The Daughter Of A Star

By Christian Reid

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THE DAUGHTER OF A STAR

CHAPTER I

A PROMISE REDEEMED

WITH a sense of reluctance which, in its degree at least, surprised himself, John Stafford, having dismissed his hansom,— for it was before the day of taxicabs, and the great vogue of motoring was just beginning,— mounted the steps of a small but very smart house in London, which was the final destination of a journey that had brought him across Europe. The servant who opened the door did not know him, and was doubtful whether Mrs. Lestrange would receive visitors. It was her hour for driving— she was just going out.

"Take my card to Mrs. Lestrange. I am sure she will see me," Stafford told him quietly, but in a tone which admitted of no further demur; and, after a doubtful glance at the tall, well-knit figure, the man showed him up-stairs and into the drawing-room.

There followed an interval in which Stafford looked around the room with its luxurious furnishings, and felt as if three years were blotted out, and he had been there only the day before, so familiar was every detail. The bowls of violets on table and piano, filling the air with their fragrance, the profusion of rich embroideries, the quantity of photographs in silver frames scattered about among costly bric-a-brac— how well he knew it all! Even the soft sound of the fire, burning behind its brass screen, and the subdued roll of carriages outside were a part of the familiarity. He looked at the cushioned corner of a couch near the fire, and at a tea-table not far off. He could see a graceful figure reclining among the cushions, a white, slender hand holding out a cup filled with fragrant tea. Involuntarily he glanced at a picture near by— the portrait of a strikingly beautiful woman in eighteenth-century costume, painted by one of the foremost artists of the day— and then at a mirror which reflected his own sunburned physiognomy. "Nothing is changed but myself," he said, speaking aloud as people who live much alone are inclined to do.

A light, musical laugh answered him. He turned quickly, and faced the person who had entered through a curtain-hung door behind him. The original of the portrait— there could be no doubt of that, although the eighteenth-century costume was replaced by modern dress. A woman not less beautiful in life than in her picture, from the grace of her perfectly proportioned and perfectly carried figure, the delicate modelling of her features, her exquisite complexion, violet eyes, and masses of red-gold hair; a woman at whom every man would have looked with admiration and every woman with interest, such a stamp of undefinable seductiveness was set upon her, such was her poise, her self-possession, her compelling charm of air and manner that spoke eloquently of a life in which the note of applause sounded continuously. She extended her hands with a gesture of cordial, caressing welcome.

"Dear Jack!" she cried in a voice as light and musical as her laugh. “How good it is to see you again! And you haven't changed a bit— don't think it!— except to become more interesting in appearance."

“*You* haven't, Violet, at any rate," said Stafford, taking the extended hands. "You don't look a day older, and you are as ready as ever to flatter a man's vanity."

"I could never find that you had any to flatter," she returned. "You are as different from most men in that as in some other particulars."

He looked at her with a smile. How entirely she was the same, he thought, and how well she understood the means by which vanity is flattered. To tell him now that he was not like other men, was to flatter him in the most agreeable manner, as she well knew. He lifted his brows with a slightly satirical air.

"For example?" he queried.

"Oh, for example, what other man would have gone away and stayed away as you have done, and then had to be begged— positively begged— to come and see *me?*" she replied as, with a soft rustle of silken draperies, she flung herself among the cushions of the couch, just as he had seen her in his fancy a few minutes before.

He sat down in a chair opposite; and his keen, bright glance noted, as she meant that it should, every detail of the picture she made, a picture of the most careless yet finished grace. "Just the same!" he said to himself again; and then he became aware of the reality of another change in himself which he had almost feared to put to the test. The picture was the same, but it had no longer the same charm for him; it pleased the eye and gratified the artistic instinct which was so strong in him, but it no longer allured the senses or touched the heart. Indeed he doubted now if the heart had ever been touched, if it had not been the senses alone which were allured.

"I think," he remarked, "that any other man with a grain of common sense would have done just what I did about going away. The doubtful thing is the wisdom of returning, even when asked to do so."

She made a little gesture of disdain. "Who cares for common sense?" she said. "Oh, Jack, how dreadfully you must have changed after all, before you could talk like that!"

"I have changed," he admitted. "You know I was remarking the fact when you entered. Then I was thinking of my sunburned face, but now I am thinking—"

"Not of your heart— don't say your heart has changed!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps my heart hasn't changed— we really don't know much about hearts, even our own, do we?— but my will has changed. You were a demoralizing influence in my life, and so I determined to put you out of it."

"A demoralizing influence!" Mrs. Lestrange sat up with suddenly deepened colour. "I think I must ask you to explain that remark."

"Does it need explanation?" he inquired. "It surely was a demoralizing influence which dominated ten years of a man's life, kept him in a hopeless position, and in return— gave him what, Violet?"

"I gave him all that I was free to give, all that he had any right to expect," she answered coldly. "And he was not compelled to accept it if it was so demoralizing."

"You are right," the man in question acknowledged. "I was not compelled; I acted with a perfect knowledge of the situation, and I have no right to blame you for anything. You kept me in your service; you made use of me to the uttermost. But you never deceived me. I acknowledge that."

"So good of you!" cried the lady, with a mingling of resentment and sarcasm in her tone. "If this is what you think of me," she went on petulantly, "I'm sorry that I sent for you. I thought you were my friend; but it seems you are not."

"Don't talk nonsense!" Stafford returned good-humouredly but brusquely. "I may not be your servant any longer; but you know that I am always your friend. Haven't I proved it by coming from Budapest to London, simply because you wrote that you wanted to see me?"

"I thought I could count on you," she murmured reproachfully. "I know that however successful one may be, one has after all very few friends— real friends— in life; but I said to myself, 'I am sure of Jack, dear old Jack!' And so I sent for you."

"I have justified your faith by coming," dear old Jack responded a trifle drily. "So now let us hear what you want with me."

"I want two things," said Mrs. Lestrange; and then she paused and regarded him doubtfully. She felt vaguely that this man, with the keen eyes and the firm lines about the well-cut mouth, was not altogether the Stafford she had known so long and so well; and although her imperious egotism was sure

that her influence would be able to triumph over any alteration in him, she was nevertheless uncertain how far it was wise to exert it at first.

"What are they?" he asked, after the pause had lasted a minute. "I gave you my assurance long ago that I would serve you whenever and wherever I could, and you know that I always keep a promise."

"Yes," she replied, "you have always reminded me of the man of whom it was said that, given his choice between breaking his neck or breaking his promise, he would have kept the promise. To come then to the point, the first thing I want is something which you will surely be glad to give me, I want your play— the play about Caterina Cornaro."

"My play!" It was plain that he had not expected this. "But you said when I read it to you— four years ago, wasn't it?— that it would suit neither you nor the public, that the part of Caterina was too romantic for you, and that the public wouldn't care for anything so literary, so— 'stilted,' I think, was your word."

"Oh, but conditions have changed very much since then," she told him eagerly. "All this time that you have been away in India and Persia, and Heaven knows where, we have been very far from standing still. The poetical and romantic drama is again to have its day. The public has grown tired of drab realism, of Ibsen and all his imitators. The demand once more is for romance and colour, and of course one wishes to catch the tide of reaction at the flood. So I have been looking about for a play, but I could find nothing to suit me; and then suddenly I remembered your play with the Queen of Cyprus for its heroine. The character will suit me admirably, and I want the play to open my season with. I expect it to make a fortune for both of us."

She spoke with an air of smiling triumph, the air of one accustomed to success and able to foretell it, while he on his part hardly knew how to answer her. For here was another proof of how far he had journeyed, how much he had altered, since the day when he carried his drama to her, and met the disappointment of her refusal to take the part of the heroine he had in creating grown to love.

"Well," she said at last impatiently, "what is your decision? It's rather surprising that you should hesitate. Most authors—"

"Would be very grateful for the chance to have a play produced by Mrs. Lestrange," he finished as she paused expressively. "I'm well aware of that, and I only hesitate because I have come to recognize the wisdom of your judgment four years ago. It's my judgment now. I don't think the play is suited either to you or to the public."

"Do you imagine that you can possibly know more about that than I do?" she demanded, with a touch of arrogance. "I'm confident that the play would have an immense success. It has every element to please the public taste, as that taste goes at present. It has literary grace and charm, and can be superbly staged. As for the character of Caterina, I have an instinct that I shall make my greatest success in it. You see I didn't know much about her when you read the play to me, and I was filled with the ideas of modem realism. But I've been reading books on the period, and I've seen Titian's wonderful portrait of Caterina, and I feel that I could act the part as I have never acted anything yet. It appeals to me so strongly that I believe I am a reincarnation of one of those splendid pagan women of the Italian Renaissance."

"The best were very far from pagan," Stafford observed; "but you have certainly a great deal in common with some of them, and that's why I once fancied you would play the part of the Queen of Cyprus well."

"I can; I know that I can!"

"In that case," he threw out his hands, "of course the play is at your service. After all, it was written for you, and so you've a kind of right to it. And now what is the second thing you want me to do?"

Again there was a pause— a pause in which Stafford seemed to discern a deeper cause for hesitation than had existed before; and then Mrs. Lestrange said with one of the quick, penetrating glances

which her violet eyes sometimes gave, and which belied the opinion of those who fancied her lacking in shrewdness:

"Your wanderings have been in such remote places that probably you haven't heard much news from America?"

"Very little," he assented. "What has happened?"

"You haven't heard of my husband's death?"

"No." The startled surprise of the answer was in strong contrast to the quietness of the question. "When did he die?"

“About a year ago. I thought of writing to you when I heard the news, but— er— well, I didn't."

"You were afraid it might bring me back before you had need of me," Stafford said with a flash of intuition. "You needn't have been afraid. I shouldn't have troubled you if I had heard of it."

"I can believe that now," she returned, "but you see I didn't know then how much you had changed— how hard and cold you had become."

"I may have become those things," he answered; "yet nevertheless this news strikes me as rather sad. After all, it wasn't your husband's fault that he was unsuited to you, and that you 'walked over his heart to the world made for you.' "

"If I did," she said with a frown, "what else could I do? He was absolutely impracticable, absolutely determined that I should live according to his ideas and his old-fashioned code, that my individuality was to be effaced, my genius stifled, and I—*I* to spend my life as a mere domestic nonentity. We've talked of it often; we've agreed a hundred times that it was tyrannical, absurd, impossible, that there was nothing for me to do but what I did. And his death hasn't changed anything."

"No,” Stafford agreed, "it hasn't changed anything." He looked at the beautiful, graceful creature, with her spark of genius, her dominant egotism, her craving for adulation, her cold heart, and her imperious self-will, and asked himself what other end than that which had occurred could indeed have been looked for, when Hugh Lestrange, proud, stubborn, steeped in every conservative tradition of what a woman should and should not be, linked his fate with hers. Death assuredly, no more than life, could change anything where such difference existed, could hardly be expected to bring even a touch of its reconciling tenderness to one whose every thought and feeling had long been centred in self.

"You haven't sent for me," he said presently, "merely to tell me what you were so careful not to write. There's something in connection with the matter that I can do for you. What is it?"

"There was something," she admitted in an aggrieved tone; "but you are so changed that I am doubtful whether or not to ask you to do me what would be a great service."

"I told you once," he reminded her again, "that you might always call upon me for any service which it was in my power to render, and you were kind enough to acknowledge a minute or two back that I have never broken a promise. I shall not begin now."

She glanced down, fingering nervously a tassel at the corner of one of the silken cushions against which she leaned. "It is really a great service," she murmured. "It seems almost unreasonable."

"Never mind about that," Stafford said a little impatiently. "Just tell me what it is."

"Well," she answered, lifting her eyes and looking at him with a deprecating expression, "it's about Sylvia."

"About whom?”

"Sylvia— my child, my little girl. Had you forgotten her name?"

"I'm not sure that I ever heard it. You've never been in the habit of talking about her, you know."

"The subject was too painful. One doesn't talk of what lies nearest to one's heart."

"Doesn't one? I thought there was something about the mouth speaking out of the fulness of the heart. But no matter. The question is, what can I do for you with regard to Sylvia?"

"You can go to see her for me if you will. You can tell my story to her —-you can do justice to it; you can perhaps overcome the prejudice against me that she has been taught to feel, and you may be able to induce her to come to me. She must surely want to see and know her own mother!"

"It seems possible that she might," Stafford agreed with an impartial air. "Of course she has never seen you since you— went away."

"Of course not. Her father was so afraid that I might try to see her through the courts or something of the kind,-— though I should never have dreamed of such a thing,— that he carried her to Mexico, and buried her and himself there."

"He never returned to the States?"

"Never. He declared— so utterly absurd of him, such a proof of what an old-fashioned person he was!— that I had ruined his life and so humiliated him by 'deserting' him, that he could not endure existence among his friends and relatives. Besides, he was afraid, as I have said, of my making some effort about the child— as if I should have been likely to want to burden myself at the beginning of my career with a child! And therefore he went to Mexico, where he lived the life of a recluse until he died."

"And in the year since his death have you made no effort to approach your daughter?"

"Of course I have," Mrs. Lestrange replied in an injured tone. "I've written to her most affectionately, begging her to come to me; and she has replied in the coldest manner that, since we have gone on so far in life without each other, she sees no reason for making any change in our relations. She must be altogether without feeling, a perfect Lestrange, just like her father."

"And that being so," said Stafford, "why do you wish to make any change in your relations?"

The violet eyes gazed at him reproachfully. "You know nothing of a mother's heart," Mrs. Lestrange informed him.

"Very likely," he acknowledged; "but, since your mother's heart allowed you to leave her when she was hardly more than a baby—"

"We've gone over all that," Mrs. Lestrange interrupted impatiently. "I was like Nora in ‘The Doll's House'— I had a right to go, a right to live my own life!"

"But you shouldn't be surprised if those whom you left resented your departure a little; and I confess I cannot see why you should want this particular doll back again."

"I want her to understand me and to love me—she doesn't know anything about me really!— and I want to do my duty as a mother, to give her a chance in life. Who can do it better than I? Those narrow-minded Lestranges may not think so, but you know that my social position is excellent here."

"I know," Stafford assented; "but that fact only makes such a desire on your part more remarkable. Come, Violet, be frank! What is your motive for wanting to present a grown daughter to a society that knows nothing of her existence, and of whom you know very little more than that she does exist—a girl reared in alien conditions, and in antagonism to you and your chosen life? What have you possibly to gain by such a step?"

"Oh, Jack, what a question! A mother's love—"

"Rubbish!" said Stafford rudely. And then, possibly because he was ashamed of himself, he rose and walked to the windows.

But presently, above the subdued noises that rose from the street, he caught the sound of a half-stifled sob, after which there was nothing to do but to go back to the couch, where Mrs. Lestrange lay weeping among the cushions with as due a regard to grace of attitude as she had ever preserved before a larger audience on the stage.

"What hurts me most," she murmured, after Stafford had apologized and she had accepted the apology and wiped away a few—a very few— tears, "is that you do me so much injustice. You don't believe that I have any feeling—"

"Oh, yes, I do," he hastened to assure her. "I've not the least doubt of your feeling; but you must acknowledge that this is rather a new manifestation of it."

"Why should I have manifested it before? There wouldn't have been the least use in doing so. But ever since I heard of Hugh's death, I have been making plans for having Sylvia with me; and when she refused to come, I didn't know what to do. I can't go to her, for all my engagements are on this side, and I must soon begin rehearsing my new play. So I was in despair until I thought of you; and then I said to myself, 'Jack will go and do this great thing for me! *He* will be my advocate; *he* will interpret me to the daughter who has never known me, and he will bring her to me, I know he will!' For you see I was so sure of you! I never, never thought that you could change as you have done!"

"Where is she to be found?" Stafford inquired.

"She was still in Mexico when I heard from her last; and she didn't seem to have any intention of leaving there. Oh, Jack, it is a great deal to ask of you! But if you *would* go—"

"Get the address," said Stafford, rising from his seat, as if about to start that moment. "I'll go."

CHAPTER II

An Unexpected Appeal

IF it had been a bad-tempered man who rang Mrs. Lestrange's door-bell in London, it was an even worse-tempered man, if outward appearances were to be trusted, who a few weeks later was driving across a wide Mexican plain toward a vision of white walls and arches relieved against azure heights, which, in the deceptive fashion of the country, had for an hour looked near, yet still proved to be far off.

"One might take it to be a mirage, it remains so persistently at the same apparent distance!" he muttered to himself; and then, to the *cochero* who, hearing him speak, turned and smiled over his shoulder, pointing as he spoke to the mirage-like object: "How far is it?"

"Three leagues, señor," the man answered promptly.

"Three leagues!" Stafford repeated angrily. "You said at the station that it was three leagues; and now, after we have been driving for at least an hour, you declare it the same! It is not possible."

"Now! Oh, no, señor," was the cheerful rejoinder; "from here it is no more than two leagues."

"Two!" Stafford found that his command of language was inadequate to express his impatience, so he merely flung himself back into as easy a position as the uneasy seat of the carriage would allow, and lighted a cigar to solace himself for the heat and dust which encompassed him. "Truly I am a fool!" he proceeded to meditate. "As if ten years of unselfish devotion were not enough, here I am, undertaking a very awkward errand, under most disagreeable circumstances, for a woman who has no more claim upon me for such a service than she has on her daughter for any affection. And all because of a sentiment, a superstition— the pride of keeping an idiotic promise unbroken! She may be sure, however, that this is the last draft upon that promise which I shall ever honour. Hereafter she must find some other fool to do her errands."

And yet, even while in his irritation he thought these things, he knew that something in the errand, besides his promise, had appealed to him. The Wanderlust was upon him; and he had felt an attraction in the suggestion of an entirely new and picturesque land. As well go to Mexico as to Montenegro, as he had planned; and while in Mexico he might as well see this girl, whose conditions of life had been so changed by her mother's practice of the modern gospel of ruthless individualism. It chanced that in his early sympathy with the beautiful, gifted creature who had declared her right to live her own life and express her own genius, without regard to the obligations of wife and mother which she had assumed, he had

rarely, if ever, thought of the child she had deserted. The narrow, stubborn, autocratic husband, who had strenuously objected to sharing his wife with the public, he had thought of, and had joined In those days in denunciation of his selfishness. But the child had been to his imagination, when it dealt with her at all, no more than the doll which she had apparently been to her mother. And, at the thought of seeing this doll grown to womanhood, curiosity and interest undoubtedly stirred in him. What would she be like, the child of two such people, the inheritor of natures, tendencies, ideas so diametrically opposed? The more he thought of her, the more his interest grew; and it was not until he found himself on the point of meeting her, that the difficulty and awkwardness of his errand fully dawned upon him.

And now it was too late to draw back. From the City of Mexico he had forwarded a letter from Mrs. Lestrange, with a few lines from himself, to the address which that lady had given. An answer had not been long in reaching him. He drew it from his pocket and read it again, as he drove toward the white arches across the plain.

My Dear Mr. Stafford,

In the letter from my mother which you have enclosed to me, she asks me to see you, and I know of no reason why I should refuse to do so. I am at my hacienda of El Rosario, in the State of Jalisco. To reach the hacienda, it is necessary to leave the railway at the station of Atequiza. If you decide to come, and will let me know when to expect you, I will have you met at Atequiza.

Yours truly,

Sylvia Lestrange.

Could anything, he asked himself again as he had asked when he first read it, be colder than this? He was not forbidden to come. That was all; and it was hardly strange that, in the face of a permission so icy, he had not cared to trouble Miss Lestrange to send to the station for him. Inquiry, made after he entered the State of Jalisco, had resulted in the information that he might reach the hacienda of El Rosario either from La Barca or from Atequiza, since it lay about midway between these two points. He had therefore left the railway at La Barca, the station of the beautiful town of the same name, which lies a mile or two distant across the plain, and was now being driven to his destination with only one distinct certainty in his mind—that of his own exceeding folly.

"I wonder," he presently murmured aloud, "if there is any word in any language which would fitly characterize my conduct.— No, *amigo*" he added in Spanish to the driver, who again looked over his shoulder, "I was not addressing you, but do you think there is any chance that we may reach the hacienda before nightfall?"

The man laughed, for it was early afternoon. "We shall be there within an hour, señor," he said, whipping his mules.

It was not very much more than that when Stafford found himself alighting before a building which would have astonished him by its massive impressiveness if he had not by this time seen enough of Mexico to be in a measure familiar with the noble solidity and grace of its domestic architecture— that architecture long ago imported in every detail from the Iberian peninsula. He was not aware that no finer examples of the palace-like *casas grandes* of its great estates are to be found than those which exist in the once immensely opulent, and still prosperous State of Jalisco; but he was immediately struck by the beauty of the house before him, its fine simplicity of outline and the stately effect of the lofty, arcaded front, leading to what was evidently the façade of a chapel with Carmelite belfries rising above it.

A paved balustraded court lay before the building, and at the head of the steps leading from this stood a man in the picturesque national dress. He had the appearance of a hidalgo, but, supposing him to be possibly the majordomo, Stafford offered his card, and the next moment was ushered into an inner court which was like a dream of the Alhambra. A wide corridor, with tiled floor and Moresque arches,

encircled the four sides of the great quadrangle. There was a soft murmur of water from a fountain in the centre, on the edge of the sculptured basin of which white doves were sitting; and, filling all the wide, open space and clambering up the graceful pillars were roses, roses, and again roses, of every imaginable kind and colour, growing with a glorious abandon, and blooming with a profusion and perfection never known in colder latitudes.

Stafford drew a deep breath. The coolness, the shade, the fragrance and beauty seemed more than delicious after the drive across the plain in the noon- day glare from which his eyes still ached. And the stillness of this lovely place was as great as the beauty. The delicate music of the fountain was the only sound which met the ear, and in all the length of the shining corridors, with their frescoed walls, in all the wide, flower-filled court there was no figure visible, save the one in silver-laced breeches and jacket which preceded him. The doves and the roses seemed to have all the beautiful spaciousness to themselves, and he had a feeling as if he had entered the enchanted palace of a fairy-tale. What would the princess be like—the princess whom he had come so far to seek, and was now about to meet?

He thought that he had met her when a moment later he was introduced into a large, lofty room filled with almost twilight gloom, for the heavy shutters of the large windows were closed to exclude glare and heat, and when, out of the shadowy dimness, a feminine figure came toward him.

"Miss Lestrange, I presume?" he said.

"No," a pleasant voice answered. "I am Miss Goodwin, her governess once, her companion and friend now."

And then as the speaker advanced into the full light streaming through the wide doorway, Stafford saw a middle-aged woman whose strong, sensible face was as prepossessing as her voice, and who had the air and manner of an unmistakable gentlewoman. She held out her hand with a cordial smile.

"You've never heard of me before, Mr. Stafford," she said, "but I know very well who you are. I'm acquainted with all your people at home; and I'm glad to welcome you to El Rosario. I'm afraid you have had a very disagreeable drive; the dust is dreadful at this season! No doubt you would like to get rid of it without delay. I know how one's first longing is for water, and plenty of it, when one comes from a journey in Mexico." Then in Spanish to the man who lingered at the door: "Miguel, show the señor to his room."

"Pardon me," said Stafford, as soon as this cheerful and friendly flow of words permitted him to speak. "You are very kind; but since I expect to return to La Barca immediately, it is hardly worth while to make any demand upon your hospitality."

"Not make any demand upon our hospitality!" Miss Goodwin lifted a pair of dark eyebrows with an expression of the liveliest astonishment. "What are you talking about? You can't mean that you have come from the City of Mexico to pay a morning call?"

Stafford might have truthfully replied that he had made a much longer journey merely to pay this call; but he contented himself with answering that, although he had undertaken to deliver a message from Mrs. Lestrange to her daughter, he had not felt at liberty to trouble the latter with his presence longer than was necessary, and so had intended to leave the hacienda immediately.

"But this is nonsense, you know!" said Miss Goodwin energetically. "We don't do things in that manner here, and we can't allow strangers to come and upset our customs. If Sylvia said nothing in her note about expecting you to stay, it was only because she never thought of anything else as possible. Your room has been ready for days."

"I am grateful for her kind intentions," Stafford answered. "But I still think that my original plan is best. My carriage is waiting to take me to La Barca—"

"What on earth can you do at La Barca? There's no train on which you can leave until to-morrow."

"There are inns, I presume, in which I can sleep; and some picturesque sights with which to pass the time."

"You will find none more picturesque than we can show you here. The thing is simply not to be thought of! We should feel ourselves disgraced, such are our old-world ideas, if you went away in such a manner. And apart from the question of hospitality, you have come here with a definite purpose, haven't you?"

"I have come, as I have said, to deliver a message to Miss Lestrange."

"Exactly. And since you have taken the trouble to come so far to do this, I suppose that you are interested in the result of the message."

Stafford met the glance of the shrewd brown eyes which were regarding him, with rather an enigmatic smile.

"I am by no means sure that I am interested in it," he said. "It will be best to regard me simply in the light of a human phonograph."

"Well, *I* am interested," replied Miss Goodwin shortly. "I am anxious that Sylvia should hear anything which can be said for her mother, anything which might enable her to overlook her long neglect, and have some friendly relations with her. I don't myself believe for a moment that anything can be truthfully said for the woman; but if any kind of an excuse can be patched up which Sylvia would accept, I shall be glad. You see her father's death leaves the poor child so awfully alone."

"She is fortunate in having one friend at least," said Stafford, struck by the deep feeling of the last words. "But really, I am not here to patch up excuses for Mrs. Lestrange."

"But that is what she has written. In the letter which you forwarded, she begs her daughter to see you because you can tell her story as she wishes it told, and ‘interpret her heart'— whatever that may mean."

"I don't know that I understand much more than yourself, what it means; and I haven't the least intention of attempting anything of the kind," Stafford answered. "I did promise that I would tell her story from her own point of view to her daughter—and after all, you know, *'tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*.' "

"No, I don't know it," returned Miss Goodwin, who was evidently a very positive and somewhat prejudiced person. "There are many things that I might comprehend without pardoning; and such an act as that of Violet Lestrange, when she left her husband and child for no other reason than that her nature demanded that she should go and be an actress, is one of them. But my opinion of her needn't be discussed! We have to deal with things and persons as they exist, not as we would like to have them; and things being as they are, it is my opinion that Sylvia had better have some friendly relations with her mother. For this reason I induced her to consent to see you, and for this reason also I want you to remain long enough to make an impression on her. It won't be easy, I can tell you. She is a true Lestrange in her obstinacy."

Stafford had a certain sense of amusement in remembering from whom he had heard this statement before, and in thus learning how well it was justified. But to her annoyance, Miss Goodwin perceived that he still hesitated. Then he seemed suddenly to take a resolution, and his glance met steadily the anxious eyes regarding him.

"You have been frank with me," he said, "and I will be equally frank with you. I have come here on a disagreeable errand, very much against my inclination, and simply in fulfilment of a promise to Mrs. Lestrange. All that concerns me in the matter is that I fulfil this promise. Whether or not I succeed in obtaining for her the thing she wants— which is reconciliation with her daughter—hasn't up to the present been to me a matter of importance. I have intended simply to deliver the message with which I am charged, not to play the part of an advocate."

"But I want you to play the part of an advocate," Miss Goodwin persisted. "This child is alone in the world, at an age when she needs care and protection. If you think of her—"

"My dear lady," Stafford interrupted a little impatiently, "you force me to be even brutally frank. Why should I think of her?"

There was a moment's pause, and then Miss Goodwin answered stiffly:

"That's rather a rude question, but of course I brought it on myself. And it is difficult to answer. There is on the face of it certainly no reason why Mrs. Lestrange's friend and admirer should feel sympathy for her neglected and justly estranged daughter."

"If you consider her to be justly estranged," said Stafford, who began to find this a little exasperating, "why should you wish the estrangement to be ended?"

“I have told you why," replied Miss Goodwin. "Here is a girl with remarkable beauty, with a mind and character far above the ordinary, and possessed of a great fortune, who stands on the threshold of womanhood entirely alone, except for the friendship of a woman like myself who is without social influence. Her life must be settled in these years of her youth; and here she is with no one to introduce her to the world and give her the position she should hold."

"Her father's people—"

"Her father, like the fool he was,— excuse me, but I can't speak on this subject with patience!— cut her off from his people when he brought her into exile with him. She knows little or nothing of them, and they think of her as her mother's daughter; so there is no cordiality of feeling possible. Besides, her father brought her up to feel that she had been disgraced by her mother's desertion; and therefore nothing, I think, would induce her to return to the States. So the only hope for her is with the mother who has at last remembered that she has a daughter."

Stafford felt like one who sees all doors of escape closing. But he made a final effort to avoid the unpalatable role forced upon him.

"She has been brought up in Mexico," he said. "Why are you not content for her to make her life here?"

Miss Goodwin turned upon him almost angrily. "Man," she cried, "do you think you can tell what is good for her better than I, to whom she is dear as my heart's blood? There are dangers in Mexico— I should be glad for her to leave the country at once. But she won't do so unless you can persuade her to go to her mother." She paused, glanced beyond him, and then pointed to the patio outside the great open doorway. "Look!" she said quickly. "There she is. Is that a creature to be buried here?"

CHAPTER III

The Lady of El Rosario

STAFFORD'S gaze followed her own, and the picture which he saw was one that he never forgot. Indeed it was a picture not likely to be forgotten under any circumstances, for at this moment the whole spaciousness of the lovely court, the grace of its Arabian arches, the beauty of the roses, the charm of its sculptured fountain, of murmuring water and snowy doves, served only as a setting for the figure in the midst of these things— the figure of a girl who, in crossing the patio, had paused beside the fountain, and sat down on the edge of the basin among the doves, one of which had alighted on her shoulder. It seemed to Stafford that he had never, either in reality or on canvas, beheld anything more charming than this scene : the unconscious grace of attitude of the slender figure, the perfect pose of the lovely head turned

smilingly toward the bird, the whole aroma of that divine, evanescent glory of youth and beauty which the poets of all ages have sung. He gazed silently for a minute, and then looked at Miss Goodwin.

“You are right," he told her. “Other arguments are quite useless when you can show one like that."

"Then you agree with me?" she said eagerly. "You will do what you can?"

He met her eagerness with the enigmatic smile which had puzzled and annoyed her before.

"I will do what you wish me to do," he answered, "if you will assume all the responsibility in case I succeed."

She stared a little. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Just what I say," he replied. "You know the present conditions and you wish them changed; but it's altogether possible that you will be no better, perhaps even less, satisfied with the conditions brought about by the change. In such case, I want you to remember that I have no responsibility for anything that may happen."

She did not answer immediately, and for the first time there came into her face an expression of doubt and hesitation.

"If," she said at length, "there is any reason—any real reason— why Sylvia should not go to her mother, I beg you to speak to me with as much brutal frankness as you please. I shall only be grateful."

Stafford's smile was now sincerely amused. "Believe me, brutal frankness is not my habit," he said. "And there is no occasion for it here. Mrs. Lestrange, as you are probably aware, has preserved an unblemished reputation; and her position in London, where actresses of her rank are not only socially recognized but much sought, is excellent. Her daughter would have no drawback to fear in going to her."

"Then that settles the matter," said Miss Goodwin briskly; "at least as far as the effort you are going to be good enough to make is concerned. Now come and be introduced to Sylvia."

Moved by a curiosity and interest which almost made him forget his dust-covered condition, Stafford followed her out into the patio, where a moment later he was shaking hands with Miss Lestrange, and meeting the challenging brilliance of her eyes.

They were such beautiful eyes of lucid gray, under the shadow of dark lashes and brows, that at first he hardly observed the details of the face in which they were set. When he did so, he noted some resemblance to Mrs. Lestrange in the rose-leaf delicacy of complexion, and the glittering masses of gold-threaded hair; but there was more marked distinction of feature, more suggestion of high-breeding in the lines of head and neck, altogether a more elevated type of loveliness, and an aspect as of a creature made of something finer than ordinary clay, which, with all her beauty, the famous actress had never possessed. Stafford suddenly remembered that on her father's side the girl came of a line of thinkers and scholars, and that of Hugh Lestrange himself great things had been expected before his wife's desertion killed his ambition, and made him an exile and recluse. It was from him that his daughter had taken her eyes, full of intelligence, and full also of possibilities of deep feeling; from him the fine, almost austere chiselling of her lovely features, and from him the note of strongly defined character which was apparent in her face, and which sufficiently explained Miss Goodwin's anxiety. Plainly it would be impossible to foretell by any ordinary rule how this girl would act in a given case; but it was only necessary to glance at her to feel sure that, however she elected to act, to move her from that decision would be extremely difficult. Afterwards Stafford remembered that this was his first impression of Sylvia Lestrange— this, and the crystalline coolness of her tone as she said:

“How do you do, Mr. Stafford? I hope you have had a pleasant journey."

Stafford smiled as he noticed the absence of any words of welcome. As in her letter which had almost kept him away, so by her manner the young mistress of El Rosario plainly marked that his presence in her house was merely tolerated. Yet now that he was face to face with her, this attitude

pleased rather than repelled him. In its cool remoteness, its proud reserve toward the messenger of the mother who had abandoned her, it seemed altogether suitable to the character he divined in her.

But Miss Goodwin evidently feared that it might have another effect, for she interposed quickly before he could answer:

“I 'm afraid Mr. Stafford's journey was so far from pleasant— think of the heat and dust at this season!— that I have been begging him to remain at El Rosario for a short time; but he talks absurdly of going on immediately to La Barca."

Miss Lestrange looked at Stafford with an expression of surprise.

"But surely that is unnecessary!" she said. "You will remain until to-morrow, will you not? We can send you to La Barca when you wish to go."

"You are very good," Stafford began more doubtfully than he had replied to the same invitation from Miss Goodwin; which that lady perceiving, she promptly interposed again in her energetic fashion.

"Do be sensible, there's a good man!" she urged. "Make up your mind to stay; and let Miguel go and dismiss your carriage. He’ll settle with the *cochero* better than you can, and then he'll show you to your room, for I know you are longing for a bath."

Stafford glanced at Miss Lestrange, and the amusement in his eyes encountered a like amusement in hers. She also spoke more cordially than she had spoken before:

“I am certain you can't resist, Mr. Stafford. I always find it easier to yield to Miss Goodwin. So I think you had really better let Miguel go and dismiss the carriage."

"Since you are so kind," Stafford said, amending his phrase and not only finding it easier to yield than to resist these hospitable entreaties, but conscious also of an attraction which made yielding desirable.

So it came to pass that a little later he was again following the majordomo around the shining arcade, and into a spacious apartment where large double glass doors, opening on an outer corridor, revealed a vision of wide waters stretching into enchanting distance, and remote heights robed in softest azure, which was as unexpected as it was delightful.

"Oh, by Jove!" he exclaimed, with arrested steps. "How divinely beautiful!" Then to the man who had followed him into the room : "I was not expecting a view of the sea, *amigo*!"

"No, señor," Miguel replied quite literally. "That is the lake."

"The lake!" He laughed for sheer joy in the lovely prospect. "Oh, yes, I know. I knew that I was near Chapala, largest of Mexican lakes. But I did not expect to find myself so immediately upon it."

"The house is quite close to the water, señor, although from the front one is not aware of it," Miguel replied. Then he glanced around the apartment with an air which dismissed Lake Chapala to its proper place in the perspective. "If there is anything I can do for the señor?" he inquired; and assured that there was nothing: "When the señor is ready, he will find the ladies in the corridor," he added, with a gesture indicating that which overlooked the lake.

A little later, refreshed by the ablutions for which his soul had indeed longed and by a change of toilet, Stafford emerged on the wide, tile-paved corridor, each rose-hung arch of which framed the far-spread shimmering waters and the distant, dreaming mountains. It was evidently a favourite lounging-place; for scattered along its length was a great variety of bent-wood and wicker furniture, and in an attractive angle there stood just now a low tea-table, round which basket chairs were pleasantly grouped, and at which the two ladies were already seated. When he took the chair to which Miss Goodwin's gesture invited him, he expressed his enthusiastic appreciation of the beauty surrounding him.

"I come directly from some of the most picturesque countries in the world," he said; "but nevertheless Mexico is a revelation and a delight, for it blends so many different charms. ‘A tropical Venice, a semi-barbarous Spain, a new Holy Land,' some one truly calls it; and besides all this I find the Lago di Maggiore transported here."

"Our lake is beautiful, isn't it?" Sylvia said, with a loving glance out over the shining water and at the remote, heavenly heights. "So beautiful that it seems as if it might stand for its own standard of comparison."

"Fancy that!" said Miss Goodwin, addressing Stafford. "She is so infatuated with her beloved Chapala that she absolutely doesn't like your comparing it to Maggiore!"

"You have often said yourself, Sara—"

"A number of extravagant things, no doubt," Miss Goodwin interrupted. "The lake is so charming that one is driven to extravagance sometimes, I'll admit. You couldn't live by it for the greater part of fifteen years, as I have done, and not fall under its spell," she confessed to Stafford.

"But why wish to resist the spell?" he asked. "I don't see that one could do better than yield to it."

"Oh, you'll yield to it— everybody with artistic instincts does," she returned. "But never mind about the lake just now. You must be simply famished for your *merienda*."

"I might own that I am, if I were quite sure what a *merienda* is," he acknowledged.

"That," she instructed him, "is the name of the afternoon collation which Mexicans take between their very early dinner and their very late supper. So we call what we take by that name, though it is really quite different in character."

"I can't see much difference, Sara," Miss Lestrange demurred. "Mexicans take chocolate at their *merienda*, and for that matter so do I; while you take tea. But all of us take little cakes, and anything else we can get."

"What I take," said Miss Goodwin positively, "is *afternoon tea*. The other things are merely incidental. As for chocolate, I abominate the sweet, frothy stuff!"

Sylvia looked at Stafford. "Unfortunately Miss Goodwin abominates most things Mexican," she explained.

"Now, that is unjust," Miss Goodwin promptly assured him. "There are some Mexican things that I like extremely— for instance the climate and the architecture, and the manners of the people; but there are others that I don't like at all. How could I? I was too old when I was transplanted to forget that I am an Anglo-Saxon."

"That is aimed at me," Miss Lestrange explained again. "I am the person who has forgotten that I was born an Anglo-Saxon, because I take chocolate and like other Mexican things— and people."

"Really, Sylvia—" Miss Goodwin began.

But Sylvia clapped her hands together in a manner which carried Stafford back to the Arabian Nights, said a few words in Spanish to a white-clad, red-cinctured servant who appeared at the summons, and then turned to Miss Goodwin.

"We can't afford to quarrel just now, Sara," she said. "You know you remarked a moment ago that Mr. Stafford must be famished, and so I felt it necessary to hasten Rafael's movements a little."

"I am glad Rafael— what an angelic name!— lingered longer than he should," said Stafford, "since I had the pleasure of seeing him summoned in such an Oriental fashion."

"You like it?" Sylvia asked. "That is one of the customs to which Miss Goodwin objects. She thinks a bell would be much better."

"Bells," said Miss Goodwin dogmatically, "are civilized conveniences."

"But there are so many civilized conveniences," Stafford observed, "that sometimes one is a little surfeited with them; and it's a great relief to find oneself among the picturesque inconveniences of the past. At least that is what I felt in wandering in the East. And, since I have been in Mexico, I have sometimes fancied myself back in India or Persia."

"We *are* Oriental, aren't we?" Sylvia cried, with the first friendly smile she had given him. "At least we're Oriental where we're not Spanish. There's no Anglo-Saxon ugliness about us."

"Listen to her!" cried Miss Goodwin. "That's how she talks — a girl who hasn't a drop of anything but Anglo-Saxon blood in her veins!"

"We are not accountable for what we have in our veins," Sylvia answered, "but we are accountable for what we have in our hearts; and I should be ungrateful indeed if I didn't love this dear land of sunshine, and all its lovely people, and all their lovely ways."

Miss Goodwin looked at Stafford with significance. "You see!" was what her glance expressed. But what she said aloud a little drily was: "Happily we needn't discuss the matter just now, my dear, for here comes Rafael at last with the *merienda*, and Mr. Stafford can now take his choice, and range himself under the banner of chocolate or tea."

CHAPTER IV

Enter a Cavalier

IT chanced that the *merienda*, with its solid additions for a presumably famished traveller, was not yet over when further enlightenment as to the situation which confronted him came to Stafford. He was enjoying himself extremely, and had an agreeable consciousness that the ice of Miss Lestrange's manner was perceptibly thawing, when the majordomo again appeared and announced that Don Luis de Rivera had called.

"Ask Don Luis to join us," Miss Lestrange said; and another significant glance from Miss Goodwin told Stafford that here was probably an explanation of whatever had been mysterious in her appeal.

He thought a moment later that any anxious guardian might well have been pardoned for regarding distrustfully the figure which came toward them along the corridor. A tall, graceful young man, with a dark, handsome face, the air of a prince and the manner of a thorough man of the world, was approaching, dressed in the picturesque riding costume of the country. When introduced to Stafford, he surprised him by speaking in perfect English.

“I am glad to have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Stafford," he said. "I have enjoyed reading several of your books," he added, as he put out a slender hand in greeting.

"Don Luis," Miss Goodwin said, answering Stafford's look of surprise, "was educated in England, and speaks and reads English as well as we do."

"I have besides," said Don Luis, seating himself with an air of familiarity, "had the advantage of being attached to our legation in Washington for several years, where I learned a great many American— idioms, shall I say?"

"You'll speak incorrectly if you do," said Miss Goodwin. "But that doesn't matter, of course."

"Idiotisms, Miss Goodwin considers them in the most literal sense," Don Luis returned, smiling at that austere lady — for austere she had become since his arrival— with engaging friendliness. “Si, señorita," he added, lapsing into Spanish and speaking softly to Sylvia, "a cup of chocolate, if you will do me the favour."

"Don Luis is loyal to the beverage of his country, at least when he is at home," said Sylvia, addressing Stafford. "Abroad," she shook her charming head doubtfully, "I am not so sure of him."

"Abroad," said Don Luis, "one follows the custom of the country, and, when it is necessary to do so, one drinks tea; but always, if possible, with a dash of rum in it."

"It was the Russians, I believe, who introduced the fashion of drinking tea with rum and brandy and lemon and heaven knows what not in it," said Miss Goodwin; "and it's just what one would expect of them."

'^Miss Goodwin," laughed the young Mexican, “has all the robust faith of the Anglo-Saxon in Anglo-Saxon methods being the best in the world.”

“For Anglo-Saxons, I certainly think they are," said Miss Goodwin stoutly. "Other people may have what methods they please."

Don Luis sighed ostentatiously as he looked at Stafford. "My position here is difficult," he told him in a tone of confidence. "Miss Goodwin finds fault with my Mexican tastes—"

"Not at all," Miss Goodwin interposed. "I believe in people belonging to their country in everything."

"While Miss Lestrange," Don Luis went on, and Stafford's quick ear told him that the softness always came into his voice when he uttered the girl's name, "finds fault with me for being too cosmopolitan, too partial to foreign ways."

"I think it a pity," Sylvia also explained to Stafford, "that so many Mexicans— and I am sorry to say that Don Luis is one of them— are ready to abandon the picturesque habits and customs of their country, and adopt ugly utilitarian, modern ways."

"For example?" Stafford inquired, who found all this amusing as well as illuminating.

"For example," she replied, "what do you think of a man who can ride a horse, perhaps the most beautiful thing God ever made, and whose country has given him such a dress as that in which to ride it, yet who would forsake his horse and go about in a hideous motor-car!"

"I never," said Don Luis fervently, "came to El Rosario in the car but once. You see," he explained to Stafford, “I had just arrived from Paris, where motoring was the rage; and how was I to know that Miss Lestrange was so devoted to Mexico that she would tolerate no departure from its ancient customs?"

"I detest ugly things," said Sylvia. "Motor-cars are no doubt suitable enough in Paris and many other places; but not in Mexico. Here they are absolutely inharmonious; and whatever is inharmonious is to be avoided."

"You have carried your faith into practice as few of us are able to do," said Stafford. "Everything here is harmonious, even the roses and the name."

"The roses arc a consequence of the name," she told him. "The hacienda was El Rosario when my father bought it— the name having a religious significance, of course— and it was he who conceived the idea of making it a rosary in the natural sense also. If we have not every rose in the world, it is only because some variety exists of which he knew nothing."

"And the queen rose is here among them all," said Don Luis gallantly.

Again Sylvia shook her head at him in rebuke. "Don Luis," she said, "I have often told you that it is not good form to pay broad compliments in English."

But Don Luis only laughed, curling upwards the ends of his small black moustache. "I have paid many compliments— very broad compliments— in English without ever having any reason to believe that I had violated good form," he said; "but of course if the señorita prefers them in Spanish, I shall be glad. It is much easier to say graceful things in that language!"

“You know perfectly well that I don't care for them in any language," Miss Lestrange replied.

And so the gay talk went on. After the *merienda* the men were invited to smoke, and, as they all sat in friendly companionship watching through the rose-hung arches the outspread waters gleaming in the sunshine, the lucent sapphire of the sky, the exquisite tints of the distant hills, Stafford said to himself that it was quite evident that he had not come a day too soon, if there was to be even a chance of the success of his errand; but that this success was even more doubtful than he had expected.

Presently Miss Goodwin rose. "The sun is low enough for us to take a turn in the garden," she said; "and if Mr. Stafford thinks the roses about the house are beautiful, I don't know what he will say to them there."

They all went out together, passing along a wide terrace, at one end of which there was a flight of stone steps. Then, through gates of wrought iron, they entered a garden where broad alleys, lined with orange-trees, led in every direction through a wilderness of tropical verdure; where great clumps of bananas unfurled their immense leaves like green satin banners in the sunshine; where splendid palms lifted their crowns of feathery foliage, and where on all sides roses climbed, clambered, bloomed in a profusion of beauty altogether indescribable.

"It is a paradise!" Stafford said to Miss Goodwin, by whose side he found himself pacing, while Sylvia and De Rivera sauntered in front. "I have never seen anything more charming than this Mexican home. I don't wonder that Mr. Lestrange grew so fond of it that he was willing to live and die here."

Miss Goodwin turned on him what he plainly recognized as a glance of exasperation.

"Yes," she said, "it was all well enough for him. He liked nothing better than to live here and forget the world, read books and cultivate roses. But it was an act of the most selfish folly as far as his daughter was concerned. Of her future he never seemed to think at all."

Stafford looked at the graceful girl, in her white gown, passing between the orange-trees and the roses, and at the picturesque figure of the man strolling beside her.

"Miss Lestrange seems satisfied with both her present and her future here," he observed.

"Do you think I don't see that?" Miss Goodwin returned. "She is so well satisfied— because, poor child, she knows nothing else!— that any day, any hour, her life may be irrevocably settled. That man yonder has made no formal proposal of marriage yet, but he will very soon."

"Yes," Stafford assented, "he will very soon."

"And then," Miss Goodwin went on, "I can do nothing."

"But why," Stafford inquired, "should you wish to do anything? This young man— what is there objectionable about him?"

"Nothing," replied Miss Goodwin in a depressed tone. "I mean nothing that can be reasonably urged against him. His family and position are excellent. He is the son of one of the foremost men in Mexico —a man who stands so high in the government service, that everything is open to him. Like most Mexican officials, he's immensely wealthy, and, among other estates, he has a large hacienda adjoining El Rosario, where the family come sometimes, and where Don Luis is very fond of coming." She paused and sighed. “He has every advantage of education and worldly polish," she went on, “and you can see for yourself that he's absurdly handsome. No man has any right to be as handsome as that unless he's a grand-opera tenor!"

“Then," Stafford persisted, "why do you object so much to this apparently very desirable young gentleman? He is not accountable for his romantic appearance, and that's the only drawback you’ve mentioned."

“I suppose you'll think I am a fool," said Miss Goodwin, “but it's really a case of a Dr. Fell sort of distrust and dislike. I wouldn't wish Sylvia to marry any Mexican; I would rather she went home and married one of her own people. But there are many Mexicans toward whom I shouldn't have the feeling that I have toward Luis de Rivera— a feeling that it wouldn't be safe for her to trust the happiness of her life to him."

“You are too sensible a woman," said Stafford, “not to have some tangible ground for so strong a feeling as this appears to be."

“Then if I have," she answered, "it rests first on the fact that we know so little about him. His life has been chiefly spent in foreign countries— at present he's attached to the Mexican legation in Paris. And secondly, in the things I’ve heard him say about women."

"Surely he's too much a man of the world to have said anything objectionable— to you."

“Oh, nothing really objectionable, nothing that could be taken hold of. But there's a cynicism of tone—"

"That’s a modern affectation, my dear lady."

"I think," she said, "that it is a modern reality with men of the world in which Don Luis has lived."

