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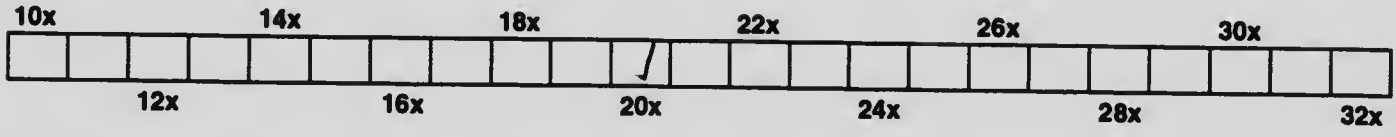

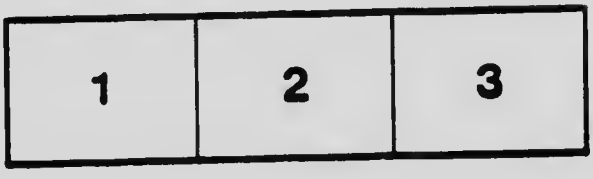

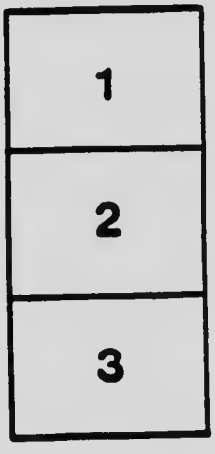

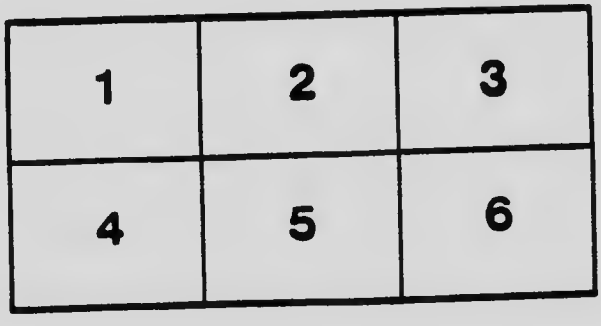

THE CAREER OF MRS. OSBORNE

CARLETON MILLECETE

THE CAREER OF MRS. OSBORNE


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"But it was Van Ingen who could not speak."

The Career of Mrs. Osborne

BY

CARLETON-MILECETE

AUTHOR OF
"MISS VANDELEUR, PIRATE"

ILLUSTRATED BY BAYARD JONES

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PREFACE.

THE principal business of a preface is, the present writers have always believed, to make some explanation of, or to offer some apology for, the work that follows. But the pages of this book need no explanation, as the reader may soon discover for himself; and we have no intention to apologize if, perchance, we succeed in bringing a smile to the lips of one who is so venturesome as to delve into this little comedy. This brief foreword, then, has lost sight of its chief object. We can only wish that some one may find the pleasure in reading of Mrs. Osborne that we experienced in writing of her.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Haste thee, Nymph, and bring with thee
Jest, and youthful Jollity,
Quips, and Cranks, and wanton Wiles,
Nods, and Becks, and wreathèd Smiles,
Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,
And love to live in dimple sleek;
Sport that wrinkled Care derides,
And Laughter holding both his sides.

Milton—"L'Allegro."

Forward and frolic glee was there,
The will to do, the soul to dare.

Scott—"Lady of the Lake."

The Career of Mrs. Osborne

CHAPTER I

A BACKGROUND

When Captain George Wilton of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, only son of Colonel and Mrs. Wilton of The Cedars, Elmhurst, Berkshire, married an American, his mother fainted. When, two years after, he sent his wife and her sister home from India to reside under the parental rooftree until his return, she fainted no more. Instead, a fine light of battle rose in her small brown eyes with the advent of the two daughters of Heth. They should be shown what it meant to brave an outraged English mother in her own drawing-room.

And shown they were throughout an English Winter, with kind advice and other things that

left them calm as glass, till one night in April, when Mrs. George Wilton by the light of one composition candle read and re-read a paragraph in *Vanity Fair.*

It was a small thing to rouse the spirit of the Declaration of Independence in a woman who had married because she was asked to marry, and had borne tacitly with the rule of a mother-in-law because she was asked to bear with it; but rouse that spirit it did. Jane Egerton had married with a Background, a gorgeous tapestry of life with one figure in it. Even on her wedding day her husband had been as a faint etching hung on the splendid color, the too bold lines of that never forgotten Background. And here—the paper shook in her shaking hand—the Background was alive again; was "become a multi-millionaire by the tragic death of his unmarried uncle in the ill-fated *S. S. City of Perth;* had taken a house in Grosvenor Crescent and would entertain largely during the season." The new millionaire was but thirty-three and unmarried.

"Miles," said Mrs. George Wilton to her-

self, "Miles in London! And I'm here, dead and buried—and married to a Wilton!" She wished wildly that she had married a duke or a Vanderbilt, to be able to meet Miles Van Ingen and tell him so.

She remembered the last time she had seen him. It was at church, the evening service. She could see now that country choir, the ghostly purples and pinks of the east window against the dying light outside. It was a queer way to remember Van Ingen, but it was true; just as the walk home afterward was true, and the good-bye under the big hornbeam by the gate he had been forbidden to enter. He had had no money, no more had she—of course it had been good-bye; he was not the sort of man to ask a girl to marry him and exist in a two-by-four house in Brooklyn. But there was money now, hers as well as his; and—her thoughts crowded so that she could not think. Her eyes fell on a paragraph below the one she had been reading.

Mrs. George Wilton clutched the paper tight to a leaping heart, stared at her own face in the glass and turned from absolutely white to scar-

let, and back again. With shoeless feet she stole along the corridor to the door of her sister's bedroom and closed it behind her with elaborate caution.

"Is the oil stove lit?" she demanded. "Thank heaven!" But she stretched her chilled hands over the hot brass without gratitude. Sarah groaned.

"I've spoiled my best dressing gown trying to abate the smell," she said. "Does it smell —much—outside?"

"Not at all." Jane had been conscious of paraffin yards down the passage, but why say so? Were not the Wilton family all in bed in woolen nightgowns, and safe till morning? Let it smell.

She disposed herself as near the stove as possible, while a polite clock somewhere rang half-past twelve. Everything was genteel in the house of her mother-in-law except her father-in-law, and he was unspeakable. An old Indian who does not smoke and never controls his temper usually is. Colonel Wilton managed his family and his house with a precision as dull as a Scotch story. The days

at The Cedars rolled by in heavy state, punctuated neatly with meals and finished elegantly at ten o'clock with the full stop of prayers.

The object in life of Colonel and Mrs. Wilton was to marry their daughters. They said so in unadorned phrases to their daughter-in-law and her sister. The two girls themselves spoke of possible matches with smug smiles. The smooth garden, the neat fields, the solemn dinners and the weary evenings all seemed saturated with matchmaking to the two American visitors, to whom marriage had never been pointed out as The Only Career of Women.

The two Misses Wilton were considered by their parents to be "on approval," but the supposed approvers had said nothing—they were merely constant in coming to tea.

It had struck none of the Wiltons that the appearance of these male lights on the horizon was coeval with the arrival of Mrs. George Wilton and her sister Miss Egerton. Life at The Cedars did not sharpen the wits. No one ever did anything there but eat, drink and gossip. A letter was an event—to be inquired into. Heavy puddings at luncheon were followed by

heavier ones at dinner. There were no duties, no diversions; and Jane and Sarah had endured existence there for months. Their Colonial blood ran thin in the damp of a cold April, when they were not allowed fires because the label of the month was Spring. In boredom and a raging east wind their noses grew red and chilly, till Sarah in desperation had invested in her contraband oil stove. But Jane was oblivious of it now, even while she sat by it and thawed.

"Sarah," she said, sharply, "are you happy?"

Sarah stared at her.

"Happy! After this afternoon? When Mr. O'Hara came in with his cheerful smile and his red-gold hair—" warming to her subject in the malodorous cheer of her cherished stove and regardless of a certain look on her sister's face—"and mamma-in-law prepared to annex him, then it was that he sat down by me. Think of my daring to appropriate Amelia's lawful prey! Mamma-in-law could have killed me. No wonder she gave us boiled veal for dinner. For you were no better. She intended

Mr. Hopkins for Evelyn, and it was you by whom he seated himself, while his looks—oh, if his looks had only been turned on Amelia! But a married woman has no right to looks from a young man."

"As if I did not hear that every day!" Jane's voice was dryly indifferent, her frown contemptuous. "And what do I want of a Hopkins?"

Sarah shrugged her shoulders.

"He and Mr. O'Hara are all we've had to keep us alive," she said. "Not that they're much pleasure to me. I hate talking to a man when I am surrounded by females with their mouths open like young robins. But we'd have looked well at that ball without them!"

For Colonel Wilton had taken his two daughters, his daughter-in-law and her sister to the Hunt Ball in haste; and had repented at leisure. Jane and Sarah had danced all night with the men who should have been dancing with Evelyn and Amelia. The atmosphere at The Cedars had been thunderous since that ball. Amelia had flashed sheet lightning to the effect

that married women should never go to balls; they were sold, and no longer "on approval." Mrs. Wilton's lightning was the forked form of regretting the exploring and annexing and marrying tendency of young and unprotected Englishmen in wild regions, such as America. The insult to her beloved country stung Sarah now.

"I wish we were in New York," she said, viciously, getting up and beginning to brush her waving hair. "But as we're here I suppose we may as well go to bed. There is nothing to get up for to-morrow, but if we don't sleep we shall look even worse than we do. Your nose was bright red to-day when the drawing-room was so cold." Sarah was vilely truthful.

But truth was what Jane had come for. She stood up in her white dressing gown, her throat rising very straight and round out of its lace and chiffon, her eyes hard, her young shoulders held superbly.

"Sarah," she said, "look at me—look hard. Do you think I'm good-looking? I don't mean pretty. I mean—more."

Sarah's brush waved in mid-air.

"I always said you were a fool to throw yourself away on George, even if it was while we were poor," she said, with the composure of contempt. "You know you're lovely; you always were, even at fifteen. Why do you want me to tell you so?" She looked clear-eyed at Jane as she spoke, at her chestnut-brown hair, her brown eyes, her exquisite azalea-colored cheeks; saw, as the world saw when Jane Wilton passed by, her grace, her carriage, her air that was half princess and half child. "Much good it has done you to be beautiful," she added, huskily, though she liked George. Perhaps she knew too well why Jane had married him.

But Jane's eyes only brightened.

"That's all I wanted to know," she returned, coolly, and sat down. "No woman's beautiful for nothing—when she knows it. It's going to do this much good, it will get us away from here. You said there was nothing to get up for, and no joy in life—but there shall be." She threw back her head with confidence, as became a woman who had always been

lovely. "We will go away from here. We will take a flat in London."

"Take a flat!" with an incredulous glare.

"Take a flat," firmly, "in London. We will live by ourselves, do everything, go everywhere." She swept her hand comprehensively round the horizon.

"We can't," said Sarah, crushingly. "You know they'd never let us go."

"Look here; did you ever read 'Uncle Remus'?"

Sarah nodded.

"Well, when he was just driven to desperation he 'lammed aloose,' and so shall I. We might know plenty of nice people in England. We'll never see any here."

"Men." Sarah's tone was soft and thoughtful.

"Well, men, if you like," unabashed. "But people, not monsters. Anyhow, we are going up to town next week to take a flat near a woman who's a relation of ours, quite a grand person and a beauty."

Sarah gasped.

"What's her name?" she demanded. "Whom do you mean?"

"Jane Osborne," with lofty calm.

Miss Egerton sat paralyzed. When she spoke it was in an awestruck whisper.

"But she——"

"Yes, I know," stolidly. "But the Wiltons don't. And I sha'n't tell them much about her. I don't want them to hunt her down and spend all their waking hours calling on her when they go up to town."

"But she can't be in London; she——"

"She can, just as well as we can. Are you an idiot, Sarah? Don't you remember Newport? She was useful enough there."

Sarah bounced in her chair.

"For two days," she said, solemnly. "And this isn't Newport. And do you imagine you can choke the Wiltons off her—let alone anyone else?"

"I can—just because this isn't Newport. London's a big place; they won't move in Mrs. Osborne's set. They'll never see her."

Sarah broke into wild laughter.

"A beauty!" she gasped. "Oh, I'm not

objecting. I dare say she'll be useful, she sounds so respectable. Mrs. Osborne, it's the name of one of the King's houses; even Mrs. Wilton will think it grand. But I can't see why——"

"You will by-and-bye. Don't you see we must have someone? I'm managing her; you let me alone. Listen now. I shall have a toothache to-morrow, I shall go up to town to see the dentist, and—make arrangements. Why should we stay here? These people are as horrid to us as they dare to be. Praise the saints, they will be ragingly astounded when we say that we're going, and that we've a cousin, Mrs. Osborne, to take us under her wing. They'll be frightened of her, too. Commas don't matter, but you have to take notice of a full stop."

"Why is she a full stop?" breathlessly. "And why do you want her to come to London?"

"Because she's a period," darkly, "and you'll know soon enough why I want her, if you don't now."

"So will George," dryly, "when he arrives

from India and finds us in town instead of under his paternal roof."

Jane's face went white with passion.

"Let George alone. I'm tired of this eternal George dinned at me. He *would* marry me—oh, I know he's dear and nice and sweet, but I want to *live*. I want to be free. I never had any youth, you know I never had. I'm going to use what's left while I can—I'll have forty years to live George's life. Now I'm going to live my own, with Mrs. Osborne and you. Besides," her voice was lowered again. "I can say I really couldn't stand George's people. I hope he'll never grow like them."

Sarah reflected.

"He did look like his mother once, the wet day he made you wear rubbers," she said.

"No, he didn't, Sarah," sharply. "Besides, I'd rather go away and be killed for it than stay here, for I should be certain to go mad or get very plain. We'll go as soon as I can get a—a roof to cover us in town. As for George, it will be time enough to worry about confessing to him when I have something to confess," with a pale smile. "We didn't come

to England to be shut up in jail; we came to enjoy ourselves. And we're going to do it through Mrs. Osborne. For if I told the bare truth about being bored here and wanting to be amused, Mrs. Wilton would send me to a lunatic asylum. She has taught me to be a liar already; if I stayed here she'd teach me to be a murderer. I am going to 'lam aloose,' and, incidentally, pay back every insult she has put on us. Of course," with lofty virtue, "I shall not do anything I'd mind confessing to George."

She gathered her dressing gown about her as she prepared to slip cautiously back to her own room; the paper she had brought with her fell on the carpet—she had got all she wanted out of it.

Sarah put out the oil stove and got into bed by the light of the one candle with which she nightly ruined her eyes in the effort to read a sufficiency of cheerful literature to counteract the effect of the day on her mind.

"Don't worry," she remarked, disposing her pillows high. "You'll do enough—but you won't confess it," and she smiled the smile of

security in the dim light. She bestowed no thought whatever on Mrs. Osborne. The *Vanity Fair* Jane had left behind caught her eye where it lay humped on the floor, and she clawed it with a long arm. It was folded back at the two paragraphs Jane had read—and not mentioned. At the first Miss Egerton started with enlightenment; the second she read aloud to her empty room and her one candle:

> There is an unparalleled opening in town this season for a new beauty. It is said, above a whisper, that there will not be a débutante possessed even of average good looks; and for those who are not débutantes it is permitted to say that it is a long time since they have worn their baby shoes. A new beauty, real and undeniable, and transatlantic for choice, would have the ball at her feet this year. Transatlantic, I say, because we all know how few questions are asked about Beauty backed by Dollars and untrammeled by the "Almanach de Gotha."

"Mrs. Osborne!" said Sarah, in an eldritch whisper. "Goodness gracious me!"

CHAPTER II

THE CURIOUS WILTONS

SARAH sat surrounded by Wiltons in a room that was stuffy in spite of being chilly. She was ostentatiously doing needlework, but she wore her best manner nervously, for Jane had gone to town the day before, and the atmosphere of The Cedars was straining to the nerves when taken undiluted.

"I wonder how Jane's toothache is?" she remarked, tentatively. "I think I will go down to the village and send her a wire."

Mrs. Wilton turned from her writing table with smooth disapproval.

"Oh, why go out? The roads are so damp after last night's storm."

"Storm? Oh, but there wasn't any storm," with wide eyes.

"There was heavy rain," decidedly. "But if you think it necessary to telegraph," with

emphasis—wire was a vulgar term, even commercial—"I will fill up this form for you, and James can take it to the village."

"I should like the walk," faintly.

"Oh, but I think you walk far too much. You keep yourselves thin, you and Jane, with your energetic ways," eying Sarah's slight and languid figure with disapproval. "Shall I write your telegram?"

"Please don't trouble. I can go down this afternoon."

"You are so independent," Mrs. Wilton murmured, sweetly.

Sarah fidgeted. Why had she been such a fool as not to go to town with Jane? Her head ached in the closeness and her arms crept with gooseflesh in the sunless room. Mrs. Wilton never admitted the sun into her house—it faded the carpets.

"If you want to go out, perhaps you would go into the garden with Amelia and pick some flowers," with kindly concession.

"I am not going to do the flowers this morning," said Amelia, looking up from a nightmare of blue embroidery that she was making lurid

with red and yellow. "They were done the day before yesterday. But presently I am going to pick slugs off the anemones. Sarah might come and help me there if she likes."

Sarah shuddered. The fat, slimy things that were soft and cold through her glove, the jar of salt and water to which they must be consigned, made her ill.

"I—I don't think I'll go out this morning, thank you, Amelia," she uttered, faintly. Better a thousand miles of elegant embroidery than half an hour bent double in the exciting slug chase. "My head aches to-day. I think I'll go and take a powder."

"I do not think it can be good to take drugs for headache, my dear Sarah." Remonstrance was the breath of life to Mrs. Wilton. "Try to bear it and it will pass away."

"Those long walks you and Jane take must be bad for you. Evelyn and I never walk, it is so tiring." Thus Amelia.

Sarah bent her eyes firmly on her work, her small, pale face quite expressionless. "If you would walk, or ride, or bicycle, or *something*, you might not be so unbearable to live with,"

she thought, passionately. "If something doesn't happen soon I shall scream, I know I shall."

There was a little stir in the room . a servant came in bearing a note, a very large note on a very small tray. The weary Sarah did not look up. No one ever wrote her any notes at The Cedars.

"You can bring it to me, James," Mrs. Wilton spoke condescendingly, for James was passing by her.

"It is not for you, m'm," uncomfortably. James was a new importation and still had notions of the rights of property.

Mrs. Wilton's brow clouded and then cleared magnanimously.

"If it is for Miss Wilton she is with the Colonel in his study."

James was determined if trembling.

"It is for Miss Egerton, m'm."

Sarah started violently. With a trembling hand she took the large white note from the tray. Why had he used so monogramed an envelope? Why sent it by hand? Oh, if Jane were only here! She rose to leave the room.

"Pray open your letter, my dear."

"Fancy your getting a note! You don't know anyone in the neighborhood—at least, not well." Amelia gazed at the letter with curiosity, but Sarah had clutched the monogram to her palm. "What can it be? An invitation?"

"Hardly, my dear Amelia. Sarah would only be asked anywhere as belonging to our party. Pray open your note, Sarah; we are quite dying of curiosity."

"Don't you know who it's from, Sarah?"

Miss Egerton's drooping soul rose to arms. She was under no obligation to tell the truth to Amelia. With a calm eye and a careful hand she opened the exciting letter, and for one instant sat appalled.

This is to warn you that I am asked over to luncheon. I must see you and hear your plans. I met your sister yesterday and went as far as the junction with her. She seemed in great pain, and told me she found this air too relaxing, and thought of taking a flat in town. O'Hara and I are going up in a day or two. Do tell me your plans. She was looking wretched.

"She!" And this was Amelia's supposed

adorer! Coming to luncheon! He would talk about Jane. How was she to stop him?

"Well, my dear, have you solved the mystery? Is your letter from the rectory?" Even a Yankee connection may be allowed to have notes from the parson's wife.

Sarah's blue eyes met Mrs. Wilton's small brown ones without a tremor. "My note is from Mrs.—Osborne." And if she faintly hesitated before the name no one observed it.

"And who is Mrs. Osborne, my dear?"

"We don't know any Osbornes," in unison.

"She is an American—" once launched Sarah was floating nobly—"a great friend of ours."

"Oh! I suppose she is staying in the country somewhere?"

The desperate Sarah, slipping the monogramed note wrong side up into a safe pocket, supposed she was.

"I shall ask Mr. Hopkins if he knows her; he is coming to luncheon." Mrs. Wilton purred with excitement. "Amelia, go and put on that pale-green frock of yours. Dear child!" as the obedient Amelia departed, "she looks so

Springlike in it. I always say anyone can wear blue." Sarah wore it all day and every day. "It needs a complexion to wear green."

Sarah was spared a reply by the arrival of Mr. Hopkins, which did not raise her depressed spirit. But she forgot his being small and fussy, because he bore a friendly face; even his blue serge clothes she looked on kindly, till after luncheon. After luncheon they played croquet. Sarah soon saw why Mr. Hopkins had proposed it, for he hit no ball but hers.

"Dear lady, I must speak to you." He settled his ball with care. "Or would you write to me?"

"Colonel Wilton looks over every letter in the postbag."

"Let me meet you somewhere in the village."

"With all the family at my heels," dryly.

"I'll write you to-morrow, then."

"For heaven's sake, never write again!"

