

Vance Louis Joseph

**Linda Lee, Incorporated: A
Novel**



Louis Vance

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are no portraits of living persons in the following pages.

The incidents related in illustration of present-day methods of motion-picture production are, on the other hand, with one minor exception, drawn from first-hand observation in the California studios.

Under the title of *THE COAST OF COCKAIGNE*, an abridged version of this story was published serially, during the Winter of 1921-22, in *McCall's Magazine*.

Louis Joseph Vance
Darien, 20 January, 1922.

I

"Mrs. Bellamy Druce! Rather a mouthful, that."

"Is that why you make a face over it?"

"Didn't expect me to relish it, did you, Cinda?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't thinking of you at all, Dobbin, when I took it."

"Meaning, if you had been, you might have thought twice before taking?"

"No fear: I was much too madly in love with Bel."

"Was?"

"Dobbin!"

"Sorry – didn't mean to be impertinent."

"I don't believe you. Still, I'm so fond of you, I'll forgive you – this once."

"Won't have to twice. I only – well, naturally, I wanted to know whether or not it had taken."

"Taken?"

"Your matrimonial inoculation."

"I think one may safely say it has. I've grown so old and wise in marriage, it really seems funny to remember I was ever an innocent."

"Four years – "

"Going on five."

"It's seemed a long time to me, too, Cinda – five years since these eyes were last made glad by the sight of you."

"At least, time hasn't impaired your knack at pretty speeches."

"Nor your power to inspire them."

"I'm not so sure. To myself I seem ever so much older." Lucinda Druce turned full face to the man on her left, anxiety feigned or real puckering the delicately pencilled brows. "Doesn't it show at all, Dobbin, the ruthless march of advancing years?"

The man narrowed critically his eyes and withheld his verdict as if in doubt; but a corner of his mouth was twitching.

"You are lovelier today than ever, lovelier even than the memories of you that have quickened my dreams – "

"All through these years? How sweet – and what utter tosh! You know perfectly well your heart hasn't been true to Poll – "

"Unfortunately, the damn' thing has. Oh, I'm not pretending I didn't do my level best to forget, tried so hard I thought I had won out. But it only needed this meeting tonight to prove that the others were merely anodynes for a pain that rankled on, as mortal hurts do always, 'way down beneath the influence of the opiate."

"Truly, Dobbin, you've lost nothing of your ancient eloquence. That last speech quite carried me back to the days when, more than once, you all but talked me off my feet and into your arms."

"Pity I ever stopped talking."

"I wonder!"

"You wonder – ?"

"Whether it's really a pity you never quite succeeded in talking me into believing I loved you enough to marry you, whether we wouldn't all have been happier, you, Bel, and I."

"Then you aren't altogether – "

"Hush! I haven't said so."

"No; but you've had time to find out."

"Perhaps..."

"And you know your secrets are safe with me."

"That's why I'm going to say – what I am going to say."

"O Lord! now I shall catch it."

"Don't be afraid, Dobbin, I'm not going to scold. But I know you so well, how direct and persistent you are – yes, and how sincere – it's only fair to tell you, the traditions of our kind to the contrary notwithstanding, I'm still in love with my husband."

For a moment Richard Daubeney was silent, staring at his plate. Then he roused with a light-hearted shrug and smile.

"And that's that!"

Lucinda nodded with amiable emphasis: "That's that."

The black arm of a waiter came between them, and the woman let an abstracted gaze stray idly across the shimmering field of the table, while the man at her side ceased not to remark with glowing appreciation the perfection of her gesture, at once so gracious, spirited, and reserved.

Never one to wear her heart on her sleeve, Lucinda. Look at her now: Who would ever guess she had lived to learn much, to unlearn more, in so brief a term of married life? Surely the sweet lift of her head, the shadowy smile that lurked ever about her lips, the exquisite poise of that consummate body bespoke neither disillusionment nor discontent. And who should say the dream was not a happy one that clouded the accustomed clearness of her eyes?

Unclouded and serene once more, these turned again his way.

"It's like you, Dobbin, to start making love to me all over again, precisely as if my being married meant nothing, in the first minutes of our first meeting in five years, without offering to tell me a single thing about yourself."

"Nothing much to tell. Everybody knows, when you engaged yourself to marry Druce, I rode off to the wars. Oh, for purely selfish motives! If I'd stayed, I'd have made a stupid exhibition of myself one way or another, taken to drink or something equally idiotic. So vanity prompted me to blaze a trail across the waters for my beloved country to follow when its hour struck."

"And when the war was over, what did you then?"

"Knocked about a bit with some pals I'd picked up."

"We heard you'd taken up ranching in the Argentine, and made a tidy fortune."

"I didn't do badly, that's a fact. But what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

"Please don't look at me as if I knew the answer."

"It's a question we've all got to face, soon or late."

"You forget the life one leads: a studied attempt to forget that such a question ever was asked."

"Find it succeeds?"

"Only part of the time, at best. But is one to understand you lost your soul in the Argentine? It sounds so amusingly immoral."

"At least I realized down there my soul was in a fair way to prove a total loss. We were rather out of the world, you know, away back from anywhere; so I had lots of time to think, and learned I hadn't found what I'd gone to France to seek; that there'd been nothing really elevating or heroic about the war, only sound and fury; in other words that, when all was said and done, you were all that had ever really mattered. So I sold out and shipped for home."

"Hoping to find me unhappy enough with Bel – ?"

"That's unworthy of you, Cinda. No: simply to be in the same world with you."

After a little Mrs. Bellamy Druce said severely: "Dobbin, if you keep on that tack, you will make me cross with you; and that wouldn't be nice, when I'm so glad to see you. Let's talk about anything else. How does New York look to an exile of long standing? Much changed?"

"Oh, I don't know. Skirts and morals both a bit higher, jazz a little more so, Prohibition just what one expected, society even more loosely constituted – a vast influx of new people. Time was when it would have seemed odd to see a strange face at one of the Sedley's dinners. But tonight – I

don't know half these people. Astonishing lot of pretty girls seem to have sprung up since my time. Who's the raving beauty on Bill Sedley's right?"

"Amelie Severn, Amelie Cleves that was before she married. Surely you remember her."

Daubeney stared in unaffected wonder.

"Good heavens! she was in long dresses when I saw her last."

"Pretty creature, don't you think?"

"Rather. Can't blame the chap next her for his open infatuation."

Laughter thrilled in Lucinda's reply: "Why, don't you recognize him? That's Bel."

As if the diminutive pronounced in the clear accents of his wife had carried through the murmur of talk, Bellamy Druce looked up. Perceiving Lucinda's smile at the end of an aisle of shaded lights, he smiled in turn, but with the muscles of his face alone. And looking from him to the flushed and charming countenance of the young woman on his left, bending low over her plate to hide confusion engendered by Bel's latest audacity, Lucinda thought, with a faint pang, more of impatience than of jealousy: *He's in love again.*

II

With a small sigh of animal delight in the caress of fur and the chill, sweet draught from the open window upon her face, as well as in the sense of effortless power animating that luxurious fabric which the gods had so thoughtfully provided for her ease, Lucinda Druce settled back in the town-car, aware yet unmindful of the fluid nocturne of Fifth avenue, a still, black river streaming beneath the car, its banks of soft fire strung with linked globes of milky light, its burnished surface scoured by the fleet gondolas of landmen, in number beyond counting, skimming, swooping, stopping, shoaling.

Bel had asked to be dropped at the Brook, alleging a rendezvous of one sort or another, safely masculine of course. Beyond reflecting that Bel was in all likelihood lying, Lucinda had paid slight heed to his excuses. It didn't matter whether they were fair or false, so long as he wanted to do whatever it was he wanted to do with the rest of his evening. She had little faith in that theory with which too many are infatuate, on which too many marriages are wrecked, that affection is to be persuaded, that loyalty comes of being made to toe the mark.

Then, too, she was not ill-pleased with having herself all to herself, in this thoughtful mood which had become hers since leaving the Sedleys', not an unhappy mood, but one curiously mused. Besides, Bel had been making too free with the Sedley cellar. Not that she was disposed to hold this a grievance, thoroughgoing mondaine that she was, saturate with the spirit of a day that was learning to look tolerantly upon intemperateness as a fashionable form of protest against Prohibition. No: it wasn't that, it was the fact, established by long observation, that Bel seldom drank more than he could manage gracefully unless on the verge of some new gallantry. A little wearily, Lucinda wondered why. Bel assuredly didn't need anything to stimulate his enterprise. She fancied it must be that alcohol served as a sort of anæsthetic for his conscience.

She had a smile transiently bitter. Bel's conscience! The most feather-headed, irresponsible of philanderers, the most incorrigible; between whiles the most contrite...

That, she supposed, was why she had always found it in her heart to forgive him, why she had never experienced any real pain because of his perennial peccadilloes. He couldn't help himself, it was his nature so to do. And somehow or other she always found him out, the poor boy was singularly unfortunate in his efforts to keep her in the dark, singularly clumsy and sanguine at one and the same time. Or else cynical. Sometimes she was tempted to think Bel didn't care, or thought she oughtn't to. Often his attitude seemed to be posed upon the assumption that everybody was doing it; so why affect a virtuous eccentricity?

On the other hand, his fits of penitence were terribly real, when she caught him misbehaving. Or was that, too, merely part of the game with Bel? Was it just a conventional gambit to make-believe repentance and promise faithfully never, never to be naughty again?

A disquieting question was raised by the circumstance that she seemed to be taking tonight's discovery less to heart than ever before. Somehow it didn't seem to matter so much. Was she growing hardened, then, beginning to care less for Bel than she had always cared? Or was it...

Between her dreaming eyes and the silhouetted backs of the footman and chauffeur imagination made a memory momentarily real; she saw, as it were limned darkly upon the plate-glass partition, the face of Dobbin, Richard Daubeney as that night had reintroduced him: the bold, brown face, lighted by clear eyes and an occasional gleam of teeth, of the adventurer into whom exile had metamorphosed Dobbin. Understanding, self-reliant, dependable: qualities that might have made Dobbin a rival for Bellamy to reckon with had he been able to boast them of old. But in those days he had been no more than ardent and eloquent and dear. He had needed to go away to war to find what he had lacked to make him – well, yes, dangerous. Dangerous, that is, to any but a woman well in love with her husband...

She discovered that the car was already at a standstill. Immersed in reverie, she hadn't noticed the turn off from the Avenue.

As always, her home enfolded her in its comfortable atmosphere of security from every assault of adversity by virtue of the solid wealth upon which it was founded, that formidable whole into which two great fortunes had been fused by her marriage with Bellamy. Neither she nor Bel had ever known one quail of financial uneasiness, neither by chance conceivable ever would. That irking insecurity which so largely poisons the common lot was something wholly foreign to the ken of the Druces, they must brew their own poisons to take its tonic place. None the less the feeling of her home's stability was precious, Lucinda basked in it like a cat on an accustomed hearth, wanting it she must have felt hopelessly lost and forlorn.

She went slowly up to her rooms. And here, where so large a part of her life was lived, the sense of completely satisfying personal environment was more than ever strong.

Pensively giving herself into the hands of her maid, she stood opposite a long mirror. A shade of concern tinged the regard she bent upon that charming counterfeit, her interest grew meticulous as she observed that slender and subtly fashioned body emerge from its silken sheaths. Where were the signs of age, of fading charm? What was it Bel saw in other women and failed to see in her? What could they give him that she had not to give? Was her real rival only man's insatiable appetite for some new thing?

She was as vain as any woman, if no more so than the next; and if she failed to perceive flaws, she failed with more excuse than most could claim.

Supple and young and fair, and slighted...

Her heart, too, she searched. But there was nothing wanting there that the most exacting husband and lover could require. She had told Dobbin the simple truth: she still loved Bel.

But love and beauty, it seemed, were not enough.

For a long time she lay awake in bed, the book unopened in her hands, again a creature of unthinking gratification in the consciousness of Home.

Dark and still but warm with the life she had breathed into it, monolithic in the mass and firmness of its institution yet a web of her own weaving, it endured about and around her, cradled her, dug its roots deep into earth that it might sustain her, held its head up to the skies that it might shield her from the elements, opposed the thickness of its walls between her and the world of ungenerous passions: her Home, the one thing in her life she could assert she had created.

Twenty-six, mistress of riches she had never needed to compute, safe at anchor in an enviable station, idle but for an ordered round of duties and diversions so stale it was hardly of more mental moment to her than the running of her blood, not yet a mother...

At length she opened the book. But its lines of print ran and blended, hypnogogic images, fugitive and fragmentary, formed and faded on the type-dark pages: Dobbin's face again, so changed yet the same, with that look at once disturbing and agreeable of curbed hunger in the eyes; the face of Amelie Severn, with a stagey effect of shadows cast by table-lights, piquant with mirthful mischief as she looked round, at once challenging and apprehensive of Bel's next essay in amorous impudence; and Bel's face with glimmering eyes and that tenseness in the set of the jaw which, in the sight of his wife, had but one meaning...

An echoless clap of sound penetrated the walls, the slam of a cab door. Lucinda dropped her book. The front doors crashed resoundingly. She turned out her light and lay listening, watchful.

Beneath the door that communicated with Bel's room a rim of gold shone out. She heard him stumble against a chair and swear at it, turned quietly on her side, away from the door, and composed herself to sleep.

Some minutes after, a yellow light splashed athwart her bed.

"Linda?" Bel's tongue, as thick as she had expected it to be, called again, insistently: "Linda? 'Wake, Linda?"

She made no stir at all, and presently he closed the door and she heard him grumbling, then a click as he switched off his bedside lamp.

Later he began to snore, something he never did unless he had been drinking heavily.

Her drowsy time had passed, not to return. She lay for hours, looking wide-eyed into darkness, thinking.

How had Dobbin known – or guessed – she was unhappy?

She wasn't, she was neither happy nor unhappy, she was just a little lonely ... wasted...

III

Bellamy Druce began the day frugally with grapefruit, the headlines of the *Herald*, and coffee. It is no more than fair to state that he seemed to hold all three in one degree of disfavour. The interest he showed in the other dishes set forth for his sustenance and delectation on the small table in the bow-window of his sitting-room, was limited to a single jaundiced glance at the ensemble.

From the news of the day, too, he turned affronted eyes. Strong daylight on white paper was trying to optic nerves this morning. Over his coffee he lighted a cigarette, but after a few puffs took it from his lips and examined it with louring distrust which suggested the birth of a suspicion that his tobacconist was not a true friend. Hastily putting the thing from him, he shuffled listlessly the dozen or so envelopes on the breakfast table, put these aside in turn, and for a time sat morosely contemplating his joined fingers, trying to recollect something confoundedly elusive. The mental effort contributed nothing toward assuaging a minor but distinct headache, just back of his eyes.

At thirty-five or something less, Bellamy was beginning to notice that even a few drinks tended to play the deuce with one's memory. He liked to boast and believe he never drank to excess, but it was none the less true that, of late, his alcoholic evenings were frequently much of a blur in retrospect.

After a while he unlaced his hands, held them out to the light with fingers spread, and frowned to observe their slight but unmistakable tremor.

In a petulant voice he asked the time of his valet and, learning it, ruefully digested the reflection that he had eight hours more of life to live, if it could fairly be called living, before the hour of the first cocktail.

As a man of strong principles, he made it a rule never to drink before six in the evening.

After another minute of wasted endeavour to put salt on the tail of that tricky memory, he made a disconsolate noise, told his valet to order the car round, and bestirred himself to finish dressing.

Bellamy Druce buttoned himself into his coat before a mirror. Like many men who make no pretensions to deserve the term handsome, he was inordinately finical about his person. His relations with his tailors, boot and shirt-makers, were intimate and marked by conferences as solemn and consequential as those which keep European premiers out of mischief, but no more so. No valet had yet succeeded in earning his confidence in such questions as that of the right shirt for the lounge suit of the day.

But the inspection he gave his attire this morning was perfunctory, his graver concern was with the tone of his complexion and the look of his eyes.

To his relief the one proved to be clear and of good colour, the other betrayed ravages of dissipation only in a hint of heaviness. More than this, the tremor of his hands had in the last few minutes become barely perceptible. Already a strong constitution, hardened by an athletic history and inured to abuse, was beginning to react to restorative measures taken immediately after waking, deep breathing, a steaming hot bath, an icy needle-shower, a rub-down.

Drawing one more long breath, he straightened his shoulders, lifted his chin a trifle, and went to pay his matutinal addresses to Lucinda, hoping she wouldn't notice anything, or, if she did, would be enough of a sportswoman to let it pass without comment.

