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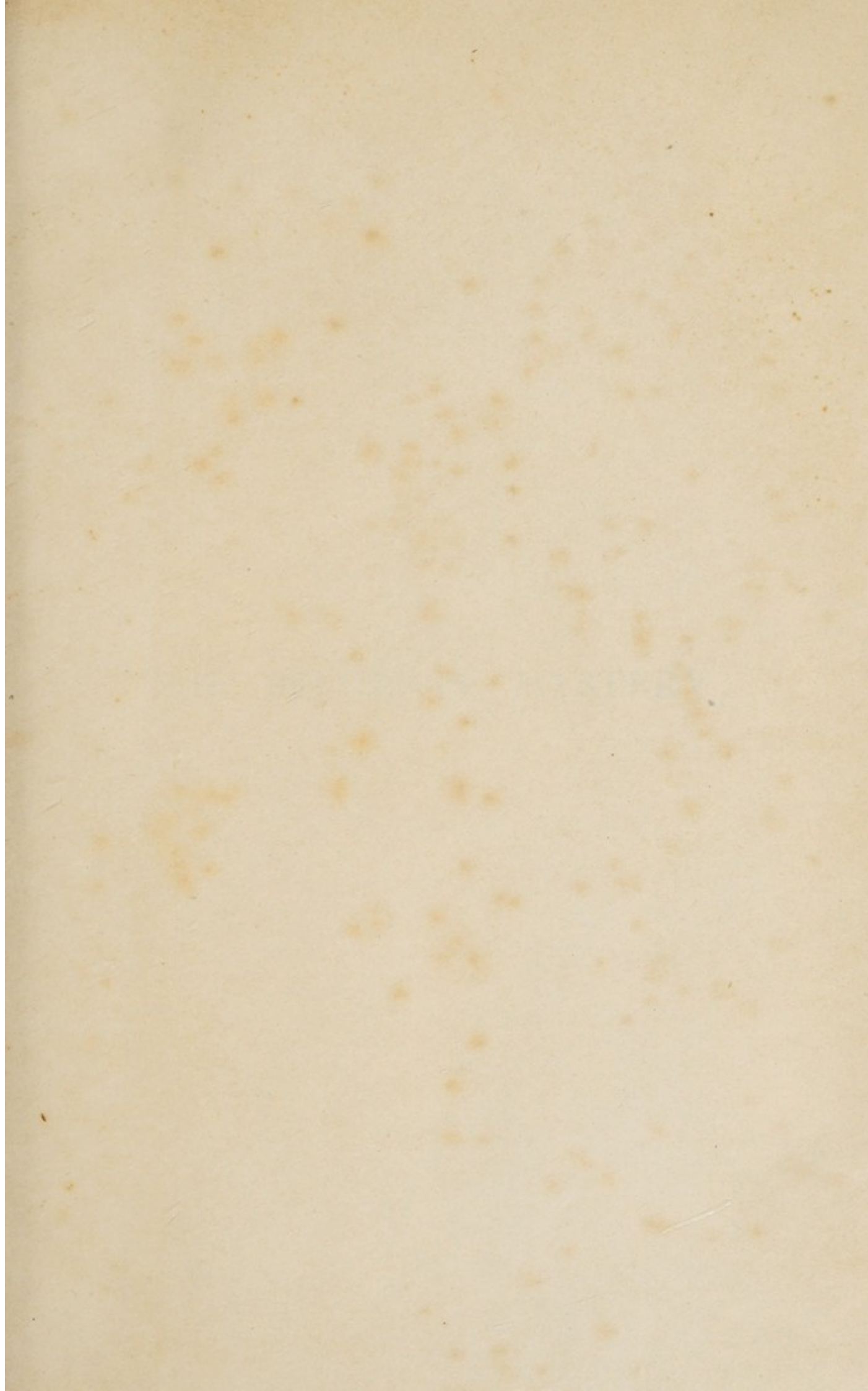
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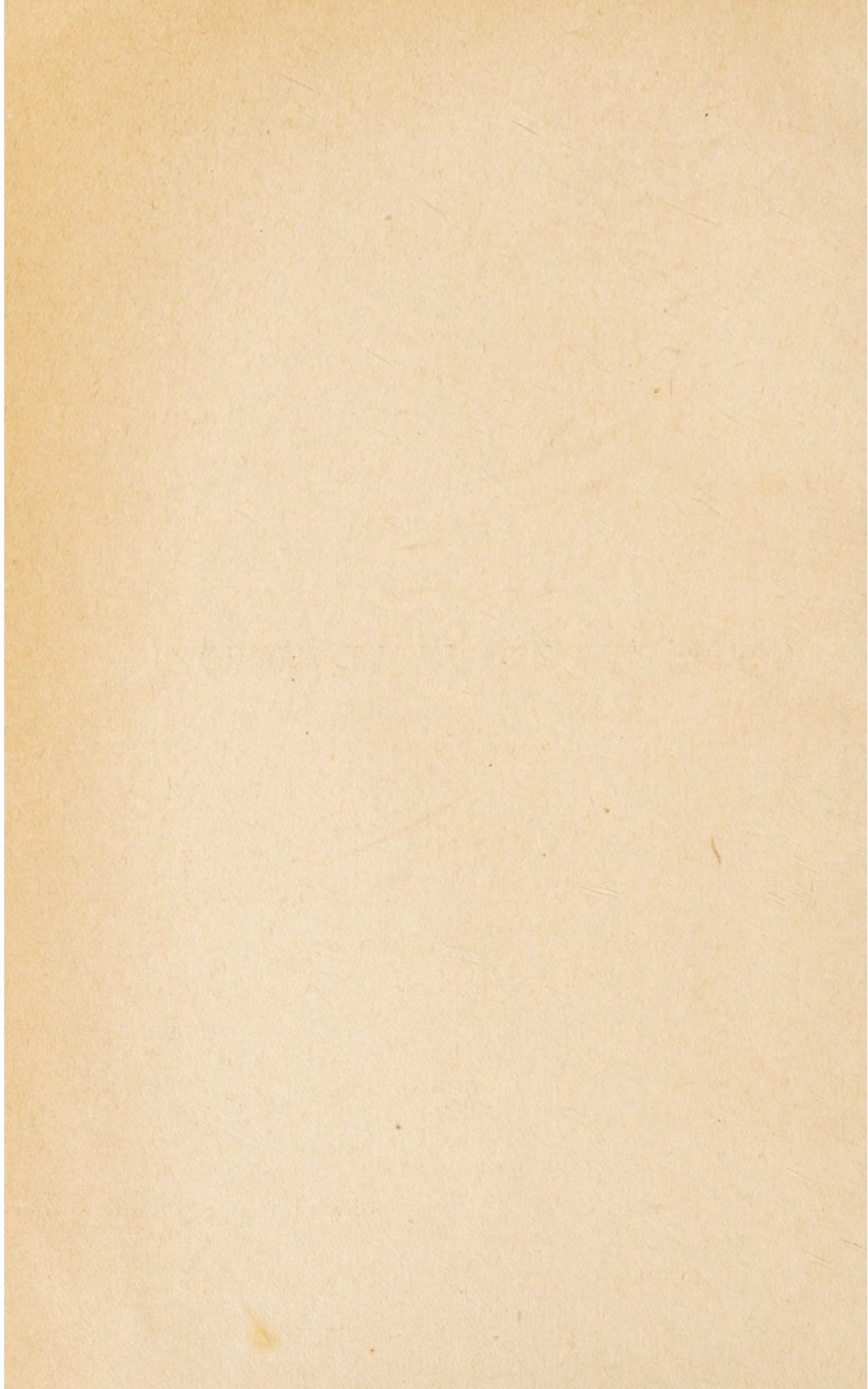




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THE BELGRAVE MYSTERY



THE BELGRAVE MYSTERY

A Novel

BY

TREVE ROSCOE

AUTHOR OF "THE MAN WHO
STOLE THE CROWN"
ETC ETC



LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE & SONS, LIMITED
BROADWAY HOUSE, LUDGATE HILL

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THE BELGRAVE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

IT was a dark chilly night in March. Overhead the stars shone out dimly after a heavy shower, which made the pavements glisten in the flood of light which emanated from the entrance of the *Hotel Belgrave*. The street was quiet and almost deserted. A neighbouring church clock was just striking eleven, when the swing doors of the hotel opened, and a man in evening dress passed out and stood on the broad white steps which descended to the street.

The hum of traffic and the beat of horses' feet in the big thoroughfare not a stone's throw away, sounded plainly in the stillness of the night, and now the silence was further broken by the strains of a jovial chorus which issued from within the hotel.

The man on the steps shivered slightly, and still stood hesitating; then he buttoned up his fur-lined coat and turned up the collar to his ears. Glancing with some indecision to where

across the way in the shadows a hansom stood, the driver of which sat hunched up on his box apparently half asleep, he finally decided to walk, and drawing a case from his pocket selected a cigar and lit it.

Just as he was turning away he caught the sound of softly swinging doors on their hinges, and a woman's figure stood for an instant silhouetted against the glare of light within. In another moment, and with a swiftness for which he was totally unprepared, she had grasped his arm. The touch though trembling was insistent. He found himself moving under it before a word had been spoken on either side. Suddenly in a low voice with the slightest suggestion of something foreign in its accents she said hurriedly, "Sir, will you do me a great favour?"

Before he had time to realize whether or no the adventure was to his liking, she had drawn him across the road to the waiting hansom. The hand

with which she held her skirts was jewelled—he caught their gleam as the light flashed over them, and she moved with the supple grace of youth. His blood warmed in compliance.

“Quick, driver, are you asleep?” she cried softly below her breath to the man on the box.

There was a strange haste and stealth about her movements. Without waiting for assistance she got into the cab, motioning him to the seat beside her.

“You wish me to accompany you?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, please.”

His foot was on the step.

“Where to?” he said.

But the driver had already received his orders through the trap, and at a touch the horse swung briskly round.

“You said Charing Cross, I think?” he asked gently after a few moments’ silence.

Behind the thick veil he caught the glint of tears—there were tears too in the low musical voice that answered him.

“Yes, the Railway Station, please. Oh I cannot thank you enough for your kindness in doing this for me.”

“Only tell me what it is you wish me to do. I am entirely at your service. When we reach the station what then?”

“Then you must leave me, please. All I ask of you is to forget we ever met, and do not speak of it to any one. Promise me that, I implore you,” she said eagerly as she placed her ungloved hand on his.

“You may rely upon me to carry out your wish,” he replied simply.

“See, we shall soon be there—and I thank you a thousand times.”

“My regret is that you ask so little,” he replied courteously.

Seeing the urgent question in his face as the cab turned swiftly into Trafalgar Square, “Oh, I pray you, do not question me, I know I can rely on your honour,” she cried. “You will have done so much—so much when you have done this.”

She seemed under the insistence of his look and the glare of lights to cower back, as far as the limits of the cab allowed.

“You shall tell me nothing if that is your wish,” he began, and his voice was very grave; “but do I understand that I am not even to know your name—nor——?”

“Nothing, please, nothing.”

Heavy tears dropped down on to her hands.

“Tell me only this,” he urged. “What can I do to help you?”

You seem in such great distress—and you may trust me. Believe that.”

“I do believe it,” she replied simply. “That is why I ventured to ask for your help. Your face is one that a woman might trust.”

“And yours I cannot even see,” he said.

“No, no, do not try. It is better that we remain strangers after to-night—though you will have done me the greatest kindness that any man could do to a woman.”

The gesture with which she clasped her hands was decidedly foreign, and her evident agitation brought the accent into greater prominence.

“We are here!” she cried, and in what seemed like one movement (so rapid was it) she had passed a coin up through the roof, and was out on the pavement. Almost as swiftly, he followed her.

“We shall meet again?” he questioned eagerly, trying to detain her.

The reply was almost thrown over her shoulder in her haste to be gone. “No, never again.”

A gleam of soft golden hair above the heavy furs—a flash of wide, wet eyes behind her veil—and she had disappeared into the shadows of the station

entrance, and he was left staring into empty space.

It was quite unlike him—just weak sentimental folly not at all in accordance with any preconceived notions of himself—but he would have given worlds to follow her.

The longing grew almost too strong to be resisted; yet she seemed to trust him. . . .

He stood motionless until the shrill shriek of an engine told of the departure of a train from the platform, and was only brought to himself by the chiming of the quarter from the clock of St. Martin's. Quarter past eleven. When last he had taken count of time on the steps of the hotel his watch had pointed to 11.5. “Only ten minutes then after all,” he muttered.

Had the episode ended? No, something seemed to answer within him. Another moment he turned, and was swallowed up in the great tide of life that ebbed and flowed along the Strand.

CHAPTER II

IN a wide, sunny room overlooking the Temple gardens two men were breakfasting. That is, one man was breakfasting with much apparent heartiness, while the

other played with a piece of toast with a preoccupied air.

The room was well and artistically furnished. There were evidences of travel and culture in the antique bronzes on the mantelshelf, bits of rare china—and oriental plaques on the frieze, old engravings in dark oak frames—on the walls which were panelled too in oak, and the morning sun shone in with good effect upon the excellent appointments of the table.

The elder man—he with the hearty appetite of unimpaired digestion—had entrenched himself behind the coffee-pot and his newspaper, the columns of which he was skimming as he ate. There was a bright and alert glance in his keen intelligent grey eyes. His well-poised head, on a pair of broad shoulders, had a habit of rapid turning from right to left which often proved disconcerting in a round argument. He had bestowed several of his sharp inquisitive glances upon his friend before he made him aware of his inspection.

“Try another egg, old man,” he said at last. “That must be as cold as charity after the time you’ve played about with it.”

“No, thanks.”

“Feeling a bit off colour this

morning, eh? I know. You’re burning the candle at both ends, my lad, and it won’t run to it. Take my advice and slow off a bit. Why, you’ve been out every night this week and grinding away at that confounded book in the daytime. Goodness only knows why you should bother about work at all—a fellow like you, with heaps of money, any amount of prospects, good-looking, popular—ahem, I wonder if I’d grind, given half your chances. Not I. I’d be married before a week was out, with a lovely little place in the country and Sylvia—God bless her! at the head of it all—and ‘we’d be as happy as two little larks in a cage.’”

“Are larks notoriously happy—in cages?”

“Oh don’t be cynical and superior. You know well enough what I mean. Mere confusion of metaphor. Anyhow, we would *be* happy; that is the main thing. Whereas, at this rate I shall be old and grey before I can offer her even the proverbial crust; but you don’t see me fiddling over my food as if I were a dyspeptic old judge. No; I eat the good fare the gods provide and pray for better luck,” continued this optimistic young man as he poured out a fresh cup of coffee.

"Talking of luck, Egerton, you must really come down with me next time I go to Edenham. I'm ashamed of inventing plausible excuses for you. Fact is, the vein of imagination is giving out. Of course they know you love to pose as a hard-worked man and all that, but still——"

"My dear Fitz, of course I'll come, though why you should seem so bent on hauling a fellow into the heart of the country merely as a spectator of your own felicity, passes my comprehension."

"Honour bright, they all want to see you, old fellow. They ask endless questions about you, Hildred specially."

"Hildred? I should hardly know her."

"Know her indeed! Well! the base ingratitude thereof! You don't mean to say you've forgotten Hildred, the little romp who used to haul us from witching slumbers by hurling gravel at our windows in what invariably seemed like the smallest of small hours, in order that we might look at the sunrise over the weir?"

"I remember. She was a pretty little energetic slip of a thing in those days."

"And even that tender memory fails apparently to

rouse you. What on earth's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Never mind me. What about this vacancy on the *Pantheon*. Have you heard anything from them? I spoke to Waverton a day or two ago, and he promised to use all the influence he could in your favour."

"Thank you, old chap. I had an interview with Hamilton, who is part proprietor, yesterday; he said he would let me know next week. I do hope I shall get it. It's just what I want."

"Well, I trust you may. By the way, is there any news this morning?"

"Only the usual thing: police courts, divorce cases. 'The Right Hon. J. Chamberlain, after a brief visit to the Colonial Office, returned to Highbury, where, &c. &c.' I wonder when my doings are going to be considered of sufficient importance to be chronicled in 'London, day-by-day,' 'Balfour, the guest of the evening at a dinner of the Fishmongers' Company.' Talking of dinners, how did yours come off last night?"

"Pretty much as usual, thanks. I left early."

"By Jove," exclaimed Fitzgerald; "here's an item that may interest you. Wasn't your affair at the *Belgrave*?"

"Yes. What of it?"

“What of it? Only that there was a murder committed there apparently at the very time you fellows were dining. I say, rather a gruesome idea, isn't it, that while you were all shouting and making merry, some poor soul was being hurried to his account. Listen to this—”

His attention was for the moment wholly engrossed with his paper, else he would have noticed the change in his companion's face as he read aloud—

“MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY AT A WEST END HOTEL

“Just as we go to press, we learn that a mysterious tragedy occurred at the *Hotel Belgrave* late last night. Shortly after midnight, a gentleman, who had been staying at the hotel for some days, was discovered stabbed to the heart in a private sitting-room. Medical aid was immediately summoned, but life was found to be extinct. The affair at present seems shrouded in mystery, but there is evidence that a foul murder has been committed.”

“Horrible. It almost makes a fellow nervous, only to think that one or other of you might have rubbed shoulders with a murderer without the faintest suspicion of it! I say, old man,

what's up, you're white as the tablecloth?”

“Nothing. But as you say, the idea of rubbing shoulders with any one coming red-handed from the very scene of a crime is a bit——”

He stopped. Suddenly, he could not have told why, a vision of the dainty be-ringed white little hands which had touched his for an instant in the hansom rose before him and seemed to overpower him.

“He glanced nervously up to where Fitzgerald was flicking crumbs from the table with his newspaper. It was the signal for his departure.

“Well, I'm off,” he said lightly as he rose from the table. “Buck up, and don't let imagination run away with you. Leave that to poor beggars like me, whose soaring Pegasus has to be harnessed to the daily grind of sensational magazines and penny-a-liners.”

The door closed, and Egerton was alone. He drew the paper toward him and hastily sought the paragraph, reading it again and again in vain quest of a clue.

The peculiarity of his strange companion's request of the previous evening was forcing itself more and more convincingly upon him. Should he go and

put the facts of his curious adventure in the hands of the Scotland Yard authorities? To what end? That a possibly innocent woman should be spied upon and subjected to every annoyance that police surveillance could inflict! And after all, why that woman more than any other who came and went in the caravanserai of a London Hotel? It was impossible, incredible!

Yet her face as it turned to him—her voice—the marked agitation of her manner—the haste and secrecy. What did they all point to but conscious guilt fleeing from its inevitable consequences?

No; he would put no authorities on her track to run her to earth. It should be his task to find her if she was still in London. And in the midst of the shock, which his earlier suspicion had brought him, he was surprised at the strange exhilaration with which his blood responded to his sudden determination.

“I am younger than I thought!” he reflected grimly as he left the table.

CHAPTER III

CLIVE EGERTON was the only son of a chemical manufacturer in the North, who had

amassed a large fortune, a considerable portion of which having found its way into the coffers of the political party then in power, he had been rewarded with a Knighthood and blossomed into a County Magnate.

On leaving Rugby, young Egerton was sent, much against his own desires, to Heidelberg to complete his chemical training, with the object of fitting himself for his father's business. But after a couple of years his father's sudden death brought him hurriedly back to England. His mother had died when he was a child, and, in the absence of any near relatives, he found himself absolutely his own master at the age of twenty-one, with a considerable income and a large share in a flourishing business. Having disposed of his interest in the latter, he decided to travel for some years, finally settling down to literary work in London.

Accident brought him across an old school chum, Jack Fitzgerald, who, upon very limited means, had been called to the Bar, but had received no further recognition in his adopted profession. The two men were so diametrically opposed in temperament and characteristics, that perhaps it was small wonder that after a short lapse

of time they determined to throw in their lot together, sharing chambers in the Temple and gradually growing into one of those quiet unobtrusive friendships which age cannot wither.

