

Madcap

George Gibbs

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MADCAP

by
George Gibbs

[Illustration: "You must flirt, Mr. Markham-and make pretty speeches-"]

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CHAPTER I

HERMIA

Titine glanced at the parted curtains and empty bed, then at the clock, and yawned. It was not yet eight o'clock. From the look of things, she was sure that Miss Challoner had arisen and departed for a morning ride before the breaking of the dawn. She peered out of the window and contracted her shoulders expressively. To ride in the cold morning air upon a violent horse when she had been out late! B--r! But then, Mademoiselle was a wonderful person--like no one since the beginning of the world. She made her own laws and Titine was reluctantly obliged to confess that she herself was delighted to obey them.

Another slight shrug of incomprehension--of absolution from such practices--and Titine moved to the linen cabinet and took out some fluffy things of lace and ribbon, then to a closet from which she brought a soft room-gown, a pair of silk stockings and some very small suede slippers.

She had hardly completed these preparations when there was the sound of a door hurriedly closed downstairs, a series of joyous yelps from a dog, a rush of feet on the stairs and the door of the room gave way before the precipitate entrance of a slight, almost boyish, female person, with blue eyes, the rosiest of cheeks and a mass of yellow hair, most of which had burst from its confines beneath her hat.

To the quiet Titine her mistress created an impression of bringing not only herself into the room, but also the violent horse and the whole of the out-of-doors besides.

"Down, Domino! Down, I say!" to the clamorous puppy. "Now--out with you!" And as he refused to obey she waved her crop threateningly and at a propitious moment banged the door upon his impertinent snub-nose.

"Quick, Titine, my bath and--why, what are you looking at?"

"Your hat, Mademoiselle," in alarm, "It is broken, and your face--"

"It's a perfectly good face. What's the matter with it?"

By this time Miss Challoner had reached the cheval glass. Her hat was smashed in at one side and several dark stains disfigured her cheek and temple.

"Oh, I'm a _sight_. He chucked me into some bushes, Titine--"

"That terrible horse--Mademoiselle!"

"The same--into some very sticky bushes--but he didn't get away. I got on without help, too. Lordy, but I _did_ take it out of him! Oh, didn't I!"

Her eye lighted gaily as though in challenge at nothing at all as she removed her gloves and tossed her hat and crop on the bed and sprawled into a chair with a sigh, while Titine removed her boots and made tremulous and reproachful inquiries.

"Mademoiselle--will--will kill herself, I am sure."

Hermia Challoner laughed.

"Better die living--than be living dead. Besides, no one ever dies who doesn't care whether he dies or not. I shall die comfortably in bed at the age of eighty-three, I'm sure of it. Now, my bath. _Vite_, Titine! I have a hunger like that which never was before."

Miss Challoner undressed and entered her bathroom, where she splashed industriously for some minutes, emerging at last radiant and glowing with health and a delight in the mere joy of existence. While Titine brushed her hair, the girl sat before her dressing-table putting lotion on her injured cheeks and temple. Her hair arranged, she sent the maid for her breakfast tray while she finished her toilet in leisurely fashion and went into her morning room. The suede slippers contributed their three inches to her stature, the long lines of the flowing robe added their dignity, and the strands of her hair, each woven carefully into its appointed place, completed the transformation from the touseled, hoydenish boy-girl of half an hour before into the luxurious and somewhat bored young lady of fashion.

But she sank into the chair before her breakfast tray and ate with an appetite which took something from this illusion, while Titine brought her letters and a long box of flowers which were unwrapped and placed in a floor-vase of silver and glass in an embrasure of the window. The envelope which accompanied the flowers Titine handed to her mistress, who opened it carelessly between mouthfuls and finally added it to the accumulated litter of fashionable stationery. Hermia eyed her Dresden chocolate-pot uncheerfully. This breakfast gift had reached her with an ominous regularity on Mondays and Thursdays for a month, and the time had come when something must be done about it. But she did not permit unpleasant thoughts, if unpleasant they really were, to distract her from the casual delights of retrospection and the pleasures of her repast, which she finished with a thoroughness that spoke more eloquently of the wholesomeness of her appetite even than the real excellence of the cooking. Upon Titine, who brought her the cigarettes and a brazier, she created the impression--as she always did indoors--of a child, greatly overgrown, parading herself with mocking ostentation in the garments of maturity. The cigarette, too, was a part of this parade, and she smoked it daintily, though without apparent enjoyment.

Her meal finished, she was ready to receive feminine visitors. She seldom lacked company, for it is not the fate of a girl of Hermia Challoner's condition to be left long to her own devices. Her father's death, some years before, had fallen heavily upon her, but youth and health had borne her above even that sad event triumphant, and now at three and twenty, with a fortune which loomed large even in a day of large fortunes, she lived alone with a legion of servants in the great house, with no earthly ties but an ineffectual aunt and a Trust Company.

But she did not suffer for lack of advice as to the conduct of her life or of her affairs, and she always took it with the sad devotional air which its givers had learned meant that in the end she would do exactly as she chose. And so the Aunt and the Trust Company, like the scandalized Titine, ended inevitably in silent acquiescence.

Of her acquaintances much might be said, both good and bad. They represented almost every phase of society from the objects of her charities (which were many and often unreasoning) to the daughters of her father's friends who belonged in her own sphere of existence. And if one's character may be judged by that of one's friends, Hermia was of infinite variety. Perhaps the sportive were most often in her company, and it was against these that Mrs. Westfield ineffectually railed, but there was a warmth in her affection for Gertrude Brotherton, who liked quiet people as a rule (and made Hermia the exception to prove it), and an intellectual flavor in her attachment for Angela Reeves, who was interested in social problems, which more than compensated for Miss Challoner's intimacy with those of a gayer sort.

Her notes written, she dressed for the morning, then lay back in her chair with a sharp little sigh and pensively touched the scratches on her face, her expression falling suddenly into lines of discontent. It was a kind of reaction which frequently followed moments of intense activity and, realizing its significance, she yielded to it sulkily, her gaze on the face of the clock which was ticking off purposeless minutes with maddening precision. She glanced over her shoulder in relief as her maid appeared in the doorway.

"Will Mademoiselle see the Countess Tcherny and Mees Ashhurst?" Titine was a great believer in social distinctions.

"Olga! Yes, I was expecting her. Tell them to come right up."

The new arrivals entered the room gaily with the breezy assertiveness of persons who were assured of their welcome and very much at home. Hilda Ashhurst was tall, blonde, aquiline and noisy; the Countess, dainty, dark-eyed and _svelte_, with the flexible voice which spoke of familiarity with many tongues and rebuked the nasal greeting of her more florid companion. Hermia met them with a sigh. Only yesterday Mrs. Westfield had protested again about Hermia's growing intimacy with the Countess, who had quite innocently taken unto herself all of the fashionable vices of polite Europe.

Hilda Ashhurst watched Hermia's expression a moment and then laughed.

"Been catching it--haven't you? Poor Hermia! It's dreadful to be the one chick in a family of ugly ducklings--"

"Or the ugly duckling in a family of virtuous chicks--"

"Not ugly, _chérie_," laughed the Countess. "One is never ugly with a million francs a year. Such a fortune would beautify a satyr. It even makes your own prettiness unimportant."

"It is unimportant--"

"Partly because you make it so. You don't care. You don't think about it, _voilà tout_."

"Why should I think about it? I can't change it."

"Oh, yes, you can. Even a homely woman who is clever can make herself beautiful, a beautiful woman--_Dieu_! There is nothing in the world

that a clever, beautiful woman cannot be."

"I'm not clever or--"

"I shall not flatter you, _cara mia_. You are--er--quite handsome enough. If you cared for the artistic you could go through a _salon_ like the _Piper of Hamelin_ with a queue of gentlemen reaching back into the corridors of infinity. Instead of which you wear mannish clothes, do your hair in a Bath-bun, and permit men the privilege of equality. Oh, la, la! A man is no longer useful when one ceases to mystify him."

She strolled to the window, sniffed at Trevvy Morehouse's roses, helped herself to a cigarette and sat down.

Hermia was not inartistic and she resented the imputation. It was only that her art and Olga's differed by the breadth of an ocean.

"For me, when a man becomes mystified he ceases to be useful," laughed Hermia.

"Pouf! my dear," said the Countess with a wave of her cigarette. "I simply do not believe you. A man is never so useful as when he moves in the dark. Women were born to mystify. Some of us do it one way--some in another. If you wear mannish clothes and a Bath-bun, it is because they become you extraordinarily well and because they form a disguise more complete and mystifying than anything else you could assume."

"A disguise!"

"Exactly. You wish to create the impression that you are indifferent to men--that men, by the same token, are indifferent to you." The Countess Olga smiled. "Your disguise is complete, _mon enfant_ --except for one thing-- your femininity--which refuses to be extinguished. You do not hate men. If you did you would not go to so much trouble to look like them. One day you will love very badly--very madly. And then--" the Countess paused and raised her eyebrows and her hands expressively. "You're like me. It's simple enough," she continued. "You have everything you want, including men who amuse but do not inspire. Obviously, you will only be satisfied with something you can't get, my dear."

"Horrors! What a bird of ill-omen you are. And I shall love in vain?"

The Countess snuffed out her cigarette daintily upon the ash tray.

"Can one love in vain? Perhaps.

/*
_ ""Aimer pour tre aim , c'est de l'homme,
Aimer pour aimer, c'est Presque de l'ange."
*/

"I'm afraid I'm not that kind of an angel."

Hilda Ashhurst laughed.

"Olga is."

"Olga!" exclaimed Hermia with a glance of inquiry.

"Haven't you heard? She has thrown her young affections away upon that owl-like nondescript who has been doing her portrait."

"I can't believe it."

"It's true," said the Countess calmly. "I am quite mad about him. He has the mind of a philosopher, the soul of a child, the heart of a woman--"

--the manners of a boor and the impudence of the devil," added Hilda spitefully.

Hermia laughed but the Countess Olga's narrowed eyes passed Hilda scornfully.

"Any one can have good manners. They're the hallmark of mediocrity. And as for impudence--that is the one sin a man may commit which a woman forgives."

"_I_ can't," said Hilda.

The Countess Olga's right shoulder moved toward her ear the fraction of an inch.

"He's hateful, Hermia," continued Hilda quickly, "a gorilla of a man, with a lowering brow, untidy hair, and a blue chin--"

"He is adorable," insisted Olga.

"How very interesting!" laughed Hermia. "An adorable philosopher, with the impudence of the devil, and the blue chin of a gorilla! When did you meet this logical--the zoological paradox?"

"Oh, in Paris. I knew him only slightly, but he moved in a set whose edges touched mine--the talented people of mine. He had already made his way. He has been back in America only a year. We met early in the winter quite by chance. You know the rest. He has painted my portrait--a really great portrait. You shall see."

"Oh, it was this morning we were going, wasn't it? I'll be ready in a moment, dear."

"But Hilda shall be left in the shopping district, finished Olga.

"By all means," said Miss Ashhurst scornfully.

CHAPTER II

THE GORILLA

Of all her friends Olga Teherny was the one who amused and entertained Hermia the most. She was older than Hermia, much more experienced and to tell the truth quite as mad in her own way as Hermia was. There were times when even Hermia could not entirely approve of her, but she forgave her much because she was herself and because, no matter what depended upon it, she could not be different if she tried. Olga Egerton had been born in Russia, where her father had been called as a consulting engineer of the railway department of the Russian Government. Though American born, the girl had been educated according to the European fashion and at twenty had married and lost the young nobleman whose name she bore, and had buried him in his family crypt in Moscow with the simple fortitude of one who is well out of a bad bargain. But she had paid her toll to disillusion and the age of thirty found her a little more careless, a little more worldly-wise than was necessary, even in a cosmopolitan. Her comments spared neither friend nor foe and Hilda Ashhurst, whose mind grasped only the obvious facts of existence, came in for more than a share of

the lady's invective.

Indeed, Markham, the painter, seemed this morning to be the only luminous spot on the Countess Olga's social horizon and by the time the car had reached lower Fifth Avenue she had related most of the known facts of his character and career including his struggle for recognition in Europe, his revolutionary attitude toward the Art of the Academies as well as toward modern society, and the consequent and self-sought isolation which deprived him of the intercourse of his fellows and seriously retarded his progress toward a success that his professional talents undoubtedly merited.

Hermia listened with an abstracted air. Artists she remembered were a race of beings quite apart from the rest of humanity and with the exception of a few money-seeking foreigners, one of whom had painted her portrait, and Teddy Vincent, a New Yorker socially prominent (who was unspeakable), her acquaintance with the cult had been limited and unfavorable. When, therefore, her car drew alongside the curb of the old-fashioned building to which Olga directed the chauffeur, Hermia was already prepared to dislike Mr. Markham cordially. She had not always cared for Olga's friends.

There was no elevator in the building before which they stopped, and the two women mounted the stairs, avoiding both the wall and the dusty baluster, contact with either of which promised to defile their white gloves, reaching, somewhat out of breath, a door with a Florentine knocker bearing the name "Markham."

Olga knocked. There was no response. She knocked again while Hermia waited, a question on her lips. There was a sound of heavy footsteps and the door was flung open wide and a big man with rumpled hair, a well-smudged painting-smock and wearing a huge pair of tortoise-shell goggles peered out into the dark hall-way, blurting out impatiently,

"I'm very busy. I don't need any models. Come another day--"

He was actually on the point of banging the door in their faces when the Countess interposed.

"Such hospitality!"

At the sound of her voice Markham paused, the huge palette and brushes suspended in the air.

"Oh," he murmured in some confusion. "It's you, Madame--"

"It is. Very cross and dusty after the climb up your filthy stairs--I suppose I ought to be used to this kind of welcome but I'm not, somehow. Besides, I'm bringing a visitor, and had hoped to find you in a pleasanter mood."

He showed his white teeth as he laughed.

"Oh, Lord! Pleasant!" And then as an afterthought, very frankly, "I don't suppose I am very pleasant!" He stood aside bowing as Hermia emerged from the shadows and Olga Tcherny presented him. It was a stiff bow, rather awkward and impatient and revealed quite plainly his disappointment at her presence, but Hermia followed Olga into the room with a slight inclination of her head, conscious that in the moment that his eyes passed over her they made a brief note which classified her among the unnecessary nuisances to which busy geniuses must be subjected.

Olga Tcherny, who had now taken full possession of the studio, fell into its easiest chair and looked up at the painter with her caressing

smile.

"You've been working. You've got the fog of it on you. Are we _de trop_?"

"Er--no. It's in rather a mess here, that's all. I _was_ working, but I'm quite willing to stop."

"I'm afraid you've no further wish for me now that I'm no longer useful," she sighed. "You're not going to discard me so easily. Besides, we're not going to stay long--only a minute. I was hoping Miss Challoner could see the portrait."

He glanced at Hermia almost resentfully, and fidgeted with his brushes.

"Yes--of course. It's the least I can do--isn't it? The portrait isn't finished. It's dried in, too--but--"

He laid his palette slowly down and wiped his brushes carefully on a piece of cheese-cloth, put a canvas in a frame upon the easel and shoved it forward into a better light.

Hermia followed his movements curiously, sure that he was the most inhospitable human being upon whom two pretty women had ever condescended to call, and stood uncomfortably, realizing that he has not even offered her a chair. But when the portrait was turned toward the light, she forgot everything but the canvas before her.

It was not the Olga Tcherny that people knew best--the gay, satirical _mondaine_, who exacted from a world which had denied her happiness her pound of flesh and called it pleasure. The Olga Tcherny which looked at Hermia from the canvas was the one that Hermia had glimpsed in the brief moments between bitterness and frivolity, a woman with a soul which in spite of her still dreamed of the things it had been denied.

It was a startling portrait, bold almost to the point of brutality, and even Hermia recognized its individuality, wondering at the capacity for analysis which had made the painter's delineation of character so remarkable, and his brush so unerring. She stole another--a more curious--glance at him. The hideous goggles and the rumpled hair could not disguise the strong lines of his face which she saw in profile--the heavy brows, the straight nose, the thin, rather sensitive lips and the strong, cleanly cut chin. Properly dressed and valeted this queer creature might have been made presentable. But his manners! No valeting or grooming could ever make such a man a gentleman.

If he was aware of her scrutiny he gave no sign of it and leaned forward intently, his gaze on the portrait--alone, to all appearances, with the fires of his genius. Hermia's eyes followed his, the superficial and rather frivolous comment which had been on her lips stilled for the moment by the dignity of his mental attitude, into which it seemed Olga Tcherny had also unconsciously fallen. But the silence irritated Hermia--the wrapt, absorbed attitudes of the man and the woman and the air of sacro-sanctity which pervaded the place. It was like a ceremonial in which this queer animal was being deified. She, at least, couldn't deify him.

"It's like you Olga, of course," she said flippantly, "but it's not at all pretty."

The words fell sharply and Markham and the Countess turned toward the Philistine who stood with her head cocked on one side, her arms a-kimbo. Markham's eyes peered forward somberly for a moment and he spoke with slow gravity.

"I don't paint 'pretty' portraits," he said.

"Mr. Markham means, Hermia, that he doesn't believe in artistic lies," said Olga smoothly.

"And I contend," Hermia went on undaunted, "that it's an artistic lie not to paint you as pretty as you are."

"Perhaps Mr. Markham doesn't think me as pretty as you do--"

Markham bowed his head as though to absolve himself from the guilt suggested.

"I try not to think in terms of prettiness," he explained slowly. "Had you been merely pretty I don't think I should have attempted--"

"But isn't the mission of Art to beautify--to adorn--?" broke in Hermia, mercilessly bromidic.

Markham turned and looked at her as though he had suddenly discovered the presence of an insect which needed extermination.

"My dear young lady, the mission of Art is to tell the truth," he growled. "When I find it impossible to do that, I shall take up another trade."

"Oh," said Hermia, enjoying herself immensely. "I didn't mean to discourage you."

"I don't really think that you have," put in Markham.

Olga Tcherny laughed from her chair in a bored amusement.

"Hermia, dear," she said dryly, "I hardly brought you here to deflect the orbit of genius. Poor Mr. Markham! I shudder to think of his disastrous career if it depended upon your approval."

Hermia opened her mouth to speak, paused and then glanced at Markham. His thoughts were turned inward again and excluded her completely. Indeed it was difficult to believe that he remembered what she had been talking about. In addition to being unpardonably rude, he now simply ignored her. His manner enraged her. "Perhaps my opinion doesn't matter to Mr. Markham," she probed with icy distinctness. "Nevertheless, I represent the public which judges pictures and buys them. Which orders portraits and pays for them. It's my opinion that counts--my money upon which the fashionable portrait painter must depend for his success. He must please me or people like me and the way to please most easily is to paint me as I ought to be rather than as I am."

Markham slowly turned so that he faced her and eyed her with a puzzled expression as he caught the meaning of her remarks, more personal and arrogant than his brief acquaintance with her seemed in any way to warrant.

"I'm not a fashionable portrait painter, thank God," he said with some warmth. "Fortunately I'm not obliged to depend upon the whims or upon the money of the people whose judgment you consider so important to an artistic success. I have no interest in the people who compose fashionable society, not in their money nor their aims, ideals or the lack of them. I paint what interests me--and shall continue to do so."

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed toward Olga. "What's the use, Madame? In a moment I shall be telling Miss--er--"

"Challoner," said Hermia.

"I shall be telling Miss Challoner what I think of New York society--and of the people who compose it. That would be unfortunate."

"Well, rather," said Olga wearily. "Don't, I beg. Life's too short. Must you break our pretty faded butterfly on the wheel?"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned aside.

"Not if it jars upon your sensibilities. I have no quarrel with your society. One only quarrels with an enemy or with a friend. To me society is neither." He smiled at Hermia amusedly. "Society may have its opinion of my utility and may express it freely--unchallenged."

"I don't challenge your utility," replied Hermia tartly. "I merely question your point of view. You do not see *_couleur de rose_*, Mr. Markham?"

"No. Life is not that color."

"Oh, la la!" from Olga. "Life is any color one wishes, and sometimes the color one does not wish. Very pale at times, gray, yellow and at times red--oh, so red! The soul is the chameleon which absorbs and reflects it. Today," she signed, "my chameleon has taken a vacation." She rose abruptly and threw out her arms with a dramatic gesture.

"Oh, you two infants--with your wise talk of life--you have already depressed me to the point of dissolution. I've no patience with you--with either of you. You've spoiled my morning, and I'll not stay here another minute." She reached for her trinkets on the table and rattled them viciously. "It's too bad. With the best intentions in the world I bring two of my friends together and they fall instantly into verbal fisticuffs. Hermia, you deserve no better fate than to be locked in here with this bear of a man until you both learn civility."

But Hermia had already preceded the Countess to the door, whither Markham followed them.

"I should be charmed," said Markham.

"To learn civility?" asked Hermia acidly.

"I might even learn that--"

"It is inconceivable," put in the Countess. "You know, Markham, I don't mind your being bearish with me. In fact, I've taken it as the greatest of compliments. I thought that humor of yours was my special prerogative of friendship. But now alas! When I see how uncivil you can be to others I have a sense of lost caste. And you--instead of being amusingly whimsical and *_ent t _*--are in danger of becoming merely *_bourgeois_*. I warn you now that if you plan to be uncivil to everybody--I shall give you up."

Markham and Hermia laughed. They couldn't help it. She was too absurd.

"Oh, I hope you won't do that," pleaded Markham.

"I'm capable of unheard of cruelties to those who incur my displeasure. I may even bring Miss Challoner in to call again."

Markham, protesting, followed them to the door.

"*_Au revoir, Monsieur_*," said the Countess.

Markham bowed in the general direction of the shadow in the hallway into which Miss Challoner had vanished and then turned back and took up his palette and brushes.

CHAPTER III

THE INEFFECTUAL AUNT

The two women had hardly reached the limousine before the vials of Hermia's wrath were opened.

"What a dreadful person! Olga, how could you have stood him all the while he painted you?"

"We made out very nicely, thank you."

"Hilda was right. He is a gorilla. Do you know he never even offered me a chair?"

"I suppose he thought you'd have sense enough to sit down if you wanted to."

"O Olga, don't quibble. He's impossible."

The Countess shrugged.

"It's a matter of taste."

"Taste! One doesn't want to be affronted. Is he like this to every one?"

"No. That's just the point. He isn't. I think, Hermia, dear," and she laughed, "that he didn't like you."

"Me! Why not?"

"He doesn't like Bath-buns. He once told me so. Besides, I don't think he's altogether in sympathy with the things you typify."

"How does he know what I typify--when I don't know myself? I don't typify anything."

"Oh, yes, you do, to a man like Markham. From the eyrie where his soul is wont to sit, John Markham has a fine perspective on life--yours and mine. But I imagine that you make the more conspicuous silhouette. To him you represent 'the New York Idea'--only more so. Besides that you're a vellum edition of the Feminist Movement with suffrage expurgated. In other words, darling, to a lonely and somewhat morbid philosopher like Markham you're a horrible example of what may become of a female person of liberal views who has had the world suddenly laid in her lap; the spoiled child launched into the full possession of a fabulous fortune with no ambition more serious than to become the 'champeen lady-aviator of Madison Avenue--'"

"Olga! You're horrid," broke in Hermia.

"I know it. It's the reaction from a morning which began too cheerfully. I think I'll leave you now, if you'll drop me at the Blouse Shop--"

"But I thought we were going--"

"No. Not this morning. The mood has passed."

"Oh, very well," said Hermia.

The two pecked each other just below the eye after the manner of women and the Countess departed, while Hermia quizzically watched her graceful back until it had disappeared in the shadows of the store. The current that usually flowed between them was absent now, so Hermia let her go; for Olga Tcherny, when in this mood, wore an armor which Hermia, clever as she thought herself, had never been able to penetrate.

Hermia continued on her way uptown, aware that the change in the Countess Olga was due to intangible influences which she could not define but which she was sure had something to do with the odious person whose studio she had visited. Could it be that Olga really cared for this queer Markham of the goggled eyes, this absent-minded, self-centered creature, who rumbled his hair, smoked a pipe and growled his cheap philosophy? A pose, of course, aimed this morning at Hermia. He flattered her. She felt obliged for the line of demarcation he had so carefully drawn between his life and hers. As if she needed the challenge of his impudence to become aware of it! And yet in her heart she found herself denying that his impudence had irritated her less than his indifference. To tell the truth, Hermia did not like being ignored. It was the first time in fact, that any man had ignored her, and she did not enjoy the sensation. She shrugged her shoulders carelessly and glanced out of the window of her car--and to be ignored by such a person as this grubby painter--it was maddening! She thought of him as "grubby," whatever that meant, because she did not like him, but it was even more maddening for her to think of Olga Tcherny's portrait, which, in spite of her flippant remarks, she had been forced to admit revealed a knowledge of feminine psychology that had excited her amazement and admiration.

One deduction led to another. She found herself wondering what kind of a portrait this Markham would make of her, whether he would see, as he had seen in Olga--the things that lay below the surface--the dreams that came, the aspirations, half-formed, toward something different, the moments of revulsion at the emptiness of her life, which, in spite of the material benefits it possessed, was, after all, only material. Would he paint those--the shadows as well as the lights? Or would he see her as Marsac, the Frenchman, had seen her, the pretty, irresponsible child of fortune who lived only for others who were as gay as herself with no more serious purpose in life than to become, as Olga had said, "the champagne lady-aviator of Madison Avenue."

Hermia lunched alone--out of humor with all the world--and went upstairs with a volume of plays which had just come from the stationer. But she had hardly settled herself comfortably when Titine announced Mrs. Westfield.

It was the ineffectual Aunt.

"Oh, yes," with an air of resignation, "tell Mrs. Westfield to come up."

She pulled the hair over her temples to conceal the scars of her morning's accident and met Mrs. Westfield at the landing outside.

"_Dear_ Aunt Harriet. So glad," she said, grimacing cheerfully to salve her conscience. "What _have_ I been doing now?"

"What _haven't_ you been doing, child?"

The good lady sank into a chair, the severe lines in her face more than usually acidulous, but Hermia only smiled sweetly, for Mrs. Westfield's

forbidding aspect, as she well knew, concealed the most indulgent of dispositions.

"Playing polo with men, racing in your motor and getting yourself talked about in the papers! Really, Hermia, what will you be doing next?"

"Flying," said Hermia.

Mrs. Westfield hesitated between a gasp and a smile.

"I don't doubt it. You are quite capable of anything--only your wings will not be sent from Heaven--"

"No--from Paris. I'm going to have a Bleriot."

"Do you actually mean that you're going to--O Hermia! Not _fly_--!"
The girl nodded.

"I--I'm afraid I am, Auntie. It's the sporting thing. You know I never could _bear_ having Reggie Armistead do anything I couldn't. Every one will be doing it soon."

"I can't believe that you're in earnest."

"I am, awfully."

"But the danger! You must realize that!"

"I do--that's what attracts me." She got up and put her arms around Mrs. Westfield's neck. "O Auntie, dear, don't bother. I'm absolutely impossible anyway. I can't be happy doing the things that other girls do, and you might as well let me have my own way--"

"But flying--"

"It's as simple as child's play. If you'd ever done it you'd wonder how people would ever be content to motor or ride--"

"You've been up--?"

"Last week at Garden City. I'm crazy about it."

"Yes, child, crazy--mad. I've done what I could to keep your amusements within the bounds of reason and without avail, but I wouldn't be doing my duty to your sainted mother if I didn't try to save you from yourself. I shall do something to prevent this--this madcap venture--I don't know what. I shall see Mr. Winthrop at the Trust Company. There must be some way--"

The pendants in the good lady's ears trembled in the light, and her hand groped for her handkerchief. "You _can't_, Hermia. I'll not permit it. I'll get out an injunction--or something. It was all very well when you were a child--but now--do you realize that you're a woman, a grown woman, with responsibilities to the community? It's time that you were married, settled down and took your proper place in New York. I had hoped that you would have matured and forgotten the childish pastimes of your girlhood but now--now--"

Mrs. Westfield, having found her handkerchief, wept into it, her emotions too deep for other expression, while Hermia, now really moved, sank at her feet upon the floor, her arms about her Aunt's shoulders, and tried to comfort her. "I'm not the slightest use in the world, Auntie, dear. I haven't a single homely virtue to recommend me. I'm only fit to ride and dance and motor and frivol. And whom

should I marry? Surely not Reggie Armistead or Crosby Downs! Reggie and I have always fought like cats across a wire, and as for Crosby--I would as life marry the great Cham of Tartary. No, dear, I'm not ready for marriage yet. I simply couldn't. There, there, don't cry. You've done your duty. I'm not worth bothering about. I'm not going to do anything dreadful. And besides--you know if anything _did_ happen to me, the money would go to Millicent and Theodore."

"I--I don't want anything to happen to you," said Mrs. Westfield, weeping anew.

"Nothing will--you know I'm not hankering to die--but I don't mind taking a sporting chance with a game like that."

"But what good can it possibly do?"

Hermia Challoner laughed a little bitterly. "My dear Auntie, my life has not been planned with reference to the ultimate possible good. I'm a renegade if you like, a hoyden with a shrewd sense of personal morality but with no other sense whatever. I was born under a mad moon with some wild humor in my blood from an earlier incarnation and I can't--I simply _can't_ be conventional. I've tried doing as other--and nicer--girls do but it wearies me to the point of distraction. Their lives are so pale, so empty, so full of pretensions. They have always seemed so. When I used to romp like a boy my elders told me it was an unnatural way for little girls to play. But I kept on romping. If it hadn't been natural I shouldn't have romped. Perhaps Sybil Trenchard is natural--or Caroline Anstell. They're conventional girls--automatic parts of the social machinery, eating, sleeping, decking themselves for the daily round, mere things of sex, their whole life planned so that they may make a desirable marriage. Good Lord, Auntie! And whom will they marry? Fellows like Archie Westcott or Carol Gouverneur, fellows with notorious habits which marriage is not likely to mend. How could it? No one expects it to. The girls who marry men like that get what they bargain for--looks for money--money for looks--"

"But Trevelyan Morehouse!"

Hermia paused and examined the roses in the silver vase with a quizzical air.

"If I were not so rich, I should probably love Trevvy madly. But, you see, then Trevvy wouldn't love me. He couldn't afford to. He's ruining himself with roses as it is. And, curiously enough, I have a notion when I marry, to love--and be loved for myself alone. I'm not in love with Trevvy or any one else--or likely to be. The man I marry, Auntie, isn't doing what Trevvy and Crosby and Reggie Armistead are doing. He's different somehow--different from any man I've ever met."

"How, child?"

"I don't know," she mused, with a smile. "Only he isn't like Trevvy Morehouse."

"But Mr. Morehouse is a very promising young man--"

"The person I marry won't be a promising young man. Promising young men continually remind me of my own deficiencies. Imagine domesticating a critic like that, marrying a mirror for one's foibles and being able to see nothing else. No, thanks."

"Whom will you marry then?" sighed Mrs. Westfield resignedly.

Hermia Challoner caught her by the arm. "Oh, I don't know--only he isn't the kind of man who'd send me roses. I think he's something between a pilgrim and a vagabond, a knight-errant from somewhere between Heaven and the true Bohemia, a despiser of shams and vanities, a man so much bigger than I am that he can make me what he is--in spite of himself."

"Hermia! A Bohemian! Such a person will hardly be found--"

"O Auntie, you don't understand. I'm not likely to find him. I'm not even looking for him, you know, and just now I don't want to marry anybody."

"I only hope when you do, Hermia, that you will commit no imprudence," said Mrs. Westfield severely.

Hermia turned quickly.

"Auntie, Captain Lundt of the Kaiser Wilhelm used to tell me that there were two ways of going into a fog," she said. "One was to go slow and use the siren. The other was to crowd on steam and go like h--."

"Hermia!"

"I'm sorry, Auntie, but that describes the situation exactly. I'm too wealthy to risk marrying prudently. I'd have to find a man who was as prudent as I was, which means that he'd be marrying me for my money--"

"That doesn't follow. You're pretty, attractive--"

"Oh, thanks. I know what I am. I'm an animated dollar mark, a financial abnormality, with just about as much chance of being loved for myself alone as a fox in November. When men used to propose to me I halted them, pressed their hands, bade them be happy and wept a tear or two for the thing that could not be. Now I fix them with a cold appraising eye and let them stammer through to the end. I've learned something. The possession of money may have its disadvantages, but it sharpens one's wits amazingly."

"I'm afraid it sharpens them too much, my dear," said Mrs. Westfield coldly. She looked around the room helplessly as if seeking in some mute object tangible evidence of her niece's sanity.

"Oh, well," she finished. "I shall hope and pray for a miracle to bring you to your senses." And then, "What have you planned for the spring?"

"I'm going to 'Wake-Robin; first. By next week my aerodrome will be finished. My machine is promised by the end of May. They're sending a perfectly reliable mechanic--"

"Reliable--in the air! Imagine it!"

"--and I'll be flying in a month."

The good lady rose and Hermia watched her with an expression in which relief and guilt were strangely mingled. Her conscience always smote her after one of her declarations of independence to her Aunt, whose mildness and ineptitude in the unequal struggle always left the girl with an unpleasant sense of having taken a mean advantage of a helpless adversary. To Hermia Mrs. Westfield's greatest effectiveness was when she was most ineffectual.

"There's nothing more for me to say, I suppose," said Mrs. Westfield.

"Nothing except that you approve," pleaded her niece wistfully.

"I'll never do that," icily. "I don't approve of you at all. Why should I mince matters? You're gradually alienating me, Hermia--cutting yourself off from the few blood relations you have on earth."

"From Millicent and Theodore? I thought that Milly fairly doted on me--"

Mrs. Westfield stammered helplessly.

"It's I--I who object. I don't like your friends. I don't think I would be doing my duty to their sainted father if--"

"Oh, I see," said Hermia thoughtfully. "You think I may pervert--contaminate them--"

"Not you--your friends--"

"I was hoping that you would all come to 'Wake-Robin' for June."

"I--I've made other plans," said Mrs. Westfield.

Hermia's jaw set and her face hardened. They were thoroughly antipathetic now.

"That, of course, will be as you please," she said coldly. "Since Thimble Cottage burned, I've tried to make you understand that you are to use my place as your own. If you don't want to come I'm sorry."

"It's not that I don't want to come, Hermia. I shall probably visit you as usual. Thimble Cottage will be rebuilt as soon as the plans are finished. Meanwhile, I've rented the island."

"And Milly and Theodore?"

"They're going abroad with their Aunt Julia."

"I think you are making a mistake in keeping us apart, Aunt Harriet."

"Why? You are finding new diversions and new friends."

"I must find new friends if my relations desert me." And then after a pause: "Who has rented Thimble Island?"

"An artist--who will occupy the bark cabin. My agents thought it as well to have some one there until the builders begin--a Mr. Markham--"

"Markham!" Hermia gasped.

"Do you know him?"

"Oh--er--enough to be sure that he is not the kind of person I shall care to cultivate."

And then as her Aunt wavered uncertainly. "Oh, of course I shall get along. I can't protest. It's your privilege to choose Milly's friends, even if you mean to exclude me. It's also my privilege to choose my friends and I shall do so. If this means that I am taboo at your houses, I shall respect your wishes but I hope you'll remember that you are all welcome at 'Wake-Robin' or here whenever you see fit to visit me."

Having delivered herself of this speech, Hermia paused, sure of her

effect, and calmly awaited the usual recantation and reconciliation. But to her surprise Mrs. Westfield continued to move slowly toward the door, through which, after a formal word of farewell, she presently disappeared and was gone.

Hermia stared at the empty door and pondered--really on the verge of tears. The whole proceeding violated all precedents established for ineffectual aunts.

CHAPTER IV

MAROONED

In the course of an early pilgrimage in search of an unfrequented spot where he might work out of doors undisturbed in June before going to Normandy, Markham had stumbled quite by accident on Thimble Island. There, to his delight, he had discovered the exact combination of rocks, foliage and barren he was looking for--the painter's landscape. The island was separated from the mainland by an arm of the sea, wide enough to keep at a safe distance the fashionable cottagers in the adjacent community.

Fire had destroyed the large frame cottage which the Westfields had occupied, but there was a small bark bungalow of two rooms and a kitchen that had been used, he learned, as quarters for extra guests, which would exactly suit his purposes. Somewhat doubtfully, he made inquiries upon the mainland and communicated with the agents of Mrs. Westfield in New York, with whom, to his delight, he managed to make the proper arrangements pending the rebuilding of the house.

He had established himself bag and baggage and at the end of two weeks a row of canvases along the wall of his room bore testimony to his diligence. To Markham they had been weeks of undiluted happiness. He was working out in his own way some theses of color which would in time prove to others that he knew Nature as well as he knew humanity; that the brutal truths people saw in his portraits were only brutal because they were true; and to prove to himself that somewhere in him, deeply hidden, was a vein of tenderness which now sought expression. Every day he was learning something. This morning for instance he had risen before daylight to try an effect in grays that he had missed two days before.

The day had just begun and Markham stood before his tripod facing to the westward painting madly, trying, in the few short moments that remained to him before sunrise, to put upon his canvas the evanescent tints of the dawn. He painted madly because the canvas was not yet covered and because he knew that within twenty minutes at the most the sun would rise behind him and the witching mystery of the half-light be gone. He stood upright painting at arm's length with a full brush and broad sweep of wrist and arm. Gobs of paint from the tubes melted into pearly-grays and purples in the middle of his palette to be quickly transposed and placed tone beside tone like a pale mosaic enriched and blended by the soft fingers of Time. His motive was simple--a rock, some trees, a stretch of sandy waste, backed by a rugged hill and a glimpse of sea, all bathed in mist; and his brush moved decisively, heavily at times, lightly, caressingly at others as the sketch grew to completion, while his dark eyes glowed behind their hideous goggles, and the firm lines at his mouth relaxed in a smile. For this moment at least he was tasting immortality--and it was good.

High above him in the air there moved a speck, growing larger with every moment, but he did not see it or hear the faint staccato sounds which proclaimed its identity. The speck moved toward the sea and then, making a wide turn over the beach, swept inland near the earth

noiselessly, and deposited itself with a quivering groan which startled him, directly in the unfinished foreground of the painter, throwing its occupant in a huddled heap upon the ground.

It had been a lovely foreground of sand and stubble, iridescent with the dew, rich with the broken grays and violets of the reflected heavens. And now--

He dropped his palette and brushes and ran forward, suddenly alive to the serious nature of the interruption. Upon the grass, stretched prone, face downward, lay a figure in leather cap, blouse and leggings. But as his hand touched the leather shoulder, the aviator moved and then sat upright, facing him. At the same moment the sun, which had been hesitating for some moments on the brink of the horizon, came up with a rush and bathed the face of the small person before him in liquid gold. The leather cap had fallen backward and a mass of golden hair which now tumbled about the face proclaimed with startling definiteness the sex of Markham's unexpected guest.

"Sorry to bother you," said the guest weakly. "She missed fire and I had to 'plane' down."

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, I think not," she replied, running her fingers over her leather jerkin to reassure herself as to the fact. "Just shaken up a little--that's all."

Markham stood up and watched her, his arms a-kimbo, a tangle at his brow. It was quite evident to Hermia Challoner that he hadn't the slightest recollection of her.

"What are you doing out at this time of day?" he asked. "Don't you know you might have drowned yourself? Where did you come from? Where are you going?" The tone of his voice was not unkind--it was even solicitous for her welfare, but it reminded her unpleasantly of his attitude toward her the last time they had met.

[Illustration: "Markham stood up and watched her, his arms a-kimbo, a tangle at his brow."]

"That," she replied, getting rather unsteadily to her feet, "is a matter of no importance."

The effort in rising cost her trouble and as she moved toward the machine her face went white, and she would have fallen had not Markham caught her by the arm.

"Oh, I'm all right," she faltered. But he led her up the hill to the cabin where he put her on a couch and gave her some whisky and water.

"Here, drink this," he said gently. "It will do you good."

She glanced around the room at the piles of canvases against the wall, at the tin coffee pot on the wooden table, and then back at his unshorn face and shock of disorderly hair, the color rising slowly to her cheeks. But she obeyed him, and drank what remained in the glass without question, sinking back upon the pillow, her lips firmly compressed, her gaze upon the ceiling.

"I--I'm sorry to put you to so much trouble," she murmured.

"Oh, that's all right," he muttered. "You got a bad shock. But there are no bones broken. You'll be all right soon. Go to sleep if you can."

She tried to sit up, thought better of it and lay back again with eyes closed, while Markham moved on tiptoe around the room putting things to rights, all the while swearing silently. What in the name of all that was unpleasant did this philandering little idiot mean by trying to destroy herself on the front lawn of his holiday house? Surely the world was big enough, the air broad enough. He glanced at her for a moment, then crept over on tip-toe and peered at her secretively. He straightened and scratched his head, fumbling for his pipe, puzzled. She resembled somebody he knew or whom he had met. Where? When? He gave it up at last and strolled out of doors--lighted his pipe and sauntered down the hill toward the devilish thing of canvas and wire that had brought her here. He knew nothing of a'roplanes, but even to his unskilled eye it was apparent that without repairs the thing would fly no more, for the canvas covering flapped suggestively in the wind. A broken wing! And the bird was in his cage. His situation--and hers--began to assume unpleasant definiteness. For three days at least, until his supply boat arrived, from the mainland, they would be prisoners here together. A pretty prospect!

He strolled to his belated canvas and stood for a while puffing at his pipe, his mind still pondering gloomily over his neglected foreground. then regretfully, tenderly, he undid the clips that fastened the canvas, unlooped the cords from his stone anchors, wiped his brushes, shut his paint-box and moved slowly up the hill toward the house, his mind protestingly adjusting itself to the situation. What was he to do with this surprising female until the boat arrived. Common decency demanded hospitality, and of course he must give it to her, his bed, his food, his time. That was the thing he begrudged her most--the long wonderful daylight hours in this chosen spot, the hourly calls of sea and sky in his painters' paradise. Silly little fool! If she had had to tumble why couldn't she have done it on the West shore where there were women, doctors and medicines?

He placed the canvas and easel against the corner of his house, knocked out his pipe on the heel of his boot and cautiously peered around the jamb of the door to find his unwelcome guest sitting on the edge of the bed smoking a cigarette. He straightened sheepishly, not knowing whether to grin or to scowl. Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"Feeling better?" he asked at last, for the silence embarrassed him.

"Oh, yes, thanks."

She rose and flicked her cigarette out of the window.

"Where are you going?" he asked again.

"Home--to breakfast."

"Impossible!"

"Why?"

"You're not fit--"

"Oh, yes I am--"

"Besides, you can't--"

"Why not?"

"Your a'roplane--it won't fly?"

She stopped in the doorway and glanced anxiously down the slope where her Bleriot had fallen.

"One wing is broken, you see."

She went down the hill, Markham following. She stood before the broken machine and looked at it dejectedly.

"Well?" he asked.

"I'm afraid you're right. It will have to be repaired. I'll go back by boat."

He smiled.

"Of course. But in the meanwhile I'm afraid you'll have to trust to my hospitality--such as it is."

She turned toward him quickly.

"You mean--"

"The boat--my only means of communication, won't be here until Thursday."

Her jaw dropped and her blue eyes were quite round in dismay.

"You can't mean it!"

"It's the truth."

"Have you no boats? Does no one come here from the mainland?"

"No. I arranged that. I came here to work and didn't want to be interrupted--" And hastily: "Of course, I'm glad to be of service to you, and if you'll put up with what I can offer--"

"Thanks," she said. "I hope it's apparent to you that I'm not stopping of my own volition." And then, as though aware of her discourtesy, she turned toward him, a smile for the first time illumining the pallor of her face.

"I'm afraid there's nothing left for me then but to accept your kind offer."

When they reached the cabin he brought out a wicker chair and put it in the shade.

"If you'll sit here and try to make yourself comfortable, I'll see what can be done about breakfast."

She thanked him with a smile, sat submissively and he disappeared indoors, where she heard him pottering about in the small kitchen. It was very quiet, very restful there under the trees and an odor of cooking coffee, eggs, bacon and toast which the breeze wafted in her direction from the open window reminded her that the hour of breakfast was approaching. But, alluring as the odor was, she had no appetite. Her knee and shoulder hurt her much less than they deserved to, much less than the state of her mind at finding herself suddenly at the mercy of this young man who had aroused both her choler and her curiosity. Last night after her guests had gone to bed she had sat alone for a long while on the porch which overlooked the bay, unconsciously surveying with her eye the water which separated Thimble Island from the mainland. But it was a mad impulse that had sent her over the sea this morning, a madder impulse that had sent her to

Thimble Island of all places, upon which she had descended with an audacity and a recklessness which surprised even herself. She realized that a while ago she had lied glibly to Markham about her mishap. Her Bleriot had not missed fire. From the perch of her lofty reconnaissance she had espied the painter working at his canvas, but her notion of visiting him she knew had been born not this morning, but last night when she had sat alone on the terrace and watched the pale moon wreathing fitfully among the clouds which hovered uncertainly off-shore. She had come to Thimble Island simply because impulse had led her here, and because she was accustomed, with possible reservations, to follow her impulses wherever they might lead her. That they had led her to Markham signified nothing except that she found herself more curious about him than she had supposed herself to be.

Her plans for the morning had provided for a brief landing while she tinkered with the machine, scorning his proffers of help; for a snub, if he chose to take advantage of their slight acquaintance; and for a triumphant departure when her pride and her curiosity had been appeased. Her plans had not included the miscalculation of distance and the projecting branch of the tree which had been her undoing. She found it difficult to scorn the proffers of help of a man who helped without proffering. It was impossible to snub a man for taking advantage of a slight acquaintance when he refused to remember that such an acquaintance had ever existed. The triumphant departure now refused to be triumphant or indeed even a departure. At the present moment her pride and her curiosity still clamored and Markham in his worried, absent-minded way was repaying her with kindness—a kindness every moment of which increased Hermia's obligation and diminished her importance.

She sang very small now in Markham's scheme of things and sat very quietly in her chair, like a rebellious child which has been punished by being put alone in a corner. She listened to his footsteps within, the clattering of dishes, the tinkle of table service and in a little while he appeared in the door of the cabin, redolent with the odor of coffee and bacon, and announced breakfast.

CHAPTER V

BREAD AND SALT

"Thanks," said Hermia. "I'm not hungry."

"But you can't get on without food."

"I'm not hungry," she repeated.

"Do you feel ill? Perhaps--"

"No. I'm all right again—quite all right. I don't know what made me feel faint. I've never done such a thing in all my life before. But you needn't worry. I'm not going to faint again."

Markham recalled the cigarette and believed her.

"But you can't get along all morning without food," he said.

She looked away from him toward the shore of the mainland where the towers of "Wake-Robin" made a gray smudge against the trees.

"Oh, yes, I can," she said shortly.

Markham eyed her curiously for a moment, then turned on his heel and

went abruptly into the cabin whence he presently emerged carrying a tray which bore a cup of steaming coffee, some toast and an egg. Before she was well aware of it, he had placed the tray on her lap, and stood before her, his six feet of stature dominating.

"Now eat!" he said, quietly.

She looked down at the food and then uncertainly up to his face. Never in her life, that she could remember, had she been addressed to peremptorily. His lips smiled, but there was no denying the note of command in his voice and in his attitude. Curiously enough she found herself fingering at the coffee cup.

"There's a lump of sugar in it," he added, "and another on the saucer. I have no cream."

"I--I don't care for cream, thanks."

There seemed nothing to do, since he still stood there looking at her, but to eat, and she did so without further remarks. He watched her for a moment and then went in at the door, returning in a moment with another cup of coffee and another dish. Without a word he sat on the step of the porch and followed her example, munching his toast and sipping his coffee with grave deliberateness, his eyes following hers to the distant shore.

Hermia's appetite had come with eating and she had discovered that his coffee was delicious. She made a belated resolution that, if she must stay here, she would do it with a good grace. He had offered to fill her coffee cup and to bring more toast, but, beyond inquiring politely how she felt, had asked her no other questions. When he had breakfasted he took her dishes and his own indoors and put them in the kitchen sink, then came to the door stuffing some tobacco into the bowl of his disreputable pipe.

"I hope I'm safe in assuming that tobacco smoke is unobjectionable to you."

"Oh, quite."

A glance at his eyes revealed the suspicion of a smile. There was humor in the man, after all. She looked up at him more graciously.

"I suppose you're wondering where I dropped from," she said at last.

"Yes," he replied, "I confess--I'm curious"--puff, puff--"though not so much about the where"--puff--"as about the why". Other forms of suicide may be less picturesque than flying, but they doubtless have other--homelier--virtues to recommend them. If I wished to die suddenly I think I should simply blow out the gas. Do you come from Quemscott, Simsbury or perhaps further?"

He asked the questions as though more from a desire to be polite than from any actual interest.

"No--from Westport. You know I live there."

"No--I didn't know it. Curiously enough in the back of my head I've not a notion that somewhere--but not in Westport--you and I have met before."

"I can't imagine where," said Hermia promptly.

He rubbed his head and thatched his brows.

"Paris, perhaps,—or—it couldn't have been in Normandy?" he asked.

"I've never been to Normandy. Besides, if we had met, I probably would have remembered it. I'm afraid you're thinking of some one else."

"Yes, perhaps I am," he said slowly. "I've got the worst memory in the world—"

"Mine is excellent," put in Hernia.

He looked at her soberly, and her gaze fell, but in a moment she flashed a bright smile up at him. "Of course it doesn't matter, does it? What does matter is how I'm going to get ashore."

"I've been thinking about that. I don't see how it can be managed," he replied briefly.

"Isn't there a boat-house?"

"Yes, but—unfortunately—no boats."

"It's a very awkward predicament," she murmured.

"Not nearly so awkward as it might have been if there had been no one here," he said slowly. "At least you won't starve."

"You're very kind. Oh, I hope you won't think me ungrateful. I'm not, really. I'll not bother you."

He looked at her amusedly.

"Can you cook?"

"No," she admitted, "but I'd like to try."

"I guess you'd better leave that to me," he finished grimly.

He was treating her as though she were a child, but she didn't resent it now. Indeed his attitude toward her made resentment impossible. His civility and hospitality, while lacking in the deference of other men of her acquaintance, were beyond cavil. But it was quite clear that the only impression her looks or her personality had made upon him was the slight one of having met and forgotten her—hardly flattering to her self-esteem. He was quite free from self-consciousness and at moments wore an air of abstraction which made it seem to Hermia as though he had forgotten her presence. In another atmosphere she had thought him unmannerly; here, somehow it didn't seem necessary to lay such stress upon the outward tokens of gentility. And his personal civility, more implied than expressed, was even more reassuring than the lip and eye homage to which she was accustomed.

In these moments of abstraction she inspected him curiously. His unshorn face was tanned a deep brown which with his rough clothing and longish hair gave him rather a forbidding aspect, and the lines into which his face fell in moments of repose were almost unpleasantly severe; but his eyes which had formed the painter's habit of looking critically through their lashes had a way of opening wide at unexpected moments and staring at her with the disconcerting frankness of those of a child. He turned them on her now so abruptly that she had not time to avert her gaze.

"You'll be missed, won't you?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Yes, I suppose I shall. They'll see the open hangar--"

"Do you think any one could have been watching your flight?"

"Hardly. I left at dawn. You see I've been bothered a lot by the curiosity of my neighbors. That's why I've been flying early."

"H--m. It's a pity to worry them so."

Markham rose and knocked out the ashes of his pipe.

"You see, Thimble Island is a good distance from the channel and only the smaller pleasure boats come this way. Of course there's a chance of one coming within hail. I'll keep a watch and do what I can, of course. In the meanwhile I hope you'll consider the cabin your own. I'll be quite comfortable to-night with a blanket in the boat-house."

She was silent a moment, but when she turned her head, he had already vanished into the cabin, where in a moment she heard the clatter of the dishes he was washing. At this moment Hermia was sure that she didn't dislike him at all. The clatter continued, mingled with the sound of splashing water and a shrill piping as he whistled an air from "Boh me." Hermia gazed out over the water a moment and then her lips broke into a lovely smile. She made a quick resolution, got up and followed him indoors.

He looked over his shoulder at her as she entered.

"Do you want anything?" he asked cheerfully.

"No--nothing--except to wash those dishes."

"Nonsense. I won't be a minute. It's nothing at all."

"Perhaps that's why I insist on doing it."

