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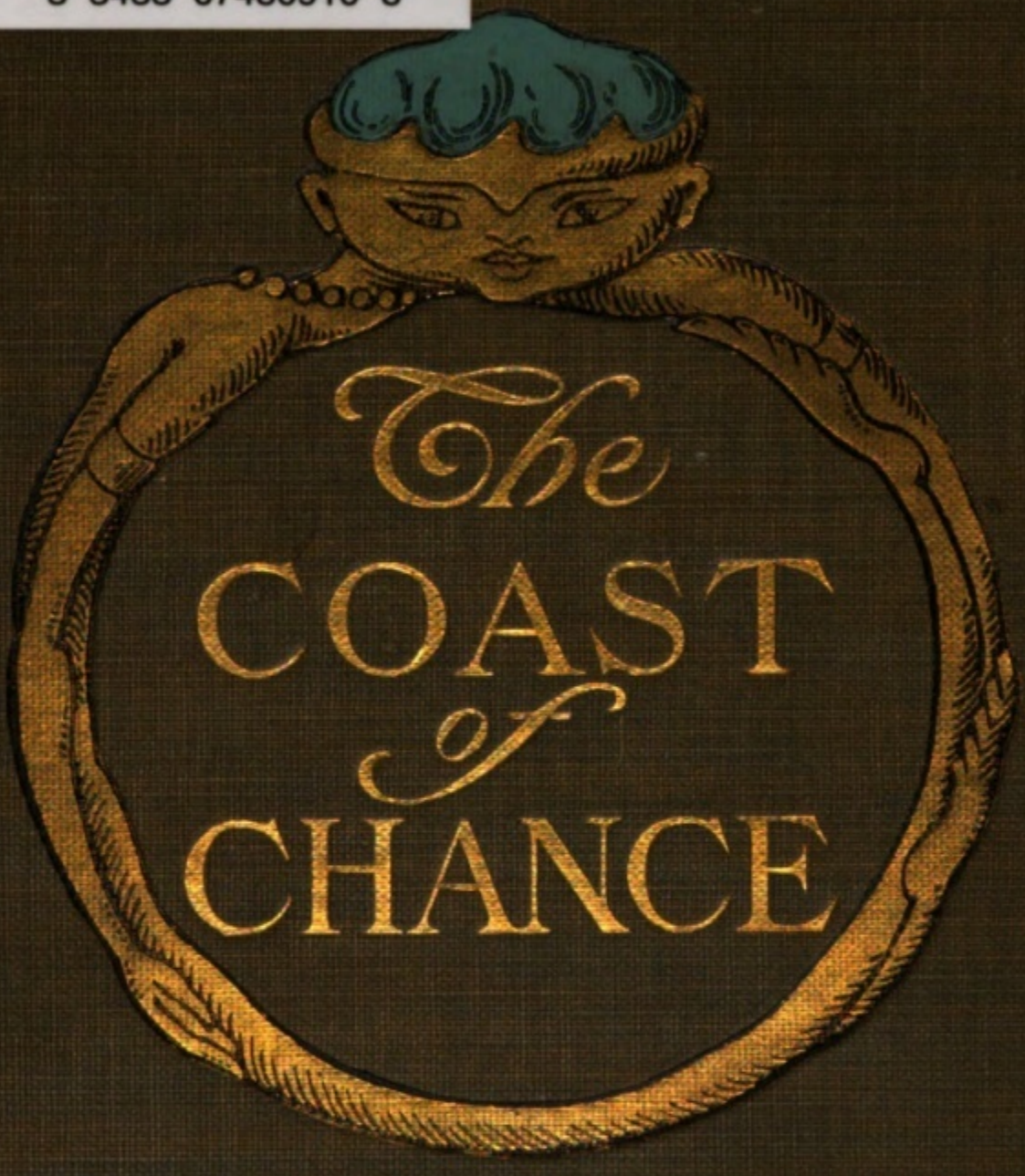

# The COAST of CHANCE

ESTHER & LUCIA CHAMBERLAIN

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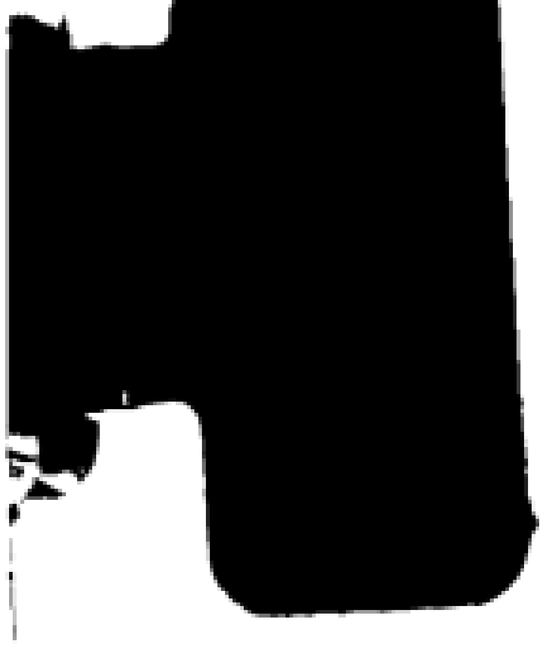

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THE

# COAST OF CHANCE

*By*

ESTHER AND LUCIA CHAMBERLAIN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD

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# THE COAST OF CHANCE

## I

## THE VANISHING MYSTERY

FLORA Gilsey stood on the threshold of her dining-room. She had turned her back on it. She swayed forward. Her bare arms were lifted. Her hands lightly caught the molding on either side of the door. She was looking intently into the mirror at the other end of the hall. All the lights in the dining-room were lit, and she saw herself rather keenly set against their brilliance. The straight-held head, the lifted arms, the short, slender waist, the long, long sweep of her skirts made her seem taller than she actually was; and the strong, bright growth of her hair and the vivacity of her face made her seem more deeply colored.

She had poised there for the mere survey of



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a new gown, but after a moment of dwelling on her own reflection she found herself considering it only as an object in the foreground of a picture. That picture, seen through the open door, reflected in the glass, was all of a bright, hard glitter, all a high, harsh tone of newness. In its paneled oak, in its glare of cut-glass and silver, in the shining vacant faces of its floors and walls, there was not a color that filled the eye, not a shadow where imagination could find play. As a background for herself it struck her as incongruous. Like a child looking at the landscape upside down, she felt herself in a foreign country. Yet it was hers. She turned about to bring it into familiar association. There was nothing wrong with it. But its great capacity suggested large parties rather than close intimacies. In the high lift of its ceilings, the ample openings of its doors, the swept, garnished, polished beauty of its cold surfaces, it proclaimed itself conceived, created and decorated for large, fine functions. She thought whimsically that any one who knew her, coming into her house, would



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realize that some one other than herself had the ordering of it.

She glanced over the table. It was set for three. It lacked nothing but the serving of dinner. She looked at the clock. It wanted a few minutes to the hour. Shima, the Japanese butler, came in softly with the evening papers. She took them from him. Nothing bored her so much as a paper, but to-night she knew it contained something she really wanted to see. She opened one of the damp sheets at the page of sales.

There it was at the head of the column in thick black type:

AT AUCTION, FEBRUARY 18
PERSONAL ESTATE OF
ELIZABETH HUNTER CHATWORTH
CONSISTING OF ——

She read the details with interest down to the end, where the name of the "famous Chatworth ring" finished the announcement with a flourish. Why "famous"? It was very provoking to ad-



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vertise with that vague adjective and not explain it.

She turned indifferently to the first page. She read a sentence, re-read it, read it again. Then, as if she could not read fast enough, her eyes galloped down the column. Color came into her cheeks. The grasp of her hands on the edges of the paper tightened. It was the most extraordinary thing! She was bewildered with the feeling that what was blazing at her from the columns of the paper was at once the wildest thing that could possibly have happened, and yet the one most to have been expected.

For, from the first the business had been sinister, from as far back as the tragedy—the end of poor young Chatworth and his wife—the Bessie, who, before her English marriage, they had all known so well. Her death, that had befallen in far Italian Alps, had made a sensation in their little city, and the large announcements of auction that had followed hard upon it had bred among the women who had known her a morbid excitement, a feverish desire to buy,



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as if there might be some special luck in them, the jewels of a woman who had so tragically died. They had been ready to make a social affair of the private view held in the "Maple Room" before the auction. And now the whole spectacular business was capped by a sensation so dramatic as to strain credulity to its limit. She could not believe it; yet here it was glaring at her from the first page. Still—it might be an exaggeration, a mistake. She must go back to the beginning and read it over slowly.

The striking of the hour hurried her. Shima's announcement of dinner only sent her eyes faster down the page. But when, with a faint, smooth rustle, Mrs. Britton came in, she let the paper fall. She always faced her chaperon with a little nervousness, and with the same sense of strangeness with which she so frequently regarded her house.

"It's fifteen minutes after eight," Mrs. Britton observed. "We would better not wait any longer."

She took the place opposite Flora's at the



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round table. Flora sat down, still holding the paper, flushed and bolt upright with her news.

"It's the most extraordinary thing!" she burst forth.

Mrs. Britton paused mildly with a radish in her fingers. She took in the presence of the paper, and the suppressed excitement of her companion's face—seemed to absorb them through the large pupils of her light eyes, through all her smooth, pretty person, before she reached for an explanation.

"What is the most extraordinary thing?" The query came bland and smooth, as if, whatever it was, it could not surprise her.

"Why, the Chatworth ring! At the private view this afternoon it simply vanished! And—and it was all our own crowd who were there!"

"Vanished!" Clara Britton leaned forward, peering hard in the face of this extraordinary statement. "Stolen, do you mean?" She made it definite.

Flora flung out her hands.

"Well, it disappeared in the Maple Room, in



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the middle of the afternoon, when everybody was there—and they haven't the faintest clue."

"But how?" For a moment the preposterous fact left Clara too quick to be calm.

Again Flora's eloquent hands. "That is it! It was in a case like all the other jewels. Harry saw it"—she glanced at the paper—"as late as four o'clock. When he came back with Judge Buller, half an hour after, it was gone."

Flora leaned forward on her elbows, chin in hands. No two could have differed more than these two women in their blondness and their prettiness and their wonder. For Clara was sharp and pale, with silvery lights in eyes and hair, and confronted the facts with an alert and calculating observation; but Flora was tawny, toned from brown to ivory through all the gamut of gold—hair color of a panther's hide, eyes dark hazel, glinting through dust-colored lashes, chin round like a fruit. The pressure of her fingers accented the slight uptilt of her brows to elfishness, and her look was introspective. She might, instead of wondering on the



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outside, have been the very center of the mystery itself, toying with unthinkable possibilities of revelation. She looked far over the head of Clara Britton's annoyance that there should be no clue.

"Why, don't you see," she pointed out, "that is just the fun of it? It might be anybody. It might be you, or me, or Ella Buller. Though I would much prefer to think it was some one we didn't know so well—some one strange and fascinating, who will presently go slipping out the Golden Gate in a little junk boat, so that no one need be embarrassed."

Clara looked back with extraordinary intentness.

"Oh, it's not possible the thing is stolen. There's some mistake! And if it were"—her eyes seemed to open a little wider to take in this possibility—"they will have detectives all around the water front by to-night. Any one would find it difficult to get away," she pointed out. "You see, the ring is an important piece of property."



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"Of course; I know," Flora murmured. A faint twitch of humor pulled her mouth, but the passionate romantic color was dying out of her face. How was it that one's romances could be so cruelly pulled down to earth? She ought to have learned by this time, she thought, never to fly her little flag of romance except to an empty horizon—never, at least, to fly it in Clara's face. It was always as promptly surrounded by Clara's common sense as San Francisco would be surrounded by the police. But still she couldn't quite come down to Clara. "At least," she sighed, "he has saved me an awful expense, whoever took it, for I should have had to have it."

Mrs. Britton surveyed this statement considerингly. "Was it the most valuable thing in the collection?"

Flora hesitated in the face of the alert question. "I—don't know. But it was the most remarkable. It was a Chatworth heirloom, the papers say, and was given to Bessie at the time of her marriage." The thought of the death



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that had so quickly followed that marriage gave Flora a little shiver, but no shade of the tragedy touched Clara. There was nothing but speculation in Clara's eyes—that, and a little disappointment. "Then they will put off the auction—if it is really so," she mused.

"Oh, yes," Flora mourned, "they can put it off as long as they please. The only thing I wanted is gone—and I hadn't even seen it."

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure. There may be some mistake about it. The papers love a sensation."

"But there must be something in it, Clara. Why, they closed the doors and searched them—*that* crowd! It's ridiculous!"

Clara Britton glanced at the empty place. "Then that must be what has kept him."

"Who? Oh, Harry!" It took Flora a moment to remember she had been expecting Harry. She hoped Clara had not noticed it. Clara always had too much the assumption that she was taking him only as the best-looking, best-natured, safest bargain presented. "He will be



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here," she reassured, "but I wish he would hurry. His dinner will be spoiled; and, poor dear, he likes his dinner so much!"

The faint silver sound of the electric bell, a precipitate double peal, seemed to uphold this statement. The women faced each other in a moment's suspense, a moment of expectation, such as the advance column may feel at sight of a scout hotfoot from the field of battle. There were muffled movements in the hall, then light, even steps crossing the drawing-room. Those light steps always suggested a slight frame, and, as always, Flora was re-surprised at his bulk as now it appeared between the parted curtains, the dull black and sharp white of his evening clothes topped by his square, fresh-colored face.

"Well, Flora," he said, "I know I'm late," and took the hand she held to him from where she sat. Her face danced with pleasure. Yes, he was magnificent, she thought, as he crossed with his light stride to Mrs. Britton's chair. He could even stand the harsh lines and lights of even-



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ing clothes. He dominated their ugly convention with his height, his face so ruddy and fresh under the pale brown of his hair, his alert, assured, deft movement. His high good nature had the effect of sweetening for him even Clara Britton's flavorless manner. The "We were speaking of you," with which she saw him to his seat, had all the warmth of a smile, but a smile far in the background of Flora's immediate possession. Indeed, Flora had seldom had so much to say to Harry as at this moment of her excitement over what he had actually seen. For the evidence that he had seen something was vivid in his face. She had never found him so splendidly alive. She had never seen him, it came to her, quite like this before.

She shook the paper at him. "Tell us everything, instantly!"

He gaily acknowledged her right to make him thus stand and deliver. He shot his hands into the air with the lightening vivacity that was in him a sort of wit. "Not guilty," he grinned at her.



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"Harry, you know you were in it. The papers have you the most important personage."

"Oh, not all that," he denied her allegation. "They had the whole lot of us cooped up together for investigation for as much as two hours. I thought I shouldn't have time to dress! I'm as hungry as a hawk!" He rolled it out with the full gusto with which he was by this time engaged on his first course.

"Poor dear," said Flora with cooing mock-sympathy, "and did they starve it? But would it mind telling us, now that it has its food, what is true, and what was the gallant part it played this afternoon?"

"Well," he followed her whimsical lead, "the chief detective and I were the star performers. I found the ring wasn't there, and he found he couldn't find it."

"Don't you know any more than the paper?" Flora mourned.

"Considerably less—if I know the papers." He grinned with a fine flash of even teeth. "What do you want me to say?"



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"Why, stupid, the adventures of Harry Cressy, Esquire. How did you feel?"

"Thirsty."

"Oh, Harry!" She glanced about, as if for a missile to threaten him with.

"Upon my word! But look here—wait a minute!" he arrived deliberately at what was required of him. "Never mind how I felt; but if you want to know the way it happened—here's your Maple Room." He began a diagram with forks on the cloth before him, and Clara, who had watched their sparring from her point of vantage in the background, now leaned forward, as if at last they were getting to the point.

"This is the case, furthest from the door." He planted a salt-cellar in his silver inclosure. "I come in very early, at half-past two, before the crowd; fail to meet you there." He made mischievous bows to right and left. "I go out again. But first I see this ring."

"What was it like?" Flora demanded.

"Like?" Harry turned a speculative eye to the dull glow of the candelabrum, as if between



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its points of flame he conjured up the vision of the vanished jewel. "Like a bit of an old gold heathen god curled round himself, with his head, which was mostly two yellow sapphires, between his knees, and a big, blue stone on top. Soft, yellow gold, so fine you could almost dent it. And carved! Even through a glass every line of it is right." He paused and ran the tip of his finger along the silver outline of his diagram, as if the mere memory of the precious eyes of the little god had power to arrest all other consideration. "Well, there he was," he pulled himself up, "and I can't remember when a thing of that sort has stayed by me so. I couldn't seem to get away from it. I dropped into the club and talked to Buller about it. He got keen, and I went back with him to have another look at it. Well, at the door Buller stops to speak to a chap going out—a crazy Englishman he had picked up at the club. I go on. By this time there's a crowd inside, but I manage to get up to the case. And first I miss the spot altogether. And then I see the card with his name; and then, under-



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neath I see the hole in the velvet where the god has been."

Flora gave out a little sigh of suspense, and even Clara showed a gleam of excitement. He looked from one to the other. "Then there were fireworks. Buller came up. The detective came up. Everybody came up. Nobody'd believe it. Lots of 'em thought they had seen it only a few minutes before. But there was the hole in the velvet—and nothing more to be found."

"But does no one know anything? Has no one an idea?" Clara almost panted in her impatience.

"Not the ghost of a glimmer of a clue. There were upward of two hundred of us, and they let us out like a chain-gang, one by one. My number was one hundred and ninety-three, and so far I can vouch there were no discoveries. It has vanished—sunk out of sight."

Flora sighed. "Oh, poor Bessie Chatworth!"

It came out with a quick inconsequence that made Clara—even in her impatience—ever so faintly smile. "It seems so cruel to have your things



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taken like that when you're dead, and can't help it," Flora rather lamely explained. "I should hate it."

Harry stared at her. "Oh, come. I guess you wouldn't care." His eyes rested for a moment on the fine flare of jewels presented by Flora's clasped hands. "Besides,"—his voice dropped to a graver level—"the deuce of it is—" he paused, they, both rather breathless, looking at him. He had the air of a man about to give information, and then the air of a man who has thought better of it. His voice consciously shook off its gravity. "Well, there'll be such a row kicked up, the probability is the thing'll be returned and no questions asked. Purdie's keen —very keen. He's responsible, the executor of the estate, you see."

