

PANTHER'S  
CUB

*By* AGNES AND  
EGERTON CASTLE



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BY  
AGNES AND EGERTON CASTLE

AUTHORS OF

"ROSE OF THE WORLD," "THE SECRET ORCHARD"  
"THE STAR DREAMER," "WROTH," ETC.



ILLUSTRATED BY FLORENCE R. A. WILDE

*"A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse . . .  
(Canticle of Canticles)*

GARDEN CITY      NEW YORK  
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY  
1911

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There she sat . . . all white-robed against  
the dark wall of clipped yew . *Frontispiece*

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She was standing on the lawn . . . receiving  
her guests with that urbane, *grande*  
*dame* manner in which she was becoming  
ever more proficient . . . . 152

“Shall I not dance?” she cried, shaking  
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speak to my bride” . . . . 386



# BOOK I



# I

## LA MARMORA

“OF COURSE you would not attempt the dance yourself. It’s all very well for Ilma, she’s young —though, if it comes to that, if I had anything to say to Ilma, she shouldn’t do it. A singer should think of her voice — Good God, my dear friend!” said the impresario, with his fat chuckle, “if a singer does not think of her voice before her soul, I ——”

He broke off. The woman opposite to him had yawned in his face; yawned brutally, with a noisy sigh and a display of teeth, white and strong as those of a young dog.

The Baron de Robecq was not offended, not even taken aback. He paused only because he was essentially a man of business, and he was not going to waste his advice upon unhearing ears. He turned his cigar round and round between his fat, white fingers and waited good-humouredly until the lady’s paroxysm had passed. Then, after puffing out a volume of aromatic smoke — Baron de Robecq’s cigars were of proverbial quality — he proceeded in precisely the same level intonation with his interrupted sentence:

“I wouldn’t give a damn for her.”

La Marmora, who was half reclining upon the spare Empire sofa, half supported by her elbow on the small table that divided her from the Baron’s armchair, here

gave her long, lithe body a twist that brought her face considerably nearer that of the smoker. Chin on her interlaced fingers, she fixed him for a moment through narrowed lids. Then she spoke with great deliberation.

“Röbecq, you may shut up about Salome — I’m sick to death of the sound of the word, I don’t care what Ilma does. But I know this, I’m bored — I’m bored,” she repeated on a higher, fuller note. Even in speech, her voice had rich and wonderful inflections; it swelled now like an organ peal. “You haven’t got Fritz’s talent, you’ve contrived to bore me, with your Salome. *Ah ça*” — with a sudden movement she flung herself back on the sofa and lay flat, her eyes sombrely fixing the ceiling: “Do you know, my friend, that you have given me Salome for breakfast, Salome for dinner, Salome for supper, ever since we came to Vienna? I have had it over the ears, and it bores me — go then, and talk of it to Ilma. She’s young.” The full lips sneered. “She’ll take your advice, I daresay. As for me, I’m not sure I shall sing it at all.”

Röbecq hoisted himself out of the comfortable depth of his seat, and stood looking down at her philosophically.

A short, stout man in those middle years of life, when the materialist begins to consider comfort superior to pleasure; he was already bald, and the clipped, pointed, auburn beard was streaked with gray. To a casual observer, his somewhat heavy face might have seemed merely typical of an easy good-nature and a large epicurism. But there was acute intelligence in the glance of the small, quick eyes, and a fine development of brow



above them. A materialist the Baron might be; but he was also a man of art, of profound financial and diplomatic capacity.

It is the special gift of one powerful race that its sons can combine these apparently antithetic temperaments with so much success. Robecq was of that vast denationalized nation; and like so many of his Hebrew brothers, spoke most gentile languages with the fluency of the native and the accent of the stranger.

His English bore curiously the impress of two other tongues; its drawling and emphatic enunciation was transatlantic; while the roll of gutturals, and the uncertainty of consonants were German.

"Why, then, Fulvia," he remarked, after a pause, "we'll give Salome a rest. Anyhow, as I told you yesterday, I'm not at all keen on your beginning the score till Fritz is back."

"What did you drag me to this hateful place for, then?"

"My dear friend ——"

"You know perfectly well that Vienna is no *milieu* for me. What position have I — an opera singer — in Vienna? Ah, *la sottie ville!* Ah, my fine days in St. Petersburg!"

"Let us understand each other, Fulvia. Do you want to be heard at Covent Garden? My Lord!" said the man, with a weary laugh, "did you not din it into my ears long enough that I had done nothing for you since I had failed to get you London?"

"Well," she snapped, "London's the only centre for an artist. In London an artist is recognized; she takes rank; she ——"

"She is more sought after than a duchess, and no one inquires into her morals," the other interrupted unemotionally. "Granted. You're going to London. But how did I manage it, my dear friend? The syndicate wouldn't have you, not at any price. There was some one wanted to keep you out, over there —"

"Oh — devil take her! Don't I know?"

"But I got you in on Salome — the public will have novelty."

"Aye." The singer reared her superb figure from its lolling attitude; and, one hand on her hip, sketched a sinuous step: "Let her try Salome — *ce traversin, cette tonne là!*"

With his patient drawl, he brought the erratic mind back to the argument:

"And you had to see the performance for yourself, hadn't you?"

But swiftly she attacked him in flank.

"And why did I not create the part? It was your business, *mon cher!* And why, since the matter is so important, did you allow Fritz to go to Carlsbad just now, when I wanted him so badly?"

"Because, if your repertory is not fit for his work, the prima donna — his gout has to be nursed as carefully as your voice, my dear; have you forgotten that?" Here he suddenly paused. What was the good of talking common sense to such a creature? He began afresh in a soothing voice. "Every fine artist creates her own part, don't forget that. I wanted you to hear Ilma's reading, not to copy her."

Fulvia de la Marmora flung herself violently back on

her sofa; thrust her fingers into her ears, and gave a short, piercing scream.

“If you mention Ilma again, if I hear one word more about that skinny, squalling little brute — *Mon Dieu*, let her dance! That’s what she’s fit for, to kick the skirts in a café-chantant and rap the tambourine. I’ve heard as good a song through a keyhole!”

The prima donna rolled off the couch, drove her silk-stockinged feet into dilapidated pink slippers, and took a restless turn across the window bow. Imperturbably the man shifted his position to watch her. Behind the blue clouds of tobacco smoke his brain was busily working.

“There’s not a woman on the stage can move like that. The Panther — never was better nick-name! Why, she *is* Salome — Strauss’s Salome — the world’s Salome! If she could have Ilma’s head on a charger, she’d dance right enough for it, this moment! But it must be this year or never. The body’s young enough still — but the voice? I shall be very much mistaken if we don’t have to lower the score as it is, by half a tone.”

La Marmora halted in her feline prowl, and stood staring down into the gay, spring-lit Ring. All at once she cried in an altered tone:

“Come here, Robecq!” And as the man approached, she pointed dramatically. A carriage had halted before the hotel entrance. Its splendid horses, coroneted panels, servants smart as only Viennese lacqueys can be, would all have proclaimed a fashionable and aristocratic owner, had not the occupants themselves conclusively settled the point. These were a mother and daughter; “fine,” in the French sense, both; with delicate pale faces under

their spring hats, and that elegant simplicity of attire which demands so expensive a *faiseur*. The girl was fresh as the primroses at her breast, and charming in her freshness; but, contrasted with her mother, had something of the unsatisfying meagreness of a sketch beside a finished painting.

Humouring the singer, after his fashion, the impresario bent to look.

"Is it the hats that take your fancy?" he inquired in his unctuous voice.

"Idiot!" she said. "Wait a minute, wait. He will be back!"

Even as she spoke, a tall, dark man, as unmistakably English as the ladies in the carriage were of Vienna, emerged from the hotel, and somewhat languidly took a seat opposite to them. Before the carriage drew away with clatter and dash, Robecq's keen glance took a rapid inventory of the countenance of him who had so much interested his prima donna. As refined and pale as the women themselves, and as high-bred; a young man still, but worn-looking, tired.

"Who is he?" asked La Marmora, in French this time, still with her pointed finger.

Robecq shrugged his shoulders — he could also be French when occasion suited. She moved back to her sofa with her long, restless step, dropping a slipper on her way. He picked it up and followed her with it:

"You will catch cold," he said, placing it before her.

"I want to know who it is," she ordered, kicking the slipper away. "I want to know him."

"One can always ask the name in the hall," he conceded, patiently.

"Did you see he had no eyes but for the mother? That woman was older than I am, Robecq." Then, with her abrupt change of mood, she burst forth — and her voice had tears in it. "But I'm also a mother. My God, you would grind the heart out of me in this odious *carrière!* I am a mother, Robecq, I want my child, I will have my child — Robecq!" She beat the table with her impatient hand. "I, too, will have my child to drive beside me! I will have a carriage and a pair of chestnuts, and the little one beside me in the Prater. . . . She shall wear a hat with blue wings in it — the little one."

Her long, green eyes, that had an extraordinary lustre between very black lashes, were now suffused. "I have not seen her for how many — heavens! — how many years?"

He reckoned a moment: "Not since Lausanne — getting on for three."

She wailed. "Lausanne! How can you remind me of it? . . . the little innocent! — Monsters you are to me, you and Fritz. I will have her telegraphed for, to-day, now!"

"Now," said Robecq, assenting with perfect amiability. His cigar, two-thirds smoked, he dropped into the grate, and moved to the door. "I will telegraph," he said.

"As you are going down," she asked in mellifluous tones, "ask the porter the name of that man."

As Robecq closed the door gently, he laughed.

La Marmora's tactics were elemental.



Baron de Robecq had two principles in life which had carried him from poverty to affluence; from obscurity to the utmost distinction to which a man of his kind could attain: "Never mix pleasure with business"; "Nothing was ever done in a hurry that could not have been done better with deliberation."

Madame la Marmora in her eighteen years' professional intercourse with him had been obliged to accept the first of these axioms, though not without a struggle. But to the second, she could never adapt herself.

When he returned to the sitting room upon the accomplishment of his errands, he found her raging again. The carpet was strewn with scarce-smoked cigarettes. She paused in the act of striking a fresh match to turn her glare upon him.

"At last! It takes you then an eternity to ask a question! Did I not tell you I was boring myself? Did you not understand that?"

Ascending, her wrathful cry broke suddenly into hoarseness. The man raised his eyebrows significantly, then came across the room, took the match from her hand, closed the cigarette box and slipped it into his tail pocket.

"Hein!" he said then in his crawling voice, "that was a little warning, was it not? Do that once on the boards, my dear — na! Only go on as you are going, smoke, excite yourself, scream, and you will do it. 'Tis Robecq tells you so."

There was fear in the still furious glance she flung sideways at him. Her lip trembled. She panted and choked, but Robecq had not spent the years of his manhood in traffic with that most delicate of all commodities,

the human voice, and its concomitant erratic humanity, without having learned how to deal with his wares. Even at the eleventh hour he could avert the storm.

"It seems," he remarked tranquilly, "that the man is English."

The heaving shoulder turned upon him became still.

"A toff, my dear friend," said Robecq jocularly. "In the Embassy here. One Lord Desmond Brooke."

"Lord Desmond" — she repeated the name in her softest note. As by a miracle the suffocating tumult within her had subsided.

"Brother to the Marquis of Sturminster," the Jew proceeded with unction, "and son of that tremendous old lady known as 'Martia Marchioness.'"

"It is the porter told you all that?" she queried.

For the first time that day she smiled. Her rather square-cut lips tilted upward, and the full beauty of her face, somewhat hard and brooding in repose, became revealed as by a ray of sunlight.

"No, Fulvia, no, my dear friend, I happened to have met Sturminster more than once." His eye became reminiscent; a chuckle gently shook him. "I had the honour also of bowing to 'Martia Marchioness' once; she didn't bow to me. These cast-iron old London ladies unbend to music, most of them, you know — but she's an exception."

The singer made a gesture as if brushing aside an importunate fly.

"What's that to me? Did you ever meet him?"

"No."

"Robecq!" She put her head on one side and opened

her narrow eyes wide upon him. Her voice was caressing. He smiled back at her with utter good-humour. Such creatures had to be treated like children. A good slap when it was necessary; a sweet or a top to keep them quiet afterward. La Marmora had had her slap, she should have her sweet.

"But I know Darcy at the Embassy," he conceded.

She clapped her hands:

"You're a darling old thing." Then she ran her fingers through her hair reflectively, and sank contentedly back on the cushions of the sofa. "*C'est ça!* You will arrange that."

"A supper party?" he suggested.

She drew her brows together:

"A supper party? Ah, I don't know. I'm not going to have it *à la Bohémienne*. I'm a great artist. I'm as good as any of the fine ladies here. Aye — and better! Shall I not have my daughter with me, too? You did wire for Fifi? A mother with her daughter? . . . Come, what do you mean with your supper parties? Who do you take me for?"

"A *déjeuner*, then? It won't be quite so easy." He rubbed his grizzled beard. "But one can always try. Oh, yes, of course, I wired for Fifi. And you shall drive up in the carriage with the chestnuts, with Miss Fifi beside you — in a blue-winged hat."

Once more mirth gurgled from him.

"Arrange it, then," she said, with dignity.

During their conversation he had been collecting, first with one foot, then with the other, into a neat little pile, the cigarettes scattered on the floor. This he now



ground under his heel, which execution being accomplished he went over to the open grand piano and closed it. Then, with the same deliberation he took possession of the score of the opera Salome, which was lying face downward on the stool.

“It is arranged.” He repeated her words. “We shall have a pleasant social time in Vienna and leave Salome until Fritz returns.”

## II

### “FIFI”

THE headmistress of the English School where Virginia Lovinska was still pursuing her studies at the somewhat unusual age of twenty years and ten months, telegraphed back that the young lady would be dispatched by the next day's express.

Now it says something for Baron de Robecq's good-nature that the matutinal hour of six-thirty found him pent up in the waiting room of the Westbahn, possessing his soul with characteristic patience till the arrival of the train from Basle should liberate him.

On the last occasion when he had seen Virginia, or rather Fifi — for he never thought of her by any other than her child's pet name — she had been still in the hobbledehoy stage of girlhood in spite of her seventeen years. But he trusted to a good memory, coupled with an unusual power of observation, for an easy recognition. Yet, after all, it was the girl herself who hailed him.

“Hullo, Baron!” Her voice rang out clear and gay and loud, to the shocked discomfiture of the little exhausted English teacher, who stood helplessly beside her on the platform.

“Hush, my dear! Every one will hear you!”

“Well, what does it matter — so long as he hears me?”

cried the girl. "He's come to meet us. Hey, Baron! Here I am!"

She never could understand why people should be shocked at behaviour that was simply logical. All her years of prim school life had not succeeded in teaching her the value of a single convention.

The Baron wheeled round; then he took off his hat, and came forward, with a genial smile that changed into a look of intense surprise, succeeded by one of admiration. Both these emotions were so rapidly superseded again by an air of mere cordiality that it would have required very keen eyes to detect them.

Neither Virginia nor Miss Smithson observed anything but a businesslike benevolence.

"Miss Fifi! — My word, how you've grown! — Where's your luggage ticket? The hotel porter is waiting for it. Now you both come right along with me to my little car."

"My dear, you haven't introduced me," fluttered Miss Smithson, who thought the Baron a gentleman of most aristocratic mien.

"Oh — Baron — this is Miss Smithson. She's the second English teacher. Madame Aubert had fits at the bare idea of my coming alone!"

Virginia's ideas of social grace were conspicuous by their absence. But Robecq carried off the situation with what the little governess considered high-bred tact. His bald head shone as he removed his Homburg hat for another bow.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Smithson." And on that he shook hands with, as she told herself, blushing agreeably, quite a pressure.

The little padded landaulette rolled luxuriously through the streets. Robecq from his seat opposite the travellers let his shrewd eye rest in ever larger appreciation on La Marmora's daughter.

As he looked, he became himself unusually and unpleasantly conscious of his forty-five years, of his denuded cranium, of his rounded waistcoat. He passed his hand across his chin and felt the gray bristle in his beard through the suède glove. For perhaps the first time in his existence he waxed purely sentimental. "Divine youth — glorious youth!" he said to himself.

Despite the racking experience of that night's journey which had written itself in a score of grimy lines on the English teacher's sallow countenance, Virginia's youthful vitality emerged triumphant. The disarranged mass of her dark auburn hair seemed to spring from her temples with a life of its own. The short oval face glowed like a ripe fruit, whereon the faint but lovely gold of sunshine itself seemed to overlie the rose and white.

Robecq's stare prolonged itself and drew her notice with a sudden wondering parting of her lips and widening of her eyes. The mouth was square-cut, the eyes were golden hazel — she was a woman, almost. But the soul that looked out of those eyes was that of a child.

The man gave her a paternal smile.

"You don't show as if you had been travelling all night," said he, in a banal tone; adding in his mind, and in the vernacular that came most naturally to him: "You peach, you!"

The girl laughed.

"Not that I would have cared; only, poor Miss Smith-

son could not sleep. So, of course, I couldn't sleep either. She takes a lot of looking after on a journey — don't you, Smithy, dear?"

Robecq's eye twinkled humorously. The teacher had been sent to "look after" the pupil. Yet Madame Aubert had been right: such youth and beauty and innocent self-reliance were not to be sent out into the world alone. He did not know himself in this morning's mood. To sentimentality was now being added an emotion resembling pity. What was to become of this radiant being? What mercy would the Panther have upon anything so helpless and so lovely?

It was with an effort that he brought his urbanity to respond to Miss Smithson's observation.

"I am a wretched traveller," the poor spinster was saying, with that singular pride in infirmity which belongs to her type.

"It is a most trying ordeal," said the Baron.

Miss Smithson thrilled to the sympathy in his voice.

"My dear, who is the gentleman?" she took occasion to whisper to Virginia, as they entered the hotel hall together. "An Austrian nobleman, I suppose."

"I don't know," said the girl indifferently. "He's Mama's business manager."

The little governess was incapable of grasping the situation. Everything surrounding a prima donna was to her enveloped in lurid mystery. That such a one should have an Austrian nobleman for business manager — a nobleman of such wealth, obviously — seemed strange and romantic, and was perhaps wicked. "I will not inquire further," she told herself. "There are things

I do not want to hear about. . . . But, however wrong, how fascinating the nobility can be!"

La Marmora's sallow, ugly French maid was waiting for them in the palm lounge at the foot of the stairs. She was a grim creature, whom Virginia associated with most of the unpleasant memories of her childhood. Hers was the hand that had slapped, shaken; that had brushed so excruciatingly, soaped with such disregard of eyes and mouth.

"You're to come upstairs at once," ordered Elisa.

"Well, I will say good-bye for the moment," said the Baron.

But Virginia, unheeding, was already in the lift. Miss Smithson blushed for such discourtesy.

"I am sure we are very much obliged," she murmured.

He took the cold, knobby hand in its cotton glove, into his warm, soft clasp.

"I'm to go back this evening," she faltered, unable to resist the impulse of expansion. "It is Madame Aubert's particular wish." How many years it was since any man had looked at her with eyes of human kinship! "She said I could sleep in the *coupé-lit* just as well as in my bed."

"Oh, my dear friend!" said the Baron, and clacked his tongue. "I wonder," he added, as the lift swung out of sight, "have they ordered a room for you?"

As he spoke he moved away, and after a quick, masterful colloquy at the Bureau, returned smiling, a waiter at his heels.

"You had better go to bed at once, he'll show you a room. And I've ordered breakfast to be brought to you.



You must want another breakfast — coffee and Brodchen and fresh egg, such as only Vienná can give you. Have it in bed and sleep till dinner. Time enough to see Madame la Marmora when you're rested."

He bowed to her twice in response to the stammered thanks, and with quick, short steps was gone out into the gay street to his car.

For ever after he lived in the inmost shrine of Jane Smithson's heart — "A real nobleman!"

### III

#### ROBECQ

BARON DE ROBECQ, financier, operatic manager of European and American celebrity, had in truth been born in Vienna; but that event had taken place in the Judengasse, and the name bestowed upon him by his parents had been Jokanahan Hirsch. These circumstances had as much passed out of his existence as if they belonged to another incarnation. He acknowledged no memory beyond those subsequent years in New York, when, as John Rehbock, the smart office boy of the firm of Mendoza, Taubman and Maw, Public Entertainment Company, he had begun to mark the leading principles of financial success, in connection with the high commercial potentialities of Art.

He was barely twenty when he made his first *coup*. The firm, as often happens where thousands are juggled with daily, found itself in sudden and urgent need of 50,000 dollars. The office boy, now confidential clerk, begged for an hour's leave of absence, ran at full speed back to his lodgings and then and there proposed a business transaction to a certain elderly Jewess who had shown him distinct favour ever since they had first made acquaintance.

"If you trust me with 50,000," he told her deliberately, "I will double it for you within three months."



She bade him sit down beside her and expound the situation. Her decision had to be immediate and she made it so. But with one condition:

“I will risk it,” she said, “for my husband.”

Neither did he hesitate. In that brief colloquy (he was fond of telling his friends) he had recognized a business mind that matched his own. “What if my first dear wife was twenty-five years older than myself — till the day we separated we were one soul.”

It was thus that John Rehbock was admitted by a single bold transaction into two partnerships at once. He made his own terms with the firm.

One of those fortunate beings of whom it is proverbially said, “everything they touch turns to gold,” he could look back now on every stage of his existence with the satisfactory conviction that it had not only helped him definitely on his determined way to fortune, but had been so happily concatenated with the past that there was no retrogression.

Had not Jokanahan Hirsch chosen America for his adopted land, John Rehbock had not been able so easily to free himself from his first matrimonial alliance, at the ripe moment — for the moment did come when this union of business souls was dissolved by mutual consent. Mrs. Rehbock began to find, with increasing years and infirmities that the atmosphere of speculation and consequent feverish excitement, which was as the breath of her young husband's nostrils, was too trying for her. She could not reproach him with failure, for he had kept his first promise with biblical prodigality — full measure pressed down, running over! Neither, she quite recognized, could she

expect him to share in her longing for rest and retirement. With the same good-humoured placidity which had marked all their marital relations, they decided to part, and repaired for the purpose to that State where the best legal facilities abounded. They divided lives and spoils with mutual respect, esteem and an odd sort of regret.

John Rehbock started life again with a halved fortune — but a free man.

After a lengthy European tour connected with ever wider-reaching managerial schemes he returned to New York in possession of a new name — Jean de Robecq — a well-authenticated Belgian pedigree and religion to match, and a new wife—a Dutch lady of considerable personal attractions, excellent society manners, and an aptitude for spending money as great as had been Mrs. Rehbock's capacity for saving.

To the superficial observer this second matrimonial venture of the rising impresario might have seemed disastrous, for it ended, after a couple of years, in Madame de Robecq's elopement with an Italian tenor, whereupon she was divorced in her turn without the necessity of any pilgrimage to more accommodating regions. But the man found advantages in the affair — advantages which counterbalanced the slight unpleasantness of its abrupt conclusion.

In one unerring swing he had attained social eminence. Madame de Robecq's parties had become famous; for if she had known how to invite and to receive, he had known how to provide such entertainment as royalty itself could scarce achieve and which the most restless

and pleasure-seeking society in the world was quick to appreciate.

Those two years of reckless extravagance and domestic discomfort had been worth the result. When Madame de Robecq opportunely departed, she had served her turn. Jean de Robecq stood where he intended, and was strong enough to stand alone.

From Rehbock to Robecq, with the added elegance of the *particule*, had been as natural a transition as from Hirsch to Rehbock. When the title of Baron came to complete this ingenuous edifice in nomenclature, he was ready to receive the crown, the *tortil de Baron*, without undue elation upon a pate already bald.

No great operatic venture could be undertaken without his coöperation. Already in every artistic circle, however select, in whatever class, his was a name to conjure with. If Leopold of Belgium had not been the first to recognize his services, by this trifling prefix, his own original sovereign, or Germany's potentate, would have certainly done so in a very short time. But the cradle of the ancient family of De Robecq is to be found on Belgic lands. And other European nations could not be jealous as, on gala nights, the cosmopolitan nature of his fame was displayed in a miniature chaplet of decorations, which ranged from the *Légion d'Honneur* to the *Croix de St. Nicholas de Montenegro*.

Much of his rapid and complete success had been no doubt owing to his own fortunate business temperament, coupled with unerring artistic sagacity. As some men can instantly distinguish the false and the real in gems, Robecq's *flair* for the genuine money-maker was such that

it never once misled him. Besides which the man's luck had become proverbial.

It was, for instance, by an accidental supper party at the house of a young Polish spendthrift in Biarritz that he first came across La Marmora's superb personality, and recognized the golden possibilities of her voice.

## IV

### THE COUNTESS LOVINSKA

M. JEAN DE ROBECQ — not yet Baron — but newly released once more from matrimony, had halted at Biarritz, on his way back from Madrid, whither he had gone to verify some wonderful tales anent a new dancer. The dancer failed to strike him in a pecuniary light. In her own atmosphere she passed — to the clink of castanets, to white grins on swarthy faces — but in New York or Petersburg, her little *canaille* gifts would have been petrified.

At the casino at Biarritz, he was hailed by an eager, hectic, handsome youth, who grasped him by both hands, called him *mon cher*, reminded him effusively of happy meetings in New York, and invited him cordially for the same evening. "I have a little villa on the cliff — my *buen retiro*. You shall have an entertainment . . . *je ne vous dis que ça!* You shall meet one," he kissed his fingers extravagantly, "a pearl — a splendour! Wait — come and see. *Je ne vous dis que ça!*"

The impresario, who had been contemplating the young man with his steady, small, urbane eyes, suddenly found a name for the well-remembered face — he never forgot a face.

"Count Lovinski — I'm sure I'm very pleased to meet you again!"



Yes — he knew him now. The Pole had shot, meteor-like, across the horizon of New York society some two years previously. He had been indeed of Robecq's brand-new salon. He had had then already, Robecq recalled, a talent for discovering pearls from rather low surroundings, and setting them with great, if transient splendour. Robecq had no great taste for such jewellery himself; but he felt genially inclined toward his only acquaintance in the gay Basque town, and he benevolently consented to come and inspect.

The little villa was situated high on the *falaise* and commanded a gorgeous view of Atlantic and Pyrenees. It faced the sunset, and the waters were still glowing with the blood-red afterglow, as he ascended the perron.

Count Lovinski's pearl at first appeared to the visitor's eye as very much the usual type of gem to be met in such a *garçonnière*.

She was a fine specimen, he was ready to admit; and paint and dye failed to obliterate real luxuriance of natural beauty. But she had all the tricks of her trade; and the impresario scarcely even found the long looks through half-closed lids, the transparent pettishness, the deliberate smile, amusing to watch; but halfway through the meal *à trois* — here at least the host had kept his word: *je ne vous dis que ça*, was quite appropriate to its ridiculous perfection — a slight incident occurred which gave a new and unexpected interest to the proceedings. A child's sleepy cry rang out from some inner room, and Count Lovinski's Phryne rose precipitately from the table, and with the exclamation, "My Baby . . .!" rushed from the room with great flutter of satin and gauze.

"It is her child," said the Count, explaining, between two sips of wine. "I first saw her with the child, *mon cher*, and she captivated me — such an adorable picture!"

"A widow?" queried Robecq between two bites of his ortolan.

"A widow," said the Count, haughtily, instantly adding with great good fellowship, arching his red eyebrows, and flinging out his emaciated hand, shrugging shoulder-blades: "*Quien sabe!*"

He leant across the small round table, to whisper; his peaked beard wagging against the orchids as he did so: "A mystery. My very dear Robecq, I know nothing of her. Past or present, a sphinx. She has French blood in her, certainly. A French mother? Probably. Some waif from Mont Martre stranded in Australia. Australian on the father's side — such a mixture of wild and decadent blood! A savage doubled with a *chanteuse!*" Then he proceeded, his mad, blue eyes growing wistful: "But the little one is a darling. If I could get rid of the mother, and keep the little one —"

He broke off. Robecq was laughing, *de son rire bonhomme*; and there was a sound of singing in the passage without.

The door was flung open. Claspings to her breast, and rocking as she came a well-grown child of some three years, the mother entered superbly upon them.

"Good Lord, but the creature has movements — she has carriage. I've never seen any one walk like that before, but once a contadina in the Trastevere — and it was music, and poetry and strength and balance, and all the arts in one —" So thought the man who trafficked

in arts; and then his admiration was checked, for the ear superseded the eye.

Count Lovinski's *camarade* was singing a lullaby to her burden; the while, three paces from the door, she halted and stood cradling and rocking; her eyes wandered from face to face challenging.

Her voice rang out in one glorious high note, sustained, drawn out, fading away and then dropping unerringly, like the lark on the field.

Robecq sprang to his feet, and the child turned its tangled golden head to smile sleepily at him.

Jean de Robecq, who had meant to leave the next day for Paris, prolonged his stay at Biarritz.

Count Lovinski had dropped certain hints that night of their little supper. The impresario had seen with his own unerring glance certain unmistakable signs and tokens. There were loud rumours in the Town. The Polish millionaire was near the end of his tether. He had been in difficulties already when he had formed his connection with the beautiful mysterious being whom he introduced to his friends vaguely, as the Countess Fulvia, and thereafter the end was bound to come with vertiginous rapidity.

The man of business, who never did anything in a hurry on principle, determined to bide his time. He had spent but a sunny golden September fortnight of delay when the crash duly came. Here was his moment. He stepped in, in his genial way, to offer the lady a more promising, and not less gratifying mode of subsistence.

As she had already shown him, "Countess" Fulvia



had found motherhood an effective pose. This day she was *la mère explorée*, clasping her sturdy child to her breast, arraigning heaven with eyes alternately tear-laden and menacing. She ran through the complete series of histrionic attitudes for the impresario's benefit; all of which he surveyed with the eye of a connoisseur; and sensibilities utterly untouched.

He was quite willing, however, to fall in with her emotion in furtherance of his own scheme, and spent some time in representing to her how richly this maternal passion would be rewarded for the hard work and other sacrifices the suggested career would entail. But, in a very few minutes, he had discovered that the fair one's instincts were as commercial as his own; only on different lines.

It was his golden rule, as has been said, never to mix pleasure and business. Her single and simple maxim was much the reverse. There ensued an explanation in which the impresario very clearly expounded his invariable method with regard to the wares he dealt in — stocks and shares to him and rigidly nothing more.

Upon this exposition the lady's face had first become distorted with fury; but, upon a second thought, she had angelically smiled, promising herself to put this pragmatic resolve to the test, and thereupon accepting the proposed contract with alacrity.

The young Polish nobleman's gratitude to his friend for delivering him of his temporarily adored Fulvia was profound; but he also had his doubts touching the future of the new relations. And he thought it incumbent upon him to drop a word in season:

“Beware of her, *cher ami*. Never hope to tame her.

Believe one who knows. It is a panther. Let her but get at your throat, she will not release you till she has sucked to the last drop of your blood."

Robecq, in his turn, had quite a pleasant smile, as he walked away from the little villa, pondering on his bargain — a panther . . . ! The simile struck him as apt. The most salient attribute of the lady was her feline grace, with the sense of a crouching power; of caprice and passion; of uncertain, incomprehensible motives behind all the sleek languor. Aye — she could spring at a man's throat — at a man's heart. These Slavs had a poetic imagery. . . . And drain his blood — his Polish blood, no doubt. No doubt, but not Jean de Robecq's — not Jokanahan Hirsch's. He smiled again.

After vainly trying to induce Fulvia to cede him the little Fifi, Count Lovinski, in gallant Polish fashion, and true to his type, committed suicide that night.

## V

### THE TRAINING OF A VOICE

IT WAS to the celebrated Madame Visconti, in Paris, that Robecq confided his new investment — Fulvia's voice. But at first it seemed as if, for once, his perspicacity had failed him. The great trainer, after several months' serious work, doubted if she could ever make a prima donna of its owner.

"My dear Robecq," she cried, candidly, to him one day, "it's a block, my friend! — Oh, I'm not talking of the woman," as he raised his eyebrows — "I'm talking of the singer. The voice is there, but about as much use to her, to me, and to you, as a stone! Marble, marble! I can polish it. Oh, I can polish it! But squeeze a drop of divine unction from it? Never! — Never will she bring tears to any one's eyes. I can put her in a rage, a wild-beast rage, easy enough. Then she'll scream. Oh, she'll scream! — Where did you pick that up? from what gutter, *hein?*"

"From a most artistic little villa, at Biarritz," said Robecq, demurely.

"I thought so," said Madame Visconti. "Well, put her back in a villa. That's all she's fit for. — Oh, I know, I know." With a pair of very small brown hands she waved away his protest. "She sang a lullaby after supper and you thought, after supper! that you had found

the voice of the century. You needn't repeat the story all over again. Oh, she's got a voice, I grant you! Yes, it's as pure as crystal, as ringing as a bell. Oh, yes, it's got a tremendous range. She's an Australian born—it says everything. You can gather such voices like berries from the hedgerows . . . in Australia. . . It's the soil, or the air, or what not. They drop on you like the music of caged larks from the attics of Melbourne slums. But make a singer of her! . . . Frankly, Robecq, she and I will do no good."

"Oh, my dear friend!" said Robecq, and pleaded for further probation.

He was not going to be beaten so soon or so easily. He was not prepared to acknowledge a mistake. He remained some time in Paris; paid constant visits to the little apartment where Fulvia was lodged, in unwonted simplicity and an almost continuous state of sulks. Yet the woman had had awakened in her a new and better emotion than that which the most artistic villa could evoke. She had become ambitious. She wanted to succeed, and by her own talent. At Madame Visconti's she had heard wondrous stories of the power and opulence, the brilliant social position of two or three pupils of hers, now world-renowned *prime donne*. She had seen portraits of Madame Adelaide, Emma Immer, and La Norma; and had pulled a lip of disdain upon their corporeal shortcomings. Madame Visconti, marking her in the mocking contemplation of a signed photograph and reading her thoughts, had told her pretty brutally that no one minded the bird's shape, so it could sing.

"But when you've taught me," cried Fulvia, arching her beautiful throat at the mirror —

"You'll do for — oratorio, my dear, perhaps," said the teacher with a twinkle in her shrewd eye that had galled Fulvia to the quick.

Her humour was infamous, therefore, when Robecq found her; but she had set her teeth. She was working. She was trying her best. Perhaps it was that she was trying too hard; for, each time she sang to him, he told himself it was more "deplorable."

One day, however, his hopes revived with a spring — he had treated her to a choice *déjeûner* at Doyen's, and presented her, on the way home, with a sable stole that had taken her fancy at Révillon Frères. This was all duly platonic, all in the way of business. He had told himself that until she was in a better mood they would do nothing with her. "She must," he said sagely, "have her *détente des nerfs*." The panther would have to be stroked and set a-purring — and then, perhaps, the voice would have some chance. He accompanied her back to the flat he had taken for her in the Rue Lord Byron, pleased, in his good-natured way, with her new content.

The first thing she did was to dash into her bedroom to survey the effect of her furs in her *armoire-à-glace*. Apparently the reflection was gratifying; for she began to hum a song which presently waxed louder and louder in her joy, till even the little sitting room rang.

Robecq, who was lounging on the red-plush sofa, slowly reared himself and sat up, listening intently.

She broke off abruptly on a high note, and fell again to humming in a muffled way.



He rose, bounced in upon her without ceremony, and found her, a hatpin in her mouth, engaged in the act of removing her hat to try the effect of the fur on her hair. She spat the pin from her lips, and it clattered on the parquet.

"Oh, Robecq," she cried, "if I had a toque to match!"

"Who taught you to sing that song?" he demanded disregarding. His voice was thick and agitated. "You never learnt that with Visconti. Who taught you that?" he repeated, almost fiercely.

"What's the matter with you? Did you like it?" she smiled. "It was a fiddler called Meyer, in Melbourne, if you want to know." Suddenly her eyes widened upon him. "What do you want to know for?" she asked.

"Because it is the same fellow, I'll swear, that taught you the lullaby, my dear. The lullaby that I never could get you to sing again as you did that night at Biarritz," said the impresario slowly. "If we could find this man, he would be worth his weight in gold, to you and to me. . . . That's why I want to know, my dear."

Her eyes filled with angry terror. She stooped to pick up her hatpin and turned a scarlet face upon him.

"What are you doing in my room? — Out of it you go."

"But what about a toque? You tell me a little more about that Melbourne man, my dear friend, and then we'll go and choose a toque." He gauged her with a keen glance. Her mouth was settling into lines of sullen obstinacy — "And a muff," he went on.

She frowned, but there was a wavering in her eye;

she had been starved of finery so long. All at once she had a flashing smile:

"But of course, you silly old Robecq, what is there to make a mystery about? Have I not told you everything about my life already? You're rather a bore." She yawned elaborately. "But there was a dream of a muff, to go with that stole, you know."

"Well, come and sit on the sofa, in the salon," he said patiently. Personally he preferred not to be in her bedroom. "You will tell me all you can remember about this Meyer. He was a fiddler, you say? But he taught you to sing . . . that song and the lullaby. Now for the lies," he said to himself, and folded his fat hands patiently between his knees.

But Robecq had the determination and the scent of the sleuth-hound. He had sunk a great deal of money already in Fulvia. He was now preparing to sink more. One of the secrets of the builders of great fortunes is perseverance. He had an intimate conviction that his investment could yet be made to pay. And, like a flash of lightning, that snatch of song had shown him the only way.

Nothing large in life is ever accomplished without imagination, even in so practical a sphere as that of mere money-making.

"I shall find that man," the financier was saying to himself, "if he be in the land of the living. — My luck's not going under, here. He is alive. I shall find him. If he could teach her such phrasing once he can teach her again. Visconti, my dear friend, you're a clever woman, but you're not infallible. You have been

all these months laboriously laying foundations on sand. Some one has built before you — aye, built on that rock, that block, that marble. Some one else has known how to make the woman sing — anomaly of stone and panther as she is.”

Meanwhile “the lies” were proceeding. Some were, indeed, already familiar to Robecq. He had heard about the rich home in Australia, the millionaire husband who had married the beautiful heiress whilst still almost in her childhood; the financial crisis and the suicide of this individual a few weeks after the birth of little Virginia, throwing the lovely young widow, helpless and penniless upon a cruel world. The details varied slightly on each occasion. Fulvia was not a woman of much imagination, and her romancing was on the whole clumsy. Her own family had had necessarily to be swept away, as an after-thought. She had once suggested yellow fever; but on finding that it was not an Australian complaint, fell back on shipwreck in the Pacific as a wholesale method of destruction.

One of her infirmities as a story-teller, was her inability to remember the names originally bestowed upon the actors in this dramatic past. Now her patronymic would be Mordaunt, now Delaval.

The individual who had committed suicide had also a variegated nomenclature; but as she had from the beginning determined to be known in Paris as Countess Fulvia Lovinska — widow of the owner of that little Biarritz villa — she did not find herself personally inconvenienced by these discrepancies. Robecq had acquiesced with tolerance, and not without amusement, in this post-



mortem adoption. "She'll stick to that, that's one comfort."

Now, as he sat listening, he had however a sharp attention for each fresh mis-statement; waiting for the moment to put the question which would entrap her into something approaching the truth.

And, finally, he obtained one grain of fact in the middle of all the chaff. A meagre harvest, it would seem, yet sufficient for one who could, where business was concerned, unite so much doggedness with such abnormal penetration. After learning some poignant details of the demise of Count Lovinski's predecessor, he was informed that the widow had been obliged to make use of her voice to support herself and her babe. He saw his opportunity and planted his inquiry in his slow, amiable voice:

"So it was then, dear friend, that Mr. Meyer taught you?" Her narrow eye had a sudden wary contraction of the pupils.

"Yes, it was then," she admitted, defiantly. "He was struck by my voice. He was a celebrated singing master . . . in Melbourne," she added dreamily.

"I thought you mentioned that he was a fiddler," pursued Robecq, drawing out his cigar case, to emphasize the carelessness of the remark.

"He was," she snapped. "He began as a fiddler, in the Opera —" she broke off abruptly; and the furtive frightened gleam came back to her glance, and revealed a slip of the tongue.

That was the grain. He lit his cigar and puffed at it, with all the appearance of his usual satisfaction. She

had fallen into silence. But by the fluttering dilation of her nostrils, the restless beating of one foot, the changing colour on her cheek, he judged that she was on the verge of one of those outbreaks which as a rule were the signal for his flight, but which, to-day, he welcomed as a likely source of further self-betrayal.

“It was Mr. Meyer who taught you also that song, which you sang so divinely, the first night we ever met, dear friend?”

“And if it were? — What is it to you, Robecq? What maggot have you got into your head about this man? — He’s dead, I tell you. He’s dead!”

Suddenly she screamed. She sprang to her feet and stood, threatening his placid sitting presence like an embodiment of storm. “You don’t believe me? Go and see for yourself in the churchyard of Melbourne. Have I not left wreaths on his grave? Did I not pay for the tombstone myself? ‘Sacred to the memory of Friedrich Meyer.’ Poor old Fritz!” She broke into a passion of sobs.

## VI

### FRIEDRICH MEYER

WHEN Jean de Robecq had reached a safe distance down the Champs-Élysées, he sat him down on a bench and proceeded to make the following notes in his pocket-book: "F. M. Violin in the Melbourne Orchestra, King's Theatre. Some date subsequent to 1892 when Brahms's *Veilchen* was first published." He sat awhile, pondering.

This gave him comparatively short limits for his investigation. Friedrich Meyer was alive as far as Fulvia knew and Fulvia, for reasons of her own, was in abject terror of ever meeting him again. On this point his recent interview had sufficed to convince him.

"The first of the lot, no doubt," he commented cynically. "He beat her, perhaps."

Upon this reflection, he rose and pursued his way to the Rue Matignon Post Office, where he indited a lengthy cable to the conductor of the Melbourne Orchestra.

Révillon Frères, the noted furriers, received his next visit — and were gratified by the order to submit a selection of toques and muffs "to the Comtesse Lovinska"; her choice made, the account to be sent to M. de Robecq for immediate acquittal.

When he reëntered the Hotel du Rhin and let himself sink into the most comfortable chair in the lounge, with

the soothing Green Chartreuse by his side, he calculated the expenses of the day with full consciousness of their heavy character, yet an agreeable conviction that they were promotion money wisely laid out.

The next morning he received the expected cable reply: Friedrich Meyer had not been in the Melbourne Orchestra, to the knowledge of its present chief, who was of recent appointment. But Robecq's name was already a power, and investigation was promised.

These investigations, however, at the end of a week, only disclosed through a second cable message that one Meyer who had been first violin, had left the town some five years previously. But Robecq had the end of the thread in his fat fingers; and patiently, relentlessly, he followed it up. The conductor of the Melbourne Orchestra supplemented his second cable by a letter.

Robecq was at Homburg when it reached him.

Anxious as his informant had been to please the great impresario, the circumstances had rendered all information concerning Meyer very difficult to obtain. There had been some five years previous great dispute between the Opera Syndicate and the then orchestral chief, which had led to the latter's resignation and the practical breaking up of the whole band. At the time of writing only First Flute, a Frenchman, remained of the old musical company. He knew very little of First Violin, his whilom comrade, beyond the fact that Meyer was then about forty, and an able artist, and that he had once heard him say he would stick to his conductor. The latter, one Manuel Zorilla, had left Melbourne for Europe.

Robecq had gone out with his morning letters. It

was his habit to read them under the trees between his first and second glass of water. It took him scarce thirty-six paces to make up his mind.

Meyer was forty and a first violin. He was not likely to be found in another breadwinning capacity at forty-five. Wherever he was, his work was in an orchestra. Meyer was a German and must have the Teutonic tenacity of disposition. He had announced his intention of sticking to his chief. If this Manuel Zorilla was anywhere still waving the bâton, Meyer in all probability was sitting under it of nights.

Robecq drank glass number two with his usual deliberation and sauntered to the Post Office, whence he sent a telegram to a well-known Paris firm of private investigators, requesting them to find the whereabouts of Manuel Zorilla, *chef d'orchestre* whilom of Melbourne.

Ten days later, Meyer and Robecq stood face to face, in London. Zorilla, alas for deceived ambitions! was conducting the jingle of one of London's half-dozen musical comedies, and Meyer was his first violin.

In after days Robecq was often wont to say that, from the first moment, he had liked "old Fritz." "Moreover, I recognized, sir, one of the most remarkable beings that I had ever met," he would say, emphasizing certain syllables after his acquired transatlantic fashion. "A genius, my dear friend, not an executant so much, but . . . Have you noticed old Fritz's eye? Sir, it's the eye of the born trainer. . . ."

The pity of it was, of course, that, being sought out in this manner by the most famous musical agent of the



day, the struggling artist had naturally built some hope of personal advancement and recognition which had to be instantly shattered. Robecq had averted his glance while he had given the musician clearly to understand that his proposal to him was in no way connected with his present craft; and Meyer had grown from red to white very rapidly under the blow. This, Robecq ascertained when on his own next remark he looked curiously back at him.

"I believe," he said, "that once you gave singing lessons? Did you not, Mr. Meyer? At least, it is with reference to a whilom pupil of yours that I have requested this interview. A young lady called Fulvia."

"If you please," said Mr. Meyer, in his simple German way, "I have never known any young lady called Fulvia. I have never been a singing master. There is some mistake. I have the honour to salute you."

And he dived for his shabby hat.

A moment Robecq saw his edifice crumble before the mental eye. Was it all erected on Fulvia's lies? He called desperately after the solid retreating back: "Wait a minute, wait a minute! It was in Melbourne. Did you ever teach anybody to sing: "*Herz, mein Herz?*" He hummed in his *voix de tête*.

The great figure stopped suddenly, without turning round.

"Or," cried Robecq, marking his advantage, "this Wiegenlied: '*Schlaf, Kindchen*'. . . ."

Very slowly the violinist turned and came back. His countenance had grown darkly red again. He did not speak till he was quite close.

"There was in Melbourne a poor child . . ." he

began huskily; and then broke off as if his trembling lips could be trusted no further.

Robecq, in his secret triumph, spoke volubly for a minute or two, falling unconsciously into the language of his hearer.

“This poor child, *lieber freund*, is now a very charming woman. The widow, I believe, of a Polish Count. She is the Countess Fulvia Lovinska. She wants to study music professionally. She's got a divine voice, as you know, *bester Herr Meyer*. But . . . well now, the matter is just this: Madame Visconti, you've heard of course of the great teacher? Well, she has been trying to train her. She can make nothing of her, *nix — gar nix*. But you, Mr. Meyer, you taught her, you somehow managed to teach her. I want you to do it again, for I believe in her career.”

While he was speaking, his acute mind was working at express speed. “Forty-five? Nonsense, the man looked sixty! His great bush of hair was already white. It was impossible to associate any thought of love between this almost venerable, this — despite his shabby garb, dignified — being, and ‘*cette superbe canaille, la Fulvia!*’ — thus the impresario classed her. Her lover? The first of the lot? . . . One never could tell. Here, so far as he could judge, was an honest Teuton, with the stern principles and morality of his race. No Lothario, certainly, in the past any more than in the present — Robecq would be shot for that! The very phrase “A poor child . . .” wrung as it was from an undoubted anguish, revealed pity, not remorse. But if not lover, what then? Father, perhaps —

For a moment he juggled with the thought that here was Fulvia's father in the flesh. But, on reflection, the absence of any trace of German accent or idiom in her speech, or the faintest shadow of German type in her appearance, much less any resemblance to the strong personality before him, made him dismiss the conjecture.

But if not lover or father — what?

An odd thought struck the Jew. He measured the burly figure of the musician doubtfully. That would be an inconvenient complication — so inconvenient, indeed, that he instantly drove the possibility of it from his mind. Why seek to probe? Here was a case where the less he knew, the freer he would be to act. He would know nothing.

"She is a widow, then," said the musician suddenly. He spoke still in his painstaking English, and with a quietness which made the listener draw a breath of relief. He was leaning with his great flexible hand on the table, on the other side of which sat Robecq with his inevitable cigar. And the table shook with the pressure — but otherwise there was no sign of emotion!

"Yes," drawled Robecq, not without some sense of the humour of his tale, though it was marred for him by the fact that his companion obviously could not enjoy it too, "she has been very unfortunate. She has been widowed at least once before. Her first husband committed suicide, she tells me — and so oddly enough did Count Lovinski."

"So!" said the German. He seemed all at once to become aware of the shaking table; and, removing his



hands, he let himself fall into a chair. "Is she now . . . alone?" he asked, slowly and heavily.

"If you mean, without a husband, yes, for the moment," assented Robecq. "She and her little girl——" he paused suddenly and looked in alarm at Meyer. It was almost as if the latter had called out. But there had been neither sound nor movement from the listener; and Robecq sat a moment or two staring as if he found it difficult to take up the thread of his discourse again.

It was the violinist who brought him back to the subject.

"If you will kindly explain your desire with me," he requested in his formal English.

Robecq laid his cigar on the table and made his desires clear, again launching forth in Viennese German of the most fluent and persuasive description. He begged his best Mr. Meyer to listen patiently and not regard him as a lunatic. As a matter of fact he wanted him to undertake the musical education of the Countess Fulvia Lovinska — he could not help rolling out this title with a twinkle that verged on the wink, but he might as well have winked at a granite rock as at the massive, set countenance bent to listen. He waited for the protest to his preposterous scheme. But as none came, he glibly proceeded to develop it.

"I want you to give up your post here. I want you to train this young lady for the Operatic Stage — under my guidance. It shall be made worth your while. I feel convinced that you alone can do what I require and that there will be a future for yourself in the business not less honourable and certainly more lucrative than anything

your present employment is likely to afford you — if you succeed. If you don't succeed I pledge myself to find you another post ——”

Meyer lifted his hand. It was a slight gesture, but sufficient to make the flow of words stop abruptly.

“That will not be the question. I must think,” said the German.

He bent his great head. Robecq leaned back in his chair and relit his Havana. He was satisfied with the march of negotiations. The violinist had made no demur, not even a modest disclaimer of his alleged capacity and power. It seemed to be merely a matter of consent. Robecq was convinced by the man's very air of absorbing reflection that the consent would come.

It was to come, but after a stipulation which, shrewd as he was, the impresario had not anticipated.

Mr. Meyer rose.

“I must see her first,” he said in a tone of finality. “Then I will let you know.”

Momentary consternation overwhelmed Robecq.

“What would be the good of that?” he asked, testily. “She has neither the power, nor the intelligence, to make terms with you. Her voice is mine. I have paid good money down for it already, and she's only got to do what I tell her.”

Meyer waited patiently till the protest was concluded — in moments of emotion Robecq's drawl became accentuated — then he repeated:

“I must see her first. If you will kindly give me the address.”

The sitting man flashed up an acute glance at the stand-

ing man; puffed out two fierce volumes of smoke, and without more ado produced his pocketbook and wrote Fulvia's address on his own card, with the added memorandum, "Claridge's Hotel, four o'clock, Friday, 10th." It was then Tuesday, the 7th.

"It gives you ample time," he remarked deliberately, as the musician read with his air of grave absorption. The latter nodded; put the card into a rubbed pocketbook of his own, bowed and took his departure — all without a word.

Robecq looked after him exultantly. A sense of exhilaration foreign to his balanced nature had taken possession of him.

"I have found my man," he announced aloud to the Hotel sitting room. The exclamation represented a more comprehensive content in the discovery than the mere running down of his quarry.

At four o'clock on Friday, the tenth, Meyer returned exact to the rendezvous. As he entered the room, Robecq watched him anxiously; it struck him that the musician looked even older, grayer in the face, that his massive height was even more bowed.

"Has the Panther mauled him too much?" he asked himself. What had happened at that interview in Paris the impresario was never to know. But, even as his glance met that of Friedrich Meyer, he received assurance of one fact at least — and his disquieting thoughts took flight: these were the eyes of the tamer.

Meyer disregarded the outstretched hand, the smile of genial welcome, which were here offered to him.

"I will undertake what you ask," he said without any preamble. "But I have conditions."

"My dear friend . . .!" gushed the other, ready with his assurance; "my dear friend, sit down. That will be no difficulty between us."

"I will stand, thank you. A few words will suffice."

Then the few words were spoken. Meyer demanded complete personal independence; he preferred a solitary life. He would never consent to share roof or board with either employer or pupil. He next fixed his own salary. It was what he received in the orchestra.

Robecq checked the disclaimer that rose instinctively and generously to his lips. His inquisitive eye pondered upon the strange being, but his acumen told him he must take the man on his own terms or not at all.

The last condition was as simple and as surprising as the rest: there was to be no contract on one side or the other.

So it came to pass that Madame Visconti's prophecy proved false; and that in due course, Fulvia was revealed to the world a great singer.

It was Robecq who devised a stage name for her, with a malicious remembrance of the voice-trainer's obloquy — "a block, a stone — marble, marble!" Before the laurel wreaths of Fulvia la Marmora, the doubtful coronet of Comtesse Lovinska faded into the background.

## VII

### THE DAUGHTER OF A STAR

VIRGINIA could just remember the Biarritz Villa and its happy days of luxury and petting.

She believed herself to be the daughter of the unfortunate Count, whose name she bore with pride, and whose image she cherished sentimentally. The subsequent interregnum in Paris was chiefly associated with memories of extreme discomfort, broken by a few delirious interludes of maternal adoration and spoiling. It was then Elisa had first appeared upon the scene. Instead of being made much of and brought forward on every possible occasion, instead of being attired like a baby princess and addressed as *mignonne*, little Fifi seemed nearly always to be in everybody's way, only noticed to be scolded and slapped. The neglected child used to be very cold sometimes, hungry even; all her pretty clothes had gone the way of the sunny nursery, of the carriage, of the kind "papa" and the big dog.

Then there came another great change. Mama grew rich and happy again; and Elisa shook and abused her no longer, for there was one who had found her in the act, who had thereupon roared like a lion, and had, as Elisa herself averred, all but flung her out of the third-floor window.

Fritz — old Fritz — had come into the child's life; and from that moment, as far as it was possible for the daugh-



ter of a prima donna whose fame was ever rising, little Fifi, whose official name was still Virginia Lovinska, led the well-regulated existence of any ordinary, respectable, middle-class child. She forgot equally the taste of champagne and the sting of a blow; had bread and milk for supper, went daily to "the good sisters" to be taught things that bored her exceedingly.

It was when she was eleven that her mama went away for her first great American engagement; and then also it was that Fifi made acquaintance with her first boarding school. She was to grow very familiar with such establishments as years went on. For, with an irregular interval of holidays, her girlhood was passed at various pensionnats. She was a year at Versailles, under the charge of two Church of England ladies; three years at a very dowdy little parsonage in Germany, guarded and drilled by the Frau Pastorin. It was after a memorable summer visit to her mother at Lausanne that Fritz had himself brought her to Madame Aubert's select Seminary in Geneva, which was conducted on mitigated Calvinistic principles. Past seventeen then, she had been kept there for over three years, though older than any girl in the school. During this time she had not seen her mother at all. Fritz it was, who had taken her away for the holidays, and though she was fond of the old man, these holidays had seemed scarcely less dull than school itself; and Fritz's constant little homilies nearly as unendurable as Madame Aubert's lectures. She hated the state of tutelage with a hatred that grew more rebellious hour by hour. When the summons came, it was like the opening of prison gates.

“Don't you think for an instant,” said the girl to Miss Smithson, as the train steamed out of the station in Geneva, “that I shall ever come back to this horrible place — I'd run away rather. I am sure I don't know why I never did!”

“Oh, my dear ——” said Miss Smithson.

Virginia sat reflecting. Fritz was at Carlsbad, ill; he wrote a regular weekly letter to her, in German; he was very anxious that she should keep up her German — these letters invariably began *Mein liebes Kind*, “my dear child,” and ended with *Grüss vom alten Fritz*, “greetings from old Fritz.” They were very simple documents with brief chronicles of La Marmora's and his own doings, and always a little advice about herself. The girl had accepted him into her life as unquestioningly as she had accepted her mother's fame, and the Baron's control of their existence. But to-day she asked herself by what right old Fritz had assumed this tutorship of herself. He was at Carlsbad, for once out of the way, and her mother from Vienna had bidden her to her side. This she told herself was no coincidence. She had always had a singular idea that it was Fritz's fault that the beautiful, wonderful being, who had, on occasion, such treasures of maternal love for her, should ever have consented to so long and terrible a separation. Fritz had ridiculous notions that theatres and theatrical society were not good for little girls — and Fritz would continue to treat her as a little girl, in spite of all her protestations. Twice she had seen her mother weep passionately at parting.

In most such young hearts the memory of a mother's

kisses, of a mother's tears, is sufficient to sweep away any recollection of a mother's ill-treatment. Parents talk very sagely of making allowances for their children; one may wonder if they realize what constant allowance children have to make for them; how generously, how completely, it is made in most cases. Never more generously or completely than as by such a nature as Virginia's, to which rancour was unknown. It was with unmitigated happiness, therefore, that she prepared to meet her mother — with a sanguine confidence in the maternal affection, and a buoyant determination that now was her moment in Fritz's absence to insure herself against further separation.

If Fritz, by the mere virtue of his Repetitor's office, could make himself so indispensable to her mother, that he could impose his old-fashioned notions upon her, could not she, the only child, make herself indispensable, too? — more indispensable? She would be everything, daughter, friend, slave, she would wind herself into the mother-heart, that they should never be torn apart again.

As she ran down the hotel corridor, leaving Elisa far behind, the girl's whole being was possessed by the single sense of filial love.

“Is it my child?” cried the well-remembered voice from the scented depths of a dim room.

Virginia had no reply but tears as she flung herself on the bed. When she found that her mother wept too, as she clasped her, the girl could have died in an ecstasy of tenderness, gratitude and joy.

“Pull the blinds, Elisa,” ordered the singer after the long embrace had exhausted itself, “that I may see my child!”



It was when the order was obeyed that the first little cloud began to gather on Virginia's radiant horizon.

"Good heavens!" cried La Marmora. "How long are you, in the name of heaven? Stand up! *Au nom du ciel*, Elisa, it is a grenadier — an Amazon!"

How was it possible that she had allowed herself to grow like that? Virginia's anxious conscience demanded. She stood blushing and guilty; the tears of joy still standing on her cheek. But the narrow green eyes that surveyed her, if not approving, were not unkind. Good-humour still held the Panther. A laugh shook the lovely lazy being in the bed.

"Madame Aubert takes her ideas of fashion from Noah's Ark! Elisa ——" she broke into her fluent Boulevard French — "is it possible for a human being to be fagotted like that? She really isn't so bad, poor child!" Virginia began to hope again. "We can dress her, we can advantage her — if only she were not such a maypole."

For two days the Marmora devoted herself with energy and enthusiasm to the clothing of the pole in question. Virginia was taken to tailor, dressmaker, milliner, and, in each case, the long consultation that ensued was preceded by the formula:

"I want something young, young, young, you understand. My daughter has the misfortune to be too tall — altogether too tall for her age. I want something — something *noch ganz Backfisch* for a young girl not yet out in society."

Virginia, standing ashamed of her inches and her school clothes, ashamed too, that her mother should forget, or

pretend to forget, that she was already past twenty, the age of womanhood, would crimson and hang her head — looking the awkward *Backfisch* to the life.

Madame la Marmora was exceedingly particular about the carrying out of her own ideas; and these consultations occupied a great deal of time and thought; but the result in the end was extraordinarily convincing. Virginia, her hair parted and tied in a Cadogan plait, with artfully cut garments, the simple lines of which gave value to the slimness, but concealed the delicate ripeness of her youth, with shapely feet exposed in the smartest of buckle shoes; with her own unconquerable blushes and smiles, timidity and boldness, appeared what she was meant to do: an overgrown, adorable child. Madame la Marmora's maternal sentiments thereupon knew once again so warm a recrudescence that her daughter could not commit the disloyalty of a thought of criticism.

