Oppenheim Edward Phillips

Anna the Adventuress

Edward Oppenheim

Anna the Adventuress

Oppenheim E.

Anna the Adventuress / E. Oppenheim — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Chapter I 6
Chapter II 11
Chapter III 14
Chapter IV 17
Chapter V 20
Chapter VI 23
Chapter VII 26
Chapter VIII 29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 33

Oppenheim E. Phillips Edward Phillips Anna the Adventuress

About the Story

Annabel Pellissier, for reasons of her own, allows Sir John Ferringhall to believe that she is her sister Anna. Anna lets the deception continue and has to bear the burden of her sister's reputation which, in Paris at any rate, is that of being a coquette. Endless complications ensue when both sisters return to London.

This is one of the late E. Phillips Oppenheim's most intriguing stories.

Chapter I
THE CARPET-KNIGHT AND THE LADY

The girl paused and steadied herself for a moment against a field gate. Her breath came fast in little sobbing pants. Her dainty shoes were soiled with dust and there was a great tear in her skirt. Very slowly, very fearfully, she turned her head. Her cheeks were the colour of chalk, her eyes were filled with terror. If a cart were coming, or those labourers in the field had heard, escape was impossible.

The terror faded from her eyes. A faint gleam of returning colour gave her at once a more natural appearance. So far as the eye could reach, the white level road, with its fringe of elm-trees, was empty. Away off in the fields the blue-smocked peasants bent still at their toil. They had heard nothing, seen nothing. A few more minutes, and she was safe.

Yet before she turned once more to resume her flight she schooled herself with an effort to look where it had happened. A dark mass of wreckage, over which hung a slight mist of vapour, lay half in the ditch, half across the hedge, close under a tree from the trunk of which the bark had been torn and stripped. A few yards further off something grey, inert, was lying, a huddled-up heap of humanity twisted into a strange unnatural shape. Again the chalky pallor spread even to her lips, her eyes became lit with the old terror. She withdrew her head with a little moan, and resumed her flight. Away up on the hillside was the little country railway station. She fixed her eyes upon it and ran, keeping always as far as possible in the shadow of the hedge, gazing fearfully every now and then down along the valley for the white smoke of the train.

She reached the station, and mingling with a crowd of excursionists who had come from the river on the other side, took her place in the train unnoticed. She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. Until the last moment she was afraid.

Arrived in Paris she remembered that she had not the money for a *fiacre*. She was in ill trim for walking, but somehow or other she made her way as far as the Champs Elysées, and sank down upon an empty seat.

She had not at first the power for concealment. Her nerves were shattered, her senses dazed by this unexpected shock. She sat there, a mark for boulevarders, the unconscious object of numberless wondering glances. Paris was full, and it was by no means a retired spot which she had found. Yet she never once thought of changing it. A person of somewhat artificial graces and mannerisms, she was for once in her life perfectly natural. Terror had laid a paralyzing hand upon her, fear kept her almost unconscious of the curious glances which she was continually attracting.

Then there came briskly along the path towards her, an Englishman. He was perhaps forty-five years of age. He was dressed with the utmost care, and he set his feet upon the broad walk as though the action were in some way a condescension. He was alert, well-groomed, and yet – perhaps in contrast with the more volatile French type – there was a suggestion of weight about him, not to say heaviness. He too looked at the girl, slackened his pace and looked at her again through his eye-glasses, looked over his shoulder after he had passed, and finally came to a dead stop. He scratched his upper lip reflectively.

It was a habit of his to talk to himself. In the present case it did not matter, as there was no one else within earshot.

"Dear me!" he said. "Dear me! I wonder what I ought to do. She is English! I am sure of that. She is English, and apparently in some distress. I wonder – "

He turned slowly round. He was inclined to be a good-natured person, and he had no nervous fears of receiving a snub. The girl was pretty, and apparently a lady.

"She cannot be aware," he continued, "that she is making herself conspicuous. It would surely be only common politeness to drop her a hint – a fellow countrywoman too. I trust that she will not misunderstand me. I believe – I believe that I must risk it."

He stood before her, his hat in his hand, his head bent, his voice lowered to a convenient pitch.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but you appear to be a fellow countrywoman of mine, and in some distress. Can I be of any assistance? I can assure you that it would give me very much pleasure."

Her first upward glance was one of terrified apprehension. When she saw however that this man was a stranger, and obviously harmless, her expression changed as though by magic. A delicate flush of colour streamed into her cheeks. Her eyes fell, and then sought his again with timid interest. Her natural instincts reasserted themselves. She began to act.

"You are very kind," she said hesitatingly, "but I don't remember – I don't think that I know you, do I?"

"I am afraid that you do not," he admitted, with a smile which he meant to be encouraging. "You remind me of the story which they tell against us over here, you know – of the Englishman who refused to be saved from drowning because he was unacquainted with his rescuer. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Ferringhall – Sir John Ferringhall."

There was genuine interest in her eyes now. Sir John saw it, and was flattered.

"You are Sir John Ferringhall," she repeated. "Yes, I remember you now. You were pointed out to me at – a few nights ago."

He was not in the least surprised. A millionaire and a knight, even though his money has been made in carpets, is used to being a person of interest.

"Very likely," he answered. "I am fairly well known here. I must apologize, I suppose, for speaking to you, but your appearance certainly indicated that you were in some sort of trouble, and you were becoming – pardon me – an object of comment to the passers-by."

The girl sat up and looked at him with a curious twist at the corners of her mouth – humorous or pathetic, he could not tell which. As though accidentally she swept her skirts from a chair close drawn to her own. Sir John hesitated. She was marvellously pretty, but he was not quite sure – yet – that it was advisable for him to sit with her in so public a place. His inclinations prompted him most decidedly to take the vacant chair. Prudence reminded him that he was a county magistrate, and parliamentary candidate for a somewhat difficult borough, where his principal supporters were dissenters of strict principles who took a zealous interest in his moral character. He temporized, and the girl raised her eyes once more to his.

"You are the Sir John Ferringhall who has bought the Lyndmore estate, are you not?" she remarked. "My father's sisters used once to live in the old manor house. I believe you have had it pulled down, have you not?"

"The Misses Pellissier!" he exclaimed. "Then your name – "

"My name is Pellissier. My father was Colonel Pellissier. He had an appointment in Jersey, you know, after he left the army."

Sir John did not hesitate any longer. He sat down.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, "this is most extraordinary. I – "

Then he stopped short, for he began to remember things. He was not quite sure whether, after all, he had been wise. He would have risen again, but for the significance of the action.

"Dear me!" he said. "Then some of your family history is known to me. One of your aunts died, I believe, and the other removed to London."

The girl nodded.

"She is living there now," she remarked.

"Your father is dead too, I believe," he continued, "and your mother."

"Two years ago," she answered. "They died within a few months of one another."

"Very sad – very sad indeed," he remarked uneasily. "I remember hearing something about it. I believe that the common report was that you and your sister had come to Paris to study painting."

She assented gently.

"We have a small studio," she murmured, "in the Rue de St. Pierre."

Sir John looked at her sideways. Her eyes were fixed upon the ground, the pink colour coming and going in her cheeks was very delicate and girlish. After all, this could never be the black sheep. He had been quite right to sit down. It was astonishing how seldom it was that his instincts betrayed him. He breathed a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Come," he continued, "the world after all is a very small place. We are not altogether strangers, are we? I feel that under the circumstances I have the right to offer you my advice, and if necessary my help. I beg that you will consider me your friend."

She looked at him with fluttering eyelids – sweetly grateful. It was such an unexpected stroke of fortune. Sir John was not used to such glances, and he liked them.

"It is so difficult," she murmured, "so impossible to explain. Even to my own brother – if I had one – I could not tell everything, and you, although you are so kind, you are almost a stranger, aren't you?"

"No, no!" he protested. "You must not think of me as one. Try and consider me your elder brother, or an old family friend, whichever you like best."

She thanked him with one of her shy little glances. More than ever Sir John was glad that he had sat down.

"It is very, very difficult," she continued, looking steadfastly at the ground. "Only – I have come face to face – with something terrible, and wholly unexpected trouble. I want to leave Paris to-day – this very day. I want to leave it for ever."

He looked at her very gravely.

"But your sister?" he asked. "What of her? Have you quarrelled with her?"

The girl shook her head.

"No," she answered. "I have not quarrelled with her. It is simply our point of view which is altogether different. I want to get away – to go to London. I cannot explain beyond that."

"Then I am sure," Sir John declared, "that I shall not ask you. I know nothing about the matter, but I feel convinced that you are right. You ought to have had better advice two years ago. Paris is not the place for two young girls. I presume that you have been living alone?"

She sighed gently.

"My sister," she murmured, "is so independent. She is Bohemian to the finger-tips. She makes me feel terribly old-fashioned."

Sir John smiled and congratulated himself upon his insight. He was so seldom wrong.

