

**MERRICK
LEONARD**

THE QUANT
COMPANIONS

Leonard Merrick

The Quint Companions

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Leonard Merrick
The Quint Companions / With
an Introduction by H. G. Wells

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Jesus Christ." – Galatians iii. 28.

INTRODUCTION

The chief fault of *The Quaint Companions* is that it ends. Mr. Merrick is no follower of the "well-made novel" school; he accepts his liberties as an English novelist, and this book has not only the beginning and middle and end of one story, but the beginning and some of the middle of another. The intelligent reader would be the gladder if it went on to that second end, and even then he might feel there was more to be said. For this book is about the tragedy of racial miscegenation. It is, perhaps, the most sympathetic and understanding novel, in its intimate everyday way, about the clash of colour and race-prejudice and racial quality that has ever been written in English, and its very merits make its limitation of length and scope the more regrettable. It is not a book to read alone. One should go from it to *Le Chat Maigre* of M. Anatole France; and good collaterals to it would be Mr. Archer's *Through Afro-America* and Mr. Hesketh Prichard's *Where Black rules White*.

On the whole the strength of the book lies rather in the earlier part of it. Elisha Lee is the realest, most touching individuality in this little piebald group of second-rate humanity. He has, as the vulgar way of the studio puts it —*guts*. When he is hurt he swears, and the heart of the reader responds. David Lee is a weakling, diffusing a weakness over all the story of his development. The story loses spirit as he replaces his father. He is sensitive without strength, and expressive without pride. He *writes*. He wields what is ultimately the most powerful weapon a man can take into his hand, the pen. He has, we are told, the moving touch. What more is needed for pride and happiness? Apparently the normal gratification of a healthy guinea-pig. All Mr. Merrick's skill will not reconcile us to the pathos of David's disappointment at the loss of a pretty fool, or make us see in him and Bee anything more than two unreasonably despondent beings who have merely to look up to rejoice in the gifts of understanding they possess. This second story is not a tragedy, but a misunderstanding, and when Mr. Merrick should begin to elucidate that, when, indeed, he has just got to the gist of his enthralling subject and brought his Quaint Companions together, he sounds a short unjustifiable note of sentimentality — and ends.

Since 1900 when Mr. Merrick closed this story eighteen years have passed. It is now possible to tell a little more of the fate of Bee and David. They did come into closer juxtaposition even as Mr. Merrick fore-shadowed. Indeed, availing themselves of the wilder courage of these latter days, they married. They had no children. Bee developed a practical side that was extraordinarily sustaining to David. She learnt to write and he, adventuring beyond the delicacies of his earlier days, began to produce short fantastic pieces of fiction that had an immense vogue in America...

But why confine ourselves to the limit of 1918? Let us glance on a few years. David's long-deferred success was now at hand. The younger generation hailed him with the utmost delight, his name became almost a symbol for the revolt against the lengthy, crowded novels of Bennett, Merrick, Wells, Cannan, Compton Mackenzie and their elderly contemporaries. David was inordinately praised by the aged but still active Yeats, and elected an original member of the New Academy of Literature which had just received its charter. Mr. Gosse was extremely nice to him... David's slight melancholy, his effect of ill-usage patiently borne has never quite deserted him, and the subtle charm of Bee's crumpled sweetness became more and more recognisable with the passing of the years...

Perhaps, like the sailor who wanted to fight the villain of the play, I have been a little carried away by the reality of the figures before me. How real these people are! So real are they that one can take them out of their author's hands and look at them in another light and not destroy them. That is a very good test of created reality. Elisha Lee is a memorable and unique figure. He stands for something that has never been done in fiction before, and he is done so well that he must necessarily become a type in our memories. He lives in my mind just as Micawber or Peter Quint live. And I would never be surprised to find myself in a railway carriage with Mrs. Lee and his stepson. How disagreeable they would make the journey! Bee I did actually see the other day, in the Hampstead

tube; she did not look up, but I knew that it was Bee. And how admirable, too, is Professor Sorrenford and his comic opera!

But why go on? Yielding to a modern convention among publishers that good wine needs a bush, and being eager to set my admiration for and interest in Mr. Merrick on record, I have written this. But having subscribed my testimony, I very cheerfully gesture the reader on to the book.

H.G. WELLS.

CHAPTER I

Lee had not returned from the concert alone. Gregarious at all times, he never found solitude so little to his taste as when he left the platform – when he was still excited by the fervour of his voice and the public's applause. Two of the other soloists had driven to the hotel with him, and he had taken them up to his sitting-room to give them champagne, and proffer fat cigars. Though his guests resented his prosperity too bitterly to need reminding of it, he had changed his dress-coat for a smoking-jacket of plum-coloured velvet and was complacently conscious, as he crossed his slippers on the window-sill, that neither of his fellow-artists would fail to notice that he wore silk socks.

There was a pause in the vociferous conversation. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck a quarter to one. Like his companions, he had arrived here only in time for his engagement, but unlike them, he was remaining a fortnight for his pleasure. His gaze wandered from their sprawling forms to the view outside. The night was fair, and behind the silent Parade the decorous sea of Brighton shimmered becomingly under a full moon. Fifteen years had slipped by since he was in Brighton last, and in his mind they were momentarily effaced. By a perfectly natural process there rose in the stillness beyond the uncurtained window the apparition of his First Love.

Neither of the other men in the room saw it. Indeed she lingered there only an instant – just for a heart-beat – though some enchantment played upon the scene after she had gone. Lee turned in his chair, and followed the girl into the past. In reality he was thirty-one; in fancy he was sixteen.

She had been beautiful. Even in retracing his youth by the light of experience, he would not wrong her by a lesser word. She was beautiful, and there was justification for his homage. But heavens! In retrospect he was humiliated to perceive his shyness; he beheld his blunders and his ignorance with dismay. How very young he had been at sixteen – how very young, to be sure!

The discovery caused him a distinct shock, for at the time he was convinced that he was exceedingly old for his age, and he had never been back till now to see if it was true. He recollected the evening when she first dazzled him; he had gone to the theatre here, and the overture was not more than half over when his sight was smitten by a girl sitting in the next row. She had the slightly disdainful air which becomes a girl to whom the gods have been bountiful, and whose dressmaker has done her duty. He watched her as man watches woman in the stage when he has yet to realise that she is mortal. She was with a lady whose features seemed familiar to him, and presently he remembered the lady's name. She was Mrs. Tremlett, and the girl could be no other than "Ownie" – "Ownie" who, when he stayed in their lodging-house a few summers since, had been in short frocks. Of a truth it was a very pretty incident, and the ordinary boy would have pronounced it "jolly luck"; but he – O lout! how stupid he had been, how self-conscious and impossible.

"You and Ownie must want to talk over old times?" A simple, kindly soul, the mother. He recalled her suggestion, and the divinity's involuntary glance at her white kid glove as he released her hand. The sentiment of the evening, his tremors and his painful struggle to think of something to say recurred to him, though fifteen years had gone by since the audience dispersed. As they streamed out, Ownie Tremlett had turned with a smile to look at herself in a mirror in the vestibule. That was vivid, the girl's movement, and the reflection of her figure with the flimsy white thing over her hair – quick with the warmth of yesterday.

His absurdity of the following morning recurred to him too: he had lately acquired a trick with a loop of string, and had tramped the town tirelessly with a piece of string in his pocket, thrilling with the thought that it might draw their heads together. He recollected that at last he had met her, but that he didn't show her the trick after all – somehow the careless reference to it that he had rehearsed stuck to his tongue. He had said, "How d'ye do," and agreed that Brighton was very full. There was a humming in his ears that dulled her voice, and he had been obliged to keep clearing his throat. He was rather relieved to bid her good-bye. Reviewing the period, he could not remember that there

had been any more, excepting that he had had the emotion of bowing to her on several occasions. Yes, that was all that had happened really. In the lyric that he made up about her, things had gone further – in that he had saved her life, and married her – but actually he had said very little, and forgotten her very soon.

Nevertheless she had been his First Love, and his thoughts strayed to her – or to his own boyhood – tenderly to-night. He wondered if she lived here still, and if it often surprised her to reflect that the lad whom she had once known had risen to fame. She must be his own age, or rather more; the fact struck him queerly. The cruelties of life had bruised her now – Time had dimmed the radiance of the girl who had patted her golden hair in the mirror. For years she had not flitted across his memory, but being where he was, he saw her again. His interest revived, and gained ephemeral strength. He hoped she was not unhappy.

The pause came to an end. One of the visitors yawned, and said something about "making a move." Lee went downstairs with them, and they accepted a cigar each from his jewelled case to smoke on their way.