She had taken off her blouse, rolled up the sleeves of her waist with a business-like air and elbowed him away from the dishpan unceremoniously.

"I'm going to wash them--wash them properly. You may wipe them if you like."

He grinned and fished around on a shelf for a dishcloth. Having found it he stationed himself beside her and took the dishes one by one as she finished with them.

"Your name is Markham, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes--how did you know?" he asked in surprise.

She indicated a packing case in the corner which was addressed in letters six inches high.

"Oh," he said. "Of course."

"You're the Mr. Markham, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure about that. I'm this Mr. Markham."

"Markham, the portrait painter?"

"That's what I profess. Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

He examined her, puzzling again, wiping the cup in his fingers with great particularity.

"_Are_ you an anarchist?" she asked in a moment.

He laughed.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Or a gorilla?"

"One of my grandfathers was--once a long while ago."

"Or a misogynist?"

"A what?"

"A grouch. _Are_ you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I am."

"I don't believe it now. I did at first. You can look very cross when you like."

"I haven't been cross with you, have I?"

"No. But you didn't like being interrupted."

"Not then--but I'm rather enjoying it now." He took a dish from her fingers. "You know you _did_ drop in rather informally. Who's been talking of me?"

"Oh, that's the penalty of distinction. One hears such things. _Are_ you queer, morbid and eccentric?"

"I believe I am," amusedly, "now that you mention it."

She was silent a moment before she spoke again.

"I don't believe it--at all. But you _are_ unconventional, aren't you?"

"According to the standards of _your_ world, yes, decidedly."

"_My_ world! What do you know about my world?"

"Only what you've told me by your opinions of mine."

"I haven't expressed my opinions."

"There's no need of your expressing them."

"If you're going to be cross I'll not wash another dish." But she handed the last of them to him and emptied the dishpan.

"Now," she exclaimed. "I wish you'd please go outside and smoke."
"Outside! Why?"

"I'm going to put this place in order. Ugh! I've never in my life seen such a mess. _Won't_ you go?"

He looked around deprecatingly. "I'm sorry you came in here. It _is_ rather a mess on the floor--and around," and then as though by an inspiration, "but then you know, I do keep the pots and dishes clean."

By this time she had reached the shelves over which she ran an inquisitive finger.

"Dust!" she sniffed. "Barrels of it! and the plates--?" She took one down and inspected it minutely. "I thought so. _Please_ go out," she pleaded.

"And if I don't?"

"I'll do it anyway."

By this time she was peering into the corners, from one of which she triumphantly brought forth a mop and pail.

"Oh, I say, I'm not going to let you do that."

"I don't see that you've got any choice in the matter. I'm going to clean up, and if you don't want to be splashed, I'd advise you to clear out."

She went to the spigot and let the water run into the bucket, while she extended her palm in his direction.

"Now some soap please--hand-soap, if you have it. _Any_ soap, if you haven't."

"I've only got this," he said lifting the soap from the dishpan.

"Oh, very well. Now please go and paint." But Markham didn't. He found it more amusing to watch her small hands rubbing the soap into the fiber of the mop.

"If you'll show me I'll be very glad--" he volunteered. But as he came forward, she brought the wet mop out of the bucket with a threatening sweep which splashed him, and set energetically to work about his very toes.

He moved to the door jamb, but she pursued him.

"Outside, please," with relentless scorn. "This is no place for a philosopher."

Markham was inclined to agree with her and retreated in utter rout.

CHAPTER VI

THE RESCUE

On the porch he sank into the wicker chair, filled his pipe and looked afar, his ear attuned to the sounds of his domestic upheaval, not quite sure whether he was provoked or amused. At moments, by her pluck she had excited his admiration, at others she had seemed a little less worthy of consideration than a spoiled child, but her present role amused him beyond expression. Whoever she was, whatever her mission in life, she was quite the most remarkable young female person in his experience. Who? It didn't matter in the least of course, but he found himself somewhat chagrined that his memory had played him such a trick. Young girls, especially the impudent, self-satisfied kind that one met in America, had always filled Markham with a vague alarm. He didn't understand them in the least, nor did they understand him, and he had managed with some discretion to confine his attentions to women of a riper growth. Madame Tcherny, for instance!

Markham sat suddenly upright in his chair, a look of recognition in his eyes.

Olga Tcherny! Of course, he remembered now. And this was the cheeky little thing Olga had brought to the studio to see her portrait, who had strutted around and talked about money--Miss--er--funny he couldn't think of her name! He got up after a while, walked around and peered in at the kitchen door.

His visitor had washed the shelves with soap and water, and now he found her down on her knees with the bucket and scrubbing-brush working like a fury.

"See here, I can't let you do that--" he began again.

She turned a flushed face up at him and then went on scrubbing.

"You've got to stop it, do you hear? I won't have it. You're not up to that sort of work. You haven't got any right to do a thing like this. Get up at once and go out of doors!"

She made no reply and backed away toward the door of the living-room, finishing the last strip of unscoured floor before she even replied. Then she got up and looked at her work admiringly.

"There!" she said as though to herself. "That's better."

The area of damp floor lay between them and when he made a step to relieve her of the bucket she had lifted, she waved him back.

"Don't you dare walk on it--after all my trouble. Go around the other way."

He obeyed with a meekness that surprised him, but when he reached the other door she had already emptied her bucket and her roving eye was seeking new fields to conquer.

"You've got to stop it at once," he insisted.

"It's the least I can do to earn my board. This room must be dusted, the bed made and--"

"No. I won't have it."

He took her by the elbows and pushed her out of the door to the chair on the porch into which she sank, red of face and out of breath.

"I'll only rest for a minute," she protested.

"We'll see about that later," he said with a smile. "For the present, strange as it may seem, you're really going to obey orders!"

She squared her chin at him defiantly.

"Really! Are you sure?"

"Positive!"

"It's more than I am."

"I'm bigger than you are."

"I'm not in the least afraid of you."

He laughed.

"You hardly know me well enough to be afraid of me."

"Then I don't want to know you any better."

"You're candid at any rate. But when I like I can be most unpleasant. Ask Olga Tcherny."

Her gaze flickered then flared into steadiness as she said coolly.

"I haven't the remotest idea what you're talking about."

"Do you mean to say that you don't remember?" he asked smiling.

"My memory is excellent. Perhaps I lack imagination. What should I remember?"

"My studio--in New York. You visited me with the Countess Tcherny."

"I do not know--I have never met the Countess Tcherny."

The moment was propitious. There was a sound of voices, and Markham and his visitor glanced over their shoulders past the angle of the cottage to where in the bright sunlight into which she had emerged, stood the Countess Olga.

"Hermia, thank the Lord!" she was saying. "How you've frightened us, child!" She came quickly forward, but when Markham rose she stopped, her dark eyes round with astonishment.

"You! John Markham! Well, upon my word! _C'est abracadabrant_! Here I've been harrowing my soul all morning with thoughts of your untimely death, Hermia, dear, turning Westport topsy-turvy, to find you at your ease snugly wrapped in _t te- -t te_ with this charming social renegade. It is almost too much for one's patience!"

Hermia rose laughing, and faced the rescue party which came forward chattering congratulations.

"I thought my friends were too wise ever to be worried about _me_," she said coolly. "But I'm awfully obliged and flattered. Hilda, have you met Mr. Markham? Miss Ashhurst, Miss Van Vorst, and Mr. Armistead, Mr. Markham's island fortunately happened to be just underneath where my machine decided to miss fire--"

"You _did_ fall then?"

"Well rather--look at my poor bird, there."

Salignac, the mechanic, was already on the spot confirming the damage.

"How on earth did you happen to know that you would find me here?" asked Hermia.

"We didn't know it," replied the countess. "We took a chance and came, worried to death. The head coachman's wife who was up with a sick child heard you get off and watched your flight over the bay in this direction. She didn't see you fall. But when you didn't return she became frightened and alarmed the household--woke us all at half-past five. Think of it!" She yawned and dropped wearily on the step of the porch. And then, as Markham went indoors in search of chairs, in a lower tone to Hermia, "With a person you have professed

to detest you seem to be getting on famously, my dear."

"One hardly quarrels with the individual who provides one with breakfast," she said coolly.

At the call of Salignac, the mechanic, Hermia followed the others down the slope to the machine, leaving the Countess and Markham alone.

"Well," Olga questioned, "what on earth are you doing here?"

He couldn't fail to note the air of proprietorship.

"What should I be doing?" and he made a gesture toward his idle easel.

"Why didn't you answer my letters?"

"I have never received them. No mail has been forwarded here."

"Oh!" And then: "I didn't know just what to think--unless that you had gone back to Normandy."

"I'm going next month. Meanwhile I rented Thimble Island--"

"I wrote you that I was coming here to 'Wake-Robin,' Miss Challoner's place," she said pettishly, "and that I was sure there would be one or two commissions for you in the neighborhood if you cared to come."

"It was very kind of you. I'm sorry. It's a little too late now. I'm due at Havre in August."

She made a gesture of mock helplessness.

"There. I thought so. My plans for you never seem to work out. It's really quite degrading the way I'm pursuing you. It almost seems as if you didn't want me"

He leaned over the back of her chair, his lips close to her ear. "You know better than that. But I'm such hopeless material to work with. These people, the kind of people one has to paint--they want lies. It gives me a diabolical pleasure to tell them the truth. I'll never succeed. O Madame! I'm afraid you'll have to give me up."

"And Hermia?" she asked.

He laughed.

"An _enfant terrible_! Has she no parent--or guardians? Do _you_ encourage this sort of thing?"

"I--_Dieu_! No! She will kill herself next. I have no influence. She does exactly as she pleases. Advice merely decides her to do the opposite thing."

"It's too bad. She's quite human."

"Oh."

The Countess Olga examined him through her long lashes.

"Are you alone here?"

"Yes. I'm camping."

"Ugh," she shuddered. "You had better come to 'Wake-Robin'."

"No."

She stamped her small foot.

"Oh, I've no patience with you."

"Besides, I haven't been asked," he added.

The others were not approaching and Markham straightened as Hermia came toward him.

"Olga, dear, we must be going. It's too bad to have spoiled your morning, Mr. Markham."

The obvious reply was so easy and so polite, but he scorned it.

"Oh, that doesn't matter," he said, "and I'm the gainer by a clean kitchen."

No flattery there. Hermia colored gently.

"I--I scrubbed his floor," she explained to Olga. "It was filthy."

The Countess Olga's eyes opened a trifle wider.

"I don't doubt it," she said, turning aside.

Miss Van Vorst in her role of ingénue by this time was prying about outside the bungalow, on the porch of which she espied Markham's unfinished sketch.

"A painting! May I look? It's all wet and sticky." She had turned it face outward and stood before it uttering childish panegyric. "Oh, it's too perfectly sweet for anything. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite so wonderful. Won't you explain it all to me, Mr. Markham?"

Markham good-humoredly took up the canvas.

"Very glad," he said, "only you've got it upside down."

In the pause which followed the laughter Salignac came up the slope and reported to Hermia that he had found nothing wrong with the engine and that the damaged wing could be repaired with a piece of wire.

Hermia's eyes sparkled. The time for her triumphant departure, it seemed, had only been delayed. "Good news," she said quietly. "In that case I intend flying back to 'Wake-Robin'."

A chorus of protests greeted her decision.

"You shan't, Hermia," shouted Reggie Armistead, "until either Salignac or I have tried it out."

"You will oblige me, Reggie," replied Hermia calmly, "by minding your own business."

"O Hermia, after falling this morning! How can you dare?" cried Miss Van Vorst, with a genteel shudder.

"_Si Mademoiselle me permettrait_--" began Salignac.

But she waved her hand in negation and indicated the wide lawn in front of the ruined buildings which sloped gently to the water's edge.

"Wheel it there, Salignac," in French, "and, Reggie, please go at once and help."

Armistead's boyish face turned toward her in admiration and in protest, but he followed Salignac without a word.

"It's folly, Hermia," added Hilda. "Something must be wrong with the thing. You remember just the other day--"

"I'm going, Hilda," imperturbably. "You can follow me in the launch."

Of Hermia's companions, Olga Tcherny alone said nothing. She had no humor to waste her breath. And Markham stood beside the group, his arms folded, his head bowed, listening. But when Hermia went into the cottage for her things he followed her.

"You're resolved?" he asked, helping her into her blouse.

"Well, rather."

"I wish I might persuade you--your nerves were--a little shaken this morning."

She paused in the act of putting on her gauntlets and held one small bare hand under his nose that he might see how steady it was. He grasped it in both of his own and then, with an impulse that he couldn't explain, kissed it again and again.

"Don't go, child," he whispered gently. "Not today."

She struggled to withdraw her hand, a warm flush stealing up her neck and temples.

"Let me go, Mr. Markham. Let me go."

He relinquished her and stood aside.

"As you please," he muttered. "I'm sorry--"

She turned, halfway to the door and examined his face.

"Sorry? For what?"

"That I haven't the authority to forbid you."

"_You?_" she laughed. "That is amusing."

"I would teach you some truths that you have never learned," he persisted, "the fatuity of mere bravado, the uses of life. You couldn't play with it if you knew something of its value--"

"The only value of life is in what you can get from it--"

"Or in what you can give from it--"

"Good-bye, Mr. Markham. I will join your school of philosophy another day. Meanwhile--" and she pointed her gauntleted hand toward the open doorway, "life shall pay me one more sensation."

He shrugged his shoulders and followed.

The machine was already on the lawn surrounded by Hermia's guests and preliminary experiments had proven that all was ready. Hermia climbed into the seat unaided, while Markham stood at one side and watched the propellers started. Faster and faster they flew, the machine held by

Armistead and the Frenchman, while Hermia sat looking straight before her down the lawn through the opening between the rocks which led to open water.

"_Au revoir_, my friends," she cried and gave the word, at which the men sprang clear, and amid cries of encouragement and congratulation the machine moved down the lawn, gathering momentum with every second, rising gracefully with its small burden just before it reached the water and soaring into the air. The people on the lawn watched for a moment and then with one accord rushed for the launch.

Olga Tcherny paused a moment, her hand on Markham's arm.

"You will come to 'Wake-Robin'?" she asked.

"I think not," he replied.

"Then I shall come to Thimble Island," she finished.

"I shall be charmed, of course."

She looked over her shoulder at him and laughed. He was watching the distant spot in the air.

"You're too polite to be quite natural."

"I didn't mean to be."

"Then don't let it happen again."

The voices of her companions were calling to her and she hastened her footsteps.

"_E bien_," she cried.

"_Au revoir_, Madame." He saw her hurried into the launch, which immediately got under way, its exhaust snorting furiously, and vanished around the point of rocks. In a moment there was nothing left of his visitors to Markham but the lapping of the waves from the launch upon the beach and the spot in the air which was not almost imperceptible.

He stood there until he could see it no more, when he turned and took his pipe thoughtfully from his trousers pocket and addressed it with conviction.

"Mad!" he muttered. "All--quite mad!"

CHAPTER VII

"WAKE ROBIN"

Markham climbed the hill slowly, pushing tobacco into his pipe. Once or twice he stopped and turned, looking out over the bay toward the distant launch. The a'roplane had vanished. When he reached the bungalow he dropped into a chair, his gaze on space, and smoked silently for many minutes.

Mad! Were they? Madness after all was merely a matter of relative mental attitudes. Doubtless he was as mad in the eyes of his visitors as they were to him. In his present mood he was almost ready to admit that the sanest philosophy of life was that which brought the greatest happiness. And sanity such as his own was only a sober kind of madness after all, a quiet mania which sought out the soul of things

and in the seeking fed itself upon the problems of the world, a diet which too much prolonged might lead to mental indigestion. Morbid--was he? Introspective? A "grouch"? He was--he must be--all of these things.

His small inquisitor had neglected none of his failings, had practiced her glib tongue at his expense in the few hours in which she had taken possession of Thimble Island and of him. What a child she was, how spoiled and how utterly irresponsible! He identified her completely now, Hermia Challoner, the sole heiress of all Peter Challoner's hard-gotten millions, the heiress, too, it was evident, of his attitude toward the world, the flesh and the devil; Peter Challoner, by profession banker and captain of industry, a man whose name was remembered the breadth of the land for his masterly manipulation of a continental railroad which eventually came under his control; an organizer of trusts, a patron saint of political lobbyists, a product of the worst and of the best of modern business! This girl who had fallen like a bright meteor across Markham's sober sky this morning was Peter Challoner's daughter. He remembered now the stories he had heard and read of her caprices, the races on the beach at Ormonde, her fearlessness in the hunting field and the woman's polo team she had organized at Cedarcroft which she had led against a team of men on a Southern field. It had all been in the newspapers and he had read of her with a growing distaste for the type of woman which American society made possible. Peter Challoner's daughter, the spoiled darling of money idolaters, scrubbing the floor of his kitchen!

As he sat looking out over the bay thinking of his visitor, a picture rose and wreathed itself amid the smoke of his tobacco--the vision of a little working girl in New York, a girl with tired eyes and a patient smile, with the faded hair and the faded skin which came from too few hours of recreation--from too many uninterrupted hours of plodding grind at the tasks her employers set for her, a girl who would have been as pretty as Hermia Challoner if her youth had only been given its chance. This was Dorothy Herick, whose father, a friend of Markham's father, had been swallowed up in one of the great industrial combinations which Peter Challoner had planned. Markham, who had been studying in Paris at the time, had forgotten the details of Oliver Herrick's downfall, but he remembered that the transaction which had brought it about had not even been broadly in accordance with the ethics of modern business, and that there had been something in the nature of sharp practice on Peter Challoner's part which had enabled him to obtain for his combination the mills in the Wyoming Valley which had been in the Herrick family for three generations.

Markham knew little of business and hated it cordially, but he had heard enough of this affair to be sure that, whatever the courts had decided, Oliver Herrick had been unfairly dealt with and that a part, at least, of Peter Challoner's fortune belonged morally, at least, to the inconsiderable mite of femininity who read proof in a publisher's office in New York. He knew something of the law of the survival of the fittest, for he himself had survived the long struggle for honors which had put him at last in a position where he felt secure at least from the pinch of poverty, and whatever Oliver Herrick's failings among the larger forces with which he had been brought into contact, Markham knew him to have been an honest man, a good father and a faithful gentleman. Something was wrong with a world which pinched the righteous between the grindstones of progress and let the evil prosper.

It was an unfairness which descended to the second generation and would descend through the years until the equalizing forces of character and will--or the lack of them--brought later generations to the same level of condition. Markham could not help comparing Hermia Challoner with her less fortunate sister--Hermia Challoner, the

courted, the fêted, who had but to wish for a thing to have it granted, with Dorothy Herrick, the neglected and forgotten, who was bartering her youth for twelve dollars a week and was glad to get the money; one, who boasted that the only value life had for her was what she could get out of it, with the other, who almost felt it a privilege to be permitted to live at all. The more he thought of these two girls, the more convincing was his belief that Miss Herrick did not suffer by the comparison. She was doing just what thousands of other girls were doing in New York, with no more patience and no more self-sacrifice than they, but the childish vagaries of his visitor, still fresh in his memory, seemed to endow Dorothy Herrick with a firmer contour, a stronger claim on his interest and sympathies.

And yet--this little madcap aviatrix disclosed a winning directness and simplicity which charmed and surprised him. She was a joyous soul. He could not remember a morning when he had been so completely abstracted from the usual current of thought and occupation as today, and whatever the faults bequeathed by her intrepid father, she was, as Markham had said to Olga, quite human. There were possibilities in the child--and it seemed a pity that no strong guiding hand led the way on a road like hers, which had so many turnings. She was only an overgrown child as yet, flat chested, slender, almost a boy, and yet redeemed to femininity by an unconscious coquetry which she could no more control than she could the warm flush of her blood; a child indeed, full of quick impulses for good or for evil.

Markham rose, knocked the ash out of his pipe, walked over to his canvas, set it up against the porch pillar and examined it leisurely. But in a moment he took it indoors and added it to the pile in the living-room, fetching a fresh canvas and carrying his easel and paint-box over the hill to another spot, a shady one among the rocks where he had already painted many times.

He worked a while and then sat and smoked again, his thoughts afar. What sort of an influence was Olga Tcherny for the mind of this impressionable child? The Countess was clever, generous and wonderfully attractive to men and to women but, as Markham knew, her views of life were liberal and she was not wise--at least, not with a wisdom which would help Hermia Challoner. One doesn't live for ten years in Paris in the set in which Markham had met her without absorbing something of its careless creed, its loose ethical and moral standards. New York society, he knew, reflected much that was bad, and much that was good of the gay worlds of Paris and London; for Americans are unexcelled in the talent of imitation, but from phrases that had passed Olga's lips he knew that she had outgrown her own country.

Markham tried to paint but things went wrong and so he gave it up, swearing silently at the interruption which had spoiled his day. After lunch he tried it again with no better success, and finally gave it up and, taking a book, went out on a point of rocks where the tide swirled and cast in a fishing line, not because he hoped to catch anything but because fishing, of all the resources available, had most surely the ways of peace. The book was a French treatise on the Marxian philosophies--dull reading for a summer's day when the water lapped merrily at one's feet, the breeze sighed softly, laden with the odors of the mysterious deeps, and sea and sky beckoned him invitingly into the realms of adventure and delight, so dull that, the fish biting not, Markham dozed, and at last rolled over in the sunlight and slept.

How long he lay there he did not know. He was awakened by the exhaust of a launch close at hand and sat up so quickly that "Karl Marx," rudely jostled by his elbow, went sliding over the edge of the rock and into the sea. But there was no time at present to bewail this

calamity for the man in the launch had brought her inshore and hailed him politely.

"Mr. Markham?" he questioned.

Markham nodded. "That's my name," he said.

"A note for you." The launch moved slowly in toward the landing and Markham met his visitor, already aware that there was to be a further intrusion on his solitude. He broke the seal of the note and read. It was from Hermia Challoner.

Dear Mr. Markham:

Life, as you see, has yielded me one more sensation without penalty. I am safe at home again, my philosophy triumphant over yours. There isn't a great deal of difference between them after all. You, too, take from life, Mr. Markham--you take what you need just as I do; but just because your needs differ from mine, manlike, you assume that I must be wrong. Perhaps I am. Then so must you, because you give less than I do.

There is but one way to justify yourself, and that is to give up what you are hoarding--what you prize most highly--your solitude. We want you at "Wake Robin," Mr. Markham. Will you come to dine and stay the night? By so doing you will at least show an amiable disposition, which is more to the point than all the philosophy in the world. We are very informal and dine at eight.

I am sure that if you disappoint us Madame Tcherny, who is already tired of us all, will perish of ennui.

Very cordially yours,
Hermia Challoner

Markham read the note through and turned toward the cabin for pen and paper.

"Will you moor the launch and come ashore?"

"Oh, no, sir," said the man, tinkering with the engine, "I'll wait for you here. Miss Challoner said that I was to wait."

When Markham reached the bungalow he remembered suddenly that he had no ink, pen--or indeed paper, and yet a verbal reply would hardly be courteous. He stood in the doorway puzzling a moment and then went over to a trunk in the corner, opened it and began pitching its contents about. He straightened at last, put some garments on the bed and looked at them with a ruminative eye.

"Oh, I had better go," he muttered, rubbing the roughness on his chin. "I owe it to Olga. But why the devil they can't leave a fellow alone--" and, fuming silently, he shaved, made a toilet, and packing some things in a much battered suit case made his way to the launch.

At the Westport landing he found the Countess Olga, wonderfully attired in an afternoon costume of pale green, awaiting him in a motor.

"There's a chance for you still, my friend," she laughed. "You have won my fond regard--and, incidentally, the cost of a new frock."

"I?"

"Yes. We laid a bet as to whether you would come, Hermia and I. We've been watching the island through the telescope, and saw you embark--so

to me--the victor, falls the honor of conducting you home in triumph."

"I'm to go in chains, it seems," he laughed, getting in beside her.
"I've rarely seen you looking so handsome."

"You're improving. It's joy, *_mon ami_*, at seeing once again a full grown man. I have been bored--oh, so bored! Will you be nice to me?"

The motor skimmed smoothly over the perfect roads, mounting the hills through the village and spinning along a turnpike flanked by summer residences. "Wake Robin" stood at some distance from the village on the highest point of the hills and made a very imposing vista from the driveway--an English house with long wings at either side, flanked by terraces, lawns and gardens, guarded from the intrusive eyes of the highway by a high privet hedge. The tennis courts seemed to be the center of interest and in a corner of the terrace which faced the bay were some people taking tea and watching a match of singles between Reggie Armistead and their hostess. The chauffeur took the suit case to the butler and Olga Tcherny led the way to the tea table where Phyllis Van Vorst was pouring tea. Beside her sat a tall handsome woman with a hard mouth, dressed in white linen and a picture hat, who ogled him tentatively through a lorgnon during the moment of introduction before permitting her face to relax into a smile of welcome.

"So glad," she purred at last, extending a long slim hand in Markham's direction. "Phyllis, do give Mr. Markham some tea."

"How d'ye do, Mr. Markham," chortled Miss Van Vorst. "I'm afraid you'll have to put up with the Philistines for a while. Hermia's beating Reggie Armistead at tennis, and it's as much as one's life is worth to interrupt."

"That's no joke," said Archie Westcott, who was watching the game. "Some tennis, that. They're one set all and Hermia just broke through Reggie's service. That makes it five four."

Markham, teacup in hand, followed the Countess to the balustrade and watched. One would never have supposed from the way she played that this girl had been up since dawn and suffered an accident which had temporarily incapacitated her. Youth was triumphant. Vigor, suppleness and grace marked every movement, the smashing overhand service, the cat-like spring to the net, the quick recovery, the long free swing of the volley from the back-court, all of which showed form of a high order. It was a man's tennis that the girl was playing and Reggie Armistead needed all his cleverness to hold her at even terms. It was an ancient grudge, Markham learned, and an even thing in the betting, but Armistead pulled through by good passing and made the sets deuce.

"Gad! It makes me hot to look at 'em!" said Crosby Downs, fingering at his collar band, his face brick-color from the day in the open. "Make 'em stop, somebody."

He dropped into a wicker chair and fanned vigorously with his hat.

"Lord! Golf is bad enough. Oh, what's the use," he sighed heavily.

"Been golfing, Crosby?" smiled the Countess.

"Oh, call it that if you like," he growled. "Rotten game, that. Doctor's orders. A hundred and ten to-day. Couldn't hit the earth even and there were acres of it."

"Living up to your reputation, Crosby," sneered Carol Gouverneur.

"_Sans putt et sans approach_?"

"You've struck it, young man. Sans anything, but that Weary Willie feelin' and a devourin' thirst. But I lost four pounds," he added more cheerfully--his fingers demonstrating in his waistband. "Oh, I'll put it on again to-night at dinner. Silly ass business--this runnin' around in the sun."

"Quite so," Olga agreed, "but everything we do is silly and asinine."

There was an outburst of applause from the others at a particularly brilliant shot below.

"By George!" cried Westcott, "she's got him. It's Hermia's vantage and forty-love. O Reggie! A love game, by Jiminy! Hermia, you've won me a cool hundred."

The game was over and the players shook hands before the net, Hermia laughing gaily, Armistead's eyes full of honest adoration. They were handsome children, those two.

Hermia climbed the steps slowly amid the congratulations of the guests and smiled as Markham came forward to meet her. She was rosy as a cherub, her bright hair tumbled beneath her crimson hair-band.

"Very good of you to come, Mr. Markham," she said breathlessly. "I had my eye in, and _couldn't_ stop. I simply had to beat Reggie, you know," And then as her responsibilities recurred to her, "you've met everybody? Mrs. Renshaw, Miss Coddington--Mr. Markham--the Hermit of Thimble Island."

With a laugh she led him away from the others and threw herself in a lounge chair and motioned him to a seat nearby.

"You see," she said gaily, "her I am--quite safe--and ready to mock at all seriousness--the grasshopper entertaining the ant. Do you think you can stand so much gayety, Mr. Markham?"

"Even an ant must have its moments of frivolity."

"You frivolous!" she smiled.

"I've always wanted to be. It's one of my secret longings. I was born old. Show me how to be young and I'll give you anything I possess."

"That's tempting. I think I'll begin at once."

He laughed. "At what?"

She scrutinized him from top to toe.

"Oh, at your goggles."

He fingered his glasses.

"These?"

She nodded.

He took them off and looked at them amusedly.

"That's the first step. You're ten years younger already," she said.

"Oh, am I?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it--when you don't frown."

"And next?"

"You must flirt, Mr. Markham--and make pretty speeches--"

"Pretty speeches!"

"Oh, yes--you must treat every woman as though you adored her secretly, and when ladies visit your studio you mustn't bang the door in their faces."

"Did I do that?"

"Er--figuratively, yes. You were very impolite." She lay back and laughed at him. "There--I feel better. Now we shall be good friends."

He fingered his goggles a moment, and then his eyes met hers in frank agreement.

"I'm glad of that," he said, with a slow smile. "I like you a great deal."

She straightened, her eyes sparkling merrily.

"You see? You're improving already. I have great hopes for you, Mr. Markham." She threw a glance at the others and rose. "Here endeth the first lesson. It is time to dress. We will resume after dinner. That is," she added, "if Olga will spare you for a few moments."

"Olga--Madame Tcherny won't mind in the least," he laughed. "If you can make me anybody but myself, she will thank you from the bottom of her heart. Madame Tcherny is already at the point of giving me up as a hopeless case."

"In what respect?"

"Oh, in all respects. I'm a great disappointment to her--" He stopped suddenly. "I mean socially--professionally. You see I'm not the stuff that successful portrait painters are made of--"

"Except perhaps that you really can paint?" she asked over her shoulder.

He shrugged and followed.

CHAPTER VIII

OLGA TCHERNY

As the guests gathered in the drawing-room and on the terrace before dinner it was apparent to Markham that, unless he obeyed the injunctions of his small preceptor, he would be quite forgotten amid this gay company. On Thimble Island, as in New York, he had not found them necessary to his own existence, and it was quite clear that here at "Wake-Robin" they returned his indifference. After the first nod and appraising glance in his direction, Crosby Downs and Carol Gouverneur had completely ignored him. Archie Westcott had unbent to the point of offering him a cigarette, and Trevvy Morehouse, who had joined them over the cocktails, and injected polite bromidics into the conversation which Reggie Armistead, who knew nothing of Markham's art and cared less, only saved by some wholesome enthusiasm, in which all joined, over the "sand" and all-around good fellowship of their hostess.

But it required little assurance to make one's self at home here where informality seemed to be the rule, and before Hermia and the Countess came down Markham found himself on easy terms with the group he had joined. Mrs. Renshaw's appraisal and patronizing air dismayed him less than the china blue eyes of Phyllis Van Vorst which she had raised with a pretty effectiveness to his; Hilda Ashhurst hadn't even taken the trouble to notice him. When Carol Gouverneur was in her neighborhood there were no other men in the world.

But Hermia took pains to make her guests aware of the status of Mr. Markham in her house by seating him on her right at dinner and paying him an assiduous attention which detracted something from Reggie Armistead's interest, as well as Olga's, in that repast.

With a carelessness which put him off his guard Hermia drew him into the general conversation, aroused his sense of humor, until with a story of an experience in France, which he told with a dry wit that well suited him, he found himself the center of interest at the head of the table.

Out on the terrace over the coffee and tobacco, the compound slowly resolved itself into its elements, social and sentimental. Markham, scarcely aware of the precise moment when she had appropriated him, found himself in the garden below the terrace with Olga Tcherny. The heavy odor of the roses was about them, unstirred by the land breeze which faintly sighed in the treetops. A warm moon hung over Thimble Island, its soft lights catching in the ornaments Markham's companion wore, caressing her white shoulders and dusky hair, and softening the shadows in her eyes which peered like those of a seer down the path of light where the moonbeams played upon the water.

He had always thought her handsome, but to-night she was a fragment of the night itself, with all its tenderness and its melancholy mystery. He watched her slender figure as she reached forward, plucked a rose and raised its petals to her lips--a full flown rose, wasting its last hours of loveliness. She fastened it in her corsage and led the way to a stone bench beneath an arbor at the end of the wall where she sat and motioned to the place beside her.

The accord which existed between these two was unusual because of the total difference in their points of view on life and the habits of thought which made each the negative pole of the other. However unusual Markham may have appeared to a person of Olga Tcherny's training, he was not an unusual young man in the ordinary sense. He had always taken life seriously, from the hour when as a clerk in a broker's office he had started to work at night at the League in New York, with the intention of becoming a painter. He was no more serious than thousands of other young men who plan their lives early and live them up to specifications; but Olga Tcherny, who had flitted a zig-zag butterfly course among the exotics, now found in the meadows she had scorned a shrub quite to her liking. Markham was the most refreshingly original person she had ever met. He always said exactly what he thought and refused to speak at all unless he had something to say. Those hours in the studio when he had painted her portrait had been hours to remember, sound, sane hours in which they had discussed many things not comprehended in her philosophy, when he had led her by easy stages up the steep path he had climbed until she had gained, from the pinnacle of his successes, a vista of what had lain beneath. Unconsciously he had drawn upon her mentality until, surprised at its own existence, it had awakened to life and responded to his. To make her mental subjection the more complete, he had in his simplicity peered like a child through all her disguises and painted her soul as he saw it--as it was. The flattery was the more effectual because of its subtlety and because she knew, as he did, that in it there was no guile, no self-interest or sentimentality. And in return she could

have paid him no higher compliment than when coolly, almost coldly, she told him of her life and what she had made of it.

She was very winning to-night--very gentle and womanly--more English than French or Russian, more American than either. Neither of them spoke for a long while. Such words as they could speak would have taken something from the perfection of their background. But Markham thought of her as he had frequently done, thankful again for the benefits of her regard, the genuineness of which she had brought home to him in many material ways.

To Olga alone there was a peril in the silence, a peril for the sanity he had taught her, for the pact which she had made with herself. She had eaten the bread and salt of his friendship and had given him hers. He believed in her and she could not deceive him. She knew his nature well. She had not been a student of men all her life for nothing. It would have been so easy to lie to him, to befuddle and bewitch him, to bring him to her feet by unfair means. But she had scorned to use them. For her, John Markham had been taboo. But there was peril in the silence. She sat looking into the wake of the moon in the water, very quiet, tense and almost breathless.

"You're glad you came?" she asked at last in the tones of matter and fact.

"Yes, I am. You've been too kind and patient with me, Olga."

He laid his hand over hers with a genuine impulse. It did not move beneath his touch or return his pressure.

"Yes," she said coolly, "I think I have."

"Have I offended you?"

"No. Not at all--only disappointed me a little. I had such nice plans for you."

He laughed.

"Olga, you're the most wonderful woman in the world. I don't deserve your friendship. But I did want to loaf--I worked pretty hard last winter."

"Oh, you needn't evade me. I can't make you like my friends. But I hoped you wouldn't disappoint them. Mrs. Berkley Hammond, the Gormeley twins, and now Hermia--"

"Miss Challoner!" in surprise. "Her portrait! I thought she disapproved of my method."

She smiled. "Oh, you don't know Hermia as I do. One is never more certain in one's judgment of her than when one thinks one is wrong." She gave a short laugh. "At any rate, she said she was going to speak to you about it."

"That's curious," he muttered.

"Will you do it?" she asked.

He looked away toward the terrace.

"I hadn't planned to do any portraits until Fall."

"Doesn't she interest you?" she continued quickly.

"She's paintable--it would be profitable, of course--"

"You're evading again."

"Yes, she interests me," he said frankly. "She's clever, amiable, hospitable--and quite irresponsible. But then she would want to be 'pretty.' I'm afraid I should only make her childish."

"Oh, she's prepared for the worst. You had better paint her. It will do you a lot of good. Besides, you paint better when you're a little contemptuous."

"I'm not sure that I could take that attitude toward Miss Challoner," he said slowly. "She's too good for the crowd she runs with, that's sure, and--"

"Thanks," laughed Olga. "You always had a neat turn for flattery."

But he didn't laugh.

"I mean it," he went on warmly. "She's too good for them--and so are you. Mrs. Renshaw, a woman notorious even in New York, who at the age of thirty has already changed husbands three times, drained them and thrown them aside as one would a rotten orange; Hilda Ashhurst who plays cards for a living and knows how to win; Crosby Downs, a merciless voluptuary who makes a god of his belly; Archie Westcott, the man Friday of every Western millionaire with social ambitions who comes to New York--a man who lives by his social connections, his wits and his looks; Carol Gouverneur, _his_ history needn't be repeated--"

"Nor mine--" finished Olga quietly, "you needn't go on." The calmness of her tone only brought its bitterness into higher relief. Markham stopped, turned and caught both her hands in his.

"No, not yours, Olga. God knows I didn't mean _that_. You're not their kind, soulless, cynical, selfish and narrow social parasite who poison what they fee don and live in the idleness that better men and women have bought for them. Call them your crowd if you like. I know better. You've only taken people as you've found them--taken life as it was planned for you--moved along the line of least resistance because you'd never been taught that there was any other way to go. In Europe you never had a chance to learn--"

"That's it," she broke in passionately, "I never had a chance--not a chance."

Her fingers clutched his and then quickly released them.

"Oh, what's the use?" she went on in a stifled tone. "Why couldn't you have let me live on, steeped in my folly? It's too late for me to change. I can't. I'm pledged. If I gamble, keep late hours, and do all the things that this set does it's because if I didn't I should die of thinking. What does it matter to any one but me?"

She stopped and rose with a sudden gesture of anger.

"Don't preach, John. I'm not in the humor for it--not to-night--do you hear?"

He looked up at her in surprise. One of her hands was clenched on the balustrade and her dark eyes regarded him scornfully.

"I've made you angry? I'm sorry," he said.

The tense lines of her figure suddenly relaxed as she leaned against

the pergola and then laughed up at the sky.

"Would you preach to the stars, John Markham? They're a merry congregation. They're laughing at you--as I am. A sermon by moonlight with only the stars and a scoffer to listen!"

Her mockery astonished and bewildered him. His indictment of those with whom she affiliated was no new thing in their conversations, and he knew that what he had said was true.

"I'm sorry I spoke," he muttered.

She laughed at him again and threw out her arms toward the moonlit sea.

"What a night for the moralities--for the ashes of repentance! I ask a man into the rose-garden to make love to me and he preaches to me instead--_preaches to me_! of the world, the flesh and the devil, _par exemple_! Was ever a pretty woman in a more humiliating position!"

She approached him again and leaned over him, the strands of her hair brushing his temples, her voice whispering mockingly just at his ear.

"Oh, la la! You make such a pretty lover, John. If I could only paint you in your sackcloth and ashes, I should die in content. What is it like, _mon ami_, to feel like moralizing in a rose-garden by moonlight? What do they tell you--the roses? Of the dull earth from which they come? Don't they whisper of the kisses of the night winds, of the drinking of the dew--of the mad joy of living--the sweetness of dying? Or don't they say anything to you at all--except that they are merely roses, John?"

She brushed the blossom in her fingers lightly across his lips and sprang away from him. But it was too late. She had gone too far and she realized it in a moment; for thought she eluded him once, he caught her in his arms and kissed her roughly on the lips.

"You'd mock at me, would you?" he cried.

She struggled in his arms and then lay inert. She deserved this revenge she knew, but not the carelessness of these kisses of retribution, each of them merciless with the burden of her awakening.

"Let me go, John," she said faintly. "You must not--"

"Not yet. I'm no man of stone. Can you scoff now?"

"No, no. Let me go. I've paid you well and you--O God! you've paid me, too. Let me go."

"Not until you kiss me."

"No--not that."

"Why?" he whispered.

"No--never that! Oh, the damage you have done!"

"I'll repair it--"

"No. You can't bring the dead to life----our friendship----it was so clean----Let me go, do you hear?"

But he only laughed at her.

"You'll kiss me--"

"Never!"

"You shall--"

"Never!"

He raised her face to his. She quivered under his touch, but her lips were insensate, and upon his hand a drop of moisture fell--a tear limpid, pure from the hidden springs of the spirit. He kissed its piteous course upon her cheek.

"Olga!" he whispered softly. "What have I done?"

"Killed something in me--I think--something gentle and noble that was trying so hard to live--"

"Forgive me," he stammered. "I didn't know you cared so much."

She started in his arms, then slowly released herself, and drew away while with an anxious gaze he followed her.

"Our friendship--I cared for that more than anything else in the world," she said simply.

"It shall be stronger," he began.

"No--friendship does not thrive on kisses."

"Love--" he began. But her quick gesture silenced him.

"Love, boy! What can you know of love!"

"Nothing. Teach me!"

She looked up into his face, her hands upon his shoulders holding him at arm's length, flushed with her empty victory--ice-cold with self contempt at the means she had used to accomplish it. Another man--a man of her own world--would have played the game as she had played it, mistrusting the tokens she had shown and taking her coquetry at its worldly value; would have kissed and perhaps forgotten the next morning. But as she looked in Markham's eyes she saw with dismay that he still read her heart correctly and that the pact of truthfulness which neither of them had broken was considered a pact between them still. Her gaze fell before his and she turned away, sure now that for the sake of her pride she must deceive him.

"No, I can teach you nothing, it seems, except, perhaps, that you should not make the arms of your lady black and blue. Love is a zephyr, *_mon ami_*, not a tornado."

He stared at her, bewildered by the sudden transformation.

"I--I kissed you," he said stupidly. "You wanted me to."

"Did I?" she taunted him. "Who knows? If I did"--examining her wrist--"I have now every reason to regret it."

He stood peering down at her from his great height, his thoughts tumbling into words.

"Don't lie to me, Olga. You were not content with friendship. No woman ever is. You wanted me to do--what I have done."

"Perhaps," she admitted calmly, "but not the way you did it. Kissing

should be done upon the soft pedal _mon ami, adagio, con amore_. Your technique is rusty. Is it a wonder that I am disappointed?"

She was mocking him again, but this time he was not deceived.

"Perhaps I will improve with practice," he muttered.

He would have seized her again but she eluded him, laughing.

"Thank you, no--" she cried.

He went toward her again, but she sprang behind the bench, Markham following, both intent upon their game. He had seized her again when suddenly over their very heads there was a sound of feminine laughter among the vines from which there immediately emerged a white satin slipper, a slender white ankle, followed quickly by another--draperies, and at last Hermia Challoner, who, swinging for a moment by her hands, dropped breathlessly upon the bench between them. Markham, whose nose had been narrowly missed by the flying slippers, drew back in astonishment.

"Hello!" panted Hermia, laughing. "Reggie was chasing me, so I slipped over the balustrade onto the pergola--" She stopped and looked with quick intuition from one to the other. "Sorry I blunder'd in here, though, Olga--awfully sorry. Did I kick you in the nose, Mr. Markham?"

CHAPTER IX

OUT OF HIS DEPTH

Markham stammered something, but Olga was laughing softly. "Hermia, darling, you always do go into things feet first, but it's perilous in French heels. Mr. Markham and I were just trying to decide whether this stone bench wouldn't be just the place to do your portrait. If you'll observe--"

The situation was so palpable. Hermia looked from one to the other amusedly. Markham was following Olga's artistic dissertation with the eye of dubiety, but their hostess was merciless.

"Olga, dear," she inquired sweetly, "did you know your back hair was down?"

"Oh, is it? How provoking! Georgette is positively worthless!"

Even Olga's resourcefulness was not proof against Hermia's persistent audacity, especially as she was aware of a smudge of face-powder on John Markham's coat lapel which could not have been attributed by any chance to the deficiencies of her unlucky maid.

"Poor Georgette!" said Hermia softly, watching Olga's fingers quickly twist the erring strand into place.

At this moment there was a sound of footsteps on the walk and Reggie Armistead, who, like an ubiquitous terrier, had at last found the scent, came down the arbor on the run with Trevvy Morehouse after him, a poor second, and emerged upon the scene.

"You're mine--" cried Reggie triumphantly. "I win!" He moved forward and would have caught Hermia around the waist, but she dodged him.

"Reggie," she cried, "how dare you!"

"Oh, don't mind us," laughed Olga.

"I don't--" he said stoutly. "But I got here first, Olga, didn't I?"

"You surely did--"

"I'm glad to have witnesses. Hermia's dreadfully slippery, you know."

Olga, who had dropped into a corner of the stone bench, looked up languidly.

"Would you mind telling us what it all means?" she asked.

Hermia laughed. "May I, Trevvy?"

The excellent Trevelyan smiled politely and shrugged his shoulders.

"By all means--since I have no further interest in the matter."

"It's too amusing. They were to give me ten minutes' start from the house--the two of them. Oh, what a lark!" she laughed. "I made for the Maze, while they watched me from the drawing-room windows; but instead of going in, I skirted the edge and crept through the bushes on the other side. By the time they had reached the privet hedge, I had gone through the house from the kitchen to the terrace again, where I sat for ten minutes entirely alone laughing and watching those geese chasing each other around in the moonlight. I've never had such fun since I was _born_."

"Geese! Oh, I say, Hermia!"

"Then Reggie came out sniffing the breeze and I had to run for cover, so I slipped over the balustrade to the pergola, down which I crept on my hands and knees and dropped through--and here I am," she concluded.

"But what is it all about?" asked Olga again.

"It means that Hermia is mine--for a month," said Reggie, glowing. "She promised--you couldn't go back on that, Hermia. Could she, Olga?" he appealed.

"I'm sure I don't know. Do you mean _engaged_ to you?" she asked curiously.

"Yes--for a month," said Reggie. "The idea was to try and see if she really could like either of us well enough to--"

"I didn't really promise anything," Hermia broke in, severely. "I merely agreed--"

"She did, Olga," he insisted. "I knew she'd be trying to wriggle."

Olga was laughing silently.

"You're admirably suited to each other, you two. You're actually quarreling already."

"We always do--"

"Then marry at once, my dears."

Hermia glanced at Markham, who was leaning over the back of the bench watching the scene with alien eyes. She turned toward Armistead frankly with an extended hand, which he promptly seized.

"You are a nice boy, Reggie. I'll try it. But you'll have to promise--"

"Oh, I'll promise anything," cried Reggie rapturously.

The excellent Trevelyan watched them a moment in silence, and then lighting his cigarette slowly wandered away.

Hermia and Armistead followed hand in hand, but not before Hermia had turned her head over her shoulder and whispered mischievously to Olga:

"You can sit as many risks as you run, Olga, darling."

In the moments which had passed during this interesting revelation Olga Tcherny had been thinking--desperately. The taste of life had never been so sweet in her mouth--nor so bitter. With the departure of the trio Markham had not moved, but his eyes followed the two figures through the rose garden. The moon was suddenly snuffed out and the sea grew lead-color--like a passion that has gone stale. Markham's silhouette loomed monstrous against the sky, and the silence was abruptly broken by the rough laughter of Crosby Downs from somewhere in the distance. Olga shivered and rose.

"Come," she said, "let's follow."

Markham straightened slowly and stood before her, one hand on her arm.

"Olga," he said quietly.

She paused, but she didn't look up at him, and gently she took his fingers from her arm.

"It's a pity--" he stopped again. "What you said was true. You--and I--one of us has killed the old relation between us."

"Yes," she murmured.

"Can we forget--to-night--"

"No, no," she said. "Never. I know."

"Will you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive."

He shook his head.

"Nothing to forgive if you were only amusing yourself--much to forgive if you really care"

His ingenuousness was alarming.

"Par exemple!" She bantered him. "You mean that I--that I love you?"

"Yes, I mean just that."

She took quick refuge in laughter.

"You are the most surprising creature! Much as I esteem, I cannot flatter you so much as that." And she drew away from him, still laughing softly.

"I have done you a wrong," he went on steadily.

His simplicity was heroic. She did not dare question him.

"You have a New England conscience, *_mon ami_*," she said, gently ironical. "Your code is meshed in the cobwebs of antiquity. One kisses in the moonlight--or one doesn't kiss. What is the difference? It is a pastime--not a tragedy. *_Je M'amusais_*. I fished for minnows and caught a Tartar--*_voilà tout_*. I love you--I do love you--but only when you paint, *_monsieur l'artiste_*--then you are magnificent--a companion to the gods! When you kiss-- Oh, la la! You are--er--paleozoic!"

It was Olga's master stroke. She could parry no longer and must thrust if she would survive. The tenderness that this *gaucherie* aroused in her made her the more merciless in her mockery! And she was aware of a throb of exaltation as she made the sacrifice which prevented the declaration that was hanging on his lips. In making a fool of him again she was saving him from making a fool of himself. Markham did not reply and only stood there gnawing at his lips. He was no squire of dames he knew, and what she said of him touched him on the raw of his self-esteem. Paleozoic he might be, but it stung him that she should tell him so.

She delivered his *_coup de grace_* unerringly.

"Take my advice and let love-making alone, or if you must make love, do it as other gods do--my messenger. Otherwise your Elysian dignity is in jeopardy. You are not the kind of man that women love, *_mon cher_*. Come, it is time that we joined the others."

She led him down the avenue of roses, every line of her graceful figure rebuking his insufficiency, and he followed dumbly, aware of it.

Upon the terrace occupied by couples intent upon private matters, she promptly deserted him, leaving him without a word to his own devices. He stood for a moment of uncertainty, and then fumbling in his pocket for his pipe, which was not there, went into the smoking-room in search of a cigarette.

"Two spades," declared Archie Westcott at the auction table, and then when Markham went out, "Odd fish--that."

"Three hearts," said Mrs. Renshaw. "Why Hermia asks such people I can't imagine. You're never certain whom you're asked to meet nowadays. Prig, isn't he?"

"Oh, rather! Has ideals, and all that sort of thing, hasn't he, Hilda?"

"If his ideals are as rotten as his manners I can't say much for 'em."

"Olga likes him--"

"Oh, Olga--" sniffed Hilda. "Anything for a new sensation. Remember that queer little French marquis who trailed around after her at Monte Carlo?"

"Oh, play ball," growled Gouverneur. "Who cares--so long as he keeps out of here."

Unaware of these unflattering comments, Markham strolled out of doors and into a lonely armchair on the terrace, and smoked in solitary dignity. Indeed solitude seemed to be the only thing left to him. He was not a man who made friends rapidly, and the three or four people whom he might have cared to cultivate had other fish to fry to-night--and were not frying them on the terrace. Olga, it seemed, had no intention of returning and Hermia Challoner was doubtless

already in that happy phase of experimentation so warmly advocated by Reggie Armistead.

He envied those two young people their carelessness, their grace, their ruddy delights which by contrast added conviction to Olga's indictment of him. He tried with some difficulty to analyze the precise nature of his sentiments toward Olga Tcherny, and found at the end of a quarter of an hour, to his surprise, that the only feeling of which he was conscious was one of dull resentment at her for having made a fool of him.

Whatever Markham the painter had accomplished in the delineation of character of the fashionable women he had painted, the truth was that Markham both feared and misunderstood them. Their changing moods, their unaccountable likes and dislikes, their petty ambitions and vanities he accepted as part of the heritage of a race of beings apart from his own, and he hid his timidity under a brusque manner which gave him credit for a keener penetration than he actually possessed. And, strangely enough, Fate, with sardonic humor, had given him a knack, which so few painters possess, of catching on canvas the elusive charm of his feminine sitters, of investing with grace those characteristics he professed so much to despise. He had told Hermia Challoner that he did not paint "pretty" portraits, but as Olga knew, it was upon his delineation of beauty, his manipulation of dainty draperies, the sheen of silk and satin, that his reputation so securely rested. It was perhaps merely a contemptuous cleverness which had given him the name among his craft of being a "master brushman."

Into Olga Tcherny's portrait he had put something more of his sitter than usual. He had painted the soul of the girl in the body of the woman of thirty, and if he rendered his subject in a manner more stilted than usual, he repaid her in the real interest with which her portrait was invested. He liked Olga. He had accepted her warily at first until he had proved to his own satisfaction the disinterestedness of her regard and then he had given her his friendship without reserve, his first real friendship with a woman of the world, conscious of the charm of their relation from which all sentiment had been banished.

He had awakened rudely to-night. He was now aware that sentiment on Olga's part had never been banished nor could ever be banished with a woman of her type. He had made the mistake of judging her by the records of their friendship, unmindful of her history as to which he had been forewarned.

To-night the secret was out. The feminine in her had been triumphant. He was a different kind of fish from any she had caught and for reasons of her own she wanted him. She had been playing him skillfully for months, giving him all the line in her reel that he might be hooked the more easily. And to what end? Their friendship had fallen into shreds. What was to follow?

