

they are looking in from the night. Can one see the sea from here, Mr. De la Borne?"

"It is scarcely a hundred yards away," he answered. "This window looks straight across the German Ocean, and if you look long enough you will see the white of the breakers. Listen! You will hear, too, what my forefathers, and those who begat them, have heard from the birth of the generations."

The girl, with strained face, stood looking out into the darkness. Outside, the wind and sea imposed their thunder upon the land. Within, there was no sound but the soft patter of the cards, the languid voices of the four who played bridge. A curious little company, on the whole. The Princess of Strurm, whose birth was as sure as her social standing was doubtful, the heroine of countless scandals, ignored by the great heads of her family, impoverished, living no one know how, yet remaining the legal guardian of a step-daughter, who was reputed to be one of the greatest heiresses in Europe. The courts had moved to have her set aside, and failed. A Cardinal of her late husband's faith, empowered to treat with her on behalf of his relations, offered a fortune for her cession of Jeanne, and was laughed at for his pains. Whatever her life had been, she remained custodian of the child of the great banker whom she had married late in life. She endured calmly the threats, the entreaties, the bribes, of Jeanne's own relations. Jeanne she was determined should enter life under her wing, and hers only. In the end she had her way. Jeanne was entering life now, not through the respectable but somewhat *bourgeois* avenue by which her great monied relatives would have led her, but under the auspices of her step-mother, whose position as chaperon to a great heiress had already thrown open a great many doors which would have been permanently closed to her in any other guise. The Princess herself was always consistent. She assumed to herself an arrogant right to do as she pleased and live as she pleased. She was of the House of Strurm, which had been noble for centuries, and had connections with royalty. That was enough. A few forgot her past and admitted her claim. Those who did not she ignored.

Then there was Lord Ronald Engleton, an orphan brought up in Paris, a would-be decadent, a dabbler in all modern iniquities, redeemed from folly only by a certain not altogether wholesome cleverness, yet with a disposition which gained for him sometimes friends in most unlikely quarters. He had excellent qualities, which he did his best to conceal; impulses which he was continually stifling.

By his side sat Forrest, the Sphinx, more than middle-aged, a man who had wandered all over the world, who had tried many things without ever achieving prosperity, and was searching always, with tired eyes, for some new method of clothing and feeding himself upon an income of less than nothing a year. He had met the Princess at Marienbad years ago, and silently took his place in her suite. Why, no one seemed to know, not even at first the Princess herself, who thought him chic, and adored what she could not understand. Curious Flotsam and Jetsam these four, of society which had something of a Continental flavour, personages, every one of them, with claims of recognition, but without any noticeable hallmark.

There remained the girl, Jeanne herself, half behind the curtain now, her head thrust forward, her beautiful eyes contracted with the effort to penetrate that veil of darkness. One gift at least she seemed to have borrowed from the woman who gambled with life as easily and readily as with the cards which fell from her jewelled fingers. In her face, although it was still the face of a child, there was the same inscrutable expression, the same calm languor of one who takes and receives what life offers with the indifference of the cynic, or the imperturbability of the philosopher. There was little of the joy or the anticipation of youth there, and yet behind the eyes, as they looked out into the darkness, there was something—some such effort, perhaps, as one seeking to penetrate the darkness of life must needs show. And as she looked, the white, living breakers gradually resolved themselves out of the dark, thin, filmy phosphorescence, and the roar of the lashed sea broke like thunder upon the pebbled beach. She leaned a little more forward, carried away with her fancy—that the shrill grinding of the pebbles was indeed the scream of human voices in pain!



CHAPTER VI.

"IF ANDREW INTERFERES!"

WITH the coming of dawn the storm passed away northwards, across a sea snow-flecked and still panting with its fury, and leaving behind many traces of its violence even upon these waste and empty places. A lurid sunrise gave a little promise of better weather, but by six o'clock the wind had fallen, and the full tide was swelling the creeks. On a sand-bank, far down amongst the marshes, Jeanne stood hatless, with her hair streaming in the breeze, her face turned seaward, her eyes full of an unexpected joy. Everywhere she saw traces of the havoc wrought in the night. The tall rushes lay broken and prostrate upon the ground, the beach was strewn with timber from the breaking up of an ancient wreck. Eyes more accustomed than hers to the outline of the country could have seen inland dismantled cottages and unroofed sheds, groups of still frightened and restive cattle, a snapped flagstaff, a fallen tree. But Jeanne knew none of these things. Her face was turned towards the ocean and the rising sun. She felt the sting of the sea wind upon her cheeks, all the nameless exhilaration of the early morning sweetness. Far out seaward the long breakers, snow-flecked and white crested, came rolling in with a long, monotonous murmur toward the land. Above, the grey sky was changing into blue. Almost directly over her head, rising higher and higher in little circles, a lark was singing. Jeanne half closed her eyes and stood still, engrossed by the unexpected beauty of her surroundings. Then suddenly a voice came travelling to her from across the marshes.

