POOR DOCUMENT

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A LOST LEADER

A FASCINATING STORY OF MODERN LIFE

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CHAPTER XXXI—(Continued.)

"There is no place for us down there," she answered, sadly. "There is joy enough for them, because the finger has never touched their eyes. But for us—no, we have to go on! I was a foolish woman, Lawrence. I lost my sense of proportion. Traditions, you see, were hard to break away from. I did not understand. Let this be the end of all mention of such things between us. We have missed the turning, and we must go on. That is the hardest thing in life. One can never retrace one's steps."

"We go on—apart?"

"We must," she assented. "Don't think me prejudiced, Lawrence. I must stand by my party. Theoretically I think that you are the only logical politician I have ever known. Actually I think that you are steering your course towards the sandbanks. You will fail, but you will fail magnificently. Well, that is something."

"It is a good deal," he answered, "but if I live long enough, and my strength remains, I shall succeed. I shall place the Government of this country upon an altogether different basis. I shall empty the workhouses and fill the factories. Nothing short of that will content me. Nothing short of that would content any man upon whose shoulders the burden has fallen."

"You have centuries of prejudices to fight," she warned him. "You may not succeed! Yet you have all my good wishes. I shall always watch you."

They turned homeward in silence. All that had passed between them seemed to be already far back in the past. Their retrogression seemed almost symbolical. They spoke of indifferent things.

"Tell me," he asked, "how you came to know what was going on in Leeds."

"It was your wife," she answered, "who discovered it!"

"My wife?"

"She saw a telegram on Sir Leslie's table at breakfast, a telegram from the man Polden. She read it and demanded an explanation. Sir Leslie tried all he could to wriggle out of it, but in vain. She appealed to me. Even I had a great deal of difficulty in dealing with him, but eventually he gave way."

"Then the telegram," Mannering exclaimed, "wasn't that from you?"

She shook her head.

"It was from your wife," she said. "I cannot take much credit for myself. It is she whom you must thank for your election. I came out at rather a dramatic moment. Sir Leslie had just offered her money, five hundred pounds, I think, to give him back his telegram and say nothing. She appealed to me at once, and Sir Leslie looked positively foolish."

"I am much obliged to you for telling me," Mannering muttered. He remembered now that he had scarcely spoken a dozen words to his wife since his return.

"Mrs. Mannering appears to have your interests very much at heart," Berenice said, quietly. "She proved herself quite a match for Sir Leslie. I think that he would have left here at once, only we are expecting Clara back."

Mannering smiled scornfully.

"I do not think that Clara," he said, "is quite fool enough not to recognize in Borrowdean the arrant opportunist. For my part I am glad that all pretence at friendship between us is now at an end. He is one of those men whom I should count more dangerous as a friend than as an enemy."

Berenice did not reply. They were already in the courtyard of the hotel. Blanche was in a wicker chair in a sunny corner, talking to a couple of young Englishmen. Berenice turned towards the steps. They parted without any further words.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Mannering for a moment hesitated. One of the two young men who were talking to his wife he recognized as a former acquaintance of hers—one of a genus with whom he had little sympathy and less desire to know. While he stood there Blanche laughed at some remark made by one of her companions, and the laugh too seemed somehow to remind him of the old days. He moved slowly forward.

The young men strolled off almost at once. Mannering took a vacant chair by his wife's side.

"I have only just heard," he said, "how much I have to thank you for. I took it for granted somehow that it was the Duchess who had discovered our friend Borrowdean's little scheme and sent that telegram. Why didn't you sign it?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It was the Duchess who made him chuck it up," she said. "I could never have made him do that. I was an idiot to let Parkins stay in England at all."

"I always understood," he said, "that he was dead."

"I let you think so," she answered. "I thought you might worry. But seriously, if he told the truth now, after all these years, would any one take any notice of it?"

"Very likely not," he said, "so far as regards any criminal responsibility. But our political life is fenced about by all the middle class love of propriety and hatred of all form of scandal. Parkins' story, authenticated or not, would have lost me my seat for Leeds."

"Then I am very glad," she said, "that I happened to see the telegram. Do you know where Parkins is now?"

"One of my supporters," he said, "a queer little man named Richard Fardell, has him in tow. He is bringing him up to London, I think."

She nodded.

"What are you doing this afternoon?" he asked.

She looked at him curiously.

"Mr. Englehall has asked me to go out in his car," she said. "I am rather tired of motoring, but I think I shall go."

Mannering lit a cigarette which he had just taken from his case.

"I don't think I should," he remarked.

She turned her head slowly, and looked at him.

"Why not?" she asked. "How can it concern you? Your plans for the afternoon are, I presume, already made!"

"It may not concern me directly," he answered, "but I have an idea that Mr. Englehall is not exactly the sort of person I care to have you driving about with."