"But I must know when you are leaving. Your sister said you would tell me. I'll send a boy for a message."

"Don't send any boys to *me*," furiously.

It was all very well that Mr. Hopkins and Mr. O'Hara should follow them to town as useful adorers, but they should do no more; she would not have them sitting at the door of her flat till she wanted them. Besides, for all she knew Jane's town plans comprehended neither a Hopkins nor an O'Hara.

"It is of no use asking me things," she said, sternly. "I don't know what we are going to do. But we'll write to you from town. I can't write a letter here without being asked why I'm writing; I can't go out without being told not to tire myself and asked where I'm going; I can't even say 'No, thank you,' to pudding. And if you want to say anything to me, don't whisper. You do growl so when you whisper!"

"Dear Sarah does get so excited about games. She is so energetic about everything," said that Spring lamb Amelia to Hopkins as he returned to her side.

And Mr. Hopkins made no reply.

CHAPTER III

THE COMEDY BEGINS

Miss Egerton sprawled on the sofa in a furnished flat in the suburb of West Kensington and surveyed her sister. To arrive at a servantless abode after dark was not her idea of "lamming aloose," and she said so.

Jane laughed.

"I am going to call on my godmother this morning," she said.

"She won't know you from Eve."

"So much the better," with a little laugh. "You wait," and she vanished.

The godmother was Lady Jane Mandeville, daughter of the Earl of Shropshire and wife of Sir Richard Mandeville, late Ambassador at Washington and a power in the land.

Sarah thought, and said nothing. She would make a divine wife for some man some

day; this capacity for holding her tongue would be a priceless benefit to her husband. Of course she was well aware that Jane's visit to her godmother was the result of but one fact—the presence of Miles Van Ingen in town. But Sarah had none of the qualities of a missionary; she had no sermon to preach. However, she would take good care that Jane's little ship should not fly the pirate flag too long or get into troubled seas. For the rest—well, she as well as her sister had the "*wander lust*" in her blood after her course of Wilton society.

Mrs. George Wilton emerged from her coupé at Lady Jane's house in Prince's Gardens looking a vision in frills of soft lace and dull-pink muslin and a hat solely constructed of apple blossoms that would have made a Devonshire apple tree look as if suffering from blight.

Lady Jane was at home. She did not remember her goddaughter, but as Jane had been exactly two when the Ambassadress left Washington she had not expected an affectionate greeting. No one with a figure more like a hippopotamus than any other living thing can possess the memory of a Royalty. She prompt-

ly explained that she was one of the goddaughters.

Lady Jane began with the painfully affable smile she had acquired in the early days of her husband's career, but she gradually succumbed to the charm of the girl, and waxed natural.

"Was your father the copper Egerton, or the oil, my dear?" she inquired.

"Neither," said Jane, firmly. "He was the Senator."

"Oh, of course!" cheerfully. "I know all about you now. You must forgive me for my want of memory. After I left Washington I learned my work better, and I kept a book. There were so many babies wherever I went, and I am a wretched hand at names," plaintively. "I never could tell them apart unless their mothers were with them." She sighed, and then her face lit up. This girl was more than pretty, and had come just in the nick of time to save her trouble. Sir Richard Mandeville was rather a bother to his obedient spouse, and that very morning had told her her parties consisted of the ugliest women in London—adding that he knew why, with a sneer. She

"Lady Jane was at home."

had not answered him; her passion for her too amorous lord had only survived sufficiently to make her wish to keep him innocently amused, and here was the means at her hand.

"Of course you married Osborne," she said, and plainly Mrs. Osborne's name was not unknown to her, for she nodded approval.

Jane sat in scarlet silence, and then nodded like a mandarin. It was not she who had told a lie.

"Well, you are not 'Plain Jane,' as they used to call me in the days of my youth! You will have a great success here, I foresee that. You are lucky to be a widow and so fascinating. I am very glad to see you," and she was —it would take Richard off her mind.

"I am giving a ball next week;" her playful manner was almost elephantinely ridiculous. "You must come. I love pretty people, and your women do know how to dress. I yearn to have a beauty at my shows." Here Lady Jane beamed with great amiability. "You must let me see a lot of you and your companion. Did you say she was your cousin?"

"No," replied Jane, truthfully, if reluctantly.

But her godmother did not wait for explanations. Sir Richard had killed her taste for them—he had so many for one sin, and all so different, that it was not surprising.

"You must let me launch you," was all she said.

Jane laughed for joy. It was such plain sailing, and she did so long to be happy and forget the whole duty of woman as preached by the Wilton family. She rose to go.

"Good-bye, dear." Lady Jane kissed her new-found godchild with effusion. She had a meeting at two on the disposal of superfluous women, and the thought was depressing. How could she, one of the most superfluous of women, dispose of the others?

But Jane departed feeling as if someone were waving chiffon through her cloudy brain. She paid a mysterious visit to a house-agent, and wrote a note to Lady Jane, after securing a furnished house and its stamped note paper.

Lunch time had long passed when Mrs. George Wilton arrived at her suburban flat, to find Sarah yawning in a big chair by the window.

"You've been away a century," said Miss Egerton, crossly. "I suppose she kicked you out. Your frills weren't wasted on her footman, I dare say. Did she make you feel small? Oh, I've been so bored! I have had nothing to do but count fourteen women with purple faces playing tennis in the square, and each one's skirt was four inches longer in the back than in the front. Why does the suburban woman think there is something immoral in a smart short skirt?"

"Eve did not bother about her toilet or the lack of it till she met the devil," said Jane, sententiously. "They haven't met him. Nowadays it is worse to be suburban than American; even Colonials are better than dwellers in Suburbia."

"I don't want to hear about Imperialism," said Sarah, petulantly. "I want to hear your adventures. And I may as well tell you, I won't live here!"

"You needn't," said Jane, concisely. "She asked us to a ball next week. Have you a gown?"

"Have I a gown? I've four gowns. Did

she really ask us? It is—" in a tone of concentrated fear—"all right?"

Jane nodded.

"You see before you—Mrs. Osborne!" she said. "Lady Jane says so."

"What?" The gentle Sarah's voice was slightly shrill.

"It must be Osborne, or no ball." Jane's voice was languid. "And I've taken a house in Eaton Place."

"I see: 'no ball,' like cricket! Yet, after all, what's in a name?—except to the Wiltons. But Mr. Van Ingen," brutally, "where does he come in?"

"Don't know till I see him," coolly, though her face flushed.

"And this flat?" stupidly.

"Is for Wilton letters and Wilton visits," quietly. "We put a maid in it and come and go as it is necessary. No Wilton shall ever see Mrs. Osborne—or Lady Jane."

"Oh!" said Sarah. She rose with a skip. "Well, now let us think what I shall wear to the ball. Blue? Yes, blue, the immortal creation of my dear Paquin." And as Jane had cast care away, so did she, to all appearance.

CHAPTER IV

A DEAD LION

THE rooms at Lady Jane's were full, very full; yet the new goddaughter was noticed, most carefully noticed. The fame of the fortune of Jane Osborne had crossed the Atlantic, but wealth at a distance is not really interesting, and in this case distance had lent disenchantment, for certainly no one had ever heard of her good looks. Now the view was too alluring.

Mrs. Osborne wore white, white with the shine of moonlight on it, and in her eyes, too, was moonlight. She had plenty of partners, and if she kept some blanks in her card no one saw them. She stood discoursing to Sir Richard Mandeville, who, of all men in London, had the most brains and the quickest eye for the charms of a woman. But in spite

of his outspoken admiration she was bored, and more. Her eyes ached with looking for the man she had come to find; and her heart, too, ached, in spite of the introduction to the great world her godmother had given her that night. As her host led her through the hall they were mobbed by a well-bred crowd, whose stares at the new star were too intent to be reassuring to Jane, even though her companion enjoyed them.

"They are worse than a mob of cattle looking at a red umbrella," said she, calmly.

Sir Richard laughed, being for once grateful to his wife.

"You are the red umbrella," he said.

She did not hear him. She saw a man leaning against the wall. He was tall, with sleepy gray eyes that she knew could sparkle like the sea in the sun; and his clean, hard chin with the little cleft in it, his determined mouth, were printed on her heart with indelible distinctness. That mouth had spoken the awful words that turned life into ashes for Jane Egerton, when he had said he never meant to marry, and said truly. The Wild World was his everlasting

portion—the sea, the sound of wind in the rigging, the rip of the paddle, the sleep under the stars. All these things made life for him, not the arms of a woman, even of the woman he worshiped. If he could have had all, indeed! But to the poor man only one thing comes, and Van Ingen chose his—with soft words, yet he chose it. Now that he was a millionaire, the woman who looked at him knew a choice was no longer necessary. For her, life with him would have been heaven. It is always so when a woman plays the game of life with gold and the man plays with counters. Her admiring companion, who knew he was one of the most attractive men in London, was quite happy, even to beaming at Lady Jane. To his wife's goddaughter he was only a little pebble on the side of the river of life, and while she pretended to listen to him her eyes looked long and long at the man against the wall. As if he had suddenly awakened from sleep, Van Ingen started. For a moment the two pairs of eyes were locked; the next he was through the crowd and at her side.

"Ah, Van Ingen, I see you know Mrs. Os-

borne!" said Sir Richard, genially. He was surprised to find the two acquainted, but as he had to join his wife to welcome Royalty he bowed the celebrated bow that had reduced the hearts of so many women to pulp, murmured he hoped she would remember her promise to him of the tenth dance, and vanished. Mr. Van Ingen took Mrs. Osborne's hand and put it on his arm. He held it rather high, close to his side; and she felt his heart beating like a trip-hammer. Without speaking they went down the steps to a little door that led to a tiny garden—empty as Paradise.

"The grass is wet." Mrs. Osborne hesitated on the edge. Did she fear the dampness for her feet, or the darkness of the shadows for her heart?

In the dim light of the fairy lamps Van Ingen took her up in his arms and carried her to a couple of chairs in the shadow. He trembled a little as he put her down gently, and his old tyrannical, barbaric love for her swept over him like a wave out of a smooth sea.

From the doorway Sarah saw him. No one else did, for Miss Egerton blocked the view—

shoulders were worn wide that year. She turned so sternly that her partner asked her what was wrong.

"Not the ice," replied she. "It was very good. I am thinking of the proverb: 'Better a living dog than a dead lion.'"

"What do you mean by it?" asked the bewildered man.

"I mean that it is better to risk everything to find out that the lion you worship is dead than it is to worship him as a live, far-away king with whom you lived in the past. Most men—most lions—sign their own death warrant, because no lion can live and be good in a cage."

"You mean they bite their keepers?" said the man.

"Exactly," she assented. "And then one loves one's own dear, good dog again."

"A pet lion often leaves a scar," with a laugh. "He gets too affectionate, he——"

"Oh, no, he can't!" interrupted Sarah. Perhaps she was chilly, for she shuddered as she continued her reflections to herself.

"Jane can keep her head," thought she.

"Van Ingen always was peculiar. He was too unselfish ages ago, and unselfishness in a man is usually inspired by poverty in the girl. Therefore he will probably be selfish now; he will believe that he has never forgotten his love for Jane. And as he takes love in long draughts, just as he takes his excursions into the wild places of the earth with all his strength, there'll be trouble."

Van Ingen did not ask Mrs. Osborne any questions, though she had been dreading them. He had heard about her from Lady Jane Mandeville, and did not want to be told the details of the past. That past concerned her husband, not him.

CHAPTER V

A BREATH OF LIBERTY

"ARE these all the letters?" Jane looked at the one maid with her lovely smile.

"Yes, m'm. The two gentlemen who called—" The maid hesitated almost stupidly, though she was not at all a stupid girl. It was only that she had never imagined anyone so beautiful as her new mistress looked to-day. It was not Mrs. Wilton's clothes—they were plain enough, nor her hat—which was not, but herself. Her rose-and-white smile, the soft starriness of her eyes, her radiancy that seemed to light the dingy little narrow pa[illegible] She was good-looking when she engaged me," thought the dazed Adams, "but she's a thousand times more so now." Then she realized that she had stopped in the middle of a sentence. "They were very sorry not to find you at home," she ended, hastily.

"You said——?"

"Yes, m'm. As you told me."

Mrs. Wilton nodded.

"Then tea, please, Adams," and she followed Sarah into the microscopic drawing-room. It looked very unused for the abode of a fortnight, and this rather struck Jane. "We ought to get more settled looking, really," she said. "You know, Sarah, we've been here long enough."

Sarah made no answer, but stretched herself on the solid sofa with a reckless display of faultless shoes. "Jane, will you ever forget The Cedars' farewell? Colonel Wilton's ponderous growls in the background were really like distant thunder. How could you be so brave as to leave? I should have wept and remained."

"It was I supplied the lightning," grimly. "Don't think about it," and she recklessly pushed her best bodice into a drawer too small for it.

Across the garden were other flats in other high brick mansions, and ever since the imposing arrival of two smart young women and wonderful dressing bags at No. 16, Rossetti

Mansions, a lady with an opera glass had been engaged in staring in at their windows from the flat opposite. Sarah observed her with disapproval.

"I shall give that old person something to see," she said, and lit a cigarette in front of the window with a joy only marred by being unable to see the countenance behind the opera glasses. "What was in the letters?" she inquired, suddenly.

"Nothing. Just settling for to-night, and sorry to have missed us when they called. It's lucky they write more letters about themselves than Horace Walpole, or they might have gone on missing us. I could have borne it," dryly "if they had stayed with Amelia."

Sarah's lip straightened.

"I think they'll be refreshing," she said, just as dryly. "At all events, they have come up, and as we have to dine with them we may as well think we like it. Perhaps you'd rather be dining with Royalty, but I wouldn't. Give me my little amusements."

Jane chuckled. Somehow it was very funny —Jane Wilton coupled with Royalty.

"No, I wouldn't, for that would please the W[illegible]. They'd be much angrier at my din[illegible] restaurant with their sacred Hopkins. But it's past seven! Come and dress. It will take indecent haste to get us into Charles street by a quarter-past eight."

[illegible] flying departure, indeed, that neither [illegible] observed the trifling fact that every denizen of the flat was observing their exit with deep interest. Jane had taken a suburban flat, thinking it would be more retired, quieter. She had made no allowance for suburban curiosity. The neighbors gazed with disapproval at Jane's curled head and Sarah's high-heeled shoes as they disappeared into the hansom. A man standing at the nearest point of vantage caught the name of the restaurant where they were dining, flung out in Jane's high, sweet voice as she drove off, and he whistled to the empty air.

Meanwhile the unconscious dames drove on joyfully. How shocked, how ill would their relations be if they could only see them!

"And what have you been doing?" inquired the ambrosially arrayed O'Hara at dinner.

"You ought to have done all sorts of things in this fortnight. Have you been asked about much? Or do you want to be? Would you go to the Duchess of Aston's dance if I got cards?"

"West Kensington flats aren't asked to duchesses'." Jane laughed her lovely laugh as she said it. "No, no! Don't get us cards for anything. We'd rather just dine quietly with you and Mr. Hopkins." The heart of Hopkins bounded. "When you go to the Duchess's we will sit quietly in our suburb and imagine you."

"You'll have to imagine very hard. I sha'n't go where you are not going. As for Hopkins, he never goes out."

Something like relief lighted Mrs. Wilton's eyes.

"Bores me," said Mr. Hopkins. "Tired of their old beauties and don't want to be of their new ones—all paint and French dressmaker!" He looked at Jane's clean cheek and sweetly simple little gown. "Though there's the usual story this year. They say—well, they say she's a revelation! But I don't believe it."

The azalea face his eyes were on paled a lit-

tle. With the Background in town and "entertaining largely," Mrs. George Wilton, who could never go to his parties, had perhaps no desire to hear of the woman who could.

"I'm told she really is exquisite—" O'Hara was a great man for justice. "I must meet her! The new American millionaire is running her. At least, the millionaire's supposed to have discovered her, though he keeps mightily in the background and swears he hardly knows her."

Only Sarah knew what sick apprehension made the quick coldness in Jane's voice.

"What's her *name?*" she said. She drank cold water thirstily. The Background must love a woman if he would lie for her. It made her murderous to think of any other woman's lips at his.

"Name? Osborne, Mrs. Osborne. She—What's the matter?"

Mrs. Wilton had dropped her glass, and her sister thought she could see her heart leaping under the crêpe bodice.

"Mrs. Osborne! Is *she* your new beauty?

Why," with a laugh of wild relief, of pleasure, for the Background was welcome to a woman like Mrs. Osborne, "she's not a beauty at all! I don't call her even good-looking. She's as made up as ever she can be—certainly not worth while going out of your way to see."

Mr. Hopkins hid a smile in champagne. His beloved was so womanly with her guess-work "made up." Mr. O'Hara was bewildered.

"But you haven't seen her." He was too polite to say it was unlikely she ever would.

Jane had the loveliest laugh in the world, the laugh of a beautiful mouth that does not care if you see every tooth in it.

"Seen her!" she cried. "Why, I know her. So does Sarah. She's a relation of ours, though she has never had much to do with us. But she's going to be of the greatest use to us while we're in town. Oh, I dare say men," scornfully, "might call her a beauty! She always has shoals of them about her. I saw her to-day. She was going to meet the Duke of Cornwall at dinner to-night."

Mr. Hopkins was perturbed. Shoals of men

and Royalty were no surroundings for his sweet, simply mannered Jane.

"Dear me!" said he, "will you see her often?" He scented danger for his schemes of possessive dinners, of protective theatre parties. Instead, would he have to call, to dine, to scour London in the wake of the relation of the beauty?

"Very often." Jane spoke firmly. "When my 'in-laws' come up to town and want us to go to them, I shall always be going to Mrs. Osborne's. You see, we have very few friends in town and Mrs. Osborne will be convenient."

"Has she a husband?" Mr. Hopkins's voice was hollow. The husbands of beauties were always fast or drunken. He trembled for his Jane.

"He's dead," she said, shortly. "There are Mrs. Osborne and her father-in-law, old Mr. Osborne; and his son, Mr. Howard K. Osborne, on a visit from Boston, U. S.; and that is all. Old Mr. Osborne and Mr. Howard are going to take us wherever we want to go. Mrs. Osborne won't want us to bore her. And I—

sometimes I am afraid she bores Sarah a little."

"I see," said O'Hara, stiffly. "Are they—nice? They sound—charming;" sarcastic effort all over him.

"Very nice," returned Sarah. She had taken no notice of Jane's last sentence. She was looking her prettiest, her curly hair shining golden in the pink-enwrapped light—"amber dropping" hair, Mr. O'Hara, being susceptible, had fondly called it to Mr. Hopkins. Many men were susceptible where Sarah was concerned. "Can't you understand?" Her little teeth showed white between her fresh lips. "The Osborne men relations do not exist. We have invented them, so that we could give names and dates to the Wiltons. There is really only Mrs. Osborne, and she has me to lunch and gets done with me. I," with ungodly pride, "invented her men relations."

"No! You didn't really!" O'Hara was filled with admiration. "Let me be Mr. Howard K. Osborne, of Boston, U. S. I can be such a good American! What a pity," with feeling, "that the Wiltons know me! If only

you could introduce me as Mr. Howard K. Osborne."

"You would spoil it all," said Jane, with decision. "Mr. Hopkins is to be old Mr. Osborne—to the Wiltons."

Mr. Hopkins remembered sharply that he was thirty-nine. He made an effort to smile.

"It's simply splendid!" the correctly languid O'Hara spluttered with rapture.

"Gorgeous!" echoed the old Mr. Osborne, faintly. Then with a flash of manly insight: "Whenever you say you are going to the Osbornes, you will come somewhere with us."

"Oh, no," returned Jane, with crushing candor, "not at all. It is to cover up our going where we choose that we have created the Osbornes—*père et fils*. Whenever we do not want my relatives we shall say we are going to the Osbornes."

Sarah yawned.

"We are going home now," she announced. "We are tired."

CHAPTER VI

THE TROUBLES OF A FLAT

"JANE!" said Sarah, shaking the calmly sleeping form, "Jane!"

Jane started up, justly exasperated.

"Good heavens, what a vice you have for early rising! What's the matter? And a wet morning, too! You might let me sleep on a wet morning."

"The bath won't run. And you never could have *looked* at this flat; there isn't any dining-room."

"Well, I knew that. We aren't ever going to dine here, so what would be the good of one? There's a sweet kitchen with rows of white china and a gas stove," severely.

"Oh," said Sarah, darkly. "Well, *I've* had a bath." She enveloped herself in a blue silk garment and departed, leaving Jane's nose once more buried in the bolster.

After all, it was a cheerful novelty to breakfast in a kitchen, and a gas stove made excellent toast. It was not so very hot in the kitchen, if you kept the window and the door open and sat between them. Miss Egerton encouraged her outraged maid to pour her a third cup of coffee. That damsel was convinced that her mistresses were mad, but she, at least, would be primly sane. She stood behind Miss Egerton's chair with a bearing of pomp suited to a banqueting hall, but bursting with intelligence.

"If you please, Miss Egerton," as Sarah looked up for fresh toast, "do you think this flat is *respectable?*" The dark meaning was lost on Sarah.

"No. No flat is respectable," calmly, "without a dining-room. Why, Adams?" For the face of the factotum was portentous.

"Well, Miss Egerton, last night I took a walk in the garden after you went out, and I heard them all wondering who we could be. 'Three pretty young women,' one man was saying as I passed; the ignorant wretch had no idea," with a conscious smirk, "as how I'm your maid."

