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Vision House



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CHAPTER I ENTER MISS SOREL

It was the third day out from Liverpool on the way to New York, and people were just beginning to take an interest in each other's names and looks.

The passenger list of the *Britannia* was posted up close to the lift on B deck, but the weather had not encouraged curious groups to study and inwardly digest its items. In fact, digestion of all sorts had been difficult. To-day, however, the huge ship had ceased to step on and stumble over monster waves, and had slipped into a sea of silken blue. Bad sailors and lazy ones were on deck staring at their fellows as at unearthly creatures who had dropped on board since the vessel sailed, miraculously like manna from heaven. The news had flown round, as news flies in an Eastern bazaar, that there were three names of conspicuous interest on the hitherto neglected list, and that now was the moment for "spotting" their owners.

Two of these should be easy to find, for their steamer chairs, plainly labelled, stood side by side on A deck, where everyone sat or was supposed to sit. The sea dogs and dogesses who braved all weathers had nosed out those labels, but had so far watched in vain for the chairs to be occupied. They had observed, also, that corresponding places at the captain's table were vacant. There were three chairs together on deck, and in the dining-saloon, but the third did not count with the public. It was that of a mere chaperon – The Girl's mother. She was not the third of the Three Thrilling Passengers. That person happened to be a man, and he had neither chair nor label. If he had eaten a meal outside his cabin he had somehow passed unrecognised.

The stewards, questioned, said that John Garth had not applied for a seat at table. Yes, certainly, one had been assigned to him, next Mrs. Sorel, she being in the place of honour on the right of the *Britannia's* captain. In this position Garth would have faced Lord Severance, and sat diagonally opposite Miss Sorel, who was on the captain's left. But the favoured man had ignored his privilege. It was understood that he preferred snatching vague sandwiches and glasses of beer at odd hours in the smoking-room, or on deck; therefore it would be hard to identify him. Meanwhile, however, celebrity seekers gathered near those three chairs on the sunny port side of A deck.

By ten o'clock the crowd had thickened; but it was not till close on eleven that a tall figure in uniform, preceded by a steward with rugs, sat down in the chair ticketed "Major the Earl of Severance."

Many Americans were on board, homeward bound after months of Red Cross and other war work, and they knew in their hearts, no doubt, that titles, once valued by snobs, were absolutely out-of-date in this newly-democratised world. Nevertheless, they threw glances at Lord Severance. Their glances would not have been wasted on a mere every-day male. Of course, their excuse might have been that they'd prefer glancing at their own American Johnny Garth, who was as much a major as Lord Severance, and, being a V.C. (the one and only American V.C.), twice as much a man for them.

But then Garth wasn't in sight, and Severance was. Besides, the chair between Lord Severance's and Mrs. Sorel's was ticketed "Miss Marise Sorel." Nobody could deny that Miss Sorel was worth flocking to gaze at, had Severance not existed.

Thousands, hundred of thousands, of men and women paid good money to gaze at her in theatres. Here she could be seen free of charge. But was she coming out? the deck pilgrims wondered.

And Lord Severance had an air of wondering, too. He held a book in his hand; but his eyes were often on the nearest door.

They were strikingly fine eyes, and Lord Severance was in appearance a striking man. "Stunning" was an adjective used by some American promenaders. They remarked, too, that he "wasn't a typical Englishman. You'd think he was Spanish or something."

He was not Spanish, but half of him was not English; the "something" was Greek. His mother had been a Greek heiress and beauty, but her money and looks had been lost before she died. Most valuable things were lost after they had been in the Severance family for any length of time. The beautiful Greek woman's handsome son had pale olive skin, a straight nose, full red lips under a miniature moustache like two inked finger-prints, raven hair sleekly brushed straight back from his square forehead, and immense eyes of unfathomable blackness.

He was going to "the States" on some military mission, no one knew quite what, and so, although the war had finished months ago, he was still in uniform, with the "brass hat" of a staff officer, and the gorgeous grey-lavender overcoat of the Guards. It seemed as if nobody could help admiring him, and nobody did help it, except a great, hulking chap in abominable clothes, with a khaki-coloured handkerchief round his neck instead of a collar. This beast – in a sat-on-looking cap, enough to disgrace a commercial traveller, sleeves as much too short for his red-brown wrists as were the trousers for his strapping ankles – strode to and fro along the deck as if for a wager. It was almost as if he flaunted himself in defiance of someone or something. Yet he didn't appear self-conscious. He had in his yellow-grey eyes that bored-with-humanity look of a lion in a zoo, who gazes past crowds to the one vision he desires – the desert. Only, now and then as he passed the chair of Lord Severance, his look came back for an instant from the desert, or waste of waves, to shoot scorn at a pair of well-shod feet crossed on a black fur rug. This would hardly indicate any emotion higher than jealousy, it seemed, as the boots of Major Lord Severance were perfect, and his own were vile.

When Severance had restlessly occupied his chair for fifteen minutes he suddenly sprang up. A maid, unmistakably French, was squeezing a load of rugs through a doorway. Severance ignored the offered service of a deck steward, as if the rugs were too sacred for human hands to touch. With a kind smile he himself helped the woman in black to spread the soft, furry folds over the two neighbouring chairs.

"It's like a scene on the stage in a play written for her," said one American Red Cross nurse to another. "The hero of the piece and the maid working up the woman star's entrance."

"Which is he, more like hero or villain?" the second nurse reflected aloud. "If I wrote him into a play, he'd be the villain – that dark type with red lips and a little black moustache. But the Sorel's a star all right. We ought to tune up and whistle a bar of entrance music! See how the French maid puts the brown rug on one chair and the blue rugs on the other. What'll you bet Sorel and her mother aren't dressed one in blue and one in brown? Gee! The biggest blue rug's lined with chinchilla. Can you beat it?"

Neither nurse could beat it, but the approaching vision could. She beat it with a long cloak of even more silvery chinchilla.

At the door she stood aside for an older, shorter, plumper woman to pass, she herself being very tall and exquisitely slender. She did not seem to look at anyone, or be aware that anyone looked at her. Nevertheless, all eyes were focussed upon the standing figure in the chinchilla coat and blue toque while the lady in brown and sables was being seated. Even Lord Severance had eyes only for the girl as he lent his hands to her maid to tuck in the brown rugs. But the girl's smile was for her mother, and it was not till Mrs. Sorel was settled that she moved. A charming little scene of daughterly devotion, worthy a paragraph if there were a journalist in sight!

Just as Severance, with an air of absorption, wrapped Miss Sorel's grey suède shoes in her chinchilla-lined rug, the giant in the ghastly clothes hurled himself past. The girl did not lift her lashes,

so famous for their length and curl. She was hanging a gold-mesh bag on the arm of her chair. You would say that she had not noticed the fellow. But the fellow had noticed her.

The distant-desert look died. In his eyes a flame lit, and flashed at the girl in the chair. It was a light that literally spoke. It said "God! You're a beauty." Then he flung one of his glances at Severance, scornful or jealous as before. To do this he had not actually paused, yet it was as if something had happened. Whatever the thing was, Severance resented it in hot silence; and, in turn, his eyes did deadly work. They stabbed the broad back of the badly-cut, badly-fitting coat as its wearer forged away, hands deep in pockets.

Miss Sorel sat between her mother and Lord Severance. She glanced at the former as if to begin a conversation, but Mrs. Sorel had opened her lorgnettes and a novel. The girl knew the signal: "Don't talk to me. Talk to him." But she was lazy in obeying. She felt so sure of Severance, that she needn't try to hold him by any tricks. She might now treat him as she chose. Not that she had ever let him see that she was anxious to please. But there *had* been an anxious time. The girl didn't want to talk, so she sat deliciously still, deliciously happy. She was thinking. The restful peace of the sea after stormy days made her think of herself.

She often thought of herself; more, indeed, than of any other subject, because, like most beautiful young actresses, she had been encouraged to form the habit. But this was special – extra special.

The girl was so content with her world that she shut herself in with it by shutting her eyes. Then she faintly smiled in order that (just in case they happened to look) people shouldn't suppose she was seasick.

How odd that it should be her mother's lorgnettes which had reminded her suddenly of her own good luck – the lorgnettes, and the delicate ringed fingers grasping the tortoiseshell handle!

Once that little hand had not been so white. There had been no leisure for manicuring nails, and polishing them to the sheen of pink coral. There had been no rings – no lorgnettes monogrammed with rose diamonds. That was before the "Marise" days; before clever Mums had linked together in the French way her daughter's name of Mary Louise (after father and mother) and begun training the girl into superlative beauty and grace for the stage. Oh yes, Marise owed a lot to ambitious little Mums! But at last she had been able to make generous payment for all the trouble, all the sacrifices. She, Marise, had bought the lorgnettes, and the sables, and the antique rings which Mums told everyone were heirlooms in the Sorel family, bequeathed to a great-grandfather of "poor dear Louis by a Countess Sorel beheaded in the Revolution." She, Marise, had easily earned money for all the other lovely things they both possessed.

It was like a dream to remember how, three years ago, she had been just a pretty "actorine" among other "actorines" in New York, struggling for a chance to "show what she could really do," her heart jumping like a fish at the sight of a Big Manager. Why, hadn't she literally squeaked with joy when she got a contract for "fifty per"? And hadn't she soon after nearly fallen dead when Dunstan Belloc let her understudy Elsa Fortescue in "The Spring Song"?

Of course, even at that time, she and Mums had both been sure she was born to play "Dolores," and that Elsa *wasn't*. Belloc hadn't been so sure. He had given her the part only because she looked irresistible when she begged for it. Oh, and perhaps a little because her dead father, Louis Sorel, had been an old friend of his. Marise had had to "make good," and she had made good.

Not that the girl had wished harm to Elsa Fortescue. But Elsa was a "Has Been," whereas "Dolores" was supposed to be in the springtime of youth, and possessed of an annihilating beauty – the beauty which draws men as the moon draws the sea. Marise didn't think it conceited to face facts, and admit that this description fitted her like a glove. These gifts had brought her sensational success in a single night, whereas the piece had simply "flivvered" with Elsa as star. The critics had been cold if not cruel, and grief mixed with *grippe* laid Elsa low. Then little Marise Sorel (only figuratively "little," she being one of those willowy, long-limbed nymphs who are the models and manikins of

the moment), "little Marise," in whom author and manager felt scant faith, had saved the play and made herself. Both had boomed for a wonderful year, and at the end of that time England had called for "Dolores" and "The Song."

Oh, and those two years in London that followed! Never could another girl have known anything like them since the days of the great professional beauties whom crowds had mobbed in Hyde Park. Papers and people had praised Miss Sorel's looks, her voice, and her talent. It was thought quite amazing that a girl so lovely should take the trouble to act well, but Marise explained to interviewers that she couldn't help acting. It was in her blood to act – her father's blood. She didn't add that ambition was in her mother's blood, and that Mums was doing all she could to hand it on to the next generation. It wasn't necessary to mention ambition to the public. Some people considered ambition more a vice than a virtue. But Marise, who knew what poor Mums's past had been, understood the passion and even felt the thrill of it. Not only had she had the "time of her life" in those two years, but she had met people whom she couldn't have approached before her blossoming as "Dolores" in "The Spring Song." As "Dolores" she had been spoiled, fêted, adored; and she had become rich.

