

Vance Louis Joseph

The Destroying Angel



Louis Vance

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| I | 5 |
| II | 7 |
| III | 11 |
| IV | 16 |
| V | 23 |
| VI | 32 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 37 |

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I DOOM

"Then I'm to understand there's no hope for me?"

"I'm afraid not..." Greyerson said reluctantly, sympathy in his eyes.

"None whatever." The verdict was thus brusquely emphasized by Hartt, one of the two consulting specialists.

Having spoken, he glanced at his watch, then at the face of his colleague, Bushnell, who contented himself with a tolerant waggle of his head, apparently meant to imply that the subject of their deliberations really must be reasonable: anybody who wilfully insists on footing the measures of life with a defective constitution for a partner has no logical excuse for being reluctant to pay the Piper.

Whitaker looked quickly from one to the other of his three judges, acutely sensitive to the dread significance to be detected in the expression of each. He found only one kind and pitiful: no more than might have been expected of Greyerson, who was his friend. Of the others, Hartt had assumed a stony glare to mask the nervousness so plainly betrayed by his staccato accents; it hurt him to inflict pain, and he was horribly afraid lest the patient break down and "make a scene." Bushnell, on the other hand, was imperturbable by nature: a man to whom all men were simply "cases"; he sat stroking his long chin and hoping that Whitaker would have the decency soon to go and leave them free to talk shop – his pet dissipation.

Failing to extract the least glimmering of hope from the attitude of any one of them, Whitaker drew a long breath, unconsciously bracing himself in his chair.

"It's funny," he said with his nervous smile – "hard to realize, I mean. You see, I *feel* so fit – "

"Between attacks," Hartt interjected quickly.

"Yes," Whitaker had to admit, dashed.

"Attacks," said Bushnell, heavily, "recurrent at intervals constantly more brief, each a trifle more severe than its predecessor."

He shut his thin lips tight, as one who has consciously pronounced the last word.

Greyerson sighed.

"But I don't understand," argued the prisoner at the bar, plaintively bewildered. "Why, I rowed with the Crew three years hand-running – not a sign of anything wrong with me!"

"If you had then had proper professional advice, you would have spared yourself such strains. But it's too late now; the mischief can't be undone."

Evidently Bushnell considered the last word his prerogative. Whitaker turned from him impatiently.

"What about an operation?" he demanded of Greyerson.

The latter looked away, making only a slight negative motion with his head.

"The knife?" observed Hartt. "That would merely hasten matters."

"Yes," Bushnell affirmed...

There was a brief uneasy silence in the gloomy consulting room. Then Whitaker rose.

"Well, how long will you give me?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Six months," said Greyerson, miserably avoiding his eye.

"Three," Hartt corrected jerkily.

"Perhaps..." The proprietor of the last word stroked his chin with a contemplative air.

"Thanks," said Whitaker, without irony. He stood for an instant with his head bowed in thought. "What a damned outrage," he observed thoughtfully. And suddenly he turned and flung out of the room.

Greyerson jumped to follow him, but paused as he heard the crash of the street door. He turned back with a twitching, apologetic smile.

"Poor devil!" he said, sitting down at his desk and fishing a box of cigars from one of the drawers.

"Takes it hard," commented Hartt.

"You would, too, at his age; he's barely twenty-five."

"Must feel more or less like a fellow whose wife has run off with his best friend."

"No comparison," said Bushnell bluntly. "Go out, get yourself arrested for a brutal murder you didn't commit, get tried and sentenced to death within six months, the precise date being left to the discretion of the executioner —*then* you'll know how he feels."

"If you ask me" – Greyerson handed round the box – "he feels pretty shaky and abused, and he wants a drink badly – the same as me."

He unlocked a cellaret.

"Married?" Hartt inquired.

"No. That's the only mitigating circumstance," said Greyerson, distributing glasses. "He's quite alone in the world, as far as I know – no near relatives, at least."

"Well off?"

"Tolerably. Comes of good people. Believe his family had a lot of money at one time. Don't know how much of it there was left for Whitaker. He's junior partner in a young law firm down-town – senior a friend or classmate of his, I understand: Drummond & Whitaker. Moves with the right sort of people. Young Stark – Peter Stark – is his closest friend... Well... Say when."

II

THE LAST STRAW

Greyerson was right in his surmise as to Hugh Whitaker's emotions. His soul still numb with shock, his mind was altogether preoccupied with petulant resentment of the unfairness of it all; on the surface of the stunning knowledge that he might count on no more than six months of life, floated this thin film of sensation of personal grievance. He had done nothing to deserve this. The sheer brutality of it...

He felt very shaky indeed.

He stood for a long time – how long he never knew – bareheaded on a corner, just as he had left Greyerson's office: scowling at nothing, considering the enormity of the wrong that had been put upon him. Later, realizing that people were staring, he clapped on his hat to satisfy them and strode aimlessly down Sixth Avenue. It was five o'clock in the afternoon of a day late in April – a raw, chilly, dark, unseasonable brute of a day. He found himself walking fast, instinctively, to keep his blood in warm circulation, and this struck him as so inconsistent that presently he stopped short and snarled at himself:

"You blithering fool, what difference does it make whether you're warm or cold? Don't you understand you're going to die within half a year?"

He strove manfully to grapple with this hideous fact. He felt so well, so strong and efficient; and yet he walked in the black shadow of death, a shadow from which there was for him no escape.

He thought it the damnedest sensation imaginable!

On top of this reflection came the third clause of Greyerson's analysis: he made the discovery that he wanted a drink – a lot of drinks: in point of fact, more than he had ever had before, enough to make him forget.

He turned across-town toward Fifth Avenue, came to his club, and went in. Passing through the office, force of habit swung his gaze to the letter-rack. There was a square white envelope in the W pigeonhole, and it proved to be addressed to him. He knew the handwriting very well – too well; his heart gave a great jump as he recognized it, and then sank like a stone; for not only must he die, but he must give up the girl he loved and had planned to marry. The first thing he meant to do (after getting that drink) was to write to her and explain and release her from her promise. The next thing...

He refused to let the idea of the next step form in his mind. But he knew very well what it would be. In the backwards of his understanding it lurked – a gray, grisly, shameful shadow.

"Anyhow," he muttered, "I'm not going to stick round here, dying by inches, wearing the sympathy of my friends to tatters."

But as yet he dared not name the alternative.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket, and passed on to the elevator gates, meaning to go up to the library and there have his drink and read his letter and write the answer, in peace and quiet. The problem of that answer obsessed his thoughts. It would be hard – hard to write – that letter that meant the breaking of a woman's faithful heart.

The elevator kept him waiting a moment or two, just round the corner from the grill-room door, whence came a sound of voices talking and laughing. One was Billy Hamilton's unmistakable semi-jocular drawl. Whitaker knew it without thinking of it, even as he heard what was being said without, at first, comprehending – heard and afterwards remembered in vivid detail.

"Seems to be the open season for runaways," Hamilton was saying. "It's only a few days since Thurlow Ladislas's daughter – what's her name? – Mary – took the bit between her teeth and bolted with the old man's chauffeur."

Somebody asked: "How far did they get before old Ladislas caught up?"

"He didn't give chase. He's not that kind. If he was put to it, old Thurlow could play the unforgiving parent in a melodrama without any make-up whatever."

"That's right," little Fiske's voice put in. "Chap I know on the *Herald*— reporter — was sent to interview him, but old Ladislas told him quite civilly that he'd been misinformed — he hadn't any daughter named Mary. Meaning, of course, that the girl had defied him, and that his doors were thenceforth barred to her."

"He's just like that," said Hamilton. "Remember his other daughter, Grace, eloping with young Pettit a few years ago? Old Ladislas had a down on Pettit — who's a decent enough kid, notwithstanding — so Grace was promptly disowned and cast into the outer darkness, where there's weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, because Pettit's only something-on-a-small-salary in the diplomatic service, and they've no hope of ever touching a penny of the Ladislas coin."

"But what became of them — Mary and the stoker-person?"

"Nobody knows, except possibly themselves. They're laying low and — probably — getting first-hand information as to the quantity of cheese and kisses they can afford on chauffeur's pay."

"What's she like, this Mary-quite-contrary?" inquired George Brenton's voice. "Anybody ever see her?"

"Oh, nothing but a kid," said little Fiske. "I used to see her often, last summer, kiting round Southampton on a bike. The old man's so mean he wouldn't let her use the car alone... Weedy little beggar, all legs and eyes — skirts to her shoe-tops and hair to her waist."

"Not over eighteen, I gather?"

"Oh, not a day," little Fiske affirmed.

The elevator was waiting by this time, but Whitaker paused an instant before taking it, chiefly because the sound of his own name, uttered by Hamilton, had roused him out of the abstraction in which he had overheard the preceding conversation.

"Anyhow, I'm sorry for Hugh Whitaker. He's going to take this hard, mighty hard."

George Brenton asked, as if surprised: "What? I didn't know he was interested in that quarter."

"You must be blind. Alice Carstairs has had him going for a year. Everybody thought she was only waiting for him to make some big money — he as much as anybody, I fancy."

Brenton added the last straw. "That's tough," he said soberly. "Whitaker's a white man, and Alice Carstairs didn't deserve him. But I wouldn't blame any man for feeling cut-up to be thrown over for an out-and-out rotter like Percy Grimshaw..."

Whitaker heard no more. At the first mention of the name of Alice Carstairs he had snatched her letter from his pocket and thrust his thumb beneath the flap. Now he had withdrawn the enclosure and was reading.

When a mean-spirited, selfish woman starts in to justify herself (especially, on paper) for doing something thoroughly contemptible, the result is apt to be bitterly unfair to everybody involved — except herself. Nobody will ever know just what Alice Carstairs saw fit to write to Hugh Whitaker when she made up her mind to run away with another man; but there can be little doubt that they were venomous words he read, standing there under the curious eyes of the elevator boy and the pages. The blood ebbed from his face and left it ghastly, and when he had torn the paper to shreds and let them flutter about his feet, he swayed perceptibly — so much so that one of the pages took alarm and jumped to his side.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Whitaker — did you call me?"

Whitaker steadied himself and stared until he recognized the boy. "No," he said thickly, "but I want you. Give me a bar order."

The boy produced the printed form and Whitaker hastily scribbled his order on it. "Bring that up to the library," he said, "and be quick about it."

He stumbled into the elevator, and presently found himself in the library. There was no one else about, and Whitaker was as glad of that as it was in him to be glad of anything just then. He

dropped heavily into a big arm-chair and waited, his brain whirling and seething, his nerves on edge and screeching. In this state Peter Stark found him.

Peter sauntered into the room with a manner elaborately careless. Beneath that mask he was anything but indifferent, just as his appearance was anything but fortuitous. It happened that the page who had taken Whitaker's order, knowing that Peter and Hugh were close friends, and suspecting that something was wrong with the latter, had sought out Peter before going to get the order filled. Moreover, Peter had already heard about Alice Carstairs and Percy Grimshaw.

"Hel-lo!" he said, contriving by mere accident to catch sight of Whitaker, who was almost invisible in the big chair with its back to the body of the room. "What you doing up here, Hugh? What's up?"

"It's all up," said Whitaker, trying to pull himself together. "Everything's up!"

"Don't believe it," said Stark, coolly. "My feet are on the ground; but you look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I have – my own," said Whitaker. The page now stood beside him with a tray. "Open it," he told the boy, indicating a half-bottle of champagne; and then to Peter: "I'm having a bath. Won't you jump in?"

