The Lamp of Fate eBook

The Lamp of Fate

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THE LAMP OF FATE

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

THE NINTH GENERATION

The house was very silent. An odour of disinfectants pervaded the atmosphere. Upstairs hushed, swift steps moved to and fro.

Hugh Vallincourt stood at the window of his study, staring out with unseeing eyes at the smooth, shaven lawns and well-kept paths with their background of leafless trees. It seemed to him that he had been standing thus for hours, waiting—waiting for someone to come and tell him that a son and heir was born to him.

He never doubted that it would be a son. By some freak of chance the first-born of the Vallincourts of Coverdale had been, for eight successive generations, a boy. Indeed, by this time, the thing had become so much a habit that no doubts or apprehensions concerning the sex of the eldest child were ever entertained. It was accepted as a foregone conclusion, and in the eyes of the family there was a certain gratifying propriety about such regularity. It was like a hall-mark of heavenly approval.

Hugh Vallincourt, therefore, was conscious at this critical moment of no questionings on that particular score. He was merely a prey to the normal tremors and agitations of a husband and prospective father.

For an ageless period, it seemed to him, his thoughts had clung about that upstairs room where his wife lay battling for her own life and another's. Suddenly they swung back to the time, a year ago, when he had first met her—an elusive feminine thing still reckoning her age in teens—beneath the glorious blue and gold canopy of the skies of Italy.

Their meeting and brief courtship had been pure romance—romance such as is bred in that land of mellow warmth and colour, where the flower of passion sometimes buds and blooms within the span of a single day.

In like manner had sprung to life the love between Hugh Vallincourt and Diane Wielitzska, and rarely has the web of love enmeshed two more dissimilar and ill-matched people—Hugh, a man of seven-and-thirty, the strict and somewhat self-conscious head of a conspicuously devout old English family, and Diane, a beautiful

dancer of mixed origin, the illegitimate offspring of a Russian grand-duke and of a French artist's model of the Latin Quarter.

The three dread Sisters who determine the fate of men must have laughed amongst themselves at such an obvious mismating, knowing well how inevitably it would tangle the threads of many other lives than the two immediately concerned.

Vallincourt had been brought up on severely conventional lines, reared in the narrow tenets of a family whose salient characteristics were an overweening pride of race and a religious zeal amounting almost to fanaticism, while Diane had had no up-bringing worth speaking of. As for religious views, she hadn't any.

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Yet neither the one nor the other had counted in the scale when the crucial moment came.

Perhaps it was by way of an ironical set-off against his environment that Fate had dowered Hugh with his crop of ruddy hair—and with the ardent temperament which usually accompanies the type. Be that as it may, he was swept completely off his feet by the dancer's magic beauty. The habits and training of a lifetime went by the board, and nothing was allowed to impede the swift (not to say violent) course of his love-making. Within a month from the day of their first meeting, he and Diane were man and wife.

The consequences were almost inevitable, and Hugh found that his married life speedily resolved itself into an endless struggle between the dictates of inclination and conscience. Everything that was man in him responded passionately to the appeal and charm of Diane's personality, whilst everything that was narrow and censorious disapproved her total inability to conform to the ingrained prejudices of the Vallincourts.

Not that Diane was in any sense of the word a bad woman. She was merely beautiful and irresponsible—a typical *cigale* of the stage—lovable and kind-hearted and pagan, and possessing but the haziest notions of self-control and self-discipline. Even so, left to themselves, husband and wife might ultimately have found the road to happiness across the bridge of their great love for one another.

But such freedom was denied them. Always at Hugh's elbow stood his sister, Catherine, a rigidly austere woman, in herself an epitome of all that Vallincourts had ever stood for.

Since the death of their parents, twenty years previously, Catherine had shared her brother's home, managing his house—and, on the strength of her four years' seniority in age, himself as well—with an iron hand. Nor had she seen fit to relinquish the reins of government when he married.

Privately, Hugh had hoped she might consider the propriety of withdrawing to the dower house attached to the Coverdale estates, but if the idea had occurred to her, she had never given it utterance, and Hugh himself had lacked the courage to propose such an innovation.

So it followed that Catherine was ever at hand to criticise and condemn. She disapproved of her brother's marriage wholly and consistently. In her eyes, he had committed an unpardonable sin in allying himself with Diane Wielitzska. It was his duty to have married a woman of the type conventionally termed "good," whose blood—and religious outlook—were alike unimpeachable; and since he had lamentably failed in this respect, she never ceased to reproach him. Diane she regarded with chronic

disapprobation, exaggerating all her faults and opposing her joy-loving, butterfly nature with an aloofly puritanical disdain.

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Amid the glacial atmosphere of disapproval into which marriage had thrust her, Diane found her only solace in Virginie, a devoted French servant who had formerly been her nurse, and who literally worshipped the ground she walked on. Conversely, Virginie's attitude towards Miss Vallincourt was one of frank hostility. And deep in the hearts of both Diane and Virginie lurked a confirmed belief that the birth of a child—a son—would serve to bring about a better understanding between husband and wife, and in the end assure Diane her rightful place as mistress of the house.

"*Vois-tu*, Virginie," the latter would say hopefully. "When I have a little baby, I shall have done my duty as the wife of a great English milord. Even Miss Catherine will no longer regard me as of no importance."

And Virginie would reply with infinite satisfaction:

"Of a certainty, when madame has a little son, Ma'moiselle Catherine will be returned to her place."

And now at last the great moment had arrived, and upstairs Catherine and Virginie were in attendance—both ousted from what each considered her own rightful place of authority by a slim, capable, and apparently quite unconcerned piece of femininity equipped against rebellion in all the starched panoply of a nurse's uniform, while downstairs Hugh stared dumbly out at the frosted lawns, with their background of bare, brown trees swaying to the wind from the north.

The door behind him opened suddenly. Hugh whirled round. He was a tall man with a certain rather formal air of stateliness about him, a suggestion of the *grand seigneur*, and the unwontedly impulsive movement was significant of the strain under which he was labouring.

Catherine was standing on the threshold of the room with something in her arms—-something almost indistinguishable amid the downy, fleecy froth of whiteness amid which it lay.

Hugh was conscious of a new and strange sensation deep down inside himself. He felt rather as though all the blood in his body had rushed to one place—somewhere in the middle of it—and were pounding there against his ribs.

He tried to speak, failed, then instinctively stretched out his arms for the tiny, orris-scented bundle which Catherine carried.

The next thing of which he was conscious was Catherine's voice as she placed his child in his arms—very quiet, yet rasping across the tender silence of the room like a file.

"Here, Hugh, is the living seal which God Himself has set upon the sin of your marriage."

Hugh's eyes, bent upon the pink, crumpled features of the scrap of humanity nestled amid the bunchy whiteness in his arms, sought his sister's face. It was a thin, hard face, sharply cut like carved ivory; the eyes a light, cold blue, ablaze with hostility; the pale obstinate lips, usually folded so impassively one above the other, working spasmodically.

For a moment brother and sister stared at each other in silence. Then, all at once, Catherine's rigidly enforced composure snapped.

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“A girl child, Hugh!” she jeered violently. “A *girl*—when you prayed for a boy!”

“A girl?”

Hugh stared stupidly at the babe in his arms.

“Ay, a girl!” taunted Catherine, her voice cracking with rising hysteria. “*A girl!* . . . For eight generations the first-born has been a son. And the ninth is a girl! The daughter of a foreign dancing-woman! . . . God has indeed taken your punishment into His own Hands!”

CHAPTER II

THE WIDENING GULF

The birth of a daughter came upon Hugh in the light of an almost overwhelming shock. He was quite silent when, in response to Catherine’s imperative gesture, he surrendered the child into her arms once more. As she took it from him he noticed that those thin, angular arms of hers seemed to close round the little swaddled body in an almost jealously possessive clasp. But there was none of the tender possessiveness of love about it. In some oddly repugnant way it reminded him of the motion of a bird of prey at last gripping triumphantly in its talons a victim that has hitherto eluded pursuit.

He turned back dully to his contemplation of the wintry garden, nor, in his absorption, did he hear the whimpering cry—almost of protest—that issued from the lips of his first-born as Catherine bore the child away.

For a space it seemed as though his mind were a blank, every thought and feeling wiped out of it by the stupendous, nullifying fact that his wife had given birth to a daughter. Then, with a rush as torturing as the return of blood to benumbed limbs, emotions crowded in upon him.

Catherine’s incessant denunciations of his “sin” in marrying Diane Wielitzska—poured upon him without stint throughout this first year of his marriage—seemed to din in his ears anew. Such phrases as “selling your soul,” “putting a woman of that type in our sainted mother’s place,” “mingling the blood of a foreign dancing-woman with our own,” jangled against each other in his mind.

Had he really been guilty of a sin against his conscience—satisfied his desires irrespective of all sense of duty?

He began to think he had, and to wonder in a disturbed fashion if God thought so too. What was it Catherine had said? *"God has indeed taken your punishment into His own Hands."*

Hugh was only too well aware of the facts which gave the speech its trenchant significance. He himself had inherited owing to the death of an elder brother in early childhood. But there was no younger brother to step into his own shoes, and failing an heir in the direct line of succession the title and entailed estate would of necessity go to Rupert Vallincourt, a cousin—a gay and debonair young rake of much charm of manner and equal absence of virtue. From both Catherine's and Hugh's point of view he was the last man in the world fitted to become the head of the family. Hence the eagerness with which they had anticipated the arrival of a son and heir.

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And now, prompted by Catherine's bitter taunt, the birth of a daughter as his first-born —the first happening of the kind for eight successive generations—appeared to Hugh in the light of a direct manifestation of God's intention that no son born of Diane Wielitzska should be dowered with such influence as the heir to the Vallincourts must necessarily wield.

Better, even, that the title and estates should go to Rupert! Bad as his reputation might be, good blood ran in his veins on either side—an inherited tradition of right-doing which was bound to assert itself in succeeding generations. Whereas in the offspring of Diane heaven alone knew what hidden inherited tendencies towards evil might lie fallow, to develop later and work incalculable mischief in the world.

Hugh felt crushed by the unexpected blow which had befallen him. Since his marriage, he had opposed a forced indifference to his sister's irreconcilable attitude, finding compensation in the glowing moments of his passion for Diane. Nevertheless—since living in an atmosphere of disapproval tends to fray the strongest nerves—his temper had worn a little fine beneath the strain; and with Diane's faults and failings thrust continually on his notice he had unconsciously grown more critical of her.

And now, all at once, it seemed as though scales had been torn from his eyes. He saw his marriage for the first time from the same standpoint as Catherine saw it, and in the unlooked-for birth of a daughter he thought he recognised the Hand of God, sternly uprooting his most cherished hopes and minimising, as much as possible, the inevitable evil consequences of his weakness in marrying Diane.

He was conscious of a rising feeling of resentment against his wife. Words from an old Book flashed into his mind: *"The woman tempted me."*

With the immediate instinct of a weak nature—the very narrowness and rigidity of his views was a manifestation of weakness, had he but realised it—he was already looking for someone with whom to share the blame for his lapse from the Vallincourt standard of conduct, and in that handful of wayward charm, red lips, and soft, beguiling eyes which was Diane he found what he sought.

Again the room door opened. This time, instead of putting a longed-for end to a blank period of suspense, the little quiet clicking of the latch cut almost aggressively across the conflict of Hugh's thoughts. He turned round irritably.

"What is it?" he demanded.

A uniformed nurse was standing in the doorway. At the sound of his curtly-spoken question she glanced at him with a certain contemplative curiosity in her eyes. They might have held surprise as well as curiosity had she not lately stood beside that huge,

canopied bed upstairs, listening pitifully to a woman's secret fears and longings, unveiled in the delirium of pain.

"I know you sometimes wish you hadn't married me. . . . I'm not good enough. And Catherine hates me. Yes, she does, she does! And she'll make you hate me too! But you won't hate me when my baby comes, will you, Hugh? You want a little son . . . a little son . . ."

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Nurse Maynard could hear again the weary, complaining voice, trailing off at last in the silence of exhaustion, and an impulse of indignation added a sharp edge to her tone as she responded to Hugh's query.

"Her ladyship is asking to see you, Sir Hugh. She ought to rest now, but she is too excited. She has been expecting you."

There was no mistaking the implied rebuke in the last sentence, and Hugh's face darkened.

"I'll come," he said, briefly, and followed the crisp starched figure up the stairs and into a half-darkened room, smelling faintly of antiseptics.

Vaguely the white counterpane outlined the slim figure of Diane upon the bed. The nurse raised the blind a little, and the light of the westering sun fell across the pillow, revealing a small, dark head which turned eagerly at the sound of Hugh's entrance.

"Hugh!" The voice from the bed came faintly.

Hugh looked down at his wife. Probably never had Diane looked more beautiful.

The little worldly, sophisticated expression common to her features had been temporarily obliterated by the holy suffering of motherhood, and the face of the "foreign dancing-woman," born and bred in a quarter of the world where virtue is a cheap commodity, was as pure and serene as the face of a Madonna.

She held out her hands to her husband, her lips curving into a smile that was all love and tenderness.

"Hugh—*mon adore!*"

The lover in him sent him swiftly to her side, and as he drew her into his arms she let her head fall back against his shoulder with a tremulous sigh of infinite content.

And then, from the firelit corner of the room, came the sound of a feeble wailing. Hugh started as though stung, and his eyes left his wife's face and riveted themselves upon the figure in the low chair by the hearth—Virginie, rocking a little as she sat, and crooning a Breton lullaby to the baby in her arms.

In a moment remembrance rushed upon him, cutting in twain as though with a dividing sword this exquisite moment of reunion with his wife. Insensibly his arms relaxed their clasp of the frail body they held, and Diane, sensing their slackening, looked up startled and disconcerted.

Her eyes followed the direction of his glance, then, coming back to his face, searched it wildly. Instantly she knew the meaning of that suddenly limp clasp and all that it implied.

“Hugh!” The throbbing tenderness had gone out of her voice, leaving it dry and toneless. “Hugh! You don’t mean . . . you’re *angry* that it’s a girl?”

He looked down at her—at the frightened eyes, the lovely face fined by recent pain, and all his instinct was to reassure and comfort her. But something held him back. The old, narrow creed in which he had been reared, whose shackles he had broken through when he had recklessly followed the bidding of his heart and married Diane, was once more mastering him—bidding him resist the natural human impulses of love and kindliness evoked by his wife’s appeal.

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"God Himself has taken your punishment into His own Hands."

Again he seemed to hear Catherine's accusing tones, and the fanatical strain inbred in him answered like a boat to its helm. There must be no more compromise, no longer any evasion of the issues of right and wrong. He had sinned, and both he and the woman for whose sake he had defied his own creed, and that of his fathers before him, must make atonement. He drew himself up, and stood stiff and unbending beside the bed. In his light-grey eyes there shone that same indomitable ardour of the zealot which had shone in Catherine's.

"No," he said. "I am not angry that the child is a girl. I accept it as a just retribution."

No man possessed of the ordinary instincts of common humanity would have so greeted his wife just when she had emerged, spent and exhausted, from woman's supreme conflict with death. But the fanatic loses sight of normal values, and Hugh, obsessed by his newly conceived idea of atoning for the sin of his marriage, was utterly oblivious of the enormity of his conduct as viewed through unbiased eyes.

The woman who had just fought her way through the Valley of the Shadow stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Retribution?" she repeated blankly.

"For my marriage—our marriage."

Diane's breath came faster.

"What—what do you mean?" she asked falteringly. Suddenly a look of sheer terror leaped into her eyes, and she clutched at Hugh's sleeve. "Oh, you're not going to be like Catherine? Say you're not! Hugh, you've always said she was crazy to call our marriage a sin. . . . *A sin!*" She tried to laugh, but the laugh stuck in her throat, caught and pinned there by the terror that gripped her.

"Yes, I've said that. I've said it because I wanted to think it," he returned remorselessly, "not because I really thought it."

Diane dragged herself up on to her elbow.

"I don't understand. You've not changed?" Then, as he made no answer: "Hugh, you're frightening me! What do you mean? What has Catherine been saying to you?"

Her voice rose excitedly. A patch of feverish colour appeared on either cheek. Old Virginie sprung up from her chair by the fire, alarmed.

"You excite madame!"

Hugh turned to leave the room.

“We’ll discuss this another time, Diane,” he said.

Diane moved her head fretfully.

“No. Now—now! Don’t go! Hugh!”

Her voice rose almost to a scream and simultaneously the nurse came hurrying in from the adjoining room. She threw one glance at the patient, huddled flushed and excited against the pillows, then without more ado she marched up to Hugh and, taking him by the shoulders with her small, capable hands, she pushed him out of the room.

“Do you want to *kill* your wife?” she demanded in a low voice of concentrated anger. “If so, you’re going the right way about it.”

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The next moment the door closed behind her, and Hugh found himself standing alone on the landing outside it.

Although the scene with her husband did not kill Diane, it went very near it. For some time she was dangerously ill, but at last the combined efforts of doctor and nurse restored her once more to a frail hold upon life, and the resiliency of youth accomplished the rest.

Curiously enough, the remembrance of Hugh's brief visit to her bedside held for her no force of reality. When the fever which had ensued abated, she described the whole scene in detail to Virginie and the nurse as an evil dream which she had had—and pitifully they let her continue in this belief.

Even Hugh himself had been compelled, under protest, to take part in this deception. The doctor, a personal friend of his, had not minced matters.

"You've acted the part of an unmitigated coward, Vallincourt—salving your own fool conscience at your wife's expense. Even if you no longer love her—"

"But I do love her," protested Hugh. "I—I *worship* her!"

Jim Lancaster stared. In common with most medical men he was more or less used to the odd vagaries of human nature, but Hugh's attitude struck him as altogether incomprehensible.

"Then what in the name of thunder have you been getting at?" he demanded.

"I both love and hate her," declared Hugh wretchedly.

"That's rot," retorted the other. "It's impossible."

"It's not impossible."

Hugh rose and began pacing backwards and forwards. Lancaster's eyes rested on him thoughtfully. The man had altered during the last few weeks—altered incredibly. He was a stone lighter to start with, and his blond, clear-cut face had the worn look born of mental conflict. His eyes were red-rimmed as though from insufficient sleep.

"It's not impossible." Hugh paused in his restless pacing to and fro. "I love her because I can't help myself. I hate her because I ought never to have married her—never made a woman of her type the mother of my child."

"All mothers are sacred," suggested the doctor quietly.

Hugh seemed not to hear him.

“How long is this pretence to go on, Lancaster?” he demanded irritably.

“What pretence?”

“This pretence that nothing is changed—nothing altered—between my wife and myself?”

“For ever, I hope. So that, after all, there will have been no pretence.”

But the appeal of the speech was ineffectual. Hugh looked at the other man unmoved.

“It’s no use hoping that you and I can see things from the same standpoint,” he added stubbornly. “I’ve made my decision—laid down the lines of our future life together. I’m only waiting till you, as a medical man, tell me that Diane’s health is sufficiently restored for me to inform her.”

“No woman is ever in such health that you can break her heart with impunity.”

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Hugh's light-grey eyes gleamed like steel.

"Will you answer my question?" he said curtly.

Lancaster sprang up.

"Diane is in as good health now as ever she was," he said violently. And strode out of the room.

During the period of her convalescence Diane, attended by Nurse Maynard, had occupied rooms situated in a distant wing of the house, where the invalid was not likely to be disturbed by the coming and going of other members of the household, and it was with almost the excitement of a schoolgirl coming home for the holidays that, when she was at last released from the doctor's supervision, she retook possession of her own room. She superintended joyously the restoration to their accustomed place her various little personal possessions, and finally peeped into her husband's adjoining room, thinking she heard him moving there.

On the threshold she paused irresolutely, conscious of an odd sense of confusion. The room was vacant. But, beyond that, its whole aspect was different somehow, unfamiliar. Her eyes wandered to the dressing-table. Instead of holding its usual array of silver-backed brushes and polished shaving tackle, winking in the sunshine, it was empty. She stared at it blankly. Then her glance travelled slowly round the room. It had a strangely untenanted look. There was no sign of masculine attire left carelessly about—not a chair or table was a hairbreadth out of its appointed place.

Her hand, resting lightly on the door-handle, gripped it with a sudden tensity. The next moment she had crossed the room and torn open the doors of the great armoire where Hugh kept his clothes. This, too, was empty—shelves and hanger alike. Impulsively she rang the bell and, when a maid appeared in response, demanded to know the meaning of the alteration.

The girl glanced at her with the veiled curiosity of her class.

"It was made by Sir Hugh's orders, my lady."

With an effort, Diane hid the sudden tumult of bewilderment and fear that filled her. Her dream! Had it been only a dream? Or had it been an actual happening—that terrible little scene with her husband when, standing rigid and unbending beside her bed, he had told her that the birth of their daughter was a just retribution for a union he regarded as a sin?

Memories of their brief year of marriage came surging over her in a torrent—Catherine's narrow-minded opposition and disapproval, Hugh's own moodiness and irritability and, latterly, his not infrequent censure. There had been times when Diane—rebuked

incessantly—had fancied she must be the Scarlet Woman herself, or at least a very near relative. And then had come moments when Hugh, carried away by his ardour, had once more played the lover as he alone knew how, with all the warmth and abandon of those days when he had wooed her in Italy, and Diane would forget her unhappiness and fears in the sure knowledge that she was a passionately beloved woman.

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But always she was subconsciously aware of a sense of strife—of struggle, as though Hugh loved her in spite of himself, in defiance of some inner mandate of conscience which accused him.

And now, fear mastered her. Her dream had been a reality. And this—this sweeping away from what had been his room of every familiar little personal possession—was the symbol of some new and terribly changed relation between them.

Forcing herself to move composedly while the maid still watched her, she walked slowly out of the room, but the instant the door had closed behind her she flew downstairs to her husband's study and, not pausing to comply with the unwritten law which forbade entrance there without express permission, broke in upon him as he sat at his desk, busily occupied with his morning mail.

"Diane!"

Hugh turned towards her with a cold light of astonished disapproval in his eyes.

"You know I don't like to be interrupted——"

"I know, I know. But I *had* to come. Something's happened. There's been a mistake. . . . Hugh, they've taken everything out of your room. All your things."

She stood beside him breathlessly awaiting his reply—her passionate dark eyes fixed on his face, two patches of brilliant colour showing on the high cheek-bones that bore witness to her Russian origin.

They made a curious contrast—husband and wife. She, a slender thing of fire and flame, hands clenched, lips quivering—woman every inch of her; he, immaculate and composed, his face coldly expressionless, yet with a hint of something warmer, a suppressed glow, beneath the deliberately chill glance of those curious light-grey eyes—the man and bigoted fanatic fighting for supremacy within him.

"Hugh! Answer me! Don't sit staring at me like that!" Diane's voice held a sharpened sound.

At last he spoke, very slowly and carefully.

"There has been no mistake, Diane. Everything that has been done has been with my sanction—by my order. Our marriage has been a culpable mistake. Catherine realised it from the beginning. I only realise my full guilt now that I am punished. But whatever I can do in atonement—reparation, that I have made up my mind to do. The first—the chief thing—is that our married life is at an end."

She heard him with a curious absence of surprise. Somehow, from the instant she had seen his dismantled room she had known, known surely, that the long fight between herself and Catherine was over. And that Catherine had won.

“At an end? Hugh, what do you mean? What are you going to do? You’re not, you’re not going to send me away?”

“No, not that. I’ve no right to punish you. You’ve been guilty of no fault—”

“Except the fault of being myself,” she flung back bitterly.

“But I ought never to have married you. I did it, knowing you were not fit—suitable”—he corrected himself hastily. “So I alone am to blame. You will retain your position here as my wife—mistress of my home.” Diane, remembering Catherine’s despotic rule, smiled mirthlessly. “But henceforth you will be my wife in name only. I shall have no wife.”

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Diane caught that note of dull endurance in his voice, and seized upon it. He still cared!

“Hugh, you’ve listened to Catherine till you’ve lost all sense of truth.” She spoke gently, pleadingly. “Don’t do this thing. We’ve been guilty of no sin that needs atonement. It isn’t wrong to love.”

But he was implacable.

“No,” he returned. “It isn’t wrong to love—but sometimes love should be denied.”

Diane drew nearer to him, and laid her hand on his arm.

“Not ours, Hugh,” she whispered. “Not love like ours—”

“Be silent!”

Hugh sprang to his feet, his eyes ablaze, his voice hoarse and shaking.

“Don’t tempt me! Do you think I’ve found it easy to decide on this? When every fibre of my body is calling out for you? My God, no!”

“Then don’t do it! Hugh—dearest—”

With sudden violence he caught her by the arms.

“Be silent, I tell you! Don’t tempt me! I’ll make my penance, accept the burden laid on me—that my first-born should be a girl!”

Diane clung to him, resisting his attempt to thrust her from him.

“Hugh! Ah, wait! Listen to me! . . . Dear, some day there may be a little son, yours and mine—”

He flung her from him violently.

“There shall never be a son of ours! Never! It is the Will of God.”

With an immense effort he checked the rising frenzy within him—the ecstasy of the martyr embracing the stake to which he shall be bound. He moved across to the door and held it open for her.

“And now, will you please go? That is my last word on the matter.”

Diane turned hesitatingly towards the doorway, then paused.

“Hugh——”

There was an infinite appeal in her voice. Her eyes were those of a frightened, bewildered child.

“Go, please,” he repeated mechanically.

A convulsive sob tore its way through her throat. She stepped blindly forward. The next moment the door closed inexorably between husband and wife.

CHAPTER III

SAINT-MICHAEL AND THE WONDER-CHILD

Day by day her husband’s complete estrangement from her was rendered additionally bitter to Diane by Catherine’s complacent air of triumph. The latter knew that she had won, severed the tie which bound her brother to “the foreign dancing-woman,” and she did not scruple to let Diane see that she openly rejoiced in the fact.

At first Diane imagined that Catherine might rest content with what she had accomplished, but the grim, hard-featured woman still continued to exhibit the same self-righteous disapproval towards her brother’s wife as hitherto.

Diane endured it in resentful silence for a time, but one day, stung by some more than usually acid speech of Catherine’s, she turned on her, demanding passionately why she seemed to hate her even more since the birth of the child.

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“I nearly gave my life for her,” she protested with fierce simplicity. “I could do no more! Is it because *le bon dieu* has sent me a little daughter instead of a little son that you hate me so much?”

And Catherine had answered her in a voice of quiet, concentrated animosity:

“If you had died then—*died childless*—I should have thanked God day and night.”

Diane, isolated and unhappy, turned to her baby for consolation. It was all that was left to her out of the wreck of her life, and the very fact that both Hugh and Catherine seemed to regard the little daughter with abhorrence only served to strengthen the passionate worship which she herself lavished upon her.

The child—they had called her Magda—was an odd little creature, as might have been expected from the violently opposing characteristics of her parents.

She was slenderly made—built on the same lithe lines as her mother—and almost as soon as she was able to walk she manifested an amazing balance and suppleness of limb. By the time she was four years old she was trying to imitate, with uncertain little feet and dimpled, aimlessly waving arms, the movements of her mother, when to amuse the child, she would sometimes dance for her.

However big a tragedy had occurred in Magda’s small world—whether it were a crack across the insipid china face of a favourite doll or the death of an adored Persian kitten—there was still balm in Gilead if *"petite maman"* would but dance for her. The tears shining in big drops on her cheeks, her small chest still heaving with the sobs that were a passionate protest against unkind fate, Magda would sit on the floor entranced, watching with adoring eyes every swift, graceful motion of the dancer, and murmuring in the quaint shibboleth of French and English she had imbibed from old Virginie.

On one of these occasions Hugh came upon the two unexpectedly and brought the performance to a summary conclusion.

“That will do, Diane,” he said icily. “I should have thought you would have had more self-respect than to dance—in that fashion—in front of a child.”

“It is, then, a sin to dance—as it is to be married?” demanded Diane bitterly, abruptly checked in an exquisite spring-flower dance of her own invention.

“I forbid it; that is sufficient,” replied Hugh sternly.

His assumption of arrogant superiority was unbearable. Diane’s self-control wavered under it and broke. She turned and upbraided him despairingly, alternately pleading and reproaching, battering all her slender forces uselessly against his inflexible determination.

“This is a waste of time, Diane—mine, anyway,” he told her. And left her shaken with grief and anger.

Driven by a sense of utter revolt, she stormed her way to Catherine, who was composedly sorting sheets in the linen room.

“I will not bear it!” she burst out at her furiously. “What have I done that I should be treated as an outcast—a pariah?”

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Catherine regarded the tense, quivering little figure with chill dislike.

“You married my brother,” she replied imperturbably.

“And you have separated us! But for you, we should be happy together—he and baby and I! But you have spoilt it all. I suppose”—a hint of the Latin Quarter element in her asserting itself—“I suppose you think no one good enough to marry into your precious family!”

Catherine paused on her way to the cupboard, a pile of fine linen pillowslips in her hands.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “It is I who have separated you—spoilt your happiness, if you like. And I am glad of it. I can’t expect anyone like you to understand”—there was the familiar flavour of disparagement in her tones—“but I am thankful that my brother has seen the wickedness of his marriage with you, that he has repented of it, and that he is making the only atonement possible!”

She turned and composedly laid the pile of pillowslips in their appointed place on the shelf. A faint fragrance of dried lavender drifted out from the dark depths of the cupboard. Diane always afterwards associated the smell of lavender with her memories of Catherine Vallincourt, and the sweet, clean scent of it was spoiled for her henceforward.

“I hate you!” she exclaimed in a low voice of helpless rage. “I hate you—and I wish to God Hugh had never had a sister!”

“Well”—composedly—“he will not have one much longer.”

Diane stared.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that as far as our life together is concerned, it is very nearly over.”

“Do you mean”—Diane bent towards her breathlessly—“do you mean that you are *going away*—going away from Coverdale?”

“Yes. I am entering a sisterhood—that of the Sisters of Penitence, a community Hugh is endowing with money that is urgently needed.”

“Endowing?”

“As part of the penance he has set himself to perform.” Catherine’s steely glance met and held the younger woman’s. “Thanks to you, the remainder of his life will be passed in expiation.”

Diane shook her head carelessly. Such side-issues were of relatively small importance compared with the one outstanding, amazing fact: Catherine was going away! Going away from Coverdale—for ever!

“Yes”—Catherine read her thoughts shrewdly—“yes, you will be rid of me. I shall not be here much longer.”

Diane struck her hands together. For once, not even the fear of Catherine’s gibing tongue could hold her silent.

“I’m glad—glad—*glad* you’re going away!” she exclaimed passionately. “When you are gone I will win back my husband.”

“Do you think so?” was all she said.

But to Diane’s keyed-up consciousness it was as though the four short words contained a threat—the germ of future disaster.

In due time Catherine quitted Coverdale for the austere seclusion of the sisterhood, and a very few weeks sufficed to convince Diane that her forebodings had been only too well founded.

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Catherine had long been anxious to enter a community, restrained from doing so solely by Hugh's need of her as mistress of his house, and now that her wish was an accomplished fact, it seemed as though he were spurred on to increasing effort by the example of his sister's renunciation of the world. He withdrew himself even more completely from his wife, sometimes avoiding her company for days at a time, and adopted a stringently ascetic mode of life, denying himself all pleasure, fasting frequently, and praying and meditating for hours at a stretch in the private chapel which was attached to Coverdale. As far as it was possible, without actually entering a community, his existence resembled that of a monk, and Diane came to believe that he had voluntarily vowed himself to a certain form of penance and expiation for the marriage which the bigotry of his nature had led him to regard as a sin.

His life only impinged upon his wife's in so far as the upbringing of their child was concerned. He was unnecessarily severe with her, and, since Diane opposed his strict ruling at every opportunity, Magda's early life was passed in an atmosphere of fierce contradictions.

The child inherited her mother's beauty to the full, and, as she developed, exhibited an extraordinary faculty for getting her own way. Servants, playmates, and governesses all succumbed to the nameless charm she possessed, while her mother and old Virginie frankly worshipped her.

The love of dancing was instinctive with her, and this, unknown to Hugh, her mother cultivated assiduously, fostering in her everything that was imaginative and delicately fanciful. Magda believed firmly in the existence of fairies and regarded flowers as each possessed of a separate entity with personal characteristics of its own. The originality of the dances she invented for her own amusement was the outcome.

But, side by side with this love of all that was beautiful, she absorbed from her mother a certain sophisticated understanding of life which was somewhat startling in one of her tender years, and this, too, betrayed itself in her dancing. For it is an immutable law that everything—good, bad, and indifferent—which lies in the soul of an artist ultimately reveals itself in his work.

And Magda, inheriting the underlying ardour of her father's temperament and the gutter-child's sharp sense of values which was her mother's Latin Quarter garnering, at the age of eight danced, with all the beguilement and seductiveness of a trained and experienced dancer.

Even Hugh himself was not proof against the elusive lure of it. He chanced upon her one day, dancing in her nursery, and was so carried away by the charm of the performance that for the moment he forgot that she was transgressing one of his most rigid rules.

In the child's gracious, alluring gestures he was reminded of the first time that he had seen her mother dance, and of how it had thrilled him. Beneath the veneer with which his self-enforced austerity had overlaid his emotions, he felt his pulses leap, and was bitterly chagrined at being thus attracted.

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He found himself brought up forcibly once more against the inevitable consequences of his marriage with Diane, and reasoned that through his weakness in making such a woman his wife, he had let loose on the world a feminine thing dowered with the seductiveness of a Delilah and backed—here came in the exaggerated family pride ingrained in him—by all the added weight and influence of her social position as a Vallincourt.

“Never let me see you dance again, Magda,” he told her. “It is forbidden. If you disobey you will be severely punished.”

Magda regarded him curiously out of a pair of long dark eyes the colour of black smoke. With that precociously sophisticated instinct of hers she realised that the man had been emotionally stirred, and divined in her funny child’s mind that it was her dancing which had so stirred him. It gave her a curious sense of power.

“Sieur Hugh is *afraid* because he likes me to dance,” she told her mother, with an impish little grin of enjoyment.

(On one occasion Hugh had narrated for her benefit the history of an ancestor, one Sieur Hugues de Vallincourt, whose effigy in stone adorned the church, and she had ever afterwards persisted in referring to her father as “Sieur Hugh”—considerably to his annoyance, since he regarded it as both disrespectful and unseemly.)

From this time onwards Magda seemed to take a diabolical delight in shocking her father—experimenting on him, as it were. In some mysterious way she had become conscious of her power to allure. Young as she was, the instinct of conquest was awakened within her, and she proceeded to “experiment” on certain of her father’s friends—to their huge delight and Hugh’s intense disgust. Once, in an outburst of fury, he epitomised her ruthlessly.

“The child has the soul of a courtesan!”

If this were so, Hugh had no knowledge of how to cope with it. His fulminations on the subject of dancing affected her not at all, and a few days after he had rebuked her with all the energy at his command he discovered her dancing on a table—this time for the delectation of an enraptured butler and staff in the servants’ hall.

Without more ado Hugh lifted her down and carried her to his study, where he administered a sound smacking. The result astonished him considerably.

“Do you think you can stop me from dancing by beating me?”

Magda arraigned him with passionate scorn.

“I do,” he returned grimly. “If you hurt people enough you can stop them from committing sin. That is the meaning of remedial punishment.”

“I don’t believe it!” she stormed at him. “You might hurt me till I *died* of hurting, but you couldn’t make me good—not if I hated your hurting me all the time! Because it isn’t good to hate,” she added out of the depths of some instinctive wisdom.

“Then you’d better learn to like being punished—if that will make you good,” retorted Hugh.

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Magda sped out into the woods. Hugh's hand had been none too light, and she was feeling physically and spiritually sore. Her small soul was aflame with fierce revolt.

Just to assure herself of the liberty of the individual and of the fact that "hurting couldn't make her good," she executed a solitary little dance on the green, mossy sward beneath the trees. It was rather a painful process, since certain portions of her anatomy still tingled from the retributive strokes of justice, but she set her teeth and accomplished the dance with a consciousness of unholy glee that added appreciably to the quality of the performance.

"Are you the Fairy Queen?"

The voice came suddenly out of the dim, enfolding silence of the woods, and Magda paused in the midst of a final pirouette. A man was standing leaning against the trunk of a tree, watching her with whimsical grey eyes. Behind him, set up in the middle of a clearing amongst the trees, an easel and stool evidenced his recent occupation.

Magda returned the scrutiny of the grey eyes. She was no whit embarrassed and slowly lowered her foot—she had been toe-dancing—to its normal position while she surveyed the newcomer with interest.

He was a tall, lean specimen of mankind, and the sunlight, quivering between the interlacing boughs above his head, flickered on to kinky fair hair that looked almost absurdly golden contrasted with the brown tan of the face beneath it. It was a nice face, Magda decided, with a dogged, squarish jaw that appealed to a certain tenacity of spirit which was one of her own unchildish characteristics, and the keen dark-grey eyes she encountered were so unlike the cold light-grey of her father's that it seemed ridiculous the English language could only supply the one word "grey" to describe things that were so totally dissimilar.

"They're like eyes with little fires behind them," Magda told herself. Then smiled at their owner radiantly.

"Are you the Fairy Queen?" he repeated gravely.

She regarded him with increasing approval.

"Yes," she assented graciously. "These are my woods."

"Then I'm afraid I've been trespassing in your majesty's domain," admitted the grey-eyed man. "But your woods are so beautiful I simply had to try and make a sketch of them."

Magda came back to earth with promptitude.

“Oh, are you an artist?” she demanded eagerly.

He nodded, smiling.

“I’m trying to be.”

“Let me look.” She flashed past him and planted herself in front of the easel.

“*Mais, c’est bon!*” she commented coolly. “Me, I know. We have good pictures at home. This is a good picture.”

The man with the grey eyes looked suitably impressed.

“I’m glad you find it so,” he replied meekly. “I think it wants just one thing more. If”—he spoke abstractly—“if the Fairy Queen were resting just there”—his finger indicated the exact point on the canvas—“tired, you know, because she had been dancing to one of the Mortals—lucky beggar, wasn’t he?—why, I think the picture would be complete.”

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Magda shot him a swift glance of comprehension. Then, without a word, she moved towards the bole of a tree and flung herself down with all the supple grace of a young faun. The artist snatched up his palette; the pose she had assumed without a hint from him was inimitable—the slender limbs relaxed and drooping exactly as though from sheer fatigue. He painted furiously, blocking in the limp little figure with swift, sure strokes of his brush.

When at last he desisted he flung a question at her.

“Who taught you to pose—and to dance like that, you wonder-child?”

Magda surveyed him with that mixture of saint and devil in her long, suddenly narrow eyes which, when she grew to womanhood, was the measure of her charm and the curse of her tempestuous life.

“*Le bon dieu*,” she responded demurely.

The man smiled and shook his head. It was a crooked little smile, oddly humorous and attractive.

“No,” he said with conviction. “No. I don’t think so.”

The daylight was beginning to fade, and he started to pack up his belongings.

“What’s your name?” asked Magda suddenly.

“Michael.”

She looked at him with sudden awe.

“Not—not *Saint Michel*?” she asked breathlessly.

Virginie had told her all about “*Saint Michel*.” He was a very great angel indeed. It would be tremendously exciting to find she had been talking to him all this time without knowing it! And the grey-eyed man had fair hair; it shone in the glinting sunset-light *almost* like a halo!

He quenched her hopes with that brief, one-sided smile of his.

“No,” he said. “I’m not Saint Michael. I’m only a poor devil of a painter who’s got his way to make in the world. Perhaps, you’ve helped me, Fairy Queen.”

And seeing that “The Repose of Titania” was the first of his paintings to bring Michael Quarrington that meed of praise and recognition which was later his in such full measure, perhaps she had.

“I think I’m glad you’re not a saint, after all,” remarked Magda thoughtfully. “Saint’s are dreadfully dull and superior.”

He smiled down at her.

“Are they? How do you know?”

“Because Sieur Hugh is preparing to be one. At least Virginie says so—and she sniffs when she says it. So you see, I know all about it.”

“I see,” he replied seriously. “And who are Sieur Hugh and Virginie?”

“Sieur Hugh is my father. And Virginie is next best to *petite maman*. Me, I love Virginie.”

“Lucky Virginie!”

Magda made no answer, but she stood looking at him with an odd, unchildlike deviltry in her sombre eyes.

“Fairy Queen, I should like to kiss you,” said the man suddenly. Then he jerked his head back. “No, I wouldn’t!” he added quickly to himself. “By Jove, it’s uncanny!”

Magda remained motionless, still staring at him with those long dark eyes of hers. He noticed that just at the outer corners they slanted upwards a little, giving her small, thin face a curiously Eastern look.

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At last—

“Please kiss me, Saint Michael,” she said.

For a moment he hesitated, a half-rueful, half-whimsical smile on his lips, rather as though he were laughing at himself. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he stooped quickly and kissed her.

“Witch-child!” he muttered as he strode away through the woods.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEED OF EVIL

Diane sat in the twilight, brooding. Winter had come round again, gripping the world with icy fingers, and she shivered a little as she crouched in front of the fire.

She felt cold—cold in body and soul. The passage of time had brought no cheery warmth of love or loving-kindness to her starved heart, and the estrangement between herself and Hugh was as definite and absolute as it had been the day Catherine quitted Coverdale for the Sisterhood of Penitence.

But the years which had elapsed since then had taken their inevitable toll. Hugh had continued along the lines he had laid down for himself, rigidly ascetic and austere, and his mode of life now revealed itself unmistakably in his thin, emaciated face and eyes ablaze with fanatical fervour.

Diane, thrust into a compulsory isolation utterly foreign to her temperament, debarred the fulfilment of her womanhood which her spontaneous, impetuous nature craved, had drooped and pined, gradually losing both her buoyant spirit and her health in the loveless atmosphere to which her husband had condemned her.

She had so counted on the prospect that a better understanding between herself and Hugh would ensue after Catherine’s departure that the downfall of her hopes had come upon her as a bitter disappointment. Once she had stifled her pride and begged him to live no longer as a stranger to her. But he had repulsed her harshly, refusing her pleading with an inexorable decision there was no combating.

Afterwards she had given herself up to despair, and gradually—almost imperceptibly at first—her health had declined until finally, at the urgent representations of Virginie, Hugh had called in Dr. Lancaster.

“There is no specific disease,” he had said. “But none the less”—looking very directly at Hugh—“your wife is dying, Vallincourt.”

Diane had been told the first part of the doctor's pronouncement, and recommended by her husband to "rouse herself" out of her apathetic state.

"'No specific disease!'" she repeated bitterly, as she sat brooding in the firelight. "No—-only this death in life which I have had to endure. Well, it will be over soon—and the sooner the better."

The door burst open suddenly and Magda came in to the room, checking abruptly, with a child's stumbling consciousness of pain, as she caught sight of her mother curled up in front of the fire, staring mutely into its glowing heart.

"*Maman*?" she begin timidly. "*Petite maman*?"

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Diane turned round.

“Cherie, is it thou?”

She kneeled up on the hearthrug and, taking the child in her arms, searched her face with dry, bright eyes.

“Baby,” she said. “Listen! And when thou art older, remember always what I have said.”

Magda stared at her, listening intently.

“Never, never give your heart to any man,” continued Diane. “If you do, he will only break it for you—break it into little pieces like the glass scent-bottle which you dropped yesterday. Take everything. But do not give—anything—in return. Will you remember?”

And Magda answered her gravely.

“*Oui, maman*, I will remember.”

What happened after that remained always a confused blur in Magda’s memory—a series of pictures standing out against a dark background of haste and confusion, and whispered fears.

Suddenly her mother gave a sharp little cry and her hands went up to her breast, while for a moment her eyes, dilated and frightened-looking, stared agonisingly ahead. Then she toppled over sideways and lay in a little heap on the great bearskin rung in front of the fire.

After that Virginie came running, followed by a drove of scared-looking servants and, last of all, by Hugh himself, his face very white and working strangely.

The car was sent off in frantic haste in search of Dr. Lancaster, and later in the day two white-capped nurses appeared on the scene. Then followed hours of hushed uncertainty, when people went to and fro with hurried, muffled footsteps and spoke together in whispers, while Virginie’s face grew yellow and drawn-looking, and the tears trickled down her wrinkled-apple cheeks whenever one spoke to her.

Last of all someone told Magda that “*petite maman*” had gone away—and on further inquiry Virginie vouchsafed that she had gone to somewhere called Paradise to be with the blessed saints.

“When will she come back again?” demanded Magda practically.

Upon which Virginie had made an unpleasant choking noise in her throat and declared:

"Never!"

Magda was frankly incredulous. *Petite maman* would never go away like that and leave her behind! Of that she felt convinced, and said so. Gulping back her sobs, Virginie explained that in this case madame had been given no choice, but added that if Magda comported herself like a good little girl, she would one day go to be with her in Paradise. Magda found it all very puzzling.

But when, later, she was taken into her mother's room and saw the slender, sheeted figure lying straight and still on the great bed, hands meekly crossed upon the young, motionless breast, while tall white candles burned at head and foot, the knowledge that *petite maman* had really gone from her seemed all at once to penetrate her childish mind.

That aloofly silent figure could not be her gay, pretty *petite maman*—the one who had played and laughed with her and danced so exquisitely that sometimes Magda's small soul had ached with the sheer beauty and loveliness of it. . . .

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She met Dr. Lancaster as she came out from the candle-lit room and clutched him convulsively by the hand.

“Is that—being dead?” she whispered, pointing to the room she had just quitted.

Very gently he tried to explain things to her. Afterwards Magda overheard the family lawyer asking him in appropriately shocked tones of what complaint Lady Vallincourt had died, and there had been a curious grim twist to Lancaster’s mouth as he made answer.

“Heart,” he said tersely.

“Ah! Very sad. Very sad indeed,” rejoined the lawyer feelingly. “These heart complaints are very obscure sometimes, I believe?”

“Sometimes,” said Lancaster. “Not always.”

The next happening that impressed itself on Magda’s cognisance as an event was the coming of Lady Arabella Winter. She arrived on a day of heavy snow, and Magda’s first impression of her, as she came into the hall muffled up to the tip of her patrician nose in a magnificent sable wrap, was of a small, alert-eyed bird huddled into its nest.

But when the newcomer had laid aside her furs Magda’s impression qualified itself. Lady Arabella was not in the least of the “small bird” type, but rather suggested a hawk endowed with a grim sense of humour—quick and decisive in movement, with eyes that held an incalculable wisdom and laughed a thought cynically because they saw so clearly.

Her hair was perfectly white, as white as the snow outside, but her complexion was soft and fine-grained as that of a girl of sixteen—pink and white like summer roses. She had the manner of an empress with extremely modern ideas.

Magda was instructed that this great little personage was her godmother and that she would in future live with her instead of at Coverdale. She accepted the information without surprise though with considerable interest.

“Think you’ll like it?” Lady Arabella shot at her keenly.

“Yes,” Magda replied unhesitatingly. “But why am I going to live with you? Sieur Hugh isn’t dead, too, is he?”—with impersonal interest.

“And who in the name of fortune is Sieur Hugh?”

Lady Arabella looked around helplessly, and Virginia, who was hovering in the background, hastened to explain the relationship.

“Then, no,” replied Lady Arabella. “Sieur Hugh is not dead—though to be sure he’s the next thing to it!”

Magda eyed her solemnly.

“Is he very ill?” she asked.

“No, merely cranky like all the Vallincourts. He’s in a community, joined a brotherhood, you know, and proposes to spend the rest of his days repenting his sins and making his peace with heaven. I’ve no patience with the fool!” continued the old lady irascibly. “He marries to please himself and then hasn’t the pluck of a rabbit to see the thing through decently. So you’re to be my responsibility in future—and a pretty big one, too, to judge by the look of you.”

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Magda hardly comprehended the full meaning of this speech. Still she gathered that her father had left her—though not quite in the same way as *petite maman* had done—-and that henceforth this autocratic old lady with the hawk's eyes and quick, darting movements was to be the arbiter of her fate. She also divined, beneath Lady Arabella's prickly exterior, a humanness and ability to understand which had been totally lacking in Sieur Hugh. She proceeded to put it to the test.

"Will you let me dance?" she asked.

"Tchah!" snorted the old woman. "So the Wielitzska blood is coming out after all!" She turned to Virginia. "Can she dance?" she demanded abruptly.

"Mais oui, madame!" cried Virginie, clasping her hands ecstatically. "Like a veritable angel!"

"I shouldn't have thought it," commented her ladyship drily.

Her shrewd eyes swept the child's tense little face with its long, Eastern eyes and the mouth that showed so vividly scarlet against its unchildish pallor.

"Less like an angel than anything, I should imagine," muttered the old woman to herself with a wicked little grin. Then aloud: "Show me what you can do, then, child."

"Very well." Magda paused, reflecting. Then she ran forward and laid her hand lightly on Lady Arabella's knee. "Look! This is the story of a Fairy who came to earth and lost her way in the woods. She met one of the Mortals, and he loved her so much that he wouldn't show her the way back to Fairyland. So"—abruptly—"she died."

Lady Arabella watched the child dance in astonished silence. Technique, of course, was lacking, but the interpretation, the telling of the story, was amazing. It was all there—the Fairy's first wonder and delight in finding herself in the woods, then her realisation that she was lost and her frantic efforts to find the way back to Fairyland. Followed her meeting with the Mortal and supplication to him to guide her, and finally the Fairy's despair and death. Magda's slight little figure sank to the ground, drooping slowly like a storm-bent snowdrop, and lay still.

Lady Arabella sat up with a jerk.

"Good gracious! The child's a born dancer! Lydia Tchinova must see her. She'll have to train. Poor Hugh!" She chuckled enjoyably. "This will be the last straw! He'll be compelled to invent a new penance."

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

THE FLOWERING

“You’re very trying, Magda. Everyone is talking about you, and I’m tired of trying to explain you to people.”

Lady Arabella paused in her knitting and spoke petulantly, but a secret gleam of admiration in her sharp old eyes as they rested upon her god-daughter belied the irritation of her tones.

Magda leaned back negligently against the big black velvet cushions in her chair and lit a cigarette.

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“I *want* everyone to talk about me,” she returned composedly. Her voice was oddly attractive—low-pitched and with a faint blur of huskiness about it that caught the ear with a distinctive charm. “It increases the box-office receipts. And there’s no reason in the world for you to ‘explain’ me to people.”

Her godmother regarded her with increasing irritation, yet at the same time acutely conscious of the arresting quality of the young, vividly alive face that gleamed at her from its black-velvet background.

Ten years had only served to emphasise the unusual characteristics of the child Magda. Her skin was wonderful, of a smooth, creamy-white texture which gave to the sharply angled face something of the pale, exotic perfection of a stephanotis bloom. Her eyes were long, the colour of black pansies—black with a suggestion of purple in their depths. They slanted upwards a little at the outer corners, and this together with the high cheek-bones, alone would have betrayed her Russian ancestry. When Lady Arabella wanted to be particularly obnoxious she told her that she had Mongolian eyes, and Magda would shrug her shoulders and, thrusting out a foot which was so perfect in shape that a painting of it by a certain famous artist had been the most talked-of picture of the year, would reply placidly: “Well, thank heaven, *that’s* not English, anyway!”

“It certainly required some explanation when you chose to leave me and go off and live by yourself,” pursued Lady Arabella, resuming her knitting. “A girl of twenty! Of course people have talked. Especially as half the men in town imagine themselves in love with you.”

“Well, I’m perfectly respectable now. I’ve engaged a nice, tame pussy-cat person to take charge of my morals and chaperon me generally. Not—like you, Marraine—an Early Victorian autocrat with a twentieth-century tongue.”

“If you mean Mrs. Grey, she doesn’t give me the least impression of being a ‘nice, tame pussy-cat,’” retorted Lady Arabella. “You’ll find that out, my dear.”

Magda regarded her thoughtfully.

“Do you think so?”

“I do.”

“Oh, Gillian is all right,” affirmed Magda, dismissing the matter airily. “She’s a gorgeous accompanist, anyway—almost as good as Davilof himself. Which reminds me—I must go home and rehearse my solo dance in the *Swan-Maiden*. I told Davilof I’d be ready for him at four o’clock; and it’s half-past three now. I shall never get back to Hampstead through this ghastly fog in half an hour.” She glanced towards the window through which was visible a discouraging fog of the “pea-soup” variety.

Lady Arabella sniffed.

“You’d better be careful for once in your life, Magda. Davilof is in love with you.”

“Pouf! What if he is?”

Magda rose, and picking up her big black hat set it on her head at precisely the right angle, and proceeded to spear it through with a wonderful black-and-gold hatpin of Chinese workmanship.

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Lady Arabella shot a swift glance at her.

“He’s just one of a crowd?” she suggested tartly.

Magda assented indifferently.

“You’re wrong—quite wrong,” returned her godmother crisply. “Antoine Davilof is not one of a crowd—never will be! He’s half a Pole, remember.”

Magda smiled.

“And I’m half a Russian. It must be a case of deep calling to deep,” she suggested mockingly.

Lady Arabella’s shining needles clicked as they came to an abrupt stop.

“Does that mean you’re in love with him?” she asked.

Magda stared.

“Good gracious, no! I’m never in love. You know that.”

“That doesn’t prevent my hoping you may develop—some day—into a normal God-fearing woman,” retorted the other.

“And learn to thank heaven, fasting, for a good man’s love?” Magda laughed lightly. “I shan’t. At least, I hope not. Judging from my friends and acquaintances, the condition of being in love is a most unpleasant one—reduces a woman to a humiliating sense of her own unworthiness and keeps her in a see-saw state of emotional uncertainty. No, thank you! No man is worth it!”

Lady Arabella looked away. Her hard, bright old eyes held a sudden wistfulness foreign to them.

“My dear—one man is. One man in every woman’s life is worth it. Only we don’t always find it out in time.”

“Why, Marraine—you don’t mean—you weren’t ever——”

Lady Arabella rose suddenly and came across to where Magda stood by the fire, one narrow foot extended to the cheerful warmth.

“Never mind what I mean,” she said, and her voice sounded a little uncertain. “Only, if it comes your way, don’t miss the best thing this queer old world of ours has to offer. If it brings you nothing else, love at least leaves you memories. Even that’s something.”

Magda glanced at her curiously. Somehow she had never imagined that behind the worldly-wise old woman's sharp speeches and grim, ironic humour there lay the half-buried memory of some far-distant romance. Yet now in the uneven tones of her voice she recognised the throb of an old wound.

"And meanwhile"—Lady Arabella suddenly resumed in her usual curt manner—-"meanwhile you might play fair with one or two of those boys you have trailing around—Kit Raynham for instance."

"I don't understand," began Magda.

"You understand perfectly. A man of the world's fair game. He can look after himself—-and probably sizes you up for what you are—a phenomenally successful dancer, who regards her little court of admirers as one of the commonplaces of existence—like her morning cup of tea. But these boys—they look upon you as a woman, even a possible wife. And then they proceed to fall in love with you!"

Magda's foot tapped impatiently on the floor.

"What's this all leading up to?"

Lady Arabella met her glance squarely.

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“I want you to leave Kit Raynham alone. His mother has been to me—Magda, I’m sick of having their mothers come to me!—and begged me to interfere. She says you’re ruining the boy’s prospects. He’s a brilliant lad, and they expect him to do something rather special. And now he’s slacking completely. He’s always on your doorstep. If you care about him—do you, Magda?—tell him so. But, if you don’t, for goodness’ sake send him about his business.”

She waited quietly for an answer. Magda slipped into a big fur-coat and caught up her gloves. Then she turned to her godmother abruptly.

“Lady Raynham is absurd. I can’t prevent Kit’s making a fool of himself if he wants to. And—and”—rather helplessly—“I can’t help it if I don’t fall in love to order.” She kissed her godmother lightly. “So that’s that.”

A minute later Lady Arabella’s butler had swung open the front door, and Magda crossed the pavement and entered her waiting car.

Outside, the fog hung like a thick pall over London—thick enough to curtain the windows of the car with a blank, grey veil and to make progress through the streets a difficult and somewhat dangerous process. Magda snuggled into her furs and leant back against the padded cushions. All sight of the outside world was cut off from her, except for the blurred gleam of an occasional street-lamp or the menacing shape of a motor-bus looming suddenly alongside, and she yielded herself to the train of thought provoked by her talk with Lady Arabella.

In a detached sort of way she felt sorry about Kit Raynham—principally because Lady Arabella, of whom she was exceedingly fond, seemed vexed about the matter. It had not taken her long to discover, when as a child she had come to live with her godmother, the warm heart that concealed itself beneath the old lady’s somewhat shrewish exterior. And to Lady Arabella the advent of her god-child had been a matter for pure rejoicing.