"The next question, Miss Anna," he said, "is how am I to help you? I am wholly at your disposal."

She looked up at him quickly. Her expression was a little changed, less innocent, more discerning.

"Anna!" she repeated. "How do you know – why do you think that my name is Anna?" He smiled in a quietly superior way.

"I think," he said, "that I am right. I am very good at guessing names."

"I am really curious," she persisted. "You must have heard – have you – oh, tell me, won't you?" she begged. "Have you heard things?"

The tears stood in her eyes. She leaned a little towards him. Nothing but the publicity of the place and the recollection of that terrible constituency kept him from attempting some perfectly respectful but unmistakable evidence of his sympathy.

"I am afraid," he said gravely, "that your sister has been a little indiscreet. It is nothing at all for you to worry about."

She looked away from him.

"I knew," she said, in a low despairing tone, "that people would talk."

He coughed gently.

"It was inevitable," he declared. "It is not, of course, a pleasant subject of conversation for you or for me, yet I think I may venture to suggest to you that your sister's – er – indiscretions – have reached a point which makes a separation between you almost a necessity."

She covered her face with her hands.

"It – it – must come," she faltered.

"I do not lay claim," he continued, "to any remarkable amount of insight, but it is possible, is it not, that I have stumbled upon your present cause of distress."

"You are wonderful!" she murmured.

He smiled complacently.

"Not at all. This is simply a chapter of coincidences. Now what I want you to feel is this. I want you to feel that you have found a friend who has a strong desire to be of service to you. Treat me as an elder brother, if you like. He is here by your side. How can he help you?"

She threw such a look upon him that even he, Sir John Ferringhall, carpet-merchant, hide-bound Englishman, slow-witted, pompous, deliberate, felt his heart beat to music. Perhaps the Parisian atmosphere had affected him. He leaned towards her, laid his hand tenderly upon hers.

"I hope you realize," he went on, in a lower and less assured tone, "that I am in earnest – very much in earnest. You must let me do whatever I can for you. I shall count it a privilege."

"I believe you," she murmured. "I trust you altogether. I am going to take you entirely at your word. I want to leave Paris to-day. Will you lend me the money for my ticket to London?"

"With all the pleasure in the world," he answered heartily. "Let me add too that I am thankful for your decision. You have somewhere to go to in London, I hope."

She nodded.

"There is my aunt," she said. "The one who used to live at Lyndmore. She will take me in until I can make some plans. It will be horribly dull, and she is a very trying person. But anything is better than this."

He took out his watch.

"Let me see," he said. "Your best route will be via Boulogne and Folkestone at nine o'clock from the Gare du Nord. What about your luggage?"

"I could get a few of my things, at any rate," she said. "My sister is sure to be out."

"Very well," he said. "It is just six o'clock now. Supposing you fetch what you can, and if you will allow me, I will see you off. It would give me great pleasure if you would dine with me somewhere first."

She looked at him wistfully, but with some unwilling doubt in her wrinkled forehead. It was excellently done, especially as she loved good dinners.

"You are very kind to think of it," she said, "but – don't you think perhaps – that I had better not?"

He smiled indulgently.

"My dear child," he said, "with me you need have no apprehension. I am almost old enough to be your father."

She looked at him with uplifted eyebrows – a look of whimsical incredulity. Sir John felt that after all forty-five was not so very old.

"That sounds quite absurd," she answered. "Yet it is my last evening, and I think – if you are sure that you would like to have me – that I will risk it."

"We will go to a very quiet place," he assured her, "a place where I have often taken my own sisters. You will be wearing your travelling dress, and no doubt you would prefer it. Shall we say at half-past seven?"

She rose from her chair.

"I will take a carriage," she said, "and fetch my things."

"Let us say that Café Maston, in the Boulevard des Italiennes, at half-past seven then," he decided. "I shall be waiting for you there, and in the meantime, if you will help yourself – pray don't look like that. It is a very small affair, after all, and you can pay me back if you will."

She took the pocket-book and looked up at him with a little impulsive movement. Her voice shook, her eyes were very soft and melting.

"I cannot thank you, Sir John," she said. "I shall never be able to thank you."

"Won't you postpone the attempt, then?" he said gallantly, "until I have done something to deserve your gratitude? You will not forget – seven-thirty, Café Maston, Boulevard des Italiennes."

She drove off in a little *fiacre*, nodding and smiling at Sir John, who remained upon the Avenue. He too, when she had disappeared, called a carriage.

"Hotel Ritz," he said mechanically to the coachman. "If only her sister is half as pretty, no wonder that she has set the Parisians talking."

Chapter II
THE ADVENTURE OF ANNABEL

The man spoke mercilessly, incisively, as a surgeon. Only he hated the words he uttered, hated the blunt honesty which forced them from his lips. Opposite, his pupil stood with bowed head and clasped hands.

"You have the temperament," he said. "You have the ideas. Your first treatment of a subject is always correct, always suggestive. But of what avail is this? You have no execution, no finish. You lack only that mechanical knack of expression which is the least important part of an artist's equipment, but which remains a tedious and absolute necessity. We have both tried hard to develop it – you and I – and we have failed. It is better to face the truth."

"Much better," she agreed. "Oh, much better."

"Personally," he went on, "I must confess to a great disappointment. I looked upon you from the first as the most promising of my pupils. I overlooked the mechanical imperfections of your work, the utter lack of finish, the crudeness of your drawing. I said to myself, 'this will come.' It seems that I was mistaken. You cannot draw. Your fingers are even now as stiff as a schoolgirl's. You will never be able to draw. You have the ideas. You are an artist by the Divine right of birth, but whatever form of expression may come to you at some time it will not be painting. Take my advice. Burn your palette and your easel. Give up your lonely hours of work here. Look somewhere else in life. Depend upon it, there is a place for you – waiting. Here you only waste your time."

She was silent, and in the gloom of the dimly lit apartment he could not see her face. He drew a little breath of relief. The worst was over now. He continued tenderly, almost affectionately.

"After all, there are great things left in the world for you. Painting is only one slender branch of the great tree. To-night all this may seem hard and cruel. To-morrow you will feel like a freed woman. To-morrow I shall come and talk to you again – of other things."

A man of infinite tact and kindness, he spoke his message and went. The girl, with a little moan, crossed the room and threw open the window.

She looked steadfastly out. Paris, always beautiful even in the darkness, glittered away to the horizon. The lights of the Champs Elysées and the Place de la Concorde, suggestive, brilliant, seductive, shone like an army of fireflies against the deep cool background of the night. She stood there with white set face and nervously clenched fingers. The echo of those kindly words seemed still to ring in her ears. She was crushed with a sense of her own terrible impotency. A failure! She must write herself down a failure! At her age, with her ambitions, with her artistic temperament and creative instincts, she was yet to be denied all coherent means of expression. She was to fall back amongst the ruck, a young woman of talent, content perhaps to earn a scanty living by painting Christmas cards, or teaching at a kindergarten. Her finger-nails dug into her flesh. It was the bitterest moment of her life. She flung herself back into the bare little room, cold, empty, comfortless. In a momentary fury she seized and tore in pieces the study which remained upon the easel. The pieces fell to the ground in a little white shower. It was the end, she told herself, fiercely. And then, as she stood there, with the fragments of the torn canvas at her feet, some even caught upon her skirt, the door was thrown open, and a girl entered humming a light tune.

The newcomer stopped short upon the threshold.

"Anna! What tragedy has happened, little sister? No lights, no supper, no coffee – and, above all, no Mr. Courtlaw. How dreary it all looks. Never mind. Come and help me pack. I'm off to England."

"Annabel, are you mad? To England! You are joking, of course. But come in, dear. I will light the stove, and there shall be some coffee presently."

"Coffee! Bah!"

The newcomer picked her way across the floor with daintily uplifted skirts, and subsided into a deck chair of stretched canvas.

"I will not rob you of your coffee, most dutiful of sisters!" she exclaimed. "I have had adventures – oh, more than one, I can assure you. It has been a marvellous day – and I am going to England."

Anna looked at her sister gravely. Even in her painting smock and with her disarranged hair, the likeness between the two girls was marvellous.

"The adventures I do not doubt, Annabel," she said. "They seem to come to you as naturally as disappointment – to other people. But to England! What has happened, then?"

Already the terror of a few hours ago seemed to have passed away from the girl who leaned back so lazily in her chair, watching the tip of her patent shoe swing backwards and forwards. She could even think of what had happened. Very soon she would be able to forget it.

"Happened! Oh, many things," she declared indolently. "The most important is that I have a new admirer."

The wonderful likeness between the two girls was never less noticeable than at that moment. Anna stood looking down upon her sister with grave perturbed face. Annabel lounged in her chair with a sort of insolent *abandon* in her pose, and wide-open eyes which never flinched or drooped. One realized indeed then where the differences lay; the tender curves about Anna's mouth transformed into hard sharp lines in Annabel's, the eyes of one, truthful and frank, the other's more beautiful but with less expression – windows lit with dazzling light, but through which one saw – nothing.

