

THE DIVINE FIRE

when she tossed her tall grenadier's cap to the back of the stage, and still spinning, shook out her hair, and flung herself backwards, till it streamed and eddied with the whirlwind of her dance. In her fantastic dress (she wore her colours, the red and black) her very womanhood had vanished, she was a mere insignificant morsel of flesh and blood, inspired by the dizzy, reckless Fury of the foot-lights.

There was a noise of many boots beating the floor of the house ; it grew into a thick, solid body of sound, torn at intervals by a screaming whistle from the galleries. Someone up there shouted her name—" Poppy—Poppy Grace ! " and Rickman shivered.

To Rickman's mind the name was an outrage ; it reeked of popularity ; it suggested—absurdly and abominably—a certain cheap drink of sudden and ephemeral effervescence. He never let his mind dwell on those dreadful syllables any longer than he could help ; he never thought of her as Poppy Grace at all. He thought of her in undefined, extraordinary ways ; now as some nameless aerial spirit, unaccountably wandering about in a world too gross for it ; and now as the Young Joy, the fugitive actuality. To-night, after brandy and soda, his imagination possessed itself of Poppy, and wove round her the glory and gloom of the world. It saw in her, not the incarnation of the rosy moment, but the eternal sacrifice of woman, the tragedy of her abasement, her obedience to the world. Which, when he came to think of it, was really very clever of his imagination.

Meanwhile Poppy was behaving, as she had behaved for the last fifty nights, like a lunatic humming top. Now it had steadied itself in the intensity of its speed ; the little humming-top was sleeping. Poppy, as she span, seemed to be standing, her feet rooted, her body swaying delicately from the hips, like a flower rocked by the wind, the light of her flickering flamewise. There was a stir, a wave, as if the heart of the house had heaved. Pit and gallery breathed hard. Rickman leaned forward with clouded eyes and troubled forehead, while the young shop-men—the other young shop-men—thrilled with familiar and delicious emotion. Now she curtsied, as she had