Garland Hamlin

The Light of the Star: A Novel

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Содержание

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I

AFTER the appointment with Miss Merival reached him (through the hand of her manager), young Douglass grew feverishly impatient of the long days which lay between. Waiting became a species of heroism. Each morning he reread his manuscript and each evening found him at the theatre, partly to while away the time, but mainly in order that he might catch some clew to the real woman behind the shining mask. His brain was filled with the light of the star – her radiance dazzled him.

By day he walked the streets, seeing her name on every bill-board, catching the glow of her subtle and changeful beauty in every window. She gazed out at him from brows weary with splendid barbaric jewels, her eyes bitter and disdainful, and hopelessly sad. She smiled at him in framework of blue and ermine and pearls – the bedecked, heartless coquette of the pleasure-seeking world. She stood in the shadow of gray walls, a grating over her head, with deep, soulful, girlish eyes lifted in piteous appeal; and in each of these characters an unfathomed depth remained to vex and to allure him.

Magnified by these reflections on the walls, haloed by the teeming praise and censure of the press, she seemed to dominate the entire city as she had come to absorb the best of his own life. What her private character really was no one seemed to know, in spite of the special articles and interviews with her managers which fed the almost universal adulation of her dark and changeful face, her savage and sovereign beauty. There was insolence in her tread, and mad allurement in the rounded beauty of her powerful white arm – and at his weakest the young playwright admitted that all else concerning her was of no account.

At the same time he insisted that he was not involved with the woman – only with the actress. "I am not a lover – I am a playwright, eager to have my heroine adequately portrayed," he contended with himself in the solitude of his room, high in one of the great apartment buildings of the middle city. Nevertheless, the tremor in his nerves caused him thought.

Her voice. Yes, that, too, was mysterious. Whence came that undertone like the moan of a weary wastrel tortured with dreams of idyllic innocence long lost? Why did her utterance, like her glorious face, always suggest some inner, darker meaning? There were times when she seemed old – old as vice and cruelty, hoarse with complaints, with curses, and then again her lips were childishly sweet, and her voice carried only the wistful accents of adolescence or the melody of girlish awe.

On the night before his appointment she played *The Baroness Telka*, a lurid, lustful, remorseless woman – a creature with a vampire's heart and the glamour of Helen of Troy – a woman whose cheeks were still round and smooth, but whose eyes were alight with the flame of insanity – a frightful, hungry, soulless wretch. And as he sat at the play and watched that glittering, inexplicable woman, and thought of her rôles, Douglass asked himself: "How will she meet me to-morrow? What will be the light in her eyes when she turns them upon me? Will she meet me alone – haughty, weary with praise, or will she be surrounded by those who bow to her as to a queen?" This latter thing he feared.

He had not been without experience with women – even with actresses; but no woman he had ever met had appealed to his imagination beyond the first meeting. Would it be so with Helen Merival? He had loved twice in his life, but not well enough to say so to either of his sweethearts. Around Myra's name clung the perfume and moonlight of summer evenings in the far-off mid-continent village where he was born, while Violet recalled the music, the comfort, and the security of a beautiful Eastern home. Neither of these sweet and lovely girls had won his heart completely. How was it that

this woman of the blazoning bill-boards had already put more of passion into his heart than they of the pure and sheltered life?

He did not deceive himself. It was because Helen could not be understood at a glance. She appealed to his imagination as some strange bird – alien voyager – fled from distant islands in dim, purple seas. She typed the dreams of adventuring youth seeking the princesses of other and more romantic lands.

At times he shuddered with a fear that some hidden decay of Helen Merival's own soul enabled her to so horrify her audience with these desolating rôles, and when the curtain fell on *The Baroness*, he was resolved to put aside the chance of meeting the actress. Was it worth while to be made ashamed and bitter? She might stand revealed as a coarse and selfish courtesan – a worn and haggard enchantress whose failing life blazed back to youth only when on the stage. Why be disenchanted? But in the end he rose above this boyish doubt. "What does it matter whether she be true or false? She has genius, and genius I need for my play – genius and power," and in the delusion he rested.

He climbed to his den in the tower as physically wearied as one exhausted with running a race, and fell asleep with his eyelids fluttering in a feverish dream.

The hour of his appointment with her fell upon Sunday, and as he walked up the street towards her hotel the bells in a church on a side street were ringing, and their chimes filled his mind with memories of the small town from which he came. How peaceful and sweet the life of Woodstock seemed now. The little meeting-house, whose shingled spire still pointed at the stars, would always be sweet with the memory of Myra Thurber, whose timid clasp upon his arm troubled him then and pained him now. He had so little to give in return for her devotion – therefore he had given nothing. He had said good-bye almost harshly – his ambition hardening his heart to her appeal.

Around him, in his dream of those far-off days, moved other agile forms – young lovers like Myra and himself, their feet creaking on the glittering snow. They stepped slowly, though the bells called and called. The moonlight was not more clear and untouched of baleful fire than Myra's sweet eyes looking up at him, and now he was walking the wet pavement of the great metropolis, with the clang and grind of cars all about him, on his way to meet a woman whose life was spent in simulating acts as destructive as Myra's had been serene and trustful. At the moment he saw his own life as a thread in some mysterious drama.

"To what does it lead?" he asked, as he drew under the overhanging portal of the great hotel where the star made her home. It was to the man of the West a splendid place. Its builders had been lavish of highly colored marbles and mosaics, spendthrift of light and gilding; on every side shone the signs and seals of predatory wealth. Its walls were like costly confectionery, its ornaments insolent, its waste criminal. Every decorative feature was hot, restless, irreverent, and cruel, quite the sort of avenue one might expect to find in his walk towards the glittering woman of the false and ribald drama.

"She chose her abode with instinctive bad taste," he said, bitterly; and again his weakness, his folly turned him cold; for with all his physical powers he was shy to the point of fear.