He found Lucinda seated on a chaise-longue in her boudoir, running through her morning's mail by way of preparation for the daily half-hour with her secretary which it demanded. Posed with unflinching grace in a *négligé* scarcely more than a sketch in lace and ribbon, with the light from the windows seemingly drawn to a focus by hair abundant, always rebellious, and the hue of ripe corn-silk, she seemed as pretty, as fair and fragile as a porcelain figurine. Bellamy needed only to see her thus to know a stab of shame and self-reproach.

Why must he be such a fool as ever to let himself be flattered into forgetting sheer perfection was to be found nowhere if not within the walls of his own home?

Bending to kiss his wife, he put that thought behind him. He couldn't afford to dwell upon it. Already he was too far committed in this new affaire to withdraw without losing face. But he would find some way soon to make an end of it (thank God! they all had an end sometime) and this would be the last – "and after this, never again!"

He really meant it this time, he vowed he did...

"Rest well, dear? Don't need to ask that, though, only need to look at you. Besides, you know you went to sleep as soon as you got home; you were dead to the world when I came in."

"You didn't stay late at the Brook?"

"As a matter of fact, made excuses to get away early. But you were too quick for me, my dear."

Bellamy sat down on the foot of the chaise-longue and helped himself to one of Lucinda's cigarettes. To his relief, it tasted remarkably like tobacco.

"Never looked sweeter in your life than last night, Linda. I was quite jealous of old Daubenev, monopolizing you..."

"You needn't have been, Bel."

"Don't know about that. Dick took it pretty hard when you accepted me, and if I'm any judge now, he's come back only to be hit twice as hard, in the same place, too. If not, he's got no right to look at you the way he does."

"I don't think you were in a good condition to judge." Bel winced, because he had laid himself open to this, and it could be taken two ways, neither comforting. It was actually a relief to hear Lucinda add: "You seemed to be fairly preoccupied yourself, at the table."

"Oh, bored to tears, assure you. Amelie's a pretty little thing, amiable enough, but nobody to talk to – no conversation whatever."

Lucinda limited comment to a mildly quizzical look. Her maid, having answered the door, was announcing that the car was waiting for Mr. Druce. Bellamy nodded, but seemed in no hurry. What was on his mind?

"Doing anything special today?"

Lucinda shook her head slowly, watching him with a half-smile lambent with lazy intelligence. He felt vaguely uneasy, as who should of a sudden find himself hard by the brink of some abysmal indiscretion.

"Thought we might meet somewhere for luncheon, if you're lunching out."

"I'd love to." Lucinda put out an arm deliciously rounded beneath skin of a texture fairer and finer than any other Bellamy had ever seen, and took a morocco-bound engagement book from her escritoire. "Let me see..." She riffled the leaves. "I know I've got some shopping to do –"

"Have you, now!"

"And Mrs. Rossiter Wade's bridge-tea for some charity or other this afternoon, but... Oh, yes! I'm having Fanny Lontaine to lunch at the Ritz, with Nelly Guest and Jean Sedley. What a pity. Though nothing can prevent your coming, too, if you like."

A dark suspicion knitted Bellamy's eyebrows. "Some actress? Sounds like it."

"Fanny Lontaine?" Needless to ask which he meant, the other women were fixtures of their immediate circle. Lucinda laughed. "Nothing of the sort. Fanny was at school with me – Frances Worth –"

"Chicago people?" Bellamy put in with symptoms of approval. "Not a bad lot. Old man Worth – 'Terror of the Wheat Pit', they called him – died not long ago in the odour of iniquity, leaving eighty millions or so. Your little schoolmate ought to be fairly well-fixed."

"I don't know, I'm sure. I believe it's something to do with the will that brought them over. Fanny's father disliked Harry Lontaine, so Fanny had to run away to marry him and was duly excommunicated by the family. She's lived in England ever since; her husband's an Englishman."

"I see: another of your charity cases."

"Hardly. They're stopping at the Ritz, that's where I met Fanny the other day."

"Anybody can stop there, but not everybody can get away."

"Does it matter?"

"It's only I don't like seeing you made use of, Linda. Your name makes you fair game for every climber and fortune-hunter who can claim or scrape acquaintance with you."

"But my friends – "

"Oh, you're forever being too friendly with stray cats. Why did you ask Nelly and Jean to meet this woman if it wasn't in the hope they'd take her up, too?"

Lucinda shrugged. "Come to my luncheon and see for yourself. Not that I think you'd care for Fanny, though she is pretty to death."

"Why not, if you like her so much?"

"She's not at all the type you seem to find most attractive. Why is it, I've often wondered, the women you lose your head about are almost always a bit – well – !"

Bellamy flushed sullenly. It was one of his crosses that he seemed never to have the right answer ready for Lucinda when she took that line. After all, there is only one salvation for a man married to a woman cleverer than himself: to do no wrong.

"Oh, if you're going to rake up ancient history – !"

But Lucinda pursued pensively, as if she hadn't heard: "I presume you've got to run after that sort, Bel, because they don't know you as well as I do – can't."

Even a slow man may have wit enough not to try to answer the unanswerable. Bellamy got stiffly to his feet.

"I'll drop in at the Ritz if I can make it."

"Do, dear ... And Bel!" Lucinda rose impulsively and ran to him. "I'm sorry, Bel, I was so catty just now. Only, you know, there are some things one can't help feeling keenly. Dear!"

She clung to him, lifting to his lips a face tempting beyond all telling. Insensibly his temper yielded, and catching her to him, he kissed her with a warmth that had long been missing in his caresses.

"Linda: you're a witch!"

"I wish I were ... enough of a witch, at least, to make you realize nobody cares for you as I do, nor ever will. Bel: don't go yet. There's something I want to ask you..."

"Yes?" He held her close, smiling down magnanimously at that pretty, intent face. As long as she loved him so, couldn't do without him, all was well, he could do pretty much as he liked – within reasonable limits, of course, bounds dictated by ordinary discretion. "What's on the busy mind?"

"I've been wondering if we couldn't go away together somewhere this Winter." Lucinda divined hostility in the tensing of the arm round her waist. "We're not really happy here, dearest – "

"But you were in Europe all Summer."

"Not with you, except for a few weeks. You took me over but left me to come back to business affairs that could have got along perfectly without you. And while you were with me, what was different from our life here? Nothing but the geography of our environment. Meeting the same people, doing the same things, living in the self-same groove abroad as at home – that sort of thing's no good for us, Bel."

"What's wrong with the way we live?"

"Its desperate sameness wears on us till we turn for distraction to foolish things, things we wouldn't dream of doing if we weren't bored. Look through my calendar there; you'll find I'm booked up for weeks ahead, and week in and week out the same old round. And so with you. Consciously or unconsciously you resent it, dear, you're driven to look for something different, some excitement to lift you out of the deadly rut. As for me ... Would you like it if I took a lover simply because I was bored silly, too?"

"Linda!"

"But don't you see that's what we're coming to, that is how it's bound to end with us if we go on this way, all the time drifting a little farther apart? Why can't we run away from it all for a while, you and I, forget it, and find ourselves again? Take me to Egypt, India, any place where we won't see the same people all the time and do the same things every day. I feel as if I'd lost you already – "

"What nonsense!"

"Oh, perhaps not altogether yet. But slowly and surely I am losing you. Bel: I want my husband and – he needs me. Give me a chance to find him again and prove to him I'm something better than – than a boutonnière to a man of fashion."

"Boutonnière?"

"A neglected wife, the finishing touch."

Bellamy laughed outright, and Lucinda's earnestness melted into an answering smile. "What a notion! How did you get it, Linda?"

"Thought it up all out of my own head, strange as it may appear. You see – this is the danger of it all – you make me think, dear. And if you keep that up, first thing you know I'll be all mental – and that would be too awful!"

Bel laughed again, more briefly, and slackened his embrace; and she understood from this that, if she had not actually lost, she had gained nothing.

"Perhaps you're right. At all events, it's worth thinking about."

"You will think it over, Bel – promise?"

"Word of honour. But now – late for an appointment – must run."

Against the better counsel of her instinct, Lucinda put all she had left unsaid into her parting kiss – and felt that his response was forced.

In chagrin she wandered to a window and stood gazing blankly out till recalled by a new voice: "Good morning, Mrs. Druce."

Lucinda wadded the handkerchief into her palm and turned to her secretary, an unruffled countenance.

"Good morning, Elena."

Elena Fiske was conscientiously unalluring in the livery affected by intellect in reduced circumstances. Thanks to a cultivated contempt for powder, her good features wore an honest polish. She walked with a stride and looked you in the eye. Erroneously she conceived her opinion of Lucinda to be privately entertained.

"If you're ready for me," she suggested with perfect poise.

"Yes, quite ready."

Elena consulted a sensible note-book. "I was to remind you to telephone Mrs. Rossiter Wade."

"Oh, yes."

Lucinda took up the telephone but only to find the wire already in use; that is to say, somebody in another part of the house was talking without having thought to disconnect the boudoir extension. Recognizing Bel's voice, she would have hung up at once had she not overheard a name.

"Lucky to catch you in, Amelie," Bellamy was saying in the blandishing accents she knew too well. "About our luncheon, you know – "

"See here, Bel: you're not going to put me off at the last minute!"

"Rather not! But for reasons which I confidently leave to your imagination, it might be better to make it any place but the Ritz. What do you say to the Clique? It's at least discreet – "

"But Bel!" the mocking voice of Amelie Severn put in – "we settled on the Clique instead of the Ritz last night, just before you went home. What's happened to the old memory?"

Bellamy was still stammering sheepishly when Lucinda cutoff.

IV

Frost in the air of that early Winter day lent its sunlight the cold brilliance of diamond-dust. The sky was turquoise glaze, more green than blue, incredibly hard, shining, high and resonant. Though the new year was well launched, snow had not yet fallen, no dismal sierras of mud, slush and rubbish disfigured the city streets and hindered their swift business. But on Fifth avenue, by that mid-morning hour, the crush of motor-cars had grown so dense that one could hardly hope to drive from the Plaza to Thirty-fourth street in less than thirty minutes.

Bellamy, nursing a mood blackly malcontent, fumed over every halt dictated by the winking semaphore lights of the traffic towers. He could have made far better time afoot, and would infinitely have preferred the exercise – indeed, felt need of it. But in his understanding it was essential that the car should set him down in front of the sedate pressed-brick structure on East Thirtieth street whose entrance was flanked by an ever-stainless plate of brass advertising in dignified black letters Offices of the Druce Estate – necessary for the planting of what he was pleased to term his "alibi." It made his mind easier to know he could prove by the chauffeur that he had "gone to business." What he did with himself after passing through those austere portals the chauffeur couldn't know, couldn't be expected to know, consequently couldn't tell.

It was true, Lucinda had never deigned to question a servant about his comings and goings, he had no reason to believe she would ever be so far forgetful of her dignity. Still, if one will flirt with fire, the first rule is to take out insurance.

Notwithstanding the numerous occasions when his own laches and errors of judgment had betrayed Bellamy, his life of a licensed philanderer (so he rated himself) remained one endless intrigue of evasion, a matted tangle of lies, equivocations, shifts and stratagems, to keep account of which was not only a matter of life and death with him but a task to tax the wits of any man. The wonder was less that feet which trod such treacherous ground were known to slip, than that they slipped so seldom.

Merely to admit the need for all this involution of ambiguity and double-dealing grievously affronted self-esteem. Deceit was strangely distasteful to this man who was forever floundering in a muck of it, a quagmire from whose grim suck his feet were never wholly free. In saner interludes, times of disillusion and clear inner vision such as this, he loathed it all, himself most of all. Naturally fastidious, he felt himself defiled, much as if he were constrained continually to dabble those well-manicured hands in a kennel. He would have given half of all he possessed to be free of this feeling of personal dishonor which was the fruit of self-indulgence. A quaint contradiction was to be read in the fact that he knew no way to satisfy his vanity but at the cost of giving his vanity offence.

Today found Bellamy more out of humour with himself than ever before, more disposed to consider turning over a new leaf, a project often mooted by his conscience (always when he was falling out of love) often approved but never seriously tackled.

Now, however, he had every incentive: self-esteem sick to death in sequence to last night's dissipation, anxiety to reanimate it with a noble gesture; mortification due to that lapse of memory which had laid him open to Amelie's derision, accompanied by reluctance to see the lady soon again; most of all, Lucinda's unmistakable appeal to his senses and sensibilities both, in their interview just ended.

There was no one like Linda, not a woman in New York who could hold a candle to her for looks, wit and intelligence, none other whom he could trust, no one who loved him so well. And it would be such a simple matter to do as she suggested, humour her, make her happy – clear out of New York and not return till time had wiped the slate clean of his score, then settle down to behave, and incidentally to respect, himself.

Where was the sense in holding on this tack, ignoring Linda, making her miserable, storing up sure retribution, and meantime playing the silly goat, all for the sake of a few hours of facile excitement? It wasn't as if he couldn't help himself, as if his fatal beauty rendered it impossible for women to resist him. No: the women he flirted with were as ready to flirt with any other man who has as much to offer them...

Why, then go on?

Bellamy assured himself he was damn' sorry that he hadn't, while calling Amelie up from the library, obeyed his first impulse and broken off the appointment altogether. Chances were her resentment would have resulted in a permanent breach. In which event all hands would have been happier. While if he went on now to meet her at this shady Clique Club, the end might easily be, what the outcome of persistence in his present courses must surely be, heart-break, unhappiness, the slime of the divorce courts.

Thrice in the course of the scant hour he spent at his desk Bellamy put out a hand to the telephone, meaning to call up Amelie and call it off; and thrice withheld his hand, partly because he hated the thought of a wrangle over the wire, partly because he was afraid the girl at the switchboard might listen in.

In the end he left his office half an hour earlier than he need have, and telephoned the Severn apartment from the Waldorf, only to learn from her maid that Mrs. Severn was not at home.

Divided between relief and annoyance, he took a taxi to the Clique, arriving twenty minutes before the time appointed, and Heaven alone knew how long before he might expect Amelie. For Amelie was one of those who, having no personality of their own worth mentioning, build themselves one of appropriated tricks and traits, as a rule those which are least considerate of the comfort of others. Amelie believed a certain distinction inhered in being always late for an appointment.

Now Bellamy detested waiting, especially in a public place, and never more than in the little foyer of the Clique, with its suggestively discreet lighting; the last place where one cared to be hung up on exhibition.

The Clique Club was a post-Prohibition institution of New York, run in direct, more or less open, and famously successful defiance of the Eighteenth Amendment. One had to become a member in order to obtain admission, or else be introduced as the guest of a member; and the initiation fee was something wholly dependent on one's rating in the esteem of the Membership Committee, whose powers had been delegated en bloc to an urbane brigand, the club steward, Theodore by name: in more humid days the more than ordinarily supercilious, courted and successful maître-d'hotel of a fashionable restaurant. Once a member and within those unhallowed precincts, "everything went," in the parlance of its frequenters, "you could get away with murder." There was a floor for dancing, with the inevitable jazz band, rather a good one. Rooms were provided for private dinner parties of every size, however small. In the restaurant proper an improper degree of privacy was obtainable at will simply by drawing the curtains of the booths in which the tables were individually set apart. The cooking was atrocious, the wines and liquors only tolerable, the tariffs cynical.

Amelie Severn kept Bellamy kicking his heels a bad quarter of an hour longer than she need have; and those fifteen minutes, added to the twenty which he had inflicted upon himself, served to draw his temper fine. Nothing of this, however, was apparent in his reception of her, in fact much of it was obscured for the first few minutes by the admiration which her undeniable good looks could hardly have failed to excite. There was, after all, a measure of compensation in the knowledge that one had made a conquest of so rare a creature.

It didn't count that there had been more truth than good faith in Bellamy's statement to his wife that Amelie was "amiable enough, but nobody to talk to." Good humour, easy, spirits, grace of manner and charm of person will carry even a dull woman far. Amelie was neither stupid nor witty; she was shrewd. Mainly through instinct but in part through education she was shrewd, she knew what she wanted, which was every luxury, and how to go about obtaining it, which was simple; all

one needed to do was to fix on some tedious man to flatter with one's attentions. For the more dull the man, the better the dividends returned by such inexpensive investments; the more keen-witted, the more disposed to count the cost.

If there was nothing subtle in the philosophy of Amelie, it boasted this rare virtue, it was practical and practicable in the extreme; just as it is practised to an extent few men dream of.

To women of this type love is the poppy of hallucination, calling for ruthless extermination if found in one's own garden, but sure to produce goodly crops if cultivated by fair, skilled hands in the fields of the neighbouring sex.

Amelie had married Ross Severn because he was well-to-do, uninteresting, middle-aged, of good family; and had quickly repented because he spoiled her and showed no intention of ceasing to be a good insurance risk. So she craved much exciting indiscretions as this assignation with another's husband at the Clique Club of questionable repute.

