

MacGrath Harold

The Place of Honeymoons



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MacGrath H.

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	19
CHAPTER V	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

Harold MacGrath

The Place of Honeymoons

To B. O'G

Horace calls no more to me,
Homer in the dust-heap lies:
I have found my Odyssey
In the lightness of her glee,
In the laughter of her eyes.

Ovid's page is thumbed no more,
E'en Catullus has no choice!
There is endless, precious lore,
Such as I ne'er knew before,
In the music of her voice.

Breath of hyssop steeped in wine,
Breath of violets and furze,
Wild-wood roses, Grecian myrrhs,
All these perfumes do combine
In that maiden breath of hers.

Nay, I look not at the skies,
Nor the sun that hillward slips,
For the day lives or it dies
In the laughter of her eyes,
In the music of her lips!

CHAPTER I AT THE STAGE DOOR

Courtlandt sat perfectly straight; his ample shoulders did not touch the back of his chair; and his arms were folded tightly across his chest. The characteristic of his attitude was tenseness. The nostrils were well defined, as in one who sets the upper jaw hard upon the nether. His brown eyes – their gaze directed toward the stage whence came the voice of the prima donna – epitomized the tension, expressed the whole as in a word.

Just now the voice was pathetically subdued, yet reached every part of the auditorium, kindling the ear with its singularly mellowing sweetness. To Courtlandt it resembled, as no other sound, the note of a muffled Burmese gong, struck in the dim incensed cavern of a temple. A Burmese gong: briefly and magically the stage, the audience, the amazing gleam and scintillation of the Opera, faded. He heard only the voice and saw only the purple shadows in the temple at Rangoon, the oriental sunset splashing the golden dome, the wavering lights of the dripping candles, the dead flowers, the kneeling devoteés, the yellow-robed priests, the tatters of gold-leaf, fresh and old, upon the rows of placid grinning Buddhas. The vision was of short duration. The sigh, which had been so long repressed, escaped; his shoulders sank a little, and the angle of his chin became less resolute; but only for a moment. Tension gave place to an ironical grimness. The brows relaxed, but the lips became firmer. He listened, with this new expression unchanging, to the high note that soared above all others. The French horns blared and the timpani crashed. The curtain sank slowly. The audience rustled, stood up, sought its wraps, and pressed toward the exits and the grand staircase. It was all over.

Courtlandt took his leave in leisure. Here and there he saw familiar faces, but these, after the finding glance, he studiously avoided. He wanted to be alone. For while the music was still echoing in his ears, in a subtone, his brain was afire with keen activity; but unfortunately for the going forward of things, this mental state was divided into so many battalions, led by so many generals, indirectly and indecisively, nowhere. This plan had no beginning, that one had no ending, and the other neither beginning nor ending. Outside he lighted a cigar, not because at that moment he possessed a craving for nicotine, but because like all inveterate smokers he believed that tobacco conducted to clarity of thought. And mayhap it did. At least, there presently followed a mental calm that expelled all this confusion. The goal waxed and waned as he gazed down the great avenue with its precise rows of lamps. Far away he could discern the outline of the brooding Louvre.

There was not the least hope in the world for him to proceed toward his goal this night. He realized this clearly, now that he was face to face with actualities. It required more than the chaotic impulses that had brought him back from the jungles of the Orient. He must reason out a plan that should be like a straight line, the shortest distance between two given points. How then should he pass the night, since none of his schemes could possibly be put into operation? Return to his hotel and smoke himself headachy? Try to become interested in a novel? Go to bed, to turn and roll till dawn? A wild desire seized him to make a night of it, – Maxim's, the cabarets; riot and wine. Who cared? But the desire burnt itself out between two puffs of his cigar. Ten years ago, perhaps, this particular brand of amusement might have urged him successfully. But not now; he was done with tomfool nights. Indeed, his dissipations had been whimsical rather than banal; and retrospection never aroused a furtive sense of shame.

He was young, but not so young as an idle glance might conjecture in passing. To such casual reckoning he appeared to be in the early twenties; but scrutiny, more or less infallible, noting a line here or an angle there, was disposed to add ten years to the score. There was in the nose and chin a certain decisiveness which in true youth is rarely developed. This characteristic arrives only with manhood, manhood that has been tried and perhaps buffeted and perchance a little disillusioned. To

state that one is young does not necessarily imply youth; for youth is something that is truly green and tender, not rounded out, aimless, light-hearted and desultory, charming and inconsequent. If man regrets his youth it is not for the passing of these pleasing, though tangled attributes, but rather because there exists between the two periods of progression a series of irremediable mistakes. And the subject of this brief commentary could look back on many a grievous one brought about by pride or carelessness rather than by intent.

But what was one to do who had both money and leisure linked to an irresistible desire to leave behind one place or thing in pursuit of another, indeterminately? At one time he wanted to be an artist, but his evenly balanced self-criticism had forced him to fling his daubs into the ash-heap. They were good daubs in a way, but were laid on without fire; such work as any respectable schoolmarm might have equaled if not surpassed. Then he had gone in for engineering; but precise and intricate mathematics required patience of a quality not at his command.

The inherent ambition was to make money; but recognizing the absurdity of adding to his income, which even in his extravagance he could not spend, he gave himself over into the hands of grasping railroad and steamship companies, or their agencies, and became for a time the slave of guide and dragoman and carrier. And then the wanderlust, descended to him from the blood of his roving Dutch ancestors, which had lain dormant in the several generations following, sprang into active life again. He became known in every port of call. He became known also in the wildernesses. He had climbed almost inaccessible mountains, in Europe, in Asia; he had fished and hunted north, east, south and west; he had fitted out polar expeditions; he had raided the pearl markets; he had made astonishing gifts to women who had pleased his fancy, but whom he did not know or seek to know; he had kept some of his intimate friends out of bankruptcy; he had given the most extravagant dinners at one season and, unknown, had supported a bread-line at another; he had even financed a musical comedy.

Whatever had for the moment appealed to his fancy, that he had done. That the world – his world – threw up its hands in wonder and despair neither disturbed him nor swerved him in the least. He was alone, absolute master of his millions. Mamas with marriageable daughters declared that he was impossible; the marriageable daughters never had a chance to decide one way or the other; and men called him a fool. He had promoted elephant fights which had stirred the Indian princes out of their melancholy indifference, and tiger hunts which had, by their duration and magnificence, threatened to disrupt the efficiency of the British military service, – whimsical excesses, not understandable by his intimate acquaintances who cynically arraigned him as the fool and his money.

But, like the villain in the play, his income still pursued him. Certain scandals inevitably followed, scandals he was the last to hear about and the last to deny when he heard them. Many persons, not being able to take into the mind and analyze a character like Courtlandt's, sought the line of least resistance for their understanding, and built some precious exploits which included dusky island-princesses, diaphanous dancers, and comic-opera stars.

Simply, he was without direction; a thousand goals surrounded him and none burned with that brightness which draws a man toward his destiny: until one day. Personally, he possessed graces of form and feature, and was keener mentally than most young men who inherit great fortunes and distinguished names.

Automobiles of all kinds panted hither and thither. An occasional smart coupé went by as if to prove that prancing horses were still necessary to the dignity of the old aristocracy. Courtlandt made up his mind suddenly. He laughed with bitterness. He knew now that to loiter near the stage entrance had been his real purpose all along, and persistent lying to himself had not prevailed. In due time he took his stand among the gilded youth who were not privileged (like their more prosperous elders) to wait outside the dressing-rooms for their particular ballerina. By and by there was a little respectful commotion. Courtlandt's hand went instinctively to his collar, not to ascertain if it were

properly adjusted, but rather to relieve the sudden pressure. He was enraged at his weakness. He wanted to turn away, but he could not.