"Of course he can't help it," said the 'cellist to the baritone tentatively, as they got into stride, "but he does grate on a gentleman's nerves a bit, eh?"

The baritone took his arm, and foresaw a cheerful walk.

"What can you expect of a nigger?" he said with a shrug. "I always say it's a damned insult to us to put us in the same programme as a black chap. Have you got a match? – this cigar isn't burning straight."

In the card-room the gas was still alight, and Lee went in for a minute to open a local directory. He had forgotten the number, but her home had been in Regency Square. The name of "Mrs. Tremlett" appeared agreeably as the tenant of Sunnyview House. Ownie, no doubt, though, was married.

His youth sang clear to him when he went to bed, and it was not entirely mute next day. When he took a stroll after breakfast he smiled at his idea, but turned attentive eyes and hoped for what he felt to be unlikely. It was his humour to declare it possible that he might pass her, and he thought that he would know her if they came face to face. So Elisha Lee, the negro tenor, sauntered along the Brighton front, looking for Ownie Tremlett where he had looked for her fifteen years before.

CHAPTER II

The month was November, and the King's Road wore its smartest air. This was in the time before Brighton boasted so many places of amusement and while it was much more amusing. People promenaded on the roof of the Aquarium after dinner then; the pier at night twinkled with diamonds; and "La Fille de Madame Angot" was the popular selection by the band. Lee had stopped at a florist's and bought a rose for his buttonhole. In his elaborate toilette, twirling a tortoise-shell stick, and with his hat tilted a trifle to one side, he bore himself proudly. Nearly all of the last night's audience idled on the front. He marked with painful eagerness the quick glances, the occasional whispers he provoked – always avid of signs of recognition, always fearful of reading derision of his race. Sometimes at a look he caught, his teeth met behind his great lips, and fiercely he reminded himself of his empire while he sang. It was not so they looked at him then, these insolent women – with the curious stare that they might have levelled at a showman's freak. No, he could make their cold eyes misty, and their hearts throb faster, sway them, and thrill them – he, with his voice!

The man was to be pitied, though nobody pitied him and there were thousands who would have changed skins with him for the sake of his income. He was not without vulgarities; he was vain; he was prodigal; his failings were the failings of the average negro, intensified by the musical temperament and a dazzling success; but he had his higher hours, and in these he was doomed to be alone. He could buy gay company, but he could never gain affection; there were many who would laugh with him, but there was none to give him a sigh.

When he reached Regency Square he hesitated for an instant, and then moved slowly up it. He had no intention of calling at the house, but he wanted to look at the windows again. It was pleasurable to stroll round the square. It had not changed at all; it was just as he remembered it. He remembered the bushes at the top of the enclosure, and that they had been known to him as the "brigands' lair"; a military band used to play three times a week on the lawn when he was a child, and he wondered if it did so now. As he neared Mrs. Tremlett's, the door opened, and a woman came down the steps. She walked listlessly ahead of him. His full black eyes dilated, and he paused agape, presenting a rather comic appearance, as the negro so often does when he is in earnest. He thought that he had discerned a likeness to Ownie in her face; but it had flashed on him only for a second – in the circumstances he was very liable to deceive himself.

He saw that she was in mourning – more, that the veil depending from her bonnet proclaimed her a widow. He followed. She turned the corner; and, quickening his pace, he arrived in Preston Street just in time to see her enter a fishmonger's. Her position during the few minutes that she remained there was unfavourable; but when she came out, the view that he caught of her could scarcely have been better, and now he was tempted to address her on the chance of being right.

She passed him before he had thought what to say, and he loitered behind her discreetly, until she went into a greengrocer's. A display of fruit offered an alternative to his waiting on the pavement this time; he would order some grapes to be sent to his hotel! He would order some grapes and utter his name loudly, so that she heard it; if he had really found Ownie, she might bow.

Her business was concluded, however, and she left the shop before anyone attempted to serve him. Some minutes were wasted before he was free to pursue her. He took hasty strides, afraid that she was lost. Her veil came in sight again at the end of the street, and, dodging among the crowd on the King's Road, he kept at close quarters to her for a long while, wishing that she would cross to the other side and sit down.

At the foot of Ship Street she crossed to the other side at last, but she did not stop until she reached Marine Parade. On Marine Parade there were fewer visitors. A nursemaid narrated her wrongs, while her charges imperilled their necks on the railings; here and there a bow-backed man who owned a bath-chair enjoyed a respite and a pipe; a sprinkling of convalescent Londoners, basking

in the summer weather, forgot their shivers in the City of Gloom. The lady settled herself on a bench. Lee lounged nearer. She was paler and more languid than he recalled her; he could see shadows about Beauty's eyes which the mirror had not shown to him at the theatre, but he felt sure it was she. Though he had believed himself prepared to find her changed, he found the difference saddening – just as if he were a white man, and a girl of whom he used to be fond had been met after many years.

As he drew level with her, she noticed him with a quick frown. Evidently she had misconstrued his interest. He stopped, and, throwing away his cigar with a flourish, said:

"Miss Tremlett?"

The lady in widow's weeds looked surprised and indignant, and he added hurriedly:

"That's the name I knew you by. Don't you remember me? I'm Elisha Lee."

Her expression was astonished still, but the indignation had faded when he heard her, voice.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh, are you? I didn't know you again. Fancy! Yes, I remember. It's a long time ago."

"Let me see," he said; "it must be fifteen years. I recognised you at once."

She regarded him more kindly, and gave him a faint smile; "I shouldn't have thought you would."

"How's that? I'm not short-sighted. Do you know, I was thinking about you yesterday; hoped I should meet you – and here you are. I haven't been in Brighton since the last time I saw you."

"Haven't you really?"

"No; it's funny, isn't it? I've often been coming – for the week-end, or a concert, but something has always turned up to prevent me. Well, this is first-rate! Were you at the Dome last night?"

"No," she said, "I couldn't go; I was sorry. I heard you in Liverpool once. Let me congratulate you – though I suppose you get such a lot of congratulations that you don't care much about them any more?"

"You can bet I care for yours," he said. "Have you been living here all the time?"

"Oh no; I left here when I married; I only came back after my loss." Her tone was bitter.

"I saw," said Lee, "I saw by your dress that – Is it long since you were left a widow?"

"Twelve months. My home was in Liverpool while my poor husband was alive. Why, you used to know him, Mr. Lee! Yes, of course you did. That summer as children we were all together. How strange! I'm not sure if you met him afterwards? I wonder if you can remember 'Reggy Harris'?"

The long-forgotten name awoke memories of a pasty-faced boy peppered with freckles, who had always called him "Snowball." He bowed solemnly. For a moment it deprived the situation of all its sentiment to hear that she had married Reggy Harris.

"Things happen queerly, don't they?" she said with a short laugh. "I married, and I left Brighton for good – and I sit telling you about it when I am in Regency Square all over again. I never thought I should come back any more, excepting on a visit. Of course I used to come to see mother."

"I hope your mother is well?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, "thank you... It was mother who was certain from the first that the singer we read about must be you. I had forgotten you were called 'Elisha,' but she was sure you were; and the 'Elisha' settled it. We did stare!"

"I thought you would. But I'm not the only 'Elisha' where I come from, by a long chalk. Biblical names are very common among us; we like them. In Savannah, where I was born, I daresay you'd find a good many 'Elishas' – and as to 'Lees,' they're as plentiful as pins. You stared, eh? It seemed wonderful?"

"Well, yes, it did. But your parents were – were musical, too, weren't they?"

"My parents came over here as banjoists when I was a kiddy. They played jolly well."

"Are they living?"

He shook his head. "I am quite alone in the world," he said theatrically. "They were spared to see me famous, though; I'm glad of that."

"They must have been ever so proud of you."

"They were ever so good to me," he replied, and his manner was natural again. "They got decent terms in the music-halls, and they sent me to school, and did all they could for me. It was on one of their tours, you know, that I stayed in your house. They paid some people to give me a good time during my holidays, God bless 'em."

There was a brief pause. A little child, trailing her toy spade, lagged to a standstill and watched him expectantly. He drove her away with an angry gesture; the lady blushed.

"I think I must be going," she murmured, rising. "I've got to meet my baby and the nurse. If you sing down here again, Mr. Lee, I hope I shall hear you."

"I'll sing to you whenever you like," he said promptly. "Won't you and Mrs. Tremlett come and have dinner with me at the hotel one evening? I've got a piano in my sitting-room."

"My mother so seldom goes out at night."