She frankly owned as much while Bellamy was helping her with her wrap in the semi-seclusion of their as yet uncurtained booth.

" – Thrilled to a jellybean!" she declared, employing an absurdity which she had promptly pirated upon hearing the laugh that rewarded its use by another woman. "Thanks, old dear." She shrugged out of her furs, planted elbows upon the table, cradled her chin upon the backs of engaged fingers, and peered about the room with quick, inquisitive, bird-like glances. "Ross would be furious."

"Hope so. If he weren't, he ought to be spoken to about it. Or don't you think he has any right to object to your doing as you please?"

"Oh, why worry about Ross's rights? He's just a husband."

"And husbands haven't any rights worth considering. Quite so! All the same, sometimes they assert 'em."

"I'd like to see Ross..." A laugh of lazy insolence rounded off Amelie's thought. "Besides, I'm not doing anything wrong..."

"Not yet," Bellamy admitted equably. He nodded to their hovering waiter. "What kind of cocktail, Amelie? Everything else is ordered."

"Thank goodness: I'm famished. A T-N-T, please."

The waiter noted down this frightful prescription with entire equanimity, but lingered. "And monsieur – ?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Nothing, monsieur?" Professional poise was sadly shattered for an instant. Why should one punish oneself with the cuisine of the Clique and reject the solitary compensation the establishment had to offer? Ejaculating "Nothing!" once more, in a tone of profound perturbation, the waiter retired.

Bellamy tried to cover his annoyance with a laugh, but surprised a look of dark resentment in Amelie's eyes and opened his own. "Hello?"

"Why did you do that? Simply to mortify me?"

"Afraid I don't follow – "

"Do you want the waiters to think you bring me here solely to satisfy *my* appetite for liquor? It isn't as if you were a plaster saint in that line yourself – not exactly."

"Sorry, Amy. Make it a rule never to drink before evening."

"Then why come here at all?"

"Thought we'd agreed a little everyday discretion wouldn't do us any harm."

"What are you afraid of? Your wife?"

Bellamy answered only with a fatigued look. The cocktail was being served.

"And the melon, monsieur – shall I bring it at once?"

"Please."

The tone was crisp if the word was civil. Amelie sipped her mixed poisons, mysterious malice informing the eyes that watched Bellamy over the rim of the glass.

"Why take it out on the waiter if you're in a temper with me?"

"I'm not, Amy, I – " Bellamy caught himself, and permitted impatience to find an outlet in a sound of polite expostulation: "Really!"

Amelie put aside an empty glass. Refreshed and fortified, she brooded with sultry eyes while wedges of under-ripe casaba bedded in cracked ice were set before them.

"You know, Bel," she observed in the dispassionate accents of the friend who wouldn't for worlds mention it, only it's for your own good – "you really ought to be more careful about your drinking. You barely escaped being pretty awful at times, last night."

An indictment the more unkind because a cloudy memory refused to affirm or deny its justice. Bellamy began to repent his fidelity to the six o'clock rule.

"Fancy your forgetting we'd agreed to meet here instead of at the Ritz. That ought to show you how lit you were."

"Sorry – "

"That's all very well: but suppose you hadn't had sense enough to call up this morning, suppose I had come here to meet you, just as we'd arranged, and had to go home after waiting around for hours like some shop-girl forgotten on a street corner – "

"Poetic justice, if you ask me – something to offset some of the hours you've kept me fidgeting, wondering if you meant to show up at all."

Injudiciously, Bellamy added a smile to the retort, by way of offsetting its justice.

"So it amuses you to think of making an exhibition of me in a place like this!"

"Oh, I don't know." Bellamy surveyed the restaurant without bias. "Not a bad little hole for people in our position."

The melon, inedible and uneaten, was removed, soup in cups was substituted.

"People in our position! I'm to understand, then, any 'little hole' is good enough for me, so long as I don't interfere with Lucinda's parties at the Ritz."

Bellamy straightened his spine and put down his spoon. An understanding captain of waiters read his troubled eye and made casual occasion to draw the curtains across the front of the booth.

"It is because Lucinda's lunching at the Ritz today, isn't it?"

"My dear Amy," said Bellamy coolly: "I'm unaware of having done anything to provoke this, and if I've sinned unwittingly, I beg your pardon very truly. Won't you believe that, please, and let me off for today? I'm feeling rather rusty myself, my dear, and this is beginning to get on my nerves."

At his first words the woman drew back, flushing, eyes stormy above a mouth whose gentle allure lost itself in a hardening line. Then swiftly reconsideration followed, visibly the selfish second thought took shape in the angry eyes and melted their ice to a mist of unshed tears beneath lids newly languorous. The petulant lips, too, refound their tremulous tenderness. Amelie's hand fell upon Bellamy's in a warm, convulsive clasp. She leaned across the corner of the table.

"Kiss me, Bel – I'm so wretched!"

He kissed her adequately but without any sort of emotion, thinking it strange, all the while her mouth clung to his, that he should so clearly know this to be good acting, no more than that, no less. Bellamy was not accustomed to see through women at so young a stage of intimacy; that came later, came surely; but never before had it come so soon. And in a little quake of dread he wondered if it were because he had grown old beyond his years, too aged in sentimental tipping to have retained the capacity for generous credulity of his younger years. Or was it that the woman's insincerity had so eaten out her heart, no technical perfection could lend persuasion to her playing, her caresses potency? Or that he had, since morning, fallen in love with his wife all over again and so truly that no rival passion could seem real?

It was true, at least, that his thoughts were quick and warm with memories of Linda even while he was most engaged with the effort to do justice to Amelie's lips. And perceiving this to be so, self-contempt took hold of him like a sickness.

They resumed their poses of nonchalant and sophisticated creatures amiably discussing an informal meal. But first the woman made effective use of a handkerchief.

"Forgive me, dear," she murmured. "I know it was perfectly rotten of me, but I couldn't help it. I'm a bit overwrought, Bel, not too happy; being in love with you has made the way things are at home doubly hard to endure, you must know that; and then – of course" – she smiled nervously – "I'm jealous."

He was silent, fiddling with a fork, avoiding her eye.

"Of Lucinda – you understand."

He said heavily: "Yes..."

She waited an instant, and when he failed to say more began to see that she had overplayed her hand.

"You do love me, don't you, Bel?"

"Of course."

"Then you must know how hard it is for me, you can't blame me for growing impatient."

This time he looked up and met her gaze. "Impatient for what?"

"Why, for what every woman expects when she's in love and the man whom she loves loves her; something definite to look forward to, I mean. We can't go on like this, of course."

"No, not like this."

"I'm not the kind of a woman for a hole-and-corner affair, Bel. If I were, you wouldn't be in love with me."

He nodded intently: "What do you propose?"

"I've been waiting for that to come from you, dear; but you never seem to live for anything but the moment."

"I've got to know what's in your mind, Amy. Tell me frankly."

"Well, then!" – she saw the mistake of it instantly, but for the life of her couldn't muffle the ring of challenge – "I fancy it means Reno for both of us."

"Meaning I'm to divorce Linda and marry you?"

She gave a deprecating flutter of hands. "What else can we do?"

Bellamy said with a stubborn shake of his head: "Never without good cause; and as far as I know, Linda's blameless. I'm a pretty hopeless proposition, I know, but not quite so bad as all that."

Amelie sat back, her colour rising. She could not misinterpret the determination in his temper; yet vanity would not permit her to forego one last attempt. "But if she should divorce you?"

"Deal with that when it comes up. Frankly, don't believe it ever will. Don't mean to give Linda any reason I can avoid."

"What you mean is, you really love – !"

"I mean," he cut in sharply, "whatever my shortcomings, I respect Linda, I won't hurt her if I can help it."

"How charming of you!"

For all acknowledgment she received a silent inclination of his head; and she began to laugh dangerously, eyes a-brim with hatred, the heat in her cheeks shaming their rouge.

"Well, thank God I've come to understand you before we went any farther!"

"Amen to that."

"And so all your love-making has been simply –"

"The same as yours, Amy."

"Then why did you ever make love to me at all, please?"

"Because you let me see you wanted me to."

The brutal truth of that lifted the woman to her feet. "I don't think I care for any more luncheon," she said in a shaking voice. "If you don't mind..."

Bellamy rose, bowing from his place: "Not at all."

He offered to help her with her fur, but she wouldn't have that, threw the garment over her arm and flung round the table, then checked and looked back. "You understand – this ends it – for all time?"

"I couldn't do you the injustice of thinking anything else."

She made a tempestuous exit through the curtains. Bellamy grunted in self-disgust, lighted a cigarette, and looked up to see the suavely concerned countenance of Theodore.

"Something is wrong, Mr. Druce? The lady – ?"

"Was suddenly taken ill. Be good enough to cancel the rest of the order, Theodore, and let me have my bill. And – yes, think I will – you may send me a Scotch and soda."

Bellamy consulted his watch. Just on two: Linda's luncheon party would be in full swing. He had nothing better to do, might as well look in at the Ritz. Linda would like it...

V

"Three o'clock, Thomas, say a quarter to."

"Yes, madam."

The footman performed a faultless salute and doubled round to hop into place beside the chauffeur, while the door-porter shut the door with a bang whose nicely calculated volume told all the world within ear-shot that the door-porter of the fashionable hotel of the day was banging the door to Mrs. Bellamy Druce's brougham.

The technique of every calling is similarly susceptible of refinement into an art.

Two Lucinda Druces crossed the sidewalk and passed through the turnstile of bright metal and plate-glass which served as a door at the Forty-sixth street entrance to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel – the one perceptible to mortal vision a slender and fair young person costumed in impeccable taste and going her way with that unstudied grace which is the last expression of man's will to make woman a creature whose love shall adorn him.

To the luncheon-hour mob that milled in the meagre foyer of this hotel, which holds its public by studiously subjecting it to every Continental inconvenience, she presented the poise of a pretty woman who has never known care more galling than uncertainty as to her most becoming adornment. Not even the shadow of that other Lucinda who walked with her, who was no more separate from her than her own shadow, who ceased not to beat her bosom and cry to Heaven for help, was to be detected in the composed, steady eyes that searched swiftly, but without seeming to see, the faces of that congested congregation of fashionables and half-fashionables and would-be fashionables, their apes and sycophants and audience.

Seeing nowhere those whom she was seeking, Lucinda made her way to the lounge; or it would be more true to say a way was made for her by the simple prestige of her presence, by the magic whisper of her name from mouth to mouth commanding a deference neither beauty nor breeding alone could have earned her.

The lounge was at that hour three-quarters invested by an overflow of tables from the dining-room proper, only at its eastern end a few easy chairs and settees had been left for the accommodation of those lucky enough to win past the functionary who guarded the portals, charged with winnowing the sheep from the goats, admitting the elect to this antechamber to the one true Olympus, shunting off the reject to the limbo of the downstairs grill.

Sighting Lucinda from afar, with a bow of ineffable esteem this one glided forward. "Mrs. Sedley and Mrs. Guest are waiting for you, Mrs. Druce." At the same time Lucinda herself discovered her friends occupying a settee, with Fanny Lontaine between them. "Your table is quite ready. Do you wish luncheon to be served at once?"

Lucinda assented pleasantly and passed on. Immediately the headwaiter caught the eye of a subaltern in the middle of the room, and in intimate silence conversed with him without moving a muscle more than the superciliary. The confederate acknowledged this confidence by significantly dropping his lashes, then in even more cryptic fashion flashed on the inspiring intelligence to that statuesque figure which, from the head of the stairs, between lounge and oval dining-room, brooded with basilisk eyes over the business of both. Thus a minor miracle was worked, bringing that one at once to life and down to earth; in another moment the maître-d'hôtel himself was attentive at Lucinda's elbow.

"But I never dreamed you three knew one another!" she was exclaiming in the surprise of finding Fanny Lontaine on terms with those whom she had bidden to meet her. "Fanny, why didn't you tell me – ?"

"But I didn't know – how should I? – your Nelly Guest was Ellen Field married."

"That's so; I'd completely forgotten you both come from Chicago."

"Hush!" Nelly Guest gave a stage hiss. "Someone might hear. You never forget anything, do you? And all these years I've tried so hard to live it down! It's no fair..."

Impressively convoyed, the quartet proceeded to "Mrs. Druce's table" in the oval room. Rumour of gossip and turning of heads attended their progress, flattery to which Lucinda, Nelly and Jean were inured, of which they were aware only as they were of sensuous strains of stringed music, the orderly stir of waiters, the satisfying sheen of silver and napery, the brilliance and brouhaha of that gathering of amiable worldlings, and the heady breath of it, a subtly blended, oddly inoffensive mélange of scents of flowers and scented flesh, smells of cooked food and cigarette smoke.

But in the understanding of Fanny Lontaine, accustomed to admiration as she was, and no stranger to the public life of European capitals, the flutter caused by the passage of her companions through a phase of existence so polite and skeptical conferred upon them an unmistakable cachet. She had been long abroad and out of touch, she had never been on intimate terms with New York ways, but the busy mind at work behind her round eyes of a child was like a sponge for the absorption of delicate nuances and significant signs of all sorts. Life had made it like that.

Six years married, and two years older than Lucinda Druce, Fanny retained, and would till the end, whatever life might hold in store for her, a look of wondering and eager youthfulness. Romance trembled veritably upon her lashes. She had a way of holding her lips slightly apart and looking steadily at one when spoken to, as if nothing more interesting had ever been heard by the ears ambushed in her bobbed, ashen hair. Her eyes of a deep violet shade held an innocence of expression little less than disconcerting. Her body seemed never to have outgrown its adolescence, yet its slightness was quite without any angularity or awkwardness, it achieved roundness without plumpness, a stroke of physical genius. In the question of dress she showed a tendency to begin where the extreme of the mode left off, a fault held venial in view of her apparent immaturity. And then, of course, she had lived so long in England, where people are more broad-minded...

Apparently not talkative but a good listener, she had a knack of making what she did say stick in memory, not so much for its content as for its manner, a sort of shy audacity that pointed observations often racy and a candour sometimes devastating. But unless one happened to be looking at Fanny when she spoke, her remarks were apt to seem less memorable, her humour less pungent.

"It's heavenly," she now declared, coolly staring at their neighbours through the smoke of her cigarette – "simply divine to be home. I'm sure I'd never want to see Europe again if it weren't for Prohibition."

"You're not going to suffer on that account today," Jean Sedley promised, producing from her handbag a little flash of jewelled gold.

"But I shall!" Fanny protested with tragic expression. "It's the frightful hypocrisy that's curdling my soul and ruining my insides. It makes one homesick for England, where people drink too much because they like it, and not to punish themselves for electing a government which conscientiously interprets the will of the people – and leaves them to interpret their wont."

"No dear, thanks." Smilingly Nelly Guest refused to let Jean fill her glass.

"The figure?" Jean enquired in deep sympathy.

"I've positively got to," Nelly sighed. She cast a rueful glance down over her plump, pretty person. "Compassionate Columbia simply must not waddle when she pokes her horn of plenty at famine-stricken China."

"Oh, that wretched pageant!" Lucinda roused from a lapse into communion with the Lucinda who made an unseen fifth. "When is it? I'd forgotten all about it." Nelly Guest named a day two weeks in the future. "And I haven't even thought about my costume! Oh, why do we punish ourselves so for Charity's sweet sake?"

"Because deep down in our hearts we all like to parade our virtues."

"Much virtue in that plural," Nelly Guest commented.

"Well, I don't like parading mine in pageants, I assure you."

"Don't you, honestly, Cindy?" Fanny asked. "I should think you'd love that sort of thing. You used to be perfectly mad about acting."

"So is every woman – isn't she? – at one stage or another of her life convinced she's truly a great actress cheated out of her birthright."

"I know. All the same you know you've got talent. Don't you remember our open-air performance of *Much Ado About Nothing*? You were a simply ravishing Rosalind."

"Heavens! What do amateur theatricals prove?"

"For one thing," Jean Sedley commented, "how long-suffering one's friends can be."

"And one's enemies. Consider what they sit through just to see us make public guys of ourselves."

"Well!" Nelly Guest lamented: "my pet enemies are going to have a real treat at the pageant unless I can find some way to reduce, inside a fortnight."

"There was a man in London had a marvelous system," Fanny volunteered. "Everybody was going to him last Season. There ought to be somebody like him over here."

Duly encouraged, she launched into a startlingly detailed account of London's latest fad in "treatment"; and Lucinda's thoughts turned back to her other self, insensibly her identity receded into and merged with its identity again and became lost in its preoccupations.

How to go on, how to play out this farce of a life with Bel when faith in him was dead?