Now, here she was on the way back to dear New York to revive the play, which Belloc, as manager, and Sheridan, as author, expected to surpass its first success. At present Miss Sorel had the valued cachet of a London triumph added to her charms. She was more *chic*, she could act and sing better, than before. Isadora Duncan had coached her for the dance in the last scene, as an act of generous friendship, and this had given "The Song" a new fillip in London. It would be the same in New York.

As if this were not enough to satisfy an older "star" than she, there was the wonderful way in which the affair of Tony Severance had developed. He had strained every nerve to sail with her on the *Britannia*. Heaven alone knew how he'd obtained or invented the "mission" which had made his plan possible. It was entirely for her sake, and everyone was coupling their names – in a nice, proper way, of course. She was that kind of girl. And Mums was that kind of mother. Even before Severance had come into the title, he had been splendidly worth while on account of his looks, his position, and his "set," but now it seemed to Marise that every unmarried woman in England and America must be envying her.

As she sipped the honey of these thoughts, the girl felt that Severance was staring at her eyelashes, and willing her to lift them. But she would not, just yet. She went on with her thinking. She asked herself if her feeling for him were love? Of course, it wasn't the "Dolores" sort of love for "David Hardcastle," but love like that was safer on the stage than off. Marise admired Tony, and was very proud of her conquest, though she would admit that to no one except Mums. She had been horribly afraid, humiliatingly afraid for a few days, that he might change his mind if not his heart, when the earldom fell into his hands like a prize-package. If she'd not been sure before that Tony was the one man for her, she was frantically sure after the great surprise, when he was safely on board the *Britannia*. How pleased the cats would have been if she'd lost him – the cats who pretended to think, in the days before he was Lord Severance, that the honesty of his intentions depended upon her money.

They would see now – hateful, jealous things! For, as the Earl of Severance, though not rich, Tony would be no longer poor, and he had proved by sailing with her that life without Marise Sorel was worthless to him.

The cats would be sorry when she was the Countess of Severance, for every nasty word they'd said. She would forgive, but she would never be nice to them, of course. She would ask the creatures only to big, dull parties, just to let them see what a *grande dame* little Marise had become. And even if she weren't certain that she'd rather be a Countess than a stage star, Mums was certain for her – poor Mums, who had always yearned to be at the top! And it would really be nice to "belong" among the great people who had played with her for a while and made her their pet.

Marise opened her eyes. She did not, however, turn them to Severance. She gazed at the one ring which adorned her left hand. She never wore more than one ring at a time. This, and having all

her jewels match each other, her dress and her mood, was a fad of hers. Céline helped her carry it out. But if Severance gave her a diamond, that would match nothing, and spoil the scheme.

"You have the longest lashes of any woman in the world," he remarked.

"One would think you'd seen them all – all the women and all the eyelashes!" She looked at him at last, and her soft, smoke-blue eyes were the colour of her sapphire brooch and chain.

"I've seen my share of fair ladies."

"So I've heard."

"You've probably heard a good deal that isn't true." Severance glanced at Mrs. Sorel, or at what he could see of her, which was mostly book, lorgnettes, and hand. She seemed absorbed. He leaned towards Marise.

"The last three days have been a hundred years long," he murmured.

"Why? Have you been seasick, poor boy?"

"No!" (This was a slight deviation from the truth.) "I've been beastly dull without you."

"If you're such a good sailor, couldn't you walk, and read, and –"

"I couldn't be bothered doing anything intelligent. I moped in my cabin." ("Moped" was one word for what he had done.) "I –"

"Oh, here comes Samson again!" Marise broke in. "Isn't that absolutely the name for him? It jumped into my head when he passed before and gave me that wild sort of look – did you notice?"

"I did," said Severance drily. "I thought you didn't. Your eyes were apparently glued to your gold bag."

"What's the good of being an actress if you can't see two things at once, especially if one of them's the biggest thing on the ship? Nobody could help noticing that – any more than if Mont Blanc suddenly waltzed down stage from off the back drop."

"Waltzed? 'Galumped' is the word in this case."

"Oh, do you think so?" Marise appealed. "He walks like a man used to wide, free spaces."

"Like a farmer, you mean. To my mind, that's his part: Hodge – not Samson."

"I've forgotten what Samson was, I'm ashamed to say, before he played opposite Delilah," confessed Marise. "I suppose he was a warrior – most men were in those days – as now. This might be one – if it weren't for the clothes. They certainly are the limit! But do you know, he could be very distinguished-looking, even handsome, decently turned out?"

"No, I don't know it, my child." Severance beat down his irritation. "The only way I can picture that ugly blighter being decently 'turned out,' is out of a respectable club."

"You talk as if you had a grudge against my provincial Samson," laughed Marise, whose blue eyes had followed the "blighter" along the deck to the point of disappearance.

"I don't want to talk about him at all," protested Severance. "I want to talk about you."

"We're always talking about me!" smiled Marise, who was honestly not aware how she enjoyed talking about herself, or how soon she tired of most other subjects. "If you won't talk of one man, let's talk of another! For instance, have you seen our V.C. passenger?"

Severance flushed slightly. "Didn't I tell you, angel girl, that I've been in my cabin the whole time?"

"You didn't say the 'whole' time. And anyhow, there's such a crowd on board, they might have stuck a fellow-soldier in with you at the last moment. Didn't they warn you that they couldn't promise a cabin to yourself? Naturally they'd have chosen a V.C. as the least insupportable person."

"Several V.C.'s I've met have been most insupportable persons," grumbled Severance.

Something in his tone made the girl suddenly face him with wide-open eyes. She saw the dusky stain of red under the olive skin, and the drawing down of the black brows. "Why, Tony, how stupid of me not to remember before!" she exclaimed.

There! It had come – the thing that was bound to come sooner or later. Severance, rawly sensitive on this subject which the girl refused to drop, had wanted it to be later.

For the first time he thought that Marise Sorel was more obstinate than a beautiful young woman ought to be. In a man he would call such persistence mulish.

CHAPTER II

EXIT THE BLIGHTER

"Stupid not to remember what?" Severance still temporised, though he knew the answer.

"Not to remember that man named Garth, in your regiment, who was promoted from a private to be an officer, and won the V.C. I think it was Mums who asked you about him one day, when she'd read something in the *Daily Mail*, and you said he was a cad. Is this by any chance the same Garth?"

"By evil chance, it is."

Marise was interested. She was dramatic, and liked coincidences. Mrs. Sorel was interested too, with that part of her mind – the principal part – which was not reading Wells's *Joan and Peter*. It was quite easy, for two reasons, to unhook her attention from the book. One reason was that as a chaperon she was reading by discretion, not inclination. The other reason was, if she had to read at all, she would secretly have preferred a "smart society" novel. But when she read in public she always selected a book which could be talked about intellectually.

She knew how strong this feeling of Lord Severance against the regimental hero had been, and she wished that Marise would show a little tact, and not vex him. He had not proposed yet!

But Marise went on. "How quaint that your Major Garth should be on board our ship!"

"For Heaven's sake, don't call him my Major Garth, dear girl! I loathe the brute."

"But why, old thing? You might tell me why."

"I did, at the time your mother mentioned him."

"If you did, I've forgotten. Do tell me again. It sounds exciting."

Mary Sorel thought that intervention would now be more useful than detachment.

"You two are talking so loudly, I can't read!" she sweetly reproved the pair. "I caught the name of Garth, and the whole conversation we had that day, about him, came back to me. We were lunching with Lord Severance at the Carlton, and I showed him a paragraph I'd clipped from the *Daily Mail*. I thought as it was about his regiment he might be interested if he hadn't seen it. It was headed 'Romantic Career of a Hero. British-born American Wins the Victoria Cross.' But he wasn't interested, because he explained that the man was a blot on the Brigade; very common, not a gentleman."

"Yes, it comes back to me, too," said Marise. "But if he was a hero –"

"That's all newspaper tosh!" cut in Severance. "They must have headings! It's luck more than heroism that gets a chap the Victoria Cross. Soldiers all know that. Otherwise –"

His lips said no more. Only his eyes were eloquent. The beautiful lavender-grey overcoat hid no ribbon-symbols of decorations on his breast. But how can a staff officer find the chance his soul yearns for, to show his mettle – except the metal on his expensive "brass hat"?

"Of course!" Mrs. Sorel breathed sympathetically.

"Garth was all right as a private, I dare say," Severance gruded. "Even as an officer he might have passed in some regiments. But not in the Guards. He ought never to have been let come in. And he ought certainly not to have stayed in, knowing how we felt. If he'd had any proper pride, he wouldn't have stopped a day."

"Perhaps it was pride made him stick," suggested Marise, led on somehow she hardly knew why – to defend the culprit.

"'Proper' pride was my word," Severance reminded her.

"Extraordinary that an American should be serving with the Guards, in the first place!" Mary Sorel flung herself into the breach, hoping to stop the argument. Arguments made her anxious. She thought that they led to quarrels. And not for anything on earth would she have Marise quarrel with Severance, the only earl who had ever shown symptoms of proposing. It had been well enough for

the girl to pique him when he was a handsome young man about town, whose good position was counterbalanced by the star's financial and face value. But since six weeks Severance had become a great catch. Other girls were digging bait in case the fish should wriggle, or be coaxed, off Marise Sorel's hook.

"The fellow's luck again!" growled Severance. "I don't know what his job was in his own country. I don't interest myself in the private life of the lower classes. All I know is, he wasn't a soldier; but he had some bee in his bonnet about a future war, and a theory that there'd be trench fighting on a big scale. He contrived to invent and patent a motor entrenching tool, supposed to act fifty times quicker than anything else ever seen. Then he proceeded to experiment on his back-woods farm, or his wild west ranch, or whatever it was. Washington wasn't 'taking any,' however (isn't that what you say in the States?), so Garth decided to try it on the British bulldog. Where his big stroke of luck came in was meeting our old C.O. on board ship crossing to England. The Colonel had been in New York with his American wife. He probably heard the blighter brag of his invention, and that would catch him as toasted cheese in a trap catches a hungry rat. You see, the old boy always had a craze of his own about trench warfare, and I believe he used to bore the W.O. stiff, roaring for some such machine as this chap Garth invented. Naturally, Pobbles (that's what we call the C.O. behind his back) – Lord Pobblebrook, you know – took the man up. Not socially, of course. Garth's about on a social level with Lady Pobblebrook's foot-man, I should think. But he got the W.O. to look at the trench tool, and – as if that wasn't luck enough for the bounder! – the war broke out. The W.O. bought Garth's invention, as you saw in the *Mail*, and paid about tuppence for it, I suppose. He had a fancy to enlist in the British Army – feared the U.S.A. would be a bit late coming in, perhaps. I never heard of any American dropping into the Guards before, even as a Tommy, but it must have been easy enough with a push from Pobbles, especially as the chap's people had been English, I believe. If it hadn't been for Pobbles, Garth would certainly not have got a commission. Anyhow not with us."