## VIII

### DESMOND BROOKE

EXCEPT for one brief spell of emancipation, some three years ago at Lausanne, Virginia Lovinska had known no taste of social life since her remote childhood. Singular memories awoke within her, as she followed her mother into the restaurant on the day of the Baron's *déjeûner*. The very atmosphere of the place, the smell of the cigars, food and flowers, of wine and coffee, recalled scenes of those early Paris days before Fritz, the Herr Repetitor, had entered upon her life with his stern solicitude. (Virginia never voluntarily admitted an unkind thought, but she could not feel sorry for the gout that kept Fritz a prisoner away from them.)

Yet, reminiscent of those wilder pre-Fritzian times as this morning's experience seemed, the girl was conscious of a difference; not only in her mother, but in her mother's guests; even in the Baron's manners. She realized that she had become the daughter of a personage; that this exquisitely attired, rather languid and low-voiced being, would not to-day tear off her hat and thrust the flowers from the table decoration into her hair; that she would not sing the menu card in a high recitative to an admiring, applauding circle; that neither of the two grand English gentlemen would call her

“adorable,” or “goddess,” would clink glasses with her or hold her hands across the table; that Robecq — yet so much the same Robecq as ever — would not puff cigar smoke into their faces or take the almonds from her mother’s very fingers as roughly as if she were a disobedient child.

To-day all was, indeed, very different. All was decorous to dulness; hardly a word spoken above its fellow, hardly even a laugh. Yet there was something in the air of the place that seemed to get intoxicatingly into Fifi’s blood. Perhaps it was the air of Vienna itself; the sunshine, the spring flowers. She was not given to analysis, but she knew herself singularly happy that morning. During the whole of the Baron’s entertainment, the only approach to excitement was provided by herself; she was awkward and terribly the schoolgirl.

The Baron sat on one side of her; on the other, Mr. Darcy — one of the grand gentlemen; the second sat opposite to her, next her mother. In spite of his enviable post, the girl thought him languid almost to discourtesy. At first, indeed, she was not disposed to think him worth her notice. She saw gray streaks in the wave of crisp black hair that dominated his forehead; and in the insouciance of her youth, she dubbed him old. He looked so tired, too, and so white; and when her mother addressed him, it seemed such an effort for him to answer that it exasperated her girlish vigour.

But presently she realized that each time she raised her eyes it was to find his glance upon her; not with the caressing kindness with which the Baron’s gaze so often met hers, or with the bold curiosity which yonder smart

officers had displayed when she passed them just now in her mother's wake. These eyes of Lord Desmond had a deep, thoughtful searching in them; and they were wonderfully, unexpectedly blue between very black lashes.

Virginia began to crumble her bread.

Mr. Darcy asked her a question, the kind of question which a budding diplomat who finds himself relegated to a schoolgirl would condescend to put, merely in order not to partake of his meal in utter silence.

"Do you know Vienna well?"

Virginia said she did. And then she said she didn't. Then she shook her head and blushed and laughed at her own stupidity; and caught the deep look fixed upon her from across the table, and stretching out her hand in vague confusion for her glass, knocked it over. It was quite full — and she did not like wine, and was too timid to ask for water. The contents ran across the table.

She glanced in terror at her mother and blushed to agony. It was then Lord Desmond bent over and spoke to her for the first time.

"A libation to the gods — for luck!" he said and smiled — also for the first time. The smile lit up his pale face with an indescribable pleasantness. Fifi, who had felt miserable under a single dagger-glance of her mother's, had a sudden sense of comfort and support, which all the Baron's purring assurances failed to produce. La Marmora was now smiling, too.

"*Ne te désoles pas, ma Fifi,*" she said tenderly, in the language that came so easy to her. "As Lord Des-



mond says, it is luck." She turned to the pale man. "One must make allowances for a schoolgirl."

When she had swallowed her coffee, Madame la Marmora declared that she had a thousand engagements and must depart with her *petite*.

"We promised the Gräfin, did we not, darling?"

Fifi stared. She had heard of no Gräfin. But Robecq created a useful diversion by pleading unctuously for more of the ladies' company.

La Marmora had quite the right tone of distinguished amiability as she refused. She was enjoying her rôle of grande dame.

"But it is not good-bye! — au revoir, I hope," she went on suavely, as she laid her hand in Lord Desmond's. She turned to Robecq while her hand lingered in the Englishman's loose clasp. "Perhaps," she said condescendingly, "you will bring your friends to dine with me one night, before we leave."

Mr. Darcy, much injured that he had received so little attention from the handsome singer, forgot his manners in an abrupt disclaimer. He was very sorry, he was engaged every evening far ahead.

"Thanks," Lord Desmond said, slowly, in his turn. "Yes, I should like to come."

There was a lightning triumph under La Marmora's heavy lid. But she maintained her dignity, dropped the chill fingers with a little friendly pressure, and with the true aristocratic indifference of tone ordered the impresario to "arrange that, my good Baron — Thursday or Friday, to Lord Desmond's choice."

Fifi's heart had a strange flutter as they moved to the door; as Lord Desmond had accepted, again he had looked at her.

"I say, Brooke," said Mr. Darcy, turning a sulky pink face upon his companion after they had passed the Kartner Strasse some time in silence. "You're bowled over pretty quick, aren't you? I think I'd rather see her from a box, myself."

"Oh, really?" commented the Secretary.

"As for me, of course," grumbled the attaché, full of his recently acquired local *savoir-faire*, "I only came to-day to oblige old Robecq, who isn't a bad sort, but — once is enough, thank you. I don't want to be mixed up with that kind of people. It is all very fine in London. But in Vienna, my dear fellow ——!"

"Oh, damn Vienna," said Desmond Brooke unexpectedly, but without an inflection in his weary voice. "Don't I know Vienna, oh, Lord, don't I know it, all these years!"



## IX

### SIC VOS NON VOBIS

ALTHOUGH no man is a hero to his valet, it is quite possible for a woman to be heroine to her maid. To Elisa, cross-grained, ugly, shrewish Elisa, who knew every secret of her mistress's beauty, every twist of her character, La Marmora had remained, after sixteen years' experience, something to be worshipped with a dog-like devotion, to be humoured and borne with in maternal patience.

La Marmora, true to her type, apart from some certain inevitable and pardonable explosions, was affable to her servants. "*Ma bonne Elisa,*" "*ma vieille Elisa,*" would trip affectionately off her tongue in connection with her orders. "*Ma fidèle,*" she called her sometimes. In moments of depression she had wept against her shoulder: "There is but thee to love me in the world." A truer statement, perhaps, than many that the singer was wont to make, though it would have been the last she herself believed.

Elisa seemed as unresponsive as it was possible to be. Even a dog could have wagged a tail, or licked a caressing hand; but her eyes spoke.

"She is as ugly as sin," La Marmora said of her, "but she's as clever as the devil — and she worships me."

And if she was the only person in the world to love her

mistress unreservedly, it seemed as if this strange love of Elisa's had turned all her other feelings in the direction of hate. She hated Robecq because of the contemptuous clear-sightedness which underlay all his dealings with the singer. She hated the fluctuating household, because of its comments and sneers, its discoveries and its inventions. She had always hated Virginia; hated her as a child, in her jealousy of those spasmodic maternal outbursts; hated her worse in her blooming girlhood for its contrast with the beauty which she, better than any one, knew was on the wane. But, above every one, she hated Fritz; and while she hated, she feared him. Fear is a passion which gives an edge to all the other passions, and incomparably heightens their object.

On the evening of the Friday when Madame la Marmora expected Lord Desmond to dinner, Elisa had some trying hours. Ten times her mistress changed her mind with regard to her dress. She did not want to make herself too beautiful; nor yet too dowdy; nor, heavens, an eccentricity; green did not suit her; pink made her pale, a ghost! — "The white velvet teagown? Elisa, you want, decidedly, to make me look like an invalid."

She sat before the mirror, her wonderful hair unbound. drumming on the table and biting her lip. Mutely the maid laid each rejected garment on the bed.

"What does Madame la Comtesse say to her new toilette *de chez Revel*, the black crêpe de Venise?" Elisa had never chosen to drop the title her mistress had borne when she first entered her service.

"My black — So that I may look like a mute!"

But Elisa saw in her lady's eye that the suggestion had

struck a sympathetic chord; and, in her incomparable way, was proceeding silently to carry it out, when a knock at the outer door summoned her in another direction.

“*Qu’ est-ce encore* ——?” screamed the Panther.

“It is a letter, Madame la Comtesse.”

“A letter — Bring!”

Madame la Comtesse had turned white. “The creature! — He is not coming ——” All day the dread of this had haunted her. “But give, then!” She snatched the missive and drew a quick breath. “Ah! It is only Robecq. What does he want now? — the imbecile!”

What Robecq wanted was set forth in four lines. He deplored that he was unable to secure a fourth to dinner that night to his dear friend’s order, and advised that Miss Fifi should be summoned to dine down after all — three being an awkward number. He was devotedly hers, Jean de Robecq.

“Ah, the imbecile!” said La Marmora again; but she said it lightly. Compared to the calamity she had dreaded, this was a very small contretemps. She had not wanted to have Fifi, “on the top of her,” that night. No reasonable people were ever *à l’aise* with a long-legged schoolgirl, all ears and eyes, and blushes, playing non-conductor to the most interesting conversation. But three, that was true, was an awkward number and Fifi’s presence was better than a Robecq perpetually cutting in, with his dominating drawl, his fund of anecdote, his fat chuckle. He should occupy himself with Fifi — so be it — since he had failed in so simple a task.

She could not do without him, or she would remorselessly have revoked her invitation. It was part of her

programme to sing a little in the evening, and Robecq must accompany. After Fritz — a long way after — there was only one who could do this for her, and it was Robecq.

“Elisa!”

“Madame la Comtesse?”

“Tell Fifi to come here — quick! but quick!”

“*Ah ça!*” cried La Marmora as Elisa returned at last, pushing her mistress's daughter before her into the room with much the same spiteful hand that had boxed and shaken in bygone days. “*Ah ça, Mademoiselle, you keep me waiting!*”

The mother broke off, stared and added in an altered voice:

“What is this? — you have been crying?”

The sobs struggling in Virginia's throat prevented reply. But the other had seen swollen features, reddened eyelids. The clouds rolled away from her face.

“*Eh bien, petite sottie!* You are to dine down after all. See now what a monster you have made of yourself! Does one cry because one is not yet in society? Come, dress, dress! Your white chiffon and green sash. Fly — get a chambermaid to help you.”

She turned, radiant once more, to her mirror, as the door closed upon Fifi's exit.

The girl halted a minute in the passage to try and control the fresh rush of tears. Fate was playing her one trick after another; she was to come down, to be at the dinner, after all, and she had made a fright of herself for those blue eyes to see. She could not master the sob that rose in her throat.

"Listen to her," said the singer, blithely. "She is crying again, I declare."

Elisa had a sympathetic grin. She knew why her mistress was pleased; was she not herself pleased for the same reason?

"Yes" — said La Marmora — "I shall wear the black crêpe — and the emeralds, just the emeralds."

"I am a monster; Mama said so," said Fifi, surveying her own reflection disconsolately.

Miza, the good-natured little Viennese chambermaid, hovering at the back of her chair, was full of comforting suggestions.

"Na — it was only the *Spitzle* — the tip of the Fräulein's little nose. If Fräulein would put a little powder on it, all would be repaired."

Fifi had no powder. Schoolgirls are not allowed these snares. But the other was not so easily defeated. She would watch till the Frau Mama went into the sitting room; and she would rush then, borrow the powder and return it, all so quick that no one should know.

"The Frau Mama's powder," she went on ingenuously, "would of a certainty be of a superfine kind."

Fifi, still shaken with gusty sighs, overcome by the lassitude that succeeds such youthful storms, permitted rather than encouraged the audacity.

Miza returned from her raid, out of breath, triumphant and voluble. She had watched the Gnädige across the passage — superb she was! And the old one after her, carrying a scarf all embroidered like peacock's feathers — never had she seen such a scarf! And besides the powder, she had found something on the dressing table,



which would suit the Fräulein beautifully and match her sash.

"Something" was a wreath; a delicate strand of trembling young oak leaves. Fifi recognized it at once — it had taken her mother's fancy in a milliner's shop that morning.

"But Mama was going to wear it to-night," she faltered.

"Na — it is the Fräulein who shall wear it." The maid held it over Fifi's ruddy curls. "Only Fräulein must not wear that plait with it. See, we will turn a little of the Gnädige's Blanc-de-perle into a little saucer and I will pop it back in the room, and then I will be free to do the Fräulein's beautiful hair."

Once more Miza fluttered out and in. She was laughing gleefully, as she appeared again.

"Think of it, Mamzell, the old one caught me. That was a joke. I began to powder my own nose! Will Fräulein look at it — to see that she can trust hers to me? 'You will come to a bad end,' says the French witch. 'Anyhow,' says I, 'it's further off than yours!' So furious she was she never missed the wreath."

"But I don't know if I dare," said Fifi dreamily.

The little Viennese paid no attention to her. Her fingers were already busy in the thick strands of auburn. She was not Viennese for nothing — not chambermaid in the most fashionable hotel without having a special experience. Her fingers were deft, her eyes coquettish and sure.

"A bunch of curls," she murmured, her mouth full of hairpins. "Ah, *pracht Haar* has the Fräulein, it curls

of itself! At the back of the head — a little high — the Greek way. And the wreath. A cloud of powder over the face — Na! not too much, not too much, the *Nasle* is already white of itself. But a little, to give interest. There was a lady here, last winter — a real countess she was —” the words slipped out unawares and unperceived — “when she powdered, she would say to me ‘a little mystery, just a little mystery!’ Na, now will Fräulein look herself?”

Fifi looked. The renewed protest: “I daren’t wear the wreath,” died half spoken. Her heart echoed Miza’s quick answer.

“When one is a beauty, like Mamzell, one can always dare ——”

Fifi rose.

“Now it does not matter, Fräulein being dressed like a *Backfisch*,” said Miza triumphantly. “Her head is the head of a lady.”

Lord Desmond had entered the room but a few seconds before Fifi. In fact, she had waited, with beating heart, at a corner of the passage, to watch him, tall, pale, fatigued, pass slowly in after the waiter.

She was not witness, therefore, of his first look round the room and of the blankness that succeeded its searching; of the almost insulting indifference — if anything so negative as his manner could be called insulting — with which he responded to his hostess’s greetings. But what she did see was the swift lighting up of those blue eyes, upon her entrance. Her own had found his, unerringly, from the threshold. It was but a momentary flash between them, for as swiftly his eyelids had dropped.



But, to Fifi, grown woman in all her childish ignorance, it was a sudden light, sudden warmth, sudden intoxication. She reared her head, with its Greek knot, its stolen wreath, to meet her mother's glance, first astonished, then furious — Alas, that savage gleam was not altogether unfamiliar!

“I know I ought not to have taken the wreath,” she was thinking, with a new defiance, “but I don't care what happens afterward. He likes me in it.”

“Miss Fifi!” came the Baron's bland voice at her ear, “I'm de-lighted to see you down.”

His eyes were saying something else — something that had kinship with what Desmond's had said: that remote kinship which the glow of a coal fire may have with the flame of sunrise.

“*Du bist ja bezaubernd, Kind,*” he added, under his voice. She caught the words, unresentful of the familiarity — was he not, from all time, a kind of old uncle? — unmindful of the something new and distinctly non-avuncular, which had crept into his mien.

She felt a new Fifi, to-night; miles distant from the schoolgirl that had flung herself with such inner vows of devotion into her mother's arms, only ten days ago. She had thought, then, that if fate allowed her to be a daughter, she would ask no more. Now her whole being demanded something else as with great cries and a turmoil of restlessness. What? She was too much of a child, too undeveloped in her womanhood, to know how to formulate it even to herself; but for another such look from those blue eyes she felt that she would have faced all the maternal angers. It was not that she loved less, trusted less the

beautiful, the wonderful being whose daughter it was her privilege to be, but that a feeling deeper and more overpowering was sweeping in upon her life.

If she was new to herself, she seemed also to present a new aspect to the singer. More than once during the course of that evening, La Marmora's regard fixed itself upon her daughter not with the panther flash, that meant, after all, but the passing of an animal emotion; but with the brooding look that boded infinitely more mischief. It was a look that weighed, and pondered, and decided. It had in it something far beyond anger. Jealousy -- the love-killer -- lurked there.

Yet it but lurked. In the denseness of a magnificent egoism, it was yet impersonal; jealousy of maturity for youth; of the painted face for the matchless bloom of spring; of the sordidly experienced for this ignorance, this innocence, this virginality.

## X

### PARTIE CARRÉE

IN SPITE of the provided fourth, it was after all Robecq who dominated the conversation, during the meal. The singer, unsure of her ground, and cautious in her set purpose, was picking her steps, as it were; she kept her voice to an undertone and spoke little; adopted a weary air, almost as if in imitation of that of her guest. But through her narrowed lids those long, lustrous green eyes flung long, slow looks upon Lord Desmond.

Through his drawling, desultory talk, the impresario surveyed her with feelings that began in amusement and ended in uneasiness. To see the Panther regard her prey, all her claws in; all purr and sleekness and sinuosity — that was amusing. But behind these feline graces his discerning and experienced gaze was aware of the steel of the muscles, the sharpness of the indrawn claws, the set and terrible determination.

Any prima donna who respects herself must have her established admirers; it is a necessary stimulus to her art, and a wholesome, if she is careful to put her voice first among her cares. La Marmora had had a many-coloured, polyglot collection but she had never taken any of them with seriousness, since the episode of the poor young Pole, with the exception of one stormy experience with a Russian Grand Duke. The impresario believed that

she had had her lesson, and that she had learnt the incompatibility of ambition and *la grande passion*, that the folly would never be repeated. He had, therefore, encouraged what he believed to be a mere useful relaxation — a *détente des nerfs* — for the sullen woman who was boring herself. Gaily, indeed, had he facilitated the necessary introduction, believing that Salome would reap the benefit of renewed zest for life. A Salome who was boring herself! — he had shuddered at the thought.

But to-night, as has been said, he was growing uneasy. The developments of the fancy born of a chance glance out of the hotel window threatened to become dangerous. A memory of Lovinski's warning came back into his mind: "She will jump at his throat, she will jump at his throat. . . ." He told himself that he ought to have known better the creature he had dealt with so long; to have known the incredible extravagances of which, with youth slipping from them, such women as Fulvia were capable; to have known that one whose heart had been as a dried fig all her life, may be seized with a passion as devastating as a prairie fire — horrible nemesis of the love they have blasphemed.

And this was the crucial year of La Marmora's career. By Salome she would stand or fall, in London. And with her his own credit. London was yet unconquered by him, and La Marmora was his conquering army.

"I have made a mistake and I shall have to steer precious carefully," he was thinking. "Yes, precious carefully! I shall have to deal with her precious carefully. Humour her . . . humour her at least until Fritz returns, Fritz the Tamer."

Then his furtive glance wandered to the young crowned head on the other side of him — the divine young head that seemed to be encircled with a kind of halo of radiance and beauty. Here was another complication. But it was a complication that he could not regret; nay, it was one which every moment made him more anxious to solve for himself, and that in a manner so agreeable that even his strong head reeled a little as he pondered on it.

The dinner was served in the prima donna's sitting room, at a small round table. The lights overhanging it were discreetly shaded; the room itself was unusually pretty and artistic for an hotel; Empire in style with white-panelled walls picked out delicately in gold. There was a set of furniture, genuine "of the period," upholstered in dim green; the chairs had lions' heads and bosses of ormolu. It was all a little too simple for La Marmora's taste. But, on hearing that the apartment was generally reserved for princely guests, she had decided that no other would suit her. She had, however, to-night, determined to make up for what she considered its shortcomings by an extravagance of flowers.

"I will have flowers — flowers everywhere, Robecq," she commanded — "What's that you say — lily of the valley? — *Suis-je une femme à muguet moi?* — Give me carnations — the deep carmine sort. . . . And roses, red ones, Robecq. Roses everywhere!"

Roses therefore glowed in every corner; sheaves of them, superb, long-stalked, velvet-petalled, fire-hearted, mirrored themselves on the mantel-shelf, on the *consoles*. Carnations warred with them in spicier breath and ruddier flame. A bowl in the centre of the table was filled with



specimen blossoms of that rose the crimson of which is so deep as to be nearly black; the scent of which is so unutterably sweet as to be almost beyond the compass of sense.

La Marmora, in her emeralds and her black dress, might have seemed of beauty wonderful enough against a background so subtly contrived to set it off, to turn any man's head. But the two who sat with her to-night were singularly proof. Robecq had read her through long ago, and found the page scarce worth the perusal. Lord Desmond had had one measuring glance for her, as she sat down beside him. She had bent for a moment to inhale the soul of a rose, and over it their eyes had met. Paling under the exquisite artifice of her bloom, she had fixed him, her nostrils fluttering, her breast heaving — he had looked away from her, without a flicker of expression on his face. After that, he had not raised his eyes higher than her hand when forced to address her — but mostly looked at his plate.

Toward the end of the meal, the impresario and his prima donna had drifted into a private discussion which threatened to shake the lady out of her assumed aristocracy of repose. Roused from her languorous absorption she rolled an eye lively with anger, oblivious of her guest.

It was then Lord Desmond turned at last toward Fifi. She had sat, most of the time, in a whirl of excitement, mute, scarce conscious of what was going on about her, of anything but the one presence. Absently she was playing with a flower that lay loose before her plate.

As the deep glance sought her, confusion overcame her;



and to conceal it she pretended in her turn to be absorbed in inhaling the scent.

"Don't!" said Lord Desmond in a low voice.

She turned a startled, wide-eyed gaze upon him. "Those roses are abominable," he went on; "keep to the lily of the valley!"

Again she questioned, with those appealing eyes.

"The white-and-green lily of the valley," went on the man, speaking quick and low, "with its sharp, fresh scent — its clean scent, instead of all this heavy, horrible sweetness. Keep to the lily of the valley."

"But I haven't any!" her voice rang out.

Both her mother and Robecq stopped in their wrangle to look at her. And Lord Desmond said no more. His eyes went back to his plate.

At dessert the girl mustered courage to speak to the Englishman on her own account.

"Do you like emeralds?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He gave her his attention so quickly that she felt her silly shyness rushing upon her again; to cover it she grew bold.

"The emeralds of my mama — I like them best of all her jewels — it was my papa gave them to her."

No sooner had she said the words that in some inexplicable way, she had a sense of having committed an enormity.

Lord Desmond had not as much as shifted his gaze to glance at the green fire that lapped La Marmora's columned throat.

Robecq's fingers were in his beard.

The girl turned desperately to him.

"You knew Papa, didn't you?" she cried with a break in her voice. She could not imagine what prompted the question; but she was conscious of fresh enormity upon its propounding.

Her mother fixed her across the table with the gaze that brooded and plotted, the gaze that was so evil.

"I certainly knew the Count," said Robecq after a pause. His slow, unemotional utterance relieved the surcharged atmosphere. And Fifi, who had trembled on the verge of the utter disgrace of tears, drew a quivering breath.

"Don't you think we've had enough food," said the singer, rising abruptly. "Lord Desmond—" her voice sank from its harsh vibration to the undertone that the Baron called her purr. "I will perhaps sing you a little song, by and by. Sit on the sofa, here, with your cigarette, and tell me what I shall sing."

Royalty reverses all the usual social rules, invites itself to other people's houses, chooses the guests it will meet there. The Kings and Queens of Art confer their favours in much the same way. It is the last solecism to ask them for what it is etiquette to press the dilettante to give. So La Marmora regally proposed to sing. No millionaire could have bought the grace of her; indeed it was hardly hers to give, and she shot defiance at her manager even as she spoke.

"Not for an hour at least," was the latter's only comment and drily enough given.

"If I refuse," he thought, "she will make me a scene

afterward, and scream — anything is better than that she should scream.”

He had a certain rueful, yet humorous *revanche* in observing the extreme moderation of Lord Desmond's gratitude.

“She will do nothing with him,” he said to himself. “Poor Fulvia!”

But she had to be humoured. And so, to humour her, he took the not disagreeable course of drawing Fifi with him to the piano, and making her help him in his selection of songs for the occasion.

“Something that won't try Mama's voice, after those peaches — eh, Fifi? Something soothing and cradly.”

He sat on the piano stool and ran his stubby fingers over the keys with a touch as soft as velvet.

“No, Robecq, no!” cried the prima donna, roundly from the sofa.

She was tingling to her finger-tips with impatience. What, for an hour and a half she had looked her loveliest and longest, smiled her sweetest, spoken her most dulcet! And this stock sat, twisting his cigarette between his pale fingers, with never a glance, scarce even a monosyllable! He had moved away from her, too, as she moved toward him, to the very limit of the sofa.

Englishmen . . .! Englishmen were dense, not like your Spaniard, your Pole, or your Frenchman, who in a look find a whole speech, in an intonation, an avowal, in a sigh, a surrender.

One had to put the dots on the i's with Englishmen, she told herself.

“No, Robecq, not that mawkish thing, I’ll have . . . I’ll have *that song of Hahn’s!*” She rose as she spoke, and swept across the parquet floor.

The manager’s eyebrows went up, wrinkling into his forehead. He shrugged his shoulders. “With the high A!” he murmured.

But he knew that swish of drapery. It was the Panther lashing her tail. He allowed her, resignedly, to look for the piece. — She scattered music like autumn leaves before she placed it on the desk.

“Stop it,” she said, between her teeth; “I’m not maternal to-night.”

Virginia caught the words: all the blood from her wounded heart seemed to rush to her face.

“Go to bed,” continued the mother. She tried to give the order a tone of gay solicitude — “little girls must have their beauty sleep.”

“Not at all,” drawled Robecq; “Miss Feefi is going to stop and listen to Mama’s singing.”

He flung open the first page of the song as he spoke and struck a chord. It was not the prescribed hour yet; but in this wild-beast mood, the poor man could only repeat to himself, “The Panther must be humoured.”

Fifi went over to the furthest corner of the room, and sat on a high chair, in the shade of the curtain, looking out unseeingly into the street and fighting back her tears.

La Marmora turned her back on the piano and fixed her gaze upon Lord Desmond. He had never heard her sing before and she was going to sing to him, to him alone, as never she had sung for fame or money.

The first liquid note rang out; the man dropped his

cigarette, and shaded his face with his hand. The singer's heart rioted in triumph; its pulsation beat into the passionate ecstasy of the melody.

Little did she guess that, under the penthouse of those lax fingers, his deep tired eyes were seeking the young figure in the window; that he was dreaming of her, only her, so white and green and fresh against the roses and carnations.

## XI

### THE ASPIRANT

“ROBECQ,” said the prima donna in her most strident tone, “you never did anything more idiotic than when you sent for that long-legged child to join us. Here! Here! Why, she makes me blush ten times a day. She was frankly impossible, last night. Pack her back! It’s not right to interfere with her studies, anyhow. Without Fritz knowing, too! He’ll be furious. How am I to get up Salome if Fritz is furious?”

The Baron, with his round legs slightly apart, stood gazing down at the speaker. Fulvia was in elaborate spring toilet; and though she could not keep the vibrating harshness from her voice, she was holding herself well under control. But her eyes glittered between the long lids and her hand moved restlessly among the odds and ends of the table beside her.

He passed his fingers along his beard and pursed his lips; then he very deliberately sat down. Through the open window the hum of the joyous afternoon hour on the Ring rose through the spring air, and little gusts of wind stirred the heavy, flower-filled atmosphere of the room.

“So,” said Robecq, as he sat down, “that’s why you sent for me in such a hurry? You’ve had enough of Miss Fifi already!”

Fulvia rolled her beautiful dyed head impatiently on



the cushioned top of her chair. With her curious animal instinct she scented opposition. But she did not want to make a scene; she was going to drive in the Prater and she wanted to look her best.

"I've told Elisa to get her trunks ready," she answered briefly, "and you're to find a chaperon for her, and she's to take the night train. I've wired to Madame Aubert."

Again Robecq pondered, his thick fingers on his beard. He had expected this. She was not the woman to submit long to the proximity of blooming girlhood, even had no Lord Desmond been within her horizon. The sudden desire to play *grande dame* and the devoted mother at one and the same time was bound to go the way of all her emotional impulses, once she discovered that her child's April had ripened into May, and that she was no longer a perfect foil but a possible standard of undesirable comparison.

He had anticipated this; what he had not anticipated was that her jealous vanity should be so soon on the alert; he had placed more reliance on her immeasurable conceit.

Poor child! So, she had made her mother blush? He recalled last night's innocent but disconcerting questions, with this new stirring of a dormant sensibility. "*You knew my papa?*" Well, although he doubted whether the mother had ever possessed the grace of blushing, it was possible and even a little human for the Panther to feel that such innocence would be better kept apart from her present plans.

In his deliberate way he thrashed out each proposition in turn before speaking; and decided that all these reasons were at work with almost equal strength.

He shook his head mentally over the short-sighted policy of the woman in her sudden violent attraction. She might sweep a boy off his feet, but with a man like this fastidious roué . . .! The Panther was tired already of stalking her prey; she wanted to spring after three days' acquaintance! She would spring — and miss — and then "What of Salome?" If Fifi's proximity should delay the spring, it was another reason for not allowing her to depart.

"I don't think," the slow treacly voice announced at last, "that we can let Elisa go on with the packing."

"How?" snarled the lady, with quick stiffening of her back. Her eyes flashed. She sat up suddenly. "Understand me, Robecq. We're going to England next week, aren't we?"

"Are we? You told me yesterday that nothing would induce you to go back to England till the last possible moment."

"I've changed my mind." She struggled to speak quietly. "Let us be reasonable! Must I not be in England, to be settled and rested before the rehearsals begin? I want a house of my own, over there. A house where I can receive; I am sick of hotels. We are going next week."

"Well, I've no objection — no very great objection to next week — only it would have been better to wait for Fritz here. But if you give me a good reason — a real reason for this hurry . . ." His cynical small eyes were upon her. A moment her own glance wavered from them; then, with a jerk, she faced him; staring, speaking with a brutal frankness:

"Lord Desmond is going to London, Monday, on leave; didn't you hear him say so, last night?"

"No, my dear," said the manager, imperturbably; "if I had heard that I should not have asked. Well, I repeat, I have no objection. Miss Fifi will help you nicely to settle into the London house."

"I won't take her to England, I won't, and that's all about it. Have I not told you, she's got to go back to school?"

"I think Miss Fifi has done with school."

"Robecq . . .!" she warned. It was almost a growl in the throat.

"My dear friend, be reasonable," he pursued in his steady way, "she is too old for school — much too old."

"Seventeen . . . eighteen," she panted. "How dare you!"

"We'll call it eighteen, if you like. Eighteen's a very good age for a young woman . . . like Miss Fifi . . . to be married."

She sprang up. "Robecq!" She began on a scream of fury. He raised his fat forefinger warningly for a moment or two, and then gently tapped his throat.

"You'll do that once too often, my dear," he said. "I've told you so before."

The effervescence of her wrath vanished as suddenly as bubbles of boiling milk on the immersion of the spoon. She sat down again.

"Robecq, you are a brute." It was plaintively, almost tearfully uttered. He laid his hands on his knees and leaned over to her.

"Don't you think it would be rather a good thing

. . . for everybody . . . if Miss Fifi were married?" He paused to let the idea sink in. He saw her hesitate upon it. Doubt succeeded anger.

"If your maternal anxiety were completely satisfied . . ." there was a faintly sarcastic twinkle in his eye, but his voice retained its business-like inflection. "If you knew her husband to be a kind man, a safe man, a very well-to-do man, wouldn't it be the very best way, wouldn't it relieve you of some responsibility, remove some possible future complication? You can't much longer keep a fine, well-grown young woman in those short skirts and baby blouses, those *corsages bébés*, without making yourself supremely ridiculous. And if you send her back to school—it will get about, my dear, and it won't make the world think you any younger, or any nicer."

The singer's foot began to tap; her colour was fluctuating.

"And this rich man, this safe man, this kind man, this paragon — where are you going to find him for me?"

"He is found," said the impresario quietly.

She stared at him. Then as his meaning dawned upon her she broke into laughter — the coarse, taunting laugh of the child of the Melbourne gutter.

"You! *Ma foi, c'est cocasse, vrai! Toi, mon vieux!* My poor old Robecq! You?"

In the very middle of her laughter, her vanity cried out. The maypole . . . ! to succeed where she, conquering Fulvia, had failed! A moment she looked at him as if she could have stabbed him.

"You are mad. You, and that child! And the other two, what of them?"

The prosperous ruddiness on the Baron's plump cheek deepened to purple. It was the only sign of annoyance that he permitted himself to show.

"You would naturally feel uneasiness on the subject of any illegality," he remarked with a kind of genial sarcasm. "But you may put your mind at rest. As an American citizen both my divorces have been most strictly conducted according to every formality required by the law. And I have, in either case, I am glad to say, nothing to reproach myself with. Besides which, my first dear wife, I regret to say, passed away last autumn. She never was very strong."

He broke off: she was not listening. With knitted brows, La Marmora, whose anger had cooled once more as suddenly as it had waxed hot, was revolving in her crude mind the value to herself of the extraordinary proposition. The long-legged girl, with her insolent youth, out of her way! A hold for life upon the rich and powerful man before her . . .

Suddenly she rose and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Ah, but there's Fritz!"

He wheeled on his chair to fling a searching look at her.

"Fritz? What has he got to say to it?"

"He's always interfering," she said in a strangled whisper. "Robecq, you will have to be quick, quick, before Fritz comes back."

She took a stride toward the door, as if hurrying to immediate action. He caught her back by the skirt.

"Now, look here, Fulvia." He rose as he spoke — a tone of mastery, foreign to his persuasive accents, rang

in his voice. "I'll manage this my own way, do you hear? or not at all. For one thing I won't have the child hurried — and, if Fritz interferes I'll deal with Fritz."

His eye was still upon her. There was a hint of fear of him also in her glance, as she shifted it uneasily from his scrutiny.

"At least," she said sullenly, "permit me to stop the packing."

"Certainly," he conceded, all urbanity again. "And if you've nothing better to do this afternoon, my dear, you might get your daughter some long clothes." He laughed gently. "Some garments to suit a charming young lady of nearly —" he paused — "twenty-one."



## BOOK II



## I

### THE DOWAGER

THE Honourable George Darcy was a young man who, over a dish of tea, enjoyed gossip as much as any proverbial old lady. The conversation he preferred was "about people."

"There's nothing so interesting as people," he was wont to say, cosily. But it went without saying that to be interesting, people must be doing — well, something a little shocking or distressing, such as admiring their neighbours' wives unduly, or being ruined.

He was a fetch-and-carry youth, and was already making himself indispensable to the wife of his chief, in the way of providing her with shawls and card cases, and tittle-tattle. It was through Mr. Darcy that the story of Lord Desmond Brooke's infatuation for Madame la Marmora, the celebrated singer, got about. It is true that the ambassadress, who was the first to hear it, made a point of repeating nothing. She was a discreet woman. She had heard many a story of Lord Desmond, in her day, stories of an even more thrilling nature than this last one; she shrugged her shoulders and was faintly amused.

"What will our poor Gräfin Warinsky say?" she thought; then had a little contempt. She had seen the celebrated Marmora; had heard her and of her at Petersburg. She

had admired the artist and despised the woman, as such great ladies will. "Bold, painted adventuress! — So, that was what Desmond was sinking to!"

Such reflections she kept to herself; but others of Mr. Darcy's *confidantes* had not her diplomatic reserve. There was the pink and plump wife of the second secretary, for instance. She was thrilled. She never had liked Lord Desmond, resenting his languorous indifference with all the self-importance of a recent bride. She thought it was quite dreadful, and she wrote home about it at once. In subsequent letters she had further details to add. Lord Desmond had dined with Madame la Marmora; had sent her cartloads of lily of the valley. "Lord Desmond has left," she wrote at last. "Would you believe it? the same day as that Marmora! Some say, actually with her. All Vienna is talking about it."

Thus the ball was set rolling. Plump Mrs. Denison's London people were of those that live on the outskirts of the "best set," and liked to show their familiarity with it. A good deal of boasting went on among them about "my daughter, my sister, my cousin in Vienna." Certain drawing rooms in the Cromwell Road, in Eccleston Square and in Connaught Place, began to echo Lord Desmond's name. Then, in artistic circles, where everything connected with the new Salome, with the great Marmora, who was at last to be heard in London, was a matter for eager discussion, the question of her alleged latest admirer became current talk. "Was there not a Grand Duke on the tapis? That was an old story! The last is Lord Desmond Brooke. Haven't you heard?"

Then sporadically, like measles, the gossip was all over the town.

Sir Joseph Warren-Smith, for instance, heard it at the Conservative, on the same day that Lord Sturminster was ragged on the subject at the Turf. When "Martia Marchioness" (as the great Dowager, the mother-in-law and mother respectively of these two distinguished persons, was irreverently dubbed) sent a note round to her dear Mr. Vere Hamilton, in Queen Anne's Mansions, begging him to call in the evening, for there was a matter upon which she urgently needed his valued assistance, he was already sufficiently in possession of the facts to guess what the matter was.

On his way to Lowndes Square he beheld, approaching, the plump, well-groomed, porcine figure and face of his familiar acquaintance, Mr. Philip Scott, the admired musical critic and dilettante. The latter stopped and wagged his tight-gloved hand in flapping greeting:

"How do, Verie? — Gay as ever, eh? A rendezvous, I'll wager, by your haste. Oh, you dog!"

This was Mr. Philip Scott's facetious way. Mr. Vere Hamilton, be it said, was well known as the most straight-laced of little, elderly gentlemen. But he had a weakness — his only weakness was of the most respectable kind — it was the Peerage. He could not resist stopping to inform Mr. Scott whither his steps were bent.

"And dear old Lady Sturminster most particularly begged me to come round at once," he concluded.

The other pursed his lips.

"You'll find them in a rare stew about that scamp Desmond," he opined. "Jove, what a fellow it is! —

Nothing less than La Marmora. — Upon my soul, he's got courage. She's a glorious creature. But La Marmora, prrr! I'd die of fright, if I were in his shoes. Ever seen her, Verie? Oh, she's a glorious creature! Come with me down to Branksome, I'll introduce you."

Mr. Hamilton had a genuine shiver as he trotted away from the suggestion.

A mouse-gray, amiable, beaver-like old gentleman; who, if shocked at some of the doings of his dear friends in the Peerage, was yet always benevolently and conscientiously anxious to assist in the reclamation of the aristocratic sinner. It was by no means the first time that he had been summoned by some coroneted elderly lady, distraught at the doings of some irresponsible scion of the family. It was very well known that it was owing to his prompt diplomacy that weak-minded Lord Caradoc had been picked away from the registry office, just in time. It was whispered that when little Miss Bolsover was run away with by her chauffeur, it was Vere Hamilton who caught them at Dover.

But although a familiar of old Lady Sturminster's forbidding salon, it had never been his privilege yet to be admitted to that redoubtable lady's confidence — much less consulted by her. And he felt, this day, a proportionate sense of elation and responsibility.

The Dowager Marchioness of Sturminster was one of a fast disappearing type. From the stronghold of her early-Victorian surroundings, at war with the progressive world, and all its theories and doings, she yet made her influence felt upon it; was still a power in it, more by virtue of personality than by reason of her rank and con-



nection. Well past seventy as she was, there gleamed an unquenchable vitality in her pale gray eye. In the thick bands of hair, smoothed down in swelling puffs over her ears, not a gray strand; they were of a horrible sandy hue that owed nothing to artifice. These were invariably crowned with a flat agglomeration of lace and black riband.

She had never been handsome; she had never been even pleasant-looking; she had never known how to dress herself; she was not in the least brilliant of conversation; her ideals, her principles were narrow and uncompromising. Her religion combined a certain Puritan self-assertiveness with a truly Erastian finality; withal a deep ingrain of worldliness which tinged her every thought and her whole outlook on life: she would be as repellant to the plebeian as to the peccant.

Needless to say that she had innumerable toadies; that her only daughter was a weak-minded nonentity; that both her sons were notorious, even in this rapid age, for the fastness of their living: one a spendthrift, the other a roué; and that her daughter-in-law, the reigning Marchioness — a delicate, extravagant, American millionaire beauty — outraged every one of the terrible old peeress's most cherished prejudices.

No sooner was Mr. Vere Hamilton ushered into the room in Lowndes Square than he became aware that he had indeed been summoned to a family conclave.

Here was Lady Alice Warren-Smith rolling her pale, frightened eyes at him from the chair beside her mother; it was an easy-chair, but she sat bolt upright to mark her deference. And here was Sir Joseph Warren-Smith,

Bart., J. P., M. P., her worthy, wealthy, vulgar spouse — whom the Dowager had insisted upon her accepting and whom she treated, with much system, with far less respect than she did her butler. An obese man this, sitting on the edge of a high chair, occasionally checking a tendency to call his mother-in-law “my lady.”

A look of relief passed over his countenance at sight of the last comer. Here was one who was safe to greet him as an equal and bring balm to his harrowed self-esteem.

Naturally a purse-proud, self-assertive, bumptious personality, he suffered agonies in his intercourse with his wife's relations; but, such is the innate respect for the nobility in the British middle-class mind, he would not have exchanged his purgatory for any less aristocratic heaven.

The Dowager extended a cold wrinkled hand, and smiled a faint welcome. She liked Vere Hamilton. He was the most sympathetic of her toadies; she knew him to be a gentleman and of quite decent country stock. He went everywhere, too; there was hardly a fashionable entertainment the list of which did not end with the words “and Mr. Vere Hamilton.”

“How do you do, Mr. Hamilton? It is very good of you to come, I'm sure. Sit down, won't you — Sir Joseph, a chair for Mr. Hamilton.”

“Joseph!” said Lady Alice, warningly.

Her husband bullied her pompously at home; but in her mother's house she was still his unconquerable superior. Poor Joseph hurried to advance the Berlin wool-work atrocity he was himself sitting on.

The Dowager was not one to beat about the bush.

"I've just heard the most shocking news of Desmond," she began. "Alice heard it at the Peterboroughs. Sir Joseph heard it — in the City. It's all over the place. — I see you know it too." She broke off and drew her long upper lip over her teeth with a kind of gloomy triumph.

"I have heard — rumours ——" said the distressed beaver.

"Shocking!" said Sir Joseph.

Lady Alice drew her mouth down in imitation of her mother's.

"It seems," said this latter, taking up the thread again, "that creature has taken a place on the river, and that my wretched son motors down every day. — Joseph tells me there was a paragraph about it in one of these scurrilous picture papers."

The informant wagged his head, encouraged by that rare mark of favour, the dropping of the prefix to his name.

"My attention was drawn to it; I don't, as a rule, open these — papers," said he, lifting a protesting hand. "I thought the family ought to know."

His mother-in-law cut in rudely upon this explanation, and he coughed apologetically, to show that so far from bearing malice he recognized it was his mistake.

"It's not my way," the old lady was saying, "as you know, Mr. Hamilton, to take notice of idle or offensive gossip. It is natural, I suppose, that young men, in my son's position, should be talked about; but I understand that the creature in question is extremely notorious."

Indescribable was the arrogance of the Dowager's eye and voice when she spoke of her son's social eminence; equally indescribable the cold disdain of her reference to "the creature."— "And there is my son's diplomatic position to consider. It may seriously injure his prospects, if this scandalous tittle-tattle continues."

Vere Hamilton really felt, as he had just now announced, very much distressed.

"I assure you," he said, "that not only shall I make a point of contradicting any rumours that I hear, but ——"

"What good will that do?" asked his hostess, with her usual ruthlessness. "What we've got to find out is how much truth there is in the whole thing. I am told you can't open a paper without seeing her photograph. I believe the creature's an opera singer or something of that kind, and they're advertising her, or she's advertising herself. She must be easy enough to find — at least for gentlemen." She showed her long yellow teeth in a withering smile. Then she leaned back in her chair, and added with finality: "You've got to find out for me, Mr. Hamilton."

"I!" cried the little gray gentleman, in a tremendous flutter. He remembered Scott's airy proposition of a few minutes before, and blushed to the roots of his hair with a sense of guilt. It was, indeed, easy for gentlemen!

She looked upon his embarrassment with a hard eye, at the back of which there was a remote and icy gleam of humour.

"You'd better go to the creature's house and see for yourself." She paused, to let the full bearing of her

mandate be grasped: and then added, with once again that arctic glint of amusement: "Joseph will go with you."

The baronet gave a leap on his chair, accompanied with a gasp. "My lady ——" he began, only to break off with his apologetic cough.

"Oh, Mama! ——" murmured Lady Alice. It was a very meek protest; but even that brought the protuberant gray eye slowly upon her, and she quailed.

"Of course, my dear, if you're afraid to trust Joseph ——"

"Oh, Mama — oh, no, Mama! Joseph will certainly do what he can!"

The wife frowned at her husband with a nod and a grimace, stimulating him to speak for himself. The poor man cleared his throat and echoed the conjugal "certainly" in no very certain voice. A gloved hand laid before his mouth — for that expressive cough of his was again in requisition — he turned a piteous glance upon Vere Hamilton.

The latter was looking very dubious himself. To go and visit a far-famed prima donna upon a laudable errand was an alarming but not altogether unpleasant prospect — but to go in the company of Sir Joseph Warren-Smith was quite another thing.

"Of course I know he means well and is a most worthy person," the friend of the aristocracy was saying in his little gentlemanly soul, "but he is a vulgarian! And this requires a great deal of tact. . . . Still, for such an old friend as Lady Sturminster, and for poor Lord Desmond's sake, perhaps it may be really better to go with one of the family — more above-board."

As he cogitated in this strain, the decision was made for him:

“So it is settled,” said the great lady. “You will make arrangements, both of you. It had better be early this week. — Now, I think we’ll have tea.” Her countenance assumed the nearest approach to affability of which it was capable. “Sir Joseph, ring the bell.”



## II

### CASSANDRA

SIR JOSEPH rose with alacrity; agitated the china handle — there were no electrical innovations for the Lowndes Square house — and, on his way back to the walnut chair with that Berlin wool-worked seat, paused to look out of the window. He had caught the sound of motor throbs slackening at the door; and an insatiable curiosity was part of the worthy cotton-spinner's moral dower.

"I believe it is Sturminster!" he announced, in tones of stifled excitement. "Sturminster" — the name rolled off his tongue with a never-fading zest — "and Lady Sturminster with him," he added, in less assured accents.

He had never yet dared call this relation "Cassandra."

The Dowager collected the attention of her guests by a single, magnetic sweeping glance; then she said: "Kindly do not mention the matter at all before my son and his wife."

"Of course not, Mama." Lady Alice was spokeswoman for the party. Fancy, if Sturminster had wanted to go and visit this woman, too, how dreadful that would be!

"Lord and Lady Sturminster," heralded the mouldy butler. He had a fine graduation of manner for his office — his intonation was a study in precedence.

Lady Sturminster was considerably taller than her husband; and her height was accentuated by a sapling slenderness. Everything about her was long and slim — except her nose, which was delicately cocked. As Vere Hamilton rose at her entrance, he was conscious of a new and agreeable sensation; she was so young, so smart, so pretty, in these ugly, sombre and austere surroundings, amid these rigid, heavy people! Of course he repressed the comparison as disloyal to his dear old friend; but he adjusted his eyeglasses for a better view of the piquant transatlantic face with its subtle, delicious spice of mischief.

“Hullo!” said Lord Sturminster — he was a squat, sandy man, with a remarkable likeness to his mother, but with this startling difference, that light protruding eyes, prominent teeth and Wellingtonian nose, in him all made for joviality. He had a loud ringing voice; and one almost instinctively expected to see a straw in his mouth and riding gaiters on his rather bowed legs. He bred and ran his own horses; betted as heavily as any man in the Kingdom; had never been known to wear a silk hat straight; had the Garter and was the most popular peer on the turf.

If the Dowager felt for any human being a sensation resembling the warmth of love it was for her elder son; and this latter, under all this rattle and rollick, seemed to reciprocate the attachment. Whether the sentiment were genuine on his part or not, his mother's banking account certainly testified, at too frequent intervals, to the sincerity of hers. She gave him now, as he entered, a glance and smile reserved for him alone. He stooped

and kissed her with a smack, then genially faced the room.

“Hullo!” he said in a loud cheery voice; “hullo, old girl, we’ve not timed ourselves quite right I see! The mater’s got a tabby tea. Hullo, Hamilton — old chap! Hullo, Joseph!”

Meanwhile the greeting between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law took place in nearly complete silence. Cassandra Sturminster had made merely a little cooing sound in her throat as she stooped a scented cheek vaguely in the direction of the lean one that was freezingly extended to her. Then she nodded all round with another little circular murmur:

“Alice — Sir Joseph,” and extended her long slim hand for Vere’s pressing, blinking the while positively fabulous eyelashes appealingly at him.

“Tea, Sturminster?” inquired his mother unemotionally. “Tea, Cassandra? Alice, I believe there’s muffin.”

Sir Joseph precipitated himself to hand the muffin dish. Long-toothed, dull-eyed, the image of patrician nullity, his wife ministered among the tea-cups.

“We just looked in, you know,” said the sporting marquis. He sat him down astride a chair, leaning his arms on the back, and gazed genially at his mother — “Looked in, just to show I’m still alive, don’t you know. The new car’s a ripper. When will you come for a spin in it? Do you a world of good, you know.”

The Dowager gave him a peculiar smile:

“I do not think you’ll ever see me in a motor-car, Sturminster.” Her voice was, for her, quite warm.

“Ha! don’t be too sure. What do you bet? Why,

at the rate we are going, there won't be a gee left in the Kingdom in another couple of years. I say, mater, if you don't hurry up, you'll be bowled to the family monument in a motor-hearse. Good idea, that — wonder it has not been thought of before — capital thing for country funerals. Might start a company! Eh, old girl — an idea in that, what?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Wurzel!" The American's soft, tired voice fell as gently in the midst of his great guffaw as a bird-note in the pause of a March gale. "Oh, no, no, Mr. Hamilton, no tea, thank you — No, Sir Joseph, no muffin, thank you. No, mother, I won't have any tea, thank you, I've had a pick-me-up at the Club."

"A pick-me-up!" gasped Lady Alice into the Dowager's silence, which had become stony the instant her daughter-in-law monopolized the conversation.

"Red lavender, chloroform, soda-mint," murmured Cassandra Sturminster ingenuously. "I'm so dyspeptic —" She turned her great violet eyes, that seemed one lovely craving for sympathy, toward Vere Hamilton.

In the day of the Dowager Marchioness no lady had a club, no lady had pick-me-up's, no lady had dyspepsia. Every fold of the Dowager's black silk, every large flat button on its surface protested. But she sat rigid, and she said nothing. It was by this weight of silence and rigidity that she fought the losing battle of early-Victorian tradition.

Lord Sturminster pranced his chair as a boy's hobby-horse; then his alert eye rested on his brother-in-law.

"Hullo, Joe, you look a bit rough in the coat, old man! What's to do? Ain't Manchester where it was,

market a bit shirty? Joseph — you've something on your mind — Alice, what's Joseph got on his mind?"

"Sir Joseph is kind enough to take the family anxiety to heart, about your brother," said the Dowager.

Lady Alice felt the sneer, the more so that her unconscious spouse was puffing out his chest with satisfaction.

"So that's what the tabby tea is about," said the graceless head of the house with his rich guffaw. "Lucky fellow, young Desmond! They say she's a corker. Seen her photo, Joe? Oh, Joe, don't deny it! What d'you bet old Joe is planning to get introduced?"

The poor millionaire turned purple at this close shot; and Mr. Hamilton was not unaware of a blush. Cassandra drew attention to herself with one of her audacious soft-voiced statements:

"Please do, Sir Joseph. Then you can take me — you know. I'm just longing to go. I hear she's a deevy place on the river. Mrs. Orris's you know, all marble and white bear skins. I've always wanted to see it. But Mrs. Orris always went to so many races — I should have had to bow to her, and that would have been tiresome for Wurzel, as he knows her so well."

She paused, smiling at the toes of her gray doeskin shoes, apparently quite unconscious of the awful character of the sensation she was producing. Even Wurzel (alias Sturminster) threw her one quick angry look before that burst of hilarity which with him greeted every situation.

"I hear she's giving strawberry teas," pursued the cooing accents. "Katty Berkshire says they're rippin'. One meets just every one one wants to meet. And they



call her the Panther. I'd just like to go and have strawberries with a Panther."

"It seems as if we should really have some hot weather at last," said the Dowager.

"Why don't you ask young Desmond to take you, eh, old girl?" asked his lordship, ignoring the severe maternal lead.

"I will, Wurzel, thanks for the tip. Oh, do you think he will?"

Cassandra fixed her husband with a wealth of appeal in her eyes. He gave another quick glance before his laugh. Cool, unruffled, invariably sweet, with apparently as little heart as temper, Lady Sturminster was a complete and exasperating mystery to her husband. She had taken his first infidelity — a mere trial trip or *coup d'essai* — with the same unruffled front as that with which she now accepted his many intrigues. Inconsequently and manlike, he resented that she should not resent; smarted that she did not smart; and in some lost corner of moral manhood, was shocked that she was not shocked. Had she retaliated in kind, he would have shown no mercy to her. But aloof, untouched, self-possessed, gay, to all appearances, she sailed through her brilliant life as if it utterly contented her.

"Alice and I propose to drive in the Park after tea," the undaunted Dowager proceeded.

"Well," said Cassandra, "then Wurzel and I had better hook it." Her soulful eyes sought the mother-in-law's face. Again the rose-leaf cheek made its feint of brushing the parchment one. "Good-bye, Sir Joseph. You won't forget? I count upon you, if Desmond fails. Alice,



you're fenced in by the tea-table." She kissed her pearl-gray finger-tip over the massive tea-urn. "You've got a bit of muffin on your lap, dear. Good-bye."

It was Vere Hamilton alone who had the privilege of holding that slender hand for a moment in his own.

"You'll come to see me, won't you? . . ." she measured his pleasant elderly countenance — what use would she have for Mr. Hamilton after all? and added with her gossamer sweetness — "some day? Come along, Wurzel."

The silence that proclaims a dissatisfaction too deep for words followed her departure. Then the Dowager turned to Alice with the sepulchral question:

"Can you tell me why she calls him Wurzel?"

"I believe," said Lady Alice feebly, "that when they were first married she began by nicknaming him 'old turnip head.'"

Again the silence fell — a painful silence, broken only by Sir Joseph's apologetic cough.

### III

#### ORRIS'S FOLLY

THE dining room at Branksome Cottage — Orris's Folly, as the neighbourhood had dubbed it, the country house rented by Madame la Marmora for the season — was almost an *al fresco* apartment. The celebrated and erratic lady, under whose auspices the once unpretentious little building, so admirably situated, had been practically reconstructed, had happened to be passing through a phase of classic enthusiasm at the time. It had struck her as nothing incongruous — or perhaps the very incongruity had pleased — to set on homely English lawns, beside a placid-flowing English river, these fancies of a southern grace, of bygone Attic days. Neither had it troubled her that slender columns of white marble, marble floors and steps, should abut on brick and half-timber. She had demanded classic halls and terraces to set off what some enthusiastic critic had called her peculiar classic grace — the Greek drama had been her last success — and had obtained what she demanded. In no room had her own taste and her architect's fidelity to it been carried out to better purpose than in that reserved for "Feasts."

On one side it opened upon a covered, columned, loggia-like terrace, which, with six shallow steps of white marble running the whole length of the front, led out to the

falling sweep of the turf, with the river sparkling far beneath. Huge tangles of Virginia creeper and honeysuckle had been trained to climb to the roof and fling wreaths and long hanging tendrils between and across the pillars.

Within, the room was almost bare; it was cool and marble-walled; it was ceiled with gleaming copper foil; on the marble flags two or three tiger skins were tossed about. Classic reclining seats ran the length of the narrow board which served as dining table, on one of which a gorgeous spread of purple silk marked the hostess's place. At one end of the strange chamber a pedestal of exquisite line bore a bronze head of Antinous, before which it had been Mrs. Orris's much applauded custom to place fruits in sacrifice, and a lamp ever burning with aromatic oil.

The present occupant of this fantastic dwelling was as ignorant of, as she was indifferent to, the pieties of the Golden Age; but she too fancied herself vastly amid the marble, and found a childish pleasure in dispensing hospitality in surroundings so unusual as to provoke perpetual comment, wonder and admiration.

This day of May, however, she sat at luncheon in her colonnaded feast chamber with no other guest than her manager, who had motored down from London unexpectedly; Fifi made a third at the meal. And none of them appeared to be in any specially contented frame of mind, for Robecq had brought news that was unpalatable to each.

Yet it was a day to make the heart glad. The wind, faint and warm as summer, though the incomparable

freshness of spring still lurked in its breath, set the long tendrils of young green swinging against the blue sky. A double row of blue hyacinths bordered the grass walk to the lip of the terrace where grass stairs led to the lower lawns. At the head of these, two classic vases, springing with orange azalea, blazed against the distant beechwoods on the other side of the river, which gleamed far below like the damascene of some cunning Oriental blade.

May had begun its course in unusual radiance. Day after day passed in splendour of blue sky; Madame la Marmora had been but a week in possession of Branksome, and no cloud had thus far dimmed the long sunny hours. But now the cloud was on the brow of the dwellers in this paradise. Fulvia flung herself petulantly against the purple drapery of her Greek seat. Her strong white hand drummed the fine linen on the table before her. It was a choice bit of weaving with a key-pattern orange border; for Mrs. Orris's taste had provided suitable drapery to her classic board, which had had perforce to be left to her tenants.

"Never a moment's peace, *sapristi!* One might think that I might have as much holiday as a schoolboy. *Mais non* — M. le Pédagogus is back upon me! Robecq, that is a fine trick you played me. It was you dug up the old man!"

"The best turn I ever did you in all my life, Fulvia," said the manager, with a trifle less urbanity than was usual with him. "Where would you be without Fritz? Answer me that."

She capped him after the fashion that betrayed her origin: "Come, where would you be?"

“Considerably poorer,” owned he with the ghost of his chuckle. “Considerably worse off. I’m the first to admit it.”

His eye fell on the ripe, sullen countenance of the girl opposite to him, at the far end of the table. Both her elbows were propped on it, her clasped hands under her chin; the loose sleeves of her silk blouse had fallen back from the young, firm curves of sunburnt arms and wrists. Her hair stood out in a glory against a sunlit patch of marble space behind her. Her face beneath was downcast as a child’s — beautiful, he thought, with its glow and tan, with the carmine and gold in which this open-air week had steeped it.

“Considerably worse off,” drawled Robecq again; wiped his bearded lip with the absurd fringed napkin; and suddenly smiled — his own genial self once more.

“Fritz does keep us a little too much in order,” he pursued; “and I own, dear friend, that I should have been quite content, if he had withdrawn the light of his countenance for just another fortnight, when the work for Salome must begin in earnest — I’m not clear, either, that he ought to travel so soon. He’s had a pretty sharp attack, I’m afraid.”

“Show me his letter,” ordered the singer.

She snapped it from his hand, as with characteristic deliberation he selected it from his pocketbook. He watched her face as she read; he had expected just that dilation of the nostrils, that uplifted lip of anger; that glance of menace flung from one end of the table to the other.