Strange that faith should have been shattered finally by such a minor accident as her overhearing that morning's treachery. As if it had been the first time she had known Bel to be guilty of disloyalty to her! But today she could not forget that neither love nor any kindly feeling for his wife, nor even scruples of self-respect, but only dread of a contretemps had decided Bel against lurching Amelie in that very room, making open show of his infatuation before all those people who knew them both and who, being human, must have gloated, nudged, and tittered; who, for all Lucinda knew to the contrary, were even now jeering behind their hands, because they knew things about Bel and his gallivantings which all the world knew but his wife. Even the servants – !

Her cheeks kindled with indignation – and blazed still more ardently when she discovered that she had, in her abstraction, been staring squarely at Richard Daubeney, who was lurching with friends at a nearby table.

But Dobbin bowed and smiled in such a way that Lucinda's confusion and her sense of grievance were drowned under by a wave of gratitude. She nodded brightly and gave him a half-laughing glance.

Good old Dobbin! She had never appreciated how much she was missing him till he had turned up again last night and offered to take his old place in her life, on the old terms as nearly as might be, the old terms as necessarily modified by her own change of status.

What a pity!

Those three words were so clearly sighed in her mental hearing that Lucinda, fearing lest she had uttered them aloud, hastily consulted the faces of her companions. But they had exhausted the subject of reducing régimes and passed on naturally – seeing that Nelly and Jean were approaching that stage when such matters become momentous – to that of "facials."

"... Parr's fuller's earth and witch hazel. Make a thick paste of it and add a few drops of tincture of benzoin, then simply plaster it all over your face, but be careful not to get it near your eyes, and let it dry. It only takes a few minutes to harden, and then you crack and peel it off, and it leaves your skin like a baby's."

"Elizabeth Baird charges twenty-five dollars a treatment."

"But my dear, you can see for yourself how stupid it is to pay such prices to a beauty specialist when the materials cost only a few cents at any drug-store, and anybody can apply it, your maid if you don't want to take the trouble yourself..."

What a pity!

But was it? Would she have been happier married to Dobbin? Was it reasonable to assume that Dobbin would not have developed in the forcing atmosphere of matrimony traits quite as difficult as Bel's to deal with? In this wrong-headed world nobody was beyond criticism, and anybody's faults, condonable though they might seem at a distance, could hardly fail of exaggeration into vices through daily observation at close range. Impossible to imagine any two human creatures living together, after the first raptures had begun to wane, without getting on each other's nerves now and then.

Wasn't the fault, then, more with the institution than with the individuals?

Lucinda remembered having once heard a physician of psycho-analytic bent commit himself to the statement that in ten years of active professional life he had never entered one ménage where two people lived in wedded happiness. And sifting a list of married acquaintances, Lucinda found it not safe to say of one that he or she was happy; of most it was true that they had the best of reasons for being unhappy. It was true of Nelly Guest and Jean Sedley, it was true of herself, doubtless it was true of Fanny. Lucinda had yet to meet Lontaine, and if Fanny's looks were fair criterion, she was the most carefree of women; and yet...

Fanny caught Lucinda eyeing her and smiled.

"What under the sun are you thinking about so solemnly, Cindy?"

"You, dear. You haven't told me anything about yourself yet."

"No chance. Give me half a show" – Fanny glanced askance at Jean and Nelly, now amiably engaged in bickering about the merits of various modistes – "and you shall know All."

"I'd dearly love to. You must lunch with me at home some day soon; and then I want you and your husband to dine with us – say next Thursday?"

"I don't know. That's one of the exciting things about being married to Harry Lontaine, one never knows what tomorrow will bring forth. We've got to go to Chicago soon, because – daresay you know – father relented enough to leave me a little legacy, nothing to brag about, but nothing people in our position can afford to despise, either."

Lucinda made a sympathetic face and said something vague about everybody in England still feeling the pinch of the War. But Fanny elected to scorn generalizations.

"Oh, the only effect the War could have had on our fortunes would have been to kill off the half a dozen relatives that stand between Harry and the title. But he was out of luck – served three years in France and Flanders and got all shot up and decorated with the dearest little tin medals on the prettiest ribbons, while his precious kinsmen held down cushy berths in the Munitions and kept in training for the longevity record."

"But how proud you must have been – !"

"Of Harry? On account of his decorations? My dear: heroes are three-a-penny in England today. You see, everybody, more or less, barring Harry's family, had a shot at active service, just as almost everybody has a shot at marriage sooner or later; only, of course, the percentage of unscarred survivors of the War was higher."

(Fanny, too! What a world!)

"For all that, I do want to meet your husband."

"You will, soon enough. He's lunching some men down in the grill, a business luncheon, American cinema people; and I told him when he got rid of them to wait for me in the lounge. Very likely we'll find him there on our way out."

"How nice. He's interested in the motion-picture business then?"

"In a way. That is, he was, in England, for a while, after the War. And when we decided to come over about my legacy, he secured options on the American rights to some Swedish productions. Somebody told him you were having a run on foreign films over here, so Harry said he might as well try to turn an honest penny. I told him it wouldn't do him any harm, he'd enjoy the adventure."

"I see," said Lucinda a bit blankly. "I don't know much about it, of course, almost never go to see a motion picture; that is, unless it's Elsie Ferguson, I've always been mad about her."

She looked round to the waiter who was substituting a finger-bowl for her neglected sweet. "We'll all want coffee, Ernest, and you may bring it to us in the Palm Room."

"Four demi-tasses: yes, Mrs. Druce."

"Nelly! Jean!" These Lucinda haled forth from the noisome morass of the newest divorce scandal. "Fanny's first husband is waiting for her in the lounge, and she's getting nervous."

"Good-looking, I suppose?" Jean Sedley enquired, and got a merry nod from Fanny. "She ought to be nervous. A New York Winter is the open season for other women's good-looking husbands, it doesn't do to leave them standing round loose – here of all places!"

VI

Fanny's husband came in shortly after Lucinda and her guests had settled down to coffee and cigarettes in a Palm Room now rapidly regaining its legitimate atmosphere of a lounge, as the extemporized tables were vacated, dismantled, and spirited away.

He fitted so neatly into the mental sketch of Lucinda's unconscious preconception, that she was naturally prejudiced in his favour. She liked Englishmen of that stamp, even if the stamp was open to criticism as something stereotyped, liked their manner and their manners and the way they dressed, with an effect of finish carelessly attained, as contrasted with the tight ornateness to which American men of the same caste are so largely prone.

Tall and well made, Lontaine had the good colour of men who care enough for their bodies to keep them keen and clean of the rust that comes of indoor stodging. The plump and closely razored face seemed perhaps a shade oversize for features delicately formed, and the blue eyes had that introspective cast which sometimes means imagination and frequently means nothing at all more than self-complacence. He affected a niggardly moustache, and when he spoke full lips framed his words noticeably. His habit was that of a man at ease in any company, even his own, who sets a good value on himself and confidently looks for its general acceptance.

He talked well, with assurance, some humour, and a fair amount of information. He had lived several years in the States, off and on, and on the whole approved of them. In fact, he might say there were only two sections of the country with which he was unacquainted, the South and the Pacific Coast; defects in a cosmopolitan education which he hoped to remedy this trip, as to the Coast at least. He had pottered a bit with the cinema at home, and it was just possible he might think it worth his while to jog out to Los Angeles and see what was to be seen in that capital of the world's motion-picture industry. England, he didn't mind admitting, had a goodish bit to learn from America in the cinema line. They were far too conservative, the cinema lot at home, behind the times and on the cheap to a degree that fairly did them in the eye when it came to foreign competition. On the Continent, too, the cinema was making tremendous strides, while in England it was merely marking time. If you asked Lontaine, it was his considered belief that the really top-hole productions of the future would come of combining American brilliance of photography and investiture with European thoroughness in acting and direction.

This by no means unintelligent forecast was uttered with an authority that impressed even Lucinda, elaborately uninterested as she was. Conscious of a rather pleasing deference in Lontaine, who was addressing himself to her more directly than to any of the others, she maintained a half-smile of amiable attention which would have deceived a sharper man, and let her thoughts drift on dreary tides of discontent.

Hour by hour the conviction was striking its roots more deeply into her comprehension that life with Bel on the present terms was unthinkable. And yet – what to do about it? She hadn't the remotest notion. Obviously she would have to arrive somehow at some sort of an understanding with Bel. But how? The one way she knew had failed her. And she knew no one to confide in or consult.

Her father had died several years before her marriage, her mother soon after. Of her immediate family there remained only an elder sister, married and living in Italy.

She saw herself a puny figure, with only her bare wits and naked need for allies, struggling to save her soul alive from a social system like a Molock of the moderns, a beast-god man has builded out of all that he holds hateful, all his fears and lusts and malice, envy, cruelty and injustice, and to which, having made it, he bows down in awe and worship, sacrificing to it all that he loves best, all that makes life sweet and fair...

A losing fight. One were mad to hope to win. Already Bel was lost, caught in the mad dance of the system's bacchantes, already drunkard and debauchee... Nor might all her love redeem him... And O the pity!

Aware of pain welling in her bosom, a sense of suffocation, tears starting to her eyes, she jumped up hastily lest her friends should see, mumbled an excuse, and made her way out to the foyer, turning toward the women's cloak-room.

A few moments alone would restore equanimity, a little rouge and powder mend the wear of her emotions.

The foyer was still fairly thronged; she was almost in Bel's arms before she saw him, so near to him, when she stopped in shocked recognition of his grimace of affection, that she caught, as she started back, a heavy whiff of breath whiskey-flavoured.

She heard him say, "Why, hello, Linda! what's the hurry?" and cut in instantly with a gasp of indignation: "What are you doing here?"

"Thought I'd look in on your party. You know, you asked me – "

She could not trust her tongue. If she said more in her anger, she would say too much, considering that time and place, lose what poor vestiges of self-control remained to her, make a scene. She cried all in a breath: "Well, go away, then! I don't want you, I won't have you!" – and pushing past Bel, fled into the cloak-room.

He lingered half a minute, with perplexed eyes meeting the amused stares of those who had been near enough to catch an inkling of the altercation; then drew himself up sharply and ironed out all indications of his embarrassment, assuming what he believed to be a look of haughty indifference.

But he was hurt, stricken to the heart by Lucinda's treatment. He couldn't think what he'd done to deserve it, he felt sure she couldn't have noticed the few drinks that had constituted luncheon for him. But whatever had been the matter, obviously it was up to him to find some way to placate Linda. He was through with Amelie and all such foolishness, from now on he was going to be good to Linda; and it wouldn't do at all to begin his new life by getting on the outs with her.

His gaze focused intelligently upon the glass case that displays the wares of the hotel florist. Women liked flowers. But there were four in Linda's party, her guests would think it funny if he joined them bringing flowers for his wife only... A tough problem. He decided to step round to the club and mull it over...

He had disappeared by the time Lucinda felt fit to show herself again. Inwardly still forlorn and disconsolate, but outwardly mistress of herself, she resumed her chair; and had hardly done so when she saw Richard Daubeney pass by with his luncheon party, pause at the door and take leave, then turn back and make directly for her corner. And instantaneously Lucinda experienced a slight psychic shock and found herself again the individual self-contained, the young woman of the world whom nothing could dismay.

Dobbin knew everybody except the Lontaines; and when the flutter created by his introduction had subsided, he found a chair by Lucinda's side and quietly occupied himself with a cigarette until the conversation swung back to the pageant; whereupon he took deft advantage of the general interest in that topic to detach Lucinda's attention.

"I couldn't resist the temptation to butt in, Cinda. Hope you don't mind."

"I do, though, fearfully. It's always nice to see you."

"Many thanks. Appreciation makes up for a lot of neglect."

"Poor old soul: somebody been neglecting you again?"

"Somebody's always neglecting me and my affectionate disposition. That's why I've wiggled to your side, wagging a friendly tail, ready to lick your hand at the first sign of an inclination to adopt me."

Lucinda eyed him in grave distrust. "Dobbin: are you trying to start something? I thought we'd settled all that last night, agreed I wasn't in a position to adopt stray men, no matter how nice."

"That was last night. You've had time to sleep on it. Lots of things can come up overnight to change a woman's mind. Don't tell me: I can see something unusual has happened."

"Oh! you can?"

"Don't be alarmed: you're not wearing your heart on your sleeve. I can see you're troubled about something, simply because I know you so much better than anybody else. Oh, yes, I do. You never knew how thoroughly I studied you in the dear, dead days of yore. I'll lay long odds no one else has noticed anything, but to my seeing eye you've been flying signals of distress all during luncheon. That being so, it wouldn't be decent of me not to give you a hail and stand by in case I'm needed – now would it?"

Momentarily Lucinda contended against temptation. Then, "You are a dear, Dobbin," she said almost regretfully. "But it isn't fair of you to see too much. If it's true I have secrets I don't want to share, it would be kinder to let me keep them – don't you think?"

"Lord bless you, yes! But it's my observation the human being in trouble has got to talk to somebody, and will to the wrong body if the right isn't handy. Not only that, but you'll find most people will listen to your troubles only to get a chance to tell you their own; whereas I have none except the one you know all about. So you needn't fear reprisals."

She pondered this, sweetly serious, then in little better than a whisper said: "At least, not now..."

Jean Sedley was claiming her attention. "What do you think of that, Cindy? Isn't it a ripping idea?"

"Afraid I didn't hear – I was flirting with Dobbin."

"Yes, I know. But Mr. Lontaine has just made a priceless suggestion about the pageant. He says we can have moving-pictures taken as we enter the ball-room and shown before the evening is over."

"But is that possible?"

"Oh, quite," Lontaine insisted – "assure you. It's really extraordinary how they do these things, three or four hours is all they require to develop and prepare a film for projection. Say your pageant starts at ten: by one you can see yourself on the screen."

"Everybody would adore it!" Nelly Guest declared with deep conviction.

"And you could arrange it, Mr. Lontaine?"

"Easily, Mrs. Druce – that is to say, if I'm still in New York."

"What do you think, Cindy?" Jean urged. "Almost everybody is moving-picture mad. We could sell twice as many tickets on the strength of such a novelty. And it is a charity affair, you know."

"Meaning to say," Dobbin put in, "you're rather keen about it yourself."

"Of course – crazy to see myself as others see me. So is every woman – Fanny, Jean, Cindy –"

"I don't know," Lucinda demurred. "It must be a weird sensation."

"Not one you need be afraid of," Lontaine promised. "If you don't mind my saying so, you would screen wonderfully, Mrs. Druce."

"You think so, really?"

"Oh, no doubt about it, whatever. You're just the type the camera treats most kindly. If you wanted to, you could make a fortune in the cinema. No, seriously: I'm not joking."

"I'm glad of that," Lucinda returned soberly. "It wouldn't be at all nice of you to trifle with my young affections. Still, I will admit I'm skeptical."

"Tell you what," Lontaine offered eagerly: "Suppose you take test, what? No trouble at all to fix it up for you – chaps I know – only too glad – anything I say. I'd like to prove I know what I'm talking about. Take us all, for that matter, just as we are. What do you say?"

"I say it's perfectly damn' splendid!" Jean Sedley declared. "We'd all love it. When can you arrange it?"

"Any time you like – this afternoon, if that suits everybody. Only have to telephone, and in half an hour they'll be all ready for us. Shall I?" Lontaine got out of his chair. "Do say yes, all of you. Mrs. Druce? I know the others will if you do?"

"I don't mind..."

"Right-O! Give me five minutes..."

VII

Lontaine brought back a gratified countenance from the telephone booths. As he had promised, so had he performed. This cinema chap he knew, Culp, had professed himself only too delighted. Rum name, what? A rum customer, if you asked Lontaine, diamond in the rough and all that sort of thing, one of the biggest guns in the American cinema to boot.

Dobbin wanted to know if Mr. Culp wasn't the husband of Alma Daley, the motion-picture actress. Lontaine said he was. Extraordinary pair. Married a few years ago when they were both stoney, absolutely. Now look at them; Culp a millionaire and better, Miss Daley one of the most popular stars. You might say he'd made her and she'd made him. Showed the value of team-work in marriage, what? You pulled together, and nothing could stop you. You pulled in opposite directions, and what happened? You stood still! What?

(Lucinda remarked the patient smile with which Fanny listened. But repetition is, after all, a notorious idiosyncrasy of the married male.)

Charming little woman, Miss Daley. As it happened, she was working in a picture at the studio now. Rare luck; they'd get a look in at practical producing methods in addition to getting shot for their tests. Not bad, what?

Somebody echoed "shot" with a puzzled inflection. But that term, it appeared, was studio slang; one was shot when one was photographed by a motion-picture camera. No doubt because they first aimed the camera at one, then turned the crank – like a machine-gun, Lontaine meant to say.

Lucinda discovered that it was already three o'clock, and wondered how long they would need to get properly shot. Lontaine protested it would take no time at all. Astonishing chaps, these American cinema people, absolutely full of push and bounce, did everything in jig-time, if you knew what he meant.