The warm Celtic nature of Jack Fitzgerald found its fitting complement in Egerton's silent reserved strength, while his own whole-hearted buoyancy and enthusiasm proved a constant source of amusement to his friend. Popular as Egerton indubitably was to a certain degree among his own set, his calm, restrained nature seemed to interpose a barrier against easy intimacies, and hitherto the blandishments and fascinations of woman had beckoned in vain.

Passion had never stirred him, therefore it was the more astounding that the memory of his adventure with the unknown woman should so have influenced a man of his unflammable nature. But influence him it did to the exclusion of every other interest, with a spell against which he seemed impotent. The fleeting vision of that delicately outlined face against its heavy furs, the low troubled voice, those pretty appealing hands, it almost seemed as if they had fastened a hold upon him which

he should never again shake off. It was absurd, that this odd meeting with a woman, whose name he did not even know and had no apparent chance of learning, should so fill his thoughts. He scanned the newspapers eagerly morning and evening for further news. While his mind was thus occupied, work was out of the question, her face would so persistently rise between him and the outspread page, that on the third day he flung his books aside and strolled into the smoking-room of the Carmelite Club—a little coterie of literary men and critics, whose special haunt was a cosy suite of rooms in one of the many narrow alleys off Fleet Street.

He found the room deserted, so lighting his pipe and choosing the most comfortable of the easy chairs he picked up an early edition of the *Pall Mall*. Glancing quickly down its columns his eye was caught by the headline—

“THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT THE HOTEL BELGRAVE

INQUEST AND VERDICT

“The mysterious tragedy which happened at the *Hotel Belgrave* was investigated yesterday, at the inquest held by the Westminster Coroner.

“Mr. Repton, manager of the hotel, stated the deceased man arrived at the hotel about a week ago and engaged two rooms, a bedroom and private sitting-room. He gave the name of Kaspari. He appeared to have ample means and received no visitors that he was aware of.

“James Foote, a waiter, deposed, he attended to the gentleman, who had all his meals served in his own room. On the night of the tragedy a lady called to see Mr. Kaspari about half-past nine. About an hour afterwards he was ordered to take up some refreshments. The lady was still there. The rooms were on the third floor. Between that time and midnight he was downstairs waiting, as a big dinner was on. Shortly after twelve o'clock he went upstairs and knocked at the door of Mr. Kaspari's room to see if he wanted anything. He received no answer. The door was shut—but not locked. He then entered and found the gentleman lying partly across the couch, apparently dead. His shirt front was covered with blood, and there was a pool of blood on the floor. There was no sign of a struggle having taken place. He at once summoned the manager, and a

doctor was sent for. He helped to lift the gentleman on to the couch. He groaned several times, but did not speak. They tried to give him brandy, but he ceased to breathe before the doctor arrived. He found a gold ornament shaped like a dagger on the floor, close to where the gentleman lay. It looked as if it had dropped from his hand. He identified the dagger produced. The lady gave no name. She was about medium height and had fair hair. He did not think he could identify her. He did not see her leave. Between 10.30 and 11.30 all the waiters and the hall porter were listening to the singing which was going on after the dinner downstairs.

“A Russian gentleman, at present staying in London, stated he knew the deceased and identified the body. He was well known in Russia.

“Dr. Hopkins deposed, he was called to the *Hotel Belgrave* by telephone, soon after midnight on the evening in question. On examining the man he found life extinct. Death was caused by a small incised wound which had penetrated to the heart. The shirt front had apparently been dragged open, as it had not been penetrated. The wound was produced by a stab

from right to left, and might have been self-inflicted, but it was impossible to say with certainty. It was doubtless caused by the small dagger produced, which on examination he found was stained with blood. There was no other evidence.

"The coroner remarked there was considerable mystery about the affair. It was strange that the lady who had visited the deceased man had not come forward. He would leave the matter in the hands of the police to make what inquiries they thought necessary. After a few minutes' deliberation the jury returned an open verdict."

The paper dropped to Egerton's knee as he pondered the case. Now, there seemed no shadow of doubt that the companion of his adventure was the woman who had called on the man that night. Why had she not come forward? If he succeeded in finding her, what then? His very blood ran cold as all the gruesome possibilities presented themselves before his mental vision.

He was aroused by the entrance of a man who crossed the room towards him.

"How are you, Snowdon?" he replied absently to the new-

comer's cheery greeting. "Where have you been hiding yourself lately?"

"I've been up to the eyes in work; and you know I never visit these haunts when I have anything to do," replied the other gaily.

He was a young man with a florid complexion, who, on the strength of a recently achieved success with a series of sensational stories in the *Blackfriars Magazine*, was rapidly turning off novels at the rate of four per year in response to the eager demands of an insatiable public. He had lately bought an old farmhouse in the Midlands, kept a couple of hunters, and affected the habits of a country squire.

"Have a cigar?"

"Thanks," said Snowdon, as he helped himself from Egerton's case.

"And what have you got on now?" asked Egerton.

"Oh, I've just finished a new yarn, 70,000 words, for the *Buckingham*. Sold the American rights to a syndicate."

"You're a lucky fellow," said Egerton, smiling, as he laid down his paper. He knew from experience when Snowdon once commenced to talk shop, he didn't require any encouragement to go on.

"Many a poor struggling beggar would like to know the secret of your success," he continued.

"Secret? Well, it mainly consists in the accomplishment of the gentle art of 'booming.' My advice to beginners is," said Snowdon, as he waved his cigar in a grandiloquent manner, "make friends with the reviewers, if you haven't the money to 'boom' yourself through a press agency."

"Oh, thou egregious Philistine," cried a little man with long hair and a pointed sandy beard, who had just entered the room. "Giving yourself away again as usual, eh? How are you, old chap?" he continued, as he extended a rather dirty hand to Egerton.

"I was just going to say," said Snowdon, taking no notice of the interruption, "Take the case of Maclaren, who reviews for two dailies and three weeklies. He is a man worth being friendly with, and if your publishers can give half a column of advertisement to his special prints, so much the better."

"My dear Snowdon," chimed in the little man, whose name was Alfric Lovell, and who was the author of more than one slim volume of vapid verse, "you are so abominably com-

mercial. One writes for a larger public than the soulless reviewer. What does the opinion of a single individual matter?"

"When a single individual can address a public of a million or more souls in number, the majority of whom swallow his opinion with their daily pennyworth of mental pabulum, I maintain he is a factor to be reckoned with," retorted Snowdon.

"In my opinion, the worst feature of multiple reviewing is, when a man sometimes writes a review under his own name, then writes others under a nom-de-plume, and so deludes the public into believing it has read different opinions on the same book. I'm afraid the average individual too often takes a reviewer's judgment on a book, as he takes that of the leader writer of his favourite newspaper on current events. It saves him the trouble of thinking for himself," remarked Egerton.

"The public, who know little or nothing how these things are worked, are often led to believe that what is merely one man's opinion is an important consensus of opinion," said Lovell.

"But you can't get away from the fact," said Snowdon, "that

a favourable notice is a good advertisement."

"Doubtless," replied Egerton; "but the majority of such notices are not criticisms, but mere expressions of opinion."

"If a reviewer would rest content with expressing his opinion, without showering abuse on the author, there would be less to grumble at," remarked Lovell.

"My dear fellow, it's only human after all, that a fellow should sometimes pay off old scores against a writer, who may in his time have been an editor or reviewer," replied Snowdon.

"Ah, here comes one of the noble fraternity," cried Lovell, as he turned to greet a stout black-bearded man who had just come in.

The new-comer nodded to the trio, and proceeded leisurely to fill a well-seasoned briar.

"Seen the *Planet* to-day, Snowdon?" he asked as he allowed himself to subside into an easy chair.

"No."

"It would interest you. It contains a fine slating on your last story," said the stout man slowly with a quiet smile.

"It's that confounded Linklater," exclaimed Snowdon. "What does he say, Farrell?"

"Oh, nice agreeable things in a sarcastic style. He suggests that, as you are apparently getting played out, you should follow the prevailing fashion, and publish some recollections of your schooldays."

"Capital idea, Snowdon," remarked Lovell, chuckling. "Call it 'The Adventures of Cockroach and Co., or Life at a Midland Grammar School.'"

"And to think I took that wretch down to Henley last year and treated him like a prince. Oh, the base ingratitude of man!" sighed Snowdon.

"Take warning. This all comes through attempting to bribe a conscientious reviewer," said Farrell sententiously. "Personally I am not troubled with that uncomfortable mentor."

"Well, I won't give you the chance," laughed Snowdon. "But, I say, you fellows, I have a box for Covent Garden Ball to-night. Will you all come?"

"Thanks, I will, on the understanding that you won't expect a flattering review from me on your next book," said Farrell.

"And you, Egerton?"

"I'll try to join you."

"That's all right. Lovell, I know you won't refuse an invitation anywhere, so long as

the fair sex is likely to be in evidence ; so I'll expect to see you all in the foyer at twelve prompt."

CHAPTER IV

It was close upon midnight when Egerton sauntered up Wellington Street through the nipping night air. The street was dark, and more than usually cheerless, for the big, brilliantly lighted theatres had closed their doors, and Covent Garden was silent and deserted, save for one solitary individual who leisurely plied his broom among the débris that strewed the pavement.

Higher up, the old Opera-House was ablaze with light, in striking contrast to its dismal surroundings.

The inevitable little group of poorly clad spectators stood in the biting wind round the entrance-gates, eager for a fleeting glimpse at the motly-garbed occupants of carriages and cabs, which in quick succession drew up under the portico.

There was a momentary block as Egerton leisurely turned in at the gates. Almost at his elbow a hansom stood in the long line. Glancing up, his heart gave a sudden leap, for he caught a momentary glimpse of a woman's

profile as she hurriedly adjusted her mask, and surely those fingers were none other than those which for one never-to-be-forgotten moment had lain on his. The knot of fair hair above the fur-edged domino. There could be no mistaking it!

With a strange thrill of excitement he stepped hastily forward, but the crowd barred his way, and before he could reach the portico the long queue had moved on, and the cab was driving away empty.

He pressed on hurriedly through the corridors, scanning the draped figures eagerly, but could find no trace of her he sought.

In the foyer he was seized upon by Snowdon and piloted toward a group of men who, in conventional evening dress, were lazily chatting near the head of the stairs.

"We thought you were never coming—" drawled Lovell with an aggrieved air, "or that, finding something more attractive, you had seen fit to desert us."

"Well, now that he is here, let us push on and find our box," cried Snowdon, leading the way along the corridor.

"There's one advantage here, at least to a non-dancing man! You can sit down and enjoy the fun without being in the way.

And equally without that detestable sensation of your hostess' eye piercing you with the reproachful reminder, that there are a score or so of elderly and usually unattractive damsels pining to be escorted to a distant supper-table."

"Number 39. Here we are!"

As Snowdon marshalled his friends into the box the band of the Grenadiers was wooing couples to the floor with the bewitching strains of Waldteufel's *Himmelsagen*.

The scene that met Egerton's eye was a strange one. Around him the grand tier was festooned with coloured lamps, that sparkled like innumerable jewels. The scarlet uniforms of the band presented a dazzling background of colour, in the blaze of the great electric crescent and star which flashed brilliantly in mid air.

His eye slowly scanned the ever-moving throng below, kaleidoscopic in its endless variety. Ill-assorted couples whirled gaily round regardless of the eternal fitnesses. Mephistos in their lurid scarlet with the daintiest and primmest of sober grey Puritans. Folly with his cap and bells leading Solitude from her sorrowful contemplation of unattainable heights. Heavily-cowled friars toeing it

bravely in company with ladies in scanty draperies. Here icy Winter led glowing Love by his chill hand; and there Time the hoary-headed invincible, forgetful for once of his grim mission, flirted with a belated Cinderella.

"An interesting scene!" murmured Snowdon, as the couples moved bewilderingly hither and thither, ever forming a new series of pictures. "If one were in a moralizing mood, behold here ample food for reflection, eh, Poet?"

"Isn't that Kitty Darcy?" was the Poet's inspired response as he hastily adjusted his monocle. "You know little Kitty of the 'Gaiety,' Snowdon? Ah, she sees me, the little darling," and he ecstatically waved his handkerchief in the direction of a group of pink dominoes, whose movements were more remarkable for vivacity than decorum.

"'Twas ever thus," sighed Snowdon in mock heroics. "Where one looks for the honey of Hymettus, lo! the flavour of the Music-hall! What do you say to a turn, Egerton?"

But Egerton had already disappeared in hasty pursuit of a delicate blue domino which had passed for an instant athwart the throng.

In and out he moved in vain quest. Of blue dominoes there

were of course no lack, but of the only one which so strangely held the power to thrill his pulses—not a trace! Lovell passed him twice in animated chase of his pink-robed charmer—a grin of ecstatic anticipation on his sensuous little face.

Suddenly, as he sought the shelter of a distant lounge, which was almost entirely concealed by palms, his senses were arrested by the breath of a faint perfume. The subtle association that lurks in scents troubled him. What did it recall? He turned quickly to see seated quietly in front of him, her blue draperies falling softly round her—a woman, surely *the* woman of his search.

Her face was in profile and a mask hid the upper part, but that knot of fair hair low in the nape of the neck—the delicate, unmistakable contour of chin and cheek! He was angrily conscious of a sudden shortening of breath, as he quietly stepped from his corner and stood in front of her. Their eyes met. A look of recognition dawned in hers.

“We *do* meet again, after all, you see; did I startle you?” asked Egerton quietly.

“You knew me then, even through—this? She touched her mask with her shapely hand.

“Hardly by your face,” he answered with a note of invitation in his voice.

“And you—remembered?”

“I do not easily forget,” he replied, speaking calmly above that unaccustomed warmth at his heart.

“You said we should meet again. Are you a prophet?”

“No, only a seer,” he answered gaily. “I knew that Fate held this in store for me—somewhere—some day.”

“Scarcely so soon?”

“So soon?” he echoed vaguely. It seemed an age to him. He put resolutely away the disturbing suspicions which instantly recurred to him, but they drove him restlessly to his feet. Her little shoe beneath her dainty draperies kept time to the distant music.

“They are dancing. Will you give me the pleasure?”

He offered his arm and in a moment they were moving dreamily, intoxicatingly to the rhythmic lilt. To him it seemed the very poetry of motion—she scarcely stirred within his arm as they glided with perfect step over the great floor. Her eyes were closed.

“You are tired?” he questioned softly.

“I could go on like this—for ever,” she breathed.

But when at last he led her back to their sheltered corner she sank upon the lounge with a little sigh.

"You *were* tired then, after all," he said, as he fanned her.

"No, no; but after the dullness of the day the light—the movement are exciting. That waltz—it was heavenly; and the scene, it is pretty, isn't it?"

"Ay, after all, motley's the only wear."

"I do not understand," she answered vaguely. "You seem—triste."

"So was Jacques when he originated the remark—only we call it melancholy."

"We?" she pouted. "That is unkind. It is a reflection on my English accent, of which I am so proud. Confess, now, that I speak your language well."

"Perfectly. So perfectly that you could not possibly be English. Our methods are more—slip-shod."

"Slip-shod?" Again she seemed puzzled. "Ah! I see, the evidence of too much foot."

"Precisely. The cloven foot it has even been called." He smiled whimsically at his own fancy, the hidden meaning of which escaped her.

"Ah, well, like your Cinderella I must be running away now. My hour is over."

She rose, drawing the soft fur about her face.

"You are—alone?" he asked.

"Yes, quite alone. Are you shocked? Your English ladies do not come alone to these places? Ah, but when one is triste—how do you say it? me—mel—melancholy; oh, the ugly word—what is one to do?"

"Accept me as your escort, of course," laughed Egerton, promptly offering her his arm. "Will you not stay for one more, just one more heavenly waltz? Quite sure? Then let me see you to your cab."

She smiled mischievously into the earnest face bent above her.

"That you may learn my address?"

"You are going to tell me that yourself—and you are going to tell me your name also—and I am coming to see you," he said confidently with equal mischief.

"What a programme!" she replied laughingly. "And suppose I do not wish you to know my name nor—nor—that you shall come to see me?"

"You do wish it," he said. "I am going to tell you mine in exchange for yours. My name is Clive Egerton."

"And mine is Irise Romanoff."

"Suppose we shake hands over our formal introduction?" suggested Egerton, holding out

his hand. Laughingly she put hers into it.

They stood on the steps of the portico, while a commissionaire whistled up a hansom.

"—and the address?" whispered Egerton.

"129, Upper Baker Street. Now are you satisfied?"

"Not until the third item is conceded. I may come and see you?"

"But do you really, really wish to come?"

"With all my heart and soul.

"Sunday afternoon then. Au revoir, Mr. Egerton."

"Till Sunday," said Egerton, smiling into the laughing, mischievous eyes. His own were radiant as he turned away.

For the moment prudence had no place in his philosophy. There would be ample time for her claims later on, in the night watches. Just now, he was richly and amply content.

CHAPTER

WHEN Egerton came down to breakfast after a restless night, he was greeted by Fitzgerald, who sprang to his feet, brandishing an open letter, his face beaming with delight.

"Read that, old man," he

cried rapturously, "Who says now that it's not better to be born lucky than rich?" Egerton took the letter and glanced hastily through its contents.

"Good business," he said, grasping his friend's hand warmly. "This will mean a great deal to you, eh, Fitz?"

"A great deal. Why, man, it means *everything*. Think of the position. Editor of the *Pantheon*. None of your tuppenny ha'penny rags, but the *Pantheon*! mark you.

He was evidently beside himself with excitement and delight.

"And the salary?" asked Egerton, his practical side uppermost.

"£400 a year. By Jove, it sounds incredible. Why, it means opulence, you stolid old ruffian. Opulence. It means—" his voice sank to tenderness—"why, it just means—Sylvia, little Sylvia, my dear little patient girlie—how proud she'll be. I say, Egerton, I vote we strike work for to-day. The occasion warrants it, and just run down to Edenham. What do you say?"

"But hadn't you better go alone? I'm sure you and Sylvia will have such heaps to talk over that you won't want bothering with outsiders——"

“Nonsense! besides, you can amuse Hildred while we discuss ways and means. Great Scott, there *are* no ways and means to be discussed! Ways and means indeed! Our ship has arrived! We shall just sail in on the flood-tide!”

So noon found them speeding through the desolate hop-gardens and soft undulating valleys of Kent—Egerton was glad of anything to distract his own thoughts, and unfeignedly—delighted at his friend’s good fortune.

Long before they had reached the little roadside station he had caught the infection of his friend’s gaiety, and they were laughing like two schoolboys as they tramped through the crisp country air along the chalky road. It was familiar ground to both. Jack’s father had been Vicar of the little church with the old grey tower, which showed plainly among the trees in the bright sunshine.

“Not a bad idea,” said Fitzgerald musingly, after a brief silence, “to come back here and settle one day in this good old familiar corner.”

“Not yet, not till your work is done,” answered Egerton. “Your place is with the labourers yet, in the burden and heat of the day, old man! Time enough

to think of this when the long day draws to a close.”

“Well, there’s one little corner at least that I shall claim for rest—the long rest you know, old chap, when sun-down comes—among her people and mine.”

A moment’s silence fell.

“I declare we’re getting absolutely morbid on the happiest day of my life, too. It’s all your fault, old sober-sides. Look here! I’ll race you to the Park corner! Now then!”

And at the corner he almost ran full tilt into a group, and pulled himself up breathlessly to confront Sylvia and Hildred—their brother Cyril—a mischievous young imp just home from school for the holidays—a thin young man in clerical attire and a leash of dogs, who frisked and gambolled round him with such clamorous demonstrations of delight that any other greetings were out of the question.

“Down, Nero! Ben! Be quiet, Rip! Oh, what dreadful manners! Dear Jack, what a delightful surprise!—and Mr. Egerton too, this is kind. We were just giving the dogs a run,” cried Sylvia rather incoherently, her face betraying without any need of words the joy her lover’s presence brought her. “You

remember Hildred—my sister I think, Mr. Egerton—and Cyril. This is Mr. Mathews, our curate.”