"A new admirer, Annabel? But what has that to do with your going to England?"

"Everything! He is Sir John Ferringhall – very stupid, very respectable, very egotistical. But, after all, what does that matter? He is very much taken with me. He tries hard to conceal it, but he cannot."

"Then why," Anna asked quietly, "do you run away? It is not like you."

Annabel laughed softly.

"How unkind!" she exclaimed. "Still, since it is better to tell you, Sir John is very much in earnest, but his respectability is something altogether too overpowering. Of course I knew all about him years ago, and he is exactly like everybody's description of him. I am afraid, Anna, just a little afraid, that in Paris I and my friends here might seem a trifle advanced. Besides, he might hear things. That is why I called myself Anna."

"You – you did what?" Anna exclaimed.

"Called myself Anna," the girl repeated coolly. "It can't make any difference to you, and there are not half a dozen people in Paris who could tell us apart."

Anna tried to look angry, but her mouth betrayed her. Instead, she laughed, laughed with lips and eyes, laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

"You little wretch!" she exclaimed weakly. "Why should I bear the burden of your wickedness? Who knows what might come of it? I shall permit nothing of the sort."

Annabel shrugged her shoulders.

"Too late, my dear girl," she exclaimed. "I gave your name. I called myself Anna. After all, what can it matter? It was just to make sure. Three little letters can't make a bit of difference."

"But it may matter very much indeed," Anna declared. "Perhaps for myself I do not mind, but this man is sure to find out some day, and he will not like having been deceived. Tell him the truth, Annabel."

"The truth!"

There was a brief but intense silence. Anna felt that her words had become charged with a fuller and more subtle meaning than any which she had intended to impart. "The truth!" It was a moment of awkwardness between the two sisters – a moment, too, charged with its own psychological interest, for there were secrets between them which for many months had made their intercourse a constrained and difficult thing. It was Annabel who spoke.

"How crude you are, Anna!" she exclaimed with a little sigh. "Sir John is not at all that sort. He is the kind of man who would much prefer a little dust in his eyes. But heavens, I must pack!"

She sprang to her feet and disappeared in the room beyond, from which she emerged a few minutes later with flushed cheeks and dishevelled hair.

"It is positively no use, Anna," she declared, appealingly. "You must pack for me. I am sorry, but you have spoilt me. I can't do it even decently myself, and I dare not run the risk of ruining all my clothes."

Anna laughed, gave in and with deft fingers created order out of chaos. Soon the trunk, portmanteau and hat box were ready. Then she took her sister's hand.

"Annabel," she said, "I have never asked you for your confidence. We have lived under the same roof, but our ways seem to have lain wide apart. There are many things which I do not understand. Have you anything to tell me before you go?"

Annabel laughed lightly.

"My dear Anna! As though I should think of depressing you with my long list of misdeeds."

"You have nothing to tell me?"

"Nothing!"

So Annabel departed with the slightest of farewells, wearing a thick travelling veil, and sitting far back in the corner of a closed carriage. Anna watched her from the windows, watched the carriage jolt away along the cobbled street and disappear. Then she stepped back into the empty room and stood for a moment looking down upon the scattered fragments of her last canvas.

"It is a night of endings," she murmured to herself. "Perhaps for me," she added, with a sudden wistful look out of the bare high window, "a night of beginnings."

Chapter III
ANNA? OR ANNABEL?

Sir John was wholly unable to understand the laugh and semi-ironical cheer which greeted his entrance to the smoking-room of the English Club on the following evening. He stood upon the threshold, dangling his eye-glasses in his fingers, stolid, imperturbable, mildly interrogative. He wanted to know what the joke against him was – if any.

"May I enquire," he asked smoothly, "in what way my appearance contributes to your amusement? If there is a joke I should like to share it."

A fair-haired young Englishman looked up from the depths of his easy chair.

"You hear him?" he remarked, looking impressively around. "A joke! Sir John, if you had presented yourself here an hour ago we should have greeted you in pained silence. We had not then recovered from the shock. Our ideal had fallen. A sense of loss was amongst us. Drummond," he continued, looking across at his *vis-à-vis*, "we look to you to give expression to our sentiments. Your career at the bar had given you a command of language, also a self-control not vouchsafed to us ordinary mortals. Explain to Sir John our feelings."

Drummond, a few years older, dark, clean-shaven, with bright eyes and humorous mouth, laid down his paper and turned towards Sir John. He removed his cigarette from his lips and waved it gently in the air.

"Holcroft," he remarked, "in bald language, and with the usual limitations of his clouded intellect, has still given some slight expression to the consternation which I believe I may say is general amongst us. We looked upon you, my dear Sir John, with reverence, almost with awe. You represented to us the immaculate Briton, the one Englishman who typified the Saxonism, if I may coin a word, of our race. We have seen great and sober-minded men come to this unholy city, and become degenerates. We have known men who have come here for no other purpose than to prove their unassailable virtue, who have strode into the arena of temptation, waving the – the what is it – the white flower of a blameless life, only to exchange it with marvellous facility for the violets of the Parisienne. But you, Ferringhall, our pattern, an erstwhile Sheriff of London, a county magistrate, a prospective politician, a sober and an upright man, one who, had he aspired to it, might even have filled the glorious position of Lord Mayor – James, a whisky and Apollinaris at once. I cannot go on. My feelings overpower me."

"You all seem to be trying to pull my leg," Sir John remarked quietly. "I suppose you'll come to the point soon – if there is one."

Drummond shook his head in melancholy fashion.

"He dissembles," he said. "After all, how easy the descent is, even for the greatest of us. I hope that James will not be long with that whisky and Apollinaris. My nerves are shaken. I require stimulant."

Sir John seated himself deliberately.

"I should imagine," he said, shaking out a copy of *The Times*, "that it is your brain which is addled."

Drummond looked up with mock eagerness.

"This," he exclaimed, "must be either the indifference of an utterly callous nature, or it may be – ye gods, it may be – innocence. Holcroft, we may have been mistaken."

"Think not," that young man remarked laconically.

"I will put the question," Drummond said gravely. "Ferringhall, were you or were you not dining last night at a certain restaurant in the Boulevard des Italiennes with —*la petite* Pellissier?"

Now indeed Sir John was moved. He sat up in his chair as though the question had stung him. *The Times* slipped from his fingers. His eyes were bright, and his voice had in it an unaccustomed *timbre*.

"It is true," he said, "that I was dining last night at a restaurant in the Boulevard des Italiennes, and it is true that my companion was a young lady whose name is Pellissier. What of it?"

There was a shout of laughter. Sir John looked about him, and somehow the laugh died away. If such a thing in connexion with him had been possible they would have declared that he was in a towering rage. An uncomfortable silence followed. Sir John once more looked around him.

"I repeat, gentlemen," he said, in an ominously low tone, "what of it?"

Drummond shrugged his shoulders.

"You seem to be taking our little joke more seriously than it deserves, Ferringhall," he remarked.

"I fail to see the joke," Sir John said. "Kindly explain it to me."

"Certainly! The thing which appeals to our sense of humour is the fact that you and *la petite* Pellissier were dining together."

"Will you tell me," Sir John said ponderously, "by what right you call that young lady —*la petite* Pellissier? I should be glad to know how you dare to allude to her in a public place in such a disrespectful manner!"

Drummond looked at him and smiled.

"Don't be an ass, Ferringhall," he said tersely. "Annabel Pellissier is known to most of us. I myself have had the pleasure of dining with her. She is very charming, and we all admire her immensely. She sings twice a week at the 'Ambassador's' and the 'Casino Mavise' – "

Sir John held up his hand.

"Stop," he said. "You do not even know what you are talking about. The young lady with whom I was dining last night was Miss Anna Pellissier. Miss Annabel is her sister. I know nothing of that young lady."

There was a moment's silence. Drummond took up a cigarette and lit it.

"The young lady, I presume, told you that her name was Anna," he remarked.

"It was not necessary," Sir John answered stiffly. "I was already aware of the fact. I may add that the family is well known to me. The two aunts of these young ladies lived for many years in the dower house upon my estate in Hampshire. Under the circumstances you must permit me to be the best judge of the identity of the young lady who did me the honour, as an old family friend, of dining with me."

Like most men who lie but seldom, he lied well. Drummond smoked his cigarette meditatively. He remembered that he had heard stories about the wonderful likeness between these two sisters, one of whom was an artist and a recluse, whilst the other had attached herself to a very gay and a very brilliant little *coterie* of pleasure-seekers. There was a bare chance that he had been mistaken. He thought it best to let the matter drop. A few minutes later Sir John left the room.