He made a sober and singular spot in the blaze of the rotunda. So sombre was his look, so intent his gaze. Youths in high hats and shining shirt-fronts stood in groups conversing loudly, and in the resplendent dining-hall bediamonded women and their sleek-haired, heavy-jewelled partners were eating leisurely, attended by swarms of waiters so eager they trod upon one another's feet.

The clerk eyed him in impassible silence as he took out his worn card-case, saying: "Please send my card to Miss Merival."

"Miss Merival is not receiving any one this evening," the clerk answered, with a tone which was like the slap of a wet glove in the face.

Douglass faced him with a look which made him reflect. "You will let her be the judge of that," he said, and his tone was that of one accustomed to be obeyed.

The little man bowed. "Oh, certainly, Mr. Douglass, but as she left orders – "

When the boy with his card had disappeared into the candy-colored distances, the playwright found himself again studying the face of his incomprehensible sorceress, who looked down upon him even at that moment from a bulletin-board on the hotel wall, Oriental, savage, and sullen – sad, too, as though alone in her solitary splendor. "She can't be all of her parts – which one of them will I find as I enter her room?" he asked himself for the hundredth time.

"Miss Merival will see Mr. Douglass," said the bell-boy. "This way, sir."

As he stepped into the elevator the young man's face grew stern and his lips straightened out into a grim line. It was absurd to think he should be so deeply moved by any woman alive, he who prided himself on his self-possession.

Down a long hall on the tenth floor the boy led him, and tapped at a door, which was opened after a pause by a quiet woman who greeted him with outstretched hand, kindly cordial.

"How do you do, Mr. Douglass? It is very good of you to come," she said, with the simplest inflection.

"This must be an elder sister," he thought, and followed her into a large sitting-room, where a gray-haired woman and a young man were sipping after-dinner coffee.

"Mother, this is Mr. Douglass, the author of *The Modern Stage*, the little book of essays we liked so well." The elderly lady greeted him cordially, but with a timid air. "And this is my brother Hugh," the young man gave Douglass's hand a firm and cordial grip.

"Sit down, please – not there – over here, where the light will fall on you. I want to see how you look," she added, in smiling candor; and with that smile he recognized in his hostess the great actress.

He was fairly dazed, and for the moment entirely wordless. From the very moment the door had opened to him the "glittering woman" had been receding into remote and ever remoter distances, for the Helen Merival before him was as simple, candid, and cordial as his own sister. Her voice had the home inflection; she displayed neither paint nor powder; her hair was plainly brushed – beautiful hair it was, too – and her dress was lovely and in quiet taste.

Her face seemed plain at first, just as her stature seemed small. She was dark, but not so dark as she appeared on the stage, and her face was thinner, a little careworn, it seemed to him; and her eyes – "those leering, wicked eyes" – were large and deep and soft. Her figure was firm, compact, womanly, and modest in every line. No wife could have seemed more of the home than this famous actress who faced him with hands folded in her lap.

He was stupefied. Suddenly he perceived the injustice and the crass folly of his estimate of her character, and with this perception came a broader and deeper realization of her greatness as an actress. Her real self now became more complex than his wildest imagined ideal of her. That this sweet and reflective girl should be the actress was as difficult to understand as that *The Baroness* should be at heart a good woman. For five minutes he hardly heard what she said, so busy was his mind readjusting itself to this abrupt displacement of values. With noiseless suddenness all the lurid light which the advertiser had thrown around the star died away. The faces which mocked and mourned, the clutching hands, the lines of barbaric ornaments, the golden goblets of debauchery, the jewelled daggers, the poison phials – all those accessories, designed to produce the siren of the posters, faded out, and he found himself face to face with a human being like himself, a thoughtful, self-contained, and rather serious American girl of twenty-six or twenty-eight years of age.

Not merely this, but her attitude towards him was that of a pupil. She lifted eyes to him as to one occupying an intellectual height. She began to tell him how much she enjoyed his little book on the drama, which a friend had recommended to her, but as soon as he had fairly recovered himself he led her away from his own work. "I am supposed to be an architect," he explained. "I write of the stage because I love it – and because I am a failure in my profession. My book is a very slight and unambitious attempt."

"But you know the stage and its principles," she insisted; "and your view of the future is an inspiration to those of us who wish to do good work. Your letter was very helpful to me, for I am

deeply discouraged just now. I am disgusted with the drama in which I work. I am weary of these unwholesome parts. You are quite right, I shall never do my best work so long as I am forced to assume such uncongenial rôles. They are all false, every one of them. They are good acting rôles, as acting goes; but I want plays that I can live as well as act. But my manager tells me that the public will not have me in anything else. Do you think they would? Is he right?" She ended in appeal.

"I think the public will take you at your best in anything you do," he replied, with grave gallantry. "I don't know that managers are omniscient. They are only men like the rest of us."

She smiled. "That is high treason; but I'm very much inclined to believe it is true. I am willing to concede that a theatre must be made to pay, but I am not content to think that this splendid art is always to be measured by the number of dollars which fall into the box-office. Take Westervelt as a type. What ideals has he? None whatever, save to find a play that will run forever and advertise itself."

She had dreams, too, it seemed. She glowed with her plans, and as she timidly presented them Douglass perceived that the woman was entirely unconscious of the false glamour, the whirling light and tumult, which outsiders connected with her name. At the centre of the illumination she sat looking out upon the glorified bill-boards, the gay shop windows, the crowded auditoriums, a wholesome, kindly, intelligent woman, subject to moods of discouragement like himself, unwilling to be a slave to a money-grubber. Something in his face encouraged the story of her struggles. She passed to her personal history while he listened as one enthralled.

The actress fled, and the woman drew near. She looked into the man's eyes frankly, unshrinkingly, with humor, with appeal. She leaned towards him, and her face grew exquisitely tender and beautiful. "Oh, it was a struggle! Mother kept boarders in order that Hugh and I might go to school – didn't you, dear old muz?" She laid her hand on her mother's knee, and the mother clasped it. "Father's health grew worse and worse, and at last he died, and then I had to leave school to help earn our living. I began to read for entertainments of various sorts. Father was a Grand Army man, and the posts took an interest in my reading. I really earned a thousand dollars the second year. I doubled that the next year, and considered myself a great public success." She smiled. "Mother, may I let Mr. Douglass see how I looked then?"

