THE LIGHT OF THE STAR

HAMLIN GARLAND

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"HE WAS A NOTICEABLY HANDSOME FIGURE AS HE SAT ALONE IN THE BOX"

THE LIGHT OF THE STAR

A Novel

BY

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I

AFTER the appointment with Miss Merival reached him (through the hand of her manager), young Douglass grew feverishly impatient of the long days which lay between. Waiting became a species of heroism. Each morning he reread his manuscript and each evening found him at the theatre, partly to while away the time, but mainly in order that he might catch some clew to the real woman behind the shining mask. His brain was filled with the light of the star—her radiance dazzled him.

By day he walked the streets, seeing her name on every bill-board, catching the glow of her subtle and changeful beauty in every window. She gazed out at him from brows weary with splendid barbaric jewels, her eyes bitter and disdainful, and hopelessly sad. She smiled at him in framework of blue and ermine and pearls—the bedecked, heartless coquette of the pleasure-seeking world. She stood in the shadow of gray walls, a grating over her head, with deep, soulful, girlish eyes lifted in piteous appeal; and in each of these characters an unfathomed depth remained to vex and to allure him.

Magnified by these reflections on the walls, haloed by the teeming praise and censure of the press, she seemed to dominate the entire city as she had come to absorb the best of his own life. What her private character really was no one seemed to know, in spite of the special articles and interviews with her managers which fed the almost universal adulation of her dark and changeful face, her savage

and sovereign beauty. There was insolence in her tread, and mad allurement in the rounded beauty of her powerful white arm—and at his weakest the young playwright admitted that all else concerning her was of no account.

At the same time he insisted that he was not involved with the woman — only with the actress. "I am not a lover—I am a playwright, eager to have my heroine adequately portrayed," he contended with himself in the solitude of his room, high in one of the great apartment buildings of the middle city. Nevertheless, the tremor in his nerves caused him thought.

Her voice. Yes, that, too, was mysterious. Whence came that undertone like the moan of a weary wastrel tortured with dreams of idyllic innocence long lost? Why did her utterance, like her glorious face, always suggest some inner, darker meaning? There were times when she seemed old—old as vice and cruelty, hoarse with complaints, with curses, and then again her lips were childishly sweet,

and her voice carried only the wistful accents of adolescence or the melody of girlish awe.

On the night before his appointment she played *The Baroness Telka*, a lurid, lustful, remorseless woman—a creature with a vampire's heart and the glamour of Helen of Troy—a woman whose cheeks were still round and smooth, but whose eyes were alight with the flame of insanity—a frightful, hungry, soulless wretch. And as he sat at the play and watched that glittering, inexplicable woman, and thought of her rôles, Douglass asked himself: "How will she meet me to-morrow? What will be the light in her eyes when she turns them upon me? Will she meet me alone—haughty, weary with praise, or will she be surrounded by those who bow to her as to a queen?" This latter thing he feared.

He had not been without experience with women—even with actresses; but no woman he had ever met had appealed to his imagination beyond the first meeting. Would it be so with Helen Merival? He had loved twice

in his life, but not well enough to say so to either of his sweethearts. Around Myra's name clung the perfume and moonlight of summer evenings in the far-off mid-continent village where he was born, while Violet recalled the music, the comfort, and the security of a beautiful Eastern home. Neither of these sweet and lovely girls had won his heart completely. How was it that this woman of the blazoning bill-boards had already put more of passion into his heart than they of the pure and sheltered life?

He did not deceive himself. It was because Helen could not be understood at a glance. She appealed to his imagination as some strange bird—alien voyager—fled from distant islands in dim, purple seas. She typed the dreams of adventuring youth seeking the princesses of other and more romantic lands.

At times he shuddered with a fear that some hidden decay of Helen Merival's own soul enabled her to so horrify her audience with these desolating rôles, and when the cur-

tain fell on *The Baroness*, he was resolved to put aside the chance of meeting the actress. Was it worth while to be made ashamed and bitter? She might stand revealed as a coarse and selfish courtesan—a worn and haggard enchantress whose failing life blazed back to youth only when on the stage. Why be disenchanted? But in the end he rose above this boyish doubt. "What does it matter whether she be true or false? She has genius, and genius I need for my play—genius and power," and in the delusion he rested.

He climbed to his den in the tower as physically wearied as one exhausted with running a race, and fell asleep with his eyelids fluttering in a feverish dream.

The hour of his appointment with her fell upon Sunday, and as he walked up the street towards her hotel the bells in a church on a side street were ringing, and their chimes filled his mind with memories of the small town from which he came. How peaceful and sweet the life of Woodstock seemed now. The little

meeting-house, whose shingled spire still pointed at the stars, would always be sweet with the memory of Myra Thurber, whose timid clasp upon his arm troubled him then and pained him now. He had so little to give in return for her devotion—therefore he had given nothing. He had said good-bye almost harshly — his ambition hardening his heart to her appeal.

Around him, in his dream of those far-off days, moved other agile forms—young lovers like Myra and himself, their feet creaking on the glittering snow. They stepped slowly, though the bells called and called. The moonlight was not more clear and untouched of baleful fire than Myra's sweet eyes looking up at him, and now he was walking the wet pavement of the great metropolis, with the clang and grind of cars all about him, on his way to meet a woman whose life was spent in simulating acts as destructive as Myra's had been serene and trustful. At the moment he saw his own life as a thread in some mysterious drama.

"To what does it lead?" he asked, as he drew under the overhanging portal of the great hotel where the star made her home. It was to the man of the West a splendid place. Its builders had been lavish of highly colored marbles and mosaics, spendthrift of light and gilding; on every side shone the signs and seals of predatory wealth. Its walls were like costly confectionery, its ornaments insolent, its waste criminal. Every decorative feature was hot, restless, irreverent, and cruel, quite the sort of avenue one might expect to find in his walk towards the glittering woman of the false and ribald drama.

"She chose her abode with instinctive bad taste," he said, bitterly; and again his weakness, his folly turned him cold; for with all his physical powers he was shy to the point of fear.

He made a sober and singular spot in the blaze of the rotunda. So sombre was his look, so intent his gaze. Youths in high hats and shining shirt-fronts stood in groups conversing loudly, and in the resplendent dining-hall

bediamonded women and their sleek-haired, heavy-jewelled partners were eating leisurely, attended by swarms of waiters so eager they trod upon one another's feet.

The clerk eyed him in impassible silence as he took out his worn card-case, saying: "Please send my card to Miss Merival."

"Miss Merival is not receiving any one this evening," the clerk answered, with a tone which was like the slap of a wet glove in the face.

Douglass faced him with a look which made him reflect. "You will let her be the judge of that," he said, and his tone was that of one accustomed to be obeyed.

The little man bowed. "Oh, certainly, Mr. Douglass, but as she left orders—"

When the boy with his card had disappeared into the candy-colored distances, the playwright found himself again studying the face of his incomprehensible sorceress, who looked down upon him even at that moment from a bulletin-board on the hotel wall, Oriental, savage, and sullen — sad, too, as though alone

in her solitary splendor. "She can't be all of her parts—which one of them will I find as I enter her room?" he asked himself for the hundredth time.

"Miss Merival will see Mr. Douglass," said the bell-boy. "This way, sir."

As he stepped into the elevator the young man's face grew stern and his lips straightened out into a grim line. It was absurd to think he should be so deeply moved by any woman alive, he who prided himself on his self-possession.

Down a long hall on the tenth floor the boy led him, and tapped at a door, which was opened after a pause by a quiet woman who greeted him with outstretched hand, kindly cordial.

"How do you do, Mr. Douglass? It is very good of you to come," she said, with the simplest inflection.

"This must be an elder sister," he thought, and followed her into a large sitting-room, where a gray-haired woman and a young man were sipping after-dinner coffee.

"Mother, this is Mr. Douglass, the author of *The Modern Stage*, the little book of essays we liked so well." The elderly lady greeted him cordially, but with a timid air. "And this is my brother Hugh," the young man gave Douglass's hand a firm and cordial grip.

"Sit down, please—not there—over here, where the light will fall on you. I want to see how you look," she added, in smiling candor; and with that smile he recognized in his hostess the great actress.

He was fairly dazed, and for the moment entirely wordless. From the very moment the door had opened to him the "glittering woman" had been receding into remote and ever remoter distances, for the Helen Merival before him was as simple, candid, and cordial as his own sister. Her voice had the home inflection; she displayed neither paint nor powder; her hair was plainly brushed—beautiful hair it was, too—and her dress was lovely and in quiet taste.

Her face seemed plain at first, just as her

stature seemed small. She was dark, but not so dark as she appeared on the stage, and her face was thinner, a little careworn, it seemed to him; and her eyes—"those leering, wicked eyes"—were large and deep and soft. Her figure was firm, compact, womanly, and modest in every line. No wife could have seemed more of the home than this famous actress who faced him with hands folded in her lap.

He was stupefied. Suddenly he perceived the injustice and the crass folly of his estimate of her character, and with this perception came a broader and deeper realization of her greatness as an actress. Her real self now became more complex than his wildest imagined ideal of her. That this sweet and reflective girl should be the actress was as difficult to understand as that *The Baroness* should be at heart a good woman. For five minutes he hardly heard what she said, so busy was his mind readjusting itself to this abrupt displacement of values. With noiseless suddenness all the lurid light which the

advertiser had thrown around the star died away. The faces which mocked and mourned, the clutching hands, the lines of barbaric ornaments, the golden goblets of debauchery, the jewelled daggers, the poison phials—all those accessories, designed to produce the siren of the posters, faded out, and he found himself face to face with a human being like himself, a thoughtful, self-contained, and rather serious American girl of twenty-six or twenty-eight years of age.

Not merely this, but her attitude towards him was that of a pupil. She lifted eyes to him as to one occupying an intellectual height. She began to tell him how much she enjoyed his little book on the drama, which a friend had recommended to her, but as soon as he had fairly recovered himself he led her away from his own work. "I am supposed to be an architect," he explained. "I write of the stage because I love it—and because I am a failure in my profession. My book is a very slight and unambitious attempt."

"But you know the stage and its principles," she insisted; "and your view of the future is an inspiration to those of us who wish to do good work. Your letter was very helpful to me, for I am deeply discouraged just now. I am disgusted with the drama in which I work. I am weary of these unwholesome parts. You are quite right, I shall never do my best work so long as I am forced to assume such uncongenial rôles. They are all false, every one of them. They are good acting rôles, as acting goes; but I want plays that I can live as well as act. But my manager tells me that the public will not have me in anything else. Do you think they would? Is he right?" She ended in appeal.

"I think the public will take you at your best in anything you do," he replied, with grave gallantry. "I don't know that managers are omniscient. They are only men like the rest of us."

She smiled. "That is high treason; but I'm very much inclined to believe it is true.

I am willing to concede that a theatre must be made to pay, but I am not content to think that this splendid art is always to be measured by the number of dollars which fall into the box-office. Take Westervelt as a type. What ideals has he? None whatever, save to find a play that will run forever and advertise itself."

She had dreams, too, it seemed. She glowed with her plans, and as she timidly presented them Douglass perceived that the woman was entirely unconscious of the false glamour, the whirling light and tumult, which outsiders connected with her name. At the centre of the illumination she sat looking out upon the glorified bill-boards, the gay shop windows, the crowded auditoriums, a wholesome, kindly, intelligent woman, subject to moods of discouragement like himself, unwilling to be a slave to a money-grubber. Something in his face encouraged the story of her struggles. She passed to her personal history while he listened as one enthralled.

The actress fled, and the woman drew near.

She looked into the man's eyes frankly, unshrinkingly, with humor, with appeal. She leaned towards him, and her face grew exquisitely tender and beautiful. "Oh, it was a struggle! Mother kept boarders in order that Hugh and I might go to school—didn't you, dear old muz?" She laid her hand on her mother's knee, and the mother clasped it. "Father's health grew worse and worse, and at last he died, and then I had to leave school to help earn our living. I began to read for entertainments of various sorts. Father was a Grand Army man, and the posts took an interest in my reading. I really earned a thousand dollars the second year. I doubled that the next year, and considered myself a great public success." She smiled. "Mother, may I let Mr. Douglass see how I looked then?"

The mother nodded consent, and the great actress, after a few moments' search, returned with a package of circulars, each bearing a piquant, girlish face.

"There," she said, as she handed them to

Douglass, "I felt the full ecstasy of power when that picture was taken. In this I wore a new gown and a new hat, and I was earning fifty dollars at each reading. My success fairly bewildered me; but oh, wasn't it glorious! I took mother out of a tenement and put her in a lovely little home. I sent Hugh to college. I refurnished the house. I bought pictures and rugs, for you know I continued to earn over two thousand a year. And what fun we had in spending all that money!"

"But how did you reach the stage?" he asked.

She laughed. "By way of 'the Kerosene circuit,' if you know what that means."

"I've heard the phrase," he answered; "it corresponds to the old-time 'barn-storming,' doesn't it?"

"It does."

Hugh interposed. "I wouldn't go into that, sis."

"Why not? It's great fun—now. I used to think it pretty tragic sometimes. Yes, I

was nineteen when I went on the New England rural circuit—to give it a better name. Oh, I've been through all the steps! As soon as I felt a little secure about mother, I ventured to New York in answer to advertisements in *The Reflector*, and went out 'on the road' at 'fifteen per.'" These slang phrases seemed humorous as they came from her smiling lips, but Douglass knew some little part of the toil and discomfort they stood for.

Her eyes danced with fun. "I played *The Lady of Lyons* in a 'kitchen set,' and the death-scene in *East Lynne* before a 'wood drop.' And my costumes were something marvellous, weren't they, mother? Well, this lasted two seasons — summer seasons; while I continued to read in winter in order to indulge my passion for the stage in summer and early autumn. Then I secured a small part in a real company, and at a salary that permitted me to send some money home. I knocked about the country this way two seasons more—that makes me twenty-two. I

knew the office of every manager in New York by this time, but had been able to reach an audience with but one or two. They were kind enough, but failed to 'see anything' in me, as the phrase goes; and I was quite disheartened. Oh, 'the Rialto'!" Her face clouded and her voice softened. "It is a brilliant and amusing place to the successful, but to the girl who walks it seeking a theatrical engagement it is a heartless and cruel place. You can see them there to-day—girls eager and earnest and ready to work hard and conscientiously—haunting the agencies and the anterooms of the managers just as I did in those days—only five years ago."

"It seems incredible," exclaimed Douglass. "I thought you came here from a London success."

"So I did, and that is the miraculous chapter of my story. I went to London with Farnum—with only a little part—but McLennan saw me and liked my work, and asked me to take the American adventuress in his new

play. And then—my fortune was made. The play was only a partial success, but my own position was established. I continued to play the gay and evil-minded French and Russian woman of the English stage till I was tired of them. Then I tried *Joan of Arc* and *Charlotte Corday*. The public forced me back to *The Baroness Telka*, and to wealth and great fame; and then I read your little book, which seemed directed straight to me, and I asked Hugh to write you—now you have the 'story of me life.' I have had no struggle since—only hard work and great acclaim." She faced her mother with a proud smile. Then her face darkened. "But—there is always a but—I want New York to know me in some better way. I'm tired of these women with cigarettes and spangled dinner-gowns."

She laid her hand again on her mother's knee, and the gentle old fingers closed around the firm, smooth wrist.

"I've told mother that I will cut these rôles out. We are at last in a position to do as we

please. I am now waiting for something worth while to come to me. That is my present situation, Mr. Douglass. I don't know why I've been so frank. Now let me hear your play."

He flushed a little. "To tell the truth, I find it rather hard to begin. I feel as though I were re-enacting a worn-out scene in some way. Every other man in the car writes plays nowadays and torments his friends by reading to them, which, I admit, is an abominable practice. However, as I came here for that express purpose, I will at least outline my scenario."

"Didn't you bring the play itself?"

"Yes; but, really, I hesitate. It may bore you to death."

"You could not write a play that would bore me—I am sure of that."

"Very well," he soberly answered, and drew forth his manuscript. As if upon signal, the mother and her son rose to withdraw. "You are entirely justified," said Douglass, with some humor. "I quite understand your feelings."

"We should like very much to hear it, but—"

"No excuses, I beg of you. I wonder at Miss Merival's hardihood. I am quite sure she will live to repent her temerity."

In this spirit of banter the playwright and the star were left alone with the manuscript of the play. As he read on, Douglass was carried out of his own impassivity by the changes in the face before him. It became once more elusive, duskily mysterious in its lines. A reflective shadow darkened the glorious eyes, veiled by drooping lids. Without knowing it, the actress took on from moment to moment the heart-trials of the woman of the play. In a subconscious way even as he read, Douglass analyzed and understood her power. Hers was a soul of swift and subtle sympathy. A word, a mere inflection, was sufficient to set in motion the most complicate and obscure conceptions in her brain, permitting her to comprehend with equal clarity the Egyptian queen of pleasure

and the austere devotee to whom joy is a snare. From time to time she uttered little exclamations of pleasure, and at the end of each act motioned him to proceed, as if eager to get a unified impression.

It was after eleven o'clock when he threw down the manuscript, and, white with emotion, awaited her verdict. She was tense with the strain, and her lashes were wet with tears, but her eyes were bright and her mind alert. She had already entered upon a new part, having been swept up into a region of resolution as far away from the pleasant hostess as from the heartless adventuress whose garments she had worn but the night before. With hands clasped between her knees, and shoulders laxly drooping, she brooded on the sorrows of his mimic world.

"I will do your play," she said at last. "I will do it because I believe in its method and because I think it worthy of my highest powers."

The blood rushed to the playwright's throat and a smarting heat dimmed his eyes. He

spoke with difficulty. "I thank you," he said, hoarsely. "It is more than I expected; and now that you have promised to do it, I feel you ought not to take the risk." He could say no more, overcome by the cordial emphasis of her decision.

"There is a risk, I will be frank with you; but your play is worth it. I have not been so powerfully moved in years. You have thrilled me. Really I cannot tell you how deeply your theme has sunk into my heart. You have the Northern conscience—so have I; that is why I rebel at being merely the plaything of a careless public. Yes, I will do your play. It is a work of genius. I hope you wrote it in a garret. It's the kind of thing to come from a diet of black bread and water."

He smiled. "I live in a sort of garret, and my meals are frequently beans and brown bread. I hope that will do."

"I am glad the bread is at least brown. . . . But you are tired. Leave the manuscript with me." He rose and she moved towards

him with a gesture of confidence which made words impossible to him. "When we meet again I want you to tell me something of yourself. . . . Good-night. You will hear from me soon." She was regal as she said this—regal in her own proper person, and he went away rapt with wonder and admiration of the real Helen Merival as she now stood revealed to him.

"She is greater than my dreams of her," he said, in a sort of rapture as he walked the street. "She is greater than she herself can know; for her genius is of the subtle, unspeakable deeps—below her own consciousness, beyond her own analysis. How much greater her art seems, now that I have seen her. It is marvellous! She will do my play, and she will succeed—her power as an actress would carry it to a success if it were a bad play, which it is not. My day has dawned at last."

Helen went to bed that night with a consciousness that something new and powerful

had come into her life. Not merely the play and her determination to do it moved her—the man himself profoundly impressed her. His seriousness, his decision and directness of utterance, and the idealism which shone from his rugged, boyish face remained with her to the verge of sleep. He was very handsome, and his voice singularly beautiful, but his power to charm lay over and beyond these. His sincere eyes, his freedom from flippant slang, these impressed her with a sense of his reliability, his moral worth.

"He is stern and harsh, but he is fine," she said to her mother next morning, "and his play is very strong. I am going to do it. You will like the part of *Lillian*. It has the Scotch sense of moral responsibility in it."

II

DOUGLASS rose next morning with a bound, as if life had somehow become surcharged with fresh significance, fresh opportunity. His professional career seemed dull and prosaic — his critical work of small avail. His whole mind centred on his play.

His was a moody, sensitive nature. Stern as he looked, and strong as he really was, he could be depressed by a trifle or exalted by a word. And reviewing his meeting with Helen in the light of the morning, he had more than a suspicion that he had allowed himself to talk too freely in the presence of the brother and

mother, and that he had been over-enthusiastic, not to say egotistic; but he was saved from dejection by the memory of the star's great, brown-black eyes. There was no pretence in them. She had been rapt—carried out of conventional words and graces by something which rose from the lines he had written, the characters he had depicted.

The deeper his scrutiny went the more important she became to him. She was not simple—she was very complex, and an artist of wonderful range, and certainty of appeal. He liked the plain and simple (almost angular) gestures and attitudes she used when talking to him. They were so broadly indicative of the real Helen Merival, and so far from the affectations he had expected to see. Of course, she was the actress—the mobility of her face, her command of herself, was far beyond that of any untrained woman, no matter how versatile; but she was nobly the actress, broadened and deepened by her art.

He was very eager to see her again, and as

the day wore on this desire grew to be an ache at his heart most disturbing. He became very restless at last, and did little but walk around the park, returning occasionally as the hour for the postman came. "I don't know why I should expect a letter from her. I know well the dilatory methods of theatrical people—and to-day is rehearsal, too. I am unreasonable. If I hear from her in a week I may count myself lucky."

A message from the dramatic editor of *The Blazon*, asking him to do a special study of an English actor opening that night at the Broadway, annoyed him. "I can't do it," he answered. "I have another engagement." And recklessly put aside the opportunity to earn a week's board, so exalted was he by reason of the word of the woman.

At dinner he lacked appetite entirely, and as he had taken but an egg and a cup of coffee for breakfast, and had missed luncheon altogether, he began to question himself as to the meaning of his ailment, with sad attempt at

humor. "It isn't exactly as serious as dying. Even if she reconsiders and returns my play, I can still make a living." He would not admit that any other motive was involved.

He had barely returned to his room before a knock at the door announced a boy with a note. As he took it in his hand his nerves tingled as though he had touched the wondrous woman's hand. The note was brief, yet fateful:

"I enclose a ticket for the manager's box. I hope you can come. I want to talk about your play. I will send my brother to bring you in back to see me. I have been rehearsing all the afternoon, but I re-read the play this morning while in bed. I like it better and better, but you can do more with it—I feel that you have suppressed the poetry here and there. My quarrel with you realists is that you are afraid to put into your representations of life the emotions that make life a dynamic thing. But it is stirring and sug-

gestive as it is. Come in and talk with me, for I am full of it and see great possibilities in the final act."

His hands were tremulous and his eyes glowing as he put the note down and faced himself in the glass. The pleasure of meeting her again under such conditions made him forget, for the moment, the rôle she was to play—a part he particularly detested. Truly he was the most fortunate and distinguished of men—to be thus taken by the hand and lifted from nameless obscurity to the most desired position beside a great star.

He dressed with unusual care, and was a noticeably handsome figure as he sat alone in the box; and elated, tense, self-conscious. When she came on and walked close down to the footlights nearest him, flashing a glance of recognition into his eyes, his breath quickened and his face flushed. A swift interchange of light and fire took place at the moment, her eyelids fell. She recoiled as if in

dismay, then turned and apparently forgot him and every one else in the fervor of her art.

A transforming readjustment of all the lines of her face took place. She became sinister, mocking, and pitiless. An exultant cruelty croaked in her voice. Minute, repulsive remodellings of her neck and cheeks changed her to a harpy, and seeing these evidences of her great genius Douglass grew bitterly resentful, and when she laughed, with the action of a vulture thrusting her head forward from the shoulders, he sickened and turned away. It was marvellous work, but how desecrating to her glorious womanhood. Coming so close on that moment of mystic tenderness it was horrible. "My God! She must not play such parts. They will leave their mark upon her."

When the curtain fell he did not applaud, but drew back into the shadow, sullen, brooding, sorrowful. In the tableau which followed the recall, her eyes again sought for him (though she still moved in character), and

the curtain fell upon the scene while yet she was seeking him.

Here now began a transformation in the man. He had come to the theatre tremulous with eagerness to look upon her face, to touch her hand, but when her brother entered the box, saying, "Mr. Douglass, this is the best time to see my sister," he rose slowly with a curious reluctance.

Through devious passages beneath the theatre, Hugh led the way, while with greater poignancy than ever before the young playwright sensed the vulgarity, the immodesty, and the dirt of the world behind and below the scenes. It was all familiar enough to him, for he had several friends among the actors, but the thought of one so sovereign as Helen in the midst of a region so squalid stung him. He was jealous of the actors, the scene-shifters, who were permitted to see her come and go.

He was reserved and rather pale, but perfectly self-contained, as he entered the little reception-hall leading to her dressing-room.

He faced her with a sense of dread—apprehensive of some disenchantment. She met him cordially, without the slightest reference to her make-up, which was less offensive than he had feared; but he winced, nevertheless, at the vulgarity of her part so skilfully suggested by paint and powder. She gave him her hand with a frank gesture. "You didn't applaud my scenes to-night," she said, with a smile as enigmatic as the one she used in *The Baroness.*

His voice was curt with emotion as he replied, "No, I did not; I couldn't. They saddened me."