Of one thing he was certain. He was learning something, also progressing. In the twelve hours that had passed he had kissed two women—something of a record for a man of his prejudices. He rose and threw the unsatisfactory cigarette into the bushes. It was high time he was making his way back to Thimble Island and solitude.

There was a rustle of silk behind him, and he turned.

"Oh, do stay, Mr. Markham. I was just coming out to talk to you."

He greeted Hermia with delight, quickly responding to the charm of her juvenility.

"I was wondering if I would see you again," he said genuinely.

"You see," she laughed, "I don't always pop in feet first." She sat and examined him curiously, and then, after a pause.

"What a fraud you are, Mr. Markham!"

"I?"

"A deep-dyed hypocrite--I can't see how you can dare look me in the face--"

"But I can--and I find it very pleasant."

"Oh--shame! To take advantage of my childish credulity--my trusting innocence. You make me believe you to be a fossilized pedant--a philosopher prematurely aged--willing to barter your hope of salvation for a draught of the Fountain of Youth--and I find you making love to my chaperon and most distinguished woman guest! And I was actually offering to teach you! Aren't you a little ashamed of yourself?"

"No, I think not," he said slowly. "You know Madame Tcherny is a very old friend of mine."

"So she is of mine. She's a perfectly adorable chaperon--but then there are limits even to the indiscretions of a chaperon."

"Do you think it quite fair to Olga--" he began.

She leaned back in her chair and smiled at him mischievously.

"Oh, Olga is quite capable of taking care of herself. It isn't Olga I'm thinking about at all. It's you, my poor friend. Did you know that Olga has the reputation of being quite the most dangerous woman in Europe?"

"All women are dangerous. Fortunately I'm not the kind of man such women find interesting."

"I'm not sure that I know just what kind of a man you are, Mr. Markham. In your studio I inclined to the opinion that you had most of the characteristics of an amiable gorilla; on Thimble Island you seemed like Diogenes--without the tub; to-night you're Lothario, Bluebeard, and Lancelot--all in one."

"I'm afraid you flatter me. First impressions are usually correct, I think. I'm an amiable gorilla. Perhaps by the time you visit my studio again, I may have reached the next link in the chain to the human." He laughed and then quickly turned the conversation to a topic less personal. "You will visit my studio next winter, won't you?"

"Of course. You're to do my portrait, you know? But I was hoping that you might stay on and paint it here at 'Wake-Robin!'"

He looked off toward Thimble Island a moment before replying.

"I'm sorry I can't. I have some engagements in New York and my passage is booked for Europe early in the month. I leave Thimble Island almost at once."

"Oh, that's unkind of you. Don't you find it sufficiently attractive here?"

"Yes, I do. Unfortunately, I can't consult my own wishes in the

matter."

She had been examining him narrowly.

"You don't want to stay, Mr. Markham," she announced, decisively.

He looked her in the eyes, but made no reply.

"We're not your sort, I know. But I thought that with Olga here--"

"It has been very pleasant. I am glad to have had the privilege--"

"Don't, Mr. Markham. The truth is," she went on, "that you came here because you thought you ought to be polite. You go because you think you have been quite polite enough. Isn't that true?"

"Figuratively, yes," he replied frankly. "I'm not gregarious by instinct. I can't help it. I suppose I'm just unsociable, that's all."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry," she said, rising. "If you _won't_ stay--shall I see you again?"

"I think not. I'm leaving early."

"Oh," with a stamp of her foot. "I have no patience with you!"

"You see," he shrugged, "I don't wear well."

They reached the hall and she gave him her fingers.

"I wish you all the happiness in the world," he said quietly. She glanced at him quickly.

"I'm always happy. You mean--"

"Your engagement to Mr. Armistead."

Her lips curved demurely.

"Oh, of course--Reggie and I will get along--we'll manage somehow--but a month is a long while--"

"But life is a longer while--"

"Yes--it is--too long--"

There was a note in her voice he had not heard before. He glanced at her inquisitively, but she went up the steps, one hand extended over the baluster to his, laughing mischievously. "Good night, Mr. Markham. Thanks for the breakfast--and the philosophy. But please remember that people who love in glass houses--shouldn't cast aspersions."

CHAPTER X

THE FUGITIVE

Like the skillful general who covers his retreat by an unexpected show of strength, Olga Tcherny had retired in good order, with colors flying. She had struck hard, spent some ammunition and endangered her line of communications, but she had reached the cover of the tall timbers, where for the moment it was safe to go into camp, repair damages and take account of injuries.

At the beginning of their acquaintance her interest in Markham had not been unlike that of the motherly hen in the doings of the newly hatched duckling with which she differed as to the practical utility of duckponds. She had been intensely interested in his work and in his career which during the winter in Paris had been definitely shaped as a painter of successful portraits. She had liked the man from the first, liked him well enough to be as genuine as he was, and found delight in a companionship which led her down pleasant lanes of thought--which terminated, as they had begun, in quiet satisfaction. He neither lied to her nor flattered her; his speech had the simple directness of a child's, and while she frequently reproved him for his rusticity, in secret she adored it. She had been used all her life to the polish of Europe, satiated with its compliments, glutted with its hypocrisy, courted by men with manner and no manners, whom she had met with their own weapons. She had never known a real friendship in man--or woman--had not even sought friendship, because life had taught her that, for her, such things did not exist. In Markham she had found the myth without searching, and once found she had grappled it to her soul with hoops of steel. His friendship it was that she had loved--not Markham. He was her own discovery, her very own, and she followed her first sober impulse, calmly, giving him the best of her, scorning the arts which she had been accustomed to employ on other men with so much success.

A born coquette is much like the hunter who hunts for the love of hunting and has no appetite for game upon his own table. Olga Tcherny had hunted in all the covers of sportive Europe with an appetite which always ended with the chase. Markham had not been marked as game. He was simply a delicious accident and she had accepted him as such, grateful for the new appetite which was as healthy as it was unusual.

But it was very natural that his indifference should pique her vanity. Markham did not care for women. That was all the more a reason why he should learn to care for her. The love of being loved was habit, ingrained, and she could not dismiss it with a word. But she gave him her friendship, and having given it would not recant from her secret vow to be honest with it and with him.

There had been moments of uncertainty, moments of ennui, but never of danger--until to-night, when she had fallen from grace and yielded to an impulse, once ignoble, but now ignoble no longer, to bring Markham at all hazards to her feet. It was no longer their friendship that she loved, but Markham. She loved fervently as coquettes will at last, placing in one ship the cargo that had fared forth in so many vessels. It was the coquette in her that had mocked and tantalized him, the coquette even whom he had kissed--but it was the woman who had struck and now suffered the pains of her imprudence.

Olga dismissed the unfortunate Georgette when she came to brush her hair and threw herself on the bed, both hands supporting her chin, staring at vacancy. He had guessed the truth--the agony of it! She had wept--real tears, the tears of subjection. She had begun--a coquette, trusting to her skill in dissimulation, but her heart had betrayed her. She had wept and Markham had seen her tears. Even a less sophisticated man than he would have known that women of her type only weep when they are stirred to the lees. Had she deceived him in the end? The doubt still assailed her. She had cut him deeply, hurt his amour propre and left him scowling in Arcadian resentment. Would the lesson last? Or must she seek further means to convince him of her indifference? Why had she provoked him? A whim--the dormant devil in her--to whom her better self must now pay in the loss of his friendship.

The old relation between them was dead. She had nailed it in its coffin. He did not love her, but she knew, that had she wished, she

could have made him think he was, coaxed lies from his lips which both of them would have lived to regret.

The future? Had she one? Happiness? It must come soon. She had reached the beginning of wrinkles and cheekbones and her wrists were squarer than they used to be. Thirty!--a year older than Markham! Roses grown in hothouses are quick to fade. Would she fade, too, quickly?

She went to the dressing-table and examined her face in a hand-mirror with assiduous care. Yes, crow's feet--three of them at each eye, and two tiny wrinkles leading into her dimples. She was positively haggard to-night. It did not do for the woman of thirty to cry. Her hair--another gray one--she plucked it out viciously. She would not grow old. Age was a disease which could be prevented by the use of proper precautions. She must stop playing cards so late, get up earlier, take long walks in the air, play tennis as Hermia did--

She put the mirror down and lay back in her chair, her gaze fixed upon the wall beside her which bore a photograph of her young hostess astride her favorite hunter. Hermia's youth and her own knowledge of the world--what would she not give for that indomitable combination! She was glad in a way that Markham had decided to postpone the painting of Hermia's portrait. She wasn't quite certain about Hermia. It was never wise to be certain about any girl--especially if that girl was seven years younger than you were and quite as pretty. And what on earth did Hermia mean by scrubbing John Markham's floor? In her present mood it seemed a symbol--was it prophetic? Markham was candid in his likes and dislikes and he made no bones now of the pleasure in Hermia's society. Hermia was a surprising person. Her love of mischief was increasing with her years, her capacity for making it only limited by the end of opportunity.

She was not surprised when she came downstairs rather late the next morning to learn that Markham had returned to the island. This meant that he was still angry--which was healthful. She needed a little time for reconstruction, too, and Markham's anger was a more pleasant thought for contemplation than his repentance, apology or sentiment, all of which he would have offered as sops to her pride, and none of which could have been genuine. His departure without seeing her meant that he had believed her spoken word rather than that which had been written in silence, the testimony of her drooping figure and her unlucky tears.

A walk refreshed her. By the time she returned to "Wake-Robin" all doubts had been cleared from her mind. She would wait. He would come to her. Time would mend his wounds.

On the way to the house she passed the hangar where her hostess, Reggie Armistead and Salignac were tinkering with the machines. She stopped and watched them for a moment, when Hermia joined her and they walked toward the house together.

"I'm awfully sorry, Olga--" Hermia paused.

"About what?"

"Last night. How could I have known that the pergola was occupied!"

"Oh, it didn't matter in the least," she said coolly. "Markham was making love to me, that's all. Pity--isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Hermia slowly, "a great pity--you're no respecter of persons, Olga."

Olga shrugged effectively.

"How should I have known?"

"You have had time enough to study him, I should say. Why couldn't you let him be? When there are so many other men--"

"Hear the child! One might think that I had brought him to my knees, malice propense. I didn't. Mon Dieu, one can't always prevent the unexpected."

Hermia laughed dryly. "One doesn't plan the unexpected quite so carefully as you do, Olga, dear."

It was beneath Olga's dignity to reply.

"At any rate," continued Hermia, "you've driven him away from 'Wake-Robin'."

"Oh, he'll come back," said Olga lightly.
"Do you think so?"

"Of course."

"We shall see," said the girl.

At the end of three days the Countess Olga realized that for the first time in her life she had made a mistake in judgment; for Mr. Markham did not return to "Wake-Robin." And when she went to the island in the launch to make her peace with him she found the cabin deserted.

It was not until some days later that she received a letter from him dated in New York, and sent on the eve of his sailing for Europe.

My Dear Olga:

It is to laugh! But you can be sure that I was angry for a day or two. What is the use? I have forgotten my misadventure and will consider it a warning against rose gardens. I'll not venture into a rose garden by moonlight again unless quite alone. It's dangerous--even with a sworn friend. It wasn't altogether your fault or mine, and you served me quite properly in cutting my self-esteem to ribbons. But it hurt, Olga. You know the least of us mortals thinks he's a heart-breaker, if he tries to be. You've put me back upon my shelf among the cobwebs and there I shall remain. I'm hopeless material to work with socially and deserve no better fate than to be laid away and forgotten. People must take me as I am or not at all. I don't mind rubbing elbows with the great unwashed. They're human somehow. But your world of dissatisfied women and unsatisfied men! It gets on my nerves, and so I've cut it and run.

I'm painting an antiquated countess in Havre, and then I'm off for the open country with a thumb box, a toothbrush and a smile, and with this equipment I have all that the world can offer. I shall live upon the fat of the land at forty sous a day--ripaille--under the trees--a sound red wine to wash the dust from one's throat--and an appetite and a thirst such as Westport will never know.

Au revoir, chere Olga. I could wish you with me, but I shall be many honest kilometers from a limousine, which is not your idea of a state of being.

With affectionate regards,

Faithfully,
J.M.

In the same mail was a note to Hermia:

My Dear Miss Challoner:

Your kindness deserves a better return than my abrupt and rather churlish departure from "Wake Robin," and, if it isn't already too late to restore myself to your graces, I hope you will accept my regrets and apologies, and the sketch from Thimble Island, which goes to you by express. I hope you will like it. I do. That's why I've giving it to you. But it's hardly complete without the wrecked monoplane and the small person who came with it. Perhaps some day you'll "drop in" on me again somewhere and I can finish it. Meanwhile please think seriously about the portrait. I don't believe I'm just the man to do it. I can't seem to see you somehow. My business is to portray the social anachronism. That is easy--a matter of clothes. But how shall a mere mortal define in terms of paint the dwellers of the air? You have me guessing, dear lady. Imagine Ariel in the conventional broadcloth of commerce. It's preposterous. I can't lend myself to any such deception.

The rest of the letter was more formal and finished with a message of congratulation to Mr. Armistead and a word of thanks for her own hospitality. And he hoped to remain very cordially "John Markham."

Hermia smiled as she finished it and then read it over again. The letter with its mixture of the formal and whimsical both pleased and reassured her. It represented more the Markham of Thimble Island, a person whose identity had lost something of its definiteness since her talks with Olga in the days that had followed his departure from "Wake-Robin." She had been aware of a sense of doubt and disappointment in him and she had not been quite so sure that she liked him now. Of course, if he chose to make a fool of himself over Olga it was none of her affair, and she had been obliged to admit that her discovery had taken from him some of the charm of originality. She did not know what had passed between her guests before her abrupt descent through the pergola, but she was quite certain she had fallen into the middle of a psychological moment. Whose moment was it, Olga's or his? She couldn't help wondering. Olga had intimated that Markham was in love with her. Hermia now doubted. Indeed a suspicion was growing in her mind that it was Olga who was in love with Markham. Hermia smiled and put the letter away in her desk. It didn't matter to her, of course, only interested her a great deal, but she couldn't help wondering why, if Markham was so deeply under the spell of Olga's worldliness, he had not come back to her when she had wanted him.

A northeaster had set in along the coast, and the guests of "Wake Robin" were driven indoors. Olga, when she wasn't playing auction, wandered from window to window, looking out at the dreary skies, venting her ennui on anyone within earshot. Archie Westcott, who was losing more money than he could afford to lose, now lacked the buoyant spirits which carried him so blithely along the crest of the social wave and scowled gloomily at his cards which persisted in favoring his opponents. Crosby Downs, whose waistband had again reached its fullest tension, sought the tall grasses of the smoking-room and refused to be dislodged. Without the shadows of her hat and veil Mrs. Renshaw showed her age to a day, and that didn't improve her temper. Beatrice Coddington had an attack of the megrims and remained in her room.

Hermia played bottle pool and pinochle with Reggie Armistead until they began discussing the exact terms of Hermia's promise when there began a quarrel which lasted the entire afternoon and ended in Reggie's going

out into the pouring rain and swearing that he would never come back. But he did come back just in time for dinner, through which he sat pretending that he was interested in Phyllis Van Vorst and casting gloomy looks in the direction of the oblivious Hermia. At the end of three days there were no more than two people in the house on terms of civility, and most of Hermia's guests had departed.

Olga Tcherny, after an afternoon alone in her room, came downstairs at the last extremity of fatigue.

"I can't stand it another hour, Hermia. I'm off in the morning."

"Off? Where?" asked Hermia.

"Oh, I don't know. Anywhere. New York first and then--"

"Normandy?" queried Hermia impertinently.

Olga only smiled.

CHAPTER XI

THE GATES OF CHANCE

Markham had finished the portrait of his antiquated countess in Havre and abandoning the luxuries of the Hotel Frascati had taken to the road with his knapsack and painting kit for a two months' jaunt along unfrequented Norman byways. This had been his custom since his first year in Paris, when his means were small and the *wanderlust* drove him forth from the streets of Paris. He had walked from the Savoie to Brittany, from Belgium to Provence and the vagabond instinct in him had grown no less with advancing years. He liked the long days in the open. The slowly moving panorama of hill and dell, which was lost upon the touring motorists who continually passed him, filling the air with their evil smells and clouds of dust. He liked the odor of the loam in the early morning, the clean air washed by the dew and redolent of burning wood, the drowsy hour of noon with its meal of cheese and bread eaten at the shady brink of some musical stream and the day-dream or doze that followed it; the long mellow afternoons under the blue arch of sky where the pink clouds moved as lazily as he, in vagabond procession, across the zenith. His aimlessness and theirs made them brothers of the air, and he followed them under the trackless sky, aware that his destination for the night lay somewhere ahead of him, leaving the rest to chance and the patron saint of Nomads. He liked the rugged faces he saw on the road, the Norman welcome of his host and the deep sleep of utter weariness and content which defied the tooth of time and discomfort.

After a few days in Rouen, where he always lingered longer than he intended to, he had crossed the river at Sotteville and had followed main roads which led him to the south and east through the heart of the historic Eure.

He had given Trouville a wide berth; for he knew some people there, friends of Olga Tcherny's, people of fashion who would have looked askance at his dusty clothes and general air of disrepute. He was not in the humor for Olga's kind of friends or indeed for Olga, if as the last note from her had indicated she, too, had arrived on this side of the water. He was sufficient unto himself and gloried in his selfishness. Song he would have and did often have at night with his chance companions of the road, and wine or the sound Norman cider which was better--but no women--no women for him!

It was on the road beyond Evreux that he thus congratulated himself for

the twentieth time. His path passed near the brink of a river fringed with trees and to the right the hills mounted abruptly to a rocky eminence, crowned with an ancient castle which stolidly sat as it had done for a thousand years and guarded the peaceful valley beneath. It had looked down upon the pageantry of an earlier day when knights in armor had ridden forth of its portals for the honor of their ladies, had listened to the hoof-beats of more than one army, and had heard in the distance the clash of Ivry. To-day a railroad wound around the base of its pedestal, reminding it of the new order of things and of its own antiquity.

As Markham approached the railroad crossing, from the opposite direction, in a cloud of dust, came an automobile. But as it neared the track a woman waving a red flag and blowing a horn came running from a small house by the roadside and pulled the gates across the road. The automobile, which had only one occupant, came to a sudden stop and an argument followed. Markham was too far away to hear what was said, but the gestures of the disputants could be easily understood. There was no train in sight and plenty of time to cross, said the motorist. The peasant waved her flag and pointed down the track. More words, more gesticulations, but the gate-keeper was obdurate. The motorist looked up the track and at the gate and road, and then followed explosives, smoke and dust from the impatient machine, which slowly moved backward a short distance up the road again. Markham, slowly approaching, watched the comedy with interest. An impatient Parisian, jealous of the passing minutes, and an obstinate peasant--to whom passing minutes had no significance--could any two humans be more definitely antagonistic?

What was the person in the car about? More explosions and the blue of burning oil as the car came forward, its cutout open, turning to the left off the road over a ditch and into a field. The gate-keeper ran forward shaking her flag and screaming as she guessed the motorist's intention. But it was too late. The car was hidden for a moment from Markham's view in the declivity upon the other side of the railroad embankment, the exhaust roaring furiously, and leaped into sight, the front wheels high in the air as it took the near rail and then fell heavily with a complaining groan across the track and moved no more, its rear axle snapped in two.

Of all the fool performances! Markham ran forward crying in French to the chauffeur to jump, for around the profile of the hill the locomotive of the oncoming train was emerging. The motorist looked at Markham and then at the advancing train in bewilderment; then jumped clear of the track beside Markham as the freight train, its brakes creaking, its steam shrieking, crashed into the unfortunate machine, turning it over and then crumpling it into a shapeless mass, through which it tore, its impetus carrying it well down the road and scattering the torn fragments of nickel and steel on both sides of the tracks.

It was not until the train had been brought to a stop that Markham had had time to notice that the motorist was a woman--not until she turned a rather wan face in his direction that he saw that the victim of this misfortune was Hermia Challoner.

"You, child!" he gasped. "What in the name of all that's impossible--"

"John Markham!"

"Good Lord, but you had a close call for it! Couldn't you have waited a moment--"

"It was a new machine," she stammered. "I was trying for a record to Trouville from Paris."

"It was a d--n fool thing to do," he blurted forth angrily. "You might have been killed."

She looked at him, her lips compressed, but made no reply.

The gate-woman, who for a few moments had stood as though petrified with fright, now resumed her screams and gesticulations as the crew of the train descended. In a few moments they surrounded Hermia, all shouting at once, and waving their arms under Hermia's nose. She attempted replies, but the noise was deafening and no one listened to her. Peasants working in the fields nearby who had heard the crash came running and added their numbers and temperaments to the Babel. The gate-keeper thrust herself violently into the midst of the group pointing at the wreck of the machine and at Hermia, her remarks as unintelligible to the train crew as they were to Markham.

Hermia stood her ground, but when one of the train crew seized her by the arm and thrust his grimy face close to her own she grew pale and drew back. Markham stepped between and gave the fellow a shove which sent him sprawling. There was a pause and for a moment matters looked difficult. But Markham mounted the embankment, drew Hermia up beside him, put his back against a car, held up his hand and in French demanded silence. His voice rang true and they listened. He had seen the accident from the road and would bear witness. It was not the fault of the gate-keeper or of the lady who drove the car. It was simply an accident in which lives had fortunately been spared. The axle of the machine had broken upon the track. If there was any claim for damages he would testify that the engineer was not to blame.

A man in a peasant's smock from a neighboring field, who, it appeared, held some local office of authority, now took a hand in the investigation and, after a number of questions of Hermia and the gate-keeper, sent the train upon its way.

Amid the turmoil of the gate-keeper's voice who was recounting the affair to the latest arrivals Hermia watched the train as it passed between the fragments of what a few minutes before had been a new French machine. Some of the peasants had already gathered around the wreck and one of them restored her leather bag, which had been tossed some distance into the ditch. To all appearances this was the only salvage and she took it gratefully. A walk down the track convinced Markham that what was left of the car was only fit for the scrap-heap. And as the crowd still surrounded Hermia he put his arm in hers and led her away. She followed him silently up the road by which she had come until they had left the gaping crowd behind them. Then he made her sit on a bank by the roadside and unslinging his knapsack dropped beside her. "Well?" he asked.

She looked down the road toward the scene of her misfortune, the smile, half plaintive, half whimsical, that had been hovering on her lips suddenly breaking.

"If you scold me I shall cry."

"I'm not going to scold," he said kindly. "That wouldn't help matters."

"It was such a beautiful piece of mechanism--so human--so intelligent--" a tear trembled on her lashes and fell--"and I've only had it two days."

She was the child with a broken toy. It was the child he wanted to comfort.

"I'm sorry," he said genuinely. "I wish I could put it together for

you again."

"It's gone--irretrievably. There's nothing to be done, of course."
And then, "Oh! it seems so cruel! The thing cried out like a wounded animal. You heard it, didn't you? And it was all my fault. That's what hurts me so."

"One gets over being hurt, but one doesn't get over being dead. You only missed being killed by the part of a second."

She dashed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Oh, I know. And I'm awfully grateful. I really am. I don't know why I didn't jump sooner. I saw the train, too. I simply couldn't move. I seemed to be glued there--until you shouted. It was lucky you were there."

She buried her face in her hands a moment and when she straightened was quite calm again.

"It's all over now, Mr. Markham, and I'm awfully obliged," she said with a laugh. "You seem fated to be the recording angel of my maddest ventures."

"It was madness," he insisted.

"I know it," she sighed. "And yet I'm quite sure I would do it again."

"I don't doubt that in the least," he replied gravely, concealing a smile as one would have done from a mischievous child.

There was a silence.

"The world is very small, isn't it, Mr. Markham?" she asked. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I? Oh, vagabonding. It's a habit I have, I'm doing Normandy."

She examined him from top to toe and then said amusedly:

"Did you know that for the past week Olga has been searching Havre high and low for you?"

"No. I didn't know it. Where is she now?"

"At Trouville. And I was to have dined with her tonight."

"I'm afraid you'll hardly get there," he said, looking at his watch. "This line doesn't connect."

"Doesn't it? Oh, some line will, I suppose." And then irrelevantly, "Do you know, Mr. Markham, I've often wondered what it would be like to be a vagabond? I think I really am one deep down in my heart."

"Vagabonds are born--not made, Miss Challoner. They belong to the immortal Fellowship of the Open Air, an association which dates from Esau--an exclusive company, I can tell you, which black-balled brother Jacob, and made Francois Villon its laureate. It is the only club in the world where the possession of money is looked on with suspicion. Imagine a vagabond in a six thousand-dollar motor car!"

She opened her eyes wide and threw out her hands with a hopeless gesture.

"But I'm not responsible for the money. I didn't make it. I don't

see why I haven't just as much right to be a vagabond as you have."

He examined her amusedly.

"You would have the right perhaps if it wasn't for your unfortunate millions. It's too bad. I'm really very sorry for you."

His irony passed beyond her.

"I _am_ a vagabond," she insisted. "I haven't a single conventional instinct. I've never had. I hate convention. It fetters and stifles me. My money! If you only knew how I loathe the responsibilities, the endless formalities, the people who prey upon me and those who would like to, the toadying of the older people, the hypocrisy of the younger ones. It isn't me that they care for. I have no friends. No one as rich as I am _can_ have friends. I distrust everyone. Sometimes I've thought of going away from it all--disappearing and never coming back again. I'm so tired of having everything I want. I want to want something I can't get. I am weary of everything that life can offer me. I have to choose unhealthy excitements to keep my soul alive. Speed--danger--they're the only things that seem to make life worth while."

He shook his head as she paused for breath.

"Oh, I know you think I'm mad. I seem so by contrast to your content. You seem so happy, Mr. Markham."

"I am," he said. "All vagabonds are happy."

She looked at him enviously as though she might by chance discover his secret of life, but he lit his pipe and puffed at it silently.

"What is your secret of happiness, Mr. Markham?" she asked wistfully. "Tell me, won't you?"

"An open hand, an easy shoe and a hope to make the day go through," he quoted with a quick laugh.

"What else?"

"Thirst--and a good inn to quench it at."

"Yes--"

"A conscience," he finished, "with little on it--a purse with little in it. You see the Ancient Order of Vagabonds never used purses--unless they were other people's."

He stopped with a laugh and glanced down the road toward the scene of Hermia's accident. "All of which is interesting," he said with a practical air, "but doesn't exactly solve the problem of how we're to get you to Trouville in time for dinner with the Countess Tcherny." He took a road map from his pocket and spread it out on his knapsack between them, while Hermia peered over his shoulder and followed his long forefinger.

"Evreux, Conches, Breteuil--we must be about here--yes--and there's your crooked railroad. It goes around to Evreux, where there's a through line to the coast. You might hire a horse and wagon--but even then you would hardly get to Evreux before sunset. Miss Challoner, I'm afraid you'll not reach Trouville to-night--"

"Oh, I don't care," she said. "It's a matter of indifference to me whether I reach Trouville at all--"

"But your friends will worry."

"Oh, no--I could wire them, I suppose--"

"Oh yes. And there's a good inn at Evreux. But we had better be going at once."

He folded his map, put it in his pocket and rose, slinging his knapsack across his shoulder and offering her a hand to rise. But she didn't move or look at him. She had plucked a blade of grass and was nibbling at it, her gaze on the distant landscape to the southward.

"Wait a moment, please. I--I've something more to say to you."

He looked at her keenly, then leaned against the bole of a tree, listening.

"I--I don't know just what you'll think of me, but if I--I didn't feel pretty sure that you'd understand what I mean I don't think I'd have the courage to speak to you. You once told me you liked me a great deal, Mr. Markham, and I--I know you meant it because you're not a man to say things you don't mean."

"That's true," he confirmed to her. "I'm not."

"And I think that's one of the reasons I believe in you," she went on, smiling, "and why I thought your friendship might be worth while. You're the only person I've ever met in my world or out of it whose opinions were not tainted with self-interest. Can you wonder that I value them?"

"I'm glad of that," he said genuinely. "I'd like to help you if I can."

"Would you?" she asked, "would you really?" She rose and faced him. "Then teach me the secret of your happiness, John Markham," she cried. "Show me how to live my life so that I can get as much out of it as you get out of yours. There is--there must be some way to learn. I've always wanted to be happy, but I've never known how to be. When I grew up, people told me how much better off I was than other people, how happy I would be--that anything I wanted was mine for the asking, measuring my future happiness--as the world will--in terms of dollars and cents. I'm only twenty-three, John Markham, but I've bought from life already all it has to offer. Isn't there something else? Isn't there something that one can't buy?"

"Yes," he said. "Freedom."

"That's it," she cried. "Freedom--I'm a slave. I've always been-a slave to my lawyers and trustees, a tool in the hands of the people who fatten on me, the servants who rob me, the guests who flatter and use me, the people of society to invite me to their houses and take my character when my back is turned. I'm a slave, John Markham, a moral coward, afraid of my enemies--afraid of my friends, afraid to hate, afraid to love--distrusting everyone--even myself."

He did not speak, but as she turned toward him she saw that his eyes were alight with comprehension. She thrust out her hands impulsively and caught his in her own.

"Take me with you, John Markham. I want to learn what makes you happy--I want to learn your secret of living."

"Impossible!" he stammered.

She dropped his hands and turned away.

"You refuse then?"

"I--I didn't say so. But I can't believe--"

"You must. I've paid you the high compliment of thinking you'd understand."

He tangled his brows in perplexity. "Yes--I'm flattered--but have you thought? I'm afoot--eating and drinking where and what I can get, sleeping where I may. It wouldn't be easy--for a girl."

"I'm not made of tender stuff--" she broke off and turned toward him with an impulsive gesture.

"If you don't want me," she cried, "tell me so. I'll believe you and go."

"No," he muttered. "I won't tell you that. But have you thought of the consequences? Of what people will think?"

"Let them think what they choose," she said.

She met the inquisition of his eyes frankly and the thought which for a moment had troubled him went flying to the winds in the treetops. For all her experience with the world she was a child--with a trust in him or an innocence which was appalling.

"The roads of France are free," he laughed gaily. "How should _I_ stop you."

She looked up at him in delight. "You mean it? I may go? Oh, John Markham, you're a jewel of a man."

"Perhaps you won't think so when we're vagabonds together; for vagabonds you must be--taking what comes without complaint--sour wine--a crust--"

"Here's my hand on it--a vagabond--with vagabond's luck--vagabond's fare."

He studied her a moment again, soberly testing her with this gaze, but she did not flinch.

"This," he said at last, "is the maddest thing--you've ever done."

CHAPTER XII

THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

He threw the knapsack over his shoulder and picked up Hermia's leather bag which had been saved from the wreck of the machine, but she quickly took it from him.

"No," she said sternly, "I'll do my own carrying. I'll take my half, whatever it is." She led the way out into the road, then paused.

"Which way, brother?"

He pointed with his stick. "Southward," he said, but paused, looking down the hill toward the gate-keeper's cottage around which a small crowd still hovered. "But there's something to do before we go."

"The machine? There's nothing to do with that. I'll leave it--"

"Not only the machine--we'll leave something else here."

Her puzzled glance questioned.

"Our identities--we'll leave them here, too, if you please," he replied. "The person by the name of Hermia Challoner from this point simply ceases to exist--"

"She does. She ceased to exist ten minutes ago," she laughed joyfully. "And John Markham?"

"Is Philidor, portrait artist, by appointment to the proletariat of France, at two francs the head."

"Delicious! And I--?"

"You? You'll have to be my--er--sister."

"Oh, never! I simply won't be your sister. That's entirely too respectable. A pretty vagabond you'll have me! You'll be giving e a green umbrella and a copy of Baedeker next. I'll be something devilish and French or I'll be Hermia. Yvonne--that's my name--Yvonne Deschamps, compagnon de voyage of the Philidor aforesaid."

"No," he protested.

"Why not?"

He shook his head. "I don't like the idea," he said thoughtfully.

"But I insist."

He looked down at her for a moment, measuring her with his eye, and then smiled and shrugged a shoulder with an air of accepting the inevitable. And then as the thought came to him.

"Your car--could the wreck be identified?"

"Its number. We must find that and destroy it."

They went down the hill together and, eyed by the curious peasants, sauntered down the track where Markham, after some searching among the bushes, found the number of the machine still clinging to the ruins of the radiator. This he unstrapped and slipped into his knapsack, presently joining Hermia, who was making her peace with the gate-keeper.

"Two tires, one wheel--the speedometer," she was saying in French. "I will leave them for you to sell, Madame, if you can. And Monsieur--he may have whatever else is left. That is understood between you, and these gentlemen will bear witness. As for me--never will I ride in an automobile again. If it pleases you, say nothing more of this than may be necessary. Adieu, Madame et Monsieur."

There were offers of conveyance to Evreux (for a consideration), which Markham refused, and the two companions took to the road and soon passed out of sight, leaving the group of peasants staring after them, still mystified as to the whole occurrence and wondering with Norman stolidity whether Hermia was mad or just a fool.

As Hermia followed Markham over the ridge and down the long slope that led to Vagabondia a deep-drawn breath of delight escaped her.

The gray road descended slowly into a valley, already filled with the long shadows of the afternoon—a valley of ripening crops laid out in lozenges of green and purple and gold, like a harlequin suit, girdled at the waist by the blue ribbon of the river, a cap of green and purple where a clump of young oaks perched jauntily on the bald contour of the distant hilltop; above, a sky of blue flecked with saffron and silver like a turquoise matrix—against which the tall poplars marched in stately procession, their feathery tops nodding solemnly at the sun.

It was curious. From a car the landscape had never looked like this. Indeed, when she was motoring, Hermia never saw anything much but the stretch of road in front of her, its "thank ye marms," its ditches and its speed signs.

She glanced up at Markham, who strode silently beside her, his pipe hanging bowl-downward from his teeth, his lips smiling under the shadowy mustache, his eyes blinking merrily at the sky. She guessed now at the reason for the serenity in his face, as to which she had been so curious. It was the reflection of the wide blue vault above him, the quiet river and the dignity of the distances.

Hermia paused and drank the air in gulps.

"Vagabondia! You've opened its gates to me, John Markham."

He looked around at her in amusement.

"There are no gates in Vagabondia, Miss Challoner."

"Miss Challoner!" she reproved him.

"Hermia, then. Do you realize, you very mischievous young person, that this is precisely the fourth time that you and I have met?"

"I shall call you John, just the same," she announced.

"By all means, or Philidor—anything else would be rather silly—under the circumstances. You aren't regretting this madness? There's still time to reconsider."

"No," promptly. "I've burned my bridges. *En avant, Monsieur.*"

The next rise of land brought into view the houses of a small town huddled among the trees along the river bank. They were still on the main line of communication between Paris and the Coast, and here perhaps they would find a telephone or telegraph office. Hermia made a wry face.

"I didn't know there were any telephones in Vagabondia."

"There aren't. We haven't reached there yet." He glanced at her modish French suit and hat and down at the English leather traveling case she was carrying.

"If you think you look like a vagabond in that get up you're much mistaken," he laughed.

"I don't. I know I don't," looking ruefully at her clothes. "But I will before long. You'll see."

The village upon closer inspection achieved a dignity which the distance denied it. There was a row of small shops, a *brasserie* and an inn, all slumbering under the shadows of a grove of trees. The road became a street. Upon their left a gate into an open-air cabaret

under the trees next to a wine shop stood invitingly open, and the pilgrims entered. There were wooden tables and benches upon which sat some workmen in their white smocks drinking beer and discussing politics.

The proprietor of the place, a motherly person, took Markham's order and went indoors, presently emerging with a tray which bore a pitcher of cider, a wonderful cheese and a tower of bread, all of which she deposited before them. She only glanced at Markham, for she was used to the visits of traveling craftsmen along the highway--but she studied Hermia's modish frock with a critical eye. After the first polite greetings she lingered nearby, her curiosity getting the better of her discretion.

"Monsieur and Madame are stopping at the Inn?" she asked at last.

Markham smiled. It was the curiosity of interest rather than intrusiveness.

Monsieur and Madame had not decided yet. Was the inn a good one?

Very good. Monsieur Duchanel, a cousin of hers, took great pride in receiving guests who knew good fare.

All the while she was appraising with a Norman eye the value of the feather in Hermia's hat.

"We thought of going on to Boisset," Markham went on. "Perhaps it is too far to reach by nightfall."

"Oh, mon Dieu, yes--if one is walking--ten kilometers at the least. Did Monsieur and Madame desire a carriage?"

"No, perhaps after all we will stay here."

This wouldn't do at all. To be taken for persons who were accustomed to the excellences of French cuisine was not Hermia's idea of being a vagabond. She had been studying the face of their hostess and came to a sudden resolution. Here was the person who could, if she would, complete her emancipation. Turning to Markham she said smoothly in French:

"Will you go on to the Inn and see if you can find accommodations? In the meanwhile I will stay here and talk with Madame."

Taking the hint Markham finished his glass and leaving his knapsack on the bench went out into the high road in the direction indicated. He walked slowly, his head bent deep in thought, realizing for the first time the exact nature of the extraordinary compact which he had made with the little nonconformist who had chosen him for a traveling companion. The more he thought of the situation the more apparent became the gravity of his responsibility. Why had he yielded to her reckless whim? Only this morning he had been thanking his lucky stars that he was well rid of women of the world for a month at least. And now--Shades of Pluto! He had one hanging around his neck more securely than any millstone. And this one--Hermia Challoner, an enthusiast without a mission--a feminine abnormality, half child, half oracle, wholly irresponsible and yet, by the same token, wholly and delightfully human!

But in spite of the charm of her amiability and enthusiasm he felt it his duty to think of her at this moment as the daughter of Peter Challoner, the arrogant, hard-fisted harvester of millions--to think of her as he had thought of her when she had left his studio in New York with Olga Tcherny, as the spoiled and rather impertinent example

of the evils of careless bringing up, but try as he might he only succeeded in visualizing the tired and rather unhappy little girl who wanted to learn "how to live." Whether that confession were genuine or not it made an appealing picture--one which he could not immediately forget. Markham had lived in the thick of life for a good many years as a man must who wins his way in Paris, but his view of women was elemental, like that of the child who chooses for itself at an early age between the only alternatives it knows, "good" and "bad." To Markham women were good or they were bad and there weren't any women to speak of between these two classifications. He had seen Hermia first as the protegee and boon companion of the Countess Tcherny, had afterward met her as the intimate of such men as Crosby Downs and Carol Gouverneur, and of such women as Mrs. Renshaw, and yet it had never occurred to him to think of Hermia as anything but the spoiled child of Peter Challoner's too eloquent millions, the rebellious victim of environment which meant the end of idealism, the beginning of oblivion.

This hapless waif of good fortune had thrown herself upon his protection and had paid him the highest compliment that a woman could pay a man--a faith in him that was in itself an inspiration.

Was she in earnest and worth teaching? That was the rub, or would weary feet, hunger, thirst, the chance mishaps of the road bring recantation and flight to Trouville or to Paris? He would put her intentions to the test. She could be pretty sure of that--and if she survived this week under his program of peregrination and philosophy there were hopes for her to justify his rather impulsive acquiescence.

A motor approached and stopped beside him, the man at the wheel asking in French l'Américain the way to Evreux. He directed them and then, finding that he had emerged upon the other side of the town, returned in search of the Inn, his stride somewhat more rapid than before. Of one thing he was now certain. They must get away from the main road without any further delay.

He found Monsieur Duchanel smoking a pipe upon his door-sill. It was no wonder that he had passed the hostelry by; for saving a small sign obscured by the shadows of the trees, the house, an ancient affair of timber and plaster, differed little from the others which faced the street.

Monsieur Duchanel was a short, round-bellied, dust-colored man, with gray hair and a tuft upon his chin. He was the same color as his house and his sign and gave Markham the impression of having sat upon this same door-sill since the years of a remote antiquity. But he got up blithely enough when the painter announced the object of his visit and showed him, with an air of great pride, through the sleeping apartments which at the present moment were all without occupants. One room with a four-poster, which the host announced had once been occupied by no less a personage than Henri Quatre, Markham picked out for Hermia, and chose for himself a small room overlooking the courtyard at the rear. He ordered dinner, a good dinner, with soup, an entrée and a roast to be served in a private room. The American motorist had warned him. But Vagabondia should not begin until to-morrow.

These arrangements made, he returned to the cabaret under the trees. Hermia had disappeared, so he sat at the table, poured out another glass of cider, filled his pipe and waited.

The political argument of his neighbors drew to an end with the end of their beer and they passed him on their way to the gate, each with a friendly glance and a "Bon soir, Monsieur"--which Markham returned in kind. After that it was very quiet and restful under the trees.

Markham was not a man to borrow trouble and preferred to reach his bridges before he crossed them, and so whatever the elements Hermia was to inject into the even tenor of his holiday, Markham awaited them tranquilly, though not without a certain mild curiosity as to what was to happen next.

But he was not destined to remain long in doubt; for in a few minutes he hears Hermia's light laugh in the door of the wine-shop, followed by the beating of a drum, the ringing of bells, the crashing of cymbals, the notes of some other instrument sounding discordantly between whiles. And as he started to his feet, wondering what it could be all about, a blonde head stuck out past the edge of the door and peered around at the deserted cabaret. He had hardly succeeded in identifying the head as Hermia's because it wore a scarlet cap embroidered with small bells which explained the bedlam of tinkling. When the rest of her body emerged upon the scene Markham noted that Hermia's transformation was in other respects complete; for she wore a zouave jacket of red, a white blouse and a blue skirt. Upon her back was a round object which upon close inspection turned out to be a drum, the sticks of which were fastened to her elbows, and attached to her neck was a harmonica, so placed that she had only to bend her head forward to reach it with her lips. In her right hand was a mandolin which she waved at him triumphantly as she reached him with a grand crash, squeak, tinkle and thump of all the instruments at once.

Too amazed to speak, Markham stood grinning at her foolishly!

"Well?" she said, throwing her head and elbows back, provoking an unintentional thump and tinkle. "How do you like me?"

"Immensely! But what does it all mean?"

"Foolish man. Mean! It means that Yvonne Deschamps has found a fairy godmother who has transformed her. She has now become a Femme Orchestre and for two sous will discourse sweet music to the rustic ear--mandolin and mouth organ, bells, cymbals and drum--"

She ignored the protest of his upraised hand and again made the air hideous with sound, ending it all with a laugh that made the bells in her cap tinkle merrily.

"Oh, I don't do it very well yet. It's the first time--but you shall see--"

"Do you mean that you're going to wear that harness?"

"I do."

"But you can't walk in that."

"The orchestra is detachable, mon ami."

"It is incredible--"

"And I have engaged a creature to carry it--"

"Meaning--"

"Not you--behold."

Markham followed her symphonic gesture. Madame Bordier approached, leading a donkey from the stable-yard, a diminutive donkey of suspicious eye and protesting ears.

"She's very gentle," sighed the fairy godmother. "It hurts the heart

to sell her. But as Monsieur knows--the times are not what they used to be." "She is adorable," cried Hermia. "Isn't she, John Markham?"

"She is," muttered Markham, caressing the stubble at his chin, "entirely so--a vagabond--I should say, every inch of her."

It was not until they had reached the Inn of Monsieur Duchanel some time later that Hermia, having divested herself of the orchestral adjuncts of her costume, confided to Markham the stroke of good fortune which had put her into possession of this providential accoutrement. She had confessed her predicament to Madame Bordier, who, after assuring herself that Hermia was not an escaping criminal, had entered with grace and even some avidity upon the bargain. Hermia wanted a blouse, skirt and hat somewhat worn. But in the act of searching in the garret of the wine-shop among the effects of a departed relative the great discovery had been made. As Madame Bordier went deeper and deeper into the recesses of the *malle* there was a tinkling sound and she emerged with the cap that Hermia wore and looked at it with sighs followed by tears. At the appearance of each article of apparel, Madame wept anew, and Hermia listened calmly while the "great idea" was slowly being born. It was the daughter of Madame Bordier's late sister-- *Pauvre fille* --who had worn the costume. She was a *Femme Orchestre* of such skill that her name was known from one end of the Eure to another. She made money, too, *bien sûr*, but *hélas!* she married a *vaurien* acrobat who had taken her off to America, where she had died last year. Those clothes-- *bon Dieu!* --they recalled the days of happiness; but if Mademoiselle desired them, she, Madame Bordier, could not stand in the way. Times were hard, as Mademoiselle knew, and if she would give two hundred francs--

"Two hundred francs!" put in Markham at this point.

"I paid it," said Hermia, firmly, "and two hundred more for the donkey. It was all I had. And now, as you see, I must work for my living."

Markham laughed. His responsibilities, it seemed, were increasing with the minutes.

They dined alone at the *Hôtel des Rois*, Monsieur Duchanel himself doing them the honor of serving the repast, which Hermia soon discovered had none of the characteristics of the vagabond fare promised her--a velvety soup-- *petits pois à la crème*, *artichauts*, then *poulet rôti*, *salade endive*, cheese and coffee--a meal for the gods, which these mortals partook of with unusual enjoyment. The coffee served, their host departed with one last inquiry for their comfort, which more even than the cooking and service betrayed his appreciation of their proper condition.

"Such a dinner!" said Hermia contemptuously when he went out. "I'm so disappointed. Where are your crust and sour wine, John Markham? I'm losing faith in your sincerity. I 'ask for bread' and you give me *poulet Duchanel*. I want to be bourgeois and everyone treats me like--like a rich American. Shall I never escape?" she sighed.

"To-morrow--" said Markham through a cloud of smoke. "To-morrow you shall be a vagabond. I promise you."

And, as she still looked at him doubtfully, "You don't believe it? Then look!"

He brought out his hand from a pocket and laid some money on the table. "That's all I have, do you see? Fifty francs--twenty of it at least must go for this dinner--I can observe it in the eye of Monsieur

Duchanel--ten more for your chamber Henri Quatre--five for mine--leaving us in all fifteen francs to begin life on. You will not feel like a rich American to-morrow--unless you care to send to your bankers--"

"Sh--!" she whispered theatrically. "There is no such thing as a banker in the world."

"You will wish there were before the week is out."

"Will I? You shall see."

So far her enthusiasm was genuine enough. But the philosophy begotten of a _poulet Duchanel_ might easily account for such optimism. Indeed to-night Markham himself was disposed to see all things the color of roses. The small voice of his conscience still protested faintly at the unconventional character of their fellowship and reminded him that, whatever her indifference to consequences, his obligation to protect her from her own imprudences became the more urgent. But there was a charm in the situation which quite surpassed anything in his experience. She was a child to-night--nothing more--and the zouave jacket and short skirt quite obliterated the memory of that young lady of fashion who had presided a short time ago at the head of the long dinner-table at "Wake Robin." If there was any doubt in her mind as to the propriety of what she had done--of what she planned to do, or any doubt as to his own share in the arrangement, her gay mood gave no sign of it, and the frankness of her friendship for him left nothing to be desired. What did it matter, after all, so long as they were happy--so long as no one learned the secret.

His brow clouded and she read his thought.

"You're worried about me."

He nodded.

"The sooner we're far away from the high road between Paris and Trouville, the better I'll be pleased."

She smiled down at her costume.

"No one will possibly know me in this. That's why I got it."

"Don't be too sure. There are people--" he paused, his thoughts flying, curiously enough, to Olga Tcherny, "people who wouldn't understand," he finished. She laughed.

"I don't doubt it. It's quite possible I wouldn't understand myself. We're never quite so impressed with our own virtues as when we can find flaws in other people. But you know I'm not courting discovery."

"Nor I. We must leave here at dawn."

"As you please. Now I'm going to bed."

She got up and gave him her hand and he led her to the door.

"Good night, Hermia, and pleasant dreams. You shall taste the springs at their fountain head, meet the world with naked hands, learn the luxury of contentment; or else--" as he paused she put her hand before his lips.

"There is no alternative. I shall not fail you. Good night, Philidor."

"Good night, Hermia."

Markham sought out Duchanel and sent a telegram to Olga which Hermia had dictated. "Have changed my plans. Am leaving with a party for a tour of French Inns. Will communicate later."

Duchanel understood. The message would be forwarded from Paris as Monsieur directed. No one in Passy or elsewhere should know.

Markham nodded and paid the bill, producing from a wallet which Hermia had not seen an additional amount which Duchanel found sufficient to compensate him for his trouble.

"You understand, Monsieur?" said Markham, as he went up to bed. "Madame and I are leaving here ^ pied. We shall have coffee and bricche at five. You will not remember which way we go."

"Parfaitement, Monsieur. You may rely upon my discretion."

CHAPTER XIII

VAGABONDIA

They took the road in the gray of a morning overcast with clouds and portentous of a storm. At the last moment, their host, with an eye upon the weather (and another upon Markham's hidden wallet), had sought to keep them until the skies were more propitious. But they were not to be dissuaded and trudged off briskly, Monsieur Duchanel and Madam Bordier accompanying them to the cross-roads and bidding them God-speed upon their journey.

Markham, pipe in mouth, his hat pulled over his eyes, his coat collar turned up, showed the way, while Hermia, her finery hidden under a long coat, followed, leading the donkey, which, after a few preliminary remonstrances, consented to accompany them. A tarpaulin covered Hermia's orchestra and Markham's knapsack which were securely packed upon the animal—a valiant, if silent company, marching confidently into the unknown, Hermia smiling defiance at the clouds, Markham smoking grimly, the donkey ambling impassively, the least concerned of the three.

A rain had fallen in the night but Hermia splashed through the mud and water joyously, like a child, thankful nevertheless for Markham's thoughtfulness which had provided her last night with a pair of stout shoes and heavy stockings. To a spirit less blithe than hers the outlook would have been gloomy enough, for all the morning the clouds scurried fast overhead and squalls of rain and fog drove into the misty south. The trees turned the white backs of their shivering leaves to the wind and dripped moisture. The birds silently preened their wet plumage on the fences or sought the shelter of the hedges. Nature had conspired. But Hermia plodded on undismayed, aware of her companion's long stride and his indifference to discomfort. Her shoes were soaked and at every step the donkey splashed her new stockings, but she did not care; for she had discovered a motive in life and followed her quest open-eyed, aware that already she was rearranging her scale of values to suit her present condition. She was beginning to feel the "needs and hitches" of life and had a sense of the flints strewn under foot. Her mind was already both occupied and composed. She was quite moist and muddy. She had never been moist or muddy before without the means at hand to become dry and clean. Those means lacking, mere comfort achieved an extraordinary significance—reached at a bound an importance which surprised her.

After a while Markham glanced at her and drew alongside.

"Discouraged?" he asked.

"Not a bit," she smiled at him. "But I hadn't an idea that rain was so wet."

"I promised you the fountain springs of life--not a deluge," he laughed. "But it won't last," he added cheerfully with a glance at the sky. "It should clear soon."

"I don't care. The sunshine will be so much the more welcome."

He smiled at her approvingly.

"You are learning. That's the vagabond philosophy."

He was a true prophet. In an hour a brisk wind from the west had blown the storm away and burnished the sky like a new jewel. All things animate suddenly awoke and field and road were alive with people. The birds appeared from tree and bush and set joyously about getting their belated breakfasts. A miracle had happened, it seemed to Hermia. The blood in her veins surged deliciously, and all the world rejoiced with her. And yet--it was merely that the sun had come out.

They had mounted a high hill and stopped for breath at its summit. The country over which they were to travel was spread out for their inspection. Down there in the valley the river choosing its leisurely course northward to the Seine, and beyond it the harlequin checkerboard of vine and meadow, the sentinel poplars, and to the east-ward the blue hills that sheltered Ivry-la-Bataille. Tiny villages, each with its slender campanile, made incidental notes of life and color and here and there, afar, the tall chimneys of factories stained the sky. About them in the nearer fields were hay-wagons and workers, men and women, their shouts and songs floating up the hill refined and mellowed by the distances.

Hermia took the air into her lungs, and surveyed the landscape.

"All this," said Markham, "is yours and mine--you see, when you have nothing, everything belongs to you."

She laughed.

"You won't dare to put that philosophy to the test. There's a delicious odor of cooking food. If everything belongs to me, I'll trouble you for the contents of that coffee-pot."

"Not hungry already--!"

"Frightfully so. I haven't eaten for ages."

He looked at his watch.