"Let me ask her and do a bit of coaxing!"

"Oh – er – if you can, of course," she said, "though I'm afraid it would be no good. We shall be glad to see you."

He swept off his hat, and took leave of her buoyantly. While they talked he had ceased to contrast her with what she used to be and thought only of the young and pretty woman who was present. Having less refinement than when she was a girl, too, she made him a more intimate appeal. The vulgarities in her blood had come to the surface by this time. At seventeen, to be a gentlewoman superficially is not impossible, but at thirty-two the varnish cracks.

He saw her again, himself unnoticed, as he was returning to lunch. A little nurse-girl—a cheap imitation to be called a "nurse," he thought – pushed a perambulator, and the widow walked drearily beside it. Threading her way among the fashionable toilettes, she looked poor and discontented to him; she looked sullen, like a woman who resents her fate. But she had blue eyes and yellow hair, and he had never resisted a desire in his life. He promised himself to call on her the next day.

CHAPTER III

He went early in the afternoon, and he found her more cordial than on Marine Parade, though he gathered that she had been unprepared to see him so soon. He was shown into a small back parlour reserved for the family's own use, and when he entered she was in a rocking-chair with her baby on her lap. At his playful advances it began to cry, and it wailed continuously while he paid it the usual compliments, and heard that it was fifteen months old, and christened "Vivian."

"The only one?" he asked, as the noise subsided.

"Yes," she said, "I lost my little girl. How nice of you to remember your promise! I made sure you'd forget."

"That was very wicked of you. You ought to have known better; didn't I show you what sort of a memory I've got?"

"Well, really you did! I can't think how you knew me again."

"Why, you haven't changed much," he said, "you were just as good-looking then."

"Don't be so foolish." She bent over the baby.

"I knew you directly I caught sight of you. You were just coming out of the house."

"What, this house? Were you passing?"

He nodded, grinning. "And I followed you into Preston Street."

"I saw you in Preston Street," she said. "You came into the greengrocer's, didn't you?"

"Yes, but first I'd had to wait outside a fishmonger's. Oh, I had a heap of trouble before I got a chance to speak to you, I can tell you! You looked so – Lee was 'fraid!"

"Did I?" She gave him instinctively the glance she would have given to a white man. "Oh, I had no idea who you were, you know. I thought – "

"Thought my admiration infernal cheek, eh? Didn't you look me up and down when I came to the seat! 'Sir, how dare you?' you meant. *I* knew!" His jolly laughter shook him, and startled the baby into a fresh outbreak.

"Well, I was all right when I understood, now wasn't I? – There, there, pet, suck his ribbons, and let his mummy talk! – Do you know, I've got something to ask you, Mr. Lee; after you had gone it struck me you might be able to give me a hint. I want to make use of my voice; I thought perhaps you would tell me the best way to set about it? I have written to people already, but they don't answer, and – His mummy will have to send him away if he isn't quiet."

"Make use of your voice?" he said doubtfully. "Oh yes, I'll help you with pleasure if there's anything I can do, but what is it you mean?"

"I was thinking of concert singing; only in a small way, of course – I know I can't expect to do anything marvellous – but I've had a lot of lessons, and in Liverpool I used to practise hard. My master – If you'll excuse me for a minute, I'll take Baby upstairs."

He excused her for that purpose readily, and when she came back her mother was with her. He found that Mrs. Tremlett had altered too, but in the most surprising way. When he was a lad she had looked quite old to him, and now she looked only middle-aged. She was the widow of a novelist who had written such beautiful prose that many people had been eager to meet him – once. Afterwards they talked less about his prose than his manners. He had left her, their daughter, a policy for five hundred pounds, and an album of carefully pasted Press cuttings. During his life she had suffered with him in furnished apartments; at his death she took to letting them. She was a well-meaning, weak-natured creature. For forty years she had related her dream of the previous night over the breakfast-table, and read the morning paper after supper. She religiously preserved the reviews, which she had never understood; believed that Darwin was a monomaniac who said we sprang from monkeys; and that Mrs. Hemans had written the most beautiful poetry in the world.

"Mother was quite excited when she heard I had seen you," said Mrs. Harris. "Weren't you, mother?"

"You were a very bad girl. What do you think, Mr. Lee? She came home and said that a – that a" – she gulped – "a strange man had stopped and spoken to her. Such a thing to say! And she didn't tell me who it was for ever so long."

He understood that he had been referred to as a "nigger." She deprecated her blunder to the younger woman with worried eyes, and the latter struck in hastily:

"I was just telling Mr. Lee what I want to do, mother. He thinks he might help me."

"Oh, now I'm sure that's very kind of him indeed! You see, Mr. Lee, it's not altogether nice for Ownie here, and of course having had a home of her own, she feels it more still. Well, dear, you do, it's no good denying it! If she had something to take her out of herself a little it would be so good for her in every way; and we always thought she would make money with her voice – it's a magnificent one, really."

Mrs. Harris shrugged her shoulders. "To talk about its being 'magnificent' in front of Mr. Lee is rather funny. But if I could make even a second-rate position," she went on, "I should be satisfied. I'd try for an engagement in a comic opera if I thought I could act, but I'm afraid I should be no good on the stage, and one has to start in such tiny parts. We had a lady staying with us who used to be in the profession, and she was telling us how hard the beginning was."

"And do you imagine that concert-engagements are to be had for the asking?" he said. "Good heavens! But of course you don't know anything about the musical world – how should you?"

"I don't imagine that they are to be had for the asking," she returned a shade tartly; "but if one can sing well enough, the platform must be easier for a woman like me than the stage, by all accounts."

"Accounts," he echoed, "whose accounts? I could give you accounts that would make your hair stand up. Do you know that professional singers, with very fine voices, come over from the Colonies to try to get an appearance here and find they can't do it? They eat up all the money that they've saved and go back beggared. They go back beaten and beggared. It is happening all the time. My dear girl, you couldn't make a living on the concert-stage under five years if you had the voice of an Angel."

"Not if I had bad luck, I daresay," she muttered.

"I tell you nobody can do it – it isn't to be done. It would take you five years to earn a bare living if you were a Miracle. The Americans and Australians try it for two or three and clear out with broken hearts and empty pockets. It's killing; they starve while they are struggling to be heard. I'll give you an example; a singer with a glorious voice came to England —I say it, 'glorious.' I won't mention his name, it wouldn't be fair; but, mind, this is a fact! He had worked hard in his own country – they believed in him there; they got up a benefit for him before he sailed. He had three thousand pounds when he landed – and he spent every penny trying to get a footing here and went home in despair... Do you know that when I give a concert, even artists who *are* making a living go to my agent, and offer him twenty, twenty-five, thirty guineas to be allowed to sing at it?"

"They pay to be allowed to sing?" said Mrs. Tremlett. "But why should they do that?"

"Because they can't get into a fashionable programme without; and it's worth paying for. Singers who have been at the game half their lives do it, I tell you. I'm not supposed to know. *I* don't get their money; I leave the agent to engage the people to support me, and if he makes a bit extra over the affair – well, he forgets to talk to me about it! But it's a usual thing. 'Easy for a woman'?" He turned to Mrs. Harris again, and rolled his black head. "Easy? Poor soul! She looks so fine, doesn't she, when she sweeps down the platform in her satin dress and lays her bouquet on the piano? Oh, dear Lord! if you knew what she has gone through to get there. And what it has cost her to get there. And how she has pigged to buy the bouquet and the satin dress. You think if you can sing, that's all that's wanted, do you? You can wait and beg for years before an agent will hear your singing. And when you are heard at last – if your production is first-rate, and the quality pleases him, and you are

a smart and agreeable woman, and you have found him at the right moment – he will ask: 'How many pounds' worth of tickets will you guarantee?'"

"And in spite of everything, some women get on!" she said. "One would think nobody had ever had an immense success, to hear you talk. One would think there had never been a Patti, or –"

"Ah, Jehoshaphat! An immense success? With an immense success – when it comes – you're the cock of the walk. When a woman has made an 'immense success' she can fill the Albert Hall, and move the world. She can move even the English, and hold them breathless in the gallery, though they have got no chairs and the notices forbid them to sit on the floor. The singers who make 'immense successes' are the kings and queens. They mayn't be able to act, or to talk – they may be as stupid as geese; but God has given them this wonderful power; nobody knows why... And sometimes with His other hand He gives them a black skin; nobody knows why!"

At the unexpected reference to his colour, Mrs. Tremlett started as if she had been pinched; and her daughter murmured:

"Well, I thought you might be able to do something for me. I see you only think that I'm very foolish."