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a startled, anxious paling beneath her rouge.

His voice was low, but fiercely reproachful in answer. "I mean you should treat your beautiful self and your splendid art with greater consideration."

"You mean I should not be playing such women? I know it—I hate them. But no one ever accused me of taking my art lightly. I work harder on these uncongenial rôles than

upon any other. They require infinitely more effort, because I loathe them so."

"I mean more than that. I am afraid to have you simulate such passions. They will leave their mark on you. It is defilement. Your womanhood is too fine, too beautiful to be so degraded."

She put her hand to her bosom and looked about her restlessly. His intensity scared her. "I know what you mean, but let us not talk of that now; let us discuss your play. I want to suggest something for your third act, but I must dress now. You will wait, won't you? We will have a few minutes before I go on. Please sit here and wait for me."

He acquiesced silently, as was his fashion. There was little of the courtier about him, but he became very ill at ease as he realized how significant his waiting must seem to those who saw him there. Deeply in the snare as he was, this sitting beside an actress's dressing-room door became intolerable to his arrogant soul, and he was about to flee when Hugh came

back and engaged him in conversation. So gratified was Douglass for this kindness, he made himself agreeable till such time as Helen, in brilliant evening-dress, came out; and when Hugh left them together he was less assertive and brusque in manner.

She was so luminous, so queenly, she dissipated his cloud of doubts and scruples, and the tremor of the boyish lover came back into his limbs as he turned to meet her. His voice all but failed him as he answered to her question.

For some ten minutes from behind her mask she talked of the play with enthusiasm—her sweet eyes untouched of the part she was about to resume. At last she said: "There is my cue. Good-bye! Can you breakfast with us to-morrow, at eleven-thirty? It's really a luncheon. I know you are an early riser; but we will have something substantial. Will you come?"

Her smooth, strong fingers closed cordially on his hand as she spoke, and he answered,

quickly, "With the greatest pleasure in the world."

"We can talk at our leisure then. Good-bye!" and as she opened the canvas door in the "box-scene" he heard her say, with high, cool, insulting voice, "Ah, my dear Countess, you are early." She was *The Baroness* again. After the fall of the curtain at the end, Douglass slipped out upon the pavement, his eyes blinded by the radiant picture she made in her splendid bridal robes. It was desolating to see her represent such a rôle, such agony, such despair; and yet his feet were reluctant to carry him away.

He was like a famishing man, who has been politely turned from the glittering, savory dining-room into the street—only his hunger, immaterial as light, was a thousand times keener than that of the one who lacks only bread and meat. He demanded her face, her voice, as one calls for sunlight, for air. He knew that this day, this night, marked a new era in his life. Old things were passed away

—new things, sweet, incredible things, were now happening.

Nothing like this unrest and deep-seated desire had ever come into his life, and the realization troubled him as a dangerous weakness. It enslaved him, and he resented it. He secured a new view on his play, also, with its accusing defiance of dramatic law and custom. In this moment of clear vision he was permitted a prevision of Helen struggling with the rebellious critics. Now that he had twice taken her hand he was no longer so indifferent to the warfare of the critics, though he knew they could not harm one so powerful as she.

In the end of his tumult he wrote her a letter, wherein he began by begging her pardon for seeming to interfere in the slightest degree with her work in the world. His letter continued:

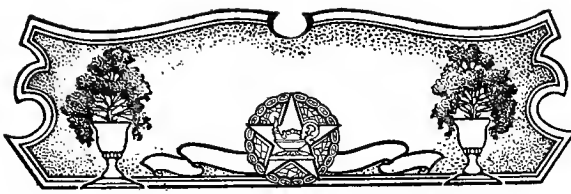
"I have back of me the conscience of my Scotch forebears, and though my training in college and in my office has covered my

conscience with a layer of office dust it is still there. Of course (and obviously) you are not touched by the words and deeds of the women you represent, but I somehow feel that it is a desecration of your face and voice to put them to such uses. That is the reason I dreaded to go back and see you to-night. If you were seeking praise of your own proper self, the sincerity of this compliment is unquestionable. I ought to say, 'I hope my words to-night did not disturb you,' but I will not, for I hope to see you speedily drop all such hideous characters as *The Baroness Telka*. I felt as an artist might upon seeing a glorious statue befouled with mire. I say this not because I wish you to do *Lillian*. In the light of last night's performance my own play is a gray autumn day with a touch of frost in the air. It is inconceivable that you should be vitally interested in it. I fear no play that I care to write will please a sufficient number of people to make its production worth your while. I release you from your promise. Be-

lieve me, I am shaken in my confidence to-night. Your audience seemed so heartless, so debased of taste. They applauded most loudly the things most revolting to me. Since I have come to know you I cannot afford to have you make a sacrifice of yourself to produce my play, much as I desire to see you in new characters."

As he dropped this letter into the box a storm-wave of his former bitterness and self-accusation swept over him.

"That ends another attempt to get my play staged. Her manager will unquestionably refuse to consider it."



III

HELEN read Douglass's letter next morning while still in bed, and its forthright assault made her shiver. She did not attempt to deceive herself. She acknowledged the singular power of this young man to shake her, to change her course of action. From the first she acknowledged something almost terrifying in the appeal of his eyes, a power which he seemed unconscious of. His words of condemnation, of solicitude, troubled her as the praise of no other man in all her life had done. He had spoken to her soul, making her triumph over the vast audience loathsome—almost criminal.

He was handsome—a manly man—but so were dozens of others of her wide acquaintance. His talent was undeniable, but he was still obscure, undeveloped, a failure as an architect, unambitious as a critic, though that was his best point. His articles in *The Blazon* possessed unusual insight and candor. Beyond this she knew as little of him as of any other of the young newspaper men who sought her acquaintance, and yet he had somehow changed her world for her in these two meetings.

She let the letter fall on her breast, and lay with her eyes fastened upon a big rose in a pot on the window-sill—the gift of another admirer. "I do know more of him. I know that he is strong, sincere. He does not flatter me—not even to win me to his play. He does not hasten to send me flowers, and I like him for that. If I were to take his point of view, all my rôles and half my triumphs would drop from me. But *is* there not a subtle letting-down, a disintegration? May he not be right, after all?"

She went over once more the talk of the few moments they had spent together, finding each time in all his words less to criticise and more to admire. "He does not conceal his hate," she said; and she might have added, "Or his love," for she was aware of her dominion, and divined, though she did not whisper it even to herself, that his change of attitude with regard to her rôles came from his change of feeling towards her. "He has a great career. I will not allow him to spoil his own future," she decided, at length, in her own large-minded way. And there were sweet, girlish lines about her mouth when her mother came in to inquire how she felt.

"Very much like work, mamma, and I'm going to catch up on my correspondence. Mr. Douglass is coming to take breakfast with us, to talk about his play. I wish you would see that there is something that a big man can eat."

The note she sent in answer to his was like herself—firm, assured, but gentle:

"MR. DOUGLASS,—'What came you out for to see—a reed shaken with the wind?' I know my own mind, and I am not afraid of my future. I should be sorry to fail, of course, especially on your account, but a *succès d'estime* is certain in your case, and my own personal following is large enough—joined with the actual lovers of good drama — to make the play pay for itself. Please come to my combination breakfast and luncheon, as you promised, and we can arrange dates and other details of the production, for my mind is made up. I am going to do your play, come what will. I thank you for having started all my dormant resolutions into life again. I shall expect you at twelve-thirty."

Having despatched this note by special messenger, she serenely set to work on less important matters, and met him in modish street dress — trim and neat and very far from the meretricious glitter of *The Baroness*. He was glad of this; he would have dis-

liked her in négligée, no matter how "artistic."

Her greeting was frank and unstudied. "I'm glad you've come. There are oceans of things to talk over."

"There was nothing else for me to do but come," he replied, with a meaning light in his eyes. "Your letter was a command."

"I'm sorry it takes a command to bring you to breakfast with us. True, this is not the breakfast to be given in your honor—that will come later."

"It would be safer to have it before the play is produced," he replied, grimly.

Helen turned to her brother. "Hugh, we have in Mr. Douglass a man not sanguine of the success of his play. What does that argue?"

"A big hit!" he promptly replied.

The servants came and went deftly, and Douglass quite lost sight of the fact that the breakfast-room was high in a tower-like hotel, for Helen's long engagement in the city

had enabled her to make herself exceedingly comfortable even amid the hectic color and insistent gilt of the Hotel Embric. The apartment not only received the sun, a royal privilege in New York, but it was gay with flowers, both potted and in vases, and the walls were decorated with drawings of her own choosing. Only the furniture remained uncompromisingly of the hotel tone.

"I did intend to refurnish, but mother, who retains a little of her old Scotch training, talked me out of it," Helen explained, in answer to a query. "Is there anything more hopelessly 'handsome' and shining than these chairs? There's so little to find fault with, and so little to really admire."

"They're like a ready-made suit—unobjectionable, but not fit."

"They have no soul. How could they have? They were made by machines for undistinguished millions." She broke off this discussion. "I am eager for a run through the park. Won't you go? Hugh is my en-

gineer. Reckless as he looks, I find him quite reliable as a tinker, and you know the auto is still in the tinkery stage."

"I have a feeling that it is still in the dangerous stage," he said. "But I will go." He said this in a tone of desperation which amused them all very much.

It was impossible for him to remain glum in the midst of the good cheer of that luxurious little breakfast with the promise of a ride in the park in prospect. A few moments later a young girl, Miss Fanny Cummings, came in with a young man who looked like an actor, but was, in fact, Hugh's college-mate and "advance man" for Helen, and together they went down to the auto-car.

There was a well-defined sense of luxury in being in Helen Merival's party. The attendants in the hotel were so genuinely eager to serve her, and the carefully considered comfort of everything she possessed was very attractive to a man like George Douglass, son of a village doctor, who had toiled from child-

hood to earn every dollar he spent. To ride in such swift and shining state with any one would have had extraordinary interest, and to sit beside Helen in the comparative privacy of the rear seat put a boyish glow of romance into his heart. Her buoyant and sunny spirit reacted on his moody and supersensitive nature till his face shone with pleasure. He forgot his bitter letter of the night before, and for the moment work and worry were driven from his world. He entered upon a dreamland—the city of menace disappeared.

The avenue was gay with promenaders and thick with carriages. Other autos met them with cordial clamor of gongs, and now and then some driver more lawless than Hugh dashed past them in reckless race towards the park. The playwright had never seen so many of New York's glittering carriages, and the growing arrogance of its wealth took on a new aspect from his newly acquired viewpoint. Here were rapidly centring the great leaders of art, of music, of finance. Here the

social climbers were clustering, eager to be great in a city of greatness. Here the chief ones in literature and the drama must come as to a market-place, and with this thought came a mighty uplift. "Surely success is now mine," he thought, exultantly, "for here I sit the favored dramatist of this wondrous woman."

There was little connected conversation—only short volleys of jests as they whizzed along the splendid drives of the park—but Douglass needed little more than Helen's shining face to put him at peace with all the world. Each moment increased their intimacy.

He told her of his stern old father, a country doctor in the West, of the way in which his brother and sisters were scattered from North to South, and how he came to set his face Eastward while all the others went West.

"How handsome he is," thought Helen.

"How beautiful you are," his glances said

in answer, and both grew young beneath the touch of love.

When they were once more in the hotel Helen cried out:

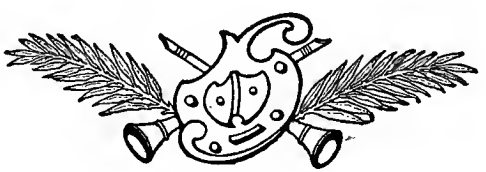
"There! Isn't your brain washed clear of all doubts? Come, let's to work at the play."

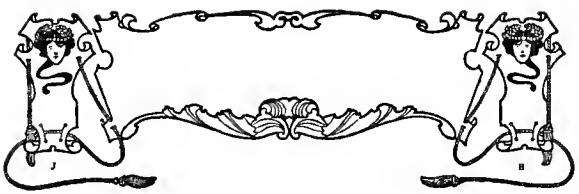
He looked down at her with eyes whose glow made her eyelids fall in maidenly defence. "I am capable of anything you ask," he said, with quiet power.

After a long and spirited discussion of the last act she said: "Well, now, we'll put it in rehearsal as soon as you feel that it is ready. I believe in doing a part while the spell of its newness is on me. I shall put this on in place of the revival of *Rachel Endicott.*" She rose on the wave of her enthusiasm. "I feel the part taking hold of me. I will make *Lillian's Duty* the greatest success of my life, and the lion's share of both honor and money shall be yours."

He left the hotel quite as exalted as he had been previously depressed. The pleasure of

sitting by her side for four blessed hours enriched him to the point of being sorry for all the rest of the world. The Prince of Wales had been denied an introduction to her, he had read; therefore the Prince was poor.





IV

THE reading of the play took place on the Monday morning following, and was an exceedingly formal and dignified function. The principal players came prepared to be politely interested, while some of the lesser minds were actually curious to taste the quality of the play as a piece of writing.

As there was no greenroom in the Westervelt, the reading took place on the open stage, which was bleak and draughty. The company sat in a funereal semicircle, with the author, the star, and the manager in a short line facing them. All the men retained their

overcoats, for the morning was miserably raw, and at Helen's positive command kept their heads covered; and the supernumerary women sat shivering in their jackets. Helen was regal in a splendid cloak of sable, otherwise there was little of the successful actress in her dress. At her suggestion a box-scene was set around them to keep off at least a part of the draught, and under these depressing conditions the reading proceeded.

Douglass was visibly disheartened by the surroundings, but set manfully to work, and soon controlled the attention of all the players except two, who made it a boast that they had never read a play or listened to one. "I am interested only in me lines, me boy," said one of them.

"And your acting shows it," replied Douglass, with quiet sarcasm, and proceeded to the second act.

"You read that with greater power here than to me," said Helen. "I wish we could give it the same unity and sweep of expression

as we act it." She addressed the company in her calm, clear voice: "I hope you will all observe carefully Mr. Douglass's reading. He is giving us most valuable advice in every inflection."

Her attitude towards her company was admirable in its simplicity and reserve. It was plain that she respected their personalities and expected the same high courtesy from them. Some of the men were of the kind who say "My deah" to every woman, and "My deah boy" to the most casual acquaintance—vain, egotistical, wordy, and pompous; but one glance from Helen was sufficient to check an over-familiar hand in mid-air. The boldest of them did not clap her on the shoulder but once.

The reading passed to a rather enthusiastic finish, and Douglass then said: "I have read the play to you carefully, because I believe—*I know*—that an intelligent rendition of your individual parts is impossible without a clear knowledge of the whole drama. My theories

of a play and its representation are these: As an author, I see every detail of a scene as if it were a section of life. I know where all my people are at each moment of time, and their positions must be determined by the logic of the picture without any reference to those who wish to hold the centre of the stage. In a certain sense you are only different-colored pigments in my hands, to be laid on to form a unified painting. You must first of all learn to subordinate yourselves to the designs of the author. I know this sounds harsh—seems to reduce you to a very low level of intelligence; but, as a matter of fact, the most highly gifted of our actors to-day are those who are able to do this very thing—to carry in their minds a conception of the unity of a scene, never thrusting their personalities through it or out of it. I mention these points because I intend to assist in the rehearsals, and I don't want to be misunderstood."

Helen interposed a word: "I need not say that I consider this a very powerful play—

with that opinion you all agree, I am sure—but I want to say further that Mr. Douglass has the right to demand of each of us subordination to the inner design of his work. I am personally very glad always to avail myself of the author's criticism and suggestion. I hope you will all feel the same willingness to carry out Mr. Douglass's scenes as he has written them. Mr. Saunders, will you please give out the parts and call a rehearsal for to-morrow at ten o'clock sharp?"

At this point all rose. Saunders, a plain little man, highly pleased with his authority, began to bustle about, bellowing boisterously: "Here you are now—everybody come letter-perfect to-morrow. Sharp at ten. No lagging."

The players, accustomed to his sounding assumption of command, paid no attention other than to clutch their rolls of type-written manuscript. Each withdrew into the street with an air of haste.

As Helen received her portion Saunders

said: "Here, Miss Merival, is a fat part—must be yours. Jee-rusalem the golden! I'd hate to tackle that rôle."

Douglass was ready to collar the ass for his impudent tone, but Helen seemed to consider it no more than the harmless howl of a chair sliding across the floor. She was inured to the old-time "assistant stage-manager."

Turning to Douglass, she said, "Do you realize, Mr. Author, that we are now actually begun upon your play?"

"No, I do not. I confess it all seems a make-believe—a joke."

"You'll not think it a joke at the end of the week. It's terribly hard work to put on a big piece like this. If I seem apathetic in my part I beg you not to worry. I must save myself all I can. I never begin to act at rehearsal till I have thought the business all out in my mind. But come, you are to lunch with us in honor of the first rehearsal, and it is late."

"It seems a deplorable thing that you must

come every morning to this gloomy and repellent place—"

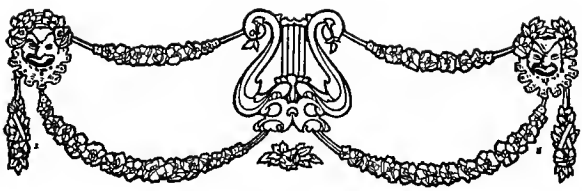
"Ah! this is a part of our life the public knows nothing of. They all come to it—the divine Sarah, Duse—none are exempt. The glamour of the foot-lights at night does not warm the theatre at eleven of the morning."

"I see it does not," he answered, lightly; but in reality he felt that something sweet and something regal was passing out of his conception of her. To see her even seated with these commonplace men and women detracted even from her glory, subjected her to the same laws. It was a relief to get out into the gay street—to her carriage, and to the hotel where the attendants hovered about her as bees about their queen.

She was in high spirits all through the luncheon, and Douglass was carried out of his dark gravity by her splendid vitality, her humor, and her hopefulness.

"All you need is a hearing," she said. "And you shall have that. Oh, but there is a wil-

derness of work before us! Can you design the scenes? I like to do that. It's like playing with doll-houses. I'll show you how. We'll leave the financial side of it to you, Hugh," she said, to her brother. "Come, Mr. Playwright," and they set to work with paste and card-board like a couple of children, and soon had models of all the sets. They seemed childish things indeed, but Helen was mistress of even the mechanical side of the stage, and these paste-pot sketches were of the greatest value to the scene-painter and the carpenter.



V

THESE three weeks of rehearsal formed the happiest time Douglass had ever known, for all things conspired to make each day brim with mingled work and worship. First of all, and above all, he was permitted to meet Helen each day, and for hours each day, without fear of gossip and without seeking for an excuse.

Each morning, a little before ten, he left his room and went directly to the theatre to meet the company and the manager. The star, prompt as a clock, arrived soon after, and Douglass, beforehand, as a lover, was always there to help her from her carriage and to lead

the way through the dark passage to the stage, where the pompous little Saunders was forever marshalling his uneasy vassals in joyous exercise of sovereignty.

Helen was happy as a child during these days, and glowing with new ideas of "business" and stage-setting. "We will spare no work and no expense," she said, buoyantly, to Mr. Westervelt, her manager. "We have a drama worthy of us. I want every one of Mr. Douglass's ideas carried out."

The manager did not know, as Douglass did, that some of the ideas were her own, and so took a melancholy view of every innovation.

"You can't do that," he gloomily repeated. "The public won't stand for new things. They want the old scenes rehashed. The public don't want to think; it wants to laugh. This story is all right for a book, but won't do for a play. I don't see why you quit a good thing for a risk like this. It is foolish and will lose money," he added, as a climax.

"Croak, you old raven—you'll be embar-

rassed when we fill your money-box," she replied, gayly. "You should have an ideal, Mr. Westervelt."

"An ideal. What should I do with that?"

Like most men, Douglass knew nothing about gowns in their constituent parts, but he had a specially keen eye for the fitting and beautiful in a woman's toilet, and Helen was a constant delight to him because of the distinction of her dresses. They were refined, yet not weakly so — simple, yet always alluring. Under the influence of her optimism (and also because he did not wish to have her apologize for him) he drew on his slender bank-account for funds to provide himself with a carefully tailored suit of clothes and a new hat.

"How well you are looking!" she said, in soft aside, as he met her one morning soon after. "Your hat is very becoming."

"I am made all over new *inside*—so I hastened to typify the change exteriorly. I am rejoiced if you like me in my 'glad rags,'" he replied.

"You are really splendid," she answered, with admiring fervor. "Let us hurry through to-day; I am tired and want a spin in the park."

"That is for you to say," he answered.

"You are never tired," she sighed. "I wish I had your endurance."

"It is the endurance of desperation. I am staking all I have on this venture." Then, in low-toned intensity, he added: "It hurts me to have you forced to go over and over these lines because of the stupidity of a bunch of cheap little people. Why don't you let me read your part?"

"That would not be fair," she answered, quickly—"neither to them nor to you. No, I am an actress, and this is a part of my life. We are none of us exempt from the universal curse."

"Royleston is our curse. Please let me kick him out the stage-door—he is an insufferable ass, and a bad actor besides."

"He is an ass, but he can act. No, it's too

late to change him now. Wait; be patient. He'll pull up and surprise you at the final rehearsal."

At four o'clock they were spinning up Fifth Avenue, which resounded with the hoof-strokes of stately horses, and glittered with the light of varnished leather. The rehearsal was put far behind them. The day was glorious November, and the air sparkling without being chill. A sudden exaltation seized Helen. "It certainly is a beautiful world—don't you think so?" she asked.

"I do now; I didn't two weeks ago," he replied, soberly.

"What has brought the change?"

"You have." He looked at her steadily.

She chose to be evasive. "I had a friend some years ago who was in the deeps of despair because no one would publish her book. Once she had secured the promise of a real publisher that he would take it she was radiant. She thought the firm had been wondrously kind. They made thirty thousand

dollars from the sale of her book. I am selfish—don't you think I'm not—I'm going to make fame and lots of money on your play."

"I hope you may, for am I not to share in all your gold and glory? I have greater need of both than you. You already have all that mortal could desire. I don't believe I've told you what I called you before I met you—have I?"

"No; what was it?" Her eyes widened with interest.

"'The glittering woman.'"

She looked puzzled. "Why that?"

"Because of the glamour, the mystery, which surrounded your name."

"Even now I don't see."

He looked amused and cried out: "On my life, I believe you don't! Being at the source of the light, you can't see it, of course. It's like wearing a crown of electric lamps—others see you as a dazzling thing; you are in the dark. It is my trade to use words to express my meaning, but I confess my hesitation in

trying to make you see yourself as I saw you. You were like a baleful, purple star, something monstrous yet beautiful. Your fame filled the world and fell into my garret chamber like a lurid sunrise. With your coming, mysterious posters bloomed and crimson letters blazed on street-walls. Praiseful paragraphs appeared in the newspapers, gowns and hats (named after you) and belt-buckles and shoes and cigarettes arranged themselves in the windows, each bearing your name."

"What a load of tinsel for a poor little woman to carry around! How it must have shocked you to find me so commonplace! None of us escape the common fates. It is always a surprise to me to discover how simple the men of great literary fame are. A friend of mine once spent a whole evening with a great novelist without discovering who he was. She said to him when she found him out, 'I couldn't believe that any one I could meet could be great.' Really, I hope you will forgive me for not being as superhuman as

my posters. It was the mystery of the unknown. If you knew all about me I would be entirely commonplace." She was more concerned about his opinion of her than she expressed in words. Her eagerness appeared in her voice.

"I found you infinitely more womanly than I had supposed, and simpler. Even yet I don't see how you can carry this oppressive weight of advertising glory and still be—what you are."

"You seem to hesitate to tell me what I am."

"I do," he gravely answered, and for a moment she sat in silence.

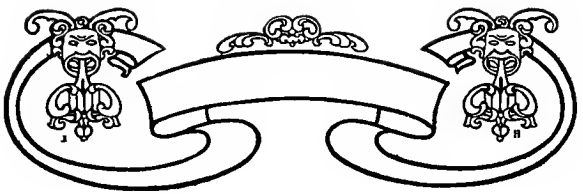
"There's one objection to your assisting at rehearsals," she said, irrelevantly. "You will lose all the intoxication of seeing your play freshly bodied forth. It will be a poor, old, ragged story for you at the end of the three weeks."

"I've thought of that; but there are other compensations."

"You mean the pleasure of having the work go right—"

"Yes, partly that—partly the suggestion that comes from a daily study of it."

But the greatest compensation of all—the joy in her daily companionship—he did not have the courage to mention, and though she divined other and deeper emotions she, too, was silent.



VI

IN the wearisome grind of rehearsal, Douglass was deeply touched and gratified by Helen's efforts to aid him. She was always willing to try again, and remained self-contained even when the author flung down the book and paced the stage in a breathless rage. "Ah, the stupidity of these people!" he exclaimed, after one of these interruptions. "They are impossible. They haven't the brains of a rabbit. Take Royleston; you'd think he ought to know enough to read a simple line like that, but he doesn't. He can't even imitate my way of reading it. They're all so absorbed in their plans to make a hit—"

"Like their star," she answered, with a gleam in her eyes, "and the author."