“*Et voilà!*” she cried. “The old nurse is after the

baby! Who told him Fifi was here? Who told him, I say!"

Again she rapped the table:

"*Ah, ça!* Did you, you little fool?"

Fifi shook her aureoled head.

"You then?"

"No," soothed the Baron, "neither the young fool," his glance rested caressingly upon Fifi, "nor the old fool." He tapped his buff waistcoat jocosely. "My dear friend, it's as simple as A B C. You forget Madame Aubert."

"Old busybody! It serves me right for letting that brat be planted on me!"

Fifi unclasped her hands to hide a trembling lip. This mother, still beloved in spite of a hundred cruel caprices, had not yet lost the power to wound to the quick. She was still enthroned in a sanctuary, to be believed in, to be worshipped, propitiated; a vengeful deity, if you will, but still a deity!

"Have some strawberries, little girl," purred the Baron. He rose to fetch the basket from the side table — a white marble slab supported by green-bronze fauns — and began to pick the largest fruit into a green majolica platter; his voice trickling on complacently, though a furtive glance or two satisfied him that the girl was choking down her tears: "I always think these hothouse strawberries have the best flavour. Everything is the better for cultivation, eh, Fulvia? Cream, *liebes Kind*, and sugar? Brown sugar, to my taste."

Meanwhile La Marmora, all to her grievance, had begun, with jeering comment, to read the letter of her undesired repeditor.



“‘*Verehrter Herr,*’ — (Oh, yes, much he honours you, Robecq — why don’t you show yourself the master for once? You’ve let him get beyond you.) ‘I thank you for your kindness in saying that you wish me to remain some time longer to recruit, and finish my cure, before joining you.’ (You wrote him that, did you?)” An ironical smile twisted her mouth; she turned and strove in vain to catch his eye as he sifted sugar over the selected strawberries. “Robecq, what did you call yourself just now — *ein alter Narr?*” As she swept her eyes away from him back to the letter, they rested a second vindictively on her daughter’s bent head; then she proceeded in a higher and still harsher key: “‘I have had news that decides me to come to England at once. *Ergebenst, F. Meyer.*’ Decides him! *Ergebenst!* I like that! News? He’s had news!” Again the flaming glance sought her daughter. “*Ah, mais, c’est un farceur!* And if I choose to say, I won’t have him about me till he’s wanted, what then, Monsieur le Baron?”

“Why, then, my dear, you’ll be the greatest fool of us three,” he responded tranquilly; he slipped the plate before the girl as he spoke: “To please *me*, Miss Fifi,” he coaxed — “na — never mind fork or spoon — in your own pretty fingers!”

“Pshaw!” exclaimed the prima donna and rose abruptly. Even as she rose she stiffened into an attitude of petrified astonishment.

One of the pert parlourmaids, whose flying white streamers and befrilled aprons were so ludicrously out of tone with these classic haunts, had just drawn aside the heavy purple hanging that separated the reception room

from the dining hall. In the aperture stood a man, looking in upon them.

A man, large of build though bent a little from the shoulders, with a leonine head of white hair, and massive features hewn as out of rock. About the whole figure was the majesty of age, but none of its decadence. His great bowed figure, the lines of his countenance, above all the look in the eyes, spoke of one old in suffering and in endurance, rather than in actual years.

When he had first beheld him, Robecq had recognized in those steadfast eyes, the glance, as he phrased it, of the tamer. No doubt it was through this gaze that Fritz Meyer imposed his authority. Even those to whom he could only be "the old repetitor," had a way of deferring to him when under the spell of his glance. But it would have needed a soul more akin to his own than any he was like to meet in his present life, to understand what lay behind it.

"Fritz!" cried La Marmora, with a quaver in her voice.

"Hullo!" ejaculated the Baron. He strove to be jovial, but the ejaculation rang somewhat flat.

Fifi's high young tones made no disguise of her dismay:

"Oh, dear — Fritz already!"

"Mr. Meyer," announced the pert parlourmaid after a prolonged interval of observation — the ways of the opera singer's household were a constant source of excitement, not unmixed with contempt to her and her kin. She dropped the purple curtain and departed with the flounce she considered her duty to bestow upon a mistress so far removed from gentility.

## IV

### THE REPETITOR

THE newcomer took a few heavy paces forward; and then it was perceived that he walked with difficulty, leaning upon a crutchstick. He paused suddenly, closed his eyes and reeled very slightly. Immediately the impresario, with an exclamation of anxiety, was by his side:

“Good heavens — Meyer — my dear friend, you’re ill! Tut, tut! You’d no business to travel in this state — Sit down! Good God, man,” his eye fell on a swollen bandaged foot encased in a huge black-cloth slipper, “you’ll have phlebitis, as sure as fate! Miss Fifi —” hardly ever had they heard the deliberate Baron speak so sharply, “if there’s a footstool in this — in this damn fool of a place,” he cast a furious glance at the marble nudeness of the room, “bring it along, quick!”

“A glass of wine . . .” suggested the singer, faltering and oddly subdued.

“No,” almost snarled her manager, “wine with inflammatory gout! Murder! Some brandy and water, weak.”

Under his guidance the repetitor sank into a classic chair; and, with a rush of young feet, Fifi plunged into the inner room, to return with an armful of cushions. The gray head was bent forward on the great chest.

"Is he faint?" whispered the girl, terrified; a nip of remorse was at her heart. Fritz had always meant so well by her — had she hurt him? Had he marked her ungracious greeting? She dropped on her knees.

"Child, don't touch the foot!" almost screamed Robecq.

"Oh, Fritz!". . . she cried, and caught the pendant, livid hand.

The old man raised his head, opened his eyes and looked at her. No, he was not faint, for there was illimitable strength of sorrow in those eyes.

"Fritz! Fritz!" she exclaimed again, and scarcely knew why she should feel herself so stricken with remorse, so heartless, so ungrateful. Crouching closer against his chair, she burst into tears. He disengaged his hand to lay it on her head.

"Will you drink this?" said Fulvia with that unwonted, strange uncertainty of manner.

"Thank you, Madame, I will not drink." They were the first words he had spoken since his entrance.

"My dear friend —" Robecq was beginning to protest. He stretched out his hand impatiently for the glass. But La Marmora flung a dark and furtive look at him.

"It's no use," she whispered angrily, and set the glass behind her on the marble slab.

Meyer grasped the edge of the table with one hand and his stick with the other preparatory to the effort of wrenching himself up from his seat. Robecq, his unusual agitation subsiding, measured him thoughtfully.

"*Aber, du lieber,*" he admonished, "*aber mein bester* — you're not in a state to move. You ought to be in bed! Fulvia, get one of those impossible maids of yours to prepare a room directly."

"No," said Meyer.

His voice rang out with such unexpected force and decision that all three started, and Fifi sat back on her heels, pushing the hair back from her wet face to stare. Slowly La Marmora crimsoned. She walked away from them toward one of the archways and leaned against a pillar, looking out upon the green.

The repetitor made another attempt, this time successful, to rise to his feet.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly then, "for making a disturbance. I felt I must come straight to you, just to see —" he paused for a scarcely appreciable moment and let his gaze fall on the girl crouching before him — "to see that all was well with you here. A cab is waiting with my luggage. I go to the Inn."

Though he knew it was futile, the Baron again attempted expostulation. An inn! An English inn! And his friend in such case! And his health so important to them all! And Salome — Salome upon them before they knew where they were!

"And if you're ill — for I fear you'll pay for this — was ever creature so obstinate! If you're ill, where are we? For our sakes, most excellent Meyer, stay here and be nursed."

"It is impossible," answered the other shortly. "Madame —" as if impelled against her will, the singer turned upon the word — "I shall have the honour of



presenting myself for repetition as soon as the Herr Baron thinks it necessary."

"Only don't get ill," she answered fretfully.

He made her a little bow, without speaking. It was so courteous that it was almost a rebuke. Then, once more, he looked at Fifi: "Na — and will you come and see the old man at the Inn?"

She sprang and clung to the hand that held the stick. He looked so ill, her poor old Fritz, with his gray, lined face! There were beads of perspiration on his forehead. His foot must be hurting him dreadfully, and she had been so unkind!

Panther's Cub had a heart and it smote her.

"I'll come this evening! Every evening — just as always!" she cried. "Oh, Fritz, don't be ill!"

Nearly the same words as her mother's; but with what different solicitude!

The old man smiled; then he turned and began to move painfully and slowly toward the entrance.

"I'll go with you," said Robecq. "Here, let me take you, on this side, under the armpit — my dear, dear Fritz! It's straight to bed with you; and I'm dashed —" the Baron rarely swore, but when he did he was extraordinarily emphatic — "if I don't motor up to London and bring down a specialist and a nurse for you this very evening!"

He was as good as his word. A nurse was secured. A specialist was duly kidnapped and brought down; something puzzled, and a little offended at finding that the object was nothing but a shabby old German



musician, laid up in a stuffy roadside-inn room. Robecq's solemn asseveration that the man was more precious to him than gold, that it was a matter almost of life and death to his enterprise, that it was as important to set this Meyer on foot as to preserve his famous singer in voice, failed to convince the great Harley Street oracle. If it had been Madame la Marmora herself whom he had been requested to attend, the expedition would have been more interesting, certainly. But he was willing to make allowances for the proverbial excitability of foreigners; and on examination, found the patient ill enough to awaken some professional zeal.

Mr. Meyer accepted the unsolicited attentions with perfect simplicity, and promised obedience to instructions. Sir James looked very grave and shook his head over the Baron's reiterated asseveration that their good Meyer must somehow or other be up and about in a fortnight at latest. There was fever, there was, as the impresario had himself surmised, venal inflammation. These cases were slow, and depended on individual temperament. It was impossible to pronounce.

Robecq sent the great man home in his own motor, and returned disconsolately to Fritz's bedside.

"Now, here's a pretty thing, Fritz!" he cried, with almost a sound of tears in his drawl.

The old man turned his drawn face on the pillow to look at his manager.

"Do not fret, Herr Baron," he said with conviction, "I shall not fail to the work."

"Well," said the Baron, brightening. "I've never known you fail yet."

In the evening, as she had promised, came Fifi. She ran down through the grounds — it was only some five minutes' walk — still in the rough white serge in which Meyer had seen her that afternoon. Her hair was loosened by the wind and the long day's exercise. She sprang in, with her usual impetuous leap, and roused him from a heavy doze in which he had fallen under the effect of the drugs, which it had been Robecq's business to see promptly delivered.

"Is that my little child?" he asked rather hoarsely.

She came on tiptoe and stood beside the bed. In the dim light of the solitary candle her eyes widened upon him with the awed pity of a child. "The Baron says I'm not to touch you," she whispered. "He says it half kills people to touch them, when they have gout."

"Kneel down," said the man, "and let me see your face."

She knelt. He moved the candle forward, and his eyes, dilated with fever, circled with pain, fixed themselves long and searchingly upon the flushed face. Then he glanced down at the earth-stained hands that lay clasped upon his sheet, and encircled them with his own.

"Ach! Always the tomboy!"

He was wont to scold her for this; but to-night he spoke the words like an indulgent caress, almost as a joyful discovery. Then he laid his fevered finger against her cheek.

"*Es war mir so bang* — I was so afraid when I heard that the little girl had escaped from school."

"But it was to go to Mama — and I am not a little girl any more — Afraid, when I was with my mama?"

The sick man sighed.

"No, you are no longer a little girl. Haf you been good, Fifi?"

She answered him "yes"; though there was an unwonted sense of unreasonable guilt, a weight at her heart as she did so. Why did she not want to tell him about Lord Desmond and all the wonderful new thoughts that circled round him in her mind? Why was she almost glad — nay, quite glad — that Fritz should be kept to his bed, and unable to find out anything yet, for many a long free day to come? The consciousness of her own hidden baseness lent an extra tenderness to her next words:

"Darling old Fritz, I am so sorry you're in pain. Why did you travel?"

"To make sure that you were safe."

It was Fritz's way to fuss over her, she knew; but he had never spoken so openly of his self-appointed guardianship. She resented it as much as her real tenderness of heart would allow her to resent anything to-night from the sick old man who loved her.

"But, Fritz ——"

"Have you said your prayers every night?"

Her laugh rang out:

"Of course, of course, old stupid!"

It was a relief to be able to reassure him in complete truthfulness. For rarely indeed had Fifi prayed so earnestly as after those troubling, delightful evenings, with the memory of the blue eyes in her soul!

"You used to pray at my knee," Meyer went on dreamily.

She thought he was wandering a little; she had never

known him like this before; his face was gray on the pillow, his touch was burning.

"I will say them beside you now," she cried on an inspiration. "And after that you must sleep. Your grand nurse with the cap told me I must not stay long."

She said them then, her child's prayers that he himself had taught her. And when she had done, unconsciously as in the old days, she offered him her forehead for his kiss. He had not kissed her since her confirmation in the German school. Now he did so, solemnly, like one who blesses. After that, with a deep sigh:

"I will sleep," he said, and turned his face toward the wall.

As she looked back from the threshold upon the gray head, she thought, so still he lay, he was already asleep. Then she flew like an arrow from the bow, through the dews and the shadows and scents of the gardens. She was in haste to make herself beautiful — for she never knew what guests her mother might have, and as the Baron was sure, as usual, to ask for her in the evening, perhaps "he" might be among them. Even if they had not a word apart together, their eyes would meet; she had learned — in how short a time! — to seek and find the deep kindling of those slow blue eyes; to feel that it was for her alone.

## V

### SIR JOSEPH CALLS AT BRANKSOME

SIR JOSEPH looked about him with almost apprehensive curiosity. It was the first time that he found himself in what he considered a questionable situation; and every instinct of his middle-class, conventional mind revolted against it. He stood clutching his top-hat as if by it he held on to his endangered respectability; and, awestruck, he watched the serious composure with which Mr. Vere Hamilton, his introducer, trod the marble floor of the reception room — it was adjacent and similar to the hall of feasts — and sat neatly down upon the couch that held the centre of this fantastic apartment.

It was a couch raised upon a dais, canopied with green silk, covered with a huge white bear skin — suggestive of Cleopatra or Helen, or Heaven knew what other reprehensive female with whom even the most virtuous Englishman cannot help having a school-book acquaintance.

“So, here you are, my dear Sir Joseph, in Branksome Cottage,” said Mr. Vere Hamilton in his pleasant way. “Branksome Cottage!” he repeated, lingering over the word in amiable philosophic appreciation. “Dear, dear — when I think that I knew it in its days of dimity and decorum, when my kind old friend, Lady Margaret Branksome used to give her quiet little week-end parties! As Lord Charles was saying to me the other day, it would



be enough to make her turn in her grave to see what that Mrs. Orris has made of her favourite retreat. — You might as well sit down, Sir Joseph. — Circe's couch!" He tapped the bear skin invitingly.

Sir Joseph, who was approaching gingerly, started back.

"Circe!" he exclaimed in tones of horror. He could not for the moment remember what he had once read about that character; but he was quite sure she must be a very improper goddess indeed, to be mentioned in such a connection. "Mr. Hamilton," he proceeded, "I — I was not prepared — Mr. Hamilton, when I entered these — purlieus —"

The little beaver gentleman was shaken by gentle laughter.

"My dear sir, "his tone was soothing, "pray do not be alarmed. My acquaintance with the lady is no greater than your own; but I venture to assure you that everything will be conducted here, to-day, with the utmost propriety. I understand indeed that Madame la Marmora's parties are nothing if not select. — Do sit down."

Sir Joseph sidled toward the couch, and — the image of anxious virtue — sat on the extreme edge of its compromising contour. There he caught a sudden glimpse of his own countenance in a mirror cunningly hidden in the drapery of the canopy, and instantly averted his eyes: that familiar countenance seemed so severely reprobative! But curiosity began to gain the mastery over doubt in the gaze he presently allowed to wander about the room.

It was a large apartment and of unusual shape, with



rounded recesses — evidently several of the cottage parlours thrown into one. Vanished were the modest beflowered papers, vanished the cosy panelling, the rafters and window-seats, which had once made their charm in the eyes of the old gentlewoman. A silvered ceiling, artfully brightened toward the centre from dimness to lustre, produced an illusive dome-like effect. Translucent marbles covered the floor, strewn with huge white bear skins here and there, and, between alabaster pillars, hung weighty draperies of faint-coloured green silk.

Sir Joseph supposed there must be an entrance, since he found himself in the room. But his questioning glance could perceive no issue, save indeed through those open pillared spaces which seemed, between long draperies, to lead on to a sunlit marble terrace, rose-twined, which it would have required an imagination much livelier than his own to associate with the usual riverside verandah.

“It is certainly a strange place,” he remarked. “Strange place indeed . . . like what the imagination would depict as appertaining to the days of ancient pagan Rome. It reminds me, Mr. Hamilton, of those scenes of revelry — ah — revelry and marble halls — that certain artists, with what has always appeared to me questionable taste — have rendered familiar to the public.”

“Perhaps that was the actual source of Mrs. Orris’s inspiration,” suggested Hamilton, a little wearily. “Carried out, I have been told, in an incredibly short space of time — and paid for by an equally incredible cheque, signed, it is whispered, by —”

Mr. Hamilton broke off abruptly. The name ‘Stur-

minster' had actually been on his tongue, before he realized the enormity of the revelation in such ears.

But Sir Joseph had raised a stiffly forbidding hand and attributed the halt to that action: such scandalous whispers were not for his ears! With alacrity, Mr. Vere Hamilton embarked upon a fresh sentence:

"The poor lady who now rents these splendours can scarcely be aware that they are already dubbed, among her intimates, the Panther's Den."

Sir Joseph started and rolled upon the speaker an eye in which dismay, reprobation and inquisitiveness were strangely blended. The Panther . . .! The meaning sobriquet was not altogether new to his ear; but to hear the counsellor of the aristocracy, the man of all others whom anxious mothers consulted upon the errors of gilded youths, the friend of Sir Joseph's own mother-in-law — that Boadicea of high-placed British virtue — talk in this tone of Madame la Marmora! It set the Member of Parliament wondering whether the confidence they all placed in Mr. Vere Hamilton was justified.

Now that he came to think of it, was it not a little singular (but for his laboured gentility, the word in his mind would have been "fishy") that the invitation to Branksome should have been so speedily obtained? It was all very well to talk of Mr. Philip Scott. Sir Joseph had no acquaintance with Mr. Philip Scott, but he did not approve of him; for though he knew that he was received in society, even by titled families, he also knew he was a musical critic. The Marchioness did not receive him. A musical critic must, of necessity, have some traffic with Bohemian society: and there was a Biblical maxim

— which she was fond of quoting in this very respect — anent the touching of pitch. Was Mr. Hamilton, perchance, no more fit to be received into their midst than his friend, Mr. Scott?

But, all unconscious, the object of these uneasy speculations pursued his reflections aloud:

“I asked Mr. Scott,” he went on, leaning back, with what to the other seemed undue and ghastly nonchalance, “why his talented friend did not drop the ‘Cottage’ and call it Villa la Marmora, during her tenancy, and so cheat us into the belief that the waters outside were of some fair Italian lake, not of prosy Thames? But Scott assures me that, like Mrs. Orris herself, she revels in contrast ——”

Sir Joseph was unable to follow the gentle divagations of his companion's mind; but he felt that it would ill become a man of his position to make himself so much at home in Corinthian halls. It was rather hard upon him, he considered, after forty years of unblemished propriety, that the peccadilloes of a brother-in-law should force him into a situation which might almost appear equivocal. What though it was actually with the approval of the wife of his bosom; under the sanction, nay by the command, of that most high-principled of great ladies, her mother; what though (as Vere Hamilton, who knew everybody, assured him) quite nice people went to Madame la Marmora's parties? The fact remained that Sir Joseph Warren-Smith found himself the guest of the notorious woman; that he was likely to meet acquaintances, persons in society who knew him and of him. And his purpose, *I am here only to rescue a*

*noble brother-in-law*, was not written on his blameless brow. The world is a censorious place.

No hard-screwed courage has ever grown by waiting, and Sir Joseph had desperate, if inchoate, resolves in his mind. He began to feel absurdly nervous. The curious, un-English splendour of his surroundings, the subtle fragrance of the atmosphere, the sense of unprotectedness which these mysterious hangings (behind which any one might be lurking) and the unholy secretiveness which the apparently doorless walls gave to the apartment, began to oppress him.

He drew his watch, striving to hide his qualms under the airs of the legislator whose time is valuable not only to himself, but to the nation.

"You were so anxious to be early," observed Hamilton, in answer to the action, "and a lady of Madame la Marmora's profession so invariably takes it out of her friends for the punctuality the public demands of her, that I fear you must arm yourself with patience. But, no doubt, some fellow-guests may soon be expected."

The words were still on his lips, when one of the curtains between the alabaster columns was drawn aside, and Mr. Scott in person, stout and smiling, tripped buoyantly toward them. He was clad in the lightest of spring suits; a damask rose hung from his button-hole. He looked quite respectable, Sir Joseph noticed with relief — a relief which was further confirmed by the geniality of Vere Hamilton's greeting. However little in sympathy with him, your man of the world — and Hamilton was eminently that — invariably meets an acquaintance of long standing as if he were a cherished friend.

"Why, Scott, my dear fellow!"

"Glorious afternoon, Verie! — You're a bit early on the scene, are you not? Didn't I tell you the hour was five? I am staying here, you know. The Panther is still in the inner lair — Blanc-de-perle, Bloom of Ninon and all that."

The newcomer laughed affably, as if, like his hostess, he appreciated the humour of contrast. But as he spoke his small gray eyes were shrewdly appraising Sir Joseph.

"We came early with a purpose," said Vere Hamilton gravely. "You remember I asked you if I might bring a friend — Sir Joseph Warren-Smith."

Taking Scott by the sleeve, he drew him on one side, and began to speak low in his ear, at once to Sir Joseph's relief and further discomfort. For, while he was glad that there should be no misinterpretation concerning his visit, his self-consciousness during the explanation became painfully acute. Mr. Scott's countenance expressed delighted amusement, tempered with a certain airy pity. As the brief colloquy ended, he advanced to shake hands with the devoted pilgrim.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance. — Used to meet Lady Alice. Good Lord, yes, night after night . . . season after season! Meet Sturminster now and again at the Beefsteak. Growing rather bald, eh? And how is the old lady? — grand old lady that, 'Martia Marchioness'! — Makes you all march, don't she?"

Sir Joseph's features grew ever more wooden during this address. He was not accustomed to hear his exalted relatives thus flippantly commented on. Yet, he did not



dare to show open displeasure. For, in the first place, he could not afford to fall out with one who might be useful; and, in the second, there was something impressive about such familiarity of allusion to those whom, even in his inmost thoughts, he only approached with awe.

“My wife’s, Lady Alice’s, mother is as well as her present anxiety will admit of,” he now observed, rallying his pomposity. “If I mistake not, my friend, Mr. Hamilton here, has even now informed you what a painful family dilemma it is that brings me into these, ah, purlieus, Mr. Scott.”

Hugely pleased was Sir Joseph with the comprehensive dignity of this phrase. Scott composed his pursy mouth to a suitable gravity, though his eyes gleamed maliciously as he responded, wagging his head:

“Ah, the prodigal son! Queer fellow, Desmond! Always took a line of his own, hasn’t he? — Naughty, naughty!”

Mr. Scott was here fain to relapse into mirth. Turning toward Hamilton, he took him by the lapels of his coat and shook him gently backward and forward in cadence.

“Panther’s last! — Positively her last. God bless us all, I never saw the creature so — so, so *enragée*, shall we say? Your brother-in-law, my dear — ah — Sir Joseph, comes here pretty often, you know. I’ve had opportunities of judging. Good-looking fellow, in his lean, languid way. — My dear Verie,” turning back to Hamilton, “you should see the Panther’s eyes upon him — phosphorescent! Green flame, positive flame!”

“Phos — green flame . . . ! How revolting . . .



how distressing!" ejaculated the horror-struck Member of Parliament.

"The family are very anxious," said Hamilton. His refined voice rang as pleasantly as if the topic had been specially agreeable to all concerned. "They understand that Lord Desmond has followed the lady from Vienna. And it is expected, as you know, my dear Scott, that a diplomatist should at least be discreet in his indiscretions. — Lord Desmond's attitude, I believe, when approached on the subject . . ."

He paused and looked expectantly toward Sir Joseph, who thereupon, not without a gloomy pride, described his wife's brother's attitude as callous as well as reckless in the last degree.

"His mother, his sister, myself," he concluded, "have communicated with him on the subject — by letter, for he has so far refused, absolutely refused to frequent our houses."

"Lord Desmond," said Mr. Scott, "is not exactly the person to be driven on the curb, is he? Never was a steady goer, I take it. *Toujours ombrageux*, as our French friends have it — and now, at his age —"

"Nearly thirty-three," commented Hamilton.

"You're not likely to get him in between the shafts. — I fear you poor, dear, excellent, anxious people are not likely to improve matters. Dear, dear, if relations would only now and again shut their eyes and stop their ears, how much trouble they might save themselves and others!"

"When matters have become public report," rebuked Sir Joseph, "the policy you recommend, Mr. Scott, were mere cowardice. It is a question of saving my brother-

in-law in spite of himself. His whole career is at stake. The position of a diplomatist is so important. In fact," said Sir Joseph, blowing out his cheeks with something of his best House manner, "it is the imminent sense of his danger that has brought me into this, ah, this, I say this establishment, prepared, if need be, to address myself, ah, to the . . . source of the mischief itself. — I refer to Madame la Marmora."

Vere Hamilton turned his little mouse-gray face, startled, upon the speaker. Surely this was exceeding their mandate. But Sir Joseph's eye met him proudly. A minute ago he had not had the vaguest idea of such a proceeding. The threat had escaped him upon the tide of his own pomposity. But, now uttered, it had so fine a ring of manly determination in his ears, that he determined to abide by it, on fitting occasion. — Yes, that was it, on fitting occasion.

Scott clapped his plump hands together and fell upon the couch the more comfortably to indulge in delighted laughter.

"Pick the Panther off her prey!" cried he. "May I be there to see!"

Vere Hamilton deprecated in his gentle way:

"I hardly think, Sir Joseph, that we are justified — that it would even be advisable — I believe, myself, that when a lady of her description has one of these peculiar fancies, the less she is opposed the more quickly it is likely to pass."

But there was no relenting in Sir Joseph's aspect.

Mr. Scott wiped his eyes and dabbed his brow expressively with a mauve silk handkerchief. Then, restoring it to his pocket, he remarked carelessly:

“How well you express it, Verie. But, really, you good people are agitating yourselves unnecessarily. Fortunately, or unfortunately for my poor dear hostess — now don't die of astonishment — Lord Desmond can't endure her.”

Both his hearers exclaimed, turning upon him incredulously. Mr. Scott's wreathed smile not unnaturally led them to the conclusion that he was attempting a poor joke.

“Good gracious, Scott!” cried Mr. Hamilton.

The simple expletive showed him as nearly annoyed as it lay in his amiable nature to be. — Harmless creature! his sole aim in life had been that social position, which he had reached without any of the spites, the envies, the petty meannesses which generally accompany such a career. He was never so nearly moved to wrath as when anything grated upon his gentlemanly ideals. It was a look of approval that he cast upon the smirking Scott.

But it was choler, on the other side, that might be seen mounting to Sir Joseph's brow — purple choler; well-nigh rattling, as you may see it mount in an offended turkey.

“Your levity, sir, is misplaced — misplaced,” he spluttered.

“You dear, good people,” cried the culprit again, beaming yet more broadly, “I am not pulling your leg: 'pon honour, I'm not. Lord Desmond is bored to death by all Panther's ogles and gambols. — He does not care one twopenny curse for her. The more she fawns, the silkier and the sleeker she grows with him, the more utterly she bores him. I positively declare he loathes the sight of her.”

There was conviction in the words as well as in the tone.

"Dear Mr. Scott," Sir Joseph exclaimed as this conviction was agreeably borne in upon him, "you take a crushing weight off my mind!"

He drew a huge breath as if the relief were physical, both hands held out in his effusion. But Mr. Scott made no responsive gesture. His fat fingers were playing a jaunty, silent tune on his fat knees.

Hamilton eyed him askance: he had known the critic many years already.

"Yet Lord Desmond," he objected, "has admittedly followed Madame la Marmora to England; and he comes to Branksome, it is said, constantly."

"Quite so, Verie," responded the other with unabated cheerfulness. He looked benignly from Sir Joseph to Hamilton: then he cackled: "Yes, Lord Desmond did follow from Vienna to London, and he does come to Branksome. But it is —" he stopped and shook out a triumphant forefinger — "it is for the daughter — for the girl."

"The girl!" ejaculated Hamilton, while Sir Joseph stood open-mouthed.

"Didn't you know," proceeded Scott, "that Panther has a cub?"

Sir Joseph fumbled for his pocket-handkerchief; his brow was suddenly moist. He did not in the least understand, but a new sense of calamity was borne in upon him. Hamilton's face, however, clouded. He understood. He sat down again on the couch beside Scott.

"A girl, the daughter?" he went on. — "I heard vaguely there was a child in the background. But — but, my dear fellow, you don't mean to tell me ——"

“The child, La Marmora vows, is just seventeen.— An uncommonly well-developed young woman to pass for being barely out of the schoolroom. She’s been kept hidden away at school, certainly. A few months ago the Panther suddenly turned maternal, and sent for her cub. That was at Vienna. That’s where Desmond saw them, and ——”

Vere Hamilton interrupted, pulling at his neat, pointed beard with nervous fingers:

“This is indeed a very different matter ——”

“Yes — a horse of quite another colour, isn’t it?” said Scott, charmed at the concern he had created.

“Quite another colour indeed,” assented Mr. Hamilton, faintly.

“And much more likely to run away with him,” concluded the other, with his chuckle.

Sir Joseph started. The last remark had pricked him into a sudden perspicacity.

“Run away with Lord Desmond! Merciful heavens, what do you mean by that?”

“I mean, my dear sir, that the mother might cost your brother-in-law a few thousands and another shred or two of reputation. But the daughter might cost him ——” He paused and drew a circle in the air.

As if hypnotized, the Member of Parliament bent over him and unconsciously imitated the gesture.

“Might cost him — in Heaven’s name speak out.”

“A wedding ring,” chuckled Philip Scott.

Sir Joseph exploded: “A wedding ring! — Monstrous!” He turned to Hamilton. He could no longer address personally one who had been guilty of this out-



rageous suggestion. "Would Mr. Scott have us believe, Mr. Hamilton, that my brother-in-law, Lord Desmond, could be so unprincipled, so lost to every sense of honour, to what is due to his family, to himself, to society, as to contemplate marriage — marriage with such a — such a young person?"

"Not necessarily. — Possibly," said Mr. Scott. He shrugged his shoulders: seldom had a situation appealed to his sense of humour more completely. With a groan, the Baronet let himself drop upon the white bear skin beside the two.

"Poor Lady Alice, my poor wife . . .! The Marchioness — my poor mother-in-law, none of us had any idea of this!" he murmured. "It's — it's horrible," he groaned. "To marry the girl —"

"Not necessarily; but possibly," soothed Scott again. "Of one thing, you may be sure, my dear Sir Joseph, you will have a powerful ally in La Marmora herself. She's not going to allow her cub to snap her own chosen morsel."

He paused and laughed with something of the soft unctuous note of the reflective starling.

"Funny thing," he resumed; "the situation has not even dawned upon poor, dear Fulvia yet. She thinks your handsome brother-in-law comes here for her, ha, ha!" He emphasized his appreciation of the joke by a finger-pat against Sir Joseph's rigid knee. "So accustomed, you know, to being the magnet, and all that. Else she'd not keep Miss Fifi a moment longer on the scene, even for her own little plan — which, Sir Joseph, I may presently unfold for your consolation. — Surely I hear



a motor. Perhaps the naughty diplomat. His chauffeur must be familiar with the road to Branksome."

"Oh, Hamilton," cried Sir Joseph, looking across Scott's rounded outline, toward his sympathetic friend. "This is worse, much worse, than we anticipated!"

"Tut, tut!" interposed Scott before the other could think of a suitable reply. "Buck up! Our friend is very far from buying a wedding ring yet. I'll swear the thought has not even crossed his mind. Come, we'll all stand by you. — I'd do it for poor, dear Panther's sake alone," he added sentimentally. "Between ourselves, I can't endure Cub."

There was the beat of a slow footstep against the marble. A tall man appeared between the green silk curtains, and stood looking with a sardonic smile at the three gentlemen seated side by side upon the Greek couch under the canopy.

"The three graces!" he said presently, with jeering nonchalance. "Why, Joseph! Joseph? It's never Joseph . . . in the Venusberg!"

Two of the trio rose discountenanced, each in his own way; while Scott lolled and smiled a trifle one-sidedly. — He did not much care for other people's jokes.

The newcomer advanced. The smile was still on his lips, but his eyes were not friendly.

## VI

### GOSSIP

MR. VERE HAMILTON looked with interest at Lord Desmond whom he had not seen for many years; not, in fact, since the latter's undergraduate days. As he looked, he recalled their last meeting. Yes, it was in the late Marquis's time, on an autumn visit to Sturminster. He remembered how he had liked the boy. They had had a certain long ride together in the woods. He had been struck by his companion's freshness of mind, his enthusiasm, high spirits; by the nobility — Vere Hamilton was a man to appreciate nobility in any form — of his outlook on life. "He'll be a credit to his race," he had told himself pleasantly.

As he now looked, he found it difficult to trace any connection between past and present; between the dashing, enthusiastic boy, and the man before him.

Sixteen years was certainly a long time; but it did not seem natural to Hamilton — who was himself, at sixty, much the same guileless, precise, tuft-hunting little gentleman he had been at twenty — that the mere passage of time could cause so much alteration. Handsome the man was, as the boy had been; and the crisp wave of the hair over the low, wide forehead was the same; but the colour had gone out of it, as indeed out of the whole

personality; and it lay dull-dark and gray-streaked against the pallid darkness of the face.

For the rest, in spite of a well-knit frame and broad shoulders, the general effect of figure as well as of countenance was one of extreme languor. When he spoke, however, the lines of the face were mocking; they betrayed also a latent bitterness. The eyes, blue between thick black lashes, eyes which Hamilton had remembered as singularly brilliant, had now no light in them. The smile showed white teeth, but rarely merriment. Down to the long pale hands, all told the kindly man of the world, whose own existence had been, and was still, replete with harmless interests, that here was one whom a Frenchman would have summed up in a single phrase: "*il a veçu.*"

Vere Hamilton would not have been Vere Hamilton, had he not seized the opportunity to reintroduce himself as a friend of the family.

"I have not forgotten our rides in the New Forest, Lord Desmond," said he.

Lord Desmond shook hands loosely, with a vague: "Ah, really — really?"

And Hamilton fell back with an uneasy smile of the rebuffed.

Yet rebuff was as far from the diplomatist's thoughts as cordiality itself. He was merely slipping through his part in the social play with as little trouble as possible. He now flung himself upon the nearest chair, acknowledged Mr. Scott's familiar wave of greeting with a jerk of the head, and turned his glances and his mocking smile in the direction of his brother-in-law.

"Three Graces did I say? the three goddesses rather --

to whom shall Paris give the apple? What will you do with it, my fair Joseph?" he asked.

"The apple ——?" stammered Sir Joseph.

He had been making furtive signals of distress to Hamilton. But, as the latter showed no response, the baronet drew a long breath of resolve; and ignoring the prodigal's further taunting suggestion; "Forbidden fruit, eh?" strutted up to him, bent over his chair, and sepulchrally whispered:

"Do you think this is a nice place for you — Lord Desmond Brooke — to be seen at?"

"Well, Joe, and what is your opinion on the point? Ah — what would my good sister, Alice, say — and what the constituents? Oh, Joe!"

Sir Joseph broke into a cold sweat in spite of the oppressive heat of the day. His tormentor went on, without the smallest attempt at lowering his drawling accents or concealing his mockery.

"Often come here, Joseph? Strange we never should have met before."

Mr. Scott sniggered aloud, while Hamilton discreetly abstracted his attention. St. Lawrence could not have felt more uneasy on his grid than did the pompous Member of Parliament.

"You are very well aware, Desmond," he began, in blustering rebuke, "what unfortunate circumstances bring me to this house. Nothing but my sense of duty to the family, to my — my — to your —" he broke off, to resume feebly: "We are very unhappy! The family is very unhappy, Desmond. . . . And you know very well that I've never been here before."

"Never mind," said Lord Desmond, leaning back and yawning. "You'll come again, Tannhäuser, when you find how thrilling it is in the grotto, and how much more pleasant Venus is than . . . Alice."

"Alice . . .!" gasped the husband, unable to credit the possibility of such blasphemy.

"I mean — Elizabeth, of course," said his brother-in-law imperturbably.

Scott laughed again; and the kindly Hamilton, pitying Sir Joseph's agony of bewilderment and impotent resentment, intervened with somewhat forced *naïveté*:

"Must we all explain our reasons for coming to Branksome? Our hostess gives very pleasant garden parties, I understand. I expect to meet many of my friends, and besides to make the acquaintance of a celebrated artist."

Scott broke in, with his starling chuckle.

"Let *me* not be behind Verie in unfolding the moral passport. I might plead, as musical critic, that I am bound to penetrate these, aha! grottoes occasionally. But I will be candid. La Marmora's got a splendid chef; I never refuse an invitation to Branksome. You see, my reason lies in a nutshell."

"Is that what you call it?" asked Desmond, with a slight glance in the direction of Mr. Scott's garden-party waistcoat.

Mr. Scott glared at the speaker's countenance with sudden vindictiveness; but was baffled by its imperturbability, not to say blankness.

"Wait, my superior friend, wait," angrily he apostrophized the diplomatist in his mind; "and if I do not ruffle that aristocratic languor of yours before long!"



"I assure you, Mr. —" The effort to recollect the name of one of such recent acquaintance, was evidently too much for Lord Desmond. He looked at Mr. Hamilton, as if inviting him to fill up the hiatus — and pursued with his mirthless smile:

"I assure you that I don't see why any one need explain his reasons for coming here. Least of all, Sir Joseph — Oh, no, Joseph, I beg — I beg, do not explain! Why distress yourself this way, my dear fellow?"

"Don't explain, Sir Joseph," said Scott, extending his curves more gracefully and comfortably on the classic couch, and proceeding to select a cigar.

Sir Joseph, turning upon him with all the exasperation he dared not vent upon his aristocratic brother-in-law, was met by the smiling proffer of the open case. His splutter was cut short through sheer inability to meet the situation, and he tamely took a cigar. This, however, he continued to stare at with an air of abstract horror, until Scott, voluptuously drawing the first puff, noted his attitude.

"Don't be afraid of it, Sir Joseph," he said. "They're from Robecq's own cabinet. Ah, I always make a point of filling my case here — best cigars in Europe."

As he spoke, he offered one to Lord Desmond. The latter looked for a moment at the case, and then, through his heavy lids at the easy gentleman's countenance, and said:

"Thanks, I prefer my own."

"May I sample one?" interposed Hamilton, as usual ready to cover the moment's tension. (Poor old Scott might not be the best fellow in the world, but really he



meant well. . . . Lord Desmond's manner was almost disagreeable . . . doubtless only manner.) "You mean, of course, Robecq the financier," he went on as he selected a Panatella.

"Exactly; the great American impresario and financier. The Panther's keeper, aha! if I may use the expression — Our dear creature's showman . . . shortly —" Scott paused and shot a malevolent look at Lord Desmond, "shortly to be her pretty little son-in-law."

The diplomatist had just struck a match to light his cheroot; he paused and held it flaming between his fingers, as if fallen into a sudden muse. The flame reached his fingers; he shook them and seemed to think that he had lit his cigar, for he puffed at it vaguely, once or twice.

Mr. Scott's smile became accentuated, as he proceeded, still keeping him under his scrutiny:

"Tut — tut! I believe I have let out a little secret. You will kindly keep it to yourselves, dear, good people. You see, I am an old friend of Fulvia la Marmora."

Mr. Hamilton was really flustered.

"To finance the mother is all very well — but to marry the daughter! Scott, my dear friend, did I hear you say: Marry the daughter? The daughter — quite a young girl!"

"You do misunderstand — My dear Verie, your countenance is as good as a play — Gossip, for once, has maligned the prima donna and the Jew. Robecq is, above all things, a man of business. It is his rule in life never to mix up business and pleasure — he is fond of saying so, and it is no vain boast — She is, of course, only one of his many investments; but, just now, she is

by far the most important. He makes her engagements on his own terms, carts her about the world, pays the bills, and above all looks after the voice that is his gold mine. But there has never been that —" he snapped the edge of his nail expressively — "between them."

"I am very glad," said Hamilton relieved, "very glad."

Sir Joseph shook his head with a grunt of disbelief.

"Dear me, yes, I went over to Paris for her *début*. I was on the *Argus*, then. Robecq left me no peace till I consented to write her up; and by George, she was worth it! After that I never missed a new performance of hers anywhere within reach. Dear me, yes, we're quite old friends. She knows I've done her many a good turn. Why, I really think Robecq would never have got her Covent Garden engagement, if it weren't for me."

Sir Joseph turned, woodenly, as if constructed all of a piece, to survey the speaker. He really did not think he could smoke the cigar of a man who talked so lightly of so notorious a being; a man who admitted, almost boastfully, that he had been instrumental in bringing her contaminating presence into Britain.

Unconsciously the sinner continued his self-satisfied discourse.

"So the dear lady does me the honour to consult me, in confidence, now and again. Not that she ever follows my advice. But in this instance, she has my approval. Capital thing for all parties, except, perhaps, for old Robecq. I'm not so sure about poor Robecq — Odd, now, with all his wives, that he should want Panther's Cub!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Hamilton.

Sir Joseph turned his bovine air of reproving astonishment upon him. Since there was a chance of getting the girl out of the way, what ailed Hamilton, the accredited friend of the family, that he should look so shocked?

Hamilton was really flustered.

"Surely, Scott, my dear fellow, I misunderstand you. You cannot approve of such a marriage, if this Mr. — Mr. Robecq is — is — has ——"

"Reassure yourself, my dear Verie. Robecq is neither Bluebeard nor Mormon. Merely a law-abiding American citizen. He is perfectly free to make a fresh choice."

But the little gray gentleman was still disturbed in his mind.

"Is not Miss la Marmora still a very young lady?"

"Fresh from school last month. Her name, by the way, is not La Marmora, but Lovinska. She's about as much right to the one as to the other. Don't ask me why, before Sir Joseph." The last-named gentleman still stood, rigidly holding the reprobate cigar at arm's length. He was listening intently. Scott now regarded him with a quizzical air.

"Have a light, won't you — And you, Lord Desmond, unless you prefer cold tobacco?"

Desmond stretched out his hand in silence for the lighted match, which his brother-in-law had sternly waved aside.

But Hamilton was manifestly uneasy.

"It seems to me a very unsuitable match for an innocent young girl," he ejaculated querulously.

The critic's eyebrows described a humorous curve. "Who spoke of innocence, Verie?"

Sir Joseph glared the same question. Innocent indeed! the daughter of such a mother! and now Mr. Scott again phrased the baronet's own thought in what he could not but consider a remarkable manner:

"Well, and what do you expect of the Cub, but that it should gambol after the Panther? Do sit down, my good, excellent Verie, you make one feel so hot. It is high time that Miss Fifi should be married — high time."

The cotton spinner tried to exchange a glance of intelligence with his accomplice. "Draw him out!" it urged.

But the friend of the family seemed to be taking an unaccountable view of the situation. He turned (with what Sir Joseph afterward described to his wife as quite a scowl) from the meaning look and flung himself on a seat at some distance, his shoulder turned to the company. The tapping of a very neat black boot within a superlatively white spat further protested against the subject of conversation.

Sir Joseph swelled. It was quite evident that the matter must be entirely conducted by himself. If flip-pant, this Scott was nevertheless a gentlemanly, pleasant fellow enough. Yes, he would smoke that cigar. He would be tactful and do the drawing out himself.

"Do I understand you to imply, sir —" his manner was once more parliamentary — "that the young person in question shows a disposition to, ah — to follow in her mother's footsteps?"

"Why shouldn't she?" cried the airy Scott. "Admirable woman, her mother, delightful woman, successful

woman! Who could blame Miss Fifi for wanting to follow in her mother's footsteps?"

"Pshaw," said Hamilton. He uncrossed and recrossed his legs; scraped his chair indignantly on the marble.

Scott laughed. Nothing so stimulated his peculiar form of humour as opposition.

"Not that she cannot toddle along on her own account already," he concluded.

Sir Joseph, though following with difficulty the nimble twists of the critic's fancy, had wit enough to seize the trend, if not the full bearing of this observation.

"Do I gather that there has been already, ahem, some scandal ——"

He rolled his eyes toward his brother-in-law, as he spoke. Lord Desmond was lying back in his easy-chair; he might have been asleep or dead, for all the expression discernible on his pallid countenance.

"Scandal? Oh, my dear sir!" said Scott smiling. His glance likewise sought the impassive face. "Scandal is a big word, a big word for any little stir that Miss Fifi may have made. Come, come, don't ask me to give her away."

Hamilton rose stiffly from his chair; wheeled and surveyed the group, his neat countenance, his mild glance, charged with unusual severity; then he walked away toward the shaded terrace. It was the most scathing rebuke there was in him to give; he himself thought it fulminating. He was ashamed of his companions; outraged by Philip Scott; amazed that a man of breeding like Lord Desmond should lie and feign sleep, while a



young lady — the young lady he was said to admire — was thus lightly spoken of.

The critic, however, was alone of the trio to be aware of this disapproval, in which moreover his idle malice would merely have found a zest; Lord Desmond's eyelids were sealed, and Sir Joseph, agog with excitement, was bent only on extracting the hinted-at revelation in its completeness.

"I think, Mr. Scott," said the baronet, "that under the circumstances, you owe it to us —" he glanced round and perceived his companion's final defection. "To me," he amended firmly, "not to refrain from putting me in possession of, hum — er, the whole of the facts to which you allude. The family, on whose behalf I am here to-day — the family of my — I fear I must say my infatuated brother-in-law."

Lord Desmond's black-lashed eyelids slowly unclosed, and his blue eyes glittered for a barely appreciable moment on the speaker. It was enough to reduce Joseph to a purple silence. Then:

"Stop that, you silly ass!" said his lordship, succinctly.

As the baronet gasped, Scott's chuckle resounded in delight.

"My dear Sir Joseph, why should you imagine that I know anything of the kind? And if I did, just reflect a moment; could I be expected to — to — 'Pon my word 'tisn't fair to ask me. Supposing that the dear child had made her little *faux pas* —"

"Her — what?" echoed the other with a self-forgetful emphasis; "her what?" He craned his neck; his eyes protruded.



"*Faux pas*," repeated the gossip. "Delightfully generic term, which may include every kind of fancy step, my dear, good sir, except indeed the *pas seul*."

He was alone to appreciate his own humour. Sir Joseph stood staring. Lord Desmond was yawning. Philip Scott perceived that it might after all be advantageous to change the subject. He knew, none better, how much more disturbing is the innuendo than the statement. He knew that he had so far succeeded in his benevolent intention and sown the seed of conjecture in Lord Desmond's mind.

"For all your airs, my noble lord, you have not been able to smoke your cigar," he said inwardly.

The pompous baronet, too, was left in a state of tantalization; and "dear Verie," who was so ridiculously superior, and always coming the perfect gentleman over one, was positively peevish. The dull half-hour of waiting had not been wasted.

He rose, yawned in his turn, and surveyed the long ash of his cigar critically.

"Any sign of our fair hostess without, Verie?"

Hamilton came down from the terrace, flung an unappeased glance upon his interpolator, passed him deliberately and addressed Lord Desmond; his conscience smiting him the while lest his extraordinary display of severity should have been-too acutely felt.

"Do you feel inclined to come for a stroll in the garden? There are quite a number of people there already, and it seems to me oppressively hot here."

His words were emphasized by a liquid thud and rhythm of oars, and a distant ring of laughter.

Lord Desmond opened his eyes.

“Really — I don't happen to feel hot.” Upon this he closed them again and settled his long limbs as for more deliberate repose.

Unusually discomfited, the little gentleman drew back and took his solitary way out on the terrace, passing the gloomily ruminating Joseph and the still chuckling Scott with renewed disfavour.

“Certainly,” ran his sore thought, “Lord Desmond's manners are far from pleasant — far from pleasant.”

## VII

### THE PANTHER'S DEN

MADAME LA MARMORA had been a fortnight in England; and almost from the day of landing seemed to have stepped into that social position for which she had so long hankered in vain.

True, in the States, as much homage had been paid to her talent and success by all classes as any artist could claim to have received; but Americans are notably large-minded in such matters. There were also one or two noted salons in Paris where she was made welcome, but only one or two and these cosmopolitan. While, as an artist she could not feel that she had reached full success until the English public had acknowledged her, as a woman she had always aspired to the social eminence given to so many of her operatic sisters; aspired to it almost more ardently.

Robecq had assured her that all would be well. It was his business indeed to see that all should be well. But even he was surprised at the reception which spontaneously greeted the new star. How much was due to his own clever advertising (he was determined that her long-delayed London *début* should be heralded with the utmost *éclat*) this astute gentleman carefully kept to himself.

But the London society craze for personality, and

novelty at any price, was no doubt a material factor. The Salome arrived upon the scene at a moment when Society was at a loss for a fresh idol. Bare-footed dances had been multiplied *ad nauseam*; the murderous gymnastics of Apaches were beginning to pall; Sicilian epileptic convulsions were already forgotten. Here was one reputed of extraordinary beauty, of peerless voice, of fantastic notoriety. For her savage grace no less than for her wild adventures, it seemed that she had been nicknamed the Panther. Every one could see for himself that rumour had not lied with regard to her beauty; for her portraits, in every conceivable attitude and costume, flooded the papers. Needless to say, the hostess who could first secure such a presence at her house was certain of the success of the season. Coroneted notes poured in upon Robecq at Claridge's. The slightest shadow of acquaintance with the impresario was held sufficient pretext.

“Dear Baron, I hope you have not forgotten me; we met once last year, at Lady Caradoc's — I'm just dying to meet Madame la Marmora — ”

“Can we induce you to bring your *merveille*?”

“Fix your own night, dear Baron — the Duke and I — ”  
etc.

The manager had a private smile, and an invariable reply for these blandishments. It was no part of his programme that his star should make herself cheap by shining, except from her proper setting, even if the risk of crowds and hot rooms had not of necessity to be shunned. But as he could not altogether keep the more enterprising novelty-hunters from applying direct to her;

and as it was of the utmost importance to keep the Panther in good humour; as further he was supremely anxious to provide a counter attraction to Lord Desmond, he permitted the tenancy of the marble "cottage," and even encouraged the bi-weekly strawberry parties. Let her have a fling for a little while; it could only be for a little while. The Herr Repetitor was keeping his word satisfactorily; work was to begin in earnest at the end of the month. The production of Salome was announced for the week following Ascot.

Meanwhile, faithful to his maxim of not mixing business with pleasure, he was making no attempt to advance his courtship qua suitor. Besides the fact that he could not give his mind to it with any comfort, it was his purpose to let the girl familiarize herself with him first as a kind of benevolent genie. He treated her as one would a child one is bent on spoiling. He was for ever bringing her little gifts; constantly procuring little treats. Between her and her mother's stormy caprices he would interpose his authoritative good nature. But it was on the day when he presented her with a Persian kitten that he altogether won from her some real liking.

Meanwhile he was by no means blind to the fact that it was for her and her alone that Lord Desmond Brooke paid his frequent visits to Branksome. At first it caused him some annoyance, though hardly amounting to perturbation. He could easily have put a stop to it, no doubt, by one hint dropped in the mother's ear. But that was the last thing the manager of an irascible prima donna could afford to do. We must tide over Salome — at all costs, was his perpetual preoccupation. After that

we shall have summer holidays — let the Panther scream then. She would have served her turn — Let her scream.

It was his cue, of course, to foil Lord Desmond's opportunities with Fifi, if not for the sake of his future "pleasure," at least for that of his present "business." He even went so far as to allay any possible suspicion in La Marmora's breast by straining the truth in his reference to Lord Desmond; speaking of him casually as "your latest adorer, dear friend"; laughing gently at British manners of expressing feelings as exemplified by his lordship; never failing to comment with knowing smile on the frequency of his appearance among them.

Privately he wondered at the singer's obtuseness. He little knew that he had had a potent ally in this work of deception. And this was Elisa.

When the sheaf of lily of the valley had arrived at the hotel, in Vienna, Lord Desmond's card attached very distinctly had borne the dedication: "For Mademoiselle." Mother and daughter had both been out; it was the maid who had received the flowers from the messenger. A spasm of rage had seized the old woman at the thought of her mistress's eclipse, of her own jealous forebodings thus early realized.

"*Ah bien, non!*" she had cried through her teeth. "Little viper, it shall not be for thee!" With her nimble French fingers she had detached the card, erased the pencil inscription and rewritten it.

The singer had found the great cool fragrant bunch in her room upon returning from her drive; and as she read the dedication — "Pour Madame la Marmora,"



had known a moment of exquisite joy and triumph. Fifi had cried herself to sleep that night.

Thus the web of illusion had begun to be woven. The diva was wound round with it; living in it cocoon-like, with something that almost approached happiness in her restless heart.

On this, the day of her fourth garden party, she was standing on the lawn, in the shade of a great cedar tree, receiving her guests with that urbane, *grande dame* manner in which she was becoming ever more proficient.

She wore a filmy garment of corn-coloured crêpe, embroidered with wonderful delicacy and richness in long lines of wheat-ears. An immense hat of the same tint, garlanded with bunches of corn in every shade of yellow, crowned her burnished head. It was the inspiration of an artist; an embodiment of summer ripeness, yet conveying a sense of diaphanous coolness. Tucked into the riband of the high Directoire waist was a bunch of tea roses.

“*Mais vous savez qu'elle est ideale!*” exclaimed a little French countess, who had left her dear Lady Peterborough no peace till she had been brought within the coveted circle.

La Marmora overheard, as she was meant to do, and the radiance in her eyes was heightened.

It was a gay and pretty scene. The grounds at Branksome ran in two terraces down to the river. All that was not smooth green turf in the upper lawn was rose garden. At one end of the marble colonnade that so incongruously replaced the original verandah against the brick walls, a long buffet with tea and every kind of iced drink

awaited the guests. But the promised strawberries were set on small tables in lost corners under the trees; beneath pergolas; in unexpected and shady nooks; each provided with but two chairs — little traps for summer flirtations. This device created merriment among the company, but seemed nevertheless appreciated.

Sir Joseph, piloted by the friend of the house, stepped as gingerly from the fine gravel of the path on to the sward, as if in this garden of Eden he feared to find the serpent beneath his foot.

“Behold,” said Scott, dithyrambically, indicating the variegated group under the cedar tree with a gesture. “Behold Margherita, Messalina, Mimi, Violetta — Salome! Ah, above all, Salome!”

Sir Joseph stopped with a jerk:

“Mimi, Violetta, Salome!” he ejaculated in horror — “Mr. Scott, this is a very unpleasant situation. Hamilton gave me to understand — I am afraid I cannot disguise from myself that this is more than doubtful company!”

The other was overcome with laughter, such laughter that he was fain to clutch his companion's unresponsive coat sleeve;

“Oh, my dear, good sir,” he gasped at last, “positively you'll be the death of me!” Then, meeting the offended glare of the baronet, he composed himself to gravity — only to break out again.

“My fault — my fault entirely! My little picturesque way. I refer merely to our peerless hostess. Yonder she stands — ravishing creature! All in yellow



*She was standing on the lawn . . . receiving her guests with that urbane, grande dame manner, in which she was becoming ever more proficient*



to-day. True to her Panther's livery! Fulvia well named! Never look so alarmed, my dear, good fellow — why the air is thick with her purrs! You will be received as if you were royalty and her most beloved friend rolled into one."

"Mr. Scott," said Sir Joseph, "I trust that such blandishments — if the lady thinks by flattery she will make me condone — sir, it is with the utmost repugnance I have set foot in these purlieus, and — in short, Mr. Scott, I cannot share your light way of regarding ——"

He tripped in a croquet hoop in his agitation as he spoke; and the critic caught him nimbly by the elbow.

"Steady, Sir Joseph.—" Then he had to stop to enjoy another cachinnation. "Look at — the doubtful company. Pray forgive me. I cannot help seeing the droll side of things. You dear, good people have such vivid imaginations!"

He glanced at Sir Joseph's face and the comic inexactitude of his own words, "vivid imagination," as applied to anything so wooden, tickled him afresh. "As our good Verie told you, Madame la Marmora's parties are conducted with a good deal more decorum than you will find, say, at Sturminster under the present reign. And you'll meet people here to-day every whit as virtuous, and a great deal more amusing, than Martia Marchioness herself. Why, look yonder, isn't that Lord and Lady Lossie coming toward us?"

The poor bewildered Member of Parliament fumbled for his eyeglasses and remained staring. In the large, bland, whitebearded gentleman, strolling smilingly across his line of vision, and in the little withered lady in violet

silk who tripped beside him, looking with alert interest about her, he recognized indeed that well-known pair. The Low Church Champions; the Temperance enthusiasts; the organizers of Drawing-room prayer meetings, of the Anti-Betting League, the young men's Lord's Day Association; the young woman's black-bonnet friend; of the cocoa-and-lemonade hostels and the rest of it. Lord and Lady Lossie! Lord and Lady Lossie, Madame la Marmora's guests! And indubitably well pleased to be so! . . .

"Come, come," said Scott, jogging him playfully with his cane. "Your hostess is looking at you."

The baronet tottered on. All his most cherished convictions violently upheaved. What was the world, and, more important still, what was British aristocracy coming to?

As one in a nightmare, he found himself under the cedar tree in actual proximity to the abandoned creature. He had resolved, as he had even informed his wife ere departing, that nothing would induce him to shake hands with her. And here he stood gazing helplessly at his own stout, suède-covered fist encircled in her slender bare hand.

Her clasp lingered, as she turned with honeyed questioning from the stranger to his introducer:

"Sir Joseph Warren-Smith? But, of course, Sir Joseph Warren-Smith. . . . No, we have not met before, have we, Sir Joseph? But, of course, I know the name."

"The Member of Parliament," said Scott with a grin.

"The Member of Parliament!" The virtuous fingers



received yet another pressure. "The Member of Parliament, of course."

"And brother-in-law of our friend, Lord Desmond."

"Indeed!" murmured the lady in the same dulcet tone. But the ring-laden hand twitched, and to the baronet's infinite relief, slowly abandoned his. Her long eyelids narrowed, and a glance of scrutiny shot out upon him, keen as a suddenly bared knife. "Of course —" she repeated, but it was vaguely; her voice trailed off. "We half expected your brother-in-law to-day."

Here she flung both hands toward a stout, radiant, swart Italian, who was hurrying, almost bounding, up to her. "*Ah, mon cher — vous voilà enfin!* And I, who was fearing you had failed me!"

"It's Guarcini," whispered Scott to Sir Joseph.

"Guarcini?" repeated the baronet, blankly.

"Yes, the tenor, the great tenor, don't you know? You're in luck! Just look how Lady Lossie is skimming back to us! I'll wager she's going to cadge for a song for her Temperance Concert next week!"

But Sir Joseph had no attention to spare from the new arrival. His astounded eyes received the impression of Guarcini's emerald tie, his brown frock coat with the carnation in the button hole, the gray tyrolese hat which he was flourishing in a series of ecstatic bows.