The introductions over they turned with one accord in the direction of the old Manor House—Hildred leading with Egerton, Jack and Sylvia following more leisurely—while the Rev. Simon Mathews, with a disappointed expression dawning on his mild countenance, was somewhat cavalierly relegated to the rear, and the tender mercies of that notorious tease, Cyril.

“So this is little Hildred!” said Egerton, speaking unconsciously half aloud.

“I beg your pardon,” said the girl, turning a bright face toward him. The air had given a touch of becoming colour to her usually pale skin. Egerton liked the clear, fearless look with which her brown eyes met his. It brought before him more vividly than any words could have done, the memory of that “little slip of a thing,” who in the old times had impatiently hurled gravel at their windows that they might share her rapture in the glorious summer dawns.

“I was recalling old days,” he said, smiling. “One realizes how swiftly Time slips by, when

one comes face to face with such transformations as—this.”

“What transformations?” she asked simply.

“When I last saw you, you were a slight little child in short frocks, Miss Hildred. Now——”

“I’m afraid my frock is still rather short,” she replied, with a smile and a somewhat rueful glance at her sensible skirts and the thick-soled country boots below them. “But what you say only serves to show what an age it is since you were last at Edenhams. Then—you were dreaming—I think—of great things. Now you are making quite a stir in the world. We read your last book,” she added more shyly.

“Hardly a stir, Miss Hildred! It’s the women nowadays who do all that, while we men stand aghast, lost in wonder as to what little corner will be finally left to us. They write—they paint—they lecture—alas! they preach! and generally do everything they used not to dream of doing!”

“I rather fancied preaching at least had always been among their prerogatives,” she responded with a laughing glance of her bright eyes. “Are you one of the army of objectors to a woman’s work in the world, Mr. Egerton?”

“Well, it’s rather a weakness of mine to think of a woman

stowed safely away from the strife and turmoil, in the shelter of the domestic hearth. The old ideal of Woman holds something infinitely sweet and attractive to a man somewhat tired with the fret and fever of the eternal grind. I have always fancied that she loses more than she is aware of, when she steps out of that warm shelter into man's arena, and fights him with his own weapons—" He hesitated a moment. "I am vexing you," he added, seeing a shadow on the brightness of her face.

"N—no. Your idea of the sheltered life is all very well—very chivalrous—very sweet—but a woman wants scope—she wants—ah well! it would be far too long a business to attempt to tell you half that a modern woman may want without the least desire to un-sex herself; and anyway, here we are, and here's mother waiting to know what has kept us so late. Naughty little mother! without the faintest semblance of a shawl, too, in this nipping air!" she scolded tenderly, drawing the somewhat frail figure within her strong young arm. "We met Jack and Mr. Egerton in the Church lane, dear. Jack has brought the most delightful news—and Mr. Egerton"—she shot a glance of mischief in his direc-

tion—"has been lecturing me on the general unattractiveness of modern women. And the worst of it is, Mr. Egerton—that my mother will agree with every word you said."

"I don't think I said *very* much, Miss Temple."

"Perhaps not. But you evidently thought whole volumes. There, the kettle is boiling," she said cheerily, busying herself at the tea-table, which gleamed invitingly in the warm firelight.

"In my young days," said Mrs. Temple in her soft sweet voice, as she subsided into a chair, "girls were content with their mother's fireside until they had one of their own. Now, all they seem to desire, is to go and help to keep strangers' hearths bright, no matter how desolate they may leave their own. There was none of this hankering after independence when I was a girl, but everything is changed now, it seems."

"Yes, everything is changed indeed, dear Mrs. Temple," cried Jack's hearty voice, breaking in on a somewhat embarrassing silence. "Like the other fellow in the parable, I've awoke to find myself—well, not exactly famous, but on the highroad to it!—and rich—not altogether beyond the dreams of avarice, but 'twill serve—'twill serve,

and we're going to set about house-hunting without delay."

"Dear Jack, you take my breath away."

"I don't wonder. It nearly took mine away too, Mrs. Temple. The girls are coming up to their aunt at Bayswater early in next week. We've settled it all on the way here, you see—haven't we, dearest?—and now all that remains is to ask your blessing, and the services of our clerical friend here, eh?"

The curate, who had followed in somewhat tardily with Cyril, smiled in a melancholy fashion, and after a few congratulatory commonplaces drifted aimlessly away.

Then the programme of ways and means was happily discussed in every possible form and shape, as they all sat cosily round the fire and drank tea.

When at last the men reluctantly rose to go, Egerton paused for a moment at Hildred's side. Her face had a tired, wistful look, in spite of her bright, unflagging interest in her sister's affairs.

"I do sincerely trust that nothing I said hurt you, Miss Temple," he remarked.

"Not in the very least—really. Only you know *I* want my work in the world too, and it's not preaching nor lecturing—

nor is it indeed, I think, altogether unwomanly if undertaken in the right spirit."

"And what may the work be?" he asked.

"I want to be a hospital nurse, only mother objects so strongly. You heard her just now? Dear little mother! She wants to keep her fledglings round her, even though they are quite old enough and strong enough to spread out their wings and fly."

"She would be very lonely without you, when your sister has gone to that 'fireside of her own.'"

"I know. I shall stay with her of course. There is no question of that."

The firm lines that her young face took, showed how large a place duty held in her life's philosophy. "And you will be lonely, too, without Jack, won't you?" she added lightly, dismissing her own interests.

"He is the best fellow in the world, and I *shall* miss him, but my work fills my life to a very large extent. No man can be really lonely while he has work to do. It's a wonderful panacea."

"Ah yes, but only for *a man*," she smiled whimsically.

"A woman's best work lies usually very near her hand, believe me," he said gently,

with a meaning glance towards the frail figure over in the fire-light.

The girl nodded as they shook hands.

CHAPTER VI

LONG before Sunday dawned Egerton had made up his mind that he would not avail himself of that eagerly sought permission to call at Upper Baker Street. Prudence had re-asserted her claims with no uncertain voice. It was palpably absurd, he argued with himself, that a man, who for so many years had prided himself upon being the possessor of certain qualities denied to the majority of men, should allow impulse to override him in such a high-handed fashion. Certainly, if only to prove to himself his right to the reputation he had gained, he would not go. His mind was made up.

Yet, the room in its Sunday morning desolation — all the more desolate by reason of Fitzgerald's absence (for he had gone to spend the week-end at Edenham)—struck him with a chill of premonition. It was during the long hours before noon, in which he alternately tried to concentrate his attention

upon his work and paused to listen with a weakness for which he mentally scourged himself, to the allurements of longing, that perhaps he first realized the grip with which this woman held him.

He lunched disconsolately and inadequately, at an abnormally early hour, to break the monotony of the tedious day, missing with a pang of foreboding Jack's inconsequent chatter. After all, he was not surprised to find himself brushing his hat with elaborate care, previous to what he promised himself would be nothing more than a short stroll.

He sauntered west through the quiet, almost deserted streets, meeting here and there a gaily dressed shop-girl starting on her Sunday afternoon ramble with eyes alert for promising-looking young men. More than one of these damsels cast more or less inviting glances in the direction of the tall, well-groomed figure, so typically English in its look of easy strength.

He was still assuring himself with the too much protestation of insincerity of his determination not to call, even while his eye was diligently scanning the numbers over the houses in Upper Baker Street.

That, then, was the house, across

the way, where the windows of the lower floor were screened by leaded glass. Above, firelight flickered upon heavy curtains. It would be interesting to see the sort of house she lived in—he might just see her this once—indeed, it would seem almost churlish not to do so after his own insistence—and then shake off, once and for all, this absurd infatuation.

It was with this laudable determination that he finally rang the bell. A neat maid opened the door, and faced him inquiringly.

“Miss Romanoff?” he queried, conscious with a sense of relief that the die was cast.

“Please to step this way, sir,” she replied, and he ‘stepped’ accordingly after her up the stairs to a door at the end of the passage. She ushered him into a cosy, well-furnished room, bright with firelight, and heavy with the mingled perfumes of hothouse flowers and tobacco. He surveyed the room with a searching glance, holding firmly by the doctrine that a room betrays much of the mind and disposition of its occupant. The mantelshelf was literally covered with signed photographs in massive frames—there were inviting-looking lounges bestrewn with luxurious cushions—a

profusion of small tables where more silver frames held more lavishly inscribed photographs. Heavy curtains screened a further apartment. A moment later a woman’s hand drew them aside, and Irise Romanoff stood in the entrance. She was the first to speak.

“You have come then?” she cried gaily.

“Yes, I am here,” he replied self-consciously as he took her outstretched hands.

All misgiving vanished the instant he was once more face to face with her.

Seeing her thus—fully—for the first time, he found her even more beautiful than he had imagined. Her long clinging gown fell in straight lines to her feet, and there were touches of rare old lace about her throat and wrists. Her hair was rolled simply away from her face in the heavy coil with which already he seemed so familiar. Her eyes—a couplet leapt to his mind, though he was not apt to think in poetry—

Her eyes were deeper than the depths
Of waters stilled at even.

Just now they had all the mystery and depth of twilight waters.

She laughed a little low laugh as she turned from the very visible admiration in his face,

“These terrible English Sundays,” she cried, nestling into a heap of cushions with a little shiver. “You will draw your chair up close to the fire, and we will forget that outside there is loneliness and cold. You smoke?”

“Thanks, not just now.”

“Oh, but surely yes! Those cigarettes in the box at your elbow are excellent—they are my favourites. Yes, I smoke too. Does that shock you?”

Drawing the silver box toward her, she lighted one with the ease of habit. He had always hated to see a woman smoke, but now he watched her lithe fingers, adorned with their flashing rings, with growing fascination.

Everything she did was imbued with an individual grace—the quick light poise of her head—the play of her arms, from which the old lace fell, as she daintily arranged the cushions to her liking.

“Now that you are here you must talk—you must amuse me,” she said with pretty imperiousness.

“What shall I talk about? Surely it would be a much better arrangement to let me sit quiet and listen to you!”

“Ah, no, I am not interesting.”

After that, how can you possibly expect me to bore you with such an abjectly uninteresting subject as myself and my affairs? No, tell me if you will—of yourself—of that—” he paused. “You remember our curious meeting a week or two ago?”

“Ah, yes, I remember.” The gaiety had fallen from her voice and he fancied her colour faded. “But you will not ask me to talk about that? Someday perhaps—but not now. You were very kind, and you helped me; and though at first I hoped never to see you again—now——”

“Yes, now?” he questioned as she hesitated.

“I am glad that we did meet at Covent Garden.”

“That is very nice of you. And you still find London as ‘triste,’ as it was, or are you becoming more reconciled to its dullness?” he asked lightly, falling in with her evident desire to change the subject.

“It is different,” she answered simply. “It grows upon me. I like the movement—the haste—the sense of ardent *living*. It excites me—like the scene the other evening.”

“Must you always have movement—excitement?” he asked, smiling indulgently.

"Oh, I want life!" she exclaimed, spreading her arms with a wide gesture. "Life—rich, warm, pulsating. You see, I have quicker blood than you cold English. I am——"

"Tell me," he urged, seeing that she hesitated.

She leaned forward, her chin in her clasped hands. The firelight played in her wonderful hair and in the depths of her dreaming eyes.

"There is so little to tell," she said. "I was born in Prague. Do you know Prague? It's such a quaint, quaint old city! My father was a Russian, but my mother was English. That is why I was hurt when you said 'we' the other night—do you remember? because on my mother's side I am 'we' too, you see. She loved England. Always when we were alone she talked to me in her own language. The first memory I have is of her crooning, sweet little English nursery songs in her soft small voice. Oh, I ought to love England for my mother's sake!"

"She died?"

"Yes, she died when I was quite a little child."

"And your father?"

"He died too when I was about fifteen. He was first violin in the orchestra at the old Opera

House. He was a great favourite with all the other players, and old Otto Hertz, the leader, took me under his wing and was a second father to me. But ah, my friend, it was lonely. You will understand?"

"Poor little child, yes, I understand," he said tenderly.

"I had a passion for dancing. Always as a little child when my father played those old Hungarian dances they went to my head like wine, and I danced and danced for sheer joy of life! Afterwards, the old Maestro saw in this a prospect for my future. We were all so poor, you see; all poor together. It is a sordid story, is it not? Let us talk of something else."

"Go on, please. I *want* to hear it," he said gravely.

"Well, the Maestro sent me to Vienna to study, and afterwards I went to Milan and made my *début* there."

"And now you are come to London to take the town by storm," he said encouragingly.

"No, I did not come to London to work," she answered. "I came—on—another errand——"

He saw her deep eyes gleam with tears in the firelight.

"And that was the first night I saw you?" he asked gently.

"Yes, that was the first night—

my first night in England. Some day, if you still care to remain my friend, I will tell you the rest. Not now."

"Thank you. That is a bargain," he said quietly. "I should like to see one of your Hungarian dances."

"Perhaps you may—who knows?" she said with a recurrence of her old gaiety. "Now that I am in London I want to appear at one of your big theatres."

"When?"

"Ah, not yet, I'm afraid. Not for some time. They book up all their engagements so long ahead."

"See here, let me try and manage this for you, will you? I know one or two of the managers of the big variety theatres. Beauchamp, the manager of the 'Eldorado,' is an old friend of mine. If you will let me introduce him to you——"

"But why should you take so much trouble, dear friend?"

"It is not the slightest trouble, and if it were I should like to do it. At any rate let me try," he said as he rose to go.

"But though you know my own name you do not yet know my professional one! See, this is it."

She took a card from a table near by and gave it to him.

There was a touch of professional pride in her voice as she said "though it evidently conveys nothing to you, it will not be altogether unknown to your friend, I think."

He put the card away safely in his pocket-book.

"I shall remember," he said, smiling, as he held out his hand.

"I know. You 'do not easily forget,'" she quoted softly, and the look which accompanied her words went with him down the stairs and out into the street.

CHAPTER VII

As the door closed Irise sank into her cushions with a little sigh, and, with her hands clasped behind her head, gave herself up to smiling reverie.

She was aroused by a soft tap at the door, and the maid entered, followed closely by a tall, dark man of military bearing. His well-cropped hair and pointed moustache were slightly tinged with grey, while his closely buttoned frock-coat showed his powerfully built figure to perfection.

For a moment Irise remained seated. Her rigid attitude almost conveyed the impression

that his appearance had suddenly robbed her of the power of movement. He bowed. There was something sinister in the gleam of his dark eyes as he met her surprised gaze. With an effort she rose. There was no cordiality in the manner with which she touched his outstretched hand.

"You! Captain Lexoff," she murmured. "I was not aware you were in England."

"I have taken the first opportunity which presented itself to pay my homage at the shrine of Beauty!" he said with easy gallantry, bowing again over the hand he held.

"And to what am I indebted for the—honour—of your visit?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle, are not my previous words sufficient explanation? Can the needle turn from the Pole?"

"I do not care for flattery, Captain Lexoff," she said wearily, with a significant shrug of her shoulders. "Will you not be seated?"

He stood for a moment looking down on her, and then slowly drew forward the chair in which Egerton had sat. There was a moment's silence, in which Irise was conscious of his concentrated gaze.

"When did you arrive in London?" she asked, breaking

the silence; "and how long do you remain?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle," he replied, evasively. "We birds of passage are ever on the wing. To-day, here. To-morrow, who knows? May I venture the hope that, at least, my presence to-day is not an intrusion?" he continued, suavely.

"Had you come a few moments later you would have found me out," she replied.

"Then I am the more fortunate that I chose the lucky hour," he answered. "You do not ask the reason of my presence in England, chère Mademoiselle."

"Are the motives for your 'swallow-flights' of paramount importance to me, Captain?" she queried, with scarcely-veiled indifference.

"I came to see a mutual friend," he continued blandly; "one in whom we are both much interested. Alas! I came too late."

"Ah! he had gone away, I suppose?" said the girl with a fine assumption of indifference.

"As you say, he had already gone away" he said slowly, with intention. "On a long journey, Mademoiselle."

"But being as you say a 'bird of passage,' might you not have followed him?"

“Scarcely so far, *yet*, Mademoiselle. My poor friend—or shall I not rather say *our* poor friend—had taken a journey where even swallow-wings are inadequate.” He smiled grimly at the covert jest.

“You mean?” queried the girl calmly, conscious the while of her blanching face, “he was dead?”

“Yes; I found him, dead, dear lady,” replied the Captain gravely.

“And you had not heard of it? It was perhaps—a sudden death?”

“So,” replied the Captain grimly, striking his chest with a significant gesture.

The girl shuddered.

“My story distresses you?” he said softly. “You have such a tender heart; *chère Mademoiselle*. For me such cases are—interesting. This one specially so.”

“Doubtless. The death of a friend is naturally at once distressing, and of deep interest,” she answered. With all her art she could not conceal her rapid breathing. “And now—I suppose you return to Russia?”

“Not quite yet, I think,” replied the imperturbable captain. “There are circumstances connected with our friend’s sudden death which will keep me some time longer in England.”

The girl put up her hands as if to arrange the knot of her loosened hair—in reality to hide the whiteness of her face.

“Apropos,” said the captain with ominous *sauvity*, “I see you no longer wear that charming ornament with which all your numerous admirers in St. Petersburg are so familiar.”

“What ornament?” Her breath caught.

“A curious little toy fashioned like a dagger. ‘Cupid’s dart’ your friends had named it—aptly I think, considering the havoc worked among their hearts by its wearer.”

Her agitation grew under his torturing smile, but she still simulated an air of indifference.

“Oh—that. I do not care for it any longer. One discards such trifles.”

“After they have served their purpose, I suppose,” remarked the captain, with a meaning smile.

“What do you mean?”

“Only that what you were unfortunate enough to lose, I was fortunate enough to find, *chère Mademoiselle*. Do not disquiet yourself. Your treasure is safe.”

“I do not understand you.”

“Pardon, Mademoiselle, if I say I think you *do*. Such an

ornament as I describe was discovered in—my—I mean our—friend's room. The authorities very generously permitted me to retain it. Some day—” he paused meaningly—“some day, perhaps I shall have much pleasure in restoring it to you. Strange,” he continued musingly, his piercing eyes never for an instant leaving her face, “is it not, that this little toy should have been discovered in my friend's room? One pauses to admire the very admirable methods of Fate—”

“Captain Lexoff!” she cried, springing to her feet.

“Softly, softly, most chère Mademoiselle, we will not disturb ourselves. The little weapon is safe.”

“And you will return it to me?”

“You are certain it is yours, then?” he queried, tauntingly.

“If it is mine,” corrected the girl, conscious of a wrong move. “You say you will return it some day. Why not now, if it is in your possession?”

“Not so fast, dear friend,” he answered slowly. “There are certain conditions attendant upon its restoration.”

“Name them.”

“Again, not quite so fast,” he said, with exasperating coolness.

“Nothing is to be gained by

over-impetuosity. Let us lay our cards on the table, Mademoiselle. You hold an excellent hand, but the game is mine. You value your ornament, after all, eh? You would give much to have it again in your own possession. Is it not so?

“Name your price.”

“Ah, do not talk like that, Mademoiselle. I am not mercenary.” A gleam of passion suddenly lighted his keenly-sombre eyes, and he rose and stood before her. “Listen. I love you. You have known that for years. I want you. Come to me. As my wife there will be no cause for fear. A community of interests——” he paused, smiling.

“Your wife? Yours.” Her accent was unflattering. His face darkened.

“Mine, Mademoiselle. I have much to offer.”

“If you had the whole world and all its gold, I would not take them at your hands,” she cried, contemptuously.

“I can scarcely plead that my offer includes so wide an area,” he said with sarcasm. “Still, as I say, I offer much. I make a good friend—and a better enemy. As an enemy—believe me, Mademoiselle——” he paused, meaningly.

“I have nothing to fear.

Coward! Did ever any woman worth the name stoop to be won by threats? I have borne enough, Captain Lexoff. Leave me."

With a magnificent gesture of her outstretched hands she seemed as if sweeping him from her path.