"It's only eleven, but of course--"

"Oh, don't let me interfere with your plans."

"You don't. I have no plans. We'll go into camp at once."

They descended the hill and after a while found a secluded spot near the river bank. Markham quickly unstrapped the donkey's pack and to Hermia's surprise drew forth a loaf of bread, some cheese, and a bottle of red wine which he set out with some pride on a flat rock near by.

"This," he announced, "is our _d jeuner la

fourchette_. I won't apologize for it."

"Wonderful man! Somehow you remind me of the sleight-of-hand performer producing an omelette from a silk hat. I don't think I've ever been really hungry before in my life."

He opened the bottle with the corkscrew on his pocket-knife and watched her munching hungrily at the rye-bread.

"Half the pleasure in life, after all, is wanting a thing and getting it," he observed. "How can you want anything if you've already got it?"

"I can't," she mumbled, her mouth full, "unless perhaps it's this bread."

He passed the bottle to her and she drank from it sparingly, passing it to him again.

"Every wine is a vintage if you're thirsty enough," he added. "The trouble with our world is that most of its people are always about half full of food. You can't really enjoy things to eat or things to drink unless you're quite empty. It's the same thing with ideas. You can't think very clearly when you're half full of other people's biases."

"Or their b-bread and ch-cheese!" she said, choking. Further than that she did not reply at once. The reasons were obvious. But she munched reflectively, and when she had swallowed:

"If all your arguments are as convincing as your fare, then you and I shall never disagree," she said.

Clarissa, for that was the name she had given the beast, was turned loose in the meadow. Markham sat beside Hermia on the warm rock, and, between them, without further words, they finished both the wine and the food. Markham filled his pipe and stretched out at full length in lazy content while she sat beside him, brushing the dried cakes of mud from her skirt and stockings.

"Well, here we are across the Rubicon," she said at last.

He nodded.

"Are you sorry?"

"No, not in the least. I'm more astonished than anything else at the ridiculous simplicity of my emancipation. Yesterday at this hour I was a highly respectable if slightly pampered person with a shrewd sense of my own importance in the economic and social scheme; to-day I'm a mere biped--an instinct on legs, with nothing to recommend me but an amiable disposition and an abnormal appetite.

"You've made progress," he laughed lazily. "Yesterday you lisped knowingly of devil-wagons. You weren't even a biped. I'll admit it's something to have discovered the possession of legs."

"I do. And it's something more to have discovered the possession of an appetite."

"And still something more to discover a means to gratify it," he grunted.

If he sought to intimidate her, he failed of his object, for she only laughed at him.

"Oh, I shall not starve. Presently you shall hear me practice with my

orchestra. Just now, _mon ami_, I'm too delightfully sleepy to think of doing anything else."

"Sleep, then."

He laid his coat on the rock, and she sank back upon it, but not to close her eyes. They were turned on a squadron of clouds which sailed in the wide bay between the forest and the hilltop. Markham, leaning on an elbow, puffed at his pipe in silence. She turned her head and looked at him.

"It's curious--" she began, and then passed.

"What is--curious?"

She laughed.

"Curious with what little ceremony I threw myself on your mercy; curious that you've been so tolerant with me; curious that--you've no curiosity."

"I never believe in being curious," he laughed. "When you're ready, you'll tell me and not before.

"About what?"

"About young Armistead, for instance."

"We disagreed. He insisted on marrying me."

"That was tactless of him."

"You know it was only a trial engagement, and it _was_--a trial--to both of us."

Markham grinned.

"You've relieved my mind of one burden, at least," he said. "I like Reggie. He's a nice boy. But I haven't any humor to find him poking around in these bushes with a shotgun." "Oh, there's no danger of that," she replied demurely, oblivious of his humor. "Reggie and I have parted."

Markham's eyes were turned upon the clouds. "That's rather a pity--in a way," he said quietly. "I thought you were quite suited to each other. But then--" and he surprised a curious look in her eyes "--if you were going to marry Reggie, you see, you couldn't be here--and I would be the loser."

"I don't see that that would have made the slightest difference," she replied rather tartly, "provided I had not married him."

"Oh, don't you?" he finished with a smile.

"No, I don't. And I don't believe you when you say that you think Reggie and I were suited to each other. Because if you thought I was the kind of girl to be satisfied with Reggie, you wouldn't have thought it worth while to make a vagabond of me."

His brows drew downward. "I haven't made a vagabond of you--not yet."

She examined his face steadily.

"You mean--that you don't believe me to be sincere?"

He didn't reply at once.

"I won't quibble with you, Hermia," he said in a moment. "You've paid me a pretty compliment by coming with me out here. But I'm not going to let it blind my judgment. You were hopelessly bored--back there. You've admitted it. You felt the need of some other form of amusement--so you chose this. That's all."

Hermia straightened and sat with her hands clasped around her knees, looking at vacancy. "That's unkind of you," she said quietly.

"I don't mean it to be unkind," he went on softly. "I don't deny the genuineness of your impulse. But you mustn't forget that you and I have grown up in different schools. I'm selfish in my way as you are in yours. I choose this life because I love it better than anything else, because it's my idea of contentment. I've approached it thoughtfully and with a great deal of respect, as a result of some years of patient and unsuccessful experiment with other forms of existence. That's the reason why I'm a little jealous for it, a little suspicious of your sudden conversion."

[Illustration: "Even Clarissa stopped her grazing long enough to look up."]

"You have no right to doubt my sincerity--not yet," she said.

"No," slowly. "Not yet. I'm only warning you that it isn't going to be easy--warning you that you will be placed in positions that may be unpleasant to you, when our relations may be questioned--"

"I've considered that," quickly. "I'm prepared for that. I will do what is required of me."

He took her hand and held it for a moment in his own, but she would not look at him.

"Hermia--"

"What, Philidor?"

"You're not angry?"

"Not in the least. I'm not a fool--"

Suddenly she sprang down the rock away from him, and, before he knew what she was about, had fastened her "orchestra" around her and was making the air hideous with sound. He sat up, swinging his long legs over the edge of the rock, watching her and laughing at the futile efforts of her members to achieve a concert. Even Clarissa stopped her grazing long enough to look up, ears erect, eying the musician in grave surprise, and then, with a contemptuous flirt of her tail, went on with her repast.

"Everyone knows a donkey has no soul for music," laughed Hermia, in a breathless pause between efforts.

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning both of you," said Hermia. "Wait a moment."

She tuned her mandolin, and, neglecting the harmonica, in a moment drew forth some chords and then sang:

/*

"Sur le pont d'Avignon
L'on y danse, l'on y danse,

Sur le pont d'Avignon
L'on y danse tout en rond."
*/

And then, after a pause, with an elaborate curtsy to Clarissa:

/*
"Les beaux messieurs font comme a
Et puis encore comme a."
*/

"The Pont d'Avignon?" he laughed with delight. "Bravo, Yvonne!"

"Now perhaps you'll believe in me."

"I do. I will. Until the end of time," he cried. "Once more now,
with the drum _obbligato_."

She obeyed and found it difficult because every time her elbows struck
the drum her fingers flew from the mandolin. But she managed it at
last, and in the end made shift to use the harmonica, too.

Then followed "The Marseillaise." That was easier. The air had a
swing to it, and she managed both the drum and the cymbals. But it was
warm work and she stopped for a while, rosy and breathless.

"What do you think?"

"Oh, magnificent. Yvonne Deschamps--_Femme Orchestre, Messieurs et
Dames_, queen of the lyrical world, the musical marvel of the century,
artist by appointment to the President of the R_ublique
Fran_aise and all the crowned heads of Europe. How will that
do?"

"Beautifully. And you--what will _you_ do?"

"I-- Oh, I will pass the hat."

She laughed. "So! You intend to live in luxury at my expense. No,
thank you, Monsieur Philidor. I'm doing my share. You shall do
yours. I'll trouble you to keep your word. You shall paint portraits
at two francs a head."

"I didn't really intend--"

"You shall keep your promise," she insisted.

"But, Hermia, I--"

"There are no 'buts!'" she broke in. "A moment ago you indulged in
some fine phrases at the expense of my sincerity. Now look to yours.
We'll have an honest partnership--an equal partnership, or we'll have
no partnership."

He rubbed his head reflectively.

"Oh, I'll do it, I suppose," he said at last.

She laughed at him and resumed her practicing, making some notable
improvements on her first attempts and adding "_M_ re Michel_"
and "_Au Claire de la Lune_" "_Le Roi Dagobert_" to her
r_ertoire.

"Where on earth did you learn that?" he asked in an entr'acte.

"At school--in Paris."

"And the mandolin?"

"A parlor trick. You see, I'm not so useless, after all."

Presently, when she sat beside him to rest, he brought out a pad and crayon and made a drawing of her in her cap and bells. He began a little uncertainly, a little carelessly, but his interest growing, in a moment he was absorbed.

Whatever knowledge of her had been hidden from him as a man, it seemed suddenly revealed to the painter now. The broad, smooth brow which meant intelligence, the short nose, which meant amiability, the nostrils well arched, which meant pride, the first rounded lips, which meant sensibility, the sharp little declivity beneath them and the squarish chin, which meant either willfulness or determination (he chose the former), and the eyes, gray blue, set ever so slightly at an angle, which could mean much or nothing at all.

"Do you see me like that?" she laughed when it was finished. "I'm so glad. You can draw, can't you?"

He held out his palm. "Two francs, please."

She put the sketch behind her back.

"Oh, no, Monsieur. Not so fast. You shall give me this for the sake of my belle musique. Is not that fair?"

"But I've taken rather a fancy to it myself."

"We'll compromise," and she stuck it up on a crevice of the rock, "and hang it on the wall of the dining-room."

Another rehearsal of Hermia's program, longer this time and with a greater care for details; and then Markham looked at his watch, knocked out his pipe, and reported that it was time they were on their way.

Half an hour later they had reached a fork of the road.

"Which way now, camarade?" cried Hermia, who was leading. Markham examined the bushes, the trees, and the fences. He stood for a moment looking down at a minute object by the side of the road, a twig, as Hermia saw, broken in the middle, the open angle toward them.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It's the patteran," he replied, "and it points to the west road."

And so to the westward they went.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FABIANI FAMILY

The walking was easier now. It was blither, too. Hermia's achievements in a musical way had given her confidence. If Madame Bordier's defunct niece had been the best Femme Orchestre in the Eure, there was no reason why Hermia shouldn't fit into her reputation as comfortably as she fitted into her post-humous garments. Clarissa, too, jogged along without her bridle, and Markham found little use for the goad he had whittled to save the use of the halter. The people on the road looked at them curiously, passed a rough jest, and sent them

on the merrier. Markham had destroyed his road map and now they followed the _patteran_, leaving their destiny to fortune. In the late afternoon, on their way through a forest, Clarissa suddenly halted and, in spite of much urging, refused to go on. Hermia took the halter and Markham the goad, and after a while they moved slowly forward, the donkey still protesting. A scurrying in the underbrush, and several dogs appeared, barking furiously. Their offensiveness went no further than this, however, and in a moment Markham made out the bulk of a _roulette_ in the shadows of the wood, the shaggy specter of a horse, a camp-fire, and a party of caravaners. There was a strip of carpet laid out near the fire upon which a small figure, clad only in an undershirt and a pair of faded red trunks, was busily engaged in wrapping its legs round the back of its neck. The cause of Clarissa's unhappiness was also apparent; for chained to a sapling nearby, rolling its great head foolishly from side to side, sat a tame bear.

There were greetings as the newcomers approached, the dogs were called off, and a burly man rose and came to the roadside to meet them.

"_Bona jou_," he said, smiling, his teeth milk white under his stringy black mustache. Markham returned the salutation. The caravaner glanced at Hermia's costume and swept off his hat.

"You go to Alen on for the f te?" he asked in very bad French.

Markham nodded. It was easier to nod than to explain just now. The big man smiled again and pointed to the fire with a gesture of invitation. After a glance at Hermia, in whose face he read affirmation, Markham assented, and urging the unwilling donkey, he and Hermia followed their host down the slope and into the glen.

The small figure on the carpet, which had not for one moment ceased its contortions, now consented to unwind its limbs and stand upright; and in this position assumed definite form as a slender slip of a girl, about twelve years of age. A man and a woman with a baby rose and greeted them. The introductions were formal. They had fallen, it seems, upon the tender mercies of the Fabiani Family of Famous Athletes. The big man tapped his huge chest.

"_Moi_!" he announced with pardonable pride. "I am Signor Cleofonte Fabiani, the world's greatest wrestler and strong man. Here," and he pointed to the others, "is Signor Luigi Fabiani, the world's greatest acrobat; there Signora Fabiani, world famous as a juggler and hand balancer; Signorina Stella Fabiani, the child wonder of the twentieth century."

He recited this rapidly and with much more assurance than his ordinary command of French had indicated, giving complexion to the thought, as did his gestures, that this was his public confession. Not to be outdone in civility, Markham replied:

"Mademoiselle--" he paused and changed her title to "Madame" (a discretion which the others acknowledged with nods of the head)--Madame was Yvonne Deschamps, Premier lady musician of the world, who played five separate and distinct musical instruments at one and the same time--an artist known, as the Signor would perhaps be aware, from Sicily to Sweden, from Brittany to the Russias.

Hermia bowed.

As for himself, he was Monsieur Philidor, the lightning portrait artist, of Paris. Likenesses, two francs--soldiers, ten sous.

Signor Fabiani was glad. _Madonna mia!_ It was not often that such

persons met. Would the visitors not join him at a pitcher of Calvados which was not cooling in the stream?

Markham fastened Clarissa's halter to the wheel of the _roulette_ near the shaggy horse, and joined Hermia, who was already at her ease by the fire and playing with the _bambino_. They were a jolly lot and made a fine plea for Markham's philosophy of content. Signor Fabiani brought the pitcher from the stream and Luigi cups from the house-wagon, and there they all sat, as thick as thieves, drinking healths and wishing one another a prosperous pilgrimage. The Fabiani family had never been to Alençon. This was one of the few parts of the world into which their fame had not yet spread. All the more their profit and glory! _Sacro mento_! They would see what they would see. He, Cleofonte Fabiani, would snap heavy chains about his chest. He would put a great stone on his stomach, and, while he supported himself on his feet and hands, Luigi would break the stone with a sledge hammer. He, Cleofonte Fabiani, would lift her far above his head, tossing her to Luigi, who would catch her upon his shoulders. And the Signora meanwhile would juggle with a piece of paper, an egg, and a cannonball. _O Jesu_! They should see!

He stopped and looked at Hermia. A _Femme Orchestre_! In all his travels in Italy he had never seen one. The signora was an _artista_, though. That was clear. One only had to look at her to see that. He would listen with delight to her music. And Signor Philidor--would Signor Philidor do his portrait? He would pay--

He straightened, put his enormous hand upon his chest, elbow out, and took a dramatic pose of the head. He was wonderful. Markham at once fetched his sketching materials and drew him, while the others crowded about, looking over the shoulders of Monsieur Philidor, and watched the feat accomplished. Not until it was done was Cleofonte permitted to see. It would spoil the pose.

And then! _Che magnifico pitture_! It was nothing short of a miracle! The nose perhaps a little shorter--but _Madre Dio_! what could one expect in twenty minutes! Did not the mustache need a little smoothing? Upon the morning of the performance it was Cleofonte's custom to dress it with pomatum. The cap, the earrings, the mole upon his cheek--everything was as like as possible. _Si_, Monsieur Philidor was a great artist--a very great artist. He, Cleofonte Fabiani, said so.

But when Philidor took the sketch from his pad and presented it to Cleofonte with his compliments, the athlete's delight knew no bounds. He shoed his teeth, and stood first upon one foot and then upon the other, the sketch held before him by the very tips of his stubby fingers. The Signora, relinquishing the _bambino_ to Hermia, looked over his shoulder, more pleased, even, than he. After that nothing would do but that the visitors must stay for supper. Nothing much--a soup, some rye bread, peas, and lettuce, but, if they would condescend, he, Fabiani, would be highly honored. Hermia accepted with alacrity. She was hungry again. Markham smiled and glanced up at the smiling heavens, unfastened Clarissa's pack, and brought out a roasted chicken cold, a loaf of bread, a new tin pot, and a bag of coffee, which he brought to the fireside.

The Signora insisted on preparing the meal, so Markham filled his pipe and helped Hermia to amuse the _bambino_.

"You will pardon?" said Fabiani. "But this is the hour of practice, while the supper is preparing. Luigi, Stella, we will go on if you please."

The child rose, rather ruefully, Hermia thought, and took her place

upon the mat, where, under Luigi's direction, she went through the exercises which were to keep her young limbs supple for the approaching performances. It was the familiar thing--the slow bending of the back until the palms of the hands touched the ground, in which position the child walked backward and forward, the contortions of the slender body, the "split," the putting of the legs around the neck. Hermia had seen these acts at the Vari t s and at Madison Square Garden when the circus came, but had seen them at a great distance, under a blaze of light, as part of a great spectacle in a performance which went so smoothly that one never gave a thought to the difficulty of achievement. There in the silent shadows of the wood, bared of its tinsel and music, the rehearsal took on a different color. She saw the straining muscles of the child, the beads of perspiration which stood on her brow, the livid face with its tortured expression. An exclamation of pity broke from her lips. "Is it not enough?" she asked. Cleofonte only laughed through his cigarette smoke. It seemed like a great deal, he said. She had not had her practice yesterday. It would be still easier to-morrow. And then he signaled for the performance to be repeated. At last Hermia turned to the bambino and would look no more. She was tasting life, other people's, at the springs, as John Markham had promised, and it was not sweet.

There was a brief rest, after which Luigi and Stella did an acrobatic performance of tumbling and balancing in which at the end Cleofonte joined with a masterful air, punctuating the acts with cries and handclaps, and at the end of each act they all bowed and kissed the tips of their fingers right and left to the imaginary audience. The rehearsal ended in applause from the visitors. As for the Signora, having put the coffee on to boil, she was not nursing the bambino. Cleofonte came up, puffing and blowing and tapping his chest. "The performance is ended," he exclaimed, "in tricks with Tomasso--that is the name of my bear--and in great feats of strength, as I have told you, after which I make my great wrestling challenge, to throw any man in the world for one hundred francs. Madre de Dio! You can be sure that when they see Luigi break the stone upon me--they are not zealous."

The baby bed and fast asleep, it was put to bed in the wagon and they all sat at supper. The delight Hermia had taken in her new acquaintances--Fabiani's bombast, Luigi's grace, and the Signora's motherly perquisites--had lost some of its spontaneity since she had seen the expression on the face of the child Stella, when she had gone through her act of d carcasse. It haunted her like the memory of a bad dream and brought into stronger contrast her own girlhood in New York, with its nurses and governesses and the sheltered life she had led under their care and supervision.

And when Stella, her slim figure wrapped in a shabby cloak, came from the roulette and joined them at the fire, Hermia motioned her to the place beside her. When she sat, Hermia put an arm around the child and kissed her softly on the brow. Stella looked up at her timidly and then put her sinewy brown hand in Hermia's softer ones and there let it stay. Hermia had made a friend.

Cleofonte looked up from his chicken bone and shook his huge shoulders.

"You are sorry, Signorina? Jesu mio! So am I. But what would you have? One must eat."

"It seems a pity," said Hermia, smiling.

Fabiani shrugged his shoulders and raised his brows to the sky, with the resignation of the fatalist. "It is life--voil^ tout."

The soup was of vegetables, for which the Fabiani family had not paid,

but it was none the less nourishing on that account. The chicken, a luxury, for which for many days the palate of the Fabiani family had been innocent, was acclaimed with joy and dispatched with magic haste. The cheese, the rye bread, and the salad were beyond cavil; and the coffee--of Monsieur Duchanel's best--made all things complete.

The dusk had fallen, velvety and odorous, and the stars came peeping shyly forth. Fabiani, who for all his braggadocio did not lack a certain magnificence, had insisted that the visitors remain in camp for the night. Madame should sleep in the house-wagon with the Signora Fabiani, Stella and the baby. Were there not two beds? As for Monsieur Philidor--he knew a man when he saw one. The night was heaven sent. Monsieur should sleep as he and Luigi slept--[^] la belle toile_.

Hermia's cover for the night assured, Markham had accepted the invitation, and now, all care banished for at least twelve hours, they sat in great good fellowship before the fire, listening to Cleofonte's tales of the road. They forgave him much for his good heart and at appropriate moments led in applause of his prowess and achievements. When the conversation lagged, which it did when Cleofonte grew weary, Hermia brought forth her _orchestre_ and played for them; first the tunes she had practiced and afterward, as she gained new confidence in their appreciation, "Santa Lucia" and "Funiculi, funicula," to which Cleofonte, who had a soul for concord, roared a fine basso. It was a night for vagabonds, carefree, a night of laughter, of mirth and of song. What did it matter what happened on the morrow? Here were meat, drink and good company. Could any mortal ask for more?

After a time, the din awakening the _bambino_, the Signora went to bed, and Hermia, her hand in Stella's, followed to the wagon. The animals fed and watered, Markham settled down by the fire with his newly found friends and lit a pipe. In a moment Luigi had fallen back on his blanket and was asleep. Markham was conscious that Fabiani still talked, but he had already learned that it was not necessary to make replies, and so he sat, nodding or answering in monosyllables. A warm breeze sighed in the tree tops, the rill tinkled nearby, and a night bird called in the distance. The glow of the fire painted the trunks of the trees which rose in dim majesty to where their branches held eyrie among the stars. The chains of the bear still clanked as he rolled to and fro until a gruff "Be silent, thou!" from Cleofonte brought quiet in that direction. After a while even Cleofonte grew weary of his own voice, his head fell upon his breast, and he sank prone and slept.

Markham sat for a long while, his back against the bole of a tree, pipe in mouth, gazing into the embers of the fire. He had brought the tarpaulin which covered the donkey's pack, and Cleofonte had provided him with a blanket, but he seemed to have no desire to sleep. The smile at his lips indicated that his thoughts were pleasant ones. Hermia had learned something to-day--would learn something more to-morrow, and yet she had not flinched from the school in which he was driving her. If he had thought by hardship to dissuade her from her venture, it seemed that he had thus far missed his calculations. Indeed, each new experience seemed only to make her relish the keener. She was drinking in impressions avidly, absorbing the new life as a sponge absorbs water, differing from this only in the particular that her capacity for retention had no limitations. He smiled because it pleased him to think that his judgment of her character had not been at fault. Hers was a brave soul, not easily daunted or discouraged, better worthy of this life which was teaching its stoicism, charity and self-abnegation than of that other life which denied by self-sufficiency their very existence--a gallant spirit which for once soared free of the worldly, venal and time-serving. It pleased him to think it was by his means that she had been bought into his valley of

contentment and that thus far she had found it pleasant. Would the humor last?

Fabiani snored, as he did everything, from the depths of his being, and Luigi, in the shadows, echoed him nobly. Markham looked toward the _roulette_. The lantern which had burned there a while ago had been extinguished. Strangely enough, although it was his custom to be much alone, Markham wanted company. He wished at least that Hermia had bade him good night. It was curious how quickly one fell into the habit of gregariousness. He and Hermia had fared together but for one day, and yet he already felt a sort of material dependence upon her presence. It was the habit of interdependence, of course--he recognized it, the same habit which led men and women in droves to the cities, to herd in the back streets of the slums when the clean vales of the open country awaited them, sweet with the smells of shrub and clover, where one could lie at one's length and look up as one should at the stars, lulled by the song of the stream or the whistle of the south wind in the-- His head nodded and his pipe dropped from his teeth. Heigho! he had almost been asleep.

He rose and spread his tarpaulin upon the ground. As he did so a dry twig cracked nearby, a dog growled, and presently a small phantom emerged from the shadows. It was Hermia, with a finger laid upon her lips in token of silence.

"Couldn't you sleep?" he whispered.

"No. It was a pity to crowd them, so when Stella got to sleep I came away."

He laid a log upon the fire, and made a place for her beside him.

"It was very nice of you," he whispered. "To tell the truth, I wanted you."

"Then I'm glad I came. I shall sleep here, by the fire, if you don't mind."

"You're not afraid of the damp?"

"I never take colds."

She smiled at the prostrate Cleofonte, whose stertorous breathing shattered the silences.

"He is so much in earnest about everything," she laughed.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked. "You've had a hard day."

"Yes--a little. But I don't feel like sleeping."

"Nor I--but you'd better sleep, you've been up since dawn."

"What time is it?" she inquired.

He looked at his watch. "There is no time in Vagabondia. The birds have been asleep a long while. But if you must know--it's half-past nine."

"Only that?" in surprise. "We've turned time backward, haven't we?"

"Of life forward," he paused and then: "You are still willing to go on?" he asked.

She smiled into the fire.

"I am," quietly. "I'm committed irrevocably."

"To me?"

"Oh, no. To myself, *_mon ami_*. You are merely my recording angel."

"A vagabond angel--"

"Or an angel vagabond. I haven't disappointed you?"

He laughed softly, but made no reply. Of a truth, she had not.

"I was just thinking what a pity it was that during all these years your gifts have been so prodigally wasted. You have, I think, the greatest gift of all."

"And what is that?"

"The talent for living."

"Have I? Then I've learned it to-day. I *_have_* lived to-day, John," she whispered. "I *_have_* lived every hour of it." She watched the yellow rope of smoke which rose from the damp log. "The talent for living!" she mused. "I never thought of that."

"Yes, it's a talent, a fine art; but you've got to have your root in the soil, *Hermia*--unless you're an orchid."

"That's it, I know. But I'm not an orchid any longer."

Markham rose and knocked his pipe out.

"No," he smiled, "you're a night-blooming cereus--and so am I. You must remember that in this world the darkness was made for sleep, dawn for waking. The birds know that. So does *Cleofonte*. Therefore, you, too, child, shall sleep--and at once."

He raised the tarpaulin, scraped the ground free of twigs and stones, and then laid it back carefully, fetching his overcoat for a pillow.

"*_Voil^_*, *Mademoiselle*, your sheets have been airing all day. I hope you will find the mattress to your liking."

"But--where will you sleep?"

"Here; nearby--in *Cleofonte's* blanket."

She drew her long coat around her.

"You're a masterful person," she laughed. "What would happen if I refused to obey?"

"An immovable object would encounter an irresistible force."

She smiled and stretched herself out. He bent forward and laid the loose end of the cover over her.

"Good night, child. As a reward of obedience, you shall dream of a porcelain bath tub and a tooth brush."

She smiled, and, fishing in the pocket of her coat, drew out a small object wrapped in paper.

"It's the only thing I've saved from the wreck of my

respectability--but the porcelain bath tub! Don't temp me."

He turned away and picked up Fabiani's blanket.

"Good night, Hermia," he said.

"Good night."

"Pleasant dreams."

"And you--good night."

"Good night."

CHAPTER XV

DANGER

It seemed to Hermia that she had hardly closed her eyes before she opened them again and found herself broadly awake. A blue light was filtering softly through the tops of the trees and the birds were already calling. She pushed her cover away and sat up, all her senses acutely alive. The fire was out, but the air was not chill. She glanced at Markham's recumbent figure, at Cleofonte and Luigi, and then stealthily arose. Tomasso, the bear, who of all the vagabond company had alone kept vigil, eyed her whimsically from his small eyes and moved uneasily in his chains.

On tiptoe she made her way to the stream, one of the dogs following her, but she patted him on the head and sent him back to the wagon. As she reached the depths of the forest she relaxed her vigilance and went rapidly down the stream, finding at last at some distance a quiet pool in the deep shadows. Here was her porcelain tub. She quickly undressed and bathed, her teeth chattering with the cold, but before the caravaners were awake was back in camp, gathering wood for the fire.

Her activities, furtive as they were, awakened Markham, who sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Hello!" he said. "Haven't you been asleep?"

For reply she pointed silently through the tree trunks to the rosy East.

He got to his feet, shaking himself, rubbed his eyes sleepily, and took from her hand the dead branch which she was dragging to the fire. Between them they awoke Cleofonte, who lumbered to his feet and stared about with bleary eyes.

"_Bon giorno, Signora--Signor_. I have slept--oh, what sleep! Luigi! Up with you. _Dio_! It is already day."

Immediately the camp was in commotion. The Signora descended from the wagon, and with Hermia's help prepared the breakfast while Stella held the baby. By sunrise the gray horse was hitched to the shafts of the wagon, the bear hitched to its tail and the travelers were on their way--the contents of one's valise is on one's back in Vagabondia. Cleofonte had invited Hermia to sit with him upon the seat of the wagon, but she had refused and taken her place by Markham's side behind Clarissa, who, quite peacefully, followed in the trail of Tomasso, the bear.

In this order the procession moved forward into the golden wake of the morning. Hermia was in a high humor--joyous, sparkling, satirical by turns. If yesterday she had found a talent for living, to-day it

seemed the genius for joy had gotten into her veins. Her mood was infectious, and Markham found himself carried along on its tide, aware that she was drawing him by imperceptible inches from his shell, accepting his aphorisms in one moment that she might the more readily pick them to pieces in the next. He couldn't understand her, of course. She hadn't intended that he should, and this made the game so much the more interesting for them both. He didn't mind her tearing his dignity to tatters--and this she did with a thoroughness which surprised him, but he discarded the rags of it with an excellent grace, meeting her humor with a gaiety which left nothing to be desired.

"O Philidor!" she cried. "What a delusion you are!"

"Me? Why?"

"Your gravity, your dignity, your wise saws and maxims--your hatred of women."

"Oh, I say."

"All pose!" she continued gaily. "Politic but ineffective. You love us all madly, I know. Do they make love to you, Philidor?"

"Who?"

"Your beautiful sitters."

"No," he growled. "That's not what they're in the studio for."

She smiled inscrutably.

"Olga did."

He gave Clarissa a prod.

"Olga?"

"Yes. She told me so."

"Curious I shouldn't have been aware of it."

"And you weren't aware of it--er--in my perg--"

"Hermia!"

"Or of the face powder on your coat lapel?"

"No."

"It was there, you know. You carried it quite innocently into the glare of the smoking-room. Poor Olga! And she is always so careful to cover her trails! But I warned her. She shall not trifle with your young affections--"

"You warned her?" he said, with a startled air.

"Yes, that unless she intended to marry you she must leave you alone."

Markham flicked a fly from the donkey's ear.

"H--m," he said, and relapsed into silence. She glanced at him sideways before she went on.

"You know you're not really angry with me, Philidor. You couldn't be. It isn't my fault if I stumbled into the climacteric of your

interesting romance. I wouldn't willingly have done it for worlds. But I couldn't help seeing, could I? And Olga was so self-possessed! Only a woman terribly disconcerted could be quite so self-possessed as Olga was. And then the next day you went away. Flight is confession, Philidor."

"H--m," said Markham. "If there are any missing details that you'd like me to supply, don't hesitate to mention them."

"I wouldn't--if there were any."

"And you believe--"

"That you're madly in love with the most dangerous woman in New York, and that only time and distance can salve your wounds and her conscience."

He puffed at his pipe and shrugged a shoulder.

"That's why I say you're a fraud, Philidor," she went on, "a delusion--also a snare. Your beetling brows, your air of indifference, your intolerance of the world, they're the defensive armor for your shrinking susceptibilities--you a painter of beautiful women! Every sitter in your studio an enemy in the house--every tube of paint a silent witness of your frailty--every brush stroke a delicious pain--the agony of it!"

She tweaked Clarissa's ear and whispered into its tip. "It's much wiser to be just a donkey, isn't it, Clarissa?"

Markham grinned a little sheepishly, but like Clarissa refused to be drawn into the discussion. Indeed, his patience, like that of their beast of burden, continued to be excellent. Hermia's impish spirit was not proof against such imperturbably good humor, and at last she subsided. Markham walked in silence for some moments, speaking after a while with a cool assertiveness.

"It's rather curious, Hermia, if I'm the silly sentimental ass you've been picturing me, that you'd care to trust yourself to what you are pleased to call my shrinking susceptibilities."

"But you're in love with another woman," she said taking to cover quickly.

"I'm in love with all other women," he laughed. "All--that is--except yourself. It must be a surprise to one who counts her conquests daily to discover that, of all the women in the world, you are the only female my shrinking susceptibilities are proof against."

Her eyes were turned on him in wide amazement, eyes now quite violent and child-like.

"I never thought of that, Philidor. It is curious that I never thought of that. It isn't very flattering to me, is it?"

"No--especially as the opportunities for indulgence in my favorite pursuit are so very obvious."

She laughed but looked away. He had provided a sauce for the gander which made him seem anything but a goose.

"But, of course, you--you couldn't take advantage of them--under the circumstances," she remarked.

He shook his head, doggedly whimsical. "One never can tell just how

long one's defensive armor may hold out. I'm sure my brows are beetling much less than usual. In fact, this morning in spite of severe provocation they don't seem to be beetling at all. And as for my air of indifference--I challenge you to discover it. If these are forbidding symptoms, Hermia, take warning while there's time."

"Oh, I'm not in the least alarmed," she said demurely.

But she let him alone after that. They followed slowly in the trail of the _roulotte_. Whether because of Clarissa's habitual drowsiness or their own interest in other matters, the shaggy horse had gone faster than they, and when presently they came to a long stretch of straight road their hosts of the night had disappeared.

"Do you know where we're going?" asked Hermia then.

"No, I don't. I never know where I'm going. But I'm sure of one thing. We must make some money at once."

"We'll follow Cleofonte to Alen on then," said Hermia resolutely.

So Markham prodded the donkey and they moved forward at a brisker pace.

They had met few people upon the road this morning and these, as on the day before, were farmers or those who worked for them, both men and women. The main line of traffic from Evreux, they had learned, lay some miles to their right, and it was over this road, a much harder one, that the motorists went if southward bound. It was therefore with some surprise that they heard behind them the sound of a motor horn. Markham caught the donkey's bridle and drew to one side, the car came even with them, running slowly, and stopped, its engine humming.

"This is the way to Verneuil?" asked the man at the wheel in French.

"I hope so," said Markham returning their salutation. "For that's the way we're going."

Something in Markham's manner and speech arrested the driver's eye, which passed rapidly to Hermia, who stood silently at the side of the road, suddenly aware of an unusual interest in her appearance. The man at the wheel turned to his companion and said something in a low tone. Markham felt a warm color surge upward to his brows.

"Will you precede us, Monsieur," he said coolly, "we are already late upon the way."

But the Frenchman showed no intention of moving at once and, ignoring Markham, questioned Hermia gaily.

Mademoiselle was a _boh mienne_. Perhaps she would condescend to read their fortunes.

Hermia made a pretty courtesy and laughed.

"Unfortunately--Monsieur is mistaken," she said easily. "I am not a teller of fortunes. But what does it matter since Monsieur's fortune is so plainly written upon his face."

"And what is that?"

"The fortune of the fortunate. _Bien s r_. The _bon Dieu_ cared well for those who rode in automobiles."

The Frenchman smiled and glanced at Markham, who was busying himself with the donkey's pack.

"Mademoiselle is very blonde for a _tsigane_," he ventured again.

"I come from the North country," said Hermia promptly.

The Frenchman's eyes which had never left her face wore a curious expression.

"It is strange," he said, "but somewhere I have seen your face before."

"That is where I am accustomed to wear it, Monsieur," she said quickly.

He laughed.

"I can only say that it becomes your costume admirably."

Markham straightened, frowning.

"_Allons, Yvonne_," he muttered.

But Hermia only stood smiling and curtsied again.

"_Merci, Monsieur_. You pay a high tribute to the skill of my hands. I did the best I could--and as for the matter of that," pertly, "so did the _bon Dieu_."

He laughed gaily. Her ready tongue delighted him, but his face sobered as he glanced at Markham, who stood with narrowed gaze fixed on the road ahead of them.

"You pass through Verneuil, Mademoiselle?" the motorist went on. "Perhaps Monsieur your companion would not object if we carried you there."

"You are very kind, Monsieur, but riding in such state is not for me."

"_Allons_! You will be doing us the favor of your company."

"I should be frightened at the great speed."

"Oh, I will run very slowly, I promise you."

She seemed to hesitate and Markham's head slowly turned toward her, a wonder growing in his eyes. Could she? Did she really think of going? She looked at the machine and then at Markham and Clarissa.

"I will go--upon one condition," she announced.

"Mademoiselle has but to name it."

"And that is, Monsieur, that you will also carry in your automobile Monsieur Philidor and the donkey."

He looked at her a moment as if he hadn't believed his own ears, while his companion burst into wild laughter.

"_Touch , mon ami_," he cried, clapping the chauffeur on the back.

"My faith, but she has a pretty wit--the donkey and Monsieur Philidor--_par exemple_!" And he roared with laughter again.

The man at the wheel flicked his cigarette into the bushes, smiling with as good grace as he could command.

"You have many chaperons, Mademoiselle," he said. "It is too bad. I shall remember your _beaux yeux_, just the same."

He waved a hand, then, opening the cutout, drove the machine forward and in a moment was out of sight in a cloud of dust.

Markham grinned at the departing vehicle and then, turning, met Hermia's gleaming eyes.

"O _mon ami_, it is to laugh!" she cried. "Imagine Clarissa seated in the tonneau of that machine entering the gates of Verneuil! If you have any doubt about getting the better of a Frenchman just set him up to ridicule."

She began laughing again, her eyes on Markham.

"My poor Philidor! Did you think I was about to desert you--and Clarissa? You were really quite angry for a moment."

"He was impertinent," growled Markham.

"To Hermia--but not to Yvonne."

"You're both."

"Oh, this will never do at all! You mustn't fly at the throat of every man who takes a fancy to me."

"I don't--but the man--is what is called a gentleman. There's a difference." And while she hesitated for a reply.

"What did he mean by saying that he had seen you before?" he asked.

"Just that. He _had_. I remembered him perfectly. He's the Marquis de Folligny."

"Pierre de Folligny!" in amazement. "Not _Olga's_ Pierre de Folligny?"

"The same. I knew him instantly. I met him in London, at an evening garden party. That is why I didn't want you to make any trouble."

"De Folligny! I have met him. He used to wear a beard."

"Yes, when _you_ didn't."

"I see." And then after a pause. "I thought he was one of that Trouville crowd."

"He is, I think. How lucky I hadn't seen him there!"

They walked along for some moments in silence, Markham slowly stuffing tobacco into his pipe, his gaze upon the ground.

"Hermia," he said briefly at last, "you'll have to be careful."

"Well--aren't I?" reproachfully.

"I'm not sure it's wise of us to pass through the larger towns."

"Why not?"

"You might be recognized."

"I'll have to take that chance. If you remove the element of danger you take away half the charm of our pilgrimage."

"I'd rather the danger were mine--not yours," he said soberly.

She laughed at his uneasiness. "I've absolved you from all responsibility. You are merely my Oedipus, the *vade mecum* of my unsentimental journey."

But he didn't laugh.

"I'll warrant you De Folligny doesn't think that," he said.

"Well--suppose he doesn't. Are you and I responsible for the unpleasant cast of other people's thoughts? My conscience is clear. So is yours. *You* know how unsentimental our journey is. So do I. Why, Philidor, can't you see? It wouldn't be quite right if it *wasn't* unsentimental."

"And how about my--er--my shrinking susceptibilities?" he asked.

"Oh, that! You are losing your sense of humor," she said promptly. "The worst of your enemies or the best of your friends would hardly call you sentimental. I could not feel safer on that score if I were under the motherly wing of Aunt Harriett Westfield!"

She was a bundle of contradictions and said exactly what came into her head. He examined her again, not sure whether it were better to be annoyed or merely amused, and saw again the wide violet gaze. He looked away but he didn't seem quite happy.

"I suppose that would be the truth," he said slowly. "Unfortunately our vulgar conventions make no such nice distinctions."

"But what is the difference if *we* make them?"

"None, of course. But I would much prefer it if we gave Verneuil a wide berth."

"Oh, I'm not afraid. Fate is always kind to the utterly irresponsible. That's their compensation for being so. What does it matter to-morrow so long as we are happy to-day?"

His expression softened.

"You are still contented then?"

"Blissfully so. Don't I look it?"

"If you didn't I wouldn't dare to ask you."

By ten o'clock Hermia was hungry again and when they came to a small village she vowed that without food she would walk no more.

"Very well then," said Markham. "We must earn the right to do it."

They found a small *auberge* before which Hermia unpacked her orchestra and played. A crowd of women and children soon surrounded them, and the sounds of the drum brought the curious from the fields and more distant houses. The *patronne* came out and Philidor offered to do her portrait for ten sous.

They were lucky. When the hat was passed they found the total returns upon their venture, including the portrait, were one franc and thirty centimes. This paid for their share of the *rago t*, some cheese, bread and a liter of wine. When they got up to go, such was the immediate fame of Philidor's portrait, that two other persons came with the money in their hands to sit to him. But he shook his head. He would be back this way, perhaps--but now--no--they must be upon their

way. And so amid the farewells of their latest friends, the cries of children and the barking of dogs they took to the road again.

CHAPTER XVI

MANET CICATRIX

Olga Tcherny sat at a long window in the villa of the Duchesse d'Orsay and looked out over the sparkling sands upon the gleaming sea. Trouville was gay. The strand was flecked with the bright colors of fashionable pilgrims who sat or strolled along the margin of the waves, basking in the warm sun, recuperating from the rigors of the Parisian spring. White sails moved to and fro upon the horizon and a mild air stirred the lace curtains in Olga's window, which undulated lightly, their borders flapping joyously with a frivolous disregard for the somber mood of the guest of the house.

Olga's gaze was afar, quite beyond the visible. Her horizon was inward and limitless, and though she looked outward she saw nothing. Her brows were tangled, the scarlet of her lips was drawn in a thin line slightly depressed at the outer corners and the toe of her small slipper tapped noiselessly upon the rug. It was nothing, of course, to be bored, for when she was not gay she was always bored; but there was a deeper discontent in her whole attitude that that which comes from mere ennui, an aggressive discontent, sentient rather than passive, a kind of feline alertness which needed only an immediate incentive to become dangerous. Upon the dressing-table beside her was Hermia Challoner's telegram, explaining her failure to reach Trouville; in her fingers a letter from a friend in Rouen telling her of John Markham's visit to that city and of his departure. Both the telegram and the letter were much crumpled, showing that they had been taken out and read before. There seemed no doubt about it now. John Markham had received her letters announcing her arrival in Normandy and had in spite of them fled from Havre, from Rouen, to parts unknown, where neither Olga's rosily tinted notes nor Olga's rosily tinted person could reach him. She had hoped that Hermia's arrival from Paris would have made existence at Trouville at least bearable, but Hermia's change of mind explained by the belated telegram had made it evident that Fate was conspiring to her discomfort and inconvenience. To make matters the worse the Duchesse had taken upon herself an attack of the gout which made her insupportable, and Pierre de Folligny, Olga's usual refuge in hours like these, had gone off for a week of shooting at the Château of a cousin of the Duchesse's, the Comte de Cahors.

Hermia's change of plans had disappointed her; for, jealous as she was of the years between them, Hermia always added a definite note of color to her surroundings, or a leaven of madness--which made even sanity endurable. There seemed just now nothing in her prospect but a dreary waste of the usual--the beach, the inevitable sea, the Casino, tea, more beach, with intervals of fretful *_piquet_* with the Duchesse, an outlook both gloomy and disheartening. Indeed it had been some weeks now since things had gone quite to her liking, and her patience, never proof against continued disappointment, was almost at the point of exhaustion. The letters she had written John Markham, one from New York telling of her immediate departure, another from Paris hoping to see him at her hotel, a third from Trouville, assuming the miscarriage of the other two--cool, friendly notes, tinted with a nonchalance she was far from feeling, had failed of their purpose, and save for a brief letter telling of his departure from Rouen, he had not given the slightest evidence of his appreciation of her efforts toward a platonic reconciliation. She had not despaired of him and did not despair of him now, for it was one of her maxims that a clever woman--a woman as clever as she was--could have any man in the world if she set her cap for him.

Her self-esteem was at stake. She consoled herself with the thought that all she needed was opportunity, which being offered, she would succeed in her object, by fair means if she could, by other means if she must. She smiled a little as she thought how easily she could have conquered him had she chosen to be less scrupulous in the use of her weapons. She could have won him at "Wake Robin" if some silly Quixotism hadn't steeled her breast against him--more than that, she knew that in spite of herself she would have won him if it hadn't been for Hermia. Hermia had discovered a remarkable faculty for unconsciously interfering with her affairs. Unconsciously? It seemed so--and yet--

The slipper on the floor tapped more rapidly for a moment and then stopped. Olga rose, her lips parting in a slow smile. It was curious about Hermia--there were moments when Olga had caught herself wondering whether Hermia wasn't more than casually interested in her elusive philosopher. Hermia's decision to follow her to Europe had been made with a suddenness which left her motives open to suspicion. Olga had learned from Georgette, who had got it from Titine, that notes had passed between Hermia and Markham, for Georgette, whatever the indifference of her successes as a hairdresser, had a useful skill at surreptitious investigation. This morning Georgette had received a note from Titine who was in Paris where she had been left by her mistress to do some shopping and to await Hermia's return. Titine had expressed bewilderment at the disappearance of her mistress, who had left Paris in her new machine with the avowed intention of reaching Trouville by night. Georgette had imparted this information to Madame while she was doing her hair in the morning, and as the hours passed Olga found her mind dwelling more insistently on the possible reasons for Hermia's change of plans. Where was she? And who was with her? Olga ran rapidly through her mental list of Hermia's acquaintances and seemed to be able to account for the whereabouts or engagements of all those who might have been her companions.

What if-- She started impatiently, walked across the room and looked out into the Duchesse's rose garden. Really, Markham's importance in her scheme of things was getting to be intolerable. It infuriated her that this obsession was warping her judgment to the point of imagining impossibilities. Hermia and Markham? The idea was absurd. And yet somehow it persisted. She turned on her heel and paced the floor of the room rapidly two or three times. She paused for a moment at her dressing-table and then with a quick air of resolution rang for her maid.

"Georgette," she announced, "I shall have no need of you for a day or two. I would like you to go to Paris,"

Georgette smiled demurely, concealing her delight with difficulty. To invite a French maid to go to Paris is like beckoning her within the gates of Paradise.

"_Oui, Madame_"

"I need two hats, a parasol and some shoes. You are to go at once."

"_Bien, Madame_"

"You know what I desire?"

"_Oh, oui, parfaitement, Madam_--a hat for the green afternoon robe and one of white--"

"And a parasol of the same color, shoes--of suede with the new heel, dancing slippers of white satin and a pair of pumps."

"I comprehend perfectly."

"You are to return her to-morrow. The train leaves in an hour. That is all."

Georgette withdrew to the door but as she was about to lay her hand upon the knob she paused.

"And, Georgette," her mistress was saying lazily, "you will see Titine, will you not?"

"If I have the time, Madame--"

"If you should see Titine, Georgette, will you not inquire where and with whom Miss Challoner has gone automobiling?"

The eyes of the maid showed a look of comprehension, quickly veiled. "I shall make it a point to do so, Madame."

Olga yawned and looked out the window.

"Oh, it isn't so important as that--but, Georgette, if you could--discreetly, Georgette--"

"I comprehend, Madame."

When she was gone Olga threw herself on a couch upon the terrace and read a French Play just published. There was a heroine with a past who loved quite madly a young man with a future and she succeeded in killing his love for her by the simple expedient of telling him the truth. At this point Olga dropped the book upon the flagging and sat up abruptly, her face set in rigid lines.

Silly fool! What more right had he to her past than she had to his. The world had changed since that had been the code of life. That code was a relic of the dark ages when the Tree of Knowledge grew only in the Garden of Eden. Now the Tree of Knowledge grew in every man's garden and in every woman's.

She marveled that a dramatist of modern France could have gone back into the past for such a theme. It was the desire to seem original, of course, to be different from other writers--an affectation of naivete, quite out of keeping with the spirit of the hour--unintelligent as well as uninteresting. (You see Olga didn't believe in the double standard.)

She got up, spurning the guilty volume with her foot and walked out into the rose garden. But their odor made her unhappy and she went indoors. She began now to regret that she had not gone down to the house party of Madeleine de Cahors at Alençon. At least Pierre de Folligny would have been there--Chandler Cushing, and the Renauds--a jolly crowd of people among whom there was never time to think of one's troubles--still less to brood over them as she had been doing to-day.

The return of her maid from Paris added something to the sum of her information. Miss Challoner had left her hotel at ten in the morning in her new machine with an intention of making a record to Trouville. Titine was to follow her there when the shopping should be finished. In the meanwhile a telegram had come dated at Passy, telling of the change in plans, with orders for Titine to remain in Paris until further notice. Several days had passed and Titine still waited in Miss Challoner's apartment at the hotel which was costing, so Titine related, three hundred francs a day. It was all quite mystifying and Titine was worried, but then Mademoiselle was no longer a child and, of

course, Titine had only to obey orders.

Olga listened carelessly, examining Georgette's purchases, and when the maid had gone she sat for a long time in her chair by the window thinking.

At last she got up suddenly, went down into the library and found the paper booklet of the *Chemins de Fer de l'état*. In this there was a map of Normandy and Brittany and after a long search she found the name she was looking for--Passy--south from Evreux on the road to Dreux--this was the town from which Hermia's telegram to Titine had been sent.

Olga's long polished finger nail shuttled back and forth. Here was Paris, there Rouen, here Evreux--there Alençon. Curious! Hermia with her machine doing in half a day from Paris what John Markham had taken four days from Rouen to do afoot. What more improbable? And yet entirely possible!

She took the *livret* to her room where she could examine it at her ease and sent to the garage for a road map which had been left in the car of the Duchesse. The *livret* and map she compared, and diligently studied, arriving, toward the middle of the afternoon, at a sudden resolution.

CHAPTER XVII

PERE GUEGOU'S ROSES

Had Yvonne needed encouragement in her career as a bread-winner her success of the morning had filled her with confidence. She had earned the right to live for this day at least, and looked forward to the morrow with joyous enthusiasm. Philidor, who still confessed to the possession of a few francs of their original capital, was for putting up at a small hotel or inn and paying for this accommodation out of principal. But Yvonne would not have it so. The sum they had earned for the *ragoût* had filled her with pride and cupidity, had developed a niggardly desire to hoard their sous against a rainy day. They had earned the right to lunch. They must also earn the right to dine and sleep!

Late in the afternoon they came to a small village where a crowd of idlers soon surrounded them. Philidor unpacked Clarissa and recited in a loud tone the now familiar inventory of their artistic achievements and Yvonne, smiling, donned her orchestra, tuned her mandolin and played. The audience jested and paid her pretty compliments, and joined with a good will in the familiar choruses. And for his part, Philidor made a lightning sketch of an *ancien* who stood by, leaning upon his stick, which brought him several other commissions at ten sous the portrait. "Reduced rates!" he cried. "*Bien entendu!*" For to-morrow at Verneuil would the people not pay him two francs fifty? This final argument was convincing to their frugal souls, and he sat upon a chair until sunset making Vallée immortal. Philidor was too busy even to pass the hat for the musical part of the performances, so Yvonne did it herself, returning with two francs, all in coppers. When this was added to the earnings of Philidor, they found that in just two hours the princely sum of six francs had been earned.

"To-night," whispered Philidor, "you shall sleep in a chamber once occupied by the Grand Monarch at the very least. We are tasting success, Yvonne."

"Yes--and it's good--but I've learned a healthy scorn of beds. You, of course shall rest where you please, but as for me--I've an ungovernable

desire to sleep in a hay-mow."

"But hay-mows are not for those who can earn six francs in two hours. We are rich," he cried, "and who knows what to-morrow may bring besides!"

They compromised. The ancien to whom Markham applied in this difficulty offered them bed and board for the small sum of two francs each, and accordingly they made way to his house. The ancien was a person of some substance in the community as they soon discovered, for his house, the last one at the end of the street, was a two storied affair and boasted of a wall at the side which inclosed a vegetable patch and a small flower garden at the back. M^{re} Gu^{gou}, a woman younger than her lord, looked at them askance until her good man exhibited the portrait by Monsieur Philidor, when she burst into smiles and hospitality.

Oui, bien s^r, there were rooms. This was no auberge, that was understood, but the house was very large for two old people. Yes, they rented the spare rooms by the month. Just now they were fortunately empty. Did Monsieur desire two rooms or one?

"Two," said Philidor promptly. "We will pay of course."