Stafford could not gainsay her. He knew better than any woman could know what was the tone of the world in which a handsome young diplomat would naturally find himself; and he did not doubt that love had sharpened her perception until it discerned a fact. But what then? If she had hoped for a paladin for this beautiful maiden— well, there was nothing to be said except that paladins are somewhat out of fashion and rarely to be found in modern days.

"And now," Miss Goodwin resumed, "you have the reason why I regarded your letter as a godsend, why I persuaded Sylvia to let you come, and why I think that even to go to the selfish and odious woman who abandoned her, will be better than for her to remain here."

"I have generally observed," Stafford remarked abstractedly, "that too much playing Providence is unwise. We have such limited horizons, you see; we know so little of what will be the outcome of anything."

"I know," said Miss Goodwin sharply, "that Sylvia should have the opportunity to meet other men before she promises to marry Luis de Rivera."

Stafford looked at her with the smile she began to know, and which had so often annoyed Violet Lestrange.

"Doesn't it occur to you," he said, "that the men she would meet in London might, in all essential particulars, be very much like Don Luis?"

Miss Goodwin was silent for a moment. Evidently this had not occurred to her. She reflected on it, and then said: "There's safety in numbers. I'm willing to take the chance; to run the risk, in order to put him out of her head."

"Are you quite sure he is in it?"

"No," she replied, "I 'm not sure. Nobody is so close to Sylvia as I am. But I don't always understand her. Frankly, I don't understand her now. She seems wonderfully mistress of herself, but then she has always been reserved. I only know that if I were a girl I should be in love with him, wouldn't you?"

Stafford threw back his head with a burst of laughter which made Sylvia glance over her shoulder.

"I really haven't imagination enough to tell what I would be if I were a girl," he said. "But I grant Don Luis's attractions, and, since you are so bent on frustrating them, I'll promise again to do my best to help you."

Chapter V

Stafford Delivers His Message

A FEW hours later Stafford had the pleasure of seeing the moon rise over Lake Chapala, and, common as this phenomenon is, it seemed to add the last touch of enchantment to the picture which the arches of the corridor framed. Since he sat in this pleasant place before, several things had happened. For one, he had seen Don Luis de Rivera ride away, like a figure out of romance, through the colour-filled twilight, over the rich, green valley toward his own hacienda; for another, he had taken the *cena*— the

evening meal— in a delightful dining-room, with delicately frescoed walls and hanging lamps; and for a third, as he went out again with the two ladies to the beautiful world, where the moon was just lifting her golden disc above the hills beyond the lake. Miss Goodwin had found an opportunity to say to him in an earnest aside:

"I'll leave you alone with Sylvia presently, and do try your best!"

This sounded enigmatical, but Stafford by this time thoroughly understood what trying his best meant from Miss Goodwin's point of view; and he was by no means as averse to the effort required of him as he had been when she had first made her appeal. Indeed his reluctance had changed to interest since the first moment when he had seen the girl beside the fountain among the roses and doves; the girl in whom, besides her youth and her beauty, he discerned the indefinable quality of the unexpected that always appeals irresistibly to the spirit of the artist, which was so keenly alive within him. And, if an additional incentive to interest were required, it had been furnished by the appearance on the scene of the inevitable man— the man who enters a woman's life not only to change but to appropriate it, and whose entrance has therefore, from the beginning of the world, been rightly regarded as the most important thing which can happen to her.

This man was plainly here — one so liberally endowed, in outward aspect at least, with the qualities likely to please a maiden's fancy, that Stafford could not but feel that it would be surprising if Sylvia Lestrange hesitated to hold out her hand to him. That she had only to hold out her hand, was evident. There could be no doubt of the nature of the feeling which shone in De Rivera's eloquent dark eyes when they rested on her; and if there was no answering fire in *her* eyes, that might be accounted for in many ways. The woman who knew her best accounted for it by saying that she had always been "reserved"; but this was only a phrase, which stands for many different manifestations of character, and Stafford found himself wondering what it stood for in the case of this girl whom Miss Goodwin also declared to be “wonderfully mistress of herself."

Certainly the pure, clear-cut face had that air, as he regarded it in profile while he talked to the elder woman. For after they came out on the corridor again, Sylvia did not trouble herself to talk at all. Lying back in one of the deep chairs, she appeared to forget her companions, as she gazed out over the lake growing more magically beautiful each moment as the moon rose higher in the hyacinth-blue sky and poured a flood of radiance over the wide expanse of sleeping water. She did not even stir when Miss Goodwin, murmuring some excuse, presently went away, leaving Stafford alone with her. He, on his side, was neither surprised nor offended by this silence, which seemed to him altogether harmonious with the scene, and, left to his own inclinations, he would have made no effort to break it. But he had an amused recollection of Miss Goodwin's parting glance, which seemed to bid him be up and doing; and with the certainty that she would entertain a robust contempt for shirking or delay, he presently forced himself to speak.

"The night is so divine," he said, "that I can't help wondering if it wouldn't be possible to go out on the lake."

Sylvia glanced around at him.

"Oh, yes," she answered, "it is quite possible. We have several boats — among them a light skiff, easily handled by one person, if you care to go alone."

"I am a gregarious animal," he replied. "I don't care to go alone, if you will go with me."

She hesitated a moment and then rose from her seat. "I am always ready to go on the water," she said.

He followed her across the terrace and down a flight of steps which led to the beach. There he found a boat-house containing various boats, of which one —the light, easily handled skiff of which she had spoken— was riding on the water, ready to be unfastened and pushed out by a single stroke of the oars.

"It seems to have been prepared for us," Stafford said, as he held out his hand to her.

But she did not appear to see the hand. Stepping in lightly without assistance, she said as she sat down: "It was prepared for me. I like to go out on the lake at night, and this boat is always ready for my use."

"Do you go out alone?"

"As a rule, yes. Sometimes I take Miss Goodwin, but she doesn't care for the water as much as I do. You see I was brought up on it; or perhaps I should rather say in it. My father loved the lake, and taught me when I was very small to swim and row like a boy."

It was the first time that she had mentioned her father's name, and, as he caught the inflection of tenderness which came into her voice, he had a vision of the self-exiled man and the little mother-forsaken child together on the shores of this remote foreign lake, which struck him as containing a deeper note of pathos than he had been conscious of before. Somewhat absently, he cast the boat loose and put his oars in the water. The next moment they were floating on a wide sea of silver with the marvellous beauty of the night about them like a benediction.

And what night and moonlight are on Lake Chapala, words are but poor instruments with which to tell. The mystical shining loveliness of the lake, the clearness as of a sublimated day, in which every outline of the heights both near and far were revealed
—those near by, their rocky escarpments rich with tropical luxuriance of vegetation, throwing dark, bold shadows over the water, and those afar off exchanging their azure robes of day for a tint so ethereal that it had an almost unearthly beauty— the vast tranquil majesty of the scene, the coolness and stillness of the perfect night— all were filled, like a brimming flower-chalice, with that deep charm of
Nature which has power to touch most poignantly the spirit of man.

Neither of the two who were in the boat spoke for some time. They had left the shore, with the white arches of the *casa grande*, a considerable distance behind, and were far out on the water, where every stroke of the oar-blades meant a flash of diamonds, and the great sweep of the lucid sky came down to meet the wonderful distance where lake and mountains swam in silver mist, when Stafford remarked meditatively:

"How much you must be attached to this enchanting place!"

A moment passed before Sylvia answered: "I am more attached to it than to anything else in the world— now."

"And yet," Stafford said after another pause, in the same quiet tone, "I think you must feel that the time has come to leave it."

"You are mistaken," she returned quickly. "I feel nothing of the kind."

Again he did not reply immediately. The oars flashed in and out of the water several times before he said: "But I am sure you *will* feel it when you consider a little."

All the challenge he had read in her eyes when he met them first was in them now as she glanced at him.

"Is it your habit to speak so confidently of things of which you know nothing?" she inquired.

"That sounds like a deserved rebuke," he answered; "but, as a matter of fact, I really know something of the matter of which we speak at present."

"The matter of my feelings?"

"Rather, perhaps, of what will influence your feelings. And I venture to think that when you have given that matter consideration, you will agree with me that, notwithstanding the charm of this fairy-like spot, it is too narrow a setting for your life."

"Suppose I like a narrow setting? Suppose I prefer that, where my life has been cast, it shall remain?"

"Anything may be supposed, of course," he replied, "but in your case you are asking me to suppose too much. It is impossible to look at you and believe that you really think that the conditions in which your life was accidentally set, should continue."

"Why is it impossible to believe it when you look at me?"

"Because if you have not one of the most valuable gifts of Nature, saving good sense, she has hung out misleading signs in your appearance."

He knew the next moment that she possessed another valuable gift of Nature, for her involuntary smile testified to her sense of humour.

"You are at once flattering and astute," she said; "no one would wish to accuse Nature of hanging out misleading signs of one's own good sense. But aren't you rather undervaluing mine, in imagining that I don't see why you are so sure that this is too narrow a setting for my life?"

"If you mean, because I have come on your mother's behalf to urge a change on you," he answered, "I can only say that it is quite true that I am here for that purpose; but I may add that, when I arrived, I was altogether indifferent as to how you received her message. It was only after I saw you that I began to feel an interest in your decision, and every hour of my stay deepens the impression that it will be a very important decision for your life; that the opportunity offered you is offered by the hand of Fate itself at a critical moment."

She did not deny this, but sat for a moment silent, gazing over the shining water at the distant heights. Presently she said, without turning her head: "It may be as well to deliver your message, and be done with it."

"Oh, the message!" His voice seemed to reflect the indifference he had expressed with regard to it. "That is soon delivered. Your mother is intensely anxious to see and know you, and she begs very earnestly that you will give her an opportunity to do so, by going to visit her in London."

She glanced at him with evident surprise. "Is that all?"

"Well,"— he paused reflectively,— "that is the substance. There were many embellishments, but I hardly think it necessary to add those. I have a fancy that they wouldn't influence your decision very much."

"You are right, they wouldn't influence it at all," she replied. "But I can't help wondering why you should have taken the trouble to come here to say what my mother herself has already said, with the embellishments you disdain."

"No doubt it does seem odd, and possibly a little absurd," he acknowledged. "To make things clear, it might be well to explain why I have undertaken such an errand."

Miss Lestrange's manner congealed a trifle more. "Is any explanation required?" she asked. "I know that you are a great friend and— champion of my mother; so it is natural enough that you should undertake her errands."

"Not so natural perhaps as you think," Stafford answered. "But I happen to have a weakness for keeping my word when it has once been given, and long ago I promised Mrs. Lestrange that any service she might demand of me should be performed, if it were in my power to perform it. Most women would hesitate to exact fulfilment of that promise as she has more than once exacted it, but Mrs. Lestrange has not hesitated. I was in Hungary when she summoned me to London to ask me to come to Mexico and plead her cause with you."

"And you have come to Mexico for no other reason than that!" Sylvia exclaimed in a tone of amazement. "What power of fascination the woman must possess for whom a man would do such a thing!"

Even in the moonlight a flush of colour showed through Stafford's sunburned face, but his eyes met hers with a very direct gaze.

"You are mistaken," he told her. "In fulfilling the promise of which I have spoken, there has been only a rather irksome sense of obligation— so irksome indeed that I have assured myself that this shall be its last fulfilment."

She regarded him curiously for a moment before she said: "But you can't deny the fascination which caused you to make such a promise."

"It would be quite useless to deny it," he answered. "The fascination was very real, and I was its subject for a long time. I was very young when Mrs. Lestrange— who, by the by, is distantly related to me— came to London, where a short time before I had carried my literary ambitions, because I knew that success meant more there, in the centre of the English-speaking world, than anywhere else. It had not yet arrived, however, when Mrs. Lestrange came with her beauty, her genius— she really has genius, you know — and her story of a life which did violence to every instinct of her nature, and from which she was forced to break away at any cost — "

Sylvia interposed quickly. "She never dared to make any charge against my father?"

"Only the charge of inability to comprehend the needs and exactions of her nature," Stafford replied. "She demanded the right to live her life in her own way, and he denied her right to do so, since she had assumed the duties of wife and mother. The difference between them was absolutely irreconcilable; it was the tragedy of modern life epitomized— the hopeless clashing of the old and new standards. In those days I believed enthusiastically in the new, espoused her cause, held her justified in the course she had taken, asked nothing better than to serve her in the first hard steps of the career upon which she had set out, made the unlimited promise to which I have alluded, and altogether was rendered happy for several years by spending my time and efforts in her service in the fullest manner. I suppose no one did more to help her become the great actress she is to-day, and, that being so, no doubt I should feel sufficiently rewarded."

Silence again— a silence in which the girl looked once more at the distant mountains. "But also no doubt," she said at last, "you are hoping for a reward."

"No." The reply was short and sharp. "I am neither hoping for, nor desiring a reward. I understand what you mean. You think— you have possibly been told— that I am in love with Mrs. Lestrange. It is not true. Years ago I believed in and served her with that chivalric passion which a young man of poetic instincts often feels for a woman of beauty and genius like hers; but as I have grown older, and have learned to know her better, that feeling has vanished and for a long time I have only remembered that she is a woman alone in the world, and that I am her kinsman and countryman."

A sudden softness came now into the eyes which met his own— a softness such as he had not seen in them before.

"It is kind of you to remember that, when you have forgotten the other," Sylvia said. "You can hardly expect me to feel sympathy for her because she is alone in the world, but no doubt she needs such a friend as you are— as you must be, since you go across the world to do her bidding."

"I have already told you how it comes about that I am here to do her bidding," he said. "But I shall be glad if, in fulfilling that old promise, I can be of service to you by inducing you to comply with her request. I wish I could tell you how strongly I believe that you should comply with it."

"And I," she replied almost sternly, "have no desire to tell you how strongly I am opposed to meeting the woman who broke my father's heart, made wreck of all that he could have achieved in the world, and threw me out of her life as a worthless thing at a time when I might have been supposed to need her most. But though I speak of the last," she added hastily, "you must not imagine that I care about myself. I have often thought that she did the best thing possible for me when she removed herself and her influence out of my life. It is of my father I think— of the great wrong she did *him*. It is that I can never forgive."

Stafford did not answer immediately. It was what he had wanted, to learn where the point of most resistance lay; and, having learned it, he considered it a little before he spoke.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he said at length, "that there must have been a certain element of weakness in your father's character, since he allowed his life to be wrecked in such a manner? And not his own life only." He glanced around at the wide, beautiful scene. "I think that you have much to forgive both your parents, for it is clear that they equally forgot their duty to you."

"How dare you say that of my father?" Sylvia asked in a low, vibrating tone. "He thought only of me, lived only for me—"

"Forgive me, no," Stafford interposed. "If he had thought only, or even at all of you, he would not have isolated and buried your life here."

"I refuse to admit that my life is isolated and buried."

"Refusing to admit a fact doesn't change it. Your life is isolated; and it is buried at a time when you need most to see and know the world, to meet men and women— especially men— lest you make one of the irreparable mistakes to which inexperience is peculiarly liable."

"It's clear that Sara has been talking to you."

"Give me credit for penetration enough not to need Miss Goodwin's aid in reading the situation. It would be plain to any one that you should go out into the world without delay, and your mother is the proper person to introduce you there. May I remind you that she has kept the social position to which she was born, and made another very brilliant one for herself?"

"At the cost of a far more brilliant one that might have been my father's!"

"Can you not try to forget that? I think, if your father could speak to you, he would counsel your doing so. For, if the dead can look back to earth and see the effect of their actions here, he must realize that, when he carried you into a life of exile with him, he did you an injury almost as great as your mother's injury in forsaking you."

"Mr. Stafford, I will not listen to another word—"

"Yes," he said gently, "I am sure you will listen to this, and perhaps reflect on it a little—that, in permitting one parent to make reparation for the wrong she did you, it is possible that you may be helping her to undo the work of the other also; a work he could only regret if he saw its consequences. Now," he turned the boat around as he spoke, "I shall not keep you out longer."

In unbroken silence they rowed back across the shining water, amid the wonderful, unearthly radiance of the tranquil night, but when Sylvia stepped out of the boat at the landing-stage, she paused and looked up at Stafford.

"Don't think that I am angry— now," she told him. "You have said things that I have never allowed any one to say to me before; but possibly there is some degree of truth in them, and I will at least consider them before I decide finally what I shall do."

"That," he answered, "is all I ask."

"And," she added, with an evident effort, yet gracefully and courteously enough, "since you have come so far to bring this message to me, I hope you will not be in haste to leave El Rosario. I think you might enjoy a few days here."

"I am quite sure of it," he answered without an instant's hesitation. "I shall be delighted to remain."

Chapter VI

Don Luis Is Confidential

“THERE is," said Don Luis, "something very agreeable in your Anglo-Saxon standard of manners."

Stafford turned his head to regard the speaker with an amused glance. They were sitting together smoking in the patio of the *casa grande* of the De Rivera hacienda, a large and massive building which indicated the wealth of its owner, but possessed none of the poetic beauty of El Rosario. Stafford had spent the day with the young Mexican, and they were now waiting until the sun should decline sufficiently for the return ride across the plain to be made in comfort. Conversation had languished for some time; and it was after a long pause that Don Luis suddenly broke the silence with the above remark.

"I should like," Stafford said, "to know what has inspired that particular sarcasm."

"Sarcasm! but no!" The handsome dark eyes were vivid with denial. "I am not sarcastic," De Rivera declared. "I mean what I have said in all seriousness."

"Do you really? Well then, I can only say that it's exceedingly kind of you," Stafford replied. "I was under the impression that from your point of view— that is, the point of view of your people— Anglo-Saxons can hardly be said to have any manners."

"Oh!" the other threw out his hand with a quick gesture, “from the point of view of my people, perhaps not. But I, you see, am a cosmopolitan; and it is as a cosmopolitan that I approve of a standard that permits many things which the standard not only of my people, but of Continental Europe, forbids."

"I begin to understand. You are kindly commending the lack of formality which characterizes our manners; and I imagine that you approve of this informality particularly where women are concerned."

De Rivera laughed. "Exactly," he said. "You have, according to your phrase, ‘hit the nail on the head.' There is no man of Latin blood who does not find the freedom allowed him in social intercourse with women in England and America as agreeable as it is surprising."

"I observe, however, that these men are very far from allowing the freedom they find so agreeable in others to their own women," Stafford remarked a little drily.

"That is another matter," Don Luis answered. "Our women neither desire, nor would understand such freedom. It would be opposed to all our traditions and customs. But it is very charming in your Anglo-Saxon woman, who has been brought up in these free and easy ways."

There was a minute's silence and then Stafford said:

"I presume that the Anglo-Saxon woman whom you have just now in mind is Miss Lestrange. But it strikes me that, since she has been brought up and lives in Mexico, it is rather a mistake to treat her with more freedom than the standard of manners here allows.”

"It would be an inexcusable mistake," De Rivera returned, "if she did not herself indicate the degree of freedom which is permitted— and especially permitted me perhaps, because I am an old friend. I have known her since she was a child— the most charming, the most intelligent, the most fascinating child whom I have ever seen."

"I can believe it," Stafford said. Before his mental vision there rose a picture of what Sylvia Lestrange might have been as a child, and he had a vague sense of irritation against the man who had the advantage of having known her then.

"And to think," the young Mexican went on, "that the woman who is her mother never even saw her during that adorable period of her life. You will pardon me, my friend, if I say, what a woman that must be!"

"She is what we are accustomed to call a modern woman," Stafford replied; "for although no doubt the species has always existed, it required modern theories and modern conditions of life to develop it thoroughly. Mrs. Lestrange simply puts what she is pleased to call her duty to herself, before any duty which she owes to any one else."

"She must be a monster of selfishness."

"Not a monster exactly; but selfish, yes. I don't suppose that even she would deny that; but she would maintain that this selfishness is the necessary result of her genius, that she is an actress first, and a mother secondarily."

"Such a woman has no right to become a mother."

"Possibly not; but, in this case as in some others, we have to deal with an accomplished fact."

Again there was an interval during which both men smoked reflectively, and Stafford regarded with an appreciative eye the picturesquely massed roof of the chapel, which formed part of the great building, outlined against the turquoise sky. It was Don Luis who presently broke the silence, with a slight note of hesitation in his voice.

"I believe," he said, "that you are a very intimate friend of Mrs. Lestrange."

"I am a friend of Mrs. Lestrange," Stafford answered, with a note of reserve in his tone, "and also a kinsman of herself and her daughter."

"Ah, it is then as a kinsman of Miss Lestrange that you are here?"

Stafford now turned a glance in which there was a good deal of sarcastic meaning on his companion.

"I perceive that you approve of Anglo-Saxon manners— or, to be accurate, shouldn't we say lack of manners?— in more than one respect," he observed. "But it's really only fair to tell you that well-bred people among us draw the line at personal questions."

De Rivera had no difficulty in comprehending the rebuke. He coloured, wavered for an instant on the brink of anger, and then looked at the other with disarming frankness.

"A thousand apologies!" he cried. "Don't for a moment suppose that I am so ignorant as not to know that well-bred people draw the line, as you say, at personal questions. But sometimes one feels an interest which makes one forget even the rules of good-breeding. I've no doubt you have divined what my interest is."

"I am certainly unable to flatter myself that I have inspired it," Stafford replied.

"My interest is in Miss Lestrange," the young Mexican said, with a sudden gravity which sat well upon him. "And when I asked if you are here as her kinsman, it was because I am anxious to find some one representing her family to whom I can address myself as her suitor. It is an unheard-of situation that a woman so young, of such social position, should be entirely without natural protectors, so that a man is absolutely at a loss to know how to approach her with the respect which is her due."

"Well," Stafford answered with a smile which was now more kindly than sarcastic, "to hark back to what we were saying a few minutes ago, you know that our Anglo-Saxon code of manners allows you to address her personally."

"Yes, I know," the other assented; "and, if she were in her own country, that would be, no doubt, what you call 'all right.' But here such an informality is out of place in a matter of the grave importance of marriage. It is as if one treated a señorita of the highest rank like a *muchacha* of the people."

"And yet," Stafford suggested, "you don't hesitate to make love to your señoritas, through windows and over balconies, without permission to do so from the heads of the family."

"Ah, to make love, that is another matter!" the young Latin cried. "You do not understand— how hard it is for one race to understand another, *n'est-ce pas*? To make love is one thing, and for that there is almost always implied permission; but the serious business of marriage must be approached in another manner. I have not made love openly to Miss Lestrange because it is unnecessary. She knows— there can be no doubt but that she knows— what I feel for her; and I have only restrained myself from its expression because I have first desired to learn who it is that takes the place of her father, before whom I can lay my pretensions if I have the great happiness of being accepted by her."

"I see," Stafford said. In point of fact he saw many things— for one, that the "if" in the young man's speech did not loom very large in his mind. Evidently he had not much doubt of the probable

answer to his suit, and was quite honest in saying that what troubled him was the difficulty of transacting what is in his country all the ceremonious business of arranging a marriage with a girl so singularly placed as Sylvia Lestrange.

"I 'm afraid I can't help you very much," Stafford went on after a minute. "I know so little of Miss Lestrange's affairs that I have never heard who stands in the relation of guardian to her. It may be Miss Goodwin—"

"I don't think that possible," De Rivera said in a slightly contemptuous tone. "Miss Goodwin is merely a *dame de compagnie*, and Mr. Lestrange would not have left his daughter to her guardianship. Besides there are large property interests. El Rosario alone is an extremely valuable estate."

"I can't offer you any other advice, then, than frankly to ask Miss Lestrange herself all you want to know, after you have told her why you want to know It. There's no good In trying to conduct the affair in a Mexican manner. You had better congratulate yourself that the Anglo-Saxon standard, which you began by commending, allows you to go at it in a straightforward fashion with the young lady herself."

"Yes, it is a great advantage," Don Luis agreed. But he spoke a little absently; and Stafford felt instinctively that something else was in his mind. He was not therefore greatly surprised when the young man added abruptly: "Since I have spoken so freely of my own wishes and hopes, perhaps you will allow me to ask another personal question: isn't it possible that you may take the place of a father to Miss Lestrange?"

"I suppose," Stafford answered, conscious that he had no right to be angry, yet equally sure that he was so, "you mean to inquire if I am likely to marry the lady whom a little time ago you were kind enough to characterize as a monster of selfishness?"

"Ah, that was quite unpardonable!" the other exclaimed in a tone of the most sincere apology. "I knew it immediately after I had said it. But I have felt so much, so deeply on behalf of Miss Lestrange, that I was unable to contain my— er—"

"It doesn't matter," Stafford said curtly, as he halted. "You are at liberty to feel what you please toward Mrs. Lestrange as far as I am concerned. I have no more desire to marry her than she would have intention of marrying me if I did desire it."

"And yet, if I have understood rightly, you are here as her ambassador/' De Rivera said, with something of the same wonder in his tone that Stafford had seen in Sylvia's eyes by moonlight on Lake Chapala.

"That's rather a large way of putting it," he replied. "As a matter of fact, I've merely undertaken on behalf of Mrs. Lestrange to make some representations to her daughter which may induce the latter to go to her. I hope," he added, with a distinct intention of retaliation for annoyance, "that I shall succeed."

"And I hope—I am sure that you will not!" De Rivera cried, with a note of indignation in his voice. "I am unable to understand how you can even wish to succeed," he went on aggressively. "To my mind it is almost a shameful thing to suggest that such conduct as that of this woman should be condoned, that her daughter should ever recognize her existence."

"Well, I have been guilty of the shameful thing," Stafford remarked quietly. "I have urged Miss Lestrange to meet her mother's advances. For one thing, she is her mother, you know—-"

"She has forfeited all rights of the relationship."

"I'm not quite sure that they can be forfeited; but however that may be, there are various reasons which make it desirable that Miss Lestrange should go to her mother. One you have just touched upon — her position of singular isolation, her lack of the natural protection of which any girl of her age stands in need."

"That," said Don Luis, "might be supplied."

"By yourself?" Stafford queried. "But allow me to remind you further that you have just said that there is a respect due to her which will render it more fitting that you should prefer your suit when she is under the care of her mother."

"Under the care of her mother! an actress! a woman of—"

"Don Luis!" Stafford's voice was quiet as ever, but vibrant with a warning which made itself felt, "I must remind you that I am the friend of Mrs. Lestrange, and that I cannot hear her disrespectfully spoken of. Moreover I shall be glad if you will understand that no one has any right to speak of her in such a manner. She has never forfeited her social position, except by the act of going on the stage; and her success there has been so great, that in London she is counted among celebrities."

"I must again beg you to accept my apologies," Don Luis replied. "I spoke hastily, but I confess that the thought of Miss Lestrange under such protection seemed to me unendurable. If I can venture to hope that I have any influence with her, I shall certainly use it against her going to London."

"Then," Stafford said cheerfully, "we know where we are. You oppose the idea of any reconciliation between Miss Lestrange and her mother, and I hope to bring such a reconciliation about. It will soon be clear which of us is to be gratified by success. Meanwhile, don't you think it is late enough for the ride to El Rosario?"

Chapter Vii

A Declaration and an Answer

THE Anglo-Saxon standard of manners, which Don Luis, like many other men of his race, thought so agreeable in the freedom of social intercourse which it permits between the sexes, never seemed to him more deserving of commendation than when he found himself a few hours later left alone with Miss Lestrange, by the intervention of the representative of that young lady's family, to whom he had so freely unbosomed himself.

For it was Stafford who said to Miss Goodwin, when she made a move to follow Sylvia, as the latter strolled away into the moonlit garden with the young Mexican,

“My dear lady, permit me to suggest that the role of duenna doesn't suit such a strenuous advocate of other national customs as yourself. Besides, in this case it's as futile as it is unnecessary."

Miss Goodwin sank back into the chair from which she had partly risen, and looked— or, to be quite correct, glared— at the speaker.

"I don't know why I pay any attention to you," she said; "what can you know about it?"

"One can divine a good many things by the light of commonsense," he replied.

"Commonsense hasn't anything on earth to do with Mexican customs," she retorted. "There isn't any commonsense about them."

"All the more reason then why they shouldn't be followed by such an embodiment of commonsense as yourself."

"But that man is a Mexican! If he were an American or an Englishman, do you suppose I would trouble myself to wander about in the moonlight, when I'd much rather stay comfortably quiet here? He won't understand what is so opposed to their customs."

"Oh yes, he will. You forget that he is more of a cosmopolitan than a Mexican, and too much a man of the world to make any stupid mistake. Be quite honest! Acknowledge that you are less afraid of such a mistake on his part, than of the use he may make of this opportunity."

"And, if I am, isn't it natural?"

"Natural enough perhaps, but, as I have said, very futile. Believe me, no degree of discomfort which you may lay upon yourself in the way of playing duenna, can prevent Don Luis from declaring himself when he is ready to do so, or Miss Lestrange from listening to him and consulting herself alone in her reply."

Miss Goodwin sighed.

"You are right," she said. "Of course I know that, though how you've found it out so soon, I don't know."

"For one thing, you were kind enough to enlighten me with regard to the situation; for another, both the persons in question have kindly added their quota of enlightenment; and for a third, the study of man (and woman) has been my occupation for years, so that I have acquired some proficiency in reading human nature."

"And what does your proficiency tell you about the present situation? Is Sylvia going to marry the man?"

"Ah, that is asking too much. 'Who is't can read a woman' in such a case as this? I am only certain that nothing you can say or do will prevent her from hearing and considering his suit. The result will depend upon whether she really cares for him, and if so, in what degree."

Instead of replying. Miss Goodwin looked toward the garden into which Sylvia and Don Luis had disappeared. It was clear that it was hard for her to pursue the policy of inaction recommended, that she longed to rise, follow them, and by her presence defer, if she could not entirely prevent, the declaration she feared. Stafford, as he watched her with a sympathy largely tinged with amusement, was not surprised when her glance presently turned back to him with a gleam which matched the asperity of her tone when she said:

"I don't see that I've gained much by invoking your aid. You haven't accomplished anything with Sylvia; and I knew before you came that Luis de Rivera would certainly ask her to marry him. I also knew that it was likely she would accept him; so things are just where they were."

"Not exactly," he replied. "I don't think she had seriously taken into consideration the question of going to her mother before I came."

"And do you believe that she has taken it seriously into consideration now?"

"If I didn't believe it, I shouldn't be sitting here holding this agreeable conversation with you at present."

"Never mind about being sarcastic. The question is, what precisely did she tell you?"

"She told me that she would reflect upon what I had said to her, before deciding finally on her answer, and she asked me to remain for a few days at El Rosario, which I have been glad to do."

"Hum! I can't say that that sounds very satisfactory."

"Possibly not, but my experience of life is that the absolutely satisfactory is so rare, that it is well to cultivate a spirit of gratitude for the comparatively satisfactory, when we are lucky enough to obtain even so much."

Miss Goodwin snorted— no other word will describe the sound expressive of mingled impatience and contempt which she uttered.

"You are an exasperating kind of person," she said, "with your didactic platitudes. Of course I'm glad if you have succeeded at all in persuading Sylvia to think of going to her mother, but that influence," she nodded toward the garden, "will be exerted in just the other direction."

"Certainly," Stafford assented, "there's not the least doubt of it. In fact Don Luis was quite frank with me to-day, and expressed himself as very strongly opposed to any intercourse with Mrs. Lestrange on the part of her daughter."

"Indeed! I hope you told him what you thought of his impertinence!"

"I had no right either to think or to tell him anything on the subject. That is for Miss Lestrange to do when he speaks to her."

"And you've given him the opportunity to speak to her now— to undo the effect of all your efforts!"

"I have given him, or advised you to give him, the opportunity to test the degree and extent of his influence with her," Stafford said quietly. "I suppose you'll again think me an exasperating person, who talks in didactic platitudes, but I must remind you that there are some forces which it is mere waste of strength to fight against. The force called love is one of these. If that is arrayed on the side of Don Luis, it is useless to urge anything to which he is opposed; and however it may be with yourself, I should like to know as soon as possible how much influence he really possesses."

"I suppose it is better to know," Miss Goodwin agreed, with another heavy sigh, "but I confess it will be hard for me to reconcile myself if Sylvia consents to marry him."

The man thus discussed was meanwhile using the opportunity presented to him exactly as Stafford had foreseen that he would use it. It is not likely that under any circumstances he would have been able to resist the temptation to do so— the subtle influences of time and place, of the moonlight night and perfumed garden, as well as the accommodating social customs which left him alone with the girl whom he found so fascinating; but what he had lately learned put an end to possible hesitation, and made him feel that he must declare himself without delay, or run the risk of losing what just now appeared to him the most desirable thing in life. He, therefore, no sooner found himself alone with Sylvia than, wasting no time, he poured forth all that was in his heart with the passion of his race and the eloquence of his language.

The girl heard him quietly— too quietly he began to fear, as he went on. There was something chilling to a lover's ardour in the calmness with which she listened, and in her manner when he finally paused for an answer.

"And you are quite sure," she said then, "that you wish to marry me?"

It was an unexpected and, it seemed to him, an altogether unnecessary question, but he responded passionately:

"I am more than sure. There is nothing on earth that I wish so much."

"Ah!" She uttered the ejaculation in a reflective tone; and, as at this moment they entered one of the *glorietas* common in Mexican gardens, from which the orange-shaded alleys radiated, and in the centre of which a fountain slept in its great stone basin, she stopped and gazed down into the moon-silvered water as if seeking the answer to a riddle there. "In that case," she went on after a moment, "your position is different from mine ; for I am not sure that I wish to marry you."

This was so far from encouraging that Don Luis had to remind himself that the blood of an unemotional race was in her veins before he was able to reply.

"To say that you are 'not sure' means that at least you are in some degree inclined to do so," he said, "and for that I am grateful."

She glanced at him with one of the sweet, quick smiles which had such power to change her face.

"It is very kind of you to say that," she remarked, "since I 'm certain you think me cold and unresponsive to all that you have told me."

"It is true," he acknowledged, "I had hoped that you would answer differently. But I remember that your people don't feel as we do; and, as long as you are only ‘not sure,' I will trust that it is but a question of time until you become sure."

“It may be," she admitted, "but I don't know. I have no experience—"

"It is not by experience that one learns in such matters; it is by the teaching, the impulse, of the heart."

"But if the heart does not teach, if its impulses are contradictory?" She reflected a little, "I will be quite frank with you," she said then. "I like you very much — I have liked you always; but I am not certain that I like you well enough to marry you. I know this sounds to you dreadfully cold-blooded, as if I did not care at all; but it is not so— it is, perhaps more than anything else, because I have always thought of marriage as a terrible thing."

In his dismay, he could only repeat her words. "A terrible thing!"

She met his eyes gravely. "Yes," she said. "Whatever has such possibilities in it of happiness or misery, whatever influences one's life so deeply and changes it so radically, and whatever is so unalterable in its nature and its consequences, is surely terrible. Perhaps I shouldn't think of this so much— I imagine that most young people don't think of it— if I had not the example before me of my parents' marriage—"

He uttered an impatient, almost angry ejaculation.

"You should not think of that," he said.

"But it is of that I must think," she answered. She sat down on the stone rim of the basin, and looked up at the man standing tall and straight before her. The moonlight seemed to give a spiritual touch to the pure outlines of her face, and the lucid beauty of her eyes. "What should I be made of if I didn't think of such a tragedy as that marriage was?" she asked. "I have thought of it ever since I have been old enough to think of anything, and it is clear to me that it was a tragedy because there was no ground of sympathy between the two people who entered into it. They were, no doubt, in love with each other; but, you see, love is not enough—"

"It is enough," the man interposed, "if it is real love. In this case it was plainly not real— on one side at least. Your mother could have loved no one but herself; and she was not even loyal to the duties she had assumed."

"No, she was not loyal," the girl agreed. "But if she had been, she must have suffered greatly in suppressing the strong inclinations of her nature. Sometimes I have thought of that; and then I have seen more clearly than ever that the mistake was when two people so unlike tried to live a life together."

"No doubt that is true," De Rivera assented, "but what has it to do with me and you? I tell you of my love, and you talk to me of the marriage of your parents! That is not what I ask of you— whether they were happy or not; it is that you will make me happy, and allow me to devote my life to making you so.

"But you don't understand," she said. "I talk to you of their marriage because it leads me to doubt whether we could make each other happy, to ask whether we might not fail as they failed."

"It is impossible! You could never be selfish, disloyal, disregardful of others, like the woman who is your mother."

"Perhaps not. But, even if I were not selfish and disloyal, I might be unhappy."

"That means," and his voice was sharp with the intensity of his feeling, "that you don't love me! You could not think of these things if you did. You would fear nothing except that we should miss the happiness of spending our lives together."

"Would I not?" She looked down again into the water, through which she was absently trailing one white hand like a lily leaf. "Then, if that is the test, I suppose I don't love you, for I fear a great deal else," she said. "I fear the terrible thing of unsympathetic lives, bound together by a tie which cannot be broken."

"But why," he demanded vehemently, "should you fear such a thing? Are we not sympathetic? Have we ever failed to understand each other?"

"I don't think," she answered, "that we really know a great deal about each other. And no doubt there is much for us to learn even about ourselves. We have always seemed sympathetic, yes. And we like each other— there is no doubt of that."

"Like! that is your cold English word!" he cried. "I do not like— I *love* you!"

Again she smiled at him— a very charming smile, though it, too, struck him as subtly cold. For even while it thanked, it seemed to set him at a distance.

"I *like*," she replied, "to hear you say that; but what this liking means exactly, forgive me if I add that I don't know. And I must know before I can answer you— unless indeed you will take your answer now."

He caught his breath. Surely to a man of Latin blood and impulses she was a perplexing problem, this girl who sat there in the moonlight, looking and talking, so it seemed to him, more like a spirit than a woman, as he had known women.

"If I take my answer now," he said, "what will it be?"

"It can only be no," she answered with candid directness.

"Ah!" He looked away from her for a moment. "And if I wait until you know— *Dios de mi alma*! how strange that you should not know now!— how long will that be?"

"I cannot tell, and this makes the injustice of asking you to wait. But, if I go into the world, it may be very soon."

"You are going into the world, then?"

"I am thinking of going to my mother, for a time at least."

Again De Rivera uttered involuntarily an angry ejaculation.

"So the man who has come here on her behalf has succeeded in his mission!" he exclaimed. "I did not believe it. I told him to-day that I was sure you would never consent to go to the woman who deserted you so heartlessly, and has treated you with such long neglect."

Miss Lestrange lifted her graceful head with an air which was more than chilling.

"I am surprised," she said in a very crisp tone, "that Mr. Stafford should have discussed my affairs with you; and," her tone grew a little more crisp, "I am not aware that you possess either the knowledge or the right to speak for me in such a manner."

"You think I was presumptuous?" De Rivera asked quickly. "Perhaps I was. Of course it is true that I have no right to speak for you. But I thought I had the knowledge. I thought I knew you well enough to be sure how you would feel."

"But you see now that you were mistaken," she replied. "You are not only ignorant of how I feel, but you have given a proof that we have much to learn about each other, for you don't even know what I am likely to feel."

"And do you mean," he demanded incredulously, "that you don't think exactly what I have said— about your mother?"

"I have never cared to discuss what I think of her," the girl answered proudly, "and I shall not begin to do so now. Of course her desertion and neglect are facts which cannot be denied; yet there are reasons why I may overlook them sufficiently to go to her. But I am very much surprised," she repeated, "that Mr. Stafford should have spoken of the matter to you."

"He only did so," Don Luis felt himself bound to explain, "because I spoke to him, telling him what I felt for you, and my great desire to find some representative of your family to whom I could present myself as your— how do you say it in English? —suitor?"

"It must be rather puzzling, from a Latin point of view, to make proposals to a girl without any family," Sylvia said with a smile. "The advantage is, however, that you reach the girl herself more directly. Probably Mr. Stafford suggested as much."

"He did; but he also said that he had reason to believe — or perhaps only to hope— that you would soon be under the protection of your mother. It was then I told him what I thought— what a mockery I consider her protection would be."

Miss Lestrange's manner became even more remote. "Perhaps," she suggested, "you will kindly let me hear what reason you have for such an opinion.

"She has," the young man declared, "not only deserted and neglected you. The life she has chosen and made for herself is not a life which it is fit for you to share."

"Do you know anything of her life?"

"Only that she is an actress, and the lives of such women are all alike. They are lives into which it would be desecration for you to enter."

Once more Sylvia was silent for a minute, looking at her hand as she slowly drew it through the water; finally lifting it, she shook a shower of sparkling drops from the ends of the slender fingers.

"I believe that the lives of actresses differ as much as those of other people," she said then. "And Mr. Stafford assures me that my mother has a very good social position in London."

"It is possible," De Rivera reluctantly admitted. "I have heard that London is peculiar in this respect — I mean in the position which some actresses hold in society. But even so, her friends and associates would not probably be people whom you should know."

"That I shall find out when I go to her."

"You are determined to go?"

"I am not determined, but I think that I shall go. How else am I to enter the world, and learn what only knowledge of the world can teach? And such knowledge will be of little use unless it comes before my life is settled on unchangeable lines. So if you will wait for your answer—"

"How long?"

"Again, how can I tell? A year perhaps—"

"Why not say an eternity?"

"Because I say exactly what I mean. But if you hesitate, if you do not wish to wait—"

"I certainly do not wish to wait," he told her passionately. "But if there is no alternative I will wait a year, or an eternity— for *you*."

Chapter VIII

Stafford Gives His Pledge

IT was the next day that Stafford observed: "This life is very delightful—positively idyllic, in fact — but I feel somewhat in the case of an ambassador who is amused by court entertainments, instead of receiving an answer to the affair of state on which he has been sent."

Sylvia looked at him with a smile. "You have delivered your message," she said. "Why should you care what the answer may be?"

"Perhaps because my credit as an ambassador is at stake," he replied; "or perhaps because I am foolish enough to have become interested."

She lifted her brows. "Why 'foolish enough'? But never mind! You can tell me that later. Any other reason?"

"Well, Miss Goodwin gives me no peace, and will not be persuaded that I have done my best to induce you to go to London."

"Poor Sara!" The girl laughed gently. "The motive for her anxiety is so transparent— almost as transparent as, you were good enough to tell me that, the outlines of my character are."

"You will remember that I spoke only of the outlines. There are depths in your character which I am no more able to sound than you can sound them yourself."

She did not answer this, and silence settled over them— silence which held within it the most exquisite sense of peace. For where does peace so perceptibly brood as over wide waters at the close of day, and on far heights of softest azure? The wide waters were all about these two, and beyond their shining expanse rose the distant hills, draped in ethereal colour. As the sunset tints grew each moment more divine, and their splendours were more broadly cast, more vividly reflected in the vast liquid mirror of the lake, earth and heaven seemed blended in one radiant, jewel-like whole, in the heart of which floated the little boat, with Stafford at the oars, as on the first night of his coming, and the graceful girl's figure opposite him. It was he who presently spoke again, as if meanwhile his thoughts had been busy:

"Only life will enable you to sound them," he said, "and I confess that I am interested in the result."

"In other words, the professional analyst is interested."

"No," he replied. "I don't deny that the professional analyst was at first, and is still in some degree interested; but the man who has, if you will allow him to say so, become your friend, is more interested still. It is as your friend that I recognize the necessity of your going."

"In order that I may be tested by life?"

"Yes, in order that you may be tested by life; for none of us know what we are in any real sense, until we have been so tested. And this is especially true of a character like yours. If you were commonplace, I shouldn't be interested. I should think that the best thing you could do would be to remain here, avoid experiences which may prove unpleasant, and presently marry Don Luis de Rivera."

"Oh!" The girl, leaning back in her seat, was regarding him intently. "But as it is, you think such a course would be— unsafe?"

"That is just the word. It would be unsafe— for you. It's always unsafe to possess unsounded depths. Life is so constituted that the odds are that you will be forced to sound them at some highly inconvenient time. Therefore, it is best to learn all that can be learned about oneself before the crucial moments come."

"Before the crucial moments come!" She repeated the words as if to herself, while her eyes turned away from him, over the expanse of shining water to the soft loveliness of the distant hills. "Of course there is no escaping them," she said presently. "Of course they must come."

"The crucial moments? There is nothing in life more certain than their coming. And when they come, they determine— no, they don't determine, they only reveal what we are. But what they reveal often surprises ourselves as much as others."

"And you think it is well to have as few such surprises in store for oneself as possible?"

"I am quite sure of it. *Ergo*— but I don't believe it is necessary to point the moral further."

"It is not necessary," she said. "I understand all that you mean, and I have no doubt you are right. Indeed I have felt it myself. And it is the desire to test myself which makes me think of going to London. But it will be a trial in many ways. You can hardly imagine how I shrink from meeting my mother!"

"Yes," he answered, “I can imagine. I know that you shrink from meeting her with the thought of the past in your mind. But you must try to realize that the past, as you see it, has never for one moment existed for Mrs. Lestrange."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that she is one of the people to whom self-questioning and self-reproach are absolutely unknown. She looks at life, and all its duties and demands, simply and solely from one point of view — that of her own desires, her own interest; and she never knows a qualm of doubt that she is justified in doing so. She is quite sincere in wishing to see you, now that the way is open for her to do so without any annoyance to herself; and she will meet you without the faintest sense that she has anything to justify or excuse in her conduct. This, you will find, simplifies the situation exceedingly."

"Shall I? I am not sure of it. It strikes me that I shall find such abnormal egotism intensely repulsive. I don't know how far I can be even tolerant."

"Then that is one lesson you must learn— to be tolerant," he told her. "You must learn that there is no good in expecting more of people than their natures allow them to give. There are many persons who go through the world making impossible demands on others, demands to which they can't possibly respond; but I don't believe you will be one of these."

"It would argue a good deal of stupidity, wouldn't it?" she asked. "After all, I see that my mother was right when she said that you would interpret her to me; though I am not sure that she would approve the manner of the interpretation."

"I 'm quite sure that she wouldn't approve," Stafford said with a laugh; "but it is not only correct, it is also the only interpretation which I think would influence you."

She nodded. "You are right. It is absolutely the only interpretation which would influence me, and make it possible for me to meet her, for I have spent my life in almost hating her. Perhaps you are shocked—"

"No, I am not," he interposed. "I understand that the surface view of human relationships does not appeal to you; that you can be moved only through some demand upon the eternal verities of love and faith and reverence, which must be behind these relationships to give them strength and value. The fact that this woman is your mother, has no power to lessen your scorn of her as one who has proved disloyal to every duty of life."

"It has rather seemed to give a sharper edge to scorn," the girl said in a tone of strong emotion. "And when I think of my father, of what her disloyalty made of his life, the feeling has possessed me like a passion." She paused for a moment, and then went on more calmly: "But what you said of him the first night you came, is possibly in some degree true. There must have been a strain of weakness in him, or he would not have allowed her to wreck his life as he did. He would have remembered that a man's life, with all its possibilities, is too great a thing to let a woman break it in two and end its usefulness."

The clear young voice spoke with a tone of almost judicial severity, and it occurred to Stafford that the situation acquired a new touch of pathos when the girl was thus forced into the attitude of judging the father she had adored. He was conscious of a sense of regret for the words which had opened this view of his character to her, as well as of wonder for the power of judging unsparingly, even where her feelings were most enlisted, which she displayed. He remembered what he had thought when he saw her first, and read, or tried to read, the secret of the delicate lips and the lucent eyes. Yes, surely it would fare ill with any one who fell from the height of Sylvia Lestrange's respect, and with an impulse to soften her judgment, he was about to speak, when she went on, almost in the words he was going to utter :

“But no doubt it is true that we mustn't expect of people more than they are able to give. It may not have been possible for him to act otherwise than he did. We can't judge others by ourselves, for we know nothing of their weakness or their strength. I suppose," she broke off with a sudden smile, “that all this sounds to you as if I were repeating a primer —first lessons in knowledge of life, or something like that."

"On the contrary," he replied, "I know no more than you on these subjects. We are all mere guessers in the face of such deep mysteries as the forces which underlie human character. But I am glad if

I have been able to throw any light on the present matter which may help you to a decision with regard to it."

"It has not only helped, it has made the decision possible to me. I think— no, I am sure that I must go."

"Yes," he assented, with a feeling that he was assisting in one of the momentous acts of life, one of those decisions which involve such a train of consequences that, if we were able to see them as they truly are, we would shrink from the necessity of deciding; "you must go."

"And yet," she said, meeting his gaze with a great wistfulness in her own, "I shrink also from what I shall learn about myself, and— perhaps about others. For I dread change 1 I would rather continue to look at the old things with the same eyes."

"That," said the man of the world, "is impossible. Even if you stayed here, you could not guard against the greatest change of all, that which comes within ourselves. It is better to face this law of life boldly, better to go to meet it than to be overtaken by it— too late. I am certain of one thing, that you will never change toward anything worth keeping."