With two cars at its disposal, the party split up into threes, Mrs. Sedley, Mrs. Guest, and Lontaine leading the way. On the point of entering her own car after Fanny, however, Lucinda recalled her promise to look in at the bridge-tea for the Italian Milk Fund, and bidding Dobbin keep Fanny amused while they waited for her, turned back into the hotel to telephone Mrs. Wade that she would be a little late.

Having seen no more of Bellamy since their encounter near the cloak-room, she had assumed that he had taken her at her word, and had dismissed from her calculations the possibility of his returning. The surprise was so much the more unwelcome, consequently, when on leaving the telephone booth she saw her husband with his hat on the back of his head and his arms full of lavender orchids, wavering irresolutely in the entrance to the Palm Room, surveying with a dashed expression its now all but deserted spaces; a festive spectacle that left no room for surmise as to what he had been up to. And with sickening contempt added to the bitterness already rankling in her heart, Lucinda made hastily for the revolving door.

Simultaneously Bel caught sight of her and, with a blurred travesty of his really charming smile, and a faltering parody of that air of gallant alacrity which she had once thought so engaging, moved to intercept Lucinda. And finding her escape cut off, she paused and awaited him with a stony countenance.

"Ah! there you are, eh, Linda! 'Fraid I'd missed you. Sorry couldn't get back sooner, but – "

"I'm not," Lucinda interrupted.

"Had to go over to Thorley's to find these orchids..." Bel extended his burden as if to transfer it to Lucinda's arms and, when she prevented this by falling back a pace, looked both pained and puzzled. "Ah – what say? What's matter?"

"I said," Lucinda replied icily, "I'm not sorry you couldn't get here sooner. Surely you can't imagine I'd care to have my friends see you as you are, in the middle of the afternoon. It's bad enough to have them know you get in this condition nearly every night."

"But – look here, Linda: be reasonable – "

"I think I have been – what you call reasonable – long enough – too long!"

Bellamy hesitated, nervously moistening his lips, glancing sidelong this way and that. But there was nobody in the foyer at the moment but themselves; even the coatroom girls had retired to their office and were well out of ear-shot of the quiet conversational key which, for all her indignation, Lucinda had adopted. For all of which the man should have been abjectly grateful. Instead of which (such is the wicked way of drink) Bellamy took heart of these circumstances, their temporary isolation and Lucinda's calculated quietness, and offered to bluster it out.

"Here – take these flowers, won't you? Plenty for you and all your friends. That's what kept me so long – had to go all over to find enough."

Again Lucinda defeated his attempt to disburden himself. "Oh, Bel!" she cried sadly – "how can you be such a fool?"

"How'm I a fool? Like flowers, don't you? Thought I was going to please you... And this is what I get!"

"You know all the orchids in New York couldn't make up for your drinking."

"Why cut up so nasty about a little drink or two? Way you talk, anyone'd think I was reeling."

"You will be before night, if you keep this up."

"Well, I'm not going to keep it up. I've made arrangements to have the afternoon free, just to be with you. We'll go somewhere – do something – "

"Thank you: I'd rather not."

"Don't talk rot." Most unwisely, Bellamy essayed the masterful method. "Of course we'll go some place – "

"We will not," Lucinda told him inflexibly. "My afternoon is booked full up already, and – "

"Where you going? I don't mind tagging along – "

"Sorry, but I don't want you."

Injudiciously again, Bellamy elected to show his teeth, stepped closer to Lucinda and with ugly deliberation demanded: "See here: where you going? I've got a right to know – "

"Have you, Bel? Think again. I never ask you such questions. If I did, you'd either lose your temper or lie to me, and justify yourself by asserting that no man ought to be asked to stand prying into his affairs. So – I leave you to your affairs – and only ask that you leave me to mine."

"Meaning you won't tell me where you're going?"

Lucinda shrugged and turned away; but Bellamy swung in between her and the exit.

"See here, Linda! there are limits to my patience."

"And to mine – and you have found them. Let me go."

She didn't move, but her face had lost colour, her eyes had grown dangerous. Neither spoke in that clash of wills until Bellamy's weakened, his eyes shifted, and he stepped aside, slightly sobered.

"Please!" he begged in a turn of penitence. "Didn't mean... Frightfully sorry if I've been an ass; but – you know – pretty well shot to pieces last night – had to pull myself together somehow to talk business at luncheon – "

"Oh! it was a business luncheon, then?" asked Lucinda sweetly, pausing.

"Of course."

With an ominous smile she commented: "It has come to that already, has it?"

"Ah – what d'you mean?"

"Since you tell me it was a business luncheon, you leave me to infer that your affair with Amelie has reached the point where you take her to the Clique Club to talk terms." Bellamy's jaw sagged, his eyes were dashed with consternation. "What else do you wish me to think, Bellamy?"

He made a pitiable effort to pull himself together. "Look here, Linda: you're all wrong about this – misinformed. I can explain – "

"You forget I know all your explanations, Bel; I've heard them all too often!"

"But – but you must give me a chance! Damn it, you can't refuse – !"

"Can't I? Go home, Bel, get some sleep. When you wake up, if you still think you have anything to say – consider it carefully before you ask me to listen. Remember what I tell you now: you've lied to me for the last time, one more lie will end everything between us, finally and for all time!"

Conscious though she was that her wrath was righteous, she experienced an instant of irresolution, of yielding and pity excited by the almost dog-like appeal in his eyes. But immediately she remembered Amelie, hardened her heart and, leaving him agape, pushed through the door to the street.

And instantly she effected one of those shifts of which few but the sensitive know the secret, who must hide their hurts from alien eyes though they spend all their strength in the effort; instantly she sloughed every sign of her anger and with smiling face went to rejoin Fanny and Dobbin.

As soon as she appeared the latter jumped out of the car and offered his hand. He said something in a jocular vein, and Lucinda must have replied to the point, for she heard him chuckle; but she could not, a minute later, recollect one word of what had passed between them.

With her hand resting on Dobbin's she glanced back and saw Bellamy – still with his armful of orchids – emerge from the hotel. He halted, his face darkening as he watched Daubeney follow Lucinda into the car. It drew away quickly, giving him no chance to see for himself that it held another passenger.

He stood still upon the steps, deep in sombre and chagrined reflection, till a touch on his arm and a civil "Pardon!" roused him to the fact that he was obstructing the fairway. As he moved aside he was hailed by name.

"Well, I'm damned! Bellamy Druce drunk, dressed up, and highly perfumed."

In his turn, he recognized the speaker, a personage of the theatrical world with modest social aspirations and a noble cellar.

"Why, hello, Whittington!" said Bellamy, smiling in spite of his disgruntlement, to see that carved mask of a wise clown upturned to his. "All by yourself? What's happened to the girl crop you should be so lonesome?"

Without direct reply, Mr. Freddie Whittington linked his arm and began to walk toward Fifth avenue.

"Just the man I'm looking for," he declared without a smile. "Come along. Got a thousand women I want you to meet 'safternoon. They'll take care of your orchids."

"Well," Bellamy conceded, "that sounds reasonable. But what do you say, we drop in at the Club? Got something there won't do us any good – in my locker."

VIII

On the far West Side, well beyond the drab iron articulation of the Ninth Avenue Elevated, in a region of New York whose every aspect was foreign to Lucinda's eyes, the brougham drew to a shuddering stop, in thoroughbred aversion to such surroundings, before a row of blank-avised brick buildings whose façades of varying heights and widths showed them to have been originally designed for diverse uses. That they were today, however, united in one service was proved by the legend that linked them together, letters of black on a broad white band running from end to end of the row beneath its second-story windows:

ALMA DALEY STUDIOS – CULP CINEMAS INC. – BEN CULP, PRES'T

Across the way unsightly tenements grinned like a company of draggletail crones who had heard a rare lot about the goings-on of picture actors and, through this happy accident of propinquity, were in a position to tell the world it didn't know the half of it. Children liberally embellished with local colour swarmed on sidewalks where ash and garbage-cans flourished in subtropical luxuriance, and disputed the roadway with the ramshackle wagons and push-carts of peddlers, horse-drawn drays, and grinding, gargantuan motor-trucks that snarled ferociously at the aliens, the frail, pretty pleasure cars from Fifth avenue. Apparently an abattoir was languishing nearby, discouraged in its yearning to lose consciousness of self in the world's oblivion. At the end of the street the Hudson ran, a glimpse of incredible blue furrowed by snowy wakes.

Such the nursery in which what Mr. Culp (or his press agent) had brilliantly imaged as the youngest, fairest sister of the plastic arts was fostering the finest flower of its expression, to wit, the artistry of Alma Daley...

"Like a lily springing from the mire," Fanny Lontaine murmured.

Lucinda laughed and gave Fanny's arm a mock-pinch, grateful for any gleam of wit to lighten life's dull firmament. The temper in which she had left Bel at the Ritz had been quick to cool; and though its cooling had not affected her determination to brook no longer his misconduct, she was beginning to experience premonitions of that débâcle whose event was certain if this breach, so lately opened, were to widen.

If it should come to a break asunder, what would become of her? of the home she loved so well? and what of Bel, whom she loved best of all?

In the eyes of Dobbin, as he waited for her at the main entrance to the building, she read too shrewd a question; and understanding that she had for a moment let fall her mask, she hastily resumed that show of debonair amusement which was her heart's sole shield against the tearing beaks and talons of envy, malice and all manner of uncharitableness.

Fortunately there was something to jog her sense of humour in the utter absence of preparations to receive them, such as Lontaine had confidently promised.

A sense of hostility made itself felt even in the bare antechamber, a vestibule with makeshift walls of match-boarding, and for all features a wooden bench, a card-board sign, NO CASTING TODAY, a door of woven iron wire at the mouth of a forbidding tunnel, and a window which framed the head of a man with gimlet eyes, a permanent scowl, and a cauliflower ear.

Interviewed by Lontaine, this one grunted skeptically but consented to pass on the name and message to some person unseen, then resumed his louring and distrustful watch, while beyond the partition the professional sing-song of a telephone operator made itself heard: "Lis'n, sweetheart. Mista Fountain's here with a party, says he's got 'nappointment with Mista Culp... Wha' say?.. Oh,

a'right, dearie. Say, Sam: tell that party Mista Culp's into a conf'rince, but they kin go up to the stage if they wanta an' stick around till he's dis'ngaged."

With every symptom of disgust the faithful watchdog pressed a button on the window ledge, a latch clicked, the wire door swung back, the party filed through and in twilight stumbled up two flights of creaking steps to a tiny landing upon which a number of doors stood all closed, and each sternly stencilled: PRIVATE.

After a moment of doubt during which even Lontaine began to show signs of failing patience, one of the doors opened hastily and ejected a well-groomed, nervously ingratiating young man, who introduced himself as Mr. Lane, secretary to Mr. Culp, and said he had been delegated to do the honours. A public-spirited soul, he shook each visitor warmly by the hand, protested that he was genuinely pleased to meet them all, then threw wide another of the PRIVATE doors.

"This is the main stage, ladies. Miss Daley is working on one of the sets now, making the final scenes for her latest picture, 'The Girl in the Dark'; so if you'll be kind enough not to talk out loud while she's before the camera... Miss Daley is very, er, temperamental, y'understand..."

Reverently the barbarians obeyed a persuasive wave of Mr. Lane's hand and tiptoed into the studio, to huddle in a considerably awe-stricken group on one side of an immense loft with a high roof of glass.

Stage, as the layman understands that term, there was none; but the floor space as a whole was rather elaborately cluttered with what Lucinda was to learn were technically known as "sets," in various stages of completion and demolition; a set being anything set up to be photographed, from a single "side" or "flat" with a simple window or door, or an "angle" formed of two such sides joined to show the corner of a room, up to the solid and pretentious piece of construction which occupied fully one-half of the loft and reproduced the Palm Room at the Ritz-Carlton, not without discrepancies to be noted by the captious, but by no means without fair illusion.

On a modest set near at hand, apparently a bedchamber in a home of humble fortunes, a bored chambermaid in checked shirt and overalls, with a cigarette stuck behind his ear, was making up the bed.

In another quarter a number of workmen were noisily if languidly engaged in knocking down a built wall of real brick and lugging away sections of a sidewalk which had bordered it, light frames of wood painted to resemble stone.

At the far end of the room a substantial set represented a living-room that matched up with the bedchamber nearer at hand, or seemed to, for a good part of it was masked from Lucinda's view by a number of massive but portable metal screens or stands arranged in two converging ranks, at whose apex stood a heavy tripod supporting a small black box. To these stands lines of insulated cable wandered over the floor from every quarter of the room. Just back of the tripod several men were lounging, gazing off at the set with an air of listless curiosity. The spaces between the screens afforded glimpses of figures moving to and fro with, at that distance, neither apparent purpose nor animation.

Elsewhere about the studio, in knots, by twos and singly, some twenty-five or thirty men and women, mostly in grease-paint and more or less convincing afternoon dress, were lounging, gossiping, reading newspapers, or simply and beautifully existing.

An enervating atmosphere of apathy pervaded the place, as if nothing of much moment to anybody present was either happening or expected to happen. An effect to which considerable contribution was made by the lugubrious strains of a three-piece orchestra, piano, violin, and 'cello, stationed to one side of the living-room set.

At first sight this trio intrigued Lucinda's interest. To her its presence in a motion-picture studio seemed unaccountable, but not more so than patience with its rendition of plaintive and tremulous melodies of a bygone period, tunes which one more familiar with the cant of the theatre would unhesitatingly have classified as "sob stuff," and to which nobody appeared to be paying any attention whatever.

Mystified to the point of fascination, she studied the musicians individually.

The pianist, perched sideways on his stool and fingering the keyboard of an antique upright without once looking at the music on its rack, as often as not played with one hand only, using the other to manipulate a cigarette which he was smoking in open defiance of the many posted notices that forbade this practice.

The violinist, stretched out with ankles crossed, occupied a common kitchen chair which his body touched at two places only, with the end of his spine and the nape of his neck. His eyes were half-shut, his bowing suggested the performance of a somnambulist.

The 'cellist, too, seemed to be saved from falling forward from his chair solely by the instrument which his knees embraced. His head drowsily nodding to the time, the fingers of his left hand automatically stopped the strings at which his right arm sawed methodically. An honest soul, a journeyman who for a set wage had contracted to saw so many chords of music before the whistle blew and was honestly bent on doing his stint...

Mr. Lane, having excused himself for a moment, returned from consulting some member of the group round the tripod.

"Sall right," he announced with a happy smile. "They won't begin shooting a while yet. You can come closer if you want, I'll show you where to stay so's you won't be in the way."

Guided by him, the exotics gingerly picked their way across the banks, coils, loops and strands of electric cable that ran in snaky confusion all over the floor, like exposed viscera of the cinema; and Lucinda presently found herself on the side lines of the living-room, between it and the dogged orchestra, and well out of range of the camera.

She could now see three people on the set, two men with a girl whom, thanks to the wide circulation of the lady's photographs, she had no difficulty in identifying as Alma Daley herself – a prepossessing young person with bobbed hair, a boldly featured face, comely in the flesh rather than pretty, and a slight little body whose emaciation told a tale of too-rigorous dieting and which she used not unpleasingly but with a rather fetching effect of youthful *gaucherie*. Her make-up for the camera was much lighter and more deftly applied than seemed to be the rule. Gowned effectively if elaborately in a street dress hall-marked by the *rue de la Paix*, she was leaning against a table and lending close if fatigued attention to the quiet conversation of the two men.

Of these one was tall and dark, with a thick mane of wavy black hair, a wide and mobile mouth, and great, melancholy eyes. His well-tailored morning-coat displayed to admiration a splendid torso. The other was a smaller, indeed an undersized man, who wore a braided smoking-jacket but no paint on his pinched, weather-worn face of an actor. His manner was intense and all his observations (and he was doing most of the talking) were illustrated by gesticulation almost Latin in its freedom and vividness.

"King Laughlin," Mr. Culp's secretary informed Lucinda – "man in the smoking-jacket, he always wears one when he's working – greatest emotional director in the business, nobody can touch him. Why, alongside him, Griffith's a joke in a back number of *Judge*. You wouldn't guess what he gets: thirty-five hundred."

"That's almost a thousand a week, isn't it?"

"Thousand a *week!*" Mr. Lane suspiciously inspected Lucinda's profile. Could it be possible that this well-born lady was trying to kid him? But no; he could see she was quite guileless. In accents of some compassion he corrected: "Three-thousand five-hundred every week's what King Laughlin drags down in the little old pay envelope. But that's Mr. Culp all over; expense's no object when he's making an Alma Daley picture, nothing's too good."

"I'm sure..." Lucinda agreed vaguely.

