

ALICE MANGOLD DIEHL

A WOMAN MARTYR

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CHAPTER I

A sharp shower pattering on the foliage of the sycamores and elms was scattering the equestrians in the Row. Fair girls urged their hacks into a canter and trotted swiftly homewards. Other riders, glancing upwards, and deciding that the clouds had done their worst, drew up under the trees. Among these was a slight, graceful girl in a well-fitting habit with a pale, classic face, and the somewhat Venetian combination of dark brown eyes and red-gold hair. With a slight wave of her whip to her groom-who halted obediently under a neighbouring tree-she reined in her slender-limbed bay mare under a horse-chestnut tree whose shelter was still undemanded.

There she sat still in her saddle, with a slight frown-biting her lip-as she asked herself again and again, "Did he see me? Has he ridden out of the park?"

When she cantered along just as the shower began, she fancied she recognised an admirer she had believed to be far away, walking his horse in the same direction as herself. This was Lord Vansittart-a man who had several times repeated his offer of marriage-an offer she did not refuse because he had not stirred her heart-for she loved him, and passionately-but for other reasons. Although it had caused her bitter pain, she had at least been determined enough in her "No" to send him off, in dudgeon, to seek forgetfulness in other climes.

And now he had appeared again!

Her first feeling had been dismay, mingled with involuntary ecstasy which startled her. Then came a wild, almost uncontrollable impulse just to speak to him-to touch his hand, to look into those love laden eyes once more-only once more!

She gazed furtively here and there, divided between the hope and fear that her longing would be sated-she would meet him. Riders passed and repassed. The little crowds gathered, thickened, dispersed. She was disappointedly telling herself that as the shower had temporarily subsided she ought to be returning home, when her heart gave a leap. A rider who was trotting towards her was the man-the man strongly if slightly built, handsome, fair, if stern-who alone among men had conquered that heart, who, although despair had driven her to hold her own against him, was her master.

It was all over-fate had decided-they two must once more meet! There was no escape.

He rode up. She blanched, but looked him steadily in the face. He gazed sadly, beseechingly, yet with that imperious compelling glance which had so often made her quail-into those beautiful brown eyes.

"We meet again, you see," he said, in a harsh, strained voice. He felt on the rack-to him, wildly panting, yearning to take her in his arms after weary, maddening months of longing, that gulf between them seemed a very hell.

"So it seems," she said, with a pitiful attempt at a laugh. "I thought you were in Kamschatka, or Bombay-or anywhere!"

"I have come back," he returned, lamely, mechanically accompanying her as she rode out of shelter-she would not, could not, stay there and bandy words with him! "I felt-I must know-the worst!"

Involuntarily she reined in, and so suddenly that she startled her steed, and it was some moments before the mare's nerves were calmed. Then she turned a white, set face upon her self-elected escort.

"What do you mean, Lord Vansittart?" she asked scornfully, and her eyes flashed.

"You-know," he hoarsely said. "I am not so utterly vain as to think that where I have failed, other and-and-more attractive fellows may not succeed!"

"You know, or ought to know, that what you are saying is absurd!" she faltered. What had she thought, feared? She hardly knew, she only felt a tremendous relief. Thank Heaven, even had she been secretly vowed to the cloister, her conduct since their parting could not have borne closer scrutiny! "You must remember-what I said-I never, never, intend to marry-anyone. I shall never, never, change my mind-about *that*!"

He said nothing; but glanced at her-a curious glance. A puzzle to him since he first had felt encouraged to believe from symptoms which only a watchful, anxious lover would perceive, that she involuntarily, perhaps even unconsciously, loved him-she had remained an insoluble problem during the long days of their separation when he pondered on the subject the slow, lagging hours through-and, now again, she bid fair to be as great a problem as ever. For he felt, he knew, that her reception of him-her pallor, the strange look in her eyes and the curious pitch of her voice-why, the veriest fool alive would not have mistaken her demeanour or one of its details for indifference!

"I-I think you mistake yourself," he began slowly, revolving certain ideas which he had jotted down at intervals for his future guidance, in his mind. "I suppose you do not believe in marriage. You have seen its failure! Is that it?"

"Perhaps," she said. "I really can't tell, myself. All I know is, that I am firmly resolved not to marry-any one!" She spoke doggedly, with almost a childish obstinacy.

"But-you do not bar friendship?" he said, earnestly, appealingly. "Supposing some one of the unfortunate men you determine to have nothing to do with were to wish to devote his whole life and energies to you, secretly, but entirely-with the absolute devotion of a would-be anchorite or martyr-what then? You would not refuse to give the poor devil a chance? I mean, to give him something in return; if friendship were too much to expect, tolerance, pity, a look now and then, or a word, you would allow him to play your faithful knight, of course in strict secrecy, from afar, unsuspected by the world?"

A faint colour suffused her lovely face. She looked at him, furtively. "Some people may care for that sort of thing-I don't!" she bluntly said. "Oh, Lord Vansittart! why will you not, can you not, see and understand that all I want of-of-everyone is to be let alone? I have my own ideas of what my life should be; surely any one professing interest in me ought to respect them!"

"I respect your every thought," he eagerly, if somewhat perplexedly returned. "Only-I should like thoroughly to understand the kind of life you wish to lead. Because-well, I will not beat about the bush. Joan! you know I love you! You are my very life! And if I cannot be nearer than I am now, my only happiness and motive for living must be to serve you in some way, to see you, speak to you, help you, be your very slave-"

Just as his voice was most impassioned his appeal was interrupted. An elderly gentleman rode swiftly up and tapped him on the arm.

"Why, Vansittart! can I believe my eyes?" he exclaimed, somewhat breathlessly. "Joan, where has he dropped from?"

It was Sir Thomas Thorne, the wealthy uncle who had adopted Joan, his late brother's only child, at her mother's death a few years previously. The admired beauty, whose only flaw seemed to be her adamant pose in regard to her many suitors, was known to be sole heiress of the wealthy baronet and his wife, who were not only childless, but curiously devoid of near relations.

"From Paris, Sir Thomas," he replied, as easily as he could. Then he gave a brief account of his wanderings. He seemed to have roamed and ranged over the earth, prowling about for some interest, which evaded him from Dan to Beersheba. Sir Thomas listened with a peculiar twist of his thin, fine lips and a curious twinkle in his shrewd, handsome old eyes.

"Come in to lunch," he genially, if abruptly, proposed, as they left the park. "My lady will be delighted to see you-you are one of her particular favourites."

What could Vansittart do but accept? With many deprecatory glances at Joan-which, as she rode on looking straight before her, she either did not, or would not see, – he accompanied uncle

and niece through the pale sunshine which now bathed the wet streets and shone upon the dripping bushes and bright green foliage of the trees, to the door of Sir Thomas' tastefully beflowered mansion in one of the largest West-end squares.

Here, before the groom had had time to wait upon his mistress, he was off his horse, and at her stirrup.

"Forgive me," he pleaded, as she eluded his help and sprang lightly down. "I could not resist the temptation!"

Had she heard him? She had marched on into the house. "She will not appear at luncheon," he told himself bitterly, as he accompanied the very evidently friendly Sir Thomas up the steps and through the hall. "She will make some plausible excuse to avoid me, as she has always done, worse luck!"

CHAPTER II

But for once Lord Vansittart's good star seemed in the ascendant. Joan was seated at the end of the long table in the big, finely furnished diningroom, where luncheon was already being handed round by the men in Sir Thomas' fawn-and-silver livery to some ladies and a man or two who had dropped in and been invited to stay by Lady Thorne. As the kindly, middle-aged, motherly-looking lady welcomed him with what he felt to be pleasurable astonishment, he felt less sickened by the mingled scent of savoury entrées and the pines, forced strawberries and rich rose blooms that decorated the luncheon-table in profusion. Perhaps she seemed to smile upon him, almost to sympathize, indeed, as Sir Thomas had made no secret of doing some months previously-his hostess might stand his friend in his hitherto dismally unsuccessful wooing.