"Oh, you Guardsmen think you're gods!" the girl teased him.

"Not gallery gods, in any case," Severance caught her up. "That's why we don't want that sort in our mess and clubs. Most regiments have had to put up with a mixture of these 'temporary gentlemen,' but not Ours. Besides, 'temporary' and 'permanent' are different words. The 'temporary' kind can't be permanent, don't you see? For their own sakes, they ought to step down and out when they cease to be useful, because they never can be ornamental. We of the Brigade have a good deal to live up to, you must admit. I assure you, I'm not the only one who hasn't exactly encouraged Garth to wear out his welcome."

"How about the Colonel?" Marise inquired.

"Oh, Pobbles. He doesn't count in this scrap. He's practically never in the mess, so the bad manners and bad boots of a cad don't interfere with his digestion. Besides, he was responsible for landing us with the fellow. I don't suppose he ever dreamed for a moment that a man of that type would dare – or wish – to stay on as an officer of the regiment after the war. But there it is! To save his own face the C.O. could hardly give Garth the cold shoulder. Pobbles whitewashed himself by extolling the swine as a soldier, and quoting such stuff as 'hearts are more than coronets,' and so on."

"Aren't they?" murmured Marise.

"Oh, of course, in the way you mean. But not in the mess of a Guards regiment."

"I see," said the girl, with a blue twinkle beneath the admired lashes. For some reason it amused her to wave a red flag, and play with the lordly Severance as with a baited bull, under her mother's cautioning glances. It was just a mood. Marise wasn't even sure that she did not agree with Tony; and she was certain that Mums agreed. No lady possessed of ancestral jewels, handed down from beheaded aristocrats, could afford to hide the smallest coronet under the biggest bushel of hearts, in a mess, or a drawing-room, or anywhere! Poor Mums, she was being baited, too! But it was rather fun. And it could do no harm, since Marise counted Tony her own forever.

"So all of you younger officers have been doing your best to squeeze my poor countryman out?" she ventured on.

"Not because he's a countryman of yours. You must understand that! Because he's impossible. And for the honour of the regiment. I'm sorry to say, though, that we weren't unanimous in the matter. There have been two or three – er – not rows, but something in that line, a few men inclining to let Garth 'dree his own weird,' and learn for himself that he's a square peg in a round hole. But Billy Ravenswood and Cecil de Marchand and I took a firm stand."

"I can see you taking it!" giggled Marise. "You took the firm stand on one foot only, and kicked with the other! When you got tired of the exercise, and had to sit down, you sat on Major Garth, V.C. – sat hard!"

Severance laughed a little too, her giggle was so contagious. Besides, at last, she did seem to be entering into the spirit of the game. "Something of the sort," he admitted, not without pride in remembered achievements. "The lot of an intruder among us isn't a happy one."

"I should think not, if the rest are like you," said Marise. "I've seen you perfectly horrid to quite inoffensive people you didn't happen to approve of."

"The person you force me to discuss, dear child, is the opposite of inoffensive," amended Severance. "Can't we drop him?"

"You seem to have done so successfully already," said she. "As he's on this ship, homeward bound, the regiment is rid of him, isn't it?"

"I'm not so sure. In fact, I'm not at all sure. He's in mufti, certainly – to insult the good old word! But I understand he still refuses to confess he's beaten, and is only on long leave."

"Oh, he's in mufti! But you'll point him out, if he comes on deck, won't you, boy? After all this talk, I pine to see what he's like. If he passes by – "

"Thank Heaven, he has passed by. He's gone inside, and we're rid of him for the moment."

"Tony, you don't mean – you can't!"

"What?"

"Samson?"

"Why, yes. Didn't you realise that? Now perhaps you'll understand why we don't want this particular Samson pulling down the pillars of our temples."

"He may have heard what we said! He was walking back and forth part of the time as we talked."

"Who cares if he did hear? It would do him good – be a douche to cool his conceit."

At that instant the back of Severance's head was coldly doused. Something popped: something spurted. A jet of water sprayed over him, fizzing with such force that it blew his gold-laced Guards' cap over his eyes.

Marise and her mother were petrified. They could only gasp.

CHAPTER III

A CABIN WINDOW

After the first dazed instant, the girl had a wild inclination to laugh. She suppressed it with the explosive struggle of suppressing a sneeze. Poor, dear Tony! It would be cruel to make fun of him, more cruel than if the top of his head had been blown off! For him – especially at this moment of his high boasting – it was tragic to be made ridiculous. But it was funny – frightfully funny – to see his expression of stunned rage at the accident, as he dried his face and hair with a faintly fragrant, monogrammed handkerchief, and wiped something fizzing out of his eyes.

Of course it – whatever it was – must have been an accident. Yet it was odd, or perhaps merely fortunate, that all the liquid had spurted over Severance, not a drop spattering the girl's blue toque. That thought darted through the mind of Marise, and prompted a quick turn of the head. At the open stateroom window behind the deck chairs stood someone whose face she could not see. In fact, the presence of this person was indicated only by a ginger-beer bottle still pointing, pistol-like, at Lord Severance's back. The bottle was almost empty, its contents having been discharged in one rush, and a mere inoffensive froth now dribbled over the window-sill. This vision told at a glance what had occurred. The glass ball inside the mouth of the bottle had been pushed with too great violence. But why, why, had the experiment been made at the window? Was it the act of a stupid steward, or —

An answer to the question flashed into the girl's brain, and again it was all she could do to control a shriek of laughter. (She had an inconvenient sense of humour, inherited from Louis Sorel, and earnestly discouraged by her mother.) What if – but no! The creature wouldn't dare. Or would he?

"Sorry!" said a voice. "Accident, I assure you. Hope the lady wasn't touched."

With this, Marise knew that the creature had dared. Though she had never heard the "blighter" speak, she was as certain of his identity as of her own. That, then, was his stateroom window. He had disappeared from the deck intending to do the thing, and he had done it. From his own point of view he had done it with deadly skill, and she was sure he knew without asking that "the lady" had not been "touched." Of course, he had heard what Severance said, and this was his revenge for past and present insults. It was, no doubt, the deed of a cad, or a mischievous schoolboy, but arriving on top of Severance's last words, thus douching the doucher, it was so neat that it hit the girl's sense of drama as the beer had hit the "brass hat."

She wanted to say, "No, I wasn't touched, thank you." But Severance would never forgive her for bandying words with the bounder. She expected Tony to speak – to say something, if only a "Damn you!" which would have been almost excusable even in the presence of ladies. But to her surprise he left the disguised defiance unanswered.

"Disgusting!" he exclaimed impersonally. "Creatures like that ought to be caged. I'm afraid I must retire for repairs. But I'll be back in a few minutes. You won't go away, will you?"

"No, indeed," Mary Sorel assured him. "What a shocking shame. Poor Lord Severance! But how much worse if it had been ale or stout! Think of the horrid odour – and the stains on your beautiful coat!"

"It would have been ale or stout if the ship wasn't 'dry' on account of a few returning soldiers!" said Severance with extreme bitterness, as he got up. "I wonder it wasn't ink. Only ink doesn't spurt."

He crushed his wet cap over his wet hair, and went off, mumbling like distant thunder. Behind the chairs, the beer-bottle window slid shut, but Marise fancied she heard through the thick stained glass a wild chortle of joy.

Mrs. Sorel closed her book, with the lorgnettes to mark her page, and leaned across Tony's empty chair.

"Marise, you laughed!" she reproved her daughter. "How could you?"

"I didn't, I only boo-higgled in my throat."

"I wish you'd be more careful," cautioned the elder woman. "If you're not, take it from me, you may be sorry yet. Tony is worried about something. I noticed it the moment we came on board. You know what an instinct I have! I feel as if – but I mustn't tell you now. He may get to his stateroom and hear us."

"What makes you think he could hear us from his stateroom?" asked Marise. "Do you know where it is?"

"Why, yes," replied the other. "I was with him when he chose the place for our chairs. You were in our cabin showing Céline what to unpack. He pointed out his window, and – but my goodness!"

A gasp stopped her words. Marise followed the direction of the puzzled or startled brown eyes. They stared at the window just closed, from whose sill ginger-beer continued to drip.

"Is that his room?" breathed the girl.

"I thought that was the window, but I must be mistaken, of course. Probably it's the next one – on my side or yours."

Marise let the question drop. She wasn't pining to confide the contents of her mind. Besides, her conjectures were too vague for words. In striving to frame them she would surely laugh, and Mums would think her a callous wretch.

Mrs. Sorel, anxious to be overheard saying the right thing, if she were overheard at all, began to chat about friends who had sent flowers or telegrams on board. Each name she mentioned had a "handle." She liked Lord Severance to be reminded casually now and then that her girl had titled admirers outside the circle he had brought round them. But Marise was not listening. She was putting two and two together.

When she suggested that the V.C. had been billeted in Tony's cabin, Tony had said neither "yes" nor "no," now she came to think of it. He had caught at another branch of the subject which she elected to pursue. He hadn't wanted her to know that the loathed Major Garth was his room-mate. Why? Oh, he would feel it humiliating to his *amour propre*. He had wished to buy a cabin for himself alone, and had been told that it was too late: "the company would do their best, but could not promise." Then, fate and the company's good intentions had picked out the one companion he would least have chosen.

It was almost too queer, and too bad, to be true; yet the more she thought of it the truer it seemed. Her mother's impression about the window – and the lack of surprise Severance had shown after the "accident." Once recovered from the shock, he wore an air of having got what might have been expected. He hadn't even looked over his wet shoulder to glare at the sniper. Oh, Marise saw it all now! Tony had made his last remarks for the benefit of the *bête noire*, believing he had gone to the mutual cabin, but not dreaming how far a bounder, in bounding, might bound for revenge. She would have given a good deal to know whether Severance had now joined his room-mate in their quarters, and if so, what was going on.

In a hand-to-hand fight Severance would be apt to get second best with Samson, unless skill should master strength. Was that why he had flung back no challenge? But, of course, it couldn't be; Tony was not a coward. He had merely kept his temper to save a scene. Nevertheless, she wished that Garth hadn't shut the window!

CHAPTER IV

REPRISALS – ET CETERA

Jorn Garth considered himself completely justified in shooting Severance with a pint of iced ginger-beer, and even had his conscience squirmed he would have committed the act. Knowing that Severance thought of, and denounced, him as "a bounder," he didn't see why, when worst came to worst, he shouldn't live up to the reputation.

Worst had come to worst on board the *Britannia*. Things had been bad enough before, but the climax was reached when the two men found themselves caged in the same room, neither one willing to play lamb to the other's lion. Garth hated the proximity as hotly as Severance hated it; but there was no cabin of any class with a free berth, save one occupied by a coloured colonel in charge of negro troops going home. Garth had a deep respect for the dark soldiers, who had distinguished themselves in the war; but men of white and men of black skin were not quartered together; and he had never boiled to throttle Severance as he boiled at the cool proposal that he should join Colonel Dookey.

"Join him yourself," he said.

"I'm not an American," shrugged Severance.

"That's why you and he would get along better than you and me, or he and me," retorted Garth, careless of grammar.