"How can you be certain of that?"

He smiled at her. "How can I be certain that, come back when I will, I shall find those heights yonder steadfast and unchanged in their divine loveliness? Some things one knows."

"You are very kind to me," she said in a low voice. "I am glad that you have stayed this week at El Rosario. It was good of you to do so, for I was not cordial in asking you to come."

"You undoubtedly were not," he agreed.

"But I am sure you understood why I was prejudiced against you."

"I should have been very dull if I had not understood. And I may add that I think the manner in which you overcame the prejudice and judged me on my own — merits, may I say?— was as remarkable as everything else about you. For the rest, I've enjoyed this week in your enchanted castle as I've seldom in my life enjoyed anything."

"I am glad," she said again. "And remember that if you had not come, I should not be going to London."

"I shall remember. I hope I shall never regret it."

"There will be nothing for you to regret in any case. I only want you to remember because I wish to make of it a little claim on you. Is it probable that you will be there also?"

"I must be there to superintend the rehearsal of a play of mine in which Mrs. Lestrange is to appear."

"You never told me that before," Sylvia exclaimed in a tone of keen interest. "I have been thinking how I should dislike to see her on the stage; but if it is in a play of yours, that will make a difference."

"You are very good to feel that it will."

"And it will also make a great difference if you are there," she went on. "I am sure that I shall need a friend very much in the strange, new life to which I am going, and I should like you to promise to help me when I am perhaps puzzled and in doubt. You will promise, will you not?"

"With all my heart," Stafford answered earnestly. He leaned forward and held out his hand. "Here is my pledge of friendship and service," he said. "There is no demand you can make upon me that I shall not be glad to honour, no help that it will not be the greatest possible pleasure to give. Promise me that you will not forget this!"

"There is no need to promise. I shall not forget," she answered, as she laid her hand in his, while the lovely sunset glow fell over water and mountains, the little boat and the two figures within it, like a benediction.

Chapter IX

Sylvia's Decision

OUT of the great arch of the violet sky the golden stars were shedding that marvellous radiance which belongs only to high latitudes— a radiance which in its all-pervading clarity, in the complete absence of high lights or deep shadows, seems more exquisite, as it is also more full of power to touch the deepest chords of human emotion, than even the splendour of the silver moon.

From her earliest childhood this mystical starlight had always exerted a peculiar fascination over Sylvia Lestrange. It was one of the first recollections of the change in her life which had brought her to this new land, her gazing wide-eyed up at the brilliant pageant of the star-set sky, while she whispered to her father: "We're ever so much nearer heaven than we were at home, aren't we, papa?" She remembered with what sad bitterness he had laughed as he clasped her to him. "God knows, little daughter," he answered; "but if so, it has been by a strange road that we have come."

By a strange road! She recalled the words, as she stood by the window of her chamber, looking out over the starlit world long after every one at El Rosario except herself seemed asleep. She, too, had made an effort to sleep, but it was Impossible; so presently rising, she had thrown her window wide open to the glorious night. The cool freshness of its air bathed her as if she had plunged into the lake; and, as she lifted her eyes upward to the familiar constellations wheeling in solemn splendour of order on their appointed way, her father's voice seemed sounding in her ears in the fragments of poetry which he loved and had so often repeated to her. From Byron's noble cadences, from "Ye stars which are the poetry of heaven," through all the verse of his day and generation she could hear the mellow music of his tones rolling out line upon line, while the sense of deep mystery and deeper awe clutched the impressionable heart of the child. She could hear him say:

> "The night
> Hath been to me a more familiar face
> Than that of man; and in her starry shade
> Of dim and solitary loveliness
> I learned the language of another world."

She knew that this was true, that year by year in his seclusion his thoughts had dwelt upon spiritual things, upon the lasting purpose and meaning of human life, rather than upon its transient phenomena. He had not been religious in the ordinary sense of the word, but his deepest interest had become that of trying to fathom the mystery of God's strange dealings with the soul of man. The high philosophy which treats of these things gradually became the most absorbing of his intellectual interests, and among all those of the ancient or modern world who have expounded this philosophy he found greatest charm and deepest solace in St. Augustine. The “Confessions" was never far from his hand, and he often called it the most complete, as it is among the most immortal, of human documents.

These memories returned to Sylvia, as she stood alone with the night and the stars, and as they stirred within her she again recalled his words, "by a strange road." Yes, surely it had been by a strange road that his steps were led to this remote, lovely spot, and beyond it— whither? Had he not perhaps, after all, done well to forsake the world which had dealt him such a deadly blow, and had she been presumptuous when only a few hours earlier she had sat in judgment upon his act? Her heart reproached her. How could she tell? Perhaps he had learned here something greater and deeper than he could have

mastered in the absorbing stress and battle of life, something akin to the still radiance, the steadfast power of the stars he loved. And even for herself, had he indeed been careless of her future, or had he not rather desired to shield her from influences of which she knew nothing, to give her, as a reserve fountain of refreshment and strength in her journey over the beaten and dusty paths of the world, the memory of a youth into which nothing sordid, frivolous or lowering had ever entered, the recollection of ideals as high, remote and beautiful as the shining worlds above?

A sudden passionate longing for his lost companionship and counsel came over her, and again she felt herself tossed on waves of doubt and indecision. He had been strangely silent always about her future; had never even expressed a desire with regard to what she should do, although he knew long before the end that his days were briefly numbered. Now for the first time, by a flash of divining instinct, she understood this; she comprehended that he wished to leave her free. He was unable to advise her to go to her mother, but he gave no contrary advice; and she knew now that this had been by deliberate intention, not by neglect. It was as if he had said— she could almost hear him saying: "When I am gone, her claim, the natural claim of blood and duty, will be the strongest left you in the world. Do what you can, what you feel yourself able to do, about recognizing it. I can give you no counsel. Your line of conduct must rest with yourself and God."

She shivered slightly with the sense of moral loneliness, and then, impelled by the radiant beauty of the night, slipped her feet into a pair of slippers, and, gathering up the filmy folds of her white draperies, stepped through the open window and passed, with the light, noiseless movement of a spirit, across the space between the house and the *huerta*. As she entered the gates of the lovely pleasaunce, the fragrance of orange-blooms, which dominated even that of the roses, met her with all its strong associations of the long, sunny years of childhood in this paradise of the South. Was it a paradise which she was leaving never to find again? Was it true that "nothing can be as it has been before"; that, when we turn a page of life, it is closed forever, and we are unable in any sense to recall the conditions which made it, or the charm which possibly filled it? The inevitableness of deep and lasting change, the weakness of man in the strong hand of destiny, filled her with a sense of poignant sadness. "I can go," she thought, "so much is in my power, but how shall I come back? That no one can tell me. What will life—the life my father forsook— do to me? What will it teach me?"

She had by this time reached the *glorieta* where only the night before she had listened to the passionate declaration of the first man who ever spoke of love to her. Stopping, as she had stopped then, she sat down again on the edge of the basin and dipped her hand in the water below her. She seemed to see De Rivera's graceful figure standing before her, to hear his eager words in the beautiful language which lends poetry even to simple utterances. Why, she wondered, had all that he said left her cold? By every law of romance, as romance is interpreted by those who write of it, she should have responded with an answering fire, and she had not done so. What did it mean? Were these things exaggerated, and was the liking which she felt for him, the sense of pleasure in his companionship, in the agreeable flattery of his looks and words, what poets had glorified as the great, the immortal passion of love? She shook her head, not in denial, but in doubt. How could she tell? It was true that she was unwilling to lose him, but beyond that point certainty did not extend; and so, as she had said to him, there seemed no alternative but to go and test herself and him in the great world beyond these quiet shades.

"Sylvia!"

The sudden sound of her name, breaking the absolute stillness of the night, made her start violently, as she turned to see a figure emerge from one of the radiating avenues and advance across the open space toward her. It was rather a grotesque figure in the starlight, but even at first glance she had no difficulty in recognizing it as that of Miss Goodwin, arrayed in a highly unbecoming negligee and with a dark *rebozo* twisted tightly about her head.

"What on earth are you doing here?" the latter irritably demanded. "Have you any idea what time of night it is?"

"Some time between midnight and morning, I judge by those," Sylvia answered, glancing up at the pointing constellations, "but what difference does it make?"

"You ought to be in bed and asleep."

"Then why aren't you in bed and asleep yourself? What brings you here at such an hour?"

"Because I was— well, nervous, I suppose, and couldn't sleep, so I got up and wandered around the corridor. Then I saw your window open, and looking in, I found you gone, so I thought I might as well learn what had become of you. But it gave me quite a start, seeing you sitting there— you looked so dreadfully like your own ghost!"

"I won't return the compliment by saying that you look like yours, for I hope you will make a handsomer ghost," the girl responded with a laugh; "but you startled me so much when you spoke that I nearly fell backward into the fountain, in which case I should have come out more ghostly still."

"I'd like to know what is the matter with us," Miss Goodwin remarked, as she, too, seated herself on the basin's rim. "There's nothing in the atmosphere to account for such unusual insomnia."

"There's a great deal in the spiritual atmosphere," Sylvia replied. "We both feel the influence of impending change, and it makes us sad and restless."

"No doubt that is it," the other agreed. "You haven't told me that you have decided to go away, but Mr. Stafford gave me a hint as he said good-night, and, in thinking of it, I couldn't sleep."

"That is just why I didn't tell you myself," Sylvia said. "I didn't want to spoil your night's rest. For, although you have been so anxious for me to go, I knew you would be sorry when you heard that it was really settled that our life here is to end."

"If I have been anxious," Miss Goodwin answered, "it was for your sake, not for my own." She paused, to swallow something like a sob. "For myself," she went on, "I'm wretched. It simply breaks my heart to think of going away, of ending the happy years I've spent here, of losing you—"

"You'll never lose me, as long as I am alive."

"We can't fight against the law of life, dear child," was the sad reply. "I shan’t lose your affection, I know, but I'll lose you— for the matter of that, you'll lose yourself. I mean, you won't be the same Sylvia if we ever come back here. You'll be somebody else— dear and lovely and pleasant, no doubt, but not the same."

"Yes," Sylvia assented, "I've been thinking that, too. It is terrible, isn't it, that we can't be sure even of ourselves, that we don't in the least know what life will make of us? But even if I stayed here," she added with a remembrance of some of Stafford's words, "you know change of one kind or another must come."

"And it might be a very objectionable kind," Miss Goodwin said, in the tone of one who fortifies her courage, "so I 'm glad, very glad that you’ve decided to go."

"You have certainly all the outward appearance of gladness!" Sylvia observed ironically. "I wish," she added after a moment, "that you would tell me exactly why you dislike Luis de Rivera so much?"

"I don't dislike him," Miss Goodwin promptly asserted.

"Oh, Sara, Sara!"

"Except as a possible husband for you."

"But that is just what I mean. Why do you dislike him in that point of view?"

"I suppose because I mistrust him," Miss Goodwin answered. "I've no faith in the depth or stability of his feelings. No doubt you'll say that this is because I don't understand and don't do justice to his type, and of course that may be true. But I can't bear for you to run any risk. I have an instinct that it wouldn't be safe— for you."

"How odd!" Sylvia commented. "That is Just what Mr. Stafford says— that it wouldn't be safe for me. He thinks that I have some depths in my character which I ought to sound before settling my life in unchangeable lines."

"I'm glad that you are going to heed him."

"Yes, I 'm going to heed him— and the feeling within myself which echoes what he says. For this is what gives force to his opinion, that I have dimly felt it all along. Perhaps I should have acknowledged it sooner if I had not dreaded change; but I don't believe that under any circumstances I could have accepted Luis de Rivera without being more certain of myself than I am."

"Thank Heaven that at least you are not in love with him!" said Miss Goodwin fervently.

"Are you quite sure that I'm not?"

The elder woman uttered a short derisive laugh. "If you had ever seen any one in love you'd be sure, you innocent baby!" she replied. "When people are in love there's no reason about them; they are perfectly certain that what they feel will last forever, and they are ready to take any absurd risk rather than face separation."

"That is what he said," Sylvia observed meditatively. "He said I wouldn't hesitate and feel as I do if I knew what love really was."

"He's right; I'll say that for him!"

"And so there seems nothing to do but to go and find out what the world will teach me about myself." Then she looked at the woman before her with the same expression of wistful pain which had been in her eyes earlier that night. "Have you ever thought, Sara, what it must be to meet a mother whom you don't know, and whom you have every reason to dislike?" she asked.

"My poor darling," Miss Goodwin's voice trembled, "I haven't thought of anything else since we began to consider this. But I don't— -I really don't see anything better for you to do."

"I shouldn't feel that the fact of there being nothing better to do would be a sufficient reason for going to her," Sylvia answered; "but some things Mr. Stafford has suggested have made me think that I ought to see and judge her for myself. After all, she is my mother— nothing can change that— and there is perhaps a duty owing to her—"

"No," Miss Goodwin interrupted sharply. "When she abandoned every duty of a mother, she also abandoned every claim to anything which under other circumstances would have been due from you."

"That," Sylvia said, "is what I have been telling myself almost as long as I can remember. But lately a new light seems to have come to me, and I begin to realize that we cannot make what we owe to others depend upon the manner in which they act toward us. We must be guided by something higher, some standard of right doing which no act of theirs can change or affect. And so it is possible that she has a claim upon me which even her own desertion cannot efface."

She spoke more to herself, as if continuing some inward debate, than to her companion, and Miss Goodwin turned a glance of apprehension at the young face which had such austere beauty in the starlight. It was true, as she had acknowledged to Stafford, that much as she loved this girl, she was conscious of not altogether understanding her, and of an undefined fear of those unsounded depths of character of which she too was dimly aware.

"I don't like to hear you talk in this way," she remonstrated. "I am sorry that you entertain any such idea as a motive for going."

"You would rather my motive was altogether selfish?" Sylvia asked. "But surely one is always certain enough of being selfish; and, if some inspiration of another motive comes, one should welcome and be glad of it."

Miss Goodwin shook her head energetically. "There are people," she said, "with whom it is not safe to be unselfish. Your mother, my poor child, is one of them. If you go to her with any belief that you owe her anything she will be quick to recognize and trade upon it to the utmost. She has been like that all

her life. Everything that she could take from man or woman she has taken, and given nothing. Now, at this late day, let her give something to you, even if it is only the shelter of her roof; but don't, on any account, allow her to think that you owe her anything."

"But if I do?" Again the girl breathed the words as if to herself. And then, after a moment, she shivered slightly and rose to her feet. "What is to be, will be," she said. "Dear Sara, don't worry yourself over it. You have your wish. I am going. The rest is in *los manos de Dios*, as the dear people here say. And now come to bed."

Chapter X

The Envoy Returns

"AND so," Mrs. Lestrange cried gaily, "the envoy extraordinary has at last appeared for his reward of praise and thanks!"

The envoy extraordinary shrugged his shoulders as, having held for a moment the hand she extended, he sank into a chair.

"Spare the praise and defer the thanks," he said, "until we know whether either is deserved."

"How can there be a question of that?" she demanded. "Of course you know that Sylvia has arrived."

"Oh, yes, I know that," he replied, "since I had the pleasure of seeing her off on the other side."

"I wondered you did not come with her. It seemed as if it would have been a sensible thing to do, especially since you have been wanted so badly here."

"It seemed to me more sensible to stay in America in order to look after some business, since I can't tell when I shall go back again."

"Oh, business!" It was now the lady's turn to lift a pair of shapely shoulders. "One could tell that you had been in America by the manner in which you utter that horrid word. And yet, if it comes to that, I 'm sure no business there was half so important as the business you've been neglecting here."

"You mean the play?*'

"What else could I mean? Good Heavens, Jack, what has come over you? I never saw a man so changed!"

Stafford seemed to give himself a mental shake. Then he laughed.

"If you have sent a man half around the world to do your bidding," he said, "you should not be surprised if he is a little tired when he returns, a little out of touch with the things he left behind."

"Are you tired? Poor old Jack!" She leaned forward and patted his hand caressingly. As she did so, the fragrance from her hair and draperies rushed over him, and, with the touch of the ring-laden fingers, it was as if the whole personality of the woman enveloped him. The effect was curious, and as unexpected to him as to her. He frowned, and with a quick, involuntary gesture, withdrew his hand.

"Tired!" he repeated hastily in a constrained tone. "Yes, one grows tired after a time of everything. But it isn't worth discussing. Tell me how you are pleased with the daughter you have secured at last."

Mrs. Lestrange did not answer immediately. She had fallen back in her chair with a flush on her face, as he drew away his hand so abruptly; and she now busied herself with lighting a cigarette. Perhaps the whiff or two which she took had a calming effect on whatever irritation she felt, for when she spoke her voice was quite smooth.

"The question is," she said, "have I secured her in any real sense? There's rather a wide gulf of non-comprehension between us at present."

"But of course you were prepared for that."

"To a certain extent, yes. But not quite to the extent which exists. I was prepared to find her ignorant—what could she know of life, brought up as she was? But I find her also difficult, provincial, hostile to every modern idea—"

"You remember that I warned you—"

"Oh" (impatiently), "for mercy's sake, spare me that! Yes, you warned me; but how could I think that my daughter would be so entirely like those odious Lestranges!"

"She is very beautiful," said Stafford unguardedly.

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Lestrange asked carelessly. "I scarcely expected you to admire that austere type of beauty. But you didn't warn me that she was bringing a lover in her train."

"A lover!" Stafford stared. "You don't mean —but yes, certainly. What a fool I was not to foresee it! Of course Don Luis de Rivera is in Paris."

"In Paris! No, in London— attached to the Mexican legation. I believe he got himself transferred as soon as he heard that Sylvia was coming here. Do you know I'm surprised she came at all, since Mexico could produce such a lover as that?"

Stafford in his surprise found nothing to say except: "You like him?"

"My dear Jack, how could I fail to like any one so picturesque and polished? I always adore such men. You are the only bear I was ever able to endure."

"Bears have their uses," observed the bear in question, while he said to himself that this feline scratch was only what was to be expected.

"Dear me, yes," Mrs. Lestrange returned. "They can write charming plays occasionally, for example. And now, you don't mean to say that you are not anxious to hear how ‘The Queen of Cyprus' is coming on?"

"Not anxious, but certainly interested. Tell me about it."

"Well, ring for tea, and I'll tell you what I have done, and what I want you to do."

When a servant appeared with the tea equipage—all of the exquisite Russian silver-work from the Slavonski Bazaar in Moscow— Mrs. Lestrange interrupted her voluble account of the difficulties with which she was wrestling as actress-manager to say carelessly: "Let Miss Lestrange know that you have brought in tea," and then, as she went on with her recital, Stafford could only hope that she was not aware of the divided attention with which he listened to her.

And this was not only because his ear was waiting and longing for the sound of a voice which he had missed in a manner that amazed him, but also because the familiarity of everything about him accentuated strongly the difference which had arisen in himself, and of which up to this time he had been only partly conscious. As he glanced around the room, with its rich draperies, its pictures and screens and wealth of costly flowers, at the glittering tea-table and the beautiful creature in the marvellous tea-gown who lolled carelessly yet gracefully beside it— everything, even to that "pale light which London calls day," recalled a hundred other days when he had sat here absorbed in the affairs and career, and also in the personality, of the woman before him. *Then* he could not have conceived anything more interesting than to discuss with her every detail which could make her success in his play as brilliant as possible; and *now*— well, now he was only able to wonder at the indifference, the sense of something akin to boredom, with which he listened.

Presently Mrs. Lestrange herself became aware of this. She flashed another keen glance at him when he made some particularly absent reply.

"I see I shall have to give you time to recover your bearings," she said. "Frankly, wandering about the world hasn't improved you, my dear Jack. Have you possibly fallen in love? Is that the reason you are so *distrait*?"

"The question doesn't come with a very good grace from you," Stafford answered a trifle grimly. "When a man has devoted his youth to the service of one woman, he hasn't very much left worth offering another."

"Oh, that's where you are mistaken," Mrs. Lestrange replied with a light laugh. "What you gave me was only the romantic devotion of a dear, chivalric boy. How chivalrous you were in those days, Jack!—"

"How idiotic would come nearer the truth!" Stafford observed drily. .

"It's very unchivalrous of you to say so," she reproved. "But I was going on to add that what you have now to give to some fortunate woman,"— a slight, effective sigh here,— "is the strong, enduring devotion of your manhood. Who is she, Jack? I should like to congratulate her on winning such a heart as yours."

"Don't talk absolute nonsense, Violet!" Stafford returned a little rudely. "There is not only no such woman, but, as I have already observed, nothing of the kind is even remotely possible."

"But I don't want to believe that. I don't want to think that I have ruined your life. Jack," the violet-eyed siren murmured softly.

"Don't distress yourself," Stafford laughed. "You haven't ruined it. You only found a young fool who poured out at your feet all that he had to give of certain beliefs and sentiments, and since then has been rather bankrupt in their regard. Ah!" he rose suddenly to his feet, "here is—"

"Sylvia," said the girl who had entered the room unobserved by the two at the fireplace. She came forward, holding out her hand with a flashing smile. "I didn't know you were here," she said. "How glad I am to see you again!"

For a moment Stafford was unable to reply. The irony of what he had just been saying, coupled with the flood of emotion which rushed over him at the sound of the voice for which his ear had unconsciously longed, absolutely deprived him of the power of speech. But eyes can be eloquent when lips are not, often indeed more eloquent when expression devolves solely upon them; and if his eyes, glowing into such deep and sudden light, did not tell Sylvia what he was feeling, they told the other woman, who was watching him. Involuntarily she uttered an exclamation, which she promptly knocked over a tea-cup to cover.

"Too bad, isn't it?" she said, as Sylvia darted forward to pick up the fragile fragments. "One of my precious Sevres cups! That comes of being startled. You really shouldn't come into a room so noiselessly, my dear. It's bad for one's nerves."

"I'm sorry," Sylvia said, as she laid the broken tea-cup down. "It's plain I was inconsiderate. I have a great deal to learn in this new life," she added, looking at Stafford, "as I foresaw that I should, you may remember."

"I remember," he answered; and as he spoke, he remembered indeed very much, and yet it almost seemed to him that he had remembered nothing of the charm which exhaled like a perfume from this girl. Had it grown greater since he saw her last, or was it only in contrast with the artificial air of all things around her, especially with the beautiful figure which seemed to embody everything most seductive in and suggestive of the world, that it appeared so?

"I remember," he repeated. "We were afloat on Lake Chapala. Heavens! how strange to think here of that lake and all its miraculous colour!"

"It does seem like a dream," Sylvia said wistfully. "I am wondering all the time if the sun can be shining in Mexico as it shone when I was there. It is so long since I have really seen sunshine!"

"I'm sure," said Stafford with a laugh which had the same note of tenderness in it as his voice, "that the sun must have felt your absence enough to throw one light veil across his brightness, at least at El Rosario."

"What a pretty compliment, even if a bit fanciful!" remarked Mrs. Lestrange a little mockingly. "Mexico must be a wonderful place— and here comes some one who can join in your raptures over it."

Even before the servant's voice, announcing "Mr. De Rivera," fell on his ear, Stafford knew whom he should see when he turned around. It was indeed Don Luis himself, handsome, graceful, self-possessed, and if not quite so picturesque a figure as when he came in his Mexican riding-costume around the rose-hung corridor at El Rosario, at least a perfectly appointed figure in the dress in which the modern man of fashion arrays himself.

"Ah, Mr. Stafford!" he exclaimed. "What an unexpected pleasure this is!"

"How easy to tell that Mr. De Rivera belongs to another race than the Anglo-Saxon," said Mrs. Lestrange. "What would an American or Englishman's greeting be now? 'Hello, old man, here you are again!' Wouldn't that cover it?"

"No doubt," Stafford answered, with a laugh. "The Anglo-Saxon is a speechless animal at best, and for a hundred years, more or less, has been sedulously cultivating the art of how not to say anything gracefully."

"So unnecessary on his part— the cultivation, I mean," said Mrs. Lestrange, "as he must have possessed that art always. Nature gave him certain very useful gifts, but she denied him the power to appreciate the great charm of fine manners."

"And therefore," added Don Luis, "he sneers at the races who do possess the appreciation and the manners."

"That of course," Mrs. Lestrange agreed, "since he is quite the most self-satisfied animal on the face of the earth. Sylvia, give Mr. De Rivera a cup of tea. I know he doesn't like it; but when one is in England, it's best to fall into English habits, especially when one can get real Russian caravan tea like this."

Sylvia glanced at De Rivera with a smile, as she filled a cup with fragrant tea, and then lifted the tiny, gold-etched decanter of Santa Cruz. "Rum and lemon, and— anything else?" she asked.

"Probably that will be enough to overcome the taste of the tea," he answered with an air of resignation as he took the cup from her hand. To Stafford, watching with a keenness of which he was himself hardly aware, it seemed that his manner was more formal, more reserved, than it had been at El Rosario. Something was lacking of the open admiration, the scarcely restrained ardour, of that time. Was it due to a difference of environment, to a consciousness of the eyes that were upon them? He felt that a little time would be necessary to answer this question; and meanwhile he held out his own cup to Sylvia.

"If the tea is Russian caravan," he said, "that explains its delightful flavour, and so I must beg for another cup. It strikes me," he added, glancing at the beautiful and elaborate articles which covered the tea-table, "that there is altogether a very Russian atmosphere here."

Mrs. Lestrange laughed a trifle consciously.

"You would make a good detective, my dear Jack," she said. "Can't you go on, proceed from atmosphere to detail, and tell us the kind of Russian from whom the Moscow silver and the caravan tea have been evolved?"

"Easily," Stafford answered. "He is a man of wealth, and of taste, and of marked susceptibility to the charms of feminine beauty."

De Rivera applauded gently. "Good," he said, "but after all, obvious. Can't we help Mr. Stafford to more detail?"

Mrs. Lestrange looked around vaguely, and then suddenly pounced on something which lay on a *bibelot*-crowded table near at hand. It was a cigarette-case of odorous Russian leather, bearing a sparkling monogram and device.

"Ah!" said Stafford, as this was placed in his hands. "Everything is now perfectly clear. A Russian of high rank, luxury-loving as all Russians are, no doubt immensely rich, and devoted to— the drama, shall we say?"

It was now Mrs. Lestrange's turn to applaud. "Bravo, Jack!" she exclaimed. "You've really told us everything except his name, and that—"

"Prince Voronine," announced a servant at the door.

The high-bred, diplomatic-looking man of middle age who quietly entered the room, was plainly surprised at the stare which met him on all sides. He only understood the sensation his entrance caused when Mrs. Lestrange rushed into explanation.

"My dear prince," she cried, "how charming of you to come just at this moment, and how dramatically appropriate! One might think the situation had been rehearsed."

"I am delighted that my entrance should be dramatically appropriate," said the prince, as he bowed over her hand. "But if I might ask why—"

"My friend and kinsman, Mr. Stafford— you have often heard of him, the author of many delightful plays, you know," said Mrs. Lestrange— "has been playing Sherlock Holmes—"

"With this," said Stafford, rising and holding out the cigarette-case. "And I am gratified to find that I was successful enough to deduce from it everything except Prince Voronine's name."

The prince laughed as he took the case. "Very interesting," he said. "I am happy to meet Mr. Stafford, and glad that this trifle afforded him an opportunity to display his skill in deduction. Thanks, mademoiselle, a cup of tea, if you will be so kind."

He had already nodded to De Rivera, in the manner of one intimate acknowledging the habitual presence of another, and now Stafford was struck with something of the same manner toward Sylvia, an air of easy intimacy, very significant of his position in the inner circle of Mrs. Lestrange's particular friends.

He found an opportunity to remark this to the girl herself a few minutes later, when both the other men were absorbed by the beautiful actress, as she lay back in her luxurious chair, with her draperies of soft silk and lace falling in graceful folds around her perfect figure. Her white hand, flashing with rings, used for gesticulation the cigarette she was smoking, and as the men were smoking also, the fumes made a faintly clouded atmosphere, slightly laden with opium. Stafford did not wonder that Sylvia looked pale. It was all so different from the scene where he had known her first— the great court, open to all the airs of heaven, the roses and the doves! As he sat down beside her he met her eyes with the smile she remembered.

"*Señorita de mi corazon*," he said gently, "this is a strange environment for you."

"Yes, it is strange," she agreed. "I have sometimes to shake myself and wonder if indeed 'I be I, as I do think I be.' But it is what I came for, you know— to enlarge my knowledge of the world."

"You have surely enlarged it," he said, "though whether for the better—" he glanced significantly at the group a few paces distant. "Mrs. Lestrange seems to have set up a new *ami de la maison*," he added.

"You mean the prince?" Sylvia asked. "He seems to admire her very much, and she likes him extremely."

"No doubt." Stafford's tone was a little dry. "Prince Voronine is exactly the kind of man whom Mrs. Lestrange always likes extremely. But how do you like him?"

"Really I like him very well," the girl replied. "Better than any one else who comes here."

"Not better than an old friend?" Again Stafford looked toward the group, and this time his glance fell on De Rivera.

"Oh, Don Luis is an old friend," Sylvia returned. "He belongs to the old life, you know." She paused a moment, and then went on with a subtle smile, "You probably haven't forgotten some opinions

which he expressed to you as well as to me about my coming here— about the objectionable character of the life in which I should find myself."

"I haven't forgotten in the least," Stafford answered, "but his presence, notwithstanding that opinion, doesn't need much explanation."

"Possibly not," yet the smile which lingered about her lips was still a trifle enigmatic. "He was good enough to tell me when he appeared, that he had come to London in order to be at hand to guard me against certain vague dangers. The result is— rather amusing." She paused again. "I find it a pity that poor dear Sara isn't here," she added.

"I should have asked before about my friend, Miss Goodwin," Stafford said. "I hope she is well."

"She was very well when I heard from her. She has gone to join some friends of hers in Dresden."

"She told me that she would probably not remain in London very long."

Sylvia laughed. "Oh, I wish, I do wish that you could have seen Sara and my mother together!" she said. "You know they were friends in girlhood, and there was an old tone of intimacy to be maintained in the face of present inexpressible disapproval on the one side, and equally inexpressible impatience and contempt on the other. It lasted about two days. Then Sara told me that if I found things unbearable, as she plainly thought I should, she would be ready to answer a summons to rejoin me at any hour of the day or night, but meanwhile she would go to her cousin in Dresden. And so she departed."

"I am afraid you miss her," said Stafford, thinking of the complete lack of sympathy which must of necessity exist between this girl and her mother.

The deep gray eyes met his calmly. "Under other circumstances I should miss her very much," Sylvia said; "but under these circumstances, I was glad to see her go. It is as you told me once. If people have no power of tolerating what they don't approve, they can only make themselves and others very uncomfortable when they are in uncongenial surroundings."

"To be able to tolerate what we don't like, is certainly a very necessary part of the art of life," Stafford assented, "but it is one which positive characters like Miss Goodwin never learn. About yourself," he went on, "how is it? Have you mastered the art of tolerating what you cannot possibly like?"

Sylvia's gaze turned, perhaps unconsciously, toward the group on the other side of the tea-table. "It looks like it, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Never mind what it looks like," Stafford returned. "I want to know what it really is. You haven't forgotten our talk in Mexico when you said you would need a friend in this strange, new life, and when you let me promise that I would be that friend."

"Oh, no, I haven't forgotten," she answered, "but you have been a long time coming to fulfil the promise, and I— well, I have meanwhile learned to solve the puzzles myself, or else to leave them unsolved; which is no doubt wiser than depending on somebody else to solve them for one."

"I 'm not certain of that," said Stafford, and then he stopped abruptly, for at this moment Prince Voronine, cup in hand, approached.

"I have come to beg for a little more tea, mademoiselle," he said to Sylvia; and when he had received it, he sat down beside her and fell into easy talk.

Stafford remained for several minutes listening rather than joining in the conversation, and as he did so was struck by the manner in which the girl sustained her part. Clearly Mrs. Lestrange had been wrong in speaking of her as unformed. She had not only caught the tone of the world into which she had entered, but to this note of thorough modernity she added the charm of that fine distinction of mind and manner which Stafford had perceived in her at their first meeting. It was a quality which had been in embryo then, but which the atmosphere of the world

—that wonderful forcing house for all intellectual growth— had already greatly stimulated, something at once brilliant and illusive, delicate as the fragrance of a flower, yet distinct as the chiselling of a statue, and which rendered quite intelligible the interest she plainly inspired in the man of the world who was

talking to her. Presently Stafford rose. In these few minutes he had begun to fear that he had delayed too long in coming, that the golden hour of opportunity was past, and that the need for him as mentor, guide or friend no longer existed.

Chapter XI

Stafford Makes an Appeal

HAVING made an appointment to meet Mrs. Lestrange the next day at the theatre where his play was in rehearsal, Stafford took his leave and, with a vague sense of disappointment and depression, walked away from the smart little house, with its flower-filled windows.

Although it was still early in the Spring, London already began to wear the holiday look of the season which in a few weeks would be in full blast. The trees were as yet clothed only in faint, cloud-like green, and the sunshine was pale and misty; but a sense of quickened life was in the air, and the streets were filled with fashionable equipages, for society was flocking to town.

One of these equipages suddenly drew up at a curb near Stafford, and a footman, hurrying across the pavement, touched his hat. "Lady Feringham would like to speak to you, sir," the man said. Turning, Stafford saw a graceful figure leaning forward and a handsome face smiling at him. He hastened to take the gray-gloved hand extended, for Lady Feringham was a countrywoman and an old friend, one of the large number of American women who during the last few decades have married Englishmen of rank and won a position of their own in
English society. The daughter of a man whose millions had been made in mines and railways, she was through her mother connected with many of the old families of the South— among the rest, Stafford remembered, with the Lestranges.

"I hadn't the least idea you were in England," she said, after he had expressed his pleasure at meeting her. "Somebody told me you had gone to the Far East in search of new sensations. When did you get back?"

"I landed in Liverpool yesterday," he answered, "not from the Far East but from America, where I have been lately."

"America!" She looked surprised. "I thought you cared only for old civilizations— the older the better. Well, did you find any new sensations there?"

He smiled. "I haven't thought of it in that way before," he said, "but I really believe I did."

"Come and tell me about it, then." She held aside her skirts with one hand while she motioned with the other to the vacant seat beside her. "I am just going for a turn in the Park, and it's good luck to run upon an entertaining companion."

"I think the luck is mine," he said, as he stepped into the victoria.

Lady Feringham swept him with a comprehensive glance as they turned through the great gates of the
Park and, amid a throng of carriages, bowled along the most famous drive in Europe. It was a very kindly glance, for, in company with a good many other people, she liked extremely this quiet, intellectual man, who made no pretensions of any kind, but was always to be relied upon for certain qualities of sincerity and strength.

“In the language of my adopted country, I can't say that you are looking very fit," she remarked.

"Possibly not," he replied. “I've been travelling rather incessantly for a considerable time now, and rolling stones don't accumulate moss, which in this case we may take to mean superfluous flesh, you know."

"I'm not talking of superfluous flesh," she said. "One grows rather tired of the well-fed, well-groomed type of man. But you are not only looking thin and sunburned, you look— if you'll excuse my frankness— as if the new sensations hadn't proved altogether agreeable."

"Doesn't experience tell you," he said, "that new sensations are seldom altogether agreeable? One must be grateful if they are even partially so."

"They have at least been interesting. But things, or emotions which interest, are also apt to absorb one a little too much. So I have come back to the old grooves, you see."

"I've been wondering that you haven't returned before this," she said, "since we've heard a good deal of a new play of yours in which Mrs. Lestrange is soon to appear. By the bye, you are still a great friend of hers, aren't you?"

"Of Mrs. Lestrange?" Stafford was rather surprised at the introduction of this name, for the famous actress was far from popular with her feminine compatriots in general, and particularly the reverse with any friend or relative of her husband's family. "Yes, I may still call myself a friend of hers, though I’ve seen very little of her for several years past, and the absent are easily forgotten— and replaced."

"I suppose you have heard that her husband is dead?"

"I heard that news not very long ago."

"And do you know that she has her daughter with her now?"

"Yes, I know it. I"— he hesitated slightly— "I met Miss Lestrange in America."

"Oh!" Lady Feringham turned again to look at him. "Then perhaps you arranged the matter?" she cried with a quick flash of intuition.

"I think I may take so much credit to myself," he replied.

"Credit!" she echoed sharply. "I don't think there is much credit for you in having done a thing like that."

"Don't you?" he spoke very coolly. "Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me why."

"I can't think you need for me to tell you why," Lady Feringham returned, with the old directness of her country and rearing. "Although you've always been a friend of Mrs. Lestrange, you must know that she doesn't deserve any notice from her daughter, and she certainly isn't the proper person to have charge of her."

"If I yield the first point, I must disagree with you on the second," he said. "It strikes me that she is not only eminently the proper person to have charge of her, but that it is better to fulfil a duty late than never."

"Fulfil a duty!" The expression of incredulity and scorn which the speaker threw into those words was quite indescribable. "As if the wildest flight of imagination could conceive Violet Lestrange fulfilling a duty! Of course she has some selfish object in having the girl with her. But it seems a pity."

"For the girl?"

"For the girl undoubtedly. I saw her the other evening— it was at the Carlton, and she came in with her mother. She is a distinguished-looking creature."

"And as distinguished in mind as in person."

"Then that makes it all the more sad for her to be in such a position. I don't see how you can reconcile it with your conscience to have had any part in placing her there!"

Stafford did not reply immediately. Instead he looked away, across the rolling stretches of the Park to the vistas between the great trees of Kensington Gardens, and the pale blue sky which overhung the scene. But as he looked, he saw not so much what was before him as a dazzling glare of sunshine on a wide Mexican plain, a sky like a vault of burning sapphire, white arches clear-cut against azure hills, the

flash of water falling in a fountain, and a woman's urgent voice saying: "Man, do you think you can tell what is good for her better than I?" It struck him that it was a little hard to be assailed by different women in such contrary fashion on account of Sylvia Lestrange, and, when his eyes returned to Lady Feringham, she perceived a smile in them.

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously. "I'm sure I have said nothing amusing."

"Not intentionally," he told her, "but one may prove amusing sometimes without intention. I was just thinking how earnestly I was appealed to by Miss Lestrange's most devoted friend to do what you are blaming me for having done."

"And who on earth is her most devoted friend, who could wish nothing better for her than this?"

"Did you ever know or hear of Miss Sara Goodwin? No?" as Lady Feringham shook her head. "Your mother would probably answer differently. She, too, belongs to the old order of the South, a woman of good birth and strong character who, like many of her class, has fallen upon days of poverty. Hence she was Miss Lestrange's governess in her childhood, and has been her companion since her father's death. You know, I suppose, that he lived and died in Mexico, a voluntary exile from his home and people."

"I've heard something of the kind, but only vaguely. Why did he do that?"

"Through some inherent weakness— or, God knows! perhaps through some inherent strength— of character. He couldn't face the world after his wife deserted him; and possibly was afraid of her giving him trouble about the child."

"I'm certain he needn't have feared anything of that kind."

"I am certain of it also; but you see he wasn't, so he took steps to be safe. He carried his daughter to a remote part of Mexico, made a home there which is like a castle in a fairy-tale, kept her isolated from the world, and finally died, leaving her as ignorant of life as a child, and without any means of entering it."

"Did he leave no fortune?"

"Oh, yes; I fancy from what I have heard that he left her a large fortune. But this only makes the situation a little more pathetic. Money increases dangers for her, but cannot buy friends."

"I don't know," the woman of the world said. "I think money can do even that. At least no one who possesses it need ever lack friends."

"We are using the word in different senses. Friends of a sort it can buy; but this girl with her youth and beauty needs friends of a kind that money cannot buy. And so it came about that the woman who loves her like a mother, and who in her behalf resents more deeply than you can the desertion and neglect of her real mother, was driven to beg me to induce her to accept that mother's offer to introduce her to the world."

"And you succeeded in inducing her to do so?"

"I succeeded— as you perceive."

It was now Lady Feringham's turn to be silent for an interval, during which she nodded absently to various acquaintances in the passing throng, while her thoughts dwelt on a face she had not been able to forget since she saw it— a face which had arrested attention not only by its beauty but by a quality, an expression, which seemed to set a seal of strangeness upon it, to bring the breath of some widely different world into the familiar scene of brilliant modern life where it had appeared. Suddenly she looked again at Stafford.

"I only hope you '11 never regret it," she said.

"I hope so too," he answered gravely; "and yet I don't know that under any circumstances, even if the association turns out as badly as it may, I should regret what seemed the only thing to do. For there was a man in the case—"

"Oh, there was a man! So she didn't live in such a desert island after all."

"If you remember, the fact that Miranda was on a desert island didn't prevent Ferdinand from arriving. There are few Islands so remote that the instrument of fate cannot arrive. And when absolute inexperience is united to unusual potentialities of character, we have a dangerous combination. Almost any risk seemed preferable to the risk of allowing her to settle her life without more knowledge of the world."

"You have surely arranged to give it to her," Lady Feringham commented. "What a contrast to the life you describe, this in which she finds herself now must be!"

"Very great, no doubt. But you must let me remind you that Mrs. Lestrange— "

"Has managed to keep her place in the society which runs after beautiful and fashionable actresses, in spite of skating on very thin ice occasionally? Yes, I know; but that doesn't alter many things." She was silent again for a moment. "It's rather a sad story," she said presently, "and interesting, too. One feels a little curiosity to know what the end of it will be."

Stafford nodded. "Exactly," he said. "I feel that curiosity, too, but I also feel something else."

"Which is—?"

"That I would like to assist in making the end what it should be. But a man is very powerless in such matters. What this girl needs is a woman friend— a woman kind enough, and powerful enough to help her."

"I understand," Lady Feringham said. "You want me to be that friend."

"There is no one better fitted to be," he answered, "and it would be an act of kindness worthy of you."

"I'll not deny that it has occurred to me," she said. "That was why I wanted to ask you if you knew anything about the girl. I've not been able to get her out of my mind since I saw her; but there is her mother! I've always set my face against Mrs. Lestrange."

"Still, you know her."

"After a fashion, yes. But I couldn't tolerate any association with her."

"I don't think there would be the least fear of anything of the kind, if you decide to show a little interest in her daughter. Mrs. Lestrange is not only a very busy woman, but she has already all the social opportunities she desires."

"Dear me, yes. I suppose she would find anything I have to offer very dull in comparison with what she has."

"You know perfectly well," Stafford said, "that nobody could find what you have to offer dull; but the fact remains that she does not need social patronage, and she cares only for what is in sympathy with her tastes. Now there's no doubt that there isn't much sympathy between herself and her daughter, so I don't think she would wish to interfere in the least in any associations which the latter might form. On the contrary, I believe she would welcome them, as relieving her of responsibility."

"In that case," Lady Feringham said guardedly, "I might make an effort— call once, perhaps. You are sure," she turned on him almost threateningly, "that I won't regret it?"

"I am perfectly sure," he replied, "that no one could ever regret knowing Sylvia Lestrange."

Chapter XII

A Rehearsal

IT was with a feeling of distinct relief that, on waking the next morning, Stafford remembered his appointment to meet Mrs. Lestrange at the rehearsal of "The Queen of Cyprus." And this was not so much from any great interest in the play— he was in truth astonished at his own indifference with regard to it—

as from the desire to find himself again launched on the current of life, to stimulate if possible his interest in things which had once interested him so keenly, and to find an occupation for the hours which just now threatened to hang rather heavily on his hands. Also, he could not disguise from himself that he was anxious to see Sylvia again, and to learn a little more of what the great change in her life meant for her. When they parted the day before she had said something about the play, a few words expressive of her admiration of it, which showed that occasionally at least she attended the rehearsals, and it was with the hope that she might be sufficiently interested in his presence today to accompany her mother to the theatre that he was himself punctual in arriving there.

But when, having entered at the stage door, he made his way through the devious passages of the dingy world which lies behind the scenes to the great empty stage, he was not surprised to find Mrs. Lcstrange already arrived. Nor, having seen her frequently on such occasions, was he surprised at the change which had transformed the indolent beauty in her draperies of silk and lace of the afternoon before into the trim, tweed-skirted, fur-wrapped person who stood talking with the stage manager. As Stafford approached, she turned and nodded to him with an alert air which showed her to be what she really was, one of the keenest of business women where her interests were at stake.

"Here's Mr. Stafford at last, Mr. Hawkes," she said. "Now we can get to work at once on those changes which we have been waiting for him to make."

Mr. Hawkes shook his head reproachfully, as he also shook hands with the delinquent dramatist. "You shouldn't have treated us so, Mr. Stafford, you really shouldn't!" he said in a tone of remonstrance. "We might have produced the play a fortnight earlier if we could have got hold of you; and every day lost means a serious deficit of profits, you know."

"I'm sorry," Stafford replied. "But really I didn't think my presence was so necessary."

"Author's presence is always necessary, when he's alive," explained Mr. Hawkes. "Of course when he's dead—like Shakespeare, for instance— that's another matter."

"Quite so," observed Mrs. Lestrange drily. "It's a distinct advantage for an author to be dead, because then one needn't bother about consulting him with regard to changes one wants to make in his work. But when he's alive, there would be an awful row if one didn't consult him."

Stafford laughed. "I don't know about the awful row," he said, "but necessarily one wouldn't wish to have one's work cut to pieces in an unauthorized manner."

"Necessarily you wouldn't," Mrs. Lestrange echoed sarcastically; "and yet you stay away, on the other side of the world, and so force us to keep things at an exasperating standstill! But there's no good in quarrelling with you now! Where's Mr. Waring? where are they all? Let us get to work immediately, Mr. Hawkes."

Mr. Hawkes glanced through the proscenium arch, where the curtain was raised, to the dark and empty auditorium which yawned beyond. "Waring!" he called, and the next moment there was a slight stir as of a chair moved back. Stafford raised his eyebrows a little, as he tried with his own glance to pierce the gloom of the dusky obscurity beyond the stage.

"Have we an audience?" he asked.

"Only Sylvia," Mrs. Lestrange answered carelessly. "She thought she would like to see the rehearsal this morning. Cyril has been out there talking to her. Ah, here he comes!"

It was indeed the handsome young actor, who for some time had had all the world of impressionable feminine London at his feet, who now appeared, and against whom, even while returning his warm greeting, Stafford was conscious of a vague sense of irritation. And yet he was well aware that this irritation was entirely without cause, that there was no reason why Cyril Waring should not have been talking to Miss Lestrange, apart from the fact that, in view of her mother's profession, she could hardly avoid knowing some at least of the people of the stage, while as for his attractiveness— well, was it not primarily in order that she might meet attractive men that he had urged her coming to London?

Nevertheless, a recollection of some of De Rivera's words occurred to him at this moment with a more sympathetic understanding than he had given them when they were uttered. A sacrilege the young man had called Sylvia's going into her mother's world; and now that Stafford found himself again in this world, he was conscious of the same feeling, the same shrinking from its associations for her. A realization of his own inconsistency transferred his irritation in a degree to himself. “Withal, I am much of a fool!" he thought impatiently, in the phrase of Carlyle, as he turned to the work which demanded his attention.

It was very strenuous work, the hardest of the kind he had ev6r known, although this was by no means the first time he had been in the position of an author whose play is produced. For, as the rehearsal proceeded, he understood how great had been the need of his presence earlier, and how near to being hopelessly ruined, at least in his eyes, his play had been. In fact he soon felt that it was almost too late to save it now. For, although nothing had been violently or radically changed, there was a subtle alteration of the whole spirit. The delicate, poetic grace of his conception of Caterina— the beautiful daughter of Venice, true child of the Renaissance, and embodiment of its best spirit—had almost disappeared in Mrs. Lestrange's hands, and what she gave instead was a character of deeper lines and darker shadows, a creature of passion, more like Elizabeth of England than the proud young Queen of Cyprus, on whose name there rests no shadow of stain. The change displayed the power of the actress, which lay chiefly in emotional strength, as his character would not have displayed it; but it angered him as the lowering of an ideal which had almost satisfied him when he had succeeded in embodying it in his drama. At the end of the first act, he expressed his opinion very plainly to Mrs. Lestrange.

"You have left the letter of the play comparatively untouched," he said; "but you have done far worse than if you had cut it to pieces, for you have altered its whole spirit. You have put another character in the place of the central figure. *Your* Caterina is no more *my* Caterina, than Juliet would be Juliet if you played her as Messalina."

"It is a question of dramatic value," Mrs. Lestrange said angrily. "The character was insipid and worthless, as you meant it to be played. I have simply put vitality and meaning into it."

"You have put— courtesy restrains me from saying precisely what you have put," Stafford replied. "But I should never have allowed such an interpretation if I had been here."