He hesitated and M^{re} Gu^{gou} examined them with new interest, but Yvonne, with great presence of mind, flew to the rescue.

"We--we are not married yet, Madam," she said flushing adorably. "One day--perhaps--"

"Soon--Madame," put in Philidor, rising to the situation with alacrity. "We shall be married soon."

Madame Gu^{gou} beamed with delight.

"Tiens! C'est joli, a! Gu^{gou}!" she called. "We must kill a chicken and cut some haricots and a lettuce. They shall dine well in Vall^{cy}--these two."

Gu^{gou} grinned toothlessly from the doorway of the shed where he was stabling Clarissa, and then hobbled his way up to the garden.

When M^{re} Gu^{gou} went into the kitchen to prepare the dinner, Yvonne and Philidor walked through the garden to a small rustic arbor at the end which looked down over a meadow and a stream.

"I hope the bon Dieu will forgive me that fib," she laughed.

"It was no fib at all." And as her eyes widened, "You merely said that we hadn't been married yet. We haven't you know," he laughed.

Her look passed his face and sought the saffron heavens across which the swallows were wheeling high above the tree tops.

"Obviously," she said coolly. "Nowadays one only marries when every other possibility of existence is exhausted."

He examined her gravely.

"The bon Dieu will not forgive you that," he said slowly.

"Why not?"

"Because you don't mean what you say. Whatever Hermia was--Yvonne at least is honest. She knows as I do that she will not marry for the

reasons you mention."

She accepted his reproof smilingly and thrust out her hand--a browner hand now, a ringless, earnest little hand--and put it into his.

"You are right, Philidor, I shall marry--if I may--for love. Or--I shall not marry at all."

He turned his palm upward, but before he could seize her fingers she had eluded him.

"But I'm not ready yet, Philidor," she laughed, "and when I am I shall not seek a husband on the highroads of Vagabondia."

Her speech puzzled him for a moment. In it were mingled craft and artlessness with a touch of dignity to make it unassailable. But in a moment she was laughing gaily. "Whom shall it be? Cleofonte is married. Luigi? He has a temper--"

"Marry _me_! You might do worse," he said suddenly.

Her face changed color and the laughter died on her lips.

"_You_? O Philidor!"

She turned away from him and looked up at the sky.

"I--I mean it," he repeated. "I think you had better."

He sought her hand and she trembled under his touch.

"Fate has thrown us together--twice. Its intention is obvious. Let Fate look after the rest--"

"You, Philidor. Oh--"

She buried her head in her arms still quivering, but he only held her hand more tightly.

"Don't child. I did not mean to frighten you. I would not hurt you for anything in the world. I thought you needed me--"

At that she straightened quickly, turned a flushed face toward him and he saw that she was shaking, not with sobs, but with merriment.

"O Philidor--_such_ a wooing! You'd marry me because I need you. Was ever a dependent female in such a position!" And she began laughing again, her whole figure shaking. "I need you--forsooth! How do you know I do? Have I told you so?" she asked scornfully.

"You need me," he repeated doggedly.

"And that is why I should marry you? You who preach the gospel of sincerity and love for love's sake?"

"I--I love you," he stammered.

But she only laughed at him the more.

"_You_. You wear your passion lightly. _Such_ a tempestuous wooing! You ask me to marry you because you fear I might do worse--because you believe that I'm irresponsible, and that without you I'll end in spiritual beggary. I appreciate your motives. They're large, ingenuous and heroic. Thanks. Love is not a matter of expediency or marriage a search for a guardian. If they were, _mon ami_, I should

have long ago married my Trust Company. _You_--John Markham!"

He sat silent under her mockery, his long fingers clasped over his knees, his gaze upon the field below them, his mind recalling unpleasantly a similar incident in his unromantic career. Hermia had stopped laughing, had left him suddenly and was now picking one of P re Gu gou's yellow roses. Her irony had cut him to the quick, as Olga's had, her mockery dulled his wits and rendered him incapable of reply, but curiously enough he now felt neither anger nor chagrin at her contempt--only a deep dismay that he had spoken the words that had risen unbidden to his lips, that placed in jeopardy the joy of their fellowship which had owed its very existence to the free, unsentimental character of their relations. He knew that, however awkwardly he had expressed it, he had spoken the truth. He loved her, had loved her since Thimble Island, when she had spoiled his foreground by eliminating every detail of foreground and background by becoming both. Since then to him she had always been Joy, Gayety, Innocence, Enchantment and he adored her in secret.

Since they had met in France he had guarded the secret carefully--often by an air of indifference which fitted him well, a relic of his years of seclusion, and a native awkwardness which was always more or less in evidence before women. Whatever his secret misgivings, he had blessed the opportunity which chance and her own wild will had thrown in his way. And now--she would leave him, of course. There was nothing left for her to do.

Slowly, fearfully, he raised his eyes until she came within the range of their vision, first to her shoes, then to her stockings, her skirt, gaudy jacket and at last met her eyes, which were smiling at him saucily over the rosebud which she was holding to her lips. But he only sat glowering stupidly at her.

"O Philidor!" she cried. "You look just as you did on the night when I slipped down through the pergola."

"Hermia!" He rose and approached her. "I forbid you."

She retreated slowly, brandishing the blossom beneath his nose.

"Without--er--the face powder!"

"You have no right to speak of that."

"Oh, haven't I? You've just given it to me."

"How?"

"By proving to me that I wasn't mistaken in you. O Philidor, did you propose to her, too, from purely philanthropic--"

"Stop!" He seized her by both wrists and held her straight in front of him, while he looked squarely into her eyes. "You _shall_ not speak--"

"Or was it because she 'needed' you, Philidor, as I do?"

"There's nothing between Olga and me," he said violently. "There never was--"

"Face powder," she repeated.

"Listen to me. You shall," fiercely. "You've got to know the truth now. There's no other woman in the world but you. There never has been another. There won't be. I love you, child. I always have--from the first. I wanted to keep it from you because I didn't want to make

you unhappy, because I wanted you here--in Vagabondia. When the chance came to take you, I welcomed it, though I knew I was doing you a wrong.

I wanted to meet you on even terms, away from the reek of your fashionable set--to see the woman in you bud and blossom under the open skies away from the hothouse plants of your vicious circle. Even there at 'Wake Robin,' I wanted to tear you away from them. They were not your kind. In the end you would have been the same as they. That was the pity of it. Perhaps it was pity that first taught me how much you were to me--how much you were worth saving from them--from yourself. I seemed impossible. I was nothing to you then--less than I am now--a queer sort of an amphibious beast that had left its more familiar element and taken to walks abroad among the elect of the earth. But I loved you then, Hermia, I love you now, and I've told you so. I hadn't meant to, but I'm not sorry. I'm glad that you know it--even though your smiles deride me; even though I know I've spoiled your idyl here and made a mockery of my own Fool's Paradise."

Her head was lowered now and he could not see her eyes, but he was sure they must be still laughing at him. When he had finished he released her and turned away.

"To-morrow we shall be in Verneuil," he said quietly. "I will give you money to buy clothes and put you on the train for Paris."

There was a long silence, broken by the sound of P re Gu gou's chickens flapping to their roosting bars. The saffron heavens had changed to purple, and in the spire of the village campanile a bell tolled solemnly the strokes of Philidor's doom. He did not see her face. He had not dared to look at it. But when the bell stopped ringing, Hermia's voice was speaking softly.

"Do you want me to go, Philidor?"

Her tone still mocked and he did not turn toward her.

"No--but you had better," he murmured.

"Suppose I refused to go to Paris. What would you do?"

He did not reply.

"Could you treat me so? Is it my fault that you--you fell in love with me? I'm not responsible for that--am I? I didn't make you do it, did I? Would you have me give up all this? Think a moment, Philidor. Wouldn't it be cruel of you--after letting me be what I am--after letting me know what I can be--after giving me an ego, an individuality, and making me a success in life--to send me back to Paris to be a mere nonentity? You couldn't, I'll not go."

Her voice, half mocking, half tender, rose at the end in a note of stubbornness.

"Of course, you will do as you please," he muttered.

He felt rather than heard her coming toward him.

"Don't be cross with me," she pleaded. "I--I don't want to go away--from this--from you, Philidor."

He turned quickly--but she thrust out her hand with a frank gesture which he could not misinterpret.

"You're the best friend I have in the world," she said.

He took her hand in both of his and held it a moment.

"That's something," he muttered. "I'll try to be--to deserve your faith in me."

He looked so woebegone that her heart went out to him, but she only laughed gaily.

"You'll not be rid of me so easily, Monsieur. I'm not going, do you hear?"

He shrugged and smiled.

"There!" she smiled. "I knew you wouldn't refuse me. You're an angel, Philidor, and I shall reward you."

She touched P re Gu gou's blossom to her lips, then put it deftly into the lapel of his coat.

"It is the Order of the Golden Rose, _mon ami_, and its motto is _Sincere et Constant_. You will remember that motto, Philidor, and however mad, however inconsistent or incomprehensible I may be, know that I am bound to you, apprenticed to learn the trade of living and that not until you send me away will I ever leave you."

He smiled and lifted the blossom to his lips.

"Friendship?" he asked.

"Yes, that always--whatever else--"

She stopped suddenly as his eyes eagerly alight sought her face, and then turning quickly she fled to the kitchen of M re Gu gou and upstairs away from him.

The Gu gou family made good its promise, and they supped upon the fat of Vall cy, M re Gu gou waiting upon them, her good man bringing from the cellar a cob-webbed bottle which dated from a vintage which was still spoken of in the valley with reverence. A brave wine it was, such as one remembers in after days, and a brave night for Philidor whose heart was singing.

"Ah! _la jeunesse_!" sighed Madame Gu gou, setting down her glass when the healths were drunk. "I, too, Mademoiselle, was once young."

Yvonne patted her cheek gently.

"Age is only in the heart, Madame," she said.

"_Non, ma belle_, " cackled Gu gou from his corner. "It's in the joints."

"_Tais-toi_, Jules," scolded his wife. "What should lovers care about thy joints."

"My joints are my joints," he creaked stubbornly. "When one has ninety years--"

"Ninety!" cried Yvonne. "Monsieur carries his years lightly. I should not have said that he had over sixty."

"Say no more, Mademoiselle," put in M re Gu gou. "You will render him conceited."

Indeed it seemed that the old man had already forgotten his joints, for he poured out another glass of wine and was pledging Yvonne with

toothless gayety.

"_Vos beaux yeux_, Mademoiselle," he creaked gallantly, "and to your good fortune, Monsieur Philidor."

"To your roses, Monsieur Gu ̄gou," replied Philidor. "In the whole of the _Eure et Oise_ there are not such roses. To your omelette, Madame. In the country there is not such another!"

With these compliments and in others like them the minutes passed quickly. Yvonne's eyes avoided Philidor's, though he frequently sought them. Nor was he dismayed when, in response to Madame Gu ̄gou's interest query as to when they would marry, Yvonne shrugged her shoulders indifferently and sighed.

"Oh, I do not know, Madame. Often I think--never. One marries and that is the end of romance. One lover--pouf! When one may have many."

She tossed her chin in the direction of Philidor, who looked at her over his chicken bone.

"If one has but one lover," she went on, "he must have all the virtues of the many and none of the faults. He must sing when we are gay, weep when we are sad, and make love to us while doing either. _Enfin_, he must be what no man is. _Voyez-vous_?" and she pointed the finger of scorn at Philidor. "He eats just as you or I."

Madame Gu ̄gou laughed.

"What you require is no man at all. Mademoiselle Yvonne, but a saint."

"Perhaps," she finished, yawning. "But, _bien entendu_, I'm in no hurry."

When the dinner was finished, Yvonne helped M ̄re Gu ̄gou with the dishes, and when that was done went straightway to her room, with no other word for Philidor than a "_Bon soir_," and a nod of the head.

Philidor sat for a long while in the arbor smoking a pipe. He had much to think about. One by one the lights went out, and the village grew quiet. The moon rose over the forest on the hilltop beyond the stream, and he stretched his limbs and smiled at it in drowsy content. He was so wrapped in his reflections that he hardly heard a voice which came to him over the yellow roses.

"_Bonne nuit_, Philidor."

"Hermia!"

"You're to go to bed--at once."

"I couldn't. Imagine a saint going to bed."

"You're _not_ a saint. You're a prowler."

"Let me prowl. I'm happy."

"Why should you be?"

"I love you."

The shutter above him closed abruptly. He waited in the shadow of the wall looking upward. There was no sound.

CHAPTER XVIII

A PHILOSOPHER IN A QUANDARY

Clarissa carried a double burden the next day, but she breasted the keen morning air so briskly that whatever her own thoughts upon the subject she gave no sign of her increasing responsibilities. Yet Cupid sat perched upon the pack which Philidor had been at such pains to fasten. Yvonne alone of the three was out of humor and she moved along silently, suppressing the joyous mood of her companion by answers in monosyllables and a forbidding expression which defied conciliation. As nothing seemed to please her, Philidor, too, relapsed into silence and swinging his stick, walked on ahead, whistling gaily. But that only provoked her mood the more, and when she overtook him she made him stop.

His silence seemed even more exasperating.

"Oh, if you have nothing to say to me," she said petulantly at last, "I'd much rather you whistled."

He glanced at her before replying.

"Your motto of the Golden Rose needs amending," he said.

"What would you add?"

"Patience," he laughed.

"Clarissa is patient," she sniffed. "The bon Dieu preserve me from the patient man."

It was clear that she meant to affront him and she succeeded admirably, for Philidor flushed to the brows. Then catching her in his arms without more ado, he kissed her full on the lips.

"I'm no more patient than I should be," he said.

She flung away from him, pale and red by turns, struggling between anger and incomprehension.

"Oh!" she stammered at last. "That you could!"

She brushed the back of her hand across her lips and then her eyes blazing at him, turned and walked rigidly on her way. He watched her a moment, his anger cooling quickly, then caught the bridle of Clarissa who had taken advantage of this interlude to browse by the wayside. Cupid had fled!

Markham drove the beast before him and strode after, his eyes on the small figure which had almost reached the turn in the road. She walked with a quick stride, her head turning neither to the left nor right, but he knew that her gaze, fixed upon the road before her, still blazed with resentment. He goaded the donkey into a more rapid pace, but try as he might he could not come up with her, and so giving up the chase he let Clarissa choose her own gait, lighted a pipe to compose his spirit and followed leisurely in the steps of outraged dignity.

It was not until she came to a cross-roads that she stopped and waited for him. When he arrived with Clarissa, already chastened and even prepared for humility, she surprised him by smiling as though nothing had happened.

"Which way, Philidor?" she asked.

He had already seen the towers of Verneuil from the hilltops behind them and indicated.

"I'm sorry, Hermia," he said softly. "Will you forgive me?"

She shrugged. "Oh, it's of no consequence. I've been kissed before," she said.

His gaze was lowered, his jaw set.

"You provoked it--"

"Did I? I know now how you consider me. I did not believe you to be that kind of a man."

"What kind of a man?"

"The man of promiscuous gallantries."

"I'm not--"

She shrugged and turned away.

"Your record is against you."

He found no reply and she laughed at him.

"When I wish to be kissed," she said brazenly, "I usually find a way of letting men know it."

"You are speaking heresies," he said slowly. "That is not true."

"It is the truth, John Markham. But I did not choose your companionship for that purpose."

"No, no, don't!" he pleaded contritely. "I've never thought that of you. We've had a code of our own, Hermia--all our own. Last night you made me happy. I dreamed of you, child, that you cared for me and I--"

She halted suddenly, her slight figure barring the way, her eyes flashing furiously.

"We'll have no more of that nonsense," she cried. "Do you hear? When I ask for love--uncomplaining--unselfish, I know where to seek it." She reached up suddenly, snatched P re Gu gou's faded blossom from his button-hole and throwing it in the road, ground it under her heel. "The Order of the Golden Rose is not for you, Monsieur Philidor," she finished. And before he was really awake to the full extent of his disaster was again on her way.

They entered Verneuil in a procession, Hermia in the lead, the donkey following, and Philidor, now thoroughly disillusioned, bringing up the rear. He was thinking deeply, his gaze on the graceful lines of her intolerant back, aware that she had paid him in full for his temerity, and wondering in an aimless way how soon she would be taking the train for Paris. He had done what he could to atone but some instinct warned him against further contrition.

His judgment was excellent. As they entered the street of the town she stopped and waited for him to join her.

"You'll unpack my orchestra if you please," she said acidly. "I'm going through the town alone."

He laid his hand on the strap at which she was already fingering, his manner coolly assertive.

"No," he said quietly. "You'll not go alone. You're in my charge. Where you go, I go--unless of course"--and he pointed toward the railroad which passed nearby, "I put you on the train for Paris."

She had not expected that. She was powerless and knew it. Wide-eyed she sought his face, but he met her look squarely.

"I mean it," he said evenly. "You shall do what I say."

Her gaze flared angrily and then fell.

"Oh!" she stammered. "You would _dare_!"

"Your remedy--is yonder," he said firmly, pointing to the Gare.

Some loiterers, a few children and a stray dog had gathered about them. The dog, a puppy, barked at Clarissa and was promptly kicked for its precocity. The crowd laughed. This relaxed the tension of the situation.

"Come," said Markham, his hand on the donkey's halter. "This will never do. We will go on, please."

Hermia stood her ground a moment defiantly, her arms akimbo and then dumbly followed.

Markham led the way toward the market-place, where the crowds were gathered. The glance he stole at Hermia revealed a set expression, a cheek highly flushed and a lambent eye.

"If you would prefer not to perform to-day I will get you a room at an inn," he said gently.

But she raised her chin and looked at him with the narrow eye of contempt.

"You will get me nothing," she replied.

"Nothing but food," he replied. "We are now going to eat."

If scorn could kill, Philidor must have died at once. But she followed him to the Hotel Dieu, and nibbled silently at what he had ordered. His efforts to relieve the tension were unavailing so he gave it up and at last led the way to the market-place where Clarissa was unpacked and Yvonne donned her orchestra.

Business was good, though Philidor did the lion's share of it. The sound of Yvonne's drum speedily drew a crowd and Philidor got out his sketching block and went to work on the nearest onlooker, a peasant girl of eighteen, in Norman headgear. She demurred at first, but she was pretty and knew it, and Philidor's tongue was persuasive, his nervous crayon eloquent. He was at his best here, and when the sketch was done he gave it to her with his compliments. The girl's lover, a gardener from an estate nearby, showed it jubilantly from group to group, and Philidor's fame was again established.

It could not in any truth be said that Yvonne's orchestra was a symphonic success, for she jangled her mandolin horribly out of tune, and blew her mouth-organ atrociously. But whatever her performance lacked in artistry it made up in noise, her drum and cymbals awaking such a din that existence was unbearable within ten feet of them. Philidor went on with his portraits and was so absorbed that for at

least twenty minutes he neither saw nor heard what was going on about him. He had been aware of his companion's execrable performance a while ago, and now realized with a suddenness which surprised him that she played no more. He rose and peered about over the shoulders of his rustic admirers. Somebody directed his glance. There she was across the square, her orchestra dangling, talking to a gentleman. It was true; and plainly to be seen that the gentleman was Pierre de Folligny.

Philidor watched them uncertainly. A joke passed, they both laughed and the Frenchman indicated his quivering machine hard by. Then it was that Philidor went forth across the square, his brow a thundercloud. The girl cast a glance over her shoulder in his direction and then followed the Frenchman to his machine. Philidor's long stride made the distance quickly, and before the pair were seated, he stood beside them.

"Where are you going, Yvonne?" he asked quietly.

"Who knows?" she laughed. "To Paris, perhaps."

"Mademoiselle has consented to ride with me," said De Folligny coolly. "I trust we do not interfere with your plans."

Philidor's eyes sought only hers.

"You insist?" he asked of her.

She laughed at him.

"_Naturellement_."

The car had begun to move.

"One moment, Monsieur--"

De Folligny only smiled, put on the power and in a moment was speeding down the cobbled street, leaving Philidor staring after them, his head full of wild thoughts of pursuit, the most conspicuous dolt in all Verneuil.

But he did not care. He thrust his bony fists deep in his pockets and slowly made his way through the piles of vegetables back to Clarissa. He bundled his materials into his knapsack and quickly disappeared from the interested gaze of the bystanders, who had not scrupled to offer him both questions and advice.

He was quite helpless with the alternatives of sitting at the HTMtel Dieu to await developments or of hiring a car at the garage nearby and going on a wild-goose chase which, whether successful or unsuccessful, must end unprofitably. Hermia had paid him in strange coin. Could she afford it? He knew something of Pierre de Folligny. What did Hermia know? She was mad, of course. He had thought her mad before when she had volunteered with him for Vagabondia, but now-- What could he think of her now? There was a difference.

Even his pipe failed to advise him. He knocked it out and wandered forth, his footsteps taking him down the street through which the pair had fled. He followed it to its end, emerging presently on a country road which took the line of the railroad to the South. He did not know where he was going, and did not much care so long as he was doing something. His stride lengthened, his jaw was set, his gaze riveted on the spot where his road entered the forest. It would have fared ill with De Folligny if they had met at that moment. Persons who met him on the road turned to look at him and passed on. Lunatics were scarce along the Avre.

After a while his fury passed and he brought what reason he still

possessed to bear upon his topic. It was Hermia, not De Folligny who was to blame--Hermia, the mad, the irrepressible, whom he had roused from her idyl in their happy valley and driven forth, _t te baiss e_, upon this fool's errand--Hermia the tender, the tempestuous, the gentle, the precipitate, because of whose wild pranks he, John Markham, Dean of the College of Celibates, now stalked the highroads of France, the victim of his own philosophy.

Fool that he was! Thrice a fool for having stumbled to his fate, open-eyed. Last night she had laughed at him. To-day she mocked him still--with De Folligny.

His responsibilities oppressed him. He must find her and bring this mad pilgrimage to an end. To-morrow--to-night, perhaps he would put her on a train which would take her back to the people of her own kind. For he would go upon his way--his own way, which he was not sure could no longer be hers.

Emerging from the forest the road took a sharp turn away from the railroad tracks down hill and across a level plain. From the slight eminence upon which he stood, his road lay straight as a string before him, its length visible for almost a mile. Near its end he saw a dark object at the side of the road. A wagon? Or was it a motor? This was the way De Folligny had come, for there had been no turnings. He hurried on, his gaze on the distant object which grew nearer at every step. He was sure of one thing now, that the object had not moved--of two things--that it was not a motor. And yet there was something familiar about it. A wagon it was--a wagon with a roof, its end showing a window which caught the reflection of the sky--a house wagon, and near it, phantom-like against the dim foliage, a shaggy gray horse; to the right, the white smoke of a newly made fire rising among the trees. It was the _roulotte_ of the Fabiani family and there in the woods was his friend of a night, Cleofonte, the incomparable.

He had almost made out the bulk of figures near the fire when from the hedge beside the road there came sounds of tinkling bells and a small wraith in red and blue rose like a Phoenix from the dust and confronted him with outstretched hands.

"You are late, Philidor. I've been waiting at least half an hour."

"You've been--_what?_"

"Waiting for you," coolly. "What kept you so long?"

He looked at her as though sure that one of them must have lost his sense.

"Where is De Folligny?" he growled.

"How should _I_ know?"

He took her by the elbows and looked into her eyes.

"He has gone?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"N-nothing."

She met his eyes with a clear gaze--a whimsical smile twisting her lips.

"You know, Philidor," she said quietly, "I don't like to be kissed

unless--unless--"

She stopped and slowly disengaged her elbows from his grasp, "Unless I _want_ to be kissed."

He searched her face anxiously.

"He--he kissed you?" he snapped savagely.

"Almost--"

"Did he?"

"No." She smiled up at him. "You see," amusedly, "every time he put his arm around me the drum and cymbals played. It quite disconcerted him." But Philidor found no amusement in her recital.

"How do you happen to be here?"

His tone was still querulous. She looked at him calmly and after a pause she answered evenly.

We were driving slowly. I saw the _routlotte_ and recognized it at once. So I switched off the magneto of his machine--I don't know what he thought--but he looked at me as though he believed I had gone suddenly mad, and, while he still wondered, I jumped."

"And then?"

Hermia laughed softly. "He swore at me. 'You little devil,' he cried, 'how did you happen to do that?'"

"My elbow slipped,' said I, from the roadside.

"Your elbow! _Ma foi_, you have educated elbows!"

"That's true, I should not play the cymbals else."

"Cymbals! Who taught you to run a machine?"

"The _bon Dieu!_' said I, and fled to the Signora."

She laughed gaily. "Oh, he didn't follow. I think he understood that there had been a mistake. He watched me a moment and then got out, cranked his car thoughtfully, and went on in a cloud of dust-- And that--that's all," she finished.

Markham looked down the road, his narrowed eyes slowly relaxing and a smile growing under his small mustache.

"O Hermia,--what a frolic you've had! I feared--" He paused.

"What?"

"Anything--everything. You had no right--"

She raised a warning finger.

"We'll speak of it no more, Philidor," she said quietly.

His anger flared and died; for her eyes were soft with friendship, gentleness and compassion, and her bent head begged forgiveness. She had been unreasonable and would make him unhappy no more. All those things he read. It was quite wonderful.

She led him through the bushes to the fire where the Signora and Stella made him welcome with their kindest smiles and the _bambino_ cried lustily. Cleofonte and Luigi presently emerged from the forest where they had gone in search of wood and deposited their loads by the fireside. They all made merry as befitted good comrades of the road,

once more reunited, and when Philidor suggested going back to Verneuil for the night the jovial strong man would not have it, nor would Yvonne. So Luigi was dispatched on the gray horse to the town for Clarissa and the pack, but not until Philidor had privily given him some instructions and a piece of money which opened his sleepy eyes a trifle wider and increased the dimension of his smile.

When he returned later with both animals laden with packages deep was the joy and great the astonishment of the caravaners. With an air of mystery Luigi proudly laid his packages out in a row beside the fire and Yvonne opened them one by one, disclosing a chicken, a ham, three loaves of bread, butter, two cheeses, some marmalade, a quart of milk, a pound of coffee, a pound of tea, a tin of crackers and two bottles of wine.

"_Jesu mio!_" said Cleofonte, his eyes starting from his head. "It is beyond belief."

"To-night you dine with me--with us," laughed Philidor with a glance at Yvonne. They all took a hand in preparing the meal, which was to be magnificent. Luigi built another fire for the chicken which was to be roasted on a spit, and the coffee pot was soon simmering.

Yvonne made toast, Philidor cut the ham, the Signora made vegetable soup, and Stella hurried back and forth from the wagon, bringing the slender supply of dishes and utensils.

When all was ready they sat and ate as though they had never eaten before and were never to eat again. The wine was passed and drunk by turns from two broken tumblers and two tin cups, the only vessels available for both the wine and coffee, and healths were merrily pledged. Cleofonte swore an undying friendship for Philidor. Were they not both great artists--of different _m tiers_, but each great in his own profession? The world should know it. He, Cleofonte, would proclaim it. And the Signora Fabiani--she and the Signora were already sisters. They must all travel together. There was enough food for an army to eat. It would last a week at the very least.

Philidor was content. And when the others had cleared away what remained of their feast and brought out the blankets, Yvonne sat for a long while by the fire with Philidor, who smoked and talked of many things. But the train to Paris no longer interested him.

CHAPTER XIX

MOUNTEBANKS

They reached Alençon at the end of the third day. Soon after leaving Verneuil their road mounted a rocky country of robust wooded hills, cleft by gorges and defiles, the uplands of the Perche and Normandie, from the crests of which the pilgrims had a generous view of the whole of the Orne. On the first day the company had dined at St. Maurice and supped and slept near Tourouvre, in the heart of a primeval forest of oaks and pines. Philidor and Yvonne had followed close upon the steps of Tomasso the bear, keeping, so to speak, under the shadow of Cleofonte's protecting wing. There was a difference in their relations, indefinable yet quite obvious to them both, a reserve on Philidor's part, marked by consideration and deference; on Yvonne's a gentleness and amiability which showed him how companionable she could be. Indeed, her docility was nothing short of alarming, and Philidor was ever on his guard against a new outbreak which, he was sure, was to be expected at any moment. But she cajoled him no more. Perhaps she understood him better now. Who knows? He spoke no more of love, nor were the roses of P^ré-Gou again

mentioned.

At Mortagne, which they had reached upon the second day, Philidor and Yvonne had a first view of a public performance of the Fabiani family, for, the conditions being agreeable, Cleofonte had pitched their camp within the limits of the town, and a crowd, augmented by Yvonne and her orchestra, had made their visit profitable. Yvonne had slept that night at a small *_auberge_*, her bed and board paid for with money she had made, and Philidor, who complained of a lack of sitters, slept quite comfortably near Clarissa in a stable.

In the morning Yvonne had made some purchases in the town--and later they had caught up with their friends near La Mesle, along the Sarthe, down which their road descended by easy stages to their destination.

Alençon was in holiday garb and the tricolor flaunted bravely from many poles, though the beginning of the fête was not until to-morrow. The streets were gay with people, the market-place showed a number of booths, tents and canvas enclosures within which performances were already in progress. The Fabiani family was late in arriving, but a spot was found, between the sword-swallower and the Circassian lady, which suited Cleofonte's purpose. So the *_routlotte_* was backed into place and Cleofonte, his coat off, his brows beading, directed the erection of the canvas barrier within which the performances were to be given. For let it be understood the Fabianis were no common mountebanks for whom one passed a hat. There was to be a gate through which one only passed upon the payment of ten sous, and within were to be benches upon which one could sit in luxury while he beheld these marvels of the age. Philidor and Yvonne helped, too, getting out the canvas which had been rolled and fastened beneath the wagon, and the uprights which supported it. Not satisfied with the sign which was to be fastened over the entrance, Philidor sought out a paint shop and before dark painted two great posters three metres in height;--one of them depicting Cleofonte with bulging muscles (real pink muscles that one felt like pinching) in the act of breaking into bits with his bare hands a great iron chain; the other showing the child Stella being tossed in the air from Cleofonte to Luigi, her heels and head almost touching. By sunset the paintings were finished and fastened in place, and when Cleofonte lit the torches upon either side of the entrance gate, the folk who were passing stopped in wonder to gaze. There were to be no performances to-night, Cleofonte explained, the company was weary; but to-morrow--! He pause and the magnificence with which his huge fist tapped his deep chest were eloquence itself.

Their work done for the night, Philidor set off post haste in search of quarters for Yvonne; but the inns were full and it was too late to search elsewhere. So he bought a truss of straw and one of hay (for Clarissa and the shaggy phantom) and brought them to the *_roulotte_* upon his back. The night was mild, and so he made Yvonne's bed and his own within the enclosure, and amid a babel of sounds, above which the barrel organ of the carousel near by wheezed tremulously, they dropped upon the blankets, dead tired, and fell asleep at once.

The sun was not long in the heavens before the barrel organ, silenced at midnight, renewed its plaint and the business of the day began. After an early breakfast Cleofonte and Luigi retired to the dressing tent, emerging after a while in gorgeous costumes of pink fleshings and spangles, their hair well greased with pomatum, their mustachios elaborately curled. The Signora and Stella soon followed, their hair wreathed in tight braids around their heads. The *_bambino_*, neglected, was howling lustily, so Yvonne took him in her lap upon the straw and soothed him to slumber while the carpet was laid and the impediments of the athletes brought out and placed near by for the day's work.

More than anything else in the world, Yvonne longed for a bath, but she

suppressed this desire as unworthy of a true vagabond and washed in a bucket of water which Philidor had brought from the pump, sharing at the last in the suppressed excitement which pervaded the arena. There was no doubt in the minds of any that the Troupe Fabiani was to be the great success of the occasion. The duties and destinies of all its members had already been explained and decided. A girl was hired to care for the *_bambino_*. Yvonne was to beat her drum and play her orchestra on the platform outside, and this would attract the people, already anxious to behold the wonders within, a foretaste of which would be given, when the crowd gathered, by Cleofonte, who would lift a few heavy weights and introduce the Signora, the Child Wonder, and Tomasso, the bear. Philidor was to keep the gate and between the performances was to make portraits of those who desired them. Their organization was perfection. Cleofonte was at his best when in the executive capacity.

At nine o'clock Hermia mounted the platform (a piano box turned on its side) and began to thump the drum and cymbals. Her position was conspicuous and she began a little uncertainly, for it was one thing to choose one's audience among the simple folk of the countryside, another to face the kind of crowd which now gathered to gaze up at her--peasants, horse-fanciers, shop people, clerks on a holiday, with here and there a person of less humble station, but she bent to her work with a will, encouraged by the example of the Circassian lady next to her who was selling in brown bottles an elixir which was a cure for all things except love and the goiter. The sword-swallower next to her was already busy, and the *_Homme Sauvage_*, a hirsute person, whose unprofessional mien was both kind and peaceable (as Yvonne had discovered unofficially last night), was roaring horribly, at two sous the head, in his enclosure near by.

The wooden horses of the *_manège_*, upon which some children and a few soldiers from the garrison were riding, were already whirling on their mad career.

While Yvonne played, Cleofonte and Philidor "barked." That is, they proclaimed in loud tones the prodigies that were to be disclosed and that the performance was about to begin; to the end that, in a little while, coppers and centime pieces jingled merrily in Philidor's coat pocket, the benches were filled and a crowd two deep stood behind. This augured well. Cleofonte beamed as he counted noses, and the performance began.

Yvonne played a lively air while Tomasso was put through his paces, walking with a stick and turning somersaults, and at the end Cleofonte put on a heavy coat to keep himself from being torn by the savage claws of the beast and wrestled for some minutes with Tomasso, making the act more realistic by straining from side to side and puffing violently while Tomasso clung on, his muzzle sniffing the air, to be finally dragged down upon his master and proclaimed the victor. The applause from this part of the program was allowed to die and a dignified pause ensued, after which the signora appeared in her famous juggling act, unmindful of the cries of the *_bambino_* from the *_roulotte_* in active rebellion against the substitute. During Stella's performance, which followed, the orchestra played jerkily and then stopped, for Yvonne had never yet succeeded in looking on at the child's contortions without a pang of the heart. But the act went smoothly enough, and the entertainment, which lasted nearly an hour, concluded with Cleofonte's exhibition of prowess and the stone-breaking episode of which he was so justly proud.

The receipts were four hundred sous--twenty francs--and there were to be six performances a day! Well might Cleofonte wring Philidor by the hand and pay him over the five francs which he and Hermia had earned! There were no portraits to do, so Philidor sat at the entrance with

Yvonne until the time for the next performance. It was tiresome work and the breathing space was welcome enough. To Philidor his companion seemed already weary. But when he suggested that perhaps they had better take to the road again she shook her head.

"No, no. I've reached the soul of things--felt the pulse-beats of humanity. I delight with Cleofonte, suffer with Stella. I'm learning to live, that's all."

"I thought you looked a little tired," he said gently.

"I am tired--but not mind-tired, heart-tired, spirit-tired as I once was. My elbows ache and there's a raw place on my shoulder, but it's an honorable scar and I'll wear it. And I sleep, O Philidor, I never knew the luxury of sleep such as mine."

"I don't want you to be ill."

"I can do my share," she finished steadily, "if Stella can."

Toward three o'clock of the afternoon Yvonne mounted her piano box. The Fabiani family had been so well received that once it had been necessary for Philidor to draw the flap at the gate because there was no room in the enclosure for more people. As the time for the beginning of the fourth performance drew near, a crowd had again gathered, listening to the *Femme Orchestre* and moving in groups of two and three toward the entrance where Philidor in the intervals between announcements pocketed their coins and watched Yvonne. This last occupation was one in which of late he had taken great delight. Her costume, as Monsieur de Folligny had also discovered, became her admirably, the sun and wind had tanned her face and arms to a rich warmth, and this color made the blue of her eyes the more tender. The lines he had discovered in her face were absent now, for it was the business of a *Femme Orchestre* to smile.

Cleofonte had come out and was looking over the crowd with an appraising eye, adding his own voice to the din as Philidor paused for breath, when in the midst of a lively air the music stopped--stopped so suddenly that Philidor turned to see what the matter was. Yvonne gave one startled glance over the crowd, then jumped down behind the box and, unslinging her orchestra as she dropped, literally dove under the canvas flap and disappeared. Philidor, who was in the act of making change, called Cleofonte to take his place and went inside, to find that Yvonne had fled behind the wagon.

"What is it?" he asked, alarmed. "Are you ill?"

"No, no," breathlessly. "Olga! I saw her. She's out there."

It was Philidor's turn to be perturbed. "Olga Tcherny! You must be mistaken."

"I'm not. I wish I was. I saw her plainly--and the Renauds, Madeleine de Cahors and Chandler Cushing. O Philidor, they mustn't see me here!" She seized his arm and looked up into his eyes appealingly.

His brows drew downward and he glanced toward the entrance.

"They wouldn't come in here."

"They might--"

He glanced irresolutely about him and then opened the door of the *roulotte* and helped her up the steps.

"Stay there-and lock the door."

He paused a moment, his hand on the doorknob, looking over the head of the audience toward the entrance flap, where Cleofonte, oblivious of the tragedy which threatened the newer members of his family, still shouted hoarsely. Philidor stopped in the dressing tent and spoke a few words to the Signora, made his way across the arena, peering over Cleofonte's shoulder, and then, his course of action chosen, slipped quickly into his accustomed place outside.

"_Dix sous, Messieurs et Dames!" he shouted. "The greatest act of this or any age--the _Famille Fabiani_, the world renowned acrobats, jugglers and strong man! Six great acts of skill and strength, any one of which is worth the price of admission! _Entrez, Mesdames_, and see the fight between Signor Cleofonte, the strongest man in the world, and the savage bear captured from the forests of Siberia! A contest which thrills the blood--for in spite of the great strength of the Signor--which has been compared to that of Samson, who once fought and conquered, single handed, a lion (smiles of approval from Cleofonte at the eloquence of this comparison), in spite of the great strength of the Signor--I say--the danger of his destruction is ever present, as any one who has seen the contest can testify. Come one, come all, _Messieurs_, only once in a lifetime does one have a chance to see the Signorina Stella Fabiani, the child wonder, Queen of the Mat and Queen of the Air, in her extraordinary acts of flight and contortion--"

During this harangue Philidor had felt rather than seen the figure which had slowly wedged through the crowd at one side and now stood beside him. He knew that it was Olga Tcherny, but he had not dared to look at her, though he was quite sure that her head was perched on one side in the birdlike pose she found effective, and that her eyes, mocking and mischievous, were searching him intently. But he went on extravagantly, searching his wits for Barnum-like adjectives.

"_Entrez, Messieurs_, and see the beautiful female Juggler of Naples, who tosses ten sharp knives and burning brands into the air at one and the same time, not lets one of them touch the ground--who tosses a cannon ball, an apple and a piece of paper--who spins two dishes on the end of a stick, with one hand, while she rolls a hoop with the other--a lady who has acted before all of the crowned heads of Europe. There will never again be such great artists, a performance unsurpassed and even unequalled in the history of the Oire."

Philidor's adjectives had given out--as had his breath--and so he paused. As he did so he heard Olga's voice beside him in a single but curiously expressive syllable.

"Well?" it asked.

His eyes met hers without other token of recognition than a slight twinkle of amusement.

"Mademoiselle wishes to enter? Ten sous, if you please." And then with a loud voice directed over her head, "_Entrez, Messieurs et Dames_, and see the hand to hand struggle between a man and a savage beast! A contest at once magnificent and appalling--one which you will remember to the end of your days, a spectacle to describe to your children and to your children's children--"

[Illustration: "Philidor had felt rather than seen the figure which had slowly wedged through the crowd."]

"John Markham!" Olga's voice sounded shrilly in English. "Stop howling at once and listen to me."

"_Oui, Mademoiselle_, ten sous, if you please. The performance is about to begin and--"

"This performance has been going on quite long enough. What on earth are you doing here in Alençon?"

"Barking," said Markham with a grin. "Also doing crayon portraits at two francs fifty a head," and he pointed to the sign beside the poster of Cleofonte breaking the chains which advertised the nature of his talents in glowing terms. "My name is Philidor, Mademoiselle," bowing; "itinerant portrait painter--at your service."

"Oh, do stop that nonsense and explain--"

"There's nothing to explain. Here I am. That's all."

"How did you get here--to Alençon?"

"Walked--it's my custom."

"Rom Rouen?"

He nodded. "I'm a member of the Troupe Fabiani of Strolling Acrobats," he laughed. "I'm learning the gentle art of bear-baiting. Won't you come in?"

She searched his face keenly and accepted his invitation, first handing him her fifty centime piece, which he dropped without comment into his pocket. The enclosure was already filled, so he closed the entrance flap and mounted guard over it--and Olga stood beside him, her glance passing swiftly from one object to another. Cleofonte's bout with Tomasso was more than usually dramatic, but her eyes roved toward the dressing tent, eyeing with an uncommon interest the Signora when she appeared.

"Your troupe is not large," Olga remarked when the program had been explained to her.

"No, we are few, my dear Olga, but quite select. You have yet to see Luigi perform and the Child Wonder--and the _Femme Orchestre_--a remarkable person who plays five instruments at the same time."

Olga watched the show for a while with an abstracted air.

"You surely can't mean that you enjoy this sort of thing?" she questioned at last.

He laughed. "I do mean just that--otherwise I shouldn't be here, should I?"

"Oh, you're impossible!" she said impatiently.

"I know it," she laughed with a shrug, "and the worst of it is that I'm quite shameless about it."

He was really an extraordinary person. She couldn't help wondering how it was that she could have cared for him at all, and yet she was quite sure that he had never seemed more interesting to her than at this moment. But it was quite evident that she did not believe him. The performance was soon over, the people crowded toward the entrance, Olga, alone at last, remaining. Indeed, she was making herself very much at home, and to Philidor's chagrin insisted upon examining the Signora's knives and torches, the heavy weights of Cleofonte, the chains and the larger fragments of the stone which Luigi had broken on Cleofonte's chest. It was all very interesting. Then she sat upon a

bench, her glance still roving restlessly, lighting at last upon the house wagon.

"And that," she indicated, "is where you sleep?"

"Not I. That's for the women. I sleep out when I can--indoors when I must."

Still she gazed at it, and while Philidor, his inquietude rapidly growing, watched her keenly, she rose and walked slowly around the _roulette_, peering under it where the dogs lay chained, and up at its small windows and door as though fascinated by a new and interesting study of contemporary ethnology.

The active members of the Fabiani family had all retired to the dressing tent and were occupied in the preliminaries to supper. Philidor's mind was working rapidly, but, think as he would, nothing occurred to him which might effectually serve to stem the tide of his visitor's dangerous curiosity. She paused before the door, looking upward, and Philidor watched the window fearfully.

"It seems absurdly small for so many people. A baby, too, you said?" she asked coolly.

"Oh, yes, there are beds," he said; "two of them--quite comfortable, I believe."

"I'm awfully anxious to see what it's like inside. The Signora wouldn't mind, I'm sure--" She put one foot on the steps and reached up for the knob.

It was locked he knew, for there was a key on the inside, but the knowledge of that fact did nothing to decrease his alarm.

"Oh, I wouldn't bother," he muttered helplessly. "There's nothing--"

But before he could move she had stepped up and with a quick movement had flung the door wide open.

Philidor closed his eyes a second, praying for a miracle, then followed Olga's gaze within. The beds were there, the shelves of dishes, the racks of clothing, but of Hermia there was no sign. How the miracle had happened Philidor knew not, unless she had gone through the roof, but with the discovery his courage returned to him in a gush, and when Olga's eyes keenly sought his face he was calmly smoking. Just at this moment a sound was heard, of merry, rippling laughter, light and mocking, which had a familiar ring. Olga looked around quickly toward the spot behind her from which the sounds seemed to come, her gaze meeting nothing but the canvas wall. They heard the sounds again, this time faintly, as though receding in the distance overhead. It was most extraordinary. She glanced toward the dressing tent from which the Signora was just emerging.

"Would you like to visit the green room?" asked Philidor, amusedly directing the way. "We are happy family, as you will see."

"Who was laughing, John Markham?" asked his visitor.

His eyes were blanks.

"Laughing? I don't know. Everyone laughs here. Stella perhaps--or the Circassian lady?"

She shook her head, still eyeing him narrowly, but he only smoked composedly and, after looking into the tent, threw open the flaps with

a generous gesture and invited her to enter. Cleofonte and Luigi were counting their money, but when the title of their visitor was announced, rose and bowed to the ground. It was seldom that the Fabiani family had been done so great an honor.

Olga returned his compliments with others quite as graceful upon the quality of the performance she had witnessed, but her eyes, as Philidor saw, were still roving carelessly but with nice observance of minuti³/₄, taking in every object in sight. Upon the ground in the corner where it had been thrown lay a drum and cymbals fastened to a framework of wire and straps.

Philidor grew unquiet.

"How curious!" she exclaimed, examining the contrivance.

"It is the music," put in the Signora pleasantly, "of our _Femme Orchestre_. She is ill. We were forced to leave her yesterday at La Mesle. To-morrow she will play again. The Contessa will hear her, perhaps?"

Philidor breathed gratefully. A firmer hand than his now controlled their destinies. Olga searched the Signora's face, which was as innocent as that of the _bambino_.

"_Grazia, Signora_," she returned politely; "perhaps I shall."

Philidor accompanied her to the gate, reassured and jocular.

"How long are you going to persist in this foolishness?" she asked at last irritably.

"Who knows?" he laughed. "I think I've struck my proper level. Did you see my posters?" he asked, pointing proudly. "Great, aren't they?"

"They're disgusting," said Olga.

He smiled good-humoredly. "That's too bad. I'm sorry. I thought you'd like 'em."

She only shrugged contemptuously.

"And this is your Valhalla?" she sniffed. "A kingdom of charlatans, and tinsel and clap-trap, of fricassees and onions, and greasy mendicants. Ugh! You're rather overdoing the simple life, Monsieur er--Philidor. You're very ragged and--ah--a trifle soiled."

"Outwardly only, _ch re_ Olga," he laughed. "Inwardly my soul is lily-white."

"I'm not so sure of that. No one's soul can be lily-white whose beard is two weeks old. Also, _mon ami_, you look half famished."

"My soul--" he began.

"Your stomach!" she broke in. "Come with me. At least I'm going to see you properly fed."

"You're awfully kind, but--"

"You refuse?"

"I must--besides, you could hardly expect me to appear at your house party in these."

She turned on her heel and walked away from him.

"I hardly expect you ever to do anything that I want you to do."

"But, Olga,--"

Without turning her head she disappeared in the crowd.

CHAPTER XX

THE EMPTY HOUSE

Markham stood for a moment watching the white plume of Olga Tcherny's huge straw hat until it nodded its way out of sight. Then he turned back just in time to note a disturbance of the canvas barrier, from under which, her slouch hat pushed down over her ears, her gray coat hiding her finery, Hermia breathlessly emerged.

"I've never had such a fright since I was born," she laughed nervously. "She won't come back?"

"I think not."

He helped her to her feet. "It's lucky you weren't in the _roulotte_."

"Not luck--forethought. I knew she'd never be content until she'd seen the inside of that wagon. She expected to find _me_ there."

"You! She saw you--outside?"

"No--I'll take my oath on that--you see, I saw her first. But she expected to find me there just the same. I can't tell you why--a woman guesses these things. I watched her. She's a deep one." She laughed again. "I wouldn't have her find me here for anything in the world." She suddenly laid her hand on his arm. "Philidor! we must go on--at once."

"But you're tired--"

"I'd be in a worse plight if I were identified--by Olga."

He paused a moment, and then, pointing to the dressing tent, turned swiftly and went out, examining the street between the booths, and then, with a pretence of looking to the fastening of the uprights, carelessly made the round outside the barrier. An atmosphere of peace pervaded the encampment and an odor of cooking food. The crowd had scattered and of Olga, or Olga's party, he saw nothing.

A wail went up in the dressing tent when Hermia announced her decision. What should Cleofonte do without her? It was she who attracted the crowds--the eloquence of Monsieur Philidor which drew them within the arena. Never in their lives had the Fabiani family enjoyed such success. And now--that the Signor and Signora should go! It was unthinkable--unbelievable! Cleofonte could not permit it. But Yvonne was obdurate. There were reasons--the Signor would understand that--which made this decision inevitable. They must go--at once, as soon as the night had fallen.

The first shock over, Cleofonte clasped his hands over his knees and stared gloomily at the tent flap. If the Signora could have stopped in Alen on but two days more. He, Cleofonte, would have paid ten francs a performance--anything to keep them there. Signora Fabiani moved silently about her tasks, but her eyes were deep with wisdom. What she was thinking, Philidor knew not, nor did Yvonne set the matter

straight. It was necessary to go--that was all. It was very sad and made Yvonne unhappy, but she had, unfortunately, no choice in the matter. When it was clearly to be seen that the decision was unalterable, Cleofonte jingled his bag of coppers and sighed, Luigi scowled at vacancy and Stella unreservedly wept.

"We could have made two thousand francs," muttered Cleofonte.

"More than that," said Luigi the silent, "three thousand."

"There will be no longer pleasure in the _d carcasse_ when the music ceases to play," sobbed Stella.

Yvonne put her arms around the child and kissed her gently.

"We shall meet again--soon, _cara mia_."

"I know--in Heaven," cried Stella, refusing to be comforted.

"We shall find you again, child, never fear," said Yvonne.

Stella's eyes brightened. "Then you _will_ return?"

Yvonne patted her cheek softly.

"Have I not said I will see you again, _carissima_?" she finished.

After supper Philidor went forth and bought supplies which were packed securely upon Clarissa, together with Philidor's knapsack and other personal belongings. Hermia changed her gay apparel for a shirtwaist and dark skirt, and when dusk fell, after a reconnaissance by Luigi, the back of the canvas barrier was raised and the trio quietly departed and were swallowed up in the shadows of a back street.

The weather so far still favored them, but the night was murky and high overhead the clouds were flying fast. Their road, and they chose the first one which led them forth of the town, wound up between a row of hedges and pollard trees to an eminence from which, when they paused for breath, they had a view of the lights of the town. The _man ge_ whirled and the barrel organ still wheezed its thin thread of sound across the still air. The _Homme Sauvage_ was roaring again and the deep voice of Cleofonte, their late partner and companion, was heard at intervals in his familiar plaint. There was a fascination in the lights and in the medley of noises--each of which had come to possess an interest and a personality--for behind them were the pale road and the inhospitable darkness.

"It seems a pity to leave them," said Hermia, thinking of Stella, "when we were doing so well. I shall regret the _roulotte_."

John Markham smiled.

"It's time we were moving, then," he said. "Your true vagabond wants no roots--even in a _roulotte_--nor regrets anything."

"I can't forgive Olga for this. I consider her most intrusive, impertinent--"

Markham had laid warning fingers upon her arm. A moment ago on the hill below them a man's figure had been in silhouette against the lights. At the sound of their voices it had suddenly disappeared. They stood in silence for a moment, watching, but the figure did not reappear.

"That was curious. I was mistaken, perhaps," said Markham. "Come, we

must go on."

They turned their backs resolutely to the light and in a moment had passed over the brow of the hill and were alone under the wan light of the darkening heavens. They had not traveled by night before and the obscurity closed in upon them shrouded in mystery. But as they emerged from beneath the trees their eyes became accustomed to the darkness and they followed the road cheerfully enough, determined to put as many kilometers as possible between themselves and the threatening white plume of Olga Tcherny which seemed in the last few hours to have achieved an appalling significance. At first Markham had been disposed to laugh at Hermia's fears. What reason in the world could Olga have had to suspect Hermia's share in his innocent pilgrimage? Of his own tastes she had of course been ready to believe anything, and he had had ample proof that she thoroughly disapproved of his present mode of living. Nor was that a matter which could affect a great deal their personal relations, which were already strained to the point of tolerance. But as to his companion--that was another affair. He had never understood the intuitions of women and thought them more often shrewd guesswork in which they were as likely to be wrong as right. But the more he considered what Hermia had said to him, the more definite became the impression that Olga Tcherny had fallen upon some clue to Hermia's whereabouts--that she had expected to find her--as Hermia had said--in Cleofonte's house-wagon. He knew something of Olga and had a wholesome respect for her intelligence. If it was to her interest to prove Hermia his companion on this mad pilgrimage, it was clearly to Hermia's interest to prove her own non-existence. As Hermia had suggested, her intrusiveness was impertinent, and Markham mentally added the adjectives "ruthless" and "indecent." He had been almost ready to add "vengeful," but could not really admit, even to himself, that she had anything to be vengeful about.