She laughed hardly.

"I am most flattered by your interest in me," she declared. "Pray consider Mr. Englehall disposed of. You have some other plans, perhaps?"

"If you care to," he said, "we will walk down to the club for lunch and come home by the sea."

"Alone?"

"Certainly! Unless you choose to bring Hester."

She rose slowly to her feet.

"No," she said. "Let us go alone. It will be almost the first time since we were married, I think. I am curious to see how much I can bore you! Will you wait here while I find a hat?"

She disappeared inside the hotel. Mannering watched her absently. In a vague sort of way he was wondering what it was that had made their married life so completely a failure. He had imagined her as asking very little from him, content with the shelter of his name and home, content at any rate without those things of which he had made no mention when he had spoken to her of marriage. And he was becoming gradually aware that it was not so. She expected, had hoped for more. The terms which he had zealously striven to cultivate with her were terms of which she clearly did not approve. The signs of revolt were already apparent.

Mannering became absorbed in thought. He remembered clearly the feelings with which he had gone to her and made his offer. He went over it all again. Surely he had made himself understood? But then there was her confession to him, the confession of her love. He had ignored that, but it was unforgetable. Had he not tacitly accepted the whole situation? If so was he doing his duty? The shelter of his name and home, what were those to a warm-hearted woman, if she loved him? He had married her, loving another woman. She must have known this, but did she understand that he was not prepared to make any effort to accept the inevitable? He was still deep in thought when Berenice came out.

"What are you doing there all by yourself?" she asked. "Where is your wife?"

"She has gone to get a hat," he answered. "We thought of going to the club for dejeuner."

She nodded.

"A delightful idea," she said. "Do invite me, and I will take you in the car. Mrs. Mannering likes motoring, I know."

"Of course!" he murmured. "We shall be delighted!"

She beckoned to her chauffeur who was in the courtyard. Just then Blanche came out. She had changed her gown for one of plain white serge, and she wore a hat of tuscan straw which Mannering had once admired.

"You won't mind motoring, Mrs. Mannering?" Berenice said, as she approached. "I have invited myself to luncheon with you, and I am going to take you round to the club in the car."

Blanche stood quite still for a moment. The sun was in her eyes, and she lowered her parasol for a moment.

"It will be very pleasant," she said, quietly, "only I think that I will go in and change my hat. I thought that we were going to walk."

She retraced her steps, walking a little wearily. Berenice came and sat down by Mannering's side.

"I hope Mrs. Mannering does not object to my coming," she said. "It occured to me that she was not particularly cordial."

"It is only her manner," he answered. "It is very good of you to take us."

"Your wife doesn't like me," Berenice said. "I wonder why. I thought that I had been rather decent to her."

"Blanche is a little odd," Mannering answered. "I am afraid that it is my fault. Here are the Redfords. I wonder if they would join us."

"Three," she murmured, "is certainly an awkward number."

In the end the party became rather a large one, for Lord Redford met some old friends at the club who insisted upon their joining tables. In the interval, whilst they waited for luncheon, Mannering contrived to have a word alone with his wife.

"I am not responsible," he said, "for this enlargement of our party. The Duchess invited herself."

"It does not matter," she declared, listlessly. "What are you doing afterwards?"

"Playing golf, I fancy," he answered. "You heard what Redford said about a foursome."

"And you are returning—when?"

"I must leave here at six tomorrow morning."

They were leaning over the white palings of the pavilion, looking out upon the last green. She seemed to be watching the approach of two players who were just coming in.

"It is a long way to come," she remarked, "for so short a time."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"The aftermath of a contested election is a thing to escape from," he said. "I felt that I wanted to get as far away as possible, and then again I wanted to find out who it was who had sent that telegram."

They sat apart at luncheon, and Blanche was much quieter than usual. The others were all old friends. It seemed to her more than ordinarily apparent that she was present on sufferance, accepted as Mannering's wife, as an evil to be endured, and so far as possible ignored. Mannering himself spoke to her now and then across the table. Lord Redford, always good-natured, made a few efforts to draw her into conversation. But it seemed to her that she had lost her confidence. The freemasonry of old acquaintance which existed between all of them left her outside an invisible but very real circle. Words came to her with difficulty. She felt stupid, almost shy. When she made an effort to break through it she was acutely conscious of her failure. Her laugh was too hard, it lacked sincerity or restraint. The cigarette, which she smoked out of bravado with her coffee, seemed somehow out of place. When at last luncheon was over Mannering left his place and came over to her.

"The Duchess and I," he said, "are going to play Lord Redford and Mrs. Arbuthnot. Won't you walk round with us? The links are really very pretty."

"Thanks, I hate watching golf," she answered, rising and shaking out her skirts. "Hester and I will walk home."