Then came the meeting between hostess and guest; and the poor M. P's cup of horror and amazement was full.

Guarcini had seized both La Marmora's extended hands and was planting kisses upon them with a rapidity

and vehemence, the like of which the M. P. had never conceived possible. Ejaculations in a tongue unknown to his shocked ears, escaped the while from under the upturned black moustaches: "*In fine! che gioja! Quel memento aspettato! Carissima! Bellissima amica . . . Divina — divina!*"

Sir Joseph was convinced that the foreign tongue was but a cloak for the utmost impropriety. Scott roused him from his attitude of spell-bound distress by eagerly advancing in his turn to attract the tenor's attention. This latter, his tyrolese hat at the back of a profusion of sable curls, was now mopping a brow heated by the effervescence of his emotion. But from behind the folds of a huge sky-blue handkerchief the irrepressible southern speech still flowed on.

"*Caro Guarcini —*" the critic called out, in staccato Italian. It was the signal for the blue flag to be stuffed away and for a new conjunction of clasped hands.

"*Ma no! non e possibile! Scotti? e Scotti, in verita!*"

"*Scott en chair et en os!*" said La Marmora. Then, with a murmurous laugh: "*Plus chair que d'os — eh, mon ami?*"

"*Deliciou!*" said the tenor with a deep-chested shout of appreciation. "*Ma!*" he flung a moist look of affection on the critic, "*toujours cher, notre bon Scotti.*" Thereupon he made a lurch, enfolded the gentleman in question in his arms, and saluted him on both cheeks.

Revolted out of his spell-bound contemplation, Sir Joseph turned and stalked away. But not before he had caught a glimpse of Lady Lossie, diving in, all smiles, for her opportunity. Shattered was his trust in Scott,

in Low Church peeresses, in the morals of his own country.

When Desmond Brooke found himself alone his air of languor dropped from him like a garment. Rising to his feet he began to pace the echoing length of the room, pausing each time in front of the curtains that concealed the outer door before retracing his steps toward the colonnade as if drawn by some external force. What was he doing here, after all? If Fifi Lovinska were truly her mother's daughter, what but disaster was likely to follow upon a further intercourse? And if she were the child her innocent eyes proclaimed her, oh, then the question became ten thousand times intensified; what was he doing here, indeed?

He stopped by the couch and struck his forehead with his open palm. Infatuation — that was what that ass Joseph had charged him with. Infatuation — And the charge was true. Though Joseph said it, it was apt, and struck home.

Then as he stood, the dark colour of anger rose to his bleached face. So, his mother had dispatched her vulgar son-in-law and her gentlemanly little toady to spy on him! He recognized her touch there — the touch of the mean cold hand that had not known how to clasp him warmly, even as a child.

Unlike Sturminster, Desmond did not get on with his mother. She had never liked him — he had never liked her. Once before she had interfered with his life, to his bitter misfortune.

He had been a very young man then, believing in good-

ness, and therefore had been an easy victim. He was nearly middle-aged now, and believed in nothing: he was not likely to submit to the same interference — and through such an agent! He laughed out loud shortly. “Joseph — Joseph to hector me! Damn Joseph! And damn too that sleek animal with the poisonous tongue, what’s his name — that Scott — that kind of pig on his hind legs!”

There came a burst of gay cymbalon music from some depth of the garden, and a stream of chattering figures began to cross the long windows, open on the terrace. There was laughter and a medley of voices, dominated all at once by the unctuous German-American drawl of Robecq.

The impresario was apparently attending to the wants of some important dowager.

“Now, what will you have, Lady Constance? a glass of orangeade? champagne cup? or tea — champagne cup.”

His white top-hat crossed and recrossed the furthest window. Desmond had a swift vision of a stout figure in a too well-fitting gray frock coat. Then the drawling voice began again:

“Glorious day! yes, I’ve but this instant arrived.”

“La Marmora’s pretty little son-in-law.” A vision of Scott’s sniggering face rose before him. Nausea overcame the listener. Faugh, what creatures one met here! To have to hobnob with a Scott — and a Robecq! He looked down at the couch with its bear skins. After all, what was he doing here?

He turned decidedly toward the hidden door. To

reach it he had to pass one of the odd little out-jutting rounded corners which had once been separate rooms. This was lit by a narrow, deeply recessed window, so narrow indeed that it was dignified by neither blind nor curtain; only long tangles of green creepers and rambler roses shadowed it from outside. Framed by this blossom and leaf and looking in upon him through the open casement was the face of Fifi Lovinska.

As their eyes met she smiled.

"Oh, I thought you'd never look round! Won't you come into the garden?"

He took two paces toward her. Quick and impulsive they were for one generally so weary. She lowered her voice, nearly to a whisper: she could not have known how her golden-hazel eyes pleaded and caressed: could not have known all that they admitted, all that they offered.

"I am so longing for a row on the river."

"I'll join you in a second," cried Desmond rather hoarsely.

The current had hold of him again and he was drifting. For ten years he had been drifting, deliberately; never so pleasantly as now that, it seemed to him, he could not help it.

Before he gained the little plot of grass with the sundial, where he knew the girl was awaiting him, he paused a second to apostrophize the blue vault above him. And why should he not drift? he asked of it, with the passion that had lain dormant within him these long, long years. Was there any power up there to prevent it?



He had a smile on his lips and a swing in his tread, as he came round the yew hedge. Neither Heaven nor — nor Joseph — should keep him away from his pleasure to-day — from the pleasure of floating out upon the cool green water with this peerless creature beside him — This nymph with the sun-kiss on her cheek and the golden glories in her hair; with the eyes that were so mysterious in their child-wonder and that were beginning to hold such revelation for him. The nymph with the frank lips, the smile of which was youth itself in its happy carelessness, the laugh of which was the spring of a fountain.

Had any man indeed kissed those lips? he asked himself, as the shapely sunburned hand was laid in his. He felt a jealous clutch at the heart. The concomitant thought sent a sudden eddy of blood to his brain. To kiss those smiling lips!

Yet, as their hands fell apart, he knew that, lonely as they stood, and small as the offence would probably seem in her eyes, he could not kiss her. It was almost as if he dared not.

What Desmond Brooke had defied Heaven and Sir Joseph to do, the Baron de Robecq was fated to accomplish. Even as finger on lip, laughing over her shoulder, like the woodland being she seemed, Fifi prepared to lead the way, through a deserted shrubby path to the lonely backwater of her choice, the Baron, urbane, smiling, sure of his welcome, but with a panting breath that revealed unwonted hurry, crunched into their *solitude à deux*.



"Caught, Miss Feefi!" he observed jocularly — "Oh, how do you do, Lord Desmond?"

Desmond could do no less than submit to the warm handshake which it was the impresario's genial way to prolong beyond the usual limit.

"Miss Feefi, your mama wants you, badly! She's just overwhelmed. We never had so many." He turned, in an explanatory manner from one to the other, with apparent unconsciousness of their blank looks and undisguised resentment. "Madame la Marmora has heard of your arrival, Lord Desmond, and I gladly offered to convey a message to you. Your hostess bids me say she has kept a place for you at her own strawberry table. It is in the pergola, at the right of the cedar tree. I think you know the way."

("See what a good fellow I am," his air proclaimed. "I like pleasing everybody.")

The recipient of this pleasing news made a gesture of impatience. The words: "I've promised Mademoiselle Lovinska to take her on the river," were rising to his lips; but for some reason, not quite clear to himself, he hesitated, and the girl quickly forestalled him. Though angry tears had sprung to her eyes, there was a look of fear in them too.

"You must go to Mama — of course you must go to Mama," she said in a rapid whisper.

Behind that mask of impassivity, which it was his way to don before nearly every one, Desmond's thoughts were once again acutely active. Again the odious phrase: "He is to be her pretty son-in-law," recurred to his mind . . . The woodland creature and that porsy Jew

with his divorces and his oily amiability! . . . The satyr and the nymph — and her own mother's planning! Monstrous! Incredible! Yet there was fear in the girl's eyes.

With a heat of feeling amazing to himself, he made a sudden decision. Whoever captured the nymph it should not be Robecq. To go out of her life, now (as a little while ago wisdom had bade him), would be impossible. And if to remain on the scene he must so far meet with the prima donna's unendurable graciousness as to sit with her at the strawberry table — when with all his heart he would be under the willows on the river — why then he must even submit to the weariness. If only for the fear in those eyes; if only for the sheer humanity of being able later on to thwart the German-American-Jewish satyr.

This latter, unconscious of the violence of antipathy he was rousing in the diplomatist's breast, but by no means unconscious of his own ungracious rôle of spoilsport, stood waiting, inflexible under his urbanity, till his desires were complied with. It was by this unalterable good temper that the impresario had successfully imposed all his life his equally unalterable will.

With an imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, and one look at Fifi's now downcast face, revelatory of an ardour of which he himself was as yet not fully aware, Lord Desmond mutely gave in.

"Well, we may as well all go," he said, with an air of indolent resignation. "Mademoiselle Lovinska, shall we go, since your mother wants you, too?"

"I beg your pardon," interposed the Baron. "Miss

Feeffi's post is in the colonnade, and the Duchess particularly wants to see the Persian kitten. And I have a little message, besides, for Miss Feeffi's ear alone. You can't mistake the pergola, Lord Desmond."

Side by side, nymph and satyr, watched the tall figure retreat from them upon its laggard way. Then, with a stamp of her foot, and a crimsoning cheek, the girl turned fiercely to her companion. It was not "old Robecq" she was afraid of.

"How you do plague me, Baron! Always after me! You're as bad as Fritz! What's your precious message?"

The man ran an indulgent eye from the radiant head down the lovely lines of the young strong figure in its already crumpled and green-stained muslin. His glance rested thoughtfully on her white doeskin shoes, wet with the river slime. From thence it wandered back to the hands which were clenched angrily in front of her — those sunburned, shapely hands, the touch of which had stirred Lord Desmond with such an unwonted and complicated emotion — stained, too, with the wholesome earth and the green of riverside tree-bolls.

"Your Mama said you'd probably have to change your dress, my dear; and if you don't mind my adding, I think you'd better change your shoes and wash your hands."

She stamped her foot again.

"Why, you're worse than Fritz," she cried. "You're a regular old nurse." But she seemed to find no choice but compliance. She flung herself away from him, and ran round the yew hedge, catching the unhappy

muslin against the rustic archway, and wrenching it away with an angry hand that left a fluttering streamer behind.

He watched her with an expression that no one had as yet surprised in his small shrewd eyes.

“She’s adorable!” he said aloud, in his emphatic nasal drawl.

## VIII

### THE DOWAGER ON THE WARPATH

LADY ALICE WARREN-SMITH sat in the gorgeous drawing room of her gorgeous house in Prince's Gate. Upon this mansion, as Sir Joseph was fond of informing his friends, no expense had been spared. "Put in the hands of a first-class firm, sir, and 'go ahead,' I said to them, 'go ahead. Give me value for money — that's all I ask.'"

The first-class firm of Daring and Gibbons had "gone ahead," and in three-pile carpet and velvet brocade, inlay and gesso work, alabaster and ormolu, Viennese bronze and Florentine carving, Sir Joseph had his money value. There was not an inch of wall-space left untormented; not one refreshing plain line or surface. The very bedrooms repudiated the simplicity of chintz or china and contained marvels in the way of porphyry and satin. There was heraldry even on the blankets. But the drawing room was, naturally, the first-class firm's supreme effort.

Philip Scott could hardly repress a shudder as he entered its splendour for the first time. Like Mr. Vere Hamilton he had been summoned by an urgent letter, and very well knew what family dilemma had gained him the distinction.

The critic, the artist, the literary man, had been hitherto

classed among the "queer people" that Martia Marchioness and her daughter would never invite into their houses, no matter what modern Society might do. Martia Marchioness had even a text in this connection: it was one referring to pitch. It was a text which her sons had both of them been wont to put to the test with the utmost frequency. And now Desmond was actually bringing the truth of it home to the sacred maternal and sisterly circles. Joseph himself had dipped into the pitch-pot.

He had returned from Branksome in a curiously excited state, with many strange tales; his wife had never seen him thus. Horrified as he had been, such phrases as "Alluring, my dear . . . undoubtedly alluring!" had escaped him. Once he had spoken of that afternoon as "an Arabian Night's dream." This unwonted poetry of expression had kept Lady Alice awake till dawn. Filled with wrath against the want of consideration — she would not say of principle — that had exposed the virtuous man to such perils, she determined that never, never again should Joseph be mixed up in this scandalous business.

But she had reckoned without the Dowager. Martia Marchioness had elicited a full and particular account of her son-in-law's expedition; and in her shrewd mind had ear-marked several items of information as containing potentiality.

When, after the interval of another week, she found that there was no falling off in Desmond's assiduities, while the gossip occasioned by them was progressing in geometrical ratio, she resolved upon action. Like the



old-fashioned generals, she was very slow to act, as a rule.

"Alice," she had ordered, "you must invite that person Scott to tea, and find out what he knows about that girl's past. Since it seems, after all, that your brother is even more abandoned than I thought and that the mother is a mere blind."

Lady Alice gasped. Her protuberant eyes fixed themselves on the relentless old face, with a mixture of resentment and fear.

"Mama, I don't know him."

"Joseph does. Let Joseph write."

"Mama, I've never had that kind of people."

"What nonsense, Alice! You needn't know him afterward."

"Mama — couldn't you . . . . ?"

Lady Sturminster slowly turned her eyes upon her daughter. They were as prominent as her own. But whereas the peculiar setting of Lady Alice's orbs made all for weak-mindedness and pusillanimity, that of her mother's but served to heighten, almost to terrifying effect, the impression of cold, unsparing purpose.

"I?" queried the great lady, after a long pause.

No more had been needed. Alice had abjectly acceded to every detail of the order. Mr. Scott was to be asked. Lady Alice and Joseph were to find out. The Dowager arranged to look in accidentally during the interview. She would perhaps bring Vere Hamilton; an independent witness might be useful. Thereafter she herself would act.

Hardly a month passed, nowadays, without the papers,

even such papers as the *Morning Post*, announcing the marriage of some infatuated young heir to a peerage with some terrible young person from the chorus of a musical comedy. If Desmond should be so lost as to contemplate "marriage" with the young person in the marble cottage, it was his mother's duty to enlighten him as to her character. These designing creatures were always eighteen, and of unblemished antecedents as vouched for by the halfpenny press. Lady Sturminster knew her son better perhaps than might have been imagined, given their antithetical natures. She knew that, if she could convince him of certain things, the irreparable at least might be averted. The dark saying of Mr. Scott had been duly repeated to her: "That is a horse of quite another colour and much more likely to run away with him." Wherever that mad race might lead him, it should not be to the altar.

And this was why Lady Alice sat waiting in her drawing room this mid-May morning; why Mr. Scott entered upon her; and why Sir Joseph, summoned from the library, followed after in a state of such overcharged importance that he had to let off steam in a series of snorts and puffs before he could even shake hands.

Averting his eyes from the Scylla of a Viennese biscuit group of the Three Graces, to fall into the Charybdis of Lady Alice's portrait by Ellis Roberts (leaning, clad in pink with a white scarf, against a rose-twined pillar) Mr. Philip Scott fixed his glance upon his hostess's face and prepared to enjoy himself as completely as such distressing surroundings would allow his artistic nature to do.

There was a torture of embarrassment and a shrinking aristocratic distaste both to the task imposed upon her and to his company written all over the poor lady. To prolong the torture, and to punish her for the distaste, was the visitor's obvious task.

"Charming day, isn't it, Lady Alice? Quantities of people in town. Astounding!"

"Yes, indeed," said the lady, helplessly. "We were anxious, as my husband wrote to you ——"

"Delighted," said Mr. Scott. "Came a bit early, I'm afraid. But I am due at Lady Charles Flamboorough's. She's got the Little Tweenies from the Coliseum. Have you seen them, Sir Joseph? Astounding performance. Have you seen them, Lady Alice?"

Lady Alice's eye assumed something of her mother's freezing blankness.

"No," she dropped.

"My wife, Lady Alice ——" began the M. P.

"The fact is, Mr. Scott ——" she interrupted, with a desperate plunge. But the latter airily eluded the threatened *entrée en matière*.

"Quite so, Lady Alice, you don't care for such shows. But really they're quite a wonderful little pair. Guarcini is going to sing too. You remember my old friend, Guarcini, Sir Joseph? You met him down at Branksome."

"The — the man who — I think I saw him greet you," murmured Sir Joseph faintly.

"Yes, the dear fellow. Fell into my arms — I should have introduced him to your husband, Lady Alice ——"

"God forbid!" said Sir Joseph. He turned, explanatory, to his wife. "A foreign opera singer, my dear."

Lady Alice cast down her long pink eyelids.

"We do not care to know that kind of people," she said, lisping frigidly.

"No," said the Member of Parliament; he threw out his chest and took the lapels of his coat with both hands. "Neither I nor my wife, Lady Alice, care to know that kind of person."

Scott, who knew that Guarcini would have expected endless blandishments even to go to Marlborough House unless the mood were upon him, was seized with an internal chuckle that crimsoned his smooth pink face to the roots of his grayish blond hair. He looked down at the patch of expensive Wilton pile between his well-shod feet and strove to conceal his amusement behind a gray glove and an agate cane-handle. Lady Alice looked agonizedly at the clock. Mama might come in at any moment and they had not even managed to start the vital topic.

"Expecting many friends, this afternoon, Lady Alice?" asked the critic, raising his head suddenly. "People are shockingly late, these fine days, aren't they?"

Husband and wife gazed at him, startled and helpless.

"Afraid I must be on the trot again," pursued the malicious guest. "Promised the Flamboroughs."

"Mr. Scott, oh, Mr. Scott——" panted the flurried lady.

"The fact is, my dear fellow ——" puffed Sir Joseph.

The tormentor had risen and was holding out his plump ungloved hand.

"So sorry — no, I can't stay for tea."

It was at this point that the Dowager came to the rescue. Unannounced, she stepped in upon them. Clad in gray-brown silk of ribbed texture, with an awe-inspiring bonnet tied with large velvet strings, she advanced into the room, followed by Mr. Hamilton who bore an unwonted peevish expression on his meek beaver countenance. And after him, to the intense amazement of the three, came Desmond Brooke himself.

In her slow drive round the park, expounding her intentions to a for once rebellious Vere Hamilton, she had caught sight of her son lounging under the trees; and with an inspiration sudden and decisive, resolved upon the *coup-de-main*. Better, after all, that he should hear from other lips than those of his family what was to be heard. "So much more convincing," had thought the Dowager in her cold-blooded way.

It was poor Vere who had to summon the recalcitrant one to the carriage door, where the following typical conversation took place:

"Why, Mother!"

The diplomatist raised his hat. In the company of no human being on earth did he feel more utterly bored; his eye immediately became lack-lustre, his voice extinguished.

"You are to get in," commanded the lady without wasting time in salutation, though they had not met for ten days.

"In there?" he asked, his eyebrow raised, his eye plunging incredulously and disparagingly into the depths of the antique barouche.

"Yes, in here, beside me. Mr. Hamilton will sit back.



We're going to Alice's. There's something I've got to say to you, Desmond." Her voice suddenly dropped an octave lower, and her pale eye took a glassy fixity of purpose. "You had better come, my son," it said unmistakably.

He returned the glance with a long blank stare. The sunshine glistened on the feathers of her bonnet, mouldy green; on the dead-leaf sheen of her hideous gown; on the long teeth fixed upon the retreating lip. He had a slight shudder; but he got in.

He knew that she would run him down at his club, or at his chambers, with an inflexibility of purpose the more deadly for being thwarted. At least from another's he could take his departure when things were beyond bearing; but were he to be caught in his own lair, it might be difficult to turn out a lady and that lady his mother. Let her say her say: he would say his. Up to this he had contented himself with eluding her; it was best perhaps to face her now and have done with it.

And thus it was that, in the train of the Dowager and Mr. Hamilton, Desmond Brooke made his unexpected call upon his sister, Lady Alice Warren-Smith.

Lady Sturminster settled herself into the discomfort of a Birmingham Louis XV. armchair, and slowly turned a scrutinizing glance from face to face, until it rested on the critic's still humorously pursed countenance.

"Is that Mr. Scott?" she demanded. "Introduce him."

Scott abandoned his pretence of immediate departure with a deprecatory wave of his hand, and went through the ceremony required of him with an insolence peculiarly his own.



“What a disgusting old woman!” he reflected, even as in the Dowager’s own brain flashed the thought: “The creature’s not even the beginning of a gentleman.”

“Sit down, Mr. Scott.” The general was issuing her orders — “Sit down, everybody. Sir Joseph, sit down — and don’t fidget like that. It’s quite kind of you to come and see us, Mr. Scott, when we have not the pleasure of your acquaintance. Desmond —” she paused.

Her son had sunk upon a sofa at some distance, and was lying back in his favourite attitude of weary endurance, chin upturned, eyes half closed.

Scott, who had failed to elicit any recognition, glanced toward him. He hated all these people, a little more than the rest of the world — though he flattered himself that he disliked the larger proportion of his acquaintances — but most, he hated this infernal languid fellow.

“You know my son Desmond,” proceeded Lady Sturminster. No beating about the bush for her. “You know why we have taken the unusual step of requesting you to call here.”

“My dear Lady Sturminster,” again Scott spread his hands outward, palm upward, “Lady Alice asked me to tea — very kindly ——”

“Alice!” The Dowager flung one baleful look.

“I had hardly time to explain, Mama.”

“I really think,” said Mr. Hamilton, getting up from the chair on which he had been jiggling, in an ecstasy of discomfort, “I really think that I am quite out of place ——”

Martia dropped him a contemptuous admonition:

"Sit down — you are wanted." Then she caught Scott on the hook of her gaze and held him.

"It is idle to pretend you don't know the circumstances. My son-in-law has already made you acquainted with them some time ago. You gave him to understand then that you were in possession of facts concerning —" She paused; she did not even know the name of the young person in question — "concerning ——"

She sought Sir Joseph's aid with irritation on her countenance; but he only stared, goggle-eyed and helpless, back at her. Lady Alice had suddenly begun to blow her nose and sniff.

"Concerning the Panther's Cub, perhaps?" put in Scott, silkily.

"Panther's Cub!" echoed Sir Joseph and his mother-in-law, simultaneously, in different tones of reprobation.

Desmond rolled his head a trifle sideways, and a gleam of dangerous eye became visible between his half-closed lids.

"Didn't you know?" said the innocent critic. "It's a nickname for the mother, Lady Sturminster: 'Panther.' Suits her: lissom, lovely, sleek, dangerous creature!"

"I am concerned, sir, with the daughter," Lady Sturminster warned in her contralto.

"The daughter, of course. That's the Cub. Panther's Cub. Dear me, yes. Born in the original jungle: nobody knows where that was. She has been dubbed with some kind of absurd Polish name she has no shadow of right to. But that's neither here nor there. Miss Fifi ——"

"Fifi!" ejaculated the Dowager, her daughter and son-in-law, in unison.

"Only Christian name of Cub," explained the critic with his most fascinating smile. He was the centre of attention and that was ever an agreeable sensation.

"Well, Mr. Scott," said the ruthless Dowager, "will you kindly tell us, now, what you know about, about this — this Fifi creature." Indescribable was the great lady's tone of bleak contempt.

"Oh, my dear Lady Sturminster!" Scott wagged his head jocosely. ("She was *impayable*," he thought. What a story he would make of this!)

Sir Joseph lumbered up to the assault in his turn.

"You made some remark — some pleasantry, the other day, about the young person, hem, following in her mother's footsteps — about her having made already — ah —" The M. P. drew a long breath, but the ribald French words had to be uttered, and stentoriously he uttered them: "having made a *faux pas*."

Scott burst into irrepressible laughter. Lady Alice subsided tearfully into her handkerchief and Hamilton crossed the room to stand beside Lord Desmond.

"You put a stop to this sort of thing the other day; had you not better do so again?" he said in a low voice. Poor little toady, and he had been so pleased to drive round the park with his aristocratic friend, and to be taken to tea where she would! Desmond turned a gleam of eye upon him.

"This time he may go on," he said unemotionally.

As he spoke, his mother unconsciously repeated his words: "Go on, Mr. Scott."

"But, really —" Scott was coy. "It is so unusual!" He turned his chair toward the sofa where Desmond lay.

"We are all waiting to hear," said this latter.

"To hear what? You dear, good people, is not this really a little unusual? Not that there is any mystery about the Panther or the Panther's Cub. Cub took a certain leap — let me see, she must have been about eighteen then — took a certain leap with native impetuosity, under my eye as it happens — From Como it was."

"Como!" gasped Sir Joseph. These immoral foreign places!

"Speak plainly," ordered the Marchioness.

"Oh, dear me, there was nothing to make a fuss about. She went off on a little excursion, with a charming young man . . . from the hotel."

"A little excursion?" echoed Sir Joseph, much disappointed.

"Yes, Sir Joseph — just two or three days' jaunt. Oh, his people were annoyed . . . unduly so. He was fetched back, and all the rest of it. Panther was annoyed too. General rumpus — very unpleasant. What? Would you care to hear the name of young Lothario, my dear fellow? I daresay Verie knows him. Young Wentworth, Verie. Wentworth's Entire, you know, the beer people."

Desmond had closed his eyes.

"I really must —" said Mr. Hamilton inarticulately, and thereupon, for the first time in the whole of his polite existence, committed the solecism of taking French leave.

As the door closed upon him, Mr. Scott also rose. His immediate mission was fulfilled, and the situation might lose its humour at any moment. He bade good-bye with an airy grace, shaking Lady Alice's limp hand

with the warmth of an old friend, bowing to the Dowager, waving a valedictory fin playfully from Desmond to Sir Joseph. His last words to the latter from the threshold ran thus:

“*Au revoir*. We'll meet again at Branksome before long!”

“There, Desmond!” said Lady Sturminster.

She did not raise her voice, or even deepen it; but its tones, her whole air, the way in which she lifted both her small brown-gloved hands an inch or two off her knees and let them fall again, bespoke a triumph that was almost malignant. She knew her son: if he was not moral, he was fastidious.

“Oh, Joseph!” sobbed Lady Alice.

“Wentworth . . . Wentworth?” Sir Joseph was muttering, as he stroked his jaw and rubbed his chin. “I wonder if that could be the son of Colonel Wentworth, the Member for Harrington. He's in the brewing interest, I know.”

“You'd better find out what he thinks of the young lady,” said the Dowager.

“Do, Joseph,” put in Desmond, rising suddenly from among the crimson satin cushions. He strolled over and stood before his mother. “Why — you're making quite a gay dog of Joseph!” said he, with his mirthless smile. “No wonder Alice is in tears, over there. Well, good-bye, mother — good-bye, Alice. Ta-ta, Joseph. As your friend, Mr. Scott, says: till our next meeting — at Branksome.”

“Desmond ——”

The Dowager's authority was here supported by her



son-in-law, who laid an agitated hand upon Desmond's coat sleeve.

"Stay," he blustered; "I cannot permit such imputations, such innuendos! My only motive, as you know — only a sense of my duty to your family, your mother's terrible anxiety ——"

Lord Desmond turned the flicker of a mocking glance upon his mother's stony face:

"Go on, Joseph — you're doing it very nicely."

"Desmond, I went to — to those purlieus — to try and save you before it was too late."

"And confoundedly impertinent it was of you," said the diplomatist serenely.

The Dowager gave a withering smile, directed as much to the virtuous plebeian as to her own high-bred profligate. The latter, after a second's consultation with himself, suddenly made up his mind. He took one of the knobby gilt chairs and sat down about a yard in front of his mother.

"Now," said he, "let's have it out and have done with it. You sent Joseph to spy on me, at Branksome. What was the good of it?"

"Sir Joseph was exceedingly useful," said the old lady, unabashed. "It was my duty to know what was going on, Desmond. And Joseph and Mr. Hamilton both gave me valuable information on the subject. I understand that you are pursuing the daughter of that notorious woman."

"Would you prefer me to pursue the mother?"

"An entanglement with the mother would be bad enough; but an entanglement with the girl ——"



Desmond interrupted the level tones with a laugh that was scarcely as assured as he would have had it.

“What are you afraid of — my virtue?”

His mother smiled again.

“Her virtue, then? You’ve just heard all about that! What are you afraid of?”

As the old woman looked at him in her snake-like way, without speaking, Sir Joseph deemed it incumbent upon him to intervene:

“Some irreparable step — some act of fatal folly!” he warned.

“That you’ll disgrace us all —” sobbed Lady Alice in her turn.

“What!” cried Desmond, and laughed out loud. “You’re all afraid I’ll marry her, O moral Joseph, O Alice, my high-minded sister! Oh, Mother —” his voice took a note of scathing bitterness — “you had better have let me marry poor little Susan all those years ago, after all!”

“The girl’s no better than her mother,” said the Dowager, unheeding. She brushed aside the reference to the old wound, with her own masterly relentlessness.

“Well, I don’t want her better than her mother,” exclaimed the man.

All of a sudden he stood up. The colour rushed to his pale face. And extraordinary passion fired his eye and voice.

“Now look here,” the words rose quickly to his lips. “You may as well hear my views on this subject, once for all. It’s none of your business, but it will save me trouble in the end. You all believe I am going to make

a fool of myself? I wish to God I could — I wish to God I could!”

“Tut-tut-tut!” cried the M. P. But his mother-in-law and his wife sat staring at the speaker. This was almost a forgotten Desmond.

“Mother,” he went on, “it is fifteen years ago, now, since you broke my life. Little Susan was no match for me. She was only a poor squire’s daughter — only a little flower of a good dear child, whom I loved. You schemed and intrigued, and stopped my letters, and warned her off me. Well, I was too young to guess then half what you did. Susie’s dead and I — what was left alive of me, Vienna killed.”

“Oh, Desmond,” cried his sister, raising a shocked disfigured countenance, “how can you speak to Mama like that!”

No one ever paid any attention to Lady Alice. But her brother dropped his strong note of passion; he was ashamed to have shown this glimpse of soul to such futile minds.

“If you wanted to study the Branksome sort of thing, you ought to have come to Vienna, Joseph,” he exclaimed banteringly, turning to his brother-in-law with a satiric smile. “We men, as they say, live in Vienna. I lived there. I lived and died there.”

“Good gracious!” spluttered the baronet.

“I’ve about as much life left in me as that statue over there. I’m a corpse, that is about it. And precious dull work it is, taking a corpse around. But the girl —” His blue eye gleamed again as he once more addressed his mother. “The girl — Mademoiselle Lovinska —

Fifi — the Panther's Cub — call her what you like — well, she interests me. She amuses me. She makes me forget that I am a corpse. Hang it all, if I want to be galvanized now and again, I won't ask my family's permission! And that's what you'd better understand, all of you!"

"I had hoped, Desmond," said Lady Sturminster, "that you had given up this absurd exaggeration, years ago." Mother and son exchanged a deep look expressive of a life-long enmity.

"A corpse! . . . Galvanized! . . ." said Sir Joseph, in a scandalized undertone, blowing out his cheeks between the words.

"And now that's all, I think," concluded Desmond. "Good-bye again."

This time he was allowed to depart unrestrained. Husband and wife looked anxiously at the Dowager. She sat with fixed eyes, gazing lethargically before her.

"I am deeply distressed," the master of the house ventured to say at last, as the silence, broken only by Alice's sniffs, grew unbearable to his fussy mind. "I am in a state of painful perplexity. He says he wishes he could make a fool of himself. He says he's a corpse — and that the — ah — the girl galvanizes him. Now, what interpretation are we to put upon this?"

"Joseph, hold your tongue!" said his mother-in-law. She rose from her chair and tottered, ever so little. "Will you kindly ring for the carriage?"

## IX

### UNPROFITABLE THOUGHTS

DESMOND went straight back to his chambers in the Albany; the secluded quarters which he had regarded, from his student days on, as his real home in London. Always held ready to receive him, after an absence whether of years or of a few days, they remained the one link with his English past since he had embarked upon the cosmopolitan existence imposed on him by his profession.

These were kept up almost like the college rooms of old, lined with books, pictures of another age, portraits of forgotten chums, athletic trophies, the lares and penates of a mode of life that was past recall.

Old-fashioned they had always been; in this rapid era they seemed to breathe an almost antique spirit. The only concession to modern habits permitted by their owner was the admission of a telephone.

He telephoned now for his car to be in readiness at seven o'clock and flung himself into one of the deep red-leather armchairs, preparatory to smoking a reflective cigar.

He had received an urgent telegraphed invitation to dinner at Branksome that night, which he had accepted by the same medium. But, a little while ago, when his mother had met him strolling across the park, he had once again arrived at the wise decision to resist the impulse

that was urging him to Fifi's presence. The mood of "What's the use? Better keep away from the danger" had been upon him: that cold mood, to which even the most ardent and happy lover is subject at times, and which, with him, the weary man of the world, was ever lying in ambush. Lady Sturminster's interference had produced the not uncommon result: it had broken the shackles of a passion hitherto, save for a rare moment or two, kept fairly well in leash.

To see him lying back in his great chair, just drawing sufficiently at his cigar to keep it alive, with drooping eyelids and lax limbs, none could have guessed at the fierceness of the fire burning within him. The old hatred seemed to join with the new love in a single flame. His whole childhood his mother had overshadowed; she had seemed to stand always between him and the sunshine. Every legitimate hope of his young manhood, his first and honourable love, his prospect of a happy home of his own, she had shattered; unrelenting in her determination, without remorse after the deed. What he had become, a mere drifter in life, without enthusiasm, without belief, without purpose beyond the mere routine of his profession, a cynic the more hopeless because of his capacity for high ambition, he had become because of her. The irredeemable materialist is he who has once most aspired. Now the fire was kindling again amid what he had believed dead ashes. Ah, let it burn! He scarce cared what it consumed, so long as he could have the joy of the glow. . . .

The door was opened gingerly, and an extremely

fashionable, extremely pretty head on an extremely long throat was coyly inserted:

“Say, Desmond!”

He started up, the white ash of his cigar dropped from the red tip.

“Cassandra!”

“Call me Cassie, won't you?”

Young Lady Sturminster conveyed her slenderness delicately into the room and shut the door.

“My dear Cassandra — Cassie, then ——”

The fair young American's brother-in-law stood, unsmiling, the expression of boredom familiar to his countenance deepening into gloom. “Can I do anything for you? This is . . . this is an unexpected pleasure!”

“Spoke sarcastic?” commented she. She came closer to him, looking about her curiously. “What a nice, shabby; old room! Oh, I like your old books, and these nice worn, leather chairs — and those Dürer prints! I think Dürer's just cunning. No, I've never been here before — have I? I thought I'd just come along.”

She let herself drift as aimlessly, it seemed, as a floating apple-blossom petal into the recesses of the companion armchair. Then she smiled in her detached way into his face.

“Have you also been sent by the family?” he asked suddenly.

“I?” She laughed. It was an elfish laugh; it seemed to have little that was human in it. “I say, don't you know, brother-in-law, that the Dow. hates me like poison? No,” the violet eyes became wistful. “I just came along ——”



He, in his turn, let himself sink back into his chair and his glance softened upon her.

"Now what can I give you? tea, whiskey-and-soda, or a cigarette?"

He stretched out a finger toward the bell. But she shook her head.

"What a pity," he pursued, "you did not come another day . . . Cassie! We might have gone off, you and I *en partie fine*; done a dinner and a play. But I'm bound out of London this evening. Have to start at seven."

He shot a look at the clock: she followed it.

"Well, it's only just six," she stated, and settled herself with satisfaction in the shabby armchair. Then a gleam came into her eyes; it had the same elfish quality as her laughter. "Going to Branksome?"

He fixed her steadily for a moment, then nodded.

"Oh, Desmond," she said, clasping slender hands in long buff gloves, "do be a darling, and get me asked to the next strawberry party!"

"Get Joseph to take you. He knows the way," said the man grimly.

"Say now, don't! Be nice to me. I'm nice to you, don't you think? Wait a bit till I give you my reason. I've got a reason, quite a good one."

"Not Joseph's reason?" He smiled at her. It was impossible to resist Cassandra's airs of fascination when she chose to exercise them.

"No — a real reason of my own."

"Feminine curiosity?"

"Not at all." She put her head on one side. The

shadow of the sweeping gray feathers fell upon the oval of her pretty face. Her eyes were all vague innocence, like those of a very young child. "If any one," she plaintively proceeded, "has a right to see Branksome Cottage it's me — considering Sturminster built it."

"My dear Cassandra!"

"Oh, call me Cassie! Why, you know he built it — for Mrs. Orris."

"But my dear — Cassie!"

Gently, musically persistent, her voice went on:

"I couldn't go and see it, while Mrs. Orris was walking about in it, could I? But now that Madame la Marmora's got it ——" Suddenly she tripped up her plaint with laughter. "It's just a bit of a joke, you know. Wurzel used to run there after his Orris, and now you're running there, after your Panther! You're just a pair of you, real bad boys."

Desmond looked at her with a feeling very rare to him, that of amazement. Was she as callous as she seemed? Was there no natural womanly feeling behind this pretty, delicate, soulless air of fooling?

"But I will say this for you," she concluded, "that you're a different kind of bad boy from Wurzel. I rather think a nicer kind," she added after a pause.

He did not know what to say to her. Feebly, he assented:

"Sturminster and I were always different."

"Yes," she admitted thoughtfully; "Sturminster's really the born image of his mother."

Desmond gave a note of laughter which all at once fell silent.

"Yes," the soft little voice continued. "Underneath the froth and the go — underneath it all," she moved her fingers expressively: the "all" was comprehensive of a very great deal, "there's Mama!"

She gave the arm of the chair a little slap, and turned the allurements of her smile and eyes upon him.

"Cassie ——" he hesitated and hesitatingly put out his hand to her, but drew it back: he knew too little. There might be pain hidden away behind this mask — and, if so, what pride!

She rose and smoothed down her sheath-like, clinging skirt. "It's settled, isn't it? You'll bring me to Branksome?"

Again he hesitated.

"I'll get you asked," he said grudgingly. "I can't take you there. I——" Then upon an impulse he spoke: "Cassie, I'm making a fool of myself!"

"Desmond, you darling! . . . Madame la Marmora is just a stunner, isn't she?"

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed. "I'm not such a fool as that. No, no, I'm worse, Cassie; it's the daughter ——"

A moment the two looked at each other.

"Oh, I wonder," she said, under her breath, "I wonder!" All at once she gave a quick sigh and turned away resolutely; but, from the door she called over her shoulder: "It's Tuesday, isn't it?"

"What?"

"The next strawberry party. Oh, don't forget!"

"You really want to see that silly place?"

“You bet I do, my beau-frère. You’ve no idea what a big cheque Poppa had to send over to us that year!”

“Cassie ——”

There was fierce disgust in the man’s voice. Decidedly he had begun to feel again. She laughed in her fairy, heartless way.

“Why, that’s where America comes in so useful to dear old England. Ta-ta! Don’t forget.”

## X

### A DINNER AT BRANKSOME

LA MARMORA had quite a dinner party that night, but her impresario was not among the guests, and Fifi was absent from the board.

Proportionate to the fever of his desire to be with her was Desmond's exasperation at this discovery. Even for him, his air of weariness, as the meal progressed, became noticeable to amazement. Fortunately for his hostess's self-satisfaction, her attention was so fully taken up with the unwonted distinction of her company that she had little time to spare for special observation. And indeed even his gloom, his outrageous countenance of *ennui*, she was quite ready to explain to herself:

"He expected to be beside me — *pauvre garçon!* There he sits hating them all! Aha! he thought he was going to have it all his own way to-night! A *tête-à-tête*, I dare say. It will do my diplomat no harm to make him languish a little. He will see too that here I can have my pick, if I choose. We are no longer in Vienna!"

Her heart swelled with triumph as she glanced down the long board. An ambassador — *rien que ça!* True, he was a bachelor; though only the more charming. And then there was his first secretary and he was a "marquis." Pity he had not brought his wife, that one! She had accepted too, but perhaps her *migraine* was a

true excuse. Not that it mattered indeed. Fulvia had only needed to telephone to her dear Lady Peterborough; and hadn't dear Lady Peterborough just hopped at the chance! And then there was the great American painter!

Madame la Marmora had quickly learned how to bait the society trap. How enchanted he was, this pleasant genius, with the entertainment — with the marble room, the classic detail of the feast, above all with her, his hostess!

"I'd like to paint you," he said, fixing her with his appraising, discriminating artist's eye. And she knew what an acknowledgement that was. She had heard something about him: "A bear, my dear — divine artist, but a bear!" . . . A Princess Tilpitz had cried herself sick last month: he would not do her portrait, at any price. First he swore that he could not bring himself to draw a woman who did her hair *à la chinoise*: and when she said she would do her hair anyway he liked, he had declared it was her nose that was impossible! . . .

And yonder sat this great Larpent, smiling and talking, and eating, with ever and anon a long appraising glance at her. The names of those two young men who displayed such wonderful shirt fronts and collars were written in the peerage. Nothing less than a lord or a genius or an ambassador would serve Fulvia to-night. And the dear little Duchess of Glastonbury — Fulvia knew that people said things against her, but she herself was quite sure it was the Duke who was to blame: every one received her still. And she particularly wished to show her attention. The comic side of the situation



— Fulvia la Marmora upholding a reputation! — never struck her. But the Panther was entirely without humour.

Finally there were two other concomitants to complete her full measure of satisfaction this evening. She was shining without Robecq's support; and, consequently, she had been able likewise to eliminate Fifi. No face in the room challenged hers; there were masculine eyes enough to tell her so. She was conscious of being supreme.

More from instinct than from any innate good taste, she had robed herself in accordance with her classical setting. Happily, Greek draperies were just now in fashion. The wreath of oak-leaves, once worn on Fifi's insolent youthful head, crowned the mother's tresses. A bunch of artificial purple grapes, with long tendrils, was fastened on one shoulder. The green streamers fell on the white folds, and against the curves of the long, wonderfully shaped bare arms. She had not donned a jewel — her instinct again! She looked a savage thing of beauty. The charming and artistically impressionable ambassador by her side could scarcely remove his gaze from her, even to attend to the fare before him, which was unique in its out-of-the-way refinement.

Madame la Marmora, however glad to be rid of her bear-leader for the nonce, had not been above profiting by any hint dropped by his wisdom and experience. Once he had casually remarked to her that the head of a certain celebrated French firm of caterers, in Bond Street, was something of a genius; and when the singer had conceived the daring scheme of this impromptu banquet,

she had sent for M. Christophe — to the fury of her own chef.

“I want something superlative, something that people will talk about, something that will . . .”

She hesitated. The little fat man bowed:

“Madame desires a sensation?”

“*Vous y êtes, mon cher,*” said Fulvia.

His black eyes, sharp as gimlets, roamed about the marble reception hall.

“Would it be permitted to see the room destined to the repast?” He was promptly conducted through the draped doorway.

“What Madame requires,” he then pronounced, “is a Roman feast. Everything,” he went on, warming to his opportunity, “must be as in the days of the Emperors. It shall be a feast of Lucullus. A feast of Lucullus, Madame . . . but cooked with the latest art of Paris.”

The culinary genius had been given *carte blanche*, and proved himself as good as his word. (His bill, by the way, was to cause Robecq, a couple of days later, considerable annoyance.) Every detail of menu and decoration had been left to him, at his urgent request. There was but one item in which La Marmora asserted herself, and the memory of it was to haunt the *maître de bouche* with chagrin to his dying day. This had been the opportunity of his life, and his triumph was not to be complete. He had wished his feast served by boys and maidens in appropriate garments. Madame la Marmora had characteristically insisted upon footmen in powder and silk stockings “as in the great houses!”

And the object of it all — for if she was yearning for social success and intoxicated with the pride of it, deep down under the froth of vanity, was always the thought of one man, the longing for his notice, for his admiration; the craving to make him want for what others wanted in vain — the object of it all, Desmond Brooke, sat anathematizing the whole tomfool business, and in chief his own folly for being of it!

The ladies lingered after the usual time for withdrawal. Coffee and tobacco were indulged in in company. The Doric seats, though not perhaps the acme of comfort, lent themselves to attitudes of relaxation more than the modern dining-room chair. The elegant decorum which had marked the proceedings hitherto began to give place to a subtle blend of bohemianism. Through the vague mists of cigar and cigarette smoke, glances became bolder or more veiled. The little South American Duchess began to bandy wits with the more fatuous of the gilded youths; Larpent to talk in heavy, masterful tones across every one else's conversation, explaining how he would pose his hostess in the portrait he intended to paint of her.

In the midst of his dissertation he rose, came round to her and with those great hands that no one would suspect of being so delicate with the brush, set himself to altering something in the arrangement of her hair, which he averred had been annoying him the whole evening.

It was so clearly the artist that moved in him that the action seemed as natural as if he had been in his studio.

But Fulvia understood and demanded no such niceties. Instantly she grew coquettish.

"Ah, but," she cried, catching at his wrist, "are you not a bold man? How do you know that it does not all come off?"

He moved back a step, surveying her solemnly, all to the thought of his conception.

"I saw it didn't," he answered absently, making a gesture with two fingers — "by the way it springs from the temples."

Every one was now looking at her; there was suspended laughter on most lips. Only Desmond stared at the tip of his cigarette, brooding.

The Panther was without her keeper; without even the restraint of the presence of a critic like Scott. She glanced down the table at the sombre man.

"So we are jealous, my lord! Why then, you shall be made more jealous — aye, and be shown something to be jealous for!"

She swept her assembled guests with conquering eye.

"Aha," she laughed, "how you stare! There's not one of them believes you, Larpent. They think I've given myself away. But, there you are —" her strong white hands plunged into those curls and twists which the hair-dresser had elaborated as "absolutely Grecian, Madame," a few hours before. She flung a dozen tortoiseshell hairpins right and left, snatched away a couple of combs, then shook her head and ran her hands through the loosened locks. Her actions were as savage as the laughter which accompanied them. So might

the mænad of Euripides have looked as she sprang along the mountain height.

The company, all excepting Desmond, were amused, enchanted, by the incident. It was exactly thus that they wished and expected the great artist to conduct herself. If your lions did not roar, and if your bohemians were not eccentric, where was the use of knowing them at all. This was the department requisite for "the Panther." Moreover, the glory that fell upon Fulvia's shoulder and down to her waist provoked a genuine murmur of admiration.

"But it is phenomenal! It is simply superb!" exclaimed the ambassador. He took up a tress and weighed it in his hand.

"Oh, for my sketch book!" cried the artist with almost a roar of regret.

"What a Salome we shall have!" cried the "marquis."

"Salome! . . ." echoed the prima donna.

She stood panting a little, trembling on the apex of her triumph.

As they had acclaimed her, Desmond had looked up and their eyes had met. In a flash, she had thought to see in them a flame of passion, anger, jealousy, reproach. It had been all that had been needed to complete her intoxication. Could she have but guessed that the man she loved had seen in her, beautiful in the glory of her wild locks, a sudden resemblance to her daughter, and that what now filled his soul was loathing; loathing to horror!

"Salome!" she cried again on a still higher key. "Ah,



I charge you all to come to my Salome! You will hear something, I promise you — you will see — something! It will be worth your while!”

She took a few steps back, poised herself in the centre of the wide space away from them, fell into an attitude, drawing her splendid arms upward through her hair.

“And to think,” she proceeded, dropping one arm and holding the spell-bound group with the glance that could hold hundreds, “to think,” she boasted, “that my idiot of an impresario wants to get a dummy for the dance! Ah, *mais non!* . . . shall I not dance and sing as well as Ilma?”

With a gesture as limber as it was *canaille* she kicked off both her shoes and stood with shapely silk-stockinged feet, gripping the marble floor.

“Shall I not dance?” she cried, shaking her mane once more. She caught up her draperies dexterously, and flinging her disengaged hand aloft with inimitable sweep, undulated through one of those Eastern, languorous movements which she had been practising in secret ever since her arrival in England.

Her guests rose from their seats to press forward in eager knots. She saw, through half-closed lids, the tall figure of him for whom, only, she was revealing herself so wonderful, dominate the rest; then her supple body bent backward in the gradual evolution of a dance-phrase as long-drawn as a violin wail.

When she raised herself again, and once again furtively searched, he was there no more. One of the weighted purple silk curtains that hung between the feast room





*“Shall I not dance?” she cried, shaking her mane once more*



and the summer night was still swaying as if it had been thrust aside by a hasty hand.

A sharp exclamation escaped her. She stood staring, stiffening herself, regardless of frenzied applause, loud acclamations, hand clapping, and entreaties. Suddenly she laughed, laughed gaily at a thought that seemed to have been flung into her consternation like a rose into a dark room.

*"He couldn't stand it. I have made him jealous, jealous with a vengeance!"*

Laughing still she threw herself back into her chair; the ambassador on one side, Larpent on the other, brought her each a shoe.

"Only do not give me away!" she implored, panting. "For if my manager heard of it — you understand. . . . Oh, la, oh, la, it is I that would never hear the end of it!"

Desmond hurried across the turf and ran almost headlong down the grass steps to the lower terrace. He felt he must be free even of the shadow of the roof supported by those Grecian columns. Upon the lower lawn, circled by syringa and lilac bushes, he paused at length and inhaled the night air, with a sense of laving himself as if in pure water from contamination. He could not have stood the spectacle a moment longer. To see her, at her Eastern antics, that *mænad* . . . who was like his wood nymph!

It was a dim starlight night, with a heavy dew, and very still. He could hear the drip of infinitesimal drops of moisture falling all around him from leaf to leaf, and the whisper of the water lipping the river sedge only a few

feet away. Now and again a faint sigh seemed to sweep over the garden as though the night drew a long breath in her sleep.

A distant shout of laughter, the mingling of many voices uplifted, roused him from the inarticulate abstraction of wrath into which he had fallen. He felt, suddenly and pressingly, as if he could not place sufficient distance between himself and that house to which an equal fever of impatience had, only a couple of hours ago, drawn him. With a distaste that was almost shuddering, he thought that he would have to recross its threshold to fetch his coat and hat; not that he need fear any encounter: they were all too well amused with each other in the Greek hall of feasting.

Heavily he went along the lower terrace, through a honeysuckle pergola that was wickedly sweet, seeking the second grass staircase which he knew led to the lawn in front of the reception room. As he mounted the steps, he saw with some annoyance, that this room had been left with undrawn curtains, open to the night. From it long shafts of light fell through the colonnade upon the stretch of turf he would have to cross. A moment he almost drew back. Then another burst of mirth and beat of clapping hands reassured him; he moved on steadily toward the house.

He had passed but half this way, when, with a sharp pang of emotion, in which he could not distinguish consternation from joy, he beheld a white figure emerge from the shadow of a column and advance toward him.

"I knew it was you," said Fifi, still some ten paces from him. And:

"I knew it was you," he answered, standing still to let her approach.

There was such a tumult within him that he was scarcely aware that he had spoken. It was as if thought but answered thought. The overpowering sense of revolt within him only gave poignancy to the passion that he had already acknowledged to himself as inevitable and hopeless. He cared too madly, he cared too stupidly. She was the daughter of such a woman, she was "the Panther's Cub" — what was he doing here? It must be the end, he told himself. And then he resolved that, since it was the end, he would kiss her once, once in farewell! A kiss, more or less, to the Panther's Cub . . . to her who had made that public leap, three years ago, at Como! Well, it would not harm her. While, for him — for him, it would be pain, an ecstasy, a memory of what life might mean, to carry away into the dead years to come.

So when she came up to him and stopped, a little timidly, he caught both her hands in his, clasped them as he had never clasped a woman's hands before in all his dissipated and varied experience, and drew her toward the colonnade, into the full light. She gave way to him, unresisting. Just within a rose-hung arch he paused and spoke.

"I have something to say to you." His voice was very low, and rather hoarse. "I wanted to see your face first."

He hardly knew himself what it was he had to say, what wild, what foolish words before the farewell kiss. But, even as he flung that desired gaze upon her, some

thing seemed to break over him, like a huge salt wave and tear him apart from his purpose. He stood staring. Her eyes were upon him, dilated; her face, a little pale, was lifted confidently; with parted lips she seemed to wait for an unknown wonder, a new, joyous, beautiful, exquisite moment, a gift of unutterable sweetness that she longed for and yet was afraid of! Half child, half woman, palpitating toward him, yet almost trembling on flight, she stood, waiting. No, he could not take her into his arms, he could not kiss her; he could not speak those words of passion, of insult and renunciation that rose in fire from his heart:

“Panther’s Cub — daughter of yonder mænad, I would fain go to perdition in your arms, but I have not yet fallen so low! There is yet something of my father’s soul within me that keeps me from this baseness. Therefore will I cut myself from you, though it is life itself I part from. Only once I must kiss you — once. That I may know what life could mean!”

He could not say these words. He passed his hand over his forehead, it was wet with a cold sweat.

“What is it?” she whispered. She leant forward, and her lips drooped at the corners like a child’s on the verge of tears. A shadow of horror gathered in her eyes. He tried to smile at her, as one would at a child.

“Nothing, nothing — good night, Miss Fifi!” He took her hand once more into his own ice-cold one, just with the barest touch of civility.

“You are going?”

He could hardly bear to hear the disappointment in



her voice, to see it written on that face, every line of which seemed made to express splendid joy.

Then from the dining room came the loudest clamour that had yet escaped from its merry, irresponsible company. The daughter of the house frowned; a slight shiver ran through her.

"Oh, I wish they wouldn't!" she said, fretfully. Then suddenly: "Oh, is that why you are going? Because of all this noise and laughter? It does seem horrid, somehow, this quiet, pretty night."

He looked at her furtively, darkly, with something akin to agony in his glance.

"I must go," he repeated, evading. "Good night."

He sprang from her into the room, and across it toward the outer vestibule, as if hunted.

Disconsolate, bewildered, she followed him halfway, and then paused. He looked back as lovers must, and his resolution melted. He took two steps toward her again, his blue eyes shining:

"Fifi! . . . ."

The colour and light rushed back into her face.

"You will come to-morrow?"

"Yes, I will come to-morrow," he answered, with a break in his voice. The next moment he was gone.

## XI

### VALUABLE INFORMATION

“MY DEAR,” said Sir Joseph Warren-Smith — he stood on the threshold of his dressing room, looking in upon the horrible strawberry-pink splendour of the connubial apartment — “I have something to say to you.”

Lady Alice, seated before the dressing table in a blue dressing gown — of the shade best calculated to set one’s teeth on edge in conjunction with the strawberry-pink — turned her eyes querulously upon her lord. Her pale sandy locks, already flecked with gray, were in the hands of her tirewoman. Before her a huge, three-winged mirror reflected from three aspects her countenance; the left profile was undoubtedly the most disastrous. But Sir Joseph beheld in her a daughter of the marquis, and for him she walked in sufficient beauty.

“Well, Joseph?” she queried.

In his shirt sleeves he stood adjusting his white tie. She disliked him to display such familiarity, especially before the servants. In the inmost recesses of her mean nature she resented every one of his middle-class ways with an extraordinary secret vehemence; but Prince’s Gate and Warren Park, a “sixty H. P. Mercédès,” and Daring & Gibbons’s art and luxury were preferable to Lowndes Square and all that appertained thereto.

Nay, it was even conceivable that, upon comparison, Sir Joseph Warren-Smith, vulgarian as he might be, would prove a companion preferable to Martia Marchioness. Lady Alice was too filial actually to formulate such a comparison; but the consciousness of it may have helped her not to quarrel with her bread and butter, had she dared quarrel. But, though she might have become easily an adept in the art, his wife could not henpeck him, whatever might be the provocation. Sir Joseph was nothing if not master in his own house. He had all the bourgeois ideas of the supremacy of man, of the husband's high authority. The very name of woman suffrage was anathema to him; it was only before his mother-in-law that principle gave way. Now, Lady Alice quickly amended her querulous tone and sketched a smile as she repeated her question:

“Well, Joseph?”

Sir Joseph, succeeding with some difficulty in adjusting the bow satisfactorily under his swelling chin, puffed and snorted after his fashion, rolled his eyes and jerked his thumb; which signals, interpreted, meant that he had private matters of importance to communicate and desired the dismissal of the maid. Apprehensively, Lady Alice gave the required order and again fixed her eyes upon her husband in a helpless stare.

Ever since he had been actually brought into his brother-in-law's affairs, the Member of Parliament had been in a state of perpetual restlessness, of bubbling importance; the torments, which in this condition he inflicted on his entourage were comparable only to those they had had to endure during his last electoral campaign.

"Well, my dear," said he, closing the door carefully behind him and advancing pompously, "I met Colonel Wentworth in the House this afternoon. Met him plump in the lobby! He could not avoid shaking hands," said Sir Joseph ingenuously, "and I kept him a few minutes in conversation." He paused and blew himself out, and his braces creaked. "I took the opportunity, my dear, of speaking to him about this business, this deplorable business."

"Joseph!" cried his wife sharply, "you did not, surely, mention Desmond's name!"

Something of a glow of triumph faded from his countenance. He protruded his jaw and rubbed it with his forefinger.

"Why, my dear —" he flung her a furtive look; then the master of the house asserted himself. "I did what I considered necessary. I have obtained valuable information. Valuable information," he repeated. That was his mother-in-law's own desire, he could not have done wrong in acting upon it. "Mr. Scott was quite right, Alice. Young Wentworth did go off with that disreputable girl."

"Good heavens!" gasped Lady Alice, whom six years of union with Sir Joseph Warren-Smith had not deprived of all conceptions of gentlemanly behaviour. "Surely he did not tell you so!"

"I made him tell me," said the complacent go-between. "He would have evaded me, I assure you; but I was one too many for him. 'Look here,' I said, and took him by the elbow, 'you'll be doing a good piece of work in preventing an irretrievable disaster to a noble family——"

a noble family — if you'll tell me the rights of this business. Did that singing woman's daughter, Madame la Marmora's daughter, go off with your son, or did she not, at Como, you know, three years ago?' . . . I am afraid Colonel Wentworth is rather a bad-tempered man. He looked at me for a moment as if he was going to fly at my throat, he did indeed, Alice! Then he muttered something about its being not my business, nor anybody's, if his son had been a young fool. You see, he couldn't deny his son had been a young fool. First confirmation. Then he tried to make off, pulled his arm away from my hand quite rudely almost. But of course he was upset at the recollection, and I make allowances. 'Just one word,' I said, 'one more word, Colonel,' I said. 'I should be extremely obliged by your candid opinion of the girl.' Well, then, my dear, he stopped and turned round — he had been positively running away from me — and he said ——”

“Oh, Joseph!” moaned the poor lady, and the triple mirror reflected a most distressing spectacle. “What could he say?”

“Don't hurry me, Alice. I am endeavouring to remember the exact words, for they were remarkable. Yes, it was like this: 'My candid opinion, sir, is that the girl's as bad as they make them; and the mother's worse than they make them; but if all I hear of your brother-in-law is true, he about matches them. Good afternoon.' Now Alice, what do you think of that?”

“Joseph!” gasped the lady again.

Conflicting emotions struggled within her. Resentment that the *roturier* should presume to discuss his noble



relative and repeat with such satisfaction insulting comments upon him; resentment that the unknown brewing colonel should have treated a rich and influential man, her husband, with such open rudeness; a galling and unwilling sense of this same husband's want of breeding; of the absurd figure he even now presented to her in his air of jubilation over such an incident; and yet withal an acrid righteous satisfaction kindred to his own, over this valuable corroboration to their worst suspicions. . . . Valuable corroboration; those were the words now falling from Sir Joseph's lips.