Having no children of her own, she lavished a pent-up wealth of affection upon Magda of which few would have thought her capable, and though she was by no means niggardly in her blame of Hugh Vallincourt for his method of shelving his responsibilities, she was grateful that his withdrawal into the monastic life had been the means of throwing Magda into her care. Five years later, when death claimed him, she found he had appointed her the child’s sole guardian.

True to her intention, she had asked the opinion of Lydia Tchinova, the famous dancer, and under Madame Tchinova’s guidance Magda had received such training that when she came to make her debut she leaped into fame at once. Hers was one of those rare cases where the initial drudgery and patient waiting that attends so many careers was

practically eliminated, and at the age of twenty she was probably the most talked-of woman in London.

She had discarded the family surname for professional purposes, and appeared in public under the name of Wielitzska—“to save the reigning Vallincourts from a soul convulsion,” as she observed with a twinkle. During the last year, influenced by the growing demands of her vocation, she had quitted her godmother’s hospitable roof and established herself in a house of her own.

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Nor had Lady Arabella sought to dissuade her. Although she and Magda were the best of friends, she had latterly found the onus of chaperoning her god-child an increasingly heavy burden. As she herself remarked: “You might as well attempt to chaperon a comet!”

It was almost inevitable that Magda, starred and feted wherever she went, should develop into a rather erratic and self-willed young person, but on the whole she had remained singularly unspoilt. Side by side with her gift for dancing she had also inherited something of her mother’s sweetness and wholesomeness of nature. There was nothing petty or mean about her, and many a struggling member of her own profession had had good cause to thank “the Wielitzska” for a helping hand.

Women found in her a good pal; men, an elusive, provocative personality that bewitched and angered them in the same breath, coolly accepting all they had to offer of love and headlong worship—and giving nothing in return.

It was not in the least that Magda deliberately set herself to wile a man’s heart out of his body. She seemed unable to help it! Apart from everything else, her dancing had taught her the whole magic of the art of charming by every look and gesture, and the passage of time had only added to the extraordinary physical allure which had been hers even as a child.

Yet for all the apparent warmth and ardour of her temperament, to which the men she knew succumbed in spite of themselves, she herself seemed untouched by any deeper emotion than that of a faintly amused desire to attract. The lessons of her early days, the tragedy of her mother’s married life, had permeated her whole being, and her ability to remain emotionally unstirred was due to an instinctive reserve and self-withdrawal—-an inherent distrust of the passion of love.

"Take everything. But do not give—anything—in return." Subconsciously Diane’s words, wrested from her at a moment of poignant mental anguish, formed the credo of her daughter’s life.

No man, so far, had ever actually counted for anything in Magda’s scheme of existence, and as she drove slowly home from Lady Arabella’s house in Park Lane she sincerely hoped none ever would. Certainly—she smiled a little at the bare idea—Kit Raynham was not destined to be the man! He was clever, and enthusiastic, and adoring, and she liked him quite a lot, but his hot-headed passion failed to waken in her breast the least spark of responsive emotion.

Her thoughts drifted idly backward, recalling this or that man who had wanted her. It was odd, but of all the men she had met the memory of one alone was still provocative of a genuine thrill of interest—and that was the unknown artist whom she had encountered in the woods at Coverdale.

Even now, after the lapse of ten years, she could remember the young, lean, square-jawed face with the grey eyes, “like eyes with little fires behind them,” and hear again the sudden jerky note in the man’s voice as he muttered, “Witch-child!”

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That brief adventure with “Saint Michel”—she remembered calling him “Saint Michel”—-stood out as one of the clearest memories of her childhood. That, and the memory of her mother, kneeling on the big bearskin rug and saying in a hard, dry voice: “Never give your heart to any man. Take everything. But do not give—anything—in return.”

CHAPTER II

OUT OF THE FOG

A sudden warning shout, the transient glare of fog-blurred headlights, then a crash and a staggering blow on the car’s near side which sent it reeling like a drunken thing, bonnet foremost, straight into a motor-omnibus.

Magda felt herself pitched violently forward off the seat, striking her head as she fell, and while the car yet rocked with the force of its collision with the motor-bus another vehicle drove blindly into it from the rear. It lurched sickeningly and jammed at a precarious angle, canted up on two wheels.

Shouts and cries, the frenzied hooting of horns, the grinding of brakes and clash of splintered glass combined into a pandemonium of terrifying hubbub.

Magda, half-dazed with shock, crouched on the floor of the car where she had been flung. She could see the lights appearing and disappearing in the fog like baleful eyes opening and shutting spasmodically. A tumult of hoarse cries, cursing and bellowing instructions, crossed by the thin scream of women’s cries, battered against her ears.

Then out of the medley of raucous noise came a cool, assured voice:

“Don’t be frightened. I’ll get you out.”

Magda was conscious of a sudden reaction from the numbed sense of bewildered terror which had overwhelmed her. The sound of that unknown voice—quiet, commanding, and infinitely reassuring—was like a hand laid on her heart and stilling its terrified throbbing.

She heard someone tugging at the handle of the door. There came a moment’s pause while the strained woodwork resisted the pull, then with a scrape of jarring fittings the door jerked open and a man’s figure loomed in the aperture.

“Where are you?” he asked, peering through the dense gloom. “Ah!” She felt his outstretched hands close on her shoulders as she knelt huddled on the floor. “Can you get up? Or are you hurt?”

Magda tested her limbs cautiously, to discover that no bones were broken, though her head ached horribly, so that she felt sick and giddy with the pain.

“No, I’m not hurt,” she answered.

“Then come along. The car’s heeled up a bit, but I’ll lift you out if you can get to the door.”

She stumbled forward obediently, groping her way towards the vague panel of lighter grey revealed by the open door.

Once more, out of the swathing fog, hands touched her.

“There you are! That’s right. Now lean forward.”

She found herself clasped by arms like steel—so strong, so sure, that she felt as safe and secure as when Vladimir Ravinski, the amazingly clever young Russian who partnered her in several of her dances, sometimes lifted her, lightly and easily as a feather, and bore her triumphantly off the stage aloft on his shoulder.

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“You’re very strong,” she murmured, as the unknown owner of the arms swung her down from the tilted car.

“You’re not very heavy,” came the answer. There was a kind of laughter in the voice.

As the man spoke he set her down on her feet, and then, just as Magda was opening her lips to thank him, the fog seemed to grow suddenly denser, swirling round her in great murky waves and surging in her ears with a noise like the boom of the ocean. Higher and higher rose the waves, a resistless sea of blackness, and at last they swept right over her head and she sank into the utter darkness of oblivion.

“Drink this!”

Someone was holding a glass to her lips and the pungent smell of sal volatile pricked her nostrils. Magda shrank back, her eyes still shut, and pressed her head further into the cushions against which it rested. She detested the smell of sal volatile.

“Drink it! Do you hear?”

The voice seemed to drive at her with its ring of command. She opened her eyes and looked straight up into other eyes—dark-grey ones, these—that were bent on her intently. To her confused consciousness they appeared to blaze down at her.

“No,” she muttered, feebly trying to push the glass away.

The effort of moving her arm seemed stupendous. Her head swam with it. The sea of fog came rolling back again, and this time she sank under it at once.

Then—after an immensity of time, she was sure—she felt herself struggling up to the surface once more. She was lying rocking gently on the top of the waves now; the sensation was very peaceful and pleasant. A little breeze played across her face. She drew in deep breaths of the cool air, but she did not open her eyes. Presently a murmur of voices penetrated her consciousness.

“She’s coming round again.” A man was speaking. “Go on fanning her.”

“Poor young thing! She’s had a shaking up and no mistake!” This in a woman’s voice, very kindly and commiserating. A hand lightly smoothed the fur of her coat-sleeve. “Looks as if she was a rich young lady. Her people must be anxious about her.”

Someone laughed a little, softly.

“Oh, yes, she’s a rich enough young lady, Mrs. Braithwaite. Don’t you know who it is we’ve rescued?”

“I, sir? No. How should I?”

“Then I’ll tell you. This is Mademoiselle Wielitzska, the famous dancer.”

“Never, sir! Well, I do declare——”

“Now, drink this at once, please.” The man’s voice cut sharply across the impending flow of garrulous interest, and Magda, who had not gathered the actual sense of the murmured conversation, felt an arm pass behind her head, raising it a little, while once more that hateful glass of sal volatile was held to her lips.

Her eyes unclosed fretfully.

“Take it away,” she was beginning.

“Drink it! Do you hear? Do as you’re told!”

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The sharp, authoritative tones startled her into sudden compliance. She opened her mouth and swallowed the contents of the glass with a gulp. Then she looked resentfully at the man whose curt command she had obeyed in such unexpected fashion. Magda Wielitzska was more used to giving orders than to taking them.

“There, that’s better,” he observed, regarding the empty glass with satisfaction. “No, lie still”—as she attempted to rise. “You’ll feel better in a few minutes.”

“I’m better now,” declared Magda sulkily.

Her head was growing clearer every minute. She was even able to feel an intense irritation against this man who had just compelled her to drink the sal volatile.

He looked at her unperturbedly.

“Are you? That’s good. Still, you’ll stay where you are till I tell you that you may get up.” He turned to a comfortable-looking woman who was standing at the foot of the couch on which Magda lay—a housekeeper of the nice old-fashioned black-satin kind. “Now, Mrs. Braithwaite, I think this lady will be glad of a cup of tea by the time you can have one ready.”

“Very good, sir.”

With a last, admiring glance at the slender figure on the couch the good woman bustled away, leaving Magda alone with her unknown host and burning with indignation at the cool way in which he had ordered her to remain where she was.

He had his back to her for the moment, having turned to poke up the fire, and Magda raised herself on her elbow, preparatory to getting off the couch. He swung round instantly.

“I told you to stay where you were,” he said peremptorily.

“I don’t always do as I’m told,” she retorted with spirit.

“You will in this instance, though,” he rejoined, crossing the room swiftly towards her.

But quick though he was, she was still quicker. Her eyes blazing defiance, she slipped from the couch and stood up before he could reach her side. She took a step forward.

“There!” she began defiantly. The next moment the whole room seemed to swim round her as she tottered weakly and would have fallen had he not caught her.

“What did I tell you?” he said sharply. “You’re not fit to stand.”

Without more ado he lifted her up in his arms and deposited her again on the couch.

“I—I only turned a little giddy,” she protested feebly.

“Precisely. Just as I thought you would. Another time, perhaps, you’ll obey orders.”

He stood looking down at her with curiously brilliant grey eyes. Magda almost winced under their penetrating glance. She felt as though they could see into her very soul, and she summoned up all her courage to combat the man’s strange force.

“I’m not used to obeying orders,” she said impatiently.

“No?”—with complete indifference. “Then it will be a salutary experience for you. Now, lie still until tea comes. I have a letter to write.”

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He walked away and, seating himself at a desk in the window, appeared to forget all about her, while his pen travelled swiftly over the sheet of notepaper he had drawn towards him.

Magda watched him with rebellious eyes. Gradually, however, the rebellion died out of them, replaced by a puzzled look of interest. There was something vaguely familiar about the man. Had she ever seen him before? Or was it merely one of those chance resemblances which one comes across occasionally? That fair hair with its crisp wave, the lean, square-jawed face, above all, the dark-grey eyes with their bright, penetrating glance—why did she feel as though every detail of the face were already known to her?

She failed to place the resemblance, however, and finally, with a little sigh of fatigue, she gave up the attempt. Her brain still felt muddled and confused from the blow she had received. Perhaps later she would be able to think things out more clearly.

Meanwhile she lay still, her eyes resting languidly on the face that so puzzled her. It was not precisely a handsome face, but there was a certain rugged fineness in its lines that lifted it altogether out of the ruck of the ordinary. It held its contradictions, too. Notwithstanding the powerful, determined jaw, the mouth had a sensitive upward curve at the corners which gave it an expression of singular sweetness, and beneath the eyes were little lines which qualified their dominating glance with a hint of whimsical humour.

The clock ticked on solemnly. Presently Mrs. Braithwaite bustled in with the tea and withdrew again. But the man remained absorbed in his writing, apparently oblivious of everything else.

Magda, who was rapidly recovering, eyed the teapot longingly. She was just wondering whether she dared venture to draw his attention to its arrival or whether he would snap her head off if she did, when he looked up suddenly with that swift, hawk-like glance of his.

“Ready for some tea?” he queried.

She nodded.

“Yes. Am I”—sarcastically—“allowed to get up now?”

He surveyed her consideringly.

“No, I think not,” he said at last. “But as the mountain can’t go to Mahomet, Mahomet shall come to the mountain.”

He crossed the room and, while Magda was still wondering what he proposed to do, he stooped and dexterously wheeled the couch with its light burden close up to the tea-table.

“Now, I’ll fix these cushions,” he said. And with deft hands he rearranged the cushions so that they should support her comfortably while she drank her tea.

“You would make a very good nurse, I should think,” commented Magda, somewhat mollified.

“Thanks,” was all he vouchsafed in answer.

He busied himself pouring out tea, then brought her cup and placed it beside her on a quaint little table of Chinese Chippendale.

“Mrs. Braithwaite—my housekeeper—is looking after your chauffeur in the kitchen,” he observed presently. “Possibly you may be interested to hear”—sarcastically—“that he wasn’t hurt in the smash-up.”

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Magda felt herself flushing a little under the implied rebuke—as much with annoyance as anything else. She knew that she was not really the heartless type of woman he inferred her to be, to whom the fate of her dependents was only of importance in so far as it affected her own personal comfort, and she resented the injustice of his assumption that she was.

She had been so bewildered and dazed by the suddenness of the accident and by the blow she herself had received that she had hardly yet collected her thoughts sufficiently to envisage the possible consequences to others.

With feminine perverseness she promptly decided that nothing would induce her to explain matters. If this detestably superior individual chose to think her utterly heartless and selfish—why, let him think so!

“And the car?” she asked in a tone of deliberate indifference. “That’s quite as important as the chauffeur.”

“More so, surely?”—with polite irony. “The car, I am sorry to say, will take a good deal of repairing. At present it’s still in the middle of the street with red lights fore and aft. It can’t be moved till the fog lifts.”

“What a nuisance! How on earth am I to get home?”

“There are such things as taxis”—suggestively. “Later, when it clears a bit, I’ll send out for one.”

“Thanks. I’m afraid I’m giving you a lot of trouble.”

He did not hastily disclaim the idea as most men would have done.

“That can’t be helped,” he returned bluntly.

Magda felt herself colouring again. This man was insufferable!

“Evidently the role of knight-errant is new to you,” she observed.

“Quite true. I’m not in the habit of rescuing damsels in distress. But how did you guess?”—with interest.

“Because you do it with such a very bad grace,” she flashed at him.

He smiled—and once more Magda was aware of the sense of familiarity even with that whimsical, crooked smile.

“I see,” he replied composedly. “Then you think I ought to have been overwhelmed with delight that your car cannoned into my bus—incidentally I barked my shins badly in the general mix-up—and that I had to haul you out and bring you round from a faint and so on?”

The question—without trimmings—was unanswerable. But to Magda, London’s spoiled child, conscious that there were men who would have given half their fortune for the chance to render a like service, and then counted themselves amply rewarded by the subsequent hour or two alone with her, the question was merely provocative.

“Some men would have been,” she returned calmly.

“Ah! Just because you are the Wielitzska, I suppose?”

She stared at him in blank astonishment.

“You knew—you knew who I was all the time?” she gasped.

“Certainly I knew.”

“Then—then——”

“Then why wasn’t I suitably impressed?” he suggested drily.

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She sprang to her feet.

“Oh! you are intolerable!” she exclaimed hotly. “You know I didn’t mean that!”

He regarded her quite placidly.

“You did. That is precisely what you were thinking. Only you funked putting it into plain words.”

He got up and came to her side and stood looking down at her.

“Isn’t it a fact?” he insisted. “Isn’t it?”

Magda looked up, tried to answer in the negative and failed. He had spoken the simple truth and she knew it. But none the less she hated him for it—hated him for driving her up into a corner and trying to force an acknowledgment from her. She remained obstinately silent.

He turned away with a short, amused laugh.

“So you haven’t even the courage of your convictions,” he commented.

Magda clenched her hands, driving the nails hard into the soft palms of them. He was an absolute boor, this man who had come to her rescue in the fog! He was taking a brutal advantage of their relative positions to speak to her as no man had ever dared to speak to her before. Or woman either! Even old Lady Arabella would hardly have thrust the naked truth so savagely under her eyes.

And now he had as good as told her that she was a coward! Well, at least he should not have the satisfaction of finding he was right in that respect. She walked straight up to him, her small head held high, in her dark eyes a smouldering fire of fierce resentment.

“So that is what you think, is it?” she said in a low voice of bitter anger. “Well, I *have* the courage of my convictions.” She paused. Then, with an effort: “Yes, I did think you weren’t ‘suitably impressed,’ as you put it. You are perfectly right.”

He threw her a swift glance of surprise. Presumably he hadn’t anticipated such a candid acknowledgment, but even so he showed no disposition to lay down the probe.

“You didn’t think it possible that anyone could meet the Wielitzska without regarding the event as a piece of stupendous good luck and being appropriately overjoyed, did you?” he pursued relentlessly.

Magda pressed her lips together. Then, with an effort:

“No,” she admitted.

“And so, just because I treated you as I would any other woman, and made no pretence of fatuous delight over your presence here, you supposed I must be ignorant of your identity? Was that it?”

Magda writhed under the cool, ironical questioning with its undercurrent of keen contempt. Each word stung like the flick of a lash on bare flesh. But she forced herself to answer—and to answer honestly.

“Yes,” she said very low. “That was it.”

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

“Comment is superfluous, I think.”

She made an impulsive step towards him.

For some unfathomable reason she minded—minded intensely—that this man should hold her in such poor esteem. She wanted to put herself right with him, to justify her attitude in his eyes.

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“Have you ever seen me dance?” she asked abruptly.

Surely if he had ever seen that wonderful artistry which she knew was hers, witnessed the half-crazy enthusiasm with which her audience received her, he would make allowance, judge her a little less harshly for what was, after all, a very natural assumption on the part of a stage favourite.

An expression of unwilling admiration came into his eyes.

“Have I seen you dance?” he repeated. “Yes, I have. Several times.”

He did not add—which would have been no more than the truth—that during her last winter’s season at the Imperial Theatre he had hardly missed a dozen performances.

“Then—then——” Magda spoke with a kind of incredulous appeal. “Can’t you understand—just a little?”

“Oh, I understand. I understand perfectly. You’ve been spoilt and idolised to such an extent that it seems incredible to you to find a man who doesn’t immediately fall down and worship you.”

Magda twisted her hands together. Once more he was thrusting at her with the rapier of truth. And it hurt—hurt inexplicably.

“Yes, I believe that’s—almost true,” she acknowledged falteringly. “But if you understand so well, couldn’t you—can’t you”—with a swift supplicating smile—“be a little more merciful?”

“No. I—I *hate* your type of woman!”

There was an undertone of passion in his voice. It was almost as though he were fighting against some impulse within himself and the fierceness of the struggle had wrung from him that quick, unvarnished protest.

“Then you despise dancers?”

“Despise? On the contrary, I revere a dancer—the dancer who is a genuine artist.” He paused, then went on speaking thoughtfully. “Dancing, to my mind, is one of the most consistent expressions of beauty. It’s the sheer symmetry and grace of that body which was made in God’s own likeness developed to the utmost limit of human perfection. . . . And the dancer who desecrates the temple of his body is punished proportionately. No art is a harder taskmistress than the art of dancing.”

Magda listened breathlessly. This man understood—oh, he understood! Then why did he “hate her type of woman”?

Almost as though he had read her thoughts he pursued:

“As a dancer, an artist—I acknowledge the Wielitzska to be supreme. But as a woman ——”

“Yes? As a woman? Go on. What do you know about me as a woman?”

He laughed disagreeably.

“I’d judge that in the making of you your soul got left out,” he said drily.

Magda forced a smile.

“I’m afraid I’m very stupid. Do you mind explaining?”

“Does it need explanation?”

“Oh—please!”

“Then—one of my best pals was a man who loved you.”

Magda threw him a glance of veiled mockery from beneath her long white lids.

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“Surely that should be a recommendation—something in my favour?”

His eyes hardened.

“If you had dealt honestly with him, it might have been. But you drew him on, *made* him care for you in spite of himself. And then, when he was yours, body and soul, you turned him down! Turned him down—pretended you were surprised—you’d never meant anything! All the old rotten excuses a woman offers when she has finished playing with a man and got bored with him. . . . I’ve no place for your kind of woman. I tell you”—his tone deepening in intensity—“the wife of any common labourer, who cooks and washes and sews for her man day in, day out, is worth a dozen of you! She knows that love’s worth having and worth working for. And she works. You don’t. Women like you take a man’s soul and play with it, and when you’ve defiled and defaced it out of all likeness to the soul God gave him, you hand it back to him and think you clear yourself by saying you ’didn’t mean it’!”

The bitter speech, harsh with the deeply rooted pain and resentment which had prompted it, battered through Magda’s weak defences and found her helpless and unarmed. Once she had uttered a faint cry of protest, tried to check him, but he had not heeded it. After that she had listened with bent head, her breath coming and going unevenly.

When he had finished, the face she lifted to him was white as milk and her mouth trembled.

“Thanks. Well, I’ve heard my character now,” she said unsteadily. “I—I didn’t know anyone thought of me—like that.”

He stared at her—at the drooping lines of her figure, the quivering lips, at the half-stunned expression of the dark eyes. And suddenly realisation of the enormity of all he had said seemed to come to him. But he did not appear to be at all overwhelmed by it.

“I’m afraid I’ve transgressed beyond forgiveness now,” he said curtly. “But—you rather asked for it, you know, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “I think I did—ask for it.” Suddenly she threw up her head and faced him. “If—if it’s any satisfaction to you to know it, I think you’ve paid off at least some of your friend’s score.” She looked at him with a curious, almost piteous surprise. “You—you’ve hurt me!” she whispered passionately. She turned to the door. “I’ll go now.”

“No!” He stopped her with a hand on her arm, and she obeyed his touch submissively. For a moment he stood looking down at her with an oddly conflicting expression on his

face. It was as though he were arguing out some point with himself. All at once he seemed to come to a decision.

“Look, you can’t go till the fog clears a bit. Suppose we call a truce? Sit down here”—-pulling forward a big easy-chair—“and for the rest of your visit let’s behave as though we didn’t heartily disapprove of one another.”

Magda sank into the chair with that supple grace of limb which made it sheer delight to watch her movements.

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“I never said I disapproved of you,” she remarked.

He seated himself opposite her, on the other side of the hearth, and regarded her quizzically.

“No. But you do, all the same. Naturally, you would after my candour! And I’d rather you did, too,” he added abruptly. “But at least you’ve no more devoted admirer of your art. You know, dancing appeals to me in a way that nothing else does. My job’s painting—”

“House-painting?” interpolated Magda with a smile. Her spirits were rising a little under his new kindliness of manner.

He laughed with sudden boyishness and nodded gaily.

“Why, yes—so long as people continue to cover their wall-space with portraits of themselves.”

Magda wondered whether he was possibly a well-known painter. But he gave her no chance to find out, for he continued speaking almost at once.

“I love my art—but a still, flat canvas, however beautifully painted, isn’t comparable with the moving, living interpretation of beauty possible to a dancer. I remember, years ago—ten years, quite—seeing a kiddy dancing in a wood.” Magda leaned forward. “It was the prettiest thing imaginable. She was all by herself, a little, thin, black-and-white wisp of a thing, with a small, tense face and eyes like black smudges. And she danced as though it were more natural to her than walking. I got her to pose for me at the foot of a tree. The picture of her was my first real success. So you see, I’ve good reason to be grateful to one dancer!”

Magda caught her breath. She knew now why the man’s face had seemed so familiar! He was the artist she had met in the wood at Coverdale the day Sieur Hugh had beaten her—her *"Saint Michel"*! She was conscious of a queer little thrill of excitement as the truth dawned upon her.

“What was the picture called?” she asked, forcing herself to speak composedly.

“‘The Repose of Titania.’”

She nodded. The picture was a very well-known one. Everybody knew by whom it had been painted.

“Then you must be Michael Quarrington?”

“Yes. So now, we’ve been introduced, haven’t we?”

It seemed almost as if he had repented of his former churlish manner, and were endeavouring to atone for it. He talked to her about his work a little, then slid easily into the allied topics of music and books. Finally he took her into an adjoining room, and showed her a small, beloved collection of coloured prints which he had gathered together, recounting various amusing little incidents which had attended the acquisition of this or that one among them with much gusto and a certain quaint humour that she was beginning to recognise as characteristic.

Magda, to whom the study of old prints was by no means an unknown territory, was thoroughly entertained. She found herself enthusing, discussing, arguing points, in a happy spirit of *camaraderie* with her host which, half an hour earlier, she would have believed impossible.

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The end came abruptly. Quarrington chanced to glance out of the window where the street lamps were now glimmering serenely through a clear dusk. The fog had lifted.

“Perhaps it’s just as well,” he said shortly. “I was beginning—” He checked himself and glanced at her with a sudden stormy light in his eyes.

“Beginning—what?” she asked a little breathlessly. The atmosphere had all at once grown tense with some unlooked-for stress of emotion.

“Shall I tell you?”

“Yes—tell me!”

“I was beginning to forget that you’re the ‘type of woman I hate,’” he said. And strode out of the room, leaving her startled and unaccountably shaken.

When he came back he had completely reassumed his former non-committal manner.

“There’s a taxi waiting for you,” he announced. “It’s perfectly clear outside now, so I think you will be spared any further adventures on your way home.”

He accompanied her into the hall, and as they shook hands she murmured a little diffidently:

“Perhaps we shall meet again some time?”

He drew back sharply.

“No, we shan’t meet again.” There was something purposeful, almost vehemently so, in the curtly spoken words. “If I had thought that——”

“Yes?” she prompted. “If you had?”

“If I’d thought that,” he said quietly, “I shouldn’t have dared to risk this last half-hour.”

A momentary silence fell between them. Then, with a shrug, he added lightly:

“But we shan’t meet again. I’m leaving England next week. That settles it.”

Without giving her time to make any rejoinder he opened the street-door and stood aside for her to pass out. A minute later she was in the taxi, and he was standing bare-headed on the pavement beside it.

“Good-bye,” she said. “Good-bye—*Saint Michel*.”

His hand closed round hers in a grip that almost crushed the slender fingers.

"*You*!" he cried hoarsely. There was a note of sudden, desperate recognition in his voice. "*You*!"

As Magda smiled into his startled eyes—the grey eyes that had burned their way into her memory ten years ago—the taxi slid away into the lamp-lit dusk.

CHAPTER III

FRIARS' HOLM

With a grinding of brakes the taxi slowed up and came to a standstill at Friars' Holm, the quaint old Queen Anne house which Magda had acquired in north London.

Once within the high wall enclosing the old-world garden in which it stood, it was easy enough to imagine oneself a hundred miles from town. Fir and cedar sentinelled the house, and in the centre of the garden there was a lawn of wonderful old turf, hedged round in summer by a riot of roses so that it gleamed like a great square emerald set in a jewelled frame.

Magda entered the house and, crossing the cheerfully lit hall, threw open the door of a room whence issued the sound of someone—obviously a first-rate musician—playing the piano.

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As she opened the door the twilight, shot by quivering spears of light from the fire's dancing flames, seemed to rush out at her, bearing with it the mournful, heart-shaking music of some Russian melody. Magda uttered a soft, half-amused exclamation of impatience and switched on the lights.

"All in the dark, Davilof?" she asked in a practical tone of voice calculated to disintegrate any possible fabric of romance woven of firelight and fifths.

The flood of electric light revealed a large, lofty room, devoid of furniture except for a few comfortable chairs grouped together at one end of it, and for a magnificent grand piano at the other. The room appeared doubly large by reason of the fact that the whole of one wall was taken up by four immense panels of looking-glass, cleverly fitted together so that in effect the entire wall was composed of a single enormous mirror. It was in front of this mirror that Magda practised. The remaining three walls were hung with priceless old tapestry woven of sombre green and greys.

As she entered the room a man rose quickly from the piano and came forward to meet her. There was a kind of repressed eagerness in the action, as though he had been waiting with impatience for her coming.

He was a striking-looking man, tall, and built with the slender-limbed grace of a foreigner. Golden-brown hair, worn rather longer than fashion dictates, waved crisply over his head, and the moustache and small Vandyck beard which partially concealed the lower part of his face were of the same warmly golden colour.

The word "musician" was written all over him—in the supple, capable hands, in the careless stoop of his loosely knit shoulders, and, more than all, in the imaginative hazel eyes with their curious mixture of abstraction and fire. They rather suggested lightning playing over some dreaming pool.

Magda shook hands with him carelessly.

"We shall have to postpone the practice as I'm so late, Davilof," she said. "I had a smash-up in the fog. My car ran into a bus—"

"And you are hurt?" Davilof broke in sharply, his voice edged with fear.

"No, no. I was stunned for a minute and then afterwards I fainted, but I'm quite intact otherwise."

"You are sure—sure?"

"Quite." Hearing the keen anxiety in his tone she smiled at him reassuringly and held out a friendly hand. "I'm all right—really, Antoine."

He took the hand in both his.

“Thank God!” he said fervently.

Antoine Davilof had lived so long in England that he spoke without trace of accent, though he sometimes gave an unEnglish twist to the phrasing of a sentence, but his quick emotion and the simplicity with which he made no effort to conceal it stamped him unmistakably as a foreigner.

A little touched, Magda allowed her hand to remain in his.

“Why, Davilof!” She chided him laughingly. “You’re quite absurdly upset about it.”

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“I could not have borne it if you had been hurt,” he declared vehemently. “You ought not to go about by yourself. It’s horrible to think of *you*—in a street accident—alone!”

“But I wasn’t alone. A man who was in the other half of the accident—the motor-bus half—played the good Samaritan and carried me into his house, which happened to be close by. He looked after me very well, I assure you.”

Davilof released her hand abruptly. His face darkened.

“And this man? Who was he?” he demanded jealously. “I hate to think of any man—a stranger—touching you.”

“Nonsense! Would you have preferred me to remain lying in the middle of the road?”

“You know I would not. But I’d rather some woman had looked after you. Do you know who the man was?”

“I did not—at first.”

“But you do now. Who was it?”

“No one you know, I think,” she answered provokingly. His eyes flashed.

“Why are you making a mystery about it?” he asked suspiciously. “You’re keeping something from me! Who was this man? Tell me his name.”

Magda froze.

“My dear Antoine! Why this air of high tragedy?” she said lightly. “And what on earth has it to do with you who the man was?”

“You know what it has to do with me——”

“With my accompanist?”—raising her brows delicately.

“No!”—with sudden violence—“With the man who loves you! I’m that—and you know it, Magda! Could I play for you as I do if I did not understand your every mood and emotion? You know I couldn’t! And then you ask what it matters to me when some unknown man has held you in his arms, carried you into his house—kissed you, perhaps, while you were unconscious!”—his imagination running suddenly riot.

“Stop! You’re going too far!” Magda checked him sharply. “You’re always telling me you love me. I don’t want to hear it.” She paused, then added cruelly: “I want you for playing my accompaniments, Davilof. That’s all. Do you understand?”

His eyes blazed. With a quick movement he stepped in front of her.

“I’m a man—as well as an accompanist,” he said hoarsely. “One day you’ll have to reckon with the man, Magda!”

There was a new, unaccustomed quality in his voice. Hitherto she had not taken his ardour very seriously. He was a Pole and a musician, with all the temperament that might be expected from such a combination, and she had let it go at that, pushing his love aside with the careless hand of a woman to whom the incense of men’s devotion has been so freely offered as to have become commonplace. But now the new ring of determination, of something unexpectedly dogged in his voice, poignantly recalled the warning uttered by Lady Arabella earlier in the day.

Magda’s nerve wavered. A momentary panic assailed her. Then she intuitively struck the right note.

“Ah, Davilof, don’t worry me now—not to-night!” she said appealingly. “I’m tired. It’s been a bit of a strain—the accident and—and——”

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“Forgive me!” In a moment he was all penitence—overwhelmed with compunction. “Forget it! I’ve behaved like a brute. I ought to have seen that you were worn out.”

He was beside himself with remorse.

“It’s all right, Antoine.” She smiled forgiveness at him. “Only I felt—I felt I couldn’t stand any more to-night. I suppose it’s taken it out of me more than I knew—the shock, and fainting like that.”

“Of course it has. You ought to rest. I wish Mrs. Grey were in.”

“Is she not?”

“No. The maid told me she was out when I came, and she hasn’t returned yet.”

“She’s been held up by the fog, I expect,” answered Magda. “Never mind. I’ll sit here—in this big chair—and you shall switch off these glaring lights and play to me, Antoine. That will rest me better than anything.”

She was a little sorry for the man—trying to make up to him for the pain she knew she had inflicted a moment before, and there was a dangerous sweetness in her voice.

Davilof’s eyes kindled. He stooped swiftly and kissed her hand.

“You are too good to me!” he said huskily.

Then, while she lay back restfully in a chair which he heaped with cushions for her, he played to her, improvising as he played—slow, dreaming melodies that soothed and lulled but held always an undertone of passionate appeal. The man himself spoke in his music; his love pleaded with her in its soft, beseeching cadences.

But Magda failed to hear it. Her thoughts were elsewhere—back with the man who, that afternoon, had first rescued her and afterwards treated her with blunt candour that had been little less than brutal. She felt sore and resentful—smarting under the same dismayed sense of surprise and injustice as a child may feel who receives a blow instead of an anticipated caress.

Indulged and flattered by everyone with whom she came in contact, it had been like a slap in the face to find someone—more particularly someone of the masculine persuasion—who, far from bestowing the admiration and homage she had learned to look for as a right, quite openly regarded her with contemptuous disapproval—and made no bones about telling her so.

His indictment of her had left nothing to the imagination. She felt stunned, and, for the first time in her life, a little unwilling doubt of herself assaulted her. Was she really

anything at all like the woman Michael Quarrington had pictured? A woman without heart or conscience—the “kind of woman he had no place for”?

She winced a little at the thought. It was strange how much she minded his opinion—-the opinion of a man whom she had only met by chance and whom she was very unlikely ever to meet again. He himself had certainly evinced no anxiety to renew the acquaintance. And this, too, fretted her in some unaccountable way.

She could not analyse her own emotions. She felt hurt and angry and ashamed in the same breath—and all because an unknown man, an absolute stranger, had told her in no measured terms exactly what he thought of her!

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Only—he was not really quite a stranger! He was the “Saint Michel” of her childhood days, the man with whom she had unconsciously compared those other men whom the passing years had brought into her life—and always to their disadvantage.

The first time she had seen him in the woods at Coverdale was the day when Hugh Vallincourt had beaten her; she had been smarting with the physical pain and humiliation of it. And now, this second time they had met, she had been once more forced to endure that strange and unaccustomed experience called pain. Only this time she felt as though her soul had been beaten, and it was Saint Michel himself who had scourged her.

The door at the far end of the room opened suddenly and a welcome voice broke cheerfully across the bitter current of her thoughts.

“Well, here I am at last! Has Magda arrived home yet?”

Davilof ceased playing abruptly and the speaker paused on the threshold of the room, peering into the dusk. Magda rose from her seat by the fire and switched on one of the electric burners.

“Yes, here I am,” she said. “Did you get held up by the fog, Gillian?”

The newcomer advanced into the circle of light. She was a small, slight woman, though the furs she was wearing served to conceal the slenderness of her figure. Someone had once said of her that “Mrs. Grey was a charming study in sepia.” The description was not inapt. Eyes and hair were brown as a beechnut, and a scattering of golden-brown freckles emphasised the warm tints of a skin as soft as velvet.

“Did I get held up?” she repeated. “My dear, I walked miles—miles, I tell you!—in that hideous fog. And then found I’d been walking entirely in the wrong direction! I fetched up somewhere down Notting Hill Gate way, and at last by the help of heaven and a policeman discovered the Tube station. So here I am. But if I could have come across a taxi I’d have been ready to *buy* it, I was so tired!”

“Poor dear!” Magda was duly sympathetic. “We’ll have some tea. You’ll stay, Davilof?”

“I think not, thanks. I’m dining out”—with a glance at his watch. “And I shan’t have too much time to get home and change as it is.”

Magda held out her hand.

“Good-bye, then. Thank you for keeping me company till Gillian came.”

There was a sudden sweetness of gratitude in the glance she threw at him which fired his blood. He caught her hand and carried it to his lips.

“The thanks are mine,” he said in a stifled voice. And swinging round on his heel he left the room abruptly, quite omitting to make his farewells to Mrs. Grey.

The latter looked across at Magda with a gleam of mirth in her brown eyes. Then she shook her head reprovingly.

“Will you never learn wisdom, Magda?” she asked, subsiding into a chair and extending a pair of neatly shod feet to the fire’s warmth.

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Magda laughed a little.

“Well, it won’t be the fault of my friends if I don’t!” she returned ruefully. “Marraine expended a heap of eloquence over my misdeeds this afternoon.”

“Lady Arabella? I’m glad to hear it. Though she has about as much chance of producing any permanent result as the gentleman who occupied his leisure time in rolling a stone uphill.”

“Cat!” Magda made a small grimace at her. “Ah, here’s some tea!” Melrose, known among Magda’s friends as “the perfect butler,” had come noiselessly into the room and was arranging the tea paraphernalia with the reverential precision of one making preparation for some mystic rite. “Perhaps when you’ve had a cup you’ll feel more amiable—that is, if I give you lots of sugar.”

“What was the text of Lady Arabella’s homily?” inquired Gillian presently, as she sipped her tea.

“Oh, that boy, Kit Raynham,” replied Magda impatiently. “It appears I’m blighting his young prospects—his professional ones, I mean. Though I don’t quite see why an attack of calf-love for me should wreck his work as an architect!”

“I do—if he spends his time sketching ‘the Wielitzska’ in half a dozen different poses instead of making plans for a garden city.”

Magda smiled involuntarily.

“Does he do that?” she said. “But how ridiculous of him!”

“It’s merely indicative of his state of mind,” returned Gillian. She gazed meditatively into the fire. “You know, Magda, I think it will mean the end of our friendship when Coppertop reaches years of discretion.”

Coppertop was Gillian’s small son, a young person of seven, who owed his cognomen to the crop of flaming red curls which adorned his round button of a head.

Magda laughed.

“Pouf! By the time that happens I shall be quite old—and harmless.”

Gillian shook her head.

“Your type is never harmless, my dear. Unless you fall in love, you’ll be an unexploded mine till the day of your death.”

“That nearly occurred to-day, by the way,” vouchsafed Magda tranquilly. “In which case,”—smiling—“you’d have been spared any further anxiety on Coppertop’s account.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Gillian, startled.

“I mean that I’ve had an adventure this afternoon. We got smashed up in the fog.”

“Oh, my dear! How dreadful! How did it happen?”

“Something collided with the car and shot us bang into a motor-bus, and then, almost at the same moment, something else charged into us from behind. So there was a pretty fair mix-up.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before! Was anyone badly hurt? And how did you get home?” Gillian’s questions poured out excitedly.

“No, no one was badly hurt. I got a blow on the head, and fainted. So a man who’d been inside the bus we ran into performed the rescuing stunt. His house was close by, and he carried me in there and proceeded to dose me with sal volatile first and tea afterwards. He wound up by presenting me with an unvarnished summary of his opinion of the likes of me.”

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There was an unwontedly hard note in Magda's voice as she detailed the afternoon's events, and Gillian glanced at her sharply.

"I don't understand. Was he a strait-laced prig who disapproved of dancing, do you mean?"

"Nothing of the sort. He had a most comprehensive appreciation of the art of dancing. His disapproval was entirely concentrated on me—personally."

"But how could it be—since he didn't know you?"

Magda gave a little grin.

"You mean it would have been quite comprehensible if he *had* known me?" she observed ironically.

The other laughed.

"Don't be so provoking! You know perfectly well what I meant! You deserve that I should answer 'yes' to that question."

"Do, if you like."

"I would—only I happen to know you a good deal better than you know yourself."

"What do you know about me, then, that I don't?"

Gillian's nice brown eyes smiled across at her.

"I know that, somewhere inside you, you've got the capacity for being as sweet and kind and tender and self-sacrificing as any woman living—if only something would happen to make it worth while. I wish—I wish to heaven you'd fall in love!"

"I'm not likely to. I'm in love with my art. It gives you a better return than love for any man."

"No," answered Gillian quietly. "No. You're wrong. Tony died when we'd only been married a year. But that year was worth the whole rest of life put together. And—I've got Coppertop."

Magda leaned forward suddenly and kissed her.

"Dear Gillyflower!" she said. "I'm so glad you feel like that—bless you! I wish I could. But I never shall. I was soured in the making, I think"—laughing rather forlornly. "I don't trust love. It's the thing that hurts and tortures and breaks a woman—as my mother

was hurt and tortured and broken." She paused. "No, preserve me from falling in love!" she added more lightly. "'A Loaf of Bread, and Thou beside me in the Wilderness' doesn't appeal to me in the least."

"It will one day," retorted Gillian oracularly. "In the meantime you might go on telling me about the man who fished you out of the smash. Was he young? And good-looking? Perhaps he is destined to be your fate."

"He was rather over thirty, I should think. And good-looking—quite. But he 'hates my type of woman,' you'll be interested to know. So that you can put your high hopes back on the top shelf again."

"Not at all," declared Gillian briskly. "There's nothing like beginning with a little aversion."

Magda smiled reminiscently.

"If you'd been present at our interview, you'd realise that 'a little aversion' is a cloying euphemism for the feeling exhibited by my late preserver."

"What was he like, then?"

"At first, because I wouldn't take the sal volatile—you know how I detest the stuff!—and sit still where he'd put me like a good little girl, he ordered me about as though I were a child of six. He absolutely bullied me! Then it apparently occurred to him to take my moral welfare in hand, and I should judge he considered that Jezebel and Delilah were positively provincial in their methods as compared with me."

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“Nonsense! If he didn’t know you, why should he suppose himself competent to form any opinion about you at all—good, bad, or indifferent?”

“I don’t know,” replied Magda slowly. Then, speaking with sudden defiance: “Yes, I do know! A pal of his had—had cared about me some time or other, and I’d turned him down. That’s why.”

“Oh, Magda!” There was both reproach and understanding in Gillian’s voice.

Magda shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, if he wanted to pay off old scores on his pal’s behalf, he succeeded,” she said mirthlessly.

Gillian looked at her in surprise. She had never seen Magda quite like this before; her sombre eyes held a curious strained look like those of some wild thing of the forest caught in a trap and in pain.

“And you don’t know who he was—I mean the man who came to your help and then lectured you?”

“Yes, I do. It was Michael Quarrington, the artist.”

“Michael Quarrington? Why, he has the reputation of being a most charming man!”

Magda stared into the fire.

“I dare say he might have a great deal of charm if he cared to exert it. Apparently, however, he didn’t think I was worth the effort.”

CHAPTER IV

IN THE MIRROR ROOM

Shouts of mirth came jubilantly from the Mirror Room as Davilof made his way thither one afternoon a few days later. The shrill peal of a child’s laughter rose gaily above the lower note of women’s voices, and when the accompanist opened the door it was to discover Magda completely engrossed in giving Coppertop a first dancing lesson, while Gillian sat stitching busily away at some small nether garments afflicted with rents and tears in sundry places. Every now and again she glanced up with softly amused eyes to watch her son’s somewhat unsteady efforts in the Terpsichorean art.

Coppertop, a slim young reed in his bright green knitted jersey, was clinging with one hand to a wooden bar attached to the wall which served Magda for the “bar practice”

which constitutes part of every dancer's daily work, while Magda, holding his other hand in hers, essayed to instruct him in the principle of "turning out"—that flexible turning of the knees towards the side which gives so much facility of movement.

"Point your toes sideways—so," directed Magda. "This one towards me—like that." She stooped and placed his foot in position. "Now, kick out! Try to kick me!"

Coppertop tried—and succeeded, greeting his accomplishment with shrieks of delight.

It was just at this moment that Davilof appeared on the scene, pausing abruptly in the doorway as he caught sight of Magda's laughing face bent above the fiery red head. There was something very charming in her expression of eager, light-hearted abandonment to the fun of the moment.

At the sound of the opening door Coppertop wriggled out of her grasp like an eel, twisting his lithe young body round to see who the new arrival might be. His face fell woefully as he caught sight of Davilof.

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“Oh, you can’t *never* have come already to play for the Fairy Lady!” he exclaimed in accents of dire disappointment.

“Fairy Lady” was the name he had bestowed upon Magda when, very early in their acquaintance, she had performed for his sole and particular benefit a maturer edition of the dance she had evolved as a child—the dance with which she had so much astonished Lady Arabella. Nowadays it figured prominently on her programmes as “The Hamadryad,” and was enormously popular.

“It’s not never three o’clock!” wailed Coppertop disconsolately, as Davilof dangled his watch in front of him.

“I think it is, small son,” interpolated Gillian, gathering together her sewing materials. “Come along. We must leave the Fairy Lady to practise now, because she’s got to dance to half the people in London to-morrow.”

“Must I really go?” appealed Coppertop, beseeching Magda with a pair of melting green eyes.

She dropped a light kiss on the top of his red curls.

“’Fraid so, Coppertop,” she said. “You wouldn’t want Fairy Lady to dance badly and tumble down, would you?”

But Coppertop was not to be taken in so easily.

“Huh!” he scoffed. “You *couldn’t* tumble down—not never!”

“Still, you mustn’t be greedy, Topkins,” urged Magda persuasively. “Remember all the grown-up people who want me to dance to them! I can’t keep it all for one little boy.” He stared at her for a moment in silence. Suddenly he flung his arms round her slender hips, clutching her tightly, and hid his face against her skirt.

“Oh, Fairy Lady, you are so booful—*so booful*!” he whispered in a smothered voice. Then, with a big sigh: “But one little boy won’t be greedy.” He turned to his mother. “Come along, mummie!” he commanded superbly. And trotted out of the room beside her with his small head well up.

Left alone, Davilof and Magda smiled across at one another.

“Funny little person, isn’t he?” she said.

The musician nodded.

“Grown-ups might possibly envy the freedom of speech permitted to childhood,” he said quietly. Then, still more quietly: “’Fairy Lady, you are so beautiful!’”

“But you’re not a child, so don’t poach Coppertop’s preserves!” retorted Magda swiftly. “Let’s get to work, Antoine. I’ll just change into my practice-kit and then I want to run through the ‘Swan-Maiden’s’ dance. You fix the lighting.”

She vanished into an adjoining room, while Davilof proceeded to switch off most of the burners, leaving only those which illumined the space in front of the great mirror. The remainder of the big room receded into a grey twilight encircling the patch of luminance.

Presently Magda reappeared wearing a loose tunic of some white silken material, girdled at the waist, but yet leaving her with perfect freedom of limb.

Davilof watched her as she came down the long room with the feather-light, floating walk of the trained dancer, and something leaped into his eyes that was very different from mere admiration—something that, taken in conjunction with Lady Arabella’s caustic comments of a few days ago, might have warned Magda had she seen it.

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But with her thoughts preoccupied by the work in hand she failed to notice it, and, advancing till she faced the great mirror, she executed a few steps in front of it, humming the motif of *The Swan-Maiden* music under her breath.

“Play, Antoine,” she threw at him over her shoulder.

Davilof hesitated, made a movement towards her, then wheeled round abruptly and went to the piano. A moment later the exquisite, smoothly rippling music which he had himself written for the Swan-Maiden dance purled out into the room.

The story of the Swan-Maiden had been taken from an old legend which told of a beautiful maiden and the youth who loved her.

According to the narrative, the pair were unfortunate enough to incur the displeasure of the evil fairy Ritmagar, and the latter, in order to punish them, transformed the maiden into a white swan, thus separating the hapless lovers for ever. Afterwards, the disconsolate youth, bemoaning the cruelty of fate, used to wander daily along the shores of the lake where the maiden was compelled to dwell in her guise of a swan, and eventually Ritmagar, apparently touched to a limited compassion, permitted the Swan-Maiden to resume her human form once a day during the hour immediately preceding sunset. But the condition was attached that she must always return to the lake ere the sun sank below the horizon, when she would be compelled to reassume her shape of a swan. Should she fail to return by the appointed time, death would be the inevitable consequence.

Every reader of fairy tales—and certainly anyone who knows anything at all about being in love—can guess the sequel. Comes a day when the lovers, absorbed in their love-making, forget the flight of time, so that the unhappy maiden returns to the shore of the lake to find that the sun has already dipped below the horizon. She falls on her knees, beseeching the witch Ritmagar for mercy, but no answer is vouchsafed, and gradually the Swan-Maiden finds herself growing weaker and weaker, until at last death claims her.

A dance, based upon this legend, had been devised for Magda in conjunction with Vladimir Ravinski, the brilliant Russian dancer, he taking the lover’s part, and the whole tragic little drama was designed to terminate with a solo dance by Magda as the dying Swan-Maiden. Davilof had written the music for it, and the dance was to be performed at the Imperial Theatre for the first time the following week.

Davilof played ever more and more softly as the dance drew to its close. The note of lament sounded with increasing insistence through the slowing ripple of the accompaniment, and at last, as Magda sank to the ground in a piteous attitude that somehow suggested both the drooping grace of a dying swan and the innocence and helplessness of the hapless maiden, the music died away into silence.

There was a little pause. Then Davilof sprang to this feet.

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“By God, Magda! You’re magnificent!” he exclaimed with the spontaneous appreciation of one genuine artist for another.

Magda raised her head and looked up at him with vague, startled eyes. She still preserved the pose on which the dance had ceased, and had hardly yet returned to the world of reality from that magic world into which her art had transported her.

The burning enthusiasm in Davilof’s excited tones recalled her abruptly.

“Was it good—was it really good?” she asked a little shakily.

“Good?” he said. “It was superb!”

He held out his hands and she laid hers in them without thinking, allowing him to draw her to her feet beside him.

She stood quite still, breathing rather quickly from her recent exertions and supported by the close clasp of his hands on hers. Her lips were a little parted, her slight breast rose and fell unevenly, and a faint rose-colour glowed beneath the ivory pallor of her skin.

Suddenly Davilof’s grip tightened.

“You beautiful thing!” he exclaimed huskily. “Magda——”

The next moment, with a swift, ungoverned movement, he caught her to him and was crushing her in his arms.

“Antoine! . . . Let me go!”

But the pressure of her soft, pulsing body against his own sent the blood racing through his veins. He smothered the words with his mouth on hers, kissing her breathless with a headlong passion that defied restraint—slaking his longing for her as a man denied water may at last slake his thirst at some suddenly discovered pool.

Magda felt herself powerless as a leaf caught up in a whirlwind—swept suddenly into the hot vehemence of a man’s desire while she was yet unstrung and quivering from the emotional strain of the Swan-Maiden’s dance, every nerve of her quickened to a tingling sentience by the underlying passion of the music.

With an effort she wrenched herself out of his arms and ran from him blindly into the furthest corner of the room. She had no clear idea of making for the door, but only of getting away—anywhere—heedless of direction. An instant later she was standing with her back to the wall, leaning helplessly against the ancient tapestry that clothed it. In

that dim corner of the vast room her slim figure showed faintly limned against its blurred greens and greys like that of some pallid statue.

“Go . . . go away!” she gasped.

Davilof laughed triumphantly. Nothing could hold him now. The barriers of use and habit were down irrevocably.

“Go away?” he said. “No, I’m not going away.”

He strode straight across the space that intervened between them. She watched his coming with dilated eyes. Her hands, palms downwards, were pressed hard against the woven surface of the tapestry on either side of her.

As he approached she shrank back, her whole body taut and straining against the wall. Then she bent her head and flung up her arms, curving them to shield her face. Davilof could just see the rounded whiteness of them, glimmering like pale pearl next the satin sheen of night-black hair.

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With a stifled cry he sprang forward and gripped them in his strong, supple hands, drawing them down inexorably.

“Kiss me!” he demanded fiercely. “Magda, kiss me!”

She shook her head, struggling for speech.

“No!” she gasped. “No!”

She glanced desperately round, but he had her hemmed in, prisoned against the wall.

“Kiss me!” he repeated unsteadily. “You—you’d better, Magda.”

“And if I don’t?” she forced the words through her stiff lips.

“But you will!” he said hoarsely. “You will!”

There was a dangerous note in his voice. The man had got beyond the stage to be played with. In the silence of the room Magda could hear his laboured breathing, feel his heart leaping against her own soft breast crushed against his. It frightened her.

“You’ll let me go if I do?” The words seemed to run into each other in her helpless haste.

“I’ll let you go.”

“Very well.”

Slowly, reluctantly she lifted her face to his and kissed him. But the touch of her lips on his scattered the last vestige of his self-control.

“My beloved . . . Beloved!”

He seized her roughly in his arms. She felt his kisses overwhelming her, burning against her closed eyelids, bruising her soft mouth and throat.

“I love you . . . worship you——”

“Let me go!” she cried shrilly, struggling against him. “Let me go—you promised it!”

He released her, drawing slowly back, his arms falling unwillingly away from her.

“Oh, yes,” he muttered confusedly. “I did promise.”

The instant she felt his grip relax, Magda sprang forward and switched on the centre burners, flooding the room with a blaze of light, and in the sudden glare she and Davilof stood staring silently at each other.

With the springing up of the lights it was as though a spell had broken. The strained, hunted expression left Magda's face. She wasn't frightened any longer. Davilof was no more the man whose sudden passion had surged about her, threatening to break down all defences and overwhelm her. He was just Davilof, her accompanist, who, like half the men of her acquaintance, was more or less in love with her and who had overstepped the boundary which she had very definitely marked out between herself and him.

She regarded him stormily.

"Have you gone mad?" she asked contemptuously.

He returned her look, his eyes curiously brilliant. Then he laughed suddenly.

"Mad?" he said. "Yes, I think I *am* mad. Mad with love for you! Magda"—he came and stood close beside her—"don't send me away! Don't say you can't care for me! You don't love me now—but I could teach you." His voice deepened. "I love you so much. Oh, sweetest!—*Soul* of me! Love is so beautiful. Let me teach you how beautiful it is!"

Magda drew back.

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“No,” she said. The brief negative fell clear and distinct as a bell.

“I won’t take no,” he returned hotly. “I won’t take no. I want you. Good God! Don’t you understand? My love for you isn’t just a boy’s infatuation that you can dismiss with a word. It’s all of me. I worship you! Haven’t I been with you day after day, worked with you, followed your every mood—shared your very soul with you? You’re mine! Mine, because I understand you. You’ve shown me all you thought, all you felt. You couldn’t have done that if I hadn’t meant something to you.”

“Certainly you meant something to me. You meant an almost perfect accompanist. Why should you have imagined you meant more? I gave you no reason to think so.”

“*No reason*?”

It was as though the two short words were the key which unlocked the floodgates of some raging torrent. Magda could never afterwards recall the words he used. She only knew they beat upon her with the cruel, lancinating sharpness of hail driven by the wind.

She had treated him much as other men, evoking the love of his ardent temperament by that subtle witchery which was second nature to her and which can be such a potent weapon in the hands of a woman whose own emotions remain untouched. And now the thwarted passion of the lover and the savage anger of a man who felt himself deceived and duped broke over her in a resistless storm—an outburst so bitter and so trenchant that for the moment she remained speechless before it, buffeted into helpless, resentful silence. When he ceased, he had stripped her of every rag of feminine defence.

“Have you finished?” she asked in a stifled voice.

She made no attempt to palliate matters or to refute anything he had said. In his present frame of mind it would have been useless pointing out to him that she had treated him no differently from other men. He was a Pole, and he had caught fire where others would merely have glowed smoulderingly.

“Yes,” he rejoined sullenly. “I’ve finished.”

“So much the better.”

He regarded her speculatively.

“What are you made of, I wonder? Does it mean nothing to you that a man has given you his very best—all that he has?”

She appeared to reflect a moment.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t. There’s only one thing really means much to me—and that is my art. And Lady Arabella,” she added after a pause. “She’ll always mean a good deal.”

She sat down by the fire and held out her hands to its warmth. The slender fingers seemed almost transparent, glowing rosily in the firelight. Davilof turned to go.

“Good-bye, then,” he said curtly.

“Good-bye.” Magda nodded indifferently. Then, carelessly: “I shall want you to-morrow, Davilof—same time.”

