THE HILLMAN

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By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "The Kingdom of The Blind"
"Mr. Grex of Monte Carlo," Etc.

WITH FRONTISPIECE
By GEORGE AVISON

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I

Louise, self-engrossed, and with a pleasant sense of detachment from the prospective inconveniences of the moment, was leaning back among the cushions of the motionless car. Her eyes, lifted upward, traveled past the dimly lit hillside, with its patchwork of wall-enclosed fields, up to where the leaning clouds and the unseen heights met in a misty sea of obscurity.

The moon had not yet risen, but a faint and luminous glow, spreading like a halo about the topmost peak of that ragged line of hills, heralded its approach. Louise sat with clasped hands, rapt and engrossed in the esthetic appreciation of a beauty which found its way but seldom into her town-enslaved life. She listened to the sound of a distant sheepbell. Her eyes swept the hillsides, vainly yet without curiosity, for any sign of a human dwelling. The voices of her chauffeur and her maid, who stood talking heatedly together by the bonnet of the car, seemed to belong to another world. She had the air of one completely yet pleasantly detached from all material surroundings.

The maid, leaving her discomfited companion with a final burst of reproaches, came to the side of the car. Her voice, when she addressed her mistress, sank to a lower key, but her eyes still flashed with anger.

"But would *madame* believe it?" she exclaimed. "It is incredible! The man Charles there, who calls himself a chauffeur of experience, declares that we are what he calls 'hung up'! Something unexpected has happened to the magneto. There is no spark. Whose fault can that be, I ask, but the chauffeur's? And such a desert we have reached! We have searched the map together. We are thirty miles from any town, many miles from even a village. What a misfortune!"

Louise turned her head regretfully away from the mysterious spaces. She listened patiently, but without any sort of emotion, to her maid's flow of distressed words. She even smiled very faintly when the girl had finished.

"Something will happen," she remarked indifferently. "There is no need for you to distress yourself. There must be a farmhouse or shelter of some sort near. If the worst comes to the worst, we can spend the night in the car. We have plenty of furs and rugs. You are not a good traveler, Aline. You lose heart too soon."

The girl's face was a study.

"*Madame* speaks of spending the night in the car!" she exclaimed. "Why, one has not eaten since luncheon, and of all the country through which we have passed, this is the loneliest and dreariest spot."

Louise leaned forward and called to the chauffeur.

"Charles," she asked, "what has happened? Are we really stranded here?"

The man's head emerged from the bonnet. He came round to the side of the car.

"I am very sorry, madam," he reported, "but something has gone wrong with the magneto. I shall have to take it to pieces before I can tell exactly what is wrong. At present I can't get a spark of any sort."

"There is no hope of any immediate repair, then?"

The chauffeur shook his head dolefully.

"I shall have to take the magneto down, madam," he said. "It will take several hours, and it ought to be done by daylight."

"And in the meantime, what do you suggest that we do?" she asked.

The man looked a little helpless. His battle of words with Aline had depressed him.

"I heard a dog bark a little while ago," he remarked. "Perhaps I had better go and see whether there isn't a farm somewhere near."

"And leave us here alone?" Aline exclaimed indignantly. "It is a good suggestion. It comes well from the man who has got us into such trouble!"

Her mistress smiled at her reassuringly.

"What have we to fear, you foolish girl? For myself, I would like better than anything to remain here until the moon comes over the top of that round hill. But listen! It is just as I told you. There is no necessity for Charles to leave us."

They all turned their heads. From some distance behind on the hard, narrow road, curling like a piece of white tape around the hillside, there came, faintly at first, but more distinctly every moment, the sound of horse's hoofs.

"It is as I told you," Louise said composedly. "Some one approaches—on horseback, too. He will be able to fetch assistance."

The chauffeur walked back a few yards, prepared to give early warning to the approaching horseman. The two women, standing up in the car, watched the spot where the road, hidden for some time in the valley, came into sight.

Louder and louder came the sound of the beating of hoofs. Louise gave a little cry as a man on horseback appeared in sight at the crest of the hill. The narrow strip of road seemed suddenly dwarfed, an unreasonable portion of the horizon blotted out. In the half light there was something almost awesome in the unusual size of the horse and of the man who rode it.

"It is a world of goblins, this, Aline!" her mistress exclaimed softly. "What is it that comes?"

"It is a human being, *Dieu merci*!" the maid replied, with a matter-of-fact little sigh of content.

Conscious of the obstruction in the road, the rider slackened his speed. His horse, a great, dark-colored animal, pricked up his ears when scarcely a dozen yards away from the car, stopped short, and suddenly bolted out on the open moor. There was the sound of a heavy whip, a loud, masterful voice, and a very brief struggle, during which the horse once plunged and reared so high that Louise, watching, cried out in fear. A few moments later, however, horse and rider, the former quivering and subdued, were beside the car.

"Has anything happened?" the newcomer asked, raising his whip to his hat.

He addressed Louise, instinctively conscious, even in that dim light, that she was the person in authority.

She did not at once reply. Her eyes were fixed upon the face of her questioner. There was little enough of him to be seen, yet she was aware of an exceptional interest in his dimly revealed personality. He was young, unusually tall, and his voice was cultivated. Beyond that, she could see or divine nothing.

He, for his part, with his attention still largely engaged in keeping his horse under control, yet knew, in those first few moments, that he was looking into the face of a woman who had no kinship with the world in which he had been born and had lived his days. Those were fugitive thoughts which passed between them, only half conceived, yet strong enough to remain as first and unforgettable

impressions. Then the commonplace interests of the situation became insistent.

"I have broken down," Louise said. "My chauffeur tells me that it will take hours to effect some necessary repair to the car. And meanwhile—here we are!"

"You couldn't have chosen a worse place for a breakdown," the young man observed. "You are miles away from anywhere."

"You are indeed a comforter!" Louise murmured. "Do you think that you could possibly get down and advise us what to do? You look so far away up there."

There was another brief struggle between the man and his still frightened horse. Then the former swung himself down, and, with the bridle through his arm, came and stood by the car.

"If there is any way in which I can help," he ventured, "I am quite at your service."

Louise smiled at him. She remained unoppressed by any fear of inconvenience or hardship. She had the air of one rather enjoying her plight.

"Well, you have begun very nicely by doing what I asked you," she said. "Really, you know, to an impressionable person there was something rather terrifying about you when you appeared suddenly from out of the shadows in such a lonely place. I was beginning to wonder whether you were altogether real, whether one of those black hills there had not opened to let you out. You see, I know something of the legends of your country, although I have never been here before."

The young man was less at his ease. He stood tapping his boot nervously with his long riding-whip.

"I am sorry if I frightened you," he said. "My horse is a little restive, and the acetylene light which your chauffeur turned on him was sufficiently alarming."

"You did not exactly frighten me," she assured him, "but you looked so abnormally large. Please tell us what you would advise us to do. Is there a village near, or an inn, or even a barn? Or shall we have to spend the night in the car?"

"The nearest village," he replied, "is twelve miles away. Fortunately, my own

home is close by. I shall be very pleased—I and my brother—if you will honor us. I am afraid I cannot offer you very much in the way of entertainment—"

She rose briskly to her feet and beamed upon him.

"You are indeed a good Samaritan!" she exclaimed. "A roof is more than we had dared to hope for, although when one looks up at this wonderful sky and breathes this air, one wonders, perhaps, whether a roof, after all, is such a blessing."

"It gets very cold toward morning," the young man said practically.

"Of course," she assented. "Aline, you will bring my dressing-bag and follow us. This gentleman is kind enough to offer us shelter for the night. Dear me, you really are almost as tall as you appeared!" she added, as she stood by his side. "For the first time in my life you make me feel undersized."

He looked down at her, a little more at his ease now by reason of the friendliness of her manner, although he had still the air of one embarked upon an adventure, the outcome of which was to be regarded with some qualms. She was of little more than medium height, and his first impressions of her were that she was thin, and too pale to be good-looking; that her eyes were large and soft, with eyebrows more clearly defined than is usual among Englishwomen; and that she moved without seeming to walk.

"I suppose I am tall," he admitted, as they started off along the road. "One doesn't notice it around here. My name is John Strangewey, and our house is just behind that clump of trees there, on the top of the hill. We will do our best to make you comfortable," he added a little doubtfully; "but there are only my brother and myself, and we have no women servants in the house."

"A roof of any sort will be a luxury," she assured him. "I only hope that we shall not be a trouble to you in any way."

"And your name, please?" he asked.

She was a little amazed at his directness, but she answered him without hesitation.

"My name," she told him, "is Louise."

He leaned down toward her, a little puzzled.

"Louise? But your surname?"

She laughed softly. It occurred to him that nothing like her laugh had ever been heard on that gray-walled stretch of mountain road.

"Never mind! I am traveling incognito. Who I am, or where I am going—well, what does that matter to anybody? Perhaps I do not know myself. You can imagine, if you like, that we came from the heart of your hills, and that to-morrow they will open again and welcome us back."

"I don't think there are any motor-cars in fairyland," he objected.

"We represent a new edition of fairy lore," she told him. "Modern romance, you know, includes motor-cars and even French maids."

"All the same," he protested, with masculine bluntness, "I really don't see how I can introduce you to my brother as 'Louise from fairyland.'"

She evaded the point.

"Tell me about your brother. Is he as tall as you, and is he younger or older?"

"He is nearly twenty years older," her companion replied. "He is about my height, but he stoops more than I do, and his hair is gray. I am afraid that you may find him a little peculiar."

Her escort paused and swung open a white gate on their left-hand side. Before them was an ascent which seemed to her, in the dim light, to be absolutely precipitous.

"Do we have to climb up that?" she asked ruefully.

"It isn't so bad as it looks," he assured her, "and I am afraid it's the only way up. The house is at the bend there, barely fifty yards away. You can see a light through the trees."

"You must help me, then, please," she begged.

He stooped down toward her. She linked her fingers together through his left arm, and, leaning a little heavily upon him, began the ascent. He was conscious of some subtle fragrance from her clothes, a perfume strangely different from the odor of the ghostlike flowers that bordered the steep path up which they were climbing. Her arms, slight, warm things though they were, and great though his

own strength, felt suddenly like a yoke. At every step he seemed to feel their weight more insistent—a weight not physical, solely due to this rush of unexpected emotions.

It was he now whose thoughts rushed away to that medley of hill legends of which she had spoken. Was she indeed a creature of flesh and blood, of the same world as the dull people among whom he lived? Then he remembered the motor-car, the chauffeur, and the French maid, and he gave a little sigh of relief.

"Are we nearly there?" she asked. "Do tell me if I lean too heavily upon you."

"It is only a few steps further," he replied encouragingly. "Please lean upon me as heavily as you like."

She looked around her almost in wonder as her companion paused with his hand upon a little iron gate. From behind that jagged stretch of hills in the distance a corner of the moon had now appeared. By its light, looking backward, she could see the road which they had left below, the moorland stretching away into misty space, an uneasy panorama with its masses of gray boulders, its clumps of gorse, its hillocks and hollows.

Before her, through the little iron gate which her escort had pushed open, was a garden, a little austere looking with its prim flower-beds, filled with hyacinths and crocuses, bordering the flinty walks. The trees were all bent in the same direction, fashioned after one pattern by the winds. Before them was the house—a long, low building, part of it covered with some kind of creeper.

As they stepped across the last few yards of lawn, the black, oak door which they were approaching suddenly opened. A tall, elderly man stood looking inquiringly out. He shaded his eyes with his hands.

"Is that you, brother?" he asked doubtfully.

John Strangewey ushered his companion into the square, oak-paneled hall, hung with many trophies of the chase, a few oil-paintings, here and there some sporting prints. It was lighted only with a single lamp which stood upon a round, polished table in the center of the white-flagged floor.

"This lady's motor-car has broken down, Stephen," John explained, turning a little nervously toward his brother. "I found them in the road, just at the bottom of the hill. She and her servants will spend the night here. I have explained that there is no village or inn for a good many miles."

Louise turned graciously toward the elder man, who was standing grimly apart. Even in those few seconds, her quick sensibilities warned her of the hostility which lurked behind his tightly closed lips and steel-gray eyes. His bow was stiff and uncordial, and he made no movement to offer his hand.

"We are not used to welcoming ladies at Peak Hall, madam," he said. "I am afraid that you will find us somewhat unprepared for guests."

"I ask for nothing more than a roof," Louise assured him.

John threw his hat and whip upon the round table and stood in the center of the stone floor. She caught a glance which flashed between the two men—of appeal from the one, of icy resentment from the other.

"We can at least add to the roof a bed and some supper—and a welcome," John declared. "Is that not so, Stephen?"

The older man turned deliberately away. It was as if he had not heard his brother's words.

"I will go and find Jennings," he said. "He must be told about the servants."

Louise watched the disappearing figure until it was out of sight. Then she looked up into the face of the younger man, who was standing by her side.

"I am sorry," she murmured apologetically. "I am afraid that your brother is not pleased at this sudden intrusion. Really, we shall give you very little trouble."

He answered her with a sudden eager enthusiasm. He seemed far more natural then than at any time since he had ridden up from out of the shadows to take his place in her life.

"I won't apologize for Stephen," he said. "He is a little crotchety. You must please be kind and not notice. You must let me, if I can, offer you welcome enough for us both."

II

Louise, with a heavy, silver-plated candlestick in her hand, stood upon the uneven floor of the bedroom to which she had been conducted, looking up at the oak-framed family tree which hung above the broad chimney-piece. She examined the coat of arms emblazoned in the corner, and peered curiously at the last neatly printed addition, which indicated Stephen and John Strangewey as the sole survivors of a diminishing line. When at last she turned away, she found the name upon her lips.

"Strangewey!" she murmured. "John Strangewey! The name seems to bring something into my memory. Have I ever known any one with such a name, Aline?"

The maid shook her head.

"Never, *madame*, to the best of my belief," she declared. "Yet I, too, seem to have heard it, and lately. It is perplexing. One has seen it somewhere. One finds it familiar."

Louise shrugged her shoulders. She stood for a moment looking around her before she laid down the candlestick.

The room was of unusual size, with two worm-eaten beams across the ceiling; the windows were casemented, with broad seats in each recess. The dressing table, upon which her belongings were set out, was of solid, black oak, as was also the framework of the huge sofa, the mirror, and the chairs. The ancient four-poster, hung with chintz and supported by carved pillars, was spread with fine linen and covered with a quilt made of small pieces of silk, lavender-perfumed. The great wardrobe, with its solid mahogany doors, seemed ancient enough to have stood in its place since the building of the house itself. A log of sweet-smelling wood burned cheerfully in the open fireplace.

"Really," Louise decided, "we have been most fortunate. This is an adventure! Aline, give me some black silk stockings and some black slippers. I will change nothing else."

The maid obeyed in somewhat ominous silence. Her mistress, however, was

living in a little world of her own.

"John Strangewey!" she murmured to herself, glancing across the room at the family tree. "It is really curious how that name brings with it a sense of familiarity. It is so unusual, too. And what an unusual-looking person! Do you think, Aline, that you ever saw any one so superbly handsome?"

The maid's little grimace was expressive.

"Never, *madame*," she replied. "And yet to think of it—a gentleman, a person of intelligence, who lives here always, outside the world, with just a terrible old man servant, the only domestic in the house! Nearly all the cooking is done at the bailiff's, a quarter of a mile away."

Louise nodded thoughtfully.

"It is very strange," she admitted. "I should like to understand it. Perhaps," she added, half to herself, "some day I shall."

She passed across the room, and on her way paused before an old cheval-glass, before which were suspended two silver candlesticks containing lighted wax candles. She looked steadfastly at her own reflection. A little smile parted her lips. In the bedroom of this quaint farmhouse she was looking upon a face and a figure which the illustrated papers and the enterprise of the modern photographer had combined to make familiar to the world.

A curious feeling came to her that she was looking at the face of a stranger. She gazed earnestly into the mirror, with new eyes and a new curiosity. She contemplated critically the lines of her slender figure in its neat, perfectly tailored skirt—the figure of a girl, it seemed, notwithstanding her twenty-seven years. Her soft, white blouse was open at the neck, displaying a beautifully rounded throat. Her eyes traveled upward, and dwelt with an almost passionate interest upon the oval face, a little paler at that moment than usual; with its earnest, brown eyes, its faint, silky eyebrows, its strong, yet mobile features; its lips a little full, perhaps, but soft and sensitive; at the masses of brown hair drawn low over her ears.

This was herself, then. Did she really justify her reputation for beauty, or was she just a cult, the passing craze of a world a little weary of the ordinary standards? Or, again, was it only her art that had focused the admiration of the world upon her?

How would she seem to these two men down-stairs, she asked herself—the dour, grim master of the house, and her more youthful rescuer, whose coming had somehow touched her fancy? They saw so little of her sex. They seemed, in a sense, to be in league against it. Would they find out that they were entertaining an angel unawares?

She thought with a gratified smile of her incognito. It was a real trial of her strength, this! When she turned away from the mirror the smile still lingered upon her lips, a soft light of anticipation was shining in her eyes.

John met her at the foot of the stairs. She noticed with some surprise that he was wearing the dinner-jacket and black tie of civilization.

"Will you come this way, please?" he begged. "Supper is quite ready."

He held open the door of one of the rooms on the other side of the hall, and she passed into a low dining room, dimly lit with shaded lamps. The elder brother rose from his chair as they entered, although his salutation was even grimmer than his first welcome. He was wearing a dress-coat of old-fashioned cut, and a black stock, and he remained standing, without any smile or word of greeting, until she had taken her seat. Behind his chair stood a very ancient man servant in a gray pepper-and-salt suit, with a white tie, whose expression, at the entrance of this unexpected guest, seemed curiously to reflect the inhospitable instincts of his master.

Although conscious of this atmosphere of antagonism, Louise looked around her with frank admiration as she took her place in the high-backed chair which John was holding for her. The correctness of the setting appealed strongly to her artistic perceptions. The figures and features of the two men—Stephen, tall, severe, stately; John, amazingly handsome, but of the same type; the black-raftered ceiling; the Jacobean sideboard; the huge easy chairs; the fine prints upon the walls; the pine log which burned upon the open hearth—nowhere did there seem to be a single alien or modern note.

The table was laid with all manner of cold dishes, supplemented by others upon the sideboard. There were pots of jam and honey, a silver teapot and silver spoons and forks of quaint design, strangely cut glass, and a great Dresden bowl filled with flowers.

"I am afraid," John remarked, "that you are not used to dining at this hour. My brother and I are very old-fashioned in our customs. If we had had a little longer

notice—"

"I never in my life saw anything that looked so delicious as your cold chicken," Louise declared. "May I have some—and some ham? I believe that you must farm some land yourselves. Everything looks as if it were home-made or home-grown."

"We are certainly farmers," John admitted, with a smile, "and I don't think there is much here that isn't of our own production."

"Of course, one must have some occupation, living so far out of the world," Louise murmured. "I really am the most fortunate person," she continued. "My car comes to grief in what seems to be a wilderness, and I find myself in a very palace of plenty!"

"I am not sure that your maid agrees," John laughed. "She seemed rather horrified when she found that there was no woman servant about the place."

"Aline is spoiled, without a doubt," her mistress declared. "But is that really the truth?"

"Absolutely."

"But how do you manage?" Louise went on. "Don't you need dairymaids, for instance?"

"The farm buildings are some distance away from the house," John explained. "There is quite a little colony at the back, and the woman who superintends the dairy lives there. It is only in the house that we are entirely independent of your sex. We manage, somehow or other, with Jennings here and two boys."

"You are not both woman-haters, I hope?"

Her younger host flashed a warning glance at Louise, but it was too late. Stephen had laid down his knife and fork and was leaning in her direction.

"Madam," he intervened, "since you have asked the question, I will confess that I have never known any good come to a man of our family from the friendship or service of women. Our family history, if ever you should come to know it, would amply justify my brother and myself for our attitude toward your sex."

"Stephen!" John remonstrated, a slight frown upon his face. "Need you weary

our guest with your peculiar views? It is scarcely polite, to say the least of it."

The older man sat, for a moment, grim and silent.

"Perhaps you are right, brother," he admitted. "This lady did not seek our company, but it may interest her to know that she is the first woman who has crossed the threshold of Peak Hall for a matter of six years."

Louise looked from one to the other, half incredulously.

"Do you really mean it? Is that literally true?" she asked John.

"Absolutely," the young man assured her; "but please remember that you are none the less heartily welcome here. We have few women neighbors, and intercourse with them seems to have slipped out of our lives. Tell me, how far have you come to-day, and where did you hope to sleep to-night?"

Louise hesitated for a moment. For some reason or other, the question seemed to bring with it some unexpected and disturbing thought.

"I was motoring from Edinburgh. As regards to-night, I had not made up my mind. I rather hoped to reach Kendal. My journey is not at all an interesting matter to talk about," she went on. "Tell me about your life here. It sounds most delightfully pastoral. Do you really mean that you produce nearly everything yourselves? Your honey and preserves and bread and butter, for instance—are they all home-made?"

"And our hams," the young man laughed, "and everything else upon the table. You underestimate the potentiality of male labor. Jennings is certainly a better cook than the average woman. Everything you see was cooked by him. We have a sort of secondary kitchen, though, down at the bailiff's, where the preserves are made and some of the other things."

"And you live here all the year round?" she asked.

"My brother," John told her, "has not been further away than the nearest market-town for nearly twenty years."

Her eyes grew round with astonishment.

"But you go to London sometimes?"

"I was there eight years ago. Since then I have not been further away than

Carlisle or Kendal. I go into the camp near Kendal for three weeks every year—Territorial training, you know."

"But how do you pass your time? What do you do with yourself?" she asked.

"Farm," he answered. "Farming is our daily occupation. Then for amusement we hunt, shoot, and fish. The seasons pass before we know it."

She looked appraisingly at John Strangewey. Notwithstanding his sun-tanned cheeks and the splendid vigor of his form, there was nothing in the least agricultural about his manner or his appearance. There was humor as well as intelligence in his clear, gray eyes. She opined that the books which lined one side of the room were at once his property and his hobby.

"It is a very healthy life, no doubt," she said; "but somehow it seems incomprehensible to think of a man like yourself living always in such an out-of-the-way corner, with no desire to see what is going on in the world, or to be able to form any estimate of the changes in men's thoughts and habits. Human life seems to me so much more interesting than anything else. Does this all sound a little impertinent?" she wound up naïvely. "I am so sorry! My friends spoil me, I believe, and I get into the habit of saying things just as they come into my head."

John's lips were open to reply, but Stephen once more intervened.

"Life means a different thing to each of us, madam," he said sternly. "There are many born with the lust for cities and the crowded places in their hearts, born with the desire to mingle with their fellows, to absorb the conventional vices and virtues, to become one of the multitude. It has been different with us Strangeweys."

Jennings, at a sign from his master, removed the tea equipage, evidently produced in honor of their visitor. Three tall-stemmed glasses were placed upon the table, and a decanter of port reverently produced.

Louise had fallen for a moment or two into a fit of abstraction. Her eyes were fixed upon the opposite wall, from which, out of their faded frames, a row of grim-looking men and women, startlingly like her two hosts, seemed to frown down upon her.

"Is that your father?" she asked, moving her head toward one of the portraits.

"My grandfather, John Strangewey," Stephen told her.

"Was he one of the wanderers?"

"He left Cumberland only twice during his life. He was master of hounds, magistrate, colonel in the yeomanry of that period, and three times he refused to stand for Parliament."

"John Strangewey!" Louise repeated softly to herself. "I was looking at your family tree up-stairs," she went on. "It is curious how both my maid and myself were struck with a sense of familiarity about the name, as if we had heard or read something about it quite lately."

Her words were almost carelessly spoken, but she was conscious of the somewhat ominous silence which ensued. She glanced up wonderingly and intercepted a rapid look passing between the two men. More puzzled than ever, she turned toward John as if for an explanation. He had risen somewhat abruptly to his feet, and his hand was upon the back of her chair.

"Will it be disagreeable to you if my brother smokes a pipe?" he asked. "I tried to have our little drawing-room prepared for you, but the fire has not been lit for so long that the room, I am afraid, is quite impossible."

"Do let me stay here with you," she begged; "and I hope that both of you will smoke. I am quite used to it."

John wheeled up an easy chair for her. Stephen, stiff and upright, sat on the other side of the hearth. He took the tobacco-jar and pipe that his brother had brought him, and slowly filled the bowl.

"With your permission, then, madam," he said, as he struck a match.

Louise smiled graciously. Some instinct prompted her to stifle her own craving for a cigarette and keep her little gold case hidden in her pocket. All the time her eyes were wandering around the room. Suddenly she rose and, moving round the table, stood once more facing the row of gloomy-looking portraits.

"So that is your grandfather," she remarked to John, who had followed her. "Is your father not here?"

He shook his head.

"My father's portrait was never painted."

"Tell the truth, John," Stephen enjoined, rising in his place and setting down

his pipe. "Our father's portrait is not here, madam, because he was one of those of whom I have spoken—one of those who were drawn into the vortex of the city, and who knew only the shallow ways of life. Listen!"

With a heavy silver candlestick in either hand, Stephen crossed the room. He raised them high above his head and pointed to the pictures one by one.

"John Robert Strangewey, our great-grandfather," he began. "That picture was a presentation from the farmers of Cumberland. He, too, was a magistrate, and held many public offices in the county.

"By his side is his brother, Stephen George Strangewey. For thirty-five years he took the chair at the farmers' ordinary at Market Ketton on every Saturday at one o'clock, and there was never a deserving man in this part of the county, engaged in agricultural pursuits, who at any time sought his aid in vain. They always knew where he was to be found, and every Saturday, before dinner was served, there would be some one there to seek his aid or advice. He lived his life to his own benefit and to the benefit of his neighbors—the life which we are all sent here to lead.

"Two generations before him you see my namesake, Stephen Strangewey. It was he who invented the first threshing-machine used in this county. He farmed the land that my brother and I own to-day. He was churchwarden at our little church, and he, too, was a magistrate. He did his duty in a smaller way, but zealously and honestly, among the hillmen of this district."

"There are gaps in your family history," Louise observed.

"The gaps, madam," Stephen explained, "are left by those who have abandoned their natural heritage. We Strangeweys were hillfolk and farmers, by descent and destiny, for more than four hundred years. Our place is here upon the land, almost among the clouds, and those of us who have realized it have led the lives God meant us to lead. There have been some of our race who have been tempted into the lowlands and the cities. Not one of them brought honor upon our name. Their pictures are not here. They are not worthy to be here."

Stephen set down the candlesticks and returned to his place. Louise, with her hands clasped behind her back, glanced toward John, who still stood by her side.

"Tell me," she asked him, "have none of your people who went out into the world done well for themselves?"

"Scarcely one," he admitted. "My brother's words seem a little sweeping, but they are very near the truth. The air of the great cities seems to have poisoned every Strangewey—"

"Not one," Stephen interrupted. "Colonel John Strangewey died leading his regiment at Waterloo, an end well enough, but reached through many years of evil conduct and loose living."

"He was a brave soldier," John put in quietly.

"That is true," Stephen admitted. "His best friends have claimed no other quality for him. Madam," he went on, turning toward Louise, "lest my welcome to you this evening should have seemed inhospitable, let me tell you this. Every Strangewey who has left our county, and trodden the downward path of failure, has done so at the instance of one of your sex. That is why those of us who inherit the family spirit look askance upon all strange women. That is why no woman is ever welcome within this house."

Louise resumed her seat in the easy chair.

"I am so sorry," she murmured, looking down at her slipper. "I could not help breaking down here, could I?"

"Nor could my brother fail to offer you the hospitality of this roof," Stephen admitted. "The incident was unfortunate but inevitable. It is a matter for regret that we have so little to offer you in the way of entertainment." He rose to his feet. The door had been opened. Jennings was standing there with a candlestick upon a massive silver salver. Behind him was Aline. "You are doubtless fatigued by your journey, madam," Stephen concluded.

Louise made a little grimace, but she rose at once to her feet. She understood quite well that she was being sent to bed, and she shivered a little when she looked at the hour—barely ten o'clock. Yet it was all in keeping. From the doorway she looked back into the room, in which nothing seemed to have been touched for centuries. She stood upon the threshold to bid her final good-night, fully conscious of the complete anachronism of her presence there.

Her smile for Stephen was respectful and full of dignity. As she glanced toward John, however, something flashed in her eyes and quivered at the corners of her lips, something which escaped her control, something which made him grip for a moment the back of the chair against which he stood. Then, between

the old man servant, who insisted upon carrying her candle to her room, and her maid, who walked behind, she crossed the white stone hall and stepped slowly up the broad flight of stairs.

III

Louise awoke the next morning filled with a curious sense of buoyant expectancy. The sunshine was pouring into the room, brightening up its most somber corners. It lay across the quilt of her bed, and seemed to bring out the perfume of lavender from the pillow on which her head reposed.

Aline, hearing her mistress stir, hastened at once to the bedside.

"Good morning, *madame*!"

Louise sat up and looked around her, with her hands clasped about her knees.

"Tell me everything, Aline," she said. "Have you my breakfast there? And what time is it?"

"It is half-past nine, *madame*," Aline replied, "and your breakfast is here. The old imbecile from the kitchen has just brought it up."

Louise looked approvingly at the breakfast tray, with the home-made bread and deep-yellow butter, the brown eggs and clear honey. The smell of the coffee was aromatic. She breathed a little sigh of content.

"How delicious everything looks!" she exclaimed.

"The home-made things are well enough in their way, *madame*," Aline agreed, "but I have never known a household so strange and disagreeable. That M. Jennings, who calls himself the butler—he is a person unspeakable, a savage!"

Louise's eyes twinkled.

"I don't think they are fond of women in this household, Aline," she remarked. "Tell me, have you seen Charles?"

"Charles has gone to the nearest blacksmith's forge to get something made for the car, *madame*," Aline replied. "He asked me to say that he was afraid he would not be ready to start before midday."

"That does not matter," Louise declared, as she settled down to her breakfast. "I do not care how long it is before he is ready. I should love to spend a month

here!"

Aline held up her hands. She was speechless. Her mistress laughed at her consternation.

"Well," she continued, "there is no fear of their asking us for a month, or for an hour longer than they can help. The elder Mr. Strangewey, it seems, has the strongest objection to our sex. There is not a woman servant in the house, is there?"

"Not one, *madame*," Aline replied. "I have never been in a household conducted in such a manner. It is like the kitchen of a monastery. The terrible Jennings is speechless. If one addresses him, he only mumbles. The sound of my skirts, or my footstep on the stone floor, makes him shiver. He is worse, one would imagine, than his master."

Louise ate and drank reflectively.

"It is the queerest household one could possibly stumble upon," she remarked. "The young Mr. Strangewey—he seems different, but he falls in with his brother's ways."

Aline glanced at herself in the mirror. She was just out of her mistress's range of vision, and she made a little grimace at her reflection.

"I met him twice this morning in the hall," she remarked. "He wished me good morning the first time. The second time he did not speak. He did not seem to see me."

Louise finished her breakfast and strolled presently to the window. She gave a little sigh of pleasure as she looked out.

"But, Aline," she exclaimed, "how exquisite!"

The maid glanced over her shoulder and went on preparing her mistress's clothes.

"It is as *madame* finds it," she replied. "For myself, I like the country for fête days and holidays only, and even then I like to find plenty of people there."

Louise heard nothing. She was gazing eagerly out of the casement-window. Immediately below was a grass-grown orchard which stretched upward, at a precipitous angle, toward a belt of freshly plowed field; beyond, a little chain of

rocky hills, sheer overhead. The trees were pink and white with blossom; the petals lay about upon the ground like drifted snowflakes. Here and there yellow jonquils were growing among the long grass. A waft of perfume stole into the room through the window which she had opened.

"Fill my bath quickly, Aline," Louise ordered. "I must go out. I want to see whether it is really as beautiful as it looks."

Aline dressed her mistress in silence. It was not until she had finished lacing her shoes that she spoke another word. Then, suddenly, she stopped short in the act of crossing the room. Her eyes had happened to fall upon the emblazoned genealogical record. A little exclamation escaped her. She swung round toward her mistress, and for once there was animation in her face.

"But, *madame*," she exclaimed, "I have remembered! The name Strangewey—you see it there—it was in our minds all the time that we had seen or heard of it quite lately. Don't you remember—"

"Yes, yes!" Louise interrupted. "I know it reminds me of something, but of what?"

"Yesterday morning," Aline continued, "it was you *madame*, who read it out while you took your coffee. You spoke of the good fortune of some farmer in the north of England to whom a relative in Australia had left a great fortune—hundreds and thousands of pounds. The name was Strangewey, the same as that. I remember it now."

She pointed once more to the family tree. Louise sat for a moment with parted lips.

"You are quite right, Aline. I remember it all perfectly now. I wonder whether it could possibly be either of these two men!"

Aline shook her head doubtfully.

"It would be unbelievable, *madame*," she decided. "Could any sane human creatures live here, with no company but the sheep and the cows, if they had money—money to live in the cities, to buy pleasures, to be happy? Unbelievable, *madame*!"

Louise remained standing before the window. She was watching the blossom-laden boughs of one of the apple trees bending and swaying in the fresh morning

breeze—watching the restless shadows which came and went upon the grass beneath.

"That is just your point of view, Aline," she murmured; "but happiness—well, you would not understand. They are strange men, these two. The young one is different now, but as he grows older he will be like his brother. He will live a very simple and honorable life. He will be—what is it they call it?—a county magistrate, chairman of many things, a judge at agricultural shows. When he dies, he will be buried up in that windy little churchyard, and people will come from a long way off to say how good he was. My hat, quickly, Aline! If I am not in that orchard in five minutes I shall be miserable!"

Louise found her way without difficulty across a cobbled yard, through a postern gate set in a red-brick wall, into the orchard. Very slowly, and with her head turned upward toward the trees, she made her way toward the boundary wall. Once, with a little exclamation of pleasure, she drew down a bough of the soft, cool blossom and pressed it against her cheek. She stopped for a moment or two to examine the contents of a row of chicken-coops, and at every few steps she turned around to face the breeze which came sweeping across the moorland from the other side of the house.

Arrived at the farther end of the orchard, she came to a gate, against which she rested for a moment, leaning her arms upon the topmost bar. Before her was the little belt of plowed earth, the fresh, pungent odor of which was a new thing to her; a little way to the right, the rolling moorland, starred with clumps of gorse; in front, across the field on the other side of the gray stone wall, the rock-strewn hills. The sky—unusually blue it seemed to her, and dotted all over with little masses of fleecy, white clouds—seemed somehow lower and nearer; or was she, perhaps higher up?

She lingered there, absolutely bewildered by the rapid growth in her brain and senses of what surely must be some newly kindled faculty of appreciation. There was a beauty in the world which she had not felt before.

She turned her head almost lazily at the sound of a man's voice. A team of horses, straining at a plow, were coming round the bend of the field, and by their side, talking to the laborer who guided them, was John Strangewey. She watched him as he came into sight up the steep rise. Against the empty background, he seemed to lose nothing of the size and strength that had impressed her on the previous night. He was bareheaded, and she noticed for the first time that his

closely cropped fair hair was inclined to curl a little near the ears.

He walked in step with the plowman by his side, but without any of the laborer's mechanical plod—with a spring in his footsteps, indeed, as if his life and thoughts were full of joyous things. He was wearing black-and-white tweed clothes, a little shabby but well-fitting; breeches and gaiters; thick boots, plentifully caked now with mud. He was pointing with his stick along the furrow, so absorbed in the instructions he was giving that he was almost opposite the gate before he was aware of her presence. He promptly abandoned his task and approached her.

"Good morning!" he called out.

She waved her hand.

"Good morning!"

"You have slept well?" he asked.

"Better, I think, than ever before in my life," she answered. "Differently, at any rate. And such an awakening!"

He looked at her, a little puzzled. The glow upon her face and the sunlight upon her brown hair kept him silent. He was content to look at her and wonder.

"Tell me," she demanded impetuously, "is this a little corner of fairy-land that you have found? Does the sun always shine like this? Does the earth always smell as sweetly, and are your trees always in blossom? Does your wind always taste as if God had breathed the elixir of life into it?"

He turned around to follow the sweep of her eyes. Something of the same glow seemed to rest for a moment upon his face.

"It is good," he said, "to find what you love so much appreciated by some one else."

They stood together in a silence almost curiously protracted. Then the plowman passed again with his team of horses, and John called out some instructions to him. She followed him down to earth.

"Tell me, Mr. Strangewey," she inquired, "where are your farm-buildings?"

"Come and I will show you," he answered, opening the gate to let her through.

"Keep close to the hedge until we come to the end of the plow; and then—but no, I won't anticipate. This way!"

She walked by his side, conscious every now and then of his frankly admiring eyes as he looked down at her. She herself felt all the joy of a woman of the world imbibing a new experience. She did not even glance toward the dismantled motor in the barn which they passed.

"I am glad," he remarked presently, "that you look upon us more charitably than your maid."

"Aline is a good girl," Louise said, smiling, "but hot-water taps and electric lights are more to her than sunshine and hills. Do you know," she went on, "I feel like a child being led through an undiscovered country, a land of real adventures. Which way are we going, and what are we going to see? Tell me, please!"

"Wait," he begged. "It is just a queer little corner among the hills, that is all."

They reached the end of the plowed field, and, passing through a gate, turned abruptly to the left and began to climb a narrow path which bordered the boundary wall, and which became steeper every moment. As they ascended, the orchard and the long, low house on the other side seemed to lie almost at their feet. The road and the open moorland beyond, stretching to the encircling hills, came more clearly into sight with every backward glance. Louise paused at last, breathless.

"I must sit down," she insisted. "It is too beautiful to hurry over."

"It is only a few steps farther," he told her, holding out his hand; "just to where the path winds its way round the hill there. But perhaps you are tired?"

"On the contrary," she assured him, "I never felt so vigorous in my life. All the exercise I take, as a rule, is in Kensington Gardens; and look!" She pointed downward to her absurd little shoes, and held out her hand, "You will have to help me," she pleaded.

The last few steps were, indeed, almost precipitous. Fragments of rock, protruding through the grass and bushes, served as steps. John moved on a little ahead and pulled her easily up. Even the slight tightening of his fingers seemed to raise her from her feet. She looked at him wonderingly.

"How strong you are!"

"A matter of weight," he answered, smiling. "You are like a feather. You walk as lightly as the fairies who come out on midsummer night's eve and dance in circles around the gorse-bushes there."

"Is it the home of the fairies you are taking me to?" she asked. "If you have discovered that, no wonder you find us ordinary women outside your lives!"

He laughed.

"There are no fairies where we are going," he assured her.

They were on a rough-made road now, which turned abruptly to the right a few yards ahead, skirting the side of a deep gorge. They took a few steps further, and Louise stopped short with a cry of wonder.

Around the abrupt corner an entirely new perspective was revealed—a little hamlet, built on a shoulder of the mountains; and on the right, below a steep descent, a wide and sunny valley. It was like a tiny world of its own, hidden in the bosom of the hills. There was a long line of farm-buildings, built of gray stone and roofed with red tiles; there were fifteen or twenty stacks; a quaint, white-washed house of considerable size, almost covered on the southward side with creepers; a row of cottages, and a gray-walled enclosure—stretching with its white tombstones to the very brink of the descent—in the midst of which was an ancient church, in ruins at the further end, partly rebuilt with the stones of the hillside.

Louise looked around her, silent with wonder. A couple of sheep-dogs had rushed out from the farmhouse and were fawning around her companion. In the background a gray-bearded shepherd, with Scottish plaid thrown over his shoulder, raised his hat.

"It isn't real, is it?" she asked, clinging for a moment to John Strangewey's arm.

He patted one of the dogs and smiled down at her.

"Why not? William Elwick there is a very real shepherd, I can assure you. He has sat on these hills for the last sixty-eight years."

She looked at the old man almost with awe.

"It is like the Bible!" she murmured. "Fancy the sunrises he must have seen,

and the sunsets! The coming and the fading of the stars, the spring days, the music of the winds in these hollow places, booming to him in the night-time! I want to talk to him. May I?"

He shook his head. The old man was already shambling off.

"Better not," he advised. "You would be disappointed, for William has the family weakness—he cannot bear the sight of a woman. You see, he is pretending now that there is something wrong with the hill flock. You asked where the land was that we tilled. Now look down. Hold my arm if you feel giddy."

She followed the wave of his ash stick. The valley sheer below them, and the lower hills, on both sides, were parceled out into fields, enclosed within stone walls, reminding her, from the height at which they stood, of nothing so much as the quilt upon her bed.

"That's where all our pasture is," he told her, "and our arable land. We grow a great deal of corn in the dip there. All the rest of the hillside, and the moorlands, of course, are fit for nothing but grazing; but there are eleven hundred acres down there from which we can raise almost anything we choose."

Her eyes swept this strange tract of country backward and forward. She saw the men like specks in the fields, the cows grazing in the pasture like toy animals. Then she turned and looked at the neat row of stacks and the square of farm-buildings.

"I am trying hard to realize that you are a farmer and that this is your life," she said.

He swung open the wooden gate of the churchyard, by which they were standing. There was a row of graves on either side of the prim path.

"Suppose," he suggested, "you tell me about yourself now—about your own life."

The hills parted suddenly as she stood there looking southward. Through the chasm she seemed to see very clearly the things beyond. Her own life, her own world, spread itself out—a world of easy triumphs, of throbbing emotions always swiftly ministered to, always leaving the same dull sensation of discontent; a world in which the pathways were broad and smooth, but in which the end seemed always the same; a world of receding beauties and mocking

desires. The faces of her friends were there—men and women, brilliant, her intellectual compeers, a little tired, offering always the same gifts, the same homage.

"My life, and the world in which I live, seem far away just now," she said quietly. "I think that it is doing me good to have a rest from them. Go on talking to me about yourself, please."

He smiled. He was just a little disappointed.

"We shall very soon reach the end of all that I have to tell you," he remarked. "Still, if there is anything you would like to know—"

"Who were these men and women who have lived and died here?" she interrupted, with a little wave of her hand toward the graves.

"All our own people," he told her; "laborers, shepherds, tenant-farmers, domestic servants. Our clergyman comes from the village on the other side of that hill. He rides here every Sunday on a pony which we have to provide for him."

She studied the names upon the tombstones, spelling them out slowly.

"The married people," he went on, "are buried on the south side; the single ones and children are nearer the wall. Tell me," he asked, after a moment's hesitation, "are you married or single?"

She gave a little start. The abruptness of the question, the keen, steadfast gaze of his compelling eyes, seemed for a moment to paralyze both her nerves and her voice. Again the hills rolled open, but this time it was her own life only that she saw, her own life, and one man's face which she seemed to see looking at her from some immeasurable distance, waiting, yet drawing her closer toward him, closer and closer till their hands met.

She was terrified at this unexpected tumult of emotion. It was as if some one had suddenly drawn away one of the stones from the foundation of her life. She found herself repeating the words on the tombstone facing her:

"And of Elizabeth, for sixty-one years the faithful wife and helpmate of Ezra Cummings, mother of his children, and his partner in the life everlasting."

Her knees began to shake. There was a momentary darkness before her eyes. She felt for the tombstone and sat down.

IV

The churchyard gate was opened and closed noisily. They both glanced up. Stephen Strangewey was coming slowly toward them along the flinty path. Louise, suddenly herself again, rose briskly to her feet.

"Here comes your brother," she said. "I wish he wouldn't glower at me so! I really am not such a terrible person as he seems to think."

John muttered a word or two of polite but unconvincing protest. They stood together awaiting his approach. Stephen had apparently lost none of his dourness of the previous night. He was dressed in gray homespun, with knickerbockers and stockings of great thickness. He wore a flannel shirt and collar and a black wisp of a tie. Underneath his battered felt hat his weather-beaten face seemed longer and grimmer than ever, his mouth more uncompromising. As he looked toward Louise, there was no mistaking the slow dislike in his steely eyes.

"Your chauffeur, madam, has just returned," he announced. "He sent word that he will be ready to start at one o'clock."

Louise, inspired to battle by the almost provocative hostility of her elder host, smiled sweetly upon him.

"You can't imagine how sorry I am to hear it," she said. "I don't know when, in the whole course of my life, I have met with such a delightful adventure or spent such a perfect morning!"

Stephen looked at her with level disapproving eyes—at her slender form in its perfectly fitting tailored gown; at her patent shoes, so obviously unsuitable for her surroundings, and at the faint vision of silk stockings.

"If I might say so without appearing inhospitable," he remarked, with faint sarcasm, "this would seem to be the fitting moment for your departure. A closer examination of our rough life up here might alter your views."

She turned toward John, and caught the deprecating glance which flashed from him to Stephen.

"Your brother is making fun of me," she declared. "He looks at me and judges

me just as I believe he would judge most people—sternly and without mercy. After all, you know, even though I am a daughter of the cities, there is another point of view—ours. Can you not believe that the call which prompts men and women to do the things in life which are really worth while is heard as often amid the hubbub of the city as in the solitude of these austere hills?"

"The question is a bootless one," Stephen answered firmly. "The city calls to its own, as the country holds its children, and both do best in their own environment. Like to like, and each bird to his own nest. You would be as much out of place here with us, madam, as my brother and I on the pavements of your city."

"You may be right," she admitted, "yet you dismiss one of the greatest questions in life with a single turn of your tongue. It is given to no one to be infallible. It is even possible that you may be wrong."

"It is possible," Stephen agreed grimly.

"The things in life which are worth while," she continued, looking down into the valley, "are common to all. They do not consist of one thing for one man, another for another. To whom comes the greater share of them—the dweller in the city, or you in your primitive and patriarchal life? You rest your brains, you make the seasons feed you, you work enough to keep your muscles firm, and nature does the rest. She brings the food to your doors, and when your harvest is over your work is done. There are possibilities of rust here, Mr. Strangewey!"

Stephen's smile was almost disdainful.

"Madam," he declared, "you have six or seven million people in London. How many of them live by really creative and honorable work? How many are there of polyglot race—Hebrews, Germans, foreigners of every type, preying upon one another, making false incomes which exist only on paper, living in false luxury, tasting false joys? The sign-post of our lives must be our personal inclinations. Our inclinations—my brother's inclinations and mine—lead us, as they have led my people for hundreds of years, to seek the cleaner things in life and the simpler forms of happiness. If I do not have the pleasure, madam, of seeing you again, permit me to wish you farewell."

He turned and walked away. Louise watched him with very real interest.

"Do you know," she said to John, "there is something which I can only

describe as biblical about your brother, something a little like the prophets of the Old Testament, in the way he sees only one issue and clings to it. Are you, too, of his way of thinking?"

"Up to a certain point, I believe I am," he confessed. "I do not think I could ever have lived in the city. I do not think I could ever have been happy in any of the professions."

"Certainly I could not imagine you as a stock-broker or a lawyer. I feel it hard to realize you in any of the ordinary walks of life. Still, you know, the greatest question of all remains unanswered. Are you content just to live and flourish and die? Are there no compelling obligations with which one is born? Do you never feel cramped—in your mind, I mean?—feel that you want to push your way through the clouds into some other life?"

"I feel nearer the clouds here," he answered simply.

"I suppose you are sure of content—that is to say, if you can keep free from doubts. Still, there is the fighting instinct, you know; the craving for action. Don't you feel that sometimes?"

"Perhaps," he admitted.

They were leaving the churchyard now. She paused abruptly, pointing to a single grave in a part of the churchyard which seemed detached from the rest.

"Whose grave is that?" she inquired.

He hesitated.

"It is the grave of a young girl," he told her quietly.

"But why is she buried so far off, and all alone?" Louise persisted.