Peter whistled, watching the wine cream over the brandy in the long glass. "King's peg, eh?" he said, with a lift of disapproving eyebrows. "Here, boy, bring me some Scotch and plain water for common people."

The boy disappeared as Whitaker lifted his glass.

"I'm not waiting," he said bluntly. "I need this now."

"That's a question, in my mind, at least. Don't you think you've had about enough for one day?"

"I leave it to your superior knowledge of my capacity," said Whitaker, putting aside the empty glass. "That's my first to-day."

Peter saw that he was telling the truth, but the edge of his disapproval remained keen.

"I hope," he said thoughtfully, "that the man who started that lie about drink making a fellow forget died the death of a dog. He deserved to, anyway, because it's one of the cruellest practical jokes ever perpetrated on the human race. I know, because I've tried it on, hard – and waked up sick to my marrow to remember what a disgusting ass I'd made of myself for all to behold." He stopped at Whitaker's side and dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Hugh," he said, "you're one of the best. Don't..."

Whatever he had meant to say, he left unfinished because of the return of the page with his Scotch; but he had said enough to let Whitaker understand that he knew about the Carstairs affair.

"That's all right," said Whitaker; "I'm not going to make a damn' fool of myself, but I am in a pretty bad way. Boy – "

"Hold on!" Peter interrupted. "You're not going to order another? What you've had is enough to galvanize a corpse."

"Barring the negligible difference of a few minutes or months, that's me," returned Whitaker. "But never mind, boy – run along."

"I'd like to know what you mean by that," Peter remarked, obviously worried.

"I mean that I'm practically a dead man – so near it that it makes no difference."

"The devil you say! What's the matter with you?"

"Ask Greyerson. I can't remember the name – it's too long – and I couldn't pronounce it if I did."

Peter's eyes narrowed. "What foolishness has Greyerson been putting into your head?" he demanded. "I've a good mind to go punch his – "

"It isn't his fault," Whitaker asserted. "It's my own – or rather, it's something in the nature of a posthumous gift from my progenitors; several of 'em died of it, and now it seems I must. Greyerson says so, at least, and when I didn't believe him he called in Hartt and Bushnell to hold my ante-mortem. They made it unanimous. If I'm uncommonly lucky I may live to see next Thanksgiving."

"Oh, shut up!" Peter exploded viciously. "You make me tired – you and your bone-headed M.D.'s!"

He worked himself into a comforting rage, damning the medical fraternity liberally for a gang of bloodthirsty assassins and threatening to commit assault and battery upon the person of Greyerson, though Whitaker did his best to make him understand that matters were what they were – irremediable.

"You won't find any higher authorities than Hartt and Bushnell," he said. "They are the court of last resort in such cases. When they hand down a decision, there's no come-back."

"You can't make me believe that," Peter insisted. "It just can't be so. A man like you, who's always lived clean... Why, look at your athletic record! Do you mean to tell me a fellow could hold a job as undisputed best all-round man in his class for four years, and all the time handicapped by a constitutional...? Oh, get out! Don't talk to me. I'm far more likely to be doing my bit beneath the daisies six months from now... I won't believe it!"

His big, red, generous fist described a large and inconclusive gesture of violence.

"Well," he growled finally, "grant all this – which I don't, not for one little minute – what do you mean to do?"

"I don't mind telling you," said Whitaker: "I don't know. Wish I did. Up to within the last few minutes I fully intended to cut the knot with my own knife. It's not reasonable to ask a man to sit still and watch himself go slowly to pieces..."

"No," said Stark, sitting down. "No," he admitted grudgingly; "but I'm glad you've given that up, because I'm right and all these fool doctors are wrong. You'll see. But..." He couldn't help being curious. "But why?"

"Well," Whitaker considered slowly – "it's Alice Carstairs. You know what she's done."

"You don't mean to say you're going – that you think there's any consideration due her?"

"Don't you?" Whitaker smiled wearily. "Perhaps you're right. I don't know. We won't discuss the ethics of the situation; right or wrong, I don't mean to shadow whatever happiness she has in store for her by ostentatiously snuffing myself out just now."

Peter gulped and succeeded in saying nothing. But he stared.

"At the same time," Whitaker resumed, "I don't think I can stand this sort of thing. I can't go round with my flesh creeping to hear the whisperings behind my back. I've got to do something – get away somewhere."

Abrupt inspiration sparked the imagination of Peter Stark, and he began to sputter with enthusiasm.

"I've got it!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "A sea trip's just the thing. Chances are, it'll turn the trick – bring you round all right-O, and prove what asses doctors are. What d'you say? Are you game for a sail? The *Adventuress* is laid up at New Bedford now, but I can have her put in commission within three days. We'll do it – we'll just light out, old man! We'll try that South Seas thing we've talked about so long. What d'you say?"

A warm light glowed in Whitaker's sunken eyes. He nodded slowly.

III

"MRS. MORTEN"

It was three in the morning before Peter Stark, having to the best of his endurance and judgment tired Whitaker out with talking, took his hat and his departure from Whitaker's bachelor rooms. He went with little misgiving; Whitaker was so weary that he would have to sleep before he could think and again realize his terror; and everything was arranged. Peter had telegraphed to have the *Adventuress* rushed into commission; they were to go aboard her the third day following. In the meantime, Whitaker would have little leisure in which to brood, the winding up of his affairs being counted upon to occupy him. Peter had his own affairs to look to, for that matter, but he was prepared to slight them if necessary, in order that Whitaker might not be left too much to himself...

Whitaker shut the hall door, when the elevator had taken Peter away, and turned back wearily into his living-room. It was three in the morning; his body ached with fatigue, his eyes were hot and aching in their sockets, and his mouth hot and parched with excess of smoking; yet he made no move toward his bedchamber. Insomnia was a diagnostic of his malady: a fact he hadn't mentioned to his friend. He had little wish to surrender his mind to the devils that haunt a wakeful pillow, especially now when he could feel the reaction setting in from the anodynous excitement of the last few hours. Peter Stark's whirlwind enthusiasm had temporarily swept him off his feet, and he had yielded to it, unresisting, selfish enough to want to be carried away against the wiser counsels of his intuition.

But now, alone, doubts beset him.

Picking his way across a floor littered with atlases, charts, maps and guide-books, he resumed his chair and pipe and with the aid of a copy of "The Wrecker" and a nightcap, strove to drug himself again with the fascination of the projected voyage. But the savour had gone out of it all. An hour before he had been able to distil a potent magic, thought obliterating, by sheer force of repetition of the names, Apia, Hawaii, Tahiti, Samoa... Now all their promise was an emptiness and a mockery. The book slipped unheeded from his grasp; his pipe grew cold between his teeth; his eyes burned like lamps in their deep hollows, with their steady and undeviating glare...

Dawn-dusk filled the high windows with violet light before he moved.

He rose, went to the bath-room and took a bottle of chloral from the medicine-closet. He wondered at the steadiness of the hand that measured out the prescribed dose – no more, no less. He wondered at the strength of will which enabled him to take no more. There was enough in the bottle to purchase him eternity.

What he took bought him three hours of oblivion. He rose at eight, ordered his breakfast up by telephone, bathed and dressed. When the tray came up, his mail came with it. Among others there was one letter in a woman's hand which he left till the last, amusing himself by trying to guess the identity of the writer, the writing being not altogether strange to him. When at length he gave over this profitless employment, he read:

"Dear Hugh: I can call you that, now, because you're Peter's dearest friend and therefore mine, and the proof of that is that I'm telling you first of all of our great happiness. Peter and I found out that we loved one another only yesterday, so we're going to be married the first of June and..."

Whitaker read no more. He could guess the rest, and for the moment he felt too sick a man to go through to the end. Indeed, the words were blurring and running together beneath his gaze.

After a long time he put the letter aside, absent-mindedly swallowed a cup of lukewarm coffee and rose from an otherwise untasted meal.

"That settles that, of course," he said quietly. "And it means I've got to hustle to get ahead of Peter."

He set busily about his preparations, thinking quickly while he packed. It occurred to him that he had, after all, several hours in which to catch together the loose ends of things and make an exit without leaving the businesses of his clients in a hopeless snarl; Peter Stark would sleep till eleven, at least, and it would be late in the afternoon before the young man could see his fiancée and find out from her that Whitaker knew of the sacrifice Peter contemplated for friendship's sake.

Whitaker packed a hand-bag with a few essentials, not forgetting the bottle of chloral. He was not yet quite sure what he meant to do after he had definitely put himself out of Peter Stark's sphere of influence, but he hadn't much doubt that the drug was destined to play a most important part in the ultimate solution, and would as readily have thought of leaving it behind as of going without a toothbrush or railway fare.

Leaving the bag in the parcels-room at the Grand Central Station, he went down-town to his office and put in a busy morning. Happily his partner, Drummond, was out of town for the day; so he was able to put his desk in order unhindered by awkward questionings. He worked expeditiously, having no callers until just before he was ready to leave. Then he was obliged to admit one who desired to make a settlement in an action brought against him by Messrs. Drummond & Whitaker. He took Whitaker's receipt for the payment in cash, leaving behind him fifteen one-hundred-dollar notes. Whitaker regarded this circumstance as a special dispensation of Providence to save him the bother of stopping at the bank on his way up-town; drew his personal check for the right amount and left it with a memorandum under the paper-weight on Drummond's desk; put a match to a shredded pile of personal correspondence in the fireplace; and caught a train at the Grand Central at one-three.

Not until the cars were in motion did he experience any sense of security from Peter Stark. He had been apprehensive until that moment of some unforeseen move on the part of his friend; Peter was capable of wide but sure casts of intuition on occasion, especially where his affections were touched. But now Whitaker felt free, free to abandon himself to meditative despair; and he did it, as he did most things, thoroughly. He plunged headlong into an everlasting black pit of terror. He considered the world through the eyes of a man sick unto death, and found it without health. Behind him lay his home, a city without a heart, a place of pointing fingers and poisoned tongues; before him the brief path of Fear that he must tread: his broken, sword-wide span leaping out over the Abyss...

He was anything but a patient man at all times, and anything but sane in that dark hour. Cold horror crawled in his brain like a delirium – horror of himself, of his morbid flesh, of that moribund body unfit to sheathe the clean fire of life. The thought of struggling to keep animate that corrupt Self, tainted by the breath of Death, was invincibly terrible to him. All sense of human obligation disappeared from his cosmos; remained only the biting hunger for eternal peace, rest, freedom from the bondage of existence...

At about four o'clock the train stopped to drop the dining-car. Wholly swayed by blind impulse, Whitaker got up, took his hand-bag and left the car.

On the station platform he found himself pelted by a pouring rain. He had left Town in a sodden drizzle, dull and dismal enough in all conscience; here was a downpour out of a sky three shades lighter than India ink – a steadfast, grim rain that sluiced the streets like a gigantic fire-hose, brimming the gutters with boiling, muddy torrents.

The last to leave the train, he found himself without a choice of conveyances; but one remained at the edge of the platform, an aged and decrepit four-wheeler whose patriarchal driver upon the box might have been Death himself masquerading in dripping black oilskins. To Whitaker's inquiry he recommended the Commercial House. Whitaker agreed and imprisoned himself in the body of the vehicle, sitting on stained and faded, threadbare cushions, in company with two distinct odours, of dank and musty upholstery and of stale tuberoses. As they rocked and crawled away, the blind windows wept unceasingly, and unceasingly the rain drummed the long roll on the roof.