He swung round.

“I will never play for you again. Did you imagine I should?”

She smiled at him—that slow, subtle smile of hers with its hint of mockery.

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“You won’t be able to keep away,” she replied.

“I will never play for you again,” he repeated. “Never! I will teach myself to hate you.”

She shook her head lightly.

“Impossible, Davilof.”

“It’s not impossible. There’s very little difference between love and hate—sometimes. And I want all or nothing.”

“I’m afraid it must be nothing, then.”

“We shall see. But if I can’t have you, *I* swear no other man shall!”

She glanced up at him, lifting her brows a little.

“Aren’t you going too far, Antoine? You can hate me, if you like, or love me—it’s a matter of indifference to me which you do. But I don’t propose to allow you to arrange my life for me. And in any case”—after a moment—“I’m not likely to fall in love—with you or anyone else.”

“You think not?” He stood looking down at her sombrely. “You’ll fall in love right enough some day. And when you do it will be all or nothing with you, too. You’re that kind. Love will take you—and break you, Magda.”

He spoke slowly, with an odd kind of tensity. To Magda it seemed almost as if his quiet speech held the gravity of prophecy, and she shivered a little.

“And when that time comes, then you’ll come back to me,” he added.

Magda threw up her head, defying him.

“You propose to be waiting round to pick up the pieces, then?” she suggested nonchalantly.

But only the sound of the closing door answered her. Davilof had gone.

CHAPTER V

THE SWAN-MAIDEN

Lady Arabella was in her element. She had two brilliant and unattached young men dining with her—one, Michael Quarrington, a lion in the artistic world, and the other,

Antoine Davilof, who showed unmistakable symptoms of developing sooner or later into a lion in the musical world.

It was Davilof who was responsible for the artist's presence at Lady Arabella's dinner table. She had expressed—in her usual autocratic manner—a wish that he should be presented to her, and had determined upon the evening of the first performance of *The Swan-Maiden* as the appointed time.

Davilof appeared doubtful, and declared that Quarrington was leaving England and had already fixed the date of his departure.

"He's crossing from Dover the very day before the one you want him to dine with you," he told her.

But Lady Arabella swept his objections aside with regal indifference.

"Crossing, is he?" she snapped. "Well, tell him I want him to dine here and go to the show with us afterwards. He'll cross the day *after*, you'll find—if he crosses at all!" she wound up enigmatically.

So it came about that her two lions, the last-arrived artist and the soon-to-arrive musician, were both dining with her on the appointed evening.

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Lady Arabella adored lions. Also, notwithstanding her seventy years, she retained as much original Eve in her composition as a girl of seventeen, and she adored young men.

In particular, she decided that she approved of Michael Quarrington. She liked the clean English build of him. She liked his lean, square jaw and the fair hair with the unruly kink in it which reminded her of a certain other young man—who had been young when she was young—and to whom she had bade farewell at her parents' inflexible decree more than fifty years ago. Above all, she liked the artist's eyes—those grey, steady eyes with their look of reticence so characteristic of the man himself.

Reticence was an asset in her ladyship's estimation. It showed good sense—and it offered provocative opportunities for a battle of wits such as her soul loved.

"Have you seen my god-daughter dance, Mr. Quarrington?" she asked him.

"Yes, several times."

His tone was non-committal and she eyed him sharply.

"Don't admire dancing, do you?" she threw at him.

Quarrington regarded her with a humorous twinkle.

"And I an artist? How can you ask, Lady Arabella?"

"Well, you sounded supremely detached," she grumbled.

"I think Mademoiselle Wielitzska's dancing the loveliest thing I have ever seen," he returned simply.

The old woman vouchsafed him a smile.

"Thank you," she answered. "I enjoyed that quite as much as I used to enjoy being told I'd a pretty dimple when I was a girl."

"You have now," rejoined Quarrington audaciously.

Lady Arabella's eyes sparkled. She loved a neatly turned compliment.

"Thank you again. But it's a pity to waste your pretty speeches on an old woman of seventy."

"I don't," retorted the artist gravely. "I reserve them for the young people I know of that age."

She laughed delightedly. Then, turning to Davilof, she drew him into the conversation and the talk became general.

Later, as they were all three standing in the hall preparatory to departure, she flashed another of her sudden remarks at Quarrington.

“I understand you came to my god-daughter’s rescue in that bad fog last week?”

The quiet grey eyes revealed nothing.

“I was privileged to be some little use,” he replied lightly.

“I hardly gathered you regarded it as a privilege,” observed her ladyship drily.

The shaft went home. A fleeting light gleamed for a moment in the grey eyes. Davilof was standing a few paces away, being helped into his coat by a man-servant, and Quarrington spoke low and quickly.

“She told you?” he said. There was astonishment—resentment, almost—in his voice.

“No, no.” Lady Arabella, smiling to herself, reassured him hastily. “It was a shot in the dark on my part. Magda never confides details. She hands you out an unadorned slice of fact and leaves you to interpret it as you choose. But if you know her rather well—as I do—and can add two and two together and make five or any unlikely number of them, why, then you can fill in some of the blanks for yourself.”

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She glanced at him with impish amusement as she moved towards the door.

“Come along, Davilof,” she said. “I suppose you want to hear your own music—even if Magda’s dancing no longer interests you?”

Davilof gave her his arm down the steps.

“What do you mean, miladi?” he asked. “There is no more beautiful dancing in the world.”

“Then why have you jacked up your job of accompanist? Shoes beginning to pinch a little, eh?”—shrewdly.

“You mean I grow too big for my boots? No, madame. If I were the greatest musician in Europe, instead of being merely Antoine Davilof, it could only be a source of pride to be asked to accompany the Wielitzska.”

Lady Arabella paused on the pavement, her foot on the step of the limousine.

“Then how is it that Mrs. Grey accompanies her now? She was playing for her at the Duchess of Lichbrooke’s the other evening.

“Magda didn’t tell you, then?”

“No, she didn’t; or I’d not be wasting my breath in asking you. I asked her, and she said you had taken to playing wrong notes.”

A faint smile curved the lips above the small golden beard.

“Then it must be true. Undoubtedly I played wrong notes, miladi.”

“Very careless of you, I’m sure.” Under the garish light of a neighbouring street-lamp her keen old eyes met his significantly. “Or—very imprudent, Davilof. You need the tact of the whole Diplomatic Service to deal with Magda. And you ought to know it.”

“True, miladi. But I was not designed for diplomacy, and a man can only use the weapons heaven has given him.”

“I wouldn’t have suggested heaven as invariably the source of your inspirations,” retorted Lady Arabella. And hopped into the car.

They arrived at the Imperial Theatre to find Mrs. Grey already seated in Lady Arabella’s box. Someone else was there, too—old Virginie, with her withered-apple cheeks and bright brown, bird-like eyes, still active and erect and very little altered from the Virginie of ten years before. Just as she had devoted herself to Diane, so now she devoted

herself to Diane's daughter, and no first performance of a new dance of the Wielitzska's took place without Virginie's presence somewhere in the house. To-night, Lady Arabella had invited her into her box and Virginie was a quivering bundle of excitement. She rose from her seat at the back of the box as the newcomers entered.

"Sit down, Virginie." Lady Arabella nodded kindly to the Frenchwoman. "And pull your chair forward. You'll see nothing back there, and there is plenty of room for us all."

"*Merci, madame. Madame est bien gentille.*" Virginie's voice was fervent with ecstatic gratitude as she resumed her seat and waited expectantly for Magda's appearance.

Other dances, performed principally by lesser lights of the company and affording only a briefly tantalising glimpse of Magda herself, preceded the chief event of the evening. But at last the next item on the programme read as *The Swan-Maiden (adapted from an Old Legend)*, and a tremour of excitement, a sudden hush of eager anticipation, rippled through the audience like wind over grass.

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Slowly the heavy silken curtains drew to either side of the stage, revealing a sunlit glade. In the background glimmered the still waters of a lake, while at the foot of a tree, in an attitude of tranquil repose, lay the Swan-Maiden—Magda. One white, naked arm was curved behind her head, pillowing it, the other lay lightly across her body, palm upward, with the rosy-tipped fingers curled inwards a little, like a sleeping child's. She looked infinitely young as she lay there, her slender, pliant limbs relaxed in untroubled slumber.

Lady Arabella, with Quarrington sitting next to her in the box, heard the quick intake of his breath as he leaned suddenly forward.

"Yes, it has quite a familiar look," she observed. "Reminds me of your 'Repose of Titania.'"

His eyes flickered inquiringly over her face, but it was evident that hers had been merely a chance remark. The old lady had obviously no idea as to who it was who had posed for the Titania of the picture. That was one of the "slices of fact" which Magda had omitted to hand out when recounting her adventure in the fog to her godmother. Quarrington leaned back in his chair satisfied.

"It's not unlike," he agreed carelessly.

Then the entrance of Vladimir Ravinski, the lovelorn youth of the legend, riveted his attention on the stage.

The dance which followed was exquisite. The Russian was a beautiful youth, like a sun-god with his flying yellow locks and glorious symmetry of body, and the *pas de deux* between him and Magda was a thing to marvel at—sweeping through the whole gamut of love's emotion, from the first shy, delicate hesitancy of worshipping boy and girl to the rapturous abandon of mated lovers.

Then across the vibrant, pulsating scene fell the deadly shadow of the witch Ritmagar. The stage darkened, the violins in the orchestra skirled eerily in chromatic showers of notes, and the hunched figure of Ritmagar approaching menaced the lovers. A wild dance followed, the lovers now kneeling and beseeching the evil fairy to have pity on them, now rushing despairingly into each other's arms, while the witch's own dancing held all of threat and malevolence that superb artistry could infuse into it.

The tale unfolded itself with the inevitableness of preordained catastrophe.

Ritmagar declines to be appeased. She raises her claw-like hand, pointing a crooked finger at the lovers, and with a clash of brazen sound and the dull thrumming of drums the whole scene dissolves into absolute darkness. When the darkness lifts once more, the stage is empty save for a pure white swan which sails slowly down the lake and

disappears. . . . Followed a solo dance by Ravinski in which he gave full vent to the anguish of the bereft lover, while now and again the swan swam statelily by him. At length the witch appeared once more and, yielding to his impassioned entreaties, declared that the Swan-Maiden might reassume her human form during the hour preceding sunset, and Magda—the Swan-Maiden released from enchantment for the time being—came running in on the stage.

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This love-duet was resumed and presently, when the lovers had made their exit, Ritmagar was seen gleefully watching while the red sun dropped slowly down the sky, sinking at last below the rim of the lake.

Then a low rumble of drums muttered as she stole from the stage, the personification of vindictive triumph, and all at once the great concourse of people in the auditorium seemed to strain forward, conscious that the climax of the evening, the wonderful solo dance by the Wielitzska, was about to begin.

The moon rose on the left, and Magda, a slim white figure in her dress which cleverly suggested the plumage of a swan, floated on to the stage with that exquisite, ethereal lightness of movement which only toe-dancing—and toe-dancing of the most perfectly finished quality—seems able to convey. It was as though her feet were not touching the solid earth at all. The feather-light drifting of blown petals; the swaying grace of a swan as it glides along the surface of the water; the quivering, spirit-like flight of a butterfly—it seemed as though all these had been caught and blended together by the dancer.

The heavier instruments of the orchestra were silenced, but the rippling music of the strings wove and interwove a dreaming melody, unutterably sweet and appealing, as the Swan-Maiden, bathed in pallid moonlight, besought the invisible Ritmagar for mercy, praying that she might not die even though the sun had set. . . . But there comes no answer to her prayers. A sombre note of stern denial sounds in the music, and the Swan-Maiden yields to utter despair, drooping slowly to earth. Just as Death himself claims her, her lover, demented with anguish, comes rushing to her side, and turning towards him as she lies dying upon the ground, she yields to his embrace with a last gesture of passionate surrender.

Slowly the heavy curtains swung together, hiding the limp, lifeless body of the Swan-Maiden and the despairing figure of her lover as he knelt beside her, and after a breathless pause, the great audience, carried away by the tragic drama of the dance, its passion and its pathos, broke into a thunder of applause that rolled and reverberated through the theatre.

Again and again Magda and her partner were called before the curtain, the former laden with the sheafs of flowers which had been handed up on to the stage. But the audience refused to be satisfied until at last Magda appeared alone, standing very white and slender under the blaze of lights, a faint suggestion of fatigue in the poise of her lissome figure.

Instantly the applause broke out anew—thunderous, overwhelming. Magda smiled, then held out her arms in a little disarming gesture of appeal, touching in its absolute simplicity. It was as though she said: “Dear people, I love you all for being so pleased, but I’m very, very tired. Please, won’t you let me go?”

So they let her go, with one final round of cheers and clapping, and then, as the curtains fell together once more and the orchestra slid unobtrusively into the *entr'acte* music, a buzz of conversation arose.

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Michael Quarrington turned and spoke to Davilof as they stood together.

“This will be my last memory of England for some time to come. Mademoiselle Wielitzska is very wonderful. As much actress as dancer—and both rather superlatively.”

There was an odd note in Quarrington’s voice, as if he were forcibly repressing some less measured form of words.

Davilof glanced at him sharply.

“You think so?” he said curtly.

The musician’s hazel eyes were burning feverishly. One hand was clenched on the back of the chair from which he had just risen; the other hung at his side, the fingers opening and shutting nervously.

Quarrington smiled.

“Don’t you?”

The eyes of the two men met, and Michael became suddenly conscious that the other was struggling in the grip of some strong emotion. He could even sense its atmosphere of antagonism towards himself.

“I think”—Davilof spoke with slow intensity—“I think she’s a soulless piece of devil’s mechanism.” And turning abruptly, he swung out of the box, slamming the door behind him.

Quarrington frowned. With his keen perceptions it was not difficult for him to divine what lay at the back of Davilof’s bitter criticism. The man was in love—hopelessly in love with the Wielitzska. Probably she had turned him down, as she had turned down better men than he, but he had been unable to resist the bitter-sweet temptation of watching her dance, and throughout the evening had almost certainly been suffering the torments of the damned.

The artist smiled a little grimly to himself, remembering the many evenings he, too, had spent at the Imperial Theatre, drawn thither by the magnetism of a white, slender woman with night-black hair, whose long, dark eyes haunted him perpetually, even coming between him and his work.

And then, just as he had made up his mind to go away, first to Paris and afterwards to Spain or perhaps even further afield, and thus set as many miles of sea and land as he could betwixt himself and the “kind of woman he had no place for,” fate had played him a trick and sent her out of the obscurity of the fog-ridden street straight to his very

hearth and home, so that the fragrance and sweetness and charm of her must needs linger there to torment him.

He thought he could make a pretty accurate guess at the state of Davilof's feelings, and was ironically conscious of a sense of fellowship with him.

Lady Arabella's sharp voice cut across his reflections.

"I don't care for this next thing," she said, flicking at her programme. "Mrs. Grey and I are going round to see Magda. Will you come with us?"

Quarrington had every intention of politely excusing himself. Instead of which he found himself replying:

"With pleasure—if Mademoiselle Wielitzska won't think I'm intruding."

Lady Arabella chuckled.

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“Well, she intruded on you that day in the fog, didn’t she? So you’ll be quits.” She glanced impatiently round the box. “Where on earth has Davilof vanished to? Has he gone up in flame?”

Michael laughed involuntarily.

“Something of the kind, I fancy,” he replied. “Anyway, he departed rather hurriedly.”

“Poor Antoine!” Gillian spoke with a kind of humorous compassion. “He has a temperament. I’m glad I haven’t.”

“You have the best of all temperaments, Mrs. Grey,” answered Michael, as they both followed Lady Arabella out of the box.

She looked at him inquiringly.

“The temperament that understands other people’s temperaments,” he added.

“How do you know?” she asked, smiling.

Lady Arabella was prancing on ahead down the corridor, and for the moment Michael and Gillian were alone.

“We artists learn to look for what lies below the surface. If your work is sincere, you find when you’ve finished a portrait that the soul of the sitter has revealed itself unmistakably.”

Gillian nodded.

“I’ve been told you’ve an almost diabolical genius for expressing just what a man or woman is really like—in character, I mean—in your portraits.”

“I can’t help it,” he said simply. “It comes—it reveals itself—if you paint sincerely.”

“And do you—always paint sincerely?”

He laughed.

“I try to. Though once I got hauled over the coals pretty sharply for doing so. My sitter happened to be a pretty society woman, possessed of about as much soul as would cover a threepenny-bit, and when I’d finished her portrait she simply turned and rent me. ’I wanted a taking picture,’ she informed me indignantly, ’not the bones of my personality laid bare for public inspection.’”

They were outside Magda's dressing-room by this time, and Virginie, who had flown to her nurseling the moment the dance was at an end, opened the door in response to Lady Arabella's preemptory knock. Gillian paused a moment before entering the room.

"Yours is a wonderful gift of perception," she said quietly. "It ought to make you—very merciful."

Michael looked at her swiftly. Her eyes seemed to be asking something of him—-entreating. But before he could speak Lady Arabella's voice interposed remorselessly.

"Come in, you two; and for goodness' sake shut the door. There's draught enough to waft one to heaven."

There was no choice but to obey, and silently Quarrington followed Mrs. Grey into the room.

CHAPTER VI

MICHAEL CHANGES HIS MIND

Magda's dressing-room at the Imperial Theatre was something rather special in the way of dressing-rooms. It had been designed expressly for her by the management, and boasted a beautifully appointed bathroom adjoining it where she could luxuriate in a refreshing dip immediately after the strain and fatigue of her work on the stage.

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She had been very firm about the bathroom, airily dismissing a plaintive murmur from the manager to the effect that they were “somewhat crowded for space at the Imperial.”

“Then take another theatre, my dear man,” she had told him. “Or build! Or give the *corps de ballet* one less dressing-room amongst them. But if you want *me*, I must have a bathroom. If I dance, I bathe afterwards. If not, I don’t dance.”

Being a star of the first magnitude, the Wielitzska could dictate her own terms, and accordingly a bathroom she had.

She had just emerged from its white-tiled, silver-tapped luxury a few minutes before Lady Arabella, together with Gillian and Michael Quarrington, presented themselves at her dressing-room door, and they found her ensconced in an easy-chair by the fire, sipping a cup of steaming hot tea.

“I’ve brought Mr. Quarrington to see you,” announced Lady Arabella. “I thought perhaps you’d like some other congratulations besides family ones.”

“Am I permitted?” asked Quarrington, taking the hand Magda held out to him. “Or are you too tired to be bothered with an outsider?”

Magda looked up at him.

“I’ve very glad to see you,” she said quietly.

She appeared unwontedly sweet and girlish as she sat there, clad in a negligee of some soft silken stuff that clung about the lissom lines of her figure, and with her satiny hair coiled in a simple knot at the nape of her neck. There was little or nothing about her to remind one of the successful ballerina, and Michael found himself poignantly recalling the innocent, appealing charm of the Swan-Maiden. It was difficult to associate this woman with that other who had so unconsciously turned down his pal—the man who had loved her.

“Well? Did it go all right?”

Magda’s eyes sought Gillian’s eagerly as she put the question.

“Did it go?” Mrs. Grey’s voice held all the unqualified enthusiasm any artiste could desire.

“Oh, Magda! It was wonderful! The most wonderful, beautiful dance I’ve ever seen.”

“And you know it as well as we do,” interpolated Lady Arabella tartly, but smiling pridefully in spite of herself.

“Still, of course, she likes to hear us *say* it.” Gillian championed her friend stoutly.

“The whole world will be saying it to-morrow,” observed Quarrington quietly.

Here Virginie created a diversion by handing round cups of freshly brewed tea.

“You’ll get nerves—drinking tea at this hour of the night,” commented Lady Arabella, accepting a cup with alacrity, nevertheless.

“I take it very weak,” protested Magda, smiling faintly. “It’s the only thing I like after dancing.”

But Lady Arabella was already deep in conversation with Gillian and Virginie—a conversation which resolved itself chiefly into a laudatory chorus regarding the evening’s performance. In the background Magda’s maid moved quietly to and fro, carefully putting away her mistress’s dancing dresses. For the moment Michael and Magda were to all intents and purposes alone.

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“I shall not easily forget to-night,” he said rather low, drawing a chair up beside her.

“You liked it, then?” she asked hesitatingly—almost shyly.

“‘Like’ is hardly the word.”

Magda flashed him a swift glance.

“And yet,” she said slowly, “I’m the ‘type of woman you hate.’”

“You make it rather difficult to maintain the point of view,” he admitted.

She was silent a moment.

“You were very unkind to me that day,” she said at last.

Their eyes met and in hers was something soft and dangerously disarming. Quarrington got up suddenly from his chair.

“Perhaps I was unkind to you so that I might not be unkind to myself,” he replied curtly.

Magda’s soft laugh rippled out.

“But how selfish! And—and aren’t you being rather mysterious?”

“Am I?” he returned pointedly. “Surely self-preservation is the first instinct of the human species?”

She picked up the challenge and tossed it lightly back to him.

“Is the danger, then, very great?”

“I think it is. So, like a wise man, I propose to avoid it.”

“How?”

“Why, by quitting the danger zone. I go to Paris to-morrow.”

“To Paris?”

Magda experienced a sudden feeling of blankness. It was inexplicable, but somehow the knowledge that Quarrington was going away seemed to take all the savour out of things. It was only by a supreme effort that she contrived to keep her tone as light and unconcerned as his own as she continued:

“And then—after Paris?”

“After Paris? Oh, Spain possibly. Or the Antipodes!”—with a short laugh.

“Who’s talking about the Antipodes?” suddenly chimed in Lady Arabella. “Home to bed’s my next move. Gillian, you come with me—the car can take you on to Hampstead after dropping me in Park Lane. And Virginie can drive back with Magda.”

“Yes, do go with Marraine,” said Magda, nodding acquiescence in reply to Gillian’s glance of interrogation. “I have to dress yet.”

There was a general move towards the door.

“Good-bye”—Magda’s slim hand lay for a moment in Quarrington’s. “I—I’m sorry you’re going away, Saint Michel.”

Only Michael heard the last two words, uttered in that *trainante*, slightly husky voice that held so much of music and appeal. He turned abruptly and made his way out of the room in the wake of Gillian and Lady Arabella.

“You’d better postpone your visit to the Antipodes, Mr. Quarrington,” said the latter, as presently they all three stood together in the vestibule, halted by the stream of people pouring out from the theatre. “I’m giving a dinner-party next week, with a ‘crush’ to follow. Stay and come to it.”

“It’s awfully kind of you, Lady Arabella, but I’m afraid it’s impossible.”

“Fiddlesticks! You’re a free agent, aren’t you?”—looking at him keenly.

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A whimsical light gleamed for an instant in the grey eyes.

“I sometimes wonder if I am,” he returned.

“There’s only one cord I know of that can’t be either unknotted—or cut. And that’s lack of money. That’s not your complaint”—significantly.

“No.”

“So you’ll come?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Magda has promised to dance for me,” proceeded Lady Arabella, entirely disregarding his quietly uttered negative. “They’re not giving *The Swan-Maiden* that night at the Imperial. She can’t dine, of course, poor dear. Really, dancers have a lot to put up with—or rather, to put up *without*! Magda never dares to enjoy a good square meal. Afraid of getting fat, of course! After all, a dancer’s figure’s her fortune.”

Like a low, insistent undertone beneath the rattle of Lady Arabella’s volubility Michael could hear again the murmur of a soft, dragging voice: “I’m sorry you’re going away, Saint Michel.”

It seemed almost as though Lady Arabella, with that uncanny shrewdness of hers, divined it.

“You’ll come, then?” She smiled at him over her shoulder, moving forward as the crush in the vestibule lessened a little.

And Michael, with an odd expression in his eyes, answered suddenly:

“Yes, I’ll come.”

Later, as Lady Arabella and Gillian drove home together, the former laughed quietly. There was an element of pride and triumph in the laughter. Probably the hen who has reared a duckling and sees it sail off into the water experiences, alongside her natural apprehension and astonishment, a somewhat similar pride in the startling proclivities evinced by her nurseling.

“That nice artist-man is in love with Magda,” crowed Lady Arabella contentedly.

Gillian smiled.

“Do you think so?”

“I do. Only it’s very much against his will, for some reason or other. Crossing from Dover to-morrow, forsooth!”—with a broad smile. “Not he! He’ll be at my party—and asking Magda to marry him before the week’s out, bar accidents! . . . After all, it’s not surprising that the men are falling over each other to marry her. She’s really rather wonderful. Where do you think she gets it all from, Gillian, my dear? Not from the Vallincourts, I’ll swear!”—chuckling.

Mrs. Grey shook her head.

“I don’t know. But I think Magda is a standing argument in favour of the doctrine of reincarnation! She always seems to me to be a kind of modern embodiment of Helen of Troy or Cleopatra.”

“Only without the capacity for falling in love! She’s as chilly as an iceberg and yet somehow gives you the idea she’s all fire and passion. No wonder the men get misled, poor lambs!”

“She’s not cold, really,” asserted Gillian positively. “Of that I’m sure. No one could dance as she does—and be an iceberg.”

Lady Arabella chuckled again, wickedly.

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“A woman who can dance like that ought to be preceded through life by a red flag. She positively stirs my old blood—that’s been at a comfortably tepid temperature for the last thirty years!”

“Some day,” said Gillian, “she’ll fall in love. And then—”

“Then there’ll be fireworks.”

Lady Arabella completed the sentence briskly just as the car pulled up in front of her house. She skipped nimbly out on to the pavement.

“Fireworks, my dear,” she repeated emphatically. “And a very fine display, too! Good-night.”

The car slid away north with Gillian inside it reflecting rather ruefully upon the very great amount of probability contained in Lady Arabella’s parting comment.

CHAPTER VII

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Lady Arabella’s big rooms were filling rapidly. The dinner to which only a few of the elect had been bidden was over, and now those who had been invited to the less exclusive reception which was to follow were eagerly wending their way towards Park Lane.

The programme for the evening promised to be an attractive one. A solo from Antoine Davilof, Lady Arabella’s pet lion-cub of the moment; a song from the leading operatic tenor; and afterwards a single dance by the Wielitzska—who could never be persuaded to perform at any other private houses than those of her godmother and the Duchess of Lichbrooke—the former’s half sister. So, in this respect, Lady Arabella enjoyed almost a monopoly, and such occasions as the present were enthusiastically sought after by her friends and acquaintances. Later, when the artistes had concluded their programme, there was to be a dance. The ballroom, the further end of which boasted a fair-sized stage, had been temporarily arranged with chairs to accommodate an audience, and in one of the anterooms Virginie, with loving, skilful fingers, was putting the finishing touches to Magda’s toilette.

Magda submitted passively to her ministrations. She was thinking of Michael Quarrington, the man who had come into her life by such strange chance and who had so deliberately gone out of it again. By the very manner of his going he had succeeded in impressing himself on her mind as no other man had ever done. Other men did not shun her like the plague, she reflected bitterly!

But from the very beginning he had shown her that he disapproved of her fundamentally. She was the “type of woman he hated!” Night and day that curt little phrase had bitten into her thoughts, stinging her with its quiet contempt.

She felt irritated that she should care anything about his opinion. But if she were candid with herself she had to admit that she did care, intensely. More than that, his departure from England had left her conscious of an insistent and unaccountable little ache. The knowledge that there could be no more chance meetings, that he had gone right out of her ken, seemed like the sudden closing of a door which had just been opening to her. It had somehow taken the zest out of things.

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“Voila!” Virginie drew back to survey the results of her labours, turning for approval to Gillian, who was in attendance in her capacity of accompanist. “Is it not that mademoiselle looks ravishing?”

“Quite ravishing, Virginie,” agreed Gillian. “Did you expect her to look anything else by the time you had finished decking her out?” she added teasingly.

“It is nothing that I do,” responded the old Frenchwoman seriously. “Mademoiselle cannot help but be beautiful to the eye—*le bon dieu* has created her like that.”

“I believe He has,” assented Gillian, smiling.

As she spoke the bell of the telephone instrument on the table beside her rang imperatively and she lifted the receiver. Magda, watching her face as she took the message, saw it suddenly blanch.

“Coppertop! . . . He’s ill!” she gasped.

“Ill?” Magda could hardly credit it. Two hours ago they had left the child in perfect health.

“Yes.” Gillian swallowed, moistening her dry lips. “They’ve sent for the doctor. It’s croup. Oh!”—despairingly, and letting the receiver fall unheeded from her grasp—“What am I to do? What am I to do?”

Magda stepped forward, the filmy draperies of the dress in which she was to dance floating cloudily about her as she moved. She picked up the receiver as it hung dangling aimlessly from the stand and replaced it on its clip.

“Do?” she said quietly. “Why, you’ll go straight home, of course. As quickly as the car can take you. Virginie”—turning to the maid—“fly and order the car round at once.”

Gillian looked at her distractedly.

“But you? Who’ll play for you? I can’t go! I can’t leave you!” Her voice was shaken by sobs. “Oh, Coppertop!”

Magda slipped a comforting arm round her shoulder.

“Of course you’ll go—and at once, too. See, here’s your coat”—lifting it up from the back of the chair where Gillian had thrown it. “Put it on.”

Hardly conscious of what was happening, Gillian allowed herself to be helped into the coat. Suddenly recollection returned.

“But your dance—your dance, Magda? You’ve forgotten!”

Magda shook her head.

“No. It will be all right,” she said soothingly. “Don’t worry, Gillyflower. *You’ve* forgotten that Davilof is playing here to-night.”

“Antoine?” Gillian stared at her incredulously. “But you can’t ask him to play for you! You’d hate asking him a favour after—after his refusal to accompany you any more.”

Magda smiled at her reassuringly.

“My dear,” she said, and there was an unaffected kindliness in her voice which few people ever heard. “My dear, I’m not going to let a little bit of cheap pride keep you away from Coppertop.”

She bent suddenly and kissed Gillian’s white, miserable face just as Virginie reappeared in the doorway to announce that the car was waiting.

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“There, run along. Look, would you like to take Virginie with you?”

“No, no.” Gillian shook her head decidedly. “I shall be quite all right. Oh, Magda!”—-impulsively drawing the slender figure close into her arms a moment. “You are *good*!”

Magda laughed a trifle bitterly.

“That would be news to the world at large!” she replied. Then cheerfully: “Now, don’t worry, Gillyflower. Remember they’ve got a doctor there. And ’phone me presently about Coppertop. If he’s worse, I’ll come home as early as I can get away. Send the car straight back here.”

As soon as Gillian had gone, Magda flung a loose wrap over her diaphanous draperies and turned to Virginie.

“Where is Monsieur Davilof? Do you know?”

“*Mais oui, mademoiselle*! I saw him through the doorway as I came from ordering the car. He is in the library.”

“Alone?”

“*Oui, mademoiselle*!” Virginie nodded eloquently. “He smokes a cigarette—to steady the nerves, I suppose.”

Magda went swiftly out of the room. She reached the hall by way of an unfrequented passage and slipped into the library closing the door behind her.

“Antoine!”

At the sound of her voice Davilof, who had been standing by the fire, wheeled round.

“You!” he exclaimed violently. “You!” And then remained silent, staring at her.

“You knew I was dancing here to-night,” she said chidingly. “Why are you so startled? We were bound to meet, weren’t we?”

“No, we were not. I proposed leaving the house the moment my solo was over.”

Magda laughed a little.

“So afraid of me, Antoine?” she mocked gently.

He made no answer, but his hands, hanging at his sides, clenched suddenly.

Magda advanced a few steps towards him and paused.

“Davilof,” she said quietly. “Will you play for me to-night?”

He looked at her, puzzled.

“Play for you?” he repeated. “But you have Mrs. Grey.”

“No. She can’t accompany me this evening.”

“And you ask me?” His voice held blank amazement.

“Yes. Will you do it?”

“Do you remember what I told you the last time we met? That I would never play for you again?”

Magda drew her breath slowly. It was hurting her pride far more than Gillian knew or could imagine to ask a favour of this man. And he wasn’t going to make it easy for her, either—that was evident. But she must ask it, nevertheless. For Gillian’s sake; for the sake of poor little Coppertop fighting for breath and with no “mummie” at hand to help and comfort him; and for the sake of Lady Arabella, too. After promising to dance for her she couldn’t let her godmother down by crying off at the last moment, when all the world and his wife had come crowding to her house on the strength of that promise.

So she bent her head in response to Davilof’s contemptuous question.

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“Yes, I remember,” she said quietly.

“And you still ask me to play for you?”

“I still ask you.”

Davilof laughed.

“You amaze me! And supposing I reply by saying I refuse?”

“But you won’t,” dared Magda.

Davilof’s eyes held something of cruelty in their hazel depths as he answered quietly:

“On the contrary—I do refuse.”

Her hand went up to her throat. It was going to be more difficult than she had anticipated!

“There is no one else who can play for me as you do,” she suggested.

“No,” fiercely. “Because no one loves you as I do.”

“What is the use of saying you love me when you won’t do the one little thing I ask?” she retorted. “It is not often that I ask favours. And—and no one has ever refused me a request before.”

Davilof could hear the note of proud resentment in her voice, and he realised to the full that, in view of all that had passed between them in the Mirror Room, it must have been a difficult matter for a woman of Magda’s temperament to bring herself to ask his help.

But he had no intention of sparing her. None but himself knew how bitterly she had hurt him, how cruelly she had stung his pride, when she had flung him that contemptuous command: “I shall want you to-morrow, Davilof!—same time.” He had unveiled his very soul before her—and in return she had tossed him an order as though he were a lackey who had taken a liberty. All his pain and brooding resentment came boiling up to the surface.

“If I meant anything to you,” he said slowly, “if you had even looked upon me as a friend, you could have asked what you liked of me. But you showed me once—very clearly—-that in your eyes I was nothing more than your paid accompanist. Very well, then! Pay me—and I’ll play for you to-night.”

“Pay you?”

“Oh, not in money”—with a short laugh.

“Then—then what do you mean?” Her face had whitened a little.

“It’s quite simple. Later on there is a dance. Give me a dance with you!”

Magda hesitated. In other circumstances she would have refused point-blank. Davilof had offended her—and more than that, the revelation of the upsettingly vehement order of his passion for her that day in the Mirror Room had frightened her not a little. There was something stormy and elemental about it. To the caloric Pole, love was love, and the fulfilment of his passion for the adored woman the supreme necessity of life.

Realising that she had to withstand an ardour essentially unEnglish in its violently inflammable quality, Magda was loth to add fuel to the flame. And if she promised to dance with Davilof she must let him hold her in his arms, risk that dangerous proximity which, she knew now, would set the man’s wild pulses racing unsteadily and probably serve as the preliminary to another tempestuous scene.

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“Well?” Davilof broke in upon her self-communings. “Have I asked too high a price?”

Time was flying. She must decide, and decide quickly. She took her courage in both hands.

“No,” she returned quickly. “I will dance with you, Antoine.”

He bowed.

“Our bargain is complete, then,” he said ironically. “I shall be charmed to play for you, mademoiselle.”

An hour or so later the last burst of applause had died away, and the well-dressed crowd which had sat in enthralled silence while the Wielitzska danced emerged chattering and laughing from the great ballroom.

Their place was immediately taken by deft, felt-slippered men, who proceeded swiftly to clear away the seats and the drugget which had been laid to protect the surface of the dancing floor. In the twinkling of an eye, as it were, they transformed what had been to all intents and purposes a concert-hall into a flower-decked ballroom, while the members of the band engaged for the dance began climbing agilely into their allotted places on the raised platform preparatory to tuning up for the evening’s work.

Magda, released at last from Virginie’s worshipfully careful hands, came slowly down the main staircase. She was in black, diaphanous and elusive, from which her flower-pale face and shoulders emerged like a water-lily starring the dark pool on which it floats. A crimson rose glowed just above her heart—that and her softly scarlet lips the only touches of colour against the rare black-and-white loveliness of her.

She was descending the stairs reluctantly, mentally occupied in screwing up courage to fulfil her promise to Davilof. A ’phone message from Friars’ Holm had come through saying that Coppertop was better. All danger was passed and there was no longer any need for her to return early. So it remained, now, for her to keep her pact with the musician.

As she rounded the last bend in the staircase, she saw that a man was standing with bent head at the foot of the stairs, apparently waiting for someone, and she threw a quick, nervous glance in the direction of the motionless figure, thinking it might be Davilof himself. It would be like his eager impatience to await her coming there. Then, as the lights gleamed on fair, crisply waving hair she realised that the man was Michael—Michael, whom she believed to be on his way to Spain!

Perhaps it was merely chance, or perhaps it was at the direct inspiration of Lady Arabella, but, whatever may have been the cause, Gillian had not confided to Magda that Quarrington was to be at her godmother’s reception. The sudden, totally

unexpected meeting with him—with this man who had contrived to dominate her thoughts so inexplicably—startled a little cry of surprise from her lips. She drew back abruptly, and then—quite how it happened she could not tell—but she missed her footing and fell.

For the fraction of a second she experienced a horrible sensation of utter helplessness to save herself; then Michael's arms closed round her as he caught her before she reached the ground.

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The shock of the fall stupefied her for a moment. She lay against his breast like a terrified child, clinging to him convulsively.

“It’s all right,” he murmured soothingly. “You’re quite safe.”

Unconsciously his arms tightened round her. His breath quickened. The satin-soft hair had brushed his cheek as she fell; the pale, exquisite face and warm white throat lay close beneath his lips—all the fragrant beauty of her gathered unresisting against his heart. He had only to stoop his head——

With a stifled exclamation he jerked himself backward, squaring his shoulders, and released her, though he still steadied her with a hand beneath her arm.

“There, you are all right,” he said reassuringly. “No bones broken.”

The commonplace words helped to restore her poise.

“Oh! Thank you!” The words came a little gaspingly still. “I—I don’t know how I came to fall like that. I think you startled me—I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I didn’t expect to be,” he returned, smiling a little.

Magda did not ask how it had come to pass. For the moment it was enough for her that he *was* there—that he had not gone away! She was conscious of a sudden incomprehensible sense of tumult within her.

“It was lucky for me you happened to be standing just at the foot of the stairs,” she said a little unsteadily.

“I didn’t ‘happen.’ I was there of *malice prepense*”—the familiar crooked smile flashed out—“waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me?”

“Yes. Lady Arabella asked me to shepherd you into the supper-room and see that you had a glass of champagne and a sandwich before the dancing begins.”

“Orders from headquarters?”—smiling up at him.

“Exactly.”

He held out his arm and they moved away together. As they passed through the crowded rooms one man murmured ironically to another:

“Quarrington’s got it badly, I should say.”

The second man glanced after the pair with amused eyes.

“So he’s the latest victim, is he? I head young Raynham’s nose was out of joint.”

“You don’t mean she’s fired him?”

The other nodded.

“Got the push the day before yesterday,” he answered tersely.

“Poor devil! He’ll take it hard. He’s a hotheaded youngster. Just the sort to go off and blow his brains out.”

Meanwhile Quarrington had established Magda at a corner table in the empty supper-room and was seeing to it that Lady Arabella’s commands were obeyed, in spite of Magda’s assurances that she was not in the least hungry.

“Then you ought to be,” he replied. “After dancing. Besides, unlike the rest of us, you had no dinner.”

“Oh, I had a light meal at six o’clock. But naturally, you can’t consume a solid dinner just before giving a performance.”

“I’m not going to pay you compliments about your dancing,” he observed quietly, after a pause. “You must receive a surfeit of them. But”—looking at her with those direct grey eyes of his—“I’m glad I didn’t leave England when I intended to.”

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“Why didn’t you?” she asked impulsively.

He laughed.

“Because it’s so much easier to yield to temptation than to resist,” he answered, not taking his eyes from her face.

She flushed a little.

“What was the temptation?” she asked uncertainly.

He waited an instant, then answered with deliberation:

“The temptation of seeing you again.”

“I should have thought you disapproved of me far too much for that to be the case! Saint Michel, don’t you think you’re rather hard on me?”

“Am I? I had an old-fashioned mother, you see. Perhaps my ideas about women are out of date.”

“Tell me them.”

He regarded her reflectively.

“Shall I? Well, I like to think of a woman as something sweet and fragrant, infinitely tender and compassionate—not as a marauder and despoiler. Wherever she comes, the place should be the happier for her coming—not bereft by it. She should be the helper and healer in this battered old world. That’s the sort of woman I should want my wife to be; that’s the sort of woman my mother was.”

“And you think I’m—not like that? I’m the marauder, I suppose?”

He remained silent, and Magda sat with her bent head, fingering the stem of her wine-glass restlessly.

“You like my dancing?” she said at last.

“You know I do.”

“Well”—she looked at him with a mixture of defiance and appeal. “My dancing is me—-the real me.”

He shook his head.

“You’re not the ‘Swan-Maiden,’ whose love was so great that she forgot everything except the man she loved—and paid for it with her life.”

“The process doesn’t sound exactly encouraging,” she retorted with a flash of dry humour. “But how do you know I’m not—like that?”

“How do I know? Because, if you knew anything at all about love, you couldn’t pay with it as you do. Even the love you’ve no use for is the biggest thing the poor devil who loves you has to offer you; you’ve no right to play battledore and shuttlecock with it.”

He spoke lightly, but Magda could hear the stern accusation that underlay the words. She rose from the table abruptly.

“I think,” she said, “I think I’m afraid of love.”

As she spoke, she made a movement as though to quit the supper-room, but, either by accident or design, Michael barred her way.

“Love,” he said, watching her face intently, “means sacrifice—surrender.”

“And you believe I’m not capable of it?”

“I think,” he replied slowly, drawing aside to let her pass, “I think I’m afraid to believe.”

Something in the deep tones of his voice sent a thrill of consciousness through her. She felt her breath come and go unevenly and, afraid to trust herself to speak, she moved forward without response in the direction of the door. A moment later they were drawn into the stream of people wending their way by twos and threes towards the ballroom.

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As they entered, Antoine Davilof broke away from a little group of men with whom he had been conversing and came to Magda's side.

"The next dance is just beginning," he said. "Are you engaged? Or may I have it?"

"No, I'm not engaged," she answered.

She spoke flurriedly. She was dreading this dance with Antoine. She felt as though the evening had drained her of her strength and left her unequal to a battle of wills should Antoine prove to be in one of his hotheaded moods.

She glanced round her with a hint of desperation in her eyes. If only Michael had asked her to dance with him instead! But he had bowed and left her as soon as the musician joined them, so that there was no escape to be hoped for that way.

Davilof was watching her curiously.

"I believe," he said, "that you're afraid to dance with me!"

On an impulse she answered him with perfect candour.

"I believe I am."

"Then why did you promise? You did promise, you know."

"I know. I promised. I promised because Coppertop had croup and they had telephoned down for his mother to go to him. And you wouldn't accompany me unless I gave you this dance. So I promised it."

Davilof's eyes held a curiously concentrated expression.

"And you did this so that Mrs. Grey could go to her little boy—to nurse him?"

Magda inclined her head.

"Yes," she said simply.

"But you hated asking me—*loathed* it!"

"Yes," she said again.

He was silent for a moment. Then he drew back from her. "That was kind. Extraordinarily kind," he commented slowly. His expression was one of frank amazement. "I did not believe you could be so kind—so womanly."

"Womanly?" she queried, puzzled.

“Yes. For is not a woman—a good woman—always ready to sacrifice herself for those she loves?”

Magda almost jumped. It was as though she were listening to an echo of Quarrington’s own words.

“And you sacrificed yourself,” continued Davilof. “Sacrificed your pride—crushed it down for the sake of Mrs. Grey and little Coppertop. Mademoiselle”—he bowed gravely—“I kiss your hands. And see, I too, I can be generous. I release you from your promise. I do not claim that dance.”

If any single thing could have astonished Magda more than another, it was that Davilof should voluntarily, in the circumstances, renounce the dance she had promised him. It argued a fineness of perception and a generosity for which she would never have given him credit. She felt a little warm rush of gratitude towards him.

“No, no!” she cried impulsively, “you shan’t give up your dance.” Then, as he still hesitated: “I should *like* to dance with you—really I should, Antoine. You’ve been so—so *decent*.”

Davilof’s face lit up. He looked radiant—like a child that has been patted on the back and told it is good.

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“No wonder we are all in love with you!” he exclaimed in low, vehement tones; adding quickly, as he detected a flicker of apprehension in Magda’s eyes: “But you need not fear to dance with me. I will be as your brother—I will go on being ‘decent.’”

And he was. He danced as perfectly as any of his music-loving nationality can dance, but there was a restraint, a punctilious deference about him that, even while it amazed, availed to reassure Magda and restore her shaken confidence in the man.

She did not realise or suspect that just those two simple actions of hers—the good turn she had done Gillian at some considerable cost to herself in the matter of personal pride, and her quick recognition of the musician’s sense of fair play in renouncing his dance with her when he knew the circumstances which had impelled her to promise it—these two things had sufficed to turn Davilof’s heady, emotional devotion into something more enduring and perhaps more dangerous, an abiding, deeply rooted love and passion for her which was stronger than the man himself.

He left the house immediately after the conclusion of his dance with her, and Magda was speedily surrounded by a crowd of would-be partners. But she felt disinclined to dance again, and, always chary of her favours in this respect, she remained watching the dancing in preference to taking any part in it, exchanging small-talk with the men who, finding she could not be induced to reconsider her decision, clustered round her chair like bees round a honey-pot.

It was towards the end of the evening that Michael Quarrington finally joined the group. Magda’s eyes rested on him with a mixture of annoyance and approval—annoyance because she had expected him to ask her for a dance quite early in the course of the programme and he had failed to do so, and approval because he was of that clean-cut, fair-haired type of man who invariably contrives to look particularly well-groomed and thoroughbred in evening kit.

She had no intention of permitting him to request a dance at this late hour, however, and rose from her seat as he approached.

“Ah! You, Mr. Quarrington?” she said gaily. “I am just going home. It’s been a charming evening, hasn’t it?”

“Charming,” he rejoined courteously. “May I see you to your car?”

He offered his arm and Magda, dismissing her little court of disgruntled admirers with a small gracious nod, laid her slim hand on his sleeve. As they moved away together the orchestra broke into the swinging seductive rhythm of a waltz.

Quarrington paused abruptly.

“Don’t go yet!” he said. “Dance this with me.”

His voice sounded strained and uneven. It was as though the words were dragged from him without his own volition.

For an instant the two pairs of eyes met—the long, dark ones with their slumbrous fire brooding beneath white lids, and the keen, hawk-like grey ones. Then:

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“Very well,” she answered a trifle breathlessly.

She was almost glad when the waltz came to an end. They had danced it in utter silence—a tense, packed silence, vibrant with significances half-hidden, half-understood, and she found herself quivering with a strange uncertainty and nervousness as she and Quarrington together made their way into the dim-lit quiet of the winter-garden opening off the ballroom.

Overhead the green, shining leaves of stephanotis spread a canopy, pale clusters of its white, heavy-scented bloom gleaming star-like in the faint light of Chinese lanterns swung from the leaf-clad roof. From somewhere near at hand came the silvery, showering plash of a fountain playing—a delicate and aerial little sound against the robust harmonies of the band, like the notes of a harp.

It seemed to Magda as though she and Michael had left the world behind them and were quite alone, enfolded in the sweet-scented, tender silence of some Garden of Eden.

They stood together without speaking. In every tingling nerve of her she was acutely conscious of his proximity and of some rapidly rising tide of emotion mounting within him. She knew the barrier against which it beat and a little cry escaped her, forced from her by some impulse that was stronger than herself.

“Oh, Saint Michel! Can’t you—can’t you believe in me?”

He swung round at the sound of her voice and the next moment she was crushed against his breast, his mouth on hers, his kisses burning their way to her very heart. . . .

Then voices, quick, light footsteps—someone else had discovered the Eden of the winter-garden, and Michael released her abruptly.

Behind the chimneystacks the grey fingers of dawn were creeping up in the sky as Magda drove home. In the wan light her face looked unusually pale, and beneath the soft lace at her breast her heart throbbed unevenly.

Five minutes ago Michael had held her in his arms and she had felt herself stirred to a sudden passionate surrender and response that frightened her.

Was this love—the love against which Diane had warned her? It had all happened so suddenly—that last, unpremeditated dance, those tense, vibrant moments in the winter-garden, then the jarring interruption of other couples seeking its fragrant coolness. And she and Michael suddenly apart.

Afterwards, only the barest conventionalities had passed between them. Nothing else had seemed possible. Their solitude had been ruthlessly destroyed; the outside world

had thrust itself upon them without warning, jerking them back to the self-consciousness of suddenly arrested emotion.

“I must be going.” The stilted, banal little phrase had fallen awkwardly from Magda’s lips, and Quarrington had assented without comment.

She felt confused and bewildered. What had he meant? Had he meant anything at all? Was it possible that he believed in her now—trusted her? It had been in answer to that low, imploring cry of hers—“*Saint Michel, can’t you believe in me?*”—that he had taken her in his arms.

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Looking out through the mist-blurred window at the pale streamers of dawnlight penciling the sky, Magda's eyes grew wistful—wonderingly questioning the future. Was she, too, only waiting for the revelation of dawn—the dawn of that mysterious thing called love which can transmute this everyday old world of ours into heaven or hell?

Gillian was at the door to welcome her when at length the car pulled up at Friars' Holm. She looked rather white and there were purple shadows under her eyes, but her lips smiled happily.

"Coppertop? How is he?" asked Magda quickly.

"Sleeping, thank God! He's safe now! But—oh, Magda! It's been awful!"

And quite suddenly Gillian, who had faced Death and fought him with a dogged courage and determination that had won the grave-eyed doctor's rare approval, broke down and burst into tears.

Magda petted and soothed her, until at last her sobs ceased and she smiled through her tears.

"I *am* a fool!" she said, dabbing at her eyes with a moist, screwed-up ball of something that had once been a cambric handkerchief. "But I've quite recovered now—really. Come and tell me about everything. Did Davilof play for you all right? And did you enjoy the dance afterwards? And, oh, I forgot! There's a letter for you on the mantelpiece. It was delivered by hand while we were both at Lady Arabella's."

Mechanically, as she responded to Gillian's rapid fire of questions, Magda picked up the square envelope propped against the clock and slit open the flap. It was probably only some note of urgent invitation—she received dozens of them. An instant later a half-stifled cry broke from her. Gillian turned swiftly.

"What is it?" she asked, a note of apprehension sharpening her voice.

Magda stared at her dumbly. Then she held out the letter.

"Read it," she said flatly. "It's from Kit Raynham's mother."

Gillian's eyes flew along the two brief lines of writing:

"Kit has disappeared. Do you know where he is?—ALICIA RAYNHAM."

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST REAPING

At breakfast, some hours later, Magda was in a curiously petulant and uncertain mood. To some extent her fractiousness was due to natural reaction after the emotional excitement of the previous evening. Granted the discovery of the Garden of Eden, and add to this the almost immediate intrusion of outsiders therein—for everybody else is an "outsider" to the pair in possession—and any woman might be forgiven for suffering from slightly frayed nerves the following day. And in Magda's case she had been already rather keyed up by finding the preceding few days punctuated by unwelcome and unaccustomed happenings.

They all dated from the day of the accident which had befallen her in the fog. It almost seemed as though that grey curtain of fog had been a symbol of the shadow which was beginning to dog her footsteps—the shadow which stern moralists designate "unpleasant consequences."

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First there had been Michael Quarrington's plain and candid utterance of his opinion of her. Then had followed Davilof's headlong wooing and his refusal, when thwarted, to play for her again. He, too, had not precisely glossed things over in that tirade of accusation and reproach which he had levelled at her!

And now, just when it seemed as though she had put these other ugly happenings behind her, Kit Raynham, who for the last six months had been one of the little court of admirers which surrounded her, had seen fit to complicate matters by vanishing without explanation; while his mother, in an absurd maternal flurry of anxiety as to what had become of him, must needs write to her as though it inevitably followed that she was responsible for his disappearance!

Magda was conscious of an irritated sense of injury, which Gillian's rather apprehensive little comments on the absence of further news concerning young Raynham scarcely tended to allay.

"Oh, don't be tiresome, Gillian!" she exclaimed. "The boy's all right. I expect he's been having a joy-day—which has prolonged itself a bit."

"It seems he hasn't been seen or heard of since the day before yesterday," responded Gillian gravely. "They're afraid he may—may have committed suicide"—she brought out the word with a rush. "They've been dragging the lake at his home."

Magda flared.

"Where did you hear all this—this nonsense? You said nothing about it last night."

"Lady Raynham told me. She rang up half an hour ago—before you were down—to ask if by any chance we had had any news of him," replied Gillian gently.

Magda pushed away her plate and, leaving her breakfast unfinished, moved restlessly across to the window.

"There's nothing about it in this morning's paper, is there?" she asked. Her tone sounded apprehensive.

Gillian's eyes grew suddenly compassionate.

"Yes. There is—something," she returned, laying her hand quickly over the newspaper as though to withhold it.

But Magda swung round and snatched it from her. Gillian half rose from her chair.

"Don't look—don't read it, Magda!" she entreated hastily.

The other made no response. Instead, she deliberately searched the columns of the paper until she found a paragraph headed: Disappearance of the Honourable Kit Raynham.

No exception could reasonably be taken to the paragraph in question. It gave a brief resume of Kit Raynham's short life up to date, referred to the distinguished career which had been predicted for him, and, in mentioning that he was one of the set of brilliant young folks of whom Magda Wielitzska, the well-known dancer, was the acknowledged leader, it conveyed a very slightly veiled hint that he, in particular, was accounted one of her most devoted satellites. The sting of the paragraph lay in its tail:

"It will be tragic indeed if it should eventually transpire that a young life so full of exceptional promise has foundered in seas that only a seasoned swimmer should essay."

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It was easy enough for Magda to read between the lines. If anything had happened to Kit Raynham—if it were ultimately found that he had taken his own life—society at large was prepared to censure her as more or less responsible for the catastrophe!

Side by side with this paragraph was another—a panegyric on the perfection of Wielitzska's dancing as a whole, and dwelling particularly upon her brilliant performance in *The Swan-Maiden*.

To Magda, the juxtaposition of the two paragraphs was almost unendurable. That this supreme success should be marred and overshadowed by a possible tragedy! She flung the newspaper to the ground.

"I think—I think the world's going mad!" she exclaimed in a choked voice.

Gillian looked across at her. Intuitively she apprehended the mental conflict through which her friend was passing—the nervous apprehension and resentment of the artiste that any extraneous happening should infringe upon her success contending with the genuine regret she would feel if some untoward accident had really befallen Kit Raynham. And behind both these that strange, aloof detachment which seemed part of the very fibre of her nature, and which Gillian knew would render it almost impossible for her to admit or even realise that she was in any way responsible for Kit Raynham's fate—whatever it might be.

Of what had taken place in the winter-garden at Lady Arabella's Gillian was, of course, in ignorance, and she had therefore no idea that the intrusion of Kit Raynham's affairs at this particular juncture was doubly unwelcome. But she could easily see that Magda was shaken out of her customary sang-froid.

"Don't worry, Magda." The words sprang consolingly to her lips, but before she could give them utterance Melrose opened the door and announced that Lady Raynham was in the library. Would Mademoiselle Wielitzska see her?

The old man's face wore a look of concern. They had heard all about the disappearance of Lady Raynham's son in the servants' hall—the evening papers had had it. Moreover, it always seems as though there exists a species of wireless telepathy by which the domestic staff of any household, great or small, speedily becomes acquainted with everything good, bad, or indifferent—and particularly bad!—which affects the folks "above-stairs."

A brief uncomfortable pause succeeded Melrose's announcement; then Magda walked quietly out of the room into the library.

Lady Raynham rose from a low chair near the fire. She was a little, insignificant woman, rather unfashionably attired, with neat grey hair and an entirely undistinguished

face, but as she stood there, motionless, waiting for Magda to come up to her, she was quite unconsciously impressive—transformed by that tragic dignity with which great sorrow invests even the most commonplace of people.

Her thin, middle-aged features looked drawn and puckered by long hours of strain. Her eyes were red-rimmed with sleeplessness. They searched Magda's face accusingly before she spoke.

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“What have you done to my son?”

“Where is he?” Magda’s answering question came in almost breathless haste.

“You don’t know!”

Lady Raynham sat down suddenly. Her legs were trembling beneath her—had been trembling uncontrollably even as she nerved herself to stand and confront the woman at whose door she laid the ruin of her son. But now the spurt of nervous energy was exhausted, and she sank back into her chair, thankful for its support.

“I don’t know where he is,” she said tonelessly. “I don’t even know whether he is alive or dead.”