"Do take the car, Mrs. Mannering," Bernice said. "It will simply be waiting here doing nothing."

"Thank you," Blanche answered. "I shall enjoy the walk."

The foursome was played in very leisurely fashion. There was plenty of time for conversation.

"I don't quite understand your wife," Bernice said to Mannering. "Her dislike of me is a little too obvious. What does it mean? Do you know?"

He shook his head. He was looking very pale and tired.

"I am not sure that I know anything about it at all," he said. "I am beginning to distrust my own judgment."

"Your marriage—" she began, thoughtfully.

"Don't let us talk about it," he interrupted. "I tried to pay a de[illegible] It seems to me that I have only incurred a fresh one."

They were silent for some time. Then their opponents lost a ball and displayed no particular diligence in attempting to find it. Bernice sat down upon a plank seat.

"Your marriage," she said, "seemed always to me a piece of quixotism. I never altogether understood it."

"It was an affair of impulse," he said, slowly. "Life from a personal point of view had lost all interest to me. I did not even dream after my, shall we call it apostacy? that I could rely upon even a modicum of your friendship. I looked upon myself as an outcast commencing life afresh. Then chance intervened. I thought I saw my way to making some atonement to a woman whose life I had certainly helped to ruin. That was where the serious part of the mistake came. I thought that what I had to offer would be sufficient. I am beginning now to doubt it."

"And what are you going to do?" she asked, looking steadily away from him.

"Heaven knows," he answered, bitterly. "I cannot give what I do not possess."

Was it his fancy, or was there a gleam of satisfaction about her still pale face? He went on.

"I don't want to play the hypocrite. On the other hand I don't want all that I have done to go for nothing. Can you advise me?"

"No, nor any one else," she answered, softly. "Yet I can perhaps correct a little your point of view. I think that you overestimate your indebtedness to the woman whom you have made your wife. Her husband was a weak, dissipated creature, and he was a doomed man long before that unfortunate day. It is even very questionable whether that scene in which you figured had anything whatever to do in hastening his death. That is a good many years ago, and ever since then you seem to have impoverished yourself to find her the means to live in luxury. I consider that you paid your debt over and over again, and that your final act of self-abnegation was entirely uncalled for. What more she wants from you I do not know. Perhaps I can imagine."

There was a moment's silence. She turned her head and looked at him—looked him in the eyes unshamed, yet with her secret shining there for him to see.

"There may be others, Lawrence," she said, "to whom you owe something. A woman cannot take back what she has given. There may be sufferers in the world whom you ought also to consider. And a woman loves to think that what she may not have herself is at least kept sacred—to her memory."

"Fore!" cried Lord Redford, who had found his ball. "Awfully decent of you people to wait so long. We were afraid you meant to claim the hole!"

Mannering rose to play his shot.

"The Duchess and I, Lord Redford," he said, lightly, "scorn to take small advantages. We mean to play the game!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Blanche, in a plain black net gown, sat on Lord Redford's right hand at the hastily improvised dinner-party that evening. Berenice, more subtly and more magnificently dressed, was opposite by Mannering's side. The conversation seemed mostly to circle about them.

"A very charming place," Lord Redford declared. "I have enjoyed my stay here thoroughly. Let us hope that we may all meet here again next year," he added, raising his glass. "Mannering, you will drink to that, I hope?"

"With all my heart," Mannering answered. "And you, Blanche?"

She raised her almost untasted glass and touched it with her lips. She set it down with a faint smile. Bernice moved her head towards him.

"Your wife is not very enthusiastic," she remarked.

"She neither plays golf nor bathes," Mannering said. "It is possible that she finds it a little dull."

"Both are habits which it is possible to acquire," Bernice answered. "I am telling your husband, Mrs. Mannering," she continued, "that you ought to learn to play golf."

"Lawrence has offered to teach me more than once," Blanche answered, calmly. "I am afraid that games do not attract me. Besides I am too old to learn!"

"My dear Mrs. Mannering!" Lord Redford protested.

"I am forty-two," Blanche replied, "and at that age a woman thinks twice before she begins anything new in the shape of vigorous exercise. Besides, I find plenty to amuse me here."

"Might one ask in what direction?" Berenice murmured. "I have found the place many things that are delightful, but not amusing."

"I find amusement often in watching my neighbors," Blanche said. "I like to ask myself what it is they want, and to study their way of attaining it. You generally find that every one is fairly transparent when once you have found the key,—and everybody is trying for something which they don't care for other people to know about."

The Duchess looked at Blanche steadily. There was a certain insolence, the insolence of her aristocratic birth and assured position in the level stare of her clear brown eyes. But Blanche did not flinch.

"I had no idea, Mrs. Mannering, that you had tastes of that sort," she said, languidly. "Suppose you give us a few examples."