"I think it is my duty, Alice, to see your brother again."

Lady Alice looked doubtful. She muttered, in her dejected, rabbit-like manner that she feared it would only make matters worse.

"Then I will tell your mother. Yes," he pursued importantly, "I will drive round to Lowndes Square this evening, and inform your mother. She has — ah — placed so much confidence in me, with regard to this painful matter. Alice —" he read hesitation and disapproval on his wife's countenance and was all the more determined — "I consider it my duty. I will telephone for the car."

He drew a long breath of self-satisfaction, loosened his collar on either side, to make room for his bursting sense of importance, and disappeared within his dressing room.

Lady Alice returned to her mirror with a peevish sigh. She wished as ardently as she could wish anything that Joseph had not been brought into this business;



she hated it with all the hatred of the ugly virtuous woman for the side of life in which feminine witchery was the moving spring. She had made a resolve that her husband should never return to those dangerous grounds; the adjective "alluring," which he had used in reference to his hostess at Branksome, rankled in the mind of the woman who could never have allured. Yet, in spite of a determination perpetually reasserted in secret, she had an uneasy haunting that she might not be strong enough to impose it.

Sourly, therefore, she saw him depart, after that enormous repast which he owed it to his wealth to have served as expensively and unseasonably as possible. He was the type of man who "believed in doing himself well," as an acknowledgment to his own success, and who never rose from his board without having disposed of at least the best part of a bottle of the best champagne.

He was full of valiance as he stepped into his car, although the big cigar had perforce to be deferred till after his important interview.

Lady Alice withdrew into the vast unhomeliness of her drawing room and sat dismally stitching at a piece of Church embroidery.

She had a faint malicious smile as the car throbbed once again beneath the balconies within the half-hour: Mama had dismissed Joseph with great celerity. But when her husband came in, panting more than usual, there was no sign of discomfiture upon his countenance — rather a heightened appearance of responsibility.

"Your mother, my dear, was greatly struck. Greatly, I may say greatly, impressed by my information. She

made use of most gratifying expressions. 'Joseph,' she said, 'Joseph, you are invaluable.'

Lady Alice raised the pale globes of her eyes incredulously upon the speaker. But she knew better than to express her feelings in words.

"Yes, Joseph?" she nibbled.

"She immediately wrote to your brother," pursued the other, sitting heavily on the crimson-satin sofa, knees wide apart, hands hanging loosely between them. "She wrote to Desmond. I suggested one or two phrases. She read me the letter." Triumph was bursting from him as he spoke. "It was telling, Alice, very telling. After that we had a little chat. That is a very remarkable woman, a lady ——"

He broke off, his eyes met those of his wife with a slight hesitation. He leaned back and yawned, then sat up and clasped those wide-apart knees with outspread fingers.

"If that letter fails," he resumed in an off-hand manner, "we are agreed, your mother and I, that there is only one thing more to be done."

Lady Alice still stared, blinking. She knew what was coming.

"I have told her that, hem — however distasteful to me is the thought of, ahem, those purlieus, that for the sake of the family, for her sake, the sake of a mother's anxiety, I will once again, if necessary, beard the lion in her den — I should say the Panther —" He stopped to laugh at his quip; but the tail of his glance was watchful upon his wife's horror-stricken countenance.

"Curiously enough," he went on, pretending not to

perceive its horror, "even at the very time of my first visit to Madame la Marmora, I came to a conclusion similar to that expressed by the Marchioness to-night: if Desmond will not listen to reason, the — ah — source of the mischief herself must be approached; or rather the mother of the source."

"Joseph!" interrupted Lady Alice shrilly, "you are not going there again ——"

"Alice!"

"I won't have it!" she cried. "It's shameful! It's no place for a married man!"

Even as she protested she knew how utterly unavailing her protest would be: knew indeed that to a man of her husband's character, home-tyrant as he was, her attempt to control him was but an incentive. Yet would she protest.

"It is wicked of Mama!" she cried, with sudden sobs.

The man rose, solemnly, glaring at her with an offended eye.

"Alice, I am surprised. You know my opinion, my regard for your mother. Have I not even just now expressed it? I think, um, Alice, the suspicion you express of myself is as injurious and misplaced as the unfilial remark that has just escaped you. You will be sorry for this, Alice. If a man, ha — of unblemished repute cannot be trusted . . . upon an errand of duty . . . Alice, have I ever given you cause to doubt me?"

"No," she admitted, fixed him with one long pathetic gaze, and then sought, sniffing, for her pocket-handkerchief.

"But you told me yourself how . . . alluring she was," wept she.

"We will not discuss this till you are calmer," said the husband and stalked with great dignity out of the room in search of his cigar.

Though he had deemed it incumbent on him to show so much displeasure, in his heart he was not altogether displeased. Indeed, before he lit his cigar, he surveyed himself complacently in the smoking-room looking-glass.

It is the strength of such worthy households that in an atmosphere of super-abounding rectitude no disturbing sense of humour can live.

# BOOK III





## I

### PLEASURE AND BUSINESS

IF ROBECQ, in his unavoidable speculations on the past relations of his two musical purchases, had come to a definite conclusion, he remained careful to let no one suspect it, least of all those immediately concerned, and events had justified the wisdom of this somewhat cynical decision. For years things had progressed very comfortably. If ever ignorance was bliss, here had been a case in point. But with his own new projects concerning Fifi, he was beginning to feel a certain amount of uneasiness with regard to the old musician whom he had been at such pains to attach to his enterprise. Fritz was still an unknown quantity. Fritz had not only extraordinary powers in his own personality, but a secret power over "the Panther" — a power exclusively and relentlessly exercised with regard to "the Panther's Cub."

It had suited the impresario well enough hitherto that Fritz should have his own way in this point; the Jew was a man of strong common sense as well as of kindly disposition, and he quite approved of a sensible middle-class education for the child; approved too of her being kept as much as possible from the deleterious influence of an opera singer's entourage. After one disastrous summer holiday spent by mother and daughter in company, he had cordially endorsed the policy which thereafter

had kept them separate for nearly three years. When he had telegraphed the mother's summons from Vienna, he had only done so with the cynical prevision: "It won't last long — it will keep her quiet for a few days, not long enough to do the child any harm."

What he had not foreseen was the result of the move upon himself.

Robecq, who had placed business before everything else in life; who had twice married for advantage; who, in his shrewd mind, had kept a genial contempt for the master passion; had at forty-five (critical age!) fallen pathetically in love. And it was a complication. For the Jew was not yet so blindly in love as to contemplate the sacrifice of the greatest stroke of business he had yet accomplished and he knew that there would be "the devil to pay with old Fritz!" Upon him everything pivoted.

So he was torn this way and that, between anxiety for Salome and infatuation for Fifi; between terror lest the repititor's illness should interfere with the necessary work, and consciousness that it suited his secret purpose remarkably well.

Meyer was faithful to his pledge: already he had so far recovered as to be able to receive the singer daily for her daily "repetition." From the inn bedroom he had been moved to a cottage, almost abutting on the grounds of Branksome; and in its best parlour — only large enough to contain the Bechstein upright and a slippery horsehair sofa — repititor and prima donna had for the last few days been hard at word over Strauss's complicated score.

But the manager's apprehensions on this head were by no means altogether relieved by his tamer's return to duty.

He had unexpected trouble with Fritz himself. Fritz disliked Salome, disliked the idea of assisting in its production. A moment the impresario actually trembled before the possibility of having to forego his practically indispensable assistance: never had pupil and teacher been on such unsympathetic terms. He had found La Marmora and her repetitor, more than once at loggerheads, in the stuffy little parlour.

One afternoon she returned to her marble halls actually in tears.

"*Ah, ça, mais, Robecq,*" she stormed at him, tearing her Panama hat from her head, and stabbing it with her jewelled hatpin as if she were stabbing her enemies, "it's becoming frankly impossible! — Fritz is beyond bearing. Ten times he took me through that first solo of mine — till I was fit to scream. His ideas are not my ideas —"

"I daresay not, my dear," said Robecq soothingly; but his eye was upon her, measuring. "Perhaps you were screaming," he added as a pleasant suggestion.

She glowered on him, without speaking.

"You see, Fulvia," proceeded the man, "Fritz and I happen to be agreed on the reading; and that's enough for you, I think." He smiled disarmingly. "Salome is a dark Eastern nature; she reserves her passion for one or two supreme outbursts. Up to that she contains herself, *elle se contient*, you see — that's just what we want you to do, to restrain yourself. Now you're inclined to force the note from the outset. You detract from your effects —"

He broke off. He felt he might as well talk thus

didactically to her savage prototype. Fritz it was who knew how to manage her, with his tamer's eye, his unwearying patience of repetition, his inflexible method: "Wrong — do it again." One did not discuss with wild beasts, one put them through the task, till it was learned at last.

"Well, between you two, your sacred Salome will be a fiasco!" she sobbed.

"When you can have your repetition here, it will seem different," he said consolingly.

This was to bring a fresh outbreak of complaint: how was it possible to sing with four walls on the top of one, with her ribs squeezed between the piano and the sofa and Fritz's foot in its bandages making her sick! "*Est-ce étonnant si j'hurle?*"

Robecq hesitated, too much possessed by the urgency of the situation to find his usual laugh.

"As you say, my poor Fulvia, it is not astonishing that you should howl. Why not, then," he drawled, "let the old man do as he suggests, and be wheeled down here in a bath chair for the repetition?"

An ugly, sly gleam shone between her narrowed eyelids.

"That would suit you, would it not?" she taunted; "that he should be prying all over the place next Tuesday."

"No," said Robecq in his candid way. "No, my dear, it would not." His fingers played in his clipped beard. "Well, then, there's nothing for it but to possess our souls in patience as best we may."

"It's you that are an idiot!" she cried; "it's you that have muddled everything! Ah, *sapristi!* — to fall in love at your age!"

“One falls in love when one can and when one must. Our age, my dear ——”

By a convulsive start she warned him from that delicate point; he swerved gracefully.

“A man is as old as he feels. A woman, divine Fulvia, . . . finish the saying for yourself. *Et avec ça* ——” he dropped into his easy boulevard French, “that it does not arrange you famously that my little love affair should succeed?”

But she was in the mood for quarrel.

“And it is you who have ruined Fritz,” she resumed. “What is the old fellow but our creature whom we pay, a kind of servant when all is said and done? — Why don’t you treat him like one? You’ve let him get above himself. In God’s name why should it be an understood thing that he should come to the house whenever he likes? Why should he have the run of my parties? Answer me that. Tell him to stay away on Tuesday.”

Robecq rose from his chair. When the Panther got into one of her rages it was his custom to put space between them. She was beginning to scream. He went, with his heavy, picking tread, toward the nearest exit. But before touching the *portière*, he felt unable to resist the impulse and turned for a retort. His formerly imperturbable good-humour was becoming impaired these days, when for the first time in his well-regulated existence, the demands of business and pleasure had come in conflict.

The glance that went back to his prima donna was anything but benevolent. She was sprawling on the bear-skin couch; panting breath, dilated nostrils, restless

hands, all portended the explosion it was his interest to avert.

"Tell Fritz all this yourself, Fulvia," he said, slowly.

His gaze was steadily upon her; and he had a small chuckle, for just the cringe he expected to see came upon the tense frame; the furtive terror, the swift query, into her eye.

But, as has been said, it was far from the impresario's policy to pursue inconvenient knowledge.

"I'll send Elisa to you, with some *Fleur d'Oranger*," he remarked, in his usual tone of urbanity, after a subtly impressive pause. "You had better drink it, and lie down. *Vous avez les nerfs agacés, très chère.*"



## II

### INNOCENCE IN MUSLIN

IT WAS the last of Madame la Marmora's celebrated strawberry parties — the third of June. On the fourth, the singer was to retire from the world; the star was to hide her effulgence: Salome, in short, was to be veiled until she was ready to burst forth in triumph.

It was a heavy, brooding day: lowering accumulation of cloud to the north threatened a thunderstorm. Nevertheless Madame la Marmora's guests mustered in force. It was their last chance of profiting of an unwonted occasion; and all who hitherto had been exempt from her hospitality, had left no stone unturned to be included this afternoon.

Among these, young Lady Sturminster made an early appearance. The yellow Mercedes which had brought her down from Park Lane also contained that indispensable member of society, Mr. Vere Hamilton. Cassandra had discovered a use for him at last.

When the worthy gentleman had shaken the dust of Prince's Gate from his patent-leather shoes on the memorable afternoon of Lord Desmond's declaration, he had resolved that no power on earth would induce him to be connected with the business in question again. But he was not proof against a pretty, imperious note, inviting him to lunch with and escort his sincerely, Cassandra

Sturminster to Branksome Cottage. — How could any Vere Hamilton of this world — proud of the honour of being on the visiting list of an old and ugly dowager — refuse to give his company to the young, pretty, reigning marchioness, no matter where she chose to take him!

And he had indeed a most agreeable repast, *en tête-à-tête* with his hostess; and Cassandra (who would have made eyes to a scarecrow) completely turned the neat, sleek head of the little man before they had reached their coffee.

She wore some kind of adorable lace confection with bobbing cherries on her head; and it was tied under her chin on one side, with a narrow red velvet ribbon. The garment that accompanied this artful headgear was of a misleading white muslin simplicity. Mr. Vere Hamilton, who unostentatiously gave half his income to charity, would have been genuinely shocked, had he been told that this artless effect would be jotted down at some sixty guineas on Lady Sturminster's next bill from the *Maison Angèle*.

In comfortable ignorance, however, he was able to add an exquisite innocence of attire to his hostess's many charms. — Indeed, until she revealed to him the reasons for her afternoon expedition, he had been basking in a complete state of satisfaction compounded of admiration for his companion, and a naïve pleasure in his own exalted position as her escort.

It was on the journey down that the first shadow fell on his content.

The car was rolling at an agreeably moderate pace, for Lady Sturminster had no notion of being blown into

a guy (as she told the cavalier, with one of her irresistible *oeillades*) they were proceeding just fast enough to produce a desirable freshness and cheat themselves into the belief that there was air to breathe.

"Oh, isn't the country nice!" cooed the lady, indicating the green fields with a vague gesture of delicate hands. "It's always been just my dream to have a cottage on the river."

"Surely," said Mr. Hamilton, in his old-fashioned courtesy, "you had but to breathe the desire . . ."

"Breathe!" she echoed, with her musical shallow-sounding laugh; "I'd have blown a hurricane at him, if it had been any good. But, you see, it was Mrs. Orris's dream too!" She turned an infantile smile upon him. But Mr. Hamilton did not see . . .

Good heavens! the bare idea was preposterous. Charming, innocent lady, he would be base indeed who could put such a construction upon her prattling lips. He stared a second blankly; and then, blushing at himself, hastened to cover the awful suggestiveness of his pause.

"Indeed," he stammered, "Lord Sturminster is right . . . I apprehend, I apprehend, dear lady. The river-side is becoming sadly notorious. It would not do for people like yourself ——"

Her laughter tinkled at him again.

"Oh, well, I don't know that I should have minded so much — I needn't have been just next door to Mrs. Orris. And anyhow it wouldn't have altered facts. But you see, all that marble cost such a tarnation lot! I really couldn't ask Poppa twice ——"

She broke off. The man was gasping. Perspiration had broken out on his crimsoning forehead.

"Didn't you know?" she went on. Her soft voice took a still softer inflection, as it were, of a little pity for his guilelessness. "Didn't you know that Wurzel just ran that marble lodge?"

Mr. Hamilton passed a silk handkerchief over his countenance.

"Oh, Lady Sturminster — I trust . . . I trust — if I have unintentionally seemed to make any allusion — I assure you nothing was further from my thoughts."

Coolly she commented:

"Then you did know!" She laughed again; there was the faintest note of hardness now in the tinkle: "Of course, everybody knows."

She tossed the words from her as a child would toss a broken flower, and proceeded confidentially:

"Now you understand why I've been just mad to see the place."

Her companion fairly leaped in his seat, every nerve quivering as if he had received an electric shock. Then he gazed earnestly at the delicate profile. He half expected to see a drooping lip, a swimming glance; almost he hoped that the quiver in the pretty voice was due to suppressed tears. But the corners of the mouth were tilting upward and mirth once more rippled from it, as, drawn by his glance, Cassandra turned her mocking elf-countenance upon him.

What was his dear "Society" coming to? He really would no longer be able to frequent these selectest circles his soul delighted in, if all his best instincts were to be

subjected to such unpleasant commotions. This transatlantic crudity — well-nigh amounting to a want of feminine modesty—outraged his most sensitive prejudices. The mid-Victorian woman of his dreams would have drawn a veil over her husband's peccadilloes; would have blushed in agony at the merest reference to them; what tears she would weep would be wept in secret . . .

It seemed as if his companion's velvet eyes, with their surface childlike candour, and their unchildlike lurking depths of cynicism, read the distressed thoughts.

"I reckon you're just shocked to fits," the thread of voice proceeded with unaltered sweetness. "That's your British way, I suppose. Even Desmond got quite a turn when I asked him to tootle me down to Branksome. And it ought to take a good deal, you'd think, to shock Desmond. Oh! that's just your British way; and if you and he got together, you'd have a little chuckle over Wurzel and his Orris and the marble nonsense and all the rest of it! And you're none of you quite such idiots as to think that an intelligent woman of twenty-five is going about London with a bandage over her eyes. You all know that I know, but I mustn't speak of it to you. That's just shocking to your British modesty. I mustn't laugh at what you men snigger over. It makes you really blush. Now, Mr. Hamilton, if I wept on your shoulder, you'd think it sweet and womanly, wouldn't you?"

"I —? — I?" stammered he, uncertain whether to be appalled or transported at such a prospect.

"But because I happen to see the humour of the situation, I have given you a nasty jar, haven't I? That's



where the difference between you British and us Americans comes in. But since I married among you, I am precious glad to find I have got a sense of humour left. I'm 'dead' glad. It's something to have a sense of humour left, when the other things go, isn't it? — Ah, this is the place, I suppose."

The motor wheeled suddenly through two modest iron gates, set hospitably open and flanked on one side by a tiny black and white cottage.

"Well, I must say," she commented, "I think Wurzel might have risen to a Corinthian arch, and a marble what-do-you-call-it for the gate-keeper. Considering the amount of dollars that run into this, it strikes me the entrance looks pretty mean . . . I think Poppa'd be hurt, some."

Mr. Hamilton was beyond speech. His conscience was smiting him acutely for every past smile which it now accused him of having indeed bestowed *de par le monde* on Sturminster's infatuation and Orris's Folly. But he had not known — on his honour as an honest little Christian gentleman — he had not known that the fellow had drawn for it on his wife's exchequer. How could he now explain this to her? He could not explain it to her. It was impossible. Yet that she should so misinterpret him was agony.

"I hope," the silken accents went on, "that we shall find Desmond here to-day. Oh, I hope we shall! Don't you?"

"I — I — really ——"

The beaver was not proving himself a brilliant companion.



“No, of course you don't. You're too thick with the Dow. I'm not. If I could hate any of my dear British relations, I'd hate that old woman! She's got an eye like an alligator. My — what a queue of carriages! And isn't it hot! Yes, I'd just love Desmond to defy his mother — and to marry the Panther's Cub.”

Mr. Hamilton had no reply to this last enormity. He crawled out of the car in the wake of the light, pretty figure in her ethereal white muslins and laces, limp, utterly dejected, saddened to the heart.

“I will give up London. I will live in the country.” Some such terrible resolution was forming itself in his mind.

### III

#### THE LAST STRAWBERRY PARTY

THE air seemed stagnant to suffocation upon the terrace lawn, although now and again a gust of wind would shudder across the gardens, flinging up little columns of dust, blowing the leaves the wrong way and shivering the grass till the whole earth seemed to wither and turn pale under it. The river exhaled dank smells of weeds and slime as it ran leaden under the leaden sky. The roses drooped, the scent of the lilies was unbearably pervasive.

Madame la Marmora's company strolled about or collected together in desultory and languid groups. In the curious, glaring light, the paint on so many of the ladies' faces seemed to stare in all its crudity, like the paint on the face of a clown; ill-humour sat on most; and the masculine element showed a disastrous tendency to segregate into nooks for the consolatory cigarette.

La Marmora herself kept to her cedar tree; resolved to wait there until a certain arrival which as yet was delayed. She alternated this afternoon between a mood as brooding as the weather itself, and one of sudden vivacity. When in this latter phase her voice rang out, her eye flashed; she gesticulated and laughed.

Robecq observed her with disquietude.

"She is brewing something," he said to himself. "She

means to bring our diplomatist to book to-day, or I'm much mistaken. There'll be a rumpus as sure as coming thunder. And the Lord only knows how it will all end!"

The impresario wiped his forehead and sighed while he forced the genial smile and trivial remark that supplemented the hostess's greetings. In this function, against his wont, he remained beside her:

*"Je ne la lâche pas d'une semelle,"* he had decided.

When Lady Sturminster sailed across the lawn, Fulvia received her in the dark mood — after one piercing glance that sought in vain in her wake for the long, languid figure and the pale unsmiling face she was waiting for.

*"Bon, la belle-sœur, après le beau-frère!* What have they got, these creatures, to persecute me like this?" she was asking herself fiercely. "First one, then another, to spy upon me! And where have they hidden him to-day?"

"How de do?" said the American, her large eyes appraising the Panther with some disappointment. Dyed! Painted! forty! And it's really a common face . . .

Ill-humour is an ugly emotion. And under an ugly emotion the plebeian betrays itself.

"Good afternoon," said La Marmora, gruffly, hardly touching the slender fingers. But all at once her countenance became irradiated. The thought had struck her: to have so frightened his family, how much he must have let them see he cared!

The perfect bow of her mouth parted in a flashing smile. Her eyelids narrowed over a sweet look.

"I am so happy to see you, Lady Sturminster," she thrilled with that deepening vibration of the voice her art had taught her.

Cassandra stared, a little bewildered. "And after all, she's beautiful . . . ! If the girl is only a patch on her ——" She looked round for the daughter, but met the Baron's smile.

Easily Fulvia performed the introduction. Of course Lady Sturminster had heard of M. de Robecq?

But it was M. de Robecq who knew all about Lady Sturminster; he had met her father in New York; he knew Nicolas P. Fish-Cordevant, that charming young millionaire, her first cousin; Mrs. David Cordevant-Reuter, her girl companion, was also one of his dear friends . . .

Cassandra brightened and dimpled to the familiar names, delivered in such familiar intonation.

"I say, Baron, would you mind just touring me round a bit? I'm wild to see the marble halls."

"Yes, Robecq, conduct Lady Sturminster," commanded the hostess, still wreathed in smiles.

The Baron had no choice but to abandon his post. Yet the task was agreeable. Under the shadowy lace brim of the cherry hat, Cassandra looked down sideways on the squat figure. A moment she hesitated upon the effect of confiding to him likewise why the marble in question had such special attractions for her; but on second thoughts she refrained. He would have laughed with her. And somehow she would not have liked to hear that laugh.

Desmond Brooke took a short cut from the station across the fields to Branksome. He had put himself to the discomfort of the train journey and the walk, this oppressive day, rather than make use of his car. He desired to arrive unostentatiously; he was determined to have, if possible, a chance of meeting Fifi alone.

The man was in a condition of upheaval. Lady Sturminster had indeed known her son; she had known that, while no consideration of conventionality, of family or personal credit, of class distinction, of moral principle would succeed in restraining him, she could count on his innate fastidiousness. But what she had not reckoned upon, what indeed was beyond her nature to understand, was a passion so headlong as to overwhelm even the revulsions of distaste.

True it was that, after the interview in Lady Alice's drawing room, the man had gone forth into the streets feeling as if his woodland idyll had been blighted by a dust-storm. All that was fresh, spontaneous and pure, soiled, disbloomed, dragged down. Up to that moment no disrespectful thought had been able to live in his mind beside the image of the girl. Now, as if ugly, reptile things had been engendered by the mere poison of Scott's words — his laugh, his innuendo, his looks — a host of base suggestions had begun to awake in his feelings toward her. He had exclaimed brutally that he did not want her better than her mother; and the lower side of his nature, that unacknowledged inherent part of man (which the high-minded continue to ignore till, if not dead, it remains a negligible quantity in their existence), kept repeating the odious cry. But the other part — the soul

side which, in spite of all, had remained strong in him, which had recently, under the spell of this love, renewed something of the generosity of his youth, was lamenting with even louder voice, weeping, as it were, inner tears less for himself than for her . . . The pity of it, the pity of it . . . ! And, as it lamented, it drew him back from her.

How hideous the world was! And how cruel life — and Fate how blind! That this youth, this creature above all, it seemed, created virginal, should not have been permitted to escape them. Man, Fate, Life, between them, like three horrible Nornes, had conspired against the exquisite promise. She had not been yet eighteen — not yet eighteen . . . !

It was a poor child that had been hurt, irretrievably hurt; and because of this was he going to hurt her too? No! cried his manhood. No! determined his soul. And then another voice uprose in clamour: How could he live if he were to give her up? She was something to him that she could be to no one else. She was life itself; and if he were to cut this life from him, how would her own future be any the better. He knew into whose hands she was inevitably to fall. Would the Jew's ignoble *engouement*, under its mock matrimonial cloak, hurt her less, degrade her less than a frank and virile passion?

And thus sophistry added itself to the struggle and the man was torn in the conflict.

Yet, perhaps, the higher nature might have conquered. Indeed, after the two tortured days which had followed his singular moonlight meeting, he had decided to break his promise of return; decided to put temptation out



of reach for ever, by cutting short his leave and returning to his post immediately.

But the morning of the third day had brought him a letter from his mother.

True to her promise, the Dowager without a moment's delay had sent her epistle upon the subject of Sir Joseph's "valuable information" to the person most concerned:

"I do not for a moment suppose," ran the lines, "that you will give me the credit of believing that I am actuated in this unpleasant matter by anxiety for your own interest. Nevertheless, I feel I should not be doing my duty by you were I not to let you know of some further details that have come to my knowledge — corroborating what you yourself heard at Alice's last Monday.

"Joseph accidentally met Colonel Wentworth and had a short conversation with him, by which it would seem that Mr. Scott (no doubt out of regard for my and Alice's presence) considerably minimized the scandalous episode in question. You will not expect me to repeat here the words in which Colonel Wentworth qualified the influence to which his son, young Adolphus Wentworth, while still a mere undergraduate, fell a prey. But you can form, I am sure, a very correct estimate of them — you who (I grieve to have to write it) are so familiar with that unfortunate side of existence. Suffice it to say that the girl was spoken of as being 'worse than her mother.' I will add no more.

"Do not answer this; it is very painful to me to have to write at all on such a subject."

As Desmond read, he grew livid. The first impression had been the old overpowering sense of injury. That was his mother all over. Always she had blighted him — everything he cared for, everything he aspired to. Her

image rose before him in the act of inditing this very document. He could see her cold eye, her cold hand at work. A pen dipped in gall! What would she care if she had dipped it in his heart's blood? He knew the horrible, cold enjoyment with which she had formed those phrases alleged to be so painful!

He caught up the sheet again and conned it over. And then the poison spread and worked; his anger turned: Joseph was meddling still — Damn Joseph! If anything would drive a man to recklessness it would be the interference of a sanctimonious smug like Joseph.

Then, all at once, as if written in fire, the name of Wentworth danced across the page. Adolphus Wentworth! He could well imagine the youth . . . ! one of those cursed, clean-shaven, up-to-date young ruffians, flaunting the college colours abroad . . . with his conscious Oxford manner . . . Nausea rose in him. Was he, Desmond Brooke, to come after an Adolphus Wentworth — and God knows how many others . . . ! “The girl was worse than her mother . . .” And, after nausea, succeeded a murderous rage. Byron wished that all lovely womanhood had but one mouth, that he might kiss it. Fifi's undeclared lover longed that all his happier predecessors had but one neck — and he the wringing of it!

Inevitably the passionate turmoil centred itself again upon the supreme point — Fifi! Under the spell of the indescribable virginal innocence that seemed to encompass her like invisible armour, he had scarce dared, at their last meeting, touch her hand. He laughed at himself now, for a fool; he railed against her for a hypocrite.

Thus, like surging waters in secret sea caves, his anger ground his thoughts to shingle in the depths of his soul.

He was not capable of coming to any clear decision — not capable even of knowing what he wanted; but, out of the turmoil, one purpose shaped itself: he would see her again, were it only to drop the name of Wentworth in her hearing and watch her face. A cruel resolve and a devouring curiosity were now upon him — to speak of his knowledge and to see her face!

And thus it was that he found himself on his way to Branksome, with slow and dragging footsteps, traversing the dusty fields, but yet bent upon the meeting — that meeting which this time might inevitably be the last; or yet the beginning of a life unnamed, unnameable, and yet beckoning . . . calling as with fingers of fire, with voice of ecstasy and tears.

## IV

### STORM AND STRESS

WHEN a man is forced, by external event or internal emotion, to a state of high tension, there is added to his ordinary faculties a kind of extra or super-sense. In the genius, this becomes inspiration and leads to the masterpiece; it is the impulse that can turn the most obscure of beings in a moment to a hero. In the ordinary ways of life, the ordinary man in love will be drawn by some such super-sense to his beloved.

Desmond avoided the crowded lawn and the motor-streaked avenue and unerringly took the solitary shrubby walk that led to that secluded spot where, by the sun-dial he and Fifi had once met and parted.

And there, indeed, she sat, with hands folded on her knees, all white-robed against the dark wall of clipped yew. Her great, shady hat lay on the seat beside her.

At the sound of his steps she raised her eyes and smiled at him. It was as though she had expected him there. He came slowly across the grass-plot and stood before her; and then she lifted her hat and laid it across her knee, making room for him to sit beside her.

A smile trembled on her lips; but she had cast her eyes down at his approach, shyly. He had never seen her in a mood so quiet, so gentle. He took the mutely offered seat; and then could find no word with which to break

the silence. He was like one intent on battle, who finds himself suddenly weaponless. Those stirred deeps of his nature had been driving him out to strike and wound; and the first look at her bent head, the first step into that presence of youth and confidence, had disarmed him. More than all, her new timidity; the something at once expectant and shrinking, which is as the very bloom of the maiden wood, paralyzed his energies, confused still further his already confused mind, shook his purpose . . . Was she the most consummate actress; or had nature itself set this exquisite mask upon the wanton? Or — rending thought! — had she been created of such intrinsic innocence and chastity that fate could not all destroy; that the vessel retained the divine pattern, though the essence had fled?

Madame la Marmora's special Hungarian minstrels, who had been indulging in a rest, suddenly broke forth in the distance, with clash of tsimbalons, maddening rhythm, swing of wind-swept measure and wail of love song.

The spell of silence was snapped between them. Both spoke.

"No one knows I am here, but you," he said; while she made the admission which, in other circumstances, would have fallen so enchantingly upon his ears:

"I knew you would come here."

"Are we safe from the Baron, do you think?"

Her young smile ran like sunshine over her face:

"The Baron's watching Mama, as a cat watches a mousehole to-day. He's so terrified lest she should knock herself up, or anything — on account of her voice, you



understand." Then she added naively: "And she doesn't think you've come yet."

His eye brooded upon her. How much did she know? Did she guess what he could hardly avow to himself? And was it a simple matter to her? Was she, admittedly in her own mind, her mother's rival?

She went on, after a pause, with a certain little air of dignity as new to him as that first show of shyness:

"To Mama I am still a very little girl. She does not think I ought to be alone with gentlemen: she says it is so boring to them when they come here."

Was not this too brazenly to play the ingénue? He devoured her with his eyes; the soft oval of her cheek, a little pale to-day with the heat; the dewy candour of her eye; the child-lips . . .! were there indeed only a conspiracy to lie? Then what face would Innocence itself wear to the world, that it might hold it sacred?

The strains of the band — that infernal Hungarian music — caught his soul and tore it to shreds. One moment he saw himself holding her to him. It seemed as if the lightning which threatened from yonder livid horizon was flickering in his brain.

"You are not a little girl any more," he said hoarsely.

"No, indeed —" she jerked her head. "Remaining at school years and years does not keep one a little girl! Mama will forget —" Then, loyally, she amended what might appear a reproach: "How can Mama remember, in her busy life, with all her great journeys? We have had to be parted, and it is Fritz's fault. He is always fussing about me — Fritz —"

His gaze was fixed upon her with an expression she



had never yet seen in it, an expression that was almost angry in its intensity. It began to trouble her; she tripped upon her speech.

“Who is Fritz?” He spoke mechanically, as if he too hardly knew what he was saying.

“He works with Mama, and ——”

She broke off. The low line of sky before them seemed to open and shut upon an inner sullen flame of yellow, a far mutter of thunder succeeded; and then a hot dry gust of wind.

“Are you afraid of storms?”

She had made a swift involuntary movement closer to him: it would have brought her into his mad embrace, but that, once again, it was so much like the movement of a child.

“I don't like them,” she said plaintively.

She made a gesture, appealing. He took her hand; and as he did so, he felt her answering his clasp with clinging fingers, the storm broke in him too. It was so easy then — so easy! — Why the next minute her lips would be offering themselves! — No doubt so the blatant young Oxonian had found it — and the others! The while she counterfeited adorable young graces and prated guilelessly of her years and years at school . . . Who was Fritz? . . . His thoughts shot across each other like lightning flashes and his passion roared within him. He dropped her hand, almost flung it from him.

“But you've been in Italy so much — the thunderstorms are much worse over there — are they not? The thunderstorms at the Lakes for instance.” His voice was harsh.

She started and looked up quickly. The blood ebbed from her face, her eyes grew suddenly dark, and widened. Cruelly he went on:

“Weren't you at Como . . . once?”

She drew back. A most piteous look came over the whole countenance. Then her sudden pallor was succeeded by a burning, agonizing crimson. He could see it rise over her white bare throat to the roots of her bright hair. There was fear in the glance that she shot at him; fear; a terrified questioning.

Then the skies flashed and clamoured all about them; the earth shook under their feet; the tempest wind beat heavy drops against them. She sprang to her feet and ran from him. And as she went she covered her face with her hands; he thought he heard her sob.

He felt as if he had struck a child. . . He! to maltreat a child . . . Motionless, he sat on and let the storm rage about him. It was a kind of relief to that inner tempest that was so much more devastating. And yet, now, it was the rain that was falling. His fire and the clash had dropped dead within him, and it was sorrow that had sway. His obsession had veered round to another point of his torturing circle: the pity of it! She was only a child still. A frightened child — a child ashamed! The pity of it!

## V

### FRITZ IN COMMAND

THE Baron had conducted his charming companion first of all into the reception room, which, with an exaggeration of Americanism, probably suggested by his presence, she characterized as "just cunning" and "real cute." Here they found — alone to enjoy the coolness and shadowed space this sultry day — Mr. Philip Scott.

He opened astounded eyes at the sight of Lady Sturminster, with whom he had a slight, very slight acquaintance.

She came forward toward him with her light step and gave a cool little nod, just at the distance that precluded a handshake.

"How de do? — I'm here to see the marble."

"Of course," said Mr. Scott, "the marble is worth seeing."

As she turned, with a soft note of laughter toward the canopied couch, the critic flung a glance, charged with meaning, at the impresario; his face crimson with the laughter that any equivocal or possibly painful situation was ever wont to arouse in him. "How much does she know?" interrogated the pursed mouth and uplifted eyebrow. "Is it possible she has come on purpose?"

The Baron, who knew little, and cared less, about London society gossip, believed these grimaces to refer

to the lady's relationship to Lord Desmond. He shrugged his shoulders with the slight gesture of upturned palms, common to the race he sprang from.

"Oh, say," cried Cassandra, turning upon him so swiftly as to catch him in the act, though her guileless eyes betrayed no consciousness of it, "say, is this Cleopatra-erection of your prima donna's own invention?"

Before the Baron could reply, Mr. Scott was at her elbow.

"No, Lady Sturminster, all the decorative effects in this —" he hesitated with a chuckle, "this — one hardly knows what to call it, this palace, cottage, pylon — on the whole I think I prefer cottage — all the decorative effects of this cottage in fact are of Mrs. Orris's devising. A lady not of your acquaintance, I presume, Lady Sturminster? — She is reputed of eccentric taste."

"I suppose she just fancied herself on that pile," said the American, without a blink of her long eyelashes.

"It is considered becoming to a classic figure," assented Scott, with a sudden air of gravity.

"Why, now, won't you just show us its possibility?" cried she sweetly.

Her laugh rang out, delicately mocking. The Baron, between whom and the critic there was mutual respect but little esteem, joined in with his flat nasal cachinnation, without being the least aware of the hidden meaning of the brief passage of arms.

Mr. Scott, who had meant to punish the lady for her impertinent nod, was punished himself, on his sensitive side. Horribly conscious of that outline, which was his secret despair, for once he was nonplussed.

“’Pon honour, it’s very hot!” he exclaimed and passed a silk handkerchief over his forehead. “I shouldn’t be surprised if we had a horrid thunderstorm.”

Hardly had he spoken the words when the portentous darkness that precedes the outbreak fell upon the room like a pall. Instantly the Baron’s countenance, which still wore a bland smile, became correspondingly overcast.

“I must ask you to excuse me,” he cried, turning to Cassandra, “but if I don’t go and look after Madame la Marmora, she’s quite capable of staying under the cedar tree, and being struck by lightning, or wet to the bone in the coming deluge. Mr. Scott will show you the way to the dining room. — I’ve had everything prepared in there, in case we should be driven from the garden.”

He was moving away as he spoke, with the characteristic deliberation that overlay even his most urgent haste. His last words floated back from the colonnade. “I knew we’d not get through this without a storm!”

“Will you show me the way to the dining room?” asked Cassandra, turning in her most childlike manner to Scott.

“Proud,” said the latter, stuffing his handkerchief back into his pocket and bowing sarcastically. “The dining room is quite in keeping — the Hall of Feasts! — You will be interested, since you are interested in . . . marble.”

He thought he had scored there. But as he took two short, consequential steps in front of her he was unduly irritated to hear her laugh again. After a few more paces he paused, however, to stare through the narrow window



that gave on the sun-dial plot, and craned his neck, standing on tiptoe as he did so.

“If you will come here, beside me,” he chuckled, “you may see something that interests you, Lady Sturminster.”

He mounted the marble steps of the recess, and pointed through the tell-tale window.

Cassandra Sturminster stood still in her turn and likewise craned her long throat. She half expected from the suppressed excitement or malice in the critic's voice to see “her Wurzel and his Orris” — What though the latter was reported to be in America? — one never knew!

The laughter which such a situation must have called forth from her was already rising softly to her lips, when she beheld, against the clipped wall of yew, the dark head and pale features, the long gray-clad limbs of her brother-in-law; and beside him a girl with a ripe glowing face and a glory of uncovered hair. Instead of laughter a gravity settled unexpectedly on Cassandra's countenance. She remained a second gazing profoundly, wistfully, at the picture.

It was at this moment that the thunder rolled again, and the shudder of the coming storm rushed over the garden. The girl in the white dress flung out her hands to the man beside her.

Mr. Scott tittered, Cassandra turned on him sharply.

“Take me to the dining room,” she said. Her voice was tense and scornful. The man shrugged his shoulders faintly, and came down from the step. Halfway across the room she halted again.

“That girl — that exquisite creature . . .?” she asked.



Her companion made her a little bow, with his outspread gesture:

“Panther’s Cub . . . yes.”

The first heavy driving raindrops brought a scuttling crowd of bemuslined and befeathered refugees into the dining hall, escorted or followed by their cavaliers. The echoing marble hollows were filled with laughter and chatter; when the great clap reverberated, it struck a breathless silence; after which the human clatter began again, at first subdued, then rising to loudness as each voice strove to dominate the others.

Presently Mr. Scott, holding Vere Hamilton firmly by the arm, reappeared in the deserted reception room:

“I declare, my dear Verie, that the parrot house at the Zoo is nothing to it. Such a cacophony! — And old Lady Constance more like a cockatoo than ever, wiring into strawberries again with that ghastly old beak of hers! . . . I declare the sight of another plateful will make me sick! I must have a cigar. What do you say to a ‘Robecq,’ Verie, and a clean drink? If I can only get an apron and streamer to attend to me ——”

So saying he conveyed Mr. Hamilton’s form considerately toward the couch, relinquished him, pressed the electric bell that hung at the head of it, and let himself slowly sink upon the bear skin.

“Ever noticed the caps and aprons in these Grecian haunts, Verie? — Hullo!”

The ejaculation caused Mr. Hamilton, who had remained standing dejectedly where he had been aban-

done, to turn his eyes in the direction of his companion's suddenly alert glance.

Desmond Brooke had entered upon a quick step, promptly arrested. His eyes, flung searchingly round the room, fell now upon the two, with unmistakable annoyance.

"Hullo!" said Philip Scott again; "caught in the shower, eh? I say, you're pretty wet! Have a whiskey-and-soda? — Who are you looking for? . . . Ha! wasn't looking for us, that's clear. Isn't it, Verie?"

Lord Desmond, without answering, came slowly down toward them. As he came, he shook the rain-drops from his right shoulder and arm.

"How do you do?" he said vaguely.

Scott pressed the electric button again, two or three times in rapid succession.

"I will have a whiskey-and-soda," he declared and drew his cigar case. "You'd better have one too; dry you nicely. Unless you're pining for the menagerie? Panther's got them all next door. Feeding-time at the Zoo. Listen to 'em! You'll find a relation or so — Your pretty sister-in-law for one — and I should never be surprised if 'our Joseph' ——"

He broke off even as his hand was again vindictively approaching once more the ineffective button: a cap and streamer appeared behind a green portière.

"Look here — it was I rang."

The cap was tossed disdainfully; a very pink hand and a very white cuff swept the silken folds on one side.

"Will you please to walk in, sir?"

"Sir Joseph ——" exclaimed the critic, and flung himself

back in a paroxysm of laughter, out of which he was fain to extract himself to arrest the departing maid.

"Stop a minute, you there." He wagged his limp hand. "We want a couple of whiskey-and-sodas, at once. — D'you hear? at once." His tone became sharper, as he marked the recalcitrancy in her eye.

At sight of his brother-in-law, Desmond took a seat; sat astride of it, and folding his arms over the top, fixed the newcomer.

Sir Joseph advanced with a far more assured step and bearing than that which had marked his previous entrance into these "purlieus." He exchanged greetings, with something of the melancholy importance of a chief mourner at a funeral, with Hamilton and Scott. Then he solemnly regarded Lord Desmond.

"I expected to find you here," he remarked.

"Yes, Joseph," said the scapegrace. "I warned you we'd meet at Branksome."

"Have a cigar," reiterated the delighted Scott — "Oh, here comes the tippie at last! Let me mix you a glass, Lord Desmond? No?— Sir Joseph?—" He touched the bottle, engagingly.

Sir Joseph flung a look of defiance at his brother-in-law.

"Yes, thank you," he said with dignity. "I will, Mr. Scott. No, I thank you, not the whole soda. Thanks."

Receiving the tumbler, he added mysteriously, bending sideways to Hamilton.

"I should much like a quiet word with you."

"Oh, dear!" said Hamilton. It was his first contribution to the general conversation. He passed his hand wearily over his brow.

From the colonnade without came the sound of shuffling steps and the tapping of a stick. Mr. Scott with his glass on the way to his lips, paused and glanced across at the arch, where a burly, stooping figure loomed, black against the already clearing sky.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed again; "what an afternoon for happy meetings! — Here's Mr. Fritz! — I thought Mr. Fritz was laid by the leg."

"Fritz?" echoed Lord Desmond. He turned.

It was an old man, with a leonine white head, who was coming down into the room — an old man with one huge gouty foot in a cloth slipper, walking with difficulty. The large-featured, rough-hewn face was pale with recent sickness and lined with ancient sorrows. Under the bushy eyebrows, stern eyes, golden-brown and luminous, looked out upon them.

It was singular enough, but, as the old man approached, even Mr. Scott's glib tongue fell silent. This gentleman put down his glass untasted and picked up his selected cigar.

"If you please —" said the newcomer, halting in front of them, and leaning on his stick. — He spoke with a strong German accent. "Gentlemen, you must excuse me —" He made a bow to them, and limping painfully to the side of the room, pressed the electric bell. Curiously Desmond watched him, as he hobbled back toward them. Scott had lit his cigar, Sir Joseph had half emptied his glass, Mr. Hamilton was advancing a timid hand toward the decanter. Events had so shaken the beaver's decorous soul, that he really felt as if a little stimulant was on this occasion quite justified.

With a furious flounce Apron-and-Streamers bounced in again, unexpectedly prompt.

"Carry the spirits to the smoking room, if you please," said Mr. Meyer.

The girl opened her lips, hesitated, met his glance; and without a word, proceeded, with a great deal of action, to take up the tray again.

Mr. Hamilton had hastily withdrawn his hand; Mr. Scott, his cigar between his lips, believed himself to be smiling amusedly.

"If you please," proceeded old Fritz, addressing this latter, "will you kindly, Mr. Scott, show these gentlemen the way to the smoking room, since they wish to smoke. — This, I believe —" his glance went slowly round the group — "this is Madame la Marmora's reception room."

"Why, certainly!" cried Scott. "Certainly, my dear Mr. Meyer. If you think that Madame would have the least objection, I should be desolated ——"

"I assure you," interrupted Hamilton much distressed, "I assure you I hadn't the least idea ——"

"Come, Sir Joseph," said Scott, rising. "The smoking room is a stuffy little hole; but we'd better trot there, since there's a master of ceremonies abroad."

Sir Joseph rose in his turn. He was still stiffly holding out his half-finished glass.

"Who is that?" he was heard demanding in a stentorian whisper.

"Panther's keeper——" said Scott vindictively in his ear.

Mr. Hamilton followed dreamily. He could not have endured to remain with Lord Desmond.

Desmond, astride his chair, sat on, watching, with



inimical and cynical eyes. The storm was passing away without. Through the open archways sweeps of exquisitely invigorated, clean-washed airs blew in upon him. A long shaft of exceedingly yellow sunshine flashed out, miraculously sudden, upon the sparkling grass; rifting clouds showed spaces of blue that met the eye like balm after the livid darkness. But the storm in his heart had not abated; rather was it ever more brooding, ever gathering fresh threat. He could find no ray of light to illumine his path or hers. The tears that his inmost soul shed for her scorched, but did not relieve. There was no blue in heaven to shed comfort after gloom. The pity of it but made it worse: shame, there had been shame, in her eyes! It had been the work of Hell!

He felt as if he had been caught into some circle of the Inferno — and it was her young frank hand that was drawing him into it. With the other she was clasping some . . . some Adolphus Wentworth! And if he held back? — if indeed he could still hold back — why then, it was Robecq, Robecq on his goat legs, that would leap to take his place. . . .

And while this fantastic and agonizing turmoil had raged within him, the outer self sat watching the little scene, almost with a faint amusement. He saw the exit of the three men with a smile. The three men! Barely did these “things,” however well-tailored and finely shirted, come into the category of manhood. By sheer strength of his own virility, the stern old German had put them to flight. Desmond was conscious of an idle curiosity to see how he himself would be dealt with. He struck a match and lit a cigarette.



Fritz, apparently oblivious of his presence, was occupied in removing the traces of desecration from the marble table beside the couch. He picked up a half-burnt match, and limped across the room to throw it out of the window; then he limped back, and, with a voluminous silk handkerchief, wiped the ring of moisture, left by Sir Joseph's tumbler. The sound of Desmond's match made him turn sharply. But though the movement was that of a choleric man, the tone in which he addressed the would-be smoker was as studiously polite as before.

"I must beg of you, sir, either to put out your cigarette, or to follow the other gentlemen." With the hand that still held the bandana, he made a gesture as he spoke; it was an absurd handkerchief and had just been used as a duster, but for all that, there was a broad and commanding dignity in the movement. Vaguely the sitting man felt it; and a touch of insolence came into his cool response:

"Beg pardon — whom have I the pleasure ——?"

The great white head was bowed:

"Friedrich Meyer, sir — musician — at your service."

The other exhaled a faint blue jet of smoke. He bowed in his turn, ironically.

"Charmed. — Musician did you say?"

"Yes, sir. — Once first violin in more than one orchestra, now —" He paused, his voice took a sudden downward inflection: "now retired."

There was a fine simplicity in the old man's speech and air; something, too, of an enduring patience, as of one long braced to meet impertinence. But there was

something also indefinably warning in eye and tone, as of a gathering force.

It was this that spurred the listener in his evil mood to further taunting. He blew the smoke slowly down his nostrils; and then said, drawing the cigarette from his lips and tipping the ash with a careless finger:

“First fiddle here, still, though, it would seem.”

Then like an organ crash, the old man's anger broke forth; his hair seemed to rise round his head, the bent figure to expand; his glance measured and fulminated. Desmond hardly knew if the voice that accompanied this wrath was loud; but it was to him as if the old lion roared.

“No, sir,” said Fritz Meyer. “Here, I am merely, like yourself, the lady's guest. But I trust, a gentleman.”

A second the younger man's blue eyes remained arrested, as if fascinated, upon the speaker. Then he rose.

“I beg your pardon,” he said quietly with an altered air, “you are perfectly right.”

He made a little movement with his cigarette that was almost like a salute; strode across to the opened colonnade, and flung it from him.

Then he returned to retrace his steps. He had a sudden impulse to speak to this strange old musician, who looked so honest and was so strong; who assumed such unauthorized authority; who was so oddly anxious for polite conventions in this house of the Panther — this Fritz, whom Fifi had spoken of as a power in her life and of whom he had had a moment's hideous jealousy. All at once it was as if a gust of wind, clean and wholesome like that now rushing in the garden outside were driving in upon

the darksome vapours of his soul. He would speak to him — speak of Fifi.

But even as he turned, he was called by his name; called in that silky, cooing voice that he had grown to hate. And, staring down, blankly, in the direction of the call, he saw Madame la Marmora coming along the wet path, kilting her vapoury yellow silk skirts together in one strong white hand, and showing each step of arched, bronze-shod, shapely feet, as they crunched on the gravel.

## VI

### FULVIA HEARS THE TRUTH

“LET us make a *tour de jardin*, Lord Desmond?” she invited.

The man’s eyes rested heavily upon her. Fulvia la Marmora had halted at the foot of the marble step and was smiling up at him. Under the shadow of a monstrous hat, only her eyes and her teeth shone out of the dimmed outline of her face. The over-vivid sunshine that had followed the storm caught the yellow shimmer of her garments sideways as if sketching her in strokes of fire. She shifted the folds of her uplifted dress to her left hand and held out her right. Into what circles of unimaginable depth would he plunge, were he to take that hand? . . . It was not possible for him to conceive himself even touching it without loathing.

With reluctant foot, he came down toward her; advanced into the circle of her scented presence; and was nauseated.

“You see,” she said, as she turned to walk beside him on the narrow path, “I wear the lily of the valley.”

His glance followed the gesture of her hand. A large cluster of the flower, delicate spikes and dark summer-green leaves, was thrust among the elaborate lace and embroidery of her bodice. He saw, as he glanced, how the posy rose and fell with the tumultuous breathing. And, mingled with the artificial fragrance that emanated

from her, the sharp sweet smell of the little bells suddenly assailed his nostrils . . . So she had cast her taint even over that symbol! How were it possible indeed that innocence and purity should escape uncontaminated beside her?

“You taught me to love these white-and-green things,” the singer went on in her soft notes. “By nature I demand deeper things, colour and scent — the rose, the carnation. Before that, the rose and the carnation were my flowers.”

“Before what?”

He wondered if the exasperation that was driving him would not, in the mere sound of his voice, strike her like the lash of a whip. But, under her outrageous hat, she was smiling still.

“Why, before Vienna, when you sent them to me —!” Then under her breath, like a caress, she murmured: “*Ah, nigaud, va!*”

He flung a desperate look back upon the house. In twos and threes, vivid in the exaggerated mode of the day, like some singular gathering of exotic birds, La Marmora's fair guests were tripping down the steps, and spreading themselves, with true national disregard of climate, upon the wet English lawn.

Several couples were obviously directing their steps in pursuit of their hostess. Fulvia looked back in her turn, and then at her companion's pale and angry face. Her smile became accentuated.

“In effect, one has never a moment's peace!”

“You will have to return,” he said wearily.

She shrugged her shoulders:

“Ah, and I wanted to show you a little walk by the river — all syringas . . .! But to-night — to-night, for you must come and dine —” She turned as she spoke; and he turned, too. Then she halted. Her importunate visitors were but ten yards away: she leant toward him, her fingers pressing on his arm: “To-night, by the syringas you will tell me, if it is always ‘*muguet*’ you would give me —”

Her breath fanned his cheek; she drew back; her eyes circled fire upon him. The next moment she was hurrying forward, both hands outstretched. The ultra honey-sweet accents of her society voice were ringing out:

“What! — Not going already, dear Lady Peterborough!”

Desmond had stood staring. He felt as if he had been scorched by a breath from hell; marked and coveted by the eyes of a hawk. The echoes of that strident whisper rang still in his soul, unclean — if a sound can be unclean. He walked moodily on a pace or two; and a bough of syringa bush caught him across the chest and flung a heavy, perfumed spray into his face. He had a swift memory of that evening when he had sought refuge in the lower lawn, in silence and darkness, from the brightness and horrible gaiety of the feast in the marble room; how he had come up to the house with the smell of the syringa in his nostrils — and found Fifi. How wild and passionate had been his resolves then, and how they had all fallen away from him when he had seen her face! That was what, in spite of everything, Fifi remained to him: like a branch of wild blossom that dashed its sweetness against him, striking him with her very freshness.



He would come and dine; but if he went down among the syringas, it would not be with Madame la Marmora.

The so-called smoking room was a dark little three-cornered apartment, which had remained, untouched, from the original building. It was little likely to be used, either by the former or the present mistress of Branksome. It had an innocent rosebud wall paper, deep window-seats, diamond panes and the faint musty atmosphere peculiar to cottage structures.

Scott ensconced himself in the window, and Sir Joseph took up his favourite commanding position on the hearth-rug before the empty grate.

As the maid deposited the tray, with protesting clatter, on a rather lopsided gate-legged table, both men instinctively looked round for Hamilton, to find that he was gone.

Sir Joseph distended his nostrils after his bovine way. He regarded it as a want of courtesy that the friend of the family should thus unceremoniously take his departure from a company which he, Sir Joseph, had just joined — more especially as he had expressed his desire for a private conversation. It almost looked as if Mr. Hamilton was avoiding this. Sir Joseph had had doubts — serious doubts — of Mr. Hamilton's loyalty already.

Scott surveyed him with his malicious smile, and stretched one round leg the length of the window seat.

“Seen your hostess yet, Sir Joseph?”

“No, Mr. Scott.”

“You're getting quite a familiar of the Panther. — Booked your seat for the first English gambol?”

“Sir,” said Sir Joseph, “I do not follow you.”

“Dear me — not going to Covent Garden to see our Fulvia tempt St. John the Baptist?”

Sir Joseph started convulsively.

“No, sir. — Tempt St. John the Baptist! Tut, tut — I shall be present at no such blasphemous impropriety. You mean to tell me, Mr. Scott, that His Majesty’s censor —” the Member of Parliament was warming to the discovery of an ignored enormity — “this is a matter for investigation. I shall put a question in the House ——”

But ruthlessly the critic interrupted:

“Do — Sir Joseph, do! But you ought to go and see it, just to prime yourself first, you know.”

“Sir ——” began Sir Joseph again. Then he suddenly altered his manner. He remembered that Mr. Scott, after all, had been more useful to “the Family” in their present dilemma than any one else. He remembered the dark purpose that had brought him once more into these purlieus, in defiance of the wife of his bosom. Would not Mr. Scott (however much Sir Joseph might disapprove of his trade) be as good, if not better counsel than the weak and faithless Hamilton?

“Mr. Scott,” said the baronet confidentially, “although in your humorous manner it pleases you to jest at my appearance here to-day, I feel convinced that you do not really misunderstand my motive. I — I think I mentioned upon our first meeting that, if I felt it my duty to approach our — the source of the mischief herself, to approach her personally upon the painful matter, I would do so.”

The critic, with mouth and eyes growing ever rounder, was hanging upon the speaker’s words. He looked, as

he felt for the moment, actually thrilled beyond amusement.

"Upon my soul," he ejaculated, "I admire you, I admire you!"

Then he proceeded airily:

"When you say the source of the mischief, you refer, I take it, to the mother of the source? To Panther — not Panther's Cub?"

"You apprehend my meaning," said the hero, growing, however, a little thoughtful.

"Splendid!" cried the other. "Why you dear, good people have allowed it to go on so long beats me."

Sir Joseph turned his stare upon the smirking face.

"Surely," the critic proceeded, after moistening the end of his 'Robecq' and surveying it with his head on one side, "I gave you the hint, you and Verie, last time you were here. The Panther will never let her cub pick up her own chosen morsel, I said, did I not? The merest whisper, dropped in her ear and ——" Here Scott sucked at his cigar and puffed expressively, as if he were blowing Desmond's romance into space.

Sir Joseph, who had been following the words with a mute and anxious movement of his own lips, threw back his head and frowned; his thumbs sought the lapels of his coat.

"I shall represent to her, Mr. Scott, I shall represent to her as a mother, the danger of her daughter's position, the ——" his eye grew furtive, "the anomalous character — I think I should be justified in saying the anomalous character — of Lord Desmond's attachment."

"Do!" cried the other, closing his eyes and leaning his crooked gray head against the casement. "Do," he

went on, sitting up again and waving his cigar. "Tell her that Lord Desmond's anomalous attachment — capital word, that, Sir Joseph, is for her daughter. Tell her that. Tell her now! I'll manage you shall get a word in private. — Oh, in a good cause I promised I'd stand by you, didn't I?"

Scott slipped off the window-seat as he spoke, and swayed from one foot to another, waggishly surveying the figure on the hearthrug.

"By George," he declared again, "you're a brave man!"

He slipped his arm through Sir Joseph's, and propelled him toward the door. The latter, snorting, withdrew from the clasp with some irritation.

"Really, Mr. Scott," he said testily, "you — you flurry me, you ——"

"Come now, you're not going to funk!" ejaculated his companion.

"Funk, sir ——?"

"Come along, then. No time like the present."

Again he pressed the disturbed gentleman's elbow.

"You know," he tittered, as thus affectionately conjoined they moved toward the door, "you know, Sir Joseph, you quite realize that the Panther's not the smallest notion of the truth; believes herself the unique attraction." The devoted brother-in-law turned a scared countenance. "That's your chance, you see; that's your safeguard; that's your anchor of salvation."

Thus the critic consoled, and laughed again and again. Eager in his work of benevolence, he allowed the baronet no time for dangerous reflection; but, depositing him in the empty reception room, hurried to find his hostess.

He found her at the head of the steps, bidding farewell to her visitors, and promptly took an opportunity to draw her on one side.

"Where is Lord Desmond?" she said, forestalling his speech, as she vaguely allowed herself to be isolated under the shade of the colonnade. Her eyes roamed; failing to find him whom she was seeking, on the lawn, she shot a piercing glance into the shadowed space of the reception room.

Here one figure alone held the stage; a figure in pompous frock coat and protruding white waistcoat, with empurpled, ox-like countenance, a stiff right arm bearing, like some staff of office, a large, gray top-hat.

She turned impatiently away.

"Dear lady, do listen!" repeated Scott, politely urgent for the third time.

Thus adjured, she bestowed a look upon him, marking without interest the quiver of suppressed excitement on his face.

"What is it? — I am going into the garden."

"Sir Joseph Warren-Smith wants a few words with you — in private."

