

THE MANTLE OF ELIJAH

"With the last of your guests. How do you do, Sir Percival?"

His monstrous will was conclusively baffled for the first time, and that not by a European coalition, but ingloriously by two specimens of the sex he had never taken into his serious calculations. To aggravate the irony, Fate had bided its time till the scowls and protrusive eyeballs, which were wont to relieve his tension under opposition, must be replaced by smiles. Allegra, on the other hand, was grateful that in this last quarrel of all she was spared all physical expression, and the intolerable strain of verbal argument. Again and again, as they waited, in this palpitant atmosphere of music and light and flowers and buzzing voices, amid the many-colored brilliance of the ever-shifting crowd, in a fever that made hours of the few minutes, he edged in a passage of entreaty, of command, of threat. But Allegra would not answer, went on with her smiling greetings. He had ridden rough-shod over every rival will: he must endure this one exception. Only once—to his husky whisper: "How do you expect me to explain things?" did she vouchsafe a reply.

"You have explained away so much. Explain me away."

And she reassured herself that her consciousness of coming freedom was no illusion, by glancing at that quaint old figure of the Duchess, who, she was aware, remained posted close behind her, with an air of waiting implacability, which seemed to invest her with the dignity of a figure of Fate.

The thrill from the frenzied street passed across the hall, mounting the rose-heaped stairs, penetrating the packed rooms. Private herald of the advent, the equerry whispered his little list of those whom the Prince would delight to honor in the sanctum of reception below.

The band stopped the Strauss waltz in the middle of a