"I haven't heard you yet. I just warn you what sort of a life it is at the beginning. I'd do any blessed thing I could for you. What is your voice? Come, sing to me now!"

"Oh! not now, Ownie," exclaimed the landlady; "the drawing-room people are in, dear, and you know they complain so of every sound."

"You are still called 'Ownie,' I see," he said.

"Mother used to call me her 'little own, her little ownie,' when I was no higher than that, I believe" – she raised her hand about a foot from the table – "and I have been 'Ownie' ever since; I suppose I shall never be anything else now, though I was christened 'Lilian Augusta.' My voice is contralto. I'll sing to you the next time you are here – if the lodgers are out," she added with a harsh laugh. "One must consider the lodgers. The lodgers heard Baby crying in the night and were surprised we didn't keep it in the coal-cellar. At least that's what they seemed to mean."

"Oh, my dear," protested Mrs. Tremlett feebly, "I'm sure they didn't mean that. Mrs. Wilcox had gone to bed with a bad headache, and was just dropping off to sleep. She only said –"

"She complained when she thought it belonged to the dining-rooms; when she heard it was mine, she was astonished at the impudence of a landlady's daughter in having a baby. Oh, I'm not finding any fault with what she said" – but her tone was very resentful – "a lodging-house isn't the place for a child, I know! It's a little hard on poor Baby, perhaps, that's all."

Lee felt very glad, when he rose, that the piano had not been opened. That she was inhabiting a castle in the air he had no doubt whatever, and he flinched from the task of shattering it. The woman of thirty-two who had had "a lot of lessons" was now a pathetic as well as an alluring figure to him; and she did not lose her pathos in the following days, for he often met her, and she never failed to recur to her desire. In their earliest meetings she was considerably abashed in walking beside him, and being conscious of his colour at every step, always declared herself bound for the least frequented parts. But soon she lost much of this embarrassment, and even came to take a nervous pride in the increased attention she attracted. She reminded herself that it was not as if she were with an ordinary negro, or as if he were a famous negro who wasn't recognised. Nearly all the people they passed knew he was Elisha Lee, and there was nothing to be ashamed of in being seen with him. He looked less repulsive to her, too, on acquaintance. She now remembered having noticed niggers with much wider nostrils than those that had looked so wide to her a week ago; and his lips didn't seem to protrude so much as they had done at first. It was a pity they were so dark. If it hadn't been for his lips he really would not have been repugnant at all; there was nothing to make one shudder in a merely black skin when one grew used to seeing it, and he carried himself splendidly. As to his ears, if they had only been white, they would have been the prettiest ears she had ever seen on a man; little delicate ears, set close to his head. And he could interest her. Like most of his People, he told a good story well,

and he was full of anecdotes of the musical celebrities. It made her feel nearer to the platform, to be admitted to the artists' room in his confidences.

But though she hankered after the platform, and spoke of her ambition daily, she was not an ambitious woman in the sense in which many women are ambitious who besiege the offices of the musical and dramatic agents. She was a dissatisfied woman; it was not notoriety she thirsted for so much as means. She wanted money – the road by which she earned it was a detail. If somebody had left her an independence, she would not have been eager to sing at all. Her life was sour to her. As a schoolgirl she had understood that her prettiness was damaged by her surroundings; when she was twelve years old she had felt that the hateful card, printed "Furnished Apartments," in the window ticketed her "cheap." It was the first card to deteriorate that square that has fallen from grace. The society in which girls went to dances and sat on the stairs with rich young men, was as unattainable as a carriage-and-pair. She had nothing to expect; she looked down on the tradespeople, and the residents looked down on her. She couldn't even write novels as her father had done, and hope to escape her environment in that way.

She had married when she was five-and-twenty – not so soon as she would have married in happier circumstances; not so well as she would have married but for the card in the window. She married a furrier. Even this had been an improvement for her; she wore her first sealskin, and tasted the joy of comparative extravagance. But the business had failed and the bankrupt had died; and then there was nothing for her but the Brighton lodgings again.

It was in his sitting-room in the hotel that she at last sang to Lee. He had asked her and Mrs. Tremlett to luncheon – wondering how much he could contrive to spend on it – but the landlady had declared it was impossible for her to leave the house, and Ownie had come alone – "for ten minutes, just to hear his opinion."

She had begged him to let her sing the song through without interrupting her, and he said nothing until she finished. It had hurt him very much to hear her sing; for a few minutes he had almost forgotten her eyes and hair. His thick black fingers lingered on the final chord of the accompaniment with thankfulness and with dismay; he did not know how to undeceive her.

"Well?" she demanded.

He struck E, F, and F sharp, still hesitating. "You use too much force there in swelling the tone of your head voice," he said. "Those are your weak notes – they are mine too. They are the weak notes with all tenors and sopranos. After G the crescendo is easy enough, but the E, F, and F sharp are devils."

"You call my voice soprano?" she exclaimed. "Why, my range is – "

"Range? Did your master tell you that the range makes the voice contralto or soprano? It's the colour of tone, not that." He kept striking and re-striking the notes without looking at her. She observed the diamonds on his hands enviously.

"Do you – are you trying to tell me I'm no good?" she asked with a little gasp.

"You have been badly taught," he said, "awfully badly. I expected it. Your voice has never been placed."

"Thank you," she said. "It's kind of you to be candid." She was very pale. "I suppose there's nothing I can do to – to make it all right?"

"I'm afraid not," said Lee.

"And all because I've been badly taught?"

"Oh, I don't say that. It has done harm of course – the natural colour of the voice isn't there; but I don't think – if you want me to tell you the truth – I don't think you could ever have done what you hoped under any circumstances."

There was a long silence. Then she forced a smile, and put out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said.

"You're not going like that? Ah, you make me feel a beast! Do you want it so much? Think of the hardships you'd have to go through, even if you could make a start. Cheer up! Things aren't so bad after all."

"Aren't they?" she muttered. She sank into a chair. "Why?"

"You aren't obliged to earn a living – you have a home, anyhow. Plenty of women haven't that; there are plenty of them worse off than you, I give you my word!"

"There aren't," she cried, "there's nobody worse off than I am! Some people are resigned to drig on all their lives and never have enough of anything. I'm not resigned. I hate the scrimping and scraping, and the peal of the lodgers' bells, and the drabs of servants who think they can be impudent to you because you 'let.' I'm sick, sick, sick of it all. I got away from it once, and now I'm in a back parlour again, with never a soul to speak to. How would *you* like it? But you don't know what loneliness means. How can you understand what I feel – you?"

"Why should you say I can't understand?" he answered. "Because my name is printed in large letters on the bills, and I've got all that you want? I haven't got all that *I* want. Doesn't it strike you that inside here I may feel all that a white man feels, though no white woman will ever feel the same for me? Ah, that's news to you, eh? But it's true. People say of fools like me, 'Oh, he keeps low company, he's happiest in the gutter.' Liars! Some of us take what we can get, that's all. The moon we cry for is over our heads, and we make shift with its reflection in the puddle. I do know what loneliness, means – when I let myself think about it. Do I think about it often? No, not me, I'm not such a blooming fool: I enjoy. But the knowledge is there, and the loneliness is worse than yours. Money? I make pots of money – I never sing under eighty pounds – money isn't everything. You see these rings? They cost – Lord knows! – three hundred. I'll give them to you. All of them: here – one, two, three, four!" He threw them into her lap. "They belong to you now. Are you quite happy? No, you're not; you still want something. Well, with me it's the same. *I* still want something – and I shall go wanting all my life."

"So shall I," she returned. She picked the rings up one by one, and held them out to him with a sigh.

"What, you won't keep them?" he inquired. Though his impulse had taken a theatrical form, it was quite sincere.

"Keep them?" She looked at him amazed. "Do you mean to say you really gave them to me to keep?"

"Why shouldn't I give them to you? I'll give you anything you like. Go on, put them on, or – they're too big for you – put them in your pocket. Yes, I mean it – they're yours."

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I can't keep things from you like – But you're joking?"

"I mean it," he repeated. "Bless me, why not? I want you to have them. They're a present."

"You must be mad," she faltered: "I can't accept presents from you. It's very kind of you – very generous – but it isn't possible."

He extended his hand an inch at the time. She laid them in the yellowish palm, and watched him slip them over the finger-nails that looked as if they were bruised. Her heart dropped heavily.

"It wasn't rude to offer them to you, was it?" he asked. "I didn't mean to offend you, you know."

"I'm not offended," she said. "But – but ladies can't take presents from men – not valuable presents, hundreds of pounds' worth of rings."