But Clara Britton leveled her eyes at him, as if the thing he had produced was not at all the thing he had led up to. "Still, unless there was enormous pressure somewhere—and in this case I don't see where—I can't see what Mr. Purdie's keenness will do toward getting it back."



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Harry played a little sulkily with the proposition, but he would not pick up the thread he had dropped. "I don't know that any one sees. The question now is—who took it?"

"Why, one of us," said Flora flippantly. "Of course, it is all on the Western Addition."

"Don't you believe it!" he answered her. "It's a confounded fine professional job. It takes more than sleight of hand—it takes genius, a thing like that!"

Flora gave him a quick glance, but he had not spoken flippantly. He was serious in his admiration. She didn't quite fancy his tone. "Why, Harry," she protested, "you talk as if you admired him!"

At this he laughed. "Well, how do you know I don't? But I can tell you one thing"—he dropped back into the same tone again—"there's no local crook work in this affair. It should be some one big—some one—" He frowned straight before him. He shook his head and smiled.



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The name floated in a little silence.

"He kept them guessing," Harry went on recalling it; "did some great vanishing acts."

"You mean he could take things before their eyes without people knowing it?" Flora's eyes were wide beyond their wont.

"Something of that sort. I remember at one of the Embassy balls at St. James' he talked five minutes to Lady Tilton. Her emeralds were on when he began. She never saw 'em again."

Flora began to laugh. "He must have been attractive."

"Well," Harry conceded practically, "he knew his business."

"But you can't rely on those stories," Clara objected.

"You must this time," he shook his tawny head at her; "I give you my word; for I was there."

It seemed to Flora fairly preposterous that Harry could sit there looking so matter-of-fact with such experiences behind him. Even Clara



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looked a little taken aback, but the effect was only to set her more sharply on.

"Then such a man could easily have taken the ring in the Maple Room this afternoon? You think it might have been the man himself?"

His broad smile of appreciation enveloped her. "Oh, you have a scent like a bloodhound. You haven't let go of that once since you started. He could have done it—oh, easy—but he went out eight, ten years ago."

"Died?" Flora's rising inflection was a lament.

"Went over the horizon—over the range. Believe he died in the colonies."

"Oh," Flora sighed, "then I shall have to fancy he has come back again, just for the sake of the Chatworth ring. That wouldn't be too strange. It's all so strange I keep forgetting it is real. At least," she went on explaining herself to Harry's smile, "it seems as if this must be going on a long way off, as if it couldn't be so close to us, as if the ring I wanted so much couldn't really be the one that has disappeared."



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All the while she felt Harry's smile enveloping her with an odd, half-protecting watchfulness, but at the close of her sentence he frowned a little.

"Well, perhaps we can find another ring to take the place of it."

She felt that she had been stupid where she should have been most delicate. "But you don't understand," she protested, leaning far toward him as if to coerce him with her generous warmth. "The Chatworth ring was nothing but a fancy I had. I never thought of it for a moment as an engagement ring!"

By the light stir of silk she was aware that Clara had risen. She looked up quickly to encounter that odd look. Clara's face was so smooth, so polished, so unruffled, as to appear almost blank, but none the less Flora saw it all in Clara's eye—a look that was not new to her. It was the same with which Clara had met the announcement of her engagement; the same look with which she had confronted every allusion to the approaching marriage; the same with



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which she now surveyed the mention of the engagement ring—a look neither approving nor dissenting, whose calm, considerate speculation seemed to repudiate all interest positive or negative in the approaching event except the one large question, "What is to become of me?" Many times Clara had held it up before her, not as a question, certainly not as an accusation; as a flat assertion of fact; but to-night Flora felt it so directly and imperatively aimed at her that it seemed this time to demand an audible response. And Clara's way of getting up, and standing there, with her gloves on, poised and expectant, as if she were only waiting an opportunity to take farewell, took on, in the light of her look, the fantastic appearance of a final departure. "I'm afraid," she mildly reminded them, "that Shima announced the carriage ten minutes ago."

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry!" Flora's eyes wavered apologetically in the direction of the waiting Japanese. Clara's flicker of amusement made her hate herself the moment it was out.



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She could always depend on herself when she knew she was on exhibition. She could be sure of the right thing if it were only large enough, but she was still caught at odd moments by the trifles, the web of a certain social habit into which she had slipped, full grown on the smooth surface of her father's millions. Clara's fleeting smile lit up these trifles to her now as enormous. It took advantage of her small deficit to point out to her more plainly than ever to what large blunders she might be liable when she had cut loose from Clara's guiding, reminding, prompting genius, and chose to confront the world without it.

To be sure, she was not to confront it alone; but, looking at Harry, it came to her with a moment's qualm that she did not know him as well as she had thought.



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# II

## A NAME GOES ROUND A TABLE

FOR to-night, from the moment he had appeared, she had recognized an unfamiliar mood in him, and it had come out more the more they had discussed the Chatworth ring. It was not in any special word or action on his part. It was in his whole presence that she felt the difference, as if the afternoon's scandal had been a stimulant to him—not through its romantic aspect, as it had affected her, but merely by the daring of the theft itself.

She wondered, as he heaped her ermine on her shoulders, if Harry might not have more surprises for her than she had supposed. Perhaps she had taken him too much for granted. After all, she had known him only for a year.

She herself was but three years old in San



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Francisco, and to her new eyes Harry had seemed an old resident thoroughly established. So firmly established was he in his bachelor quarters, in his clubs, in the demands made upon him by the city's society, that it had never occurred to her he had ever lived anywhere else. Nor had he happened to mention anything of his previous life until to-night, when he had given her, in that mention of a London ball, one flashing glimpse of former experiences.

Impulsively she summed up the possibilities of what these might have been. She gave him a look, incredulous, delighted, as he handed her into the carriage. She had actually got a thrill out of easy-going, matter-of-fact, well-tubbed Harry! It was a comradeship in itself. Not that she would have told him. This capacity of hers for thrills she had found need always to keep carefully covered. In the days when she was a shoeless child—those days of her father's labor in shaft and dump—she had dimly felt her world to be a creature of a keen, a fairly cruel humor, for all things that did not pertain to the



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essence of the life it struggled for. The wonder of the western flare of day, the magic in the white eyes of the stars before sunrise, the mystery in the pulse of the pounding mine heard in the dark—of such it had been as ruthless as this new world that looked as narrowly forth at as starved a prospect with even keener ridicule. Instinctively she had turned to both the hard, bright face they required. It seemed that in the world at large this faculty of hers was queer. And to be queer, to have anything that other people had not, except money, was to be open to suspicion. And yet from the first she had had to be queer.

Fatherless, motherless, alone upon the pinnacle of her fortune, she had known that such an extraordinary entrance, even at this rather wide social portal, would only be acceptable if toned down, glossed over, and drawn out by a personality sufficiently neutral, sufficiently potent, and sufficiently in need of what she had to give. The successive flickers of the gas-lamps through the carriage window made of Clara's



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profile so hard and fine a little medallion that it was impossible to conceive it in need of anything. And yet it was just their mutual need that had drawn these two women together, and after three years it was still the only thing that held them. As much of a fight as she had put up with the rest—the people who had taken her in—she had put up the hardest with Clara. Yet of them all Clara was the only one she had failed to capture. Clara was always there in the middle of her affairs, but surveying them from a distance, and Flora's struggle with her had resolved itself into the attempt to keep her from seeing too much, from seeing more than she herself saw. Clara's seeing, thus far, had always been to help, but Flora sometimes wondered whether in an emergency this help could be depended on—whether Clara could give anything without exacting a price.

Their dubious intimacy had created for Flora a special sort of loneliness—a loneliness which lacked the security of solitude; and it was partly as an escape from this that she had accepted



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Harry Cressy. By herself she could never have escaped. The initiative was not hers. But he had presented himself, he had insisted, had overruled her objections, had captured her before she knew whether she wanted it or not—and held her now, fascinated by his very success in capturing her, and by his beautiful ruddy masculinity. She did not ask herself whether women ever married for greater reasons than these. She only wondered sometimes if he did not stand out more brilliantly against Clara and the others than he intrinsically was. But these moments when she was obliged to defend him to herself were always when he was not with her. Even in the dusky carriage she had been as aware of the splendor of his attraction as now when they had stopped between the high lamps of the club entrance, and she saw clearly the broad lines of his shoulders and the stoop of his square-set head as he stepped swingingly to the pavement. After all, she ought to be glad to think that he was going to stand up as tall and protectingly between her and the world, as now he did between



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her and the press of people which, like a tide of water, swept them forward down the hall, sucked them back in its eddy, and finally cast them, ruffled like birds that have ridden a storm, on the more generous space of the wide, upward stair.

From here, looking down on the current sweeping past them, the little islands of black coats seemed fairly drowned in the feminine sea around them—the flow of white, of pale blue and rose, and the high chatter, like a cage of birds, that for the evening held possession.

"Ladies' Night!" Harry Cressy mopped his flushed face. "It's awful!"

Flora laughed in the effervescence of her spirits. She wanted to know, teasingly, as they mounted, if this were why he had brought two more to add to the lot. He only looked at her, with his short note of laughter that made her keenly conscious of his right to be proud of her. She was proud of herself, inasmuch as her-self was shown in the long trail of daring blue her gown made up the stair, and the powdery blue of the aigrette that shivered in her bright,



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soft puffs and curls—proud that her daring, as it appeared in these things, was still discriminating enough to make her right.

She could recall a time when she had not even been quite sure of her clothes. Not Clara's subdued rustle at her side could make her doubt them now; but her security was still recent enough to be sometimes conscious of itself. It was so short a time since all these talking groups, that made a personage of her, had had the power to put her quite out of countenance. The women who craned over their shoulders to speak to her—how hard she had had to work to make them see her at all! And now she did not know which she felt more like laughing at, herself or them, for having taken it so seriously. For, when one thought of it, wasn't it absurd that people out of nowhere should suppose themselves exclusive? And people out of nowhere they were, herself and all the rest of them. From causes not far dissimilar they had drifted or scrambled to where they now stood. It was a question of squatter rights. The first on the



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ground were dictators, and how long they could hold their claim against invaders a dubious cast of fate. For there were for ever fresh invasions, and departures; swift risings from obscurity, sudden fallings back into oblivion, brilliant shootings through of strange meteors; and in the tide of fluctuation, the things that were established or traditional upon this coast of chance were mere islands in the wash of ocean. It was amazing, it was almost frightening, the fluid, unstable quality of life; the rapid, inconsequent changes; yet it was also this very quality of transformation that most stirred and delighted her.

And to-night it was not the picture exhibition, nor the function itself that elated her, but the fancy she had as she looked over the moving mass below her that the crowning excitement of the day, the vanishing mystery, hovered over them all. It was fantastic, but it persisted; for had not the Chatworth ring itself proved that the most ordinary appearances might cover unimagined wonders? Which of those bland, satis-



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fied faces might not change shockingly at the whisper "Chatworth" in its ear? She wanted to confide the naughty thought to Harry. But no, he wasn't the one. If Harry were apprehensive of anything at all it was only of being caught in too hot a crush. He saw no possibilities in the mob below except boredom. He saw no possibilities in the evening but his conventional duty; and Flora could read in his eye his intention of getting through that as comfortably as possible. His suggestion that they have a look at the pictures brought the two women's eyes together in a rare gleam of mutual mirth. They knew he suspected that the picture gallery would be the emptiest place in the club, since to have a look at the pictures was what they were all supposed to be there for. That was so infallibly the note of their life, Flora thought, as she followed up the wide sweep of the middle stair, and along the high-ceiled, gilded hall whose open arches overlooked the rooms below.

The picture gallery was new, an addition; and the plain, narrow, unexpected door in this



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place, where all was high, arched, elaborate and flourished, was like a loophole through which to slip into a foreign atmosphere. This atmosphere was resinous of fresh wood; the light was thick with drifting motes; the carpets harshly new, slipping beneath the feet on the too polished floor; the bare bones of the place yet scarcely covered. But its quiet was after all comparative. There were plenty of people lingering in groups in the center of the gallery which was dusky, eclipsed by the great reflectors that circled the room, throwing out the pictures in a bright band of color around the walls. People leaning from this border of light back into the dusk to murmur together, vanished and reappeared with such fascinating abruptness that Flora caught herself guessing what sort of face, where this nearest group stood just on the edge of shadow, would pop out of the dark next.

She was ready for something extraordinary, but now, when it came, she was taken aback by it. It gave her a start, that toss of black hair, that long, irregular, pale face whose scintillant,



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sardonic smile was mercilessly upon the poor, inadequate picture-face fronting him. His stoop above the rail was so abrupt that his long, lean back was almost horizontal, yet even thus there was something elegant in the swing of him—in the careless twist of his head, around, to speak to the woman behind him. The light above struck blind on the glass in one eye, but the other danced with a genial, a mad scintillation. The light of it caught like contagion, and touched the merest glancer at him with the spark of its warm, ironic mirth. The question which naturally rose to Flora's lips—"Who in the world is that?"—she checked; why, she didn't ask herself. She only felt as she followed Clara, trailing away across the floor, that the interest of the evening which had promised so well, beginning with the Chatworth ring, had been raised even a note higher. Her restive fancy was beginning again. All the footlights of her little secret stage were up.

Clara turned to the right, following a beckoning fan, and Flora, dallying with her anticipa-



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tion, reasoned that now they must circle the room before they should face him—the interesting apparition. It was a pilgrimage of which he on the other side was performing his half. Perfunctorily talking from group to group, conscious now and again of the lagging Clara or Harry, she could nevertheless keep a sly eye on the stranger's equal progress. The flash of jet, and the voluble, substantial shoulders of the lady so profusely introducing him, were an assurance of how that pilgrimage would terminate, since it was Ella Buller who was parading him. She even wondered before which of the florid pictures at the far, other end of the room, as before a shrine, the ceremony would take place.

She kept her eyes fixed on the paintings before her, and as she moved down from one to another, and the voices of the approaching group drew nearer, one separated itself from the general murmur, so clear, so resonantly carried, so clean-clipped off the tongue, that it stood out in syllables on the blur of sound which was Ella Buller's conversation. It had color,



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that voice; it had a quality so sharp, so individual that it touched her with a mischievous wonder that he dared speak so differently from all the world about him. Then, six pictures away, she heard her own name.

"Why, Flora Gilsey!" It was Ella's husky, boyish note. "I've been looking for you all the evening! How d'y'do, Harry?" She waved her hand at him. "Why, how d'y'do, Mrs. Britton? I wouldn't let papa go to supper until I'd found you. 'Papa,' I said, 'wait; Flora and Harry will be here.' Besides," she had quite reached Flora's side by this time and communicated it in an impressive whisper, "I want you to meet my Englishman." She looked over her shoulder, and largely beckoned to where the blunt and florid Buller and his companion, with their backs to what they were supposed to be looking at, were exchanging an anecdote of infinite amusement.

Buller's expression came around slowly to his daughter's beckoning hand, but the Englishman's face seemed to flash at the instant from what he was enjoying to what was expected of



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him. In the flourish of introductions, across and across, Flora found herself thinking the reality less extraordinary than she had at first supposed. Now that Mr. Kerr was fairly before her, presented to her, and taking her in with the same lively, impersonal interest with which he took in the whole room, "as if," she put it vexedly to herself, "I were a specimen poked at him on the end of a pin," it stirred in her a vague resentment; and involuntarily she held him up to Harry. The comparison showed him a little worn, a little battered, a little too perfunctory in manner; but his genial eyes, deep under threatening brows, made Harry's eyes seem to stare rather coldly; and the fine form of his long, plain face, and the sensitive line of his long thin lips made Harry's beauty look,—well, how did it look? Hardly callous.

This mixed impression the two men gave her was disconcerting. She was all the more ready to be wary of the stranger. She had begun with him in the way she did with every one—instinctively throwing out a breastwork of conversa-



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tion from behind which she could observe the enemy. But though he had blinked at it, he had not taken her up, nor helped her out; but had merely stood with his head a little canted forward, as if he watched her through her defenses.

"But San Francisco must seem so limited after London," she had wound up; and the way he had considered it, a little humorously, down his long nose, made her doubt the interest of cities to be reckoned in round numbers.

"It's all extraordinary," he said. "You're quite as extraordinary in your way as we in ours."

"Oh," she wondered, still vexed with his inventory, "I had always supposed us awfully commonplace. What *is* our way, please?"

"Ah," he said, measuring his long step to hers as they sauntered a little, "for one thing, you're so awfully good to a fellow. In London"—and he nodded back, as if London were merely across the room—"they're awfully good to the somebodies. It's the way you take in the nobodies over here that is so astonishing—the stray



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leaves that blow in with your 'trade,' and can't show any credentials but a letter or two, and their *faces*; and those"—his *diablerie* danced out again—"sometimes such deucedly damaged ones."

It was almost indecent, this parade of his non-entity! She wanted to say, "Oh, hush! Those are the things one only enjoys—never talks about." But instead, somewhere up at the top of her voice, she said: "Oh, we always lock up our silver!"

"But even then," he quizzed her, "I wonder how you dare to do it?"

"Perhaps we have to, because we ourselves are all—" ("without any credentials but those you mention,") she had been about to say—but there she caught herself on the very edge of giving herself and all the rest of them away to him; "—all so awfully bored," she mischievously ended with the daintiest, faintest possible yawn behind her spread fan.

He looked as if she had taken him by surprise; then laughed out. "Oh, that is the way they



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don't do here," he provoked her. "You mustn't, when I'm not expecting it."

"Then what are you expecting?" she inquired a little coolly.

"Well," he deliberated, "not expecting you to get me ready for a sweet, and then pop in a pickle; and presently expecting, hoping, anxiously anticipating, what you really care to say."

He was expecting, she looked maliciously, more than he was likely to get; but the fact that he did see through her to that extent was at once delightful and alarming. She swayed back into the shadow beyond the dazzling line of light. She wanted to escape his scrutiny, to be able to look him over from a safe vantage-ground. But he wouldn't have it. An instant he stood under the torrent of white radiance, challenging her to see what she could—then followed her into her retreat. "Shall we sit here?" he said, and she found herself hopelessly cut off and isolated with the enemy.

She couldn't withhold a little grudging pleasure in the sharpness with which he had turned



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her maneuver, and the way it had detached them from the surrounding crowd. For there, in the dusky center of the room, it was as if they watched from safe covert the rest of their party exposed in the glare of light; though not, as Flora presently noted, quite escaping observation themselves. For an instant Harry turned and peered toward them with a look in his intentness that struck Flora as something new in him, and made her wonder if he could be jealous. She turned tentatively to see if Kerr had noticed it, and surprised his glance in a quick transition back to hers.