The mother nodded consent, and the great actress, after a few moments' search, returned with a package of circulars, each bearing a piquant, girlish face.

"There," she said, as she handed them to Douglass, "I felt the full ecstasy of power when that picture was taken. In this I wore a new gown and a new hat, and I was earning fifty dollars at each reading. My success fairly bewildered me; but oh, wasn't it glorious! I took mother out of a tenement and put her in a lovely little home. I sent Hugh to college. I refurnished the house. I bought pictures and rugs, for you know I continued to earn over two thousand a year. And what fun we had in spending all that money!"

"But how did you reach the stage?" he asked.

She laughed. "By way of 'the Kerosene circuit,' if you know what that means."

"I've heard the phrase," he answered; "it corresponds to the old-time 'barn-storming,' doesn't it?"

"It does."

Hugh interposed. "I wouldn't go into that, sis."

"Why not? It's great fun – now. I used to think it pretty tragic sometimes. Yes, I was nineteen when I went on the New England rural circuit – to give it a better name. Oh, I've been through all the steps! As soon as I felt a little secure about mother, I ventured to New York in answer to advertisements in *The Reflector*, and went out 'on the road' at 'fifteen per.'" These slang phrases seemed humorous as they came from her smiling lips, but Douglass knew some little part of the toil and discomfort they stood for.

Her eyes danced with fun. "I played *The Lady of Lyons* in a 'kitchen set,' and the death-scene in *East Lynne* before a 'wood drop.' And my costumes were something marvellous, weren't they,

mother? Well, this lasted two seasons – summer seasons; while I continued to read in winter in order to indulge my passion for the stage in summer and early autumn. Then I secured a small part in a real company, and at a salary that permitted me to send some money home. I knocked about the country this way two seasons more – that makes me twenty-two. I knew the office of every manager in New York by this time, but had been able to reach an audience with but one or two. They were kind enough, but failed to 'see anything' in me, as the phrase goes; and I was quite disheartened. Oh, 'the Rialto'!" Her face clouded and her voice softened. "It is a brilliant and amusing place to the successful, but to the girl who walks it seeking a theatrical engagement it is a heartless and cruel place. You can see them there to-day – girls eager and earnest and ready to work hard and conscientiously – haunting the agencies and the anterooms of the managers just as I did in those days – only five years ago."

"It seems incredible," exclaimed Douglass. "I thought you came here from a London success."

"So I did, and that is the miraculous chapter of my story. I went to London with Farnum – with only a little part – but McLennan saw me and liked my work, and asked me to take the American adventuress in his new play. And then – my fortune was made. The play was only a partial success, but my own position was established. I continued to play the gay and evil-minded French and Russian woman of the English stage till I was tired of them. Then I tried *Joan of Arc* and *Charlotte Corday*. The public forced me back to *The Baroness Telka*, and to wealth and great fame; and then I read your little book, which seemed directed straight to me, and I asked Hugh to write you – now you have the 'story of me life.' I have had no struggle since – only hard work and great acclaim." She faced her mother with a proud smile. Then her face darkened. "But – there is always a but – I want New York to know me in some better way. I'm tired of these women with cigarettes and spangled dinner-gowns."

She laid her hand again on her mother's knee, and the gentle old fingers closed around the firm, smooth wrist.

"I've told mother that I will cut these rôles out. We are at last in a position to do as we please. I am now waiting for something worth while to come to me. That is my present situation, Mr. Douglass. I don't know why I've been so frank. Now let me hear your play."

He flushed a little. "To tell the truth, I find it rather hard to begin. I feel as though I were re-enacting a worn-out scene in some way. Every other man in the car writes plays nowadays and torments his friends by reading to them, which, I admit, is an abominable practice. However, as I came here for that express purpose, I will at least outline my scenario."

"Didn't you bring the play itself?"

"Yes; but, really, I hesitate. It may bore you to death."

"You could not write a play that would bore me – I am sure of that."

"Very well," he soberly answered, and drew forth his manuscript. As if upon signal, the mother and her son rose to withdraw. "You are entirely justified," said Douglass, with some humor. "I quite understand your feelings."

"We should like very much to hear it, but – "

"No excuses, I beg of you. I wonder at Miss Merival's hardihood. I am quite sure she will live to repent her temerity."

In this spirit of banter the playwright and the star were left alone with the manuscript of the play. As he read on, Douglass was carried out of his own impassivity by the changes in the face before him. It became once more elusive, duskily mysterious in its lines. A reflective shadow darkened the glorious eyes, veiled by drooping lids. Without knowing it, the actress took on from moment to moment the heart-trials of the woman of the play. In a subconscious way even as he read, Douglass analyzed and understood her power. Hers was a soul of swift and subtle sympathy. A word, a mere inflection, was sufficient to set in motion the most complicate and obscure conceptions in her brain, permitting her to comprehend with equal clarity the Egyptian queen of pleasure and the austere devotee to whom joy is a snare. From time to time she uttered little exclamations of pleasure, and at the end of each act motioned him to proceed, as if eager to get a unified impression.

It was after eleven o'clock when he threw down the manuscript, and, white with emotion, awaited her verdict. She was tense with the strain, and her lashes were wet with tears, but her eyes were bright and her mind alert. She had already entered upon a new part, having been swept up into a region of resolution as far away from the pleasant hostess as from the heartless adventuress whose garments she had worn but the night before. With hands clasped between her knees, and shoulders laxly drooping, she brooded on the sorrows of his mimic world.

"I will do your play," she said at last. "I will do it because I believe in its method and because I think it worthy of my highest powers."