Out of the corner of an eye the director had become aware of a new audience and one worthy of his mettle, and he was already preparing to play up to it. Dropping the easy, semi-confidential

manner in which he had been advising the younger and taller man, with surprising animation Mr. King Laughlin snatched a silk hat and stick from the other's unresisting hands.

"Right-O, Tommy!" he said in the nasal tone of the English Midlands. "I think you've got me now, but just to make sure I'll walk through it with Alma." He turned graciously to the woman: "Now, Alma dear..."

Miss Daley, herself not unconscious of a fashionable gallery, shrugged slightly to signify that she didn't mind if Mr. Laughlin thought it really worth while, it was all in the day's drudgery, and made a leisurely exit from the set by way of a door in its right-hand wall. At the same time Mr. Laughlin walked off by a door approximately opposite, and the young man in the morning-coat strolled down to the front of the set and settled himself to observe and absorb the impending lesson.

Mr. Laughlin then re-entered in character as a *dégage* gentleman with an uneasy conscience, indicating this last by stealthily opening and peering round the edge of the door before coming in and closing it with caution, and gentility by holding hat and stick in one hand and carelessly trailing the ferrule of the stick behind him. Relieved to find the room untenanted, he moved up to the table, placed the hat on it crown-down, propped the stick against it, turned and gave the door in the right-hand wall a hard look, then bent over the table and pulled out and began to ransack one of its drawers. Thus engaged, he said clearly: "*All right, Alma!*" and immediately gave a start, whereby it appeared that he had heard footfalls off, and slammed the drawer. At this Miss Daley entered, a listless little figure so preoccupied with secret woe that she quite failed at first to see Mr. Laughlin, and when she did gave a start even more violent than his had been, clasping both hands to her bosom and crying out in a thrilling voice: "*Egbert!*"

Mr. Laughlin kept his temper admirably under the sting of this epithet; all the same, anyone could see he didn't fancy it a bit. However, first and always the gentleman, he offered Miss Daley a magnanimous gesture of outstretched hands. Instantly the poor girl's face brightened with a joyous smile, a happy cry trembled upon her lips as she ran to his arms. He enfolded her, with a fond hand ground her features into the shoulder of his smoking-jacket, and turned his own toward the camera, working them into a cast of bitter anguish.

Gently rescuing herself, Miss Daley discovered *Egbert's* hat and stick, turned to him and looked him up and down with dawning horror, audibly protesting: "*But Egbert! you are going out!*" He attempted a disclaimer, but it wouldn't wash, the evidence of the top hat and the smoking-jacket was too damning; and in the end he had to give in and admit that, well, yes, he was going out, and what of it.

Evidently Miss Daley knew any number of reasons why he ought to stay in, but she made the grave mistake of trying to hold him with affection's bonds, throwing herself upon his neck and winding her arms tightly round it. And that was too much: *Egbert* made it clear that, while he'd stand a lot from a woman to whom he was Everything, there was such a thing as piling it on too thick. And against her frenzied resistance he grasped her frail young wrists, brutally broke her embrace, and flung her from him. She fell against the table, threw back her head to show the pretty line of her throat, clutched convulsively at her collar-bone, and subsided upon the floor in a fit of heart-broken sobbing; while *Egbert* callously took his hat, clapped it on his head, and marched out by a door in the rear wall, his dignity but slightly impaired by the fact that the hat was several sizes too large and would have extinguished him completely if it hadn't been for his noble ears.

Without pause Mr. Laughlin doubled round to the front of the set, threw the waiting actor a brusque "See, Tommy? Get what I mean?" and encouraged Miss Daley with "That's wonderful, Alma dear. Now go on, right through the scene."

Miss Daley, lying in complete collapse, with her head to the camera, writhed up on an elbow, planted her hands upon the floor and by main strength pushed her heaving shoulders away from it, keeping a tortured face turned to the camera throughout. Then she got her second wind, caught hold of the edge of the table, pulled herself up, looked around wildly, realized that she was a deserted

woman, saw her hat by Tappé hanging on the back of a morris-chair by Ludwig Baumann, seized it, rushed to the door by which *Egbert* had escaped, and threw herself out in pursuit.

Mr. Laughlin clapped gleeful hands.

"Fine, Alma, wonderful! You're simply marvelous today, dear. Now Tommy, run through it just once with Alma, and then we'll shoot."

Mr. Lane bustled about and found chairs for Lucinda and her friends, upon which they composed themselves to watch Tommy interpret Mr. King Laughlin's tuition in the art of acting for the screen.

To the best of Lucinda's judgment, however, the greater part of Mr. Laughlin's efforts had meant to Tommy precisely nothing at all. Beyond the rudimentary mechanics of the physical action sketched in by the director, Tommy made no perceptible attempt to follow pattern, and disregarding entirely its conventional but effective business, embellished the scene instead with business which was, such as it was, all his own, or more accurately that of a dead era of the speaking stage.

Like a wraith of histrionism recalled from the theatre of *East Lynne* and *The Silver King*, Tommy carved out his effects with flowing, florid gestures, and revived the melodramatic stride and heroic attitudinizing; and though he wilfully made faces at the camera throughout, he demonstrated the deep veneration in which he really held it by never once showing it his back, until, having duly spurned the clinging caresses of Miss Daley, he was obliged to march to the door, and even then he made occasion to pause with a hand on the knob and, throwing out his chest and fretfully tossing rebellious black locks from tragic brows, granted the camera the boon of one last, long look at him ere making his exit.

And when Mr. Laughlin tranquilly approved this performance and announced that they would forthwith "shoot it," Lucinda began to wonder if there were possibly something wrong with her own powers of observation.

"But," she protested to Mr. Lane, who had coolly elected himself her special squire and placed his chair close to hers – "that man they call Tommy – he didn't play the scene as Mr. Laughlin did."

"Oh, Tommy Shannon!" said Mr. Lane equably – "Tommy's all right, he knows what he's doing – best leading man in the movin' picture business, bar none. King Laughlin knows he can trust Tommy to put it over his own way. All you got to do is to let Tommy Shannon alone and he'll ring the gong every shot."

"But if that's the case, why did Mr. Laughlin take so much trouble to show him – ?"

"Well, you see, it's this way," Mr. Lane explained: "King's all right, and Tommy's all right, too, both stars in their line; but if Tommy don't see a scene the way King shows him, and King starts to bawl him out, why, Tommy'll just walk off the lot. And then where are you? You can't finish your picture without your leading man, can you? And there's maybe a hundred-and-fifty or two-hundred thousand dollars invested in this production already. One of the first things a director's got to learn in this game is how to handle actors. That's where King Laughlin's so wonderful, he never had an actor quit on him yet."

"I see," said Lucinda thoughtfully. "The way to handle an actor is to let him have his own way."

"You got the idea," Mr. Lane approved without a smile.

"But suppose," she persisted – "suppose the leading man insists on doing something that doesn't suit the part he's supposed to play, I mean something so utterly out of character that it spoils the story?"

"Sure, that happens sometimes, too."

"What do you do then?"

"That's easy. What's your continuity writer for?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lane. You see, I don't even know what a continuity writer is."

"Why, he's the bird dopes out the continuity the director works from – you know, the scenes in a picture, the way they come out on the screen: Scene One, Scene Two, and all like that."

"You mean the playwright?"

"Well, yes; only in pictures he's called a continuity writer."

"But that doesn't tell me what you do when an actor insists on doing something that spoils the story."

"That's just what I'm trying to tell you, Mrs. Druce. You get your continuity writer, of course, and have him make the change."

"You mean you change the story to please the actor?"

"Sure: it's the only thing to do when you got maybe a hundred-and-fifty or two-hundred thousand dollars hung up in a picture."

"But doesn't that frequently spoil the story?"

"Oh, what's a story?" Mr. Lane argued reasonably. "People don't go to see a story when they take in an Alma Daley picture. They go because they know they get their money's worth when they see a Ben Culp production that's taken from some big Broadway success and costs a hundred-and-fifty or maybe two-hundred thousand dollars. But princip'ly, of course, they go to see Alma Daley, because she's the most pop'lar actress on the screen, and makes more money than Mary Pickford, and wears the swellest clothes that cost sometimes as much as twenty thousand dollars for each picture; and besides she's the grandest little woman that ever looked into a lens, and there's never been no scandal about her private life, and an Alma Daley picture's sure to be clean. Why, Mr. Culp wouldn't let Miss Daley act in any picture where she had to be wronged or anything like that. When he buys a play for her and the heroine's got a past in it or anything, he just has the story changed so's there's never any stain upon her honour or anything anybody could get hold of. That's one thing Mr. Culp's very partic'lar about; he says no wife of his shall ever go before the public in a shady part."

"Has he many?"

Mr. Lane looked hurt, but was mollified by the mischief in Lucinda's smile.

"Well, you know what I mean. But we better stop talking, if it's all the same to you, Mrs. Druce, or Miss Daley'll get upset. They're going to shoot now."

The warning was coincident with the sudden deluging of the set with waves of artificial light of a weird violet tint, falling from great metal troughs overhead and beating in horizontally from the metal stands or screens, which were now seen to be banks of incandescent tubes burning with a blinding glare.

Nor was this all: shafts and floods of light of normal hue were likewise trained upon the scene from a dozen different points, until the blended rays lent almost lifelike colouring to the faces of the actors, whose make-up had theretofore seemed ghastly and unnatural to uninitiate eyes.

Stationed just beyond the edge of the area of most intense illumination, the audience sat in a sort of violet penumbra whose effect was hideously unflattering. In it every face assumed a deathly glow, resembling the phosphorescence of corruption, the red of cheeks and lips became purple, and every hint of facial defect stood out, a purple smudge. So that Lucinda, reviewing the libelled countenances of her companions, breathed silent thanks to whatever gods there were for their gift of a complexion transparent and immaculate.

"Camera!"

The command came from King Laughlin. Lucinda could just hear a muffled clicking, and seeking its source discovered a youngish man, with a keen face and intelligent eyes, standing behind the tripod and turning in measured tempo a crank attached to the black box.

Coached by Mr. Laughlin, who danced nervously upon the side lines, the scene was enacted.

"Now, Tommy, come on – slowly – hold the door – look around, make sure the room is empty – hold it – now shut the door – up to the table – don't forget where to put your hat – 'sright, splendid! Now you look at the other door – listen – show me that you don't hear anything – good! Open the drawer – easy now, remember you're trying not to make a noise – look for the papers – show me you can't find them. *My God! where can they be!* That's it. Now you hear a noise off – (*Ready, Alma!*) – shut the drawer – start to pick up your hat – too late – ! Come on, Alma —*come on!* You don't

see him, you look out of the window and sigh – let's see you sigh, Alma – beautiful! beautiful! Now, Tommy, you move – she sees you – see him, Alma. Slowly – hold it – wonderful! Now call to him, Alma —*Egbert! Egbert!!*"

The little man's voice cracked with the heart-rending pathos he infused into that cry; but he did not pause, he continued to dance and bark directions at star and leading-man till the door closed behind Miss Daley's frantic exit; when all at once he went out of action and, drawing a silk bandanna from his cuff to mop the sweat of genius on his brows, turned mild, enquiring eyes to the cameraman.

"Got it," that one uttered laconically.

"Think we want to take it over, Eddie?" The cameraman shook his head. "Good! Now we'll shoot the close-up. No, Tommy, not you – the only close-up I want for this scene is Alma where she gets up. We must get those tears in, she cries so pretty."

There was some delay. The camera had to be brought forward and trained at short range on the spot where Miss Daley had fallen; several stands of banked lights likewise needed to be advanced and adjusted. And then Miss Daley had to be given time to go to her dressing-room and repair the ravages her complexion had suffered in *Egbert's* embrace. But all these matters were at length adjusted to the satisfaction of director; the actress lay in a broken heap with her face buried on her arms, the camera once more began to click, Mr. King Laughlin squatting by its side, prepared to pull the young woman through the scene by sheer force of his inspired art.

But now the passion which before had kept him hopping and screaming had passed into a subdued and plaintive phase; Mr. Laughlin was suffering for and with the heroine whose woes were to be projected before the eyes and into the hearts of half the world. He did not actually cry, but his features were knotted with the anguish that wrung his heart, and his voice was thick with sobs.

"Now, dear, you're coming to – you just lift your head and look up, dazed. You don't realize what's happened yet, you hardly know where you are. *Where am I, my God! where am I?* That's it – beautiful. Now it begins to come to you – you remember what's happened, you get it. He has cast you off —*O my God! he has deserted you.* Fine – couldn't be better – you're great, dear, simply great. Now go on – begin to cry, let the big tears well up from your broken heart and trickle down your cheeks. Fine! Cry harder, dear – you must cry harder, this scene will go all flooey if you can't cry any harder than that. Think what he was to you – and now he has left you —*who knows? – perhaps for-ev-er!* Your heart is breaking, dear, it's breaking, and nobody cares. Can't you cry harder? Listen to the music and... Good God! how d'you expect *anybody* to cry to music like that?"

The last was a shriek of utter exasperation; and bounding to his feet the little man darted furiously at the musicians, stopping in front of the trio and beginning to beat time with an imaginary baton.

"Follow me, please – get this, the way *I* feel it. So – slowly – draw it out – hold it – get a little heart-break into it!"

And strangely enough he did manage to infuse a little of his fine fervour into the three. They abandoned their lethargic postures, sat up, and began to play with some approach to feeling; while posing before them, swaying from the toes of one foot to the toes of the other, his hands weaving rhythms of emotion in the air, the absurd creature threw back his head, shut his eyes, and wreathed his thin lips with a beatific smile.

Throughout, on the floor, before the camera, under that cruel glare of lights, Alma Daley strained her face toward the lens and cried as if her heart must surely break, real tears streaming down her face – but cried with fine judgment, never forgetting that woman must be lovely even in woe.

And while Lucinda watched, looking from one to the other, herself threatened with that laughter which is akin to tears, a strange voice saluted her.

"Saw me coming," it observed, "and had to show off. He's a great little actor, that boy, and no mistake – never misses a chance. Look't him now: you'd never guess he wasn't thinking about anything but whether I'm falling for this new stunt of his, would you?"

Lucinda looked around. Mr. Lane had mysteriously effaced himself. In his place sat a stout man of middle-age with a sanguine countenance of Semitic type, shrewd and hard but good-humoured. "How d'you do?" he said genially. "Mrs. Druce, ain't it? Culp's my name, Ben Culp."

IX

Of a sudden Miss Daley missed her mentor's voice, his counsel and encouragement, and in the middle of a sob ceased to cry precisely as she might have shut off a tap.

In a moment of uncertainty, still confronting the clicking camera, still bathed in that withering blaze, she cast about blankly for her runagate director. Then discovering that he had, just like a man! deserted her in her time of trouble to follow a band, outraged womanhood asserted itself, in a twinkling she cast her passion like a worn-out garment and became no more the broken plaything of man's fickle fancy but once again the spoiled sweetheart of the screen.

As Lucinda saw it, there was something almost uncanny in the swiftness and the radical thoroughness of that transfiguration, the fiery creature who sprang to her feet with flashing eyes and scornful mouth was hardly to be identified with the wretched little thing whom she had seen, only a few seconds since, grovelling and weeping on the floor.

The cameraman stopped cranking and, resting an elbow on his camera, turned with a satiric grin to observe developments. And following a sharp, brief stir of apprehension in the ranks of the professional element, there fell a dead pause of dismay, a complete suspension of all activities other than those of the musicians and their volunteer leader, and of the calloused carpenters, who, as became good union laborers, continued to go noisily to and fro upon their lawful occasions, scornful of the impending storm.

As one who finds the resources of her mother tongue inadequate, Miss Daley in silence fixed with a portentous stare the back of King Laughlin, who, all ignorant of the doom hovering over his devoted head, kept on swaying airily to and fro, smiling his ecstatic smile and measuring the music with fluent hands.

One of the Daley feet began to tap out the devil's tattoo, she set her arms akimbo, her eyes were quick with baleful lightnings, her pretty lips an ominous line; an ensemble that only too clearly foretold: *At any minute, now!*

With a smothered grunt Mr. Culp heaved out of his chair and lumbered over to his wife, interposing his not negligible bulk between her and the unconscious object of her indignation – and in the very nick of time, or Lucinda was mistaken.

What he said couldn't be heard at that distance, the sour whining of the violin, the lamentations of the 'cello, and the tinkle-tinkle of the tinny piano conspired to preserve inviolate those communications between man and wife which the law holds to be privileged. But Lucinda noticed a backward jerk of the Culp head toward the group of which she made one, and caught a glance askance of the Daley eyes, oddly intent and cool in contrast with the guise of unbridled fury which her features wore. And whatever it was that Mr. Culp found to say, indisputably it proved effectual; for nothing worse came of Miss Daley's wrath, at least publicly, than a shrewish retort inaudible to bystanders, a toss of her head, and a sudden, stormy flight from the scene.