A woman issued forth, muffled in silks and light furs. She was followed by another, quite possibly her maid. One may observe very well at times from the corner of the eye; that is, objects at which one is not looking come within the range of vision. The woman paused, her foot upon the step of the modest limousine. She whispered something hurriedly into her companion's ear, something evidently to the puzzlement of the latter, who looked around irresolutely. She obeyed, however, and retreated to the stage entrance. A man, quite as tall as Courtlandt, his face shaded carefully, intentionally perhaps, by one of those soft Bavarian hats that are worn successfully only by Germans, stepped out of the gathering to proffer his assistance. Courtlandt pushed him aside calmly, lifted his hat, and smiling ironically, closed the door behind the singer. The step which the other man made toward Courtlandt was unequivocal in its meaning. But even as Courtlandt squared himself to meet the coming outburst, the stranger paused, shrugged his shoulders, turned and made off.

The lady in the limousine – very pale could any have looked closely into her face – was whirled away into the night. Courtlandt did not stir from the curb. The limousine dwindled, once it flashed under a light, and then vanished.

“It is the American,” said one of the waiting dandies.

“The icicle!”

“The volcano, rather, which fools believe extinct.”

“Probably sent back her maid for her Bible. Ah, these Americans; they are very amusing.”

“She was in magnificent voice to-night. I wonder why she never sings *Carmen*?”

“Have I not said that she is too cold? What! would you see frost grow upon the toreador's mustache? And what a name, what a name! Eleonora da Toscana!”

Courtlandt was not in the most amiable condition of mind, and a hint of the ribald would have instantly transformed a passive anger into a blind fury. Thus, a scene hung precariously; but its potentialities became as nothing on the appearance of another woman.

This woman was richly dressed, too richly. Apparently she had trusted her modiste not wisely but too well: there was the strange and unaccountable inherent love of fine feathers and warm colors which is invariably the mute utterance of peasant blood. She was followed by a Russian, huge of body, Jovian of countenance. An expensive car rolled up to the curb. A liveried footman jumped down from beside the chauffeur and opened the door. The diva turned her head this way and that, a thin smile of satisfaction stirring her lips. For Flora Desimone loved the human eye whenever it stared admiration into her own; and she spent half her days setting traps and lures, rather successfully. She and her formidable escort got into the car which immediately went away with a soft purring sound. There was breeding in the engine, anyhow, thought Courtlandt, who longed to put his strong fingers around that luxurious throat which had, but a second gone, passed him so closely.

“We shall never have war with Russia,” said some one; “her dukes love Paris too well.”

Light careless laughter followed this cynical observation. Another time Courtlandt might have smiled. He pushed his way into the passage leading to the dressing-rooms, and followed its windings until he met a human barrier. To his inquiry the answer was abrupt and perfectly clear in its meaning: La Signorina da Toscana had given most emphatic orders not to disclose her address to any one. Monsieur might, if he pleased, make further inquiries of the directors; the answer there would be the same. Presently he found himself gazing down the avenue once more. There were a thousand places to go to, a thousand pleasant things to do; yet he doddered, full of ill-temper, dissatisfaction, and self-contempt. He was weak, damnably weak; and for years he had admired himself, detachedly, as a man of pride. He started forward, neither sensing his direction nor the perfected flavor of his Habana.

Opera singers were truly a race apart. They lived in the world but were not a part of it, and when they died, left only a memory which faded in one generation and became totally forgotten in another. What jealousies, what petty bickerings, what extravagances! With fancy and desire unchecked, what

ingenious tricks they used to keep themselves in the public mind, – tricks begot of fickleness and fickleness begetting. And yet, it was a curious phase: their influence was generally found when history untangled for posterity some Gordian knot. In old times they had sung the *Marseillaise* and danced the *carmagnole* and indirectly plied the guillotine. And to-day they smashed prime ministers, petty kings, and bankers, and created fashions for the ruin of husbands and fathers of modest means. Devil take them! And Courtlandt flung his cigar into the street.

He halted. The Madeleine was not exactly the goal for a man who had, half an hour before, contemplated a rout at Maxim's. His glance described a half-circle. There was Durand's; but Durand's on opera nights entertained many Americans, and he did not care to meet any of his compatriots to-night. So he turned down the Rue Royale, on the opposite side, and went into the Taverne Royale, where the patrons were not over particular in regard to the laws of fashion, and where certain ladies with light histories sought further adventures to add to their heptamérons. Now, Courtlandt thought neither of the one nor of the other. He desired isolation, safety from intrusion; and here, did he so signify, he could find it. Women gazed up at him and smiled, with interest as much as with invitation. He was brown from long exposure to the wind and the sun, that golden brown which is the gift of the sun-glitter on rocking seas. A traveler is generally indicated by this artistry of the sun, and once noted instantly creates a speculative interest. Even his light brown hair had faded at the temples, and straw-colored was the slender mustache, the ends of which had a cavalier twist. He ignored the lips which smiled and the eyes which invited, and nothing more was necessary. One is not importuned at the Taverne Royale. He sat down at a vacant table and ordered a pint of champagne, drinking hastily rather than thirstily.

Would Monsieur like anything to eat?

No, the wine was sufficient.

Courtlandt poured out a second glass slowly. The wine bubbled up to the brim and overflowed. He had been looking at the glass with unseeing eyes. He set the bottle down impatiently. Fool! To have gone to Burma, simply to stand in the golden temple once more, in vain, to recall that other time: the starving kitten held tenderly in a woman's arms, his own scurry among the booths to find the milk so peremptorily ordered, and the smile of thanks that had been his reward! He had run away when he should have hung on. He should have fought every inch of the way...

“Monsieur is lonely?”

A pretty young woman sat down before him in the vacant chair.

CHAPTER II

THERE IS A WOMAN?

Anger, curiosity, interest; these sensations blanketed one another quickly, leaving only interest, which was Courtlandt's normal state of mind when he saw a pretty woman. It did not require very keen scrutiny on his part to arrive swiftly at the conclusion that this one was not quite in the picture. Her cheeks were not red with that redness which has a permanency of tone, neither waxing nor waning, abashed in daylight. Nor had her lips found their scarlet moisture from out the depths of certain little porcelain boxes. Decidedly she was out of place here, yet she evinced no embarrassment; she was cool, at ease. Courtlandt's interest strengthened.

"Why do you think I am lonely, Mademoiselle?" he asked, without smiling.

"Oh, when one talks to one's self, strikes the table, wastes good wine, the inference is but natural. So, Monsieur is lonely."

Her lips and eyes, as grave and smileless as his own, puzzled him. An adventure? He looked at some of the other women. Those he could understand, but this one, no. At all times he was willing to smile, yet to draw her out he realized that he must preserve his gravity unbroken. The situation was not usual. His gaze came back to her.

"Is the comparison favorable to me?" she asked.

"It is. What is loneliness?" he demanded cynically.

"Ah, I could tell you," she answered. "It is the longing to be with the one we love; it is the hate of the wicked things we have done; it is remorse."

"That echoes of the Ambigu-Comique." He leaned upon his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"I?"

"Yes. You do not talk like the other girls who come here."

"Monsieur comes here frequently, then?"

"This is the first time in five years. I came here to-night because I wanted to be alone, because I did not wish to meet any one I knew. I have scowled at every girl in the room, and they have wisely left me alone. I haven't scowled at you because I do not know what to make of you. That's frankness. Now, you answer my question."

"Would you spare me a glass of wine? I am thirsty."

He struck his hands together, a bit of orientalism he had brought back with him. The observant waiter instantly came forward with a glass.

The young woman sipped the wine, gazing into the glass as she did so. "Perhaps a whim brought me here. But I repeat, Monsieur is lonely."

"So lonely that I am almost tempted to put you into a taxicab and run away with you."

She set down the glass.

"But I sha'n't," he added.

The spark of eagerness in her eyes was instantly curtailed. "There is a woman?" tentatively.

"Is there not always a woman?"

"And she has disappointed Monsieur?" There was no marked sympathy in the tone.

"Since Eve, has that not been woman's part in the human comedy?" He was almost certain that her lips became firmer. "Smile, if you wish. It is not prohibitory here."

