

Modern Chronicle, a — Volume 08 eBook

Modern Chronicle, a — Volume 08 by Winston Churchill

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IN WHICH A MIRROR IS HELD UP

Spring came to Highlawns, Eden tinted with myriad tender greens. Yellow-greens, like the beech boughs over the old wall, and gentle blue-greens, like the turf; and the waters of the lake were blue and white in imitation of the cloud-flecked sky. It seemed to Honora, as she sat on the garden bench, that the yellow and crimson tulips could not open wide enough their cups to the sun.

In these days she looked at her idol, and for the first time believed it to be within her finite powers to measure him. She began by asking herself if it were really she who had ruined his life, and whether he would ultimately have redeemed himself if he had married a woman whom the world would have recognized. Thus did the first doubt invade her heart. It was of him she was thinking still, and always. But there was the doubt. If he could have stood this supreme test of isolation, of the world's laughter and scorn, although it would have made her own heavy burden of responsibility heavier, yet could she still have rejoiced. That he should crumble was the greatest of her punishments.

Was he crumbling? In these months she could not quite be sure, and she tried to shut her eyes when the little pieces fell off, to remind herself that she must make allowances for the severity of his disappointment. Spring was here, the spring to which he had so eagerly looked forward, and yet the listlessness with which he went about his work was apparent. Sometimes he did not appear at breakfast, although Honora clung with desperation to the hour they had originally fixed: sometimes Mr. Manning waited for him until nearly ten o'clock, only to receive curt dismissal. He went off for long rides, alone, and to the despair of the groom brought back the horses in a lather, with drooping heads and heaving sides; one of them he ruined. He declared there wasn't a horse in the stable fit to give him exercise.

Often he sat for hours in his study, brooding, inaccessible. She had the tennis-court rolled and marked, but the contests here were pitifully-unequal; for the row of silver cups on his mantel, engraved with many dates, bore witness to his athletic prowess. She wrote for a book on solitaire, but after a while the sight of cards became distasteful. With a secret diligence she read the reviews, and sent for novels and memoirs which she scanned eagerly before they were begun with him. Once, when she went into his study on an errand, she stood for a minute gazing painfully at the cleared space on his desk where once had lain the papers and letters relative to the life of General Angus Chiltern.

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There were intervals in which her hope flared, in which she tasted, fearfully and with bated breath, something that she had not thought to know again. It was characteristic of him that his penitence was never spoken: nor did he exhibit penitence. He seemed rather at such times merely to become normally himself, as one who changes personality, apparently oblivious to the moods and deeds of yesterday. And these occasions added perplexity to her troubles. She could not reproach him—which perhaps in any event she would have been too wise to do; but she could not, try as she would, bring herself to the point of a discussion of their situation. The risk, she felt, was too great; now, at least. There were instances that made her hope that the hour might come.

One fragrant morning Honora came down to find him awaiting her, and to perceive lying on her napkin certain distilled drops of the spring sunshine. In language less poetic, diamonds to be worn in the ears. The wheel of fashion, it appeared, had made a complete revolution since the early days of his mother's marriage. She gave a little exclamation, and her hand went to her heart.

"They are Brazilian stones," he explained, with a boyish pleasure that awoke memories and held her speechless. "I believe it's very difficult, if not impossible, to buy them now. My father got them after the war and I had them remounted." And he pressed them against the pink lobes of her ears. "You look like the Queen of Sheba."

"How do you know?" she asked tremulously. "You never saw her."

"According to competent judges," he replied, "she was the most beautiful woman of her time. Go upstairs and put them on."

She shook her head. An inspiration had come to her.

"Wait," she cried. And that morning, when Hugh had gone out, she sent for Starling and startled him by commanding that the famous Lowestoft set be used at dinner. He stared at her, and the corners of his mouth twitched, and still he stood respectfully in the doorway.

"That is all, Starling."

"I beg pardon, madam. How—how many will there be at the table?"

"Just Mr. Chiltern and I," she replied. But she did not look at him.

It was superstition, undoubtedly. She was well aware that Starling had not believed that the set would be used again. An extraordinary order, that might well have sent him away wondering; for the Lowestoft had been reserved for occasions. Ah, but this was to be an occasion, a festival! The whimsical fancy grew in her mind as the day progressed, and she longed with an unaccustomed impatience for nightfall, and



anticipation had a strange taste. Mathilde, with the sympathetic gift of her nation, shared the excitement of her mistress in this fete. The curtains in the pink bedroom were drawn, and on the bed, in all its splendour of lace and roses, was spread out the dinner-gown-a chef-d'oeuvre of Madame Barriere's as yet unworn. And no vulgar, worldly triumph was it to adorn.

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Her heart was beating fast as she descended the stairway, bright spots of colour flaming in her cheeks and the diamonds sparkling in her ears. A prima donna might have guessed her feelings as she paused, a little breathless on the wide landing under the windows. She heard a footstep. Hugh came out of the library and stood motionless, looking up at her. But even those who have felt the silence and the stir that prefaces the clamorous applause of the thousands could not know the thrill that swept her under his tribute. She came down the last flight of steps, slowly, and stopped in front of him.

"You are wonderful, Honora!" he said, and his voice was not quite under control. He took her hand, that trembled in his, and he seemed to be seeking to express something for which he could find no words. Thus may the King have looked upon Rosamond in her bower; upon a beauty created for the adornment of courts which he had sequestered for his eyes alone.

Honora, as though merely by the touch of his hand in hers, divined his thought.

"If you think me so, dear," she whispered happily, "it's all I ask."

And they went in to dinner as to a ceremony. It was indeed a ceremony filled for her with some occult, sacred, meaning that she could not put into words. A feast symbolical. Starling was sent to the wine-cellar to bring back a cobwebbed Madeira near a century old, brought out on rare occasions in the family. And Hugh, when his glass was filled, looked at his wife and raised it in silence to his lips.

She never forgot the scene. The red glow of light from the shaded candles on the table, and the corners of the dining room filled with gloom. The old butler, like a high priest, standing behind his master's chair. The long windows, with the curtains drawn in the deep, panelled arches; the carved white mantelpiece; the glint of silver on the sideboard, with its wine-cooler underneath,—these, spoke of generations of respectability and achievement. Would this absorbed isolation, this marvellous wild love of theirs, be the end of it all? Honora, as one detached, as a ghost in the corner, saw herself in the picture with startling clearness. When she looked up, she met her husband's eyes. Always she met them, and in them a questioning, almost startled look that was new. "Is it the earrings?" she asked at last. "I don't know," he answered. "I can't tell. They seem to have changed you, but perhaps they have brought out something in your face and eyes I have never seen before."

"And—you like it, Hugh?"

"Yes, I like it," he replied, and added enigmatically, "but I don't understand it."

She was silent, and oddly satisfied, trusting to fate to send more mysteries.



Two days had not passed when that restlessness for which she watched so narrowly revived. He wandered aimlessly about the place, and flared up into such a sudden violent temper at one of the helpers in the fields that the man ran as for his life, and refused to set foot again on any of the Chiltern farms. In the afternoon he sent for Honora to ride with him, and scolded her for keeping him waiting. And he wore a spur, and pressed his horse so savagely that she cried out in remonstrance, although at such times she had grown to fear him.

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“Oh, Hugh, how can you be so cruel!”

“The beast has no spirit,” he said shortly. “I’ll get one that has.”

Their road wound through the western side of the estate towards misty rolling country, in the folds of which lay countless lakes, and at length they caught sight of an unpainted farmhouse set amidst a white cloud of apple trees in bloom. On the doorstep, whittling, sat a bearded, unkempt farmer with a huge frame. In answer to Hugh’s question he admitted that he had a horse for sale, stuck his knife in the step, rose, and went off towards the barn near by; and presently reappeared, leading by a halter a magnificent black. The animal stood jerking his head, blowing and pawing the ground while Chiltern examined him.

“He’s been ridden?” he asked.

The man nodded.

Chiltern sprang to the ground and began to undo his saddle girths. A sudden fear seized Honora.

“Oh, Hugh, you’re not going to ride him!” she exclaimed.

“Why not? How else am I going to find out anything about him?”

“He looks—dangerous,” she faltered.

“I’m tired of horses that haven’t any life in them,” he said, as he lifted off the saddle.

“I guess we’d better get him in the barn,” said the farmer.

Honora went behind them to witness the operation, which was not devoid of excitement. The great beast plunged savagely when they tightened the girths, and closed his teeth obstinately against the bit; but the farmer held firmly to his nose and shut off his wind. They led him out from the barn floor.

“Your name Chiltern?” asked the farmer.

“Yes,” said Hugh, curtly.

“Thought so,” said the farmer, and he held the horse’s head.

Honora had a feeling of faintness.

“Hugh, do be careful!” she pleaded.