"But our aims are larger."

"But not more vital; their board and washing hang on their success."

He refused to smile. "They are geese. I hate to have you giving time and labor to such numskulls. You should give your time to your own part."

"I'm a quick study. Please don't worry about me. Come, let's go on; we'll forget all about it to-morrow," and with a light hand on his arm she led him back to the front of the stage, and the rehearsal proceeded.

It was the hardest work he ever did, and he showed it. Some of the cast had to be changed. Two dropped out—allured by a better wage—and all the work on their characterizations had to be done over. Others were always late or sick, and Royleston was generally thick-headed from carousal at his club. Then there were innumerable details of printing and scenery to be decided upon,

and certain overzealous minor actors came to him to ask about their wigs and their facial make-up.

In desperation over the small-fry he took the stage himself, helping them in their groupings and exits, which kept him on his feet and keyed to high nervous tension for hours at a time, so that each day his limbs ached and his head swam at the close of the last act.

He marvelled at Helen's endurance and at her self-restraint. She was always ready to interpose gently when hot shot began to fly, and could generally bring about a laugh and a temporary truce by some pacific word.

Hugh and Westervelt both came to her to say: "Tell Douglass to let up. He expects too much of these people. He's got 'em rattled. Tell him to go and slide down-hill somewhere."

"I can't do that," she answered. "It's his play—his first play—and—he's right. He has an ideal, and it will do us all good to live up to it."

To this Hugh replied, with bitterness, "You're too good to him. I wish you weren't quite so—" He hesitated. "They're beginning to talk about it."

"About what?" she asked, quickly.

"About his infatuation."

Her eyes grew steady and penetrating, but a slow, faint flush showed her self-conscious ness. "Who are talking?"

"Westervelt — the whole company." He knew his sister and wished he had not spoken, but he added: "The fellows on the street have noticed it. How could they help it when you walk with him and eat with him and ride with him?"

"Well?" she asked, with defiant inflection. "What is to follow? Am I to govern my life to suit Westervelt or the street? I admire and respect Mr. Douglass very much. He has more than one side to him. I am sick of the slang of the Rialto and the greenroom. I'm tired of cheap witticisms and of gossip. With Mr. Douglass I can discuss calmly and

rationally many questions which trouble me. He helps me. To talk with him enables me to take a deep breath and try again. He enables me to forget the stage for a few hours."

Hugh remained firm. "But there's your own question—what's to be the end of it? You can't do this without getting talked about."

She smiled, and the glow of her humor disarmed him. "Sufficient unto the end is the evil thereof. I don't think you need to worry—"

Hugh was indeed greatly troubled. He began to dislike and suspect Douglass. They had been antipathetic from the start, and no advance on the author's part could bring the manager nearer. It was indeed true that the young playwright was becoming a marked figure on the street, and the paragrapher of *The Saucy Swells* spoke of him not too obscurely as the lucky winner of "our modern Helen," which was considered a smart allusion. This paragraph was copied by the lead-

ing paper of his native city, and his father wrote to know if it were really true that he was about to marry a play-actress.

This gave a distinct shock to Douglass, for it made definite and very moving the vague dreams which had possessed him in his hours of reflection. His hands clinched, and while his heart beat fast and his breath shortened he said: "Yes, I will win her if I can"; but he was not elated. The success of his play was still in the future, and till he had won his wreath he had no right to address her in any terms but those of friendship.

In spite of the flood of advance notices and personal paragraphs, in spite of envious gossip, he lived on quietly in his attic-room at the Roanoke. He had few friends and no intimates in the city, and cared little for the social opportunities which came to him. Confident of success, he gave up his connection with *The Blazon*, whose editor valued his special articles on the drama so much as to pay him handsomely for them. The editor of this

paper, Mr. Anderson, his most intimate acquaintance, was of the Middle West, and from the first strongly admired the robust thought of the young architect whose "notions" concerning the American drama made him trouble among his fellow-craftsmen.

"You're not an architect, you're a critic," he said to him early in their accidental acquaintance. "Now, I want to experiment on you. I want you to see Irving to-night and write your impressions of it. I have a notion you'll startle my readers."

He did. His point of view, so modern, so uncompromising, so unshaded by tradition, delighted Anderson, and thereafter he was able to employ the young playwright regularly. These articles came to have a special value to the thoughtful "artists" of the stage, and were at last made into a little book, which sold several hundred copies, besides bringing him to the notice of a few congenial cranks and come-outers who met in an old tavern far down in the old city.

These articles—this assumption of the superior air of the critic—led naturally to the determination to write a play to prove his theories, and now that the play was written and the trial about to be made his anxiety to win the public was very keen. He had a threefold reason for toiling like mad—to prove his theories, to gain bread, and to win Helen; and his concentration was really destructive. He could think of nothing else. All his correspondence ceased. He read no more; he went no more to his club. His only diversions were the rides and the lunches which he took with Helen.

With her in the park he was a man transformed. His heaviness left him. His tongue loosened, and together they rose above the toilsome level of the rehearsal and abandoned themselves to the pure joy of being young. Together they visited the exhibitions of painting and sculpture, and to Helen these afternoons were a heavenly release from her own world.

It made no difference to her who objected to her friendship with Douglass. After years of incredible solitude and seclusion and hard work in the midst of multitudes of admirers and in the swift-beating heart of cities, with every inducement to take pleasure, she had remained the self-denying student of acting. Her summers had been spent in England or France, where she saw no one socially and met only those who were interested in her continued business success. Now she abandoned this policy of reserve and permitted herself the joys of a young girl in company with a handsome and honorable man, denying herself even to the few.

She played badly during these three weeks, and Westervelt was both sad and furious. Her joyous companionship with Douglass, her work on his sane and wholesome drama, their discussions of what the stage should be and do unfitted her for the factitious parts she was playing.

"I am going to drop all of these characters

into the nearest abyss," she repeated each time with greater intensity. "I shall never play them again after your drama is ready. My contract with Westervelt has really expired so far as his exclusive control over me is concerned, and I will not be coerced into a return to such work."

Her eyes were opened also to the effect of her characters on the audiences that assembled night after night to hear her, and she began to be troubled by the thousands of young girls who flocked to her matinées. "Is it possible that what I call 'my art' is debasing to their bright young souls?" she asked herself. "Is Mr. Douglass right? Am I responsible?"

It was the depression of these moods which gave her corresponding elation as she met her lover's clear, calm eyes of a morning, and walked into the atmosphere of his drama, whose every line told for joy and right living as well as for serious art.

Those were glorious days for her—the de-

licious surprise of her surrender came back each morning. She had loved once, with the sweet single-heartedness of a girl, shaken with sweet and yielding joy of a boyish face and a slim and graceful figure. What he had said she could not remember; what he was, no longer counted; but what that love had been to her mattered a great deal, for when he passed out of her life the glow of his worship remained in her heart, enabling her to keep a jealous mastery of her art and to remain untouched by the admiration of those who sought her favor in every city she visited. Douglass was amazed to find how restricted her social circle was. Eagerly sought by many of the great drawing-rooms of the city, she seldom went to even the house of a friend.

"Her art is a jealous master," her intimates were accustomed to say, implying that she had remained single in order that she might climb higher on the shining ladder of fame, and in a sense this was true; but she was not sordid in her ambitions—she was a child of

nature. She loved rocks, hills, trees, and clouds. And it was this elemental simplicity of taste which made Douglass the conquering hero that he was. She felt in him concrete, rugged strength and honesty of purpose, as wide as the sky from the polished courtesy and the conventional evasions of her urban admirers.

"No, I am not a bit in society," she confessed, in answer to some remark from him. "I couldn't give up my time and strength to it if I wished, and I don't wish. I'd rather have a few friends in for a quiet little evening after the play than go to the swellest reception."

During all this glorious time no shadow of approaching failure crossed their horizon. The weather might be cold and gray; their inner sky remained unspotted of any vapor. If it rained, they lunched at the hotel; if the day was clear they ran out into the country or through the park in delightful comradeship, gay, yet thoughtful, full of brisk talk, even

argument, but not on the drama. She had said, "Once for all, I do not intend to talk shop when I am out for pleasure," and he respected her wishes. He had read widely though haphazardly, and his memory was tenacious, and all he had, his whole mind, his best thought, was at her command during those hours of recreation.

He began to see the city from the angle of the successful man. It no longer menaced him; he even began to dream of dominating it by sheer force of genius. When at her side he was invincible. Her buoyant nature transformed him. Her faith, her joy in life was a steady flame; nothing seemed to disturb her or make her afraid. And she attributed this strength, this joyous calm, to his innate sense of power—and admired him for it. That he drew from her, relied upon her, never entered her conception of their relations to each other.

Nevertheless, as the play was nearing its initial production the critics loomed larger.

Together they ran over the list. "There is the man who resembles Shakespeare?" she asked.

"He will be kindly."

"And the fat man with shifty gray eyes?"

"He will slate us, unless—"

"And the big man with the grizzled beard?"

"We'll furnish him a joke or two."

"And the man who comes in on crutches?"

"He'll slaughter us; he hates the modern."

"Then the man who looks like Lincoln?"

"He is on our side. But how about the man with the waxed mustache?"

"He'll praise me."

"And slit the playwright's ears. Well, I will not complain. What will the 'Free Lance' do—the one who accepts bribes and cares for his crippled daughter like an angel—what will he do?"

"Well, that depends. Do you know him?"

"I do not, and don't care to. That exhausts the list of the notables; the rest are

bright young fellows who are ready to welcome a good thing. Some of them I know slightly, but I do not intend to do one thing, aside from my work, to win their support."

"That is right, of course. Westervelt may take a different course." And in this confident way they approached the day of trial.

Westervelt, watching with uneasy eyes the growing intimacy of his star and her playwright, began to hint his displeasure to Hugh, and at last openly to protest. "What does she mean?" he asked, explosively. "Does she dream of marrying the man? That would be madness! Death! Tell her so, my boy."

Hugh concealed his own anxiety. "Oh, don't worry, they're only good comrades."

Westervelt grunted with infinite contempt. "Comrades! If he is not making love to her I'm a Greek."

Hugh was much more uneasy than the

manager, but he had more sense than to rush in upon his famous sister with a demand. He made his complaint to the gentle mother. "I wish she would drop this social business with Douglass. He's a good fellow, but she oughtn't to encourage him in this way. What's the sense of having him on the string every blessed afternoon? Do you imagine she's in earnest? What does she mean? It would be fatal to have her marry anybody now—it would ruin her with the public. Besides, Douglass is only a poor grub of a journalist, and a failure in his own line of business. Can't we do something?"

The mother stood in awe of her shining daughter and shook her head. "She is old enough to know her own mind, Hugh. I darena speak to her. Besides, I like Mr. Douglass."

"Yes, he won you by claiming Scotch blood. I don't like it. She is completely absorbed in him. All I can hope is it won't last."

"If she loves him I canna interfere, and if she doesna there is no need to interfere," replied Mrs. MacDavitt, with sententious wisdom.

VII

AT the last moment, when face to face with the public, young Douglass lost courage. The stake for which he played was so great! Like a man who has put his last dollar upon the hazard, he was ready to snatch his gold from the boards. The whole thing seemed weakly tenuous at dress-rehearsal, and Royleston, half-drunk as usual, persistently bungled his lines. The children in the second act squeaked like nervous poll-parrots, and even Helen's sunny brow was darkened by a frown as her leading man stumbled along to a dead halt again and again.

"Mr. Royleston," she said, with dismay and anger in her voice, "I beg of you to remember that this is a most serious matter."

Her tone steadied the man, for he was a really brilliant and famous actor beginning to break. He grew courtly. "Miss Merival, I assure you I shall be all right to-night."

At this Douglass, tense and hot, shouted an angry word, and rushed into the semi-darkness of the side aisle. There Helen found him when she came off, his face black with anger and disgust. "It's all off," he said. "That conceited fool will ruin us."

"Don't take things too seriously," she pleaded. "Royleston isn't half so hopeless as he seems; he will come on to-night alert as a sparrow and astonish you. We have worked very hard, and the whole company needs rest now rather than more drill. To show your own worry would make them worse than they are."

In the end he went back to his seat ashamed of his outburst of temper, and the rehearsal

came to an end almost triumphantly, due entirely to the spirit and example of the star, who permitted herself to act for the first time.

It was a marvellous experience to see her transformed, by the mere putting aside of her cloak, from the sweet-faced, thoughtful girl to the stern, accusing, dark, and tense woman of the play. Her voice took on the quivering intonation of the seeress, and her spread hand seemed to clutch at the hearts of her perfidious friends. At such moments Douglass sat entranced, afraid to breathe for fear of breaking the spell, and when she dropped her rôle and resumed her cloak he shivered with pain.

It hurt him, also, to have her say to Royleston: "Now, to-morrow night I shall be here at the mirror when you enter; I will turn and walk towards you till I reach this little stand. I will move around this to the right," etc. It seemed to belittle her art, to render it mechanical, and yet he admitted the necessity; for those who were to play with her were entitled to know, within certain limits, where to

find her in the scene. He began to regret having had anything to do with the rehearsal. It would have been so much more splendid to see the finished product of her art with no vexing memory of the prosaic processes of its upbuilding.

She seemed to divine his feelings, and explained: "Up to a certain point every art is mechanical; the outlines of my acting are fixed, but within those limits I am guided by impulse. Even if I dared to rely on the inspiration of the moment my support cannot; they must know what I am going to do. I sincerely wish now that you had left us to our struggle; and yet we've had a good time, haven't we?"

"The best of my whole life," he answered, fervently.

"Now, let's rest. Let's go to the opera to-night, for to-morrow I cannot see you—no, nor Monday, either. I shall remain in seclusion all day in a darkened room. I must think my part all out alone. There in the

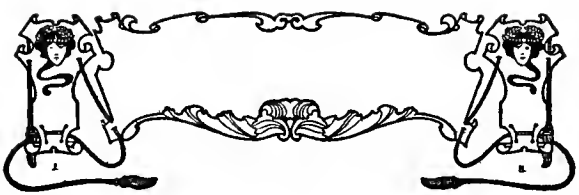
dark I shall sleep as much as possible. Helen's 'unconscious cerebration' must now get in its work," she ended, laughingly.

They all dined together at her table, and sat together in the box, while the vast harmonies of *Siegfried* rose like sun-shot mist from beneath them.

Helen was rapt, swept out of herself; and Douglass, with delicate consideration, left her alone with her musings, whose depth and intensity appeared in the lines of her sensitive face. He had begun to understand the sources of her power—that is to say, her fluid and instant imagination which permitted her to share in the joy of every art. Under the spell of a great master she was able to divine the passion which directed him. She understood the sense of power, the supreme ease and dignity of Ternina, of De Reszke, just as she was able to partake in the pride of the great athlete who wrestled upon the mat. She touched life through her marvellous intuition at a hundred points.

He was not discouraged, therefore, when, as they were going out, she said, with a quick clasp of her hand on his arm, "This matchless music makes our venture seem very small." He understood her mood, and to a lesser degree shared it.

"I don't want to talk," she said at the door of her carriage. "Good-bye till Monday night. Courage!"



VIII

DEPRIVATION of Helen's companionship even for a day produced in Douglass such longing that his hours were misery, and, though Sunday was long and lonely, Monday stretched to an intolerable length. He became greatly disturbed, and could neither work nor sit still, so active was his imagination. He tried to sleep, but could not, even though his nerves were twitching for want of it; and at last, in desperate resolution, he set himself the task of walking to Grant's tomb and back, in the hope that physical weariness would benumb his restless brain. This good result followed.

He was in deep slumber when the bell-boy rapped at his door and called, "Half-past six, sir."

He sprang up, moved by the thought, "In two hours Helen will be entering upon that first great scene," and for the first time gave serious consideration to the question of an audience. "I hope Westervelt has neglected nothing. It would be shameful if Helen played to a single empty seat. I will give tickets away on the sidewalk rather than have it so. But, good Heavens, such a condition is impossible!"

After dressing with great care, he hastened directly to the theatre. It was early, and as he stepped into the entrance he found only the attendants, smiling, expectant, in their places. A doubt of success filled him with sudden weakness, and he slipped out on the street again, not caring to be recognized by any one at that hour. "They will laugh at my boyish excitement," he said, shamefacedly.

Broadway, the chief thoroughfare of the

pleasure-seekers of all America, was just beginning to thicken with life. The cafés were sending forth gayly dressed groups of diners jovially crowding into their waiting carriages. Automobiles and cabs were rushing northward to meet the theatre-goers of the up-town streets, while the humbler patrons of the "family circles" and "galleries" of the playhouses lower down were moving southward on foot, sharing for a few moments in the brilliancy and wealth of the upper avenue. The surface cars, clamorous, irritable, and timid, jammed at the crossings like sheep at a river-ford, while overhead the electric trains thundered to and fro, crowded with other citizens also theatre-bound. It seemed that the whole metropolis, alert to the drama, had flung its health and wealth into one narrow stream, and yet, "in all these thousands of careless citizens, who thinks of *Lillian's Duty?*" thought the unnerved playwright.

"What do these laughing, insatiate amusement-seekers care about any one's duty?

They are out to enjoy life. They are the well-to-do, the well-fed, the careless livers. Many of them are keen, relentless business-men wearied by the day's toil. They are now seeking relaxation, and not at all concerned with acquiring wisdom or grace. They are, indeed, the very kind of men to whom my play sets the cold steel, and their wives, of higher purpose, of gentler wills, are, nevertheless, quite as incapable of steady and serious thought. Not one of them has any interest in the problem I have set myself to delineate."

He was saved from utter rout by remembrance of Helen. He recalled the Wondrous Woman as she had seemed to him of old, striving to regain his former sense of her power, her irresistible fascination. He assured himself that her indirect influence over the city had been proven to be enormous, almost fantastic, though her worshippers knew the real woman not at all, allured only by the aureoled actress. Yes, she would triumph, even if the play failed, for they would see her

at last in a congenial rôle wherein her nobility, her intellectual power would be given full and free expression. Her appeal to her worshippers would be doubled.

When he returned to the theatre a throng of people filled the entrance-way, and he was emboldened to pass in—even bowed to the attendants and to Hugh, who stood in the lobby, in shining raiment, a *boutonnière* in his coat, his face radiating confidence and pride.

"We've got 'em coming," he announced, with glee. "We are all sold out—not a seat left, and only the necessary 'paper' out. They're curious to see her in a new rôle. You are made!"

"I hope so," replied the playwright, weakly. "Tuesday night tells the story."

Hugh laughed. "Why, man, I believe you're scared. We're all right. I can sniff victory in the air."

This confidence, so far from inspiriting Douglass, still further depressed him, and he

passed in and on up into the second gallery, where he had privately purchased a reserved seat with intent to sense for himself the feeling of the upper part of the house during the first act. Keeping his muffler pinned close so that his evening dress escaped notice, he found his way down to the railing quite secure from recognition by any one at the peep-hole of the curtain or in the boxes, and there took his seat to watch the late-comers ripple down the aisles. He was experienced enough to know that "first-nighters" do not always count and that they are sometimes false prophets, and yet he could not suppress a growing exaltation as the beautiful auditorium filled with men and women such as he had himself often called "representative," and, best of all, many of the city's artists and literarians were present.

He knew also that the dramatic critics were assembling, jaded and worn with ceaseless attendance on worthless dramas, a condition which should have fitted them for the keener

enjoyment of any fresh, original work, but he did not deceive himself. He knew from their snarling onslaughts on plays he had praised that they were not to be pleased with anything—at least not all of them at the same time. That they were friendly to Helen he knew, that they would praise her he was assured, but that they would "slate" his play he was beginning to find inevitable.

As the curtain rose on the first scene he felt the full force of Helen's words, "You won't enjoy the performance at all." He began now to pay for the joy he had taken in her companionship. He knew the weakness of every actor, and suffered with them and for them. Royleston from the first tortured him by mumbling his lines, palpably "faking" at times. "The idiot, he'll fail to give his cues!" muttered Douglass. "He'll ruin the play." The children scared him also, they were so important to Helen at the close of the act.

At last the star came on—so quietly that the audience did not at the moment recognize

her, but when those nearest the stage started a greeting to her it was taken up all over the shining house—a magnificent "hand."

Never before had Helen Merival appeared before an audience in character so near her own good self, and the lovely simplicity of her manner came as a revelation to those of her admirers who had longed to know more of her private character. For several minutes they applauded while she smilingly bowed, but at last the clapping died away, and each auditor shrugged himself into an easy posture in his chair, waiting for the great star to take up her rôle.

This she did with a security and repose of manner which thrilled Douglass in spite of his intimate knowledge of her work at rehearsals. The subtlety of her reading, the quiet, controlled precision and grace of her action restored his confidence in her power. "She has them in her hand. She cannot fail."

The act closed triumphantly, though some among the audience began to wince. Helen

came before the curtain several times, and each time with eyes that searched for some one, and Douglass knew with definiteness that she sought her playwright in order that she might share her triumph with him. But a perverse mood had seized him. "This is all very well, but wait till the men realize the message of the play," he muttered, and lifted the programme to hide his face.

A buzz of excited comment rose from below, and though he could not hear a word beyond the water-boy's call he was able to imagine the comment.

"Why, how lovely! I didn't suppose Helen Merival could do a sweet, domestic thing like that."

"Isn't her gown exquisite? I've heard she is a dainty dresser in real life, quite removed from the kind of thing she wears on the stage. I wish she were not so seclusive. I'd like to know her."

"But do you suppose this is her real self?"

"It must be. She doesn't seem to be act-

ing at all. I must say I prefer her in her usual parts."

"She's wonderful as *The Baroness*."

"I never let my daughters see her in those dreadful characters—they are too bold; but they are both here to-night. I understood it was to be quite a departure."

Douglass, knowing well that Hugh and the manager were searching for him, sat with face bent low until the lights were again lowered. "Now comes the first assault. Now we will see them wince."

The second act was distinctly less pleasing to those who sat below him in the orchestra and dress circle. Applause was still hearty, but it lacked the fervor of the first act. He could see men turn and whisper to one another now and then. They laughed, of course, and remarked each to the other, "Brown, you're getting a 'slat' to-night."

"They are cheering the actress, not the play," observed the author.

The gallery, less sensitive or more genu-

inely patriotic, thundered on, applauding the lines as well as the growing power of Helen's impersonation. Royleston was at last beginning to play, the fumes of his heavy dinner having cleared away. He began to grip his lines, and that gave the star her first opportunity to forget his weakness and throw herself into her part. All in all, only a very discriminating ear could have detected a falling-off of favor in this act. The curtain was lifted four times, and a few feeble cries for the author were heard, chiefly from the first balcony.

Here was the point whereat his hoped-for triumph was to have begun, but it did not. He was touched by an invisible hand which kept him to his seat, though he knew that Helen was waiting for him to receive, hand-in-hand with her, the honors of the act.

Some foreknowledge of defeat clarified the young author's vision, and a bitter melancholy crept over him as the third act unrolled. "They will go out," he said to himself, "and they will not come back for the last act. The

play is doomed to disaster." And a flame of hatred rose in his heart against the audience. "They are brutes!" he muttered.

The scenes were deeply exciting, the clash of interest upon interest was swift, novel in sequence, and most dramatic in outcome, but the applause was sharp and spasmodic, not long continued and hearty as before. Some of the men who had clapped loudest at the opening now sat gnawing their mustaches in sullen resentment.

Douglass divined their thought: "This is a confidence game. We came to be amused, and this fellow instructs in sociology. We didn't cough up two dollars to listen to a sermon; we came to be rested. There's trouble enough in the street without displaying it in a place of amusement. The fellow ought to be cut out."

Others ceased to cheer because both acting and play had mounted beyond their understanding. Its grim humor, its pitiless character-drawing, wearied them. Audience and

play, speaking generally, were at cross-purposes. A minority, it was true, caught every point, shouting with great joy, and a few, who disapproved of the play, but were most devoted admirers of Helen's art, joined half-heartedly in their applause. But the act closed dismally, notwithstanding its tremendous climax. A chill east wind had swept over the auditorium and a few sensitive souls shivered. "What right has Helen Merival to do a thing like this? What possesses her? It must be true that she is infatuated with this young man and produces his dreadful plays to please him."

"They say she is carried away with him. He's very handsome, they tell me. I wish they'd call him out."

A buzz of complaining talk on the part of those aggrieved filled in the interlude. The few who believed in the drama were valiant in its defence, but their arguments did not add to the good-will of those who loved the actress but detested the play.

"This won't do," said the most authoritative critic, as a detachment lined up at the bar of the neighboring saloon. "Merival must lop off this young dramatist or he'll 'queer' her with her best friends. She mustn't attempt to force this kind of thing down our throats."

"He won't last a week," said another.