"Not for the world," Blanche answered, fervently. "Did you say that we were to have coffee outside, Lord Redford? How delightful! I wonder if Lady Redford is ready."

They all trooped out in a minute or two. Berenice laid her hand upon Mannering's arm.

"Your wife," she said, quietly, "is going a little too far. She is getting positively rude to me!"

Mannering muttered some evasive reply. He too had marked the note of battle in Blanche's tone. He had noticed too the unusual restraint of her manner. She had drunk little or no wine at dinner time, and she had talked quietly and sensibly. Directly they reached the courtyard she seated herself on a settee for two, and made room for him by her side.

"Come and tell me about the golf-match," she said. "Who won?"

Mannering had no alternative but to obey. Lady Redford however drew her chair up close to theirs, and the conversation was always general. Berenice in a few minutes rose to her feet.

"Listen to the sea," she exclaimed. "Don't some of you want to come down to the rocks and watch it?"

Blanche rose up at once.

"Do come, Lawrence, if you are not too tired!" she said.

The whole party trooped out on to the promenade. Blanche passed her arm through her husband's, and calmly appropriated him.

"You can walk with whom you please presently, Lawrence," she said, "but I want you for a few minutes. I suppose you will admit that I have some claim?"

"Certainly," Mannering answered. "I have never denied it."

"I am your wife," Blanche said, "though Heaven knows why you ever married me. The Duchess is, I suppose, the woman whom you would have married if you hadn't got into a mess with your politics. She is a very attractive woman, and you married me of course out of pity, or some such maudlin reason. But all the same I am here, and—I don't care what you do when I can't see you, but I won't have her make love to you before my face."

"The Duchess is not that sort of woman, Blanche," Mannering said, gravely.

"Isn't she!" Blanche remarked, unconvinced. "Well, I've watched her, and in my opinion she isn't very different from any other sort of woman. Do you wish you were free very much? I know she does!"

"Is there any object to be gained by this conversation?" Mannering asked. "Frankly I don't like it. I made you no absurd promises when I married you. I think that you understood the position very well. So far as I know I have given you no cause to complain."

They had reached the end of the promenade. Blanche leaned over the rail. Her eyes seemed fixed upon a light flashing and disappearing across the sea. Mannering stood uncomfortably by her side.

"No cause to complain!" she repeated as though to herself. "No, I suppose not. And yet, how much the better off do you think I am, Lawrence? I had friends before of some sort or another. Some of them pretended to like me, even if they didn't. I did as I chose. I lived as I liked. I was my own mistress. And now—well, there is no one! I enjoy the respectability of your name, the privilege of knowing your friends, the ability to pay my bills, but I should go tark mad if it wasn't for Hester. I gave myself away to you, I know. You married me for pity, I know. But what in God's name do I get out of it?"

A note of real passion quivered in her tone. Mannering looked down at her helplessly, taken wholly aback, without the power for a moment to formulate his thoughts. There was a touch of color in her pale cheeks, her eyes were lit with an unusual fire. The faint moonlight was kind to her. Her features thinner than they had been, seemed to have gained a certain refinement. She reminded him more than ever before of the Blanche of many years ago. He answered her kindly, almost tenderly.

"I am very sorry," he said, "if I have caused you any suffering. What I did I did for the best. I don't think that I quite understood, and I thought that you knew—what had come into my life."

"I knew that you cared for her, of course," she answered, with a little sob, "but I did not know that you meant to nurse it—that feeling. I thought that when we were married you would try to care for me—a little. I—Here are the others!"

Lord Redford, who had failed to amuse Berenice, and who had a secret preference for the woman who generally amused him, broke up their tete-a-tete. He led Blanche away, and Mannering followed with Berenice.

"What does this change in your life mean?" she asked, abruptly.

"Change?" he repeated.

"Yes! She watches us! If it were not too absurd one would believe her jealous. Of course, it is not my business to ask you on what terms you are with your wife, but——"

"You know what terms," he interrupted.

Her manner softened. She looked at him for a moment, and then her eyes dropped.

"I am rather a hateful woman!" she said, slowly. "I wish I had not said that. I don't think we have managed things very cleverly, Lawrence. Still, I suppose life is made up of these sort of idiotic blunders."

"Mine," he murmured, "has been always distinguished by them."

"And mine," she said, "only since I came to Blakeley, and learnt to talk nonsense in your rose-garden! But come," she added, more briskly, "we are breaking our compact. We agreed to be friends, you know, and abjure sentiment."

He nodded.

"It seemed quite easy then," he remarked.

"And it is easy now! It must be," she added, "I have scarcely congratulated you upon your election. What it all means, and with which party you are going to vote, I scarcely know even now. But I can at least congratulate you personally."

"You are generous," he said, "for I suppose I am a deserter. As to where I shall sit it is very hard to tell. I fancy myself that we are on the eve of a complete readjustment of parties. Wherever I may find myself, however, it will scarcely be with your friends."