While he accepted a vacant place on her right hand, and chatted about his travels, his ear was pitched to hear what Joan was talking so brightly about to Lady Mound and her daughters at the other end of the table. He lost the thread of Lady Thorne's remarks, until she startled him agreeably by asking him whether they would meet him that afternoon at the concert at Dulwich House.

"Are you-is Miss Thorne-going?" he stammered. "I-of course I only arrived last night, but Lady Dulwich is such an old friend, I know I should be quite the *bien-venu*!"

"Joan, you are coming with me to Lady Dulwich's this afternoon, of course?" asked her aunt, when there was a lull in the conversation. "No? Why not?"

"I am riding to Crouch Hill to see poor Nana," she said, and the determined tones of her resonant young voice seemed to strike upon Vansittart's hot, perturbedly beating heart. "I know it is not a month yet since I went last-my uncle is an autocrat, as I daresay you know, Lady Mound! He only allows me to see my poor old nurse once a month! But I had a letter from her, she is worse than usual. I meant to have told you, auntie, but you were busy, and I thought it did not matter."

"It matters very much, unless you drive, for I cannot accompany you this afternoon," said her uncle, raising his voice so that his wife could hear. "Joan can drive with her maid, my dear." He was well aware that Joan detested driving accompanied by her maid. "You can postpone it till to-morrow? I could not go with you then, Joan, I have to attend a meeting. Perhaps Vansittart will spare time to escort you? You are not deep in engagements yet I expect, my boy, are you?"

"I should be only too pleased, if Miss Thorne will accept my services, as she has done on occasion in the hunting-field," he said, with an effort not to betray his violent delight at such an opportunity to plead his cause.

"London is not the country, Lord Vansittart, thanks," said Joan, calmly; although she had suddenly paled to lividity with dread, with the indescribable fear she felt of self betrayal to this man who loved her. "I shall be perfectly safe, alone. One only meets a few wagons and carts along the highroads."

There was a slightly displeased expostulation from her uncle, a deprecatory word or two in favour of Vansittart as her squire on the part of Lady Thorne; and Joan, desperate, capitulated, feeling unequal to being focussed by all the pairs of eyes around the table. She went upstairs to change her habit and hat for one more suited to the muddy suburban roads, and presently found herself trotting northwards on her spirited grey mare Nora, Vansittart at her side.

She had chosen Nora, she coldly remarked-she meant to be an icicle to Vansittart, it was her only chance-because she "wanted a good gallop," and Nora had not been out that day. And as soon as the young mare had frisked and capered through the suburbs in a manner which made Vansittart somewhat anxious, and effectually prevented conversation, she and her mistress bounded off in a canter, and literally tore along the soft roads, startling the few pedestrians and drivers of tradesmen's carts, Lord Vansittart's horse galloping after, and the groom scampering in the rear to keep in sight of

the pair. Joan only slackened speed for more than a few moments when she saw the row of cottages where old Mrs. Todd lived, at the foot of the wide sloping road that wound downhill.

"There is the cottage," she said, pointing with her whip. "The poor old soul who lives in it loves me best in the world, and I think I return it with interest! She was my nurse when I was a child, helped my mother nurse my father through his long illness, then nursed her to her death, and only left me because she felt too helpless to be of any use!"

"And now you make her life happy by seeing her now and then," he said, gazing passionately at the pure, white, girlish profile under the felt hat.

"She can hardly be happy-doubled up with rheumatism, lonely, poor-it is ridiculous to suggest such a thing!" she said, disgustedly-then, touching Nora's flank lightly with her heel, she rode off; he followed, springing down to assist her to alight. But she frowned at him.

"You had better hold her, please," she suggested. "Where is that groom of mine? Oh, there he is! I shall be quite half an hour. You might inspect the neighbourhood."

"Thanks for the suggestion, perhaps I shall!" he good humouredly returned, with a scrutinizing glance at a stern old face framed by the cottage window panes, which disappeared as he looked; and as Joan slipped nonchalantly off her panting steed and went within, congratulating herself upon having furnished herself with a good chance of losing or evading him and returning alone, he decided to remain well out of sight of the cottage, but only where he could keep his eye on the groom and the horses.

"Well, Nana, here I am, you see," said Joan, entering and embracing the worn old crone who stood leaning on her stick in the middle of the kitchen and parlour combined. It was a dark, low room, filled with some old-fashioned furniture-remnants of Joan's vicarage home. A big old arm-chair stood by the fireplace, where there was a bright little fire, although in a few weeks it would be midsummer. "Sit down at once!" She led her gently back to her chair. "Poor old dear! You have been bad this time, haven't you? You mustn't spare the doctor-send his bill to me! You got that chicken panada and jelly? That's right! I've brought some money for little things-"

"Never mind money, dearie! but tell me who's the gentleman?" said the old woman, whose large, shining eyes shone living in her emaciated, deathly face-shading her eyes with her skinny, clawlike hand, and gazing anxiously at Joan, who had drawn a low folding chair near and was seated opposite the fire. "I like his face, that I do! I saw him as you got down from your horse."

"It is Lord Vansittart," said Joan, frowning slightly.

The old woman bent forward, and scrutinized her nursling's expressive features.

"You like him?" she suddenly asked. "Oh, if you do, may the Lord be praised!"

Joan gave a bitter, hopeless laugh.

"What good would it do me if I did?" she mournfully said.

"What good?" The aged crone leant forward and clasped Joan's gauntleted wrists with her dark, clawlike hands. "Oh, my blessed darlint! If you could only be married-to a real gentleman like him-and would forget all about that business, and that wretched chap, I should die happy, that I should! You have forgot him, haven't you, dearie?"

Mrs. Todd gazed anxiously at Joan's gloomy, miserable, yet most beautiful eyes. There was a far away look-a look of mingled dread and aversion, as if beyond all, she could see some loathsome, terrible object.

"Forget the curse of my life?" she bitterly exclaimed. "For, while I do not know where he is, if he is alive or dead, my life is accursed... How dare I-love-care for-any good man, saddle any one's life with my miserable folly, confess to any honest person my-my-association with *him*? Why, I blush and groan and grovel and tear my hair when I think of it, and if my uncle knew- Heavens! he might curse me and turn me out of doors and leave me to starve! He does not love me as if I were his own child, I know that-how can he when he was at daggers drawn with my father all those years? And auntie, kind though she is, she is only his wife-she is good to me because he wishes her to be! They

are only pleased with me because I please in society-people like me, like my looks-if they knew-if they knew-oh! my God!"

She clasped her hands over her face, and writhed. The old woman's features worked, but her brilliant, unearthly eyes were riveted firmly on her darling.

"You were once a great fool, dearie! But don't 'ee be a fool now, never no more," she said, sonorously, solemnly. "There was summat you once used to say, poetry, when you was home from school-it did go right down into my heart like a bullet dropped into a well-summat like 'a dead past oughter bury its dead.' Can your uncle, or your aunt, or this lord who loves you, or you, or me, or the finest parson or king or pope or anything or body in this world, bring back one single blessed minnit, let alone hours or days? That's where common sense comes in, as your dear dead par used to say to me often and often! No, you can't bring it back, nor he can't! It's dead! He's dead-that brute-and if he ain't dead to you, he can't worry or annoy you, bein' in prison if he's alive, as a fellow of his sort is safe as sure to be-"

"Hush! For Heaven's sake, Nana, don't talk like that!" Joan trembled, and glanced a despairing, furtive glance out of the window-above the pots of arums, and prickly cactus, and geranium cuttings, where the long, attenuated tendrils of the "mother of thousands" in the wire basket dangled in the draught. Much and often as she thought of her past, that secret past which only this faithful old soul really knew the facts of, she felt as if she could not bear it put into words.

"Who's to hear? The girl's out!" exclaimed the old woman, who was roused, excited. Her nursing's troubles, the obstacles to her becoming a great lady, were to her the worst trials of her suffering, lonely life.