"It was your own fault that you were not here," she returned. "What could I think of your indifference except that you were satisfied to leave the play in my hands?"

He looked at her with anger equal to her own, all the artist in him roused for once. "You knew well that I should never be satisfied with such a change as this," he said. "You took advantage of my absence to make it— absence by your own request, and on your own service."

"I hardly think that it has been in my service that you have spent the last month," she retorted. "Come, this is nonsense! I'm sorry that you don't like my conception of the character; but then I was rather prepared for your disapproval. I don't think you like anything about me, either my art or myself, as you once did."

"I certainly don't like this," Stafford said emphatically, unmoved by the last reproach.

"Well," with careless disdain, "what are you going to do about it?"

"You know," he answered, "that I can do nothing. Our contract is made and signed. In it certain things are provided against. You can make no important changes in the body of the play without my consent; but there is nothing to prevent your doing what you have done, altering its whole spirit. There I am powerless."

"Exactly," she replied coolly, "and that being so, wouldn't it be wise to take the thing philosophically? After all, I may be supposed to know a little more about my art than you do. What is any part but a shell into which an actress slips her own personality, and my personality is what has made me. It will make your Caterina, too. The success of the play will be a thousand-fold greater than if I had attempted to play her in the fashion you intended."

“I would rather that it never succeeded; I would rather that it should be damned to the deepest limbo of failure, than suffer the transformation it has undergone," he answered with unmistakable sincerity.

Mrs. Lestrange made an impatient gesture.

"You are simply impossible!" she declared. "For the matter of that you always were impossible! But we are only wasting time! for of course, even if I wished to do so, I couldn't alter my conception of the character now. So the only question is, will you make the changes in the situations and the lines which we want?"

"Certainly," he answered coldly. "I have no objection to making them. Let us go on."

So the rehearsal continued; and it was only toward the end, when his work was for the present done, that he felt an impulse to go and soothe his soul by a few words with Sylvia. He found her, a quiet, attentive figure, sitting in a corner of one of the proscenium boxes.

"So you sometimes come to a rehearsal," he said, as he sat down beside her. "Don't you find it rather disenchanting, without costumes or scenery?"

"I have not missed either costumes or scenery," she answered. "The play has from the first interested me so much that I have not thought of them. My opinion is probably not of much value; but it seems to me very beautiful."

"I rather liked it myself," Stafford said gloomily, "before I saw it acted."

She glanced at him quickly. The light was dim, but not so dim that she could not see that he looked worried.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Hasn't It satisfied you? Are things not going right?"

"In one respect they are going as far wrong as possible,” he answered; and then a sudden impulse made him add: "You've never seen Mrs. Lestrange act before. Would you mind telling me frankly how her acting strikes you?"

Sylvia did not reply immediately. Instead she looked at the stage where at this moment Mrs. Lestrange was going over some of the new business in one of her scenes with Waring. Even without any aid of costume of setting, the power of the actress was unmistakable, her strong emotional capability, her knowledge of her art, and also the unsparing use she made of her womanhood. It was the last perhaps, which even the inexperience of her daughter perceived, and which brought a flush to her cheeks as she presently glanced again at Stafford.

"It strikes me that she is a very fine actress," she said. "Of course I have not seen a great deal of acting; but I have watched her closely during her rehearsals, and she has impressed me deeply."

"You are right," Stafford replied. "She is a fine actress— within her limitations one of the best of her day and time."

"I thought I might be right," Sylvia went on, "because I have been impressed against my will. I did not want to admire her. I shrank from seeing her act, because of all that her acting stands for to me. But there is no denying her power. There are moments when she thrills one through and through."

Stafford nodded. "Yes," he said, "she has genius —in a degree at least; there's not a doubt of it. And so you admire her?"

“No, I don't admire her," the girl replied quickly. "1 recognize her genius, but there is something in her acting that is extremely distasteful to me. And yet seeing her has helped me to do her the justice for which you pleaded when we spoke of her at El Rosario. I understand now why she went away. There was something stronger than herself controlling her."

"Very much stronger," Stafford agreed. "And you must remember too, that, according to the modern ideas in which she was steeped, her genius justified the step she took."

Sylvia shook her head. "I don't think there is any question of justification," she said; "but one may understand things one cannot justify." She looked at him with eyes which suddenly grew brilliant. "I

understand because I have felt," she said. "I have felt not only her power, but the stirring of the same impulse within myself. As I have sat here watching her, I have been conscious of a desire to act, to fling myself into the portrayal of character, to laugh, to weep. Oh!" she broke off, "it is almost terrible to find how ignorant one may be of oneself as well as of others! I have despised her so much, and now it seems like a judgment on me that I should feel the same longing to express myself in the same way."

"It is no doubt an inherited power," said Stafford, who was, however, a good deal astonished by this unexpected revelation. "And if it helps you to understand her—"

"That is all it does," the girl interrupted. "One side of my nature understands her, and would like to do what she is doing; but the other side judges, scorns, and shrinks repelled. See how freely I am pouring out these fancies to you! They are very absurd, are they not?"

"Not absurd in the least," Stafford answered. "And you tell them to me because you know that I can comprehend and sympathize with them. More than that, they explain some things that have puzzled me. From the moment I saw you first, I recognized power in you, though what power exactly I did not know. Now I know that you could make an actress —a finer actress than your mother, because Nature has formed you altogether in finer mould. You have the artistic temperament, responsive as a violin to every touch of emotion, and capable of expressing the highest things— Ah!"

He uttered the ejaculation as if a thought had leaped at him and arrested speech. Then he laughed.

"I suppose you would think me mad if I told you what idea came to me then," he said.

Sylvia smiled a little. "Try me," she suggested.

"Well," he said, "what I thought was, how divinely you could act my Caterina—for you would understand her."

The girl gazed at him with startled eyes. "Of course you don't really mean it," she said, "but it is strange that as I have sat here I have felt as if I could act the part, for— do you altogether like the manner in which it is acted now?"

"I like it as little as possible. I have told Mrs. Lestrange so, and we have almost quarrelled over it."

"Then I really do know something of dramatic art, or at least I have the right feeling about it, for I haven't been able to think that the character was correctly interpreted. You see I have read the play, and it gave me a very different impression."

"It gave you the right impression," said Stafford. "In her presentation Mrs. Lestrange has deliberately and wholly changed my conception."

"But how shameful!" cried the girl. "And can you do nothing?"

He spread out his hands with a gesture expressive of hopelessness. "Nothing," he said. "Even"—with a whimsical smile— "if you were ready to undertake the part, I could not get the play away from Mrs. Lestrange."

Chapter XIII

The Princess And The Butterfly

IT happened to be a very brilliant evening at the Savoy. A large number of prominent people in the smart world of London society were dining there, so that handsome toilettes and flashing jewels, together with well-known faces, were very much in evidence when a party entered which was sufficiently distinguished in appearance, as well as in reality, to make a slight sensation. Heads were turned on all

sides, as Mrs. Lestrange and her daughter, attended by Prince Voronine and De Rivera, passed through the throng to a table prepared for them.

Certainly the famous actress had never looked more beautiful, and when, after seating herself, she leaned back in her chair and, while pulling off her long gloves, glanced over the room, nodding here and there to acquaintances, her air and manner plainly showed that she was agreeably conscious of the fact, and also no doubt conscious that every feminine eye was fastened on the costume which set off her beauty. Nothing could have been more striking or more becoming than her gown of moss-green velvet, which, with its long, sweeping lines, its cascades of creamy lace and edges of sable, had the look of having been copied from an old picture, besides possessing the touch of the latest and highest fashion. In effective contrast to this rich dress was the simple but elegant frock of some shimmering white fabric which Sylvia wore; while for these two charming feminine figures the Russian prince, with his air of distinction, and the extremely handsome young Mexican, were remarkably appropriate attendants.

So at least It struck Stafford, who chanced to be dining in a corner of the brilliant room with a journalist friend, who had been entertaining him with all manner of up-to-date gossip, in pitying enlightenment of the ignorance which was the result of several years' absence from the centres of civilization. This gentleman adjusted his *pince-nez* with fresh interest when the Lestrange party entered.

“Ah," he said, "here comes the beautiful actress with her prince! Of course you know that it's generally believed she will marry him and leave the stage, after she has made another great success—the success which she's expecting with this new play of yours?"

"No," Stafford answered, "I didn't know it. You see, as you have just been remarking, I'm rather out of touch with everything, owing to my long absence from London."

"I fancied you always kept in touch with Mrs. Lestrange," said the other with a quick glance; "though of course the Russian has only been in her train for a short time, and— er— women can be reticent sometimes."

Stafford laughed — at one or two recollections which he did not think it necessary to mention. "Yes," he agreed, “they can be reticent sometimes. And so the general impression is that Mrs. Lestrange will leave the stage to become a princess?"

"It has seemed pretty clear for some time," the other answered. "She could hardly do better. Prince Voronine is immensely rich, and has been absolutely infatuated with her."

“*Has been*! Does that imply that the infatuation is all in the past?"

"Not exactly perhaps, but his devotion hasn't been quite so marked of late— since the advent of the charming daughter."

"Ah!" Stafford suddenly seemed to find the subject more interesting. "You mean that the advent of the daughter has had an effect in lessening his devotion to the mother?"

"In lessening its outward manifestation at least. Of course they are as much in evidence together as ever; but if you look yonder you will see what I mean, and what a good many people are remarking. To whom is Prince Voronine chiefly directing his attention just now?"

Stafford looked. There certainly was no mistaking the fact that Prince Voronine was chiefly directing his attention to Sylvia, who, as she talked and laughed with him, had an air of easy intimacy. Stafford glanced back at his friend.

"He seems on very good terms with Miss Lestrange," he said; "but of course that is natural, in view of what you have just been saying about his devotion to her mother."

"Well, that's the question, you know," returned the other. "Does it spring from his devotion to Mrs. Lestrange, or is he perhaps transferring his devotion to a younger— one couldn't possibly say a fairer object?"

Stafford did not answer for a moment. He looked again at the table toward which many glances beside his own were directed, before he said quietly: "It strikes me as a perfectly absurd supposition. Of course, that the man is old enough to be her father has nothing to do with it."

"Nothing whatever," the other agreed.

"But the fact that he is an admirer of Mrs. Lestrange renders the idea altogether ridiculous. Fancy a man of that type attracted by an immature girl, from one of the most beautiful and fascinating women of her day! Really, Thornton, I'm surprised at you with your knowledge of the world."

"It's just because I have a little knowledge of the world that I find the idea credible," Thornton replied. "You haven't forgotten ‘The Princess and the Butterfly'?"

"Of course not; but I don't see—"

"Any similarity in the situation? Well, it's not alike on all points; but the general idea of youth attracting age seems rather in process of being exemplified by the lady who once acted the Princess so delightfully, as well as by the elderly butterfly who has been her adorer."

A sudden light broke upon Stafford. He stared at his companion. "You mean—?" he queried.

The other nodded, his eyes shining behind his glasses with the pleasure of the gossip who has produced a sensation.

"Just that," he said. "The lovely Violet has her fancies, you know, although she never allows them to interfere with business; and at present she seems to have conceived a strong fancy for that very good-looking young attaché—South American, Is he, or Mexican? —who made his first appearance in the train of her daughter."

Stafford continued to stare at his companion for a moment longer, and then said slowly, as if to himself: "So that is what she meant!"

"Rather obscure, but no doubt correct," Thornton laughed. "If ‘she'— whoever she may be— intimated that Mrs. Lestrange has made a conspicuous conquest of her daughter's lover, and is meanwhile, little as no doubt she imagines it, in danger of losing her own, ‘she' only repeated what every one else is saying. Look again, my dear fellow, and see if you don't find the situation sufficiently plain."

Thus bidden, Stafford did look again, and acknowledged that there was very good reason for thinking the situation plain. He had only observed
Prince Voronine and Sylvia before, but now, turning his scrutiny upon the other two, he clearly perceived the flame of ardent admiration which burned in De Rivera's dark eyes whenever they rested on his companion, together with the air of absorbed interest— had he not reason to know that well?— with which Mrs. Lestrange bestowed her attention on him. And as he gazed, a sudden fear for Sylvia gripped his heart. Was it natural, was it even possible, that the girl had not suffered in seeing the devotion which had been laid at her feet, and which she had so nearly accepted, openly transferred to another, and that other her own mother? He remembered her smile— enigmatic in its meaning then, very clear now— as she told him that she found the result of De Rivera's appearance “rather amusing." It seemed incredible that there should not have been pain of one kind or another behind that smile; but he had divined her character well enough to know that, if there were, it would never be acknowledged or betrayed. And then, as he thought of the woman who had brought her neglected daughter from the other side of the world only to inflict upon her the keenest pang known to feminine nature, a spasm of disgust seized him for the superb, triumphant beauty which seemed to him at this moment merely the embodiment of that ruthless selfishness which in the gratification of its own desires pays no heed to any right or feeling of another. He startled his companion by rising abruptly.

"We’ve finished, haven't we?" he said. “Let us go over and speak to them."

Thornton lifted his eyebrows, but made no objection to a step which his own degree of intimacy with the well-known actress would hardly have justified, but which was an eminently agreeable one to take, especially in a place so public.

Mrs. Lestrange on her part shrugged her shoulders a little when she saw Stafford approaching.

"Yonder comes my bear," she said in a resigned tone to De Rivera. "How glum he looks, poor fellow 1 It's too bad that he should always be so jealous of my other friends."

The young Mexican gave the condescending glance of arrogant youth at the man who had been stopped for a moment by a party at a table near them, but whose evident destination was their own.

"Bears should always remain in their native forests," he declared. “What a pity this bear has not stayed in his!"

"Oh, I don't know," Mrs. Lestrange laughed. "In that case we shouldn't have the play in which I expect to make my greatest success."

"Then for the sake of the play we'll tolerate him," De Rivera announced magnanimously. "I am so anxious to see you in that play!" he went on, with a change in his voice. "On all sides I hear such wonderful things of it— and of you."

"It will be an awful failure if it isn't a very great success," the actress sighed; "for it has cost a fortune in setting and costumes. I am staking everything on it."

"No one has any doubt but that it will be the success of the season," De Rivera assured her. "When will you be ready to produce it? I," sinking his voice still lower, "can hardly control my impatience when I think that I have never seen you act. It is as if I had not lived yet."

She looked at him with everything most seductive, and most approving too, in her gaze. "Don't be too sure that you will like me— as an actress," she murmured softly.

All the fire of his southern nature leaped into the eyes which met her own. "Like you!" he repeated. Then in an intense whisper too low to reach any ear but hers, "Since I adore you as a woman, how can I fail to adore you also as an actress?"

"Ah, what pretty thing is it that you say in Spanish?— *mil gracias, señor*!” she answered, laughing lightly, as she turned to give her hand to Stafford, who had now drawn near.

"Isn't this fashion of restaurant dining the most delightful, as well as the most convenient custom imaginable?" she asked. "It affords such admirable opportunities for meeting one's friends in the most unexpected manner."

"We are told that it is the unexpected which generally happens," Stafford replied; "but unfortunately we are not assured that it is always the most agreeable. One can only hope—"

"No, no," the rippling voice interposed, "one should be quite sure that to meet friends, however unexpectedly, is always a pleasure. Ah, Mr. Thornton, it's a pleasure which you haven't given me in a long time."

Leaving the flattered Thornton to the influence of the siren glances and tones— glances and tones which, it may be remarked, were never other than flattering when brought to bear upon any representative of the press— Stafford turned toward Sylvia, whose smiling eyes greeted him.

"At your feet, señorita!" he murmured. "And how do you like the fashion of restaurant dining?"

"I like it extremely," she answered. "It gives an agreeable sense of mingling with the world— that sense of festivity which quantities of lights and flowers and well-dressed people always produce— without making any demand upon one. I am not surprised that it has become so fashionable."

"It appeals to the modern taste, the modern desire to avoid boredom in any form," Prince Voronine informed her. "Nobody cares any longer for the reserve and seclusion which used to be considered the height of good form."

"Are you not making your assertions a little too sweeping?" Stafford suggested. "A few people still value distinction; and there can be no distinction without reserve. It will not do to give Miss Lestrange mistaken impressions of the world in which she is such a new-comer."

"I'm sure there is no danger of my obtaining wrong impressions from Prince Voronine," Sylvia said quickly. "He has been very good in taking care that I do not make the mistakes which I have found that inexperience is extremely likely to make."

"Miss Lestrange can always be counted on for kindness, as for many other delightful qualities," the prince remarked, while his eyes rested on the girl with an admiration which he made no effort to conceal. It was indeed so open and in a certain sense so tender, as if with a recognition of her flower-like youth, that it struck Stafford as being altogether compatible with his reputed relation toward her mother. Aware, however, that such a consummate man of the world was not likely to wear his heart, even in the least degree, on his sleeve, he reserved judgment, while he said lightly:

"Among those qualities, adaptability must certainly be reckoned; for," he addressed Sylvia, "you seem to have taken your place in this new world as if you had always belonged to it."

"If I may be permitted to express an opinion," said the prince, "I cannot fancy Miss Lestrange other than at ease, and therefore at home, wherever she might be placed."

Miss Lestrange shook her head in protest.

"Prince Voronine would fill me with self-conceit if I allowed myself to believe all the kind things he says," she confided to Stafford. “He not only says them with the most sincere air, but I could never have imagined that any one belonging to the Northern races could be so— so—"

"Appreciative?" the prince queried, as she hesitated. "Ah, mademoiselle, appreciation is not limited by race or latitude, although for the matter of that you must let me remind you that the Russian is more Oriental than Northern, and that in keenness of perception the races of the East far exceed those of the West."

"In subtlety, also," Stafford observed a trifle drily. "Miss Lestrange may therefore be congratulated on having such an altogether competent interpreter of the life in which she finds herself."

"Yes," Sylvia agreed, "I think that I am fortunate, for no one can doubt Prince Voronine's ability to interpret this world which is in many respects so strange to me."

The prince bowed.

"It is I," he declared, "who am fortunate in finding the most charming and sympathetic of pupils."

And it was the memory of the smile which Sylvia gave him in reply, that Stafford carried away with him.

Chapter XIV

On The River

THE memory of Sylvia's smile at Prince Voronine, and the doubt what might really be her attitude toward this suave Slav, as toward the lover who had so openly forsaken her, remained with Stafford to disturb him for several days— days in which he failed altogether in any attempt to see the girl alone, so much was she engrossed by the whirl of the season, now in full swing.

At last, however, his opportunity came, in an invitation of Lady Feringham to an Easter house-party at her country-place on the Thames. Doubtful at first, he accepted the invitation eagerly when he heard that Miss Lestrange was to be of the party, and when he arrived he was fortunate enough to find his hostess alone, established with her tea-table under a large, sweeping cedar on the lawn, for the day was unusually warm and bright for the season. The great, ivy-clad Tudor house in the background, and the green beauty of the lawns stretching into the shadowy vistas of the park in front, made a picture full of the peculiarly English charm, to which the tea-table and the lady by the side of it gave a finishing touch. She

welcomed him cordially, mentioned that Sylvia had, with several other members of the house-party, motored over to a famous castle in the neighbourhood, and then, with a good deal of enthusiasm, told him that she was altogether charmed with the girl, and added that, in her opinion, the sooner she could be removed from the influence of her mother and her mother's associates the better. When he shrugged his shoulders, and inquired how this was to be accomplished, she answered promptly:

"There is only one way; she must marry— the sooner the better."

"Oh!" He started a little. "That is your remedy, is it?"

"Of course it is my remedy," she answered. "Have you any better to offer?"

"I can only suggest that, simply as a remedy, it was open to her before she left Mexico."

"Ah, yes, I remember that you said something of a man when we talked of her first," her ladyship remarked. "What has become of him?"

Stafford laughed. "I fancy you've seen him," he said. "He's much in evidence with Mrs. Lestrange in most haunts of the fashionable world just now—an extremely good-looking young attaché of the Mexican legation."

Lady Feringham stared. "Oh! is that the man? But he is, as you say, in Mrs. Lestrange's train!"

Stafford explained the situation in a few words, and Lady Feringham's eyes began to blaze. "What a woman!" she exclaimed. "What a mother!— who induced her daughter to come to her across the world, and then took her lover away from her, careless whether or not she broke her heart."

"I haven't the faintest idea that her heart is broken," Stafford declared.

"What can you know about it?" the lady demanded. "A girl like that would die before she would betray what she feels or suffers. Oh, it is shameful! Say what you please— that woman is vile!"

"I don't know that I have defended her."

"Not now perhaps; but at other times you have. Yet any one who knows her at all, must know that she would throw this girl to the lions if by doing so she could serve in the least her own vanity, or her own greed. Sylvia must be taken out of her hands."

He shrugged his shoulders again. "How?"

"There's only one way— as I've already said. To marry her."

"You talk," he suggested, "as if you had a *parti* ready in your pocket."

"Partis are easy enough to find if one has something else in one's pocket," was the slightly scornful reply. "Do you chance to know the exact amount of her fortune?"

"Neither the exact nor the inexact amount of it," he answered. "And I really don't think it matters —from this point of view."

"It is just from this point of view that it does matter," she returned. "You see one needs to be particularly well assured in her case, because her mother is naturally somewhat of a drawback."

"I see." Stafford was by this time aware that he was distinctly angry with his friend Lady Feringham. "To induce the— er— suitable *parti* to overlook an actress as a mother-in-law, one must be prepared to guarantee— how large a fortune?"

"I really can't say precisely." Lady Feringham, on her side, was too much interested in her problem to heed or to give weight to his sarcasm. "Of course she is very charming, and he seems much attracted— "

"*He*!" Stafford's exclamation was fairly explosive. "Do you mean that you have the *parti* on hand?"

She nodded with a slightly triumphant air. "You know Percy Wyverne, don't you? No? Well, at least you know of him— one of the rising men in Parliament, clever, ambitious, and extremely well connected, but not rich. I can't take any credit to myself for arranging the matter. I really never thought of it until they met here, and I saw how much he was attracted by Sylvia. Then it flashed upon me that this is

the solution of the situation if — one might as well speak plainly— if she has money enough. A man like Wyverne must marry money, you know."

"I might answer in a well-known phrase, *'Je n'en vois pas la nécessité*,'" Stafford returned. "I grant you that it appears to be an opportunity for the American heiress— so many millions down and a coronet guaranteed in the not too remote future. But have you any reason to believe that Miss Lestrange would care to embrace such an opportunity?"

"Why shouldn't she? She isn't a fool; and any girl might be glad to marry Percy Wyverne."

"Any girl, perhaps so. But we have agreed, haven't we, that Sylvia Lestrange isn't exactly 'any girl'; that there's something beyond the ordinary about her; something that makes it seem a trifle out of— taste, let us say, to discuss her in this manner."

Lady Feringham scrutinized her companion for a minute before she replied rather coldly: "I consider that a very rude and also a very ungrateful speech. What is the matter with you? I've never known you so provincial before. Has your visit to America demoralized you— or are you in love with the girl yourself?"

It was purely a chance shot, but it told. There was another short silence, and then Stafford said slowly: "I hardly think I am such a fool, but if I am— why, so much the worse for me!"

"Oh!" said Lady Feringham, but, except this serviceable ejaculation, she had time for nothing more, since at that moment a motor-car came spinning up the avenue, its engine pulsing, its horn sounding, and its odours filling the air.

A few minutes later a gay party strolled across the lawn toward the tea-table, and Stafford found himself shaking hands with Sylvia, whose charming face smiled at him out of a cloud of delicate gray chiffon.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," she said. "Lady Feringham told me that you had promised to come; but I didn't know that she was looking for you so soon. You were wise not to delay. It is delightful here."

"I thought you would enjoy it," he told her. "Of its kind it's quite the most perfect thing in the world, life in one of these great English country-houses."

"I'm sure it must be," she agreed. "And I have all the time the oddest sense of being perfectly familiar with it, as if I were revisiting something which I had known in another state of existence; yet I am aware that it is only because I was brought up on English— especially mid- Victorian— fiction, that everything seems so familiar. It's exactly as if I had stepped into a novel and were living there. It gives one a great respect for the realism of the writers," she added laughingly.

"And theirs was genuine realism," Stafford said, "not the very unpleasant thing which nowadays goes by that name."

"One sometimes wonders," remarked Lady Feringham, "why only unpleasant things should be considered realistic. There are surely some agreeable realities in the world."

A young man with a clever keen face looked at her smilingly.

"Agreeable realities are things which we instinctively distrust," he said; "whereas we at once recognize unpleasant ones as entirely probable in the scheme of the world as we know it."

"Oh, one knows where to find *you*!" her ladyship declared. "Now I'll do Mr. Stafford— I believe you don't know Mr. Stafford, Mr. Wyverne— the credit to say that he never affects the cynical pose either in his conversation or his writings."

"I call that an outrageous insinuation," Mr. Wyverne declared. "As if *I* affected a cynical pose!"

"You all do," she returned, "all you clever young apostles of modernity. Mr. Stafford will bear me out in the assertion, I know."

"Generally speaking, I am afraid that I must," Stafford replied. "In the first place, it's the intellectual fashion of the moment; and in the second place, the most obvious thing about life is the

temptation it offers to cynicism. The pessimistic view of things lies in wait for all of us as we grow older. It is a struggle to keep an optimistic spirit after— say, thirty-five."

"Well now, do you know, I should call cynicism rather a note of youth," Lady Feringham observed.

"Affectation of cynicism is a note of youth," Stafford answered. "But the real thing is the prevailing temper of the modern mind. And," he added a little maliciously, "it is not only very easy to fall into the cynical way of regarding life, but there's a facility in making cynical epigrams, which is easily caught, and which reminds one of Tennyson's lines:

> "'All can raise the flower now.
> For all have got the seed.'"

Wyverne lifted a monocle which dangled from his button-hole by a slender gold chain, and fixing it in his eye regarded the speaker for an instant before he said in a cool, sarcastic voice:

"Extremely easy to raise any flowers, you know, when one has the seed. Even optimistic views of life may be cultivated in that way. There are many examples of it in literature."

Stafford laughed. "Not a doubt of it," he replied. "But the writer who follows a fashion, whether it be optimistic or pessimistic, romantic or realistic, instead of opening his eyes to life and painting it to the best of his ability as it is, with all its lights and shadows, is, frankly speaking, of small account as an artist, however much cleverness he may possess."

"I am glad to hear you say that," remarked Lady Feringham. "For so much modern literature is, despite its cleverness, detestable because of its spirit; and when I have said so, I have been told that I should consider artistic form before everything else; which seems to me like putting the body before the soul."

"Of course it is," a pretty young woman cried. "But don't we do that all the time? Bodies are so evident, you see, but souls— what do we really know about souls?"

With expanded eyes, she appealed to the little group, and was answered by a general laugh.

"We know," Lady Feringham said, "that your body, lovely as it is, my dear Mrs. Dalzell, wouldn't be worth very much without your soul. It would only be a little perishable matter—"

"Oh!" deprecated Mrs. Dalzell. "Don't say such horrid things— about my poor body, too!"

"And we have all," Lady Feringham went on, "known some pretty bodies quite spoiled by ugly souls. There's a great deal of literature like that, though I suppose it is very old-fashioned to think so." Then the speaker glanced around at the lengthening shadows and shivered a little. "We had better go indoors," she said. "The day has been perfect; but it is growing a little chilly now."

There was a general consensus of opinion on the latter point; and, since every one had by this time finished drinking tea, the different members of the group gathered themselves up out of their basket-chairs, and with much chatter and laughter strolled across the turf toward the house.

As the general movement began, Stafford looked at Sylvia.

“Do you feel like going indoors?" he asked. "The day is still very perfect, if one walks instead of sitting still. But perhaps you are tired?"

"Not in the least," she answered. "It will be delightful to take a walk. Where shall we go?"

"To the river, I think. For I fancy you are like myself, attracted by water in any form."

"Oh, yes," she sighed slightly; "I miss my lake, by the side of which I lived so long. Let us go to the river by all means. It might be larger, but it is quite charming. I was out on it yesterday with Mr. Wyverne."

"Ah! and can you say of Mr. Wyverne that, although he might be larger, he is quite charming?"

"How unkind!" But her eyes laughed, while her tongue reproved. "What has poor Mr. Wyverne done to you that you say such satirical things of him?"

"There is nothing satirical in what I said. He might be larger— you'll not deny that."

"Of course I can't. He has the limitations of his life, and the defects of his qualities— who hasn't?"

"Very few persons haven't, one must admit. But there's a certain British conceit which is quite hopeless, of which it strikes me that Mr. Wyverne may be an example. But granting this as only one of the defects of his qualities, you haven't answered whether or not you find the qualities charming."

"Isn't that rather a strong expression?" she asked. "I can't say that I find him or his qualities charming, but agreeable— yes, he is distinctly agreeable. And so, I may add, are a great many other people."

Stafford's whimsical smile was in his eyes as he regarded her.

"You are very happily constituted," he said, "if you find a great many people distinctly agreeable. But there is safety in numbers."

"Safety!" She lifted her brows. "For whom?"

"Don't misunderstand me if I say for yourself. You see there are dangers in matrimony for everybody; but for you—"

"Aren't you dreaming?" she inquired, as he paused. "Who is considering matrimony for me?"

"To be frank, our friend Lady Feringham," he answered. "She has set her heart on getting you established in life, and she has confided to me that, in her opinion, Mr. Wyverne has been sent by Providence as a desirable *parti*."

"How perfectly absurd!" Sylvia's laugh rang out sweet, clear and amused. "And what a shameful betrayal of confidence on your part! Poor Mr. Wyverne! I am quite certain that such an idea has never entered his head."

"I am not at all certain of it," Stafford observed, as he stooped to unfasten a boat which lay moored at the foot of some steps that went down from the end of the lawn to a beautiful stretch of water. "We have time for a short row," he said, "and at the bend of the river below we can catch the sunset."

"Can we? Then let us go. Sunsets are always worth catching."

It was a tranquil stream, typically English in its gentle beauty, on which they found themselves afloat a minute later. But as Stafford took the oars and looked at the girl who sat opposite him with the rudder lines in her slender hands, the softly-gliding crystal current, the woods in their early spring greenery overhanging it, and the faintly blue sky above seemed to vanish, while memory summoned back the marvellous glowing world of jewel-like colour, in which they had floated together before— the wide lake, stretching afar to mountains carved in lapis-lazuli, the resplendent sunset tints on sky and water.

"It is wonderful!" he said as if to himself.

Sylvia glanced curiously at him. "What is wonderful?" she asked.

"Why, that any one could fit so well into two such different scenes," he replied. "I was thinking of Chapala— how we floated there, as we are floating here, and you looked a part of that, as you seem a part of this."

"Do I?" Again came the soft sigh he was beginning to know so well. "The seeming is only outward then, for here I feel what I am— a stranger and foreigner."

"And do you regret that you came?"

"How could I regret it? Have you forgotten all our conversations— forgotten why I came?"

"No," he answered, "I have forgotten nothing; but I have begun to be a little afraid of the responsibility I assumed when I offered advice which may have influenced you a little."

"It influenced me very much," she said. "But there has not been a day since I left home that I have not realized how wise it was, not a day that in my mind I have not been grateful to you. Do you remember

what you said about unsounded depths, about their being unsafe? Well," her smile was not altogether easy to read, "I've been sounding them diligently, both in myself and others, and I have made several interesting discoveries."

"As for example—?"

"For example, I have learned the value of certain protestations of devotion."

His heart leaped up. She could not speak like this— above all, she could not look like this— if she had suffered, even in her pride, from the experience to which she alluded.

"I think," he said, "that your instinct told you the value of those protestations before you tested them."

"No," she replied, "I cannot flatter myself that I had any instinct of the kind. It never occurred to me to doubt— *him*. I only doubted myself. I was quite sure of being offered— what shall I say— a heart?— a life?— when what I was really offered was a fancy, apparently of the most light and vagrant kind. I confess that I was very much astonished when I first discovered this, and perhaps a little mortified to think that I had been so easily deceived— that I might so easily have made such a great mistake."

"There was no danger of your making any mistake," Stafford assured her. "You could never have loved the man of whom we are talking, and therefore you could never have really thought of marrying him."

She considered him attentively for a moment before she said:

"I wonder— it's my turn to wonder now, you see —how you can be so sure of that. Frankly, I am not sure. I didn't refuse him, you know. I promised to consider his suit."

Stafford sent the boat forward with a sudden spurt of energy, which was due to the angry indignation that possessed him.

"I did not know, but I imagined something of the kind," he said. "And yet in the face of his declaration and your promise to consider it, he has—"

"Become infatuated with my mother," Sylvia ended quietly. "I really don't think he could help it. She seemed, as it were, to overwhelm and take possession of him from the first. I imagine she is the kind of woman whom he finds irresistible."

"Exactly," Stafford assented drily. "She always appeals so strongly to men of his type that I am surprised I didn't foresee this."

"And strange to say, the attraction seems mutual."

"There is nothing strange in that, either," Stafford said. "Mrs. Lestrange is a person of many — fancies. Her favourite of the moment is generally some man younger than herself, who gives her a certain degree of passionate admiration which is so gratifying to her vanity that it has become a necessity to her. It is an incense without which she could hardly live."

"I have noticed it."

Something in the girl's tone, and in the expression which flitted across her face, made Stafford conscious of a passionate stirring of anger— this time against fate, and also in a measure against himself, for having brought her into such associations. Involuntarily he exclaimed:

"It has been a great mistake. You should never have come here."

She looked at him now, not only with surprise, but with something in the depths of her eyes which made him feel that he had spoken foolishly.

"You are forgetting," she said, "what I told you a few minutes ago; and you are also forgetting all the wise things you said to me before I came. *I* have not forgotten them, and I have found them very true. The crucial moments will come, and when they come one must be prepared for them, and there is no way to be prepared except by knowing—knowing oneself and others. Oh, believe me," she broke off, "I have learned a great deal since I have been here!"

"I haven't the least doubt of it," he replied, "but whether what you have learned is for your happiness—-"

"Happiness!" Leaning back in her seat, she regarded him with the same faint and subtle smile which had curved her lips before. "Do you think I came here for *that*?"

There was a moment's silence—a moment in which glance answered glance, and in which Stafford felt himself filled with a sudden wild desire to put out his hand and beg her to let him take her away from it all, to set sail with her for that elusive isle of Happiness, in vain quest of which the most of us spend our lives, but which is sometimes found, for a brief time at least, by those who seek it with self-forgetful hearts. But with the desire came the thought that to speak was to put himself in a different relation to her, and to forfeit perhaps the friendly confidence which he now received. No, for her sake even more than for his own, he must be silent, since he was her only friend in this strange, new world; and if he failed her, where would she find another? It was that question which brought his thoughts back to Lady Feringham, and so he answered Sylvia's last words by saying abruptly:

"I am very glad that you have come to know and like Lady Feringham. At least it is quite certain that she likes you."

"She has been very kind to me," Sylvia replied; "and I like her very much. She tells me that I am related to her through my father."

"Yes, her mother was his cousin. This inclines her to take you up warmly; and she has power to be of great service to you. Let me urge you to allow her to befriend you."

"Even to the extent of marrying me to Mr. Wyverne, if he is kindly complaisant?"

"You are jesting, and I am in earnest. You must know that your present position may at any time become intolerable."

A shadow came over her face. She looked away from him, for at this moment they reached the bend of which he had spoken, and the stream widening out spread mirror-like and placid before them, while over low-lying green meadows the gaze passed to a sunset full of lovely colour—no resplendence such as dwelt in the memory of both, but the soft tones, the delicate rose and tender aquamarine, of the misty English skies. There was a wonderful tranquility in the wide picture; and some of it seemed reflected in Sylvia's eyes when she presently turned them again toward Stafford.

"I don't allow myself to think of such possibilities," she said. "If they come, I hope I shall know how to meet them. But since things never happen as one looks for them to happen, it is best to spare oneself anticipation."

Chapter XV

"The Queen Of Cyprus"

THERE was no question of the fact that, when the curtain finally went up for the first presentation of "The Queen of Cyprus," there had seldom been a more brilliant first-night audience assembled in London than filled the theatre. And, although the season with its multitude of attractions was now well under way, there were several reasons for the interest manifested in the new play. In the first place,

London, as every actor and actress knows, is very loyal to its favourites; and Mrs. Lestrange had firmly established her place among these, while she was now appearing, after months of preparation, in a new part which was said to bring out some powers which she had not hitherto been suspected of possessing. Secondly, there were rumours about the play itself which excited interest. Stafford's name stood for good

work; he had one or two dramatic successes already to his credit, and those among the critics who recognized qualities of fine workmanship when they saw them, had predicted that he would one day produce something truly great. It was said that these predictions were now to be verified, that the play which after long rehearsal and unlimited expenditure was to be produced, was a very brilliant piece of work— romantic, but full of strong dramatic situations, and character-drawing which was at once effective and accurate. Naturally a public, surfeited with problem plays and depressing Norwegian pessimism, pricked its ears when these things were prophesied, and went forth in numbers in the hope of once more seeing something in touch with the heroic, rather than the sordid verities of life ; something which, however full of human interest, was yet not without poetic beauty.

And so the crowd pouring into the theatre that night was a sight to cheer any manager's heart. The fashionable world was present in force, together with artists, writers, critics, and even a representative of royalty. Everybody seemed to know everybody else, and there was a constant hum of conversation in the well-dressed throng surging up the broad staircases and all over the newly decorated house.

In a box near the stage Sylvia sat with Lady Feringham, who, notwithstanding that as a general rule she turned a cold shoulder toward the famous actress, did not allow this coldness to extend to refusing the offer of a box on such a night as this, coupled with a request of chaperonage for a girl already known both as a beauty and an heiress. The girl herself looked pale as she sat, presenting only a finely cut profile to the audience, her eyes fastened, as if in eager expectation, on the sweeping folds of the great velvet curtain which fell from the proscenium arch. Presently the orchestra filed into their seats; there was a brief rendering of some airs that in their wild, strange cadences suggested melodies which may be heard even to-day in Greece; and then the lights were lowered, the curtain parted, and revealed a picture that for sumptuous beauty had never been surpassed upon the modern stage.

The scene presented was the magnificent Council Chamber of the Palace of the Assizes in Nikosia, capital of Cyprus and city of the Crusaders. From the gleaming marble pavement of this great hall rose the polished shafts of classic columns, leading in stately vista to a canopied dais, on which stood the throne of carved alabaster. As the curtain parted there was a fanfare of trumpets, and into the splendid setting there swept a pageant in which all that was most gorgeous in the Italy of the Renaissance mingled with the splendour of the Byzantine East, and the mediaeval glory of the Crusaders, still surviving in this island kingdom, conquered by Richard Coeur de Lion, and given by him to Guy de Lusignan, the expelled King of Jerusalem.

Superbly costumed the Court of Cyprus entered, with the great nobles of the realm, the high officers of State, the hierarchy of the Church, and the representatives of Venice attending the Queen who came to take possession of the capital of her kingdom. And when the figure which was the centre of all the picturesque pomp appeared, a great burst of applause broke forth, for it was as if Titian's glorious portrait of Caterina Cornaro, wakened into life, walked across the stage in supreme loveliness and incomparable grace. Never had Mrs. Lestrange's personal charms been more effectively displayed; and, if there were those who recognized that she did not truly present the girl-queen, who at nineteen was left by the death of her husband and her son to bear the weight of a crown to which she was not born, but rather played the part with the assured and splendid bearing of a mature woman, they almost forgot the historical Caterina in admiring the conception of mingled witchery and command in the character presented.

The key-note of this conception was struck in the speech delivered after the Queen had taken her place on the throne, with the splendid Court grouped around her. In clear, silvery tones, with a subtle blending of authority and appeal, she recounted all that had preceded this assembly, recalling with pathos her coming as a bride from Venice, the tragic death of her husband, the birth of her son and his early death, followed by the conspiracy and armed attempt to wrest the kingdom from her which had lately been defeated. Then in a loftier strain she declared that, having by the late king's will inherited the crown as heir of her son, she was prepared to defend her rights, and therefore had come to the capital of her

kingdom to receive the homage of her subjects and, in accordance with ancient custom, to swear on the holy Evangel to uphold the laws of Cyprus. As she ceased speaking, a procession of priests in rich vestments advanced from the arcades of the hall, bearing the ancient and sacred Manuscript of the Evangel which was one of the treasures of Cyprus, together with a copper casket containing the revered Books of the Law, known as the "Assizes of Jerusalem." The Queen, descending the steps of the throne, knelt and kissed the venerated volume, then laid her hand on the Evangel, presented to her by the Archbishop, and solemnly swore to uphold the laws and statutes of Cyprus.

There was an outburst of cheering, with cries of "Viva Regina!"; but hardly had she risen to her feet, and turned to acknowledge the homage, when the cheering died as abruptly as it had risen, and out of a crowd gathered at the lower part of the hall a striking figure stepped— that of a knight, splendid and gallant in dress and bearing. Advancing into the open space between the Court and the spectators, he cried in a voice that rang like a trumpet:

"I, Guy de Montferrat, protest in the name of Carlota, rightful Queen of Cyprus, and in the name of all our ancient nobility, descendants of the Crusaders, against acknowledging as our sovereign one who is a stranger, a foreigner, and a mere pawn of
Venice, the grasping Lion whose paw is even now extended to seize our fair island."

Tumult at once broke out in the assembly, in the midst of which the representatives of Venice could be heard demanding the immediate arrest of the speaker, who defiantly held his ground, but behind whom now grouped a body of armed men, bearing a banner with the device and colour of the house of Montferrat, the most ancient and powerful house, after that of Lusignan, in the kingdom. There were ominous murmurs from the populace, who from the great court beyond began to fill the arcades of the hall; and, while those about the Queen looked at one another in consternation, believing strife and bloodshed to be imminent, Caterina mounted again the steps of the throne, and turned with an air of royal dignity that imposed silence on the excited throng.

"I am glad," she said, in clear, ringing tones, "that there is one among the nobles of Cyprus bold enough to utter in my presence what I know that many are saying out of my hearing, for it enables me to declare to you. Sir Guy de Montferrat, and to all who think and feel with you, that it is not as the Daughter of Venice that I stand here, but as a true Cyprian, the wife of one of your kings, and the mother and heir of another; that with my whole heart I pledge myself to put the claims of Cyprus before all else, and, as I have just sworn, to uphold her laws against any power that may assail them. To what penalty you have exposed yourself by this bold defiance, you know well; but, since nothing becomes a sovereign so well as clemency, I, Caterina, Queen of Cyprus, bid you for your bravery go hence unharmed, and take the message I have given you to my people."

There was another murmur of mingled applause and protest— the last especially from the Venetians; but, with a gesture of superb command, she forbade any attempt to arrest De Montferrat, who, bowing low before her, left the hall.

The second act, less superb in pageantry but equally beautiful in its setting, took place in the Queen's apartments in the royal palace. Here Caterina was found with one of her maids of honour, to whom she confides that, knowing it to be necessary to win De Montferrat to her side if she would ever really reign in Cyprus, since, besides his personal power and influence, the people never forgot that he was a descendant of Conrad de Montferrat who once sat upon the throne of Jerusalem, she had given orders that he should be quietly arrested before he could leave Nikosia, and brought to her in private. Even as she speaks, there is a stir at the door, the guard enters with De Montferrat and then retires, leaving her alone with him.

In the scene which followed all the powers of the actress were brought into play; and even Stafford, angered though he was at her persistence in introducing a note of deliberate seductiveness which did not belong to the character as he had conceived and drawn it, was forced to acknowledge that no one

could have risen more finely to the full height of a situation which called for the finest dramatic qualities and skill. The manner in which she overcame the hostility of the man who opposed her claims and told her to her face that she was but a tool of Venice to be used for the subjection of Cyprus, the subtle skill with which she played upon every string of feeling, appealing, charming, beguiling, and finally bringing him to the point where, overwhelmed by the spell of her fascination, he abjured allegiance to Carlota, was such a triumph of art that, when the curtain finally went down on De Montferrat kneeling to tender the homage she bent to receive, the house broke into a tempest of applause which was for the skill of the actress more than for the beauty of the woman.

Lady Feringham looked around and nodded to Sylvia.

“My dear,'* she said, "I never before realized what a fine actress your mother is. That scene was superbly played! Bernhardt herself could have done it no better. She has found a part that fits her like a glove, and she should certainly be obliged to Mr.
Stafford for providing it."

Sylvia smiled a little inscrutably. "I am not sure that Mr. Stafford had much to do with her interpretation of the character of Caterina," she said; “but, given the interpretation, she plays it wonderfully. There is no doubt of her power."

“No English-speaking actress has anything like it," Lady Feringham declared. “One is almost tempted to feel that such genius excuses *anything*."

"At least it explains many things," the girl said. Then she glanced back at the stage. “You will like the next act," she said. “It is very beautiful."

It was certainly a beautiful scene on which the curtain rose, in the garden of the palace, where the Queen receives one after another of those who are pulling strings of intrigue around her. The Cyprians come to complain of Venice, the Venetian envoy comes to protest against the pardon and favour accorded to De Montferrat, and through all the Queen steers her course with consummate skill and the intellectual subtlety of a true daughter of the Renaissance. It is only when she is finally alone with the Archbishop that, throwing aside her guard of reserve, she begs him to tell her in what way she can best convince the Cyprians that she is with them in heart and soul, and determined to maintain the independence of the island against the constantly encroaching power of Venice. The prelate, after some diplomatic hesitation, tells her that the only way she can accomplish this is to marry one of the representatives of the old nobility. Deftly led to suggest who this shall be, he names Guy de Montferrat, as the noblest and most powerful. Then the Queen bids him go, and with her authority propose the alliance to De Montferrat—"for," she says, “I am a queen, and, as a queen, must speak where as a woman it would be shame to me to do so." The Archbishop goes, and speedily returns with De Montferrat, whom he leaves with Caterina. An exquisite love scene follows, in which they lay their plans for reigning together in happiness, and making Cyprus indeed the "Isola Fortunata" of the isles of Greece.

But on this idyl there breaks the sinister power of Venice. When Caterina announces her intention of marrying again, she is peremptorily told that she is forbidden by the Signoria of the Republic to make any matrimonial alliance whatever. The paw of the
Lion, velvet-sheathed until now, puts forth its claws, and she learns that she is indeed but a pawn in Cyprus, and that nothing but a shadow of liberty or power is allowed her. Then, in a magnificent scene, she announces her resolve to rule as a true sovereign and not as a tool of Venice; she defies the power of the Signoria, and putting her hand in that of De Montferrat declares: “We will fight for the crown, for the laws and liberties of Cyprus."

The first scene of the last act shows the terrace of a fortress, from the tower of which the flag of Cyprus is floating, and where Caterina is making her last stand for independence. The ships of Venice are in the harbour below, the troops of Venice surround her, but she has not surrendered hope, for De Montferrat, with many gallant Cyprians, is in arms to maintain her claim. There is to be a desperate sally

from the fortress, which he is to lead, and he comes now to bid her farewell. In a touching scene he assures her of his undying love, while promising that the sons of those who fought for the Holy Sepulchre will once more fight as becomes their name, and will either place her in freedom and security on the throne of Cyprus, or leave their bodies on the field of battle. Then, as she cries out against this, and bids him come back even if defeated, since it is for him far more than for the throne of Cyprus that she cares, he embraces her and rushes away.

The second scene opens with the sound of tumult and fighting. The fortress is being stormed, and Caterina comes out upon the terrace again as the victorious Venetians enter. She meets them proudly, and answers their claims with defiance. Called upon to abdicate in favour of the Republic, she refuses to do so, until she is told that De Montferrat is a prisoner, and that his life will be the forfeit if she continues to refuse. There is an agonizing struggle, but the Venetians are inexorable, and at last she yields. “Remember that I do this for his safety alone," she cries when the paper is laid before her. “Swear by the Body of Christ, that after I have signed you will bring him to me." They solemnly swear to do so, whereupon she signs “Caterina Regina" for the last time, and flings down the pen. "Now your promise!" she cries. “He is to be free. Bring him to me.

The Venetian commander gives an order. There is a pause, and then, to the sound of slow music, a procession enters bearing the dead body of De Montferrat. "He fell in the fore-front of battle, as became a son of the Crusaders," the bearers tell Caterina as they lay him at her feet, and while she falls senseless upon his form, the flag of Cyprus is lowered on the tower, and the banner of St. Mark is unfurled above it.