"I shall remain where I am," Severance gave his ultimatum.

"Same here. You ought to be thankful your earlship has got the lower berth."

This statement required no answer; and the conversation lapsed.

Garth had not taken his allotted seat at the Captain's table, because he understood that ladies would be there, friends of Lord Severance. He could not trust his temper if it were strained by continued public snubbing in the presence of women. Besides, secretly shy of the dangerous sex, the man who had won the V.C. shrank like a coward from the prospect of being "turned down" by aristocratic females. He preferred to snatch picnic meals in the hot smoke-room or to munch a sandwich on the wind-swept deck, having this one advantage of the enemy: he was a good sailor.

Seeing Severance seasick had "given him back a bit of his own," and made up for a good deal, including close quarters. Because a man can't hit a foe when he's down, however, Garth had let slip a heaven-sent chance for revenge. He refrained from jeering aloud at his brother officer's qualms. But was the said officer grateful for the superhuman sacrifice? On the contrary! To-day's work on deck was the climax. Garth had heard and seen Severance sneering at him, as he had sneered before. Sneering to men was one thing, however; sneering to the most beautiful girl Garth had ever seen was another.

Severance's attempt to drive Garth from the regiment by rendering the mess impossible, and by other methods which in contrast made schoolboy ragging kind, had only stiffened the American's resolve to "stick it." Failing the stings and pin-pricks inflicted by Severance as ringleader, and two or three of his followers, Garth would not have desired to stay in the British Army after the war, although his father had been an officer in it. As it was, though he hadn't yet settled the future, he inclined to hold his commission for awhile, if only to "show those chaps they couldn't phaze him." He had felt bulldoggy rather than wild bullish. But catching a word or two blown to his ears by the wind on deck to-day, he had at the same time caught fire. Here was the limit, and down the other side! He burned to prove this to Severance in some way slightly more delicate than murder. In such a mood he slammed into their cabin, and heard a little more. Still flaming, he saw the ginger-beer bottle (by an irony of fate, Severance's bottle), and then, almost before he knew what he was doing, the thing was done. A caddish but a luscious thing! He gloried in it. As he stood at the stateroom window, the emptied weapon fizzing in his hand, it struck Garth that he had hit the nail on the head.

"That's it," he said to himself, as he watched Severance furiously sop his hair. "I've hit the nail on the head!"

Never had he been more pleased with the precision of his aim, for not a drop had gone wide of the target. He had counted on his skill to make a bull's-eye or he would not have risked the coup. Of course, Severance's friends would loathe as well as despise him; but they must admit that the reprisal was pat, and above all neat. He shut the window and roared. He hoped the trio outside would hear him, and he yearned to know what Severance's next step would be.

For this knowledge he had not long to wait; but when it came, it brought disillusion. Severance arrived promptly, still dripping, to find Garth at bay, a grin on his face.

"Your beer," said V.C. "I'll pay you for it."

He expected the other to shout "You shall!" and spring at him. Severance seemed to think, however, that the dignified course was cold silence. "Registering" scorn too glacial for language or even action, he gazed at Garth as if the latter were a worm of some new and abominable species unknown to science and beneath classification. This effect produced, he turned to the mirror and repaired ravages to his hair with "Honey and Flowers." The moment he was his well-groomed self again, he went out, having uttered not one word.

"Well, I'm damned!" remarked Garth aloud. He then laughed, also aloud. But there was a flat sound in his mirth. He felt like a good hot fire quenched by a shovelful of snow, and was not sure whether he or Severance had scored. Vaguely at a loss, like a stray dog, he took a book to the smoking room, having no ambition to parade the deck cock-o'-the-walk fashion. It turned out, however, that he could not read. He could do nothing but think of that girl – that beautiful, beautiful girl.

Every man grows up with some ideal, bright or dim, of the woman whose beauty might mean to him all romance: the woman of the horizon, of the sunrise, of the bright foam of sea-waves. The girl on A deck of the *Britannia* was Garth's ideal, his "Princess of Paradise."

He didn't know who she was, but he meant to know. Not that it would do him any good to find out. She was a friend of Severance, which meant that there was a high wall round her so far as he, Garth, was concerned. All the same, he wouldn't let much grass grow – or many waves break – under his feet before he was in possession of her name. This was about all he was ever likely to have of hers! But so much he would have, soon.

Presently a steward brought matches for his pipe. "Can you tell me," Garth inquired, "who are the ladies sitting amidships on the port side of this deck; a young lady in a blue hat, with a grey fur coat, and an older woman in brown? They look as they'd be someone in particular?"

"They are, sir," replied the man quite eagerly. "You must mean Miss Sorel and her mother; they're with the Earl of Severance."

"That's right," said Garth. "I wonder, are they the ones at the Captain's table."

"Certain to be, sir," the steward assured him.

Garth lit his pipe, and let the steward go without further questioning. He yearned to ask who the Sorels were, and why it was so certain they would be in the place of honour at the Captain's table – where he might have been, and was not! But somehow, the thought of pumping a steward for intimate details about that girl repelled him. He supposed she was "some swell" in Severance's set. Not since he had enlisted in the Grenadier Guards, nearly five years ago, had he taken leave in London. He had been eight times a "casualty," but by luck, or ill-luck, his wounds had not been "Blighty-wounds." His last leave he had spent in Paris, and the second – one summer – in Yorkshire and Scotland, because his father had been a Yorkshireman by birth.

If Garth had ever heard of Marise Sorel's success in New York and London, the story had gone in at one ear and out at the other. It did not occur to him that the Radiant Dream might be an actress. But her face haunted him, got between his eyes and his book and made his pipe go out, as sunlight is supposed to extinguish a fire.

He had rather prided himself on these old clothes of his, on shipboard. They were full five years of age, had been bought ready-made at Albuquerque, Arizona, for twenty dollars, and were damned comfortable. Now, to his shamed surprise, he found himself wishing he had kept to khaki, as he had a right to do. Severance had called him a "clod-hopper," and he knew the word fitted him in that suit, a blamed sight better than did the suit itself!

Well, it wasn't too late yet. He could doll up in his uniform any minute; he could even claim his place at the Captain's table, and meet the Girl. His heart beat at the thought. He made up his mind he would do just that; and then as quickly he changed it.

No, he might be a bounder, but he wouldn't be a cross between an ass and a peacock. He'd go on as he'd begun. If there were a laugh anywhere at present, it was against Severance. He would do nothing to turn it against Garth.

This resolution he clung to, despite occasional wobblings, for the rest of the voyage.

Garth had not a "blood relation" on earth, as far as he knew; but he had an adopted mother, and he had friends. These people lived mostly in the West. He meant to see a little life in New York before going out there, but he did not expect a soul in the east to notice his existence. It was a surprise for him when all the reporters who swarmed on board the *Britannia* from the tender made a bee-line for Major Garth, V.C. Each wanted a "story," and Garth didn't know what to say. He was too glad to see the shores of his adopted land, and too good-natured to snub the humblest, but he didn't enjoy being interviewed. He got out of the scrape as soon as he could; but there was another surprise awaiting him on deck. He found himself a hero to the Custom House men!

There was no chance of finding out what had become of Miss Sorel, but as the reporters had rallied round her, and Lord Severance also, Garth was reasonably sure to read later on who the girl was; where she was going; whether or no she were engaged to his noble brother officer; and, indeed, even many more picturesque facts than she knew about herself.

It was after two o'clock when he arrived at the Hotel Belmore, where he had stayed five years ago on the eve of sailing for England with his invention. He was hungry, and aimed straight for the restaurant; but it appeared that the manager had assigned to the only American V.C. a suite with a private salon as well as bedroom and bath. A special luncheon for the Major would be served there, with the compliments of the directors. Garth could only accept with dazed thanks; and feeling like a newly-awakened "Christopher Sly," he entered a room decorated with flowers and flags. As he devoured delicious food, the New York evening papers were handed to him by a smiling waiter who had read the headings.

Yes, there he was, served up hot to the public with sauce piquante! Lord knew how the fellows had got his photograph! Must be from some snapshot caught by a *Daily Mirror* man in London, and sent over to New York for use to-day. What a great lout he looked!.. And – gee! if there wasn't old Severance in another photo down under his. Wouldn't his earlship be wild?

Garth chuckled, and then suddenly choked. A gulp of the champagne, in which he'd been pressed to drink to his own health, had gone the wrong way. *Her* picture had caught his eye, in an adjoining column of the *Evening World*, next to the portrait of Severance. "Our Own Marise Comes Home," was the legend in big black type above. Oh! She was American, not English! Must be an heiress if that chap intended to marry her. Severance was supposed to be poor, for a peer; had been a pauper till the death of an uncle and three cousins in the war gave him the title... What? an actress! Then, it wasn't true about her and Severance – couldn't be true! That glorious girl was free! And, to judge from the way New York was treating him, John Garth, V.C., was Somebody, too. He was put above Miss Sorel's pal Severance in the papers – every one of the papers!

Eagerly Garth read about "The Spring Song" and "Dolores," the great emotional part Marise Sorel had created, and was now to revive in New York. It did not directly interest him that the whole of the old cast would support the star, but it did matter that this fact reduced the need for rehearsals to a minimum. The play would open at Belloc's Theatre next week, and it was announced that for

many days the house had been entirely sold out. There wasn't a seat to be had for love or money. "But I bet I get one for both!" Garth said to himself. "A seat for every performance." Also he thought of something else he would do. The thing might not help him to make Miss Sorel's acquaintance, but it would satisfy his soul. And it would be worth all his back pay as a British officer if he could carry out the plan.

CHAPTER V

ANONYMOUS

"Oh, Mums, I'm so happy!" purred Marise, as she sank into a chair, physically spent, spiritually elated.

It was in her dressing-room at the theatre – the marvellous dressing-room which Belloc had engaged Herté to re-decorate as a tribute and a surprise to the star. The stage curtain had rung down on the last act, after eighteen recalls and a little laughing, hysterical speech from Dolores. Sheridan and Belloc had both kissed her; and everyone had cried, and her mother had torn her from clinging arms, to shut the dressing-room door upon a dozen faces.

Sudden peace followed clamour. There was not a sound. The air was sweet with the breath of a thousand flowers. Céline moved softly about, with stolid face. Mrs. Sorel beamed.

"Well, yes, dear; I do think you may be happy now," she vouchsafed.

Marise caught the "second meaning" – the little more than met the ear – hiding in her mother's words. Mums hadn't been easy about Severance. She'd thought he had "something on his mind." She had even been afraid that, although he was following the girl he loved from London to New York, he didn't mean marriage. She had feared, and almost expected, that he might break to Marise the news of his engagement to another woman – a very different woman from the pretty actress. But that time of Mum's depression had been on shipboard. Severance had "broken" no news. He had been more devoted than ever before. He had curtailed his official business in Washington, and rushed back to New York for the first night of "The Song," so now Mrs. Sorel began to hope that for once her "instinct" had been a deceiving Voice.

"Yes, happy about everything," she added, so that Marise might understand without the maid sharing her enlightenment.

"I am, just that!" agreed Marise, stealing time to breathe before Céline should take off Dolores' "bedroom-scene" dress.