"Permit me to congratulate you on the strides you have evidently made in your art," he said, with imperturbable suavity. "I go, *chère Mademoiselle*; but I do not despair. A Russian can wait."

"That is well. A lifetime of waiting for a man of action," she sneered, contemptuously.

"Scarcely so long, I assure you. One little month—two, three—and you will tell a different tale. Permit me, without discourtesy, to remind you that prison cells—even in pampered England—are scarcely so luxurious as this delightful apartment. *Au revoir, Mademoiselle.*"

There was no diminution of his usual elaborate gallantry as he bowed low and smilingly withdrew.

Alone, Irise threw herself among her cushions, and the couch shook with her passionate sobs.

CHAPTER VIII

EGERTON had almost given up the struggle. He felt like a man who has been worsted in physical combat. He was sore and baffled and not a little humiliated. The sense of defeat lost none of its usual acute unpleasantness, though outwardly he was much the same as ever. He was quite conscious that he was drifting, without any of the pleasurable peace with which that policy is supposed to compensate the tired soul. It went sorely against the grain to discover that he in no wise differed from the generality of men, much as he had hitherto prided himself upon doing so. The cords with which this woman held him seemed slowly but surely tightening round him, and it was gall and wormwood to him to realize that he could no longer count upon the force of his will to break away from them.

In the week following his visit to Upper Baker Street, he made numerous unsuccessful efforts to see Beauchamp, who, busy with the production of a new ballet, was as unapproachable as a Cabinet Minister.

Still, in this at least, his old pugnacity stood him in good

stead, for finally, towards the end of the week, he discovered the lion in his lair—a dark, small, businesslike looking (truth to tell evil-smelling) den, at the back of the stage.

He was “up to the eyes,” to quote his own expression in press- notices, costume- sketches, interviews, and daily rehearsals. But his brilliant smile—so universally bestowed—lost nothing of its graciousness, as, after repeated attempts to elude his friend, he found himself thus cornered.

“So delighted to see you, old man. Excuse this muddle, won't you? My own room is in the hands of the decorators—beastly nuisance. We produce our new ballet on Thursday, and what with my leading lady shewing signs of incipient influenza and another kicking against the necessity for wearing tights instead of skirts, I'm nearly off my head.”

He seemed to have ample leisure for the recital of his own woes. Egerton let him chatter on at his own sweet will for some time, regardless of a ceaseless stream of would-be interrupters.

The jargon of the profession flowed on unchecked, till a diminutive boy in buttons brought in a telegram.

“One moment, dear boy,” he said to Egerton, hastily tearing the envelope. His face clouded.

“By Jove! of all the bad luck.” He ran his fingers through his abundant locks.

“Here's one of our chief ‘turns’ laid up with a sprained ankle. What inconceivable rot it is that these women, whose only capital is in their feet, will insist on playing such idiotic pranks. Thrown from her bicycle, of course. What right has she riding a bicycle at all, I'd like to know?”

Here was Irise's chance with a vengeance, thought Egerton. He had surely waited to some purpose. He spoke quietly above the other's furious lamentings.

“I think I've got the very thing for you, Beauchamp,” he remarked.

“My dear boy, excuse me, but if you had served so long an apprenticeship as I have, to this great and glorious calling of ours, you'd know that everybody always *has* ‘got the very thing’ somewhere up their sleeve. A fellow only realizes what a silly ass he's been to put any faith in 'em when he sees their pet protégés making fools of themselves—and him. However, I must wire at once

to Mainwaring. He is the man to get me out of this mess, if any one can. And anyhow, I've got enough on my hands at present."

The gesture with which he swung round to his heavily-strewn table was sufficiently pointed by way of dismissal, but Egerton stuck to his point with that quiet directness which had so often won him a hearing where others more blatantly insistent had ignominiously failed.

"Listen a moment, Beauchamp, before you send that wire. You've heard of *La Belle Etôile*?"

The name came by no means trippingly to his tongue. Somehow it was distasteful to him.

"*La Belle Etôile*. Why, of course. Isn't she that Hungarian girl who made rather a stir in Paris a season or two ago? You're not by way of suggesting her as a substitute for '*La Torriarja*,' are you? My dear fellow, I'd like to see her face if she could hear you. These foreign danseuses give themselves no end of airs—are booked up months in advance. Why you couldn't get '*La Belle Etôile*' at such a short notice for love or money."

Egerton's enthusiasm ebbed. The manner with which Beau-

champ mouthed her name filled him with loathing and all the old misgiving. After all, why should he put it in the power of a man like Beauchamp to sneeringly couple their names.

Yet a man's word was his bond. That at least, amid the general upheaval remained fixed and immutable.

"I think I can undertake to secure the services of '*La Belle Etôile*,' if you authorize me to do so," he said, quietly.

Beauchamp glanced up, with a sudden look of curiosity mingled with amusement, into the quiet face.

"Sits the wind in that quarter?" he quoted softly.

With difficulty Egerton repressed a sudden desire to kick the man.

"I'll ask her to let you know her terms with as little delay as possible," he said coldly, as he rose to depart.

"If she is in England, better instruct the lady to call and see me," replied Beauchamp with again that unholy gleam of amusement in his eye.

Egerton wished him 'Good-day' and stepped into the purer air of the street. He had done what he had promised and there was an end of it.

Yet it was part of their compact to let her know how

he fared, but there was very definite reluctance in the steps he turned in the direction of Upper Baker Street.

He found her almost buried in a profusion of Spring flowers, and the face she turned at his entrance was as bright as they.

"Ah!" she cried, letting a handful of daffodils fall in her haste to greet him. "This is sweet of you. How good you are to me. All these lovely flowers too. Did you think I should not guess whose kind thought it was to send such a divine breath of Spring into my dingy rooms?"

There were flowers everywhere—bowls of violets, daffodils in great blue jars, lilies and hyacinths in reckless profusion. The heavy scent of them made the air intoxicating. She moved among them, arranging and rearranging with swift, deft fingers. He could not resist the exquisite charm of her manner, and the look with which her deep eyes sought his. He held her outstretched hands perceptibly longer than conventionality demanded.

"There's good news, too," he said, "for you."

"Good news? What can it be? Ah you have seen your friend? He engages me?"

"I suppose that is what it amounts to," he replied. "Your agent arranges all the details of course?"

"But he is not in England. I told you I did not come on business. Ah, my friend, you are not glad? You do not want to see me dance then?"

Her face almost childish in its pretty eagerness, and her delicate beseeching hands, made him long to take her in his arms, even while he recognized in every gesture the practised arts of trained coquetry.

"I ought to go at once and see your friend Be—? what's his name?"

"Beauchamp. But why is it necessary for you to see him? Won't writing serve, or see his agent, Mainwaring?"

"Ah no, it takes too long. I must see him. Besides, what does it matter? Is that why you are vexed?"

"Am I vexed?"

"Your eyes have a frown in them, and your brows are knitted. So——" She drew her pretty forehead into puckers and wrinkles, and laughed, then as suddenly grew grave in ready response to the stern gravity of his unsmiling face.

"Ah, my friend, you don't understand. You would wrap us round carefully and warm

like your English demoiselles. Is it not so? But that is impossible. We have our work in the world, and the ways are not always quite straight; but what would you? They must be trodden all the same."

A sudden recollection of a country lane, a girl's eyes raised to his with none of the potent witchery that lurked in this woman's, rose before him. A girl's voice saying gravely: "Your ideal is very sweet, very chivalrous, but a woman wants her work in the world."

Were all women alike, then, in whatever calling or degree? What was this haunting chimera which cozened them so readily into foregoing all a man's chivalry and service? Suddenly he was swept away on a flood-tide of passion—words unbidden rose to his lips—the thought of this girl with her strange charm—her wonderful deep eyes, smiling and permitting the inevitable amorous advances of other men was maddening.

"Irise," he said, drawing her toward him with a dominant touch. "Give up all this business. There is no need. Give me the right to take care of you—to keep you from hateful men—from the chance of—the crooked ways."

She let him hold her hands,

though their unconscious grip was cutting the rings into the delicate flesh. She smiled.

"But why, dear friend, why? Why should you care? What, after all, am I—or my ways to you?"

"I love you," he said, simply. His breath seemed to come in gasps. There was nothing of a lover's usual delight in his declaration. It seemed wrung from him almost against his will. "I love you. It was for this that Fate brought us so strangely together."

In a flood-tide came memories of that night with all its accompanying mystery and misgiving, but he strangled them in his soul fiercely. "You see, dear," he said quietly, "it was for this."

"Ah, no, no!" she cried, drawing her hands away. "It's all a mistake—and oh, such a pity! You don't love me that way, dear friend, I know, I know. And I—oh, it would not do at all!" Her manner changed with its startling rapidity from grave to gay again. "I want just the things you would deny me—life, applause, excitement, change—I told you at the first."

"I could give you some of them. We would travel, and if you—cared—surely that would

compensate for the tawdry things you sacrificed."

"Besides," she interrupted, "you know nothing of me really—of my history—my belongings."

"But you would tell me, later on—someday, as you promised. You would tell me—everything. Think, Irise, how much easier, if there were anything to tell—your own husband—and if there were any danger I should be there to share it."

"Danger! What danger?" she questioned quickly. "What danger should there be?"

"Heaven knows! I suppose none of us mere mortals ever do," he said wearily.

"Dear, dear friend, listen," she said; "you are good beyond words. Once I said yours was a face that a woman might trust, and your heart is gold—pure gold all through. Ah, yes, I do not speak without knowledge, for I have tested it, you see." She smiled archly through a glitter of sudden tears. "But, believe me, it would be a mistake for us both—for me—impossible. The woman whom you marry should be—ah, well, she should be all that I am not." She laughed her gay little laugh. "For me—I should tire of it all in a week. Yes, it is quite, quite true. I should tire, and

you would hate me, and we should both be miserable. Love is miserable, you know. It spoils everything—it makes one morbid and dull and melancholy. You see?"

"You speak with conviction certainly. Have you proved it?"

"Ah, yes, I have proved it over and over again. It is always the same. Let us forget that we have said foolish things, and be friends, just good, true, faithful friends. It is so much better. You will? Ah, yes."

"Friends always, dear, of course, but I don't accept this by any means as my final answer. There is time enough, and they say everything comes to those——"

"Ah, don't say that, don't say it! It reminds me of——"

"Of what?"

"Of what I want to—forget," she shuddered. "And now I really ought to be going to this appointment. Good-bye, dear friend."

"Good-bye, dear."

Her face clouded at the dullness of his tone.

"And we are really friends—for always?" she pleaded anxiously. "You will still be my friend, and try and forget all this?"

"Your friend, yes, always. May I——?"

But he turned suddenly away, leaving the question unasked, though the thought that he might if he *had* asked, tormented him all through his homeward way.

CHAPTER IX

"I TELL you the whole question of the relation of the sexes cries out for revision. The thing wants modernising. To begin with, under the entirely revolutionized conditions of the present day these fossilized old rules and regulations are simply a dead letter——"

The speaker, little Lovell, who, well afloat on the stream of his own eloquence, planted his feet more firmly upon the club hearthrug, and surveyed his audience with a complacency scarcely justified by their inattentive demeanour.

"'I am Sir Oracle,'" quoted Farrell softly, puffing contentedly away at his pipe. "Why don't you go in for a seat in the House, Lovell, and air your valuable views there? It's a fitter sphere for your torrential eloquence than the smoking-room of the Carmelite Club. It might even hail with enthu-

siasm such a startling innovation into its usual dry-as-dust dissertations——"

"Why don't you go and get married yourself, and put a few of your blessed theories to the test of experience?" growled Denton, a thin, effeminate-looking man, who edited the *Mentor*, and who prided himself on being one of the best-dressed men in town.

"For the simple reason I haven't yet come across the woman I could contemplate as a life-long companion," replied Lovell, casting a withering glance at his interrogator.

"Take this to your comfort—that *her* life, at least, would scarcely be likely to be long, once she found herself tied to you," murmured Farrell again, behind the shelter of a newspaper.

Either Lovell did not catch, or chose to ignore his unflattering asides, for he continued with unabated complacency, "You must live with a woman before you discover her defects, her peculiarities of temper, and her petty meannesses. When you have found them out, think of having to put up with them for the remainder of your natural life."

"Men have been known to survive the infliction," said Farrell.

Lovell shot a glance of malignity in the direction of his tormentor, who smoked on placidly, his gaze fixed upon the ceiling, seen dimly through the smoke-wreaths.

"Some men," he remarked caustically, "are so easily contented. They ask little. For my part, I feel strongly that my only prospect of connubial felicity is in marrying a woman whose tastes, temperament, predilections and failings I had already put, as Denton suggests, to the test of actual experience."

"Don't go putting your wretched immoral sentiments into my mouth," exclaimed Denton irately. "I never suggested anything of the kind."

"Really," murmured Farrell, affably, "I'm afraid even Parliament might kick against such a very drastic measure as your idea would involve. Pray remember, my dear sir, we are—before everything else—or at least, pose that we are—a pre-eminently moral nation, and your suggestion opens up vistas before which I positively—shudder." He sneezed instead violently in the draught of the opening door, which admitted Egerton.

"Hullo, Egerton! that you? Well, you've just come in time to give us your views on some

startling propositions which Lovell is enunciating on the vexed question of matrimony."

"What's the good of *his* views? queried Lovell, aggrieved. "He's no more married than I am, and has infinitely less experience of the sex, I'll bet."

"The matter has not troubled me much hitherto, I'm bound to admit," said Egerton, drawing his chair into the circle.

"Well now, Egerton, just tell us this, whether it is better to marry beauty of mind or mere beauty of, say, form?"

"There's an old saying which I used to hear in my part of the world, that marrying a woman for her beauty is like eating a nightingale for its song. I doubt myself whether mere physical loveliness could altogether compensate one for the want of mental oneness and companionship. After all, we are such creatures of custom that one's eye might cease to recognize any beauty in the face that yawned with vacuity across the breakfast table."

"Exactly my point," cried Lovell. "You see"—turning a delighted eye upon his audience—"Egerton is practically of my opinion. For him, too, the prospect of desolation, conjured up by the notion of always

facing the one wearying face, is appalling."

"I hold that the wise man should look for the qualities of mind. What does the face matter in a few years' time?" remarked Farrell.

"I agree with Darwin's view," said Denton. "He says 'that the sense of beauty obviously depends upon the nature of the mind. The idea of what is beautiful is not innate or unalterable. Men of different mental calibre admire an entirely different style of beauty in woman.'"

"And a good thing, too," rejoined Farrell. "It wouldn't do for us all to fall in love with the same woman. "Now look here, Lovell," he continued, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, "you look at this matter from an entirely wrong standpoint. Let me state a case. Suppose a man meets a woman and he falls (what is commonly termed) 'in love' with her. He becomes dominated by the idea that he must have that woman for his sole possession. Now, how does he, as a rule, commence to carry this out? First of all, he employs flattery, and tries to make her believe she is something very different to what she really is. He sets her mentally on a pedes-

tal and idealizes her, until he actually comes to believe she is little short of an angel. Then he offers oblations to his goddess in the form of the usual gifts, and finally arrives at the belief that he cannot live without her. This, I grant you, is only human nature. The woman on her part naturally puts all her best goods in the window; she has an acute intuitive sense in these things, and conceals her little faults and weaknesses. Well, in short, they marry. She will take care the bonds are properly and legally forged. Afterwards, as the flame of passion gradually burns itself out, and the man has eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the scales begin to fall from his eyes. But it wouldn't do, you know, for a man to be able to abandon a woman just because he has become alive to her faults, which, owing to his own blindness, he has not been able to see. No; he must bear the brunt."

"Very well put," said Denton. "Lovell reminds me of his original ancestor's excuse, 'It was the woman who tempted me, and I did eat.' She generally does, but it would be hard lines if she was always made the sufferer."

"You mistake me, my dear fellow. I don't want the dear

creatures to suffer. Far from it. It's all a matter of perspective. Put a woman at a discreet distance, on a pedestal, and ten chances to one you'll find ample material for worship. Bring her into the focus of the domestic hearth, and all her imperfections are immediately apparent. As a wife, for instance, a woman often develops in new directions which are positively astonishing to the unfortunate husband."

"Well, I must leave you to settle the question between you," said Farrell. "Are you coming too, Denton?"

"Yes. Lovell has talked me out."

"By the way, Egerton, have you ever heard of the new cult for the worship of Beauty?" said Lovell, when the other men had gone.

"New cult?" queried Egerton with a smile of incredulity. "Surely it's a cult as old as Humanity——"

"Ah, but this is a new circle of souls, formed by a select few for the higher worship of woman's physical beauty only. Like the ancient Greeks, we look upon a beautiful human being as a Divine work, demanding adoration. We forget for a time the moral weaknesses inherent in it. The most ex-

quisite examples of womanhood that mind of man can conceive attend at our Temple each week. The members are sworn to hold no communication of any kind with, or seek any introduction to, the presiding goddess."

"It's a curious idea, certainly," said Egerton, whose tone, to any one less obtuse than Lovell, would have sufficiently shown his distaste.

"Come and see for yourself," urged Lovell. "Each member is privileged to introduce one visitor to the Temple, provided he be in sympathy with the cult. I am told that the divinity who presides to-night will transcend all former ones. Do come."

Egerton gazed into the man's sensuous face with a repulsion he could hardly conceal. Then his present restlessness for some new sensation drove him to sudden compliance, why, he knew not.

"All right," he said, rising to go. "When and where is your latest 'exhibit' on view?"

"To-night at ten," replied the ardent neophyte of the New Cult, in accents of mystery. "At a quarter to the hour I will call for you."

"Right. I'll be ready," was the unenthusiastic response, as,

picking up his hat and gloves, Egerton quitted the room.

CHAPTER X

EGERTON was busily engaged in writing letters when he heard footsteps on the stairs, and presently Lovell was announced.

"Come in!" he cried, looking up with a smile at his visitor.

"I thought I should have found you ready," said the poet in an aggrieved tone as he unbuttoned his coat.

"To tell you the truth, I had almost forgotten all about our appointment," replied Egerton, as he swept his correspondence into a drawer. "Help yourself to a cigarette and I'll be with you in a few minutes," he continued, as he disappeared into an adjoining room.

Lovell paced the room impatiently until his return. Then the two men descended the staircase together, and soon emerged into Fleet Street.

Lovell hailed a passing hansom, and directed the driver to take them some distance up Gray's Inn Road.

"And now, where are we bound for?" asked Egerton, as they drove quickly up Chancery Lane.

"I cannot tell you the exact address, for we promise not to divulge it. It is only known to the members of the circle," replied Lovell solemnly.

When they were some distance up Gray's Inn Road, Lovell signalled the driver to stop, and dismissing the cab they turned into a side street.

"We haven't very far to walk now," he remarked.

"But why all this secrecy? Is there anything to be ashamed of in going to this precious Temple of yours?" asked Egerton. He was beginning to wish he hadn't troubled about coming.

"Ashamed of!" echoed his companion indignantly. "Certainly not. The only reason we do not drive direct to the door is simply because we do not want the curiosity of the vulgar aroused."

"I see," replied Egerton quietly; "it might perhaps be taken for a betting club, eh?"

Lovell didn't deign to reply.

Turning the corner of the street, they emerged into a square surrounded by large, old-fashioned houses.

"Here we are," said Lovell, as they ascended the steps of a house which was shrouded in darkness, save for a dim red glow in the fanlight. He touched an electric bell, and

in a few moments the door opened noiselessly. The two men entered a dimly-lighted hall, the floor of which was covered with a thick carpet.

"You can leave your hat here," said Lovell, in a whisper, as he placed his own on the ledge of a small aperture in the wall. The hats at once disappeared by some unseen agency, and a ticket appeared in their place.

Egerton followed his guide along a dark passage in silence, and, drawing aside a heavy curtain, Lovell conducted him into what seemed to be a large room, which was almost in darkness. A faint light of purplish hue emanated from a large shaded lamp which hung from the ceiling. Beyond, at the far end of the room, a massive curtain was draped and fell in heavy folds on to a kind of stage or platform. The air was heavy with the smoke of incense, which ascended from two bronze tripods, that occupied niches on either side of the platform.