It was evident that the smile had been struggling for existence, for it endured to the fulness of half a minute. She had fine teeth. He scrutinized her more closely, and she bore it well. The forehead did not make for beauty; it was too broad and high, intellectual. Her eyes were splendid. There was nothing at all ordinary about her. His sense of puzzlement renewed itself and deepened. What did she want of him? There were other men, other vacant chairs.

“Monsieur is certain about the taxicab?”

“Absolutely.”

“Ah, it is to emulate Saint Anthony!”

“There are several saints of that name. To which do you refer?”

“Positively not to him of Padua.”

Courtlandt laughed. “No, I can not fancy myself being particularly concerned about bambini. No, my model is Noah.”

“Noah?” dubiously.

“Yes. At the time of the flood there was only one woman in the world.”

“I am afraid that your knowledge of that event is somewhat obscured. Still, I understand.”

She lifted the wine-glass again, and then he noticed her hand. It was large, white and strong; it was not the hand of a woman who dallied, who idled in primrose paths.

“Tell me, what is it you wish? You interest me, at a moment, too, when I do not want to be interested. Are you really in trouble? Is there anything I can do ... barring the taxicab?”

She twirled the glass, uneasily. “I am not in actual need of assistance.”

“But you spoke peculiarly regarding loneliness.”

“Perhaps I like the melodrama. You spoke of the Ambigu-Comique.”

“You are on the stage?”

“Perhaps.”

“The Opera?”

“Again perhaps.”

He laughed once more, and drew his chair closer to the table.

“Monsieur in other moods must have a pleasant laughter.”

“I haven’t laughed from the heart in a very long time,” he said, returning to his former gravity, this time unassumed.

“And I have accomplished this amazing thing?”

“No. You followed me here. But from where?”

“Followed you?” The effort to give a mocking accent to her voice was a failure.

“Yes. The idea just occurred to me. There were other vacant chairs, and there was nothing inviting in my facial expression. Come, let me have the truth.”

“I have a friend who knows Flora Desimone.”

“Ah!” As if this information was a direct visitation of kindness from the gods. “Then you know where the Calabrian lives? Give me her address.”

There was a minute wrinkle above the unknown’s nose; the shadow of a frown. “She is very beautiful.”

“Bah! Did she send you after me? Give me her address. I have come all the way from Burma to see Flora Desimone.”

“To see her?” She unguardedly clothed the question with contempt, but she instantly forced a smile to neutralize the effect. Concerned with her own defined conclusions, she lost the fine ironic bitterness that was in the man’s voice.

“Aye, indeed, to see her! Beautiful as Venus, as alluring as Phryne, I want nothing so much as to see her, to look into her eyes, to hear her voice!”

“Is it jealousy? I hear the tragic note.” The certainty of her ground became as morass again. In his turn he was puzzling her.

“Tragedy? I am an American. We do not kill opera singers. We turn them over to the critics. I wish to see the beautiful Flora, to ask her a few questions. If she has sent you after me, her address, my dear young lady, her address.” His eyes burned.

“I am afraid.” And she was so. This wasn’t the tone of a man madly in love. It was wild anger.

“Afraid of what?”

“You.”

“I will give you a hundred francs.” He watched her closely and shrewdly.

Came the little wrinkle again, but this time urged in perplexity. “A hundred francs, for something I was sent to tell you?”

“And now refuse.”

“It is very generous. She has a heart of flint, Monsieur.”

“Well I know it. Perhaps now I have one of steel.”

“Many sparks do not make a fire. Do you know that your French is very good?”

“I spent my boyhood in Paris; some of it. Her address, if you please.” He produced a crisp note for a hundred francs. “Do you want it?”

She did not answer at once. Presently she opened her purse, found a stubby pencil and a slip of paper, and wrote. “There it is, Monsieur.” She held out her hand for the bank-note which, with a sense of bafflement, he gave her. She folded the note and stowed it away with the pencil.

“Thank you,” said Courtlandt. “Odd paper, though.” He turned it over. “Ah, I understand. You copy music.”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

This time the nervous flicker of her eyes did not escape him. “You are studying for the opera, perhaps?”

“Yes, that is it.”

The eagerness of the admission convinced him that she was not. Who she was or whence she had come no longer excited his interest. He had the Calabrian’s address and he was impatient to be off.

“Good night.” He rose.

“Monsieur is not gallant.”

“I was in my youth,” he replied, putting on his hat.

The bald rudeness of his departure did not disturb her. She laughed softly and relievedly. Indeed, there was in the laughter an essence of mischief. However, if he carried away a mystery, he left one behind.

As he was hunting for a taxicab, the waiter ran out and told him that he had forgotten to settle for the wine. The lady had refused to do so. Courtlandt chuckled and gave him a ten-franc piece. In other days, in other circumstances, he would have liked to know more about the unknown who scribbled notes on composition paper. She was not an idler in the Rue Royale, and it did not require that indefinable intuition which comes of worldly-wiseness to discover this fact. She might be a friend of the Desimone woman, but she had stepped out of another sphere to become so. He recognized the quality that could adjust itself to any environment and come out scatheless. This was undeniably an American accomplishment; and yet she was distinctly a Frenchwoman. He dismissed the problem from his mind and bade the driver go as fast as the police would permit.

Meanwhile the young woman waited five or ten minutes, and, making sure that Courtlandt had been driven off, left the restaurant. Round the corner she engaged a carriage. So that was Edward Courtlandt? She liked his face; there was not a weak line in it, unless stubbornness could be called such. But to stay away for two years! To hide himself in jungles, to be heard of only by his harebrained exploits! “Follow him; see where he goes,” had been the command. For a moment she had rebelled, but her curiosity was not to be denied. Besides, of what use was friendship if not to be tried? She knew nothing of the riddle, she had never asked a question openly. She had accidentally seen a photograph one day, in a trunk tray, with this man’s name scrawled across it, and upon this flimsy base she had builded a dozen romances, each of which she had ruthlessly torn down to make room for another; but still the riddle lay unsolved. She had thrown the name into the conversation many a time, as one might throw a bomb into a crowd which had no chance to escape. Fizzles! The man had been calmly discussed and calmly dismissed. At odd times an article in the newspapers gave her an opportunity; still the frank discussion, still the calm dismissal. She had learned that the man was rich, irresponsible,

vacillating, a picturesque sort of fool. But two years? What had kept him away that long? A weak man, in love, would not have made so tame a surrender. Perhaps he had not surrendered; perhaps neither of them had.

And yet, he sought the Calabrian. Here was another blind alley out of which she had to retrace her steps. Bother! That Puck of Shakespeare was right: What fools these mortals be! She was very glad that she possessed a true sense of humor, spiced with harmless audacity. What a dreary world it must be to those who did not know how and when to laugh! They talked of the daring of the American woman: who but a Frenchwoman would have dared what she had this night? The taxicab! She laughed. And this man was wax in the hands of any pretty woman who came along! So rumor had it. But she knew that rumor was only the attenuated ghost of Ananias, doomed forever to remain on earth for the propagation of inaccurate whispers. Wax! Why, she would have trusted herself in any situation with a man with those eyes and that angle of jaw. It was all very mystifying. "Follow him; see where he goes." The frank discussion, then, and the calm dismissal were but a woman's dissimulation. And he had gone to Flora Desimone's.

The carriage stopped before a handsome apartment-house in the Avenue de Wagram. The unknown got out, gave the driver his fare, and rang the concierge's bell. The sleepy guardian opened the door, touched his gold-braided cap in recognition, and led the way to the small electric lift. The young woman entered and familiarly pushed the button. The apartment in which she lived was on the second floor; and there was luxury everywhere, but luxury subdued and charmed by taste. There were fine old Persian rugs on the floors, exquisite oils and water-colors on the walls; and rare Japanese silk tapestries hung between the doors. In one corner of the living-room was a bronze jar filled with artificial cherry blossoms; in another corner near the door, hung a flat bell-shaped piece of brass – a Burmese gong. There were many photographs ranged along the mantel-top; celebrities, musical, artistic and literary, each accompanied by a liberal expanse of autographic ink.