She fumbled in the wrist-bag she carried, and withdrawing a crumpled sheet of notepaper held it out. Magda took it from her mechanically, recognising, with a queer tightening of the muscles of her throat, the boyish handwriting which sprawled across it.

“You want me to read this?” she asked.

“You’ve *got* to read it,” replied the other harshly. “It is written to you. I found it—after he’d gone.”

Her gaze fastened on Magda’s face and clung there unwaveringly while she read the letter.

It was a wild, incoherent outpouring—the headlong confession of a boy’s half-crazed infatuation for a beautiful woman. A pathetic enough document in its confused medley of passionate demand and boyish humbleness. The tragic significance of it was summed up in a few lines at the end—lines which seemed to burn themselves into Magda’s brain:

“I suppose it was cheek my hoping you could ever care, but you were so sweet to me you made me think you did. I know now that you don’t—that you never really cared a brass farthing, and I’m going right away. The same world can’t hold us both any longer. So I’m going out of it.”

Magda looked up from the scrawled page and met the gaze of the sad, merciless eyes that were fixed on her.

“Couldn’t you have left him alone?” Lady Raynham spoke in a low, difficult voice. “You have men enough to pay you compliments and run your errands. I’d only Kit. Couldn’t you have let me keep him? What did you want with my boy’s love. You’d nothing to give him in return?”

“I had!” protested Magda indignantly. “You’re wrong. I was very fond of Kit. I gave him my friendship.”

Her indignation was perfectly sincere. To her, it seemed that Lady Raynham was taking up a most unwarrantable attitude.

“Friendship?” repeated the latter with bitter scorn. “Friendship? Then God help the boys to whom you give it! Before Kit ever met you he was the best and dearest son a woman could have had. He was keen on his work—wild to get on. And he was so gifted it looked as if there were nothing in his profession that he might not do. . . . Then you came! You turned his head, filled his thoughts to the exclusion of all else—work, duty, everything that matters to a lad of two-and-twenty. You spoilt his chances—spoilt his whole life. And now I’ve lost him. I don’t know where he is—whether he is dead or alive.” She paused. “I think he’s dead,” she said dully.

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“I’m sorry if—”

“Sorry!” Lady Raynham interrupted hysterically. Her composure was giving way under the strain of the interview. “Sorry if my son has taken his own life—”

“He hasn’t,” asserted Magda desperately. “He was far too sensible and—and ordinary.”

“Yes. Till you turned his head!”

Lady Raynham rose and walked towards the door as though she had said all she came to say. Magda sprang to her feet.

“I won’t—I won’t be blamed like this!” she exclaimed rebelliously. “It’s unfair! Can I help it if your son chose to fall in love with me? You—you might as well hold me responsible because he is tall or short—or good or bad!”

The other stopped suddenly on her way to the door as though arrested by that last defiant phrase.

“I do,” she said sternly. “It’s women like you who are responsible whether men are good—or bad.”

In silence Magda watched the small, unassuming figure disappear through the doorway. She felt powerless to frame a reply, nor had Lady Raynham waited for one. If her boy were indeed dead—dead by his own hand—she had at least cleared his memory, laid the burden of the mad, rash act he had committed on the shoulders that deserved to bear it.

Normally a shy, retiring kind of woman, loathing anything in the nature of a scene, the tragedy which had befallen her son had inspired Alicia Raynham with the reckless courage of a tigress defending its young. And now that the strain was over and she found herself once more in her brougham, driving homeward with the familiar clip-clop of the fat old carriage-horse’s hoofs in her ears, she shrank back against the cushions marvelling at the temerity which had swept her into the Wielitzska’s presence and endowed her with words that cut like a two-edged sword.

Like a two-edged sword in very truth! Lady Raynham’s final thrust, stabbing at her with its stern denunciation, brought back vividly to Magda Michael Quarrington’s bitter speech—“I’ve no place for your kind of woman.”

Side by side with the recollection came a sudden dart of fear. How would all this stir about Kit Raynham—the impending gossip and censure which seemed likely to be accorded her—affect him? Would he judge her again—as he had judged her before?

She was conscious of a fresh impulse of anger against Lady Raynham. She wanted to forget the past—blot it all out of her memory—and out of the memory of the man whose contempt had hurt her more than anything in her whole life before. And now it seemed as though everything were combining to emphasise those very things which had earned his scorn.

But, apart from a certain apprehension as to how the whole affair might appear in Michael's eyes, she was characteristically unimpressed by her interview with Lady Raynham.

"I don't see," she told Gillian indignantly, "that I'm to blame because the boy lost his head. His mother was—stupid."

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Gillian regarded her consideringly. To her, the whole pitiful tragedy was so clear. She could envisage the point of view of Kit's mother only too well, and sympathise with it. Yet, understanding Magda better than most people did, she realised that the dancer was hardly as culpable as Lady Raynham thought her.

Homage and admiration were as natural to Magda as the air she breathed, and it made very little impression on her whether a man more or less lost his heart to her or not. Moreover, as Gillian recognised it was almost inevitable that this should be the case. The influences by which Magda had been surrounded during the first ten plastic years of childhood had all tended to imbue her with the idea that men were only to be regarded as playthings, and that from the simple standpoint of self-defence it was wiser not to take them seriously. If you did, they invariably showed a disposition to become tyrants. Gillian made allowance for this; nevertheless she had no intention of letting Magda down lightly.

"I believe you were created without a soul," she informed her candidly.

Magda smiled a little.

"Do you know you're the second person to tell me that?" she said. "The idea's not a bit original. Michael Quarrington told me the same thing in other words. Perhaps, perhaps it's true."

"Of course, it's not true!" Gillian contradicted her warmly. "I only said it because I was so out of patience with you."

"Everybody seems to be hating me rather badly just now." Magda spoke somewhat forlornly. "And yet—I don't think I'm any different from usual."

"I don't think you are," retorted Gillian. "But it's your 'usual' that's so disastrous. You go sailing through life like a beautiful cold star—perfectly impassive and heartless."

"I'm not heartless. I love you—and Marraine. You surely don't blame me because I don't 'fall in love'? . . . I don't *want* to fall in love," she added with sudden vehemence.

"I wish to goodness you would!" exclaimed Gillian impatiently. "If only you cared enough about anybody to do something really outrageous—run off with another woman's husband, even—I believe I should respect you more than I do now."

Magda laughed.

"Gillyflower, I'm afraid you've no morals. And you here in the capacity of watchdog and duenna, too!"

“It’s all very well to make a joke of everything. But I know—I’m sure this business about Kit Raynham is going to be more serious than you think. It’s bound to affect you.”

Magda stared at her blankly.

“What nonsense! Affect me—why should it? How can it?”

“How can it?”—with bitterness. “Everyone will talk—more than usual! You can’t smash up people’s only sons—not lovable, popular boys like Kit—without there being a fuss. You—you should have left a kid like that alone.”

And she went out of the room, banging the door behind her like a big full-stop.

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Gillian's prophecy proved only too accurate. People did talk. Kit Raynham had been a general favourite in society, and his disappearance, taken in conjunction with the well-known fact of his infatuation for Magda, created a sensation.

Even when the theory of suicide was finally disproved by his mother's receiving a letter from Australia, whither it appeared, the boy had betaken himself and his disappointment, people seemed at first disinclined to overlook Magda's share in the matter. For a time even her immense prestige as a dancer suffered some eclipse, but this, with a performer of her supreme artistry, was bound to be only a passing phase.

The world will always condone where it wants to be amused. And—now that the gloom of young Raynham's supposed suicide was lifted from the affair—there was a definite aroma of romance about it which was not without its appeal to the younger generation.

So that gradually the pendulum swung back and Magda's audiences were once again as big and enthusiastic as ever. Perhaps even more enthusiastic, since the existence of a romantic and dramatic attachment sheds a certain glamour about any well-known artiste.

All of which affected Magda herself comparatively little—though it irritated her that her actions should be criticised. What did affect her, however, absorbing her thoughts to the exclusion of all other matters, was that since the night of Lady Arabella's reception she had received neither word nor sign from Michael Quarrington.

She could not understand it. Had he been a different type of man she might have credited him with having yielded to a sudden impulse, kissing her as some men will kiss women—lightly and without giving or asking more than the moment's caress.

But Quarrington was essentially not the man to be carried away by a passing fancy. That he had cared for her against his will, against his better judgment, Magda could not but realise. *But he had cared!* She was sure of it. And he was the only man for whom her own pulses had ever beaten one whit the faster.

His touch, the sound of his voice, the swift, hawk-like glance of those grey eyes of his, had power to wake in her a vague tumult of emotion at once sweet and frightening; and in that brief moment in the "Garden of Eden," when he had held her in his arms, she had been tremulously ready to yield—to surrender to the love which claimed her.

But the days had multiplied to weeks and still the silence which had followed remained unbroken. As far as Magda was concerned, Michael seemed to have walked straight out of her life, and she was too proud—and too much hurt—to inquire amongst her friends for news of him. It was her godmother who finally tersely enlightened her as to his whereabouts.

Characteristically, Lady Arabella had withheld her judgment regarding the Kit Raynham affair until it was found that he had betaken himself off to Australia. But when the whole of the facts were evident, she allowed nothing—neither the romantic dreams of the episode nor her own warm affection for her god-daughter—to obscure her clear-sighted vision.

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Magda twisted her slim shoulders irritably when taken to task.

“I think I’m tired of being blamed for Kit Raynham’s idiocy,” she said, a note of resentment in her voice. “No one seems to consider my side of the question! I was merely nice to him in an ordinary sort of way, and there wasn’t the least need for him to have chucked up everything and rushed off to the other side of the world like that. *I* couldn’t help it!”

Lady Arabella made a gesture of despair.

“I don’t believe you could,” she acknowledged helplessly. “I’m really beginning to have a sneaking sympathy with poor Hugh for shelving the responsibility of having brought you into the world. But at least you might refrain from baby-snatching!” she added wrathfully.

Magda protested.

“Marraine! You’re abominable! Kit is four-and-twenty if he’s a day. And I’m barely twenty.”

“That has nothing whatever to do with it,” retorted Lady Arabella incisively. “Kit is a babe in arms, while you—you’re as old as Eve.” She paused. “Anyway, you’ve broken his heart and driven him to the ends of the earth.”

“Where he’ll probably paste together the pieces and offer the repaired article to someone else.”

Lady Arabella looked up sharply. Cynicism was usually far enough away from Magda. She was too full of the joy of life and of the genuine delight an artist finds in his art to have place for it. Egoist she might be, with the unthinking egotism of youth, irresponsible in her gay acceptance of the love and admiration showered on her, but there was nothing bitter or sour in her composition. Lady Arabella, seeking an explanation for the unwonted, cast her mind back on the events of the last few weeks—-and smiled to herself.

“I suppose you know you’ve driven someone else out of England besides Kit Raynham?” she said.

“Whom do you mean?”

Magda spoke mechanically. A faint colour crept up under her white skin, and she avoided her godmother’s keen gaze.

“That charming artist-man—Michael Quarrington.”

“Has—he left England?” Magda’s throat felt suddenly parched. Then with an effort she went on: “You’re surely not going to put the entire steamship’s passenger list down to me, Marraine?”

“Only those names for which I happen to know you’re responsible.”

“You don’t know about Saint Mi—about Mr. Quarrington. It’s mere guesswork on your part.”

“Most of the things we really know in life are mere guesswork,” replied Lady Arabella sagely. “But in this case——”

“Yes. In this case?”

There was a long pause. Then Lady Arabella answered slowly:

“In this case I’m speaking from first-hand information.”

Magda’s slender figure tautened. She moistened her lips.

“Do you mean that Mr. Quarrington told you he was leaving England on my account?” she asked.

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“I don’t often meddle, Magda—not really meddle.” Lady Arabella’s voice sounded unusually deprecating. “But I did in this instance. Because—oh, my dear, he’s the only man I’ve ever seen to whom I’d be glad to give you up. He’d—he’d manage you, Magda.”

Magda’s head was turned away, but the sudden scarlet flush that flew up into her face surged over even the white nape of her neck.

“And he loves you,” went on Lady Arabella, her voice softening incredibly. “It’s only a man here or there who really *loves* a woman, my dear. Most of them whip up a hotch-potch of quite commonplace feelings with a dash of passion and call it love, while all they actually want is a good housekeeper and presentable hostess and someone to carry on the name.”

No answer came from Magda, unless a stifled murmur could be regarded as such, and after a few minutes Lady Arabella spoke again, irritably.

“Why couldn’t you have left Kit alone?”

Magda raised her head.

“What has that to do with it?”

“Everything”—succinctly. “I told you I meddled. Michael Quarrington came to see me before he went away—and I know precisely why he left England. I asked him to go and see you before he sailed.”

“What did he say?” The words were almost inaudible.

Lady Arabella hesitated. Then she quoted quickly: “’There is no need. She will understand.’”

To Magda the brief sentence held all the finality of the bolting and barring of a door. So Quarrington, like everyone else, had heard the story of Kit Raynham! And he had judged and sentenced her.

That night in the winter-garden he had been on the verge of trusting her, ready to believe in her, and she had vowed to herself that she would prove worthy of his trust. She had meant never to fall short of all that Michael demanded in the woman he loved. And now, before she had had a chance to justify his hardly-won belief, the past had risen up to destroy her, surging over her like a great tidal wave and sweeping away the whole fabric of the happiness she had visioned.

She had not wholly realised before that she loved. But she knew now. As the empty weeks dragged along she learned what it meant to long for the beloved one’s presence

—the sound and touch of voice or hand—with an aching, unassuagable longing that seems to fuse body and soul into a single entity of pain.

Outwardly she appeared unchanged. Her pride was indomitable, and exactly how much Michael's going had meant to her not even Gillian suspected—though the latter was too sensitive and sympathetic not to realise that Magda had passed through some experience which had touched her keenly. Ignorant of the incidents that had occurred on the night of Lady Arabella's party, she was disposed to assign the soreness of spirit she discerned in her friend to the general happenings which had followed from the Raynham episode. And amongst these she gave a certain definite place to the abrupt withdrawal of Quarrington's friendship, and resented it. She felt curiously disappointed in the man. With such fine perceptive faculty as he possessed she would have expected him to be more tolerant—more merciful in his judgment.

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Once she had tentatively approached the subject, but Magda had clearly indicated that she had no intention of discussing it.

Not even to Gillian, whom she had gradually come to look upon as her closest friend, could Magda unveil the wound to her pride. No one, no one in the whole world, should know that she had been ready to give her love—and that the offering had been silently, but none the less decisively, rejected.

Diane's warning now found its echo in her own heart: "Never give your heart to any man. If you do he will only break it for you—break it into little pieces like the glass scent-bottle which you dropped yesterday."

"She was right," Magda told herself bitterly. "A thousand times right!"

CHAPTER IX

THE BACK OF BEYOND

The season was drawing to its close. London lay sweltering under a heat-wave which had robbed the trees in the Park of their fresh June greenness and converted the progress of foot-passengers along its sultry pavements into something which called to mind the mediaeval ordeal of walking over hot ploughshares.

Even the garden at Friars' Holm, usually a coolly green oasis in the midst of the surrounding streets, seemed as airless as any back court or alley, and Coppertop, who had been romping ever more and more flaggingly with a fox-terrier puppy he had recently acquired, finally gave up the effort and flung himself down, red-faced and panting, on the lawn where his mother and Magda were sitting.

"Isn't it nearly time for us to go to the seaside, mummie?" he inquired plaintively.

Magda smiled down at the small wistful face.

"How would you like to go to the country instead, Topkins?" she asked. "To a farm where they have pigs and horses and cows, and heaps of cream—"

"And strawberries?" interpolated Coppertop pertinently.

"Oh, of course. Or, no—they'll be over by the time we get there. But there'll be raspberries. That's just as good, isn't it?"

Gillian looked up, smiling a little.

"It's settled we're going 'there,' then—wherever it is?" she said.

“Do you think you’d like it, Gillyflower?” asked Magda. “It’s a farm I’ve heard of in Devonshire, where they want to take paying-guests for the summer.”

Gillian, guessing from Magda’s manner that the whole matter was practically arranged, nodded acquiescence.

“I’m sure I should. But will *you*?”—whimsically. She glanced at the sophisticated simplicity of Magda’s white gown, at the narrow suede shoes and filmy stockings—-every detail of her dress and person breathing the expensiveness and luxury and highly specialised civilisation of the city. “Somehow I can’t imagine you—on a farm in the depths of the country! I believe you’ll hate it.”

“I shall like it.” Magda got up restlessly. “I’m sick of society and the theatre and the eternal gossip that goes on in London. I—I want to get away from it all!”

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Gillian's thoughts turned back to the happenings of the last few months. She thought she understood what lay behind Magda's sudden decision to bury herself in the country.

"Have you taken rooms at this farm?" she asked.

"Yes, I have"—shortly. Then, with one of those sudden flashes of affectionate insight which were part of her essential lovableness, she went on: "Gilly, are you sure you don't mind? I ought to have asked you first"—remorsefully. "I expect you'll be bored to death. Perhaps you'd rather not come?"

Gillian's quiet brown eyes smiled at her reassuringly.

"'Where thou goest—'" she quoted. "Of course I want to come. I've never been to Devonshire. And I know Coppertop will adore the pigs and cows—"

"And cream," put in Coppertop ruminatively.

"Tell me about the place," said Gillian. "How did you hear of it?"

"Through the prosaic columns of the *Daily Post*," replied Magda. "I didn't want a place recommended by anyone I knew. That doesn't cut the connecting line one bit. Probably the people who've recommended it to you decide to look you up in their car, just when you think you're safely buried, and disinter you. I don't *want* to be disinterred. I propose to get right away into the country, out of reach of everybody we know, for two months. I shan't give our address to anyone except Melrose, and he can forward on all letters." A small amused smile crossed her lips. "Then we can answer them or not, exactly as we feel disposed. It will be heavenly."

"Still I don't know where this particular paradise is which you've selected," returned Gillian patiently.

"It's at the back of beyond—a tiny village in Devonshire called Ashencombe. I just managed to find it on the Ordnance map with a magnifying glass! The farm itself is called Stockleigh and is owned and farmed by some people named Storran. The answer to my letter was signed Dan Storran. Hasn't it a nice sound—Storran of Stockleigh?"

"And did you engage the rooms on those grounds, may I ask? Because the proprietor's name 'had a nice sound'?"

Magda regarded her seriously.

"Do you know, I really believe that had a lot to do with it," she acknowledged.

Gillian went off into a little gale of laughter.

“How like you!” she exclaimed.

The train steamed fussily out of Ashencombe station, leaving Magda, Gillian, and Coppertop, together with sundry trunks and suitcases, in undisputed possession of the extremely amateurish-looking platform. Magda glanced about her with amusement.

“What a ridiculous little wayside place!” she exclaimed. “It has a kind of ‘home-made’ appearance, hasn’t it? You’d hardly expect a real bona fide train to stop here!”

“This your luggage, miss?”

A porter—or, to be accurate, *the* porter, since Ashencombe boasted but one—-addressed her abruptly. From a certain inimical gleam in his eye Magda surmised that he had overheard her criticism.

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“Yes.” She nodded smilingly. “Is there a trap of any kind to meet us?”

Being a man as well as a porter he melted at once under Magda’s disarming smile, and replied with a sudden accession of amiability.

“Be you going to Stockleigh?” he asked. The soft sing-song intonation common to all Devon voices fell very pleasantly on ears accustomed to the Cockney twang of London streets.

“Yes, to Storran of Stockleigh,” announced Coppertop importantly.

The porter’s mouth widened into an appreciative grin.

“That’s right, young master, and there’s the wagonette from the Crown and Bells waiting to take you there.”

A few minutes later, the luggage precariously piled up on the box-seat beside the driver, they were ambling through the leafy Devon lanes at an unhurried pace apparently dictated by the somewhat ancient quadruped between the shafts. The driver swished his whip negligently above the animal’s broad back, but presumably more with the idea of keeping off the flies than with any hope of accelerating his speed. There would be no other train to meet at Ashencombe until the down mail, due four hours later, so why hurry? No one ever appears to be in a hurry in the leisurely West Country—a refreshing characteristic in a world elsewhere so perforated by tubes and shaken by the ubiquitous motor-bus.

Magda leaned back in the wagonette with a sigh of pleasure. The drowsy, sunshiny peace of the July afternoon seemed very far removed from the torrid rush and roar of the previous day in London.

It was almost like entering another world. Instead of the crowded, wood-paved streets, redolent of petrol, this winding ribbon of a lane where the brambles and tufted grass leaned down from close-set hedges to brush the wheels of the carriage as it passed. Overhead, a restful sky of misty blue flecked with wisps of white cloud, while each inconsequent turn of the narrow twisting road revealed a sudden glimpse of distant purple hills, or a small friendly cottage built of cob and crowned with yellow thatch, or high-hedged fields of standing corn, deepening to gold and quiveringly still as the sea on a windless afternoon.

At last the wagonette swung round an incredibly sharp turn and rumbled between two granite posts—long since denuded of the gate which had once swung between them—-pulling up in front of a low, two-storied house, which seemed to convey a pleasant sense of welcome, as some houses do.

The casement windows stood wide open and through them you caught glimpses of white curtains looped back with lavender ribbons. Roses, pink and white and red, nodded their heads to you from the walls, even peering out impertinently to catch the sun from beneath the eaves of the roof, whose thatch had mellowed to a somber brown with wind and weather. Above the doorway trails of budding honeysuckle challenged the supremacy of more roses in their summer prime, and just within, in the cool shadow of the porch, stood a woman's slender figure.

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Gillian never forgot that first glimpse of June Storran. She looked very simple and girlish as she stood there, framed in the rose-covered trellis of the porch, waiting with a slight stir of nervousness to receive the travellers. The sunlight, filtering between the leaves of the honeysuckle, dappled her ash-blond hair with hovering flecks of gold, and a faint, shy smile curved her lips as she came forward, a little hesitatingly, to greet them.

“I am so glad to see you,” she said. “Dan—my husband had to go to Exeter to-day. He was sorry he could not meet you himself at the station.”

As she and Magda stood side by side the contrast between them was curiously marked—the one in her obviously homemade cotton frock, with her total absence of poise and her look of extreme youth hardly seeming the married woman that she was, the other gowned with the simplicity of line and detailed finish achieved only by a great dressmaker, her quiet assurance and distinctive little air of *savoir vivre* setting her worlds apart from Dan Storran’s young wife.

“Will you come in? The man will see to your luggage.”

June was speaking again, still shyly but with her shyness tempered by a sensitive instinct of hospitality. She led the way into the house and they followed her through a big, low-raftered living-room and up a flight of slippery oak stairs.

“These are your rooms,” said June, pausing at last at the end of a rambling passage-way. “I hope”—she flushed a little anxiously—“I do hope you will like them. I’ve made them as nice as I could. But, of course”—she glanced at Magda deprecatingly—“you will find them very different from London rooms.”

Magda flashed her a charming smile.

“I’m sure we shall love them,” she answered, glancing about her with genuine appreciation.

The rooms were very simply furnished, but sweet and fresh with chintz and flowers, and the whitewashed ceilings, sloping at odd, unexpected angles, gave them a quaint attractiveness. The somewhat coarse but spotless bed-linen exhaled a faint fragrance of lavender.

“You ought to charge extra for the view alone,” observed Gillian, going to one of the open lattice windows and looking across the rise and fall of hill and valley to where the distant slopes of Dartmoor, its craggy tors veiled in a grey-blue haze, rimmed the horizon.

“I hope you didn’t think the terms too high?” said June. “You see, I—we never had paying-guests before, and I really didn’t know what would be considered fair. I do hope you’ll be happy and comfortable here,” she added timidly.

There was something very appealing in her ingenuousness and wistful desire to please, and Magda reassured her quickly.

“I haven’t any doubt about it,” she said, smiling. “This is such a charming house”—-glancing about her—“so dear and old-fashioned. I think it’s very good of you to let us share your home for a little while. It will be a lovely holiday for us.”

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June Storran had no possibility of knowing that this dark, slender woman to whom she had let her rooms was the famous dancer, Magda Wielitzska, since the rooms had been engaged in the name of Miss Vallincourt, but she responded to Magda's unfailing charm as a flower to the sun.

"It will be lovely for us, too," she replied. "Do you know, we were so frightened about putting in that advertisement you answered! Dan was terribly against it." A troubled little frown knitted her level brows. "But we've had such bad luck on the farm since we were married—the rain spoilt all our crops last year and we lost several valuable animals—so I thought it would help a bit if we took paying-guests this summer. But Dan didn't really approve."

"I can quite understand," said Gillian. "Naturally he wanted to keep his home to himself—an Englishman's home is his castle, you know! And I expect"—smilingly—"you haven't been married very long."

Mrs. Storran flushed rosily. She was evidently a sensitive little person, and the blood came and went quickly under her clear skin at the least provocation.

"Not very long," she acknowledged. "But we've been very happy—in spite of our bad luck on the farm! After all, that's what matters, isn't it?"

"It's the only thing that really matters at all," said Gillian. Her eyes had grown suddenly soft with some tender recollection of the past. "But you mustn't let us give you a lot of trouble while we're here. You don't look over-strong." Her glance rested kindly on her hostess's young face. In spite of its dewy blue eyes and clear skin with the tinge of wild-rose pink in the cheeks, it conveyed a certain impression of fragility. She looked almost as though a vigorous puff of wind might blow her away.

"Oh, I'm quite well. Of course I found looking after a farmhouse rather heavy work—just at first. I hadn't been used to it, and we can't afford to keep a servant. You see, I married Dan against the wishes of my people, so of course we couldn't accept any help from them, though they have offered it."

"I don't see why not," objected Magda. "They can't feel very badly about it if they are willing to help you."

"Oh, no—they would, gladly. But Dan would hate it in the circumstances. You can understand that, can't you?"—appealingly. "He wants to justify himself—to prove that he can keep his own wife. He'd be too proud to let me take anything from them."

"Storran of Stockleigh appears to be considerably less attractive than his name," summed up Gillian, as, half an hour later, she and Magda and Coppertop were seated

round a rustic wooden table in the garden partaking of a typical Devonshire tea with its concomitants of jam and clotted cream.

“Apparently,” she continued, “he has married ‘above him.’ Little Mrs. Storran obviously comes of good stock, while I expect he himself is just an ordinary sort of farmer and doesn’t half appreciate her. Anyway, he doesn’t seem to consider her much.”

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Magda made no answer. Characteristically her interest in June Storran had evaporated, pushed aside by something of more personal concern.

“This is the most restful, peaceful spot I’ve ever struck,” she said, leaning back with a sigh of pleasure. “Isn’t it lovely, Gilly? There’s something homelike and friendly about the whole landscape—a sort of *intimate* feeling. I feel as if I’d known it all for years—-and should like to know it for years more! Don’t they say Devon folk always want to come home to die? I’m not surprised.”

“Yes, it’s very beautiful,” agreed Gillian, her gaze resting contentedly on the gracious curves of green and golden fields, broken here and there by stretches of ploughed land glowing warmly red between the ripening corn and short-cropped pasture.

“I believe I could be quite good here, Gillyflower,” pursued Magda reflectively. “Just live happily from one day to the next, breathing this glorious air, and eating plain, simple food, and feeding those adorable fluffy yellow balls Mrs. Storran calls chickens, and churning butter and—”

Gillian’s ringing, whole-hearted laughter checked this enthusiastic epitome of the simple life.

“Never, Magda!” she asserted, shaking her head. “I’m quite expecting you to get bored in about a week and to rush me off to Deauville or somewhere of that ilk. And as to being ’good’—why, it isn’t in you!”

“I’m not so sure.” Magda rose and together they strolled over the grass towards the house, Coppertop skirmishing happily behind them. “I really think I might be good here—if only for the sole reason that there’s no temptation to be anything else”—drily.

As she spoke a gate clicked close at hand. Followed the sound of quick, striding steps, and the next moment a man’s figure rounded the tall yew hedge which skirted the foot of the garden and came towards them.

He was a big giant of a man—at least six foot two in his socks, and proportionately broad and muscular in build. There was something free and bold in his swinging gait that seemed to challenge the whole world. It suggested an almost fierce independence of spirit that would give or take as it chose, but would never brook dictation from any man—or woman either.

Instinctively Magda and Gillian paused, and Magda held out a slim hand, smiling, as he overtook them.

“I’m sure you must be Mr. Storran,” she said.

He halted abruptly and snatched off his cap, revealing a crop of crinkly dark-brown hair thatching a lean sunburnt face, out of which gleamed a pair of eyes as vividly blue as periwinkles.

“Yes, I’m Dan Storran,” he said simply. “Is it Miss Vallincourt?”

Magda nodded and proceeded to introduce Gillian. But Storran’s glance only rested cursorily on Gillian’s soft, pretty face, returning at once to Magda’s as though drawn thither by a magnet.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t meet your train myself to-day,” he said, a note of eager apology in his voice.

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Magda smiled at him.

“So am I,” she answered.

CHAPTER X

FOREBODINGS

Gillian was sitting alone in the yew-hedged garden, her slim fingers busy repairing the holes which appeared with unfailing regularity in the heels of Coppertop’s stockings. From the moment he had come to Stockleigh the number and size of the said holes had increased appreciably, for, although five weeks had elapsed since the day of arrival, Coppertop was still revelling whole-heartedly in the incredible daily delights which, from the viewpoint of six years old, attach to a farm.

Day after day found him trotting contentedly in the wake of the stockman, one Ned Honeycott, whom he had adopted as guide, philosopher, and friend, and whom he regarded as a veritable fount of knowledge and the provider of unlimited adventure and entertainment.

It was Honeycott who lifted Coppertop on to the broad back of the steadiest cart-horse; who had taught him how to feed calves by dipping his chubby little hand into a pail of milk and then letting them suck the milk from off his fingers; who beneficently contrived that hardly a load of hay was driven to the great rick without Coppertop’s small person perched proudly aloft thereon, his slim legs dangling and his shrill voice joining with that of the carter in an encouraging “Come-up, Blossom,” to the bay mare as she plodded forward between the shafts.

Gillian experienced no anxiety with regard to Coppertop’s safety while he was in Ned Honeycott’s charge, but she missed the childish companionship, the more so as she found herself frequently alone these days. June Storran was naturally occupied about her house and dairy, while Magda, under Dan Storran’s tutelage, appeared smitten with an extraordinary interest in farm management.

It seemed to Gillian that Magda and Dan were in each other’s company the greater part of the time. Every day Dan had some suggestion or other to make for Miss Vallincourt’s amusement. Either it was: “Would you care to see the hay-loader at work?” Or: “I’ve just bought a couple of pedigree Devon cows I’d like to show you, Miss Vallincourt.” Or, as yesterday: “There’s a pony fair to be held to-morrow at Pennaway Bridge. Would you care to drive in it?” And to each and all of Storran’s suggestions Magda had yielded a ready assent.

So this morning had seen the two of them setting out for Pennaway in Dan's high dog-cart, while Gillian and June stood together in the rose-covered porch and watched them depart.

"Wouldn't you like to have gone?" Gillian asked on a sudden impulse.

She regretted the question the instant it had passed her lips, for in the wide-apart blue eyes June turned upon her there was something of the mute, puzzled misery of a dog that has received an unexpected blow.

"I couldn't spare the time," she answered hastily. "You see"—the sensitive colour as usual coming and going quickly in her face—"Miss Vallincourt is on a holiday."

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She turned and went quickly into the house, leaving Gillian conscious of a sudden uneasiness—that queer “trouble ahead” feeling which descends upon us sometimes, without warning and without our being able to assign any very definite cause for it.

She was thinking over the little incident now, as she sat sewing in the evening light, and meditating whether she should give Magda a hint that it might be kinder of her not to monopolise so much of Dan’s society. And then the crisp sound of a horse trotting on the hard, dry road came to her ears, and almost immediately the high dog-cart swung between the granite gateposts and clattered into the yard.

Dan tossed the reins on to the horse’s neck and, springing to the ground, came round to help Magda down from the cart.

“It’s rather a steep step. Let me lift you down,” he said.

“Very well.”

Magda stood up in the trap and looked down at him with smiling eyes, unconsciously delighting in his sheer physical good looks. He was a magnificent specimen of manhood, and the good yeoman blood in him, which had come down through the generations of the same sturdy stock, proclaimed itself in his fine physique and splendid virility.

A moment later he had swung her down as easily as though she were a child, and she was standing beside him.

She laughed up at him.

“Oh, ’girt Jan Ridd’!” she exclaimed softly.

He laughed back, well pleased. (Was there ever a man who failed to be ridiculously flattered by a feminine tribute to his physical strength?) Nor did his hands release her quite at once.

“You’re as light as a feather! I could carry you all day and—”

“Not know it!” concluded Magda gaily.

His hands fell away from her slim body abruptly.

“Oh, I should know it right enough!” he said jerkily.

His eyes kindled, and Magda, conscious of something suddenly disturbing and electric in the atmosphere, turned quickly and, leaving Storran to unharness the horse, made her way to where she espied Gillian sitting.

The latter looked up from her sewing.

“So you’ve got back? Did you have a good time?”

“Yes. It was quite amusing. There were heaps and heaps of ponies—some of them wild, unbroken colts which had been brought straight off the Moor. They were rearing and plunging all over the place. I loved them! By the way, I’m gong to learn riding, Gillyflower. Mr. Storran has offered to teach me. He says he has a nice quiet mare I could start on.”

A small frown puckered Gillian’s brows.

“Do you think Mrs. Storran will like it?”

Magda started.

“Why on earth shouldn’t she?”

“Well,”—Gillian spoke with a vague discomfort. “He’s her husband!”

“I don’t see what that has to do with it,” replied Magda. “We’re staying here and, of course, the Storrans want to make it as nice as they can for us. Anyway, I’m going to take such goods as the gods provide.”

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She got up abruptly and went in the direction of the house, leaving Gillian to digest as best she might the hint that her interference was not likely to be either welcomed or effective.

Left to herself, Gillian sighed unhappily. Almost she wished they had never come to Stockleigh, only that it was pure joy to her to see Coppertop's rather thin little cheeks filling out and growing sunburnt and rosy. He had not picked up strength very readily after his attack of croup, and subsequently the intense heat in London had tried him a good deal.

But she was gradually becoming apprehensive that disturbing consequences might accrue from Magda's stay at Stockleigh Farm. A woman of her elusive charm, equipped with all the subtle lore that her environment had taught her, must almost inevitably hold for a man of Storran's primitive way of life the fascination of something new and rather wonderful. To contrast his wife with her was to contrast a field-flower with some rare, exotic bloom, and Gillian was conscious of a sudden rush of sympathy for June's unarmoured youth and inexperience.

Magda's curiously uncertain moods of late, too, had worried her not a little. She was unlike herself—at times brooding and introspective, at other times strung up to a species of forced gaiety—a gaiety which had the cold sparkle of frost or diamonds. With all her faults Magda had ever been lovably devoid of bitterness, but now it seemed as though she were developing a certain new quality of hardness.

It puzzled Gillian, ignorant of that sudden discovery and immediate loss of the Garden of Eden. It might have been less of an enigma to old Lady Arabella, to whom the jigsaw puzzle of human motives and impulses was always a matter of absorbing interest, and who, as more or less an onlooker at life during the last thirty years, had become an adept in the art of fitting the pieces of the puzzle together.

Magda herself was only conscious of an intense restlessness and dissatisfaction with existence in general. She reflected bitterly that she had been a fool to let slip her hold of herself—as she had done the night of Lady Arabella's reception—even for a moment.

It had been thoroughly drilled into her both by precept and example—her mother's precept and her father's example—that to let a man count for anything much in her life was the biggest mistake a woman could make, and Michael's treatment of her had driven home the truth of all the warnings Diane had instilled.

He had hurt her as she had never been hurt before, and all that she craved now was change. Change and amusement to drug her mind so that she need not think. Whether anyone else got hurt in the process was a question that never presented itself to her.

She had not expected to find amusement at Stockleigh. She had been driven there by an overmastering desire to escape from London—for a few weeks, at least, to get right away from her accustomed life and from everyone who knew her. And at Stockleigh she had found Dan Storran.

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The homage that had leaped into his eyes the first moment they had rested on her, and which had slowly deepened as the days slipped by, had somehow soothed her, restoring her feminine poise which Michael's sudden defection had shaken.

She knew—as every woman always does know when a man is attracted by her—that she had the power to stir this big, primitive countryman, whose way of life had never before brought him into contact with her type of woman, just as she had stirred other men. And she carelessly accepted the fact, without a thought that in playing with Dan Storran's emotions she was dealing with a man who knew none of the moves of the game, to whom the art of love-making as a pastime was an unknown quantity, and whose fierce, elemental passions, once aroused, might prove difficult to curb. He amused her and kept her thoughts off recent happenings, and for the moment that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER XI

STORRAN OF STOCKLEIGH

It was a glorious morning. The sun blazed like a great golden shield out of a cloudless sky, and hardly a breath of air stirred the foliage of the trees.

Magda, to content an insatiable Coppertop, had good-naturally suffered herself to be dragged over the farm. They had visited the pigs—a new and numerous litter of fascinating black ones having recently made their debut into this world of sin—and had watched the cows being milked, and been chased by the irascible gander, and finally, laughing and breathless, they had made good their escape into the garden where Gillian sat sewing, and had flung themselves down exhaustedly on the grass at her feet.

"I'm in a state of mental and moral collapse, Gilly," declared Magda, fanning herself vigorously with a cabbage leaf. "Whew! It is hot! As soon as I can generate enough energy, I propose to bathe. Will you come?"

Gillian shook her head lazily.

"I think not to-day. I want to finish this overall for Coppertop. And it's such a long trudge from here down to the river."

"Yes, I know." Magda nodded. "It's three interminable fields away—and the thistles and things prick one's ankles abominably. Still, it's lovely when you *do* get there! I think I'll go now"—springing up from the velvet turf—"before I get too lazy to move."

Gillian's eyes followed her thoughtfully as she made her way into the house. She had never seen Magda so restless—she seemed unable to keep still a moment.

Half an hour later Magda emerged from the house wrapped in a cloak, a little scarlet bathing-cap turbanning her dark hair, and a pair of sandals on the slim supple feet that had danced their way into the hearts of half of Europe.

“Good-bye!” she called gaily, waving her hand. And went out by the wicket gate leading into the fields.

There was not a soul in sight. Only the cows, their red, burnished coats gleaming like the skin of a horse-chestnut in the hot sun, cast ruminative glances at her white-cloaked figure as it passed, and occasionally a peacefully grazing sheep emitted an astonished bleat at the unusual vision and skedaddled away in a hurry.

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Magda emulated Agag in her progress across the field which intervened between the house and the river, now and then giving vent to a little cry of protest as a particularly prickly thistle or hidden trail of bramble whipped against her bare ankles.

At last from somewhere near at hand came the cool gurgle of running water and, bending her steps in the direction of the sound, two minutes' further walking brought her to the brink of the river. Further up it came tumbling through the valley, leaping the rocks in a churning torrent of foam, a cloud of delicate up-flung spray feathering the air above it; but here there were long stretches of deep, smooth water where no boulder broke the surface into spume, and quiet pools where fat little trout heedlessly squandered the joyous moments of a precarious existence.

Magda threw off her wrapper and, picking her way across the moss-grown rocks, paused for an instant on the bank, her slender figure, clad in its close-fitting scarlet bathing-suit, vividly outlined against the surrounding green of the landscape. Then she plunged in and struck out downstream, swimming with long, even strokes, the soft moorland water laving her throat like the touch of a satin-smooth hand.

She was heading for a spot she knew of, a quarter of a mile below, where a wooden bridge spanned the river and the sun's heat poured down unchecked by sheltering trees. Here she proposed to scramble out and bask in the golden warmth.

She had just established herself on a big, sun-warmed boulder when a familiar step sounded on the bridge and Dan Storran's tall figure emerged into view. He pulled up sharply as he caught sight of her, his face taking on a schoolboy look of embarrassment. Deauville *plage*, where people bathed in companionable parties and strolled in and out of the water as seemed good to them, was something altogether outside Dan's ken.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he began, flushing uncomfortably.

Magda waved to him airily.

"You needn't be. I'm having a sun-bath. You can stay and talk to me if you like. Or are you too busy farming this morning?"

"No, I'm not too busy," he said slowly.

There was a curious dazzled look in his eyes as they rested on her. Sheathed in the stockingette bathing-suit she wore, every line and curve of her supple body was revealed. Her wet, white limbs gleamed pearl-like in the quivering sunlight. The beauty of her ran through his veins like wine.

"Then come and amuse me!" Magda patted the warm surface of the rock beside her invitingly. "You can give me a cigarette to begin with."

Storran sat down and pulled out his case. As he held a match for her to light up from, his hand brushed hers and he drew it away sharply. It was trembling absurdly.

He sat silent for a moment or two; then he said with an odd abruptness:

“I suppose you find it frightfully dull down here?”

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Magda laughed a little.

“Is that because I told you to come and amuse me? . . . No, I don’t find it dull. Change is never really dull.”

“Well, you must find it change enough here from the sort of life you’ve been accustomed to lead.”

“How do you know what sort of life I lead?”—teasingly.

“I can guess. One has only to look at you. You’re different—different from everyone about here. The way you move—you’re like a thoroughbred amongst cart-horses.” He spoke with a kind of sullen bitterness.

Magda drew her feet up on to the rock and clasped her hands round her knees.

“Now you’re talking nonsense, you know,” she said amusedly. “Frankly, I like it down here immensely. I happened to be—rather worried when I came away from London, and there’s something very soothing and comforting about the country—particularly your lovely Devon country.”

“Worried?” Storran’s face darkened. “Who’d been worrying you?”

“Oh”—vaguely. “All sorts of things. Men—and women. But don’t let’s talk about worries to-day. This glorious sunshine makes me feel as though there weren’t any such things in the world.”

She leaned back, stretching her arms luxuriously above her head with the lithe, sensuous grace of movement which her training had made second nature. Storran’s eyes dwelt on her with a queer tensity of expression. Every gesture, every tone of her curiously attractive voice, held for him a disturbing allure which he could not analyse and against which he was fighting blindly.

He had never doubted his love for his wife. Quite honestly he had believed her the one woman in the world when he married her. Yet now he was beginning to find every hour a blank that did not bring him sight or sound of this other woman—this woman with her slender limbs and skin like a stephanotis petal, and her long Eastern eyes with the subtle lure which seemed to lie in their depths. Beside her June’s young peach-bloom prettiness faded into something colourless and insignificant.

“It must be nice to be you”—Magda nodded at him. “With no vague, indefinable sort of things to worry you.”

He smiled reluctantly.

“How do you know I haven’t?”

“Oh, because I do.”

“A woman’s reason!”

“Quite. But women’s reasons are generally very sound—we were endowed with a sixth sense, you know! Besides—it’s obvious, isn’t it? Here you are—you and June—living a simple, primitive kind of existence, all to yourselves, like Adam and Eve. And if you do have a worry it’s a real definite one—as when a cow inconveniently goes and dies or your root crop fails. Nothing intangible and uncertain about that!”

“Have you forgotten that the serpent intruded even upon Adam and Eve?” he asked quietly.

She laughed.

“Is that a hit at Gillian and me? I know—June told us—that you were horribly opposed to anyone’s coming here for the summer. I thought that you had got over that by now?”

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“So I have”—bluntly.

“Then we’re not—not unwelcome visitors any longer?” the soft, tantalising voice went on. The low cadence of it seemed to tug at his very heartstrings.

He leaned nearer to her and, catching both her hands in his, twisted her round so that she faced him.

“Why do you ask?” he demanded, his voice suddenly roughened and uneven.

“Because I wanted to know—of course!”—lightly.

“Then—you’re not an unwelcome visitor. You never have been! From the moment you came the place was different somehow. When you go——”

He stopped as though startled by the sound of his own words—struck by the full significance of them.

“When you go!” he repeated blankly. His grip of her slight hands tightened till it was almost painful. “But you won’t go! I can’t let you go now! Magda—”

The situation was threatening to get out of hand. Magda drew quickly away from him, springing to her feet.

“Don’t talk like that,” she said hastily. “You don’t mean it, you know.”

With a sudden, unexpected movement she slipped from his side and ran down to the river’s edge. He caught a flashing glimpse of scarlet, heard the splash as her slim body cleaved the water, and a moment later all he could see was the red of her turban cap, bobbing like a scarlet poppy on the surface of the river, and the glimmer of a moon-white arm and shoulder as a smooth overhand stroke bore her swiftly away from him.

He stood staring after her, conscious of a sudden bewildered sense of check and thwarting. The blood seemed leaping in his veins. His heart thudded against his ribs. He stepped forward impetuously as though to plunge in after the receding gleam of scarlet still flickering betwixt the branches which overhung the river.

Then, with a stifled exclamation, he drew back, brushing his hand across his eyes as though to clear their vision. What mad impulse was this urging him on to say and do such things as he had never before conceived himself saying or doing?

Magda had checked him on the brink of telling her—what? The sweat broke out on his forehead as the realisation surged over him.

“God!” he muttered. “God!”

CHAPTER XII

THE LATEST NEWS

Magda hardly knew what impulse had bidden her save Dan Storran from himself—-check the hot utterance to which he had so nearly given voice and which to a certain extent she had herself provoked. Driven by the bitterness of spirit which Michael's treatment of her had engendered, she knew that she had flirted outrageously with Dan ever since she had come to Stockleigh. She had bestowed no thought on June—pretty, helpless June, watching with distressed, bewildered eyes while Dan unaccountably changed towards her, his moods alternating from sullen unresponsiveness to a kind of forced and contrite tenderness which she had found almost more difficult to meet and understand.

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It was indeed something altogether apart from any sympathy for June which had prompted Magda to leave Storran before he uttered words that he might regret, but which no power on earth could ever recall. Still beneath the resentment and wounded pride which Michael's going had caused her flickered the spark of an ideal utterly at variance with the whole tenor of the teaching of poor Diane's last embittered days—the ideal of womanhood which had been Michael's. And the impulse which had bade her leave Storran so abruptly was born of the one-time resolution she had made to become the sort of woman Michael would wish his wife to be.

She felt oddly perturbed when at last she reached the seclusion of her chintzy bedroom underneath the sloping roof. A vague sense of shame assailed her. The game, as between herself and Dan, was hardly a fair one, after all, and she could well picture the cold contempt in Michael's eyes had he been looking on at it.

Though he had no right to disapprove of her now! He had forfeited that right—if he had ever had it—when he went away without a word of farewell—without giving her even the chance to appeal against the judgment which, by his very going, he had silently pronounced against her.

For months, now, she had been a prey to a conflicting jumble of emotions—the pain and hurt pride which Michael's departure had occasioned her, the craving for anything that might serve to distract her thoughts and keep them from straying back to those few vibrant meetings with him, and deep down within her an aching, restless wonder as to whether she would ever see him again.

With an effort she dismissed the fresh tangle of thought provoked by the morning's brief scene with Dan Storran, and, dressing quickly, went downstairs to the mid-day dinner which was the order of things at Stockleigh.

At first the solid repast, with its plentitude of good farmhouse fare partaken of during the hottest hour of the day, had somewhat appalled Magda. But now she had grown quite accustomed to the appearance of a roast joint or of a smoking, home-cured ham, attended by a variety of country vegetables and followed by fruit tart and clotted cream.

Although she herself, as befitted a woman whose "figure was her fortune" according to Lady Arabella, partook extremely sparingly of this hospitable meal, it somehow pleased her to see big Dan Storran come in from his work in the fields and do full justice to the substantial fare. To Magda, ultra-modern and over-civilised as she was, there was something refreshing in the simple and primitive usages of Stockleigh Farm and its master—this man who toiled, and satisfied his hunger, and rested from toil, just as his fathers had done before him, literally fulfilling the law: In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.

And perhaps if Magda had never crossed his path Dan Storran might have gone his way contentedly, toiling from sun-up to sun-down till all his days were finished.

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Even although she had crossed it, she might still have left him pretty much as she found him—unawakened to the deeps of his own nature—if she had remained in her present ambiguous mood, half-remorseful, half indifferent. But it was precisely at this particular juncture that it pleased Fate to give a fresh twist to her swiftly turning wheel.

Storran did not come in until dinner was half over, and when finally he appeared he was somewhat taciturn and avoided meeting Magda's eyes. June got up from the table and went dutifully into the kitchen to fetch the joint of meat and vegetables which she had been keeping hot for him there. Abruptly Dan followed her.

"Sorry I'm late, June," he said awkwardly. "Here, give the tray to me; I'll carry it in."

June paused in the middle of the kitchen, flushing right up to the soft tendrils of hair that curled about her forehead. It was weeks since Dan had offered to relieve her of any of her housewifely tasks, although at one time he had been wont to hurry home, if he could manage to do so, on purpose to help her. Dozens of times they had laid the table together, punctuating the process with jokes and gay little bursts of laughter and an odd kiss or two thrown in to sweeten the work. But not lately—not since the visitors from London had come to Stockleigh Farm.

So June blushed and looked at her husband with eyes that were suddenly sweet and questioning. She knew, though she had not told him yet, that there was a reason now why he should try to save her when his greater strength could do so, and for a moment she wondered shyly if he had guessed.

"Why, Dan, Dan——" she stammered.

His face darkened. Her obvious surprise irritated him, pricking his conscience.

"It's not very complimentary of you to look so taken aback when I offer to carry something for you," he said. "Anyone might think I never did wait on my wife."

The blood drained away from June's face as suddenly as it had rushed there.

"Well, you don't often, do you?" she returned shortly.

They re-entered the sitting-room together and Magda glanced up, smiling approval. She, too, was feeling somewhat conscience-stricken, and to see Dan helping his wife in this everyday, intimate sort of fashion seemed to minimise the significance of that little incident which had occurred by the river's edge.

"What a nice, polite husband!" she commented gaily. "Mr. Storran, you really out to come up to London and give classes—'Manners for Men,' you know. Very few of them wait on their wives these days."

June upset the salt and busied herself spooning it up again from the cloth. There was no answering smile on her face. She was not quite clear *why* Dan had followed her out into the kitchen so unexpectedly, but she sensed that it was not the old, quick impulse to wait upon her which had actuated him.

Had she but known it, it was the same instinct, more primitively manifested, which induces a man whose conscience is not altogether clear respecting his loyalty towards his wife to bring her home an unexpected gift of jewellery.

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The disturbing memory of a lithe, scarlet-sheathed figure had been with Dan all morning as he went about his work, and he was sullenly ashamed of the riot which the vision occasioned within him and of his own utter helplessness to master it. It—it was damnable! So he accompanied his wife to the kitchen and offered to carry in the joint.

Following upon this incident the atmosphere seemed to become all at once constrained and difficult. June sat very silent, her eyes holding that expression of pain and bewilderment which was growing habitual to them, while Storran hurried through his meal in the shortest possible time. As soon as he had finished he pushed back his chair abruptly and, with a muttered apology, quitted the room and went out again on to the farm. June rose and began clearing the table mechanically.

“Can’t I help you?” Gillian paused as she was about to follow Magda out of the room. “You look so tired to-day.”

June’s lip quivered sensitively. She was in the state of nerves when a little unexpected sympathy is the most upsetting thing imaginable.

“Oh, I can’t let you!” she answered hastily. “No—really!”—as Gillian calmly took the tray she was carrying out of her hands.

“Supposing you go and lie down for a little while,” suggested Gillian practically. “And leave the washing-up to Coppertop and me!”

The tears suddenly brimmed up into the wide-open blue eyes.

“Oh, I couldn’t!”

“Wouldn’t you like a little rest?” urged Gillian persuasively. “I believe you’d be asleep in two minutes!”

“I believe I should,” acknowledged June faintly. “I—I haven’t been sleeping very well lately.”

A little shudder ran through her as she recalled those long hours each night when she lay at Dan’s side, staring wide-eyed into the darkness and wondering dully what it was that had come between herself and her husband—come just at the time when, with his unborn child beneath her heart, they two should have been drawn together in to the most wonderful and blessed comradeship and understanding. Only Dan didn’t know this—didn’t know that before the snowdrops lifted their white heads again from the green carpet of spring there would be a little son—June was sure it would be a son, to grow up tall and strong like Dan himself!—born of the love which had once been so sweet and untroubled by any creeping doubts.

“I assure you”—Gillian broke in on the miserable thoughts that were chasing each other through June’s tired brain—“I assure you, Coppertop and I are very competent people. We won’t break a single dish!”

“But you’ve never been used to that kind of thing—washing-up!” protested June, glancing significantly at Gillian’s white hands and soft, pretty frock of hyacinth muslin.

“Haven’t I?” Gillian laughed gaily. “I haven’t always been as well off as I am not, and I expect I know quite as much about doing ‘chores’ as you! Come now!” She waited expectantly.

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“Dan would be awfully angry if he knew—it’s my duty, you see,” objected June, visibly weakening.

“If he knew! But what a husband doesn’t know his heart doesn’t grieve over,” replied Gillian sagely. “There, that’s settled. Come along upstairs and let me tuck you up in your bed, and leave the rest to Coppertop and me.”

And June, with her heart suddenly warmed and comforted in the way in which an unexpected kindness does warm and comfort, went very willingly and, tired out in body and mind, fell asleep in ten minutes.

Meanwhile Magda had established herself in the hammock slung from the boughs of one of the great elms which shaded the garden. She had brought a book with her, since her thoughts were none too pleasant company just at the moment, and was speedily absorbed in its contents.

It was very soothing and tranquil out there in the noonday heat. The gnats hovered in the sunlight, dancing and whirling in little transient clusters; now and again a ladybird flickered by or a swallow swooped so near that his darting shadow fell across her book; while all about her sounded the pleasant hum of a summer’s day—the soft susurration of the pleasant hum of a thousand insect voices blending into an indefinite, murmurous vibration of the air.

Occasionally the whir of a motor-car sweeping along the adjacent road broke harshly across the peaceful quiet. Magda glanced up with some annoyance as the first one sped by, dragging her back to an unwilling sense of civilisation. Then she bent her head resolutely above her book and declined to be distracted any further, finally losing herself completely in the story she was reading.

So it came about that when a long, low, dust-powdered car curved in between the granite gateposts of Stockleigh Farm and came abruptly to a standstill, she remained entirely oblivious of its advent. Nor did she see the tall, slender-limbed man who had been driving, and whose questing hazel eyes had descried her almost immediately, slip from his seat behind the steering-wheel and come across the grass towards her.

“*Antoine!*”

The book fell from her hand and she sat up suddenly in the hammock.

“What on earth are you doing here?” she demanded. There was no welcome in her tone.

For a moment Davilof remained watching her, the sunshine, slanting between the leaves of the trees, throwing queer little flickering lights into the hazel eyes and glinting on his golden-brown hair and beard.

“What are you doing here?” she repeated.

“I came—to see you,” he said simply.

There was something disarming in the very simplicity of his reply. It seemed to imply an almost child-like wonder that she should ask—that there could possibly be any other reason for his presence.

But it failed to propitiate Magda in the slightest degree. She felt intensely annoyed that anyone from the outside world—from her world of London—should have intruded upon her seclusion at Ashencombe, nor could she imagine how Davilof had discovered her retreat.

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“How did you learn I was here?” she asked.

“From Melrose.”

Magda’s eyes darkened sombrely.

“Do you mean you bribed him?” she asked quickly. “Oh, but surely not!”—in dismayed tones. “Melrose would go to the stake sooner than accept a bribe!”

Davilof’s mouth twisted in a rueful smile.

“I’m sure he would! I tried him, but he wouldn’t look at a bribe of any sort. So I had to resort to strategy. It was one evening, when he was taking your letters to post, and I waited for him at the pillar-box. I came up very quietly behind him and just nipped one of the letters, readdressed to you, out of his hand. I read the address and then posted the letter for him. It was very simple.”

He recounted the incident with a little swaggering air of bravado, boyishly delighted at the success of his small ruse. Vexed as she was Magda could hardly refrain from smiling; the whole thing was so eminently un-English—so exactly like Davilof!

“Well, now that you have seen me, will you please go away again?” she said coolly, reopening her book as though to end the conversation.

He regarded her with unqualified reproach.

“Won’t you even ask me to tea?” he said plaintively.

“Certainly not,” Magda was beginning. But precisely as she spoke June Storran, looking more herself again after her short sleep, came towards them from the house.