He walked out into the Champs Elysées and sat down. His cigar burnt out between his fingers, and he threw it impatiently away. He had seldom been more perturbed. He sat with folded arms and knitted brows, thinking intently. The girl had told him distinctly that her name was Anna. Her whole conduct and tone had been modest and ladylike. He went over his interview with her again, their conversation at dinner-time. She had behaved in every way perfectly. His spirits began to rise. Drummond had made an abominable mistake. It was not possible for him to have been deceived. He drew a little sigh of relief.

Sir John, by instinct and training, was an unimaginative person. He was a business man, pure and simple, his eyes were fastened always upon the practical side of life. Such ambitions as he had were stereotyped and material. Yet in some hidden corner was a vein of sentiment, of which for the first time in his later life he was now unexpectedly aware. He was conscious of a peculiar pleasure

in sitting there and thinking of those few hours which already were becoming to assume a definite importance in his mind – a place curiously apart from those dry-as-dust images which had become the gods of his prosaic life. Somehow or other his reputation as a hardened and unassailable bachelor had won for him during the last few years a comparative immunity from attentions on the part of those women with whom he had been brought into contact. It was a reputation by no means deserved. A wife formed part of his scheme of life, for several years he had been secretly but assiduously looking for her. In his way he was critical. The young ladies in the somewhat mixed society amongst which he moved neither satisfied his taste nor appealed in any way to his affections. This girl whom he had met by chance and befriended had done both. She possessed what he affected to despise, but secretly worshipped – the innate charm of breeding. The Pellissiers had been an old family in Hampshire, while his grandfather had driven a van.

As in all things, so his thoughts came to him deliberately. He pictured himself visiting the girl in this shabby little home of her aunt's – she had told him that it was shabby – and he recalled that delicious little smile with which she would surely greet him, a smile which seemed to be a matter of the eyes as well as the lips. She was poor. He was heartily thankful for it. He thought of his wealth for once from a different point of view. How much he would be able to do for her. Flowers, theatre boxes, carriages, the "open sesame" to the whole world of pleasure. He himself, middle-aged, steeped in traditions of the City and money-making, very ill-skilled in all the lighter graces of life, as he himself well knew, could yet come to her invested with something of the halo of romance by the almost magical powers of an unlimited banking account. She should be lifted out of her narrow little life, and it should be all owing to him. And afterwards! Sir John drew his cigar from his lips, and looked upwards where the white-lights flashed strangely amongst the deep cool green of the lime-trees. His lips parted in a rare smile. Afterwards was the most delightful part of all!..

If only there had not been this single torturing thought – a mere pin-prick, but still curiously persistent. Suddenly he stopped short. He was in front of one of the more imposing of the *cafés chantants*– opposite, illuminated with a whole row of lights, was the wonderful poster which had helped to make 'Alcide' famous. He had looked at it before without comprehension. To-night the subtle suggestiveness of those few daring lines, fascinating in their very simplicity, the head thrown back, the half-closed eyes – the inner meaning of the great artist seemed to come to him with a rush. He stood still, almost breathless. A slow anger burned in the man. It was debauching, this – a devilish art which drew such strange allurements from a face and figure almost Madonna-like in their simplicity. Unwillingly he drew a little nearer, and became one of the group of loiterers about the entrance. A woman touched him lightly on the arm, and smiled into his face.

"Monsieur admires the poster?"

As a rule Sir John treated such advances with cold silence. This woman, contrary to his custom, he answered.

"It is hateful – diabolical!" he exclaimed.

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"It is a great art," she said in broken English. "The little English girl is very fortunate. For what indeed does she do? A simple song, no gesture, no acting, nothing. And they pay her. Monsieur is going inside perhaps?"

But Sir John's eyes were still riveted upon the poster, and his heart was beating with unaccustomed force. For just as though a vague likeness is sometimes borne swiftly in upon one, so a vague dissimilarity between the face on the poster and the heroine of his thoughts had slowly crept into his consciousness. He drew a little breath and stepped back. After all, he had the means of setting this tormenting doubt at rest. She had mentioned the address where she and her sister had lived. He would go there. He would see this sister. He would know the truth then once and for all. He walked hastily to the side of the broad pavement and summoned a *fiacre*.

Chapter IV
THE TEMPERAMENT OF AN ARTIST

"You may sit there and smoke, and look out upon your wonderful Paris," Anna said lightly. "You may talk – if you can talk cheerfully, not unless."

"And you?" asked David Courtlaw.

"Well, if I find your conversation interesting I shall listen. If not, I have plenty to think about," she answered, leaning back in her chair, and watching the smoke from her own cigarette curl upwards.

"For instance?"

She smiled.

"How I am to earn enough *sous* for my dinner to-morrow – or failing that, what I can sell."

His face darkened.

"And yet," he said, "you bid me talk cheerfully, or not at all."

"Why not? Your spirits at least should be good. It is not you who runs the risk of going dinnerless to-morrow."

He turned upon her almost fiercely.

"You know," he muttered, "you know quite well that your troubles are far more likely to weigh upon me than my own. Do you think that I am utterly selfish?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Troubles, my friend," she exclaimed lightly. "But I have no troubles."

He stared at her incredulously, and she laughed very softly.

"What a gloomy person you are!" she murmured. "You call yourself an artist – but you have no temperament. The material cares of life hang about your neck like a millstone. A doubt as to your dinner to-morrow would make you miserable to-night. You know I call that positively wicked. It is not at all what I expected either. On the whole, I think that I have been disappointed with the life here. There is so little *abandon*, so little real joyousness."

"And yet," he murmured, "one of the greatest of our writers has declared that the true spirit of Bohemianism is denied to your sex."

"He was probably right," she declared. "Bohemianism is the least understood word ever coined. I do not think that I have the Bohemian spirit at all."

He looked at her thoughtfully. She wore a plain black dress, reaching almost to her throat – her small oval face, with the large brown eyes, was colourless, delicately expressive, yet with something mysterious in its Sphinx-like immobility. A woman hard to read, who seemed to delight in keeping locked up behind that fascinating rigidity of feature the intense sensibility which had been revealed to him, her master, only in occasional and rare moments of enthusiasm. She reminded him sometimes of the one holy and ineffable Madonna, at others of Berode, the great courtezan of her day, who had sent kings away from her doors, and had just announced her intention of ending her life in a convent.

"I believe that you are right," he said softly. "It is the worst of including in our vocabulary words which have no definite meaning, perhaps I should say of which the meaning varies according to one's personal point of view. You, for instance, you live, you are not afraid to live. Yet you make our Bohemianism seem like a vulgar thing."

She stirred gently in her chair.

"My friend," she said, "I have been your pupil for two years. You have watched all the uncouth creations of my brain come sprawling out upon the canvas, and besides, we have been companions. Yet the fact remains that you do not understand me at all. No, not one little bit. It is extraordinary."

"It is," he replied, "the one humiliation of my life. My opportunities have been immense, and my failure utter. If I had been your companion only, and not your master, I might very well have

been content to accept you for what you seem. But there have been times, Anna, when your work has startled me. Ill-drawn, without method or sense of proportion, you have put wonderful things on to canvas, have drawn them out of yourself, notwithstanding your mechanical inefficiency. God knows how you did it. You are utterly baffling."

She laughed at him easily and mirthfully.

"Dear friend," she said, "do not magnify me into a physiological problem. I should only disappoint you terribly some day. I think I know where I am puzzling you now – "

"Then for Heaven's sake be merciful," he exclaimed. "Lift up one corner of the curtain for me."

"Very well. You shall tell me if I am wrong. You see me here, an admitted failure in the object to which I have devoted two years of my life. You know that I am practically destitute, without means or any certain knowledge of where my next meal is coming from. I speak frankly, because you also know that no possible extremity would induce me to accept help from any living person. You notice that I have recently spent ten francs on a box of the best Russian cigarettes, and that there are roses upon my table. You observe that I am, as usual, fairly cheerful, and moderately amiable. It surprises you. You do not understand, and you would like to. Very well! I will try to help you."

Her hand hung over the side of her chair nearest to him. He looked at it eagerly, but made no movement to take it. During all their long comradeship he had never so much as ventured to hold her fingers. This was David Courtlaw, whose ways, too, had never been very different from the ways of other men as regards her sex.

"You see, it comes after all," she continued, "from certain original convictions which have become my religion. Rather a magniloquent term, perhaps, but what else am I to say? One of these is that the most absolutely selfish thing in the world is to give way to depression, to think of one's troubles at all except of how to overcome them. I spend many delightful hours thinking of the pleasant and beautiful things of life. I decline to waste a single second even in considering the ugly ones. Do you know that this becomes a habit?"

"If you would only teach us all," he murmured, "how to acquire it."

"I suppose people would say that it is a matter of temperament," she continued. "With me I believe that it is more. It has become a part of the order of my life. Whatever may happen to-morrow I shall be none the better for anticipating its miseries to-day."