Lovell drew Egerton to a lounge close by where they were standing, and they sank back into the soft cushions.

"When does the performance commence?" asked Egerton, in whispered tones of unseemly levity.

"Hush! I pray you not to speak. Wait," came the reply.

When his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, Egerton observed there were many other people in the room, but he could not distinguish their faces.

He was beginning to feel considerably bored, when the strains of soft, dreamy music became audible from some concealed orchestra. Gradually the sound waxed louder, then almost died away in beautiful melody. Suddenly a gong sounded, and the heavy curtain slowly divided, revealing a brilliantly lighted background that appeared like a white cloud. Then an unseen choir of boys' sweet voices broke out into a joyous song, and as they sang the cloud seemed slowly to melt away, until it revealed a strange picture. On a great throne of burnished brass, which was approached by steps of white marble, a woman was seated. About her was draped some soft diaphanous material that looked almost transparent. Her face was wonderfully beautiful, and her fair hair flowed in rich profusion over her shoulders like a stream of molten gold. Above her forehead sparkled a diamond star, that flashed a hundred times in the brilliant light. She sat im-

movable, as if carved in stone.

Egerton felt a strange thrill pass through him as he gazed with a curious fascination at her wondrous beauty. Then, as he looked with eyes still transfixed, it slowly dawned upon him that the woman before him was none other than Irise Romanoff. Yes, he felt sure he was not mistaken. It was Irise.

As if to break the spell that seemed to hold him powerless, he rose from his seat half unconsciously, so that he might draw nearer, but a hand held him back. He muttered some incoherent words.

"What is the matter?" whispered Lovell, under his breath.

"Let us get out of this," said Egerton hoarsely, taking him by the arm.

Lovell led the way out of the room, and neither spoke until they stood outside in the cool night air.

"Who is she?" said Egerton abruptly, as they turned their steps across the square.

"My dear fellow, I really don't know," replied Lovell. "I told you it was a strict rule that no member should make any enquiries or seek a closer acquaintance with the presiding goddess of the evening. We simply gaze and pay our adoration to her beauty, that is all."

"But surely you must know where she comes from?"

"I do not, I assure you. By Jove! she was lovely though, wasn't she? She seems to have impressed you, old man. Shall we get a cab?"

"Not for me. I prefer to walk. So I'll say good-night."

Lovell took the hint, and hailing a passing hansom as they turned into the busy thoroughfare, he jumped in, and shouting a farewell, drove off, leaving Egerton standing on the pavement.

CHAPTER XI

TORN and uneasy with conflicting thoughts over the memory of the previous evening's episode, Egerton sat long over his untasted breakfast. Life seemed suddenly flavourless—dull, stale, and unprofitable.

He recalled Irise's unlooked-for appearance with a positive shudder of repugnance; her sensuous grace, and beauty, and subtle pose.

Was she really, after all, he wondered, nothing but a heartless adventuress, using her practised wiles upon him to gain some end of her own; tricking

him with her beauty and coquetry, as doubtless she had beguiled many a man before?

He pushed his plate from him impatiently, and rose. He must put an end to it all. How could he ever again know an instant's self-respect, if in the face of last night's experience he permitted himself to be again ensnared.

But in ending it, she must know once and for all his opinion of her, from the beginning of their strange intimacy to this loathsome climax. She must know—must understand that his withdrawal was from no fickle impulse—no sudden cooling of a hastily awakened interest, but solely and entirely the result of her own action.

It was with a leaping pulse of excitement, beneath his outwardly cool and immaculate appearance, that he traced his steps for what he told himself was indeed the last time towards her rooms. The same maid admitted him, and he followed her dully with heavy step up the staircase. He read a certain hesitation in her manner—a hint of possible warning, in the long discreet tap with which she announced him. Suspicion was doing its work well. Therefore it was no surprise to him to find she was not

alone. She rose hurriedly at his entrance, her face changing rapidly from white to crimson, her manner totally unlike anything he had before seen in her, except on that first fateful night of their acquaintance.

A man rose leisurely from the depths of an armchair—a man of foreign appearance, who bowed elaborately, his dark eyes furtively scanning the newcomer from the shadows of his bent brows.

A look of instinctive antipathy leapt into the glance of each, as their eyes met, spite of Egerton's quiet courtesy and the effusive manner of the other.

"Captain Lexoff," said Irise, waving them an introduction by a gesture of her hand; "an old acquaintance from Russia, Mr. Egerton—my earliest friend—in England."

The subtle significance of the distinction did not escape either of the men.

"You know England well?" asked Egerton, by way of breaking a rather embarrassing pause.

"Not very well, M'sieu," replied the Count, speaking English with less difficulty than his very foreign appearance led one to expect. "My visits to your wonderful capital are rarely for pleasure. Are they, mademoiselle?"

“My dear Captain, surely you do not expect me to stand sponsor for all your statements,” said Irise with forced lightness.

“But you have every reason on this occasion to attest the truth of what I say,” he replied significantly. “You who know so well the sole object of my visit.”

“Ah, well, your reasons and objects are scarcely likely to interest Mr. Egerton, are they? I was just telling the Captain when you came in”—she continued, turning to Egerton with the obvious intention of changing the subject—“that I make my first appearance in London on Monday week.”

“It is all settled then?” said Egerton dully. The subtle undercurrent of understanding between the two seemed to confirm his worst fears. He could not rise above the weight of depression that engulfed him.

“Yes, it is all quite satisfactorily settled; your friend Mr. Beauchamp has wired me that I am to be starred in the bills all this week; and now, do you know, I am growing quite nervous.”

“Nervous—you, mademoiselle! But surely that is impossible. You!” The Captain’s voice implied a veiled sarcasm.

“Even I, Captain Lexoff, and why not?”

“I recall your nights of triumph in Vienna—your magnificent début at Petersburg—the presence of all the nobility of that marvellous city. I remind myself how on the night of your first appearance at Berlin, where even Royalty itself condescended to applaud, the students took the horses from your carriage, and drew you in triumph themselves to your Hotel; and when I hear you say you are nervous—well,” he spread his hands in a gesture of supreme repudiation—“I repeat impossible—impossible!”

“Oh! a few silly students, carried away by their easily aroused enthusiasms—and possibly their favourite beer, who knows?” shrugged Irise. But she cast a swift sidelong glance in Egerton’s direction, eager for the effect of Lexoff’s enthusiastic tribute. Egerton’s blank face was not encouraging. “Alas, Mr. Egerton, you despise my art, and all such petty frivolities, do you not?”

“You forget that I have never seen you dance,” replied Egerton. “But, from Captain Lexoff’s very graphic description, the treat in store for us on Monday week must be even beyond my anticipations.”

He was conscious that he spoke flippantly, even meaninglessly—his whole mind concentrated on the errand which had brought him. He had no intention of sitting and exchanging empty platitudes with this Mephistophelian Russian, who filled him with a dislike he could ill conceal. As the imperturbable Captain lighted cigarette after cigarette, with ceaseless repetition, Egerton's irritation grew.

"I must be going," he said, abandoning his errand.

There was no mistaking the gleam of relief in the girl's eyes. Her manner throughout had been palpably artificial, and constrained. Yet she crossed instantly toward the door with him, and her face, turned away from the watchful Captain, had a depth of beseeching in it that almost startled him.

"There was so much that I wanted to say to you," she said, speaking scarcely above a whisper.

"And I, too, had much to say, —but it is perhaps as well unsaid——" he replied sadly. "Good-bye——"

She raised her startled eyes to his. "Good-bye?" she echoed. "But why good-bye? Why do you speak like that? What have I done?"

The heavy curtain of the half-

closed door screened them a little from the Captain's keen eye and ear. The old resistless floodtide swept over the man's soul.

"Done!" he echoed. "Ah, child, child, what have you *not* done?"

A movement within the room recalled him.

"I called to tell you I am going away——" he said quietly.

"Going away? When, where?"

"Heaven knows," he said vaguely. "I mean—that is—I need change—rest——" How he ached for rest from this fever of living!

"But surely you are not going before my first appearance? He hesitated."

"It will be nothing to me, nothing unless you are there to see——" she pleaded passionately. Her deep eyes still beseeching him. "You *will* come, and afterwards you will take me somewhere for supper, and tell me all about this projected sudden departure of yours." She laid her hand lightly on his arm. "It *is* sudden, is it not? Ah, you *will*—you will——" The pretty imperious coquetry was reasserting itself, though her face had still not a vestige of colour. Before it, he was carried

like a straw on the bosom of a stream.

"I will come," he said, decisively and turned swiftly down the stair.

"So your 'first English friend,' found a tongue to speak with when you were alone, in spite of his taciturnity in my presence." sneered Lexoff, as she re-entered the room.

"What have you to do with my friends or their actions?" she demanded, turning upon him with sudden passion. "—I wish you were back—in Russia."

Her look consigned him to a warmer sphere than her words implied.

"I share your wish," he shrugged, "—but do not overlook the fact that when I go—to Russia—you go with me."

"You are mad," cried the girl. His compelling eyes meeting hers seemed to rivet her gaze.

"Where I go you go too—" he repeated slowly, still holding her with his baleful eye, like a serpent about to pounce upon its prey. Under the spell of his fixed gaze she swayed, drooped, and would have fallen, but that his quick arm went round her. "You see how helpless you are in my hands," he said, "Where I go you go too—"

"No, no," she said, feebly struggling.

"Speak," he said insistently.

"You go—with me—— Speak."

"I go—with—you—" murmured the stricken girl mechanically, from whom all strength to resist seemed to have fled. Her voice was as toneless as a sleepwalker's. Her face had grown pallid and drawn, almost deathlike. He smiled, a sardonic slow smile of triumph.

"Again," he murmured.

"Repeat the words again—"

"I go—with—you—" she repeated, her head falling heavily on his shoulder.

As easily as he would have lifted a child, he carried her over to the couch, and laid her among the cushions.

"That is well," he whispered softly, drawing a deep breath. "Your first English friend will find his work cut out for him if he thinks to circumvent me. That is very well. Now sleep." His long supple fingers passed lightly over the drawn white brow; her eyelids drooped, and she remained motionless.

Stooping, he kissed the pale lips, turned noiselessly away, and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER XII

"I'LL tell you what it is, old man. I've come to the conclusion that there's something radically wrong with your liver," said Fitzgerald to his friend, a few days later, as they sat smoking together.

It was Sunday, and Jack's customary morning for moralizings and reflections.

"I wish to goodness you would leave me, and any other of my numerous special weaknesses and shortcomings alone, my dear fellow, and just stick to the business before you. I'm sick to death of your constant comments and speculations. Can't you find enough to employ your energies in the contemplation of your own superlative happiness?"

Jack listened in almost complete astonishment to this unexpected outburst, so utterly out of keeping with Egerton's proverbial cool good-humour. But its novelty had at least the effect of reducing him to silence for the time being, even if like the notorious parrot his thoughts were many and various.

"You see, old chap," continued Egerton, sorry in a moment to have made such a display of the irritation that consumed him. "You are view-

ing the world through the rosiest of red spectacles, and forget that we are not all in your enviable situation. We can't all be Benedicts, you know."

"I don't see in the least why *you* shouldn't. I don't believe there's a girl of our acquaintance who wouldn't jump at you, give her half a chance."

"Thanks, Fitz. I've no particular mind for any such liberal gymnastic display, nor have I ever seen anything in the behaviour of our mutual lady-friends to lead me to anticipate the possibility of any such course."

"Oh, well, you know what I mean. You are a catch, and you know it; and anyway, marriage is the very finest antidote for the hump you're evidently suffering from. I vote you try it."

"Ah, I know. It's the usual development. Rail for all you're worth against the trammels of matrimony until you find them closing round you, and then urge all your friends to go at once and do likewise."

"And a jolly good Gospel too," insisted Jack stoutly. "When a fellow sees happiness beaming ahead of him, what more natural than that he should wish his friends to steer the

same course? Look here, Egerton, surely you don't resent an old friend's anxiety. I hate to see you sitting down to meal after meal with a face like a death's head and a voice like—well, like the bottomless abyss! It worries a chap, and he naturally casts about for a remedy. Mine is—*marry!* Marry some nice sweet simple English girl like my little Sylvia, and in the words of the prophet 'you'll never look back.' Take my word for it."

"The word of a man who lacks the first essential of qualifying experience. Nay, forgive me, old man, I firmly believe that you are going to be the happiest man alive. You have chosen a charming girl—with your eyes open—and that's all in your favour in this purblind, miserable world. I've honestly the fullest faith in your happiness—don't doubt that for an instant, old fellow."

Fitz thrust his hand into that of his friend. "Thanks, old chap. You are the best of good fellows. I too believe pretty firmly in my chance of happiness, but even then you know, there's a certain element of the blues in throwing up all the jolly times one has had here, for instance. Talking of happiness, don't forget that the girls are

coming up on Monday."

"Well?" said Egerton smiling at the naïve conjunction.

"Well, I have planned out a nice little scheme to take them to the theatre or somewhere, and a supper afterwards. They're with their old aunt in Bayswater, and I imagine it's deadly dull for them when I can't get round to take them out. It will be a jolly little party—you and the girls—and of course—me," wound up Fitz with more enthusiasm than grammar.

"Monday! I'm awfully sorry it's Monday. I'm afraid I've already got an engagement for that night."

"Surely not!" cried Fitz in dismay. "Why, I've all along talked of Monday as the most probable evening for our little symposium; and you've never even hinted at any sort of an engagement before." His tone gathered huffiness as he proceeded. "I've been counting on you as an escort for Hildred. I say, don't spoil our last night together, Egerton."

"I'm really more sorry than I can say, Jack, but I'm afraid it's all settled. If I'd only known this sooner."

"You've known of it all along, only you've let some confounded fresh arrangement or other step in the way,"

growled Fitz. "Perhaps" with scathing sarcasm. "You have also settled some engagement for the 30th, or even forgotten all about the unimportant date."

"Surely not. Why, that's your great day. I'm scarcely likely to forget such a red-letter day as that, besides am I not by way of being the third most important person there? as supporting you through the trying ordeal."

"Don't flatter yourself," responded Fitzgerald with undiminished gloom, refusing to be drawn by his friend's good-humoured chaff. "The women are everything on these occasions. The men are just nowhere—mere harmless, necessary adjuncts—that's all. You're to be my best man it's true, provided you don't let some other infernal scheme step in and claim you for its own."

"Don't talk nonsense, Jack. You know as well as I do that I would like immensely to be free to come with you. Fact is, I had entirely overlooked the probability of Monday being the day you'd fix on. Can't you make it Thursday?"

"Can't *you* throw over your engagement, whatever it is. I should think it would be simple enough. You're such a chap for keeping your appointments that

no man could possibly think much at one solitary exception, specially if he understood——"

"The importance of the occasion," smiled Egerton, obligingly completing the sentence. "But it can't be done; it's gone too far; besides it was more or less my own proposition. And any way I can't go back on it."

"Then there's a woman in it to a dead certainty," growled Jack, once more relapsing into gloom and his newspaper with an air of finality.

"Who's this new dancer at the 'El Dorado'?" he said scanning the columns in his customary summary fashion. "They seem to be sounding her trumpet pretty loudly. Sure to be no good—half these foreign 'stars' *are* really third-rate or rather less in their own country; they come over here and gull the public into the belief that they are the bright particular luminary of the constellation."

Egerton felt his face flush beneath its tanned pallor, as he let his friend's tirade pass unheeded. A gorgeous bouquet was on order at his florist's, and his stall for Monday's performance was carefully stowed away in his pocket. He wondered vaguely what would have been

the irate Jack's sentiments, could he have traced the connexion between his own disappointment and the *début* of the much advertised new star at the "El Dorado."

CHAPTER XIII

THE house was packed when Egerton took his seat at the "El Dorado" about ten o'clock. The drop scene had just been lowered, after a turn by a famous juggler, and Egerton looked round hastily to scan the audience. Almost the first face that caught his eye was that of Captain Lexoff, who was seated prominently in the front of a box near the stage. For a moment Egerton caught the Captain's glance, which was now fixed steadily upon him; a malevolent smile curling his lip; and his hatred for this interloping sleek foreigner increased ten-fold.

The orchestra, after a brilliant little overture drifted softly into a dreamy melody. The soft pizzicato notes of the cellos were like the falling of soft spring rain in budding orchards, the muted violins weaving above them a witching motif, which took Egerton back in an in-

stant to the secluded corner beneath the palms, in the old Opera House—how many weeks ago?

Suddenly he lost count of time. The music wove its spells about him. It seemed as if there was not a corner of his heart, however carefully secured against intrusion, but those liquid notes found their way in and melted into ecstatic accord.

He almost forgot the crowded house, and he watched for the slow rising of the curtain with his soul in his eyes.

The sneer on Lexoff's face grew more marked, but Egerton was blissfully unconscious of it.

From the background of a fairy-like garden with a rippling cascade embowered in flowers, a slight figure wound her way down the stage. A moment's critical silence greeted the new star. Her beauty alone seemed to captivate the audience. Then a spontaneous outburst of applause from all parts of the house, as with step as light as the notes that led her, she seemed to glide into movement.

Again, as on that night that seemed so long ago, it was the very poetry of motion. Egerton recognized, without any attempt to analyze, the magnetic quality of unrivalled grace, suppleness of limb, perfection

of beauty which had worked such havoc in his life. The same spell had charmed into silence the big audience which thronged all parts of the great house.

For her, the surroundings seemed lost sight of—forgotten, in the ecstasy of her own motion. Her little feet scarcely touched the ground, her beautiful eager lips were slightly parted, and through the folds of her long diaphanous draperies her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She moved with a grace that was exquisite and fascinating.

With one swift birdlike movement, to the wail of the violins, she gained the footlights, and discarding the conventional finale she stood the impersonation of a winged Psyche on the eve of final flight.

The applause broke forth prolonged and sustained, the more bewildering from the previous stillness. The whole vast building echoed its thunders.

She bowed again and again, standing a little breathless, amid the offerings of flowers which the conductor was smilingly handing across the footlights. With a sudden swift glance of her eyes, she selected from the mass of gorgeous colour Egerton's tribute, and held it for an instant to her lips. Their glances met—in hers, a strange

triumphant challenge, with yet a hint of wistfulness; in his, well, Lexoff's expression most accurately mirrored all that might be read in that long passionate response.

The curtain fell and rose again, and yet again. It was evident that she had danced herself straight into the hearts of the enthusiastic crowd. Her turn over, they settled themselves to the consideration of the next item, and Egerton prepared for departure.

For him the entertainmen held no further attraction.

A few minutes later, with a cab in waiting, he was in the dingy purlieus of the stage entrance. Stage carpenters, scene-shifters, and the usual hangers on, chattered and smoked around the doorway. Spite of his recognition of her marvellous talent, seen in its full force for the first time, the old longing was strong upon him to carry her off from all the squalid appurtenances of her art. He paced the pavement, his brain on fire with excitement. He was in the mood for any madness. He would then and there claim her for his own. He longed to shelter her from all this vulgar gaping curiosity, which man-like marred his sense of possession. For surely that long

subtle look which he cherished in his heart, meant—if it meant anything, that she was *his*, even in the moment of her greatest triumph.

In the midst of his passionate reflections her light hand touched his arm. Without a word he hurried her to the cab.

“Well?” she said eagerly.

“Hush, hush,” he murmured. He hardly knew what he was saying. In the exultation of his mood, any words other than those which clamoured for utterance, seemed a profanation. He still retained his grasp of her hand in the security of their solitude.

Her fingers closed round his. “But you, liked it?” she questioned timidly.

“You were—superb,” he breathed.

“I know. I was better than ever before. It was all for—you,” she whispered; “only for—you. I told you it would be nothing—if you were not there.”

“Captain Lexoff possibly flattered himself it was for him,” he replied, with conscious brutality; the surging hatred of the past hours finding vent at last.