The blood rushed to the playwright's throat and a smarting heat dimmed his eyes. He spoke with difficulty. "I thank you," he said, hoarsely. "It is more than I expected; and now that you have promised to do it, I feel you ought not to take the risk." He could say no more, overcome by the cordial emphasis of her decision.

"There is a risk, I will be frank with you; but your play is worth it. I have not been so powerfully moved in years. You have thrilled me. Really I cannot tell you how deeply your theme has sunk into my heart. You have the Northern conscience – so have I; that is why I rebel at being merely the plaything of a careless public. Yes, I will do your play. It is a work of genius. I hope you wrote it in a garret. It's the kind of thing to come from a diet of black bread and water."

He smiled. "I live in a sort of garret, and my meals are frequently beans and brown bread. I hope that will do."

"I am glad the bread is at least brown… But you are tired. Leave the manuscript with me." He rose and she moved towards him with a gesture of confidence which made words impossible to him. "When we meet again I want you to tell me something of yourself… Good-night. You will hear from me soon." She was regal as she said this – regal in her own proper person, and he went away rapt with wonder and admiration of the real Helen Merival as she now stood revealed to him.

"She is greater than my dreams of her," he said, in a sort of rapture as he walked the street. "She is greater than she herself can know; for her genius is of the subtle, unspeakable deeps – below her own consciousness, beyond her own analysis. How much greater her art seems, now that I have seen her. It is marvellous! She will do my play, and she will succeed – her power as an actress would carry it to a success if it were a bad play, which it is not. My day has dawned at last."

Helen went to bed that night with a consciousness that something new and powerful had come into her life. Not merely the play and her determination to do it moved her – the man himself profoundly impressed her. His seriousness, his decision and directness of utterance, and the idealism which shone from his rugged, boyish face remained with her to the verge of sleep. He was very handsome, and his voice singularly beautiful, but his power to charm lay over and beyond these. His sincere eyes, his freedom from flippant slang, these impressed her with a sense of his reliability, his moral worth.

"He is stern and harsh, but he is fine," she said to her mother next morning, "and his play is very strong. I am going to do it. You will like the part of *Lillian*. It has the Scotch sense of moral responsibility in it."

II

DOUGLASS rose next morning with a bound, as if life had somehow become surcharged with fresh significance, fresh opportunity. His professional career seemed dull and prosaic – his critical work of small avail. His whole mind centred on his play.

His was a moody, sensitive nature. Stern as he looked, and strong as he really was, he could be depressed by a trifle or exalted by a word. And reviewing his meeting with Helen in the light of the morning, he had more than a suspicion that he had allowed himself to talk too freely in the presence of the brother and mother, and that he had been over-enthusiastic, not to say egotistic; but he was saved from dejection by the memory of the star's great, brown-black eyes. There was no pretence in them. She had been rapt – carried out of conventional words and graces by something which rose from the lines he had written, the characters he had depicted.

The deeper his scrutiny went the more important she became to him. She was not simple – she was very complex, and an artist of wonderful range, and certainty of appeal. He liked the plain and simple (almost angular) gestures and attitudes she used when talking to him. They were so broadly indicative of the real Helen Merival, and so far from the affectations he had expected to see. Of course, she was the actress – the mobility of her face, her command of herself, was far beyond that of any untrained woman, no matter how versatile; but she was nobly the actress, broadened and deepened by her art.

He was very eager to see her again, and as the day wore on this desire grew to be an ache at his heart most disturbing. He became very restless at last, and did little but walk around the park, returning occasionally as the hour for the postman came. "I don't know why I should expect a letter from her. I know well the dilatory methods of theatrical people – and to-day is rehearsal, too. I am unreasonable. If I hear from her in a week I may count myself lucky."

A message from the dramatic editor of *The Blazon*, asking him to do a special study of an English actor opening that night at the Broadway, annoyed him. "I can't do it," he answered. "I have another engagement." And recklessly put aside the opportunity to earn a week's board, so exalted was he by reason of the word of the woman.

At dinner he lacked appetite entirely, and as he had taken but an egg and a cup of coffee for breakfast, and had missed luncheon altogether, he began to question himself as to the meaning of his ailment, with sad attempt at humor. "It isn't exactly as serious as dying. Even if she reconsiders and returns my play, I can still make a living." He would not admit that any other motive was involved.

He had barely returned to his room before a knock at the door announced a boy with a note. As he took it in his hand his nerves tingled as though he had touched the wondrous woman's hand. The note was brief, yet fateful:

> "I enclose a ticket for the manager's box. I hope you can come. I want to talk about your play. I will send my brother to bring you in back to see me. I have been rehearsing all the afternoon, but I re-read the play this morning while in bed. I like it better and better, but you can do more with it – I feel that you have suppressed the poetry here and there. My quarrel with you realists is that you are afraid to put into your representations of life the emotions that make life a dynamic thing. But it is stirring and suggestive as it is. Come in and talk with me, for I am full of it and see great possibilities in the final act."

His hands were tremulous and his eyes glowing as he put the note down and faced himself in the glass. The pleasure of meeting her again under such conditions made him forget, for the moment, the rôle she was to play – a part he particularly detested. Truly he was the most fortunate and distinguished

of men – to be thus taken by the hand and lifted from nameless obscurity to the most desired position beside a great star.

He dressed with unusual care, and was a as he sat alone in the box; and elated, tense, self-conscious. When she came on and walked close down to the foot-lights nearest him, flashing a glance of recognition into his eyes, his breath quickened and his face flushed. A swift interchange of light and fire took place at the moment, her eyelids fell. She recoiled as if in dismay, then turned and apparently forgot him and every one else in the fervor of her art.

A transforming readjustment of all the lines of her face took place. She became sinister, mocking, and pitiless. An exultant cruelty croaked in her voice. Minute, repulsive remodellings of her neck and cheeks changed her to a harpy, and seeing these evidences of her great genius Douglass grew bitterly resentful, and when she laughed, with the action of a vulture thrusting her head forward from the shoulders, he sickened and turned away. It was marvellous work, but how desecrating to her glorious womanhood. Coming so close on that moment of mystic tenderness it was horrible. "My God! She must not play such parts. They will leave their mark upon her."