She looked round the room. It had been decorated by the Russian-French artist, Herté (who had never seen her), to suit Sargent's portrait which Belloc had lent him to study. In the girl's opinion it did not suit her at all, unless she were in reality a tigress camouflaged to represent a sheaf of lilies. But evidently that was what Herté thought she was, and his conception of her temperament made the girl feel subtle and mysterious. She adored feeling like that, and she adored Herté's tawny orange splashes on violent blues, and his sombre blacks and dazzling whites and lemon yellows, which somehow did not fade her sunlight fairness. People knew about this room, for descriptions and photographs of it had appeared in all the papers since she and Mums landed; consequently everyone had sent flowers to match Herté's famous colourings.

There were silver azaleas, black tulips, queer scarlet roses, Japanese tiger lilies, weird magenta orchids, and purple pinks. Severance had sent blue lilies – the blue that Marise loved, and called "the colour of her soul." The lilies had been the best of the huge collection, until the Exciting Thing came – the thing accompanied by no letter, no card. Towards this object the eyes of Marise travelled. She had been "intrigued" by it the whole evening, whenever she had time to think, and puzzle over its charm and mystery.

"It" was a table; a small, round tea-table of rich red mahogany with a well in its centre for flowers, and small holes in a line circling its edge for the same purpose. These receptacles were filled and hidden with the largest, purplest, and most fragrant violets Marise had ever seen, and their amethyst tones, massed against the dark, rose-brown wood, produced an exquisite effect. Marise believed herself an up-to-date young woman, and her Persian dressing-room in London had rivalled Lily Brayton's Chinese room during the run of "Chu Chin Chow." But she had never heard of such a

design as this in tables. It must be the newest of the new, and invented by a great artist, she thought. In fear of seeming ignorant, she had asked no questions of anyone, hoping to glean information by luck: and vanity, as usual with her, had its own reward.

"By George, who sent you Herté's latest?" Belloc had exclaimed, when he bounced into her room before the first act to see if his star were "going strong."

Marise had to admit that she didn't know. But she put on an air of awareness as to Herté. This was the sort of thing her mother taught her: to seem innocent, but never ignorant – especially of anything "smart." Mrs. Sorel had suggested that Herté himself might have contributed the lovely specimen of his work, to complete the decoration of the room. Belloc, however, had vetoed this idea. If there were no accompanying poem, or at least a card, Herté wasn't guilty. He was not a young man who bothered to blush unseen. So that hypothesis was "off"; and Marise could think of no one among her acquaintances likely to spend so much cash without getting credit.

Belloc was giving a supper for her after the theatre, and Herté was there; a dark, haggardly beautiful young man who looked as if he had detached himself from one of his own wall decorations. Belloc had placed him next the star, not knowing whether Marise were really engaged to Lord Severance or not; and the first question the girl asked was about the table.

"Ah, you have my beloved violet-table!" he said, looking at her in the way he had with beautiful young women: stripping her with his eyes and dressing her all over again in a gown of his own creation. "I am glad – glad."

"You didn't know?"

He shook his head until a black lock fell over his pale forehead. "I did not. It was finished by the glorified cabinet-maker I employ: it appeared in the window of my place. You must see my place, now your rehearsals are over! You will want beauty to rest your mind – and you will want Me to design your dresses! An hour later the table was snapped up – gone from me forever."

"Ah, but who snapped it?"

Herté looked blank. "Your admiring friend, who knew it belonged, by right of beauty, to you."

"Thanks! But I want you to tell me his – or her – name."

"Are you not acquainted with so much of him?"

"I'm not. And I'm dying to be, because the gentleman is anonymous – a great unknown!"

"I am sure he is great, as a judge of art and ladies. But that is all I am sure of, beautiful Dolores."

"Monsieur Herté, you are hiding his secret!"

"I could hide no secret from you. I will tell you all I know. A boy messenger bought the table. A millionaire's boy messenger, perhaps! My manager informed me what had happened. We guessed at once there was a mystery."

"Couldn't you find out?" Marise persisted.

Herté shrugged his sloping shoulders. "Beyond a boy messenger no man can go. He keeps the gate with a flaming sword. But you will find out some day. Meanwhile, be content. You have the latest creation of my brain – of my heart. At present it is the one thing of its kind in existence."

Mrs. Sorel asked Severance if he had sent the table, which, she explained, Marise had found in her dressing-room on arriving there. It had been brought to the theatre by two boy messengers, full of flowers (not the boys, but the table), and no word had been left whence it came. Severance, bitterly jealous of the secret gift (which had, so to speak, taken all the blue paint off his Persian lilies), would gladly have claimed credit had he dared. But the real giver might announce himself at any moment, and be able to prove his *bona fides*: so Severance made a virtue of necessity. Belloc's supper-party was a "frost" for him, though he sat by the second prettiest girl. He hated Herté and the others, especially a millionaire member of New York's "Four Hundred," who was financially interested in Belloc's schemes – and in his leading ladies.

Severance would have given anything – short of his title and estates, and such money as came with them – to snatch the girl from all the men, who would go on admiring and making love to her

when he was far away. He did not know how he could bear to turn his back and leave her to these Americans, who had so much money and so much "cheek." He felt as if he were throwing her to the lions – this exquisite morsel which he coveted for himself, but was unlikely to get on the terms he could offer. Almost, he wished that he had told her the truth in London, and said good-bye to her then. Almost, but not quite; for he simply had not been able to let her go like that. He had to be with her: he had to see the sort of men she would gather round her on the other side of the world.

Well, he had come; and he had seen; and he had made things harder for himself instead of easier. He did not know what he should do next. An arrangement, a compromise, must be thought of. When he spoke, he must have something to propose – some alternative or other. But what under heaven, or in hell, it could be, he had no clear inspiration yet.

Marise ordered the violet-table to be taken from the theatre to the Plaza Hotel, where she and her mother had a suite. She thought it would give her more pleasure there, where much of her time was passed, and the wonderful violets had not lost their freshness: they were so firm and vital that they looked as if they would never fade. But on the second night of "The Song," when Marise arrived in her dressing-room, another anonymous gift awaited her.

It was smaller than the table, but not less original; a black bowl, half full of water bright and pale green as aquamarines, on the surface of which floated three pink pond-lilies. The bowl stood on the star's dressing-table, and, switching on the electric lights, a gleam as of drowned emeralds sparkled under the lilies. Marise cried out in delight, and ran to look for a card. This time he would reveal himself! (She knew it was "he," and that it was the same man who had sent the table.) But no. There was neither card nor note. Messenger boys had brought the bowl. They had driven up in a taxi. If only Marise had dreamed of receiving a second gift from the same source, she would have watched – or even employed a detective. She was so excited and curious that she feared for her acting that night.

With the bowl and the lilies had come a large jar of crystals for tinting the water: green, glittering lumps, like precious stones from Aladdin's Cave, and that was precisely the label on the jar of jewels: "Aladdin's Cave." Marise was childishly thrilled. When Belloc peeped in, she showed her treasures, and learned that "Aladdin's Cave" was the name chosen by a queer artist, new, but famous already for his exhibition-shop in a cellar of that Bohemian haunt known as Greenwich Village.

Next morning the girl went there in a taxi: and when she had bought exotic enamels, and transparent vases filled with synthetic sapphires, she told "Aladdin" about the bowl. Like Herté, he shook his head. He was but another man who "could not go beyond a District messenger boy."

The stage door-keeper was now warned to find out what he could, if another anonymous gift appeared. Also, Céline was sent early to the theatre. Marise could not, however, quite bring herself to engage a detective. She was tempted to do so, and urged by her mother, who had visions of a mysterious millionaire ready to take the place of Severance if the Englishman failed after all. But the girl felt that to set sleuth-hounds on its track would kill romance. It would, she told Mums, be like deliberately rubbing the bloom off hothouse grapes before you ate them. And as it turned out, she was glad she had listened to sentiment; for on the third night her only offerings were chocolates and flowers ticketed conspicuously with their givers' names.

This was like a too abrupt ending to a fairy tale. But, after all, it was only the end of a chapter. On the fourth night a long blue-and-silver box lay across two chairs in the dressing-room. It looked like a box from a smart dressmaker, though no dressmaker's name was visible. "Has Mademoiselle ordered anything?" Céline inquired, as she untied the ribbon-fastenings.

No, Mademoiselle had ordered nothing that day – at least nothing for the theatre. She gave a little gasp as the Frenchwoman removed the box cover and a layer of silver-stencilled blue tissue paper. Underneath filmed a pale blue cloud which Marise snatched up and pronounced to be a "boudoir gown." It was made from a material which fashion names mousseline de soie one year and something else another. It was the blue of bluebells, banded with swansdown and embroidered with silver thistles. Altogether, it might have been created expressly for Miss Sorel by an admiring genius.

"From Herté!" exclaimed Mums.

But Marise knew better, and would pit her own "instinct" against her mother's any day. "No, from Him," she pronounced. "If this goes on much longer without my finding out who He is, I shall simply perish."

And it did go on: not night after night, but stopping, and beginning again just as she thought the giver's invention exhausted or his pockets empty. It went on for ten days, until Marise had received, in addition to the three first gifts, an ancient Italian mirror in a carved silver frame; an exquisite wax doll, modelled and dressed to represent herself as "Dolores" in the third act of "The Spring Song," and an old Sèvres box filled with crystallised violets – evidently *his* favoured flower.

"He must be rich, or else he's poor, and so in love that he's absolutely begging himself for you," said Mrs. Sorel.

Marise volunteered no opinion. But secretly she preferred the second hypothesis. She was used to rich men; but no girl is ever really used to Romance. The mystery thrilled and delighted her, and bored Severance to distraction. He realised that, if he said to the girl what he had to say while this spell was upon her, she might let him go with hardly a pang, instead of clinging to him at almost any price. So he did not say it. He waited, and sent several cables to his mother's half-brother, Constantine Ionides, one of the richest bankers in Europe. In the first of these telegrams he stated that he had influenza, and might not be allowed to travel for several weeks, but, as soon as he could, he would return to London. This, because he had come to a certain understanding with his half-uncle before undertaking the American "mission," and because Mr. Ionides unluckily knew that the unimportant mission was now wound up.

At the end of ten days the girl decided upon a desperate step, for she felt that "Dolores" as well as Marise Sorel was beginning to suffer from curiosity deferred. She forgot to take a cue on the night of the doll; and at home, after she had been in bed an hour, she suddenly sat up and switched on the light. On a table within reach of her hand were paper and envelopes, and a gold fountain-pen given her by Severance. Quickly she wrote out a paragraph which she had composed in the sleepless hours; and without a word to Mums (sure to disapprove) she gave it very early next morning to Céline with instructions.

That evening, in some of the New York papers, and the following day in all those which had "personal" columns, her paragraph appeared. "Dolores thanks the anonymous friend who has sent her six charming gifts in ten days, and begs that he or she will make an appointment to call at her hotel as soon as possible, in order that Dolores may express her pleasure and gratitude by word of mouth."

When Marise read this appeal in print her heart beat in her throat, and she was dreadfully afraid that her mother or Severance might happen to glance down that column. But she was even more afraid that the person to whom it was addressed might not.