He indicated the rigid frame within, by a slight gesture of the thumb. Catching the movement, Sir Joseph turned his head aside and coughed.

"With me?" ejaculated La Marmora, incredulously. "That — ? in private?"

"That — in private," answered the delighted Scott. Then whisperingly: "That . . . is Lord Desmond's brother-in-law, you know."

"Ah," said the singer. It was quite a soft exclamation;



but again her glance had swept into the room, and Scott's chuckle suddenly died away. Once more it was becoming too interesting for mere amusement.

But the lady disappointingly shrugged her shoulders: "Well, what's that to me?" she scoffed and wheeled toward the garden.

Sir Joseph was wound up to his deed of daring. He took two heavy steps forward to arrest her; Scott forestalled him.

"It is determined to speak to you," he urged; "you may as well let it. — My dear creature, you'll be very much amused."

"Shall I?" said La Marmora. A second "the dear creature's" dangerous eyes glinted on the critic. Then, with another shrug of her shoulders she wheeled round upon her pertinacious guest.

Sir Joseph was rasping his throat.

"Madame," he said, in words he had been laboriously rehearsing, "I must request your attention for a few minutes on a matter of vital importance."

The Member of Parliament paused and coughed. Beyond the yellow figure, his eyes sought, not without pride, the countenance of his advisor. "What do you think of that for dignity and firmness?" they seemed to question. But Scott, hurrying, almost trotting away from them, merely sent him a single backward look. His countenance was like that of some goblin; if anything so pink and inflated could bear such a resemblance. His startling chuckle seemed to hover behind him in the air.

Unaccountably disconcerted, Sir Joseph's attention



returned to his hostess; and here he met with agreeable surprise. The lady was all suavity.

"I wonder what you have to say to me!" she was dulcetly remarking. "Shall we not sit down? It is cool and quiet here, and we seem to be quite alone."

With her long, gliding step, she began to move with him — to lead him — toward the classic couch. She subsided, a wonderful, yellow-clad sorceress, upon the white bear skin, and, tapping the long white fur: "Won't you sit down, Sir Joseph?" she repeated engagingly.

He looked at her, repudiating almost in terror.

"Thank you, Madame, I — I prefer to stand."

Her eyes ran him up and down. Scott had been right; she was beginning to be amused.

"Do sit — one can talk so much more comfortably. Here beside me."

It was impossible, without gross incivility, to insist longer on his posture of virtuous uprightness: yet, he felt as if he were already yielding to the snare as he gingerly placed himself at the extreme edge of the couch. He balanced his gray hat on his knees and stared straight before him, voicelessly forming his next speech with agitated lips.

"I wonder what you can have to say to me?" she trilled again.

He cast a rolling, startled eye upon her; met the mockery of a glance that did not in the least correspond with the exaggerated sweetness of the tone; and his honest, middle-class manhood suddenly revolted.

"It must have struck you, Madame," he said in a loud, harsh voice, "when I first presented myself here — last

week — that there was something — something about me, different from the rest of your guests.”

She clasped her hands:

“Very different. Oh, very, very different!”

From those accents, she might have been openly, shamelessly making love to him; but between her long, half-closed lids, her eyes gleamed, jeering, with a glint of anger.

A man may be encased in a whole armour of pretentious stupidity, and yet through his vanity retain a sensitive perception. Sir Joseph gathered a distinct notion that he was being “made game of.” The colour of wrath rose to his brow; he resumed with all the strength of anger:

“You must have realized, then, that I am not a person to frequent these artistic, these — bohemian purlieus, without some urgent motive.”

“My dear Sir Joseph,” cried she with a tinkling laugh, “but all my friends come here, with an — an urgent motive.”

Nonplussed, he hemmed an interrogative “Er — er?” turning his countenance, judicially puckered, full upon her.

“To see me!” she explained, and folded her hands upon her knees, opening her eyes unexpectedly and then blinking.

“Madame, this is trifling,” exclaimed the M. P., irritated beyond all the pompous dignity of the lines he had laid out for himself. “I decline to trifle.” Then, breathing heavily, “I am Lord Desmond Brooke’s brother-in-law,” he announced.

It was Sir Joseph’s misfortune, not his fault, that his physiognomy recalled that of the ox. Now it was as if he had lowered his horns for hostilities. His companion

knew herself attacked, and on the instant, her native vulgarity sprang forth, through all the fine-lady veneer.

“How charming of you . . . to be that!” she cried tauntingly.

He ignored the gibe and heavily pranced on to his assault.

“I am in very great anxiety — the family of Lord Desmond are all in very great, very painful anxiety about him.”

“How sad for you!”

“My brother-in-law’s constant visits here, his infatuation, Madame ——”

Sir Joseph paused; and the woman was lying back, surveying him through her narrowed eyelids with an air of insolence quite indescribable. He was glad to have a weapon to hurt her withal.

“My brother-in-law’s infatuation, for your daughter ——” he declared.

There was triumph in his tone; but his heart thumped apprehensively. He broke off, unable to finish the sentence.

The languid figure beside him had scarcely stirred; merely turned her head, ever so little, and opened her eyes once more full upon the speaker. Sir Joseph dropped his hat; picked it up; then rose and stood before her. His face was almost apoplectic.

La Marmora slowly took three long pins from her monstrous headgear, removed it from her head, and, placing it on the couch beside her, ran both hands upward through her hair. Then she lifted her face, and spoke with extraordinary quietness:

"Would you mind repeating that last remark of yours?"

It was perhaps the consciousness that he was really terrified that lent such desperate boldness to Sir Joseph's answer:

"My unfortunate brother-in-law's infatuation for your daughter — I repeat my remark, Madame: for your — daughter."

She broke into laughter; the laughter of a blind fury.

"This is killing — go on! — Lord Desmond comes here for my daughter? Did you find that out by yourself? — How clever you are! — For my daughter . . . And then?"

"I admit that, at first, the family believed, that you yourself were the attraction."

"Indeed? — What an honour!"

"I cannot conceal that the fact of finding out that his affections are fixed upon your daughter — so young a girl, but unfortunately, already notorious — has added considerably to the danger of the situation in the eyes of the family, in my own — and also to its painfulness."

She sprang to her feet with a suddenness that drove him hastily backward.

"And how did you find that out? — Speak! How did you make that precious discovery? — Speak, you old fool!"

Shocked to bewilderment Sir Joseph could only echo the opprobrious term:

"Old fool —— !"

She flung herself back upon the sofa, laughing once again. The ugly insolence of the sound helped him to recover his valour.

"It is the talk of your own friends, Madame."

"Ha!" she mocked, and catching up her hat on her knee, began to prod the pin among the feathers. The action was meaningless in itself, but she gave to it an intention of insult: "Begone, old dotard," it seemed to say, "even this is no more amusing."

For the first time that day, Sir Joseph smiled.

"And my brother-in-law, Lord Desmond's own admission ——"

She interrupted him with a sharp, short scream:

"It's a lie! — It's a lie, I say."

Once more the man retreated. Rightly indeed was this outrageous creature nicknamed Panther.

"It's a lie!" she repeated, and drove the pin into the crown of her hat as if she had been stabbing him.

A second he meditated judicious retirement; but, struggling violently for composure, she arrested him:

"No, no. You mustn't go."

She tossed hat and pins from her. Two of the latter rolled on the floor; Sir Joseph glanced at them sideways.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, trying for her society laugh, "how droll you have been! — You don't even know Fifi. Why, she's a little schoolgirl! Oh, my poor Sir Joseph, you have been misled. Lord Desmond's been pulling your leg — isn't that what you call it?"

"Pulling my leg!" His voice rose, bearing down her affected mirth; "if you will allow me to speak, Madame, I shall convince you that I can, unfortunately, labour under no such misapprehension. — Lord Desmond Brooke's own words ——"

With a hand on either side of the couch she half lifted



her lithe body — wide-open eyes, parted lips, dilated nostrils, every quivering line of her countenance, every tense muscle, one concentrated interrogation.

“His own words ——” she breathed.

The M. P. was all at once smugly content. He had imposed himself, he had produced the desired impression.

“I taxed him with it myself,” he proceeded. “I regret to say he showed himself impervious to all representations — brazen! But he did not attempt to disguise his feelings.”

She became, if that were possible, more fixed upon him; and save for that tense quiver running through her, more deadly still. Well might he have remembered then her nickname. It was the strong stillness of the feline crouching for the spring.

“He admitted it— his love?” Her voice was a whisper.

“Madame,” exploded Sir Joseph, “he flourished it in my face! He talked, in what I can only define as exaggerated and — ah — gross language, of the effect your daughter produces upon him. — Galvanizing his corpse, he called it.”

La Marmora relaxed the grip of her hands and allowed herself to subside upon the couch. She sat a moment or two, rather huddled, with haggard eye and dropping jaw, staring: she looked, suddenly, an old woman. Then fury seized her like a hurricane.

“Ah!” she screamed, “this is good, this is famous! *Ah, par exemple!*” She clasped her hands, and writhed in convulsive laughter. “*Ah, par exemple!* Galvanizing . . . his corpse!”



He averted his eyes from a spectacle so indecent and alarming; only to be fascinated again, and gaze on.

“Oh, your funny face! Ah, ah, ah!”

And next, the hideous laughter fell from her. Pure passion of wrath and jealousy possessed her, lifting her out of vulgarity, beyond hysteric weakness, into tragedy.

“So, that, that’s what he came here for! To be . . . galvanized by Fifi . . . by Fifi! *Ah, malheureuse que je suis!* ’Tis my own child that robs me.”

But it was not in Fulvia la Marmora to keep the dignity of an emotion beyond its first moment of realization. The mud of the unknown Montmartre gutter began to foam from her lips.

“*Ah, satanée fille, va! Ah, petit crapaud, va!* His corpse . . . *C’est bon! On va te faire sauter, cadavre . . . !*”

“Merciful heavens!” murmured the M. P., dabbing his beaded brow.

“Where is Lord Desmond?” cried she, rising and advancing menacingly. “Where is Lord Desmond?”

With the sheer terror provoked by her aspect, he answered vindictively:

“With your daughter, probably.”

A piercing scream greeted his words.

“*Ah, bien! Bravo, bravo, bravissimo!* — Where’s Robecq then? Robecq! . . . Robecq!”

Each call came with a louder shriek. She turned to the electric bell and sent its shrill summons unintermit- tently forth.

“Good God!” said Sir Joseph; “it is a mad woman!”

He turned to fly, and almost knocked against Scott

who was hurrying into the room, his face pinker than usual with excitement, his mouth pursed into an expression of sympathetic concern that was contradicted by the dancing malice in the little eyes.

"Is anything the matter?" he was crying, fat hands flapping as he trotted.

"Matter!" echoed Sir Joseph, "let me get out of this!"

A couple of indignant parlour-maids now jostled each other at the entrance. Panting, their mistress turned upon them:

"The Baron! — Instantly!" she said hoarsely.

"This is what comes of rousing the Panther," whispered Scott to the distraught baronet, and for the life of him was unable to suppress a giggle. Then moving forward, he came within range of La Marmora's glance.

Instantly she roused herself from the fit of dark abstraction that had succeeded her frenzy, and the furies were loose in her again.

"Ah, Scott," she cried, jeering, while her eyes stabbed him. "I hear you knew about this. It's excruciatingly funny! . . . *A se tordre!*" She broke off, her fierce eye caught Sir Joseph at the very door. "No, no, you don't, *mon vieux*. You don't, old man! You wait and listen!"

The menace of gesture, voice and eye was not to be withstood. Sir Joseph halted miserably, to start as her scream rang out again.

"Robecq!"

Running steps were now heard under the colonnade.

"Coming, my dear friend! coming!" soothed the impresario's accents from afar.

"Robecq . . .!"

In another instant he was upon them, talking as he came:

"My dear good creature . . . for mercy's sake . . .! Oh, tut, tut! What have you been doing to her? — Your throat, my dear, your throat!"

"Pshaw!" she snarled. "Where is Fifi?"

"Fifi? — Oh, Fifi's quite safe. Compose yourself, my dear, I beg of you!"

"Quite safe! With whom?"

She was gasping, shuddering, as she sat. Robecq looked at her a second without replying; then he flung a single glance of deadly reproach at Scott and Sir Joseph. What a fool he had been to abandon his post! But there had been so many parting guests to speed . . .

He passed his hand across his forehead.

"Fifi?" he drawled — "Fifi's about with . . . well I don't think I really know. Now, listen to me, Fulvia."

"She's with Lord Desmond. Ah, you know — you knew it too." The hysterical laughter that shook her was broken by a kind of dry sob. "You're a pretty wooer, aren't you? You knew it all the time."

Convicted, he stood without a word. She flung out an arm again:

"Look here, you, you over there — you Smith. . . ."

"Smith!" murmured Sir Joseph. This was the last straw. He tottered backward toward the portière.

"Do you want to see my son-in-law?" she went on. "There he stands."

She rose with her histrionic gesture as she spoke; but her knees shook under her, and she fell heavily back upon the couch.

"Go — go!" cried Robecq fiercely.

"Yes, he can go," cried the singer.

She was livid under her paint. Her head rolled restlessly against the cushions. Through her widely distended nostrils and drawn-back lips breathing seemed really difficult. Yet, in broken, jerked phrases, she called after the disappearing figure:

"Yes, you can go now, and tell Lord Desmond's family!"

Robecq had come over to her, and taken her hand.

"Yes — yes," he agreed. And over his shoulder to Scott: "Will you call her maid?"

Scott expressed sympathy and understanding, with eyebrows, shoulders and Orientally uplifted palms. He was glad enough of the opportunity to escape also.

"We must put a stop to this, Robecq," La Marmora was panting.

"Yes — yes." He still held her fingers in his fat grasp.

"We'll have the engagement announced to-morrow. To-morrow."

"Certainly, certainly! — To-morrow, by all means!"

"Robecq —" she was beginning again excitedly. All at once he dropped her hand and started back from her, finger on lip. There was the sound of a shuffling foot, the tap of a stick upon the marble of the terrace without. She stiffened. The old look of fear swept over her features:

"Fritz!"

Like two conspirators, they looked at each other, then turned their glance in the direction of the advancing steps. These halted. Black against the sunset, Fritz's burly figure stood. He gazed in upon them a second, made a bow and slowly passed on.

## VII

### PANTHER PREPARES TO SPRING

RARELY had Mr. Scott spent so utterly enjoyable, so completely fruitful a day.

He saw Sir Joseph safely off in the yellow *Mercédès*. The latter departed in a glorious consciousness of accomplishment and success, in spite of the shock produced by the recent scene. The critic, who had refused the proffered lift to town, gazed after the swirling machine with a grin. "And Martia Marchioness will give him one of her most withering smiles," he reflected; "and for ever after keep a grudge against the busybody, who has presumed to save her aristocratic son."

Mr. Scott prided himself on knowing human nature.

He turned and reëntered the house. He had received no special invitation to remain; but with the Panther one need not stand upon ceremony. He was quite enough of an *habitué* to invite himself to dinner if he chose; and to leave the place without having seen the end of the comedy was not to be thought of. Every one has his master passion, his hobby. The dominant trait of Philip Scott's character was a mischievous curiosity; his most absorbing interest in life, meddling with other people's affairs.

Strolling back leisurely into the reception room, he found it deserted. Only the tossed green silk cushions



on the couch, the prima donna's befeathered hat, lying where she had flung it on the marble, and a half-finished glass of sal-volatile on the little console, spoke of the past storm and the lady's *pamotions*.

Mr. Scott walked across to the dais, stepping affectedly over the hat; settled himself on the bear skin, with a cushion on each side of his ribs, and lit a cigarette with the luxurious remembrance of the absurd old German's objections to smoke.

A hidden clock chimed. He glanced at his watch — it was half-past seven. La Marmora's guests had early departed to-day. The novelty was wearing off, no doubt. She was hardly worth damp feet and bedraggled skirts. He wondered if he were the only one left; if anybody was likely to return to the informal dinner, that, up to this, had always followed the garden party. At any rate Robecq was certain to remain; and where Robecq was, a man was pretty sure to find good food at a regular hour. He trusted that this hour might not be too long delayed to-night; he was, in his own phrase, growing uncommonly peckish.

The shadows were falling long and dark, against the golden evening sunshine without. The birds were piping excitably after the rain. Through the archways the vista of garden seemed extraordinarily fresh and pure-coloured. There was a red may tree in bloom; a pyramid of Pompadour pink of a tint hardly seen outside Sèvres china. And beside it fell a cascade of laburnum, yellow as a canary bird.

"A perfect Fragonard background," murmured the critic.



He found a third cushion for his head; and, comfortably supported, gazed in pleasure. He had very artistic perceptions, with especial leaning toward the rococo and the delicately sentimental, both in music and painting.

Two of the soubrettes who gave the final stamp of irrespectability to Madame la Marmora's extraordinary establishment, entered upon him with their impossible stage impertinence.

With much action of caps and streamers in his direction, they made a perfunctory visitation of the room; lit the electric star in the ceiling, shifted a couple of seats, aimlessly; captured the tumbler and withdrew. Characteristically, the hat was left upon the floor.

Next with heavy step, Robecq appeared. He came slowly across the room; beheld Scott with a momentary glance of doubt, which was succeeded by one of resignation; stooping, he picked up the neglected headgear and laid it carefully on the console.

As he was about to sit down, his foot struck against a hat pin. Again he bent and picked it up to insert it carefully among its fellows in the monstrous crown. Then he sat down, at the end of the couch, and turned his countenance upon the observant smoker.

Scott's smile, which had been gathering, grew so broad, that he was fain to remove his cigarette.

"I trust she's calmer," he remarked.

"Calm!—" ejaculated the impresario. "Oh, yes—deadly! She's getting ready for another."

"Another? You don't say so!" exclaimed Scott, endeavouring to keep the note of delight out of his voice.

Robecq looked at him philosophically. He knew his

man; knew that he owed to him a good deal of the afternoon's work. But he could not afford to quarrel with him — Scott was a pestilential necessity.

“Oh, it's a very wearing business, mine,” he continued. His drawl was half plaintive, half humorous. “Now, if she'd listen to me, she'd go straight to bed, with nothing heavier in the way of dinner than a little consommé, and a filet of sole. A voice is a very delicate organ, Scott — and hers is very specially delicate. But as well try and reason with a —” he paused for a simile.

“Wild beast,” suggested the other pleasantly.

“Sir,” said the manager, with one of his American intonations, “that simile begins to strike me as worn out.”

There followed a slight pause, broken only by the critic's soft chuckle and the heavy sigh of the Baron.

“So she's coming down to dinner,” proceeded the latter. “She expects —” again he broke off.

Scott's eyebrows questioned.

“Oh, I believe so —” was the impresario's answer, given with some testiness. “It's a kettle of fish, it's a confounded kettle of fish. And she's dressing herself. She's going to dress the girl.”

“Eh? — ” Mr. Scott leaned forward.

“Miss Fifi's got to come down here, after dinner. *Cela va sans dire* she's not to dine. And then, sir, I am to find her here — and to propose to her! I've got half an hour to do it in. And I've got to make her say yes. And then Madame will come in upon us from the dining room with Lord Desmond, and the announcement will be made. Sir, that's the programme.”

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Scott. He stared for a moment; the situation was exquisite.

“My dear Scott,” said Robecq in the same long-drawn, emphatic melancholy of utterance, “if she has a few more of these fits of rage, I don’t give that for Salome.” He snapped his nail. “It will be a vurry serious affair for me, if she goes *caput* before Salome. And if I don’t humour her ——”

“But you’re going to humour her, aren’t you, Baron?” cried Scott.

“Oh, my God! yes.” A rueful smile spread over the speaker’s countenance. “Now, that’s a pretty absurd situation for me, isn’t it? I’ve got to propose to Miss Fifi, to-night — and she’s about as easy to approach as a colt in a paddock.”

“It’s supremely comic!” exclaimed the other. And indeed, he had all the air of finding it so.

“Comic ——!”

“But how will you set to work?” Scott shifted a little nearer to his companion in a flutter of inquisitiveness.

The manager fixed a lack-lustre eye upon him.

“I’ll just — oh, I’ll show her the oats, I’ll show her the oats! After all, it’s a woman.”

“You’ve got a formidable rival,” said the consoling listener, after a musing pause.

“That’s so.” Robecq rose and began to pace slowly the small length of the dais. “Oh, dear —” he ran his fingers through his beard. “You know I want the girl. Oh, you know very well all about it, Scott. That’s why she’s here at all. But — good heavens! A man of my age has to take his time about these things. I’ve

got to get her to look upon me as a friend, first. What with chocolates — and the Persian kitten and — timely interference about her frocks, I've been very fairly successful. She is beginning to like me ——”

“But — enter Lord Desmond!”

“Lord Desmond?” repeated the Baron calmly. “Well, I don't mind admitting that at first I was rather put out over Lord Desmond. But, latterly, Scott, it was beginning to strike me that I could look upon him as an ally.”

Scott's round eyes started. He drew his mouth together for a whistle.

“Upon my word, Baron ——”

“Scott,” said Robecq, “it's plain you've never made a thorough study of women. I'd have got Miss Fifi, on the rebound, don't you see? As sure as fate. Lord Desmond? What kind of intentions has a man like that — in a house like this? My friend,” continued the impresario solemnly, “the hour was sure to strike when she would have been pretty rudely awakened from love's young dream — and that was my hour!”

“Love's young dream!” sneered the man in the cushions. “And do you think Miss Fifi such an innocent?”

Robecq turned in his bear walk and fixed his small, shrewd orbs steadily upon Scott. A second or two they stared at each other; then Mr. Scott shifted his glance uneasily aside.

“I know Miss Fifi to be perfectly innocent,” said Robecq, with more than his usual deliberation. “Otherwise, Mr. Scott, I should not intend to make her Madame de Robecq.”

Philip Scott would have been glad to show some gen-

uine amusement once more. Somehow it could not be achieved. Something in the Israelite's look and tone made him feel mean, and discovered as mean. It was a rare sensation and a fugitive. A man is generally so well justified in thinking the worst of every one! Just now he was fain to fall back upon his sneer.

"And so now you've got to capture your nymph right off — play the good old Pan? Do all your wooing in one night, like Romeo?"

"Oh, I'll worry through all right!" said the impresario, without vouchsafing a smile.

He sat down again as he said these words; his fingers began to play in his beard — a sure sign with him of deep reflection.

"I've got to put Salome first," he said into space, as if arguing with himself. "I can't afford a fee-asco. Better cancel it even than risk a fee-asco. There's one good thing, Fritz is back in his cottage — safe for the night, anyhow!"

Robecq heaved one of his profound sighs; his was, indeed, a complicated responsibility.

"Fritz?" echoed Scott, pricking his ears. He whisked buoyantly round toward his companion. "Now, if you'll explain the mystery of Fritz, I'll be deeply obliged. What's he got to say to this?"

"Oh, my dear Scott," retorted the other, wearily. "Fulvia depends on him — ergo, I depend on him. We've got to keep him in good humour."

"Well — but Miss Fifi? Where does he come in there?"

"He's chosen to come in there —" said the manager,



with his rare accent of irritation. "And I regret to say, for I have a very high opinion of Fritz," he added, falling back into his former rueful humorousness, "he hasn't a vurry high opinion of me!"

"And the Panther's afraid of him?" probed Scott. "Ah, he's got some kind of hold. Now — haven't you got a suspicion?"

The critic's plump cheeks quivered with the eagerness of his master passion; but Robecq rose decisively. He had quite sufficiently pandered to the necessary Scott.

"I'm a busy man," he said, with as much curtness as his natural way of speech would allow. "I don't waste my time in surmises. I am content to take facts as they are, Mr. Scott, and to use them to the best of my ability."

Scott pursed his lips.

"Don't be so shirty, old man," he said airily. The next moment he rose in his turn with a bland ejaculation; his hostess was sweeping into the room.

The calm after the storm had evident possession of her; but it was merely a lull, as Robecq had described — the deadly pause.

She had chosen to robe herself with a barbaric splendour. A scarlet sheath, in the extreme of the current fashion enclosed the long splendour of her limbs. Its exiguous draperies were clasped over her naked shoulder and at her breast with enamelled bosses, gleaming with rough stones — greens and purples and reds. The emeralds were slung round her neck and blazed in her ears. Her copper-red hair, twisted with more simplicity and artistic negligence than usual, just at the Greek angle in



a careless knot, was apparently only held in place by a dagger.

As she stood before the glass her last gesture had been to loosen, with impatient hand, the waves on each side of the temples, so as to cast more shadows over the haggard eyes. The result had been to impart to her whole countenance, set that night in a mask of passion and decision, something brooding, savage and tragic, which redeemed it from the haunting vulgarity which was ever its bane.

Here was the natural woman in an elemental throes — and she was splendid.

The bland exclamation with which the critic had greeted the rustle of her satin on the marble, changed to an indrawn breath of utter admiration.

“If she can look like this for you, your Salome ——” he flung a delighted whisper to the impresario and completed his phrase by an elegant gesture; for the moment the artistic sense had risen uppermost within him.

Robecq shook his head ever so slightly. For him, his investment had suddenly assumed that exaggerated height which presages a fall. It was as the blazing of a firework. Your financial genius well knows such omens!

The woman came down upon them, and her long, narrow, scarlet train swung from side to side on the flooring with each slow, free step. Pursuing the simile which the Baron had deemed worn out, Scott compared it in his mind to the lashing of the Panther's tail.

Passing by Robecq as if he did not exist, she flung upon her uninvited guest a dark look that pondered a second and then seemed to toss him aside.

He made way for her, and she took the couch with an unconscious magnificence. Her glance fell on the hat.

“*Eh bien!*” she said in harsh, brief tones. “What is that?”

Robecq hastened to the bell.

“What is that?” repeated the lady, as the parlour-maid entered: she was pointing.

The girl had insolence quite ready; but she met her mistress's eyes, and it dropped cravenly. Without a founce or a toss, she slunk away again, carrying off the offending object.

Silence was on the three; Robecq too wise to speak; Scott nonplussed, yet thrilled; and the singer absorbed. She sat with her eyes straight before her, gazing into her own thoughts, as the witch may gaze into the seething cauldron.

All at once she spoke again. Her lips scarcely moving — her eyes still fixed.

“What hour is it?”

“Just about eight,” answered both men eagerly.

They knew what she was waiting for; and in the heavy pause that succeeded, the critic's pulses positively bounded — he was nothing if not impressionable — when the faint throb of a motor began to grow into the silence. His eyes, hanging upon the singer's face, saw the flash kindle into that fixed, unnatural gaze.

His own words, of mocking description, recurred to his mind: “Phosphorescent — positively phosphorescent!”

Robecq suddenly got up and moved toward the colonnade as if the sense of suspense and impending event

was beyond his endurance. But La Marmora sat on like a statue; and it was only when Lord Desmond was actually in the room that she moved at all.

He came in in his lounging, weary way, looking singularly distinguished in the evening black and white beside the two other men in their morning suits.

She rose, slow, long, superb, and stood awaiting the moment when his eyes should behold her.

It was for this moment that she had robed herself in gorgeous scarlet, had decked herself with jewels. Silent, arrogant, she challenged for the last time; and she knew herself matchless in her own peculiar resplendence, yet if he withstood now this voiceless surrender that yet was as defiant as a trumpet blast, she knew herself powerless for ever.

In this brief pause the drama of her woman's life was acted out.

Deliberately the man's eyes swept round the room, seeking; then they fell on her — and they grew blank: in her presence his only feeling was weariness; a weariness beyond even her strength to kindle into anything so active as hostility.

“Let us dine,” said La Marmora, in that new, odd, harsh voice that seemed not so much to speak as to command. She swept down upon Lord Desmond; and he offered his arm. It was only upon the threshold of the dining hall that she spoke again:

“You shall see Fifi after dinner.”

His drooping lids were suddenly raised. A moment he and she looked at each other. For a single moment,

never to be repeated, soul sought and found soul, and knew it an enemy. Then convention dropped about the man; and her evil purpose caught the woman back to her deadly comedy of composure.

The meal that ensued was the most decorous, and tedious, that the marble walls had ever seen.

## VIII

### FRITZ PRESUMES

NEVER afterward could Fifi look back upon this June day of storm without a shudder. Those blue eyes that had held a light of joy to her soul since she had first come under their glance, had looked upon her with anger; with scorn, she thought. Oh! what had he heard of her? What did he know?

With the desperateness of her youth she told herself that hope was dead; that life would offer her nothing any more but horrible hours between the people of her mother's entourage — the Robecqs and the Scotts, the chattering, heartless, fine ladies, the dreadful young men whose every look was vaguely insulting! Nothing but Fritz's scoldings, his sad sternness, and her mother's tempers and caresses — tempers ever more frequent, caresses ever rarer.

These weeks in England had begun to make her feel dimly that hers was no normal existence; that a singer's glories were bought by the sacrifice of too much that was holy, tender and peaceful. Intangibly, there had been gathering a pressure as of danger about her.

Now, prone on her bed, in a tearless lassitude of despair, she told herself that calamity had indeed overtaken her. He had passed out of her life, and without him life was hideous.

Elisa roused her at dusk:

Madame la Comtesse demanded her.

With languid feet Fifi dragged herself obediently to the summons; the mood was upon her — the mood of all such untried spirits in trouble, of complete surrender to her own misfortunes; the black pessimism that not only expects woe but goes to meet it.

“Now for a new scene!” thought she. And, scarcely formed, the suggestion came: “She will be so angry because Lord Desmond has gone away!”

The prima donna, loose-haired, wrapped loosely in a gorgeous kimono, held out her arms.

“*Viens, chérie* ——”

And in another moment the daughter was enfolded; loving words fell round her:

“How beautiful she is! And how tall — is she not, Elisa? Behold, thou art grown up, Fifi, but to thy mother always the little one ——”

Here Fifi felt her mother's lips upon her cheek: they were burning. She drew back. How was it that her heart felt so heavy, so unable to respond to this display of tenderness? Why did she want to free herself from those encircling arms? Why did her mother's face look so pale and strange? And, since her voice was soft, why were her eyes hard, almost cruel?

She turned her head sharply, and met Elisa's gaze, Oh! did every one hate her?

“Fifi,” came those accents of treacherous sweetness, “I want you to be very beautiful to-night! — *ma vieille*, you must do Mademoiselle's hair.”

And Elisa answered with extraordinary amiability for her:



"It is as Madame la Comtesse wills." And then added with a grimacing smile: "Mademoiselle has such beautiful hair, it is a pity it should not be well dressed."

"Yes — yes," pursued her mistress, with a feverish gaiety, as hollow-sounding to the bewildered child as her tone of caress — "and after that, we will dress her, Elisa. None of those absurd pensionnaire frocks now. How about that white satin dress of mine *de chez Meyer* — the one with the crystals? Would it not become her? Would it not fit her? We resemble each other so much."

"One can try," said Elisa.

With a last pressure Fulvia released the girl's shoulder. In her touch there was an underlying fury that would more gladly have strangled than petted; her mouth was smiling, the eyes had the same dreadful fixedness.

Then Elisa's hard hands took possession of the victim and forced her into a seat; and, while the mother stood and watched and criticized, the task of hair-dressing was accomplished. After that they dressed her.

It was an Empire garment that fell in straight folds from the shoulders; cut artfully close to the figure; hung across the breast with chains of crystal drops that dripped in a glittering and uneven shower, nearly to the knee. A wonderful robe!

"It is a little short," said the maid, sourly.

"*Eh bien, tant mieux,*" retorted La Marmora. "One will see that she has well-shaped feet."

She gave an unpleasant laugh. "You can wear my silver shoes, *la petite.*"

Then she whisked her up to the long pier-glass.

"See, art thou not fine?"

The girl glanced, half afraid; then, at the vision that met her, shimmering white, an involuntary smile broke over her face. It was true, it was true; she was a woman grown, she was beautiful!

"And now go," the singer had a sudden grating in her voice. "Do not disarrange your hair. You will come down after dinner ——"

A second she paused, darkly surveying the radiant young figure. Then she took the girl by the chin and turned her face round. Fifi felt as if her lids were weighted over her eyes.

"You will be good," said the mother threateningly. "You will do what I tell you — you will be a happy woman."

"Mama!"

"I suppose you will believe that I know what is for your happiness?"

There was a moment's silence; the girl's heart was beating as if it would break.

"If you don't trust your mother ——" went on the prima donna, with a piercing sharpness in her accents.

"Oh, I do, I do," burst out the poor child, not understanding why she should feel so tortured.

"*C'est bien.*" La Marmora moved restlessly toward her dressing table. "Away with you, then! It's a promise. See to her, Elisa, and if she goes on looking pale like that — just dab on a hint of rouge."

Fifi's little bedroom gave on to the drive. And as she sat, hugging her blue kitten, feeling singularly forlorn, she heard the throbbing of a motor approaching the

front door. One of the dinner guests, no doubt. She had a sudden sting of curiosity to see who was arriving; her mother was certainly expecting some one special. Even as she rose, her heart began to beat heavily. She wondered, she hoped almost, she knew whom she was going to see. Her knees trembled as she crossed the room, laying the sleeping kitten on the narrow little bed as she passed. She had to lean against the casement as she looked out of the narrow dormer window. The motor had halted; its occupant was alighting; it was Lord Desmond.

Instantly the whole aspect of her life seemed to change. It was as if a storm-shadowed landscape were flooded with sunshine. He had come back! She stood, clasping her hands over the painful beating of her heart. Then, all at once the thought struck her like an arrow. Was it because of this her mother had made her beautiful, had dressed her like a woman, had told her to trust?

As one may feel a ghostly presence in a haunted room, without any testimony of the senses, Fifi had long been miserably conscious of something unnatural and threatening in the maternal attitude toward herself and Lord Desmond. Now it seemed that, though her mother did not like this wonderful possibility — and sometimes, indeed, she did not even seem to be pleased when so old a friend as the Baron himself had words of admiration for her — she would not stand in the way of it. Though she was angry, she would help. Had she not robed her in her own garments? Mothers would always do the right thing! Mothers might always be trusted!

Her supper tray was brought in to her by the panting underservant that was thought good enough to wait upon the singer's daughter; but she scarcely knew what she ate any more than what she was reading — during her lonely meals she was in the habit of having an open book before her. Elisa came in before the repast, such as it was, was finished, and stood surveying her with a measuring scowl. The girl flung from her lips the morsel she was about to raise to them — she could not have swallowed it under that glance!

“If you have done` stuffing yourself?” said the old woman — the accent brought the listener back to the days of her childhood when Elisa had been a terror in her life.

“Madame la Comtesse said some rouge,” pursued the lady's maid. She manipulated with the hare's foot, and then tweaked a curl.

“If she dared, she would box my ears,” thought Fifi.

She looked at herself in the glass — a square mirror of singularly different dimensions from any of those that hung in the great colonnaded bedroom downstairs. She thought the heightened bloom became her — and yet she hesitated.

“*Allez, maintenant,*” said Elisa.

The girl caught up her book from the table — Heaven knew how long she might not have to wait? — and went obediently. The old woman stood at the door, watching; following her with her eyes down the narrow passage where the sunny head nearly touched the sloping roof; gazing with that long, deep, vindictive look. Already, something of Fifi's tide of hope and joy had ebbed as she

descended the breakneck stair that led its incongruous way to the marble splendours below.

When she entered the reception room she was altogether dashed to behold old Fritz.

He sat in the middle of the room, on a small chair, both hands clasped on his stick. His head was a little bent, as if listening. She felt that he was waiting for her; and hated herself for the impulse of annoyance and rebellion that instantly sprang within her at sight of him.

He had merely to raise his eyes a little to see her; and he watched her approach without a word. It was only when she was quite close to him that he spoke.

“What grand young lady have we here? How modish! How elegant! — Can this be any one of my acquaintance?”

His tone was bitterly ironical; but in his eyes severity was almost lost in sadness. The colour rushed to the girl's forehead, to her rouged cheeks. Even those unwontedly bare shoulders, the long throat, blushed. Yet why should she be ashamed? There was nothing to be ashamed of. She jerked her chin defiantly.

“What's the matter with you? — what's wrong with me? My frock is beautiful. It's Mama's. And Mama said I looked beautiful in it.”

“So —!” said Fritz, with his long German emphasis. “So — the gown is beautiful and you are beautiful.” He rose painfully and caught her by the arm, as she was about to turn away in petulance. “It is beautiful to disfigure the head God has given you duly proportioned into a shape only a savage would admire; to hide the brow, the seat of intelligence, the throne of the soul, under these untidy curls? Ach, it is beautiful to be dressed



like a Christmas doll, in tinsel and beads! *Du lieber!* is that a stocking for a respectable maiden?"

He bent his head to look at the openwork mesh of silk lace that was, indeed, somewhat unduly exposed by the shortness of the skirt in front.

"And that heel, deforming the ankle. Alas! if my blessed mother had seen a daughter of hers ——"

She flung herself from him in a sudden passion of anger. She was unnerved this evening, quivering to every vibration like the strings of an overwound instrument. Fritz inspired her with fear, in spite of herself; his disfavour cast doubts over her own self-satisfaction. When one is vitally bent upon pleasing it takes very little to cast down the spirit.

"What's the matter with me — what's the matter with me?" she repeated stormily. "My shoes and stockings, now! They're Mama's, too, if you want to know."

He stood regarding her. Her words produced no perceptible impression beyond the deepening of the sadness in his eyes.

"Your mama — your mama!" he echoed. "The old silly reason! See then, child, how often must I explain that what may be becoming to the mama is not therefore becoming to the daughter? A maiden must dress maidenly. Oh, Fifi, that I should see! — Have you no tucker, my poor child — no kerchief?"

"It's not meant to have a tucker."

She spoke rudely; but again the wave of blood ran visibly over all the white skin to the shadow of those censured curls; she turned her head away like a shame-



faced child. The old man's sorrow-laden gaze grew suddenly tender. He sighed heavily. But all at once a sharp ejaculation escaped him.

"Heaven be good to me, you've painted your face!"

"Fritz!"

She stamped her foot; then raised her hands to shield her cheeks.

"Oh, don't, Fritz!"

The book had fallen from her clasp in the action. Supporting himself on his stick, he bent and picked it up. One glance at the yellow cover sufficed. In his turn a storm of red flushed his countenance; the veins on his forehead swelled. "You've got that book again! Did I not warn you yesterday at the cottage ——!"

"I wanted to see the end of it."

"It should not ever have been even between your hands!" he thundered.

She tried to defend herself.

"I heard Mama talking about it again. She says it is cut out of the quick — cut out of the quick — her own words."

"Aye!" He interrupted her with a despairing cry: "Your mama — your mama!"

Propping his stick against his chair, he tore the book deliberately apart and flung the pieces from him into the bank of palms behind the couch with unexpected strength.

"You do nothing but scold, scold," protested she, on the verge of irritable tears. "It's a stupid old book, anyhow. The stupidest book I ever read! I can't make head or tail of it. But I'm going to read the end of it, all the same. I'm tired of being bullied, bullied by every

one! Do you think I can't pick it out of that, you old silly?"

As if the weight of trouble and anger were too much for his suffering frame, the old musician sank back into the chair. The hands that clasped the crutch of the stick once more were trembling.

"Alas!" he said brokenly. "I felt it! I knew it! Something would not let me rest to-night. I was driven to come back here to you. Alas, my poor child!"

There was a pause. Sullenly she drew toward the couch, and sat on the end of it; her shoulders turned upon him, her head averted, picking aimlessly at the long fur. She must keep herself angry, or she would cry. She didn't know what had come to her of late; she was becoming an absolute cry-baby.

At length Fritz spoke again; his accents were calmer; but they struck a chill to her heart, in their masterfulness and finality. And what he said appalled her:

"This is no place for you. This life of your mama's, of the great singer, the people she must see, the things you must hear — even to the books that lie about for you to read — it is all unfit for you — poison!"

Her scared eyes were on his face.

"Poison!" he said again. And his voice filled the great room. Then it fell and softened:

"Come over to me, come to me, Fifi."

Slowly she obeyed, her eyes still fixed upon him. She was like a child, a child who dreads a blow. He took her unresponsive hand.

"My little one! — There is the old farm-house in the valley — do you remember?"

"Where your sister lives?" Angry apprehension had robbed her tones of all their young music.

"You used to like to hear about it all, in the old days. Of the farm-house with the garden, and the old well, the bees, the cows, and the goat ——"

She drew her hand away.

"It does not amuse me any more. That was when I was quite little."

"And yet, child, I am thinking it would be a very good thing if you were to go there now — just for the present."

He spoke with extreme gentleness, but she felt an iron inflexibility of purpose behind this very gentleness.

She cried out, as if he had struck her. "Oh!" and again, with a little moan: "Oh!" and next fury seized her. "So this is what you've been plotting?"

Something of her mother's insolence was in her voice and glance. But he proceeded as if he had neither heard nor felt.

"For the present, at least, certainly. I have many times wished to send you there; but it was never the right moment. Now it is the right moment — *Mein liebes Kind*," he added with an extraordinary note of tenderness, "it used to be our old dream."

She moaned again, as if she were in pain.

"Oh, Fritz, I couldn't; I couldn't!"

He caught her passionately protesting hand in his.

"Na, does piccolo flute lead the orchestra? — *Du Kleine*, thou must let the old man decide for thee."

And here it was that the rebellion, secretly gathering for years, broke forth from her at last. By what right did the old repetitor assume this guardianship? Long

enough she had suffered under his unjustified thrall. Too long! It was time to end it.

"Decide for me! — You're mad! Why should you decide for me?"

He looked at her steadily.

"I will arrange with your mama."

Arrange with her mother! That was to say, give his orders and see them enforced! The terror of his unacknowledged power drove her to insult.

"How dare you! — how dare you!" she stammered. "Oh, Mama is right, she has been saying it often enough; we have spoiled you, she and I."

The old man turned livid, as if pierced to the heart.

"*Ach, du mein Gott!*" he said under his breath.

In the heavy silence that succeeded the girl grew ashamed of the cruelty of her youth and petulance. Two or three times she looked anxiously at the bent gray head, hesitated upon speech, yet found no words, partly lest he should take apology for submission — and submission just now, was impossible — partly because she really dared not address him. At length, very wearily and with a great effort, he got up.

"So —" he said, in an extinguished voice, "that is where we are! Look back on all the years that you can remember, Fifi. Was not the old man always thinking of you, caring for you? The holidays you spent with him, year after year, from the schools. That summer when you had the fever, and you would let no one else touch you — the treats and pleasures he invented for you — it all appears to you, now, nothing but — a liberty! — A liberty, and nothing else —"

"I didn't mean," she faltered; but she hung back, and her eyes were still shadowed by mistrust, defiance.

He swayed as he stood, and passed his handkerchief over a forehead suddenly wet with anguish.

"I must go," he said faintly. An unbearable spasm of his complaint had seized him. "This is too much, I am not yet strong enough."

He took two or three limping paces away from her, and then stopped, calling upon all his forces, to stand and speak again:

"Think not I give it up, child," he said, in German, with solemn articulation. "I know my duty at last. Too long have I neglected it."

And with that, dragging himself, he left her.

The girl looked after him, torn between conflicting emotions; then the terror of his threat, of all it would mean to her if fulfilled, roused her to an impulse of final mutiny. She had been right; Fritz had presumed! It was intolerable! However useful he might be to her mother's career, her own life should no longer be sacrificed to his old-fashioned burgher notions, to his self-imposed guardianship, his unwarranted interferences.

As if to begin the work of self-defence, she first hastened to survey herself in the most accommodating mirror, re-establishing her satisfaction in the attire he had condemned. Then she went in search of the parted halves of the book; found them with some difficulty; and deliberately sat down to read.

## IX

### A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

THEY were at dessert round the pseudo-Greek board. The impresario and the critic had laboured to keep up conversation during the meal. Only a few words had the prima donna contributed. The diplomatist achieved a record of silence.

Now, with long, naked arms propped each side of her neglected plate, La Marmora roused herself from far contemplation, to fix the man opposite to her, Scott. He was delicately peeling a peach.

"*Ah ça!*" she called out to him, "you know you were not invited to dine here to-night."

He glanced up jocularly.

"Was I not, dear lady? — Is it possible? — How could I have made so agreeable a mistake?"

But there was no responsive smile in the set face of the hostess.

"You have such a sense of humour," she sneered; "it is not possible always to share it," she said. "Suppose, now, you were to rectify — this mistake of yours."

The Baron's jaw dropped.

"My dear friend!—" he remonstrated after a gasp of horrified astonishment.

Mr. Scott also was gasping. The prima donna pur-



sued, with that gathering fury in her voice which resembled a growl.

"Ah, do you take me for the kind of person that it is safe to play tricks on? — Is my house to be made free with as it were a restaurant? — Do you walk in here to meet whom you will — suit your little games, smoke, drink, feed ——"

But Scott had risen, and his action brought her to a standstill, breathing heavily through her dilated nostrils and measuring him with glaring eyes as he advanced round the length of the table, toward her in — considering the circumstances — a very creditable dignity.

"I trust, my dear lady," he began and though his fat, pink face had grown pale, his voice remained urbane, "that if I have erred in construing a special into a general invitation, you will allow me to rectify my error, with all possible alacrity — only the privilege of kissing your hand, and a word of apology ——"

She waved him from her. "No, no — no apology!" Whether intentionally or not, her angry gesticulation pointed toward the portière.

"If I may not speak, I can write," said the critic, then, with a hissing breath.

His eyes met those of the Baron; he waved his loosely hung hand toward that gentleman's countenance of despair, nodded at Desmond, and marched out of the room.

The manager struck his forehead.

"And he will write, too!" he groaned. "You will get an apology — from him — the morning after Salome, my dear! To think," he proceeded almost tearfully,

“that I have put up with Philip Scott for fifteen years, and that this is how we stand!”

“Ah, *vous m'assommez!*” said the singer.

Her manager flung upon her a single irate glance; then, in his turn, he rose suddenly.

“At least *I* am not out of my mind,” he said with more bitterness than he often allowed himself to betray. “You’ll excuse me, if I follow our poor friend.”

“Oh, go, go — ” she agreed with a fierce little laugh, “and, by the same occasion, tell Fifi that we expect to find her waiting for us presently.” She pronounced these words with significant emphasis, and added: “You needn’t hurry back, Robecq.”

The other, moving deliberately away, did not turn his head. Lord Desmond sat on, his eyes fixed on his plate. For the sake of that interview with Fifi, so strangely proffered, he was willing to wait even an hour longer in the Panther’s den; the more readily that the eyes turned upon him were, to-night, those of hatred.

A minute or two passed in heavy silence; and then the woman spoke:

“Have you got any cigarettes? — Pass them to me. I will smoke.”

He pushed his silver case without a word, struck a match and held it toward her.

But she, leaning suddenly forward, caught his hand with a grip and lit the cigarette thus. She drove her nails into his wrist as she clutched it. Then she puffed a cloud of smoke at him and released him with a spasmodic gesture that was as savage as a blow.

“Why did you send me lily of the valley?” she asked.

He drew his cuff over the marks left on his wrist, took up a cigarette with long, pale fingers; and only after he had deliberately lighted it, answered:

"I did not send them to you."

Her breast heaved stormily; the great rough jewels flashing and darkening as they rose and fell.

"*Comment cela?*"

"I sent them to Mademoiselle Lovinska," he explained, in French, likewise.

She dashed her cigarette from her, caught her throat with one hand as if she were strangling, and, with a supreme effort, restrained the cry of fury that was surging to her lips.

Desmond cast down his eyes. This was extremely tiresome and boring; but it was better than being smiled upon.

All at once she reached across the table again — this time only touching the back of his hand with a cold finger. "You wrote: 'For Madame la Marmora' on your card," she said, under her breath.

He glanced at her. Her lips were distended in a dreadful smile. His blue eyes grew steely.

"I beg your pardon: I wrote: 'For Mademoiselle' — I meant the flowers for Mademoiselle."

"*C'est bien,*" she said, "*c'est bien.*"

She clutched the curved arms of her classic chair with a fierceness that made each bone start. "*C'est bien,*" she repeated in a fainter voice: "you will have occasion to send her more flowers, by and by."

Almost for the span of a minute, she sat in this tense attitude, her head craned forward, her eyes rending him;

all the beautiful curves of throat and shoulders distorted. Then, once more fiercely mistress of herself — was it not worth while to wait for the moment of vengeance? — she fell upon his cigarette case and match-box, turned out the whole contents of the case and began to light and smoke one cigarette after the other, with an extraordinary swiftness and intensity.

The man lay back in his chair, patient, abstracted — determined. A dead silence lay between them.

By the exit he had chosen Scott was obliged to cross the reception room on his way out of the house. Fifi, vainly endeavouring to concentrate her attention upon the “stupidest book she’d ever read,” glanced up, with a leap of the heart, to find that the entering figure displayed merely the rotundity, the close-cropped gray hair, the odious smirking face of the man she most disliked of all her mother’s friends. Hers was an expressive countenance. The critic, approaching, met her glance of greeting with one that was nothing less than vindictive.

Vaguely she thought: “This is the fourth, to-day, who has looked at me with dislike!” Even the blue eyes — even the blue eyes had contemned. Was it only in old Fritz’s stern gaze that she was to find an abiding depth of love?

“Hullo, Miss Fifi,” said the intruder, after running her up and down with his malevolent scrutiny, “not gracing the dinner table — and you so beautiful!”

“And how is it,” she cried, flushing — in her unlearned habit of schoolgirl retort, “how is it that you are no longer gracing the dinner table, and you so beautiful?”

He had a small laugh which would have made the blood of the sagacious Baron run cold.

"I have been already quite sufficiently well entertained to-night, thank you, Miss Fifi. We critics, you know," he waved his limp-wristed hands, "the servants of the public! — the servants of the public! — Ta-ta, my young friend!"

He blew her a kiss that was the acme of insolence; squinted at the yellow-covered book on her lap, and chuckled loudly, as he trotted away.

The weighted portière was slowly settling down behind him, when Robecq stepped into the room from the opposite side.

He came halfway across, then paused.

"Was that Scott?"

The girl nodded. Her underlip was slightly thrust forth; another tiresome person —

"Have you ever seen a pig in a rage?" she cried. "That's what that horrid little man looked like. What did you do to him?"

The impresario made no reply; he was reflecting. The mischief was done; to admit fear now, by trying to apologize for the woman, would only be to intensify it. It is hopeless to try and caress back into good-humour a poisonous reptile roused to anger; better stamp on it — safer still, get out of its path! The outer door was slammed upon his conclusion.

And our friend will have to walk to the station. As far as the *Commonwealth Review* is concerned, Salome's dished! Well, Salome herself had still to be conciliated, if Salome there was to be at all!



The poor manager passed a hand over his careworn brow, and set himself with what courage he might to his desperate task. He advanced, smiling his genial smile, and sat down beside the girl, who made room for him, not very graciously.

“Kitten well, Miss Fifi?”

Her face lit up immediately.

“Oh, such a darling! — I left him asleep in the very middle of my bed. Do you know that his eyes are turning green?”

“They’ll be orange, all right, in a month or so.”

“Orange?” She dwelt on the thought with a delighted smile.

His glance mused on her. The mischief, to keep a splendid creature like that in leading strings! Positively, “Kittens” seemed the only subject that they could meet upon so far. He drove his fingers into his beard and began again:

“Had a good supper, Miss Fifi?”

The light died out of her face. The pouting mouth betrayed her sense of injury.

“Tea and a boiled egg.”

“Too bad!”

After all, this was not such a bad start. The young, beautiful, slighted being edged closer to her only helper.

“Mama is so strange to-night! — She dressed me up like this, hours and hours ago. Said that I was grown up, quite grown up, and that I looked — well, rather nice! — And then in the same breath says I’m not to come down till after dinner and treats me as if I was two years old.”



"Is that so?" said the listener with emphatic sympathy.

He hesitated upon the advisability of taking her hand; but refrained.

"Nobody wants me," she went on with a trembling lip.

"My dear little girl ——" he purred.

But she broke in again, all to her grievance, unheeding the motion of his arm behind her, the kindling of his gaze upon her:

"It's been a horrid day! Everybody is so cross, so odd!"

"I hope I've not seemed cross, or ——" he gave a faintly nervous laugh, "or —— odd?"

She brushed the suggestion away with complete indifference.

"Oh, no, not you. I wasn't thinking of you. Elisa and —— and ——" The name burning on her heart was the last she could pronounce. "Elisa and Fritz! And Mama! Mama was odd. Quite, quite kind ——" She was unconscious of any irony. "But Fritz was horrid. He wants to have me sent away —— to Germany! Oh, Baron" —— she flung out both hands to him —— "Baron, don't let them! You'll stand up for me? Don't let them!"

He caught the impulsive hands and pressed them reassuringly, tenderly. Old Fritz was an unsuspecting ally indeed just now —— Fritz, his most dreaded opponent!

"Ah —— he wants to send you back to Germany, does he? That's too bad! No, no, we won't allow that."

"You'll stand my friend, won't you?" she pleaded, her dewy eyes widening upon him.

"Indeed, I will, dear little friend."

The pressure of his clasp had become so ardent that, instinctively, she drew her hands away. Yet, absorbed in her trouble, she scarcely realized her own action. He was not displeased at the withdrawal; the sooner she regarded him as a man — and not a *vieux papa*, the better. He pursued what he thought his advantage.

"You're tired of always being treated like a child, aren't you?"

"You know I'm twenty-one — "

The pent-up indignation of a long-felt injury flashed in her glance, resounded in her voice.

"Hush — hush!" He put his finger on his lips. "We don't announce that quite so loud, do we? — Your Mama's a little nervous to-night. The fact is, my dear Miss Fifi, you ought to be married — married, my dear. And then no one would dare to order you about."

"Married!"

A lovely carmine rushed to her face. She flung a fugitive look upon him — a look of shyness exquisitely hovering on happiness — then dropped her eyelids. Her heart was in a tumult. Had not her mother told her to trust? Was this old friend sent further to prepare her? Lord Desmond was even now in the dining room. Perhaps discussing. She had learned abroad how parents arrange marriages first.

The Baron was proceeding.

"You would do just as you liked. It would be better than going to Germany, wouldn't it?"

The reminder stung her into mingled scorn and fear.

"Germany! In the farm-house — with Fritz's old sister! Oh! I'm likely to be married there, am I not?"

"You've only got to say the word — you shan't go to Germany."

"Oh, Baron, you'll — you mean ——" She checked herself. Again embarrassment seized her. She laughed, confused, blushing. "I don't know — I don't know——"

In his phraseology, "she was adorable!" — The task he had thought so inopportune was becoming overwhelmingly attractive. His strong head began to swim, ever so slightly.

"Ah, but I know — My little friend ——"

He took her hand, with a soft gesture; and as it lay inert in his, the ardour of his pressure grew again. "My little friend would like to be married — to have a home of her own. To have some one to order about — instead of being ordered about herself."

The flushed face was turned with a quick movement of astonishment upon him, the golden-hazel eyes were startled from their shy dream. But he was carried away.

"Some one who would do all she wants," he was urging amorously, "always, always! Who would give her as much money to spend as she liked — dresses, jewels, pearls! Pearls, Miss Fifi — for that long, beautiful throat! A great immense rope of pearls ——"

Her hand was struggling in his, like an imprisoned bird; her glance fluttered uneasily from his gaze. She had never seen the Baron look like that. She hardly knew what it meant; but it both offended and terrified her.

"I don't understand ——!" she faltered.

He could not stop himself now. Ever more closely he held her; ever more ardently proceeded:

"Wouldn't you like pearls? They needn't prevent diamonds! Fifi, one word, come, you are not afraid of me, are you?— Won't you be my little baroness?"

Utter amazement robbed her for the moment of all power to struggle.

"You —! You?"

"Even myself ——"

"You — want to marry — me?"

"More than — than the whole world!"

She freed herself with sudden strength. Then the tension of her multiplied emotions culminated in a burst of hysterical laughter.

"Me?—You!—I marry you! Oh, good gracious——!"

A second or two he contemplated her, and the look that had frightened her in his eyes became intensified into something approaching ferocity. The most spiritual man is doubled with the brute. The Baron was not spiritual.

"Do you prefer Germany? — Exile to the farm-house of Fritz's old sister? Or some other school or institution where you'll be kept till all your youth is gone? I tell you I can't fight for you, unless you are my wife. I'm powerless, between your mother and Fritz — unless you are my wife. Oh, you laughed at the bare idea — laugh away! We shall laugh together, by and by, my beauty!"

He caught her round the waist.

The black fear, with which she had heard him expound the situation, had felt its stabbing truth, was succeeded by a blind panic of revolt as his touch encircled her.

“Let me go, let me go!”

“One kiss, first ——”

The impresario had lost his head. Excellent materialist as he was, life had never given him an emotion even approaching this before. His brain had schemed and worked for the wealth, the comfort, the power, he had alone deemed covetable. Love had found no room in his measured and successful existence. The passion of the man whose time for passion is almost past was now drowning all his usual faculties; breaking down the guard of years, sweeping him he scarce knew where. And at the back of it all was the consciousness that he must be victorious, to-night, at once! Not only for the sake of his great venture, but because if he failed now, as a lover, the moment might never strike again.

“Let me go!” she panted and then screamed. The piercingness of her cry drove them apart like a sword.

“How dare you. . . !” She had sprung to her feet and stood, scorning him; beautiful like some young Valkyrie in her storm of outraged maidenliness. “How dare you touch me, you horrible old man! How dare you think you can buy me, with your pearls, your jewels! . . . I marry you! The very sight of you makes me sick!”

The language was that of a schoolgirl; but the resentment that dictated it was all of a woman.

The Baron sat, motionless, staring before him.

Man is so made, that the tenser the emotion, whether of the senses or of the spirit, the more rapidly it passes. Of its own violence it dies. Rueful, ashamed, the manager felt his heat of passion subside; and he looked only on his own folly.

“And this is what comes of mixing pleasure and business!” he thought.

Fifi's cry pierced into the dining hall and struck the two who sat there. La Marmora dropped her cigarette, and sat listening for one moment of keenly arrested attention, nostrils widened, brows contracted — her glance sideways flung. Lord Desmond leaned forward and fixed her. That was Fifi's voice! What was happening there within? The Panther knew.

Both unconsciously waited for a second call; but half a minute passed, and still there was silence — a silence that became sinister, unendurable to the man. He rose and impulsively hastened toward the archway. His hostess overtook him as he lifted the portière, and brushed out before him, almost flinging the silk folds back in his face, as if to exclude him.

He saw, with a vague wonder, as he disengaged himself, that his hands were trembling.

At sight of her mother, Fifi sprang down from the dais toward her, and then brought herself up short. She cast one swift look from the singer's face to that of Lord Desmond, and back again; and stood, head upflung, with fluctuating colour and fingers nervously interlaced — a creature at bay.



La Marmora had halted too. Now she bore down on Robecq.

“Well ——?”

The single word rang out like the crack of a whip. Robecq shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah!” — The singer drew in her breath; then, gutturally, in a voice that seemed to rise straight from those hidden depths of vulgarity in her soul: “What’s the meaning of this?” she fulminated.

Once again the impresario shrugged his shoulders, with ever so slight a gesture toward the motionless figure of Lord Desmond. A moment he sought to catch the diplomatist’s eye — to convey a warning, a reassurance, as if he said: “Do not attach any importance to this little scene. Singers are impossible creatures — who should know better than I? Only let us remain normal!” Then he got up, and advanced to his troublesome property; the old, good-humoured, deliberate, resigned Robecq.

“My dear friend, there’s nothing to agitate you. Miss Fifi is a little startled. Your humble servant has been duly snubbed. Give us all time — a little more time!”