"Even that couldn't make you ugly, Adams. Is that all?"

"No, Miss Egerton, it's not! The window across from mine in the next flat looks straight into my bedroom, and a horrid man sat in it all the evening and stared in at me. And when I got up after you had come in, to see that the door was locked, there he still was, glaring in, and me in my nightdress."

"Don't look out of the window," practically. "I hear Mrs. Wilton calling, Adams."

"Hear me calling! I should think so." A wrathful apparition stood in the doorway, swathed in white. "The bath won't run out; it's full of gallons of cold water where you had your bath."

"I told you so."

"You said it wouldn't run. I thought you meant the cold-water tap, and I didn't care, because I always use hot water. But it won't run out, and I want my breakfast."

"Dip it out then."

"If you had the Christian habit of hot baths it would have run. Hot water," crossly, "will always run. This flat is perfectly beastly!"

"There is a sweet kitchen with rows of white china and a gas stove."

But Jane was gone, and sounds of woe and dipping were rising from the bathroom. The early riser determined to persist in vice.

In the morning they went shopping in the long roads of Suburbia, because Jane said they were poor. Sarah ruined her skirt in climbing up and down from the tops of omnibuses, and Jane got her feet wet. They lunched at a ladies' restaurant, because Jane vowed nervously that someone she knew might be at Prince's—Jane Wilton, who knew six people in London! Sarah gave way to unbecoming language when she found she could have nothing to drink but tea or coffee. They had coffee, and they expended ten shillings. Jane paid the bill morosely.

"No more ladies' restaurants," she said, grimly, as she squelched with wet feet into the inside of an omnibus, for it was raining like Niagara. She explained as they rumbled toward the flat that having ruined their boots, it was not worth while to pay for a hansom too late to save them. Sarah knew it was for

quite another reason. There is no shelter like an omnibus for uncurled and dowdy wetness.

Mr. Hopkins and Mr. O'Hara had been advised that to come to tea would be useless, but they had sent a humble telegram suggesting dinner at the Carlton; they had even been so fearful of disappointment as to come to convey their divinities thither. But Jane insisted on an Italian restaurant in Oxford street. She said she disliked Prince's, the Carlton and the Cecil.

After dinner Mr. O'Hara beseeched them to come on somewhere. He murmured of the Palace. Mr. Hopkins frowned sternly. He felt himself responsible, especially for Jane, who was the prettier.

"I assure you, my dear chap, they wouldn't like it." He was very protective. "We might go to the Grosvenor Club if you like, or to see Irving. I've a box."

Jane was remarkably tired; also, she loathed theatres and clubs.

"Get two hansoms and we'll go home," she commanded. "You may come in for five minutes."

She had meant one hansom for herself and

Sarah, but Mr. Hopkins was too quick for her.

"Oh, you're going with Billy," he said, sweetly, to the less divine Sarah, and he leaped nimbly in beside Jane. But when they arrived at Rossetti Mansions there was no second hansom behind them.

"Sarah must be here," said Jane, as they entered the fourth-story flat after a weary climb. But Sarah was not there. Hopkins did not repine.

"This is very nice," he observed when he was in the drawing-room. He had been appalled at the narrow darkness of the entry. "The stairs are a little steep, though."

"We don't mind them. You are getting old," returned the practical Jane. "You would never guess who lives in the flat below us."

She pulled up the blinds to let in the cool night air, and the modest interior was plainly visible to the dwellers opposite as Sarah came in, followed by O'Hara. The lady with the opera glass hung breathless from her balcony.

"Well, O'Hara, you have been quick." Mr. Hopkins wore a meaning smirk.

"Where have you been?"

"All over town in a hansom." Sarah was pink and fresh from the night breeze. "We thought of going to supper, but we weren't hungry enough. What is Mr. Hopkins looking so perturbed about?"

"I want to know who lives below you." Hopkins did not approve of the flat, it being too far from St. James's street, where he lived. He had also had suspicions ever since he set foot on the stairs of Rossetti Mansions.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because Mrs. Wilton says it is somebody."

"Of course it's somebody, and you probably know all about her," returned Jane, cheerfully. "It's Winnie Wellwood."

"Not *the* Winnie? the music-hall Winnie? the Duke's Winnie?" Hopkins sat appalled.

"Yes."

"Then it won't do for you to stay here. O'Hara, do you hear this?"

"What a lark!" O'Hara was not appalled. "Is she in now?"

"What a lark! My good chap, these ladies can't stay here. It can't be respectable if they let that woman a flat."

"Oh!" The gravity of the situation dawned on O'Hara, even while he composed his countenance with difficulty. His eyes twinkled. "Fancy Winnie here! I suppose she has changed a lot," regretfully. "She used to be great fun."

Hopkins frowned.

"You must let us get you another flat, Mrs. Wilton. What would your husband say if he knew?"

Mrs. Wilton took a rapid survey of some pages in her George's past. When he and the Duke had lived together in Charlotte street, Winnie had—but no matter. Besides, the rent was paid.

"Another flat?" She skipped the question with masterly alacrity. "Of course not! Winnie won't hurt us. It's not catching."

"Move again!" Sarah was agonized with suppressed laughter. "Not till I have to. Winnie won't eat us. She—she won't see enough of us."

Jane interrupted hastily.

"Our maid says her brougham comes for

"He rushed Mr. Hopkins to the window."

her every night at nine and brings her home at all hours."

"Here's a carriage!" O'Hara was quite excited. He rushed Mr. Hopkins to the window.

"Hush!" growled the virtuous Hopkins, sternly, as Jane and Sarah gave way to wild laughter at the spectacle of the two correct adorers reclining recklessly on the balcony, their heads hanging over the railing and their feet dangling in the room. "Hush; don't make a noise! It's Winnie!"

The world had not been going well with Miss Wellwood, and she had been swamping sorrow. Jane and Sarah were craning from their bedroom window. Below, Miss Wellwood was grabbing at the railings for support and addressing her coachman in unknown tongues.

"Don't listen!" commanded Mr. Hopkins, hastily, leaning well out to adjure the bedroom window. "Don't!"

The anguish in his voice overcame Mrs. Wilton. She laughed till the clear, sweet sound of it fell to the street below. Winnie stopped in

her unsteady career and gazed upward, half-drunk and all-malignant, at the four silhouettes against the lighted windows. Her music-hall yell carried:

"I s'pose you laugh because you've been luckier than me!" and she pointed at the two men.

Mr. Hopkins shot back into the drawing-room, disgustedly brushing himself with black and grimy hands till his hostesses appeared again. He had much to say, but Jane cut him short. She was a little pale. That raucous voice had somehow threatened disaster.

"You must go home now," she said, wearily; "we are sleepy."

"Oh, not yet." O'Hara was suddenly sad. "I am just beginning to feel happy."

"You can feel happy in the cab."

So with regret and solemnity the adorers departed. The lights were out in the passage, and they had to cling closely to the banisters as they slowly stumbled downstairs.

"Did you impress on them that they couldn't come again for a week?"

Jane looked years younger as the door shut

on them. She had forgotten all about Winnie.

"I did," morosely. "I—I shall rather miss them."

But Mrs. George Wilton only gazed radiantly at her reflection as she took the pins out of her hair. "After all, it was very easy to "lam aloose," and Mrs. Osborne was very useful and easy to manage.

"I'm sorry I said she was made up," she murmured, repentantly, to her glass; "so ungrateful!" And she laughed just as Sarah had laughed when the freedom of the flat dawned on her.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW BEAUTY

MRS. OSBORNE came late to the Duchess of Aston's dance, the dance that the Hon. William Craven O'Hara had scorned because Miss Sarah Egerton refused cards for it. It was rather a pity, since thus he could have triumphantly disproved Mrs. George Wilton's slurs on her smart relation. Yes, Mrs. Osborne was beautiful. To know it you had only to look at the women's faces of dark envy, of blank wretchedness, as she passed by them. There was youth in her exquisite grace, but there was no simplicity. She was exotic, fine, strangely sumptuous and unmodern; her face a face that might have smiled on dead men out of Circe's window in strange lands long ago; cut exquisitely, as to show the gods what a woman's face could be. The color of it was like azalea flowers, creaming into the pink that is the pink of

dawn, not of roses. She carried her brown head high, with a curious backward loll of it on a flawless throat, and under her slow lids shone the eyes of a woman to whom the world is very young.

At least a man who knew her thought so. The woman next him was only wondering why Mrs. Osborne was not looking radiant triumph and provocation at the gathering cloud of men. Also, if that plain brown were beautiful in hair, it was a pity it cost two guineas a week to keep hers Titian red.

"What?" She was absent enough to be irritable, but hastily recovered herself. "Perfectly exquisite, is she not?"

"A woman whose mouth is scarlet and not crimson goes far," murmured the man who had been thinking of Circe, and promptly he went far himself—to Mrs. Osborne's very elbow. Her foamy skirts, that were golden-threaded lace an dawn-yellow chiffon, on something pale flame under that, brushed his foot. The cost of them would have kept Jane Wilton in West Kensington for a month. The faint, keen scent from them pleased the man, just as did the inef-

fable smartness, the grace and air of their wearer. His face was impassive, chilly, as she turned and saw him.

"There's no supper yet," she said, with a laugh. "I wonder why." Her face was lovely as she laughed, even if the sorceress look in it was intensified.

Everyone else laughed, too.

"Ask the Duke," said a man.

"Is he more truthful than his equerry? I," placidly, "don't like equerries."

"He's more patient," said the equerry, slowly. "To-night, at least, he's waited an hour."

"Oh, not for me! Nobody ever waits for me," serenely. But the equerry was gone.

Royalty, simple-mannered and rather injured was at her side. Mrs. Osborne liked Royalty, who was a gentleman, as all Royalties are not. She smiled as she went away with him, looked her loveliest as she sat beside him at a table where even the Duchess ceased from troubling. If the marvel of her eyes was on a hawk-faced man across the room, no one knew it—particularly the man.

Yet when the Duke was gone he was unos-

tentatiously beside her, and he laughed as she spoke tranquilly.

"Once round the room," said Mrs. Osborne. No one would have known she had dressed and come just to waltz once round the Duchess's ballroom in Van Ingen's arms.

His shoulder was like iron under her hand, his coat so near to her cheek the dearest thing in the world, his strong, easy hold of her—dear God! to have had his arm forever between her and all others! She made him stop, because the sharp thought hurt her.

"In here," he said. The room was empty. "Now sit down and let me look at you. I get the most awful feeling every now and then that you are a dream, and that I'm going to wake up."

"If you want to wake!" said Mrs. Osborne. A childish gayety lighted her eyes. "It's too funny," she said. "You and I, who were nobodies, poor nobodies—once!"

"You were always a princess." He had a trick of throwing back his head and smiling, his keen eyes very sweet.

Mrs. Osborne's laugh was as young as Jane Wilton's own.

"What! When you used to come to Aunt Adela's by the back gate before breakfast, and had to run all the way home to get past the other houses before they woke up? I had two hideous cotton frocks she made me wear, black with white dots on them. No one could look like a princess in white dots."

"I wish I'd got up earlier and run more!" sharply. "I wish the ship that took me away from you had never sailed. Do you know how I've always remembered you? In one of those cotton frocks, kneeling down and picking strawberries. I came behind you. You didn't expect me."

"Oh, no!" She made no pretense of having forgotten. "I didn't expect you. I was caught. I was all over strawberries. I could have cried."

"You were like a princess dressed up. It was no surprise to me when I found you like this. I knew you'd marry. If I hadn't, I—I think I should have gone back to look for you."

Mrs. Osborne's hand pressed her fan a little.

"Would you prefer the cotton frock?" she said, languidly.

"No, you were made for this! If I had gone back——"

"It might have been to find you'd lost your taste for cotton."

"It's all the same. It's you."

Somehow Mrs. Osborne remembered what time it was.

"And—me—is going home," she said, gayly.

"Do you know that I—" he rose because she did—"I never danced with you in those days? I made a vow I'd never dance again till I had the girl of my heart in my arms."

"Girls are out of fashion," observed Mrs. Osborne, sweetly. She had seen her hostess's frock in the doorway, within earshot.

"I've kept the vow, all the same," he returned, under his breath.

It was the Duke of Aston who put Mrs. Osborne in her carriage. When she drove away in the May dawn no one could have thought her impassive, indifferent to success. She put down both windows, drank the wine-sweet air avidly, wide-nostriled, full of pride. Her face was wicked with triumph. She, who

had picked strawberries in her aunt's garden in a hideous cotton frock, had taken the town by storm; had kept the heir to the throne waiting till it pleased her to arrive; had the desire of her eyes, the love of her heart within reach, when she chose to put out her hand. It was for this that she was mad with joy. No matter what happened, she would never let him go—while he wanted her! And she laughed. She was sure of him. Poor Jane Wilton, with her white frocks, and her Background! But Jane Wilton was no actress, perhaps, and carried her head a little forward as Nature put it, and let her crimson lips alone. Mrs. Osborne of the scarlet lips would have the kisses that Jane had never forgotten.

With money and unerring taste even a furnished house in Eaton Place may be made soft-colored and individual, a dimly gorgeous setting to the loveliest thing in it. Mrs. Osborne's house was that, and more. Against silks thick with silver embroidery, satins worked by cloistered nuns for princesses, faint-colored like sunsets and pale dawns, she shone starlike in her drawing-room; against brocade hangings,

the spoils of forgotten palaces, she sat at her dinner table. But for her bedroom she did not care. It was as its owner left it, hideous, frankly English; so far, the only room in the house that did not matter. She woke up in it, and laughed as she saw that her companion had brought the chocolate, instead of her maid.

"I had a gorgeous time!" she said. "I nearly woke you up to tell you of it. Oh, why don't you go about with me?"

The companion laughed.

"I'm saving money. You said so yourself the other day. Here's the paper, all about you! And the Ladies' Letter in the *World* says that 'to be a Beauty it is apparently only necessary to do one's hair low and wear green shoes.' I told you someone would spot those shoes. Do look at the invitations. How shall I answer them? Oh, and Lady Alderney says she'll be delighted to present you at the Drawing Room!"

"I've no doubt she would," with vigor. "It would take more than delight to get me to Court," chuckling. "I'm—too American to spend such a dull morning. I'll accept all the

nice things, though. Lady Lanark's dinner dance—I must go there. Miles Van Ingen's river party, of course. I wish you'd come—he said to bring you. Three balls, good houses, too; two invitations for Ascot week—they can wait. I don't," thoughtfully, "want to crowd every day till I can't turn round. What's that?"

A telegram lay, flimsy and ugly, among the smart notes.

"It was among what I got last night. I didn't show it to you. It's for Saturday week," cheerfully.

"I don't care two straws," said Mrs. Osborne, deliberately. She scribbled a list of engagements on the back of a card. "On Saturday week you and I are going to—to Hastings. Nothing can interfere with that. You can 'unavoidable absence from town' all these. They're nearly all dull. But these—" she had put six invitations together neatly—"I'll manage these. I," composedly, "will dovetail them in."

They were all places where Miles Van Ingen was going.

CHAPTER VIII

A FAMILY PARTY

THE flat looked grubby to Mrs. George Wilton as she came in. Sarah, very heartlessly gay in her best tea gown, pitchforked a letter across the placid tea table into her sister's unwilling hand.

"Another despatch," she said. "That makes five, counting the telegram."

Jane tore it open, groaned and read aloud:

"DEAR JANE: We hope to arrive in town this afternoon and are looking forward to seeing you to-morrow. Will you go to our rooms (95, Cromwell road) and give our landlady a few last directions? Tell her we shall want dinner at seven, soup, fish, whiting or haddock —six small ones, Jane—be sure you mention six, and small. They must be about the size of a herring, and she is to fry them. Order a

nice vegetable—cauliflowers are good, especially at night after a long journey. We like a plain pudding, as I have to be careful what I eat. Will you order stewed prunes?—Colonel Wilton likes them. And a pennyworth of fresh cream for me. Order a fourpenny loaf of bread. On Sunday I have in the morning two tumblerfuls of new milk, and two pennyworth of cream to last till the afternoon. She must get the same quantity fresh in the evening. Now, my dearest Jane, I am,

"With much love,

"Yours affectionately,

"ISABELLA WILTON."

"Do buy them a cow," said Sarah, crossly. "It would save so much calculation."

"We shall have to lunch with them to-morrow," Jane announced, forlornly.

"But not dine. I will not dine there on Sunday night. We are dining with the Osbornes. Will dearest Amelia be with them?"

"Of course. And I meant to have had such a nice Sunday!" wailed Jane.

"Well, don't let's go near them."

"We must; at least I must. There's a postscript that they expect us at luncheon."

"I shall read the *Pink 'Un* in bed before I go, and tell all the anecdotes. There was a nice one last week about town Sundays."

But even the bold Sarah's heart sank as they entered the respectable lodgings that the Wilton family gilded by the name of residential hotel. Upstairs the sisters toiled, up and up again, till Sarah was breathless in her best corset.

"Do they live on the roof?" she demanded, stopping so suddenly that Jane nearly fell over her, thereby causing an unseemly noise.

"Sh! This is the door."

Sarah sailed in behind Jane's train, not the same Sarah who was to be seen at Rossetti Mansions, all laughter and sweet youthfulness, but a pale Sarah, with a hard-set lip. She held up her head determinedly, and avoided the Wilton embraces with a hand pushed stiffly out before her. Jane, alas! dared not so fortify herself. Each and every Wilton kissed her with effusion.

"Now that we have arrived," said Mrs. Wil-

ton, kindly, "you will be able to go out a little. I dare say you have found that London is a very dull place when one knows no one." She could say "I told you so" to Jane's independence, even if she could not crush it.

"Dull? Oh, no, I don't think we have been exactly dull." Jane's eyes were guileless and her smile truly childlike.

"I suppose you have done a great deal of shopping," Amelia said, with some envy, though she assured herself as she said it that Jane's pale-pink muslin and Alençon lace were not pretty at all—there was no stiff collar. "You have on a very peculiar bodice, and surely those are new pearls?"

"Are they?" carelessly. "I almost forget what I have bought."

Mrs. Wilton looked alarmed.

"I hope you are not spending too much, my dear. George——"

"Oh, I never take any money from George," calmly. "He has his and I have mine. I should hate taking money from my husband."

Colonel Wilton grunted an approving grunt.

Would that he had trained his Isabella to such heights!

Isabella sat knitting furiously.

"Really, Jane," she said, with a vexed laugh, "you stick at nothing. It sounds quite improper to speak of money and your husband like that. Pray remember Eveyln and Amelia."

"And Sarah," lightly. "But my improper sentiments can't corrupt them, since they haven't any husbands."

"Sarah is looking a very bad color—" being routed, Mrs. Wilton attacked in a new place —"and very thin."

Sarah grew scarlet.

"Green blinds," she said, determined to be calm. "They make us all look frightful."

"No, I think it is perhaps that your frock is too trying for you."

But Sarah did not respond. With her other ear she heard Colonel Wilton engaging Jane, who had let them know that she had gone to see Mrs. Patrick Campbell.

Mrs. Wilton also had heard.

"I hope you did not go alone, Jane."

"Oh, no." Jane settled herself more comfortably in her uncomfortable chair and carefully avoided Sarah's eye.

"Who went with you?"

"I did not know you had any London friends." Thus Evelyn and Amelia.

"Neither have we—many."

Jane paused, and Sarah sat appalled. What was the matter with her? Had she lost her wits?

"Jane went with the Osborne's," she put in, briskly. "You remember my having a note from Mrs. Osborne at The Cedars?"

"With Mrs. Osborne and old Mr. Osborne and Mr. Howard K. Osborne, his son. He has lived so much in America!"

Jane gave the catalogue slowly.

"That is no reason he should take up their odious customs, I should think," Mrs. Wilton remarked, icily. "Mr. Howard K. Osborne! He must be most objectionable!"

"I don't think you would find him so," sweetly. "I think he looks a little like Mr. O'Hara."

Sarah gave a frightened start. This was really too wild.

"Mrs. Osborne is a relation of ours," she said, hurriedly. "The Osbornes are American, you know."

"So I should have supposed."

"Did you like the play?" inquired Amelia.

"I liked Mrs. Pat."

"Mrs.—? oh, Mrs. Patrick Campbell! You speak very flippantly, Jane. Did you sit beside Mrs. Osborne? I hope you are always very careful to sit beside her. It looks so much more modest."

"I sat between old Mr. Osborne and Mr. Howard K. Osborne," said Sarah, frantically, for there was an evil light in Mrs. George Wilton's eye.

"Osborne? Ha, I don't know any Osbornes now! I did once, though. Where do these people come from? Isabella, I wish you'd ring for luncheon," shouted Colonel Wilton.

Jane plunged wildly.

"Kalamazoo," she responded, to the annoyance of Sarah, who had meant to say Cohoes.

"What's his name—the father's?"

Now Jane had a fetish, and the fetish was a china dog of vile pottery, with a foolish smile and large blue eyes. Since the age of three she had possessed it, and wherever she went the china dog went also.

His name? Suddenly the name of the fetish occurred to her. She cast a stern glance at Sarah.

"Mr. Osborne's Christian name is Reginald Adolphus," she said, blandly.

And then the image of the true Reginald Adolphus, with his spotty china coat, his spaniel ears and his collie tail, presented itself too vividly to her mental vision. She began to laugh helplessly.

"It is—it is such a funny name!" she gasped between her hysterical chuckles, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Funny! I don't think it's funny!" snorted Colonel Wilton. "Very ordinary I call it. Isabella, I want my lunch."