When in answer to cries of "Author! Author!" from the applauding house, Stafford, leading Mrs. Lestrange, came out and bowed his thanks, he lifted his eyes to the box where Sylvia was leaning forward, and it seemed to him that the radiance of the glance which met his own might have traversed space like the light of a planet. A few minutes later the same eyes met his again, as Sylvia and Lady Feringham appeared on the stage, where the star was holding a triumphant court, and where friends and acquaintances were also crowding forward to shake the hand of the author and offer congratulations on the success of the play. Sylvia spoke to her mother, and then moved toward Stafford with extended hand.

"Oh, it was beautiful!" she cried. "Even the rehearsals gave one no idea how beautiful! And you are right; she is a great actress."

"How great I never knew myself until to-night," Stafford answered. "But with all her power, she is not the Caterina of whom I dreamed. That Caterina I shall never see."

The shining eyes looked at him. "I am mad, I suppose," the girl said, "but I feel, I almost believe, that you might see her— if the impossible could happen."

“I believe it, too," he replied, "if, as you say, the impossible could happen. But it never will."

She shook her head with a soft sigh. "No," she agreed. "It never will."

These were the only words they had together; but when all the excitement and triumph of the evening, including the brilliant supper, with congratulatory speeches and toasts which closed it, were over, Stafford found that the memory which remained with him most clearly, was not of the success of the play, of its beautiful scenes, of the grace with which Mrs. Lestrange had moved through these scenes, nor yet the words of praise which distinguished lips had spoken in his ear— discriminating praise such as every artist loving his art values—but rather the light in Sylvia's eyes, and the tone in which she had said: "If the impossible could happen!"

Chapter XVI

The Impossible Happens

THE day after the successful premiere of the play, Stafford left town and went down to a quiet place on the coast, giving as an excuse that he felt the need of secluding himself in order to accomplish some work which he had on hand, but really desiring an opportunity to pull himself together of which he knew he had greater need.

The seclusion was easily secured, though it is doubtful if his work profited much thereby. But the mental process called pulling himself together was a different matter; and this he found extreme difficulty in accomplishing. For it was one thing to tell himself that he would be a fool if he yielded to his love for a girl almost young enough to be his daughter, who was also incidentally the daughter of a woman to whom he had long given a misplaced devotion—a girl whose beauty and wealth would obtain for her a far more brilliant future than he could possibly offer; and quite another to heed his own admonitions. Do what he would, the luminous eyes shone before him, the musical voice sounded in his ear, and the whole rare and exquisite personality appealed to him with irresistible force. And it was not only these things which appealed. There was another and deeper call upon tenderness in the loneliness of the girl, in his knowledge of the relations between her mother and herself, and his perception of the dangers of many kinds which surrounded her. He could not forget that at the supper which followed the play, he had again been forced to observe Prince Voronine's attitude toward her, and been filled thereby with resentment and growing uneasiness. For since his return to London he had heard many things of this man, whom every capital of Europe knew as one who had lived to the utmost the life of his day and time; and, while none of these things perhaps unfitted him to mate with Mrs. Lestrange, they made the thought of his approaching Sylvia almost hideous. Yet of his admiration for her there could be no doubt. It was indeed so marked that Stafford wondered a little at Mrs. Lestrange's apparent indifference, although aware that this indifference was due to her absorption in her fancy for De Rivera. He had often before seen her absorbed by a like fancy; but never before had she allowed it to interfere with anything which touched her interest, nor had he ever detected such a note of triumph as that with which she received and encouraged the homage of the young Mexican. More than once he had caught a gleam of this triumph in her eyes as they turned on Sylvia. And, although the latter absolutely ignored the situation, it seemed almost impossible that Prince Voronine's admiration should not suggest a means of reprisal which lay ready to her hand.

Altogether the situation seemed to cry aloud that Lady Feringham was right; it would be better the girl should marry anybody, even Wyverne with all his British insularity, than remain exposed to such perils as now surrounded her. And then the impulse became overwhelming to put his own fate to the test, and learn if, in another and deeper sense, the impossible might not happen. So strong was the temptation that flight had seemed the only resource— flight which would give him time to reflect, consider, get himself in hand.

But, as time went on, he found that the last process was not proceeding very satisfactorily, and then suddenly one day, as he lay on the top of a cliff which overlooked the tossing waters of the Channel, he was seized with a sense of panic in remembering that he had been absent a week, and that in a week many things might happen. He felt guilty of having deserted his post, of thinking of himself rather than of her who had once asked his help in the difficulties she foresaw before her, and to whom he had again offered that help. Starting up, he determined to return to London at once; and it was one of the curious coincidences of life that, as he reached the door of his hotel, he met a messenger with a telegram for him. A deeper panic clutched his heart. He tore it open and read:

Return immediately. Serious emergency to be met.

Hawkes.

His first inclination was to laugh, so great was his relief that the recall was only from Hawkes. And then the words "serious emergency" arrested his attention. What could the emergency which demanded his presence possibly be unless it concerned Mrs. Lestrange? What had happened, and why the devil could not Hawkes have expressed himself intelligibly? His exasperation was not lessened by recollection of the fact that people almost invariably consider it necessary to be cryptic in telegrams, fancying apparently that there is some special virtue in obscurity. He could only feel that if the trouble hinted at in any way touched Sylvia, while he had not been there to help her, he would never be able to forgive himself.

He had time in the short journey up to town to convince himself that nothing serious from his point of view, whatever it might be from that of Hawkes, could possibly have happened; but was not so thoroughly convinced that he was willing to make any delay on reaching London. Since it was past the time for finding Hawkes at the theatre, he decided to see Mrs. Lestrange immediately. He drove to her house, but to his inquiry the servant at the door replied:

“Mrs. Lestrange is not at home, sir. She has had a bad accident in a motor-car, and is laid up at Richmond."

“Good heavens!" Even as Stafford stared at the man he was aware of a quick sense of relief that the thing foreshadowed proved to be no worse.

"Where is Miss Lestrange?"

He asked the question almost mechanically, expecting to be informed that Sylvia was with her mother; but much to his surprise the servant answered:

“Miss Lestrange is in town, sir. She came up from Richmond this morning."

“Oh!" Stafford walked in. “Let her know, then, that I would like to see her."

The drawing-room was empty when he was shown into it, but he had not many minutes to wait. Almost immediately the portières dividing the room from a boudoir behind were drawn back, and Sylvia entered. Before she spoke, he knew that she was glad to see him.

“What good fortune this is!" she cried. “I wonder if it was my longing for you that has brought you."

“If I had known of the longing, it would have brought me from the ends of the earth," Stafford assured her. “But I must confess myself so spiritually dull that, although I have done little lately but think of you, it required a telegram from Hawkes to bring me."

“Ah!" She looked at him with an expression of eagerness. “A telegram from Mr. Hawkes— what did he say?"

“That a serious emergency demanded my presence, or something to that effect. Of course it would have been too much to expect him to have sense enough to tell me what the emergency was; so I came up to town to find out."

“Have you seen him?"

“Hawkes? No. Fancying the trouble to be about the play, I came here to inquire what was the matter, and heard of Mrs. Lestrange's accident. I'm extremely sorry. Tell me about it."

“There is not much to tell," Sylvia answered. "Yesterday— Sunday, you know— she motored down to Richmond with Mr. de Rivera, and there was an accident. Don Luis was acting as his own chauffeur, and I suppose he didn't understand what he was about, or his attention was— distracted. At all events, the car ran against a tree, turned over, and narrowly missed killing them both. It would certainly have killed them if they hadn't fallen clear of it."

"And as it is?"

"As it is, my mother has a broken arm, and Mr. de Rivera some broken ribs; and they are both badly shaken and bruised."

"Hm! Quite a warning of the perils of motoring.”

"And of some other things," Sylvia added a trifle drily. Then her manner changed. "If you have come straight from a journey, you must be tired," she said. "Sit down, and let me ring for tea at once." As she rang the bell, she added, "I have so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin."

"Begin anywhere," Stafford said, settling himself in a chair. "To hear you talk is pleasure enough."

"It is possible that it may not continue to be a pleasure when you hear what I have to say," she answered, laughing a little, "so you must be fortified by your tea; and here it is."

While he received the tea, Stafford became conscious of a subdued excitement in the manner of the girl. The hands which moved among the cups were trembling slightly, an unaccustomed flush was on her cheeks, and the deep gray eyes were shining with a light which he had by this time learned to know. A sudden foreboding seized him.

"You might as well tell me at once what you have been doing," he said. "There is no good in deferring a shock. I am ready for it."

"Are you?" She rose for a moment, stood in her graceful slenderness on the white rug before the fireplace, and then sat down again. "I wish some one else had told you," she said.

Stafford went pale. AH that he most feared seemed expressed in those words. It was his turn now to rise. He crossed the rug and stood by the mantel, looking down at her.

"Tell me!" he repeated. "What have you done?"

She glanced up, startled by his tone; and he saw a certain appeal in her eyes.

"I have not done anything yet," she said. "I have only promised to do something; but if you think it too imprudent—too foolish—"

"If *I* think!"

"Too presumptuous, perhaps I should say— why, I will give it up. I am afraid he will be very much disappointed—"

"*He*! For God's sake tell me plainly of whom you are speaking!"

"Why, of Mr. Hawkes." There was astonishment now in look and tone— astonishment caused by his tone. "I forgot that you could not know—"

"Hawkes!" Relief, amazement, stupefaction made Stafford stand for a moment motionless, staring at her. Then, with a flash of inspiration, the meaning of her enigmatic sentences came to him. "Ah!" he cried. "You are thinking of taking your mother's part in the play."

"Yes." She stood up again, to face him more nearly. "Do you think me mad? But you know what we said— that the impossible could never happen. Yet it has happened. Here is the chance to do what we both believe I can do."

"I never believed you could do it without training or preparation," Stafford said, grasping the mantel, with an instinct of supporting himself under such a shock. "It can't be permitted; you don't know what an ordeal you would be preparing for yourself. It is not you who are mad; it is Hawkes!"

"He thought that *I* was, when I told him what I wanted to do," she replied. "You see I had no thought of it at first. I went to the theatre to tell him how impossible it was for my mother to come. I had just returned from Richmond, where I went yesterday evening, and I brought him many messages from her. They were all about closing the theatre, for it seems there is no understudy to take her part—"

"Mrs. Lestrange never has an understudy."

"So Mr. Hawkes said. He was almost weeping over the prospect, the necessity of closing the theatre, the terrible loss, and especially to-night with the house all sold. Then the thought came to me that here was my opportunity. I had a feeling of certainty that I could act the part of Caterina, and I told Mr. Hawkes so. Of course he looked at me as if I were an absolute lunatic, but I assured him that I knew the part word for word, that I had watched the rehearsals closely after I began to go to them, and begged him at least to try me. Well, finally he did; he was in despair, you see, and ready to grasp at anything. We

rehearsed the scenes in which Caterina appears, over and over again, and— and the end was that he is going to risk it. I am to act the part to-night."

"It is simply impossible!" Stafford declared. "You are both mad, you and Hawkes! Such a thing cannot be permitted."

"Then," she explained, "I must believe that you were only flattering me, that you did not mean what you said when you told me that you thought I could act the part of Caterina."

"I meant every word," he answered; "but, when I told you that I was sure you could act, it was with the implied proviso that you had the necessary training and experience."

"Of course I understood that," she replied. "But don't you think that, granting the possession of the dramatic temperament— and you said you believed I had that—"

"I am sure you have it."

"Then, granting that, may not one who possesses such a temperament dispense with training and experience?"

"Never, never!"

"Ah, listen to me!" she pleaded eagerly. "Let me finish my sentence— or rather, let me change it. Granting the possession of the power to act, might not the necessary training be gained through the eye? You see I have watched all the business of the play so closely! And— you will laugh at me perhaps, but, after you said that you wished I could act Caterina, I have again and again locked my door and gone through the part for the pure pleasure of doing so, acting it as it seemed to me that it should be acted, and wishing that I might do it in reality. So when the chance came, I was prepared to seize it, and I thought, foolishly as it seems, that I might perhaps please you—"

"Oh!" The sweetness and simplicity of her tone and manner were more than he could resist, and he seized one of the slender white hands in the clasp of both of his, as he said: "How can I tell you how much you please me by such a thought! To see you act Caterina as the part should be acted— to see the embodiment of my conception as you could embody it — would be such a pleasure as does not come to one often in life; but it might be bought too dearly. When I think of the risk you would run— of the possibility of failure, without the strong support of technical training and practice—of the merciless criticism which would follow, I feel that I must stand between you and such a possible ordeal! I cannot, dare not consent—"

She laid her other hand on his arm, and drew him toward the door by which she had entered. "There is a telephone in that room," she said. "Will you call up Mr. Hawkes, and let him tell you what he thinks?"

What Mr. Hawkes thought, transmitted over the telephone, was that he didn't blame Stafford for believing that he had taken leave of his senses; but that he was quite sane, and had no fear at all of the result of the experiment he was about to make. "If Miss Lestrange doesn't get an attack of stage-fright, she'll make a sensation such as London hasn't had in a decade!" he roared. "Her acting simply knocked me flat—*flat*, I tell you! It's wonderful! She's letter-perfect in her lines, and has the business at her finger-ends. Never saw a better understudy. She's ready to step right into the part; and I'm ready to lay almost any odds that she'll please the public as well or better than her mother. Look out for the biggest surprise you've ever had in your life; and whatever you do, don't discourage her."

Stafford hung up the receiver, and turned to Sylvia, who stood beside him.

"The thing seems settled," he said. "Heaven only knows what witchery you have exercised over Hawkes, but he appears to have gone off his head completely. So now we can only pray for a good ending of a perilous undertaking."

Chapter XVII

A Brilliant Success

STAFFORD was quite sure that he had never in his life known what nervousness really was— not even on the first night of his first play— until he stood at the wings waiting for the moment when Sylvia was to go on the stage. As one in a dream, he had heard Hawkes go out and announce to the crowded house that Mrs. Lestrange had suffered a slight accident which would prevent her appearance, but that he had pleasure in presenting in her place a young actress, for whom he begged the kind indulgence of the audience. He had heard the murmur of disappointment which greeted this announcement; he had seen Hawkes come back wiping his brow with an air of mingled trepidation and relief; he had watched the setting of the scene for the first act, and now—

Now she suddenly stood beside him, a vision of beauty in the splendid costume which Caterina wears for the High Court in the Palace of the Assizes, smiling as she held out her hand. "See," she whispered, "my nerves are quite steady."

They evidently were. The hand which he clasped had trembled more over the tea-cups in the afternoon than it was trembling now at the tremendous ordeal before her; and in its touch something like an electric current seemed to pass from her to him. Fear, anxiety, nervousness suddenly left him. He felt assured of a power in this girl to do the impossible, to rise above difficulties of which she was hardly conscious, but the knowledge of which had been crushing him, to such a triumph as is possible only for genius. In the sudden fervour of this belief he almost crushed the slender hand clasping his own. "You can do it!" he said eagerly. “I am perfectly sure of that now. The critical moment will come at your first entrance, your first speech. Don't look at the audience— don't think of them— keep yourself well in hand until you can forget yourself in your part —remember the pitch of your voice."

"Now, Miss Lestrange, now!"

It was Hawkes speaking at her side, all the anxiety which was consuming him in his tone. Sylvia withdrew her hand from Stafford's grasp, gave him another bright though slightly tremulous smile, and took her place in the procession ready to appear upon the stage.

The two men whom she left held their breath as their eyes followed her. Certainly the grace of her bearing, the inalienable grace which was part of her personal charm, was all that could be desired: and as the pageant swept into the great hall, there was no sound from the house to disconcert her. In the somewhat resentful attitude which an audience always displays when a substitute is presented instead of the star it has paid its money to see, the spectators sat silent in stalls, boxes and galleries, and through this silence the clear sweetness of her tones in her first speech— that from the throne— carried well and far. Stafford and Hawkes exchanged a glance, for this had been a critical moment. It had been altogether possible that, when she really found herself before the great sea of faces which stretched misty yet terrible beyond the footlights, stage-fright might seize her, as it has seized many another novice; that she might forget her lines, that her voice might fail, that anything in short might happen. But as it was, nothing happened— nothing except that at the first sound of that silvery voice, with a freshness and melody quite indescribable in its cadences, there was a slight stir in the audience, glasses were lifted all over the house and levelled at the lovely form in the midst of the brilliant stage-picture.

And then— well, then the audience passed entirely from Stafford's mind, as he watched with absorbed interest the progress of the scene. All fear that Sylvia might fail was now over, and he gave himself up entirely to the pleasure of seeing Caterina as he had dreamed of her, embodied before his eyes, with all the poetic charm which had been in his imagination, but which he had never expected to see grasped or realized by a living actress. But this girl who had grasped his ideal, proved also able to realize it, showing an astonishing, intuitive knowledge of the technique of the art which she was essaying to practise with so little preparation. Not for nothing, as it now proved, had she sat through long hours of

rehearsal, watching the details of stage business, absorbing all the consummate command of her art which had made Mrs. Lestrange one of the best actresses of her time. Everything that was good in the older woman's personation, the younger presented with wonderful fidelity; but in the mould thus made she poured the lavish wealth of her own personality, the finer perception, the higher mind, the truer dramatic instinct, the touch of rarer genius, the whole indefinable power which, for want of a better name, is called "magnetism."

Hawkes, who was watching the audience which Stafford had forgotten, saw how they were responding to this unexpected power. "They're sitting up; I tell you they're sitting up!" he whispered now and then with a delighted chuckle to the inattentive ear beside him as the act went on. And the audience, especially the critical part of it, was indeed "sitting up" in amazement. Who was this perfectly unknown actress who had appeared, as if by magic, to fill at a day's notice a difficult part, and to fill it in such a manner as to surprise and charm the oldest habitués of the theatre? Necessarily only a very small number of persons knew Sylvia personally, and of those persons only a few were present at the theatre; but from these few the whisper soon rose and spread that it was Mrs. Lestrange's daughter, the American heiress and beauty, who had taken her place and was filling it so wonderfully.

It was not, however, until the curtain had fallen on the first act, and the applause, which had risen in generous volume, was over, that this astonishing piece of news was generally spread. Then one critic of eminence, meeting another in the foyer, shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, I've heard," he said. "Amazing, isn't it? And yet not so amazing after all, for one understands it now. Before hearing who she was, the thing seemed inexplicable. Such beauty, coupled with undoubted dramatic talent and more than a fair grasp of dramatic art! One began to wonder if one was dreaming, or where in the name of all that was wonderful Hawkes had found such a marvel! Now it's all clear; we simply have a younger edition of Mrs. Lestrange, who has garnered the fruits of her mother's training, and added to them something finer and more delicate than the fair Violet herself ever possessed."

"It's extremely interesting," the other critic agreed. "I was on the point of leaving the house when Hawkes made his announcement, and I'm glad now that I didn't— one wouldn't have missed this for anything! The girl is charming, absolutely charming, and seems to have a conception of the character that differs from her mother's. I'm afraid it will prove an unlucky accident for Mrs. Lestrange. To have a rival in the person of her own daughter sprung upon her won't be very agreeable, you may be sure. By the bye, does anybody know what really happened to her?"

"Motor accident, I'm told. It seems she went motoring yesterday with that good-looking young Spanish-American who has been with her so much of late, and they were thrown out of the car and generally smashed up."

"By Jove! rather a heavy price to pay for flirtation, eh? And haven't I heard— yes, I'm sure I've heard that the young fellow was a lover of the daughter before the mother cast her spells over him."

"There's a nice little bit of poetical justice being enacted here to-night then," laughed the first speaker. "Unless I'm greatly mistaken in Mrs. Lestrange, fond as she is of casting spells, and of fresh and good-looking subjects on whom to cast them, she would have seen her picturesque Spanish-American comfortably in Hades before she would have run the risk of such a catastrophe as this. But we'd best be getting back to our seats. I don't want to miss a line of what's coming."

"It has been an astonishing beginning; do you think it can possibly hold out?"

The other again shrugged his shoulders. "Who can tell? Anything seems possible now, but of course she may fail entirely under the strain of the next acts. That is what I rather expect, but we'll see."

Meanwhile, with burning cheeks and shining eyes, Sylvia had received the delighted congratulations of Stafford and Hawkes and the members of the company, especially of Waring— the most handsome and graceful of knights in the part of De Montferrat — who declared that never before had he played with an actress so sympathetic and responsive. Then she hurried to her dressing-room to

make ready for the next act. When the curtain went up for this, there was no longer any fear for her in the mind of any one, and Stafford was able to give his whole attention to her presentation of the character of his heroine—a presentation more and more in accord with his ideal as the play proceeded and it became apparent how entirely the lower note which Mrs. Lestrange had introduced was eliminated. The scene with De Montferrat was played so delicately, with such exquisite though restrained art, that every touch told exactly as it was intended to tell; and, instead of a mature enchantress deliberately using the seductive arts of her womanhood to accomplish her end, there was a girl in all the radiance of youth, whose appeal was made through the finer, higher tissues of the spirit, and in whom the glow of awakening passion was as unconscious as the effect of her charm was irresistible. This conception made her acting so delightful that its poetic beauty pleased even those who under ordinary circumstances— that is, with a less enchanting personality— would have preferred the stronger and deeper effects which Mrs. Lestrange had given.

"You are everything of which I dreamed," Stafford told her when the act was over. "I never imagined it possible that I could ever see the character which was in my mind so perfectly embodied! Do you know that the future is your own— that, if you like, you can be a great actress?"

But at this she shrank a little. "Don't talk of that," she said. "I don't want to think of the future. We are just living in to-night –you and I. *You* wanted to see your character played as you dreamed of it, and *I* wanted to play it once— just once— for I felt sure that I could in a manner satisfy you."

"You have more than satisfied me. You have given me the greatest pleasure that a writer can know," he answered, "the pleasure of seeing the character I have created arise and walk in the loveliest form, the lines I have written spoken by a voice whose music I can never forget—"

"Wait, wait!" she cried, lifting her hands. "You know the hardest part is yet to come. I may disappoint you. We can't tell—"

"I can tell. It is impossible for you to disappoint me."

"It is not at all impossible. In the rehearsal I was far from satisfying myself in the supreme situation. But I feel as if I might do better to-night, for all this," she flung her hand out toward the now enthusiastic house, "helps and inspires one. It is like a tremendous stimulant, exhilarating, strengthening, putting life and fire into one's veins."

"And yet you doubt that you are a born actress!"

"I don't doubt it; half of me never doubted it. The other half— but don't let us rouse the other half! That can wait until to-morrow. To-night I must be Caterina— *all* Caterina! Is that the call? Good-bye."

Stafford caught the hand which she held out to him. "Remember," he said, "I have no doubt of your success— none."

Nevertheless he must have had a little, for to him, as to the eminent critic in the stalls and a good many less eminent critics scattered over the house, the manner in which she met the demands of the supreme situation was amazing. The force and flame of imagination which had sustained her all through, triumphing over every obstacle of inexperience, came to her aid; it was plain that she was not merely acting, she was *realizing* the situation, feeling all its emotion, rising to the supreme height of its passion, and thrilling her audience with the tragic intensity of her voice and gesture as even the actress she had replaced had hardly thrilled it. If there had been any doubt of this, the roar of applause which followed the final fall of the curtain would have been sufficient to convince the most incredulous.

This applause was still coming back in a great wave of sound when Stafford found her at his side.

"Will you help me to get away at once?" she asked quickly. "There may be people who will come to speak to me, and I cannot meet any one— I cannot!" In the reaction of excitement he saw that she was shaking like a leaf. "Will you help me?"

"With all my heart— in any way!" he answered. "Go to your dressing-room, while I see that your carriage is ready."

"Miss Lestrange!" It was Waring's voice, speaking eagerly. "You must come! The house is wild. They are determined to see you. It is a triumph of a life-time. You must appear."

"Must I?" She looked at Stafford for a moment irresolutely, then with a gesture as if pulling herself together, took the young actor's outstretched hand. "I have heard that such a triumph is sweet," she said. "Let me taste it— once."

Chapter XVIII

"To Stand Between You and All Storms"

BUT the delay to taste her triumph in its fulness brought upon Sylvia what she was so anxious to escape. She had hardly gone, and the applause with which she was greeted was rolling back to the wings in a tumultuous wave of sound, when a voice, with a cold edge to its tones, spoke at Stafford's side:

"I presume, Mr. Stafford, that we are indebted to you for this astonishing occurrence."

Stafford turned sharply to find himself looking into Prince Voronine's eyes. And, if there had been coolness in the voice, there was unmistakable hostility in the glance of those pale-blue eyes, with a glint of steel under their drooping lids. Some strong feeling was plainly forcing its way through the finished suavity of the Russian's usual manner, and Stafford's recognition of what that feeling was, gave a note of coldness to his own tone as he replied:

"It is not safe to presume too much from appearances, my dear prince. This astonishing occurrence, as you accurately call it, has been as much a surprise to me as to you. I have been out of town for a week, and only returned to-day, to find everything arranged between Miss Lestrange and Mr. Hawkes."

“Ah!" The prince looked at him keenly. "Then Mrs. Lestrange—"

“Mrs. Lestrange, as you are probably aware, has had an accident, and was unable to appear to-night."

"I am aware of Mrs. Lestrange's accident," the other returned a little drily; “but as far as one has been able to learn, her condition is not serious enough to prevent her from directing what should be done to supply her place, and it is incredible that she could have sanctioned this."

"It is possible," Stafford admitted, "that she was not consulted; but the result seems to justify those who took the risk of a daring venture."

A flash of anger came into the steel-blue eyes now. "You think," the prince said in a tone of resentment, "that the result— by which I suppose you mean the continued success of your play— justifies dragging Miss Lestrange before the public in a manner so lowering to her."

"I have already mentioned that I had absolutely nothing to do with dragging Miss Lestrange before the public," Stafford replied; "but I may be pardoned for suggesting that it is a trifle inconsistent for an admirer of the mother to find even a slight connection with her profession 'lowering' to the daughter."

The prince frowned. "You must recognize the difference in the two characters," he said. "What is suitable enough for one—"

"Is altogether unsuitable to the other," Stafford ended, as he broke off. "I grant you that readily enough. But I have no reason to believe that what we have seen to-night, remarkable as it is, will lead Miss Lestrange to adopt a life which for many reasons would be distasteful to her."

"A life with which she should never have been brought into contact," the prince declared in the same tone of resentful anger, and then paused abruptly, for at this moment Sylvia came toward them, a

radiant vision, about whom there seemed to breathe all the airs of enchanting youth. The excitement of the ovation she had just received had steadied her nerves, and like strong wine given such dazzling brilliance to her eyes, such a vivid rose-tint to her cheeks, that, looking at her, it was impossible not to recall the old simile of the lamp of naphtha in the alabaster vase, so entirely did her body appear to be merely an exquisite vessel of expression for the flame-like glow of the spirit within. When she saw the prince, she held out her hand with a smile.

"Have you come to congratulate, or to blame me?" she asked. “I have been frightfully presumptuous, I know—"

"You have been— you are wonderful!" he told her. "This is, I am sure, the most astonishing thing of its kind that ever happened, but I have not come to congratulate you. I feel too strongly that the stage is no place for you."

"Is it not?" Her shining eyes challenged the assertion. "Yet if what you are kind enough to call wonderful proves anything, it proves my right to be here."

"You don't mean that you intend to remain?" he asked in evident dismay.

Sylvia glanced at Stafford, and he alone understood the subtle meaning of her deepening smile.

“I have no intentions,” she said. “This has been merely the realization of a dream, a strange, unlooked-for chance to test my power, to find if I were right or wrong in believing that I could act. If I have proved it—"

"You know that you have proved it," Stafford interposed. "Experience in the technicalities of art is one thing, but the fire of dramatic genius is quite another; and the latter you certainly possess. Prince Voronine is right in saying that this is one of the most astonishing things of its kind that ever happened; but all the more it is necessary that you should now get away as soon as possible. You don't realize the nervous strain under which you have been acting, but you will feel it to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" It was Hawkes who echoed the word as he came up. "We must settle about to-morrow. Miss Lestrange. Of course it's understood that you will continue to appear."

But Sylvia shook her head. "Nothing is understood, Mr. Hawkes," she said, "except that I am glad to have been able to help you to-night. What will be done to-morrow depends on my mother, whom I shall see in the morning."

"It's impossible that Mrs. Lestrange will think of interfering," the manager cried. "Why, there's never been anything like it in the way of a success! And since she can't act herself, what better can she ask than to be able to put such a substitute on in her part?"

"For a man of your experience, Hawkes, you occasionally exhibit a remarkable lack of insight into feminine and dramatic human nature," Stafford observed. “But we needn't discuss Mrs. Lestrange's possible sentiments to-night, and arrangements about the play can be left for to-morrow. The imperative thing at present is that Miss Lestrange shall go home and rest.*' He turned to Sylvia with an air of decision. “Let me take you to your dressing-room," he said.

She laid one hand on his offered arm, but extended the other to the crest-fallen manager.

“We really can't settle anything to-night, Mr. Hawkes," she said; “but thank you so much for trusting and encouraging me. For your sake, even more than for my own, I am glad it wasn't a failure." Her glance turned to Prince Voronine. "And thank *you*.” she said, "if not for congratulations, at least for coming to tell me that it was wonderful."

The prince started forward, as if to speak, but Stafford had already drawn her away, and he fell back, looking after the two figures with a frown which was not dissipated by the cheerful voice of Mr. Hawkes.

"Most remarkable thing I have ever known in the course of a long stage experience!" the latter declared. "I think we may flatter ourselves, *Mossu le prince*, that we have assisted at the rising of a new dramatic star to-night."

"I hope that we have done nothing of the kind," Prince Voronine replied sharply. "This has been merely a girl's caprice, and if it goes no further, it will soon be forgotten."

"But who is to say that it shall go no further?" the manager demanded. "Miss Lestrange is old enough to know her own mind and control her own actions; and, after the success she has made to-night, she will be a fool if she turns her back on the brilliant possibilities of the stage, unless something a great deal more brilliant is offered her."

It was a mere form of expression, but it seemed to strike Prince Voronine with the force of a suggestion. He stared at the speaker for a moment. "Something may be—" he began involuntarily, and then, as if remembering himself, nodded shortly and turned away.

In the meantime Sylvia's maid met her at the door of the dressing-room with a large silk cloak which she wrapped around her. And then, while the girl lingered behind to gather up all the things which were in her charge, Stafford found an opportunity to say what was very much on his mind, as he led Miss Lestrange to her waiting carriage.

"You spoke a few minutes ago," he said, "of going to Richmond to-morrow morning. Now I want to beg you not to do so, but to allow me to carry this news to Mrs. Lestrange."

Sylvia turned her graceful head, and he thought he had never seen anything so full of sweetness as the expression of the face which looked at him from under its shadowing hood.

"It is kind of you to propose such a thing," she said in a tone which matched the look, "but you must know that I cannot allow you to take my place."

"Why should you consider it your place?" he inquired. "I look upon it as my place to report what has been done to Mrs. Lestrange. It is my play, you know."

"Yes," she laughed softly, "and how much had you to do with its production to-night? No, no, Mr. Stafford, I can't let you assume any share of my responsibility, for the whole responsibility is really mine.

“You don't know—"

"What I shall have to face? I think I know quite well. My mother will be angry—"

"Very angry, I'm afraid."

"Very angry, no doubt, but that is only the more reason why I should meet her myself. I know you would like to spare me, but there is no need for you to do so. I must not only answer for my own actions, but— you may like to be assured of this— however great her anger may be, she has no real power to hurt me."

"Don't be too sure of that," he urged. "She may have more power than you think. At least I have a conviction that she will be furiously angered by what has occurred, and I beg you to let me take the news to her."

"But why should I let you bear the brunt of a storm which I have brought on myself?"

They had by this time reached the carriage waiting at the stage entrance, and he had put her in. The maid still delayed coming, so he was able to lean forward and take the hand which lay in her lap, as he said:

"Why should you let me? Because I desire above all things to have the right to stand between you and all the storms of life, as far as a man's love and a man's strength may."

It is possible that the words surprised himself as much as they could have surprised Sylvia, for he certainly had not the least intention of uttering them when he began to speak. It was as if reflection had nothing to do with their utterance, as if all the emotions of the past few hours had unconsciously to himself acted as a blending and transfusing force upon the doubts and fears with which he had long been struggling, and had unexpectedly crystallized them into definite and determined resolve. For he suddenly perceived with a clearness not to be mistaken that to hesitate longer, when there was even the faintest possibility that he might be able to stand, as he had put it, between this girl whom he loved and things even worse than her mother's anger, would be sheer selfishness. If what he felt for her was of the least

value, or could be of the least service, in God's name let him give it to her, lay it at her feet to be used, or even scorned, as she liked!

But there was no trace of scorn, nor anything approaching to it, in the face which looked at him out of the shadows within the carriage. A stream of light from the door before which they were standing caught the whiteness of the brow, the liquid brilliance of the eyes, the smile on the lovely lips. A touch, light and soft as thistle-down, fell on his hand.

"You are— more than kind," the musical voice told him. “I may perhaps take you at your word, and let you bear some storms for me—"

“Oh, Sylvia! will you indeed?"

“But not this storm," the soft tones went on. "It is necessary that I shall meet my mother myself."

"You will not even allow me to accompany you?"

"No, I must go alone."

"Then when can I see you? For I must see you soon."

"You can come to-morrow afternoon, if you like—"

"If I like!"

"And hear the result of my visit to Richmond." Then her glance went swiftly beyond him. "Ah, there you are at last, Susan! Are you sure you have everything? Well, good-night, Mr. Stafford. It has been wonderful, hasn't it? I am glad that I really played Caterina to please you."

There was another light touch upon his hand, another glance from the beautiful eyes, and then he had no alternative but to fall back and see the carriage roll away.

Chapter XIX

Lady Feringham Expresses Her Opinion

AS Stafford sat at breakfast the next morning, with the day's journals before him, the exaltation of feeling left by a *nuit blanche* gave place to a renewed and sharpened apprehension of the storm which Sylvia would have to face in meeting her mother. For, if he had been convinced the night before that no approval of her daughter's appearance was to be looked for from Mrs. Lestrange, this conviction was deepened when he read the comments of the dramatic critics on that appearance. Those who had been fortunate enough to be present declared that it had been an event of unparallelled interest. "A new star has swum into the sky of the dramatic world," one enthusiastic writer assured his readers. “A girl who trod the boards for the first time last night, has not only made a sensation which startled the oldest theatre-goers, but has proved herself possessed of genius and a fine feeling for art, which have triumphed over all the disadvantages of inexperience, and mark out for her a brilliant future among the great actresses of the world." And, as if this were not enough to anger the actress whose place had been thus taken, every writer dwelt upon “the exquisite charm of youth" which had given new grace to the role of Caterina; and one— an eminent man whose words had most weight— spoke unhesitatingly of how much the play had gained by her interpretation of the character of the heroine, from the "poetic beauty" with which she had invested it from beginning to end. Stafford threw down the papers with a groan of despair. It was all true, and under other circumstances would have been delightful; but now he could only think of Sylvia facing alone the rage of a furious woman, rivalled in the admiration of the public which she had counted as her own, an admiration which she valued far above everything else on earth or in heaven.

While he was considering this, and asking himself if it were too late to make another attempt to persuade Sylvia to let him meet the first outburst of her mother's anger, his servant opened the door of the

sitting-room in which he was breakfasting, and with a rather awed expression of countenance said: “Lady Feringham wishes to see you, sir."

"Yes, here I am," her ladyship said, coming in so quickly that he had only time to rise from his seat. "I know you are amazed; but, as soon as I saw that," she pointed to one of the journals which lay open before him, "I had to come without delay to find out what is the meaning of it."

"The meaning of it," he answered, as he moved forward a chair, "may be briefly defined as a triumph of temperament."

"Don't be epigrammatic and obscure, there's a good man!" she begged, as she sat down. Then she waved her hand toward the table. "Go on with your breakfast. I'll sit here and talk, if you don't mind, while you consume your eggs and tea and toast. Heavens! how the British taste does run to eggs and tea and toast !"

"I cannot tempt you to join me?"

“No, thanks. I’ve breakfasted already. Like yourself, I generally glance over the morning papers while I am breakfasting; so to-day I opened them as usual, and, when I saw the dramatic notices, you might have knocked me down with a feather. What does it mean? I can hardly believe that there has not been some great mistake. Did Sylvia really play her mother's part in your play last night?"

"She really did."

"But when did she learn to be an actress? And why did Mrs. Lestrange permit her to appear? Tell me— tell me *everything*!"

Then Stafford, turning his back on his neglected breakfast, told everything, as far as he knew it himself. Her eyes fairly flashed with interest as she listened to him, and, when he finished, she threw herself back in her chair with a deep-drawn breath.

"It's the most dramatic thing!" she exclaimed. "Was ever poetical justice better dealt out than to Mrs. Lestrange, whose flirtation with her daughter's lover has ended in putting that daughter in her place before the public! It is simply delicious; but I can't think of that point of view as much as I should like, for my mind misgives me about Sylvia. Oh, why did you allow her to do such a thing?"

He lifted his shoulders. "When I reached town everything was arranged."

"Arranged perhaps, but not accomplished," Lady Feringham said. “Sylvia would never have done it if you had discouraged her. She has too high an opinion of your judgment."

“Perhaps I was not as energetic in discouragement as I should have been," Stafford confessed, "for I saw that she had set her heart on doing it."

"But why? It's the very last thing I should have dreamed of her wanting to do. I should have thought that the stage and everything connected with it would be disagreeable rather than attractive to her."

“It is both disagreeable and attractive, if you can understand what I mean. All that by association the stage stands for in her life, makes it almost detestable to her; and yet she has the artistic temperament which finds its natural expression in drama. She caught my conception where her mother, through defect of imagination, failed to do so; and told me weeks ago that she had a great longing to act the part of Caterina. And I told her that I believed she could do it."

"Of course that was a mere *façon de parler*. You couldn't have believed it."

"Strange as it may seem, I did. I had an instinct that she would be able to present the character as I had conceived it, if she had the requisite training. But what I didn't imagine was that she could present it without training."

"And she really did?"

He pointed to the journals scattered over the table.

"These will tell you. You might doubt my judgment, but you can't doubt the verdict of the men who speak here. It was a most amazing performance, a triumph of genius over inexperience for which I know no parallel."

“It proves that we were right when we felt that there was something more than ordinary in her,” Lady Feringham said, "but I should never have thought of its taking this form. It is really a pity, you know," she added, "since I don't suppose she intends going on the stage professionally."

"You may safely take for granted that she doesn't intend to do anything of the kind."

"Then for a mere caprice she has put herself in a position of rivalry to her mother which we may be quite sure that Mrs. Lestrange will not forgive, and which will probably bring about a rupture in their relations."

"Let me remind you that, even if that is the case, she has contrived to exist very well without her mother for a good many years of her life."

"That was different," Lady Feringham answered. "She had not crossed Mrs. Lestrange's path then; had not come into collision with her vanity, and roused her dangerous antagonism. I'm really very much provoked with you," she went on severely. "You should never have allowed this to happen. It is most unfortunate from every point of view. Sylvia has not only created a disagreeable situation with her mother, but she has brought herself into a personal relation with the stage in a manner which may affect her prospects in life very injuriously."

Stafford looked at the speaker with a significant smile.

"In other words," he said, "you are thinking of the Honourable Percy Wyverne."

"And if I am," her tone was defiant, "isn't it natural that I should think of him? I told you at the Court that he was very much attracted by Sylvia, and since their return to town his attentions have been *marked*. But I always knew that the connection with Mrs. Lestrange was a stumbling-block to him; and now that she has so unnecessarily identified herself with her mother's profession, I am afraid, I 'm really very much afraid, that he will draw back."

"That," Stafford commented a little drily, "would no doubt be a great misfortune—"

"Of course it would be a great misfortune," Lady Feringham interrupted impatiently. "Sylvia couldn't do better than to marry him."

"Possibly not," Stafford admitted. "Yet I believe I am safe in saying that if he offered himself, with all his brilliant prospects, she would refuse him."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Because, strange as it may appear to you, I have good reason to believe that she will accept me."

"Ah!" Lady Feringham exhibited no great sign of surprise. "And how long, if I may ask, have you had reason to believe this?"

"Since last night."

"I see! In the excitement and emotion roused by her acting, you spoke, and she—"

"Was good enough to answer as I could not have dared to hope that she would."

"Any other man in your place would have dared to hope it," her ladyship remarked. "But you have never seemed to realize that you are very attractive; and the unconsciousness has helped to make you more so. Given the situation, the thing was inevitable, I suppose, and yet—"

“I am well aware," Stafford said as she broke off, "that Sylvia might do much better than accept a man without wealth or rank, who is old enough to be her father—"

“Nonsense!" Lady Feringham cut him short energetically. “You have means enough for a girl like Sylvia, even if she had no fortune of her own. In regard to rank, of course you can't offer a title, as Percy Wyverne might prospectively, or that *vaurien* Russian prince, who has transferred his attentions from her mother to herself; but the king can be no more than a gentleman. As for your being old enough to be her

father, it is, to say the least, somewhat unusual for men of thirty-six to be the fathers of girls of twenty. These objections amount to nothing; but, my good friend, have you not thought of another?"

His eyes met hers clearly and fully. "I might think of several," he said, "but I presume you mean—"

"I mean," she said, "that you have for a long time occupied the position of an admirer of her mother; and Mrs. Lestrange will not be likely to consider the transfer of your devotion very approvingly."

"Mrs. Lestrange," he said coldly, "is well aware of the nature of my admiration— my devotion, if you choose to use that term— toward herself. As for her approval, that is happily not a matter of importance either to her daughter or to me."

Lady Feringham surveyed him curiously for a moment before she said:

"You are a brave man, but I think that even you may find that Mrs. Lestrange is not a negligible quantity. You have been too valuable to her for her to take the loss of your services amiably."

“I have already told you that it is a matter of little consequence how she takes it," Stafford replied with evident impatience. "Her daughter, if necessity arises, will simply leave her house. For so much I can answer."

"The necessity will, in my opinion, be certain to arise," Lady Feringham said; "so I want you to let her know that, if she leaves her mother's house, she must come straight to mine."

"You are very kind," he answered; "but I am sure that, in such a case, she would at once join her old friend Miss Goodwin, who is on the Continent—"

"And leave Mrs. Lestrange in possession of the field, to say whatever she pleases about her! That will never do. It would look like flight, and flight is not to be thought of. She must come to me. I shall be more than glad to have her as my guest, and it is possible that she may need to leave her mother's house very quickly. I only wish she were out of it now."

"So do I," Stafford said fervently. "But after all, nothing can happen to her worse than enduring a disagreeable outburst of anger."

"I am not at all sure of that," Lady Feringham said, as she rose. "I believe Mrs. Lestrange would stop at hardly anything to serve her passion or her interest. If you take my advice, you will get Sylvia away from her as soon as possible. Anyhow, let mc hear from you as soon as you have seen her; and I haven't congratulated you yet, so I'll do it now with all my heart; and I'll congratulate her when I see her. Vexed with you? Yes, I am still. But I'II forgive you if you bring her to me quickly. Now good-bye."

Chapter XX

The Fury of a Woman Scorned

STAFFORD was surprised that afternoon when, in reply to his inquiry for Miss Lestrange, the servant who admitted him said:

“Mrs. Lestrange is also at home, sir, and will see you."

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. “When did Mrs. Lestrange return?"

“This morning, sir. She came from Richmond with Miss Lestrange. She is in her boudoir, and gave orders that you were to be shown up immediately."

So not even a moment for preparation, or for a word with Sylvia, was to be allowed him, Stafford thought, as he followed the servant upstairs. His jaw set itself grimly. If the time had come for plain speaking between Mrs. Lestrange and himself, he was quite ready to do his part in that speaking.

She was lying back among the silken cushions of a couch, and he thought as he crossed the room toward her that for the first, the very first time, she showed her age. She was extremely pale, and lines had suddenly sprung into existence on the forehead and about the eyes and mouth. The nervous shock of her accident had evidently been very great; but Stafford felt sure that these signs were chiefly due to a second and much greater shock. She cut short his words of inquiry and condolence at once.

“Never mind about that!" she said brusquely. "There is nothing serious the matter with me. Of course this is a nuisance," she touched impatiently her bandaged arm in its sling, “but the surgeons assure me that a few weeks will set it right. I was a fool to listen to their advice and not come up to London yesterday."

"On the contrary I am sure that you were wise in following it and staying where you were," Stafford said quietly.

"No doubt that is your opinion," she returned. "My absence gave you, as well as others, the opportunity desired. You were able to get your romantic part played in a manner to suit you."

"Very much in a manner to suit me," he replied coolly. And then before he could say anything more, an unexpected voice spoke:

"I have told you, mamma," Sylvia's crystal-clear tones said, "that Mr. Stafford had absolutely nothing to do with the matter. The idea originated with me; and the whole responsibility was mine."

She came forward as she spoke, from a window where she had been standing, partially concealed by the draperies, and, with a glance of gentle salutation to Stafford, stood before her mother, in her youthful grace, her perfect poise and dignity.

Mrs. Lestrange frowned as she gazed at her, and it seemed to Stafford that he had never seen hate speak more clearly from human glance than from the violet eyes at this moment.

“Oh, it was your responsibility entirely!" she said. “It is very kind of you to assure me of the fact. I can well believe that you were ready to take advantage of my absence to bring yourself into prominence, and ruin the life I have made for myself by the most laborious work; but I am sure that he" the venom-charged glance darted to Stafford, "was more than ready to aid you in doing this."

"I have told you," Sylvia repeated, “that Mr. Stafford was not even in town—"

But at this point Stafford interrupted her by moving to her side. “I am able to answer for myself," he said. “Will you be kind enough to go away, and leave me to talk to Mrs. Lestrange?"

She smiled at him and shook her head. "No," she answered. "What has occurred was my fault—first, last, altogether mine— and I am willing to bear the consequences."

"I suppose you are," Mrs. Lestrange said, with hardly restrained fury in tone and look, "since the consequences are altogether agreeable. Those!" she pointed at a pile of the morning journals, "and *this*!"

She seized a letter from a table near by, and flung it with a dramatic gesture at the feet of the two standing before her.

They glanced at each other with equal surprise in the eyes of both. Then Stafford stooped and picked up the letter. It was addressed to Mrs. Lestrange.

"Do you intend that I shall read this?" he inquired of her.

"By all means," she answered, throwing herself back on her cushions. "It will please you extremely."

He drew the letter from its envelope, ran his eye over the first lines, then folded it again and handed it to Sylvia.

"Pardon me," he said, "for looking at this. I had of course no idea of what I should find."

With evident wonder the girl in her turn opened the letter and read it through. As she did so, all the delicate austerity of her face became strikingly apparent, and when, on reaching the end, she lifted her dark-lashed lids and looked at her mother, her glance was full of disdainful coldness.

"I suppose that you will answer this," she said. "From me it hardly requires an answer. I regard such a proposal from Prince Voronine as hardly less insulting to me than to you. You can tell him so, if you like."

Her mother stared at her. "You mean that you refuse his proposal?" she asked.

"It seems almost unnecessary to say so," the girl answered. "He had no reason to think it possible that I would do anything else."

"How do you dare to tell me such a thing?" Mrs. Lestrange demanded, with a burst of passionate anger. "Haven't I seen that you have laid yourself out, with all your *ingenue* airs and graces, to draw him away from me ever since you came? It has all been part of a plan to supplant and humiliate me— like your treachery about the play! How could I know that you were studying my part, copying my acting, making ready for what has occurred, for the opportunity I was mad enough to give you—"

"We have gone over all that," Sylvia interrupted. "I have told you that I am sorry. I know now that I should not have acted in the part without your permission, but I never thought of it as anything serious—or—or—that this," she pointed to the letter, "could result from it." Then she turned to Stafford. “Prince Voronine," she said, "has made me a proposal, which he had no right to make at all, in the most inexcusable manner possible."

"In the most insulting manner possible to me!" Mrs. Lestrange cried. "Could anything be conceived more insulting than that he should say that the motive which induces him to offer himself at this time, is that he may save you from any further contact with the stage? Oh!" she shivered with passion, as she rose to her feet, "if I only had a man to go and kill him! As for you!" she turned upon her daughter, "I was an insane fool ever to send for you! I might have known how it would be; that all your odious father would be alive in you, all the odious people and influences from which I broke away, and against which I asserted myself long ago! That I might have known; that to some extent I did know. But I never dreamed you would be such a curse and source of ruin to my life as you have been!"

Sylvia faced her, with head thrown slightly back, and eyes shining.

"How have I proved a curse and source of ruin to your life?" she asked. "It seems to me that such a charge, if I condescended to make it, might rather come from me."