"She was the daughter of one of our shepherds," he replied. "She went into service at Carlisle, and returned here with a child. They are both buried there."

"Because of that her grave is apart from the others?"

"Yes," he answered. "It is very seldom, I am glad to say, that anything of the sort happens among us."

For the second time that morning Louise was conscious of an unexpected upheaval of emotion. She felt that the sunshine had gone, that the whole

sweetness of the place had suddenly passed away. The charm of its simple austerity had perished.

"And I thought I had found paradise!" she cried.

She moved quickly from John Strangewey's side. Before he could realize her intention, she had stepped over the low dividing wall and was on her knees by the side of the plain, neglected grave. She tore out the spray of apple-blossom which she had thrust into the bosom of her gown, and placed it reverently at the head of the little mound. For a moment her eyes drooped and her lips moved—she herself scarcely knew whether it was in prayer. Then she turned and came slowly back to her companion.

Something had gone, too, from his charm. She saw in him now nothing but the coming dourness of his brother. Her heart was still heavy. She shivered a little.

"Come," she said, "let us go back!"

They commenced the steep descent in silence. Every now and then John held his companion by the arm to steady her somewhat uncertain footsteps. It was he at last who spoke.

"Will you tell me, please, what is the matter with you, and why you placed that sprig of apple-blossom where you did?"

His tone woke her from her lethargy. She was a little surprised at its poignant, almost challenging note.

"Certainly," she replied. "I placed it there as a woman's protest against the injustice of that isolation."

"I deny that it is unjust."

She turned around and waved her hand toward the little gray building.

"The Savior to whom your church is dedicated thought otherwise," she reminded him. "Do you play at being lords paramount here over the souls and bodies of your serfs?"

"You judge without knowledge of the facts," he assured her calmly. "The girl could have lived here happily and been married to a respectable young man. She chose, instead, a wandering life. She chose, further, to make it a disreputable

one. She broke her mother's heart and soured her father's latter years. She brought into the world a nameless child."

Louise's footsteps slackened.

"You men," she sighed, "are all alike! You judge only by what happens. You never look inside. That is why your justice is so different from a woman's. All that you have told me is very pitiful, but there is another view of the case which you should consider. Let us sit down upon this boulder for a few moments. There is something that I should like to say to you before I go."

They sat upon a ledge of rock. Below them was the house, with its walled garden and the blossom-laden orchard. Beyond stretched the moorland, brilliant with patches of yellow gorse, and the hills, blue and melting in the morning sunlight.

"Don't you men sometimes realize," she continued earnestly, "the many, many guises in which temptation may come to a woman, especially to the young girl so far from home? She may be very lonely, and she may care; and if she cares, it is so hard to refuse the man she loves. The very sweetness, the very generosity of a woman's nature prompts her to give, give, give all the time. There are other women, similarly circumstanced, who think only of themselves, of their own safety and happiness, and they escape the danger; but are they to be praised and respected, while she that yields is condemned and cast out? I feel that you are not going to agree with me, and I do not wish to argue with you; but what I so passionately object to is the sweeping judgment you make—the sheep on one side and the goats on the other. That is how man judges; God looks further. Every case is different. The law by which one should be judged may be poor justice for another."

She glanced at him almost appealingly, but there was no sign of yielding in his face.

"Laws," he reminded her, "are made for the benefit of the whole human race. Sometimes an individual may suffer for the benefit of others. That is inevitable."

"And so let the subject pass," she concluded, "but it saddens me to think that one of the great sorrows of the world should be there like a monument to spoil the wonder of this morning. Now I am going to ask you a question. Are you the John Strangewey who has recently had a fortune left to him?"

He nodded.

"You read about it in the newspapers, I suppose," he said. "Part of the story isn't true. It was stated that I had never seen my Australian uncle, but as a matter of fact he has been over here three or four times. It was he who paid for my education at Harrow and Oxford."

"What did your brother say to that?"

"He opposed it," John confessed, "and he hated my uncle. He detests the thought of any one of us going out of sight of our own hills. My uncle had the wander-fever."

"And you?" she asked suddenly.

"I have none of it," he asserted.

A very faint smile played about her lips.

"Perhaps not before," she murmured; "but now?"

"Do you mean because I have inherited the money?"

She leaned a little toward him. Her smile now was more evident, and there was something in her eyes which was almost like a challenge.

"Naturally!"

"What difference does my money make?" he demanded.

"Don't you realize the increase of your power as a human being?" she replied. "Don't you realize the larger possibilities of the life that is open to you? You can move, if you will, in the big world. You can take your place in any society you choose, meet interesting people who have done things, learn everything that is new, do everything that is worth doing in life. You can travel to the remote countries of the globe. You can become a politician, a philanthropist, or a sportsman. You can follow your tastes wherever they lead you, and—perhaps this is the most important thing of all—you can do everything upon a splendid scale."

He smiled down at her.

"That all sounds very nice," he admitted, "but supposing that I have no taste in any of the directions you have mentioned? Supposing my life here satisfies me?

Supposing I find all that I expect to find in life here on my own land, among my own hills? What then?"

She looked at him with a curiosity which was almost passionate. Her lips were parted, her senses strained.

"It is not possible," she exclaimed, "that you can mean it!"

"But why not?" he protested. "I have not the tortuous brain of the modern politician. I hate cities—the smell of them, the atmosphere of them, the life in them. The desire for travel is only half born in me. That may come—I cannot tell. I love the daily work here; I am fond of horses and dogs. I know every yard of land we own, and I know what it will produce. It interests me to try experiments—new crops, a new distribution of crops, new machinery sometimes, new methods of fertilizing. I love to watch the seasons come and reign and pass. I love to feel the wind and the sun, and even the rain. All these things have become a sort of appetite to me. I am afraid," he wound up a little lamely, "that this is all very badly expressed, but the whole truth of it is, you see, that I am a man of simple and inherited tastes. I feel that my life is here, and I live it here and I love it. Why should I go out like a *Don Quixote* and search for vague adventures?"

"Because you are a man!" she answered swiftly. "You have a brain and a soul too big for your life here. You eat and drink, and physically you flourish, but part of you sleeps because it is shut away from the world of real things. Don't you sometimes feel it in your very heart that life, as we were meant to live it, can only be lived among your fellow men?"

He looked upward, over his shoulder, at the little cluster of farm-buildings and cottages, and the gray stone church.

"It seems to me," he declared simply, "that the man who tries to live more than one life fails in both. There is a little cycle of life here, among our thirty or forty souls, which revolves around my brother and myself. You would think it stupid and humdrum, because the people are peasants; but I am not sure that you are right. The elementary things, you know, are the greatest, and those we have. Our young people fall in love and marry. The joy of birth comes to our mothers, and the tragedy of death looms over us all. Some go out into the world, some choose to remain here. A passer-by may glance upward from the road at our little hamlet, and wonder what can ever happen in such an out-of-the-way corner. I think the answer is just what I have told you. Love and marriage, birth and death

happen. These things make life."

Her curiosity now had become merged in an immense interest. She laid her fingers lightly upon his arm.

"You speak for your people," she said. "That is well. I can understand their simple lives being as absorbing to them as ours are to us. I can imagine how, here among your hills, you can watch as a spectator a cycle of life which contains, as you have pointed out, every element of tragedy and happiness. But you yourself?"

"I am one of them," he answered, "a necessary part of them."

"How you deceive yourself! I am sure you are honest, I am sure you believe what you say, but will you remember what I am going to tell you? The time will come, before very long, when you will feel doubts."

"Doubts about what?"

She smiled enigmatically.

"Oh, they will assert themselves," she assured him, "and you will recognize them when they come. Something will whisper to you in your heart that after all you are not of the same clay as these simple folk—that there is a different mission in the world for a man like you than to play the part of feudal lord over a few peasants. Sooner or later you will come out into the world; and the sooner the better, I think, Mr. John Strangewey, or you will grow like your brother here among your granite hills."

He moved a little uneasily. All the time she was watching him. It seemed to her that she could read the thoughts which were stirring in his brain.

"You would like to say, wouldn't you," she went on, "that your brother's is a useful and an upright life? So it may be, but it is not wide enough or great enough. No one should be content with the things which he can reach. He should climb a little higher, and pluck the riper fruit. Some day you will feel the desire to climb. Something will come to you—in the night, perhaps, or on the bosom of that wind you love so much. It may be a call of music, or it may be a more martial note. Promise me, will you, that when you feel the impulse you won't use all that obstinate will-power of yours to crush it? You will destroy the best part of yourself, if you do. You will give it a chance? Promise!"

She held out her hand with a little impulsive gesture. He took it in his own, and held it steadfastly.

"I will remember," he promised.

Along the narrow streak of road, from the southward, they both watched the rapid approach of a large motor-car. There were two servants upon the front seat and one passenger—a man—inside. It swung into the level stretch beneath them, a fantasy of gray and silver in the reflected sunshine.

Louise had been leaning forward, her head supported upon her hands. As the car slackened speed, she rose very slowly to her feet.

"The chariot of deliverance!" she murmured.

"It is the Prince of Seyre," John remarked, gazing down with a slight frown upon his forehead.

She nodded. They had started the descent, and she was walking in very leisurely fashion.

"The prince is a great friend of mine," she said. "I had promised to spend last night, or, at any rate, some portion of the evening, at Raynham Castle on my way to London."

He summoned up courage to ask her the question which had been on his lips more than once.

"As your stay with us is so nearly over, won't you abandon your incognito?"

"In the absence of your brother," she answered, "I will risk it. My name is Louise Maurel."

"Louise Maurel, the actress?" he repeated wonderingly.

"I am she," Louise confessed. "Would your brother," she added, with a little grimace, "feel that he had given me a night's lodging under false pretense?"

John made no immediate reply. The world had turned topsyturvy with him. Louise Maurel, and a great friend of the Prince of Seyre! He walked on mechanically until she turned and looked at him.

"Well?"

"I am sorry," he declared bluntly.

"Why?" she asked, a little startled at his candor.

"I am sorry, first of all, that you are a friend of the Prince of Seyre."

"And again why?"

"Because of his reputation in these parts."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"I am not a scandalmonger," John replied dryly. "I speak only of what I know. His estates near here are systematically neglected. He is the worst landlord in the country, and the most unscrupulous. His tenants, both here and in Westmoreland, have to work themselves to death to provide him with the means of living a disreputable life."

"Are you not forgetting that the Prince of Seyre is a friend of mine?" she asked stiffly.

"I forget nothing," he answered. "You see, up here we have not learned the art of evading the truth."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"So much for the Prince of Seyre, then. And now, why your dislike of my profession?"

"That is another matter," he confessed. "You come from a world of which I know nothing. All I can say is that I would rather think of you—as something different."

She laughed at his somber face and patted his arm lightly.

"Big man of the hills," she said, "when you come down from your frozen heights to look for the flowers, I shall try to make you see things differently!"

V

The prince, who had just been joined by Stephen, had descended from his car and was waiting in the road when Louise and John approached. He came a few paces forward to meet her, and held out both his hands.

"My dear wandering guest!" he exclaimed. "So I have found you at last! What shall I say to this mishap which has robbed me of so many hours of your visit? I am too happy, though, to know that you have suffered no personal inconvenience."

"Thanks to the great kindness of my hosts," Louise replied, smiling a little mockingly at Stephen, "I have been completely spoiled here, prince, and I can only regard my accident as a delightful little interlude."

The prince bowed, and half held out his hand to Stephen. The latter, however appeared not to notice the movement.

"I shall always remember with gratitude," the prince declared, "the kindness of Mr. Strangewey and his brother to my lost guest. I fear," he went on regretfully, "that I do not seem very neighborly. I am not often at Raynham Castle, except in August and September. I find your northern air somewhat too severe for me."

"Your tenants, prince," Stephen remarked calmly, "would like to see a little more of you."

The prince shrugged his shoulders. He was a man of medium height, slender, with a long and almost colorless face. He carried himself with the good-humored air of the man of the world among strange surroundings toward which he desired to express his toleration. His clothes and voice were perfectly English, although the latter was unusually slow and soft. At first sight there was no apparent evidence of his foreign birth. He turned once more toward Stephen.

"My agent, Mr. Simon, is a very excellent man, and I have every confidence in his discretion. My tenants here could scarcely feel toward me as they might have done if Raynham had come into my possession in the direct line. However, this year, as it happens, I have made up my mind to spend more time here. My

keepers tell me that after four bad seasons the prospects for grouse on my higher moors are excellent. I shall hope," he added, turning to John, "to have you join us often. I must confess that the only time I had ever heard your name, before the newspapers advertised your recent good fortune, was in connection with shooting. They tell me that you are the best shot and the finest horseman in Cumberland."

"You were probably told that at Raynham," John remarked. "Our people always exaggerate the prowess of their own folk, and my brother and I are natives."

"I trust," the prince concluded, "that you will give me the opportunity of judging for myself. And now, dear lady," he went on, turning to Louise, "I am loath to lose another minute of my promised visit. I have taken the liberty of telling your maid to place your wraps in my car. We can reach Raynham in time for a late lunch. Your own car can follow us and bring your maid."

For a moment Louise did not reply. The prince had moved a few steps away, to give some directions to his chauffeur, and he saw nothing of the strange look of indecision that had suddenly crept into her face. Her eyebrows were contracted. She had turned, and was gazing up the precipitous strip of moorland toward the gray-walled church. Then she glanced at John Strangewey, and her eyes seemed filled with the questioning of a child. It was as if she had abandoned the rôle of mentor, as if she herself were seeking for guidance or help.

John's unspoken response was prompt and unmistakable; and she smiled ever so slightly. She no longer thought him narrow and prejudiced, an unfair judge of things beyond his comprehension. He had helped her in a moment of trial. An idea had flashed between them, and she acted upon it with amazing promptitude.

"Alas, prince," she sighed, as he turned back toward them, "I am so sorry, but I fear that this little accident must change all my plans! As you know, mine was to have been only a brief stay at Raynham, and I fear now that even that is impossible."

The prince drew a step nearer. Something of the calm suavity had suddenly gone from his manner. When he spoke, his measured words were full of appeal.

"But, my dear friend," he begged, "you will not rob me altogether of this visit, to which I have looked forward so eagerly? It was to receive you for a few hours

that I came from Paris and opened Raynham Castle. You yourself shall decide the length of your stay, and a special train shall take you back to London the moment you give the word. In that way you will both save time and spare me—one of the greatest disappointments of my life!"

She shook her head, slowly and very decisively.

"You cannot imagine how sorry I am, prince," she said, "but as it is I must take a special train from Kendal, if there is not one starting soon after I reach the station. I wish to reach London either this evening or very early in the morning."

The prince was holding himself in restraint with a visible effort. His eyes were fixed upon Louise's face, as if trying to read her thoughts.

"Is the necessity so urgent?" he asked.

"Judge for yourself," she replied. "Henri Graillot is there, waiting for me. You know how impatient he is, and all London is clamoring for his play. Night to him is just the same as day. I shall telegraph from Kendal the hour of my arrival."

The prince sighed.

"I think," he said quietly, "that I am the most unfortunate man in the world! At least, then, you will permit me to drive you to Kendal? I gather from your chauffeur that your car, although temporarily repaired, is not altogether reliable."

She answered him only after a slight hesitation. For some reason or other, his proposition did not seem wholly welcome.

"That will be very kind of you," she assented.

"If we start at once," the prince suggested, "we shall catch the Scotch mail."

"You will surely lunch first—and you, prince?" John begged.

She laid her hand upon his arm.

"My friend, no," she replied. "I am feverishly anxious to get back to London. Walk with me to the car. I will wave my adieus to Peak Hall when we are up among the hills."

She drew him on a few paces ahead.

"I am going back to London," she continued, lowering her voice a little, "with

some very strange impressions and some very pleasant memories. I feel that your life here is, in its way, very beautiful, and yet the contemplation of your future fills me with an immense curiosity. I have not talked to you for very long, Mr. Strangewey, and you may not be quite the sort of person I think you are, but I am seldom mistaken. I am an artist, you see, and we have perceptions. I think that even here the time will come when the great unrest will seize you, too, in its toils. Though the color may not fade from your hills, and though the apple-blossom may still glorify your orchard, and your flowers bloom and smell as sweetly, and your winds bring you the same music, I think that the time will come when the note in you which answers to these things, and which gives you contentment, will fail to respond. Then I think—I hope, perhaps—that we may meet."

She spoke very softly, almost under her breath, and when she had finished there seemed everywhere a strange emptiness of sound. The panting of the engine from the motor-car, Stephen's measured words as he walked with his uncongenial companion, seemed to come to John from some other world.

His voice, when he spoke, sounded a little harsh. Although he was denying it fiercely to himself, he was filled with a dim, harrowing consciousness that the struggle had already begun. Notwithstanding the unrealized joy of these few hours, his last words to Louise were almost words of anger; his last look from beneath his level, close-drawn eyebrows was almost militant.

"I hope," he declared, "that what you have said may not be true. I hope fervently that the time may never come when I shall feel that I need anything more in life than I can find in the home I love, in the work which is second nature to me, in my books and my sports!"

The prince, escaping gracefully from a companion who remained adamant to all his advances, had maneuvered his way to their side. The last few steps were taken together. In a few moments they were in the car and ready to start. Stephen, with a stiff little bow, had already departed. Louise leaned out from her place with outstretched hands.

"And now good-by, dear Mr. Strangewey! Your brother would not let me make my little speech to him, so you must accept the whole of my thanks. And," she went on, the corners of her mouth twitching a little, although her face remained perfectly grave, "if the time should come when the need of reinvestments, or of some new machinery for your farm, brings you to London,

will you promise that you will come and see me?"

"I will promise that with much pleasure," John answered.

She leaned back and the prince took her place, holding out his hand.

"Mr. Strangewey, although your luck has been better than mine, and you have robbed me of a visit to which I had looked forward for months, I bear you no ill-will. I trust that you will do me the honor of shooting with me before long. My head keeper arranges for the local guns, and I shall see that he sends you a list of the days on which we shall shoot. May I beg that you will select the most convenient to yourself? If you have no car here, it will give me additional pleasure to welcome you at Raynham as my guest."

John, struggling against an instinctive dislike of which, for many reasons, he was a little ashamed, murmured a few incoherent words. The prince leaned back and the car glided away, followed, a few minutes later, by Louise's own landaulet, with Aline in solitary state inside.

John watched the little procession until it finally disappeared from sight; then he turned on his heel and went into the house. Stephen, who had just filled a pipe, was smoking furiously in the hall.

"Have they gone?" he demanded.

John nodded.

"They are racing into Kendal to catch the Scotchman for London."

"The sooner she gets there, the better," Stephen growled.

John raised his head. The light of battle flashed for a moment in his eyes.

"She came here unbidden," he said, "and we did no more than our bounden duty in entertaining her. For the rest, what is there that you can say against her? Women there must be in the world. Why do you judge those who come your way so harshly?"

Stephen withdrew the pipe from his mouth and dealt the black oak table in front of him a blow with his great fist. Even John himself was struck with the sudden likeness of his brother's face to the granite rocks which were piled around their home.

"I'll answer your question, John," he said. "I'll tell you the truth as I see it and as I know it. Women there must be to breed men's sons, to care for their households; even, I grant you, to be their companions and to lighten the dark days when sorrow comes. But she isn't that sort. She is as far removed from them as our mountain road is from the scented thoroughfares of Bond Street or the Rue de la Paix, where she might take her daily exercise. I'll tell you about her, John. She is one of those who have sown the hatred of women in my heart. Do you know what I call them, John? I call them witch-women. There's something of the devil in their blood. They call themselves artists. They have the gift of turning the heads and spoiling the lives of sober, well-living men, till they make them dance to their bidding along the ways of shame, and turn their useful lives into the dotage of a love-sick boy. They aren't child-bearing women, that sort! They don't want to take their proper place in your household by your side, breed sons and daughters for you, sink their own lives in the greater duties of motherhood. There's generally a drop of devilish foreign blood in their veins, as she has. Our grandmother had it. You know the result. The empty frame in the lumber-room will tell you."

John, half angry, half staggered by his brother's vehemence, was for the moment a little confused.

"There may be women like that, Stephen," he confessed. "I am not denying the truth of much that you say. But what right have you to class her among them? What do you know of her?"

"It's written in her face," Stephen answered fiercely. "Women like her breathe it from their lips when they speak, just as it shines out of their eyes when they look at you. An actress, and a friend of the Prince of Seyre! A woman who thought it worth her while, during her few hours' stay here—" John had suddenly straightened himself. Stephen clenched his teeth. "Curse it, that's enough!" he said. "She's gone, anyway. Come, let's have our lunch!"

VI

Once more that long, winding stretch of mountain road lay empty under the moonlight. Three months had passed, and none of the mystery of the earlier season in the year remained. The hills had lost their canopy of soft, gray mist. Nature had amplified and emphasized herself. The whole outline of the country was marvelously distinct. The more distant mountains, as a rule blurred and uncertain in shape, seemed now to pierce with their jagged summits the edge of the star-filled sky.

Up the long slope, where three months before he had ridden to find himself confronted with the adventure of his life, John Strangewey jogged homeward in his high dog-cart. The mare, scenting her stable, broke into a quick trot as they topped the long rise. Suddenly she felt a hand tighten upon her reins. She looked inquiringly around, and then stood patiently awaiting her master's bidding.

It seemed to John as if he had passed from the partial abstraction of the last few hours into absolute and entire forgetfulness of the present. He could see the motor-car drawn up by the side of the road, could hear the fretful voice of the maid, and the soft, pleasant words of greeting from the woman who had seemed from the first as if she were very far removed indeed from any of the small annoyances of their accident.

"I have broken down. Can you help?"

He set his teeth. The poignancy of the recollection was a torture to him. Word by word he lived again through that brief interview. He saw her descend from the car, felt the touch of her hand on his arm, saw the flash of her brown eyes as she drew close to him with that pleasant little air of familiarity, shared by no other woman he had ever known.

Then the little scene faded away, and he remembered the tedious present. He had spent two dull days at the house of a neighboring landowner, playing cricket in the daytime, dancing at night with women in whom he was unable to feel the slightest interest, always with that far-away feeling in his heart, struggling hour by hour with that curious restlessness which seemed to have taken a permanent place in his disposition. He was on his way home to Peak Hall. He knew exactly the welcome which was awaiting him. He knew exactly the news he would

receive. He raised his whip and cracked it viciously in the air.

Stephen was waiting for him, as he had expected, in the dining room. The elder Strangewey was seated in his accustomed chair, smoking his pipe and reading the paper. The table was laid for a meal, which Jennings was preparing to serve.

"Back again, John?" his brother remarked, looking at him fixedly over his newspaper.

John picked up one or two letters, glanced them over, and flung them down upon the table. He had examined every envelope for the last few months with the same expectancy, and thrown each one down with the same throb of disappointment.

"As you see."

"Had a good time?"

"Not very. We were too strong for them. They came without a bowler at all."

"Did you get a good knock?"

"A hundred and seven," John replied. "It was just a slog, though. Nothing to eat, thank you, Jennings. You can clear the table so far as I am concerned. I had supper with the Greys. Have they finished the barley-fields, Stephen?"

"All in at eight o'clock."

There was a brief silence. Then Stephen knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose to his feet.

"John," he asked, "why did you pull up on the road there?"

There was no immediate answer. The slightest of frowns formed itself upon the younger man's face.

"How did you know that I pulled up?"

"I was sitting with the window open, listening for you. I came outside to see what had happened, and I saw your lights standing still."

"I had a fancy to stop for a moment," John said; "nothing more."

"You aren't letting your thoughts dwell upon that woman?"

"I have thought about her sometimes," John answered, almost defiantly. "What's the harm? I'm still here, am I not?"

Stephen crossed the room. From the drawer of the old mahogany sideboard he produced an illustrated paper. He turned back the frontispiece fiercely and held it up.

"Do you see that, John?"

"I've seen it already."

Stephen threw the paper upon the table.

"She's going to act in another of those confounded French plays," he said; "translations with all the wit taken out and all the vulgarity left in."

"We know nothing of her art," John declared coldly. "We shouldn't understand it, even if we saw her act. Therefore, it isn't right for us to judge her. The world has found her a great actress. She is not responsible for the plays she acts in."

Stephen turned away and lit his pipe anew. He smoked for a minute or two furiously. His thick eyebrows came closer and closer together. He seemed to be turning some thought over in his mind.

"John," he asked, "is it this cursed money that is making you restless?"

"I never think of it except when some one comes begging. I promised a thousand pounds to the infirmary to-day."

"Then what's wrong with you?"

John stretched himself out, a splendid figure of healthy manhood. His cheeks were sun-tanned, his eyes clear and bright.

"The matter? There's nothing on earth the matter with me," he declared.

"It isn't your health I mean. There are other things, as you well know. You do your day's work and you take your pleasure, and you go through both as if your feet were on a treadmill."

"Your fancy, Stephen!"

"God grant it! I've had an unwelcome visitor in your absence."

John turned swiftly around.

"A visitor?" he repeated. "Who was it?"

Stephen glowered at him for a moment.

"It was the prince," he said; "the Prince of Seyre, as he calls himself, though he has the right to style himself Master of Raynham. It's only his foreign blood which makes him choose what I regard as the lesser title. Yes, he called to ask you to shoot and stay at the castle, if you would, from the 16th to the 20th of next month."

"What answer did you give him?"

"I told him that you were your own master. You must send word to-morrow."

"He did not mention the names of any of his other guests, I suppose?"

"He mentioned no names at all."

John was silent for a moment. A bewildering thought had taken hold of him. Supposing she were to be there!

Stephen, watching him, read his thoughts, and for a moment lost control of himself.

"Were you thinking about that woman?" he asked sternly.

"What woman?"

"The woman whom we sheltered here, the woman whose shameless picture is on the cover of that book."

John swung round on his heel.

"Stop that, Stephen!" he said menacingly.

"Why should I?" the older man retorted. "Take up that paper, if you want to read a sketch of the life of Louise Maurel. See the play she made her name in —'La Gioconda'!"

"What about it?"

Stephen held the paper out to his brother. John read a few lines and dashed it into a corner of the room.

"There's this much about it, John," Stephen continued. "The woman played that part night after night—played it to the life, mind you. She made her reputation in it. That's the woman we unknowingly let sleep beneath this roof! The barn is the place for her and her sort!"

John's clenched fists were held firmly to his sides. His eyes were blazing.

"That's enough, Stephen!" he cried.

"No, it's not enough!" was the fierce reply. "The truth's been burning in my heart long enough. It's better out. You want to find her a guest at Raynham Castle, do you?—Raynham Castle, where never a decent woman crosses the threshold! If she goes there, she goes as his mistress. Well?"

An anger that was almost paralyzing, a sense of the utter impotence of words, drove John in silence from the room. He left the house by the back door, passed quickly through the orchard, where the tangled moonlight lay upon the ground in strange, fantastic shadows; across the narrow strip of field, a field now of golden stubble; up the rough ascent, across the road, and higher still up the hill which looked down upon the farm-buildings and the churchyard.

He sat grimly down upon a great boulder, filled with a hateful sense of unwreaked passion, yet with a queer thankfulness in his heart that he had escaped the miasma of evil thoughts which Stephen's words seemed to have created. The fancy seized him to face these half-veiled suggestions of his brother's, so far as they concerned himself and his life during the last few months.

Stephen was right. This woman who had dropped from the clouds for those few brief hours had played strange havoc with John's thoughts and his whole outlook upon life. The coming of harvest, the care of his people, his sports, his cricket, the early days upon the grouse moors, had all suddenly lost their interest for him. Life had become a task. The echo of her half-mocking, half-challenging words was always in his ears.

He sat with his head resting upon his hands, looking steadfastly across the valley below. Almost at his feet lay the little church with its graveyard, the long line of stacks and barns, the laborers' cottages, the bailiff's house, the whole little

colony around which his life seemed centered. The summer moonlight lay upon the ground almost like snow. He could see the sheaves of wheat standing up in the most distant of the cornfields. Beyond was the dark gorge toward which he had looked so many nights at this hour.

Across the viaduct there came a blaze of streaming light, a serpentlike trail, a faintly heard whistle—the Scottish Express on its way southward toward London. His eyes followed it out of sight. He found himself thinking of the passengers who would wake the next morning in London. He felt himself suddenly acutely conscious of his isolation. Was there not something almost monastic in the seclusion which had become a passion with Stephen, and which had its grip, too, upon him—a waste of life, a burying of talents?

He rose to his feet. The half-formed purpose of weeks held him now, definite and secure. He knew that this pilgrimage of his to the hilltop, his rapt contemplation of the little panorama which had become so dear to him, was in a sense valedictory.

After all, two more months passed before the end came, and it came then without a moment's warning. It was a little past midday when John drove slowly through the streets of Market Ketton in his high dogcart, exchanging salutations right and left with the tradespeople, with farmers brought into town by the market, with acquaintances of all sorts and conditions. More than one young woman from the shop-windows or the pavements ventured to smile at him, and the few greetings he received from the wives and daughters of his neighbors were as gracious as they could possibly be made. John almost smiled once, in the act of raising his hat, as he realized how completely the whole charm of the world, for him, seemed to lie in one woman's eyes.

At the crossways, where he should have turned up to the inn, he paused while a motor-car passed. It contained a woman, who was talking to her host. She was not in the least like Louise, and yet instinctively he knew that she was of the same world. The perfection of her white-serge costume, her hat so smartly worn, the half-insolent smile, the little gesture with which she raised her hand—something about her unlocked the floodgates.

Market Ketton had seemed well enough a few minutes ago. John had felt a

healthy appetite for his midday meal, and a certain interest concerning a deal of barley upon which he was about to engage. And now another world had him in its grip. He flicked the mare with his whip, turned away from the inn, and galloped up to the station, keeping pace with the train whose whistle he had heard. Standing outside was a local horse-dealer of his acquaintance.

"Take the mare back for me to Peak Hall, will you, Jenkins, or send one of your lads?" he begged. "I want to catch this train."

The man assented with pleasure—it paid to do a kindness for a Strangewey. John passed through the ticket-office to the platform, where the train was waiting, threw open the door of a carriage, and flung himself into a corner seat. The whistle sounded. The adventure of his life had begun at last.

VII

The great French dramatist, dark, pale-faced, and corpulent, stood upon the extreme edge of the stage, brandishing his manuscript in his hand. From close at hand, the stage manager watched him anxiously. For the third time M. Graillot was within a few inches of the orchestra-well.

"If you would pardon me, M. Graillot," he ventured timidly, "the footlights are quite unprotected, as you see."

Graillot glanced behind him and promptly abandoned his dangerous position.

"It is you, ladies and gentlemen," he declared, shaking his manuscript vigorously at the handful of people upon the stage, "who drive me into forgetfulness and place me in the danger from which our friend here has just rescued me. Do I not best know the words and the phrases which will carry the messages of my play across the footlights? Who is to judge, ladies and gentlemen—you or I?"

He banged the palm of his left hand with the rolled-up manuscript and looked at them all furiously. A slight, middle-aged man, clean-shaven, with a single eyeglass, and features very well known to the theatergoing world, detached himself a little from the others.

"No one indeed, dear M. Graillot," he admitted, "could possibly know these things so well as you; but, on the other hand, when you write in your study at Fontainebleau you write for a quicker-minded public than ours. The phrase which would find its way at once to the brain of the French audience needs, shall I say, just a little amplification to carry equal weight across the footlights of my theater. I will admit that we are dealing with a translation which is, in its way, not sufficiently literal, but our friend Shamus here has pointed out to me the difficulties. The fact is, M. Graillot, that some of the finest phrases in your work are untranslatable."

"There are times," the dramatist asserted, moistening his lips vigorously with his tongue, "when I regret that I ever suffered Mr. Shamus or anybody else to attempt to translate my inimitable play into a language wholly inadequate to express its charm and subtlety!"

"Quite so," the actor remarked sympathetically; "but still, since the deed has been done, M. Graillot, and since we are going to produce the result in the course of a fortnight or so, or lose a great deal of money, don't you think that we had all better try our utmost to insure the success of the production?"

"The only success I care for," Graillot thundered, "is an artistic success!"

"With Miss Maurel playing your leading part, M. Graillot," the actor-manager declared, "not to speak of a company carefully selected to the best of my judgment, I think you may venture to anticipate even that."

The dramatist bowed hurriedly to Louise.

"You recall to me a fact," he said gallantly, "which almost reconciles me to this diabolical travesty of some of my lines. Proceed, then—proceed! I will be as patient as possible."

The stage manager shouted out some directions from his box. A gentleman in faultless morning clothes, who seemed to have been thoroughly enjoying the interlude, suddenly adopted the puppetlike walk of a footman. Other actors, who had been whispering together in the wings, came back to their places. Louise advanced alone, a little languidly, to the front of the stage. At the first sound of her voice M. Graillot, nodding his head vigorously, was soothed.

Her speech was a long one. It appeared that she had been arraigned before a company of her relatives, assembled to comment upon her misdeeds. She wound up with a passionate appeal to her husband, Mr. Miles Faraday, who had made an unexpected appearance. M. Graillot's face, as she concluded, was wreathed in smiles.

"Ah!" he cried. "You have lifted us all up! Now I feel once more the inspiration. *Mademoiselle,* I kiss your hand," he went on. "It is you who still redeem my play. You bring back the spirit of it to me. In you I see the embodiment of my *Thérèse*."

Miles Faraday gave a little sigh of relief and glanced gratefully toward Louise. She nodded back to him and gave her hand to the Frenchman, who held it to his lips.

"You flatter me, M. Graillot," she said. "It is simply that I feel the force of your beautiful words. *Thérèse* is a wonderful conception! As to those disputed passages—well, I feel myself in a very difficult position. Artistically, I am

entirely in accord with you, and yet I understand exactly what Mr. Faraday means from the commercial point of view. Let us submit the matter to the prince. He knows something of both sides of the question."

The Prince of Seyre, who was seated in the orchestra-leader's chair, looked reproachfully toward Louise.

"Is this fair?" he protested. "Remember that I am more than half a Frenchman, and that I am one of our friend's most faithful disciples. I realize the delicacy of the situation, and I understand Mr. Faraday's point of view. I tell you frankly that the thought of an empty theater appals me. It is not the money—I am sure you all know that—but there isn't a single man or woman in the world who can do his best unless he or she plays to a full house. Somehow or other, we must secure our audience."

"It really comes to this," Faraday intervened. "Shall we achieve a purely artistic triumph and drive the people away? Or shall we—at the expense, I admit, of some of the finest passages in M. Graillot's superb drama—compromise the matter and keep our box-office open? In a more humble way I hope I also may call myself an artist; and yet not only must I live myself, but I have a staff of employees dependent upon me."

Graillot waved his hand.

"So! No more!" he exclaimed grandiloquently. "The affair is finished. My consent is given. Delete the lines! As to the scene laid in the bedroom of *madame*, to-night I shall take up my pen. By noon to-morrow I will give you a revision which will puff out the cheeks of the Philistines with satisfaction. Have no fear, *cher ami* Faraday! Mothers shall bring their unmarried daughters to see our play. They shall all watch it without a blush. If there is anything to make the others think, it shall be beneath the surface. It shall be for the great artist whom it is my supreme joy to watch," he went on, bowing to Louise, "to act and express the real truth of my ideas through the music of innocent words."

"Then all is arranged," Miles Faraday concluded briskly. "We will leave the second act until tomorrow; then M. Graillot will bring us his revision. We will proceed now to the next act. Stand back a little, if you please, ladies and gentlemen. Miss Maurel, will you make your entrance?"

Louise made no movement. Her eyes were fixed upon a certain shadowy corner of the wings. Overwrought as she had seemed a few minutes ago, with the

emotional excitement of her long speech, there was now a new and curious expression upon her face. She seemed to be looking beyond the gloomy, unlit spaces of the theater into some unexpected land.

Curiously enough, the three people there most interested in her—the prince, Graillot, and her friend, Sophy Gerard—each noticed the change. The little fair-haired girl, who owed her small part in the play to Louise, quitted her chair to follow the direction of her friend's eyes. Faraday, with the frown of an actor-manager resenting an intrusion, gazed in the same direction.

To Sophy, the newcomer was simply the handsomest young man she had ever seen in her life. To Faraday he represented nothing more nor less than the unwelcome intruder. The prince alone, with immovable features, but with a slight contraction of his eyebrows, gazed with distrust, almost with fear, unaccountable yet disturbing, at the tall hesitating figure that stood just off the stage.

Louise only knew that she was amazed at herself, amazed to find the walls of the theater falling away from her. She forgot the little company of her friends by whom she was surrounded. She forgot the existence of the famous dramatist who hung upon her words, and the close presence of the prince. Her feet no longer trod the dusty boards of the theater. She was almost painfully conscious of the perfume of apple-blossom.

"You!" she exclaimed, stretching out her hands. "Why do you not come and speak to me? I am here!"

John came out upon the stage. The French dramatist, with his hands behind his back, made swift mental notes of an interesting situation. He saw the coming of a man who stood like a giant among them, sunburnt, buoyant with health, his eyes bright with the wonder of his unexpected surroundings; a man in whose presence every one else seemed to represent an effete and pallid type of humanity.

The dramatist and the prince were satisfied, however, with one single glance at the newcomer. Afterward, their whole regard was focused upon Louise. The same thought was in the mind of both of them—the same fear!

VIII

Those first few sentences, spoken in the midst of a curious little crowd of strangers, seemed to John, when he thought of his long waiting, almost piteously inadequate. Louise, recognizing the difficulty of the situation, swiftly recovered her composure. She was both tactful and gracious.

"Do tell me how you got in here," she said. "No one is allowed to pass the stage door at rehearsal times. Mr. Faraday, to whom I will introduce you in a moment, is a perfect autocrat; and Mr. Mullins, our stage manager, is even worse."

"I just asked for you," John explained. "The doorkeeper told me that you were engaged, but I persuaded him to let me come in."

She shook her head.

"Bribery!" she declared accusingly.

"I heard your voice, and after that it was hard to go away. I'm afraid I ought to have waited outside."

Louise turned to Miles Faraday, who was looking a little annoyed.

"Mr. Faraday," she said appealingly, "Mr. Strangewey comes from the country—he is, in fact, the most complete countryman I have ever met in my life. He comes from Cumberland, and he once—well, very nearly saved my life. He knows nothing about theaters, and he hasn't the least idea of the importance of a rehearsal. You won't mind if we put him somewhere out of the way till we have finished, will you?"

"After such an introduction," Faraday said in a tone of resignation, "Mr. Strangewey would be welcome at any time."

"There's a dear man!" Louise exclaimed. "Let me introduce him quickly. Mr. John Strangewey—Mr. Miles Faraday, M. Graillot, Miss Sophy Gerard, my particular little friend. The prince you already know, although you may not recognize him trying to balance himself on that absurd stool."

John bowed in various directions, and Faraday, taking him good-naturedly by the arm, led him to a garden-seat at the back of the stage.

"There!" he said. "You are one of the most privileged persons in London. You shall hear the finish of our rehearsal. There isn't a press man in London I'd have near the place."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," John replied. "Is this, may I ask, the play that you are soon going to produce?"

"Three weeks from next Monday, I hope," Faraday told him. "Don't attempt to judge by anything you hear this afternoon. We are just deciding upon some cuts. See you later. You may smoke, if you like."

Twenty-four hours away from his silent hills, John looked out with puzzled eyes from his dusty seat among ropes and pulleys and leaning fragments of scenery. What he saw and heard seemed to him, for the most part, a meaningless tangle of gestures and phrases. The men and women in fashionable clothes, moving about before that gloomy space of empty auditorium, looked more like marionettes than creatures of flesh and blood, drawn this way and that at the bidding of the stout, masterly Frenchman, who was continually muttering exclamations and banging the manuscript upon his hand.

He kept his eyes fixed upon Louise. He told himself that he was in her presence at last. As the moments passed, it became more and more difficult for him to realize the actuality of the scene upon which he was looking. It seemed like a dream-picture, with unreal men and women moving about aimlessly, saying strange words.

Then there came a moment which brought a tingle into his blood, which plunged his senses into hot confusion. He rose to his feet. Faraday was sitting down, and Louise was resting both her hands upon his shoulders.

"Is there nothing I can be to you, then, Edmund?" she asked, her voice vibrating with a passion which he found it hard to believe was not real.

Faraday turned slowly in his chair. He held out his arms.

"One thing," he murmured.

John had moved half a step forward when he felt the prince's eyes fixed upon him, and was conscious of a sudden sense of ignorance, almost of uncouthness.

It was a play which they were rehearsing, of course! It was a damnable thing to see Louise taken into that cold and obviously unreal embrace, but it was only a play. It was part of her work.

John resumed his seat and folded his arms. With the embrace had fallen an imaginary curtain, and the rehearsal was over. They were all crowded together, talking, in the center of the stage. The prince, who had stepped across the footlights, made his way to where John was sitting.

"So you have deserted Cumberland for a time?" he courteously inquired.

"I came up last night," John replied.

"You are making a long stay?"

John hesitated. He felt that no one knew less of his movements than he himself. His eyes had wandered to where Louise and Graillot were talking.

"I can scarcely tell yet. I have made no plans."

"London, at this season of the year," the prince observed, "is scarcely at its best."

John smiled.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I am not critical. It is eight years since I was here last, on my way down from Oxford."

"You have been abroad, perhaps?" the prince inquired.

"I have not been out of Cumberland during the whole of that time," John confessed.

The prince, after a moment's incredulous stare, laughed softly to himself.

"You are a very wonderful person, Mr. Strangewey," he declared. "I have heard of your good fortune. If I can be of any service to you during your stay in town," he added politely, "please command me."

"You are very kind," John replied gratefully.

Louise broke away from the little group and came across toward them.

"Free at last!" she exclaimed. "Now let us go out and have some tea."

They made their way down the little passage and out into the sudden blaze of the sunlit streets. Two cars were drawn up outside the stage door.

"The Carlton or Rumpelmayer's?" asked the prince, who had overtaken them upon the pavement.

"The Carlton, I think," Louise decided. "We can get a quiet table there inside the restaurant. You bring Sophy, will you, Eugène? I am going to take possession of Mr. Strangewey."

The prince, with a little bow, pointed to the door of his limousine, which a footman was holding open. Louise led John to a smaller car which was waiting in the rear.

"The Carlton," she told the man, as he arranged the rugs. "And now," she added, turning to John, "why have you come to London? How long are you going to stay? What are you going to do? And—most important of all—in what spirit have you come?"

John breathed a little sigh of contentment. They were moving slowly down a back street to take their place in the tide of traffic which flooded the main thoroughfares.

"That sounds so like you," he said. "I came up last night, suddenly. I have no idea how long I am going to stay; I have no idea what I am going to do. As for the spirit in which I have come—well, I should call it an inquiring one."

"A very good start," Louise murmured approvingly, "but still a little vague!"

"Then I will do away with all vagueness. I came to see you," John confessed bluntly.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, looking at him with a little smile. "How downright you are!"

"Country methods," he reminded her.

"Don't overdo it," she begged.

"The truth—" he began.

"Has to be handled very carefully," she said, interrupting him. "The truth is either beautiful or crude, and the people who meddle with such a wonderful

thing need a great deal of tact. You have come to see me, you say. Very well, then, I will be just as frank. I have been hoping that you would come!"

"You can't imagine how good it is to hear you say that," he declared.

"Mind," she went on, "I have been hoping it for more reasons than one. You have come to realize, I hope, that it is your duty to try to see a little more of life than you possibly can leading a patriarchal existence among your flocks and herds."

"That may be so," John assented. "I have often thought of our conversation. I don't know, even now, whether you were right or wrong. I only know that since you went away I have felt something of the unrest with which you threatened me. I want to settle the matter one way or the other. I want to try, for a little time, what it is like to live in the crowded places, to be near you, to see, if I may, more of you and your way of living."

They were silent for several moments.

"I thought you would come," Louise said at last; "and I am glad, but even in these first few minutes I want to say something to you. If you wish to succeed in your object, and really understand the people you meet here and the life they lead, don't be like your brother—too quick to judge. Do not hug your prejudices too tightly. You will come across many problems, many situations which will seem strange to you. Do not make up your mind about anything in a hurry."

"I will remember that," he promised. "You must remember, though, that I don't expect ever to become a convert. I believe I am a countryman, bred and born. Still, there are some things that I want to understand, if I can, and, more than anything else—I want to see you!"

She faced his direct speech this time with more deliberation.

"Tell me exactly why."

"If I could tell you that," he replied simply, "I should be able to answer for myself the riddle which has kept me awake at night for weeks and months, which has puzzled me more than anything else in life has ever done."

"You really have thought of me, then?"

"Didn't you always know that I should?"

"Perhaps," she admitted. "Anyhow, I always felt that we should meet again, that you would come to London. The problem is," she added, smiling, "what to do with you now you are here."

"I haven't come to be a nuisance," he assured her. "I just want a little help from you."

She became indiscreet. She looked at him with a little smile at the corners of her lips.

"Nothing else?" she asked, almost under her breath.

"At the end of it all, yes," he answered simply. "I want to understand because it is your world. I want to feel myself nearer to you. I want—"

She gripped at his arm suddenly. She knew well enough that she had deliberately provoked his words, but there was a look in her face almost of fear.

"Don't let us be too serious all at once," she begged quickly. "If you have one fault, my dear big friend from the country," she went on, with a swiftly assumed gaiety, "it is that you are too serious for your years. Sophy and I between us must try to cure you of that! You see, we have arrived."

He handed her out, followed her across the pavement, and found himself plunged into what seemed to him to be an absolute vortex of human beings, all dressed in very much the same fashion, all laughing and talking together very much in the same note, all criticising every fresh group of arrivals with very much the same eyes and manner. The palm-court was crowded with little parties seated at the various round tables, partaking languidly of the most indolent meal of the day. Even the broad passageway was full of men and women, standing about talking or looking for tables. One could scarcely hear the music of the orchestra for the babel of voices.

The Prince of Seyre beckoned to them from the steps. He seemed to have been awaiting their arrival there—a cold, immaculate, and, considering his lack of height, a curiously distinguished-looking figure.

"I have a table inside," he told them as they approached. "It is better for conversation. The rest of the place is like a beer-garden. I am not sure if they will dance here to-day, but if they do, they will come also into the restaurant."

"Wise man!" Louise declared. "I, too, hate the babel outside."

They were ushered to a round table directly before the entrance, and a couple of attentive waiters stood behind their chairs.

"We are faced," said the prince, as he took up the menu, "with our daily problem. What can I order for you?"

"A cup of chocolate," Louise replied.

"And Miss Sophy?"

"Tea, please."

John, too, preferred tea; the prince ordered absinth.

"A polyglot meal, isn't it, Mr. Strangewey?" said Louise, as the order was executed; "not in the least; what that wonderful old butler of yours would understand by tea. We become depraved in our appetites, as well as in our sensations. We are always seeking for something new. Sophy, put your hat on straight if you want to make a good impression on Mr. Strangewey. I am hoping that you two will be great friends."

Sophy turned toward John with a little grimace.

"Louise is so tactless!" she said. "I am sure any idea you might have had of liking me will have gone already. Has it, Mr. Strangewey?"

"On the contrary," he replied, a little stiffly, but without hesitation, "I was thinking that Miss Maurel could scarcely have set me a more pleasant task."

The girl looked reproachfully across at her friend.

"You told me he came from the wilds and was quite unsophisticated!" she exclaimed.

"The truth," John assured them, looking with dismay at his little china cup, "comes very easily to us. We are brought up on it in Cumberland."