Her face brightened as she caught sight of Davilof. Even to June’s inexperienced eyes it was quite obvious that he admired the woman with whom he was talking. The very way he looked at her told her that. Presumably he was one of her London friends who had motored to Devonshire to see her. No man—within the limited scope of June’s knowledge of men—did that deliciously absurd, extravagant kind of thing unless he was tremendously in love. Nor would any nice woman let a man take such a journey on her behalf unless she reciprocated his feelings. Of this June—whose notions were old-fashioned—felt assured. So her spirits rose accordingly. Since, if these two were on the verge of becoming engaged, the mere fact would clear away the indefinable shadows which seemed to have been menacing her own happiness from the time Miss Vallincourt had come to Stockleigh.

“Tea is just ready,” she announced, approaching. “Will you come in? And perhaps your friend will have tea with us?” she added shyly.

Davilof was presented and June repeated her invitation. He shot a glance of triumph at Magda.

“I shall be delighted, madame,” he said, giving June one of his quaint little foreign bows. “But—the sun is shining so gloriously—might we not have it out here?”

June looked round her doubtfully. As is often the case with people born and bred in the country, it never occurred to the Storrans to have the family meals out-of-doors, and June felt considerable misgiving as to whether Dan would appreciate the innovation.

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“Ah, please, madame!” pleaded Davilof persuasively. “Let us have it here—under this tree. Why, the tree grows here expressly for the purpose!”

Davilof had all the charm of his nationality, and June capitulated, retreating to make the necessary arrangements.

“I don’t fancy Dan Storran will at all approve of the alteration from his usual customs which you’ve engineered,” observed Magda when they were again alone.

“Dan Storran?” Davilof’s glance flashed over her face, searching, questioning.

“The owner of the place. He’s been teaching me to ride,” she added inconsequently.

“Who is he?”—with swift jealousy. “The little fair-haired lady’s brother?”

“No, her husband. I said *Mrs.* Storran.”

Davilof’s interest waned suddenly.

“Did you?”—indifferently. “I didn’t notice. She’s a pretty little person.”

Magda agreed absently. A fresh difficulty had occurred to her; Davilof might chance to give away to the Storrans the secret of her identity.

“Oh, by the way,” she said hurriedly. “They don’t know me here as Magda Wielitzska. I’m plain Miss Vallincourt to them—enjoying the privileges of being a nobody! You’ll be sure to remember, won’t you?” He nodded, and she pursued more lightly: “And now, as you insist on having your tea here, you might begin to earn it by telling me the latest London gossip. We hear nothing at all down here. We don’t even get a London newspaper.

“I don’t think there is much news. There never is at this time of the year. Everybody’s out of town.”

He vouchsafed one or two items concerning mutual friends—an engagement here, a forthcoming divorce there. So-and-so was in Italy and Mrs. Somebody Else was said to have eloped with a well-known actor-manager to America—all the odds and ends of gossip that runs like wildfire over the social prairie.

“Oh, by the way,” he went on, “your artist friend—”

“Which artist friend?” Magda interrupted almost rudely. She was moved by a perfectly irrational impulse to stop him, to delay what he had to say.

“Why, Quarrington—Michael Quarrington. It seems he has married a Spanish woman—a rather lovely person who had been sitting to him for one of his pictures. That’s the latest bit of news.”

For an instant it seemed to Magda as though the whole world stood still—gripped in a strange, soundless stillness like the catastrophic pause which for an infinitesimal space of time succeeds a bad accident. Then she heard herself saying:

“Really? Where did you hear that?”

“Oh, there’ve been several rumours of a beautiful Spaniard whom he has been using as a model. The Arlingtons were travelling in Spain and saw her. Mrs. A. said she was a glorious creature—a dancer. And the other day I saw in one of the papers—the *Weekly Gossip* I think it was—that he’d married her.”

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The carelessly spoken words drove at Magda with the force of utter certainty. It was true, then—quite true! The fact that the Spaniard had been a dancer gave an irrefutable reality to the tale; Michael so worshipped every form of dancing.

“Never give your heart to any man.” Her mother’s last cynical warning beat in Magda’s brain with a dull iteration that almost maddened her. She put her hand up to her throat, feeling as if she were choking.

Then, dimly, as though from a great way off, she heard Antoine’s voice again:

“I’m glad Quarrington’s married. He was the man who saved you in the fog—you remember?—and I’ve always been afraid you might get to care for him.”

Magda was conscious of one thing and one thing only—that somewhere, deep down inside her, everything had turned to ice. She knew she would never feel anything again—much. . . . She thought death must come like that sometimes—just one thrust of incredible, immeasurable agony, and then a dull, numbed sense of finality.

“. . . afraid you might get to care for him.” The meaning of Antoine’s last words slowly penetrated her mind. She gave a hard little laugh.

“Why should I? Does one ‘get to care’ for a man just because he does the only obvious thing there is to do in an emergency?”

She was surprised to hear how perfectly natural her voice sounded. It was quite steady. Reassured, she went on, shrugging her shoulders:

“Besides—do I ever care?”

Antoine, sitting on the grass at her feet, suddenly raised himself a little and put his hand over hers as they lay very still and folded on her lap.

“You shall care—some time,” he said in a low, tense voice. “I swear it!”

CHAPTER XIII

DAN STORRAN’S AWAKENING

“Fairy Lady, we’re going to have a picnic tea!”

Coppertop’s excited voice, shrilling across the garden as he came racing over the grass, put an abrupt end to a scene that was threatening to develop along the familiar tempestuous lines dictated by Antoine’s temperament.

The child's advent was somewhat differently received—by Magda with unmixed relief, by Antoine with a baulked gesture of annoyance. However, he recovered himself almost immediately, and when, a moment later, June reappeared, laden with the paraphernalia for tea, he rushed forward with his usual charming manners to assist her.

Presently Gillian joined them, exclaiming with surprise as she perceived who was the visitor.

"Why, this is like a bit of London appearing in our very midst," she declared, shaking hands with Davilof. "Where have you hailed from? I heard the car but never suspected you were the arrival."

"I'm on holiday," he replied. "And it struck me"—his hazel eyes smiled straight into hers—"that Devonshire might be a very delightful place in which to spend my holiday."

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Magda looked up suddenly from stirring her tea.

“I think you’ve made a mistake, Davilof,” she said curtly. “You’re not likely to enjoy a holiday in Devonshire.”

June, innocently unaware of any double entente in Magda’s speech, glanced across at her in astonishment.

“Oh, but why not, Miss Vallincourt? Devon is a lovely county; most people like it so much. But perhaps you don’t care for the country, Mr.—Mr. Davilof?” She stumbled a little over the foreign name.

“I think it would depend upon who my neighbours were—whether I liked it or nor,” he returned, meeting Magda’s glance challengingly over the top of June’s head, bent above the teacups. “I feel sure I should like it here. And there is a charming little inn at Ashencombe where one might stop.”

Gillian divined that a veiled passage of arms between Magda and the musician underlay the light discussion. Moreover—though she had no clue to the cause—she was sensitively conscious that the former was not quite herself. She had seen that white, set look on her face before. Something had distressed her, and Gillian felt apprehensive lest Davilof had been the bearer of unwelcome tidings. It was either that, or else he must have succeeded in frictioning Magda in some way himself, since, beyond flinging an occasional double-edged sentence in his direction, she seemed absent and disinclined to take part in the conversation.

It was almost a relief to Gillian when Dan Storran appeared, although the recollection of the strained atmosphere which had attended the previous meal did not hold out much promise of better things to come. His face was still clouded and he glowered at the tea-table under the elms with dissatisfied eyes.

“What on earth’s the meaning of this?” he demanded ungraciously of his wife. “Is it some newfangled notion that’s got you?”

June coloured up nervously, and was about to falter an explanation of the innovation when Magda suddenly took the matter out of her hands.

“There’s nothing newfangled about tea out-of-doors, on a glorious day like this,” she said. “It’s the only sensible thing to do. You don’t really mind, do you?”

She smiled up at him provocatively and his sombre face lightened.

“Not if you like it,” he replied shortly.

“Well, I do. So sit down and be pleased—instead of looking like a thundercloud, please.” The softness in her voice robbed the speech of its sharpness. “I have a friend here—and we’re having tea outside in his honour.”

She introduced the two men, who exchanged a few commonplace words—each, meanwhile, taking the measure of the other through eyes that were frankly hostile. They were of such dissimilar type that there was practically no common ground upon which they could meet, and with the swift, unerring intuition of the lover each had recognised the other as standing in some relationship to Magda which premised a just cause for jealousy. Both men endeavoured to secure her undivided attention and, failing lamentably, their mutual antagonism deepened, smouldering visibly beneath the stiff platitudes they exchanged with one another.

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Gillian, thrust rather into the position of an onlooker, watched the proceedings with amused eyes—her amusement only tempered by the slightly apprehensive feeling concerning Magda of which she had been vaguely conscious from the first moment she had found her in Davilof's company, and which continued to obsess her.

True, she no longer wore that set, still look which Gillian had observed on her face prior to Dan Storran's appearance upon the scene. But even when she smiled and talked, playing the men off one against the other with a deft skill that was inimitable, there seemed a curious new hardness underlying it all—a certain reckless deviltry for which Gillian was at a loss to account.

June watched, too, with troubled eyes. Half an hour ago she had been feeling ridiculously happy, comfortably assured in her own mind that this tall, rather exquisite foreigner and the woman whose presence in her home had occasioned so much bitter heart-burning were only hesitating, as it were, on the brink of matrimony. And now—-now she did not know what to think! Miss Vallincourt was treating Davilof with an airy negligence that to June's honest and candid soul seemed altogether incompatible with such circumstances.

Meanwhile, with her own ears attuned to catch each varying shade of Dan's beloved voice, she could not but perceive its change of quality, slight, but unmistakable, when he spoke to Magda—the sudden deepening of it—and the unconscious self-betrayal of his glance as it rested on her. It was a relief when at last he got up and moved off, excusing himself on the plea that he had some work he must attend to. As he shook hands with Davilof the eyes of the two men met, hard as steel and as hostile.

Storran's departure was the signal for the breaking-up of the party. June returned to the house, while Gillian allowed herself to be carried off by Coppertop to visit the calves, which were a never-failing source of interest to him.

Left alone, an awkward pause ensued between Davilof and Magda, backwash of the obvious clash of antagonism between the two men.

"So!" commented Davilof, at last. "It looks as though there might be another Raynham episode down here before long."

The colour rushed up into Magda's face.

"Don't you think that remark is in rather bad taste?" she replied icily.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps it was. But the men who love you get rather beyond considering the matter of good or bad taste."

She made a petulant gesture.

“Oh, don’t begin that old subject again. We’ve had it all out before. It’s finished.”

“It’s not finished.”

There was a clipped, curt force about the brief denial. The good-humoured, big-child mood in which Davilof had joyously narrated to her how he had circumvented the unfortunate Melrose had passed, leaving the man—turbulent and passionately demanding as of old.

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“It’s not finished,” he repeated. “It never will be—till you’re my wife.”

Magda laughed lightly.

“Then I’m afraid it will have to remain unfinished—a continued-in-our-next kind of thing. For I certainly haven’t the least intention of becoming your wife. Do understand that I *mean* it. And please go away. You had no business to come down here at all.”

A smouldering fire lit itself in his eyes.

“No!” he said, taking a step nearer her. “No! I’m not going. I came because I can’t bear it any longer without you. Since you went away I’ve been half-mad, I think. I can’t eat or sleep! I can’t even play!”—he flung out his sensitive musician’s hands in a gesture of despair.

Magda glanced at him quickly. It was true. The man looked as though he had been suffering. She had not noticed it before. His face had altered—worn a trifle fine; the line from chin to cheek-bone had hollowed somewhat and his eyes held a certain feverish brightness. But although she could see the alteration, it did not move her in the least. She felt perfectly indifferent. It was as though the band of ice which seemed to have clasped itself about her heart when she heard of Michael’s marriage had frozen her capacity for feeling anything at all.

“I thought once”—Davilof was speaking again—“I thought once that you had said ‘no’ to me because of Quarrington. But now I know you never cared for him——”

“How do you know?”

The question sprang from her lips before she was aware.

“How do I know?” Davilof laughed harshly. “Why, because the man who was loved by Magda Wielitzska wouldn’t marry any other woman. There would be no other woman in the world for him. . . . There’s no other woman in the world for me.” His control was rapidly deserting him. “Magda, I can’t live without you! I’ve told you—I can neither eat nor sleep. I burn for you! If you refuse to give yourself to me, you destroy me!”

Swept by an emotion stronger than himself, his acquired Englishisms went by the board. He was all Pole in the picturesque ardour of his speech.

Magda regarded him calmly.

“My dear Davilof,” she said quietly. “What weight do you suppose such an argument would have with me?”

The cool, ironic little question, with its insolent indifference, checked him like the flick of a lash across the face. He turned away.

“None, I suppose,” he admitted bitterly. “You are fire and flame—but within, you are ice.”

“Yes,” she said, almost as though to herself. “Within, I’m ice. I believe that’s true.”

“True!” he repeated. “Of course it’s true. If it were not——”

A slight smile tilted her mouth.

“Well?” she echoed. “If it were not?”

He swung round. With a quick stride he was beside her. His eyes blazing with a sudden fury of passion and resentment, he caught her by the shoulders, forcing her to face him.

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“God!” he muttered thickly. “What are you made of? You make men go through hell for you! Even here—here in this little country place—you do it! Storran’s wife—one can see her heart breaks, and it is you who are breaking it. Yet nothing touches you! You’ve no conscience like other women—no heart—”

Magda pulled herself out of his grasp.

“Oh, do forget that I’m a woman, Davilof! I’m a dancer. Nothing else matters. I don’t want to be troubled with a heart. And—and I think they left out my soul.”

“Yes,” he agreed with intense bitterness. “I think they did. One day, Magda some man will kill you. You’ll try him too far.”

“Indeed? Is that what you contemplate doing when you finally lose patience with me?”

He shook his head.

“I shall not lose patience—until you are another man’s wife,” he said quietly. “And I don’t intend you to be that.”

An hour later, Gillian, having dispatched her small son to bed and seen him safely tucked up between the lavender-scented sheets, discovered Magda alone in the low-raftered sitting-room. She was lying back idly in a chair, her hands resting on the arms, in her eyes a curious abstracted look as though she were communing with herself.

Apparently she was too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice Gillian’s entrance, for she did not speak.

“What are you thinking about? Planning a new dance that shall out-vie *The Swan-Maiden*?” asked Gillian at last, for the sake of something to say. The silence and Magda’s strange aloofness frightened her in some way.

It was quite a moment before Magda made any answer. When she did, it was to say with a bitter kind of wonder in her voice:

“What centuries ago it seems since the first night of *The Swan-Maiden*!”

“It’s not very long,” began Gillian, then checked herself and asked quickly: “Is there anything the matter, Magda? Did Antoine bring you bad news of some kind?”

“He brought me the offering of his hand and heart. That’s no news, is it?”

The opening was too good to be lost. With the remembrance of June’s wistful face before her eyes, Gillian plunged in recklessly.

“Apropos of such offerings—don’t you think it would be wiser if you weren’t quite so nice to Dan Storran?”

“Am I nice to him?”

“Too much so for my peace of mind—or his! It worries me, Magda—really. You’ll play with fire once too often.”

“My dear Gillian, I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself. Do you imagine”—with a small, fine smile—“that I’m in danger of losing my heart to a son of the soil?”

Gillian could have shaken her.

“*You?* You don’t suppose I’m afraid for you! It’s Dan Storran who isn’t able to look after himself.” She stooped over Magda’s chair and slipped an arm persuasively round her shoulders. “Come away, Magda. Let’s leave Stockleigh—go home to London.”

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“Certainly not.” Magda stood up suddenly. “I’m quite well amused down here. I don’t propose to leave till our time is up.”

She spoke with unmistakable decision, and Gillian, feeling that it would be useless to urge her further at the moment, went slowly out of the room and upstairs. As she went she could hear Dan’s footstep in the passage below. It sounded tired—quite unlike his usual swinging stride with its suggestion of impetuous force.

But it was not work that had tired Dan Storran that afternoon. When he had quitted the little party gathered beneath the elms, he had started off across the fields, unheeding where he went, and for hours he had been tramping, deaf and blind to the world around him, immersed in the thoughts that had driven him forth.

The full significance of the last few weeks had suddenly come home to him. Till now he had been drifting—drifting unthinkingly, conscious only that life had become extraordinarily full of interest and of a breathless kind of happiness, half sweet, half bitter. Bitter when Magda was not with him, sweet with a maddening sweetness when she was.

He had not stopped to consider what it all meant—why the dull, monotonous round of existence on the farm to which he had long grown accustomed should all at once have come alive—grown vibrant and quick with some new impulse.

But the happenings of to-day had suddenly shown him where he stood. That revealing moment by the river’s edge with Magda, the swift, unreasoning jealousy of Davilof which had run like fire through his veins—jealousy because the other man was so evidently an old acquaintance with prior rights in her which seemed to set him, Dan Storran, quite outside the circle of their intimacy—had startled him into recognition of how far he had drifted.

He loved her—craved for her with every fibre of his being. She was his woman, and beside the tumultuous demand for her of all his lusty manhood the quiet, unexacting affection which he bore his wife was as water is to wine.

And since in Dan’s simple code of ethics a man’s loyalty to his wife occupied a very definite and unassailable position, the realisation came to him fraught with the acme of bitterness and self-contempt. Nor did he propose to yield to the madness in his blood. Hour after hour, as he tramped blindly across country, he thrashed the matter out. This love which had come to him was a forbidden thing—a thing which must be fought and thrust outside his life. For the sake of June he must see no more of Magda. She must go—leave Stockleigh. Afterwards he would tear the very memory of her out of his heart.

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Dan was a very direct person. Having taken his decision he did not stop to count the cost. That could come afterwards. Dimly he apprehended that it might be a very heavy one. But he was strong, now—strong to do the only possible thing. As he stood with his hand on the latch of the living-room door, he wondered whether what he had to say would mean to Magda all, or even a part, of what it meant to him—wondered with a sudden uncontrollable leaping of his pulses. . . . The latch grated raucously as he jerked it up and flung open the door. Magda was standing by the window, the soft glow of the westering sun falling about her. Dan's eyes rested hungrily on the small dark head outlined against the tender light.

"Why—Dan——" She faltered into tremulous silence before the look on his face—the aching demand of it.

The huskily sweet voice robbed him of his strength. He strode forward and caught her in his arms, staring down at her with burning eyes. Then, almost violently, he thrust her away from him, unkissed, although the soft curved lips had for a moment lain so maddeningly near his own.

"When can you and Mrs. Grey make it convenient to leave Stockleigh Farm?" he asked, his voice like iron.

The crudeness of it whipped her pride—that pride which Michael had torn down and trampled on—into fresh, indignant life.

"To leave? Why should we leave?"

Storran's face was white under his tan.

"Because," he said hoarsely, "because you're coming between me and my wife. That's why."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MOONLIT GARDEN

The chintzy bedroom under the sloping roof was very still and quiet. The moonlight, streaming in through the open casement, revealed the bed unoccupied, its top-sheet neatly folded back just as when June had made her final round of the house some hours earlier, leaving everything in order for the night.

Magda, crouched by the window, glanced back at it indifferently. She did not want to go to bed. If she went, she knew she would not sleep. She felt as though she would never sleep again.

She had no idea of the time. She might have been there half an hour or half eternity—-she did not know which. The little sounds of movement in the different bedrooms had gradually died down into silence, until at least the profound tranquillity and peace of night enshrouded the whole house. Only for her there was neither tranquility nor peace.

She was alone now, face to face with the news which Davilof had brought her—the news of Michael's marriage. Throughout the rest of the day, after Davilof had gone, she had forced the matter into the background of her thoughts, and during supper she had kept up a light-hearted ripple of talk and laughter which had deceived even Gillian, convincing her that her apprehensions of the afternoon were unfounded.

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Perhaps she was helped by the fact that Dan failed to put in an appearance at the supper-table. It was easier to scintillate successfully for the sole benefit of a couple of other women than under the eyes of a man who had just ordered you out of his life. But when at last she was alone in her own room, the sparkle was suddenly quenched. There was no longer any need to pretend.

Michael was married! Married! And the bitterness which she had been strenuously keeping at bay since the day, months ago now, when she had learned from Lady Arabella that he had deliberately left England without seeing her again swept over her in a black flood.

It had hurt her badly enough when he had gone away, but somewhere in the depths of her consciousness there had always lurked a little fugitive hope that he would come back—that she would be given another chance. Now she knew that he would never come back—that one isn't always given a second chance in this world.

And beneath the sick anguish of the realisation she was aware of a fierce resentment—-a bitter, rebellious anger that any man could make her suffer as she was suffering now. It was unjust—a burden that had been forced upon her unfairly. She could not help her own character—that was a heritage with which one comes into the world—and now she was being punished for simply having been herself!

An hour—two hours crept by. Hours of black, stark misery. The clock in the hall struck one—a single, bell-like stroke that reverberated through the silent house. It penetrated the numbed confusion of her mind, rousing her to a sudden recognition of the fact that she had been crouched so long in one position that her limbs were stiff and aching.

She drew herself up to her feet, stretching her cramped muscles. The night was warm and the room felt stiflingly hot. She looked longingly through the window to where the garden lay drenched in moonlight, with cool-looking alleyways of moon-washed paths threading the black gloom of overhanging trees, ebony-edged in the silver light.

She felt as though she could hardly breathe in the confined space of the room. Its low, sloping roof, which she had thought so quaintly attractive, seemed to press down on her like the lid of a box. She must get out—out into the black and silver night which beckoned to her through the open window. She could not stay in this room—this little room, alone with her thoughts.

She glanced down dubiously at the soft, chiffony negligee which she had slipped on in place of a frock. Her feet, too, were bare. She had stripped off her shoes and stockings first thing upon coming upstairs, for the sake of coolness. Certainly her attire was not quite suitable for out-of-doors. . . . But there would be no one to see her. Ashencombe folk did not take their walks abroad at that hour of the night. And she longed to feel the cool touch of the dewy grass against her feet.

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Very quietly she opened her door and stole out into the passage. The house was strangely, wonderfully still. Only the ticking of the hall-clock broke the silence. So lightly that not a board creaked beneath her step, Magda flitted down the old stairway, and, crossing the hall, felt gingerly for the massive bolt which barred the heavy oaken door. She wondered if it would slide back quietly; she rather doubted it. She remembered often enough having heard it grate into its place as Storran went his nightly round, locking up the house. But, as her slender, seeking fingers came in contact with the knob, she realised that to-night by some oversight he had forgotten to shoot the bolt and, noiselessly lifting the iron latch, she opened the door and slipped out into the moonlit garden. Down the paths she went and across the lawns, the touch of the earth coming clean and cool to her bare feet. Now and again she paused to draw a long breath of the night air, fresh and sweet with the lingering scents of the day's blooming.

An arch of rambler roses led into the distant part of the garden towards which she was wending her way, its powdering of tiny blossoms gleaming like star clusters borrowed from the Milky Way. Magda stooped as she passed beneath it to avoid an overhanging branch. Then, as she straightened herself, lifting her head once more, she stood still, suddenly arrested. On a stone bench, barely twenty yards away, sat Dan Storran!

Against the pallid ghost-white of the bench his motionless figure showed black and sombre like some sable statue. His big shoulders were bowed, his hands hung loosely clasped between his knees, the white mask of his face, mercilessly revealed in the clear moonlight, was twisted into harsh lines of mental conflict. A certain grim triumph manifested itself in the set of his mouth and out-thrust jaw.

He did not see the slight figure standing just within the shade of the rose-twined arch, and Magda remained for a moment or two watching him in silence. The unbarred door was explained now. Storran had not come in at all that night. She guessed the struggle which had sent him forth to seek the utter solitude of the garden. Almost she thought she could divine the processes of thought which had closed his lips in that strange line of ironic triumph. He had told her to go—when every nerve of him ached to bid her stay. And he was glad that the strength in him had won.

A bitter smile flitted across her face. Men were all the same! They idolised a woman just because she was beautiful—for her lips and eyes and hair and the nameless charm that was in her—and set her up on an altar at which they could kneel becomingly. Then, when they found she was merely an ordinary human being like themselves, with her bundle of faults and failings, hereditary and acquired, the prig in them was appropriately shocked—and they went away!

An unhappy woman is very often a bitter one. And Magda had been slowly learning the meaning of unhappiness for the first time in her life—a life that had been hitherto roses and laurel all the way.

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The devils that lie in wait for our weak moments prompted her then. The bitterness faded from her lips and they curved in a smile that subtly challenged the stern decision in Dan Storran's face. She hesitated an instant. Then, with feet that scarcely seemed to brush the grass, she glided forward, swaying, bending to some rhythmic measure, floating spirit-like across the lawn.

With a great cry Dan leaped to his feet and stared at her, transfixed. At the sound of his voice she paused, poised on one bare foot, leaning a little towards him with curving, outstretched arms. Then, before he could touch her, she drew away, step by step, and Dan Storran, standing there in tense, breathless silence, beheld what no one else had ever seen—the Wielitzska dancing in the moonlight as she alone could dance.

He knew nothing of art, nor of the supreme technique which went to make each supple movement a thing of sheer perfection, instinct with rhythm and significance. But he was a man, and a man in love, fighting the strongest instincts of his nature; and the bewildering beauty of her as she danced, the languorous, ethereal allure, delicately sensuous as the fragrance of a La France rose, sent the hot blood rioting through his veins. . . . She was going—slowly retreating from him. The primal man in him, the innate hunter who took his mate by capture, swept him headlong. With a bound he sprang past the dusky shrubbery that hedged the lawn and overtook her, catching her in his arms. She did not struggle. He felt her yield, and strained the soft, panting body closer to him. Beneath his hand he could feel the hurrying beat of her heart. Her breath, quickened by the exertion of the dance, came unevenly between her lips as she smiled at him.

"Do you still want me to go away, Dan Storran?"

There was a note of half-amused, half-triumphant mockery in her voice. The last bonds that held him snapped suddenly: "Yes!" he cried hoarsely. "Yes, I do. To go away with me!"

He crushed his mouth down on hers, draining the sweetness of her in burning kisses he had thwarted through all these weeks that they had been together, pouring out his love in disjointed, stumbling phrases which halted by very reason of the force of passion which evoked them.

Frightened by the tempest of emotion she had aroused she strained away from him. But she was powerless against his huge strength, helpless to resist him.

At length the fierce tensity of his grip relaxed, though his arms still clasped her.

"Tell me," he commanded triumphantly. "Tell me you love me. I want to hear it!" His voice vibrated and his eyes sought her face hungrily.

She summoned up all her forces to deny him—to deny him in such a manner that he should realise his mistake absolutely and at once. “But I don’t! I don’t love you! If you thought that, you misunderstood me.”

His hands released their hold of her and fell heavily to his sides. “Misunderstood?” he muttered. The glad triumph went suddenly out of his voice. “Misunderstood?” he repeated dully.

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“Yes. Misunderstood me altogether.”

“I don’t believe it!”

“But you *must* believe it,” she insisted. “It’s the truth!”

He stared at her.

“Then what have you meant all these weeks?”

“I’ve not meant anything.”

“It’s a lie!” he gave back savagely. “Unless”—he came closer to her—“unless—is it that man, that damned foreigner, who was here to-day?”

“Antoine? No. Oh, Dan”—she forced an uncertain little laugh to her lips—“if you knew me better you’d know that I never *do*—’mean anything’!”

The bitter intonation in her voice—the gibe at her own poor ruins of love fallen about her—was lost on him. He was in total ignorance of her friendship with Quarrington. But the plain significance of her words came home to him clearly enough. He did not speak for a minute or two. Then: “You’ve been playing with me, then—fooling me?” he said heavily.

Magda remained silent. The heavy, laboured speech seemed to hold something minatory in it—the sullen lowering which precedes a tempest.

“Answer me!” he persisted. “Was that it?”

“I—I suppose it was,” she faltered.

He drew still closer and instinctively she shrank away. A consciousness of repressed violence communicated itself to her. She half expected him to strike her.

“And you don’t love me? You’re quite sure?”

There was an ominous kind of patience in the persistent questioning. It was as though he were deliberately giving her every possible chance to clear herself. Her nerves frayed a little.

“Of course I’m sure—perfectly sure,” she said with nervous asperity. “I wish you’d believe me, Dan!”

“I only wanted to make sure,” he returned.

Something in the careful precision of his answer struck her with a swift sense of apprehension. She looked up at him and what she saw made her catch her breath convulsively. His face was ashen, the veins in his forehead standing out like weals, and his eyes gleamed like blue flame—mad eyes. His hands, hanging at his sides, twitched curiously.

"I'm sure now," he said. "Sure. . . . Do you know what you've done? You've smashed up my life. Smashed it. June and I were happy enough till you came. Now we'll never be happy again. I expect you've smashed other lives, too. But you won't do it any more. I'm the last. Women like you are better dead!"

His great arms swung out and gripped her.

"No, don't struggle. It wouldn't be any good, you know." He went on speaking very carefully and quietly, and while he spoke she felt his left arm tighten round her, binding her own arms down to her sides as might a thong, while his right hand slid up to the base of her throat. She writhed, twisting her body desperately in his grip. "Keep still. I've kissed you. And now I'm going to kill you. You'll be better dead."

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There was implacable purpose in his strangely quiet, unhurried accents. Magda recognised it—recognised that death was very close to her. It would be useless to scream. Before help could come—if anyone heard her cries, which was unlikely—Dan would have accomplished what he meant to do.

In the last fraction of time these thoughts flashed through her mind. Her brain seemed to be working with abnormal clarity and speed. This was death, then—unavoidable, inevitable.

She felt Dan's hand creep upward, closing round her throat. Quite suddenly she ceased to struggle and lay still in his grasp. After all, she didn't know that she would much mind dying. Life was not so sweet. There would be pain, she supposed . . . a moment's agony. . . .

All at once, Storran's hands fell away from her passive, silent body and he stepped back. "I can't do it!" he muttered hoarsely. "I can't do it!"

For a moment the suddenness of her release left Magda swaying dizzily on her feet. Then her brain clearing, she looked across to where Dan Storran's big figure faced her. The nonchalance with which she usually met life, and with which a few moments earlier she had been prepared to face inevitable death, stood by her now. A faint, quizzical smile tilted her mouth.

"So you couldn't do it after all, Dan?" The familiar note of half-indifferent mockery sounded in her voice.

Storran stared at her. "By God! I don't believe you are a woman!" he exclaimed thickly.

She regarded him contemplatively, her hands lightly touching the red marks scored by his fingers on the whiteness of her throat.

"Do you know," she replied dispassionately, "I sometimes wonder if I am? I don't seem to have—feelings, like other women. It doesn't matter to me, really, a bit that I've—what was it you said?—smashed up your life. I don't know that it would have mattered much if you had strangled me." She paused, then stepped towards him. "Now you know the truth. Do you still want to kill me, Dan Storran! . . . Or may I go?"

He swung aside from her.

"Go!" he muttered sullenly. "Go to *hell*!"

CHAPTER XV

THE DAY AFTER

“Magda, how could you?” Gillian’s voice was full of blank dismay. “You ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself!”

Magda perched on the foot of Gillian’s bed, her hands clasped round her knees, nodded.

“Yes, I suppose I ought. I don’t know what made me do it—except that he’d suggested I should leave Stockleigh! I’m not used to being—shunted!”

“Heaven knows you’re not!” agreed Gillian ruefully. “It would be a wholesome tonic for you if you were. I told you only yesterday that it would be better if we left here. And on top of that you must needs go and dance in the moonlight, of all things, while Dan Storran looks on! What ordinary man is going to keep his head in such circumstances, do you suppose? Especially when he was more than half in love with you to start with. . . . Oh, I should like to shake you!”

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“Well, I’ll leave now—as soon as ever you like,” replied Magda, slipping down from the bed. She was unwontedly meek, from which Gillian judged that for once she felt herself unable to cope with the situation she had created. “Will you arrange it?”

Gillian shrugged her shoulders.

“I suppose so,” she returned resignedly. “As usual, you break the crockery and someone else has to sweep up the pieces.”

Magda bent down and kissed her.

“You’re such a dear, Gillyflower,” she said with that impulsive, lovable charm of manner which it was so difficult to resist. “Still”—her voice hardening a little—“perhaps there are a few odd bits that I’ll have to sweep up myself.”

And she departed to her own room to complete her morning toilette, leaving Gillian wondering rather anxiously what she could have meant.

When, half an hour later, the two girls descended for breakfast, Dan Storran was not visible. He had gone off early to work, June explained, and Magda experienced a sensation of distinct relief. She had dreaded meeting Dan this morning. The mad, bizarre scene of the night before, with sudden unleashing of savage and ungoverned passions, had shaken even her insouciant poise, though she was very far from seeing it in its true proportions.

June received Gillian’s intimation that they proposed leaving Stockleigh Farm that day without comment. She was very quiet and self-contained, and busied herself in making the necessary arrangements for their departure, sending a boy into Ashencombe to order the wagonette from the Crown and Bells to take them to the station whilst she herself laboriously made out the account that was owing. When she presented the latter, with a perfectly composed and business-like air, and proceeded conscientiously to stamp and receipt it, no one could have guessed how bitter a thing it was to her to accept Miss Vallincourt’s money. Within herself she recognised that every penny of it had been earned at the cost of her own happiness.

But as she stood at the gate, watching the ancient vehicle from the Crown and Bells bearing the London visitors towards the station, a little quiver of hope stirred in her heart. Early that morning Dan himself had said to her before starting out to his work: “Get those people away! They must be out of the house before I come into it again. Pay them a week’s money instead of notice if necessary. We can afford it.” So it was evident that he, too, had realised the danger of their happiness—hers and his—if Miss Vallincourt remained at Stockleigh any longer.

He did not come in till late in the evening, when June was sitting in the lamplight, adding delicate stitchery to some tiny garments upon which she was at work. She hid them hastily at the sound of his footsteps, substituting one of his own socks that stood in need of repair. Not yet could she share with him that wonderful secret joy which was hers. There must be a clearer understanding between them first. They must get back to where they were before Miss Vallincourt came between them, so that nothing might mar the sweetness of the telling.

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Presently Dan came into the room and sat down heavily. June looked across at him.

“She has gone, Dan,” she said quietly. She did not use the word “they.” Those others did not count as far as she was concerned. Her use of the pronoun sounded significantly in Storran’s ears.

“You know, then?” he said dully. Adding, after a moment’s pause. “Did she tell you?”

“Tell me?” repeated June doubtfully. “Tell me what?”

“That she’s robbed you of all that belongs to you.”

Her face blanched. “What do you mean, Dan?” she asked falteringly. “I don’t think I understand.”

Her wide, questioning blue eyes, with that softness and depth of expression dawning in them which motherhood gives to women’s eyes, searched his face. The innocent appeal of them cut him to the heart. He had loved his wife; and now he had to tell her that he loved her no longer.

“You’ve got to understand,” he said roughly. His hatred of being compelled to hurt her made him almost brutal. “I—everything is changed between us, June.” He stopped, not knowing how to go on.

“Changed? How, Dan?” Her voice sharpened with apprehension. “Do you mean—that you don’t—care any longer?”

“Yes. It’s that. It’s Magda—Oh, good God! Can’t you understand?”

“You love Miss Vallincourt?” June spoke in carefully measured accents. She felt that if she did not speak very quietly indeed she should scream. She wanted to laugh, too. It sounded so absurd to be asking her husband if he loved Miss Vallincourt!

Dan’s eyes met her own.

“Yes,” he said. “I love her.” He paused a moment, then added: “I asked her to go away with me.”

June stared at him dumbly. The whole thing seemed unreal. She could not feel as though what Dan was saying had any relation to herself, any bearing on their life together. At last:

“Why didn’t you go, then?” she heard herself say—at least, she supposed she must be saying it, although the voice didn’t sound a bit like her own.

Dan turned on her with sudden savagery. His nerves were raw.

“You speak as though you were disappointed,” he said roughly.

“No. But if you care for Miss Vallincourt and she cares for you, I’m wondering what stopped you.”

“She doesn’t care for me”—shortly.

June felt a thrill of pure joy. If Magda didn’t care, then she could win him back—win back her husband! Within her she was instinctively aware that if Magda *had* cared, no power of hers could have won back Dan’s allegiance. A faint doubt assailed her.

“She—she *seemed* as if she cared?” she ventured.

Dan nodded indifferently.

“Yes. I was a summer holiday’s amusement for her.”

“And—was that all?”

As June spoke, her direct gaze sought her husband’s face. He met it fair and square, unflinchingly.

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“That’s all,” he replied quietly.

She crossed the room swiftly to his side.

“Then, if that’s all, Dan, we—we won’t speak of it again—ever,” she said steadily. “It—it was just a mistake. It need never come between us. You’ll get over it, and I”—her small head reared itself bravely—“I’ll forget it.”

The pathetic courage of her! Storran turned away with a groan.

“No,” he answered. “I shan’t ‘get over it.’ When a man loves a woman as I love Magda he doesn’t ‘get over it.’ That’s what I meant when I told you she had robbed you.”

“You *will* get over it, Dan,” she persisted. “I’ll help you.”

“You can’t,” he returned doggedly. “You, least of all! Every touch of your hand—I should be thinking what her touch would have meant! The sound of your step—I’d be listening for hers!”

He saw her wince. He wanted to kick himself for hurting her like this. But he knew what he intended doing; and sooner or later she must know too. It would be better for her in the long run to face it now than to be endlessly waiting and hoping and longing for what he knew could never be.

“Dan, I’ll be very patient. Don’t you think—if you tried—you could conquer this love of yours for Miss Vallincourt?”

He shook his head.

“It’s conquered me, June. It’s—it’s torture!”

“It will be easier now she’s gone away,” she suggested.

“Gone away? . . . Aye, as far as London! And in five hours I could be with her—see her again——”

He broke off. At the bare thought his heart was pounding against his ribs, his breath labouring in his throat.

“Won’t you try, Dan?” Even to herself June’s voice sounded faint and far away.

“It would be useless.” He got up and strode aimlessly back and forth, coming at last to a standstill in front of her. “A man knows his own limits, June. And I’ve reached mine. England can’t hold the two of us.”

June gave a little stifled cry.

“What do you mean? You’re not—you’re not going to leave me? To go abroad—now?”

There would be need for him in England soon—in a few months. But of course he couldn’t know that. Should she tell him. Tell him why he *must not* leave her now? Keep him with her by a sure and certain chain—the knowledge that she was soon to be the mother of his child?

She debated the question wildly in her mind, tempted to tell him, yet feeling that even if then he stayed with her it would not be because he loved her or had ceased to care for Miss Vallincourt, but only because he was impelled by a sense of duty. And her pride rebelled against holding him by that.

His voice broke in upon her conflicting thoughts.

“Yes. I’m going abroad. It’s the only thing, June. I can’t stay in England—and keep away from her.”

June was silent a moment. Then she said in a very low voice, almost as though speaking to herself:

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“I wonder if—if you ever loved me.”

He wheeled round, and the desperate misery in his eyes hurt her almost physically.

“Yes,” he said harshly. “I did love you. In a way, I do now. But it’s nothing—nothing to the madness in my blood! I’m a brute to leave you. But I’m going to do it. No civilised country can hold me now!”

So that was to be the end of it! June recognised the bitter truth at last. Magda had indeed robbed her of everything she possessed. And robbed her wantonly, seeing that she herself set no value on Dan’s love—had, in fact, tossed it aside like an outworn plaything.

June ceased to plead with Dan then. She would not wish to hold him by any other chain than his love for her. And if that chain had snapped—broken irrevocably—then the child born of what had once been love would only be an encumbrance in his eyes, an unwelcome tie, shackling him to a duty from which he longed to escape.

So she let him go—let him go in silence. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT LADY ARABELLA KNEW

Lady Arabella might disapprove of her god-daughter from every point of the compass, but she was nevertheless amazingly fond of her, so that when Gillian appeared on her spotless Park Lane doorstep one afternoon with the information that she and Magda had returned from Devonshire, she hailed the announcement with enthusiasm.

“But where is Magda? Why didn’t she come with you?” she demanded impatiently.

“Her manager rang up to know if he could see her about various things in connection with this next winter’s season, so there’s a great council in progress. But she’s coming to see you to-morrow. Won’t I do”—Gillian wrinkled her brows whimsically—“for to-day?”

“Bless the child! Of course you will! Come along and tell me all about your Devonshire trip. I suppose,” she went on, “you heard the news of Michael Quarrington’s marriage? Or didn’t you get any newspapers down in your benighted village?”

“No, we had no London papers,” replied Gillian doubtfully. “But—I don’t understand. Mr. Quarrington isn’t married, is he? I thought—I thought——”

“You thought he was in love with Magda. So he was. The announcement startled everybody, I can tell you! And Davilof promptly decided that a motoring trip would benefit his health and shot off to Devonshire at top speed. Of course he wanted to impart the news to Magda. He must have felt a pretty fool since!” And Lady Arabella gave one of her enjoyable chuckles.

“Yes. Antoine came down to see us,” replied Gillian in puzzled tones. “But Magda never confided anything special he had said. I suppose he *must* have told her——” She broke off as all at once illumination penetrated the darkness. “That explains it, then! Explains everything!” she exclaimed.

“What explains what?” demanded Lady Arabella bluntly.

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“Why——” And Gillian proceeded to recount the events which had led up to the abrupt termination of the visit to Stockleigh Farm.

“She was in a very odd kind of mood after Antoine had gone. I even asked her if he had brought any bad news, but I couldn’t get any sensible answer out of her. And that night she proceeded to dance in the moonlight with Dan Storran for audience—out of sheer devilment, of course!”

“Or sheer heartsickness,” suggested Lady Arabella, with one of those quick flashes of tender insight which combined so incongruously with the rest of her personality.

“Do you think she—cared, then?” asked Gillian.

“For Quarrington? Of course I do. Oh, well it will all come right in the end, I hope. And, anyway”—with a wicked little grin—“Davilof won’t have quite such a clear coast as he anticipated.”

“But if Michael Quarrington is married—”

“He isn’t,” interrupted Lady Arabella briskly. “It was contradicted in the papers the very next morning. Only I suppose Davilof hustled off to Devonshire in such a hurry that he never saw it.

“Contradicted? But how did such a mistake arise?”

“Oh, whoever supplied that particular tidbit of news got the names mixed. It ought really to have been *Warrington*, not Quarrington—Mortrake Warrington, the sculptor, you know. It seems he and Michael were both using the same woman as a model—only Warrington married her! Spoiled Michael’s picture—or his temper—when he ran off with her for a honeymoon, I expect!”

On her return to Friars’ Holm Gillian hastened to retail for Magda’s benefit the information she had acquired from Lady Arabella, and was rewarded by the immediate change in her which became apparent. The haunted, feverish look in her eyes was replaced by a more tranquil shining, the intense restlessness she had evinced of late seemed to fall away from her, and she ceased to pepper her conversation with the bitter speeches which had worried Gillian more than a little, recognising in them, as she did, the outcrop of some inward and spiritual turmoil.

To Magda, the fact that Michael was not married, after all, seemed to re-create the whole world. It left hope still at the bottom of the box of life’s possibilities. Looking backward, she realised now how strongly she had clung to the belief that some day he would come back to her. It had been the one gleam of light through all those dark months which had followed his abrupt departure; and the intolerable pain of the hours

that had succeeded Davilof's announcement of his marriage to the Spanish woman had taught her how much Michael meant to her.

She was beginning to appreciate, too, the tangle of convictions and emotions which had driven him from her side. His original attitude toward her, based on the treatment she had accorded to his friend who had loved her, had been one of plain censure and distrust, strengthened and intensified by that strong "partisan" feeling of one man for another—fruit of the ineradicable sex antagonism which so often colours the judgments men pass on women and women on men. Then had come love, against which he had striven in vain, and gradually, out of love, had grown a new tentative belief which the pitiful culmination of the Raynham episode had suddenly and very completely shattered.

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Of late, circumstances had combined to impress on Magda an altogether new point of view—the viewpoint from which other people might conceivably regard her actions. She had never troubled about such a thing before, nor was she finding the experience at all a pleasant one. But it helped her to understand to a certain extent—though still only in a very modified degree—the influences which had sent Michael Quarrington out of England.

And now, in the passionate relief bred of the knowledge that he was still free, that he had not gone straight from her to another woman, much of the resentful hardness which had embittered her during the last few months melted away, and she became once more the nonchalant, tantalising but withal lovable and charming personality of former days.

She was even conscious of a certain compunction for her behaviour at Stockleigh. She had been bitterly hurt herself, and since, for the moment, to experiment with a new and, to her, quite unknown type of man had amused her and helped to distract her thoughts, she had not paused to consider the possible resultant consequences to the subject of the experiment.

She endeavoured to solace herself with the belief that after she had gone he would instinctively turn to June once more, and that life on the farm would probably resume the even tenor of its way. Gradually, with the passage of time, her thoughts reverted less and less often to the happenings at Stockleigh, and the prickings of conscience—-which beset her return to London—grew considerably fainter and more infrequent.

It was almost inevitable that this should be so. With the autumn came the stir and hustle of the season, with its thousand-and-one claims upon her thought and time. The management of the Imperial Theatre was nothing if not enterprising, and designed to present a series of ballets throughout the course of the winter, in the greater number of which Magda would be the bright and particular star. And in the absorption of work and the sheer joy she found in the art which she loved, the recollection of her holiday at Stockleigh slipped by degrees into the background of her mind. Fraught with such immense significance and catastrophe to those others, Dan and June—to Magda it soon came to occupy no more than an incidental niche in her memory.

CHAPTER XVII

CROSS CURRENTS

Winter had slipped away, pushed from his place by the tender, resistless hands of spring. And now spring had given place to summer, and June, arms filled with flowers, was converting the earth into a garden of roses.

Magda's car, purring its way southward along the great road from London, sped between fields that still gleamed with the first freshness of their young green, while through the open window drifted vagrant little puffs of clean country air, coming delicately to her nostrils, fragrant of leaf and bloom.

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She was motoring to Netherway, a delightfully small and insignificant place on the Hampshire coast where Lady Arabella had what it pleased her to term her “cottage in the country,” a charming old place, Elizabethan in character—the type of “cottage” which boasted a score or so of rooms and every convenience which an imaginative estate agent, sustained by the knowledge that his client regarded money as a means and not an end, could devise.

Summer invitations to the Hermitage—as the place was quite inaptly called, since no one could be less akin to a hermit than its gregarious owner—were much sought after by the younger generation of Lady Arabella’s set. The beautifully wooded park, with its green aisles of shady solitude sloping down from the house to the very edge of the blue waters of the Solent, was an ideal spot in which to bring to a safe and happy conclusion a love affair that might seem to have hung fire a trifle during the hurly-burly of the London season. And if further inducement were needed, it was to be found in the fact that Lady Arabella herself constituted the most desirable of chaperons, remaining considerately inconspicuous until the moment when her congratulations were requested.

This year a considerable amount of disappointment had been occasioned by the fact that she had left town quite early during the season, and later on had apparently limited her invitations exclusively to the trio at Friars’ Holm. She declared that the number of matrimonial ventures for which the Hermitage was responsible was beginning to weigh on her conscience. Also, she wanted a quiet holiday and she proposed to take one.

And now Magda was on her way to join her, Gillian remaining behind in order to close up the house at Hampstead and settle the servants on board wages. It had been arranged that she and Coppertop should come on to Netherway immediately this was accomplished.

Magda could hardly believe that only a year had elapsed since last the roses beckoned her out of London. It seemed far longer since that hot summer’s day when she had rushed away to Devonshire, vainly seeking a narcotic for the new and bewildering turmoil of pain that was besetting her.

She had learned now that you carry a heartache with you, and that no change of scenery makes up for the beloved face you can no longer see. For Michael had not come back. He had remained abroad and had never by sign or letter acknowledged that he even remembered her existence. Magda had come to accept it as a fact now that he had gone out of her life entirely.

A whiff of air tinged with the salt tang of the sea blew in at the window, and she came suddenly out of her musings to find that the car was winding its way up the hill upon which the Hermitage was perched.

A long, low house, clothed in creeper, it stood just below the hill's brow, sheltered to the rear by a great belt of woods, and overlooking a sea which sparkled in the sunlight as though strewn with diamond-dust.

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Lady Arabella was waiting in the porch when the car drew up and welcomed her god-daughter with delight. She seemed bubbling over with good spirits, and there was a half-mischievous, half-guilty twinkle in her keen old eyes which suggested that there might be some ulterior cause for her effervescence.

“If you were poor I should say you’d just come into a fortune,” commented Magda, regarding her judicially. “As you’re not, I should like to know why you’re looking as pleased as a child with a new toy. Own up, now, Marraine! What’s the secret you’ve got up your sleeve?”

“Yes, there is a secret,” acknowledged Lady Arabella gleefully. “Come along and I’ll show it you.”

Magda smiled and followed her across the long hall and into a room at the further end of which stood a big easel. On the easel, just nearing completion, rested a portrait of her godmother. It was rather a wonderful portrait. The artist seemed to have penetrated beyond the mere physical lineaments of his sitter into the very crannies of her soul. It was all there—the thoroughly worldly shrewdness, the mordant, somewhat cynical humour, and the genuine kindness of heart which went to make up Lady Arabella’s personality as her world knew it. And something more. Behind all these one sensed the glamour of a long-past romance, the unquenched spark of a faith that, as Lady Arabella had herself once put it in a rare moment of self-revelation, “love is the best thing this queer old world of ours has to offer.” The portrait on the easel was that of a woman who had visioned the miracle of love only to be robbed of its fulfilment.

Magda stood silently in front of the picture, marvelling at its keen perceptive powers. And then quite suddenly she realised who must have painted it. It almost seemed to her as though she had really known it from the first moment her eyes had rested on the canvas. The brushwork, and that uncannily clever characterisation, were unmistakable.

“Good likeness, don’t you think?”

Lady Arabella’s snapping speech broke the silence.

“It’s rather more than that, isn’t it?” said Magda. “How did you seduce Michael Quarrington? I thought”—for an instant her voice wavered, then steadied again—“I thought he was abroad.”

“He was. At the present moment he’s at the Hermitage.”

“*Here*?”

Magda turned her head aside so that Lady Arabella might not see the wave of scarlet which flooded her face and then receded, leaving it milk-white. Michael . . . *here*! She felt her heart beating in great suffocating throbs, and the room seemed to swim round

her. If he were here, knowing that she was to be his fellow-guest, surely he could not hate her so badly! She was conscious of a sudden wild uprush of hope. Perhaps—-perhaps happiness was not so far away, after all!

And then she heard Lady Arabella's voice breaking across the riot of emotion which stirred within her.

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“Yes, he has been here the last three weeks painting my portrait. It’s for you, the portrait. I thought you’d like to have it when you haven’t got the original any longer.”

Magda turned to her suddenly, her affection for her godmother alertly apprehensive.

“What do you mean?” she said anxiously. “You’re—you’re not ill, Marraine?”

“Ill? No. But I’m over seventy. And after seventy you’ve had your allotted span, you know. Anything beyond that’s an extra. And whether fate gives me a bit more rope or not, I’ve nothing to grumble at. I’ve *lived*, not vegetated—and I’ve had a very good time, too.” She paused, then added slowly: “Though I’ve missed the best.”

Magda slipped her hand into the old woman’s thin, wrinkled one with a quick gesture of understanding, and a little sympathetic silence fell between them.

“Then you’ll find the hanging-room for the portrait at Friars’ Holm?” queried Lady Arabella, breaking it at last in practical tones.

“You know we’d love to have it,” replied Magda warmly. In a studiously casual voice she pursued: “By the way, does Mr. Quarrington know I’m here?”

Lady Arabella nodded. Secretly she was congratulating herself on having successfully tided over the awkwardness of explaining Michael’s presence at the Hermitage. She had been somewhat apprehensive as to how Magda would take it. It was quite on the cards that she might have ordered her car round again and driven straight back to London!

But she had accepted the fact with apparent composure—one’s mental states, fortunately, being invisible to the curious eyes of the outside world!—and Lady Arabella felt proportionately relieved. Nor had Quarrington himself evinced any particular emotion, either of dissatisfaction or otherwise, when she had confided to him the fact that she was expecting her god-daughter. And although the extreme composure exhibited by both Michael and Magda was a trifle baffling, Lady Arabella was fain to comfort herself with her confirmed belief in propinquity as the resolution of most lovers’ problems and misunderstandings.

She was fully determined to bring these two together once more if it were in any way possible, and the commission to paint her portrait had been merely part of her scheme. Her three score years and ten had had little enough to do with it. They weighed extremely lightly on her erect old shoulders, and her spirit was as unquenchable as it had been twenty years ago. It seemed more than likely that fate was preparing to allow her quite a good deal of rope.

As for Quarrington, he would probably have refused to return to England at this juncture to please anyone other than Lady Arabella. But somehow no one ever did refuse Lady

Arabella anything that she particularly set her heart upon. Moreover, as he reflected upon receipt of her assured little missive commissioning him to paint her portrait, he would be obliged to return to England sooner or later, and by now he felt he had himself sufficiently in hand to risk the contingency of a possible meeting with Magda. But he had hardly counted upon finding himself actually under the same roof with her for days together, and, although outwardly unmoved, he was somewhat taken aback when halfway through his visit to the Hermitage, Lady Arabella cheerfully communicated the prospect to him.

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He could read between the lines and guess her purpose, and it afforded him a certain sardonic amusement. It was like Lady Arabella's temerity, he reflected! No other woman, knowing as much of the special circumstances as she did, would have ventured so far.

Well, she would soon realise that her attempt to bridge matters over between himself and her god-daughter was foredoomed to failure. He would never trust Magda, or any other woman, again. From the moment he had left England he had made up his mind that henceforth no woman should have any place in his life, and certain subsequent occurrences had confirmed him in this determination.

At the same time he was not going to run away. He would stay and face it out. He would remain at the Hermitage until he had finished the portrait upon which he was at work, and then he would pack up and depart.

So that when finally he and Magda met in the sun-filled South Parlour at the Hermitage each of them was prepared to treat the other with a cool detachment.

But Magda found it difficult to maintain her pose after her first glance at his face. The alteration in it sent a swift pang to her heart. It had hardened—hardened into lines of a grim self-control that spoke of long mental conflict. The mouth, too, had learned to close in a new line of bitterness, and in the grey eyes as they rested on her there lay a certain cynical indifference which seemed to set her as far away from him as the north is from the south. She realised that the gulf between them was almost as wide and impassable as though he were in very truth the Spanish dancer's husband. This man proposed to give her neither love nor forgiveness. Only the feminine instinct of pride—-the pride of woman who must be sought and never the seeker—carried her through the ordeal of the first meeting. Nor did he seek to make it easier for her.

"It is a long time since you were in England," she remarked after the first interchange of civilities.

"Very long," agreed Quarrington politely. "It would probably have been still longer if Lady Arabella had not tempted me. But her portrait was too interesting a commission to refuse."

"It sounds banal to say how good I think it. You never paint anything that *isn't* good, do you?"

"I paint what I see."

"In that case quite a lot of people might be afraid to have their portraits painted by you—beauty being so much in the eye of the beholder!" returned Magda with the flippancy that is so often only the defence behind which a woman takes refuge.

“I don’t think so. As a matter of fact I have no objection to painting a plain face—-provided there’s a beautiful soul behind it.”

“But I suppose a beautiful soul in a beautiful body would satisfy you better?”

“It might, if such a combination existed.”

Magda flushed a little.

“You don’t think it does?”

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The grey, contemptuous eyes swept her face suddenly.

“My experience has not led me to think so.”

There was an almost calculated insolence in the careless answer. It was as though he had tossed her an epitome of his opinion of her. Magda’s spirit rose in opposition.

“Perhaps your experience has been somewhat limited,” she observed.

“Perhaps it has. If so, I have no wish to extend it.”

In spite of Michael’s taciturnity—or perhaps, more truly, on account of it—Magda’s spirits lightened curiously after that first interview with him. The mere fact of his presence had stilled the incessant ache at her heart—the ache to see him again and hear his voice. And the morose cynicism of his thrusts at her was just so much proof that, although he had forced himself to remain out of England for a year and a half, yet he had not thereby achieved either peace of mind or indifference. Magda was too true a daughter of Eve not to know that a man doesn’t expend powder and shot on a woman to whom he is completely indifferent.

The next day or two were not without their difficulties, as Lady Arabella speedily realised. A triangular party, when two out of the three share certain poignant memories, is by no means the easiest thing to stage-manage. There were inevitable awkward moments that could only be surmounted by the exercise of considerable tact, and the hours which Lady Arabella passed sitting to Quarrington for her portrait, while Magda wandered alone through the woods or sculled a solitary boat up the river, helped to minimize the strain considerably.