She nodded.

"I realize that, and I am sorry," she said. "All that we need is a leader, and you might have been he. As it is I suppose we shall muddle along somehow until some one comes out of the ruck strong enough to pull us together. . . . Come and see me in London, Lawrence. Who knows but that you may be able to convert me!"

"You are too staunch," he answered, "and you have not seen what I have seen."

She sighed.

"Didn't you once tell me at Blakely that politics for a woman was a mischosen profession,—that we were at once too obstinate and too sentimental? Perhaps you were right. We don't come into touch with the same forces that you meet with, and we come into touch with others which make the world seem curiously upside-down. Good-night, Lawrence! I am going to my room quietly. Lady Redford wants to play bridge, and I don't feel like it! Bon voyage!"

Mannering stood alone in the little courtyard, lit now with hanging lights, and crowded with stray visitors who had strolled in from the streets. The rest of the party had gone into the salon beyond, and Mannering felt curiously disinclined to join them. Suddenly there was a touch upon his arm. He turned round. Blanche was standing there looking up at him. Something in her face puzzled him. Her eyes fell before his. She was pale, yet as he looked at her a flood of color rushed into her cheeks. His momentary impression of her eyes was that they were very soft and very bright. She had thrown off her wrap, and with her left hand was holding up her white skirt. Her right hand was clenched as though holding something, and extended timidly towards him.

"I wanted to say good-night to you—and—there was something else—this!"

Something passed from her hand to his, something cold and hard. He looked at her in amazement, but she was already on her way up the grey stone steps which led from the courtyard into the hotel, and she did not turn back. He opened his hand and stared at what he found there. It was a key,—number forty-four, Premier etage.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Mannering was conscious of an overpowering desire to be alone. He made his way out of the courtyard and back to the promenade. Some of the lights were already extinguished, and a slight drizzling rain was falling. He walked at once to the further wall, and stood leaning over, looking into the chaos of darkness. The key, round which his fingers were still slightly clenched, seemed almost to burn them.

What to do? How much more of his self was he bound to surrender? Through a confusion of thoughts some things came to him then very clearly. Amongst others the grim, pitiless selfishness of his life. How much must she have suffered before she had dared to do this thing! He had taken up a burden and adjusted the weight to suit himself. He had had no thought for her, no care save that the seemliness of his town absorbed life might not be disturbed. And behind it all the other reason. What a pigmy of a man he was after all.

A clock from the town struck eleven. He must decide!! A vision of her rose up before him. He understood now her weakness and her strength. She was an ordinary woman, seeking the affection her sex demanded from its legitimate source. He understood the coming and going of the color in her cheeks, her strained attempts to please, her barely controlled jealousy. In that mad moment when he had planned for her salvation he had imagined that she would have understood. What folly! Why should she? The complexion workings of his innermost nature were scarcely likely to have been patent to her. What right had he to build upon that? What right as an honest man to contract a debt he never meant to pay. If he had not at the moment realized his responsibilities that was his own fault. From her point of view they were obvious enough, and it was from her point of view as wes as his own that they must be considered.

He turned back to the hotel, walking a little unsteadily. All the time he was not sure that this was not a dream. And then on the wet pavement he came face to face with two cloaked figures, one of whom stopped short and called him by name. It was Berenice!

"You!" he exclaimed, more than ever sure that he was not properly awake.

"Is it so wonderful?" she answered. "To tell you the truth, I was not sleepy, and I felt like a little walk. You can go back now, Bryan," she said, turning to her maid. "Mr. Mannering will see me home."

As though by mutual consent they crossed to the sea-wall.

"What made you come out again?" she asked. "No, don't answer me! I think that I know."

"Impossible," he murmured.

"I was going up to my room," she said, "and as I passed the landing window which looks into the courtyard I saw you talking to your wife. I—I am afraid that I watched. I saw her leave you."

"Yes."

"What was it that she gave you? What is it that you have in your hand?"

He opened his fingers. She turned her head away. It seemed to him an eternity that she stood there. When she spoke her voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Lawrence," she said, "we have been very selfish, you and I! There have been no words between us, but I think the compact has been there all the same. It seemed to me somehow that it was a compensation, that it was part of the natural order of things, that as our own folly had kept us apart, you should still belong to me—in my thoughts. And I have no right to this, or any share of you, Lawrence."

He drew a little nearer to her. She moved instantly away.

"I am glad," she said, "that our party breaks up tomorrow. When we meet again, Lawrence, it must be differently. I am parting with a great deal that has been precious to me, but it must be. It is quite clear."

"I made no promise," he cried, hoarsely. "I did not mean—"

She stopped him with a swift glance.