"Positively nourished on it," Louise agreed. "My dear Sophy, what he says is quite true. Up there a man would tell you that he didn't like the cut of your new blouse or the droop of your hat. It's a wonderful atmosphere, and very austere. You ought to meet Mr. Strangewey's brother, if you want to know the truth about yourself. Do go on looking about you, Mr. Strangewey; and when you have finished, tell us just what you are thinking."

"Well, just at that moment," he replied, "I was thinking that I ought not to have come here in these clothes."

The girl by his side laughed reassuringly.

"As a matter of fact, you couldn't have done anything more successful," she declared. "The one thing up here that every one would like to do if he dared is to be different from his fellows; but very few have the necessary courage. Besides, at heart we are all so frightfully, hatefully imitative. The last great success was

the prince, when he wore a black stock with a dinner-coat; but, alas, next evening there were forty or fifty of them! If you come here to tea to-morrow afternoon, I dare say you will find dozens of men wearing gray tweed clothes, colored shirts, and brown boots. I am sure they are most becoming!"

"Don't chatter too much, child," Louise said benignly. "I want to hear some more of Mr. Strangewey's impressions. This is—well, if not quite a fashionable crowd, yet very nearly so. What do you think of it—the women, for instance?"

"Well, to me," John confessed candidly, "they all look like dolls or manikins. Their dresses and their hats overshadow their faces. They seem all the time to be wanting to show, not themselves, but what they have on."

They all laughed. Even the prince's lips were parted by the flicker of a smile. Sophy leaned across the table with a sigh.

"Louise," she pleaded, "you will lend him to me sometimes, won't you? You won't keep him altogether to yourself? There are such a lot of places I want to take him to!"

"I was never greedy," Louise remarked, with an air of self-satisfaction. "If you succeed in making a favorable impression upon him, I promise you your share."

"Tell us some more of your impressions, Mr. Strangewey," Sophy begged.

"You want to laugh at me," John protested good-humoredly.

"On the contrary," the prince assured him, as he fitted a cigarette into a long, amber tube, "they want to laugh with you. You ought to realize your value as a companion in these days. You are the only person who can see the truth. Eyes and tastes blurred with custom perceive so little. You are quite right when you say that these women are like manikins; that their bodies and faces are lost; but one does not notice it until it is pointed out."

"We will revert," Louise decided, "to a more primitive life. You and I will inaugurate a missionary enterprise, Mr. Strangewey. We will judge the world afresh. We will reclothe and rehabilitate it."

The prince flicked the ash from the end of his cigarette.

"Morally as well as sartorially?" he asked.

There was a moment's rather queer silence. The music rose above the hubbub

of voices and died away again. Louise rose to her feet.

"Quite an intelligent person, really," she said, moving her head in the direction of the prince. "His little attacks of cynicism come only with indigestion or after absinth. Now, if you like, you shall escort me home, Mr. Strangewey. I want to show him exactly where I live," she explained, addressing the others, "so that he will have no excuse for not coming to pay his respects to me to-morrow afternoon."

The prince, with a skilful maneuver, made his way to her side as they left the restaurant.

"To-morrow afternoon, I think you said?" he repeated quietly. "You will be in town then?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You have changed your mind, then, about—"

"M. Graillot will not listen to my leaving London," she interrupted rapidly. "He declares that it is too near the production of the play. My own part may be perfect, but he needs me for the sake of the others. He puts it like a Frenchman, of course."

They had reached the outer door, which was being held open for them by a bowing commissionnaire. John and Sophy were waiting upon the pavement. The prince drew a little back.

"I understand!" he murmured.

IX

The first few minutes that John spent in Louise's little house were full of acute and vivid interest. From the moment of his first meeting with Louise upon the moonlit Cumberland road, during the whole of that next wonderful morning until their parting, and afterward, through all the long, dreaming days and nights that had intervened, she had remained a mystery to him. It was amazing how little he really knew of her. During his journey to town, he had sat with folded arms in the corner of his compartment, wondering whether in her own environment he would find her easier to understand.

He asked himself that question again now, as he found himself in her drawing-room, in a room entirely redolent of her personality. Their meeting at the theater had told him nothing. She had gratified his sentiment by the pleasure she had shown at his unexpected appearance, but his understanding remained unsatisfied.

The room that he was so eagerly studying confirmed his cloudy impressions of its owner. There was, for a woman's apartment, a curious absence of ornamentation and knickknacks. The walls were black and white, an idea fantastic in its way, yet carried out with extreme lightness in the ceiling and frieze. The carpet was white; the furniture, of which there was very little, of the French period before the rococo type, graceful in its outline, rather heavy in build, and covered with old-rose colored chintz. There were water-colors upon the wall, an etching or two from a Parisian studio, and some small black-and-white fantasies, puzzling to John, who had never even heard the term Futurist, yet in their way satisfactory.

There was a small-sized grand piano, which seemed to have found its way almost apologetically into a remote corner; a delightful open fireplace with rough, white tiles, and an old-fashioned brass box, in which was piled a little heap of sweet-smelling wood blocks. A table, drawn up to the side of one of the easy chairs, was covered with books and magazines, some Italian, a few English, the greater part French; and upon a smaller one, close at hand, stood a white bowl full of pink roses. Their odor was somehow reminiscent of Louise, curiously sweet and wholesome—an odor which suddenly took him back to the morning when she had come to him from under the canopy of apple-blossom.

He drew a little sigh of contentment as he rose to his feet and walked to the window. The room charmed him. It was wonderful that he should find it like this. His heart began to beat with pleasure even before the opening of the door announced her presence. She came in with Sophy, who at once seated herself by his side.

"We have been making plans," Louise declared, "for disposing of you for the rest of the day."

John smiled happily.

"You're not sending me away, then? You're not acting this evening?"

"Not until three weeks next Monday," she replied. "Then, if you are good, and the production is not postponed, you may seat yourself in a box and make all the noise you like after the fall of the curtain. These are real holidays for me, except for the nuisance of rehearsals. You couldn't have come at a better time."

Sophy glanced at the clock.

"Well," she said, "I must show my respect to that most ancient of adages by taking my departure. I feel—"

"You will do nothing of the sort, child," Louise interrupted. "I want to interest you in the evolution of Mr. Strangewey."

"I don't feel that I am necessary," Sophy sighed. "Perhaps I might take him off your hands some evening when you are busy."

"On this first evening, at any rate," Louise insisted, "we are going to be a truly harmonious party of three."

"Of course, if you really mean it," Sophy remarked, resuming her seat, "and if I sha'n't make an enemy for life of Mr. Strangewey, I should love to come, too. Let's decide what to do with him, Louise."

For a moment the eyes of the two others met. Louise looked swiftly away, and John's heart gave a little leap. Was it possible that the same thought had been in her mind—to spend the evening quietly in that little room? Had she feared it?

"We must remember," Louise said calmly, "that a heavy responsibility rests upon us. It is his first night in London. What aspect of it shall we attempt to show him? Shall we make ourselves resplendent, put on our best manners and

our most gorgeous gowns, and show him the world of starch and form and fashion from the prince's box at the opera? Or shall we transform ourselves into Bohemians, drink Chianti at our beloved Antonio's, eat Italian food in Soho, smoke long cigarettes, and take him to the Palace? Don't say a word, Sophy. It is not for us to choose."

"I am afraid that isn't any choice," John declared, his face falling. "I haven't any clothes except what you see me in."

"Hooray!" Sophy exclaimed. "Off with your smart gown, Louise! We'll be splendidly Bohemian. You shall put on your black frock and a black hat, and powder your nose, and we'll all go to Guido's first and drink vermuth. I can't look the part, but I can act it!"

"But tell me," Louise asked him, "did you lose your luggage?"

"I brought none," he answered.

They both looked at him—Sophy politely curious, Louise more deeply interested. He answered the inquiry in her eyes.

"You'll say, perhaps," he observed, "that living that quiet, half-buried life up in Cumberland one should have no moods. I have them sometimes. I was in Market Ketton, on my way to the hotel for lunch, when I heard the whistle of the London Express coming in. I just had time to drive to the station, leave the horse and dog-cart with a man I knew, and jump into the train. I had no ticket or luggage."

They both stared at him.

"You mean," Louise demanded, "that after waiting all these months you started away upon impulse like that—without even letting your brother know or bringing any luggage?"

"That's exactly what I did," John agreed, smiling. "I had a sovereign in my pocket when I had bought my ticket; and by the time I had paid for my dinner on the train, and tipped the men—well, I hadn't a great deal left to go shopping with. I stayed at the St. Pancras Hotel, and telephoned to my solicitor before I got up this morning to have him send me some money. The joke of it was," he went on, joining in the girls' laughter, "that Mr. Appleton has been worrying me for months to come up and talk over reinvestments, and take control of the money my uncle left me; and when I came at last, I arrived like a pauper. He

went out himself and bought my shirt."

"And a very nice shirt, too," Sophy declared, glancing at the pattern. "Do tell us what else happened!"

"Well, not much more," John replied. "Mr. Appleton stuffed me full of money and made me take a little suite of rooms at what he called a more fashionable hotel. He stayed to lunch with me, and I have promised to see him on business to-morrow morning."

The two girls sat up and wiped their eyes.

"Oh, this is a wonderful adventure you have embarked upon!" Louise exclaimed. "You have come quite in the right spirit. Now I am going to change my clothes and powder my face, and we will go to Guido's for a little vermuth, dine at Antonio's, and sit side by side at the Palace. We shall have to take Sophy with us, but if you show her too much attention I shall send her home. It is your first night here, Mr. Strangewey, so I warn you that Sophy is the most irresponsible and capricious of all my friends. She has more admirers than she knows what to do with, and she disposes of them in the simplest way in the world—by getting new ones."

Sophy made a grimace.

"Mr. Strangewey," she begged earnestly, "you won't believe a word she says, will you? All my life I have been looking for a single and steadfast attachment. Of course, if Louise wants to monopolize you, I shall fall into the background, as I usually do; but if you think that I am going to accept hints and let you go out to dinner alone, you are very much mistaken. To-night, at any rate, I insist upon coming!"

Louise shook her head.

"We shall have to put up with her," she told John with a little grimace.

The door of the room was suddenly opened. The parlor maid stood at one side.

"The Prince of Seyre, madam," she announced.

Louise nodded. She was evidently expecting the visit. She turned to John.

"Will you come back and call for us here—say at seven o'clock? Mind, you are not to bother about your clothes, but to come just as you are. I can't tell you,"

she added under her breath, "how much I am looking forward to our evening!"

Sophy sprang to her feet.

"Won't you drop me, please, Mr. Strangewey?" she asked. "Then, if you will be so kind, you can pick me up again on your way here. You'll have to pass where I live, if you are at the Milan. I must go home and do my little best to compete."

Louise's frown was so slight that even John failed to notice it. Upon the threshold they encountered the prince, who detained John for a moment.

"I was hoping that I might meet you here, Mr. Strangewey," he said. "If you are in town for long, it will give me great pleasure if I can be of any service to you. You are staying at a hotel?"

"I am staying at the Milan," John replied.

"I will do myself the pleasure of calling upon you," the prince continued. "In the meantime, if you need any service that a Londoner can offer you, be sure to let me know. You will easily find my house in Grosvenor Square."

"It is very kind of you indeed," John said gratefully.

Sophy made a wry face as the prince entered the drawing-room.

"Didn't some old Roman once write something about being afraid of Greeks who brought gifts?" she asked, as they descended the stairs together.

"Quite right," John assented.

"Well, be careful!" she advised him. "That's all."

John handed Sophy into the taxi and took his place beside her.

"Where shall I put you down?" he asked.

"It's such a terribly low neighborhood! However, it's quite close to the Milan —No. 10 Southampton Street."

John gave the address to the man, and they started off. They were blocked in a

stream of traffic almost as soon as they reached Hyde Park Corner. John leaned forward all the time, immensely interested in the stream of passers-by.

"Your interest in your fellow creatures," she murmured demurely, "is wonderful, but couldn't you concentrate it just a little?"

He turned quickly around. She was smiling at him most alluringly. Unconsciously he found himself smiling back again. A wonderful light-heartedness seemed to have come to him during the last few hours.

"I suppose I am a perfect idiot," he admitted. "I cannot help it. I am used to seeing, at the most, three or four people together at a time. I can't understand these crowds. Where are they all going? Fancy every one of them having a home, every one of them struggling in some form or another toward happiness!"

"Do you know," she pronounced severely, "for a young man of your age you are much too serious? Please commence your psychological studies to-morrow. To-night we are going to have a really frivolous evening, you and I—and Louise. If you want to be a great success during the next few hours, what you have to do is to imagine that there are only two people in the world beside yourself—Louise and I."

"I think I shall find that very easy," he promised, smiling.

"I am quite sure you could be nice if you wanted to," she continued. "How much are you in love with Louise?"

"How much am I what?"

"In love with Louise," she repeated. "All the men are. It is a perfect cult with them. And here am I, her humble companion and friend, absolutely neglected!"

"I don't believe you are neglected at all," he replied. "You are too much too—"

He turned his head to look at her. She was so close to him that their hats collided. He was profuse in his apologies.

"Too what?" she whispered.

"Too attractive," he ventured.

"It's nice to hear you say so," she sighed. "Well, I have to get out here. This is where I live, up on the fourth floor."

"How does one get there?" he inquired.

She looked at him quickly. There was a little catch in her breath.

"What do you mean?" she murmured.

"Didn't you say that I was to come and fetch you, and then we could go on to Miss Maurel's together?"

"Of course," she assented slowly. "How stupid of me! Some day I'll show you, but I know you would lose the way now. If you like, I'll come for you—to the Milan."

"If you would really prefer it?"

"I am quite sure that I should," she decided. "There are about seven turns up to my room, and I shall have to personally conduct you there three or four times before you'll ever be able to find your way. I will come as soon as I am ready, and then you can give me a cocktail before we set out."

She disappeared with a little wave of the hand, and John drove on to his destination. His rooms at the Milan were immensely comfortable and in their way quite homelike. John made some small changes to his toilet and was still in his shirt-sleeves, with hair-brushes in his hands, when there came a ring at the bell. He answered it at once and found Sophy standing outside. He gave a little start.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry!"

"What for, you silly person?" she laughed. "Which way is the sitting room, please? Oh, I see! Now, please ring for the waiter and order me a vermuth cocktail, and one for yourself, of course; and I want some cigarettes. How clever of you to get rooms looking out upon the Embankment! I wish they would light the lamps. I think the illuminated arcs along the Embankment and past the Houses of Parliament is the most wonderful thing in London. Don't please, look so terrified because you haven't got your coat on! Remember that I have five brothers."

"I had no idea you would be here so soon," he explained, "or I would have been downstairs, waiting for you."

"Don't be stupid!" she replied. "Please remember that when you are with me,

at any rate, you are in Bohemia and not Belgravia. I don't expect such attentions. I rather like coming up to your rooms like this, and I always love the Milan. I really believe that I am your first lady visitor here."

"You most assuredly are!" he told her.

She turned away from the window and suddenly threw up her arms.

"Oh, I love this place!" she exclaimed. "I love the sort of evening that we are going to have! I feel happy to-night. And do you know?—I quite like you, Mr. Strangewey!"

She clasped the back of her chair and from behind it looked across at him. She was petite and slender, with a very dainty figure. She wore a black tailor-made costume, a simple, round-black hat with a long quill set at a provoking angle, white-silk stockings, and black, patent shoes. She was unlike any girl John had ever known. Her hair was almost golden, her eyes a distinct blue, yet some trick of the mouth saved her face from any suggestion of insipidity. She was looking straight into his eyes, and her lips were curled most invitingly.

"I wish I knew more about certain things," he said.

She came round from behind the chair and stood a little nearer to him.

"What things?"

"You know," he said, "I am afraid there is no doubt about it that I am most horribly in love with another woman. I have come to London because of her. It seems to me that everything in life depends upon how she treats me. And yet—"

"And yet what?" she asked, looking up at him a little wistfully.

"I feel that I want to kiss you," he confessed.

"Well, if you don't get it done before the waiter brings in those cocktails, I shall scream!"

He took her lightly in his arms for a moment and kissed her. Then she threw herself down in the easy chair and began to laugh softly.

"Oh, why didn't you come before?" she exclaimed. "Fancy Louise never telling me about you!"

The waiter entered a few minutes later. He drew up a small round table

between them, placed the two wineglasses upon it, and departed expeditiously. John took one of the glasses over to Sophy. She accepted it and gave him her fingers to kiss.

"Dear man," she sighed, "I am getting much too fond of you! Go and sit in your corner, drink your cocktail, and remember Louise. I love your rooms, and I hope you'll ask me to lunch some time."

"I'll have a luncheon party to-morrow, if you like—that is, if Louise will come."

She looked up at him quickly.

"Isn't Louise going to Paris?" she asked.

He set down the glass which he had been in the act of raising to his lips.

"Paris? I didn't hear her say anything about it."

"Perhaps it is my mistake, then," Sophy went on hastily. "I only fancied that I heard her say so."

There was a moment's silence. John had opened his lips to ask a question, but quickly closed them again. It was a question, he suddenly decided, which he had better ask of Louise herself.

"If she does go, I shall be very sorry," he said; "but I do not wish, of course, to upset her plans. We must talk to her about it to-night. I suppose we ought to go now."

Sophy walked with him to the door and waited while he took his hat and gloves from the hat-stand. Suddenly she laid her hand upon his arm.

"If Louise goes to Paris," she whispered disconsolately, "I suppose there will be no luncheon-party?"

For a single moment he hesitated. She was very alluring, and the challenge in her eyes was unmistakable.

"I think," he said quietly, "that if Miss Maurel goes to Paris, I shall return to Cumberland to-morrow."

He opened the door, and Sophy passed out before him. She had dropped her veil.

They drove down the Strand toward Knightsbridge. For a time there was a significant silence. Then Sophy raised her veil once more and looked toward John.

"Mr. Strangewey," she began, "you won't mind if I give you just a little word of advice? You are such a big, strong person, but you are rather a child, you know, in some things."

"This place does make me feel ignorant," he admitted.

"Don't idealize any one here," she begged. "Don't concentrate all your hopes upon one object. Love is wonderful and life is wonderful, but there is only one life, and there are many loves before one reaches the end. People do such silly things sometimes," she wound up, "just because of a little disappointment. There are many disappointments to be met with here."

He took her hand in his.

"Little girl," he said, "you are very good to me, and I think you understand. Are you going to let me feel that I have found a friend on my first evening in London?"

"If you want me," she answered simply. "I like you, and I want you to be happy here; and because I want you to be happy, I want you to come down from the clouds and remember that you have left your hills behind and that we walk on the pavements here."

"Thank you," he whispered, "and thank you for what you have not said. If I am to find sorrow here instead of joy," he added, a little grimly, "it is better for me to stumble into the knowledge of it by myself."

"Your hills have taught you just that much of life, then?" Sophy murmured.

X

The Prince of Seyre handed his hat and stick to the parlor maid and seated himself upon the divan.

"I should be very sorry," he said politely, as the maid left the room, "if my coming has hastened the departure of your visitors."

"Not in the least," Louise assured him. "They were leaving when you were announced. Sophy and I are taking Mr. Strangewey to a Bohemian restaurant and a music-hall afterward."

"Fortunate Mr. Strangewey!" the prince sighed. "But, forgive me, why not a more dignified form of entertainment for his first evening?"

"The poor man has no clothes," Louise explained. "He came to London quite unexpectedly."

"No clothes?" the prince repeated. "It is a long journey to take in such a fashion. A matter of urgent business, perhaps?"

Louise shrugged her shoulders. She had risen to her feet and was busy rearranging some roses in the bowl by her side.

"Mr. Strangewey has just come into a large fortune, as you know," she said. "Probably there are many things to be attended to."

The prince made no further comment. He drew a tortoise-shell-and-gold cigarette-case from his pocket.

"It is permitted that one smokes?" he inquired.

"It is always permitted to you," was the gracious reply.

"One of my privileges," he remarked, as he blew out the match; "in fact, almost my only privilege."

She glanced up, but her eyes fell before his.

"Is that quite fair?"

"I should be grieved to do anything or to say anything to you that was not entirely fair."

She crushed one of the roses to pieces suddenly in her hands and shook the petals from her long, nervous fingers.

"To-day," she said, "this afternoon—now—you have come to me with something in your mind, something you wish to say, something you are not sure how to say. That is, you see, what Henri Graillot calls my intuition. Even you, who keep all your feelings under a mask, can conceal very little from me."

"My present feelings," the prince declared, "I do not wish to conceal. I would like you to know them. But as words are sometimes clumsy, I would like, if it were possible, to let you see into my heart, or, in these days, shall I not say my consciousness? I should feel, then, that without fear of misunderstanding you would know certain things which I would like you to know."

She came over and seated herself by his side on the divan. She even laid her hand upon his arm.

"Eugène," she expostulated, "we are too old friends to talk always in veiled phrases. There is something you have to say to me. I am listening."

"You know what it is," he told her.

"You are displeased because I have changed my mind about that little journey of ours?"

"I am bitterly disappointed," he admitted.

She looked at him curiously and then down at her rose-stained fingers.

"That does not sound quite like you," she said. "And yet I ought to know that sometimes you do feel things, even though you show it so little. I am sorry, Eugène."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because I feel that I cannot take that journey."

"You mean that you cannot now, or that you cannot at any time?"

"I do not know," she answered. "You ask me more than I can tell you. Sometimes life seems so stable, a thing one can make a little chart of and hang

up on the wall, and put one's finger here and there—'To-day I will do this, to-morrow I will feel that'—and the next morning comes and the chart is in the fire. I wish I understood myself a little better, Eugène!"

"Self-understanding is the rarest of all gifts," the prince remarked. "It is left for those who love us to understand us."

"And you?"

"I believe that I understand you better, far better, than you understand yourself," he declared. "That is why I also believe that I am necessary to you. I can prevent your making mistakes."

"Then prevent me," she begged. "Something has happened, and the chart is in the fire to-day."

"You have only," he said, "to give your maid her orders, to give me this little hand, and I will draw out a fresh one which shall direct to the place in life which is best for you. It is not too late."

She rose from beside him and walked toward the fireplace, as if to touch the bell. He watched her with steady eyes but expressionless face. There was something curious about her walk. The spring had gone from her feet, her shoulders were a little hunched. It was the walk of a woman who goes toward the things she fears.

"Stop!" he bade her.

She turned and faced him, quickly, almost eagerly. There was a look in her face of the prisoner who finds respite.

"Leave the bell alone," he directed. "My own plans are changed. I do not wish to leave London this week."

Her face was suddenly brilliant, her eyes shone. Something electric seemed to quiver through her frame. She almost danced back to her place by his side.

"How foolish!" she murmured. "Why didn't you say so at once?"

"Because," he replied, "they have only been changed during the last few seconds. I wanted to discover something which I have discovered."

"To discover something?"

"That my time has not yet come."

She turned away from him. She was oppressed with a sense almost of fear, a feeling that he was able to read the very thoughts forming in her brain; to understand, as no one else in the world could understand, the things that lived in her heart.

"I must not keep you," he remarked, glancing at the clock. "It was very late for me to call, and you will be wanting to join your friends."

"They are coming here for me," she explained. "There is really no hurry at all. We are not changing anything. It is to be quite a simple evening. Sometimes I wish that you cared about things of that sort, Eugène."

He blew through his lips a little cloud of smoke from the cigarette which he had just lit.

"I do not fancy," he replied, "that I should be much of a success as a fourth in your little expedition."

"But it is silly of you not to visit Bohemia occasionally," she declared, ignoring the meaning that lay beneath his words. "It is refreshing to rub shoulders with people who feel, and who show freely what they feel; to eat their food, drink their wine, even join in their pleasures."

The prince shook his head.

"I am not of the people," he said, "and I have no sympathy with them. I detest the *bourgeoisie* of every country in the world—my own more particularly."

"If you only knew how strangely that sounds!" she murmured.

"Does it?" he answered. "You should read my family history, read of the men and women of my race who were butchered at the hands of that drunken, lustful mob whom lying historians have glorified. I am one of those who do not forget injuries. My estates are administered more severely than any others in France. No penny of my money has ever been spent in charity. I neither forget nor forgive."

She laughed a little nervously.

"What an unsympathetic person you can be, Eugène!"

"And for that very reason," he replied, "I can be sympathetic. Because I hate some people, I have the power of loving others. Because it pleases me to deal severely with my enemies, it gives me joy to deal generously with my friends. That is my conception of life. May I wish you a pleasant evening?"

"You are going now?" she asked, a little surprised.

He smiled faintly as he raised her fingers to his lips. She had made a little movement toward him, but he took no advantage of it.

"I am going now."

"When shall I see you again?" she inquired, as she came back from ringing the bell.

"A telephone-message from your maid, a line written with your own fingers," he said, "will bring me to you within a few minutes. If I hear nothing, I may come uninvited, but it will be when the fancy takes me. Once more, Louise, a pleasant evening!"

He passed out of the door, which the parlor maid was holding open for him. Crossing to the window, Louise watched him leave the house and enter his waiting automobile. He gave no sign of haste or disappointment. He lit another cigarette deliberately upon the pavement and gave his orders to the chauffeur with some care.

As the car drove off without his having once glanced up at the window, she shivered a little. There was a silence which, it seemed to her, could be more minatory even than accusation.

XI

The little room was gaudily decorated and redolent with the lingering odors of many dinners. Yet Louise, who had dined on the preceding evening at the Ritz and been bored, whose taste in food and environment was almost hypercritical, was perfectly happy. She found the cuisine and the Chianti excellent.

"We are outstaying every one else," she declared; "and I don't even mind their awful legacy of tobacco-smoke. Do you see that the waiter has brought you the bill, Mr. Strangewey? Prepare for a shock. It is fortunate that you are a millionaire!"

John laughed as he paid the bill and ludicrously overtipped the waiter.

"London must be a paradise to the poor man!" he exclaimed. "I have never dined better."

"Don't overdo it," Sophy begged.

"I can only judge by results," John insisted. "I have dined, and I am happy; therefore, the dinner must have been good."

"You are so convincing!" Sophy murmured. "There is such a finality about your statements that I would not venture to dispute them. But remember that your future entertainment is in the hands of two women, one of whom is a deserving but struggling young artist without the means of gratifying her expensive tastes. There are heaps of places we are going to take you to which even Louise pretends she cannot afford. It is so fortunate, Mr. Strangewey, that you are rich!"

"I believe you would be just as nice to me if I weren't," John ventured.

"I am so susceptible!" Sophy sighed, looking into her empty coffee-cup; "much more susceptible than Louise."

"I won't have Mr. Strangewey spoiled," Louise put in. "And don't build too much upon his being content with us as entertainers-in-chief. Remember the halfpenny papers. In a few days he will be interviewed—'Millionaire Farmer Come to London to Spend His Fortune.' He will become famous. He will buy a

green morocco engagement-book, and perhaps employ a secretary. We shall probably have to ask ourselves to luncheon three weeks ahead."

"I feel these things coming," John declared.

"My children," said Louise, rising, "we must remember that we are going to the Palace. It is quite time we started."

They made their way down two flights of narrow stairs into the street. The commissionnaire raised his whistle to his lips, but Louise stopped him.

"We will walk," she suggested. "This way, Mr. Strangewey!"

They passed down the long, narrow street, with its dingy foreign cafés and shops scarcely one of which seemed to be English. The people who thronged the pavements were of a new race to John, swarthy, a little furtive, a class of foreigner seldom seen except in alien lands. Men and women in all stages of dishabille were leaning out of the windows or standing on the doorsteps. The girls whom they met occasionally—young women of all ages, walking arm in arm, with shawls on their heads in place of hats—laughed openly in John's face.

"Conquests everywhere he goes!" Louise sighed. "We shall never keep him, Sophy!"

"We have him for this evening, at any rate," Sophy replied contentedly; "and he hasn't spent all his fortune yet. I am not at all sure that I shall not hint at supper when we come out of the Palace."

"No hint will be necessary," John promised. "I feel the gnawings of hunger already."

"A millionaire's first night in London!" Sophy exclaimed. "I think I shall write it up for the *Daily Mail*."

"A pity he fell into bad hands so quickly," Louise laughed. "Here we are! Stalls, please, Mr. Millionaire. I wouldn't be seen to-night in the seats of the mighty."

John risked a reproof, however, and was fortunate enough to find a disengaged box.

"The tone of the evening," Louise grumbled, as she settled herself down comfortably, "is lost. This is the most expensive box in the place."

"You could restore it by eating an orange," Sophy suggested.

"Or even chocolates," John ventured, sweeping most of the contents of an attendant's tray onto the ledge of the box.

"After this," Sophy declared, falling upon them, "supper will be a farce."

"Make you thirsty," John reminded her.

They devoted their attention to the show, Louise and Sophy at first with only a moderate amount of interest, John with the real enthusiasm of one to whom everything is new. His laughter was so hearty, his appreciation so sincere, that his companions found it infectious, and began to applaud everything.

"What children we are!" Louise exclaimed. "Fancy shrieking with laughter at a ventriloquist whom I have seen at every music-hall I have been to during the last five or six years!"

"He was wonderfully clever, all the same," John insisted.

"The bioscope," Louise decided firmly, "I refuse to have anything to do with. You have had all the entertainment you are going to have this evening, Mr. Countryman."

"Now for supper, then," he proposed.

Sophy sighed as she collected the half-empty chocolate-boxes.

"What a pity I've eaten so many! They'd have saved me a luncheon to-morrow."

"Greedy child," Louise laughed, "sighing for want of an appetite! I think we'll insist upon a taxi this time. I don't like overcrowded streets. Where shall we take him to, Sophy? You know the supper places better than I do."

"Luigi's," Sophy declared firmly. "The only place in London."

They drove toward the Strand. John looked around him with interest as they entered the restaurant.

"I've been here before," he said, as they passed through the doors.

"Explain yourself at once," Louise insisted.

"It was eight years ago, when I was at Oxford," he told them. "We were here on the boat-race night. I remember," he added reminiscently, "that some of us were turned out. Then we went on to—"

"Stop!" Louise interrupted sternly. "I am horrified! The one thing I did not suspect you of, Mr. Strangewey, was a past."

"Well, it isn't a very lurid one," he assured them. "That was very nearly the only evening about town I have ever been guilty of."

Luigi, who had come forward to welcome Sophy, escorted them to one of the best tables.

"You must be very nice to this gentleman, Luigi," she said. "He is a very great friend of mine, just arrived in London. He has come up on purpose to see me, and we shall probably decide to make this our favorite restaurant."

"I shall be vairy happy," Luigi declared, with a bow.

"I am beginning to regret, Mr. Strangewey, that I ever introduced you to Sophy," Louise remarked, as she sank back into her chair. "You won't believe that all my friends are as frivolous as this, will you?"

"They aren't," Sophy proclaimed confidently. "I am the one person who succeeds in keeping Louise with her feet upon the earth. She has never had supper here before. Dry biscuits, hot milk, and a volume of poems are her relaxation after the theater. She takes herself too seriously."

"I wonder if I do!" Louise murmured, as she helped herself to caviar.

She was suddenly pensive. Her eyes seemed to be looking out of the restaurant. Sophy was exchanging amenities with a little party of friends at the next table.

"One must sometimes be serious," John remarked, "or life would have no poise at all."

"I have a friend who scolds me," she confided. "Sometimes he almost loses patience with me. He declares that my attitude toward life is too analytical. When happiness comes my way, I shrink back. I keep my emotions in the background, while my brain works, dissecting, wondering, speculating. Perhaps what he says is true. I believe that if one gets into the habit of analyzing too

much, one loses all elasticity of emotion, the capacity to recognize and embrace the great things when they come."

"I think you have been right," John declared earnestly. "If the great things come as they should come, they are overwhelming, they will carry you off your feet. You will forget to speculate and to analyze. Therefore, I think you have been wise and right to wait. You have run no risk of having to put up with the lesser things."

She leaned toward him across the rose-shaded table. For those few seconds they seemed to have been brought into a wonderfully intimate communion of thought. A wave of her hair almost touched his forehead. His hand boldly rested upon her fingers.

"You talk," she whispered, "as if we were back upon your hilltops once more!"

He turned his head toward the little orchestra, which was playing a low and tremulous waltz tune.

"I want to believe," he said, "that you can listen to the music here and yet live upon the hilltops."

"You believe that it is possible?"

"I do indeed," he assured her. "Although my heart was almost sick with loneliness, I do not think that I should be here if I did not believe it. I have not come for anything else, for any lesser things, but to find—"

For once his courage failed him. For once, too, he failed to understand her expression. She had drawn back a little, her lips were quivering. Sophy broke suddenly in upon that moment of suspended speech.

"I knew how it would be!" she exclaimed. "I leave you both alone for less than a minute, and there you sit, as grave as two owls. I ask you, now, is this the place to wander off into the clouds? When two people sit looking at each other as you were doing a minute ago, here in Luigi's, at midnight, with champagne in their glasses, and a supper, ordered regardless of expense, on the table before them, they are either without the least sense of the fitness of things, or else—"

"Or else what?" Louise asked.

"Or else they are head over heels in love with each other!" Sophy concluded.

"Perhaps the child is right," Louise assented tolerantly, taking a peach from the basket by her side. "Evidently it is our duty to abandon ourselves to the frivolity of the moment. What shall we do to bring ourselves into accord with it? Everybody seems to be behaving most disgracefully. Do you think it would contribute to the gaiety of the evening if I were to join in the chorus of 'You Made Me Love You,' and Mr. Strangewey were to imitate the young gentleman at the next table and throw a roll, say, at that portly old gentleman with the highly polished shirt-front?"

"There is no need to go to extremes," Sophy protested. "Besides, we should get into trouble. The portly old gentleman happens to be one of the directors."

"Then we will just talk nonsense," Louise suggested.

"I am not very good at it," John sighed; "and there is so much I want to say that isn't nonsense."

"You ought to be thankful all your life that you have met me and that I am disposed to take an interest in you," Sophy remarked, as she moved her chair a little nearer to John's. "I am quite sure that in a very short time you would have become—well, almost a prig. Providence has selected me to work out your salvation."

"Providence has been very kind, then," John told her.

"I hope you mean it," she returned. "You ought to, if you only understood the importance of light-heartedness."

The lights were lowered a few minutes later, and John paid the bill.

"We've enjoyed our supper," Louise whispered, as they passed down the room. "The whole evening has been delightful!"

"May I drive you home alone?" he asked bluntly.

"I am afraid we can't desert Sophy," she replied, avoiding his eyes. "She nearly always goes home with me. You see, although she seems quite a frivolous little person, she is really very useful to me—keeps my accounts, and all that sort of thing."

"And does her best," Sophy joined in, "to protect you against your ruinously extravagant habits!"

Louise laughed. They were standing in the little hall, and the commissionnaire was blowing his whistle for a taxi.

"I won't be scolded to-night," she declared. "Come, you shall both of you drive home with me, and then Mr. Strangewey can drop you at your rooms on his way back."

Sophy made a little grimace and glanced up at John anxiously. He was looking very big and very grim.

"Shall you mind that?" she asked.

A slight plaintiveness in her tone dispelled his first disappointment. After all, it was Louise's decision.

"I will try to bear it cheerfully," he promised, smiling, as he handed them into the cab.

XII

As they drove from Luigi's to Knightsbridge, Louise leaned back in her corner. Although her eyes were only half closed, there was an air of aloofness about her, an obvious lack of desire for conversation, which the others found themselves instinctively respecting. Even Sophy's light-hearted chatter seemed to have deserted her, somewhat to John's relief.

He sat back in his place, his eyes fixed upon Louise. He was so anxious to understand her in all her moods and vagaries. He was forced to admit to himself that she had deliberately chosen not to take any portion of that drive home alone with him. And yet, as he looked back through the evening, he told himself that he was satisfied. He declined to feel even a shadow of discouragement.

After a time he withdrew his eyes from her face and looked out upon the human panorama through which they were passing.

They were in the very vortex of London's midnight traffic. The night was warm for the time of year, and about Leicester Square and beyond the pavements were crowded with pedestrians, the women lightly and gaily clad, flitting, notwithstanding some sinister note about their movements, like butterflies or bright-hued moths along the pavements and across the streets. The procession of taxicabs and automobiles, each with its human freight of men and women in evening dress on their way home after an evening's pleasure, seemed endless.

Presently Sophy began to talk, and Louise, too, roused herself.

"I am only just beginning to realize," the latter said, "that you are actually in London."

"When I leave you," he replied, "I, too, shall find it hard to believe that we have actually met again and talked. There seems to be so much that I have to say," he added, looking at her closely, "and I have said nothing."

"There is plenty of time," she told him, and once more the signs of that slight nervousness were apparent in her manner. "There are weeks and months ahead of us."

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"Whenever you like. There are no rehearsals for a day or two. Ring me up on the telephone—you will find my number in the book—or come and lunch with me to-morrow, if you like."

"Thank you," he answered; "that is just what I should like. At what time?"

"Half past one. I will not ask either of you to come in now. You can come down to-morrow morning and get the books, Sophy. I think I am tired—tired," she added, with a curious little note of self-pity in her tone. "I am very glad to have seen you again, Mr. Strangewey," she said, lifting her eyes to his. "Good night!"

He helped her out, rang the bell, and watched her vanish through the swiftly opened door. Then he stepped back into the taxicab. Sophy retreated into the corner to make room for him.

"You are going to take me home, are you not?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied, his eyes still fixed with a shade of regret upon the closed door of Louise's little house. "No. 10 Southampton Street," he told the driver.

They turned round and spun once more into the network of moving vehicles and streaming pedestrians. John was silent, and his companion, for a little while, humored him. Soon, however, she touched him on the arm.

"This is still your first night in London," she reminded him, "and there is to-morrow. You are going to lunch with her to-morrow. Won't you talk to me, please?"

He shut the door upon a crowd of disturbing thoughts and fantastic imaginings, and smiled back at her. Her fingers remained upon his arm. A queer gravity had come into her dainty little face.

"Are you really in love with Louise?" she inquired, with something of his own directness.

He answered her with perfect seriousness.

"I believe so," he admitted, "but I should not like to say that I am absolutely certain. I have come here to find out."

Sophy suddenly rocked with laughter.

"You are the dearest, queerest madman I have ever met!" she exclaimed, holding tightly to his arm. "You sit there with a face as long as a fiddle, wondering whether you are in love with a girl or not! Well, I am not going to ask you anything more. Tell me, are you tired?"

"Not a bit," he declared. "I never had such a ripping evening in my life."

She held his arm a little tighter. She was the old Sophy again, full of life and gaiety.

"Let's go to the Aldwych," she suggested, "and see the dancing. We can just have something to drink. We needn't have any more supper."

"Rather!" he assented readily. "But where is it, and what is it?"

"Just a supper club," she told him. "Tell the man No. 19 Kean Street. What fun! I haven't been there for weeks."

"What about my clothes?" he asked.

"You'll be all right," she assured him. "You're quite a nice-looking person, and the manager is a friend of mine."

The cab stopped a few minutes later outside what seemed to be a private house except for the presence of a commissionnaire upon the pavement. The door was opened at once, and John was relieved of his hat and stick by a cloak-room attendant. Sophy wrote his name in a book, and they were ushered by the manager, who had come forward to greet them, into a long room, brilliantly lit, and filled, except in the center, with supper-tables.

They selected one near the wall and close to the open space in which, at the present moment, a man and a woman were dancing. The floor was of hardwood, and there was a little raised platform for the orchestra. John looked around him wonderingly. The popping of champagne corks was almost incessant. A slightly voluptuous atmosphere of cigarette-smoke, mingled with the perfumes shaken from the clothes and hair of the women, several more of whom were now dancing, hung about the place. A girl in fancy dress was passing a great basket of flowers from table to table.

Sophy sat with her head resting upon her hands and her face very close to her companion's, keeping time with her feet to the music.

"Isn't this rather nice?" she whispered. "Do you like being here with me, Mr. John Strangewey?"

"Of course I do," he answered heartily. "Is this a restaurant?"

She shook her head.

"No, it's a club. We can sit here all night, if you like."

"Can I join?" he asked.

She laughed as she bent for a form and made him fill it in.

"Tell me," he begged, as he looked around him, "who are these girls? They look so pretty and well dressed, and yet so amazingly young to be out at this time of night."

"Mostly actresses," she replied, "and musical-comedy girls. I was in musical comedy myself before Louise rescued me."

"Did you like it?"

"I liked it all right," she admitted, "but I left it because I wasn't doing any good. I can dance pretty well, but I have no voice, so there didn't seem to be any chance of my getting out of the chorus; and one can't even pretend to live on the salary they pay you, unless one has a part."

"But these girls who are here to-night?"

"They are with their friends, of course," she told him. "I suppose, if it hadn't been for Louise, I should have been here, too—with a friend."

"I should like to see you dance," he remarked, in a hurry to change the conversation.

"I'll dance to you some day in your rooms, if you like," she promised. "Or would you like me to dance here? There is a man opposite who wants me to. Would you rather I didn't? I want to do just which would please you most."

"Dance, by all means," he insisted. "I should like to watch you."

She nodded, and a minute or two later she had joined the small crowd in the center of the room, clasped in the arms of a very immaculate young man who had risen and bowed to her from a table opposite. John leaned back in his place

and watched her admiringly. Her feet scarcely touched the ground. She never once glanced at or spoke to her partner, but every time she passed the corner where John was sitting, she looked at him and smiled.

He, for his part, watched her no longer with pleasant interest, but with almost fascinated eyes. The spirit of the place was creeping into his blood. His long years of seclusion seemed like a spell of time lying curiously far away, a crude period, mislived in an atmosphere which, notwithstanding its austere sweetness, took no account of the human cry. He refilled his glass with champagne and deliberately drank its contents. It was splendid to feel so young and strong, to feel the wine in his veins, his pulse and his heart moving to this new measure!

His eyes grew brighter, and he smiled back at Sophy. She suddenly released her hold upon her partner and stretched out her arms to him. Her body swayed backward a little. She waved her hands with a gesture infinitely graceful, subtly alluring. Her lips were parted with a smile almost of triumph as she once more rested her hand upon her partner's shoulder.

"Who is your escort this evening?" the latter asked her, speaking almost for the first time.

"You would not know him," she replied. "He is a Mr. John Strangewey, and he comes from Cumberland."

"Just happens that I do know him," the young man remarked. "Thought I'd seen his face somewhere. Used to be up at the varsity with him. We once played rackets together. Hasn't he come into a pile just lately?"

"An uncle in Australia left him a fortune."

"I'll speak to him presently," the young man decided. "Always make a point of being civil to anybody with lots of oof!"

"I expect he'll be glad to meet you again," Sophy remarked. "He doesn't know a soul in town."

The dance was finished. They returned together to where John was sitting, and the young man held out a weary hand.

"Amerton, you know, of Magdalen," he said. "You're Strangewey, aren't you?"

"Lord Amerton, of course!" John exclaimed. "I thought your face was

familiar. Why, we played in the rackets doubles together!"

"And won 'em, thanks to you," Amerton replied. "Are you up for long?"

"I am not quite sure," John told him. "I only arrived last night."

"Look me up some time, if you've nothing better to do," the young man suggested. "Where are you hanging out?"

"The Milan."

"I am at the Albany. So-long! Must get back to my little lady."

He bowed to Sophy and departed. She sank a little breathlessly into her chair and laid her hand on John's arm. Her cheeks were flushed, her bosom was rising and falling quickly.

"I am out of breath," she said, her head thrown back, perilously near to John's shoulder. "Lord Amerton dances so well. Give me some champagne!"

"And you—you dance divinely," he told her, as he filled her glass.

"If we were alone," she whispered, "I should want you to kiss me!"

The stem of the wine-glass in John's fingers snapped suddenly, and the wine trickled down to the floor. A passing waiter hurried up with a napkin, and a fresh glass was brought. The affair was scarcely noticed, but John remained disturbed and a little pale.

"Have you cut your hand?" Sophy asked anxiously.

"Not at all," he assured her. "How hot it is here! Do you mind if we go?"

"Go?" she exclaimed disconsolately. "I thought you were enjoying yourself so much!"

"So I am," he answered, "but I don't quite understand—"

He paused.

"Understand what?" she demanded.

"Myself, if you must know."

She set down the glass which she had been in the act of raising to her lips.

"How queer you are!" she murmured. "Listen. You haven't got a wife or anything up in Cumberland, have you?"

"You know I haven't," he answered.

"You're not engaged to be married, you have no ties, you came up here perfectly free, you haven't even said anything yet—to Louise?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then—" she began.

Her words were so softly spoken that they seemed to melt away. She leaned forward to look in his face.

"Sophy," he begged, with sudden and almost passionate earnestness, "be kind to me, please! I am just a simple, stupid countryman, who feels as if he had lost his way. I have lived a solitary sort of life—an unnatural one, you would say—and I've been brought up with some old-fashioned ideas. I know they are old-fashioned, but I can't throw them overboard all at once. I have kept away from this sort of thing. I didn't think it would ever attract me—I suppose because I didn't believe it could be made so attractive. I have suddenly found out—that it does!"

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"There is only one thing for me to do," he answered. "Until I know what I have come to London to learn, I shall fight against it."

"You mean about Louise?"

"I mean about Louise," he said gravely.

Sophy came still closer to him. Her voice was as soft as the lightest, finest note of music, trembling a little with that one thread of passion. She seemed so dainty, so quiet and sweet, that for a moment he found himself able to imagine that it was all a dream; that hers was just one of those fairy, disquieting voices that floated about on the summer breeze and rippled along the valleys and hillsides of his Cumberland home. Then, swift as the fancy itself, came the warm touch of her hand upon his, the lure of her voice once more, with its trembling cadence.

"Why are you so foolish?" she murmured. "Louise is very wonderful in her

place, but she is not what you want in life. Has it never occurred to you that you may be too late?"

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I believe what the world believes, what some day I think she will admit to herself—that she cares for the Prince of Seyre."

"Has she ever told you so?"

"Louise never speaks of these things to any living soul. I am only telling you what I think. I am trying to save you pain—trying for my own sake as well as yours."

He paid his bill and stooped to help her with her cloak. Her heart sank, her lips quivered a little. It seemed to her that he had passed to a great distance.

"Very soon," John said, "I shall ask Louise to tell me the truth. I think that I shall ask her, if I can, to-morrow!"

XIII

John's first caller at the Milan was, in a way, a surprise to him. He was sitting smoking an after-breakfast pipe on the following morning, and gazing at the telephone directory, when his bell rang. He opened the door to find the Prince of Seyre standing outside.

"I pay you a very early visit, I fear," the latter began.

"Not at all," John replied, taking the pipe from his mouth and throwing open the door. "It is very good of you to come and see me."

The prince followed John into the little sitting room. He was dressed, as usual, with scrupulous care. His white linen gaiters were immaculate, his trousers were perfectly creased, the hang of his coat had engaged the care of an artist. His tie was of a deep shade of violet, fastened with a wonderful pearl, and his fingers were perhaps a trifle overmanicured. He wore a bunch of Parma violets in his buttonhole, and he carried with him a very faint but unusual perfume, which seemed to John like the odor of delicate green tea. It was just these details, and the slowness of his speech, which alone accentuated his foreign origin.

"It occurred to me," he said, as he seated himself in an easy chair, "that if you are really intending to make this experiment in town life of which Miss Maurel spoke, I might be of some assistance to you. There are certain matters, quite unimportant in themselves, concerning which a little advice in the beginning may save you trouble."

"Very good of you, I am sure," John repeated. "To tell you the truth, I was just looking through the telephone directory to see if I could come across the name of a tailor I used to have some things from."