She threw aside her hat and wraps with that manner of inconsequence which distinguishes the artistic temperament from the thrifty one, and passed on into the cozy dining-room. The maid had arranged some sandwiches and a bottle of light wine. She ate and drank, while intermittent smiles played across her merry face. Having satisfied her hunger, she opened her purse and extracted the bank-note. She smoothed it out and laughed aloud.

"Oh, if only he had taken me for a ride in the taxicab!" She bubbled again with merriment.

Suddenly she sprang up, as if inspired, and dashed into another room, a study. She came back with pen and ink, and with a celerity that came of long practise, drew five straight lines across the faint violet face of the bank-note. Within these lines she made little dots at the top and bottom of stubby perpendicular strokes, and strange interlineal hieroglyphics, and sweeping curves, all of which would have puzzled an Egyptologist if he were unused to the ways of musicians. Carefully she dried the composition, and then put the note away. Some day she would confound him by returning it.

A little later her fingers were moving softly over the piano keys; melodies in minor, sad and haunting and elusive, melodies that had never been put on paper and would always be her own: in them she might leap from comedy to tragedy, from laughter to tears, and only she would know. The midnight adventure was forgotten, and the hero of it, too. With her eyes closed and her lithe body swaying gently, she let the old weary pain in her heart take hold again.

CHAPTER III

THE BEAUTIFUL TIGRESS

Flora Desimone had been born in a Calabrian peasant's hut, and she had rolled in the dust outside, yelling vigorously at all times. Specialists declare that the reason for all great singers coming from lowly origin is found in this early development of the muscles of the throat. Parents of means employ nurses or sedatives to suppress or at least to smother these infantile protests against being thrust inconsiderately into the turmoil of human beings. Flora yelled or slept, as the case might be; her parents were equally indifferent. They were too busily concerned with the getting of bread and wine. Moreover, Flora was one among many. The gods are always playing with the Calabrian peninsula, heaving it up here or throwing it down there: *il terremoto*, the earthquake, the terror. Here nature tinkers vicariously with souls; and she seldom has time to complete her work. Constant communion with death makes for callosity of feeling; and the Calabrians and the Sicilians are the cruellest among the civilized peoples. Flora was ruthless.

She lived amazingly well in the premier of an apartment-hotel in the Champs-Élysées. In England and America she had amassed a fortune. Given the warm beauty of the Southern Italian, the passion, the temperament, the love of mischief, the natural cruelty, the inordinate craving for attention and flattery, she enlivened the nations with her affairs. And she never put a single beat of her heart into any of them. That is why her voice is still splendid and her beauty unchanging. She did not dissipate; calculation always barred her inclination; rather, she loitered about the Forbidden Tree and played that she had plucked the Apple. She had an example to follow; Eve had none.

Men scattered fortunes at her feet as foolish Greeks scattered floral offerings at the feet of their marble gods – without provoking the sense of reciprocity or generosity or mercy. She had worked; ah, no one would ever know how hard. She had been crushed, beaten, cursed, starved. That she had risen to the heights in spite of these bruising verbs in no manner enlarged her pity, but dulled and vitiated the little there was of it. Her mental attitude toward humanity was childish: as, when the parent strikes, the child blindly strikes back. She was determined to play, to enjoy life, to give back blow for blow, nor caring where she struck. She was going to press the juice from every grape. A thousand odd years gone, she would have led the cry in Rome – “Bread and the circus!” or “To the lions!” She would have disturbed Nero's complacency, and he would have played an *obbligato* instead of a solo at the burning. And she was malice incarnate. They came from all climes – her lovers – with roubles and lire and francs and shillings and dollars; and those who finally escaped her enchantment did so involuntarily, for lack of further funds. They called her villas Circe's isles. She hated but two things in the world; the man she could have loved and the woman she could not surpass.

Arrayed in a kimono which would have evoked the envy of the empress of Japan, supposing such a gorgeous raiment – peacocks and pine-trees, brilliant greens and olives and blues and purples – fell under the gaze of that lady's slanting eyes, she sat opposite the Slavonic Jove and smoked her cigarette between sips of coffee. Frequently she smiled. The short powerful hand of the man stroked his beard and he beamed out of his cunning eyes, eyes a trifle too porcine to suggest a keen intellect above them.

“I am like a gorilla,” he said; “but you are like a sleek tigress. I am stronger, more powerful than you; but I am always in fear of your claws. Especially when you smile like that. What mischief are you plotting now?”

She drew in a cloud of smoke, held it in her puffed cheeks as she glided round the table and leaned over his shoulders. She let the smoke drift over his head and down his beard. In that moment he was truly Jovian.

“Would you like me if I were a tame cat?” she purred.

“I have never seen you in that rôle. Perhaps I might. You told me that you would give up everything but the Paris season.”

“I have changed my mind.” She ran one hand through his hair and the other she entangled in his beard. “You’d change your mind, too, if you were a woman.”

“I don’t have to change my mind; you are always doing it for me. But I do not want to go to America next winter.” He drew her down so that he might look into her face. It was something to see.

“Bah!” She released herself and returned to her chair. “When the season is over I want to go to Capri.”

“Capri! Too hot.”

“I want to go.”

“My dear, a dozen exiles are there, waiting to blow me up.” He spoke Italian well. “You do not wish to see me spattered over the beautiful isle?”

“Tch! tch! That is merely your usual excuse. You never had anything to do with the police.”

“No?” He eyed the end of his cigarette gravely. “One does not have to be affiliated with the police. There is class prejudice. We Russians are very fond of Egypt in the winter. Capri seems to be the half-way place. They wait for us, going and coming. Poor fools!”

“I shall go alone, then.”

“All right.” In his dull way he had learned that to pull the diva, one must agree with her. In agreeing with her one adroitly dissuaded her. “You go to Capri, and I’ll go to the pavilion on the Neva.”

She snuffed the cigarette in the coffee-cup and frowned. “Some day you will make me horribly angry.”

“Beautiful tigress! If a man knew what you wanted, you would not want it. I can’t hop about with the agility of those dancers at the Théâtre du Palais Royale. The best I can do is to imitate the bear. What is wrong?”

“They keep giving her the premier parts. She has no more fire in her than a dead grate. The English-speaking singers, they are having everything their own way. And none of them can act.”

“My dear Flora, this Eleonora is an actress, first of all. That she can sing is a matter of good fortune, no more. Be reasonable. The consensus of critical opinion is generally infallible; and all over the continent they agree that she can act. Come, come; what do you care? She will never approach your Carmen...”

“You praise her to me?” tempest in her glowing eyes.

“I do not praise her. I am quoting facts. If you throw that cup, my tigress...”

“Well?” dangerously.

“It will spoil the set. Listen. Some one is at the speaking-tube.”

The singer crossed the room impatiently. Ordinarily she would have continued the dispute, whether the bell rang or not. But she was getting the worst of the argument and the bell was a timely diversion. The duke followed her leisurely to the wall.

“What is it?” asked Flora in French.

The voice below answered with a query in English. “Is this the Signorina Desimone?”

“It is the duchess.”

“The duchess?”

“Yes.”

“The devil!”

She turned and stared at the duke, who shrugged. “No, no,” she said; “the duchess, not the devil.”

“Pardon me; I was astonished. But on the stage you are still Flora Desimone?”

“Yes. And now that my identity is established, who are you and what do you want at this time of night?”

The duke touched her arm to convey that this was not the moment in which to betray her temper.

“I am Edward Courtlandt.”

“The devil!” mimicked the diva.

She and the duke heard a chuckle.

“I beg your pardon again, Madame.”

“Well, what is it you wish?” amiably.

The duke looked at her perplexedly. It seemed to him that she was always leaving him in the middle of things. Preparing himself for rough roads, he would suddenly find the going smooth. He was never swift enough mentally to follow these flying transitions from enmity to amity. In the present instance, how was he to know that his tigress had found in the man below something to play with?

“You once did me an ill turn,” came up the tube. “I desire that you make some reparation.”