"I tell you this, dearie, if you won't have anything to do with that splendid lord who loves you, and you say you like, I shall think you hanker after *him*-that viper who ain't fit to live, let alone to black that noble gentleman's boots! What-you don't? Then what should stand between you and him as loves you? That-that nonsense of that fellow's? What do it matter if he's dead, or in prison? It's four years ago, ain't it? If you are so partickler, you could wait another three, and then he wouldn't have any sort of claim upon ye, if he has any now, which I doubt! He was humbuggin' of you, dearie! I'm not to talk about it? I must! I can't die happy till I know ye're safe with a good man as'll take care of ye, my pretty, and that's a fact. And I am sick and tired of all these aches and pains, it's such a weary world! Now, my dearie, when he asks ye to be his'n, and he'll do it, too-ah! I can see he's done it a'ready-just you listen to him. Be engaged as they call it, secret-like, for a time. Then don't go and tell him about all that which is dead and done with-never tell living soul a word about *that*! But let him think it's one of the whimsies beauties like you are supposed to have. Make him wait! And then-find out what's become of *him*! I'll help ye! I'll help ye!"

"You-you have heard-from-of him!" gasped Joan, wildly. "Nana! When! How?"

"Gawd is my witness, I've never set eyes on him, the vagabond, since ye showed him to me that day when he came with us in the fields, five year ago, when you was at school, and your poor mar was nearin' her end," she said, solemnly. "Letters? Not likely! You've had a letter from 'im? No, I knew you couldn't 'ave had. Them convicts-hush? All right, then! If you'll listen to me, I'll hush and welcome."

When Joan rose to go a few minutes later, her thoughts were in a frantic whirl, but there was a gleam of hope shining upon those dismal memories which stood between her and happiness.

Still she glanced round as she issued from the cottage, hoping that her escort would not be in sight, and they would happen to miss each other. She wanted time to think, to ponder over new possibilities suggested by her old nurse's words, possibilities which seemed to her, numbed by her long battle royal to overcome her passion for Vansittart, too magnificent ever to become probable. And she mounted, and after a pretence of waiting about for him as they walked their horses slowly uphill, she said to her groom, "We had better go on, Simms," and quickening her pace, was presently trotting homewards.

But Vansittart was calmly awaiting them at the cross roads, and reined round and accompanied her as a matter of course. She gave him a desperate glance as their eyes met, and it caused him to change his tactics. He had meditated an onslaught upon her emotions during their homeward ride. "It will keep," he sagely told himself, and after an uneventful canter and a little ordinary small talk he left her at her door without even an allusion to a next meeting.

CHAPTER III

She went to her room somewhat heavy-hearted. She was no woman of the world, and was taken aback by his unexpected change of manner. Her maid Julie was busy with a charming *toilette de bal* just arrived from Paris: a gauzy robe over satin, richly sewn with flowers and foliage made of tiny seed pearls.

"This will suit mademoiselle *a merveille*," exclaimed the little Frenchwoman. "And with that pearl *garniture*-"

"I shall not go out to-night," she said, with a disgusted glance at the finery which seemed such hollow mockery. And as soon as she had changed her habit for a tea-gown, she locked herself in her boudoir, and stormily pacing the room, asked herself what this sudden chill in her lover meant.

"I have gone too far-I have been too cold-I have lost him!" she told herself, wildly. "I cannot bear it! While there was the faintest of faint hope left-that I might be with him some day-I could bear-everything! But to see him look at me as if I were anybody, speak as if he did not care what became of me-no, no, I should soon go mad!"

Flinging herself prone on her sofa, she clasped her throbbing head in both hands, and asked herself passionately what could be done.

"I cannot, must not, lower myself by writing to him-and then, if he was the same again, I could not take advantage of it! Was ever poor wretched girl in such a miserable position as I am?"

All seemed hopeless, gloomy, dark, until a sudden thought came like a brilliant flash of light.

"He may be there, he will be there, to-night! Of course, he is a friend of the Duchess," she told herself. "That is what it meant! He knew we should meet there! He was teasing me-trying me!"

The suggestions comforted her as she rang, told Julie she had changed her mind, and would go to the ball; and she subsequently dined with her uncle and aunt, who seemed in exceedingly good spirits. (Sir Thomas' pet project was that Lord Vansittart should marry Joan, and he augured well from his appearance at this juncture, and went through the ceremony of dressing with a certain amount of patience.) When she stood before her long glass, with all the electric lights switched on, and saw herself in her gleaming white and shining pearls, tall, queenly, fair, with the glistening wreaths of golden hair crowning her small head, and her lustrous brown eyes alive with that peculiar, unfathomable expression which had gained her the epithet "sphinx-like" more than once when she was discussed as the Beauty who meant to flout every Beast that approached her, and did-she felt comforted. Only when she was shut into the carriage, her aunt prattling platitudes, and the flickering street lamps flashing stray gleams into the dimly-lit vehicle as they drove along, was she seized with a sudden panic.

"I feel as if-if he does not come-I shall break down, utterly-I shall not be able to bear my life any more!" she told herself, despondently. "I shall end it all-no one will care! There is only old Nana, who is barely alive, and she would follow me at once!"

The Duke of Arran was a man of ideas-and he lived to carry them out. The balls and entertainments at Arran House were always unique. That evening was no exception. As Joan alighted, and passing through the hall accompanied Lady Thorne through the vestibule and up the wide staircase, even she felt transient admiration. White and gold everywhere was the rule to-night at Arran House, where the famous marble staircase had been brought from an old Venetian palazzo. This evening's decorations were carried out in gold-yellow; after the gardens and houses had been denuded of gold and white flowers to the disgust of the ducal gardeners, the London florists had been commissioned to supply the banks and wreaths and festoons of gold and white blossoms which everywhere met the eye, perfumed the atmosphere, and made a fitting background for the large staff of tall, handsome powdered men-servants in black velvet and satin liveries, which was augmented to-night into a very regiment.

One sickening glance round the magnificent ballroom, full of delicately-beautiful toilettes, bright with flowers, lights, and laughter, gay with the music of a well-known band-told her Vansittart was not there. However, she maintained her composure-he might yet come-and with her usual chilly indifference allowed her few privileged friends to inscribe their initials on her tiny tablet. New partners she declined, with the plea of fatigue. But it was weary work! She was just telling herself, fiercely, that she could bear no more; she was seeking Lady Thorne to implore a retreat, when she came upon Vansittart talking pleasantly to her aunt in a cool corner.

"I was waiting for you," he said, looking into her eyes and reading in them that which fired his blood. "You will give me this dance?"

"Yes," she said, and she accompanied him, meek, silent, subdued, and allowing him to encircle her slight waist with a firm, proprietary clasp, glided round and round to the dreamy melody of the "Bienaimée" valse. Once before, when she had first longed for his love, and felt the throes of this overwhelming life-passion, they had danced together to that swaying, suggestive melody. He remembered it-remembered how to feel her slight form almost in his embrace had urged him into a reckless avowal of a love which was promptly rejected. He set his teeth. He was at a white heat again-and she-? By some subtle sense he believed his moment had come.

"I must speak to you," he hoarsely said, as they halted, Joan white and breathless with emotion. "May I?"

She looked up into his eyes, and at the intensity of the appealing, passionate abandonment to his will in that gaze, he thrilled with triumph.

"We will go into the Duchess's boudoir, I know we may," he said, feeling a little giddy as he escorted her along a corridor and through the drawing-rooms. The boudoir was empty-one or two couples only were seated in the adjacent anteroom, he saw at a glance they were well occupied with their own flirtations. He closed the door, drew the embroidered satin portière across-they were alone in the dimly-lighted room.

He turned to her as she stood gazing at him, pale, fascinated. He took her hands. "Joan!" he said-then, as he felt her passion, he simply drew her into his arms, and stooping, kissed her lips-a long, passionate kiss.

To feel his lips on hers was ecstasy to her-for a few moments she forgot all-it was like heaven before its time. Then she feebly pushed him away, and gave a low moan.

"Oh! what have I done?" she wailed, and she glanced about like a hunted creature. "How could you?"

"You love me! What is to keep us asunder?" he hoarsely cried. As she sank shuddering, gasping, into a chair, he fell at her knees, and embraced them. "I am the happiest man on earth! For your uncle will approve, and you-you, Joan! All that was wanted was your love to make you my dear-wife!"