"If it pleases you to place yourself in my hands," the prince suggested, "I will introduce you to my own tradespeople. I have made the selection with some care."

"That will suit me admirably," John declared. "If you will just give me the addresses—I couldn't think of taking up your time."

"I have, fortunately, an idle morning," the prince said, "and it is entirely at

your disposal. At half past one I believe we are both lunching with Miss Maurel."

John was conscious of a momentary sense of annoyance. His *tête-à-tête* with Louise seemed farther off than ever. At the prince's suggestion, however, he fetched his hat and gloves and entered the former's automobile, which was waiting below.

"Miss Maurel!" the prince remarked, as they glided off westward, "is, I believe, inviting a few friends to meet you. If you would feel more comfortable in town clothes, I think the tailor to whom I am taking you will be able to arrange that. He makes special preparations for such emergencies."

"I will do what you think best," John agreed.

They spent the morning in the neighborhood of Bond Street, and John laid the foundations of a wardrobe more extensive than any he had ever dreamed of possessing. At half past one they were shown into Louise's little dressing room. There were three or four men already present, standing around their hostess and sipping some faint yellow cordial from long Venetian glasses.

Louise came forward to meet them, and made a little grimace as she remarked the change in John's appearance.

"Honestly, I don't know you, and I don't believe I like you at all!" she exclaimed. "How dare you transform yourself into a tailor's dummy in this fashion?"

"It was entirely out of respect to you," John said.

"In fact," the prince added, "we considered that we had achieved rather a success."

"I suppose I must look upon your effort as a compliment," Louise sighed, "but it seems queer to lose even so much of you. Shall you take up our manners and our habits, Mr. Strangewey, as easily as you wear our clothes?"

"That I cannot promise," he replied.

"The brain should adapt itself at least as readily as the body," the prince remarked.

M. Graillot, who was one of the three men present, turned around.

"Who is talking platitudes?" he demanded. "I write plays, and that is my monopoly. Ah, it is the prince, I see! And our young friend who interrupted us at rehearsal yesterday."

"And whom I am anxious to have you meet again," Louise intervened. "You remember his name, perhaps—Mr. John Strangewey."

Graillot held out his left hand to the prince and his right to John.

"Mr. Strangewey," he said, "I congratulate you! Any person who has the good fortune to interest Miss Maurel is to be congratulated. Yet must I look at you and feel myself puzzled. You are not an artist—no? You do not paint or write?"

John shook his head.

"Mr. Strangewey's claim to distinction is that he is just an ordinary man," Louise observed. "Such a relief, you know, after all you clever people! And that reminds me, Miles," she added, turning to the actor, "I asked you here, too, especially to meet Mr. Strangewey again. Mr. Faraday is one of the most dangerous guides in London a young man could have. He knows everybody and everything unknowable and yet worth knowing. I present him to you as a hero. He is going to make love to me three hours a night for very many nights, we hope."

John shook hands with everybody and sipped the contents of the glass which had been handed to him. Then a butler opened the door and announced luncheon. Louise offered her hand to the prince, who stepped back.

"It shall be the privilege of the stranger within our gates," he decided.

Louise turned to John with a little smile.

"Let me show you, then, the way to my dining room. I ought to apologize for not asking some women to meet you. I tried two on the telephone, but they were engaged."

"I will restore the balance," the prince promised, turning from the contemplation of one of the prints hanging in the hall. "I am giving a supper party to-night for Mr. Strangewey, and I will promise him a preponderance of your charming sex."

"Am I invited?" Louise inquired.

The prince shook his head.

"Alas, no!"

They passed into a small dining room, and here again John noticed that an absolute simplicity was paramount. The carpet was of some dark, almost indistinguishable color. The walls were white, hung with three or four French etchings in black reed frames. At one end a curved window looked out upon a vista of green trees and shrubs, and the recess was completely filled in with what appeared to be almost a grotto of flowers. The round table, covered with an exquisitely fine cloth, was very simply laid. There was a little glass of the finest quality, and a very little silver. For flowers there was only one bowl, a brilliant patch of some scarlet exotic, in the center.

"A supper party to which I am not invited," said Louise, as she took her place at the table and motioned John to a seat by her side, "fills me with curiosity. Who are to be your guests, prince?"

"Calavera and her sprites," the prince announced.

Louise paused for a moment in the act of helping herself to *hors d'oeuvres*. She glanced toward the prince. He was busy studying the menu through his eyeglass.

"By her sprites you mean—"

"The young ladies of her wonderful ballet," the prince replied. "I am also dipping into musical comedy for a few of my guests. Calavera, however, is to be the *pièce de résistance*."

The prince dropped his eye-glass and glanced toward his hostess. For a moment their eyes met. Louise's lips were faintly curled. It was almost as if a challenge had passed between them.

"Mr. Strangewey," she said, turning to John, "let me warn you. You are to meet to-night a woman for whom kings are reported to sigh in vain, at whose feet the *jeunesse dorée* of the world pours out its riches. Is it kind of the prince, I wonder, to try and seal your fate so soon?"

John laughed easily. He met the challenge in her eyes and answered it.

"If you are talking of the great Calavera," he said, "she will be far too

wonderful a lady to take any notice of a yokel like myself. And besides—"

"Besides?" the prince intervened.

"I have only seen her photographs and read of her," John remarked, "but I don't think she would attract me very much."

They all laughed. Graillot leaned across the table.

"My young friend," he exclaimed, "pray to your presiding genius, the presiding genius that won for you the friendship of our hostess, that Calavera never hears that speech, or within a week you will be at her chariot-wheels! I have seen many women and loved many, but there are none like Calavera. In her way she is the greatest artist that ever breathed. As for her beauty, wait till you see her! She has a body which makes me close my eyes and dream of Greece; eyes such as one seldom sees save in a few parts of southern Spain; and as for her smile—well, if I go on I shall begin to tell stories of her victims and neglect my lunch."

The conversation drifted away to reminiscences of other great dancers. Louise, under its cover, devoted her attention to her guest,

"First of all," she asked, "tell me how you like my little friend?"

"I think she is charming," John answered without hesitation. "We went to a supper club last night and stayed there till about half past three."

"A supper club?"

John nodded.

"I have forgotten the name of the place, but they made me a member. It was great fun. We had some more champagne, and Sophy danced. I found a young man there whom I used to know."

"Really," said Louise, "I am not sure that I approve of this! A supper club with Sophy until half past three in the morning!"

He looked at her quickly.

"You don't mind?"

"My dear man, why should I mind?" she returned. "What concern is it of mine if you and Sophy care to amuse each other? It is exactly what I hoped for."

"That's all right, then," John declared, with a sigh of relief. "Do you know," he went on, lowering his voice, "that I am just a little disappointed about today?"

"Disappointed? After I have taken the trouble to give a luncheon party for you?"

"I should have thought it a greater compliment, and liked it better, if you had asked me to lunch with you alone," he said.

She shook her head.

"It would have been a wasted opportunity. You have come up to London with a purpose. You have an experiment to make, an experiment in living. All these men can help you."

"The greater part of my experiment," he pointed out, "needs the help of only one person, and that person is you."

She moved a little uneasily in her chair. It might have been his fancy, but he imagined that she glanced under her eyelids toward the Prince of Seyre. The prince, however, had turned almost ostentatiously away from her. He was leaning across the table, talking to Faraday.

"You have not lost your gift of plain speech," she observed.

"I hope I never shall," he declared. "It seems to me to be the simplest and the best plan, after all, to say what you feel and to ask for what you want."

"So delightful in Cumberland and Utopia," she sighed; "so impracticable here!"

"Then since we can't find Utopia, come back to Cumberland," he suggested.

A reminiscent smile played for a moment about her lips.

"I wonder," she murmured, "whether I shall ever again see that dear, wonderful old house of yours, and the mist on the hills, and the stars shining here and there through it, and the moon coming up in the distance!"

"All these things you will see again," he assured her confidently. "It is because I want you to see them again that I am here."

"Just now, at this minute, I feel a longing for them," she whispered, looking

across the table, out of the window, to the softly waving trees.

At the close of the luncheon, a servant handed around coffee and liqueurs. The prince turned to Louise.

"You must not keep our young friend too late," he said. "He has appointments with his tailor and other myrmidons who have undertaken to adorn his person."

"Alas," replied Louise, rising, "I, too, have to go early to my dressmaker's. Do the honors for me, prince, will you?—and I will make my adieus now."

They all rose. She nodded to Graillot and Faraday. The prince moved to stand by the door. For a moment she and John were detached from the others.

"I want to see you alone," he said under his breath. "When can I?"

She hesitated.

"I am so busy!" she murmured. "Next week there are rehearsals nearly every minute of the day."

"To-morrow," John said insistently. "You have no rehearsals then. I must see you. I must talk to you without this crowd."

It was his moment. Her half-formed resolutions fell away before the compelling ring in his voice and the earnest pleading in his eyes.

"I will be in," she promised, "to-morrow at six o'clock."

XIV

After the departure of her guests, Louise seemed to forget the pressing appointment with her dressmaker. She stood before the window of her drawing-room, looking down into the street. She saw Faraday hail a taxicab and drive off by himself. She watched the prince courteously motion John to precede him into his waiting automobile. She saw the two men seat themselves side by side, and the footman close the door and take his place beside the chauffeur. She watched until the car took its place in the stream of traffic and disappeared. The sense of uneasiness which had brought her to the window was unaccountable, but it seemed in some way deepened by their departure together. Then a voice from just behind suddenly startled her.

"Lest your reverie, dear lady, should end in spoken words not meant for my ears, I, who often give myself up to reveries, hasten to acquaint you with the fact of my presence."

She turned quickly around. It was Graillot who had returned noiselessly into the room.

"You?" she exclaimed. "Why, I thought you were the first to leave."

"I returned," Graillot explained. "An impulse brought me back. A thought came into my mind. I wanted to share it with you as a proof of the sentiment which I feel exists between us. It is my firm belief that the same thought, in a different guise, was traveling through your mind, as you watched the departure of your guests."

She motioned him to a place upon the couch, close to where she had already seated herself.

"Come," she invited, "prove to me that you are a thought-reader!"

He sank back in his corner. His hands, with their short, stubby fingers, were clasped in front of him. His eyes, wide open and alert, seemed fixed upon her with the ingenuous inquisitiveness of a child.

"To begin, then, I find our friend, the Prince of Seyre, a most interesting, I might almost say a most fascinating, study."

Louise did not reply. After a moment's pause he continued:

"Let me tell you something which may or may not be unknown to you. A matter of eighty years ago, there was first kindled in the country places of France that fire which ultimately blazed over the whole land, devastating, murderous, anarchic, yet purifying. The family seat of the house of Seyre was near Orléans. In that region were many oppressors of the poor who, when they heard the mutterings of the storm, shivered for their safety. Upon not one of them did that furious mob of men and women pause to waste a single moment of their time. Without even a spoken word save one simultaneous, unanimous yell, they grouped together from all quarters—from every hamlet, from every homestead, men and women and even children—and moved in one solid body upon the Château de Seyre. The old prince would have been burned alive but for a servant who threw him a pistol, with which he blew out his brains, spitting at the mob. One of the sons was caught and torn almost to pieces. Only the father of our friend, the present Prince of Seyre, escaped."

"Why do you tell me all this?" Louise asked, shivering. "It is such a chapter of horrors!"

"It illustrates a point," Graillot replied. "Among the whole aristocracy of France there was no family so loathed and detested as the *seigneurs* of Seyre. Those at the *château*, and others who were arrested in Paris, met their death with singular contempt and calm. Eugène of Seyre, whose character in my small way I have studied, is of the same breed."

Louise took up a fan which lay on the table by her side, and waved it carelessly in front of her face.

"One does so love," she murmured, "to hear one's friends discussed in this friendly spirit!"

"It is because Eugène of Seyre is a friend of yours that I am talking to you in this fashion," Graillot continued. "You have also another friend—this young man from Cumberland."

"Well?"

"In him," Graillot went on, "one perceives all the primitive qualities which go to the making of splendid manhood. Physically he is almost perfect, for which alone we owe him a debt of gratitude. He has, if I judge him rightly, all the

qualities possessed by men who have been brought up free from the taint of cities, from the smear of our spurious over-civilization. He is chivalrous and unsuspicious. He is also, unfortunately for him, the enemy of the prince."

Louise laid down her fan. She no longer tried to conceal her agitation.

"Why are you so melodramatic?" she demanded. "They have scarcely spoken. This is, I think, their third meeting."

"When two friends," Graillot declared, "desire the same woman, then all of friendship that there may have been between them is buried. When two others, who are so far from being friends that they possess opposite qualities, opposite characters, opposite characteristics, also desire the same woman—"

"Don't!" Louise interrupted, with a sudden little scream. "Don't! You are talking wildly. You must not say such things!"

Graillot leaned forward. He shook his head very slowly; his heavy hand rested upon her shoulder.

"Ah, no, dear lady," he insisted, "I am not talking wildly. I am Graillot, who for thirty years have written dramas on one subject and one subject only—men and women. It has been given to me to study many varying types of the human race, to watch the outcome of many strange situations. I have watched the prince draw you nearer and nearer to him. What there is or may be between you I do not know. It is not for me to know. But if not now, some day Eugène of Seyre means you to be his, and he is not a person to be lightly resisted. Now from the skies there looms up this sudden obstacle."

"You do not realize," Louise protested, almost eagerly, "how slight is my acquaintance with Mr. Strangewey. I once spent the night and a few hours of the next morning at his house in Cumberland, and that is all I have ever seen of him. How can his presence here be of any serious import to Eugène?"

"As to that," Graillot replied, "I say nothing. If what I have suggested does not exist, then for the first time in my life I have made a mistake; but I do not think I have. You may not realize it, but there is before you one of those struggles that make or mar the life of women of every age. As for the men, I will only say this, and it is because of it that I have spoken at all—I am a lover of fair play, and the struggle is not even. The younger man may hold every card in the pack, but Eugène of Seyre has learned how to win tricks without aces. I stayed behind to

say this to you, Louise. You know the young man and I do not. It is you who must warn him."

"Warn him?" Louise repeated, with upraised eyebrows. "Dear master, aren't we just a little—do you—melodramatic? The age of duels is past, also the age of hired bravos and assassins."

"Agreed," Graillot interrupted, "but the weapons of to-day are more dangerous. It is the souls of their enemies that men attack. If I were a friend of that young man's I would say to him: 'Beware, not of the enmity of Eugène of Seyre, but of his friendship!' And now, dear lady, I have finished. I lingered behind because the world holds no more sincere admirer of yourself and your genius than I. Don't ring. May I not let myself out?"

"Stop!" Louise begged.

Graillot resumed his seat. He watched with an almost painful curiosity the changes in Louise's face, which was convulsed by a storm of passionate apprehension. Yet behind it all he could see the truth. There was something softer in her face than he had ever perceived before, a tenderer light than he had ever seen in her eyes. He sighed and looked down at the carpet.

Louise rose presently and walked abruptly to the window. Then she came back and reseated herself by his side.

"You are the one friend I have in life who understands, dear master," she said. "Do I weary you if I speak?"

He looked steadfastly into her eyes. His plain, bearded face was heavy-browed, lined, tired a little with the coming of age.

"Louise," he declared, "it is only because I dare not lift my thoughts and eyes any higher that I count myself the greatest friend you ever could have in life!"

She caught at his hand, her head drooped a little.

"Don't overpower me," she faltered. "I can't—no, I can't!"

He watched in silence the twitching of her lips, the filling of her eyes. A momentary remorse struck him. Why should he afflict her at this moment with his own secret? He closed his eyes, and deliberately shut out the vision which had lured his tongue into the byways of unwonted sentiment. He spoke firmly

and without emotion.

"Louise," he begged, "let me be your confidant! No man knows more of the game of life as it is played out between men and women. There is no one in whom you can place a greater trust."

Her fingers clutched his, her nails dug into his palm, but he did not flinch.

"I do not know," she murmured, her voice trembling with agitation. "That is the truth of it all. I do not know where to go for guidance or inspiration. Life has suddenly become mysterious. Men seem always so strong and sure. It is only we poor women who lose our bearings."

Graillot patted her hands tenderly. Then he rose to his feet.

"You are not going?" she asked him.

"Dear Louise," he said, "I am going, because the time when I can help is not yet. Listen! More harm has been done in this world by advice than in any other way. I have no advice to give you. You have one sure and certain guide, and that is your own heart, your own instincts, your own sweet consciousness of what is best. I leave you to that. If trouble comes, I am always ready!"

XV

During the remainder of that afternoon and evening John was oppressed by a vague sense of the splendor of his surroundings and his companion's mysterious capacity for achieving impossibilities. Their visits to the tailors, the shirt-makers, the hosiers, and the boot-makers almost resembled a royal progress. All difficulties were waved aside. That night he dined, clothed like other men from head to foot, in the lofty dining room of one of the most exclusive clubs in London. The prince proved an agreeable if somewhat reticent companion. He introduced John to many well-known people, always with that little note of personal interest in his few words of presentation which gave a certain significance to the ceremony.

From the club, where the question of John's proposed membership, the prince acting as his sponsor, was favorably discussed with several members of the committee, they drove to Covent Garden, and for the first time in his life John entered the famous opera-house. The prince, preceded by an attendant, led the way to a box upon the second tier. A woman turned her head as they entered and stretched out her hand, which the prince raised to his lips.

"You see, I have taken you at your word, Eugène," she remarked. "So many evenings I have looked longingly from my stall at your empty box. To-night I summoned up all my courage, and here I am!"

"You give me a double pleasure, dear lady," the prince declared. "Not only is it a joy to be your host, but you give me also the opportunity of presenting to you my friend, John Strangewey. Strangewey, this is my very distant relative and very dear friend, Lady Hilda Mulloch."

Lady Hilda smiled graciously at John. She was apparently of a little less than middle age, with dark bands of chestnut hair surmounted by a tiara. Her face was the face of a clever and still beautiful woman; her figure slender and dignified; her voice low and delightful.

"Are you paying your nightly homage to Calavera, Mr. Strangewey, or are you only an occasional visitor?" she asked.

"This is my first visit of any sort to Covent Garden," John told her.

She looked at him with as much surprise as good breeding permitted. John, who had not as yet sat down, seemed almost preternaturally tall in that small box, with its low ceiling. He was looking around the house with the enthusiasm of a boy. Lady Hilda glanced away from him toward the prince, and smiled; then she looked back at John. There was something like admiration in her face.

"Do you live abroad?" she asked.

John shook his head.

"I live in Cumberland," he said. "Many people here seem to think that that is the same thing. My brother and I have a farm there."

"But you visit London occasionally, surely?"

"I have not been in London," John told her, "since I passed through it on my way home from Oxford, eight years ago."

"But why not?" she persisted.

John laughed a little.

"Well, really," he admitted, "when I come to think of it seriously, I scarcely know. I have lived alone with an elder brother, who hates London and would be very unhappy if I got into the way of coming up regularly. I fancy that I have rather grown into his way of thinking. I am quite satisfied—or rather I have been quite satisfied—to live down there all the year round."

"I have never heard anything so extraordinary in my life!" the woman declared frankly. "Is it the prince who has induced you to break out of your seclusion?"

"Our young friend," the prince explained, "finds himself suddenly in altered circumstances. He has been left a large fortune, and has come to spend it. Incidentally, I hope, he has come to see something more of your sex than is possible among his mountain wilds. He has come, in short, to look a little way into life."

Lady Hilda leaned back in her chair.

"How romantic!"

"The prince amuses himself," John assured her. "I don't suppose I shall stay

very long in London. I want just to try it for a time."

She looked at him almost wistfully. She was a woman with brains; a woman notorious for the freedom of her life, for her intellectual gifts, for her almost brutal disregard of the conventions of her class. The psychological interest of John Strangewey's situation appealed to her powerfully. Besides, she had a weakness for handsome men.

"Of course, it all sounds like a fairy tale," she declared. "Tell me exactly, please, how long you have been in London."

"About forty-eight hours," he answered.

"And what did you do last night?"

"I dined with two friends, we went to the Palace, and one of them took me to a supper club."

She made a little grimace.

"You began in somewhat obvious fashion," she remarked.

"I can vouch for the friends," the prince observed, smiling.

"At any rate," said Lady Hilda, "I am glad to think that I shall be able to watch you when you see Calavera dance for the first time."

The curtain rang up upon one of the most gorgeous and sensuous of the Russian ballets. John, who by their joint insistence was occupying the front chair in the box, leaned forward in his place, his eyes steadfastly fixed upon the stage. Both the prince and Lady Hilda, in the background, although they occasionally glanced at the performance, devoted most of their attention to watching him.

As the story progressed and the music grew in passion and voluptuousness, they distinctly saw his almost militant protest. They saw the knitting of his firm mouth and the slight contraction of his eyebrows. The prince and his friend exchanged glances. She drew her chair a little farther back, and he followed her example.

"Where did you find anything so wonderful as this?" she murmured.

"Lost among the hills in Cumberland," the prince replied. "I have an estate up there—in fact, he and I are joint lords of the manor of the village in which he has

lived."

"And you?" she whispered, glancing at John to be sure that she was not overheard. "Where do you come in? An educator of the young? I don't seem to see you in that rôle!"

A very rare and by no means pleasant smile twisted the corners of his lips for a moment.

"It is a long story."

"Can I be brought in?" she asked.

He nodded.

"It rests with you. It would suit my plans."

She toyed with her fan for a moment, looked restlessly at the stage and back again at John. Then she rose from her place and stood before the looking-glass. From the greater obscurity of the box she motioned to the prince.

John remained entirely heedless of their movements. His eyes were still riveted upon the stage, fascinated with the wonderful coloring, the realization of a new art.

"You and I," Lady Hilda whispered, "do not need to play about with the truth, Eugène. What are you doing this for?"

"The idlest whim," the prince assured her quietly. "Look at him. Think for a moment of his position—absolutely without experience, entirely ignorant about women, with a fortune one only dreams of, and probably the handsomest animal in London. What is going to become of him?"

"I think I understand a little," she confessed.

"I think you do," the prince assented. "He has views, this young man. It is my humor to see them dissipated. The modern *Sir Galahad* always irritated me a little."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"They'll never give him a chance, these women," she said. "Much better hand him over to me."

The prince smiled enigmatically, and Lady Hilda returned to her seat. John was still leaning forward with his eyes fixed upon Calavera, who was dancing alone now. The ballet was drawing toward the end. The music had reached its climax of wild and passionate sensuousness, dominated and inspired by the woman whose every movement and every glance seemed part of some occult, dimly understood language.

When the curtain rang down, John, like many others, was confused. Nevertheless, after that first breathless pause, he stood up and joined in the tumultuous applause.

"Well?" the prince asked.

John shook his head. "I don't know," he answered.

"Neither does any one else," Lady Hilda said. "Don't try to analyze your impressions for our benefit, Mr. Strangewey. I am exactly in your position, and I have been here a dozen times. Even to us hardened men and women of the world, this Russian music came as a surprise. There were parts of it you did not like, though, weren't there?"

"There were parts of it I hated," John agreed. "There were passages that seemed to aim at discord in every sense of the word."

She nodded sympathetically. They were on their way down the broad staircase.

"I wonder," she murmured, "whether I am going to be asked out to supper?"

"Alas, not to-night, dear lady," the prince regretted. "I am having a few friends at Seyre House."

She shot a glance at him and shrugged her shoulders. She was evidently displeased.

"How much too bad!" she exclaimed. "I am not at all sure that it is right of you to invite Mr. Strangewey to one of your orgies. A respectable little supper at the Carlton, and a cigarette in my library afterward, would have been a great deal better for both of you—certainly for Mr. Strangewey. I think I shall run away with him, as it is!"

The prince shrugged his shoulders.

"It is unfortunate," he sighed, "but we are both engaged. If you will give us the opportunity some other evening—"

"I am not at all sure that I shall have anything more to do with you, Eugène," she declared. "You are not behaving nicely. Will you come and see me while you are in town, Mr. Strangewey?" she added, turning to John. "I suppose you can be trusted to reach No. 21 Pont Street without your Mephistophelian chaperon?"

"I should like to very much," he replied. "I think," he added, a little hesitatingly, "that I have read one of your books of travel. It is very interesting to meet you."

"So my fame has really reached Cumberland!" she laughed. "You must come and talk to me one afternoon quite soon. Will you? I want so much to hear your impressions of London. I am always in between six and seven; or if you want to come earlier, I will try to be in if you telephone."

"I will come with pleasure," John promised.

They stood for a few moments in the crowded vestibule until Lady Hilda Mulloch's car was called. The prince stood back, allowing John to escort her to the door. She detained him for a moment after she had taken her seat, and leaned out of the window, her fingers still in his hand.

"Be careful!" she whispered. "The prince's supper parties are just a little—shall I say banal? There are better things if one waits!"

XVI

The reception-rooms of Seyre House, by some people considered the finest in London, were crowded that night by a brilliant and cosmopolitan assembly. For some time John stood by the prince's side and was introduced to more people than he had ever met before in his life. Presently, however, he was discovered by his friend Amerton.

"Queer thing your being here, a friend of the prince and all that!" the young man remarked. "Where's Miss Sophy this evening?"

"I haven't seen her," John replied. "I don't believe she is invited."

"Did you hear that Calavera is coming?" Amerton inquired.

John nodded.

"She's expected any moment. I wonder what she's like off the stage!"

"You wait and see," Lord Amerton sighed. "There isn't another woman in Europe to touch her. Why, they say that even our host is one of her victims. Like to be introduced to some of the girls, or shall we go and have a drink?"

John was hesitating when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. The prince's voice sounded in his ear.

"Strangewey," he said, "I am privileged to present you to Mme. Aida Calavera. *Madame*, this is the friend of whom I spoke to you."

John turned away from the little group of girls and young men toward whom Amerton had been leading him. Even though the prince's speech had given him a moment's breathing-space, he felt himself constrained to pause before he made his bow of ceremony.

The woman was different from anything he had imagined, from anything he had ever seen. In the ballet a writhing, sensuous figure with every gesture a note in the octave of passion, here she seemed the very personification of a negative and striking immobility. She was slender, not so tall as she had seemed upon the stage, dressed in white from head to foot. Her face was almost marblelike in its

pallor, her smooth, black hair was drawn tightly over her ears, and her eyes were of the deepest shade of blue.

During that momentary pause, while he searched among a confused mixture of sensations for some formula of polite speech, John found time to liken her in his mind to something Egyptian. She raised her hand, as he bowed, with a gesture almost royal in its condescension. The prince, with quiet tact, bridged over the moment during which John struggled in vain for something to say.

"Mr. Strangewey," he remarked, "paid his first visit to Covent Garden to-night. He has seen his first ballet, as we moderns understand the term. I cannot help envying him that delight. He naturally finds it difficult to realize this additional good fortune. Will you excuse me for one moment?"

The prince departed to welcome some later arrivals. The noisy little group standing close at hand, from which John had been diverted, passed on into the refreshment-room, and the two were, for a few moments, almost isolated.

Even then John felt himself tongue-tied. Standing where she was, with that background of dark oil-paintings lit only by shaded electric lamps, she was more than ever like a wonderful old Egyptian statue into which some measure of slow-moving life had been breathed. He recognized almost with wonder the absence of any ornament of any sort on her neck or fingers.

"You were pleased with the performance, I hope?"

Her voice was in character with her personality. It was extremely low, scarcely louder than a whisper. To his surprise, it was almost wholly free from any foreign accent.

"It was very wonderful," John answered.

"You understood the story?"

"Only partly," he confessed.

"Would you have recognized me, seeing me as you do now?"

"Never in the world," he assured her.

"Tell me why I am so different off the stage."

"On the stage," he replied, "you seem to me to be the embodiment of wild

movement. Here, you seem—forgive me—to be a statue. I can scarcely believe that you walked across the room."

"It is my pose," she said calmly.

"Then you are a great actress as well as a great dancer," he declared.

For the first time the plastic calm of her features seemed disturbed. She smiled, but even her smile seemed to him more like some mechanically contrived alteration in the facial expression of a statue than anything natural or spontaneous.

"The prince tells me," she continued, "that you are a stranger in London. Give me your arm. We will walk to a quieter place. In a few moments we are to be disturbed for supper. One eats so often and so much in this country. Why do I say that, though? It is not so bad as in Russia."

They passed across the polished wood floor into a little room with Oriental fittings, where a lamp was swinging from the ceiling, giving out a dim but pleasant light. The place was empty, and the sound of the music and voices seemed to come from a distance. She sank down upon a divan back among the shadows, and motioned John to sit by her side.

"You have come to find out, to understand—is that not so?" she inquired. "What you know of life, the prince tells me, you have learned from books. Now you have come to discover what more than that there is to be learned in the world of men and women."

"Did the prince tell you all this?" John asked.

"He did," she admitted. "He seems much interested in you."

"He has been very kind," John said.

She turned her head slowly and looked at him.

"A young man to whom the prince chooses to be kind is, in a way, fortunate," she said. "I think he knows more of life than any other person whom I ever met."

"You have known him for long?"

"In Budapest, five years ago; in Russia, the season afterward; then in Paris; in Petersburg again, and now in London. The prince has been a faithful friend. He

came once from Florence to Petersburg, to be present at my first night at the opera. Always he impresses me the same way. There is very little in life, in men or in women, which he does not understand. Let us return to what we were speaking about. I find it very interesting."

"You are very kind," John declared.

"What you will learn here," she went on, "depends very much upon yourself. Are you intelligent? Perhaps not very," she added, looking at him critically. "You have brains, however, without a doubt. You have also what places you at once *en rapport* with the cult of the moment—you are wonderfully good-looking."

John moved a little uneasily in his place. He felt that the dancer's eyes were fixed upon him, and he was feverishly anxious not to respond to the invitation of their gaze. He was conscious, too, of the queer, indefinable fascination of her near presence in the dimly lighted room.

"What you will learn," she proceeded, "depends very much upon your desires. If you seek for the best, and are content with nothing else, you will find it. But so few men are content to wait!"

"I intend to," John said simply.

"Look at me, please," she ordered.

Once more he was compelled to look into her deep-blue eyes. The incomprehensible smile was still upon her lips.

"You have loved?"

"No," he answered, taken a little aback by the abruptness of the question.

"You grow more wonderful! How old are you, may I ask?"

"Twenty-eight."

"At the present moment, then, you are free from any distracting thoughts about women? You have no entanglements?"

"I have nothing of the sort," John declared, almost irritably. "There is one person who has made a wonderful change in my life. I believe I could say that I am absolutely certain of my feelings for her, but so far she has not given me much encouragement. Tell me, *madame,* why do you ask me these questions?"

"Because it interests me," she replied. "Why do you not insist that this lady should tell you the truth?"

"I have come to London to insist," he told her, "but I have been here only forty-eight hours."

"So you are waiting?"

"I am waiting," he assented.

"So many people spend their lives doing that," she went on presently. "It does not appeal to me. The moment I make up my mind that I want a thing, I take it. The moment I make up my mind to give, I give."

John was suddenly conscious of the closeness of the atmosphere. The fingers of his hands were clenched tightly together. He swore to himself that he would not look into this woman's face. He listened to the band which was playing in the balcony of the great hall, to the murmur of the voices, the shouts of laughter. He told himself that Mme. Calavera was amusing herself with him.

"The prince's party," she continued, after a long pause, "seems to be a great success, to judge by the noise they are making. So many people shout and laugh when they are happy. I myself find a more perfect expression of happiness in silence."

She was leaning a little back in her place. One arm was resting upon a pile of cushions, the other hung loosely over the side of the divan. John felt a sudden desire to rise to his feet, and a simultaneous consciousness that his feet seemed to be made of lead.

"You may hold my fingers," she said; "and please keep your face turned toward me. Why are you nervous? I am not very formidable."

He took her fingers, very much as the prince had done upon her arrival, and pressed them formally to his lips. Then he released them and rose.

"You know," he confessed, "I am very stupid at this sort of thing. Shall we go back to the reception rooms? I shall be the most unpopular man here if I keep you any longer."

The smile deepened slightly. Little lines appeared at the sides of her eyes. So far from being annoyed, he could see that she was laughing.

"Joseph," she mocked, "I am not tempting you, really! Do sit down. I have met men in many countries, but none like you. So you do not wish to accept those small privileges which a woman may offer when she chooses?"

"I believe—in fact, I am almost certain—that I love the woman I have come to London to see," John declared.

"You get more and more interesting," she murmured. "Don't you realize that your love for one woman should make you kind to all?"

"No, I don't," he answered bluntly.

"Come," she said, "do not be afraid of me. I will not make love to you—seriously. You must be kind to me because everybody spoils me. After supper there are one or two more questions I must ask you. Do you know that I am going to dance here? Never before have I danced in a private house in England. Except upon the stage, I like to dance only to those whom I love!"

The little space between the curtains was suddenly darkened. John turned eagerly around, and, to his immense relief, recognized the prince. Their host came forward to where they were sitting, and held out his arm to Calavera.

"Dear lady," he announced, "supper is served. Will you do me this great honor?"

She rose to her feet. The prince turned to John.

"This is my privilege as host," he explained; "but if you will follow us, you will find some consolation in store for you."

XVII

"Well?" the prince asked, as he handed Aida Calavera to her place at his right hand.

"I think not," she replied.

He raised his eyebrows slightly. For a moment he glanced down the supper-table with the care of a punctilious host, to see that his guests were properly seated. He addressed a few trivialities to the musical-comedy star who was sitting on his left. Then he leaned once more toward the great dancer.

"You surprise me," he said. "I should have thought that the enterprise would have commended itself to you. You do not doubt the facts?"

"They are obvious enough," she replied. "The young man is all that you say, even more ingenuous than I had believed possible, but I fancy I must be getting old. He tried to tell me that he was in love with another woman, and I felt suddenly powerless. I think I must be getting to that age when one prefers to achieve one's conquests with the lifting of a finger."

The prince sighed.

"I shall never understand your sex!" he declared. "I should have supposed that the slight effort of resistance such a young man might make would have provided just the necessary stimulus to complete his subjection."

She turned her beautiful head and looked at the prince through narrowed eyes.

"After all," she asked, "what should I gain? I am not like a child who robs an insect of life for a few moments' amusement. Even if I have no conscience, it gives me no pleasure to be wanton. Besides, the young man is, in his way, a splendid work of art. Why should I be vandal enough to destroy it? I shall ask you another question."

The prince slowly sipped the wine from the glass that he was holding to his lips. Then he set it down deliberately.

"Why not?"

"What is your interest? Is it a bet, a whim, or—enmity?"

"You may count it the latter," the prince replied deliberately.

Calavera laughed softly to herself.

"Now, for the first time," she confessed, "I feel interest. This is where one realizes that we live in the most impossible age of all history. The great noble who seeks to destroy the poor young man from the country is powerless to wreak harm upon him. You can neither make him a pauper nor have him beaten to death. Why are there princes any longer, I wonder? You are only as other men."

"It is an unhappy reflection, but it is the truth," the prince admitted. "My ancestors would have disposed of this young man as I should a troublesome fly, and it would have cost them no more than a few silver pieces and a cask of wine. To-day, alas, conditions are different. It will cost me more."

She trifled for a moment with the salad upon her plate, which as yet she had scarcely tasted.

"I am feeling," she remarked, "magnificently Oriental—like Cleopatra. The sensation pleases me. We are bargaining, are we not—"

"We shall not bargain," the prince interrupted softly. "It is you who shall name your price."

She raised her eyes and dropped them again.

"The prince has spoken," she murmured.

He touched her fingers for a moment with his, as if to seal their compact; then he turned once more to the lady upon his left.

Seyre House was one of the few mansions in London which boasted a banqueting-hall as well as a picture-gallery. Although the long table was laid for forty guests, it still seemed, with its shaded lights and its profusion of flowers, like an oasis of color in the middle of the huge, somberly lighted apartment. The penny illustrated papers, whose contributors know more of the doings of London society than anybody else, always hinted in mysterious terms at the saturnalian character of the prince's supper parties. John, who had heard a few whispers beforehand, and whose interest in his surroundings was keen and intense, wondered whether this company of beautiful women and elegant men were

indeed a modern revival of those wonderful creations of Boccaccio, to whom they had so often been likened.

Some of the faces of the guests were well known to him through their published photographs; to others he had been presented by the prince upon their arrival. He was seated between a young American star of musical comedy and a lady who had only recently dropped from the social firmament through the medium of the divorce-court, to return to the theater of her earlier fame. Both showed every desire to converse with him between the intervals of eating and drinking, but were constantly brought to a pause by John's lack of knowledge of current topics. After her third glass of champagne, the lady who had recently been a countess announced her intention of taking him under her wing.

"Some one must tell you all about things," she insisted. "What you need is a guide and a chaperon. Won't I do?"

"Perfectly," he agreed.

"Fair play!" protested the young lady on his left, whose name was Rosie Sharon. "I spoke to him first!"

"Jolly bad luck!" Lord Amerton drawled from the other side of the table. "Neither of you have an earthly. He's booked. Saw him out with her the other evening."

"I sha'n't eat any more supper," Rosie Sharon pouted, pushing away her plate.

"You ought to have told us about her at once," the lady who had been a countess declared severely.

John preserved his equanimity.

"It is to be presumed," he murmured, "that you ladies are both free from any present attachment?"

"Got you there!" Amerton chuckled. "What about Billy?"

Rosie Sharon sighed.

"We don't come to the prince's supper parties to remember our ties," she declared. "Let's all go on talking nonsense, please. Even if my heart is broken, I could never resist the prince's *pâté*!"

Apparently every one was of the same mind. The hum of laughter steadily grew. Jokes, mostly in the nature of personalities, were freely bandied across the table. It was becoming obvious that the contributors to the penny illustrated papers knew what they were talking about. Under shelter of the fire of conversation, the prince leaned toward his companion and reopened their previous discussion.

"Do you know," he began, "I am inclined to be somewhat disappointed by your lack of enthusiasm in a certain direction!"

"I have disappointed many men in my time," she replied. "Do you doubt my power, now that I have promised to exercise it?"

"Who could?" he replied courteously. "Yet this young man poses, I believe, as something of a St. Anthony. He may give you trouble."

"He is then, what you call a prig?"

"A most complete and perfect specimen, even in this nation of prigs!"

"All that you tell me," she sighed, "makes the enterprise seem easier. It is, after all, rather like the lioness and the mouse, isn't it?"

The prince made no reply, but upon his lips there lingered a faintly incredulous smile. The woman by his side leaned back in her place. She had the air of accepting a challenge.

"After supper," she said, "we will see!"

A single chord of music in a minor key floated across the room, soft at first, swelling later into a volume of sound, then dying away and ceasing altogether. John, standing momentarily alone in a corner of the picture-gallery, found it almost incredible that this wildly hilarious throng of men and women could so soon, and without a single admonitory word, break off in the midst of their conversation, stifle their mirth, almost hold their breath, in obedience to this unspoken appeal for silence. Every light in the place was suddenly extinguished. There remained only the shaded lamps overhanging the pictures.

Not a whisper was heard in the room. John, looking around him in

astonishment, was conscious only of the half-suppressed breathing of the men and women who lined the walls, or were still standing in little groups at the end of the long hall. Again there came the music, this time merged in a low but insistent clamor of other instruments. Then, suddenly, through the door at the farther end of the room came a dimly seen figure in white. The place seemed wrapped in a mystical twilight, with long black rays of deeper shadow lying across the floor. There was a little murmur of tense voices, and then again silence.

For a few moments the figure in white was motionless. Then, without any visible commencement, she seemed suddenly to blend into the waves of low, passionate music. The dance itself was without form or definite movement. She seemed at first like some white, limbless spirit, floating here and there across the dark bars of shadow at the calling of the melody. There was no apparent effort of the body. She was merely a beautiful, unearthly shape. It was like the flitting of a white moth through the blackness of a moonless summer night.

The impression it made upon John was indescribable. He watched with straining eyes, conscious of a deep sense of pleasure. Here was something appealing insistently to his love of beauty pure and simple; a new joy, a new grace, something which thrilled him and which left no aftermath of uneasy thoughts.

The music suddenly faded away into nothing. With no more effort than when she had glided into her poem of movement, the dancer stood in a pose of perfect stillness. There were a few moments of tense silence. Then came a crash of chords, and the slender white figure launched into the dance.

Her motions became more animated, more human. With feet which seemed never to meet the earth, she glided toward the corner where John was standing. He caught the smoldering fire in her eyes as she danced within a few feet of him. He felt a catch in his breath. Some subtle and only half-expressed emotion shook his whole being, seemed to tear at the locked chamber of his soul.

She had flung her arms forward, so near that they almost touched him. He could have sworn that her lips had called his name. He felt himself bewitched, filled with an insane longing to throw out his arms in response to her passionate, unspoken invitation, in obedience to the clamoring of his seething senses. He had forgotten, even, that any one else was in the room.

Then, suddenly, the music stopped. The lights flared out from the ceiling and

from every corner of the apartment. Slender and erect, her arms hanging limply at her sides, without a touch of color in her cheeks or a coil of her black hair disarranged, without a sign of heat or disturbance or passion in her face, John found Aida Calavera standing within a few feet of him, her eyes seeking for his. She laid her fingers upon his arm. The room was ringing with shouts of applause, in which John unconsciously joined. Every one was trying to press forward toward her. With her left hand she waved them back.

"If I have pleased you," she said, "I am so glad! I go now to rest for a little time."

She tightened her clasp upon her companion's arm, and they passed out of the picture-gallery and down a long corridor. John felt as if he were walking in a dream. Volition seemed to have left him. He only knew that the still, white hand upon his arm seemed like a vise burning into his flesh.

She led him to the end of the corridor, through another door, into a small room furnished in plain but comfortable fashion.

"We will invade the prince's own sanctum," she murmured. "Before I dance, I drink nothing but water. Now I want some champagne. Will you fetch me some, and bring it to me yourself?"

She sank back upon a divan as she spoke. John turned to leave the room, but she called him back.

"Come here," she invited, "close to my side! I can wait for the champagne. Tell me, why you are so silent? And my dancing—that pleased you?"

He felt the words stick in his throat. The sight of her cold, alluring beauty, shining out of her eyes, proclaiming itself and her wishes from her parted lips, filled him with a sudden resentment. He hated himself for the tumult which raged within him, and her for having aroused it.

"Your dancing was indeed wonderful," he stammered.

"It was for you!" she whispered, her voice growing softer and lower. "It was for you I danced. Did you not feel it?"

Her arms stole toward him. The unnatural calm with which she had finished her dance seemed suddenly to pass. Her bosom was rising and falling more quickly. There was a faint spot of color in her cheek.

"It was wonderful," he told her. "I will get you the champagne."

Her lips were parted. She smiled up at him.

"Go quickly," she whispered, "and come back quickly! I wait for you."

He left the room and passed out again into the picture-gallery before he had the least idea where he was. The band was playing a waltz, and one or two couples were dancing. The people seemed suddenly to have become like puppets in some strange, unreal dream. He felt an almost feverish longing for the open air, for a long draft of the fresh sweetness of the night, far away from this overheated atmosphere charged with unnamable things.

As he passed through the farther doorway he came face to face with the prince.

"Where are you going?" the latter asked.

"Mme. Calavera has asked me to get her some champagne," he answered.

The prince smiled.

"I will see that it is sent to her at once," he promised. "You are in my sanctum, are you not? You can pursue your *tête-à-tête* there without interruption. You are a very much envied man!"

"Mme. Calavera is there," John replied. "As for me, I am afraid I shall have to go now."

The smile faded from the prince's lips. His eyebrows came slowly together.

"You are leaving?" he repeated.

"I must!" John insisted. "I can't help it. Forgive my behaving like a boor, but I must go. Good night!"

The prince stretched out his hand, but he was too late.

It was twenty minutes past two o'clock when John left Grosvenor Square, and it was twenty minutes to five when a sleepy hall-porter took him up in the lift to his rooms on the fourth floor at the Milan. The intervening space of time was never anything to him but an ugly and tangled sheaf of memories.

His first overwhelming desire had been simply to escape from that enervating

and perfervid atmosphere, to feel the morning air cool upon his forehead, to drink in great gulps of the fresh, windy sweetness. He felt as if poison had been poured into his veins, as if he had tampered with the unclean things of life.

He found himself, after a few minutes' hurried walking, in Piccadilly. The shadows that flitted by him, lingering as he approached and offering their stereotyped greeting, filled him with a new horror. He turned abruptly down Duke Street and made his way to St. James's Park. From here he walked slowly eastward. When he reached the Strand, however, the storm in his soul was still unabated. He turned away from the Milan. The turmoil of his passions drove him to the thoughts of flight. Half an hour later he entered St. Pancras Station.

"What time is the next train north to Kendal or Carlisle?" he inquired.

The porter stared at him. John's evening clothes were spattered with mud, the rain-drops were glistening on his coat and face, his new silk hat was ruined. It was not only his clothes, however, which attracted the man's attention. There was the strained look of a fugitive in John's face, a fugitive flying from some threatened fate.

"The newspaper train at five thirty is the earliest, sir," he said. "I don't know whether you can get to Kendal by it, but it stops at Carlisle."

John looked at the clock. There was an hour to wait. He wandered about the station, gloomy, chill, deserted. The place sickened him, and he strolled out into the streets again. By chance he left the station by the same exit as on the day of his arrival in London. He stopped short.

How could he have forgotten, even for a moment? This was not the world which he had come to discover. This was just some plague-spot upon which he had stumbled. Through the murky dawn and across the ugly streets he looked into Louise's drawing-room. She would be there waiting for him on the morrow!

Louise! The thought of her was like a sweet, purifying stimulant. He felt the throbbing of his nerves soothed. He felt himself growing calm. The terror of the last few hours was like a nightmare which had passed. He summoned a taxicab and was driven to the Milan. His wanderings for the night were over.

XVIII

Sophy Gerard sat in the little back room of Louise's house, which the latter called her den, but which she seldom entered. The little actress was looking very trim and neat in a simple blue-serge costume which fitted her to perfection, her hair very primly arranged and tied up with a bow. She had a pen in her mouth, there was a sheaf of bills before her, and an open housekeeping-book lay on her knee. She had been busy for the last half-hour making calculations, the result of which had brought a frown to her face.

"There is no doubt about it," she decided. "Louise is extravagant!"

The door opened, and Louise herself, in a gray morning gown of some soft material, with a bunch of deep-red roses at her waist, looked into the room.

"Why, little girl," she exclaimed, "how long have you been here?"

"All the morning," Sophy replied. "I took the dogs out, and then I started on your housekeeping-book and the bills. Your checks will have to be larger than ever this month, Louise, and I don't see how you can possibly draw them unless you go and see your bankers first."

Louise threw herself into an easy chair.

"Dear me!" she sighed. "I thought I had been so careful!"

"How can you talk about being careful?" Sophy protested, tapping the little pile of bills with her forefinger. "You seem to have had enough asparagus and strawberries every day for at least half a dozen people. As for the butcher, I am going this afternoon to tell him exactly what I think of him. And there are several matters here," she went on, "concerning which you must really talk to the cook yourself. For instance—"

"Oh, please don't!" Louise broke in. "I know I am extravagant. I suppose I always shall be; but if there is one thing in the world I will not do, it is talk to the cook! She might insist upon going, and I have never known any one who made such entrées. Remember, child, it will be full salary in a fortnight's time."

"You will have to go and see your bankers, anyhow," Sophy declared. "It's no

use my writing out these checks for you. Unless you have paid in some money I don't know anything about, you seem to be overdrawn already."

"I will see to that," Louise promised. "The bank manager is such a charming person. Besides, what are banks for but to oblige their clients? How pale you look, little girl! Were you not late last night?"