“Sainted Mother! but it has taken you a long time to find out that I have injured you,” she mocked.

There was no reply to this; so she was determined to stir the fire a little.

“And I advise you to be careful what you say; the duke is a very jealous man.”

That gentleman fingered his beard thoughtfully.

“I do not care a hang if he is.”

The duke coughed loudly close to the tube.

Silence.

“The least you can do, Madame, is to give me her address.”

“Her address!” repeated the duke relievedly. He had had certain grave doubts, but these now took wing. Old flames were not in the habit of asking, nay, demanding, other women’s addresses.

“I am speaking to Madame, your Highness,” came sharply.

“We do not speak off the stage,” said the singer, pushing the duke aside.

“I should like to make that young man’s acquaintance,” whispered the duke.

She warned him to be silent.

Came the voice again: “Will you give me her address, please? Your messenger gave me your address, inferring that you wished to see me.”

“I?” There was no impeaching her astonishment.

“Yes, Madame.”

“My dear Mr. Courtlandt, you are the last man in all the wide world I wish to see. And I do not quite like the way you are making your request. His highness does not either.”

“Send him down!”

“That is true.”

“What is?”

“I remember. You are very strong and much given to fighting.”

The duke opened and shut his hands, pleurably. Here was something he could understand. He was a fighting man himself. Where was this going to end, and what was it all about?

“Do you not think, Madame, that you owe me something?”

“No. What I owe I pay. Think, Mr. Courtlandt; think well.”

“I do not understand,” impatiently.

“*Ebbene*, I owe you nothing. Once I heard you say – ‘I do not like to see you with the Calabrian; she is – Well, you know.’ I stood behind you at another time when you said that I was a fool.”

“Madame, I do not forget that, that is pure invention. You are mistaken.”

“No. You were. I am no fool.” A light laugh drifted down the tube.

“Madame, I begin to see.”

“Ah!”

“You believe what you wish to believe.”

“I think not.”

“I never even noticed you,” carelessly.

“Take care!” whispered the duke, who noted the sudden dilation of her nostrils.

“It is easy to forget,” cried the diva, furiously. “It is easy for you to forget, but not for me.”

“Madame, I do not forget that you entered my room that night ...”

“Your address!” bawled the duke. “That statement demands an explanation.”

“I should explain at once, your Highness,” said the man down below calmly, “only I prefer to leave that part in Madame’s hands. I should not care to rob her of anything so interesting and dramatic. Madame the duchess can explain, if she wishes. I am stopping at the Grand, if you find her explanations are not up to your requirements.”

“I shall give you her address,” interrupted the diva, hastily. The duke’s bristling beard for one thing and the ice in the other man’s tones for another, disquieted her. The play had gone far enough, much as she would have liked to continue it. This was going deeper than she cared to go. She gave the address and added: “To-night she sings at the Austrian ambassador’s. I give you this information gladly because I know that it will be of no use to you.”

“Then I shall dispense with the formality of thanking you. I add that I wish you twofold the misery you have carelessly and gratuitously cost me. Good night!” Click! went the little covering of the tube.

“Now,” said the duke, whose knowledge of the English tongue was not so indifferent that he did not gather the substance, if not all the shadings, of this peculiar conversation; “now, what the devil is all this about?”

“I hate him!”

“Refused to singe his wings?”

“He has insulted me!”

“I am curious to learn about that night you went to his room.”

Her bear had a ring in his nose, but she could not always lead him by it. So, without more ado, she spun the tale, laughing at intervals. The story evidently impressed the duke, for his face remained sober all through the recital.

“Did he say that you were a fool?”

“Of course not!”

“Shall I challenge him?”

“Oh, my Russian bear, he fences like a Chicot; he is a dead shot; and is afraid of nothing ... but a woman. No, no; I have something better. It will be like one of those old comedies. I hate her!” with a burst of fury. “She always does everything just so much better than I do. As for him, he was nothing. It was she; I hurt her, wrung her heart.”

“Why?” mildly.

“Is not that enough?”

“I am slow; it takes a long time for anything to get into my head; but when it arrives, it takes a longer time to get it out.”

“Well, go on.” Her calm was ominous.

“Love or vanity. This American singer got what you could not get. You have had your way too long. Perhaps you did not love him. I do not believe you can really love any one but Flora. Doubtless he possessed millions; but on the other hand, I am a grand duke; I offered marriage, openly and legally, in spite of all the opposition brought to bear.”

Flora was undeniably clever. She did the one thing that could successfully cope with this perilous condition of the ducal mind. She laughed, and flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“I have named you well. You are a tigress. But this comedy of which you speak: it might pass in Russia, but not in Paris.”

“I shall not be in the least concerned. My part was suggestion.”

“You suggested it to some one else?”

“To be sure!”

“My objections ...”

“I will have my way in this affair. Besides, it is too late.”

Her gesture was explicit. He sighed. He knew quite well that she was capable of leaving the apartment that night, in her kimono.

“I’ll go to Capri,” resignedly. Dynamite bombs were not the worst things in the world.

“I don’t want to go now.”

The duke picked up a fresh cigarette. “How the devil must have laughed when the Lord made Eve!”

CHAPTER IV

THE JOKE OF MONSIEUR

With the same inward bitterness that attends the mental processes of a performing tiger on being sent back to its cage, Courtlandt returned to his taxicab. He wanted to roar and lash and devour something. Instead, he could only twist the ends of his mustache savagely. So she was a grand duchess, or at least the morganatic wife of a grand duke! It did not seem possible that any woman could be so full of malice. He simply could not understand. It was essentially the Italian spirit; doubtless, till she heard his voice, she had forgotten all about the episode that had foundered his ship of happiness.

Her statement as to the primal cause was purely inventive. There was not a grain of truth in it. He could not possibly have been so rude. He had been too indifferent. Too indifferent! The repetition of the phrase made him sit straighter. Pshaw! It could not be that. He possessed a little vanity; if he had not, his history would not have been worth a scrawl. But he denied the possession vehemently, as men are wont to do. Strange, a man will admit smashing those ten articles of advisement known as the decalogue and yet deny the inherent quality which surrenders the admission – vanity. However you may look at it, man's vanity is a complex thing. The vanity of a woman has a definite and commendable purpose: the conquest of man, his purse, and half of his time. Too indifferent! Was it possible that he had roused her enmity simply because he had made it evident that her charms did not interest him? Beyond lifting his hat to her, perhaps exchanging a comment on the weather, his courtesies had not been extended. Courtlandt was peculiar in some respects. A woman attracted him, or she did not. In the one case he was affable, winning, pleasant, full of those agreeable little surprises that in turn attract a woman. In the other case, he passed on, for his impressions were instant and did not require the usual skirmishing.

A grand duchess! The straw-colored mustache now described two aggressive points. What an impossible old world it was! The ambition of the English nobility was on a far lower scale than that of their continental cousins. On the little isle they were satisfied to marry soubrettes and chorus girls. Here, the lady must be no less a personage than a grand-opera singer or a *première danseuse*. The continental noble at least showed some discernment; he did not choose haphazard; he desired the finished product and was not to be satisfied with the material in the raw.

Oh, stubborn Dutchman that he had been! Blind fool! To have run away instead of fighting to the last ditch for his happiness! The Desimone woman was right: it had taken him a long time to come to the conclusion that she had done him an ill turn. And during all these weary months he had drawn a melancholy picture of himself as a wounded lion, creeping into the jungle to hide its hurts, when, truth be known, he had taken the ways of the jackass for a model. He saw plainly enough now. More than this, where there had been mere obstacles to overcome there were now steep mountains, perhaps inaccessible for all he knew. His jaw set, and the pressure of his lips broke the sweep of his mustache, converting it into bristling tufts, warlike and resolute.

