flowing garments that moulded themselves fluently to her sweet and girlish body, in a posture of pensive meditation: she was nothing less than adorable. Whitaker could not take his eyes from her, for sheer wonder and delight.

He was only vaguely conscious that Max, at length satisfied, barked a word to that effect to an unseen electrician off to the left, and waving his hand with a gesture indelibly associated with his personality, dragged a light cane-seated chair to the left of the proscenium and sat himself down.

"All ready?" he demanded in a sharp and irritable voice.

The woman on the marble seat nodded imperceptibly.

"Go ahead," snapped the manager....

An actor advanced from the wings, paused and addressed the seated woman. His lines were brief. She lifted her head with a startled air, listening. He ceased to speak, and her voice of golden velvet filled the house with the flowing beauty of its unforgettably sweet modulations. Beyond the footlights a handful of sophisticated and sceptical habitués of the theatre forgot for the moment their ingrained incredulity and thrilled in sympathy with the wonderful rapture of that voice of eternal Youth. Whitaker himself for the time forgot that he was the husband of this woman and her lover; she moved before his vision in the guise of some divine creature, divinely unattainable, a dream woman divorced utterly from any semblance of reality.

That opening scene was one perhaps unique in the history of the stage. Composed by Max in some mad, poetical moment of inspired plagiarism, it not only owned a poignant and enthralling beauty of imagery, but it moved with an almost Grecian certitude, with a significance extraordinarily direct and devoid of circumlocution, seeming to lay bare the living tissue of immortal drama.

But with the appearance of other characters, there came a change: the rare atmosphere of the opening began to dissipate perceptibly. The action clouded and grew vague. The auditors began to feel the flutterings of uncertainty in the air. Something was failing to cross the footlights. The sweeping and assured gesture of the accomplished playwright faltered: a clumsy bit of construction was damningly exposed; faults of characterization multiplied depressingly. Sara

Law herself lost an indefinable proportion of her rare and provoking charm; the strangeness of failing to hold her audience in an ineluctable grasp seemed at once to nettle and distress her. Max himself seemed suddenly to wake to the amazing fact that there was something enormously and irremediably wrong; he began with exasperating frequency to halt the action, to interrupt scenes with advice and demands for repetition. He found it impossible to be still, to keep his seat or control his rasping, irritable voice. Subordinate characters on the stage lost their heads and either forgot to act or overacted. And then—intolerable climax!—of a sudden somebody in the orchestra chairs laughed in outright derision in the middle of a passage meant to be tenderly emotional.

The voice of Sara Law broke and fell. She stood trembling and unstrung. Max without a word turned on his heel and swung out of sight into the wings. Four other actors on the stage, aside from Sara Law, hesitated and drew together in doubt and bewilderment. And then abruptly, with no warning whatever, the illusion of gloom in the auditorium and moonlight in the postscenium was rent away by the glare of the full complement of electric lights installed in the house.

A thought later, while still all were blinking and gasping with surprise, Max strode into view just behind the footlights. Halting, he swept the array of auditors with an ominous and truculent stare.

So quickly was this startling change consummated that Whitaker had no more than time to realize the reappearance of the manager before he caught his wrathful and venomous glance fixed to his own bewildered face. And something in the light that flickered wildly behind Max's eyes reminded him so strongly of a similar expression he had remarked in the eyes of Drummond, the night the latter had been captured by Ember and Sum Fat, that in alarm he half rose from his seat.

Simultaneously he saw Max spring toward the box, with a distorted and snarling countenance. He was tugging at something in his pocket. It appeared in the shape of a heavy pistol.

Instantly Whitaker was caught and tripped by Ember and sent sprawling on the floor of the box. As this happened, he heard the voice of the firearm, sharp and vicious—a single report.

Unhurt, he picked himself up in time to catch a glimpse of Max, on the stage, momentarily helpless in the embrace of a desperate and frantic woman who had caught his arms from behind and, presumably, had so deflected his arm. In the

same breath Ember, who had leaped to the railing round the box, threw himself across the footlights with the lithe certainty of a beast of prey and, seemingly in as many deft motions, knocked the pistol from the manager's hand, wrested him from the arms of the actress, laid him flat and knelt upon him.

With a single bound Whitaker followed him to the stage; in another he had his wife in his arms and was soothing her first transports of semi-hysterical terror....



It was possibly a quarter of an hour later when Ember paused before a door in the ground floor dressing-room gangway of the Theatre Max—a door distinguished by the initials "S L" in the centre of a golden star. With some hesitation, with even a little diffidence, he lifted a hand and knocked.

At once the door was opened by the maid, Elise. Recognizing Ember, she smiled and stood aside, making way for him to enter the small, curtained lobby.

"Madam—and Monsieur," she said with smiling significance, "told me to show you in at once, Monsieur Ember."

From beyond the curtains, Whitaker's voice lifted up impatiently: "That you, old man? Come right in!"

Nodding to the maid, Ember thrust aside the portières and stepped into the brightly-lighted dressing-room, then paused, bowing and smiling his self-contained, tolerant smile: in appearance as imperturbable and well-groomed as though he had just escaped from the attentions of a valet, rather than from a furious hand-to-hand tussle with a vicious monomaniac.

Mary Whitaker, as yet a little pale and distraught and still in costume, was reclining on a chaise-longue. Whitaker was standing close beside his wife; his face the theatre of conflicting emotions; Ember, at least, thought with a shrewd glance to recognize a pulsating light of joy beneath a mask of interest and distress and a flush of embarrassment.

"I am intruding?" he suggested gravely, with a slight turn as if offering to withdraw.

"No."

The word faltering on the lips of Mary Whitaker was lost in an emphatic iteration by Whitaker.