"Wife!" She sank back and groaned. "I shall never be any man's wife!" she said. "Why? Because I do not want to be! That is all! Because I never shall and will be!"

Was she crazy? He rose, slowly, and contemplated her. No! There were anguish and suffering in the lines about her mouth and eyes-in those lustrous, strained brown orbs-but no insanity.

"We must talk it all over. I must-I mean, I may see you to-morrow, may I not?" he gently said, drawing a chair near, and seating himself between her and the door, he besought at least one interview, so that they should "understand each other." He had but just obtained a reluctant consent to a *tête-à-tête* on the morrow, when the door suddenly opened, a gay young voice cried, "surely there can't be any one in here!" and a bright face peeped round the curtain and at once disappeared.

"Lady Violet!" exclaimed Joan, starting up. "She has seen us!"

"And if she has?" asked her lover, mystified by her terror at having been discovered alone with him by the Duke's eldest daughter. Still, with the promise of an elucidatory interview, he obeyed her wishes, and left her to return to the ballroom without his escort.

She did not linger: she almost fled, scared, from the boudoir through the drawing-rooms, into the corridor. Which way led to the ballroom? Hesitating, glancing right and left, she saw one of the picturesque black-clad servitors coming towards her. She would ask him.

As he advanced, the man's face riveted her attention. Not because of its wax mask-like regularity, and the intent, glittering stare of the black eyes which fixed themselves boldly upon her own; but because the countenance was singularly like one which haunted her memory-waking and sleeping-the hideous ghost of her foolish past.

"Heavens-how terribly like him!" she murmured to herself, unconsciously, involuntarily shrinking back against the wall as he came near.

Like! As the man came up, and halted, she gave a strangled cry like the pitiful dying wail of a poor hare.

"I see, you recognize me," he said, in a low voice, with a bitter little smile. "Don't be alarmed! I am not going to claim you publicly, here, to-night. But if you do not want me to call and send in my credentials at your uncle's house, you will meet me to-morrow at the old place, in the evening. I shall be there at eight, and will wait till you come. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered. As he passed on and opening a baize door, disappeared, she stood gazing after him as if his words had been a sword-thrust, and she was a dead woman.

CHAPTER IV

Joan stood in the corridor, white, hardly breathing, as if turned to stone, her beautiful eyes riveted on the spot where the man who was once her lover had disappeared.

"Victor!" she thought, as her whole being seemed to writhe in an agony of despair. "Victor-and in the duke's livery-am I mad?"

She gave a wild laugh, and the sudden sound startled her into sanity. Numbness had followed the shock of seeing the man living, in the flesh, whom she had hoped against hope was dead. Now she seemed to come to life again. She clenched her nails into her gloved hands so vehemently that the fine kid was rent. She suppressed her almost ungovernable desire to groan out her misery, and as she set her teeth and closed her eyes to realize the situation and deal with it, she seemed to see her soul naked within her, and it was ablaze with one dominating passion alone-love for Vansittart.

"I am all his," she slowly told herself. "How I have become so-I never wished it-Nature, fate, the Creator who made us, alone, know. But I am his, he is my lord and master, and whatever comes between me and him must be trodden under foot!"

Her whole being, violently shocked and almost outraged by the sudden blow, the reappearance of the unscrupulous man who had dared to annex her fair young girlhood and chain it to his fouled existence, rose and asserted itself in a strong, overpowering will-to belong to Vansittart, its rightful owner by legitimate conquest, against all and every obstacle. The feeling was so huge, so powerful, she felt as a very feather in its grasp: she was awed by it, but strengthened.

"I will, I must be his, and I shall be!" she told herself, feeling as if the words had uttered themselves prophetically, by some mysterious agency, within her soul. And she quietly returned to the ballroom, calmed; for she was as an almost automaton, swayed by some obsessive spirit which had asserted itself when she was half wild with despair.

Entering the ballroom, she saw Vansittart, pale, his eyes laden with emotion, watching for her just within the doorway. The heat, the buzz, the patter of feet upon the parquet-they were dancing a cotillon-the braying of the band, took her aback in her strained, nervous state for a moment. Then she recovered herself and went up to him.

"Take me to auntie," she said, smiling up at him. "But first, one word! Do I look ill? I feel so-I am subject to horrid neuralgia, and it has just begun. I am distracted with pain! I shall be in bed all day to-morrow, I am sure! Put off coming till the day after, won't you?"

Was it a dream, an illusion-her confiding, tender manner-that sweet appealing look in those adored, beautiful eyes? Vansittart felt suddenly weak and tremulous as he drew her hand within his arm. She loved him! He was certain of it! She loved him! She had not known it till he dared all in that passionate kiss. He vaguely felt himself the Pygmalion who had awakened another Galatea.

"My darling, I am afraid it is my fault," he murmured in her ear, as he conveyed her towards the corner where Lady Thorne sat patiently listening to the prattle of the surrounding dowagers, and trying not to wish the evening at an end. "How dear of you to to say 'No!' Of course I will postpone coming. But I may call and enquire? No? Very well! You have only to command me, my queen, my adored!"

Could it be real, that faint pressure of his arm, as he looked fondly down upon that lovely little golden head? Vansittart almost lost his grip upon himself, almost forgot to act the mere amiable cavalier, as he accompanied Joan and her inwardly relieved and delighted aunt to the cooler regions of the ducal establishment, and after vainly pressing them to take some refreshment, found their carriage. As he stood bareheaded under the awning after they had driven off, he glanced up at the sky-it had been raining and now a wreath of cloud had parted to disclose a misty moon-and a vague but real remorse that he had not kept up with the noble truths he had learned at his dead mother's knee in those days which seemed a century or more ago brought the moisture to his happy eyes. "God

forgive me, I do not deserve her!" was the honest prayer which went up from his overladen heart as he turned, somewhat giddily, and tried to walk into the ducal mansion without the unsteadiness which might lead some of those priggish menservants to imagine he had dined rather too well than wisely. "But, if I only can succeed in making her my own, her life shall be a royal one!"

Would he have felt so triumphantly joyful if he could have seen his beloved, after they parted?

Arrived at home, Joan dismissed her maid as soon as she could get rid of her without exciting any suspicion, and spent a night's vigil in facing the situation.

She remembered her innocent, ignorant schooldays-when, infected by the foolish talk of frivolous elder girls-they were mostly daughters of rich parents, Joan's godmother paid for the education which could not be afforded by the poor clergyman and his invalid wife-she was flattered by the admiring gaze of a handsome young man who watched her in church each Sunday from his seat in a neighbouring pew. Schoolgirl talk of him led to chance glances of hers in response. Then came a note artfully dropped by him and picked up by a school friend, delighted to feel herself one of the *dramatis personæ* in a living loveplay. This and ensuing love-letters proved the young man a clever scribe. He represented himself as a member of a distinguished family, banished from home on account of his political opinions. The secret correspondence continued; then, with the assistance of a bribed housemaid whose mental pabulum was low class novelettes with impossible illustrations of seven feet high countesses and their elongated curly-haired lovers, there were brief, passionate meetings. When Joan was just recovering from her grief at her father's recent death, the climax came. Her mother died-her lawyers sent for her. When she returned to school, it was with the knowledge that the rich uncle intended to take her from thence, why and for what she did not know; that her godmother acknowledged his right to deal with her future, and that her days in C- were numbered.

With what agony and humiliation she remembered that next wildly emotional meeting with the man she fancied she loved-his passionate pleading that she would be his-her reluctant consent-their meeting in town a few weeks later when she had boldly fled from school to her old nurse in the little suburban house where she let lodgings, and their marriage before the Registrar, to attain which Victor Mercier had falsely stated her age, and their parting immediately after! She went to her uncle somewhat in disgrace because of her precipitate flight from school. But her beauty and the pathos of her orphanhood, also a secret remorse on his part for his hardheartedness to her dead parents, induced him to consider it a girlish freak alone, and to ignore it as such.

She had hardly become settled in her new, luxurious home when the blow fell which at first seemed to shatter her whole life at once and for ever. She read in a daily paper of a discovered fraud in the branch office at C- of a London house, and of the flight and disappearance of the manager, Victor Mercier.

