

CHAPTER IX

SHE was only an ordinary little variety actress, and he knew her little programme pretty well by heart. But her fascinations were independent of the glamour of the footlights. It was off the stage that he had first come to know her, really know her, a thing that at the first blush of it seems impossible; for the great goddess Diana is not more divinely secret and secluded than (to a young bookseller) a popular Dance and Song Artiste in private life. Poppy's rooms were next door to the boarding-house balcony, and it was the balcony that did it.

Now, in the matter of balconies, if you choose to regard the receding wooden partition as a partition, and sit very far back behind it, you will have your balcony all to yourself, that is to say, you will see nothing, neither will you be seen. If, however, you prefer, as Mr. Rickman preferred, to lean forward over the railings and observe things passing in the street below, you can hardly help establishing some sort of communication with the next-door neighbour who happens to be doing the same thing. At first this communication was purely in the region of the mind, without so much as the movement of an eyelid on either side, and that made it all the more intimate and intense. But to sit there Sunday evening after Sunday evening, when the other boarders were at church, both looking at the same plane-tree opposite, or the same tail-end of a sunset flung across the chimney pots, without uttering a syllable or a sound, was at last seen by both in its true light, as a thing not only painful but absurd. So one evening the deep, full-hearted silence burst and flowered into speech. In common courtesy Mr. Rickman had to open his lips to