"How have you proved so?" Mrs. Lestrange repeated. She rose, and began to pace the floor, with the long, tragic step of the stage, her sweeping draperies falling around her tall figure with fine effect. "From the first moment you came, you have proved nothing else," she declared. “You brought ill-luck to me when you crossed my threshold. Everything was in my hand then— supreme success on the stage and, when that had been secured, the opportunity to leave it at the height of success and make a brilliant marriage. That was my plan, which was all arranged; but you stepped in— and where is it now? You have spoiled success for me at the moment of my greatest triumph; and I have not even the resource of marrying the man who was at my feet when you came, for he is now at yours."

"I am sorry." It was all the pale girl could repeat. “But no act of mine brought him to my feet."

"No act of yours!" Mrs. Lestrange uttered the laugh which is of all human sounds perhaps the most significant of intense anger. "I presume that no act of yours attracted him either," she pointed to Stafford, "although he had been my lover for years."

"That," Stafford said, speaking to Sylvia, "is absolutely untrue."

"What!" Mrs. Lestrange paused and challenged him with flashing eyes. "You dare to deny that for years you were my devoted servant—"

"Anything you please," he interrupted, "except your lover in the accepted sense of the term— the sense in which you have intended your daughter to understand it. That I deny utterly."

"You deny your long devotion to me?"

"I have already told you that I deny nothing of the folly which sprang from my belief that you were something altogether different from what you are. But even that folly— that misplaced devotion to your service and your ambition— ended, as you are aware, several years ago."

“Had it ended when you went to Mexico at my bidding?"

“I went to Mexico less at your bidding than in fulfilment of a promise I had given you in the days of my infatuation."

“Oh, you may say those things now," Mrs. Lestrange retorted; "but nevertheless it is a fact that you went there belonging to me, and you came back belonging to her, I saw it as soon as you returned. I didn't care— don't fancy that I cared; but it was a warning that I should have heeded. But I didn't heed it: I trusted her, threw her with Prince Voronine—”

"We understand why." Very caustic was Stafford's tone now. "You threw her with Prince Voronine because you fancied him so safely yours that you could afford to do so; and it was desirable that he should be amused while you enjoyed your flirtation with Don Luis de Rivera, without regard to the trifling fact that your daughter might possibly love him—"

"No, thank God!" Sylvia said with low-toned fervour. "I never loved him."

"That, however, your mother neither knew nor troubled to inquire," Stafford went on. "It is an old story with Mrs. Lestrange, to bring men to her feet for the pleasure of bringing and of using them while there. De Rivera was merely serving his turn, and it is an entirely unforeseen result that he so distracted her attention that she lost the man she meant to marry."

Mrs. Lestrange turned upon him with an anger which would have withered him if it could.

"You are insolent!" she cried. “I don't know by what right you venture to speak to me, and of me, in this manner!"

“By the right of that long and, I am now more than ever sure, misplaced devotion to which you alluded a moment ago," he answered. “It is not likely that I shall ever exercise the right again; but for this once it is well that we should speak plainly. You have charged your daughter with certain things—"

“I charge her with them again!" Mrs. Lestrange interrupted passionately. "She has stolen my lovers, and not content with that, she has taken the part I created, and so brought her 'enchanting youth' into contrast with my age, that she has made it impossible for me to face the public in it again for a long time, if ever. I am to-day closing the theatre, notwithstanding all the heavy expenses of the play—"

Sylvia glanced at her. "I think," she said significantly, "that we need not speak of the expense."

Instantly Stafford understood, and turned to Mrs. Lestrange with a passion equal to her own. "So that was why you wanted your daughter!" he said. "That was why your mother's heart so longed for her that you must send me to Mexico to induce her to come to you. Oh, if I had known! and yet I should have guessed what you wanted! What have you ever wanted with man or woman except to serve your selfishness, and minister to your pleasure, or your gain!" He looked at Sylvia. "How much money have you let her have?" he asked.

"Don't answer him!" Mrs. Lestrange commanded. "He has no right to ask such a question."

"There is nothing to be gained by answering it," the girl said quietly. "Since I have spoiled the play, I am rather glad that I shall be the chief loser. At least I was told that the money was to go to the production of the play. If not, it doesn't matter. I never intended to come here without paying my way in every manner, and to the fullest extent. I think I have done so; and now," she looked gravely at her mother, "the time has come for me to go. Once more let me say that I am very sorry for what happened last night. I never for an instant thought that I could do you any harm, and I trust you will find that I have not really done you any. All that I wanted was to satisfy a desire to act once— just once —to test my power, to taste the triumph which is said to be so sweet. Surely," a little wistfully, "you, who threw everything away for it, might understand that."

There was silence in the room for fully a minute after the clear, young voice ceased speaking—the same voice that had thrilled a listening house with its melody the night before. For once Mrs. Lestrange seemed to find reply difficult; and it was Stafford who broke the pause.

"Since you feel that the time has come for you to go," he said to Sylvia, "I may tell you that I bring a message from Lady Feringham. She asks you, in case you decide to leave your mother's house, to come immediately to hers."

"That," Mrs. Lestrange interposed sharply, before Sylvia could speak, "is simply insolence on the part of Lady Feringham. Why should she imagine that my daughter would desire to leave my house? And if she does leave it, I shall insist that she does not go to hers."

“It is not necessary to discuss the point," Sylvia said. She looked at Stafford. “Thank Lady Feringham for her kindness; but I have already telegraphed to Miss Goodwin, asking her to meet me in Paris."

“Let me advise you to reconsider that," Stafford said earnestly. “I think that it will be best for you to accept Lady Feringham's invitation, and remain in London for a short time longer at least."

But again before Sylvia could reply, Mrs. Lestrange spoke.

“A little time ago I inquired by what right you ventured to speak to me as you did," she said; "and now I demand to know by what right you dare to advise my daughter to act in defiance of my wishes?"

Stafford turned to Sylvia. "May I tell her that you have given me the right?" he asked.

The girl bent her head. "Yes," she replied. "You may tell her."

Mrs. Lestrange's angry glance darted quickly from one to the other.

"So," she said, with the hissing intonation which has become a convention of the stage only because it is so natural to the human voice in moments of intense rage, "it is settled between you, is it, that I am to be defied and ignored? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I understand now," she went on, addressing Stafford, "why you were so ready to go to Mexico, why you persuaded this affectionate daughter of mine to come to me, and why you have discovered that your devotion to me was ‘misplaced'! A young heiress is undoubtedly preferable to a woman who has the misfortune to be her mother. Others beside you have found that out."

Sylvia turned to Stafford. "Will you go now?" she said. "There is no reason why you should remain here longer to be insulted."

"There is every reason if I can be of the least service to you," he replied. "I cannot endure to leave you in this house! Will you not let me take you away at once?"

She shook her head gently but firmly.

"No," she said. "I shall wait to hear from Miss Goodwin; and there is nothing that you can do for me, except to go."

"But don't you see that it is impossible for me to go!" he cried. "How can I leave you alone to all that you must bear? Do you forget that it is my fault that you are here?"

"I do not acknowledge that it is your fault," she replied; "but, if it were, don't you understand how much I have to compensate me for whatever is to be borne, and how little anything that can be said has power to hurt me?"

"I hope you are now sufficiently reassured to comply with a request which I must repeat and emphasize," Mrs. Lestrange broke in, with an edge of savage sarcasm to her tone. She lifted her hand and pointed to the door. "If it is necessary to speak even more plainly, be kind enough to go— at once!"

Yet even in the face of this peremptory dismissal, Stafford felt that it was, as he said, impossible for him to go, though he was well aware that it was equally impossible for him to remain, and apparently also impossible to induce Sylvia to quit the house with him. But it is difficult to express his reluctance at the thought of leaving the girl at the mercy of the furious woman before him, although he fully realized the strength of character and the courage which protected her. His longing to take her away, out of reach

of the indignities which he foresaw, and the dangers that he vaguely feared, made him throw all his energy into a last appeal.

"Sylvia," he urged, "I beg you not to remain here, but to let me take you immediately to Lady Feringham."

But in the clear depths of Sylvia's eyes he read the answer before she uttered it.

"I cannot do that," she told him. "I came here of my own free will; and if I have been to blame in the events which make it necessary for me to go away, I will at least refrain from casting any reproach, by the manner of my going, upon my mother."

“I am deeply grateful for such kind consideration!" Mrs. Lestrange's sarcastic voice commented. “And since this officious gentleman is so fully answered, I am driven to the only means by which it seems possible to relieve us of his presence." She crossed the floor and rang the bell with an energy which brought a rather startled-looking servant very quickly to the door. "Show Mr. Stafford out," she said to him.

Sylvia extended her hand to Stafford.

"As soon as I hear from Miss Goodwin," she said, "I shall let you know at what hour you may see me off for Paris. Until then, good-bye."

Chapter XXI

"You Will Never Marry Him"

IT was nearly midnight when, after several hours of strenuous work in packing what her English maid called her boxes, Sylvia dismissed the girl, saying that she would dispense with her services in undressing.

"You must be tired," she told her kindly, "so go to bed and get a good night's rest, for we shall be travelling to-morrow, and I want to start as early as possible."

"But," the maid demurred, glancing around, "I haven't finished putting up everything yet, if you please, miss."

"Everything that you can," Sylvia answered. "I shall gather together my books and papers. You may arrange the light so that I shall be able to read a little after going to bed, and that is all I require further."

This was only the work of a moment, for, totally abjuring the British institution of the bedroom candlestick, Mrs. Lestrange had her house equipped throughout with modem means of illumination, and in Sylvia's chamber a reading-lamp stood on a table by her bed, with gutta-percha tube coiled like a serpent around its base, ready for connection with the nearest gas fixture. The maid now uncoiled this tube, made the connection with a bracket in the wall near by, lighted the lamp so that the steady glow of the burner, under a jewel-like shade, fell directly on the pillows, and then bidding her young mistress good-night, left the room.

Sylvia felt a great sense of relief when the door closed behind her. It was almost the first time that she had been alone since she went to Richmond in the morning, and, despite the superb strength of her youth and health, she was now conscious of the nervous exhaustion consequent on the long strain of the day's calls upon emotion and endurance, following the intense excitement of the night before. Facing the storm of her mother's anger in the morning had proved an ordeal so terrible that she confessed to herself that, if she had foreseen what it would be, she might have been weak enough to avoid it; and hardly less trying in its demand upon all her courage, all her power of self-restraint, had been the interview with

Stafford on their return to town. After his departure she was forced to endure another storm of Mrs. Lestrange's fury, in which every conceivable accusation and reproach were hurled at her, chiefly with regard to Prince Voronine's proposal; and, before this scene was ended, she had not only lost every shred of respect for the raging woman before her, but she was filled with keen regret for not having followed Stafford's advice and gone immediately to Lady Feringham. Nevertheless, with the instinct of concealing, even from the knowledge of servants, anything so lowering as a family quarrel, she later forced herself to dine with her mother and betrayed no sign of the irreparable rupture between them.

It was while they were at dinner that the answer to her message to Miss Goodwin was brought to her, and she read it aloud. Very joyfully, as far as telegraphic brevity can express joy, Miss Goodwin promised to meet her the next day in Paris, and when they rose from table, she said to her mother:

"You will excuse me if I do not see you again this evening. I am not only very tired, but I wish to get my trunks packed to-night, so that I can take an early train for Dover to-morrow."

Mrs. Lestrange, who had made no effort whatever to sustain conversation during dinner, looked at her with eyes which expressed everything most bitter of venomous antagonism.

"I will excuse you with the greatest pleasure," she replied bitingly. "As for being tired, *I* am exhausted beyond anything that I have ever known in my life before, and I shall not see any one again to-night."

With the remembrance of these words in her mind, Sylvia had felt relieved of the fear of any further scenes that night; and, when her maid went away, she sank into a deep chair with the complete relaxation of mind and body which is Nature's sovereign remedy after any great physical exertion, or prolonged strain of mental emotion. Her trunks stood before her, packed and ready to go out of the house, the half-open doors of her wardrobe showed empty shelves and hooks, where only one gown— that in which she would travel to-morrow—still hung. The dressing-table was swept of all the articles that usually covered it, and the entire room wore already the dismantled, empty look of an apartment from which the occupant has gone out in final departure. As she glanced around, its aspect seemed to say: "This episode in life is over, this chapter forever closed, and to-morrow the page will be irrevocably turned away from it."

And then came the question which, except with light and shallow souls, must always follow at such times: "How have I borne myself during this period? What have I gained, and what lost in an experience which will never return?" Her mind went back to the night in Mexico when she had for the first time faced the thought of going to her unknown mother, and of all that such going might mean. It had meant much more than she had dreamed of then, had taught her more of herself and of others than she had imagined possible; but, balancing gain with loss, she knew that she had gained immeasurably more than she had lost in the love of the man whose eyes had looked into hers with such complete devotion a few hours earlier. She acknowledged that from his first entrance into her life, and even while she still told herself that she distrusted and disliked him, he had exercised an influence over her thoughts and her conduct such as no other person had ever possessed; and that it was largely due to this influence that De Rivera's ardent wooing found and left her cold. Then her thoughts turned to De Rivera, to his infatuation for her mother, and— stranger yet— to Mrs. Lestrange's fancy for him; to the suave Russian prince whose admiration of herself had of late made her so uncomfortable, and to the manner in which he had at last paid his debt to the woman who had fancied she could play fast and loose in any manner with him. A poignant sense of pity for that woman rushed over the girl, who had the rare power of putting herself into the place and realizing in some degree at least the feelings of another. With what overwhelming force the disappointment, which was at the same time a personal affront, had come! How sharply the blow to pride and vanity had struck home! And was it not a forecast of her future, the manner in which she stood to-day, with all her plans crumbling around her, with friends, lovers, daughter alienated by her remorseless egotism, threatened with the loss of the supremacy in her art, the popular homage and adulation for which

she had cast away everything else of value in life? The pity in the girl's heart deepened to positive pain— who indeed are such objects of pity as the ruthlessly selfish? And it was while she felt this, while she said to herself that, inad of having done any good to her mother by her coming, she was leaving her distinctly the worse for it, that she suddenly sat up in her chair, every relaxed nerve again strung to intense pitch, as she caught the rustle of silken skirts outside her door, and then the sound of a low knock.

Her heart fluttered like a bird with a sense of dread, a foreboding of something even worse than she had already endured. She cast a look of despair around her. Oh, why had she not been wise enough to put out her light and lock her door! Perhaps if she did not answer— but an instant later she knew that there was no hope of escape in this way, for the knob turned under an impatient hand, the door opened and Mrs. Lestrange entered the room.

Even in that moment it occurred to Sylvia that she could never have made a more dramatic entrance on the stage. She might indeed have been Lady Macbeth herself, in her flowing draperies, her white face, her whole tragic air and manner.

"I thought it probable that you had not gone to bed yet," she said, "so I have come for a few last words, which will be better said to-night than to-morrow. I see," her glance swept the room, "that you are ready for departure."

"You must feel with me that it is better I should go as soon as possible," Sylvia answered, as she rose and moved forward a chair, into which Mrs. Lestrange silently sank. "I don't know that there are any last words which need to be said between us," she went on, standing before the woman who fastened on her a gaze of sombre fire; "but since you are here I may tell you that I have been thinking many things; and among the rest I recognize that, although my coming was a mistake, it has at least served the end of enabling me to realize the insurmountable differences of character which separate us; has made me comprehend why it was that you cast aside every duty of life as you did, and has put in the place of resentment a pity so deep—"

"Don't dare to pity me!" the other interrupted passionately. "Insolent as you are, that is a little too much! I know that you think you can afford to take this tone, that you are going away triumphant with your youth and your wealth, that you have, for the present at least, done me a great professional injury, that you have robbed me of my lovers—"

"This is surely altogether useless," the girl told her quietly. "If I were willing to condescend to recrimination, I might answer that you had already robbed me of mine, but in fact there was no robbery in either case. As Luis de Rivera discovered that he had been mistaken in fancying himself in love with me, so Prince Voronine may have thought —"

"We need not discuss Prince Voronine!" Mrs. Lestrange cried sharply. "I am certain that his offer to you was merely the expression of jealous anger against me. But you seem to think that it is possible for you to consider seriously another man who has been a lover of mine— John Stafford."

"Yes," Sylvia answered. "I consider him very seriously. I shall marry him."

There was a pause in which gaze met gaze; and, recognizing a gleam of triumph in the eyes bent on her, the girl was suddenly conscious of that sickness which the heart can send in a moment through the whole body. She knew now that this midnight visit had a deeper purpose than the mere expression of angry vituperation; and all the powers of her soul rose up to meet the attack, whatever it might be.

"That is where you are mistaken," Mrs. Lestrange said. "You will never marry him. I have come to tell you so."

"Then," Sylvia replied, "you might have spared yourself the trouble, for I shall certainly marry him."

"I think not," the other returned. She pointed to the chair from which Sylvia had risen. "You had better sit down," she said. "A moment ago you ventured to express pity for me. It is now my turn to feel pity for you, since it appears that you are foolish enough to be in love with this man; and, being in love

with him, to believe that he spoke the truth when he had the audacity to deny to my face that he had ever been my lover."

"Yes." Sylvia's tone was that of one who accepts a challenge. "I believe that he spoke the truth; and I may add that nothing you can say will make me believe otherwise."

"I can easily credit that," Mrs. Lestrange retorted bitterly. "I am aware that he has done his work too well to allow you to have any faith in my word, and therefore I have brought an unanswerable proof of his falsehood. If I prove to you that he was my lover for years— not with the platonic, chivalrous devotion, asking no return, in which he has made you believe—but with a man's selfish passion, so that he never ceased urging me to take a step which would have forced your father to ask for a divorce, and set me free to marry him; if I not only assert, but prove this to you, will you then acknowledge that it is impossible for you to marry such a man?"

"Yes," Sylvia answered; "if you were able to prove what you have said, I should acknowledge that it would be impossible for me to marry the man who had been capable of such conduct and such falsity. But I do not believe that you can prove it."

"Do you not?" There was no question of the triumph shining in the eyes that looked at the girl now. "I am almost sorry to shatter your illusions; but I cannot permit this thing to go on. I cannot permit him, after so audaciously defying me, to carry off you and your fortune—"

"Leave that aside!" Sylvia interrupted in a tone of sharp tension. "You have made assertions which you must prove, or stand convicted of malicious falsehood."

"Here is the proof of everything I have asserted," Mrs. Lestrange said, holding out a letter. "It is only one of many letters which I have had from him, but I think you will find it sufficiently convincing."

As she spoke she flung the open sheet into Sylvia's lap, and, even before the latter took it up, she knew that Stafford's writing, always very marked and individual, was before her. Something like a cruel grasp seemed to clutch her heart, but it was no time for hesitation. Whatever was here she must know; so, lifting the paper, she read the lines traced upon it.

To the woman watching her the moments appeared long before she looked up from the written page. But when she did so, Mrs. Lestrange knew that her object was accomplished. It was as if something within the girl had died in those minutes, as if the light had been struck out of her eyes as a lamp is extinguished. There was a new and strange remoteness in them as she met the gaze of the other— the remoteness of one who looks across a great gulf. But she spoke very quietly:

"I owe you an apology for doubting your word. All that you have asserted is proved here, and you may be quite sure that I shall never marry the man who wrote this letter." She paused a moment, and then added with the same quietness: "There is nothing further to be said, I think; and I shall be glad to be left alone."

She rose as she spoke, and involuntarily Mrs. Lestrange rose also. But she could not forbear a last shaft.

"You are now able to gauge not only the truthfulness, but the disinterestedness of the man who intended to use your personal gifts, as well as your fortune, for his own ends," she said. “Having failed to secure one actress, he fancied that he had found another to exploit his plays. You are a fool indeed if you don't understand that that was the meaning of what happened last night."

Then for the first time Sylvia's composure gave way. She lifted her hands with a gesture of appeal.

"Do not speak of last night!" she cried. "I have been a fool in every sense, a mere pawn to be used in the schemes of others. I recognize that clearly now, and I feel as if there were not waters enough in the world to cleanse me from the stain of such associations. Ah, if I had only never come here!" She broke off with a passionate sob, and then, grasping again, as it were, her self-control, turned to the woman standing before her: "Will you be good enough to go?" she said. "I can bear no more."

"I have no desire to remain," Mrs. Lestrange replied coldly. She held out her hand. "Give me my letter."

"No," Sylvia replied. "I shall keep this letter and send it to its writer."

"You have no right to do that!" Mrs. Lestrange cried. "The letter is mine. Give it to me instantly!"

But Sylvia put the hand which held the letter behind her.

"You cannot have it," she said firmly. "You have given it to me as proof of a charge which I cannot repeat without showing this proof. There is no good in asking for it. I will not give it to you."

There was again a pause in which each eyed the other as men often measure each other's strength before a personal encounter, but as women seldom do. Sylvia knew instinctively that the thought in her mother's mind was whether she had any chance of success in a personal struggle; but it was plain that, with the recollection of her injured arm, she quickly decided that she had not. It was characteristic of her that, realizing this, she did not prolong a discussion which could only end in defeat. But in her eyes her daughter saw the flash of some sudden thought, which enabled her to say more calmly than she had spoken before:

“You have no right to keep, or to use a personal letter which I showed you in confidence; but of course I cannot force you to give it up. Stafford will never forgive me; but that doesn't matter. I wonder, however, that you don't see how much more dignified it would be to write and tell him simply that all is at an end between you, leaving him to draw his own conclusions, which he will have no difficulty in doing."

“There are times when truth is better than dignity," Sylvia answered. “The man who has been guilty of such falsity as this man has, must understand fully all that I know, and all that I feel with regard to him."

Mrs. Lestrange turned toward the door.

“Do as you like, then," she said. And a moment later Sylvia stood alone, with the letter still tightly clasped in her hand.

Chapter XXII

The Evidence of the Blotter

CONSIDERING the circumstances under which he had left Mrs. Lestrange's house, it was not strange that Stafford was extremely surprised when his servant waked him early the next morning with the announcement that there was a telephone call for him from Mrs. Lestrange.

"From Mrs. Lestrange!" he repeated, starting up. "You must mean from Miss Lestrange."

"I couldn't exactly understand, sir," the man replied. "It seemed to be a maid speaking; but the call is from Mrs. Lestrange's house."

"A message from Sylvia, no doubt," Stafford thought, as he sprang out of bed. A moment later he was at the telephone, with the receiver at his ear. "This is Stafford," he said. "Who is calling me?"

"Oh, Mr. Stafford," a quavering female voice replied, "it's Marks— Mrs. Lestrange's maid, please. There's been an awful accident here, and with nobody but servants in the house, we don't know what to do."

"An awful accident!" Stafford repeated sharply. "What has happened? Where is Miss Lestrange?"

"Miss Lestrange is here, sir," the quivering voice replied, "and so is Mrs. Lestrange, but they're both unconscious. They’ve been hasphyxiated—"

"Been *what*?”

"Hasphyxiated— with gas. Both of them were found nearly dead in Miss Lestrange's room, and we want to know who we are to send for."

"Have you sent for a doctor?"

"Oh, yes, sir. We called Sir William Barry, who Mrs. Lestrange always has, and he's sent for another doctor and two nurses, and we want to know—"

"I'll be with you in a few minutes," Stafford interrupted. He dropped the receiver. "Get me a cab immediately," he called to his servant, while he dashed into his chamber to dress.

It was literally only a few minutes later when he descended from the cab which had brought him at racing speed to Mrs. Lestrange's house. The servant who opened the door looked wide-eyed and startled, and had entirely mislaid his official manner.

"Oh, Mr. Stafford!" he exclaimed, "we're awfully glad to see you, sir, for nobody knows hexactly what to do."

"You did the only right thing when you sent for a doctor," Stafford said. "I want to see him at once. Where is he?"

"Upstairs where they're working over the ladies, sir. There's two doctors and two nurses."

"Take my card to Sir William Barry, and ask him if he will speak to me for a moment, as soon as possible."

It seemed an age, but in reality it was very soon when the famous doctor entered the room where Stafford stood, holding himself under a tension of strong control.

"I am an old friend and kinsman of Mrs. Lestrange, Sir William," he said; "so I have taken the liberty of sending for you to ask what has really happened."

“What has happened," replied Sir William, “is that both Mrs. Lestrange and her daughter have been asphyxiated by illuminating gas, and are in a desperate condition as the result of it."

"Do you mean that they will die?"

"I mean that it is the most probable event. But for the fortunate accident of an early discovery, both would have been dead by this time. As it is. Miss Lestrange has the best chance— if we may call it a chance— of recovery, because she was in bed, while Mrs. Lestrange was found on the floor."

"How did it occur?"

"Oh, the old story— a cock turned on instead of off, a displaced connecting tube, and a flow of poisonous gas pouring out. That is all we know."

Although his lips felt stiff, Stafford managed to utter another question. "How was it discovered?"

"In rather a strange manner," Sir William answered. "Miss Lestrange's maid, who is a girl of more than ordinary intelligence, says that she was hardly able to sleep last night, so strongly was she impressed by an instinct of danger for which she could not account. She reasoned with herself, attributed the condition to excitement over the preparations for a journey which it seems was to be taken to-day, and finally dropped asleep, only to wake suddenly with a compelling sense that she must get up and go to her mistress. Fortunately she didn't say, ‘This is all nonsense!' and turn over and go to sleep again, as most people would have done; but she heeded the instinct, or God only knows what, went to her mistress's room and saved her life, for in another half hour she would certainly have been dead."

"And now—"

"Now, as I have said, there is a chance— a very slight chance— that she may live. But I fear that I can hardly say even so much for Mrs. Lestrange, though she was still living when I left her room a few minutes ago, and we are working hard to save her."

"What are you doing? What is the treatment in such cases?"

"We stimulate the heart to action by every possible means, induce artificial respiration, and in short employ the most heroic measures to overcome the effect of the poison that has been inhaled. But although we are doing all this, it is with so little hope that I may suggest that it would be well to let any relatives or friends of these ladies know of their danger."

Stafford gave himself a mental shake. "Yes," he said. "Thanks for the suggestion. I will send a message immediately to a friend who was to have met Miss Lestrange in Paris to-day."

Sir William nodded. "Better not delay," he said. "Meanwhile I'll return to my patients, and as we shall probably know the result of our efforts very soon, if you will be in the house—"

"I shall certainly be here."

"I shall inform you as soon as a change occurs."

He went away, and Stafford was left to that state of intolerable suspense until "a change occurs," which few of us are so fortunate as not to have known at some time in life. It was a relief that there was something to do, even though it was only so small a matter as to send a message to Miss Goodwin. He rang, and when a servant appeared, asked for telegraph blanks. The man replied that Mrs. Lestrange always kept a supply of such blanks in her escritoire, and offered to look for them.

"I'll look for them myself," Stafford said. "Just wait for the message."

He crossed the floor, pushed aside the portières, entered the boudoir, and turned hastily to the escritoire.

How well he knew it— this finely carved and inlaid piece of furniture, where he had so often sat and worked with Mrs. Lestrange in the early days of her exciting struggle for dramatic success! Every faculty of his mind, every impulse of his spirit, every hour of his time— the precious, golden time of youth!—had been at her command then, and she had used them ruthlessly, never hesitating in her demands, and drawing from him inspiration, courage, help, and service in a hundred ways. He remembered it all; and although he knew, had known for long, that he was a fool to have allowed a woman, who cared for no one on earth but herself, to drain his life in such a manner, he was unable to regret, now that she lay dying, what he had done for her. He put out his hand to the escritoire. It was unlocked and yielded readily to his touch. Opening it, a glance showed him that it had been hastily left in great confusion. Torn sheets of paper were scattered carelessly over the silver-edged blotter, and a forgotten handkerchief, a delicate web of cambric that was lying there, sent a waft of violet fragrance to meet him, which recalled the personality of its owner as only perfume can. Evidently Mrs. Lestrange had been writing here very lately, possibly the night before; and with a slight sense of wonder at this, he began his search for the telegraph blanks. They were easily found, the message to Miss Goodwin written and given to the servant. Then, after the man had gone, Stafford sat motionless, staring at the blotter, which he had cleared in order to write upon it, and where his gaze had been arrested by certain characters.

His own! It seemed to him that there could be no doubt of that. His handwriting was not only extremely individual, but it was also very forcible in the sense of carrying ink heavily, and he was consequently very familiar with the appearance of his reversed characters on a blotter. He found himself staring at these characters now, and yet — when had he sat at Mrs. Lestrange's desk before, and written so much as a word? Not for years, he knew; and therefore how came this impress of fresh writing, so clearly stamped before his eyes?

He was still staring at it, and still wondering, when a timid voice broke the silence of the room:

"If you please, Mr. Stafford, may I say a word to you?"

He turned abruptly in his chair to see a young woman, intelligent-looking and rather pretty, though, like every one else in the house just now, with a very startled expression, standing before him.

"You are — ?" he said.

"Miss Lestrange's maid— Susan Bennett, if you please, sir," she replied.

"Susan Bennett," he said, putting out his hand, "I owe you thanks such as I never owed any one in this world before. The doctor tells me that you saved your mistress's life by going to her when you did."

The girl suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh," she sobbed, lifting her apron to her eyes, if I had only gone earlier, for I felt, and kept on feeling, that something was wrong, and the doctor says— says—"

"That if she lives she will owe her life to you," Stafford interposed, with a strong pressure of his hand on hers. "Don't cry, Susan— not now, at least, not while we have even a little hope that she may recover— but tell me all about it. When did this feeling of yours begin?"

The girl dropped her apron and looked up at him with honest, tear-filled eyes.

"Almost as soon as I went to bed," she answered. "I couldn't sleep, and I kept worrying and asking myself if I had forgotten anything that I ought to have done, or ought to have put up, for I'd been packing Miss Lestrange's boxes, so that she could go away to-day, you know, sir—"

"Yes, I know— I mean I know that she was going," Stafford said. "And when you finished the packing, I suppose you assisted Miss Lestrange to undress?"

The girl shook her head. "No, sir. She wouldn't let me stay for that. She was always so kind in thinking of one's comfort, and she said that I must go and get to sleep since we were to start early and travel to-day. The only thing she allowed me to do before going away, was to arrange the light by her bed."

"Ah, you arranged it! Tell me exactly what you did."

"It was just what I did every night, sir, for Miss Lestrange liked to read after she went to bed. So the last thing I always did before leaving her was to connect the lamp which stood by the bed with the nearest gas bracket. Just what I was in the habit of doing every night I did last night— uncoiled the tube, fastened it firmly on the wall fixture —"

"You are sure that you fastened it on firmly?"

"I'm very sure, sir, and that's why I can't understand how this awful thing happened; for I'll never believe that Miss Lestrange meant to leave the cock open and kill herself —"

"Good God! Has any one hinted such a thing?"

"I heard one of the nurses say it looked like it, sir."

"Go on," he said hoarsely. "Tell me everything. You arranged the lamp, you say, and left Miss Lestrange. Was she alone at the time?"

"Entirely alone, sir."

"Well, and then?"

"I went to my room, but, as I've said, it was a long time before I could sleep. At last I dropped off, but I had an uneasy feeling, as if something was pulling at me; and several times I started up, but I thought I was just dreaming and lay down again. Then suddenly I waked, trembling all over like, and I felt that I must go to Miss Lestrange. So I got up and went to her door. When I opened it, the smell of the gas almost knocked me down, but I ran across the room and threw open a window. It was day-light, though very early, and when I turned around I saw Mrs. Lestrange lying on the floor. I lifted her up at once, that the fresh air might reach her, and as I did so I noticed that she had a letter in her hand. I took it to lay it aside, and then I saw that it was addressed In Miss Lestrange's writing to you, sir, and I thought I'd be doing what she would wish if I gave it to you without letting any one else know of it. That's what I've come to say, and— here it is."

A sense of something terrible was deepening within Stafford as he extended his hand for the letter which the girl drew from her pocket. A glance showed him that the sealed envelope was indeed addressed to himself in Sylvia's writing, and it had been taken from Mrs. Lestrange's hand!

"Susan," he said, looking at the girl, "I would not have thought a moment ago that anything could increase my debt of gratitude to you. But this does, immeasurably. And now one question. Have you mentioned the letter to anybody?"

"To nobody at all, sir."

"Don't mention it, whatever happens. You have done the right thing in bringing it to me, and if there is anything necessary further, I will—"

"Let Mr. Stafford know that I wish to speak to him."

It was the voice of Sir William Barry, addressing a servant in the next room. Stafford thrust the letter into his pocket, sprang to his feet and hurried across the floor. The clash of their brass rings as he drew back the portières made the doctor turn around quickly, and a single look at his face was enough to show that he brought good news, for his eyes were shining with the gratification of the physician who has once more won a fight with his constant adversary, Death.

“I am glad to tell you that I think we shall save them, Mr. Stafford," he said. "It has been touch and go, especially with Mrs. Lestrange, but I believe now that they will both live.”

Chapter XXIII

A Stern Resolve

AS Stafford walked up and down the platform of the station where he was waiting the arrival of the train from Dover which would bring Miss Goodwin, he wondered how much it would be well to tell that excellent woman of the events which had preceded the accident that called her to England. He had not yet made up his mind on this point, when he saw her face looking at him out of the window of a railway carriage, and the next moment he was shaking hands with her, and answering her anxious question: “How is Sylvia?”

"The doctor assures me that she has very much recovered from the immediate effects of the poisoning," he said; “and he does not fear any serious later effects in her case. It was perhaps unnecessary to have summoned you. But, when I sent my message yesterday, matters looked very grave."

"Oh, I 'm glad that you let me know at once!" she told him eagerly. "It was an awful shock when I found your message, instead of my dear girl waiting for me in Paris; but I was very grateful to you for telegraphing. How did such a dreadful thing happen?"

"As such things usually happen — through carelessness, probably," he replied; "but nobody knows much about it as yet. I'll give you the details as we drive to the house. Are these all your impedimenta?"

A little later, while they drove through the crowded thoroughfares of the West End, he related all that was known about the accident, but he was hardly surprised that Miss Goodwin did not find the account very satisfactory.

“None of this explains how the thing happened," she said, when he finished. “Gas-cocks don't open of themselves, and it isn't like Sylvia to be careless. Has no one any idea how it came about that Mrs. Lestrange was in the room?"

"The inference is that, perceiving the odour of escaping gas, she went in to rouse her daughter, and was herself overcome."

"But the maid who went in for the same purpose wasn't overcome. Mrs. Lestrange must therefore have been in the room for some time. *Why*?”

"That," he replied, "is a question which only Mrs. Lestrange can answer."

"Then it is not likely to be answered, at least in a satisfactory manner," Miss Goodwin remarked drily. "I have known Violet Lestrange a long time, but I've never known her to tell the truth when falsehood or evasion would serve her purpose." She paused for a moment, and then: "Do you know," she inquired, "what had happened to make Sylvia telegraph me to meet her in Paris?"

"Yes," he replied a trifle reluctantly, "I know."

"What was it?"

"Don't you think It would be better to let Sylvia tell you herself?"

"No," Miss Goodwin returned shortly, "I don't think so; I want to get at the bottom of this thing! If Sylvia had had such a serious rupture with her mother as her message to me seemed to indicate, why was Mrs. Lestrange In her room? You needn't tell me that you can't answer that question, for I know that you can't; but you can at least tell me the cause of the rupture."

"Since you insist upon knowing, it was because Sylvia had taken her mother's part in Mrs. Lestrange's new play."

"Sylvia!" Miss Goodwin gasped. She put out her hand and clutched his arm with painful force. "You can't mean that Sylvia acted — in public?"

"I mean just that," he told her. "Mrs. Lestrange was prevented from appearing by an accident— she had gone motoring with De Rivera, and they had a serious spill. So Sylvia took her part and acted it marvellously."

"Sylvia!" Miss Goodwin appeared too stupefied with amazement to do more than repeat the name as she continued to stare at him.

"It was an amazing success," Stafford went on. "But the very brilliancy of the success angered Mrs. Lestrange so deeply that Sylvia had no choice but to end their association."

Miss Goodwin dropped his arm and sank back in her seat.

"I feel," she said weakly, "as if you had knocked me down! I don't know whether or not I am shocked, but I know that I have never been so astounded in my life. It proves that I don't know Sylvia at all; for this is the last, the very last thing I could have imagined her doing!" Then as she caught Stafford's involuntary smile: "Oh," she cried, “I give you leave to triumph over me!"

"Why," he asked, "should you imagine that I wish to triumph over you?"

"Because it is a tendency of human nature to enjoy pointing out the mistakes of others," she answered. "I haven't forgotten the things you said in Mexico, when I urged you to do all you could to induce Sylvia to go to her mother. Of course I was a fool; and therefore I repeat that you are at liberty to triumph over me as much as you like."

"But I don't like at all," he assured her. "Why should I? Who can be wise before the event? Besides, I agreed with you then that it was the best thing to do; and I have not changed my opinion now."

"I don't understand how you can say that," she protested. "It couldn't have been the best thing to do which has ended in this manner."

"That depends on what you expected or desired," he said. "If it was an agreeable experience for Sylvia, sympathetic relations with her mother, that enjoyment of things gay and bright which an American girl calls 'having a good time,' I grant that such expectations have not been realized. But if it was that she should come into touch with those mysteries of life which rest on irreconcilable differences of character; that she should be tested in a manner to try her powers of forbearance and courage to the utmost; that she should learn some of the difficult lessons which only experience can teach, and learn them in a manner to strengthen whatever is finest and best in her character, then I assure you that she has gained all that you could have desired for her."

Miss Goodwin looked at him curiously.

"I don't know that I desired all or any of those things for her," she acknowledged. "In fact I am quite sure that I am like many other short-sighted people who would wish to shield those whom they love from everything painful or disagreeable. I know that it is only by such means that our worth can be tested; but I confess that I didn't want experiences of that kind for Sylvia, and I would have shielded her from them if I could."

“And yet you were anxious to send her to London!"

"Haven't I said that I was a fool?" she returned with all her old asperity. "But I could never have imagined that sending her to London would mean sending her— Sylvia of all people!— on the stage."

"It hasn't meant that. Her appearance there was an accident which is never likely to be repeated."

"You don't understand everything, clever as you think yourself," Miss Goodwin replied unkindly. "What has occurred proves that Sylvia is her mother's daughter after all, and the passion for the stage, which made Violet Lestrange abandon every duty she had in the world, will end by taking Sylvia into that dreadful, unreal life also. I almost wish now that she had stayed in Mexico and married Luis de Rivera."

"She would never have married him if she had remained there."

"I'd like to know how you can be sure of that! You are the most exasperatingly dogmatic person I have ever known. But what are we stopping here for? This isn't Mrs. Lestrange's house."

"Carriage in the way, sir," the cabman said, leaning over.

"He can't drive up to the door because another carriage is standing there," Stafford explained, "but this is the house. May I help you out?" Then, when they were on the pavement, he glanced at the smart brougham which waited before the steps they were about to ascend. "I see that Lady Feringham is here," he remarked.

Ten minutes later they met her ladyship on the staircase, where she paused to shake hands with Stafford and be introduced to Miss Goodwin.

"Yes, I'm Mary Trevezant's daughter," she said to the latter, "and always glad to meet my mother's old friends. I am particularly glad to meet you, because I have heard so much of you from Sylvia, and she is happy to know that you are coming to her. I've just seen her, and find her almost entirely recovered from the effects of that terrible accident, only a little giddiness and nausea remaining. Here is her maid— the excellent girl who saved her life— to take you to her, so I won't detain you longer now; but I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you soon again. So glad to have met you, and to know that you are here to take charge of things. Good-bye! And now you," the speaker laid her hand on Stafford's arm, "come in here with me."

She led him into the drawing-room, and when they sat down opposite each other, she looked at him with a judicial air.

"Now," she said, "tell me the meaning of this affair."

It is probable that Stafford had never in his life been less inclined to mirth; yet he found himself laughing.

"I should like to put that question on my own part to any one who could answer it," he said; "for, as matters stand, I am no more able to throw light on the affair than you are."

"Don't quibble!" she replied impatiently. "You forget that for me the matter stands where we left it when I paid you that visit the other morning. I want you to take up the thread, and tell me what occurred when Mrs. Lestrange heard of Sylvia's appearance in her play."

"What occurred," he told her, "was much what we expected. Mrs. Lestrange was furious with her daughter and with me— comprehensively. Indeed, with every one concerned in the appearance. But her anger was chiefly roused by Prince Voronine, who, with a fine sense of the fitness of things, chose this happy moment to offer his hand and fortune to her daughter."

"Had he the audacity to do that?"

"Just that. And really, you know, one couldn't but feel that he scored rather cleverly. Mrs. Lestrange had allowed her fancy for De Rivera to make her neglect the prince, whom, however, she very distinctly meant to marry; and he not only resented this neglect, but quite independently of it, I think, decided that he preferred the daughter to the mother. So he neatly combined revenge with love when he wrote to Mrs. Lestrange, offering himself as a suitor for her daughter, and explaining that he came forward at this time in order to save Sylvia from further contamination with the stage."

"That was positively insulting to Mrs. Lestrange —brutally insulting!"

"I suppose I needn't remind you of the saying about scratching a Russian and finding a Tartar. Under their suave polish, there is often something very brutal about these half-Oriental people. And we don't know how much provocation for the blow he dealt the prince may have had."

"That is true. We know nothing, though we may surmise a good deal, about their relations. But it was a merciless blow; and I have a sense of positive fear in considering what Violet Lestrange would be likely to do under it."

"I had that consciousness of fear in leaving Sylvia with her," Stafford said. "And now I know that it was justified."

Lady Feringham leaned forward and their eyes met, the same thought in the mind of each.

"You believe that she opened the gas?" Lady Feringham whispered.

"I believe that she did," he answered. "I would not say so to any one but you— it is a terrible thing to say without positive proof; but in my own mind I have little doubt of it."

"Yet you know what we are suspecting her of? Nothing less than an attempt to—"

"Murder her daughter. Yes, I acknowledge that it sounds almost incredible. But you must remember that natural ties mean nothing to Mrs. Lestrange; that Sylvia came to her a stranger; that she developed a dislike toward her almost immediately, and this dislike finally grew, under the circumstances of which we know, to hatred." He remembered how he had seen that hatred gleaming in Mrs. Lestrange's eyes when she looked at Sylvia. “I ought to have feared more than I did,” he added. "I should never have left her there."

"But if you begged her to go and she refused, what could you have done?"

He threw out his hands with a despairing gesture. "Nothing, of course. I know that; and yet I feel that I went away and left her in deadly peril. It was a mere detail that Mrs. Lestrange had practically ordered me out of the house."

"Because Sylvia had accepted you?"

"And because I denied her assertion that I had ever been her lover."

"She asserted that— to Sylvia?"

"She did more than merely assert it, as I shall tell you presently. Meanwhile try to see the situation as she saw it. Here was her daughter whom she detested, and who stood in the position of one who had rivalled her successfully both with the public and with the man she intended to marry. Then, as far as I was concerned, I had been of great use to her, you know—"

Lady Feringham nodded. "Didn't I warn you that she would regard your suit to Sylvia as an offence to herself almost equal to that of Prince Voronine, and that in her anger she would use any weapon on which she could lay her hand, in striking at you?"

"You did, and you were right. You will understand therefore that in striking at me she struck also at Sylvia; that she included us both in her tempest of rage, disappointment and hatred. But, since Sylvia refused to believe her accusation, she knew that nothing could prevent our meeting when her daughter left the house the next day. Then remember that she had Sylvia in her power for one night more — the last, as she clearly understood, that the girl would ever spend under her roof."

He paused, and Lady Feringham found herself shivering a little. "Well," she prompted, “what followed then?"

“What followed was that she showed Sylvia a letter apparently written by me, which proved the charge she had made against me."

"But how did such a letter come to be in existence, if it were not genuine?"

“I haven't had time to go into that," he replied, "but I hope I don't need to assure you that it was not genuine. We shall therefore only consider its effect, which was this —"

He took from his pocket the letter which Susan Bennett had given him, and handed it to Lady Feringham. She drew from the envelope the sheet of paper it contained, ran her eyes over the few lines written within, and then looked up at him.

"So Sylvia believed the charge, after all!" she said.

"Read the inclosure," he answered, "and you will not blame her for believing it."

Lady Feringham opened the letter which had lain in Sylvia's sheet, and as her glance fell on it, "This certainly looks like your writing," she exclaimed.

"As far as appearance goes, I would swear to it as my writing," he said. "That increases the mystery, for I have never before had any reason to imagine that Mrs. Lestrange's talents included the capability of forgery. But read it!"

When she had read it, Lady Feringham looked up at him again. "You are right," she said. "Sylvia could not refuse to believe what is written here so clearly. Even I—"

"Am inclined to believe it?"

"Not that, of course, when you assure me that it isn't true. But if this letter were simply given to me, as it was given to Sylvia— why, then, I don't see how it would be possible to refuse to believe it."

"That is what I wanted you to understand; that is why I gave it to you. In the face of such evidence, Sylvia could do nothing but believe the charge and, so believing, write the words you read first. Now, let us go back to Mrs. Lestrange. I haven't told you that this letter was taken out of her hand by the maid who found her insensible on the floor of her daughter's room."

Lady Feringham's eyes widened. "No, I haven't heard that," she said. "How do you account for it?"

"I can only account for it by supposing that, when she showed the letter to Sylvia, she only meant it to produce an effect; she had no intention of leaving such a document for me to see. But Sylvia probably refused to return it to her. So the idea occurred to her of going to the room after Sylvia was asleep to obtain it. But there were difficulties in the way of this, and then—perhaps she thought of opening the gas. It possibly seemed an easy way of accomplishing many things. If Sylvia died by apparent accident, her mother would inherit her fortune, the fortune for the sake of which she had brought her here. And in the letter written to me there would lie a suggested motive for suicide—"

Lady Feringham uttered a sharp exclamation: “You can't think that possible?"

"Never!" he replied. "I know Sylvia, you see. Well, I am forced to believe that Mrs. Lestrange probably stole into the room and opened the gas-jet. Then, remembering that, to avoid any chance of my seeing it, she must get the enclosure out of Sylvia's letter to me, she ventured back into the chamber. Of course she dared not take a light, and she was therefore some time in finding what she wanted. So it was that, before she was able to get out again, the poisonous fumes overcame her and she fell. Being on the floor, of course her condition when found was worse than that of her daughter."

"And this letter was in her hand!"

"That letter was in her hand."

Lady Feringham shuddered again. "If what you believe really occurred, retribution, direct and merciless, overtook her," she said. "I suppose you know that there is grave doubt of her ever recovering."

"I know, but I am hoping earnestly that she may recover."

"That is good of you."

"No, not good at all— purely selfish. Without her help, how am I ever to disprove the evidence of that letter?"

Lady Feringham lifted her brows. "And do you imagine you will ever have her help?" she asked.

A change came over Stafford's face, such as no one had ever seen on it before. The lines set themselves sternly, and into his eyes there leaped a fire which, the woman regarding him said to herself, it would not be good for one who had injured him to meet.

"I do not imagine anything about it," he said. "I am sure that I will force her to tell the truth, if I have to tear it from her throat with my hands."

Chapter XXIV

Sylvia Sees Light

“SYLVIA,” said Miss Goodwin, “Mr. Stafford is waiting to see you."

Sylvia rose slowly. There was something very languid in her movements; and to the anxious gaze watching her, she seemed strangely unlike herself. It was not only that she was extremely pale, and that her eyes had the dark shadows under them which speak of pain and weakness; but there was about her the look of one who had suffered an overwhelming shock, and whose faculties were still somewhat numb from its effect. All the buoyancy, the youthful vigour and resilience, like that of a tall white lily, which had been so strikingly united with the slender grace of her beauty, were for the present at least in eclipse; and she was like the same lily over which a storm had passed, shattering and dimming its lovely bloom.

"Yes," she said, and in her tone as in her manner there was a note of extreme reluctance. "I will go to him."

Miss Goodwin regarded her solicitously. "Are you sure that you feel strong enough?" she asked. "Hadn't you better let me tell him that you are not able to see any one to-day?"

The girl looked at her with a faint smile. "Don't, dear Sara!" she said. "Don't encourage me in cowardice! If it is necessary to see him, why shirk to-day what must be faced to-morrow? And what," she added in a lower tone, "will grow no easier for the shirking."

But Miss Goodwin's ears were as sharp as her eyes were keen, and catching the words:

"If you dislike it so much," she said, "why should you see him at all? There's no reason that I know."

"But there may be a reason that you don't know," Sylvia reminded her; "so I shall not keep him waiting longer."

She left the room a little hastily, as if to avoid further discussion; and Miss Goodwin, looking after her, set her lips tightly together and nodded once or twice significantly. She began to suspect a reason for more than this reluctantly granted interview; a reason for the deep change in the girl of which she had been conscious ever since her arrival.