To recall those succeeding days and weeks of secret anguish, fear, dread and sickening horror, made her shiver even now. In her desperation she had confided in her old nurse. "But for her, I should have gone mad!" she told herself, with a shudder.

"You will never see him again, my pretty; all you have to do is to forget the brute!" was the burden of Nurse Todd's song of consolation. "Such as him daren't ever show his face at Sir Thomas'! Your husbin'? The law 'ud soon rid ye of a husbin' of his sort! But there won't be no call for that! He's as dead as a doornail in this country-and, you're not likely ever to see him again!"

And now he had come to life, and in the Duke's livery!

"He was one of the auxiliaries, of course!" Joan told herself. "But how does he dare to be here? If only I had the courage to tell Uncle-all! I believe he might forgive me. But I could never face Vansittart again-if he knew! It would be giving up his love, and that-that I will not do."

No, she must endure her second martyrdom in secret, as she endured the first. There was nothing else to be done. And, she must become that most subtle of all actresses-the actress in real life.

Morning came, and she declared herself too unwell with an attack of neuralgia to rise. Her aunt came up and petted her, and she was left in a darkened room until evening when she sat up for a little.

"You need not stay in to-night, Julie," she told her maid, a devoted, if somewhat frivolous girl-her uncle and aunt, satisfied she was better, had gone out to a dinner whither she should rightly have accompanied them. "Tell them not to disturb me unless I ring. I shall go to bed directly and get a long sleep." Julie left her, half reluctant, half eager, for her evening out-lying cosily on a soft sofa, the last new novel from the library open in her hands.

As soon as she considered that those among the servants who indulged in surreptitious outings were clear of the premises, and the supper bell had summoned the others to the favourite meal of the day, she rose, dressed herself in a short cycling costume and a long cloak, tied a veil over her smallest, plainest hat, took a latchkey she had once laughingly stolen from her uncle, but had never yet used, and after locking her door and pocketing the key, crept quietly downstairs, crossed the deserted hall, and shut herself out into the warm, cloudy night.

CHAPTER V

The big mansion of which she was the pampered, cherished darling, lay solemn, pompous, solid, dark, behind her. Before her, the pavement, wet after a summer shower, shone in the lamplight. Dark, waving shadows against the driving clouds, with their fitful patches of moonlit sky, were the trees in the enclosure, dangled by the wind. She hurried along-turning down the first by-street she came to-and emerging at its end into one of the principal thoroughfares, she hailed a crawling hansom.

"Regent's Park, Clarence Gate," she said, in a muffled voice, as she sprang lightly in.

To be dashing along the lighted streets to meet the absconded swindler who had dared to take advantage of her girlish folly to make her his wife by law, was delirious work. Cowering back in the corner of the hansom, she gazed with sickened misery at the gay shop-windows, at the crowded omnibuses, at the cheery passengers who carelessly stepped along the pavement, looking as if all life were matter-of-fact, plain sailing, "above-board." A hundred shrill voices seemed clamouring in her ears-"turn back-turn back! Face the worst, but be honest!" She had almost flung up her arm and, opening the trap, bid the driver return, when the memory of Vansittart-of his love-of his kiss-came surging upon her with redoubled force.

"If I am a coward, I shall lose him!" cried her whole nature, fiercely. No! She must battle through: she must circumvent her enemy-the enemy to her love, and Vansittart's.

But how?

"I will dare him," was her instinct. "I will tell him to claim me if he can!" But that was the madness of passion. Reason bade her use other means.

"One must fight a man with his own weapons," she told herself, as the hansom dashed along Gloucester Place, and she knew her time was short. It was now nearer nine than eight-she had seen that by an illuminated clock over a shop. *He* was to be at their trysting-place of old, when she had lodged with her old nurse in a street in Camden Town, at eight. "He lied to me from the first moment to the last. I must lie to him. I will pretend I have cared for him! It will put him off his guard," she thought, as, with a double fee to the cabman, who said "thank-ye, miss," with odious familiarity, she scurried away in the darkness, and crossing the wet road, turned up that which led to the Inner Circle.

There was no chance of forgetting the spot where they two had last met! As she neared it, a slim, dark figure stepped out from the shadow.

"My wife," he exclaimed, in emotional tones. He would have embraced her, but she slipped away and leant up against the paling.

"You can call me that-after leaving me all these years-not knowing whether you were alive or dead," she panted hoarsely. Under any circumstances emotion was natural, so she made no effort to conceal it.

"I? It was you who would not reply to my letters!" he exclaimed bitterly. "I wrote again and again, under cover to your miserable old nurse-and don't say you never had them! The last came back to me-'not known.' But the others did not-they would have if they had not reached!"

"If she had them, she never gave them to me!" she said truthfully. "And I don't wonder! I was so utterly wretched when I read of your-your-flight-that I told her-all! I had to-I should have gone raving mad if I had kept it to myself!"

"Well, all that is over and done with, thank goodness!" he exclaimed, cheerfully, after a brief pause. "I will not scold you for misjudging me-you were but a child! But you are a woman now, of age, your own mistress! I have been fortunate of late, or I should not be here. Speculations of mine have turned up trumps-and not only that, but I have friends in the City who will introduce me to your uncle, and if you only play your cards well, our real wedding shall be followed by a sham one, and Mrs. Victor a'Court will take a very nice place in society. My dear, cash opens all doors, and I have it!"

"Some one is coming," she said feebly. His speech had called forth all her powers of endurance, and, while bracing herself to bear up as she did, Nature determinedly asserted itself. She felt cold and giddy-her limbs seemed as if they did not belong to her.

"Only a Bobby," he said, with a light vulgarity which seemed the last straw. As she turned to walk along by his side, she tottered.

"Don't do that, or the Bobby will think you are drunk," he said, coarsely, holding her up by the arm. His detested touch achieved what her slackening courage had failed to do. She felt suddenly strong with a new, fierce emotion-was it hate?

"I cannot understand how you can be well off-or, indeed, how you can be here at all," she softly began, as the policeman marched solemnly on before them, the light of one of the occasional lamps gleaming on his wet weather cape. "I thought-"

"You mean, your old nurse thought!" he went on angrily. "You-you were not capable of suspecting me, if that old wretch had not put it into your head! My love, I was a victim of circumstances. The people I was with were a rotten lot. They accused me to protect themselves. They were bankrupt three years ago! Mercier was not my real name. My father was Victor Mercier a'Court. It suited me to use it, that's all! What-you don't believe me?"

"You told me lies then-why should I believe you?" she boldly said.

"Because you are my wife! It will not pay me to tell you untruths-nor will it pay you to doubt me!" he savagely retorted. "I had expected a welcome! Instead, I am treated like this! It is enough to exasperate a saint-and I don't profess to be that! Come, let us talk business, as you don't feel inclined for love. You are mine, and I mean to have you. You understand? I have waited for you all these years, and precious hard work it has been, I can tell you, for plenty of girls as good-looking as you made a dead set at me-and girls with loads of oof, too! If I don't get you by fair means, I will have you by foul-it is for you to select. By Jingo, it would serve you right if I went to that wretched uncle of yours to-morrow, and claimed you!"

She stopped short and confronted him. The moon, breaking through the driving clouds, shone full on her face. Beautiful, corpse-like in its sombre, set expression, there was that in her great, shining eyes which gave him, hardened worldling though he was, a slight shock. He felt he had gone too far.

"Drop the tragedy queen, do, and be my own little darling once more!" he wheedled, and would have embraced her, but she slid away as he approached.

"Listen!" she began, in clear, determined tones, in which there was neither fear nor hesitation, "unless you treat me with consideration, decency, respect-unless you can give me time to arrange matters so that to avow myself your-wife-will not ruin me, body and soul, I swear before God that I will put a barrier between myself and you which will separate us for ever."

"Pah, pah, pah, spitfire!" he sarcastically said, swinging his umbrella and beginning to walk onward. "I know what you mean! You have some romantic idea of suicide. You are not the kind of girl who kills herself, I can tell you that-so that threat won't hold water with me. Come now, don't let us waste time quarrelling. What do you propose to do? Before I tell you my ideas, let's hear yours. *Place aux dames* was always my motto."