He paid no heed to her. His eyes, she noticed, had a certain feverish glitter of animation, of impatience, such as men of his type must wear when they go into battle. He seized the horse's mane, he put his foot in the stirrup; the astonished animal gave a snort and jerked the bridle from the farmer's hand. But Chiltern was in the saddle, with knees pressed tight.

There ensued a struggle that Honora will never forget. And although she never again saw that farm-house, its details and surroundings come back to her in vivid colours when she closes her eyes. The great horse in every conceivable pose, with veins standing out and knotty muscles twisting in his legs and neck and thighs. Once, when he dashed into the apple trees, she gave a cry; a branch snapped, and Chiltern emerged, still seated, with his hat gone and the blood trickling from a scratch on his forehead. She saw him strike with his spurs, and in a twinkling horse and rider had passed over the dilapidated remains of a fence and were flying down the hard clay road, disappearing into a dip. A reverberating sound, like a single stroke, told them that the bridge at the bottom had been crossed.

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In an agony of terror, Honora followed, her head on fire, her heart pounding faster than the hoof beats. But the animal she rode, though a good one, was no match for the great infuriated beast which she pursued. Presently she came to a wooded corner where the road forked thrice, and beyond, not without difficulty,—brought her sweating mare to a stand. The quality of her fear changed from wild terror to cold dread. A hermit thrush, in the wood near by, broke the silence with a song inconceivably sweet. At last she went back to the farm-house, hoping against hope that Hugh might have returned by another road. But he was not there. The farmer was still nonchalantly whittling.

“Oh, how could you let any one get on a horse like that?” she cried.

“You’re his wife, ain’t you?” he asked.

Something in the man’s manner seemed to compel her to answer, in spite of the form of the question.

“I am Mrs. Chiltern,” she said.

He was looking at her with an expression that she found incomprehensible. His glance was penetrating, yet here again she seemed to read compassion. He continued to gaze at her, and presently, when he spoke, it was as though he were not addressing her at all.

“You put me in mind of a young girl I used to know,” he said; “seems like a long time ago. You’re pretty, and you’re young, and ye didn’t know what you were doin,’ I’ll warrant. Lost your head. He has a way of gittin’ ’em—always had.”

Honora did not answer. She would have liked to have gone away, but that which was stronger than her held her.

“She didn’t live here,” he explained, waving his hand deprecatingly towards the weather-beaten house. “We lived over near Morrisville in them days. And he don’t remember me, your husband don’t. I ain’t surprised. I’ve got considerable older.”

Honora was trembling from head to foot, and her hands were cold.

“I’ve got her picture in there, if ye’d like to look at it,” he said, after a while.

“Oh, no!” she cried. “Oh, no!”

“Well, I don’t know as I blame you.” He sat down again and began to whittle. “Funny thing, chance,” he remarked; “who’d a thought I should have owned that there hoss, and he should have come around here to ride it?”

She tried to speak, but she could not. The hideous imperturbability of the man's hatred sickened her. And her husband! The chips fell in silence until a noise on the road caused them to look up. Chiltern was coming back. She glanced again at the farmer, but his face was equally incapable, or equally unwilling, to express regret. Chiltern rode into the dooryard. The blood from the scratch on his forehead had crossed his temple and run in a jagged line down his cheek, his very hair (as she had sometimes seen it) was damp with perspiration, blacker, kinkier; his eyes hard, reckless, bloodshot. So, in the past, must he have emerged from dozens of such wilful, brutal contests with man and beast. He had beaten the sweat-stained horse (temporarily—such was the impression Honora received), but she knew that he would like to have killed it for its opposition.

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"Give me my hat, will you?" he cried to the farmer.

To her surprise the man obeyed. Chiltern leaped to the ground.

"What do you want for him?" he demanded.

"I'll take five hundred dollars."

"Bring him over in the morning," said Chiltern, curtly.

They rode homeward in silence. Honora had not been able to raise her voice against the purchase, and she seemed powerless now to warn her husband of the man's enmity. She was thinking, rather, of the horror of the tragedy written on the farmer's face, to which he had given her the key: Hugh Chiltern, to whom she had intrusted her life and granted her all, had done this thing, ruthlessly, even as he had satisfied to-day his unbridled cravings in maltreating a horse! And she thought of that other woman, on whose picture she had refused to look. What was the essential difference between that woman and herself? He had wanted them both, he had taken them both for his pleasure, heedless of the pain he might cause to others and to them. For her, perhaps, the higher organism, had been reserved the higher torture. She did not know. The vision of the girl in the outer darkness reserved for castaways was terrible.

Up to this point she had, as it were, been looking into one mirror. Now another was suddenly raised behind her, and by its aid she beheld not a single, but countless, images of herself endlessly repeated. How many others besides this girl had there been? The question gave her the shudder of the contemplation of eternity. It was not the first time Honora had thought of his past, but until today it had lacked reality; until to-day she had clung to the belief that he had been misunderstood; until to-day she had considered those acts of his of the existence of which she was collectively aware under the generic term of wild oats. He had had too much money, and none had known how to control him. Now, through this concrete example of another's experience, she was given to understand that which she had strangely been unable to learn from her own. And she had fancied, in her folly, that she could control him! Unable as yet to grasp the full extent of her calamity, she rode on by his side, until she was aware at last that they had reached the door of the house at Highlawns.

"You look pale," he said as he lifted her off her horse. The demon in him, she perceived, was tired.

"Do I?"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she answered.

He laughed.

“It’s confoundedly silly to get frightened that way,” he declared. “The beast only wants riding.”

Three mornings later she was seated in the garden with a frame of fancy work. Sometimes she put it down. The weather was overcast, langourous, and there was a feeling of rain in the air. Chiltern came in through the gaffe, and looked at her.

“I’m going to New York on the noon train,” he said.

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"To New York?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"There's no reason why you shouldn't if you wish to," she replied, picking up her frame.

"Anything I can get you?" he asked.

"No, thank you."

"You've been in such a deuced queer mood the last few days I can't make you out, Honora."

"You ought to have learned something about women by this time," she said.

"It seems to me," he announced, "that we need a little livening up."

CHAPTER XVII

THE RENEWAL OF AN ANCIENT HOSPITALITY

There were six letters from him, written from a club, representing the seven days of his absence. He made no secret of the fact that his visit to the metropolis was in the nature of a relaxation and a change of scene, but the letters themselves contained surprisingly little information as to how he was employing his holiday. He had encountered many old friends, supposedly all of the male sex: among them—most welcome of surprises to him!—Mr. George Pembroke, a boon companion at Harvard. And this mention of boon companionship brought up to Honora a sufficiently vivid idea of Mr. Pembroke's characteristics. The extent of her knowledge of this gentleman consisted in the facts that he was a bachelor, a member of a prominent Philadelphia family, and that time hung heavy on his hands.

One morning she received a telegram to the effect that her husband would be home that night, bringing three people with him. He sent his love, but neglected to state the names and sexes of the prospective guests. And she was still in a quandary as to what arrangements to make when Starling appeared in answer to her ring.

"You will send the omnibus to the five o'clock train," she said. "There will be three extra places at dinner, and tea when Mr. Chiltern arrives."

Although she strove to speak indifferently, she was sure from the way the old man looked at her that her voice had not been quite steady. Of late her curious feeling about him had increased in intensity; and many times, during this week she had spent alone, she had thought that his eyes had followed her with sympathy. She did not resent this.

Her world having now contracted to that wide house, there was a comfort in knowing that there was one in it to whom she could turn in need. For she felt that she could turn to Starling; he alone, apparently, had measured the full depth of her trouble; nay, had silently predicted it from the beginning. And to-day, as he stood before her, she had an almost irresistible impulse to speak. Just a word—a human word would have been such a help to her! And how ridiculous the social law that kept the old man standing there, impassive, respectful, when this existed between them! Her tragedy was his tragedy; not in the same proportion, perhaps; nevertheless, he had the air of one who would die of it.

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And she? Would she die? What would become of her? When she thought of the long days and months and years that stretched ahead of her, she felt that her soul would not be able to survive the process of steady degradation to which it was sure to be subjected. For she was a prisoner: the uttermost parts of the earth offered no refuge. To-day, she knew, was to see the formal inauguration of that process. She had known torture, but it had been swift, obliterating, excruciating. And hereafter it was to be slow, one turn at a time of the screws, squeezing by infinitesimal degrees the life out of her soul. And in the end—most fearful thought of all—in the end, painless. Painless! She buried her head in her arms on the little desk, shaken by sobs.

How she fought that day to compose herself, fought and prayed! Prayed wildly to a God whose help, nevertheless, she felt she had forfeited, who was visiting her with just anger. At half-past four she heard the carriage on the far driveway, going to the station, and she went down and walked across the lawn to the pond, and around it; anything to keep moving. She hurried back to the house just in time to reach the hall as the omnibus backed up. And the first person she saw descend, after Hugh, was Mrs. Kame.