"You would think it was funny if you saw him," retorted Jane.

Sarah rose hastily and looked out of the window. The amiable china smile of Reginald

Adolphus had occurred to her also. But Jane was too reckless; they would be getting into trouble if she went on like this. She feared the worst during luncheon. No matter how hard pressed one may be at luncheon, it is impossible to rise and fly to the window to hide a too ingenuous countenance.

"I have tickets for the Albert Hall this afternoon," Mrs. Wilton announced as she carved the orthodox hot roast beef. "Your tickets, Jane, came to four shillings."

"Oh, I am afraid we can't go! That is, I haven't any money." Jane was off her guard and pattered weakly.

"It would be a pity for you to miss the chance of hearing a little good music," Mrs. Wilton pursued. "You can owe it to me. There are always such nice ballads at the Albert Hall on Sundays, about shipwrecks and the sea and prayers—quite religious. I am so fond of sacred music!"

Sarah glared rebelliously at Jane. But Jane was hungry, and was eating roast beef and boiled potatoes as if she liked them.

"Thank heaven, I have on my best corset!"

reflected Sarah, angrily. "I couldn't feel hungry if I were starving." She looked distastefully at the waxy boiled potato, the overdone beef on her plate.

"I think, mamma dear, I had better lend Jane a bonnet, or at least a toque. A young married woman can hardly go to the Albert Hall on a Sunday in a large hat."

Jane, too stupefied for speech, gazed at Evelyn.

"What is the matter with my hat?" she demanded at last.

"It is a little—well," Mrs. Wilton nodded portentously. "Evelyn is quite right, my dear Jane. You can borrow her traveling toque to wear. And really, Jane, I consider so thick a veil *fast!* One would think you did not want to be recognized."

Jane clutched her headgear with both hands.

"Thank you, I will go as I am," she said, "or there is no need for us to go at all."

"But that would be a waste—the tickets are paid for." To pay for anything and then not use it, even if it were a...rrent, was out of Mrs. Wilton's range of vision. "And perhaps

no one will notice your hat. But you must really get a nice, quiet little bonnet to wear when you go about with us."

"I think," observed Jane, very slowly and politely, "I shall not require that bonnet." But the point was wasted on her relatives.

"We shall be engaged a great deal this week," Sarah put in, firmly. "Mrs. Osborne has come to London to—to see a doctor. And he says she must go about everywhere and be amused. It is absolutely necessary for her to be amused. So we are dining with her and going on somewhere every night this week."

Mrs. Wilton finished her custard pudding, then rose majestically.

"Go and get ready, girls," she commanded. "It is something of a walk from here to the Albert Hall."

Sarah gazed doubtfully at her high heels. She wore them conscientiously, in order to look as tall as Jane. Could she ever totter in them all that way, even at Mrs. Wilton's pace? Jane thought of the streets she must traverse in a squadron of Wiltons. Even with a thick veil . . .

"Why not drive?" she inquired.

"I do not approve of driving on Sunday. It is a day of rest for man and beast. Besides, cabs are exorbitant."

"We can go in an omnibus."

"Omnibus!" Mrs. Wilton's fat hands really flew up in the air with horror. "How could I, in my Position, be seen in an omnibus? You forget one owes a certain duty to one's County. I hope," grandiloquently, "you and Sarah never go in omnibuses. I could never hold up my head again if anyone saw you."

"Mr. Hopkins and Mr. O'Hara are in town. You would not like them to see you getting out of an omnibus!" said Evelyn, cuttingly.

"Oh, I don't know!" muttered the godless Sarah. "We haven't wooden legs—or English ankles! I think," her mind reverted rapidly to the surroundings in which she was accustomed to meet one at least of the desirable bachelors referred to—the cheerful restaurants, the pink lights, the flower-scented drawing-room at the flat—"I think we are not at all likely to meet Mr. Hopkins and Mr. O'Hara—in an omnibus!" And Sarah chuckled as she

stepped carefully down the stairs in her high heels.

Mrs. Wilton remained behind.

"Do hurry, mamma," called Evelyn, primly. "We shall be late."

"It was your father. I was obliged to stop to put away his walking sticks. He *will* carry one, though an umbrella is so much more suitable on a Sunday," and she sailed serenely onward. Jane looked at Sarah. At least they would not be there to hear the torrents of bad language with which Colonel Wilton would start for his club, supporting his gouty footsteps by the family umbrella. It was the only drop spilled out of Jane's brimming cup of woe.

CHAPTER IX

MISTAKEN IDENTITY AGAIN

Miss Egerton was dull. She had so snubbed Mr. O'Hara that he had retired in dudgeon. Jane was away, the society of Adams was not festive, and to avoid owning to herself a sneaking sorrow for the dismissal of the faithful, Miss Egerton arrayed herself and went out. It was three when she set forth, it was seven when she returned. If she had been preoccupied when she opened the door, she was jovial when she beheld Jane, whom she had not expected, awaiting her in elegant leisure and her oldest tea gown.

"I had a heavenly day," was that lady's greeting.

"Had you? Oh, never mind! I'm glad you're back, though. Where do you think I've been? And whom do you think I met?"

"Don't know. You look very smart. Have you got on any of my clothes?"

"Only your wedding ring," carelessly. "And very useful it was. Oh, you must know whom I met! It was the luckiest thing I went out."

"What!" Jane sat up from her elegant position on the sofa. "Not Urmston, Sarah? What did you do?"

"Urmston, exactly; and I didn't do anything. I said, 'How do you do?' and, well—I routed him!"

"Did he ask you where I was?" said Jane, curiously. "Was that why he wanted routing?"

Sarah winced, ever so faintly.

"No, he didn't. But oh, Jane, he knows the Wiltons. He knows we live here. He wanted to come and call."

"What did you say?" Jane was very white. The Wiltons could not be forbidden her flat any more than death or the baker's boy, but their emissaries she would not have. "How did you manage?"

"Beautifully," with a childlike smile. "He

didn't catch my name that day at—Mrs. Osborne's. On that occasion he had been glued to her side with such an effect that it was the first and last time Miss Egerton appeared in Mrs. Osborne's drawing-room. "I had borrowed your wedding ring for fun, and so," very cheerfully, "as he seemed to think I was married, I let him think so."

"But he'll find out!" Cold horror was in Jane's voice.

"Not he! He isn't half as tall as I thought he was, Jane, and he looked as if he had been *bleached* since I saw him."

"Good heavens!" said Jane, faintly. "Are you sure it was he?"

"Am I sure you are you? Listen. I met him at that new picture place, and he took me to have tea. I took off my gloves, and when he saw your ring he looked so surprised that I improved the occasion."

"What did you tell him your name was? I suppose," unkindly, "you drew the line at telling him you were the duchess of anything."

"That's where I managed so well. I didn't tell him anything. I talked a little about Cap-

tain Wilton, and I answered when he called me Mrs. Wilton."

"But why? What on earth made you pretend to be me? He'll meet you at the Wiltons'. You were mad."

"I was wise." Sarah looked at her sister significantly. "He—I—it's such an odd thing, Jane; quite inexplicable," gazing straight at her. "Last Thursday the Wiltons caught him in the Park and made him point out the celebrities. He did. And the Wiltons—well, it seemed to me that if he pined to set eyes on their daughter-in-law, he'd better do it at once!"

"But he'll see me at their house."

"Never goes there," sententiously. "Afraid of Amelia. Don't look at me like that. I tell you it was the only thing to do."

"But he'll come here!"

"He won't now; he would have. I terrified him with mamma-in-law. Also, why should he come when I'm going to meet him in the Park in the morning? The Wiltons," musingly, "only go there in the afternoons."

"Don't go—for me!" very pale. "He's 'kittle cattle to shoe behind.'"

"I must. Unless you'll put things straight yourself," slowly.

"I can't," said Jane, dully. "I'm playing for money, Sarah; and I thought it was for counters."

Sarah looked at her, and held her peace. But her choked-down answer stuck in her mind. She was playing for flesh and blood, and gallantly, if for a forlorn hope not her own. Jane's voice startled her.

"Does Urmston know—" it was the first time for days that she had said the name—"George?"

"No," shortly. "Not even that he's in India. The family were evidently pressed for time when they met him."

At one o'clock the next afternoon Lord Urmston discovered Sarah seated in the Park, a vision of diaphanous muslin, crowned with a large black hat and shaded by a faintly rosy parasol. He saw at once why the Wilton family had taken Mrs. Osborne for her. Her whole toilet was exactly what Mrs. Osborne had worn

last Thursday, when the same parasol had shaded her face from her would-be relatives. His lordship felt the warm midday air heady as he looked at her. Sarah as she greeted him made certain that her preposterous heels were out of sight. She had not told Jane all about yesterday. She had had a horrible fright, had been driven indeed before she posed as her sister. But it had been a great success, and to-day's gown clinched it. Urmston as he sat down beside her was cursing himself for a short-sighted idiot. Who would ever have thought a Wilton daughter-in-law could have been like this, with sense enough to come out rather than make him run the gantlet of Wiltons at her flat? He decided never to mention her to her relatives, if he had the bad luck to come across them.

"I believe all the nice women in the world are married," he remarked, concisely.

Sarah had the grace to blush.

"I wonder if all the nice men are," she returned, thoughtfully; and she looked straight into his gray, self-seeking eyes with her lucid blue gaze. There were friends of Sarah's who

would have known that the look threatened stormy weather. Lord Urmston saw only a fair wind and set his spinnaker.

"You look charming this morning, and so happy. Tell me—" he was the sort of man who makes acquaintance intimacy if the woman be pretty—"are you happy?"

"I never was so happy in my life," composedly. Composure is a great addition to a lie.

He gave her a sudden glance.

"I wonder if you know what happiness is. I wish I could teach you."

Teach her! Sarah kept contempt off her lips. She had an instant's vision of another man's face, young and spare, of other eyes.

"What is happiness?" she said, dreamily.

"You are married to the man of your choice, and yet—you can ask!"

"I can ask." She looked at him. "Can you answer?" She was thanking heaven it was not Urmston to whom she must look for happiness.

"Happiness? It is to be with the woman who charms you, whether you have her for-

ever or for but a little time. It is to love as the Greeks loved, to——"

Sarah laughed. No one in all the world, not even Jane, had ever before heard her laugh like that. And when Urmston, wincing, looked sharply at her she was holding her slim throat very straight, and the set of it was merciless.

His head swam. The brown-green turf, the passing carriages, the women in their pale-colored gowns went before him like a dream in which the one thing real was Sarah. And she had laughed! She should pray before he was done with her. His upper lip went up; for just one second the white teeth, with the oddly wide division between the two in front, showed. But Sarah did not see. She was getting up, carefully keeping her pale-rose parasol between her pale-rose face and the sun.

"Let us go and have luncheon," she said serenely. "Would you mind coming with me first to Jay's?"

There was an odd look on Lord Urmston's keen, eager face as he intimated that he was delighted to go to Jay's. But by the time they

had reached Hyde Park corner another look reigned in its stead.

Ten minutes later a hansom was pulled up with a jerk in the middle of Regent street, whereby causing swift profanity from the driver of an omnibus whose horses nearly ran over it. A man in gentleman's clothes jumped out and imperiled them amid the traffic swore viciously at a policeman who tried to stop him as he dived under the nose of a hansom horse, and disappeared between two omnibuses.

The driver of the hansom from which the man had fled peered down through the trap for orders, and a girl's voice said, wildly:

"Drive on—anywhere! No, Sloane street."

As the cab turned back into the street Sarah sat in it trembling with fury. Was that what Urmston called conversation?—to say he adored her; to take it for granted she adored him, because, forsooth, she had met him by appointment; to propose she should go to Paris with him! "You have never been in Paris. Your husband will never know." It had been all she could do to speak. "My husband—no, he never will know," she had said slowly. Then

"And she had laughed!"

with her parasol she had pushed up the little window in the roof. "Stop—at once!" she had said. And looking straight at Urmston, "Get out of this hansom! Go!" Her voice had been high and steady. "Get out of my sight! I loathe you!" Jane or no Jane, dangerous or not, she would for once speak the truth to Lord Urmston. She had been playing the game so calmly he had never imagined this was coming. He had sat petrified with amazement. "Will you go? Or must I?" She had held her breath as she looked at him. And without one word, without his own volition, Lord Urmston had got up, had found himself standing in the roaring traffic, being cursed on all sides.

For once Sarah was wildly unhappy. She wept sick, unwilling tears when she was safe in Rossetti Mansions with the house to herself. "I'll never be unselfish again," she sobbed.

She was startled by the ring of a telegraph boy. However, it was not what she expected, for her tears ceased as she read. It was O'Hara, begging her in a humble and lengthy wire to dine with him at the Cecil. Her heart

turned to him gratefully. What was it Jane had said? "Mr. O'Hara thinks gold is not good enough for you." He was always the same, always kind, always tender, never taking advantage of their wild adventures to say one word she would rather he had not said.

"I may forget I'm a lady—" she dashed fresh tears from her eyes—"but he never forgets he is a gentleman." So she sent an answer to the reinstated O'Hara and set forth to dine with him, dressed adorably. O'Hara thought she had never looked so pretty. He walked proudly into the Cecil with her and established her at a small table in the corner, where he ordered a dinner that even Sarah begged him to moderate. But he only laughed, and went on.

Sarah was well launched in her dinner when a man and a woman brushed past her as they took their seats at the next table. There were reasons why Miss Egerton could not turn pale, but a fierce, a frightened gleam lighted her narrowed eyes. Lord Urmston had evidently been seeking consolation, and by what evil fate was it that he brought it to the Cecil?

O'Hara's back was to the couple, but Sarah must sit and face them throughout her overlong dinner. Urmston had not seen her yet. She leaned forward and touched O'Hara with a beseeching, trembling hand.

"Whatever you do, don't call me by my name," she said. "There is a man sitting behind you whom I once knew, and I don't want him to come and speak to me. Perhaps he won't be certain who I am if he does not hear you say my name. I—I hate him!" incoherently.

"I'll break his neck if he annoys you!" O'Hara did not understand, but that was no matter—his Sarah could do no wrong. And the look of him gave Sarah courage.

"He's not—a very nice man! I know Jane," with late virtue, "would not like me to speak to him."

"All right," cheerfully. "You sha'n't."

Urmston had seen her by this time, but her look was as calmly unconscious as an utter stranger's. It was he who was disconcerted. Sarah under lowered lids saw him glance at his consolation with distaste—it was an opu-

lently fair consolation with over-golden hair. Suddenly she felt faint, for he had turned his eyes full on her and in them was an expression that terrified her. She must take strong measures. If he thought O'Hara merely an acquaintance he was quite likely to come and accost her, and she knew the words that would be on his tongue. But if he could be made to thing O'Hara was her husband! As she reflected she caught Urmston's eye—and he smiled.

At that smile Sarah's wild blood was up. There was something fundamentally strange and untamed about her under her languid manner, her childlike gayety. With the same impulse with which she would have put a knife into Urmston had she been hard pressed, she leaned forward and spoke to O'Hara. It was some trifling nonsense that she uttered, but there was a sweet familiarity as of long use in her tone, such as Mr. O'Hara had never heard. The poor boy's heart filled with pride. There was a bustling and consultation of waiters round Urmston; for the moment he could not hear. Sarah, very low, spoke to O'Hara again.

"I said not to call me by my name, but you can't say 'hi' when you speak to me. You can say 'Sarah' I believe," she laughed, "you always call me 'Sarah' in private."

O'Hara changed color.

"I would like to," he said, quietly. "I wish I could think that in private life you called me 'Billy.'" For the Honorable William Desmond Craven O'Hara, the son of many earls, had no more romantic nickname than "Billy."

"I will if you like—Billy."

The man behind O'Hara heard the tone of the last word, and it gave him a new emotion. He looked at her left hand, where Jane's wedding ring was surmounted by Sarah's pearls. This was evidently the husband. Somehow he had ignored the fact that the husband might be in town. He would rather have seen him old or insignificant than unexceptionable like this. As he watched the pair leave the room Lord Urmston decided he was well out of this day's work, but he regretted Sarah infernally, and he was exceedingly rude and disagreeable to his consolation. Mr. O'Hara, when he had climbed up the stairs of Rossetti Mansions

with Sarah, stood beside her in the empty drawing-room.

"Good-night," he said, quite huskily. "I have to thank you for the happiest evening I ever had in my life." He stooped, and with a certain reverence laid his lips lightly on her hand.

As the door closed behind him Sarah threw herself down on the sofa. There she lay till the dawn came in, her smart satin evening cloak huddled up round her, crying softly and bitterly with self-contempt and shame. If O'Hara only knew—everything!

CHAPTER X

TWO SOCIAL FAVORITES

Miss Winnie Wellwood sat reading the papers. On the *World, Truth, Vanity Fair* and *Society* she browsed every week; you knew who was who if you did that and cast no pearls before younger sons. But this week there were no names exploited—except Mr. Miles Van Ingen's. He "had taken a deer forest," had "bought Lord Elderson's place in Devonshire," "was building a steam yacht," had "given a dance with an American cotillion and American favors." Miss Wellwood's mouth watered at the favors. "All that money going to waste, and me getting old!" she said, viciously. She knew she might as well go out and try to catch the stars with a butterfly net as hope to get hold of Van Ingen. Besides, it dawned on her suddenly that in every paper a paragraph

about Mrs. Osborne, the new American beauty, came after each that held Van Ingen's name. The "Ladies' Letters" were even bolder.

"Mrs. Osborne at the Countess of Barwick's was, of course, mobbed, as usual. She bore her honors calmly, and danced a good deal with her compatriot, Mr. Van Ingen. . . .

"Mrs. Osborne I saw, among others. She was driving on the box seat of Mr. Van Ingen's coach, looking supremely beautiful and happy. . . .

"Mrs. Osborne's gown at Lady Ilminster's garden party at Bolland House was a dream in banana-green. The foamy flounces puzzled me, till I discovered they were of string-colored lace appliqué with wee pink ostrich feathers. She wore her favorite green shoes. *On dit* that she is so devoted to them as to mean to wear them *en seconde noces;* but as that occasion is likely to be a purely American one we poor Islanders will probably see many new things thereat."

Miss Wellwood cast down the third paper.

En seconde noces was Greek to her. She clawed a meaning of her own out of it that was fairly correct. And she hated Mrs. Osborne with a fine vigor, because she was in no need of Mr. Miles Van Ingen's dollars—and Miss Wellwood was.

"Banana-green gown," she sniffed, sourly. "I bet her looks are all clothes. If she's so lovely why doesn't she have her photo in the shops? All clothes and luck, I call these 'beauties,'" savagely. "I was good-looking enough, but I'd no luck. That slim woman who lives upstairs, she's about the prettiest thing I've ever seen, and all the luck she's got is one little man that's running after her. And Thompson," with a laugh. "She wouldn't look at Thompson, even if he dared look at her. But you wouldn't catch me living here if I'd her looks. One man," with deep scorn, "and a red-headed boy, all that ever come near her. She's either poor or a fool." She picked up her papers again. "I'd like to see this Mrs. Osborne that's caught Van Ingen. I'd lay odds he's having tea with her now. Tea! That's where the difference comes in. They give tea

and we give champagne. But it comes to the same thing in the end," cynically. "I won't read any more about Van Ingen. I'm never likely to do more than read. He doesn't go anywhere I go. They don't—when they can get banana-green gowns and tea. Ur-rh! I can see that tea now."

She was quite right, so far as the banana-green gown went. The tea stood neglected in Mrs. Osborne's drawing-room. Miles Van Ingen, very pale and shining eyed, stood facing Mrs. Osborne in the middle of the room.

"Do you love me as much as that?" he said. He was triumphant. Mrs. Osborne nodded. Alone with him, all the mystical, sorceress look had gone from her face. She was girlish, fresh—and ashamed! She covered her face suddenly, as if she could not meet his eyes.

"Don't," he said. "Look at me. There's nothing that can't be said between you and me. There's never been a day we haven't loved each other for all these years." He forgot the trifling episode of Osborne. This woman was his, always had been and always would be.

He caught her hands and kissed her, as no

one had kissed her since the day he left her. In a hired house in Eaton Place Mrs. Osborne stood inside the gates of heaven.

"Kiss me again," he said. "We've years to make up for. But we'll have years to do it in." He laughed, quick and short. "Oh, blessed London and blessed money! I'd never have found you without them."

"Let me go," she said. "I'm dizzy." But she was not. She only felt as if something had stopped the rioting blood in her, made her faint. Yet when he brought her a chair she did not sit down.

"Why couldn't you have found me without the money?" she said. "You could have gone back."

"You married Osborne."

"Before that."

"I couldn't have married you even if you had remained single. You knew that. Not till this year. I—I was packing raisins in a factory in Mexico. Faugh! I can see those colored papers now."

So he had really been penniless! Her blood began to move again. Sometimes she had

wondered if—But no matter. He loved her with all his soul now.

"How much do you love me?" She laughed because she was so happy.

"You wouldn't believe me. You were always an unbeliever," shrewdly. "But it's I who can't believe now. Do you know I'm a poor match? Oh, I'm not talking about money—you've that already. But a woman all London raves over, Mrs. Osborne this and Mrs. Osborne that—you could marry a prince tomorrow, and you know it. I can't believe—oh, you're a sort of queen, Mrs. Osborne!" with that quick little laugh. "I can't believe you're coming off your throne to me."

"I'm a fashion," with a quick intake of her breath. "An—an episode! Miles, tell me, if I weren't Mrs. Osborne, if I hadn't 'caught on,' would you love me?"