"Mustn't I give you anything?"

The rings magnetised her; she couldn't wrench her gaze from them.

"What for? Are you so sorry for me – the idiot who thought she could sing?"

"It's not that; it's nothing to do with your singing. Sweets? May I give you sweets?"

"I" – her eyelids fell – "I suppose so."

"What else?"

"Why should you give me anything at all?"

"Because I want to; because I – like you, Ownie... Tell me what I can get for you."

He leant nearer to her. She quivered in realising what he meant. Her physical impulse was to repel him, and the cravings of her mind tempted her to let him hope. She hesitated a moment. "Get me some sweets, then," she said unsteadily. "I must go, or I shall be late."

CHAPTER IV

When the time came for him to return to town, Mrs. Tremlett's first-floor lodgers left her, and Lee took the vacant rooms. Though his headquarters were in London, it was understood that he meant to run down to Brighton very often during the winter, and he explained that he would find private apartments more to his taste than an hotel.

Telegrams from different places were received from him every few days, and in Sunnyview House the theatrical element in his nature, found its supreme expression. Profuse at all times, he surpassed himself here. He was infatuated – blind to everything but the passion that had sprung up in him – and he meant to show the woman whom he burned to marry the sort of thing he could bestow on his wife. The housemaid, accustomed to speculating whether the parting tip would be a half-crown or five shillings, was dumfounded by a sovereign almost as often as he rang the bell; the supply of roses in his room made it look like a flower-show; prize peaches were ordered, only that they might be left to rot on the sideboard, and he had two bottles of champagne opened daily for the effect of banishing them to the kitchen three-parts full.

He had not failed, either, to place a liberal interpretation upon "sweets." The rain of bonbons and bouquets that descended on the discontented blonde in rusty crape could hardly have been more persistent if she had been a prima donna, and his prodigality made the desired sensation in a household where the "drawing-rooms" usually took mental photographs of the joints before they were removed. Mrs. Tremlett it horrified, but to her daughter there was a strong fascination in it, a fascination even more potent than it exerted over the servants – a class who rejoice at extravagance, whether it be their own or other people's. She was not backward in deriving the moral; she, too, might enjoy this lavish life if she allowed him to ask her! The chance had befallen her so suddenly that it dizzied her. She felt strange to herself; she could not realise her point of view. His admiration for her had improved his appearance very much, but it could not quell the race prejudice entirely. She knew that if he had been a nonentity she would have found his homage preposterous; and ardently as she longed to embrace the life that he could open to her, she shrank from the thought of embracing the man.

She was aware, nevertheless, that she was precipitating a moment when it would be necessary for her to take a definite course, and she was not surprised to hear Mrs. Tremlett broach the subject to her one afternoon. The landlady was making out the dining-room bill, and Ownie had been sitting upstairs, in the twilight, while Lee sang to her at the grand piano that he had hired as soon as he was installed. In the morning he practised his cadenzas and phrases alone, but in the afternoon he sang, and had begged her to go up, assuring her that a vocalist needed someone present at such times; he had omitted to add that he needed a true musician. To sing to her intoxicated him. To listen to him stimulated her. When his fancy ran riot and he thought of falling at her feet (to fall at her feet was his mental picture), he always saw himself doing it in an hour like this – while the dusk befriended him, and his voice was pleading in her senses.

"Have you been in there again, Ownie?"

"Yes," she said, pulling the rocking-chair to the fire; "it wasn't very long, was it? He wants us to go to his concert next week at the Albert Hall; he'd like us to stay the night at an hotel. Of course we should be his guests, and it would be a nice change. I told him I'd speak to you about it."

"Sleep in town at an hotel? Oh no, dear, I shouldn't think of such a thing! Whatever for?"

"Because he has invited us, because he's going to sing. I said I didn't think you'd go for the night, but we might run away in time to catch the last train. I don't much care about going alone – though he wants me to do that, if you won't come."

"Wants you to go alone?" She made a blot, and put down the pen. "Wants you to go alone, as his guest?" she repeated.

"Yes; why shouldn't I? Still, if you'll come too – "

"How can I go and leave everything to look after itself? Besides, it wouldn't be right. As to your going alone, that would be worse still. I'm sure I don't see – "

"Don't see what?"

Mrs. Tremlett hesitated. "Don't you think the servants will begin to talk?" she murmured. "You know what I mean, dear; you're up there so much – and he's always sending you things. Of course I shouldn't like him to leave, but it's a pity he doesn't see that he oughtn't to – Well, I'm sure the servants are talking! When I wanted you just now about the deposit on the bottles, Ada said, 'Oh, she's with Mr. Lee, ma'am – I'd better not call her out.' I could see what she thought, though I pretended not to notice anything."

"What did she think?"

"Well, dear, she thought that – that he was paying you attentions. And so he is! The poor fellow... It's quite natural, I daresay, that he should take to you, but I should make him understand that he mustn't be foolish, before it goes any further, if I were you. Of course, with a man like that, it mayn't be serious, but you can't *tell* what ideas he may have in his head, can you?"

"You mean he might ask me to marry him?" said Ownie slowly; "is that it?"

"Well, my dear, I suppose that – ridiculous as it sounds, I suppose that is what it might come to; and of course it would make unpleasantness, and we should have the drawing-rooms empty at the worst time of the year. Much better to keep him in his place and to show him that it would be no good."

Ownie's abrupt little laugh sounded. She swung herself to and fro in the rocking-chair rather violently.

"If I did that, I think you'd have the drawing-rooms empty at once. His 'place'? 'His place' is funny! Why, sometimes he's paid as much as a thousand pounds for four nights, and I'm a pauper... You take it for granted, then, that if he asked me I should say 'No'?"

Mrs. Tremlett looked bewildered. Her gaze fell, and wandered helplessly. Her brow was puckered when she spoke.

"Wouldn't you say 'No'?" she faltered.

"Why should I?"

"Oh, of course if you could care for him – Of course in the sight of Heaven we're all equal; but it isn't as if he were a white man, is it? And you scarcely know him."

"I know who he is – I might do a good deal worse for myself than marry Elisha Lee. I should be a rich woman."

"I don't think you'd be very rich, dear; it seems to me he must spend every penny he makes, even if he does get a thousand pounds for four nights sometimes. Besides, if you mean to marry him just for what he can give you, I'm afraid you'd be very miserable. You're not a girl, I know, and you must judge for yourself in these things, but I don't think any amount of money would make you satisfied with what you'd done if you don't care for him – and I'm sure I don't see how you can! When I married your poor father – "

"When you married father he had nothing, I know. And you've had nothing ever since. The children of people who marry on nothing are seldom as sentimental as their parents were. You were brought up in a comfortable home, and so you were romantic, and said, 'Money's the least thing;' I was brought up in a lodging-house, and so I'm practical, and put money before everything else. I think," she exclaimed, "I think it's wicked that people who make improvident marriages should brag of the folly to their poor children afterwards!"

"I am not bragging, dear. But when a woman has loved her husband, she never admits that their marriage was a folly, even in her own thoughts. A man – " She sighed. "A man, I am afraid, sometimes does. As I say, you're not a girl, and you must know your own mind, but the idea seems awful to me; I would never have believed you could think of doing such a thing."

Owgie flushed, and her shoe tapped the floor irritably. "Just because he is black," she muttered. "Where is your religion? I thought you said just now that in the sight of Heaven all men were equal?"

"In Heaven, no doubt, he will be as white as the rest of us," returned Mrs. Tremlett, after a slight pause. "But in the meantime he's a nigger, and I can't think it would be right."

Her daughter did not reply; nor did the elder woman summon courage to recur to the matter. She was, however, relieved on the morrow and the next day to notice that her remonstrance had borne fruit and that Owgie's visits to the drawing-room were discontinued. Lee, who passed the two days in hourly expectation of them, was first restless, and then enraged. The besetting tendency of the negro in his intercourse with Europeans is to take affront, and he told himself that her neglect was an insult which she would never have dared to put upon an Englishman. He left Brighton this time without any adieu, and he was absent for longer than usual.

There were two reasons for his going back when he did. When women say of another woman – as they are often heard to say – that there is nothing in her to explain infatuation, they babble, for there is no young woman, however commonplace, who may not appear unique to some man. One of Lee's reasons was, that his desire to see Owgie again was fevering him; the other was, that he wanted to know if she meant to occupy the box that he had kept for her.

He returned late, and he had no hope of seeing her that night, but he spent the following morning between the windows – his hat and fur coat on the table – waiting for her to leave the house. She had no sooner done so than he descended the stairs with elaborate carelessness, and manoeuvred until they came face to face.