"I wonder," he said, a trifle irrelevantly, "what the future has in store for you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Is that not rather a profitless speculation, my friend?"

He seemed deaf to her interruption. His grey eyes burned under his shaggy eyebrows. He leaned towards her as though anxious to see more of her face than that faint delicate profile gleaming like marble in the uncertain light.

"You were born for great things," he said huskily. "For great passions, for great accomplishments. Will you find your destiny, I wonder, or will you go through life like so many others – a wanderer, knocking ever at empty doors, homeless to the last? Oh, if one could but find the way to your heart."

She laughed gaily.

"Dear friend," she said, "remember that you are speaking to one who has failed in the only serious object which she has ever sought to accomplish. My destiny, I am afraid, is going to lead me into the ruts."

He shook his head.

"You were never born," he declared, "to follow the well worn roads. I wonder," he added, after a moment's pause, "whether you ever realize how young you are."

"Young? I am twenty-four."

"Yet you are very young. Anna, why will you persist in this single-handed combat with life?"

"Don't!" she cried.

"But I must, I will," he answered fiercely. "Oh, I know you would stop me if you could. This time you cannot. You are the woman I love, Anna. Let me make your future for you. Don't be afraid that I shall stunt it. I will give you a broad free life. You shall have room to develop, you shall live as you will, where you will, only give me the right to protect you, to free you from all these petty material cares."

She laid her hand softly upon his.

"Dear friend," she said, "do you not think that you are breaking an unspoken compact? I am very sorry. In your heart you know quite well that all that you have said is useless."

"Ay," he repeated, looking away from her. "Useless – worse than useless."

"You are foolish," she declared, with a note of irritability in her tone. "You would appear to be trying to destroy a comradeship which has been very, very pleasant. For you know that I have made up my mind to dig a little way into life single-handed. I, too, want to understand – to walk with my head in the light. Love is a great thing, and happiness a joy. Let me go my own way towards them. We may meet – who can tell? But I will not be fettered, even though you would make the chains of roses. Listen."

She stopped short. There was a sharp knocking at the outside door. Courtlaw rose to his feet.

"It is too late for visitors," she remarked. "I wonder would you mind seeing who it is."

Courtlaw crossed the room and threw open the door. He had come to Anna's rooms from a dinner party, and he was in evening dress. Sir John, who was standing outside, looked past him at the girl still sitting in the shadow.

"I believe," he said stiffly, "that these are the apartments of Miss Pellissier. I must apologize for disturbing you at such an unseemly hour, but I should be very much obliged if Miss Pellissier would allow me a few minutes' conversation. My name is Ferringhall – Sir John Ferringhall."

Chapter V
"ALCIDE"

Courtlaw took up his hat and coat at once, but Anna motioned him to remain.

"Please stay," she said briefly. "Will you come in, Sir John. I believe that I have heard my sister speak of you. This is my friend, Mr. David Courtlaw – Sir John Ferringhall."

Sir John acknowledged the introduction without cordiality. He entered the room with his usual deliberation, and looked covertly about him. He noticed the two chairs close together. Anna was still holding her cigarette between her fingers. Her likeness to her sister gave him at first almost a shock; a moment afterwards he was conscious of a wonderful sense of relief. For if the likeness between the sisters was remarkable, the likeness between this girl and the poster which he had come from studying was more remarkable still.

"I must repeat," Sir John said, "that I much regret disturbing you at such an unseemly hour. My only excuse is that I missed my way here, and I am leaving Paris early to-morrow morning."

"If your business with me is of any importance," Anna said calmly, "it does not matter in the least about the hour. Have you brought me a message from my sister? I understood, I believe, that she was seeing you last night."

"Your sister," he answered, "did me the honour of dining with me last night."

"Yes."

After all, it was not so easy. The girl's eyes never left his face. She was civil, but she was obviously impatient to know his errand. Afraid, no doubt, he thought grimly, that her other visitor would leave.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that I shall do best to throw myself upon your consideration and tell you the truth. I have recently made your sister's acquaintance, and in the course of conversation I understood from her that her Christian name was Anna. Some friends who saw us dining together persist in alluding to her as Miss Annabel Pellissier. I am guilty practically of the impertinence of coming to ask you whether I misunderstood your sister."

"Is my sister's Christian name, then, of so much importance to you?" she asked with a faint smile.

"The things involved in it are," he answered gravely.

She accepted his rejoinder with a brief nod. Courtlaw opened his lips, but remained silent in the face of her imperative gesture. "Let me hasten," she said, "to reassure you. My sister was scarcely likely to make a mistake. She told you – the truth."

Courtlaw's walking stick, which he had been handling, fell with a crash to the ground. He stooped to recover it, and his face was hidden. Sir John felt and looked several years younger.

"I am much obliged to you," he said. "Really, I do not know why I should have doubted it."

"Nor I," she remarked tersely.

He looked at her with a certain curiosity. She was a very elegant young woman, slightly taller perhaps than her sister, and with an air of reserved strength underneath her quiet face and manner which Annabel may have lacked. It was hard to associate her with the stories which he and all Paris had heard of "Alcide."

"You, then," he said, "are 'Alcide.' That wonderful poster – is of you."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"I am sorry," she said, "if you find the likeness unsatisfactory. My friends consider it wonderfully faithful. Have you any more questions to ask me?"

Sir John, on his way down, had determined to hint to this young woman that, providing certain contingencies which he had in his mind should come to pass, he would be prepared to make her

a handsome offer to change her name. He found, however, that now the time had come he utterly lacked the courage to attempt any such speech.

"None, I thank you," he answered. "I will not intrude upon you further."

"Wait," she said.

He turned back at once.

"I have answered all your questions," she said. "Perhaps you will not object to answering one for me. You have thought it worth while to take some considerable pains to resolve for yourself my sister's identity. May I ask the nature of your interest in her?"

He hesitated.

"It is not an easy matter," he said, "for me to offer you an altogether adequate explanation. I have only seen your sister for a very brief time, and I am a little past the age when a man does headstrong things. At the same time, I must say that I am most anxious to improve my acquaintance with her. I am a single man, and – "

"Thank you," she interrupted. "I will not ask you to explain further. Good night."

He left at once, immensely relieved, yet scarcely satisfied with himself as regarded his share of the interview with this young woman. They heard his footsteps descending the stone staircase, growing fainter and fainter. Then Courtlaw looked across at her with a white puzzled face.

"Why did you lie to that man?" he asked fiercely. "How dared you do yourself this injustice?"

"I did it for her sake," she answered. "It may be her salvation. I believe that he will marry her."

"You would let him – knowing – all that you know?"

"Why not? She is my flesh and blood. She is more dear to me than anything else. Perhaps if I had watched over her more closely, things would have been different."

"You! Why, you have been an angel to her," he exclaimed impatiently. "You know very well that she is selfish and pleasure-loving to the backbone. You have made enough sacrifices for her surely without this. Besides, you cannot tell where it will end. You have taken upon your shoulders the burden of her misdeeds. You may have to carry them further and longer than you think. Oh, it is unbearable."

The man's face was dark with passion. It was as though he were personally aggrieved. His tone was rough, almost threatening. The girl only smiled at him serenely, but she laid her hand for a moment quietly upon his.

"Dear friend," she said, "this is a matter which you must leave to me to do as I think best. Annabel is my only sister, you know, almost my only relative. If I do not look after her, she has no one. And she is very young, younger than her years."

It was significant of her influence over him that he answered her calmly, although a storm of angry thoughts were struggling for expression within him.

"Look after her! Why not? But you have done it all your life. You have been her guardian angel. But even you cannot alter her character. Annabel was born soulless, a human butterfly, if ever there was one. The pursuit of pleasure, self-gratification, is an original instinct with her. Blood and bone, body and spirit, she is selfish through and through. Even you have not been able to hold her back. I speak no harm of her. She is your sister, and God knows I wish her none. But – "

A look checked him.

"I know," she said quietly, "that Paris, where she has been so much admired, is not a good place for her. That is why I am glad that she has gone to London."

He rose from his chair, and walked restlessly up and down the room. The passion of pent-up speech compelled action of some sort. There was a black fear in his heart. He stopped before her suddenly.

"You, too," he said abruptly. "You mean to follow her. You will go to London?"

"It is necessary," she answered. "You yourself have decided that – apart from the question of Annabel."

He was suddenly calm.

"It is part of the irony of life," he said. "One is always playing the surgeon, one kills always the thing one loves best. I meant to lie to you. Would to God I had."

She shook her head.

"The surgeon's knife is surely a kindly weapon," she declared. "It was best for me to know. Later on I could scarcely have forgiven you."

"And now – I am to lose you."

"For a little time," she answered. "I meant to say good-bye to you to-night. Or, after all, is it worth while? The Channel is a little broader than the Boulevards – but one crosses it sometimes."

He looked at her with white, set face.