"By your leave," he said, and took away her fan, which in his hand presently assumed such rhythmic motion that it ceased to be any more present to her than a delicate current of air upon her face. Her face, which in the first place he had so well looked over, he now looked into with something more personal in his quest, as if under the low brows and crowding lashes there was a puzzle to solve in the timid, unassured glances of such splendid eyes.



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He was not, she felt sure, in spite of his light manipulation of her fan, a person who cared to please women, but one of that devastating sort who care above everything to please themselves, and who are skilful without practice; too skilful, she feared, for her defenses to hold out against if he intended to find out what she really thought. "Aren't we supposed to be looking at the pictures?" she wanted to know.

He turned his back on the wall and its attendant glare. "Why pictures," he inquired, "when there are live people to look at? Pictures for places where they're all half dead. But here, where even the damnable dust in the street is alive, why should they paint, or write, or sculpt, or do anything but live?" His irascible brows shot the query at her.

Again the proposition of life—whatever that was—was held up before her, and as ever she faltered in the face of it. "I suppose they do it here," she murmured, with a vague glance at the paintings around her, "because people do it everywhere else."



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His disparagement was almost a snarl. "That's the rotten part of it—because they do it everywhere else! As if there wasn't enough monotony in the world already without every chap trying to be like the next instead of being himself!"

"Ah!" Her small, uncertain smile in the midst of her outward splendor was pathetic. "But it is different to you. You're a man. You're not one of us."

"One of what? I'm a man. I'm myself. Which, pardon me, dear lady, is just what you won't be—yourself."

"But if you have to be what people expect?" She clung to her first principle of safety in the midst of this onslaught.

"People don't want what they expect—if you care for that." He waved it away with his quick, white hand.

"But you have to care, unless you want to be queer." Her poor little secret was out before she knew, and he looked at it, laughing immoderately, yet somehow delightfully.



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"Ah, if you think the social game is the game that counts! I had expected braver things of you. The game that counts, my girl," he preached it at her with his long white hand, "the game that is going on out here is the big, red game of life. That's the only one that's worth a guinea; and there's no winning or losing, there's no right or wrong to it, and it doesn't matter what a man is in it as long as he's a good one."

"Even if he is a thief?" The question was out of Flora's lips before she could catch it. It was a challenge. She had meant to confound him; but he caught it as if it delighted him.

"Well, what would you think?"

He threw it back at her.

What hadn't she thought! How persistently her fancy had played with the question of what sort of man that one might be who had so wonderfully put his hand under a glass case and drawn out the Chatworth ring. Why, outwardly, he must have been like all the crowd around him, to have escaped unnoticed; but, in-



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wardly, how much superior in power and skill to have so completely overreached them!

"Oh," she laughed dubiously, "I suppose he is a good one as long as he isn't caught."

"What!" His face disowned her. "You think he's a renegade, do you? A chap in perpetual flight, taking things because he has to, more or less pursued by the law? Bah! It's a guild as old, and a deal more honorable, than the beggar's. Your good thief is born to it. It's his caste. It's in his blood. It isn't money that he wants. If he had a million he'd be the same. And it isn't a mania either. It's a profession." The Englishman leaned back and smiled at her over the elegance of his long, joined fingertips.

She looked at him with a delighted alarm, with an increasing elation; but whether these arose from his lawless declarations and the singular way they kept setting before her more vividly moment by moment the possible character of the present keeper of the Chatworth ring, or whether it was just the sight of Kerr himself as



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he sat there that stirred her, she didn't try to distinguish.

"But suppose he was your own thief," she urged; "took your own things, I mean," she hastily amended, "and suppose he turned out to be—some one you knew and liked—" She hesitated. She had come at last to what she really wanted to say. She had brought out a question that had been teasing her fancy at intervals all the while he had been talking, and he hadn't even heard it. He wasn't even looking at her. She had caught him off his guard. He was looking across her shoulder straight down the dim vista of the room to the little blaze of bordering light. He was looking at Harry. No, Harry was looking at him. Harry was looking with a steady, an intent gaze, and Kerr meeting it—it might have been merely the blank glare of his monocle—seemed, to Flora, to meet it a little insolently. She fancied in the instant something to pass between the two men, something which, this time, she did not mistake for jealousy—a shade too dim for defiance or suspicion, a deep



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scrutiny that struggled to place something, some one.

Flora felt a sudden wish to break that curious scrutiny. It had broken her little moment. It had shattered the personal, almost intimate note that had been sounded between them. The look Kerr turned back to her was vague, and stirred in her a dim resentment that he could drop it all so easily.

"Shall we join the others?" It was the voice with which she had begun with him, but her eyes were hot through their light mist of lashes, and he threw her a comprehending glance of amusement.

"Oh, no," he assured her, "we can't help ourselves. They are going to join us."

Ella Buller, in the van of her procession, was already descending upon them. Her approach dissipated the last remnant of their personal moment. Her presence always insisted that there was nothing worth while but instant participation in her geniality, and whatever subject it might at the moment be taken up with. This



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conviction of Ella's had been wont to overawe Flora, and it still overwhelmed her; so that now, as she followed in the tail of Ella's marshaled force, she had a guilty feeling that there should be nothing in her mind but a normal desire for supper.

Yet all the way down the great stair, "the Corridors of Time," where the white owl glared his glassy wisdom on the passings and counter-passings, she was haunted with the thought that Harry had seen the extraordinary Kerr before; not shaken hands with him, perhaps—perhaps not even heard his name; but somewhere, across some distance, once glimpsed him, and had never quite shaken the memory from his mind. For there was something marked, notable, unforgetable in that lean distinctiveness. Against the sleek form of the men they met and shook hands with, he flashed out—seemed in contrast fairly electric. She saw him, just ahead of her where the crowd was thickening in the door of the supper-room, making way for Clara through the press with that exasperating solicitude of his



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that was half ironic. And the large broadside offered by her elegant Harry, matter-of-factly towing Ella by the elbow, herself conscious of a curl or two awry, and Judge Buller tramping heavily at her side, all took on to her the aspect of a well-chosen peep-show with the satanic Kerr officiating as showman. Even the smooth and pallid Clara, who usually coerced by her sheer correctness, failed to dominate this fantastic image; rather, she took on, as she was handed into the supper-room, the aspect of his chief exhibit.

The room, hot, polished, flaring reflections of electric lights from its glistening floor, announced itself the heart of high festivity, through the midst of which their entrance made an added ripple. The flushed faces of the women under their flowers, under their pale-tinted hats, with their smiling recognitions to Clara, to Flora, to Ella, smiled with a sharpened interest. It proclaimed that Kerr was a stranger, and, in a circle which found itself a little stale for lack of innovations, a desirable one.



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Exclamatory greetings, running into skirmishes of talk, here and there halted their progress, and even after they had settled about their table in the center of the room the attention of one and another was drawn over the shoulder to some special, trans-table recognition.

Apparently the dominant note of their party was Ella's clamorous selection for the supper; but to Flora the more real thing was the atmosphere of excitement and mystery she had been moving in all the evening. She was pursued by the obsession of something more about to happen—something imminent—though, of course, nothing would; at least, how could anything happen here, to them? And by "them," she meant herself and these people around her so stupidly talking—the eternal repetition of the story she had read out that evening to Clara, and not one glimmer of light! She wondered if her obsession was all her own—or did it reach to one of them? Certainly not Ella; not Judge Buller, settled into his collar, choosing champagnes. Clara? She had to skip Clara. One never knew whether



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Clara had not more behind her smooth prettiness than ever she brought to light. Kerr? Perhaps. With him she felt potentialities enormous. Harry? Never. Harry was being appealed to by all the women who could get at him as to his part in the affair—what had been his sensations and emotions? But Flora knew perfectly well he had had none. He was only oppressed by the attention his fame in the matter, and the central position of their table, brought upon him. Protesting, he made his part as small as possible.

"Oh, confound it, if I can't get at my oysters!" he complained, leaning back into his group again with a sigh.

"You divide the honors with the mysterious unknown, eh?" Kerr inquired across the table.

"Hang it, there's no division! I'd offer you a share!" Harry laughed, and it occurred to Flora how much Kerr could have made of it.

"Purdie'd like to share something," Buller vouchsafed. "He's been pawing the air ever since Crew cabled, and this has blown him up completely."



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"Crew?" Flora wondered. Here was something more happening. Crew? She had not heard that name before. It made a stir among them all; but if Kerr looked sharp, Clara looked sharper. She looked at Harry and Harry was vexed.

"Who's Crew?" said Ella; and the judge looked around on the silence.

"Why, bless my soul, isn't it— Oh, anyway, it will all be out to-morrow. But I thought Harry'd told you. The Chatworth ring wasn't Bessie's."

It had the effect of startling them all apart, and then drawing them closer together again around the table over the uncorked bottles.

"Why," Judge Buller went on, "this ring is a celebrated thing. It's the 'Crew Idol'!" He threw the name out as if that in itself explained everything, but the three women, at least, were blank.

"Why celebrated?" Clara objected. "The stones were only sapphires."

Kerr smiled at this measure of fame.



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"Quite so," he nodded to her, "but there are several sorts of value about that ring. Its age, for one."

He had the attention of the table, as if they sensed behind his words more even than Judge Buller could have told them.

"And then the superstition about it. It's rather a pretty tale," said Kerr, looking at Flora. "You've seen the ring—a figure of Vishnu bent backward into a circle, with a head of sapphire; two yellow stones for the cheeks and the brain of him of the one blue. Just as a piece of carving it is so fine that Cellini couldn't have equaled it, but no one knows when or where it was made. The first that is known, the Shah Jehan had it in his treasure-house. The story is he stole it, but, however that may be, he gave it as a betrothal gift to his wife—possibly the most beautiful"—his eyebrows signaled to Flora his uncertainty of that fact—"without doubt the best-loved woman in the world. When she died it was buried with her—not in the tomb itself, but in the Taj Mehal; and for a century



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or so it lay there and gathered legends about it as thick as dust. It was believed to be a talisman of good fortune—especially in love.

"It had age; it had intrinsic value; it had beauty, and that one other quality no man can resist—it was the only thing of its kind in the world. At all events, it was too much for old Neville Crew, when he saw it there some couple of hundred years ago. When he left India the ring went with him. He never told how he got it, but lucky marriages came with it, and the Crews would not take the House of Lords for it. Their women have worn it ever since."

For a moment the wonder of the tale and the curious spark of excitement it had produced in the teller kept the listeners silent. Clara was the first to return to facts. "Then Bessie—" she prompted eagerly.

Kerr turned his glass in meditative fingers. "She wore it as young Chatworth's wife." He held them all in an increasing tension, as if he drew them toward him.

"The elder Chatworth, Lord Crew, is a bache-



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lor, but, of course, the ring reverted to him on Chatworth's death."

"And Lord only knows," the judge broke in, "how it got shipped with Bessie's property. Crew was out of England at the time. He kept the wires hot about it, and they managed to keep the fact of what the ring was quiet—but it got out to-day when Purdie found it was gone. You see he was showing it—and without special permission."

Flora had a bewildered feeling that this judicial summing up of facts wasn't the sort of thing the evening had led up to. She couldn't see, if this was what it amounted to, why Harry had changed his mind about telling them at the dinner table. She could not even understand where this belonged in the march of events in their story, but Clara took it up, clipped it out, and fitted it into its place.

"Then there will be pressure—enormous pressure, brought to bear to recover it?"

"Oh-o-oh!" Buller drew out the syllable with unctuous relish. "They'll rip the town inside



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out. They'll do worse. There'll be a string of detectives across the country—yes, and at intervals to China—so tight you couldn't step from Kalamazoo to Oshkosh without running into one. The thing is too big to be covered. The chap who took it will play a lone game; and to do that—Lord knows there aren't many who could—to do that he'd have to be a—a—"

"Farrell Wand?" Flora flung it out as a challenge among these prosaic people; but the effect of it was even sharper than she had expected. She fancied she saw them all start; that Harry squared himself, that Kerr met it as if he swallowed it with almost a facial grimace; that Judge Buller blinked it hard in the face—the most bothered of the lot. He came at it first in words.

"Farrell Wand?" He felt it over, as if, like a doubtful coin, it might have rung false. "Now, what did I know of Farrell Wand?"

"Farrell Wand?" Kerr took it up rapidly. "Why, he was the great Johnnie who went through the Scotland Yard men at Perth in '94, and got off. Don't you remember? He took a



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great assortment of things under the most peculiar circumstances—took the Tilton emeralds off Lady Tilton's neck at St. James'."

"Why, Harry, you—" Flora began. "You told us that," was what she had meant to say, but Harry stopped her. Stopped her just with a look, with a nod; but it was as if he had shaken his head at her. His tawny lashes, half drooped over watching eyes, gave him more than ever the look of a great, still cat; a domestic, good-humored cat, but in sight of legitimate prey. Her eyes went back to Kerr with a sense of bewilderment. His voice was still going on, expansively, brilliantly, juggling his subject.

"He knew them all, the big-wigs up in Parliament, the big-wigs on 'Change, the little duchesses in Mayfair, and they all liked him, asked him, dined him, and—great Scott, they paid! Paid in hereditary jewels, or the shock to their decency when the thing came out—but, poor devil, so did he!"

And through it all Buller gloomed unsmiling, with out-thrust underlip.



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"No, no," he said slowly, "that's not my connection with Farrell Wand. What happened afterward? What did they do with him?"

Kerr was silent, and Flora thought his face seemed suddenly at its sharpest.

It was Clara who answered with another question. "Didn't he get to the colonies? Didn't he die there?"

Judge Buller caught it with a snap of his fingers. "Got it!" he triumphed, and the two men turned square upon him. "They ran him to earth in Australia. That was the year I was there—'96. I got a snapshot of him at the time."

It was now the whole table that turned on him, and Flora felt, with that unanimous movement, something crucial, the something that she had been waiting for; and yet she could in no way connect it with what had happened, nor understand why Clara, why Harry, why Kerr above all should be so alert. For more than all he looked expectant, poised, and ready for whatever was coming next.

"What sort of a chap?" he mused and fixed



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the judge a moment with the same stare that Flora remembered to have first confronted her.

"What sort? Sort of a criminal," the judge smiled. "They all look alike."

"Still," Clara suggested, "such a man could hardly have been ordinary—"

"In the chain-gang—oh, yes," said Buller with conviction.

"Oh! Then the picture wasn't worth anything?"

"Why, no," Buller admitted slowly, "though, come to think of it, it wasn't the chain-gang either. They were taking him aboard the ship. The crowd was so thick I hardly saw him, and—only got one shot at him. But the name was a queer one. It stuck in my mind."

"But then," Clara insisted, "what became of him?"

"Oh, gave them the slip," the judge chuckled. "He always did. Reported to have changed ships in mid-ocean. Hal, is that another bottle?"

Harry stretched his hand for it, but it stayed suspended—and, for an instant, it seemed as if



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the whole table waited expectant. Had Buller's camera caught the clear face of Farrell Wand, or only a dim figure? Flora wondered if that was the question Harry wanted to ask. He wanted—and yet he hesitated, as if he did not quite dare touch it. He laughed and filled the glasses. He had dropped his question, and there was no one at the table who seemed ready to put another.

And yet there were questions there, in all the eyes; but some impassable barrier seemed to have come between these eager people, and what, for incalculable reasons, they so much wanted to know. It was not the genial indifference with which Buller had dropped the subject for the approaching bottle. It seemed rather their own timidity that withheld them from touching this subject which at every turn produced upon some one of the eager three some fresh startling effect the others could not understand. They were restless; Clara notably, even under her calm.

Flora knew she was not giving up the quest of Farrell Wand, but only setting it aside with



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her unfailing thrift, which saved everything. But why, in this case? And Harry, who had been so merry with the mystery at dinner—why had he suddenly tried to suppress her, to want to ignore the whole business; why had he hesitated over his question, and finally let it fall? And why, above all, was Kerr so brilliantly talking at Ella, in the same way he had begun at Flora herself? Talking at Ella as if he hardly saw her, but like some magician flinging out a brilliant train of pyrotechnics to hypnotize the senses, before he proceeds with his trick. And the way Ella was looking at him—her bewildered alacrity, the way she was struggling with what was being so rapidly shot at her—appeared to Flora the prototype of her own struggle to understand what reality these appearances around her could possibly shadow. Never before had her sense of standing on the outside edge of life been so strong. It seemed as though there were some large, impalpable thing growing in the midst of them, around the edges of which they were tiptoeing, daringly, fearfully, each



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one for himself. But though it loomed so large that she felt herself in the very shadow of it, rub her eyes as she would, she couldn't see it.

Often enough in the crowds she moved among she had felt herself lonely and not wondered at it. But now and here, sitting among her close, intimate circle, her friends and her lover, it seemed like a horrible obsession—yet it was true. As clear as if it had been shown her in a revelation she saw herself absolutely alone.



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# III

## ENCOUNTERS ON PARADE

FLORA, before the mirror, gaily stabbing in her long hat-pins, confessed to herself that last night had been queer, as queer as queer could be; but this morning, luckily, was real again. Her fancy last night had—yes, she was afraid it really had—run away with her. And she turned and held the hand-mirror high, to be sure of the line of her tilted hat, gave a touch to the turn of her wide, close belt, a flirt to the frills of her bodice.

The wind was lightly ruffling and puffing out the muslin curtains of the windows, and from the garden below came the long, silvery clash of eucalyptus leaves. She leaned on the high window-ledge to look downward over red roofs, over terraced green, over steep streets running ab-



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ruptly to the broken blue of the bay. She tried to fancy how Kerr would look in this morning sun. He seemed to belong only beneath the high artificial lights, in the thicker atmosphere of evening. Would he return again, with renewed potency, with the same singular, almost sinister charm, as a wizard who works his will only by moonlight? When she should see him again, what, she wondered, would be his extraordinary mood? On what new breathless flights might he not take her—or would he see her at all? It was too fantastic. The sunlight thinned him to an impalpable ghost.

It was Clara, standing at the foot of the stairs, who belonged to the morning, so brisk, so fresh, so practical she appeared. She held a book in her hand. The door, open for her immediate departure, showed, beyond the descent of marble steps, the landau glistening black against white pavements. It was unusual for this formal vehicle to put in an appearance so early.