"Sit down!" he insisted. "As if we'd let you escape, now, after you'd kept us here in suspense!"

He offered a chair, but Ember first advanced to take the hand held out to him by the woman on the chaise-longue.

"You are feeling—more composed?" he inquired.

Her gaze met his bravely. "I am—troubled, perhaps—but happy," she said.

"Then I am very glad," he said, smiling at the delicate colour that enhanced her exquisite beauty as she made the confession. "I had hoped as much." He looked from the one to the other. "You ... have made up your minds?"

The wife answered for both: "It is settled, dear friend: I can struggle no longer. I thought myself a strong woman; I have tried to believe myself a genius bound upon the wheel of an ill-starred destiny; but I find I am"—the glorious voice trembled slightly—"only a woman in love and no stronger than her love."

"I am very glad," Ember repeated, "for both your sakes. It's a happy consummation of my dearest wishes."

"We owe you everything," Whitaker said with feeling, dropping an awkward hand on the other's shoulder. "It was you who threw us together, down there on the Great West Bay, so that we learned to know one another...."

"I plead guilty to that little plot—yes," Ember laughed. "But, best of all, this comes at just the right time—the rightest time, when there can no longer be any doubts or questions or misunderstandings, no ground for further fears and apprehensions, when 'the destroying angel' of your 'ill-starred destiny,' my dear"—he turned to the woman—"is exorcised—banished—proscribed—"

"Max—!" Whitaker struck in explosively.

"—is on his way to the police-station, well guarded," Ember affirmed with a nod and a grim smile. "I have his confession, roughly jotted down but signed, and attested by several witnesses.... I'm glad you were out of the way; it was rather a painful scene, and disorderly; it wouldn't have been pleasant for Mrs. Whitaker.... We had the deuce of a time clearing the theatre: human curiosity is a

tremendously persistent and resistant force. And then I had some trouble dealing with the misplaced loyalty of the staff of the house.... However, eventually I got Max to myself—alone, that is, with several men I could depend on. And then I heartlessly put him through the third degree—forestalling my friends, the police. By dint of asserting as truths and personal discoveries what I merely suspected, I broke down his denials. He owned up, doggedly enough, and yet with that singular pride which I have learned to associate with some phases of homicidal mania.... I won't distress you with details: the truth is that Max was quite mad on the subject of his luck; he considered it, as I suspected, indissolubly associated with Sara Law. When poor Custer committed suicide, he saved Max from ruin and innocently showed him the way to save himself thereafter, when he felt in peril, by assassinating Hamilton and, later, Thurston. Drummond only cheated a like fate, and you"—turning to Whitaker—"escaped by the narrowest shave. Max hadn't meant to run the risk of putting you out of the way unless he thought it absolutely necessary, but the failure of his silly play in rehearsal to-night, coupled with the discovery that you were in the theatre, drove him temporarily insane with hate, chagrin and jealousy."

Concluding, Ember rose. "I must follow him now to the police-station.... I shall see you both soon again—?"

The woman gave him both her hands. "There's no way to thank you," she said—"our dear, dear friend!"

"No way," Whitaker echoed regretfully.

"No way?" Ember laughed quietly, holding her hands tightly clasped. "But I see you together—happy—Oh, believe me, I am fully thanked!"

Bowing, he touched his lips gently to both hands, released them with a little sigh that ended in a contented chuckle, exchanged a short, firm grasp with Whitaker, and left them....

Whitaker, following almost immediately to the gangway, found that Ember had already left the theatre.

For some minutes he wandered to and fro in the gangway, pausing now and again on the borders of the deserted stage. There were but few of the house staff visible, and those few were methodically busy with preparations to close up. Beyond the dismal gutter of the footlights the auditorium yawned cavernous and shadowy, peopled only by low rows of chairs ghostly in their dust-cloths. The

street entrances were already closed, locked and dark. On the stage a single cluster-stand of electric bulbs made visible the vast, gloomy dome of the flies and the whitewashed walls against which sections of scenery were stacked like cards. An electrician in his street clothes lounged beside the door-keeper's cubicle, at the stage entrance, smoking a cigarette and conferring with the doorman while subjecting Whitaker to a curious and antagonistic stare. The muffled rumble of their voices were the only sounds audible, aside from an occasional racket of boot-heels in the gangways as one actor after another left his dressing-room and hastened to the street, keen-set for the clash of gossiping tongues in theatrical clubs and restaurants.

Gradually the building grew more and more empty and silent, until at length Whitaker was left alone with the shadows and the two employees. These last betrayed signs of impatience. He himself felt a little sympathy for their temper. Women certainly did take an unconscionable time to dress!...

At length he heard them hurrying along the lower gangway, and turned to join his wife at the stage-entrance. Elise passed on, burdened with two heavy handbags, and disappeared into the rain-washed alleyway. The electrician detached his shoulders from the wall, ground his cigarette under heel and lounged over to the switchboard.

Mary Whitaker turned her face, shadowy and mystical, touched with her faint and inscrutable smile, up to her husband's.

"Wait," she begged in a whisper. "I want to see"—her breath checked—"the end of it all."

They heard hissings and clickings at the switchboard. The gangway lights vanished in a breath. The single cluster-stand on the stage disappeared—and the house disappeared utterly with its extinguishment. There remained alight only the single dull bulb in the doorman's cubicle.

Whitaker slipped an arm round his wife. She trembled within his embrace.

"Black out," she said in a gentle and regretful voice: "the last exit: Curtain—End of the Play!"

"No," he said in a voice of sublime confidence—"no; it's only the prologue curtain. Now for the play, dear heart ... the real play ... life ... love...."

***END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DESTROYING
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