Whatever Hermia's further thoughts upon the subject, for the present she kept them to herself. They walked along as rapidly as Clarissa's gait would allow, for the tiny beast, never precipitate at the best of times, found the darkness little to her liking and pattered along with evident reluctance, mindful of the truss of hay only half eaten which she had left under Cleofonte's hospitable lights.

At a turn in the road Markham determined to verify his suspicions of a while ago, and accordingly drew Clarissa among some bushes, and, stick in hand, awaited the approach of the shadow which he was sure still hung upon their trail. Distant objects were dimly discernible, and Markham had almost decided that he had been mistaken when the crackling of a twig at no great distance advised him that in the shadow of the hedge someone was approaching. He remained quiet until a man slowly emerged from the shadows, when he stepped quickly out of his hiding place and confronted him.

Markham's six feet were menacing, and his pursuer stopped in his tracks, eyeing Markham's stick, undecided as to whether it were the best policy to face the thing out or take to his heels. As Markham's legs were longer than his, he chose the former and made a brave enough show of indifference, though his tongue wagged uncertainly.

"_B-bon soir, Monsieur_," he stammered. "_Il fait beau--_"

But Markham was in no mood to pass compliments upon the weather.

"What are you following me for?" he growled.

"Follow you, Monsieur? I do not comprehend," said the man.

"I'll aid your understanding, then. You followed us up the hill out of Alen on. I saw you. Well, here I am. What do you want?"

"The road of the Oire are free," he answered sullenly, gaining courage.

"Perhaps they are. But no man with honest business slinks along the hedges. You go your way, do you hear?"

"The road of France are free," the man muttered again.

Markham quickly struck a match, and, before the man could turn away, had looked into his face. He wore the cap and blouse of a chauffeur and his legs were encased in the black puttees of his craft. Olga's ambassador was unworthy of her.

"Well, you go back to those who sent you here and say with the compliments of Monsieur Philidor that the roads of the Perche are dangerous after dark. I've every right to break your head, and if I meet you again I'll do it. Comprenez?"

The man eyed Markham's stick dubiously again and then, with a glance toward the pair in the bushes, silently walked away. They watched him until he was lost in the shadows of the trees.

"You see," said Markham, "I was right. But I can't understand it. Why should Olga--?"

Hermia was laughing softly.

"Don't tell me you're as stupid as that."

He took Clarissa by the halter and led the way into the road again.

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly.

"I mean, mon ami, that you have aroused in Olga's breast a dangerous emotion. She decided some time ago to marry you. Didn't you know that? It's quite true. She told me so."

"Told you?"

"Not in words. Oh, no. Olga never tells anything important to anyone. But she told me so just the same. I know."

"Nonsense. She's a coquette. I've always understood that, but to marry--!"

"Precisely that--nothing else. She's madly in love with you, my poor friend. She has never failed to bring a man to her feet when she made up her mind to. The deduction is obvious."

There was no need of daylight to see the expression on her companion's face. Hermia could read it in the dark.

"What you say is highly unimportant," he said with attempt at a smile.

"And because she desires to make me--er--her husband she employs persons to follow me along the byways of France?"

"Oh, no. Not to follow you, my friend. Me. You are merely the bone of contention. I am the impudent terrier who has interfered with the peace of her repast."

"Impossible. She doesn't even know you're out of Paris. How can she know?"

"Now you're delving into the intricacies of the feminine mind--an occupation to which you're as little suited as Clarissa--and she's a woman. You must take my word for it. Olga has often amazed me by the

accuracy of her intuitions. I have imagined that where her own interests were involved they would be nothing short of miraculous. She is quite as sure that I am your companion moment as though she had seen me in the Signor Cleofonte's _roulotte_."

"Then if she is so sure," he asked with excellent logic, "why should she make so much bother about it?"

Hermia laughed. "The mere fact that she _is_ making a bother about it is significance in itself. She'll find me if she can and confront me with the damning fact of your presence in my society."

"And precious little good that would do her," he put in rather brutally.

"Or me," said Hermia gravely. "Hell hath no hatred--_et cetera_. You've spurned her, Philidor,--in spirit, if not in letter. Get her the chance and she will pillory me in the market-place."

Markham went along in silence, his earlier impressions confirmed by argument, sure that the chance of discovery must be avoided at all hazards. A watch of the road had revealed no sign of the stealthy chauffeur, but that argued nothing. He was an obstinate little animal, evidently quite capable, since his discomfiture, of following the adventure through to its end. They must outmaneuver him. Presently Markham discovered what he had been looking for--a path hardly perceptible in the darkness, which led through the bushes and promised immunity. They followed it silently, pausing for a while to listen for sounds of pursuit, and at last, with minds relieved, if not quite certain, plodded on into the obscurity. They had entered, it seemed, an aisle of a forest which stretched, darkly impenetrable, on either side. Before them, blackness, darkness within dark, like a cave, a smell of dampness like a dungeon. The sky lightened for a moment and they saw the shape of leaves and tree fronds far above them like a pattern on a carpet--a pattern which changed with elflike witchery, for a wind had blown up and sounded about them with the roar of a distant sea, rising now and then in a mighty crescendo, like the boom of a nearer wave upon the shore. The tree tops swayed and joined in the splendid diapason. Nature breathed deeply.

Markham led the way, his hand upon Clarissa's bridle, peering along their slender trail, while Hermia, all her senses keenly alive to the witchery of the night, followed closely, casting timorous glances over her shoulder into the murky gloom, in which she fancied she could discern the shapes of pursuers. Once thinking she had heard a sound behind her, she caught Markham's arm and they stopped, breathless, and listened, but they heard nothing in the rushing blackness but the complaint of an owl and the crash of a dead limb at a distance to their right. A drop of rain fell on Markham's hand. Their prospect was not pleasant. Markham struck a match under his coat and looked at his watch. It was one o'clock. They had been walking for four hours. He tried to focus his eyes upon the blackness. This path must lead somewhere--a shed even would serve them if it rained harder. The brief glimpse he had of Hermia's face showed it pale and dark-eyed with a look he had never discovered in it before, not of fear, for fear he had begun to believe was foreign to her. The light had cut them off for a moment from the rest of the world, or rather had made more definite the little world of their own, but Hermia's eyes still peered over her shoulder, distended and alert. She was on the defensive, ready for headlong flight, like a naiad startled.

"I'm sorry, Hermia. You're dead tired--aren't you?"

"Yes, I--I am--a little," she said quietly.

"We've traveled almost far enough. We must have come a mile at least

into this forest. It seems limitless."

He peered about, taking a few steps forward along the path, which widened here. The trees, too, were further apart, and a larger patch of the windy sky was visible. Hermia followed, guiding the donkey. They emerged into a glade, their road not well defined, and made out against the trees beyond a rectangular bulk of gray. Markham went forward more briskly, his spirits rising. Providence was kind to them. A house! A house in France, he had discovered, meant hospitality. To-night, at least, it meant a shelter from the rain which now pattered crisply upon the dry leaves of a forgotten autumn. A small affair it was, a keeper's or a forester's lodge of one story only, with a small shed or stable at the side. There were no lights, but that was reasonable enough. French country folk made no pretence of entertaining visitors at such early hours of the morning. As they approached the building the matter of its occupancy seemed open to question, for the closed windows stared blankly at the leaden sky. An eloquent shutter hung helplessly from its hinges and weeds ranged riotously about the front door, near which a wooden bench lay overturned. While Hermia waited under a tree Markham walked slowly around the house, returning presently with the information that its rear confirmed the impression of desertion. But to make the matter certain he walked to the door and vigorously clanged the knocker. Hollow echoes, but no other sound. He knocked again; to his surprise the door yielded to the touch of his shoulder and creakily opened.

"We'll go in, I think," he laughed. And, leaving the patient donkey for the moment to her fate, he led the way indoors. A match illumined for a moment the hallway, showing a ladder-like stair to a trap door above, and then, sputtering faintly in the musty air, went out. Since matches were scarce, he deftly made a torch of a paper from his pocket with better success. A brief glance into the room at their left showed signs of recent occupancy. His quick survey marked an oil lamp in the corner, which, upon investigation, proved to be in working order, so he lit it with the end of his expiring taper.

The room was handsomely paneled in white. There was a couch in the corner, a rug upon the floor and several easy chairs were drawn sociably toward the chimney breast; along one wall was a gun-rack and in the center of the room a table with a litter of magazines, a box of cigars, a decanter of wine and some glasses.

Their appraisal concluded, they faced each other blankly. Then Markham laughed.

"I wonder what's the punishment for poaching in France," he said gaily.

Hermia dropped wearily upon the couch.

"I'm sure I don't know--or care in the least," she sighed. "I'll go to prison willingly in the morning if they'll only let me sleep now. I'm tired. I didn't know I could ever be so tired."

Markham glanced at her and then quickly poured out a glass of wine, brought it to her, and in spite of her protests made her drink.

"Stolen," she muttered between sips.

"It's no less useful because of that," he said, coolly helping himself.

"It's medicine--for both of us. We've had eighteen hours to-day. _Salut_, Yvonne! We'll pay for it some day."

"To whom?"

"To the chap who owns this lodge--a man of taste, a good Samaritan and

a gentleman, if a mere vagabond may be a judge of Amontillado." He finished the glass at a gulp and set it upon the table. From her couch she watched him as he opened the windows and closed and fastened the shutters. Then he went outside and she heard him pottering around in the rain with Clarissa, undoing the pack and bringing it into the house, and leading the donkey off in the direction of the shed.

"An excellent man, our host," he laughed from the doorway. "Clarissa is up to her ears in hay."

He dripped with moisture, and, mindful of the furniture, took off his coat and hat and shook them in the hall.

"Now, child, we're snug. It's raining hard. No one would venture here in such a night. You must sleep--at once."

"What will you do?" she asked drowsily.

"I'm perishing for a smoke. You don't mind, do you?"

"Oh, no,--but you must--must sleep--too. I'm--very tired--very--" The words trailed off into mumbling, and before he could fill his pipe she was breathing deeply.

He got up and laid her coat over her feet and then stood beside her, his soul in his eyes, watching.

"Poor little madcap," he whispered; "mad little--sad little madcap."

He bent over her tenderly, with a longing to smooth away the tired lines at her eyes with caresses, to take her in his arms and soothe her with gentleness. She seemed very small, very slender, too small, too childish to have raised such a tempest in the deeper currents of his spirit, and he groped forward, his fingers trembling for the touch of her.

He straightened with a sigh. He could not and he knew it; for she trusted him and trust in him was her defence, a valiant one even against his tenderness. It had always been one of the hardest burdens he had to bear. He watched her a while longer, then turned away and sank into a chair by the table, soberly lit his pipe and smoked, his eyes roving. There were colored prints upon the wall, well chosen ones of deer and fox hunters in full chase; upon the table an ash tray of Satsuma ware and several books. He took up the one nearest him, a volume on big game hunting, and turned the pages idly. Their unconscious and unwilling host took his sports seriously, it seemed. He dropped the book upon his knees, and as he did so it fell open at the fly leaf, upon which in a feminine scrawl a name was inscribed. He read it with surprise and concern. "Madeleine de Cahors!" Olga Tcherny's Norman friend--who lived--

Alen on! What a dolt he was! This was the forest of *f couves*--or a part of it--and in the night he had come into the preserve of the wealthy marquis. Olga's friends--and Olga! A fine escape he had made of it, into the very sphere of the Countess Tcherny's activities! The Chateau must be near here, at the most not more than a few kilometers distant. He was a clod-pate, nothing less. For with all the Oire to choose from he had stumbled blindly into the one path that led to danger. What was to be done? He got to his feet stealthily and went through the lodge. A dining room, kitchen and pantry upon the other side of the hallway, deserted, but like the living room, giving signs of recent use. He opened the door and looked out. The shadows of the forest were barely discernible through the driving rain. It was a boisterous night, its inclemency heightened when viewed from the shelter of this friendly

roof, one which must defy their sleuth, the chauffeur, had he had the temerity or the stealth to follow them through the forest. Markham watched for a while, nevertheless, and then, satisfied that for the night at least they were safe from discovery, returned to the living room and dropped into his chair, determining to sit and listen a while and then perhaps take a few hours of sleep.

There was nothing else to be done. His companion was beyond moving, unless he carried her, and this he knew in his present condition could not be far. To-morrow morning they must be abroad early and make their way at top speed out of the forest, trusting to luck that had so far favored them to bring them out of harm's way. It was curious, though, the way Olga had persisted in his thoughts. Marry? _Him_? Incredible! Had she not taken the pains so long ago to make him understand that marriage was the last thing in the world she would ever think of again? Their agreement on the fundamentals of independence had been one of their strongest ties. That kiss in Hermia's rose garden meant nothing to Olga--or to him. An accident--physical only--the possibility of which their former agreements had unfortunately not foreseen. Hermia was mistaken--that was all. And yet--why this pursuit? It all seemed a little too deep for his comprehension at the present moment. His mind groped for lucidity, failed, and then was blank.

CHAPTER XXI

NEMESIS

The storm had blown itself out in the night and the sun came blithely up, awaking the forest to its orisons. The oaks dripped jewels and the black pines lifted their gilded spires above the clearing and nodded solemnly to the rosy East. The sun climbed higher and a thin pall of vapor roamed up the hillside from the gorges of the stream and sought the open sky.

Nature had wept out the gusts of her passion and her smiles were the more beautiful through the vestiges of her tears. The sunlight was spattered lavishly among the shadows, glowing with a lambent light in the hidden places under shrub and thicket and dancing madly on leaf and bough. There was mischief in the air and it took but a little flight of the fancy to conjure Pan and his nymphs gamboling about the sleeping house of the vagabonds.

Morning had importuned their shutters long before Markham awoke and gazed with startled eyes at the diagonal bar of orange light which cut the obscurity of their hiding place. Then, rubbing his eyes, he stumbled to his feet and stared at his watch. It was nine o'clock. Hermia still slept, huddled under her overcoat, one rosy cheek pillowed on her open palm, her tumbled hair flooding riotously about her shoulders. Markham stopped a moment to gaze at her again, but she stirred under his look, so he moved quickly away to the door and peered cautiously out, searching the forest with eager eyes. Gaining courage, he went out, making the round of the house with eyes and ears intent. There was much ado among the tree tops and a scurrying of four-footed among the underbrush, but of two-footed things he saw nothing. He fetched a pail of water for Clarissa and was in the act of entering the house when a gun cracked sharply at some distance on his left. The forest stopped to listen with him for a full moment as the echoes went bounding among the rocks. And then a whirring of wings great and small, hither and yon, announced that there were other vagabonds as startled as he. Two more shots, this time in the distance behind him, followed quickly by a startling noise close at hand.

Clarissa, her whole soul in the note, was incontinently braying.

It was an unearthly sound and an unfamiliar one. For never in the smooth course of their acquaintance had she been guilty of such an indiscretion. He hurried to the shed, but before he reached the door she ceased, and when he entered, regarded him with a wistful eye of recrimination which forestalled his reproaches. After all, she was only an ass! The damage, if damage there was, had already been done. In grave doubt as to his own immediate course, he hurried to the lodge, where he found Hermia sitting wide-eyed upon her couch, fearfully awaiting him.

"What on earth has happened, Philidor?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," he laughed. "Our host is abroad with a shotgun. Clarissa objects, and is so much of an ass that she can't hold her tongue about it."

She smiled and got to her feet.

"I must have slept--"

"Precisely seven hours. It's half-past nine. We must be off at once--by the back door if there is one--"

"Are they coming this way?"

"I didn't stop to inquire. They're near enough, at any rate."

"We could explain, couldn't we--I mean about the storm and the door being open?"

"Hardly--this shooting lodge, my child,--this forest, too, is the property of the De Cahors. See--" and he showed her the book.

"O Philidor! What shall we do?"

"Get out at once. They mustn't see you at any cost. If they come you must take to the bushes, and meet me in Hauterire. It's a case of the devil take the hindmost--the hindmost being me and the devil being--" he paused significantly.

"Olga! Do you think she can be shooting, too?"

He shrugged. "She's quite apt to be doing precisely that," he said shortly.

Hermia flew to the window and, unlatching the shutter, peered timidly forth. Markham heard her gasp and looked over her shoulder through the aperture.

"Olga!" she whispered in dismay.

There in the path to the deep wood, smartly attired in gaiters, a short skirt and Alpine hat, her shotgun in the hollow of her arm, was Nemesis. She came up the path at a leisurely gait, and stopped not a hundred feet away, her head held upon one side, smiling and carelessly surveying the premises.

Hermia shrank back and huddled down upon the couch.

"O Philidor, we're lost--"

But he caught her by the shoulder and hurried her out into the hall.

"Up the ladder quickly! It's our only chance. There's a window in the

gable and a trellis. I saw it a while ago. You must go--that way when I get her inside. We'll meet at Hauterive. Leave the rest to me."

And while she went up he returned to the living room, removed the most obvious traces of Hermia's presence, and, as the trap door was slid down into its place, dropped into the nearest armchair, feigning slumber. He heard Olga's footsteps as she prowled around the house and deluded himself for a moment with the thought that she had gone on, when suddenly he saw her poking at the shutters, which she finally pressed open with the butt end of her shotgun, filling the room with sunlight and revealing the prostrate Markham, who started up in dismay which needed little simulation.

"Good morning, Philidor," said she quite pleasantly.

"Olga!"

"Did you sleep well? What a sluggard you are! Behold the ant--learn her ways and do likewise."

He rose, and through the window offered her his hand. But she waved him off with the point of her gun.

"Not so fast, my young friend!" she cried, her eyes meanwhile swiftly searching the room. "You're a poacher. Will you surrender?"

"By all means--at discretion--if you'll please not keep pointing that plaguey thing--"

She raised a tiny silver object suspended around her neck by a silver chain.

"Don't you know that it's my duty to my host to whistle for the keepers to come and take you before the magistrate?"

"Of course. Whistle away."

"But I'm not going to--at least, not yet. I want to talk to you first. I'm coming in--with your permission."

"Charmed!" he said with a gaiety he was far from feeling, and opened the door with a fine flourish. "It's always easy to be hospitable at somebody else's expense," he said.

She entered without ceremony, gun in hand, her eyes, under lowered lids, shifting indolently, yet missing nothing--the pack on the floor, the tumbled couch, and Markham's familiar pipe.

"Quite handsome, I'd say. The Count always had an eye for the picturesque."

She made the round of the lower floor, carelessly observant of its arrangement, while Markham followed her, his ears straining for the sounds of Hermia's escape.

"Are your friends coming here?" he asked.

Olga poked the muzzle of her gun into a cupboard. "Not unless I whistle for them, Monsieur," she said slowly. "They're below me to the left. We have rendezvous at the lower lodge. Lucky, isn't it?"

Markham's eye lit hopefully.

"I am, it seems, completely at your mercy," he laughed.

He preceded her into the living room and in doing so failed to note the brief pause she made beside the stairs to the loft, upon the steps of which, and upon the floor beneath them, plainly to be seen were a number of small particles of mud, broken and dried. Nor did he see the quick smile of triumph replace the puzzled look with which she had pursued her investigations. She followed him in and with a sigh of content dropped into a chair by the fireplace, crossing her knees and leisurely lighting a cigarette.

"_Enfin_," she laughed. "Here we are gain--thou and I, _Monsieur le philosophe_."

He shrugged.

"At your pleasure," he replied.

She examined his face a moment before she went on. And then softly:

"Why did you run away from me last night? You did, you know, Philidor, or you wouldn't be here."

He hesitated a moment.

"I was afraid you'd insist--on my joining your house party."

She cast a glance around the room and laughed.

"It seems that you've already done so."

"Er--a mistake. I was going to camp in the woods, but it came on to rain. The door of this house was unlatched. So I walked in--and here I am."

"Reasonable enough. It _did_ rain. I remember. And weren't you lonely here?"

"Oh, no," he said easily, "I was asleep."

"And I woke you. What a pity!"

"I'm sure--I'm delighted--if you don't lead me to the Chateau de Cahors or the magistrate."

"What alternatives! One would think, John Markham, that you were really an enemy of society."

"Society with the small _S_, I am. I'm never less alone than when by myself."

"Which means that two is a crowd? Thanks. I shall tear myself away in a moment, but not until--"

"Don't be foolish, Olga," he whispered. "You know that can't mean you."

"I don't know," she murmured wistfully in a low, even voice, her gaze on the andirons. "You've surely given me no reasons to believe that you cared for my society. I wrote you twice from New York, once from Paris and once from Trouville, and you've only deigned me one reply--_such_ a reply--with comments upon the weather (upon which I was fully informed), and a hope that we might meet in October in New York. It was sweet of you, John, when I came to Europe expressly to see you!"

"Me?" He rose, walked the length of the room and glanced anxiously out of the window. "Impossible!" he said, then turned and stood by the

mantel, his back toward the door, his voice tensely subdued. "See here, Olga, don't you think it's about time that you stopped making fun of me--that you and I understood each other? For some reason, after a few years of acquaintance you've suddenly discovered that I amuse you. Why, I don't know. I'm not your sort--not the sort of man you'd find worth your while in the long run, and you know it. And I don't propose to be caught in your silken mesh, my dear, to be left to dry in the sun when you find some other specimen more to your liking."

Olga laughed silently, her head away from him, and Markham, after a quick glance over his shoulder, went on whispering.

"I gave you my friendship-freely, unreservedly, but you weren't satisfied with that. Hardly! You wanted me to be in love with you. There's no doubt of it." He laughed. "Oh, anyone else would have done as well, but I happened along at a favorable time--on the back swing of the pendulum. It hurt your pride, I think, that one of my Arcadian simplicity should fail to droop where others, more sophisticated, had fallen swiftly. Perhaps I, too, might have fallen if you hadn't warned me that you had no heart. You did me that kindness."

He stopped, listening. Olga's ears, too, were alert for a sound--a tiny sound of no more volume than that which might have been made by a mouse that had come from overhead.

"But you grew weary of that," he went on quietly. "You wanted something to happen. Your reputation was at stake. It was time for a psychological crisis of sorts--and so you arranged it--in a rose garden."

Olga had stopped smiling now and her brows were narrowing painfully. "You have no right to speak to me so," she murmured.

"It's true," he finished. "You didn't play fair and you know it."

She bent forward, her elbows on her knees, her gaze on the ashes.

"You hurt me--John," she whispered, scarcely audibly; "you hurt me--terribly."

His eyes searched her keenly. Her head drooped to her fingers, which pressed her temples nervously. If he had not known her so well he would have almost been ready to believe her contrition genuine. But in a moment she straightened.

"You advise me not to hope, then?" she murmured with a laugh.

Doubt fled. She was mocking him. Her very presence mocked him. The rafters saw his discomfiture, though the attic heard not. Was Hermia gone? He fidgeted his feet, listening. Olga was really intolerable.

"Oh, what's the use?" he muttered. "The humor's out of the thing." A change, subtle and undefined, came over his visitor's expression. She rose imperturbably and walked about, fingering things, reaching at last the book case next to the corridor, and slowly abstracted a volume, turning its leaves idly, and facing the door, spoke with perilous distinctness.

"It is charming here, *_mon ami_*," she said gaily. "If I had sent for you, things could not have been more agreeably arranged. It is *_so_* long since we've met. And I've missed you dreadfully. It mustn't happen again, *_mon cher_*." She lowered the book and leaned against the door jamb dreamily. "You shall remain here *_en vagabond_*," she went on, "and I will visit you, bringing you crumbs from the rich men's table, which we will enjoy *_^deux_*. It will remind us of those days

at Compi gne, those long days of sunshine and delight--of the moonlit Oise, and the tiny _auberge_ at La Croix among the beeches, which even the motorists hadn't yet discovered. But even La Croix is not more secluded than this. This lodge is seldom used. No one shall know--not even Madeleine de Cahors."

Markham listened dumbly at first in incomprehension and then in amazement. He had never been in Compi gne with Olga or anyone else. And La Croix--! What was she about? Her purpose came to him slowly, and with the revelation, anger.

He covered the distance between them in a step.

"Silence," he whispered, aware of the trap door about their very ears.

She smiled up into his face sweetly.

"I suppose you'll be denying next that you were ever in Compi gne--"

"I do."

"Or that you would have married me last summer if I--"

"Olga!"

"If I hadn't been wise enough--"

"You're mad!"

She drew back from him, her eyes wide, but she had no reply. He took one step toward her and then stopped, impotent before her frailness, his glance wavering toward the door into the loft which mutely stared at him. Hermia would have gone by now--she _must_ have gone. The way had been clear for twenty minutes. He looked away, and then, since there seemed nothing else to do, he laughed. But Olga didn't seem to hear him. She was fingering the shotgun which lay beside her on the table.

"Mad? Perhaps I am," she said with slow distinctness. "Though you're the last one in the world who should tell me so."

She picked up the weapon and, before he had really guessed what she was about, calmly discharged one of its barrels out of the window.

The noise was deafening and the silence which followed freighted with importance. A scraping of feet overhead, a rattle of loose hinges, and a frightened face at the aperture. Olga Tcherny turned, took a step or two into the doorway, glanced upward and then let her astonished gaze fall on Markham, who was peering up, imploring mutely.

"You--and Hermia!" This from Olga, who had recovered her speech with difficulty. "What does it mean, John?"

But John Markham thrust his hands deep into his pockets and turned his back.

"What does it mean?" she repeated distinctly. "You and Hermia--here? I hardly understand--" But Markham, looking out of the end window, shrugged his shoulders, refusing to reply. He was fuddled with misery, bewildered by the turn of events which were quite beyond his management.

Another long pause, during which he was conscious that Hermia, her dignity in jeopardy, was descending the ladder and now faced their visitor, a fugitive smile upon her lips, pale but quite composed.

"Hello, Olga," he heard her say.

The Countess Tcherny's gaze traveled over her from head to heel, the gaze of one who looks at a person one has never seen before. She looked long but replied not; then her chin was lowered quickly the fraction of an inch, after which she raised the gun, broke it and threw out the shell from the still smoking barrel.

"Stupid of me, wasn't it?" she said coolly. "I forgot it was loaded."

"It's lucky you didn't hurt yourself," said Hermia.

"Isn't it? How dreadful, Hermia, if I had peppered the trap door!"

"I rather think you did," said Hermia. She walked across to the fireplace with a queer laugh. "Well! You've brought down the game. Now whistle for your dogs!"

Olga's face was quite serious.

"I'm sure that I don't in the least know what you're talking about. Your presence is surprising enough--"

Hermia looked defiance.

"Is it? Why? You've outwitted me. I'm simply acknowledging the fact. John Markham and I have been traveling together for a week--as you perceive--_en vagabond_. We like it. It's most amusing. Indiscreet? Perhaps. If so, I'll take the consequences. Can I say more?"

Olga's smile came slowly--with difficulty. The bravado of fear? Or of indifference? She had never really measured weapons with Hermia.

"I'm the last person in the world whose censure you need fear, my dear," she said suavely.

"I don't fear it," said Hermia promptly. "I'm quite sure I'd rather have had you find me out than any one I know."

Bravado again.

"I'm glad, darling," Olga purred. "It's sweet of you to say so."

"I don't mean that I wanted to be discovered. If I had I shouldn't have fled from the _roulotte_ of the Fabiani family yesterday when you were looking for me. You traced us from Alençon, of course--"

"I? Why should I follow you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea--unless your conversation a moment ago with John Markham explains it."

"You heard--that!"

"Oh, yes,--didn't you want me to? I'm not deaf. But you needn't be at all worried about it." She paused and brushed the dust of the loft from her coat sleeve. "You know, Olga, I don't believe it--_any_ of it."

Olga smiled sagely, but Markham, who all this while had been standing like a figure of wax, now showed signs of animation.

"It was all a joke, of course, Hermia," he began, moving forward. "Olga knows as well as I do that--"

But Hermia had waved him into silence.

"Let me finish," she insisted, and he paused.

"I fancy the atmosphere needs clearing," she went on coolly, "and we may as well do it at once. As I remarked a few moments ago, I deny nothing, crave no indulgences, from you, Olga, or from anyone. I cry _peccavi_. But I want you to understand that I feel no regret. Even at the cost of this d nouement I should not hesitate to seek my freedom--if I could find it with John Markham. I love him. And he--_do_ let me finish, Philidor,--he loves _me_. So there you are. There's nothing more to be said. What _could_ one say?"

Olga had reached the door, shrugging her shoulders very prettily.

"Nothing, perhaps, except 'good day,'" she laughed. "It seems that I'm _de trop_. I'll go at once."

AT the door she paused. "You will be quite secure from interruption here to-day, I think. When you go, take to the forest to the northward and you should get out in safety. This secret is delicious. When you are well out of harm's way, _mess amiss_, I shall tell it, in my best manner, at the dinner table."

She waved her hand and was gone.

CHAPTER XXII

ONE GREAT PAN IS DEAD

As she went out Markham came forward, but Hermia waved him aside, and, going to the open window, stood silent, her head bent forward, her gaze fixed on Olga's diminishing back. It seemed more than usually shapely, that back, more than usually careless and disdainful. Her feet spurned the ground and tripped lightly among the grasses, her shoulders swinging easily, the feather in her hat nodding, mischievously defiant. After she had melted into the thicket, Hermia still stood watching the spot where she had disappeared. But Markham, no longer to be denied, came from behind and caught her around the waist.

"It's true, Hermia," he whispered, "you love--?"

Her brow had been deep in thought, and at first it had not seemed that she heard him or felt his arms about her, but as his lips touched her cheek she sprang away, her eyes blazing at him.

"You!" As she brushed the cheek his lips touched: "Hardly," scornfully, and then, with a laugh, "I lied, that's all."

"I'll not believe it. You love me--"

"No. I detest you."

He saw a light.

"You heard. You believe that Olga and I--"

"I'm not a fool. One lives and one learns."

He caught her by the shoulders as one does a child, the impulse in him strong to shake her, his heart denying it.

"She knew you were listening all the while. Can't you understand?"

That was her game. She played it--for you. I've never been in
Compi gne--"

"Let me go--"

"No. Not until you look in my eyes. You love me. You've told _her_ so
and _me_--"

"I lied. It was necessary--"

"Why?"

She struggled, but would not look at him. "Let me go."

"No. Why did you say that unless--"

"The situation--demanded it," she panted. "She had to understand--"

"The truth--"

"No--not the truth. She could not have understood the truth--so I lied
to her--lied to her."

With a supreme effort she wrenched away, putting the table between them.

"Oh," she gasped furiously. "That I could _ever_ have believed in you!"

But her anger failed to dismay him. There was a pause during which
their glances clashed, hers flashing, contemptuous--his keen, intent
and a trifle amused.

"Why did you stay--up there--when the way was clear to the forest."

Her eyes opened a little wider.

"I--I was afraid to go."

"Afraid! Perhaps. but that wasn't the only thing that kept you--"

"What then?" indifferently.

"Curiosity."

"About what?"

"Me."

"Oh!" scornfully.

"It's true. You wanted to hear what passed between us. I thought you
had gone. Olga knew you hadn't. She was the cleverest of us all, you
see."

"It hasn't made the slightest difference."

He reached her in a stride.

"You love me," he laughed. "I know it now." And as she still turned
from him: "And you'll marry me, too, Hermia."

"Never!"

"Yes," he repeated, "you'll marry me. There isn't anything else for
you to do."

She was dumb with surprise and could only gasp with rage, but before she could speak he had released her, and, catching up his hat from the table, was out of the door and on his way to the stable.

He laughed up at the sky. Subterfuge could not avail her now. He had learned the truth. Neither mockery, scorn nor any other pretence could divert the genial current of his soul. She loved him. And, whatever he had shown of mastery in her presence, his precious knowledge made him suddenly strangely gentle in his thoughts of her. The sky smiled back at him from over the leafy glades of the Comte de Cahors, and, as his gaze sought the spot in the woods where a moment ago Olga had disappeared, a sober look came into his eyes. Tell? Would she? Would Olga tell? He didn't believe it. He had learned many things. Olga kindled her altar fires not for the warmth of them, but for their incense, the odor of which was breath to her nostrils. The symbols of love—not love itself—what could Olga know of love? He knew—and Hermia? Hermia knew, for he had taught her.

He filled his bucket at the well and sought Clarissa, who was sleeping the sleep of satiety. She had eaten until she could eat no more. Watered, he led her back to the lodge, fastened his hitching strap at the door and went inside, his own appetite advising him that neither he nor Hermia had eaten since yesterday afternoon. His companion had huddled into a chair and was gazing into the fireplace. She did not offer to continue their conversation, nor did he. And so he got out his spirit lamp and made coffee, unpacked some chicken sandwiches, and, helping himself freely to the crockery of the Marquis, presently served the breakfast.

She would not eat at first and he did not insist upon her doing so, but sat comfortably, and in a moment was smacking his lips. The coffee was excellent—the best that could be had in Alençon, and its odor was delicious. He saw from where he sat her eyes shifting uncertainly. He drained his cup with a great sigh of content, set it down upon the saucer and was in the act of pouring out another helping for himself when she rose and reached forward quickly, appetite triumphant.

"I'd better eat, I suppose," she said jerkily.

He smiled politely and handed her the sandwiches, noting from the tail of his eye that several times during the meal her look sought his face for an explanation of his change of manner, which, not being forthcoming, she sat rather demurely at her meat, emptying the pot of coffee and finishing the last of the bread and chicken. Markham would have smiled if he had dared! What chance had any of the lighter passions against the craving hunger of the healthy young animal? It was another triumph of his philosophy, almost its greatest—Nature at a bound eliminating art and the feminine calculus. When he had finished eating, without a word he rose, and went out to pack Clarissa, and while he was thus engaged Hermia passed him silently with a bucket on the way to the pump for water, and in another moment he was aware that she was washing the dishes. He made no effort to help her, but sat on the door-sill, thoughtfully smoking his pipe.

She came out in a moment and announced that she was ready to go, and he saw that breakfast had done her no harm. So they followed Olga Tcherny's instructions as far as he remembered them and found a path through the woods which led northward. Clarissa had so gorged herself with the stolen fodder (which may have been sweeter on that account) that Markham had to cut a new goad to speed her upon her way. They kept a watch ahead and behind them, and emerged as Olga had prophesied without adventure or accident through a hole in a hedge upon a highroad, along which, still bending their steps northward, they took their way.

Markham's silence had a double meaning. They were at odds just now. A while back Hermia had starved for food. He meant now that she should starve for company. He wanted to think, too, to analyze and weigh his own culpability in the situation where they now found themselves. The imprudence of their venture had not seemed to matter so much back at Evreux, where accident had thrown them together and Hermia had linked her fate to his. She had been little more to him than an extraordinarily interesting specimen of a genus he little understood, a rebellious slave of convention who had shown him the shackles which galled her wrists and had pleaded with him very prettily to help her strike them off. Could any man have refused her? And yet he had known from that hour that a retribution of some sort awaited them both--Hermia, for ignoring her code; himself, for having permitted her to ignore it. There was a difference now--a difference which their discovery by an outsider had made unpleasantly manifest. De Folligny's appearance at Verneuil had made Markham thoughtful, but Olga's intrusion now had paraphrased their pastoral lyric into unworthy prose. Parnassus wept with them, but no amount of weeping could destroy the ugly doggerel as Olga had written it. Their idyl was smirched, the fair robe of *Euterpe* was trialing in the dust.

But it was too late for reproaches now. The mischief was done and one thing only left--to emerge with as good a grace as possible from a doubtful position. As the moments passed it became more clear to Markham in which way his duty lay--and the more he thought of it, the more he was convinced that it lay out of Vagabondia. Hermia must go--this very day--and he--to beard their pretty tigress.

The shadow of his thoughts fell upon his brows, and to Hermia, who watched him, when she could do so unobserved, he presented a countenance upon which gloom sat heavily enthroned.

Had he spoken his thoughts as they came to him she could not have read him more easily; and, as Markham gloomed, her own mood lightened. Though she spoke not, a dull fire slumbered in her eye which boded him mischief. Disaster had befallen--and some one was to pay for it; but his bent head was unaware of the smile that suddenly grew, a pale wintry smile which matched the devil in her eyes.

They camped in the mellow afternoon under the trees upon a rugged mountain that guarded the defile, through which a rushing torrent, one of the tributaries of the Oire, dashed over the rocks on its swift course to Argentan. Below them in the valley were a village and a railroad along which a tiny passenger train was slowly proceeding. Markham eyed the train with a grave and melancholy interest. They both observed that it stopped in the village to let off and take on passengers. He built his fire with great deliberateness, gloomy and silent as though performing a last rite for one departed, and ate solemnly, his face long.

At last she could stand the stress of him no longer and burst suddenly into a fit of laughter which echoed madly among the rocks.

"Oh, John Markham!" she cried. "Why so *triste*? The melancholy sweetness of seeing Olga again?"

"No," he replied calmly. "I was thinking--of other things."

"What?"

A smile broke over his lips. He had been right. There was nothing in the world that a woman has greater pains to endure than silence. He had starved her out.

He didn't reply at once, and that angered her.

"Must I plead with you even for speech?" she asked satirically. "Has it come to this? Will you not smile and throw a crumb of comfort to your bond-woman?"

"I have had nothing to say--until now," he replied, very quietly, over his coffee cup.

She only laughed at him and swept the ground with a low curtsy.

"Thy slave listens. Speak! To what decision has my lord and master arrived?" she asked.

He swallowed his coffee deliberately, unsmiling, his gaze over the valley where the railroad track wormed its way into the North.

"That you're to go to your friends in Paris--at once," he said decisively.

And while she watched him scornfully, the slow fire in her eyes burning suddenly into brightness, he took from his pocket a wallet he had never seen before, and counted out upon the ground some money.

"This," he continued calmly, "is yours. You have earned it. I have kept count. I will owe you, too--what is realized from the sale of--of Clarissa. Or, if you prefer it, I will pay you that now. I hope you will find the arrangement satisfactory."

He had arrested her mockery and she stood silent while he spoke, her gaze upon the ground. But her mood broke forth again with even greater virulence.

"So you want to be ride of me, _Monsieur mon Ma"tre--cancel my indentures--end my apprenticeship to the school of life--turn me adrift in a wicked world, which already treats me none too kindly. Is it wise, I say? Is it kind, is it human--just because a woman crosses our path and threatens my reputation? Look at me. Am I not the same that I was before? Now have I fallen in your graces? You, who professed a while ago to love me--oh, so madly?"

He was silent and would not look at her.

"Or is it _me_ that you fear, _mon cher_?" she taunted him. "Is it that I've learned too well your lessons? That I've foresworn the conventions which stifled me, the code which enslaved me, that I've earned at last my right to live unbound, untrammled--with no code but the love of life, no law but that of my own instincts--is it because of this that you deny me? O John Markham! What becomes of your fine philosophy? And of your natural laws? Do they fall, with me, before the first challenge from the world they profess to ignore? It is to laugh."

While she vented her joy of him he rose and faced her, but she did not flinch. Her voice only dropped a tone, and now derided, mocked and cajoled.

"Do you fear me so much, _Monsieur le Ma"tre_?" she laughed. "Is it that I love you too much to love you wisely? Why should _you_ care, _mon ami_? Is it not the lot of women to give--always to give?"

Still he turned away from her, his hands fast in his pockets, but a warning murmur broke from his lips. She did not hear it and, coming around behind him, clasped her fingers upon his arms.

"If I tell you that I do not love you, _mon ami_, will not that be

enough—enough to satisfy you that my happiness is not in danger? If I do not love you, what can you fear for me? Why should I care what the world thinks of us? Have I reproached you? Did I not give myself into your keeping, without--"

He turned and caught her into his arms and stopped her mockery with kisses, the man in him triumphant, while she struggled, her lips denied him, dumb and quivering in his arms.

"Now perhaps you know----why it is that you must go," he whispered. "Read it here. I'm mad for you, Hermia--that is why. I can't any longer be with you without reaching forth to take you----you're mine by every law of God or Nature. Philosophy! Who cares? Your lips have babbled it. Let them babble it now--if they dare--"

"Let me go, Philidor," she gasped.

"No, not yet. I've much to say and only this hour to say it in, for in a while you shall go and I will stay with Pan and mourn. The woods will sigh of you, for you will be a nymph no longer. But before you go you shall look love in the eyes and see--love full grown and masterful--here among the everlasting rocks--love so great that you shall be afraid and mock not. Look up. Look in my eyes--"

"No! No!"

"You love me."

"No!"

"You love me."

"N--no!"

As she protested he took her lips, pale lips that would have mocked again, yet dared not, for her eyes had stolen a glance through half-closed lashes and learned that what he said was true. The warm color flooded upward, staining crimson beneath the tan, and her body which had relaxed for a moment under the gust of his ardor protested anew.

"Let me go, Philidor. I--It must not be--can't you understand? Would you justify them--what they say of us? Oh, let me go. Let me--"

She wrenched away from him and stood gasping, Olga Tcherny's last laughter singing in her ears.

"You've justified her--justified her," she almost sobbed, "robbed me of my right to look her in the eyes--as I could do this morning. Why did you kiss me--like that--Philidor? Oh, you've spoiled it all--spoiled it for us both. Why couldn't you have let things be--as they were--so gentle--so sweet--so sane!"

"You mocked at love," he muttered.

"Oh, that I should have misjudged you so. You who were so strong--so kind! Who ruled me with gentleness! and now--"

"You've tried me too far."

She had; and she knew it. There was nothing for it but to skurry for the wings of convention. Alas, for Pan! Hermia was a nymph no longer--only a girl of the cities, upon the defensive for the security of her traditions. She drew aside and sank breathless upon a rock.

"Love is not so ruthless--it does not shock or sear, John Markham," she gasped.

"I've served you patiently--and long," he muttered.

"A week."

"It's enough."

"No."

"You'll marry me."

She raised her head and met his eyes fairly.

"No. I refuse you."

He could not understand.

"You--"

"I refuse to marry you. Is that clear?" she cried.

What had come over her? The warm color had flooded back to her heart and her eyes were cold like dead embers.

"I won't believe you," he said doggedly.

"You must. It was a mistake--all this--a mistake from the first. I was made to have followed you. You should have denied me--then--back there--"

"I loved you then--I know it now--and you--"

"No--not love, John Markham," she went on. "If you had loved me you would have sent me back to Paris--and saved me from--from myself. You loved me then, you say," she laughed scornfully. "What kind of love is this that slinks in hiding, preaches of friendship for its own ends and rants of philosophy? What kind of love that scoffs at public opinion and finds itself at last a topic of amusement at a fashionable dining table? A selfish love, a nameless love from which all tenderness, all gentleness and beauty--"

"Hermia!" He had caught her by the shoulders and held her gaze with his own.

"Let me go. It's true. And you ask me to marry you. Why should you marry me when you can win my lips without it?"

She laughed up at him, a hard little laugh, like a buffet in his face. Still he held her--away from him.

"Your lips are mine," he said gently, "I could take them now--again and again. But I will not. See, I am all tenderness again. Your words cannot harm me--nor yourself. For love is greater than either of us. It is the secret you once asked of me, the secret of life. I've told it to you. I tell it to you now--when I let you go."

Her color came and went and her eyes drooped before him. He dropped his hands, turned his back and walked away.

"That is my reply," he said softly.

Could he have seen the glory that rode suddenly in her eyes as she looked at him, he would have read the heart of her. But that was not

to be. Followed a silence. He would not trust himself again. The embers of their fire still smoked. With his foot he crushed them out.

"You will go, at once, to Paris," he said quietly, not looking at her.

She did not move, or reply, and only watched him as he made the preparations for departure. They went down the hill to the village in silence, Markham leading Clarissa at his side. At the gare a train was due in half an hour, and so they sat and waited, looking straight before them, no word passing, and when the train came he found a compartment and put her in it, with her bundle, then stood with head uncovered, until a stain of smoke above the trees was all that remained to him. Presently that, too, vanished, when soberly he took up his cudgel and went his way.

CHAPTER XXIII

A LADY IN THE DUSK

Halfway between the turbid currents of the lower city and the more swiftly running streams to the northward sits Washington Square, an isle of rest amid the tides of humanity which lap its shores.

Here is the true gateway to the city--below it the polyglot of Europe; above, the amalgam which makes America. It is a neighborhood of traditions which speak in the aspect of the solidly built row of houses facing to the south, breasting the living surge, its front unbroken. This park, with its stretch of green, its dusky maples and shaded benches, afforded asylum to Markham, the painter, who liked to come when the day's work was over and watch the shadows fall across the square, creeping slowly up the walls of the Arch, bringing into higher relief the rosy tints on cornice and medallion which remained animate a moment against the purple filigree beyond, a thing of joy and of beauty, a symbol of eternal freedom. He was never sure whether it was more wonderful then, or when a moment later the golden glory gone from its cap, it stood silent amid the roar of the city wrapped in pallid dignity at the end of the glittering Avenue. That Avenue was a symbol, too. It meant the world to which Markham had returned after his glimpse of Elysium, a world not too kind, already laughing perhaps at his secret and Hermia's.

His problem still puzzled him. He had had no word from Olga Tcherny, though he had sought her in Alençon and Trouville. She had gone to Paris, he had been informed, but he had not been able to find her there in her usual haunts.

Nor had he succeeded in finding Hermia, though he had left no stone unturned in the search. He had watched the hotel registers, inquired at her bankers, and scanned the sailing lists in vain. Had the earth engulfed them both they could not have more mysteriously disappeared.

Cables to New York had been unavailing, and at last, his time growing short, he had sailed from Cherbourg, a sadder but no wiser man. A call at the Challoner house at the upper end of the Avenue had only produced the information that the person he so eagerly sought had not yet returned, and that, in default of instructions to the contrary, her mail was forwarded, as before, to Paris. There was nothing for it but to wait, and Markham became aware that love, in addition to being all the things that he and Hermia had described it, was a grievous hunger which would feed upon no food but itself. He was quite wretched, painted abominably by day and prowled in the streets by night, his disembodied spirit off among the highways of Vagabondia.

November came, and still no letter nor any word of her. He was

desperate. Her silence, at first only disappointing, now became ominous. Whatever their misunderstandings in the last hour of their pilgrimage, he deserved something better of her than this. Here in New York it already seemed difficult to visualize her. He could see nothing but the belled cap and coarse stockings of Yvonne, the "woman orchestra." They filled his eye as her essence filled his heart. The broadcloth and beaver of her metropolitan sisters puzzled and dismayed him. He had only seen her once in town and then she had resembled nothing so much as a flippant cherub in skirts--an example of how New York taught the young female idea to shoot. It hadn't been the kind of shooting he had liked. Thimble Island had individualized her--differently; Westport had given her color; but it was Normandy that had completed the human document. She was Hermia, that was all! But here in New York, with Vagabondia but a memory, he was not sure that he would know her. The Avenue was full of young female ideas in the process of shooting, all dressed very much alike, all flippant, all cherubic, and he scanned them with a new interest, wondering at the lapse of circumstance which somehow could not be bridged. Yvonne tailor made! The thing was impossible.

And yet he found it necessary to realize that here in New York it was to be no Yvonne that he would find. Her silence, too, now advised him that she was to be upon the defensive, all her armor bristling with commonplace, against which the flight of his quiver of memorabilia might be dented in vain. How was she thinking of him yonder? In what terms? Did she think of him at all? His questions had even descended to that low condition. He had had such a little share in her life after all, her real life in the cities, which laid its impress with such certainty on those who were its children. He saw the marks of it all about him, the thing one called "good form," the undercurrent of strife for social honor, the corrugated brow of envy, the pomp and circumstance of spilled riches--ah! here was where his shoe would pinch him the most. For Hermia Challoner was wealthy beyond the touch of Midas. If the Westport house or her taste in automobiles had not been green in his memory, it only remained to him to view the stately splendor of the Challoner mansion up town to be reminded that his vagabond companion of a week rightfully belonged to another world in which he was only a reluctant and somewhat captious visitor. Her riches bewildered him. They obtruded unbearably, proclaiming their importance in terms which there was no denying. Vagabondia, it seemed, was a forgotten country.

Had Hermia forgotten? Was his idyl, the one dream of his life, to end in waking? Was Hermia's mad excursion but another item in the long list of entertainments by means of which she exacted from life payment in diversion which she considered her due? Had he, Markham, been but an incident in this entertainment, a humble second-liner like Luigi Fabiani, who broke stones upon his mighty brother and caught the infant Stella when she was hurled at him? The thought was unpleasant to him, and did his lady no honor--so he dismissed it with reservations. But, whatever unction he laid to his soul, the truth would not be downed that two months had elapsed since that parting in the railway station at S es during which time he had neither heard from nor of her.

One comfort he had when hope was at low ebb--the vision of a pale face at a trap-door, its eyes wide in concern--Hermia's face when Olga's fowling piece was discharged; two comforts--the memory of the roses of P re Gu gou! Both gave him joy--and reconciled him to her present intolerance which time and an ardor which knew no abating must wipe away. If it hadn't been for Olga!

This was a most exasperating if, a heart-wracking if, an if that made him pause among the ruins of his ancient friendship. He could not believe that it was altogether to chance that he and Hermia owed Olga's discovery of their strange intimacy. In his infatuation he had

forgotten that the Chateau de Cahors was near Alençon and that here was a spot which should at any costs have been avoided. Hermia must have known, too, and yet it seems they had both rushed to their danger with heedlessness which deserved no better fate. But their pursuit and the certainty with which Olga provided the culminating drama created a belief, in his own mind, at least, that had he and Hermia been in Kamschatka, their discomfiture would have been just as surely accomplished. If Olga's motives still remained shrouded in mystery, it was clear that her object had been to bring their companionship to an end, and this she had done, though not precisely in the way she had planned. Hermia hadn't believed that about La Croix and Compigne. Olga had overshot the mark. Her pleasantry with the loaded shotgun had been better aimed and her frightened game had fallen. It angered him to think how ruthless had been her plan, medieval in its simplicity, and how successful she had been in carrying it out. As to her motives--Hermia had insisted that Olga wanted to marry him! Olga and he!

With a muttered word Markham rose from his bench and made his way toward the Arch. Its phase of splendor had passed, for the dusk had fallen swiftly, but its bulk loomed in ghostly grandeur, a solemn sentinel at the meeting place of East and West. The street lights were winking merrily and brougham and limousine passed beneath it, moving rapidly northward. With the setting of the sun a chill had fallen on the wonderful day of Indian summer and people moved briskly on their homeward way. Markham buttoned his light overcoat across his chest and bent his steps in the direction of his apartment, when at the corner of the Avenue he found his way blocked by a solitary female person fashionable attire who for some reason was laughing gaily.

He stopped, awakened suddenly to the fact that the lady of his dreams was before him.

"O Monsieur Philidor!" she laughed. "Well met, upon my word! Have you waited for me long?"

"Olga!"

"The same--flushed with victory over the passing years, joyous, too, at the sight of you. I counted on finding you here."

"I'm delighted--but how--"

"I know your habits, my dear. You always loved to prowl. And there used to be a time, you know, when we prowled together."

He found himself glad to see her--so glad that he forgot how angry he was.

"Let's prowl then," he said, and turned his steps southward again.

"I suppose you know I've been hunting for you."

"Yes."

She volunteered no more.

"When did you get back?" he asked slowly.

"Tuesday. I wasted no time, you see, in looking for you. I've just come from the studio."

"You might have seen me in Normandy if you had cared to."

"Oh, I saw quite enough of you there," she said dryly. "Besides, I

knew what you wanted. I wasn't ready to talk to you. I am now."

He laughed uneasily, sparring for wind.

"What have you to say to me?"

"Much. I've been thinking, John. Curious, isn't it? Wearing, too. Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy. Is beauty's ensign yet crimson in my cheeks?"

"If you weren't sure of it you wouldn't ask me," he laughed. "Why didn't you want to see me?"

"I didn't say I didn't want to see you. I merely suggested that I didn't think it wise to."

"Why not?"

"You might not have understood my point of view. You mayn't now. I think I was a trifle bewildered over there. Now I'm clear again," She paused, her gaze focusing quickly, "O John, what a mess you've made of my ideals!"

"I?" he muttered stupidly, but he knew what she meant. "What have I to do with your ideals, Olga?"