His words, well-meaning as they were, roused the girl to a renewal of panic!

“Mama — Mama,” she cried, high-voiced; “he talks of marrying me! Me!”

The mother turned like a viper.

“Well?”

She caught the arm that had been outstretched in appeal, so savagely that the Baron instinctively sprang forward.

“*Laissez moi faire!*” she hissed at him.

Then her last remnant of self-control gave way. She had prepared a sensation and it had failed. But vengeance was not relinquished. All the baseness in her poured in remorseless fury and hatred from her lips.

"*Parole d'honneur!* . . . What do you expect, I should like to know! You little fool — *sotte! petite sotte!* To what do you aspire, I wonder? What do you think you were allowed out of the school-room for? What do you think I burdened myself with you for, all these months? *Idiote, imbécile, bête que tu es!* Who are you, what are you, to set yourself against your mother? . . . *Ingrate!* . . . Your mother! Hold your tongue, Robecq! I will manage this! *Allons!* Here is her hand."

"Mama! Oh, no, Mama!" Fifi struggled against that savage grip in vain; then flung her free hand over her eyes. (Before Lord Desmond she was ready to die of shame.)

"It is yes — it is yes! I tell you it is yes!" The mother had an atrocious mirth in her throat. "Here, take her hand, Baron!"

(And he was standing by, without a word!)

"I won't!" screamed the girl, pushed beyond the limits of endurance. "I never will! Ah, you think I don't understand. I know why you want to marry me off!" She fought to disengage herself, and with a supreme wrench succeeded. "I know why you want to get me out of the way."

She did not know what she was saying.

"Ah, be quiet, you silly child!" whispered Robecq in her ear.

In vain that he remained "normal"! Abnormal passions were at work and the drama swept by him, beyond his power to control. As well might a man strive to stem a flood with the sluice-gate of the roadside stream.

"You want to get me out of the way," repeated the girl in her high, strained note, that rang close upon tears. "I can't help being young! I can't help growing up — I can't help people liking me ——"

Whether intentionally or whether with a mere instinct of seeking for help from the quarter she most yearned to receive it from, here she turned and sought Lord Desmond with her eyes. The Panther caught the glance; and with a sharp cry of rage, that snarl in her throat, with which the Baron had been ominously acquainted once or twice before, she struck her child on the cheek.

"My God! . . ." The Baron was the only one of the four who called out. Fifi stood as if turned to stone, her head raised; on her countenance, white behind the spots of rouge, the mark of the blow began to stand out, flaming.

La Marmora was crouching, in the attitude in which she had struck.

Desmond, suddenly gray-faced, still made no movement, until Robecq flung an imperative gesture toward him, bidding instant departure. Then he looked once at Fifi, once at the Panther — the extreme of passion and the extreme of loathing were in those two glances — and slowly turned and walked from the place: not through the archway that led into the hall, but through the open columns of the terrace. He was pursued by different

sounds; a long, throbbing, hysterical cry from La Marmora, as she sank into Robecq's arms, and from Fifi's lips, laughter!

Out of the girl's outraged heart this dreadful laughter sprang. Tears were too sacred and too healing to be granted to such an injury as hers.

Without more ado, the impresario hustled the writhing woman out of the room. In sheer humanity he could not leave the Panther to maltreat her cub any more; besides this, the commercial instinct was once more asserting itself. It had indeed been a disastrous evening for him; but prompt action might still save his investment. The first thing was to put a stop to the damaging shrieks, any one of which might be fatal to that golden asset — Salome's voice.

"You will do this once too often, my dear," he had said in Vienna. If he had had a bottle of chloroform to his hand, he had been capable of smothering her with it that moment!

## X

### ANOTHER PROPOSAL

DESMOND went deliberately down into the syringa walk. It was damp and chill after the rain — but the perfume was intoxicating. Here he had planned, by some means or other, to walk with his nymph that night; to grasp, without regard to the future, some hour of entrancement, some exquisite dalliance with the infatuation that was consuming him.

When he had formed this resolution, he had been once again under the spell of the temptation that bade him gather at least a memory for the rest of his life. A kiss, and a farewell. . . . Or, a kiss and after that the deluge! What did it matter? Among the syringa bushes, he and she alone . . . and at least once his lips on hers!

But now all was changed; he carried down with him an image that seemed to go visibly, lit by flame, beside him. No longer his nymph, but a creature with head flung back and eyes at bay; hung with mock brilliants that glittered and trembled like a fiery spray with the beating of her heart, with the panting of her breath. A creature in the very flower of her young womanhood, with exquisite naked shoulders and arms, and feet arched like those of a goddess, exposed by that ill-fitting finery of sweeping satin; with painted face, one poor cheek

blazing the shame of her mother's blow. A helpless thing; frail, most piteous! The virginal woodland thing no longer, alas! but only Fifi, the Panther's Cub!

He paced the syringa walk from end to end once. The languor of the soft dark night and the poison sweetness of the flowers entered into his veins. The throbbing of his pulses settled down at last to the long, slow hammer of intensified excitement which the strong man mistakes for calmness.

His mind had been made up, he told himself, from the moment her cry had pierced to his ears; it was a cry for help — It was a cry for him! What he could give her, he would give.

But he had not sought this solitary spot to battle with his feelings, not even to encourage himself to irretrievable action; he only wanted to contemplate the fixity of his own resolution a minute or two, apart; to let the molten heat of it harden, as it were, into steel.

It was almost with a light step that he sprang up the grass stairs once more. Now, he had merely the detail of his action to settle, and the first move was to see Fifi alone.

He halted in the shadow, as once before he had done, and listened. All was silent. At least the fantastic marble hall had this advantage; it held no secret, either of sight or sound, from the garden these summer nights.

Empty! Was it empty?

He came up the slope with caution. If necessary, he must find some way of communication with his poor girl this very night; bribe, or coax, or demand — he felt reckless enough for anything.



Something like a moan floated out upon the delicate peace of the air. His heart contracted, and then burned. What were they doing to her?

With a leap he bounded up the marble steps, and then, dazzled by the flood of light, halted on the threshold, and shaded his eyes to look. Then those steady pulses seemed to stop. She was there.

Prone on the couch she lay, her golden head abased. It was the attitude of one broken, despairing. She scarcely seemed to breathe. It was not from her that the sound of lament had come to him. One would as soon have expected a lily beaten down by the storm to cry out. . . . Yes, a flower cast upon the earth, she was that!

He came nearer and called her. He would not touch her.

“Fifi. . . .!”

She shuddered, slowly lifted herself and turned to him. Her eyes, darkly encircled, looked abnormally large. The rouge which Elisa had put on with no sparing hand, mocked the ashen pallor of one cheek; the other — as she felt his gaze upon her, her whole countenance grew scarlet — she raised her hand to shelter that infamous mark from him. An overwhelming pity mingled with his passion.

“May I sit down beside you?” he said, very quietly, and took the space she made for him, carefully keeping himself apart from her.

She drew herself still closer to the head of the couch.

No, no, he did not love her — there was nothing but compassion in his eyes. And she would not have his

compassion. Why had he come back? He had stood by, without a word, and let them torture her: had watched the infamy of that blow, and had not even a cry of manhood! He was like all the rest, slinking back, when she was alone. And for what? No, he did not love her! She had no one in the world to love her, but Fritz — and Fritz was cruel, too. . . . She turned her head away, still sheltering that burning cheek with her hand.

As she moved, the torn yellow book came into view between them. Desmond took it up, glanced at it, and dropped it at his feet.

“I’ll run away! I’ll not stay here any more. . . .” Her breast heaved. Bitter, defiant words dropped from her lips. “I’m the most unhappy creature on the face of this earth, but I’ll stand it no longer. I’ll run away!”

“Indeed. . . .” Forcibly he kept his voice in those measured tones. “And where will you go? What will you do?”

“Plenty of places I can go to! . . . Plenty of things I can do!” she went on, stung to a wilder vehemence. “That much, at least, I’ve learned in this house! I’m not a fool. I know I’m not ugly. Why shouldn’t I sing, like Mama, or dance, or act? But I won’t do what they want — I won’t!” She turned the pitiful disfigured beauty of her countenance upon him! “I won’t marry that dreadful old man. I hate him! I loathe him! And I won’t be buried in Germany — that’s what Fritz wants. I won’t be imprisoned again. I’m grown up, I’m a woman, I’ve got my life to live. Why should I marry? Why shouldn’t I live my life? . . . I’m not a fool or a baby.”

All at once a sob rose, strangling, in her throat:

"Anybody would be kinder to me than they are here. I will live my life," she cried. And a second dry sob rent her.

"Panther's Cub," said the man, under his breath. Then in another moment, he had her in his arms. His voice, low, troubled, hoarse, was in her ear.

"Well, I'm better than Robecq! I'm as good as the theatre . . . at least I can take you out of this!"

She could not answer him, the surprise was too great, the relief was too exquisite. But the tears came raining down her cheeks. She let all her young body relax into his embrace; it was a surrender as complete as her trust.

His lips were on her outraged cheek. He felt her tears upon them with an indescribable tearing of the soul.

All that love could give her, she should have — "Love, love! . . ." The words escaped him confusedly, in the husky low accents of his passion. "Love, lovely — Beloved!" and "Love," again he murmured. And still his lips pressed. Oh, for that blow, that had given her to him, how she should be loved!

A moment, in his headlong impulse toward her, he was poised on the mad project of carrying her away with him, then and there. But he glanced at her face, marred, stained with tears and smudged with rouge — quivering, so tired, so young, and through all so lovely to him! and some unknown depths of tenderness in his nature awoke.

She must recover herself, she must rest, she must do this thing with due deliberation. He could not take

advantage of her desolateness, nor of this first moment of awakened love.

“Can you trust yourself to me, then?”

Trust him! Her eyes answered for her. Her trembling, dumb lips — Those lips! he had not kissed them yet. Not yet!

“Then, listen,” he said, taking both her hands. “I will come for you to-morrow. If I come for you to-morrow, will you let me take you away?”

A sigh, an indefinable movement of yielding toward him; and again, voicelessly, he was answered.

“To come away with me! To be mine — to let me care for you! To be my love for as long as you can love me, for as long as I can make you love me! Fifi, you understand it will not be a slight and passing thing? Oh, I think I shall want you — always! . . .”

BOOK IV





# I

## FIFI TELLS HER STORY

FIFI looked round the room in which she found herself momentarily alone with a sense of awakening from a bewildered dream — a curious sense of chill, attributable to no salient cause, unless perhaps the fatigue which seemed suddenly to have come upon her, and the unexpected dinginess of the Dover Hotel, which Lord Desmond had chosen for their halting place.

This was their sitting room. Here they were to spend their first evening together! A single electric light, with unshaded loop, flung into relief every prosy detail of the surroundings: the huge pattern of the Morris paper, the chiffonier with its cheap veneer, the lopsided sofa, the armchairs in saddlebag, with their lace antimacassars starched and blue-tinted, as were also the insufficient curtains that veiled, without concealing, the green Venetian blinds of the bow window.

“What a horrid, horrid room!” thought the girl.

The bare painted boards and the picturesque simplicity of the German wayside *Gasthof* she had known, and found pleasing, on many a summer holiday with Fritz. She had known also the cushioned luxuriousness of those hotels patronized by the great prima donna. But this? This — she could find no word for it. She was too inex-

perienced in English travel. To her Biddicombe's Marine Hotel was merely hideous.

She laid, after some deliberation, the basket she had been unconsciously clutching, behind the sofa, and loosened the strings of her motor veil. Then, becoming more distinctively aware of the closeness of the room, charged with many strange and musty smells, she turned to the window. As she did so the sound of the sea for the first time asserted itself upon her ears. Hastily she drew up the clattering blind and opened the window. The sea! She could not see it, but the breath of it dashed in upon her, and the voice. In the darkness, and across the barrier of houses opposite, her soul seemed to seek it and be sought by it. Mysterious, wide and free, like the new unknown life that awaited her, it was calling. Its multitudinous voices promised: what, she knew not. Its restless waves beckoned: to what shore, she could not guess. Only this she knew was to be hers — love and freedom.

Leaning against the window sill, her thoughts wandered. Already the dawn of this day, when she had gone forth from her home forever, seemed immensely distant; already this irretrievable step seemed to have cut her off completely from her past life.

She tried to recall, in orderly manner, the events of the day; they slid before her mind, melting one into another, like the gliding pictures of a magic-lantern show. . . . The swirling passage through the veiled loveliness of the early morning: from dew-spangled hedgerows, still and shadowing trees, long vistas of fields all bathed in silver sheen and hung with mists of pearliness, to the first ugly

outskirts of great London, to the rattle, the sordidness, the dismal streets. . . . Lord Desmond had driven the car himself. He had had very few words for her from the moment he had helped her to step up beside him to the moment of their first halt at the big hotel, the name of which she did not even know. . . . There he had left her for many hours. She did not think it unkind of him, for he had explained to her as they went, why it was best. He was known in London; she was not. It had, of course, been impossible for her to bring luggage out of Branksome, as she stole down through the shrubberies to the corner of the road where he awaited her. He could not, however, take her himself to shop, but it was quite easy to order the little she wanted from one of those big establishments which provide for universal wants. "Once in Paris," he had said, his blue eyes upon her, "you shall get everything, everything ——"

That glance of his was decking her, as he spoke, with the lavishness of love. Just now she must content herself with some little boxful that would fit on the motor. But she could get many things sent up on approval, and amuse herself choosing, for a couple of hours. It would have to be at least a couple of hours before he could fetch her again, for he had much business to despatch.

And before they approached the great thoroughfare, he slackened speed and told her to put her veil over her face. She obeyed, in the blind, unquestioning way with which she had followed his least word hitherto. She had wondered at first, and then laughed at herself: she seemed so safe with him. But, of course, till they

were married (she realized) her mother might still interfere. Her mother — or Fritz. . . .

And, after all, the time had not hung too heavily upon her, in the smart sitting room in the grand Hotel; for it had all been rather thrilling — first the ordering by telephone, and then the choosing of the pretty things, of which a bewildering display was brought for inspection.

A pleasant chambermaid had helped her. And by and by, when, after a lonely meal she had been beginning to turn restlessly about the room, hearkening to the sound of his step along the muffled corridor, the arrival of three parcels, not of her own ordering, proved an agreeable diversion. A little dressing case with gold fittings; a box of chocolates, and a novel.

She was child enough to love a present for its own sake — woman enough to linger over what was to her eyes a bridal gift — schoolgirl enough still, to find chocolates and a novel a very good pastime. . . . It was a gay and dashing story of a romance in a motor car — and she was plunged in the second chapter, when Lord Desmond had walked in upon her.

He had given her no time even to thank him: he was bent on haste. They were to dine at Canterbury, he told her, and catch the evening boat for France.

So, while he saw her new little box taken down, and her bag, she had been veiled again by the good-natured chambermaid, had received back from her the precious basket, and, with a dream-like feeling strongly upon her again, found herself seated once more in the car — once more dashing toward her wonderful future, through streets and squares and desolated suburbs, out into the

green fields again! This time a chauffeur, carapaced like a shining beetle, drove; and she and Desmond sat together!

That was a wonderful afternoon. After a while she lifted the smothering folds of tissue before her face. It was against her instinct to do anything secret — and she loved to feel the wind blowing against her cheeks. The knowledge of his presence beside her was bliss. . . . Once or twice, indeed, she had a kind of vague disappointment that he had not once held her to his heart, like last night; that even now he should not fold an arm about her or even hold her hand. But she explained it to herself, very sapiently: until they were married — and she supposed, nay, she felt quite certain it was not safe, that they should be married in England — until they were married, why, of course. . . . That was why he was so pressed with desire to get her across the water.

She knew, through her English novels, that when English people were engaged to be married, it was usual for them to kiss and to embrace; but she also knew that this was not the custom among foreigners, and doubtless she was a foreigner — and that was why he was thus careful of her position. . . .

So she had talked to herself, silencing the little questioning voices as they woke within her:

Upon this point in her reflection, Lord Desmond entered the room. He carried her new travelling bag in one hand, and, depositing it on the table, came over to her. His motor cap, pushed at the back of his head, gave a rakish



look to his face, that was quite unusual to it. There was a haggard anxiety in his eyes.

"Well, my dear," he said, with an effort at joviality, likewise singularly foreign to his usual manner — "dreaming out into the night? Come away from the window. Why, it hasn't even a view of the sea! Well, this is a hole!" he then continued discontentedly, as, clinging to his arm, she turned back into the room with him. "I'm sorry to have so mismanaged things. If that tire hadn't burst, we'd have caught the boat right enough; though I'm afraid we ran it rather fine." He took off his cap and flung it on the table, then smiled at her. "We dawdled a bit at Canterbury."

"Oh, I can't be sorry for it," she interrupted, "it was lovely! It was, oh so —" She made an expressive gesture with both hands, in her impulsive, un-English way. "Oh, that church! I did not know churches over here could be so beautiful."

The man's gaze, as it rested upon her, grew more and more puzzled.

"That — church, as you call it, is that what you liked?"

"The church —" She laughed — her spirits were rising; the intoxicating dream-feeling was coming back upon her — "The church, yes, and the rest. Our dinner in the queer little inn. And what you said to me when you drank my health . . . and what you said to me about my eyes! And that once, when you took my hand across the table, as the waiter went out of the room."

She was pulling her hat and veil from her head, as she



spoke, crimsoning in adorable manner under the loosened hair. Her eyes, dewy with unshed tears, her lips all smiles.

No, he thought as he brooded upon her; no, he did not regret. Not for a moment!

"You have spoiled me," she went on. It was absurd, she had not found courage yet to call him by his name. Engaged people were not on such formal terms. He would think her cold. "Desmond!" she cried, and the effort lent a loud assurance to the word, "you are kind to me! I have never been spoiled like this before!"

"You shall always be spoilt now." He caught her to him as he spoke. "Oh, I did not mean our first evening to be spent in a sordid place like this. But I didn't dare take you to a big hotel, Fifi —" His voice had sunk to those low, husky accents, which had held such passion in her ears last night.

"No?" she questioned as he paused.

"There will be hue and cry, you know," he went on, releasing her, for there were steps on the landing without.

She nodded to him with an air of portentous wisdom.

"Of course, of course."

Then she slipped out of her motor coat and ran to the window.

"What does it matter about the room? One can hear the sea."

"To-morrow we shall be across that sea!" he said, his deep glance following her.

There was a knock on the door, and sharply he turned and cried:

"Come in!"

The little, shabby, heated German waiter propelled himself headforemost into the room, bearing poised on one hand a tea tray, on the other a large, greasy, leather-bound volume, both of which he slid on to the table with the skill peculiar to his order.

"Will Mister and Madame kindly write names?"

The girl came back with a spring.

"Oh, I will — I will!"

She had the book spread open before her and was plunging the dusty pen into the muddy ink, before Lord Desmond had sufficiently collected his wits to intervene.

"Better let me, my dear," he said, bending over her.

But she squared her elbows, childishly fending him off.

"No, no — let me!"

Then, with pen in the air, she began to read out, as if nothing could be of deeper interest to her:

"Mr. and Mrs. Altamount Smith, Palmerston, Blackheath. I wonder if they are bride and bridegroom? Mr. and Mrs. Percy Fitzroy Hodson, 203, Penywern Road, W. Do you think they are bride and bridegroom?"

She flourished the pen and began to write: Desmond, reading over her shoulder, suddenly snapped it from her hand.

"Get up — I'll write!"

His voice rang out harshly. She looked, startled, half frightened; saw his frowning face, and rose without a word, biting her lip.

He took the seat she had vacated. With great care he obliterated the couple of words she had begun, and wrote himself. From where she stood she could see the

page as he lifted his hands from it and dropped the pen. A loud involuntary exclamation escaped her.

"Oh! . . ."

He rose with unnecessary noise, and cast a single glance upon her, warning. She went then back to the window, and leaned her head against the casement as before, staring out into the night.

The waiter, who with his neck craned and his hopeless eye fixed into a corner of the room, as etiquette taught him, stood in patience till the *Heerschaften* would be pleased to let him depart with his book. He had seen many brides and bridegrooms, German and English: and their skirmishes had ceased to interest him.

Desmond blotted the inscription with the much-used square of blotting paper and handed back the folio.

"Thank you, sir," said the alien and fled from the room.

At the closing of the door, Fifi wheeled from the window.

"Why did you write that? We are not Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Brown!"

Her voice shook.

"Good heavens!" he returned, "why, you made my hair stand on end — Miss Fifi — Mercifully I caught you at the Fifi. Miss Fifi Lovinska, no doubt. And underneath, no doubt also, you'd have written: Lord Desmond Brooke."

"Of course — Why not?"

Her cheeks were flaming.

"Well, in England," said the man, and hardly knew that a note almost of anger had crept into his voice,

“people don't give themselves away like that — at least not the class of people I belong to.”

“But it isn't,” she argued, feeling that she must argue or she might be silly enough to burst into tears, “it isn't as if you could keep it a secret. All the world is bound to know — All the world, my people, your people in the course of the next two days, that I, Fifi Lovinska, and you, Lord Desmond Brooke, have run away together!”

He stared at her as if he were hardly sure of her meaning; and his puzzled expression became intensified almost to trouble.

She went to the tray, and, with a slightly trembling hand, began to pour herself out a cup of tea.

“Oh, dear, I'm so thirsty! You would make me drink that glass of champagne, at Canterbury, and I hate it.”

As she spoke she found his arm round her again; and happiness once more stole over her inarticulate sense of discomfort.

“It was to toast our life together,” he pleaded, with his lips upon her hair.

With an ineffable content upon her, she caressingly rubbed her head against his shoulder, sipping her vile tea. Suddenly she felt him shake a little, and she glanced up.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because you are such a true Panther's Cub,” he told her.

She gave a faint cry, and started from him, putting down her cup.

“Oh, what a horrid name!”

But he drew her back:

"Don't move! Are we not well like this? You see, Fifi, you've just taught me a lesson in philosophy. Why should one ever hide anything one has made up one's mind to do? . . . You know, my beauty — what delicious hair you have — you know that I was beginning to have almost a kind of remorse!"

She turned her head lazily, under his caress:

"Why?" she murmured. He was right, she was very well like this.

"Why?" he echoed. "Because you are so young still."

"Not too young for love."

And, at that, she smiled broadly, and then hid her face, because of the boldness of her speech:

He repeated the words after her with a mingled ecstasy and pain in his voice:

"Not too young for love. . .! Ah, Fifi, and I was wondering all day whether I should not have done better to leave you to your mother's matrimonial projects — such as they were."

She disengaged herself, with that odd little air of wisdom that she had adopted since the great event.

"You'd better have a cup of tea," she began parenthetically; and then, with a sudden, half-mocking, half-shy glance from lustrous golden-hazel eyes: "And, if I happen to prefer our matrimonial projects, what then, sir?" She was offering the cup, as she spoke.

"Our —" He checked himself upon that single sharp word.

"Such as it is —" She mimicked his phrase with a gay laugh.

Laughter was upon him too as he took the cup.

"Such as it is —" There was relief in his air, a new ease in his tone. "Quite so. Mr. and Mrs. Brown, Fifi?"

A moment it seemed as if he was bending to kiss her. But another swift change of mood came upon him. He frowned, took a step away and laid down his cup.

"Don't you like your tea?" said the girl anxiously. "Oughtn't I to have put in the sugar? Fritz always says I'll never know how to manage a house. But I'm going to learn from you when we are married — When ——"

Her eyes were cast down as she made her little humble speech, and she did not see his sudden start nor the wild glance he flung at her. She went on, halting prettily upon coquettishness: "When I'm Mrs. Brown."

The man passed his hand over his forehead. Again a kind of wonder and trouble fought in his countenance with what was anger, almost disgust. Then, as if with an effort, he flung these conflicting feelings from him, and, coming up to her quickly, caught her by both hands.

"Oh, my dear, we are neither of us very good, are we?"

Pain was piercing through the renewed ardour of his voice. Fifi dropped her head. She could not hide the torturing crimson that rushed into her face.

"I don't know . . ." she faltered. "I think you are good."

"Alas!" he went on, the pain growing deeper in his accents, and a new note, that of tenderness, gathering to it. "We have both done those things which we ought not to have done, have we not?"



She winced, and it hurt him to see her distress. He went on hurriedly:

"We are not exactly being good now, are we, sweetheart?"

"You mean," she said faintly, "because we've run away?"

"I mean . . . because we've run away. Well, you've taught me a lesson just now, as I told you. And you need not rub that Mr. and Mrs. Brown hypocrisy into me any more. You are just Fifi — the Panther's Cub . . . an untamed thing that cannot lie . . . and I am just Desmond Brooke who loves you! Kiss me and tell me — is not that the way between us?"

But, with her young sunburnt hands pressed against his shoulders, she held him from her. And still with bent head, speaking with difficulty:

"I want to be truthful," she murmured, then paused. "You said . . ."

Again speech became too difficult. But yet she was determined; and, lifting her lovely face, crimsoned:

"It is true," she blurted out, "I have not always done what is right."

"Hush, hush, for Heaven's sake! We'll take each other as we are. Hush! Oh, Fifi, what does it matter? Wild things of the woods mate where they please and ask no sanction. We'll go away together, you and I — How you look at me, you untamed thing! I don't want to tame you, Fifi. It is you who shall teach me freedom."

Her eyes were indeed fixed upon his face with a dilating intensity. Livid, startled, she hung on his words! Could he have but guessed, it, the fascination that held

her was as much that of a terrifying mystery as of a passion shared! He caught her by the shoulders now:

"How beautiful you are! Ah, I was dead . . . I am alive again! I am alive, Fifi! Some of your quick blood has got into my veins. What indeed should you want with wine? You are intoxication in yourself. Oh, if I were a rich man, how I would set off your beauty! You should have a crown of diamonds to shine on your hair; diamonds to run like a fire round your throat — your beautiful throat. Fifi . . . kiss me!"

In her wide eyes the terror had been growing. She gave a cry — even such a cry as that which had pierced his ears last night, in the marble dining hall.

"Let me go! You frighten me!" She tore herself from his slackening grasp and ran from him to a corner of the room, cowering. "I want to go home! I want Fritz!" she moaned, and then burst into an agony of sobs.

"Fifi . . .!" He stood blasted. Then, in a completely altered voice: "Fifi . . .!" he cried again and went halfway across the room toward her. He stopped and stared at her as she clung, sobbing, to the wall. And at last, speaking as if to a child: "Fifi . . ." he repeated.

At last she turned her face. The tears were streaming down it.

"Oh, Lord Desmond. . . !"

It was more piteous to his sight even than that berouged, stricken visage of last night!

"For God's sake!" he exclaimed. "Don't cry like that! What is it?"

She drew back closer to the wall.

"You've frightened me!"

"I don't frighten you . . . now?"

His own voice shook. He came closer, hesitating; took her hand with an infinite gentleness.

"I don't frighten you now?" he asked again.

"No," she said, on the catch of a sob, "not now."

She allowed him to lead her to the sofa, to press her down upon it; then he stood back from her.

"Will you try and tell me why I frightened you?"

His manner was still painstakingly gentle; still the manner a man would use to a terrified child. She broke into a passion of weeping again, at the recollection.

"You were so strange — I had never seen you look like that — oh, you looked at me — your eyes . . .! You spoke — you were like the Baron!"

"The Baron!" he cried loudly.

"Yes," she shuddered. "Last night . . . when he wanted — to kiss me!"

She buried her face in the dusty sofa cushions. Desmond stood rigid, convicted. There was a long silence. In a smothered voice, scarcely raising her head, at length she spoke:

"Are you angry?"

Harshly, he questioned in his turn:

"Why did you come away with me?"

She dropped her head again.

"I — you were so different from the others —" She was shaken by a great sigh. "I felt so safe with you!"

Once more the convicted silence!

"Well, there's no harm done," he cried suddenly. "I will take you back."

She started, dashed the tears from her eyes.

"Take me back!" she echoed, pitifully.

He bent to her.

"You don't want to go back?"

Biting her quivering lip to keep back the sobs, she shook her head.

"What then?" he asked, and the impatience of an extreme pain was in his tones. Helplessly she burst out crying once more.

"Don't be angry with me! You are not like the Baron. I don't know how I could have thought it. Don't take me back, I will try. . . . I will try — I will be a good wife to you."

The man took two steps back as if struck by an invisible hand. Then, coming forward again, he took her head between both his hands — miserably conscious of her wet burning cheeks against his palms — and looked piercingly into her eyes; looked until her plaintive, appealing, fearful gaze wavered and fell before him. Releasing her then, he straightened himself and drew a long breath.

"You are either the greatest actress on earth or ——"

Springing to her feet, she interrupted him, stung all at once to a sudden anger!

"Or . . . what?"

"Or — shooting's too good for me!"

The words came out with almost a groan. Flinging himself into a chair, he covered his face with his hands. Her tears had dried; a strange coldness had come upon

her. Her womanhood was waking to some indefinable horror.

"I don't understand," she said slowly. She let herself sink on the sofa again and shivered slightly. "Lord Desmond . . ."

He dropped his hands, without turning his head to look at her.

"Well?"

"Perhaps —" she spoke with difficulty, as if every word hurt her — "perhaps you had better take me back after all."

A moment he was silent. Then, with a sudden movement of decision, he got up, dragged his chair close to the sofa and sat down again, facing her. He had regained his self-control; but behind, there was a tenseness of extreme purpose, extreme resolve. For a little while, he fixed her with a gaze now almost relentless in its keenness. Then abruptly:

"How old are you?" he asked.

She answered, wondering, timid, falling back into childishness under his masterful bearing:

"Twenty one — just."

He repeated her answer as if to himself: "Twenty-one — just."

Nervously she added:

"Mama did not want me to say so. You know she kept me at school . . ."

"All the time?"

"Oh — except during the holidays."

"Ah, the holidays. Did you always go home, for the holidays?"

"Not home — At least . . . we had no home. But Fritz used to take me away somewhere, always. Sometimes I was with Mama. But if not, with Fritz."

"Fritz — that's the old man? The musician?"

"He's Mama's repititor. He's been very good to me always." She hardly knew why her heart turned to the old tyrant just now, with such a rush — a rush of longing that was all so strange, so bewildering. She wished Fritz were here. "He's always been good to me," she went on; and her voice trembled to the memory of her sobs. "I've been always so bad to him."

"How long have you been back with your mother?"

"Only since Easter." Her dazed submissiveness suddenly failed her. "Why do you ask all these questions?" she exclaimed passionately. Who was this man — no longer lover and bridegroom? What did he want with her with this probing, with these eyes that pierced and sought into her very soul?

A quick flash came and was gone in his unsparing gaze.

"Because I must know — all."

All at once she understood. All that was puzzling and torturing became clear to her, clear with a great terror. As one groping in a dangerous mountain path, blinded by mist, may see the chasm at his feet under a sudden blast of wind, she understood.

A kind of pity came over his face. His eyes softened.

"You needn't answer, if you don't like."

But something rose within her, intrinsic frankness, pushing her to the truth. Reservation, or deceit, was



not of her. She rejected it, less by virtue than by a necessity of her nature.

"No, I will answer —" She paused and gathered her bravery; then, whitening as she spoke, went on: "Ask what you like."

"Your mother sent for you, last Easter?" His tone was now gentle; less that of the cross-examiner, more that of the confessor; less that of one who wants to entrap an admission than that of one who wants to help the difficult utterance of the truth.

"She would have sent me away, after a week. It was the Baron made her keep me."

"Did you know why, then?"

"No, indeed!" she cried hurriedly. "I only thought it was fun to be out of prison."

"So you went to Vienna."

"Yes — and then we met you."

He rose and took a couple of slow turns, up and down the room. Apprehensively she watched him. Oh, that he would ask and be done with it! Once or twice she hesitated on speech, but checked herself. Courage failed her to volunteer her shameful confession. Pausing at last by the chair, one knee upon it, he looked down upon her. . . . Again, again, those eyes of compelling demand!

"These three months, then, you have seen all your mother's friends; been present at her parties; lived the life she lives?"

"I suppose so," she answered slowly. Then, with a flash of resentment; "You ought to know: you've been to nearly all of them yourself."

"I saw you fall into Miss Maud Mayall's arms, last week — What do you and she talk about, when you are together?"

The question was abrupt. To her it seemed offensively pointless.

"Lots of things," she replied sullenly.

"For instance?"

She shook her head with a growing defiance.

"Oh — Shakespeare's heroines, and music, and books."

"Books!" he echoed sharply. "Like that French book that was beside you on the sofa, last night?"

"No —" she flung the denial angrily at him. Then she drooped her head and the blood rushed into her face. "I know I ought not to have looked into that book. Fritz forbade me."

"But it was so amusing?" His voice was insinuating, while his eyes remained keen as a knife-blade. "You wanted to go on, didn't you?"

"I wanted to find out why he did not want me to read it."

"And did you find out?"

"No —" she blurted out, irritably. "I couldn't make any sense out of it: it was all so silly."

He laughed abruptly; then checked himself as suddenly; sat down and pondered a moment.

"And now I know all your life, do I?"

The question was slow, weighted with importance. She stared, with parted lips, as if she could not detach her frightened eyes from his face. He could see an agonized pulse beating in her throat. He laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Fifi, there was something you were going to tell me, just now, when I stopped you —" She shifted further from him, her gaze still fixed on his face. "When you said you had not always . . ." He paused, his voice grew husky, "always been good, what did you mean by that?" Then, almost roughly, stabbed by the sight of her misery: "Don't tell me," he said once more, "if you'd rather not."

"I will tell you — I'd rather." The words leaped bravely, though she twisted her interlaced fingers. "It was something that happened — something ——"

"At Como?" He was trying to help her out, but she winced.

"Yes — when I was eighteen. Mama took me away that summer for the holidays. She was very good to me that summer, Mama. She had been ill. She was quite gentle. She used to say it was nice to have a daughter. That was at the beginning."

The words were wrung from her in jerks, as with each spasm of a breath shortened by the quick beating of her heart.

"That was at the beginning — and then?"

He felt he was cruel — but he had to be cruel.

"Then Mama got better, and then she did not want me any more. She used to go away, on picnics and things, and leave me behind. There was an English family in the hotel. I got into the way of going about with the girls, and playing tennis — and there was a young man with them, their brother. He was at school, at Oxford."

Desmond over the turmoil of his feelings had a faint smile.

"An undergraduate, I suppose. Well, Fifi?"

"One day they were all away, even Fritz. I was alone. It was so dull." She faltered and stopped. Then: "He asked me to go on the lake with him," she whispered.

"The Oxford young man — this Adolphus Wentworth?"

A little indignant cry escaped her. Reproach and anger leaped into her glance. Then she drooped her head:

"You know all about it," she said dully. "I knew you knew — why must I tell you?"

"Because," he said, and sitting down before her once more, quickly took her cold hands into his, gave them one pressure and released them, "because, Fifi, I will know nothing, except what you tell me. You went with him that day ——"

Dumbly she nodded.

"Just you and he, alone?"

She nodded again: "Just he and I alone." Then, in a torrent of words, her confession escaped from her overcharged heart.

They had had chocolate at the town on the other side of the lake. And there had come a storm, and the boat could not go back. The steamers even would not go. No one would take them. "And we could not get a carriage to take us round, and so we walked. We walked till I dropped. And it was quite late at night. At last we got a cart and we did not get back to the Hotel till four in the morning. . . . Oh, it was all so dreadful!" She covered her hot face with her hand.

"They were all up. They said they thought we must be drowned. Nobody was a bit glad we were alive.

. . . And Mama said I was disgraced!" She was caught by a sob; but, with the impulse that leads one at certain moments of intensity to pile up pain deliberately: "Next day," she went on, "the English girl and her mother cut me!"

Amazedly, she felt his hands fold over hers again. How cold they both were!

"And the young man, Fifi?"

"He left by the next boat," she said bravely, but had not the courage to lift her eyes. Would she ever have the courage to lift them to his face again?

"Fifi, when you and that young fool were alone, that night — Fifi, I must have the truth!"

He felt her hands twist in his.

"Yes, yes —" passionately she flung away the last reserve, the last shred between herself and what she conceived her shame. "He tried to kiss me, and was horrible! I never told any one but Fritz, and Fritz said — he said . . ." her voice trailed away pitifully, "he said that it was all my own fault; that no good girl would have gone away like that with a man who was not her betrothed!"

The clasp of his cold fingers suddenly relaxed. The man rose. Looking down upon her he was shaken by a sudden tender laugh. But even as he laughed, tears rose to his eyes; and, hastily he went to the open window, struggling with the tide of exquisite emotion that was sweeping over him.

Desolately she watched him leave her. Then, as he did not come back to her, she said at length, with a long forlorn sigh:

"I suppose it makes a great difference — now you know. . . ."

He started. Swiftly he was by her side again:

"A great difference!" he cried. "All the difference in the world!"

His tone was joyous, his blue eye on fire. She could not understand what had come over him. But she could not but see that he was putting great force upon himself, to keep his self-control.

"Give me your hands, Fifi . . . Fifi! pshaw! what is your real name?"

"Virginia. . . ."

"Virginia!" he cried. And then again, with a change of tone that was like a caress: "Virginia." He paused a while, sitting on the sofa beside her, holding her hand, his own clasp growing warm again, warm and close. Comfort slid from it all unawares into her veins. "Virginia — you told me a little while ago, that you had felt safe with me. You are safe."

She glanced up at him. How had she ever doubted him? His blue eyes held a depth of unimaginable tenderness and loyalty, something that in her innocence she could not fathom, but which, unerringly, she felt.

"I know."

"I'm not like . . . the Baron de Robecq now?"

"No — oh, no! Oh, Lord Desmond, you never were!"

He lifted the hand he held to his lips:

"Ah — Fifi — ah, Virginia. . . . Ah, my poor child."

His voice broke upon tenderness; he rose, rang the bell and coming back to the table leaned with one hand



upon it, his eyes on that cup of untasted tea she had prepared for him. The girl sat on, too bewildered by the conflicting emotions of the hour to be able to think reasonably. He had flung her from utter confidence to blank apprehension; from heights of bliss to deeps of misery; had tortured, had probed; had shown himself relentless, an inquisitor — and now, though he had spoken no word of condonement, even of forgiveness, a peace and joy deeper than anything she had ever felt, had come upon her. She only knew one thing: she loved him; he was her master; she would follow him to the end of the earth because she trusted him!

Like the savour from trampled herbs and exquisite broken flowers, bruised before the altar, love and trust alone rose out of her pain.

With a movement, as if wakened from abstraction, he stretched his hand for the cup.

“Oh,” she cried involuntarily, “it must be cold!”

As he paused, smiling, to look at her, over the rim, the waiter entered, headlong as before, upon his knock.

“Yes, sir?” The words shot from the threshold.

“Kindly ask the landlady to be so good as to come to me . . . immediately.”

The dingy creature arrested himself upon the normal impulse of subserviency. This was not a customary order. His blank eyes, frantically fixed on distant arrears of work, focussed themselves with difficulty on the speaker's face.

“Mrs. Biddicombe, sir?”

“Mrs. Biddicombe, if you please.”

The waiter's mind focussed itself a second in its turn — and promptly gave up the problem.

“Yes, sir — ver' well, sir — immediately.”

His small, harassed body was already outside the room, and the door closed upon the last words.

Then Desmond lifted the cup again to his lips, looked across it at Virginia, and drank the cold tea.

“There was not too much sugar in it,” he said, laying the empty cup on the table. “It was excellent — let Fritz say what he likes, my wife will keep house perfectly for me!”

He spoke the words in a deliberately airy voice; but he smiled as he spoke, and the girl closed her eyes over a sudden sense of happiness almost beyond endurance.

## II

### A CHANGE OF PLAN

THE proprietress of Biddicombe's Marine Hotel closed the door behind her with genteel precision; and advancing within a few paces of the couple, stood eyeing them with suspicion and some loftiness. She was a stout, elderly lady, whose large brooch, black-laced cap with mauve ribbons, and gray side-curls proclaimed the embodiment of middle-Victorian respectability.

"Good evening — Mrs. Brown — Good evening — Mr. Brown." She inclined her head in turn to each. "Do I understand that you expressed a wish for an interview with me — Mr. Brown?"

"Good evening," responded Lord Desmond. He felt absurdly nervous under the stern eye that seemed to express such doubt of him. "Will you sit down?"

He pushed the chair slightly toward her. She received this attention with an acid titter, and a formal inclination from the waist.

"No, thank you — Mr. Brown. When you sent for me, I was about to ask for an interview myself."

Again she had a sound of faint and bitter mirth.

"Indeed?" said he.

He tried to look only politely interested. Bolt upright on the sofa, Virginia Lovinska sat staring with wide, tired eyes. Mrs. Biddicombe broke into a sudden glibness.

"Yes — Mr. Brown, I regret to say that has there been a mistake about the rooms. They were engaged previously. It was an error of the office, sir. If you'll excuse the liberty . . . Mr. Brown, I think you and your, your lady, Mr. Brown, would do better at the Metropole, or some similar establishment."

The unexpected appearance of an "h" at the beginning of the last word seemed to lend it an awful significance. As she pronounced it, Mrs. Biddicombe's cold gaze swept Fifi's ringless bare hands, and was averted with an audible sniff. As the bare meaning of this speech penetrated to Fifi's dazed brain, she sprang up with an outcry of dismay.

"But we can't go to the Metropole! And, oh, I'm so tired."

"Hush!" said Desmond under his breath.

The landlady withered him with one glance and then turned to survey the girl; then, unexpectedly, her face softened.

"Oh, dear — yes, you do look tired! She does look tired — Mr. Brown, and she's so young!"

There was a world of feminine reproach in her tones. Quickly the man seized his opportunity.

"There has been a mistake altogether. I want to leave this young lady in your charge."

"In my charge, sir?" echoed Mrs. Biddicombe, surprised out of all her defences.

Without paying any attention to Fifi's long-drawn, disconsolate "Oh," Desmond proceeded:

"She is very tired — much too tired to go out again to-night. You're a good kind woman, I can see that in your face!"

"Oh — Mr. Brown . . .!" Mrs. Biddicombe was not quite sure that she appreciated the familiarity of the compliment; but his earnestness bore her down.

"A good, kind, motherly woman," he repeated, with feeling in his voice. "Take care of her, to-night. I'll look for lodgings for myself elsewhere. I shouldn't feel happy about her, if I didn't know that I was leaving her, safe, with some one like you."

"Oh . . . Mr. Br —"

He raised his hand to check her, unable to bear the sound of that appellation again.

"I'm not Mr. Brown. She's not Mrs. Brown. This is Miss Lovinska, and I am Lord Desmond Brooke."

Virginia gave another cry, this time of astonishment. She could not, for the life of her, make out the meaning of his changeful purpose. But her voice was lost in the landlady's ejaculation. Unctuously, as became the situation, if still reprobatively, the latter exclaimed:

"Oh, my lord!"

"She's run away from home," went on the distinguished guest of Biddicombe's rapidly, "because she was unhappy. Because they wanted to marry her to — to some one else, some one she could not love. I'm — I'm," he hesitated and passed his hand across his forehead. "I'm bound to see that she comes to no harm, Mrs. Biddicombe. Do you understand me? Do you understand why I brought her to your house?"

Mrs. Biddicombe ran a fat wrinkled hand doubtfully up and down one side of her black satin apron:

"I am . . . beginning to understand," she conceded slowly. "At least I think so, my lord."

"Then you will take care of her?" said Desmond, and smiled.

All at once the kindness and motherly feeling which he had diagnosed in her, overflowed in the good woman.

"I will, my lord —" No doubt it was an unwonted and pleasurable sensation to be called upon to oblige a nobleman. She waddled across to Fifi, who sat disconsolately on the side of the table. "I will, my dear." She patted the unringed hand. "I will take care of you, excuse the liberty, as if you was my own."

Fifi drew her hand away, a little peevishly.

"I don't want any looking after — thank you very much!"

"She can have the use of this suite of rooms, my lord," volunteered the matron, neglecting this foolish remark.

"Then there wasn't any mistake. . . ."

"Hush, Fifi!"

Mrs. Biddicombe hastily looked aside and coughed; and, hastily too, Lord Desmond pursued:

"That's right. And — I wonder if you could sleep in her room to-night? Just that she might not be nervous — frightened in a strange place."

Horror-stricken, Virginia slid from the table and sprang round to him.

"Oh, but I shouldn't — Oh, what nonsense! Oh, I should hate it! Oh, why shouldn't you stay in the same hotel?"

He put her aside, as one puts aside a beloved but tiresome child.

"It's quite settled, then?"

"Yes, my lord. I understand your lordship is leaving



at once." This came bashfully. The next sentence was more hesitating still: "I hope your lordship will excuse me. The situation was a little awkward, wasn't it? What with the scratch out on the book, and the air of your lordship's motor, and the way your lordship's choffer took upon himself to answer boots — in a house like mine, and as a widow, my lord, one can't be too particular —" She broke off, taken aback by his frown.

"You need not say another word!" ("You have said too many already, silly old woman!" his eyes plainly added.) "Yes, I'm going now."

"And have your luggage brought down again, my lord?"

"Certainly." He almost stamped his foot at her.

All in a fluster (as Mrs. Biddicombe described her sensations to the young lady in the offices), the worthy woman hurried to the door.

"I'll come back and look after you presently, Miss Loosky, dear." It was as near as she could get to the outlandish name.

She had to pause on the landing and breathe very heavily three times with a flat and vibrating sound, one hand pressed upon the fourth button of her purple cashmere bodice: these were exciting and singular doings, for Biddicombe's!

The door had no sooner shut off the portly form than Fifi broke into loud remonstrance. Had she been as young in years as she was still in mind, it would have been the loud wail of a worn-out child.

"Oh, oh! I never thought you would have been so

unkind! To leave me alone like this! What do you mean to do with me? I don't understand!"

"My dear, it is only because I must take care of you. I shall be back in the morning. I've got a great deal to do to-night. I—" He broke off. All at once the stifled mewling of a cat seemed to fill the room. He looked round distractedly. The creature was shut in next door, no doubt. He tried to take up the thread of his explanation. The plaintive sound obtruded itself again. "I can't explain," he cried, almost irritably.

She was moving away from him in uncertainty; she glanced at him once or twice timidly over her shoulder, then flung herself across the sofa and extracted from behind it a hidden basket. Instantly the mewling ceased.

Defiantly, yet with apprehension too, she set it on the table and hurriedly lifted forth a struggling, irate kitten.

"You brought that!" he cried.

"I could not leave him behind. — Elisa would have killed him!" She hugged the little beast to her breast. "He'll give no trouble. He's been so good!"

"How did you hide him?"

"Oh, your chauffeur looked after him, at Canterbury."

"Gibbons?"

He was smiling. She looked up, all confidence, and smiled in her turn. Then, suddenly, in a frightened voice:

"Lord Desmond . . . what is the matter?"

It seemed impossible that she could have seen aright, but, surely there were tears in his eyes!

"The matter is," he said, and tried to laugh, and failed, "that you are such a child!"

Still clasping close the now swearing Persian, she stood, not daring to glance at her lover again.

"Good night," he said and stroked her head with a light touch. "Sleep well!"

"How strange you are — Don't you love me any more?"

"Do I not love you!" He gave a kind of broken laugh. "Do I not?" and he caught her bright dishevelled head between both his hands. Checking himself upon the very pulse of his passion, he kissed her once, above the eyes, and in two strides he was gone.

### III

#### FRITZ ARRIVES

FIFI and the kitten, having been duly fed and cosseted by the now completely conquered Mrs. Biddicombe, the latter proceeded to help her charge to prepare for bed.

“I could, of course, easily depute one of the chambermaids to brush your hair and undress you, Miss Loosky, my dear, but I promised his lordship —” it was pleasant to hear with what gusto the words “his lordship,” unusual to her experience, tripped off the good lady’s tongue — “I promised his lordship to look after you myself. And a bargain’s always been a bargain to me, miss — whether with boarders or my own family.”

But Fifi announced she always brushed her own hair. And, having seen her beginning to wield one of those gold-mounted hair brushes — the like of which the proprietress of the Marine Hotel had never beheld before — Mrs. Biddicombe ventured to think she might slip downstairs herself and have her supper.

“After which, my love, I’ll creep to bed in the little dressing room just off; and I’ll put the door on the jar, so that you’ll not feel frightened — as his lordship feared.”

The girl sat dreamily before the dimity-covered dressing table, wrapped in a very wonderful dressing gown of white silk and lace (the chambermaid in the London

Hotel, and the young lady from Selfridge's having both opined that such a garment was a necessity for a bride).

Her hands dropped in her lap. She stared into the little mirror, with the dazed fixity of the over-fatigued. Confusedly the scene of stormy emotions she had just lived through kept repassing in her mind. She had a vague, desolate sense of being abandoned in this strange place; of everything being terrifyingly different from what she had expected. Yet confidence transcended doubt; the vision of Desmond's last look, the echo of his last words were as the memory of a consecration.

"Do I not — do I not love you!" . . . How he had said those words! How he had gazed upon her!

Warmth and comfort flooded her being at the thought. And so the moments flowed on, in the silence of her room.

Presently some sound from without began to fix her attention. She became conscious of approaching steps on the stairs, on the landing outside; and then of a whispered colloquy. But when the door of the sitting room was opened and shut, her heart bounded. Could he have returned? Who else indeed would be brought into her sitting room? Ah, he had realized how lonely she would be if he were not in the house. . . .

A sharp knock at the door of communication; and the waiter's laboured English through the panels:

"Gentleman want to speak you, miss," confirmed the delightful anticipation.

"Oh, Lord Desmond, is it you?" she cried joyfully. "Back already! One minute, one minute!"

Her grand new dressing wrapper was quite good enough

for a tea-gown, she thought; but she must just do up her hair again.

Her hands were trembling in her thick tresses, when another knock fell upon her door, and another voice called:

“Fifi . . . !”

“Fritz!” she answered impulsively, in a loud cry of dismay.

She threw open the door upon the same impulse: mixed anger, mixed fear. — Old Fritz stood indeed on the threshold.

He took her by the wrist, and drew her into the sitting room. She turned her head away uncomfortably from the sad, reproachful eyes that burned upon her out of his haggard face.

He measured her and her finery a moment in silence; glanced across her through the open door into the bedroom and saw the gold gleaming on the dressing-table under the grim electric lamp.

“Ah, my poor little one!” he exclaimed, in a sort of whisper; and unconsciously his grasp tightened on her wrist.

She called out in pain, and he released her, exclaiming violently:

“To leave me this way, after all!”

“I did write to you,” she said, backing to the table, and tossing her hair from her face.

“Yes — Yes —” The old man sat down suddenly, and leaned his head on his hand as one stunned. There fell a small, miserable silence. When he roused himself he drew a crumpled note from his pocket.



"Yes, you wrote," he resumed. "You gave me the clue. Ah, I have traced you. That yellow motor, that *verdammte* yellow motor ——!"

"Fritz . . .!" she cried, frightened by his incoherence, biting her lip as he went on, unheeding:

"'I won't go to Germany!' . . . Ah, poor silly child! 'I won't marry that Baron!' . . . God forgive them that drove you to worse . . .! 'I'm going to be happy.'" He crushed the letter in his hand and covered his face, groaning. "Happy! *mein Gott*, happy!"

"Fritz! — Oh, don't Fritz! Fritz . . .!"

The sight of his suffering, the sense of its unreasonableness, withal a heavy consciousness of her own inaptitude, drove her more to exasperation than to remorse.

"And am I not to be happy?" she demanded. "Why should I not be happy?"

He lifted his head, fulminating her with his lion look.

"Silence, child!" Then he turned his chair and with his great trembling hands spread out her letter on the table. "'How would you like to call me my lady?'" — He pointed to the sentence with a slowly moving finger, then got up. "My lady!" Suddenly the fierce anguish possessing him escaped control: he struck the words with his fist. "And so I knew!"

"Oh," she cried, as if he had struck her.

"My lady!" he repeated in yet more unmeasured passion. "So he baited the trap! — And what shall the world call you now?" At the height of his wrath, the agonizing meaning of his own words struck him; he fell from anger into depth of compassion and his voice suddenly broke into notes of tenderness and sorrow

far beyond tears. "What shall the world call thee, now? *Ach*, my poor little girl, *ach*, *mein Kindchen!* — Never fear, never fear! to me never anything but the little one I love."

He opened his arms with a wide gesture.

"My little one . . ." he repeated.

But, pettishly she drew from the shadow of his embrace.

"Don't, Fritz — I'm not a child now!"

His arms dropped by his side. He stood, staring before him a moment in silence; then, drawing his great red silk handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped his forehead. Suddenly, he seemed to draw himself together; inhaled a long breath through his nostrils, as one bracing himself to endurance; and, turning once more upon her the profound sorrow of his glance, he said slowly:

"So, it has come to this! No —" lifting up his hand, as if in answer to the defiance on her flushing, sullen face — "you need fear no reproaches from me; what is done is done. Of that, better to speak no word!"

"Oh, Fritz, don't look at me like that!" she exclaimed miserably.

Instantly he averted his eyes.

"No, no —" Again tenderness fought with the severe composure he was putting upon himself. "Try and understand. I am here for you. The old man is here for you!" Peremptorily he bore down her attempt to speak. "Not another word! Not one minute more in this place! Tie up your hair — all that dishevelled hair! — Take off that ill-gotten finery. On with your cloak and come with me!"

"Go with you!"

Amazement, derision, the utmost rebellion, was in her voice, in her attitude, in her look.

"But you must come with me, unhappy child — you must come! There is nothing else for you."

She fended him off, as he would again have seized her hand.

"Leave Lord Desmond? — for the Baron, I suppose! That's what you want! Or your farmhouse in Germany!" Her voice grew shriller and more strained at every word. "You're all determined to spoil my life. — What right, what right have you to order me about? — I've told you before, you've no right."

His gray head bent a little lower; his bowed shoulders seemed to become weighted as in silence he listened. With such sorrow might a man look upon one beloved in delirium.

"Oh, you've kept me a child long enough, all of you!" she went on. "Now I'm a woman at last, I'm a woman! I can choose for myself!"

"And you chose —" he said in a low voice — "dishonour."

"Dishonour?" she repeated, dropping from her high key of resentment into a lower note of complete astonishment.

"Ah, Fifi, it isn't as if you did not know! — You had your lesson, that time at Como. . . . With what tears did you not learn, then, what is thought of a girl who goes away with a man —"

She interrupted him, almost stammering in an angry haste of triumph.

"Unless she is going to marry him! Well, I am going to marry Lord Desmond!"

"Marry him!"

He spoke almost voicelessly, as if the strength for sound had suddenly failed him. The girl laughed in scorn.

"What do you think, what do you think, I wonder? Of course he is going to marry me!"

The old man was silent, and his silence pressed inexplicably, like a weight of misery, upon the girl's heart. She was so tired! Oh, she was so tired! It was all so strange, and she had cried all her tears!

Old Fritz put out an uncertain hand, feeling for the table, as if to support himself. Then, at last, very gently, he spoke:

"When, Fifi?"

She stared at him a second, with abashed face.

"He didn't say," she faltered at last.

"My poor little Fifi! *Ach*, my poor, unhappy child! — When a man means to marry a maiden, seest thou, he marries her before he takes her away."

"What?" she cried sharply.

"It is the old, old story. — This morning you should have been married. This morning! — *Ach*, Thou my God! how this black-hearted scoundrel has deceived you!"

As his passion mounted once more, so did hers. Anger warning her again to defiance, after that transient, inexplicable moment of apprehension and misery.

"I won't listen to you!" she cried, thrusting her fingers into her ears, and stamping her foot.

He caught her as she flung herself toward her room.

"Fritz . . . let me go! Oh, oh, Fritz, you brute,

let me go. I hate you! — Oh, why did he go away and leave me?"

"Aye, where is he, the villain? The devil who stole my little child, my little pure child! *Ach, Gott!* that he were indeed here!"

"If you don't let me go, I'll scream for help."

His hands dropped from her. He was a strong man; in spite of age and sickness, stronger than most. And, in his wrath and anguish he felt himself indeed a match for the seducer. Lord Desmond would have met with small mercy, had he found himself within the great knotted hands. But he was no match against her. To him she was always the little one. He saw her, not in vigorous young womanhood, defying him with all her vigour and youth, as she was, but the child he had guarded most of her life; the child who was always ill-treated, always in danger; the child that could be so easily hurt.

"I won't listen to you," she was saying again, in calmer tones that expressed all the more firmly an unalterable resolve. "I trust him, I must trust him. I love him! I'll never leave him — never! — You have always scolded me and been cross and spoilt my least, least little bit of fun, all my life. Mama's always hated me, I see that now. She's cruel. She doesn't want me! — I'm free of you all. I am free of you all!" she repeated with a fierce deliberation, "and I'm going to be happy, happy in my own way."

She stood on the threshold of her door, and shot him a look of final repudiation. Then, with her inexpressible schoolgirl roughness of movement dashed into her room and slammed the door between them.



He heard her push the bolt, and remained gazing at the closed door as if blasted. Then he let himself fall into a chair and covered his face with his hands. There are moments when the vision before the mental eye is so terrible that one has to force one's brain to realize it. Fritz clasped his forehead in this agonizing effort.

The bolt within was drawn back with a slow touch, very different from the energy of that which had shot it. — Fifi opened the door a little way; peered in childishly; hesitated; and then, almost timidly, came up to the bent figure with the hidden face.

“Fritz . . . !”

He did not move.

“Fritz, dear — I didn't mean to be so horrid! I — I'm sorry. You've always meant to be good to me. I know that. Only you shouldn't have said those things — of him. You ought to be sorry for that, too. Fritz —” She was close to him now; laid her hand upon his shoulder; stooped and pressed herself against him, her loose ruddy hair against his white locks.

“I don't want to be bad friends with you. Not to-night of all nights! For, somehow, Fritz dear, though he did not say so, I feel that to-morrow will be my wedding-day.”

She had sunk down on her knees as she spoke, and at these last words he looked at her. His eyes were dim; the soul that looked through them seemed far away. She went on, flinging her warm round arm coaxingly about him.

“Oh, don't be angry! I know I was ungrateful to go off without telling you. But you are so strict, Fritz. And you frightened me about Germany . . . And oh, oh, I'm so tired . . . It's been such a strange



night, and I do so want to go to bed, and to wake up and find it's to-morrow morning! — Look here, just let me say my prayers at your knee. It's perhaps for the last time, you know. And then you'll have to forgive me.”

She was almost inarticulate, from very weariness; too overcome with an ever-increasing exhaustion to be able to think of anything much beyond the single idea of the moment.

Without waiting for him to answer, she bowed her head and began with an unconscious lapse into the voice and manner of the child who had first been taught these words:

“*Vater im Himmel, gieb mir deinen Segen. Hilf mir sein ein gutes Kind. . . .*” All at once the man interrupted her with a great cry:

“She can still say her child-prayers! Oh, merciful Father, how hast Thou preserved Thy lamb!”

He flung his arms up, and as she clung to him, frightened, gave a loud sob and clasped her to him.

It was the culminating mysterious terror of the night for her. Fifi sobbed a little in her turn. But, even as she pressed against his heaving breast, the sleep of exhaustion overpowered her.

It was years, many years, since she had slept in his arms. He held her yet a little longer for the comfort of it. He thought, with a yearning tenderness, how, those many years ago, he would have carried the little figure in his arms, and laid her in her cot without awakening her.