"Yes," he said, "I shall come. That is very certain. But, after all, it will be different. I think that I have become a drug drinker. I need you every day. In the mornings I find labour easy because I am going to see you. In the afternoon my brain and fingers leap to their work because you have been with me. Anna, you shall not go. I cannot let you go."

She threw away the end of her cigarette. Without turning or looking in his direction she leaned forwards, her head supported upon her fingers, her elbows upon her knees. She gazed steadily out of the window at that arc of glittering lights. He made a quick movement towards her, but she did not flinch. His arm fell to his side. The effort of self-repression cost him a sob.

"David," she said, "you are not a coward, are you?"

"I do not know," he muttered. "The bravest of us have joints in our armour."

"You are not a coward," she repeated, "or you would not be my friend. A woman may choose any one for her lover, but for her friend she makes no mistake. You are not a coward David, and you must not talk like one. Put out your hand and bid me God-speed. It is the only way."

"I cannot do it!" he cried hoarsely. "I cannot part with you. You have grown into my life. Anna – "

Again she stopped him, but this time it was not so easy. The man's passion became almost unbearable at the thought of losing her. And yet, as she rose slowly to her feet and stood looking at him with outstretched hands, a strange mixture of expressions shining in her wonderful eyes, he realized in some measure the strength of her determination, felt the utter impotence of anything which he could say to her. He forgot for the moment his own self-pity, the egotism of his own passionate love. He took her hands firmly in his and raised them to his lips.

"You shall go," he declared. "I will make of the days and weeks one long morning, but remember the afternoon must come. Always remember that."

Her hands fell to her side. She remained for a few moments standing as though listening to his retreating footsteps. Then she turned, and entering the inner room, commenced to dress hastily for the street.

Chapter VI
A QUESTION OF IDENTIFICATION

The little man with the closely-cropped beard and hair looked at her keenly through his gold eye-glasses. He sat before a desk littered all over with papers and official looking documents. The walls of the room were lined with shelves, on which were glass jars, retorts, countless bottles and many appliances of surgical science. A skeleton was propped against the mantelpiece. The atmosphere seemed heavy with the odour of drugs.

"You are Mademoiselle Pellissier?" he asked, without rising to his feet.

Anna admitted the fact.

"We sent for you several hours ago," he remarked.

"I came directly I was disengaged," Anna answered. "In any case, there is probably some mistake. I have very few friends in Paris."

He referred to a sheet of paper by his side.

"Your name and address were upon an envelope found in the pocket of an Englishman who was brought here late last night suffering from serious injuries," he said in a dry official tone. "As it is doubtful whether the man will live, we should be glad if you would identify him."

"It is most unlikely that I shall be able to do so," Anna answered. "To the best of my belief, I have not a single English acquaintance in the city."

"My dear young lady," the official said irritably, "this man would not have your name and address in his pocket without an object. You cannot tell whether you know him or not until you have seen him. Be so good as to come this way."

With a little shrug of the shoulders Anna followed him. They ascended by a lift to one of the upper floors, passed through a long ward, and finally came to a bed in the extreme corner, round which a screen had been arranged. A nurse came hurrying up.

"He is quiet only this minute," she said to the official. "All the time he is shouting and muttering. If this is the young lady, she can perhaps calm him."

Anna stepped to the foot of the bed. An electric light flashed out from the wall. The face of the man who lay there was clearly visible. Anna merely glanced at the coarse, flushed features, and at once shook her head.

"I have never seen him in my life," she said to the official. "I have not the least idea who he is."

Just then the man's eyes opened. He saw the girl, and sprang up in bed.

"Annabel at last," he shouted. "Where have you been? All these hours I have been calling for you. Annabel, I was lying. Who says that I am not Meysey Hill? I was trying to scare you. See, it is on my cards – M. Hill, Meysey Hill. Don't touch the handle, Annabel! Curse the thing, you've jammed it now. Do you want to kill us both? Stop the thing. Stop it!"

Anna stepped back bewildered, but the man held out his arms to her.

"I tell you it was a lie!" he shouted wildly. "Can't you believe me? I am Meysey Hill. I am the richest man in England. I am the richest man in the world. You love money. You know you do, Annabel. Never mind, I've got plenty. We'll go to the shops. Diamonds! You shall have all that you can carry away, sacks full if you like. Pearls too! I mean it. I tell you I'm Meysey Hill, the railway man. Don't leave me. Don't leave me in this beastly thing. Annabel! Annabel!"

His voice became a shriek. In response to an almost imperative gesture from the nurse, Anna laid her hand upon his. He fell back upon the pillows with a little moan, clutching the slim white fingers fiercely. In a moment his grasp grew weaker. The perspiration stood out upon his forehead. His eyes closed.

Anna stepped back at once with a little gasp of relief. The hand which the man had been holding hung limp and nerveless at her side. She held it away from her with an instinctive repulsion, born of her unconquerable antipathy to the touch of strangers. She began rubbing it with her pocket-handkerchief. The man himself was not a pleasant object. Part of his head was swathed in linen bandages. Such of his features as were visible were of coarse mould. His eyes were set too close together. Anna turned deliberately away from the bedside. She followed the official back into his room.

"Well?" he asked her tersely.

"I can only repeat what I said before," she declared. "To the best of my belief, I have never seen the man in my life."

"But he recognized you," the official objected.

"He fancied that he did," she corrected him coolly. "I suppose delusions are not uncommon to patients in his condition."

The official frowned.

"Your name and address in his pocket was no delusion," he said sharply. "I do not wish to make impertinent inquiries into your private life. Nothing is of any concern of ours except the discovery of the man's identity. He was picked up from amongst the wreckage of a broken motor on the road to Versailles last night, and we have information that a lady was with him only a few minutes before the accident occurred."

"You are very unbelieving," Anna said coldly. "I hope you will not compel me to say again that I do not know the man's name, nor, to the best of my belief, have I ever seen him before in my life."

The official shrugged his shoulders.

"You decline to help us in any way, then," he said. "Remember that the man will probably die. He had little money about him, and unless friends come to his aid he must be treated as a pauper."

"I do not wish to seem unfeeling," Anna said, slowly, "but I can only repeat that I am absolutely without concern in the matter. The man is a stranger to me."

The official had no more to say. Only it was with a further and most unbelieving shrug of the shoulders that he resumed his seat.

"You will be so good as to leave us your correct name and address, mademoiselle," he said curtly.

"You have them both," Anna answered.

He opened the door for her with a faint disagreeable smile.

"It is possible, mademoiselle," he said, "that this affair is not yet ended. It may bring us together again."

She passed out without reply. Yet she took with her an uneasy consciousness that in this affair might lie the germs of future trouble.

As she crossed the square, almost within a stone's throw of her lodgings, she came face to face with Courtlaw. He stopped short with a little exclamation of surprise.

"My dear friend," she laughed, "not so tragic, if you please."

He recovered himself.

"I was surprised, I admit," he said. "You did not tell me that you were going out, or I would have offered my escort. Do you know how late it is?"

She nodded.

"I heard the clock strike as I crossed the square," she answered. "I was sent for to go to the Hospital St. Denis. But what are you doing here?"

"Old Père Runeval met me on your doorstep, and he would not let me go. I have been sitting with him ever since. The Hospital St. Denis, did you say? I hope that no one of our friends has met with an accident."

She shook her head.

"They wanted me to identify some one whom I had certainly never seen before in my life, and to tell you the truth, they were positively rude to me because I could not. Have you ever heard the name of Meysey Hill?"

"Meysey Hill?" He repeated it after her, and she knew at once from his tone and his quick glance into her face that the name possessed some significance for him.

"Yes, I have heard of him, and I know him by sight," he admitted. "He was a friend of your sister's, was he not?"

"I never heard her mention his name," she answered. "Still, of course, it is possible. This man was apparently not sure whether he was Meysey Hill or not."

"How long had he been in the hospital?" Courtlaw asked.

"Since last night."

"Then, whoever he may be, he is not Meysey Hill," Courtlaw said. "That young man was giving a luncheon party to a dozen friends at the Café de Paris to-day. I sat within a few feet of him. I feel almost inclined to regret the fact."

"Why?" she asked.

"If one half of the stories about Meysey Hill are true," he answered, "I would not stretch out my little finger to save his life."

"Isn't that a little extreme?"

"I am an extreme person at times. This man has an evil reputation. I know of scandalous deeds which he has done."

Anna had reached the house where she lodged, but she hesitated on the doorstep.

"Have you ever seen Annabel with him?" she asked.

"Never."

"It is odd that this man at the hospital should call himself Meysey Hill," she remarked.

"If you wish," he said, "I will go there in the morning and see what can be done for him."

"It would be very kind of you," she declared. "I am only sorry that I did not ask you to go with me."