Meanwhile Stafford, waiting in Mrs. Lestrange's boudoir with a great sense of uncertainty and a keen realization of all that he had ever felt of the element of the unexpected in Sylvia's character, was so shocked by this change when she appeared that he almost overlooked the remoteness of her aspect. He had expected her to show signs of the danger and suffering through which she had passed, but the girl who entered the room seemed to him no more than the ghost of the brilliant, vivid creature who had played Caterina Cornaro so short a time before; and unheeding the fact that she had paused at some distance from him and stood, resting one hand on the back of a chair, as if with the intention of putting a barrier between them, he stepped forward quickly and seized the hand which hung by her side.

“My God!" he cried. "It is only now that I realize what you have suffered!"

She drew her hand from him, not violently, but with a firmness more decisive than violence.

"Yes," she said, and her voice was crystalline in its coldness; "I have suffered very much; but there is no need to speak of that. I am here because you have begged me to see you. I do not know what you can have to say which will justify you in asking this. But I have come to hear."

The words, as well as the tone, seemed to put him at a distance which terms of space only slightly represent. But, as he drew back a step and stood looking at her, he perceived all that he had recognized in

her when he saw her first—the proud reserve, the scorn for whatever failed to meet the high demands of her esteem. And he remembered how he had divined then that it would fare ill with any one who fell from the height of Sylvia Lestrange's respect; since such a one would fall to rise no more.

"It is plain," he said, "that you have judged me without waiting for any explanation from me. That is not what I should have expected from you."

"I think," she replied, "that it is all you have a right to expect. But as I have told you, I am ready to hear whatever you have to say."

"Although," he took up her speech, "you do not know what I can have to say that will justify me in asking such an effort of you! Doesn't this mean that your mind is made up— -that it hasn't occurred to you that I might be guiltless of the charge which has been brought against me? You have not had even so much faith in me as a doubt would imply. Again I say, that is not what I expected of Sylvia Lestrange!"

This was carrying the war into Africa indeed, and a flash of indignation came into the eyes which met his own.

"What right have you to reproach me for want of faith?" she demanded in a low, vibrating tone. "I believed in you, without a shadow of doubt, as long as the accusation made against you rested only on the word of— another person. But when all that she said and you denied was proved by your own words, in your own handwriting, how could I continue to believe in the face of such evidence as that?"

"It would have required an heroic act of faith, I grant," he replied. "But somehow I expected even that from you, for you seem made for heroic things. It is true, however, that I have no right to reproach you for not giving it. The proof appeared unanswerable; and, if you accepted it, you could not fail to despise the man whom you believed to have written that letter. Nevertheless I am here to tell you that I did not write it." He paused, but as she did not speak— only gazed at him with a startled intentness— he continued: "It is asking much to expect you to believe this, in the face of a forgery so skilful that it might almost deceive myself, and yet— I do ask it."

"But if you did not write the letter, how do you account for its existence?" she asked. "A forgery so skilful that it might deceive even yourself would need to be the work of an expert. But this letter was brought to me without time or opportunity for preparation."

"Nevertheless, it must have been prepared," he answered. "Prepared and held in readiness perhaps."

But Sylvia shook her head. "I am sure that the thought of— of what she heard for the first time that afternoon, had never occurred to my mother," she said. "And this being so, why should she have prepared such a letter?"

"I don't know why she should have done it," Stafford replied. "I am only sure that it was done. Sylvia," his voice took a sudden note of passion, "I ask you to believe me, rather than that lying piece of paper! I give you my word of honour that I did not write the letter showed to you; and, having given you this, I will add no further assurance that I am not guilty of the charge which it seems to support. If you do not believe me, if you think me capable of deliberate falsity, why then, I was about to say, it hardly matters whether the charge be true or false; and, as far as you are concerned, that holds good. But there is another point of view from which it does matter. For the sake of my own honour I must prove that I am not guilty of the conduct with which I stand charged."

There was an upleaping of light in her eyes as she looked at him. "How will you prove it?" she asked.

"I can only prove it," he replied, "by forcing Mrs. Lestrange to tell the truth. What methods I shall employ to accomplish this, I do not know. But I will find them. Can you give me any idea when she will be able to see me?"

"I cannot give you the least," Sylvia answered. "Have you not heard that she is paralyzed?"

He stared at her. "Paralyzed! Impossible!"

"So far from that, the doctor tells me it is a frequent result in such cases of poisoning."

"But the condition is temporary? She will recover?"

"His tone about that Is not hopeful. And so, instead of going away, and putting half the world between myself and— the scenes and people here, as I hoped to do, I must remain."

"Because?"

"Because she is my mother, and I cannot leave her helpless and alone."

Stafford frowned. "She is your mother," he said, "but she has forfeited every claim of the relationship upon you."

"Can such claims ever be forfeited?" Sylvia asked. "I think we settled that question in Mexico, and it was you who helped me to see that we cannot make what we owe to others depend upon the manner in which they discharge their obligations to us. I came here with the idea that there might be a duty for me to fulfil, without regard to the fact that all duties had been disregarded on the other side. But it was soon clear that there was nothing of the kind possible; and at last, conscious of arousing only dislike and bitterness, I was ready to go when— what we know occurred."

She paused, as if unable to go on, and, after a moment, Stafford said:

"Will you let me ask what knowledge you have of the causes which led to the accident that nearly cost you your life?"

"I have no knowledge," she answered; "and, if I have suspicions, I do not wish to dwell on them. I am unwilling even to conjecture why my mother should have been found in my room—"

"Are you aware that your letter to me was taken from her hand?"

"I have heard that," she answered, "but I am unable to understand it." Then, with an effort, "I know," she added, "the awful thing you are thinking. You believe that she opened the gas—"

"Yes," he said, "I am forced to believe it."

"But if— if that were so, why should she have risked her life by going back into the room to secure a letter that she must have known was all she desired?"

"Have you forgotten that you enclosed in your letter the other— the forged letter— which she had every reason for wishing that I should not see? It was to obtain the latter that she went back into your room. Think a little! Don't you see a reason there?"

She did think, drawing her brows together over the eyes which seemed gazing beyond him at the scene of that night. She saw her mother standing before her, heard her demand for the return of the letter she had brought, remembered her own positive refusal to give it up, and caught again the flash in Mrs. Lestrange's glance as she finally acquiesced. Yes, the reason was there! It was to gain possession of this letter that she had entered the room where the gas-jets were open. Stafford was startled by the expression in the eyes which suddenly turned to him.

"You have given me a suggestion," Sylvia said, "which throws a light on what has been before altogether dark. Let me tell you all that happened. But first, I think I will sit down."

She sank into the seat by which up to this time she had remained standing, for the reaction from the tension in which she had been holding herself seemed to relax every fibre of her frame. She was so pale as she leaned her head against the back of the chair for a moment, while the lashes of her eye-lids fell on her cheeks, that Stafford was afraid she was about to faint. But while he hesitated what to do, the dark fringes lifted, and her eyes met his, lucid and very beautiful, as if with a great relief.

"Will you not sit down also?" she said. Then, as he drew a chair forward and sat down: "I want to tell you as far as possible every detail," she went on. "It was late that night when my mother came to me with the letter which-you disown. After I had read it, she wished me to give it back to her, but I refused to do so, saying that I must send it to you. She objected, but I was firm in my refusal; and then quite suddenly she seemed to agree, and went away. I suppose it occurred to her that she could return when I was asleep and get it. After she left I wrote to you, and I have little recollection of what followed. I may

have been careless in turning off the gas, or by some hasty movement disconnected the tube. I remember nothing; but such was the preoccupation of my mind that anything was possible. Having written the letter, and knowing that some rest was necessary if I was to travel next day, I undressed and threw myself on the bed. I must have fallen asleep almost immediately— no doubt from exhaustion, for I had not slept at all the night before. And I knew no more until I awoke in the hands of the doctors and nurses. I think now that I must have left the gas open, I think that my mother came into the room to get the letter and was overcome, and I think— yes, it seems quite clear— that she would not have come if what she wished to obtain had not been—"

"A forgery!"

The words leaped from his lips as she paused, and she did not refuse them.

"Yes, a forgery," she repeated; "for if it were really your letter, why should she have been so determined to prevent your seeing it?" She suddenly extended her hand. "Forgive me," she said, "that I did not see this sooner."

He took the hand into the clasp of both his own, lifting it to his lips in the flood of emotion which overpowered him.

"I have nothing to forgive," he said. "I have recognized from the first moment the letter was put into my hands that you could hardly have been expected to doubt its evidence; and it is wonderful that you should reach such doubt at last through your own unassisted perception."

"Not unassisted," she said. "It was your suggestion which has made me see what should have been clear to me from the time that I heard of her presence in my room. But the awful suspicion about the gas overpowered any thought of the letter in her hand. The significance of that never occurred to me — until now. Yet," she paused again, "there are many difficulties remaining. It is almost impossible to see how or when such a letter could have been prepared."

“Nevertheless, it must have been prepared," Stafford declared; "and I shall never ask you to withdraw the sentence which you wrote me, until I can prove the forgery beyond possibility of doubt."

"But should not faith, if it exist at all, be great enough to dispense with proof?" she queried gently.

He shook his head. "Not when faith has been tried by such a doubt as this. You must demand, and I must give the fullest proof of the falsity of that letter, before you can lay your hand in mine again, except in this generous token of confidence, for which I thank you with all my heart. And so thanking," he kissed the slender hand again and laid it in her lap, “I give it back to you."

"It is you who are generous!" she told him in a low tone. "I see now that my faith in you should not have been shaken, let the evidence have been what it might. For evidence may deceive, but character does not. But do you comprehend the difficulty of the task to which you are pledging yourself—how hard it will be to find proof of such a forgery?"

"Wherever a crime has been committed, the proof of it must exist," he replied. He rose, crossed the floor, opened Mrs. Lestrange's escritoire and brought her the blotter that lay within. "Here is one proof," he said, "that the letter was written at that desk, probably on the night it was taken to you. I found this the next morning when I came here to write a message to Miss Goodwin. As you may imagine I was amazed to see the impression of my own handwriting before my eyes, when I knew that I had not for years written a line at Mrs. Lestrange's desk."

Sylvia sat for a minute staring silently at the evidence thus laid before her. Then she rose, walked to the fireplace, and held the blotter up before the overmantel mirror. Stafford followed her, and standing by her side read clearly and legibly reflected certain words of the forged letter. Their eyes met in the glass as each recognized these words; and then, turning quickly around, Sylvia faced him.

"Why did you not show me this at once?" she asked.

"Because," he answered, "without some measure of faith on your part it would be no proof at all. You have only my word that it is not the impression of my writing, that I did not deliberately prepare it after I read your letter— which, by the bye, was brought to me while I sat at that desk."

"But how could my mother have done this alone?" she wondered. "Even if she were the expert forger which it would imply, she had that day only the use of one hand."

"Her right hand, however."

"True, but still— Oh, it is a mystery which I do not see how you can ever solve."

"I shall never rest, and I shall never ask you to trust me again, until I have solved it," he answered with the stern note in his voice, the stern lines about mouth and square-set chin, which had made Lady Feringham think that it would not be well for one who had injured him to be forced to face him. "What I desire most of all now," he said, "is to see Mrs. Lestrange."

"That is impossible in her present condition."

"Then I will go to Sir William Barry and find out how long this condition is likely to last. Don't you understand? I am on fire with impatience to prove the truth to you—"

He broke off as, extending her hand again, she laid it on his arm.

"You have given me such great relief," she said, "that I can wait with patience, and so must you, for the proof which may, or may not be forthcoming; but which, for me at least, has become unnecessary."

And it was with those sweet and gracious words still sounding in his ears, that he left the house a few minutes later.

Chapter XXV

A Medical Sentence

“YES," said Sir William Barry, “I am sorry to say that Mrs. Lestrange's condition is very grave indeed."

Stafford glanced at the famous physician quickly. The tone, even more than the words, warned him that one of those medical sentences from which there is no appeal, was about to be pronounced.

“If you do not object to telling me," he said, "I should like to hear exactly what her condition is. As I have mentioned to you before, I am an old friend and kinsman of Mrs. Lestrange."

"I quite understand your interest," the other replied, "and I wish that I were able to give you a more encouraging account of her state. But I am sorry to say that there is very little to encourage in it. You have probably heard that she is paralyzed?"

“I have heard it with the greatest surprise. What does that mean?"

“It means that she is suffering from a disease which is frequently the result of poisoning from illuminating gas. We call it multiple neuritis; and it is marked by an acute ascending paralysis, commencing in the feet and arms and extending rapidly toward the nerve centres. With this we have, in her case, a heart action badly weakened."

Stafford sat for an instant staring silently at the man who had uttered these words with a gravity and decision which justified his foreboding.

"But surely there is hope of her recovery?" he asked at last. "She has always appeared to have superb health."

The physician shook his head.

"The appearance of health was somewhat deceptive," he said. "Mrs. Lestrange has lived under a high pressure for so long, that I have several times been obliged to warn her of the possible result. The heart in particular was not in a condition to bear the strain to which this poisoning has subjected it."

"I should have thought the heart the last organ likely to be weak with Mrs. Lestrange," Stafford involuntarily remarked.

A gleam of amusement came into the doctor's eyes.

"The physical heart and the emotion for which it stands in imaginative speech, are two different things," he replied. "But you ask if there is hope of her recovery. I cannot say positively that there is none, for such cases do occasionally recover; but I am bound to tell you that the indications in this case are not favourable for recovery."

Again the carefully weighed utterance conveyed an impression of finality which filled Stafford with a sense of pity so poignant, that in it he almost forgot his own injury and resentment.

"But this is terrible!" he exclaimed. "I cannot imagine anything more dreadful than for a woman like Mrs. Lestrange to be struck down in this manner at the height of her career."

"It is very sad," Sir William agreed. "I feel it deeply, and I need hardly say that I am employing all possible means, even those which are largely experimental, for her relief."

"And if these means fail, will the paralysis continue?"

"It is more than likely. The disease is now in the first acute stage. If the symptoms yield to treatment, there will probably follow a subacute or chronic state, in which the pain will be less, but paralysis even more marked. From such a condition recovery is occasionally possible; but I cannot advise the building much hope upon it in the present case."

"And if there is no recovery," Stafford pressed, "how long will this chronic state last?"

"You ask a question which no doctor in the world could answer," Sir William told him. "Months or years— the length of time will depend entirely upon the vitality of the patient, the resistance which Nature is able to offer to the forces of the disease."

"Then one more inquiry," Stafford went on. "With this condition existing, would mental agitation—an exciting conversation, for instance— be injurious to the patient?"

"It would be so injurious," was the emphatic reply, "that nothing of the kind could be permitted. I have positively prohibited, and shall continue to prohibit, anything in the least exciting, even the admittance of visitors to Mrs. Lestrange. On that depends her only hope of recovery."

It was with the feeling of one who sees himself confronted by an obstacle which he is altogether powerless to overcome, that Stafford a little later left Sir William Barry's door. The diagnosis of Mrs. Lestrange's case was so much worse, the prognosis so much more unfavourable than he had anticipated, that he could not fail to recognize that there was little hope of his being able to see her and force from her any admission which would help him to prove the falsity of the letter she had taken to Sylvia.

And yet without this, how was the forgery to be proved? For the more he studied the letter, the more he became aware that it was a most ingenious piece of work. Not only was the writing sufficiently like his own to have, as he had said, deceived even himself, but the matter was in its manner even more distinctively his. As he read the sentences, he was tormented by a recollection, a memory too vague to grasp, of having used some such collocation of words at some time— in another existence it seemed, so illusive was the association. He could almost have fancied that he had written the letter under hypnotic influence, so clearly did he recognize a note of familiarity in the forms and turns of expression which it contained, had such an explanation been in the least degree possible.

But since it was not possible, how could he account for a likeness in matter deeper and more convincing than the likeness in writing, if he were unable to obtain any clue to the mystery from Mrs. Lestrange? He recalled the pledge he had made when he laid Sylvia's hand back in her lap— recalled it with something like a sense of despair for the difficulty of its fulfilment, and yet with no regret. For the

offer of her confidence had only made him realize more deeply than before the necessity of clearing himself in the most complete manner, and proving himself worthy of the faith she was ready to give him. He set his teeth as he thought of Mrs. Lestrange.

"I will force her to tell the truth, if I have to tear it from her throat with my hands," he had said to Lady Feringham; and now he felt himself in the position of one who has vainly boasted. Fate had intervened; Mrs. Lestrange, as a consequence of her own vindictive passion, was placed beyond his reach, and from what Sir William Barry said, it seemed as if she might elude him in the most final manner of all, leaving on him the stain of a charge which he could never disprove.

In the deep depression of his spirit, he walked on, hardly knowing where he was going, until he presently found himself at his own lodgings, where, on entering, he was met by his servant with a rather mysterious air.

"A lady, sir," the man informed him, "has been waiting for you for some time."

"A lady!" Stafford ejaculated. "Who is she? And why should you have allowed her to wait, when you know that nothing is more uncertain than my return?"

"I told her that, sir. But she said she would wait on the chance that you might come in. Then she walked into the sitting-room—"

"How long ago?"

"At least an hour, sir; but she's there yet."

Stafford felt extremely irritated. He had already had some experience of the annoyances which beset the literary famous; and he had no doubt that this present visitor was some feminine journalist, desirous of turning him into "copy," or an actress anxious that he should write a play to exploit her personality. He frowned as he regarded his servant.

"I don't know what's the good of you, if you let me in for such annoyance as this," he said. "Now I shall simply walk out again, and leave you to deal with the waiting lady as best you can."

The man looked alarmed. Evidently the lady had impressed him as a person not easy to be dealt with.

"She's very anxious to see you, sir," he said hastily, as Stafford turned to carry out his threat of departure; "and I judged from the way she spoke that perhaps you'd be anxious to see her—"

"But who is she?" Stafford demanded sharply. "I can't possibly tell whether or not I am anxious to see her, unless I know her name!"

"She is Miss Good— something, sir. An elderly, very positive lady."

"Oh, Miss Goodwin! Why on earth didn't you say so at once? You are a blockhead, Fenton!"

The next minute he was in the sitting-room, shaking hands with Miss Goodwin herself, whom he found settled in an easy chair beside the book-laden writing-table.

"I was about to give you up and go away," she told him. "I've read through a novel— awful trash it is, and very improper besides— while waiting for you, and I think your man regards me as a suspicious character, for he has been looking into the room continually. Why don't you leave word when you go out at what time you'll be back?"

"Because, as a rule, I haven't the faintest idea what that time will be," he replied, "and because I couldn't possibly anticipate the honour of a visit from you—"

"No, you couldn't anticipate that," she agreed, "for it's a surprise to myself—at least the matter which has brought me here is a surprise, and a shock as well."

"What is the matter?" he asked, conscious how many things might have been revealed to surprise and shock the speaker.

She considered him for an instant with an air of severity, and he found his mind darting about among half a dozen different conjectures before she said:

"Do you know that Sylvia has put money— a great deal of money— into her mother's theatrical venture?"

"Yes," he replied, "I have lately learned it with great regret."

A flush sprang to Miss Goodwin's face, and a flash of anger into her keen brown eyes.

"Had you any idea," she demanded, "that that was what Mrs. Lestrange wanted when she sent you to Mexico, to represent how much her mother's heart yearned to know the daughter she had abandoned, and when you persuaded Sylvia to come to her?"

"I am sure, if you stop to think for a moment, you will see that an answer is hardly required for that question," he replied quietly. "When you begged me to try and induce Sylvia to accept her mother's invitation—"

"Fool that I was!" she interjected bitterly.

"I warned you," he went on, "that you might be no better, perhaps even less satisfied with the conditions brought about by the change, than you were with the conditions then existing. In such case, I asked you to remember that I assumed no responsibility for anything that might happen."

"Am I to understand, then, that this— robbery, for it is nothing less—was one of the things for which you disavowed responsibility in advance?" she inquired.

"So far from that," he answered with the same quietness, "I had not the least suspicion of such a motive on Mrs. Lestrange's part. It is a little odd that, knowing her as I did, the idea should not have occurred to me. But as a matter of fact it did not enter my mind even as a possibility. Had it done so," he paused with an effort at self-restraint, "I should not have gone to Mexico," he ended.

"Perhaps I ought to beg your pardon for thinking it possible that you could have known," Miss Goodwin told him. "But you see it was your play—"

He threw back his head and laughed, but not mirthfully.

"Yes, the thing no doubt appeared very clear," he said. "The playwright and the star, looking about for some one to finance their play, thought of the neglected daughter, with her rich inheritance, in Mexico, and the former was sent to persuade her to come to London, in order that she might fill the part of theatrical ‘angel.' My dear Miss Goodwin, my compliments on your ability to construct an imaginary situation!"

"You can be as sarcastic as you please," Miss Goodwin returned; "but you can't deny that it is a possible situation."

"Oh, possible!" He lifted his shoulders. "Anything is possible, given the proper characters. With those you might construct a plot to murder as readily as to finance a play."

"God only knows whether murder has not been nearly done," she said, "but I am sure—"

"That I had no part in that? How very kind you are!"

"Look here!" She leaned forward and laid her hand on his arm. "There's no good in being so dreadfully angry. I may have been foolish in thinking it possible that you knew, or even suspected, Mrs. Lestrange's motive in sending for her daughter; but I have not come here to talk about that. I’ve come to tell you that as a result Sylvia is now threatened with heavy loss."

Stafford started.

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "Why haven't I thought of it before? The collapse of the play means—"

"Absolute ruin for Mrs. Lestrange. It seems that she has not been doing very well professionally since she became her own manager a year or two ago; and, in an attempt to recoup her losses, she leased this expensive theatre and put on your play at an immense cost—"

"The cost has certainly been immense."

"*And Sylvia stands for it*. Do you comprehend?" she asked, as he sat staring at her. "Mrs. Lestrange is overwhelmed with debt; and the failure of this venture means that she is thrown penniless and helpless on the hands of her daughter whose fortune she has already impaired."

"Good heavens!" Stafford was simply appalled. "Why did Sylvia allow herself to be drawn into such an undertaking without at least consulting me?"

"I fancy from what she tells me that Mrs. Lestrange put the matter to her in a way that seemed to leave her no alternative," Miss Goodwin replied. "There was a Russian prince involved, and to prevent her mother from taking his money—which, between ourselves, I haven't a doubt she had already taken, as far as she could— this poor, foolish child pledged herself for the tremendous expense of the production of the play—" She broke off as Stafford rose, pushing back his chair with an abrupt movement.

"This is intolerable!" he declared. "The play is mine, and I shall immediately take steps to assume all the expense of its failure."

"But it will ruin you!"

"What difference does that make, if I save Sylvia from ruin? Don't you see," he turned on her impetuously, "that, although I was so angry with you a minute ago, you were quite right in thinking that the whole matter is in a degree my fault? If I had not gone to Mexico on that woman's errand, none of all this would have happened."

"You couldn't tell that, you know."

"No, I couldn't tell it, any more than I could tell the other results of the folly which led me to condone, and even— God forgive me!— to applaud her violation of every duty, to follow the law of her own selfish desires. It is just enough that I should have a part in reaping the harvest of such sowing. But Sylvia has no part in it!"

"It would be an easy world," observed Miss Goodwin, "if we only suffered from those things in which we were ourselves in fault. But, as matters are arranged, we suffer most from the faults and the doings of others over whom we have no control. So it is now with Sylvia. But sit down again! This is only the beginning of what I have come to tell you."

"What else can there be?" he queried.

"Something which, to me at least, makes the rest seem almost trifling," she responded. "Mr. Hawkes —isn't that the name of the manager of Mrs. Lestrange's theatre? Well, this man has been to see Sylvia, and has urged her to continue the production of the play, and to fill her mother's part herself. And Sylvia has consented."

"No!" Stafford cried in a tone of protest.

"She has consented," Miss Goodwin repeated with emphasis. "I can do nothing to change her resolution, so I have come to you in the hope that, if you see the thing as I do, you may be able to interfere and prevent it. If you haven't sufficient influence with Sylvia to induce her to give the matter up, haven't you power to stop the performance of the play?"

"It is possible that I may have, since my contract was made with Mrs. Lestrange and calls for her appearance."

"Then surely that settles it. Mrs. Lestrange can't appear; and it is madness for Sylvia to think of attempting professionally what she did once as an amateur, but which of course was regarded and judged merely as an amateur performance."

"You are mistaken," Stafford interrupted. "There was nothing amateur about the performance, which was amazing throughout. But I agree with you that it would be tempting fate for Sylvia to repeat it. There are many reasons why such a thing must not be thought of."

"Will you come and tell her so?"

"Immediately." He crossed the floor and rang the bell. "Fenton, call a cab as quickly as possible. I will see Sylvia first," he went on, addressing Miss Goodwin as the man left the room. "And then I'll meet Hawkes, give up the house, withdraw the play, and assume all the expense of the production myself."

Miss Goodwin looked at him a little oddly as she rose.

"You talk very decidedly," she said, "and I hope you will be able to act with equal decision. But I warn you that Sylvia has a strong will of her own."

"Yes," he said, "I know that. But I have no fear that I shall fail to make her will yield to mine in this matter."

Chapter XXVI

Sylvia Carries Her Point

IF, as we are told on excellent authority, pride goes before a fall, so an excess of confidence in one's own ability to accomplish some desired end often leads to disappointment. And such disappointment awaited Stafford when he matched his will against Sylvia's in the matter of the play. She listened to him quietly, and then said:

"All this can only mean that you believe there is a risk in my appearing again, because what I achieved when I appeared before was not a real success, but only an illusion."

"You are mistaken," he replied; "I neither mean nor believe anything of the kind. Your success was as genuine as it was amazing. But it was a triumph of inspiration over inexperience; and, if you attempt to repeat it, I fear that the lack of training will become apparent."

"But, if it did not appear in the first attempt, and you said that it did not—"

"I said so most truly."

"Then what is there to fear now? Having tested my power once, and succeeded, why should I fail in a second attempt?"

"Because you will be judged more severely than you were judged then," he told her. "On that occasion the audience was taken by surprise, and there was no critical attitude whatever. People were carried away by your personal charm, and, knowing who you were, did not judge you as a professional actress is judged. But you would be judged in that manner if you appeared again."

"And you don't believe that I could successfully sustain the judgment?" she asked.

"I am afraid," he answered, "that is the truth —I am afraid of the risk. You have no idea what it would mean to fail."

"Perhaps not," she returned calmly; "but I have a very clear idea that I shall not fail. I told you before that I felt certain of my power to act, and you found that I was not mistaken. Why haven't you more faith in me, and in your own past judgment, now?"

"Because I am doubtful of my judgment under the glamour of that night," he acknowledged. "But don't misunderstand me. Even if I were certain of your ability to repeat what was a phenomenal success, I should not wish you to do so."

"Why not?"

"Because the stage is no place for you. I feel this so strongly, that I cannot consent to your appearing again in the play."

"I am sorry, for in that case I must appear without your consent. It is possible that you don't know how many reasons there are that make it necessary for me to do so."

"I know that you have been induced to make yourself responsible for the expense of the play's production," he said. "But you can't believe that I will permit you to bear that expense."

"I don't see how you will prevent my doing so," she replied. "It is my mother's business, and I am acting as her representative."

"I am sure that Mrs. Lestrange would prefer financial failure to the continued production of the play, with you in her part," he asserted.

"It is possible," Sylvia admitted; "but I shall not ask her sanction, unless you force me to do so."

"If you did, she would refuse it."

"I think not, when she clearly understood that the comfort and luxury of her present life depend on what I propose to do."

It occurred to him as he looked at her— this girl with the lucid eyes and firmly-cut mouth, who faced him with such serene and immovable resolution — that there were depths in her character which he had not yet fathomed. Clearly there was nothing to be gained by the tone of dominant opposition which he had adopted, so he descended to entreaty.

"Sylvia," he said, "I beg you most earnestly not to do this thing! The play is mine, and I insist upon assuming the expense of its production. This will leave your fortune untouched, and you can give Mrs. Lestrange, little as she deserves anything from you, all the comfort and luxury she needs."

"And you?" she queried. "Have you any idea of the amount of the expense which you are ready to assume?"

"Not yet; but that is a detail of small importance."

"Are you, then, a very rich man?"

"You know that I am not," he answered; "but while I have never cared much about making money, and so have not accumulated a great deal, I am not without means which I can immediately command, and I have also capabilities which are negotiable assets."

"In other words, you are willing to strip yourself of all that you possess, and even to lay a burden on your future, in order to pay my mother's debts. It is good of you to be willing to do this for one who has treated you as she has."

"Don't give me credit for a virtue which I do not possess," he broke in sharply. "I am not thinking of Mrs. Lestrange; I have not the least desire to do anything for her."

"Then it is for me you would be doing it," she said. "I am very grateful, but I am not an object of charity. Don't think," she added quickly, "that I am using the expression in an offended spirit! I am simply stating a fact. No one is a fit object for charity who has power to help herself, and through indolence or pride refuses to use that power. Now, I have such a power, and there would be no excuse for me if I refused to use it under circumstances like the present. Why will you not understand?" She leaned toward him, so lovely in her appealing grace, that the man's heart seemed melting within his breast as he looked at her. "I would never be able to regain my own self-respect if I failed to respond to this demand of positive duty. Why have I always despised my mother so much but for the reason that she flung every duty aside to follow her own selfish desires? And if I now followed mine, should I not be more despicable than she, because, having ventured to sit in judgment upon her, I prove when tested as weak and as selfish as she proved?"

"The cases are totally different," he answered. "The duties which Mrs. Lestrange flung aside were of the most binding character; but there is no obligation resting upon you to impoverish yourself, or to undertake a laborious task for her sake. I know what you are about to answer. You will tell me again that her neglect of her duty toward you does not acquit you of the duty which you owe to her—"

The girl nodded. "Yes," she said, "I would tell you that."

"Then let me tell you, with all the force of which I am capable, that you are mistaken. It does acquit you of the larger measure of that duty, though not of course of the duty altogether. To secure her

from want is all that is required of you; and I have the right to remonstrate against your determination to do so much more, because it is my fault that you are in this position. You cannot deny that, if I had not gone to Mexico, you would not be in London now."

"I have no desire to deny it."

"And therefore I am responsible for all that has followed, for the trying experiences you have had, for the terrible risk of death which you have run. And now you would add to it the robbery of your fortune, the desecration of your youth upon the stage? Sylvia, it is too much! While you are considering Mrs. Lestrange, will you not consider me also a little? Do you wish to crush me under the weight of my own self-reproach, and of the scorn of others as well?"

She started. "What do you mean by that?" she asked. “How can there be any question of the scorn of others?"

"Are you so ignorant of the world as not to know that I will be held accountable for all that has happened about the play? Even Miss Goodwin was ready to believe that the object of my going to Mexico was to bring you here to finance its production, that Mrs. Lestrange and I had planned the matter together."

His words were quiet, but she comprehended suddenly all that they meant. Like a flash the situation —as others would see it, as Miss Goodwin had already seen it— was revealed to her. Yes, that was what the world, so quick in low judgment and so slow in high, would think and say! He had gone to Mexico to find an "angel" for his play, in the person of the daughter whom the star only remembered when she wished to make use of her. Sylvia could hear the comments which would be uttered, see the lifted shoulders, the cynically smiling lips! She looked at Stafford with a dawning consternation in her gaze.

"Such an idea has never occurred to me," she said. "What can I say? What can I do? It is intolerable that you should be the object of such unjust judgment."

"There is nothing you can say," he replied, "but there is much that you can do. You can allow me to bear the expense of the play's failure."

"Would that prevent such comment?"

"To a certain extent it would. Or at least people would be kind enough to believe that, although I might have been willing to use your fortune, I drew the line at actually robbing you of it."

“If that is the best they would believe," she remarked contemptuously, “I don't see why we should consider them. But since you have told me this, I perceive that I must have your consent before going on with my plans. Listen, then, and let me tell you exactly how the matter stands. My mother it appears is practically ruined, which accounts for her asking money from me soon after my arrival. I was glad to let her have it, and so prevent her accepting aid from Prince Voronine."

“Do you really fancy," Stafford interrupted, "that you prevented her from accepting his aid?"

“I at least tried to do so," Sylvia answered. "And if I find that she owes him anything, the debt shall be paid."

"But, good heavens!" consternation was now in Stafford's tone, "if you attempt to pay all the people from whom Mrs. Lestrange has— let us say—borrowed money, your fortune will be swept away."

"I am not so foolish," she replied. "I should not think of doing anything of the kind. But Prince Voronine is another matter, and— we won't argue about that, if you please. To go on, then, I pledged my credit to enable my mother to meet the expense incurred in the production of the play; and no doubt, if it had continued, it would have made the financial success which she counted upon. But we know what has happened; and, with the collapse of the play, I find myself confronted with the necessity of making some great sacrifice— perhaps of my dear home in Mexico."

Stafford uttered a violent exclamation. "That is not to be thought of!" he cried.

"It must not only be thought of, it must be done," she said, "unless another way to pay the debts for which I am responsible can be found. Don't say anything again about your paying them. That I can never permit. You have suffered enough from your friendship for my mother, without being ruined by her."

"Do you think I shall suffer less in seeing you ruined?" he asked bitterly. "How little you know me, after all! And when you spoke a moment ago of not carrying out your plans without my consent, was that only irony?"

"Very far from it," she replied. "But let me finish before I explain. As I have said, I found myself confronted with the necessity of meeting such large demands that there seemed nothing to do but to sell the hacienda in Mexico. And I was very sad in thinking of all the dear people who would miss me so much, when Mr. Hawkes came to me, and suddenly I saw the way to fulfil my obligations and yet avoid parting with El Rosario. I had not thought of continuing the play until he urged me to do so, spoke of the tremendous cost of the production, of the large cast that would be thrown out of employment, of his certainty that I could fill the part of Caterina, and so—"

"And so," Stafford took up her words as she paused, "there is nothing left for me to say."

"There is everything for you to say," she answered. "Now that you know the situation, the word is with you. I will not touch the play without your consent."

“And El Rosario?"

“If you refuse to allow the continued production, of course I must part with El Rosario."

“What a mockery this is!" he cried angrily. "You declare that you will not act without my consent, and then you announce a resolution which leaves me no choice but to say ‘do as you please.'"

“Oh, but I want you to say it differently," she told him eagerly. “I want you to see it all as I see it; and, if you only think a little, I believe that you will. I confess that I dislike the idea of going upon the stage professionally; but at the same time it is borne in upon me that *this is what I came here to do*— not only to recognize the claim of duty, and fulfil its obligations as far as lies in my power, but in this particular manner to atone for the hardness of my judgment, the bitterness of my resentment toward my mother." She paused for a moment, and looked at him with a touch of spiritual exaltation shining in her eyes. “I wish," she said, "that I could make you understand how much this feeling helps me. It is like a strong hand sustaining one on a difficult road. For that the road is difficult, I don't for a moment deny. It would be so if this trouble about money did not exist. But, since it does exist, it appears to me that the way of independence, and the way, I also believe, of expiation, lies in doing the task which seems set before me— a task which is repugnant to me, yet which, having the power to do, I feel bound by every law governing right conduct not to refuse."

There fell a silence, during which Stafford was conscious of realizing not only the inflexible nature of her resolution, but the character of the force behind it— that mysterious force which enables the human soul to choose the high and difficult road, instead of the low and easy one, to accept sacrifice and hardship as its portion, rather than the pleasant and attractive things of life, when the compelling voice of duty demands the choice. Then suddenly she caught the gleam of his whimsical smile.

"You wish me, like the prophet— what was his name?— to bless where I came to curse, or at least to oppose?" he said. "Well, you have convinced me. I see the matter from your point of view, and thus seeing it—"

"You agree with me that there is nothing to do but what I am thinking of doing?"

"No, I don't agree to that, for there is something else, and in my opinion a better thing, which you might do; but I agree that you will not be satisfied, either now or in the future, unless you make this effort, and therefore—"

"The prophet *will* bless? Ah, I felt sure of it! And there really is only this to do. For you know,—

" ‘The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
Is not to fancy what were fair in life,
Provided it could be,— but finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means.'

That is what I am trying to do— make it fair up to my means."

He took her hand and kissed it in a passion of admiration and love.

"You make it fair indeed," he said; "so fair that one realizes by what fine alchemy even the unworthy things of life may be transmuted to form the inspiration of high deeds and noble purposes."

Chapter XXVII

Prince Voronine Desires to Intervene

THERE had not been for years a sensation in the theatrical world, or in the world interested In theatrical matters, equal to that which followed the announcement that Mrs. Lestrange was unable to resume her part in "The Queen of Cyprus," and that it would be taken by her daughter— the girl who had appeared in it once with such astonishing success. The recollection of that success quickened an intense interest in this new appearance. Those who had witnessed the first were eager to renew the pleasure they had experienced, and also to test the impression received, to find if indeed the glamour of youth, grace, and beauty had, as seemed probable, obscured the lack of dramatic experience; while those who had not witnessed the first appearance were anxious to discover how far their impressions of the new actress would coincide with the verdict to which they had listened with a wonder largely tinged with incredulity. The result of this interest was, from the box-office point of view, all that could have been desired. Hawkes rubbed his hands with glee, but Stafford's heart sank with the realization of what was before Sylvia. He had been aware of it from the first, but every hour, every fresh proof of public curiosity and interest, sharpened his perception that the ordeal of her first appearance was nothing to the ordeal now awaiting her.

For that first appearance, as he reminded her, had not only been absolutely unheralded, and therefore without any challenge to critical judgment, but it proved so amazing that such judgment had been to a certain degree overcome in the delight of a new and fresh sensation. He even admitted that he was not sure how far this was not the case with himself; and he was well aware that several of the critics present on that night were inclined to believe that they had been swept off their feet by a wave of enthusiasm for a young and beautiful girl, essaying a difficult part under circumstances which seemed to render the application of rigorous critical standards impossible.

"Of course one judged it as an amateur, not as a professional performance," one of these men said to Stafford. “We were all carried away by the charm with which she invested the part. It was that, rather than her art as an actress, which roused enthusiasm, for she couldn't possibly have possessed any art."

"That wasn't your opinion at the time," Stafford reminded him. "You said then that her art was more remarkable than the charm of which you talk."

"I remember," the other admitted, "but my judgment must have been at fault when I said so. For where would she have gained knowledge of the art of acting?"

"From study of her mother, whom you must acknowledge to be a finished actress."

"There's no question of Mrs. Lestrange's talents, or of her mastery of every trick of her trade," the other agreed; "but her daughter could hardly have grasped immediately an art which was with Mrs. Lestrange the result of twenty years' experience and training."

"In short," Stafford saw that argument was useless, "you have made up your mind that Miss Lestrange's performance was merely the *succès fou* of a pretty amateur."

"Oh, more than that. She has genuine dramatic ability, and she has temperament— lots of temperament. It will be extremely interesting to see her again, and try to find out in cold blood what it was in her performance that so completely carried one away before."

And this was the consensus of opinion among those in whose power it largely rests to make or mar a reputation. They were all quite certain that they had been "carried away" by unprofessional enthusiasm, and they were resolved to atone for it by a great coolness of judgment and an additional rigour of criticism on the occasion of Miss Lestrange's second appearance. It was no wonder that, perceiving this, Stafford found himself more and more apprehensive, and his forebodings were not lessened by a few words which the most eminent critic of all addressed to him when they met accidentally on the pavement of Piccadilly.

"This is sad news of Mrs. Lestrange," he said. "Is it true that she is seriously ill— paralyzed— absolutely unable to act?"

"I am sorry to say that it is quite true," Stafford told him.

"And that she may never be able to act again? Too bad!" as Stafford nodded assent. "A beautiful woman and fine actress, within her limitations. It is a positive tragedy I But what's this I hear of the production of your play being resumed, with her daughter in the leading part? Really, you know, I think that's a mistake. Miss Lestrange acted the part once quite charmingly; but it's a pity to disturb that impression in the minds of those who saw her, and challenge another and possibly different verdict."

"I understand what you mean," Stafford said, "and to a certain extent I agree with you. I have advised Miss Lestrange against taking the risk; but
I have been unable to prevent her doing so. She is quite determined to appear, and as for its being a mistake, you will let me remind you —"

"Of what I said when she appeared before? Yes, I know. I said that it was a remarkable and very charming performance. But you see I was judging her as an amateur. Now she will have to be judged by the standards one applies to professional acting, and— well, it's a pity, really a pity! The very praise given her before will make the critics more keen to point out faults in her performance. You must see that."

"I do see it very clearly," Stafford replied, while he said to himself that he also saw that the eminent critic was less concerned for Sylvia than for what would be said of his commendation of her first performance if she failed in a second; "but I can only repeat that I have no power to turn her from her purpose. And," he added, "I am not sure that it would be wise to do so, if I could. It seems to me, remembering the impression which her acting produced even upon such a trained judgment as your own, that she may achieve a real success."

The other shook his head, putting out his lower lip after a fashion which expressed much discouragement.

"I 'm afraid that's hardly possible," he said. "Candidly, I doubt the value of my own impression of her performance. It was so unexpected— sprung upon one, as it were, without any preparation— and so delightful from the effect of her personality, that it was difficult to be cool and critical in judging it. And ill-judged praise is always misleading. I feel myself largely accountable for what she is now about to face, and I wish some means could be found to induce her to reconsider her decision."

"There is no such means," Stafford said, "because she is thinking as little as possible of herself. You are fancying her a stage-struck amateur, whose vanity has been inflamed and whose head turned by

the praise she has received. But so far from that she is like a soldier who takes up the gun of the comrade who has dropped by his side, and goes on into the battle, to lead a forlorn hope, if necessary."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that Mrs. Lestrange is practically bankrupt, and that on the success of this play she had staked everything. If the doors of the theatre are finally closed upon it, all the tremendous expense of the production will have been incurred for nothing, all the people connected with it will be thrown out of employment, and a mountain of debt will face Miss Lestrange, who has made herself responsible to a great extent for her mother's liabilities."

"Good heavens! this is dreadful."

"Quite dreadful; and I have mentioned it to you not at all for the purpose of working upon your sympathy, but merely that you may understand the matter in its true light. Miss Lestrange is meeting a situation of the utmost difficulty with rare courage; and, although I would gladly spare her the ordeal which is before her, I believe that she does not overrate her own power to win a genuine artistic success, even with those who will judge her most critically."

“I hope so— earnestly I hope so!" the other said. "You may be certain that I will do and say everything I can to ensure it."

"She would not wish you to do or say anything which your artistic conscience did not fully sustain," Stafford assured him. "But I, for one, haven't a doubt that it will sustain you in all that you have already said. Simply don't make up your mind that you must have been mistaken."

"I see that I was quite right in making up my mind from the first that there were some very uncommon qualities in this young lady," the older man said, as they shook hands and parted.

It seemed to Stafford altogether on a line with that conversation, and indeed with all he was just now going through, when he entered his sitting-room a little later to see Prince Voronine sitting where on another occasion Miss Goodwin had sat, beside his book-piled table.

"Not finding you at home, I have, as you perceive, taken the liberty of waiting, in the hope that you might come in," the prince told him, as they shook hands. "I have been anxious to meet you ever since I heard of the terrible accident to Mrs. and Miss Lestrange."

"Ah, yes," Stafford felt as if, for the time at least, his power of commenting on this accident was exhausted, "it must have shocked you very much."

"It shocked me inexpressibly," the prince said, as they sat down. "I had just received a letter from Mrs. Lestrange, written and mailed that very night, which was so full of— well, of what I can only describe as bitterness and fury, that when I heard of the asphyxiation I could not but wonder if possibly— "

"She had attempted suicide?" Stafford smiled a little. "I can relieve your mind on that point. However furious she may have been against you, she did not pay you the compliment of trying to kill herself on your account."

The prince glanced at him sharply, and the steel blue eyes seemed keen enough to probe the depth of any mystery.

"Did she not try to kill any one else?" he asked. "You surely can't be surprised," Stafford had started perceptibly, "that the suspicion occurred to me, if you know anything of the circumstances immediately preceding the accident."

"I know everything— everything that is of importance," Stafford replied. "I know that Mrs. Lestrange had received from you a proposal for the hand of her daughter, which she regarded— with how much reason you alone can tell— as a deliberate insult to herself. She was extremely angry — furious indeed might be the better word; but I am quite sure that it did not occur to her to kill her daughter to prevent her from marrying you, because Miss Lestrange had in the most emphatic manner declined your proposal."

"Your knowledge certainly appears comprehensive," the prince observed haughtily.

"You will admit that it is also accurate," Stafford returned. "I can imagine how the suspicion of which you have spoken originated in your mind; but
I am glad to be able to assure you that, as far as any one is able to judge, the accident was purely an accident."

"As far as any one is able to judge!" the prince repeated. "That seems to imply a lack of certainty."

"I need hardly remind you that, without certainty, one has no right to entertain a contrary suspicion."

"This, if you will pardon me," said the prince coldly, "is mere quibbling. I don't, however, expect you to speak plainly on such a subject; and I have not come to see you in order to discuss it."

"I have been wondering," Stafford remarked, "for what purpose you have come."

"My purpose," the prince replied with an even more pronounced and haughty coldness, "is to make one or two inquiries about Miss Lestrange, because
I have so far failed in my efforts to see her, and I have been astonished to learn that she is about to appear again in her mother's part in your play."

Stafford nodded. "That is her intention," he said.

"May I ask what induces her to do this?"

"I don't know that there is any reason why I shouldn't tell you," Stafford answered. "The chief reason which induces her to do it is to make the money necessary to pay her mother's debts."

"Ah!" It was a sharp exclamation. "That is what I feared. Mrs. Lestrange did not tell the truth about the manner in which she applied certain sums of money which she obtained from me."

Stafford regarded him meditatively.

"I am sure that you did not expect her to tell the truth," he said.

"Perhaps not," the other agreed; "and it does not matter, except as far as her daughter is concerned. But that she should be forced to go on the stage for such a purpose is intolerable, and must be prevented."

"As it chances. Miss Lestrange's ideas of the nature of obligations, monetary or otherwise, are the exact opposite of her mother's," Stafford remarked; "and consequently no one is able to prevent her from doing what she has determined upon."

"Cannot you?" the prince demanded. "The play is yours; can you not insist upon assuming the expense of its production? I have come to say that, if you will do so, I will furnish the money required."

"This is very good of you," Stafford answered deliberately. "Extremely good to offer your financial aid in this liberal manner; but do you mind telling me exactly why you are doing it?"

"I think you know why I am doing it," the prince replied. "I wish to prevent Miss Lestrange from appearing again on the stage. If I had been able to see her, and obtain her consent, I should have interfered in my own person."

"But you must be aware," Stafford said, "that, if you had seen Miss Lestrange, you would have obtained no such consent. Nothing which could be urged by you, or any one else— especially, if you will pardon me, by you— would change her purpose, which is quite fixed. As for my power to interfere, I have already proposed to assume the expenses of the play, and she has positively refused to allow me to do so."

The prince uttered an exclamation under his breath. "But this is intolerable!" he repeated. "If I could only see her— talk to her—"

Stafford leaned forward, the restrained coolness of his manner accentuated by a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Prince," he said, "you belong to a race which, whatever its other faults, is not lacking in keenness of perception. I wonder, therefore, that you do not recognize the reason of Miss Lestrange's

refusal to see you. It is sufficiently clear. If you insist upon an explanation, I have no doubt she will give it to you; but you will pardon me for suggesting that there are some things with regard to which it is not wise to force explicitness. This is one of them."

There was a moment's pause, in which the two men looked at each other silently, and Stafford was quite prepared for anything which might follow; but after an instant Prince Voronine rose quietly to his feet.

"I will justify your kind opinion of my keenness of perception," he said, "by remarking that, if the meaning of Miss Lestrange's refusal to see me is clear, the motive of your advice is not less clear. It is evident that there is nothing to be done through you to prevent her appearance on the stage; and this being so, I regret to have troubled you with an unnecessary visit, and have the honour to bid you good-day."

Chapter XXVIII

"I Am Not Going To Fail"

NOTWITHSTANDING that Stafford repeated to himself with much emphasis what he had said to the eminent critic of his conviction that Sylvia did not overrate her ability to achieve a genuine artistic success even under the fire of criticism which would be directed upon her, he found himself extremely nervous and beset by many fears when he met her at the theatre on the first night of the new production of the play. Despite his intentions to the contrary, these fears were so plainly written on his face that a smile flashed over hers as she looked at him.

"You are dreadfully afraid for me," she said, “but there really isn't the least reason why you should be. I am not going to fail."

"Of course you are not going to fail," he said quickly. "Why should you imagine—?"