As he was leaving, a square of light attracted his attention. He looked up to see the outline of the bearded Russ in the window. Poor devil! He was going to have a merry time of it. Well, that was his affair. Besides, Russians, half the year chilled by their bitter snows, were susceptible to volcanoes; they courted them as a counterbalance. Perhaps he had spoken roughly, but his temper had not been under control. One thing he recalled with grim satisfaction. He had sent a barbed arrow up the tube to disturb the felicity of the dove-cote. The duke would be rather curious to know what was meant in referring to the night she had come to his, Courtlandt's, room. He laughed. It would be a fitting climax indeed if the duke called him out.

But what of the pretty woman in the Taverne Royale? What about her? At whose bidding had she followed him? One or the other of them had not told the truth, and he was inclined to believe that

the prevarication had its source in the pomegranate lips of the Calabrian. To give the old barb one more twist, to learn if its venomous point still held and hurt; nothing would have afforded the diva more delight. Courtlandt glared at the window as the shade rolled down.

When the taxicab joined the long line of carriages and automobiles opposite the Austrian ambassador's, Courtlandt awoke to the dismal and disquieting fact that he had formulated no plan of action. He had done no more than to give the driver his directions; and now that he had arrived, he had the choice of two alternatives. He could wait to see her come out or return at once to his hotel, which, as subsequent events affirmed, would have been the more sensible course. He would have been confronted with small difficulty in gaining admission to the house. He knew enough of these general receptions; the announcing of his name would have conveyed nothing to the host, who knew perhaps a third of his guests, and many of these but slightly. But such an adventure was distasteful to Courtlandt. He could not overstep certain recognized boundaries of convention, and to enter a man's house unasked was colossal impudence. Beyond this, he realized that he could have accomplished nothing; the advantage would have been hers. Nor could he meet her as she came out, for again the odds would have been largely in her favor. No, the encounter must be when they two were alone. She must be surprised. She must have no time to use her ready wit. He had thought to wait until some reasonable plan offered itself for trial; yet, here he was, with nothing definite or recognizable but the fact that the craving to see her was not to be withstood. The blood began to thunder in his ears. An idea presented itself. It appealed to him at that moment as quite clever and feasible.

"Wait!" he called to the driver.

He dived among the carriages and cars, and presently he found what he sought, – her limousine. He had taken the number into his mind too keenly to be mistaken. He saw the end of his difficulties; and he went about the affair with his usual directness. It was only at rare times that he ran his head into a cul-de-sac. If her chauffeur was regularly employed in her service, he would have to return to the hotel; but if he came from the garage, there was hope. Every man is said to have his price, and a French chauffeur might prove no notable exception to the rule.

"Are you driver for Madame da Toscana?" Courtlandt asked of the man lounging in the forward seat.

The chauffeur looked hard at his questioner, and on finding that he satisfied the requirements of a gentleman, grumbled an affirmative. The limousine was well known in Paris, and he was growing weary of these endless inquiries.

"Are you in her employ directly, or do you come from the garage?"

"I am from the garage, but I drive mademoiselle's car most of the time, especially at night. It is not madame but mademoiselle, Monsieur."

"My mistake." A slight pause. It was rather a difficult moment for Courtlandt. The chauffeur waited wonderingly. "Would you like to make five hundred francs?"

"How, Monsieur?"

Courtlandt should have been warned by the tone, which contained no unusual interest or eagerness.

"Permit me to remain in mademoiselle's car till she comes. I wish to ride with her to her apartment."

The chauffeur laughed. He stretched his legs. "Thanks, Monsieur. It is very dull waiting. Monsieur knows a good joke."

And to Courtlandt's dismay he realized that his proposal had truly been accepted as a jest.

"I am not joking. I am in earnest. Five hundred francs. On the word of a gentleman I mean mademoiselle no harm. I am known to her. All she has to do is to appeal to you, and you can stop the car and summon the police."

The chauffeur drew in his legs and leaned toward his tempter. "Monsieur, if you are not jesting, then you are a madman. Who are you? What do I know about you? I never saw you before, and for

two seasons I have driven mademoiselle in Paris. She wears beautiful jewels to-night. How do I know that you are not a gentlemanly thief? Ride home with mademoiselle! You are crazy. Make yourself scarce, Monsieur; in one minute I shall call the police.”

“Blockhead!”

English of this order the Frenchman perfectly understood. “*Là, là!*” he cried, rising to execute his threat.

Courtlandt was furious, but his fury was directed at himself as much as at the trustworthy young man getting down from the limousine. His eagerness had led him to mistake stupidity for cleverness. He had gone about the affair with all the clumsiness of a boy who was making his first appearance at the stage entrance. It was mightily disconcerting, too, to have found an honest man when he was in desperate need of a dishonest one. He had faced with fine courage all sorts of dangerous wild animals; but at this moment he hadn't the courage to face a policeman and endeavor to explain, in a foreign tongue, a situation at once so delicate and so singularly open to misconstruction. So, for the second time in his life he took to his heels. Of the first time, more anon. He scrambled back to his own car, slammed the door, and told the driver to drop him at the Grand. His undignified retreat caused his face to burn; but discretion would not be denied. However, he did not return to the hotel.

Mademoiselle da Toscana's chauffeur scratched his chin in perplexity. In frightening off his tempter he recognized that now he would never be able to find out who he was. He should have played with him until mademoiselle came out. She would have known instantly. That would have been the time for the police. To hide in the car! What the devil! Only a madman would have offered such a proposition. The man had been either an American or an Englishman, for all his accuracy in the tongue. Bah! Perhaps he had heard her sing that night, and had come away from the Opera, moonstruck. It was not an isolated case. The fools were always pestering him, but no one had ever offered so uncommon a bribe: five hundred francs. Mademoiselle might not believe that part of the tale. Mademoiselle was clever. There was a standing agreement between them that she would always give him half of whatever was offered him in the way of bribes. It paid. It was easier to sell his loyalty to her for two hundred and fifty francs than to betray her for five hundred. She had yet to find him untruthful, and to-night he would be as frank as he had always been.

But who was this fellow in the Bavarian hat, who patrolled the sidewalk? He had been watching him when the madman approached. For an hour or more he had walked up and down, never going twenty feet beyond the limousine. He couldn't see the face. The long dark coat had a military cut about the hips and shoulders. From time to time he saw him glance up at the lighted windows. Eh, well; there were other women in the world besides mademoiselle, several others.

He had to wait only half an hour for her appearance. He opened the door and saw to it that she was comfortably seated; then he paused by the window, touching his cap.

“What is it, François?”

“A gentleman offered me five hundred francs, Mademoiselle, if I would permit him to hide in the car.”

“Five hundred francs? To hide in the car? Why didn't you call the police?”

“I started to, Mademoiselle, but he ran away.”

“Oh! What was he like?” The prima donna dropped the bunch of roses on the seat beside her.

“Oh, he looked well enough. He had the air of a gentleman. He was tall, with light hair and mustache. But as I had never seen him before, and as Mademoiselle wore some fine jewels, I bade him be off.”

“Would you know him again?”

“Surely, Mademoiselle.”

“The next time any one bothers you, call the police. You have done well, and I shall remember it. Home.”

The man in the Bavarian hat hurried back to the third car from the limousine, and followed at a reasonably safe distance.

The singer leaned back against the cushions. She was very tired. The opera that night had taxed her strength, and but for her promise she would not have sung to the ambassador's guests for double the fee. There was an electric bulb in the car. She rarely turned it on, but she did to-night. She gazed into the little mirror; and utter weariness looked back from out the most beautiful, blue, Irish eyes in the world. She rubbed her fingers carefully up and down the faint perpendicular wrinkle above her nose. It was always there on nights like this. How she longed for the season to end! She would fly away to the lakes, the beautiful, heavenly tinted lakes, the bare restful mountains, and the clover lawns spreading under brave old trees; she would walk along the vineyard paths, and loiter under the fig-trees, far, far away from the world, its clamor, its fickleness, its rasping jealousies. Some day she would have enough; and then, good-by to all the clatter, the evil-smelling stages, the impossible people with whom she was associated. She would sing only to those she loved.