She rang the bell, and he waited by her side until she was admitted to the tall, gloomy lodging-house. And ever after it struck him that her backward smile as she disappeared was charged with some special significance. The door closed upon her, and he moved reluctantly away. When next he asked for her, some twelve hours later, he was told that Mademoiselle had left. His most eager inquiries and most lavish bribes could gain no further information than that she had left for England, and that her address was – London.

Chapter VII
MISS PELLISSIER'S SUSPICIONS

"Anna!"

Anna kissed her sister and nodded to her aunt. Then she sat down – uninvited – and looked from one to the other curiously. There was something about their greeting and the tone of Annabel's exclamation which puzzled her.

"I wish," she said, "that you would leave off looking at me as though I were something grisly. I am your very dutiful niece, aunt, and your most devoted sister, Annabel. I haven't murdered any one, or broken the law in any way that I know of. Perhaps you will explain the state of panic into which I seem to have thrown you."

Annabel, who was looking very well, and who was most becomingly dressed, moved to a seat from which she could command a view of the road outside. She was the first to recover herself. Her aunt, a faded, anæmic-looking lady of somewhat too obtrusive gentility, was still sitting with her hand pressed to her heart.

Annabel looked up and down the empty street, and then turned to her sister.

"For one thing, Anna," she remarked, "we had not the slightest idea that you had left, or were leaving Paris. You did not say a word about it last week, nor have you written. It is quite a descent from the clouds, isn't it?"

"I will accept that," Anna said, "as accounting for the surprise. Perhaps you will now explain the alarm."

Miss Pellissier was beginning to recover herself. She too at once developed an anxious interest in the street outside.

"I am sure, Anna," she said, "I do not see why we should conceal the truth from you. We are expecting a visit from Sir John Ferringhall at any moment. He is coming here to tea."

"Well?" Anna remarked calmly.

"Sir John," her aunt repeated, with thin emphasis, "is coming to see your sister."

Anna drummed impatiently with her fingers against the arm of her chair.

"Well!" she declared good-humouredly. "I shan't eat him."

Miss Pellissier stiffened visibly.

"This is not a matter altogether for levity, Anna," she said. "Your sister's future is at stake. I imagine that even you must realize that this is of some importance."

Anna glanced towards her sister, but the latter avoided her eyes.

"I have always," she admitted calmly, "taken a certain amount of interest in Annabel's future. I should like to know how it is concerned with Sir John Ferringhall, and how my presence intervenes."

"Sir John," Miss Pellissier said impressively, "has asked your sister to be his wife. It is a most wonderful piece of good fortune, as I suppose you will be prepared to admit. The Ferringhalls are of course without any pretence at family, but Sir John is a very rich man, and will be able to give Annabel a very enviable position in the world. The settlements which he has spoken of, too, are most munificent. No wonder we are anxious that nothing should happen to make him change his mind."

"I still – "

Anna stopped short. Suddenly she understood. She grew perhaps a shade paler, and she glanced out into the street, where her four-wheeler cab, laden with luggage, was still waiting.

"Sir John of course disapproves of me," she remarked slowly.

"Sir John is a man of the world," her aunt answered coldly. "He naturally does not wish for connexions which are – I do not wish to hurt you feelings, Anna, but I must say it – not altogether desirable."

The irrepressible smile curved Anna's lips. She glanced towards her sister, and curiously enough found in her face some faint reflection of her own rather sombre mirth. She leaned back in her chair. It was no use. The smile had become a laugh. She laughed till the tears stood in her eyes.

"I had a visit from Sir John in my rooms," she said. "Did he tell you, Annabel?"

"Yes."

"He mentioned the matter to me also," Miss Pellissier remarked stiffly. "The visit seems to have made a most painful impression upon him. To tell you the truth, he spoke to me very seriously upon the subject."

Anna sprang up.

"I will be off," she declared. "My cab with all that luggage would give the whole show away. Good-bye, aunt."

Miss Pellissier tried ineffectually to conceal her relief.

"I do not like to seem inhospitable, Anna," she said hesitatingly. "And of course you are my niece just as Annabel is, although I am sorry to learn that your conduct has been much less discreet than hers. But at the same time, I must say plainly that I think your presence here just now would be a great misfortune. I wish very much that you had written before leaving Paris."

Anna nodded.

"Quite right," she said. "I ought to have done. Good-bye aunt. I'll come and see you again later on. Annabel, come to the door with me," she added a little abruptly. "There is something which I must say to you."

Annabel rose and followed her sister from the room. A maidservant held the front door open. Anna sent her away.

"Annabel," she said brusquely. "Listen to me."

"Well?"

"Sir John came to me – that you know – and you can guess what I told him. No, never mind about thanking me. I want to ask you a plain question, and you must answer me faithfully. Is all that folly done with – for ever?"

Annabel shivered ever so slightly.

"Of course it is, Anna. You ought to know that. I am going to make a fresh start."

"Be very sure that you do," Anna said slowly. "If I thought for a moment that there was any chance of a relapse, I should stop here and tell him the truth even now."

Annabel looked at her with terrified eyes.

"Anna," she cried, "you must believe me. I am really in earnest. I would not have him know – now – for the world."

"Very well," Anna said. "I will believe you. Remember that he's not at all a bad sort, and to speak frankly, he's your salvation. Try and let him never regret it. There's plenty to be got out of life in a decent sort of way. Be a good wife to him. You can if you will."

"I promise," Annabel declared. "He is very kind, Anna, really, and not half such a prig as he seems."

Anna moved towards the door, but her sister detained her.

"Won't you tell me why you have come to England?" she said. "It was such a surprise to see you. I thought that you loved Paris and your work so much."

A momentary bitterness crept into Anna's tone.

"I have made no progress with my work," she said slowly, "and the money was gone. I had to ask Mr. Courtlaw for his true verdict, and he gave it me. I have given up painting."

"Anna!"

"It is true, dear. After all there are other things. All that I regret are the wasted years, and I am not sure that I regret them. Only of course I must begin something else at once. That is why I came to London."

“But what are you going to do – where are you going to live?” Annabel asked. “Have you any money?”

“Lots,” Anna answered laconically. “Never mind me. I always fall on my feet, you know.”

“You will let us hear from you – let us know where you are, very soon?” Annabel called out from the step.

Anna nodded as she briskly crossed the pavement.

“Some day,” she answered. “Run in now. There’s a hansom coming round the corner.”

Anna sat back in her cab, but found it remain stationary.

“Gracious!” she exclaimed to herself. “I don’t know where to go to.”

The cabman, knocking with the butt end of his whip upon the window, reminded her that he was in a similar predicament.

“Drive towards St. Pancras,” she directed, promptly. “I will tell you when to stop.”

The cab rumbled off. Anna leaned forward, watching the people in the streets. It was then for the first time she remembered that she had said nothing to her sister of the man in the hospital.

Chapter VIII
"WHITE'S"

Northwards, away from the inhospitality of West Kensington, rumbled the ancient four-wheel cab, laden with luggage and drawn by a wheezy old horse rapidly approaching its last days. Inside was Anna, leaning a little forward to watch the passers-by, bright-eyed, full to the brim of the insatiable curiosity of youth – the desire to understand and appreciate this new world in which she found herself. She was practically an outcast, she had not even the ghost of a plan as to her future, and she had something less than five pounds in her pocket. She watched the people and hummed softly to herself.

Suddenly she thrust her head out of the window.

"Please stop, cabman," she ordered.

The man pulled up. It was not a difficult affair.

"Is this Montague Street, W.C.?" she asked.

The man looked as though he would have liked to deny it, but could not.

"Stay where you are for a moment," she directed. "I want to find an address."

The man contented himself with a nod. Anna rummaged about in her dressing-case, and finally drew out a letter. On the envelope was written —

Sydney Courtlaw, Esq.,
13, Montague St.

She put her head out of the window.

"Number 13, please, cabman."

"We've come past it, miss," the man answered, with a note of finality in his gruff voice.

"Then turn round and go back there," she directed.

The man muttered something inaudible, and gathered up the reins. His horse, which had apparently gone to sleep, preferred to remain where he was. After a certain amount of manœuvring, however, he was induced to crawl around, and in a few minutes came to stop again before a tall brightly-painted house, which seemed like an oasis of colour and assertive prosperity in a long dingy row. This was number 13, Montague Street, familiarly spoken of in the neighbourhood as "White's."

Anna promptly alighted with the letter in her hand. The door was opened for her by a weary-looking youth in a striped jacket several sizes too large for him. The rest of his attire was nondescript.

"Does Mr. Courtlaw, Mr. Sydney Courtlaw, live here, please?" Anna asked him.

"Not home yet, miss," the young man replied. "Generally gets here about seven."

Anna hesitated, and then held out the letter.

"I think that I will leave this letter for him," she said. "It is from his brother in Paris. Say that I will call again or let him know my address in London."