"Oh, Mr. Lee," she said. "So you are back again!"

His resolve to ignore his grievance succumbed to the temptation to reproach her for it.

"I didn't think you knew I'd been away," he said sulkily.

"Not know you had been away?" The innocent wonder of her tone was unsurpassable.

"I hadn't seen you for a long time when I went. Have you forgotten that?"

"A long time?" she smiled. "Two days, wasn't it?"

"It seemed a week to me."

Now she had trembled during his absence, and though she was as far as ever from knowing whether she wished to marry him, she knew at least that she did not wish to avert his asking her. So she shot a glance at him before her eyes were lowered, and said:

"One can't always do as one likes, you know."

A platitude and a pair of eyes are sometimes potent. He walked on beside her mollified.

"What about the concert?" he inquired. "I've saved the box for you."

"Oh, have you?" she stammered. "I don't quite know. I'm afraid – Have you really saved it?"

"Rather! Don't say you aren't coming – you as good as promised. Have you spoken to your mother?"

"Yes, she can't go – that's to say, she says she can't. There's nothing to prevent her, but she's so funny, you know. I don't see how I can go alone."

"Why not? That would be jollier still. Don't be unkind. I should sing so much better if you were there."

"Such nonsense!" she said. "I – I'll see. Of course I should like it awfully. I'll think about it, and tell you to-morrow."

And on the morrow she told him that she was going. She was dogged, though Mrs. Tremlett sighed protests. Her life was dull enough, she insisted; she meant to extract the little amusement that was to be had! Lee went to town again jubilantly. He had arranged to meet her at the station when she arrived, and to travel back with her at night. She was to go up in the afternoon and to take her evening frock in a trunk.

On the day of the concert she found him at Victoria, attended by a gentlemanly person who he explained was his valet. As he greeted her, he tossed away a cigar which he had just lighted for that

purpose; he felt it must impress her with his breeding to see him throw away a long cigar. The valet seemed to have little to do but to show that he existed. Lee led her to a brougham, and they were driven to the hotel that was then the most fashionable, and ushered into a sitting-room glorified with roses. A chambermaid conducted her to a bedroom.

Here more flowers did her honour, and on the dressing-table were bottles of scent, the largest that could be bought, and all of different colours. In front of the armchair that had been rolled to the fire was a pair of velvet slippers, with the sort of buckles she had coveted in the East Street windows.

She thrilled with a sense of her importance. The buckles fascinated her so much that she put the slippers on at once, and went back to the sitting-room in them, though in his excessive admiration he had chosen a size that cramped her toes.

She had scarcely rejoined him when a waiter appeared with tea and petits fours. She observed that Lee was addressed as if he had been a prince.

"Aren't you going to have any?" she asked.

"I mustn't," he said. "I must run away in a minute. But they'll look after you all right here, don't be afraid."

"I'm not," she said, laughing. "Did the manager provide the slippers?" She raised her foot coquettishly, and resented her stockings. "I'm sure you might have a cup of tea and a biscuit if you may smoke – I saw you throw away a cigar as you met me."

He was gratified that this effect had been remarked.

"Oh, that's nothing," he said; "smoking doesn't hurt."

"You say so because you like it. Well, smoke now, then."

"May I?"

"Why, of course you may, if it really isn't bad; but I always thought it was awful for singers."

"Some fools say so. Mario always smoked just before he sang – he was the only man ever allowed to smoke behind at Covent Garden. I do wish I could stop! If you knew how glad I am you've come!"

"I'm glad too," she said. "But I won't encourage you to do anything wrong. Go home, and – " She was going to say, "Think of me," but she felt that her elation was carrying her too far. "And do your best," she added. "Remember I am coming to applaud you."

He remained for about a quarter of an hour, and as soon as he had gone she took the slippers off, and spread her feet on the hearth in comfort.

At half-past six the deferential waiter appeared again, accompanied by another – mute, but seeming to deprecate by his shoulders the liberty of moving on the same planet with her. For the first time in her experience she dined. Perhaps, because she was a woman, the appointments impressed her more than the cuisine, but she appreciated the menu too. She enjoyed the oysters, the strange dark red soup, the sole with prawns and little mushrooms and things on the top; she liked the bird, and the pink frilled cutlets with a wonderful sauce, the omelette in blue flames, the silver bowl of strawberries and cream inserted in a block of ice. The resplendent sweet, representing a castle, and glowing with multi-coloured lights, astonished her, and the wines that flowed into the glasses stole through her veins deliciously.

She had not long set down her coffee-cup when she was informed that the brougham was at the door. She left the tiny flacons of liqueurs untouched, and ran back to the bedroom, to grimace at her toilette, and dip her puff in the powder again. In the brougham she felt even more opulent than she had done when Lee was beside her in it; she felt almost as if it were her own. She wrapped the rug about her knees, and looked out luxuriously at the gaslit streets. Soon all the traffic of London seemed to converge; the flash of carriage-lamps and the clatter of hoofs surrounded her. Into the cheaper parts of the Hall, the long black files of patient music-lovers still pressed forward. Her demeanour was haughty as she was shown to her box. To her first glance the great building seemed already full, but a thin stream of white-breasted women and shirt-fronts trickled continuously down the red stairway

to the stalls. A certain exultation possessed her; they were all here to hear him – the man who was in love with her.

Somebody climbed to the great organ. His name was unfamiliar to her, and she did not know what the title of the piece meant. He juggled with the stops, and flooded the house with a composition in E flat. She cared little for the organ; it reminded her too strongly of church. She was relieved when he finished. A lady sailed on to the platform and warbled something of Schumann's. Was it a fact that she could not afford her dress? How beautifully it was made! She retired amid loud applause, her finger-tips supported by a gentleman whose functions suggested the ring-master at a circus. She was recalled, and bowed deeply three times, and tripped off with the ring-master once more. A popular baritone received an "encore." A lady violinist had painfully thin arms. Ownie glanced at the programme again – yes, the next name was "Mr. Elisha Lee." The faces in the serried tiers of the vast dome seemed to crane a little; a wave of expectation stirred the throng. There was a long pause before he came.

He bore himself loftily – that was her first thought. The slow, measured steps that he had been taught to make added to his height; the conventional costume, in which his native predilections found no scope, became him well. The unsightly hands were gloved; only his black features and frizzy hair marred the dignity of the man as he stood before the hushed audience, during the opening bars on the piano. He raised his head – the music that he held vibrated for an instant; and then from the nigger's mouth – out over the breathless stalls, mounting high and mounting higher to the back of the far massed gallery – there seemed to float God's Voice. And now nobody remembered that the features were black; and no man among the thousands knew what message the voice was bringing to the heart beside him, for to all there was a different message that the poet had never told. Men tightened their lips to hide their tremors; the jewels on the women's breasts rose faster. Among the hot, tense crowd that strained over the topmost railings, was heard the sobbing of a little child – but only one soul heard it, and the child would have been a woman then if she had lived.

The music was lowered – his arms falling in studied curves to his sides, gave the signal for applause; there was the moment's silence that was so sweet to him. He bowed, and drew a step back. The audience recovered itself; the thunders broke. She saw fashionable women beating their hands together frantically; the roar recalled him again and again. He responded, and retired with a glance at Ownie. Her eyes were moist, and she shivered a little. She was not an emotional woman, but she was a vain one.

In Part II. he sang early, to conform with her arrangements, and they drove to Victoria, where the valet was waiting with her trunk. Lee guided her to a first-class compartment, and she congratulated herself on her forethought in having taken only a "third single" at Brighton. She observed, though she betrayed no consciousness of the fact, that the guard turned his key in the door after the foot-warmers were put in.

"And so," asked Lee for the second time, "you were satisfied with me?" His desire to flatter her was inordinate, but it wasn't responsible for the question: he was only thirsting to be praised.

"I felt as if I had never heard you sing before," she said; "I felt as if I had never heard *anybody* sing. You thrilled me. You have given me a day I shall remember all my life; it was perfect from beginning to end."

"I should like to give you many such days," he blurted.

"Ah!" She smiled – the faint, appealing smile that had always been so effective with Harris before he married her. "I'm afraid that isn't possible; I must think of this one instead."

Her heart throbbed heavily at her boldness. Even now she was not sure what answer she meant to make; why was she encouraging him to ask the question?

But though he had promised himself to ask it on the journey, Lee hesitated. The question surged to his throat, and swelled immensely and stuck there. A great timidity was on the nigger who had just swaggered before a multitude. The man's heart throbbed heavily at his cowardice.