“Here we are, Honora,” she cried. “I hope you’re glad to see us, and that you’ll forgive our coming so informally. You must blame Hugh. We’ve brought Adele.”

The second lady was, indeed, none other than Mrs. Eustace Rindge, formerly Mrs. Dicky Farnham. And she is worth—even at this belated stage in our chronicle an attempted sketch, or at least an attempted impression. She was fair, and slim as a schoolgirl; not very tall, not exactly petite; at first sight she might have been taken for a particularly immature debutante, and her dress was youthful and rather mannish. Her years, at this period of her career, were in truth but two and twenty, yet she had contrived, in the comparatively brief time since she had reached the supposed age of discretion, to marry two men and build two houses, and incidentally to see a considerable portion of what is known as the world. The suspicion that she was not as innocent as a dove came to one, on closer inspection, as a shock: her eyes were tired, though not from loss of sleep; and her manner—how shall it be described to those whose happy lot in life has never been to have made the acquaintance of Mrs. Rindge’s humbler sisters who have acquired—more coarsely, it is true—the same camaraderie? She was one of those for whom, seemingly, sex does not exist. Her air of good-fellowship with men was eloquent of a precise knowledge of what she might expect from them, and she was prepared to do her own policing,—not from any deep moral convictions. She belonged, logically, to that world which is disposed to take the law into its own hands, and she was the possessor of five millions of dollars.

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"I came along," she said to Honora, as she gave her hand-bag to a footman. "I hope you don't mind. Abby and I were shopping and we ran into Hugh and Georgie yesterday at Sherry's, and we've been together ever since. Not quite that—but almost. Hugh begged us to come up, and there didn't seem to be any reason why we shouldn't, so we telephoned down to Banbury for our trunks and maids, and we've played bridge all the way. By the way, Georgie, where's my pocket-book?"

Mr. Pembroke handed it over, and was introduced by Hugh. He looked at Honora, and his glance somehow betokened that he was in the habit of looking only once. He had apparently made up his mind about her before he saw her. But he looked again, evidently finding her at variance with a preconceived idea, and this time she flushed a little under his stare, and she got the impression that Mr. Pembroke was a man from whom few secrets of a certain kind were hid. She felt that he had seized, at a second glance, a situation that she had succeeded in hiding from the women. He was surprised, but cynically so. He was the sort of person who had probably possessed at Harvard the knowledge of the world of a Tammany politician; he had long ago written his book—such as it was—and closed it: or, rather, he had worked out his system at a precocious age, and it had lasted him ever since. He had decided that undergraduate life, freed from undergraduate restrictions, was a good thing. And he did not, even in these days, object to breaking something valuable occasionally.

His physical attributes are more difficult to describe, so closely were they allied to those which, for want of a better word, must be called mental. He was neither tall nor short, he was well fed, but hard, his shoulders too broad, his head a little large. If he should have happened to bump against one, the result would have been a bruise—not for him. His eyes were blue, his light hair short, and there was a slight baldness beginning; his face was red-tanned. There was not the slightest doubt that he could be effectively rude, and often was; but it was evident, for some reason, that he meant to be gracious (for Mr. Pembroke) to Honora. Perhaps this was the result of the second glance. One of his name had not lacked, indeed, for instructions in gentility. It must not be thought that she was in a condition to care much about what Mr. Pembroke thought or did, and yet she felt instinctively that he had changed his greeting between that first and second glance.

"I hope you'll forgive my coming in this way," he said. "I'm an old friend of Hugh's."

"I'm very glad to have Hugh's friends," she answered.

He looked at her again.

"Is tea ready?" inquired Mrs. Kame. "I'm famished." And, as they walked through the house to the garden, where the table was set beside the stone seat: "I don't see how you ever can leave this place, Honora. I've always wanted to come here, but it's even more beautiful than I thought."

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"It's very beautiful," said Honora.

"I'll have a whiskey and soda, if I may," announced Mrs. Rindge. "Open one, Georgie."

"The third to-day," said Mr. Pembroke, sententiously, as he obeyed.

"I don't care. I don't see what business it is of yours."

"Except to open them," he replied.

"You'd have made a fortune as a barkeeper," she observed, dispassionately, as she watched the process.

"He's made fortunes for a good many," said Chiltern.

"Not without some expert assistance I could mention," Mr. Pembroke retorted.

At this somewhat pointed reference to his ancient habits, Chiltern laughed.

"You've each had three to-day yourselves," said Mrs. Rindge, in whose bosom Mr. Pembroke's remark evidently rankled, "without counting those you had before you left the club."

Afterwards Mrs. Kame expressed a desire to walk about a little, a proposal received with disfavour by all but Honora, who as hostess responded.

"I feel perfectly delightful," declared Mrs. Rindge. "What's the use of moving about?" And she sank back in the cushions of her chair.

This observation was greeted with unrestrained merriment by Mr. Pembroke and Hugh. Honora, sick at heart, led Mrs. Kame across the garden and through the gate in the wall. It was a perfect evening of early June, the great lawn a vivid green in the slanting light. All day the cheerful music of the horse-mowers had been heard, and the air was fragrant with the odour of grass freshly cut. The long shadows of the maples and beeches stretched towards the placid surface of the lake, dimpled here and there by a fish's swirl: the spiraeas were laden as with freshly fallen snow, a lone Judas-tree was decked in pink. The steep pastures beyond the water were touched with gold, while to the northward, on the distant hills, tender blue lights gathered lovingly around the cosses. Mrs. Kame sighed.

"What a terrible thing it is," she said, "that we are never satisfied! It's the men who ruin all this for us, I believe, and prevent our enjoying it. Look at Adele."

Honora had indeed looked at her.

"I found out the other day what is the matter with her. She's madly in love with Dicky."

"With—with her former husband?"

"Yes, with poor little innocent Dicky Farnham, who's probably still congratulating himself, like a canary bird that's got out of a cage. Somehow Dicky's always reminded me of a canary; perhaps it's his name. Isn't it odd that she should be in love with him?"

"I think," replied Honora, slowly, "that it's a tragedy."

"It is a tragedy," Mrs. Kame hastily agreed. "To me, this case is one of the most incomprehensible aspects of the tender passion. Adele's idea of existence is a steeplechase with nothing but water-jumps, Dicky's to loiter around in a gypsy van, and sit in the sun. During his brief matrimonial experience with her, he nearly died for want of breath—or rather the life was nearly shaken out of him. And yet she wants Dicky again. She'd run away with him to-morrow if he should come within hailing distance of her."

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"And her husband?" asked Honora.

"Eustace? Did you ever see him? That accounts for your question. He only left France long enough to come over here and make love to her, and he swears he'll never leave it again. If she divorces him, he'll have to have alimony."

At last Honora was able to gain her own room, but even seclusion, though preferable to the companionship of her guests, was almost intolerable. The tragedy of Mrs. Rindge had served—if such a thing could be—to enhance her own; a sudden spectacle of a woman in a more advanced stage of desperation. Would she, Honora, ever become like that? Up to the present she felt that suffering had refined her, and a great love had burned away all that was false. But now—now that her god had turned to clay, what would happen? Desperation seemed possible, notwithstanding the awfulness of the example. No, she would never come to that! And she repeated it over and over to herself as she dressed, as though to strengthen her will.

During her conversation with Mrs. Kame she had more than once suspected, in spite of her efforts, that the lady had read her state of mind. For Mrs. Kame's omissions were eloquent to the discerning: Chiltern's relatives had been mentioned with a casualness intended to imply that no breach existed, and the fiction that Honora could at any moment take up her former life delicately sustained. Mrs. Kame had adaptably chosen the attitude, after a glance around her, that Honora preferred Highlawns to the world: a choice of which she let it be known that she approved, while deploring that a frivolous character put such a life out of the question for herself. She made her point without over-emphasis. On the other hand, Honora had read Mrs. Kame. No very careful perusal was needed to convince her that the lady was unmoral, and that in characteristics she resembled the chameleon. But she read deeper. She perceived that Mrs. Kame was convinced that she, Honora, would adjust herself to the new conditions after a struggle; and that while she had a certain sympathy in the struggle, Mrs. Kame was of opinion that the sooner it was over with the better. All women were born to be disillusionized. Such was the key, at any rate, to the lady's conduct that evening at dinner, when she capped the anecdotes of Mr. Pembroke and Mrs. Rindge and even of Chiltern with others not less risque but more fastidiously and ingeniously suggestive. The reader may be spared their recital.