"I am going to drive over to the Purdies'," Clara explained. "I have an errand there."



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Flora smiled at the thought of how many persons would be having errands to the Purdies' now. It was refreshing to catch Clara in this weakness. She felt a throb of it herself when she recalled the breathless moment at the supper table last evening. "Oh, that will be a heavenly drive," she said. "Please ask me to go with you. My errand can wait."

"Why, certainly. I should like to have you," said Clara. But if she had returned a flat "no," Flora would not have had a dryer sense of unwelcome. Still, she had gone too far to retreat. After all, this was only Clara's manner, and her buoyant interest in the expedition was stronger than her diffidence.

Mischievous reflections of the doctrine the Englishman had startled her with the night before flickered in her mind, as they drove from the door. Was this part of "the big red game," not being accommodating, nor so very polite? The streets were still wet with early fog, and, turning in at the Presidio gate, the cypresses dripped dankly on their heads, and hung out



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cobwebs pearled with dew. She was sure, even under their dripping, that the "damnable dust" was alive.

Down the broad slopes that were swept by the drive all was green to the water's edge. The long line of barracks, the officers' quarters, the great parade-ground, set in the flat land between hills and bay, looked like a child's toy, pretty and little. They heard the note of a bugle, thin and silver clear, and they could see the tiny figures mustering; but in her preoccupation it did not occur to Flora that they were arriving just in time for parade. But when the carriage had crossed the viaduct, and swung them past the acacias, and around the last white curve into the white dust of the parade-ground, Clara turned, as if with a fresh idea.

"Wouldn't you like to stop and watch it?"

"Why, yes," Flora assented. The brilliance of light and color, the precision of movement, the sound of the brasses under the open sky were an intermezzo in harmony with her spirited mood.



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The carriage stopped under the scanty shadow of trees that bordered the walk to the officers' quarters. Clara, book in hand, alertly rose.

"I'll just run up to the Purdies' and leave this," she said.

"Then she really did want to be rid of me," Flora mused, as she watched the brisk back moving away; "and how beautifully she has done it!" Her eyes followed Clara's little figure retreating up the neat and narrow board walk, to where it disappeared in overarching depths of eucalyptus trees. Further on, beyond the trees, two figures, smaller than Clara's in their greater distance, were coming down. Flora almost grinned as she recognized the large linen umbrella that Mrs. Purdie invariably carried when abroad in the reservation, and presently the trim and bounding figure of Mrs. Purdie herself, under it. The Purdies were coming down to parade—at least Mrs. Purdie was. But the tall figure beside her —that was not the major. She took up her lorgnon. It was—no it could not be—yet surely



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it *was* Harry! Lazy Harry, up and out, and squiring Mrs. Purdie to the review at half-past ten in the morning! "Are we all mad?" Flora thought.

The three little figures, the one going up, the two coming down, touched opposite fringes of the grove—disappeared within it. On which side would they come out together? Flora wondered. They emerged on her side with Harry a little in advance. He came swingingly down the walk, straight toward her, and across the road to the carriage, his hat lifted, his hand out.

"Well, Flora," he said, "this is luck!"

"What in the world has got you out so early?" she rallied him.

"Came out to see Purdie on business, and here you are all ready to drive me back."

"That's your reward."

He brushed his handkerchief over his damp forehead. "Well, there's one coming to me, for I haven't found Purdie."

Her eyes were dancing with mischief. "Harry,



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I believe you're out here about the Crew Idol, too!"

He shook his head at her, smiling. "I wouldn't talk too much about that, Flora. It flicks poor Purdie on the raw every time that—" His sentence trailed off into something else, for Mrs. Purdie and Clara had come up.

The book had changed hands, together, evidently, with several explanations, and Mrs. Purdie, with her foot on the carriage step, was ready to make one of these over again.

"The major'll be so sorry. He's gone in town. It's so unusual for him to get off at this hour, but he said he had to catch a man. As Mrs. Britton and I were saying, he's likely to be very busy until this dreadful affair is straightened out. If you can only wait a little longer, Mr. Cressy," she went on, "I am expecting him every moment."

"Oh, it's of no importance," said Harry, but he looked at his watch with a fold between his brows, and then at the car that was coming in.



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"Well, at least, you'll have time to see the parade," said Mrs. Purdie. "I always think it's a pretty sight, though most of the women get tired of it."

Clara's face showed that she belonged to the latter class; but Flora, too keenly attuned to sounds and sights not to be swayed by outward circumstances, was content for the time to watch, in the cloud of dust, the wheeling platoons and rhythmic columns.

Yet through all—even when she was not looking at him—she was aware of Harry's restlessness, of his impatience; and as the last company swung barrackward, and the cloud began to settle over the empty field, he snapped his watch-case smartly, and remarked, "Still no major."

"Why, there he is now!" Mrs. Purdie screamed, pointing across the parade-ground.

Flora looked. Half-way down on the adjoining side of the parallelogram, back toward her, the redoubtable Kerr was standing. She recognized him on the instant, as if he were the most familiar figure in her life. Yet she was more



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surprised to see him here than she had been to see Harry. She felt inclined to rub her eyes. It took a moment for her to realize that his companion was indeed Major Purdie.

The major had recognized his wife's signaling umbrella. Now he turned toward it, but Kerr, with a quick motion of hand toward hat, turned in the opposite direction. In her mind Flora was with the major who ran after him. The two men stood for a little, expostulating. Then both walked toward the landau and the linen umbrella.

The carriage group waited, watching with flagging conversation, which finally fell into silence. But the two approaching strolled easily and talked. Even in cold daylight Kerr still gave Flora the impression that the open was not big enough to hold him, but she saw a difference in his mood, a graver eye, a colder mouth, and when he finally greeted them, a manner that was brusk. It showed uncivil beside the major's urbanity.

The major was glad, very glad, to see them



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all. He was evidently also a little flurried. He seemed to know that they had all met Kerr before. Had it been at the moment of his attempted departure that Kerr had told him, Flora wondered? And had he given them as his excuse for going away? It hurt her; though why should she be hurt because a stranger had not wanted to cross the parade-ground to shake hands with her? He was less interested in her than he was in Harry, at whom he had looked keenly.

But Harry's nervousness had left him, now that Purdie was within his reach. He returned the glance indifferently. He stood close to the major—his hand on his shoulder. The major, with his bland blue eyes twinkling from Clara to Flora, seemed the only man ready to devote himself to the service of the ladies.

"And what's the news from the front?" said Clara gaily. Kerr gave her a rapid glance; but the major blinked as if the allusion had got by him.

"I mean the mystery—the Chatworth ring,"



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she explained. However lightly and sweetly Clara said it, it was a little brazen to fling such a question at poor Purdie, whose responsibility the ring had been.

He received it amicably enough, but conclusively. "No news whatever, my dear Mrs. Britton."

She smiled. "We're all rather interested in the mystery. Flora has made a dozen romances about it."

"Oh, yes, yes," said the major indulgently. "It will do for young ladies to make romances about. It'll be a two days' wonder, and then you'll suddenly find out it's something very tame indeed."

"Why, have they fixed the suspicion?" said Clara.

There was a restless movement from Kerr.

"No, no, nothing of that sort," said the major quickly.

Harry passed his hand through his arm.

"May I see you for five minutes, Major?"

The excellent major looked harassed.



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"Suppose we all step up to the house," he suggested. "Why, you're not going, man?" he objected, for Kerr had fallen back a step, and, with lifted hat and balanced cane, was signaling his farewells.

"Do let us go up to the house," said Clara. "And Mrs. Purdie, won't you drive up with me? Flora wants to walk."

Flora stood up. She had a confused impression that she had expressed no such desire, and that there was room for three in the landau; but the mental shove that Clara had administered gave her an impetus that carried her out of the carriage before she realized what she was about. Some one had offered a hand to help her, and when she was on the ground she saw it was Kerr, who had come back and was standing beside her. He was smiling quizzically.

"I feel rather like walking, myself," he said. "Do you want a companion?"

She turned to him with gratitude. "I should be glad of one," she said quickly. She was



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touched. She had not thought he could be so gentle.

Harry was already moving off up the board walk with the major. The carriage was turning. Kerr looked at the backs of the two women being driven away, and then at Flora. "Very good," he said, raising her parasol; "you are the deposed heir, and I am your faithful servant."

"But indeed I do want to walk," she protested, a little shy at the way he read her case.

"But you didn't think of it until she gave you the suggestion, eh?" he quizzed.

"She probably had something to say to Mrs. Purdie that—"

"My dear child," he caught her up earnestly, "don't think I'm criticizing your friend's motive. I am only saying I saw something done that was not pretty, though really, if you will forgive me—it was very funny."

Flora smiled ruefully. "It must have been —absurd. I am afraid I often am. But what else could I have done?"



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He seemed to ponder a moment. "I fancy *you* couldn't have done anything different. That's why I came back for you," he volunteered gaily.

The casual words seemed in her ears fraught with deeper meaning. Her cheeks were hot behind her thin veil. They were strolling slowly up the board walk, and for a moment she could not look at him. She could only listen to the flutter of the fringes of the parasol carried above her head. She felt herself small and stupid. She could not understand what he could see in her to come back to. Then she gave a side glance at him. She saw an unsmiling profile. The lines in his face were indeed extraordinary, but none was hard. She liked that wonderful mobility that had survived the batterings of experience.

As if he were conscious of her eyes, he looked down and smiled; but vaguely. He did not speak; and she was aware that it was at her appearance he had smiled, as if that only reached him through his preoccupation and pleased him.



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And since he seemed content with this vague looking, she was content to move beside him silent, a mere image of youth and—since he liked it—of prettiness, with a fleeting color and a gust of little curls blowing out under a fluttering veil.

But what was he thinking about so seriously between those smiling glances? Not her problem, she was sure.

Yet he had stayed for her when he had not meant to stay. He had been anxious to get away since he had first sighted them. Surely he must like her more than he disliked some other member of her party. Or had he simply reached forth out of his kindness to rescue her, as he might have rescued a blind kitten that he pitied? "No," he had said, "*you* could not have done anything different."

They had almost reached the major's gate, and it was now or never to find out what he thought of her. She looked up at him suddenly, with inquiring eyes.

"Do you think I am weak?" she demanded.



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The lines of his face broke up into laughter. "No," he said, "I think you are misplaced."

She knitted her brows in perplexity, but his hand was on the white picket gate, and she had to walk through it ahead of him as he set it open for her.

Of their party only the two women were in sight waiting on the diminutive veranda. Clara had a mild domestic appearance, rocking there behind the potted geraniums. All the windows were open into the little shell of a house. Trunks still stood in the hall, though the Purdies had been quartered at the Presidio for nine months. From the rear of the house came the sound of bowl and chopper, where the Chinese cook was preparing luncheon, and the major's man appeared, walking around the garden to the veranda, with a cluster of mint juleps on a copper tray.

In this easy atmosphere, how was it that the thread of restraint ran so sharply defined? Clara and Mrs. Purdie were matching crewels; and, sitting on the top step Flora instructed



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Kerr as to the composition of the tropical glacier they were drinking. Ten girls had probably so instructed him before, but it would do to fill up the gap. It was so, Flora thought, they were all feeling. Even the carriage, driving slowly round and round the rectangle of officers' row, added its note of restlessness.

Like a stone plumped into a pool the major and Harry reëntered this stagnation. They were brisk and buoyant. Harry, especially, had the air of a man who sees stimulating business before him. Immediately all talked at once.

"Now that we've got you here, you must all stay to luncheon," Mrs. Purdie determined.

It looked as if they were about to accept her invitation unanimously, but Harry demurred. He had to be at Montgomery Street and Jackson by one o'clock. "I hoped," he added, glancing at Flora, "that some one was to drive me—part of the way, at least."

Flora, with an unruly sense of disappointment, yet opened her lips for the courteous answer. But Clara was quicker. She rose.



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"Yes," she said, "I'll drive you back with pleasure."

Harry's glimmer of annoyance was comic.

"I have to be at the house for luncheon," Clara explained to her hostess as she buttoned her glove, "but there is no reason why Flora shouldn't stay."

"Oh, I should love to," Flora murmured, not knowing whether she was more embarrassed or pleased at this high-handed dispensation which placed her where she wanted to be.

But the way Clara had leaped at her opportunity! Flora looked curiously at Harry.

He seemed uneasy at being pounced upon, but that might be merely because he was balked of a tête-à-tête with herself. For while Clara went on to the gate with their hostess he lingered a moment with Flora.

"May I see you to-night?"

"All you have to do is to come."

She gave him an oblique, upward glance, and had a pleasant sense of power in seeing his face relax and smile. She had a dance for that even-



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ing; but she thrust it aside without regret. For suppose Harry should have something to tell her about the Chatworth ring? She wondered if Clara would get it out of him first on the way home.

The four left on the veranda watched the two driving away with a sudden clearing of the social atmosphere. In vain Flora told herself it was only the relief she always felt in getting free of Clara. For in the return of the major's elderly blandishments, in Kerr's kindlier mood, as well as in her own lightened spirits, she had the proofs that, with them all, some tension had relaxed. It seemed to her as if those two, departing, were bearing away between them the very mystery of the Crew Idol.



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# IV

## FLOWERS BY THE WAY

FLORA liked this funny little dining-room with walls as frail as box-boards, low-ceiled and flooded with sun. It recalled surroundings she had known later than the mining camp, but long before the great red house. It seemed to her that she fitted here better than the Purdies. She looked across at Kerr, sitting opposite, to see if perhaps he fitted too. But he was foreign, decidedly. He kept about him still the hint of delicate masquerade that she had noticed the night before. Out of doors, alone with her, he had lost it. For a moment he had been absolutely off his guard. And even now he was more off his guard than he had been last night. She was surprised to see him so un-



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studied, so uncritical, so humorously anecdotal. If she and the major, between them, had dragged him into this against his will he did not show it. She rose from the table with the feeling that in an hour all three of them had become quite old friends of his, though without knowing anything further about him.

"We must do this again," Mrs. Purdie said, as they parted from her in the garden.

"Surely we will," Kerr answered her.

But Flora had the feeling that they never, never would. For him it had been a chance touching on a strange shore.

But at least they were going away together. They would walk together as far as the little car, whose terminal was the edge of the parade-ground. But just outside of the gate he stopped.

"Do you especially like board walks?" he asked.

It was an instant before she took his meaning. Then she laughed. "No. I like green paths."

He waved with his cane. "There is a path



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yonder, that goes over a bridge, and beyond that a hill."

"And at the top of that another car," Flora reminded him.

"Ah well," he said, "there are flowers on the way, at least." He looked at her whimsically. "There are three purple irises under the bridge. I noticed them as I came down."

She was pleased that he had noticed that for himself—pleased, too, that he had suggested the longer way.

The narrow path that they had chosen branched out upon the main path, broad and yellow, which dipped downward into the hollow. From there came the murmur of water. Green showed through the white grass of last summer. The odor of wet evergreens was pungent in their nostrils. They looked at the delicate fringed acacias, at the circle of hills showing above the low tree-tops, at the cloudless sky; but always their eyes returned to each other's faces, as if they found these the pleasantest points of the landscape. Sauntering be-



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tween plantations of young eucalyptus, they came to the arched stone bridge. They leaned on the parapet, looking down at the marshy stream beneath and at the three irises Kerr had remarked, knee-deep in swamp ground.

"Now that I see them I suppose I want them," Flora remarked.

"Of course," he assented. "Then hold all these."

He put into her hands the loose bunch of syringa and rose plucked for her in the Purdies' garden, laid his hat and gloves on the parapet; then, with an eye for the better bank, walked to the end of the bridge.

She watched him descending the steep bank and issuing into the broad shallow basin of the stream's way. The sun was still high enough to fill the hollows with warm light and mellow the doubles of trees and grass in the stream. In this landscape of green and pale gold he looked black and tall and angular. The wind blew longish locks of hair across his forehead, and she had a moment's pleased and timorous



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reflection that he looked like Satan coming into the Garden.

He advanced from tussock to tussock. He came to the brink of the marsh. The lilies wavered what seemed but a hand's-breadth from him. But he stooped, he reached— Oh, could anything so foolish happen as that he could not get them! Or, more foolish still, plunge in to the knees! He straightened from his fruitless effort, drew back, but before she could think what he was about he had leaned forward again, flashed out his cane, and with three quick, cutting slashes the lilies were mown. It was deftly, delicately, astonishingly done, but it gave her a singular shock, as if she had seen a hawk strike its prey. He drew them cleverly toward him in the crook of his cane, took them up daintily in his fingers, and returned to her across the shallow valley. She waited him with mixed emotions.

"Oh, how could you!" she murmured, as he put them into her hand.



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He looked at her in amused astonishment. "Why, aren't they right?"

They were as clean clipped off and as perfect as if the daintiest hand had plucked them.

"Oh, yes," she admitted, "they're lovely, but I don't like the way you got them."

"I took the means I had," he objected.

"I don't think I like it."

His whole face was sparkling with interest and amusement. "Is that so? Why not?"

"You're too—too"—she cast about for the word—"too terribly resourceful!"

"I see," he said. If she had feared he would laugh, it showed how little she had gauged the limits of his laughter. He only looked at her rather more intently than he had before.

"But, my good child, resourcefulness is a very natural instinct. I am afraid you read more into it than is there. You wanted the flowers, I had a stick, and in my youth I was taught to strike clean and straight. I am really a very simple fellow."



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Looking him in the eyes, which were of a clear, candid gray, she was ready to believe it. It seemed as if he had let her look for a moment through his manner, his ironies, his armor of indifference, to the frank foundations of his nature.

"But, you see, the trouble is you don't in the least look it," she argued.

"So you think because I have a long face and wild hair that I am a sinister person? My dear Miss Gilsey, the most desperate character I ever knew was five feet high and wore mutton-chop whiskers. It is an uncertain business judging men by their appearance."

She could not help smiling. "But most people do."

"I don't class you with most people."

She gave him a quick look. "You *did* the first night."

"Possibly—but less and less ever since. You have me now in the state of mind where I don't know what you'll be at next."