"Never mind that. You and I are not of the race of people who shrink from their duty, or fear to do what is right. Your wife's face taught me mine. Your conscience will tell you yours."

"You mean?" he exclaimed.

"You know what I mean. We shall meet again, of course, but this is none the less our farewell. No, don't touch me! Not even my hand, Lawrence. Don't make it any harder. Let us go in."

But he did not move. The place where they stood was deserted. From below the white spray came leaping up almost to their faces as the waves beat against the wall. Behind them the town was black and deserted, save where a few lights gleamed out from the hotel. She shivered a little ,and drew her cloak around her.

"Come," she said, "I am getting cold and cramped."

He walked by her side to the hotel. At the foot of the steps she left him.

"We shall meet again in London," she said, quietly. "Don't be too hard upon your old friend when you take your seat. Remember that you were once one of us."

She looked round and waved her hand as she disappeared. He caught a glimpse of her face as she passed underneath the hanging lamp—the face of a tired woman suddenly grown old. With a little groan he made his way into the hotel, and slowly ascended the stairs.

* * * * * * *

Early the next morning Mannering left Bonestre, and in twenty-four hours he was back again summoned by a telegram which had met him in London. It seemed to him that everybody at the station and about the hotel regarded him with shocked and respectful sympathy. Hester, looking like a ghost, took him at once to her room. He was haggard and weary with rapid traveling, and he sank into a chair.

"Tell me—the worst!" he said.

"She started with Mr. Englehall about mid-day," Hester said. "They had luggage, but I explained that he was going to Paris, she was coming back by train. At two o'clock we were rung up on the telephone. Their brake had snapped going down the hill by St. Entuiel, and the chauffeur, he is mad now, but they think he lost his nerve. They were dashed into a tree, and—they were both dead—when they were got out from the wreck."

"God in Heaven!" Mannering murmured, white to the lips.

There was a silence between them. Mannering had covered his head with his hands. Hester tried once or twice to speak, but the tears were streaming from her eyes. She had the air of having more to say. The white horror of tragedy was still in her face.

"There is a letter," she said at last. "She left a letter for you."

Mannering rose slowly to his feet and moved to the lamp. Directly he had broken the seal he understood. He read the first line and looked up. His eyes met Hester's.

"Who knows—this?" he asked, hoarsely.

"No one! They had not been gone two hours. I explained everything."

Then Mannering read on.

My Dear Husband,

I call you that for the last time, for I am going off with Englehall to Paris. Don't to be too shocked, and don't despise me too much. I am just a very ordinary woman, and I'm afraid I've bad blood in my veins. Anyhow, I can't go on living under a glass case any longer. The old life was rotten enough, but this is insupportable. I'm going to have a fling, and after that—I don't care what becomes of me.

Now, Lawrence, I don't want you to blame yourself. I did think perhaps that when we were married I might have got you to care for me a little, but I suppose that was just my vanity. It wasn't very possible with a woman like—well, never mind who—about. You did your best. You were very nice and very kind to me last night, but it wasn't the real thing, was it? I knew you hated being where you were. I could almost hear your sigh of relief when I let you go. The fact of it is, our marriage was a mistake. I ought to have been satisfied with your name, I suppose, and the position it gave me, but I'm not that sort of woman. I've been in Bohemia too long. I like cheery friends, even if their names are not in Debrett, and I must have some one to care for me, or to pretend to care for me. You know I've cared for you—only you in a certain way—but I'm not heroic enough to be content with a shadowy love. I'm not an idealist. Imagination doesn't content me in the least. I'd rather have an inferior substance than ideal perfection. You see, I'm a very commonplace person at heart, Lawrence—almost vulgar. But these are my last words to you, so I've gone in for plain speaking. Now you're rid of me.

That's all! From your point of view I suppose, and your friends, I've gone to the devil. Don't be too sure of it. I'm going to have a good time, and when the end comes I'm willing to pay. If you are idiot enough to come after me I shall be angry with you for the first time in my life, and it wouldn't be the least bit of use. Englehall's an old friend of mine, and he's a good sort. He's wanted me to do this often enough for years, but I never felt quite like it. I believe he'd marry me after, but he's got a wife shut up somewhere.

I expect you think this a callous sort of letter. Well, I can't help it. If it disgusts you with me so much the better. I'm sorry for the scandal, but you'll get over that. Good-bye, Lawrence. Forgive me for all the bother I've been to you.

BLANCHE.

Mannering looked up from the letter, and again his eyes met Hester's. The secret was theirs alone. Very carefully he tore the pages into small pieces. Then he opened the stove and watched them consumed.

"No one will ever know," Hester said. "She said—when she left—that it was a morning's ride—but motors were so uncertain that she took a bag."