Since the meeting in the restaurant the day before, which had resulted in Hugh's happy inspiration that the festival begun should be continued indefinitely at Highlawns, a kind of freemasonry had sprung up between the four. Honora found herself, mercifully, outside the circle: for such was the lively character of the banter that a considerable adroitness was necessary to obtain, between the talk and—laughter, the ear of the company. And so full were they of the reminiscences which had been crowded into the thirty hours or so they had spent together, that her comparative silence remained unnoticed. To cite an example, Mr. Pembroke was continually being addressed as the Third Vice-president, an allusion that Mrs. Rindge eventually explained.

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"You ought to have been with us coming up on the train," she cried to Honora; "I thought surely we'd be put off. We were playing bridge in the little room at the end of the car when the conductor came for our tickets. Georgie had 'em in his pocket, but he told the man to go away, that he was the third vice-president of the road, and we were his friends. The conductor asked him if he were Mr. Wheeler, or some such name, and Georgie said he was surprised he didn't know him. Well, the man stood there in the door, and Georgie picked up his hand and made it hearts—or was it diamonds, Georgie?"

"Spades," said that gentleman, promptly.

"At any rate," Mrs. Rindge continued, "we all began to play, although we were ready to blow up with laughter, and after a while Georgie looked around and said, 'What, are you there yet?' My dear, you ought to have seen the conductor's face! He said it was his duty to establish Georgie's identity, or something like that, and Georgie told him to get off at the next station and buy Waring's Magazine—was that it, Georgie?"

"How the deuce should I know?"

"Well, some such magazine. Georgie said he'd find an article in it on the Railroad Kings and Princes of America, and that his picture, Georgie's, was among the very first!" At this juncture in her narrative Mrs. Rindge shrieked with laughter, in which she was joined by Mrs. Kame and Hugh; and she pointed a forefinger across the table at Mr. Pembroke, who went on solemnly eating his dinner. "Georgie gave him ten cents with which to buy the magazine," she added a little hysterically. "Well, there was a frightful row, and a lot of men came down to that end of the car, and we had to shut the door. The conductor said the most outrageous things, and Georgie pretended to be very indignant, too, and gave him the tickets under protest. He told Georgie he ought to be in an asylum for the criminally insane, and Georgie advised him to get a photograph album of the high officials of the railroad. The conductor said Georgie's picture was probably in the rogue's gallery. And we lost two packs of cards out of the window."

Such had been the more innocent if eccentric diversions with which they had whiled away the time. When dinner was ended, a renewal of the bridge game was proposed, for it had transpired at the dinner-table that Mrs. Rindge and Hugh had been partners all day, as a result of which there was a considerable balance in their favour. This balance Mr. Pembroke was palpably anxious to wipe out, or at least to reduce. But Mrs. Kame insisted that Honora should cut in, and the others supported her.

"We tried our best to get a man for you," said Mrs. Rindge to Honora. "Didn't we, Abby? But in the little time we had, it was impossible. The only man we saw was Ned Carrington, and Hugh said he didn't think you'd want him."

"Hugh showed a rare perception," said Honora.

Be it recorded that she smiled. One course had been clear to her from the first, although she found it infinitely difficult to follow; she was determined, cost what it might, to carry through her part of the affair with dignity, but without stiffness. This is not the place to dwell upon the tax to her strength.

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"Come on, Honora," said Hugh, "cut in." His tone was of what may be termed a rough good nature. She had not seen him alone since his return, but he had seemed distinctly desirous that she should enjoy the festivities he had provided. And not to yield would have been to betray herself.

The game, with its intervals of hilarity, was inaugurated in the library, and by midnight it showed no signs of abating. At this hour the original four occupied the table for the second time, and endurance has its limits. The atmosphere of Liberty Hall that prevailed made Honora's retirement easier.

"I'm sure you won't mind if I go to bed," she said. "I've been so used to the routine of—of the chickens." She smiled. "And I've spent the day in the open air."

"Certainly, my dear," said Mrs. Kame; "I know exactly how one feels in the country. I'm sure it's dreadfully late. We'll have one more rubber, and then stop."

"Oh, don't stop," replied Honora; "please play as long as you like."

They didn't stop—at least after one more rubber. Honora, as she lay in the darkness, looking through the open square of her window at the silver stars, heard their voiced and their laughter floating up at intervals from below, and the little clock on her mantel had struck the hour of three when the scraping of chairs announced the breaking up of the party. And even after that an unconscionable period elapsed, beguiled, undoubtedly, by anecdotes; spells of silence—when she thought they had gone—ending in more laughter. Finally there was a crash of breaking glass, a climax of uproarious mirth, and all was still. . .

She could not have slept much, but the birds were singing when she finally awoke, the sunlight pouring into her window: And the hands of her clock pointed to half-past seven when she rang her bell. It was a relief to breakfast alone, or at least to sip her coffee in solitude. And the dew was still on the grass as she crossed the wide lawn and made her way around the lake to the path that entered the woods at its farther end. She was not tired, yet she would have liked to have lain down under the green panoply of the forest, where the wild flowers shyly raised sweet faces to be kissed, and lose herself in the forgetfulness of an eternal sleep; never to go back again to an Eden contaminated. But when she lingered the melody of a thrush pierced her through and through. At last she turned and reluctantly retraced her steps, as one whose hour of reprieve has expired.

If Mrs. Rindge had a girlish air when fully arrayed for the day, she looked younger and more angular still in that article of attire known as a dressing gown. And her eyes, Honora remarked, were peculiarly bright: glittering, perhaps, would better express the impression they gave; as though one got a glimpse through them of an inward consuming fire. Her laughter rang shrill and clear as Honora entered the hall by the

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rear door, and the big clock proclaimed that the hour was half-past eleven. Hugh and Mr. Pembroke were standing at the foot of the stairs, gazing upward. And Honora, following their glances, beheld the two ladies, in the negligee referred to above, with their elbows on the railing of the upper hall and their faces between their hands, engaged in a lively exchange of compliments with the gentlemen. Mrs. Kame looked sleepy.

"Such a night!" she said, suppressing a yawn. "My dear, you did well to go to bed."

"And to cap it all," cried Mrs. Rindge, "Georgie fell over backwards in one of those beautiful Adam chairs, and there's literally nothing left of it. If an ocean steamer had hit it, or a freight tram, it couldn't have been more thoroughly demolished."

"You pushed me," declared Mr. Pembroke.

"Did I, Hugh? I barely touched him."

"You knocked him into a cocked hat," said Hugh. "And if you'd been in that kimono, you could have done it even easier."

"Georgie broke the whole whiskey service,—or whatever it is," Mrs. Rindge went on, addressing Honora again. "He fell into it."

"He's all right this morning," observed Mrs. Kame, critically.

"I think I'll take to swallowing swords and glass and things in public. I can do it so well," said Mr. Pembroke.

"I hope you got what you like for breakfast," said Honora to the ladies.

"Hurry up and come down, Adele," said Hugh, "if you want to look over the horses before lunch."

"It's Georgie's fault," replied Mrs. Rindge; "he's been standing in the door of my sitting-room for a whole half-hour talking nonsense."

A little later they all set out for the stables. These buildings at Highlawns, framed by great trees, were old-fashioned and picturesque, surrounding three sides of a court, with a yellow brick wall on the fourth. The roof of the main building was capped by a lantern, the home of countless pigeons. Mrs. Rindge was in a habit, and one by one the saddle horses were led out, chiefly for her inspection; and she seemed to Honora to become another woman as she looked them over with a critical eye and discussed them with Hugh and O'Grady, the stud-groom, and talked about pedigrees and strains. For she

was renowned in this department of sport on many fields, both for recklessness and skill.

“Where did you get that brute, Hugh?” she asked presently.

Honora, who had been talking to Pembroke, looked around with a start. And at the sight of the great black horse, bought on that unforgettable day, she turned suddenly faint.

“Over here in the country about ten miles,” Chiltern was saying. “I heard of him, but I didn’t expect anything until I went to look at him last week.”

“What do you call him?” asked Mrs. Rindge.

“I haven’t named him.”

“I’ll give you a name.”

Chiltern looked at her. “What is it?” he said.

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"Oblivion," she replied:

"By George, Adele," he exclaimed, "you have a way of hitting it off!"

"Will you let me ride him this afternoon?" she asked.

"I'm a—a candidate for oblivion." She laughed a little and her eyes shone feverishly.

"No you don't," he said. "I'm giving you the grey. He's got enough in him for any woman—even for you: And besides, I don't think the black ever felt a side saddle, or any other kind, until last week."

"I've got another habit," she said eagerly. "I'd rather ride him astride. I'll match you to see who has him."

Chiltern laughed.

"No you don't," he repeated. "I'll ride him to-day, and consider it to-morrow."

"I—I think I'll go back to the house," said Honora to Pembroke. "It's rather hot here in the sun."

"I'm not very keen about sunshine, either," he declared.