Their finality of tone resembled that of emperors and sultans in counsel.

Douglass, sitting humped and motionless among his gallery auditors, was clearly aware that Helen was weary and agitated, yet he remained in his seat, his brain surging with rebellious passion.

His perverse pride was now joined by shame, who seized him by the other arm and held him prisoner. He felt like fleeing down the fire-escape. The thought of running the gantlet of the smirking attendants, the possibility of meeting some of the exultant dramatic critics, most of whom were there to cut him to pieces, revolted him. Their joyous grins were harder

to face than cannon, therefore he cowered in his place during the long wait, his mind awhirl, his teeth set hard.

There were plenty of empty seats in the orchestra when the curtain lifted on the last act. Several of the critics failed to return. The playwright dared not look at his watch, for the scenes were dragging interminably. His muscles ached with the sort of fatigue one feels when riding in a slow train, and he detected himself pushing with his feet as if to hurry the action. The galleries did not display an empty bench, but he took small comfort in this, for he was not a believer in the old-time theory of pleasing the gallery. "In this city the two-dollar seats must be filled," he said. "Helen is ruined if she loses them."

He began to pity her and to blame himself. "What right had I to force my ferocious theories upon her?" he asked himself, and at the moment it seemed that he had completely destroyed her prestige. She was plainly dis-

pirited, and her auditors looked at one another in astonishment. "Can this sad woman in gray, struggling with a cold audience and a group of dismayed actors, be the brilliant and beautiful Helen Merival?"

That a part of this effect—most of it, in fact—lay in the rôle of *Lillian* they had not penetration enough to distinguish; they began to doubt whether she had ever been the very great success and the powerful woman they had supposed her to be.

The play did not really close, the audience began to dribble out before the last half of the act began, and the curtain went down on the final scene while scores of women were putting on their wraps. A loyal few called Helen before the curtain, and her brave attempt to smile made every friendly heart bleed.

Douglass, stiff and sore, as one who has been cudgelled, rose with the crowd and made his way to one of the outside exits, eager to escape recognition, to become one

of the indistinguishable figures of the street.

A couple of tousled-headed students going down the stairway before him tossed him his first and only crumb of comfort. "It won't go, of course," said one, in a tone of conviction, "but it's a great play all the same."

"Right, old man," replied the other, with the decision of a master. "It's too good for this town. What New York wants is a continuous variety show."

Douglass knew keenly, deeply, that Helen needed him—was looking for him—but the thought of those who would be near at their meeting made his entrance of the stage door impossible. He walked aimlessly, drifting with the current up the street, throbbing, tense, and hot with anger, shame, and despair. At the moment all seemed lost—his play, his own position, and Helen. Helen would surely drop him. The incredible had happened—he had not merely defeated himself, he had

brought battle and pain and a stinging reproof to a splendid, triumphant woman. The enormous egotism involved in this he did not at the moment apprehend. He was like a wounded animal, content merely to escape.

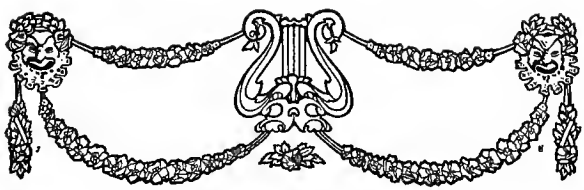
He longed to reach her, to beg her pardon, to absolve her from any promise, and yet he could not face Westervelt. He revolted at the thought of meeting Royleston and Miss Carmichael and Hugh. "No; it is impossible. I will wait for her at the hotel."

At this word he was filled with a new terror. "The clerks and the bell-boys will have learned of my failure. I cannot face them to-night." And he turned and fled as if confronted by serpents. "And yet I must send a message. I must thank Helen and set her free. She must not go through another such night for my sake."

He ended by dropping into another hotel to write her a passionate note, which he sent by a messenger:

"Forgive me for the part I have played in bringing this disaster upon you. I had no idea that anything I could say or do would so deeply injure you—you the Wondrous One. It was incredible—their disdain of you. I was a fool, a selfish boaster, to allow you to go into this thing. The possible loss of money we both discussed, but that any words of mine could injure you as an artist never came to me. Believe me, my dearest friend, I am astounded. I am crushed with the thought, and I dare not show my face among your friends. I feel like an assassin. I will call to-morrow—I can't do it to-night. I am bleeding at the heart because I have made you share the shame and failure which I feel to-night are always to be mine. I was born to be of the minority. Please don't give another thought to me or my play. Go your own way. Get back to the plays that please people. Be happy. You have the right to be happy, and I am a selfish, unthinking criminal whom you would better forget. Don't waste an-

other dollar or another moment on my play—it is madness. I am overwhelmed with my debt to you, but I shall repay it some day."



IX

HELEN was more deeply hurt and humiliated by her playwright's flight than by the apparent failure of the play, but the two experiences coming together fairly stunned her. To have the curtain go down on her final scenes to feeble and hesitating applause was a new and painful experience. Never since her first public reading had she failed to move and interest her audience. What had happened? What had so swiftly weakened her hold on her admirers? Up to that moment she had been sure that she could make any character successful.

For a few moments she stood in the middle of the stage stifling with a sense of mortification and defeat, then turned, and without a word or look to any one went to her dressing-room.

Her maid was deeply sympathetic, and by sudden impulse stooped and kissed her cheek, saying, "Never mind, Miss Merival, it was beautiful."

This unexpected caress brought the tears to the proud girl's eyes. "Thank you, Nora. Some of the audience will agree with you, I hope."

"I'm sure of it, miss. Don't be downcast."

Hugh knocked at the door. "Can you come out?"

"Not now, Hugh. In a few moments."

"There are some people here to see you—"

She wanted to say, "I don't want to see them," but she only said, "Please ask them to wait."

She knew by the tone of her brother's voice

that he, too, was choking with indignation, and she dreaded the meeting with him and with Westervelt. She was sustained by the hope that Douglass would be there to share her punishment. "Why had he not shown himself?" she asked again, with growing resentment.

When she came out fully dressed she looked tired and pale, but her head was high and her manner proudly self-contained.

Westervelt, surrounded by a small group of depressed auditors, among whom were Mrs. MacDavitt, Hugh, and Royleston, was holding forth in a kind of bellow. "It proves what? Simply that they will not have her in these preachy domestic parts, that's all. Every time she tries it she gets a 'knock.' I complain, I advise to the contrary. Does it do any good? No. She must chance it, all to please this crank, this reformer."

The mother, reading the disappointment and suffering in Helen's white face, reached for her tremulously and drew her to her bos-

om. "Never mind what they say, Nellie; it was beautiful and it was true."

Even Westervelt was awed by the calm look Helen turned on the group. "You are very sure of yourself, Mr. Westervelt, but to my mind this night only proves that this audience came to hear me without intelligent design." She faced the silent group with white and weary face. "Certainly Mr. Douglass's play is not for such an audience as that which has been gathering to see me as *The Baroness*, but that does not mean that I have no other audience. There is a public for me in this higher work. If there isn't, I will retire."

Westervelt threw his hands in the air with a tragic gesture. "Retire! My Gott, that would be insanity!"

Helen turned. "Come, mother, you are tired, and so am I. Mr. Westervelt, this is no place for this discussion. Good-night." She bowed to the friends who had loyally gathered to greet her. "I am grateful to you for your sympathy."

There was, up to this time, no word of the author; but Hugh, as he walked by her side, broke out resentfully, "Do you know that beggar playwright—"

"Not a word of him, Hugh," she said. "You don't know what that poor fellow is suffering. Our disappointment is nothing in comparison with his. Think of what he has lost."

"Nonsense! He has lost nothing, because he had nothing to lose. He gets us involved—"

"Hugh!" There was something in her utterance of his name which silenced him more effectually than a blow. "I produced this play of my own free will," she added, a moment later, "and I will take the responsibility of it."

In the carriage the proud girl leaned back against the cushions, and pressed her two hands to her aching eyes, from which the tears streamed. It was all so tragically different from their anticipations. They were to have had a little supper of jubilation together, to

talk it all over, to review the evening's triumph, and now here she sat chill with disappointment, while he was away somewhere in the great, heartless city suffering tortures, alone and despairing.

The sweet, old mother put her arm about her daughter's waist.

"Don't cry, dearie; it will all come right. You can endure one failure. 'Tis not as bad as it seems."

Helen did not reply as she was tempted to do by saying, "It isn't my defeat, it is his failure to stand beside me and receive his share of the disaster." And they rode the rest of the way in sad silence.

As she entered her room a maid handed her a letter which she knew to be from Douglass even before she saw the handwriting, and, without opening it, passed on into her room. "His message is too sacred for any other to see," she said to herself, with instant apprehension of the bitter self-accusation with which he had written.

The suffering expressed by the scrawling lines softened her heart, her anger died away, and only big tears of pity filled her glorious eyes. "Poor boy! His heart is broken." And a desire to comfort him swelled her bosom with a passion almost maternal in its dignity. Now that his pride was humbled, his strong figure bowed, his clear brain in turmoil, her woman's tenderness sought him and embraced him without shame. Her own strength and resolution came back to her. "I will save you from yourself," she said, softly.

When she returned to the reception-room she found Westervelt and Hugh and several of the leading actors (who took the evening's "frost" as a reflection on themselves, an injury to their reputations), all in excited clamor; but when they saw their star enter they fell silent, and Westervelt, sweating with excitement, turned to meet her.

"You must not go on. It is not the money alone; it will ruin you with the public. It is not for you to lecture the people. They will

not have it. Such a failure I have never seen. It was not a 'frost,' it was a frozen solid. We will announce *The Baroness* for to-morrow. The pressmen are waiting below. I shall tell them?" His voice rose in question.

"Mr. Westervelt, this is my answer, and it is final. I will not take the play off, and I shall expect you to work with your best energy to make it a success. One night does not prove *Lillian* a failure. The audience to-night was not up to it, but that condemns the auditors, not the play. I do not wish to hear any more argument. Good-night."

The astounded and crestfallen manager bowed his head and went out.

Helen turned to the others. "I am tired of this discussion. One would think the sky had fallen—from all this tumult. I am sorry for you, Mr. Royleston, but you are no deeper in the slough than Miss Collins and the rest, and they are not complaining. Now let us sit down to our supper and talk of something else."

Royleston excused himself and went away, and only Hugh, Miss Collins, Miss Carmichael, and the old mother drank with the star to celebrate the first performance of *Lillian's Duty*.

"I have had a letter from Mr. Douglass," Helen said, softly, when they were alone. "Poor fellow, he is absolutely prostrate in the dust, and asks me to throw him overboard as our Jonah. Put yourself in his place, Hugh, before speaking harshly of him."

"I don't like a coward," he replied, contemptuously. "Why didn't he face the music to-night? I never so much as set eyes on him after he came in. He must have been hiding in the gallery. He leads you into this crazy venture and then deserts you. A man who does that is a puppy."

A spark of amusement lit Helen's eyes. "You might call him that when you meet him next."

Hugh, with a sudden remembrance of the

playwright's powerful frame, replied, a little less truculently: "I'll call him something more fit than that when I see him. But we won't see him again. He's out of the running."

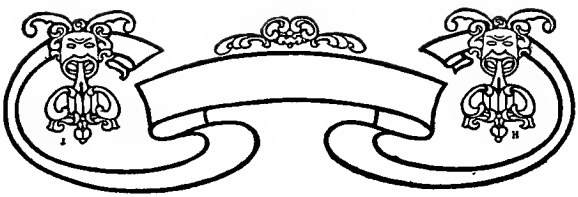
Helen laid her cheek on her folded hands, and, with a smile which cleared the air like a burst of sunshine, said, laughingly: "Hugh, you're a big, bad boy. You should be out on the ice skating instead of managing a theatre. You have no more idea of George Douglass than a bear has of a lion. This mood of depression is only a cloud; it will pass and you will be glad to beg his pardon. My faith in him and in *Lillian's Duty* is unshaken. He has the artistic temperament, but he has also the pertinacity of genius. Come, let's all go to bed and forget our hurts."

And with this she rose and kissed her mother good-night.

Hugh, still moody, replied, with sudden tenderness: "It hurt me to see them go out

on your last scene. I can't forgive Douglass for that."

She patted his cheek. "Never mind that, Hughie. 'This, too, shall pass away.'"



X

AT two o'clock, when Douglass returned to his hotel, tired and reckless of any man's scorn, the night clerk smiled and said, as he handed him a handful of letters, "I hear you had a great audience, Mr. Douglass."

The playwright did not discover Helen's note among his letters till he had reached his room, and then, without removing his overcoat, he stood beneath the gas-jet and read:

"My dear Author,—My heart bleeds for you. I know how you must suffer, but you must not despair. A first night is not conclu-

sive. Do not blame yourself. I took up your play with my eyes open to consequences. You are wrong if you think even the failure of this play (which I do not grant) can make any difference in my feeling towards you. The power of the lines, your high purpose, remain. Suppose it does fail? You are young and fertile of imagination. You can write another and better play in a month, and I will produce it. My faith in you is not weakened, for I know your work is good. I have turned my back on the old art and the old rôles; I need you to supply me with new ones. This is no light thing with me. I confess to surprise and dismay to-night, but I should not have been depressed had you been there beside me. I was deeply hurt and puzzled by your absence, but I think I understand how sore and wounded you were. Come in to see me to-morrow, as usual, and we will consider what can be done with this play and plan for a new one. Come! You are too strong and too proud to let a single unfriendly audience dishearten you. We will

read the papers together at luncheon and laugh at the critics. Don't let your enemies think they have driven you into retirement. Forget them in some new work, and remember my faith in you is not shaken."

This letter, so brave, so gravely tender and so generous, filled him with love, choked him with grateful admiration. "You are the noblest woman in the world, the bravest, the most forgiving. I will not disappoint you."

His bitterness and shame vanished, his fists clinched in new resolution. "You are right. I can write another play, and I will. My critics shall laugh from the other side of their mouths. They shall not have the satisfaction of knowing that they have even wounded me. I will justify your faith in my powers. I will set to work to-morrow—this very night—on a new play. I will make you proud of me yet, Helen, my queen, my love." With that word all his doubts vanished. "Yes, I love her, and I will win her."

In the glow of his love-born resolution he began to search among his papers for an unfinished scenario called *Enid's Choice.* When he had found it he set to work upon it with a concentration that seemed uncanny in the light of his day's distraction and dismay. *Lillian's Duty* and the evening's bitter failure had already grown dim in his mind.

Helen's understanding of him was precise. He was of those who never really capitulate to the storm, no matter how deeply they may sink at times in the trough of the sea. As everything had been against him up to that moment, he was not really taken by surprise. All his life he had gone directly against the advice and wishes of his family. He had studied architecture rather than medicine, and had set his face towards the East rather than the West. Every dollar he had spent he had earned by toil, and the things he loved had always seemed the wasteful and dangerous things. He wrote plays in secret when he should have been soliciting commissions for

warehouses, and read novels when he should have been intent upon his business.

"It was impossible that I should succeed so quickly, so easily, even with the help of one so powerful as Helen Merival. It is my fate to work for what I get." And with this return of his belief that to himself alone he must look for victory, his self-poise and self-confidence came back.

He looked strong, happy, and very handsome next morning as he greeted the clerk of the Embric, who had no guile in his voice as he said:

"Good-morning, Mr. Douglass. I hear that your play made a big hit last night."

"I reckon it hit something," he replied, with easy evasion.

The clerk continued: "My wife's sister was there. She liked it very much."

"I am very glad she did," replied Douglass, heartily. As he walked over towards the elevator a couple of young men accosted him.

"Good - morning, Mr. Douglass. We are

from *The Blazon.* We would like to get a little talk out of you about last night's performance. How do you feel about the verdict."

"It was a 'frost,'" replied Douglass, with engaging candor, "but I don't consider the verdict final. I am not at all discouraged. You see, it's all in getting a hearing. Miss Merival gave my play a superb production, and her impersonation ought to fill the theatre, even if *Lillian's Duty* were an indifferent play, which it is not Miss Merival, in changing the entire tone and character of her work, must necessarily disappoint a certain type of admirer. Last night's audience was very largely made up of those who hate serious drama, and naturally they did not like my text. All that is a detail. We will create our own audience."

The reporters carried away a vivid impression of the author's youth, strength, and confidence, and one of them sat down to convey to the public his admiration in these words:

"Mr. Douglass is a Western man, and boldly shies his buckskin into the arena and invites the keenest of his critics to take it up. If any one thinks the 'roast' of his play has even singed the author's wings, he is mistaken. He is very much pleased with himself. As he says, a hearing is a great thing. He may be a chopping-block, but he don't look it."

Helen met her playwright with an anxious, tired look upon her face, but when he touched her fingers to his lips and said, "At your service, my lady," she laughed in radiant, sudden relief.

"Oh, but I'm glad to see you looking so gay and strong. I was heart-sore for you last night. I fancied you in all kinds of torture."

His face darkened. "I was. My blue devils assailed me, but I vanquished them, thanks to your note," he added, with a burning glance deep-sent, and his voice fell to a tenderness which betrayed his heart. "I think you are the most tolerant star that ever

put out a hand to a poor author. What a beast I was to run away! But I couldn't help it then. I wanted to see you, but I couldn't face Westervelt and Royleston. I couldn't endure to hear them say, 'I told you so.' You understood, I'm sure of it."

She studied him with admiring eyes. "Yes, I understood—later. At first I was crushed. It shook my faith in you for a little while." She put off this mood (whose recollected shadows translated into her face filled Douglass's throat with remorse) and a smile disclosed her returning sense of humor. "Oh, Hugh and Westervelt are angry—perfectly purple with indignation against you for leading me into a trap—"

"I feared that. That is why I begged you to throw my play—"

She laid a finger on her lips, for Mrs. MacDavitt came in. "Mother, here is Mr. Douglass. I told you he would come. I hope you are hungry. Let us take our places. Hugh is fairly used up this morning. Do you see that bunch

of papers?" she asked, pointing at a ragged pile. "After breakfast we take our medicine."

"No," he said, firmly. "I have determined not to read a line of them. To every word you speak I will listen, but I will not be harrowed up by a hodgepodge of personal prejudices written by my enemies before the play was produced or in a hurried hour between the fall of the curtain and going to press. I know too much about how these judgments are cooked up. I saw the faults of the play a good deal clearer than did any of those sleepy gentlemen who came to the theatre surfeited and weary and resentful of your change of programme."

She looked thoughtful. "Perhaps you are right," she said, at last. "I will not read them. I know what they will say—"

"I thought the play was very beautiful," said Mrs. MacDavitt. "And my Nellie was grand."

Helen patted her mother's hand. "We have one loyal supporter, Mr. Douglass."

"Ye've many more, if the truth were

known," said the old mother, stoutly, for she liked young Douglass.

"I believe that," cried Helen. "Did you consider that as I change my rôles and plays I must also, to a large extent, change my audience? The people who like me as *Baroness Telka* are amazed and angered by your play. They will not come to see me. But there are others," she added, with a smile at the slang phrase.

"I thought of that, but not till last night."

"It will take longer to inform and interest our new public than any of us realized. I am determined to keep *Lillian* on for at least four weeks. Meanwhile you can prune it and set to work on a new one. Have you a theme?"

"I have a scenario," he triumphantly answered. "I worked it out this morning between two o'clock and four."

She reached her hand to him impulsively, and as he took it a warm flush came into her face and her eyes were suffused with happy tears.

"That's brave," she said. "I told them you could not be crushed. I knew you were of those who fight hardest when closest pressed. You must tell me about it at once—not this minute, of course, but when we are alone."

When Hugh came in a few minutes later he found them discussing a new automobile which had just made a successful trial run. The play became the topic of conversation again, but on a different plane.

Hugh was blunt, but not so abusive as he had declared his intention to be. "There's nothing in *Lillian*," he said — "not a dollar. We're throwing our money away. We might better close the theatre. We won't have fifty dollars in the house to-night. It's all right as a story, but it won't do for the stage."

Douglass kept his temper. "It was too long; but I can better that in a few hours. I'll have a much closer-knit action by Wednesday night."

As they were rising from the table Westervelt entered with a face like a horse, so long

and lax was it. "They have burned us alive!" he exclaimed, as he sank into a chair and mopped his red neck. He shook like a gelatine pudding, and Helen could not repress a smile.

"Your mistake was in reading them. We burned the critics."

The manager stared in vast amaze. "You didn't read the papers?"

"Not one."

"Well, they say—"

She stopped him. "Don't tell me what they say—not a word. We did our best and we did good work, and will do better to-night, so don't come here like a bird of ill-omen, Herr Westervelt. Go kill the critics if you feel like it, but don't worry us with tales of woe. Our duty is to the play. We cannot afford to waste nervous energy writhing under criticism. What is said is said, and repeating it only hurts us all." Her tone became friendly. "Really, you take it too hard. It is only a matter of a few thousand dollars at the worst, and to free you from all further anxiety I will

assume the entire risk. I will rent your theatre."

"No, no!" cried Hugh. "We can't afford to do that."

"We can't afford to do less. I insist," she replied, firmly.

The manager lifted his fat shoulders in a convulsive shrug. His face indicated despair of her folly. "Good Gott! Well, you are the doctor, only remember there will not be one hundred people in the house to-night." He began to recover speech. "Think of that! Helen Merival playing to empty chairs—in *my* theatre. Himmel!"

"It is sad, I confess, but not hopeless, Herr Westervelt. We must work the harder to let the thoughtful people of the city know what we are trying to do."

"Thoughtful people!" Again his scorn ran beyond his words for a moment and his tongue grew German. "Doughtful beople. Dey dondt bay dwo tollors fer seats! *Our* pusiness iss to attract the rich—the gay theatre-goers. Who

is going to pring a theatre-barty to see a sermon on the stage—hay?"

"You are unjust to *Lillian's Duty*. It is not a sermon; it is a powerful acting play—the best part, from a purely acting standpoint, I have ever undertaken to do. But we will not discuss that now. The venture is my own, and you will be safe-guarded. I will instruct my brother to make the new arrangement at once."

With a final, despairing shrug the manager rose and went out, and Helen, turning an amused face to Douglass, asked, humorously: "Isn't he the typical manager?—in the clouds to-day, stuck in the mud to-morrow. Sometimes he is excruciatingly funny, and then he disgusts me. They're almost all alike. If business should be unexpectedly good to-night he would be a man transformed. His face would shine, he would grasp every actor by the hand, he would fairly fall upon your neck; but if business went down ten dollars on Wednesday night then look for the 'icy mitt'

again. Big as he is he curls up like a sensitive plant when touched by adversity. He can't help it; he's really a child—a big, fat boy. But come, we must now consider the cuts for *Lillian;* then to our scenario."

As the attendants whisked away the breakfast things Helen brought out the original manuscript of *Lillian's Duty*, and took a seat beside her playwright. "Now, what is the matter with the first act?"

"Nothing."

"I agree. What is out in the second?"

"Needs cutting."

"Where?"

"Here and here and here," he answered, turning the leaves rapidly.

"I felt it. I couldn't hold them there. Royleston's part wants the knife badly. Now, the third act?"

"It is too diffuse, and the sociologic background gets obstinately into the foreground. As I sat there last night I saw that the interest was too abstract, too impersonal for the ordi-

nary play-goer. I can better that. The fourth act must be entirely rewritten. I will do that this afternoon."

She faced him, glowing with recovered joy and recovered confidence. "Now you are Richard once again upon his horse."

"A hobby horse," he answered, with a laugh, then sobered. "In truth, my strength comes from you. At least you roused me. I was fairly in the grasp of the Evil One when your note came. Your splendid confidence set me free. It was beautiful of you to write me after I had sneaked away like a wounded coyote. I cannot tell you what your letter was to me."

She held up a finger. "Hush! No more of that. We are forgetting, and you are becoming personal." She said this in a tone peculiarly at variance with the words. "Now read me the scenario of the new play. I am eager to know what has moved you, set you on high again."

The creative fire began to glow in his eyes.

"This is to be as individual, as poetic, as the other was sociologic. The character you are to play is that of a young girl who knows nothing of life, but a great deal of books. *Enid's* whole world is revealed by the light which streams from the window of a convent library—a gray, cold light with deep shadows. She is tall and pale and severe of line, but her blue eyes are deep and brooding. Her father, a Western mine-owner, losing his second wife, calls on his daughter to return from the Canadian convent in which she has spent seven years. She takes her position as an heiress in his great house. She is plunged at once into the midst of a pleasure-seeking, thoughtless throng of young people whose interests in life seem to her to be grossly material. She becomes the prey of adventurers, male and female, and has nothing but her innate purity to defend her. Ultimately there come to her two men who type the forces at war around her, and she is forced to choose between them."