Nevertheless, it was a relief to everyone concerned when Gillian and Coppertop were added to the party. A strained atmosphere was somewhat difficult of accomplishment anywhere within the joyous vicinity of the latter, while Gillian’s tranquil and happy nature reacted on the whole household.

“That’s an extraordinary friendship,” commented Quarrington one day as he and his hostess stood at the window watching Gillian and Magda, returned from shopping in the village, approaching up the drive. “Mrs. Grey is so simple and—to use an overworked word—so essentially womanly.”

“And Magda?”

The hard look deepened in Michael’s eyes.

“Essentially—feminine,” he answered curtly. “A quite different thing.”

“She hasn’t found her soul yet,” said Lady Arabella. Adding with sudden daring: “Suppose you find it for her, Michael?”

“I don’t think the search would interest me,” he returned coolly. “I haven’t the instinct of the prospector.” He paused, then went on slowly and as though making the admission almost against his will: “But I’d like to paint her.”

“A portrait of her?”

“No, not a portrait.”

“Then you mean you want her to sit for your ’Circe’?”

Lady Arabella knew all about the important picture he had in mind to paint. They had often discussed it together during the progress of the sittings she had been giving him, and she was aware that so far he had been unable to find a suitable model.

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“Yes,” he said slowly. “She is the perfect model for such a subject—body and soul.”

Lady Arabella ignored the sneer.

“Then why not ask her to sit for you?”

Quarrington’s brows drew together.

“You know the answer to that, I think, Lady Arabella,” he answered curtly.

“Oh, you men! I’ve no patience with you!” exclaimed the old lady testily. “*I* shall ask her, then!”

Gillian and Magda, laden with parcels, entered the room as she spoke, and, before Quarrington could prevent her, she had flashed round on her god-daughter.

“Magda, here’s Michael in need of a model for the best picture he’s ever likely to paint, and it seems you exactly fit the bill. Will you sit for him?”

Followed an astonished silence. Gillian glanced apprehensively towards Magda. She felt as though Lady Arabella had suddenly let off a firework in their midst. Magda halted in the process of unwrapping a small parcel.

“What is the subject of the picture?”

There was a perceptible pause. Then Lady Arabella took the bull by the horns.

“Circe,” she said tersely.

“Oh!” Magda seemed to reflect. “She turned men into swine, didn’t she?” She looked across at Quarrington. “And I’m to understand you think I’d make a suitable model for that particular subject?”

“She was a very beautiful person,” suggested Gillian hastily.

“Mr. Quarrington hasn’t answered my question,” persisted Magda.

He met her glance with cool defiance.

“Then, yes,” he returned with a little bow. “As Mrs. Grey has just remarked—Circle was very beautiful.”

“You score,” observed Magda demurely. There was a glint of amusement in her eyes.

“Yes, I think he does,” agreed Lady Arabella, who was deriving an impish, pixie-like enjoyment from the situation. Then, recognising that it might be more diplomatic not to

press the matter any further at the moment, she skilfully drew the conversation into other channels.

It was not until evening, after dinner, that she reverted to the subject. They had all four been partaking of coffee and cigarettes on the verandah, and subsequently she had proposed a stroll in the garden—a suggestion to which Gillian responded with alacrity. Magda, her slim length extended on a comfortably cushioned wicker lunge, shook her head.

“I’m too comfortable to stir,” she declared idly.

Lady Arabella paused at the edge of the verandah and contemplated her critically. Something in the girl’s pose and in the long, lithe lines of her recumbent figure was responsible for her next remark.

“I can see you as Circe,” she commented, “quite well.” She tucked her arm into Gillian’s and, as they moved away together, threw back over her shoulder: “By the way, have you two settled the vexed question of the model for the picture yet?”

Quarrington blew a thin stream of smoke into the air before replying. Then, looking quizzically across at Magda, he asked: “Have we?”

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“Have we what?”

“Decided whether you will sit for my picture of Circe?”

Magda lifted her long white lids and met his glance.

“Why should I?” she asked lazily.

He shrugged his shoulders with apparent unconcern.

“No reason in the world—unless you feel inclined to do a good turn.”

His indifference was maddening.

“I don’t make a habit of doing good turns,” she retorted sharply.

“So I should imagine.”

The contemptuous edge to his voice roused her to indignation. As always, she found herself stung to the quick by the man’s coolly critical attitude towards her. She was back once more in the atmosphere of their first meeting on the day he had come to her assistance in the fog. It seemed almost incredible that all that followed had ever taken place—incredible that he had ever cared for her or taught her to care for him. At least he was making it very clear to her now that he intended to cut those intervening memories out of his life.

It was a sheer challenge to her femininity, and everything that was woman in her rose to meet it.

She smiled across at him engagingly.

“I might—perhaps—make an exception.”

For a moment there was silence. Quarrington’s gaze was riveted on her slim, supple figure with its perfect symmetry and rare grace of limb. It was difficult to interpret his expression. Magda wondered if he were going to reject her offer. He seemed to be fighting something out with himself—pulled two ways—the artist in him combating the man’s impulse to resist her.

Suddenly the artist triumphed. He rose and, coming to her side, stood looking down at her.

“Will you?” he said. “*Will you*?”

Something more than the artist spoke in his voice. It held a note of passionate eagerness, a clipped tensity that set all her pulses racing.

She turned her head aside.

“Yes,” she answered, a little breathlessly. “Yes—if you want me to.”

CHAPTER XVIII

A READJUSTMENT OF IDEAS

Magda glanced from the divan covered with a huge tiger-skin to Michael, wheeling his easel into place. A week’s hard work on the part of the artist had witnessed the completion of Lady Arabella’s portrait, and to-day he proposed to make some preliminary sketches for “Circe.”

Magda felt oddly nervous and unsure of herself. This last fortnight passed in daily companionship with Quarrington had proved a considerable strain. Not withstanding that she had consented to sit for his picture of Circe, he had not deviated from the attitude which he had apparently determined upon from the first moment of her arrival at the Hermitage—an attitude of aloof indifference to which was added a bitterness of speech that continually thrust at her with its trenchant cynicism. It was as though he had erected a high wall between them which Magda found no effort of hers could break down, and she was beginning to ask herself whether he could ever really have cared for her at all. Surely no man who had once cared could be so hard—so implacably hard!

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And now, alone with him in the big room which had been converted into a temporary studio, she found herself overwhelmed by a feeling of intense self-consciousness. She felt it would be impossible to bear the coolly neutral gaze of those grey eyes for hours at a time. She wished fervently that she had never consented to sit for the picture at all.

“How do you want me to pose?” she inquired at last, endeavouring to speak with her usual detachment and conscious that she was failing miserably. “You haven’t told me yet.”

He laughed a little.

“I haven’t the least intention of telling you,” he replied. “’The Wielitzska’ doesn’t need advice as to how to pose.”

Magda looked at him uncertainly.

“But you’ve given me no idea of what you want,” she protested. “I must have some idea to start from!”

“I want a recumbent Circe,” he vouchsafed at last. “Hence the divan. Here is the goblet”—he held it out—“supposed to contain the fatal potion which transformed men into swine. I leave the rest to you. You posed very successfully for me some years ago—without my issuing any stage directions. Afterwards you played the part of a youthful Circe, I remember. You should be more experienced now.”

She flushed under the cool, satirical tone. It seemed as though he neglected no opportunity of impressing on her the poor estimation in which he held her. Her thoughts flew back to a sunlit glade in a wood and to the grey-eyed, boyish-looking painter who had kissed her and called her “Witch-child!”

“You—you were kinder in those days,” she said suddenly. She made a few steps towards him and stood looking up at him, her hands hanging loosely clasped in front of her, like a penitent school-girl.

“Saint Michel”—and at the sound of her old childish name for him he winced. “Saint Michel, I don’t think I can sit for you if—if you’re going to be unkind. I thought I could, but—but—I can’t!”

“Unkind?” he muttered.

“Yes,” she said desperately. “Since I came here you’ve said a good many hard things to me. I—I dare say I’ve deserved them. But”—smiling up at him rather wanly—“it isn’t always easy to accept one’s deserts.” She paused, then spoke quickly: “Couldn’t we—while we’re here together—behave like friends? Just friends? It’s only for a short time.”

His face had whitened while she was speaking. He was silent for a little and his hand, grasping the side of the big easel, slowly tightened its grip till the knuckles showed white like bone. At last he answered her.

“Very well—friends, then! So be it.”

Impulsively she held out her hand. He took it in his and held it a moment, looking down at its slim whiteness. Then he bent his head and she felt his lips hot against her soft palm.

A little shaken, she drew away from him and moved towards the divan. She paused beside it and glanced down reflectively at the goblet she still carried in her hand, mentally formulating her conception of Circe before she posed. An instant later and her voice roused Quarrington from the momentary reverie into which he had fallen.

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“How would this do?”

He looked up, and as his gaze absorbed the picture before him an eager light of pure aesthetic satisfaction leaped into his eyes.

“Hold that!” he exclaimed quickly. “Don’t move, please!” And, snatching up a stick of charcoal, he began to sketch rapidly with swift, sure strokes.

The pose she had assumed was matchless. She was half-sitting, half-lying on the divan, the swathing draperies of her tunic outlining the wonderful modelling of her limbs. The upper part of her body, twisting a little from the waist, was thrown back as she leaned upon one arm, hand pressed palm downward on the tiger-skin. In her other hand she held a golden goblet, proffering the fatal draught, and her tilted face with its strange, enigmatic smile and narrowed lids held all the seductive entreaty and beguilement, and the deep, cynical knowledge of mankind, which are the garnerings of the Circes of this world.

At length Quarrington laid down his charcoal.

“It’s a splendid pose,” he said enthusiastically. “That sideways bend you’ve given to your body—it’s wonderful! But can you stand it, do you think? Of course I’ll give you rests as often as I can, but even so it will be a very trying pose to hold.”

Magda sat up, letting her feet slide slowly over the edge of the divan. The “feet of Aurora” someone had once called them—white and arched, with rosy-tipped toes curved like the petals of a flower.

“I can hold it for a good while, I think,” she answered evasively.

She did not tell him that even to her trained muscles the preservation of this particular pose, with its sinuous twist of the body, was likely to prove somewhat of a strain. If the pose was so exactly what he wanted for his Circe, he should have it, whatever the cost to herself.

And without knowing it, yielding to an impulse which she hardly recognised, Magda had taken the first step along the pathway of service and sacrifice trodden by those who love.

“It seems as though you were destined to be the model of my two ‘turning-point’ pictures,” commented Quarrington some days later, during one of the intervals when Magda was taking a brief rest. “It was the ‘Repose of Titania’ which first established my reputation, you know.”

“But this can’t be a ‘turning-point,’” objected Magda. “When you’ve reached the top of the pinnacle of fame, so to speak, there isn’t any ’turning-point’—unless”—laughing—-“you’re going to turn round and climb down again!”

“There’s no top to the pinnacle of work—of achievement,” he answered quietly. “At least, there shouldn’t be. One just goes on—slipping back a bit, sometimes, then scrambling on again.” His glance returned to the picture and Magda watched the ardour of the creative artist light itself anew in his eyes. “That”—he nodded towards the canvas—“is going to be the best bit of work I’ve done.”

“What made you”—she hesitated a moment—“what made you choose Circe as the subject?”

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His face clouded over.

“The experience of a friend of mine.”

Magda caught her breath.

“Not--you don’t mean-----”

“Oh, no”—divining her thought—“not the friend of whom you know—who loved the dancer. She hurt him”—looking at her significantly—“but she didn’t injure him to that extent. Circe turned men into swine, you remember. My friend was too fine a character for her to spoil like that.”

“I’m glad.” Magda spoke very low, her head bent. She felt unable to meet his eyes. After a short silence she asked: “Then what inspired—this picture?”

Was it some woman-episode that had occurred while he was abroad which had scored those new lines on his face, embittering the mouth and implanting that sternly sad expression in the grey eyes? She must know—at all hazards, she must know!

Quarrington lit a cigarette.

“It’s not a pretty story,” he remarked harshly.

Magda glanced towards the picture. The enchanting, tilted face smiled at her from the canvas, faintly derisive.

“Tell it me,” was all she said.

“There’s very little to tell,” he answered briefly. “There was a man and his wife—and another woman. Till the latter came along they were absolutely happy together—-sufficient unto each other. The other woman was one of the Circe type, and she broke the man. Broke him utterly. I happened to be in Paris at the time, and he came to see me there on his way out to South America. He’d left his wife, left his work—everything. Just *quitted*! Since then I believe ’Frisco has seen more of him than any other place. A man I know ran across him there and told me he’d gone under—utterly.”

“And the wife?”

“Dead”—shortly. “She’d no heart to go on living—no wish to. She died when their first child was born—she and the child together—a few months after her husband had left her.”

Magda uttered a stifled cry of pity, but Quarrington seemed not to hear it.

“That woman was a twentieth-century Circe.” He paused, then added with grim conviction: “There’s no forgiveness for a woman like that.”

“Ah! Don’t say that!”

The words broke impulsively from Magda’s lips. The recollection of the summer she had spent at Stockleigh rushed over her accusingly—and she realised that actually she had come between Dan Storran and his wife very much as the Circe woman of Michael’s story had come between some other husband and wife.

A deep compassion for that unknown woman surged up within her. Surely her burden of remorse must be almost more than she could endure! And Magda—to whom penalties and consequences had hitherto been but very unimportant factors with which she concerned herself as little as possible—was all at once conscious of an intense thankfulness that she had not been thus punished, that she had quitted Stockleigh leaving husband and wife still together. Together, they would find the way back into each other’s hearts!

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“Don’t say that!” she repeated imploringly. “It sounds so hard—so relentless!”

“I don’t think that it is a case for relenting. But I oughtn’t to have told you about it. After all, neither the husband nor wife were friends of yours. And you’re looking quite upset over it. I didn’t imagine that you were so easily moved to sympathy.”

She looked away. Of late she had been puzzled herself at the new and unwonted emotions which stirred her.

“I don’t think—I used to be,” she said at last, uncertainly.

“Well, please don’t take the matter too much to heart or you won’t be able to assume the personality of Circe again when you’ve rested. I don’t want to paint the picture of a model of propriety!”

It seemed as though he were anxious to restore the conversation to a lighter vein, and Magda responded gladly.

“I’m quite rested now. Shall I pose again?” she suggested a few minutes later.

Michael assented and, picking up his palette, began squeezing out fresh shining little worms of paint on to it while Magda reassumed her pose. For a while he chatted intermittently, but presently he fell silent, becoming more and more deeply absorbed in his work. Finally, when some remark of hers repeated a second time still remained unanswered, she realised that he had completely forgotten her existence. As far as he was concerned she was no longer Magda Wielitzska, posing for him, but Circe, the enchantress, whose amazing beauty he was transferring to his canvas in glowing brushstrokes. As with all genius, the impulse of creative work had seized him suddenly and was driving him on regardless of everything exterior to his art.

Time had ceased to matter to him, and Magda, with little nervous pains shooting first through one limb, then another, was wondering how much longer she could maintain the pose. She was determined not to give in, not to check him while that fervour of creation was upon him.

The pain was increasing. She felt as though she were being stabbed with red-hot knives. Tiny beads of sweat broke out on her forehead, and her breath came gaspingly between her lips.

All at once the big easel at which Michael was standing receded out of sight, and when it reappeared again it was quite close to her, swaying and nodding like a mandarin. Instinctively she put out her hand to steady it, but it leaned nearer and nearer and finally gave a huge lurch and swooped down on top of her, and the studio and everything in it faded out of sight. . . .

The metallic tinkle of the gold goblet as it fell from her hand and rolled along the floor startled Michael out of his absorption. With a sharp exclamation he flung down his brush and palette and strode hurriedly to the divan. Magda was lying half across it in a little crumpled heap, unconscious.

His first impulse to lift her up was arrested by something in her attitude, and he stood quite still, looking down at her, his face suddenly drawn and very weary.

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In the limp figure with its upturned face and the purple shadows which fatigue had painted below the closed eyelids, there was an irresistible appeal. She looked so young, so helpless, and the knowledge that she had done this for him—forced her limbs into agonised subjection until at last conscious endurance had failed her—moved him indescribably.

Surely this was a new Magda! Or else he had never known her. Had he been too hard—hard to her and pitilessly hard to himself—when he had allowed the ugly facts of her flirtation with Kit Raynham to drive him from her?

Eighteen months ago! And in all those eighteen months no word of gossip, no lightest breath of scandal against her, had reached his ears. Had he been merely a self-righteous Pharisee, enforcing the penalty of old sins, bygone failings? A grim smile twisted his lips. If so, and he had made her suffer, he had at least suffered equally himself!

He stooped over the prone figure on the divan. Lower, lower still, till a tendril of dark hair that had strayed across her forehead quivered beneath his breath. Then suddenly he drew back, jerking himself upright. Striding across the room he pealed the bell and, when a neat maidservant appeared in response, ordered sharply:

“Bring some brandy—quick! And ask Mrs. Grey to come here. Mademoiselle Wielitzska has fainted.”

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE END OF THE STORM

“This is very nice—but it won’t exactly contribute towards finishing the picture!”

As she spoke Magda leaned back luxuriously against her cushions and glanced smilingly across at Michael where he sat with his hand on the tiller of the *Bella Donna*, the little sailing-yacht which Lady Arabella kept for the amusement of her guests rather than for her own enjoyment, since she herself could rarely be induced to go on board.

It had been what Magda called a “blue day”—the sky overhead a deep unbroken azure, the dimpling, dancing waters of the Solent flinging back a blue almost as vivid—and she and Quarrington had put out from Netherway harbour in the morning and crossed to Cowes.

Here they had lunched and Magda had purchased one or two of the necessities of life (from a feminine point of view) not procurable in the village emporia at Netherway. Afterwards, as there was still ample time before they need think of returning home, Michael had suggested an hour’s run down towards the Needles.

The *Bella Donna* sped gaily before the wind, and neither of its occupants, engrossed in conversation, noticed that away to windward a bank of sullen cloud was creeping forward, slowly but surely eating up the blue of the sky.

“Of course it will contribute towards finishing the picture.” Quarrington answered Magda’s laughing comment composedly. “A blow like this will have done you all the good in the world, and I shan’t have you collapsing on my hands again as you did a week ago.”

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“Oh, then, you brought me out on hygienic grounds alone?” derided Magda.

She was feeling unaccountably happy and light-hearted. Since the day when she had fainted during the sitting Michael seemed to have changed. He no longer gave utterance to those sudden, gibing speeches which had so often hurt her intolerably. That sense of his aloofness, as though a great wall rose between them, was gone. Somehow she felt that he had drawn nearer to her, and once or twice those grey, compelling eyes had glowed with a smothered fire that had set her heart racing unsteadily within her.

“Haven’t you enjoyed to-day, then?” he inquired, responding to her question with another.

“I’ve loved it,” she answered simply. “I think if I’d been a man I should have chosen to be a sailor.”

“Then it’s a good thing heaven saw to it that you were a woman. The world couldn’t have done without its Wielitzska.”

“Oh, I don’t know”—half-indifferently, half-wistfully. “It’s astonishing how little necessary anyone really is in this world. If I were drowned this afternoon the Imperial management would soon find someone to take my place.”

“But your friends wouldn’t,” he said quietly.

Magda laughed a little uncertainly.

“Well, I won’t suggest we put them to the test, so please take me home safely.”

As she spoke a big drop of rain splashed down on to her hand. Then another and another. Simultaneously she and Michael glanced upwards to the sky overhead, startlingly transformed from an arch of quivering blue into a monotonous expanse of grey, across which came sweeping drifts of black cloud, heavy with storm.

“By Jove! We’re in for it!” muttered Quarrington.

His voice held a sudden gravity. He knew the danger of those unexpected squalls which trap the unwary in the Solent, and inwardly he cursed himself for not having observed the swift alteration in the weather.

The *Bella Donna*, too, was by no means the safest of craft in which to meet rough weather. She was slipping along very fast now, and Michael’s keen glance swept the gray landscape to where, at the mouth of the channel, the treacherous Needles sentinelled the open sea.

“We must bring her round—quick!” he said sharply, springing up. “Can you take the tiller? Do you know how to steer?”

Magda caught the note of urgency in his voice.

“I can do what you tell me,” she said quietly.

“Do you know port from starboard?” he asked grimly.

“Yes. I know that.”

Even while they had been speaking the wind had increased, churning the sea into foam-flecked billows that swirled and broke only to gather anew.

It was ticklish work bringing the *Bella Donna* to the wind. Twice she refused to come, lurching sickeningly as she rolled broadside on to the race of wind-driven waves. The third time she heeled over till her canvas almost brushed the surface of the water and it seemed as though she must inevitably capsize. There was an instant’s agonised suspense. Then she righted herself, the mainsail bellied out as the boom swung over, and the tense moment passed.

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“Frightened?” queried Quarrington when he had made fast the mainsheet.

Magda smiled straight into his eyes.

“No. We almost capsized then, didn’t we?”

“It was a near shave,” he answered bluntly.

They did not speak much after that. They had enough to do to catch the wind which seemed to bluster from all quarters at once, coming in violent, gusty spurts that shook the frail little vessel from stem to stern. Time after time the waves broke over her bows, flooding the deck and drenching them both with stinging spray.

Magda sat very still, maintaining her grip of the wet and slippery tiller with all the strength of her small, determined hands. Her limbs ached with cold. The piercing wind and rain seemed to penetrate through her thin summer clothing to her very skin. But unwaveringly she responded to Michael’s orders as they reached her through the bellowing of the gale. Her eyes were like stars and her lips closed in a scarlet line of courage.

“Port your helm! *Hard*! . . . Hold on!”

Then the thudding swing of the boom as the *Bella Donna* slewed round on a fresh tack.

The hurly-burly of the storm was bewildering. In the last hour or so the entire aspect of things had altered, and Magda was conscious of a freakish sense of the unreality of it all. With the ridiculous inconsequence of thought that so often accompanies moments of acute anxiety she reflected that Noah probably experienced a somewhat similar astonishment when he woke up one morning to find that the Flood had actually begun.

It seemed as though the storm had reached out long arms and drawn the whole world of land and sea and sky into its turbulent embrace. Driving sheets of rain blurred the coastline on either hand, while the wind caught up the grey waters into tossing, crested billows and flung them down again in a smother of angry spume.

Overhead, it screamed through the rigging of the little craft like a tormented devil, tearing at the straining canvas with devouring fingers while the slender mast groaned beneath its force.

Suddenly a terrific gust of wind seemed to strike the boat like an actual blow. Magda saw Michael leap aside, and in the same instant came a splitting, shattering report as the mast snapped in half and a tangled mass of wood and cordage and canvas fell crash on to the deck where he had been standing.

Magda uttered a cry and sprang to her feet. For an instant her heart seemed to stop beating as she visioned him beneath the mass of tackle. Or had he been swept off his feet—overboard into the welter of grey, surging waters that clamoured round the boat?

The moment of uncertainty seemed endless, immeasurable. Then Michael appeared, stepping across the wreckage, and came towards her. The relief was almost unendurable. She stretched out shaking hands.

“Oh, Michael! . . . Michael!” she cried sobbingly.

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And all at once she was in his arms. She felt them close about her, strong as steel and tender as love itself. In the rocking, helpless boat, with the storm beating up around them and death a sudden, imminent hazard, she had come at last into haven.

An hour later the storm had completely died away. It had begun to abate in violence almost immediately after the breaking of the *Bella Donna's* mast. It was as though, having wreaked its fury and executed all the damage possible short of absolute destruction, it was satisfied. With the same suddenness with which it had arisen it sank away, leaving a sulky, sunless sky brooding above a sullen sea still heaving restlessly with the aftermath of tempest.

The yacht had drifted gradually out of mid-channel shorewards, and after one or two unsuccessful efforts Quarrington at last succeeded in casting anchor. Then he turned to Magda, who had been assisting in the operation, with a smile.

"That's about all we can do," he said. "We're perfectly helpless till some tug or steamer comes along."

"Probably they'll run us down," she suggested. "We're in the fairway, aren't we?"

"Yes—which is about our best hope of getting picked up before night." Then, laying his hand on her arm: "Are you very cold and wet?"

Magda laughed—laughed out of sheer happiness. What did being cold matter, or wet either, if Michael loved her? And she was sure now that he did, though there had been but the one moment's brief embrace. Afterwards he had had his hands full endeavouring to keep the *Bella Donna* afloat.

"I think the wind has blown my things dry," she said. "How about you?"

"Oh, I'm all right—men's clothing being adapted for use, not ornament! But I must find something to wrap you up in. We may be here for hours and the frock you're wearing has about as much warming capacity as a spider's web."

He disappeared below into the tiny, single-berthed cabin, and presently returned armed with a couple of blankets, one of which he proceeded to wrap about Magda's shoulders, tucking the other over her knees where she sat in the stern of the boat.

"I don't want them both," she protested, resisting. "You take one."

There was something rather delightful in this unconventional comradeship of discomfort.

"You'll obey orders," replied Michael firmly. "Especially as you're going to be my wife so soon."

A warm flush dyed her face from brow to throat. He regarded her with quizzical eyes. Behind their tender mockery lurked something else—something strong and passionate and imperious, momentarily held in leash. But she knew it was there—could feel the essential, imperative demand of it.

“Well? Does the prospect alarm you?”

Magda forced herself to meet his glance.

“So soon?” she repeated hesitantly.

“Yes. As soon as it can be accomplished,” he said triumphantly.

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He seated himself beside her and took her in his arms, blankets and all.

“Did you think I’d be willing to wait?” he said.

“I didn’t think you wanted to marry me at all!” returned Magda, the words coming out with a little rush. “I thought you—you disapproved of me too much!”

His mouth twisted queerly.

“So I did. I’m scrapping the beliefs of half a lifetime because I love you. I’ve fought against it—tried not to love you—kept away from you! But it was stronger than I.”

“Saint Michel, I’m so glad—glad it was stronger,” she said tremulously, a little break in her voice.

He bent his head and kissed her lips, and with the kiss she gave him back she surrendered her very self into his keeping. She felt his arms strain about her, and the fierce pressure of their clasp taught her the exquisite joy of pain that is born of love.

She yielded resistlessly, every fibre of her being quivering responsive to the overwhelming passion of love which had at last stormed and broken down all barriers—-both the man’s will to resist and her own defences.

Somewhere at the back of her consciousness Diane’s urgent warning: *"Never give your heart to any man. Take everything, but do not give!"* tinkled feebly like the notes of a worn-out instrument. But even had she paused to listen to it she would only have laughed at it. She knew better.

Love was the most wonderful thing in the world. If it meant anything at all, it meant giving. And she was ready to give Michael everything she had—to surrender body, soul, and spirit, the threefold gift that a man demands of his mate.

She drew herself out of his arms and slipped to her knees beside him.

“Saint Michel, do you believe in me now?”

“Believe in you? I don’t know whether I believe in you or not. But I know I love you! . . . That’s all that matters. I love you!”

“No, no!” She resisted his arms that sought to draw her back into his embrace. “I want more than that. I’m beginning to realise things. There must be trust in love. . . . Michael, I’m not really hard—and selfish, as they say. I’ve been foolish and thoughtless, perhaps. But I’ve never done any harm. Not real harm. I’ve never”—she laughed a little brokenly—“I’ve never turned men into swine, Michael. . . . I’ve hurt people, sometimes, by letting them love me. But, I didn’t know, then! Now—now I know what

love is, I shall be different. Quite different. Saint Michel, I know now—love is self-surrender."

The tremulous sweetness of her, the humble submissiveness of her appeal, could not but win their way. Michael's lingering disbelief wavered and broke. She had been foolish, spoilt and thoughtless, but she had never done any real harm. Men had loved her—but how could it be otherwise? And perhaps, after all, they were none the worse for having loved her.

Deliberately Michael flung the past behind him and with it his last doubt of her. He drew her back into his arms, against his heart, and their lips met in a kiss that held not only love but utter faith and confidence—a pledge for all time.

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“Beloved!” he whispered. “My beloved!”

CHAPTER XX

NIGHT

Michael and Magda stood together on the deck of the crippled yacht which now rocked idly on a quite placid sea. Dusk was falling. That first glorious, irrecoverable hour when love had come into its own was past, and the consideration of things mundane was forcing itself on their notice—more especially consideration of their particular plight.

“It looks rather as though we may have to spend the night here,” observed Quarrington, his eyes scanning the channel void of any welcome sight of sail or funnel.

Magda’s brows drew together in a little troubled frown.

“Marraine and Gillian will be frightfully worried and anxious,” she said uneasily. It was significant of the gradual alteration in her outlook that this solicitude for others should have rushed first of anything to her lips.

“Yes.” He spoke with a curious abruptness. “Besides, that’s not the only point. There’s —Mrs. Grundy.”

Magda shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

“Well, if it’s to come to a choice between Mrs. Grundy and Davy Jones, I think I should decide to face Mrs. Grundy! Anyway, people can’t say much more—or much worse—-things about me than they’ve said already.”

Quarrington frowned moodily.

“I’d like to kick myself for bringing you out to-day and landing you into this mess. I can’t stand the idea of people gossiping about you.”

“They’ve left me very little reputation at any time. A little less can’t hurt me.”

His eyes grew stormy.

“Don’t!” he said sharply. “I hate to hear you talk like that.”

“But it’s true! No public woman gets a fair chance.”

“*You* will—when you’re my wife,” he said between his teeth. “I’ll see to that.”

Magda glanced at him swiftly.

“Then you don’t want me to—to give up dancing after we’re married?”

“Certainly I don’t. I shall want you to do just as you like. I’ve no place for the man who asks his wife to ‘give up’ things in order to marry him. I’ve no more right to ask you to give up dancing than you have to ask me to stop painting.”

Magda smiled at him radiantly.

“Saint Michel, you’re really rather nice,” she observed impertinently. “So few men are as sensible as that. I shall call you the ‘Wise Man,’ I think.”

“In spite of to-day?” he queried whimsically, with a rueful glance at the debris of mast and canvas huddled on the deck.

“*Because* of to-day,” she amended softly. “It’s—it’s very wise to be in love, Michael.”

He drew her into his arms and his lips found hers.

“I think it is,” he agreed.

Another hour went by, and still there came no sign of any passing vessel.

“Why the devil isn’t there a single tug passing up and down just when we happen to want one?” demanded Quarrington irately of the unresponsive universe. He swung round on Magda. “I suppose you’re starving?” he went on, in his voice a species of savage discontent—that unreasonable fury to which masculine temperament is prone when confronted with an obstacle which declines to yield either to force or persuasion.

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Magda laughed outright.

“I’ll admit to being hungry. Aren’t you? . . . It’s horribly unromantic of us, Michael,” she added regretfully.

Quarrington grinned.

“It is,” he assented. “All the same, I believe I could consume a tin of bully beef and feel humbly grateful for it at the present moment!”

Magda had a sudden inspiration.

“Michael! Let’s forage in the locker! There’s almost sure to be some biscuits or chocolate there. Marraine nearly always has things like that put on board. And there may be something left from the last supply.”

A brief search brought to light a half-tin of biscuits and some plain chocolate, and off these, with the addition of a bottle of soda-water, also discovered, they proceeded to make an impromptu meal. It was a somewhat thin substitute for the perfectly appointed little dinner of which they would have partaken in the ordinary course of events at the Hermitage, but when you have been a good many hours without food of any description, and spent the greater part of the time in “saving your own life at sea,” as Michael put it, even biscuits and chocolate have their uses.

When the improvised feast was over, Quarrington explored the recesses of the tiny hold and unearthed a lantern, which he proceeded to light and attach to the broken mast. It burned with a flickering, uncertain light, momentarily threatening to go out altogether.

“We’re not precisely well-equipped with lights,” he remarked grimly. “But at least that’s a precaution—as long as it lasts! It may—or may not—save us from being run down.”

Twilight deepened slowly into dark. The lights of Yarmouth sprang into being, a cluster of lambent orange points studding the dim coast of the Island. One by one the stars twinkled out in the dusky sky, and a waning moon, thin and frail like a worn sickle, flung a quivering ribbon of silver across the sea.

It was strangely still and quiet. Now and again the idle rudder creaked as the boat swung to the current. Once there came the long-drawn hoot of a distant siren. Beyond these fitful sounds only the gurgle of water lapping the sides of the boat broke the silence.

“We’re here till morning,” said Quarrington at last. “You may as well go to bed.”

“To bed?”

“Well, there’s a cabin, isn’t there?”—smiling. “And a more or less uncomfortable bunk. Come down and see what you can make of it as an abiding-place for the night.”

“And—and you? Can’t we rig up anything for you?” Magda looked round her vaguely.

“I shan’t sleep. I’ll do sentry-go on deck”—laughing. “It wouldn’t do for us both to go comfortably asleep and get run down without even having a shot at making our presence known!”

“Then I’ll keep watch with you,” said Magda.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort. You’ll go down to the cabin and sleep.”

“Let me stay, Michael. I couldn’t bear to think of your watching all through the night while I slept comfortably below.”

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“You won’t sleep *comfortably*—if my estimate of the look of that bunk is correct. But you’ll be out of the cold. Come, be sensible, Magda. You’re not suitably attired for a night watch. You’d be perished with cold before morning.”

“Well, let us take it in turns, then,” she suggested. “I’ll sleep four hours and then I’ll keep a look-out while you have a rest.”

“No,” he said quietly.

“Then we’ll both watch,” she asserted. Through the starlit dark he could just discern her small head turned defiantly away from him.

“Has it occurred to you,” he asked incisively, “what a night spent in the open might mean to you? Rheumatism is not precisely the kind of thing a dancer wants to cultivate.”

“Well, I’m not going below, anyway.”

She sat down firmly and Quarrington regarded her a moment in silence.

“You baby!” he said at last in an amused voice.

And the next moment she felt herself picked up as easily as though she were in very truth the baby he had called her and carried swiftly down the few steps into the cabin. The recollection of that day of her accident in the fog, when he had carried her from the wrenched and twisted car into his own house, rushed over her. Now, as then, she could feel the strength of his arms clasped about her, the masterful purpose of the man that bore her whither he wished regardless of whether she wanted to go or not.

He laid her down on the bunk and, bending over her, kept his hands on her shoulders.

“Now,” he demanded, “are you going to stay there?”

A faint rebellion still stirred within her.

“Supposing I say ’no’!”—irresolutely.

“I’m not supposing anything so unlikely,” he assured her. “I’m merely waiting to hear you say ‘yes.’”

She recognised the utter futility of trying to pit her will against the indomitable will of the man beside her.

“Michael, you are a bully!” she protested indignantly, half angry with him.

“Then you’ll stay there?” he persisted.

“You don’t give me much choice”—twisting her shoulders restlessly beneath his hands.

He laughed a little.

“You haven’t answered me.”

“Well, then—yes!”

She almost flung the word at him, and instantly she felt him lift his hands from her shoulders and heard his footsteps as he tramped out of the cabin and up on to the deck. Presently he returned, carrying the blankets which he had wrapped round her earlier in the course of their vigil. Magda accepted them with becoming docility.

“Thank you, Wise Man,” she said meekly.

He stood looking down at her in the faint moonlight that slanted in through the open door of the cabin, and all at once something in the intentness of his gaze awakened her to a sudden vivid consciousness of the situation—of the hour and of her absolute aloneness with him. Their solitude was as complete as though they had been cast on a desert island.

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Magda felt her pulses throb unevenly. The whole atmosphere seemed sentient and athrill with the surge of some deep-lying emotion. She could feel it beating up against her—the clamorous demand of something hardly curbed and straining for release.

“Michael——” The word stammered past her lips.

The sound of her voice snapped the iron control he had been forcing on himself. With a hoarse, half-strangled exclamation he caught her up from where she lay, crushing her slim, soft body in a grip that almost stifled her, kissing her fiercely on eyes and lips and throat. Then abruptly he released her and, without a word, without a backward look, strode out of the cabin and up on to the deck.

Magda sank down weakly on the edge of the narrow bunk. The storm of his passion had swept through her as the wind sweeps through a tree, leaving her spent and trembling. Sleep was an impossibility. Ten minutes, twenty passed—she could not have told how long it was. Then she heard him coming back, and as he gained the threshold she sprang to her feet and faced him, nervously on the defensive. In the pale, elusive moonlight, and with that startled poise of figure, she might well have been the hamadryad at bay of one of her most famous dances.

Michael looked rather white and there was a grim repression about the set of his lips. As he caught sight of her face with its mute apprehension and dilated eyes, he spoke quickly.

“You should be resting,” he said. “Let me tuck you up and then try to go to sleep.”

There was something infinitely reassuring in the steady tones of his voice. It held nothing but kindness—just comradeship and kindness. He was master of himself once more. For her sake he had fought back the rising tide of passion. It had no place while they two were here alone on the wide waters.

He stooped and picked up the blankets, laying them over her with a tenderness that seemed in some subtle way to be part of his very strength. Her taut nerves relaxed. She smiled up at him.

“Good-night, Saint Michel,” she said simply. “Take care of me.”

He stooped and kissed the slim hand lying outside the blanket.

“Now and always,” he answered gravely.

When Magda awoke, seven hours later, the sunlight was streaming into the cabin. She could hear Michael moving about the deck, and she sprang up and proceeded to make such toilette as was possible in the circumstances, taking down her hair and dressing it

afresh at the tiny looking-glass hung on the wall. She had barely completed the operation when she heard Michael give a shout.

“Ahoy! Ahoy there!”

She ran up on deck. Approaching them was a small steam-tug, and once again Quarrington sent his voice ringing lustily across the water, while he flourished a large white handkerchief in the endeavour to attract the attention of those on board.

Suddenly the tug saw them and, altering her course, came fussing up alongside. Quarrington briefly explained their predicament—in the face of the *Bella Donna’s* battered appearance a lengthy explanation was hardly necessary—and a few minutes later the tug was steaming for Netherway harbour, towing the crippled yacht behind her.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE OTHER MAN

“Please, Marraine, will you give us your blessing?”

The joyous excitement and relief incidental to the safe return of the voyagers had spent itself at last, and now, refreshed and invigorated by a hot bath and by a meal of more varied constituents than biscuit and plain chocolate, Magda propounded her question, a gleam of mirth glancing in her eyes.

Lady Arabella glanced doubtfully from one to the other. Then a look of undisguised satisfaction dawned in her face.

“Do you mean——” she began eagerly.

“We’ve been and gone and got engaged,” explained Quarrington.

“My dears!” Lady Arabella jumped up with the agility of twenty rather than seventy and proceeded to pour out her felicitations. Incidentally she kissed everybody all round, including Quarrington, and her keen old hawk’s eyes grew all soft and luminous like a girl’s.

Coppertop was hugely excited.

“Will the wedding be to-morrow?” he asked hopefully. “And shall I be a page and carry the Fairy Lady’s train?”

Magda smiled at him.

“Of course you shall be a page, Topkins. But the wedding won’t be quite as soon as to-morrow,” she told him.

“Why not?” insinuated Quarrington calmly. “There are such things as special licences, you know.”

“Don’t be silly,” replied Magda scathingly. “I’ve only just been saved from drowning, and I don’t propose to take on such a risk as matrimony till I’ve had time to recover my nerve.”

Lady Arabella surveyed them both with a species of irritated approval.

“And to think,” she burst out at last, indignantly, “of all the hours I’ve spent having my silly portrait painted and getting cramp in my stiff old joints, and that even then it needed Providence to threaten you both with a watery grave to bring you up to the scratch!”

“Well, we’re engaged now,” submitted Magda meekly.

Lady Arabella chuckled sardonically.

“If you weren’t, you’d have to be—after last night!” she commented drily.

“No one need know about last night,” retorted Magda.

“Huh!” Lady Arabella snorted. “Half Netherway will know the tale by midday. And you may be sure your best enemy will hear of it. They always do.”

“Never mind. It will make an excellent advertisement,” observed Magda philosophically. “Can’t you see it in all the papers?—’NARROW ESCAPE OF THE WIELITZSKA.’ In big capitals.”

They all laughed, realising the great amount of probability contained in her forecast. And, thanks to an enterprising young journalist who chanced to be prowling about Netherway on that particular day, the London newspapers flared out into large headlines, accompanied by vivid and picturesque details of the narrow escape while yachting of the famous dancer and of the well-known artist, Michael Quarrington—who, in some of the cheaper papers, was credited with having saved the Wielitzska’s life by swimming ashore with her.

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The immediate result was an augmented post-bag for the Hermitage, and Gillian had to waste the better part of a couple of sunshiny days in writing round to Magda's friends assuring them of her continued existence and wellbeing, and thanking them for their kind inquiries.

It was decided to keep the engagement private for the present, and life at the Hermitage resumed the even tenor of its way, Magda continuing to sit daily for the picture of Circe which Michael was anxious to complete before she returned to London for the autumn season.

"It's *our* picture now, Saint Michel," she told him, with a happy, possessive pride in his work.

In this new atmosphere of tranquil happiness Magda bloomed like a flower in the sun. To the nameless natural charm which was always hers there was added a fresh sweetness and appeal, and the full revelation of her love for him startled even Michael. He had not realised the deep capacity for love which had lain hidden beneath her nonchalance.

It seemed as though her whole nature had undergone a change. Alone with him she was no longer the assured woman of the world, the spoilt and feted dancer, but just a simple, unaffected girl, sometimes a little shy, almost diffident, at others frank and spontaneous with the splendid candour and simplicity of a woman who knows no fear of love, but goes courageously to meet it and all that it demands of her.

She was fugitively sweet and tender with Coppertop, and now and then her eyes would shine with a quiet, dreaming light as though she visioned a future wherein someone like Coppertop, only littler, might lie in the crook of her arm.

Often during these tranquil summer days the two were to be found together, Magda recounting the most gorgeous stories of knights and dragons such as Coppertop's small soul delighted in. On one such occasion, at the end of a particularly thrilling narrative, he sat back on his heels and regarded her with a certain wistful anxiety.

"I suppose," he asked rather forlornly, "when you're married they'll give you a little boy like me, Fairy Lady, won't they?"

The clear, warm colour ran up swiftly beneath her skin.

"Perhaps so, Topkins," she answered very low.

He heaved a big sigh. "He'll be a very *lucky* little boy," he said plaintively. "If Mummie couldn't have been my mummie, I'd have choosed you."

And so, in this tender atmosphere of peace and contentment, the summer slipped by until it was time for Magda to think of going back to London. The utter content and happiness of these weeks almost frightened her sometimes.

“It can’t last, Gilly,” she confided to Gillian one day, caught by an access of superstitious fear. “It simply *can’t* last! No one was meant to be as happy as I am!”

“I think we were all meant to be happy,” replied Gillian simply. “Happy and good!” she added, laughing.

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“Yes. But I haven’t been particularly good. I’ve just done whatever it occurred to me to do without considering the consequences. I expect I shall be made to take my consequences all in a heap together one day.”

Gillian smiled.

“Then I suppose we shall all of us have to rally round and get you out of them,” she said cheerfully.

“Perhaps—perhaps you wouldn’t be able to.”

There was a strange note of foreboding in Magda’s voice—an accent of fatality, and despite herself Gillian experienced a reflex sense of uneasiness.

“Nonsense!” she said brusquely. “What on earth has put all these ridiculous notions into your head?”

Magda smiled at her. “I think it was four lines I read in a book yesterday. They set me thinking.”

“More’s the pity then!” grumbled Gillian. “What were they?”

Magda was silent a moment, looking out over the sea with abstracted eyes. It was so blue to-day—all blue and gold in the dancing sunlight. But she knew that self-same sea could be grey—grey and chill as death.

Her glance came slowly back to Gillian’s face as she quoted the fragment of verse which had persisted in her thoughts:

> “To-day and all the still unborn To-morrows
> Have sprung from Yesterday. For Woe or Weal
> The Soul is weighted by the Burden of Dead Days—
> Bound to the unremitting Past with Ropes of Steel.”

After a moment she added:

“Even you couldn’t cut through ‘ropes of steel,’ my Gillyflower.”

Gillian tried to shrug away this fanciful depression of the moment.

“Well, by way of a counterblast to your dejection of spirit, I propose to send an announcement of your engagement to the *Morning Post*. You’re not meaning to keep it private after we get back to town, are you?”

“Oh, no. It was only that I didn’t want to be pestered with congratulations while we were down here. I suppose they’ll have to come some day”—with a small grimace of disgust.

“You’ll be snowed under with them,” Gillian assured her encouragingly.

The public announcement of the engagement preceded Magda’s return from Netherway by a few days, so that by the time the Hermitage house-party actually broke up, its various members returning to town, all London was fairly humming with the news. The papers were full of it. Portraits of the fiances appeared side by side, together with brief histories of their respective careers up to date, and accompanied by refreshing details concerning their personal tastes.

“Dear me, I never knew Michael had a passion for raw meat before,” remarked Magda, after reading various extracts from the different accounts aloud for Gillian’s edification.

“Has he?” Gillian was arranging flowers and spoke somewhat indistinctly, owing to the fact that she had the stem of a chrysanthemum between her lips.

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“Yes, he must have. Listen to this, ’Mr. Quarrington’s wonderful creations are evidently not entirely the fruit of the spirit, since we understand that his staple breakfast dish consists of a couple of underdone cutlets—so lightly cooked, in fact, as to be almost raw.’ I’m glad I’ve learned that,” pursued Magda earnestly. “It seems to me an important thing for a wife to know. Don’t you think so, Gillian?”

Gillian shouted with delight.

“Of course I do! Do let’s ask Michael to lunch and offer him a couple of raw cutlets on a charger.”

“No,” insisted Magda firmly. “I shall keep a splendid treat like that for him till after we’re married. Even at a strictly conservative estimate it should be worth a new hat to me.”

“Or a dose of arsenic in your next cup of tea,” suggested Gillian, giggling.

The following evening was the occasion of Magda’s first appearance at the Imperial after the publication of her engagement, and the theatre was packed from floor to ceiling. “House Full” boards were exhibited outside at quite an early hour, and when Magda appeared on the stage she was received with such enthusiasm that for a time it was impossible to proceed with the ballet. When finally the curtain fell on what the critics characterised next day as “the most appealing performance of *The Swan-Maiden* which Mademoiselle Wielitzska has yet given us,” she received an absolute ovation. The audience went half-crazy with excitement, applauding deliriously, while the front of the stage speedily became converted into a veritable bank of flowers, from amidst which Magda bowed and smiled her thanks.

She enjoyed every moment of it, every handclap. She was radiantly happy, and this spontaneous sharing in her happiness by the big public which idolised her served but to intensify it. She was almost crying as she returned to her dressing-room after taking a dozen or more calls, and when, as usual, Virginie met her on the threshold, she dropped the great sheaf of lilies she was carrying and flung her arms round the old woman’s neck.

“Oh, the dears!” she exclaimed. “The blessed *dears*! Virginie, I believe I’m the happiest woman alive!”

“And who should be, *mon petite chou*, if not thou?” returned the old woman with conviction. “Of course they love thee! *Mais bien sur*! Doest thou not dance for them as none else can dance and give them angel visions that they could not imagine for themselves?” She paused. Then thrusting her hand suddenly into the pocket of her apron and producing a card: “*Tiens*! I forgot! Monsieur Davilof waits. Will mademoiselle receive him?”

Magda nodded. She had not seen Antoine since her return from Netherway. He had been away in Poland, visiting his mother whom, by the way, he adored. But as her engagement to Michael was now public she was anxious to get her first meeting with the musician over. He would probably rave a little, despairing in the picturesque and dramatic fashion characteristic of him, and the sooner he "got it out of his system," as Gillian had observed on one occasion, the better for everyone concerned. So Magda braced herself for the interview, and prepared to receive a tragical and despondent Davilof.

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But she was not in the least prepared for the man as he appeared when Virginie ushered him into the dressing-room and retired, discreetly closing the door behind her. Magda, her hand outstretched to greet him, paused in sheer dismay, her arm falling slowly to her side.

She had never seen so great a change in any man. His face was grey—grey and lined like the face of a man who has had no sleep for days. His shoulders stooped a little as though he were too weary to hold himself upright, and there was a curiously rigid look about his features, particularly the usually mobile mouth. The only live thing about him seemed to be his eyes. They blazed with a burning brightness that made her think of flame. With it all, he was as immaculately groomed, his small golden beard as perfectly trimmed, as ever.

“Antoine!” His name faltered from Magda’s lips. The man’s face, its beauty all marred by some terrible turmoil of the soul, shocked her.

He vouchsafed no greeting, but came swiftly to her side.

“Is it true?” he demanded imperiously.

She shrank back from him. There was a dynamic force about him that startled her.

“Is what true?”

“Is it true that you’re engaged to Quarrington?”

“Of course it is. It was in all the papers. Didn’t you see it?”

“Yes, I saw it. I didn’t believe it. I was in Poland when I heard and I started for England at once. But I was taken ill on the journey. Since then I’ve been travelling night and day.” He paused, adding in a tone of finality: “You must break it off.”

“Break it off? Are you crazy, Antoine?”

“No, I’m not crazy. But you’re mine. You’re meant for me. And no other man shall have you.”

Magda’s first impulse was to order him out of the room. But the man’s haggard face was so pitifully eloquent of the agony he had been enduring that she had not the heart. Instead, she temporised persuasively.

“Don’t talk like that, Antoine.” She spoke very gently. “You don’t mean it, you know. If—if you do care for me as you say, you’d like me to be happy, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d make you happy,” he said hoarsely.

She shook her head.

“No,” she answered. “You couldn’t make me happy. Only Michael can do that. So you must let me go to him. . . . Antoine, I’d rather go with your good wishes. Won’t you give them to me? We’ve been friends so long—”

“*Friends*?” he broke in fiercely. “No! We’ve never been ‘friends.’ I’ve been your lover from the first moment I saw you, and shall be your lover till I die!”

Magda retreated before his vehemence. She was still wearing her costume of the Swan-Maiden, and there was something frailly virginal and elusive about her as she drew away from him that set the hot, foreign blood in him on fire. In two strides he was at her side, his hands gripping her bare arms with a savage clasp that hurt her.

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"*Mon adoree*!"

His voice was harsh with the tensity of passion, and the cry that struggled from her throat for utterance was smothered by his lips on hers. The burning kisses seemed to scorch her—consuming, overwhelming her. When at last he took his mouth from hers she tried unavailingly to free herself. But his clasp of her only tightened.

"Now you know how I love you," he said grimly. He was breathing rather fast, but in some curious way he seemed to have regained his self-control. It was as though he had only slipped the leash of passion so that she might, as he said, comprehend his love for her. "Do you think I'll give you up? I tell you I'd rather kill you than see you Quarrington's wife."

Once more she made an effort to release herself.

"Oh, you're mad, you're mad!" she cried. "Let me go, Davilof! At once!"

"No," he said in a measured voice. "Don't struggle. I'm not going to let you go. Not yet. I've reached my limit. You shall go when you promise to marry me. Me, not Quarrington."

She had not been frightened by the storm of passion which had carried him headlong. That had merely roused her to anger. But this quiet, purposeful composure which had succeeded it filled her with an odd kind of misgiving.

"It's absurd to talk like that," she said, holding on desperately to her self-possession. "It's silly—and melodramatic, and only makes me realise how glad I am I shall be Michael's wife and not yours."

"You will never be Quarrington's wife."

He spoke with conviction. Magda called up all her courage to defy him.

"And do you propose to prevent it?" she asked contemptuously.

"Yes." Then, suddenly: "*Adoree*, don't force me to do it! I don't want to. Because it will hurt you horribly. And it will all be saved if you'll promise to marry me."

He spoke appealingly, with an earnestness that was unmistakable. But Magda's nerve was gradually returning.

"You don't seem to understand that you can't prevent my marrying Michael—or anyone else," she said coolly. "You haven't the power."

"I can prevent your marrying Michael"—doggedly.

She was silent a moment.

“I suppose,” she said at last, “you think that because he once thought badly of me you can make him think the same again. Well, you can’t. Michael and I trust each other—-absolutely!”

Her face was transfigured. Michael trusted her now! Nothing could really hurt her while he believed in her. She could afford to laugh at Antoine’s threat.

“And now,” she said quietly, “will you please release me?”

Slowly, reluctantly Davilof’s hands dropped from her arms, revealing red weals where the grip of his fingers had crushed the soft, white flesh. He uttered a stifled exclamation as his eyes fell on the angry-looking marks.

“*Mon dieu*! I’ve hurt you—”

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“No!” Magda faced him with a defiance that was rather splendid. “No! *You can’t* hurt me, Davilof. Only the man I love can do that.”

He flinched at the proud significance of the words—denying him even the power to hurt her. It was almost as though she had struck him, contemptuously disdainful of his toy weapons—the weapons of the man who didn’t count.

There was a long silence. At last he spoke.

“You’ll be sorry for that,” he said in a voice of concentrated anger. “Damned sorry. Because it isn’t true. I *can* hurt you. And by God, if you won’t marry me, I will! . . . Magda——” With one of the swift changes so characteristic of the man he softened suddenly into passionate supplication. “Have a little mercy! God! If you knew how I love you, you couldn’t turn me away. Wait! Think again—”

“That will do.” She checked him imperiously. “I don’t want your love. And for the future please understand that you won’t even be a friend. I don’t wish to see or speak to you again!”

CHAPTER XXII

THE ROPES OF STEEL

Magda sat gazing idly into the fire, watching with abstracted eyes the flames leap up and curl gleefully round the fresh logs with which she had just fed it. She was thinking about nothing in particular—merely revelling in the pleasant warmth and comfort of the room and in the prospect of a lazy evening spent at home, since to-night she was not due to appear in any of the ballets to be given at the Imperial Theatre.

Outside, the snow was falling steadily in feathery flakes, hiding the grime of London beneath a garment of shimmering white and transforming the commonplace houses built of brick and mortar, each capped with its ugly chimneystack, into glittering fairy palaces, crowned with silver towers and minarets.

The bitter weather served to emphasise the easy comfort of the room, and Magda curled up into her chair luxuriously. She was expecting Michael to dinner at Friars’ Holm this evening. They had not seen each other for three whole days, so that there was an added edge to her enjoyment of the prospect. She would have so much to tell him! About the triumphant reception she had had the other night down at the theatre—he had been prevented from being present—and about the unwarrantable attitude Davilof had adopted, which had been worrying her not a little. He would sympathise with her over that—the effortless sympathy of the man in possession!

Then the unwelcome thought obtruded itself that if the snow continued falling Michael might be weather-bound and unable to get out to Hampstead. She uncurled herself from her chair and ran to the window. The sky stretched sombrely away in every direction. No sign of a break in the lowering, snow-filled clouds! She drummed on the window with impatient fingers; and then, drowning the little tapping noise they made, came the sound of an opening door and Melrose's placid voice announcing:

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“Mr. Quarrington.”

Magda whirled round from the window.

“Michael!” she exclaimed joyfully. “I was just wondering if you would be able to get over this evening. I suppose you came while you could!”—laughing. “I shouldn’t be in the least surprised if you were snowed up here. Shall you mind—dreadfully—if you are?”

But Michael made no response to the tenderly mocking question, nor did her smile draw from him any answering smile. She looked at him waveringly. He had been in the room quite long enough to take her in his arms and kiss her. And he hadn’t done it.

“Michael——” She faltered a little. “How queer you are! Have you—brought bad news?” A sudden dread rushed through her. “It’s not—Marraine?”

“No, no.” He spoke hastily, answering the startled apprehension in her eyes. “It’s not that.”

Her mind, alertly prescient, divined significance in the mere wording of the phrase.

“Then there is—something?”

“Yes, there is something.”

His voice sounded forced, and Magda waited with a strange feeling of tension for him to continue.

“I want to ask you a question,” he went on in the same carefully measured accents. “Did you ever stay at a place called Stockleigh—Stockleigh Farm at Ashencombe?”

Stockleigh! At the sound of the word it seemed to Magda as though a hand closed suddenly round her heart, squeezing it so tightly that she could not breathe.

“I—yes, I stayed there,” she managed to say at last.

“Ah-h!” It was no more than a suddenly checked breath. “When were you there?” The question came swiftly, like the thrust of a sword. With it, it seemed to Magda that she could feel the first almost imperceptible pull of the “ropes of steel.”

“I was there—the summer before last,” she said slowly.

Michael made no answer. Only in the silence that followed she saw his face change. Something that had been hope—a fighting hope—died out of his eyes and his jaw seemed to set itself with a curious inflexibility.