When the curtain fell he did not applaud, but drew back into the shadow, sullen, brooding, sorrowful. In the tableau which followed the recall, her eyes again sought for him (though she still moved in character), and the curtain fell upon the scene while yet she was seeking him.

Here now began a transformation in the man. He had come to the theatre tremulous with eagerness to look upon her face, to touch her hand, but when her brother entered the box, saying, "Mr. Douglass, this is the best time to see my sister," he rose slowly with a curious reluctance.

Through devious passages beneath the theatre, Hugh led the way, while with greater poignancy than ever before the young playwright sensed the vulgarity, the immodesty, and the dirt of the world behind and below the scenes. It was all familiar enough to him, for he had several friends among the actors, but the thought of one so sovereign as Helen in the midst of a region so squalid stung him. He was jealous of the actors, the scene-shifters, who were permitted to see her come and go.

He was reserved and rather pale, but perfectly self-contained, as he entered the little reception-hall leading to her dressing-room. He faced her with a sense of dread – apprehensive of some disenchantment. She met him cordially, without the slightest reference to her make-up, which was less offensive than he had feared; but he winced, nevertheless, at the vulgarity of her part so skilfully suggested by paint and powder. She gave him her hand with a frank gesture. "You didn't applaud my scenes to-night," she said, with a smile as enigmatic as the one she used in *The Baroness*.

His voice was curt with emotion as he replied, "No, I did not; I couldn't. They saddened me."

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a startled, anxious paling beneath her rouge.

His voice was low, but fiercely reproachful in answer. "I mean you should treat your beautiful self and your splendid art with greater consideration."

"You mean I should not be playing such women? I know it – I hate them. But no one ever accused me of taking my art lightly. I work harder on these uncongenial rôles than upon any other. They require infinitely more effort, because I loathe them so."

"I mean more than that. I am afraid to have you simulate such passions. They will leave their mark on you. It is defilement. Your womanhood is too fine, too beautiful to be so degraded."

She put her hand to her bosom and looked about her restlessly. His intensity scared her. "I know what you mean, but let us not talk of that now; let us discuss your play. I want to suggest something for your third act, but I must dress now. You will wait, won't you? We will have a few minutes before I go on. Please sit here and wait for me."

He acquiesced silently, as was his fashion. There was little of the courtier about him, but he became very ill at ease as he realized how significant his waiting must seem to those who saw him there. Deeply in the snare as he was, this sitting beside an actress's dressing-room door became intolerable to his arrogant soul, and he was about to flee when Hugh came back and engaged him in conversation. So gratified was Douglass for this kindness, he made himself agreeable till such time as

Helen, in brilliant evening-dress, came out; and when Hugh left them together he was less assertive and brusque in manner.

She was so luminous, so queenly, she dissipated his cloud of doubts and scruples, and the tremor of the boyish lover came back into his limbs as he turned to meet her. His voice all but failed him as he answered to her question.

For some ten minutes from behind her mask she talked of the play with enthusiasm – her sweet eyes untouched of the part she was about to resume. At last she said: "There is my cue. Good-bye! Can you breakfast with us to-morrow, at eleven-thirty? It's really a luncheon. I know you are an early riser; but we will have something substantial. Will you come?"

Her smooth, strong fingers closed cordially on his hand as she spoke, and he answered, quickly, "With the greatest pleasure in the world."

"We can talk at our leisure then. Good-bye!" and as she opened the canvas door in the "box-scene" he heard her say, with high, cool, insulting voice, "Ah, my dear Countess, you are early." She was *The Baroness* again. After the fall of the curtain at the end, Douglass slipped out upon the pavement, his eyes blinded by the radiant picture she made in her splendid bridal robes. It was desolating to see her represent such a rôle, such agony, such despair; and yet his feet were reluctant to carry him away.

He was like a famishing man, who has been politely turned from the glittering, savory dining-room into the street – only his hunger, immaterial as light, was a thousand times keener than that of the one who lacks only bread and meat. He demanded her face, her voice, as one calls for sunlight, for air. He knew that this day, this night, marked a new era in his life. Old things were passed away – new things, sweet, incredible things, were now happening.

Nothing like this unrest and deep-seated desire had ever come into his life, and the realization troubled him as a dangerous weakness. It enslaved him, and he resented it. He secured a new view on his play, also, with its accusing defiance of dramatic law and custom. In this moment of clear vision he was permitted a prevision of Helen struggling with the rebellious critics. Now that he had twice taken her hand he was no longer so indifferent to the warfare of the critics, though he knew they could not harm one so powerful as she.

In the end of his tumult he wrote her a letter, wherein he began by begging her pardon for seeming to interfere in the slightest degree with her work in the world. His letter continued:

> "I have back of me the conscience of my Scotch forebears, and though my training in college and in my office has covered my conscience with a layer of office dust it is still there. Of course (and obviously) you are not touched by the words and deeds of the women you represent, but I somehow feel that it is a desecration of your face and voice to put them to such uses. That is the reason I dreaded to go back and see you to-night. If you were seeking praise of your own proper self, the sincerity of this compliment is unquestionable. I ought to say, 'I hope my words to-night did not disturb you,' but I will not, for I hope to see you speedily drop all such hideous characters as *The Baroness Telka*. I felt as an artist might upon seeing a glorious statue befouled with mire. I say this not because I wish you to do *Lillian*. In the light of last night's performance my own play is a gray autumn day with a touch of frost in the air. It is inconceivable that you should be vitally interested in it. I fear no play that I care to write will please a sufficient number of people to make its production worth your while. I release you from your promise. Believe me, I am shaken in my confidence to-night. Your audience seemed so heartless, so debased of taste. They applauded most loudly the things most revolting to me. Since I have come to know you I cannot afford to have you make a sacrifice of yourself to produce my play, much as I desire to see you in new characters."