Sophy swung round in her place.

"I am all right. I spent the evening in my rooms and went to bed at eleven o'clock. Who's lunching with you? I see the table is laid for two."

Louise glanced at the clock upon the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Strangewey," she replied. "I suppose he will be here in a minute or two."

Sophy dropped the housekeeping-book and jumped up.

"I'd better go, then."

"Of course not," Louise answered. "You must stay to lunch. Ring the bell and tell them to lay a place for you. Afterward, if you like, you may come in here and finish brooding over these wretched bills while Mr. Strangewey talks to me."

Sophy came suddenly across the room and sank on the floor at Louise's feet.

"What are you going to do about Mr. Strangewey, Louise?" she asked wistfully.

"What am I going to do about him?"

"He is in love with you," Sophy continued. "I am sure—I am almost sure of it."

Louise's laugh was unconvincing.

"I do not think," she said, "that he quite knows what it means to be in love."

Sophy suddenly clasped her friend's knees.

"Dear," she whispered, "perhaps I am a little fool, but tell me, please!"

Louise, for a moment, was startled. Then she leaned forward and kissed the eager, upturned face.

"You foolish child!" she exclaimed. "I believe that you have been worrying. Why do you think so much about other people?"

"Please tell me," Sophy begged. "I want to understand how things really are between you and John Strangewey. Are you in love with him?"

Louise's eyes were soft and dreamy.

"I wish I knew," she answered. "If I am, then there are things in life more wonderful than I have ever dreamed of. He doesn't live in our world—and our world, as you know, has its grip. He knows nothing about my art, and you can guess what life would be to me without that. What future could there be for him and for me together? I cannot remake myself."

There was something in Sophy's face which was almost like wonder.

"So this is the meaning of the change in you, Louise! I knew that something had happened. You have seemed so different for the last few months."

Louise nodded.

"London has never been the same place to me since I first met him in Cumberland," she admitted. "Sometimes I think I am—to use your own words—in love with John. Sometimes I feel it is just a queer, indistinct, but passionate appreciation of the abstract beauty of the life he seems to stand for."

"Is he really so good, I wonder?" Sophy asked pensively.

"I do not know," Louise sighed. "I only know that when I first talked to him, he seemed different from any man I have ever spoken with in my life. I suppose there are few temptations up there, and they keep nearer to the big things. Sometimes I wonder, Sophy, if it was not very wrong of me to draw him away from it all!"

"Rubbish!" Sophy declared. "If he is good, he can prove it and know it here. He will come to know the truth about himself. Besides, it isn't everything to possess the standard virtues. Louise, he will be here in a minute. You want to be left alone with him. What are you going to say when he asks you what you know he will ask you?"

Louise looked down at her.

"Dear," she said, "I wish I could tell you. I do not know. That is the strange,

troublesome part of it—I do not know!"

"Will you promise me something?" Sophy begged. "Promise me that if I stay in here quietly until after he has gone, you will come and tell me!"

Louise leaned a little downward as if to look into her friend's face. Sophy suddenly dropped her eyes, and the color rose to the roots of her hair. There was a knock at the door, and the parlor maid entered.

"Mr. Strangewey, madam," she announced.

XIX

"There can be no possible doubt," Louise remarked, as she unfolded her napkin, "as to our first subject of conversation. Both Sophy and I are simply dying of curiosity to know about the prince's supper party."

"It was very cheerful and very gay," John said. "Every one seemed to enjoy it very much."

"Oh, la, la!" Sophy exclaimed. "Is that all you have to tell us? I shall begin to think that you were up to mischief there."

"I believe," Louise declared, "that every one of the guests is sworn to secrecy as to what really goes on."

"I can assure you that I wasn't," John told them.

"The papers hint at all sorts of things," Sophy continued. "Every one who writes for the penny illustrated papers parades his whole stock of classical knowledge when he attempts to describe them. We read of the feasts of Lucullus and Bacchanalian orgies. They say that at supper-time you lie about on sofas and feast for four hours at a stretch."

"The reports seem exaggerated," John laughed. "We went in to supper at half past twelve and we came out just before two. We sat on chairs, and the conversation was quite decorous."

"This is most disappointing!" Louise murmured. "I cannot think why the prince never invites us."

"The ladies of his family were not present," John remarked stiffly.

There was a moment's silence. Louise had looked down at her plate, and Sophy glanced out of the window.

"Is it true that Calavera was there?" the latter asked presently.

"Yes, she was there," John replied. "She danced after supper."

"Oh, you lucky man!" Louise sighed. "She only dances once or twice a year

off the stage. Is she really so wonderful close to?"

"She is, in her way, very wonderful," John agreed.

"Confess that you admired her," Louise persisted.

"I thought her dancing extraordinary," he confessed, "and, to be truthful, I did admire her. All the same, hers is a hateful gift."

Louise looked at him curiously for a moment. His face showed few signs of the struggle through which he had passed, but the grim setting of his lips reminded her a little of his brother. He had lost, too, something of the boyishness, the simple light-heartedness of the day before. Instinctively she felt that the battle had begun. She asked him no more about the supper party, and Sophy, quick to follow her lead, also dropped the subject.

Luncheon was not a lengthy meal, and immediately its service was concluded, Sophy rose to her feet with a sigh.

"I must go and finish my work," she declared. "Let me have the den to myself for at least an hour, please, Louise. It will take me longer than that to muddle through your books."

Louise nodded and rose to her feet.

"We will leave you entirely undisturbed," she promised. "I hope, when you have finished, you will have something more agreeable to say than you had before lunch. Shall we have our coffee up-stairs?" she suggested, turning to John.

"I should like to very much," he replied. "I want to talk to you alone."

She led the way up-stairs into the cool, white drawing-room, with its flower-perfumed atmosphere and its delicate, shadowy air of repose. She curled herself up in a corner of the divan and gave him his coffee. Then she leaned back and looked at him.

"So you have really come to London, Mr. Countryman!"

"I have followed you," he answered. "I think you knew that I would. I tried not to," he went on, after a moment's pause. "I fought against it as hard as I could; but in the end I had to give in."

"That was very sensible of you," she declared knocking the ash from her cigarette. "There is no use wearing oneself out fighting a hopeless battle. You know now that there are things in life which are not to be found in your passionless corner among the hills. You have realized that you owe a duty to yourself."

"That was not what brought me," he answered bluntly. "I came for you."

Louise's capacity for fencing seemed suddenly enfeebled. A frontal attack of such directness was irresistible.

"For me!" she repeated weakly.

"Of course," he replied. "None of your arguments would have brought me here. If I have desired to understand this world at all, it is because it is your world. It is you I want—don't you understand that? I thought you would know it from the first moment you saw me!"

He was suddenly on his feet, leaning over her, a changed man, masterful, passionate. She opened her lips, but said nothing. She felt herself lifted up, clasped for a moment in his arms. Unresisting, she felt the fire of his kisses. The world seemed to have stopped. Then she tried to push him away, weakly, and against her own will. At her first movement he laid her tenderly back in her place.

"I am sorry!" he said. "And yet I am not," he added, drawing his chair close up to her side. "I am glad! You knew that I loved you, Louise. You knew that it was for you I had come."

She was beginning to collect herself. Her brain was at work again; but she was conscious of a new confusion in her senses, a new element in her life. She was no longer sure of herself.

"Listen," she begged earnestly. "Be reasonable! How could I marry you? Do you think that I could live with you up there in the hills?"

"We will live," he promised, "anywhere you choose in the world."

"Ah, no!" she continued, patting his hand. "You know what your life is, the things you want in life. You don't know mine yet. There is my work. You cannot think how wonderful it is to me. You don't know the things that fill my brain from day to day, the thoughts that direct my life. I cannot marry you just because

—because—"

"Because what?" he interrupted eagerly.

"Because you make me feel—something I don't understand, because you come and you turn the world, for a few minutes, topsyturvy. But that is all foolishness, isn't it? Life isn't built up of emotions. What I want you to understand, and what you, please, must understand, is that at present our lives are so far, so very far, apart. I do not feel I could be happy leading yours, and you do not understand mine."

"I have come to find out about yours," John explained. "That is why I am here. Perhaps I ought to have waited a little time before I spoke to you as I did just now. Come, you can forget what I have said and done; but to me it will be an everlasting joy. I shall treasure the memory of it. It will help me—I can't tell you quite in what way it will help me. But for the rest, I will serve my apprenticeship. I will try to get into sympathy with the things that please you. It will not take me long. As soon as you feel that we are drawing closer together, I will ask you again what I have asked you this afternoon. In the meantime, I may be your friend, may I not? You will let me see a great deal of you? You will help me just a little?"

Louise leaned back in her chair. She had been carried off her feet, brought face to face with emotions which she dared not analyze. Perhaps, after all her self-dissection, there were still secret chambers. She thought almost with fear of what they might contain. Her sense of superiority was vanishing. She was, after all, like other women.

"Yes," she promised, "I will help. We will leave it at that. Some day you shall talk to me again, if you like. In the meantime, remember we are both free. You have not known many women, and you may change your mind when you have been longer in London. Perhaps it will be better for you if you do!"

"That is quite impossible," John said firmly. "You see," he went on, looking at her with shining eyes, "I know now what I half believed from the first moment that I saw you. I love you!"

Springing restlessly to her feet, she walked across the room and back again. Action of some sort seemed imperative. A curious hypnotic feeling seemed to be dulling all her powers of resistance. She looked into her life and she was terrified. Everything had grown insignificant. It couldn't really be possible that

with her brains, her experience, this man who had dwelt all his life in the simple ways had yet the power to show her the path toward the greater things!

Through the complex web of emotions which made up her temperament there suddenly sprang a primitive instinct, the primitive instinct of all women, rebelling against the first touch of a master's hand. Was she to find herself wrong and this man right? Was she to submit, to accept from his hand the best gifts of life—she who had looked for them in such very high, such very inaccessible places?

She felt like a child again. She trembled a little as she sat down by his side. It was not in this fashion that she had intended to hear what he had to say.

"I don't know what is the matter with me to-day," she murmured distractedly. "I think I must send you away. You disturb my thoughts. I can't see life clearly. Don't hope for too much from me," she begged. "But don't go away," she added, with a sudden irresistible impulse of anxiety. "Oh, I wish—I wish you understood me and everything about me, without my having to say a word!"

"I feel what you are," he answered, "and that is sufficient."

Once more she rose to her feet and walked across to the window. An automobile had stopped in the street below. She looked down upon it with a sudden frozen feeling of apprehension.

John moved to her side, and for him, too, the joy of those few moments was clouded. A little shiver of presentiment took its place. He recognized the footman whom he saw standing upon the pavement.

"It is the Prince of Seyre," Louise faltered.

"Must you see him?" John muttered.

"Yes!"

"Send him away," John begged. "We haven't finished yet. I won't say anything more to upset you. What I want now is some practical guidance."

"I cannot send him away!"

John glanced toward her and hated himself for his fierce jealousy. She was looking very white and very pathetic. The light had gone from her eyes. He felt suddenly dominant, and, with that feeling, there came all the generosity of the

conqueror.

"Good-by!" he said. "Perhaps I can see you some time to-morrow."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers, one by one. Then he left the room. She listened to his footsteps descending the stairs, firm, resolute, deliberate. They paused, there was a sound of voices—the prince and he were exchanging greetings; then she heard other footsteps ascending, lighter, smoother, yet just as deliberate.

Her face grew paler as she listened. There was something which sounded to her almost like the beating of fate in the slow, inevitable approach of this unseen visitor.

XX

Henri Graillot had made himself thoroughly comfortable. He was ensconced in the largest of John's easy chairs, his pipe in his mouth, a recently refilled teacup—Graillot was English in nothing except his predilection for tea—on the small table by his side. Through a little cloud of tobacco-smoke he was studying his host.

"So you call yourself a Londoner now, my young friend, I suppose," he remarked, taking pensive note of John's fashionable clothes. "It is a transformation, beyond a doubt! Is it, I wonder, upon the surface only, or have you indeed become heart and soul a son of this corrupt city?"

"Whatever I may have become," John grumbled, "it's meant three months of the hardest work I've ever done!"

Graillot held out his pipe in front of him and blew away a dense cloud of smoke.

"Explain yourself," he insisted.

John stood on the hearth-rug, with his hands in his pockets. His morning clothes were exceedingly well-cut, his tie and collar unexceptionable, his hair closely cropped according to the fashion of the moment. He had an extremely civilized air.

"Look here, Graillot," he said, "I'll tell you what I've done, although I don't suppose you would understand what it means to me. I've visited practically every theater in London."

"Alone?"

"Sometimes with Miss Maurel, sometimes with her little friend, Sophy Gerard, and sometimes alone," John replied. "I have bought a Baedeker, taken a taxicab by the day, and done all the sights. I've spent weeks in the National Gallery, picture-gazing, and I've done all those more modern shows up round Bond Street. I have bought a racing-car and learned to drive it. I have been to dinner parties that have bored me stiff. I have been introduced to crowds of people whom I never wish to see again, and made one or two friends," he added,

smiling at his guest, "for whom I hope I am properly grateful."

"The prince has been showing you round a bit, hasn't he?" Graillot grunted.

"The prince has been extraordinarily kind to me," John admitted slowly, "for what reason I don't know. He has introduced me to a great many pleasant and interesting people, and a great many whom I suppose a young man in my position should be glad to know. He has shown me one side of London life pretty thoroughly."

"And what about it all?" Graillot demanded. "You find yourself something more of a citizen of the world, eh?"

"Not a bit," John answered simply. "The more I see of the life up here, the smaller it seems to me. I mean, of course, the ordinary life of pleasure, the life to be lived by a young man like myself, who hasn't any profession or work upon which he can concentrate his thoughts."

"Then why do you stay?"

John made no immediate reply. Instead, he walked to the window of his sitting room and stood looking out across the Thames with a discontented frown upon his face. Between him and the Frenchman a curious friendship had sprung up during the last few months.

"Tell me, then," Graillot continued, taking a bite from his piece of cake and shaking the crumbs from his waistcoat, "what do you find in London to compensate you for the things you miss? You are cooped up here in this little flat—you, who are used to large rooms and open spaces; you have given up your exercise, your sports—for what?"

"I get some exercise," John protested. "I play rackets at Ranelagh most mornings, and I bought a couple of hacks and ride occasionally in the park before you're out of bed."

"That's all right for exercise," Graillot observed. "What about amusements?"

"Well, I've joined a couple of clubs. One's rather a swagger sort of place—the prince got me in there; and then I belong to the Lambs, where you yourself go sometimes. I generally look in at one or the other of them during the evening."

"You see much of Miss Maurel?"

John shook his head gloomily.

"Not as much as I should like," he confessed. "She seems to think and dream of nothing but this play of yours. I am hoping that when it is once produced she will be more free."

"I gather," Graillot concluded, "that, to put it concisely and truthfully, you are the most bored man in London. There is something behind all this effort of yours, my friend, to fit yourself, the round human being, into the square place. Speak the truth, now! Treat me as a father confessor."

John swung round upon his heel. In the clear light it was obvious that he was a little thinner in the face and that some of the tan had gone from his complexion.

"I am staying up here, and going on with it," he announced doggedly, "because of a woman."

Graillot stopped eating, placed the remains of his cake in the saucer of his teacup, and laid it down. Then he leaned back in his chair and balanced his finger-tips one against the other.

"A woman!" he murmured. "How you astonish me!"

"Why?"

"Candor is so good," Graillot continued, "so stimulating to the moral system. It is absolute candor which has made friends of two people so far apart in most ways as you and myself. You surprise me simply because of your reputation."

"What about my reputation?"

Graillot smiled benignly.

"In France," he observed, "you would probably be offered your choice of lunatic asylums. Here your weakness seems to have made you rather the vogue."

"What weakness?"

"It is to a certain extent hearsay, I must admit," Graillot proceeded; "but the report about you is that, although you have had some of the most beautiful women in London almost offer themselves to you, you still remain without a mistress."

"What in the world do you mean?" John demanded.

"I mean," Graillot explained frankly, "that for a young man of your age, your wealth, and your appearance to remain free from any feminine entanglement is a thing unheard of in my country, and, I should imagine, rare in yours. It is not so that young men were made when I was young!"

"I don't happen to want a mistress," John remarked, lighting a cigarette. "I want a wife."

"But meanwhile—"

"You can call me a fool, if you like," John interrupted. "I may be one, I suppose, from your point of view. All I know is that I want to be able to offer the woman whom I marry, and who I hope will be the mother of my children, precisely what she offers me. I want a fair bargain, from her point of view as well as mine."

Graillot, who had been refilling his pipe, stopped and glowered at his host.

"What exactly do you mean?" he asked.

"Surely my meaning is plain enough," John replied. "We all have our peculiar tastes and our eccentricities. One of mine has to do with the other sex. I cannot make an amusement of them. It is against all my prejudices."

Graillot carefully completed the refilling of his pipe and lit it satisfactorily. Then he turned once more to John.

"Let us not be mistaken," he said. "You are a purist!"

"You can call me what you like," John retorted. "I do not believe in one law for the woman and another for the man. If a man wants a woman, and we all do more or less, it seems to me that he ought to wait until he finds one whom he is content to make the mother of his children."

Graillot nodded ponderously.

"Something like this I suspected," he admitted. "I felt that there was something extraordinary and unusual about you. If I dared, my young friend, I would write a play about you; but then no one would believe it. Now tell me something. I have heard your principles. We are face to face—men, brothers, and friends. Do you live up to them?"

"I have always done so," John declared.

Graillot was silent for several moments. Then he opened his lips to speak and abruptly closed them. His face suddenly underwent an extraordinary change. A few seconds ago his attitude had been that of a professor examining some favorite object of study; now a more personal note had humanized his expression. Whatever thought or reflection it was that had come into his mind, it had plainly startled him.

"Who is the woman?" he asked breathlessly.

"There is no secret about it, so far as I am concerned," John answered. "It is Louise Maurel. I thought you must have guessed."

The two men looked at each other in silence for some moments. Out on the river a little tug was hooting vigorously. The roar of the Strand came faintly into the room. Upon the mantelpiece a very ornate French clock was ticking lightly. All these sounds seemed suddenly accentuated. They beat time to a silence almost tragical in its intensity.

Graillot took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. He had written many plays, and the dramatic instinct was strongly developed in him.

"Louise!" he muttered under his breath.

"She is very different, I know," John went on, after a moment's hesitation. "She is very clever and a great artist, and she lives in an atmosphere of which, a few months ago, I knew nothing. I have come up here to try to understand, to try to get a little nearer to her."

There was another silence, this time almost an awkward one. Then Graillot rose suddenly to his feet.

"I will respect your confidence," he promised, holding out his hand. "Have no fear of that. I am due now at the theater. Your tea is excellent, and such little cakes I never tasted before."

"You will wish me good luck?"

"No!"

"Why not?" John demanded, a little startled.

"Because," Graillot pronounced, "from what I have seen and know of you both, there are no two people in this world less suitable for each other."

"Look here," John expostulated, "I don't want you to go away thinking so. You don't understand what this means to me."

"Perhaps not, my friend," Graillot replied, "but remember that it is at least my trade to understand men and women. I have known Louise Maurel since she was a child."

"Then it is I whom you don't understand."

"That may be so," Graillot confessed. "One makes mistakes. Let us leave it at that. You are a young man of undeveloped temperament. You may be capable of much which at present I do not find in you."

"Tell me the one quality in which you consider me most lacking," John begged. "You think that I am narrow, too old-fashioned in my views? Perhaps I am, but, on the other hand, I am very anxious to learn and absorb all that is best in this wider life. You can't really call me prejudiced. I hated the stage before I came to London, but during the last few months no one has been a more assiduous theatergoer. I understand better than I did, and my views are immensely modified. I admit that Louise is a great artist, I admit that she has wonderful talents. I am even willing, if she wished it, to allow her to remain for a time upon the stage. What could I say more? I want you on my side, Graillot."

"And I," Graillot replied, as he shook his friend's hand and hurried off, "want only to be on the side that will mean happiness for you both."

He left the room a little abruptly. John walked back to the window, oppressed with a sense of something almost ominous in the Frenchman's manner, something which he could not fathom, against which he struggled in vain. Side by side with it, there surged into his memory the disquietude which his present relations with Louise had developed. She was always charming when she had any time to spare—sometimes almost affectionate. On the other hand, he was profoundly conscious of her desire to keep him at arm's length for the present.

He had accepted her decision without a murmur. He made but few efforts to see her alone, and when they met he made no special claim upon her notice. He was serving his apprenticeship doggedly and faithfully. Yet there were times like the present when he found his task both hateful and difficult.

He walked aimlessly backward and forward, chafing against the restraint of the narrow walls and the low ceiling. A sudden desire had seized him to fly back to the hills, wreathed in mist though they might be; to struggle on his way through the blinding rain, to drink down long gulps of his own purer, less civilized atmosphere.

The telephone-bell rang. He placed the receiver to his ear almost mechanically.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Lady Hilda Mulloch is asking for you, sir," the hall-porter announced.

Lady Hilda peered around John's room through her lorgnette, and did not hesitate to express her dissatisfaction.

"My dear man," she exclaimed, "what makes you live in a hotel? Why don't you take rooms of your own and furnish them? Surroundings like these are destructive to one's individuality."

"Well, you see," John explained, as he drew an easy chair up to the fire for his guest, "my stay in London is only a temporary one, and it hasn't seemed worth while to settle anywhere."

She stretched out her graceful body in front of the fire and raised her veil. She was very smartly dressed, as usual. Her white-topped boots and white silk stockings, which she seemed to have no objection to displaying, were of the latest vogue. The chinchilla around her neck and in her little toque was most becoming. She seemed to bring with her an atmosphere indefinable, in its way, but distinctly attractive. Brisk in her speech, a little commanding in her manner, she was still essentially feminine.

John, at her direct invitation, had called upon her once or twice since their meeting at the opera, and he had found her, from the first, more attractive than any other society woman of his acquaintance. None the less, he was a little taken aback at her present visit.

"Exactly why are you here, anyhow?" she demanded. "I feel sure that Eugène told me the reason which had brought you from your wilds, but I have forgotten

it."

"For one thing," John replied, "I have come because I don't want to appear prejudiced, and the fact that I had never spent a month in London, or even a week, seemed a little narrow-minded."

"What's the real attraction?" Lady Hilda asked. "It is a woman, isn't it?"

"I am very fond of a woman who is in London," John admitted. "Perhaps it is true that I am here on her account."

Lady Hilda withdrew from her muff a gold cigarette-case and a little box of matches.

"Order some mixed vermuth with lemon for me, please," she begged. "I have been shopping, and I hate tea. I don't know why I came to see you. I suddenly thought of it when I was in Bond Street."

"It was very kind of you," John said. "If I had known that you cared about seeing me, I would have come to you with pleasure."

"What does it matter?" she answered. "You are thinking, perhaps, that I risk my reputation in coming to a young man's rooms? Those things do not count for me. Ever since I was a child I have done exactly as I liked, and people have shrugged their shoulders and said, 'Ah, well, it is only Lady Hilda!' I have been six months away from civilization, big-game shooting, and haven't seen a white woman. It didn't matter, because it was I. I traveled around the world with a most delightful man who was writing a book, but it didn't affect my reputation in the slightest. I am quite convinced that if I chose to take you off to Monte Carlo with me next week and spend a month with you there, I should get my pass to the royal enclosure at Ascot when I returned, and my invitation to the next court ball, even in this era of starch. You see, they would say, 'It is only Lady Hilda!'"

The waiter brought the vermuth, which his visitor sipped contentedly.

"So there is a woman, is there?" she went on, looking across the room at her companion. "Have you committed yourself already, then? Don't you remember what I told you the first night we met after the opera—that it is well to wait?"

"Yes, I remember," John admitted.

"I meant it."

He laughed good-humoredly, yet not without some trace of self-consciousness.

"The mischief was done then," he said.

"Couldn't it be undone?" she asked lazily. "Or are you one of those tedious people who are faithful forever? Fidelity," she continued, knocking the ash from her cigarette, "is really, to my mind, the most bourgeois of vices. It comes from a want of elasticity in the emotional fibres. Nothing in life has bored me so much as the faithfulness of my lovers."

"You ought to put all this into one of your books," John suggested.

"I probably shall, when I write my reminiscences," she replied. "Tell me about this woman. And don't stand about in that restless way at the other end of the room. Bring a chair close to me—there, close to my side!"

John obeyed, and his visitor contemplated him thoughtfully through a little cloud of tobacco-smoke.

"Yes," she decided, "there is no use denying it. You are hatefully good-looking, and somehow or other I think your clothes have improved you. You have a little more air than when you first came to town. Are you quite sure that you haven't made up your mind about this woman in a hurry?"

"Quite sure," John laughed. "I suppose I am rather an idiot, but I am addicted to the vice of which you were speaking."

She nodded.

"I should imagine," she said, "that you were not an adept in the art of flirtation. Is it true that the woman is Louise Maurel?"

"Quite true," John replied.

"But don't you know—"

She broke off abruptly. She saw the face of the man by her side suddenly change, and her instinct warned her of the danger into which she was rushing.

"You surprise me very much," she said. "Louise Maurel is a very wonderful woman, but she seems to spend the whole of her time with my cousin, the prince."

"They are, without doubt, very friendly," John assented. "They have a good many interests in common, and the prince is connected with the syndicate which finances the theater. I do not imagine, however, that the prince wishes to marry her, or she him."

Lady Hilda began to laugh, softly, but as if genuinely amused. John sat and watched her in ominous silence. Not the flicker of a smile parted his set lips. His visitor, however, was undisturbed. She leaned over and patted his hand.

"Simple Simon!" she murmured, leaning a little toward him. "If you go looking like that, I shall pat your cheeks, too. You are really much too nice-looking to wear such thunderclouds!"

"Perhaps if we chose some other subject of conversation—" John said stiffly.

"Oh, dear me!" she interrupted. "Very well! You really are a most trying person, you know. I put up with a great deal from you."

John was silent. Her face darkened a little, and an angry light flashed in her eyes.

"Well, I'll leave you alone, if you like," she decided, tossing her cigarette into the grate. "If my friendship isn't worth having, let it go. It hasn't often been offered in vain. There are more men in London than I could count who would go down on their knees for such a visit as I am paying you. And you—you," she added, with a little tremble of real anger in her tone, "you're too hatefully polite and priggish! Come and ring the bell for the lift. I am going!"

She slid gracefully to her feet, shook the cigarette ash from her clothes, and picked up her muff.

"You really are an egregious, thick-headed, obstinate countryman," she declared, as she moved toward the door. "You haven't either manners or sensibility. I am a perfect idiot to waste my time upon you. I wouldn't have done it," she added, as he followed her dumbly down the corridor, "if I hadn't rather liked you!"

"I am very sorry," he declared. "I don't know quite what I have done. I do appreciate your friendship. You have been very kind to me indeed."

She hesitated as his finger touched the bell of the lift, and glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"Well," she said, "if you want to be friends, I will give you one last chance. I am doing what sounds rather a ghastly thing—I am having a little week-end party down at my cottage at Bourne End. It will be rather like camping out, but some interesting people are coming. Will you motor down on Saturday evening and stay till Sunday night or Monday?"

"I shall be very pleased indeed," John replied. "It is very good of you to ask me. When I come, I'd like, if I may," he went on, "to tell you about myself, and why I am here, and about Louise."

She sighed, and watched the top of the lift as it came up. Then she dropped her veil.

"You will find me," she assured him, as she gave him the tips of her fingers, "a most sympathetic listener."

Louise and Sophy came to dine that evening with John in the grill-room at the Milan. They arrived a little late and were still in morning clothes. Louise was looking pale and tired, and her greeting was almost listless.

"We are dead beat," Sophy exclaimed. "We've been having a secret rehearsal this afternoon without Graillot, and he came in just as we were finishing. He was perfectly furious!"

"He was here to tea with me," John remarked, as he led the way to their table.

"My dear man," Louise exclaimed, "if you could have kept him half an hour longer you'd have earned our undying gratitude! You see, there are several little things on which we shall never agree, he and myself and the rest of the company; so we decided to run over certain passages in the way we intend to do them, without him. Of course, he saw through it all when he arrived, tore up his manuscript on the stage, and generally behaved like a madman."

"I am sorry," John said, as they took their seats and he handed Louise the menu of the dinner that he had ordered. "Won't the play be produced to-morrow night, then?"

"Oh, it will be produced all right," Louise told him; "but you don't know how we've all worn ourselves out, trying to make that old bear see reason. We've had

to give way on one scene, as it is. What a delightful little dinner, John! You're spoiling us. You know how I love that big white asparagus. And strawberries, too! Well, I think we've earned it anyhow, Sophy!"

"You have," the latter declared. "You were the only one who could soothe Graillot at all."

"I can get my way with most people," Louise remarked languidly; "but it simply means that the more difficult they are, the more you have to spend yourself in getting it. John," she went on, after a moment's pause, "you are coming to-morrow night, I suppose?"

"Of course. Didn't I take my box two months ago?"

"And now that my part after the first act has been cut out, I am coming with him," Sophy put in. "I may, mayn't I?"

"Of course," John assented.

Louise sighed dejectedly.

"I am not at all sure that I shall like having you there," she said. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if it made me nervous."

He laughed incredulously.

"It's all very well," she went on, watching the champagne poured in to her glass, "but you won't like the play, you know."

"Perhaps I sha'n't understand it altogether," John agreed. "It's very subtle, and, as you know, I don't find problem plays of that sort particularly attractive; but with you in it, you can't imagine that I sha'n't find it interesting!"

"We were talking about it, coming up in the taxi," Louise continued, "and we came to the conclusion that you'd hate it. We've had to give way to Graillot with regard to the last act. Of course, there is really nothing in it, but I don't know just what you will say."

"Well, you needn't be afraid that I shall stand up in my box and order the performance to cease," John assured them, smiling. "Besides, I am not quite such an idiot, Louise. I know very well that you may have to say and do things on the stage which in private life would offend your taste and your sense of dignity. I am quite reconciled to that. I am prepared to accept everything you do and

everything that you say. There! I can't say more than that, can I?"

Louise smiled at him almost gratefully. She drew her hand over his, caressingly.

"You are a dear!" she declared. "You've really made me feel much more comfortable. Now please tell me what you have been doing all day."

"Well, Graillot came in and spent most of the afternoon," John answered. "Since then, Lady Hilda Mulloch has been here."

Louise looked up quickly.

"What, here in your rooms?"

"I didn't ask her," John said. "I have been to see her once or twice, and she has been very nice, but I never dreamed of her coming here."

"Shameless hussy!" Sophy exclaimed, as she set down her wine-glass. "Didn't you tell her that Louise and I are the only two women in London who have the entrée to your rooms?"

"I am afraid it didn't occur to me to tell her that," John confessed, smiling. "All the same, I was surprised to see her. It was just a whim, I think."

"She is a clever woman," Louise sighed. "She won't know me—I can't imagine why. She is a cousin of the prince, too, you know."

"She is very amusing," John agreed. "I have met some interesting people at her house, too. She has asked me down to Bourne End for this next week-end—the week-end you are spending with Mrs. Faraday," he continued, glancing toward Louise.

Louise nodded. She looked at John critically.

"Quite a success in town, isn't he?" she remarked to Sophy. "People tumble over one another to get invitations for her week-end parties in the season. I must say I never heard of going down to Bourne End in February, though."

"The idea seemed rather pleasant to me," John confessed. "So many of you people know nothing of the country except just in the summer!"

"If John gets talking about the country," Louise said, "we shall not be allowed our proper share in the conversation for the rest of the evening. The question is,

are we to allow him to go down to Bourne End? Lady Hilda isn't exactly a Puritan where your sex is concerned, you know, John."

"She'll expect you to flirt with her," Sophy insisted.

"She won't," John replied. "I have told her that I am in love with Louise."

"Was there ever such a man in the world?" Louise exclaimed. "Tell me, what did Lady Hilda say to that?"

"Not much," he answered. "She suggested that her cousin had a prior claim on you."

Louise laid down her knife and fork. Her left hand clutched the piece of toast which was lying by her side. She began to crumble it up into small pieces.

"What did Lady Hilda say exactly?" she insisted.

"Nothing much," John replied. "She seemed surprised when I mentioned your name. I asked her why, and she told me, or rather she hinted, that you and the prince are very great friends."

"Anything more?"

"Nothing at all. I pointed out that the prince is interested in theatrical affairs, and that he is the chief member of the syndicate that runs the theaters. She seemed to understand."

There was a brief silence. Louise was once more looking a little tired. She changed the subject abruptly, and only returned to it when John was driving home with her.

"Do you know," she said, after a long silence, "I am not at all sure that I want you to go to Lady Hilda's!"

"Then I won't," he promised with alacrity. "I'll do just as you say."

Louise sat quite still, thinking, looking through the rain-splashed windows of the taxicab.

"You have only to say the word," John continued. "I should be flattered to think that you cared."

"It isn't that. Lady Hilda is very clever, and she is used to having her own way.

I am afraid!"

"Afraid of what?"

"Of nothing," Louise declared suddenly. "Go, by all means, John. I am simply a little idiot when I give way for a moment to such poisonous thoughts. Lady Hilda can say what she likes about anybody or anything. It really doesn't matter at all whether you go to Bourne End or not."

"I don't quite understand you," John confessed; "but if you mean that you are afraid of anything Lady Hilda might say to me about you, why, I feel inclined to laugh at you. Lady Hilda," he added, with a touch of intuition, "is far too clever a woman to make such a mistake."

"I believe you are right," Louise agreed. "I shall pin my faith to Lady Hilda's cleverness and to your—fidelity. Go and spend your week-end there, by all means. I only wish I wasn't bound to go to the Faradays', but that can't possibly be helped. Come and lunch with me on Monday," she added impulsively. "It seems a long time since we had a little talk together."

He suddenly held her to him, and she met his lips unresistingly. It was the first time he had even attempted anything of the sort for months.

"You are a dear, John," she said, a little wistfully. "I am terribly divided in my thoughts about you. Just now I feel that I have only one wish—that I could give you all that you want, all that you deserve!"

He was very loverlike. She was once more a slight, quivering thing in his arms.

"Why need we wait any longer?" he begged. "If we told everyone to-night—to-morrow—the Faradays would not expect you to keep your engagement."

She shook herself free from him, but her smile was almost a compensation. The taxicab had stopped opposite her door, and her servant came hurrying out.

"Until Monday!" she murmured.

XXI

Early on the following morning John glided out of London in his two-seated racing-car, on his way to Bourne End. The white mist that hung over the Streets and parks and obscured the sky passed away as he left the suburbs behind him. With his first glimpse of the country came a welcome change. There were little flecks of blue in the firmament above him, a distinct if somewhat watery sunshine, and a soft buoyancy in the air, almost an anticipation of spring.

John leaned back in his seat, filled with an unexpected sense of contentment. After all, this week-end visit would probably turn out to be pleasant enough, and on Monday night the play was to be produced at last. He felt that for weeks Louise had been living in an atmosphere of high tension. He himself had begun to realize the nervous excitement of a first night, when the work of many months is at last presented in its concrete form. He was content to believe that all that had depressed him in Louise's demeanor had been due to this cause—to anxiety about her success, to the artistic dissatisfaction evolved by the struggle between her desire to conform to the prejudices of the critics and her wish to present truthfully the work of the great French dramatist. Once it was all over and the verdict given, relaxation would come. He was content to wait.

He had no trouble in finding Lady Hilda's cottage in Bourne End—a long, white bungalow-looking building, surrounded by a little stream which led down to the river. A man servant took his dressing case from the back of the car and showed him the way to the garage. Lady Hilda herself came strolling up the lawn and waved her hand.

"Now what about my week-end on the river?" she exclaimed, as they shook hands. "Isn't it delightful? I have ordered lunch early—do you mind?—and I thought, if you felt energetic, it's not too cold for you to take me out on the river; or, if you feel lazy, I'll take you."

"I am not much of an oarsman," John told her, "but I certainly won't ask you to pull me about!"

She led him into the little dining room and answered the question in his eyes when he saw the table laid for two.

"Colonel and Mrs. Dauncey are coming down this afternoon," she said, "and my brother Fred will be here in time for dinner. I wired to Mrs. Henderson—the woman who writes novels, you know—to come down, too, if she can, but I haven't heard from her. I have been looking at the river this morning, and it's almost like glass; and I can see little specks of green in the flower-beds where my bulbs are coming up. Richards will show you your room now, if you like, and we'll have lunch in ten minutes."

John found his cottage bedroom, with its view of the river, delightful, and at luncheon Lady Hilda showed him the side of herself that he liked best. She talked of her travels, and of big-game shooting. Afterward they sauntered out to the stream, and John, selecting the more stable of the two boats moored to the little landing-stage, pulled out into the river. Lady Hilda, in a fur coat, leaned back on a pile of cushions and watched him, with a cigarette between her lips. He found the exercise stimulating and delightful. Some of the color which he had lost came back to his cheeks.

"Aren't you sorry," she asked him once, as they paused to look across a vista of green meadows toward a distant range of hills, "for the people who see nothing in the country except in summer? Look at those lines of bare, sad trees, the stillness of it all, and yet the softness; and think what it will soon be, think what there is underneath, ready to burst into life as the weeks go on! I always come down here early, just to watch the coming of springtime. That wood to our left, with its bare, brown undergrowth, will soon show little flushes of pinky-yellow, and then a few days more sunshine and the primroses will be there. And you see, higher up, that wood where the trees stand so far apart? A little later still, the wild hyacinths will be like a blue carpet there. In the garden we begin with little rings of white snowdrops; then the crocuses come up in lines, yellow and purple; and the daffodils; and then, on those beds behind, the hyacinths. When the wind blows from the south, the perfume of them, as you pass down the river, is simply wonderful. Be careful, if you are turning round. There's a strong current here."

John nodded. He was watching his hostess a little curiously.

"I had no idea," he said simply, "that you cared about flowers and that sort of thing."

She threw her cigarette away and looked at him for a moment without speaking.

"You see, you don't really understand me very well," she remarked.

The twilight was coming on as they turned into their own little stream, and gleams of light shot from the windows of the few houses that were open. As they strolled up the lawn, they could see a rose-shaded lamp and a silver tea-equipage set out in Lady Hilda's sitting room.

"No one arrived yet, I see," she remarked carelessly, as they entered the cottage. "I'll play you a game of billiards as soon as we have had tea."

John, who had thoroughly enjoyed his exercise, sat in a low chair by her side, drank innumerable small cups of tea, and ate buttered toast in thin strips. When they had finished, Lady Hilda rose.

"Go and knock the balls about for a few minutes," she begged. "I am going to put on a more comfortable gown. If the Daunceys come, you can entertain them. I played a round of golf this morning before you came."

John made his way into the comfortable billiard room, at one end of which a wood fire was burning, lit a cigarette, and took out a cue. Presently Lady Hilda returned. She was wearing a rose-colored tea-gown, and once more John caught a glimpse of something in her eyes, as she looked at him, which puzzled him.

"I am a little gaudy, I am afraid," she laughed, as she took a cue from the rack, "but so comfortable! How many will you give me in a hundred?"

"I have never seen you play," John reminded her. "I am not much good myself."

They played two games, and John had hard work to escape defeat. As they were commencing the third, the butler entered the room, bearing a telegram. Lady Hilda took it from the salver, glanced at it, and threw it into the fire.

"What a nuisance!" she exclaimed. "The Daunceys can't come."

John, who was enjoying himself very much, murmured only a word or two of polite regret. He had never got over his distaste for meeting strangers.

"Can't be helped, I suppose," Lady Hilda remarked. "There is nothing from Flo Henderson yet. We'll have one more game, and then I'll ring her up."

They played another game of billiards, and sat by the fire for a little while. The silence outside, and the air of repose about the place, were delightful to John

after several months of London.

"I wonder you ever leave here," he said.

She laughed softly.

"You forget that I am a lone woman. Solitude, as our dear friend wrote in her last novel, is a paradise for two, but is an irritant for one."

There was a short silence. For the first time since his arrival John's tranquillity was a little disturbed. There was something almost pathetic in the expression which had flashed for a moment over his hostess's face. Was she really lonely, he wondered? Perhaps she had some sort of unhappy love history underneath her rather hard exterior. He was disposed just then to judge the whole world charitably, and he had never believed the stories which people were so anxious to tell of her. He felt no desire to pursue the subject.

"I have never read any of Mrs. Henderson's books," he remarked.

She stretched out an arm, took a volume from the swinging table by her side, and threw it across to him.

"You can glance through that while you dress," she said.

A gong rang through the house a few moments later, and the butler brought in two cocktails on a little silver tray.

"We are having quite a solitude *à deux*, aren't we?" Lady Hilda remarked, as she raised her glass. "I'll go and ring up Flo on my way up-stairs."

They parted a few minutes later, and John went up to his room. He found his clothes carefully laid out, a bright fire burning, and a bath-room leading from his bedroom. He dressed in somewhat leisurely fashion, and the dinner-gong rang as he descended the stairs. He could hear Lady Hilda's voice talking on the telephone, and made his way to her little room. She had just laid down the receiver.

"It seems," she said, "that you and I are the only people who appreciate the country at this time of the year. I have just been talking to Flo. She declares that nothing in the world would tempt her down here. She is convinced that all the trees are dropping with damp, and that the mud is inches deep. She won't believe a single word about the sunshine."

"She isn't coming, then?"

Lady Hilda shook her head.

"Fred is our last hope as a chaperon," she remarked carelessly, as she took his arm. "I expect he'll turn up later."

Dinner—which, as John observed when they entered the room, was laid only for two—was served at a small, round table drawn pleasantly up to the fire. John, who had never admired his hostess more, put all disquieting thoughts behind him and thoroughly enjoyed the dainty meal. The pleasant warmth of the room, the excellent champagne, and Lady Hilda's amusing conversation, unlocked his tongue. He talked much more freely than usual of his life in Cumberland, of the various half-formed plans which he had made as to the spending of his unexpected fortune, of the new pleasure he found in motoring, of his almost pathetic efforts to understand and appreciate the town life which at heart he hated. A clever listener, like most good talkers, Lady Hilda frequently encouraged him with a sympathetic word or two.

They were sitting over their coffee and liqueurs in two great easy chairs drawn up to the fire, when John glanced at the clock with a little start.

"Why, it's nearly ten o'clock!" he exclaimed. "What on earth can have become of your brother?"

Almost as he spoke the telephone-bell rang. It stood on a little table behind him. Lady Hilda, who was leaning back in her chair in an attitude of luxurious repose, pointed lazily to it.

"Answer it for me, there's a dear man," she begged.

John took up the receiver. He recognized the voice at once—it was Lady Hilda's brother who spoke.

"I say, is Lady Hilda there?" he asked.

"Yes, where are you?" John replied. "I am John Strangewey. We have been expecting you all the evening."

"Expecting me?" was the reply. "What on earth are you talking about? And what are you doing in the wilderness?"

"I am spending the week-end with your sister," John replied. "I understood

that you were coming."

The young man at the other end laughed derisively.

"Something better to do, old chap!" he said. "I am dining with Flo Henderson—just speaking from her flat. Send Hilda along, there's a good fellow."

John turned around. His eyes met Lady Hilda's, and he understood. He handed the receiver to her in silence. Of the conversation which passed he scarcely heard a word. As soon as it began, in fact, he left the room and went across the hall to the billiard room. The lights were already lit, and cues, ready chalked, were standing by the table.

John went through a few moments of dismayed wonder. He glanced out of the window toward the garage, which was all in darkness. He heard the soft sweep of Lady Hilda's skirts across the hall, the closing of the door as she entered. Her eyes met his, as he turned around, with something of challenge in them. Her lips were curved in a faintly ironical smile.

"Well?" she exclaimed, a little defiantly. "Shall I telephone to London for a chaperon?"

"Not unless you think it necessary," John replied, suddenly feeling the fire of battle in his blood. "I can assure you that I am to be trusted. On the other hand, if you prefer it, I can motor back to town; or I can go to the inn, and come and take you on the river in the morning."

It was obvious that she was a little surprised. She came over to him, put her hands upon the billiard table, and looked up into his face.

"Don't be a goose," she begged, "and please don't imagine foolish things. I suppose my telegram to Fred must have gone wrong. Anyhow, I don't think we need anybody else. We've got along very well so far to-day, haven't we?"

"I've enjoyed every moment of it," John declared cheerfully, "and I am looking forward more than I can tell you to beating you at billiards, to sleeping once more with my windows wide open and no smuts, and to having another pull on that river in the morning. Let me give you fifteen this time. I want to play my best!"

She took up her cue with a little sigh of half-puzzled relief. They played two games, the second one at John's insistence. Then the butler brought in whisky

and soda.

"Is there anything further to-night, madam?" he asked, after he had arranged the tray.

"Nothing," Lady Hilda answered. "You can go to bed."

They played the last game almost in silence. Then Lady Hilda replaced her cue in the rack and threw herself into one of the easy chairs.

"Bring me a whisky-and-soda," she said. "We'll have one cigarette before we go to bed."

John obeyed her, and sat by her side. She looked at him a little questioningly. His unhesitating acceptance of the situation had puzzled her. There was nothing but the slightest change in his manner to denote his realization of the fact that the house-party was a sham.

"I believe you are cross," she exclaimed suddenly.

"On the contrary," John replied, "I have had a thoroughly delightful day."

"You don't like people who tell fibs," she went on. "You know quite well, now, that my house-party was a farce. I never asked the Daunceys, I never sent a telegram to Fred. It was simply rotten luck that he rang me up. I asked you down here to spend the week-end with me—alone."

He looked her in the face, without the slightest change of expression.

"Then I think that it was exceedingly nice of you," he said, "and I appreciate the compliment. Really," he went on, with a smile, "I think we are quite safe, aren't we? You are known as a man-hater, and you are allowed special privileges because you are what you are. And I am known to be in love with another woman."

She frowned slightly.

"Does the whole world, then, know of your infatuation?" she asked.

"It may know, for all I care," John replied simply. "I am hoping that after Monday Louise will let me announce it."

There was a short silence. A portion of the log fell to the hearth, and John carefully replaced it upon the fire.

"Do you remember," she asked, dropping her voice almost to a whisper, "what I said to you the first night we met at Covent Garden, before I had any particular interest in you, before I had come to like you?"

John made no reply. Why did she again remind him of what she had said that night?

"I advised you," she went on, "not to be too rash. I think I told you that there were better things."

"There is no better thing in the world," John said simply, "than to give every feeling of which you are capable to the woman you love."

She frowned and threw her cigarette into the hearth.

"You talk," she declared, "either like George Alexander on the stage, or like a country bumpkin! Why doesn't some one teach you the manners of civilized life?"

"Lady Hilda," he replied, "I am past teaching. You see, the fact of it is that a country bumpkin is exactly what I am."

She turned her white shoulder away from him.

"You will find a candle on the hall table," she snapped.

John rose at once to his feet.

"It's your delightful country air, I suppose," he said. "I am sorry if I betrayed my sleepiness, however. Good night!"

Lady Hilda made no answer. John looked backward from the door. She had kicked off her slipper and was warming her foot before the fire.

"Good night!" he repeated. "I am going to wake like a giant in the morning, and pull you just as far as you like up the river!"

He closed the door, lit a candle, and made his way to his room. As soon as he was there he locked the door and flung the window wide open. Resting his elbows upon the window-sill, he looked out at the soft, misty darkness. He had the sensation of having been through some undignified fight, in which even victory savored of shame. He felt a quivering consciousness, half indignant, half irritated, of having been forced into an impossible situation.