In time they stopped before a rambling structure whose weather-boarded façade, white with flaking paint, bore the legend: Commercial House. Whitaker paid his fare and, unassisted, carried

his hand-bag up the steps and across the rain-swept veranda into a dim, cavernous hall whose walls were lined with cane-seated arm-chairs punctuated at every second chair by a commodious brown-fibre cuspidor. A cubicle fenced off in one corner formed the office proper – for the time being untenanted. There was, indeed, no one in sight but a dejected hall-boy, innocent of any sort of livery. On demand he accommodatingly disentangled himself from a chair, a cigarette and a paper-backed novel, and wandered off down a corridor, ostensibly to unearth the boss.

Whitaker waited by the desk, a gaunt, weary man, hag-ridden by fear. There was in his mind a desolate picture of the room up-stairs when he – his soul: the imperishable essence of himself – should have finished with it...

At his elbow lay the hotel register, open at a page neatly headed with a date in red ink. An absence of entries beneath the date-line seemed to indicate that he was the first guest of the day. Near the book was a small wooden corral neatly partitioned into stalls wherein were herded an ink-well, toothpicks, matches, some stationery, and – severely by itself – a grim-looking raw potato of uncertain age, splotted with ink and wearing like horns two impaled penholders.

Laboriously prying loose one of the latter, Whitaker registered; but two-thirds of his name was all he entered; when it came to "Whitaker," his pen paused and passed on to write "Philadelphia" in the residence column.

The thought came to him that he must be careful to obliterate all laundry marks on his clothing.

In his own good time the clerk appeared: a surly, heavy-eyed, loutish creature in clothing that suggested he had been grievously misled by pictures in the advertising pages of magazines. Whitaker noted, with insensate irritation, that he wore his hair long over one eye, his mouth ajar, his trousers high enough to disclose bony purple ankles. His welcome to the incoming guest was comprised in an indifferent nod as their eyes met, and a subsequent glance at the register which seemed unaccountably to moderate his apathy.

"Mr. Morton – uh?" he inquired.

Whitaker nodded without words.

The youth shrugged and scrawled an hieroglyph after the name. "Here, Sammy," he said to the boy – "Forty-three." To Whitaker he addressed the further remark: "Trunks?"

"No."

The youth seemed about to expostulate, but checked when Whitaker placed one of his hundred-dollar notes on the counter.

"I think that'll cover my liability," he said with a significance misinterpreted by the other.

"I ain't got enough change – "

"That's all right; I'm in no hurry."

The eyes of the lout followed him as he ascended the stairs in the path of Sammy, who had already disappeared. Annoyed, Whitaker quickened his pace to escape the stare. On the second floor he discovered the bell-boy waiting some distance down a long, darksome corridor, indifferently lighted by a single window at its far end. As Whitaker came into view, the boy thrust open the door, disappeared for an instant, and came out minus the bag. Whitaker gave him a coin in passing – an attention which he acknowledged by pulling the door to with a bang the moment the guest had entered the room. At the same time Whitaker became aware of a contretemps.

The room was of fair size, lighted by two windows overlooking the tin roof of the front veranda. It was furnished with a large double bed in the corner nearest the door a wash-stand, two or three chairs, a bandy-legged table with a marble top; and it was tenanted by a woman in street dress.

She stood by the wash-stand, with her back to the light, her attitude one of tense expectancy: hardly more than a silhouette of a figure moderately tall and very slight, almost angular in its slenderness. She had been holding a tumbler in one hand, but as Whitaker appeared this slipped from her fingers; there followed a thud and a sound of spilt liquid at her feet. Simultaneously she cried out inarticulately in a voice at once harsh and tremulous; the cry might have been "You!" or "Hugh!"

Whitaker took it for the latter, and momentarily imagined that he had stumbled into the presence of an acquaintance. He was pulling off his hat and peering at her shadowed face in an effort to distinguish features possibly familiar to him, when she moved forward a pace or two, her hands fluttering out toward him, then stopped as though halted by a force implacable and overpowering.

"I thought," she quavered in a stricken voice – "I thought ... you ... my husband ... Mr. Morton ... the boy said..."

Then her knees buckled under her, and she plunged forward and fell with a thump that shook the walls.

"I'm sorry – I beg pardon," Whitaker stammered stupidly to ears that couldn't hear. He swore softly with exasperation, threw his hat to a chair and dropped to his knees beside the woman. It seemed as if the high gods were hardly playing fair, to throw a fainting woman on his hands just then, at a time when he was all preoccupied with his own absorbing tragedy.

She lay with her head naturally pillowed on the arm she had instinctively thrown out to protect her face. He could see now that her slenderness was that of youth, of a figure undeveloped and immature. Her profile, too, was young, though it stood out against the dark background of the carpet as set and white as a death-mask. Indeed, her pallor was so intense that a fear touched his heart, of an accident more serious than a simple fainting spell. Her respiration seemed entirely suspended, and it might have been merely his fancy that detected the least conceivable syncopated pulsation in the icy wrist beneath his fingers.

He weighed quickly half a dozen suggestions. His fundamental impulse, to call in feminine aid from the staff of the hotel, was promptly relegated to the status of a last resort, as involving explanations which might not seem adequate to the singular circumstances; besides, he entertained a dim, searching, intuitive suspicion that possibly the girl herself would more cheerfully dispense with explanations – though he hardly knew why... He remembered that people burned feathers in such emergencies, or else loosened the lady's stays (corsets plus a fainting fit equal stays, invariably, it seems). But there weren't any feathers handy, and – well, anyway, neither expedient made any real appeal to his intelligence. Besides, there were sensible things he could do to make her more comfortable – chafe her hands and administer stimulants: things like that.

Even while these thoughts were running through his mind, he was gathering the slight young body into his arms; and he found it really astonishingly easy to rise and bear her to the bed, where he put her down flat on her back, without a pillow. Then turning to his hand-bag, he opened it and produced a small, leather-bound flask of brandy; a little of which would go far toward shattering her syncope, he fancied.

It did, in fact; a few drops between her half-parted lips, and she came to with disconcerting rapidity, opening dazed eyes in the middle of a spasm of coughing. He stepped back, stoppering the flask.

"That's better," he said pleasantly. "Now lie still while I fetch you a drink of water."

As he turned to the wash-stand his foot struck the tumbler she had dropped. He stopped short, frowning down at the great, staring, wet, yellow stain on the dingy and threadbare carpet. Together with this discovery he got a whiff of an acrid-sweet effluvium that spelled "*Oxalic Acid – Poison*" as unmistakably as did the druggist's label on the empty packet on the wash-stand...

In another moment he was back at the bedside with a clean glass of water, which he offered to the girl's lips, passing his arm beneath her shoulders and lifting her head so that she might drink.

She emptied the glass thirstily.

"Look here," he said almost roughly under the lash of this new fear – "you didn't really drink any of that stuff, did you?"

Her eyes met his with a look of negation clouded by fear and bewilderment. Then she turned her head away. Dragging a pillow beneath it, he let her down again.

"Good," he said in accents meant to be enheartening; "you'll be all right in a moment or two."

Her colourless lips moved in a whisper he had to bend close to distinguish.

"Please..."

"Yes?"

"Please don't ... call anybody..."

"I won't. Don't worry."

The lids quivered down over her eyes, and her mouth was wrung with anguish. He stared, perplexed. He wanted to go away quickly, but couldn't gain his own consent to do so. She was in no condition to be left alone, this delicate and fragile child, defenceless and beset. It wasn't hard to conjecture the hell of suffering she must have endured before coming to a pass of such desperation. There were dull blue shadows beneath eyes red with weeping, a forlorn twist to her thin, bloodless lips, a pinched look of wretchedness like a glaze over her unhappy face, that told too plain a story. A strange girl, to find in a plight like hers, he thought: not pretty, but quite unusual: delicate, sensitive, high-strung, bred to the finer things of life – this last was self-evident in the fine simplicity of her severely plain attire. Over her hair, drawn tight down round her head, she wore one of those knitted motor caps which were the fashion of that day. Her shoes were still wet and a trifle muddy, her coat and skirt more than a trifle damp, indicating that she had returned from a dash to the drug store not long before Whitaker arrived.

A variety of impressions, these with others less significant, crowded upon his perceptions in little more than a glance. For suddenly Nature took her in hand; she twisted upon her side, as if to escape his regard, and covered her face, her palms muffling deep tearing sobs while waves of pent-up misery racked her slender little body.

Whitaker moved softly away...

Difficult, he found it, to guess what to do; more difficult still to do nothing. His nerves were badly jangled; light-footed, he wandered restlessly to and fro, half distracted between the storm of weeping that beat gustily within the room and the deadly blind drum of the downpour on the tin roof beyond the windows. Since that twilight hour in that tawdry hotel chamber, no one has ever been able to counterfeit sorrow and remorse to Whitaker; he listened then to the very voice of utter Woe.

Once, pausing by the centre-table, he happened to look down. He saw a little heap of the hotel writing-paper, together with envelopes, a pen, a bottle of ink. Three of the envelopes were sealed and superscribed, and two were stamped. The unstamped letter was addressed to the Proprietor of the Commercial House.

Of the others, one was directed to a Mr. C. W. Morton in care of another person at a number on lower Sixth Avenue, New York; and from this Whitaker began to understand the singular manner of his introduction to the wrong room; there's no great difference between *Morton* and *Morten*, especially when written carelessly.

But the third letter caused his eyes to widen considerably. It bore the name of Thurlow Ladislas, Esq., and a Wall Street address.

Whitaker's mouth shaped a still-born whistle. He was recalling with surprising distinctness the fragment of dialogue he had overheard at his club the previous afternoon.

IV

MRS. WHITAKER

He lived through a long, bad quarter hour, his own tensed nerves twanging in sympathy with the girl's sobbing – like telegraph wires singing in a gale – his mind busy with many thoughts, thoughts strangely new and compelling, wearing a fresh complexion that lacked altogether the colouring of self-interest.

He mixed a weak draught of brandy and water and returned to the bedside. The storm was passing in convulsive gasps ever more widely spaced, but still the girl lay with her back to him.

"If you'll sit up and try to drink this," he suggested quietly, "I think you'll feel a good deal better."

Her shoulders moved spasmodically; otherwise he saw no sign that she heard.

"Come – please," he begged gently.

She made an effort to rise, sat up on the bed, dabbed at her eyes with a sodden wisp of handkerchief, and groped blindly for the glass. He offered it to her lips.

"What is it?" she whispered hoarsely.

He spoke of the mixture in disparaging terms as to its potency, until at length she consented to swallow it – teeth chattering on the rim of the tumbler. The effect was quickly apparent in the colour that came into her cheeks, faint but warm. He avoided looking directly at her, however, and cast round for the bell-push, which he presently found near the head of the bed.

She moved quickly with alarm.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded in a stronger voice.

"Order you something to eat," he said. "No – please don't object. You need food, and I mean to see you get it before I leave."

If she thought of protesting, the measured determination in his manner deterred her. After a moment she asked:

"Please – who are you?"

"My name is Whitaker," he said – "Hugh Morten Whitaker."

She repeated the name aloud. "Haven't I heard of you? Aren't you engaged to Alice Carstairs?"

"I'm the man you mean," he said quietly; "but I'm not engaged to Alice Carstairs."

"Oh..." Perplexity clouded the eyes that followed closely his every movement. "How did you happen to – to find me here?"

"Quite by accident," he replied. "I didn't want to be known, so registered as Hugh Morten. They mistook me for your husband. Do you mind telling me how long it is since you've had anything to eat?"

She told him: "Last night."