As he outlined this new drama the mind of

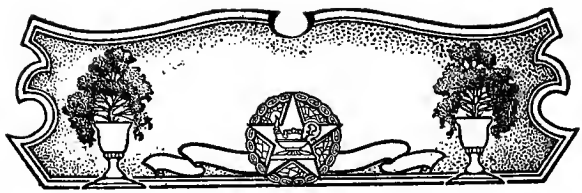
the actress took hold of *Enid's* character, so opposite in energy to *Lillian*, and its great possibilities exalted her, filled her with admiration for the mind which could so quickly create a new character.

"I see I shall never want for parts while you are my playwright," she said, when he had finished.

"Oh, I can write—so long as I have you to write for and to work for," he replied. "You are the greatest woman in the world. Your faith in me, your forgiveness of my cowardice, have given me a sense of power—"

She spoke quickly and with an effort to smile. "We are getting personal again."

He bowed to the reminder. "I beg your pardon. I will not offend again."



XI

HELEN'S warning was not as playful as it seemed to her lover, for something in the glow of his eyes and something vibrant in the tones of his voice had disturbed her profoundly. The fear of something which he seemed perilously near saying filled her with unrest, bringing up questions which had thus far been kept in the background of her scheme of life.

"Some time I shall marry, I suppose," she had said to one of her friends, "but not now; my art will not permit it. Wedlock to an actress," she added, "is almost as significant as death. It may mean an end of her playing

—a death to her ambitions. When I decide to marry I shall also decide to give up the stage."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the other. "There are plenty who do not. In fact, Mary Anderson is the exception. When the conquering one comes along you'll marry him and make him your leading man, the way so many others do."

"When 'the conquering one' comes along I shall despise the stage," retorted Helen, with laughing eyes—"at least I'm told I will."

"Pish! You'd give a dozen husbands for the joy of facing a big first-night audience. I tell Horace that if it comes to a matter of choice for me he'll have to go. Gracious goodness! I could no more live without the applause of the stage—"

"How about the children?"

"The children! Oh, that's different. The dear tots! Well, luckily, they're not absolutely barred. It's hard to leave the darlings behind. When I go on the road I miss their

sweet little caresses; but I have to earn their bread, you see, and what better career is open to me."

Helen grew grave also. "I don't like to think of myself as an *old* actress. I want to have a fixed abiding-place when I am forty-five. Gray hairs should shine in the light of a fireside."

"There's always peroxide," put in the other, and their little mood of seriousness vanished.

It was, indeed, a very unusual situation for a young and charming actress. The Hotel Embric stood just where three great streams of wealth and power and fashion met and mingled. Its halls rustled with the spread silks of pride and glittered with the jewels of spendthrift vanity, and yet few knew that high in the building one of the most admired women of the city lived in almost monastic seclusion. The few men who recognized her in the elevator or in the hall bowed with deferential admiration. She was never seen in the

dining-rooms, and it was known that she denied herself to all callers except a very few intimate friends.

This seclusion—this close adherence to her work—added to her mystery, and her allurement in the eyes of her suitors increased as they sought vainly for an introduction. It was reported that this way of life was "all a matter of business, a cold, managerial proposition," a method of advertising; but so far as Helen herself was implicated, it was a method of protection.

She had an instinctive dislike, almost a fear, of those who sought her acquaintance, and when Westervelt, with blundering tactlessness or impudent design, brought round some friends, she froze them both with a single glance.

Furthermore, by denying herself to one she was able to escape the other, and thus save herself for her work; for though she had grown to hate the plays through which she reached the public, she believed in the power and the

dignity of her art. It was a means of livelihood, it gratified her vanity; but it was more than this. In a dim way she felt herself in league with a mighty force, and the desire to mark an epoch in the American drama came to her. This, too, was a form of egotism, but a high form.

"I do not care to return to the old," she said. "There are plenty of women to do *Beatrice* and *Viola* and *Lady Macbeth*. I am modern. I believe in the modern and I believe in America. I don't care to start a fad for Ibsen or Shaw. I would like to develop our own drama."

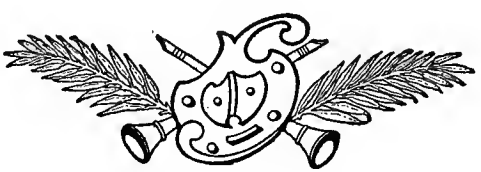
"You will have to eliminate the tired business-man and his fat wife and their late dinners," said a cynical friend.

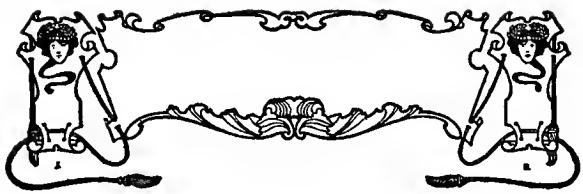
"All business-men are not tired and all wives are not fat. I believe there is a public ready to pay their money to see good American drama. I have found a man who can write—"

"Beware of that man," said the cynic, with

a twofold meaning in his tone. "'He is a dreamer; let him pass.'"

"I do not fear him," she replied, with a gay smile.





XII

DOUGLASS now set to work on his second play with teeth clinched. "I will win out in spite of them," he said. "They think I am beaten, but I am just beginning to fight." As the days wore on his self-absorption became more and more marked. All his morning hours were spent at his writing, and when he came to Helen he was cold and listless, and talked of nothing but *Enid* and her troubles. Even as they rode in the park his mind seemed forever revolving lines and scenes. In the midst of her attempt to amuse him, to divert him, he returned to his theme. He invited her judg-

ments and immediately forgot to listen, so morbidly self-centred was he.

He made no further changes in the book of *Lillian's Duty*, but put aside Westervelt's request with a wave of his hand. "I leave all that to Miss Merival," he said. "I can't give it any thought now."

From one point of view Helen could not but admire this power of concentration, but when she perceived that her playwright's work had filled his mind to the exclusion of herself she began to suffer. Her pride resented his indifference, and she was saved from anger and disgust only by the beauty of the writing he brought to her.

"The fury of the poet is on him. I must not complain," she thought, and yet a certain regret darkened her face. "All that was so sweet and fine has passed out of our intercourse," she sadly admitted to herself. "I am no longer even the great actress to him. Once he worshipped me—I felt it; now I am a commonplace friend. Is the fault in me?

Am I one whom familiarity lessens in value?"

She did not permit herself to think that this was a lasting change, that he had forever passed beyond the lover, and that she would never again fill his world with mystery and light and longing.

And yet this monstrous recession was the truth. In the stress of his work the glamour had utterly died out of Douglass's conception of Helen, just as the lurid light of her old-time advertising had faded from the bill-boards and from the window displays of Broadway. As cold, black, and gray instantaneous photographs had taken the place of the gorgeous, jewel-bedecked, elaborate lithographs of the old plays, so now his thought of her was without warmth.

Helen became aware, too, of an outside change. Her friends used this as a further warning.

"You are becoming commonplace to the public," one said, with a touch of bitterness.

"Your admirers no longer wonder. Go back to the glitter and the glory."

"No," she replied. "I will regain my place, and with my own unaided character—and my lines," she added, with a return to her faith in Douglass.

And yet her meetings with him were now a species of torture. Her self-respect suffered with every glance of his eyes. He resembled a man suffering from a fever. At times he talked with tiresome intensity about some new situation, quoting his own characters, beating and hammering at his scenes until Helen closed her eyes for very weariness. Only at wide intervals did he return to some dim realization of his indebtedness to her. One day he gratified her by saying, with a note of tenderness in his voice: "You are keeping the old play on; don't do it. Throw it away; it is a tract—a sermon." Then spoiled it all by bitterly adding, "Go back to your old successes."

"You used to dislike me in such rôles," she

answered, with pain and reproach in face and voice.

"It will only be for a little while," he replied, with a swift return to his enthusiasm. "In two weeks I'll have the new part ready for you." But the sting of his advice remained long in the proud woman's heart.

He went no more to the theatre. "I can't bear to see you playing to empty seats," he declared, in explanation, but in reality he had a horror of the scene of his defeat.

He came to lunch less often, and when they went driving or visiting the galleries all the old-time, joyous companionship was gone. Not infrequently, as they stood before some picture or sat at a concert, he would whisper, "I have it; the act will end with *Enid* doing so-and-so," and not infrequently he hurried away from her to catch some fugitive illumination which he feared to lose. He came to her reception-room only once of a Saturday afternoon, just before the play closed.

"How is the house?" he asked, with indifference.

"Bad."

"Very bad?"

"Oh yes."

"I must work the harder," he replied, and sank into a sombre silence. He never came inside again.

Helen was deeply wounded by this visit, and was sorely tempted to take him at his word and end the production, but she did not. She could not, so deep had her interest in him become. Loyal to him she must remain, loyal to his work.

As his bank account grew perilously small, Douglass fell into deeps of black despair, wherein all imaginative power left him. At such times the lack of depth and significance in his work appalled him. "It is hopelessly poor and weak; it does not deserve to succeed. I've a mind to tear it in rags." But he resisted this spirit, partly restrained by some hidden power traceable to the influence of

Helen and partly by his desire to retrieve himself in the estimation of the world, but mainly because of some hidden force in his own brain, and set to work each time filing and polishing with renewed care of word and phrase.

Slowly the second drama took on form and quality, developing a web of purpose not unlike that involved in a strain of solemn music, and at the last the author's attention was directed towards eliminating minute inharmonies or to the insertion of cacophony with design to make the *andante* passages the more enthrallingly sweet. As the play neared completion his absorption began to show results. He lost vigor, and Helen's eyes took anxious note of his weariness. "You are growing thin and white, Mr. Author," she said to him, with solicitude in her voice. "You don't look like the rugged Western Scotchman you were when I found you. Am I to be your vampire?"

"On the contrary, I am to destroy you, to judge from the money you are losing on my wretched play. I begin to fear I can never

repay you, not even with a great success. I have days when I doubt my power to write a successful drama."

"You work too hard. You must not ruin your health by undue haste. A week or two will not make a killing difference with us. I don't mind playing *Lillian* another month, if you need the time. It is good discipline, and, besides, I enjoy the part."

"That is because you are good and loyal to a poor writer," he answered, with a break to humble appreciation of her bounty and her bravery. "Be patient with me," he pleaded. "*Enid* will recoup you for all you have suffered. It will win back all your funds. I have made it as near pure poetry as our harsh, definite life and our elliptical speech will permit." And straightway his mind was filled with dreams of conquering, even while he faced his love, so strangely are courtship and ambition mingled in the heart of man.

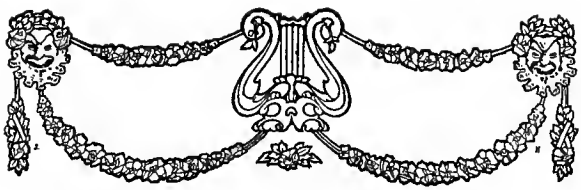
At last he began to exult, to boast, to call attention to the beauty of the lines spoken by

Enid. "See how her simplicity and virginal charm are enhanced by the rugged, remorseless strength, and by the conscienceless greed of the men surrounding her, and yet she sees in them something admirable. They are like soldiers to her. They are the heroes who tunnel mountains and bridge cataracts. When she looks from her slender, white hands to their gross and powerful bodies she shudders with a sort of fearsome admiration."

"Can all that appear in the lines?"

"Yes. In the lines and in the acting; it *must* appear in your acting," he added, with a note of admonition.

Her face clouded with pain. "He begins to doubt my ability to delineate his work," she thought, and turned away in order that he might not know how deeply he had wounded her.



XIII

HELEN'S pride contended unceasingly with her love during the weeks of her lover's alienation; for, with all her sweet dispraise of herself, she was very proud of her place in the world, and it was not easy to bow her head to neglect. Sometimes when he forgot to answer her or rushed away to his room with a hasty good-bye, she raged with a perfectly justifiable anger. "You are selfish and brutal," she cried out after him on one occasion. "You think only of yourself. You are vain, egotistical. All that I have done is forgotten the moment you are stung by criticism," and

she tried to put him aside. "What do his personal traits matter to me?" she said, as if in answer to her own charge. "He is my dramatist, not my husband."

But when he came back to her, an absent-minded smile upon his handsome lips, holding in his hands some pages of exquisite dialogue, she humbled herself before him. "After all, what am I beside him? He is a poet, a creative mind, while I am only a mimic," and straightway she began to make excuses for him. "Have I not always had the same selfish, desperate concentration? Am I always a sweet and lovely companion? Certainly the artistic temperament is not a strange thing to me."

Nevertheless, she suffered. It was hard to be the one optimist in the midst of so many pessimists. The nightly performance to an empty house wore on her most distressingly, and no wonder. She, who had never hitherto given a moment's troubled thought to such matters, now sat in her dressing-room listen-

ing to the infrequent, hollow clang of the falling chair seats, attempting thus to estimate the audience straggling sparsely, desolately in. To re-enter the stage after an exit was like an icy shower-bath. Each night she hoped to find the receipts larger, and indeed they did from time to time advance suddenly, only to drop back to desolating driblets the following night. These gains were due to the work of the loyal Hugh as advertising agent, or to some desperate discount sale to a club on the part of Westervelt, who haunted the front of the house, a pale and flabby wraith of himself, racking his brain, swearing strange, German oaths, and perpetually conjuring up new advertising devices. His suffering approached the tragic.

His theatre, which had once rustled with gay and cheerful people, was now cold, echoing, empty, repellent. Nothing came from the balcony, wherein Helen's sweet voice wandered, save a faint, half-hearted hand-clapping. No one sat in the boxes, and only here

and there a man wore evening-dress. The women were always intense, but undemonstrative. Under these sad conditions the music of the orchestra became factitious, a brazen clatter raised to reinforce the courage of the ushers, who flitted about like uneasy spirits. There were no carriages in waiting, and the audience returned to the street in silence like funeral guests from a church.

Hugh remained bravely at his post in front. Each night after a careful toilet he took his stand in the lobby watching with calculating eye and impassive face the stream of people rushing by his door. "If we could only catch one in a hundred?" he said to Westervelt. "I never expected to see Helen Merival left like this. I didn't think it possible. I thought she could make any piece go. To play to fifty dollars was out of my reckoning. It is slaughter."

Once his disgust topped all restraint, and he burst forth to Helen: "Look at this man Douglass. He bamboozles us into producing

his play, then runs off and leaves us to sink or swim. He won't even change the lines—says he's working on a new one that will make us all 'barrels of money.' That's the way of these dramatists—always full of some new pipe-dream. Meanwhile we're going into the hole every night. I can't stand it. We were making all kinds of money with *The Baroness*. Come, let's go back to it!" His voice filled with love, for she was his ideal. "Sis, I hate to see you doing this. It cuts me to the heart. Why, some of these newspaper shads actually pretend to pity you—you, the greatest romantic actress in America! This man Douglass has got you hypnotized. Honestly, there's something uncanny about the way he has queered you. Brace up. Send him whirling. He isn't worth a minute of your time, Nellie—now, that's the fact. He's a crazy freak. Say the word and I'll fire him and his misbegotten plays to-night."

To this Helen made simple reply. "No, Hugh; I intend to stand to my promise. We

will keep *Lillian* on till the new play is ready. It would be unfair to Mr. Douglass—"

"But he has lost all interest in it himself. He never shows up in front, never makes a suggestion."

"He is saving all his energy for the new play."

Hugh's lips twisted in scorn. "The new play! Yes, he's filled with a lot of pale-blue moonshine now. He's got another 'idea.' That's the trouble with these literary chaps, they're so swelled by their own notions they can't write what the common audience wants. His new play will be a worse 'frost' than this. You'll ruin us all if you don't drop him. We stand to lose forty thousand dollars on *Lillian* already."

"Nevertheless, I shall give the new play a production," she replied, and Hugh turned away in speechless dismay and disgust.

The papers were filled with stinging allusions to her failure. A shrewd friend from Boston met her with commiseration in her face. "It's a good play and a fine part," she

said, "but they don't want you in such work. They like you when you look wicked."

"I know that, but I'm tired of playing the wanton adventuress for such people. I want to appeal to a more thoughtful public for the rest of my stage career."

"Why not organize a church like Mrs. Allinger?" sneered another less friendly critic. "The stage is no place for sermons."

"You are horribly unjust. *Lillian's Duty* is a powerful acting drama, and has its audience if I could reach it. Perhaps I'm not the one to do Mr. Douglass's work, after all," she added, humbly.

Deep in her heart Helen MacDavitt the woman was hungry for some one to tell her that he loved her. She longed to put her head down on a strong man's breast to weep. "If Douglass would only open his arms to me I would go to him. I would not care what the world says."

She wished to see him reinstate himself not merely with the public but in her own esti-

mate of him. As she believed that by means of his pen he would conquer, she comprehended that his present condition was fevered, unnatural, and she hoped—she believed—it to be temporary. "Success will bring back the old, brave, sanguine, self-contained Douglass whose forthright power and self-confidence won my admiration," she said, and with this secret motive to sustain her she went to her nightly delineation of *Lillian.*

She had lived long without love, and her heart now sought for it with an intensity which made her art of the highest account only as served the man she loved. Praise and publicity were alike of no value unless they brought success and happiness to him whose eyes called her with growing power.

XIV

AT last the new play was finished and the author brought it and laid it in the hands of the actress as if it were a new-born child, and her heart leaped with joy. He was no longer the stern and self-absorbed writer. His voice was tender as he said, "I give this to you in the hope that it may regain for you what you have lost."

The tears sprang to Helen's eyes, and a word of love rose to her lips. "It is very beautiful, and we will triumph in it."

He seemed about to speak some revealing, sealing word, but the presence of the mother restrained him. Helen, recognizing the re-

turning tide of his love, to which she related no self-seeking, was radiant.

"Come, we will put it in rehearsal at once," she said. "I know you are as eager to have it staged as I. I will not read it. I will wait till you read it for the company to-morrow morning."

"I do not go to that ordeal with the same joy as before," he admitted.

The company met him with far less of interest in this reading of the second play, and his own manner was distinctly less confident. Hugh and Westervelt maintained silence, but their opposition was as palpable as a cold wind. Royleston's cynical face expressed an open contempt. The lesser people were anxious to know the kind of characters they were to play, and a few were sympathetically eager to hear the play itself.

He read the manuscript with some assurance of manner, but made no suggestion as to the stage business, contenting himself with producing an effect on the minds of the principals;

but as the girlish charm of *Enid's* character made itself felt, the women of the company began to glow.

"Why, it's very beautiful!" they exclaimed.

Hugh, on the scent for another "problem," began to relax, and even Westervelt grunted a few words of approval, qualified at once by the whispered words, "Not a cent in it—not a cent." Royleston, between his acts, regarded the air with dreamy gaze. "I don't see myself in that part yet, but it's very good—very good."

The reading closed rather well, producing the desired effect of "happy tears" on the faces of several of the feminine members of the cast, and Helen again spoke of her pleasure in such work and asked them to "lend themselves" to the lines. "This play is a kind of poem," she said, "and makes a direct appeal to women, and yet I believe it will also win its way to the hearts of the men."

As they rose Douglass returned the manu-

script to Helen with a bow. "I renounce all rights. Hereafter I am but a spectator."

"I think you are right in not attempting rehearsals. You are worn and tired. Why don't you go away for a time? A sea voyage would do you good."

"No, I must stay and face the music, as my father used to say. I do not wish to seem to run away, and, besides, I may be able to offer a suggestion now and then."

"Oh, I didn't mean to have you miss the first night. You could come back for that. If you stay we will be glad of any suggestion at any time—won't we, Hugh?"

Hugh refused to be brought into any marked agreement. "Of course, the author's advice is valuable, but with a man like Olquest—"

"I don't want to see a single rehearsal," replied Douglass. "I want to have the joy this time of seeing my characters on the opening night fully embodied. If the success of the play depended upon my personal supervision, the case would be different, but it

doesn't. I trust you and Olquest. I will keep away."

Again they went to lunch together, but the old-time elation was sadly wanting. Hugh was silent and Douglass gloomy. Helen cut the luncheon for a ride in the park, which did them good, for the wind was keen and inspiriting and the landscape wintry white and blue and gold. She succeeded in provoking her playwright to a smile now and then by some audacious sally against the sombre silence of her cavaliers.

They halted for half an hour in the upper park while she called the squirrels to her and fed them from her own hands—those wonderful hands that had so often lured with jewels and threatened with steel. No one seeing this refined, sweet woman in tasteful furs would have related her with the *Gismonda* and *Istar*, but Douglass thrilled with sudden accession of confidence. "How beautiful she will be as *Enid!*" he thought, as, with a squirrel on her shoulder, she turned with shining face

to softly call: "This is David. Isn't he a dear?"

She waited until the keen-eyed rascals had taken her last nut, then slowly returned to the carriage side. "I like to win animals like that. It thrills my heart to have them set their fearless little feet on my arm."

Hugh uttered a warning. "You want to be careful how you handle them; they bite like demons."

"Oh, now, don't spoil it!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure they know me and trust me."

Douglass was moved to their defence, and strove during the remainder of the ride to add to Helen's pleasure; and this effort on his part made her eyes shine with joy — a joy almost pathetic in its intensity.

As they parted at the door of his hotel he said: "If you do not succeed this time I will utterly despair of the public. I know how sweet you will be as *Enid.* They must bow down before you as I do."

"I will give my best powers to this — be sure nothing will be neglected at rehearsal."

"I know you will," he answered, feelingly.

She was better than her promise, laboring tirelessly in the effort to embody through her company the poetry, the charm, which lay even in the smaller rôles of the play. That one so big and brusque as Douglass should be able to define so many and such fugitive feminine emotions was a constant source of wonder and delight to her. The discovery gave her trust and confidence in him, and to her admiration of his power was added something which stole into her mind like music, causing foolish dreams and moments of reckless exaltation wherein she asked herself whether to be a great actress was not, after all, a thing of less profit than to be a wife and mother.

She saw much less of him than she wished, for Hugh remained coldly unresponsive in his presence, and threw over their meetings a restraint which prevented the joyous companionship of their first acquaintanceship.

More than this, Helen was conscious of being watched and commented upon, not merely by Hugh and Westervelt, but by guests of the hotel and representatives of the society press. Douglass, in order to shield her, and also because his position in the world was less secure than ever, returned to his self-absorbed, impersonal manner of speech. He took no part in the rehearsals, except to rush in at the close with some changes which he wished embodied at once, regardless of the vexation and confusion resulting. His brain was still perilously active, and not only cut and refined the dialogue, but made most radical modifications of the "business."

Helen began to show the effects of the strain upon her; for she was not merely carrying the burden of *Lillian's Duty*, and directing rehearsals of the new piece—she was deeply involved in the greatest problem than can come to a woman. She loved Douglass; but did she love him strongly enough to warrant her in saying so—when he should ask her?

His present poverty she put aside as of no serious account. A man so physically powerful, so mentally alert, was rich in possibilities. The work which he had already done entitled him to rank above millionaires, but that his very forcefulness, his strong will, his dominating idealism would make him her master — would inevitably change her relation to the world—had already changed it, in fact—she was not ready to acknowledge.

Up to this time her love for the stage had been single-minded. No man had touched her heart with sufficient fire to disturb her serenity, but now she was not merely following where he led, she was questioning the value and morality of her avocation.

"If I cannot play high rôles, if the public will not have me in work like this I am now rehearsing, then I will retire to private life. I will no longer be a plaything for the man-headed monster," she said one day.

"You should have retired before sinking your good money in these Douglass plays,"

Hugh bitterly rejoined. "It looks now as though we might end in the police station."

"I have no fear of that, Hugh; I am perfectly certain that *Enid* is to regain all our losses."

"I wish I had your beautiful faith," he made answer, and walked away.

Westervelt said little to her during these days; he only looked, and his doleful gestures, his lugubrious grimaces, were comic. He stood to lose nothing, except possible profits for Helen. She was paying him full rental, but he claimed that his house was being ruined. "It will get the reputation of doing nothing but failures," he said to her once, in a last despairing appeal, and to this she replied:

"Very well. If at the end of four weeks *Enid* does not pull up to paying business I will release you from your contract. I will free your house of Helen Merival."

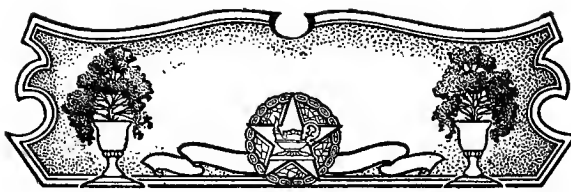
"No, no! I don't want that. I want you, but I do not want this crazy man Douglass. You must not leave me!" His voice grew

husky with appeal. "Return to the old plays, sign a five-year contract, and I will make you again rich."

"There will be time to consider that four weeks hence."

"Yes, but the season is passing."

"Courage, mein Herr!" she said, with a smile, and left him almost in tears.



XV

AS the opening night of *Enid's Choice* drew near, Douglass suffered greater anxiety but experienced far less of nervous excitement than before. He was shaking rather than tense of limb, and did not find it necessary to walk the streets to calm his physical excitement. He was depressed by the knowledge that a second defeat would leave him not merely discredited but practically penniless. Nevertheless, he did not hide; on the contrary, he took a seat in one of the boxes.