It was her turn to bid him hush.

“Let us forget—forget everything, but that we are—to-

gether,” she pleaded, “and that in some degree I have justified myself in your eyes.”

“Does it matter to you that we are—together?” he asked passionately; “or that I hate so desperately all these hateful surroundings for you? Oh Irise, dear one, let us make an end of it; come to me, and let us, as you say, forget everything—everything but each other.” His hushed tones told of almost uncontrollable excitement. Her eyes gleamed.

“Dear friend,” she said; “you are bewitched. I know, I know. It is the music, the atmosphere, and just a little, my dancing. Let us talk of it another day—to-morrow—when the glamour is over, and you are your own strong, sensible self again.”

“I want to talk of it now—*here*, this instant. Irise, you are mine. Child, child, you know that you *are* mine. Come and be mine altogether, in the face of all the world. We will go away for a while—right away if you wish it—and you shall be mine for always—to shelter—to take care of—and——”

“And, meanwhile, here we are, at our immediate destination—and I am oh, so hungry,” she cried gaily, with that essential coquetry which whenever

exercised for his benefit had upon him invariably the effect of a cold douche.

Perforce he helped her from the cab, the words of passion frozen on his lips, and in silence they mounted the thickly carpeted stairs.

Her heavy rich cloak was thrown back, revealing the gleam of jewels at her throat, her bewitching face was aglow with excitement, success, anticipation. As they passed up the room together, her vivid beauty challenged every eye. Her low musical voice and soft rippling laugh caught the ear, as she moved along with the supple exquisite grace which characterised her every movement. For the moment she looked like some happy irresponsible child, bent upon the fullest possible enjoyment of a too rare festivity.

Glancing down the long room, with its shaded crimson lights, Egerton was aware of a prolonged scrutiny from a direction close beside them. Turning under its influence he met the eye of Fitzgerald, who, in company of Sylvia, Hildred and a man unknown to him, was supping at an adjacent table.

Fitzgerald's usually good-humoured countenance bore an expression of blank astonishment. The look he swept over his

friend and concentrated upon his friend's companion was to the last degree, antagonistic. The two girls toyed with a little fruit, and scarcely glanced toward Egerton's table.

His face flushed, but it was with annoyance at Jack's unconscionable absurdity, and by no means from the consciousness of detected guilt which Jack instantly read into it. His first and most natural impulse had been to rise and greet the little party with all his usual cordiality, but in the face of Fitzgerald's marked antagonism (for he had now turned his back upon them) such a course was out of the question.

He interposed a broad shoulder between Irise and her evidently unfriendly neighbours; and, inwardly anathematising the ill-luck which had led them unwittingly to select the same place of rendezvous, devoted himself with the greater energy to his fair companion.

CHAPTER XIV

THE two men met at breakfast the following morning, both conscious of a feeling of restraint they had never experienced before.

Fitzgerald was the first to

broach the subject of the previous night's episode, as with his natural impulsiveness he explained :

"Well. I must say I was surprised to see you at the 'Savoy' last night, old man."

"You made it very apparent," remarked Egerton quietly. "Was it so very extraordinary that I should happen to be having supper at so well-known a restaurant?"

"It wasn't that exactly, as the queer coincidence we should have both fixed on the same place, especially as I had hoped you would have joined us."

"I told you I had a previous engagement, and as it was with a lady, of course I could not cancel it. I would certainly have come across and spoken to you and your friends, but you so markedly showed the cold shoulder, I felt I could not."

"I had no idea you wished to be recognised, and we could hardly make the first move, as we did not know the lady, but I can assure you, old chap, I had no idea of giving you any offence. I say, Egerton, she was a 'stunner.' Where did you pick her up?"

"My dear Fitz, you are somewhat vulgar. I did not pick her up as you phrase it."

"Well, you know what I mean. She is in the profession of course?"

"Yes, she is a professional artiste."

"Of course, one could tell that. I don't remember having seen her before; but the odd thing was seeing you with her," said Fitzgerald smiling. "You, the reserved misogynist, you, the stern moralist, who is believed to be impervious to the wiles of woman."

"I fail to see anything odd about it," rejoined Egerton, somewhat sharply.

"Now don't get on your high horse, old man. I won't allude to it again. But, I say, you will introduce me some day, won't you?" said the irrepressible Fitz, insinuatingly.

Egerton couldn't resist smiling.

"Introduce you. A man over head and ears in love, or supposed to be, with the most charming girl in the world. Why, it would be criminal to subject an individual of your susceptible nature to such a temptation."

"Ah, well, I'll soon be done for. Only another week. I can hardly realize it."

"You'll realize fast enough, and so shall I, old fellow, for I candidly confess I don't look forward to my solitary occupation here with any great degree of pleasure."

“Well, after last night, I’ve distinct hopes of you. It shows a moving in the dry bones,” said Fitzgerald, with his cheery laugh. “But, you know, I’m not going to give up all my old friends. I’ll come and root you out, and we’ll have many a night together, as of yore.”

“I’ve heard that remark before, my dear Fitz. I know what it means. I can imagine you tearing yourself away from your fireside; then, after you have been out for an hour or two, you look at your watch every five minutes. It is getting so late, you remark. You feel you are a selfish brute to leave that little woman all alone for so long. You know she will be sitting up for you, and you must catch the next train. You get home and find the lights low, and she is asleep in the easy chair, and you register a solemn vow it shall not happen again.”

“You paint the picture in too sombre colours, you old cynic.”

“Ah, well, you’ll see,” remarked Egerton.

CHAPTER XV

As the great day to which Jack had looked forward so enthusiastically drew nearer, he astonished his friends by an exhibition of despondency for which they were one and all—Egerton among them—utterly at a loss to account.

His hourly increasing depression called down upon his devoted head a rain of well-meant, if somewhat unmerciful, chaff. He bore it with stoical fortitude until the evening before the eventful day, when Egerton, coming into his room, discovered him seated disconsolately among a medley of half-packed portmanteaux and piles of clothes, evidently fresh from the hands of his tailor.

“Hullo, taking an inventory of your trousseau, old man?” cried Egerton, picking his way with difficulty among the garments strewn about to a disengaged chair.

“I say, Egerton, it’s getting awfully near now, isn’t it?” was Jack’s mournful response. “Fact is, I’m feeling decidedly chippy, I can tell you. It’s no light thing to undertake—this tearing of a young, innocent girl from all the associations of her girlhood. Supposing a fellow found out after all that it was a hideous fiasco.”

"Oh come, I say, isn't it rather late in the day for this sort of thing? You talk as if you were some old savage swooping down upon a peaceful homestead and 'tearing' a reluctant Sabine maiden from her parents' arms. Don't be a fool, Jack. If ever there was a dear, loving, little woman, who gave herself gladly and willingly to the man of her own choice, I from my limited observation of the case, should say that Sylvia Temple was that woman."

"For the moment I wasn't looking at it exactly from her point of view. I'm thinking of *my* side of the question. It seems to me that no man who has knocked about the world and done all sorts of things that he had no business to do, as most of *us* fellows unfortunately have, has any right to take a young, innocent life into his keeping."

"Hang it all, Jack. Now you're talking like a recent lecturer on 'Mere Man.' Why, my dear fellow, you're as straight as any man I've ever known. If that's all that's the matter with you, my advice is, cheer up and let's get some of this blessed litter packed away! Take my word for it, *she'll* be amply satisfied with her bargain, and not without reason."

"That's just the point," said

Jack, without budging, and still staring vacantly into the dim recesses of his past. "That's exactly what's the matter with me. *Will she?* Shall I stand the test of a day-to-day companionship, or will she find out what very common clay she's mixed her sweetness up with, and grow, well, like half, or more than half, the married women one meets? 'Pon my soul, Egerton, I'm not by way of being an over-sentimental sort of fellow, but I'd rather cut my throat now, this instant, before it's too late, than run the risk of that."

"All I ask of you as a friend, and almost a brother, is, that you'll postpone your pleasing little programme of butchery until I'm out of the way. Why, you silly old owl, I declare you've shut yourself up here with the bogies of your own imagination till you've got no common sense left. Give a hand with this confounded strap, and for Heaven's sake don't maudle!"

"You've been no end of a good chum to me, old chap," continued Fitzgerald, somewhat lachrymosely, and struggling ineffectually with a refractory buckle. "It costs a man something to give up——"

"Bosh. Who talks of giving

up? I'm coming round to see you perhaps oftener than I shall be wanted, and you and Mrs. Jack are going to take pity on my bereaved condition as often as you possibly can to cheer up my deserted table. Now do hurry up with that shining paraphernalia over there, and don't let's talk any more of this despondent nonsense."

And, by dint of alternate harriving and good-natured chaff, Egerton succeeded in rousing Fitzgerald from his unaccustomed immersion in the Slough of Despond to better cheer, with the result that, at a somewhat late hour, the room had achieved something of its normal condition, shorn albeit of much impedimenta, in the shape of various odds and ends of more or less value, picked up in many travels, and now gone to grace the little house which was to contain Fitzgerald's married bliss.

By the time they were in the train on their way to Edenham the following morning, he had recovered all his habitual good spirits, and was able to descant upon his prospects without apparently a backward glance.

On the whole, Egerton rather enjoyed the day to which he had looked forward with no special anticipations of pleasure. The

animation and love that seemed to pervade the very atmosphere—the excitement—the coming and going—all helped his hidden sense of loneliness. The quaint old-fashioned rooms of the Manor house had been transformed by Hildred's untiring and artistic efforts into veritable bowers of flowers; and the girl herself moved in and out among the assembling guests with a word or smile for each, the serene and cheerful genius of the hour. It was pleasant to sit beside her at the long flower-decked table—for, at Mrs. Temple's request, they had adhered to the good old fashion of a wedding-breakfast—and to note the ceaseless care and devotion with which she watched over the frail little mother, who showed signs of breaking down from time to time when her eyes lighted upon the face of her fledgling so soon to wing her flight from the home-nest. It was Hildred who supported the drooping form standing on the steps of the verandah, to watch through a mist of heavy tears the carriage bearing her child away to her new life. The tenderness of the young face was a sudden revelation to him as, coming in to make his adieux, he found her sitting on the arm of her mother's chair, holding the now sobbing figure in her firm, strong embrace.

“You will come often to see us, won't you?” urged Mrs. Temple, with a pathetic attempt at a smile through the slowly falling tears of age. “You've been such a true, good friend to my dear son-in-law, that if, for no more personal reason, we should always be very, very glad to welcome you. Come, sometimes, and spend your week-ends with us, if you have nothing better to do, and are not afraid of the dullness.”

He thanked her cordially, and promised. The thought that, to a great extent, these dear folk, with their delightful old-world hospitality and gracious homeliness, must pass out of his life, had troubled him at various moments during the long day, and he was glad that Mrs. Temple's hearty invitation put further intercourse within his reach. Hildred walked with him down the shadowing lane to the little roadside station, and, though few words were spoken—for much of the light and brightness had died from the young face into an almost pathetic weariness—he felt nearer to her in a strange, subtle sense of comradeship than ever before. His empty rooms smote upon him with an absolute pang of loneliness in the fading evening light, and, in a sudden whim for companionship, he bent

his steps, almost unconsciously, in the direction of Upper Baker Street. He crossed Marylebone Road and was lost in thought, wondering if he should find Irise at home. As he drew close to the house he noticed a cab standing at the kerb, and, before he could cross the street, he saw the door open and Irise stepped out followed by a man, whom he recognized by the light from the lamp as Lexoff. Egerton remained standing in the shadow on the opposite pavement. Having assisted Irise into the cab, Lexoff followed, and they drove off quickly towards town.

CHAPTER XVI

EGERTON felt that, this time at least, he did well to be angry. After all the girl's protestations and asseverations, to find her actions so palpably giving the lie direct to her words, was bitterness itself. For the hundredth time he scourged himself with an unsparing hand, as a love-sick fool not worthy the name of a man.

It was with a positive pang of relief that he recalled Mrs. Temple's pressing invitation to

spare the first of his free week-ends to them at Edenham. A week-end was rather too large an order—he knew himself unequal to the ordeal of so long and self-inflicted an abstinence—but Saturday he could, and would, give himself.

His glimpse of Nature decked in all the radiance and unsullied freshness of early summer, acted with a spell the power of which he had never experienced before; the hedge-rows of vivid green, the orchards aglow with blossoming cherry trees, and the hill-sides ablaze with broom and yellow gorse.

Mrs. Temple sat in her fire-lit corner, a fragile little figure in her fleecy shawl.

He felt the restful graciousness of her welcome with an almost pathetic gratitude. After the fret and fever of the past months, bringing such a harvest of estrangement, not the least of which was his helpless sense of isolation from his best self and all his truest instincts, this quiet homely oasis held a rare charm for him.

He sat contentedly enough, chatting with her on the topics dear to her feminine soul—of Sylvia's wedding—Jack's prospects—Hildred's unselfishness and loving devotion.

“She is somewhere about in

the garden, I think,” she said at last; “pottering among bulbs and things. Wouldn't you like to go out to her? Young folk are best in the sunshine. They will find the shadows quite long enough by and bye.”

There was no demand for pity, no hint of regret in her quiet voice, only a sweet subtle resignation to Time and the inevitable. Egerton bent over her, the lines of his face softening to wonderful tenderness.

“If this is shadow,” he said gently, “it is good to be here.”

But he went at her bidding through the long windows out on to the sunny lawn. Hildred's grey dress was visible among the beds at the lower end.

She straightened herself as she saw him coming toward her, her stooping attitude perhaps accounting satisfactorily enough for the flood of colour her face shewed, as she put out her hand.

“It's hardly fit to shake,” she said, holding it for his inspection. Her clear eyes met his with their frank, steady fearlessness above the touch of heightened colour. She was essentially and beyond everything else, the typical English girl, as Englishmen in all time have best loved to think of. Egerton felt in every fibre of him, that

if it had been good to be in that warm-scented, serene shadow, it was infinitely good also to be out here in this brave wealth of sunlight with the brave, serene eyes of this girl meeting his, and her sunny smile of genuine welcome.

All at once life seemed to partake of a new freshness, a strange, glad, quiet charm—ineffably soothing, devoid of menace or sinister inspiration. A sudden peace descended upon him like summer showers on parched uplands.

They strolled together along the sunlit path. The scent of pinks rose on the evening air; a gardener watered shady beds, which promptly exhaled gratitude with intoxicating lavishness of fragrance.

“How sweet it all is,” he said, drawing a long full breath. “How happy you ought to be here.”

“Ought to be,” echoed the girl. “Why is it that one so rarely hears ‘how happy one is.’”

“It is too direct a challenge to fate, I suppose. One has a lurking, unworthy suspicion, bred of sinister experience, that the avowal of happiness is the surest way to forfeit it.”

“When *is* one really happy? At what age may one expect

the zenith of content? To me looking on, one seems always either too young or too old.”

“‘Man never is, but always to be blessed,’” he quoted. “Youth is too engrossed looking eagerly forward; age in grudging reminiscence. Yet there is so much to be happy for—all this beauty, the sunlight. You—you are happy?” he asked.

She smiled a swift, fleeting smile as sad as tears. He wondered at the strange sadness of that smile.

“‘The fault is in ourselves, not in—all this.’” She waved a comprehensive hand over the fields of living green, the nearer trees in their bountiful wealth of summer foliage, the flower-bordered walks in their rich splendour. “We crave a future, and so the present slips by unheeded. Later, we shall remember and long with infinite longing for the old-forgotten, secure, dim peace.”

He leaned forward, his hands clasped loosely over his knees. Her words woke reminiscent echoes in his own soul. Later, he too, would so surely remember the green wild flower-ways of this old garden, the summer glory of sunlit peace. A silence fell.

“Let us go and gather roses,” she said lightly, springing to her feet. “We are so proud of

our early roses. Cyril complains that they are too 'previous,' and predicts disaster for them, in the shape of blighting frosts, by way of punishment for their forwardness, ridiculous boy! If you don't share the usual man's hatred of carrying flowers, you shall take some back to grace your deserted table."

He watched her moving lightly among the standards, cutting a bloom here and there.

"Perhaps, one of the surest methods of eluding melancholy is never to look back, to keep one's gaze fixed steadily on the beyond—the beckoning 'blue hills' of distant 'may-be's.' They do at least hold promise among their possibilities; the 'might-have-beens' are what so inevitably seem to sadden and to sour one's outlook," he said, his eyes intent upon the slim brown fingers.

"The Past, behind me, like a sealed book;
Before, the Future, as an open scroll."

She turned swiftly with the roses in her hands. In her haste one of the buds snapped from its stem and fell at her feet. With a quick gesture and a pathetic little sound, almost like a moan, she picked it up and laid her soft lips to it in pity for its early doom.

He caught his breath quickly at the spontaneous tenderness and its utter simplicity, remembering in a flash the golden daffodils, which Irise had once let fall and lie unheeded throughout their whole interview. He realised now what it was that had hurt him in her thoughtlessness for the flowers' fate. He knew too that, but for her influence, this quiet garden, the graciousness of this girl's presence, her sweet companionship, the atmosphere of subtle sympathy which was acting on his tired nerves with narcotic effect, would more than have sufficed for his content—that she fulfilled every womanly ideal or picture that his maturer manhood had cherished.

He turned to the house to bid farewell to Mrs. Temple with heart-whole regret as the church clock chimed a quarter to seven.

It had indeed been good to be here; better far than he had hoped or expected.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR the next few days Egerton endeavoured to banish all disturbing thoughts from his mind.

by sticking close to his work, which he had latterly neglected. His book on the *History of the Byzantine Empire* was slowly drawing to a conclusion; he worked at it early and late, till one morning the brilliant sunshine tempted him to throw down his pen and wander forth for a long stroll.

Walking back by a circuitous round to his chambers, he crossed Regent's Park and, as he approached Clarence Gate, his absent eye lighted on two people, a man and a woman, who were walking at some distance in front of him. As he drew closer to them he at once recognized them as Irise and Captain Lexoff.

The realization of being hoodwinked is always a sufficiently unpleasant experience, but for Egerton, at this juncture, it was tenfold more unbearable; on the moment the old fierce passion was roused within him. To say that he was furious (though more with himself than with the girl) is inadequately to describe the turmoil of his mind. And with it all, the Englishman's sturdy, stolid lust of possession determined him.

He walked hastily across the Quadrant and reached the house the moment the captain was adjusting Irise's latchkey in the

door. Just as he raised his hat, Irise turned, a look of glad surprise on her face.

"Good-morning, Irise," he said quietly. Lexoff's face was eloquently expressive of his surprise at the encounter. "Will you come and take a turn in the Park before you go in?" continued Egerton calmly, with a somewhat cavalier nod amounting to a dismissal of the irate captain.

"By what right do you take Mademoiselle from her friends, Monsieur?" he asked, scarce able to conceal his anger.

"By the fullest right a man can urge, a right which I fancy even you will not attempt to gainsay, Captain Lexoff, the right a man has to protect to the uttermost his *future* wife. Come, Irise."

Without waiting to observe the effect of his unpremeditated announcement he drew Irise quietly away. They walked across Clarence Gate in silence. *He* felt the full weight of having crossed the Rubicon. *Her* face was expressive of many emotions.

"Why, oh why, did you say that?" she asked anxiously.

"I said it because it must henceforth be the truth," he replied with decision. "We will have no more uncertainty. From to-night it shall be fully under-

stood. There must be no more of this, Irise. You are mine."

"He will be furious."

"Captain Lexoff's humours and furies do not interest me. Tell me, what is there between you and this man? What cause have you to fear him?—for you *do* fear him. I see that. I have seen it from the first."

"Oh my dear, it is all part of the same story—the story you are going to hear some day. Ah, don't look so. It hurts me. Believe me, that though things look black against me, I am not all bad. You do believe that?"

"Child, I don't know what I believe. I only know that you are mine—you have told me so—there is so little room for any other thought."

His smile had no gladness in it. She sighed heavily, recognizing its joylessness.