As he dropped this letter into the box a storm-wave of his former bitterness and self-accusation swept over him.

"That ends another attempt to get my play staged. Her manager will unquestionably refuse to consider it."

III

HELEN read Douglass's letter next morning while still in bed, and its forthright assault made her shiver. She did not attempt to deceive herself. She acknowledged the singular power of this young man to shake her, to change her course of action. From the first she acknowledged something almost terrifying in the appeal of his eyes, a power which he seemed unconscious of. His words of condemnation, of solicitude, troubled her as the praise of no other man in all her life had done. He had spoken to her soul, making her triumph over the vast audience loathsome – almost criminal.

He was handsome – a manly man – but so were dozens of others of her wide acquaintance. His talent was undeniable, but he was still obscure, undeveloped, a failure as an architect, unambitious as a critic, though that was his best point. His articles in *The Blazon* possessed unusual insight and candor. Beyond this she knew as little of him as of any other of the young newspaper men who sought her acquaintance, and yet he had somehow changed her world for her in these two meetings.

She let the letter fall on her breast, and lay with her eyes fastened upon a big rose in a pot on the window-sill – the gift of another admirer. "I do know more of him. I know that he is strong, sincere. He does not flatter me – not even to win me to his play. He does not hasten to send me flowers, and I like him for that. If I were to take his point of view, all my rôles and half my triumphs would drop from me. But *is* there not a subtle letting-down, a disintegration? May he not be right, after all?"

She went over once more the talk of the few moments they had spent together, finding each time in all his words less to criticise and more to admire. "He does not conceal his hate," she said; and she might have added, "Or his love," for she was aware of her dominion, and divined, though she did not whisper it even to herself, that his change of attitude with regard to her rôles came from his change of feeling towards her. "He has a great career. I will not allow him to spoil his own future," she decided, at length, in her own large-minded way. And there were sweet, girlish lines about her mouth when her mother came in to inquire how she felt.

"Very much like work, mamma, and I'm going to catch up on my correspondence. Mr. Douglass is coming to take breakfast with us, to talk about his play. I wish you would see that there is something that a big man can eat."

The note she sent in answer to his was like herself – firm, assured, but gentle:

> "Mr. Douglass, – 'What came you out for to see – a reed shaken with the wind?' I know my own mind, and I am not afraid of my future. I should be sorry to fail, of course, especially on your account, but a *succès d'estime* is certain in your case, and my own personal following is large enough – joined with the actual lovers of good drama – to make the play pay for itself. Please come to my combination breakfast and luncheon, as you promised, and we can arrange dates and other details of the production, for my mind is made up. I am going to do your play, come what will. I thank you for having started all my dormant resolutions into life again. I shall expect you at twelve-thirty."

Having despatched this note by special messenger, she serenely set to work on less important matters, and met him in modish street dress – trim and neat and very far from the meretricious glitter of *The Baroness*. He was glad of this; he would have disliked her in négligée, no matter how "artistic."

Her greeting was frank and unstudied. "I'm glad you've come. There are oceans of things to talk over."

"There was nothing else for me to do but come," he replied, with a meaning light in his eyes. "Your letter was a command."

"I'm sorry it takes a command to bring you to breakfast with us. True, this is not the breakfast to be given in your honor – that will come later."

"It would be safer to have it before the play is produced," he replied, grimly.

Helen turned to her brother. "Hugh, we have in Mr. Douglass a man not sanguine of the success of his play. What does that argue?"

"A big hit!" he promptly replied.

The servants came and went deftly, and Douglass quite lost sight of the fact that the breakfast-room was high in a tower-like hotel, for Helen's long engagement in the city had enabled her to make herself exceedingly comfortable even amid the hectic color and insistent gilt of the Hotel Embric. The apartment not only received the sun, a royal privilege in New York, but it was gay with flowers, both potted and in vases, and the walls were decorated with drawings of her own choosing. Only the furniture remained uncompromisingly of the hotel tone.

"I did intend to refurnish, but mother, who retains a little of her old Scotch training, talked me out of it," Helen explained, in answer to a query. "Is there anything more hopelessly 'handsome' and shining than these chairs? There's so little to find fault with, and so little to really admire."

"They're like a ready-made suit – unobjectionable, but not fit."

"They have no soul. How could they have? They were made by machines for undistinguished millions." She broke off this discussion. "I am eager for a run through the park. Won't you go? Hugh is my engineer. Reckless as he looks, I find him quite reliable as a tinker, and you know the auto is still in the tinkery stage."

"I have a feeling that it is still in the dangerous stage," he said. "But I will go." He said this in a tone of desperation which amused them all very much.

It was impossible for him to remain glum in the midst of the good cheer of that luxurious little breakfast with the promise of a ride in the park in prospect. A few moments later a young girl, Miss Fanny Cummings, came in with a young man who looked like an actor, but was, in fact, Hugh's college-mate and "advance man" for Helen, and together they went down to the auto-car.

There was a well-defined sense of luxury in being in Helen Merival's party. The attendants in the hotel were so genuinely eager to serve her, and the carefully considered comfort of everything she possessed was very attractive to a man like George Douglass, son of a village doctor, who had toiled from childhood to earn every dollar he spent. To ride in such swift and shining state with any one would have had extraordinary interest, and to sit beside Helen in the comparative privacy of the rear seat put a boyish glow of romance into his heart. Her buoyant and sunny spirit reacted on his moody and supersensitive nature till his face shone with pleasure. He forgot his bitter letter of the night before, and for the moment work and worry were driven from his world. He entered upon a dreamland – the city of menace disappeared.