The glamour of the life had long ago passed; she sang on because she had acquired costly habits, because she was fond of beautiful things, and above all, because she loved to sing. She had as many moods as a bird, as many sides as nature. A flash of sunshine called to her voice; the beads of water, trembling upon the blades of grass after a summer shower, brought a song to her lips. Hers was a God-given voice, and training had added to it nothing but confidence. True, she could act; she had been told by many a great impressario that histrionically she had no peer in grand opera. But the knowledge gave her no thrill of delight. To her it was the sum of a tremendous physical struggle.

She shut off the light and closed her eyes. She reclined against the cushion once more, striving not to think. Once, her hands shut tightly. Never, never, never! She pressed down the burning thoughts by recalling the bright scenes at the ambassador's, the real generous applause that had followed her two songs. Ah, how that man Paderewski played! They two had cost the ambassador eight thousand francs. Fame and fortune! Fortune she could understand; but fame! What was it? Upon a time she believed she had known what fame was; but that had been when she was striving for it. A glowing article in a newspaper, a portrait in a magazine, rows upon rows of curious eyes and a patter of hands upon hands; that was all; and for this she had given the best of her life, and she was only twenty-five.

The limousine stopped at last. The man in the Bavarian hat saw her alight. His car turned and disappeared. It had taken him a week to discover where she lived. His lodgings were on the other side of the Seine. After reaching them he gave crisp orders to the driver, who set his machine off at top speed. The man in the Bavarian hat entered his room and lighted the gas. The room was bare and cheaply furnished. He took off his coat but retained his hat, pulling it down still farther over his eyes. His face was always in shadow. A round chin, two full red lips, scantily covered by a blond mustache were all that could be seen. He began to walk the floor impatiently, stopping and listening whenever he heard a sound. He waited less than an hour for the return of the car. It brought two men. They were well-dressed, smoothly-shaven, with keen eyes and intelligent faces. Their host, who had never seen either of his guests before, carelessly waved his hand toward the table where there were two chairs. He himself took his stand by the window and looked out as he talked. In another hour the room was dark and the street deserted.

In the meantime the prima donna gave a sigh of relief. She was home. It was nearly two o'clock. She would sleep till noon, and Saturday and Sunday would be hers. She went up the stairs instead of taking the lift, and though the hall was dark, she knew her way. She unlocked the door of the apartment and entered, swinging the door behind her. As the act was mechanical, her thoughts being otherwise engaged, she did not notice that the lock failed to click. The ferrule of a cane had prevented that.

She flung her wraps on the divan and put the roses in an empty bowl. The door opened softly, without noise. Next, she stopped before the mirror over the mantel, touched her hair lightly, detached

the tiara of emeralds ... and became as inanimate as marble. She saw another face. She never knew how long the interval of silence was. She turned slowly.

“Yes, it is I!” said the man.

Instantly she turned again to the mantel and picked up a magazine-revolver. She leveled it at him.

“Leave this room, or I will shoot.”

Courtlandt advanced toward her slowly. “Do so,” he said. “I should much prefer a bullet to that look.”

“I am in earnest.” She was very white, but her hand was steady.

He continued to advance. There followed a crash. The smell of burning powder filled the room. The Burmese gong clanged shrilly and whirled wildly. Courtlandt felt his hair stir in terror.

“You must hate me indeed,” he said quietly, as the sense of terror died away. He folded his arms. “Try again; there ought to be half a dozen bullets left. No? Then, good-by!” He left the apartment without another word or look, and as the door closed behind him there was a kind of finality in the clicking of the latch.

The revolver clattered to the floor, and the woman who had fired it leaned heavily against the mantel, covering her eyes.

“Nora, Nora!” cried a startled voice from a bedroom adjoining. “What has happened? *Mon Dieu*, what is it?” A pretty, sleepy-eyed young woman, in a night-dress, rushed into the room. She flung her arms about the singer. “Nora, my dear, my dear!”

“He forced his way in. I thought to frighten him. It went off accidentally. Oh, Celeste, Celeste, I might have killed him!”

The other drew her head down on her shoulder, and listened. She could hear voices in the lower hall, a shout of warning, a patter of steps; then the hall door slammed. After that, silence, save for the faint mellowing vibrations of the Burmese gong.

CHAPTER V

CAPTIVE OR RUNAWAY

At the age of twenty-six Donald Abbott had become a prosperous and distinguished painter in water-colors. His work was individual, and at the same time it was delicate and charming. One saw his Italian landscapes as through a filmy gauze: the almond blossoms of Sicily, the rose-laden walls of Florence, the vineyards of Chianti, the poppy-glowing Campagna out of Rome. His Italian lakes had brought him fame. He knew very little of the grind and hunger that attended the careers of his whilom associates. His father had left him some valuable patents – wash-tubs, carpet-cleaners, and other labor-saving devices – and the royalties from these were quite sufficient to keep him pleasantly housed. When he referred to his father (of whom he had been very fond) it was as an inventor. Of what, he rarely told. In America it was all right; but over here, where these inventions were unknown, a wash-tub had a peculiar significance: that a man should be found in his money through its services left persons in doubt as to his genealogical tree, which, as a matter of fact, was a very good one. As a boy his schoolmates had dubbed him “The Sweep” and “Suds,” and it was only human that he should wish to forget.

His earnings (not inconsiderable, for tourists found much to admire in both the pictures and the artist) he spent in gratifying his mild extravagances. So there were no lines in his handsome, boyish, beardless face; and his eyes were unusually clear and happy. Perhaps once or twice, since his majority, he had returned to America to prove that he was not an expatriate, though certainly he was one, the only tie existing between him and his native land being the bankers who regularly honored his drafts. And who shall condemn him for preferring Italy to the desolate center of New York state, where good servants and good weather are as rare as are flawless emeralds?

Half after three, on Wednesday afternoon, Abbott stared moodily at the weather-tarnished group by Dalou in the Luxembourg gardens – the *Triumph of Silenus*. His gaze was deceptive, for the rollicking old bibulous scoundrel had not stirred his critical sense nor impressed the delicate films of thought. He was looking through the bronze, into the far-away things. He sat on his own folding stool, which he had brought along from his winter studio hard by in the old Boul’ Miche’. He had arrived early that morning, all the way from Como, to find a thunderbolt driven in at his feet. Across his knees fluttered an open newspaper, the Paris edition of the *New York Herald*. All that kept it from blowing away was the tense if sprawling fingers of his right hand; his left hung limply at his side.

It was not possible. Such things did not happen these unromantic days to musical celebrities. She had written that on Monday night she would sing in *La Bohème* and on Wednesday, *Faust*. She had since vanished, vanished as completely as though she had taken wings and flown away. It was unreal. She had left the apartment in the Avenue de Wagram on Saturday afternoon, and nothing had been seen or heard of her since. At the last moment they had had to find a substitute for her part in the Puccini opera. The maid testified that her mistress had gone on an errand of mercy. She had not mentioned where, but she had said that she would return in time to dress for dinner, which proved conclusively that something out of the ordinary had befallen her.

The automobile that had carried her away had not been her own, and the chauffeur was unknown. None of the directors at the Opera had been notified of any change in the singer’s plans. She had disappeared, and they were deeply concerned. Singers were generally erratic, full of sudden indispositions, unaccountable whims; but the Signorina da Toscana was one in a thousand. She never broke an engagement. If she was ill she said so at once; she never left them in doubt until the last moment. Indecision was not one of her characteristics. She was as reliable as the sun. If the directors did not hear definitely from her by noon to-day, they would have to find another Marguerite.

The police began to move, and they stirred up some curious bits of information. A man had tried to bribe the singer's chauffeur, while she was singing at the Austrian ambassador's. The chauffeur was able to describe the stranger with some accuracy. Then came the bewildering episode in the apartment: the pistol-shot, the flight of the man, the astonished concierge to whom the beautiful American would offer no explanations. The man (who tallied with the description given by the chauffeur) had obtained entrance under false representations. He claimed to be an emissary with important instructions from the Opera. There was nothing unusual in this; messengers came at all hours, and seldom the same one twice; so the concierge's suspicions had not been aroused. Another item. A tall handsome Italian had called at eleven o'clock Saturday morning, but the signorina had sent down word that she could not see him. The maid recalled that her mistress had intended to dine that night with the Italian gentleman. His name she did not know, having been with the signorina but two weeks.