Presently he began to undress. He moved about on tiptoe, and found himself continually listening. He heard Lady Hilda come out from the billiard room below, heard her strike a match as she lit a candle, heard her coming up the stairs. He stood quite still. Suddenly he saw the handle of his door turned softly —once, and then again. He watched it with fascinated, almost horrified eyes. The door was shaken slightly. A voice from outside called him.

"Good night!"

He made no reply. The handle ceased to rattle. He heard retreating footsteps, the opening and closing of Lady Hilda's door.

XXII

John was awakened the next morning by the sound of rain against his window. He got out of bed and looked upon a scene of desolation. The clouds hung low, and rain was coming down in level sheets. The lawns and gardens which yesterday had had the air of waiting for the spring were to-day a sudden wilderness.

There was a knock at the door, and the butler brought in his tea.

"Lady Hilda sends her compliments, sir," he announced, "and as the morning is so unfavorable she will not rise until eleven o'clock. Breakfast will be ready down-stairs at half past nine, or can be served in your room."

"Thank you, I'll come down," John replied.

He bathed and shaved himself, he even packed his own clothes. Then he left the room, descending the stairs softly, and glancing furtively at the door of Lady Hilda's room with an air almost of a guilty schoolboy. He breakfasted alone and spent the morning in the billiard room until Lady Hilda appeared.

"I am a terrible hostess, am I not?" she said apologetically, as she opened the door; "but what is there to be done? The weather is too hopeless, isn't it?"

"Appalling!" John agreed. "Still, it's very comfortable in here, and I have just made a seventy-one break."

"We'll have a two hundred and fifty up—that ought to last until lunch-time," she suggested, throwing herself into a chair. "Give me ten minutes, will you? This weather is so depressing. Even the effort of getting up seems to have tired me."

She threw herself into an easy chair, and John tried to concentrate his attention upon the balls. More than once, however, he glanced across at his hostess. She was looking older this morning, paler, her face a little drawn, her eyes large and soft. She sat looking into the fire; on her knee were some letters, at which she scarcely glanced. Presently she threw them aside and rang the bell.

"Bring me a brandy-and-soda and the cigarettes," she told the butler. "Now,

Mr. Strangewey, I am ready," she went on, turning to John. "Give me fifty in two hundred and fifty, if you dare!"

"We'll try," he agreed.

They played until lunch-time, both affecting a rapt interest in the game. At the sound of the gong Lady Hilda laid down her cue.

"We'll finish later," she suggested.

John strolled to the window. There were some signs of clearing in the sky, although the whole place seemed still to reek of moisture.

"I am afraid I shall have to start soon after lunch," he said. "It will take some time to get up to town. I am not a very experienced driver, and my car is a little inclined to skid on wet roads."

She made no remark, and to both of them the presence of servants during the meal appeared to be somewhat of a relief. The coffee and liqueurs, however, again were served in the billiard room, and there was a very awkward silence. For some time Lady Hilda had baffled his efforts at ordinary conversation, and his last few remarks about the weather she had ignored altogether.

"So you are going up this evening?" she said at last.

"This afternoon, if you don't mind," he replied, glancing at the clock, and thinking of the bliss with which he would turn his car out into the road. "I explained, didn't I, that I had an engagement this evening?"

"Quite right," she admitted. "All the same, you are rather an inconsiderate guest, aren't you, to leave me here alone in this swamp?"

"Come, too?" he suggested. "I'll motor you up."

"Thanks," she replied, "I will."

He was a little taken aback, but, after all, it was perhaps the simplest way out of his difficulties.

"I'll take you, with pleasure, if you don't mind being drenched."

"I can stand physical discomforts," she said. "It's the other sort of knocks that bruise."

"It won't be so bad," he continued, ignoring her last speech, "if you wear a mackintosh and something thick for your head. Shouldn't wonder if it cleared up presently."

Lady Hilda smiled.

"I have been out in a shower in Patagonia," she reminded him, "which lasted for three weeks. Will it suit you to start in half an hour?"

"Any time you like," he agreed.

She had changed her position a little, and he was forced to look at her.

"Mr. Strangewey," she said, "I want to ask you a question. Are you going to marry Louise Maurel?"

"I am," he replied, without hesitation; "at least, I hope to do so."

She looked at him for a moment with a strange expression. Then she rose to her feet. Her lips were quivering. She leaned against the mantelpiece, with her forehead upon her arms. At first he imagined that she was going to weep; then, to his horror, he found that she was laughing—half-hysterically, perhaps, but still laughing. He drew a step nearer to her, but she waved him away.

"Sit down!" she gasped. "Oh, if I might tell this to Henri Graillot! What a play! What humor! My friend John Strangewey, I congratulate you! You have created a new situation in life. Leave me alone, please!"

She bent forward until her face was completely hidden. Her body was shaken. Once or twice he fancied that her laughter had turned to sobs. When at last she looked up, however, there were the remains of an almost devilish mirth on her lips. She rang the bell.

"That is for my maid," she said. "I am now going to change my clothes and let you motor me up to London. I shall get some fresh air, at any rate, and your car always fills me with longing. Amuse yourself, won't you? I shall be an hour getting ready, and I will order an early tea."

"You wouldn't care to tell me, I suppose," he asked, "what is the new situation in life which you say I have created?"

She turned to him from the door. She was really a very handsome woman. Her lips were most expressive.

"My friend," she said, "if you knew, if you understood, the priceless humor of it would be gone."

She closed the door and left John alone. He went back to the billiard-table, but somehow or other his skill seemed to have vanished. He had the picture of her face in his mind, the subtle meaning of her lips, the mockery of her eyes.

They drove up to London almost in silence. It was nearly seven o'clock when John swung the little car in Pont Street. It was still raining softly.

"Thank you very much," he said, "for my week-end. I enjoyed the river immensely yesterday afternoon."

"And thank you very much for everything, Mr. John Strangewey," she returned. "You have given me what we are all sighing for, a new sensation—not exactly what I expected, perhaps, but something new."

"I know you think I am a country yokel and a fool," John said; "but I wish you'd tell me why you laughed at me in that mysterious fashion."

She shook her head.

"It would spoil it," she replied. "Besides, it isn't for me to tell you. I am the last person who should."

They drew up outside her little house, from which came no sign of light.

"Will you dine with me to-night?" he asked suddenly.

She turned toward him quickly—and understood.

"Very nice of you," she replied lightly. "I shall go round to my club. You don't agree with me, somehow. When I look at you or think of you, I feel inclined either to laugh or cry, and I hate emotions. Don't get out, please. You see, they are opening the door already."

She slipped away and disappeared into her house. John drove slowly back toward the Milan. Just as he was turning in, a little waterproofed figure from the pavement waved her hand and called to him. He drew up and she hastened to his side.

"What are you doing here?" Sophy asked. "I thought you were spending the week-end up the river."

"I stayed there last night," he answered. "To-day—well, look at the weather! I have just motored Lady Hilda up."

"And what are you going to do now?" she inquired eagerly.

"Give you some dinner," he replied promptly.

"Hurrah!" she answered. "I have been so bored and miserable that I went and walked over Waterloo Bridge in a mackintosh, just to get a little air. I'll be round in an hour. Will that do?"

"Any time you like," he agreed; "the sooner the better. I was almost wishing, a few minutes ago," he went on, "that I could find the courage to storm you in your little room. Louise is away, and I'm hating myself."

"So I am to come and amuse my lord!" she laughed. "Well, I'll come," she went on quickly. "We'll sit and you shall imagine that I am Louise, and make love to her. Will that make you happy?"

John leaned out of the car.

"Sophy," he whispered, as he slipped in his clutch, "just now I do not feel like making love to any woman on earth!"

"Fed up with us, eh?"

He nodded.

"You're different, thank Heaven! Don't be late."

XXIII

"This is very nearly my idea of perfect happiness," Sophy murmured, as she leaned across the table and listened idly while John ordered the dinner. "Give me very little to eat, John, and talk a great deal to me. I am depressed about myself and worried about everything!"

"And I," he declared, "am just beginning to breathe again. I don't think I understand women, Sophy."

"Wasn't your week-end party a success?" she asked.

"Not altogether," he confessed; "but don't let's talk about it. Tell me what is depressing you."

"About myself, or things generally?"

"Yourself, first."

"Well, the most respectable young man you ever knew in your life, who lives in Bath, wants me to marry him. I don't think I could. I don't think I could live in Bath, and I don't think I could marry any one. And I've just thirteen shillings and fourpence left, I haven't paid my rent, and my dressmaker is calling for something on account on Monday morning."

"There's only one answer to that," John insisted cheerfully. "I am going to lend you fifty pounds while you make your mind up about the young man."

She made a face at him.

"I couldn't borrow money from a strange gentleman," she protested.

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed. "If you begin calling me a stranger—but there, never mind! We'll see about that after dinner. Now what is the other cause for depression?"

"I am not very happy about you and Louise," she observed.

"Why not?"

She hesitated. While she seemed to be pondering over her words, John studied her almost critically. Unquestionably she was very pretty; her fair hair was most becomingly arranged, her petite features and delicate mouth were charming. Her complexion and coloring were exquisite, her neck and throat very white against the plain black satin of her gown.

"In a way," she confessed at last, "it's the play that's bothering me."

"The play?" he repeated.

"You won't like it," she sighed. "The reason the production has been delayed so long is Graillot's insistence upon calling a spade a spade. Even with all Louise and Miles Faraday have managed to get him to leave out, there is one scene which is certainly a little startling for English playgoers."

"And Louise is in it?" he asked.

"Louise is the principal figure in it."

John's face darkened a little.

"I have noticed lately," he remarked gloomily, "that she rather avoids talking about the play. I wish she'd chuck it altogether!"

Sophy shook her head.

"Louise won't do that," she said. "I sometimes think that her work is more to her than anything else in life. I suppose you two will find a way out of it, somehow."

"There is only one way, and Louise will have to make up her mind to it," John declared steadfastly. "However, my time hasn't come just yet. Until it comes, I must make the best of things. Tell me more about your own love-affairs, Sophy."

"It isn't a love-affair at all!" she exclaimed, almost indignantly.

"Why, I am sorry. Your prospective alliance, then, shall I call it?"

"Oh, it isn't interesting," she said. "It's just a young man in Bath. He is a lawyer and moderately well off. He has wanted me to marry him for years. He was a friend of my brother's. Lately he has been bothering a little more than usual—in fact, I suppose I have received what might be called an ultimatum. He came up yesterday, and I went out with him last night. He has gone back to Bath

this morning, and I have promised to let him know in a month. I think that is why I went out to Waterloo Bridge in a mackintosh and got wet."

"Do you like him?" John asked practically.

"I like him, I suppose," Sophy sighed. "That's the worst of it. If I didn't like him, there might be some chance. I can't realize myself ever doing more than liking him in a mild sort of way; and if he expected more, as of course he would, then I should probably hate him. He tried to kiss me on the way to the station and I nearly scratched him. That isn't like me, you know. I rather like being kissed sometimes."

John buried himself in the wine-list.

"Well," he admitted, "it doesn't sound very hopeful. I'm no sort of judge in these matters, but I have heard lots of people say that one gets on all right after marriage without caring very much before. You don't seem to have a very comfortable life now, do you?"

"Comfortable? No, but I am free," Sophy replied quickly. "I can come in and go out when I please, choose my own friends, give my kisses to whom I please. Marriage—the sort of marriage mine would be—is slavery, and nothing else. What I am afraid of," she went on, "is that when I was down in that highly respectable old city, sitting all day in a respectable little villa, with two servants to order about and housekeeping-books to keep, I should feel the old pull come over me, and some day I should chuck it all and come back here to play around under the lights. It's rather fine to be here, you know—to be in the atmosphere, even if the lime-light misses one."

John sighed, and regarded her thoughtfully.

"You're a queer little girl, Sophy," he said. "I don't know how to advise you."

"Of course you don't," she answered. "No one could. As for you, I suppose you will marry Louise. What will happen to you after that, I don't know. Perhaps I sha'n't care so much about London then. You've made it very nice for me, you know."

"You've made it bearable even for me," he told her. "I often think how lonely I should have been without you to talk to. Louise sometimes is delightfully companionable, and kind enough to turn one's head. Other days I scarcely understand her; everything we say to one another seems wrong. I come away and

leave her simply because I feel that there is a wall between us that I can't get over."

"There isn't really," Sophy sighed. "Louise is a dear. Considering everything, I think she is wonderful. But you are utterly different. She is very complex, very emotional, and she has her own standards of life. You, on the other hand, are very simple, very faithful and honest, and you accept the standards which have been made for you—very, very rigidly, John."

"I wonder!" he murmured, as he looked into his wine-glass. "Sometimes I think I am a fool. Sometimes I think I'd do better to let go the strings and just live as others do. Sometimes ideas come into one's head that upset principles and everything. I don't know!"

Sophy leaned across the table toward him.

"Be a little more human, John," she begged. "You must feel kind things sometimes. Couldn't you say them? I am depressed and gloomy. Be like other men, for once, and flirt with me a little! Try to say things, even if you don't mean them—just for once, for a few short hours!"

He held her hand for a moment. The fingers seemed to respond to his touch with a little thrill.

"You silly child!" he exclaimed. "If I were to begin to say all the kind things I feel about you—"

"Begin, then—begin!" she interrupted. "What do you think of me, really? Am I pretty? Do you like to have me here at the table with you, or is your mind too full of Louise? Do you notice that I've a pretty frock on, and my hair is nicely arranged? I have taken so much trouble to-night. What are you looking at?"

John's whole expression had suddenly changed. His eyes were fixed upon the door, his face was stern as a granite block. Sophy turned quickly around. The *maître d'hôtel*, with another satellite in his rear, was welcoming with much ceremony two lately arrived guests. Sophy clutched at the table-cloth. The newcomers were Louise and the Prince of Seyre.

"I don't understand this!" John muttered, his lips twitching.

Sophy Gerard said nothing. Her cheeks were pink with excitement.

Suddenly Louise saw John and Sophy. She stood quite still for a moment; then she came toward them, slowly and a little languidly. The prince was still studying through his eye-glass the various tables which the head waiter was offering for his consideration.

"What an astonishing meeting!" Louise remarked, as she laid her hand for a moment on Sophy's shoulder. "What is going on behind my back?"

John rose very slowly to his feet. He seemed taller than ever, and Louise's smile remained unanswered.

"The rain broke up my week-end party," he explained, "and I met Sophy in the Strand. In any case, I intended returning to-night. I understood that you would not be here until to-morrow about eleven o'clock."

"Those were my plans," Louise replied; "but, as you see, other things have intervened. Our little house party, too, was broken up by this abominable weather, and we all motored up to town. The Faradays have gone home. The prince heard from Miles that I was at home, and telephoned me to dine. *Me voici!*"

John was struggling with a crowd of hateful thoughts. Louise was wearing a wonderful gown; her hair was beautifully arranged; she had the air of a woman whose toilet was complete and perfect down to the slightest detail. The prince's slow drawl reached them distinctly.

"It was my servant's fault, I suppose," he said. "I told him to ring up last night and order the table for two in that corner. However, we will take the vacant one near your desk."

He looked around and, as if for the first time, missed Louise. He came toward them at once.

"The prince seems to have ordered his table last night," John remarked, his tone, even to himself, sounding queer and strained.

Louise made no reply. The prince was already shaking hands with Sophy.

"I thought you were spending the week-end with my cousin, Strangewey," he remarked, turning to John.

"We did spend part of it together," John replied. "The weather drove us back

this afternoon."

"I congratulate you both on your good taste," said the prince. "There is nothing more abominable than a riverside retreat out of season. We are taking the table on the left, Louise."

He led her away, and they passed down the room. John slowly resumed his seat.

"Sophy," he demanded hoarsely, "tell me the truth. Is there anything between the prince and Louise?"

Sophy nervously crumbled up the toast by her side.

"The prince admires Louise, and has done so for many years," she answered. "No one knows anything else. Louise never speaks of him to me. I cannot tell you."

"But you must know," he persisted, with a little break in his voice. "Forgive me, Sophy, if I make an ass of myself. First Lady Hilda, and then Graillot, and then—well, I thought Louise might have rung up to see whether I was at home, if she came back sooner than she expected; and the prince took the table last night!"

She leaned over and patted him on the hand.

"Don't worry," she begged. "If Louise has to choose some day between him and you, I don't think she'll hesitate very long. And please remember that you were commencing to flirt with me. I insist upon it! I won't be put off. Don't look so stern, please. You look very statuesque and perfect, but I don't want to dine with a piece of sculpture. Remember that I am really looking very pretty, and that I am finding you too attractive for my peace of mind. There's your text!"

He poured a glass of wine and drank it off.

"I'll do my best," he agreed. "If it sounds like rubbish, you can still believe that I appreciate everything you've told me. You are pretty, and I am lucky to have you here. Now I'll try to make you believe that I think so."

She leaned over so that her head almost touched his.

"Go on, please!" she murmured. "Even if it hurts afterward, it will be heavenly to listen to!"

XXIV

The next night Sophy acted as showman. Her part was over at the end of the first act, and a few minutes later she slipped into a seat by John's side behind the curtain.

"What do you think of it so far?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"It seems quite good," John replied cheerfully. "Some very clever lines, and all that sort of thing; but I can't quite see what it's all leading to."

Sophy peered around the house from behind the curtain.

"There isn't standing-room anywhere," she declared. "I don't suppose there ever was a play in London that was more talked about; and then putting it off for more than three months—why, there have been all sorts of rumors about. Do you want to know who the people in the audience are?"

"Not particularly," John answered. "I shouldn't know them, if you told me. There are just a few familiar faces. I see the prince in the box opposite."

"Did you telephone to Louise to-day?" Sophy asked.

John shook his head.

"No. I thought it better to leave her alone until after to-night."

"You are going to the supper, of course?"

"I have been asked," John replied, a little doubtfully. "I don't quite know whether I want to. Is it being given by the prince or by the management?"

"The management," Sophy assured him. "Do come and take me! It's going to be rather fun."

The curtain went up upon the second act. John, from the shadows of the box, listened attentively. The subject was not a particularly new one, but the writing was brilliant. There was the old *Marquis de Guy*, a roué, a degenerate, but still overbearing and full of personality, from whose lips came some of Graillot's most brilliant sayings; Louise, his wife; and Faraday, a friend of the old marquis,

and obviously the intended lover of his wife.

"I don't see anything so terrible in this," John remarked, as the curtain went down once more and thunders of applause greeted some wonderful lines of Graillot's.

"It's wonderful!" Sophy declared. "Try and bear the thread of it all in your mind. For two acts you have been asked to focus your attention upon the increasing brutality of the marquis. Remember that, won't you?"

"Not likely to forget it," John replied. "How well they all act!"

There was a quarter of an hour's interval before the curtain rose again. Rumors concerning the last act had been floating about for weeks, and the house was almost tense with excitement as the curtain went up. The scene was the country *château* of the *Marquis de Guy*, who brought a noisy crowd of companions from Paris without any warning. His wife showed signs of dismay at his coming. He had brought with him women whom she declined to receive.

The great scene between her husband and herself took place in the square hall of the *château*, on the first floor. The marquis is on the way to the room of one of his guests. Louise reaffirms her intention of leaving the house. Her husband laughs at her. Her position is helpless.

"What can you do?" he mocks.

She shrugs her shoulders and passes into her room. The marquis sinks upon a settee, and presently is joined by one of the ladies who have traveled with him from Paris. He talks to her of the pictures upon the wall. She is impatient to meet the *Marquis de Guy*.

The marquis knocks at his wife's door. Her voice is heard clearly, after a moment's pause.

"In a few minutes!" she replies.

The marquis resumes his flirtation. His companion becomes impatient—the marquis has pledged his word that she should be received by his wife. An ancient enmity against the *Marquis de Guy* prompts her to insist.

The marquis shrugs his shoulders and knocks more loudly than ever at his wife's door. She comes out—followed by Faraday.

"You asked me what I could do," she says, pointing to her lover. "You see now!"

There was a moment's breathless silence through the house. The scene in itself was a little beyond anything that the audience had expected. Sophy, who had been leaning over the edge of the box, turned around in no little anxiety. She heard the door slam. John had disappeared!

He left the theater with only his hat in his hand, turning up his coat by instinct as he passed through the driving rain. All his senses seemed tingling with some nameless horror. The brilliance of the language, the subtlety of the situation, seemed like some evil trail drawn across that one horrible climax. It was Louise who had come from that room and pointed to Faraday! Louise who confessed herself a—

He broke out into language as he walked. The desire of Samson burned in his heart—to stride back into the theater, to smash the scenery, to throw the puppets from the stage, one by one, to end forever this ghastly, unspeakable play. And all the time the applause rang in his ears. He had read with one swift glance the tense interest—almost lascivious, it seemed to him—on the faces of that great audience. The scene had tickled their fancies. It was to pander to such base feelings that Louise was upon the stage!

He reached his rooms—he scarcely knew how—and walked up-stairs. There he threw off some of his dripping garments, opened the window wide, and stood there.

He looked out over the Thames, and there was a red fire before his eyes. Stephen was right, he told himself. There was nothing but evil to be found here, nothing but bitter disappointment, nothing but the pain which deepens into anguish. Better to remain like Stephen, unloving and unloved, to draw nearer to the mountains, to find joy in the crops and the rain and the sunshine, to listen stonily to the cry of human beings as if to some voice from an unknown world.

He leaned a little further from the window, and gazed into the court at a dizzy depth below. He had cut himself adrift from the peace which might have been his. He would never know again the joys of his earlier life. It was for this that he had fought so many battles, clung so tightly to one ideal—for Louise, who could show herself to any one who cared to pay his shilling or his half-guinea, glorying in her dishonor; worse than glorying in it—finding some subtle humor in the little gesture with which she had pointed, unashamed, to her lover.

John bent a little lower from the window. A sudden dizziness seemed to have come over him. Then he was forced to turn around. His door had been quickly opened and shut. It was Sophy who was crossing toward him, the rain streaming from her ruined opera-cloak.

"John!" she cried. "Oh, John!"

She led him back to his chair and knelt by his side. She held his hands tightly.

"You mustn't feel like this," she sobbed; "you mustn't, John, really! You don't understand. It's all a play. Louise wouldn't really do anything like that!"

He shivered. Nevertheless, he clutched her hands and drew her closer to him.

"Do, please, listen to me," she begged. "It's all over. Louise is herself again—Louise Maurel. The *Marquis de Guy* never lived except upon these boards. It is simply a wonderful creation. Any one of the great actresses would play that part and glory in it—the very greatest, John. Oh, it's so hard to make you understand! Louise is waiting for you. They are all waiting at the supper-party. You are expected. You must go and tell her that you think it was wonderful!"

He rose slowly to his feet.

"Wonderful!" he muttered. "Wonderful! But, child, it is damnable!"

"Don't be foolish," she answered. "Go and put on another dress coat, tie your tie again, and brush your hair. I have come to take you to the supper."

He caught at her hands roughly.

"Supposing I won't go?" he whispered hoarsely. "Supposing—I keep you here instead, Sophy?"

She swayed for a moment. Something flashed into her face and passed away. She was paler than ever.

"Dear John," she begged, "pull yourself together! Remember that Louise is waiting for you. It's Louise you want—not me. Nothing that she has done to-night should make her any the less worthy of you and your love."

He strode away into the farther room. He reappeared in a moment or two, his hair smoothly brushed, his tie newly arranged.

"I'll come, little girl," he promised. "I don't know what I'll say to her, but I'll

come. There can't be any harm in that!"

"Of course not," she answered cheerfully. "You're the most terrible goose, John," she added, as they walked down the corridor. "Do, please, lose your tragical air. The whole world is at Louise's feet to-night. You mustn't let her know how absurdly you have been feeling. To-morrow you will find that every paper in London will be acclaiming her genius."

John squared his shoulders.

"All the same," he declared grimly, "if I could burn the theater and the play, and lock up Graillot for a month, to-night, I'd do it!"

XXV

The days and weeks drifted into months, and John remained in London. His circle of friends and his interests had widened. It was only his relations with Louise which remained still unchanged. Always charming to him, giving him much of her time, favoring him, beyond a doubt, more than any of her admirers, there was yet about her something elusive, something which seemed intended to keep him so far as possible at arm's length.

There was nothing tangible of which he could complain, and this probationary period was of his own suggestion. He bore it grimly, holding his place, whenever it was possible, by her side with dogged persistence. Then one evening there was a knock at his door, and Stephen Strangewey walked in.

After all, this meeting, of which John had often thought, and which sometimes he had dreaded a little, turned out to be a very ordinary affair. Stephen, although he seemed a little taller and gaunter than ever, though he seemed to bring into the perhaps overwarmed atmosphere of John's little sitting room something of the cold austerity of his own domain, had evidently come in no unfriendly spirit. He took both his brother's hands in his and gripped them warmly.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Stephen!" John declared.

"It has been an effort to me to come," Stephen admitted. "But I had it in my mind, John, that we parted bad friends. I have come to see how things are with you."

"Well enough," John answered evasively. "Sit down."

Stephen held his brother away from him, gripping his shoulders with both hands. He looked steadily into his face.

"Well enough you may be, John," he said, "but your looks tell a different story. There's a look in your eyes already that they all get here, sooner or later."

"Nonsense!" John protested cheerfully. "No one pretends that the life here is quite as healthy as ours, physically, but that isn't everything. I am a little tired to-day, perhaps. One spends one's time differently up here, you know, and there's a little more call upon the brain, a little less upon the muscles."

"Give me an example," Stephen suggested. "What were you doing last night, for instance?"

John rang the bell for some tea, took his brother's hat and stick from his hand, and installed him in an easy chair.

"I went to a political meeting down in the East End," he replied. "One of the things I am trying to take a little more interest in up here is politics."

"No harm in that, anyway," Stephen admitted. "That all?"

"The meeting was over about eleven," John continued. "After that I came up here, changed my clothes, and went to a dance."

"At that time of night?"

John laughed.

"Why, nothing of that sort ever begins until eleven o'clock," he explained. "I stayed there for about an hour or so, and afterward I went round to a club I belong to, with the Prince of Seyre and some other men. They played bridge, and I watched."

"So that's one of your evenings, is it?" Stephen remarked. "No great harm in such doings—nor much good, that I can see. With the Prince of Seyre, eh?"

"I see him occasionally."

"He is one of your friends now?"

"I suppose so," John admitted, frowning. "Sometimes I think he is, sometimes I am not so sure. At any rate, he has been very kind to me."

"He is by way of being a friend of the young woman herself, isn't he?" Stephen asked bluntly.

"He has been a friend of Miss Maurel since she first went on the stage," John replied. "It is no doubt for her sake that he has been so kind to me."

"And how's the courting getting on?" Stephen demanded, his steely eyes suddenly intent.

"None too well," John confessed.

"Are you still in earnest about it?"

"Absolutely! More than ever!"

Stephen produced his pipe from his pocket, and slowly filled it.

"She is keeping you dangling at her heels, and giving you no sort of answer?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that," John declared, good-humoredly. "I asked her to marry me as soon as I came up, and we both agreed to wait for a time. You see, her life has been so extraordinarily different from mine. I have only half understood the things which to her are like the air she breathes. She is a great artist, and I scarcely ever leave her without feeling appallingly ignorant. Our life down in Cumberland, Stephen, is well enough in its way, but it leaves us outside many of the great things of life."

"That may be true enough, boy," Stephen admitted, blowing out dense volumes of smoke from his pipe; "but are you sure that it's toward those great things that she is pointing you?"

"I am sure of it," John answered earnestly. "I appreciate that in my heart. Let us talk together, Stephen, as we used. I will admit that I have found most of the time up here wearisome. On the other hand, I am beginning to understand that I have been, and still am, very ignorant. There is so much in the world that one can only learn by experience."

"And what are you willing to pay for the knowledge?" Stephen asked. "Your health, I suppose, your simple life, your love of the pure ways—all these are to go into the melting-pot?"

"There's no such payment demanded for the things I am thinking of," John assured his brother. "Take art, for instance: We reach the fringe of it with our books. There are pictures, even here in London, which when you look at them, especially with one who understands, give a new vigor to your understanding, a new resource to living. You become conscious of a new beauty in the world, a new garden, as it were, into which one can wander every day and yet not explore it in a lifetime. I have seen enough, Stephen, to make me want to go to Italy. It's a shameful thing to keep one's brain and taste unemployed!"

"Who takes you to see the pictures?" Stephen demanded.

"Miss Maurel, generally. She understands these things better than any one I

have ever talked with."

"Pictures, eh?" Stephen grunted.

"I mentioned pictures as an example," John continued; "but the love of them includes many other things."

"Theaters?"

"Of course," John assented. "It's no good being narrow about theaters, Stephen. You read books readily enough, and theaters are only living books, after all. There is no real difference."

"There is a difference in plays, though, as there is a difference in books," Stephen reminded him. "What about the play Miss Maurel is acting in now? She's a man's mistress in it, isn't she, and glories in it?"

John, who had been walking about the room, came and sat down opposite to his brother. He leaned a little forward.

"Stephen," he confessed, "I loathed that play the first night I saw it. I sha'n't forget how miserable I was. Louise was so wonderful that I could see how she swayed all that audience just by lifting or dropping her voice; but the story was a horror to me. The next day—well, she talked to me. She was very kind and very considerate. She explained many things. I try my best, now, to look at the matter from her point of view."

Stephen's eyes were filled for a moment with silent scorn. Then he knocked out the ashes from his pipe.

"You're content, then, to let the woman you want to make your wife show herself on the stage and play the wanton for folks to grin at?" he asked.

John rose once more to his feet.

"Look here, Stephen," he begged, a little wistfully, "it isn't any use talking like that, is it? If you have come here with evil things in your mind about the woman I love, we had better shake hands and part quickly. She'll be my wife some day, or I shall count my life a failure, and I don't want to feel that words have passed between us—"

"I'll say no more, John," Stephen interrupted. "I was hoping, when I came, that there might be a chance of seeing you back home again soon. It's going to be an

early spring. There was June sunshine yesterday. It lay about the hillsides all day and brought the tender greens out of the earth. It opened the crocuses, waxy yellow and white, all up the garden border. The hedgerows down in the valley smelled of primrose and violets. Art and pictures! I never had such schooling as you, John, but there was old Dr. Benson at Clowmarsh—I always remember what he said one day, just before I left. I'd been reading Ruskin, and I asked him what art was and what it meant. 'My boy,' he answered, 'art simply represents man's passionate desire to drag the truth out of life in half a dozen different ways. God does it for you in the country!' They called him an ignorant man, old Benson, for a schoolmaster, but when I'd struggled through what I could of Ruskin, I came to the conclusion that he and I were something of the same mind."

"It's good to hear you talk like that, Stephen," John said earnestly. "You're making me homesick, but what's the sense of it? For good or for evil, I am here to wrestle with things for a bit."

"It's no easy matter for me to open out the things that are in my heart," Stephen answered. "I am one of the old-fashioned Strangeweys. What I feel is pretty well locked up inside. The last time you and I met perhaps I spoke too much; so here I am!"

"It's fine of you," John declared. "I remember nothing of that day. We will look at things squarely together, even where we differ. I'm—"

He broke off in the middle of his sentence. The door had been suddenly opened, and Sophy Gerard made a somewhat impetuous entrance.

"I'm absolutely sick of ringing, John," she exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon! I hadn't the least idea you had any one with you."

She stood still in surprise, a little apologetic smile upon her lips. John hastened forward and welcomed her.

"It's all right, Sophy," he declared. "Let me introduce my brother, may I? My brother Stephen—Miss Sophy Gerard."

Stephen rose slowly from his place, laid down his pipe, and bowed stiffly to Sophy. She held out her hand, however, and smiled up at him delightfully.

"How nice of you to come and see your poor, lonely brother!" she said. "We have done our best to spoil him, but I am afraid he is very homesick sometimes.

I hope you've come to stay a long time and to learn all about London, as John is doing. If you are half as nice as he is, we'll give you such a good time!"

From his great height, Stephen looked down upon the girl's upturned face a little austerely. She chattered away, entirely unabashed.

"I do hope you're not shocked at my bursting in upon your brother like this! We really are great pals, and I live only just across the way. We are much less formal up here, you know, than you are in the country. John, I've brought you a message from Louise."

"About to-night?"

She nodded.

"Louise is most frightfully sorry," she explained, "but she has to go down to Streatham to open a bazaar, and she can't possibly be back in time to dine before the theater. Can you guess what she dared to suggest?"

"I think I can," John replied, smiling.

"Say you will, there's a dear," she begged. "I am not playing to-night. May Enser is going on in my place. We arranged it a week ago. I had two fines to pay on Saturday, and I haven't had a decent meal this week. But I had forgotten," she broke off, with a sudden note of disappointment in her tone. "There's your brother. I mustn't take you away from him."

"We'll all have dinner together," John suggested. "You'll come, of course, Stephen?"

Stephen shook his head.

"Thank you," he said, "I am due at my hotel. I'm going back to Cumberland to-morrow morning, and my errand is already done."

"You will do nothing of the sort!" John declared.

"Please be amiable," Sophy begged. "If you won't come with us, I shall simply run away and leave you with John. You needn't look at your clothes," she went on. "We can go to a grill-room. John sha'n't dress, either. I want you to tell me all about Cumberland, where this brother of yours lives. He doesn't tell us half enough!"

John passed his arm through his brother's and led him away.

"Come and have a wash, old chap," he said.

They dined together at Luigi's, a curiously assorted trio—Sophy, between the two men, supplying a distinctly alien note. She was always gay, always amusing, but although she addressed most of her remarks to Stephen, he never once unbent. He ate and drank simply, seldom speaking of himself or his plans, and firmly negativing all their suggestions for the remainder of the evening. Occasionally he glanced at the clock. John became conscious of a certain feeling of curiosity, which in a sense Sophy shared.

"Your brother seems to me like a man with a purpose," she said, as they stood in the entrance-hall on their way out of the restaurant. "Like a prophet with a mission, perhaps I should say."

John nodded. In the little passage where they stood, he and Stephen seemed to dwarf the passers-by. The men, in their evening clothes and pallid faces, seemed suddenly insignificant, and the women like dolls.

"For the last time, Stephen," John said, "won't you come to a music-hall with us?"

"I have made my plans for the evening, thank you," Stephen replied, holding out his hand. "Good night!"

He left them standing there and walked off down the Strand. John, looking after him, frowned. He was conscious of a certain foreboding.

XXVI

"I suppose," Sophy sighed, as they waited for a taxicab, "we shall spend the remainder of the evening in the usual fashion!"

"Do you mind?" John asked.

"No," she assented resignedly. "That play will end by making a driveling idiot of me. Only think for yourself! At first we had to rehearse an extra month to please M. Graillot. I never had more than a dozen lines to say, even before my part was practically cut out, but I had to be there every time. Now it has been running for I don't know how many nights, I have played in it half the time, and if your highness ever vouchsafes me a few hours in the evening, you turn to me about nine o'clock with just the same plaintive expression, and murmur something about going on to the theater!"

"We'll do something else to-night," John proposed heroically. "I really had no idea that you were so fed up with it."

Sophy shook her head. They were in the taxicab now and on their way.

"Too late!" she sighed. "Besides, my sense of economy revolts at the idea of your empty box. If Louise is tired to-night, though, I warn you that I shall insist upon supper."

"It's a bargain," John promised. "We'll drive Louise home, and then I'll take you back to Luigi's. We haven't been out together for some time, have we?"

She looked up at him with a little grimace and patted his hand.

"You have neglected me," she said. "I think all these fine ladies have turned your head."

She drew a little closer to him and passed her arm through his. John made no responsive movement. He was filled with resentment at the sensation of pleasure that her affectionate gesture gave him.

"I might as well try to flirt with a statue!" she declared, discontentedly. "What makes you so unlike other people, you man of granite? You used to kiss me very

clumsily when I asked you to, and now—why, how hot your hand is!"

John pushed her away almost roughly.

"Yes, I know I did," he admitted, "and now I don't want to any more, do you see? It's this cursed place and this cursed life! One's feet seem always on the sands. I wouldn't have believed it when I first came here. Don't tease me, Sophy," he added, turning toward her suddenly. "I am rather inclined to despise myself these last few weeks. Don't make me worse—don't make me loathe myself!"

She shrugged her shoulders a little pettishly as she leaned back in the cab.

"You are nothing but a crank," she declared; "you and your brother, too! You've lived among those flinty rocks till you've become almost like them yourselves."

The taxi drew up at the theater. John, with a little sigh of relief, was already out upon the pavement. Sophy's eyes were still shining at him through her veil, as she walked lightly and gracefully by his side, but he led the way in silence down the stairs to the box that he had taken for the season.

"And now," she exclaimed with a pout, as she leaned back in the corner, "my little reign is over! You will sit in the front seat and you will look at Louise, and feel Louise, and your eyes will shine Louise, until the moment for your escape comes, when you can go round to the back and meet her; and then you will try to make excuses to get rid of me, so that you can drive her home alone!"

"Rubbish, Sophy!" he answered, as he drew a chair to her side. "You know quite well that I can't sit in the front of the box, for the very prosaic reason that I haven't changed my clothes. We shall both have to linger here in the shadows."

"Well, there is some comfort in that, at any rate," Sophy confessed. "If I become absolutely overcome by my emotions, I can hold your hand."

"You had better not," John observed. "The stage manager has his eye on you. If his own artists won't behave in the theater, what can he expect of the audience?"

Sophy made a little grimace. "If they stop my three pounds a week," she murmured, "I shall either have to starve or become your valet!"

The curtain was up and the play in progress—a work of genius rather in its perfectly balanced development and its phraseology than in any originality of motive. Louise, married as an ingénue, so quickly transformed into the brilliant woman of society poking mild fun at the unsympathetic husband to whom she has been sold while still striving to do her duty as a wife, easily dominated every situation. The witty speeches seemed to sparkle upon her lips. While she was upon the stage, every spoken sentence was listened to with rapt attention. Graillot, seated as usual among the shadows of the opposite box, moved his head appreciatively each time she spoke, as if punctuating the measured insolence of her brilliance.

Exquisitely gowned, full of original and daring gestures, she moved about the stage as if her feet scarcely touched the boards. She was full of fire and life in the earlier stages of the comedy. She heaped mild ridicule upon her husband and his love-affairs, exchanged light sallies with her guests, or parried with resourceful subtlety the constant appeals of the man she loved.

The spell of it all, against which he had so often fought, came over John anew. He set his chair back against the wall and watched and listened, a veritable sense of hypnotism creeping over his senses. Presently the same impulse which had come to him so many times before induced him to turn his head, to read in the faces of the audience the reflection of her genius. He had often watched those long lines of faces changing, each in its own way, under the magic of her art. To-night he looked beyond. He knew very well that his search had a special object. Suddenly he gripped the arms of his chair. In the front row of the pit, sitting head and shoulders taller than the men and women who lounged over the wooden rest in front of them, was Stephen. More than ever, among these unappropriate surroundings, he seemed to represent something almost patriarchal, a forbidding and disapproving spirit sitting in judgment upon some modern and unworthy wantonness. His face, stern and grave, showed little sign of approval or disapproval, but to John's apprehending eyes the critical sense was there, the verdict foredoomed. He understood as in a flash that Stephen had come there to judge once more the woman whom his brother desired.

At last the second act ended, and John pushed back his chair. Sophy, whose apprehensions were remarkably acute, especially where John was concerned, lifted the edge of the curtain and understood. She exchanged a quick glance with her companion.

"He won't like it!" she whispered.

"If only we could get him away before the next act!" John muttered.

They both glanced once more into the auditorium below. Many of the spectators had left their places to stroll about. Not so Stephen. Unflinchingly he sat there, with an air of dogged patience. He had bought a program and was reading the names, one by one.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Sophy asked. "Couldn't we send a message—persuade him that the last act isn't worth staying for?"

John shook his head.

"Stephen has come here with a purpose," he said gloomily. "I might have guessed it. He will see it through. He will sit there till the end."

The curtain went up again and the play moved on, with subtle yet inevitable dramatic power, toward the hated and dreaded crisis. Louise's moment of combined weakness and strength was so wonderfully natural, so very human, that its approach sent a thrill of anticipation through the audience. The intense lifelikeness of the play predominated over every other feeling. It was as if real things were happening, as if they were watching and listening to a woman at the moment of her choice. And then at last the tense moment, the sudden cessation of her husband's foolish laughter and futile taunts, the supreme dénouement with its interval of breathless silence.

John, who was slowly tearing his program to pieces, turned his head toward the spot where his brother was sitting in the dimmer light. Stephen's countenance seemed to have changed into the color as well as the likeness of those granite rocks. The line of faces on either side of him appeared now curiously featureless. His eyes were still riveted upon that closed door, his eyebrows had come together in a stupendous frown.

Sophy had parted the curtain and was peeping through.

"Nothing in the world could make him understand!" she murmured. "Do you think it would be of any use if we met him outside?"

John shook his head.

"You can't convince people," he replied, "when you are unconvinced yourself."

The play came to an end presently, amid a storm of applause. The grim figure in the front of the pit remained motionless and silent. He was one of the last to leave, and John watched his retreating figure with a sigh. Sophy drew him away.

"We had better hurry round," she said. "Louise is always very quick getting ready."

They found her, as a matter of fact, in the act of leaving. She welcomed them naturally enough, but John fancied that her greeting showed some signs of embarrassment.

"You knew that I was going out to supper to-night?" she asked. "Or didn't I tell you? The prince has asked the French people from His Majesty's to meet M. Graillot at supper. I am hurrying home to dress."

John handed her into her waiting automobile in silence. She glanced into his face.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing!"

"The prince would have asked you, without a doubt," Louise continued, "but he knows that you are not really interested in the stage, and this party is entirely French—they do not speak a word of English. *Au revoir!* Sophy, take care of him, and mind you behave yourselves!"

She waved her hand to them both and threw herself back among the cushions as the car glided off. John walked to the corner of the street in gloomy silence. Then he remembered his companion. He stopped short.

"Sophy," he begged, "don't hold me to my promise. I don't want to take you out to supper to-night. I am not in the humor for it."

"Don't be foolish!" she replied. "If you stay alone, you will only imagine things and be miserable. We needn't have any supper, unless you like. Let me come and sit in your rooms with you."

"No!" he decided, almost roughly. "I am losing myself, Sophy. I am losing something of my strength every day. Louise doesn't help as she might. Don't stay with me, please. I am beginning to have moods, and when they come on I want to be alone."

She drew a little closer to him.

"Let me come, please!" she begged, with a pathetic, almost childlike quiver at the corner of her lips.

He looked down at her. A sudden wave of tenderness swept every other thought from his mind. His mental balance seemed suddenly restored. He hailed a passing taxi and handed Sophy into it.

"What a selfish pig I am!" he exclaimed. "Anyhow, it's all over now. We'll go back to Luigi's to supper, by all means. I am going to make you tell me all about that young man from Bath!"

XXVII

Louise glanced at her watch, sat up in bed, and turned reproachfully toward Aline.

"Aline, do you know it is only eleven o'clock?" she exclaimed.

"I am very sorry, *madame*," the latter hastened to explain, "but there is a gentleman down-stairs who wishes to see you. He says he will wait until you can receive him. I thought you would like to know."

"A gentleman at this hour of the morning?" Louise yawned. "How absurd! Anyhow, you ought to know better than to wake me up before the proper time."

"I am very sorry, *madame*," Aline replied. "I hesitated for some time, but I thought you would like to know that the gentleman was here. It is Mr. Stephen Strangewey—Mr. John's brother."

Louise clasped her knees with her fingers and sat thinking. She was wide awake now.

"He has been here some time already, *madame*," Aline continued. "I did not wish to disturb you, but I thought perhaps it was better for you to know that he was here."

"Quite right, Aline," Louise decided. "Go down and tell him that I will see him in half an hour, and get my bath ready at once."

Louise dressed herself simply but carefully. She could conceive of but one reason for Stephen's presence in her house, and it rather amused her. It was, of course, no friendly visit. He had come either to threaten or to cajole. Yet what could he do? What had she to fear? She went over the interview in her mind, imagining him crushed and subdued by her superior subtlety and finesse.

With a little smile of coming triumph upon her lips she descended the stairs and swept into her pleasantly warmed and perfumed little drawing-room. She even held out her hand cordially to the dark, grim figure whose outline against the dainty white wall seemed so inappropriate.

"This is very nice of you indeed, Mr. Strangewey," she began. "I had no idea that you had followed your brother's example and come to town."

She told herself once more that her slight instinct of uneasiness had been absurd. Stephen's bow, although a little formal and austere, was still an acknowledgment of her welcome. The shadows of the room, perhaps, had prevented him from seeing her outstretched hand.

"Mine is a very short visit, Miss Maurel," he said. "I had no other reason for coming but to see John and to pay this call upon you."

"I am greatly flattered," she told him. "You must please sit down and make yourself comfortable while we talk. See, this is my favorite place," she added, dropping into a corner of her lounge. "Will you sit beside me? Or, if you prefer, draw up that chair."

"My preference," he replied, "is to remain standing."

She raised her eyebrows. Her tone altered.

"It must be as you wish, of course," she continued; "only I have such pleasant recollections of your hospitality at Peak Hall that I should like, if there was any possible way in which I could return it—"

"Madam," he interrupted, "you must admit that the hospitality of Peak Hall was not willingly offered to you. Save for the force of circumstances, you would never have crossed our threshold."

She shrugged her shoulders. She was adapting her tone and manner to the belligerency of his attitude.

"Well?"

"You want to know why I have found my way to London?" he went on. "I came to find out a little more about you."

"About me?"

"To discover if there was anything about you," he proceeded deliberately, "concerning which report had lied. I do not place my faith in newspapers and gossip. There was always a chance that you might have been an honest woman. That is why I came to London, and why I went to see your play last night."

She was speechless. It was as if he were speaking to her in some foreign tongue.

"I have struggled," he continued, "to adopt a charitable view of your profession. I know that the world changes quickly, while we, who prefer to remain outside its orbit, of necessity lose touch with its new ideas and new fashions. So I said to myself that there should be no mistake. For that reason I sat in a theater last night almost for the first time in my life. I saw you act."

"Well?" she asked almost defiantly.

He looked down at her. All splendid self-assurance seemed ebbing away. She felt a sudden depression of spirit, a sudden strange sense of insignificance.

"I have come," he said, "if I can, to buy my brother's freedom."

"To buy your brother's freedom?" she repeated, in a dazed tone.

"My brother is infatuated with you," Stephen declared. "I wish to save him."

Her woman's courage began to assert itself. She raised her eyes to his.

"Exactly what do you mean?" she asked calmly. "In what way is any man to be saved from me? If your brother should care for me, and I, by any chance, should happen to care for him, in what respect would that be a state from which he would require salvation?"

"You make my task more difficult," he observed deliberately. "Does it amuse you to practise your profession before one so ignorant and so unappreciative as myself? If my brother should ever marry, it is my firm intention that he shall marry an honest woman."

Louise sat quite still for a moment. A flash of lightning had glittered before her eyes, and in her ears was the crash of thunder. Her face was suddenly strained. She saw nothing but the stern, forbidding expression of the man who looked down at her.

"You dare to say this to me, here in my own house?"

"Dare? Why not? Don't people tell you the truth here in London, then?"

She rose a little unsteadily to her feet, motioning him toward the door, and moving toward the bell. Suddenly she sank back into her former place,

breathless and helpless.

"Why do you waste your breath?" he asked calmly. "We are alone here, and I—we know the truth!"

She sat quite still, shivering a little.

"Do we? Tell me, then, because I am curious—tell me why you are so sure of what you say?"