"I might have seen you," with superfluous truth.

"If I'd had a husband alive when you met me?"

"Osborne died in '98," he said roughly. "You never loved him. Forget him."

"Loved him! Why should I love him?" It was a queer thing to say. "He's got nothing to do with it—except the money that lets me be the success you say I am. I—I'm only talking, Miles. Let me talk. I always," with a sharp smile, "liked to get at the root of things. Suppose, instead of finding me Mrs. Osborne, you'd found me married to a well-meaning, kind, middle-class husband, the sort I should have been likely to marry at Aunt Adela's, what would you have done then?"

"Kept out of your way—or made you get a divorce."

"If you couldn't do either? If——"

He laughed.

"If 'ifs and ans were pots and pans,'" he said; but the laugh had covered annoyance. "It would be just the same. You know it would. Sweetheart, what's the matter?"

For the second time Mrs. Osborne's hands had covered her face.

"I—I wanted to be sure it was I you loved, not the Mrs. Osborne the town runs after. You are sure?"

"I'm sure I won't let you talk any more

nonsense." He came to her masterfully. "You're mine; you've said so."

"But listen. I must——"

"I won't. That's more than your 'must.' Do you think anything could stop my loving you? Nothing. Now are you satisfied?" He took her hands from her face, and whatever thought of indecision had been on it was gone.

He was right, nothing mattered; nothing she could ever tell him would matter. It was Miles who had come back to her, Miles who would love her as she loved him, out beyond and in the world to come, whatever one called it, hell or heaven. She held out her arms to him as if he were all she had on earth.

"My sweetheart, how lovely you are!" he said, his cheek against hers. And his voice caught at the soul of Mrs. Osborne.

Whatever she had to tell him of a hitherto colorless life should not be told to-day. Besides, there was a step outside, a——

She was standing at the tea table as the door opened; Mr. Van Ingen with an impassive face was saying good-bye. Mrs. Osborne's incom-

ing visitors thought they had never seen her so lovely; and perhaps they never had.

She dined with Lady Lanark. Van Ingen from the other side of the table worshiped her. The glamour of her dazed him—her beauty, her vogue, her indefinable air, the beauty that was redoubled to-night because of him. As soon as dinner was over he would ask her to let him tell his victory. His hard face was feverish as he thought of it. But after dinner Lady Lanark had plans; he found he could go home or agree to them. She apparently patronized an oil-and-color shop for her complexion, and she liked her pleasures to match. They were all going to the Empire. Mr. Van Ingen knew why as well as if he had been told.

"Show!" cried Lady Lanark. "We haven't come to see the show. We've come to sit here in the lounge and eat ices and see the world." Mr. Van Ingen was the only man who did not put on an air of nervous gloom.

"Dear me, they look very prim and pious!" She omitted to say whom she meant. "They're

—really, Mr. Van Ingen, they do those things better in France!"

Mrs. Osborne fanned herself, her exquisite head held even more backward than usual. It amused her to hear Lady Lanark appeal to Van Ingen; he was so openly restive. He started now.

"What? The show? How do you know when you won't look at it?"

"No, not the show, my dear *ingénu!*" Lady Lanark was impervious to snubs. "The—the —what's that over there? It *looks*—like a Japanese screen!" She pointed to a girl in red, with gold embroideries spilled all over her. "And the lady in the tailor frock—so sweet and sergey! What's her name?"

"I really never heard it." Van Ingen calmly retired to Mrs. Osborne's side. "Why on earth did we ever let her drag us here?" he said, in a furious undertone. "Let me take you home."

"I daren't. They'd talk!"

"Then let me tell them."

"Please, no," said Mrs. Osborne, faintly.

He nodded.

"You watch me get our beloved hostess away," he remarked, dryly.

Mrs. Osborne laughed. If the laugh was sweet and ringing, it was also incredulous.

At the sound of it Miss Winnie Wellwood swung round and inspected Mrs. Osborne's unconscious back.

"My, what a gown!" said she to the girl in serge. "Who's the man?"

"Oh, Van something!" The sergey girl did not care to converse with Miss Wellwood. "American millionaire. The woman's the beauty, Mrs. Osborne. Let go my arm! Don't grab me like that! What's the matter?"

Once more Mrs. Osborne's laugh came high and sweet as she passed, triumphantly leading Lady Lanark away.

"Mrs. Osborne!" repeated Miss Wellwood. She plumped down on a convenient chair. "*Mrs. Osborne!* That's her?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"She's a beauty," said the Wellwood, slowly; "a beauty. But, my word, she's a fool!"

CHAPTER XI

A THREATENED EVICTION.

SARAH on the narrow hardness of her bed in the flat lay waiting for Jane to come. She sleepily contemplated the long array of her little shoes ranged out on the mantelpiece, rejoicing that she had thought of bestowing them there before it occurred to Jane. Jane had been obliged to put hers under her bed and glare passionately into that dusty bourne whenever she required a fresh pair of shoes, which she did ten times a day. Miss Egerton also contemplated, with content at her own ingenuity, the thirty-guinea traveling bag for which she had found a home in the empty grate.

"It only takes a little cleverness to be perfectly comfortable in a flat," she thought, proudly. "Where is that low wretch, Jane? I want the light put out."

She climbed over Jane's couch to extinguish

the gas when she was conscious of sharp whispering from Adams's room, where Jane had gone to be unlaced. There was something going on! Miss Egerton nimbly arrived on the scene of action.

"What are you whispering for? And wh, are you in the dark?" at the top of her cool soprano voice.

"Hush, miss, please!" Adams was nearly in tears.

"Shut up, Sarah!"

Mrs. Wilton and her maid stood in pitchy darkness, each holding to a slat of the Venetian blind and peering cautiously out through the slit afforded.

"Oh! what shall we do, Sarah? He looks like a *murderer!*"

"What!"

Sarah, all in white, shouldered her sister out of the way. In the opposite window, four yards away, sat a man. He was smoking, and every now and then the glow from the end of his cigar lit up a loathsome face. All three women stood motionless.

"He's been staring like that at me all the

evening," shivered Adams, "and he watched the gentlemen go just now half out of the window."

"He couldn't see them," Sarah murmured, contemptuously. "He's got a perfect right to sit at his own window."

"He could, Sarah. They lighted matches all the way down stairs; he could see them on every landing, and he's only sitting there to stare at us."

Suddenly there was a sharp rasp. The man opposite had lighted a fusee. The light shone plainly on his face, and it was the face of a beast. The three watchers sprang from the window.

"What a devil!" cried Sarah, sharply, between her teeth.

Jane threw herself on Adams's bed.

"Oh, he's a detective, I know he's a detective! The Wiltons have sent him to watch me!" She broke into shuddering sobs. Sarah threw her arms round her.

"Hush, darling, hush! He's just a horrid man trying to annoy us." Her own heart was beating quickly; she had never seen just such

a look on a man's face before. "Adams, the door!" she said, softly, as she held Jane tight.

Adams flew to the front door and bolted it. Jane was quiet and Sarah got up and stood beside the maid in the bedroom doorway. The little entry was only half-dark, for the drawing-room light shone into it from one end. As they stood mistress and maid looked at each other. Someone treading softly on the balls of his feet was coming up the long stone stair.

"He's gone," said Jane, with relief. She had got up and was peering through the blind once more.

"Brute! He's gone down his own stairs and in our door, and he's coming up our stairs. Hush, don't move!"

In the silence the soft footfall stopped outside their flat, which was the top one in the building. Some one knocked. Sarah hardly breathed. Then the letter-box was cautiously rattled. Sarah's wild blood raced in her; she made a step in the entry, but Adams caught her firmly by her white embroidered sleeve.

"Don't go out, miss. He can see you!" She spoke very low, but the man heard her.

"T'ss, t'ss, t'ss!" he called, with vile caution, through the letter-box.

"I'm going to open the door and speak to that man!" Sarah's high voice was low with rage. "To think he should dare!"

Jane was herself again. She laid a quiet hand on Sarah's slim shoulder.

"Don't move," she said. "Let him knock. Once we opened the door he would be in; we couldn't keep him out. And then if we made a fuss and roused the house, they would believe we had *let* him in and got frightened afterward. It's this beastly suburb that's the matter. They're not used to people who have visitors all day and go out in hansoms. He has probably seen all our doings, and saw us bring those two men home with us. Oh, why aren't we in America, where, if you amuse yourself, no one immediately thinks you vile?"

The handle of the door turned softly, it shook as a strong shoulder heaved against it, but the bolt and the latch held. Presently the footsteps, treading softly, went away.

"I wish he had done it while Mr. O'Hara

was here." Sarah thought longingly of O'Hara's iron muscles.

"Not he," said Jane. "Catch him! They would have kicked him downstairs, too, and we should all have been put in the papers."

"Let's go to bed," said Sarah, drearily. "My feet are frozen on this horrid oilcloth. Mr. Hopkins will make us leave this flat if we tell him we've been annoyed, and we can't go to a hotel. You know we can't."

"The bolt is strong; he can pound all night if he likes. Come to bed. Don't light your gas again, Adams. Good-night."

She followed the shivering Sarah to bed, but their narrow stretchers were not reposeful. They turned and tossed for an hour. Suddenly Jane started out of bed.

"He's at the door again."

Sarah stood in the bedroom door, looking into the sitting-room. She had taken Jane's bed at the fly in the effort to pass her sister, and had bumped her shins successively against every article in the room.

"Come back to bed," she said, contemptuously. "If he likes to spend the night on our

door-mat, let him. I've cut my foot on your vile bonnet-box."

She limped back to bed and fell fast asleep, to dream of earthquakes.

It was morning, and the postman's knock was loud at the door. Adams appeared presently with letters and tea.

"That's a funny letter!" Sarah surveyed a common envelope with distaste; the writing on it sloped backward, and she despised it. "It's for you, Jane."

Jane was drinking hot water; she said tea was not good for the complexion. She felt as languid as her tasteless draught.

"Open the thing," she said, listlessly.

Sarah pulled a small slip of paper from the flimsy envelope—and stared.

Jane snatched it.

"This is from a friend. You'd better go away.

"THOMPSON."

"I wonder if we had," she said, with curious earnestness.

"Go away!" shrieked Sarah. "The man's

mad. We're away enough, what with those old Wiltons and adorers and things. You can go if you like, but I sha'n't stir," and she departed, to be first at the bath that would not run.

Her pains were wasted, for Jane breakfasted in bed, to an obligato of discomforting thoughts. Against her will she believed in the good faith of their besieger of last night. She wished, as the panic-struck always wish, that she had had sense enough to dress and speak to him. She had but just finished a languid toilet and emerged into the drawing-room when Adams announced a visitor.

"Mr. Elmslie, m'm, would like to see you."

"Who is he?" said Sarah.

"The agent for the flats. Ask him to come in, Adams."

Mr. Elmslie was tall and gray, with the manner of an auctioneer. Jane asked him to sit down, which he did with an uneasiness the appearance of his chair did not justify.

"I have come about a letter," he began.

"A letter?" Jane was nobly calm. This

was not the man of last night. How did he know about the letter?

"Yes." He fidgeted. "Some of the ladies in the Mansions have written complaining about —about you."

"About us!" Jane turned white.

"How interesting!" said Sarah, languidly.

Mr. Elmslie glanced at his surroundings; he wished he had not come in person.

"In fact, Mrs. Wilton, they have written they consider you too young, and—and cheerful. They think it improper—in fact they think it gives a bad tone to the Mansions for two girls to live alone here." He had meant to say it with elegance, but he became blunt in his despair.

"What impertinence!" said Jane, icily. "Still, Sarah, I am glad we look young; are not you? You know all about us," turning on the wretched Elmslie. "I wonder you took the trouble to come and tell us such idiocy."

"I don't see—" Sarah's calm eyes rested on the emissary who had in very truth been sent to evict them—"I don't see what we can do to look old, except wear wigs. I suppose it is

a lady opposite who has been writing about us. Tell her we do not like being stared at through an opera glass. Tell her we find it boring. Does she accuse us of anything else but youth?"

"The truth is," said Elmslie, slowly, gazing at Jane, who was evidently not wasted on him, "that they don't exactly complain."

"What do they do then?"

"They simply say that you have no husbands —and many visitors—and——"

Jane rose—a different woman from the one who had trembled at his entrance. Her head held very high and backward, her eyes half-closed, she looked at him, and then smiled—magnificently. Whatever she had been, she was perfectly untroubled now.

"My husband is in India, and my sister is not married. If you want us to go on that account we are perfectly willing. We," with calm insolence, "will leave the neighborhood unpolluted for Miss Wellwood."

Mr. Elmslie caught his breath. The letters were suddenly stigmatized in his mind as "d--d cheek."

"My goodness!" he said, incoherently. "I

was a fool; I might have known. I—I will arrange this affair for you. I understand these complaints are insults. I will answer them accordingly. I——"

"Then it is nothing?"

"Quite so. Nothing." If she had been a murderess Mr. Elmslie would not have cared. All he knew was that he had never seen anyone so beautiful in all his life. He bowed himself out, sadly conscious that he, as a visitor, would not be welcome at Rossetti Mansions.

"And you never mentioned last night and that horrid man!" shrieked the astonished Sarah when Elmslie had departed.

"I forgot him," returned Jane, meekly. But she had not; she only preferred other methods. Last night's letter was no worry to her now, since it was all of a piece with the agent's visit. But if the writer waited uselessly night after night to speak to Mrs. Wilton on the stairs, no one but the night-watchman knew.

CHAPTER XII

THE PALACE

THERE was no escape. Jane was forced to "dine quietly" with the Wiltons. Sarah was pungently ignored in the invitation, and she smiled.

"Praise the pigs!" was her low comment. "Don't agitate yourself to explain. I would not enjoy it any more than you will. I am going out. I shall take Adams. I shall go to the Palace."

"Why don't you take an adorer instead?"

"They wouldn't go. Or if they did they'd stuff me into a box and not let me call my soul my own. They treat me as if I were made of virgin gold and everything were acid and might corrode me. I shall take Adams. And I won't even sit in the stalls. I shall sit in the upstairs balcony."

"You can't."

"I can, my beloved. And if you put me to it I can walk about in the promenade."

And Miss Egerton retired to the bedroom to make a carefully studied toilet. Evening dress was out of the question; street dress was too hot. Eventually she compromised on a muslin blouse, all creamy pink and lace, a chiffon ruffle, and a toque covered with pink roses. These splendors she toned down with an old black satin skirt and covered up with a gorgeous dark-blue satin cloak adorned with quantities of priceless lace. She surveyed herself with some pride, and sailed blandly into the drawing-room.

Jane raised her eyebrows.

"What's the matter?" inquired the bedecked one, with suspicion.

"Oh, nothing! You look sweet, but not precisely inconspicuous!"

"Fudge! I've had this cloak and this old skirt for forty years."

"You have had that complexion for only the past forty minutes." For the pale Sarah was adorned with a flush as of faint roses.

"Only ten, if you wish to be exact." Sarah,

unabashed, departed to beat up Adams. That damsel had likewise spent time on her toilet. She had enlivened the smart black dress that duty compelled her to wear with a hat culled from the treasuries of the Brompton Road. It was large and it bore plumes of black that waved high.

"Good heavens!" cried Sarah. "I had no idea you were so pretty, Adams." She surveyed her hand-maiden with astonishment, taking in the black hair and the creamy skin deftly brought out by like tones in her toilet. Sarah's pinkness and her amber-gold hair stood out softly beside the low-toned good looks of her maid.

"Come along, we're going in an omnibus," she cried, prosaically, and the enraptured Adams followed the rapid click of her high heels down the long stone stairs.

"Buy the tickets, Adams!" Sarah spoke rather faintly. They were very late, the entrance to the Palace was full of men, and Sarah's pink toque was striking to the eye. Adams was a London girl, and not in the least appalled. She purchased tickets and followed

Sarah upstairs. Three men strolled up after them, but Sarah was happily oblivious.

Upstairs it was pitch dark. Someone was in the middle of a turn. It was a slim girl in voluminous drapings on which were chastely thrown varying transparencies of the heads of different members of the Royal family. The audience applauded loyally; they were accustomed to the type of the Royal countenances, and did not find them unhandsome.

Sarah leaned breathless over the rail of the promenade.

"Adams," she breathed, "there aren't any seats."

Adams, with the air of a masquerading duchess, beckoned her onward after a white-capped maid. Sarah was conscious of going down steps in darkness, dazzled the while by blue and red flashes on the darkened stage where the Royal family glared in primary colors, of stumbling over outstretched legs, finally of sinking into her seat with joy. The lights flashed up as the girl on the stage finished her last gyration, and the French gentlemen whom Sarah's preposterous heels had made wince were all

glaring wrathfully at her. But she was letting her cloak slip back from her shoulders, and her innocent pinkiness and the cloudy amber of her small, drooping head worked a miracle with the annoyed ones. They glanced eloquently at their friends instead of glaring at Sarah. One of them offered her his program, and she calmly took it, but somehow he became conscious that he was a hairdresser in private life, and he felt it impossible to begin the conversation he had contemplated. All that he accomplished was to sit out the rest of the performance without any program.

As the next turn came on Sarah piously gave thanks that she had not come with an adorer. Four men were singing, singing very well, but one of them was so wobblingly fat, either by nature or art, that he made her feel ill. A Frenchman beside the hairdresser made a realistic remark to him in French that caused the hapless Sarah to start.

"I'm not a bit amused!" she said, wrathfully. "And all this smoke when I'm not smoking makes my head ache." For all round her, in the low-turned light, resounded the

cheerful click of wax matches, followed by the little flame and glow as man after man lighted up. It was paradise with the peri inside but unable to enjoy herself. Miss Egerton's sharp eye traveled carefully over the house when the fat and pendulous horror on the stage had disappeared amid frantic applause, and the lights were turned on.

"There's a woman smoking in one of the boxes. I shall smoke," she declared, cheerfully. "Can we buy cigarettes in the bar, Adams?"

It took a good deal to jar Adams.

"Certainly, Miss Egerton. Shall I get you some?"

"I'll go with you."

And she followed the doughty, handsome maid across the promenade and into the refreshment place. Adams disappeared into a crowd of men; Sarah sank composedly on a wide sofa and surveyed the scene. Everywhere were men and girls walking up and down or seated at small tables in retired corners having drinks. Sarah envied none of them. They looked dull, their scraps of talk that reached her were coarse and stupid. Still she was the only woman in

sight not talking to a man, and it was annoying to be out of the fashion. Not for worlds would she have owned to herself that she resented the glances of the attached and unattached males lavished on her dainty prettiness, where she nestled alone in a corner of the big sofa by the door. Adams returned with the cigarettes, and Sarah rose. They went into the promenade and leaned on the rail very happily while they discussed the house. Suddenly Adams took her mistress by the arm.

"That fair man has followed you ever since we came in—he'll speak to you if you don't move. And—don't start, Miss Egerton—I saw Mr. Hopkins behind him just now as I turned my head!"

Sarah glided nimbly to her place as the lights went down, and the fair man retired disappointed. Mr. Hopkins hastily decided that he must have had the jumps to have imagined Miss Egerton here alone, and he went downstairs again. Sarah drew a long breath.

"Adams, you are a priceless angel!" she said, solemnly. "One more minute and my situation—heavens! suppose Mr. Hopkins, of

all persons, had observed me being accosted by a man I didn't know! After that escape I can venture on anything!"

She took a cigarette from the box of Egyptians Adams had procured, and leaned back composedly in her chair to a stout Frenchman behind her. He was accompanied by his stouter wife, and when the slim, fair angel in front of him calmly asked him for a light his position was truly appalling. Had he been alone, indeed!—but alas, he was not! Politeness made him produce the match, abject cowardice in the glare of his wife's eye made him present it to Sarah in silence.

Anna Held came on the stage, and for the first time Sarah took joy in the performance. She laughed softly as she smoked her cigarette, oblivious of Hopkins below stairs and the fair man who stood gazing at her from the promenade. The hairdresser next her was more puzzled than ever. He was obliged to dismiss the theory that she was a little girl run away from the schoolroom, and fortunately the supposition he substituted was unknown to the subject of it.

Sarah put out her cigarette against the opera glass in front of her.

"Let's go home, Adams. I'm hungry!" and she yawned. The people were getting up to go. Sarah and Adams went out in the crush, escaping Hopkins by keeping carefully at his back. As they edged along behind him in the bright light of the street door Sarah gasped:

"Adams, *run!*"

She seized her by the arm and dragged her across the street, then on at top speed to Piccadilly Circus. Neither of them spoke till they were safely on an omnibus, wedged in by grubby, nondescript people.

"Colonel Wilton!" Adams ejaculated.

Solemnly Sarah nodded. "Bad old man!" she said virtuously. She had never seen a pair of opera glasses that had been leveled on her all the evening from a box, nor the puzzled ill temper in a face behind them.

A man got up on the omnibus. It was the fair man who had gazed at them throughout the evening. Sarah drew another long breath, this time of annihilated conceit. For

the man sat down beside Adams. It was to Adams that he addressed himself, and for the first time in her life Sarah comprehended that mistress and maid were of the same clay. The man was a gentleman and perfectly polite. Sarah found a wicked joy in egging the uncomfortable and reluctant Adams on to mild flirtation. In spite of drawbacks it was evident that the latter could hold her own. Sarah felt like saying "bravo" at every sharp, quiet cut the town-bred girl dealt her unwelcome swain.