"Nothing--except that you gave them birth and then destroyed them. It's infanticide--nothing less," she said slowly.

He groped for a word, stammered and was silent.

She examined him curiously, then smiled.

"Silence? Confession!"

"I've nothing to confess." And then desperately. "Appearances are--were against us. If you've spoken of that--you've done a great mischief--an irreparable wrong--to--to Hermia."

She was laughing again, silently, inwardly, her head bent.

"Oh, as to that, I'll relieve your anxiety at once," she said at last. "It was too rich a secret to tell too quickly--too good a story--and then the embroideries--I had to think of those. No, I have not told it, John,--not yet. You see, after I left you, I changed my mind about things. Your rural _amourette_ is still a secret, _mon ami_."

He gasped a sigh of relief. How could he ever have believed it of her? He laughed lightly with an air of carelessness.

"You wouldn't tell. I knew that. You're not that sort, Olga--"

"Not so fast, my poor friend," she put in quickly. "I've said that your indiscretion was still a secret, but I still reserve the right to tell it here in New York if the humor seizes me."

"Nonsense," he laughed. "I simply don't believe you would."

She shrugged.

"I have told you the truth. I mean what I say. I shall tell what I know, unless--"

She paused. Her moment was not yet.

"Unless?" he questioned.

"Unless I find reasons why I shouldn't," she finished provokingly.

"Meaning--what?" he persisted.

He regarded her for a moment in silence, quickly joining in her laughter.

"Oh, what's the use of making such a lot of fuss over a thing? It was imprudent, indiscreet of us, if you like. Hermia and I met by accident. I was tramping it--as you know. I asked her if she didn't want to go along, and she did. Simplest thing in the world. We waved convention aside. Nothing odd about that. We're doing it every day."

"Oh, are we?"

"Yes. The laws of convention were only made as props and crutches for the crooked. If you're straight, you don't need 'em."

"Still," she mused sweetly, "society must be protected. Who is to tell which of us is straight and which crooked? Even if we were crooked, you know, neither of us would be willing to admit it."

"But it's a question not so much of my wisdom--as of Hermia's. You'll admit--"

"I admit nothing," she said quickly. "You've surprised, shocked and grieved me beyond words, both of you, also made me feel a trifle foolish. My judgment is shaken to the earth. Here I've been holding you up as a kind of paragon, a fossilized Galahad, with a horizon just at your elbows, to find you touring France, faisant l'aimable with a frolicsome scapegrace in a bolero jacket."

"I would remind you," he broke in stiffly, "that you're speaking of Hermia Challoner."

"Oh, I'm quite aware of it," with a careless wave of her hand. "And as to Hermia's wisdom--life has taught me this--that a woman may be clever, she may be intuitive, she may be skillful, but she's never wise. And so I say--I'm shocked, John Markham, outraged and shocked beyond expression."

"Oh, you're the limit, Olga," he blurted out.

"Simply because I adhere to the traditions of my sex, because I adhere to the memory of my friendships. I like you, John Markham, your simplicity has always appealed to me. And now that you add gallantry to your more sober charms I confess you're quite irresistible."

Markham stopped short.

"I can't have you talking like this," he said quietly. "I don't mind what you say of me, of course, but your choice of words is not fortunate. Miss Challoner and I--"

"Spare your breath," she said, turning on him swiftly. "I'm no fool. I've lived in the world. If Hermia Challoner chooses to lay herself open to criticism that's her lookout. I'll say what I please of her. She has earned that retribution. Talk as you will of your own virtues and hers you'd never succeed in convincing anyone of your innocence--me least of all. What's the use of beating around the bush. I can see through a millstone--if it has a hole in it. Hermia Challoner--"

"Silence!" His fingers gripper her arm and she stopped, ready to

scream with the pain of it. "You're insulting the woman I love. Do you hear?" he whispered through set lips. "I'll hear no more of it here--or elsewhere? We traveled together, that is all. My God--that you should dare!" He stopped suddenly, peering through the dusk at her face which still smiled, though the pain of her arm gave her agony, and then he relaxed with a laugh. "You don't mean it, I know. It isn't worthy of you. Why, Olga, you are her friend. You know her intimately--body and soul. You can't believe it. You don't--"

"I do," fiercely. "I do believe it--more's the pity."

They had stopped and were facing each other, bayonets crossed. The city roared about them, but they did not hear it. He dominated her, masterful. She fought back silently, a thing of nerves and passion only, but she did not flinch, though he had already wounded her mortally.

"Lie, if you like to me, John Markham. Lie to me. It's your duty. Lie like a gentleman. But you can't make me believe you. I'm no fool. I'll say what I like of her--or of you, when I choose, where I choose--"

"I won't believe you."

"You must. It has come to that," she went on, whispering. "I've given you the best of me, the very best, what no man has had of me, affection, strong and tender, friendship, clean and wholesome. I gave gladly. I'm not sorry. They were sweeter even than the love in my breast which stifled--which still stifles me."

"Olga!"

The suppressed passion of her confession startled him. Her half-closed eyes burned through the dusk, then paled again.

"It's true," she went on haltingly. "I love you. My love--I'm proud of it--prouder of it than of anything I've ever been or known--because it's sweet and clean. That's why I can look you in the eyes and tell you so. Why shouldn't I? What is my woman's pride beside that other pride? I have not stopped--as she has--to conquer."

"Sh--!"

"She stooped to conquer. I'm glad--glad--it shows the difference between us. It weighs us one against the other. You shall know. One day you shall know. You'll tire of her. It's always the ending of a conquest like that."

"You're mad," he whispered, aghast.

She threw up her hands and pressed them to her breast a moment. Then, with a quivering intake of the breath, the tension broke, and her hands dropped to her sides, her laughter jarring him strangely.

"Curious, isn't it?" he heard her saying. "You're the last man in the world I would have dreamed of. I used to laugh at you, you know. You were so gauche and so ill-mannered. I took you up as a sort of game. It amused me to try and see what could be made of you. If you'd made love to me, I would have laughed at you. But you didn't. Why didn't you, John? It would have saved us all such a lot of trouble."

Her mockery set him more at ease. He saw a refuge and took it.

"I think you're not quite so mad--as mischievous," he said boldly. "Your loves are too frequent to cause your friends much concern--least

of all the one you honor with your present professions. I'm not woman-wise, Olga. And I'm not honey-mouthed. I hope you won't mind if I say I don't believe you."

Her smile vanished.

"You will--in time," she said quickly. "So will--Hermia." She paused, and then, her fingers on his arm, her eyes to his.

"Have you--? Has she--? You wouldn't _marry_ her, John?"

Her tone was soft, but the inference had the ominous sibilance of a whip-lash, which swirled in the air and circled over Hermia, too. He chose his words deliberately.

"She's the sweetest, cleanest, purest woman I've ever known."

She shrugged and drew away. Whatever she felt, no sound escaped her. He followed toward the lights of the Avenue, aware that a crisis in his affairs of some sort had been reached and passed. His companion walked more and more rapidly, setting the pace which outdid the slow movement of his wits.

But he caught up with her presently and took her by the arm.

"Olga, forgive me. You maddened me. I wanted you to know--that Hermia was not what you thought she was. You lower your own standards--can't you see--when you lower hers? She's only a girl--thoughtless, a thing of impulses only--mad impulses if you like--but clean, Olga,--like a child. You've only to look at her and see--"

"I did look at her--and see," she said through her teeth.

He stopped her by main force.

"You've got to listen! Do you hear? It was I who put her in this false position. I who must get her out of it. I owe her that and you owe it to me."

He released her and went on more quietly. "I'm no _Galahad_ and I make no pretences to virtue, but I'm no rake or despoiler of women either. I dare you to doubt it. You didn't doubt it--there--in the studio. You can't doubt it now. Women of your sort--and hers--are inviolable."

Her lids flickered and fell.

"A girl--Olga, a mere child. Think! What is this love of yours that feeds on hatred--on uncleanness Love is made of gentler stuff--beautifies, uplifts--not destroys."

Her head was bent and her face was hidden under her wide hat, but her whisper came to him quite clearly.

"_You_--tell _me_--what love is? _You!_"

When she raised her head her lips were smiling softly, and she moved forward slowly, he at her side. They had reached the Avenue. A motor he had not observed stood near.

"We part here I think. It's _adieu_, John."

"No," he muttered.

"Oh, yes, it is." And then with a gay laugh which was her best defence--"Too bad we couldn't have hit it off, isn't it? I would have

liked it awfully. I give you my word you've never seemed nearly so interesting as at this moment of discomposure. There's a charm in your awkwardness, John,—a native charm. Good night. I go alone."

He followed her a few paces but she reached the machine before him and was whisked away.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WINGS OF THE BUTTERFLY

John Markham spent an unpleasant evening. He dined alone at a club, wandering afterward aimlessly from library to billiard room and then took to the streets, trusting to physical exercise to clear his head of the tangle that Olga had put into it. Olga, the irrepressible man-hunter, in love with a "fossilized Galahad_." That was ironically amusing, extraordinary, if true, a punishment which fitted her crime, and something of a grim joke on the man-hunter as well as the fossil. Markham tried to view the matter with unconcern, man-like, recalling the many times that Olga's name had been coupled with those of various distinguished foreigners and the frequent reports of her engagement, always denied and forgotten. And yet she worried him. For a brief moment she had given him a glimpse of the shadowy recesses where she hid her naked soul; a glimpse only, like some of those she had given him when he was painting her portrait; but what he had seen now was different—an Olga no longer wistful no longer amenable; a wild, unreasoning thing who purred, cat-like, while he stroked her, sheathing and unsheathing her claws. There was mischief brewing—he felt it in her sudden access of self-control, and in the final jest with which she had left him. He knew her better now. It was when she mocked that Olga was most dangerous. It was clear that she had not believed him when he told her the truth. Her standards forbade it, of course. It was too bad.

But she had not told what she knew—that was the main thing. What if she did tell now? Hermia could deny it, of course, and if necessary he must lie, as Olga had said, like a gentleman. And where were Olga's proofs? Who would confirm her? What evidence, human or documentary could she bring forward here in New York to prove Hermia's culpability, if, as it seemed to be her intention, she insisted on carrying her sweet vengeance to its end? There was no one—he paused, his brow clouding. De Folligny! Had De Folligny learned who Hermia was? Had Olga found out about the companion in his automobile at Verneuil? He waved the thought away. De Folligny was on the other side of the ocean. The psychological moment for Olga's revelation had passed.

Consoling himself with these thoughts he went home and to bed and morning found him early at the studio, awaiting his new sitter, in a more quiescent, if still uncertain, frame of mind.

The portrait of Mrs. Berkeley Hammond on which he had been working sat smugly upon one of his easels, a thing of shreds and patches (though the lady was in pearls and a Dr. coll frock), a thing "painty" without being direct, mannered without being elegant, highly colored without being colorful, a streaky thing with brilliant spots, like the work of a promising pupil; a pretty poor Markham, which had pleased the sitter because its face flattered her, and for which she would gladly pay the considerable sum he charged, while Markham's inner consciousness loudly proclaimed that the canvas was not worth as much as the crayon sketch of Madam Daudifret in Normandy which had been the price of a _rago t_. Really he would have to pain better. He swung the easel around with a kick of the foot and faced a new canvas, primed some days before, and busied himself about his palette and paint tubes.

When Phyllis Van Vorst emerged from the dressing-room a while later into the cool north light, Markham's eyes sparkled with a genuine delight. Here was the sort of thing he could do--white satin with filmy drapery from which rose the fresh-colored flower of girlhood. Without being really pretty, his model created the illusion of beauty by her youth, her abundant health and many little tricks of gesture and expression. Her role was that of the ingénue and she prattled childishly of many things, flitting like a butterfly from topic to topic, grave and gay with a careless grace which added something to the picture she made. Markham let her talk, interjecting monosyllables lulled by the inexhaustible flow, aware, after the first pose or two, that he was painting well, with the careless brush of entire confidence. As Olga had said, he always was at his best when a little contemptuous. In three hours the head was finished and the background laid in, _premier coup_-- the best thing he had done in a year.

He twisted the canvas around to get a better look at it and groped for his pipe, suddenly conscious of the fact that he had painted and that his model had sat steadily for an hour and a half without a rest.

"You poor child," he muttered with compunction, as he helped her down, "that's the penalty of being interesting."

"Oh, I'm so glad," she cried, "You _can_ say nice things, can't you?"

"When I think of them," he laughed.

She stood before the canvas in breathless delight.

"Oh, do I look like that, Mr. Markham, like _Psyche_ with the lamp? It's quite too wonderful for _words_. I'm a _dream_. I've never seen anything quite so flattering in my _life_. Oh, I'm _so_ glad I came to you instead of to Teddy Vincent. You've made my poor nose quite straight--and yet it's _my_ nose, too. How on _earth_ did you do it? You're not going to work any more--?"

"No--" he laughed, "the head is done."

She sat in the chair he brought forward for her and Markham dropped on the divan near her and smoked. She gazed at the head for a while in rapturous silence.

"O Mr. Markham, will you _ever_ forgive me for being so stupid last summer," she said at last, "about that upside-down painting? I've been so humiliated--"

"I'm not really a landscape man, you know," he said cheerfully by way of consolation, "and it was only a sketch."

"Oh, but they made such a lot of fun of me--at Westport. They're not very merciful--that crowd."

Markham's gaze shifted.

"Yes, I know," he said quietly.

"Oh, have you heard?" his companion laughed suddenly.

"About Crosby Downs."

"No."

"He has married Sybil Trenchard."

Markham took a puff at his pipe.

"Really? Why?"

She laughed. And then quickly.

"I don't know. And Hilda and Carol--Carol Gouverneur, you know--engaged. She has wanted him a long time. Everybody thought he'd wiggle out of it somehow, but he didn't or couldn't or something."

He smiled. "Cupid has had a busy summer."

"Oh, yes, quite extraordinary. You see out of all that house party, there are only three or four left." She spoke of this wholesale selection and apportionment as though her topic had been apples.

"Indeed?" Markham stopped smoking. "Who else?" he asked calmly.

"Me," she said blushing prettily. "I mean I--I and Reggie--"

"Reginald Armistead! I thought that he and Miss Challoner--"

"Oh, that's all off," she laughed. "They didn't really care for each other at all--not that way--just as friends you know. Hermia is a good deal like a fellow. Reggie liked her that way. They were pals--had been from childhood, but then one doesn't marry one's pal."

"I'm very glad," said Markham politely, examining her with a new interest. "I shall make it a point at once to offer him my congratulations. I like him."

"He's adorable, isn't he? But I'm horribly frightened about him. He's so dreadfully reckless--flying, I mean. If it hadn't been for Hermia, I'm sure he never would have begun it. But he has promised me to give it up--now. Hermia may break her neck if she likes; that's Mr. Morehouse's affair, but--"

"Morehouse!" Markham broke in, wide-eyed.

She regarded him calmly.

"Where on earth have you been, Mr. Markham?"

"In--France," he stammered. "Do you mean that Hermia--Miss Challoner is--"

"Engaged to Trevvy? Of course. It was cabled from Paris--to the Herald. But then nobody who knows about things is really very much surprised. Trevvy has been wild about her for years and her family have all wanted it. It's really a very good match. You see Trevvy is so steady and she needs a skid to her wheel--"

She rambled on but to Markham her voice was only a confused chatter of many voices. He rose and turned the easel into a better light, then knocked out his pipe into the fireplace. The room whirled around him and he steadied himself against the mantel, while he tried to listen to what else she was saying. Her loquacity, a moment ago so amusing, had assumed a deeper significance. The phrases purred with diabolical fluidity from her lips, searing like molten metal. Hermia! The girl was mad.

The confusion about him ceased and in the silence he heard her voice.

"Are you ill, Mr. Markham?"

He straightened with a short laugh and faced toward her.

"No--not at all. And I was really very much interested," he said evenly. "Miss Challoner is in Europe?" he asked carelessly.

"Oh, yes,--or was--and Trevvy followed her there. She's home now--came yesterday--of course, with Trevvy at her heels. Oh! he'll keep her in order, no fear about that. It's about time that Hermia settled down. She's quite the wildest thing--perfectly properly, you know, Olga Tcherny says--"

"Olga is home, too?" he interrupted, steadying himself.

She nodded quickly and went on. "Olga says that Hermia disappeared from Paris for over a week and no one knew where she was. Trevvy was crazy with anxiety. But she came back one night in an old gray coat and hat with a bundle--the shabbiest thing imaginable, looking like a tramp. Trevvy was in the hotel and saw her. But they patched things up somehow."

"Did Madame Tcherny learn where she had been?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "You see Olga was too busy with her own affairs. She has a Frenchman in tow this season--she's brought him here with her--florid, blonde, curled and monocled, the Marquis de Folligny--"

"Pierre de Folligny!"

"You know him?"

"Yes--er--slightly."

She had babbled her gossip so lightly and rapidly that this last piece of information had not given him the start its significance deserved. But its import grew.

"It's an affair of long standing, isn't it?" she asked him.

"I--I don't know, I'm sure," he muttered, his brow clouding.

"Something in his manner made her glance at the clock.

"Half-past one--and Reggie's coming to lunch at two. I'll have to tear."

He opened the dressing-room for her and, after she had vanished within, stood glowering at the door like one possessed.

A butterfly that dripped poison! He was drenched with it. How lightly Hermia's name had dropped from her satin wings! He smiled grimly at the thought of his own situation, the central figure in at least one act of this comedy, viewing it from the far side of the proscenium arch, gaping like the rustic in the metropolis who sees himself for the first time depicted upon the stage. What right had she--this little flutter-budget--to know these things--when he was denied them? Hermia--the report of her engagement had been disturbing, but some reason it seemed less important now than the fact that she was here--here in New York within twenty minutes of him--perhaps, upon the very street where he might meet her when he went out. Hermia and Trevvy Morehouse! He simply would not believe it. Hermia might look him in the eyes and tell him so--and then-- But she would not dare. Those eyes--blue--violet--gray--all colors as the mood or the sunlight pleased--honest eyes into whose depths he had peered when they were dark with the shadows of the forest and seen his image dancing. She was his that day--all his. He could have taken her; and he had let her

go back to Paris--and the excellent Trevelyan. Hermia, his mad vagabond Hermia, was ready to tie herself for life to that automatic nonentity at Westport who trailed, a patient shadow in Hermia's swirling wake. Hermia and Morehouse! He simply wouldn't believe it.

When his sitter had departed in a rush to keep her engagement, he filled his pipe again and walked the floor smoking furiously, the scenario of Olga's little drama taking a more definite form. He understood now the reasons why she had not told what she had seen. He doubted now whether it was her intention to tell. But she had brought the Frenchman De Folligny over to do the telling for her, reserving her little climax until all her marionettes were properly placed according to her own stage directions, when she would let the situation work itself out to its own conclusion. It was an ingenious plan, one which did her hand much credit. She had realized, of course, that a revelation of Hermia's shortcomings in Alençon, Paris or Trouville would have deprived her vengeance of half its sting. It required a New York background, a quiet drawing-room filled with Hermia's intimates for her "situation" to produce its most telling effect. De Folligny now had the center of the stage and at the proper moment she would pull the necessary wires and the thing would be accomplished.

Something must be done at once. He changed into street clothes and went out, lunched alone on the way uptown and at three was standing at the door of the Challoner house.

The butler showed Markham into the drawing-room and took his card. He did not know whether Miss Challoner was in or not, but he would see. Markham sat and impatiently waited, his eyes meanwhile restlessly roving the splendor of the room in search of some object which would suggest Hermia--mad Hermia of Vagabondia. Opposite him upon the wall was a portrait of her by a distinguished Frenchman, with whose mother he was familiar--an astounding falsehood in various shades of tooth-powder. This Hermia smirked at him like the lady in the fashion page, exuding an atmosphere of wealth and nothing else--a strange, unreal Hermia who floated vaguely between her guilt barriers, neither sprite nor flesh and blood. How could Marsac have known the real Hermia--the heart, the spirit of her as he knew them!

And yet when a few moments later she appeared in the doorway he wondered if he knew her at all. She was dressed for afternoon in some clinging dark stuff which made her figure slim almost to the point of thinness. She wore a small hat with a tall plume and seemed to have gained in stature. Her face was paler and her modulated voice and the studied gesture as she offered him her hand did more to convince him that things were not as they should be.

"_So_ good of you to come, Mr. Markham," he heard her saying coolly. "I was wondering if I'd have the pleasure of seeing you here."

He stood uncertainly at the point of seizing her in his arms when he was made aware of her premeditation. The tepor of her politeness was like a blow between the eyes, and he peered blindly into her face in vain for some sign of the girl he knew.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked, and dumbly he sat. "I hear you were in Normandy," she went on smoothly. "Did you have a good summer? You did leave us rather abruptly at Westport, didn't you? But then you know, of course, I understood that--"

"Hermia," he broke in in a low voice. "What has happened to you? Why didn't you answer my letters. I've been nearly mad with anxiety." He leaned forward toward her, the words falling in a torrent. But she only examined him curiously, a puzzled wrinkle at her brows vying with the set smile she still wore.

"Your letters, Mr. Markham!" she said in surprise. "Oh! You mean the note about the sketch of Thimble Island? I _did_ reply, didn't I? It was awfully nice--"

"Good God!" he muttered, rising. "Haven't you punished me enough now, without this--" with a wave of his hand--"this extravaganza. Haven't I paid? I searched Paris high and low for you, Hermia, haunted your bankers and the hotel where you had been stopping, only returning here at the moment when my engagements in New York made it necessary. Has it been kind of you, or just to ignore my letters and leave me all these weeks in anxiety and ignorance? I've missed you horribly--and I feared--nameless things--that you had forgotten me, that you wanted everything forgotten." As he came forward she rose and took a step toward an inner room, her eyes still narrowed and quizzical, watching him carefully.

"Hermia--Hermia!" He stopped, the tension breaking in a laugh. "Oh, you want to punish me, of course. Don't you think you've paid me well already? See! I'm penitent. What do you want? Shall I go down on my knees to you. I have been on my knees to you for weeks--you must have know it. My letters--"

He paused and then stopped, puzzled, for she had not moved and her gaze surveyed him, coolly critical.

"You got my letters?" he asked anxiously.

She was silent.

"I've written you every day--since you left me--poured my heart out to you. You didn't get them? O Hermia, you must have known what life has been without you. Do you think I could forget what I read in your eyes that day in the forest? Could _you_ forget what you wrote there? Only your lips refused me. Even when they refused me, they were warm with my kisses. They were mine, as you were, body and soul. You loved me, Hermia--from the first. These flimsy barriers you're raising, I'll break them down--and take you--"

As he approached, she reached the curtains, one hand upraised.

"You're dreaming, Mr. Markham," she said, distinctly. "I haven't the least idea what you're talking about."

"You love me--" he stammered.

"_I_?"

Her laughter checked him effectually. He stood, his full gesture of entreaty frozen into immobility. Then slowly his arms relaxed and he stood awkwardly staring, now thoroughly awake. She meant him to understand that Vagabondia was not--that their week in Arcadia had never been.

He gaped at her a full moment before he found speech.

"You wish to deny that you and I--that you were there with me--in Normandy?" he stammered.

"One only denies the possible, Mr. Markham," she said with a glib certitude. "The impossible needs no denial. I was in Paris and in Switzerland this summer. Obviously I couldn't have been in Normandy, too."

"I see," he muttered mechanically. "You were in Switzerland."

"Yes. In Switzerland, Mr. Markham," she repeated.

He turned slowly and walked toward the window, his hands behind him, struggling for control. When his voice came, it was as firm as her own.

"Can you prove that?" he asked coldly.

"Why should I prove it, Mr. Markham?" she asked, "My word should be sufficient, I think."

The even tones of her voice and the repetition of his name inflamed him. There was little doubt of her apostasy. He turned toward her with a change of manner, his eyes dark.

"Perhaps you'll be obliged to prove it," he muttered.

"I? Why?"

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"Monsieur de Folligny is with Olga Tcherny--her in New York."

The plume on her hat nodded back, and her eyes widely opened gave him a momentary glimpse of her terror.

"De Folligny is here--with Olga!"

"Yes. I've just learned it--to-day."

She moved her slender shoulders upward in the gesture she had learned from Olga Tcherny.

"That will be quite pleasant," she resumed, easily. "He will render us a little less prosy, perhaps."

Markham watched her a moment in silence, his wounds aching dully.

"I came here--to warn you of that--danger," he said slowly. "Since you don't fear it, my mission is ended." He took up his hat and stick and moved toward the door. "I shall not question your wisdom or your sense of responsibility to me or to yourself. But I think I understand at last what you would have of me. Whatever you wish, of course, I shall do without question. I was alone in Normandy--or with someone else, if you like. It was my Vagabondia--not yours. There was no Philidor--no Yvonne--no Cleofonte or Stella--no roses of P re Gu gou--no roses in my heart. They're withered enough, God knows. You wish to forget them. You want me to remember you as you are--to-day." He laughed. "I think I'll have no difficulty in doing so--or helping by my silence or my cooperation in carrying out any plans you may have, if you should find it necessary to call upon me."

"I thank you," she murmured, her head bent.

He regarded her a moment steadily, but she would not meet his gaze. At the door he paused.

"I have heard of your reported engagement," he finished more slowly. "I'd like you to know that I had too much faith in you to believe it. But I think--indeed I'm sure I'm ready to believe it now--if you tell me it's true."

She did not raise her head, but her lips moved inarticulately. He glanced at her a moment longer and then, with an inclination of the

head, passed out into the hall and so to the door.

CHAPTER XXV

CIRCE AND THE FOSSIL

Christmas had come and gone and the city had struck its highest note of winter activity. Those envied mortals who compose society, pausing for a brief moment of air and relaxation in the holidays, plunged again into the arduous treadmill of the daily round, urged by the flying lash of unrest, creatures of a common fate, plodding wearily up the path of preferment, not daring to falter or to rest under the pain of instant oblivion.

Olga Tcherny paused only long enough to catch a deep breath after her momentous interview with John Markham in Washington Square and then plunged into the busy throng with De Folligny after. She had heard with some interest the reports of Hermia Challoner's engagement to Mr. Morehouse, but it had made no very deep impression upon her mind. She only considered it, in fact, with reference to its possible effect upon the mind of John Markham, who she soon learned was avoiding the social scene, as had been his custom, before she had made forcible entry into his studio last year and had dragged him forth into the company of his fellow man.

It was quite evident that Hermia was playing her game rather ruthlessly and, whatever her object, John Markham and she for the present at least were at cross purposes. Olga did not dare to go to see him, and though her door stood open she had no hope that he would enter it without encouragement. But one blithe morning she sent him a note:

What's this I hear? Can it be true that your nymph has fled from the woods of Pan to take shelter under the eaves of a Morehouse? And what becomes of the faun? I can't believe it--and yet my rumor comes direct. Do satisfy my craving for veracity, won't you? I'd like awfully to see you, if you'll forgive and forget. I can now give you positive assurances that you will be quite as safe in my drawing-room as in that smudgy place where you immortalize mediocrity. I'll never propose to you again as long as I live. The phantasy has passed, I think. Do you believe me? Come and see--but 'phone first.

Affectionately,
Olga.

To her surprise, he came the following afternoon. She received him with a frank and careless gayety which put him very much at his ease. He marveled at her assurance and the resumption of the little airs of proprietorship to which he had been accustomed before the visit to Westport. She was the Olga of the portrait with the added graces of a not too obtrusive sympathy and a manner which seemed subtly to suggest self-elimination. He accepted the situation without mental reservation, sat in the chair she indicated with a grateful sigh and watched her pretty hands busy about the tea-tray. Whatever their relations and however directly he could trace his present misfortunes to her very door, the illusion of her friendliness was not to be dispelled, and he relinquished himself to its charm with a grateful sense that, for the moment at least, here was sanctuary.

She found him thinner and said so.

"You're working too hard, my dear Markham," she said. "On every hand I hear of people you've painted or are about to paint. A real success--un success fou--and in spite of yourself! It's quite wonderful."

"I've painted very badly," he muttered.

"Oh, you're too close to your work to have a perspective. Mrs. Hammond has touted you the length and breadth of the town--you know--and that means there's a pedestal for you in her Hall of Fame. What does Immortality taste like? Sweet?"

He laughed. "Fame in New York--is merely a matter of dollars. My prices are enormous--hence my reputation. If I charged what the things are worth, these people would send me back to Paris."

"And still you refuse to go to their houses? I hear that Mrs. Hammond wanted to give a dinner for you--to all her set--and that's quite extraordinary of her--even for a lion--"

"But I couldn't eat them, you know--"

"But you could let them watch you eat--"

"I wouldn't have eaten. You see, magnificence of that sort takes my appetite away."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'm a crank. They speak another language--those people. I don't understand them. I find that no exertion of the legs brings my mind and theirs any closer together. They bore me stiff and I bore them. What's the use?"

"You have no social ambitions?"

"None whatever--in the sense you mean. I like my fellow men stripped to the bone. That's indecent when one dines out."

"And your fellow woman?"

He shrugged and laughed.

"She's a child--adorable always. But then I never understand her--nor she me."

She sipped tea and smiled.

"Woman is at once the woman and the serpent, *_mon ami_*. All she needs is a man and a Garden of Paradise."

He frowned into his teacup but did not reply.

"Is it true, John?" she asked quietly.

"What is true?"

"That Hermia is to marry Trevvy Morehouse?"

"From whom did you hear that?" he asked.

"From whom have I not heard it? Everyone. Hermia hasn't denied it, has she?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Why should she deny it? It's her own affair."

His tone rebuked her.

"I don't want to be meddlesome, you know. I only thought--"

"Oh, I'm glad you spoke," he murmured. "I--I wanted to talk about her. You know, you and I--when you left me--there in the Park--you gave me the impression that you--er--that you didn't care for Miss Challoner any more--"

"Did I? I'm glad I did. That's the truth. I don't care for her. She cut me very prettily on the street the week after she got back from Europe. Evidently the antipathy is mutual."

He paused, considering.

"I'm sorry she saw fit to do that. That was foolish--very foolish of her."

"Wasn't it? Especially as I had about decided to forget that I'd ever been in Alençon--"

He put his hand over hers and held it there a moment.

"I want you to forget that, Olga," he muttered. "It--it never happened."

She smiled, her gaze on the andirons.

"You're quite positive of that?"

"Yes. I was--er--in Holland last summer."

"Oh, _were_ you?"

"Yes. And Hermia--Miss Challoner was in Switzerland."

"Yes. So I hear. Very interesting. But how does that explain things to Pierre de Folligny? He met her the other day--and remembered her perfectly--"

Markham rose and paced the floor.

"Oh," he heard her saying, "she denied seeing him in France, of course,--but it was quite awkward--for her, I mean."

He took two or three turns, his brows serious, and then came and stood near her at the mantelpiece.

"You must straighten things out, Olga--with De Folligny," he muttered. "It will ruin her, if he speaks--you know what New York is. Gossip like that travels like fire. And she doesn't deserve it--not that. You've told me that you don't believe in her innocence, but at heart I think you do. You must. I swear to you--on the honor of--"

She raised a hand.

"Don't--!" quickly. "I'm willing to assume her innocence. Haven't I told you that I had been prepared to forget the whole incident--when she cut me. Why did she do that? What does that mean?"

"Not guilt surely--wouldn't she be trying to get you on her side?"

Olga waved an expressive hand.

"Oh, that's impossible--and she knows it."

"Why?"

She paused, shielding her eyes with her fingers. He was such an

innocent. But she had no notion of enlightening him.

"She has given you up--to marry. That's clear. I told her secret. The simplest way out of her difficulty is to ignore me. Well--let her. I don't mind. I'll survive. But I would give my ears to let Fifth Avenue know--"

"No--no," he put in quickly, "you mustn't do that-- If you've ceased to care for her, you've got your duty to me to consider. Do you hold my honor so lightly--"

"Yours?"

"Yes. She was in my care. I let her go with me. The responsibility was sacred. I was morally pledged to keep her from harm. That responsibility has not ceased because she no longer--because she has made up her mind to--to marry. It's greater even. If you ever told that story--"

"And De Foligny? You forget him--"

He came quickly over and took her hands in his.

"You can seal this secret, if you will, as in a tomb. Do it, Olga. It will be magnificent of you. Give me your word--your promise to keep silent--to keep De Folligny silent--"

She had turned, her chin upon her shoulder, away from him.

"You ask a great deal," she said with reluctance.

"Not more than you can give--not more than you will give. Whatever your--your differences she doesn't deserve this of you. Will it give you pleasure in after years to think of her life embittered--of his life embittered, too, by a piece of gossip, woven out of a tissue of half-truths--that will damn her--as half-truths do?"

"You love her so much as this?" she gasped.

He relinquished her hand--stood a moment looking dumbly at her and then walked the length of the room away. The little clock on the mantel ticked gaily, the fire sparkled and the familiar sounds of the careless city came faintly to their ears. She stirred and he turned toward her.

"Will you promise?" he asked quietly.

"Promise what?"

"Not to speak--of what you saw at Alen on."

"Yes. I promise that," she said slowly at last.

"Or let De Folligny speak?"

Another silence. And then from thinned lips.

"I--I will use my influence--to keep him silent."

The firmness of her tone assured him. He caught up her hands and pressed them softly to his lips.

"I knew you would, Olga. I knew you were bigger than that. I thank you--I will never forget--"

But before he could finish she had snatched her fingers away from him

and was laughing softly at the tea-caddy.

"Now, if you please," she said composedly, "we will speak of pleasanter things."

She opened a long silver box on the table and took a cigarette, offering him one.

"The pipe of peace?" he asked.

"If you like."

He drew in the smoke gratefully.

"Olga, you're a trump," he said with a genuine heartiness.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "I know it. And you're playing me quite successfully--aren't you? Hearts? and I'm the 'dummy.' I never liked playing the 'dummy.'"

He laughed.

"I wish I were quite sure in my mind what you do like to play."

Her look questioned coolly.

"I mean, that, as well as I've thought I've know you, I find that I've never known you at all. You're a creature of bewildering transitions. I hear that you're going to marry De Folligny."

"And what if I am?" she flashed at him.

"I'm sure I wish you every happiness. Only--"

He paused.

"Please finish."

"Nothing--except that you will leave me with an unpleasant sense of having been made a fool of."

She rose, flicked her cigarette into the fire and then turned as if about to speak. But thought better of it. There was a long silence.

"Pierre de Folligny and I are friends of long standing," she said at last. "One marries some day. Why not an old friend? The age of madness passes--I am almost thirty and I have lived--much. It is time--" she finished wearily, "time that I married again. We understand each other perfectly." A smile slowly dawned and broke. "What one wants in a husband is not so much a rhapsodist as a rhymester, not so much a lover as a walking-gentleman--Pierre is that, you know."

She sighed again and rose.

"It was very sweet of you to come in, John. Don't misunderstand me again. That --" and she paused to give the word emphasis, "is all over. I'm quite safe as a confidante. Hermia has treated you very badly, I think. I'd like to tell her so--No? Well, good-bye. Do come in again. I want you to know Pierre better. He really is all that a walking-gentleman should be."

He laughed and kissed her fingers, and in a moment had gone.

Olga Tcherny stood immovable where he had left her, one foot upon the

fender, her gaze upon the fire. After a time she stretched forth her fingers to the blaze. All over! She straightened slowly and caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror. The firelight gleamed under her brows, brought out with unpleasant sharpness the angle of her jaw and touched the bones of her cheek caressingly. She looked again, the truth compelling her, and then buried her face in her arm. The truth--middle age, had set its first mark upon her. The fallow fingers of Time had touched her lightly, more as a warning than as a prophecy, painted with a reluctant brush a deeper tone into the shadows, a higher note in the lights, had brushed in haltingly the false values that now mocked at her. Time! She seemed to count it by her heart-throbs.

She walked across the room and stood before the portrait John Markham had painted of her. The face gazed out from its shadows, its eyes met hers for a moment, then looked through her and beyond, eyes which looked, yet saw not, eyes deep and inscrutable, seers of visions, bathed in memories which would not sink into oblivion. Her eyes he had painted carefully. For him it seemed the rest of the face had been a blank. The nose, the chin, were hers, and the mouth--the lips, a scarlet smudge of illusiveness. They were hers, too. He had had difficulty with her lips, painting and repainting them. They had puzzled him. "The eyes we are born with," he had said--how well she remembered it now! "The lips are what we make ourselves." At last he had painted them in quickly--almost brutally and let them be. They seemed to mock at her now--to contradict the meaning of the eyes--which would not, could not, smile.

Hermia had scoffed at this portrait because it was not "pretty." There was something bigger than mere prettiness here. He had painted the soul of her, reading with his art what had been hidden from the man, as he had strayed through the labyrinth of her thoughts viewing the blighted blossom of her girlhood and wifehood and the neglected garden of her maturity. As she viewed the portrait now in the light of time and event, she saw, more clearly than ever, her soul and body as Markham had seen it. He had painted her as he would have painted character--an old man or an old woman, searching for shadows rather than lights, seeking the anatomy of sorrow rather than that of joy--had made her the subject of a cool and not too flattering psychological investigation. Was this how he had always seen her? This far-looking, inscrutable, satiated woman of the world, who peered forth into the future, from the dull embers of the past--a being whose physical beauty was rather suggested than expressed--whose loveliness lay in what she might have been rather than in what she was? He had always thought of her thus?

She rubbed her eyes and looked again. Not, not always. She remembered now--he couldn't have painted her as he had painted others--as he had painted a while ago the portrait of Phyllis Van Vorst--carelessly, contemptuously. He had probed deeply--painted from his own deeps. They had been very close together in those hours, mentally, spiritually, and only the barrier she herself had raised prevented their physical nearness. That, too, she could have had?

A mist fell across the canvas and Hermia's vision interposed, rosy and careless, her braggart youth triumphant.

She turned, threw herself upon the couch and buried her head, her fingers clenched, in the pillows. She made no sound and lay so immovable that one might have thought she was sleeping. But her blood was coursing madly and her pulses throbbed a wrist and neck. She had been true to her better self--with Markham--and her idealism had brought her only this void of barren regret. Whichever way she looked into the past or into the future, the vista was empty; behind her only the echoes of voices and a grim shape or two; before her--vacancy. She had bared her soul to Markham, there in the Square, torn away the veil

of her pride and let him know the truth. Why, God knew. She had been mad. She had believed the worst of Hermia and of him, and had offered herself to him that he might judge between them—her heart and Hermia's, her mind, her body and Hermia's. Was her own face no longer fair that she should have looked at her so curiously and turned away with Hermia's name on his lips, Hermia's image in his heart? A doubt had crept into her mind and lingered insidiously. Hermia innocent! She was beginning to believe it now. In spite of the damning facts she had discovered, the evidence of Madam Bordier and Monsieur Duchanel, of the peasant women at Tillières and of Pierre de Folligny, the testimony of Hermia's pale face at the shooting lodge at Alençon and of her confession which she had not thought of doubting, the belief had slowly gained force in her mind that Markham had not lied to her. She found confirmation of it in Hermia Challoner's disappearance in France, in her attitude toward Markham and in the announcement of her engagement to another man. Markham could not guess, as she did now, that this was only a *ruse de femme*, born of the access of timidity at the discovery of her indiscretion and the consciousness that she had gone too far with Markham, who must be punished for his share in her downfall. It seemed pitifully clear now.

Olga's bitterness choked and whelmed her. It seemed even worse that Hermia should be innocent. She dared not think of the picture she had made in Markham's mind when she had thrown herself into the scales that he might weigh their frailties and compare them. Hermia innocent! How Olga hated her for it, and for her youth and beauty. They mocked and derided the tender flame that she had nourished, which now glowed ineffectually as in another, a greater light. She hated Hermia for all the things that she herself was not.

Lucidity came to her slowly. After a long while she raised a disordered face and leaned her chin upon her hands, staring at the dying log. She had promised him not to speak. She could not. She had even promised to persuade De Folligny to silence. Had he mentioned the incident already? She did not know. He was not by nature a gossip, but Hermia had not been too tactful and it was a good story—the sanctity of which, upon the mind of a man of De Folligny's temperament, might not be impressive. She would keep her promise to Markham and persuade Pierre to silence. No one should know by word of mouth—

Olga started up, her eyes wide open, staring at the opposite wall, where there hung a colored print of a woodland scene by Morland, and a smile slowly grew at one end of her lips, a crooked smile, that might have been merely quizzical, had not the impression been unpleasantly modified by the narrowing eyes and the tiny wrinkle that suddenly grew between her brows.

"I will do it," she muttered. "It may be amusing."

CHAPTER XXVI

MRS. BERKELEY HAMMOND ENTERTAINS

The heritage of the world comes at last to the pachyderms. Fate is never so unkind as to those who blindly resist her and into the lap of stoic and unimpressionable she pours the horn of plenty.

Trevelyan Morehouse had gone through life on the low gear. In fact he had no change of gears and needed none. He never "hit it up" on the smooth places or burned out his tires on the rough ones, and was therefore always to be found in perfect repair. He was a good hill climber and had a way of arriving at his destination no matter how difficult the going. When others passed him he let them go, and plodded on after them with solemn assurance, his gait so leisurely that

rapid travelers had the habit of regarding his conservatism with undisguised contempt. And yet his perseverance, though inconspicuous, was singularly effective. He had won his way into the sanctorum of a big corporation and his advice, though never brilliant, was always sane and peculiarly reliable. He did not mind rebuffs and was so indifferent to indignities that people had ceased to offer them. Socially he could always be trusted to do the usual thing in the usual way and was therefore always much in demand by hostesses who required conventional limitations. In a word he was "the excellent Trevelyan." and the adjective fitted him as snugly as it did the well-known comestible with which it had come to be so comfortably and freely associated. His excellence lay largely in the fact that he did not excel. He was content with his subordinate capacity, wise in his confidence that all things would come to him in the end, if he only waited long enough.

The same rules which he found so successful in business he now applied to his affair of the heart, and plodded off in the wake of the fast flying Hermia, imperturbable and undismayed. His flowers had been sent to her with the regularity of the clock, his visits carefully timed, and his proposals renewed with a well-bred ardor. He had waited patiently through Hermia's short and sportive attachment for "Reggie" Armistead, and when their "trial" engagement reached its tempestuous conclusion, had stepped softly into the breach, rosy with hope and a definite sense that his time had come. Hermia liked him--had liked him for years. She had gotten used to him as one does to a familiar chair or an article of diet. He was a habit with her like her bedroom slippers or her afternoon tea. He was comfortable, always safe and quite sane, which she was not, and she accepted him in the guise of counselor and friend with the same cheerful tolerance that she gave to her Aunt Harriet Westfield or to Mr. Winthrop of the Pilgrim Trust Company.

When Hermia departed suddenly for Europe, her sportive idyl so suddenly shattered, Mr. Morehouse followed her in the next steamer. She had given him no definite encouragement, it was true, and yet he found reasons to hope that the time was at hand when she must make some definite decision. In Europe her brief disappearance from the scene of her usual activities had mystified him and her return to her hotel, shabby and uncommunicative, had aroused a chagrin and an anxiety quite unusual to him; but he had sat and waited her pleasure, survived her turbulent moods and had found his patience at last rewarded by her silent acquiescence in his presence, and by an invitation to accompany her to Switzerland, where she was to join her Aunt Julia and the children.

From the vantage point of his office window down town, where he now sat and viewed the bleak perspective of the city, his memories of the summer with Hermia seemed a strange compound of brief blisses and more enduring pangs. They had been much seen together and the announcement of their engagement which had appeared in the newspapers had not been surprising. Aunt Julia had favored his suit and Mrs. Westfield had given him to understand that it was time Hermia married. But the fact remained that Hermia had not accepted him. His insistence had always provoked and still provoked one of two moods--either resentment or mockery. She either dismissed him in a dudgeon or cajoled him with elusive banter. Why was he so impatient? There was plenty of time? Was he sure that he wanted to marry her? What did her really know about her heart of hearts? Perhaps, if he knew her better he might not want to marry her. He pleaded in patient calm. The world, it seemed, thought them engaged. Why shouldn't he be permitted to think so. She only laughed at him and her heart of hearts had come to be the most profound enigma that it had ever been his fortune to study. So the prize, which he had thought most surely his own, still hung reluctantly upon the lip of the horn of plenty. It would not fall, and all the

traditions of his experience forbade that he should jostle it. And so he only watched with patient eyes and a physical restraint which could only be described as "excellent."

What did she mean by saying that if he knew her better he might not want to marry her? Vague doubts assailed him. Did he, after all, know her? What was this chapter of her life of which he knew nothing and to which she had so frequently alluded? Was it something which had happened to her in America? Or had it something to do with her disappearance last summer from Paris, after which she had returned sober and intolerant? He gave it up. He was always giving her up and then putting his doubts of her in his pocket with his neat handkerchief, plodding sedulously as before. He must wait. Everything that he had got in life had come from waiting and Hermia, his philosophy told him, must be no exception to the rule.

The winter drew on toward spring. Lent arrived, and society, quite bored and thoroughly exhausted, halted in the mad round of the "one-step" and turned to calmer delights. Country places in adjacent counties were opened and guests flitted from one house to the other in a continuous round of visits.

Mrs. Berkeley Hammond's invitations, whether to the big house near the Park or to Rood's Knoll, her place in the country, were much in demand.

The Hammonds had unlimited means, the social instinct, worthy family traditions, and a talent for entertainment, a combination of qualities and circumstances which explained the importance of this family in the social life of the city. The mantle of an older leader who had passed had fallen comfortably on Mrs. Hammond's capacious shoulders and she wore it with a familiar grace which gave the impression that it had always been there. Conservative, the more radical called her, and radical, the conservative; but her taste and her chef were both above reproach, and her dinners, whether large or small, had the distinction which only comes of a rare order of tact and discrimination. Nor were her hospitalities confined to the entertainment of the indigenious. Visitors to New York, foreign celebrities, literary, artistic or political, found within her doors a welcome and a company exactly suited to their social requirements. She liked young people, too, and contrived to let them know it, to the end that her dances, while formal, were gay rather than "stodgy," juvenescent rather than patriarchal.

The house at Rood's Knoll was a huge affair, of brick and timbered plaster, set in the midst of its thousand acres of woodland in the heart of the hills. Lent found it full of people and its gayety was reflected in other houses of the neighborhood whose owners, like the Hammonds, kept open house. There was much to do. March went out like a lion and the snow which kept the more timid indoors at the cards made wonderful coasting and sledding, of which latter these wearied children of fortune were not slow to take advantage. The ponds were frozen, too, and skating was added to the sum of their rural delights.

Hermia Challoner, who was visiting Caroline Anstell, joined feverishly in these pursuits, glad of the opportunity they afforded her of relief from her personal problems. There were some of her intimates here in the neighborhood, but she found greater security in the society of an older set of whom she had seen little in town and in the pleasure of picking up the loose ends of these acquaintanceships she managed to forget, at least temporarily, her sword of Damocles. Olga Tcherny was one of Mrs. Berkeley Hammond's house guests, but she had not been in evidence on either of the occasions when Hermia had called. There was some excitement over an evening which Mrs. Hammond was planning to take place in the country during the latter days of Lent. The invitations were noncommittal and merely mentioned the date and hour, but it was understood that "everyone" was to be there, and that an entertainment a

little out of the ordinary was to be provided.

It was, therefore, with a pleasurable anticipation that Hermia got down from the Anstell's machine on the appointed evening, and followed her party into the great house. The rooms were comfortably filled, but not crowded, and it seemed that the women had done their best to add their share to the merely decorative requirements of the occasion. The ball-room lights shimmered softly on the rich tissues of their costumes, and caught in the facets of the jewels on their bared shoulders. Society was at its best, upon its good behavior, patiently eking out the few short days that remained to it of the penitential season. Hermia managed to elude the watchful Trevelyan and entered the ball-room with Beatrice Coddington and Caroline Anstell. Just inside she found herself face to face with the Countess Tcherny. She would have passed on, but Olga was not to be denied.

"So glad to see you, Hermia, dear," she purred, her eyes lighting.
"It's really dreadfully unlucky how seldom we've met this winter.
You're a little thinner, aren't you? But it becomes you awfully."

"Thanks," said Hermia. "I'm quite well."

"I hope you'll like the play, you know I--" and she whispered. "Nobody knows--_I_ wrote it."

"Oh, really," Hermia smiled coolly. "I hope it's quite moral."

"Oh, you must judge for yourself," said Olga, and disappeared.

The men, having searched the premises vainly for the bridge tables, resigned themselves to the inevitable and drifted by twos and threes into the ball-room, where they melted into the gay company which was not seated, or stood along the back and side walls, making a somber background for the splendid plumage of their dinner-partners.

"_Tableaux-vivants_, for a dollar!" said Archie Westcott in bored desperation.

"Oh, rot!" blurted out Crosby Downs in contempt. "What's the use? They'll be havin' Mrs. Jarley's waxworks next--"

"Or the 'Dream of Fair Women'--"

"Or charades. Not a card in sight--or a cigar! Rotten taste--_I'd_ call it."

The music of the orchestra silenced these protests and a ripple of expectation passed over the audience as the curtain rose, disclosing a sylvan glade and a startled nymph in meager draperies hiding from a faun. The music trembled for a moment and then, as the nymph was discovered, broke into wild concords through which the violins sang tunefully as the chase began. It was not for some moments that the audience awoke to the fact that these must be the Austrian dancers whose visit to New York had been so widely heralded. Captured at last, the nymph was submissive, and the dance which followed revealed artistry of an order with which most of the spectators were unfamiliar. Even Crosby Downs ceased to grumble and wedged himself down the side wall where he could have a better view. The dance ended amid applause and the audience now really aroused from its lethargy eagerly awaited the next rise of the curtain.

The first part of the program, it seemed, was to be a vaudeville. A famous tenor sang folk songs of sunny Italy; two French pantomimists did a graceful and amusing _Pierrot_ and _Pierrette_; a comedian did a black-face monologue; and the first part of the program concluded with

the performances of a young violinist, the son of a Russian tobacconist down town, whom Mrs. Berkeley Hammond had "discovered" and was now sending to Europe to complete his musical education. A budding genius, was the verdict, almost ready to blossom. The brief period of disquiet which had followed Hermia's meeting with Olga, had been forgotten in her enjoyment of the performance and in the gay chatter of her companions and of her neighbors back and front. When the curtain had fallen upon the violinist, there was a rustle of programs.

"The Lady Orchestra,' some on back of her read aloud. 'Comedy with a Sting--' What's coming now? What's a 'Lady Orchestra'? Does anyone know?"

"A 'Lady Orchestra,' my dear Phyllis," said Reggie Armistead, "is an orchestra lady."

"An orchestra lady! I wonder what she plays--"

"The devil probably--he's your most familiar instrument."

"Reggie! I'm surprised at you. You know--"

The remainder of Miss Van Vorst's speech was lost to Hermia, who sat staring speechless at the stage curtain, her body suddenly ice-cold, all its blood throbbing in her temples. "The Lady Orchestra!" The words had fallen so lightly that their significance had dawned upon her slowly. This play--this "comedy with a sting" was about _her_--Hermia--and John Markham. Olga had written it, and was even now watching her face for some sign of weakness. Olga, De Folligny--and how many others? Terror gripped her--blind terror, every instinct urging flight. But this, she knew, was impossible. She stared hard at the red curtain, and swallowed nervously, sure now that, whatever the play revealed, she must sit until its end, giving no sign of the tumult that raged within her. The eyes of the audience burned into the back of her head, and she seemed to read a knowledge of her secret in every careless glance thrown in her direction. This was a vengeance worth of Olga--the refinement of cruelty.

"What is it, Hermia," she heard Caroline Anstell whispering. "Are you ill, dear?"

"Oh, no, not at all. Why do you ask?" coolly.

"I thought you looked a little tired."

"I--I think it's the heat," said Hermia. "Sh--Carrie, there goes the curtain."