During her long vigil, scheme after scheme of escaping him and of belonging irrevocably to Vansittart, one plan wilder than another, had agitated her mind. She had at last arrived at one set conclusion-Victor Mercier must be cajoled into giving her time. Events would decide the rest.

"All I ask of you is to wait," she pleaded earnestly, vehemently. "Give me time to find some way of introducing you to friends, and through them to uncle and aunt-then I can begin seeming to encourage you, and feel my way-"

He burst into a derisive laugh.

"Rats!" he cried brutally. "That sort of thing won't do for me, my dear wife, I can tell you! I see you are as big a baby as ever-you need some one badly to teach you your way about! No, no! I want you at once-who and what's to prevent me from taking possession of my lawful property?"

There is only one thing for us to do: to bolt together-and to leave them completely in the dark as to your fate. I hear that those two old prigs who wouldn't give bite or sup to your father when he was a dying man are dead nuts on you. We must make 'em suffer, my darling! We must madden them till they are ready to do anything and everything if they can only find you alive. And we must talk it over-so that your disappearance may be a regular thunderbolt! Can you come to my lodgings to-morrow evening? I want you to myself-it's natural, isn't it? This road, quiet as it is, is hardly the place for husband and wife to meet, is it? What? You can't come?" His voice hoarsened-he clutched her arm so fiercely that she gave a faint cry. "You don't want me?" he exclaimed, in tones which to her strained ears seemed those of deadly menace. "If you don't-I know you, you see! I have not forgotten your kisses, if you have mine-it means another man! And if it does, I will have no mercy on you, do you understand? None!"

"How dare you?" Once more she faced him, this time in an access of desperation. "How dare you accuse me of crime? My coldness, my absolute refusal to listen to any man is so well known that it has been common talk in society! More than once I have felt that uncle has suspected me-and, indeed, he has sounded me-"

In her earnestness she was off guard, and drawing her to him, he suddenly threw his arms about her neck and kissed her lips-a long, violent, almost savage kiss.

"There-go home and think of that!" he said, with a triumphant chuckle, as she staggered away and almost fell against the fence. "And take this address. I shall be here every evening at the same hour. And if you don't come-well, you had better come, that's all! I am not in a very patient humour."

She made her way out of the Park at his side, dazed, trembling. When at last he consented to leave her, and hailing a hansom, she clambered in, she leant back, and for a few minutes was barely conscious. She came to herself with a sob.

"Will God have mercy on me?" she wailed. "I was so-so-very young!"

CHAPTER VI

Joan made her way home-how, she hardly knew. In the confusion of thought succeeding that terrible interview which had successfully shown her she was in the power of a merciless tyrant, instinct guided her. After Victor Mercier had put her into a cab, and she had alighted from it in a thoroughfare near her uncle's house, she let herself in with the latchkey she had playfully annexed, little dreaming how she would need to use it-and meeting no one as she made her way up to her room, locked herself in to face her misery alone.

As she tossed and writhed through the long, miserable night she almost despaired. Perhaps she would have utterly and entirely lost heart, had not a thought flashed upon her mind-an idea she welcomed as an inspiration.

"There is only one way to escape the grip of that savage tiger-flight!" she told herself. Although the sole tie between them was the hasty ceremony in a Registrar's office he had cajoled her into years ago-although she had met him but once afterwards before he absconded and disappeared, and that was in the very spot where their interview a few hours before had taken place, she believed, indeed she knew, that for her to try to undo that knot would entail publicity-disgrace-even shame-that if she endured the ordeal, she would emerge unfit to be Vansittart's wife. If *he* forgave her, even her uncle-society could and would never overlook the smirch upon her fair girlhood. She would bear a brand.

"Victor gave me the idea, himself," she told herself, with a bitter smile at the irony of the fact. "He-the man who is legally my husband until he chooses to renounce me" – in her ignorance of the law she fancied that Victor Mercier might divorce her quietly in some way, if he pleased-"proposed that we should disappear together, and frighten my uncle into a concession. What if I disappeared alone-and only allowed one person to find me-Vansittart?"

That Vansittart loved her passionately, with all the fervour and intensity of a strong, virile nature, she knew. Whether the love was mad enough to fall in with any wildly romantic proceeding, she had yet to discover.

"He will seek me as soon as he can!" she correctly thought. As she was crossing the hall after breakfasting with her uncle, who-in his hopes that his only niece and adopted daughter and heiress was thinking better of her aloofness to mankind, and melting in regard to his favourite among her many admirers, Lord Vansittart-had been unwontedly urbane and affectionate, a telegram was brought to her.

"If I may see you at twelve, noon, do not reply. – Vansittart."

At noon her uncle would be at his club, and her aunt had, she knew, an appointment with her dressmaker in Bond Street. She went to her room and spent some little time in deciding upon her toilette. How did she look best, or, rather, how should she be attired to appeal most strongly to Vansittart's imagination and senses?

Most women are born with subtle instincts in regard to the weakness of manhood, especially the manhood already to a certain extent in their power. Joan hardly knew why she felt that a certain dishabille-a suggestion of delicacy and fragile helplessness in her appearance, would place Vansittart more entirely at her mercy; but it was with this conviction that she attired herself in a white, soft, silken and lace-adorned tea-gown, with lace ruffles about her smooth, rounded throat and wrists-a robe that fell away from a pink silk underdress which, fitting tightly about her waist, showed the rich, yet girlish curves of her beautiful form to the fullest advantage.

Her hair had been wound somewhat carelessly but classically about her small head by Julie, who was rather excited at having received an offer of marriage. Joan had listened sympathetically-she had encouraged the girl in her love affair, more, perhaps, because it would serve her own interests, being one which was to remain a secret from "his parents in France" until they had seen Julie, and therefore subject to mysterious "evenings-out" and holidays taken, with other explanations to the housekeeper.

Altogether there was a certain softness about her whole appearance, Joan considered, as she anxiously gazed at her reflection in the many mirrors she passed proceeding to her boudoir, which was on the same floor as the drawing-rooms, and opened upon a small balcony full of flowers, with a peep of the enclosure and the Park beyond, just under the red and white awning.

It was eleven when she entered her room and set herself to write a whole host of letters. She had barely finished three before a brougham dashed up to the hall door. She started up, her heart beating, her cheeks aflame.

"It cannot be-why, it is hardly a quarter to twelve," she thought, glancing at the Dresden china clock. But even as she spoke she heard his voice-those musical, resonant, manly tones she loved-and in another moment the groom of the chambers announced, "Lord Vansittart," with an assurance which seemed strange to Joan, unaware of the freemasonry below stairs which enlightened the domestic staff as to the wishes and opinions of the master of the house.

As he came in, tall, his fair, wavy hair flung back from his broad brow; his large, frank eyes alight, his cheeks aglow with passion; some suggestion of a conqueror in his mien-his very fervour and exultation were infectious-she could have fallen into his arms and abandoned herself to his embraces as if there were no obstacle to their mutual love.

As it was she merely gave one limp, chill hand into his eager clasp, and cast down her eyes as he said: "I am early-I could not help it-Joan, Joan, what is it? You are not glad to see me" – his voice faltered.

"Sit down-won't you?" she said, and she sank into a low chair and motioned him to one out in the cold-but he would not understand-he drew a light low chair quite near to hers, and fixed her with an intent, anxious gaze.

"Last night you behaved-as if-you cared a little for me," he began, almost reproachfully.

"Last night-I was a fool!" she bitterly said. "I let you see too much."

"Why too much?" he drew eagerly nearer. "Joan, my beloved-the only one in the whole world I care for-for, indeed, you have all my love, all-I am yours, body and soul! – what can come between us if you love me? And you do! I know you do! I feel you don't want to-and I don't wonder, I am not good enough, no one can be-but if you love me, I and no other man, ought to be your husband!"