CHAPTER VI ON SUNDAY AT THREE

"Oh, by the way, Miss Marks," said Marise, "you needn't trouble to read my letters this morning. I – er – slept badly, and I'm up at such an unearthly hour, I might as well go through them myself."

She spoke from the doorway between her bedroom and the salon, where Miss Marks, her secretary, was taking off gloves and hat before getting to work; and she had on the boudoir gown of mousseline de soie and swansdown sent by the Great Unknown a week ago. This was the first time she had worn it, and Miss Marks's eyes sent forth a flash which might mean admiration or jealousy, or both. Marise diagnosed the emotion as jealousy. If she were right, she was sorry for the girl, who, though handsome, could not compare with her, and who, though very intelligent, was only a stenographer, at about twenty-five: two years older than she, who was already a brilliant star!

This thought was but a flash, brief as the flash in the secretary's eyes, for instantly the mind of Marise turned to the letters. Thank goodness she was in time! Another three minutes, and she might have been too late. Miss Marks would by then have begun her first task of the day: opening letters and sorting them, placing requests for autographs and photos in one pile, pleas for money in a second, demands for advice or help about going on the stage in a third, and so on. Who could tell if the one envelope whose contents no eye but Marise Sorel's should see mightn't lie at the very top?

As a matter of fact, it did not lie at the top. It was nearer the bottom, and long before she found it Marise had begun to fear that it didn't exist.

The trying part was that the envelopes told her nothing. She had to cut or tear open each one, unless she recognised the handwriting of the address, and could then throw it aside till later. She went through the business curled up on a sofa, sitting on one foot, which showed among snowdrifts of swansdown. It was a stockingless foot, thrust into a silver *mule* lined with blue velvet; and her skin was satin smooth and creamy pink as the inside of a conch shell. Miss Marks noticed this, and noticed also how long and thick was the plait of yellow-brown hair that dangled over the sofa-back, its curling end within a few inches of the floor. She smiled faintly as she saw how fast her employer worked, and how she tossed the letters aside after a fevered glance at each. Marise was quite right. Miss Marks was very intelligent! She knew, almost as well as if she had been told the whole story, just why Miss Sorel had got up at so "unearthly an hour" this morning.

"Ah, now she's found the one she didn't want me to see!" the dark girl said to herself, as the face of Marise turned suddenly pink, and bent over a letter which she read through twice from beginning to end. Then, lest she should be caught staring, Miss Marks began to arrange her newly-sharpened pencils and the writing-pad on which she would take down, in shorthand, letters dictated by Miss Sorel.

She need not, however, have troubled herself with these elaborate precautions. Miss Sorel was interested in and puzzled by this handsome young Jewess with the burning eyes and wet-coral lips; but for the moment Miss Marks's very existence was forgotten.

The letter had come, as Marise hoped it might, on this the second day of her advertisement; but the mystery remained unsolved. Indeed, it was purposely kept up, for the thick parchment paper had neither initial nor address. The few words on the first page were unsigned, and only one secret was given away: but to Marise this was of great importance. The strong, black handwriting was certainly that of a man. She would have turned sick with chagrin at sight of a woman's penmanship.

"It is I who have to thank you, not you me," she read. "You are very kind to invite me to call, and say I must come soon. I will take you at your word. Unless I hear to the contrary through a second 'personal' in the *New York Record*, I will ask for you at the Plaza Hotel at three o'clock next Sunday afternoon."

This was all, and Marise hardly knew whether to be pleased or disappointed with the brief simplicity of her anonymous admirer. He, whose original ideas in presents had made her imagine him the most modern and mundane of men, expressed himself on paper rather like a shy, old-fashioned schoolboy. A dampening doubt oozed into the girl's mind. What if he hadn't picked out those wonderful things himself? What if he had got some woman to choose them? But even a doubt – a piercing, new doubt – had its fascination. And after Sunday it would be gone for ever. She would know the worst – or best – of her Mystery Man.

On Sunday afternoons she and her mother were "at home" to their friends, from four to six; He proposed coming at three, however, and he was sure to be prompt to the moment. That ought to give an hour before extraneous people began to pour in. But – what about Mums? Marise concentrated her mind upon that pressing problem.

Mums was as curious as she concerning the unknown. But Mums, though an absolute trump and a darling, was the most conventional woman on earth. Just because she and Marise were not born to the high sphere they now adorned, Mums was determined that neither should be guilty of the smallest act unworthy of – at least – a countess. Naturally, as Mums herself would admit, if you were already a countess, you could perhaps afford to do what you pleased: and to judge from "smart society" columns many countesses availed themselves to the full of their prerogatives. Marise might soon be a countess; and if so, Mums would cease to dictate from the rules of an etiquette book; but until that day those keen brown eyes needed no lorgnettes to watch a daughter's doings.

After a few minutes' reflection, the girl decided that she would not confess to Mums what she had done. It would mean a scolding as a first instalment, and a serial continued day by day of gentle, motherly nagging. Marise loved her parent, but she hated to be nagged. No. Mums must somehow be whisked out of the way before three o'clock next Sunday, and kept out of it long enough for an understanding to be reached with Him.

Of course, Marise said to herself, she wouldn't tell a fib. She would just explain frankly (she could see how she would look, her eyes very blue and big, being frank with Him!) that she hadn't dared tell anyone, even her mother, about the advertisement. And she would beg him to "help her out" when she – er – made it seem as if he'd merely written to say he would call unless he heard to the contrary. By that time she would know his name, so the thing could be managed easily, and Mums never suspect to what lengths she had gone. As for Severance, the coast would be clear of him on Sunday till long after three. Dunstan Belloc was giving a "stag" luncheon that day, at one-thirty, and she had persuaded Tony against his will to accept. But Mums? How dispose of her? Suddenly a bright idea swam to the rescue.

Marise slipped the Unknown's letter into a pocket disguised as a bunch of silver thistles. Then, with large, innocent eyes, she turned to her secretary, "Oh, Miss Marks!" she exclaimed. And being an actress, it occurred to her that the young woman addressed was surprisingly absorbed in removing lead-pencil dust from her manicured fingers. If she – Marise – had been secretly studying Miss Marks's profile or back hair, she would have been equally absent-minded if addressed! She wondered for the fiftieth time whether it was a coincidence that Miss Marks had called on the manager of the Plaza the very day after the Sorels had asked him to find a private secretary.

At first, when Marise saw how handsome the girl was, and heard that she'd "hoped Miss Sorel might want someone," the wary young actress feared that Miss Marks wished to go on the stage. But now the stenographer had been coming to the Plaza each morning for a week, and had not thrown out such a hint. She was, indeed, entirely business-like, and possessed of good references. Still, the fact remained that she had never before applied to the manager of this hotel; and her appearance had been apropos as that of the sacrificial sheep caught in the bushes. Besides, Marise had often observed that odd, appreciative flame in the black eyes, as if Miss Marks were more interested than a secretary need be in her employer.

"Yes, Miss Sorel?" the dark girl responded. "Would you like me to take dictation?"

"Not yet, thanks," said Marise. "I haven't had my bath or breakfast, and I'm hungry. But I've thought of something. Mother and I were so excited about that Polish boy-dressmaker genius you were talking of yesterday. He sounds wonderful; and, as he's only beginning, I suppose he's not choked with orders. He might do some work for me in a hurry?"

"I think he'd sit up at night and go without meals by day to work for you," replied Miss Marks. "It would be such an advertisement. And he loves working for pretty people."

"Well, I love helping geniuses." Marise modestly accepted the compliment. "Didn't you say his flat is on your floor?"

Miss Marks answered that this was the case. Valinski would move to a fashionable neighbourhood some day. At present his talent budded in 85th Street.

"I wish I could go to him myself," sighed Marise. "I can't now, for I'm so hard-worked and tired. But I thought mother might take a taxi after lunch next Sunday and choose a design for a tea-gown – his specialty, you said. Would he see her on Sunday – about a quarter to three, so she could get back for her friends?"

Miss Marks was certain of Valinski's consent. She would come for Mrs. Sorel, if that would suit, and take her to the dressmaker. Marise thought it would suit: and Mums, arriving at that moment dressed for the day, an appointment was made.

The life of Marise Sorel was so full, the pattern of each day so gaily embroidered with emotions and incidents, that she was surprised at her own excitement. She did not, however, try to quench it. She loved to feel that, in spite of the adulation she received, one side of her nature was as fresh, as unspoiled, as a child's. And she was as guiltily pleased as a child when, at twenty minutes before three on Sunday afternoon, her mother went down to a waiting taxi with Zélie Marks. Patronising the Pole and choosing a design would eat up an hour, Marise had calculated.

She had put on a white dress of the simplicity whose price is beyond rubies. Her hair was in a great gleaming knot of gold at the nape of her neck. She looked about sixteen, and felt it. When the bell of the telephone rang at three minutes before three, she thrilled all over.

"A gentleman asking for Mademoiselle. He says he has an appointment," announced Céline at the 'phone.

"Any name?" Marise inquired.

Céline put her lips to the instrument, the receiver to her ear. "The gentleman has given no name, because he is expected. But if Mademoiselle wishes that I insist – ?"

"No. Tell them he's to come up at once. And, Céline, be ready to open the door of the suite."

The Frenchwoman went out noiselessly: Marise rushed to the long mirror, in front of which tall, scented roses were banked. Her cheeks were very pink. She was like a rose herself. But hastily she rubbed her little nose with powder from a vanity box. The gold case was only just snapped shut, and Marise seated with a book, when she heard a sound in the vestibule. He had come!

CHAPTER VII

SAMSON AGONISTES

Marise raised her eyes from an uncut volume of poems, and looked into the face of – Samson. The shock of disillusion was so cruel that the girl felt faint. She was giddy, as if she had stooped too long over a hot fire and risen abruptly.

So this —*this*— was her Man of Mystery, he who had held in unseen hands more than half her thoughts for a delicious fortnight! She had deigned to advertise in a newspaper for the pleasure of meeting this lout, spurned by his smart regiment, despite his Victoria Cross: this cad, whose notion of revenge was to explode as a bomb a bottle of ginger-beer!

The warm glow of anticipation was chilled to ice. The hands that tightened on the book went suddenly cold. Marise did not know what to do. She wavered between an impulse to be rude and the dutiful decency of a hostess. Meanwhile, forgetting to act, she stared at the tall figure as if at an approaching executioner. No one but a blind man or a fool could have failed to see in those beautiful eyes the blankness of disappointment.

John Garth was neither blind nor a fool, and that look of hers was a sharp-edged axe which "hit him where he lived," as his bruised mind vaguely put it.

He too had been like a child. Ever since the day of landing in New York he had planned and existed only for this moment. He had coached himself for it, dressed himself for it, spent his money like water for it. And this was his reward. The sight of him was a blow over the heart for his queen of romance. It blanched her cheeks. It made her physically sick.

Céline had softly shut the door behind the guest, but involuntarily he backed against it. If he had been a few years younger he would have turned like a country boy and rushed away without a word. But there are some things a man can't do; and others he must do. Garth had to say something – the sooner the better.