"I wonder, though, what he would think if I were to sit beside him and talk to his valet."

The omnibus stopped at Rutland Gate, and Adams whispered to her. They rose and flew down the steps and disappeared before the fair man realized they had departed. It was dark and there were no hansoms. Miss Egerton, as she trudged along toward Hammersmith in uncomfortable shoes, felt that if ever there was an overrated pleasure it was going to music-halls. But Adams sailed onward, puffed with pride.

CHAPTER XIII

A PAIR OF BUCCANEERS

THE clock was striking nine as Mrs. Wilton toiled up the stairs to her flat. She had told Hopkins that she did not mind stairs; to-night she was conscious of each step of them. She looked, as she passed the landing light, tired; exactly as a woman looks who has been out to lunch and then to a garden party, and has hated each worse than the other. Adams opened the door before she had time to knock.

"I'm so glad you've come back, m'm," she said, solemnly.

"Why? Is anything—" she was so weary that she was petulant—"the matter here?" as if it were the last straw to have anything wrong in the flat.

"Those dreadful people who let you their flat never paid their gas bill, and the gas man came this afternoon and said he must have the

four pounds they owed him. I would not give him all that money."

"Did you have it?" Jane's interruption was to the point.

"Well, no," unwillingly, "I hadn't. So he said he must cut off the gas. And he did."

"What about dinner? There was no dinner?" said Jane.

"No, m'm! Miss Egerton did not come in. I suppose she was dining out. My tea," gloomily, "I made on the oil stove."

Mrs. Wilton was at once aware that she was hungry. It was this, of course, that made her so depressed.

"This is too much!" she said.

"I might make you some porridge on the oil stove."

Jane turned ungratefully from the suggestion.

"No, thank you, Adams; I am too hungry. What I want is dinner." She never drank champagne; but it came over her now that some soup and a glass of it would lift this senseless worry off her. Where on earth was Sarah? It was not fair of her to be out.

"Here is Miss Egerton now," remarked the doleful Adams. "Sometimes she brings cakes home with her."

"Cakes!" cried Sarah, gayly. "What are you talking about cakes for at this time of night? Isn't there any dinner left? I'm getting old. The society of a young man no longer makes me oblivious of food."

"There was no dinner," announced Jane.

"No dinner! What rubbish! I'll have supper, then," with the falling inflection of relief.

"They've cut off the gas, miss," said Adams.

"Well, there's a range—cook on the range."

"It won't draw."

"Won't draw!" cried Sarah, flinging herself down on the sofa. "It must draw. I'm hungry. Can't you do something?"

"Just after the man cut off the gas Mr. Elmslie sent word over to say he'd paid him rather than let us be inconvenienced. But the gas man had gone. I can't do anything, miss, till the morning. Couldn't you ladies go out?"

"Why didn't I stay out?" groaned Sarah. "But I couldn't."

"Where's Mr. O'Hara?"

"You know where he is," gloomily. "Dining out and going to the Glastonbury's ball. He has to! She's his aunt. You knew that."

The weariness came back to Mrs. Wilton's face. This night, of all nights, she wished devoutly that Mr. O'Hara had not known a soul in town.

"Why can't we go to Mrs. Osborne's?" said Sarah, briskly.

"We can't [illegible]. "She's away. We can't [illegible] You know," irrelevantly, "I have to be at the Wiltons' most of to-morrow. And anyway, Mrs. Osborne is supposed to have been off at Paddington in the 8.20 train."

"Then she's out of it! But," firmly, "we must eat. That Italian place in the Strand—we could go there to supper."

"But it's miles from here."

"There's nowhere nearer," dryly. "You know that." She spoke as securely as if Regent street and Piccadilly had been wiped out.

But Jane only said: "No, there's nowhere nearer."

It was odd that after having driven all the

way in a cab, Jane, nevertheless, should stand breathless in the entrance of the unfashionable restaurant.

"Come on," urged Sarah. "No one we ever heard of will be here. We're just between dinner and supper, too. The room's half-empty."

Jane cast hesitation to the winds.

"Where shall we go, upstairs or down? Down is à la carte."

"Oh, down, if you've got enough money."

Sarah's experience of many restaurants had shown her the error of table d'hôte dining. But it was Jane's party, so she kindly added a saving clause to her decision.

"Heaps!"

Jane kept money in little piles on the bedroom mantelpiece between Sarah's row of shoes. She had hastily swept a pile of sovereigns into her pocket just as they were leaving that crowded retreat.

She led the way straight before her and took possession of a table near the door.

Sarah gazed at the electric lamps with soft rose shades on the tables, marked with satis-

faction her own reflection in the many mirrors, and regarded the astoundingly frescoed walls with keen rapture.

"This is my favorite color for lamp shades," she remarked, cheerfully. "I know I shall enjoy my supper."

"Thank heaven, I can back myself to order it against any man in London," murmured Jane, piously.

She was apt to suffer many things when dining with the excellent Hopkins, who liked joints—with vegetables.

"Cold trout, Sarah, or whitebait?"

"Whitebait. Mr. O'Hara always feeds me on cold trout."

The head waiter murmured respectfully that one portion of fish would doubtless be ample for the two ladies, who had chosen their wine and omitted soup in a manner that had placed them high in his estimation.

"*Filet à la Toscano*," Jane commanded.

"Shall we have asparagus?"

"Yes, cold."

"And a vanilla soufflé. They make heavenly soufflés. And—can we have some straw-

berries—with kirsch or maraschino? Iced, you know."

The head waiter did know, and the two buccaneers sat awaiting their supper. It was early, and there were not many people. They were sufficiently noticeable as they sat discoursing happily, and a middle-aged gentleman opposite eyed them with approbation. He specially admired Sarah's exquisite wild-rose complexion.

"They're not very quick," remarked that lady, ruefully. "Jane, I shall *die* if I do not get something to eat!"

"Have a *hors d'œuvre*."

"Never eat raw fish!" ungratefully eyeing the Norwegian *hareng*. Jane was eating a buttered roll, she did not specially like it, but it kept her calm.

"If I could turn pale," wailed Sarah, "I should faint. But you can't expect everything from a complexion that lives in a china box!"

"Here's the whitebait."

Jane divided it triumphantly. There was "ample" for two, as the waiter had prophesied.

Under the gentle influences of champagne and whitebait Sarah revived. She even became hilarious. Her dark-blue eyes shone starry, her laugh rang out nearly as clear and sweet as Jane's—Jane had the most delicious laugh in the world. And Jane, too, sat laughing and talking like a happy child, her modishly dressed hair and her fine hat somehow adding point to the fresh delicacy of her face, the fine, unspoilt lines of her firm red lips. After all, her apprehensions had been no more than hungry crossness.

"Don't, don't, Sarah!" she implored. For Sarah was recklessly flinging away her best conversation and her most cheerful tales on this tête-à-tête dinner with a sister. Could Colonel Wilton, who said sisters always hated each other and talked only before men, but have heard her!

"Oh, Sarah, I am getting hysterical. Do stop making me laugh," Jane implored.

She put down her knife and fork on her plate and put her hand in her pocket for a handkerchief. A small pile of coins came out with it and dropped with a clink into her lap. She

looked at them absently. Then she started. She thrust her hand back into her pocket; there was nothing else in it. Every bit of color left her face.

She had brought five shillings instead of five sovereigns; she had not enough to pay for their dinner!

"Sarah!"

"What's the matter? Do you see any Wiltons?"

"Oh, do attend, Sarah! Have you got any money?"

"Me? You know I never have," cheerfully. "Why? You said you'd plenty."

"I made a mistake." The *filet* was growing cold on Jane's plate. "Look! That's all I've got."

She pointed a small, miserable finger at the pile of silver that should have been gold.

Sarah dived wildly into the recesses of her gown. Piecemeal she produced shillings and sixpences.

"Two pounds," she announced, grimly. "It is not enough."

Jane drank some champagne. Then she did some rapid mental arithmetic.

"It's not enough, not nearly. Oh, that soufflé! Why did I order it? It was only greediness; we didn't need it!"

The middle-aged man near by was taking in the tragedy. He gave way to a broad smile of approval at Sarah's calm response.

"Well, it *is* ordered, and I'm going to eat it. When we get to the bill, we can think of wrestling with it. Your *filet's* getting cold.

Jane took up her knife and fork again, but visions of a row and an outraged proprietor loomed large before her. Even the soufflé did not give her courage. But the strawberries and maraschino made her bold.

"Best strawberries and maraschino in London one gets here," she announced, as she ate her first. At her third she waxed cheerful, and she was herself again throughout the coffee and cigarettes. It was Sarah who was doubtful about smoking without the stalwart O'Hara to back her.

"Pouf!" said Jane, her cigarette tight in her childish mouth as she got a light from the out-

wardly calm waiter. "They can only ask us to stop. This is the first smoke I've had to-day."

She leaned back, placidly happy. They were not asked to stop; no one took any notice of them.

"I can't smoke in peace till I know about that bill," said Sarah, suddenly. She unearthed half-a-crown from a forgotten pocket and gave it to Jane. There was a period of awful suspense; then the bill arrived on a plate. Jane glanced at it; Sarah snatched it.

"Oh, blessed half-crown!" she cried. "Give me that light, Jane," holding out a slim, fair hand for the spirit lamp. For the bill was just two pounds—they had half-a-crown for the waiter.

But when they were in the street it dawned on them that they had only sixpence to get them home.

"Hansom, and pay at the house," said Sarah.

"No money when we get there. I remember now. I paid the bills yesterday."

"The top of an omnibus will be much nicer," calmly. "I've always wanted to go on one

at night. Come on. We'll get one from Charing Cross."

Jane said nothing. Her mental aspect was clouded again by the vision of a man's face—if he could see them careering madly up the Strand at 11 P.M.! But at Charing Cross there was not one omnibus for West Kensington.

"We can't stay here," said Jane, desperately. "We must go to Piccadilly Circus in the first one we see, and get our own there."

She climbed as she spoke into a dark-green omnibus bearing the desired legend of Chapel Street and Piccadilly. But there was no room inside. With shaking legs she followed Sarah to the top and to the front seat.

"Horses are quite good," said Sarah. Sarah was enjoying herself.

"We're all good on this 'bus!" The driver turned round with a drunken leer. "Men and 'orses and girls are all good!"

"Don't talk to him!" commanded Jane. "Don't you see he is a pirate? He's drunk." She picked up her skirts and fled wildly down the steps. "And the conductor—oh, hear the conductor!"

There was no need to draw attention to him. His cheerfully intoxicated yells were loud in their ears.

"Come on! My 'bus goes everywhere. To hell, if you like!" He caught Jane's arm. "Hi, miss, you can't get off! If you does we charges sixpence."

But she fled by him after Sarah into the crowd. It seemed miles to Piccadilly, and no blue omnibus greeted them when they reached the corner.

"We'd better walk to Mrs. Osborne's," said Jane, desperately. "We'll never get to the flat. Come across the street. She might have come home unexpectedly. Anyhow, they'll let us in."

The lamps shone down on them bright as day as they waited while the stream of hansoms and omnibuses passed ceaselessly, and for once the policeman lingered before stopping the traffic to let them cross.

"Jane!" cried Sarah.

"Sarah!" muttered Jane.

In a hansom close to them, but driving rapidly past, were Mrs. Wilton and her lord.

"Did they know us?" Jane was sick with horror. But she grew worse when she turned and beheld another hansom coming from the other direction. Out of it Mr. Hopkins and Mr. O'Hara gazed straight at them.

There was no question of going to Mrs. Osborne's now. Jane grasped her sister by the arm, and they tore across the street under the noses of omnibus horses, but not before they had observed a wild stampede in the hansom, and had heard "Stop! stop!" from its occupants.

"Here's an omnibus!" Sarah jerked Jane into it. It went to Putney, but that was no matter. There were two vacant seats on the top. From that eminence they descried two men tearing back from the point at which they had succeeded in stopping their hansom. Mr. Hopkins rushed to the omnibus as it started.

"No room!" yelled the conductor.

"We'll stand!"

"Not allowed," roared the man, with a glance at the policeman directing the traffic.

Sarah looked no more, for the reluctant Hopkins had dropped off the step. Jane was

too agitated to speak. Not till they were past the corner of Brompton road did she muster courage to lead the way down from the sheltering omnibus into the street. Penniless, weary, for once silent, Sarah trudged beside her. It had been a day of storm. It seemed the middle of the night when they came to their own door, but not even the night-watchman saw them drag wearily into its blessed shelter. Half-way up the endless stairs Jane lagged and stopped; by chance she looked out of the landing window.

Winnie Wellwood's door was open. In the stream of light from it a man came out, and—Jane Wilton's heart stopped beating—the man was Van Ingen!

She set her teeth and walked upstairs.

CHAPTER XIV

EXPLANATIONS

"JANE," said Sarah, half-awake, "Jane!" She looked at the empty bed beside hers; then sat up and stared round the little bedroom. Was Jane ill that she was up at half-past seven in the morning? The electric bell ringing as it had never rung in that flat brought Adams at a run. But all her mistress said was:

"Breakfast." She had seen a note on her bed. She read it, standing barefoot by the window—perhaps that made her shiver. The note was simple enough:

"I've gone out—I had to go. If the Wiltons come I don't care. I'm done with Wiltons. Don't go to Mrs. Osborne's till you see me. I may be back in an hour; I may stay there. If I do I'll stay for good."

"'Don't care!' 'Done with Wiltons!'" repeated Sarah. "She's mad! She can't be

done with them. Oh, I hate George Wilton, I hate him! Why did I ever let her marry him? But if she doesn't come back—" Sarah, who never cried, was crying wildly. "What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?" She knew Jane could never pay the price of being "done with Wiltons." "I thought it would be fun. But it isn't—funny!"

She dressed, at half-past seven, because she must be doing something. She was afraid to go out, afraid Jane might come back and miss her. If she had dared be honest with herself she would have said, afraid Jane might not come back. "In an hour," Jane had written. What on earth did she mean by an hour? There were years of minutes, aging centuries of them, and they stretched on indefinitely. By four Sarah Egerton had paid mentally all the price that would bankrupt Jane, the price of being done with Wiltons. At half-past four precisely an impetuously touched doorbell gave a hideous and disquieting shock to nerves that were nearly at breaking strain.

"Adams—" she had to moisten her lips to say it—"who is it?"

Adams craned to the glass of the front door. "Mrs. and Miss Wilton, m'm."

Something like electricity ran through Sarah. If Jane were done with Wiltons she could tell them so, decently and in order; no silly school-girl prank should do it for her. And—there was the off chance yet; Jane might never tell them. The sister walked back to the drawing-room and sat down.

"Truth, mixed with Osbornes, will do the Wiltons," she said to herself, though ten minutes ago she had not cared whether or not there was a Wilton in the world. It was queer how determined she felt this: if Jane must be blamed in great things she should stand clear of small.

Mrs. Wilton could be heard now, demanding of Adams in breathless gasps if Mrs. George Wilton were at home. The information that she was not was useless, and Adams, momentarily effaced by the drawing-room door, announced the visitors. Miss Egerton rose to receive them.

"How do you do, dear Mrs. Wilton?" Her voice was oiled with the serpent's guile;

she kissed her connection-in-law lightly on both cheeks—yes, kissed her! "Quite well I hope? What a bad horse you had in your hansom last night! I was sure he would kick before you got home. Do sit here on the sofa. Tea has just come in."

Mrs. Wilton stood rigid. Sarah was denying nothing; the shameless sight of last night had been no delusion.

"Where—" she said, but she was forced to pause for the breath horror had knocked out of her, "where is Jane?"

"I don't know." It was a truthful answer.

"She should be here. She should have come to me this morning with an explanation. She——"

"She was very tired last night," calmly. "She went out to get rid of a headache. Will you have cake or bread and butter?"

"Do you mean to say," said Mrs. Wilton, slowly, sternly, with a full stop after each word, "that you *were* in Piccadilly Circus last night, that we really saw you, with our own eyes! Oh, Amelia!" she turned her portentous gaze on her daughter.

Sarah softly and profanely hummed, "Oh, Louisa!"

"Of course it was," said she, opening her eyes innocently to meet Mrs. Wilton's stare. "Did you think I should say we were not there? Is that why you came to-day? You saw us."

"No, no. But Jane," severely, "Jane must be aware that only women of a—a certain class are seen at night in Piccadilly Circus!"

"You were there," meekly.

"Passing through, merely."

"We did not stay there all night." Sarah laughed; no one would have known it was with iron determination, with a heart quaking for a step that did not come. "What did you think we were doing—camping out?"

Mrs. Wilton opened her mouth and shut it again. She was incapable of speech.

Sarah's voice, sweetly raised, lost all that uncalled-for mirth.

"It was so unfortunate! We had an accident. We were coming home from the theatre with old Mr. Osborne and Mrs. Osborne in a four-wheeler, and she became faint. The

four-wheeler had no pneumatic tires. And the driver was drunk!"

Amelia sniffed.

"Yes, very drunk," with calm asseveration. "We were all obliged to get out, and they took the only hansom we could find. Of course Mrs. Osborne had to be got home, and Mr. Osborne could not leave his fainting daughter-in-law. He was so distressed at having to desert us! We had to come home in another hansom, with a sober driver." Sarah was all the time wondering why she took this trouble to lie to people who to-morrow might be neither here nor there to her and Jane.

But the lies were a success. Mrs. Wilton and her daughter were calmed. They ate cake and drank much tea, as their due for the disappointment of not finding Jane and at finding Sarah ready with an explanation, even bold with one—for she dared much before they left. Mrs. Wilton said so, with a decent varnish, but finally she and her daughter departed amicably. Sarah, with huge relief, washed off the taste of Wilton cheek, that stung her lips a Judas red, and sat down. The horrible bell rang again.

"Mr. Hopkins, Mr. O'Hara," announced Adams.

Mr. Hopkins's appearance was as warlike as his unwarlike figure would permit; he wore depression and suspicion ostentatiously. But the eyes of O'Hara were troubled. At their glance Sarah's only ray of consolation was that she had on her best and most becoming tea-gown.

"We saw you—" Hopkins seated himself by her—"last night. How could you do such a thing?" He was really glaring at her. "And is your sister not here?" disagreeably.

For Hopkins Sarah had cared not at all, and the nameless aggression of his manner roused her to sudden battle. No Hopkins must be allowed to look like that, and so speak of Jane!

"Do what?" she asked, carelessly. "I think it is you who shouldn't have done it."

"But it was extraordinary—dreadful!"

"Who was dreadful! There were we, alone, after an adventure with a drunken driver, having to get out in Piccadilly Circus and forage

for ourselves. And there were you, two selfish men in a hansom with a sober driver, and you never even offered him to us."

"We would have," Hopkins interposed, "but you ran! You went on an omnibus—a Putney omnibus." There was blood-curdling tragedy in his tone.

"We had no time to offer you our hansom," began O'Hara. "You were so quick, so very, very quick, as if you wanted——" he paused.

Sarah was regarding him intently. He avoided his doom by that pause. Not so Mr. Hopkins, who rushed on his.

"We were sure you did not want us to see you," he said, unpleasantly.

"As if we should mind what *you* saw us do!" Sarah made that "you" scathing. "And why, then, did you come here to-day?" she inquired, with the air of her late visitor. "We were most unhappy last night. We did not like the streets, or the men—they stared at us. But as for you——"

"Of course they did," said Hopkins, gruffly. "How horrible for you both!" The "both" was added to appease Sarah; but he thought of

bold, bad men staring at his beloved Jane, and felt quite ill.

"And you drove on," said Sarah, softly. "You did not care enough about us to get out of your hansom." Her voice was icy. "We had been dining out, we were very tired, and at least you could have got us a hansom." She thought as she said it, "What fools we were not to stay still and make them get one." Then she thought it wise to thaw. "And we were a little—a little frightened." Could Mrs. Wilton have heard that gentle, cooing voice!

"Your sister goes out a great deal," said Hopkins, suddenly, "for a person who dislikes it. She refused to go to the theatre with *me!*"

"What do you mean?" Sarah's eyes were too childlike, too wide.

"I mean I was at the Lyceum on Saturday night."

"Well," she looked really babyish, "Jane was not, though I suppose she had a right to be if she had wanted to."

"In the Duke of Alte-Henneberg's box," dryly, "with three men and no women! I must say I was surprised!"

"Then you wasted an emotion," returned Sarah, very quietly, "on our cousin, Mrs. Osborne. Jane would not speak to a man like the Duke; she couldn't because she doesn't know him. But I suppose even Jane can't help what Mrs. Osborne does. Do you imagine she would take the trouble to lie—to you—about going to a theatre? She has no need!" (With a sister to do it for her.)

"Mrs. Osborne!" Hopkins gasped. "Was that Mrs. Osborne? Then—oh, that explains it! I—I couldn't get near; I'd no glass; and I never thought your sister could have that manner—with a man like Alte-Henneberg. I—can you forgive me for being such a fool?" His countenance had assumed the expression of the villain of a piece when his villainy is brought home to him. Even Sarah was mollified by his crestfallen, guilty face.

"Oh, what does it matter?" she said. "But last night—we had a dreadful time last night! I'm—I'm so wretched to-day!"

Emotion was in her voice, and O'Hara longed for a screen that he might humble himself and kiss her hand in secret. Hopkins in

humiliation was calling himself by every name, when the drawing-room door was flung open —not by Adams.

A man, tall, clean-shaven, grimly handsome, stood in the doorway. Sarah, behind Hopkins's back, clutched O'Hara by the arm.