He leant forward, and tucked the rug round her. He was rather a long time tucking the rug round her. "Is that better?" he muttered. "You're not cold?"

"Thank you. No, I'm as warm as can be. Oughtn't you to keep your wrap round your neck?"

"Not in here," he said; "I'll put it on again at the other end. Sunset is the worst time for me, too – not night."

"That's funny."

"I believe it's the worst time for all singers."

The velocity of the train seemed to him phenomenal, and a sudden misgiving seized him about the second door: somebody might intrude on them at the first stoppage, in spite of the tip. The minutes flew, and in every flashing bank and tree he saw a danger-signal.

"Why?" he said at last.

"Why'?" She was at a loss.

"Why isn't it possible for you to have other days just as good?"

He was terribly black – she averted her face before she spoke:

"How can I?" she murmured.

"I love you," he said huskily.

She had no words. He got up, and sat beside her. She felt his hand groping for hers under the rug, and trembled. Should she let him take it?.. He was holding it. "Do I frighten you?" She shook her head. "I'd give my life for you!" he cried. "Oh, if you can like me a little, only a little, I'll be so good to you! You shall never be sorry – I'll give you everything you want. I love you; I sang to *you* to-night. No white man could adore you as I do. Can't you – can't you forget the difference? It's cruel to me. No, no, not cruel; you could never be cruel; I know, I know, it's natural you can't understand – you fill my soul, but you can see no deeper than my skin."

"I do like you," her voice made answer.

"Will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she said. She shut her eyes and let him kiss her.

CHAPTER V

And she did not repent the promise, nor did her mother's consternation have any effect upon her, other than making her lend a willing ear to Lee's entreaties for a speedy marriage. She agreed to marry him at the end of the following month. She even came to accept his kisses without shrinking much, and to offer her own in return for the jewellery that he brought her. Only once during the engagement her reflections terrified her. The thought crossed her mind that he might lose his voice. He might lose his voice and she would have done it all for nothing! He would be helpless; she would have yoked herself for life to a negro dependent on her exertions. What a future! What a hell! In the moment of alarm it even occurred to her – because she attended church punctiliously every Sunday – that the disaster would be a fitting punishment for the sin she was committing in stifling her better instincts. She was abasing herself under a temptation – she might be bowed under a burden as the result. Characteristically she ignored the fact that to afflict her husband in order to point the moral would be a shade unjust; there are many Christians who would figuratively fire the house to roast the pig, like Ho-ti in the Dissertation. And quite as many who can reconcile their interests and their conscience by judicious prayer. The name of "Vivian" figured in Ownie's prayer. She prayed for strength to act a mother's part to Vivian.

Also she determined that before she had been Lee's wife long she would persuade him to assure his life. Experience teaches; and this precautionary measure had been neglected during her first marriage. She was naturally ignorant of the negro temperament, or she would have known that there is nothing from which it is quite so averse as providing for emergencies, and that she might almost as hopefully have begged him to acquire a cream-and-roses complexion.

Meanwhile there were paragraphs in the papers; and presents were delivered from his fellow-artists, and from some of the Musical Societies; and there were presents from the Public. Even Mrs. Tremlett began to say, "It might be all for the best," now. A man who received big silver teapots from total strangers, she felt, was entitled to more respect than she had shown to him. Her grandchild and the adolescent nurse were to remain with her until the honeymoon was over. The wedding took place in London, and Ownie and Lee departed for Paris, where he was to sing.

If Mrs. Lee had kept a journal at this period, it would have been one of the most fascinating of human documents, though much of its fascination would have lain between the lines, since she inherited nothing of her father's gift for expression. It would have been the gradual diminuendo, that told the tale, the change of key. They stayed in Paris nearly five weeks, and before a fortnight had passed, the outcry in her heart was still. She was resigned. She did not acknowledge it to herself yet; that would not have been written in the diary; she did not look it; but her avaricious little soul was gratified, although her eyes claimed sympathy.

Strangers gave it to her. She was prettier still in the extravagant gowns that Lee paid for – that true loveliness unadorned is adorned the most is as silly a thing as the poet of "The Seasons" could have said – and the Englishmen and Americans in Paris spoke feelingly of "that pretty woman married to a nigger." There are women to whom pity is as sweet as noise to the masses, and Ownie Lee's abortive conscience found all the anodyne it needed in the perception that she was held a pathetic figure. The appealing smile which had always become her so well, gained in intensity. Lucretia might have worn that expression in time, if she had taken drives in the Bois instead of stabbing herself.

And Lee? Lee was intoxicated. If he had wooed her in a fool's paradise, at least the shadow of the tree of knowledge had been in it; he had had no illusions. He had not looked for passion, or for tenderness, or for understanding. It was enough for him as yet to squander devotion on indifference. He shook at the touch of the languid woman who accepted his transports with such sovereign calm. To pour out money for her adornment, to buy diamonds to flash on her fingers and her breast, was his delight. He had a contract for a six weeks' tour in England at six hundred a week, and he

spent a fortnight's fees on jewels for her one morning. In the foyers and the streets, when he read the men's eyes, exultance swelled him; they envied his possession of her, these blatant fools who were consequential because they had been born with a white skin. He cursed them cheerfully in his thoughts, arrogant with power – the woman who attracted them was his wife!

Yet there was one occasion before the honeymoon ended when he seemed almost to stultify himself, when the admiration that she roused enraged him instead, and was responsible for a burst of resentment. They had met a Londoner of his acquaintance, a singer; and Lee the elated had presented him to her gaily. The singer, who was a handsome man, and not a gentleman, was too bent on being gallant to remember to be polite as he ogled her, and curled his moustache, and propped his elbows on the café table. His shoulder excluded Lee more and more; the conversation became frankly a duologue. The art of rebuffing a man without *gaucherie* is not known to every woman; it is, in fact, the peculiar attribute of the well-bred. Still Ownie was to blame; she regarded such impertinence as a compliment, and she made no attempt to check it with dignity or otherwise. Lee's scowl grew fiercer and fiercer, his lips bulged appallingly; and the Englishman had no sooner bowed himself away than she beheld her husband in a new light.

He rose from his chair, and put his hand on her arm. She could feel that he was trembling, but he said nothing until they had walked some steps. She turned to him, half frightened and half defiant.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's the matter with you?"

"Don't you ever speak to that fellow again," he exclaimed hoarsely. "Do you hear? I won't have it. Don't you ever dare to speak to him again. If you meet him, you're to pass him by. Is that the way you think a respectable woman ought to behave? Sitting there and – Blast him, I wish I'd thrown the glasses in his face!"

She was alarmed and angry too now. She tried to subdue him by her tone.

"Have you gone out of your mind?" she said, as steadily as she could speak. "I think you forget who it is you're talking to."

"I'm talking to you," he gasped; "I'm talking to my wife; don't you forget it either! You flirted with him, you know you did. You sat there flirting with him – and in front of your husband; you sat flirting with a skunk you'd never seen before, in front of your husband." He came to a standstill, gesticulating excitedly. "You weren't so ready with *me*, were you? I suppose any man may make love to you if he's white, eh? But take care – you don't know me yet. By God –"

"Hush," she said, "for Heaven's sake; the people are staring at you."

She signalled nervously to a cabman, and gave him the name of the hotel. In the cab Lee's reproaches were so furious that she drew up the windows to muffle his voice from the passers-by. The distance between the café and the hotel was short, and in less than five minutes the courtyard was reached. She sprang out, and hurried to the bedroom while he paid the fare. When he tried the door he found that she had locked it. He called to her, but she made no answer. Then he beat at the panels, and to avoid a scandal she turned the key.

"Is this going on all night?" she demanded, running to the bell-pull. "If you try to hit me, I'll ring for the manager." Her dread of receiving a blow was of the slightest – such fear of personal violence as she had known had faded during the drive – but it was the cruellest thing that she could invent to say on the spur of the moment. She clung to the bell-pull, a picture of agitation.

The threat, the idea that she thought him capable of striking her, sobered him. He entered shamefacedly.

"You needn't be afraid that I shall hurt you," he muttered.

"Needn't I?" she said. "How do I know that? I don't know what you might do, you bully, you – you coward!"

He winced, and stood looking at the ground in silence. Then:

"I didn't mean to bully you," he said huskily. "I – I'm sorry, Ownie, I'll never do it again."

She saw that she was mistress of the situation. Her hold on the bell-pull relaxed; her tone acquired a tinge of shrewishness.

"You won't ever have the chance again," she retorted, "don't flatter yourself! You've shown me what I might expect – I won't live with you."

Though the words were empty enough, they frightened him. He took a step towards her in a panic.