The audience he at once perceived was of totally different character and temper from

that which greeted *Lillian*. It was quiet and moderate in size, rather less than the capacity of the orchestra seats, for Helen had asked that no "paper" be distributed. Very few were in the gallery, and those who were had the quietly expectant air of students. Only three of the boxes were occupied. The fashionables were entirely absent.

Plainly these people were in their seats out of interest in the play or because of the known power of the actress. They were not flushed with wine nor heavy with late dinners.

The critics were out again in force, and this gave the young author a little satisfaction, for their presence was indisputable evidence of the interest excited by the literary value of his work. "I have made a gain," he said, grimly. "Such men do not go gunning for small deer." But that they were after blood was shown by the sardonic grins with which they greeted one another as they strolled in at the door or met in the aisles. They ex-

pected another "killing," and were resolute to be thorough.

From the friendly shelter of the curtain Douglass could study the house without being seen, and a little glow of fire warmed his heart as he recognized five or six of the best-known literary men of the city seated well down towards the front, and the fifteen minutes' wait before the orchestra leader took his seat was rendered less painful by his pride in the really high character of his audience; but when the music blared forth and the curtain began to rise, his blood chilled with a return of the fear and doubt which had assailed him at the opening of *Lillian's Duty*. "It is impossible that I should succeed," was his thought.

However, his high expectation of pleasure from the performance came back, for he had resolutely kept away from even the dress rehearsal, and the entire creative force of his lines was about to come to him. "In a few moments my characters will step forth from

the world of the disembodied into the mellow glow of the foot-lights," he thought, and the anticipated joy of welcoming them warmed his brain and the chill clutch of fear fell away from his throat. The dignity and the glow, the possibilities of the theatre as a temple of literature came to him with almost humbling force.

He knew that Hugh and the actors had worked night and day towards this event—not for him (he realized how little they cared for him), but for Helen. She, dear girl, thought of everybody, and forgot herself in the event. That Westervelt and Hugh had no confidence in the play, even after dress rehearsal, and that they had ignored him as he came into the theatre he knew, but he put these slights aside. Westervelt was busy incessantly explaining to his intimates and to the critics that he no longer shared in Merival's "grazy schemes. She guarantees me, orderwise I would glose my theatre," he said, with wheezy reiteration.

The first scene opened brilliantly in the home of Calvin Wentworth, a millionaire mine-owner. Into the garish and vulgarly ostentatious reception-room a pale, sweet slip of a girl drifted, with big eyes shining with joy of her home-coming. Some of the auditors again failed to recognize the great actress, so wonderful was her transformation in look and manner. The critics themselves, dazed for a moment, led in the cheer which rose. This warmed the house to a genial glow, and the play started with spirit.

Helen, deeply relieved to see Douglass in the box, advanced towards him, and their eyes met for an instant in a lovers' greeting. Again that subtle interchange of fire took place. She looked marvellously young and light-hearted; it was hard to believe that she was worn with work and weakened by anxiety. Her eyes were bright and her hands like lilies.

The act closed with a very novel piece of business and some very unusual lines passing between *Enid* and *Sidney*, her lover. Towards

this passage Douglass now leaned, uplifted by a sense of power, exulting in Helen's discernment, which had enabled her to realize, almost perfectly, his principal characters. He had not begun to perceive and suffer from the shortcomings of her support; but when *Enid* left the stage for a few minutes, the fumbling of the subordinate actors stung and irritated him. They had the wrong accent, they roared where they should have been strong and quiet, and the man who played *Sidney* stuttered and drawled, utterly unlike the character of the play.

"Oh, the wooden ass!" groaned Douglass. "He'll ruin the piece." A burning rage swept over him. So much depended on this performance, and now—"I should have directed the rehearsals. I was a fool to neglect them. Why does she keep the sot?" And part of his anger flowed out towards the star.

Helen, returning, restored the illusion, so complete was her assumption of the part, and the current set swiftly towards that unparal-

leled ending, those deeply significant lines which had come to the author only late in the week, but which formed, indeed, the very key to *Sidney's* character — they were his chief enthusiasm in this act, suggesting, as they did, so much. Tingling, aching with pleasurable suspense, the author waited.

The curtain fell on a totally different effect —with *Sidney* reading utterly different lines!

For a moment the author sat stunned, unable to comprehend what had happened. At last the revelation came. "They have failed to incorporate the changes I made. They have gone back to the weak, trashy ending which I discarded. They have ruined the scene utterly!" and, looking at two of the chief critics, he caught them in the act of laughing evilly, even as they applauded.

With face set in rage, he made his way back of the curtain towards Helen's room. She met him at the door, her face shining with joy. "It's going! It's going!" she cried out, gleefully.

His reply was like a blow in the face. "Why didn't you incorporate that new ending of the act?" he asked, with bitter harshness.

Helen staggered, and her hands rose as if to shield herself from violence. She stammered, "I—I—I—couldn't. You see, the lines came so late. They would have thrown us all out. I will do so to-morrow," she added.

"To-morrow!" he answered, through his set teeth. "Why to-morrow? To-night is the time. Don't you see I'm staking my reputation on to-night? To-night we win or lose. The house is full of critics. They will write of what we do, not of what we are *going* to do." He began to pace up and down, trembling with disappointment and fury. He turned suddenly. "How about the second act? Did you make those changes in *Sidney's* lines? I infer not," he added, with a sneer.

Helen spoke with difficulty, her bosom heaving, her eyes fixed in wonder and pain

on his face. "No. How could I? You brought them only yesterday morning; they would have endangered the whole act." Then, as the indignity, the injustice, the burning shame of his assault forced themselves into her mind, she flamed out in reproach: "Why did you come back here at all? Why didn't you stay away, as you did before? You are cruel, heartless!" The tears dimmed her eyes. "You've ruined my whole performance. You've broken my heart. Have you no soul—no sense of honor? Go away! I hate you! I'll never speak to you again! I hate you!" And she turned, leaving him dumb and staring, in partial realization of his selfish, brutal demands.

Hugh approached him with lowering brows and clinched hands. "You've done it now. You've broken her nerve, and she'll fail in her part. Haven't you any sense? We pick you off the street and feed you and clothe you—and do your miserable plays—and you rush in here and strike my sister, Helen Merival, in

the face. I ought to kick you into the street!"

Douglass stood through this like a man whose brain is benumbed by the crashing echoes of a thunderbolt, hardly aware of the fury of the speaker, but this final threat cleared his mind and stung him into reply.

"You are at liberty to try that," he answered, and an answering ferocity shone in his eyes. "I gave you this play; it's good work, and, properly done, would succeed. Ruin it if you want to. I am done with it and you."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the brother, as the playwright turned away. "Good riddance to a costly acquaintance."

Hardly had the street door clapped behind the blinded author when Helen, white and agitated, reappeared, breathlessly asking, "Where is he; has he gone?"

"Yes; I am glad to say he has."

"Call him back—quick! Don't let him go

away angry. I must see him again! Go, bring him back!"

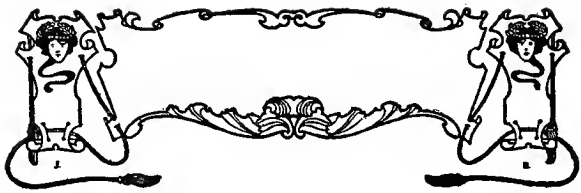
Hugh took her by the arm. "What do you intend to do—give him another chance to insult you? He isn't worth another thought from you. Let him go, and his plays with him."

The orchestra, roaring on its *finale*, ended with a crash. Hugh lifted his hand in warning. "There goes the curtain, Helen. Go on. Don't let him kill your performance. Go on!" And he took her by the arm.

The training as well as the spirit and quality of the actress reasserted their dominion, and as she walked out upon the stage not even the searching glare of the foot-lights could reveal the cold shadow which lay about her heart.

When the curtain fell on the final "picture" she fairly collapsed, refusing to take the curtain call which a goodly number of her auditors insisted upon. "I'm too tired," she made answer to Hugh. "Too heart-sick," she ad-

mitted to herself, for Douglass was gone with angry lights in his eyes, bearing bitter and accusing words in his ears. The temple of amusement was at the moment a place of sorrow, of despair.



XVI

DOUGLASS knew before he had set foot upon the pavement that his life was blasted, that his chance of success and Helen's love were gone, forfeited by his own egotism, his insane selfishness; but it was only a half-surrender; something very stark and unyielding rose within him, preventing his return to ask forgiveness. The scorn, the contempt of Hugh's words, and the lines of loathing appearing for the first time in Helen's wonderfully sensitive face burned each moment deeper into his soul. The sorrows of *Enid's* world rose like pale clouds above the immovable mountains of his shame and black despair.

He did not doubt for a moment but that this separation was final. "After such a revelation of my character," he confessed, "she can do nothing else but refuse to see me. I have only myself to blame. I was insane," and he groaned with his torment. "She is right. Hugh is right in defending his household against me. My action was that of a fool—a hideous, egotistic fool."

Seeking refuge in his room, he faced his future in nerveless dejection. His little store of money was gone, and his profession, long abandoned, seemed at the moment a broken staff—his place on the press in doubt. What would his good friend say to him now when he asked for a chance to earn his bread? He had flouted the critics, the dramatic departments of all the papers. In his besotted self-confidence he had cast away all his best friends, and with these reflections came the complete revelation of Helen's kindness—and her glittering power. Back upon him swept a realization of the paradise in which he had lived,

in whose air his egotism had expanded like a mushroom.

Leagued with her, enjoying her bounty and sharing in the power which her success had brought her, he had imagined himself a great writer, a man with a compelling message to his fellows. It seemed only necessary to reach out his hand in order to grasp a chaplet —a crown. With her the world seemed his debtor. Now he was a thing cast off, a broken boy grovelling at the foot of the ladder of fame.

While he withered over his defeat the electric cars, gigantic insects of the dawn, began to howl and the trains on the elevated railway thundered by. The city's voice, which never ceases, but which had sunk to a sleepy murmur, suddenly awoke, and with clattering, snarling crescendo roar announced the coming of the tides of toilers. "I am facing the day," he said to himself, "and the papers containing the contemptuous judgments of my critics are being delivered in millions to my fellow-

citizens. This thing I have gained — I am rapidly becoming infamous."

His weakness, his shuddering fear made his going forth a torture. Even the bell-boy who brought his papers seemed to exult over his misery, but by sternly sending him about an errand the worn playwright managed to overawe and silence him, and then, with the city's leading papers before him, he sat down to his bitter medicine. As he had put aside the judgments of *Lillian's Duty*, with contemptuous gesture, so now he searched out every line, humbly admitting the truth of every criticism, instructed even by the lash of those who hated him.

The play had closed unexpectedly well, one paper admitted, but it could never succeed. It was not dramatic of construction. Another admitted that it was a novel and pretty entertainment, a kind of prose poem, a fantasy of the present, but without wide appeal. Others called it a moonshine monologue— that a girl at once so naïve and so powerful

was impossible. All united in praise of Helen, however, and, as though by agreement, bewailed her desertion of the rôles in which she won great renown. "Our advice, given in the friendliest spirit, is this: go back to the twilight of the past, to the costume play. Get out of the garish light of to-day. The present is suited only for a kind of crass comedy or Bowery melodrama. Only the past, the foreign, affords setting for the large play of human passion which Helen Merival's great art demands."

"You are cheating us," wrote another. "There are a thousand little *ingénues* who can play acceptably this goody-goody *Enid*, but the best of them would be lost in the large folds of your cloak in *The Baroness Telka*."

Only one wrote in almost unmeasured praise, and his words, so well chosen, salved the smarting wounds of the dramatist. "Those who have seen Miss Merival only as the melodrama queen or the adventuress in jet-black evening dress have a surprise in store for

them. Her *Enid* is a dream of cold, chaste girlhood—a lily with heart of fire—in whose tender, virginal eyes the lust and cruelty of the world arouse only pity and wonder. So complete was Miss Merival's investiture of herself in this part that no one recognized her as she stepped on the stage. For a moment even her best friends sat silent." And yet this friend ended like the rest in predicting defeat. "The play is away over the heads of any audience likely to come to see it. The beringed and complacent wives of New York and their wine-befuddled husbands will find little to entertain them in this idyl of modern life. As for the author, George Douglass, we have only this to say: He is twenty years ahead of his time. Let him go on writing his best and be patient. By-and-by, when we have time to think of other things than money, when our wives have ceased to struggle for social success, when the reaction to a simpler and truer life comes—and it is coming—then the quality of such a play as *Enid's Choice*

will give its author the fame and the living he deserves."

The tears came to Douglass's eyes. "Good old Jim! He knows I need comfort this morning. He's prejudiced in my favor—everybody will see that; and yet there is truth in what he says. I will go to him and ask for work, for I must get back to earning a weekly wage."

He went down and out into the street. The city seemed unusually brilliant and uncaring. From every quarter of the suburbs floods of people were streaming in to work or to shop, quite unknowing of any one's misfortunes but their own, each intent on earning a living or securing a bargain. "How can I appeal to these motes?" he asked himself. "By what magic can I lift myself out of this press to earn a living—out of this common drudgery?" He studied the faces in the coffee-house where he sat. "How many of these citizens are capable of understanding for a moment *Enid's Choice?* Is there any subject holding an interest com-

mon to them and to me which would not in a sense be degrading in me to dramatize for their pleasure?"

This was the question, and though his breakfast and a walk on the avenue cleared his brain, it did not solve his problem. "They don't want my ideas on architecture. My dramatic criticism interests but a few. My plays are a proved failure. What is to be done?"

Mingled with these gloomy thoughts, constantly recurring like the dull, far-off boom of a sombre bell, was the consciousness of his loss of Helen. He did not think of returning to ask forgiveness. "I do not deserve it," he repeated each time his heart prompted a message to her. "She is well rid of me. I have been a source of loss, of trouble, and vexation to her. She will be glad of my self-revelation." Nevertheless, when he found her letter waiting for him in his box at the office he was smitten with sudden weakness. "What would she say? She has every reason to hate

me, to cast me and my play to the winds. Has she done so? I cannot blame her."

Safe in his room, he opened the letter, the most fateful that had ever come to him in all his life. The very lines showed the agitation of the writer:

"My dear Author,—Pardon me for my harshness last night, and come to see me at once. I was nervous and anxious, as you were. I should have made allowances for the strain you were under. Please forgive me. Come and lunch, as usual, and talk of the play. I believe in it, in spite of all. It must make its own public, but I believe it will do so. Come and let me hear you say you have forgotten my words of last night. I didn't really mean them; you must have known that."

His throat filled with tenderness and his head bowed in humility as he read these good, sweet, womanly lines, and for the moment he

was ready to go to her and receive pardon kneeling. But as he thought of the wrong he had done her, the misfortune he had brought upon her, a stubborn, unaccountable resolution hardened his heart. "No, I will not go back till I can go as her equal. I am broken and in disgrace now. I will not burden her generosity further."

The thought of making his peace with Hugh, of meeting Westervelt's hard stare, aided this resolution, and, sitting at his desk, he wrote a long and passionate letter, wherein he delineated with unsparing hand his miserable failure. He took a pride and a sort of morbid pleasure in punishing himself, in denying himself any further joy in her company.

"It is better for you and better for me that we do not meet again—at least till I have won the tolerance of your brother and manager and my own self-respect. The work I have done is honest work; I will not admit that it is wholly bad, but I cannot meet Hugh again

till I can demand consideration. It was not so much the words he used as the tone. I was helpless in resenting it. That I am a beggar, a dangerous influence, I admit. I am appalled at the thought of what I have done to injure you. Cast me overboard. Not even your beauty, your great fame, can make my work vital to the public. I am too perverse, too individual. There is good in me, but it is evil to you. I no longer care what they say of me, but I feel every word derogatory of you as if it were a red-hot point of steel. I did not sleep last night; I spent the time in reconstructing myself. I confessed my grievous sins, and I long to do penance. This play is also a failure. I grew cold with hate of myself last night as I thought of the irreparable injury I had done to you. I here relinquish all claim to both pieces; they are yours to do with as you like. Take them, rewrite them, play them, or burn them, as you will.

"You see, I am very, very humble. I have put my foolish pride underfoot. I am not

broken. I am still very proud and, I fear, self-conceited, in spite of my severe lesson. *Enid* is beautiful, and I know it, and it helps me write this letter, but I have no right to ask even friendship from you. My proved failure as a playwright robs me of every chance of meeting you on equal terms. I want to repay you, I *must* repay you, for what you have done. If I could write now, it would be not to please myself, but to please you, to help you regain your dominion. I want to see you the radiant one again, speaking to throngs of happy people. If I could by any sacrifice of myself call back the homage of the critics and place you where I found you, the acknowledged queen of American actresses, I would do it. But I am helpless. I shall not speak or write to you again till I can come with some gift in my hand—some recompense for your losses through me. I have been a malign influence in your life. I am in mad despair when I think of you playing to cold and empty houses. I am going back to the

West to do sash factories and wheat elevators; these are my *métier*. You are the one to grant pardon; I am the malefactor. I am taking myself out of your world. Forgive me and—forget me. Hugh was right. My very presence is a curse to you. Good-bye."

XVII

THIS letter came to Helen with her coffee, and the reading of it blotted out the glory of the morning, filling her eyes with smarting tears. It put a sudden ache into her heart, a fierce resentment. At the moment his assumed humbleness, his self-derision, his confession of failure irritated her.

"I don't want you to bend and bow," she thought, as if speaking to him. "I'd rather you were fierce and hard, as you were last night." She read on to the end, so deeply moved that she could scarcely see the lines. Her resentment melted away and a pity, pro-

found and almost maternal, filled her heart. "Poor boy! What could Hugh have said to him! I will know. It has been a bitter experience for him. And is this the end of our good days?"

With this internal question a sense of vital loss took hold upon her. For the first time in her life the future seemed desolate and her past futile. Back upon her a throng of memories came rushing—memories of the high and splendid moments they had spent together. First of all she remembered him as the cold, stern, handsome stranger of that first night—that night when she learned that his coldness was assumed, his sternness a mask. She realized once again that at this first meeting he had won her by his voice, by his hand-clasp, by the swiftness and fervor of his speech; he had dominated her, swept her from her feet.

And now this was the end of all their plans, their dreams of conquest. There could be no doubt of his meaning in this letter: he had

cut himself off from her, perversely, bitterly, in despair and deep humiliation. She did not doubt his ability to keep his word. There was something inexorable in him. She had felt it before—a sort of blind, self-torturing obstinacy which would keep him to his vow though he bled for every letter.

And yet she wrote again, patiently, sweetly, asking him to come to her. "I don't know what Hugh said to you—no matter, forgive him. We were all at high tension last night. I know you didn't intend to hurt me, and I have put it all away. I will forget your reproach, but I cannot have you go out of my life in this way. It is too cruel, too hopeless. Come to me again, your good, strong, buoyant self, and let us plan for the future."

This message, so high, so divinely forgiving, came back to her unopened, with a line from the clerk on the back—"Mr. Douglass left the city this evening. No address."

This laconic message struck her like a blow. It was as if Douglass himself had refused her

outstretched hand. Her nerves, tense and quivering, gave way. Her resentment flamed up again.

"Very well." She tore the note in small pieces, slowly, with painful precision, as if by so doing she were tearing and blowing away the great passion which had grown up in her heart. "I was mistaken in you. You are unworthy of my confidence. After all, you are only a weak, egotistical 'genius'—morbid, selfish. Hugh is right. You have proved my evil genius. You skulked the night of your first play. You alternately ignored and made use of me—as you pleased—and after all I had done for you you flouted me in the face of my company." She flung the fragments of the note into the fire. "There are your words—all counting for nothing."

And she rose and walked out to her brother and her manager, determined that no sign of her suffering and despair should be written upon her face.

The day dragged wearily forward, and when

Westervelt came in with a sorrowful tale of diminishing demand for seats she gave her consent to a return to *Baroness Telka* on the following Monday morning.

The manager was jubilant. "Now we will see a theatre once more. I tought I vas running a church or a school. Now we will see carriages at the door again and some dress-suits pefore the orchestra. Eh, Hugh?"

"I'm glad to see you come to your senses," said Hugh, ignoring Westervelt. "That chap had us all—"

She stopped him. "Not a word of that. Mr. Douglass was right and his plays are right, but the public is not yet risen to such work. I admire his work just as much now as ever. I am only doubting the public. If there is no sign of increasing interest on Saturday we will take *Enid* off. That is all I will say now."

It seemed a pitiful, a monstrous thing. Hugh made no further protest, but that his queenly sister, after walking untouched

through swarms of rich and talented suitors, should fall a victim to a poor and unknown architect, who was a failure at his own business as well as a playwright.

Mrs. MacDavitt, who stood quite in awe of her daughter, and who feared the sudden, hot temper of her son, passed through some trying hours as the days went by. Helen was plainly suffering, and the mother cautioned the son to speak gently. "I fear she prized him highly—the young Douglass," she said, "and, I confess, I had a kin' o' liking for the lad. He was so keen and resolved."

"He was keen to 'do' us, mother, and when he found he couldn't he pulled his freight. He could write, I'll admit that, but he wouldn't write what people wanted to hear. He was too badly stuck on his own 'genius.'"

Helen went to her task at the theatre without heart, though she pretended to a greater enthusiasm than ever. But each time she entered upon the second act of the play a mysterious and solacing pleasure came to her.

She enjoyed the words with which *Enid* questions the life of her richest and most powerful suitor. The mingled shrewdness, simplicity, and sweetness of this scene always filled her with a new sense of Douglass's power of divination. Indeed, she closed the play each night with a sense of being more deeply indebted to him as well as a feeling of having been near him. Once she saw a face strangely like his in the upper gallery, and the blood tingled round her heart, and she played the remainder of the act with mind distraught. "Can it be possible that he is still in the city?" she asked herself.

XVIII

IT was, indeed, the playwright. Each night he left his boarding-place, drawn by an impulse he could not resist, to walk slowly to and fro opposite the theatre entrance, calculating with agonized eye the meagre numbers of those who entered. At times he took his stand near the door in a shadowy nook (with coat-collar rolled high about his ears), in order to observe the passing stream, hoping, exulting, and suffering alternately as groups from the crowd paused for a moment to study the displayed photographs, only to pass on to other amusement with some careless allusion to the fallen star.

This hurt him worst of all—that these motes, these cheap little boys and girls, could now sneer at or pity Helen Merival. "I brought her to this," he repeated, with morbid sense of power. "When she met me she was queen of the city; now she is an object of pity."

This feeling of guilt, this egotism deepened each night as he watched the city's pleasure-seekers pace past the door. It was of no avail to say that the few who entered were of higher type than the many who passed. "The profession which Helen serves cannot live on the wishes of the few, the many must be pleased. To become exclusive in appeal is to die of hunger. This is why the sordid, commonplace playwrights and the business-like managers succeed while the idealists fail. There is an iron law of limitation here."

"That is why my influence is destructive," he added, and was reassured in the justice of his resolution to take himself out of Helen's life. "Everything I stand for is inimical to her interests. To follow my path is to eat

dry crusts, to be without comfort. To amuse this great, moiling crowd, to dance for them like a monkey, to pander to their base passions, this means success, and so long as her acting does not smirch her own soul what does it matter?" In such wise he sometimes argued in his bitterness and wrath.

From the brilliant street, from the gay crowds rolling on in search of witless farce-comedy and trite melodrama, the brooding idealist climbed one night to the gallery to overlook a gloomy, empty auditorium. Concealing himself as best he could, he sat through the performance, tortured by some indefinable appeal in Helen's voice, hearing with cold and sinking heart the faint applause from the orchestra chairs which used to roar with bravos and sparkle with the clapping of white and jewelled hands.

There was something horrifying in this change. In his morbid and overwrought condition it seemed murderous. At last a new resolution set his lips in a stern line, and when

the curtain fell on the last act his mind was made up. "I will write one more play for the sensation-loving fools, for these flabby business men and their capon-stuffed wives. I will mix them a dramatic cocktail that will make them sit up. I will create a dazzling rôle for Helen, one that will win back all her old-time admirers. They shall come like a roaring tide, and she shall recoup herself for every loss—in purse and prestige."

It was this night, when his face was white with suffering, that Helen caught a glimpse of him hanging across the railing of the upper balcony.

He went no more to see her play. In his small, shabby room in a musty house on one of the old side streets he set to work on his new plan. He wrote now without fervor, without elation, plodding along hour after hour, erasing, interlining, destroying, rewriting. He toiled terribly. He permitted himself no fancy flights. He calculated now. "I must have a young and beautiful duchess

or countess," he mused, bitterly. "Our democratic public loves to see nobility. She must peril her honor for a lover—a wonderful fellow of the middle-class, not royal, but near it. The princess must masquerade in a man's clothing for some high purpose. There must be a lord high chamberlain or the like who discovers her on this mission to save her lover, and who uses his discovery to demand her hand in marriage for his son—"

In this cynical mood he worked, sustained only by the memory of "The Glittering Woman" whose power and beauty had once dazzled him. Slowly the new play took shape, and, try as he might, he could not keep out of it a line now and then of real drama—of literature. Each act was designed to end with a clarion call to the passions, and he was perfectly certain that the curtain would rise again and again at the close. At every point was glitter and the rush of heroics.