This was fortunate, she thought, since she



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had not the least idea herself, beyond a teasing desire to find out more about him. He had shown her many fleeting phases which, put together, seemed contradictory. She could not connect this man, so mild and amusing, strolling beside her, with the alert, whetted, combative person of the night before, or even with the aloof and reticent figure on the parade-ground. His very attitude toward herself had changed from the amused scrutiny of the first night into something more indulgent, more sympathetic. There was only one attitude on his part that had remained the same—one attitude toward one person—and her mind hovered over this. On each occasion it had stirred her curiosity and, though she had not admitted it, made her uneasy. Why not probe him on the subject, now that she had him completely to herself? But as soon as silence fell between them she saw that wave of preoccupation which had submerged him during their walk from the parade-ground to the Purdies' rising over him again and floating him away from her. He no longer even



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looked at her. His eyes were on the ground, and it was not until they had crossed the open expanse of the shallow valley and were climbing toward the avenue of cypress that she found courage to put her question.

"Have you and Mr. Cressy met before?"

He raised his head with a jerk and looked at her a moment in astonishment.

"Do you mind if I answer your question American fashion by asking another?" he said presently. "What put it into your head that we may have met before?"

"The way you looked at each other at the club, and again this morning."

Kerr shook his head. "You are an observant young person! The fact is, I've never met him —of that I'm certain, but I believe I've seen him before, and for the life of me, I can't think where. At the moment you spoke I was trying to remember."

"Was it in this country?" Flora prompted, hopeful of fishing something definite out of this vagueness.



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"No, it was years ago. It must have been in England." He looked at her inquiringly, as if he expected her to help him.

"Oh, Harry's been in England," she said quickly; and then, with a flashing thought, came to her the one scene Harry had mentioned in his English experience. Was it at a ball? The question came to her lips, but she checked it there. She remembered how Harry had stopped her the night before with a nod, with a look, from mentioning that very thing. Still she hesitated—for the temptation was strong. But no; it was only loyal to Harry to speak to him first.

"So you're not going to tell me?" Kerr remarked, and she came back to a sudden consciousness of how her face must have reflected her thought.

"No—not this time!" she said, smiling, though somewhat flushed.

He knitted his brows at her. They had reached the arched gate, and the car that would carry her home was approaching.



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"Ah, then, I am afraid it will be never," he said.

Was it possible this was their last meeting? Did he mean he was going away? The questions formed in her mind, but there was no time for words. He had stopped the car with a flick of his agile cane, and handed her in as if he had handed her into a carriage; and not a word as to whether they would see each other again, though she hoped and hesitated to the last moment.

Her hand was in his for the fraction of a minute. Then the car was widening the distance between them, and she was no longer looking into his face, which had seemed at their last moment both merry and wistful, but back at his diminishing figure, showing black against the pale Presidio hills.



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# V

## ON GUARD

HE had so disturbed her, his presence had so obliterated other presences and annihilated time, that it took an encounter with Clara to remind her of her arrangement for the evening. The dance? No, she had given that up. She had promised Harry to be at home. Clara wanted to know rather austerely what she intended to do about the dinner. This was dreadful! Flora had forgotten it completely. Nothing to be done but go, and leave a message for Harry—apology, and assurance that she would be home early. She wondered if she were losing her memory.

She appeared to be changing altogether, for the dinner—a merry one—bored her. What she wanted was to get away from it as soon as pos-



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sible for that interesting evening. When she had made the appointment with Harry she had been excited by the thought that he might tell her whether he had learned anything from the major that morning in the matter of the ring. But now she was more engrossed with the idea of asking about Kerr—whether Harry had really met him—if so, where; and, finally, why did not Harry want her to mention that Embassy ball?

Primed with these questions, she left immediately after coffee, arriving at her own red stone portal at ten. But coming in, all a-flutter with the idea of having kept him waiting when she had so much to ask, she found her note as she had left it. She questioned Shima. There had been no message from Mr. Cressy. Her first annoyance was lost in wonder. What could be the matter? If this was neglect on Harry's part—well, it would be the first time. But she did not believe it was neglect. He had been too eager that morning.

She went into the drawing-room—a dull-pink, stupendous chamber—knelt a moment before the



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flashing wood fire, then rose, and crossing to the window, looked anxiously out. She had a flight of fancy toward accidents, but in that case she would certainly have heard. The French clock on the mantel rang half-past ten. The sound had hardly died in the great spaces before she heard the fine snarl of the electric bell.

She restrained an impulse to dash into the hall, and stood impatient in the middle of the room.

He came in hastily, his lips all ready with words which hesitated at sight of her.

"Why, you're going out!" he said.

She had forgotten the cloak that still hung from her shoulders.

"No, I've just come in, and all my fine apologies for being out are wasted. How long do you think Clara'll let you stop at this hour?"

"Clara isn't here," he said.

"Well, then your time is all the shorter." She was nettled that he should be oblivious of his lapse. Their relation had never been sentimental, but he had always been punctilious.



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"I'm sorry," he said, arriving at last at his apology. "I couldn't help being late. I've had a day of it." He drew his hands across his forehead, and she noticed that he was in his morning clothes and looked as rumpled and flurried as a man just from the office.

She relented. "Poor dear! You do look tired! Don't take that chair. It's more Louis Quinze than comfortable. Come into the library. And remember," she added, when Shima had set the decanter and glasses beside him, "you are to stay just twenty minutes."

He took a sip of his drink and looked at her over the top of his glass. "I may have to stay longer if you want to hear about it."

"Oh, Harry, you really know something? All the evening I've heard nothing but the wildest rumors. Some say Major Purdie couldn't speak because some one 'way up knows more than she should about it. And somebody else said it wasn't the real ring at all that was taken, only a paste copy, and that is why they're not doing more about getting it back."



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"Not doing more about getting it back?" Harry laughed. "Is that the idea that generally prevails? Why, Flora—" He stopped, waited a moment while she leaned forward expectant. "Flora," he began again, "are you mum?"

She nodded, breathless.

"Not a word to Clara?"

"Oh, of course not."

"Well—" He twisted around in his chair the better to face her. "To-morrow there will be published a reward of twenty thousand dollars for the return of the Crew Idol, and no questions asked."

"Oh!" she said. And again, "Oh, is that all!" She was disappointed. "I don't see why you and the major should have been so mysterious about that."

"You don't, eh? Suppose you had taken the ring—wouldn't it make a difference to you if you knew twenty-four hours ahead that a reward of twenty thousand dollars would be published? Wouldn't you expect every man's hand



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to be against you at that price? If you had a pal, wouldn't you be afraid he'd sell you up? Wouldn't you be glad of twenty-four hours' start to keep him from turning state's evidence? Well—it's just so that he shan't have the start that the authorities are keeping so almighty dark about the reward. They want to spring it on him."

Flora leaned forward with knitted brows. "Yes, I can see that, but still, just among ourselves, this morning—"

Harry smiled. "You've lost sight of the fact that it is just among ourselves the thing has happened."

"Oh, oh! Now you're ridiculous!"

"I might be, if the thing had happened anywhere but in this town; but think a moment. How much do we know of the people we meet, where they were, and who they were, before they came here? There's a case in point. It was not quite 'among ourselves' this morning."

"Harry, how horrid of you!" She was on the point of declaring that she knew Kerr very



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well indeed; but she remembered this might not be the thing to say to Harry.

"My dear girl, I'm not saying anything against him. I only remarked that we did not know him."

"Don't *you*, Harry?"

He gave her a quick look. "Why, what put that into your head?"

"I—I don't know. I thought you looked at him very hard last night in the picture gallery. And afterward, at supper, don't you remember, you did not want me to mention your connection with something or other he was talking about?"

"Something or other he was talking about?" Harry inquired with a frowning smile.

"I think it was about that Embassy ball—"

"*I* didn't want you to mention the Embassy ball?" he repeated, and now he was only smiling. "My dear child, surely you are dreaming."

She looked at him with the bewildered feeling that he was flatly contradicting himself.



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And yet she could remember he had not shaken his head at her. He had only nodded. Could it be that her cherished imagination had played her a trick at last? But the next moment it occurred to her that somehow she had been led away from her first question.

"Then *have* you seen him, Harry?" she insisted.

"No!" He jerked it out so sharply that it startled her, but she stuck to her subject.

"And you wouldn't have minded my telling him you had been at that ball?"

There was a pause while Harry looked at the fire. Then— "Look here," he burst out, "did he ask you about it?"

"Oh, no," she protested. "I only just happened to wonder."

He stared at her as if he would have liked to shake her. But then he rose from his frowning attitude before the fire, came over to her, sat on the arm of her chair, and, with the tip of one finger under her chin, lifted her face; but she did not lift her eyes. She heard only



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his voice, very low, with a caressing note that she hardly knew as Harry's.

"It isn't that I care *what* you say to him. The fact is, Flora, I suppose I was a little jealous, but I naturally don't like the suggestion that you would discuss me with a stranger."

She knew herself properly reproved, and she reproached herself, not for what she had actually said to Kerr of Harry—that had been trivial enough—but for that wayward impulse she had to confide in this clear-eyed, whimsical stranger, as it had never occurred to her to confide in Harry.

She raised her eyes. "Certainly I shall not discuss you with him."

"Is that a promise?"

"Harry, how you do dislike him!"

"Well, suppose I do?" he shrugged.

"You've used up twice your twenty minutes," she said, "and Clara will be scandalized."

He stopped the caressing movement of his hand on her hair. "Are you afraid of Clara?" he asked.



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"Mercy, yes!" She was half in earnest and half laughing. "But then I'm afraid of every one."

He put his arm affectionately around her. "But not of me?"

"Oh," she told him, "you're a great big purring pussy-cat, and I am your poor little mouse."

He thought this reply immensely witty, and Flora thought what a great boy he was, after all.

"Now, really, you must go home," she urged, trying to rise.

"But look here," he protested, still on the arm of her chair, "there's another thing I want to ask you about." And by the tip of one finger he lifted her left hand shining with rings. "You will have to have another one of these, you know. It's been on my mind for a week. Is there any sort you haven't already?"

She held up her hand to the light and fluttered its glitter.

"Any one that you gave me would be dif-



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ferent from the others, wouldn't it?" she asked prettily.

"Oh, that's very nice of you, Flora, but I want to find you something new. When shall we look for it? To-morrow, in the morning?"

"Yes, I should love it," she answered, but with no particular enthusiasm, for the idea of shopping with Harry, and shopping at Shrove's, did not present a wide field of possibility. "But I have a luncheon to-morrow," she added, "so we must make it as early as ten."

"Oh, you two!"

At Clara's mildly reproving voice so close beside them both started like conspirators. They had not heard her come in, yet there she was, just inside the doorway, still wrapped in her cloak. But there was none of the impetus of arrested motion in her attitude. She stood at repose as if she might have waited not to interrupt them.

"Don't scold Flora," said Harry, rising. "It's my fault. She sent me away half an hour ago. But it is so comfortable here!"



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Flora couldn't tell whether he was simply natural, or whether he was giving this domestic color to their interview on purpose. She rather thought it was the latter.

"To-morrow at ten, then!" he said cheerfully to Flora. The stiff curtains rustled behind him and the two women were left together.

"What an important appointment," said Clara lightly, "to bring a man at this hour to make it."

"Oh, it is, awfully!" Flora answered in the same key. "To choose my engagement ring."

Clara's delicate brows flew upward, and though Clara herself made no comment, the quick facial movement said, "I don't believe it."



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# VI

## BLACK MAGIC

THE memory of Clara's incredulous glance remained with her as something curious, and she was not unprepared to be challenged when, the next morning, she hurried down the hall, drawing on her gloves. Clara's door did open, but the lady herself, yawning lightly on the threshold, had this time no questions for her. "Remember the luncheon," she advised, "and by the way, Ella wants us to sit in their box to-night. Don't forget to tell Harry."

Flora threw back a gay "All right," but she was in danger of forgetting even the object of their errand, once she and Harry were out in the bright glare of the street. The wind, keen and resinous from the wet Presidio woods, blew



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at their back down the short block of pavement, and buffeted them broadside, as they waited on the corner for the slow-crawling little car. In spite of the blustering air Flora insisted on the side seat of the "dummy," and, catching her hat with one hand, pressing down her fluttering skirts with the other, she laughed, now sidelong at Harry, now out at the dancing face of the bay.

Each succeeding cross-street gave up a flash of blue water. The short blocks slid by, first stone fronts and fresh lawns, stucco and tiles; then here and there corner lots, the great gray, towered, wooden mansions the stock-brokers of the "seventies" built, and below them, like a contingent of shabby-genteel relations, the narrow gray wooden faces of what was "smart" in the "sixties". It was a continuous progress backward toward the old, the original town. There was no stately nucleus. This town was a succession of widening ripples of progress, each newer, more polished than the last, but not different in quality from the old center that still



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teemed—a region of frail wooden rookeries full of foreign contending interests, haunted with the adventures of its feverish past. It had built itself on the hopes of a moment, and what spread from it still was the spell of the new, the changing, and the reckless. It drew still from the ends of the earth. The broad road in over the mountains, the broad road out over the ocean made it where it stood, touching all trades, a road-house of the world.

Some dim perception of this touched Flora as the houses, gliding past, grew older, grayer, with steeper gardens, narrower streets, here and there even trees, lone, sentinel, at the edge of cobbled gutters. From the crest of the last hill they had looked a mile down the long gray throat of the street to where the ferry building lay stretched out with its one tall tower pricked up among the masts of shipping. Halfway between their momentary perch and the ferry slips the street suddenly thickened, darkened, swarmed, flying a yellow pennon high above blackened roofs. And now, as they slip-



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ped down the long decline into the foreign quarter the pungent oriental breath of Chinatown was blown up to them. She breathed it in readily. It was pleasant because it was strange, outlandish, suggesting a wide web of life beyond her own knowledge. She wondered what Harry was thinking of it, as he sat with his passive profile turned from her to the heathen street ahead. She guessed, by the curl of his nostril, that it was only present to him as an unpleasant odor to be got through as quickly as possible; but she was wrong. He had another thought. This time, oddly enough, a thought for her.

He gave it to her presently, abrupt, matter-of-fact, material. "That Chinese goldsmith down there has good stuff now and then. How'd you like to look in there before we go on to what-you-call-'em's,—the regular place?"

"You mean for a ring?" She was doubtful only of his being in earnest.

"You have so many of the Shrove kind," he explained. "I thought you might like it, Flora; you're so romantic!" he laughed.



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"Like it!" she cried, too touched at his thought for her to resent the imputation. "I should love it! But I didn't know they had such things."

"Now and then—though it is a rare chance."

"But that will be just the fun of it," she hastened, half afraid lest Harry should change his mind, "to see if we can possibly find one that will be different from all these others."

She kept this little feeling of exploration close about her, as they left the car, a block above the green trees of the plaza, and entered one of the narrow streets that was not even a cross-street, but an alley, running to a bag's end, with balconies, green railings and narcissi taking the sun.

A slant-eyed baby in a mauve blouse stared after them; and a white face so poisoned in its badness that it gave Flora a start, peered at them from across the street. It made her shrink a little behind Harry's broad shoulder and take hold of his arm. The mere touch of that arm was security. His big presence, moving agilely



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beside her, seemed to fill the street with its strength, as if, by merely flinging out his arms, Samson-like, he could burst the dark walls asunder.

In the middle of the block, sunk a little back from the fronts of the others, the goldsmith's shop showed a single, filmed window; and the pale glow through it proclaimed that the worker in metals preferred another light to the sun's. The threshold was worn to a hollow that surprised the foot; and the interior into which it led them gloomed so suddenly around them after the broad sunlight, that it was a moment before they made out the little man behind the counter, sitting hunched up on a high stool.

"Hullo, Joe," said Harry, in the same voice that hailed his friends on the street-corners; but the goldsmith only nodded like a nodding mandarin, as if, without looking up, he took them in and sensed their errand. He wore a round, blue Chinese cap drawn over his crown; a pair of strange goggles like a mask over his eyes, and his little body seemed to poise as



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lightly on his high stool as a wisp, as if there were no more flesh in it than in his long, dry fingers that so marvelously manipulated the metal. Save for that glitter of gold on his glass plate, and the grin of a lighted brazier, all was dark, discolored and cluttered.

And the way Harry bloomed upon this background of dubious antiquity! He leaned on the little counter, which creaked under his weight, in his big, fresh coat, with his clear, fresh face bent above the shallow tray of trinkets—doubtful jades, dim-eyed rings, dull clasps and coins —his large, fastidious finger poked among. He was the one vital thing in the shop.

Over everything else was spread a dimness of age like dust. It enveloped the little man behind the counter, not with the frailness that belongs to human age, but with that weathered, polished hardness which time brings to antiques of wood and metal. Indeed, he appeared so like a carved idol in a curio shop that Flora was a little startled to find that he was looking at her. Chinamen had always seemed to her blank automatons;



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but this one looked keenly, pointedly, as if he personally took note. She told herself whimsically that perhaps it was his extraordinary glasses that gave point to that expression; and presently when he took them off she was surprised to see it seemed verily true. His little physiognomy had no more expression than a withered nut. But there was something about it more disturbing than its vanishing intelligence, something unexpected, and out of harmony with the rest of him, yet so illusive that, flit over him as her eye would, she failed to find it.

"Harry," she murmured to Cressy, who was still stirring the contents of the box with a disdainful forefinger, "this little man gives me the shivers."

"Old Joe?" Harry smiled indulgently. "He's a queer customer. Been quite a figurehead in Chinatown for twenty years. Say, Joe, heap bad!" and with the back of his hand he flicked the tray away from him.

The little man undoubled his knees and de-



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scended the stool. He stood breast-high behind the counter. He dropped a lack-luster eye to the box. "Velly nice," he murmured with vague, falling inflection.

"Oh, rotten!" Harry laughed at him.

"You no like?"

"No. No like. You got something else—something nice?"

"No." It was like a door closed in the face of their hope—that falling inflection, that blank of vacuity that settled over his face, and his whole drooping figure. He seemed to be only mutely awaiting their immediate departure to climb back again on his high stool. But Harry still leaned on the counter and grinned ingratiatingly. "Oh, Joe, you good flen'. You got something pretty—maybe?"

The curtain of vacuity parted just a crack —let through a gleam of intense intelligence. "Maybe." The goldsmith chuckled deeply, as if Harry had unwittingly perpetrated some joke—some particularly clever conjurer's trick. He sidled out behind the counter, past the grin-



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ning brazier, and shuffled into the back of the shop where he opened a door.