"The world has it," he replied, "that you are the mistress of the Prince of Seyre. I came to London to satisfy myself as to the truth of that report. Do you believe that any man living, among that audience last night, could watch the play and know that you passed, night after night, into your bed-chamber to meet your lover with that look upon your face—you are a clever actress, madam—and believe that you were a woman who was living an honest life?"

"That seems impossible to you?" she demanded.

"Utterly impossible!"

"And to John?"

"I am speaking for myself and not for my brother," Stephen replied. "Men like him, who are assailed by a certain madness, are best left alone with it. That is why I came to you to bargain, if I could. Is there anything that you lack—anything which your own success and your lover, or lovers, have failed to provide for you?"

It was useless to try to rise; she was powerless in all her limbs. Side by side with the anger and horror that his words aroused was a sense of something almost grotesque, something which seemed to force an unnatural laugh from her lips.

"So you want to buy me off?"

"I should be glad to believe that it was within my power to do so. I have not John's great fortune, but I have money, the accumulated savings of a lifetime, for which I have no better purpose. There is one more thing, too, to be said."

"Another charge?"

"Not that," he told her; "only it is better for you to understand that if you turn

me from your house this morning, I shall still feel the necessity of saving my brother from you."

"Saving him from me?" she exclaimed, rising suddenly and throwing out her arms. "Do you know what you are talking about? Do you know that if I consented to think of your brother as my husband, there is not a man in London who would not envy him? Look at me! I am beautiful, am I not? I am a great artist. I am Louise Maurel, and I have made myself famous by my own work and my own genius. What has your brother done in life to render him worthy of the sacrifice I should make if I chose to give him my hand? You had better go back to Cumberland, Mr. Strangewey. You do not see life as we see it up here!"

"And what about John?" he asked, without moving. "You tempted him away. Was it from wantonness, or do you love him?"

"Love him?" she laughed. "I hate you both! You are boors—you are ignorant people. I hate the moment I ever saw either of you. Take John back with you. Take him out of my life. There is no place there for him!"

Stephen picked up his hat from the sofa where it lay. Louise remained perfectly still, her breath coming quickly, her eyes lit with passion.

"Madam," he said, "I am sorry to have distressed you, but the truth sometimes hurts the most callous of us. You have heard the truth from me. I will take John back to Cumberland with me, if he will come. If he will not—"

"Take him with you!" she broke in fiercely. "He will do as I bid him—do you hear? If I lift my little finger, he will stay. It will be I who decide, I—"

"But you will not lift your little finger," he interrupted grimly.

"Why shouldn't I, just to punish you?" she demanded. "There are scores of men who fancy themselves in love with me. If I choose, I can keep them all their lives hanging to the hem of my skirt, praying for a word, a touch. I can make them furious one day and penitent the next—wretched always, perhaps, but I can keep them there. Why should I not treat your brother in the same way?"

He seemed suddenly to dilate. She was overcome with a sense of some latent power in the man, some commanding influence.

"Because," he declared, "I am the guardian of my brother's happiness. Whoever trifles with it shall in the future reckon with me!"

His eyes were fixed upon her soft, white throat. His long, lean fingers seemed suddenly to be drawing near to her. She watched him, fascinated. She was trying to scream. Even after he had turned away and left her, after she had heard his measured tramp descending the stairs, her fingers flew to her throat. She held herself tightly, standing there with beating heart and throbbing pulses. It was not until the front door had closed that she had the strength to move, to throw herself face downward upon the couch.

XXVIII

Louise ate a very small luncheon, but—an unusual thing for her—she drank two glasses of wine. Just as she had finished, Sophy came in, with ink-stained fingers and a serious expression.

"You silly child!" Louise exclaimed. "No one told me you were here. Have you had any lunch?"

"Long ago," Sophy replied. "I have been finishing your accounts."

Louise made a little grimace.

"Tell me the worst," she begged.

"You are overdrawn at your bank, your bills are heavier than ever this month, and there are five or six special accounts—one for some electric fittings, another for the hire of a motor-car—which ought to be paid."

"People are always wanting money!" Louise declared pettishly.

"People always will want money," Sophy retorted, "so long as you earn three thousand a year and spend four or five thousand!"

Louise selected a cigarette and lit it.

"Instead of scolding me, child," she yawned, "suppose you suggest something?"

"What is there to suggest?" Sophy replied. "Your bank has written you to put your overdraft straight at once—it comes to about two hundred and seventy pounds. There are bills, for which the people are asking for payment, and which come to about as much again. You've nothing but your hundred pounds a week, and you're spending half of that, as it is."

Louise flicked the ash from her cigarette.

"And even you, my child, don't know the worst," she remarked. "There's Fenillon, my dressmaker. She doesn't send me a bill at all, but I owe her nearly six hundred pounds. I have to wear a shockingly unbecoming gown in the

second act, as it is, just because she's getting disagreeable."

"Well, I've tried to set things straight," Sophy declared. "You'll have either to marry or to borrow some money. You can't go on much longer!"

Louise was looking up at the ceiling. She sighed.

"It would be nice," she said, "to have some one to pay one's bills and look after one, and see that one wasn't too extravagant."

"Well, you need some one badly," Sophy asserted. "I suppose you mean to make up your mind to it some day."

"I wonder!" Louise murmured. "Did you know that that terrible man from the hills—John Strangewey's brother—has been here this morning? He frightened me almost to death."

"What did he want?" Sophy asked curiously.

"He was a trifle vague," Louise remarked. "I gathered that if I don't send John back to Cumberland, he's going to strangle me."

Sophy leaned across the table.

"Are you going to send him back?" she asked.

"I am in an uncertain frame of mind," Louise confessed. "I really can't decide about anything."

Sophy poured herself out some coffee.

"I think," she said, "that you'll have to decide about John before long."

"About John, indeed!" Louise exclaimed lightly. "Who gave you the right to call him by his Christian name?"

Sophy colored.

"I suppose I have just dropped into it," she remarked. "Tell me what you have decided to do, Louise?"

"Why should I do anything at all?"

"You know very well," Sophy insisted, "that you have encouraged John Strangewey shamefully. You have persuaded him to live up here, to make new

friends, and to start an entirely new mode of life, just in the hope that some day you will marry him."

"Have I?" Louise asked. "Then I suppose I must keep my word—some day!"

Sophy drew her chair a little nearer to her friend's. She passed her arm around Louise's waist; their heads almost touched.

"Dear Louise," she whispered, "please tell me!"

Louise was silent. Her hesitation became momentous. Her eyes seemed to be looking through the walls. Sophy watched her breathlessly.

"You ought to make up your mind," she went on. "You see, it isn't as if there was no one else. There is the prince."

Sophy felt the fingers that she was clasping grow a little colder.

"Yes," Louise repeated, "there is the prince. Sophy, I feel that I am drifting into an impossible position. Every day is bringing me nearer to it."

"I want to tell you this, Louise," Sophy said firmly. "John is getting to know a great many people, and you know how men talk at the clubs. Aren't you sometimes afraid that he will hear things and misunderstand?"

"I am expecting it every day," Louise admitted.

"Then why don't you end it?"

"Which way?"

There was a silence between the two women. The muffled street noises from outside became the background to a stillness which grew every moment more oppressive. Louise returned to her former attitude. She looked steadfastly before her, her face supported by her hands.

Sophy grew paler and paler as the minutes passed. There was something strange and almost beautiful in Louise's face, something which had come to her lately, and which shone from her eyes only at rare intervals.

"You care for him, I believe!" Sophy cried at last. "You care for him!"

Louise did not move.

"Why not?" she whispered.

"You, Louise!" Sophy gasped. "You, the great artist! Why, think of the men who have tried to make you care—poets, musicians—so many of them, so many famous men! It can't be true. John Strangewey is so far apart. He doesn't belong to your world."

Louise leaned over and stroked her little friend's hair.

"Child," she said, "that's all very true. I have had it ringing in my brain for longer than you would believe. But now tell me something. No, look at me—don't be ashamed. Are you in love with John yourself?"

Sophy never hesitated.

"From the very first moment I saw him," she confessed. "Don't let that bother you, dear. He would never look at me except as a little pal. I never expected anything from him—anything serious, of course—never dared to hope for it. I have thrown myself at his head in the most shameless manner. It is all no good. I never met any one like him before. Louise, do you know that he is good—really good?"

"I believe he is," Louise murmured. "That is what makes it so wonderful."

"It's all incomprehensible," Sophy declared wearily.

There was a ring at the front door. Louise, from her place, could see the long, gray bonnet of John's car. Almost before she could speak, he was announced.

"It's an atrocious time to come, I know—" he began apologetically.

"You're in time for some coffee, anyhow," Sophy told him cheerfully. "And I know Louise is glad to see you, because if you hadn't come I was going to make her go through some accounts."

"You know I am always glad to see you," Louise murmured, pointing to a chair. "Sophy and I have been having a most interesting discussion, but we have come to a *cul-de-sac*."

"I really came," John explained, "to ask if you cared to come and see a collection of pictures. There's an Italian—a Futurist, of course—just unpacked his little lot and set them up over a curiosity-shop in Clifford Street. He is sending out cards for next week, but I could take you to-day—that is, if you

would care about it. We can go somewhere for some tea afterward."

Louise made a little grimace.

"What bad luck!" she exclaimed.

She stopped short. She felt that by her hesitation she had, in a sense, committed herself.

"I have promised to go and have tea with the prince at Seyre House," she said. "It is an engagement we made last week."

John set down his empty coffee-cup with a clatter. An inexplicable but dominating fury seemed to have suddenly assailed him. He took out a cigarette and tried to light it. Sophy, after watching him for a moment in astonishment, slipped out of the room. Louise came over to his side.

"Are you really so much disappointed?" she asked. "I am so sorry. If I had known that you were coming for me, I would have kept myself free."

"It isn't that exactly," John answered. "It's something I can't altogether explain. If you don't mind, I think I will be going. There is something I must put right."

He left without another word. She watched him step into his new motor-car and drive away a little recklessly, considering the crowded state of the streets. He drew up, a few minutes later, outside the club in Pall Mall, where, as it chanced, he had lunched that day with the Prince of Seyre.

He found the prince still sitting in the smoking room, reading a review, over the top of which he glanced up as John approached, and nodded nonchalantly.

"Back again?" he murmured.

"I came back to have a word with you, prince."

The prince laid down the review, keeping his finger in the place.

"Delighted!"

"Not long ago," John went on, "in this room, some one—I think it was Major Charters—asked you what you were doing this afternoon. You replied that you were engaged. There were several others present, and they began to chaff you. Perhaps I joined in—I don't remember. I think that it was Major Charters who asked you, to use his own words, whether your appointment was with a lady.

You replied in the affirmative. There was a little volley of chaff. You listened without contradiction to many references concerning the nature of your afternoon's amusement."

The prince nodded slightly. His face remained quite expressionless.

"As a matter of fact," John concluded, "I have discovered by the purest accident that Miss Maurel is to be your guest this afternoon at Seyre House."

The prince inclined his head gently. He remained monosyllabic.

"Well?"

John frowned heavily.

"Can't you see," he went on bluntly, "that if any one of those men who were present, and heard what was said about your guest, found out afterward that it was Miss Maurel who came to see you—well, I need not go on, need I? I am sure you understand. The things which were hinted at could not possibly apply to her. Would you mind sending a note to Miss Maurel and asking her to have tea with you some other afternoon?"

"And why the deuce should I do that?" the prince asked, a trifle paler, but entirely self-possessed.

"To oblige me," John replied.

The prince wiped his eye-glass carefully upon his handkerchief.

"Mr. Strangewey, you are a very amiable young man," he said equably, "to whom I have tried to show some kindness for Miss Maurel's sake. I really do not see, however—pardon my putting it plainly—what business this is of yours."

"It is my business," John declared, "because I have asked Miss Maurel to be my wife, and because I am hoping that some day, before very long, she will consent."

The prince sat quite still in his chair, his eyes fixed upon a certain spot in the carpet. He had not even the appearance of being engaged in thought. He seemed only steeped in a sort of passivity. Finally, with a sigh, he rose to his feet.

"My young friend," he decided, "your statement alters the situation. I did not credit you with matrimonial intentions. I must see what can be done!"

His lips had relaxed ever so slightly—so slightly that they showed only a glimpse of his teeth in one straight, hard line. He looked at John mildly, and his words seemed destitute of all offense; yet John felt that the lightnings were playing around them.

"I shall write a note to Miss Maurel," the prince promised, as he made his way toward the writing-table, "and ask her to visit me upon some other afternoon."

XXIX

Back again to his rooms, and, later on, once more to Louise's little house in Kensington; a few minutes' masterful pleading, and then success. Louise wrapped herself up and descended to the street by his side.

For an hour or more John drove steadily westward, scarcely speaking more than a chance word. It was twilight when he brought the car to a standstill. Louise raised her veil and looked up.

"Well?" she asked inquiringly.

He pushed back the throttle on his steering-wheel and stopped the engine. Then he turned toward her.

"I have something to say to you," he said. "I have brought you here that I may say it in my own way and in my own atmosphere."

She responded instantly to his mood, although she did not yet grasp the full significance of the situation. She leaned forward in the car, and her eyes were lighted with interest. Into their faces a slight, drizzling rain was carried at intervals by a gusty, north wind. The sky was murky gray, except for one black mass of cloud that seemed bending almost over their heads.

Down at their feet—they had made a circuit and were facing London again—began the long lines of feeble lights which lit the great avenues stretching onward to the city, the lights of suburban thoroughfares, of local railways, and here and there a more brilliant illumination of some picture palace or place of amusement. Farther away still, the vast glow from the heart of the city was beginning to flare against the murky sky—here red and threatening, as if from some great conflagration; in other places yellow, with a sicklier light of fog-strangled brilliance.

"This is like you!" Louise murmured. "You had to bring me out to a hilltop, on the dreariest hour of a wet March afternoon, to tell me—what?"

"First of all," John began, "I will answer a question which you have asked me three times since we started out this afternoon. You wanted to know how I found out that you were not going to tea with the prince. Well, here is the truth. I asked

the prince to change the day of your visit to him."

Her fine, silky eyebrows came a little closer together.

"You asked him that?" she repeated.

John nodded.

"And he consented?"

"I will explain," John continued. "It was a most unfortunate circumstance, but in the club, after lunch, the subject of spending the afternoon came up. The prince spoke of an engagement. He was tied at home, he said, from four to six. Some of the men began to chaff him, and suggested that he was entertaining some lady friend, his latest favorite—well, I dare say you can imagine the rest," John broke off. "The prince, thoughtlessly, I am sure, and probably to get rid of them, pleaded guilty. Then I came down to see you, and from what you said I discovered that it was you who were to be his visitor."

Her fingers played nervously for a moment with the edge of the rug. She drew it higher up.

"Well, when I left your house the first time this afternoon, I went straight back to the prince. I pointed out to him that after what had been said, as it might become known that you were his guest of to-day, it would be better for him to postpone your visit. He agreed to do so."

"Was that all that passed between you?"

"Not quite," John replied. "He asked me what concern it was of mine, and I told him exactly what my concern was. I told him I hoped that some day you would be my wife."

She sat quite still, looking down upon the flaring lights. She was filled with a restless desire to escape, to start the motor herself and rush through the wet air into London and safety. And side by side with that desire she knew that there was nothing in the world she wanted so much as to stay just where she was, and to hear just the words she was going to hear.

"So much for that!" John proceeded. "And now, please listen. I have brought you out here because under these conditions I feel more master of myself and my thoughts, and of the things I want to say to you. Something takes me by the

throat in your little drawing-room, with its shaded lights, its perfume of flowers, and its atmosphere of perfection. You sit enthroned there like the queen of a world I know nothing of, and all the time letters and flowers and flattering invitations are showered upon you from the greatest men in London. The atmosphere there stifles me, Louise. Out here you are a woman and I a man, and those other things fall away. I have tried my best to come a little way into sympathy with your life. I want you now to make up your mind to come down a little way into mine!"

She shook her head.

"We are still too far apart," she murmured. "Can't you understand that yourself?"

"I have been a pupil for many months," he answered, turning toward her, with one arm at the back of her cushions and the fingers of the other hand suddenly seeking hers. "Can't you understand, if you do care a little, if you have just a little flame of love in your heart for me, that many of these other things which keep us apart are like the lime-light which flashes out to give artificial light in an honest darkness? Don't you believe, at the bottom of your heart, that you can be happier if you will climb with me to the place where we first met, even where the clouds lean over my own hills? You thought me very narrow then. Perhaps I am. But I think you are beginning to understand, dear, that that life is only a type. We can wander about where you will. My hills are only the emblems of the things that are dear to me. There are many countries I want to visit. I don't want to cramp your life. You can't really be afraid of that, because it is the most widening thing in the world that I have to give you—my love, the love of my heart and my soul!"

She felt the sudden snapping of every nerve in her body, the passing away of all sense of will or resistance. She was conscious only of the little movement toward him, the involuntary yielding of herself. She lay back in his arms, and the kisses which closed her eyes and lips seemed to be working some strange miracle.

She was in some great empty space, breathing wonderful things. She was on the hilltops, and from the heights she looked down at herself as she had been—a poor little white-faced puppet, strutting about an overheated stage, in a fetid atmosphere of adulation, with a brain artificially stimulated, and a heart growing cold with selfishness. She pitied herself as she had been. Then she opened her

eyes with a start of joy.

"How wonderful it all is!" she murmured. "You brought me here to tell me this?"

"And to hear something!" he insisted.

"I have tried not to, John," she confessed, amazed at the tremble of her sweet, low voice. Her words seemed like the confession of a weeping child. "I cannot help it. I do love you! I have tried not to so hard, but now—now I shall not try any more!"

They drove quietly down the long hill and through the dripping streets. Not another word passed between them till they drew up outside her door. She felt a new timidity as he handed her out, an immense gratitude for his firm tone and intuitive tact.

"No, I won't come in, thanks," he declared. "You have so little time to rest and get ready for the theater."

"You will be there to-night?" she asked.

He laughed as if there were humor in the suggestion of his absence.

"Of course!"

He slipped in his clutch and drove off through the rain-gleaming streets with the smile and air of a conqueror. Louise passed into her little house to find a visitor waiting for her there.

XXX

Eugène, Prince of Seyre, had spent the early part of that afternoon in a manner wholly strange to him. In pursuance of an order given to his majordomo immediately on his return from the club after lunch, the great reception rooms of Seyre House, the picture-gallery and the ballroom, were prepared as if for a reception. Dust-sheets were swept aside, masterpieces of painting and sculpture were uncovered, the soft brilliance of concealed electric lights lit up many dark corners.

When all was ready, the prince, with his hands clasped behind him, with expressionless face and slow, thoughtful movements, passed from room to room of the treasure-house which had come to him through a long line of distinguished and famous men. Here and there he paused to handle with the fingers of a connoisseur some excellent piece of bronze statuary, some miracle of Sèvres china, some treasure of carved ivory, yellow with age. And more than once he stood still for several minutes in rapt contemplation of one of the great masterpieces with which the walls were hung.

As he passed, a solitary figure, from one to another of that long chain of lofty, palatial rooms, his stature seemed more than ever insignificant; yet he walked always with the dignity of the master. Notwithstanding the slight excesses of his immaculate morning dress, his pallid features, his insignificant build, he appeared to belong to these things, to dominate them, to understand them. Every beautiful object upon which he looked brought back to his memory some reminiscence of his years of travel. He knew the history of the chinas and the bronzes, the statuary and the lacquer-work, the friezes, and the great pictures which adorned his house. Perhaps, he thought, as he paused to study some Italian tapestry of his own discovery, he had spent too many years in the contemplative life.

There had been many careers open to him in his younger days. France was still his own country, and he might easily have joined the long line of soldiers whose portraits filled one side of the picture-gallery. Once he had had ambitions, either to wield the sword or to take his place in the world of diplomacy. It was his political inheritance which had deadened them, the awful debt of blood that he still owed to the enemies of his race. He had found the spirit of patriotism

dead within him, and in that day he had turned his back upon his country. Since then he had carried his great name through the pleasure places of the world, always upholding its dignity, perhaps, but never adding to its luster.

He was forty-one years old that day, and the few words which John had spoken to him barely an hour ago had made him realize that there was only one thing in life that he desired. The sight of his treasures merely soothed his vanity. It left empty and unsatisfied his fuller and deeper desire of living. He told himself that his time had come. Others of his race had paid a great price for the things they had coveted in life. He, too, must follow their example.

He was in Louise's drawing-room when she returned—Louise, with hair and cheeks a little damp, but with a wonderful light in her eyes and with footsteps that seemed to fall upon air.

"Some tea and a bath this moment, Aline!" she called out, as she ran lightly up the stairs. "Never mind about dinner, I am so late. I will have some toast. Be quick!"

"*Madame*—" Aline began.

"Don't bother me about anything now," Louise interrupted. "I will throw my things off while you get the bath ready."

She stepped into her little room, throwing off her cloak as she entered. Then she stopped short, almost upon the threshold. The prince had risen to his feet.

"Eugène!"

He came toward her. Even as he stooped to kiss her fingers, his eyes seemed to take in her disheveled condition, the little patches of color in her cheeks, the radiant happiness which shone in her eyes.

"I am not an unwelcome intruder, I hope," he said. "But how wet you are!"

The fingers which he released fell nervelessly to her side. She stood looking at him as if confronted with a sudden nightmare. It was as if this new-found life were being slowly drained from her veins.

"You are overtired," he murmured, leading her with solicitude toward an easy chair. "One would imagine, from your appearance, that I was the bearer of some terrible tidings. Let me assure you that it is not so."

He spoke with his usual deliberation, but she seemed powerless to recover herself. She was still dazed and white. She sank into the chair and looked at him.

"Nothing, I trust," he went on, "has happened to disturb you?"

"Nothing at all," she declared hastily. "I am tired. I ran up-stairs perhaps a little too quickly. Aline had not told me that there was any one here."

"I had a fancy to see you this afternoon," the prince explained, "and, finding you out, I took the liberty of waiting. If you would rather I went away and came for you later, please do not hesitate to say so."

"Of course not!" she exclaimed. "I do not know why I should have been so silly. Aline, take my coat and veil," she directed, turning to the maid, who was lingering at the other end of the room. "I am not wet. Serve some tea in here. I will have my bath later, when I change to go to the theater."

She spoke bravely, but fear was in her heart. She tried to tell herself that this visit was a coincidence, that it meant nothing, but all the time she knew otherwise.

The door closed behind Aline, and they were alone. The prince, as if anxious to give her time to recover herself, walked to the window and stood for some moments looking out. When he turned around, Louise had at least nerved herself to meet what she felt was imminent.

The prince approached her deliberately. She knew what he was going to say.

"Louise," he began, drawing a chair to her side, "I have found myself thinking a great deal about you during the last few weeks."

She did not interrupt him. She simply waited and watched.

"I have come to a certain determination," he proceeded; "one which, if you will grace it with your approval, will give me great happiness. I ask you to forget certain things which have passed between us. I have come to you to-day to beg you to do me the honor of becoming my wife."

She turned her head very slowly until she was looking him full in the face. Her lips were a little parted, her eyes a little strained. The prince was leaning toward her in a conventional attitude; his words had been spoken simply and in his usual conversational manner. There was something about him, however,

profoundly convincing.

"Your wife!" Louise repeated.

"If you will do me that great honor."

It seemed at first as if her nerves were strained to the breaking-point. The situation was one with which her brain seemed unable to grapple. She set her teeth tightly. Then she had a sudden interlude of wonderful clear-sightedness. She was almost cool.

"You must forgive my surprise, Eugène," she begged. "We have known each other now for some twelve years, have we not?—and I believe that this is the first time you have ever hinted at anything of the sort!"

"One gathers wisdom, perhaps, with the years," he replied. "I am forty-one years old to-day. I have spent the early hours of this afternoon in reflection, and behold the result!"

"You have spoken to me before," she said slowly, "of different things. You have offered me a great deal in life, but never your name. I do not understand this sudden change!"

"Louise," he declared, "if I do not tell you the truth now, you will probably guess it. Besides, this is the one time in their lives when a man and a woman should speak nothing but the truth. It is for fear of losing you—that is why."

Her self-control suddenly gave way. She threw herself back in her chair. She began to laugh and stopped abruptly, the tears streaming from her eyes. The prince leaned forward. He took her hands in his, but she drew them away.

"You are too late, Eugène!" she said. "I almost loved you. I was almost yours to do whatever you liked with. But somehow, somewhere, notwithstanding all your worldly knowledge and mine, we missed it. We do not know the truth about life, you and I—at least you do not, and I did not."

He rose very slowly to his feet. There was no visible change in his face save a slight whitening of the cheeks.

"And the sequel to this?" he asked.

"I have promised to marry John Strangewey," she told him.

"That," he replied, "is impossible! I have a prior claim."

The light of battle flamed suddenly in her eyes. Her nervousness had gone. She was a strong woman, face to face with him now, taller than he, seeming, indeed, to tower over him in the splendor of her anger. She was like a lioness threatened with the loss of the one dear thing.

"Assert it, then!" she cried defiantly. "Do what you will. Go to him this minute, if you have courage enough, if it seems to you well. Claim, indeed! Right! I have the one right every woman in the world possesses—to give herself, body and soul, to the man she loves! That is the only claim and the only right I recognize, and I am giving myself to him, when he wants me, forever!"

She stopped suddenly. Neither of them had heard a discreet knock at the door. Aline had entered with the tea. There was a moment of silence.

"Put it down here by my side, Aline," her mistress ordered, "and show the Prince of Seyre out."

Aline held the door open. For a single moment the prince hesitated. Then he picked up his hat and bowed.

"Perhaps," he said, "this may not be the last word!"

XXXI

Jennings stood with a decanter in his hand, looking resentfully at his master's untasted wine. He shook his head ponderously. Not only was the wine untouched, but the *Cumberland Times* lay unopened upon the table. Grim and severe in his high-backed chair, Stephen Strangewey sat with his eyes fixed upon the curtained window.

"There's nothing wrong with the wine, I hope, sir?" the man asked. "It's not corked or anything, sir?"

"Nothing is the matter with it," Stephen answered. "Bring me my pipe."

Jennings shook his head firmly.

"There's no call for you, sir," he declared, "to drop out of your old habits. You shall have your pipe when you've drunk that glass of port, and not before. Bless me! There's the paper by your side, all unread, and full of news, for I've glanced it through myself. Corn was higher yesterday at Market Ketton, and there's talk of a bad shortage of fodder in some parts."

Stephen raised his glass to his lips and drained its contents.

"Now bring me my pipe, Jennings," he ordered.

The old man was still disposed to grumble.

"Drinking wine like that as if it were some public-house stuff!" he muttered, as he crossed the room, toward the sideboard. "It's more a night, this, to my way of thinking, for drinking a second glass of wine than for shilly-shallying with the first. There's the wind coming across Townley Moor and down the Fells strong enough to blow the rocks out of the ground. It 'minds me of the time Mr. John was out with the Territorials, and they tried the moor for their big guns."

The rain lashed the window-panes, and the wind whistled past the front of the house. Stephen sat quite still, as if listening—it may have been to the storm.

"Well, here's your pipe, sir," Jennings continued, laying it by his master's side, "and your tobacco and the matches. If you'd smoke less and drink a glass or two

more of the right stuff, it would be more to my liking."

Stephen filled his pipe with firm fingers. Then he laid it down, unlit, by his side.

"Bring me back the port, Jennings," he ordered, "and a glass for yourself."

Jennings obeyed promptly. Stephen filled both glasses, and the two men looked at each other as they held them out.

"Here's confusion to all women!" Stephen said, as he raised his to his lips.

"Amen, sir!" Jennings muttered.

They set down the two empty glasses. Stephen lit his pipe. He sat smoking stolidly, blowing out great clouds of smoke. Jennings retreated, coughing resentfully.

"Spoils the taste of good wine, that tobacco do," he snapped. "Good port like that should be left to lie upon the palate, so to speak. Bless me, what's that?"

Above the roar of the wind came another and unmistakable sound. The front door had been opened and shut. There were steps upon the stone floor of the hall —firm, familiar steps.

Jennings, with his mouth open, stood staring at the door. Stephen slowly turned his head. The hand which held his pipe was as firm as a rock, but there was a queer little gleam of expectation in his eyes. Then the door was thrown open and John entered. The rain was dripping from his clothes. He was breathless from his struggle with the elements.

The two other men looked at him fixedly. They both realized the same thing at the same moment—there was no trace of the returned prodigal in John's countenance, or in his buoyant expression. The ten-mile ride seemed to have brought back all his color.

"Master John!" Jennings faltered.

Stephen said nothing. John crossed the room and gripped his brother's hand.

"Wet through to the skin, and starving!" he declared. "I thought I'd find something at Ketton, but it was all I could do to get Gibson, at the George, to lend me a horse. Give me a glass of wine, Jennings. I'll change my clothes—I

expect you've kept them aired."

Not a word of explanation concerning his sudden return, nor did either of the two ask any questions. They set the bell clanging in the stable-yard and found shelter for the borrowed horse. Presently, in dry clothes, John sat down to a plentiful meal. His brother watched him with a grim smile.

"You haven't forgotten how to eat in London, John," he remarked.

"If I had, a ten-mile ride on a night like this would help me to remember! How's the land doing?"

"Things are backward. The snow lay late, and we've had drying winds."

"And the stock?"

"Moderate. We are short of heifers. But you didn't come back from London to ask about the farm."

John pushed back his plate and drew his chair opposite to his brother's.

"I did not," he assented. "I came back to tell you my news."

"I was thinking that might be it," Stephen muttered.

John crossed the room, found his pipe in a drawer, filled it with tobacco, and lit it.

"Old man," he said, as he returned to his place, "it's all very well for you and old Jennings to put your heads together every night and drink confusion to all women; but you know very well that if there are to be any more Strangeweys at Peak Hall, either you or I must marry!"

Stephen moved uneasily in his chair.

"If you're going to marry that woman—" he began.

"I am going to marry Louise Maurel," John interrupted firmly. "Stephen, listen to me for a moment before you say another word, please. It is all settled. She has promised to be my wife. I don't forget what we've been to each other. I don't forget the old name and the old tradition; but I have been fortunate enough to meet a woman whom I love, and I am going to marry her. Don't speak hurriedly, Stephen! Think whatever you will, but keep it to yourself. Some day I shall expect you to give me your hand and tell me you are glad."

Stephen knocked the ashes deliberately from his pipe.

"I will tell you this much now," he said. "I had rather that we Strangeweys died out, that the roof dropped off Peak Hall and the walls stood naked to the sky, than that this woman should be your wife and the mother of your children!"

"Let it go at that, then, Stephen," John replied. "It is enough for me to say that I will not take it ill from you, because you do not know her."

"But I do know her," Stephen answered. "Perhaps she didn't tell you that I paid her a visit?"

"You paid her a visit?"

"Aye, that I did! She wouldn't tell you. There'll be many a thing in life she won't tell you. I went to let her hear from my lips what I thought of her as a wife for you. I told her what I thought of a woman who plays the part of a wanton—"

"Stephen!" John thundered.

"The part of an adulterous wife upon the stage for every man and woman who pay their silver to go and gape at! It seems I did no good—no good, that is, if she has promised to marry you."

John drew a breath. His task was harder, even, than he had imagined. All the time he tried to keep one thought fixed in his mind. Stephen was his elder brother. It was Stephen who had been his guardian and his guide through all his youth. He thought of Stephen's fifty odd years of simple and strenuous living, of his charity, of his strength—that very strength which had kept him in the narrow way, which had kept him from looking to the right or to the left in his walk through life.

"Stephen," John said, "you are growing harder with the years. Was there never a time, when you were younger, when you were my age, when you felt differently toward women?"

"Never, thank Heaven!" Stephen replied. "I was too near the sorrow that fell upon our house when our father died with a broken heart. There were the other two as well—one with a bullet in his brain, the other a drunkard. Maybe, when I was your age, I felt at times what I suppose you feel. Well, I just took it in both hands and strangled it. If you must have a sweetheart, why don't you take the

little fair-haired girl—Sophy, you called her? She'd do you as little harm as any of them."

"Because it is not a sweetheart of that sort I want," John protested vigorously. "I've had the same feelings as most men, I suppose, but I've fought my battle out to the end, only for a different reason. I want a wife and I want children."

"Will she bring you children, that woman?" Stephen asked bitterly.

"I hope so," John asserted simply. "I believe so."

There was a moment's silence. Stephen lit his pipe and puffed steadily at it, his eyes fixed upon the log that blazed on the hearth.

"There is a muzzle upon my mouth," he said presently. "There are words close to my lips which would part you and me, so I'll say no more. Go your own way, John. I'll ask you but one more question, and you must take that as man from man, brother from brother. How old is she?"

"Twenty-seven."

"And she has been an actress, playing parts like the one I saw her in, for how long?"

"Since she was nineteen," John replied.

"And you believe she's a good woman?"

John gripped at the sides of his chair. With a tremendous effort he kept the torrent of words from his lips.

"I know she is," he answered calmly.

"Has she told you so?"

"A man has no need to put such a question to the woman he cares for."

"Then you haven't asked her?"

John laid down his pipe and rose to his feet. He gripped his brother by the arm.

"Stephen," he said, "it's a hard fight for me, this, to sit face to face with you and know what you are thinking, with the love for this woman strong and sweet

in my heart. You don't understand, Stephen; you're a long way from understanding. But you are my brother. Don't make it too hard! I am not a child. Believe in me. I would not take any woman to be my wife, and the mother of my children, who was not a good woman. I am off to-morrow morning, Stephen. I came all the way just on an impulse, because I felt that I must tell you myself. It would be one of the best things in the world to ride that ten miles back again to-morrow morning, to have told you how things are, to have felt your hand in mine, and to know that there was no shadow of misunderstanding between us!"

Stephen, too, rose to his feet. They stood together before the fire.

"Man to man, John," Stephen said, as he gripped his brother by the hands, "I love you this moment as I always have done and as I always shall do. And if this thing must be between us, I'll say but one last word, and you'll take it from me, even though I am the only man on earth you'd take it from. Before you marry, ask her!"

XXXII

John went back to town, telling himself that all had gone as well as he had expected. He had done his duty. He had told Stephen his news, and they had parted friends. Yet all the time he was conscious of an undercurrent of disconcerting thoughts.

Louise met him at the station, and he fancied that her expression, too, although she welcomed him gaily enough, was a little anxious.

"Well?" she asked, as she took his arm and led him to where her motor-car was waiting. "What did that terrible brother of yours say?"

John made a little grimace.

"It might have been worse," he declared. "Stephen wasn't pleased, of course. He hates women like poison, and he always will. That is because he doesn't know very much about them, and because he will insist upon dwelling upon certain unhappy incidents of our family history."

"I shall never forget the morning he came to call on me," Louise sighed. "He threatened all sorts of terrible things if I did not give you up."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" John asked.

"I thought it might worry you," she replied, "and it couldn't do any good. He believed he was doing his duty. John, you are sure about yourself, aren't you?"

"Come and have tea with me in my rooms, and I'll tell you," he laughed.

"Just what I'd planned to do," she assented, with a sigh of content. "It's too late to go home and get back to the theater comfortably."

"The theater!" John murmured, a few minutes later, when they were seated in his comfortable little sitting room and he had ordered tea. "Do you know that I grudge those three or four hours of your day?"

"I believe I do, too," she admitted; "and yet a little while ago it was my only pleasure in life. Don't sit over there, please! You are much too far away. Closer still! Let me feel your arms. You are strong and brave, aren't you, John? You

would not let any one take me away from you?"

He was a little startled by the earnestness of her words. She seemed pale and fragile, her eyes larger and deeper than usual, and her mouth tremulous. She was like a child with the shadow of some fear hanging over her. He laughed and held her tightly to him.

"There is nothing that could take you away—you know that quite well! There is nobody in the world whom you need fear for a single moment. If you have troubles, I am here to share them. If you have enemies, you can leave me to dispose of them."

"I think," she murmured, "that I am in an emotional frame of mind to-day. I am not often like this, you know. I woke this morning feeling so happy; and then, all of a sudden, I couldn't somehow believe in it—in myself. I felt it slip away. You won't let it slip away, John?"

"Never a chance!" he promised confidently. "Look at me. Do I seem like a person to be easily got rid of? What you need is a holiday, and you need it badly. We haven't made any plans yet, have we? I wonder whether we could break your contract at the theater!"

"We must talk to Graillot," she said. "There is a little Frenchwoman over here now. I once saw her act in Paris, and I am sure she could play *Thérèse* wonderfully. But don't let's talk seriously any longer. Just let us sit here and talk nonsense!"

"Have you told any of your friends yet, Louise—the prince, for instance?"

He had asked this question on his way across the room to ring the bell. There was no reply, and when he turned around, a moment or two later, he was almost frightened. Louise was sitting quite still, but the color seemed to have been drained from her cheeks. Her eyes were filled with some expression which he did not wholly understand. He only knew that they were calling him to her side, and he promptly obeyed the summons. Her head fell upon his shoulder, her arms were locked about his neck.

"John," she sobbed, "I do not know what is the matter with me. I am hysterical. Don't ask me any questions. Don't talk to me. Hold me like you are doing now, and listen. I love you, John—do you understand?—I love you!"

Her lips sought his and clung to them. A queer little wave of passion seemed

to have seized her. Half crying, half laughing, she pressed her face against his. "I do not want to act to-night. I do not want to play, even to the most wonderful audience in the world. I do not want to shake hands with many hundreds of people at that hateful reception. I think I want nothing else in the world but you!"

She lay, for a moment, passive in his arms. He smoothed her hair and kissed her tenderly. Then he led her back to her place upon the couch. Her emotional mood, while it flattered him in a sense, did nothing to quiet the little demons of unrest that pulled, every now and then, at his heart-strings.

"What is this reception?" he asked.

She made a little grimace.

"It is a formal welcome from the English stage to the French company that has come over to play at the new French theater," she told him. "Sir Edward and I are to receive them. You will come, will you not?"

"I haven't an invitation," he told her.

"Invitation? I invite you. I am the hostess of the evening."

"Then I am not likely to refuse, am I?" he asked, smiling. "Shall I come to the theater?"

"Come straight to the reception at the Whitehall Rooms," she begged. "Sir Edward is calling for me, and Graillot will go down with us. Later, if you care to, you can drive me home."

"Don't you think," he suggested, "that it would be rather a good opportunity to announce our engagement?"

"Not to-night!" she pleaded. "You know, I cannot seem to believe it myself except when I am with you and we are alone. It seems too wonderful after all these years. Do you know, John, that I am nearly thirty?"

He laughed.

"How pathetic! All the more reason, I should say, why we should let people know about it as soon as possible."

"There is no particular hurry," she said, a little nervously. "Let me get used to it myself. I don't think you will have to wait long. Everything I have been used to

doing and thinking seems to be crumbling up around me. Last night I even hated my work, or at least part of it."

His eyes lit up with genuine pleasure.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear you say that," he declared. "I don't hate your work—I've got over that. I don't think I am narrow about it. I admire Graillot, and his play is wonderful. But I think, and I always shall think, that the dénouement in that third act is damnable!"

She nodded understandingly.

"I am beginning to realize how you must feel," she confessed. "We won't talk about it any more now. Drive me to the theater, will you? I want to be there early to-night, just to get everything ready for changing afterward."

The telephone-bell rang as they were leaving the room. John put the receiver to his ear and a moment later held it away.

"It is Sophy," he announced. "Shall I tell them to send her up?"

"Sophy, indeed!" Louise exclaimed. "I thought she was in the country, on tour, and was not expected back until to-morrow."

"I thought she went away for a week," John said, "but there she is, waiting down-stairs."

Louise hesitated for a moment. Then she came over to John with a tremulous little smile at the corners of her lips.

"Dear," she said, "I am in a strange frame of mind to-day. I don't want even to see Sophy. Tell them to send her up here. She can wait for you while you take me out the other way."

"May I tell her?" John asked, as he rang for the lift. "She has been such a good little pal!"

Once more Louise seemed to hesitate. A vague look of trouble clouded her face.

"Perhaps you had better, dear," she agreed spiritlessly. "Only tell her not to breathe it to another soul. It is to be our secret for a little time—not long—just a day or two longer."

The gates of the lift swung open, and John raised her fingers to his lips.

"It is for you to say, dear," he promised.

When he came back to his room, Sophy was curled up on the couch with a cigarette between her lips. She looked at him severely.

"I am losing faith in you," she declared. "There are signs of a hurried departure from this room. There is a distinct perfume of roses about the place. You have always told me that I am the only visitor of my sex you allow here. I am fiercely jealous! Tell me what this tea-tray and the empty cups mean?"

"It means Louise," he answered, smiling. "She has just this moment gone away."

Sophy sighed with an air of mock relief.

"Louise I suppose I must tolerate," she said. "Fancy her coming here to tea with you, though!"

"I have been up to Cumberland for a day," he told her, "and Louise came to meet me at the station."

"How is your angel brother?" she asked. "Did he ask after me?"

"He did mention you," John confessed. "I don't remember any direct message, though. You want a cocktail, of course, don't you?"

"Dying for it," she admitted. "I have had such a dull week! We've been playing in wretched little places, and last night the show went bust. The manager presented us with our fares home this morning. We were only down in Surrey, so here I am."

"Well, I'm glad to see you back again," John told her, after he had ordered the cocktails. "Louise has been quite lost without you, too."

"I didn't want to go away," she sighed, "but I do get so tired of not working! Although my part wasn't worth anything, I hated it being cut out. It makes one feel so aimless. One has too much time to think."

He laughed at her, pleasantly but derisively.

"Time to think!" he repeated. "Why, I have never seen you serious for five minutes in your life, except when you've been adding up Louise's housekeeping-

books!"

She threw her cigarette into the grate, swung round toward him, and looked steadily into his face.

"Haven't you?" she said. "I can be. I often am. It isn't my correct pose, though. People don't like me serious. If they take me out or entertain me, they think they are being cheated if I am not continually gay. You see what it is to have a reputation for being amusing! Louise keeps me by her side to talk nonsense to her, to keep her from being depressed. Men take me out because I am bright, because I save them the trouble of talking, and they don't feel quite so stupid with me as with another woman. My young man at Bath wants to marry me for the same reason. He thinks it would be so pleasant to have me always at hand to chatter nonsense. That is why you like me, too. You have been pitched into a strange world. You are not really in touch with it. You like to be with some one who will talk nonsense and take you a little way out of it. I am just a little fool, you see, a harmless little creature in cap and bells whom every one amuses himself with."

John stared at her for a moment, only half understanding.

"Why, little girl," he exclaimed, "I believe you're in earnest!"

"I am in deadly earnest," she assured him, her voice breaking a little. "Don't take any notice of me. I have had a wretched week, and it's a rotten world, anyway."

There was a knock at the door, and the waiter entered with the cocktails.

"Come," John said, as he took one from the tray, "I will tell you some news that will give you something to think about. I hope that you will be glad—I feel sure that you will. I want you to be the first to drink our healths—Louise's and mine!"

The glass slipped through her fingers and fell upon the carpet. She never uttered even an exclamation. John was upon his knees, picking up the broken glass.

"My fault," he insisted. "I am so sorry, Sophy. I am afraid some of the stuff has gone on your frock. Looks as if you'll have to take me out shopping. I'll ring for another cocktail."

He rose to his feet and stepped toward the bell. Then it suddenly occurred to him that as yet she had not spoken. He turned quickly around.

"Sophy," he exclaimed, "what is the matter? Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

She was sitting bolt upright upon the couch, her fingers buried in the cushions, her eyes closed. He moved quickly across toward her.

"I say, Sophy, what's wrong?" he asked hastily. "Aren't you well?"

She waved him away.

"Don't touch me," she begged. "I went without my lunch—nearly missed the train, as it was. I was feeling a little queer when I came, and dropping that glass gave me a shock. Let me drink yours, may I?"

He handed it to her, and she drained its contents. Then she smiled up at him weakly.

"What a shame!" she said. "Just as you were telling me your wonderful news! I can scarcely believe it—you and Louise!"

John sat down beside her.

"Louise does not want it talked about for a day or two," he observed. "We have not made any plans yet."

"Is Louise going to remain upon the stage?"

"Probably, if she wishes it," he replied; "but I want to travel first for a year or so, before we settle definitely upon anything. I did not think that you would be so much surprised, Sophy."

"Perhaps I am not really," she admitted. "One thinks of a thing as being possible, for a long time, and when it actually comes—well, it takes you off your feet just the same. You know," she added slowly, "there are no two people in this world so far apart in their ways as you and Louise."

"That is true from one point of view," he confessed. "From another, I think that there are no two people so close together. Of course, it seems wonderful to me, and I suppose it does to you, Sophy, that she should care for a man of my type. She is so brilliant and so talented, such a woman of this latter-day world,

the world of which I am about as ignorant as a man can be. Perhaps, after all, that is the real explanation of it. Each of us represents things new to the other."

"Did you say that no one has been told yet—no one at all?"

"No one except Stephen," John assented. "That is why I went up to Cumberland, to tell him."

"You have not told the prince?" Sophy asked, dropping her voice a little. "Louise has not told him?"

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask?" John inquired, looking into Sophy's face.

"I don't know," she answered. "It just occurred to me. He and Louise have known each other for such a long time, and I wondered what he might have to say about it."

John laid his hands upon the poisonous thoughts that had stolen once more into his blood, and told himself that he had strangled them. He swept them away and glanced at his watch.

"Let's have some dinner before I change, down in the grill-room—in a quarter of an hour's time, say. I don't want to be at the theater before the second act."

Sophy hesitated. There was a hard feeling in her throat, a burning at the back of her eyes. She was passionately anxious to be alone, yet she could not bring herself to refuse. She could not deny herself, or tear herself at once away from the close companionship which seemed, somehow or other, to have crept up between herself and John, and to have become the one thing that counted in life.

"I'd love to," she said, "but remember I've been traveling. Look at me! I must either go home, or you must let me go into your room—"

"Make yourself at home," John invited. "I have three letters to write, and some telephone messages to answer."

Sophy lit another cigarette and strolled jauntily through his suite of rooms. When she was quite sure that she was alone, however, she closed the door behind her, dropped her cigarette, and staggered to the window. She stood there, gazing down into an alleyway six stories below, where the people passing back and forth looked like dwarf creatures.

One little movement forward! No one could have been meant to bear pain like this. She set her teeth.

"It would be so soon over!"

Then she suddenly found that she could see nothing; the people below were blurred images. A rush of relief had come to her. She sank into the nearest chair and sobbed.

XXXIII

The reception in honor of the little company of French tragedians, at which almost the whole of the English stage and a sprinkling of society people were present, was a complete success. Louise made a charming hostess, and Sir Edward more than ever justified his reputation for saying the right thing to the right person at the right moment. The rooms were crowded with throngs of distinguished people, who all seemed to have plenty to say to one another.

The only person, perhaps, who found himself curiously ill at ease was John. He heard nothing but French on all sides of him—a language which he read with some facility, but which he spoke like a schoolboy. He had been wandering about for more than an hour before Louise discovered him. She at once left her place and crossed the room to where he was standing by the wall.

"Cheer up!" she begged, with a delightful smile. "I am afraid that you are being bored to death. Will you not come and be presented to our guests?"

"For goodness' sake, no!" John implored. "I have never seen one of them act, and my French is appalling. I am all right, dear. It's quite enough pleasure to see you looking so beautiful, and to think that I am going to be allowed to drive you home afterward."

Louise looked into a neighboring mirror, and gazed critically at her own reflected image. The lines of her figure, fine and subtle, seemed traced by the finger of some great sculptor underneath her faultlessly made white-satin gown. She studied her white neck and shoulders and her perfectly shaped head, seeking everywhere for some detail with which an impartial critic might find fault.