Celeste Fournier, the celebrated young pianist and composer, who shared the apartment with the missing prima donna, stated that she hadn't the slightest idea where her friend was. She was certain that misfortune had overtaken her in some inexplicable manner. To implicate the Italian was out of the question. He was well-known to them both. He had arrived again at seven, Saturday, and was very much surprised that the signorina had not yet returned. He had waited till nine, when he left, greatly disappointed. He was the Barone di Monte-Verdi in Calabria, formerly military attaché at the Italian embassy in Berlin. Sunday noon Mademoiselle Fournier had notified the authorities. She did not know, but she felt sure that the blond stranger knew more than any one else. And here was the end of things. The police found themselves at a standstill. They searched the hotels but without success; the blond stranger could not be found.

Abbott's eyes were not happy and pleasant just now. They were dull and blank with the reaction of the stunning blow. He, too, was certain of the Barone. Much as he secretly hated the Italian, he knew him to be a fearless and an honorable man. But who could this blond stranger be who appeared so sinisterly in the two scenes? From where had he come? Why had Nora refused to explain about the pistol-shot? Any woman had a perfect right to shoot a man who forced his way into her apartment. Was he one of those mad fools who had fallen in love with her, and had become desperate? Or was it some one she knew and against whom she did not wish to bring any charges? Abducted! And she might be, at this very moment, suffering all sorts of indignities. It was horrible to be so helpless.

The sparkle of the sunlight upon the ferrule of a cane, extending over his shoulder, broke in on his agonizing thoughts. He turned, an angry word on the tip of his tongue. He expected to see some tourist who wanted to be informed.

"Ted Courtlandt!" He jumped up, overturning the stool. "And where the dickens did you come from? I thought you were in the Orient?"

"Just got back, Abby."

The two shook hands and eyed each other with the appraising scrutiny of friends of long standing.

"You don't change any," said Abbott.

"Nor do you. I've been standing behind you fully two minutes. What were you glooming about? Old Silenus offend you?"

"Have you read the *Herald* this morning?"

"I never read it nowadays. They are always giving me a roast of some kind. Whatever I do they are bound to misconstrue it." Courtlandt stooped and righted the stool, but sat down on the grass, his feet in the path. "What's the trouble? Have they been after you?"

Abbott rescued the offending paper and shaking it under his friend's nose, said: "Read that."

Courtlandt's eyes widened considerably as they absorbed the significance of the heading – "Eleonora da Toscana missing."

"Bah!" he exclaimed.

“You say bah?”

“It looks like one of their advertising dodges. I know something about singers,” Courtlandt added. “I engineered a musical comedy once.”

“You do not know anything about her,” cried Abbott hotly.

“That’s true enough.” Courtlandt finished the article, folded the paper and returned it, and began digging in the path with his cane.

“But what I want to know is, who the devil is this mysterious blond stranger?” Abbott flourished the paper again. “I tell you, it’s no advertising dodge. She’s been abducted. The hound!”

Courtlandt ceased boring into the earth. “The story says that she refused to explain this blond chap’s presence in her room. What do you make of that?”

“Perhaps you think the fellow was her press-agent?” was the retort.

“Lord, no! But it proves that she knew him, that she did not want the police to find him. At least, not at that moment. Who’s the Italian?” suddenly.

“I can vouch for him. He is a gentleman, honorable as the day is long, even if he is hot-headed at times. Count him out of it. It’s this unknown, I tell you. Revenge for some imagined slight. It’s as plain as the nose on your face.”

“How long have you known her?” asked Courtlandt presently.

“About two years. She’s the gem of the whole lot. Gentle, kindly, untouched by flattery... Why, you must have seen and heard her!”

“I have.” Courtlandt stared into the hole he had dug. “Voice like an angel’s, with a face like Bellini’s donna; and Irish all over. But for all that, you will find that her disappearance will turn out to be a diva’s whim. Hang it, Suds, I’ve had some experience with singers.”

“You are a blockhead!” exploded the younger man.

“All right, I am.” Courtlandt laughed.

“Man, she wrote me that she would sing Monday and to-night, and wanted me to hear her. I couldn’t get here in time for *La Bohème*, but I was building on *Faust*. And when she says a thing, she means it. As you said, she’s Irish.”

“And I’m Dutch.”

“And the stubbornest Dutchman I ever met. Why don’t you go home and settle down and marry? – and keep that phiz of yours out of the newspapers? Sometimes I think you’re as crazy as a bug.”

“An opinion shared by many. Maybe I am. I dash in where lunatics fear to tread. Come on over to the Soufflet and have a drink with me.”

“I’m not drinking to-day,” tersely. “There’s too much ahead for me to do.”

“Going to start out to find her? Oh, Sir Galahad!” ironically. “Abby, you used to be a sport. I’ll wager a hundred against a bottle of pop that to-morrow or next day she’ll turn up serenely, with the statement that she was indisposed, sorry not to have notified the directors, and all that. They do it repeatedly every season.”

“But an errand of mercy, the strange automobile which can not be found? The engagement to dine with the Barone? Celeste Fournier’s statement? You can’t get around these things. I tell you, Nora isn’t that kind. She’s too big in heart and mind to stoop to any such devices,” vehemently.

“Nora! That looks pretty serious, Abby. You haven’t gone and made a fool of yourself, have you?”

“What do you call making a fool of myself?” truculently.

“You aren’t a suitor, are you? An accepted suitor?” unruffled, rather kindly.

“No, but I would to heaven that I were!” Abbott jammed the newspaper into his pocket and slung the stool over his arm. “Come on over to the studio until I get some money.”

“You are really going to start a search?”

“I really am. I’d start one just as quickly for you, if I heard that you had vanished under mysterious circumstances.”

“I believe you honestly would.”

“You are an old misanthrope. I hope some woman puts the hook into you some day. Where did you pick up the grouch? Some of your dusky princesses give you the go-by?”

“You, too, Abby?”

“Oh, rot! Of course I never believed any of that twaddle. Only, I’ve got a sore head to-day. If you knew Nora as well as I do, you’d understand.”

Courtlandt walked on a little ahead of the artist, who looked up and down the athletic form, admiringly. Sometimes he loved the man, sometimes he hated him. He marched through tragedy and comedy and thrilling adventure with no more concern that he evinced in striding through these gardens. Nearly every one had heard of his exploits; but who among them knew anything of the real man, so adroitly hidden under unruffled externals? That there was a man he did not know, hiding deep down within those powerful shoulders, he had not the least doubt. He himself possessed the quick mobile temperament of the artist, and he could penetrate but not understand the poise assumed with such careless ease by his friend. Dutch blood had something to do with it, and there was breeding, but there was something more than these: he was a reversion, perhaps, to the type of man which had made the rovers of the Lowlands feared on land and sea, now hemmed in by convention, hampered by the barriers of progress, and striving futilely to find an outlet for his peculiar energies. One bit of knowledge gratified him; he stood nearer to Courtlandt than any other man. He had known the adventurer as a boy, and long separations had in nowise impaired the foundations of this friendship.

Courtlandt continued toward the exit, his head forward, his gaze bent on the path. He had the air of a man deep in thought, philosophic thought, which leaves the brows unmarred by those corrugations known as frowns. Yet his thoughts were far from philosophic. Indeed, his soul was in mad turmoil. He could have thrown his arms toward the blue sky and cursed aloud the fates that had set this new tangle at his feet. He longed for the jungles and some mad beast to vent his wrath upon. But he gave no sign. He had returned with a purpose as hard and grim as iron; and no obstacle, less powerful than death, should divert or control him. Abduction? Let the public believe what it might; he held the key to the mystery. She was afraid, and had taken flight. So be it.

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