"Go! Take him away!" she said, not above her breath; but he heard. "Go quick!"

To this day Mr. Hopkins does not know why he did not wait for Mrs. Wilton, or for his tea. He was so instantly out on the landing, hat in hand, that he never dreamed O'Hara put him there. He did not look at O'Hara, or he would have seen that he was deadly pale, as pale as Sarah left behind—Sarah, who, as the door closed behind Hopkins's unconscious back, stood staring at the Background! If a mind can jabber, hers did it then.

"Here! He's here! What brings him here? What shall I do? What shall I do?"

CHAPTER XV

THE LION UNMASKS

Old Lord de Fort stared. He put up his eyeglass and stared again; then he tittered. He always tittered when affairs—other people's affairs—looked involved. The crush in which Lady Lanark was exploiting her visiting list suddenly became so interesting as to obviate the heat of it and the treading on his lordship's gouty toe. "Mrs. Osborne," he reflected, "*without* Mr. Van Ingen! Mr. Van Ingen, *with* Miss Delabere! There have been events. Gad! She couldn't have been fool enough to refuse him!" And he studied Mrs. Osborne's face.

It was not as usual, though for his life he could not tell what made the change in it. She had not refused the American prince, or she would not glance furtively at his immaculate

back. The Delabere girl—he looked at her—was pretty, seventeen and not clever. "Lord, Lord!" said de Fort, piously, "she must have given him too much caviare to make him fly to jam; raspberry jam," unkindly—for the Delabere cheeks were dyed with elation. "I shall see this through." He trotted downstairs and employed half an hour in the hall, outside the tea-room door.

Mrs. Osborne, with the Duke of Alte-Henneberg in tow, passed him so closely that her gown brushed him. She was not hearing a word the Duke of Alte-Henneberg said, and she never saw Lord de Fort at all. She looked as lovely as a painting, and as hard. He saw now where the change was in her. Her scarlet, triumphant lips were straight shut. She looked driven.

"Do you mind letting me pass?" The voice took no pains to be civil, and Lord de Fort started.

It was Van Ingen, at Mrs. Osborne's heels. His little idea had been erroneous, and he hated to waste an idea. To try and save it he hastened after the man who had shoved past

him—and obtained nothing whatever for his pains.

Eaton Place is no distance from Eaton Square. Mrs. Osborne and her German Highness were slowly descending the steps to walk the short way between Lady Lanark's door and hers. Mr. Van Ingen, not a yard from them, jumped hastily into his smart private hansom and gave an order Lord de Fort did not hear.

Mrs. Osborne heard—and never changed her step nor flickered an eyelid. It was no concern of hers, apparently, where Mr. Van Ingen went. She went home, and stayed at home. As for the Delabere girl, she never gave a thought to her. But Lord de Fort remembered afterward that she had looked very ill at the Lanark tea.

Never in all her life had Mrs. Osborne dressed as she dressed that evening for her solitary dinner. She dismissed gown after gown. They were too pale, too meek. She must have color to-night; must "go proud in scarlet, brave in red." She was like a pale flame when she was dressed; her very servants gaped at her beauty as she sat alone in her din-

ing-room, her gown a heart of color to the sombre gold-embroidered hangings. But for all the red of it she was cold. Jane Wilton would have ordered a fire and crouched over it, regardless that the night was June, and suffocating. Mrs. Osborne sat still, a woman in pale scarlet, all alone at a table decked with dull orchids, warm with red light from the shaded candles that flickered in the air from the open window. As she had sat still when the servants were in the room she was still when they were gone—with the stillness of a wild animal that will not stir one way or the other for fear of a hidden trap. Surely there could be no trap for Mrs. Osborne, the reigning beauty of a set that was small because there can be but one top layer of eggs in a basket. Her beauty was unaltered, her money undoubted. But her lover had not spoken to her that afternoon; he had spent his time with a girl, though his set ignored girls. It was not what he had done but the reason of his doing it that made Mrs. Osborne's lips hard-set.

She looked up at the clock, though she knew the time, since her heart had ticked true to

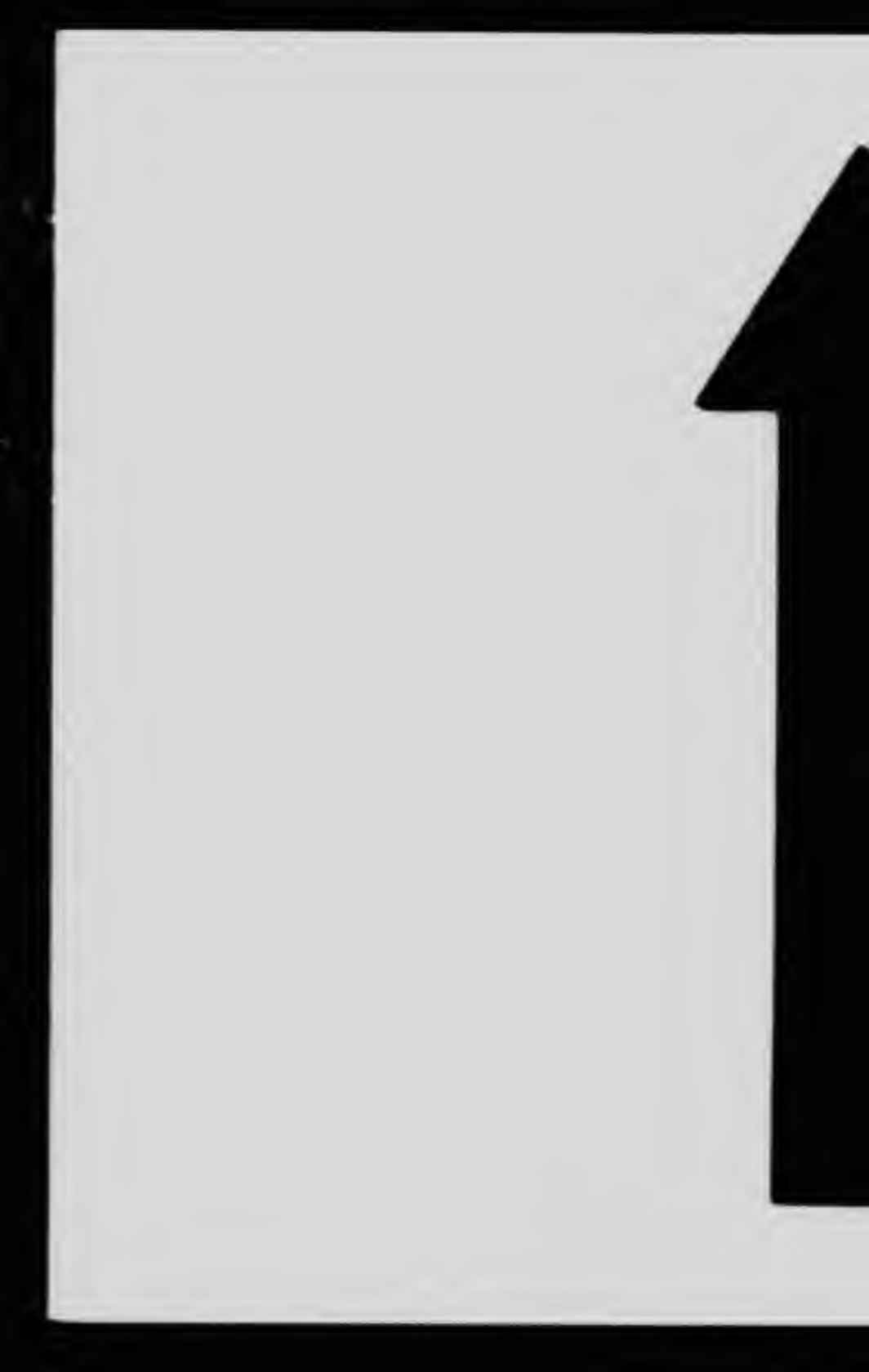
every second of it. Half-past nine! She would give him till midnight. He had never come to her house alone at night, never uninvited; but if he loved her he would do both to-night. The candles shot up leaping flames in the sudden draughts from the door; Mrs. Osborne's heart leaped to match them, leaped almost out of her body. Yet she only lifted her eyes with a little, slighting glance.

"Mr. Van Ingen," said the butler. If the butler was surprised she did not care.

Miles was in the doorway, very tall against the brilliant hall behind him. It was odd that instead of looking at his face she only thought what a curious "lamplight effect" he made, standing there with white light behind him and red candlelight on the black and white of his evening clothes.

The butler closed the door softly. Perhaps he had not noticed that neither his mistress nor Mr. Van Ingen had said one word. But it was Van Ingen who could not speak.

"What came ye out for to see?" They were old words, and not usual in society, but they came into his head. Whatever he had come



to see it was not this: Mrs. Osborne like a flame so incandescent that the burn of it would feel cold, seated at her dinner table among her everyday surroundings, with a plate and coffee and fruit before her, with quiet eyes that met his with—was it wonder, or—something else? He did not know.

"Is anything the matter?" she said, tranquilly. "You don't see a ghost, do you?" Will you have some Bénédictine or anything?" She was miles away from him, unapproachable.

Bénédictine! It dawned on him that he had not dined. He had been too angry, too appalled. But the woman he was angry with was still at the last stage of her unexceptionable dinner. The small thought found his tongue for him.

"I forgot dinner." He stopped her with a sharp gesture as she would have rung a silver bell. "I—for God's sake tell me why you said you went to Hastings last night."

Mrs. Osborne's head went back a little, slowly. She had never seen him like this; she did not know if she loved him so—or hated him. She answered as if she did neither.

"I said I was going. I didn't go. Why?"

"You weren't here."

"I wasn't here. You're quite right. I met my Hastings protégée," her voice was too even to be mocking, "at the station. I dined with her, I got home about midnight. After this afternoon I don't see why this catechism. My movements did not apparently concern you then."

"I couldn't trust myself to go near you," sulkily. "I wouldn't believe my eyes when I saw you last evening driving along the Brompton Road in a hansom. You were vilely dressed and different somehow. But I knew it was you."

"It was I, certainly. Aren't you going to sit down? You are not at the bar of justice, even though I seem to be." It was not her words that made him look at her, but something in the way she said them. Something critical behind her coldness came suddenly home to him.

"I'm a brute, but I've been half-mad. When you think a woman like the stars it's a jar to see her in the sort of clothes she never wears,

and a thick veil—if she's told you she'd be in the country! And there's more—I can't tell you all, it's too confused. That cousin of yours, I saw her one night when you'd told me she was going away with you—saw her at a music hall, with—well, Lord knows whor she was with! I saw a man speak to her. And last night—I thought if you had changed your mind and stayed in town you'd be at the Glastonburys', and you weren't there. I only stayed ten minutes. I went along Piccadilly—and stood like a fool, till the woman I thought was you jumped on an omnibus! But that wasn't you, like——"

Mrs. Osborne interrupted him:

"If it had been I—what of it?"

"There is no need to tell you," said Van Ingen. "But—it wasn't! I know that, or I couldn't tell you the rest. I went to supper at a woman's flat in West Kensington. And she was—I wasn't civil to her; I wasn't in a civil temper——"

"And you wreaked it," softly, "on a poor soul like that!" It did not dawn on him that he had not said the woman was not a lady; Mrs.

Osborne had never needed the i's of conversation dotted.

"I did nothing of the kind," sullenly. "But she turned on me and said she was as good as the woman I was so hit with. That if I chose to go upstairs I would see my fine Mrs. Osborne, with the men who came home with her each time she came to her flat. And she gave me the dates of her coming."

"Did you go upstairs?" said Mrs. Osborne, gently.

Van Ingen's face burned dully.

"She was a woman; I couldn't knock her down. I went home. But—it bit me to the bone."

He had never moved from where he stood since the first gesture that had stopped her from ringing the bell. Mrs. Osborne looked at him, and every line of the face that she loved seemed new to her.

"Miles," she said, slowly, "if I had ten flats in Kensington should you think me the sort of woman to take men to them?"

"No," he said. He came toward her and held out his hands. "Forgive me, and let it go."

But she went on as if he had not heard, as if she did not see the strong, fine hands she loved.

"Let us suppose a case," she said. "If I were not Mrs. Osborne, but a woman who masqueraded in her shoes, who did so to see you, to be with you; if I had been a woman with a husband, who had never had a thought of him beyond living in peace and paying his bills; who, as his wife, could never have come in touch with you; who longed to live a little, to get out of the deadly, dull *milieu* that belonged to her, then you could treat me as you treat me now—or would you?"

He was staring at her, his face perplexed, half-suspicious. But as he stared it cleared, though not to laughter. It was not the woman he loved he thought of, but Mrs. Osborne, the run-after, the pink of fashion, the season's success. Not a man in town but envied him his place at her side, her use of his carriages. And it was she, the unapproachable, the woman he had known for years, Osborne's widow, who asked him this. He had brought it on himself, for he had insulted her; but he would insult

her no more by letting her imagine he could care for such a woman as she had pictured.

"All that," he said, quickly, "would not be *you!* I never could have loved a woman like that."

"You would not," she smiled securely, "let her get a divorce and then marry her?" In her mind was that insane adoration of Jane Wilton for the Background who was Mrs. Osborne's Miles Van Ingen.

"A woman like that would not expect me to marry her!"

"But—if she did? if she came and told you all she had done to make you care for her, even to pretending to be someone else whose husband was dead?"

He had Puritan ancestors as well as Knickerbocker, and they spoke in him now; he did not often give them an opportunity.

"I won't have you draw yourself into suppositious cases like this. My wife won't be a divorced woman. I won't have you put yourself into any such woman's place." He had thought of her in a worse place this very day, but she did not say so.

"If she loved you enough not to care for divorce—or marriage! Would you take her? would you take me if I were what I've been saying?" For if he had been as bad, and worse, she would have gone with him gladly, happier to have his love, even if he beat her, than to have married a king.

"You mean," slowly, "if you were an imposter?"

The word was electric. Mrs. Osborne's hand caught the table sharply, as if the solid wood were a support.

"An imposter!" He had never seen her pale before. Now her lips showed like new blood spilled on the lips of the dead. "An imposter? I didn't mean quite that. I only meant a woman who had lied about her circumstances, her relations—not herself. Could you love me if I were like that?"

For a moment he stood bewildered; then he knew it was only anger in her face. He came close to her, masterful, not to be denied. He knelt beside her, his dark, smooth head against her shoulder, his arms locked round her loveliness.

"Don't," he whispered, "don't! I deserve you to score off me. I was mad to-day, but you've made me pay for what I dared think of you. Sweetheart, don't say any more such things. I know you could not lie. I'd sooner see you dead than insult you by thinking you could deceive me in even the littlest way." His voice must have thrilled to her soul, for her hands gripped him desperately. "You couldn't be like that, even for love. Don't you know that women who are liars can't love? They can't be true."

"You mean all that?" Her voice was sharp, insistent.

"All that. Don't punish me any more, though I deserve it. I've something still to confess. I did doubt you. I went to West Kensington to-day."

"Well?" said Mrs. Osborne, as tranquilly as if she had known it.

"Well," his clasp loosened as he leaned back to look her in the face, "your cousin's affairs are no business of mine, except that I won't have it said that she lived with my wife. When I ask for Mrs. Wilton, as that cursed woman

below stairs told me, and find Miss Egerton, I can't help drawing my own conclusions. Especially when I don't find her alone."

Mrs. Osborne got up. She was curiously magnificent; her beauty went home to him as it had never done before. All the light in the room seemed centred on her marvelous face, the pale scarlet of her gown, as she stood tall beside him.

"Miles, I want a little spade truth," she said, slowly, and her voice was the voice he had heard her use only to say she loved him; it came soft and slow like melted lava, as warm and as dangerous. She made no effort whatever to defend her cousin. "You have found your Mrs. Wilton, as you would never have found me. But if I were Mrs. Wilton—I don't mean *pour rire*, but really married to a Wilton, a middle-class man in a marching regiment—and had come up to town to a poor little flat and written to you to come and see me, would you have come? Would it have been all like this?"

He laughed. He was besotted by her beauty, her sumptuousness. The spade truth was a

joke, like the rest of her words, but if she wanted it she should have it.

"I'd have come, yes. Once!"

"When you had found me surrounded by middle-class relations, a mother-in-law, sisters, what would you have done next?"

"Gone away," promptly. "We're talking truth to night; I'll tell you anything. When I first saw you this year I'd completely forgotten you. If you had not been Mrs. Osborne, and the fashion, I don't think I'd have ever thought of you as I have. It wouldn't have occurred to me. You wouldn't have come in my way, don't you see? If I had fallen in love with you, I -well, I wouldn't have asked you to run away with me and have a divorce! I've no fancy for shopworn goods in women or anything else."

"You wouldn't have lent me your carriages, or your kind countenance at balls?"

"Carriages! Oh, that, if you liked, certainly! But I didn't mean that sort of meaningless politeness. I meant marrying. I—" and he laughed—"I certainly never would have thought of passing through the fire and soot

of the divorce court to marry you. I always want the pick of the basket, like Mrs. Osborne!"

"Then you only love me for my success—my vogue. Oh, Miles!" mockingly.

"Oh, well, I dare say that had something to do with it. I wouldn't have loved Mrs. Wilton *pour rire* or anything else. By the way, you will really have to tell your cousin—the text of all this—that she can't come here any more. I won't have you mixed up with doubtful Mrs. Wiltons."

"She won't come—after to-day," very quietly. "She is not really Mrs. Wilton, though. She——"

"I don't care who she is, so long as you are Mrs. Osborne—though I'm not content with her, I want Mrs. Van Ingen." And éclat, and envy, and the great beauty of the season. But he did not say so.

"I'm rather tired of Mrs. Osborne myself," She laughed lightly. "And you're right—there's no need for her to last much longer. But," she paused, looked long and long at him, "she's been a very happy woman!"

"She'll be happier yet," he whispered, and the words sounded fatuous.

"I think she will." She said it with deliberation. "I think she will. She will be clear-sighted, leading you no more will-o'-the-wisp chases. Miles, do you know that it is nearly the middle of the night? Say good-bye to me and go."

His kiss was quick—so quick that it hurt her soul. Miles Van Ingen had made many scars in women's lives, but he had scarred one woman's soul.

"It's more good-bye than you think. I have to go away to-morrow—not your kind of going away, but really. I won't be back for a week."

From the weary, longing sound in her voice she might have said, "I won't be back for eternity." She turned to him with a sudden passionate vehemence.

"I wonder if you really love me?"

He looked at her. He did not like the tone.

"Don't expect me to be too constant to—" he paused—"to Mrs. Van Ingen. I am a wayfarer. I believe now that no other woman ever

could appeal to me. I'm new, life is new, and I've got money, and that is good—sufficient for the present—with you."

"Don't tell me bare truths now—don't you know that a man should never tell the truth to the woman who loves him?"

"You are not a fool." She stiffened. "The world is my country—this is only an interlude. I shall want to go out from civilization again, to feel the sea, the wind across the prairies, to camp out, to kill things."

She gave a little gasp.

"To kill things!" she repeated. "I could go with you."

"No. Then I should cease to love you. I could not see you roughing it—in serge and thick boots. I wouldn't want you then. You aren't calico."

"I'm chiffon?"

He nodded.

Mrs. Osborne was finding things out. The lion was killing himself, and the killing was merciless. He took her hands—he did not notice that there was something wanting in their touch. As to the glance of her eyes—he did

not see the sword in them. He had left the wilderness of doubt, had reached the pleasant country of certainty, had forgotten that there were enemies. If Mrs. Osborne had looked at him before with worship, she did not do so now.

"Good-bye," she said, "good-bye!"

When he had left her she rang for her housekeeper. Perhaps the woman had been prepared for the order she received, for she showed no surprise.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PASSING OF THE OSBORNES

"JANE," said Mrs. Wilton, heavily, "you never told me that your Mrs. Osborne was the Beauty, or that Lady Jane Mandeville is her godmother. Mrs. Osborne cannot be flighty if Lady Jane has anything to do with her."

"Quite right," said Sarah, with approval. "Lady Jane is too heavy for flight."

Mrs. Wilton merely sniffed. Sarah was too frivolous about the aristocracy—to speak in such a way about the daughter of a nobleman!

"That, Jane," she said, pointedly, "explains Mrs. Osborne's success to me. Sarah cannot be expected to understand the undercurrents of English society. When a woman has a member of the aristocracy for her godmother she can attain anything."

Jane started. She looked pale, unlike herself, and had been staring round her mother-

in-law's room as if she were surprised to find herself once more in that chaste retreat. She said nothing, and Mrs. Wilton put down her knitting and gazed at her.

"I really think, Jane, you should have told me. I should have called. Politeness demands something from us. Mrs. Osborne has been so useful to you and Sarah."

"She hasn't been useful to me," said Sarah, sharply. "I never could bear her!" She glanced hastily at her sister, behind Mrs. Wilton's back, and amended, hastily, "At least, I mean I never could bear her to do anything for me."

"Don't you think I ought to call on her, Jane?" demanded Mrs. Wilton.

Jane looked taken aback. Her voice was the voice of one appalled as she faltered forth an answer.

"I think it would be very nice of you, but you had better wait a few days. Mrs. Osborne is—has gone away."

"It would be nice for you to meet the aristocracy," said Sarah.

"But she will return," said Mrs. Wilton,

who never replied to Sarah when she could possibly avoid it. "You said you were going to dine there on Monday next. How can you dine there if she is away?"

"We were asked to amuse old Mr. Osborne while his daughter-in-law was away," returned Sarah with a righteous air.

