

THE STREETS OF ASCALON

"If you don't marry that delectable young man," she said, "I'll take a stick and beat you, Strelsa."

"I don't want to—I don't want to!" protested the girl, getting possession of Molly's hands and covering them with caresses. And, resting her soft lips on Molly's fingers, she looked at her; and the young matron saw tears glimmering under the soft, dark lashes.

"I can't love him—that way," whispered the girl. "I would if I could. . . . I couldn't care for him more than I do. . . . And—and it terrifies me to think of losing him."

"Losing him?"

"Yes—by doing what you—what he—wishes."

"You think you'll lose him if you marry him?"

"I—yes. It would spoil him for me—spoil everything for me in the world—"

"Well, you listen to me," said Molly, exasperated. "When he has stood a certain amount of this silliness from you he'll really and actually turn into the sexless comrade you think you want. But he'll go elsewhere for a mate. There are plenty suitable in the world. If you'd never been born there would have been another for him. If you passed out of his life there would some day be another."

"Will we women never learn the truth?—that at best we are incidental to man, but that, when we love, man is the whole bally thing to us?"

"Let him escape and you'll see, Strelsa. You'll get, perhaps, what you're asking for now, but he'll get what he is asking for, too—if not from you, from some girl of whom you and I and he perhaps have never heard."

"But she exists; don't worry. And any man worth his title is certain to encounter her sooner or later."