Mannering's eyes were filled once more with tears. The intolerable pity of the whole thing, it's awful suddenness, swept every other thought out of his mind. He remembered how anxiously she had tried to please him on that last night. He loathed himself for the cold brutality of his chilly affection. Hester came and knelt by his side, but she said nothing. So the hours passed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"And what does Mannering think of it all, I wonder!" Lord Redford remarked, lighting a fresh cigarette. "This may be his opportunity, who can tell!"

"Will he have the nerve to grasp it?" Borrowdean asked. "Mannering has never been proved in a crisis."

"He may have the nerve. I should be more inclined to question the desire," Lord Redford said. "For a man in his position he has always seemed me singularly unambitious. I don't think that the prospect of being Prime Minster would dazzle him in the least. It is part of the genius of the politician too to know exactly when and how to seize an opportunity. I can imagine him watching it come, examining it through his eyeglass, and standing on one side with a shrug of the shoulders."

"You do not believe, then," Berenice said, "that he is sufficiently in earnest to grasp it?"

"Exactly," Lord Redford answered. "I have that feeling about Mannering, I must admit. Especially during the last two years. He seems to have drawn away from all us, to live aleogether too absorbed and self-contained a life for a man who has great ambitions to realize, or who is in downright earnest about his work."

"What you all forget when you discuss Lawrence Mannering is this," Berenice said. "He holds his position almost as a sacred charge. He is absolutely conscientious. He wants certain things for the sake of the people, and he will work steadily on until he gets them. I believe it is truth that he has no personal ambition, but if the cause he has at heart is to be furthered at all it must be by his taking office. Therefore I think that when the time comes he will take it."

"That sounds reasonable enough," Lord Redford admitted. "By the bye, did you notice that he is included in the house party at Sandringham again this week?"

Austruther, the youngest cabinet minister, and Lord Redford's nephew, joined in the conversation.

"I can tell you something for a fact," he said. "My cousin is lady in waiting, and she's been up in town for a few days, and she asked me about Mannering. The King thinks very highly of him indeed. Told some one that Mr. Mannering was the most statesman-like politician in the service of his country. I believe he'd sooner see Mannering Prime Minster than any one."

"But he has no following," Borrowdean objected.

"I think," Berenice said, slowly, "that he keeps as far aloof as possible for one reason, and one reason only. He avoids friendship, but he makes no enemies. He cultivates a neutral position whenever he can. What he is looking forward to, I am sure, is to found a coalition government."

"It is very possible," Lord Redford said. "I wonder if he will ask me to join."

"Always selfish," Berenice laughed. "You men are all alike!"

"On the contrary," Lord Redford answered, "my interest was purely patriotic. I cannot imagine the affairs of the country flourishing deprived of my valuable services. Let us go and wander through the crowd. Members of a government in extremes like ours ought not to whisper together in corners. It gives rise to comment."

Anstruther came hurrying up. He drew Redford on one side.

"Mannering is here," he said, quietly. "Just arrived from Sandringham. He is looking for you."

Almost as he spoke Mannering appeared. He did not at first see Berenice, and from the corner where she stood she watched him closely.

It was two years since those few weeks at Bonestre, and during all that time they had scarcely met. Berenice knew that he had avoided her. For twelve months he had declined all social engagements, and since then he had pleaded the stress of political affairs as an excuse for leading the life almost of a recluse. Unseen herself, she studied him closely. He was much thinner, and every trace of his once healthy coloring had disappeared. His eyes seemed deeper set. There were streaks of grey in his hair. And for all that to her he was unaltered. He was still the one man in the world. She saw him shake hands with Lord Redford and draw him a little on one side.

"Can you spare me five minutes?" he asked. "I have a matter to discuss with you."

"Certainly!" Lord Redford answered. "I am leaving directly, and I might drive you home if you liked. We heard that you were at Sandringham."

"I came up this afternoon," Mannering answered. "I heard that you were likely to be here, and as Lady Herrington had been kind enough to send me a card I came on."

Lord Redford nodded.

"Borrowdean and Anstruther are here too," he remarked. "We all felt in need of diversion. As you know very well, we're in a tight corner."

Berenice came out from her place. At the sound of the rustling of her skirts both men turned round. She wore a gown of black velvet and a wonderful rope of pearls hung from her neck. She raised her hand and smiled at Mannering.

"I am glad to see you again," she said, softly. "It is quite an age since we met, isn't it?"

He held her hand for a moment. The touch of his fingers chilled her. He greeted her with quiet courtesy, but there was no answering smile upon his lips.

"I have heard often of your movements from Clara," he said. "You have been very kind to her."

"It has never occurred to me in that light," she said. "Clara needs a chaperon, and I need a companion. We were talking yesterday of going to Cairo for the winter. My only fear is that I am robbing you of your niece."

"Please do not let that trouble you," he said. "Clara would be a most uncomfortable member of my household."