She waited for him to speak—waited with a keyed-up intensity of longing that was almost physically painful. At last, unable to bear the continued silence, she spoke again. Her voice cracked a little.

“Why—why do you ask, Michael?”

He looked at her and a sudden cynical amusement gleamed in his eyes—an amusement so bitterly unmirthful that there seemed something almost brutal about it. Her hand went up to her face as though to screen out the sight of it.

“You can’t guess, I suppose?” he said with dry, harsh irony. Then, after a moment: “Why did you never tell me you were there? You never spoke of it. . . . Wasn’t it curious you should never speak of it?”

She made a step towards him. She could not endure this torturing suspense another instant. It was racking her. She must know what Stockleigh signified to him.

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“What do you mean? Tell me what you mean!” she asked desperately.

“Do you remember the story I told you down at Netherway—of a man and his wife and another woman?”

“Yes, I remember”—almost whispering.

“That was the story of my sister, June, and her husband, Dan Storran. You—were the other woman.”

She felt his eyes—those eyes out of which all hope had died—fixed on her.

“June—your sister? Your sister? Are you sure?” she stammered stupidly.

It couldn’t be true! Not even God could have thought of a punishment so cruel, so awful as this. That June—the woman who had died just because she “had no heart to go on living”—should be Michael’s sister! Oh, it was a crazy tangling of the threads—mad! Like some macabre invention sprung from a disordered brain. She wanted to laugh, and she knew if she began to laugh she should never stop. She felt she was losing her hold over herself. With a violent effort she clutched at her self-control.

“Will you say it all over again, please?” she said in a flat voice. “I don’t think I understand.”

“Nor did I till to-day,” he replied shortly. “Davilof made me understand—this morning.”

“Davilof?” The word seemed to drag itself from her throat. . . . Davilof—who had been at Stockleigh that summer! Then it was all going to be true, after all.

“Yes, Davilof. He had chanced on the fact that June was my sister. Very few people knew it, because, when she married, it was against our father’s wishes, and she had cut herself adrift from the family. I wanted to help her, but she would never let me.” He paused, then went on tonelessly: “It’s all quite clear, isn’t it? You know everything that happened while you were at Stockleigh. I’ve told you what happened afterwards. Storran cleared out of the country at once, and June had nothing left to live for. The only thing I didn’t know was the name of the woman who had smashed up both their lives. I saw Dan in Paris . . . He came to me at my studio. But he was a white man. He never gave away the name of the woman who had ruined him. I only knew she had spent that particular summer at Stockleigh. It was Davilof who told me who the woman was.”

"I can prevent your marrying Quarrington!" Magda could hear again the quiet conviction of Antoine’s utterance. So he had known, then, when he threatened her, that June was Michael’s sister! She wondered dully how long he had been aware of the fact—how he had first stumbled across it and realised its value as a hammer with which to crush her

happiness. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered any more. The main fact was that he *had* known.

June was dead! Amid the confused welter of emotions which seemed to have utterly submerged her during the last few minutes, Magda had almost lost sight of this as a fact by itself—as distinct from its identity with the fact that Michael's sister was dead. She felt vaguely sorry for June.

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Since the day she and Gillian had left Ashencombe she had heard nothing of Storran or his wife. No least scrap of news relating to them had come her way. In the ordinary course of events it was hardly likely that it would. The circles of their respective lives did not overlap each other. And Magda had made no effort to discover what had happened at Stockleigh after she had left there. She had been glad to shut the door on that episode in her life. She was not proud of it.

There were other incidents, too, which she could have wished were blotted out—the Raynham incident amongst them. With the new insight which love had brought her she was beginning to rate these things at their true value, to realise how little she had understood of all love's exquisite significance when she played with it as lightly as a child might play with a trinket. She had learned better now—learned that love was of the spirit as well as of the body, and that in playing at love she had played with men's souls.

She believed she had put that part of her life behind her—all those unrecognising days before love came to her. And now, without warning, sudden as an Eastern night, the past had risen up and confronted her. The implacable ropes of steel held her in bondage.

"Michael . . . can't you—forgive me?"

Her voice wavered and broke as she realised the utter futility of her question. Between them, now and always, there must lie the young, dead body of June Storran.

"Forgive you?" Michael's voice was harsh with an immeasurable bitterness. "Good God! What are you made of that you can even ask me? It's women like you who turn this world into plain hell! . . . Look back! Have you ever looked back, I wonder?" He paused, and she knew his eyes were searching her—those keen, steady eyes, hard, now, like flint—searching the innermost recesses of her being. She felt as though he were dragging the soul out of her body, stripping it naked to the merciless lash of truth.

"June—my little sister, the happiest of mortals—dead, through you. And Storran—he was a big man, white all through—down and out. And God knows who else has had their sun put out by you. . . . You're like a blight—spreading disease and corruption wherever you go."

A little moan broke from her lips. For a moment it was a physical impossibility for her to speak. She could only shrink, mute and quivering, beneath the flail of his scorn.

At last: "Is—is that what you think of me?" she almost whispered.

"Yes."

She winced at the harsh monosyllable. There was a finality about it—definite, unalterable. She looked at him dry-eyed, her face tragically beautiful in its agony. But he seemed impervious to either its beauty or its suffering. There was no hint of softening in him. Without another word he swung round on his heel and turned to leave her.

“Michael . . . don’t go!” The lovely voice was a mere thread of sound—hoarse and strangulated. “Don’t go! . . . Oh, be a little merciful!”

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She laid an imploring hand on his arm, and at the touch of her his iron composure shook a little. For a moment the hardness in his eyes was wiped out by a look of intolerable pain. Then, with a quiet, inexorable movement he released himself from her straining clasp.

“There’s no question of mercy,” he said inflexibly. “I’m not judging you, or punishing you. It’s simply that I can’t marry you. . . . You must see that June’s death—my sister’s death—lies at your door.”

“No,” she said. “No. I suppose you can’t marry me—now.”

Her breath came in short, painful gasps. Her face seemed to have grown smaller—-shrunk. There was a pinched look about the nostrils and every drop of blood had drained away, leaving even her lips a curious greyish-white. She leaned forward, swaying a little.

“I suppose,” she said in a clear, dry voice, “you don’t even love me any more?”

His hands clenched and he took a sudden impetuous step towards her.

“Not love you?” he said. And at last the man’s own agony broke through his enforced calm, shaking his voice so that it was hoarse and terrible. “Not love you? I love you now as I loved you the day I first saw you. God in heaven! Did you think love could be killed so easily? Does it die—just because it’s forbidden by every decent instinct that a man possesses? If so, nine-tenths of us would find the world an easier place to live in!”

“And there is—no forgiveness, Michael?” The lovely grief-wrung face was uplifted to his beseechingly.

“Don’t ask me!” he said hoarsely. “You know there can be none.”

He turned and strode to the door. He did not look back even when his name tore itself like a cry between her lips. The next moment the sound of a door’s closing came dully to her ears.

She looked vaguely round the room. The fire was dying, the charred logs sinking down on to a bed of smouldering cinders. A touch would scatter them from their semblance of logs into a heap of grey, formless ash. Outside the window the snow still fell monotonously, wrapping the world in a passionless, chill winding-sheet.

With a little broken cry she stumbled forward on to her knees, her arms outflung across the table.

CHAPTER XXIII

ACCOUNT RENDERED

The long, interminable night was over at last. Never afterwards, all the days of her life, could Magda look back on the black horror of those hours without a shudder. She felt as though she had been through hell and come out on the other side, to find stretching before her only the blank grey desolation of chaos.

She was stripped of everything—of love, of happiness, even of hope. There was nothing in the whole world to look forward to. There never would be again. And when she looked back it was with eyes that had been vouchsafed a terrible enlightenment.

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Phrases which had fallen from Michael's lips scourged her anew throughout the long hours of the night. "Women like you make this world into plain hell," he had said. "You're like a blight—spreading disease and corruption wherever you go." And the essential truth which each sentence held left her writhing.

It was all true—horribly, hideously true. The magical, mysterious power of beauty which had been given her, which might have helped to lighten the burden of the sad old world wherever she passed, she had used to destroy and deface and mutilate. The debt against her—the debt of all the pain and grief which she had brought to others—had been mounting up, higher and higher through the years. And now the time had come when payment was to be exacted.

Quite simply and directly, without seeking in any way to exculpate herself, she had told Gillian the bare facts of what had happened—that her engagement was broken off and the reason why. But she had checked all comment and the swift, understanding sympathy which Gillian would have given. Criticism or sympathy would equally have been more than she could bear.

"There is nothing to be said or done about it," she maintained. "I've sinned, and now I'm to be punished for my sins. That's all."

The child of Hugh Vallincourt spoke in that impassive summing up of the situation and Lady Arabella, with her intimate knowledge of both Hugh and his sister Catherine, would have ascribed it instantly to the Vallincourt strain in her god-daughter. To Gillian, however, to whom the Vallincourts were nothing more than a name, the strange submissiveness of it was incomprehensible. As the days passed, she tried to rouse Magda from the apathy into which she seemed to have fallen, but without success.

"It's no use, Gillyflower," she would reply with a weary little smile. "There *is* no way out. Do you remember I once said I was too happy for it to last? It was quite true. . . . Have you told Marraine?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes. And she wants to see you."

"I don't think I want to see her—or anyone just at present. I've got to think—to think things out."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"I—don't know—yet."

Gillian regarded her with some anxiety. That Magda, usually so unreserved and spontaneous, should shut her out of her confidence thoroughly disquieted her. She felt afraid. It seemed to her as though the girl were more or less stunned by the enormity of the blow which had befallen her. She went about with a curious absence of interest in

anything—composed, quiet, absorbed in her own thoughts, only rousing herself to appear at the Imperial as usual. Probably her work at the theatre was the one thing that saved her from utter collapse.

As far as Gillian knew she had not shed a single tear. Only her face seemed to grow daily more strained-looking, and her eyes held a curious expression that was difficult to interpret.

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There were days which she spent entirely in the seclusion of her own room, and then Virginie alone was allowed entrance. The old Frenchwoman would come in with some special little dish she had cooked with her own hands, hoping to tempt her beloved mistress's appetite—which in these days had dwindled to such insignificant proportions that Virginie was in despair.

"Thou must eat," she would say.

"I don't want anything—really, Virginie," Magda would insist.

"And wherefore not?" demanded Virginie indignantly one day. "Thou art not one of the Sisters of Penitence that thou must needs deny thyself the good things of life."

Magda looked up with a sudden flash of interest.

"The Sisters of Penitence, Virginie? Who are they? Tell me about them."

Virginie set a plate containing an epicurean omelet triumphantly in front of her.

"Eat that, then, *cherie*, while I tell thee of them," she replied with masterly diplomacy. "It is good, the omelet. Virginie made it for thee with her own hands."

Magda laughed faintly in spite of herself and began upon the omelet obediently.

"Very well, then. Tell me about the Sisters of Penitence. Are they always being sorry for what they've done?"

"It is a sisterhood, *mademoiselle cherie*, for those who would withdraw themselves from the world. They are very strict, I believe, the sisters, and mortify the flesh exceedingly. Me, I cannot see why we should leave the beautiful world the *bon dieu* has put us into. For certain, He would not have put us in if He had not meant us to stay there!"

"Perhaps—they are happier—out of the world, Virginia," suggested Magda slowly.

"But my niece, who was in the sisterhood a year, was glad to come out again. Though, of course, she left her sins behind her, and that was good. It is always good to get rid of one's sins, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"Get rid of your sins? But how can you?"

"If one does penance day and night, day and night, for a whole long year, one surely expiates them! And then"—with calm certainty—"of course one has got rid of them. They are wiped off the slate and one begins again. At least, it was so with my niece. For when she came out of the sisterhood, the man who had betrayed her married her,

and they have three—no, four *bebes* now. So that it is evident *le bon dieu* was pleased with her penance and rewarded her accordingly."

Magda repressed an inclination to smile at the naive simplicity of Virginie's creed. Life would indeed be an easy affair if one could "get rid of one's sins" on such an ingenuous principal of quid pro quo!

But Virginie came of French peasant stock, and to her untutored mind such a process of wiping the slate clean seemed extremely reasonable. She continued with enthusiasm:

"She but took the Vow of Penitence for a year. It is a rule of the sisterhood. If one has sinned greatly, one can take a vow of penitence for a year and expiate the sin. Some remain altogether and take the final vows. But my niece—no! She sinned and she paid. And then she came back into the world again. She is a good girl, my niece Suzette. Mademoiselle has enjoyed her omelet? Yes?"

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Magda nodded.

“Yes, Virginie, I’ve enjoyed it. And I think your niece was certainly a brave *fille*. I’m glad she’s happy now.”

For long after Virginie had left her, Magda sat quietly thinking. The story of the old Frenchwoman’s niece had caught hold of her imagination. Like herself she had sinned, though differently. Within her own mind Magda wondered whether she or Suzette were in reality the greater sinner of the two. Suzette had at least given all, without thought of self, whereas she had only taken—taken with both hands, giving nothing in return.

Probably Suzette had been an attractive little person—of the same type of brown-eyed, vivacious youth which must have been Virginie’s five-and-thirty years ago—and her prettiness had caused her downfall. Magda glanced towards the mirror. It was through her beauty she herself had sinned. It had given her so much power, that exquisite, perfect body of hers, and she had pitifully misused the power it had bestowed. The real difference between herself and Suzette lay in the fact that the little French girl had paid the uttermost farthing of the price demanded—had submitted herself to discipline till she had surely expiated all the evil she had done. What if she, likewise, were to seek some such discipline?

The idea had presented itself to her at precisely the moment when she was in the grip of an agony of recoil from her former way of life. Like her father, she had been suddenly brought up short and forced to survey her actions through the eyes of someone else, to look at all that she had done from another’s angle of vision. And coincidentally, just as in the case of her father, the abrupt downfall of her hopes, the sudden shattering of her happiness, seemed as though it were due to the intervention of an angry God.

The fanatical Vallincourt blood which ran in Magda’s veins caused her to respond instinctively to this aspect of the matter. But the strain of her passionate, joy-loving mother which crossed with it tempered the tendency toward quite such drastic self-immolation as had appealed to Hugh Vallincourt.

To Magda, Michael had come to mean the beginning and end of everything—the pivot upon which her whole existence hung. So that if Michael shut her out of his life for ever, that existence would no longer hold either value or significance. From her point of view, then, the primary object of any kind of self-discipline would be that it might make her more fit to be the wife of “Saint Michel.”

He despised her now. The evil she had done stood between them like a high wall. But if she were to make atonement—as Suzette had atoned—surely, when the wickedness had been purged out of her by pain and discipline, Michael would relent!

The idea lodged in her mind. It went with her by day and coloured her thoughts by night, and it was still working within her like yeast when she at last nerved herself to go and see her godmother.

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Lady Arabella, as might have been anticipated, concealed her own sore-heartedness under a manner that was rather more militant than usual, if that were possible.

“Why you hadn’t more sense than to spend your time fooling with a sort of cave-man from the backwoods, I can’t conceive,” she scolded. “You must have known how it would end.”

“I didn’t. I never thought about it. I was just sick with Michael because he had gone abroad, and then, when I heard that he was married, it was the last straw. I don’t think —that night—I should have much cared what happened.”

Lady Arabella nodded.

“Women like you make it heaven or hell for the men who love you.”

“And hell, without the choice of heaven, for ourselves,” returned Magda.

The bitterness in her voice wrung the old woman’s heart. She sighed, then straightened her back defiantly.

“We have to bear the burden of our blunders, my dear.”

There was a reminiscent look in the keen old eyes. Lady Arabella had had her own battles to fight. “And, after all, who should pay the price if not we ourselves?”

“But if the price is outrageous, Marraine? What then?”

“Still you’ve got to pay.”

Magda returned home with those words ringing in her ears. They fitted into the thoughts which had been obsessing her with a curious precision. It was true, then. You had to pay, one way or another. Lady Arabella knew it. Little Suzette had somehow found it out.

That night a note left Friars’ Holm addressed to the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Penitence.

CHAPTER XXIV

GILLIAN INTERCEDES

It was a bald, austere-looking room. Magda glanced about her curiously—at the plain, straight-backed chairs, at the meticulously tidy desk and bare, polished floor. Everything was scrupulously clean, but the total absence of anything remotely

resembling luxury struck poignantly on eyes accustomed to all the ease and beauty of surroundings which unlimited money can procure.

By contrast with the severity of the room Magda felt uncomfortably conscious of her own attire. The exquisite gown she was wearing, the big velvet hat with its drooping plume, the French shoes with their buckles and curved Louis heels—all seemed acutely out of place in this austere, formal-looking chamber.

Her glance came back to the woman sitting opposite her, the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Penitence—tall, thin, undeniably impressive, with a stern, colourless face as clean-cut as a piece of ivory, out of which gleamed cold blue eyes that seemed to regard the dancer with a strange mixture of fervour and hostility.

Magda could imagine no reason for the antagonism which she sensed in the steady scrutiny of those light-blue eyes. As far as she was concerned, the Mother Superior was an entire stranger, without incentive either to like or dislike her.

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But to the woman who, while she had been in the world, had been known as Catherine Vallincourt, the name of Magda Wielitzska was as familiar as her own. In the dark, slender girl before her, whose pale, beautiful face called to mind some rare and delicate flower, she recognised the living embodiment of her brother's transgression—that brother who had made Diane Wielitzska his wife and the mother of his child.

All she had anticipated of evil consequence at the time of the marriage had crystallised into hard fact. The child of the "foreign dancing-woman"—the being for whose existence Hugh's mad passion for Diane had been responsible—had on her own confession worked precisely such harm in the world as she, Catherine, had foreseen. And now, the years which had raised Catherine to the position of Mother Superior of the community she had entered had brought that child to her doors as a penitent waveringly willing to make expiation.

Catherine was conscious of a strange elevation of spirit. She felt ecstatically uplifted at the thought that it might be given to her to purge from Hugh's daughter, by severity of discipline and penance, the evil born within her. In some measure she would thus be instrumental in neutralising her brother's sin.

She was supremely conscious that to a certain extent—though by no means altogether—her zealous ardour had its origin in her rooted antipathy to Hugh's wife and hence to the child of the marriage. But, since beneath her sable habit there beat the heart of just an ordinary, natural woman, with many faults and failings still unconquered in spite of the austerities of her chosen life, a certain very human element of satisfaction mingled itself with her fervour for Magda's regeneration.

With a curious impassivity that masked the intensity of her desire she had told Magda that, by the rules of the community, penitents who desired to make expiation were admitted there, but that if once the step were taken, and the year's vow of penitence voluntarily assumed, there could be no return to the world until the expiration of the time appointed.

Somehow the irrevocability of such a vow, undertaken voluntarily, had not struck her in its full significance until Catherine had quietly, almost tonelessly, in the flat, level voice not infrequently acquired by the religious, affirmed it.

"Supposing"—Magda looked round the rigidly bare room with a new sense of apprehension—"supposing I felt I simply couldn't stand it any longer? Do you mean to say, *then*, that I should not be allowed to leave here?"

"No, you would not be permitted to. Vows are not toys to be broken at will."

"A year is a long time," murmured Magda.

The eyes beneath the coifed brow with its fine network of wrinkles were adamant.

“The body must be crucified that the soul may live,” returned the cold voice unflinchingly.

Magda’s thoughts drew her this way and that. A year! It was an eternity! And yet, if only she could emerge purified, a woman worthy to be Michael’s wife, she felt she would be willing to go through with it.

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It was as though the white-faced, passionless woman beside her read her thoughts.

“If you would be purified,” said Catherine, “if you would cast out the devil that is within you, you will have to abide meekly by such penance as is ordained. You must submit yourself to pain.”

At the words a memory of long ago stirred in Magda’s mind. She remembered that when her father had beaten her as a child he had said: “If you hurt people enough you can stop them from committing sin.”

Groping dimly for some light that might elucidate the problems which bewildered her, Magda clutched at the words as though they were a revelation. They seemed to point to the only way by which she might repair the past.

Catherine, watching closely the changes on the pale, sensitive face, spoke again.

“Of course, if you feel you have not the strength of will to keep your vow, you must not take it.”

The words acted like a spur. Instantly, Magda’s decision was taken.

“If I take the vow, I shall have strength of mind to keep it,” she said.

The following evening Magda composedly informed Gillian that she proposed to take a vow of expiation and retire into the community of the Sisters of Penitence for a year. Gillian was frankly aghast; she had never dreamed of any such upshot to the whole miserable business of Magda’s broken engagement.

“But it is madness!” she protested. “You would hate it!”

Magda nodded.

“That’s just it. I’ve done what I liked all my life. And you know what the result has been! Now I propose to do what I *don’t* like for a year.”

Neither persuasion nor exhortation availed to shake her resolution, and in despair Gillian referred the matter to Lady Arabella, hoping she might induce Magda to change her mind.

Lady Arabella accepted the news with unexpected composure.

“It is just what one might expect from the child of Hugh Vallincourt,” she said thoughtfully. “It’s the swing of the pendulum. There’s always been that tendency in the Vallincourts—the tendency towards atonement by some sort of violent self-immolation. They are invariably *excessive*—either excessively bad like the present man, Rupert, or

excessively devout like Hugh and Catherine! By the way, the Sisters of Penitence is the community Catherine first joined. I wonder if she is there still? Probably she's dead by now, though. I remember hearing some years ago that she was seriously ill—-somewhere about the time of Hugh's death. That's the last I ever heard of her. I've been out of touch with the whole Vallincourt family for so many years now that I don't know what has become of them."

"You don't mean to say that you're going to *let* Magda do what she proposes?" exclaimed Gillian, in dismayed astonishment.

"There's never much question of 'letting' Magda do things, is there?" retorted Lady Arabella. "If she's made up her mind to be penitential—penitential she'll be! I dare say it won't do her any harm."

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“I don’t see how it can do her any good,” protested Gillian. “Magda isn’t cut out for a sisterhood.”

“That’s just why it may be good for her.”

“I don’t believe in mortification of the flesh and all that sort of thing, either,” continued Gillian obstinately.

“My dear, we must all work out our own salvation—each in his own way. Prayer and fasting would never be my method. But for some people it’s the only way. I believe it is for the Vallincourts. In any case, it’s only for a year. And a year is very little time out of life.”

Nevertheless, at Gillian’s urgent request, Lady Arabella made an effort to dissuade Magda from her intention.

“If you live long enough, my dear,” she told her crispy, “providence will see to it that you get your deserts. You needn’t be so anxious to make sure of them. Retribution is a very sure-footed traveller.”

“It isn’t only retribution, punishment, I’m looking for,” returned Magda. “It is—I can’t quite explain it, Marraine, but even though Michael never sees me or speaks to me again, I’d like to feel I’d made myself into the sort of woman he *would* speak to.”

From that standpoint she refused to move, declining even to discuss the matter further, but proceeded quietly and unswervingly with her arrangements. The failure to complete her contract at the Imperial Theatre involved her in a large sum of money by way of forfeit, but this she paid ungrudgingly, feeling as though it were the first step along the new road of renunciation she designed to tread.

To the manager she offered no further explanation than that she proposed to give up dancing, “at any rate for a year or so,” and although he was nearly distracted over the idea, he found his arguments and persuasions were no more effective than those King Canute optimistically addressed to the encroaching waves. The utmost concession he could extract from Magda was her assent to giving a farewell appearance—for which occasion the astute manager privately decided to quadruple the price of the seats. He only wished it were possible to quadruple the seating capacity of the theatre as well!

Meanwhile Gillian, whose normal, healthy young mind recoiled from the idea of Magda’s self-imposed year of discipline, had secretly resolved upon making a final desperate venture in the hope of straightening out the tangle of her friend’s life. She would go herself and see Michael and plead with him. Surely, if he loved Magda as he had once seemed to do, he would not remain obdurate when he realised how bitterly she had repented—and how much she loved him!

It was not easy for Gillian to come to this decision. She held very strong opinions on the subject of the rights of the individual to manage his own affairs without interference, and as she passed out of the busy main street into the quiet little old-world court where Michael had his rooms and studio she felt as guilty as a small boy caught trespassing in an orchard.

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The landlady who opened the door in response to her somewhat timid ring regarded her with a curiously surprised expression when she inquired if Mr. Quarrington were in.

“I’ll see, miss,” she answered non-committally, “if you’ll step inside.”

The unusual appearance of the big double studio where she was left to wait puzzled Gillian. All the familiar tapestries and cushions and rare knick-knacks which wontedly converted the further end of it into a charming reception room were gone. The chairs were covered in plain holland, the piano sheeted. But the big easel, standing like a tall cross in the cold north light, was swathed in a dust-sheet. Gillian’s heart misgave her. Was she too late? Had Michael—gone away?

A moment later a quick, resolute footstep reassured her. The door opened and Michael himself came in. He paused on the threshold as he perceived who his visitor was, then came forward and shook hands with his usual grave courtesy. After that, he seemed to wait as though for some explanation of her visit.

Gillian found herself nervously unready. All the little opening speeches she had prepared for the interview deserted her suddenly, driven away by her shocked realisation of the transformation which the few days since she had last seen him had wrought in the man beside her.

His face was lined and worn. The grey eyes were sunken and burned with a strange, bitter brilliance. Only the dogged, out-thrust jaw remained the same as ever—obstinate and unconquerable. Twice she essayed to speak and twice failed. The third time the words came stumblingly.

“Michael, what—what does it mean—all this?” She indicated the holland-sheeted studio with a gesture.

“It means that I’m going away,” he replied. “I’m packing now. I leave England to-morrow.”

“You mustn’t go!”

The words broke from her imperatively, like a mandate.

He glanced at her quickly and into his eyes came a look of comprehension.

“You’re a good friend,” he said quietly. “But I must go.”

“No, no, you mustn’t! Listen—”

“Nothing can alter my decision,” he interrupted in a tone of absolute finality. “Nothing you could say, Gillian—so don’t say it.”

“But I must!” she insisted. “Oh, Michael, I’m not going to pretend that Magda hasn’t been to blame—that it isn’t all terrible! But if you saw her—now—you’d *have* to forgive her and love her again.” She spoke with a simple sincerity that was infinitely appealing.

“I’ve never ceased to love her,” he replied, still in that quiet voice of repressed determination.

“Then if you love, her, can’t you forgive her? She’s had everything against her from the beginning, both temperament and upbringing, and on top of that there’s been the wild success she’s had as a dancer. You can’t judge her by ordinary standards of conduct. You *can’t*! It isn’t fair.”

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“I don’t presume to judge her”—icily. “I simply say I can’t marry her.”

“If you could see her now, Michael——” Her voice shook a little. “It hurts me to see Magda—like that. She’s broken——”

“And my sister, June, is dead,” he said in level, unemotional tones.

Gillian wrung her hands.

“But even so——! Magda didn’t kill her, Michael. She couldn’t tell—she didn’t know that June——” She halted, faltering into silence.

“That June was soon to have a child?” Michael finished her sentence for her. “No. But she knew she loved her husband. And she stole him from her. When I think of it all, of June . . . little June! . . . And Storran—gone under! Oh, what’s the use of talking?”—-savagely. “You know—and I know—that there’s nothing left. Nothing!”

“If you loved her, Michael—”

“If I loved her!” he broke out stormily. “You’re not a man, and you don’t know what it means to want the woman you love night and day, to ache for her with every fibre of your body—and to know that you can’t have her and keep your self-respect!”

“Oh—self-respect!” There was a note of contempt in Gillian’s voice. “If you set your ‘self-respect’ above your love—”

“You don’t understand!” he interrupted violently. “You’re a woman and you can’t understand! I must honour the woman I love—it’s the kernel of the whole thing. I must look up to her—not down!”

Gillian clasped her hands.

“Oh!” she said in a low, vehement voice. “I don’t think we women *want* to be ‘looked up to.’ It sets us so far away. We’re not goddesses. We’re only women, Michael, with all our little weaknesses just the same as men. And we want the men who love us to be comrades—not worshippers. Good pals, who’ll forgive us and help us up when we tumble down, just as we’d be ready to forgive them and help them up. Can’t you—can’t you do that for Magda?”

“No,” he said shortly. “I can’t.”

Gillian was at the end of her resources. She would not tell him that Magda proposed joining the Sisters of Penitence for a year. Somehow she felt she would not wish him to know this or to be influenced by it.

She had made her appeal to Michael himself, to his sheer love for the woman he had intended to make his wife. And she had failed because the man was too bitter, too sore, to see clearly through the pain that blinded him.

His voice, curt and clipped, broke the silence which had fallen.

“Have you said all you came to say?” he asked with frigid politeness.

“All,” she returned sadly.

He moved slowly towards the door.

“Good-bye,” she said, holding out her hand.

He took it and held it in his. For a moment the hard eyes softened a little.

“I’m sorry I can’t do what you ask,” he said abruptly.

Gillian opened her lips to speak, but no words came. Instead, a sudden lump rose in her throat, choking her into silence, at the sight of the man’s wrung face, with its bitter, pain-ridden eyes and the jaw that was squared implacably against love and forgiveness, and against his own overwhelming desire.

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CHAPTER XXV

"CHILDREN STUMBLING IN THE DARK"

As Gillian mingled once more with the throng on the pavements she felt curiously unwilling to return home. She had set out from Friars' Holm so full of hope in her errand! It had seemed impossible that she could fail, and she had been almost unconsciously looking forward to seeing Magda's wan, strained face relax into half-incredulous delight as she confided in her the news that Michael was as eager and longing for a reconciliation as she herself.

And instead—this! This utter, hopeless failure to move him one jot. Only the memory of the man's stern, desperately unhappy eyes curbed the hot tide of her anger against him for his iron refusal.

He still loved Magda, so he said. And, indeed, Gillian believed it. But—love! It was not love as she and Tony Grey had understood it—simple, forgiving, and wholly trustful. It seemed to her as though Michael and Magda were both wandering in a dim twilight of misunderstanding, neither of them able to see that there was only one thing for them to do if they were ever to find happiness again. They must thrust the past behind them—-with all its bitterness and failures and mistakes, and go forward, hand in hand, in search of the light. Love would surely lead them to it eventually.

Yet this was the last thing either of them seemed able to think of doing. Magda was determined to spend the sweetness of her youth in making reparation for the past, while Michael was torn by bitterly conflicting feelings—his passionate love for Magda warring with his innate recoil from all that she had done and with his loyalty to his dead sister.

Gillian sighed as she threaded her way slowly along the crowded street. The lights of a well-known tea-shop beckoned invitingly and, only too willing to postpone the moment of her return home, she turned in between its plate-glass doors.

They swung together behind her, dulling the rumble of the traffic, while all around uprose the gay hum of conversation and the chink of cups and saucers mingling with the rhythmic melodies that issued from a cleverly concealed orchestra.

The place was very crowded. For a moment it seemed to Gillian as though there were no vacant seat. Then she espied an empty table for two in a distant corner and hastily made her way thither. She had barely given her order to the waitress when the swing doors parted again to admit someone else—a man this time.

The new arrival paused, as Gillian herself had done, to search out a seat. Then, noting the empty place at her table, he came quickly towards it.

Gillian was idly scanning the list of marvellous little cakes furnished by the menu, and her first cognisance of the new-comer's approach was the vision of a strong, masculine hand gripping the back of the chair opposite her preparatory to pulling it out from under the table.

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“I’m afraid there’s no other vacant seat,” he was beginning apologetically. But at the sound of his voice Gillian’s eyes flew up from that virile-looking hand to the face of its owner, and a low cry of surprise broke from her lips.

“Dan Storran!”

Simultaneously the man gave utterance to her own name.

Gillian stared at him stupidly. Could this really be Dan Storran—Storran of Stockleigh?

The alteration in him was immense. He looked ten years older. An habitual stoop had lessened his apparent height and the dark, kinky hair was streaked with grey. The golden-tan bestowed by an English sun had been exchanged for the sallow skin of a man who has lived hard in a hot country, and the face was thin and heavily lined. Only the eyes of periwinkle-blue remained to remind Gillian of the splendid young giant she had known at Ashencombe—and even they were changed and held the cynical weariness of a man who has eaten of Dead Sea fruit and found it bitter to the taste.

There were other changes, too. Storran of Stockleigh was as civilised, his clothes and general appearance as essentially “right,” as those of the men around him. All suggestion of the “cave-man from the backwoods,” as Lady Arabella had termed him, was gone.

“I didn’t know you were in England,” said Gillian at last.

“I landed yesterday.”

“You’ve been in South America, haven’t you?”

She spoke mechanically. There seemed something forced and artificial about this exchange of platitudes between herself and the man who had figured so disastrously in Magda’s life. Without warning he brought the conversation suddenly back to the realities.

“Yes. I was in ’Frisco when my wife died. Since then I’ve been half over the world.”

Behind the harshly uttered statement Gillian could sense the unspeakable bitterness of the man’s soul. It hurt her, calling forth her quick sympathy just as the sight of some maimed and wounded animal would have done.

“Oh!” she said, a sensitive quiver in her voice. “I was so sorry—so terribly sorry—to hear about June. We hadn’t heard—we only knew quite recently.” Her face clouded as she reflected on the tragic happenings with which the news had been accompanied.

At this moment a waitress paused at Storran's side and he gave his order. Then, looking curiously at Gillian, he said:

"What did you hear? Just that she died when our child was born, I suppose?"

Gillian's absolute honesty of soul could not acquiesce, though it would have been infinitely the easier course.

"No," she said, flushing a little and speaking very low. "We heard that she might have lived if—if she had only been—happier."

He nodded silently, rather as though this was the answer he had anticipated. Presently he spoke abruptly:

"Does Miss Vallincourt know that?"

Gillian hesitated. Then, taking her courage in both hands she told him quickly and composedly the whole story of the engagement and its rupture, and let him understand just precisely what June's death, owing to the special circumstances in which it had occurred, had meant for Magda of retribution and of heartbreak.

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Storran listened without comment, in his eyes an odd look of concentration. The waitress dexterously slid a tray in front of him and he poured himself out a cup of tea mechanically, but he made no attempt to drink it. When Gillian ceased, his face showed no sign of softening. It looked hard and very weary. His strong fingers moved restlessly, crumbling one of the small cakes on the plate in front of him.

"'Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small,'" he quoted at last, quietly.

Gillian met his harshly cynical glance with one of brave defiance.

"I don't think God's mills have anything to do with it," she said swiftly. "He'd understand all the excuses and allowances that should be made for her better even than I do. And I shouldn't want to punish Magda. I'd make her—happy. She's never known what it means to be really happy. Success and gaiety aren't *happiness*."

"And you?" he asked quickly.

There was a soft and wonderful shining in the brown eyes that were lifted to his.

"I had one year of utter happiness," she answered gently. "And I've got Coppertop—so I can't ever be quite unhappy."

"If there were more women like you——" he began abruptly.

She shook her head.

"No, no," she said, smiling a little. "If there were more men like Tony! You men are so hard—so cruelly hard."

He looked at her very directly.

"Haven't I the right to be?" he demanded bitterly.

"Ah! Forgive me!" Gillian spoke with an accent of self-reproach. "I'd forgotten you still—care."

"For Magda?" He laughed shortly. "No. That's dead, thank God! I killed it. Worked it out of my system in 'Frisco"—with exceeding bitterness. "Then I got the news of June's death. Her sister wrote me. Told me she died because she'd no longer any wish to live. That sobered me-brought me back to my sense. There was a good deal more to the letter—my sister-in-law didn't let me down lightly. I've had to pay for that summer at Stockleigh. And now Magda's paying. . . . Well, that seems to square things somehow."

"Oh, you are brutal!" broke out Gillian.

His eyes, hard as steel and as unyielding, met hers.

“Am I?”—indifferently. “Perhaps I am.”

This was a very different Dan from the impetuous, hot-headed Dan of former times. Gillian found his calm ruthlessness difficult to understand, and yet, realising all that he had suffered, she could not but condone it to a certain extent.

When at last she rose to go, he detained her a moment.

“I am remaining in England now. I should like to see you sometimes. May I?”

She hesitated. Then something that appealed in the tired eyes impelled her answer.

“If you wish,” she said gently.

Back once more in the street she made her way as quickly as possible to the nearest tube station, in order to reach it before the usual evening crowd of homeward-wending clerks and typists poured into the thoroughfares from a thousand open office doors. But as soon as she was safely seated in the train her thoughts reverted to the two strange interviews in which she had taken part that afternoon.

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She felt very low-spirited. Since she had seen and talked with the two men in whose lives Magda had played so big a part, she was oppressed with a sense of the utter hopelessness of trying to put matters right. Things must take their course—drive on to whatever end, bitter or sweet, lay hidden in the womb of fate.

She had tried to stem the current of affairs, but she had proved as powerless to deflect it as a dried stick tossed on to a river in spate. And now, whether the end were ultimate happiness or hopeless, irretrievable disaster, Michael and Magda must still fight their way towards it, each alone, by the dim light of that "blind Understanding" which is all that Destiny vouchsafes.

CHAPTER XXVI

FAREWELL

The curtains swung together for the last time, the orchestra struck up the National Anthem, and the great audience which had come from all parts to witness the Wielitzska's farewell performance began to disperse.

A curious quietness attended its departure. It was as though a pall of gravity hung over the big assemblage. Public announcements of the performance had explained that the famous dancer proposed taking a long rest for reasons of health. "But," as everyone declared, "you know what that means! She's probably broken down—heart or something. We shall never see her dance again." And so, beneath the tremendous reception which they gave her, there throbbed an element of sadness, behind all the cheers and the clapping an insistent minor note which carried across the footlights to where Magda stood bowing her thanks, and smiling through the mist of tears which filled her eyes.

The dance which she had chosen for her last appearance was the *Swan-Maiden*. There had seemed a strange applicability in the choice, and to those who had eyes to see there was a new quality in the Wielitzska's dancing—a depth of significance and a spirituality of interpretation which was commented upon in the Press the next day.

It had been quite unmistakable. She had gripped her audience so that throughout the final scene of the ballet no word was spoken. The big crowd, drawn from all classes, sat tense and silent, sensitive to every movement, every exquisite, appealing gesture of the Swan-Maiden. And when at last she had lain, limp in death, in her lover's embrace, and the music had quivered into silence, there followed a vibrant pause—almost it seemed as though a sigh of mingled ecstasy and regret went up—before the thunderous applause roared through the auditorium.

The insatiable few were still clapping and stamping assiduously when Magda, after taking innumerable calls, at last came off the stage. It had been a wonderful night of triumph, and as she made her way towards her dressing-room she was conscious of a sudden breathless realisation of all that she was sacrificing. For a moment she felt as though she must rush back on to the stage and tell everybody that she couldn't do it, that it was all a mistake—that this was not a farewell! But she set her teeth and moved resolutely towards her dressing-room.

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As her fingers closed round the handle of the door, someone stepped out from the shadows of the passage and spoke:

“Magda!”

The voice, wrung and urgent, was Antoine Davilof’s.

Her first impulse was to hurry forward and put the dressing-room door betwixt herself and him. She had not seen him since that night when he had come down to the theatre and implored her to be his wife, warning her that he would prevent her marriage with Michael. He had carried out his threat with a completeness that had wrecked her life, and although, since the breaking-off of her engagement, he had both written and telephoned, begging her to see him, she had steadfastly refused. Once he had come to Friars’ Holm, but had been met with an inexorable “Not at home!” from Melrose.

“Magda! For God’s sake, give me a moment!”

Something in the strained tones moved her to an unexpected feeling of compassion. It was the voice of a man in the extremity of mental anguish.

Silently she opened the door of the dressing-room and signed to him to follow her.

“Well,” she said, facing him, “what is it? Why have you come?”

The impulse of compassion died out suddenly. His was the hand that had destroyed her happiness. The sight of him roused her to a fierce anger and resentment.

“Well?” she repeated. “What do you want? To know the result of your handiwork?”—-bitterly. “You’ve been quite as successful as even you could have wished.”

“Don’t,” he said unevenly. “Magda, I can’t bear it. You can’t give up—all this. Your dancing—it’s your life! I shall never forgive myself . . . I’ll see Quarrington and tell him —”

“You can’t see him. He’s gone away.”

“Then I’ll find him.”

“If you found him, nothing you could say would make any difference,” she answered unemotionally. “It’s the facts that matter. You can’t alter—facts.”

Davilof made a gesture of despair.

“Is it true you’re going into some sisterhood?” he asked hoarsely.

"Yes."

"And it is I—I who have driven you to this! *Dieu*! I've been mad—mad!"

His hands were clenched, his face working painfully. The hazel eyes—those poet's eyes of his which she had seen sometimes soft with dreams and sometimes blazing with love's fire—were blurred by misery. They reminded her of the contrite, tortured eyes of a dog which, maddened by pain, has bitten the hand of a beloved master. Her anger died away in the face of that overwhelming remorse. She herself had learned to know the illimitable bitterness of self-reproach.

"Antoine——" Her voice had grown very gentle.

He swung round on her.

"And I can't undo it!" he exclaimed desperately. "I can't undo it! . . . Magda, will you believe me—will you *try* to believe that, if my life could undo the harm I've done, I'd give it gladly?"

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“I believe you would, Antoine,” she replied simply.

With a stifled exclamation he turned away and, dropping into a chair, leaned his arms on the table and hid his face. Once, twice she heard the sound of a man’s hard-drawn sob, and the dry agony of it wrung her heart. All that was sweet and compassionate in her—the potential mother that lies in every woman—responded to his need. She ran to him and, kneeling at his side, laid a kind little hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t Antoine!” she said pitifully. “Ah, don’t, my dear!”

He caught the hand and held it against his cheek.

“It’s unforgivable!” he muttered.

“No, no. I do forgive you.”

“You can’t forgive! . . . Impossible!”

“I think I can, Antoine. You see, I need forgiveness so badly myself. I wouldn’t want to keep anyone else without it. Besides, Michael would have been bound to learn—what you told him—sooner or later.” She rose to her feet, pushing back the hair from her forehead rather wearily. “It’s better as it is—that he should know now. It—it would have been unbearable if it had come later—when I was his wife.”

Antoine stumbled to his feet. His beautiful face was marred with grief.

“I wish I were dead!”

The words broke from him like an exceeding bitter cry. To Magda they seemed to hold some terrible import.

“Not that, Antoine!” she answered in a frightened voice. “You’re not thinking—you’re not meaning——”

He shook his head, smiling faintly.

“No,” he said quietly. “The Davilofs have never been cowards. I shan’t take that way out. You need have no fears, Magda.” The sudden tension in her face relaxed. “But I shall not stay in England. England—without you—would be hell. A hell of memories.”

“What shall you do, then, Antoine? You won’t give up playing?”

He made a fierce gesture of distaste.

“I couldn’t play in public! Not now. Not for a time. I think I shall go to my mother. She always wants me, and she sees me very little.”

Magda nodded. Her eyes were wistful.

“Yes, go to her. I think mothers must understand—as other people can’t ever understand. She will be glad to have you with her, Antoine.”

He was silent for a moment, his eyes dwelling on her face as though he sought to learn each line of it, so that when she would be no more beside him he might carry the memory of it in his heart for ever.

“Then it is good-bye,” he said at last.

Magda held out her hands and, taking them in his, he drew her close to him.

“I love you,” he said, “and I have brought you only pain.” There was a tragic simplicity in the statement.

“No,” she answered steadily. “Never think that. I spoiled my own life. And—love is a big gift, Antoine.”

She lifted her face to his and very tenderly, almost reverently, he kissed her. She knew that in that last kiss there was no disloyalty to Michael. It held renunciation. It accepted forgiveness.

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“Did you know that Dan Storran was in front to-night?” asked Gillian, as half an hour later she and Magda were driving back to Hampstead together. She had already confided the fact of her former meeting with him in the tea-shop.

Magda’s eyes widened a little.

“No,” she said quietly. “I think I’m glad I didn’t know.”

She was very silent throughout the remainder of the drive home and Gillian made no effort to distract her. She herself felt disinclined to talk. She was oppressed by the knowledge that this was the last night she and Magda would have with each other. To-morrow Magda would be gone and one chapter of their lives together ended. The gates of the Sisters of Penitence would close upon her and Friars’ Holm would be empty of her presence.

Everything had been said that could be said, every persuasion used. But to each and all Magda had only answered: “I know it’s the only thing for me to do. It probably wouldn’t be for you, or for anyone else. But it is for me. So you must let me go, Gillyflower.”

Gillian dreaded the morrow with its inevitable moment of farewell. As for Virginie, she had done little else but weep for the last three days, and although Lady Arabella had said very little, she had kissed her god-daughter good-bye with a brusqueness that veiled an inexpressible grief and tenderness. Gillian foresaw that betwixt administering comfort to Lady Arabella and Virginie, and setting Magda’s personal affairs in order after her departure, she would have little time for the indulgence of her own individual sorrow. Perhaps it was just as well that these tasks should devolve on her. They would serve to occupy her thoughts.

The morning sunlight, goldenly gay, was streaming in through the windows as Magda, wrapped in a soft silken peignoir, made her way into the bathroom. Virginie, her eyes reddened from a night’s weeping, was kneeling beside the sunken bath of green-veined marble, stirring sweet-smelling salts in to the steaming water. Their fragrance permeated the atmosphere like incense.

“My tub ready, Virginie?” asked Magda, cheerfully.

Virginie scrambled to her feet.

“*Mais oui, mademoiselle*. The bath is ready.”

Then, her face puckering up suddenly, she burst into tears and ran out of the room. Magda smiled and sighed, then busied herself with her morning ablutions—prolonging them a little as she realised that this was the last occasion for a whole year when she would step down into a bath prepared and perfumed for her in readiness by her maid.

A year! It was a long time to look forward to. So much can happen in a year. And no one can foresee what the end may bring.

Presently she emerged from her bath, her skin gleaming like wet ivory, her dark hair sparkling with the drops of water that had splashed on to it. As she stepped up from its green-veined depths, she caught a glimpse of herself in a panel mirror hung against the wall, and for a moment she was aware of the familiar thrill of delight in her own beauty —in the gleaming, glowing radiance of perfectly formed, perfectly groomed flesh and blood.

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Then, with a revulsion of feeling, came the sudden realisation that it was this very perfection of body which had been her undoing—like a bitter blight, leaving in its wake a trail of havoc and desolation. She was even conscious of a fierce eagerness for the period of penance to begin. Almost ecstatically she contemplated the giving of her body to whatever discipline might be appointed.

To anyone hitherto as spoiled and imperious as Magda, whose body had been the actual temple of her art, and so, almost inevitably, of her worship, this utter renouncing of physical self-government was the supremest expiation she could make. As with Hugh Vallincourt, whose blood ran in her veins, the idea of personal renunciation made a curious appeal to her emotional temperament, and she was momentarily filled with something of the martyr's ecstasy.

Gillian's arms clung round Magda's neck convulsively as she kissed her at the great gates of Friars' Holm a few hours later.

"Good-bye! . . . Ah, Magda! Come back to me!"

"I shall come back."

One more lingering kiss, and then Magda stepped into the open car. Virginie made a rush forward before the door closed and, dropping on to her knees on the footboard, convulsively snatched her adored young mistress's hand between her two old worn ones and covered it with kisses.

"Oh, mademoiselle, thy old Virginie will die without thee!" she sobbed brokenly.

And then the car slid away and Magda's last glimpse was of the open gates of Friars' Holm with its old-world garden, stately and formal, in the background; and of Virginie weeping unrestrainedly, her snowy apron flung up over her head; and of Gillian standing erect, her brown eyes very wide and winking away the tears that welled up despite herself, and her hand on Coppertop's small manful shoulder, gripping it hard.

As the car passed through the streets many people, recognising its occupant, stopped and turned to follow it with their eyes. One or two women waved their hands, and a small errand-boy—who had saved up his pennies and squeezed into the gallery of the Imperial Theatre the previous evening—threw up his hat and shouted "Hooray!"

Once, at a crossing, the chauffeur was compelled to pull up to allow the traffic to pass, and a flower-girl with a big basket of early violets on her arm, recognising the famous dancer, tossed a bunch lightly into the car. They fell on Magda's lap. She picked them up and, brushing them with her lips, smiled at the girl and fastened the violets against the furs at her breast. The flower-girl treasured the smile of the great Wielitzska in her

memory for many a long day, while in the arid months that were to follow Magda treasured the sweet fragrance of that spontaneous gift.

Half an hour later the doors of the grey house where the Sisters of Penitence dwelt apart from the world opened to receive Magda Vallincourt, and closed again behind her.

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE GREY VEIL

Magda felt a sudden stab of fear. The sound of the latch clicking into its place brought home to her the irrevocability of the step she had taken. That tall, self-locking door stood henceforth betwixt her and the dear, familiar world she had known—the world of laughter and luxury and success. But beyond, on the far horizon, there was Michael—-her "Saint Michel." If these months of discipline brought her nearer him, then she would never grudge them.

The serene eyes of the Sister who received her—Sister Bernardine—helped to steady her quivering pulses.

There was something in Sister Bernardine that was altogether lacking in Catherine Vallincourt—a delightfully human understanding and charity for all human weakness, whether of the soul or body.

It was she who reassured Magda when a sudden appalling and unforeseen idea presented itself to her.

"My hair!" she exclaimed breathlessly, her hand going swiftly to the heavy, smoke-black tresses. "Will they cut off my hair?"

As Sister Bernardine comfortingly explained that only those who joined the community as sisters had their heads shaven, a strange expression flickered for an instant in her eyes, a fleeting reminiscence of that day, five-and-twenty years ago, when the shears had cropped their ruthless way through the glory of hair which had once been hers.

And afterwards, as time went on and Magda, wearing the grey veil and grey serge dress of a voluntary penitent, found herself absorbed into the daily life of the community, it was often only the recollection of Sister Bernardine's serene, kind eyes which helped her to hold out. Somehow, somewhere out of this drastic, self-denying life Sister Bernardine had drawn peace and tranquillity of soul, and Magda clung to this thought when the hard rules of the sisterhood, the distastefulness of the tasks appointed her, and the frequent fasts ordained, chafed and fretted her until sometimes her whole soul seemed to rise up in rebellion against the very discipline she had craved.

Most of her tasks were performed under the lynx eyes of Sister Agnetia, an elderly and sour-visaged sister to whom Magda had taken an instinctive dislike from the outset. The Mother Superior she could tolerate. She was severe and uncompromising. But she was at least honest. There was no doubting the bedrock genuineness of her disciplinary ardour, harsh and merciless though it might appear. But with Sister Agnetia, Magda was always sensible of the personal venom of a little mind vested with authority

beyond its deserts, and she resented her dictation accordingly. And equally accordingly, it seemed to fall always to her lot to work under Sister Agnetia's supervision.

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Catherine had been quick enough to detect Magda's detestation of this particular sister and to use it as a further means of discipline. It was necessary that Magda's pride and vanity should be humbled, and Catherine saw to it that they were. It was assuredly by the Will of Heaven that the child of Diane Wielitzska had been led to her very doors, and to the subject of her chastening Catherine brought much thought and discrimination. *"If you hurt people enough you can make them good."* It had been her brother's bitter creed and it was hers. Pain, in Catherine's idea, was the surest means of chastening, and Magda was to remember her year at the sisterhood by two things—by the deadly, unbearable monotony of its daily routine and by her first acquaintance with actual bodily pain.

Her health had always been magnificent, and—with the exception of the trivial punishments of childhood and those few moments when she was sitting for the picture of Circe—physical suffering was unknown to her. The penances, therefore, which Catherine appointed her—to kneel for a stated length of time until it seemed as though every muscle she possessed were stretched to breaking-point, to fast when her whole healthy young body craved for food, to be chastened with flagellum, a scourge of knotted cords—all these grew to be a torment almost beyond endurance.

Almost! . . . Yet in the beginning the thought of Michael sustained her triumphantly.

It was a curious sensation—that first stroke of the flagellum.

As Magda, unversed in physical suffering, felt the cords shock against her flesh, she was conscious of a strange uplifting of spirit. This, then, this smarting, blinding thing called pain, was the force that would drive the will to do evil out of her soul.

She waited expectantly—almost exultantly—for the second fall of the thongs. The interval between seemed endless. Sister Agnetia was very deliberate, pausing between each stroke. She knew to a nicety the value of anticipation as a remedial force in punishment.

Again the cords descended on the bared shoulders. Magda winced away from them, shivering. For a moment Sister Agnetia's arm hung flaccid, the cords of the flagellum pendant and still.

"Are you submitting to the discipline, Sister Penitentia?" came her voice. It was an unpleasant voice, suggestive of a knife that has been dipped in oil.

Magda caught her breath.

"Yes . . . yes . . . I submit myself."

Dimly she felt that by means of this endurance she would win back Michael, cleanse herself to receive his love.

“I submit,” she repeated in a rapt whisper of self-surrender.

Sister Agnetia’s voice swam unctuously into her consciousness once more.

“I thought you tried to avoid that last stroke. If you flinch from punishment it is not submission, but rebellion.”

Magda gripped her hands together and pressed her knees into the hard stone floor, her muscles taut with anticipation as she heard the soft whistle of the thongs cleaving the air.

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This time she bore the pang of anguish motionless, but the vision of Michael went out suddenly in a throbbing darkness of swift agony. Her shoulders felt red-hot. The pain shot up into her brain like fingers of flame. It clasped her whole body in a torment, and the ecstasy of self-surrender was lost in a sick groping after sheer endurance.

The next stroke, crushing across that fever of intolerable suffering, wrung a hoarse moan from her dry lips. Her hands locked together till she felt as though their bones must crack with the strain as she waited for the next inexorable stroke.

One moment! . . . Two! An eternity of waiting!

“Go on!” she breathed. “Oh! . . . Be quick . . .” Her voice panted.

No movement answered her. Unable to endure the suspense, she straightened her bowed shoulders and turned in convulsive appeal to where she had glimpsed the flail-like rise and fall of Sister Agnetia’s serge-clad arm.

There was no one there! The bare, cell-like chamber was empty, save for herself. Sister Agnetia had stolen away, completing the penance of physical pain by the refinement of anguish embodied in those hideous moments of mental dread.

Magda almost fancied she could hear an oily chuckle outside the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THOSE THAT WERE LEFT BEHIND

For the first month or two after Magda’s departure Gillian found that she had her hands full in settling up various business and personal matters which had been left with loose ends. She was frankly glad to discover that there were so many matters requiring her attention; otherwise the blank occasioned in her life by Magda’s absence would have been almost unendurable.

The two girls had grown very much into each other’s hearts during the years they had shared together, and when friends part, no matter how big a wrench the separation may mean to the one who goes, there is a special kind of sadness reserved for the one who is left behind. For the one who sets out there are fresh faces, new activities in store. Even though the new life adventured upon may not prove to be precisely a bed of thornless roses, the pricking of the thorns provides distraction to the mind from the sheer, undiluted pain of separation.

But for Gillian, left behind at Friars’ Holm, there remained nothing but an hourly sense of loss added to that crushing, inevitable flatness which succeeds a crisis of any kind.

Nor did a forlorn Coppertop's reiterated inquiries as to how soon the Fairy Lady might be expected back again help to mend matters.

Lady Arabella's grief was expressed in a characteristically prickly fashion.

"Young people don't seem to know the first thing about love nowadays," she observed with the customary scathing contempt of one age for another.

In *my* young days! Ah! there will never be times like those again! We are all quite sure of it as our young days recede into the misty past.

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“If you loved, you loved,” pursued Lady Arabella crisply. “And the death of half a dozen sisters wouldn’t have been allowed to interfere with the proceedings.”

Gillian smiled a little.

“It wasn’t only that. It was Michael’s bitter disappointment in Magda, I think, quite as much as the fact that, indirectly, he held her responsible for June’s death.”

“It’s ridiculous to try and foist Mrs. Storran’s death on to Magda,” fumed Lady Arabella restively. “If she hadn’t the physical health to have a good, hearty baby successfully, she shouldn’t have attempted it. That’s all! . . . And then those two idiots—Magda and Michael! Of course he must needs shoot off abroad, and equally of course she must be out of the way in a sisterhood when he comes rushing back—as he will do!”—with a grim smile.

“He hasn’t done yet,” Gillian pointed out.

“I give him precisely six months, my dear, before he finds out that, sister or no sister, he can’t live without Magda. Michael Quarrington’s got too much good red blood in his veins to live the life of a hermit. He’s a man, thank goodness, not a mystical dreamer like Hugh Vallincourt. And he’ll come back to his mate as surely as the sun will rise to-morrow.”

“I wish I felt as confident as you do.”

“I wish I could make sure of putting my hand on Magda when he comes,” grumbled Lady Arabella. “That’s the hitch I’m afraid of! If only she hadn’t been so precipitate—-only waited a bit for him to come back to her.”