The avenue was gay with promenaders and thick with carriages. Other autos met them with cordial clamor of gongs, and now and then some driver more lawless than Hugh dashed past them in reckless race towards the park. The playwright had never seen so many of New York's glittering carriages, and the growing arrogance of its wealth took on a new aspect from his newly acquired viewpoint. Here were rapidly centring the great leaders of art, of music, of finance. Here the social climbers were clustering, eager to be great in a city of greatness. Here the chief ones in literature and the drama must come as to a market-place, and with this thought came a mighty uplift. "Surely success is now mine," he thought, exultantly, "for here I sit the favored dramatist of this wondrous woman."

There was little connected conversation – only short volleys of jests as they whizzed along the splendid drives of the park – but Douglass needed little more than Helen's shining face to put him at peace with all the world. Each moment increased their intimacy.

He told her of his stern old father, a country doctor in the West, of the way in which his brother and sisters were scattered from North to South, and how he came to set his face Eastward while all the others went West.

"How handsome he is," thought Helen.

"How beautiful you are," his glances said in answer, and both grew young beneath the touch of love.

When they were once more in the hotel Helen cried out:

"There! Isn't your brain washed clear of all doubts? Come, let's to work at the play."

He looked down at her with eyes whose glow made her eyelids fall in maidenly defence. "I am capable of anything you ask," he said, with quiet power.

After a long and spirited discussion of the last act she said: "Well, now, we'll put it in rehearsal as soon as you feel that it is ready. I believe in doing a part while the spell of its newness is on me. I shall put this on in place of the revival of *Rachel Endicott*." She rose on the wave of her enthusiasm. "I feel the part taking hold of me. I will make *Lillian's Duty* the greatest success of my life, and the lion's share of both honor and money shall be yours."

He left the hotel quite as exalted as he had been previously depressed. The pleasure of sitting by her side for four blessed hours enriched him to the point of being sorry for all the rest of the world. The Prince of Wales had been denied an introduction to her, he had read; therefore the Prince was poor.

IV

THE reading of the play took place on the Monday morning following, and was an exceedingly formal and dignified function. The principal players came prepared to be politely interested, while some of the lesser minds were actually curious to taste the quality of the play as a piece of writing.

As there was no greenroom in the Westervelt, the reading took place on the open stage, which was bleak and draughty. The company sat in a funereal semicircle, with the author, the star, and the manager in a short line facing them. All the men retained their overcoats, for the morning was miserably raw, and at Helen's positive command kept their heads covered; and the supernumerary women sat shivering in their jackets. Helen was regal in a splendid cloak of sable, otherwise there was little of the successful actress in her dress. At her suggestion a box-scene was set around them to keep off at least a part of the draught, and under these depressing conditions the reading proceeded.

Douglass was visibly disheartened by the surroundings, but set manfully to work, and soon controlled the attention of all the players except two, who made it a boast that they had never read a play or listened to one. "I am interested only in me lines, me boy," said one of them.

"And your acting shows it," replied Douglass, with quiet sarcasm, and proceeded to the second act.

"You read that with greater power here than to me," said Helen. "I wish we could give it the same unity and sweep of expression as we act it." She addressed the company in her calm, clear voice: "I hope you will all observe carefully Mr. Douglass's reading. He is giving us most valuable advice in every inflection."

Her attitude towards her company was admirable in its simplicity and reserve. It was plain that she respected their personalities and expected the same high courtesy from them. Some of the men were of the kind who say "My deah" to every woman, and "My deah boy" to the most casual acquaintance – vain, egotistical, wordy, and pompous; but one glance from Helen was sufficient to check an over-familiar hand in mid-air. The boldest of them did not clap her on the shoulder but once.

The reading passed to a rather enthusiastic finish, and Douglass then said: "I have read the play to you carefully, because I believe —*I know*– that an intelligent rendition of your individual parts is impossible without a clear knowledge of the whole drama. My theories of a play and its representation are these: As an author, I see every detail of a scene as if it were a section of life. I know where all my people are at each moment of time, and their positions must be determined by the logic of the picture without any reference to those who wish to hold the centre of the stage. In a certain sense you are only different-colored pigments in my hands, to be laid on to form a unified painting. You must first of all learn to subordinate yourselves to the designs of the author. I know this sounds harsh – seems to reduce you to a very low level of intelligence; but, as a matter of fact, the most highly gifted of our actors to-day are those who are able to do this very thing – to carry in their minds a conception of the unity of a scene, never thrusting their personalities through it or out of it. I mention these points because I intend to assist in the rehearsals, and I don't want to be misunderstood."

Helen interposed a word: "I need not say that I consider this a very powerful play – with that opinion you all agree, I am sure – but I want to say further that Mr. Douglass has the right to demand of each of us subordination to the inner design of his work. I am personally very glad always to avail myself of the author's criticism and suggestion. I hope you will all feel the same willingness to carry out Mr. Douglass's scenes as he has written them. Mr. Saunders, will you please give out the parts and call a rehearsal for to-morrow at ten o'clock sharp?"

At this point all rose. Saunders, a plain little man, highly pleased with his authority, began to bustle about, bellowing boisterously: "Here you are now – everybody come letter-perfect to-morrow. Sharp at ten. No lagging."

The players, accustomed to his sounding assumption of command, paid no attention other than to clutch their rolls of type-written manuscript. Each withdrew into the street with an air of haste.

As Helen received her portion Saunders said: "Here, Miss Merival, is a fat part – must be yours. Jee-rusalem the golden! I'd hate to tackle that rôle."

Douglass was ready to collar the ass for his impudent tone, but Helen seemed to consider it no more than the harmless howl of a chair sliding across the floor. She was inured to the old-time "assistant stage-manager."

Turning to Douglass, she said, "Do you realize, Mr. Author, that we are now actually begun upon your play?"

"No, I do not. I confess it all seems a make-believe – a joke."

"You'll not think it a joke at the end of the week. It's terribly hard work to put on a big piece like this. If I seem apathetic in my part I beg you not to worry. I must save myself all I can. I never begin to act at rehearsal till I have thought the business all out in my mind. But come, you are to lunch with us in honor of the first rehearsal, and it is late."