She turned round unwillingly, and with a vague feeling of irritation against this interruption, which seemed to her so inopportune, and in turning round she realized at once that her period of absorption must have lasted a good deal longer than she had had any idea of. She had walked straight across the marshes towards the little hillock on which she stood, but the way by which she had come was no longer visible. The swelling tide had circled round through some unseen channel, and was creeping now into the land by many creeks and narrow ways. She herself was upon an island, cut off from the dry land by a smoothly flowing tidal way more than twenty yards across. Along it a man in a flat-bottomed boat was punting his way towards her. She stood and waited for him, admiring his

height, and the long powerful strokes with which he propelled his clumsy craft. He was very tall, and against the flat background his height seemed almost abnormal. As soon as he had attracted her attention he ceased to shout, and divided all his attention to reaching her quickly. Nevertheless, the salt water was within a few feet of her when he drove his pole into the bottom and brought the punt to a momentary standstill. She looked down at him, smiling.

"Shall I get in,?" she asked.

"Unless you are thinking of swimming back," he answered drily, "it would be as well."

She lifted her skirts a little, and laughed at the inappropriateness of her thin shoes and open-work stockings. Andrew de la Borne held out his strong hand, and she sprang lightly on to the broad seat.

"It is very nice of you," she said, with her slight foreign accent, "to come and fetch me. Should I have been drowned?"

"No!" he answered. "As a matter of fact, the spot where you were standing is not often altogether submerged. You might have been a prisoner for a few hours. Perhaps as the tide is going to be high, your feet would have been wet. But there was no danger."

She settled down as comfortably as possible in the awkward seat.

"After all, then," she said, "this is not a real adventure. Where are you going to take me to?"

"I can only take you," he answered, "to the village. I suppose you came from the Hall?"



"Yes!" she answered. "I walked straight across from the gate. I never thought about the tide coming up here."

"You will have to walk back by the road," he answered. "It is a good deal further round, but there is no other way."

She hung her hand over the side, rejoicing in the touch of the cool soft water.

"That," she answered, "does not matter at all. It is very early still, and I do not fancy that any one will be up yet for several hours."

He made no further attempt at conversation, devoting himself entirely to the task of steering and propelling his clumsy craft along the narrow way. She found herself watching him with some curiosity. It had never occurred to her to doubt at first but that he was some fisherman from the village, for he wore a rough jersey and a pair of trousers tucked into sea-boots. His face was bronzed, and his hands were large and brown. Nevertheless she saw that his features were good, and his voice, though he spoke the dialect of the country, had about it some quality which she was not slow to recognize.

"Who are you?" she asked, a little curiously. "Do you live in the village?"

He looked down at her with a faint smile.

"I live in the village," he answered, "and my name is Andrew."

"Are you a fisherman?" she asked.

"Certainly," he answered gravely. "We are all fisherman here."

She was not altogether satisfied. He spoke to her easily, and without any sort of embarrassment. His words were civil enough, and yet he had more the air of one addressing an equal than a villager who is able to be of service to to some one in an altogether different social sphere.

"It was very fortunate for me," she said, "that you saw me. Are you up at this hour every morning?"

"Generally," he answered. "I was thinking of fishing, higher up in the reaches there."

"I am sorry," she said, "that I spoilt your sport."

He did not answer at once. He in his turn was looking at her. In her tailor-made gown, short and fashionably cut, her silk stockings and high-heeled shoes, she certainly seemed far indeed removed from any of the women of those parts. Her dark hair was arranged after a fashion that was strange to him.

"You are not English," he remarked, a little abruptly.

She shook her head.

"My father was a Portuguese," she said, "and my mother French. I was born in England, though. You, I suppose, have lived here all your life?"

"All my life," he repeated. "We villagers, you see, have not much opportunity for travel."

"But I am not sure," she said, looking at him a little doubtfully, "that you are a villager."

"I can assure you," he answered, "that there is no doubt whatever about it. Can you see out yonder a little house on the island there?"

She followed his outstretched finger.

"Of course I can," she answered. "Is that your home?"

He nodded.

"I am there most of my time," he answered.

"It looks charming," she said, a little doubtfully, "but isn't it lonely?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps," he answered. "I am only ten minutes sail from the mainland, though."

She looked again at the house, long and low, with its plaster walls bare of any creeping thing.

"It must be rather fascinating," she admitted, "to live upon an island. Are you married?"

"No!" he answered.

"Do you mean that you live quite alone?" she asked.

He smiled down upon her as one might smile at an inquisitive child.

"I have a ser—some one one to look after me," he said. "Except for that I am quite alone. I am going to set you ashore here. You see those telegraph posts? That is the road which leads direct to the Hall."

She was still looking at the island, watching the waves break against a little stretch of pebbly beach.

"I should like very much," she said, "to see that house. Can you not take me out there?"

He shook his head.

"We could not get so far in this punt," he said, "and my sailing boat is up at the village quay, more than a mile away."

She frowned a little. She was not used to having any request of hers disregarded.

"Could we not go to the village," she asked, "and change into your boat?"

He shook his head.

"I am going fishing," he said, "in a different direction. Allow me."