At lunch she was unable to talk; to sustain, at least, a conversation. That word oblivion, which Mrs. Rindge had so aptly applied to the horse, was constantly on her lips, and it would not have surprised her if she had spoken it. She felt as though a heavy weight lay on her breast, and to relieve its intolerable pressure drew in her breath deeply. She was wild with fear. The details of the great room fixed themselves indelibly in her brain; the subdued light, the polished table laden with silver and glass, the roses, and the purple hot-house grapes. All this seemed in some way to be an ironic prelude to disaster. Hugh, pausing in his badinage with Mrs. Rindge, looked at her.

"Cheer up, Honora," he said.

"I'm afraid this first house-party is too much for her," said Mrs. Kame.

Honora made some protest that seemed to satisfy them, tried to rally herself, and succeeded sufficiently to pass muster. After lunch they repaired again to the bridge table, and at four Hugh went upstairs to change into his riding clothes. Five minutes longer she controlled herself, and then made some paltry excuse, indifferent now as to what they said or thought, and followed him. She knocked at his dressing-room door and entered. He was drawing on his boots. "Hello, Honora," he said.

Honora turned to his man, and dismissed him.

"I wish to speak to Mr. Chiltern alone."

Chiltern paused in his tugging at the straps, and looked up at her.

"What's the matter with you to-day, Honora?" he asked. "You looked like the chief mourner at a funeral all through lunch."

He was a little on edge, that she knew. He gave another tug at the boot, and while she was still hesitating, he began again.

"I ought to apologize, I know, for bringing these people up without notice, but I didn't suppose you'd object when you understood how naturally it all came about. I thought a little livening up, as I said, wouldn't hurt us. We've had a quiet winter, to put it mildly." He laughed a little. "I didn't have a chance to see you until this morning, and when I went to your room they told me you'd gone out."

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“Hugh,” she said, laying her hand on his shoulder. “It isn’t the guests. If you want people, and they amuse you, I’m—I’m glad to have them. And if I’ve seemed to be—cold to them, I’m sorry. I tried my best—I mean I did not intend to be cold. I’ll sit up all night with them, if you like. And I didn’t come to reproach you, Hugh. I’ll never do that—I’ve got no right to.”

She passed her hand over her eyes. If she had any wrongs, if she had suffered any pain, the fear that obsessed her obliterated all. In spite of her disillusionment, in spite of her newly acquired ability to see him as he was, enough love remained to scatter, when summoned, her pride to the winds.

Having got on both boots, he stood up.

“What’s the trouble, then?” he asked. And he took an instant’s hold of her chin—a habit he had—and smiled at her.

He little knew how sublime, in its unconscious effrontery, his question was! She tried to compose herself, that she might be able to present comprehensively to his finite masculine mind the ache of today.

“Hugh, it’s that black horse.” She could not bring herself to pronounce the name Mrs. Rindge had christened him.

“What about him?” he said, putting on his waistcoat.

“Don’t ride him!” she pleaded. “I—I’m afraid of him—I’ve been afraid of him ever since that day.

“It may be a foolish feeling, I know. Sometimes the feelings that hurt women most are foolish. If I tell you that if you ride him you will torture me, I’m sure you’ll grant what I ask. It’s such a little thing and it means so much—so much agony to me. I’d do anything for you—give up anything in the world at your slightest wish. Don’t ride him!”

“This is a ridiculous fancy of yours, Honora. The horse is all right. I’ve ridden dozens of worse ones.”

“Oh, I’m sure he isn’t,” she cried; “call it fancy, call it instinct, call it anything you like—but I feel it, Hugh. That woman—Mrs. Rindge—knows something about horses, and she said he was a brute.”

“Yes,” he interrupted, with a short laugh, “and she wants to ride him.”

“Hugh, she’s reckless. I—I’ve been watching her since she came here, and I’m sure she’s reckless with—with a purpose.”

“You’re morbid,” he said. “She’s one of the best sportswomen in the country—that’s the reason she wanted to ride the horse. Look here, Honora, I’d accede to any reasonable request. But what do you expect me to do?” he demanded; “go down and say I’m afraid to ride him? or that my wife doesn’t want me to? I’d never hear the end of it. And the first thing Adele would do would be to jump on him herself—a little wisp of a woman that looks as if she couldn’t hold a Shetland pony! Can’t you see that what you ask is impossible?”

He started for the door to terminate a conversation which had already begun to irritate him. For his anger, in these days, was very near the surface. She made one more desperate appeal.

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“Hugh—the man who sold him—he knew the horse was dangerous. I’m sure he did, from something he said to me while you were gone.”

“These country people are all idiots and cowards,” declared Chiltern. “I’ve known ’em a good while, and they haven’t got the spirit of mongrel dogs. I was a fool to think that I could do anything for them. They’re kind and neighbourly, aren’t they?” he exclaimed. “If that old rascal flattered himself he deceived me, he was mistaken. He’d have been mightily pleased if the beast had broken my neck.”

“Hugh!”

“I can’t, Honora. That’s all there is to it, I can’t. Now don’t cut up about nothing. I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go. Adele’s waiting.”

He came back, kissed her hurriedly, turned and opened the door. She followed him into the hallway, knowing that she had failed, knowing that she never could have succeeded. There she halted and watched him go down the stairs, and stand with her hands tightly pressed together: voices reached her, a hurrah from George Pembroke, and the pounding of hoofs on the driveway. It had seemed such a little thing to ask!

But she did not dwell upon this, now, when fear was gnawing her: how she had humbled her pride for days and weeks and months for him, and how he had refused her paltry request lest he should be laughed at. Her reflections then were not on his waning love. She was filled with the terror of losing him—of losing all that remained to her in the world. Presently she began to walk slowly towards the stairs, descended them, and looked around her. The hall, at least, had not changed. She listened, and a bee hummed in through the open doorway. A sudden longing for companionship possessed her—no matter whose; and she walked hurriedly, as though she were followed, through the empty rooms until she came upon George Pembroke stretched at full length on the leather-covered lounge in the library. He opened his eyes, and got up with alacrity.

“Please don’t move,” she said.

He looked at her. Although his was not what may be called a sympathetic temperament, he was not without a certain knowledge of women; superficial, perhaps. But most men of his type have seen them in despair; and since he was not related to this particular despair, what finer feelings he had were the more easily aroused. It must have been clear to her then that she had lost the power to dissemble, all the clearer because of Mr. Pembroke’s cheerfulness.

“I wasn’t going to sleep,” he assured her. “Circumstantial evidence is against me, I know. Where’s Abby? reading French literature?”

“I haven’t seen her,” replied Honora.

“She usually goes to bed with a play at this hour. It’s a horrid habit —going to bed, I mean. Don’t you think? Would you mind showing me about a little?”

“Do you really wish to?” asked Honora, incredulously.

“I haven’t been here since my senior year,” said Mr. Pembroke. “If the old General were alive, he could probably tell you something of that visit—he wrote to my father about it. I always liked the place, although the General was something of a drawback. Fine old man, with no memory.”

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"I should have thought him to have had a good memory," she said.

"I have always been led to believe that he was once sent away from college in his youth,—for his health," he explained significantly. "No man has a good memory who can't remember that. Perhaps the battle of Gettysburg wiped it out."

Thus, in his own easy-going fashion, Mr. Pembroke sought to distract her. She put on a hat, and they walked about, the various scenes recalling incidents of holidays he had spent at Highlawns. And after a while Honora was thankful that chance had sent her in this hour to him rather than to Mrs. Kame. For the sight, that morning of this lady in her dressing-gown over the stairway, had seemingly set the seal on a growing distaste. Her feeling had not been the same about Mrs. Rindge: Mrs. Kame's actions savoured of deliberate choice, of an inherent and calculating wickedness.

Had the distraction of others besides himself been the chief business of Mr. Pembroke's life, he could not have succeeded better that afternoon. He must be given this credit: his motives remain problematical; at length he even drew laughter from her. The afternoon wore on, they returned to the garden for tea, and a peaceful stillness continued to reign about them, the very sky smiling placidly at her fears. Not by assuring her that Hugh was unusual horseman, that he had passed through many dangers beside which this was a bagatelle, could the student of the feminine by her side have done half so well. And it may have been that his success encouraged him as he saw emerging, as the result of his handiwork, an unexpectedly attractive—if still somewhat serious-woman from the gloom that had enveloped her. That she should still have her distraught moments was but natural.

He talked to her largely about Hugh, of whom he appeared sincerely fond. The qualities which attracted Mr. Pembroke in his own sex were somewhat peculiar, and seemingly consisted largely in a readiness to drop the business at hand, whatever it might be, at the suggestion of a friend to do something else; the "something else," of course, to be the conception of an ingenious mind. And it was while he was in the midst of an anecdote proving the existence of this quality in his friend that he felt a sudden clutch on his arm.