What he said – or what said itself lamely – was: "You didn't expect to see me?"

"No. I – didn't," Marise as lamely agreed.

"Do you want me to go?" he blundered. "If you do, I will."

"No – no," she breathed a lukewarm protest. "Don't go – please. I – I'm only a little surprised. I remember – seeing you on the ship, of course. And I didn't think – "

"You didn't think I'd force myself on you – by false pretences."

"I was going to say, I didn't think of seeing anyone to-day – whom I'd ever seen before." The ice of her shocked resentment melted slightly in the reflected fire of his pain. "That's all! Do – sit down, won't you? I'm so grateful. I want to tell you how much – how much I thank you for those beautiful things."

As she spoke, the girl's face flushed again. After all, the man had done nothing so monstrous. He couldn't be blamed, perhaps, for not realising that merely by being himself – by being a bouncer whom his brother officers rejected – he had broken the charm of the mystery. He couldn't know how undesirable he would seem to a girl of her sort. And the way he had dressed himself up like a provincial actor playing a duke, to make his call, was pathetic! Besides, there was the money he'd spent on her – hundreds and hundreds of dollars which he couldn't afford. Oh, she was glad that she hadn't followed her first fierce impulse, and been rude!

Garth had not accepted the invitation to sit down. He remained standing upright as a stick, and stolid as a stone, against the door. Evidently he stuck to his resolve to take himself away, and was delayed only by the mental puzzle of how best to do it. With a repentant throe the girl sprang up, light and lithe from among her cushions, holding out her hands.

"I do thank you!" she exclaimed. "And I *want* you to sit down."

Her look, her gesture, overcame him. He took a step forward, seized the offered hands, and almost crushed them in his. Marise was rather frightened, rather touched, but not too much moved to notice that he didn't know enough about behaviour to take off his gloves – his brutally new, gamboge-coloured gloves! Or else he was absent minded!

Partly because her one ring was pressing into her finger, partly because she wished for instant release, she gave a little squeak of pain. "Oh, my ring!"

Red blood poured up to the man's brown face. The pressure relaxed, but he did not let her hands go. He lifted them to his lips and kissed first one, then the other. His mouth was hot as a coal just dropped from the fire!.. That was her quick impression. She was not shocked, for her hands had been kissed a hundred times by sad, mad men – though not men like this. She said "Oh!" however, and gazed at him reproachfully, as "Dolores" gazed at the villain in "The Song."

The effect upon Garth was the same as if she had been sincerely offended. He let her hands fall, and stammered "Forgive me!"

Marise was beginning to enjoy herself a little, on the whole.

Of course the man was common and rough. What was it that Tony had called his despised brother officer? A "temporary gentleman!" Yes, that was it! And a "momentary gentleman" would be even more appropriate, she thought, because at an instant of deep emotion all decent men were raised to the heights of Nature's gentility. This fellow was as fine as any nobleman, for these few seconds of time, she realised, and it was worship of her which added the new decoration to his V.C.! Despite her disappointment, she felt that romance was not utterly lacking in the situation.

"There's nothing to forgive," were the obvious words her lips spoke: but the language of such eyes as hers could never be obvious. The soul of John Garth drowned in their blue depths. As dying men lose all care for conventions, so did he lose it while thus he drowned.

"I love you – I love you!" he faltered. "You know, don't you? From the first – from the first look!"

"Oh no, I don't know that," Marise soothed him. "But you've been so kind. Those wonderful presents! You ought not – "

"Thinking of them – sending them – has been the big joy of my life," he broke in. "I've been – drunk with it. I've never felt anything like this before. Why, I'd die for you; I'd sell my soul. Even that's nothing!"

"They're very great things," she assured him gravely, as she had assured other men of different types who had flung themselves on her altar as burnt-offerings. "Any woman would feel the same. But – "

"I don't care a hang what any other woman would feel. All I care for on God's earth is you – you. Couldn't you think of me – couldn't you, if I tried to make something of myself – ?"

Marise laughed a charming laugh. "Isn't it making something of yourself, to have won the Victoria Cross?" she challenged.

"Oh, that! That was an accident. I just got so mad I forgot to be scared for a minute or two, and went for a few Germans – "

"The newspapers compared you to Horatio keeping the bridge against an army."

"George! You remember that?"

"Women don't forget such things." (She would have forgotten if that clipping from the *Daily Mail* hadn't associated itself with Tony's onslaught upon the regimental hero. But she wasn't called upon to mention this.) "It was long before I saw you, that I read what you had done, and fixed your name in my mind," she went on. "Now I have my own special memories of you. I shall keep your gifts always. And I shall be prouder of them than ever, because they came from a hero – "

"You're breaking it to me that there's no hope," he cut in. The blood was gone from his face now. "Nothing I could do, or try to be, would make you like me well enough – "

"Oh, you are too impulsive!" she checked him. "You've seen me only twice – "

"I've seen you every night since we landed, and twice a week in the afternoon."

"What, you've come to the theatre for every performance, even matinées, just to – to – ?"

"Hear your voice and see your face. And hate that damned actor-chap who kisses you in the third act."

"He doesn't really kiss me," Marise hurried to explain. "He only seems to."

"God! He must be a stone image!"

"He is a gentleman," amended Marise. "Actors who are gentlemen don't kiss the actresses who play opposite parts, unless – unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Then if I played a part with you on the stage, I couldn't be a gentleman," Garth exploded. But even as he spoke he blushed darkly. "You don't think I am one *off* the stage," he added. "And you're right. I'm not what your friend Lord Severance calls a gentleman. I know what he does call me, and I am that, I guess, anyhow when he's within gunshot. He brings out all that's worst in me. There's a lot of it – so much, that if that thing on shipboard was to do over again, I'd do it without a qualm. I suppose there's where the 'cad' element he talks about in me shows up. If he was here now –"

"Ze Earl of Severance, Mademoiselle," announced Céline.

Whether Garth had meant to boast or belittle himself Marise would never know. Nor did she care. All her faculties concentrated upon how to account to Severance for the man. It was a suffocating moment. She feared a scene between the two. The situation called for a stroke of genius. Was she equal to it? She must be, for Garth's sake and for her own, even more than for Tony's, and what he would think.

Severance came in. Suddenly Marise felt as she had felt on the stage when something went wrong with the play. She had often had to save situations by sheer, quick mother wit. Never had she failed her fellow actors in a crisis. She ought to be ready for this!

Her nerves ceased to jump. She was calm and confident. As Severance's darkening gaze fell on Garth, she heard herself glibly explaining the latter, as if to an audience.

"Major Garth is a friend of Miss Marks, my secretary. She has gone out for a few minutes with mother, but he is waiting for her. She'll soon be back."

Speaking, she smiled at the V.C., and her eyes pleaded excuses for the fib. "It's only a white one," they said. "And it saves our secret. I know you'd hate me to tell him you'd sent the presents, and I never, never will. That is sacred, between us two. So is all the rest. And I'm trying to straighten things out for us both."

Garth appeared to be astonished, but not shocked. His silk hat (a size too small) lay on a table in a pool of water from an upset vase, he having flung it there to free his hands for hers. Now he made a move to retrieve his damaged property, but a second thought gave him pause. Marise read his mind as if it worked under glass. Her fib about Miss Marks had doomed him to the part of Casabianca, while the ship of his pride burned.

The "lion-look" she had seen in the man's eyes that day at sea was in them again. Poor brute at bay, caged with Severance! The girl pitied him. But things must take their course. Luckily for the success of her lie, Miss Marks was not returning with Mums. She – Marise – need only say, when the latter arrived alone, what a pity it was! Thus Samson would automatically obtain his release.

The men nodded to one another, as polite enemies must sullenly do in a woman's drawing-room. Then Severance turned to Miss Sorel with the air of sponging Garth's mean existence off the earthly slate. "I'm early," he explained, "because the hotel people sent me a cable to Belloc's place. I told them to do so, if one came. My Uncle Constantine Ionides is ill, and I'm afraid I shall have to go back by the first ship I can catch. I hoped to be in time for a few words with you before your friends began to drop in."

This was hard on the intruder, forced against his will to turn a "company" into a "crowd," and Marise's kind heart might have resented the slap if her mind had been free. But it was instantly preoccupied with Tony's news. He was going home! He wanted to talk with her alone. This could

mean only one thing. She supposed that he wished her to understand as much; and either he took Garth for a dunce or intended him to understand it too. It was as if he said to the bouncer: "You're welcome to what you can find in your own class: Miss Marks and her set. But eyes down and hands off this girl. She's mine."

The hint was too broad, the position too humiliating, for Garth's temper to bear in patience. Like the caged brute in Marise's simile, he searched the bars for some way of breaking through. But he could not leave her in the lurch. Practically, she'd ordered him to "stand by," and he'd have to do it, unless some look of hers gave him leave to bolt. The look did not come, however, and he could not guess that the girl was merely too absent-minded to give it. She had suddenly become as self-absorbed as a hermit-crab when he pulls every filament of himself inside his ample shell. As Miss Sorel questioned Severance about the telegram, Garth was left to his own resources. He felt gigantic in the small, pretty salon, where Chinese jars and ribboned pots of flowers left hardly room for a clumsy fellow like him to turn among frail chairs and tables. He knew that Severance knew how he writhed in spirit, and that Severance knew he knew. How much worse was this ordeal than a petty barrage of ginger-beer! Severance was scoring heavily now. Garth thought in dumb rage that he would give a year of life for some way to pay him back. And the girl, too! He loved her with a burning love, but at this moment the difference between love and hate was as imperceptible as that between the touch of ice and a red-hot poker. She was being very cruel. Garth felt capable of punishing her – with Severance – if he could.

He took his hat from the table, and rubbing the wet silk with his glove, stained the yellow kid. Incidentally he made the hat worse. He wandered to a window looking over the park, and longed to jump out. In his awkward misery, the man's raw sensitiveness suffered to exaggeration. Staring jealously at the crowd below – walking, driving, spinning past in autos – he knew the emotions of one penned at the top of a house on fire, gazing down at the safe, comfortable people free to pursue their daily business of life, and love, and work. Behind him, Marise and her friend jabbered (that was the word in his head, even for her sweet voice) as if he were invisible. Desperation seized him. He turned, and down went a stand with a statuette and the Sèvres box the "Unknown" had sent Miss Sorel. It was poetic justice that *his* gift should be the thing smashed!

Marise said "Oh!" Severance said nothing. He stood still, fingering his miniature moustache with the air of a man who expects a lackey to repair damage. Garth saw red; and if he had picked up a piece of the broken box it would have been to hurl it at the dark, sneering face. But Heaven sometimes tempers the wind to shorn lions as well as lambs: and if Providence did not order the entrance of two women at that instant, who did?

It was Mrs. Sorel who appeared and (Marise gasped) Miss Zélie Marks. Out of her shell in self-defence, the actress would have rushed to save this scene, as she had saved the last – somehow, anyhow! But to her bewilderment Garth took one great stride towards Miss Marks and snatched her hand as drowning men are said to snatch at straws. "How do you do?" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Miss Marks and Major Garth are friends," Marise rattled off to her mother. And to herself she added, "How smart of him to guess who she was! Or – did he know?"