He suffered a sense of shame only second to her own, to see the dull flush that accompanied her reply. His fingers itched for the throat of Mr. C. W. Morton, chauffeur. Happily a knock at the door distracted him. Opening it no wider than necessary to communicate with the bell-boy, he gave him an order for the kitchen, together with an incentive to speed the service.

Closing the door, he swung round to find that the girl had got to her feet.

"He won't be long – " Whitaker began vaguely.

"I want to tell you something." She faced him bravely, though he refused the challenge of her tormented eyes. "I ... I have no husband."

He bowed gravely.

"You're so good to me – " she faltered.

"O – nothing! Let's not talk about that now."

"I must talk – you must let me. You're so kind, I've got to tell you. Won't you listen?"

He had crossed to a window, where he stood staring out. "I'd rather not," he said softly, "but if you prefer – "

"I do prefer," said the voice behind him. "I – I'm Mary Ladislas."

"Yes," said Whitaker.

"I ... I ran away from home last week – five days ago – to get married to our chauffeur, Charles Morton..."

She stammered.

"Please don't go on, if it hurts," he begged without looking round.

"I've got to – I've got to get it over with... We were at Southampton, at my father's summer home – I mean, that's where I ran away from. He – Charley – drove me over to Greenport and I took the ferry there and came here to wait for him. He went back to New York in the car, promising to join me here as soon as possible..."

"And he didn't come," Whitaker wound up for her, when she faltered.

"No."

"And you wrote and telegraphed, and he didn't answer."

"Yes – "

"How much money of yours did he take with him?" Whitaker pursued.

There was a brief pause of astonishment. "What do you know about that?" she demanded.

"I know a good deal about that type of man," he said grimly.

"I didn't have any money to speak of, but I had some jewellery – my mother's – and he was to take that and pawn it for money to get married with."

"I see."

To his infinite relief the waiter interrupted them. The girl in her turn went to one of the windows, standing with her back to the room, while Whitaker admitted the man with his tray. When they were alone once more, he fixed the place and drew a chair for her.

"Everything's ready," he said – and had the sense not to try to make his tone too cheerful.

"I hadn't finished what I wanted to tell you," said the girl, coming back to him.

"Will you do me the favour to wait," he pleaded. "I think things will seem – well, otherwise – when you've had some food."

"But I – "

"Oh, please!" he begged with his odd, twisted smile.

She submitted, head drooping and eyes downcast. He returned to his window, rather wishing that he had thought to order for himself as well as for the girl; for it was suddenly borne strongly in upon him that he himself had had little enough to eat since dinner with Peter Stark. He lighted a cigarette, by way of dulling his appetite, and then let it smoulder to ashes between his fingers, while he lost himself in profound speculations, in painstaking analysis of the girl's position.

Subconsciously he grew aware that the storm was moderating perceptibly, the sky breaking...

"I've finished," the girl announced at length.

"You're feeling better?"

"Stronger, I think."

"Is there anything more – ?"

"If you wouldn't mind sitting down – "

She had twisted her arm-chair away from the table. Whitaker took a seat a little distance from her, with a keen glance appraising the change in her condition and finding it not so marked as he had hoped. Still, she seemed measurably more composed and mistress of her emotions, though he had to judge mostly by her voice and manner, so dark was the room. Through the shadows he could see little more than masses of light and shade blocking in the slender figure huddled in a big, dilapidated chair – the pallid oval of her face, and the darkness of her wide, intent, young eyes.

"Don't!" she cried sharply. "Please don't look at me so – "

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to – "

"It's only – only that you make me think of what you must be thinking about me – "

"I think you're rather fortunate," he said slowly.

"Fortunate!"

He shivered a little with the chill bitterness of that cry.

"You've had a narrow but a wonderfully lucky escape."

"Oh! ... But I'm not glad ... I was desperate – "

"I mean," he interrupted coolly, "from Mr. Morton. The silver lining is, you're not married to a blackguard."

"Oh, yes, yes!" she agreed passionately.

"And you have youth, health, years of life before you!"

He sighed inaudibly...

"You wouldn't say that, if you understood."

"There are worse things to put up with than youth and health and the right to live."

"But – how can I live? What am I to do?"

"Have you thought of going home?"

"It isn't possible."

"Have you made sure of that? Have you written to your father – explained?"

"I sent him a special delivery three days ago, and – and yesterday a telegram. I knew it wouldn't do any good, but I ... I told him everything. He didn't answer. He won't, ever."

From what Whitaker knew of Thurlow Ladislas, he felt this to be too cruelly true to admit of further argument. At a loss, he fell silent, knitting his hands together as he strove to find other words wherewith to comfort and reassure the girl.

She bent forward, elbows on knees, head and shoulders cringing.

"It hurts so!" she wailed ... "what people will think ... the shame, the bitter, bitter shame of this! And yet I haven't any right to complain. I deserve it all; I've earned my punishment."

"Oh, I say – !"

"But I have, because – because I didn't love him. I didn't love him at all, and I knew it, even though I meant to marry him..."

"But, why – in Heaven's name?"

"Because I was so lonely and ... misunderstood and unhappy at home. You don't know how desperately unhappy... No mother, never daring to see my sister (she ran away, too) ... my friendships at school discouraged ... nothing in life but a great, empty, lonesome house and my father to bully me and make cruel fun of me because I'm not pretty... That's why I ran away with a man I didn't love – because I wanted freedom and a little happiness."

"Good Lord!" he murmured beneath his breath, awed by the pitiful, childish simplicity of her confession and the deep damnation that had waited upon her.

"So it's over!" she cried – "over, and I've learned my lesson, and I'm disgraced forever, and friendless and – "

"Stop right there!" he checked her roughly. "You're not friendless yet, and that nullifies all the rest. Be glad you've had your romance and learned your lesson – "

"Please don't think I'm not grateful for your kindness," she interrupted. "But the disgrace – that can't be blotted out!"

"Oh, yes, it can," he insisted bluntly. "There's a way I know – "

A glimmering of that way had only that instant let a little light in upon the darkness of his solicitous distress for her. He rose and began to walk and think, hands clasped behind him, trying to make what he had in mind seem right and reasonable.

"You mean beg my father to take me back. I'll die first!"

"There mustn't be any more talk, or even any thought, of anything like that. I understand too well to ask the impossible of you. But there is one way out – a perfectly right way – if you're willing and brave enough to take a chance – a long chance."

Somehow she seemed to gain hope of his tone. She sat up, following him with eyes that sought incredulously to believe.

"Have I any choice?" she asked. "I'm desperate enough..."

"God knows," he said, "you'll have to be!"

"Try me."

He paused, standing over her.

"Desperate enough to marry a man who's bound to die within six months and leave you free? I'm that man: the doctors give me six months more of life. I'm alone in the world, with no one dependent upon me, nothing to look forward to but a death that will benefit nobody – a useless end to a useless life... Will you take my name to free yourself? Heaven my witness, you're welcome to it."

"Oh," she breathed, aghast, "what are you saying?"

"I'm proposing marriage," he said, with his quaint, one-sided smile. "Please listen: I came to this place to make a quick end to my troubles – but I've changed my mind about that, now. What's happened in this room has made me see that nobody has any right to – hasten things. But I mean to leave the country – immediately – and let death find me where it will. I shall leave behind me a name and a little money, neither of any conceivable use to me. Will you take them, employ them to make your life what it was meant to be? It's a little thing, but it will make me feel a lot more fit to go out of this world – to know I've left at least one decent act to mark my memory. There's only this far-fetched chance – I *may* live. It's a million-to-one shot, but you've got to bear it in mind. But really you can't lose – "

"Oh, stop, stop!" she implored him, half hysterical. "To think of marrying to benefit by the death of a man like you – !"

"You've no right to look at it that way." He had a wry, secret smile for his specious sophistry. "You're being asked to confer, not to accept, a favour. It's just an act of kindness to a hopeless man. I'd go mad if I didn't know you were safe from a recurrence of the folly of this afternoon."

"Don't!" she cried – "don't tempt me. You've no right... You don't know how frantic I am..."

"I do," he countered frankly. "I'm depending on just that to swing you to my point of view. You've got to come to it. I mean you shall marry me."

She stared up at him, spell-bound, insensibly yielding to the domination of his will. It was inevitable. He was scarcely less desperate than she – and no less overwrought and unstrung; and he was the stronger; in the natural course of things his will could not but prevail. She was little more than a child, accustomed to yield and go where others led or pointed out the path. What resistance could she offer to the domineering importunity of a man of full stature, arrogant in his strength and – hounded by devils? And he in the fatuity of his soul believed that he was right, that he was fighting for the girl's best interests, fighting – and not ungenerously – to save her from the ravaging consequences of her indiscretion!

The bald truth is, he was hardly a responsible agent: distracted by the ravings of an ego mutinous in the shadow of annihilation, as well as by contemplation of the girl's wretched plight, he saw all things in distorted perspective. He had his being in a nightmare world of frightful, insane realities. He could have conceived of nothing too terrible and preposterous to seem reasonable and right...

The last trace of evening light had faded out of the world before they were agreed. Darkness wrapped them in its folds; they were but as voices warring in a black and boundless void.

Whitaker struck a match and applied it to the solitary gas-jet. A thin, blue, sputtering tongue of flame revealed them to one another. The girl still crouched in her arm-chair, weary and spent, her powers of contention all vitiated by the losing struggle. Whitaker was trembling with nervous fatigue.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Oh, have your own way," she said drearily. "If it must be..."

"It's for the best," he insisted obstinately. "You'll never regret it."

"One of us will – either you or I," she said quietly. "It's too one-sided. You want to give all and ask nothing in return. It's a fool's bargain."

He hesitated, stammering with surprise. She had a habit of saying the unexpected. "A fool's bargain" – the wisdom of the sage from the lips of a child...

"Then it's settled," he said, business-like, offering his hand. "Fool's bargain or not – it's a bargain."

She rose unassisted, then trusted her slender fingers to his palm. She said nothing. The steady gaze of her extraordinary eyes abashed him.

"Come along and let's get it over," he muttered clumsily. "It's late, and there's a train to New York at half-past ten, you might as well catch."

She withdrew her hand, but continued to regard him steadfastly with her enigmatic, strange stare. "So," she said coolly, "that's settled too, I presume."

"I'm afraid you couldn't catch an earlier one," he evaded. "Have you any baggage?"

"Only my suit-case. It won't take a minute to pack that."

"No hurry," he mumbled...

They left the hotel together. Whitaker got his change of a hundred dollars at the desk – "Mrs. Morten's" bill, of course, included with his – and bribed the bell-boy to take the suit-case to the railway station and leave it there, together with his own hand-bag. Since he had unaccountably conceived a determination to continue living for a time, he meant to seek out more pleasant accommodations for the night.

The rain had ceased, leaving a ragged sky of clouds and stars in patches. The air was warm and heavy with wetness. Sidewalks glistened like black watered silk; street lights mirrored themselves in fugitive puddles in the roadways; limbs of trees overhanging the sidewalks shivered now and again in a half-hearted breeze, pelting the wayfarers with miniature showers of lukewarm, scented drops.

Turning away from the centre of the town, they traversed slowly long streets of residences set well back behind decent lawns. Warm lamplight mocked them from a hundred homely windows. They passed few people – a pair of lovers; three bareheaded giggling girls in short, light frocks strolling with their arms round one another; a scattering of men hurrying home to belated suppers.

The girl lagged with weariness. Awakened to this fact, Whitaker slackened his impatient stride and quietly slipped her arm through his.

"Is it much farther?" she asked.