Flora had expected a cupboard, but the vista it gave upon was a long, black, incredibly narrow passage, that stretched away into gloom with all the suggestion of distance of a road going over a horizon. Down this the goldsmith went, with his straw slippers clapping on his heels, until his small figure merged in the gloom and presently disappeared altogether, and only the faint flipper-flap of his slippers came back growing more and more distant to them, and finally dying into silence. In the stillness that followed while they waited they could hear each other breathe. The little shop with the water-stained walls and the ancient odor—ancient as the empire of China—inclosed them like a spell cast around them by a vanishing enchanter to hold them there mute until his returning. They did not look at each other, but rather at the glowing brazier, at the gold on the glass plates, at the forms of people passing in the street, moving palely across the dim window pane, as



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distant to Flora's eye as though they moved in another world. Then came the flipper-flap of the goldsmith's slippers returning. The sound snapped their tension, and Harry laughed.

"Lord knows how far he went to get it!"

"Across the street?" Flora wondered.

"Or under it. And it won't be worth two bits when it gets here." He peered at the little man coming toward them down the passage, flapping and shuffling, and carrying, held before him in both hands, a square, deep little box.

It was a worn, nondescript box that he set down before them, but the jealous way he had carried it had suggested treasure, and Flora leaned eagerly forward as he raised the cover, half expecting the blaze of a jewel-case. She saw at first only dull shanks of metal tumbled one upon the other. But, after a moment's peering, between them she caught gleams of veritable light. Her fingers went in to retrieve a hoop of heavy silver, in the midst of which was sunk a flawed topaz. She admired a moment the play of light over the imperfection.



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"But this isn't Chinese," she objected, turning her surprise on Harry.

"Lots of 'em aren't. These men glean everywhere. That's pretty." He held up a little circle of discolored but lusterful pearls—let it fall again, since it was worth only a glance. He leaned on the counter, indifferent to urge where value seemed so slight. He seemed amused at Flora's enthusiasm for clouded opals.

"They look well enough among this junk," he said, "but compare them with your own rings and you'll see the difference."

She heard him dreamily. She was wishing, as she turned over the tumble of damaged jewels, that things so pretty might have been perfect. To find a perfect thing in this place would be too extraordinary to hope for. Yet, taking up the next, and the next, she found herself wishing it might be this one—this cracked intaglio. No? Then this blue one—say. The setting spoke nothing for it. It was a plain, thin, round hoop of palpable brass, and the battered thing seemed almost too feeble to hold the soli-



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tary stone. But the stone! She looked it full in the eye, the big, blazing, blue eye of it. What was the matter with this one? A flaw? She held it to the light.

She felt Harry move behind her. She knew he couldn't but be looking at it. For how, by all that was marvelous, had she for a moment doubted it? Down to its very heart, which was near to black, it was clear fire, and outward toward the facets struck flaming hyacinth hues with zigzag white cross-lights that dazzled and mesmerized. Just the look of it—the marvelous deep well of its light—declared its truth.

"Harry," she breathed, without taking her gaze from the thing in her hand, "do look at this!"

She felt him lean closer. Then with an abrupt "Let's see it," he took it from her—held it to the light, laid it on his palm, looking sharply across the counter at the shopkeeper, then back at the ring with a long scrutiny. His face, too, had a flush of excitement.

"Is it—good?" Flora faltered.



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"A sapphire," he said, and taking her third finger by the tip, he slid on the thin circle of metal.

She breathed high, looking down at the stone with eyes absorbed in the blue fire. There was none of the cupidity of women for jewels in her look. It was the intrinsic beauty of this drop of dark liquid light that had captured her. It had mystery, and her imagination woke to it —the wistful mystery of perfect beauty. And perfect beauty in such a place! It was too beautiful. The feeling it brought her was too sharp for pure pleasure. It was dimly like fear. Yet instinctively she shut her hand about the ring. She murmured out her wonder.

"How in the world did such a thing come here?"

"Oh, not so strange," Harry answered. He leaned on his elbow upon the counter, his head bent close to hers above the single, glittering point that drew the four eyes to one focus.

"Sailors now and then pick up a thing of whose value they have no idea—get hard up, and



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pawn it—still without any idea. These chaps" —and his bold hand indicated the shopkeeper —"take in anything—that is, anything worth their while; and wait, and wait, and wait until they see just the moment—and turn it to account."

It might be because Harry's eyes were so taken with the jewel that his tongue ran recklessly. He had spoken low, but Flora sent an anxious glance to be sure the shopkeeper hadn't overheard. She had meant only to glance, but she found herself staring into eyes that stared back from the other side of the counter. That wide, unwinking scrutiny filled her whole vision. For an instant she saw nothing but the dance of scintillant pupils. Then, with a little gasp she clutched at her companion's arm.

"Oh, Harry!"

His glance came quickly round to her. "Why, what's the matter?"

She murmured, "That Chinaman has blue eyes."

He looked at her with good-natured wonder.



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"Why, Flora, haven't you blue on the brain? I believe he has, though," he added, as he peered across the counter at the shopkeeper, whose gaze now fluttered under narrowed lids; "but why in the world should blue eyes scare you?" His look returned indulgently to Flora's face.

She could not explain her reason of fear to him. She could not explain it to herself more than that the eyes had seemed to know. What? She could not tell; but they had had a deadly intelligence. She only whispered back, "But he is awful!"

"Oh, I guess not," Harry grinned, and turned his back to the counter, "only part white. Makes him a little sharper at a bargain."

But, in spite of his off-handedness, Flora saw he was alert, touched with excitement. Once or twice he looked from the shopkeeper to the sapphire.

"Do you like it, Flora?" he said. "Do you



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want it?" He spoke eagerly against her reluctance.

"It is the most beautiful thing I ever saw, but—" She could not put it to him why she shrank from it. That feeling which had touched her at the first had a little expanded, the sense of the sapphire's sinister charm. She faltered out as much as she could explain. "It's too much for me."

His shoulders shook with appreciation of this. "Oh, I guess not! If you keep that up I shall be thinking you mean it is too much for me."

It hadn't been in the least what she meant, but now that he had suggested it to her—"Well, I shouldn't like it to be," she blushed, but she braved him.

The ring of his laughter filled the little, dark, old shop, and made the proprietor blink.

"Oh, I guess not," he said again, and with that he seemed to make an end of her hesitations. There was not another objection she could bring up. She let him draw the ring off



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her hand with a mingled feeling of reluctance and relief. She saw him turn briskly to the shopkeeper.

"Now, Joe, how much you want?" That much she heard as she turned away with a fear lest it might, and a hope that it would be, too much for him!

She lingered away to the door, through whose upper glazed half she saw the street swarming and sunny, picked out with streamers of red and squares of green. The murmur of traffic outside was faint to her ears. The murmur of the two voices talking on inside the shop momently grew fainter. She looked behind her and saw them now in the back of the shop, close by the grinning brazier.

The light of it showed what would have been otherwise dark. It showed her Harry, straddling, hands in pockets, hat thrust back, a silhouette as hard as if cast in cold metal. The aspect of him, thus, was strange, not quite unlike himself, but giving her the feeling that she



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had never known how much Harry smoothed over.

Perhaps men were always like that with men. Still she looked away again because she felt she had taken a liberty in catching him when he was coming out so plain and coming out so positive to the shopkeeper, whom he seemed really to be bullying. She felt that, considering the sapphire, nothing that went on about it could be too extraordinary. And yet the tone their voices were taking on made her nervous. Whatever they were arguing about, she found it hard to go on standing thus with her back to it, and for so long, while her expectancy tightened, and her unreasonable idea that she did not want the ring, more and more took hold of her. If he did not want to sell it, why not let it go—the beautiful thing!

She thought she would call Harry, and suggest it—but no. She hesitated. She would give them a chance to finish it themselves. She would count ten pigtails past the window first.



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She watched the last far into the distance, and still she was there, blowing hot and cold. She would call to Harry—call out to him from where she stood, that she wouldn't have the thing.

She turned, and there they were yet. They had not moved. The shadow of the gesticulating little Chinaman danced like a bird on the wall, and before him Harry glowed, immovable, but ruddy, as if the hard metal whereof he was cast was slowly heating through. The thought came to her then. Harry was iron! The hard shade of his profile on the wall, the stiff movement of his lips, the forward thrust of his head on his shoulders gave her another thought. Was Harry also brutal? The sight of that brutality awake, feeding, as it were, on the fluttering little figure before it, distressed her. How long were they going on putting an edge to their argument? There was continually with her the fear that it might sharpen into a quarrel; for now the goldsmith had ceased his gesticulation and became suddenly immobile, and



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still Harry was requiring of him the same thing. It was insisted upon, by all the lines of his stiff braced figure, and she had a fluttered expectancy that if the little man didn't do something quickly, now—now it would happen.

What she expected of Harry, a violent act or a quick relaxation of his iron mood, she had not time to consider, for the shopkeeper had moved. He was jerking his head, his thumb, and finally his arm in the direction of the long, dim passage—such a pointed direction, such a singular gesture, as to startle her with its incongruity. What had that to do with the price of the ring? And if it had nothing to do with the price of the ring, what had they been talking about? Her small scruple against knowing what was going on behind her was forgotten. Indeed, now she was oblivious of everything else. She was taking it in with all her eyes, when Harry turned and looked at her. And, oddly enough, she thought he looked as if he wondered how she came there. She saw him return to it slowly. Then, in a flash, he



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met her brilliantly. He came toward her out of the gloom, holding the ring before him, as if with the light of that, and the flash of his smile, he was anxious immediately to cover his deficit.

"I had the very devil of a time getting it," he said. "The little beggar didn't want to let me have it." But there was a subsiding excitement in his face, and a something in his manner, both triumphant and troubled, which his explanation did not reasonably account for. Had Harry felt the touch of the same strange influence that the little shop, and the blue-eyed Chinaman, and the sapphire, had wrought around her? Or was it something more salient, the same thing that had suggested itself to her with the violent gesticulation of the shopkeeper at the passage—that some question other than the mere transfer of the ring had come up between them?

"Harry"—she hesitated—"are you quite sure it's all right?"

"All right?" The sudden edge in his voice



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made her look at him. "Why, it's genuine, if that's what you mean."

It hadn't been, quite; but her meaning was too vague to put into words—a mere sensation of uneasiness. She watched Harry turn the ring over, as if he were reluctant to let it go out of his hands. And then, looking at her, she thought his glance was a little uncertain. She thought he hesitated, and when he finally slid the ring over her finger, "I wouldn't wear it until it is reset," he said. "That setting isn't gold. It's hardly decent."

"Yes," she assented; "Clara will laugh at us."

"She won't if we don't show it to her until it's fit to appear. In fact, I would rather you wouldn't. As it is now, the thing doesn't represent my gift to you."

She felt this was Harry's conventional streak asserting itself. But even she had to admit that an engagement ring which was palpably not gold was rather out of the way.

"You'd better keep it a day or two and look it over and make up your mind how you want



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it set, and then we'll spring it on them," he advised.

But now it was finally on her finger, she did not want to think it would ever have to be taken off again. She drew her glove over it. The great facets showed sharp angles under the thin kid. She wished the sapphire were not quite so large, so difficult to reconcile with everything else. Now that she had the perfect thing with her, clasping her so heavily around the third finger, she was half afraid it was going to be too much for her, after all.



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# VII

## A SPELL IS CAST

IT was hers! She did not believe it. It had been done too quickly. It seemed to her she had hardly felt Harry slip it on her finger before they had left the shop; that she had hardly shaken off the musty inclosed atmosphere, before Harry had left her on the corner of California and Powell Streets—left her alone with the ring! Still, she didn't believe she had it, even while she looked at the large lump it made under her glove. She kept feeling it with a cautious finger-tip.

A trio of girls she knew flocked off the California Street car and surrounded her. They were going to the White House for bargains in shirt waists. They wanted to carry her off in their company. They encompassed her in a



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chatter of lace and lingerie. There were held up to her all the interests of her every-day existence; but these seemed to have no part in her real life. They had never appeared more remote and trivial. She kept her conscious hand in the folds of her skirt. She would have liked to strip off her glove and show them the ring. It would have entertained them so much. To herself its entertainment was of the Arabian Nights—the way of its finding, its beauty in the false setting, the struggle over it in the shop—all were wine to her imagination. It was a thing to conjure adventure; it was a talisman of romance.

She colored faintly as she mentally corrected herself. It was her engagement ring, and as such she had never once thought of it. Strange, when all the forms of her engagement had been so well observed; when Harry himself represented that side of life to which she had tried to form herself from as far back as the old days when her mother had made fun of her fancies. It must be right, she thought, this life of conventions and forms; and the queer way she saw



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things, something wrong in her. But because she knew herself different, and because she felt life without understanding it, she feared it. It was too big to take hold of alone. And she was so alone; and Harry was so strong, so matter-of-fact; alone like herself, yet adequate in the world she was afraid of. She had accepted him as naturally, and yet as unreally, as she took all that life, and to the moment she had never questioned the wisdom or the happiness. She didn't question now. She only was shocked that so large a fact in her life as her engagement could be completely wiped out for the moment by a thing so trivial. It was not even the ring. It was the feeling she had about the ring. Her imagination was always running away with her, as it had the night at the club. And here it was, still uncurbed, speeding her forward into fields of romance.

She went over whole dramas—imaginary histories of chance and circumstance—woven about the ring, as she walked up and down the long, windy hills, westward and homeward, the blue



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bay on the one hand beaten green under the rising "trade," and the fog coming in before her. With the experience of the morning, and the exercise and the lively air, her spirits were riding high. From time to time she had the greatest longing to peep again at the sapphire, but not until the house door had closed after her did she dare draw off her glove and look. It was still glorious. What a pity she must take it off! Yet that point Harry had made about not showing it had been too sharp to be disregarded. But what could she say, supposing Clara asked about the morning's expedition? At this thought all her spring deserted her, and she went slowly up the stair. Perhaps Clara had forgotten about it, and then it recurred reassuringly to her mind how seldom Clara touched anywhere near the subject of her engagement.

None the less, she went very softly down the hall, anxious lest Clara might open her door and ask what she had brought home with her.

But even in the refuge of her own rooms the ring encircled Flora with unease. The light



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of it on her finger made her restless. It wasn't that she was apprehensive of it, but she could not forget it. She could hear the maid Marrika moving about in the room beyond. She could hear the rustle of clothes carried to and fro. She knew there were things to dress for—a luncheon, and a bevy of teas—things which must be gone through with, things which at other times she had found sufficiently pleasurable. But now, try as she would to turn her mind to these, it persistently wandered back to the jewel. All the fine, simple pleasure of the morning was dazzled out by it. She slipped it off her finger on to the dressing-table, and it lay among her laces like a purple prism, cast by some unearthly sun in a magic glass. She had jewels, rubies even—the most precious—but nothing that gave her this sense of individual beauty, of beauty so keen as to be disturbing. She emptied her jewel casket in a glittering heap around it. It shone out unquenched. It had not been the dingy little shop, and the dingy little street, and the odds and ends of jade and



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tarnished silver that had made it of such a value. It seemed to her that any eye would fix it, any hand pluck it out first from that shining heap before her.

Marrika was coming in, and quickly Flora swept the jewels and the sapphire back into the casket, turned the key upon them, and thrust it back in the far corner of the drawer. She would give every one a great surprise when the ring was properly set. She glanced nervously over her shoulder to see if Marrika had noticed her action. The Russian had been moving to and fro between the wardrobe and the dressing-table with a droning thread of song. And now she took up the combs and brushes, and filling her mouth with pins, began on the long river of yellow-brown hair that flowed down Flora's back. The broad, pale face reflected beside her own in the mirror was reassuring by its serene indifference. She had soothing hands, Marrika. It was a luxury to be dressed by her, a mental soporific. But to-day it wrought no relaxation in Flora's tightened nerves. All the while she



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was being combed and laced and hooked her eyes were alertly on the dressing-table drawer, that remained a little open; and presently she caught herself vaguely speculating on how, after she had been fastened up and into her clothes so securely, she could dispose upon herself the sapphire. How had she arrived at this consideration? No course of reasoning led up to it. She was annoyed with herself. If she wasn't going to wear the ring on her finger, and show it, why did she want to take it with her at all? For fear it might be lost? Lost, in her jewel box, in the back of the drawer! She blushed for herself. She looked severely at her guilty reflection in the mirror. Perhaps she did look tall; yes, and outwardly sophisticated, but underneath that bold exterior Flora knew she was only the smallest, youngest, most ridiculous child ever born. There were moments when this fact appeared to her more vividly than at others. One had been the other night when Kerr's eyes had looked through and through her; and here she was again, when



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she was going to a girls' luncheon, and most wanted to feel competent, stared out of countenance by the wonderful eye of a ring.

Through the long afternoon it was more apparent to her than the faces of the people around her. She was restless to get back to it, but people talked interminably. At the luncheon they talked of Kerr. Flora knew these girls felt a little resentment that she had so easily captured Harry Cressy; for Harry had been more than an eligible man in the little city. He had been an eligible personage. Not that he had money; not that his family tree was plainly planted in their midst; but that without these two things he had achieved what, with these things, the people he knew were all striving for. He stood before them as the embodiment of what they most believed in—perfect bodily splendor, and perfect knowledge of how to get on with the world; and the fact that he wouldn't quite be one of them, but after five years still stood a little off—made him shine with greater brilliance, especially in the eyes of these young



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girls. It was hard, they seemed to feel, that such an apparently remote and difficult person should have succumbed so easily; and now that a new luminary of equal luster was apparent in their sky, Flora felt their remarks a little triumphantly aimed at her. It was odd to her that they should envy her anything, especially those one or two exquisite flowers of old families, whose lovely eyes saw not one inch farther than her turquoise collar. And the way they talked of Kerr, with flourishes, made her feel a faint, responsive irritation that he had talked to so many of them in exactly the same way.

But between the threads of interest the table group wove together, kept flashing up her furtive desire to be away, to be at home, to see what had happened to the sapphire. Of course, she knew that nothing could have happened; but she wanted to look at it, to open the casket and see the flash of it before her eyes. For was she quite sure that it was not one of those fairy gifts, which, put into the hand in a blaze of beauty, may be found in the pocket as withered



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leaves? Yet her tenacious nets of duty caught and caught, and again caught her, so that when the carriage finally fetched her home it was between lighted street-lamps.