He lived sparely, seeing no one, going out only at night for a walk in the square. To

send to his brother or his father for money he would not, not even to write his wonder-working drama. His letters home, while brief, were studiedly confident of tone. The play-acting business and all those connected with it stood very remote from the farming village in which Dr. Donald Douglass lived, and when he read from his son's letters references to his dramas his mind took but slight hold upon the words. His replies were brief and to the point. "Go back to your building and leave the play-actors to themselves. They're a poor, uneasy lot at the best." To him an architect was a man who built houses and barns, with a personal share in the physical labor, a wholesome, manly business. The son understood his father's prejudices, and they formed a barrier to his approach when in need.

On the morning of the fifteenth day *Alessandra* went to the type-writer, and the weary playwright lifted his head and took a full, free breath. He was convinced beyond

any question that this melodrama would please. It had all the elements which he despised, therefore it must succeed. His desire to see Helen now overpowered him. Worn with his toil and exultant in his freedom, he went out into the street to see what the world was doing.

Enid's Choice was still running. A slight gain at the end of the first week had enabled Helen to withhold her surrender to mammon. The second week increased the attendance, but the loss on the two plays was now very heavy, and Hugh and Westervelt and all her friends as well urged her to give way to the imperious public; but some deep loyalty to Douglass, some reason which she was not free to give, made her say, "No, while there is the slightest hope I am going to keep on." To her mother she said: "They are associated in my mind with something sweet and fine—a man's aspiration. They taste good in my mouth after all these years of rancid melodrama."

To herself she said: "If they succeed—if they win the public—my lover will come back. He can then come as a conqueror." And the hope of this, the almost certain happiness and honor which awaited them both led her to devise new methods of letting the great non-theatre-going public know that in George Douglass's *Enid* they might be comforted—that it was, indeed, a dramatic sign of promise. "We will give it a faithful trial here, then go on the road. Life is less strenuous in the smaller towns—they have time to think."

Hugh and Westervelt counselled against any form of advertising that would seem to set the play in a class by itself, but Helen, made keen by her suffering, bluntly replied: "You are both wrong, utterly wrong. Our only possible chance of success lies in reaching that vast, sane, thoughtful public which seldom or never goes to the theatre. This public very properly holds a prejudice against the theatrical world, but it will welcome a play which is high and poetic without being dull.

This public is so vast it makes the ordinary theatre-going public seem but a handful. We must change all our methods of printing."

These ideas were sourly adopted in the third week, just when a note from Douglass reached her by the hand of a special messenger. In this letter he said: "I have completed another play. I have been grubbing night and day with incessant struggle to put myself and all my ideals aside—to give the public what it wants—to win your old admirers back, in order that I might see you playing once more to crowded and brilliant houses. It will succeed because it is diametrically opposed to all I have expressed. It is my sacrifice. Will you accept it? Will you read my play? Shall I send it to you?"

Something went out from this letter which hurt Helen deeply. First of all there was a certain humble aloofness in his attitude which troubled her, but more significant still was his confessed departure from his ideals. Her brave and splendid lover had surrendered to

the enemy—for her sake. Her first impulse was to write refusing to accept his sacrifice. But on second thought she craftily wrote: "I do not like to think of you writing to please the public, which I have put aside, but come and bring your play. I cannot believe that you have really written down to a melodramatic audience. What I will do I cannot say till I have seen your piece. Where have you kept yourself? Have you been West? Come and tell me all about it."

To this self-contained note he replied by sending the drama. "No, I cannot come till Hugh and you have read and accepted this play. I want your manager to pass on *Alessandra*. You know what I mean. You are an idealist like myself. You will condemn this drama, but Westervelt may see in it a chance to restore the glitter to his theatre. Ask them both to read it—without letting them know who wrote it. If they accept it, then I can meet them again on equal terms. I long to see you; but I am in disgrace

and infinitely poorer than when I first met you."

Over this letter Helen pondered long. Her first impulse was to send the play back without reading it, but her love suggested another subterfuge. "I will do his will, and if Hugh and Westervelt find the play acceptable I will share in his triumph. But I will not do the play except as a last resort—for his sake. *Enid* is more than holding its own. So long as it does I will not permit him to lower his splendid powers."

To Hugh she carelessly said: "Here is another play—a melodrama, to judge from the title. Look it over and see if there is anything in it."

As plays were constantly coming in to them, Hugh took this one quite as a matter of routine, with expectation of being bored. He was a little surprised next morning when she asked, "Did you look into that manuscript?"

He answered: "No. I didn't get time."

She could hardly conceal her impatience.

"I wish you'd go over it this morning. From the title it's one of those middle-age Italian things that costume well."

"Oh, is it?" he exclaimed. "Well, I'll get right at it." Her interest in it more than the title moved him. It was a most hopeful sign of weakening on her part.

He came to lunch full of enthusiasm. "Say, sis, that play is a corker. There is a part in it that sees the *Baroness* and goes her one better. If the last act keeps up we've got a prize-winner. Who's Edwin Baxter, anyhow?"

Helen quietly stirred her tea. "I never heard the name before. A new man in the theatrical world, apparently."

"Well, he's all right. I'm going over the whole thing again. Have you read it?"

"No, I thought best to let you and Westervelt decide this time. I merely glanced at it."

"Well, it looks like the thing to pull us out of our hole."

That night Westervelt came behind the scenes with shining face. "I hope you will consent to do this new piece; it is a cracker-jack." He grew cautious. "It really is an immensely better piece of work than *The Baroness*, and yet it has elements of popularity. I have read it hastily. I shall study it to-night. If it looks as big to me to-morrow morning as now I will return to the old arrangement with you—if you wish."

"How is the house to-night?" she asked.

His face dropped. "No better than last night." He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, ten or fifteen dollars, maybe. We can play all winter to two hundred dollars a night with this play. I do not understand such audiences. Apparently each man sends just one to take his place. There is no increase."

"Well, report to me to-morrow about *Alessandra*, then I will decide upon the whole matter."

In spite of herself she shared in the glow which shone on the faces of her supports, for

the word had been passed to the leading members that they were going back to the old drama. "They've found a new play—a corking melodrama."

Royleston straightened. "What's the subject?"

"Middle-age Italian intrigue, so Hugh says —bully costumes—a wonder of a part for Merival."

"Then we are on velvet again," said Royleston.

The influence of the news ran through the action on the stage. The performance took on spirit and gusto. The audience immediately felt the glow of the players' enthusiasm, and warmed to both actress and playwright, and the curtain went down to the most vigorous applause of the entire run. But Westervelt did not perceive this, so engrossed was he in the new manuscript. Reading was prodigious labor for him—required all his attention.

He was at the hotel early the next morning,

impatient to see his star. As he waited he figured on a little pad. His face was flushed as if with drink. His eyes swam with tears of joy, and when Helen appeared he took her hand in both his fat pads, crying out:

"My dear lady, we have found you a new play. It is to be a big production. It will cost a barrel of money to put it on, but it is a winner. Tell the writer to come on and talk terms."

Helen remained quite cool. "You go too fast, Herr Westervelt. I have not read the piece. I may not like the title rôle."

The manager winced. "You will like it—you must like it. It is a wonderful part. The costuming is magnificent—the scenes superb."

"Is there any text?"

Westervelt did not feel the sarcasm. "Excellent text. It is not Sardou—of course not—but it is of his school, and very well done indeed. The situations are not new, but they are powerfully worked out. I am anxious

to secure it. If not for you, for some one else."

"Very well. I will read the manuscript. If I like it I will send for the author."

With this show of tepid interest on the part of his star Westervelt had to be content. To Hugh he complained: "The influence of that crazy Douglass is strong with her yet. I'm afraid she will turn down this part."

Hugh was also alarmed by her indifference, and at frequent intervals during the day asked how she was getting on with the reading.

To this query she each time replied: "Slowly. I'm giving it careful thought."

She was, indeed, struggling with her tempted self. She was more deeply curious to read the manuscript than any one else could possibly be, and yet she feared to open the envelope which contained it. She did not wish to be in any sense a party to her lover's surrender. She knew that he must have written falsely and without conviction to have made such a profound impression on Westervelt. The

very fact that the theme was Italian, and of the Middle Ages, was a proof of his abandonment of a cardinal principle, for he had often told her how he hated all that sort of thing. "What kind of a national drama would that be which dealt entirely with French or Italian mediæval heroes?" he had once asked, with vast scorn.

It would win back her former worshippers, she felt sure of that. The theatre would fill again with men whose palates required the highly seasoned, the far-fetched. The critics would rejoice in their victory, and welcome Helen Merival to her rightful place with added fervor. The bill-boards would glow again with magnificent posters of Helen Merival, as *Alessandra*, stooping with wild eyes and streaming hair over her slain paramour on the marble stairway, a dagger in her hand. People would crowd again behind the scenes at the close of the play. The magazines would add their chorus of praise.

And over against this stood the slim, po-

etic figure of *Enid*, so white of soul, so simple, so elemental of appeal. A whole world lay between the two parts. All that each stood for was diametrically opposed to the other. One was modern as the telephone, true, sound, and revealing. The other false from beginning to end, belonging to a world that never existed, a brilliant, flashing pageant, a struggle of beasts in robes of gold and velvet—assassins dancing in jewelled garters. Every scene, every motion was worn with use on the stage, and yet her own romance, her happiness, seemed to depend upon her capitulation as well as his.

"If they accept *Alessandra* he will come back to me proudly—at least with a sense of victory over his ignoble enemies. If I return it he will know I am right, but will still be left so deeply in my debt that he will never come to see me again." And with this thought she determined upon a course of action which led at least to a meeting and to a reconciliation between the author and the

manager, and with the thought of seeing him again her heart grew light.

When she came to the theatre at night Westervelt was waiting at the door.

"Well?" he asked, anxiously. "What do you think of it?"

"I have sent for the author," she answered, coldly. "He will meet me to-morrow at eleven. Come to the hotel and I will introduce him to you."

"Splendid! splendid!" exclaimed the manager. "You found it suited to you! A great part, eh?"

"I like it better than *The Baroness*," she replied, and left him broad-faced with joy.

"She is coming sensible again," he chuckled. "Now that that crank is out of the way we shall see her as she was—triumphant."

Again the audience responded to every line she spoke, and as she played something reassuring came up to her from the faces below. The house was perceptibly less empty, but the comfort arose from something more intangible

than an increase of filled chairs. "I believe the tide has turned," she thought, exultantly, but dared not say so to Hugh.

That night she sent a note to Douglass, and the words of her message filled him with mingled feelings of exultation and bitterness:

"You have won! Westervelt and Hugh are crazy to meet the author of *Alessandra*. They see a great success for you, for me, for all of us. Westervelt is ready to pour out his money to stage the thing gorgeously. Come to-morrow to meet them. Come proudly. You will find them both ready to take your hand—eager to acknowledge that they have misjudged you. We have both made a fight for good work and failed. No one can blame us if we yield to necessity."

The thought of once more meeting her, of facing her managers with confident gaze on equal terms, made Douglass tremble with excitement. He dressed with care, attempting as best he could to put away all the dust and odors of his miserable tenement, and went

forth looking much like the old-time, self-confident youth who faced down the clerk. His mind ran over every word in Helen's note a dozen times, extracting each time new and hidden meanings.

"If it is the great success they think it, my fortune is made." His spirits began to overleap all bounds. "It will enable me to meet her as an equal—not in worth," he acknowledged—"she is so much finer and nobler than any man that ever lived—but I will at least be something more than a tramp kennelled in a musty hole." His mind took another flight. "I can go home with pride also. Oh, success is a sovereign thing. Think of Hugh and Westervelt waiting to welcome me—and Helen!"

When he thought of her his confident air failed him, his face flushed, his hands felt numb. She shone now like a far-off violet star. She had recovered her aloofness, her allurement in his mind, and it was difficult for him to realize that he had once known her intimately and that he had treated her in-

considerately. "I must have been mad," he exclaimed. It seemed months since he had looked into her face.

The clerk he dreaded to meet was off duty, and as the elevator boy knew him he did not approach the desk, but went at once to Helen's apartments.

She did not meet him at the door as he had foolishly expected. Delia, the maid, greeted him with a smile, and led him back to the reception-room and left him alone.

He heard Helen's voice, the rustle of her dress, and then she stood before him. As he looked into her face and read love and pity in her eyes he lost all fear, all doubt, and caught her hand in both of his, unable to speak a word in his defence—unable even to tell her of his gratitude and love.

She recovered herself first, and, drawing back, looked at him searchingly. "You poor fellow, you've been working like mad. You are ill!"

"No, I am not ill—only tired. I have had

only one thought, one aim since I saw you last, that was to write something to restore you to your old place—"

"I do not want to be restored. Now listen, Lord Douglass. If I do *Alessandra*, it is because we both need the money and the prestige; but I do not despair, and you must not. Please let me manage this whole affair; will you?"

"I am your slave."

"Don't say such things. I don't want you to be humble. I want you to be as brave, as proud as before."

She said this in such a tone that he rose to it. His face reset in lines of resolution. "I will not be humble with any other human being but you. I worship you."

She stood for a moment looking at him fixedly, a smile of pride and tender dream on her lips, then said, "You must not say such things to me—not now." The bell rang. "Here comes your new-found admirers," she exclaimed, gleefully. "Now, you sit here, a

little in the shadow, and I will bring them in."

Douglass heard Hugh ask, eagerly, "Is he here?"

"Yes, he is waiting for you." A moment later she re-entered, followed closely by Westervelt. "Herr Westervelt, let me introduce Mr. George Douglass, author of *Alessandra*, *Lillian's Duty*, and *Enid's Choice*."

For an instant Westervelt's face was a confused, lumpy mass of amazement and resentment; then he capitulated, quick to know on which side his bread was buttered, and, flinging out a fat hand, he roared:

"Very good joke. Ha! ha! You have fooled me completely. Mr. Douglass, I congratulate you. You have now given Helen Merival the best part she has ever had. You found we were right, eh?"

Douglass remained a little stiff. "Yes, for the present we'll say you are right; but the time is coming—"

Hugh came forward with less of enthusiasm,

but his wall of reserve was melting. "I'm mighty glad to know that you wrote *Alessandra*, Douglass. It is worthy of Sardou, and it will win back every dollar we've lost in the other plays."

"That's what I wrote it for," said Douglass, sombrely.

Westervelt had no further scruples — no reservations. "Well, now, as to terms and date of production. Let's get to business."

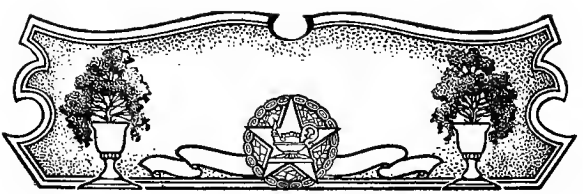
Helen interposed. "No more of that for to-day. Mr. Douglass is tired and needs recreation. Leave business till to-morrow. Come, let us go to mother; she is anxious to see you —and you are to breakfast with us in the good old spirit."

It was sweet to sit with them again on the old footing—to be released from his load of guilty responsibility. To face the shining table, the dear old mother — and Helen! Something indefinably domestic and tender came from her hesitating speech and shone in her liquid, beaming eyes.

The room swam in vivid sunshine, and seemed thus to typify the toiler's escape from poverty and defeat.

"Don't expect me to talk," he said, slowly, strangely. "I'm too dazed, too happy to think clearly. I can't believe it. I have lived two months in a horrible nightmare; but now that the business men, the practical ones, say you are to be saved by me, I must believe it. I would be perfectly happy if only I had won the success on my own lines without compromise."

"Put that aside," she commanded, softly. "The fuller success will come. We have that to work towards."



XIX

HELEN insisted that her playwright should go back to the West for a month's rest.

"I do not need rest, I need you," he answered, recklessly. "It fills me with content merely to see you."

"Nevertheless, you must go. We don't need you here. And, besides, you interfere with my plans."

"Is that true?" His eyes searched deep as he questioned.

"I am speaking as the actress to the playwright." She pointed tragically to the door. "Go! Your poor old, lonely mother awaits you."

"There are six in the family; she's my stepmother, and we don't get on smoothly."

"Your father is waiting to congratulate you."

"On the contrary. He thinks actresses and playwrights akin to 'popery.'"

She laughed. "Well, then, go on my account—on your account. You are tired, and so am I—"

"That is why I should remain, to relieve you, to help you. Or, do you mean you're tired of me?"

"I won't say that; but I must not see you. I must not see any one. If I do this big part right, I must rest. I intend to sleep a good part of the time. I have sent for Henry Olquest, and I intend to put the whole of the stage end of this play in his hands. Our ideals are not concerned in this *Alessandra*, you remember."

His face clouded. "That is true. I wish it were otherwise. But can you get Olquest?"

"Yes; his new play has failed. 'Too good,' Westervelt said."

"Oh, what blasphemy! To think Harry Olquest's plays are rejected, and on such grounds! You are right—as always. I will go."

"Thank you!"

"I am a little frazled, I admit, and a breath of mountain-air will do me good. I will visit my brother Walt in Darien. It's hard to go. My heart begins to ache already with prospective hunger. You have been my world, my one ambition for three months—my incessant care and thought."

"All the more reason why you should forget me and things dramatic for a while. There is nothing so destructive to peace and tranquillity as the stage."

"Don't I know that? When I was a youth in a Western village I became in some way the possessor of two small photographs of Elsie Melville. She was my ideal till I saw her, fifteen years later."

Helen laughed. "Poor Elsie, she took on flesh dreadfully in her later years."

"Nevertheless, those photographs started me on the road to the stage. I used to fancy myself as Macbeth, but I soon got switched into the belief that I could write plays. Now that I have demonstrated that"—his tone was a little bitter again—"I think I would better return to architecture."

She silenced him. "All that we will discuss when you come back reinvigorated from the mountains." She turned to her desk. "I have something here for you. Here is a small check from Westervelt on account. Don't hesitate to take it. He was glad to give it."

"It is the price of my intellectual honesty."

"By no means!" She laughed, but her heart sickened with a sense of the truth of his phrase. "It's only a very small part payment. You can at least know that the bribe they offer is large."

"Yes"—he looked at her meaningly—"the prize was too great for my poor resolution.

All they can give will remain *part* payment. I wonder if you will be compassionate enough to complete the purchase—"

"*That*, too, is in the future," she answered, still struggling to be gayly reassuring, though she knew, perfectly well, that she was face to face with a most momentous decision and that an insistent, determined lover was about to be restored to confidence and pride. "And now, good-bye." And she gave him her hand in positive dismissal.

He took the hand and pressed it hard, then turned and went away without speaking.

There was a hint of spring in the air the afternoon of his leaving. The wind came from the southwest, brisk and powerful. In the pale, misty blue of the sky a fleet of small, white clouds swam, like ships with wide and bellying sails, low down in the eastern horizon, and the sight of them somehow made it harder for Douglass to leave the city of his adoption. He was powerfully minded to turn back, to re-

main on the ferry-boat and land again on the towering island so heavily freighted with human sorrows, so brilliant with human joys, and only a realization that his presence might trouble and distract Helen kept him to his journey's westward course.

As he looked back at the monstrous hive of men the wonder of Helen's personality came to him. That she alone, and unaided (save by her own inborn genius and her beauty), should have succeeded in becoming distinguished, even regnant, among so many eager and striving souls, overwhelmed him with love and admiration.

He wondered how he could have assumed even for an instant the tone of a lover, the gesture of a master. "I, a poor, restless, penniless vagabond on the face of the earth—I presumed to complain of her!" he exclaimed, and shuddered with guilty disgust at thought of that night behind the scenes.

In this mood he rode out into the West,

which was bleak with winter winds and piled high with snow. He paused but a day with his father, whom he found busy prolonging the lives of the old people with whom the town was filled. It was always a shock to the son, this contrast between the outward peace and well-seeming of his native town and the inner mortality and swift decay. Even in a day's visit he felt the grim destroyer's presence, palpable as the shadow of a cloud.

He hastened on to Darien, that curious mixture of Spanish-Mexican indolence and bustling American enterprise, a town wherein his brother Walt had established himself some years before.

Walter Douglass was shocked by the change in his brother. "I can't understand how fourteen months in New York can reduce a lusty youth to the color of a cabbage and the consistency of a gelatine pudding. I reckon you'd better key yourself down to my pace for a while. Look at me!"

The playwright smiled. "I haven't indulged myself too much. You can't hit a very high pace on twelve dollars a week."

"Oh, I don't know. There are cheap brands of whiskey; and you can breathe the bad air of a theatre every night if you climb high enough. I know you've been too strenuous at some point. Now, what's the meaning of it all?"

"I've been working very hard."

"Shouldn't do it. Look at me. I never work and never worry. I play. I weigh two hundred pounds, eat well, sleep like a doorknob, make about three thousand dollars a year, and educate my children. I don't want to seem conceited, but my way of life appeals to me as philosophic; yours is too wasteful. Come, now, you're keeping back something. You might as well 'fess up. What *were* you doing?"

The playwright remained on his guard. "Well, as I wrote you, I had a couple of plays accepted and helped to produce them.

There's nothing more wearing than producing a play. The anxiety is killing."

"I believe you. I think the writing of one act would finish me. Yes, I can see that would be exciting business; but what's all this about your engagement to some big actress?"

This brought the blood to the younger man's cheek, but he was studiedly careless in reply. "All newspaper talk. Of course, in rehearsing the play, I saw a great deal of Miss Merival, but—that's all. She is one of the most successful and brilliant women on the stage, while I—well, I am only a 'writing architect,' earning my board by doing a little dramatic criticism now and then. You need not put any other two things together to know how foolish such reports are."

Walt seemed satisfied. "Well, my advice is: slow down to Darien time. Eat and sleep, and ride a bronco to make you eat more and sleep harder, and in two weeks you'll be like your old-time self."

This advice, so obviously sound, was hard

to follow, for each day brought a letter from Helen, studiously brief and very sparing of any terms of affection—frank, good letters, kindly but no more—and young Douglass was dissatisfied, and said so. He spent a large part of each morning pouring out upon paper the thoughts and feelings surging within him. He told her of the town, of the delicious, crisp climate — like October in the East—of the great snow-peaks to the West, of his rides far out on the plain, of his plans for the coming year.

"I dug an old play out of my trunk to day" (he wrote, towards the end of the first week). "It's the first one I ever attempted. It is very boyish. I had no problems in my mind then, but it is worth while. I am going to rewrite it and send it on to you, for I can't be idle. I believe you'll like it. It is a love drama pure and simple."

To this she replied: "I am interested in what you say of your first play, but don't work—rest and enjoy your vacation."

A few days later he wrote, in exultation: "I got a grip on the play yesterday and rewrote two whole acts. I think I've put some of the glory of this land and sky into it—I mean the exultation of health and youth. I am putting you into it, too—I mean the adoration I feel for you, my queen!

"Do you know, all the old wonder of you is coming back to me. When I think of you as the great actress my nerves are shaken. Is it possible that the mysterious Helen Merival is my Helen? I am mad to rush back to you to prove it. Isn't it presumptuous of me to say, 'My Helen'? But at this distance you cannot reprove me. I came across some pictures of you in a magazine to-day, and was thrilled and awed by them. I have not said anything of Helen MacDavitt to my people, but of the good and great actress Helen Merival I speak copiously. They all feel very grateful to you for helping me. Father thinks you at least forty. He could not understand how a woman under thirty could rise to such

eminence as you have attained. Walt also takes it for granted you are middle-aged. He knows how long the various 'Maggies' and 'Ethels' and 'Annies' have been in public life. He saw something in a paper about us the other day, but took it as a joke. If this fourth play of mine comes off, and you find it worth producing, I shall be happy. It might counteract the baleful influence of *Alessandra*. I began to wonder how I ever did such a melodrama. Is it as bad as it seems to me now? . . .

"I daren't ask how *Enid* is doing. It makes me turn cold to think of the money you are losing. Wouldn't it pay to let the theatre go 'dark' till the new thing is ready? . . .

"I am amazed at my temerity with you, serene lady. If I had not been filled with the colossal conceit of the young author, I never would have dared to approach— What I did during those mad weeks (you know the ones I mean) gives me such shame and suffering as I have never known, and my whole life is now

ordered to make you forget that side of my character. I ask myself now, 'What would Helen have me do?' I don't say this humble mood will last. If *Alessandra* should make a 'barrel of money,' I am capable of soaring to such heights of audacity that you will be startled."