She had a curious feeling that at that precise moment she had reached the zenith of her power and her charm. Her audience at the theater had been wonderfully sympathetic, had responded with rare appreciation to every turn of her voice, to every movement and gesture. The compliments, too, which she had been receiving from the crowds who had bent over her fingers that night had been no idle words. Many distinguished men had looked at her with a light in their eyes which women understand so well—a light questioning yet respectful, which provokes yet begs for something in the way of response.

She was conscious, acutely conscious, of the atmosphere she had created around her. She was glorying in the subtle outward signs of it. She was in love with herself; in love, too, with this delightful new feeling of loving. It would have given her more joy than anything else in the world, in that moment of her triumph, to have passed her arm through John's, to have led him up to them all, and to have said:

"After all, you see, I am a very simple sort of woman. I have done just the sort of simple thing that other women do, and I am glad of it—very glad and very happy!"

Her lips moved to the music of her thoughts. John leaned toward her.

"Did you say anything?" he asked.

"You dear stupid, of course I did not! Or if I did, it was just one of those little whispers to oneself which mean nothing, yet which count for so much. Can I not do anything to make you enjoy yourself more? I shall have to go back to my guests now. We are expecting a royal personage, and those two dears who keep so close to my side do not speak a word of English."

"Please go back, dear," John begged promptly. "It was nice of you to come at all. And here's Sophy at last, thank goodness! Now I am all right."

She laid her fingers upon his arm.

"You must take me back to my place," she said. "Then you can go and talk nonsense to Sophy. I won't even ask you what she said when you told her the news. I suppose you did tell her?"

"Of course!"

She glanced at him swiftly. His reply had sounded a little lame; but they were back in the crowd now, and she dismissed him with a little nod. He made his way quickly to the spot where he had seen Sophy. To his disappointment, she had disappeared. Graillot, however, came up and seized him by the arm.

"Still playing the moth, my young friend?" he exclaimed. "Aren't the wings sufficiently burned yet?"

"I am afraid it's become a permanent rôle," John replied, as the two men shook hands. "Where have you been all these weeks, and why haven't you been to see

me?"

"Paris, my dear young friend—Paris and life! Now I am back again—I am not sure that I know why. I came over with these French people, to see them start their theater. Forgive me, I have not paid my respects to our hostess. We shall meet again presently."

He strolled off, and a few minutes later John found Sophy.

"How late you are!" he grumbled.

"I couldn't help it," she answered. "This is the only evening dress I possess at present, and I had to mend it before it was decent to come out in. Why are you wandering about alone? Hasn't Louise been kind to you?"

"She has been charming," John declared promptly, "but she is surrounded with all sorts of people I don't know. I can't help her. For one thing, my French is absurd. Then they are all talking about things which I don't understand in the least."

Sophy remained silent for a moment. Then she took John's arm and led him to the buffet.

"Give me an ice and a cigarette, will you, please? You are a dear, impractical person, but you are as much out of this world as a human being well could be!"

John waited upon her without any further remark. The Prince of Seyre, passing through, bowed to them. John looked after his retreating figure. An irresistible impulse seized him.

"Sophy," he asked, sitting down by her side, "tell me, why have the prince and Louise always been such great friends?"

Sophy looked steadfastly at her ice.

"I suppose because the prince is a very clever and cultivated person," she said. "He has been of great assistance to Louise several times. It was he who financed Miles Faraday when he put on this play of Graillot's. Graillot hasn't a penny, you know, and poor Miles was almost broke after three failures."

"That was just an investment," John remarked irritably. "He will get his money back again."

"Of course," Sophy agreed. "I think the prince generally manages to get value for what he does in life."

"You don't think Louise ever thought of caring for him, do you?" John persisted.

Sophy paused until she had lit a cigarette. The expression in her face, when she looked up at John, irritated him vaguely. It was as if she were talking to a child.

"I think," she said, "you had better ask Louise that question yourself, don't you?"

He asked it an hour or so later, when at last the party of guests had taken their leave, and, somewhat to the well-bred surprise of the one or two friends who lingered, Louise had beckoned to John to take her out to her car. Her hand had sought his at once, her head rested a little wearily but very contentedly upon his shoulder.

"Louise dear," he began, "I asked Sophy a question to-night which I ought to have asked you. Quite properly, she told me so."

"Nice little soul, Sophy!" Louise murmured. "What was it, John?"

"Once or twice I have wondered," he went on, "whether you have ever cared in any sort of way, or come near to caring, for the Prince of Seyre?"

For a moment she made no movement. Then she turned her head and looked at him. The sleepy content had gone from her eyes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Isn't it quite a natural question from a jealous man who believes that every one who sees you must be in love with you? You have seen a great deal of the prince, haven't you, in the last few years? He understands your art. There are many things that you and he have in common."

Louise was looking out of the window at the thin stream of people still passing along Piccadilly. She seemed suddenly to have become only the shadow

of her former brilliant self.

"I think that once—perhaps twice," she confessed, "I came very near to caring for him."

"And now?"

"And now," she repeated, suddenly gripping John's hands, "I tell you that I am very much nearer hating him. So much for the prince! In ten minutes we shall be at home, and you are such a dear stupid about coming in. You must try to say all the nice things in the world to me quickly—in ten minutes!"

"How shall I begin?" he whispered.

She leaned once more toward him.

"You don't need any hints," she murmured. "You're really quite good at it!"

XXXIV

The ten minutes passed very much too quickly. She was gone, and John, thrilled though he was through all his senses by the almost passionate fervor of her leave-taking, found himself once more confronted by that little black demon. He sat up in the car, which bore him quickly back toward his rooms; and although the sense of her presence, the delicate perfume, the empty place by his side, even a fallen flower from her gown, were still there, the unrest seemed sharper.

There was something about all of them, all these people whom he knew to be his friends, which seemed to him to savor of a conspiracy. One by one they flitted through his brain—Graillot's covert warning; Sophy's plaintive, almost fearful doubts; the prince's subtle yet cynical silence; and behind it all, Stephen's brutal and outspoken words. There was nothing that could be put into definite shape—just the ghost of torturing, impossible thoughts. John told himself that it must be ended. Even though the words should blister his tongue with shame, they must be spoken.

A moment later he hated himself for the thought. He set his teeth, filled his thought with the glory of her presence, and crushed those demoniacal suggestions to the back of his brain. He was in no humor to go home, however. Changing the order he had first given to the chauffeur, he was driven instead to a small Bohemian club which he had joined at Graillot's instigation. He had a vague hope that he might find the great dramatist there. There were no signs of him, however, in the smoking room, or any one else whom John knew.

He threw himself into an easy chair and ordered a whisky-and-soda. Two men close at hand were writing at desks; others were lounging about, discussing the evening's reception. One man, sitting upon the table, a recognized authority, was treating the company to a fluent dissertation upon modern actresses, winding up by contrasting Louise Maurel's style with that of her chief French rival. John found himself listening with pleased interest. The man's opinion was certainly not unfavorable to Louise.

"It is only in the finer shades of emotionalism," the critic declared, "that these French actresses get at us a little more completely even than Louise Maurel. Do

you know the reason? I'll tell you. It is because they live the life. They have a dozen new emotions in a season. They make a cult of feeling. They use their brains to dissect their passions. They cut their own life into small pieces and give us the result without concealment. That is where they score, if anywhere. This Mme. Latrobe, who opens over here to-morrow night, is living at the present moment with Jean Tourbet. She had an affair with that Italian poet in the summer, so they tell me. She was certainly in Madrid in October with Bretoldi, the sculptor. These men are all great artists. Think what she must have learned from associating with them! Now Louise Maurel, so far as we know, has never had but one lover, the Prince of Seyre, and has been faithful to him all the time."

It was out at last! John had heard it spoken in plain words. The black demon upon which his hand had lain so heavily, was alive now, without a doubt, jeering at him, mocking at him—alive and self-assertive in the sober words of the elderly, well-bred man who lounged upon the table.

For a moment or two John was stunned. A wild impulse assailed him to leap up and confront them all, to choke the lie back down the throat of the man who had uttered it. Every nerve in his body was tingling with the desire for action. The stupor of his senses alone kept him motionless, and a strange, incomprehensible clarity of thought. He realized exactly how things were. This man had not spoken idly, or as a scandalmonger. He had spoken what he had accepted as a fact, what other people believed.

John rose to his feet and made his way toward the door. His face showed little sign of disturbance. He even nodded to some men whom he knew slightly. As he passed down the stairs, he met Graillot. Then once more the self-control became in danger. He seized the Frenchman savagely by the arm.

"Come this way," he said, leading him toward the card-room. "Come in here! I want to speak to you."

He locked the door—a most unheard-of and irregular proceeding. Graillot felt the coming of the storm.

"Well!" he exclaimed grimly. "Trouble already, eh? I see it in your face, young man. Out with it!"

John—who had won a hard match at rackets a few days before against a more experienced opponent simply because of his perfect condition—was breathing hard. There was a dull patch of color in his cheek, drops of sweat stood upon his

forehead. He controlled his voice with difficulty. Its tone was sharp and unfamiliar.

"I was sitting in the smoking room there, a few moments ago," he began, jerking his head toward the door. "There were some men talking—decent fellows, not dirty scandalmongers. They spoke of Louise Maurel."

Graillot nodded gravely. He knew very well what was coming.

"Well?"

"They spoke, also, of the Prince of Seyre."

"Well?"

John felt his throat suddenly dry. The words he would have spoken choked him. He banged his fist upon the table by the side of which they were standing.

"Look here, Graillot," he cried, almost piteously, "you know it is not true, not likely to be true! Can't you say so?"

"Stop, my young friend!" the Frenchman interrupted. "I know nothing. It is a habit of mine to know nothing when people make suggestions of that sort. I make no inquiries. I accept life and people as I find them."

"But you don't believe that such a thing could be possible?"

"Why not?" Graillot asked steadily.

John could do no more than mumble a repetition of his words. The world was falling away from him. He was dimly conscious that one of the engravings upon the wall opposite was badly hung. For the rest, Graillot's face, stern, yet pitying, seemed to loom like the features of a giant, eclipsing everything else.

"I will not discuss this matter with you, my friend. I will only ask you to remember the views of the world in which we live. Louise Maurel is an artist, a great artist. If there has been such an affair as you suggest, between her and any man, if it were something which appealed to her affections, it is my opinion that she would not hesitate. You seem to think it an outrageous thing that the prince should have been her lover. To be perfectly frank, I do not. I should be very much more surprised at her marriage."

John made his escape somehow. He remembered opening the door, but he had

no recollection of reaching the street. A few minutes later, however, he found himself striding down Piccadilly toward Hyde Park Corner.

The night was warm, and there were still plenty of people about. A woman touched his arm; her hackneyed greeting filled him with inexpressible horror. He stared at her, barely conscious of what he was doing, filled with an indescribable sickness of heart.

"You look about done up," she said in friendly fashion. "Come round to my flat and have a drink. You needn't stay if you don't want to."

He muttered something and passed on. A moment or two later, however, he retraced his steps. Out of the horror of his thought had come an irresistible impulse. He slipped some gold into her hand.

"Please take this and go home," he enjoined. "Go home at once! Get out of the streets and hide yourself."

She stared at him and at the money.

"Why, I've only just come out," she protested. "All the same, I'm dead tired. I'll go. Walk with me, won't you? You look as if you wanted looking after."

"I'm all right," he answered. "You go home."

She slipped the money carefully into her purse, and hailed a taxi.

"You shall have your own way," she declared. "Can't I drop you anywhere?"

He raised his hat, and, once more swinging around, passed on his way. Presently he found himself in the street where Louise lived. He looked at his watch—it was twenty minutes to three o'clock.

The house was in solemn darkness. He stood and looked up at it. There was no sign of a light, not even from the top windows. Its silence seemed to him more than the silence of sleep. He found himself wondering whether it was really inhabited, whether there were really human souls in this quiet corner, waiting peacefully for the dawn, heedless of the torment which was tearing his soul to pieces. Perhaps, behind that drawn blind, Louise herself was awake. Perhaps she was thinking, looking back into the past, wondering about the future. He took a step toward the gate.

"Are you going in there, sir?"

He turned quickly around. A policeman had flashed a lantern upon him. John suddenly became intensely matter-of-fact.

"No," he replied. "It is too late, I am afraid. I see that they have all gone to bed. Any chance of a taxi about here?"

"Most likely you'll find one at the corner," the policeman pointed out. "There's a rank there, and one or two of them generally stay late. Very much obliged, sir."

John had slipped a coin into the man's hand. Then he walked deliberately away. He found a taxicab and was driven toward the Milan. He let down both the windows and leaned out. He was conscious of a wild desire to keep away from his rooms—to spend the night anywhere, anyhow, sooner than go back to the little apartment where Louise had sat with him only a few hours ago, and had given herself into his arms. Every pulse in his body was tingling. He was fiercely awake, eager for motion, action, excitement of any sort.

Suddenly he remembered the night-club to which he had been introduced by Sophy on the first night of his arrival in London. The address, too, was there quite clearly in his disordered brain. He leaned out of the cab and repeated it to the driver.

XXXV

The little place was unexpectedly crowded when John entered, after having handed his hat and coat to a *vestiaire*. A large supper-party was going on at the further end, and the dancing space was smaller than usual. The *maître d'hôtel* was escorting John to a small table in a distant corner, which had just been vacated, when the latter heard his name suddenly called by a familiar voice. Sophy, who had been dancing, abandoned her partner precipitately and came hurrying up to John with outstretched hands.

"John!" she exclaimed. "You, of all people in the world! What do you mean by coming here alone at this time of night? Fancy not telling me! Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing," he replied. "I really don't exactly know why I am here. I simply didn't want to go to bed."

She looked at him closely. It was clear that she was a little puzzled at his appearance.

"If it were not you, John," she declared, "I should say that you had been having more to drink than was good for you!"

"Then you would be very wrong," John assured her, "because I haven't had anything at all. I have come here to get something. Can't you come and sit with me?"

"Of course!" she assented eagerly. "The prince is giving a supper-party at the other end of the room there. We all came on together from the reception. Let us get away to your corner quickly, or they will see you and make you go and join them. I would much rather have you to myself. The people here seem so stupid to-night!"

John stood still, and made no movement toward the table which the *maître d'hôtel* was smilingly preparing for them.

"Where is the prince?" he asked.

Sophy, struck by something in his voice, swung around and looked at him.

Then she thrust both her arms through his, clasped her two hands together, and led him firmly away. A glimmering of the truth was beginning to dawn upon her.

"Tell me where you have been since you left the reception," she insisted, when at last they were seated together.

"Wait till I have ordered some wine," he said.

A waiter served them with champagne. When John's glass was filled, he drained its contents. Sophy watched him with surprise. She came a little closer to him.

"John," she whispered, "you must tell me—do you hear? You must tell me everything! Did you take Louise home?"

"Yes."

"What happened, then? You didn't quarrel with her?"

"Nothing at all happened," he assured her. "We parted the best of friends. It wasn't that."

"Then what? Remember that I am your friend, John dear. Tell me everything."

He poured himself more wine and drank it.

"I will tell you," he assented. "I went to a little club I belong to on the Adelphi Terrace. I sat down in the smoking room. There was no one there I knew. Some men were talking. They had been to the reception to-night. They were comparing French actresses and English. They spoke first of the French woman, Latrobe, and her lovers; then of Louise. They spoke quite calmly, like men discussing history. They compared the two actresses, they compared their lives. Latrobe, they said, had lovers by the score—Louise only one."

Sophy's hand stole into his. She was watching the twisting of his features. She understood so well the excitement underneath.

"I think I can guess," she whispered. "Don't hurt yourself telling me. Something was said about the prince!"

His eyes blazed down upon her.

"You, too?" he muttered. "Does the whole world know of it and speak as if it did not matter? Sophy, is it true? Speak out! Don't be afraid of hurting me. You

call yourself my friend. I've been down, looking at the outside of her house. I dared not go in. There's a fire burning in my soul! Tell me if it is true!"

"You must not ask me that question, John," she begged. "How should I know? Besides, these things are so different in our world, the world you haven't found out much about yet. Supposing it were true, John," she went on, "remember that it was before you knew her. Supposing it should be true, remember this—your idea of life is too absurd. Is one creed made to fit human beings who may differ in a million different ways? A woman may be as good as any ever born into the world, and yet take just a little love into her life, if she be true and faithful in doing it. I don't believe there is a dearer or sweeter woman breathing than Louise, but one must have love. Don't I know it? A man may be strong enough to live without it, but a woman—never!"

The skirts of the women brushed their table as they danced, the rhythm of the music rose and fell above the murmur of laughter and conversation. John looked around the room, and a sort of despair crept in upon him. It was no good! He had come to London to understand; he understood nothing. He was made of the wrong fiber. If only he could change himself! If it were not too late! If he could make himself like other men!

He turned and glanced at his companion. Sophy was looking very sweet and very wistful. The warm touch of her fingers was grateful. Her sympathy was like some welcome flower in a wilderness. His heart ached with a new desire. If only he could make himself different! If only he could stretch out his hand for the flowers which made the lives of other men so sweet!

"I must not ask you any more questions, Sophy," he said. "You are her friend, and you have spoken very sweetly. To-morrow I will go and see her."

"And to-night, forget it all," she pleaded. "Wipe it out of your memory. Louise and your future belong to to-morrow. To-night she is not here, and I am. Even if you are furiously in love with her, there isn't any harm in your being just a little nice to me. Give me some champagne; and I want some caviar sandwiches!"

"I wonder why you are so good to me, Sophy!" he exclaimed, as he gave the order to a waiter. "You ought either to marry your young man down at Bath, or to have a sweetheart of your own, a companion, some one quite different."

"How different?"

"Some one who cared for you as you deserve to be cared for, and whom you cared for, too."

"I cannot take these things as lightly as I used to," she answered a little sadly. "Something has come over me lately—I don't know what it is—but I seem to have lost my taste for flirtations. John, don't look up, don't turn round! I have been afraid of the prince all the evening. When you came in, I fancied that you had been drinking. When the prince asked me something about you, an hour or so ago, I knew that he had. I saw him like it once before, about a year ago. Don't take any notice of him! Don't talk to him, if you can help it!"

John was scarcely conscious of her words. A new glow of excitement seemed to be taking entire possession of him, to be thrilling his blood, to be shining out of his eyes. He rose slowly to his feet. It was as if he were being drawn forward out of himself to meet some coming challenge.

Toward their table the prince was slowly making his way, skilfully avoiding the dancers, yet looking neither to the right nor to the left. His eyes were fastened upon John. If he had been drinking, as Sophy suggested, there were few signs of it. His walk was steady; his bearing, as usual, deliberate and distinguished.

He came to a standstill beside them. Sophy's fingers clutched at the tablecloth. The prince looked from one to the other.

"You have robbed me of a guest, Mr. Strangewey," he remarked; "but I bear you no ill-will. It is very seldom that one sees you in these haunts of dissipation."

"It is a gala night with me," John replied, his tone raised no more than usual, but shaking with some new quality. "Drink a glass of wine with me, prince," he invited, taking the bottle from the ice-pail and filling a tumbler upon the table. "Wish me luck, won't you? I am engaged to be married!"

"I wish you happiness with all my heart," the prince answered, holding his glass up. "May I not know the name of the lady?"

"No doubt you are prepared for the news," John told him. "Miss Maurel has promised to become my wife."

The prince's hand was as steady as a rock. He raised his glass to his lips.

"I drink to you both with the greatest pleasure," he said, looking John full in the face. "It is a most remarkable coincidence. To-night is the anniversary of the night when Louise Maurel pledged herself to me in somewhat different fashion!"

John's frame seemed for a moment to dilate, and fire flashed from his eyes.

"Will you be good enough to explain those words?" he demanded.

The prince bowed. He glanced toward Sophy.

"Since you insist," he replied. "To-night, then, let me tell you, is the anniversary of the night when Louise Maurel consented to become my mistress!"

What followed came like a thunder-clap. The prince reeled back, his hand to his mouth, blood dropping upon the tablecloth from his lips, where John had struck him. He made a sudden spring at his assailant. Sophy, shrieking, leaped to her feet. Every one else in the place seemed paralyzed with wonder.

John seized the prince by the throat, and held him for a moment at arm's length. Then he lifted him off his feet as one might lift a child from the floor. Holding his helpless victim in a merciless grip, he carried him across the room and deliberately flung him over the table toward his empty chair.

There was a crash of glass and crockery which rang through the momentarily hushed room. The dancers had stopped in their places, the bow of the violinist lay idle upon the strings of his instrument. The waiters were all standing about like graven images. Then, as the prince fell, there was a shout, and all was pandemonium. They rushed to where he was lying motionless, a ghastly sight, across the wreck of his flower-strewn supper-table.

Sophy held John by the arm, clutching it hysterically, striving to drag him away. But to John the room was empty. He stood there, a giant, motionless figure, his muscles still taut, his face tense, his eyes aflame, glaring down at the prostrate figure of the man on whom he had wreaked the accumulated fury of those last days and weeks of madness.

XXXVI

Toward nine o'clock on the following morning John rose from a fitful sleep and looked around him. Even before he could recall the events of the preceding night he felt that there was a weight pressing upon his brain, a miserable sense of emptiness in life, a dull feeling of bewilderment. Although he had no clear recollection of getting there, he realized that he was in his own sitting room, and that he had been asleep upon the couch. He saw, too, that it was morning, for a ray of sunlight lay across the carpet.

As he struggled to his feet, he saw with a little shock that he was not alone. Sophy Gerard was curled up in his easy chair, still in evening clothes, her cloak drawn closely around her, as if she were cold. Her head had fallen back. She, too, was asleep. At the sound of his movement, however, she opened her eyes and looked at him for a moment with a puzzled stare. Then she jumped to her feet.

"Why, we have both been asleep!" she murmured, a little weakly.

At the sound of her voice it all came back to him, a tangled, hideous nightmare. He sat down again upon the couch and held his head between his hands.

"How did I come here?" he asked. "I can't remember!"

She hesitated. He answered the unspoken question in her eyes.

"I remember everything that happened at the club," he went on slowly. "Is the prince dead?"

She shook her head.

"Of course not! He was hurt, though, and there was a terrible scene of confusion in the room. The people crowded around him, and I managed, somehow, to drag you away. The manager helped us. To tell the truth, he was only too anxious for you to get away before the police arrived. He was so afraid of anything getting into the papers. I drove you back here, and, as you still seemed stunned, I brought you up-stairs. I didn't mean to stay, but I couldn't get you to say a single coherent word. I was afraid to leave you alone!"

"I suppose I was drunk," he said, in a dull tone. "I remember filling my glass over and over again. There is one thing, though," he added, his voice gaining a sudden strength; "I was not drunk when I struck the prince! I remember those few seconds very distinctly. I saw everything, knew everything, felt everything. If no one had interfered, I think I should have killed him!"

"You were not drunk at all," she declared, with a little shiver, "but you were in a state of terrible excitement. It was a long time before I could get you to lie down, and then you wouldn't close your eyes until I came and sat by your side. I watched you go to sleep. I hope you are not angry with me! I didn't like to go and leave you."

"How could I be angry?" he protested. "You are far kinder to me than I deserve. I expect I should have been in a police cell but for you!"

"And now," she begged, coming over to him and speaking in a more matter-of-fact tone, "do let us be practical. I must run away, and you must go and have a bath and change your clothes. Don't be afraid of your reputation. I can get out by the other entrance."

He made no movement. She laid her hand on his arm. In the sunlight, with a little patch of rouge still left on her cheek, with her disordered hair and tired eyes, she looked almost ghastly.

"Remember," she whispered, "you have to go to see Louise!"

He covered his face with his hands.

"What's the use of it?" he groaned. "It's only another turn of the screw!"

"Don't be foolish, John," she admonished briskly. "You don't actually know anything yet—nothing at all; at least, you are not sure of anything. And besides, you strange, impossible person," she went on, patting his hand, "don't you see that you must judge her, not by the standards of your world, in which she has never lived, but by the standards of her world, in which she was born and bred? That is only fair, isn't it?"

He made no answer. She watched him anxiously, but there was no sign in his face.

"Pull yourself together, John," she continued. "Ring for some tea, get your bath, and then have it out with Louise. Remember, life is a very big thing. You

are dealing this morning with all it may mean to you."

He rose listlessly to his feet. There was a strange, dull look in his face.

"You are a dear girl, Sophy!" he said. "Don't go just yet. I have never felt like it before in my life, but just now I don't want to be left alone. Send a boy for some clothes, and I will order some tea."

She hesitated.

"My own reputation," she murmured, "is absolutely of no consequence, but remember that you live here, and—"

"Don't be silly!" he interrupted. "What does that matter? And besides, according to you and all the rest of you here, these things don't affect a man's reputation—they are expected of him. See, I have rung the bell for breakfast. Now I am going to telephone down for a messenger-boy to go for your clothes."

They breakfasted together, a little later, and she made him smoke. He stood before the window, looking down upon the river, with his pipe in his mouth and an unfamiliar look upon his face.

"Do you suppose that Louise knows anything?" he asked at length.

"I should think not," she replied. "It is for you to tell her. I rang up the prince's house while you were in your bathroom. They say that he has a broken rib and some bad cuts, sustained in a motor accident last night, but that he is in no danger. There was nothing about the affair in the newspapers, and the prince's servants have evidently been instructed to give this account to inquirers."

A gleam of interest shone in John's face.

"By the bye," he remarked, "the prince is a Frenchman. He will very likely expect me to fight with him."

"No hope of that, my belligerent friend," Sophy declared, with an attempt at a smile. "The prince knows that he is in England. He would not be guilty of such an anachronism. Besides, he is a person of wonderfully well-balanced mind. When he is himself again, he will realize that what happened to him is exactly what he asked for."

John took up his hat and gloves. He glanced at the clock—it was a little past eleven.

"I am ready," he announced. "Let me drive you home first."

His motor was waiting at the door, and he left Sophy at her rooms. Before she got out, she held his arm for a moment.

"John," she said, "remember that Louise is very high-strung and very sensitive. Be careful!"

"There is only one thing to do or to say," he answered. "There is only one way in which I can do it."

He drove the car down Piccadilly like a man in a dream, steering as carefully as usual through the traffic, and glancing every now and then with unseeing eyes at the streams of people upon the pavements. Finally he came to a standstill before Louise's house and stopped the engine with deliberate care. Then he rang the bell, and was shown into her little drawing-room, which seemed to have become a perfect bower of pink and white lilac.

He sat waiting as if in a dream, unable to decide upon his words, unable even to sift his thoughts. The one purpose with which he had come, the one question he designed to ask, was burning in his brain. The minutes of her absence seemed tragically long. He walked up and down, oppressed by the perfume of the flowers. The room seemed too small for him. He longed to throw open all the windows, to escape from the atmosphere, in which for the first time he seemed to find some faint, enervating poison.

Then at last the door opened and Louise entered. She came toward him with a little welcoming smile upon her lips. Her manner was gay, almost affectionate.

"Have you come to take me for a ride before lunch?" she asked. "Do you know, I think that I should really like it! We might lunch at Ranelagh on our way home."

The words stuck in his throat. From where she was, she saw now the writing on his face. She stopped short.

"What is it?" she exclaimed.

"Ever since I knew you," he said slowly, "there have been odd moments when I have lived in torture. During the last fortnight, those moments have become hours. Last night the end came."

"Are you mad, John?" she demanded.

"Perhaps," he replied. "Listen. When I left you last night, I went to the club in Adelphi Terrace. There was a well-known critic there, comparing you and Latrobe. On the whole he favored you, but he gave Latrobe the first place in certain parts. Latrobe, he said, had had more experience of life. She had had a dozen lovers—you, only one!"

She winced. The glad freshness seemed suddenly to fade from her face. Her eyes became strained.

"Well?"

"I found Graillot. I cornered him. I asked him for the truth about you. He put me off with an evasion. I came down here and looked at your window. It was three o'clock in the morning. I dared not come in. A very demon of unrest was in my blood. I stopped at a night-club on my way back. Sophy was there. I asked her plainly to put me out of my agony. She was like Graillot. She fenced with me. And then—the prince came!"

"The prince was there?" she faltered.

"He came up to the table where Sophy and I were sitting. I think I was half mad. I poured him a glass of wine and asked him to drink with me. I told him that you had promised to become my wife. He raised his glass—I can see him now. He told me, with a smile, that it was the anniversary of the day on which you had promised to become his mistress!"

Louise shrank back.

"He told you that?"

John was on his feet. The fever was blazing once more.

"He told me that, face to face—told me that it was the anniversary of the day on which you had consented to become his mistress!"

"And you?"

"If we had been alone," John answered simply, "I should have killed him. I drove the words down his throat. I threw him back to the place he had left, and hurt him rather badly, I'm afraid. Sophy took me home somehow, and now I am here."

She leaned a little forward on the couch. She looked into his face searchingly, anxiously, as if seeking for something she could not find. His lips were set in hard, cold lines. The likeness to Stephen had never been more apparent.

"Listen!" she said. "You are a Puritan. While I admire the splendid self-restraint evolved from your creed, it is partly temperamental, isn't it? I was brought up to see things differently, and I do see them differently. Tell me, do you love me?"

The veins swelled for a moment upon his forehead, stood out like whip-cord along the back of his hands, but of softening there was no sign in his face.

"Love you?" he repeated. "You know it! Could I suffer the tortures of the damned if I didn't? Could I come to you with a man's blood upon my hands if I didn't? If the prince lives, it is simply the accident of fate. I tell you that if we had been alone I should have driven the breath out of his body. Love you!"

She rose slowly to her feet. She leaned with her elbow upon the mantelpiece, and her face was hidden for a moment.

"Let me think!" she said. "I don't know what to say to you. I don't know you, John. There isn't anything left of the John I loved. Let me look again!"

She swung around.

"You speak of love," she went on suddenly. "Do you know what it is? Do you know that loves reaches to the heavens, and can also touch the nethermost depths of hell? If I throw myself on my knees before you now, if I link my fingers around your neck, if I whisper to you that in the days that were past before you came I had done things I would fain forget, if I told you that from henceforth every second of my life was yours, that my heart beat with yours by day and by night, that I had no other thought, no other dream, than to stay by your side, to see you happy, to give all there was of myself into your keeping, to keep it holy and sacred for you—John, what then?"

Never a line in his face softened. He looked at her a moment as he had looked at the woman in Piccadilly, into whose hand he had dropped gold.

"Are you going to tell me that it is the truth?" he asked hoarsely.

She stood quite still, her bosom rising and falling. Even then she made one last effort. She held out her hands with a little trembling gesture, her eyes filled

with tears.

"Think for a single moment of that feeling which you call love, John!" she pleaded. "Listen! I love you. It has come to me at last, after all these years. It lives in my heart, a greater thing than my ambition, a greater thing than my success, a greater thing than life itself. I love you, John. Can't you feel, don't you know, that nothing else in life can matter?"

Not a line in his face softened. His teeth had come together. He was like a man upon the rack.

"It is true? It is true, then?" he demanded.

She looked at him without any reply. The seconds seemed drawn out to an interminable period. He heard the rolling of the motor-buses in the street. Once more the perfume of the lilacs seemed to choke him. Then she leaned back and touched the bell.

"The prince spoke the truth," she said. "I think you had better go!"

XXXVII

Before the wide-flung window of her attic bedchamber, Sophy Gerard was crouching with her face turned westward. She had abandoned all effort to sleep. The one thought that was beating in her brain was too insistent, too clamorous. Somewhere beyond that tangled mass of chimneys and telegraph-poles, somewhere on the other side of the gray haze which hung about the myriad roofs, John and Louise were working out their destiny, speaking at last the naked truth to each other.

Somehow or other, during those few minutes every thought of herself and her own life seemed to have passed away. John's face seemed always before her—the sudden, hard lines about his mouth; the dull, smoldering pain in his eyes. How would he return? Louise had guarded the secret of her life so well. Would he wrest it from her, or—

She started suddenly back into the room. There was a knocking at the door, something quite different from her landlady's summons. She wrapped her dressing-gown around her, pulled the curtains around the little bed on which she had striven to rest, and moved toward the door. She turned the handle softly.

"Who is that?" she asked.

John almost pushed his way past her. She closed the door with nerveless fingers. Her eyes sought his face, her lips were parted. She clung to the back of the chair.

"You have seen Louise?" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"I have seen Louise," he answered. "It is all over!"

She looked a little helplessly around her. Then she selected the one chair in the tiny apartment that was likely to hold him, and led him to it.

"Please sit down," she begged, "and tell me about it. You mustn't despair like this all at once. I wonder if I could help!"

"No one can help," he told her grimly. "It is all finished and done with. I would rather not talk any more about it. I didn't come here to talk about it. I

came to see you. So this is where you live!"

He looked around him, and for a moment he almost forgot the pain which was gnawing at his heart. It was such a simple, plainly furnished little room, so clean, so neat, so pathetically eloquent of poverty. She drew closer together the curtains which concealed her little chintz-covered bed, and came and sat down by his side.

"You know, you are rather a silly person," she whispered soothingly. "Wait for a time and perhaps things will look different. I know that Louise cares. Isn't that the great thing, after all?"

"I would like not to talk about it any more," said John. "Just now I cannot put what I feel into words. What remains is just this: I have been a fool, a sort of *Don Quixote*, building castles in Spain and believing that real men and women could live in them. I have expected the impossible in life. It is perhaps a good thing that I can see the truth now. I am going to climb down!"

She clasped her hands tighter around his arm. Her eyes sought his anxiously.

"But you mustn't climb down, John," she insisted. "You are so much nicer where you are, so much too good for the silly, ugly things. You must fight this in your own way, fight it according to your own standards. You are too good to come down—"

"Am I too good for you, Sophy?"

She looked at him, and her whole face seemed to soften. The light in her blue eyes was sweet and wistful. A bewildering little smile curled her lips.

"Don't be stupid!" she begged. "A few minutes ago I was looking out of my window and thinking what a poor little morsel of humanity I am, and what a useless, drifting life I have led. But that's foolish. Come now! What I want to persuade you to do is to go back to Cumberland for a time, and try hard—very hard indeed—to realize what it means to be a woman like Louise, with her temperament, her intense intellectual curiosity, her charm. Nothing could make Louise different from what she is—a dear, sweet woman and a great artist. And, John, I believe she loves you!"

His face remained undisturbed even by the flicker of an eyelid.

"Sophy," he said, "I have decided to go abroad. Will you come with me?"

She sat quite still. Again her face was momentarily transformed. All its pallor and fatigue seemed to have vanished. Her head had fallen a little back. She was looking through the ceiling into heaven. Then the light died away almost as quickly as it had come. Her lips shook tremulously.

"You know you don't mean it, John! You wouldn't take me. And if you did, you'd hate me afterward—you'd want to send me back!"

He suddenly drew her to him, his arm went around her waist. She had lost all power of resistance. For the first time in his life of his own deliberate accord, he kissed her—feverishly, almost roughly.

"Sophy," he declared, "I have been a fool! I have come an awful cropper, but you might help me with what's left. I am going to start afresh. I am going to get rid of some of these ideas of mine which have brought me nothing but misery and disappointment. I don't want to live up to them any longer. I want to just forget them. I want to live as other men live—just the simple, ordinary life. Come with me! I'll take you to the places we've talked about together. I am always happy and contented with you. Let's try it!"

Her arms stole around his neck.

"If only you cared, John!" she sobbed.

"But I do," he insisted. "I love to have you with me, I love to see you happy, I shall love to give you pretty things. I shall be proud of you, soothed by you—and rested. What do you say, Sophy?"

"John," she whispered, hiding her face for a moment. "What can I say? What could any poor, weak, little creature like me say? You know I am fond of you—I haven't had the pride, even, to conceal it!"

He stood up, held her face for a moment between his hands, and kissed her forehead.

"Then that's all settled," he declared. "I am going back to my rooms now. I want you to come and dine with me there to-night, at eight o'clock."

Her eyes sought his, pleaded with them, searched them.

"You are sure, John?" she asked, her voice a little broken. "You want me really? I am to come? You won't be sorry—afterward?"

"I am sure," he answered steadfastly. "I shall expect you at eight o'clock!"

John went back to his rooms fighting all the time against a sense of unreality, a sense almost of lost identity. He bought an evening newspaper and read it on the way. He talked to the hall-porter, he talked to a neighbor with whom he ascended in the lift—he did everything except think.

In his rooms he telephoned to the restaurant for a waiter, and with the menu in his hand, a few minutes later, he ordered dinner. Then he glanced at his watch—it was barely seven o'clock. He went down to the barber-shop, was shaved and had his hair cut, encouraging the barber all the time to talk to him. He gave his hands over to a manicure, and did his best to talk nonsense to her. Then he came up-stairs again, changed his clothes with great care, and went into his little sitting room.

It was five minutes to eight, and dinner had been laid at a little round table in the center of the room. There was a bowl of pink roses—Sophy's favorite flower—sent in from the florist's; the table was lighted by a pink-shaded lamp. John went around the room, turning out the other lights, until the apartment was hung with shadows save for the little spot of color in the middle. An unopened bottle of champagne stood in an ice-pail, and two specially prepared cocktails had been placed upon the little side-table. There were no more preparations to be made.

John walked restlessly to the window and gazed at the curving line of lights along the Embankment. This was the end, then—the end of his strenuous days, the end of his ideals, the end of a love-story which had made life for a time seem so wonderful! He could hear them talking about him in a few days' time—the prince's subtle sneer, the jests of his acquaintances. And Louise! His heart stopped for a moment as he tried to think of her face when she heard the news.

He turned impatiently away from the window and glanced at the clock. It was almost eight. He tried to imagine that the bell was ringing, that Sophy was standing there on the threshold in her simple but dainty evening dress, with a little smile parting her lips. The end of it all! He pulled down the blind. No more of the window, no more looking out at the lights, no more living in the clouds! It was time, indeed, that he lived as other men. He lifted one of the glasses to his lips and drained its contents.

Then the bell rang. He moved forward to answer its summons with beating heart. As he opened it, he received a shock. A messenger-boy stood outside. He took the note which the boy handed him and tore it open under the lamp. There were only a few lines:

John, my heart is breaking, but I know you do not mean what you said. I know it was only a moment of madness with you. I know you will love Louise all your life, and will bless me all your life because I am giving up the one thing which could make my life a paradise. I shall be in the train when you read this, on my way to Bath. I have wired my young man, as you call him, to meet me. I am going to ask him to marry me, if he will, next week.

Good-by! I give you no advice. Some day I think that life will right itself with you.

SOPHY.

The letter dropped upon the table. John stood for a moment dazed. Suddenly he began to laugh. Then he remembered the messenger-boy, gave him half a crown, and closed the door. He came back into the room and took his place at the table. He looked at the empty chair by his side, looked at the full glass on the sideboard. It seemed to him that he was past all sensations. The waiter came in silently.

"You can serve the dinner," John ordered, shaking out his napkin. "Open the champagne before you go."

"You will be alone, sir?" the man inquired.

"I shall be alone," John answered.

XXXVIII

It was a room of silence, save for the hissing of the green logs that burned on the open hearth, and for the slow movements of Jennings as he cleared the table. Straight and grim in his chair, with the newspaper by his side, Stephen Strangewey sat smoking stolidly. Opposite to him, almost as grim, equally silent, sat John.

"Things were quiet at Market Ketton to-day, then, John?" Stephen asked at last.

"There was nothing doing," was the brief reply.

That, for the space of a quarter of an hour or so, was the sole attempt at conversation between the two brothers. Then Jennings appeared with a decanter of wine and two glasses, which he reverently filled. Stephen held his up to the light and looked at it critically. John's remained by his side, unnoticed.

"A glass for yourself, Jennings," Stephen ordered.

"I thank ye kindly, sir," the old man replied.

He fetched a glass from the sideboard, filled it, and held it respectfully before him.

"It's the old toast," Stephen said glumly. "You know it!"

"Aye, Master Stephen!" the servant assented. "We've drunk it together for many a long year. I give it ye now with all my heart—confusion to all women!"

They both glanced toward John, who showed no signs of movement. Then they drank together, the older man and his servant. Still John never moved. Jennings drained his glass, placed the decanter by his master's side, and withdrew.

"So the poison's still there, brother?" Stephen asked.

"And will be so long as I live," John confessed gloomily. "For all that, I'll not drink your toast."

"Why not?"

"There was a little girl—you saw her when you were in London. She is married now, but I think of her sometimes; and when I do, you and old Jennings seem to me like a couple of blithering idiots cursing things too wonderful for you to understand!"

Stephen made no protest. For a time he smoked in silence. Curiously enough, as they sat there together, some of the grim fierceness seemed to have passed from his expression and settled upon John. More than once, as he looked across at his younger brother, it almost seemed as if there was something of self-reproach in his questioning look.

"You dined at the ordinary in Market Ketton?" Stephen asked at last.

"I did."

"Then you heard the news?"

"Who could help it?" John muttered. "There wasn't much else talked about."

"Bailiff Henderson has been over here," Stephen went on. "There's a small army of painters and decorators coming down to the castle next week. You saw the announcement of the wedding in the *Morning Post*, maybe?"

John assented without words. Stephen smoked vigorously for a few moments. Every now and then he glanced across to where John was sitting. Once again the uneasiness was in his eyes, an uneasiness which was almost self-reproach.

"You mind what I called her once, John—a witch-woman? She is that, right enough. This marriage of hers proves it. Although he is half a Frenchman, the Prince of Seyre is the greatest landowner in the county. He is the worst landlord, maybe, but the blood's there. He is a man who has lived among women all his life. He should know something about them, and be proof against their wiles. Yet he's going to marry her next Thursday!"

John moved a little restlessly in his chair.

"Let's drop it, Stephen," he begged. "We both know the facts. She is going to marry him, and that's the end of it. Fill your glass up again. Here's mine untouched. I'll drink your toast with you, if you'll leave out the little girl who was kind to me. I'll give it to you myself—confusion to all women!"

"Confusion to—" Stephen began. "What on earth is that?"

They both heard it at the same time—the faint beating of a motor-engine in the distance. John set down his glass. There was a strange look in his eyes.

"There are more cars passing along the road now than in the old days," he muttered; "but that's a queer sound. It reminds one—good Heavens, how it reminds one!"

There was a look of agony in his face for a moment. Then once more he raised his glass to his lips.

"It's passed out of hearing," Stephen said. "It's some one on the way to the castle, maybe."

Still their glasses remained suspended in mid air. The little garden gate had opened and closed with a click; there were footsteps upon the flinty walk.

"It's some one coming here!" John cried hoarsely. "Why can't they keep away? It's two years ago this week since I brought her up the drive and you met us at the front door. Two years ago, Stephen! Who can it be?"

They heard the front door open, they heard Jenning's voice raised in unusual and indignant protest. Then their own door was suddenly flung wide, and a miracle happened. John's glass slipped from his fingers, and the wine streamed out across the carpet. He shrank back, gripping the tablecloth. Stephen turned his head, and sat as if turned to stone.

"John!"

She was coming toward him exactly as he had dreamed of her so many times, her hands outstretched, her lips quivering, with that sweet look in her face which had dwelt there once for a few days—just a few days of her life.

"John," she faltered, "it isn't the car this time—it is I who have broken down! I cannot go on. I have no pride left. I have come to you. Will you help me?"

He found himself upon his feet. Stephen, too, had risen. She stood between the two men, and glanced from one to the other. Then she looked more closely into John's face, peering forward with a little start of pain, and her eyes were filled with tears.

"John," she cried, "forgive me! You were so cruel that morning, and you

seemed to understand so little. Don't you really understand, even now? Have you ever known the truth, I wonder?"

"The truth!" he echoed hoarsely. "Don't we all know that? Don't we all know that he is to give you your rights, that you are coming—"

"Stop!" she ordered him.

He obeyed, and for a moment there was silence—a tense, strained silence.

"John," she continued at last, "I have no rights to receive from the Prince of Seyre. He owes me nothing. Listen! Always we have seen life differently, you and I. To me there is only one great thing, and that is love; and beyond that nothing counts. I tried to love the prince before you came, and I thought I did, and I promised him at last what you know, because I believed that he loved me and that I loved him, and that if so it was his right. Look down the road, John! On that night I was on my way to the castle, to give myself to him; but I broke down, and in the morning the world was all different, and I went back to London. It has been different ever since, and there has never been any question of anything between the prince and me, because I knew that it was not love."

John was shaking in every limb. His eyes were filled with fierce questioning. Stephen sat there, and there was wonder in his face, too.

"When you came to me that morning," she went on, "you spoke to me in a strange tongue. I couldn't understand you, you seemed so far away. I wanted to tell you the whole truth, but I didn't. Perhaps I wasn't sure—perhaps it seemed to me that it was best for me to forget, if ever I had cared, for the ways of our lives seemed so far apart. You went away, and I drifted on; but it wasn't true that I ever promised to marry the prince. No one had any right to put that paragraph in the newspaper!"

"But what are you doing here, then?" John asked hoarsely. "Aren't you on your way to the castle?"

She came a little nearer still; her arms went around his neck.

"You dear stupid!" she cried. "Haven't I told you? I've tried to do without you, and I can't. I've come for you. Come outside, please! It's quite light. The moon's coming over the hills. I want to walk up the orchard. I want to hear just what I've come to hear!"

He passed out of the room in a dream, under the blossom-laden boughs of the orchard, and up the hillside toward the church. The dream passed, but Louise remained, flesh and blood. Her lips were warm and her arms held him almost feverishly.

"In that little church, John, and quickly—so quickly, please!" she whispered.

Jennings hastened in to where Stephen was sitting alone.

"Mr. Stephen," he cried, "what's coming to us? There's that French hussy outside, and a motor-car in the drive, and the chauffeur's asking where he's to sleep. The woman wants to know whether she can have the same bedroom for her mistress as last time!"

"Then why don't you go and see about it, you old fool?" Stephen replied. "Pick up those pieces of glass there, lay the cloth, and get some supper ready."

Jennings gazed at his master, dumbfounded. No power of speech remained to him.

Through the open doorway they heard Aline's voice in the hall.

"Meester Jennings, will you please come and help me with the luggage?"

"Get along with you!" Stephen ordered. "You'd better hurry up with the supper, too. The boy Tom can see to the luggage."

The old man recovered himself slowly.

"You're taking 'em in, sir—taking 'em into the house?" he gasped. "What about that toast?"

Stephen refilled two glasses.

"We'd better alter it a little," he declared. "Here's confusion to most women, but luck to John and his wife!"

"Mr. John and his wife!" Jennings repeated, as he set his glass down empty. "I'll just see that them sheets is aired up-stairs, sir, or that hussy will be making eyes at Tom!"

He departed, and Stephen was left alone. He sat and listened to the sound of luggage being taken upstairs, to Aline's little torrent of directions, good-humored but profuse, to the sound of preparations in the kitchen. In the room the tall clock ticked solemnly; a fragment of the log every now and then fell upon the hearth.

Presently he rose to his feet. He heard the click of the garden gate, the sound of John and Louise returning. He rose and stood ready to welcome them.

THE END

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Transcriber's Notes:

Errors in punctuations were not corrected unless otherwise noted below:

On page 5, "unforgetable" was replaced with "unforgettable".

On page 51, the comma after "more time here" was replaced with a period.

On page 81, "confesed" was replaced with "confessed".

On page 97, "he said." was replaced with "she said.".

On page 132, "Gaillot" was replaced with "Graillot".

On page 241, "carefullly" was replaced with "carefully".

On page 269, "tast" was replaced with "taste".

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