Now she had grown out of his arms; by her own words, out of his life. — It is the heartbreak of those who spend themselves in a real, or vicarious, paternity, to have to come to that inevitable parting of the ways; when the child

they have sheltered chooses, or is forced by fate, to take his own road; when the one who has hitherto been able to suffice, must stand aside and see danger, unhappiness threaten, and be powerless to avert it.

He led her gently, half blind with sleep as she was, to her bedside; and parted from her there.

“Good night, *Kindchen!*”

“Good-bye . . .” she murmured; yawned, and drooped against her pillow.

Averting his eyes from the open dressing case, which repeated the glint of gold of the table, Fritz went back to the sitting room. His mind was made up, after the simple and complete manner of his nature. The situation was almost an impossible one for him to solve. . . . The man who had eloped with the singer's beautiful daughter, had done so with every appearance of premeditated villainy. Yet, so far, he seemed to have behaved in such a manner as to have successfully concealed his real character from his victim. Strangest of all was this leaving her, alone in this little, utterly respectable, middle-class hotel. . . . Where had he gone? Had remorse suddenly seized him, and had he abandoned his vile project? Would he return on the morrow, as she so confidently expected, to carry her away?

From the impenetrable stupidity of his overworked compatriot, the waiter, Fritz had been able to extract nothing but the bare fact that “there had been a gentleman with the young lady, yes, and he had gone away in a motor.”

Whichever alternative was likely to prove the true one, then, Fifi would have an equally crying need of her

old Fritz. He would have either to sustain her, left desolate by an act of the most weak-minded treachery; or to tear her away from an allurements which spelt destruction. . . . There was yet the other contingency: the possibility that the lover meant honestly after all. The old musician had too much experience of life to place much credence in this too consoling thought. Yet it recurred again and again. Well, the morrow would show. For the present his own course lay clear: nothing would induce him to leave the house that held her; nay, even the room that adjoined hers. He would watch, within call, as he had watched those nights of her childish sicknesses. Never, indeed, had more mortal sickness threatened her.

He closed the windows, put out the electric light, set the door that gave on the passage ever so little ajar, so that the lightest footfall should not escape him; and groping his way to the saddle-back armchair, sat down, and prepared himself in great patience for this night watch.

He trusted to chance not to be discovered. — If he were, well, he must find some manner of imposing his will — for there he meant to stay.

An hour dragged by; he heard various sounds that denoted the closing of the quiet little establishment; then a footfall, accompanied by heavy breathing, the jingle of keys, and that rattle which an uncompromising moreen petticoat gives to the feminine gait. The steps, the panting, the jingle and the rustle halted on the landing, which suddenly became plunged in darkness. Then a door was carefully opened and closed hard by — and Biddicombe's hotel was wrapped in sleep.

## IV

### AN EXCHANGE OF GIFTS

BROAD sunshine was flooding the little sitting room, which Lord Desmond had characterized as "such a hole"; and ugly as were its details, it had stamped it with all the cheerfulness which blue sky, open windows and warm airs must carry with them.

Through a gap in the houses opposite there was a glint of the sea, dazzling; the smell of the sea was on the breeze, its wholesome salt taste sought the lips; its voice was all encompassing — not obtrusive but endlessly pleasant to the ear that cared to listen.

Old Fritz, still in the saddle-back armchair, could not but feel something of the hopefulness of the lovely morning, of the strong vigour of the sea breath, creeping upon tired frame and anxious mind.

The landlady of the hotel, in person, was spreading a white cloth, with meticulous care, upon the centre table. Strange uses had she been brought to, what with lady's-maid work overnight, and waiter's work this morning! But she had her reasons, as she was garrulously explaining the while.

"I made the tea myself, Mr. Meyer, and I brought it up myself, Mr. Meyer, as you see." She lifted the tray from the sideboard even as she spoke, and, staggering under its weight, set it in its place, with a parenthetical

"Don't stir, sir, I beg. We want as little gossip in the house as possible, Mr. Meyer, as a gentleman like you will understand. Dear! to be sure!" She paused in the act of lifting a large blue and white cup to the side nearest the armchair, and drew in her sucking breath of unctious. "To think of you sitting up here all night, and me not even aware you were in my hotel! You could have knocked me down with a feather, when I looked in out of the young lady's room, this morning ——" Here she laid her fat hand over her heart, as if the memory of that palpitating moment was still too much for her; "and saw you fast asleep in the armchair there."

"Well, well," said the old man with a faint smile. "I haf explained to you why I did it. Poor foolish child, she does not yet understand, my good madame, the position she has placed herself in. *Ach!* ——" He turned his golden-hazel eyes suddenly and sternly upon the excellent woman's broad and honest countenance — "I pray Gott she may never understand!"

Mrs. Biddicombe gave her morning cap a slight toss. If the old foreign gentleman thought she needed such hints. —

"Let me pour you out a cup, sir," she said, turning the conversation with dignity.

But, teapot in hand, her natural good-natured garrulity began to pour from her again as copiously as the strong decoction of "fruity" Indian tea from the spout.

"Well, as you say, she is indeed an innocent thing, Mr. Meyer — and that's plain for any one to see. A child, you may say — a child, in spite of her being so tall, such a fine figure of a young lady, a regular child! She's



sleeping still, sir, just like a baby, with that kitten curled against her." She chuckled, with tears in her kind eyes. "As innocent one as the other, you may say! I hadn't the heart to disturb her, though it was near ten o'clock, when I peeped in on her, just now — me having overslept myself — most unusual, sir."

Fritz absently stirred his sugarless tea.

"Let her sleep — let her sleep."

"Well, she was guarded, I must say! (Couldn't you fancy a bit of toast, sir?) What with you on the one side of her, and me on the other — oh, his lordship was most particular about that! — 'You'll sleep with her, you'll take care of her, Mrs. Biddicombe,' his lordship said."

She dropped her tone of chuckling good-humour, and her large, high-coloured face became suddenly clouded. Sidling two or three steps nearer to the abstracted figure in the chair, she hesitated and drew her finger along the tablecloth.

"It's all a mystery, Mr. Meyer, sir," she said at last, heaving a sigh. "What do you think is going to become of her?"

Her voice had dropped to a whisper. From under his shaggy gray eyebrows he cast upon her a repressive glance.

"I am here to look after her, madame."

"Ah, to be sure."

Mrs. Biddicombe was both disappointed and affronted. But curiosity was permanent in her nature, and these feelings were evanescent.

"As you was telling me," she proceeded engagingly, "she's been like a child to you."

The old man frowned heavily and drank the cup of



tea at one draught. The landlady let herself subside on to a chair, sitting on the edge of it to mark formality.

“Will he come back, do you think?” she asked. And, again, lowering her voice: “I could not help overhearing his order to the choffer: ‘London road,’ he cries, ‘and top speed.’”

Fritz pushed his chair from the table with a movement of sharp impatience. He had permitted this woman’s garrulity in the hope of obtaining some light upon a situation all painful mystery to him. But what items of information he had obtained were so contradictory; this last remark of hers seemed to point to such determined and heartless abandonment, that he felt as if he could endure it all no longer. He must cut the knot.

But even while he strove to brace himself to the misery of the coming struggle, she was flowing on:

“If only he’d come back to her, Mr. Meyer! I can’t, myself, but think he will, somehow. — Oh, dear!” Plunged thus unexpectedly into the heart of a most thrilling and aristocratic romance, Mrs. Biddicombe could not contemplate its collapse without pangs personal as well as altruistic. “He didn’t speak like a villain — no, nor looked like one! — He’s very handsome!” Here the confidential undertone was again adopted: “When I went up to them, last night, I don’t mind owning, I was thinking some ugly things about him, I can tell you — same as you this moment, Mr. Meyer. What with his grand car, his grand choffer, his grand luggage — and his crossing out ‘Miss,’ where she had begun to write it in the book, poor innocent, and his writing Mr. and Mrs. Brown, large and bold on ——”

She was interrupted by a fierce exclamation:

“What!”

“Mr. Meyer, sir!”

Fritz had risen, towering, it seemed, in that leonine wrath of his.

“Look here, my good madame, go and wake her. — But quick! — Go and wake her this minute, I must get her away, at once!”

“Lord! Mr. Meyer. — There’s no knowing, he might come back!”

“*Ach*, are you woman; need I say more to you? Can you not see I dare not, I may not, trust her within his reach again?”

The landlady had risen. She was trembling; her florid face had assumed a purplish pallor.

“Won’t you give them both the chance, sir?”

The old man was pacing backward and forward across the window-bow; half to himself, half to her, he answered:

“I have been mad to think there was a chance!”

“You see, sir,” pleaded she, “it’s rather awkward for me. I’ve given a pledge, so to speak, to his lordship ——”

Her cheeks quivered with emotion, as she spoke.

“*Ach*, silence, madame!” cried the German, in the soreness of his heart stirred beyond the bounds of courtesy. “I will myself wake the child.”

He was moving impetuously, still limping heavily on the gouty foot, toward the bedroom door, when the throb of a motor down the narrow street, the crash and groan of its sudden halt before the door, made the two look at each other with eyes in which a similar expectation chased the clouds of mutual annoyance.

Then Mrs. Biddicombe clasped her hands, and a smile as broad as the woman herself irradiated her countenance. Hasty steps were springing on the stair.

"It's him! — I knew it!" she breathed. Almost upon the ejaculation Lord Desmond entered the room. He was wrapped to the chin in a summer motor coat, and his usually pallid face was gray with fatigue. But his eyes were bright, almost boyish. He carried a small box in his hand. Pressed with haste, and travel-stained as he seemed, he had yet a made careful morning toilet, and his cheek was fresh-shaven.

"Mrs. Biddicombe!" he cried, at sight of the landlady; then became aware of the musician's burly figure, and stopped short, measuring him with a glance of sudden haughty annoyance.

Fritz returned the look with piercing steadiness. Neither spoke.

"Oh, my heart!" — Mrs. Biddicombe was tactfully flustered — "You've given me such a turn, my lord!"

Desmond, at that, wheeled round upon her, and resumed, as if he had not been interrupted:

"Will you kindly take these flowers to Miss Lovinska, and tell her please ——"

Fritz's voice broke in, almost as ponderously as if his great bulk had come between them:

"You will take no message from this gentleman to Miss — Lovinska."

"What's this?" inquired Lord Desmond, with indescribable arrogance, and once more turned to face the old man.

There was a pause, during which the two seemed

to measure forces. And in the grip of its suspense none heeded the halting of a cab under the window, nor the shuffle of footsteps on the stairs. It was not until a voice, well known to both of them, was heard repudiating any suggestion of announcement, that the musician and the diplomatist beheld, with blasted astonishment and equal dismay, the appearance on the threshold, arm in arm, of that incongruous pair of mischief-makers, Sir Joseph Warren-Smith and Mr. Philip Scott. Introduced by Hermann, the waiter, under the comprehensive though inappropriate term:

“Gentlemen” —

“Desmond — Desmond!” ejaculated the Member of Parliament, withdrawing his tightly gloved hand from the support of the critic’s arm, to uplift it in wooden reprobation. Then, turning to Scott, he piously interjected: “Thank God, we are not too late!” Turning again upon the prodigal: “Desmond, I hardly know how to frame the words. — Fortunately, most fortunately, we caught an early train! — When Mr. Scott brought me the dreadful tidings, I was so overcome —”

Here Scott took him considerately under the elbow: “Yes,” he said, “Sir Joseph was so overcome that I could do no less than offer my humble assistance.”

His small eyes, roaming from one to the other, now halted upon Fritz, and twinkled with positive delight. “Hullo, Mr. Meyer! — You’re beforehand with us, I see.”

He abandoned his charge, and minced up to the repertor with his hands hanging loosely from the wrists, his whole personality an embodiment of satisfied malice. Truly,

the hour for the payment of scores was not wont to strike with such promptitude!

"Panther's hot on the scent, you know," he murmured. "She'll be down upon you, in the yellow sixty, before you know where you are. — Are you following the young lady in her new career? — Courier, perhaps? By the way where is the young lady?"

Fritz's glance merely brushed him and somehow Mr. Scott's humour, his very presence, seemed to evaporate. Sir Joseph, rolling that ox-like eye — in agonizing composition of his next moral appeal — met Mrs. Biddicombe's fixed with the utmost disfavour upon himself.

"Tut, tut," he said fretfully to his brother-in-law, who had thrown himself into his accustomed attitude of languid endurance: "this is very painful — private matters, matters of the utmost delicacy! What's that woman doing there?"

"Mrs. Biddicombe," said Lord Desmond in tones of elaborate courtesy, "will you be so good as to take these flowers to Miss Lovinska, and kindly ask her to wear them."

Mrs. Biddicombe cast a look of triumph at Sir Joseph, and one of somewhat deprecating obstinacy at Mr. Meyer, as she replied with alacrity.

"Yes, my lord."

Sir Joseph wrung his hands. — "This is shameless, positively shameless," he commented.

"And will you ask her, from me, to wear white to-day? — If she has a white dress."

"Yes, my lord," said Mrs. Biddicombe, yet more expansively.



"This," said Sir Joseph into space, "is positively indecent." He caught the critic's eye. "Mr. Scott, this is indecent."

Mrs. Biddicombe, bustling toward the bedroom, halted to survey the last speaker with a withering glance that began at his spats and finished at his bald head. "Whoever he is, he's no gentleman," was the inward comment. The good woman was hesitating no longer; she was altogether the champion of the aristocratic lover.

"And, if you please," pursued Lord Desmond in his everyday, rather worn-out voice, "tell Miss Lovinska that I should like her to be ready in an hour."

Sir Joseph gasped. He had no words wherewith to meet a situation so monstrous. Unobtrusively, as the bedroom door closed upon the landlady, Fritz crossed the room and stood before it.

Mr. Scott had recovered his momentarily obscured pleasure in the situation. He sat down, crossed his round legs, and brought each finger-tip to meet the corresponding one; it was an attitude of much sagacity.

"Fact is, Lord Desmond," he said, "I've been dragged into this affair of yours. What can a man do? I was rung up by La Marmora herself at midday yesterday — flight of Cub just discovered — 'you'd better tell that Smith creature,' she screams (beg pardon, Sir Joseph, Panther's own words, hardly knew what she was saying, poor dear) — 'get him to take some action, you brought him to my house! — (I didn't, but that's a detail) — Make him useful for once.' You mustn't mind my repeating what she said, Sir Joseph — she was in a very natural passion ——"



He flung his head against the back of the chair, struck by the unconscious jocularly of his own description. "Natural! Jove! — I should think she was — natural in a passion! — Well, it's no laughing matter, really."

"No, indeed," puffed Sir Joseph.

"No, indeed. We are here in the interest of virtue, morality and the rest of it. Distracted family. Two distracted families.—There's yours, you know, and there's hers — Panther's. — Shocking to think of a respectable marriage project being interfered with by this — ah —" he waved a loose hand — "this kind of thing."

"Shocking, shocking!" groaned the M. P.

Lord Desmond, who had been slowly divesting himself of his motor coat, as if the critic's speech were addressed to any one but himself, now looked vaguely round at him.

"I'm rather busy — would you mind leaving my sitting room — and taking Sir Joseph with you —?" He turned to Fritz: "Would you mind?"

A gesture, quietly insolent, pointed in each case toward the door.

Sir Joseph grew slowly purple, with a really alarming air of seeming to swell with suppressed emotion. And the old musician moved not an inch from his post. Scott pursed his lips and dropped his hands upon the arms of his chair.

"My dear fellow," he said then, in his most man-of-the-world manner, "believe me it's not worth it. Panther's Cub's not worth it, really! Panther herself is on the spring. My dear sir, she's here, here in Dover! Or will be in a moment or two. She and Robecq — he-he! — the bridegroom! My dear good fellow, you were tracked

with the greatest ease. That motor of yours, telephones, detectives, police traps, all the rest of it. Cecil hotel, dinner at Canterbury, night at Biddicombe's. We had it all pat this morning. I rather think your brother's on the way, too. Martia Marchioness in a frightful state — who knows if she won't turn up? — Happy family party! — But it's Panther you'd better beware of, really. Salome, he-he! — our Salome! She's raging, foaming! Vows she'll make a police case of it, ruin you at F. O. Abduction of minor and all the rest of it. Not a pretty business, really!"

"Pretty business!" echoed Sir Joseph. He shot out a threatening arm and shook it helplessly up and down. "You must give her up, sir! You must ——"

"I'm sorry," said Lord Desmond, after a slight pause, "that I really can't oblige you in the matter."

He glanced around at all three, showing his teeth in a mirthless, angry smile. Then:

"Lady Desmond and I," he announced with great deliberation, "start for Paris this afternoon."

"*Ach, mein Gott!*" said Fritz under his breath.

"Lady Desmond!" echoed Scott, with an incredulous crow of laughter.

"Lady Desmond ——" The fatal words gurgled in the baronet's throat. "Married — married!" he gasped, horror-struck.

"Not yet, Joseph — but in an hour's time. The motor outside there is waiting for my bride. You may come and sign the register if you like — all of you — at St. Barnabas's Church on the cliff."

Inarticulate with rage, Sir Joseph turned once upon

himself and staggered into a chair, falling inertly, like a lay figure that has suddenly lost its balance.

"There's law in England," he sputtered, then. "This — this is criminal! — This can be stopped. This ——" his arms began to beat the air.

"Hush, hush!" said Scott, rising. "As a matter of fact, it can't be done, you know, Lord Desmond. The girl's under age, you know. The mother refuses her consent."

"Miss Lovinska is not under age and Madame la Marmora will not refuse her consent." The strong voice, the heavy German accents of the repititor made all start. "There is no obstacle whatever to the marriage."

Lord Desmond looked as haughtily indifferent to this encouragement as to the preceding opposition, but Sir Joseph was moved almost to tears.

"What! — What! — Mr. Scott, who is this wicked old man?"

"Really, my good Meyer," said the person thus appealed to, "this is not your business, you know."

"Mr. Scott," said Meyer with that glance of supreme contempt, "it is at least more my business than yours."

Unable to find a retort to so unanswerable a statement, the critic turned acidly to Sir Joseph, in time to prevent a fresh explosion.

"Pshaw, my dear sir, you are doing more harm than good!"

Lord Desmond went to the door and opened it.

"Mr. Scott," he said, "and you, Joseph, I have already politely requested you to leave my room. If you per-

sist in remaining, I must ring the bell and have you ejected."

The critic turned green, and dived for his hat. Twice turned out in the space of forty-eight hours! — He would remember it in due time and place.

"Allow me to remark," he said venomously, stopping beside Lord Desmond who still held the door significantly open, "that Panther's Cub seems to have succeeded in — what was the phrase, Sir Joseph?—he-he!—in galvanizing your corpse to some purpose."

"No, Mr. Scott," answered the diplomatist smiling. "Don't say galvanized — say animated. Virginia Lovinska has given me something — something I do not expect you to appreciate — a soul."

The critic muttered with a yellow look, that it was supremely comic! Then with a roughness seldom permitted in his silky accents:

"You had better come, Sir Joseph," he cried to his unfortunate companion. "You can wait downstairs for Madame la Marmora if you like. I have no desire to be mixed up any more in this peculiar — this unsavoury business!"

Still smiling, Desmond closed the door on the speaker's empty cackle; on his brother-in-law's tottering form; and turned to find Fritz Meyer's gaze upon him — piercing, luminous — compelling.

## V

### ORANGE BLOSSOMS

CASSANDRA STURMINSTER had met her husband casually at lunch on the previous day at their own residence; and from him had learned that "young Desmond had made an infernal ass of himself."

"The mater's awfully keen on my joining in the hue and cry," he had gone on, his long teeth exposed in a rueful smile, "but I can't see that I could be a ha'porth of good."

Smiling in her own enigmatic way opposite him, his wife responded.

"No, Wurzel, I don't see that you would be a ha'porth of good."

"Ha-ha!" he laughed.

This enviable couple conducted what there was of conubial life between them on humorous terms.

"Supposin' I did catch the chap," proceeded his lordship, eating voraciously as he spoke, "nice kind of fellow I should be to preach morality at him."

"You would, indeed, dear Wurzel."

His pale eye fixed her for a second.

"Would what?" — (The best people don't waste time on manners nowadays.)

"Be a nice kind of fellow."

He kept staring till the joke side of the question had



penetrated; then broke into his guffaw. She tinkled after, less convincingly than usual.

"If a fellow wants to hang himself, why, let him hang himself, I say."

"By all means, let him," said Cassandra.

"If Desmond chooses to bust himself up at the F. O., let him bust himself up! Only make the scandal worse if you try to stop it."

"Much worse," she sweetly agreed.

"Look here, Cassie," said his lordship at the end of the meal. "I'm off to Newmarket, old girl. So if there's any fresh row, if mater toddles round, or anything, you can just let 'em know, you know."

"Ta-ta," she said, nodding her pretty head.

No news, however, had penetrated from Lowndes Square or Prince's Gate to Sturminster House till the next morning, when a distracted letter from Sir Joseph arrived by special messenger at an hour when only the under-servants of that establishment were thinking of rising.

It was addressed to the Most Honourable the Marquis — or the Most Honourable the Marchioness of Sturminster, and urged either or both to join in an immediate and desperate expedition to save the family honour.

Cassandra, lost in down and lace and a kind of rococo riot of filmy lawn and pink ribbons, pondered a while, and then made up her mind.

She ordered the car round at half-past eight, and that extraordinary matutinal hour saw her whirling away to Victoria station, her countenance enveloped in almost impenetrable folds of gray gauze.



From her carriage window at Dover she watched the portly forms of her brother-in-law and the critic toddling down the station to the waiting row of flies; and only when invited to do so by the guard did she alight with a little artfully surprised laugh; and in her turn order herself to be driven to Biddicombe's Hotel.

She had studied Sir Joseph's letter more than once during the journey down and had pondered upon it with a very unusual seriousness upon her elfish countenance.

"The detective has informed us," wrote Sir Joseph — his formal business hand driven by a passion that scored the page fiercely black — "that from unimpeachable information Desmond and that infamous young woman have been traced from Branksome to the Hotel Cecil — thence to Canterbury, and thence again to one Biddicombe's Marine Hotel, Dover, where they have put up for the night. They proceeded by motor car, which was noted on more than one occasion for exceeding legal speed limit."

It was singular that Cassandra, so easily moved to laughter, should not have had a smile for this pompous phraseology; or even for the comic incongruity of the name of the Hotel which the eloping pair had selected. Through the mist of her veil she now ran her eye in astonishment over its dingy façade; then alighting, paid the cabman extravagantly and paused a second to listen to the sound of a voice issuing from the open bow windows of the first floor. She recognized the M. P.'s grating accents.

"Mr. Scott, this is indecent ——"

Then, a little nervously, she entered the hall. The

haggard form of an incredibly grease-spotted and unmistakably German waiter rushed to meet her. She hesitated and softly enquired if there was not a Mademoiselle Lovinska in the house.

Hermann drove a grimy hand across his harassed brow. There was a young lady, who first called herself Mrs. Brown, and whom Mrs. Biddicombe now spoke of as Miss Loosky. He hardly liked himself to pronounce upon so complicated a matter; and after writhing some seconds in the dilemma, suggested an interview with Mrs. Biddicombe herself.

“If madame will walk into the coffee-room?”

After some delay — minutes which seemed of intolerable length to Cassandra in the dreary surroundings of that apartment — the proprietress duly presented herself. She gave the seated veiled figure an inclination that was cool, not to say suspicious.

“What might you be wanting with me, if you please, madame? If it is accommodation ——”

With an impulsive gesture the other flung back her motor veil.

“I am Lady Sturminster ——” (Mrs. Biddicombe felt that her first suspiciousness had been more than justified: “It was another of them.” But —) “Oh, Mrs. Biddicombe,” the soft Southern voice went on and what it said was as astonishing as it was gratifying to the hearer. Stiffness melted from that good woman’s deportment as rapidly as from a jelly in the sun. There ensued a rapid and animated dialogue, at the end of which, with much pantomimic airs of precaution and many expansive smiles, the landlady conducted the new visitor

tiptoe up the stairs and into "Miss Loosky's" own bed-chamber.

Fifi turned a startled face from the strange countenance to Mrs. Biddicombe. She had not the least idea who this tall, pretty, fashionable being might be; but her heart began to beat violently.

"My dear," said the unknown, "I'm Lord Desmond's sister-in-law, and I've come to see if I can help you."

"And, my dear," burst forth from the triumphant Mrs. Biddicombe, "it's the — Marchioness of Sturminster."

The girl whitened. But Cassandra, coming lightly up to her, placed a butterfly touch on each shoulder and left an almost intangible kiss between the waves of chestnut hair.

"Do you know that I saw you the day before yesterday at Branksome. You did not see me, but I saw you through the window, you and Desmond sitting together by the sun-dial; I thought you looked just lovely, I did indeed," as the golden-hazel eyes fixed upon her became ever more filled with wonder. "I thought you looked made for happiness, and, my dear, I thought, too, I just could not bear to think of your being unhappy —"

"But I'm going to be happy," cried the girl, with a note of fear sharply defiant in her voice. She stretched out a hand toward the cardboard box on the dressing table, and Cassandra, following the movement, saw that it contained a bunch of lily of the valley, and a sprig of orange blossoms. Then she knew what the heavy fragrance was, that had greeted her nostrils from the threshold.

A quiver like that of pale sunshine passed over her face, very different from its usual determined gaiety.

"I think you will be happy, honey," she said, under her breath, then glanced across at Mrs. Biddicombe, who stood surveying them with a maternal air of responsibility.

"Orange blossoms ——" she said.

The good woman's countenance became illuminated with a far more blatant effulgence than her own.

"Did I not know it?" she exclaimed, striking her fat palms together. "There now, Mr. Meyer wouldn't believe me — and even your ladyship had your doubts. I knew his lordship meant right: 'Let her wear white, Mrs. Biddicombe,' he says; 'tell her to put on the flowers,' he says — dear, to be sure; and they — orange blossoms!"

Her distended mouth suddenly quivered at the corners like an overgrown child's; her eyes became suffused. "Dear, to be sure," she whimpered, "if it were my own daughter I couldn't be more glad! Miss Loosky, my dear," she proceeded on a fresh impetus, "it's my opinion his lordship means to make you his bride this very morning."

She broke off. The lovely young Marchioness gave her an unmistakable sign of warning, and then she saw with some dismay, that Fifi's head was bending low under the wings of her sheltering hair, as if she wished to hide her face.

"Of course, Mrs. Biddicombe," said Cassandra, with a delicate deliberation, "it isn't always easy to arrange for a runaway match. I daresay my poor brother-in-law has had endless difficulties."

Fifi jerked up her head; suddenly caught Cassandra's hand and kissed it.

Cassandra gave her fingers a quick little pressure, and proceeded with brisk cheerfulness as if quite unaware of any need for emotion.

"But orange blossoms, and a white dress — yes, it does look like the wedding to-day."

## VI

### FRITZ GIVES HIS CONSENT

LORD DESMOND and Fritz Meyer stood face to face; and, in the silence the sounds from the inner room were indistinctly audible to both. A woman's soft voice, the rustle of garments shaken free of tissue paper, a subdued current of laughter, and all at once Fifi's young voice on a high note of joy. "Oh —! Mayn't I ask him?"

The colour sprang to Desmond's cheek; he made a movement toward the door even as the handle rattled under an impulsive hand.

"Lord Desmond — are they gone? Oh, Lord Desmond!" Then, with a falling note of disappointment: "Oh ——" as Fritz's outstretched arm kept the door from opening.

"One moment, child!" commanded the old musician. Even as he spoke he turned the key in the lock and withdrew it. And, once again, the "Oh!" was repeated in a still more pronounced tone of chagrin.

Then, in a low voice of controlled anger:

"Will you kindly step aside?" said Desmond to the interloper. "I have to speak to my bride."

"One moment, young man," said the other again, coming down into the room and standing so as to guard, this time, the other door. "You have spoken brave words about your bride, just now. But explain to me this thing,





*“Will you kindly step aside?” said Desmond to the inter-  
loper. “I have to speak to my bride”*



if you please." His lowered accents took a deeper emphasis: "How comes it, Lord Desmond Brooke, that this maiden has been one day and one night under your protection and is not yet Lady Desmond Brooke?"

"What business is that of yours?" said the younger man, flashing. "Stand out of the way, sir! — What a ridiculous situation! What the devil is it to you?" he cried.

"It is a great thing to me. Your deeds and your words, look you, my lord, are in discord."

"My deeds and my words —" retorted Lord Desmond fiercely. But he broke off under the fulminating glance, the roar that fell upon him from the old man:

"You have sullied her good name."

"Good God!" Desmond caught Meyer by the arm. "Lower your voice, man, she may be listening!" There was a moment's heavy silence, while Meyer, breathing hard, held the other under a glance that seemed as if it would fain tear the flesh from him to get to his heart. "She believes in me — she believes in me completely ——"

"*Ach* ——" The German, in his turn laid a heavy hand upon the speaker, and drew him, unresisting, to the window. "It is so, then, as I suspected," he denounced, and the whisper in which he spoke, increased rather than diminished the force of the indictment. "You hound, you took her to betray her ——!" Then his rage fell away beneath a storm of tender remembrance. "She prayed at my knee, last night!"

Lord Desmond was struggling with an emotion not less than that of the old musician.

"Her innocence enfolded her," he cried, "like wings,

like angels' wings! And I — I have been kneeling at her feet in my heart, the whole night! When I took her away I — you are right — I don't want to excuse myself — I don't want to speak of that — All night, all night, the old beautiful words have been ringing in my ears — 'a garden enclosed is my sister and my spouse —' Dashing along at mad speed, every throb of the motor beat them into my brain. Oh, cannot you see how it has been?"

If Meyer had wanted to tear the heart from the man's body, it was now as if he held it between his hands.

"She is a child — she trusted you," he said slowly.

"She trusts me," passionately amended Desmond.

"And now, you ——" The old man spoke with the grave authority of one who has a right to question; and the young man went on as if he accepted that right.

"I have scarcely drawn a breath since I understood. All night I have been working — to repair. I flew to Canterbury for a special licence. I had to get a licence for to-day. I scarcely know how I managed in the time, by what insistence, what frantic expense of bribe and argument. Somehow I got round the authorities. My name worked something, my money more; back in Dover at ten — had to make myself decent to see the clergyman; I had warned him by telegram. Oh, yes, she shall be married in Church. — You see, you understand, I want her to feel that all is right with us, all sanctified. The mere registry-office marriage is not for her — I must bring her to the altar."

He fell suddenly silent, then resumed between his teeth:

"I'd rather blow my brains out — before God, I'd rather kill her than that she should ever know!"

Fritz Meyer drew a long breath and relaxed the mighty gaze that seemed to have driven the other man to utter self-betrayal. Desmond passed his hand dazedly over his head.

"I can't imagine," he said, wearily, "why on earth I should be saying all this to you!"

Silently the repetitor limped to the bedroom door, inserted the key, and unlocked it. Then he stood aside, and with that gesture of sweeping command:

"You may go to her," he said. "You need fear no difficulty about your marriage."

Desmond stared. He felt as if he had been hypnotized, and, once more passed his hand across his forehead as if to wipe away the dazed impression. Then he hastened to the door and knocked.

Promptly Mrs. Biddicombe opened and pushed Fifi across the threshold with a motherly hand. Desmond's eyes lighted at sight of the tall white figure; but a moment after, he found himself staring again. Behind the lovely apparition of his bride, Cassandra was advancing toward him, her lips arching into smiles.

"We've done our best, my lord," Mrs. Biddicombe was saying in her jovial, wheezy tone. "Though it's a bride in white serge, your lordship has, I'm sure she looks a picture! And, your lordship, it has to be a hat! But those white wings are that becoming — and after all, there's no mistaking orange blossom."

Lord Desmond had taken Fifi's hand into his and drawn her to his side — white-winged hat and white serge gar-

ments, she was the most beautiful and desirable of brides. But his glance sought beyond her, questioning the meaning of Lady Sturminster's presence.

Cassandra then came forward.

"Excuse me," she said, "dear Virginia. Desmond, will you listen to me for a second?"

Fifi, bewildered, stepped back to find Meyer's arm around her. And while the old man silently held her encircled, brother and sister-in-law retired to the window-bow and held a brief colloquy. Mrs. Biddicombe surveyed them from the threshold with critical satisfaction: two noble aristocratic beings they were!

"I've come as a friend, Desmond," said Cassandra, leaning toward him and speaking low, with unwonted gravity on her childish face.

Still his eyes questioned. She hesitated.

"I didn't know what you meant to do with her," she said at last, looking down. Then she suddenly opened the full softness of her glance upon him. "I didn't want ——" she began, and then laughed, though with a little catch, as though the pretty mechanism of her laughter did not work very well any more. "I didn't want another life spoilt by you Brookes."

And as she said these words, the man looking at her, knew all at once, and wondered how he had never seen it before, that that mask of gaiety was but the merest film — trying to cover the tragedy of a broken heart.

From his own stirred emotions there was about to spring a deep word of sympathy; but with a flickering side-long look and a smiling curve of lip, mutely she forbade it. She chose to laugh instead of to cry; that was her



way, let it be respected! Awkwardly he changed the words that were upon his lips.

“And, if you had found me as bad ——”

“As Wurzel?” she concluded with her usual airiness. “I’d have taken her then.”

“What?”

“I’d have taken her from you, I say; and just made it straight — as straight as I could. Oh, when I saw that young thing, two days ago, I just knew what she was. And so — you see, we Americans, we aren’t like you, we haven’t got all those fine distinctions of class you have over here — my heart went out to her, I just felt as if she was a young sister.”

“Cassie,” he said, “you are a good woman.”

He took her hand and pressed it. She drew it from his clasp.

“Hurry, now.”

“Yes, indeed,” he said and looked at his watch. As he came down into the room, Fifi impulsively sprang toward him.

“We’ve got to be in Church in ten minutes, Virginia.” Cassandra stood in the window, watching them. No one was paying any attention to her; for once she could let the tears well into her eyes.

## VII

### LA MARMORA'S FINAL DEFEAT

PERHAPS the most astounding of the astounding array of visitors that had passed through the unobtrusive portals of Biddecombe's Hotel these last twenty-four hours, was now deposited by the big sixty.

This monstrous machine ground into the little street like an engine of destruction; and ejected like a bomb the form of Madame la Marmora.

She dashed into the hall as if propelled by an exterior force; and almost prostrated Sir Joseph who hurried out from the front sitting room to meet her. Flung back upon her fierce advance, she surveyed him with a look that was like a slap in the face.

"Well! You! — you Smith, where is my daughter?"

Scott, grinning in the doorway, turned upon the sound of another approaching footstep, to grin again as he beheld the Baron's figure, blocking up the entrance.

"Your daughter, Madame," said Sir Joseph vindictively, "is, I understand, dressing herself for her marriage with my unhappy brother-in-law."

Fulvia la Marmora repeated the word, upon a whispering breath:

"Marriage!"

Scott could see, silhouetted against the outer light, the shrug of the impresario's shoulders.

"Where is she?" demanded the mother savagely, and caught Sir Joseph's woodenly gesticulating gloved hand.

"You'll find them on the first floor," said the Member of Parliament, unconsciously returning that contaminating pressure in the abandonment of a common emotion. "Lord Desmond is in the sitting room, the door just facing you on the landing."

There was a rush like the passage of a storm wind as La Marmora tore past him to the stairs, her silk motor cloak noisily brushing the narrow walls on either side as she went.

"She won't knock on the door," remarked Scott. "Well, Baron, aren't you going to run after her? Hullo, I say, why not do the Lochinvar business, with that car at the hall door?"

While Sir Joseph panted and puffed and wiped his forehead, swelling with melancholy triumph at his own masterly operations, the impresario advanced with his usual deliberation, and gently pressed Mr. Scott on one side in order to pass into the room. He sat down then, upon the first chair, and said, drawling even more than usual:

"It strikes me, Mr. Scott, that the Lochinvar business has been pretty successfully done already. No, sir, I'm not here after the daughter, I'm here after the mother."

"Good God!" said the baronet, as he joined them.

"Oh, Salome!" interpreted the critic, and a peculiar glance came into his eyes. "Well, she is playing hell and Tommy upstairs. Hadn't you better look after Salome?"

"Do you think," said Robecq, with apparent irrelevance, "that they'd be capable of providing me with an egg flip in this — place?"

"Rummy sort of place for his lordship to have chosen!" interpolated Scott. "Yes — I should think you might get an old egg or so."

"And some young brandy —" smiled the Baron. He was astonishingly calm, though there was now a thud of feet overhead and a confusion of voices.

"She'll tear the cub limb from limb, I vow!" said Scott, all delighted intentness, while the other concluded his phrase with a placidity which seemed to be aware of neither interruption.

"Well beaten up together, perhaps we could disguise that egg — she's had nothing to eat to-day."

He rose and rang the bell as he spoke.

"Baron," said Scott, running to the door and running back again, grinning with eagerness, "oughtn't you, oughtn't we really to see what's going on up there?"

"Oh, let her scream off the first steam — I'll come in with the egg flip," said the philosophic manager, again pulling the old-fashioned bell-rope.

"Listen to her! — listen to her!" cried Scott again.

"Perhaps, indeed, we ought to lend Madame la Marmora the weight of our presence," suggested Sir Joseph, who was now possessed by as kindling a desire to be in at the fray, as the critic himself.

"Mr. Scott," said Robecq, "would you mind hanging on to that bell-rope? — I just want to write out a telegram."

He sat down at the battered writing table and began

to write carefully with a fountain pen. The wording of this despatch had been rehearsed many times between the night of the garden party and this morning. It was addressed to Madame Ilma, in Prague, and ran, in German, to this effect:

“Would you be disposed to undertake the part of Salome for me in London. First performance Covent Garden, June 23rd.”

“Here is the waiter,” interrupted Scott.

Robecq unostentatiously folded the telegram.

“He’ll have it posted for you,” suggested the critic.

“Thank you, dear friend,” said the manager. “I’m not yet sure if I’ll have to send it.”

La Marmora broke into the room even as Desmond had taken her daughter’s hand to lead her downstairs. She hurled herself upon them in her whirlwind fury; halted a single second to grasp the scene and then fell upon the girl like a hawk upon its prey.

“So, I’ve caught you, miss!”—With an irresistible strength she dragged her from her bridegroom’s side. Then as the orange blossom and lily of the valley at Fifi’s breast struck her senses, a convulsion passed over her face. “*Ah, mais non!*” she cried, “we’ve no use for orange blossom to-day.”

“Mama! — Mama!”

The flowers were within the frenzied woman’s grasp. She turned her face, a mask of fury upon the man:

“Lord Desmond, I’ll ruin you for this!”

He felt helpless before such a display of violence;



unable to meet an experience so foreign to every instinct, to every convention of his life.

"Let the maiden go!"

It was Fritz who spoke. Not angrily, nor even loudly; and yet it was as if the sound of those few words withered the woman's rage with a livid terror. She dropped Fifi's arm, cowered back, and stared at the old musician:

"You — here!"

Fritz came forward and took the centre of the room; at the same time, it seemed, the centre of authority. In his shabby clothes, with his haggard, unshorn face, with his heavy simplicity of speech and manner he yet once again dominated.

"Madame la Marmora has been in anxiety about her daughter —" he said; "anxiety wantonly inflicted. But when she knows that the young lady is about to espouse the man of her choice, she will withdraw all opposition to the union."

"*Misérable!*" screamed the singer, recovering the courage of her passion.

"Lord 'a' mercy!" ejaculated Mrs. Biddicombe.

"Take your bride away, Lord Desmond," ordered Fritz.

"I forbid the marriage! — I will forbid it at the altar!"

The Panther was on the spring again. But now the old man came between her menace and the lovers, with uplifted hand.

"She will have her mother's consent." He raised his voice over the rising outcry. "Madame, I claim my right!"

Once again she shrank, cowered. He kept her for a moment under his glance, and then went on quietly.



“My right — as an old friend ——”

There was a pause. Cassandra, white and shaken, came down into the room; and, picking up the flowers on the floor, began to fasten them again at the girl's breast.

“Madame la Marmora consents to your marriage — Miss Fifi,” said Fritz. “Take her away, Lord Desmond, I say.”

There was a moment's breathlessness in which every one instinctively waited for the denial. The prima donna stood, huddled together, glaring under her eyebrows, drawing her breath hissing between closed teeth; the very personification of hatred, of opposition, of vengeance baffled. But she spoke no word.

“Go,” said the musician again. Then Desmond silently took Fifi's hand within his arm and, followed by Cassandra, moved toward the door.

Mrs. Biddicombe vanished discreetly by the bedroom.

“I'll stand by you, dear,” whispered Lady Sturminster to Fifi, striving to bring comfort into the words. But the bride and bridegroom went slowly and silently forth, with the weight of the mother's unspoken curse upon their hearts.

“Good heavens!” cried Mr. Scott, rushing to the window; “they're off!”

The Baron stopped in his careful beating of yolk and brandy and looked up, then, with an unexpected agility, arrested Sir Joseph in his bovine charge upon the door.

“No, my dear sir, you don't,” he purred. “You just keep quiet — keep quiet, I tell you.”

He held a dripping fork in one hand and the baronet's

coat sleeve by the other. Whether it was the fear of receiving any of that doubtful yolk upon his garment, or that his innate dignity recoiled from a personal struggle, certain it is that Sir Joseph remained, inactive; — protesting, indignant, agonized, but inactive.

Mr. Scott, peering over the grimy blind, kept up a running fire of comments, each of which seemed to strike the baronet like pellets of shot.

“There she goes! — All in white, ha-ha! — and — impossible! Yes — dash my soul!” cried Mr. Scott, struck into an unusual vigour of expletive: “It’s young Lady Sturminster! Upon my solemn word of honour it is the fair Cassandra! — As lovey-dovey as you please — her arm about the blushing bride. Well, I daresay she’s got a score to pay off with your noble family — eh, Sir Joseph? She’s scoring ’em off there! — Oh, what will Martia Marchioness say? — Off they go! — Looks a little down in the mouth, our diplomatist! Wonder how the cub managed it? Really, you know,” said Mr. Scott, coming away from the window, “she’s shown a deal more cunning than any one would have given her credit for, has Panther’s Cub!”

The Baron had gone back to his egg flip and now showed some signs of haste, as he poured in the hot milk.

Sir Joseph flung himself into an armchair. His attitude was that of one overcome by adverse fate.

“All up, eh?” said Scott.

“Eh?” repeated the baronet with a lack-lustre glance.

“U. P., you know,” chuckled the other. “Do you think Panther and the old German are murdering each other up there?”

The manager put down the glass of flip and paused on his way to the door.

“What did I hear you say?” he asked.

“Old Fritz, you know — Panther’s keeper. It is he who has done it all. Ain’t it, Sir Joseph? — Bless you, my children! Most extraordinary business, you know, Robecq,” he proceeded, warming to his usual confidential inquisitiveness, when he broke off, surprised. The Baron had walked back again to the table, and, sitting down, took up the fork.

“I reckon,” he remarked, “this will be more palatable if I go on beating it for some time. — If Fritz is up there, I needn’t hurry.”

## VIII

### JEANNE-MARIE MEYER

“*Je les maudis, maudis!*” said the singer, as beneath the window the throbbing of the motor became lost in the smooth roll of departing wheels.

Fritz Meyer turned his head. He had been staring out through the open casement at that peep of bright seas between the houses. His eyes — the eyes of the tamer, the eyes of the man who had been Panther’s keeper so long — fell now, terrible, upon the mother who cursed her child.

“Jeanne-Marie Meyer,” he said then, in a voice vibrating with the passion long gathered of years, “down on your knees and thank God that our child has gone in purity and honour, to wed an honourable man!”

The singer shrank from him, tottered across the room and flung herself face downward on the sofa. There she lay as one annihilated. After a pause he moved ponderously nearer to her.

“How dared you curse our child! It was not for that I left her with you!”

Her shoulders began to heave. The deep note of wrath left his tones and was succeeded by a sorrowful sternness. He went on in German:

“Ach, Frau, when from one day to another you turned

my poor little home from heaven to hell, you left me one hope — one hope that was also the greatest of my griefs: you took the child. Ach, when I sought you in vain, both of you, till there was not a penny between myself and starvation and I had to pawn my father's watch to get back to my work for daily bread, even then it was this thought that kept the life in me: You had not had the heart to leave your little child behind you!"

The heaving of the shoulders became more violent. A kind of sobbing moan accompanied it.

"When I found you again," he went on, and there was a hush in his voice; it might have been that of a man who, having fought in vain for another's life, stood looking down at last on the hopelessness of death, "when I found you in Paris, you still clung to the little one. You begged for her, with tears and sobs. It was in my power then to let you keep the child and to help you back to an honest life . . . I left you our child, I stood by you in your work, I kept our secret, I was as your servant — I, who had been your husband, became for the world your servant. I saw my child grow up under another's name that she should not know the shame of her mother's life; I obliterated my sacred paternal rights. For so many years, ah, so many years, have I been so much less than man. It was to save you. Ach, fool that I was! The child was not to save you . . . nothing could save you. You but loved it as the beasts do their young, by the instinct of the animal. It was not your rival then!"

Her long body writhed as if in physical agony. She



clenched and unclenched her hands and rolled her head between them, and the moan turned into a snarl, the snarl of the cowed panther beneath the lash.

“And to-day, ah, Thou my God, I see the end of my long sacrifice. Unnatural mother! Shameless woman! You had rather see your child parted from the man she loves, see her a creature for public dishonour, than know her his happy wife! And why? For what vile reason? Because you, you have fixed your shameless fancy upon your daughter's lover. Ach, wanton!”

She turned on her side, drawing up her knees, and with her arm over her eyes.

“*Tais toi — tais toi!*” she panted.

“Now it is finished,” said Meyer. He folded his arms. “The man who once loved you, who still ceaselessly worked, blindly hoped for you, is no more. He who was your husband is dead. . . . The father lives. The father only is left. My daughter and I pass out of your life for ever.”

La Marmora, huddled on the sofa, dropped her head upon her knees and broke into sobbing. He came a step closer to her.

“*Ach, du weinst!* The first time we met, you were crying. Poor little Jeanne-Marie, the street singer, beaten by the old organ-grinder, whose thin little arm was ever lifted as if to ward off a blow! It was I who taught you how to laugh, how to be afraid no more. Those days in the little home — the home you desecrated! Now it is farewell between us, and again you weep, *wieder du weinst!*”

She lifted her head. She was broken, overthrown.



But it was anger still, the helpless anger of the conquered, that looked out of her streaming eyes.

“You mean to abandon me, then?”

“Would you keep me by your side?”

“Without you I am lost — And you know it!” She flung the words at him, with a sudden ferocity of reproach.

He closed his eyes for a minute and breathed deep; then, with a slight and exceedingly bitter smile:

“Fulvia la Marmora, the great singer, is lost without the poor repetitor! So be it then . . . for a little while — A very little while, Jeanne . . . ! The years are coming on you too: it is almost the end of the fugue.”

She sprang to her feet, straightened herself and leaned toward him, with so swaying a movement that, thinking she was going to fall, he put out his hand:

“The end of the fugue . . . with me!” Her tears were all dried up; her very throat was parched.

By the hand with which he held her he pressed her back upon the sofa. Then, sitting beside her, still keeping his grasp upon her, with a touch as gentle as it was merciless, he went on:

“Already your golden voice is leaving you. Is it not so? Note by note. This year have we not had to transpose — Ach! and transpose again?”

Open-mouthed, scarcely breathing, she sat, her eyes fixed upon his face, as if she had lost even the power of looking away.

“And your beauty! Poor woman, day by day that is fading. Paint cannot hide those lines, those falling muscles. Do you think the false brightness of your hair replaces the old, wonderful tint? . . . For all

your precautions, your youth is gone from you — for all your art your voice is going!”

With a movement as sudden as it was fierce she leaped from beside him, then tore her hat from her head and flung herself against the chimney-piece to stare at her own image in the mirror. One or two china ornaments were in her way: she swept them from the marble. Almost a minute was filled with that desperate gaze, then she staggered back into the room and a long scream rang from her — a scream suddenly broken, as if the vocal chords had given way.

With a face blasted by terror, she caught at her throat; and, as she reeled, the old musician opened his arms to receive her.

“*Ach, du Arme!*”

He knew too well what had happened. The crystal was shattered. Fulvia la Marmora had been; only Jeanne-Marie Meyer remained.

“*Ach, du Arme!*” he repeated, clasping her close to his great breast, which rose and fell under overpowering emotion of pity. “If all leaves you — all the world, all your triumphs — there is still old Fritz ——”

A moment he pressed her, only the more compassionately for the shudder and the groan of misery that escaped her. Then, for there were steps without, he made her sit; and to shield her, stood before her.

After a knock and a discreet pause, Robecq entered. A single masterly glance sufficed to show him all there was to see; the shattered china on the floor, the collapsed figure of the singer, leaning with both arms outstretched

across the table; her dishevelled head between them; Fritz's face of trouble.

If he had ever doubted, he doubted no longer what was the tie between them. But this was none of his business. His business was with only one thing — La Marmora's voice.

"One moment, *mein bester* Meyer. Fulvia! Fulvia my dear," he tapped her arm and she raised her face. He started ever so slightly at sight of it, but continued courageously, in his matter of fact, good-humoured, scolding drawl:

"Tsha — tsha! . . . And the voice? Drink this, at once."

There was a reek of brandy in the room mingling with the insistent fragrance of a little crushed orange spray on the floor.

The singer's lips moved. No sound came. She reared herself in her chair, and again both hands sought her throat. At last, a gasping whisper came:

"*Imbécile!* . . ."

The impresario's florid face turned pale. He shot at Fritz one ferocious glance of inquiry. The old German slowly bowed his head.

"Twenty thousand devils!" ejaculated the impresario, and, as if scarcely aware of his own action, drained the egg flip at a draught.

He had long foreseen the possibility of such a disaster, and was already indeed making preparations against it; but when it came in reality, it effected him oddly; and from an unwontedly altruistic point of view.

“My God,” he thought, as he laid down the glass, “the wretched creature’s face!”

La Marmora was no longer the Queen of Song — she was “the wretched creature!”

He was a good-natured man, and he could not endure to remain in the room with the tragedy a moment longer.

“Tut, tut,” he said, perfunctorily consoling, “get her home, Fritz, get her home! I’ll look in in the evening and bring a doctor — *hein*, I’d better bring a doctor. You’ll soon be all right, my dear.”

Already he was on the threshold. He was in a hurry, as far as Robecq could ever be in a hurry, to send that telegram.

Fritz closed the door which the impresario had left open, and came back to the table.

La Marmora had fallen back into her hopeless attitude, and lay as one in a stupor. He took a chair opposite to her, and sat patiently, his gouty foot extended in its cloth slipper, waiting till the moment should come when she would turn to him. He was the only one she could turn to now in the world.

## IX

### LADY DESMOND

FIFI ran up to her room alone to tie on her motor veil. Lord Desmond had arranged to motor to Folkestone, dine there and take the night boat.

At the Church door, Cassandra had taken leave of them, with a gay word to the bridegroom: with a speechless, almost passionate embrace to the bride. She had gone off in a rattling fly, drawing the gray gossamer over her face. Fifi did not know why, but she thought her new sister-in-law was crying.

Preliminary farewells had also been exchanged with Mrs. Biddicombe, very exuberant on the good lady's part, very generous on Lord Desmond's.

The girl was glad to find herself alone a moment; she had so strange a sense of mounting exhilaration that it seemed almost more than she could bear. At the first touch of his ring on her finger, the shadow had been lifted from her heart, for ever — the shadow that had lain there, almost since she could reason at all. The shadow of the childhood without a home, of the imprisoned girlhood. The shadow of her mother's doubtful position, of her unnatural jealousy. The shadow of that foolish Como adventure. All the accumulated trouble of the last three days, culminating in the maternal malediction; all had been swept away! The old life was

done with and everything belonging to it. The Baron . . . with his false friendliness and his horrible endearments! . . . Fritz, with his scoldings, his suspiciousness, his perpetual interference! . . . Scott, with his sneers. The mother who hated, who struck, who cursed! It was not likely, it was not even possible that she should ever be brought into contact with any of them again, and she was glad. She had stepped into a new and radiant life; and a love beyond the most romantic dream of her innocent imagination was hers.

All the way back from the church he had hardly spoken a word to her. But that had not been needed; the blue eyes had rested upon her and brought to her soul the fulfilment of that deep promise they had held from the first. Until the motor stopped, he had clasped her hand, the hand with the wedding ring. How strange it felt. She looked at it now as if she could hardly believe her vision. She was his wife — Desmond's wife! Oh, how right she had been to trust him!

A knock came upon the door. Just gathering up the veil she hurried to open, flinging it over her hat as she went. It was Desmond.

"I'm coming," she explained, with a happy catch in her breath. But, instead of leading her downstairs, he pressed her back into the room.

"Wait a little," he said huskily, "just for a little while. I want to be in this room with you, just for a minute."

His glance went about the shabby place, as he spoke, rested on the bed where she had lain in her exhaustion and



desolation last night, then came back to her. He put out his hand as if he would take hers but drew it back.

"Why?" said she, all in wonder.

"Yes," he exclaimed, and his voice was hurried, low, pulsating with a breathless agitation, as if with the over-quick beatings of his heart. "I am afraid of you."

"Afraid . . .?"

He murmured, as if to himself, so low that she could hardly catch the words: 'A garden enclosed is my sister and my spouse. . . .' Sit there, darling, I've got to make reparation." He knelt on one knee beside her:

"Here, here in this room. I shouldn't have taken you away like that — I should have —" he caught himself up — "I should have managed better, differently — oh, darling, so differently! I shall never forgive myself. But I must hear you say — you forgive me."

"Oh, Desmond —" she breathed with the soft surrender of that night when she had first heard love words from his lips. The long folds of her veil were hanging loosely down.

But, as she leaned, almost unconsciously toward his breast, he still did not take her in his arms, only caught one end of the gossamer and kissed it.

Her hands went out to him. Then he kissed the finger with the wedding ring. And only after that at last their lips met. As he held her she felt the stormy beating of his heart against her breast. Once he had complained of being "dead" — there was life — exultant life in his veins now.

"My love, my bride — my wife! Oh, Virginia, you'll teach me."

"Indeed, yes," she said bewildered, yet ecstatic. "Only what shall I teach you?"

He rose to his feet.

"To feed among the lilies —" he said. And with those strange words, led her to the door.

Just outside the sitting room stood old Fritz, waiting for them.

Both halted as they saw him. Desmond's glance was haughty. This odd old man, with his unwarrantable authority, evidently hypnotic, was almost the last person he desired to meet. The aristocrat had bared his heart once to the shabby musician; there was the more reason now to encase himself in the armour of his class. In Fifi's glance was dismay — Had she not done with the old life after all?

"I have but a few words to say," said Meyer, in a laboured way, as if he had read their thoughts. "Only to tell this child over whom I have watched all her life that her mother has withdrawn what she said in anger. She accepts your marriage. She will in time forgive you, Fifi, even if —" speech seemed difficult to him: he chose each word as with a painful deliberation, "even if you never meet again."

Old memories — the suffering she read in his eyes and his face, overcame the girl's selfish impulse.

"Oh, Fritz!" she cried, and the first tears she had shed that day gushed from her eyes, as she cast herself in her old headlong way into his arms.

"May the good God keep you!" said the old man gently. "May He bless you!"

He lifted her head between both his hands, and kissed

fier brow. And turning to Desmond who, biting his lip, had taken a step back:

"Forgive me, my lord," he said; "she has been to me as my own child."

As he spoke, he took the girl's hand and, as it were, gave her to her bridegroom. His bearing was so simple, that Desmond would not have been the gentleman he was, had he not met him in the same spirit.

Taking the proffered hand, he paused on the top of the stairs, to say, with as much cordiality as he could force into his voice:

"I am the last person to wish my wife to forget old friends, Mr. Meyer. Remember that you will always be welcome at my house."

Fritz Meyer bowed. There was an immeasurable depth of ironic sorrow in those golden-hazel eyes, so like Virginia's:

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you, my lord, you are indeed kind!"

THE END

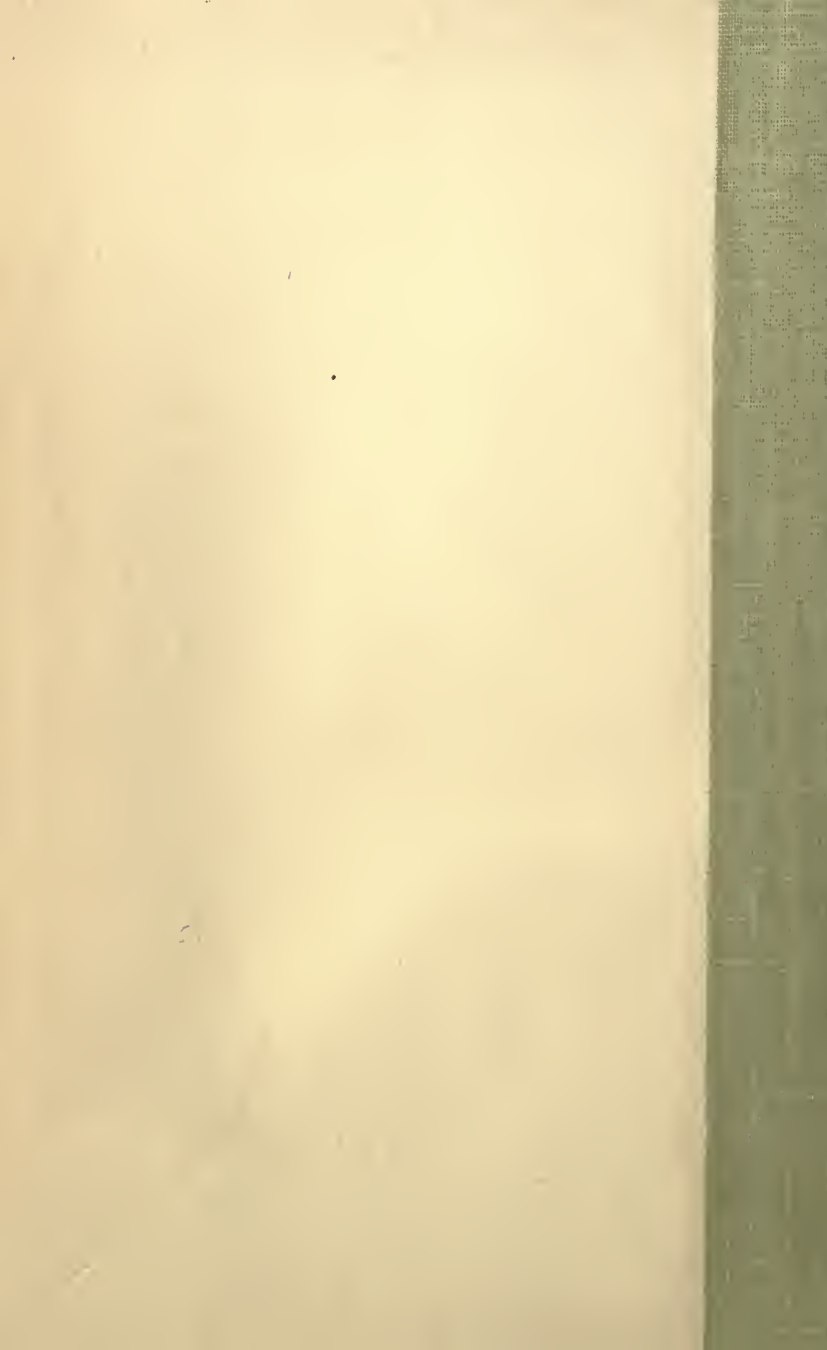












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