The secretary's cheeks were stained carnation, and she was handsomer in an instant than Marise had thought she could be in a year. Her black eyes were twinkling. Did she guess that she was a pawn in a game, and had she so keen a sense of humour as to laugh? Marise was more interested than ever in this young woman: and Mrs. Sorel, not knowing the plot of the play, was yet warned by her famous "instinct" that something queer, something dangerous, was in the air.

She was a woman who prided herself on presence of mind. Marise hadn't expected her secretary to return, therefore it seemed unlikely she would have encouraged the Bouncer to wait for Miss Marks. And as for that, why was the Bouncer here? Being here, the further he could be kept from Marise and Severance the better. She herself had no time to weave spells for him. Miss Marks must do that, and take him away with her when she went. Without appearing to pause after Marise's announcement,

Mary Sorel smiled at Miss Marks. "Talk to Major Garth, my dear," she patronised, "while I explain to my daughter why we tore back in such a rush."

Zélie Marks took the lady at her word, and drew her "friend" apart. By the remotest window the two halted, standing confidentially close, the girl looking up at the man, the man looking down at the girl. As the conversation was now only of Valinski's dress designs, not Severance's plans, Marise had a sub-eyelash glance or so to spare for the couple. Well, certainly Samson was a creditable actor, or else...

"They were all so lovely I dared not choose," Mums was expatiating. "I said to Miss Marks, 'Suppose we run back in the taxi and let my daughter select? Or, she may want to order more than one of the gowns.' So I slipped the designs back into the portfolio Mr. Valinski had taken them from, and asked permission to borrow the lot. Lord Severance must tell us which he prefers. He's such a good judge! And Miss Marks can carry back the portfolio, with a note from me to Valinski, when she goes."

The three heads – Tony's glossy black, Marise Sorel's glittering gold, her mother's a rich, expensive brown – bent together above a trio of water-colour sketches. Under cover of selection Severance whispered: "I have some bad news. Marise knows it. But I've got to have a talk with you both before I leave this room. I can't bear suspense. For heaven's sake get rid of people as early as you can."

"Must talk to them both... Couldn't bear suspense!" The woman agreed with the girl in thinking there was but one interpretation for this!

"I'll do my best," murmured Mrs. Sorel, and resolved to begin the good work by bustling Miss Marks and Major Garth off the moment the tea-gown business was finished. In the midst, however, Mrs. Dunstan Belloc breezed in with her pretty sister and Belloc's millionaire backer. Mary Sorel moved to meet them with the manner she had copied from Tony's great-aunt, the Duchess of Crownderby. So doing, she slipped Valinski's portfolio into her daughter's hands with an unduchess-like, "Hurry up and choose, and have done with it!"

Somehow, Marise had not the proper new-dress thrill this afternoon. She languidly decided on a classic design which Severance liked, and Valinski had named "Galatea."

"Put the others back in the portfolio, please, Tony," she said. "I must go and help Mums" – but the microbe of accidents was running amok in the Sorels' salon. Tony dropped the book, and the Pole's designs fluttered about the room. Everybody squealed and began picking up papers. One had fallen on the remains of the Sèvres box, as if to hide the wreckage. Garth was nearest the scene of his own disaster. He stooped. Marise seized the chance for a word with him. She stooped also. Each grasped the sketch, which came face uppermost; and under their eyes was the design for the blue and silver gown sent by the Unknown.

Zoyo Valinski had made that dress, then, and sacrificed an advertisement to keep Garth's secret! Zoyo Valinski lived in the house with Miss Marks, and was recommended by her. H'm! H'm!

These thoughts jostled each other in the brain of Marise, and brought in their train another. Naturally Garth had not been shocked at her fib. He didn't know it was a fib! The surprise was only that Miss Sorel had hit on the truth and used it so glibly.

"That Marks girl helped him choose the things," she told herself. And she was as much annoyed as puzzled. She wished to fling at Garth: "You sent her to our hotel manager to ask for my work. Why, she's simply spying on me, for you!"

But she said nothing of the sort. Indeed, she had no time. Seeing Marise and the Bounder together, Mary Sorel flew to part them. "Miss Marks wants me to say she'll be ready to go in a few minutes," the anxious lady encouraged Garth. "She's been captured by Mrs. Belloc. It seems she did secretarial work for her once. Come, and I'll introduce you. I've just told Mrs. Belloc that you are *the V.C.*"

It was half an hour before the man's martyrdom was ended. The worst had been suffered at the beginning, when he was the third in a reluctant trio. But it was all bad enough. He was as well suited

to this jewel-box of a salon as a bull is to a china shop, and he had done nearly as much damage. He didn't know what to say to Mrs. Belloc or her smart, chattering friends, and they didn't know what to say to him. Even a Victoria Cross couldn't excuse such taste in clothes as his! The big fellow's necktie was a scream; his gloves (no other man kept on gloves!) a yell; and his boots – literally – a squeak. That was the description of him which Mrs. Belloc planned for the entertainment of her husband, and Garth saw it developing behind her eyes.

"Give me the trenches!" he thought, when at last Miss Marks wriggled free of the actor-manager's wife. He still hated Marise as much as he loved her. Yet when he said "Good-bye" he did not mean it for farewell. He determined ferociously that he would see her again. "Next time," he resolved, "I won't knock over any tables. I'll turn them. I'll turn the tables my way perhaps, and against that damned pig of an earl!"

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT THE STAR SAID

"Thank Heaven she's gone, and it's ten minutes past!" fervently sighed Mrs. Sorel, as the door closed behind a guest she had kissed warmly on both cheeks. "Céline, 'phone down and tell them not to send anyone else up, no matter who. We needn't be 'at home' a second after six."

She and Marise and Severance now had the sitting-room to themselves. The girl, who had been too busy feeding others to eat anything herself, selected a macaroon from a half-empty dish and nibbled it prettily. Severance regarded the charming creature with clouded eyes, wondering how much appetite their talk would leave her.

"How dear of you to stay and see us through!" cooed Mary, as if she had not known Severance's impatience equal to her own. She did this to lead up to her own tactful exit; and the mere male swallowed her bait without suspicion.

"See you through?" he echoed. "Why, I've been hanging on by my eyelids, waiting for my chance with you and Marise."

"Unless it's something you need me for," the chaperon said sweetly, "perhaps I might leave you to Marise's tender mercies. I'm a little tired –"

"I do need you," Severance assured her. "I don't dare to say what I've got to say to Marise alone. If I did, she might misunderstand. I can't risk that. Mrs. Sorel, this talk means everything to me. You're my friend. Promise *you* won't misunderstand."

Mary Sorel retained a fixed, kind smile; but she had a sickly sensation under her Empire waistband, as if something inside had melted and then cooled. She glanced at Marise, to judge if the girl had been in any way prepared for this queer outbreak. No, evidently not! The blue eyes looked large and suddenly scared. Marise stopped eating the macaroon, and, going slowly to the table, she laid the nibbled remnant on somebody else's plate.

"Why, of course I'll stop," Mary said. "I'm not so tired as to desert you when you flatter me like that."

"I'm not flattering, I'm depending on you." Never before, in her acquaintance with him, had the voice of Severance betrayed such agitation. Mary braced herself against a blow; but the melting thing inside began to congeal like cold candle-grease. Her knees felt like water. Still smiling, she sank rather than sat on a sofa, and held up her hand to Marise.

"If Lord Severance has a confession to make, we'd better sit together in judgment," she proposed. "We'll be kind judges, and this shall be our throne."

"Call it an appeal – a prayer – not a confession," Severance said. "If I'd ever prayed to God as I'm going to pray to you both, maybe I'd not be in the fix I'm in now."

"One would think you were afraid of us!" quavered Marise.

"I am," he admitted. "I was never in such a blue funk in my life. My legs are like poached eggs without toast."

The girl laughed nervously. "You'd better sit down," she advised.

"I couldn't to save my life. Might as well ask a chap on the rack to sing 'Araby.'"

"You're really frightening us!" Mary's tone was shrill. "Have Bolsheviks blown up your family castles? Have you lost all your money? Aren't you the true heir to the title?"

"I'm the heir right enough," Severance took her seriously. "And I haven't got any money – worth calling money. There's the rub! Marise, you know I love you?"

The girl caught her breath. "Why – sometimes I've thought so."

"You've known it, as well as you know you're alive. If I hadn't come into the beastly title I'd have asked you to marry me long ago. It was your own fault I didn't ask you, before my Cousin Eric

died – the first one of the lot to go. You used to snub me every time I tried to speak of marrying. You didn't want to make up your mind!"

"No, honestly, I didn't," she confessed. "I liked you a whole lot, Tony, but – I wasn't quite sure – of either of us, you see, and – "

"You might have been sure of me! I couldn't look at any woman except you."

"It wasn't that sort of thing – exactly. People – cats! – used to put such horrid ideas into my head."

"What ideas?"

"I simply can't tell you, Tony. Don't ask me, please."

"Oh, well!" he flung out. "It doesn't matter much now what ideas you had then. Do you love me to-day, Marise?"

"I – think I do – a little," she almost whispered, as her parent's arm (twined round her waist) pressed painfully against her side.

"A little isn't enough!" Severance said. "It must be a big love to stand the strain."

"The strain of what?" Mary, as a mother, intervened.

"Of the sacrifice I'm going to ask – to beg, to implore – her to make."

"Sacrifice? Do you mean anything about money?" Mrs. Sorel wanted to know. "You were quite right in calling me your friend. I can assure you it would be a joy to Marise if, in your trouble, her money – "

"The trouble's worse than money."

"Tell us quickly," the girl bade him. "You said you couldn't bear suspense. Neither can I bear it. We're both fond of you, Tony – Mums and I. What hurts you, hurts us." And her tingling brain suddenly, inappropriately, gave her a picture of Garth, as he had stood tall and stiff against the door. He, too, had said, in vibrating tones, that he loved her. He had begged her to give him a chance; implored that she would let him try to be worthy. As if, poor fellow, he ever could come up to her standard! What girl of her breeding would think of him twice when there were blue-blooded, perfectly-groomed Greek gods like Tony Severance on earth? Mentally she whistled John Garth, V.C., down the wind to low-lying valleys peopled with girls like Miss Marks.

Tony was pale with the dusky pallor of olive complexions; his pleading eyes were like velvet with diamonds glittering through. She had never realised how he loved her – he, whom so many women worshipped. She felt that she loved him dearly, too. For the first time her heart was stirred warmly by his extraordinary good looks.

"You know all about my Uncle Constantine, my mother's half-brother," he said, leaning on the mantelpiece and nervously lighting a cigarette (Mrs. Sorel and Marise permitted this; even smoked with him now and then). "Well, Uncle Con had very little use for me till by a fluke I got the title. I never expected a penny of his money, though he was my mother's guardian before she ran away with my father. He thought I was a rotter, and didn't mind my knowing his opinion. He didn't exactly forbid me his house in London, for he'd been fond of mother in his hard way, but he gave me no encouragement to come. His vacillation was because of my cousin Ænone. Did I ever speak of her to you?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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