"That you are afraid of it? You can't see your own expression, or you would not ask the question. Why don't you believe that what I did once I can do again? *I* haven't the faintest doubt of it. I know that, when I go on the stage, I shall forget myself entirely; I shall be no longer Sylvia Lestrange but Caterina Cornaro, living her life, thinking her thoughts, feeling her emotions. You were satisfied with the manner in which I presented the character before, and yet you are doubtful of my power now."

"I am not doubtful of your power," he declared truthfully enough. “I am sure that you will satisfy me now, as you satisfied me then. I am only nervous in thinking of—"

“The critics who are ready to devour me?" She laughed gaily, fearlessly. “Do you think I don't know that they are waiting to see how much they were mistaken in their praise before, how far I shall fall short of the standards by which they mean to try me? Well, it sounds presumptuous perhaps, but I shall not fall short. The chief reason why I am sure of this, is because I am confident of my power to do what I am attempting to do; and another reason is because I care so little for their verdict. I wish to please them, of course; but it would not be a matter of serious importance if I failed. If I expected to make the stage my world, to find a life-work on it, I might be nervous and anxious; for so much would then depend upon their verdict. But as it is, I am altogether independent of their liking beyond the present occasion. If I can please them and the public sufficiently to keep the play going, I shall be glad for the sake of others; but for my own sake It means little or nothing of value to me. Now do you understand why I am so sure and so cool?"

“Yes," he answered, "I understand. You are sure because you are confident of your own power, and you are cool because you are indifferent."

"Absolutely indifferent. Those people yonder," she flung her hand toward the waiting audience, "are nothing to me, and they can give me nothing for which I really care. If I ever doubted that, I am certain of it now. If I ever thought that the fever of the stage might seize me too, I am now sure that it never will. Their applause when it comes— and it will come— may stimulate and please me, but in itself it has no value. My real life lies elsewhere. This is merely an interlude, the exercise of one side of my nature, in which I shall succeed, but in which failure would mean so little to me that I have no fear of it. For we only fear that which is important, or of value to us."

He looked at her with wonder. The lucid, brilliant eyes seemed to challenge him to doubt; but doubt was far from his mind. For this was one of his moments of insight, and he read in her even more than she expressed of serene confidence and almost disdainful indifference.

“You are marvellous!" he told her. “You make fear seem a thing absurd. I feel that anything— everything— is possible to you!"

“That is what I wanted to make you feel," she returned. "Within certain limits, it is what I feel myself. There's a wonderful exaltation in the consciousness of power, isn't there?"

"Very wonderful," he agreed. "The conviction of one's own ability to do a certain thing is the first great step toward doing it— provided that one is not misled by vanity. And you are not misled."

"No," she said quietly. "I have proved that to myself and to you. Now please go out to the front. You will find Miss Goodwin in a box with Lady Feringham. Try to keep her from being anxious, and don't come back until the play is over."

He obeyed; and as he went, carrying with him the radiance of her eyes and smile, he realized afresh that he was only beginning to understand Sylvia
Lestrange, to fathom the depths and appreciate the strength of her character.

He found Miss Goodwin in the box with Lady Feringham; and the latter greeted him with an air of unmistakable reproach.

"This," she said, "is something which I did not expect."

"Neither did I," he replied, as he sat down beside her. "Please don't be more unkind than you can help, for I have really done my best to prevent it. And like yourself, I can now only wait the result."

"Have you seen Sylvia?"

"I have just left her."

"And how is she? All this," she nodded toward the crowded house humming with talk, "is calculated to make her terribly nervous."

Stafford smiled. He had a sudden vision of Sylvia as he saw her last, and a sense of confidence warmed him like a cordial.

"No actress with a quarter of a century's experience of success could be less nervous, less doubtful of herself," he said. "It is superb, the confidence she feels in her own power."

Lady Feringham shot a curious glance at him. "Do you feel it also?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "I feel it also— now. A little while ago I did not. I was a prey to miserable forebodings, as you are at present; but, since I have talked to Sylvia, all is changed. She has made me realize that there is no possibility of failure for her."

"I wish you could make poor Miss Goodwin realize it. Look at her! Did you ever see such a picture of acute misery?"

He shrugged his shoulders. '*If Sylvia has not been able to inspire her with confidence, I cannot hope to succeed," he said.

Nevertheless, he felt bound to make an effort; but, when he approached Miss Goodwin, she simply glared at him.

“I wonder," she remarked aggressively, "if you have any idea of what I am thinking."

"Not exactly," he confessed; "but I should judge that it is perhaps that you regret the fact of my existence."

"I certainly regret that I didn't hasten your departure by every means in my power the day you first came to El Rosario," she said. "Oh, when I recall my folly, and all that has come of it, words are too weak to express my exasperation against myself, as well as against you!"

"Don't you think," he suggested, "that, before you anathematize yourself and me any more, you had better wait and see what does finally come from the act which you regret? If, as I reminded you on another occasion, the true meaning of life is to be found in the development of character, there has been some wonderful development going on with Sylvia since that time."

"To end by making her an *actress*!"

It is impossible to convey an idea of the bitter scorn which filled these words, and, as Stafford bent toward the speaker, he saw that her lips were quivering.

“Wait!” he urged gently. “After you have seen her act, you will understand that if she is indeed an actress in the highest sense— one, that is, who taking a character views it in the light of her imagination, and fuses it in the fire of her emotions, until she is able to present it with vivid force to others— it is only part of the general endowment of her nature, of the power to pass out of the narrow bounds of self into other lives, to enrich them in many ways."

She gave him a quick, startled look, but answered nothing, for at this moment the curtain rose.

The scene in the great hall of the Palace of Nikosia was as splendid as ever, the pageant of the Court as brilliant, and the eyes of the audience had hardly grown accustomed to the superb picture, when there appeared the figure which seemed to have stepped out of a fairy idyl, so fair it was, so graceful, so full of the divine poetry of youth as well as of royal dignity.

There was an instant's pause, an instant in which Stafford held his breath, and then came a quick outburst of applause, a greeting drawn irresistibly from the audience by the charm which breathed from every line of that figure, which spoke in every gesture, every glance. For the personality of the actress made itself felt, drew, held, fascinated every eye in the house before the musical voice had uttered a single word.

“Exquisite!” Stafford heard Lady Feringham murmur. "What grace! What charm! And oh, what self-possession!"

“Did I not tell you so?" he said. "She is mistress of herself, and of the situation. There is nothing to fear."

He spoke almost exultantly, for not only did he realize at once how well-founded Sylvia's confidence in her own power was, but all that he had felt at her first appearance came back to him now. Again he was conscious of a sense of satisfied artistic delight in watching the unerring sureness of her dramatic instinct, the delicacy and grace of her acting, the subtle impression of reserved strength in the lighter passages, the note of passion— presaging deeper passion to come — in the climax of the scenes. And it indicated his thorough recognition of the fact that she was, as he had said, mistress of herself, with all her powers like obedient slaves at her command, that he was able to detach his mind from the stage sufficiently to observe the effect of her acting on his immediate companions and on the eager, critical audience.

There was no doubt that Lady Feringham was frankly amazed and delighted; while Miss Goodwin, leaning forward, watched every movement, drank in every tone, with an absorption which ignored everything except the one figure on which her attention was fixed. When Stafford's glance left her to sweep the house, he saw much the same absorbed attention there. It was evident that people were astonished and interested in no ordinary degree; that they found in this acting something at once so fresh, so unconventional and yet so artistic, that It satisfied the judgment while it charmed the taste. The great critic looked up from his place in the stalls, and nodded to Stafford. It was an expressive gesture which

said: "You were right, and I was mistaken. This is wonderful!" And as with him, so with others. The guarded, critical attitude visibly relaxed. "By Jove!" the glances interchanged seemed to say, "we were correct in our first impression, after all!"

Stafford smiled to himself, and settled back in his chair with a sense of relief to give his undivided attention again to the stage. But as he turned his gaze from the audience, it was caught in passing by a familiar face in the stalls— a face which he had not expected to see. He recognized the picturesque Latin outlines with a start and a sudden realization of the drama of life, which in its strangeness so far surpasses the drama of the stage. For it was Don Luis de Rivera— Don Luis who had, unconsciously to himself, played so great a part in the series of events in which they had all been moving like puppets of Fate; Don Luis, Sylvia's graceful young lover, whom, in his mental vision, Stafford could so clearly see coming along the rose-hung corridors of El Rosario; whose suit had been the chief factor in bringing the girl to London; who had protested so passionately against her association with her mother, and whom the same mental vision ironically recalled as the quickly captured slave and abject adorer of that mother, the direct cause of the situation in which they now found themselves, and of the triumph he was now witnessing! It was no wonder that Stafford's gaze lingered meditatively upon him, noting that, like Miss Goodwin, he leaned forward, too much absorbed in gazing at the lovely figure on the stage to be conscious of anything else. "Is the old allegiance reasserting itself?" the observer thought, and then, as his momentarily arrested gaze followed that other intent gaze through the proscenium arch, he too forgot critics and audience alike in contemplation of the enchanting presence which dominated the brilliant scene.

It was not until the end of the second act, when the house was expressing its approval in no uncertain fashion, and Lady Feringham was beating her gloves to ribbons in her excitement, that he again remembered Miss Goodwin and turned toward her. She was still sitting motionless, like one under a spell, her eyes fastened on the stage, where at this moment the velvet curtains parted, and led by Cyril Waring in his rich dress as De Montferrat, Sylvia came forward, looking more dream-like than ever in her pearl-sewn robes. The audience, enthusiastic enough before, at sight of that charming figure broke into a storm of applause which the most famous actress might have envied, and Stafford heard a quick gasp from the woman beside him, as if emotion had become too poignant to be borne. Just then Sylvia looked up at the box which held her friends and smiled. Never, Stafford felt, while life lasted would he forget that smile, which seemed to express less of triumph than of all things brave, cheering and reassuring, as though she said: "Have no fear for me. You see I am not thinking of myself at all, and so I have mounted into a region where failure cannot exist."

As the curtain closed again over the fair vision, Miss Goodwin met Stafford's eyes with her own swimming in tears.

“I thought that it would break my heart to see her on the stage," she said, "but it isn't so. She makes even that unreal world lovely with the sweetness of her own personality."

Chapter XXIX

Don Luis Explains

AFTER this the play moved on through its brilliant scenes without a doubt in the mind of any one of the ability of the new actress to interpret the character she was presenting. The charm of her interpretation seemed indeed to grow upon the audience; and when the curtain finally went down on the last moving climax of tragedy, the house rose in a tempest of applause which testified to the complete success of the girl who had dared this astonishing venture. Among those who seemed altogether carried

away by enthusiasm when she appeared to bow her thanks, Stafford had a vivid impression of De Rivera, standing on his feet as he applauded, his dark eyes blazing with excitement. And in contrast he caught the next moment a glimpse of the cold, self-contained face of Prince Voronine, watching the scene from a box on the opposite side of the theatre, himself apparently unmoved.

Meanwhile Lady Feringham was crying at his side, “Isn't it wonderful? Have you ever seen anything like it?" And then impatiently, "Come, let us go to her! I want to be the first to tell her how marvellous she is. Oh, Miss Goodwin," she caught that lady's arm, “are you not proud of her?"

Miss Goodwin wiped her eyes. "I have always been that," she said quietly.

But when Stafford took the two ladies to Sylvia, they found her already surrounded by many who had come to offer congratulations, the eminent critic chief among these, and it was a long time before this rather trying, though gratifying ordeal was over, and he was able to put them in their carriage, to exchange the last tremulous, excited words: "Are you sure you are really satisfied again?" from Sylvia, and “I never dreamed that satisfaction could be so complete," from himself— to beg Miss Goodwin to get her to rest as soon as possible, to close the door, and finally to see them drive away.

Then as he turned, it was to face a man standing beside him on the pavement, whom he did not recognize at once, since his hat was pulled down on his brow, but whom he knew as soon as he spoke for De Rivera.

“Oh, it's you, Don Luis," he said, as the young Mexican uttered his name. "I'm glad that you're able to be out again. I heard that you were rather badly injured in your accident."

"I had several broken ribs, which laid me up for some time," De Rivera answered; "but I suppose they are getting on all right— at least I’ve taken the chance that they are. I couldn't fail to be here to-night, you know."

"I can imagine that you might feel a certain degree of interest in something which you have played a considerable part in bringing about," Stafford replied a trifle drily. "If you hadn't gone motoring with Mrs. Lestrange, many things which have occurred, including Miss Lestrange's appearance on the stage, would not have happened."

The other groaned audibly. "Do you think I don't know that?" he said. "I should like to talk to you about some of those things. Are you going directly home? May I come with you?"

Stafford assented, not very cordially. He had not the least desire to talk with, or be talked to by Don Luis de Rivera; yet to decline to receive and listen to him was impossible. So a little later found them in his rooms where, struck by the appearance of illness which the young man presented when seen in the light, he pressed stimulating refreshment upon him before they settled themselves at an open window with their cigarettes. After this there was a slight pause of embarrassment, on one side at least, before De Rivera said:

"I have been shocked beyond measure to hear such terrible news of Mrs. Lestrange. It seems incredible that she can be crippled— paralyzed!"

"It is very dreadful," Stafford agreed; "but the doctors say that it is a fairly common effect of poisoning from illuminating gas. I suppose," he could not refrain from adding, "that you are aware that this is one of the results of the accident with you?"

De Rivera turned a startled face upon him.

"I am aware that a good deal has resulted from that accident," he said, "but I don't see how this— "

"Don't you? Yet it's clear enough. When the accident happened, Hawkes went nearly wild about the play, and Miss Lestrange was persuaded to attempt her mother's part. It was a great risk; but she achieved a tremendous success then, as to-night—"

"It has been tremendous!" De Rivera assented eagerly. "I couldn't have conceived anything so amazing, so enchanting!"

"Well," Stafford went on, "Mrs. Lestrange was amazed, but not enchanted by the success. In fact she was so violent in her anger that her daughter was forced to tell her that she would leave her house. Her preparations for doing so were made, and she was going abroad the next day, when— the asphyxiation from gas occurred. How either she or her mother escaped death is almost incomprehensible."

The dark eyes were staring at him now, with something more than amazement in their depths.

"But you don't— *Dios*! you can't mean—" De Rivera stammered.

"I am merely stating facts," Stafford reminded him. "But for the motor accident, Miss Lestrange would not have taken her mother's part in the play, the rupture between Mrs. Lestrange and herself would not have occurred— at least just then; she would not have been so tired from her hurried preparations for departure that she neglected to close, or unconsciously opened the gas in her room, and Mrs. Lestrange would not have been likely to be where she could be affected by it."

"She was in the room, was she not?"

"She was found insensible on the floor."

"How was her presence there accounted for?" De Rivera asked, as others had asked before him.

"No one is able to account for it with any degree of certainty," Stafford replied. "But the inference is that she went into the room to obtain possession of a letter which was found in her hand, and, the gas being open, was overcome before she could get away."

"Ah, a letter!" The young man stared for a moment harder than ever at the inscrutable countenance facing him, would plainly have liked to ask another question, considered and dropped it. He struck a match, and relighted the cigarette which meanwhile had gone out in his fingers.

"I have heard something of this," he said then, "but not all the details. I went to the house as soon as I was able to be out, but was told that Miss Lestrange could not see me."

"You were hardly surprised at that, I presume."

"I had no right to be surprised," De Rivera admitted. "No doubt she thinks that I have— er — acted very badly. My friend," he suddenly threw out his hands, and spoke in the manner natural to his Latin blood, "this is the matter about which I wish to talk to you. I want to tell you why I acted as I did."

Stafford turned a rather sarcastic glance upon him.

"Is it possible that you think explanation is necessary on that point?" he inquired in a tone which matched the glance.

"But yes," De Rivera returned, "it is very necessary. You remember, perhaps, some things which I said to you in Mexico?"

"I have a tolerably good memory," Stafford replied, "and I can recall the gist of them. You were very much in love with Miss Lestrange, and very much opposed to her coming under her mother's influence."

The other nodded. "It must have been a premonition," he said. "I felt sure that I should lose her if she came to London. And so I followed her—"

"To fall promptly under the same influence yourself!"

"I was taken possession of, carried away; I had no power to resist the fascination which overwhelmed me," the young man declared. "It was like an evil enchantment; I had no will of my own left. *You*," he cried, "know what I mean; *you* have felt the irresistible influence of her allurements."

"You are mistaken," Stafford replied coldly. "I have never felt Mrs. Lestrange's allurements in the manner you mean. But I have seen others beside yourself yield to them, and I can understand their influence on those to whom they appeal. It seems to me, however, that you might have remembered that you were bound, in honour at least, to Miss Lestrange."

"Miss Lestrange had refused me before she left Mexico."

"But you declined to accept that refusal, did you not? Your position, therefore, was that of her avowed suitor when you followed her to London— to fall at once into the ranks of her mother's admirers."

"I tell you that it was a spell— *plus fort que moi*— which I was unable to resist," De Rivera repeated vehemently. "I have known, we have all known women with this power of taking possession of a man's senses; but never have I known one who had it to the degree of Mrs. Lestrange. When one was with her, one did not possess oneself any more at all."

He spoke with a sincerity which could not be questioned, and Stafford remembered some words of Sylvia's with regard to his infatuation about her mother, which conveyed the same idea.

"Well," he said, "whether the fault were yours or hers, the result remains the same. Her fooling with you has wrecked her life, if not practically ended it.
What it has done for yours, you can best tell yourself."

"I can tell easily enough," the other interrupted. "It has cost me the woman I really loved all the time. I have realized that to-night, if I did not realize it before. When I saw her on that stage, I felt that I would be willing to die at her feet if by that means I could win her forgiveness for my desertion."

"There is not the least difficulty in winning her forgiveness for your desertion," Stafford assured him. "I am quite certain that she has given you that long since. But her respect, or her friendship in any degree, you could hardly expect to regain. I can understand that, when you saw her to-night in all the glamour of her success, your old passion has revived."

"It never died; it was only obscured by temporary madness."

"Temporary or lasting, it was a madness which has ended any possible chance that you ever had with Sylvia Lestrange. I am sure that you must comprehend this. And comprehending it— you'll pardon me for being frank— you must feel that, considering your association with the trouble she has endured and is enduring, it will be well to abstain from bringing yourself in any way to her notice."

It occurred to him as he spoke that it was much the same advice which he had a little earlier offered Prince Voronine on the same subject, and that it was slightly odd that it should fall to him to counsel two of Sylvia Lestrange's lovers in such a manner. He had time to wonder if De Rivera would display the same resentful spirit as the prince, before the young man said in a tone of deep disappointment:

"I am sorry you think that, for I was going to ask you to beg Miss Lestrange to see me."

"But why," Stafford inquired, "should you wish to annoy her with such a request?"

"I don't wish to annoy her." De Rivera's tone began to show some offence now. "I only wish to explain myself, — to plead my cause—"

"Man alive, don't you know that you have no cause?" Stafford exclaimed impatiently. "You have forfeited any claim even to be heard by Miss Lestrange; and I see no reason why you should wish to subject her to the possible pain and annoyance of seeing you. Besides, I am quite positive that she would not consent to do so."

"Will you ask her?" the other persisted.

"I'll ask her," Stafford replied, "on condition that you will accept her decision as final, and make no further effort to force yourself on her attention."

"You seem to think that her decision will certainly be against me."

"I am sure that it will be against you; but if you insist—"

"I insist upon nothing from you, Mr. Stafford," the young Mexican interrupted. He rose as he spoke. "I thought I might count upon your friendship," he said, "but I find that I was mistaken. And there is no doubt in my mind of the reason why you will not help me with Miss Lestrange. I have a rival in you—"

Stafford shook his head, as he too rose deliberately.

"Pardon me," he said. "Rivalry implies a certain equality of chance, and I must remind you again that you have forfeited and lost whatever chance you had with Miss Lestrange."

"I will take the liberty of asking Miss Lestrange herself about that," De Rivera told him hotly.

"There is no objection to your doing so," Stafford replied, "unless you force yourself obnoxiously upon her. In that case—"

"Yes, in that case?"

The moment of sharp tension had come. As in the interview with Prince Voronine, the eyes of the two men met, each filled with that primitive passion of man which all his civilization hardly suffices to hold in check. It was Stafford who first remembered himself, and laughed slightly.

"This grows more tragic than is desirable between friends," he said; "for I am really your friend, Don Luis, and anxious, whether you believe it or not, to spare you useless pain. I was about to say, rather foolishly, that if you persisted in annoying Miss Lestrange, it would be necessary for her friends to interfere for her protection. But in the first place, I am quite sure that she is able to protect herself, and, in the second, that she can have nothing possibly to fear from a gentleman and man of the world like yourself."

Don Luis bowed stiffly.

"You are right, señor," he said, falling unconsciously into familiar forms of speech. "Miss Lestrange has certainly nothing to fear from me, and I may add that it is equally plain that I have nothing to hope from your assistance. You will permit me, therefore, to bid you good-night."

Chapter XXX

Mrs. Lestrange Asserts Herself

THE great success which attended Sylvia's appearance in the leading part of "The Queen of Cyprus," not only established the popularity of the play on the safe foundation which managers love, drawing crowds to the theatre and overflowing receipts to the box-office, but it made the girl herself the most prominent figure for the moment in that world of London society which, like Athens of old, lives chiefly "to see and to hear some new thing." It is well known that in this society, led by those of such assured rank and position that they are beset by no parvenu fear of endangering either, talent and achievement of whatever kind have always been secure of recognition, and, if sufficiently brilliant, of that form of social success known as "lionizing." This particular feature of the English great world has of late been carried to somewhat bizarre extremes; but it was generally known that no excursion into Bohemia was necessary to find Sylvia Lestrange.

Her beauty, her reputation as an heiress, and the social sponsorship of Lady Feringham, had already ensured a certain degree of social notice for her; while her distinction and grace had deepened the impression she produced wherever seen. It may be readily imagined, therefore, that society was prepared to cast itself at her feet when she sprang so unexpectedly into the lime-light of dazzling success in that art which, of all others, appeals most strongly to popular enthusiasm.

The story behind this success gave it also a dramatic touch that heightened interest. The tragedy which had overtaken the beautiful actress whom

London had known so long and so well, and who had been struck down at the moment of her highest triumph, made as it were a dark background which threw into relief the young figure that came forward in her place. The courage of the act stirred that chord in the public heart which always responds to bravery; and when it was further intimated that the animating cause was a wish on the part of the daughter to save

her mother's credit, keep her engagements and pay her debts, the desire of the public to testify its admiration in the most emphatic manner became overwhelming.

"What with the story which lies behind her appearance, with her striking beauty and her personal charm— that subtle power of appealing to the hearts of men and women which we call magnetism— she would be a success without the dramatic ability she displays," a noted man of letters and lover of the drama said to Stafford. "These are all things which seize the popular fancy; and the popular fancy is never critical. But when you add her really remarkable and delightful talent to it— well, it's no wonder that London is going wild over her."

And London was going wild, there was no doubt of that. As this shrewd observer had said, the popular fancy is never critical in the sense of being able to give a reason for its enthusiasms; but there could be no doubt that it was the touch of poetic genius in Sylvia's acting which conspired with her beauty and her story to rouse interest and admiration as they had not been roused in a long time. “If she likes, she may be another Mary Anderson," people said; and none knew better than those who watched her performance most closely and critically, how true this was.

"It is amazing how differently things turn out from what one expected I" Lady Feringham remarked to Miss Goodwin one day, after the success of the play, and its power to hold the continued attention of the public, were assured beyond doubt. “I thought Sylvia would ruin her social prospects by appearing on the stage. And on the contrary, she has become the rage, or might become the rage if she chose, in the highest circles of society. The Duchess of Stratton and Lady Granthorpe, who are leaders in the smartest set, are both anxious to have her at their most select entertainments. And as for marriage—"

"Sylvia," Miss Goodwin interposed, "doesn't, I am sure, think of marriage at all."

"It's a pity she doesn't," the woman of the world rejoined, "for now is her chance to establish herself. It's true that Percy Wyverne is hopelessly out of the question; he would never marry any one who had been even temporarily on the stage; for although he does not belong to the class that holds the theatre anathema, his political fortunes are bound up with that class: and political ambition is the thing for which he lives, moves, and has his being."

"I don't know why you should think that his opinions are of the least importance as far as Sylvia is concerned," Miss Goodwin remarked stiffly. "I have never heard her even mention him."

"I really don't believe she ever thought of him seriously," her ladyship confessed. “But I did. I was extremely anxious for her to marry him, and he was immensely taken with her. But all that is over now; and I was going on to say that she might from the present point of view make an even more brilliant marriage if she cared to do so. John Stafford?" Miss Goodwin had murmured his name. "No one is more a friend of his than I am. I consider him absolutely charming as a man; but it would be impossible to regard him as a brilliant match for a girl like Sylvia, you know."

Miss Goodwin was a staunch friend. She might quarrel with Stafford to his face, but there was no doubt of her genuine liking for him, and now she lifted her lance in his behalf.

"I don't agree with you," she said in her most positive tone. “I think that John Stafford would be as good a match for Sylvia as any one whom you can have in view. He belongs to her own people— to the best among them; and if he isn't rich, he has remarkable talents."

"Oh, nobody questions his talents, or his good blood, or his delightful personal qualities," Lady Feringham interrupted impatiently, "but my point remains. He wouldn't be a brilliant match for Sylvia: and she might really make such a match now. I heard Lord Alcaster raving about her last night. He had just been to see her, and he said that nothing so poetically beautiful as her acting has been seen on the stage within the present generation. I promised him that he should have an opportunity to meet her. But I don't know how I am to fulfil the promise if she continues to refuse to go into society. That is absolute nonsense, you know.”

"It seems to me very good sense, and necessity as well," Miss Goodwin replied. "She has no time for society; and, if she found time, I am sure she would have no strength. What with the hours she spends at the theatre, and those she gives her mother—"

"You don't mean that she gives personal attention to her mother? I thought that Mrs. Lestrange was in the hands of nurses."

"So she is. She has a day and a night nurse all the time. But Sylvia adds her own attention to theirs. And for some reason, Mrs. Lestrange has grown very exacting, will not be satisfied unless she sees her."

"Why? I should have expected her to dislike seeing her."

"For a time she did— absolutely refused to see her— and I believe that she dislikes it still. But for some reason she has grown anxious to have Sylvia about her, questions her closely as to what she does, and whom she sees; and makes it difficult for her to evade inquiries about how and where she spends her evenings."

"Is it possible that Mrs. Lestrange doesn't know?"

"Of Sylvia's appearance on the stage? No, it has been carefully kept from her. Sylvia consulted Sir William Barry, and he decided that she should not be told. The nightly opiate, which ensures several hours of deep sleep, is given her at the time Sylvia goes to the theatre, so that if she asked for her, as she has a habit of asking at the most inconvenient times, she would not have to be told that she had gone out."

"But the newspapers?'*

"So far she has not read them. Some one reads to her whatever is likely to interest her in the daily news; and the papers are never left within her reach.
As a matter of fact, she evinces little or no interest in them, and the reading is merely perfunctory."

"It seems to me a mistake to keep her in ignorance of what is going on; but I suppose the doctor knows best. What does he think would happen if she knew?"

"He thinks that it would excite her intensely, do her a great deal of harm, and perhaps even kill her."

"I can't believe that," Lady Feringham remarked sceptically. "I don't believe that any one like Mrs. Lestrange could be easily killed. I haven't a doubt that she will live for years as a burden on Sylvia."

"I have no patience with Sylvia about the matter," Miss Goodwin acknowledged. "She should not attempt to give her mother such personal care, to subordinate her own life, as I can clearly see that she intends to do, to this charge. Mrs. Lestrange should be placed in some sanatorium, and Sylvia would fulfil everything required of her if she bore the expense of her support."

"I am afraid it will be difficult to make Sylvia see that."

"So far it has been impossible; but I hope that time will bring more wisdom to her."

"Meanwhile her own efforts must bring her to me," Lady Feringham said decidedly. "Quantities of people, but Lord Alcaster especially, are eager to meet her; and I have promised that she shall come to my house on Friday afternoon. I depend upon you to see that she does. And of course I expect you to come also. We shall have some good music. Cantarelli has promised to sing for me—at an awful price, to be sure; but that can't be helped. There's no good in expecting people to come to one in these days unless expensive entertainment is provided for them."

A gleam of satire flickered in Miss Goodwin's dark eyes.

"How extremely flattering to the providers of expensive entertainment!" she said. "I will do my best with Sylvia. But she has given up society entirely, you know."

"That is what must be stopped," Lady Feringham declared impatiently. "Society is wild to see her, and she must take advantage of the interest. I will never forgive her if she disappoints me on Friday. Be certain to tell her so."

Sylvia was told; and, being anxious to gratify Lady Feringham, she decided to accept her urgent invitation. The only difficulty in the way was that she generally spent the afternoon with her mother, who, as Miss Goodwin said, had grown very exacting, and demanded her presence almost constantly. That this presence afforded her pleasure, it was impossible to believe; but that she derived some form of satisfaction from it, was equally beyond doubt. "She only wants you because she knows that, when you are with her, you are not doing anything agreeable to yourself," Miss Goodwin shrewdly declared. And Sylvia could not deny the probability of the interpretation. Nevertheless, the appeal of helplessness was too strong to be resisted; and so day after day found her in Mrs. Lestrange's room, engaged in the hopeless task of trying to amuse and interest the invalid, whose gloomy eyes watched her with hardly concealed animosity.

This was particularly the case on the afternoon that she was to go to Lady Feringham. When she went in to pay her usual visit, and excuse herself from remaining long by mentioning her engagement, Sylvia was fairly startled by the gleam of dislike in the eyes which looked up at her.

"You have promised Lady Feringham to go to her?" Mrs. Lestrange repeated. “Oh, by all means go! I wouldn't detain you on any account. There's not the slightest reason why you should hesitate to go anywhere, or do anything. I have not the least need of you."

"I thought that I would read to you for a short time at least," Sylvia said, ignoring this ungraciousness.

But the offer was curtly rejected. "There's no necessity for your doing so," Mrs. Lestrange declared. "In fact I am tired of this Sister of Mercy pose on your part, and would rather you left me alone. The nurse is quite able to look after me."

It was not the first time that irritation had overmastered prudence in this manner; and, knowing that it would not prevent any fresh demand upon her to-morrow, Sylvia quitted the room, happily unconscious of the passionate hatred in the gaze which followed her. Accompanied by Miss Goodwin, she left the house soon after.

As soon as Mrs. Lestrange was assured of their departure, she summoned her maid.

"Take a cab," she said to her peremptorily, "go and find Mr. Stafford and bring him to me. Mind that you find him; you are not to fail. Go first to his lodgings— indeed you might see if you could get him by telephone there. If he isn't at home, follow him wherever he may have gone— to his club or to Lady Feringham's, where he is very likely to be this afternoon. When you find him, don't send any message, but insist upon speaking to him; then tell him that I wish to see him immediately. I will accept no excuse and there must be no delay. Tell him that, whatever he may be doing, I insist upon his entering the cab with you and coming straight to me."

Even under ordinary circumstances, the woman would have known her mistress too well to question this order, but she knew her far too well to question it when such fires of smouldering fury burned in her eyes as were in them now. She went at once— first to the telephone, by means of which, as it chanced, she reached Stafford without need of the personal search her mistress had directed. He was in his chambers, although just on the point of going out, when he received the imperative summons of Mrs. Lestrange, and, with scarcely perceptible hesitation, replied that he would come to her immediately.

When the maid returned with this message, Mrs. Lestrange proceeded to give other orders, equally peremptory, and even more astonishing. She directed that she should be arrayed in her most becoming négligée, and then assisted— or carried— into her boudoir. Remonstrance on the part of the startled nurse was contemptuously put aside.

“I choose to make this effort," Mrs. Lestrange told her, "and I care nothing for what you or the doctor may say. I don't believe that I am as helpless as you think, or as I have allowed myself to fancy. I believe that by an effort of the will I can overcome this weakness in my limbs; at least I mean to try. I

have learned how great need there is that I shall try; and nothing you can say or do will prevent me. I am in my own house, and the mistress of it still."

This was true ; and, there being absolutely no one to whom she could appeal, the nurse was obliged to yield to the will which seemed as if it had indeed given renewed strength to its possessor. Under protest she lent her aid in making Mrs. Lestrange's toilette, and then assisted in getting her to the boudoir, where she had herself arranged in a graceful attitude on her favourite couch, the window-shades lowered against the afternoon sunlight, and every accessory of the scene so subtly calculated to enhance her beauty, that it was no wonder the maid whispered to the nurse as, in obedience to her command, they left the room:

"She looks as if she was just about to order the curtain to go up."

Chapter XXXI

The Curtain Falls

WHEN a little later Stafford arrived and was ushered immediately into the room, all that he had heard of Mrs. Lestrange's helplessness seemed like a dream, as his glance fell upon the familiar presence, beautifully arrayed in chiffon and lace, reclining on the couch where he had seen her so often.

"You were not expecting to find me like this," she said, reading the expression of his face. "You have been told that I am quite helpless, perhaps that I shall never be otherwise; but you see it is not so. The wish was father to the thought; and I mean to disappoint the wish."

Stafford sat down by the couch and looked at her with a distinct feeling of apprehension. He saw that some strong excitement was working in her, giving probably a fictitious sense of physical power.

"Whose wish are you speaking of?" he asked. "It was Sir William Barry who told me all that I know of your condition. If it is possible that you are better than he thought, it will be good news. But do you think it is wise to make any effort of which he would disapprove?"

"I think it very wise to prove as soon as possible that I am not dead yet," she replied emphatically. "It is only common decency to wait until one is dead before taking one's place. But mine has been taken while I am still alive."

"I suppose," he said, "that you mean—"

"I mean," she flung at him, "that, while I lay ill and helpless, my admirable daughter has taken advantage of my condition to keep me in ignorance of what she was doing; and, assisted by you, to act in my part and continue the production of your play. I have only found it out to-day by the merest accident. They thought I was too helpless even to read a paper myself; but, when one was left near my hand, I turned to the theatrical announcements, and learned the truth."

"And are you not aware why you were not told of this?" he asked with an outward quietude which hardly concealed his inward disquietude.

She smiled bitterly. "I am very well aware. She knew, and you knew that I would have forbidden anything of the kind. I would rather have died than have allowed it to be done."

"It chanced not to be a question of dying," he said coolly, "but of financial ruin. You must know the condition of your affairs."

"I know of course that I am deeply in debt," she replied. "But Sylvia has plenty of money, and I have a right to some of it. I never had my rightful share of my husband's estate."

"It is Sylvia's money that is now providing the comfort and luxury surrounding you," he reminded her. "But her fortune is not inexhaustible, and she cannot maintain this establishment and pay the debts incurred for the production of the play besides."

"Who has asked her to pay them?"

"You can't have forgotten that you asked her to pay them, when you induced her to make herself responsible for the expense of the play. What this expense is, you must know. It is so great that she has simply been forced to continue the play as the best means of avoiding a money loss that you would be obliged to feel also."

"She may have told you so," Mrs. Lestrange said scornfully, "but it is not true. She has gone on the stage because she is mad to rival me. Think of it! by the work of years— you know what work!— I have made a place for myself, achieved a reputation; and now comes this usurper, this girl who seems to embody everything that I most detested in my past, and having treacherously studied and copied me, steps into the part I created, and plays it so that the very critics talk of her dramatic genius, her grace, her youth. Oh!" as she drew a deep breath he saw how stormily her bosom was heaving under its laces, "when she came and stood by me, in her hypocritical fashion a little while ago, I longed for strength to kill her! Why didn't she die under the influence of the gas? But, instead of dying, she is well and strong, able to go out into the world, take my place, rob me of my reputation, of my lovers, of all that I have— while I am left stranded, helpless, an object of contemptuous pity, of charitable posing! Do you think I will bear it? No, a thousand times no! I will force myself to get up and walk; I will go on the stage and tear the garments of her imposture from her before the eyes of the public she has deceived."

"You are talking madly," he told her, for he saw how dangerous this excitement might prove— saw it in the gleaming eyes, in the vivid colour that came and went in her cheeks. “It was to save you from doing yourself an injury by becoming excited, as you are now, that the matter was kept from your knowledge. Your daughter has taken your place most reluctantly—"

"Fool! do you really believe that?"

"I am sure of it, whether you believe it or not. There seemed no alternative short of sacrificing the greater part of her fortune; and from that sacrifice you would have been the chief sufferer."

“I would rather suffer anything than that this should go on! And I have sent for you to tell you that it must be stopped. I have power to stop it, and I desire you to act for me in the matter."

"What do you want to do?"

"To order the theatre closed at once, and to forbid any further production of the play. I wish you to go and attend to this immediately."

He saw that it was necessary to temporize, as with an insane person.

"I could not possibly take such a step without Sylvia's knowledge," he said. "It would be treating her shamefully—"

"How has she treated me?"

"And I am sure that, when you see and talk to her, you will recognize the necessity under which she has acted."

"I will recognize nothing of the kind. There is no such necessity, and, if there were, I repeat again that I would suffer anything rather than that she should be filling my place before my public. Nothing will change my determination to force the closing of the theatre."

"Then in that case,” he said, "you will force yourself into bankruptcy, and force me to take the play and give it to Sylvia to do what she will with."

The fury in her eyes blazed upon him as she raised herself slightly.

"You would do that?"

"Of course I would do that. Why should I not? What right have you to imagine that I would not stand by Sylvia against you? Do you think I don't know, or that I have possibly forgotten, what you have

done, or attempted to do to separate us, to blacken me in her eyes, that you have descended to falsehood, even to forgery?"

"Ah!" She fell back against her cushions, and lay there for a moment staring at him. It was evident that his last words had taken her completely by surprise, that it was the first time the idea had occurred to her that he knew what she had done, that the letter she tried to prevent his seeing had reached his hand. Absorbed in herself, in her own physical condition, she had never thought of her last conscious act before asphyxiation, never wondered what had become of the letter she had risked so much to obtain. Now, with a flash of intuition, she perceived that she had utterly alienated the man who alone could help her in what she felt to be her present strait; upon whom she had called, according to the habit of years, to come to her aid and do her bidding.

But it was clear that never would bidding of hers be done by him again; and that, if she desired his assistance in the matter upon which all the strength of her passionate resolve was set— the closing of the theatre, the ending of Sylvia's appearance in the play, —she must find some means of purchasing compliance with her will. Stafford had time to wonder what process of thought was going on behind the eyes, which were fixed with such intensity of expression upon his face, before she spoke slowly.

“I understand. You have seen a letter which I never meant you to see. It was a desperate means to prevent what I felt to be intolerable."

“Do you mean my marrying Sylvia? Why should you have felt it intolerable? You know that there is no reason why I should not marry her; that you lied in saying that there was such a reason."

“Perhaps I lied, as you are courteous enough to say, in implying that you were my lover, as a man with more fire in him and less regard for outworn conventions might have been," she returned. "But you cannot deny that you were mine to do what I would with, for years."

“I do not deny that 1 gave you far more than you ever deserved of devotion, of service, of—"

"Oh, don't hesitate to say of respect. I know what you think of me now, and yet, Jack," the voice suddenly sank to softness as an impulse came to her to try a woman's strongest weapon of beguiling, "can't you understand that all I did was done because I could not bear to lose you? Can't you believe that I only realized what I felt for you when I found that this daughter of mine had taken you from me?"

“I can readily believe that you did not wish to lose the possibility of my service," he returned. "But beyond that— No, Violet, there is nothing to be gained by such pretences! You know that your daughter did not take me away from you, that I had gone away, entirely of my own accord, when I hardly knew that she existed. I may tell you now that I had found out how selfish and how self-centred you were in every respect, long before 1 left London; but it did not prevent my doing everything in my power to aid you in your career. I only went to the East when you had no further need of me, and when you called me back, did I not come? did I not go on your errand to Mexico?"

“Oh, if you had but refused! if only I had never sent you!"

"But you did send me; and in return for that, as for all that I had done in your service, you have tried to put an impassable barrier between Sylvia and myself, and have not hesitated at the lowest means—"

She interrupted him with a quick, imperative gesture.

"We needn't waste time in recrimination," she said. "I acknowledge everything; in fact, denial would be folly. I was simply mad with rage that night at the thought of your going away together—to fancy yourselves happy, for a time at least,— after she had, with your aid, brought such ruin into my life. And I determined to prevent it by any means." She paused and drew a deep breath, as if recalling that desperate resolve, and all that it had meant. "I would not have hesitated at anything,” she went on. “I didn't intend that you should see the letter I showed her, but, since you have done so, I fancy you found it rather difficult to disprove."

Thoroughly as he knew, or thought that he knew her, this cynical audacity amazed him.

"I don't know how you dare—" he began, but she interrupted him contemptuously:

“You ought to know by this time that I dare anything. And I have a reason for my frankness. You admit that I have put a barrier between Sylvia and yourself. Well, I will remove that barrier if you will do what I ask— close the theatre, stop her acting, take the play away from her."

He looked at her steadily, preserving outward composure, although his heart was beating hard.

"And if I were to agree to this," he said, "what proof would I have that you can undo what you have done? In the case of such a forgery, assertion is not enough; there must be proof furnished."

"The proof can be furnished easily enough. I suppose you have wondered how the letter was— produced?"

"I have certainly wondered how you succeeded, not only in forging my handwriting, but in producing sentences which seem to have a strange familiarity to me, as if I had written them in another existence."

She threw her head back and laughed— a laugh not of mirth but of triumph.

"It was clever," she said. "I thought so at the time. I had just written to Prince Voronine. Ah! if 1 had but the power to deal with him as I should like! And then I wondered what 1 could do to baulk your game. It occurred to me that a letter from you, if it admitted or implied enough, would do the business. I found that I could imitate your handwriting easily enough by simply tracing over a page of yours, but I was at a loss to find the exact words or phrases that I wanted, expressed in your manner, until suddenly I remembered the sketch of a play which you wrote for me— oh, ten years ago at least —in which a somewhat similar situation occurs, and the man is betrayed by a letter. It struck me that this letter might serve my purpose."

He started. "So that was how you did it! I remember that dramatic sketch, which was never acted; but I had forgotten that the manuscript remained in your hands."

"Yes, it remained in my hands, but I had not thought of it for years, until the recollection came into my mind, just as if it were suggested by some outside agency, that night. I looked for it, found it, and laughed when I saw how exactly the letter was what I wanted. But I didn't intend that you should see it, for I feared you would recognize it at once. So when Sylvia refused to return it to me, I determined to go to her room and get it after she was asleep. When I went, I found the room full of gas—"

"And you made no effort to alarm— to rouse her?"

"I did not want to rouse her before I found the letter, and it took me some time to do this, for I had only the light which came through the window from a street lamp to search by. When I finally found it, I was conscious that 1 must get out of the room quickly, since the gas was affecting me dreadfully. I thought that, once outside, I would summon assistance. But, you see, I didn't get out. I grew so giddy and faint before I could reach the door, that I suppose I fell. At least that is all I know."

In the pause that followed her last words, Stafford had time to think how entirely characteristic her conduct, as she described it, had been; how far removed from the deliberately planned crime of which he had for a time suspected her, yet how close to crime in this outcome of absolute selfishness and culpable omission. Before he could find his voice to speak, she went on, her own voice cold and a little mocking:

“I suppose you are shocked that I didn't forget everything else, and try to rouse her, though of course I couldn't have roused her ; but I had to think of myself. I had little doubt but that she had opened the gas intentionally, that she intended to kill herself—"

“You couldn't have thought such a thing!" he interrupted. “You know that Sylvia would never be guilty of the crime of suicide!"

“You are mistaken; I know nothing of the kind. It seemed to me very likely; and, if she were dead, then I wanted the letter all the more. Why should you expect me to look at the matter in any other light? The conventional way of regarding the ties and connections of life is to me hypocritical and absurd. It is

merely an accident that Sylvia and I stand in the relation of mother and daughter. We are two different and altogether antagonistic individualities; she has injured me deeply—"

"Not half as much as you have injured her!"

"How have I injured her? Everything has turned to her advantage. Even this last occurrence has left me physically helpless, while she is playing my part, in my theatre! To stop that, 1 would do anything. And so I promise that, if you will help me, I will acknowledge the writing of the letter, and give you the manuscript from which I copied it."

"The offer is unnecessary," a clear voice said. "I have the manuscript."

Stafford sprang to his feet, and turned sharply around to face Sylvia, who had entered from the next room. The folds of the velvet portière were still in her hand, and her figure in a toilette of pale gray cloth, embroidered with silver, stood in relief against its russet background. She had evidently just come in, for she still wore her hat, and the fine distinction, the delicate grace of her beauty had never been more apparent— so apparent that the man gazing at her for an instant forgot the other woman on whom he had turned his back.

But something like an inarticulate cry from the latter made him turn again, as Sylvia moved quickly forward. Mrs. Lestrange had risen to a sitting posture, and was looking at the girl with a rage that seemed to long for some weapon with which to express itself.

"So you are here! you have been listening!" she cried. "And not satisfied with stealing my reputation, my public, and my play, you have taken advantage of my helplessness to steal my private papers! It is what I should have expected of you."

"Mr. Stafford's manuscript could hardly be called your private papers," Sylvia answered quietly. "And it was altogether by accident that I found it." She turned to Stafford. "Perhaps you remember telling me that I might find some notes which you had made about certain changes in the business of “The Queen of Cyprus' in that escritoire yonder. I looked for them; and in looking found other manuscripts of yours. Naturally I read them— there seemed no reason why I should not; and there in a sketch of a play I found, word for word, the letter which had been brought to me as yours."

She glanced at Mrs. Lestrange as she uttered the last words, and the latter replied defiantly:

"And was it not his? Are you such a fool as to think that, because it was used in a manuscript, it might not have been founded on reality?"

"Whatever it was founded on," the girl said, "there was the proof that the letter you showed me was a forgery. Ah, it was no wonder you tried to make me return it to you, and, when I would not, that you risked your life to get it I And now you try to make a bribe of it to gain an end which you might have gained by a word to me. If I have not told you that I was acting in the play, it was only because I feared to excite you as you are excited now, and as it is very dangerous for you to be excited." She turned again to Stafford with a shade of reproach in her manner. "Why did you allow this?" she asked. "I told you what the doctor said. I am here because the nurse telephoned what was going on."

"I had no power to prevent it," he answered. "Mrs. Lestrange sent for me—"

"Yes, I sent for him," Mrs. Lestrange interrupted, "because I thought I could make him act for me in the business I desire to have done — to close the theatre and stop the production of the play. But I find that he is your creature now, instead of mine. You have robbed me of him, as you have of everything else that I value— my fame, the admiration which was the breath of life to me, the man I meant to marry, even my power to work and regain it all! You have made me helpless, and of course you desire to keep me so, while you step into and usurp my place."

"You do me terrible injustice," the girl said. "Nothing has been further from my intention than to usurp your place."

The other gave a bitter laugh. "Nothing further from your intention, and yet you have done it!" she cried. "But you shall not go on doing it— that I swear! Now that I know how great the need is, I shall

find strength to throw off this horrible weakness. I am sure that only an effort of the will is needed to overcome it; and I have always had will enough. I have defied everybody and everything that ever crossed my path to keep me from doing what I wanted to do. I defied your father, and all the forces that were behind him, to prevent my living my life as I chose. And now I defy you to keep me here a helpless prisoner while you take my place. I will go myself— now— to reclaim it!"

She flung off the silken *couvre-pieds* which lay over her lower limbs, and made an effort to rise to her feet. With a cry, Sylvia ran to her.

“Oh," she exclaimed entreatingly, "for heaven’s sake be quiet! Don't attempt what is impossible. You will injure yourself; you will do yourself terrible harm! Oh, lie down! lie down!"

She threw her arms about the tall figure which had by a tremendous effort succeeded in rising, and now stood erect, swaying and trembling.

But Mrs. Lestrange turned upon her, and pushed her away furiously.

"Leave me alone!" she cried in a wild voice of passion. "I hate— I detest—"

Under the fierce repulse Sylvia recoiled; but before her glance appealed to him, Stafford had interposed, and caught Mrs. Lestrange as she was in the act of falling. She was speechless now, and, when he laid her back on the couch, he recognized the signs of heart-failure, and remembered the words of Sir William Barry— "complicated in her case with a very weak heart."

"Quick!" he said to Sylvia, as he leaned over the gasping woman. "Bring your strongest stimulants, and call a doctor— any doctor— at once!"

She flew to do his bidding; but, when she returned with the nurse, bringing every stimulant which medical science has for such cases, they all saw that it was too late. In a last effort to assert her imperious will, Violet Lestrange had met a Force stronger than herself, and the curtain had fallen forever on the play of life.

THE END.
Edited by Yawtsong Lee
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