“I don’t agree with you,” rapped out Gillian smartly. “Women are much too ready to do the patient Griselda stunt. I think”—with a vicious little nod of her brown head—“it would do Michael all the good in the world to come back and want Magda—want her *badly*. And find he couldn’t get her! So there!”

Lady Arabella regarded her with astonishment, then broke into a delighted chuckle.

“Upon my word! If a tame dove had suddenly turned round and pecked at me, I couldn’t have been more surprised! I didn’t know you had so much of the leaven of malice and wickedness in you, Gillian!”

Gillian, a little flushed and feeling, in truth, rather surprised at herself for her sudden heat, smiled back at her.

“But I should have thought your opinion would have been very much the same as mine. I never expected you’d want Magda to sit down and twiddle her thumbs till Michael chose to come back to her.”

Lady Arabella sighed.

“I don’t. Not really. Only I want them to be happy,” she said a little sadly. “Love is such a rare thing—love like theirs. And it’s hard that Magda should lose the beauty and happiness of it all because of mistakes she made before she found herself, so to speak.”

Gillian nodded soberly. Lady Arabella had voiced precisely her own feeling in the matter. It *was* hard! And yet it was only the fulfilment of the immutable law: *Who breaks, pays*.

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Gillian's thoughts tried to pierce the dim horizon. Perhaps all the pain and mistakes and misunderstandings of which this workaday world is so full are, after all, only a part of the beautiful tapestry which the patient Fingers of God are weaving—a dark and sombre warp, giving value to the gold and silver and jewelled threads of the weft which shall cross it. When the ultimate fabric is woven, and the tissue released from the loom, there will surely be no meaningless thread, sable or silver, in the consummated pattern.

A few weeks after Magda's departure Gillian received a letter from Dan Storran, reminding her of her promise to let him see her and asking if she would lunch with him somewhere in town.

It was with somewhat mixed feelings that she met him again. He was much altered—so changed from the hot-headed, primitive countryman she had first known. Some chance remark of hers enlightened him as to her confused sense of the difference in him, and he smiled across at her.

"I've been through the mill, you see," he explained quietly, "since the Stockleigh days."

The words seemed almost like a key unlocking the door that stands fast shut between one soul and another. He talked to her quite simply and frankly after that, telling her how, after he had left England, the madness in his blood had driven him whither it listed. There had been no depths to which he had not sunk, no wild living from which he had recoiled.

And then had come the news of June's death. Not tenderly conveyed, but charged to his account by her sister with a fierce bitterness that had suddenly torn the veil from his eyes. Followed days and nights of agonised remorse, and after that the slow, steady, infinitely difficult climb back from the depths into which he had allowed himself to sink to a plane of life where, had June still lived, he would not have been ashamed to meet her eyes nor utterly unworthy to take her hand.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," he ended. "But she would have wished it. I can never tell her now how I regret, never ask her forgiveness. And this was the only thing I could do to atone."

Gillian's eyes were very soft as she answered:

"I expect she knows, Dan, and is glad."

After a moment she went on thoughtfully.

"It's rather the same kind of feeling that has driven Magda into a sisterhood, I think—the desire to do something definite, something tangible, as a sort of reparation. And a woman is much more limited that way than a man."

Storran's mouth hardened. Any mention of Magda would bring that look of concentrated hardness into his face, and as the months went on, giving Gillian a closer insight into the man, she began to realise that he had never forgiven Magda for her share in the ruin of his life. On this point he was as hard as nether millstone. He even seemed to derive a certain satisfaction from the knowledge that she was paying, and paying heavily, for all the harm she had wrought.

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It troubled Gillian—this incalculable hardness in Dan's nature towards one woman. She found him kindly and tolerant in his outlook on life—with the understanding tolerance of the man who has dragged himself out of the pit by his own sheer force of will, and who, knowing the power of temptation, is ready to give a helping hand to others who may have fallen by the way. So that his relentlessness towards Magda was the more inexplicable.

More than once she tried to soften his attitude, tried to make him realise something of the conflicting influences both of temperament and environment which had helped to make Magda what she was. But he remained stubbornly unmoved.

"No punishment is too severe for a woman who has done what Magda Vallincourt has done. She has wrecked lives simply in order to gratify her vanity and insensate instinct for conquest."

Gillian shook her head.

"No, you're wrong. You *won't* understand! It's all that went before—her parents' mistakes—that should be blamed for half she's done. I think you're very merciless, Dan."

"Perhaps I am—in this case. Frankly, if I could lessen her punishment by lifting my little finger—I wouldn't do it."

Yet this same man when, as often happened, he took Gillian and Coppertop for a run into the country in his car, was as simple and considerate and kindly as a man could be. Coppertop adored him, and, as Gillian reflected, the love of children is rarely misplaced. Some instinct leads them to divine unfailingly which is gold and which dross.

The car was a recent acquisition. As Storran himself expressed it, rather bitterly: "Now that I can't buy a ha'p'orth of happiness with the money, my luck has turned." He explained to Gillian that after he had left England he had sold his farm in Devonshire, and that a lucky investment of the capital thus realised had turned him into a comparatively rich man.

"Even when I was making ducks and drakes of my life generally, I didn't seem to make a mistake over money matters. If I played cards, I won; if I backed a horse, he romped in first; it I bought shares, they jumped up immediately."

"What a pity!" replied Gillian ingenuously. "If only your financial affairs hadn't prospered, you'd have had to settle down and *work*—instead of—of——"

"Playing the fool," he supplemented. "No, I don't suppose I should. I hadn't learned—-then—that work is the only panacea, the one big remedy."

"And now?"

"I've learned a lot of things in the last two years," quietly. "And I'm still learning."

As the months went on, Dan's friendship began to mean a good deal to Gillian. It had come into her life just at a time when she was intolerably lonely, and quite unconsciously she was learning to turn to him for advice on all the large and small affairs of daily life as they came cropping up.

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She was infinitely glad of his counsel with regard to Coppertop, who was growing to the age when the want of a father—of a man's broad outlook and a man's restraining hand—became an acute lack in a boy's life. And to Gillian, who had gallantly faced the world alone since the day when death had abruptly ended her "year of utter happiness," it was inexpressibly sweet to be once more shielded and helped in all the big and little ways in which a man—even if he was only a staunch man-friend—can shield and help a woman.

It seemed as though Dan Storran always contrived to interpose his big person betwixt her and the sharp corners of life, and she began to wonder, with a faint, indefinable dread, what must become of their friendship when Magda returned to Friars' Holm. Feeling as he did towards the dancer, it would be impossible for him to come there any more, and somehow a snatched hour here and there—a lunch together, or a motor-spin into the country—would be a very poor substitute for his almost daily visits to the old Queen Anne house tucked away behind its high walls at Hampstead.

Once she broached the subject to him rather diffidently.

"My dear"—he had somehow dropped into the use of the little term of endearment, and Gillian found that she liked it and knew that she would miss it if it were suddenly erased from his speech—"my dear, why cross bridges till we come to them? Perhaps, when the time comes, there'll be no bridge to cross."

Gillian glanced at him swiftly.

"Do you mean that she—that you're feeling less bitter towards her, Dan?" she asked eagerly.

He smiled down at her whimsically.

"I don't quite know. But I know one thing—it's very difficult to be a lot with you and keep one's anger strictly up to concert pitch."

Gillian made no answer. She was too wise—with that intuitive wisdom of woman—to force the pace. If Dan were beginning to relent ever so little towards Magda—why, then, her two best friends might yet come together in comradeship and learn to forget the bitter past. The gentle hand of Time would be laid on old wounds and its touch would surely bring healing. But Gillian would no more have thought of trying to hasten matters than she would have tried to force open the close-curled petals of a flower in bud.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RETURN

Magda slipped through the tall doorway in the wall which marked the abode of the Sisters of Penitence and stood once more on the pavement of the busy street. The year was over, and just as once before the clicking of the latch had seemed to signify the end of everything, so now it sounded a quite different note—of new beginnings, of release—freedom!

Three months prior to the completion of her allotted span at the sisterhood Magda had had a serious attack of illness. The hard and rigorous life had told upon her physically, while the unaccustomed restrictions, the constant obedience exacted, had gone far towards assisting in the utter collapse of nerves already frayed by the strain of previous happenings.

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Probably her fierce determination to go through with her self-elected expiation, no matter what the cost, had a good deal to do with her ultimate breakdown. With unswerving resolution she had forced herself to obedience, to the performance of her appointed tasks in spite of their distastefulness; and behind the daily work and discipline there had been all the time the ceaseless, aching longing for the man who had loved her and who had gone away.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the tired body and nerves at last gave way, and in the delirium of brain fever Magda revealed the whole pitiful story of the mistakes and misunderstandings which had brought her in desperation to the Sisters of Penitence.

Fortunately it was upon Sister Bernardine that the major part of the nursing devolved, and it was into her gentle ears that Magda unwittingly poured out the history of the past. Bit by bit, from the ramblings of delirium, Sister Bernardine pieced together the story, and her shy, virginal heart found itself throbbing in overflowing sympathy—a sympathy that sought expression in the tender care she gave her patient.

During the long, slow days of convalescence Magda, very helpless and dependent, had gradually learned to love the soft-footed little Sister who came and went throughout her illness—to love her as she would not, at one time, have believed it possible she could grow to love anyone behind the high grey walls which encircled the sisterhood.

If the past year had taught her nothing else, it had at least taught her that goodness and badness are very evenly distributed. She had found both good and bad behind those tall grey walls just as she had found them in the great free world outside.

Her last memory, as her first, was of Sister Bernardine's kind eyes.

"Some of us find happiness in the world," the little Sister had said at parting, "and some of us out of it. I think you were meant to find yours in the world."

It was Magda's own choice to leave the sisterhood on foot. She had nothing to take with her in the way of luggage, and she smiled a little as she realised that, for the moment, she possessed actually nothing but the clothes she stood up in—the same in which she had quitted Friars' Holm a year ago, and which, on departure, she had substituted for the grey veil and habit she was discarding.

At first, as she made her way along the street, she found the continuous ebb and flow of the crowded thoroughfare somewhat confusing after the absolute calm and quiet of the preceding months, but very soon the Londoner's familiar love of London and of its ceaseless, kaleidoscopic movement returned to her, and with it the requisite poise to thread her way through the throngs that trod the pavements.

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Then her eyes turned to the shop windows—Catherine's stern discipline had completely failed to stamp out the eternal feminine in her niece—and as they absorbed the silken stuffs and rainbow colours that gleamed and glowed behind the thick plateglass, she became suddenly conscious of her own attire—of its cut and style. When last she had worn it, it had been the final word in fashionable raiment. Now it was out of date. The Wielitzska, whose clothes the newspapers had loved to chronicle, in a frock in which any one of the "young ladies" behind the counters of these self-same shops into which she was gazing would have declined to appear! She almost laughed out loud. And then, quick on the heels of her desire to laugh, came a revulsion of feeling. This little incident, just the disparity between the fashion of her own clothes and the fashion prevailing at the moment, served to make her realise, with a curious clarity of vision, the irrevocable passage of time. A year—a slice out of her life! What other differences would it ultimately show?

Something else was already making itself apparent—the fact that none of the passers-by seemed to recognise her. In the old days, when she had been dancing constantly at the Imperial Theatre, she had grown so used to seeing the sudden look of interest and recognition spring into the eyes of one or another, to the little eager gesture that nudged a companion, pointing out the famous dancer as she passed along the street, that she had thought nothing of it—had hardly consciously noticed it. Now she missed it—-missed it extraordinarily.

A sudden sense of intense loneliness swept over her—the loneliness of the man who has been cast on a desert island, only returning to his fellows after many weary months of absence. She felt she could not endure to waste another moment before she saw again the beloved faces of Gillian and Virginie and felt once more the threads of the old familiar life quiver and vibrate between her fingers.

With a quick, imperative gesture she hailed a taxi and was whirled away towards Hampstead.

The first excited greetings and embraces were over. The flurry of broken, scattered phrases, half-tearfully, half-smilingly welcoming her back, had spent themselves, and now old Virginie, drawing away, regarded her with bewildered, almost frightened eyes.

"*Mais, mon dieu*!" she muttered. "*Mon dieu*!" Then with a sudden cry: "Cherie! Cherie! What have they done to thee? What have they done?"

"Done to me?" repeated Magda in puzzled tones. "Oh, I see! I'm thinner. I've been ill, you know."

"It is not—that! Hast thou looked in the glass? Oh, my poor——" And the old Frenchwoman incontinently began to weep.

A glass! Magda had not seen her own reflection in a looking-glass since the day she left Friars' Holm. There were no mirrors hanging on the walls of the house where the Sisters of Penitence dwelt. Filled with a nameless, inexplicable terror, she turned and walked out of the room. There was an old Chippendale mirror hanging at the further end, but she avoided it. Something in the askance expression of Virginie's eyes had frightened her so that she dared not challenge what the mirror might give back until she was alone.

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Once outside the door she flew upstairs to her own room and, locking the door, went to the glass. A stifled exclamation of dismay escaped her. She had not dreamed a year could compass such an alteration! Then, very deliberately, she removed her hat and, standing where the light fell full upon her, she examined her reflection. After a long moment she spoke, whisperingly, beneath her breath.

“Why—why—it isn’t me, at all. I’m ugly. Ugly——”

With a quick movement she lifted her arm, screening her face against it for a moment.

Her startled eyes had exaggerated the change absurdly. Nevertheless, that a change had taken place was palpable. The arresting radiance, the vivid physical perfection of her, had gone. She was thin, and with the thinness had come lines—lines of fatigue, and other, more lasting lines born of endurance and self-control. The pliant symmetry of her figure, too, was marred. She stooped a little; the gay, free carriage of her shoulders was gone. The heavy manual work at the sisterhood, of which, in common with the others, she had done her share, had taken its toll of her suppleness and grace, and the hands she extended in front of her, regarding them distastefully, were roughened and worn by the unwonted usage to which they had been subjected. Her hair, so long, hidden from the light and air by the veil she had worn, was flaccid and lustreless. Only her eyes remained unchangedly beautiful. Splendid and miserable, they stared back at the reflection which the mirror yielded.

It was a long time before Magda reappeared downstairs, so long, indeed, that Gillian was beginning to grow nervously uneasy. When at last she came, she was curiously quiet and responded to all Gillian’s attempts at conversation with a dull, flat indifference that was strangely at variance with the spontaneously happy excitement which had attended the first few moments after her arrival.

Gillian was acutely conscious of the difference in her manner, but even she, with all her intuition, failed to attribute it to its rightful cause. To her, Magda was so indubitably, essentially the Magda she loved that she was hardly sensible of that shadowing of her radiant beauty which had revealed itself with a merciless clarity to the dancer herself. And such change as she observed she ascribed to recent illness.

Meanwhile Magda got through that first evening at Friars’ Holm as best she might. The hours seemed interminable. She was aching for night to come, so that she might be alone with her thoughts—alone to realise and face this new thing which had befallen her.

She had lost her beauty! The one precious gift she had to give Michael, that lover of all beauty! . . . The knowledge seemed to beat against her brain, throbbing and pulsing like a wound, while she made a pretence at doing justice to the little dinner party, which

had been especially concocted for her under Virginie's watchful eye, and responded in some sort to Coppertop's periodic outbreaks of jubilation over her return.

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But the moment of release came at length. A final good-night kiss to Gillian on the landing outside her bedroom door, and then a nerve-racking hour while Virginie fussed over her, undressing her and preparing her for bed with the same tender care she had devoted to the *bebe* she had nursed and tended more than twenty years ago.

It was over at last.

“Sleep well!” And Virginie switched off the electric light as she pattered out of the room, leaving Magda alone in the cool dark, with the silken softness of crepe de chine once more caressing her slender limbs, and the fineness of lavender-scented linen smooth against her cheek.

The ease, and comfort, and wellbeing of it all! Yet this first night, passed in the familiar luxury which had lapped her round since childhood, was a harder, more bitter night than any of the preceding three hundred and sixty-five she had spent tossing weary, aching limbs on a lumpy straw mattress with a coarse brown woollen blanket drawn up beneath her chin, vexing her satin skin.

For each of those nights had counted as a step onwards along the hard road that was to lead her back eventually to Michael. Now she knew that they had all been endured in vain. Spiritually her self-elected year of discipline might have fitted her to be the wife of “Saint Michel.” But the undimmed physical beauty and charm which Michael, the man and artist, would crave in the woman he loved was gone.

The recognition of these things rushed over her, overwhelming her with a sense of blank and utter failure. It meant the end of everything. As far as she was concerned, life henceforward held nothing more. There was nothing to hope for in the future—except to hope that Michael might never see her again! At least, she would like to feel that his memory of her—of the Wielitzska whose lithe grace and beauty had swept him headlong even against the tide of his convictions—would remain for ever unmarred.

It was a rather touching human little weakness—the weakness and prayer of many a woman who has lost her lover. . . . Let him remember her—always—as she was before the radiance of youth faded, before grief or pain blurred the perfection that had been hers!

Perhaps for Magda the wish was even stronger, more insistent by reason of the fact that her beauty had been of so fine and rare a quality, setting her in a way apart from other women.

With the instinct of the wounded wild creature she longed to hide—to hide herself from Michael, so that she might never see in his eyes that look of quickly veiled disappointment which she knew would spring into them as he realised the change in

her. She felt she could not bear that. It would be like a sword-thrust through her heart. . . . Better if she had never left the sisterhood!

Suddenly every nerve of her tautened. Supposing—supposing she returned there, never to emerge again? No chance encounter could ever then bring her within sight or sound of Michael. She would be spared watching the old, eager look of admiration fade suddenly from the grey eyes she loved.

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Hour after hour she lay there, dry-eyed, staring into the darkness. And with the dawn her decision was taken.

CHAPTER XXX

AN UNANSWERED LETTER

"You shan't do it!"

When first Magda had bruited her idea of rejoining the sisterhood—the decision which had crystallised out of the long black hours of the night of her return to Friars' Holm—-Gillian had merely laughed the notion aside, attaching little importance to it. But now, a week later, when Magda reverted to the subject with a certain purposeful definiteness, she grew suddenly frightened.

"Do you want to throw away every possibility of happiness?" she demanded indignantly. "Just because Michael isn't here, waiting for you on the doorstep, so to speak, you decide to rush off and make it impossible for him ever to see you again!"

Magda kept her head bent, refusing to meet the other's eyes.

"I don't want him to see me now," she said shrinkingly. "I'm not—not the Magda he knew any longer."

"That's an absurd exaggeration. You're not looking very well, that's all," retorted Gillian with her usual practical common sense. "You can't suppose that would make any difference to Michael! It didn't make any to me. I'm only too glad to have you back at any price!"

Magda's faint responsive smile was touched with that bitter knowledge which is the heritage of the woman who has been much loved for her beauty.

"You're a woman, Gillyflower," she said. "And Michael is not only a man—but an artist. Men don't want you when the bloom has been brushed off. And you know how Michael worships beauty! He's bound to—being an artist."

"I think you're morbidly self-conscious," declared Gillian firmly. "I suppose it's the result of being out of the world for so long. You've lost all sense of proportion. You're quite lovely enough, now, to satisfy most people. You only look rather tired and worn out."

But Magda's face remained clouded.

"But even that isn't—all," she answered. "It's—oh, it's a heap of things! Somehow I thought when I came back I should see the road clear. But it isn't. It's all shadowed—-

just as it was before. I thought I should have so much to give Michael now. And I haven't anything. I don't think I ever quite realised before that, however much you try to atone, you can never *undo* the harm you've done. But I've had time to think things out while I was with the Sisters."

"And if you go back to them you'll have time to do nothing but think for the rest of your life!" flashed back Gillian.

"Oh, no!" Magda spoke quickly. "I shouldn't return under a vow of penitence. There are working sisters attached to the community who go about amongst the sick and poor in the slums. I should join as a working sister if I went back."

Gillian stared at her in amazement. Magda devoting her life to good works seemed altogether out of the picture! She began to feel that the whole affair was getting too complicated for her to handle, and as usual, when in a difficulty, she put the matter up to Lady Arabella.

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The latter, with her accumulated wisdom of seventy years, saw more clearly than the younger woman, although even she hardly understood that sense of the deadly emptiness and failure of her life which had overwhelmed Magda since her return to Friars' Holm. But the old woman realised that she had passed through a long period of strain, and that, now the reaction had come, the Vallincourt blood in her might drive her into almost any extreme of conduct.

"If only Michael were on the spot!" she burst out irritably. "I own I'm disappointed in the man! I was so sure six months would bring him to his senses."

"I know," assented Gillian miserably. "It's—it's—the most hopeless state of things imaginable!"

Lady Arabella's interview with Magda herself proved unproductive.

"Have you written to Michael?" she demanded.

"Written to him?" A flash of the old defiant spirit sounded in Magda's voice. "No, nor shall I."

"Don't be a fool, child. He's probably learned something during this last twelve months—as well as you. Don't let pride get in your way now."

"It's not pride. Marraine, I never knew—I never thought——Look at me! What have I to give Michael now? Have you forgotten that he's an artist and that beauty means everything to him?"

"Well?"

"'Well!'" Magda held out her hands. "Can't you see that I'm changed? . . . Michael wouldn't want me to pose for him as Circe now!"

"He wanted you for a wife—not a model, my dear. You can buy models at so much the hour."

"Oh, Marraine! You won't understand——"

Lady Arabella took the slender, work-roughened hands in hers.

"Perhaps I understand better than you think," she said quietly. "There are other ways of assessing life than merely in terms of beauty. And you can believe this, too: you've lost nothing from the point of view of looks that a few months of normal healthy life won't set right. Moreover, if you'd grown as plain as a pikestaff, I don't think Michael would care twopence! He's an artist, I know. He can't help that, but he's a man first. And he's a

man who knows how to love. Promise me one thing," she went on insistently. "Promise that you'll do nothing definite—yet. Not, at least, without consulting me."

Magda hesitated.

"Very well. I'll do nothing without—telling you—first."

That was the utmost concession she would make, and with that her godmother had to be content.

The same evening a letter in Lady Arabella's spirited, angular handwriting sped on its way to Paris.

"If you're not absolutely determined to ruin both your own and Magda's lives, my dear Michael, put your pride and your ridiculous principles in your pocket and come back to England. I don't happen to be a grandmother, but I'm quite old enough for the job, so you might pay my advice due respect by taking it."

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“I thought I was shelved altogether.”

Thus Dan Storran, rather crossly, when, a day or two later, he met Gillian by appointment for lunch at their favourite little restaurant in Soho. It was the first time she had been able to fix up a meeting with him since Magda’s return, as naturally his customary visits to Friars’ Holm were out of the question now.

“Well, you expected my time to be pretty well occupied the first week or two after Magda came back, didn’t you?” countered Gillian.

She smiled as she spoke and proceeded leisurely to draw off her gloves, while Storran signalled to a waiter.

She was really very glad to see him again. There was something so solid and dependable about him, and she felt it would be very comforting to confide in him her anxieties concerning Magda. Not that she anticipated he would have any particular compassion to bestow upon the latter. But she was femininely aware that inasmuch as Magda’s affairs were disturbing her peace of mind, he would listen to them with sympathetic attention and probably, out of the depths of his man’s consciousness, produce some quite sound and serviceable advice.

Being a wise woman, however, she did not launch out into immediate explanation, but waited for him to work off his own individual grumble at not having seen her recently, trusting to the perfectly cooked little lunch to exercise a tranquillising effect.

It was not until they had reached the cigarette and coffee stage of the proceedings that she allowed a small, well-considered sigh to escape her and drift away into the silence that had fallen between them. Storran glanced across at her with suddenly observant eyes.

“What is it?” he asked quickly. “You look worried. Are you?”

She nodded silently.

“And here I’ve been grousing away about my own affairs all the time! Why didn’t you stop me?”

“You know I’m interested in your affairs.”

“And I’m interested in yours. What’s bothering you, Gillian? Tell me.”

“Magda,” said Gillian simply.

She was rather surprised to observe that Dan’s face did not, as usual, darken at the mere mention of Magda’s name.

“I saw her the other day,” he said quickly. “I was in the Park and she drove by.”

Gillian felt that there was something more to come. She waited in silence.

“She has altered very much,” he went on bluntly. Then, after a moment: “I felt—sorry for her.”

“*You* did, Dan?” Gillian’s face lit up. “I’m glad. I’ve always hated your being so down on her.”

With an abrupt movement he jabbed the glowing stub of his cigarette on to an ash-tray, pressing it down until it went out. Then, taking out his case, he lit another before replying.

“I shan’t be ‘down on her’ any more,” he said at last. “I never guessed she’d felt things—like that.”

“No. No one did. I don’t suppose even Magda herself knew she could ever go through all she has done just for an ideal.”

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Then very quietly, very simply and touchingly, she told him the story of all that had happened, of Magda's final intention of becoming a working member of the sisterhood, and of Lady Arabella's letter summoning Michael back to England.

"But even when he comes," added Gillian, "unless he is very careful—unless he loves her in the biggest way a man can love, so that *nothing else matters*, he'll lose her. He'll have to convince her that she means just that to him."

Storran was silent for a long time, and when at last he spoke it was with an obvious effort.

"Listen," he said. "There's something you don't know. Perhaps when I've told you, you won't have anything more to say to me—I don't know."

Gillian opened her lips in quick disclaimer, but he motioned her to be silent.

"Wait," he said. "Wait till you've heard what I have to say. You think, and Magda thinks, that June died of a broken heart—at least, that the shock of all that miserable business down at Stockleigh helped to kill her."

"Yes." Gillian assented mechanically when he paused.

"I thought so, too, once. It was what June's sister told me—told everyone. But it wasn't true. She believed it, I know—probably believes it to this day. But, thank God, it wasn't true!"

"How can you tell? All that strain and heart-break just at a time when she wasn't strong. Oh, Dan! We can never be sure—*sure*!"

"I *am* sure. Quite sure," he said steadily. "When I came to my senses out there in 'Frisco, I couldn't rest under that letter from June's sister. It burned into me like a red-hot iron. I was half-mad with pain, I think. I wrote to the doctor who had attended her, but I got no answer. Then I sailed for England, determined to find and see the man for myself. I found him—my letter had miscarried somehow—and he told me that June could not have lived. There were certain complications in her case which made it impossible. In fact, if she had been so happy that she had longed to live—and *tried* to—it would only have made it harder for her, a rougher journey to travel. As it was, she went easily, without fighting death—letting go, without any effort, her hold on life."

He ceased, and after a moment's silence Gillian spoke in strained, horror-stricken tones.

"And you never told us! Oh! It was cruel of you, Dan! You would have spared Magda an infinity of self-reproach!"

“I didn’t want to spare her. I left her in ignorance on purpose. I wanted her to be punished—to suffer as she had made me suffer.”

There were tears in Gillian’s eyes. It was terrible to her that Dan could be so bitter—so vengefully cruel. Yet she recognised that it had been but the natural outcome of the man’s primitive nature to pay back good for good and evil for evil.

“Then why do you tell me now?” she asked at last.

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“Why—because you’ve beaten me—you with your sweetness and courage and tolerance. You’ve taught me that retribution and punishment are best left in—more merciful Hands than ours.”

Gillian’s hand went out to meet his.

“Oh, Dan, I’m so glad!” she said simply.

He kept her hand in his a moment, then released it gently.

“Well, you can tell her now,” he said awkwardly.

“I?” Gillian smiled a little. “No. I want you to tell her. Don’t you see, Dan”—as she sensed his impulse to refuse—“it will make all the difference in Magda if you and she are—are square with each other? She’s overweighted. She’s been carrying a bigger burden than she can bear. Michael comes first, of course, but there’s been her treatment of you, as well. June, too. And—and other things. And it’s crushing her. . . . No, you must tell her.”

“I will—if you say I must. But she won’t forgive me easily.”

“I think she will. I think she’ll understand just what made you do it. So now we’ll go back to Friars’ Holm together.”

An hour later Storran came slowly downstairs from the little room where he and Magda had met again for the first time since that moonlight night at Stockleigh—met, not as lovers, but as a man and woman who have each sinned and each learned, out of their sinning, how to pardon and forgive.

Storran was very quiet and grave when presently he found himself alone with Gillian.

“We men will never understand women,” he said. “There’s an angel hidden away somewhere in every one of you.” His mouth curved into a smile, half-sad, half-whimsical. “I’ve just found Magda’s.”

Lady Arabella and Gillian, both feeling rather like conspirators, waited anxiously for a reply to the former’s letter to Quarrington. But none came. The time slipped by until a fortnight had elapsed, and with the passage of each day their hearts sank lower.

Neither of them believed that Michael would have utterly disregarded the letter, had he received it, but they feared that it might have miscarried, or that he might be travelling and so not receive it in time to prevent Magda’s carrying out her avowed intention of becoming a working member of the sisterhood.

Even though she knew now that at least June Storran's death need no longer be added to her account, she still adhered to her decision. As she had told Dan with a weary simplicity: "I'm glad. But it won't make any difference—to Michael and me. Too much water has run under the bridge. Love that is dead doesn't come to life again."

Each day was hardening her resolve, and both Lady Arabella and Gillian—those two whose unselfish happiness was bound up in her own—were beginning to realise that it would be a race against time if she was to be saved from taking a step that would divide her from Michael as long as they both should live.

At the end of a fortnight Gillian, driven to desperation, despatched a telegram to his Paris address: "Did you receive communication from Lady Arabella?" But it shared the fate of the letter, failing to elicit any reply. She allowed sufficient time to elapse to cover any ordinary delay in transit, then, unknown to Magda, taxied down to the house in Park Lane.

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“I want you to invite Magda to stay with you, please,” she informed Lady Arabella abruptly.

“Of course I will,” she replied. “But why? You’ve got a reason.”

Gillian nodded.

“Yes,” she acknowledged quietly. “I’m going to Paris—to find Michael.”

Lady Arabella, whose high spirits had wilted a little in the face of the double disappointment regarding any answer from Quarrington, beamed satisfaction.

“You blessed child!” she exclaimed. “I’d have gone myself, but my old body is so stiff with rheumatism that I don’t believe they’d get me on board the boat except in an ambulance!”

“Well, I’m going,” said Gillian. “Only the point is, Magda mustn’t know. If she thought I was going off in pursuit of Michael I believe she’d lock me up in the cellar. She intends never to let him see her again. Melrose will manage about the letters, and somehow you’ve got to prevent Magda from coming to Friars’ Holm and finding out that I’m not there.”

“I’ll take her away with me,” declared Lady Arabella. “Rheumatism—Harrogate. It’s quite simple.”

Gillian heaved a sigh of relief.

“Yes. That would be a good plan,” she agreed. “Then I’d let you know when we should arrive—”

“‘We?’”

“Michael and I. I’m not coming back without him. And you could bring Magda straight back to town with you.”

Lady Arabella’s keen old eyes searched her face.

“You sound very certain of success. Supposing you find Michael still unforgiving—and he refuses to return with you?”

“I believe in Michael,” replied Gillian steadily. “He’s made mistakes. People in love do. But when he knows all that Magda has endured—for his sake, really—why, he’ll come back. I’m sure of it.”

"I don't know, my dear. *I* was sure he would come back within six months. But, you see, I was wrong. Men are kittle cattle—and often very slow to arrive at the intrinsic value and significance of things. A woman jumps to it while a man is crawling round on his hands and knees in the dark, looking for it with a match."

Gillian laughed and got up to go, and Lady Arabella—whose rheumatism was quite real at the moment—rose rather painfully and hobbled down the room beside her, her thin, delicate old hand resting on the silver knob of a tall, ebony walking-stick.

"Now, remember," urged Gillian. "Magda mustn't have the least suspicion Michael may be coming back—or she'd be off into her slums before you could stop her. *Whatever happens*, you've got to prevent her rushing back to the Sisters of Penitence."

"Only over my dead body, my dear," Lady Arabella assured her determinedly. "She shan't go any other way."

So Gillian returned to Friars' Holm bearing with her a note from Lady Arabella in which she asked her god-daughter to pay her a visit. In it, however, the wily old lady made no mention of her further idea of going to Harrogate, lest it should militate against an acceptance of the invitation. Magda demurred a little at first, but Gillian, suddenly endowed with diplomacy worthy of a Machiavelli, pointed out that if she really had any intention of ultimately withdrawing into a community the least she could do was to give her godmother the happiness of spending a few days with her.

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“She will only urge me to give up the idea all the time,” protested Magda. “And I’ve quite made up my mind. The sooner I can get away from—from everything”—looking round her with desperate, haunted eyes—“the better it will be.”

Gillian’s impulse to combat her decision to rejoin the sisterhood died on her lips stillborn. It was useless to argue the matter. There was only one person in the world who could save Magda from herself, and that was Michael. The main point was to concentrate on getting him back to England, rather than waste her energies upon what she knew beforehand must prove a fruitless argument.

“I’ll go to Marraine for a couple of nights, anyway,” said Magda at last. “After that, I want to make arrangements for my reception into the sisterhood.”

Gillian returned no answer. She felt her heart contract at the quiet decision in Magda’s voice, but she pinned her faith on Lady Arabella’s ability to hold her, somehow, till she herself had accomplished her errand to Paris.

CHAPTER XXXI

AGAINST TIME

Gillian, dashing headlong into Victoria Station, encountered Storran sauntering leisurely out of it, a newspaper under his arm.

“Where are you off to?” he demanded, stopping abruptly. “You look as if you were in a hurry.”

“I am. Don’t stop me. I’m catching the boat-train.”

Storran pulled out his watch as he turned and fell into step beside her.

“Then you’ve got a good half-hour to spare. No hurry,” he returned placidly.

Gillian glanced at the watch on her wrist.

“Are you sure?” she asked doubtfully. “If so, my watch must be altogether wrong!”

“Unbeliever! Come and look at the clock. And, incidentally, give me that suit-case.”

She yielded up the case obediently and, having verified the time, proceeded towards the platform at a more reasonable gait.

Storran, his long legs leisurely keeping pace with her shorter ones, smiled down at her.

“And now, for the second time of asking, where are you off to?”

“I’m going to France—to fetch Michael.”

He gave a quick exclamation—whether of surprise or disapproval she was not quite sure.

“You haven’t heard from him, then?”

“No. And unless something happens *quick*, it will be too late.”

“But if he were at his studio he would surely have answered Lady Arabella’s letter.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” replied Gillian absently, her eyes following the queue of passengers passing through the gate on the platform. By mutual consent they had come to a standstill outside it.

“Then if he isn’t there, what’s the use of your rushing over to Paris?” protested Storran. “It’s absurd—an absolute wild-goose chase. You can’t go!”

Gillian’s brown eyes came back to his face.

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“But I’m going,” she said calmly.

He frowned.

“If Michael’s not at his studio he may be—anywhere!”

She nodded.

“I know. If so, I shall follow—anywhere.”

Storran looked down at her and read the quiet determination in her face.

“Then let me come too,” he said. “Sort of courier, you know. I’d just be at hand in case of a tangle.”

“Oh, no! I couldn’t let you. There’s not the least need. Good heavens, I’m not a baby!”

There was a curious softness in Dan’s blue eyes as they rested on her.

“No. I think you’re—a very good friend,” he said. “But I don’t see why you should have the monopoly! Let me show I know how to be a good pal, too, if I want to.”

“No—no.” Gillian still protested, but her tone betrayed signs of weakening.

“We’ll be as conventional as you like,” urged Dan, twinkling. “I’d stop at different hotels.”

“Well, but—”

“Say ’yes’!” he insisted.

Gillian smiled.

“You obstinate person! Yes, then!”

“Thank you. Then I’ll go along and buy a ticket.”

He turned and went towards the booking-office, while Gillian, inwardly much relieved, awaited his return. She could not but acknowledge that in the “wild-goose chase” upon which she was embarking it would be an enormous comfort to have Storran at hand in case of an emergency. As to the proprieties—well, Gillian was far too honest and independent a soul to worry about them in the circumstances. Her friend’s happiness was at stake. And whether people chose to talk because she and Dan Storran travelled to Paris together—or to Timbuctoo, for the matter of that, if Michael had chanced to depart thither—troubled her not at all.

When Storran rejoined her a much more practical consideration presented itself to her mind.

“But, my dear man, you can’t fly with me to Paris without even a tooth-brush! I’d forgotten you’d no luggage!”

Her face fell as she spoke. But Storran dismissed the matter with a smile.

“Oh, I can buy clean collars and shirts as I go along,” he replied, entirely unruffled. “The dickens was to get on to the train at all! They assured me there wasn’t a seat. However, I make a point of never believing official statements—on principle.”

And as a consequence of such well-directed incredulity, Storran accompanied Gillian to Dover and thence to Calais.

They had a good crossing—sun up and blue sky. Looking back, afterwards, it always seemed to Gillian as though the short time it occupied had been a merciful breathing space—a tranquil interval, specially vouchsafed, in which she was able to brace herself for the coming race against time. Just so long as they were on board, nothing she could do was of any importance whatever, either to help or hinder the fulfilment of her errand. She could not quicken the speed of the boat by a single throb of its engine. So, like a sensible woman, she sat on deck with Dan and enjoyed herself amazingly.

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Afterwards, in quick succession, came the stir and bustle of landing and the journey to Paris. They arrived too late to make any inquiries that night, but ten o'clock the following morning found them outside the building where Michael had his apartment.

"Oh, Dan!"—Gillian was seized with sudden panic. "Supposing he is here, after all, and has *deliberately* not answered Lady Arabella's letter?"

"I shouldn't suppose anything so foolish. Michael may be many kinds of a fool—artists very often are, I believe. It's part of the temperament. But whatever he proposed to do regarding Magda, there's no reason in the world to suppose he wouldn't answer Lady Arabella's letter."

"No—no. Perhaps not," agreed Gillian hurriedly. But it was in rather a shaky voice that she asked to see Mr. Quarrington when finally they found themselves confronted by the concierge.

"Monsieur Quarrington?" Hands, shoulders, and eyebrows all seemed to gesticulate at once as madame la concierge made answer. "But he has been gone from here two—-no, three months. Perhaps madame did not know?"

"No," said Gillian. "I didn't know. But I thought he might possibly be away, because I—I have had no answer to a letter I wrote him."

"What misfortune!"

The concierge regarded Gillian with a pair of shrewd, gimlet eyes while a stream of inquiry and comment issued from her lips. Madame was the sister of monsieur, perhaps? Truly, they resembled each other! One could see at a glance. No, not a sister? Ah, a friend, then? And there had been no answer to a letter! But monsieur had left an address. Oh, yes. And all letters were forwarded. She herself saw to that.

At last Gillian managed to stem the torrent of garrulity and interposed a question concerning the telegram she had sent.

A telegram! Now that was another affair altogether. Yes, the concierge remembered the telegram. She had opened it to see if it were of life or death importance, in which case she would have, of course, telegraphed its contents to monsieur at his present address.

Gillian was nearly crying with impatience as the woman's voluble tongue ran on complacently.

"Then you did send it on?" she managed to interpolate at last.

The letter—yes. Not, of course, the telegram. That would have been a needless expense seeing that monsieur would already have had the letter, since all the letters were sent on. *All!* She, Madame Ribot, could vouch for that.

At the end of half an hour Gillian succeeded in extracting Michael's address from amid the plethora of words and, bidding the voluble concierge *bon jour*, she and Storran beat a masterly retreat.

It appeared that Michael had been commissioned to paint the portrait of some Italian society beauty and had gone to Rome. Gillian screwed up her small face resolutely.

"I shall go to Rome!" she announced succinctly. There was a definite defiance in her tone, and Storran concealed a smile.

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“Of course you will,” he replied composedly. “Just as well I came with you, isn’t it?” he added with great cheerfulness.

Her expression relaxed.

“You really are rather a nice person, Dan,” she allowed graciously. “I was horribly afraid you’d suggest wiring Michael again, or something silly like that. I’m not going to trust to anything of that kind.”

Accordingly, the only wire despatched was one to Lady Arabella, informing her as to their movements, and a few hours later found Dan and Gillian rushing across Europe as fast as the thunderous whirl of the express could take them. They travelled day and night, and it was a very weary Gillian who at last opened her eyes to the golden sunshine of Italy.

At the hotel whither Madame Ribot had directed them, fresh disappointment awaited them. The manager—when he found that the two dusty and somewhat dishevelled-looking travellers who presented themselves at the inquiry bureau were actually friends of Signor Quarrington, the famous English artist who had stayed at his hotel—was desolated, but the signor had departed a month ago! Had he the address? But assuredly. He would write it down for the signora.

“He’s in Normandy!” exclaimed Gillian in tones of bitter disappointment. “At—what’s the name of the place?—Armanches. Oh, Dan! We’ve got to go right back to Paris again and then on to the coast.”

Her face was full of anxiety. This would mean at least a delay of several days before they could possibly see Michael, and meanwhile it was a moot question as to how much longer Lady Arabella could restrain Magda from taking definite steps with regard to joining the sisterhood.

Storran nodded.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “But all the same, you’ll not start back till to-morrow—”

“Oh, but I must!” interrupted Gillian. “We can’t afford to waste a moment.”

He glanced down at her and shook his head. Her face was white and drawn, and there were deep violet shadows underneath her eyes. Suspense and her anxious impatience had told upon her, and she had slept but little on the journey. And now, with the addition of this last, totally unexpected disappointment, she looked as though she could not stand much more.

“We can afford to waste a single day better than we can afford the three or four which it would cost us if you collapsed en route,” said Storran.

“I shan’t collapse,” she protested with white lips.

“So much the better. But all the same, you’ll stay here till to-morrow and get a good night’s rest.”

“I shouldn’t sleep,” she urged. “Let’s go right on, Dan. Let’s go——”

But the sentence was never finished. Quite suddenly she swayed, stretching out her hands with a blind, groping movement. Dan was just in time to catch her in his arms as she toppled over in a dead faint.

It was a week later when, in the early morning, a rather wan and white-faced Gillian sprang up from her seat as the train ran into Bayeux.

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“Thank goodness we’re here at last!” she exclaimed.

Storran put out his hand to steady her as the train jolted to a standstill.

“Yes, we’re here at last,” he said. “Now to find a vehicle of some description to take us out to Armanches.”

As he had suggested it would, Gillian’s collapse had delayed them some time. Probably she had caught a slight chill while travelling, and that, together with the fatigue from which she was suffering, combined to keep her in bed at the hotel in Rome for a couple of days.

When the slight feverishness had abated, she slept the greater part of the time, her weary body exacting the price for all those wakeful hours she had passed on the train. But it was not until four days had elapsed that Dan would agree to a resumption of the journey. Even then, consent was only wrung from him by the fear that she would fret herself ill over any further delay. He did not consider her by any means fit to travel. But Gillian was game to the core, and they had reached Bayeux without further *contretemps*.

“The thing that puzzles me,” she said as they started on the long drive from Bayeux to Armanches, “is why Michael didn’t send his Normandy address to Madame Ribot. We should have been saved all that long journey to Rome if he had.”

“Perhaps he intended to, and forgot,” suggested Dan. “Artists are proverbially absent-minded.”

But Gillian shook her head with a dissatisfied air. Michael was not of the absent-minded type.

Armanches was a tiny place on the Normandy coast, in reality not much more than a fishing village, but its possession of a beautiful *plage*—smooth, fine, golden sands—-brought many visitors to the old-fashioned hostelry it boasted.

The landlady, a smiling, rosy-cheeked woman, with a chubby little brown-faced son hiding shy embarrassment behind her ample skirts, greeted the travellers hospitably. But when they mentioned Quarrington’s name a look of sympathetic concern overspread her comely face.

Yes, he was there. And of course madame could not know, but he had been ill, seriously ill with *la grippe*—taken ill the very day he had arrived, nearly a month ago. He had a nurse. Oh, yes! One had come from Bayeux. But this influenza! It was a veritable scourge. One was here to-day and gone to-morrow. However, Michael Quarrington was recovering, the saints be praised! Monsieur and madame wished to

see him? The good woman looked doubtful. She would inquire. What name? Grey? But there was a telegram awaiting madame!

Gillian's face blanched as the landlady bustled away in search of the wire. Had Magda already——Oh, but that was impossible! Lady Arabella was in charge at that end, and Gillian had a great belief in Lady Arabella's capacity to deal with any crisis that might arise. Nevertheless, they had wired her the Normandy address from Rome, in case of necessity. The next moment Gillian had torn open the telegram and she and Dan were reading it together.

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“Magda insists we return to London on Wednesday. She has completed preliminary arrangements to join sisterhood and goes there Thursday. Impossible to dissuade her. —ARABELLA WINTER.”

Gillian’s mouth set itself in a straight line of determination as her eyes raced along the score or so of pregnant words. She was silent a moment. Then she met Storran’s questioning glance.

“We can just do it,” she said sternly. “To-day is Wednesday. By crossing to Southampton to-night, we can make London to-morrow.”

Without waiting for his reply she entered the inn and ran quickly up the stairs which the landlady had already ascended.

“But, madame, I am not sure that monsieur will receive anyone,” protested the astonished woman, turning round as Gillian caught up with her.

“I must see him,” asserted Gillian quietly.

Perhaps something in the tense young face touched a sympathetic chord in the Frenchwoman’s honest heart. She scented romance, and when she emerged from the invalid’s bedroom her face was wreathed in smiles.

“It is all arranged. Will madame please to enter?”

A moment later Gillian found herself standing in front of a tall, gaunt figure of a man, whose coat hung loosely from his shoulders and whose face was worn and haggard with something more than *la grippe* alone.

“Oh, Michael!”

A little, stricken cry broke from her lips. What men and women make each other suffer! She realised it as she met the stark, bitter misery of the grey eyes that burned at her out of the thin face and remembered the look on Magda’s own face when she had last seen her.

She went straight to the point without a word of greeting or of explanation. There was no time for explanations, except the only one that mattered.

“Michael, why didn’t you answer Lady Arabella’s letter?”

He stared at her. Then he passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

“Letter? I don’t remember any letter.”

“She wrote to you about a month ago. I know the letter was forwarded on to Rome. It must have followed you here.”

“A month ago?” he repeated.

Then a light broke over his face. He turned and crossed the room to where a small pile of letters lay on a table, dusty and forgotten.

“Perhaps it’s here,” he said. “I was taken ill directly I arrived. I never even sent this address to the concierge at Paris. I believe I was off my head part of the time—’flue plays the deuce with you. But I remember now. The nurse told me there were some letters which had come while I was ill. I—didn’t bother about them.”

While he spoke he was turning over the envelopes, one by one, in a desultory fashion.

“Yes. This is Lady Arabella’s writing.” He paused and looked across at Gillian.

“Will you read it, please?” she said. “And—oh, you ought to sit down! You don’t look very strong yet.”

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He smiled a little.

“I’m not quite such a crock as I look. But won’t you sit down yourself while I read this letter? Is it of importance?”

“Oh! Please read it!” exclaimed Gillian with sudden nervous impatience.

It seemed to her an eternity while he read the letter. But at last he looked up from its perusal.

“Well?” she asked under her breath.

Very deliberately he refolded the sheet of notepaper and slipped it back into its envelope.

“It would have made no difference if I had received it earlier,” he said composedly.

“No difference”

“None. Because, you see, this letter—asking me to go back to Magda—is written under a misapprehension.

“How? What do you mean?”

“I mean—that Magda has—no further use for me.”

Gillian leaned forward.

“You’re wrong,” she said tersely—“quite wrong.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m not blaming her. Looking back, I’m not even very much surprised. But still, the fact remains, she has no further use for me.”

“Will you tell me what makes you think that?” With an effort Gillian forced herself to speak quietly and composedly.

He was silent a moment, staring out of the window at the gay blue sea beyond, sparkling in the morning sunlight. All at once he swung round on her, his face wrung with a sudden agony.

“I *know*,” he said in a roughened voice. “I know, because I wrote to her—six months ago. I was hard, I know, brutally hard to her that last day at Friars’ Holm. But—God! I paid for it afterwards! And I wrote to her—bared my very soul to her. . . . Wrote so that if she had ever cared she must at least have answered me.”

He stopped abruptly, his face working.

“And she didn’t answer?”

A wry smile twisted his lips.

“I got my own letter back,” he said quietly. “After all, that was an answer—a conclusive one.”

Gillian was thinking rapidly. Six months ago! A momentary flash of recollection came to her. So Lady Arabella, that wise old citizen of the world, had been quite right after all! She had given Michael six months to find out his imperative need of Magda. And he had found it. Only—something had gone wrong.

“Magda never had that letter,” she said quietly at last.

She was gradually beginning to piece together the separate parts of the puzzle. All letters that came for Magda had been forwarded on to the sisterhood, and had she herself readdressed this of Michael’s she would have recognised the handwriting. But probably she had been away from home, or had chanced to be out at post time, in which case Melrose, or old Virginie, would have readdressed the envelope and dropped it in the pillar box at the corner of the road.

Then—as was the case with any correspondence addressed to one of the Sisters of Penitence—the letter would be read by the Mother Superior and passed on to its destined recipient if she thought good. If not——

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Gillian had learned a great deal about Catherine Vallincourt by now, both from Lady Arabella and from Magda herself, who, before leaving the community, had discovered the identity of its head. And she could visualise the stern, fanatical woman, obsessed by her idea of disciplining Magda and of counteracting the effects of her brother's marriage with Diane Wielitzska, opening the letter and, after perusal, calmly sealing it up in its envelope again and returning it to the sender.

"Magda never had that letter, Michael," she repeated. "Listen!" And then, without preamble, but with every word vibrant with pity for the whole tragedy, she poured out the story of Magda's passionate repentance and atonement, of her impetuous adoption of her father's remorseless theory, mistaken though it might be, that pain is the remedy for sin, and of the utter, hopeless despair which had overwhelmed her now that she believed it had all proved unavailing.

"She has come to believe that you don't want her—never could want her, Michael—-because she has failed so much."

There was more than one reproach mingled with the story, but Michael made no protest. It was only when she had finished that Gillian could read in his tortured eyes all that her narrative had cost him.

"Yes," he said at last. "It's true. I wanted the impossible. I was looking for a goddess—not a woman. . . . But now I want—just a woman, Gillian."

"Then, if you want her, you must save her from herself. You've just twenty-four hours to do it in. To-morrow she's still Magda. The next day she'll be Sister Somebody. And you'll have lost her."

Half an hour later, when Michael's nurse returned, she found her patient packing a suit-case with the assistance of a pretty, brown-haired girl whose eyes shone with the unmistakable brightness of recent tears.

"But you're not fit to travel!" she protested in horrified dismay. "You mustn't think of it, Mr. Quarrington."

But Michael only laughed at her, defying her good-humouredly.

"If the man you loved were waiting for you in England, nurse, you know you'd go—and you wouldn't care a hang whether you were fit to travel or not!"

The nurse smiled in spite of herself.

"No," she admitted. "I suppose I shouldn't."

As the Havre-Southampton boat steamed through the moonlit night, Dan and Gillian were pacing the deck together.

“I’m so glad Michael is going back to Magda without knowing—about June,” said Gillian, coming to a standstill beside the deck-rail. “Going back just because his love is too big for anything else to matter now.”

“Haven’t you told him?”—Storran’s voice held surprise.

“No. I decided not to. I should like Magda to tell him that herself.”

They were both silent for a little while. Gillian bent over the rail, looking down at the phosphorescent water breaking away from the steamer’s bow. Suddenly a big hand covered hers.

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“I think I’m—lonely,” said Storran.

“Gillian,” he went on, his voice deepening. “Gillian . . . dear. We’re two rather lonely people. We shall be lonelier still when Michael and Magda are married. Couldn’t we be lonely—in company?”

Gillian’s hand moved a little beneath his, then stayed still.

“Why, Dan—Dan——” she stammered.

“Yes,” went on the strong, tender voice. “I’m asking you to marry me, Gillian, I’d never expect too much of you. We both know all that’s in the past of each of us. But we might help each other to be less lonely—good comrades together, Gillian.”

And suddenly Gillian realised how good it would be to rest once more in the shelter of a man’s affection and good comradeship—to have someone to laugh with or to be sorry with. There’s a tender magic in the word “together.” And she, too, had something to give in return—sympathy, and understanding, and a warm friendship. . . . She would not be going to him empty-handed.

“Is it yes, Gillian?”

She bent her head.

“Yes, Dan.”

CHAPTER XXXII

THE EDGE OF THE DAWN

Magda paused outside the closed door of the room. She knew whom she would see within. Lady Arabella had told her he was there waiting for her.

Her first impulse had been to refuse to meet him. Then the temptation to see him again—just once more—before she passed out of his life altogether, rushed over her like the surge of some resistless sea, sweeping everything before it.

Very quietly she opened the door and went into the room.

“Magda!”

She never knew whether he really uttered her name or whether it was only the voiceless, clamorous cry of his whole consciousness—of a man’s passionate demand for the woman who is mate of his soul and body.

But she answered its appeal, her innermost being responding to the claim of it. All recollection of self, of the dimming of her beauty, even of the great gulf of months that lay between them, crowded with mistakes and failure, was burned away in the white-hot flame of love that blazed up within her.

She ran to him, and that white, searing flame found its expression in the dear human tenderness of the little cry that broke from her as he turned his gaunt face towards her.

“Oh, Saint Michel! Saint Michel! How dreadfully ill you look! Oh, my dear—sit down! You’re not fit to stand!”

But when that first instinctive cry had left her lips, memory came flooding over her once more. She shrank back from him, covering her face with her hands, agonisingly conscious of the change in herself—of that shadowing of her beauty which the sensitiveness of a woman in love had so piteously magnified.

Then, drawing her hands slowly down, she braced herself to say what must be said.

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“You are free of me, Michael.” She spoke in a curious, still voice. “I know Marraine and Gillian between them have brought you back. But you are free of me. As you see—I shall never do any more harm. No other man will come to grief for the sake of the Wielitzska. . . . I determined that as I had made others pay, so I would pay. I think”—-suddenly moving towards the window and standing full in the brilliant sunlight—“I think you’ll agree I’ve settled the bill.”

Michael came to her side.

“I want you for my wife,” he said simply.

She held out her work-roughened hands, while the keen-edged sunlight pitilessly revealed the hollowed line of cheek and throat, the lustreless dark hair, the fine lines that Pain, the great Sculptor, had graved about her mouth.

“You are an artist before everything, Michael,” she said. “Look—look well!”

He took the two work-worn hands in his and drew her nearer him.

“I’m your lover before everything,” he answered. “When will you come to me, Magda?”

“No, no,” she said whisperingly. “I mustn’t come. You’ll never—never quite forgive me. Some day the past would come between us again—you’ll never forget it all.”

“No,” he replied steadily. “Perhaps not. Consequences *cannot* be evaded. There are things that can’t be forgotten. But one forgives. And I love you—love you, Magda, so that I can’t face life without you.” His voice vibrated. “The past must always lie like a shadow on our love. But you’re my woman—my soul! And if you’ve sinned, then it must be my sin, too——”

She leaned away from him.

“Do you mean—June?” she asked.

He nodded with set lips.

“Then—then you don’t know—you haven’t heard?”

His expression answered her and her face changed—grew suddenly radiant, transfigured. “Oh, Saint Michel—Saint Michel! Then there is one thing I can do, one gift I have still left to give! Oh, my dear, I can take away the shadow!” Her voice breathless and shaken, she told him how June had died—all that Dan Storran had learned from the doctor who had attended her.

“I know I hurt her—hurt her without thinking. But oh, Michael! Thank God, it wasn’t through me that she died!”

And Michael, as he folded his arms about her, knew that the shadow which had lain between him and the woman he loved was there no longer. They were free—freed from those “ropes of steel” which had held them bound. Free to go together and find once more their Garden of Eden.

Presently, when those first perfect moments of reunion were past, Magda gave utterance to the doubts and perplexities that still vexed her soul.

“Pain may purify,” she said slowly. “But it spoils, Michael, and blots, and ruins. I think, after all, pain is meaningless.”

Michael’s grey, steady eyes met her troubled ones.

“I don’t think pain—just as pain—purifies,” he answered quickly. “Pain is merely horrible. It is the *willingness to suffer* that shrives us—not the pain itself.”

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Later still, the essential woman in her came into its own again. “I shall never be able to sit for you any more, Saint Michel,” she said regretfully. “I’m nobody’s model—now!”

She could see only her lost beauty—the unthinking, radiant beauty of mere youth. But Michael could see all that her voluntary renunciation and atonement had bestowed in its stead of more enduring significance.

He took her by the hand and led her to the mirror.

“There,” he said, a great content in his voice, “is the model for the greatest picture I shall ever paint—the model for my ‘Madonna.’”