"Understand-I beg, pray, implore you to understand," she began, slowly, painfully-this holding her wild instincts in check was the most terribly hard battle she had ever fought-"I have sworn to myself never to marry. Years ago my uncle was hard, cruel to my parents: they literally died, half-starved, because he would not help them. When he adopted me I did not know this. I had some work to accept his kindness after I did know. But never, never will I accept a dowry, a trousseau, from him-yet I will not explain why-nor will I go to any man a pauper. Now perhaps you can see why-I feel-I can only do justice to myself, and show mercy to him-by remaining as I am!"

"You mean to allow this folly about your uncle to come between you and me?" he cried imperiously. His compelling grasp closed upon her wrists. "Joan, Joan, do not throw away my life and yours by such an absurdity-such a whim!"

He gazed into her eyes with his so brimful of intensity of passion that they seemed to draw her towards him. She struggled against yielding to the appeal, the yearning in his face-and he, he watched the struggle-and as she gave a little sob, which was virtually a cry for mercy, he drew her to him-he took her in his arms-she was on her knees, in his embrace, her heart beating against his, their lips clinging to each other.

Long-so it seemed to Joan-was she enwrapped in that delirium of bliss she might have imagined, weakly, but had never felt in all its fierce, oblivious ecstasy. Then she held him from her.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she wailed-and clasping his knee she leant her face upon her cold trembling hands.

"You dear, innocent child! Do, indeed!" he almost merrily exclaimed, stooping and kissing her fair wreaths of shining hair. "Why exactly as you like! I don't care a fig for your uncle-at least,

as regards what he can give you-I have enough for you and a family of brothers and sisters, too, if you had one. All I want is *you*, do you understand, you! You have only to dictate terms-I surrender unconditionally!"

CHAPTER VII

"You have only to dictate terms-I surrender unconditionally!"

Could she have heard aright? Joan lifted her pale, miserable face-miserable with the woe of reality after the delirious joy of being clasped to her lover's heart-and slowly shook her head.

"I have no terms to dictate," she slowly, dismally said. "I cannot go through a secret engagement! It would be impossible to keep it secret, either. Uncle will guess! Why, I have hardly been decently civil to any man who seemed as if he had ideas of marriage-he will know at once-and then-every one else would know-oh, I could not bear it! It would drive me mad!"

She spoke vehemently-and there was a wild, dangerous gleam in her eyes which he did not like. Perhaps the mental trouble it must have been to the sensitive orphan to accept bounty from the cold-blooded man who had let her father, his brother, die unsuccoured, had brought about hysteria. He had read and heard of such cases. It behoved him to come to his darling's rescue-to cherish and care for her-ward off every danger from one so beautiful, so helpless, so alone. As he gazed at her, an extraordinary idea flashed upon him-like lightning it illumined the darkness-the way he must go seemed to stand out plain before him.

"My dearest, there is a way out of our difficulty so simple, so obvious, that it seems to me a waste of time to discuss anything else!" he said, tenderly, gravely. "You are of age-you are entitled to act for yourself! Let us be married as soon as possible and start in my yacht for a tour round the world! I can manage everything secretly: you will only have to walk out of the house one fine morning and be married to me, and we will take the next train to wherever the yacht will be waiting for us, and be off and away before your absence has been remarked and wondered at! I will leave explanations to be sent to your uncle at the right moment, acknowledging ourselves eccentric, romantic, blameable, perhaps, but not unforgivable-saying that we knew so long a honeymoon would be unpalatable, so we took French leave-why do you shiver dearest?" He bent anxiously over her. "Joan! Won't you trust me?"

"Trust you!" she gazed up at him with that startling expression of mingled love and woe into his face-a look he had seen in a great picture of souls suffering in Hades-an expression too full of agony to be easily forgotten. "Only it seems too much to expect! It cannot possibly happen-those good things don't, in this miserable life!"

"You are morbid, dearest, if I may dare to say it," he tenderly said, drawing her into the arms with which he vowed to shelter and defend her from all and every adverse circumstance which might ever threaten her peace and content. And he set himself to comfort, hearten, encourage her drooping spirits, as he painted the joys of their future life in the most glowing terms at his command, during the rest of what was to him their glorious hour together. To a certain extent he thought he had succeeded. At least, Joan had smiled-had even laughed-although the tragic look in those beautiful eyes-absent, hunted, terror-stricken, desperate-was it only one of those things, or all? – had not been superseded by the expression of calm satisfaction it would be such relief and joy to him to see there.

"Something is wrong-but what?" he asked himself, after he had stayed luncheon, and at last succeeded in tearing himself away. "Is it only that fact-a miserable one to so tender yet passionate a nature-that while she is loaded with luxuries by her uncle, her parents died almost in want because he withheld the helping hand? It may be! Well-anyhow-the best thing for her is absolute change-as soon as possible-and that she shall have!"

* * * * *

Victor Mercier-it was his real name, his father, a meretricious French adventurer, had married his mother for a small capital, which he had got rid of some time before he ran away and left his

wife and infant son to starve-had left Joan the eventful night of their meeting after long years-in a towering rage.

His was a nature saturated with vanity and self-love. From childhood upwards he had believed himself entitled to possess whatever he coveted-the law of *meum and tuum* was non-existent in his scheme for getting as much out of life as it was possible to get. Naturally sharp, and with good looks of the kind that some women admire, he had not only made a willing slave of his mother, but when, some years after, the news of his father's death came to her, she married again, a widower with a charming little daughter, step-father and pseudo-sister also worshipped at his shrine.

Then he ingratiated himself with an employer so that he was entrusted with the sole management of the branch business at C-. Here, he "splurged"; spent money freely, and-when he heard that the pretty schoolgirl he had succeeded in establishing a flirtation with was the only surviving member of the weakly family represented by the wealthy Sir Thomas Thorne-he grew more and more reckless in the expenditure of his master's money and in his falsifying of the accounts. Like many others of his kind, he overreached his mark. When he paid a flying visit to London to marry Joan before she was adopted by her uncle-her mother had just died-it occurred to the head of his firm to "run over" to C- and audit the books. The day of Mercier's secret marriage he heard that "the game was up," and his only means of escape, instant flight and lasting absence.

It was quite true that his firm failed a couple of years later. But he had then just established himself as partner in a drinking-bar in the unsavoury neighbourhood of a gold mine in South Africa. The lady of the establishment had fallen in love with him, and there was, in fact, money to be made all round about by one who was not too particular in his morals and opinions. Suddenly, the neighbourhood grew too hot for him, and he found it convenient to remember that the rich Miss Joan Thorne must now be twenty-one and ready to be claimed as his wife.

So he returned with money enough to make a show, later on, of being rich, at least for a month or two. The first thing was to find Joan: the next to meet her.

An acquaintance made in his comparatively innocent boyhood happened to be now confidential valet to the Duke of Arran. He sought him out, flattered, and-without confiding his real story to him-made him his creature by using a certain power of fascination which had helped on his unworthy career from its beginning.

Paul Naz got him engagements as "extra hand" on state occasions in noblemen's houses; he had fulfilled three of these before he attained his end and encountered Joan at the Duke's-Paul consented to pay court to Julie le Roux, Miss Thorne's maid, so as to keep his old playfellow informed as to the doings of the family, who, he told him, owed his late father a considerable sum of money, which he wished to recover privately to save scandal. That very night Paul was taking Julie to see Mercier's so-called half-sister act in a transpontine theatre. "Vera Anerley," as she had stage-named herself, had been on tour with a popular piece-was absent at the time of Victor's return-and had appealed to his vanity by her wild emotion when they met. He was to see her on the stage, and to have a word with Naz, who had had to probe Julie in a certain direction, after he left his "wife" in the Regent's Park.

When he had watched Joan's hansom speed away in the darkness, Victor Mercier walked along, then-hailing a passing cab, was driven to the theatre. As he went he anathematized Joan in the strongest of mining oaths.

"Like all the rest," he bitterly thought. "Always another man-they must have a man hanging about them!"

Alighting at the theatre, he met Naz, a fair, innocent-looking Frenchman, coming out. He joined him, saying "Come and have a drink."

"You have lost much by being late, your half-sister is adorable!" said Naz, as they stood together at the bar of a neighbouring public-house.