If Hermia had been startled a moment ago, she now learned that she would have need of all her courage. The curtain revealed the market-place of a French town on a fine day. To the left a row of penny shows, a "man hedgehog," an "_homme sauvage_" and an Albino lady who told fortunes; to the right a platform backed by a canvas wall, surmounted by a sign in huge letters "Th %otre Tony Ricardo" flanked by rudely painted representations of the acts which were to be seen within. The setting was admirable and brought forth immediate applause from the audience, under which Hermia hid her gasp of dismay. There were even pictures like those which Philidor had painted, of Cleofonte breaking chains and of the child Stella flying in mid-air, and at one side the legend "Artistide Bruant, painter of portraits at two francs fifty--soldiers ten sous." Sure now of the scene which was to follow, but outwardly quite composed, Hermia listened carelessly to the dialogue, saw the acrobat appear, and the "Lady Orchestra," who was the guilty heroine of the piece, take her place upon the platform beside him. Here the resemblance to reality

ceased, for the heroine was dark and Aristide blonde and beardless, and yet this very discrimination on Olga's part seemed to point more definitely to Hermia even than if the characterization had been truthfully followed. The actors were professionals who had been well drilled in their parts and the plot developed quickly in the dialogue between Madeleine, the erring wife, and Aristide, the recreant husband, who had fled from fashionable Paris, met upon the road and joined this troupe of Caravaners that they might taste life together in rural simplicity and security. The dialogue was clever, if cadent, the situations amusing, the action rapid, the first act ending with the appearance of the irate wife of Aristide, and the disappearance of the guilty couple, just in time to avoid discovery.

During the entr'acte, though the restless guests moved about, Hermia sat rooted to her chair, fascinated with horror. Her body seemed nerveless and she feared that if she rose her limbs would not support her, or, if they did support her, she must fly like a mad thing from the house. And so she sat, a fixed smile frozen on her lips, greeting those who approached her. Beatrice Coddington left her seat, and Trevvy Morehouse made haste to fill it. He had never seemed so welcome to Hermia as at the present moment, and his patient mien and quiet commonplaces did much to restore her composure; so that when the bell rang for the curtain of the second act, she was laughing with a brave show of enjoyment at Reggie and Phyllis, who seemed at the point of severing their amatory relations. Hermia was prepared for anything now. If her breach of conventions had found her out, there was no one, not even Olga, who would look at her and say that she was showing the white feather.

She could see the play to its end now, for from Reggie's program she had learned that the setting for the second act was the interior of a shooting lodge in the forest, and when the curtain rose she was not surprised at the setting of the stage, which represented, as accurately as possible, the house of the Comte de Cahors, in the forest of *f couves*. The approach of the injured wife, discovered in time by the refugees through the half-opened shutter, gives Aristide time to help the fictitious orchestra lady up a stair to the garret, where she is in concealment during the dramatic interview between husband and wife, which ends in the woman seizing a loaded rifle with the intention of killing both herself and her husband. In the struggle which ensues for the possession of the weapon, the gun is discharged, there is a cry overhead and the figure of Madeleine is seen to rise, opening the trap-door, and then to fall the length of the stairs, at the feet of the woman who has been wronged.

The scene was admirably done and carried the audience to its conclusion in breathless silence. The lights of the ball-room, fortunately lowered, had hidden the pallor of Hermia's face but she realized, when they suddenly blazed, that Trevvy Morehouse was looking at her curiously, that her fingers were ice-cold and that, when she spoke a word or two in reply to his anxious query, her voice was strangely unfamiliar. As the applause ceased, there was a general movement toward the supper-room. Hermia rose stiffly and moved as in a dream. Was it her own conscience that told her that Carol Gouverneur was looking at her strangely? Or that there was meaning in the glance and laughter of Mrs. Renshaw and Archie Westcott as she passed them? She tried to smile carelessly, but her muscles would not obey her. Would she never reach the door? People stopped and spoke but she only nodded and passed on, intent upon the shadows of the hallway, where the lights glowed dimly and the gaze of these people would no longer burn past her barriers, searching out the innermost recesses of her heart, which they read according to the hideous lie which Olga had told. A comedy with a sting, she had called it, and the sting meant for Hermia, had poisoned the air with its venom. She leaned heavily on Trevvy's arm but she did

not hear what he was saying; and, as they passed the door into the hall, two men, neither of whom she knew, followed her pale face with their glances. Was it her tortured imagination that made her hear one of them say to the other after she had passed, "That's the girl--?"

What girl? Not herself? She gasped a question to Trevvy. He smiled gaily.

"Yes--they were pointing you out. Do you wonder that I'm so proud?"

Hermia stopped and faced him. She learned in that moment that the thing he had dreamed was impossible.

"Please order Mrs. Anstell's machine for me," she said quickly. "I'm going at once."

"Are you ill? Shall I go with you?"

"No--I want to go alone--alone--" she gasped.

Vaguely troubled, he followed her anxiously to the door of the dressing-room, but did her bidding.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SEATS OF THE MIGHTY

The account of this atrocity did not reach John Markham for some weeks. With the exception of the people who came to the studio and the few men he met at the club where he dined, he saw little of society, and troubled himself less with its affairs. His life was more secluded, and his work more exacting than ever, and when he walked out, which he did in the late afternoons, he choose avenues which would not remind him of the things he was trying to forget. He had given up hope of Hermia, and though her vision persisted, it was not of the modish, self-contained creature who had received him so coolly that he thought.

This was not the Hermia he had loved. That other girl, the joyous companion of his summer idyl, was no more. At times it almost seemed that she had never been. She had made it clear that she wished no more of him and he had accepted her dictum without question. A more sophisticated lover would have laughed away the barriers she had interposed, followed her carelessly, and brought her to bay when he had proved or disproved the genuineness of her indifference. But Markham was singularly ingenuous, his reasoning as simple and direct as that of a child. He had never understood the woman of society and until Olga had appeared upon his horizon had let her severely alone. Hermia had been an accident--a divine accident. Her frankness had disarmed him, and he had followed his impulses blindly, as (it seemed to him then) she had followed hers. He gloried in the memory of their pilgrimage, its gayety, its freedom and the clean spirit with which they both had entered on it. He had believed in her and in believing had let his heart carry him where it would, willing to forget that she might not be infallible. He had been so sure of her--so sure--and now--

He wiped his brushes on a square of cheesecloth, cleaned his palette and lay in his chair frowning at the portrait, which smiled back at him with ironical amusement. It was curious. All his portraits now smiled. His reputation was based on his skill in making people happy in paint--painting all people happy but himself--_Punchinello_ dancing while his _Columbine_ lay dead. He straightened with a quick intake of the breath, then washed his brushes carefully and changed into street clothes. He was writing to one of his sitters when his knocker clanged and a man in livery entered bearing a note. He opened it and read:

My Dear Mr. Markham:

I must see you at once on a matter of importance. Can you come up this afternoon for a dish of tea? I'm sending my car for you in the hope that your engagements will not forbid. If anything prevents to-day, won't you lunch with me to-morrow at two?

Very sincerely yours,
Sarah Hammond.

Markham frowned. There was no getting out of it, it seemed.

"You have Mrs. Hammond's car below?" he said to the waiting footman.

"Yes, sir. I was to get an answer or take you up, if you could go."

"I'll go. I'll be down in a moment."

The man retired, and Markham, somewhat mystified, reread Mrs. Hammond's note and got into this hat and overcoat. A matter of importance! Another commission, perhaps--she had already got him two. And yet it seemed, had it been that, she would have expressed herself differently.

He went down and got into the elegantly appointed limousine and in a while, too short to solve his problem, was set down under the *porte cochere* of his *patronne*.

He found her at the tea table, a stout but puissant figure in mauve and black. In the studio she had not bothered him. She had been merely an amiable millionaire, in pearls and black satin. Here in the majestic drawing-room, with her small court gathered about her, she dominated him. He hesitated a second at the door before going forward, but when she saw him she rose at once and excused herself to her guests. After their departure, she motioned him to a chair beside her and entered without delay upon her subject. Her manner was kindly, if restrained, and he saw at once that the matter was of a personal nature.

"I suppose, Mr. Markham, you think it rather curious that I should have sent for you in such haste, but I shouldn't have done so had I not thought it necessary. You understand that, don't you?"

Markham murmured something and waited for her to go on.

"It seems a little difficult to begin, for there are some matters which are not easy even with a friend."

"I am sure if there is anything in which I can help you--"

"There is, Mr. Markham. I should not have dared to speak to you if I hadn't, unfortunately, found myself brought into an affair in which your name has been mentioned."

"My name?"

"Yes. Yours and Miss Challoner's."

He blanched and was immediately conscious that her small eyes were watching him keenly.

"Wh--what have you heard, Mrs. Hammond?" he blurted out.

"One moment, Mr. Markham. I don't want you to think that I am the kind of woman who seeks to pry into the affairs of other people. I don't. I abominate meddlers and will have nothing to say, even if after I tell you what my motives are, you refuse to answer my questions. But a great wrong has been done, an advantage taken of my hospitality. I

speak of the theatricals which took place at my house in the country last month."

He stared at her blankly and she smiled.

"I forgot," she went on, "what a hermit you are. Of course you have not heard." She leaned over the tea table and took a slip of paper from under a tea dish. "I shall let you read this so that you may know in just what terms New York is speaking of you--of me--of us."

She handed him the clipping. It was from a weekly paper, which concerned itself with the doings of society, and he read, his eyes glowing:

The much heralded theatricals at "Roods Knoll" have come and gone, but the echoes of this affair are still reverberating the length of the Avenue. It seems that the very clever play, written by a well-known woman of society, was based upon fact, and that the hero and heroine of the adventures depicted are in New York, the girl in question a member of the hunting set and the man a distinguished portrait painter--both of whom shall be nameless. As everyone knows, the play is laid in rural France, and deals with the loves of a French countess who has fled from her husband to join her lover, also married, upon the road, where they become members of a band of strolling mountebanks, the lady masquerading as a Dame Orchestre and the gentleman as an itinerant painter of portraits--

Markham stopped, his eyes seeking those of his hostess.

"The play was given," he said hoarsely, "at your house?"

"It was, Mr. Markham," she said simply. "Read it through to the end, please."

He did so, his horror increasing as the full significance of the description grew upon him. Hermia had seen--had read this. They were talking about her and about him? He could not understand.

"You said that Miss--Miss Challoner's name had been mentioned--and mine," he said slowly. "There is no name--mentioned her. The identity of the people--"

"Your names have been mentioned, Mr. Markham, in my presence. The story back of this vile clipping is on the lips of every gossip in town. Where it originated Heaven only knows, but facts are given and dates which make it ugly in the extreme. I thought it best that you should know and sent for you to assure you that I had no knowledge about the play and its possible reference to any one."

"The play," he asked quietly, "was written by Madame Tcherny?"

She nodded, her eyes regarding him soberly.

"What shall I do, Mr. Markham? If there is some basis of truth in the reports I hear, I have been grossly imposed upon and, whatever the facts, have done a great wrong both to you and Hermia. Unfortunately, she has left New York, and I don't know where to find her. She left town, I am informed, the day after the play was given. I wish she hadn't. It makes things awkward for me. I have the best intentions in the world, but if she ties my hands by silence what can I do?"

Markham had risen and was pacing the floor slowly, his head bent, all this thoughts of Hermia. Olga's cruelty stunned him. She had promised not to speak. Had she spoken other than in this ingenious drama? Or was it--De Folligny? His fists clenched and his jaws worked forward.

De Folligny--a man. Here was something tangible--a man, not a woman, to deal with. He turned and stood beside the tea table, struggling for the control of his voice.

"Who has told this story, Mrs. Hammond?" he asked at last.

She shrugged her capacious shoulders and settled her head forward in his direction.

"Frankly, I don't know. Thank God, I'm not in any way responsible for that part of this misfortune. I only know that Olga Tcherny wrote the play. As to her motives in doing so I am at a loss. But if I thought she used my house, violated my hospitality at the expense of one of my guests, to serve some private end, I would--"

The good lady grew red in the face, and then, controlling herself after a moment, "I would find some means of getting her the punishment she deserved. Hermia Challoner was there," she went on quickly. "Her appearance was remarked. She looked ill and left the house before supper. You were invited, too, Mr. Markham, if you will remember, but would not come. I confess I'm at my wit's ends. I shall not question you. All I ask is your advice."

Markham raised his head and looked her in the eyes for a full moment. She was much distressed at the position, and the friendliness of her look was all that could be desired. He hesitated a moment, weighing his duty with his inclination. What was best for Hermia? How could he serve her? How build a bulwark to dyke the flood of scandal which threatened her in her flight? A lie? Obviously that wouldn't do, for Mrs. Hammond believed in him. And the story had gone too far, was too diabolic in its accuracy, for a flat denial without explanation. The truth?

His hostess still regarded him patiently. He searched her with his eyes, his gaze finally falling.

"If one is guiltless one does not fear the truth," he muttered slowly, "nor does virtue fear a lie--but a half-truth will damn even the innocent, Mrs. Hammond."

"There is some basis then for the stories they are telling?" she asked kindly.

"My lips have been sealed. I'm not sure that I have the right to open them now. But I will. I don't think I could pay you a higher compliment than by trusting Miss Challoner's fate entirely into your hands."

Mrs. Hammond, now keenly interested, smiled at him encouragingly.

"Thanks, Mr. Markham, I'm not so old that I have forgotten how to be human."

He glanced around the room and lowered his voice.

"You know--Hermia--Miss Challoner very well, Mrs. Hammond?"

"Since her infancy--a creature of moods--willful, wayward, if you like--but the soul of honor and virtue."

He bowed his head.

"Thanks. You make it easier for me," he said. "I want you to understand first, Mrs. Hammond, that I alone am responsible for this misfortune. Miss Challoner and I met upon the highroad in Normandy,

entirely by chance. I was doing the country afoot, as is my custom in summer. The machine was destroyed in an accident. She was alone. I asked her to go with me. She accepted my invitation. It was mad of me to ask her, made of her to accept--but she did accept. We were together more than a week--traveling afoot by day--sleeping in the open when the weather was fine and indoors when I could find a room for her. I had moments of inquietude at my responsibility, for I had done wrong in letting her go with me. She was a child and trusted me. I began by being amused. I ended by-- Good God! Mrs. Hammond, I loved--I worshiped her. I couldn't have harmed her. She was sacred to me--and is now. You must understand that."

His hostess's expression, which had grown grave during this recital, relaxed a little.

"I think I understand, Mr. Markham. I am keenly interested. Where does Olga Tcherny come in?"

Her question bothered him. He thought for a moment, and then went on, deliberately postponing a reply.

"Our relations were clearly established from the first. We had met before, you know, earlier in the summer, and I had visited at Westport. She liked and understood me, and was sensible enough to tell me so; and I--she attracted me--curiously. I had always lived a solitary sort of existence. She simply ignored my prejudices and over-rode them. She invaded my life and took it by storm. She was like the sudden capriccioso after the largo in a symphony. She was Youth and Joy, and she got into my blood like an elixir. I loved her for all the things she was that I was not, but I did not tell her so--not then. I hid my secret, for I knew that if she guessed it would make a difference to us both." He raised his head and went on more rapidly. "We joined a company of strolling mountebanks. Oh, that was true enough--and went with them as far as Alençon. Hermia--Miss Challoner--was a Dame Orchestre and I a 'lightning' artist. We made our living in that way. It was quite wonderful how she played--wonderful how she forgot what she was--how she became what I wanted her to be--an earthling among earthlings. With them she lived in poverty and discomfort, learned the meaning of weariness and felt the pinch of hunger." He smiled. "I suppose you wonder why I'm telling you all this, Mrs. Hammond. I wanted you to understand just what the pilgrimage was--how little it had in common with--with what you have heard these people saying."

"I know, Mr. Markham. I understand," she said gently. Her eyes softened and she looked past him as though back through a vista of the years. "It was Romance--the true Romance," she murmured. "She borrowed a week from Immortality--that, for once, she might be herself. She was free--from this thralldom--free!"

"She worked--hard," he went on after a moment, "and she earned what money she made. And so did I. But I was bothered. My sins were pursuing me. One day we saw upon the road a man Miss Challoner had met, and at Alençon--"

"Olga Tcherny?" asked Mrs. Hammond keenly.

Markham paused, looked beyond her and went on.

"And at Alençon, when we were giving a performance, some one I knew appeared and recognized me. Need I mention names?"

"Not if you prefer to be silent. And the hunting lodge?"

"We fled from Alençon that night and took refuge from the rain in a

house in the forest. Miss Challoner was dead tired. We had been up since sunrise. So we stayed there, thinking ourselves safe. But in the morning--" He paused.

Mrs. Hammond had risen and was fingering the flowers on the tea table.

"In the morning," she finished dryly, "Olga Tcherny found you there. I understand."

He rose and faced her uncomprehendingly. "Mrs. Hammond, do you mean that you believe--as she did?"

She turned quickly and thrust forth both of her plump jeweled hands, and he saw that her friendliness was in no way diminished.

"I'm not one to believe half-truths, Mr. Markham, when I hear whole ones," she said, smiling rosily. "If you had lied to me I should have known it. But you didn't and I believe in you."

She released his hand and made him sit again.

"I've never been so entertained and delighted since--since hundreds of years ago," she sighed. "You were mad--quite mad, both of you. And Hermia--" she stopped, sat quickly upright, and while he watched her, laughed deliberately. "Hermia comes back to New York and engages herself to--to Trevelyan Morehouse! The excellent Trevelyan--after Arcadia! And you?" She read his face like an open book, her humor dying in a gently smile.

"It doesn't matter about me, Mrs. Hammond," he said quietly.

"But I think it does," she insisted. "Do you mean that you can't understand?"

"Understand what, Mrs. Hammond?"

"How that poor child has suffered. Do you mean that you don't know why it is that she has ignored you and fled to Trevelyan Morehouse?"

He made no reply.

"Then I can't help you. There is nothing in the world denser than a lover. The object of his affections is large in his eyes, so large that the focus is blurred. He can't see her--that's all. Hermia was terror-stricken and you were not aware of it. She knew that she was clean and that you were, and the dirt that threatened her threatened her idyl, too."

She stopped abruptly and looked past him.

"I'm afraid I've said too much, Mr. Markham. That is because I see how foolish you have been--both of you in this affair. It's none of my business."

She fingered the clipping on the table and went on vigorously.

"As to this infamous story that they are telling, I shall find means to stop it. How, I don't know just yet. This paper shall print a retraction. I'll manage that. Olga Tcherny--"

"I beg of you--"

"Olga Tcherny's career in New York is ended. She shall never enter my house, or the house of any of my friends. That play was a lie, written with a motive. She has used me shamefully--shamefully--made me an

accomplice, and placed me in the undesirable position of sponsor for her villainies."

She rose, walked to the window and looked out upon the Avenue, her lips taking firmer lines of resolution. He watched her in silence, and when she spoke her tones were short and decisive.

"With your permission, Mr. Markham," she said at last, "as Hermia's friend and yours, I shall deny this story in every detail. You must provide me with an alibi."

She turned back into the room and faced him.

"You were not in Normandy last summer--that is positive."

He smiled.

"I am in your hands," he said.

"Where were you?"

"In Holland, if you like. I've tramped there."

"And Hermia?"

"In Switzerland. She went there after leaving me. There was a party. Morehouse was with her. It's easily proved."

"Good. We must lose that week somewhere. It must be wiped from the calendar. If Hermia only hadn't run away!"

"Mrs. Westfield is still here, I believe," he ventured.

She deliberated a moment.

"Excellent. I shall see her at once. Together we will manage it. You are to leave things to me. I'm not without influence here in New York, Mr. Markham. We shall see. All I ask is that you avoid seeing Olga or taking the matter into your own hands. That would only make a noise--an unpleasant noise. Will you promise me?"

He was silent. She examined him curiously.

"You think you know who told this story?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You think it was not Olga?"

"Yes. She gave me her word she would say nothing. I believed her."

"Was it--" she paused.

"The man we met upon the road in Normandy was Monsieur de Folligny, Mrs. Hammond."

"Oh! I see." She fingered the sugar tongs a moment. "And you want to question him?" she asked then.

"Er--I would like to find out if it was he who told."

"And then thrash him? You want the papers full of the whole affair, with portraits of the principals, and a description of your romantic--"

"God forbid!"

"How like a man! To get a girl talked about and then of course to want to thrash somebody! I've no patience with you. You must promise to behave yourself or I'll wash my hands of the whole affair."

He smiled down at his clasped hands. "I suppose you are right," he muttered.

"Right! Of course I am. This is a case which will require the most careful handling--a case for the subtlest diplomacy. If I am going to risk my reputation for veracity--and jeopardize my hopes of Heaven by the fibs that I must tell in your behalf, I don't propose to have my efforts spoiled by senseless bungling. Will you give me your promise?"

He shrugged. "I suppose there is nothing left for me to do."

She leaned forward toward the tea table with a laugh.

"I'm so glad that you are sensible. Now we shall have our tea. I owe you apologies. My business seemed more urgent than my hospitality."

They sat and chatted for a while, Markham sipping his tea and wondering why he was imparting to this stout and very amiable old lady all his life's secrets. A half hour later, when he rose to go, he realized that he had told her all about his week in Vagabondia, including its sudden termination. She surprised him at intervals by the sympathy of her appreciation, and at others equally serious by an unseemly mirth or an impatience which they had not merited. But when he got up to go she followed him to the door and gave him both of her hands again.

"I like you, John Markham. You're quaint--a relic of a less flippant age. I'm sorry you won't accept any of my invitations--but I'll forgive you, if you'll promise to do as I bid you."

"I'm deeply grateful to you, Mrs. Hammond. Of course, I shall be obedient. I will do whatever you ask of me."

She released him and gave him a gentle push toward the door.

"Then go--and find Hermia!"

"I, Mrs. Hammond?"

"Yes, you. At once."

"But--"

"And when you find her--marry her, do you hear? It's the happiest issue out of your afflictions." She laughed again, rather mischievously. "You know, I think you owe her that!"

"I-- She--you--"

"She is waiting for you--somewhere. Find her: Leave the rest to me. Now go."

He halted again--incredulous, but she waved him past the door where a man appeared to help him into his coat. And so he bowed his thanks and went out into the dusk of the Avenue, his brain teeming with nebulous inconsistencies.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BRASS BELL

Hermia, waiting for him! What did Mrs. Hammond mean? Was the woman mad? Hermia had fled from New York, her proud little head bent before this cruel story which, of course, had gathered impetus in the telling and now indicted her of sins unwritten in the fair page of her experience. Poor child! She had suffered--and he, fool that he was, had sat in his studio, the victim of his false pride, wrapped in his own ego while this vile plot was brewing. He might have done something if he had had his wits about him, instead of hiding his head like an ostrich and imagining himself unseen. Olga--he did not dare to think of Olga Tcherny or of De Folligny. He had given his word to Mrs. Hammond to leave the entire matter in her hands. Even while she had given him her word not to speak she had been planning this refined vengeance, probably knew that Pierre de Folligny had already made a good story of their adventure for some of his new intimates at the Club. He would have a reckoning with her--some day--and with De Folligny! His fingers tightened on his stick, and an angry tide warmed his face and temples. Had he met them, there upon the Avenue at that moment, all his promises to Mrs. Hammond must have been forgotten--and he would have made short work of that unspeakable gentleman. Of Olga Tcherny he thought with hardly less rancor. At one time--a year ago now--Olga had loomed large upon his horizon. Now in the light of his present knowledge of her he wondered how he could have ever thought of her friendship seriously.

She belonged in an atmosphere too sophisticated for his simple rustic soul. She had always lied to him; her friendship was a lie; her love, too--a lie. That declaration--Good God!--and he had been actually at the point of being sorry for her. He had nothing to regret now with regard to Olga Tcherny. She had wiped the slate clean, and made a new account at poor Hermia's expense.

Hermia in exile--and suffering! Her innocence could not make her heart pangs any the less real. Like a child she had followed the line of least resistance, and seeking freedom from the trammels of convention had obeyed her impulses blindly. It was such a trivial transgression to find so crushing a retribution. And he, Markham, walked the streets of New York the envied hero of an "armourette." This was the law, which says that women may sin if they are not found out and that men may sin when they please.

Poor little penitent, atoning for sins uncommitted! All his heart went out to her, and his memory, passing the forbidding vision of her last appearance, now pictured the real Hermia that he knew, a brave, buoyant Hermia, who knew nothing of discouragements and greeted the sunrise with a smile, her head now bowed and, like Niobe, "all tears."

Was she waiting for him? If so, why had she not written? A line, and he would have sped to her. She knew that. She must have known it when she had fled. Where was she now? At Westport, perhaps? In the South somewhere, alone with her maid, avoiding the newspapers, seeking the company of strangers that her ears might not hear or her eyes see the record of her transgression? Had she gone abroad again? Who would know? He might inquire of Phyllis Van Vorst or Caroline Anstell over the telephone. But when he reached his rooms and had taken up the receiver he saw that even this information was denied to him. Any manifest interest or anxiety on his part with regard to Hermia would be regarded with suspicion. Nor was he any more positive than before that his quest would meet with the approval of its object. He was powerless. There was nothing for him but to wait.

The thought of going to his club to dine was repellant to him. The story that Mrs. Hammond had let him read was not common property and, though none of his acquaintances would have had the bad taste to mention his connection with it, his appearance among them must revive

its disagreeable details, at Hermia's expense. So for some days he dined alone at an obscure restaurant, glooming over the evening paper and wondering what could be done. Night after night he walked the street until, at last, wearied and no nearer the solution of his problem, he went home and to bed, to toss restlessly most of the night and plan impossibilities. Through his thoughts, the friendship of Mrs. Berkeley Hammond hovered comfortingly. She was not a woman to promise idly. She had been interested in his story and felt herself morally bound to make some sort of restitution to Hermia for her own unwilling responsibility in the attention that had been drawn to it. He did not doubt that she would use all her influence to minimize the effect of Olga's machinations, and he felt sure with such a friend at court that Hermia need have little fear from the opinions of Mrs. Hammond's friends and her own, and these after all were the only opinions that mattered to her.

An early morning, a few days after the interview with Mrs. Hammond, found Markham at his studio, somber and dark eyed, regarding his latest work with a savage eye of disapproval. He didn't feel like working, and by a piece of good fortune his time was free for him to do what he chose. He would have liked above all things to have employed it in a visit to the house of Olga Tcherny and thence with dispatch to the hotel of Monsieur de Folligny, where what remained of his wrath could be honestly expended in a manner befitting the occasion. This occupation being denied him, there was nothing left but to take what pleasure he could from the mental picture that he made of it.

At last he rose and groped for his tobacco. A precious lot of good that would do him! It would have been a pity, too, because murder, even such justifiable murder, had not yet received the sanction of society as represented in the New York Department of Police. He paced the floor restlessly and brought up before his desk, where the janitor of the building had a few moments ago laid the morning mail. He took it up idly--and glanced over it--a note or two in the fashionable feminine scrawl about sittings, a letter from a framemaker, one from his Paris agent, and the usual litter of circulars. He took them up one by one, opened them, put some of them aside and consigned others to the paper basket. A small package lay at the bottom of the pile, an unobtrusive package neatly tied with string--evidently an advertisement of some sort--of a paint or of a canvas. He was about to drop it with the others when he was made aware that as he turned the small parcel over it emitted a tinkle as of two metal objects striking together. He turned it again and examined the address and stamp. His name was printed in ink as though with a bad pen and the stamp was French. Now really curious as to its contents and aware of its individuality, he cut the string and opened it. There was an inner wrapping of tissue paper containing a small white pasteboard box which bore the name of a fashionable New York jeweler, and inside the box the origin of the tinkle was revealed in a small brass bell.

He took the object out, his wonder growing, and held it suspended between his thumb and forefinger. A brass bell no larger than his thumbnail, a tarnished little trinket, no longer new, which tinkled merrily under his astonished gaze. He examined the thing more carefully, his bewilderment increasing, noting the curious construction, which was unlike that of the toy bells which had adorned the necks of the wooly beasts abroad at Christmas-time. It was heavy for its size, and when he moved it had a decisive and very mellow note. Who would send him a thing like this and why? There must have been a mistake. He took up the paper wrapper from the waste basket and examined it with renewed interest.

John Markham, Esquire,
--West--th Street,
New York City.

With a stamp of the French Republic and a postmark of--What were the postmarks? Paris. Of course. And the other? VAL-E--? Valence? Valence was in the South of France on the Rhone. He had never been there. No. That wouldn't do. VAL-L-E--Vall cy!

A brass bell from Vall cy! Still he did not understand. He took the object up again and scrutinized it, its meaning dawning slowly. Vall cy! That was the village where he and Hermia had stayed with M re Gu gou. There was the garden of the golden roses where--The bell! It was from Hermia's head-dress--the belled cap of the _Femme Orchestre_! He knew it now. It was a token. Hermia had sent it--from Vall cy. A token.

In high excitement he examined the obscure postmark again. The accent on the E, a little smudged, but quite legible. Hermia had sent the bell as a token from Vagabondia which meant that she was there in P re Gu gou's garden, whither she had fled when her own world had renounced her. She was waiting for him. She needed him, and took this means of showing him that all things that had happened to them both since they had parted in the forest at S es were to be forgotten--that they were both to take life up--from Vall cy. He stood a moment in joyous uncertainty, his glance on the clock, then, quickly wrapping the memento in its tissue paper, thrust it into his coat pocket and in a moment was striding like a madman down the street. At his apartment he rang for a taxicab, thrust a few things into a suitcase, wrote a note or two and in half an hour was on his way to the bank and then to the steamship wharf.

He had no definite plans except that he must take the first steamer which left New York for Europe. A brief glance at his morning paper advised him of two sailings this morning, one for Havre and the other for Cherbourg, and he had made up his mind to take one steamer or the other. The taxicab crawled, it seemed, and on the way downtown was caught in a block of traffic which delayed him for ten minutes, during which he fumed silently. But he reached the dock with scarcely a quarter of an hour to spare, and after a difficulty which was cleared away, found himself upon the deck of the _Kaiserin Augusta_, a somewhat flustered individual, with many loose ends dangling in retrospect, with no cabin as yet assigned to him, sober of face but inexpressibly happy.

It was really not until his ship was well out at sea and the voyage fairly begun that Markham had the opportunity to settle down comfortably and meditate upon the surprising events of the morning. He found a steamer chair in a quiet place and then gave himself up to his thoughts. He took the tiny object from his breast pocket and turned it over in his fingers. Of course it was Hermia's. The wonder was that he had not recognized it at first glance. This bell and its other small companions had tinkled their way into his heart at each step she had taken down the long road from Evreux to Alen on--tinkled merrily at Passy, joyously at Vall cy, disdainfully at Verneuil, and contentedly at La Mesle. Alen on had made them tragic so they had been packed in Hermia's bundle which went with her to S es and were heard no more, except in a faint tinkle of protest as she was put aboard the train for Paris. Wonderful bells they were, tiny chimes that had rung in the season of their joy and lingered in their memory never to be forgotten. Tokens--Hermia had realized it--symbols of her greatest happiness and his, with life reduced to the simplest elements, in which there had been no place for the extravagant commonplaces of the other life which they both had lived and endured. Hermia had fled to Vall cy to the motherly breast of M re Gu gou, and there perhaps was weeping out her troubles. He took out the square of paper (he had clipped it with his penknife) which bore the address and examined it again. This and the bell were all he had had to start him off on his

fateful pilgrimage. But they were enough. She could not have written him after her treatment of him in New York. She had thrown herself upon his mercy, given her message ambiguity that he might ignore it if he chose, or read, as she had hoped he would, the message of her heart, across the distances. It was the message of a vagabond like himself, as definite a message as the gypsy *patteran* which shows the way from one camp to another. His *patteran* pointed to Vall *cy*, that lovely village by the Arth where he had first told Hermia that he loved her. Beyond Vall *cy* had come misunderstanding, bitterness, misfortune. She had chosen that spot as though by instinct. She wanted him to remember her there where love had first been spoken. Alone and waiting for him among the roses of P *re Gu gou*—

He started up from his chair in bewilderment, staring blankly at the sunlit sea, suddenly mindful of the fact that in the hurry of getting away he had not cabled her. He threw his rugs aside and made his way hastily to the office, to find unluckily that the wireless had gotten out of order, and that it might be several hours before it was repaired. He strolled on deck again, thoughtful, suddenly impressed with the potency of the charm that had called him. The thought of replying to her message had not until this moment entered his head. All that he had been able to think of was that he must get to her at once, follow the *patteran* at top speed. He had done so and now unhappily remembered a dozen neglected people who must wonder at his extraordinary disappearance. But he only smiled joyously. He had another engagement.

He took up his walk along the promenade deck, careless of the enemies he had made, careless of the friendships he might lose, all his thoughts of the small vagabond at Vall *cy*. His inability to communicate with her by wireless set him thinking. Wasn't that, too, a symbol? If he got a message over what would be its effect? Would she still wait for him, looking forward to the precious hour of their meeting? Or would her mind change at the last moment and send her flying from him again? This was more like Hermia, the real Hermia that he knew. He feared her moods still. And if he refused to cable her would her patience last until he got to France? He cast his memory over the months that had passed in New York. He guessed how much she had suffered. He had followed her social career through the newspapers and he knew now that she had gone gaily that she might hide her terror. She was tired—poor child—tired in body and spirit, and that was why she had not stayed in Paris among the fashionable people she knew there; that was why she had fled to Vall *cy*, where at least she might be at peace, unreminded by those of her own social sphere of the villainous story which pursued her. There at Vall *cy* she sat remote, with her own innocence for company, convalescent—amid these primitive surroundings—from the sickness that her world had given her. She would wait for him *if she wasn't sure that he would come*. He smiled. He would not send the wireless. Nor would he wire her from Cherbourg.

A search of the postmark of his much-beloved package revealed the date "*Av. 22*." She had sent her token on the twenty-second of April and it was now only the second of May. Ten days only had passed, and he was already well on his way to her. In less than a week more he would be in Vall *cy*. She would wait for him. Markham, as will be observed, was learning something about women—about one woman at least, the only woman in the world who mattered.

The voyage seemed interminable, though the ship was a fast one, and the day's run (on paper) highly satisfactory. He knew no one aboard but some of the officers, with whom he had crossed before, and he was thankful that he was therefore left alone with his thoughts, which were infinitely more pleasing to him than the chatter of the salon or smoking-room. He read novels, or tried to, but his own story was so

much more interesting, so much more real than those he could find that he gave them up after a trial or two and lived again his own romance. The time to take it up again where he had left it off came slowly, but at last the Lizard hove into sight and the passengers for France prepared for debarkation. Morning of the next day found Markham in the express to Paris. Evreux was his station, and from there to Verneuil was a little over an hour, most of it along the road he and Hermia had so blithely traveled. The road from Verneuil to Vall cy—he would cover it afoot if there were no vehicles to be begged, borrowed or stolen.

CHAPTER XXIX

DUO

At some distance from the village street he dismissed the vehicle which had brought him from Verneuil, a rickety affair drawn by an emaciated horse, and suitcase in hand strode up the hill toward the house of Madame Gu gou, the garden wall of which was visible beyond the flowering orchard. The air was laden with odors, sweet with the smell of the fruit blossoms and early shrubs. In the meadow to the left some goats were grazing and, as he passed, the wether raised his head and examined him incuriously, its bell clanking solemnly. The sun was already beyond the profile of the forest; beyond the sleepy village and against the warm sky thin threads of purple smoke ascended in perpendicular lines and then drifted lazily down to the mist of the valley below. Nature breathed slowly, deeply, as though aware that its state was not a matter of days or even of years, but of an eternity, during which its evolution must not be hurried.

After the turmoil of steamer and railroad this silence was oppressive. Minute sounds came to Markham across the distances, the bark of a dog, the lowing of cattle, a shutter closing, human voices near and far, each one distinct, but each mellowed and softened as though strained through a silver mesh. He missed the shudder of the steamer, the rattle of the train, the jolting even of the station wagon from which he had just descended; for they were all a part of the fever of his voyage made in such mad haste, sounds which had soothed and given him patience, their very turbulence assuring him that he was losing no time upon the way. And now that he had reached his destination, a violent reaction had set in. He was still moving forward toward the house with the walled garden, but a fear obsessed him that perhaps after all there had been a mistake. What if, after all, Hermia were not here? His suitcase gained in weight and he perspired gently. Why hadn't he cabled her at the first moment of his decision to sail or why hadn't he relayed his wireless across when the opportunity had offered? All his hopes seemed to be slipping from his finger ends. Was this Vagabondia? It seemed different somehow. He was aware of his neatly creased trousers, his bowler hat, his gloves, and the leather bag which reeked of sophistication. He was an anachronism, or Vall cy was. They were not attune. He and Vall cy clashed discordantly.

Timorously, almost upon tiptoe, he reached the village street. A dog emerged from a field, sniffed at the crease of his trousers suspiciously and growled. At this moment Markham desired anything but commotion, so he chirped to the animal and stroke on, his head bent, his gaze on the portal of the ancien, which, as he noted, was forbiddingly closed. He paused a moment, eyeing the cur which stopped when he stopped, still regarding him uncertainly. And then summoning his courage he went to the door and knocked. This noise, which sounded faintly enough to Markham, seemed to be the demonstration of hostility the dog was waiting for, and it began barking furiously, snapping almost at Markham's immaculate heels, a signal which was taken up immediately, near and far, by every cur in the village. Curious heads

were poked out of windows, and at last after a few moments his door was opened just wide enough for the head of his former hostess to inspect him.

"Madame Gu gou," he began uncertainly and then paused.

The door opened a trifle wider.

"It is I," she remarked, her gaze on the suitcase. "I can buy nothing, Monsieur."

He laughed uneasily.

"You do not remember me, Madame?" he asked.

She relinquished the door-knob and emerged, inspecting his clothing.

"You are from Paris, of course. Last year perhaps, you came--"

"I did--last summer, Madame. I am Philidor--the artist."

"You! Monsieur! _You_ Philidor!" She leaned forward upon the step, her eyes searching his face. "Philidor was not such as you. He wore a beard and--" She suddenly caught him by the shoulder and turned him toward the sunset. "I might think--and yet--"

"I am Philidor," he repeated, laughing. "I came in search of--of Yvonne."

"You--are he! It is true. The saints be praised!" She threw the door inside open and called: "Jules! Jules! He is come. Monsieur Philidor is here!"

The _ancien_ limped forward from the inner darkness, showing his gums.

"I knew it," he cried triumphantly. "Did I not say that he would return?"

Markham took the bony fingers, his anxious gaze going past them toward the glow of the kitchen.

"And Yvonne?" he asked feverishly. "She is within?"

"She is here, yes, she is here--waiting for you."

He dropped his valise and strode past them eagerly. A pot simmered upon the fire, the table gave evidence of a recent repast, and a pile of dishes nearby stood mutely in evidence, but of Hermia there was no sign.

"_Tiens_!" Madame Gu gou was muttering. "She was here but a moment ago. In the garden, perhaps--"

He dashed out of the rear door and down the graveled walk.

"Hermia!" he called, and then again, "Hermia!"

He reached the arbor just in time to see her speed across the lower end of the meadow and vanish into the trees. Hatless he leaped the low wall and followed, joy giving him wings, while the old couple wonderingly watched from the doorway. They were mad, these two. She had been waiting for him a month and now--she fled. Mad? But what was love but madness?

Markham sprang into the cover of the trees where he had seen her

disappear and followed the path up the hill breathlessly. She would escape him now, even, when she had sent for him and he had come to her! She could not go far. The cover was thin. He would have called again, but he spared his breath, for he knew that she would not reply. He reached the end of the path and scanned the hill beyond. She could not have gone that way. He turned and plunged among the pine trees to his right where the woods were thicker. It was getting darker, but he saw her white skirt, gray in the shadows--saw it--lost it and found it again in the deep wood. He sprang forward over fallen trees, through brambles, over rocks, down the slope to the streamside and caught her behind a tree where she had hidden away from him.

"Hermia!" he cried. "Hermia, you witch! What a dance you've led me! But I have you now--I have you--"

And so he had--in both of his arms, his lips seeking hers. But she denied him.

"Did you think you could escape me--again?" he laughed, "when I've come half across the world for you?"

"You--you frightened me," she gasped.

"How did I frighten you?"

"I did--didn't expect you--"

"You sent for me?"

"I--I thought you would have cabled--"

He laughed joyously.

"Cabled the hour of my arrival, and found you--missing! I know you now, you see. I took no chances. As it is, you tried to get away--"

"I didn't get far--"

"That wasn't your fault. You tried. Why did you run?"

She was silent, her head still hidden. He repeated the question.

"I--I don't know."

"Do I frighten you now?"

"Not so much."

He held her more closely in his arms, and kissed the crown of her head, which was the only object offered.

"I know," he whispered, "because you had given me everything except yourself--and you knew that I would take that."

"No, no."

"What, then?"

Silence.

"I had feared--" she paused.

"What had you feared?"

"That you might not come. You didn't reply--"

"This is my reply."

He raised her lips slowly to his own and took them. Her eyes were closed as though she feared to open them, and show him the dawn of her womanhood. But in a moment her figure relaxed in his arms and her head sank upon his shoulder in token of surrender.

"Mad little Hermia!" he whispered.

"Mad no longer," she sighed.

"You must prove it. I'll not let you go until I'm sure you won't go flying from me again."

"I don't want you to let me go. I want you to hold me tight. It is--rest. I'm tired of going. I want to stay--here."

"You love me?"

This time she opened her eyes wide and let him see that what she said was true. She had outgrown her adolescence--her madness, unless it could be called madness to love as she did. Her eyes were deep wells of mystery, in which he saw, as from the distant brink above, his own image, clear amid the shadows. There were signs of trouble in them, too, as though she had thought long and distressfully, but greater than the marks of pain were the sweeter tokens of a love and trust unalterable.

She sank upon a rock, he beside her, her head on his breast. The dusk fell swiftly, its shadows enfolding them. He kissed her again and again, her lips trembled upon his as she murmured the words so long unspoken.

"Philidor, I love you--I love you. It was so long--the waiting."

"You needn't have waited, dear," he said gently.

"Oh, don't reproach me! I can't bear it. It had to be. Olga--she smirched us--your love and mine--made--"

He stopped her lips with kisses, smiling inwardly and thinking of the wisdom of Mrs. Hammond.

"There is no Olga--" he murmured, "no gossip but the whisper of the stream which knows the truth."

"Yes--the truth. That is all that matters, isn't it? But that play--shall I ever forget it?"

"Sh--child. You must forget. A lie never lives."

"I will forget. I don't care--now. Let them say what they choose. But I did suffer, Philidor."

"And I. You were cruel, dear."

"I had to be cruel. I feared that you--that I--"

She paused and he questioned gravely.

"I feared that you, too, might have misjudged me--there in the woods at S es--that I had cheapened myself to you--that I had been unwomanly."

"Hermia!"

"I don't know what possessed me after Olga appeared. She poisoned the very air with doubt. I was desperate. I didn't seem to care what happened. I don't know what I wanted. I think if you had taken me then and held me--as you do now--held me close to you and had not let me go, as you did, you might have had me to do as you willed. But you relinquished me--"

"I had to, dear."

"Yes, I understand now. I couldn't then. I wanted to hurt you--as I was hurt. Your sanity made me desperate. I couldn't understand why you should be so sane while I was not. You were greater than I--and though I loved you for it (O Philidor, how I loved you!) I meant that you should pay for my heart-throbs--that you should pay for Olga--for everything."

"I have paid."

"Forgive me. I suffered doubly in knowing that you suffered. I fled from you and hid my heart as a miser would buy his treasure. But your letters, forwarded from Paris, followed me. O Philidor! I did not read them--not at first. I saw Olga telling that story at the dinner table and my pride revolted. I put them away--unopened, and kept them concealed--from others, from myself and tried to forget them. I couldn't. They were you. I would take them out and look at them. I slept with them under my pillow. At last I could stand it no longer. I took them and disappeared for a whole day from the rest of my party. I read them alone on the summit of a mountain." She broke off with a sigh. "Ah me! If you had come to me there you would not need to have pleaded, Philidor."

"My Hermia!"

"You were with me that day. Didn't you know it?"

"I was with you every day, child."

She smiled happily.

"When I got down to Evian at nightfall they were searching for me. They thought that I had fallen and been killed. They reproved me. I was calm and smiling, my spirit still soaring to you across the distances. I had made up my mind to go to you the next day."

"Oh, if you had--!"

"In the morning," she went on, "came your letter telling me that you were sailing for New York. It wasn't like the other letters. You were reproachful and you were going away from me. It chilled me a little--after the day before. Olga's face interposed--again. And so I let you go. You see I'm telling you everything."

"Go on, dear."

"I got no more of your letters for a time--for a long time--"

"I wrote you--"

"Yes--from New York. There was some mistake. I didn't get those letters until long after--until I reached New York--until after I had seen you. Meanwhile, I feared--that you had cooled--that Olga had done something to change you--"

"Not that--"

"I feared her. I knew then that she was capable of anything. I heard that she was again in New York and sensed that you must have seen her--"

"I did see her," he put in grimly.

"I didn't know what had happened. I made up my mind to ignore her--to ignore you--to forget you and to make you forget, if I could, what had happened."

"That was impossible."

"I knew it, but I tried. O my dear, if you had known my pains at making you suffer! It was hard. But I did it. When you came to the house--"

"Don't speak of that," he muttered. "It was not Hermia that I saw."

"Not this Hermia. It was a girl that even I did not know. I had rehearsed that conversation and I carried it through to the end."

"The end--of all things, it seemed."

She drew more closely into the shelter of his arms and drew his lips down to hers.

"Yes--but we shall make a new beginning----And then," she went on, after a moment, "I saw Olga and cut her. I hadn't meant to--but I couldn't help it. The sight of her turned me to ice. And Pierre de Folligny--" She stopped again, her brows tangling. "That man! He remembered me. He presumed. He was odious. I had the butler show him the door. I--I wasn't very wise, I think. But I couldn't, Philidor,--I simply couldn't temporize with a man of his caliber."

"D--n him!" said Markham.

"He told--I think--of Olga did--"

"It was De Folligny," he groaned. "But I couldn't do anything. That would have made things worse."

"Oh, yes--and then the play--that dreadful play! That was Olga's doing. I was there, Philidor, at Rood's Knoll. I saw it all. Listened in terror to every word of the dreadful sacrilege. It was sacrilege!--to see my love and yours pictured the dreadful thing that that love was. I got out somehow. They were talking of me--lightly. I heard them; as they talked of--of other women who do not know right from wrong--as they would have talked of that dreadful Frenchwoman who--who was killed."

She was sobbing gently on his shoulder, her slender body quivering and drawing closer. "Oh, I have paid--paid in full for my fault--"

He soothed her, but she started back, holding him at arm's length, her eyes the more lovely through their tears, "But I regret nothing. I would suffer more, if I might, to know what I know. I have learned the meaning of life, Philidor. I bless my pain for the new meaning it has given my joy. I bless your pain even, dear, for the new meaning it has given your unselfishness. You thought only of me, of my happiness when I had paid you only misery."

"There shall be no more pain," he murmured. "There is no room for it. Joy shall crowd it out."

"Will you forgive me?" she asked.

"I'll try," he smiled. "Will you promise never to run away from me again?"

"Where should I run?"

He meditated a moment and then said with a smile:

"To Trevelyan M--"

But she put her fingers over his lips before he could finish.

"Don't Philidor. Wherever I went, I should not go to Trevvy." She laughed. "He cast me off, you know."

"Cast you off?"

She nodded. "He heard that story at Rood's Knoll after I had gone. The next day he came to my house in town. I saw him. He wore a woe-begone expression and silently presented a clipping from a paper." She laughed again. "He looked like a virtuous undertaker presenting a bill, long overdue, for the interment of some lightly mourned relative. He asked me if the story were true. I said it was--and he went out of the house--casting not even one longing, lingering look behind!"

"But it wasn't true."

"That's just the point--but he thought so. Would you have believed me that kind of a girl? You could have, you know, and didn't." She sighed happily, and sank back into his arms. "I think I don't want people to be too excellent, Philidor. Just human--"

"Were you"--he hesitated a moment--"were you engaged to him, Hermia?"

She gazed at him wide-eyed.

"Never," she asserted, and then repeated, "Never, never, never!"

"But the newspapers--"

"O Philidor! How could I have been engaged to Trevvy when I--I was already engaged to you?"

"Engaged."

"Yes, promised. After the forest at S es I knew it then. I could never have loved anyone else. Why, Philidor, you held me like this, and kissed me--"

"You loved me then--and before--?"

She hesitated demurely.

"Yes--before."

"Before, Alen on?"

"Y--yes."

"Before Verneuil?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Here--at Vall cy?"

"Before that."

"You adorable child! Passy?"

"Yes?"

He was now really astounded. What she added astounded him still more.

"I think it began before 'Wake Robin'?"

"Thimble Island?"

She stammered. "I--I think it really began in your studio."

"In New York?"

"You interested me--and you snubbed me so completely. You were so impolite, John Markham. I was curious about you. You were like no man I had ever met. You told me the truth. I didn't like it, but I respected you for telling it. When I went away I remember wanting to see you again. AT Thimble Island--"

"Yes?"

She hid her face in his breast and the words came slowly.

"My visit to--to Thimble Island--I--I knew you were there. My m--motor _didn't_ miss fire, Philidor?"

He raised her head and made her look at him. Even in the wan light her face was rosy with her confession. But she laughed joyously.

"I wanted to snub you for being so rude to me. Alas! I ended by--by scrubbing your floor."

"Diana of the Tubs! How you scrubbed!"

"I liked it. You were very nice at Thimble Island, Philidor." She paused a moment. "Then Olga came--and the others. She quite owned you, then, didn't she?"

"No," he replied slowly.

"I don't think I really liked Olga's face-powder on your coat, dear."

He was silent.

"I knew you didn't love her. You couldn't. She wasn't your sort."

More silence.

"You didn't care for her, did you?" jerkily.

He looked down into her eyes tenderly but made no reply. She sighed but asked no more questions. And, when he knew that she understood the meaning of his silence, he took her head between his hands and made her look at him.

"Isn't it enough for me to say to you that I love you better than all the world, dear, that I am yours--wholly and indivisibly--my past, my future--"

"Oh, I am content," she whispered quickly. "Your past--shall be what you have made it. I'm not afraid. But your future--"

She caught one of his hands in both of her own and held it to her heart. "That is mine."

There was a silence rich with meaning. The stream, the whispering boughs, the rising breeze in the tree-tops joined in the soft chorus of their nuptial-song. The night fell, shrouded in mystery. Behind them over their shoulders a new moon rose, a harbinger of good fortune, but they did not turn to look at it. It could not foretell them a fortune that was already theirs. Its light flowed through the shadows, paling the silhouette of the leaves against the afterglow, bathing them both in liquid silver. He told her many of the things that she already knew, but each reiteration had a new meaning and a new delight. The same immortal questions and answers, ever new, ever mystifying. The touch of hands, of eyes, the physical contact, outward tokens of the spiritual pact made already, the welding of the bonds which were to make them one! The moments of their more intimate confessions past, he told her of the friendship of Mrs. Hammond and what she had done to set the story right, but she did not seem to hear him. Her gaze was upon the pale rim of light along the hill-top beyond, a gaze which looked and saw nothing beyond the rosy aura of her thoughts.

"What does it matter now?" she murmured. "What does anything matter--after this?"

"You will marry me--soon?" he urged her.

She sighed softly and laid her hand in his.

"Whenever you want me to," she said, with eloquent simplicity.

"To-morrow?"

She smiled mischievously.

"I must, I think, Philidor. Would you have me compromised?"

He laughed happily.

"Yes. Compromised by reverence, pilloried by tenderness--"

"Not reverence, Philidor. I'm only a little devil, after all."

"Then devils are angels in Vagabondia. Your wings are white, Hermia."

"They're trailing now--"

"Brave wings--fluttering--weary of flight. They shall fly no more--"

"Not alone--broader ones shall bear them company."

A pause.

"After to-morrow--shall we go?"

"Afoot, Philidor--as before."

And then. "Poor Clarissa!"

He laughed. "You shall have her."

She started up in delight.

"You mean that you--?"

"Clarissa is languishing in a stable in Paris>"

She spoke of Cleofonte and the Signora.

"We must find them, too, Philidor. And Stella--I promised her. We must do something for Stella."

It was growing late. There was a sound in the thicket behind them. They started up and were confronted by the _ancien_, who hobbled toward them, with his stick and lantern, like _Diogenes_ searching for an honest man.

"God be praised!" he croaked. "You are here. We feared you might have fallen among the rocks."

"Among the roses, P re Gu gou. _Thy_ roses--" said Yvonne, her hand in Philidor's.

The old man stared at them witlessly, then turned and lighted them upon their way.

The End

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