"Ownie!" he cried. And again: "Ownie, I'm sorry!"

"It's not the least consequence whether you're sorry or not," she sneered; she was quite composed now. "I'm sure *I* don't care. It's very easy to say you're sorry after you've shouted at me, and insulted me as much as you want to. Yes, insulted me, you – Ah, it's what I might have expected! I'm ashamed of having married you. Only a man – a man *like you* would talk so to a woman."

She saw him shiver. She was reminded suddenly of a dog that Harris used to beat. There was a pause, in which she observed the effect of her taunt with satisfaction. After a few seconds she turned away, and began to unpin her hat at the toilet-table.

"It was because I was jealous," he stammered; "I couldn't help it – I didn't mean to insult you. Ah, take that back – don't say you're ashamed of me! Trust me, and you shall see how good I'll be to you in future. I love you, I love you, you don't know how I love you. Look at yourself in the glass. See how beautiful you are. How can you wonder that I'm jealous? Look at your hair – how soft it is! And your skin – it feels like a flower. I'd die for you. It drove me mad to see you look at another man like that. I know, I know you didn't mean anything by it, but I couldn't bear it. Ownie, forgive me!"

She made no answer. She moved carelessly across the room, tossing her cloak on to the bed. Her slippers lay by an armchair, and she sat down in it, bending over her boots. He was on his knees before her in an instant, trying to seize her hands. She snatched them away with a gesture of aversion, and clasped them behind her head.

"I *am* ashamed," she repeated. "You've disgusted me. I'd let any white man make love to me, would I? Anyhow no white, man would be beast enough to say such a thing."

He put out his hands again – not to caress her this time, but as if to ward off the daggers she was planting in him. The tears welled into his eyes, and, with a thrill of power, she watched one trickle down the black face.

"Forgive me," he implored.

"It serves me right for not listening to advice," she went on. "I ought to have known what you would be. You can't help being jealous? What right have you got to be jealous – how dare you use such a word to me? Do you suppose that I'm never going to speak to any other man again because I married you?"

"I was wrong," he cried, "I know I was wrong – don't say you're 'ashamed'! It's just because I'm a coloured man that the jealousy comes. Oh, can't you understand? Try to make allowances for me. Don't you see, don't you see? – I remember my colour all the time, I never forget it; and when you sat there talking so – talking like that to him, I hated him because he was white. But I'll never complain any more, I swear I won't! You shall do as you like – I know how good you are."

"There aren't many women who would forgive such behaviour, I can tell you," she said sulkily. She thrust out her foot, and he began to unbutton her boot. "How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"Trust me," he begged. "Be kind to me – only trust me."

She lay back in the chair without replying; her pretty face was stubborn still. He drew off her boots. "Be kind to me," he entreated, "be kind to me." He covered her feet with kisses. He knelt there, suing to her, until she said at last that she forgave.

CHAPTER VI

But it was not in the woman's nature to refrain from accepting attentions and showing that they pleased her; and it was not in human nature for a husband who loved her to keep his oath and be tolerant. Before six months had passed there had been half-a-dozen such scenes. Lee upbraided more violently – the reconciliations did not always follow so soon, but the order of things was always the same; she flirted, and he abused her, and then grovelled for pardon till her resentment was assuaged. Her perception of the extent to which she could make him grovel awoke a savage instinct in the woman. Though her faults were the outcome of weakness, not of strength, the taste of power excited her, and she often remained obdurate merely to prolong the enjoyment of it. Once she even wounded him for no other reason than to gratify the taste. They had returned from a concert, and to see the man, fresh from his triumph, abasing himself before her so shamelessly, gave her a vicious pleasure.

They had taken a house at Hampstead, a house with an ample garden, and the necessary stabling. Except the practice-room, with its bare, polished floor, its windows curtainless – containing nothing but the piano and two chairs – she had revelled in the furnishing of every corner. She wrote to her mother with pride that "there wasn't a cheap thing in the place." With almost equal truth she might have added that there wasn't a thing beautiful. She and Lee had one point in common: both admired the ostentatious, and he found his surroundings nearly ornate enough to justify the amount that had been wasted on them.

And she had half-a-dozen servants; the tenor's stepchild was wheeled to the Heath now in fine apparel by a competent nurse. In her servants Mrs. Lee aroused less sympathy than in the men whom her husband called his "friends"; they looked down upon her for having married "that blacky," who was so much more considerate to them as a master than was she as a mistress. Instinctively she knew it, and it was a frequent thing for a maid at The Woodlands to be discharged on the grounds of being "disrespectful in her manner." A landlady's daughter and negro's wife was the last person likely to submit to disrespect.

One or two women whom she met had also appeared to take a different view of her position from that taken by the men; she found feminine society a shade irksome after her marriage. There were a few mortifying incidents from the first; still she knew that people who were envious always pretended to be disdainful; and the benefits were countless, she reminded herself as time went by. But for the knowledge of what was in store, it would have sufficed for composure to reflect that the other women would act just the same, assuming they had the chance. Her real humiliation came in the form of a baby.

It was a little yellow baby who in the hour of its birth was not expected to live. She did not hear that until some days later – and when she was told, she closed her eyes, for fear they should betray her thought. It was a little yellow baby that she sickened to know her own, and when they put it in her arms, her flesh shrank from it. Lee's joy enraged her. She hated him as he hung smiling over the pillow, was angered by what she felt to be his callousness in supposing she could be glad.

He was enraptured: the child was hers and his. With the passing of the months, he had come to seek more of her than acceptance, and it seemed to him that henceforth they must be one. She was no longer merely the sovereign who permitted – she was the mother of his boy.

But his mistake was very brief, and it was his child who proclaimed to the man that his marriage had been a madness. It was when he saw that she was ashamed of her motherhood that he was ashamed of his passion; it was her contempt for their baby that showed him how he himself was despised.

For her humiliation did not fade, and though she tried to hide the feeling, all the household knew that she never touched the child without an effort. She was humiliated as often as she saw him. The pomp of robes and ribbons, the lace, the paraphernalia of infancy, was painful to her. When he

was carried into the air, she winced in imagining the neighbours' comments at their windows. Each time she bent over the bassinet the little face inside looked to her swarthier and more grotesque.

He was christened "David." It was Lee's wish, and the matter had no interest for her. It was Lee who brought him his first toy, and who haunted the nurseries in dread of draughts; it was Lee to whom the nurse soon learnt to turn when she had expensive suggestions to make. Ownie's affection for the other boy had hitherto been somewhat careless, but now she was stung to jealousy, and knew spasms of devotion which were the outcome of resentment. Though the man remained as gentle and generous as ever to him, she called him, "poor little Vivie" in her oughts, and a giggling servant, who was overheard to remark that "his nose was out of joint with somebody," was dismissed tempestuously at an hour's notice.

The baby's unsightliness increased with its length. The stain of the skin deepened; only the tiny palms and the soles of the flat little feet retained the yellowish tint. The spread nostrils gradually widened; the bunch of lip and the high cheek-bones took more and more distressfully the negro type. Vivian had a complexion like a peach, and his head was crowned with damp little flaxen curls that had been coaxed round a comb; David's face became the colour of a medlar, and his hair threatened to be as kinky as his father's. Even for a mulatto he was ill-favoured, and the mulatto and his half-brother were a queer contrast opposite each other in the perambulator. Strangers used to stop the nurse in the street and ask questions – which she seldom failed to repeat to her mistress. Vivian was robust, and had "taking ways"; David was delicate, and the most that the maids found to say for him was that he was "a very patient baby." He made known his desire for food by the whimper which served him for speech, but if the bottle didn't come, the whimper ceased. A faint bleat, and he gazed at the undesired world with resignation.

There was no resignation in Lee. He rebelled furiously – rebelled against his wife's disdain and his own weakness, for he remained the slave to a passion which he knew degraded him. This commonplace woman without intellect, without gratitude, without pretences, held him captive by a purely physical attraction against his will. There were hours when he hated her, yet she retained the power to fire him with a look, and torture him with a glance at another man.

She was not the woman to be unfaithful – for one thing, she appreciated the advantages of virtue too deeply to jeopardise them – but recriminations lost their terror for her soon, and she humoured her vanity without pity or fear. And Lee was no judge of character: in his hell, suspicion smouldered too. The recriminations were so frantic sometimes that the servants, startled from their sleep, hung trembling over the banisters; and there were crashes heard, and broken ornaments were swept up in the morning. "The nigger" was supposed to have thrown them in "the missis's face." In truth the madman shattered them to keep his hands off her.

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