To this she replied: "I am not working at rehearsal more than is necessary. Mr. Olquest is a jewel. He has taken the whole burden of the stage direction off my hands. I lie in bed till noon each morning and go for a drive each pleasant afternoon. Our spring weather is gone. Winter has returned upon us again. . . . I miss you very much. For all the worry you gave us, we found entertainment in you. Don't trouble about the money we are losing. Westervelt is putting up all the cash for the new production and is angelic of manner—or means to be. I prefer him when in the dumps. He attends every rehearsal and is greatly excited over my part. He now thinks you great, and calls you 'the

American Sardou.'. . . I have put all our dismal hours behind me. 'All this, too, shall pass away.'. . . I care not to what audacity you wing your way, if only you come back to us your good, sane, undaunted self once more."

In this letter, as in all her intercourse with him, there was restraint, as though love were being counselled by prudence. And this was, indeed, the case. A foreboding of all that an acknowledgment of a man's domination might mean to her troubled Helen. The question, "How would marriage affect my plans," beset her, though she tried to thrust it away, to retire it to the indefinite future.

Her love grew steadily, feeding upon his letters, which became each day more buoyant and manly, bringing to her again the sense of unbounded ambition and sane power with which his presence had filled her at their first meeting.

"You are not of the city," she wrote. "You belong to the country. Think how near New York came to destroying you.

You ought not to come back. Why don't you settle out there and take up public life?"

His answer was definite: "You need not fear. The city will never again dominate me. I have found myself — through you. With you to inspire me I cannot fail. Public life! Do you mean politics? I am now fit for only one thing—to write. I have found my work. And do you think I could live anywhere without hope of seeing you? My whole life is directed towards you—to be worthy of you, to be justified in asking you to join your life to mine. These are my ambitions, my audacious desires. I love you, and you must know that I cannot be content with your friendship —your affection—which I know I have. I want your love in return. Not now — not while I am a man of words merely. As I now feel *Alessandra* is a little thing compared with the sacrifice you have made for me. I have stripped away all my foolish egotism, and when I return to see you on the opening night I shall rejoice in your success without a tinge

of bitterness. It isn't as if the melodrama were degrading in its appeal. It does not represent my literary ideals, of course, but it is not contemptible, it is merely conventional. My mind *has* cleared since I came here. I see myself in proper relation to you and to the public. I see now that with the large theatre, with the long 'run' ideals, a play *must* be very general in its appeal, and with such conditions it is folly for us to quarrel. We must have our own little theatre wherein we can play the subtler phases of American life—the phases we both rejoice in. If *Alessandra* should pay my debt to you—you see how my mind comes back to that thought—we will use it to build our own temple of art. As I think of you there, toiling without me, I am wild with desire to return to be doing something. I am ready now to turn my hand to any humble thing—to direct rehearsals, to design costumes, anything, only to be near you. One word from you and I will come."

To this she replied: "No; on the contrary,

you must stay a week longer. We have postponed the production on account of some extra scenic effect which Hugh wishes to perfect. They profess wonder now at your knowledge of scenic effect as well as your eye for costume and stage-setting. Your last letter disturbed me greatly, while it pleased me. I liked its tone of boyish enthusiasm, but your directness of speech scared me. I'm almost afraid to meet you. You men are so literal, so insistent in your demands. A woman doesn't know what she wants—sometimes; she doesn't like to be brought to bay so roundly. You have put so much at stake on *Alessandra* that I am a-tremble with fear of consequences. If it succeeds you will be insufferably conceited and assured; if it fails we will never see you again. Truly the life of a star is not all glitter."

This letter threw him into a panic. He hastened to disclaim any wish to disturb her. "If you will forgive me this time I will not offend again. I did not mean to press for an

answer. I distinctly said that at present I have no right to do so. I daren't do so, in fact. I send you, under another cover, the youthful play which I call *The Morning.* Isn't that fanciful enough? It means, of course, that I am now just reaching the point in my life where the man of thirty-odd looks back upon the boy of eighteen with a wistful tenderness, feeling that the mystery of the world has in some sense departed with the morning. Of a certainty this idea is not new, but I took a joy in writing this little idyl, and I would like to see you do 'the wonderful lady I see in my dreams.' Can you find an actor who can do my lad of 'the poetic fancy'?"

She replied to this: "Your play made me cry, for I, too, am leaving the dewy morning behind. I like this play; it is very tender and beautiful, and do you know I believe it would touch more hearts than your gorgeous melodrama. Mr. Howells somewhere beautifully says that when he is most intimate in the dis-

closures of his own feelings he finds himself most widely responded to—or something like that. I really am eager to do this play. It has increased my wonder of your powers. I really begin to feel that I know only part of you. First *Lillian's Duty* taught me some of your stern Scotch morality. Then *Enid's Choice* revealed to me your conception of the integrity of a good woman's soul—that nothing can debase it. *Alessandra* disclosed your learning and your imaginative power. Now here I feel the poet, the imaginative boy. I will not say this has increased my faith in you—it has added to my knowledge of you. But I must confess to you it has made it very difficult for me to go on with *Alessandra.* All the other plays are in line of a national drama. *Alessandra* is a bitter and ironical concession. *The Morning* makes its splendor almost tawdry. It hurt me to go to rehearsal to-day. Westervelt's presence was a gloating presence, and I hated him. Hugh's report of the exultant 'I told you so's' of the

dramatic critics sickened me—" Her letter ended abruptly, almost at this point.

His reply contained these words: "It is not singular that you feel irritated by *Alessandra* while I am growing resigned, for you are in daily contact with the sordid business. Tell me I may come back. I want to be at the opening. I know you will secure a great personal triumph. I want to see you shining again amid a shower of roses. I want to help take your horses from your carriage, and wheel you in glory through the streets as they used to do in olden times as tribute to their great favorites. I haven't seen a New York paper since I came West. I hope you have put *Enid* away. What is the use wearing yourself out playing a disastrous rôle while forced to rehearse a new one? My longing to see you is so great that the sight of your picture on my desk is a sweet torture. Write me that you want me, dearest."

She replied, very simply: "You may come. Our opening night is now fixed for Monday

next. You will have just time to get here. All is well."

To this he wired reply: "I start to-night. Arrive on Monday at Grand Central. Eleven-thirty."

Helen was waiting for him at the gate of the station in a beautiful spring hat, her face abloom, her eyes dancing, and the sight of her robbed him of all caution. Dropping his valise, he rushed towards her, intent to take her in his arms.

She stopped him with one outstretched hand. "How well you look!" Her voice, so rich, so vibrant, moved him like song.

"And you — you are the embodiment of spring." Then, in a low voice, close to her ear, he added: "I love you! I love you! How beautiful you are!"

"Hush!" She lifted a finger in a gesture of warning. "You must not say such things to me—here." With the addition of that final word her face grew arch. Then in a louder

tone: "I was right, was I not, to send you away?"

"I am a new being," he answered, "morally and physically. But tell me, what is the meaning of these notices? Have you put *The Morning* on in place of *Alessandra?*"

Hugh interposed. "That's what she's done," and offered his hand with unexpected cordiality.

"You take my breath away," said Douglass. "I can't follow your reckless campaigns."

"We'll explain. We're not as reckless as we seem."

They began to move towards the street, Hugh leading the way with the playwright's bag.

Helen laughed at her lover's perplexity and dismay. "You look befoozled."

"I am. I can't understand. After all that work and expense—after all my toilsome grind—my sacrifice of principles."

She was close to his shoulder as she said, looking up at him with beaming, tender eyes:

"That's just it. I couldn't accept your offering. After *The Morning* came in, my soul revolted. I ordered the *Alessandra* manuscript brought in. Do you know what I did with it?"

"Rewrote it, I hope."

Her face expressed daring, humor, triumph, but the hand lifted to the chin expressed a little apprehension as she replied: "Rewrote it? No, I didn't think of that. *I burned it.*"

He stopped, unconscious of the streaming crowds. "Burned it! I can't believe you. My greatest work—"

"It is gone." The smile died out of her eyes, her face became very grave and very sweet. "I couldn't bear to have you bow your head to please a public not worthy of you. The play was un-American, and should not have been written by you."

He was dazed by the enormous consequences of this action, and his mind flashed from point to point before he answered, in a single word: "Westervelt."

Thereat they both laughed, and she explained. "It was dreadful. He raged, he shook the whole block as he trotted to and fro tearing his hair. I think he wished to tear my hair. He really resembled the elder Salvini as Othello—you know the scene I mean. I gave him a check to compensate him. He tore it up and blew it into the air with a curse. Oh, it was beautiful comedy. I told him our interview would make a hit as a 'turn' on the vaudeville stage. Nothing could calm him. I was firm, and *Alessandra* was in ashes."

They moved on out upon the walk and into the hideous clamor of Forty-second Street, his mind still busy with the significance of her news. Henry Olquest in an auto sat waiting for them. After a quick hand-shake Douglass lifted Helen to her place, followed her with a leap, and they were off on a ride which represented to him more than an association with success—it seemed a triumphal progress. Something in Helen's eyes exalted him, filled

his throat with an emotion nigh to tears. His eyes were indeed smarting as she turned to say: "You are just in time for dress rehearsal. Do you want to see it?"

"No, I leave it all to you. I want to be the author if I can. I want to get the thrill."

"I think you will like our production. Mr. Olquest has done marvels with it. You'll enjoy it; I know you will. It will restore your lost youth to you."

"I hope it will restore some of your lost dollars. I saw by the papers that you were still struggling with *Enid*. I shudder to think what that means. The other poor little play will never be able to lift that huge debt."

"I'm not so sure about that," she gayly answered. "The rehearsals have almost resigned"—she pointed at Hugh's back—"him to the change."

"I confess I was surprised by his cordial greeting."

"Oh, he's quite shifted his point of view.

He thinks *The Morning* may 'catch 'em' on other grounds."

"And you—you are radiant. I expected to find you worn out. You dazzle me."

"You mustn't look at me then. Look at the avenue. Isn't it fine this morning?"

He took her hint. "It is glorious. I feel that I am again at the centre of things. After all, this is our one great city, the only place where life is diverse enough to give the dramatist his material. I begin to understand the attitude of actors when they land from the ferry-boat, draw a long breath, and say, 'Thank God, I'm in New York again.'"

"It's the only city in America where an artist can be judged by his peers. I suppose that is one reason why we love it."

"Yes, it's worth conquering, and I'll make my mark upon it yet," and his tone was a note of self-mastery as well as of resolution. "It is a city set on a hill. To take it brings great glory and lasting honor."

She smiled up at him again, a proud light

in her eyes. "Now you are your good, rugged self, the man who 'hypnotized' me into taking *Lillian's Duty*. You'll need all your courage; the critics are to be out in force."

"I do not fear them," he answered, as they whirled into the plaza and up to the side entrance of the hotel.

"I've engaged a room for you here, Douglass," said Hugh, and the new note of almost comradeship struck the playwright with wonder. He was a little sceptical of it.

"Very well," he answered. "I am reckless. I will stay one day."

"Mother will be waiting to see you," said Helen, as they entered the hall. "She is your stanch supporter."

"She is a dear mother. I wish she were my own."

Each word he uttered now carried a hidden meaning, and some inner relenting, some sweet, secret concession which he dimly felt but dared not presume upon, gave her a girlish charm which she had never before worn in his eyes.

They took lunch together, seated at the same table in the same way, and yet not in the same spirit. He was less self-centred, less insistent. His winter of proved inefficiency, his sense of indebtedness to her, his all-controlling love for her gave him a new appeal. He was at once tender and humorous as he referred again to *Alessandra.*

"Well, now that my chief work of art is destroyed, I must begin again at the bottom. I have definitely given up all idea of following my profession. I am going to do specials for one of the weeklies. Anderson has interceded for me. I am to enter the ranks of the enemy. I am not sure but I ought to do a criticism of my own play to-morrow night."

She was thinking of other things. "Tell me of your people. Did you talk of me to them? What did they say of me?"

"They all think of you as a kind, middle-aged lady, who has been very good to a poor country boy."

She laughed. "How funny! Why should they think me so old?"

"They can't conceive how a mere girl can be so rich and powerful. How could they realize the reckless outpouring of gold which flows from those who seek pleasure to those who give it."

She grew instantly graver. "They would despise me if they knew. I don't like being a mere toy of the public—a pleasure-giver and nothing else. Of course there are different ways of pleasing. That is why I couldn't do *Alessandra*. Tell me of your brother. I liked what you wrote of him. He is our direct opposite, isn't he? Does he talk as well as you reported, or were you polishing him a little?"

"No, Walt has a remarkable taste in words. He has always been the literary member of our family, but is too lazy to write. He is content to grow fat in his little round of daily duties."

"I wonder if we haven't lost something

by becoming enslaved to the great city! Our pleasures are more intense, but they *do* wear us out. Think of you and me to-morrow night—our anxiety fairly cancelling our pleasure—and then think of your brother going leisurely home to his wife, his babies, and his books. I don't know—sometimes when I think of growing old in a flat or a hotel I am appalled. I hate to keep mother here. Sometimes I think of giving it all up for a year or two and going back to the country, just to see how it would affect me. I don't want to get artificial and slangy with no interests but the stage, like so many good actresses I know. It's such a horribly egotistic business—"

"There are others," he said.

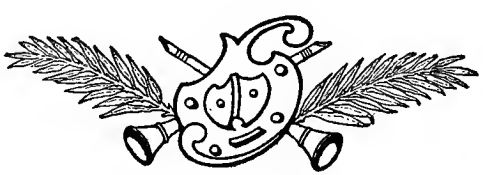
"Writers are bad enough, but actors and opera-singers are infinitely worse. Mother has helped me." She put her soft palm on her mother's wrinkled hand. "Nothing can spoil mother; nothing can take away the home atmosphere—not even the hotel. Well, now I must go to our final rehearsal. I will not see

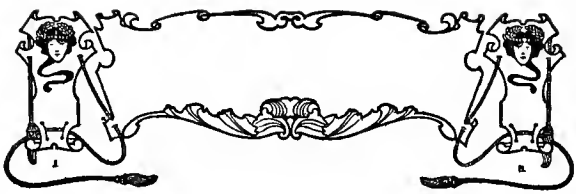
you again till the close of the second act. You must be in your place to-night," she said, with tender warning. "I want to see your face whenever I look for it."

"I am done with running away," he answered, as he slowly released her hand. "I shall pray for your success—not my own."

"Fortunately my success is yours."

"In the deepest sense that is true," he answered.





XX

AS Douglass entered the theatre that night Westervelt met him with beaming smile. "I am glad to see you looking so well, Mr. Douglass." He nodded and winked. "You are all right now, my boy. You have them coming. I was all wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't she tell you?"

"You mean about the advance sale?—no."

Westervelt grew cautious. "Oh—well, then, I will be quiet. She wants to tell you. She will do so."

"Advance sale must be good," thought the

playwright, as he walked on into the auditorium. The ushers smiled, and the old gatekeeper greeted him shortly.

"Ye've won out, Mr. Douglass."

"Can it be that this play is to mark the returning tide of Helen's popularity?" he asked himself, and a tremor of excitement ran over him, the first thrill of the evening. Up to this moment he had a curious sense of aloofness, indifference, as if the play were not his own but that of a stranger. He began now to realize that this was his third attempt to win the favor of the public, and according to an old boyish superstition should be successful.

Helen had invited a great American writer—a gracious and inspiring personality—to occupy her box to meet her playwright, and once within his seat Douglass awaited the coming of the great man with impatience and concern. He was conscious of a great change in himself and his attitude towards Helen since he last sat waiting for the curtain to rise.

"Nothing—not even the dropping of an act—could rouse in me the slightest resentment towards her." He flushed with torturing shame at the recollection of his rage, his selfish, demoniacal, egotistic fury over the omission of his pet lines.

"I was insane," he muttered, pressing a hand to his eyes as if to shut out the memory of Helen's face as she looked that night. "And she forgave me! She must have known I was demented." And her sweetness, her largeness of sympathy again overwhelmed him. "Dare I ask her to marry me?" He no longer troubled himself about her wealth nor with the difference between them as to achievement, but he comprehended at last that her superiority lay in her ability to forgive, in her power to inspire love and confidence, in her tact, her consideration for others, her wondrous unselfishness.

"What does the public know of her real greatness? Capable of imagining the most diverse types of feminine character, living each

night on the stage in an atmosphere of heartless and destructive intrigue, she yet retains a divine integrity, an inalienable graciousness. Dare I, a moody, selfish brute, touch the hem of her garment?"

In this mood he watched the audience gather—a smiling, cheerful-voiced, neighborly throng. There were many young girls among them, and their graceful, bared heads gave to the orchestra chairs a brilliant and charmingly intimate effect. The *roué*, the puffed and beefy man of sensual type, was absent. The middle-aged, bespangled, gluttonous woman was absent. The faces were all refined and gracious—an audience selected by a common interest from among the millions who dwell within an hour's travel of the theatre.

Douglass fancied he could detect in these auditors the same feeling of security, of satisfaction, of comfort with which they were accustomed to sit down of an evening with a new book by a favorite author.

"If I could but win a place like that," he

exclaimed to himself, "I would be satisfied. It can be done when the right man comes."

A dinner engagement delayed the eminent author, but he came in as the curtain was rising, and, shaking hands cordially, presented Mr. Rufus Brown, a visiting London critic.

"Mr. Brown is deeply interested in your attempt to do an American play," said the great novelist. "I hope—I am sure he will witness your triumph to-night." Thereupon they took seats with flattering promptness in order not to miss a word of the play.

Helen, coming on a moment after, was given a greeting almost frenziedly cordial, and when she bowed her eyes sought the box in which her lover sat, and the audience, seeing the distinguished novelist and feeling some connection between them, renewed their applause. Douglass, at the back of the box, rose and stood with intent to express to Helen the admiration, the love, and the respect which he felt for her. She was, indeed, "the beautiful, golden-haired lady" of whom he had written as a boy, and

a singular timidity, a wave of worship went over him.

He became the imaginative lad of the play, who stood in awe and worship of mature womanhood. The familiar Helen was gone, the glittering woman was gone, and in her place stood the ideal of the boy—the author himself had returned to "the land of morning glow"—to the time when the curl of a woman's lip was greater than any war. The boy on the stage chanted:

"Where I shall find her I know not.
But I trust in the future! To me
She will come. I am not forgot.
Out in the great world she's waiting,
Perhaps by the shore of the sea,
By the fabulous sea, where the white sand gleams,
I shall meet her and know her and claim her.
The beautiful, stately lady I see in my dreams."

"I dare not claim her," said the man, humbled by her beauty. "I am not worthy of her."

The applause continued to rise instant and cordial in support of players and play. Auditors, actors, and author seemed in singularly harmonious relation. As the curtain fell cries of approval mingled with the hand-clapping.

The novelist reached a kindly hand. "You've found your public, my dear fellow. These people are here after an intelligent study of your other plays. This is a gallant beginning. Don't you think so, Brown?"

"Very interesting attempt to dramatize those boyish fancies," the English critic replied. "But I don't quite see how you can advance on these idyllic lines. It's pretty, but is it drama?"

"He will show us," replied the novelist. "I have great faith in Mr. Douglass. He is helping to found an American drama. You must see his other plays."

Westervelt came to the box wheezing with excitement. "My boy, you are made. The critics are disarmed. They begin to sing of you."

Douglass remained calm. "There is plenty of time for them to turn bitter," he answered. "I am most sceptical when they are gracious."

The second act left the idyllic ground, and by force of stern contrast held the audience enthralled. The boy was being disillusioned. *The Morning* had grown gray. Doubt of his ideal beset the poet. The world's forces began to benumb and appall him. His ideal woman passed to the possession of another. He lost faith in himself. The cloud deepened, the sky, overshadowed as by tempest, let fall lightning and a crash of thunder. So the act closed.

The applause was unreservedly cordial—no one failed to join in the fine roar—and in the midst of it Douglass, true to his promise, hurried back to the scenes to find Helen.

She met him, radiant with excitement. "My brave boy! You have won your victory. They are calling for you." He protested. She insisted. "No, no. It is *you*. I've been out. Hear them; they want the author. Come!"

Dazed and wordless, weak from stage-fright, he permitted himself to be led forth into the terrifying glare of the footlight world. There his guide left him, abandoned him, pitifully exposed to a thousand eyes, helpless and awkward. He turned to flee, to follow her, but the roguish smile on her face, as she kissed her fingers towards him, somehow roused his pride and gave him courage to face the tumult. As he squared himself an awesome silence settled over the house—a silence that inspired as well as appalled by its expectancy.

"Friends, I thank you," the pale and resolute author weakly began. "I didn't know I had so many friends in the world. Two minutes ago I was so scared my teeth chattered. Now I am entirely at my ease—you notice that." The little ripple of laughter which followed this remark really gave him time to think—gave him courage. "I feel that I am at last face to face with an audience that knows my work—that is ready to support a serious attempt at playwriting.

I claim that a play may do something more than amuse—it may *interest*. There is a wide difference, you will see. To be an amusement merely is to degrade our stage to the level of a Punch-and-Judy show. I am sorry for tired men and weary women, but as a dramatist I can't afford to take their troubles into account. I am writing for those who are mentally alert and willing to support plays that have at least the dignity of intention which lies in our best novels. This does not mean gloomy plays or problem plays, but it does mean conscientious study of American life. If you like me as well after the close of the play"—he made dramatic pause—"well I shall not be able to sleep to-night. I sincerely thank you. You have given me a fair hearing—that is all I can ask—and I am very grateful."

This little speech seemed to please his auditors, but his real reward came when Helen met him at the wings and caught his arm to her side in an ecstatic little hug. "You did beautifully! You make me afraid of you when

you stand tall and grand like that. You were scared though. I could see that."

"You deserted me," he answered, in mock accusation. "You led me into the crackling musketry and ran away."

"I wanted to see of what metal you were made," she answered, and fled to her dressing-room to prepare for the final act.

"Now for the real test," said the novelist, with a kindly smile. "I think we could all write plays if it were not for the difficulty of ending them."

"I begin to tremble for my climax," Douglass answered. "It is so important to leave a sweet and sonorous sound in the ear at the last. It must die on the sense like the sound of a bell."

"It's a remarkable achievement, do you know," began the English critic, "to carry a parable along with a realistic study of life. I can't really see how you're coming out."

"I don't know myself," replied Douglass.

The play closed quietly, with a subjective

climax so deep, so true to human nature that it laid hold upon every heart. The applause was slow in rising, but grew in power till it filled the theatre like some great anthem. No one rose, no one was putting on wraps. The spell lasted till the curtain rose three times on the final picture.

Douglass could not speak as the critic shook his hand. It was so much more affecting than he had dared to hope. To sit there while his ideals, his hopes, his best thoughts, his finest conceptions were thus gloriously embodied was the greatest pleasure of his life. All his doubt and bitterness was lost in a flood of gratitude to Helen and to the kindly audience.

As soon as he could decently escape he hurried again to Helen. The stage this time was crowded with people. The star was hid, as of old, in a mob of her admirers, but they were of finer quality than ever before. The grateful acknowledgment of these good people was an inspiration. Every one smiled, and yet

in the eyes of many of the women tears sparkled.

Helen, catching sight of her lover, lifted her hand and called to him, and though he shrank from entering the throng he obeyed. Those who recognized him fell back with a sort of awe of his good-fortune. Helen reached her hand, saying, huskily, "I am tired—take me away."

He took her arm and turned to the people still crowding to speak to her. "Friends, Miss Merival is very weary. I beg you to excuse her. It has been a very hard week for her."

And with an air of mastery as significant as it was unconscious he led her to her room.

Safely inside the door she turned, and with a finger to her lips, a roguish light in her eyes, she said: "I want to tell you something. I can't wait any longer. *Enid's Choice* ran to the capacity of the house last week."

For a moment he did not realize the full significance of this. "What! *Enid's Choice?* Why, how can that be? I thought—"

"We had twelve hundred and eighty dollars at the Saturday matinée and eleven hundred at night. Of course part of this was due to the knowledge that it was the last day of the piece, but there is no doubt of its success."

A choking came to his throat, his eyes grew dim. "I can't believe it. Such success is impossible to me."

"It is true, and that is the reason I was able to burn *Alessandra*."

"And that is the reason Hugh and Westervelt were so cordial, and I thought it was all on account of the advance sale of *The Morning!*"

"And this is only the beginning. I intend to play all your plays in a repertoire, and you're to write me others as I need them. And finally—and this I hate to acknowledge—you are no longer in my debt."

"That I know is not true," he said. "Everything I am to-night I owe to you."

"The resplendent author has made the wondrous woman very proud and yet very

humble to-night," she ended, softly, with eyelashes drooping.

"She has reared a giant that seeks to devour her." He caught her to his side. "Do you know what all this means to you and to me? It means that we are to be something more than playwright and star. It means that I will not be satisfied till your life and mine are one."

She put him away in such wise that her gesture of dismissal allured. "You must go, dearest. Our friends are waiting, and I must dress. Some time I will tell you how much—you have become to me—but not now!"

He turned away exultant, for her eyes had already confessed the secret which her lips still shrank from uttering.

THE END