

THE STROLLERS

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM.

Author of "Under the Rose"

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"Pardon me, my lord, I am not a nobleman, but I am a man of letters, and I have just written a play which is called 'The Strollers'."

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He became dimly conscious that people were moving past them, and he suddenly longed to cry out, "My child!"

"You must down the impulse. Something within held him from speaking to her—perhaps his own inherent sense of the consistency of things, his appreciation of the legitimate finale to a miserable order of circumstances. Even pride forbade departure from long established habit. But while this train of thought passed through his mind he realized she was regarding him with clear, compassionate eyes, and he heard her voice.

"Shall we go now? The services are over."

He obeyed without question.

"Over?"

He leaned heavily upon her arm and his steps were faltering. Out into the warm sunshine they passed, the light revealing more plainly the ravages of time in his face.

"Not even to her own child?"

"She does not know her father's name?" repeated the marquis.

"But I thank you, my lord, Constance is so charming I must needs call to ask if she were related to the London actress. Good day, monsieur! You are severe on the lover. Was it not the fashion of the day for the actresses to take lovers or for the fops to have an opera girl or a comedienne? Did your most popular performers disdain such diversions?" he sneered.

"Pardie, the world has suddenly become moral! A gentleman can no longer, without being indelibly in gentlemanly failure."

"Mumbling about the decadence of fashion, the marquis departed, his manner so strange the manager gazed after him in surprise.

With no thought of direction, his lips moving, talking to himself in admiring fashion, the nobleman walked mechanically on until he reached the great cathedral. The organ was rolling, and voices arose sweet as those of seraphim. He hesitated at the portal and then laughed to himself. "Well has Voltaire said: 'Pleasure has its time; so, too, has wisdom. Make love in thy youth and in old age attend to thy salvation.'" He repeated the latter words; but, although he paused at the threshold and listened, he did not enter.

As he stood there, uncertain and trembling, a figure replete with youth and vigor approached, and, glancing at her, an exclamation escaped him that caused her to pause and turn.

"You are not well," she said solicitously. "Can I help you?"

"It is nothing, nothing," answered the marquis, ashy pale at the sight of her and the proximity of that face which regarded him with womanly sympathy. "Go away."

"At least let me assist you. You were going to the cathedral? Come."

His hand rested upon her strong young arm. He felt himself too weak to resist, so together, father and daughter, they entered the cathedral. Side by side they knelt, he to keep up the face, fearing to undecore her, while yet only mocking words came to the

man's heart as the bitterness of a situation overwhelmed him. She was a daughter in whom a prince might have found pride, but he remained there mute, not daring to speak, experiencing all the tortures of remorse and retribution, and was only recalled to himself as his glance once more rested upon the young girl.

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CHAPTER XXV.

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"It is 10 degrees above the temperature my lord always ordered," retorted Francois coolly.

"Ten degrees! Oh, you wish to remind me that the end is approaching? You do not dare deny it!" The valet shrugged his shoulders.

"But I am not gone yet!" He wagged his head cunningly and began to laugh to himself. His mind apparently rambled, for he started to chant a French love song in a voice that had long since lost its capacity for a sustained tone. The words were distinct, although the melody was broken, and the spectacle was gawsome enough. As he concluded he looked at the valet as if for approbation and began to mumble about his early love affairs.

"Bah, Francois," he said shrilly. "I'll be up tomorrow as gay as ever. Vive l'amour! Vive la joie! It was a merry life we led, eh, Francois?"

"Merry, indeed, my lord."

"It kept you busy, Francois. There was the little peasant girl on the Rhine. What flaxen hair she had and eyes like the sky! Yet a word of praise, a little flattery—"

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"There, Francois," glancing with awe behind him. And truly there stood a dark shadow, a gawsome presence. His face became distorted, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

The valet gazed at him with indifference. Then he went to an inner room and brought a valise, which he began packing carefully and methodically. After he had completed this operation he approached the dressing table and took up a magnificent jeweled watch, which he examined for a moment before thrusting it into his pocket. A snuffbox next, with diamonds and several rings followed. Francois, with the same deliberation, opened a drawer and took out a small box, which he tried to open and, failing, forced the lid with the poker. At this my lord opened his eyes and in a weak voice, for his strength had nearly deserted him, demanded:

"What are you doing, Francois?"

"Robbing you, my lord," was the slow and dignified response.

The marquis' eyes glared with rage. He endeavored to call out, but his voice failed him, and he fell back, trembling and overcome.

"Thief! Ingrate!" he hissed hoarsely.

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"Is this the way you repay me?"

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"Have you no gratitude?" stammered the marquis, whose physical and mental condition was truly pitiable.

"Gratitude for having been called 'idiot,' 'dog' and 'blockhead' nearly all my life! I am somewhat lacking in that quality, I fear."

"Is there no shame in you?"

"Shame!" repeated Francois as he proceeded to ransack another drawer.

"What lovely roses, Constance!" exclaimed Susan as she entered, bending over a large bouquet on one of the chairs. "From the count, I presume?"

"Yes," indifferently answered the young girl, who was adjusting her hat before the mirror.

"How attentive he is!" cooed Susan, her tones floating in a higher register. "Poor man! Enjoy yourself while you may, my dear," she went on. "When youth is gone what is left? Women should sow their wild oats as well as men. I don't call them 'wild oats,' though, but paradisaical oats. The Elysian fields are strewn with them."

As she spoke her glance swept her companion searchingly, and in that brief scrutiny Susan observed with inward complacency how pale the other was and how listless her manner. Their common secret, however, made Susan outward demeanor sweetly solicitous and gently sympathetic. Her mind, passing in a mild review over recent events, dwelt not without certain satisfaction upon results. True, every night she was still forced to witness Constance's success, which of itself was wormwood and gall to Susan, to stand in the wings and listen to the hateful applause, but the conviction that the sweets of popular favor brought not what they were expected to bring was, in a way, an antidote to Susan's dissatisfaction.

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