"No doubt!" said Mercier carelessly. "So is your Julie, eh? By the way, how is Julie's mistress? Any news?"

"As I said," returned Naz, in an undertone. "The beautiful creature is trapped at last, by a lover who has been out of the country to try and forget her, shooting big game! They ride-meet-he was with her when I posted you in the corridor that night. They passed me, you must have seen him."

"Him-who?" muttered Mercier. There was a gleam in his eyes.

"Lord Vansittart," replied Naz. "The Duchess has been heard to say it was a settled thing!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Duke's valet prattled on until the second and third liqueurs had solaced his being. Then Victor glanced darkly at the clock.

"Let us go," he roughly said.

The softspoken Naz only thought that the delightful fluid which warmed and comforted his gentle self had had a reverse effect upon his old friend, so-following him gently as Mercier stalked gloomily into the theatre and up to the dress circle, which was well-packed with honest citizens and their wives in their ordinary habit as they lived-he returned to his seat by Julie, and left him to his own devices.

The third act was over. In the fourth Mercier's so-called "sister" had plenty to do. She was a peccant wife, revisiting home in disguise, and seeking her husband's pardon. It was a pathetic scene, when she sought her husband and discovered herself. Throwing off her disguise-she was got up as an old woman-she emerged sweet, fascinating, in a white dress, with her black hair in Magdalen-like confusion, and sinking at his feet, alternately implored and adored with such passion and intensity that tears rolled down the feminine auditors' cheeks, and the house literally rose to her.

"And all that passion is mine, to take or leave as I please," was Victor's saturnine comment, as he leant back in his seat with folded arms and frowned darkly at the stage. He well knew that his amorous dalliance with his step-father's daughter, when he had had nothing more to his taste to dally with, had succeeded in inspiring her with so violent a devotion to him that, if he had not pitied, he might have come to loathe her. When she was a mere pretty, stupid schoolgirl, going to and fro to her middle-class girls' school, satchel in hand, he had had but little patience with her absorption in him and his career. But now that he saw her on the stage, beautiful with an undeniable beauty, full of grace and spontaneity, and possessed of that power which passion gives, he thrilled with mingled desire and satisfaction.

Strange ideas rose up in his mind-ideas of a subtle revenge upon Joan-of intense and vivid gratification to himself.

"Joan will be my wife-my bonds slave, to be dealt with how I please, and when I please; and as long as I kiss and caress her no one dare interfere, if I choose that she shall spend almost her life in my arms with my lips on hers," he grimly told himself. "But-Vera loves me-and if I am Vera's lover while I am Joan's uxorious husband, Joan's pride will not allow her to accuse me, even if she suspects! And how her proud, snobbish soul will hate my giving her half my love-as an Eastern potentate gives it to his appointed spouse, while his real devotion is his favourites'!"

The idea gave him a peculiar and indescribable pleasure. It seemed, indeed, to restore his equilibrium. As the curtain fell, he left the auditorium and made his way round to the stage door, as he had promised Vera to do.

"I wish to see Miss Anerley-which is her dressing-room?" he asked, when, after cautiously traversing a dark, unsavoury alley, he had pushed open the swing door, had entered a dimly-lit corridor where a sickly gas flame was flaring in the draught in its wire cage, and met a man coming towards him.

"You are her brother? Come this way, please." The good-natured acting-manager of the touring company, an eager little man in shabby evening dress, escorted Victor along a passage to a door on which "Miss Vera Anerley" was pasted, and knocked.

"It's your brother, Miss Anerley," he called out.

"Thanks! Wait one moment, Victor, will you?" cried a pretty, girlish voice.

"All right." Victor paced the narrow, damp-smelling corridor, hearing the thumps and shouts from the stage, intermingled with a murmur of melodramatic music now and then from the orchestra-making way occasionally for a stage carpenter in shirt-sleeves, or an actor hurrying from his dressing

room-until Vera looked out. "I am so sorry to have kept you-come in," she said caressingly, and she pulled him gently in and closed the door.

"Tell me, how do you like me?" she eagerly cried, clasping his hand with both hers. There was no reserve between these two-if, indeed, propinquity had not established complete freedom from what Victor termed *gêne* long ago-and she gazed up into his face with eyes transparent, shining, darkly blue as sapphires, eyes so brilliant that in admiring them he hardly noticed the coarse red and white grease paint which thickly coated her delicate skin, or the bistre rings around those beautiful orbs. "Victor! Speak! If you are not satisfied, I shall chuck the profession-dearly as I love my work, I couldn't stand it!"

"Silly child!" He patted her hand, and looked round for a seat. There were two broken chairs in the large, bare, cellar-like "dressing-room," with its high window shrouded by a torn and dirty red curtain and its dresser-like table with looking-glasses the worse for wear under the flaring gas jets. But he shook his head at them. "I'll sit here," he said, perching himself on one of the big dress-baskets under the pegs hung with feminine garments. "By George! what a room for a future Lady Macbeth to dress in, to be sure! My dear, don't gasp! That's your style, tragedy, melodrama, bloodcurdling! You're a damned passionate little witch, that's what you are-and I expected as much."

She gave him a rapturous glance as she drew a deep sigh of relief and satisfaction, and sank in a graceful, unstudied attitude upon one of the crippled Windsor chairs; and he dryly lighted a cigarette, and gazed critically at her. She was very fair! Small, with an oval face under glossy masses of dark silken hair; slight and graceful, with a child's hands and feet, and a tiny waist; yet the shoulders rising from her blue ball-dress with its gaudy wreaths of pink flowers were softly rounded-and the contour of neck and bust he considered "simply perfect." He ground his teeth and spat viciously on the blackened boards-there were only pieces of old carpeting here and there-as he remembered his wife-and her supposed lover, "Lord Vansittart." "What a cursed shame!" he thought. "They wallow in wealth-and I and this child-bah! there is something to be said for anarchy, after all!"

"You look-well, I feel I should like to kiss you," he grimly said.

She blushed under her paint. Since her woman's love had waxed so strong, all the former boy-and-girl intimacy went for nothing-she was shy of him.

"If you did you would spoil my 'make-up' and would get a dab or two of paint on your nose," she said, with slight embarrassment. It was just that coy fear of him in the abandonment of her passionate love which fired Victor Mercier when he was near her. Fierce though his mingled desire of, and hatred for, Joan had been, and still was, she had never thrilled him, stirred his whole nature, as this girl, the companion of his youth, had the power to do.

"You mean to say that is greasepaint on your shoulders?" he said, rising. He crossed the room, and, although she laughingly expostulated, he bent and kissed them-then lifted her chin and kissed her throat.

"Are you angry?" he said mockingly, gazing down into her eyes with an intent, triumphant expression.

"You know-very well-I could not be angry-with *you*!" she murmured, lifting them, dewy with tenderness, with fervour, to his.

Victor started, and stepped suddenly away. The door was flung open, and a young woman dressed in nurse's costume rushed in.

"Vera, what are you about? You'll keep the stage waiting! I beg your pardon, I'm sure," she exclaimed.

Vera sprang up, and with a glance in a glass and a wild pat of her hair, ran off. The young woman turned to him.

"It was a near go that time; but I think she's saved it," she said, somewhat dryly. "You're her brother-in-law, or step-brother, or whatever it is, ain't you? She's been all on wires to-night because you were in front! She's a good sort, is Vera! We all cottoned to her when she got the post. But the

stage-manager's got a grudge against her, and that's why I ran off to get her on in time. He'd have fined her as soon as look at her! You see he's taken a fancy to her, and she won't have anything to say to him. I tell her she's a fool for her pains-he's a young fellow with plenty of brains, and his people have loads of money. But there! She won't hear of it! I hope you're pleased with us, Mr., Mr. – a'Court? You are? That's a good job!"

Victor Mercier left Vera's colleague a few minutes later with the understanding that he would wait for his "sister" at the stage door. When Vera came out into the dark alley he met her, drew her hand under his arm, and marching her out into the thoroughfare hailed the first hansom he met.

"Get in!" he commanded. Then he gave the address to the driver.

CHAPTER IX

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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