"But on Tuesday Sarah said she was taking you both to the play," put in Amelia, disapprovingly. She was the unfortunate possesser of worldly yearnings and virtuous pretensions.

"I said old Mr. Osborne was," firmly.

It was Saturday afternoon and very hot. Jane and Sarah had lunched with their relatives on hot mutton and warm custard pudding. Mrs. Wilton always gave them mutton; she said it was so wholesome. Jane had muttered something about leaving early, but her mother-in-law had returned firmly that to go out at half-past two on a hot day was to court sunstroke, and that a nice rest in a quiet house would do dear Jane good. Dear Jane got as near the window as she could; the room reeked of mutton fat, and grew hotter. Small wonder, perhaps, that Mrs. George Wilton waxed

paler and paler, as people do from heat and also from hopeless straining after something that will not come.

At last—blessed signal of release—tea was brought in. Sarah sat up and grinned openly; even Jane looked as if the worst were past; but not for long. As Mrs. Wilton poured out the tea she also poured forth on the subject of Mrs. Osborne.

"It is of no use, Jane, your trying to put me off calling on her." She spoke suspiciously. "It will seem strange to her that you have no relations by marriage, if you have not mentioned us; if you have, she will doubtless wonder we have not recognized her. Now don't say any more to prevent me. I shall call upon her on Monday afternoon. If she is away still—" the sniff was openly incredulous—"I suppose she will get our cards when she comes home. Mr. Hopkins also wishes to go."

"Mr. Hopkins!" Jane and Sarah spoke together.

"Yes; what is so extraordinary in that? I have seen you so little lately that I suppose you do not know he has called twice. He has

been most polite, and so interested in Mrs. Osborne that I have promised to ask her to tea as a sort of recognition—asking you and him also. Mr. Hopkins has seen your cousin, in the distance, and thinks her like you, Jane, but much handsomer! We all know you do not pretend to be a beauty."

Sarah's lips quivered violently. She put up her hand and covered her mouth.

"Sarah," exclaimed Mrs. Wilton, "how funny you are looking! Just as if you were going to be seasick."

Sarah emitted a strange sound between a cough and a growl.

"I do feel rather ill. I think I had better go home, Jane."

"The air will do you good," said her sister, promptly.

"Perhaps so," observed Mrs. Wilton. "Well, Jane, I shall call on Mrs. Osborne on Monday."

"Do you wish me to go, too?" There was a queer change on Mrs. George Wilton's face since that mention of Mr. Hopkins. "Or will Mr. Hopkins escort you?"

"I shall go alone. Mr. Hopkins meant, I think, to go to-day. He was to be introduced by Mr. Van Ingen."

"Mr. Van Ingen is in Paris," Jane drawled, indifferently.

"He returned this morning," briskly. "If you knew him, Jane, you would know that."

"Oh!" said Jane.

Mrs. Wilton swelled with the triumph of knowledge.

"Yes, he has returned. And I owe it to you, Jane, as your only relative of any position here—I do not count Americans—to give a little fête to Mrs. Osborne and any friends of hers you may have met. Besides, she has been so useful to you that she might—who knows?—be useful to Amelia. I wonder you did not suggest Amelia to her! She might at least send her brother-in-law, Mr. Howard K. Osborne, to call."

"Did Mr. Hopkins tell you about him, too?" said Jane, grimly.

"No, I spoke of him, and it seems to me that Mr. Hopkins said——"

"He merely said, 'Oh!'" put in Amelia.

"I knew at once he did not think much of Mr. Howard K. Osborne. He changed the subject."

"Of course, my dear Amelia—" Mrs. Wilton beamed—"he would have his prejudices. Besides, if I remember, I thought your interest in Mr. Howard K. Osborne a little—a little marked. Mr. Hopkins would naturally resent it."

"Very naturally," commented Jane. She wished viciously that Amelia would marry Hopkins; he might yet be saved as by fire. She stood a minute by the tea table, and it was well that her relations-in-law had never seen her in a rage.

"Come, Sarah," she said, "we must go now. Amelia, may I see the *Standard* for a minute? Oh, you take the *Morning Post*. That will do as well. Thank you."

She glanced at it, and put it down. "Good-bye. We'll see you on Tuesday," she called back over her shoulder, gayly, as she left the room. "Then you can tell us what you think of Mrs. Osborne."

Once they were outside she drew a long breath.

"What are you going to do?" said Sarah, in an awe-struck whisper. "You will have to do something. Oh, let me get home! I could not stand the strain when your mother-in-law harped on Mrs. Osborne. Come and find an omnibus. Oh, I could kill Mr. Hopkins! He's a sneak, and we told him about old Mr. Osborne!"

"Omnibus?" scathingly. Jane took no thought for the sinning Hopkins. "Hansom. Can't you see we must be quick? I hate houses where they don't have tea till five." She settled her thick white-lace veil over her mouth; it was as impervious as a mask, and nearly as stifling. "Hurry!" She waved her parasol with command to the nearest hansom and pushed her sister in. "*Morning Post* office, Wellington street," she adjured the cabman. "Drive fast," and she sank down beside Sarah. "I hope," she added, grimly, "that he'll drive like the devil!"

"Jane!" shrieked the scandalized Sarah.

"Half-past five," returned Jane, irrelevantly. "We'll just do it."

"Do what? Why are you going to a newspaper office?"

"Don't you see they are determined to go and call on Mrs. Osborne?" fiercely. "I don't mind that, because she could be away. But I won't have that sneaking little Hopkins *find me out!* And I know he will, if I don't choke him off by Monday. And we were so nice to him, too!"

"We ate his dinners!" said Sarah, with injury at his ingratitude. "And he always had joint."

"If I'm found out I'm ruined. And I won't be ruined now, with nothing to show for it. I can only think of one thing that will save me. I got all ready for it when Mrs. Osborne gave up her house and went away. I thought of it when I paid the butler. *Mrs. Osborne must die!*" Jane's voice was hollow.

"Where? how?" demanded Sarah. "She can't. She's too much of a celebrity."

"That won't keep her alive. I shall write the notice in the *Morning Post* office, and if we are there before six it will be in on Monday morning." She dragged out her watch. "Oh,

I forgot it was slow. It's ten minutes to six now. Tell him to drive faster, do!"

"But we can't kill her." Sarah was almost tearful. "She'd be so angry if she found out. Why can't she have something infectious, or just go away? We can't kill her."

"I'm not going to stay in bed, that's why. How could she have anything infectious if I didn't? And there's more. Van Ingen's back."

"But what will you do without her?"

"I'm done with her."

"But Mr. Howard K. Osborne will have to go into mourning. He can't take me to things."

"It's old Mr. Osborne who's going to be in mourning," grimly. "Sarah, this man is crawling."

"Where?" Sarah was always prepared for anything. "Not on top of the hansom? He'll be killed if he does that."

"No, idiot, no!" looking forth distractedly. "Oh, now we are blocked!"

They were at the corner of Regent Circus, and a stream of omnibuses directed by a police-

man was surging past their horse's nose. Would they never get on?

"We shall be late, I know we shall!" moaned the miserable Jane, who knew that the misdeeds of a Beauty—and a daughter-in-law—live forever. "There is so little time, and nothing can save me but the *Morning Post*. Nothing else can make Miles Van Ingen wish he were dead," viciously, "but to lose his Mrs. Osborne unstained and untarnished. Go round!" she shouted through the little door in the roof. "Don't wait to get through the block."

It wanted four minutes to six when they alighted at the office of the *Morning Post* and tore up the stairs.

"After this," panted Jane, "I will never tell another lie. But I will not be found out—by a Mrs. Wilton, a Hopkins and a Van Ingen!" Could the Background only have heard himself being lumped in with a husband's friends and relations!

The notice was written and paid for. The murderers went down to the Strand and got into an omnibus, and Jane Wilton was almost

as pale as if she, instead of Mrs. Osborne, were death-stricken.

That evening Mrs. Wilton sat reflecting.

"It is my opinion," she said, "that Jane and Sarah do not wish us to know Mrs. Osborne. They are afraid of her taking us up, especially you, Amelia. Either they are jealous or else Mrs. Osborne is flighty. Yes, now I come to think of it, I have no doubt Mrs. Osborne is flighty, if not mad. I heard she kept the Prince waiting to dance with her till he was so angry he shook the dust off his feet and went home"—what dust was immaterial. "I must find out. I shall call there early on Monday. If only to-morrow were not Sunday! I suppose it would not do to make a first call on Sunday, would it, Amelia?"

"No, certainly not, mamma."

Amelia could not be defied. But the hours of the Sabbath were long to Mrs. Wilton, and Monday morning was welcome.

She was still at her toilet when Amelia rushed into her room bearing a newspaper.

"Listen! listen!" she shrieked.

"Suddenly, of heart failure, at Basley, Jane Osborne, *née* Egerton, widow of R. Osborne, Esq., of Virginia. No flowers. The remains will be taken to America for interment."

"How annoying! how disappointing; how dreadful!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilton. "And I can't send any flowers, which would have been a nice little surprising kindness to old Mr. Osborne. I could have sent quite a nice wreath for five shillings, or perhaps four and nine. And now old Mr. Osborne will be too depressed for a time to do anything for *you*, even if he does not accompany the body to America. And young Mr. Osborne will not be able to call, so it is of no use to trouble about sending your father to leave cards in Eaton Place. But—" she hesitated—"Amelia, Providence is all-powerful and so wise. Perhaps it is for the best. Mr. Hopkins seemed unduly interested in Mrs. Osborne." She gazed thoughtfully at the *Morning Post*. "Basley. I don't know where that is. It seems extraordinary to die there when she could have had her funeral from Eaton Place. She must, Amelia, she must have been flighty."

CHAPTER XVII

THE BACKGROUND SCORES

"NOT at home?" said Mr. Hopkins, blankly. "Not at *home!* Oh, I suppose on account of mourning."

"That, sir," returned Adams, calmly, "and of going to America. My mistress starts this evening. I was to say it was most unlikely she could see you before she went."

"America!" said Mr. Hopkins, but it was to the shut door. Was it a delusion, or did he hear the voice of O'Hara from the paradise that was denied to him? As he fumed down the steps he decided it was a delusion. As he gained the street a man jumped out of a hansom, and Mr. Hopkins, too, jumped.

"Wilton!" he gasped. "Why—where—" feebly—"I'm delighted to see you. But you're just in time. Your wife's going to America this afternoon."

"So am I," said George Wilton, calmly. "Good-day." And he flew up the stairs.

As his voice was heard at the door Miss Sarah Egerton seized Mr. O'Hara by the arm.

"Kitchen," she said, firmly. "Quick! Oh, thank heaven I telegraphed!"

Jane Wilton stood among her half-packed trunks and swayed.

"George!" she said. "George!" She looked at him as if she had never seen him before. And had she ever seen him before? Was he always bronzed, clean-cut, hawk-eyed—or had she been deliberately blind? And his clothes, his immaculate coat and boots, his distinguished air as he paused for one second in the doorway. This was the man she had called middle-class and lumped in with his relations. This! He had never seemed so desirable, so utterly——

He turned, deliberately closed the door behind Adams, and smiled.

Mrs. George Wilton backed sharply till the wall stopped her. He would never kiss her again—when she told him. It was better to refuse kisses than to have them denied you.

"You've never even said you were glad to see me," remarked Captain Wilton, politely. "Aren't you?"

How tall he was, and he wore that pin she gave him; and he wasn't a bit like the Wiltons, not like any one of them. And—she had been a fool all her days and now she must pay for it. But glad! It was all she could do not to run to him and hide her head on his breast. But she stood sti"

"Don. come near me," she muttered. For a second his face was blank. "I've—I've been doing dreadful things! I've been telling lies, and being a Beauty, and——"

"You were always a Beauty," consideringly. "And—I've known you to tell lies. Is that why I'm not to come near you?"

"I've been pretending to be Mrs. Osborne—Jane Osborne—you know," sullenly. "You don't know all I've done. You wouldn't be here if you did."

"It's just what I would be," composedly. "I've always wanted to see a murderer. Come here, Mrs. Osborne, and let me look at you."

"You know! Who told you?"

"Well," calmly, "it was Sarah. She kept writing and telegraphing till I thought I'd come home. I came overland from Marseilles, and she thoughtfully kept me amused all the way by telegrams. She sent a frantic one to the Métropole this morning. I think it was about America." He moved toward her, but he did not look at her. "I think," affably—and this did him credit, for he was afraid of something in her face—"I know all your crimes."

"You don't," she muttered. "You don't. I got frantic at The Cedars; I got tired of you; I—I went up to town and was Mrs. Osborne because Miles Van Ingen was in London, and I wanted to see him and make him think I was grand."

"I hope he did."

"George, don't laugh. Be angry. But you will be in a minute. I—I thought I always loved him; I never could forget him, he was always a shadowy third between you and me——"

"And did you find him a substantial one?" quietly.

Jane straightened herself desperately.

"I forgot all about you for two months," she said, dully—it is not pleasant to own you have found cheese-cake gingerbread. "I adored him—I used to kiss him—I——"

"I always thought you could be dangerous," calmly. "Is that all?"

But she went on as if she had not heard him.

"I thought I'd get a divorce and marry him."

"I won't make any defense," said the wronged one, blandly.

Jane leaped toward him like a leopard. Her eyes were blazing, her pale azalea cheeks scarlet.

"Don't talk like that; you sha'n't dare! I'm not like that. I kept finding out little things and seeing clearer and clearer, and—George, he didn't love me at all; it was Mrs. Osborne! And I couldn't bear it," incoherently. "I'm just as good-looking and just as nice as Mrs. Osborne; and I hated him—and so I killed her to get her out of his way and make him miserable because she was dead."

"You dear little devil!" said Captain

George Wilton, son of Colonel and Mrs. Wilton of The Cedars.

"But," said Mrs. Wilton, humbly, half an hour afterward, "some one might come in—and you're sitting on Mrs. Osborne's clothes. And I want to know what we are going to do. I don't suppose I can stay in London."

"It mightn't be exactly wise," cheerfully. "Suppose we go to New York. You know you really ought to square it with Jane Osborne. She may hang you, of course, for killing her, but——"

"I've squared her. She knew all along, except of course that she had to die. I never did anything to get her into trouble, really; that was the reason I kept away from the American Minister's and wouldn't be presented."

"Good heavens!" faintly. "I—I mean you were extremely prudent."

"And Mr. Van Ingen," she stammered over the name she had been wont to swear by, "never saw her."

"He'll be pleased when he does!" Neither knew which laughed first.

"George, she's a dear, and old Osborne did leave me a million. But oh, her figure!"

"I was thinking of her nose," meekly. "Oh, Jane!"

"And I've spent an awful lot of money, being her. And George——"

"What?"

"Winnie Wellwood lives below us."

"The devil she does! Good Lord, we'll go to New York at once. For goodness' sake, Jane, let me get at the packing."

"I suppose," said Sarah, leaning against the kitchen sink, "we can go back now. The front door's wide open, and Adams can't adorn the landing forever."

"Two minutes more won't hurt her." O'Hara leaned against the gas stove; it was well that the thoughtful Adams had put it out. "You've never answered me."

"I can't." It was a desperate Sarah, with a hard-set mouth. "I'd have to tell you things, and they'd be dishonorable if I told. And if you knew them, you wouldn't——"

Mr. O'Hara lounged a little on his well-blacked support.

"If you mean about Mrs. Osborne," he said languidly, "I've known all along; ever since the Astons' dance. I had to go—couldn't get out of it; and I saw her. I suppose she died to get the change out of Van Ingen. He wasn't fit, you know, to black her shoes. I always knew she'd find it out. I'm very fond of Jane," sweetly.

But Sarah was speechless.

"I rather helped, too." O'Hara had left the stove. "Dearest Sarah, you don't know what a struggle it was not to stay behind, the day Van Ingen came sniffing round here, and punch his head. And then there was Urmston." Sarah's teeth really chattered. "After that night, you know, I met him. And he was rather nasty—or he tried to be! I shut him up, and—he called me Captain Wilton."

"What—did—you—do?" She was white with shame.

"Oh, I'd never shatter a healthy illusion," calmly. "I'd have played up to being the Czar if it would have helped you. I knew what you'd been doing, if no one else did. I thought I'd help you save the show," simply.

"Billy, I love you," said Sarah, solemnly. "And I'll tell you now. Aunt Adela Egerton brought us up on thin bread and thinner butter, but she fed us, and she sent me to school. She kept Jane at home to write notes and mend lace and feed the prize poultry, and that was how Jane knew Mr. Van Ingen and I didn't. And Aunt Adela's daughter was named Jane, too. She had only one; she was nice and fat, and hated her mother, and never stayed with her. She made a grand marriage, and the man's name was Osborne. He had heaps of money, and when he died he left us a lot. I always thought his wife made him; she liked Jane. But what put it into Jane's head to be her was Newport. Aunt Adela took us there, just after her own Jane's engagement was announced; and for two days people fell over each other being civil to the wrong Jane. And then Aunt Adela aired herself, and the bubble burst. But Jane had found out the difference, and I suppose she thought she'd like to be some one again. She—she wanted to enjoy herself," fiercely; "she never had had much of a life, her money came too late. Mrs.

George Wilton, in Eaton Place, with rows of Wiltons glaring at everything she did—well, you can see for yourself that Dick Osborne's widow, with Dick Osborne's fortune, wouldn't be quite as pale a joy! But I never liked *him*—" incoherently—"I knew she wouldn't either, if she had her head. There were little things, I can't tell you—but he loved Mrs. Osborne, not Jane."

"What!" O'Hara let her go suddenly, "what on earth is that?"

"It's a woman!" gasped his beloved. "Oh, move! It's the Wiltons—they can't come in—George and Jane may be fighting! Besides, they don't know he's come home."

She flew to the door, with O'Hara, big and burly, behind her, and stood appalled. In the front doorway stood Mr. Van Ingen; behind him, the worse for wear and striving madly to pass him, Miss Wellwood.

"Is it true?" said Van Ingen. "What does this woman mean, if it is?"

"True, that she's dead?" shrieked Miss Wellwood, contemptuously. She dived under his arm and pointed to the open door of the

drawing-room. "Let me go in and look. I saw her, I tell you, last night."

"Go away, you nasty wretch!" gasped the sturdy Adams. "How dare you come here?"

"I want to see Mrs. Wilton. I know she's here—and Thompson," wildly, "won't speak to me because he says I told him lies about her. Let me in."

"Did anyone ask for me?" said a bland and manly voice from the drawing-room door. "Or was it my wife?"

Miss Wellwood's arm dropped paralyzed; the released Adams reeled against O'Hara's legs, and incidentally bumped Sarah violently.

"You!" said Miss Wellwood. She forgot all she had come to say, all that had made her waylay Mr. Van Ingen when kind chance showed him passing her window. "Oh, my!" And with a swift gesture she caught up her purple plush tea-gown, turned cowering from Captain George Wilton, and fled downstairs.

"It ain't she," she said, breathlessly, to a man who stood below, who had once signed himself "A Friend" to Jane Wilton for sheer joy in her lovely face. "It's just Mrs. Wil-

ton, and if I'd known she was *his* wife I'd never have looked crooked at her. He wouldn't let her play no Mrs. Osbornes."

Mr. Thompson ceased to regret he had let her pass him to go up. He assisted her somewhat grimly to her door. His profession led him to the haunts of the rich and great, of late to the control of Mr. Van Ingen's stables. He stood a moment in the sunshine and took off his hat.

"I'll never see another like her," said he, solemnly, "nor a better finish. She died game, she did," and he retired from the scene. Upstairs George Wilton stood staring before him, as if he saw no one in the well-filled hall as he reflected aloud.

"Now, who would have thought she would have remembered Charlotte street—and me! Have you any more friends, Jane, for me to polish off?" He was looking through and through Mr. Van Ingen.

"No." She had come forward and was standing at his side. "No, I can attend to the rest for myself." Her hand touched his sleeve as she passed him with a little imperious ges-

ture, and his face flushed warmly. Never until to-day had he felt just that touch in his wife's hand.

Van Ingen stood dumb, black with surprise and rage. For when Miss Wellwood caught him on her doorstep he had come to condole with and ask questions of the bereft and ungodly Sarah.

"How do you do?" said Jane, slowly. "I'm afraid we can't ask you in. I am packing—to take the deceased to America. You know, of course, that Mrs. Osborne is dead."

He bowed. Nothing else occurred to him. He had been victimized, made fun of, and must, to save himself from ridicule, play out the lonely mourner, leaving London in the middle of the season.

"And I don't think you have ever met my husband, Captain Wilton."

Mr. Van Ingen, who would be the Background no longer, looked from one to the other, and scored.

"I have to congratulate you both on the convenient career of Mrs. Osborne," he said, and turned away.

It was not a pleasant reply to make, but George Wilton made it, while Jane stood speechless.

"On the contrary," he said, "you may congratulate us on its happy conclusion."

The mystified Adams stared from one to another. There was something in the everyday scene that was not everyday. But the Honorable William Desmond Craven O'Hara clutched his Sarah's hand with cheerful abandon as the door closed forever on the Background.

"Served him right!" said he, calmly. "All the time he was making up to Jane he was living with—with somebody else. And he'll hear it in that quarter if he doesn't hold his tongue about 'careers.'"

"I knew," said Sarah, simply. "I'd have told—if I'd needed to."

And neither man knew if Jane kissed her, or she Jane. Adams had discreetly gone to cook the luncheon.

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