They were dining early that night on account of the Bullers' box party, but it was nearly eight o'clock before Flora reached the house. And it was, of course, for that reason that she ran up-stairs—ran wildly, regardlessly, before the eyes of Shima—and along the hall, her high heels clacking on the hard floors, and through her bedroom to the dressing-room, snatched open the table drawer, unlocked the casket with a twitch of the key—and, ah, it was there! It was really real! Why, what had she expected? She was laughing at herself.

She was gay in her relief at getting back to the sapphire, but at the same time she was already wondering what she should do about it that night—take it with her or leave it alone? Dared she wear it on her finger under her glove? Clara might notice the unfamiliar form of the jewel through the thin kid. Harry's



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warning had been phrased conventionally enough, but the hints his words conveyed had expanded in her mind—fear not only of Clara's laughter, that such a jewel had come from a junk shop, but of her wonder, her questions, her ability of getting out the story of the whole erratic proceeding, even to the strange pantomime between Harry and the blue-eyed Chinaman. Clara was marvelous!

Flora watched her curiously across the table that evening, wondering what was that quality of hers by which she acquired. Hitherto Flora had accepted it as a fact without question, but now she had a desire to place it. It was not beauty, for though Clara was pretty, like a polished Greuze, she was colorless and flavorless, lacking the vivid heat of magnetism. More probably it consisted in a certain sort of sweetness Clara could produce on occasions, a way she had of looking and speaking which Flora could only describe as smooth. But smooth without texture or softness; smooth as quick-flowing water, smooth as glass—a surface upon which even cau-



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tion might lose its equilibrium. For the danger in Clara was that she was disarming. There was nothing antagonistic in her. One noticed her slowly. The flat tones of her voice made background for other people's conversations. The pale tints of her gown blended with the pale tones of her hair and flesh. Beside Clara's exquisite gradations Flora felt herself without shades, a creature of violent contrasts and impulses. If Clara had been going to carry the ring about with her she would have had a reason for it. But Flora had nothing but a silly fancy.

She made up her mind to leave the sapphire at home; but in her last moment in her room the resolution failed her. Harry, of course, would be angry if he knew, but Harry wouldn't see the thing under her glove.

She came down to where Clara was waiting for her, with the guilty feeling of a child who has concealed a contraband cake; but the way Clara looked her over made her conscious that she had not concealed her excitement. Clara



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was always cool. What would it be like, she wondered, to feel the same about everything? How would it seem to be no more elated by the expectation of listening to the most beautiful of tenors than over the next meeting of the Decade Club? Was that what she was coming to in time? Not to-night, she thought; and not, at least, while that talisman of romance clasped her around the third finger.



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# VIII

## A SPARK OF HORROR

THEY found Harry waiting for them in the theater lobby. He had come up too late from Burlingame to do more than meet the party there. The Bullers were already in the box, he said, and the second act of *I' Pagliacci* just beginning.

As they came to the door of the box the lights were down, the curtain up on a dim stage, and the chorus still floating into the roof, while the three occupants of the box were indistinguishable figures, risen up and shuffling chairs to the front for Flora and Clara. It was too dark to distinguish faces.

But dark as it was, Flora knew who was sitting behind her. She heard him speaking. Un-



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der the notes of the recitative he was speaking to Clara. The pleasure of finding him here was sharpened by the surprise. She listened to his voice, the mere intonation of which brought back to her their walk through the Presidio woods as deliciously as if she were still there.

Then, as the tenor took up the theme, all talking ceased—Ella's husky whisper, Clara's smoother syllables, and the flat, slow, variable voice of Kerr—the whole house seemed to sink into stiller repose; the high chords floated above the heads of the black pit like colored bubbles, and Flora forgot the sapphire in the triple spell of the singing, the darkness, and the face she was yet to see. She felt relaxed and released from her guard by this darkness around her, that blotted out the sea of faces beneath, that dissolved the walls and high galleries, that obscured the very outline of the box where she sat, until she seemed to be poised, halfway up a void of darkness, looking into a pit in the hollowness of which a voice was singing.

The stage was a narrow shelf of wood swung



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in that void, from which the voice sang, and a bare finger of light followed it about from place to place. The sweet, searching tenor notes, the semblance of passion and reality the gesticulating Frenchman threw over all the stage, and the *crescendo* of the tragedy carried her into a mood that barred out Ella, barred out Clara, barred out Harry more than any; but, unaccountably, Kerr was still with her. He was there by no will of hers, but by some essence of his own, some quality that linked him, as it linked her, to the passionate subtleties of life. He seemed to her the eager spirit that was prompting and putting forward this comedy and tragedy playing on before her. She heard him reasserted, vigorous, lawless, wandering, in the voice of the mimic strolling player addressing his mimic audience. The appeal of the tenor to the voiceless galleries, "Underneath this little play we show, there is another play," seemed indeed the very voice of Kerr repeating itself. And with the climax of the sharp tragedy in the middle of the comic stage she



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placed him again, but placed him this time in the mimic audience looking on, neither applauding nor dissenting; but rather as if he watched the play and played it, too.

The lights went up with a spring. A wave of motion flickered over the house, the talking voices burst forth all at once, and she saw him, really saw him for the first time that evening, as in her fancy, part of the audience; as in her fancy, neither applauding nor dissenting, yet with what a difference! He leaned back in his chair, and leaned his head a little back, as if, for weariness, he wished there were a rest behind it; and how indifferently, how critically, how levelly he surveyed the fluttered house, and the figures in the box beside him! How foreign he appeared to the ardent spirit who had dominated the dark; how emptied of the heat of imagination, how worn, how dry; and even in his salience, how singularly pathetic! He was neither the satanic person of the first night, nor her comrade of the Presidio hills. And if the expression of his face was not quite so cheap as



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cynicism, it was just the absence of belief in anything.

She felt a lump in her throat, an ache of the cruelest disappointment, as though some masker, masking as the fire of life, had suddenly removed the covering of his face and showed her the burnt-out bones beneath. The shift from what she remembered him to what he now appeared was too rapid and considerable for her. She found herself looking at him through a mist of tears—there in the heart of publicity, in the middle of the circle of red velvet curtains!

He turned and saw her. She watched a smile of the frankest pleasure rising, as it were, to the surface of his weary preoccupation. Something had delighted him. Why, it was herself—just her being there! And she could only helplessly blink at him. Was ever anything so stupid as to be caught in tears over nothing! For the next moment he had caught her. She knew by the change of his look, interrogative, amused, incredulous. He straightened and leaned forward.



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"Really," he said, "you must remember that little man has only gone out for a glass of beer."

So he thought it was the tenor who had brought her to the point of tears.

"Ah, why do you say that?" she protested.

He continued to smile indulgently upon her. "Would you really rather believe it true?"

"I don't know. But I wish *you* hadn't thought of the beer."

He brought the glare of his monocle to bear full upon her. "Why not? It is all we make sure of."

So he had taken that side of it. By his words as well as his looks he repudiated all the gallant show of romance he had paraded to her before, and had taken up the cause of the world as flatly as Harry could have done.

"Oh, if to be sure is all you want," she burst out; "but you don't mean it! Wouldn't you rather have something beautiful you weren't sure of, than something certain that didn't matter?"



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He nodded to this quite casually, as if it were an old acquaintance.

"Oh, yes; but the time comes round when you want to be sure of something. The sun never sets twice alike over Mont Pelee; but you can always get the same brand of lager to-day that you had the week before." He looked at her with a faint amusement. "And by your expression I take it you don't know how fine some of those brands are. Life is not half bad—even when it is only a means to the beer."

Under these garish lights, in the middle of this theater of people, facing the bland, almost banal, stare of that monocle, it looked exceedingly probable that, after all, in spite of her dreaming, this was what life would prove to be. But she hated the thought, as she hated that Kerr should be the one to show it to her; as she would have hated her ring if, after all its splendor in the shop, it should have turned out to be a piece of colored glass.

"No, no! I won't believe you," she stoutly denied him. "There *is* more in life than you



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can touch. You're not like yourself to say there is not."

He laughed, but rather shortly.

"My dear child, forgive me; I'm sulky to-night. I feel, as I felt at eighteen, that the world has treated me badly. I've lost my luck."

The way his voice dropped at the last sounded to her the weariest thing she had ever heard. He settled back in his chair again, and looked moodily out across the brilliant house.

"I'm sorry." Her tone was sweetly vague. What could be the matter with him? Then, half timidly, she rallied him. "If you go on like this, I shall have to show you my talisman."

"Oh, have you indeed a talisman?" he humored her. And it was as if he said, "Oh, have you a doll?" He did not even turn his head to look at her.

She was chilled. She felt the disappointment, that his quick smile had lightened, return upon her. She hardly noticed the rise of the curtain on the second little play, and the singing voices did not reach her with any poignancy.



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She was vaguely aware of movements in the box—of Harry's coming in, of Clara's little rustle making room for him, of the shift of Ella's chair away from the business of listening, toward him, and her husky whisper going on with some prolonged tale of dull escapade; but to Flora they all made only a banal background for the brooding silence of her companion. He had thrown his mood over her until she was ready to doubt even the potency of her talisman to counteract it.

She felt of the stone. She drew off her glove and tried to look at it in the dim light, but couldn't get a gleam out of it. She was as impatient for the lights to go up that she might secretly be cheered by its wonder, as she had been that afternoon to get back from the luncheon, and make sure it was still in the drawer. She must see it in spite of Clara at her right hand, whose little chiseled profile might turn upon her at any moment a full face of inquiry.

She held her left hand low in the shadow of



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her chair; and if, as the lights went up again, there was any change in the sapphire, it was merely a sharper brilliance, as if, like an eye, it had moods, and this was one of its moments of excitement. In its extraordinary luster it seemed to possess a beauty that could not be valued; and she wanted to hold it up to Kerr, to see if she couldn't startle him out of his mood—to see if he wouldn't respond to it, "Yes, there is more in it than you can touch."

She turned to him with the daring flash of timid spirits. It was so sharp a motion that he started instantly from his reverie to meet it, but his alacrity was mechanical. She felt the smile he summoned was slow, as if he returned, from a long distance, a little painfully to his present surroundings.

The *Intermezzo* was playing, and to speak under the music he leaned so close his shoulder touched her chair. Through that narrow space between them, almost beneath his eyes, she moved her hand—a gesture so slightly emphasized as to seem accident. He had started to speak, but



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her motion seemed to stop his tongue. He looked hard at her hand, and something violent in his intentness made her clutch the side of the chair. Instantly she met his look, so fiercely, cruelly challenging, that it took her like a blow. For a moment they looked at each other, her eyes wide with fright, his narrowed to a glare under the terrible intentness of his brows. What had she done? What threatened her? What could save her in this sea of people? Then, while she gazed, his challenge burned out to a pale hard scrutiny, that faded to no expression at all—or was it that any expression would have seemed dim after the terrible one that had flashed across his face?

She was as shaken as if he had seized hold of her. If he had snatched the ring off her finger she wouldn't have been more shocked. The whole box must be transfixed by him, and the whole house be looking at nothing but their little circle of horror! She was ready for it. She was braced for anything but the fact which actually confronted her—that no one had noticed them at all. It was monstrous that such a thing



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could have been without their knowing! But there was no face in all the orchestra, the crowded galleries, or the tiers of boxes to affirm that anything had happened; no face in their own box had even stirred, but Clara's, and that had merely turned from profile to the full, faintly inquiring, mild, and palely pink in the warm reflections of the red velvet curtains.

And what could Clara have seen, if she had seen at all, but Flora a little paler than usual with a hand that trembled; and what worse could Clara conjecture than that she was being silly about Kerr? She turned slowly toward him, and looked at him with a courage that was part of her fear. But wasn't she, in a way, being silly about Kerr? What had become of his expression that had threatened her? There was nothing left of it but her own violent impression—and the longer Kerr sat there, talking from her to Clara, from Clara to Judge Buller, his eyes keeping pace with his light conversational flights, the less Flora felt sure he had ever fixed her with that intensity.



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And yet the thing had actually happened. Its evidence was before her. He had been silent. Now he was talking. He had been absent. Now she thought she had never seen him more vividly concerned with the moment. Yet for all his cool looks and diffuse talk around the box, she felt uneasily that his concern was pointed at her, and that he would never let her go. He only waited for the cover of the last act to come back to her single-handed.

She would have deflected his attack, but it was too quick, too unexpected for her to do more than sit helpless, and let him lift up her left hand, delicately between thumb and finger, as if in itself it was some rare, fine curio, and, bending close, contemplate the sapphire unwinkingly. She had an instant when she thought she must cry out, but how impossible in the awful publicity of her place—a pinnacle in the face of thousands! And after the first fluttered impulse came a certain reassurance in such a frank and trivial action. For all its intensity, how could it be construed otherwise than a lively if unconven-



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tional interest? It must have been her own fancy which had discerned anything more than that in his first look at her. And yet, when he had laid her hand lightly back, and readjusted his monocle, and looked out, away from her, across the black house, she didn't know whether she was more reassured or troubled because he had not spoken a word. Yet the next moment he looked around at her.

"We shan't meet every evening in such a way as this," he said, and left the statement dangling unanswerable between them. It sounded portentous—final. She wondered that in the middle of her fear it could strike such a sharp note of regret in her. She knew she would regret not meeting him again; and yet she shrank from the thought she could still want to meet him. By one look her whole feeling of sympathy, of reliance, of admiration, that had flowed out to him so naturally she had scarcely been aware of it, had been troubled and mixed with fear. She couldn't answer. She could only look at him with a reflection of her trouble in her face.



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"Are you surprised that I thought of that?" he inquired. "It's not so odd as you seem to think that I should want to see you again. I don't want to leave it to chance; do you?" He shot the question at her so suddenly, with such a casual eye, and such dry gravity of mouth, that he had her admission out of her before she realized the extent of its meaning. And the way he took that admission for granted, and overlooked her confusion, made her feel that for the sake of whatever he was after he was intentionally ignoring what it did not suit his convenience to see. She knew he must have seen; that every moment while she had changed and fluttered his eye had never left her.

"Then when are you at home?" he asked her; and by his tone, he conveyed the impression that he was only making courteous response to some invitation she had offered him; though, when she thought, she had not offered it, he had got it out of her. He had got it by sheer impertinence. But none the less he had it. She couldn't escape him there.



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She answered somewhat stiffly: "Fridays, second and fourth."

He looked at her with a humorous twist of mouth. "What? So seldom?"

She was impotent if he wouldn't be snubbed; but at the worst she wouldn't be cornered. "Oh, dear, no—but people who come at other times take a chance."

"Does that mean that I may take mine to-morrow?"

He was pressing her too hard. Why was he so anxious to see her, as he had not been the first night or yesterday, or even ten minutes ago? She, who, ten minutes ago, would have been glad, now was doing her best to put him off. She was silent a moment, considering the conventions, and then, like him, she abandoned them. Without a word she turned away from him. Whatever she said, he had her. But, if she said nothing and still he came to-morrow, whatever she did then, he would have to take the consequences of his insistence. Her only desire now was to evade him, lest he should force her out



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of her non-committal attitude. She wanted to shield herself from further pursuit.

She couldn't escape yet, for the figures on the stage were still gesticulating and trilling, and the people around her, in the small inclosure where she sat, hemmed her in so that she could no more move away from Kerr than if she had been that impaled specimen he had made her feel at their first meeting. The most she could do was to turn away, but even thus, with her eyes averted and her ears full of Ella's voice, she was still acutely aware of him, sitting looking straight before him across the black house with a face worn, wary, weathered to any catastrophe, and such an air of being alertly fixed on something a long way off, that her silence made no more difference to him than her flutterings and her rudeness. And yet she knew he was only waiting; waiting his chance to get at her again and make her commit herself; and that, she was determined, should not happen.

What had already happened, through its very violence, had left an impression like a dream.



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It seemed unreal, and yet it had made her forget everything else—the stage, the people around her, and even the very sapphire that had generated her inexplicable situation. She drew her glove over the ring. The lights were imminent. It would be hard to hide the great flash of the jewel. And besides, she didn't trust it. She couldn't tell in what direction it might not strike out a spark of horror next.

The rustle of final departure was all over the house. The people in the box were stirring and beginning to stand up; and Flora saw Kerr turn and look at her. She wanted some one to stand between herself and Kerr, and it was to Harry that she turned; not alone that he was so large and adequate, but because she thought she saw in him an inclination to step into that very place where she wanted him. She saw he was a little sullen, and though she didn't suspect him quite of jealousy, she wondered if he had not a right to blame her for the appearance of flirtation that she and Kerr must have presented. Then how much more might he blame her for



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what she had actually done—for deliberately showing the sapphire to Kerr! The very thought of it frightened her. She knew she was rattling to Harry all the while he fetched her cloak and put it on her, and she was glad now of that ability she had cultivated in herself of making a smooth crust of talk over her seething feelings. She talked the harder, she even took hold of Harry's arm to be sure of keeping him there between her and what she was afraid of, as they came out on the sidewalk and stood waiting in the windy night for the approach of their carriage lights.

Row upon row of street lamps flared in the traveling gusts. The midnight noises of the city were at their loudest; and half their volume seemed to be a scattered chorus of hoarse voices yelling all together like a pack of wolves. Thin, ragged shapes shot in and out among the crowd, ducked under horses' feet and cut wild zigzags across the street like flying goblins. The sense of their cry was indistinguishable, but it was the same—the same inarticulate shape of sound on every tongue. First one throat, then



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another took up the raucous singsong shout, then all together again, as if the pack were in full cry on the scent of something. What was this fresh quarry of the press, Flora wondered, that made it give tongue so hideously? The hunting note of it made her want to cover her ears, and yet she strained to catch its meaning.

She had stooped her head to the carriage door, when Harry stopped and took one of the damp papers from a crier in the pack. She saw the head-line. It covered half the sheet—the great figure that was offered for the return of the Chatworth ring.



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# IX

## ILLUMINATION

JUST when the two ideas had coalesced in her mind Flora couldn't be sure. It had been some time in the first dark hour that she had spent wide awake in her bed. There had been two ideas distinctly. Two impressions of the evening remained with her; and the last one, the great figures that had stared at her from the paper, the fact that had been Harry's secret, made common now in round numbers, had for the moment swallowed up the first.