They listened. Faintly, very faintly, could be heard the sound of hoof beats; rapid, though distant.

"Do you hear?" she whispered, and still held his arm.

"It's just like them to race back," said Pembroke, with admirable nonchalance.

"But they wouldn't come back at this time—it's too early. Hugh always takes long rides. They started for Hubbard's—it's twelve miles."

“Adele changes her mind every minute of the day,” he said.

“Listen!” she cried, and her clutch tightened. The hoof beats grew louder. “It’s only one—it’s only one horse!”

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Before he could answer, she was already halfway up the garden path towards the house. He followed her as she ran panting through the breakfast room, the dining room, and drawing-room, and when they reached the hall, Starling, the butler, and two footmen were going out at the door. A voice—Mrs. Kame’s—cried out, “What is it?” over the stairs, but they paid no heed. As they reached the steps they beheld the slight figure of Mrs. Rindge on a flying horse coming towards them up the driveway. Her black straw hat had slipped to the back of her neck, her hair was awry, her childish face white as paper. Honora put her hand to her heart. There was no need to tell her the news—she had known these many hours.

Mrs. Rindge’s horse came over the round grass-plot of the circle and planted his fore feet in the turf as she pulled him up. She lurched forward. It was Starling who lifted her off—George Pembroke stood by Honora.

“My God, Adele,” he exclaimed, “why don’t you speak?”

She was staring at Honora.

“I can’t!” she cried. “I can’t tell you—it’s too terrible! The horse—” she seemed to choke.

It was Honora who went up to her with a calmness that awed them.

“Tell me,” she said, “is he dead?”

Mrs. Rindge nodded, and broke into hysterical sobbing.

“And I wanted to ride him myself,” she sobbed, as they led her up the steps.

In less than an hour they brought him home and laid him in the room in which he had slept from boyhood, and shut the door. Honora looked into his face. It was calm at last, and his body strangely at rest. The passions which had tortured it and driven it hither and thither through a wayward life had fled: the power gone that would brook no guiding hand, that had known no master. It was not until then that she fell upon him, weeping . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH MR. ERWIN SEEK PARIS

As she glanced around the sitting-room of her apartment in Paris one September morning she found it difficult, in some respects, to realize that she had lived in it for more than five years. After Chiltern’s death she had sought a refuge, and she had

found it here: a refuge in which she meant—if her intention may be so definitely stated—to pass the remainder of her days.

As a refuge it had become dear to her. When first she had entered it she had looked about her numbly, thankful for walls and roof, thankful for its remoteness from the haunts of the prying: as a shipwrecked castaway regards, at the first light, the cave into which he has stumbled into the darkness-gratefully. And gradually, castaway that she felt herself to be, she had adorned it lovingly, as one above whose horizon the sails of hope were not to rise; filled it with friends not chosen in a day, whose faithful ministrations were not to cease. Her books, but only those worthy to be bound and read again; the pictures she had bought when she had grown to know what pictures were; the music she had come to love for its eternal qualities—these were her companions.

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The apartment was in the old quarter across the Seine, and she had found it by chance. The ancient family of which this hotel had once been the home would scarce have recognized, if they had returned the part of it Honora occupied. The room in which she mostly lived was above the corner of the quiet street, and might have been more aptly called a sitting-room than a salon. Its panels were the most delicate of blue-gray, fantastically designed and outlined by ribbings of blue. Some of them contained her pictures. The chairs, the sofas, the little tabourets, were upholstered in yellow, their wood matching the panels. Above the carved mantel of yellowing marble was a quaintly shaped mirror extending to the high ceiling, and flanked on either side by sconces. The carpet was a golden brown, the hangings in the tall windows yellow. And in the morning the sun came in, not boisterously, but as a well-bred and cheerful guest. An amiable proprietor had permitted her also to add a wrought-iron balcony as an adjunct to this room, and sometimes she sat there on the warmer days reading under the seclusion of an awning, or gazing at the mysterious facades of the houses opposite, or at infrequent cabs or pedestrians below.

An archway led out of the sitting-room into a smaller room, once the boudoir of a marquise, now Honora's library. This was in blue and gold, and she had so far modified the design of the decorator as to replace the mirrors of the cases with glass; she liked to see her books. Beyond the library was a dining room in grey, with dark red hangings; it overlooked the forgotten garden of the hotel.

One item alone of news from the outer world, vital to her, had drifted to her retreat. Newspapers filled her with dread, but it was from a newspaper, during the first year of her retirement, that she had learned of the death of Howard Spence. A complication of maladies was mentioned, but the true underlying cause was implied in the article, and this had shocked but not surprised her. A ferment was in progress in her own country, the affairs of the Orange Trust Company being investigated, and its president under indictment at the hour of his demise. Her feelings at the time, and for months after, were complex. She had been moved to deep pity, for in spite of what he had told her of his business transactions, it was impossible for her to think of him as a criminal. That he had been the tool of others, she knew, but it remained a question in her mind how clearly he had perceived the immorality of his course, and of theirs. He had not been given to casuistry, and he had been brought up in a school the motto of which he had once succinctly stated: the survival of the fittest. He had not been, alas, one of those to survive.

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Honora had found it impossible to unravel the tangled skein of their relationship, and to assign a definite amount of blame to each. She did not shirk hers, and was willing to accept a full measure. That she had done wrong in marrying him, and again in leaving him to marry another man, she acknowledged freely. Wrong as she knew this to have been, severely though she had been punished for it, she could not bring herself to an adequate penitence. She tried to remember him as he had been at Silverdale, and in the first months of their marriage, and not as he had afterwards become. There was no question in her mind, now that it was given her to see things more clearly, that she might have tried harder, much harder, to make their marriage a success. He might, indeed, have done more to protect and cherish her. It was a man's part to guard a woman against the evils with which she had been surrounded. On the other hand, she could not escape the fact, nor did she attempt to escape it, that she had had the more light of the two: and that, though the task were formidable, she might have fought to retain that light and infuse him with it.

That she did not hold herself guiltless is the important point. Many of her hours were spent in retrospection. She was, in a sense, as one dead, yet retaining her faculties; and these became infinitely keen now that she was deprived of the power to use them as guides through life. She felt that the power had come too late, like a legacy when one is old. And she contemplated the Honora of other days—of the flesh, as though she were now the spirit departed from that body; sorrowfully, poignantly regretful of the earthly motives, of the tarnished ideals by which it had been animated and led to destruction.

Even Hugh Chiltern had left her no illusions. She thought of him at times with much tenderness; whether she still loved him or not she could not say. She came to the conclusion that all capacity for intense feeling had been burned out of her. And she found that she could permit her mind to rest upon no period of her sojourn at Grenoble without a sense of horror; there had been no hour when she had seemed secure from haunting terror, no day that had not added its mite to the gathering evidence of an ultimate retribution. And it was like a nightmare to summon again this spectacle of the man going to pieces under her eyes. The whole incident in her life as time wore on assumed an aspect bizarre, incredible, as the follies of a night of madness appear in the saner light of morning. Her great love had bereft her of her senses, for had the least grain of sanity remained to her she might have known that the thing they attempted was impossible of accomplishment.

Her feeling now, after four years, might be described as relief. To employ again the figure of the castaway, she often wondered why she of all others had been rescued from the tortures of slow drowning and thrown up on an island. What had she done above the others to deserve preservation? It was inevitable that she should on occasions picture to herself the years with him that would have stretched ahead, even as the vision of them had come to her that morning when, in obedience to his telegram, she had told Starling to prepare for guests. Her escape had indeed been miraculous!

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Although they had passed through a ceremony, the conviction had never taken root in her that she had been married to Chiltern. The tie that had united her to him had not been sacred, though it had been no less binding; more so, in fact. That tie would have become a shackle. Her perception of this, after his death, had led her to instruct her attorney to send back to his relatives all but a small income from his estate, enough for her to live on during her lifetime. There had been some trouble about this matter; Mrs. Grainger, in particular, had surprised her in making objections, and had finally written a letter which Honora received with a feeling akin to gratitude. Whether her own action had softened this lady's feelings, she never understood; she had cherished the letter for its unexpectedly charitable expressions. Chiltern's family had at last agreed to accept the estate on the condition that the income mentioned should be tripled. And to this Honora had consented. Money had less value than ever in her eyes.

She lived here in Paris in what may be called a certain peace, made no demands upon the world, and had no expectations from it. She was now in half mourning, and intended to remain so. Her isolation was of her own choice, if a stronger expression be not used. She was by no means an enforced outcast. And she was even aware that a certain sympathy for her had grown up amongst her former friends which had spread to the colony of her compatriots in Paris; in whose numbers there were some, by no means unrecognized, who had defied the conventions more than she. Hugh Chiltern's reputation, and the general knowledge of his career, had no doubt aided to increase this sympathy, but the dignity of her conduct since his death was at the foundation of it. Sometimes, on her walks and drives, she saw people bowing to her, and recognized friends or acquaintances of what seemed to her like a former existence.