"No – not now," he assured her with a confidence he by no means felt.

He was beginning to realize the tremendous difficulties to be overcome. It bothered him to scheme a way to bring about the marriage without attracting an appalling amount of gratuitous publicity, in a community as staid and sober as this. He who would marry secretly should not select a half-grown New England city for his enterprise...

However, one rarely finds any really insuperable obstacles in the way of an especially wrong-headed project.

Whitaker, taking his heart and his fate in his hands, accosted a venerable gentleman whom they encountered as he was on the point of turning off the sidewalk to private grounds.

"I beg your pardon," he began.

The man paused and turned upon them a saintly countenance framed in hair like snow.

"There is something I can do for you?" he inquired with punctilious courtesy.

"If you will be kind enough to direct me to a minister..."

"I am one."

"I thought so," said Whitaker. "We wish to get married."

The gentleman looked from his face to the girl's, then moved aside from the gate. "This is my home," he explained. "Will you be good enough to come in?"

Conducting them to his private study, he subjected them to a kindly catechism. The girl said little, Whitaker taking upon himself the brunt of the examination. Absolutely straightforward and intensely sincere, he came through the ordeal well, without being obliged to disclose what he preferred to keep secret. The minister, satisfied, at length called in the town clerk by telephone; who issued the license, pocketed his fee, and, in company with the minister's wife, acted as witness...

Whitaker found himself on his feet beside Mary Ladislas. They were being married. He was shaken by a profound amazement. The incredible was happening – with his assistance. He heard his voice uttering responses; it seemed something as foreign to him as the voice of the girl at his side. He wondered stupidly at her calm – and later, at his own. It was all preposterously matter-of-fact and, at the same time, stupidly romantic. He divined obscurely that this thing was happening in obedience to forces nameless and unknown to them, strange and terrific forces that worked mysteriously beyond their mortal ken. He seemed to hear the droning of the loom of the Fates...

And they were man and wife. The door had closed, the gate-latch clicked behind them. They were walking quietly side by side through the scented night, they whom God had joined together.

Man and wife! Bride and groom, already started on the strangest, shortest of wedding journeys – from the parsonage to the railroad station!

Neither found anything to say. They walked on, heels in unison pounding the wet flagstones. The night was sweet with the scent of wet grass and shrubbery. The sidewalks were boldly patterned with a stencilling of black leaves and a milky dappling of electric light. At every corner high-swung arcs shot vivid slants of silver-blue radiance through the black and green of trees.

These things all printed themselves indelibly upon the tablets of his memory...

They arrived at the station. Whitaker bought his wife a ticket to New York and secured for her solitary use a drawing-room in the sleeper. When that was accomplished, they had still a good part of an hour to wait. They found a bench on the station platform, and sat down. Whitaker possessed himself of his wife's hand-bag long enough to furnish it with a sum of money and an old envelope bearing the name and address of his law partner. He explained that he would write to Drummond, who would see to her welfare as far as she would permit – issue her an adequate monthly allowance and advise her when she should have become her own mistress once more: in a word, a widow.

She thanked him briefly, quietly, with a constraint he understood too well to resent.

People began to gather upon the platform, to loiter about and pass up and down. Further conversation would have been difficult, even if they had found much to say to one another. Curiously or not, they didn't. They sat on in thoughtful silence.

Both, perhaps, were sensible of some relief when at length the train thundered in from the East, breathing smoke and flame. Whitaker helped his wife aboard and interviewed the porter in her behalf. Then they had a moment or two alone in the drawing-room, in which to consummate what was meant to be their first and last parting.

"You'll get in about two," said Whitaker. "Better just slip across the street to the Belmont for to-night. To-morrow – or the day after – whenever you feel rested – you can find yourself more quiet quarters."

"Yes," she said...

He comprehended something of the struggle she was having with herself, and respected it. If he had consulted his own inclinations, he would have turned and marched off without another word. But for her sake he lingered. Let her have the satisfaction (he bade himself) of knowing that she had done her duty at their leave-taking.

She caught him suddenly by the shoulders with both her hands. Her eyes sought his with a wistful courage he could not but admire.

"You know I'm grateful..."

"Don't think of it that way – though I'm glad you are."

"You're a good man," she said brokenly.

He knew himself too well to be able to reply.

"You mustn't worry about me, now. You've made things easy for me. I can take care of myself, and ... I shan't forget whose name I bear."

He muttered something to the effect that he was sure of that.

She released his shoulders and stood back, searching his face with tormented eyes. Abruptly she offered him her hand.

"Good-by," she said, her lips quivering – "Good-by, good friend!"

He caught the hand, wrung it clumsily and painfully and ... realized that the train was in motion. He had barely time to get away...

He found himself on the station platform, stupidly watching the rear lights dwindle down the tracks and wondering whether or not hallucinations were a phase of his malady. A sick man often dreams strange dreams...

A voice behind him, cool with a trace of irony, observed:

"I'd give a good deal to know just what particular brand of damn' foolishness you've been indulging in, this time."

He whirled around to face Peter Stark – Peter quietly amused and very much the master of the situation.

"You needn't think," said he, "that you have any chance on earth of escaping my fond attentions, Hugh. I'll go to the ends of the earth after you, if you won't let me go with you. I've fixed it up with Nelly to wait until I bring you home, a well man, before we get married; and if you refuse to be my best man – well, there won't be any party. You can make up your mind to that."

V WILFUL MISSING

It was one o'clock in the morning before Whitaker allowed himself to be persuaded; fatigue reënforced every stubborn argument of Peter Stark's to overcome his resistance. It was a repetition of the episode of Mary Ladislas recast and rewritten: the stronger will overcame the admonitions of a saner judgment. Whitaker gave in. "Oh, have your own way," he said at length, unconsciously iterating the words that had won him a bride. "If it must be..."

Peter put him to bed, watched over him through the night, and the next morning carried him on to New Bedford, where they superintended the outfitting of Peter's yacht, the *Adventuress*. Beyond drawing heavily on his bank and sending Drummond a brief note, Whitaker failed to renew communication with his home. He sank into a state of semi-apathetic content; he thought little of anything beyond the business of the moment; the preparations for what he was pleased to term his funeral cruise absorbed him to the exclusion of vain repinings or anxiety for the welfare of his adventitious wife. Apparently his sudden disappearance had not caused the least ripple on the surface of life in New York; the newspapers, at all events, slighted the circumstance unanimously: to his complete satisfaction.

Within the week the *Adventuress* sailed.

She was five months out of port before Whitaker began to be conscious that he was truly accursed. There came a gradual thickening of the shadows that threatened to eclipse his existence. And then, one day as they dined with the lonely trader of an isolated station in the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, he fell from his chair as if poleaxed. He regained consciousness only to shiver with the chill of the wind that's fanned by the wings of death. It was impossible to move him. The agonies of the damned were his when, with exquisite gentleness, they lifted him to a bed...

Stark sailed in the *Adventuress* before sundown of the same day, purposing to fetch a surgeon from Port Moresby. Whitaker said a last farewell to his friend, knowing in his soul that they would never meet again. Then he composed himself to die quietly. But the following morning brought a hapchance trading schooner to the island, and with it, in the estate of supercargo, a crapulous Scotch gentleman who had been a famous specialist of London before drink laid him by the heels. He performed an heroic operation upon Whitaker within an hour, announced by nightfall that the patient would recover, and the next day sailed with his ship to end his days in some abandoned Australian boozing-ken – as Whitaker learned in Sydney several months later.

In the same place, and at the same time, he received his first authentic news of the fate of the *Adventuress*. The yacht had struck on an uncharted reef, in heavy weather, and had foundered almost immediately. Of her entire company, a solitary sailor managed to cling to a life-raft until picked up, a week after the wreck, by a tramp steamship on whose decks he gasped out his news and his life in the same breaths.

Whitaker hunted up an account of the disaster in the files of a local newspaper. He read that the owner, Peter Stark, Esq., and his guest, H. M. Whitaker, Esq., both of New York, had gone down with the vessel. There was also a cable despatch from New York detailing Peter Stark's social and financial prominence – evidence that the news had been cabled Home. To all who knew him Whitaker was as dead as Peter Stark.

Sardonic irony of circumstance, that had robbed the sound man of life and bestowed life upon the moribund! Contemplation wrought like a toxic drug upon Whitaker's temper, until he was raving drunk with the black draught of mutiny against the dictates of an Omnipotence capable of such hideous mockeries of justice. The iron bit deep into his soul and left corrosion there...

"There is a world outside the one you know
To which for curiousness 'E'll can't compare;
It is the place where wilful missings go,
As we can testify, for we are there."

Kipling's lines buzzed through his head more than once in the course of the next few years; for he was "there." They were years of such vagabondage as only the South Seas countenance: neither unhappy nor very strenuous, not yet scarred by the tooth of poverty. Whitaker had between four and five thousand dollars in traveller's checks which he converted into cash while in Sydney. Memory of the wreck of the *Adventuress* was already fading from the Australian mind; no one dreamed of challenging the signature of a man seven months dead. And as certainly and as quietly as the memory, Whitaker faded away; Hugh Morten took his place, and Sydney knew him no more, nor did any other parts wherein he had answered to his rightful name.

The money stayed by him handsomely. Thanks to a strong constitution in a tough body (now that its malignant demon was exorcised) he found it easy to pick up a living by one means or another. Indeed, he played many parts in as many fields before joining hands with a young Englishman he had grown to like and entering upon what seemed a forlorn bid for fortune. Thereafter he prospered amazingly.

In those days his anomalous position in the world troubled him very little. He was a Wilful Missing and a willing. The new life intrigued him amazingly; he lived in open air, in virgin country, wresting a fortune by main strength from the reluctant grasp of Nature. He was one of the first two men to find and mine gold in paying quantities in the Owen Stanley country... Now that Peter Stark was dead, the ties of interest and affection binding him to America were both few and slender. His wife was too abstract a concept, a shadow too vague in his memory, to obtrude often upon his reveries. Indeed, as time went on, he found it anything but easy to recall much about the physical appearance of the woman he had married; he remembered chiefly her eyes; she moved mistily across the stage of a single scene in his history, an awkward, self-conscious, unhappy, childish phantasm.

Even the consideration that, fortified by the report of his death, she might have married again, failed to disturb either his slumbers or his digestion. If that had happened, he had no objection; the tie that bound them was the emptiest of forms – in his understanding as meaningless and as powerless to make them one as the printed license form they had been forced to procure of the State of Connecticut. There had been neither love nor true union – merely pity on one side, apathy of despair on the other. Two souls had met in the valley of the great shadow, had paused a moment to touch hands, had passed onward, forever out of one another's ken; and that was all. His "death" should have put her in command of a fair competence. If she had since sought and found happiness with another man, was there any logical reason, or even excuse, for Whitaker to abandon his new and pleasant ways of life in order to return and shatter hers?

He was self-persuaded of his generosity toward the girl.

Casuistry of the Wilful Missing!..

It's to be feared he had always a hard-headed way of considering matters in the light of equity as distinguished from the light of ethical or legal morality. This is not to be taken as an attempt to defend the man, but rather as a statement of fact: even as the context is to be read as an account of some things that happened rather than as a morality...

When at length he did make up his mind to go Home, it wasn't because he felt that duty called him; plain, everyday, human curiosity had something to do with his determination – a desire to see how New York was managing to get along without him – together with a dawning apprehension that there was an uncomfortable amount of truth in the antiquated bromidiom about the surprising littleness of the world.