"It seems a deplorable thing that you must come every morning to this gloomy and repellent place – "

"Ah! this is a part of our life the public knows nothing of. They all come to it – the divine Sarah, Duse – none are exempt. The glamour of the foot-lights at night does not warm the theatre at eleven of the morning."

"I see it does not," he answered, lightly; but in reality he felt that something sweet and something regal was passing out of his conception of her. To see her even seated with these commonplace men and women detracted even from her glory, subjected her to the same laws. It was a relief to get out into the gay street – to her carriage, and to the hotel where the attendants hovered about her as bees about their queen.

She was in high spirits all through the luncheon, and Douglass was carried out of his dark gravity by her splendid vitality, her humor, and her hopefulness.

"All you need is a hearing," she said. "And you shall have that. Oh, but there is a wilderness of work before us! Can you design the scenes? I like to do that. It's like playing with doll-houses. I'll show you how. We'll leave the financial side of it to you, Hugh," she said, to her brother. "Come, Mr. Playwright," and they set to work with paste and card-board like a couple of children, and soon had models of all the sets. They seemed childish things indeed, but Helen was mistress of even the mechanical side of the stage, and these paste-pot sketches were of the greatest value to the scene-painter and the carpenter.

V

THESE three weeks of rehearsal formed the happiest time Douglass had ever known, for all things conspired to make each day brim with mingled work and worship. First of all, and above all, he was permitted to meet Helen each day, and for hours each day, without fear of gossip and without seeking for an excuse.

Each morning, a little before ten, he left his room and went directly to the theatre to meet the company and the manager. The star, prompt as a clock, arrived soon after, and Douglass, beforehand, as a lover, was always there to help her from her carriage and to lead the way through the dark passage to the stage, where the pompous little Saunders was forever marshalling his uneasy vassals in joyous exercise of sovereignty.

Helen was happy as a child during these days, and glowing with new ideas of "business" and stage-setting. "We will spare no work and no expense," she said, buoyantly, to Mr. Westervelt, her manager. "We have a drama worthy of us. I want every one of Mr. Douglass's ideas carried out."

The manager did not know, as Douglass did, that some of the ideas were her own, and so took a melancholy view of every innovation.

"You can't do that," he gloomily repeated. "The public won't stand for new things. They want the old scenes rehashed. The public don't want to think; it wants to laugh. This story is all right for a book, but won't do for a play. I don't see why you quit a good thing for a risk like this. It is foolish and will lose money," he added, as a climax.

"Croak, you old raven – you'll be embarrassed when we fill your money-box," she replied, gayly. "You should have an ideal, Mr. Westervelt."

"An ideal. What should I do with that?"

Like most men, Douglass knew nothing about gowns in their constituent parts, but he had a specially keen eye for the fitting and beautiful in a woman's toilet, and Helen was a constant delight to him because of the distinction of her dresses. They were refined, yet not weakly so – simple, yet always alluring. Under the influence of her optimism (and also because he did not wish to have her apologize for him) he drew on his slender bank-account for funds to provide himself with a carefully tailored suit of clothes and a new hat.

"How well you are looking!" she said, in soft aside, as he met her one morning soon after. "Your hat is very becoming."

"I am made all over new *inside*– so I hastened to typify the change exteriorly. I am rejoiced if you like me in my 'glad rags,'" he replied.

"You are really splendid," she answered, with admiring fervor. "Let us hurry through to-day; I am tired and want a spin in the park."

"That is for you to say," he answered.

"You are never tired," she sighed. "I wish I had your endurance."

"It is the endurance of desperation. I am staking all I have on this venture." Then, in low-toned intensity, he added: "It hurts me to have you forced to go over and over these lines because of the stupidity of a bunch of cheap little people. Why don't you let me read your part?"

"That would not be fair," she answered, quickly – "neither to them nor to you. No, I am an actress, and this is a part of my life. We are none of us exempt from the universal curse."

"Royleston is our curse. Please let me kick him out the stage-door – he is an insufferable ass, and a bad actor besides."

"He is an ass, but he can act. No, it's too late to change him now. Wait; be patient. He'll pull up and surprise you at the final rehearsal."

At four o'clock they were spinning up Fifth Avenue, which resounded with the hoof-strokes of stately horses, and glittered with the light of varnished leather. The rehearsal was put far behind

them. The day was glorious November, and the air sparkling without being chill. A sudden exaltation seized Helen. "It certainly is a beautiful world – don't you think so?" she asked.

"I do now; I didn't two weeks ago," he replied, soberly.

"What has brought the change?"

"You have." He looked at her steadily.

She chose to be evasive. "I had a friend some years ago who was in the deeps of despair because no one would publish her book. Once she had secured the promise of a real publisher that he would take it she was radiant. She thought the firm had been wondrously kind. They made thirty thousand dollars from the sale of her book. I am selfish – don't you think I'm not – I'm going to make fame and lots of money on your play."

"I hope you may, for am I not to share in all your gold and glory? I have greater need of both than you. You already have all that mortal could desire. I don't believe I've told you what I called you before I met you – have I?"

"No; what was it?" Her eyes widened with interest.

"'The glittering woman.'"

She looked puzzled. "Why that?"

"Because of the glamour, the mystery, which surrounded your name."

"Even now I don't see."

He looked amused and cried out: "On my life, I believe you don't! Being at the source of the light, you can't see it, of course. It's like wearing a crown of electric lamps – others see you as a dazzling thing; you are in the dark. It is my trade to use words to express my meaning, but I confess my hesitation in trying to make you see yourself as I saw you. You were like a baleful, purple star, something monstrous yet beautiful. Your fame filled the world and fell into my garret chamber like a lurid sunrise. With your coming, mysterious posters bloomed and crimson letters blazed on street-walls. Praiseful paragraphs appeared in the newspapers, gowns and hats (named after you) and belt-buckles and shoes and cigarettes arranged themselves in the windows, each bearing your name."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.