Mr. Culp followed with thoughtful gaze her retreat toward her dressing-room, then looked a question to the cameraman.

"Sallright," said that one, imperturbable. "Got enough of it."

Mr. Culp nodded in relief, and signed to the electricians. As he made his way back to Lucinda's side the lights sputtered out. And as soon as this happened Mr. King Laughlin, cruelly wrenched out of his dream-land of melody, came down to an earth dangerous with the harsh dissonances of reality.

"What the – where the – what – !" he stammered, looking in vain for the little woman whom he had so heartlessly abandoned in her woe on the living-room set. Then, catching sight of her half-way across the studio, he bleated "*Alma!*" once in remonstrance, and again in consternation, and set out in panic pursuit.

Before he could overtake her, Miss Daley disappeared round one side of the Palm Room, at which point, beating the air with suppliant hands, Mr. Laughlin disappeared in turn.

"That's the sort of thing you're up against all a time in the fillum business, d'y'see," sighed Mr. Culp with a rueful grin. "A lot of kids, that's what we got to make pitchers with. And audiences all a time kickin' because we don't make 'em better... A lot of kids!"

He did not, however, appear greatly disheartened, but recounted his tribulations rather as a matter of course, appealing informally to the sympathies of his guests.

"King Laughlin all over, nice a little feller's anybody'd want to work with, but temp'amental, d'y'see, got to show off like a kid every time he gets a chance. And what's the answer? Mrs. Culp gets sore, says she won't do another stroke of work s'long's King's directin'. And here we was tryin' to finish shootin' today, behind on our release date and all, and thirty extra people, d'y'see, gettin' five and seven and maybe ten dollars, been waitin' all day to work on the big set and got to be paid whether they work or not..."

Mr. Culp broke off suddenly, singled out from the attendant cloud of retainers a young man wearing an eyeshade and a badgered expression, and instructed him to send the extra people packing, but to tell them to report for work at eight o'clock the next day.

"Sno use keepin' 'em any longer, 'safternoon," he explained confidentially. "When that little woman says a thing she means it, d'y'see, so chances are it'll be mornin' before she changes her mind. And if you ladies'll excuse me, I guess I ought to be sittin' in with her and King now. The only things they think I'm any good for, in this studio, is pay salaries and referee battles."

He was affably disposed to waive ceremony under the circumstances, but gave in with good grace when Lontaine insisted on formally presenting him to each of his guests; and thus reminded of the first purpose of their visit, which he seemed to have forgotten altogether, Mr. Culp delayed long enough to recall the worried young man with the eyeshade, whom he made known as Mr. Willing, the assistant director, and charged with supervision of the proposed tests.

And Mr. Willing was to understand that these were to be regular tests and no monkey business; he was to see that someone with plenty of know-how helped the ladies make up; after which he was to shoot the party as a whole in some little scene or other, in addition to making individual close-ups.

If Mr. Willing accepted this commission with more resignation than enthusiasm, he proved to be a modest person with pleasing manners and no perceptible symptoms of temperament. And he was as good as his name. It was his suggestion that a corner of the Palm Room be utilized, as most suitable for the group scene. And while the cameraman was amiably setting up his instrument to command this new location and superintending the moving of the lights, it was Mr. Willing who conducted Lucinda, Nelly, Jean and Fanny to a barn-like dressing-room and hunted up a matronly actress, a recruit from the legitimate theatre, to advise and assist them with their respective make-ups.

Lucinda killed time while waiting for her turn by trying her own hand with grease-paint, powder, and mascaro, with the upshot that, when she presented her face for inspection and revision, the actress refused to change the effect by the addition or subtraction of a single touch, and laughingly declined to believe it had been achieved without experience.

"It's no use, Mrs. Druce, don't tell me you haven't been in the business!"

"On the stage, you mean? But only in the most amateurish way, schoolgirl theatricals."

"No," the woman insisted – "they don't make up like that for a test unless they're camera-wise."

To this she stuck stubbornly; and Lucinda found herself curiously pleased, though she had done no more to deserve commendation than supplement native good taste and an eye for colour with close observation of the Daley make-up and how it had fared under the lights.

Another compliment signaled their return to the studio; nothing less than the presence of Miss Daley – "in person" – composed, agreeable, hospitable, showing every anxiety to make their tests successful and never a sign of the storm that had presumably broken behind the scenes.

But Lucinda reckoned it significant that Mr. King Laughlin was nowhere visible.

"I thought it would be nice if we could all have tea in my dressing-room," Miss Daley explained; "and then Daddy suggested we could have it served here, on the set – make a regular little scene of it, you know, for the camera."

"I'm sure that would be delightful," replied Lucinda, suspended judgment melting into liking even in those first few minutes.

"Oh, Daddy thinks of all the nice things!"

"And I'll see each you ladies gets a print," Culp volunteered benignly, "so's you can get it run through a projectin' machine any time you want, d'y'see, and show your friends how you once acted with Alma Daley."

"Daddy! don't be ridiculous."

Vivacious, by no means unintelligent, and either an excellent actress in private life or else an unpretending body, happy in her success and unashamed of humble beginnings, Miss Daley was tactful enough to make her guests forget themselves and the trial to come, as they took their places – with no prearrangement but much as if they were actually meeting at the Ritz – and were served with tea by actor-waiters in correct livery. All the same, Lucinda noticed that their hostess ingeniously maneuvered to a central position in the foreground, where she sat full-face to the camera; this being by far her best phase. And just before the lights blazed up, the girl launched into a spirited account of her passage-at-arms with King Laughlin, which, recited without malice but with keen flair for the incongruous, carried the amateur players easily over the first minutes, in which otherwise constraint must inevitably have attended camera-consciousness.

"I was so fussed," she concluded, "I swore I'd never act another scene for him. But when I remembered how foolish he looked, posing in front of that awful orchestra like a hypnotized rabbit, I just had to laugh; and I couldn't laugh and be mad at the same time, of course. And then I had to tell King what I was laughing at, and that made him so ashamed he's sulking in his office now and won't come out while any of you are here."

"Then all's serene-o once more, Miss Daley?"

"Oh, sure. You see, Mr. Lontaine, we've simply got to finish this picture tonight, somehow, even if we have to work on till morning; so I accepted his apology and made it up."

"But those extra people Mr. Culp let go – ?"

"That's all right," Culp responded from his place beside the camera. "When I see how things was goin', I sent down to the cashier and told him not to pay 'em off, so they didn't any of 'em get away."

At this point, clever actress that she was, Miss Daley extemporized a star part for herself by rising without warning and announcing that she would have to run and change for the scenes to be photographed as soon as the tests had been made.

"I'll hurry and try to get ready before you go," she said, shaking hands all round with charming grace; "but if I don't see you again, it's been just wonderful to meet you all, and I do hope this isn't good-bye forever!"

The general flutter in acknowledgment of her farewells had barely subsided when the bank lights hissed out and the camera stilled its stuttering.

"Nice little scene," Mr. Culp applauded generously, intercepting Lucinda as, with the others, she left the set, clearing it for the individual tests. "Goin' to screen pretty. You'll be surprised."

"Can you really tell, Mr. Culp?"

"How it's goin' to look in the projectin'-room, y'mean? Sure. Not that I'd gamble on my own judgment, I don't pretend to know how to make pitchers; all I know's how to make money makin' 'em, d'y'see. When I say that little scene's goin' to go great on the screen, I'm bankin' on Jack here."

He dropped an affectionate, fat hand on the shoulder of the cameraman. "Excuse me, Mrs. Druce, want to introduce you to Mr. Jack Timilty, best little cameraman ever turned a crank." The cameraman grinned sheepishly and preferred a diffident hand. "No temp'ament, no funny business about Jack, Mrs. Druce, always on the job and deliverin' the goods. And sticks, d'y'see. Take it the

way it is nowadays, you don't hardly get time to get to know a director before he stings somebody else for a coupla hundred dollars more'n you're paying him, d'y'see, and quits you cold as soon's he finishes his pitcher. But Jack sticks. That's why y'always can count on good photography and lightin' effects in an Alma Daley production. And when Jack says that little scene took pretty, I *know* it did."

"Sright, Mrs. Druce," Mr. Timilty averred. "I wouldn't like to say about the others, but you and that other little blonde lady – "

"Mrs. Lontaine."

"Guess so, ma'm, didn't catch her name. Her and you registered like a million dollars."

"It's awfully nice of you to tell me so, Mr. Timilty – "

"Jack wouldn't pass you a compliment unless he meant it, Mrs. Druce. He's no kidder."

"Anyway I guess it ain't the first time anybody's told you that, ma'm. It's easy to see you've been camera-broke."

"But I haven't," Lucinda protested, laughing. "Really, I assure you – "

At this juncture Mr. Willing called for Mr. Timilty's co-operation in taking the test of Jean Sedley. So Lucinda stood aside and watched and wondered if it were really true that she had shown any evidences of ability out of the ordinary.

Not that it mattered.

Nevertheless the little fillip administered to her self-esteem made her feel more contented; into the bargain, it deepened her interest in the business in hand.

Mr. Willing seemed to be taking a deal of pains to make fair and thorough tests. For each of the four women he improvised brief but effective solo scenes to bring out their best points, if nothing that made severe demands upon the ability of the subject or the invention of the director.

Lucinda, for example, was discovered to the camera arranging flowers in a vase. A servant entered, delivered a letter, retired. Lucinda recognized the handwriting, and (the word was new to her in this application) "registered" delight, then – as, smiling, she opened and read the letter – bewilderment, misgivings, and a shock of cruel revelation which strangled all joy of living in her, struck her down, and left her crushed and cringing in a chair.

Despite a natural feeling that she was making herself ridiculous, Lucinda executed to the best of her ability the gestures prescribed and tried to impart to them some colour of sincerity. As a matter of fact, she was singularly (and stupidly, she assured herself) anxious to deserve the further commendation of Mr. Culp's cameraman.

But it was at best a trying task and, when it came to posing for the close-up with a wall of blinding incandescence only a few feet from her eyes, a true ordeal. She was glad when it was over, and quite satisfied that she wouldn't care to repeat the experience, in spite of Mr. Timilty's encouraging "Pretty work, Mrs. Druce!" – whose source she could only surmise, since in her bedazzled vision everything remained a blur for some time after she had been delivered from the torture of the lights.

When at length that cloud of blindness cleared, Mr. Culp was nowhere to be seen. Nor did he show up again until the last test had been made and the party, once more shepherded by Mr. Lane, was on the point of leaving. Then Culp put in a hasty reappearance, coming from the direction of the dressing-rooms, nominated an hour for projecting the tests at the studio the next afternoon, bade a hearty good-bye to each of his guests, and insisted on escorting Lucinda to the door.

On the way, however, he managed to detain her and let the others draw ahead and out of hearing.

"Lis'n, Mrs. Druce," he abruptly volunteered: "Jack says your test's going to turn out great. That's just what he said – 'like a million dollars.' And I been thinkin' ... I was speakin' it over with Mrs. Culp in her dressing-room, d'y'see, and she's strong for it, says she'd be tickled to pieces. She's a wonderful little woman, Mrs. Culp is, she ain't never yet made any mistake about nobody, d'y'see, and she's took the biggest kind a fancy to you, and says tell you she's sure you'll never regret it – "

"Please, please, Mr. Culp! You are too good, and it makes me most happy to know Mrs. Culp thinks well of me. But what," Lucinda laughed – "what *are* you talking about?"

"Why," said Culp in some surprise – "I was thinkin' maybe you'd like to try goin' into pitchers. You got everythin', d'y'see, looks and style and all, everythin' but experience; and that's somethin' you can get right here in this studio, workin' with Mrs. Culp. I got a good part for you in her next pitcher you could try out in, and – "

"It's awfully kind of you," Lucinda interrupted, "and I'm truly appreciative, Mr. Culp; but really I couldn't think of it."

"That right?" Culp seemed to be genuinely dashed. "'Sfunny," he observed dejectedly. "I s'pose you know best what you want to do, but it'd be great little experience for you, take it from me, Mrs. Druce."

"I'm sure it would."

"And I got a hunch you'd make good all the way. You've got things nobody else on the screen's got but my little woman, d'y'see, and it wouldn't be no time at all, maybe, before you'd be a star with your own company. I'll take care of that, you wouldn't have to worry about the money end of it at all, d'y'see – "

"But what if I don't *want* to be a motion-picture actress, Mr. Culp?"

"Well, of course, if you don't, that's different." He pondered gloomily this incomprehensible freak. "Lis'n," he suggested, brightening: "Tell you what, Mrs. Druce: you go home and think it over. You got all night and most of tomorrow – you won't be comin' here to look at the tests till five o'clock, d'y'see – and if you should want to change your mind, I stand back of all I said. All you got to do is say yes, and walk right into a nice part, fit you like a glove, in the next Alma Daley pitcher – "

"Seriously, Mr. Culp; if I should think it over for a month, my decision would be the same. But thank you ever so much – and please thank Mrs. Culp for me, too."

"Well," Culp said reluctantly, holding the street door, "if that's the way you feel about it ... well, of course... G'dnigh, Mrs. Druce, and pleas't'meet you."

The street was dark with a gentle darkness kind to eyes that still ached and smarted. And the frosty air was grateful to one coming from the close atmosphere of the studio, heavy with its composite smell of steam-heated paint and dust and flesh.

And crossing to her car, Lucinda experienced a vagary of vivid reminiscence. Just for an instant the clock was turned back for her a dozen years and more, she was again a little girl, a child bringing dazed eyes of dream from the warm and scented romance of a matinee, her thrilled perceptions groping mutinously toward reconciliation with the mysterious verities of streets mantled in blue twilight.

That passed too quickly, too soon she was Lucinda Druce once more, grown up and married, disillusioned...

And with a shiver of pain Lucinda realized anew what the afternoon with its unsought boons of novelty and diversion had made her for hours on end forget, the secret dolour of her heart.

X

Notwithstanding that she drove directly home, or paused only to drop Daubeney at his club and the Lontaines at their hotel, it was after seven when Lucinda regained her rooms and was free at last to be once more her simple self, disembarassed of the pride and circumstance that stayed the public personality of Mrs. Bellamy Druce.

Out of that social character she stepped as naturally as out of her gown, and with much the same sense of relief, in the easing of that tension to which she had been keyed all afternoon. Even at the studio, when interest in that quaint, ephemeral environment of other lives had rendered her forgetful of both self and the passage of time, subconsciously the strain of keeping up appearances had been still constant and made unremitting demands upon her stores of fortitude and nervous energy.

But she counted that cost not exorbitant, seeing the immunity it had purchased.

Dobbin alone had not been taken in...

She began to be a bit afraid of Dobbin. A danger signal she had the wit to apprehend in its right value. The woman who pretends to be afraid is setting a snare, but she who is truly afraid is herself already in the toils.

Dobbin saw too much, too deeply and clearly, and let her know it in a way that not only disarmed resentment but made her strangely willing to let him see more. She to whom reserve was as an article of faith! But if the woman in love with her husband knew she had no right to foster an intimacy, however innocent, with any other man, the woman harassed and half-distracted was too hungry for sympathetic understanding not to be tempted when it offered, grateful for it and disinclined to pass it by.

This common life is unending quest for spiritual companionship – and love is the delusion that one has found it.

At twenty-six Lucinda was learning what life often takes twice that tale to teach, that though flesh must cleave unto flesh, the soul is lost unless it walk alone, creature and creator in one of its own bleak isolation.

In a moment of clear vision she promised herself to go warily with Dobbin...

And in the next, the telephone rang in the boudoir. Lucinda was in her bath, so her maid answered for her, and presently came to report: Mr. Druce had called up to say he wouldn't be dining at home that night, he was detained by a "conference."

Without looking, Lucinda knew that the woman's eyes were demure, her lips twitching.

Her just anger of that afternoon recurred with strength redoubled.

Not that she had been looking forward with any eagerness to the evening, the "quiet" dinner during which Bel would defiantly continue his tipping, the subsequent hours at the opera poisoned by forebodings, the homeward drive in antagonized silence, finally the trite old scene behind closed doors, of the piqued wife and the peccant husband, with its threadbare business of lies, aggrieved innocence, attempts at self-extenuation, ultimate collapse and confession, tears of penitence and empty promises ... and her own spirit failing and in the end yielding to Bel's importunity, out of sheer weariness and want of hope.

It had been sad enough to have all that to anticipate. To be left in this fashion, at loose ends, not knowing what to expect, except the worst, was too much.

On leaving her bath Lucinda delayed only long enough to shrug into a dressing-gown before going to the telephone.