He was in Melbourne at that time, with Lynch, his partner. Having prospered and laid by a lump of money, they had planned to finance their holdings in the traditional fashion – that is, to let in other people's money to do the work, while they rested and possessed their souls and drew dividends on a controlling interest. Capital in Melbourne had proved eager and approachable; the arrangement they desired was quickly consummated; the day the papers were signed, Whitaker passed old friends in the street. They were George Presbury and his wife – Anne Forsythe that was – self-evident tourists, looking the town over between steamers. Presbury, with no thought in his bumptious head of meeting Hugh Whitaker before the Day of Judgment, looked at and through him without a hint of recognition; but his wife was another person altogether. Whitaker could not be blind to the surprise and perplexity that shone in her eyes, even though he pretended to be blind to her uncertain nod; long after his back alone was visible to her he could feel her inquiring stare boring into it.

The incident made him think; and he remembered that he was now a man of independent fortune and of newly idle hands as well. After prolonged consideration he suddenly decided, told Lynch to look out for his interests and expect him back when he should see him, and booked for London by a Royal Mail boat – all in half a day. From London Mr. Hugh Morten crossed immediately to New York on the *Olympic*, landing in the month of April – nearly six years to a day from the time he had left his native land.

He discovered a New York almost wholly new – an experience almost inevitable, if one insists on absenting one's self even for as little as half a decade. Intimations of immense changes were borne in upon Whitaker while the steamer worked up the Bay. The Singer Building was an unfamiliar sky-mark, but not more so than the Metropolitan Tower and the Woolworth. The *Olympic* docked at an impressive steel-and-concrete structure, new since his day; and Whitaker narrowly escaped a row with a taxicab chauffeur because the fellow smiled impertinently when directed to drive to the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

A very few hours added amazingly to the catalogue of things that were not as they had been: a list so extensive and impressive that he made up his mind to maintain his incognito for a few days, until familiar with the ways of his home. He was quick to perceive that he would even have to forget most of the slang that had been current in his time, in addition to unlearning all he had picked up abroad, and set himself with attentive ears pricked forward and an open mind to master the new, strange tongue his countrymen were speaking, if he were to make himself intelligible to them – and them to him, for that matter.

So he put up at the Ritz-Carlton, precisely as any foreigner might be expected to do, and remained Hugh Morten while he prowled around the city and found himself. Now and again in the course of his wanderings he encountered well-remembered faces, but always without eliciting the slightest gleam of recognition: circumstances that only went to prove how thoroughly dead and buried he was in the estimation of his day and generation.

Nothing, indeed, seemed as he remembered it except the offerings in the theatres. He sat through plays on three successive nights that sent him back to his hotel saddened by the conviction that the tastes of his fellow-countrymen in the matter of amusements were as enduring as adamant – as long-enduring. Some day (he prophesied) New York would be finished and complete; then would come the final change – its name – because it wouldn't be New York unless ever changing; and when that was settled, the city would know ease and, for want of something less material to occupy it, begin to develop a soul of its own – together with an inclination for something different in the way of theatrical entertainment.

But his ultimate and utter awakening to the truth that his home had outgrown him fell upon the fourth afternoon following his return, when a total but most affable gentleman presented himself to Whitaker's consideration with a bogus name and a genuine offer to purchase him a drink, and promptly attempted to enmesh him in a confidence game that had degenerated into a vaudeville joke in the days when both of them had worn knickerbockers. Gently but firmly entrusting the stranger to

the care of a convenient policeman, Whitaker privately admitted that he was outclassed, that it was time for him to seek the protection of his friends.

He began with Drummond. The latter, of course, had moved his offices; no doubt he had moved them several times; however that may be, Whitaker had left him in quiet and contracted quarters in Pine Street; he found him independently established in an imposing suite in the Woolworth Building.

Whitaker gave one of Mr. Hugh Morten's cards to a subdued office-boy. "Tell him," he requested, "that I want to see him about a matter relating to the estate of Mr. Whitaker."

The boy dived through one partition-door and reappeared by way of another with the deft certainty of a trained pantomime.

"Says t' come in."

Whitaker found himself in the presence of an ashen-faced man of thirty-five, who clutched the side of his roll-top desk as if to save himself from falling.

"Whitaker!" he gasped. "My God!"

"Flattered," said Whitaker, "I'm sure."

He derived considerable mischievous amusement from Drummond's patent stupefaction. It was all so right and proper – as it should have been. He considered his an highly satisfactory resurrection, the sensation it created as complete, considered in the relation of anticipation to fulfilment, as anything he had ever experienced. Seldom does a scene pass off as one plans it; the other parties thereto are apt to spoil things by spouting spontaneously their own original lines, thus cheating one out of a crushing retort or cherished epigram. But Drummond played up his part in a most public-spirited fashion – gratifying, to say the least.

It took him some minutes to recover, Whitaker standing by and beaming.

He remarked changes, changes as striking as the improvement in Drummond's fortunes. Physically his ex-partner had gone off a bit; the sedentary life led by the average successful man of business in New York had marked his person unmistakably. Much heavier than the man Whitaker remembered, he wore a thick and solid air of good-natured prosperity. The hair had receded an inch or so from his forehead. Only his face seemed as it had always been – sharply handsome and strong. Whitaker remembered that he had always somewhat meanly envied Drummond his good looks; he himself had been fashioned after the new order of architecture – with a steel frame; but for some reason Nature, the master builder, had neglected sufficiently to wall in and conceal the skeleton. Admitting the economy of the method, Whitaker was inclined to believe that the effect must be surprising, especially if encountered without warning...

He discovered that they were both talking at once – furiously – and, not without surprise, that he had a great deal more enlightenment to impart to Drummond than he had foreseen.

"You've got an economical streak in you when it comes to correspondence," Drummond commented, offering Whitaker a sheet of paper he had just taken from a tin document-box. "That's Exhibit A."

Whitaker read aloud:

"Dear D., I'm not feeling well, so off for a vacation. Burke has just been in and paid \$1500 in settlement of our claim. I'm enclosing herewith my check for your share. Yours, H. M. W."

"Far be it from me to cast up," said Drummond; "but I'd like to know why the deuce you couldn't let a fellow know how ill you were."

Whitaker frowned over his dereliction. "Don't remember," he confessed. "I was hardly right, you know – and I presume I must have counted on Greyerson telling."

"But I don't know Greyerson..."

"That's so. And you never heard – ?"

"Merely a rumour ran round. Some one – I forget who – told me that you and Stark had gone sailing in Stark's boat – to cruise in the West Indies, according to my informant. And somebody else mentioned that he'd heard you were seriously ill. More than that nothing – until we heard that the *Adventuress* had been lost, half a year later."

"I'm sorry," said Whitaker contritely. "It was thoughtless..."

"But that isn't all," Drummond objected, flourishing another paper. "See here – Exhibit B – came in a day or so later."

"Yes." Whitaker recognized the document. "I remember insisting on writing to you before we turned in that night."

He ran through the following communication:

"Dear Drummond: I married here, to-night, Mary Ladislas. Please look out for her while I'm away. Make her an allowance out of my money – five hundred a month ought to be enough. I shall die intestate, and she'll get everything then, of course. She has your address and will communicate with you as soon as she gets settled down in Town.

"Faithfully —

"Hugh Morten Whitaker."

"If it hadn't been so much in character," commented Drummond, "I'd've thought the thing a forgery – or a poor joke. Knowing you as well as I did, however ... I just sat back to wait for word from Mrs. Whitaker."

"And you never heard, except that once!" said Whitaker thoughtfully.

"Here's the sole and only evidence I ever got to prove that you had told the truth."

Drummond handed Whitaker a single, folded sheet of note-paper stamped with the name of the Waldorf-Astoria.

"Carter S. Drummond, Esq., 27 Pine Street, City.

"Dear Sir: I inclose herewith a bank-note for \$500, which you will be kind enough to credit to the estate of your late partner and my late husband, Mr. Hugh Morten Whitaker.

"Very truly yours,

"Mary Ladislas Whitaker."

"Dated, you see, the day after the report of your death was published here."

"But why?" demanded Whitaker, dumfounded. "*Why?*"

"I infer she felt herself somehow honour-bound by the monetary obligation," said the lawyer. "In her understanding your marriage of convenience was nothing more – a one-sided bargain, I think you said she called it. She couldn't consider herself wholly free, even though you were dead, until she had repaid this loan which you, a stranger, had practically forced upon her – if not to you, to your estate."

"But death cancels everything – "

"Not," Drummond reminded him with a slow smile, "the obligation of a period of decent mourning that devolves upon a widow. Mrs. Whitaker may have desired to marry again immediately. If I'm any judge of human nature, she argued that repayment of the loan wiped out every obligation. Feminine logic, perhaps, but – "

"Good Lord!" Whitaker breathed, appalled in the face of this contingency which had seemed so remote and immaterial when he was merely Hugh Morten, bachelor-nomad, to all who knew him on the far side of the world.

Drummond dropped his head upon his hand and regarded his friend with inquisitive eyes.

"Looks as though you may have gummed things up neatly – doesn't it?"

Whitaker nodded in sombre abstraction.

"You may not," continued Drummond with light malice, "have been so generous, so considerate and chivalric, after all."

"Oh, cut that!" growled Whitaker, unhappily. "I never meant to come back."

"Then why did you?"

"Oh ... I don't know. Chiefly because I caught Anne Presbury's sharp eyes on me in Melbourne – as I said a while ago. I knew she'd talk – as she surely will the minute she gets back – and I thought I might as well get ahead of her, come home and face the music before anybody got a chance to expose me. At the worst – if what you suggest has really happened – it's an open-and-shut case; no one's going to blame the woman; and it ought to be easy enough to secure a separation or divorce –"

"You'd consent to that?" inquired Drummond intently.

"I'm ready to do anything she wishes, within the law."

"You leave it to her, then?"

"If I ever find her – yes. It's the only decent thing I can do."

"How do you figure that?"

"I went away a sick man and a poor one; I come back as sound as a bell, and if not exactly a plutocrat, at least better off than I ever expected to be in this life... To all intents and purposes I *made* her a partner to a bargain she disliked; well, I'll be hanged if I'm going to hedge now, when I look a better matrimonial risk, perhaps: if she still wants my name, she can have it."

Drummond laughed quietly. "If that's how you feel," he said, "I can only give you one piece of professional advice."

"What's that?"

"Find your wife."

After a moment of puzzled thought, Whitaker admitted ruefully: "You're right. There's the rub."

"I'm afraid you won't find it an easy job. I did my best without uncovering a trace of her."

"You followed up that letter, of course?"

"I did my best; but, my dear fellow, almost anybody with a decent appearance can manage to write a note on Waldorf stationery. I made sure of one thing – the management knew nothing of the writer under either her maiden name or yours."

"Did you try old Thurlow?"

"Her father died within eight weeks from the time you ran away. He left everything to charity, by the way. Unforgiving blighter."

"Well, there's her sister, Mrs. Pettit."

"She heard of the marriage first through me," asserted Drummond. "Your wife had never come near her – nor even sent her a line. She could give me no information whatever."

"You don't think she purposely misled you – ?"

"Frankly I don't. She seemed sincerely worried, when we talked the matter over, and spoke in a most convincing way of her fruitless attempts to trace the young woman through a private detective agency."

"Still, she may know now," Whitaker said doubtfully. "She may have heard something since. I'll have a word with her myself."

"Address," observed Drummond, dryly: "the American Embassy, Berlin... Pettit's got some sort of a minor diplomatic berth over there."

"O the devil!.. But, anyway, I can write."