"But are you never at all lonely?" she asked.

"I never have time to think of such a thing," he answered. "Besides, I have Hester. She makes a wonderful secretary, and she seems to enjoy the work."

"I should like to have a talk with you some time, she said. "Won't you come and see me?"

He hesitated.

"It is very kind of you to ask me," he said. "Don't think me churlish, but I go nowhere. I am trying to make up, you see, for my years of idleness."

She looked at him steadfastly, and her heart sank. The change in his outward appearance seemed typical of some deeper and more final alteration in his whole nature. She felt herself powerless against the absolute impenetrability of his tone and manner. She felt that he had fought a battle within himself and conquered, that for some reason or other he had decided to walk no longer in the pleasanter paths of life. She had come to him unexpectedly, but he had shown no sign of emotion. Her influence over him seemed to be wholly a thing of the past. She made one more effort.

"I think," she said, "that as one grows older one parts the less readily with the few friends who count. I hope that you will change your mind."

He bowed gravely, but he made no answer. Berenice took Borrowdean's arm and passed on. There was a little spot of color burning in her cheeks. Borrowdean felt nerved to his enterprise.

"Let us go somewhere and sit down for a few minutes," he suggested. "The rooms are so hot this evening."

She assented without words, and he found a solitary couch in one of the further apartments.

"I wonder," he said, after a moment's pause, "whether I might say something to you, whether you would listen to me for a few minutes."

Berenice was absorbed in her own thoughts. She allowed him to proceed.

"For a good many years," he said, lowering his voice a little, "I have worked hard and done all I could to be successful. I wanted to have some sort of a position to offer. I am a cabinet minister now, and although I don't suppose we can last much longer this time. I shall have a place when ever we are in again."

The sense of what he was saying began to dawn upon her. She stopped him at once.

"Please do not say any more, Sir Leslie," she begged. "I should have given you credit for sufficient perceptions to have known beforehand the absolute impossibility of—of anything of the sort.

"You are still a young woman," he said, quietly. "The world expects you to marry again."

"I have no interest in what the world expects of me," she answered, "but I may tell you at once that my refusal has nothing whatever to do with the question of marriage in the abstract. You are a man of perceptions, Sir Leslie! It will be, I trust, sufficient if I say that I have no feelings whatever towards you which would induce me to consider the subject even for a moment."

She was unchanged, then! This time he recognized the note of finality in her tone. All the time and thought he had given to this matter were wasted. He had failed, and he knew why. He seldom permitted himself the luxury of anger, but he felt all the poison of bitter hatred stirring within him at that moment, and craving for some sort of expression. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could say. But if Mannering had been within reach then he would have struck him. He rose and walked slowly away.

(To be continued.)

ENORMOUS WEALTH OF FRANCE

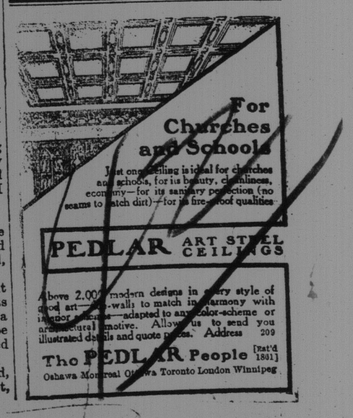
Government Will Own All Railroads and Public Utilities by 1960.

Paris, Jan. 16—The finance minister, M. Caillaux, in an interview yesterday contrasted the French financial situation with that of other countries. He called attention to the enormous assets the French government and the communes hold against their liabilities. "Within forty years," M. Caillaux declares, "these will be increased by the escheating to the local authorities of valuable franchises, such as lighting, etc., and between 1950 and 1960 all the railroads will become the property of the nation." Continuing, the minister said that the system of old age pensions for workmen, which will cost $20,000,000, and to which all workmen and employers must contribute, cannot be realized for some years to come.

BIG PROFITS OF CANADIAN BANKS

(Montreal Star.)

Canadian bank reports continue to show excellent returns from the points of view of profits. The table shows the latest reports of profits for 1907:

	1907.	1906.
Molsons	$544,038	$434,608
Montreal	1,980,138	1,797,976
Eastern Townships	372,668	279,610
Hochelaga	449,794	347,504
Commerce	1,752,349	1,741,125
Merchants	*473,144	740,394
Toronto	586,625	544,295
Bank of Ottawa	443,288	425,218
Dominion Bank	635,235	539,360
Bank of Hamilton	384,708	*671,251
Metropolitan Bank	117,819	140,570
Bank of Nova Scotia	681,709	652,516
Royal Bank	742,034	604,405
Traders' Bank	522,822	*267,182
Farmers' Bank	14,350	.....

*The 1907 figures of the Merchants Bank are for six months only. The 1906 figures of the Traders' Bank are for seven months only.