Such had been her life in Paris until a certain day in early September, a month before this chapter opens. It was afternoon, and she was sitting in the balcony cutting a volume of memoirs when she heard the rattle of a cab on the cobbles below, and peered curiously over the edge of the railing. Although still half a block away, the national characteristics of the passenger were sufficiently apparent. He was an American—of that she was sure. And many Americans did not stray into that quarter. The length of his legs, for one thing, betrayed him: he found the seat of the fiacre too low, and had crossed one knee over the other. Other and less easily definable attributes he did not lack. And as he leaned against the faded blue cushions regarding with interest the buildings he passed, he seemed, like an ambassador, to convert the cab in which he rode into United States territory. Then she saw that it was Peter Erwin.

She drew back her head from the balcony rail, and tried to sit still and to think, but she was trembling as one stricken with a chill. The cab stopped; and presently, after an interval, his card was handed her. She rose, and stood for a moment with her hand against the wall before she went into the salon. None of the questions she had asked herself were answered. Was she glad to see him? and what would be his attitude towards her? When she beheld him standing before her she had strength only to pronounce his name.

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He came forward quickly and took her hand and looked down into her face. She regarded him tremulously, instinctively guessing the vital importance of this moment for him; and she knew then that he had been looking forward to it in mingled hope and dread, as one who gazes seaward after a night of tempest for the ship he has seen at dusk in the offing. What had the tempest done to her? Such was his question. And her heart leaped as she saw the light growing in his eyes, for it meant much to her that he should see that she was not utterly dismantled. She felt; his own hand tremble as he relinquished hers. He was greatly moved; his voice, too, betrayed it.

"You see I have found you," he said.

"Yes," she answered; "—why did you come?"

"Why have I always come to you, when it was possible?" he asked.

"No one ever had such a friend, Peter. Of that I am sure."

"I wanted to see Paris," he said, "before I grew too decrepit to enjoy it."

She smiled, and turned away.

"Have you seen much of it?"

"Enough to wish to see more."

"When did you arrive?"

"Some time in the night," he said, "from Cherbourg. And I'm staying at a very grand hotel, which might be anywhere. A man I crossed with on the steamer took me there. I think I'd move to one of the quieter ones, the French ones, if I were a little surer of my pronunciation and the subjunctive mood."

"You don't mean to say you've been studying French!"

He coloured a little, and laughed.

"You think it ridiculous at my time of life? I suppose you're right. You should have seen me trying to understand the cabmen. The way these people talk reminds me more of a Gatling gun than anything I can think of. It certainly isn't human."

"Perhaps you have come over as ambassador," she suggested. "When I saw you in the cab, even before I recognized you, I thought of a bit of our soil broken off and drifted over here."



Her voice did not quite sustain the lighter note—the emotion his visit was causing her was too great. He brought with him into her retreat not so much a flood of memories as of sensations. He was a man whose image time with difficulty obliterates, whose presence was a shining thing: so she had grown to value it in proportion as she had had less of it. She did inevitably recall the last time she had seen him, in the little Western city, and how he had overwhelmed her, invaded her with doubts and aroused the spirit which had possessed her to fight fiercely for its foothold. And to-day his coming might be likened to the entrance of a great physician into the room of a distant and lonely patient whom amidst wide ministrations he has not forgotten. She saw now that he had been right. She had always seen it, clearly indeed when he had been beside her, but the spirit within her had been too strong, until now. Now, when it had plundered her soul of treasures—once so little valued—it had fled. Such were her thoughts.

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The great of heart undoubtedly possess this highest quality of the physician,—if the statement may thus be put backhandedly,—and Peter Erwin instinctively understood the essential of what was going on within her. He appeared to take a delight in the fancy she had suggested; that he had brought a portion of the newer world to France.

“Not a piece of the Atlantic coast, certainly,” he replied. “One of the muddy islands, perhaps, of the Mississippi.”

“All the more representative,” she said. “You seem to have taken possession of Paris, Peter—not Paris of you. You have annexed the seat of the Capets, and brought democracy at last into the Faubourg.”

“Without a Reign of Terror,” he added quizzically.

“If you are not ambassador, what are you?” she asked. “I have expected at any moment to read in the Figaro that you were President of the United States.”

“I am the American tourist,” he declared, “with Baedeker for my Bible, who desires to be shown everything. And I have already discovered that the legend of the fabulous wealth of the Indies is still in force here. There are many who are willing to believe that in spite of my modest appearance—maybe because of it—I have sailed over in a galleon filled with gold. Already I have been approached from every side by confidential gentlemen who announced that they spoke English—one of them said ‘American’—who have offered to show me many things, and who have betrayed enough interest in me to inquire whether I were married or single.”

Honora laughed. They were seated in the balcony by this time, and he had the volume of memoirs on his knee, fingering it idly.

“What did you say to them?” she asked.

“I told them I was the proud father of ten children,” he replied. “That seemed to stagger them, but only for a moment. They offered to take us all to the Louvre.”

“Peter, you are ridiculous! But, in spite of your nationality, you don’t look exactly gullible.”

“That is a relief,” he said. “I had begun to think I ought to leave my address and my watch with the Consul General”

Of such a nature was the first insidious rupture of that routine she had grown to look upon as changeless for the years to come, of the life she had chosen for its very immutable quality. Even its pangs of loneliness had acquired a certain sweet taste. Partly from a fear of a world that had hurt her, partly from fear of herself, she had made her burrow deep, that heat and cold, the changing seasons, and love and hate might be

things far removed. She had sought to remove comparisons, too, from the limits of her vision; to cherish and keep alive, indeed, such regrets as she had, but to make no new ones.

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Often had she thought of Peter Erwin, and it is not too much to say that he had insensibly grown into an ideal. He had come to represent to her the great thing she had missed in life, missed by feverish searching in the wrong places, digging for gold where the ground had glittered. And, if the choice had been given her, she would have preferred his spiritual to his bodily companionship—for a while, at least. Some day, when she should feel sure that desire had ceased to throb, when she should have acquired an unshakable and absolute resignation, she would see him. It is not too much to say, if her feeling be not misconstrued and stretched far beyond her own conception of it, that he was her one remaining interest in the world. She had scanned the letters of her aunt and uncle for knowledge of his doings, and had felt her curiosity justified by a certain proprietorship that she did not define, faith in humankind, or the lack of it, usually makes itself felt through one's comparative contemporaries. That her uncle was a good man, for instance, had no such effect upon Honora, as the fact that Peter was a good man. And that he had held a true course had gradually become a very vital thing to her, perhaps the most vital thing; and she could have imagined no greater personal calamity now than to have seen him inconsistent. For there are such men, and most people have known them. They are the men who, unconsciously, keep life sweet.

Yet she was sorry he had invaded her hiding-place. She had not yet achieved peace, and much of the weary task would have to be done over after he was gone.

In the meantime she drifted with astounding ease into another existence. For it was she, and not the confidential gentlemen, who showed Peter Paris: not the careless, pleasure-loving Paris of the restaurants, but of the Cluny and the Carnavalet. The Louvre even was not neglected, and as they entered it first she recalled with still unaccustomed laughter his reply to the proffered services of the guide. Indeed, there was much laughter in their excursions: his native humour sprang from the same well that held his seriousness. She was amazed at his ability to strip a sham and leave it grotesquely naked; shams the risible aspect of which she had never observed in spite of the familiarity four years had given her. Some of his own countrymen and countrywomen afforded him the greatest amusement in their efforts to carry off acquired European "personalities," combinations of assumed indifference and effrontery, and an accent the like of which was never heard before. But he was neither bitter nor crude in his criticisms. He made her laugh, but he never made her ashamed. His chief faculty seemed to be to give her the power to behold, with astonishing clearness, objects and truths which had lain before her eyes, and yet hidden. And she had not thought to acquire any more truths.

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The depth of his pleasure in the things he saw was likewise a revelation to her. She was by no means a bad guide to the Louvre and the Luxembourg, but the light in her which had come slowly flooded him with radiance at the sight of a statue or a picture. He would stop with an exclamation and stand gazing, self-forgetful, for incredible periods, and she would watch him, filled with a curious sense of the limitations of an appreciation she had thought complete. Where during his busy life had he got this thing which others had sought in many voyages in vain?

Other excursions they made, and sometimes these absorbed a day. It was a wonderful month, that Parisian September, which Honora, when she allowed herself to think, felt that she had no right to. A month filled to the brim with colour: the stone facades of the houses, which in certain lights were what the French so aptly call *bleuâtre*; the dense green foliage of the horse-chestnut trees, the fantastic iron grills, the Arc de Triomphe in the centre of its circle at sunset, the wide shaded avenues radiating from it, the bewildering Champs Elysees, the blue waters of the Seine and the graceful bridges spanning it, Notre Dame against the sky. Their walks took them, too, into quainter, forgotten regions where history was grim and half-effaced, and they speculated on the France of other days.