"Think it over," Drummond advised. "Maybe it might be kinder not to."

"Oh, I don't know –"

"You've given me to understand you were pretty comfy on the other side of the globe. Why not let sleeping dogs lie?"

"It's the lie that bothers me – the living lie. It isn't fair to her."

"Rather sudden, this solicitude – what?" Drummond asked with open sarcasm.

"I daresay it does look that way. But I can't see that it's the decent thing for me to let things slide any longer. I've got to try to find her. She may be ill – destitute – in desperate trouble again – "

Drummond's eyebrows went up whimsically. "You surely don't mean me to infer that your affections are involved?"

This brought Whitaker up standing. "Good heavens – no!" he cried. He moved to a window and stared rudely at the Post Office Building for a time. "I'm going to find her just the same – if she still lives," he announced, turning back.

"Would you know her if you saw her?"

"I don't know." Whitaker frowned with annoyance. "She's six years older – "

"A woman often develops and changes amazingly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four."

"I know," Whitaker acknowledged with dejection.

"Well, but what *was* she like?" Drummond pursued curiously.

Whitaker shook his head. "It's not easy to remember. Matter of fact, I don't believe I ever got one good square look at her. It was twilight in the hotel, when I found her; we sat talking in absolute darkness, toward the end; even in the minister's study there was only a green-shaded lamp on the table; and on the train – well, we were both too much worked up, I fancy, to pay much attention to details."

"Then you really haven't any idea – ?"

"Oh, hardly." Whitaker's thin brown hand gesticulated vaguely. "She was tall, slender, pale, at the awkward age..."

"Blonde or brune?"

"I swear I don't know. She wore one of those funny knitted caps, tight down over her hair, all the time."

Drummond laughed quietly. "Rather an inconclusive description, especially if you advertise. 'Wanted: the wife I married six years ago and haven't seen since; tall, slender, pale, at the awkward age; wore one of those funny knit – '"

"I don't feel in a joking humour," Whitaker interrupted roughly. "It's a serious matter and wants serious treatment... What else have we got to mull over?"

Drummond shrugged suavely. "There's enough to keep us busy for several hours," he said. "For instance, there's my stewardship."

"Your which?"

"My care of your property. You left a good deal of money and securities lying round loose, you know; naturally I felt obliged to look after 'em. There was no telling when Widow Whitaker might walk in and demand an accounting. I presume we might as well run over the account – though it is getting late."

"Half-past four," Whitaker informed him, consulting his watch. "Take too long for to-day. Some other time."

"To-morrow suit you?"

"To-morrow's Sunday," Whitaker objected. "But there's no hurry at all."

Drummond's reply was postponed by the office boy, who popped in on the heels of a light knock.

"Mr. Max's outside," he announced.

"O the deuce!" The exclamation seemed to escape Drummond's lips involuntarily. He tightened them angrily, as though regretting the lapse of self-control, and glanced hurriedly askance to see if Whitaker had noticed. "I'm busy," he added, a trace sullenly. "Tell him I've gone out."

"But he's got 'nappointment," the boy protested. "And besides, I told him you was in."

"You needn't fob him off on my account," Whitaker interposed. "We can finish our confab later – Monday – any time. It's time for me to be getting up-town, anyway."

"It isn't that," Drummond explained doggedly. "Only – the man's a bore, and – "

"It isn't Jules Max?" Whitaker demanded excitedly. "Not little Jules Max, who used to stage manage our amateur shows?"

"That's the man," Drummond admitted with plain reluctance.

"Then have him in, by all means. I want to say howdy to him, if nothing more. And then I'll clear out and leave you to his troubles."

Drummond hesitated; whereupon the office boy, interpreting assent, precipitately vanished to usher in the client. His employer laughed a trifle sourly.

"Ben's a little too keen about pleasing Max," he said. "I think he looks on him as the fountainhead of free seats. Max has developed into a heavy-weight entrepreneur, you know."

"Meaning theatrical manager? Then why not say so? But I might've guessed he'd drift into something of the sort."

A moment later Whitaker was vigorously pumping the unresisting – indeed the apparently boneless – hand of a visibly flabbergasted gentleman, who suffered him for the moment solely upon suspicion, if his expression were a reliable index of his emotion.

In the heyday of his career as a cunning and successful promoter of plays and players, Jules Max indulged a hankering for the picturesquely eccentric that sat oddly upon his commonplace personality. The hat that had made Hammerstein famous Max had appropriated – straight crown, flat brim and immaculate gloss – bodily. Beneath it his face was small of feature, and fat. Its trim little mustache lent it an air of conventionality curiously at war with a pince-nez which sheltered his near-sighted eyes, its enormous, round, horn-rimmed lenses sagging to one side with the weight of a wide black ribbon. His nose was insignificant, his mouth small and pursy. His short, round little body was invariably by day dressed in a dark gray morning-coat, white-edged waistcoat, assertively-striped trousers, and patent-leather shoes with white spats. He had a passion for lemon-coloured gloves of thinnest kid and slender malacca walking-sticks. His dignity was an awful thing, as ingrained as his strut.

He reasserted the dignity now with a jerk of his maltreated hand, as well as with an appreciable effort betrayed by his resentful glare.

"Do I know you?" he demanded haughtily. "If not, what the devil do you mean by such conduct, sir?"

With a laugh, Whitaker took him by the shoulders and spun him round smartly into a convenient chair.

"Sit still and let me get a *good* look," he implored. "Think of it! Juley Max daring to put on side with me! The impudence of you, Juley! I've a great mind to play horse with you. How dare you go round the streets looking like that, anyway?"

Max recovered his breath, readjusted his glasses, and resumed his stare.

"Either," he observed, "you're Hugh Whitaker come to life or a damned outrage."

"Both, if you like."

"You sound like both," complained the little man. "Anyway, you were drowned in the Philippines or somewhere long ago, and I never waste time on a dead one... Drummond – " He turned to the lawyer with a vastly business-like air.

"No, you don't!" Whitaker insisted, putting himself between the two men. "I admit that you're a great man; you might at least admit that I'm a live one."

A mollified smile moderated the small man's manner. "That's a bargain," he said, extending a pale yellow paw; "I'm glad to see you again, Hugh. When did you recrudescence?"

"An hour ago," Drummond answered for him; "blew in here as large as life and twice as important. He's been running a gold farm out in New Guinea. What do you know about that?"

"It's very interesting," Max conceded. "I shall have to cultivate him; I never neglect a man with money. If you'll stick around a few minutes, Hugh, I'll take you up-town in my car." He turned to Drummond, completely ignoring Whitaker while he went into the details of some action he desired

the lawyer to undertake on his behalf. Then, having talked steadily for upwards of ten minutes, he rose and prepared to go.

"You've asked him, of course?" he demanded of Drummond, nodding toward Whitaker.

Drummond flushed slightly. "No chance," he said. "I was on the point of doing it when you butted in."

"What's this?" inquired Whitaker.

Max delivered himself of a startling bit of information: "He's going to get married."

Whitaker stared. "Drummond? Not really?"

Drummond acknowledged his guilt brazenly: "Next week, in fact."

"But why didn't you say anything about it?"

"You didn't give me an opening. Besides, to welcome a deserter from the Great Beyond is enough to drive all other thoughts from a man's mind."

"There's to be a supper in honour of the circumstances, at the Beaux Arts to-night," supplemented Max. "You'll come, of course."

"Do you think you could keep me away with a dog?"

"Wouldn't risk spoiling the dog," said Drummond. He added with a tentative, questioning air: "There'll be a lot of old-time acquaintances of yours there, you know."

"So much the better," Whitaker declared with spirit. "I've played dead long enough."

"As you think best," the lawyer acceded. "Midnight, then – the Beaux Arts."

"I'll be there – and furthermore, I'll be waiting at the church a week hence – or whenever it's to come off. And now I want to congratulate you." Whitaker held Drummond's hand in one of those long, hard grips that mean much between men. "But mostly I want to congratulate her. Who is she?"

"Sara Law," said Drummond, with pride in his quick color and the lift of his chin.

"Sara Law?" The name had a familiar ring, yet Whitaker failed to recognize it promptly.

"The greatest living actress on the English-speaking stage," Max announced, preening himself importantly. "My own discovery."

"You don't mean to say you haven't heard of her. Is New Guinea, then, so utterly abandoned to the march of civilization?"

"Of course I've heard – but I have been out of touch with such things," Whitaker apologized. "When shall I see her?"

"At supper, to-night," said the man of law. "It's really in her honour –"

"In honour of her retirement," Max interrupted, fussing with a gardenia on his lapel. "She retires from the stage finally, and forever – she says – when the curtain falls to-night."

"Then I've got to be in the theatre to-night – if that's the case," said Whitaker. "It isn't my notion of an occasion to miss."

"You're right there," Max told him bluntly. "It's no small matter to me – losing such a star; but the world's loss of its greatest artist —*ah!*" He kissed his finger-tips and ecstatically flirted the caress afar.

"'Fraid you won't get in, though," Drummond doubted darkly. "Everything in the house for this final week was sold out a month ago. Even the speculators are cleaned out."

"*Tut!*" the manager reproved him loftily. "Hugh is going to see Sara Law act for the last time from my personal box – aren't you, Hugh?"

"You bet I am!" Whitaker asserted with conviction.

"Then come along." Max caught him by the arm and started for the door. "So long, Drummond..."

VI CURTAIN

Nothing would satisfy Max but that Whitaker should dine with him. He consented to drop him at the Ritz-Carlton, in order that he might dress, only on the condition that Whitaker would meet him at seven, in the white room at the Knickerbocker.

"Just mention my name to the head waiter," he said with magnificence; "or if I'm there first, you can't help seeing me. Everybody knows my table – the little one in the southeast corner."

Whitaker promised, suppressing a smile; evidently the hat was not the only peculiarity of Mr. Hammerstein's that Max had boldly made his own.

Max surprised him by a shrewd divination of his thoughts. "I know what you're thinking," he volunteered with an intensely serious expression shadowing his pudgy countenance; "but really, my dear fellow, it's good business. You get people into the habit of saying, 'There's Max's table,' and you likewise get them into the habit of thinking of Max's theatre and Max's stars. As a matter of fact, I'm merely running an immense advertising plant with a dramatic annex."

"You are an immense advertisement all by your lonesome," Whitaker agreed with a tolerant laugh, rising as the car paused at the entrance of the Ritz.

"Seven o'clock – you won't fail me?" Max persisted. "Really, you know, I'm doing you an immense favour – dinner – a seat in my private box at Sara Law's farewell performance –"

"Oh, I'm thoroughly impressed," Whitaker assured him, stepping out of the car. "But tell me – on the level, now – why this staggering condescension?"

Max looked him over as he paused on the sidewalk, a tall, loosely built figure attired impeccably yet with an elusive sense of carelessness, his head on one side and a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. The twinkle was momentarily reflected in the managerial gaze as he replied with an air of impulsive candour: "One never can tell when the most unlikely-looking material may prove useful. I may want to borrow money from you before long. If I put you under sufficient obligation to me, you can't well refuse... Shoot, James!"

The latter phrase was Max's way of ordering the driver to move on. The car snorted resentfully, then pulled smoothly and swiftly away. Max waved a jaunty farewell with a lemon-coloured hand, over the back of the tonneau.

Whitaker went up to his room in a reflective mood in which the theatrical man had little place, and began leisurely to prepare his person for ceremonious clothing – preparations which, at first, consisted in nothing more strenuous than finding a pipe and sitting down to stare out of the window. He was in no hurry – he had still an hour and a half before he was due at the Knickerbocker – and the afternoon's employment had furnished him with a great deal of material to stimulate his thoughts.