"Are you sorry you ever met me? Do you repent? It is not too late."

"Would to Heaven it were. Irise, for the last time—come away with me. Let us break with all this coil whatever it may be. We will go abroad—anywhere you choose, and be married. I am not a man to repent once I have made up my mind and my mind is made up now."

He spoke as one arguing down inner voices, more to himself than to her. The woman perhaps realized this.

"For the last time," she echoed. "That means that after to-night you will never ask me again. That I must make up *my* mind too, or else you will go out of my life for ever? That is what you mean, is it not?"

"Yes. I am not, as I say, the kind of man to repent, but, neither am I the man to plead too often with a woman. If you say 'No' now, as you have said it twice before, well, the third time is usually considered final in most things, isn't it, dear?"

"Then it must be 'Yes,'" she said suddenly, almost fiercely. "Yes. I cannot let you go out of my life. I have been alone and desolate so long. If you insist — it must be 'Yes.'"

The long walk was almost deserted. He turned and kissed her. "Yes," he murmured passionately. "Nothing else was possible. Shall *you* repent?"

She smiled, a troubled, wistful smile. "Only when I see the shadows on your face," she answered, her lips meeting his.

"You love me?" he questioned, as he caught her hand.

“I have always loved you—from the first, I think.”

“And yet I have kept you waiting all this time.”

“Ah, it was for *your* sake—*yours*. I wanted you to be sure—quite, quite sure. I am a woman whom tragedy seems to follow. I bring misery to those I care for most. I carry it, and put it into their very hands.” She seemed lost in painful retrospect. “That man Lexoff haunts me. I seem at times nothing but his tool. He frightens me. You do not understand. How should you? Oh, my dear one, are you still—sure—*sure*?”

“Dearest, be content—I *am* sure.”

The fervour of his tone reassured her—perhaps, too, it reassured *him*—for his face lost something of its lines of weariness and care, seeing which, she smiled more happily.

He went with her into her pretty flower-bedecked rooms, and they talked for a long hour happily enough—busy with plans, touching lightly on the future, where both were conscious as of some spectre that lurked in the background and dimmed the sunlight.

CHAPTER XVIII

EGERTON awoke the following morning to the realization that his life had in the last few hours undergone a complete metamorphose, that not only was he an engaged man at last, but that his wedding-day was fixed, and imminent. It had been decided that they should go to Berlin, be married at the Embassy there, and take their honeymoon through some of the old Continental cities which had charmed his earlier manhood.

He could hardly have told, had there been any one to question him, how it had all come to be so decided. Last night had been the spark to tinder, shrivelling up every consideration of prudence in a fierce flame. He was not sorry. As he had truly said, he was not the kind of man who, having put his hand to the plough, permitted himself any backward look at the unfurrowed fields. His soberer mood suggested difficulties, tiresome explanations from which his saner self recoiled. Liberty had been his for so many years, and though these bonds were sweet, still—Well, doubtless all men felt much the same on the eve of matrimony. Even old Jack, in the midst of his lover's rapture,

had known a thought of regret for all that he was casting behind him—the old unfettered, untrammelled freedom. Anyway, this was evidently so ordained from the beginning, else why had he, alone of all others who had dined in the hotel on that fateful night, been on those steps at the one psychological moment. Kismet!

He pulled himself up short in his reflections on realizing that they were assuming a trend scarcely flattering to their object, and continued his toilet with as much philosophy as might reasonably be expected of a man in his condition.

There was a busy day before him. Details of departure and the journey, his wedding-journey to arrange as well as many affairs to be set in order against a prolonged absence.

In the midst of a shoal of correspondence—for all other work must now wait—Captain Lexoff was announced.

Egerton turned a face of astonishment upon his unlooked-for and wholly unwelcome visitor.

“You are surprised to see me, Monsieur,” said the captain. His manner was as suave and imperturbable as ever, the sneering smile, if anything, a shade more marked.

“To what am I indebted?” began Egerton, freezingly.

“With your permission I will seat myself. The day is warm. I have risen earlier than is my custom—the early bird—you see I have an acquaintance with your very expressive proverbs. I have much to say.”

“Scarcely anything, I fancy, that is likely to be of interest to me.” Egerton showed a decided inclination to return to his unfinished letters. “Pardon me, but, as you see, I am very busy.”

“I, too, my dear sir. But there are moments when even business may profitably yield to—circumstances.”

“Precisely. This is just such a moment. Circumstances demand that I get these letters written with the least possible delay, Captain Lexoff; that is one reason why I must forgo the chance of your profitable discourse.”

“You twist words well, *chère M’sieu*. But is it worth while to fence, think you? I have that to say which you should hear, and which some day you will thank me for saying. You made a statement yesterday which occasioned me much surprise.”

“Possibly.”

“Most certainly. Now, the

lady in question I have known for long — and well — *very well.*”

“I regret that I am already aware of your acquaintance with Madlle. Romanoff, Captain Lexoff.”

Lexoff's face darkened ominously. “You do not flatter, M'sieu,” he said.

“It has never been my custom.”

“Yet without that admirable art you could scarcely have won—as I understand you to profess you have won—‘*la belle Etoile.*’”

“I must request you to leave the lady's name out of your conversation, Captain Lexoff.”

“On what grounds, pray, should I leave her name out of any conversation I may see fit to hold? ‘*La belle Etoile.*’ Pardon me if I smile, M'sieu—a name which has been on so many lips, here, there, everywhere. You have seen her cringe before me. You have perhaps not guessed the reason. To you she is unalloyed sweetness—docility personified. What if I were to tell you that, for years, she was the mistress of a man whom I knew well? He left her. That he, knowing more of her past than she cared for, she tracked him to London, and there did him to death—

that she—ah, you will listen now, I see.”

“Listen, I!” cried Egerton, as he rose and faced the man. “Listen, to the vile insinuations of a traducer of women? Not I! but *you shall listen* and mark well what I say. Repeat the words you have just uttered, and I will choke them in your throat.”

Lexoff laughed.

“Admirable, admirable. The lady, who, at your somewhat forcibly expressed request, shall be for the moment nameless, would doubtless be as astonished as I at so gallant a defence of an object so notably worthless. Dear sir, permit me, while admitting an unbounded admiration for your misplaced devotion, to remind you that, if in the future—”

Egerton made but one step forward.

“Enough, enough,” smiled the unembarrassed captain, standing coolly up to the menaced onslaught. “Your fate be on your own head. You are warned.” I wish you a very good-day—”

He withdrew with all his usual aplomb, which held no hint of haste. With a heavy step and heavier heart Egerton returned to his table—but not to write.

He had said he was not the man to regret or repent, but if his reflections through a long silent half hour did not include repentance, they wore a disguise strangely akin to it.

CHAPTER XIX

A FEW minutes before ten o'clock the following morning they stood together on the crowded platform at Charing Cross, in the bustle and noise of the departure of the boat train for Dover.

For Egerton, the few moments before taking his seat beside Irise in the carriage he had reserved, were fraught with many memories—memories, alas! lacking much of the sweetness, if little of the excitement, of more conventional betrothals.

As the train rushed once more through the orchards and hopfields, so different in its rapid transit from his journey over the same ground scarcely a week earlier, he found himself likening its breathless haste to the influence of Irise's life upon his, contrasted with the slower

passage of his more peaceful days.

Finally, meeting the somewhat sad inquiry of her gaze, he resolutely thrust out of sight all carking reflection, bent only upon remembering that, at least, he had her now for his own undisputed possession, and that a few more hours would unite them by a bond which Death alone could annul. Her deep eyes were wistful with many an unuttered thought, and her few words had a strange new note of humility, of deprecation even, in them. The prospect before her (was it fear of her promised 'confession') had robbed all buoyancy from her look and manner.

At Dover the morning mists were dispelled in beautiful sunshine, which flooded them with its radiance as they stepped on to the boat.

"A good omen, surely," she murmured, as with care he selected the sunniest and most sheltered corner on deck and wrapped her up with lover-like tenderness.

The throbbing of the engines told them that they had at last started. The white coast line slowly receded in a dazzling radiance of sunlight.

With a sudden determination, Irise turned her wistful gaze

from its contemplation and faced him. In an instant his hand closed upon hers.

"Dearest," he said. The trouble in her eyes moved him to infinite tenderness.

"I have mind up my mind," she said with decision. "Some words you spoke the other night—have haunted me—ever since. Do you remember? You said that once a thing were fixed and irrevocable you never allowed yourself a backward glance. Well, this that we are doing must not be made so fixed and irrevocable that, after you know all, you may not still go back, if you wish to, dear one. I am going to tell you all that you have wanted to know—*now—here!* Then, if it makes you regret, Heaven knows that, in reality, it is all simple enough, there will still be time for you to turn back by the way you have come and I—well, there is always the old life and my beloved Prague, the old Maestro—and nothing done that cannot be undone."

"Nothing?" he queried sadly, his worst fears in arms again at her fateful tone. "Nothing, Irise? Can our love be so readily 'undone'? Is it so slight a thing to you, that you can speak so lightly of its undoing?"

"Am I speaking lightly? Ah but, friend of my soul, my heart is not light. It is a dull, dull weight. No, dear one, not because of what I have to tell. That in itself is little enough—I know that now—know that I have allowed myself to be frightened into a view of my actions that magnified them out of all proportion, but there is a something here"—she laid his hand to her heart with an almost childish appeal—"something which I cannot define—a sense of disaster—of foreboding. It hurts."

He comforted her with every reassuring phrase his vocabulary boasted, and the sum of them surprised even himself, so apt a pupil is passion of the art of love.

But his success was scarcely in proportion to its deserts, for though she smiled again, her eyes were heavy with tears. He vaguely wondered why the smiles of women have such endless suggestions of tragedy in them, recalling another's tearlit laughter in a sunny garden.

Her voice roused him.

"Don't you think it is rather good of me to give you this great chance?" she asked with a touch of her old whimsical gaiety. "I needn't, you know—and then, no matter how much

the chain galled, I could still have held you."

"My dear," he said; "my dear, don't say such things; they hurt."

"But I *am* giving you the chance to go away from me, you see," she persisted; "even though——"

"Even though?" he queried, trying to make her look at him. "You foolish child, even though?"

Suddenly her beautiful eyes looked deep and long into his. "Even though," she repeated, her voice low and full of emotion, "if you take me at my word, you will take all the joy in life away with you—the purest and best joy my days have ever known."

"My dearest, does it indeed mean so much to you? Ah, little one, you needn't be afraid—nor talk of chains. I am already so much the captive of your love, that no further tie could bind me more than I am already bound."

His tone spite of himself was rather sad, as if, even in acknowledging the potency of her spell, he feared it.

"We are together—for good—or——" the word faltered, and when he would have forced it to utterance her hand upon his lips prevailed.

"Whatever there is of evil you shall hear it now," she said.

"No, Irise, I will not hear it," said Egerton decisively, as he placed a finger on her lips. "The woman I take for my wife, I trust. It is sufficient for me that you are ready and willing to tell me, if there be aught to tell."

"My friend. My husband," she murmured in a low voice, as she turned her eyes to his, now filled with tears. "No one but you could be so generous. I swear before Heaven your trust shall not be misplaced. Believe me, there was nought that happened on that night we first met that I could not tell you with a conscience clear of stain."

"Dear one, say no more, I do believe you fully."

"And there is only my one uncorroborated word for its truth against a hundred damning possibilities—and yet you believe—oh, but you are good—*good*. Such faith as yours merits the best, indeed, from man or woman. You have not even asked me one question about—Captain Lexoff."

The name came with difficulty from her lips.

"I don't want to hear anything about him. He is a scoundrel—let him go at that. We

will forget for the future that he ever existed. For us—Mr. and Mrs. Egerton,” he laughed almost like a schoolboy in the exhilaration of his relief—“Captain Lexoff simply does not exist; we wipe him from the tablets of our memory, and throw away the sponge.”

He made a boyish gesture of throwing, and as if in that one movement he hurled from him all the cares and frets, the gnawing anxieties and misgivings of the past months, his face assumed its old quiet serenity with a touch of something infinitely new, infinitely tender, superadded.

The rounding of the boat at the Ostend Pier came as an unwelcome interruption, and they lost no time in getting ashore.

The train, the Nord Express, was waiting, and very soon they were travelling through the flat, low country, with its endless rows of tall trees and sluggish canals.

There were few passengers at this juncture, and tea soon made its welcome appearance, after which, Irise, tired with excitement and the novelty of her position, dropped into troubled sleep, while Egerton, wrapt into a peace to which he had long been a stranger,

gazed alternately upon her face and the flying landscape.

The twilight had fallen before the train steamed slowly into the station at Brussels. The platform was thronged with passengers.

With a loving word to Irise, dazed and still not more than half awake, Egerton made his way through the bustling crowd in search of flowers and fruit. The struggle against excited tourists, who hustled and jostled hither and thither in search of a seat in the rapidly filling carriages, delayed him considerably longer than he had intended, but just as the bell rang he came hurriedly back, bearing a beautiful burden of profuse blossoms.

The train was already in motion as he passed through the now crowded cars to the saloon where he had left Irise. He was smiling to himself in anticipation of her delight at the success of his mission, but as he entered the saloon and looked about, a sudden anxiety, an inconceivable apprehension wiped all traces of mirth from his lips, for she had disappeared.

CHAPTER XX

WITH anxious face, Egerton passed rapidly through the cars and searched the train from end to end.

People looked curiously at the tall, broad-shouldered Englishman who appeared among them for an instant, gazed vaguely and questioningly around, and then withdrew.

He felt their curiosity—the voluble insistent curiosity of a Continental crowd—and it stung him even in the midst of his anxiety and foreboding.

At length he pressed the attendant into his service, a little, thick-set man, with a bristling moustache, who, by virtue of Egerton's more than usually lavish gratuity at starting, had constituted himself their special providence.

“No, most assuredly he had not seen milady leave the train. He had noticed her reading a paper in the drawing-room-car just after milor got out at Brussels, but since then he had been so very busy with these other passengers that—but more than likely Max, his confrère, might know. He would fetch Max at once—this moment—oh, yes, milor might, with great safety, leave it to him to make inquiry.” He touched his

cap and withdrew, in a whirl of words, to return a minute after, bearing the equally obsequious Max in his train.

“Oh yes, Max had certainly seen the lady, he had also seen a tall gentleman who accompanied her—oh, no, not this milor—who was so evidently and unmistakably English. No other gentleman but milor accompanied madame? Ach! then Max was confounded. He had thought, seeing them rise and leave the train together, that, *most certainly*, they left the train together—he with his own eyes had seen the gentleman—oh, he was tall—and not English in appearance—military, with a moustache like that of Heinrich here.”

In an instant the image of Lexoff loomed before Egerton's mental eye. This, then, was his revenge. It must have been Lexoff. But Irise, what possible argument or motive could explain her flight? The old story—fear? Bah! what had she to fear from Lexoff now? Or was her action part of the plotting and planning and underhand dealing that had so often seemed evident to him? His brain throbbed with a thousand conflicting theories and doubts. Had Lexoff, by one or another of his infernal wiles and

suggestions, worked upon her by some hint of danger to him—Egerton? But that was absurd. What possible danger could threaten him, or how could her flight assure him safety? No, there was no way out of the labyrinth. She had gone. It was an impasse.”

He sat by the saloon-table, his head between his burning hands, amid the disordered heap of flowers, till the obsequious and ubiquitous Heinrich returned to report, with much redundancy of gesture and expletive, the failure of his search.

“Where is the next stop?” he questioned, stung to action by the evident curiosity of his fellow passengers.

“Not until Herbesthal, just across the frontier.”

“Could he return to Brussels that same night?” he queried.

The idea was being borne in upon him, that if Irise had been in any way constrained against her will to this most unsolvable of mysterious actions, no pretext would draw her away from Brussels once she had discovered the trick played upon her. She would be so certain that he would seek her there and would doubtless, with her woman’s wit, devise some means of communicating with him. This villain Lexoff had lured her

from the train on some pretext which she—too late, poor child—had fathomed. Indignation veered to pity again. In his thoughts, she stood now impotent and speechless with passion at the dastardly outrage played upon her.

The man Heinrich did not think that Brussels could possibly be reached that night, but at three in the morning there was a good train.”

Nevertheless at Herbesthal Egerton sprang out and seized the stationmaster.

“No,” replied that urbane official. He could assure Monsieur that there was no earthly possibility of returning to Brussels that night, but there was excellent accommodation at the hotel close by.”

So the baggage was hurriedly bundled out, and the crowded train slowly panted out of the station, leaving him stranded on the deserted platform.

He did not attempt to sleep, but sat through the interminable hours in equally interminable conjecture. He would not allow himself to realize upon what a clueless quest he was bent, as he started almost with the dawn on his return journey.

Arriving at Brussels he examined and cross-examined the station officials without success;

and, indeed, what possible chance of indentification could there be in the seething throng that had packed the departure platform the previous evening. He wandered for hours about the city in dreary quest. Finally the thought of Berlin came to him with the force of a new inspiration. Berlin! What more likely spot in which to await him? Folly not to have gone there first of all. She would of course bend every energy to get there, or failing that, would find means to wire, remembering that was their ultimate destination.

Haggard, exhausted with want of sleep, worn out with aimless wandering, the following morning found him in Berlin. He at once drove straight to the hotel at which they had planned to stay. No news, not a line. He almost reeled under the fresh disappointment. Then realizing that this was no fit condition in which to conduct his search, in which to pit his ingenuity against a man like Lexoff, and, above all, doggedly determined that nothing should now turn him from his purpose, he retired to the *salle-a-manger* and compelled himself to eat against a sickening nausea and fever of unrest that threatened to overwhelm him.

Two men who were sitting at an adjacent table were recounting their travels—deep in reminiscences. The word Prague struck on his ear. Prague! Hope is once more alight. He will find her there. Why, he does not know; his exhausted brain is in a condition to entertain any superstition. So he is certain that he will find her at Prague; though why he should be certain, he does not wait to ask himself. For this, indeed, is the condition to which hope, so long deferred, and unutterable weariness of body and soul have at last brought him.

Finding that a fast train for Prague was timed to leave in the early morning, he gave instructions to be called betimes, and, tumbling into bed, he fell into the deep unrestful sleep of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXI

DURING the long slow hours in which the train wearily wound its way towards Prague, Egerton had ample leisure in which to review his own consummate foolishness in thus wasting himself in the vain

quest of a possibly worthless woman. For that, indeed, was the conclusion to which the long sleepless hours of torment and conjecture had brought him.

If not worthless, at least the tool, as Lexoff had so openly asserted, of schemers and adventurers. Why should any woman allow herself to be spirited away in so mysterious and utterly incomprehensible a fashion, almost, as it were, with the very phrases of passion and anticipation on her lips?

That abandonment of apparent rapture, her hinted presage of disaster, were they not all the arts of the consummate actress, arts wherewith she had throughout the story of their acquaintance alternately caajoled and repulsed him?

Yet he was going to find her. Nothing should turn him from his quest. It was no desire for reconciliation or renewal that urged him now to this step, only the determination to come face to face with the woman who had so ruthlessly befooled him. There seemed no room in his tired brain for any other idea than that. About him there was the lowering of disaster, that strange premonition of evil to come, which had so often dogged him throughout their strange acquaintance. Now the

clouds were upon him heavy with omen and grim with fate.

It was with no settled plan of action that he followed the stalwart porter who shouldered his traps (so disproportioned in their holiday air to the errand upon which he found himself) to the hotel, with which he had once been familiar in his wanderings in the quaint old city.

A bath and change of clothes somewhat revived him, and he repaired to the great deserted dining-room, with, truth to tell, little appetite for the meal he had ordered.

Consumed with an uncontrollable restlessness, he rose and strolled down the Zeltner Strasse towards the river.

Crossing the Grosser Ring he had almost to elbow his way through the narrow tortuous streets now thronged with pedestrians. Under ancient archways and through quaint windings he at length emerged upon the riverside.

Pausing by the grey Watchtower he scanned the many faces that passed him crossing the old Carlsbrücke, for a glimpse of a face he knew, that of the woman he was seeking.