They went farther afield; and it was given them to walk together down green vistas cut for kings, to linger on terraces with the river far below them, and the roofs of Paris in the hazy distance; that Paris, sullen so long, the mutterings of which the kings who had sat there must have heard with dread; that Paris which had finally risen in its wrath and taken the pleasure-houses and the parks for itself.

Once they went out to Chantilly, the cameo-like chateau that stands mirrored in its waters, and wandered through the alleys there. Honora had left her parasol on the parapet, and as they returned Peter went to get it, while she awaited him at a little distance. A group was chatting gayly on the lawn, and one of them, a middle-aged, well-dressed man hailed him with an air of fellowship, and Peter stopped for a moment's talk.

"We were speaking of ambassadors the other day," he said when he joined her; "that was our own, Minturn."

"We were speaking of them nearly a month ago," she said.

"A month ago! I can't believe it!" he exclaimed.

"What did he say to you?" Honora inquired presently.

"He was abusing me for not letting him know I was in Paris."

"Peter, you ought to have let him know!"

“I didn’t come over here to see the ambassador,” answered Peter, gayly.

She talked less than usual on their drive homeward, but he did not seem to notice the fact. Dusk was already lurking in the courtyards and byways of the quiet quarter when the porter let them in, and the stone stairway of the old hotel was almost in darkness. The sitting-room, with its yellow, hangings snugly drawn and its pervading but soft light, was a grateful change. And while she was gone to—remove her veil and hat, Peter looked around it.

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It was redolent of her. A high vase of remarkable beauty, filled with white roses, stood on the gueridon. He went forward and touched it, and closed his eyes as though in pain. When he opened them he saw her standing in the archway.

She had taken off her coat, and was in a simple white muslin gown, with a black belt—a costume that had become habitual. Her age was thirty. The tragedy and the gravity of her life during these later years had touched her with something that before was lacking. In the street, in the galleries, people had turned to look at her; not with impudent stares. She caught attention, aroused imagination. Once, the year before, she had had a strange experience with a well-known painter, who, in an impulsive note, had admitted following her home and bribing the concierge. He craved a few sittings. Her expression now, as she looked at Peter, was graver than usual.

“You must not come to-morrow,” she said.

“I thought we were going to Versailles again,” he replied in surprise. “I have made the arrangements.”

“I have changed my mind. I’m not going.”

“You want to postpone it?” he asked.

She took a chair beside the little blaze in the fireplace.

“Sit down, Peter. I wish to say something to you. I have been wishing to do so for some time.”

“Do you object if I stand a moment?” he said. “I feel so much more comfortable standing, especially when I am going to be scolded.”

“Yes,” she admitted, “I am going to scold you. Your conscience has warned you.”

“On the contrary,” he declared, “it has never been quieter. If I have offended; it is through ignorance.”

“It is through charity, as usual,” she said in a low voice. “If your conscience be quiet, mine is not. It is in myself that I am disappointed—I have been very selfish. I have usurped you. I have known it all along, and I have done very wrong in not relinquishing you before.”

“Who would have shown me Paris?” he exclaimed.

“No,” she continued, “you would not have been alone. If I had needed proof of that fact, I had it to-day—”

“Oh, Minturn,” he interrupted; “think of me hanging about an Embassy and trying not to spill tea!” And he smiled at the image that presented.

Her own smile was fleeting.

“You would never do that, I know,” she said gravely.

“You are still too modest, Peter, but the time has gone by when I can be easily deceived. You have a great reputation among men of affairs, an unique one. In spite of the fact that you are distinctly American, you have a wide interest in what is going on in the world. And you have an opportunity here to meet people of note, people really worth while from every point of view. You have no right to neglect it.”

He was silent a moment, looking down at her. She was leaning forward, her eyes fixed on the fire, her hands clasped between her knees.

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"Do you think I care for that?" he asked.

"You ought to care," she said, without looking up. "And it is my duty to try to make you care."

"Honora, why do you think I came over here?" he said.

"To see Paris," she answered. "I have your own word for it. To—to continue your education. It never seems to stop."

"Did you really believe that?"

"Of course I believed it. What could be more natural? And you have never had a holiday like this."

"No," he agreed. "I admit that."

"I don't know how much longer you are going to stay," she said. "You have not been abroad before, and there are other places you ought to go."

"I'll get you to make out an itinerary."

"Peter, can't you see that I'm serious? I have decided to take matters in my own hands. The rest of the time you are here, you may come to see me twice a week. I shall instruct the concierge."

He turned and grasped the mantel shelf with both hands, and touched the log with the toe of his boot.

"What I told you about seeing Paris may be called polite fiction," he said. "I came over here to see you. I have been afraid to say it until to-day, and I am afraid to say it now."

She sat very still. The log flared up again, and he turned slowly and looked at the shadows in her face.

"You-you have always been good to me," she answered. "I have never deserved it—I have never understood it. If it is any satisfaction for you to know that what I have saved of myself I owe to you, I tell you so freely."

"That," he said, "is something for which God forbid that I should take credit. What you are is due to the development of a germ within you, a development in which I have always had faith. I came here to see you, I came here because I love you, because I have always loved you, Honora."

"Oh, no, not that!" she cried; "not that!"

“Why not?” he asked. “It is something I cannot help, something beyond my power to prevent if I would. But I would not. I am proud of it, and I should be lost without it. I have had it always. I have come over to beg you to marry me.”

“It’s impossible! Can’t you see it’s impossible?”

“You don’t love me?” he said. Into those few words was thrown all the suffering of his silent years.

“I don’t know what I feel for you,” she answered in an agonized voice, her fingers tightening over the backs of her white hands. “If reverence be love—if trust be love, infinite and absolute trust—if gratitude be love—if emptiness after you are gone be a sign of it—yes, I love you. If the power to see clearly only through you, to interpret myself only by your aid be love, I acknowledge it. I tell you so freely, as of your right to know. And the germ of which you spoke is you. You have grown until you have taken possession of—of what is left of me. If I had only been able to see clearly from the first,

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Peter, I should be another woman to-day, a whole woman, a wise woman. Oh, I have thought of it much. The secret of life was there at my side from the time I was able to pronounce your name, and I couldn't see it. You had it. You stayed. You took duty where you found it, and it has made you great. Oh, I don't mean to speak in a worldly sense. When I say that, it is to express the highest human quality of which I can think and feel. But I can't marry you. You must see it."

"I cannot see it," he replied, when he had somewhat gained control of himself.

"Because I should be wronging you."

"How?" he asked.

"In the first place, I should be ruining your career."

"If I had a career," he said, smiling gently, "you couldn't ruin it. You both overestimate and underestimate the world's opinion, Honora. As my wife, it will not treat you cruelly. And as for my career, as you call it, it has merely consisted in doing as best I could the work that has come to me. I have tried to serve well those who have employed me, and if my services be of value to them, and to those who may need me in the future, they are not going to reject me. If I have any worth in the world, you will but add to it. Without you I am incomplete."

She looked up at him wonderingly.

"Yes, you are great," she said. "You pity me, you think of my loneliness."

"It is true I cannot bear to picture you here," he exclaimed. "The thought tortures me, but it is because I love you, because I wish to take and shield you. I am not a man to marry a woman without love. It seems to me that you should know me well enough to believe that, Honora. There never has been any other woman in my life, and there never can be. I have given you proof of it, God knows."

"I am not what I was," she said, "I am not what I was. I have been dragged down."

He bent and lifted her hand from her knee, and raised it to his lips, a homage from him that gave her an exquisite pain.

"If you had been dragged down," he answered simply, "my love would have been killed. I know something of the horrors you have been through, as though I had suffered them myself. They might have dragged down another woman, Honora. But they have strangely ennobled you."

She drew her hand away.

“No,” she said, “I do not deserve happiness. It cannot be my destiny.”

“Destiny,” he repeated. “Destiny is a thing not understandable by finite minds. It is not necessarily continued tragedy and waste, of that I am certain. Only a little thought is required, it seems to me, to assure us that we cannot be the judges of our own punishment on this earth. And of another world we know nothing. It cannot be any one’s destiny to throw away a life while still something may be made of it. You would be throwing your life away here. That no other woman is possible, or ever can be possible, for me should be a consideration with you, Honora. What I ask of you is a sacrifice—will you make me happy?”

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Her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, Peter, do you care so much as that? If—if I could be sure that I were doing it for you! If in spite—of all that has happened to me, I could be doing something for you—!”

He stooped and kissed her.

“You can if you will,” he said.