Since his arrival in New York he had fallen into the habit of seeking the view from his window when in meditative humour. The vast sweep of gullied roofs exerted an almost hypnotic attraction for his eyes. They ranged southward to the point where vision failed against the false horizon of dull amber haze. Late sunlight threw level rays athwart the town, gilding towering westerly walls and striking fire from all their windows. Between them like deep blue crevasses ran the gridironed streets. The air was moveless, yet sonorously thrilled with the measured movement of the city's symphonic roar. Above the golden haze a drift of light cloud was burning an ever deeper pink against the vault of robin's-egg blue.

A view of ten thousand roofs, inexpressibly enchaining... Somewhere – perhaps – in that welter of steel and stone, as eternal and as restless as the sea, was the woman Whitaker had married, working out her lonely destiny. A haphazard biscuit tossed from his window might fall upon the very roof that sheltered her: he might search for a hundred years and never cross her path.

He wondered...

More practically he reminded himself not to forget to write to Mrs. Pettit. He must try to get the name of the firm of private detectives she had employed, and her permission to pump them; it might help him, to learn the quarters wherein they had failed.

And he must make an early opportunity to question Drummond more closely; not that he anticipated that Drummond knew anything more than he had already disclosed – anything really helpful at all events.

His thoughts shifted to dwell temporarily on the two personalities newly introduced into his cosmos, strikingly new, in spite of the fact that they had been so well known to him of old. He wondered if it were possible that he seemed to them as singularly metamorphosed as they seemed to him – superficially if not integrally. He had lost altogether the trick of thinking in their grooves, and yet they seemed very human to him. He thought they supplemented one another somewhat weirdly: each was at bottom what the other seemed to be. Beneath his assumption, for purposes of revenue only, of outrageous eccentricities, Jules Max was as bourgeois as César Birotteau; beneath his assumption of the steady-going, keen, alert and conservative man of affairs, Drummond was as romantic as D'Artagnan. But Max had this advantage of Drummond: he was not his own dupe; whereas Drummond would go to his grave believing himself bored to extinction by the commonplaceness of his fantastical self...

Irresponsibly, his reverie reëmbred the memory he had of the woman who alone held the key to his matrimonial entanglement. The business bound his imagination with an ineluctable fascination. No matter how far his thoughts wandered, they were sure to return to beat themselves to weariness against that hard-faced mystery, like moths bewitched by the light behind a clouded window-glass. It was very curious (he thought) that he could be so indifferent and so interested at one and the same time. The possibility that she might have married a second time did not disturb his pulse by the least fraction of a beat. He even contemplated the chance that she might be dead with normal equanimity. Fortunate, that he didn't love her. More fortunate still, that he loved no one else.

It occurred to him suddenly that it would take a long time for a letter to elicit information from Berlin.

Incontinently he wrote and despatched a long, extravagant cablegram to Mrs. Pettit in care of the American Embassy, little doubting that she would immediately answer.

Then he set whole-heartedly about the business of making himself presentable for the evening.

When eventually he strode into the white room, Max was already established at the famous little table in the southeast corner. Whitaker was conscious of turning heads and guarded comment as he took his place opposite the little fat man.

"Make you famous in a night," Max assured him importantly. "Don't happen to need any notoriety, do you?"

"No, thanks."

"Dine with me here three nights hand-running and they'll let you into the Syndicate by the back door without even asking your name. P.T.A.'s one grand little motto, my boy."

"P.T.A.?"

"Pays to advertise. Paste that in your hat, keep your head small enough to wear it, and don't givadam if folks do think you're an addle-pated village cut-up, and you'll have this town at heel like a good dog as long as – well," Max wound up with a short laugh, "as long as your luck lasts."

"Yours seems to be pretty healthy – no signs of going into a premature decline."

"Ah!" said Max gloomily. "Seems!"

With a morose manner he devoted himself to his soup.

"Look me over," he requested abruptly, leaning back. "I guess I'm some giddy young buck, what?"

Whitaker reviewed the striking effect Max had created by encasing his brief neck and double chin in an old-fashioned high collar and black silk stock, beneath which his important chest was protected by an elaborately frilled shirt decorated with black pearl studs. His waist was strapped in by a pique waistcoat edged with black, and there was a distinctly perceptible "invisible" stripe in the material of his evening coat and trousers.

"Dressed up like a fool," Max summed up the ensemble before his guest could speak. "Would you believe that despair could gnaw at the vitals of any one as wonderfully arrayed?"

"I would not," Whitaker asserted.

"Nobody would," said Max mournfully. "And yet, 'tis true."

"Meaning – ?"

"Oh, I'm just down in the mouth because this is Sara's last appearance." Max motioned the waiter to remove the *débris* of a course. "I'm as superstitious as any trouper in the profession. I've got it in my knob that she's my mascot. If she leaves me, my luck goes with her. I never had any luck until she came under my management, and I don't expect to have any after she retires. I made her, all right, but she made me, too; and it sprains my sense of good business to break up a paying combination like that."

"Nonsense," Whitaker contended warmly. "If I'm not mistaken, you were telling me this afternoon that you stand next to Belasco as a producing manager. The loss of one star isn't going to rob you of that prestige, is it?"

"You never can tell," the little man contended darkly; "I wouldn't bet thirty cents my next production would turn out a hit."

"What will it cost – your next production?"

"The show I have in mind – " Max considered a moment then announced positively: "between eighteen and twenty thousand."

"I call that big gambling."

"Gambling? Oh, that's just part of the game. I meant a side bet. If the production flivvers, I'll need that thirty cents for coffee and sinkers at Dennett's. So I won't bet... But," he volunteered brightly, "I'll sell you a half interest in the show for twelve thousand."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"I mean it," Max insisted seriously; "though I'll admit I'm not crazy about your accepting – yet. I've had several close calls with Sara – she's threatened to chuck the stage often before this; but every time something happened to make her change her mind. I've got a hunch maybe something will happen this time, too. If it does, I won't want any partners."

Whitaker laughed quietly and turned the conversation, accepting the manager's pseudo-confidences at their face value – that is, as pure bluff, quite consistent with the managerial pose.

They rose presently and made their way out into the crowded, blatant night of Broadway.

"We'll walk, if you don't mind," Max suggested. "It isn't far, and I'd like to get a line on the house as it goes in." He sighed affectedly. "Heaven knows when I'll see another swell audience mobbing one of my attractions!"

His companion raised no objection. This phase of the life of New York exerted an attraction for his imagination of unflinching potency. He was more willing to view it afoot than from the windows of a cab.

They pushed forward slowly through the eddying tides, elbowed by a matchless motley of humanity, deafened by its thousand tongues, dazzled to blindness by walls of living light. Whitaker experienced a sensation of participating in a royal progress: Max was plainly a man of mark; he left a wake of rippling interest. At every third step somebody hailed him, as a rule by his first name; generally he responded by a curt nod and a tightening of his teeth upon his cigar.

They turned east through Forty-sixth Street, shouldered by a denser rabble whose faces, all turned in one direction, shone livid with the glare of a gigantic electric sign, midway down the block:

THEATRE MAX

SARA LAW'S

FAREWELL

It was nearly half-past eight; the house had been open since seven; and still a queue ran from the gallery doors to Broadway, while still an apparently interminable string of vehicles writhed from one corner to the lobby entrance, paused to deposit its perishable freight, and streaked away to Sixth Avenue. The lobby itself was crowded to suffocation with an Occidental durbar of barbaric magnificence, the city's supreme manifestation of its religion, the ultimate rite in the worship of the pomps of the flesh.

"Look at that," Max grumbled through his cigar. "Ain't it a shame?"

"What?" Whitaker had to lift his voice to make it carry above the buzzing of the throng.

"The money I'm losing," returned the manager, vividly disgusted. "I could've filled the Metropolitan Opera House three times over!"

He swung on his heel and began to push his way out of the lobby. "Come along – no use trying to get in this way."

Whitaker followed, to be led down a blind alley between the theatre and the adjoining hotel. An illuminated sign advertised the stage door, through which, *via* a brief hallway, they entered the postscenium – a vast, cavernous, cluttered, shadowy and draughty place, made visible for the most part by an unnatural glow filtering from the footlights through the canvas walls of an interior set. Whitaker caught hasty glimpses of stage-hands idling about; heard a woman's voice declaiming loudly from within the set; saw a middle-aged actor waiting for his cue beside a substantial wooden door in the canvas walls; and – Max dragging him by the arm – passed through a small door into the gangway behind the boxes.

"Curtain's just up," Max told him; "Sara doesn't come on till near the middle of the act. Make yourself comfortable; I'll be back before long."

He drew aside a curtain and ushered his guest into the right-hand stage-box, then vanished. Whitaker, finding himself the sole occupant of the box, established himself in desolate grandeur as far out of sight as he could arrange his chair, without losing command of the stage. A single glance over the body of the house showed him tier upon tier of dead-white shirt-bosoms framed in black, alternating with bare gleaming shoulders and dazzling, exquisite gowns. The few empty stalls were rapidly filling up. There was a fluent movement through the aisles. A subdued hum and rustle rose from that portion of the audience which was already seated. The business going on upon the stage was receiving little attention – from Whitaker as little as from any one. He was vaguely conscious only of a scene suggesting with cruel cleverness the interior of a shabby-genteel New York flat and of a few figures peopling it, all dominated by a heavy-limbed, harsh-voiced termagant. That to which he was most sensitive was a purely psychological feeling of suspense and excitement, a semi-hysterical, high-strung, emotional state which he knew he shared with the audience, its source in fact. The opening scene in the development of the drama interested the gathering little or not at all; it was hanging in suspense upon the unfolding of some extraordinary development, something unprecedented and extraneous, foreign to the play.

Was it due simply to the fact that all these people were present at the last public appearance – as advertised – of a star of unusual popularity? Whitaker wondered. Or was there something else in their minds, something deeper and more profoundly significant?

Max slipped quietly into the box and handed his guest a programme. "Better get over here," he suggested in a hoarse whisper, indicating a chair near the rail. "You may never have another chance to see the greatest living actress."

Whitaker thanked him and adopted the suggestion, albeit with reluctance. The manager remained standing for a moment, quick eyes ranging over the house. By this time the aisles were all clear, the rows of seats presenting an almost unbroken array of upturned faces.

Max combined a nod denoting satisfaction with a slight frown.

"Wonderful house," he whispered, sitting down behind Whitaker. "Drummond hasn't shown up yet, though."

"That so?" Whitaker returned over his shoulder.

"Yes; it's funny; never knew him to be so late. He always has the aisle seat, fourth row, centre. But he'll be along presently."

Whitaker noted that the designated stall was vacant, then tried to fix his attention upon the stage; but without much success; after a few moments he became aware that he had missed something important; the scene was meaningless to him, lacking what had gone before.

He glanced idly at his programme, indifferently absorbing the information that "Jules Max has the honour to present Miss Sara Law in her first and greatest success entitled Joan Thursday – a play in three acts –"

The audience stirred expectantly; a movement ran through it like the movement of waters, murmurous, upon a shore. Whitaker's gaze was drawn to the stage as if by an implacable force. Max shifted on the chair behind him and said something indistinguishable, in an unnatural tone.

A woman had come upon the stage, suddenly and tempestuously, banging a door behind her. The audience got the barest glimpse of her profile as, pausing momentarily, she eyed the other actors. Then, without speaking, she turned and walked up-stage, her back to the footlights.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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