At any other time his appreciative eye would have yielded glad tribute to the beauty around him. The flowing river

spanned by its numerous picturesque bridges, the time-worn turrets and towers of churches and palaces rising in serried outline to the brooding sky beyond, and above on the massive hillside the venerable Hradschin towering in magnificent isolation. Over all a strange moon hung in the still heavens, a moon neither of silver nor of crescent gold, but of a dull copper gleam.

He turned away alike from the scene and his own bitter reflections, and slowly retraced his steps toward the busy Kolowrat Strasse, with its gay shops and glittering cafés. He entered the Café Ferdinand, now filled with gossiping citizens, and found a vacant seat near the window which overlooked the thoroughfare. Lighting another cigar, he called for black coffee, and sat for some time lost in thought, and anon watching the ceaseless procession of vehicles and pedestrians passing and repassing.

Suddenly his heart gave a bound, for there, seated in an open carriage which was being driven rapidly past, was Lexoff.

Egerton jumped up from his seat, and tossing a coin to the astonished waiter, in a moment was in the street, running at his utmost speed in pursuit

of the fast-disappearing vehicle. It was a good distance ahead, but he managed to keep it in view, till presently, to his great joy, he saw it stop. Its occupant alighted and disappeared through an archway.

He slowed down his pace to collect his thoughts, for he felt he must make up his mind what course to take. A few moments more brought him to the building. It was an old-fashioned hotel with a wide gateway which opened into a courtyard. He paused for a minute before entering, then seeing the hall-porter standing within, he at once approached him and inquired if a Mademoiselle Romanoff was staying there? The man referred him to a passing waiter, who conducted him to a small smoking saloon that opened on to the courtyard, and there left him to make inquiries.

He paced the floor in an agony of impotent restlessness. Turning for the tenth time to the sound of an opening door he saw a man standing on the threshold.

It was Lexoff. Their eyes met.

For one fleeting moment the Captain's normal pallor assumed a greyish tinge, otherwise the urbanity of his manner and the

swiftness with which he recovered his air of easy assurance commanded, even from his enemy, a certain admiration. He was a scoundrel to the core, but at least he was game.

War to the knife leapt into the flashing glances that crossed each other.

Egerton felt the feverish blood within him suddenly cool to an icy chill that boded no good to his adversary.

"Where is Mademoiselle Romanoff?" he asked without preface, in an ominously quiet voice.

The captain spread emphatic hands of protestation.

"Am I Mademoiselle's keeper?" he said. "Surely 'la belle Etoile' was last under the protection of Monsieur. Is he not capable of guarding what is so avowedly his own?"

The sneer in his baleful voice almost lost Egerton his careful self-control.

"I am in no mood to bandy idle words with you, Captain Lexoff."

"Pardon if I fail to understand the reason of Monsieur's presence here," replied the captain suavely, and doubtless he in no wise overrated the astonishment he felt at Egerton's unlooked-for apparition.

"I am here first of all to see

Mademoiselle Romanoff. Afterwards, to call you to account, Captain Lexoff."

"For what? The lady's disappearance? For I gather that she has somehow disappeared—Monsieur's remarks are indicative of at least so much. But why hold me responsible? May a lady not exercise her own discretion—or indiscretion—in her choice of cavaliers? 'La belle Etoile' is notoriously—well, I have already wasted my efforts in endeavouring to convey to Monsieur the true nature of that fair lady's methods. How is it possible for me to say with whom of her numerous admirers she may have flown?"

It was evident that he intended to goad Egerton to a display which would afford him an opportunity for reprisal. But Egerton was on his guard. He had resolved to restrain himself until he had learnt the whereabouts of Irise from this man's lying, slanderous lips.

He leant lightly across the table. "You lie," he said, without even raising his voice. "We have a heavy reckoning between us, but it bides my time. You do not leave this room until you have told me where she is—*then*——"

The captain's hand went to his hip-pocket with an unmistakable significance.

"Ah, I see you carry your weapons about with you, a very necessary precaution with men of your kidney!" said Egerton coolly.

"Beware, Monsieur, lest you go too far, and your time be suddenly shortened," hissed Lexoff. "I make every allowance for a betrayed fool, but even a fool may overstep the bounds of his folly—and then——"

"Don't waste your breath and my time in feeble threats," said Egerton, and in a moment his hands were on the captain's throat with a swift force, under which he reeled. "Understand, you tell me now—and here—where she is, if I choke the words out of you."

The man writhed beneath the tightening grip, a murderous hatred gleamed in his darkening eyes, but the suddenness of Egerton's onslaught had given him a momentary disadvantage—he was powerless.

"Unhand me," he gasped. "Let us at least conduct this affair as between gentlemen."

"Gentlemen," echoed Egerton. "You defile the name."

Lexoff struggled like a wild animal. All his efforts were bent upon freeing his hands

to grasp the weapon concealed in his hip-pocket.

"Not yet, I tell you," hissed Egerton between his teeth. "Tell me first where she is—*then*——"

He loosed his grip for an instant, with his disengaged hand drew the revolver from its place and hurled it to the other end of the room. Lexoff made a frantic dash for it, but Egerton's grip once more restrained him. He seemed endowed with the strength of ten men.

"Now," he cried, "our chances are even. We fight for possession of that weapon. If you win you may shoot, and be d——d to you. If I"—he laughed hoarsely—"well, I warn you to expect small mercy from me."

And inch by inch they fought like madmen towards the goal of that little shining revolver lying in the distant corner. Their feet slipped upon the time-worn polished floor; they locked and strained together like dogs in a leash; the captain's forehead grew damp with a heavy sweat; his breath came short and thick, but their grip never for an instant relaxed.

He twined his long sinuous limbs round Egerton's for a deadly throw, but he was wrestling with a man reared in the North

Country, inured by long experience to all the subtleties of wrestling, and more than his match in every trick and feint.

It was indeed a trial of skill, evenly matched, hardly-contested. Egerton wasted no precious breath in words while Lexoff spat objurgations and maledictions from his white lips. All the elemental passions found sudden expression in their strained white faces.

Suddenly, above their heavy breathing and the scraping of their feet over the polished boards, a cry rang out. "Fire! fire!"

With a simultaneous impulse they relaxed their deathly grip instinctively and listened.

"Fire," the hoarse cry rang out still nearer. While they yet stood panting and listening, the sound of feet running wildly hither and thither came to them. Mingled with the screams of terrified women.

A light of apprehension, a mutual understanding of horror, dawned in their faces.

By one impulse both turned in the direction of the door. By one common instinct—for the moment shared—even the weapon for which they had fought an instant before so furiously, lay forgotten in its corner.

They struggled through the door together, neither yielding the other an inch of advantage, till Lexoff, who knew the way, gained the staircase—

Along the long deserted corridor, now thick with smoke, and up toward the second flight they urged their mad career, the smoke becoming denser every moment. Lexoff had gained a foot or two in advance, hard pressed by Egerton, who trod close upon his heels.

At the top Lexoff paused a moment as if uncertain which turning to follow. Egerton sprang before him. A cry, a shrill hoarse cry of intolerable fear and anguish reached them.

"Irise!" gasped Egerton, "Irise!" He tried to press on by crawling on hands and knees.

A great wall of smoke seemed suddenly to belch forth accompanied by leaping flames. It stifled him for an instant and he lost sight of Lexoff. Half-blinded, he staggered to his feet; the smell of burning wood filling him with a sickening nausea, the flames scorching and blistering his face. The place seemed like a rabbit warren. The captain's fleeting figure loomed for an instant before him.

Then there came a sudden deafening crash and a hoarse

baffled cry. A great beam had fallen in and Lexoff lay prone and mangled beneath it. Beyond, a door stood open, against which leaned Irise Romanoff, her face stricken into an ashen terror, her eyes staring out in frenzied entreaty.

Egerton leapt the hideous obstacle between and caught her in his arms. There was scarcely any surprise in her greeting of him.

"You! she gasped, "You. I knew you would come!"

"The corridor is ablaze, and retreat is cut off," panted Egerton.

"The window!" she breathed.

Egerton flung open the window, and they stood for a moment scanning the depths below. They seemed in that awful moment cut off from humanity. Above them a moon like burnished copper gleamed through the lurid smoke.

Descent seemed impossible; for there was a drop of forty feet or more to the street below, and from the windows beneath the flames leapt madly.

"Like rats in a trap," he muttered between his clenched teeth. Then he turned his gaze to the half-dazed woman he held in his arms. "Dearest, we shall die together."

"Together," she murmured.

The terror had faded from her unfathomable eyes.

Even in that hour of horror and revolt he found time to wonder at her strange inconsistencies.

"Irise," he cried. "Look, help is coming!"

But she had swooned and lay heavily in his arms. As he strained her closer to him, a gold dagger which was thrust in her hair, fell to the floor with a thud. The shouts from the crowd that had collected in the street below, and the hiss of the water as it fell on the burning building, roused him to action.

Looking down, he saw a ladder being raised to their window. The roar from the people grew louder as they descried the figures of the man and woman, silhouetted against that terrible background of leaping flame. Then the wind wafted the smoke aside, and he looked again. The ladder is too short—it cannot reach them. Another ladder is being run up. He watched with fascinated gaze, his senses numbed by his own powerlessness. The dense clouds of smoke now hide the street from view. His lips move in a silent prayer. Then to his great joy, the top rungs of a ladder loom up just beneath the window. There is not a moment to be lost.

Clasping Irise firmly with his right arm he stepped on to the window sill, placed his foot firmly on the ladder, and slowly began the perilous descent. Every step seemed an eternity—and his brain reeled, now almost suffocated with the heat and smoke. Suddenly, with a loud crack the ladder snapped, and he and his burden were precipitated into the abyss below.

CHAPTER XXII

AFTER a blissful holiday of nearly three weeks, Fitzgerald was recalled to town by an urgent summons from his sub-editor. With grudging acquiescence he had to curtail his honeymoon, and was soon once more back in harness. Those few weeks of delightful idling among the mountains, of lazing through sunlit days by rushing streams and peaceful valleys with Sylvia by his side, had opened his soul to a fullness of life such as he had never hitherto dreamed of.

He seized the first opportunity on his return to call in at his old quarters to see Egerton, but, to his disappointment,

he found he had gone out of town ten days previous. He had not left any address to which letters could be forwarded, nor had he told the housekeeper when he would return.

When he got home that evening he told Sylvia of his visit.

“It is quite unlike old Egerton, he is generally so methodical,” he remarked.

“Oh, I expect he took it suddenly into his head to run away for a holiday,” said Sylvia.

“I don’t think so, dearie. I have had a kind of presentiment all day that there is something wrong.”

When he got down to his office on the following morning, he found the old housekeeper from Egerton’s chambers waiting to see him in a state of suppressed excitement.

“Oh Mr. Fitzgerald,” she cried, “I am sure something horrible has happened to Mr. Egerton. See, sir, this telegram came this morning, and I have brought it straight away here to you.”

Fitzgerald took the paper from her trembling fingers and read the following message:

“Will the friends of Clive Egerton communicate immediately with the Sister Superior, Hospital St. Ursula; Prague?”

"It looks as if he had met with some accident," said Fitzgerald, with anxiety in his voice. "Thank you, Mrs. Rothwell, I will wire to this place at once for particulars and will go if necessary."

Later in the day Fitzgerald received a reply to his message stating that Egerton was in a serious condition, that if he wished to see him alive he must come at once.

Making what hurried arrangements he could, he jumped into a hansom and was driven home.

"Oh Jack," cried Sylvia ruefully, as she put her arms round his neck, when he had told his story; "and must you go at once."

"I must dearest. I know it is hard for you, and I hate it, but poor old Egerton is perhaps dying. You won't mind, wife, this once; it will only be for a few days at the most. I'll wire to Hildred and ask her to come and stay with you till I return."

In an hour he had started on his journey, his heart torn between anxiety for his old friend and the thought of leaving his young wife alone and desolate amid her new surroundings.

The journey was long and tedious, but on his arrival he

was cheered to find Egerton was still alive.

With a great lump in his throat and a scalding mist before his eyes, he stood over the low bed in the long bare ward, in which his old friend lay swathed in bandages beyond recognition.

He was still raving in the delirium of fever.

From the placid white-capped sister, Fitzgerald soon gathered all the details of the affair at the hotel. How, when the brave Englishman was rescuing a lady from one of the bedrooms of the burning building, the ladder gave way, and they both fell to the ground from a great height. The lady was terribly injured and died the same night. God rest her soul! The gentleman was dreadfully bruised but only his arm was broken. It was when he was told the lady was dead he had developed the fever, and the doctors now gave little hope of his recovery. A letter was found upon her, addressed to 'Clive Egerton,' and they gave it to him. Fitzgerald inquired the lady's name.

"It was Irise Romanoff. She was of great beauty and was so young," replied the sister gently. "He has done nothing but call for her and repeat her name day and night in his wanderings."

Fitzgerald thanked her and

went out to find the doctor.

"Yes, the case is very grave," remarked the little sallow-faced man with a pointed beard, in reply to his questions. "But he has youth on his side, and he may recover if he lives through the night."

Fitzgerald found rooms in an hotel close by and passed an anxious night.

Early in the morning he was at the hospital again, and found to his great delight that Egerton was much better and the fever was abating.

Two days later he was standing by his friend's bedside, clasping his hand, for he was now conscious.

"We must get you home, old man," he urged in a voice hoarse with emotion. "The doctor says you will be able to be moved soon, then we'll go back together. You shall go straight to Edenham. Trust the mother and Hildred to nurse you back to health again." Egerton pressed his hand in silence.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN a shady corner of the garden of the old Manor house at Edenham, a man reclined on a long deck chair. His face was drawn and thin, and showed traces of recent illness and suffering. One arm lay helpless in a sling, while in the other he held a sheet of paper which he was intently reading for the twentieth time. The paper was closely covered with writing, in a small pointed hand. It began:

"In case we should never meet again on earth, my dear, dear one, I am going to write down the story that you would not let me tell you, so you may know I never betrayed your trust, the story that led to our first strange meeting.

"Soon after my first public appearance, I received a tempting offer to go to St Petersburg to fulfil an engagement. It was there I first met the man who has ever since exerted a baleful influence over my life. His name was Otto Lexoff. Like other girls, I soon had a host of admirers, especially as I became popular, and among them was Paul Kaspari, who was a cousin on my father's side. He was about my own age and a student at the University. He soon sought me

out, and we were much together. Lexoff was then an officer in one of the Imperial Regiments. He followed me from place to place and besought me to marry him, but I refused him again and again. He was madly jealous of Paul in his cold, quiet way, though there was nothing between us, for I loved him only as a brother. Though I almost loathed Lexoff, his presence exerted a strange influence upon me. If he told me to do a thing, some inward power seemed to compel me to do it. I struggled against this feeling for a long time without avail. Then I made up my mind to leave St. Petersburg suddenly, and did not return till a few months ago, when I again went to fulfil an engagement there.

“All my old friends came to see me, and Paul, who had become an assistant professor, among them. He told me that he was in trouble, and that Lexoff now held a high position in the secret police. The foolish lad had got mixed up with some secret society, and Lexoff was doing his best to connect him with a supposed plot which had been discovered on the Czar’s life.

“I had not been many hours in St. Petersburg before Lexoff called upon me, and afterwards

I saw him almost daily. As I was anxious to try and find out what evil he meditated against Paul, I encouraged his attentions, which he pressed on me as before. At last one day I gained from him the information that Paul was in imminent danger of arrest, and he openly boasted that he would soon send him packing to Siberia. I warned Paul as soon as I could, and he got across the frontier by the next night. In three days I heard he was safe in London.

“Lexoff was furious when he found that Paul had flown, and vowed he would yet be taken.

“One morning I learned that he had concocted a criminal charge against him, and was only waiting for an order for his arrest to proceed to England, for they had discovered his place of refuge.

“I decided to travel to London at once to warn him, and left St. Petersburg the same day.

“When I arrived in London I at once sought Paul at the Hotel Belgrave, where I knew he was staying. He was greatly surprised to see me when I was shown into his room. I told him what I had learnt of Lexoff’s designs, and begged him to cross to America without de-

lay. He insisted that I should stay and have supper with him for the sake of old times. After supper he became very excited and implored me not to leave him. I must go to America with him, he declared, or he would not go. I tried to calm him and told him it could not be. He was standing on the far side of the table playing with a small gold dagger he had taken from my hair, which he said he was going to keep as a memento, when without any warning, with a sudden impulse, to my horror he plunged it into his breast. Imagine my feelings. I was paralysed with terror. In a moment he sank to the floor. I ran to his side, yet knew not what to do. I felt sure he was dying. I know I ought to have summoned the people in the hotel, or done something, and shall regret it while I live. But I was utterly panic-stricken, and my head reeled. The thought instantly came to me, what if I was found in the room; they would say I had murdered him. My one desire was to leave the place unseen. I crept from the room swiftly, like some guilty thing, and sped softly down the staircase till I came in view of the hall. There was singing and noise going on in a room

to the left. There was no one about. Once through the doors I felt I should be safe. I pulled the door open noiselessly, when I saw a man standing on the steps outside, his back toward me. I hesitated a moment, then he struck a match to light his cigar, and I caught a glimpse of his face. It was the face of an English gentleman. A sudden thought struck me—I would appeal to his honour. You, dear heart, know what followed, and how I left you that night. I never forgot your face. I read in the papers how poor Paul had been found, yet I dared not come forward and say what I knew. It was Lexoff who identified him. He saw the gold dagger, and knew it was mine. He gained possession of it and with fiendish delight used it to gain his own ends. He sought me out and threatened to denounce me as the murderer of Paul, unless I consented to marry him. I could not tell you all this then, because I loved you as I had never loved any one before. I felt Lexoff's evil influence was overmastering me again. Then you came and took me away. He must have watched us closely, for he knew our plans. He waited at Brussels for his opportunity, and saw you leave the train.

Then to my surprise he came to me in the carriage, and said he had come to restore my dagger. He had it in his bag in the waiting-room. If I would come with him I could have it. Anxious to regain this one thing which he had held in terror over me, I foolishly consented, and fell into the trap he had so cunningly laid. He led me a long way round to the far side of the station, and from one part to another, saying he had mistaken the way. At last I told him I must return and would go no farther. He laughed and said I might save myself the trouble, as the train had already started. I ran across the station in the direction of the platform where the train had been standing. The gate was shut and I saw the red lights disappearing in the distance. I was speechless with indignation. I turned and saw Lexoff at my elbow, a mocking smile on his face and his eyes fixed on mine. A strange faintness came over me. Then I remember no more, until I seemed to wake from a long, long sleep. I was lying on a couch in some strange room. My brain seemed bewildered and I could not remember what had taken place. In a few minutes Lexoff entered the room. His

hateful presence recalled to me all that had happened. His manner had changed, and he was now suave and servile. He begged me to pardon him for the trick he had played upon me, and in proof of his sincerity he at once restored the gold dagger to me. He then tried to persuade me to return to Russia with him. I resolved to temporise with him, with a hope in the meantime of finding or communicating with you. I told him I wanted to go to Prague to see my old friends there. He thought, I suppose, I was relenting, and promised all I asked; but he was watching me closely. Now I am back in the dear old city and thinking of you, my dear one, as I am writing down all that has happened since we were parted, so you may know I have never betrayed your generous trust. Shall we ever meet——”

Here the letter broke off abruptly. Egerton folded it slowly and replaced it in his pocket.

As he looked up, a girl stepped through the open windows on to the lawn and his eyes seemed to lose their sadness.

“You are better to-day, I can see,” she said with a sunny smile, as she rested her hand gently on his shoulder.

“Yes, better, thanks to you

my good angel. You have nursed me back to life. If it had not been for your kind and gentle——”

“Now if you are going to commence talking all that nonsense, I shall go in and leave you.”

Egerton looked up into her face, and placed his thin hand over her slim brown fingers and gently drew her down to his side.

“Hildred,” he said simply, “I want you never to leave me again——”

THE END