The young man accepted the letter and the message, and seemed about to close the door when a lady issued from one of the front rooms and intervened. She wore a black satin dress, a little shiny at the seams, a purposeless bow of white tulle at the back of her neck, and a huge chatelaine. She addressed Anna with a beaming smile and a very creditable mixture of condescension and officiousness. Under the somewhat trying incandescent light her cheeks pleaded guilty to a recent use of the powder puff.

"I think that you were inquiring for Mr. Courtlaw," she remarked. "He is one of our guests – perhaps I should say boarders here, but he seldom returns before dinner-time. We dine at seven-thirty. Can I give him any message for you?"

"Thank you," Anna answered. "I have a letter for him from his brother, which I was just leaving."

"I will see that he gets it immediately on his return," the lady promised. "You did not wish to see him particularly this evening, then?"

Anna hesitated.

"Well, no," she answered. "To tell you the truth though, I am quite a stranger in London, and it occurred to me that Mr. Courtlaw might have been able to give me an idea where to stop."

The lady in black satin looked at the pile of luggage outside and hesitated.

"Were you thinking of private apartments, a boarding-house or an hotel?" she asked.

"I really had not thought about it at all," Anna answered smiling. "I expected to stay with a relation, but I found that their arrangements did not allow of it. I have been used to living in apartments in Paris, but I suppose the system is different here."

The lady in black satin appeared undecided. She looked from Anna, who was far too nice-looking to be travelling about alone, to that reassuring pile of luggage, and wrinkled her brows thoughtfully.

"Of course," she said diffidently, "this is a boarding-house, although we never take in promiscuous travellers. The class of guests we have are all permanent, and I am obliged to be very careful indeed. But – if you are a friend of Mr. Courtlaw's – I should like to oblige Mr. Courtlaw."

"It is very nice of you to think of it," Anna said briskly. "I should really like to find somewhere to stay, if it was only for a few nights."

The lady stood away from the door.

"Will you come this way," she said, "into the drawing-room? There is no one there just now. Most of my people are upstairs dressing for dinner. The gentlemen are so particular now, and a good thing too, I say. I was always used to it, and I think it gives quite a tone to an establishment. Please sit down, Miss – dear me, I haven't asked you your name yet."

"My name is Pellissier," Anna said, "Anna Pellissier."

"I am Mrs. White," the lady in black satin remarked. "It makes one feel quite awkward to mention such a thing, but after all I think that it is best for both parties. Could you give me any references?"

"There is Mr. Courtlaw," Anna said, "and my solicitors, Messrs. Le Mercier and Stowe of St. Heliers. They are rather a long way off, but you could write to them. I am sorry that I do not know any one in London. But after all, Mrs. White, I am not sure that I could afford to come to you. I am shockingly poor. Please tell me what your terms are."

"Well," Mrs. White said slowly, "it depends a good deal upon what rooms you have. Just now my best ones are all taken."

"So much the better," Anna declared cheerfully. "The smallest will do for me quite well."

Mrs. White looked mysteriously about the room as though to be sure that no one was listening.

"I should like you to come here," she said. "It's a great deal for a young lady who's alone in the world, as I suppose you are at present, to have a respectable home, and I do not think in such a case that private apartments are at all desirable. We have a very nice set of young people here too just at present, and you would soon make some friends. I will take you for thirty-five shillings a week. Please don't let any one know that."

"I have no idea what it costs to live in London," Anna said, "but I should like very much to come for a short time if I might."

"Certainly," Mrs. White said. "Two days' notice shall be sufficient on either side."

"And I may bring my luggage in and send that cabman away?" Anna asked. "Dear me, what a relief! If I had had any nerves that man would have trampled upon them long ago."

"Cabmen are so trying," Mrs. White assented. "You need have no further trouble. The manservant shall bring your trunks in and pay the fare too, if you like."

Anna drew out her purse at once.

"You are really a good Samaritan," she declared. "I am perfectly certain that that man meant to be rude to me. He has been bottling it up all the way from West Kensington."

Mrs. White rang the bell.

"Come upstairs," she said, "and I will show you your room. And would you mind hurrying a little. You won't want to be late the first evening, and it's ten minutes past seven now. Gracious, there's the gong. This way, my dear – and – you'll excuse my mentioning it, but a quiet blouse and a little chiffon, you know, will be quite sufficient. It's your first evening, and early impressions do count for so much. You understand me, I'm sure."

Anna was a little puzzled, but she only laughed.

"Perhaps, as I've only just arrived," she remarked, "I might be forgiven if I do not change my skirt. I packed so hurriedly that it will take me a long time to find my things."

"Certainly," Mrs. White assured her. "Certainly. I'll mention it. You're tired, of course. This is your room. The gong will go at seven-thirty. Don't be late if you can help it."

Anna was not late, but her heart sank within her when she entered the drawing-room. It was not a hopeful looking group. Two or three podgy-looking old men with wives to match, half-a-dozen overdressed girls, and a couple of underdressed American ones, who still wore the clothes in which they had been tramping half over London since breakfast time. A sprinkling of callow youths, and a couple of pronounced young Jews, who were talking loudly together in some unintelligible jargon of the City. What had she to do with such as these? She had hard work to keep a smiling face, as Mrs. White, who had risen to greet her, proceeded with a formal, and from Anna's point of view, a wholly unnecessary round of introductions. And then suddenly – a relief. A young man – almost a boy, slight, dark, and with his brother's deep grey eyes – came across the room to her.

"You must be the Miss Pellissier of whom David has told me so much," he said, shyly. "I am very glad that you have come here. I heard from David about you only this morning."

"You are marvellously like your brother," Anna said, beaming upon him. "I have a letter for you, and no end of messages. Where can we sit down and talk?"

He led her across the room towards a window recess, in which a tall, fair young man was seated with an evening paper in his hand.

"Let me introduce my friend to you," Courtlaw said. "Arthur, this is Miss Pellissier – Mr. Brendon. Brendon and I are great chums," he went on nervously. "We are clerks in the same bank. I don't think that the rest of the people here like us very well, do they, Arthur, so we're obliged to be friends."

Anna shook hands with Brendon – a young man also, but older and more self-possessed than Sydney Courtlaw.

"Sydney is quite right, Miss Pellissier," he said. "He and I don't seem to get on at all with our fellow-guests, as Mrs. White calls them. You really ought not to stay here and talk to us. It is a most inauspicious start for you."

"Dear me," Anna laughed, "how unfortunate! What ought I to do? Should I be forgiven, do you think, if I were to go and hold that skein of wool for the old lady in the yellow cap?"

"Don't speak of her irreverently," Brendon said, in an awed whisper. "Her husband was a county councillor, and she has a niece who comes to see her in a carriage. I wish she wouldn't look like that at us over her glasses."

Horace, the manservant, transformed now into the semblance of a correctly garbed waiter, threw open the door.

"Dinner is served, ma'am," he announced to Mrs. White.

There was no rush. Everything was done in a genteel and ordinary way, but on the other hand, there was no lingering. Anna found herself next Sydney Courtlaw, with his friend close at hand. Opposite to her was a sallow-visaged young man, whose small tie seemed like a smudge of obtusively shiny black across the front of a high close-drawn collar. As a rule, Courtlaw told her softly, he talked

right and left, and to everybody throughout the whole of the meal – to-night he was almost silent, and seemed to devote his whole attention to staring at Anna. After the first courses however she scarcely noticed him. Her two new friends did their best to entertain her.

"I can't imagine, Miss Pellissier," Brendon said, leaning towards her, "whatever made you think of coming to stay if only for a week at a Montague Street boarding-house. Are you going to write a novel?"

"Not I," she answered gaily. "I came to London unexpectedly, and my friends could not take me in. I had a vague sort of idea that this was the region where one finds apartments, so I told my cabman to drive in this direction while I sat inside his vehicle and endeavoured to form a plan of campaign. He brought me past this house, and I thought I would call and leave your brother's letter. Then I saw Mrs. White – "

"No more," Sydney Courtlaw begged, laughingly. "You were booked of course. An unexpected vacancy, wasn't it? Every one comes in on unexpected vacancy."

"And they go?"

"When they get the chance. It really isn't so easy to go as it seems. We have come to the conclusion, Brendon and I, that Mrs. White is psychologically gifted. She throws a sort of spell over us all. We struggle against it at first, but in the end we have to submit. She calls us her guests, but in reality we are her prisoners. We simply can't get away. There's that old gentleman at the end of the table – Bullding his name is. He will tell you confidentially that he simply hates the place. Yet he's been here for six years, and he's as much a fixture as that sham mahogany sideboard. Everyone will grumble to you confidentially – Miss Ellicot, she's our swagger young lady, you know – up there, next to Miss White, she will tell you that it is so out of the world here, so far away from everyone one knows. Old Kesterton, choleric-looking individual nearly opposite, will curse the cooking till he's black in the face, but he never misses a dinner. The Semitic looking young man opposite, who seems to have been committing you to memory piecemeal, will tell you that he was never so bored in all his life as he has been here. Yet he stays. They all stay!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.