The voice that responded to her call said it thought Mr. Daubeney had just left the club, but if madame would hold the wire it would make sure.

She knew a moment of pure exasperation with the evident conspiracy of every circumstance in her despite.

Then the apparatus at her ear pronounced in crisp impatience: "Yes? This is Mr. Daubeney. Who wants him, please?"

"Oh, Dobbin! I'm so glad."

"You, Cinda!" The instantaneous change of tone would have been laughable if it hadn't been worse, the cause of a little flutter of forbidden delight. "Why, bless your soul! I'm glad I came back. They barely caught me at the door."

"Were you in a hurry to get on somewhere, Dobbin? I mean, am I detaining you?"

"Not a bit. Foolishly staggering out to try to find some place where the cooking was less perfunctory than here at the club."

"Sure you've got nothing important on?"

"If you must know, I was wondering what to do with a lonely evening."

"Then that makes two of us. Why can't we join forces and be miserable together?"

"With you? I'll do my best, but I don't promise... What's up?"

"Oh, everything, more or less. I'm in a villainous temper, Dobbin, and you'll be a dear if you'll come and dine with me – Bel's telephoned he won't be home – talk me into a decent humour and take me to the opera. And then – I don't care what we do!"

"Well, if you're half as reckless as you try to make out, you certainly need somebody to keep you from kicking over the traces."

"Then you will come?"

"Stop pretending to be stupid. When?"

"As soon as you like."

Later, seated at her dressing-table, adding those deft touches whose secret one woman in ten thousand knows, touches which lift an evening toilette out of the ruck of commonplace prettiness and render it wholly sorcerous, Lucinda caught in her mirror an odd look of dubious speculation on the face of the maid who waited by her shoulder.

Half an hour earlier such a look would have irritated, now its impertinence had no more effect than to make Lucinda smile illegibly at her image in the glass. What did it matter what questions might be taking form in that shallow mind? If Bel could afford to ignore the gossip of servants, that had its source in knowledge of his escapades no doubt infinitely more detailed and precise than she might ever hope or fear to gain – why, so could Bel's wife afford to go her own way and let this scandal-mongering world go hang.

Whether or not she could afford it, she meant henceforward to make her own life – as Bel did, as everybody did – and an end to this drifting with the winds of forlorn and fading hopes. She was too young, too proud, too richly warmed by ardent wine of life, to accept without a murmur affronts and slights such as were now her daily portion, without a struggle reconcile herself to the estate of the outworn wife, tolerated mainly as an ornamental prop to the dignity of the house of Druce.

Bel should learn...

Poised lightly before the cheval-glass for the final inspection from head to foot, she perceived that she had never made herself lovelier for Bel; and Dobbin's spontaneous tribute as she entered the drawing-room agreeably confirmed this judgment.

"Heavens, Cinda! how do you do it?"

"Like the way I look tonight?"

"Like! It's unfair, it's premeditated cruelty, monstrous! You ought to be ashamed of yourself to look like that to a man who's having a tough-enough fight with himself as it is."

"Fraud," Lucinda commented coolly. "You know you fancy yourself no end in the rôle of the luckless lover, you'd be scared silly if I gave you any reason to fear you'd ever have another part to play."

"Try me and see."

"No fear. I like you too well as you are. The part fits you to perfection, you do play it beautifully. Please don't ever stop: I love it."

"Imp! You need a good shaking. Don't you know you're flirting with me?"

"Do you mind?"

"Oh, no. Not if it amuses you. Not if you'll play fair."

"What do you call unfair?"

"For one thing, the way you've turned yourself out tonight."

"But only a moment ago you were leading me to believe I'd turned out at least passing fair." Lucinda affected a sigh. "And I was so happy to think I'd found favour!"

"I presume the intellectual level would be lowered if I were to say with What's-his-name, '*If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?*'"

But Lucinda, in a pensive turn, shook her head and, eyeing him gravely, murmured: "I wonder..."

"What do you wonder, Cinda?"

"What you told me last night... Was it true?"

"That I had never stopped being in love with you? God help me! that was true enough, too true."

"Then I wonder if it's fair to you, and to me, the way we're going. I mean..." She faltered, with a sign of petulance. "Be patient with me, Dobbin. It isn't easy to figure some things out, you know. I mean, if you *are* in love with me – "

"Forget the 'if'."

"And Bel is not... Oh, no, he isn't! He's in love with the figure he cuts as my lord and master and the dashing beau of every other pretty woman – not with me. Well! since you are and he isn't, and I'm discontented, and so fond of you, Dobbin: *is* it fair to either of us – because I'm bound to think of you, you know, and can't very well think of you dispassionately..." She concluded with a little shrug and a deprecating smile. "I don't know, Dobbin, I really don't know!"

"It isn't fair," he said – "of course – unless – "

She nodded seriously: "That's just it."

"I can only say, Cinda, whatever you do or say or think is right. It's all for you to decide."

"And I'm afraid I can't – not yet, at least. And when I do, I ought to warn you, the chances are I shan't decide the way you want me to."

"I know. But don't worry about me. I can take punishment, I've proved that, I think. So do what seems best to you. I'll faithfully follow your lead. I only want to play the game."

"And I... But we both want to be sure it's worth the scandal, don't we, Dobbin?"

"You joke about what's life and death to me!"

"I did it on purpose, old dear." Lucinda tapped his arm intimately with her fan. "Yes, I did. I don't want you to think, afterwards – if it turns out so you'd be tempted to think it – that I didn't, as you say, play fair. So it's only fair to let you find out as soon as possible that I'm an incurably frivolous person, Dobbin, vain, trifling, flippant, and – I'm afraid – a flirt."

"Not you!"

"Truly. Haven't I been letting you believe I made myself pretty tonight for your sake? It isn't true, at least not all true. It was for my own sake, really, because we're going to the opera, and everybody I know will see me there, and I want them to know what Bel neglects for his – other women!"

From the doorway an unctuous voice announced: "Dinner is served, madam."

XI

In this newest phase of that day's protean gamut, in this temper of reckless yet cool determination to avenge her pride and coerce life into rendering up all that it had of late withheld, she put every curbing consideration behind, and resolutely set herself for that night at least to live only for the moment and wring from each its ultimate drop of pleasure, to be amused and to be amusing, to make fête and to be fêted.

Daubeney, wanting whom all her efforts must have been wasted, for whether she love him or not a woman needs a man in love with her at hand to be at her best – Dobbin was fairly dazzled, not so much by charms of person never more witching as by gay spirits the gayer for this sudden indulgence after long inhibition, by delicate audacity, wit swift, mutable and pungent, and passages of sheer bravura in Lucinda's exposition of the arts of coquetry.

The way she flirted with him was something shameful. For the matter of that, never a masculine moth blundered into the Druce box during the entr'actes but flopped dazedly away, wondering what the deuce was the matter with old Bellamy, had he gone absolutely balmy. But Dobbin in his capacity of cavalier servente suffered more than anybody, for she took an impish delight in luring him beyond his depth and then leaving him to flounder out as best he might.

"See here!" he reminded her indignantly as the curtain rose on the last act of *Louise*— "you promised to play fair." Lucinda arched mocking brows above round eyes. "Don't call this sort of thing keeping your word, do you?"

"Aren't you having a good time, Dobbin dear?" In the half-light of the box Lucinda leaned slightly toward him, and her delicious voice dripped sympathy. "I'm so sorry, I've been trying so hard not to bore you."

"I didn't say I was bored. I ain't – I'm being plagued by a heartless young she-devil that ought to be spanked and sent to bed. Damn it, Cinda! you not only ought to, you do know better. You know I take it seriously. But you – you're merely playing."

"But with fire – eh, Dobbin?"

"You know that, too."

"And you're warning me lest I get singed?" Lucinda contrived to look a little awed. "How thoughtful!"

"Don't make me out a greater dunce than I am."

"Meaning you don't think I'm in any danger of getting scorched, carrying on with you?"

"Worse luck!"

"Dobbin: have you been deceiving me, aren't you the least bit inflammable, after all?"

"You know jolly well I took fire years ago and have never since managed to get the conflagration under control. Isn't ladylike to put the bellows to flames you don't mean to quench."

"How appallingly technical! But you do sputter so entertainingly, Dobbin – burning under forced draught, I presume you'd say, with your passion for riding a metaphor till it flounders – I'm not sure I'd care to see you quenched; I hate to think of you being put out with me."

"You play with words precisely as you play with me."

"You think so? Well, perhaps, but – Dobbin – don't be too sure. Think how sad it would be if you were to find out, too late, you'd been mistaken, you'd meant more to me than words could tell, more than you knew."

Over this equivoque Dobbin shook a baffled head; and Lucinda laughed, glanced carelessly toward the stage to make sure that the act still was young, and offered to rise.

"Let's not stay any longer, Dobbin, or we'll be caught in the carriage jam. Let's trot along and have a good time."

"What's the next jump?"

"To the Palais Royal." Dobbin uttered an involuntary sound of dissent. "Why not? Julie Allingham wants us to join her party – says everybody goes there nowadays, and it's desperately rowdy and loads of fun – said to ask for her box and make ourselves at home if we got there before she did."

Mrs. Allingham was not one of Daubeney's favorites. A persevering body, with a genius for trading in last season's husband for the latest model, gifted likewise with incurable impudence and poverty of tact, both of which she was clever enough to veneer with vivacity and exploit as whimsical idiosyncrasies, she failed to measure up to his notion of the type of woman with whom Lucinda ought to be seen. He had been civil, no more, when she had danced into the box during the first entr'acte to make a public fuss over her darling Cindy, and then – engaged in small-talk by Julie's satellites, two sleek but otherwise featureless bloods – had failed to hear her invitation; and Julie had carefully forgotten to remind him of it on taking her leave.

So Daubeney wasn't pleased as he helped Lucinda with her wraps; and she read disgruntlement in his silence and constraint.

"You don't want to go, Dobbin? With me? Why?"

"With you, anywhere. But..." He mustered an unconvincing grin. "Oh, it's all right, of course. But Julie Allingham – you know – really!"

Lucinda's mouth tightened, for an instant her eyes held a sullen light. "How tiresome! You sound just like Bel. How often have I heard him use almost the same words: 'Julie Allingham – you know – really!'"

"Sorry," Dobbin said stiffly.

"What's the matter with Julie Allingham?" Lucinda demanded in a pet. "She's amusing, I like her."

"Then there's nothing more to be said."

"Oh, you're all alike, you, Bel, and all the rest of you!"

"Think so?"

"What if Julie has made history of a few husbands? At least, she's been honest about her changes of heart; when she tired of one, she got rid of him legally before taking on another. I call that more decent treatment than most men give their wives."

"Never having had a wife, can't argue."

"Oh, you sound more like Bel every minute! Do come along."

All at once her succès had evaporated into thin air, the flavour of it, that had been so sweet, had gone flat, like champagne too long uncorked. And all (she thought) because Dobbin with his stupid prejudices had reminded her of Bel!

It began to seem as if there might have been more truth than she had guessed in her assertion that men were all alike in their attitude toward women, toward their wives and toward – the others.

But if that were so (surely she wasn't the first to glimpse an immortal truth) why did women ever marry?

And why, in the name of reason! having once worried through the ordeal of having a husband, did any woman ever repeat an experiment which experience should have taught her was predestined to prove a failure?

She emerged from a brown study to find herself in the car, with Dobbin at her side watching her thoughtfully.

"Cross with me, Cinda?"

With an effort Lucinda shrugged out of her ill-humour.

"No, of course not. With myself, rather, for being a silly. Dobbin: you're a dear."

"I know," he agreed with comic complacency; "but it doesn't get me anywhere."

"You're not very flattering. I don't tell every man he's a dear."

"I'm wondering what the term means to you."

"It means a great deal."

"But what are the privileges and appurtenances of a dear's estate in your esteem? Does it carry the right to take liberties?"

"It might be worth your while to try and find out."

"Well... It's been a question in my mind ever since last night, and something you said just now... Is the inference justified, you and Druce aren't getting along too well?"

"Oh, do stop reminding me of Bel! I do so want to forget him for tonight."

"Then it's worse than I thought."

"It's worse than anybody thinks that doesn't know, Dobbin."

"So he hasn't changed..."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, I used to know Bellamy pretty well, pal around with him and that sort of thing..."

"No," said Lucinda slowly, eyes straight ahead – "if you mean what I mean, Bel hasn't changed."

"Then..." Daubeney found a hand which Lucinda resigned to his without a struggle. "As a man who truly loves you, dear, and always has, I think the right is mine to ask yet another question: What are you going to do?"

She shook her head dolefully: "I don't know yet."

"You said last night you were still in love..."

"Last night it was true."

"But today – ?"

"I don't know."

"I won't ask you what has happened, Cinda – "

"Please don't. I don't want to talk about it."

"Only I must know one thing: Is there anyone else – with you, I mean?"

Lucinda met those devoted eyes honestly. "No, Dobbin, I'm sorry – not even you..."

"Then that's all right. No need for either of us to worry. You'll come through with flying colours. Only, don't do anything in haste, and right or wrong, count on me."

Lucinda gave his fingers a friendly pressure and disengaged her hand. "Dear Dobbin," she said gently.

The car was pulling in toward a corner.

XII

Though they had left the Metropolitan long before the final curtain, on Broadway the midnight tidal bore of motor traffic was even then gathering way and volume, the first waves of after-theatre patrons were washing the doorsteps of those sturdy restaurants which had withstood the blast of Prohibition, the foyer of the Palais Royal already held a throng of some proportions. In this omnium-gatherum of confirmed New Yorkers and self-determined suburbicides, arrayed in every gradation of formal, semi-formal and informal dress, and drawn together by the happy coup of that year's press-agent in heralding the establishment as a favorite resort of what the Four Million still styles its Four Hundred, the women stood grouped in their wraps and wistfully watching their men-folk importune a headwaiter who was heroically holding the staircase against all-comers, passing only the fore-handed in the matter of reservations, and putting all others to ignominious rout with the standardized statement that there was not a table upstairs left untaken.

At first glance, the huge main room on the second story, with its serried semicircles of tables and its flamboyant colour scheme, seemed less frequented by clients than by waiters; but the influx of the former was constant, and when, shortly after Lucinda and Daubeney had been seated, a gang of incurable melomaniacs crashed, blared and whanged into a jazz fox-trot, the oval dance floor was quickly hidden by swaying couples.

For some minutes Lucinda sat looking out over without seeing these herded dancers, only aware of the shifting swirl of colour and the hypnotic influence of savage music, her thoughts far from this decadent adaptation of jungle orgies which she had come to witness. And presently a smile began to flicker in the depths of her eyes.

"Oh!" she said, rousing when Daubeney uttered a note of interrogation – "I was thinking about this afternoon, remembering that funny little man moping and mowing in his magnificent delusion that he was conducting an orchestra."

"It was amusing, illuminating, too. One begins to understand why the movies are what they are. If I'm not mistaken, the author of that asinine exhibition is rated as one of the ablest directors in the business."

Lucinda quoted Mr. Lane's eulogy of King Laughlin.

"Well, there you are," Dobbin commented. "I presume genius must be humoured in its poses; even so, I saw nothing in Laughlin's directing to offset the silliness of his performance with the orchestra. I should say the business is poorly organized that permits men of his calibre, with so little sense of balance, to hold positions of absolute authority."

"You don't think Mr. Lane may have exaggerated Mr. Laughlin's importance – "

"Perhaps; though he was honoured with suspicious reverence by everybody present."

"Except Mr. Culp."

"Well, yes; Culp didn't seem so much overpowered. All the same, I noticed he didn't attempt to call Laughlin to order."

"But possibly the man *is* a genius. He seemed to know what he was about when he was showing them how to play that scene."

"I'll admit his grasp of primary mechanics; but the scene as he built it would have been ridiculous in the theatre."

"But it wasn't for a theatre, it was for the movies."

"Precisely my point. Why should motion-picture plays be less plausibly done than plays on the stage? The American theatre outgrew 'Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model' long before motion-pictures were seriously thought of; I mean, American audiences outgrew such trash. Yet today our movies are shaped on identically the lines of the popular melodrama that was laughed off the boards a generation ago. There's something wrong."

For some reason which Lucinda didn't stop to analyze, Daubeney's arguments stirred up a spirit of contentiousness.

"At all events, Mr. and Mrs. Culp seemed satisfied."

"Two people who have made a huge lot of money in an astonishingly short time: it isn't likely they'd be disposed to interfere with the system that enriched them, even allowing that they are sensible of its defects."

Lucinda caught herself frowning, then had the grace to laugh. "Can't make me believe they're lacking in artistic appreciation, Dobbins."

"Why not?"

"You don't know about the handsome offer Mr. Culp made me, with his wife's approval, just as we were going away."

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