For all the way home that sum was kept before her by Clara's talk. She could remember nothing of that talk except that it hadn't been able for a moment to leave the Chatworth ring alone. It had been aimed at Harry, but it had



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fallen to Flora herself to answer Clara's quick speculations, for Harry had been obstinately silent, though not indifferent, as if in his own mind he was as unable to leave it alone as Clara. One with his silence, one with her talk, they had written the figures of the reward so blazingly in Flora's mind that for the moment she could see nothing else. Yet now she was alone her first adventure recurred to her. As soon as she was quiet in the dark there came back with reminiscent terror the look that Kerr had given her in the box. She wasn't really afraid of Kerr himself. She was afraid of the meaning of his look which she didn't understand. It only established in her mind a great significance for the sapphire, if it could produce such an expression on a human face. It had given him more than a mere expression. It had given him an impulse for pursuit, as if, like a magnet, it was fairly dragging him. He had covered his impulse by his very frankness, but she knew he had pursued her—that for the matter of seeing her again he had hunted her down. And what



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had followed that? Why, she was back again to the great figures in the paper.

At first it seemed as though she had taken a clean leap from one subject to another. She had in no way connected them. But all at once they were connected. She couldn't separate them. She didn't know whether she had been stupid not to have seen them so before, or whether she was stupid to see them so now. For the thought that had sprung up in her mind was monstrous. It startled her so broad awake that she sat up in bed to meet it the more alertly. She sat up trembling. She felt like one who has walked a long way in a wood, hearing crafty footsteps following in the bushes. And now the beast had sprung out, and she was panting, terrified, not knowing which way to run.

The room was dark except for now and again the yellow square of light, from some passing cable car, traveling along the ceiling. The four walls around her, their dark bulks of furniture and light ripple of moving curtains, shut her up with this monster of her mind. The longer she



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looked at it the less she felt sure it was real, and yet it was before her. It was there with none of the loveliness of her first fancies about the ring. It was there with grisly reality. It had not been conjured up. It had sprung upon her from the solid actualities of the night. And, yes, of the day before—and the night before that. Oh, she had known well enough that there had been something wrong at the goldsmith's shop. She had felt it even before she had seen the sapphire; and afterward how it had held them, both herself and Harry! To have moved Harry it must be something indeed! Had he suspected it then, or had he only wondered?

If he had suspected why hadn't he spoken of it? Well, her appalling fancy prompted, hadn't he spoken of it?—though not to her. There flashed back to her the memory of him there in the back of the shop with the blue-eyed China-man. How furiously he had assailed the little man! How uneasily, with what a dissatisfied air he had looked at the ring even after it was on her finger, as if, after all, he had not compassed



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what he had wanted. She could be almost sure that the monstrous idea which had just overtaken her had, however fleetingly, flashed before Harry's mind in the goldsmith's shop. But surely he couldn't have entertained it for a moment. That was impossible, or he would never have let her take the sapphire—Harry, who had seen the ring, the very Crew Idol itself, within the twenty-four hours.

"A little heathen god curled round himself with a big blue stone on the top of his head." Harry hadn't said what sort of stone it was; but Kerr had said it was a sapphire. There was a sapphire on her hand now. She touched it with her finger-tips cautiously, as if to touch something hot. So near to her! In the same room with her! On her own hand! It was too much to be alone with in the dark! She reached out softly, as if she feared to disturb some threatening presence lurking around her, and lit the small night lamp on the low table by her bed. The shade was yellow, and that contended with the blue of the sapphire, but couldn't break its



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light. With the first flash of its splendor in her face she felt certainty threatening her. She shook the ring quickly off her finger and it fell with a light clatter on the table's marble top—fell with the sapphire face down, and all its light hidden. She took it up again a little fearfully, as if it might have got some harm; and again while she looked at it it seemed to her that nothing that happened about this jewel could be too extraordinary. If only it had been less wonderful, less beautiful, she would not have felt so terribly afraid! She put it back on the table and for a moment held her hand over it, as if she imprisoned a living thing.

Then, without looking again, she got out of bed and went to the window. It overlooked the dark steep of the garden, the moving trees and the lighter plane of the water. She leaned out, far out. Black housetops marched against the bay, and between them, light by light, her eyes followed the street-lamps down to the shore. If one could recover from such a nightmare as she had it would be by leaning out



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into and facing this wide soft dark. These shapeless roofs just below her the night made mysterious; and yet they covered people that she knew—her friends—kind, safe people! There had been nights when the city, through this very window, had seemed to her a savage place; but now the wicked fear that stood behind her—the fear that had got inside her house, that had slipped unseen through the circle of friends, that stood behind her now, filling her own room with its shadowy menace—had transformed the city into a very haven of security.

Oh, to escape out of this window into the innocent, sleeping city, away from the horror at her back! To look in from the outside and be even sure there was a horror! And if there was, to run away into the wide soft dark! But how did she know, her fantastic idea persisted, that the sapphire wouldn't follow her—the sapphire itself—the embodiment of her fear? Then she dared not be driven out.

But there was another way to be rid of it. The real idea occurred to her. How easy it



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would be to take it—that beautiful thing—and throw it; throw it as hard as she could, and let the night take care of it. The window was open, as if it stood ready, and there was the ring on the table. She went to it, looked at it a moment without touching it, holding her hands away.

Then with a little shiver she backed away from it and sat down on the foot of the bed. She looked pale and little, as if the eye of the ring, blazing under the feeble lamp, like the evil eye, had sapped her fire and youth. The only thing about her of any size and color was the heavy braid of hair fallen over her shoulder. She hugged her arms around her updrawn knees, and resting her chin upon them eyed the sapphire bravely.

"What shall I do with you?" she somberly inquired of it. "You are a dreadful thing. I don't know where you came from nor what you are, but I am afraid—I am afraid you are—" She hesitated. The sapphire lay shining like some idol set up for worship, and in spite of herself its beauty moved her, if not to worship, at least to awe and fear.



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"I suppose you know I can't throw you away," she murmured, "and yet I can't keep you!" She pondered, chin in hand. To take it to Harry! That seemed the natural thing to do—the simplest way to be rid of it. She hesitated.

"If I only *knew!* If I only were sure!" She locked her fingers closer, staring hard. If it had been the whole Crew Idol, the undismembered god himself, then there would have been less terror, and one plain thing to do. She looked hard at the sapphire setting, as if she hoped to discover upon its brilliance some tell-tale trace of old soft gold; but there was only one great, glassy, polished eye, and out of what head it had come, whether from the forehead of the Crew Idol, or from that of some unheralded deity, who was there who could tell her?

She tried to summon a coherent thought, but again it was only a flash out of the darkness.

"Kerr! Why, he knows more than I." She looked at this stupidly for a moment as if it were too large to take in at once. Of course he must have known! Why hadn't she thought of



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that before? Why hadn't she thought of it that first moment, when he had turned on her in the box with such terrible eyes? She drew in her shoulders, looking all around at the dim corners of the room which the lamp flame failed to penetrate. Behind her present lively fear a second shadow was growing, more dim, more formless, more vast and dubious.

What series of circumstances might have led up to Kerr's knowledge she could not dream. He was one of whom nothing was incredible. From the first moment his face had shot into the light, from the moment she had heard his voice, like color in the level voices around him, she had been bewildered by his variety. He had caught her up to the clouds. He had whirled her along dubious levels, and more than once he had shown her that the lines she had supposed drawn so sharply between this and that could no more be discerned than meridians on green earth.

If she had noticed any earnestness in him, it was his relish, his gusto for the whole of life. He had no theory to set up. Just as it was he



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took it. If he persisted in requiring people to be themselves it was for no good to themselves, but for the pleasure he himself got out of it. If he made society into a little ball, and threw it away, it was only to show it could be done.

And where, she asked herself in a summing up, might such a man not be found? But there were few places, indeed, in even the broadest plain of possibility, which could hold knowledge of so particular and piercing a quality as his look had implied. There had been so much more than curiosity or surprise in it. She could hardly face the memory of it, so cruelly it had struck her. There was no doubt in her mind that Kerr had seen the ring. Somewhere in the pageant of his experience he had met it, known it—but what he wanted of it—

She broke off that thought, and looked long at the little flame of the lamp. It was strange, but there was no doubt in her mind but that he wanted it. That had been the strongest thing in his look. She felt herself picking her way along a very narrow path, one step over either



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edge of which would plunge her chasms deep. Now she snatched at a frail sapling to save herself. The fact that Kerr knew her stone didn't prove it belonged to the Crew Idol. And if it didn't—if it wasn't the crown of the heathen god, then her whole dreadful supposition fell to pieces. But she hadn't proved it and the simplest way was just to ask Kerr. Her chance for that was the chance he had fought so hard for, the chance of their meeting the next day.

She hadn't wanted that meeting when he had first asked her for it in the box. She had feared it then, and all the more she feared it now, because now she would have to do more than defend herself. She would take the offensive; she would make the attack, now that she had a question to ask. Why should the thought of it frighten her? If this was not the Crew sapphire she would be no worse off than she had been. If it was, her course would be clear. It seemed it should be simple, it should be easy to face Kerr with her question; but she was possessed by the apprehension that it would be neither. Would



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the question she had to ask be a safe thing to give him? And if she dared undertake it and should be overpowered after all—then everything would be lost.

What the "everything" was she feared to lose would not come clear to her. The only thing that did emerge definitely from the agitation of her mind was the knowledge that this question that had been thrust upon her made it tenfold more difficult to meet Kerr. And yet, to refuse to meet him now would be as cowardly as throwing the ring out of the window.



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# X

## A LADY UNVEILED

SHE wakened in the morning to some one knocking. She thought the sound had been going on for a long time, but, now she was finally roused, it had stopped. This was odd, for no one came to her in the morning except Marrika, and it was tiresome to be thus imperatively beset before she was half awake. Now the knocking came again with a level, unimpatient repetition, and she called, "Come in!" at which Clara, in a pale morning gown, promptly entered—an apparition as cool and smooth and burnished as if she had spent the night, like a French doll, in tissue paper.

Clara's coming in in the morning was an unheard-of thing. Flora was taken aback.

"Why, Clara!" She was blank with astonish-



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ment. She sat up, flushed and tumbled, and still blinking. "I hope I didn't keep you knocking long."

"Oh, no, indeed; only three taps." Clara looked straight through Flora's astonishment, as if there had been no such thing in evidence. She drew up a chair and sat down beside the bed. It was a rocking-chair, but it did not sway with her calm poise. In the fine finish of her morning attire, with her hands placidly folded on her knee, she made Flora feel taken at a disadvantage, thus scarcely awake, disheveled and all but stripped. But Clara, if she looked at anything but Flora's eyes, looked only at her hands, one and then the other as they lay upon the coverlet.

"It isn't so very late," she said, "but I have ordered your breakfast. I thought you would want it if you had that ten-o'clock appointment; and there is something I want to ask you before you go out." Flora was conscious of a little apprehension. "It's about that place you talked of taking for the summer." She felt vaguely relieved, though she had had no actual grounds for



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anticipating an awkward question. "I came upon something in the oddest way you can imagine," Clara pursued her subject. "Had you any idea the Herricks were in straits?"

"The young Herricks?"

"Oh, no! The old Herricks, *the* Herricks, Mrs. Herrick whom you so much admire! Of course, one isn't told; but they must be, to be willing to let the old place."

"Not the San Mateo place?" said Flora, with a stir of interest. She felt as astonished as if some Confucian fanatic had set up his joss at auction.

Clara complacently nodded.

"Mrs. Herrick spoke to me herself. They don't want any publicity about it, but she had heard that we were looking, and she did me the favor"—Clara smiled a little dryly—"of telling me first."

Flora looked reflective. "I've never seen it, but they say it's beautiful."

"It is, in a way," Clara grudgingly admitted, "but it isn't new; and the ridiculous part is that



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she will let it only on condition that it shall not be done over. It is in sufficiently good shape, but it stands now just as Colonel Herrick furnished it forty years ago."

"Why, I should love that!" Flora frankly confessed, and gave a wistful glance at the walls around her, wondering how long before the soft, dark bloom of time, of use and wont, should descend on their crude faces.

"Well," Clara conceded, "at any rate we know it's genuine, and that's a consolation. The number of imitations going about and the way people pick them up is appalling! While I was getting that rug for you at Vigo's yesterday, Ella Buller came in and bought three imitation Bokharas, with the greatest enthusiasm. She buys quantities, and she's always taken in. It is enough to make one nervous about the people one sits next to at dinner there. One can not help suspecting them of being some of Ella's bargains. I wonder, now, where she picked up that Kerr."

This finale failed to take Flora off her guard.



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"At any rate, he is odd enough to be genuine," she said with a gleam of malice.

"Oh, no doubt of that," Clara mildly assented, "but genuine what?"

"Why, gentleman at large," said Flora, and quickly wanted to recall it, for Clara's glance seemed to give it a double significance. "I mean," she added, "just one of those chronic travelers who have nothing else to do, and whose way must be paved with letters of introduction" —she floundered. "At least, that was the idea he gave of himself." She broke off, doubly angry that she had tried to explain Kerr, and tried to explain herself, when the circumstances required nothing of the sort. She was sure Clara had not missed her nervousness, though Clara made no sign. Her eyes only traveled a second time to Flora's hands, as if among the flare of red and white jewels she was expecting to see another color. To Flora's palpitating consciousness this look made a perfect connection with Clara's next remark.

"At least his manners are odd enough! There



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was a minute last night when he was really quite startling."

Flora felt a small, warm spot of color increasing in the middle of each cheek. She drew a long breath, as if to draw in courage. Then Clara had really seen! That smooth, blindish look of hers, last night, had seen everything! And here she was owning up to it, and affably offering herself as a confidante; and for what reason under the sun unless to find out what it was that had so startled Kerr? Flora felt like crying out, "If you only knew what that thing may be, you would never want to come nearer to it!"

"I am afraid he annoyed you, Flora."

The girl looked into the kindly solicitude of Clara's face with a hard, almost passionate incredulity. Was that really all Clara had supposed?

"These Continentals," she went on, now lightly swaying to and fro in her chair, "have singular notions of American women. They take us for savages, my dear."

"Then isn't it for us to show them that we are



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more than usually civilized? I can't run away from him like a frightened little native."

"Of course not; but that is where I come in; it's what I'm for—to get rid of such things for you." That small, cool smile made Flora feel more than ever the immature barbarian of her simile. Clara sat throwing the protection of her superior knowledge and capability around her, like a missionary garment; but Flora could have laughed with relief. Then Clara merely supposed Kerr had been impertinent. Her little invasion had been really nothing but pure kindness and protection; and Flora couldn't but feel grateful for it. Last night she had thought herself so absolutely alone; and here was a friend coming forward again, and stepping between her and the thing above all others she was helpless about—the real world.

Clara had risen, and stood considering a moment with that same sweet, impersonal eye which Flora found it hardest to comprehend.

"What I mean," she explicitly stated, "is that if he should undertake to carry out his prepos-



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terous suggestion, and call this afternoon, I am quite ready, if you wish, to take him off your hands."

This last took Flora's breath away. It had not occurred to her that Clara had overheard. It shocked her, frightened her; and yet Clara's way of stating the fact, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, made Flora feel that she herself was in the wrong to feel thus. For, after all, Clara had been most tactful, most considerate and delicate in conveying her knowledge, not hinting that Flora could have been in the slightest degree responsible for Kerr's behavior; but simply sweetly taking it for granted that they, of course, were banded together to exclude this outlander. Under her sense of obligation, and what she felt ought to be gratitude, Flora floundered for words.

"You're very kind," she managed to get out; and that seemed to leave her committed to hand Kerr over, tied hand and foot, when she wasn't at all sure she wanted to.

"Then shall I tell Mrs. Herrick that you will



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consider the house?" said Clara, already in the act of departure. "She is to call to-day to go into it with me more thoroughly. Thus far we've only played about the edges."

Her eyes strayed toward the dressing-table as she passed it, and as she reached the door she glanced over the chiffonier. It was on the tip of Flora's tongue to ask if she had mislaid something, when Clara turned and smiled her small, tight-curled smile, as if she were offering it as a symbol of mutual understanding. Curiously enough, it checked Flora's query about the straying glances, and made her wonder that this was the first time in their relation that she had thought Clara sweet.

But there was another quality in Clara she did not lose sight of, and she waited for the closing of a door further down the hall before she drew the sapphire from under her pillow.

With the knocking at the door her first act had been to thrust it there. The feeling that it was going to be hard to hide was still her strongest instinct about it; but the morning had dis-



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sipated the element of the supernatural and the horrid that it had shown her the night before. It seemed to have a clearer and a simpler beauty; and the hope revived in her that its beauty, after all, was the only remarkable thing about it.

Her conviction of the night before had sunk to a shadowy hypothesis. She knew nothing—nothing that would justify her in taking any step; and her only chance of knowing more lay in what she would get out of Kerr; for that he knew more about her ring than she, she was convinced. She was afraid of him, yet, in spite of her fear, she had no intention of handing him over to Clara. For on reflection she knew that Clara's offer must have a deeper motive than mere kindness, and she had a most unreasonable feeling that it would not be safe. She felt a little guilty to have seemed to take her companion's help, while she left her so much at sea as to the real facts. But, after all, it was Clara who had forced the issue.

She thought a good deal about Clara while



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she was dressing. A good many times lately she had looked forward to the fall, the time of her marriage, when their rather tense relationship would be ended. This house in the country, which was to be her last little bachelor fling, was to be Clara's last commission for her.

Think how she would, she could but feel as if she were ungratefully abandoning Clara. Clara had done so well by her in their three years together! There surely must be immediately forthcoming for such a remarkable person another large opportunity, and yet she couldn't help recalling their first encounter in the particularly dull boarding-house where Clara was temporarily shelved; where, nevertheless, she had not conceded an inch of her class, nor a ray of her luster to circumstance. This surprising luster was the gloss of her body, the quality of her clothes and accessories, the way she traveled and the way she smiled. It was the bloom of luxury she kept about her person through all her varying surroundings. She had



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never to rise to the level of a new position; she was there already; and she never came down.

Flora knew it was for just her air of being ready that she had trusted Clara, and for the three years of their association she had never failed to find her companion ready wherever their common interests were concerned. She had no reason for not trusting Clara now, except the knowledge that, by her own approaching marriage, their interests would be separated, and her feeling that Clara's prudence must already be by way of looking out for itself alone.

Yet Clara would do a kindness if it did not inconvenience her, and surely this morning she had been kind. Still Flora felt she didn't want to reveal anything until she was a little surer of her own position. When she knew better where she stood she would know what she could confide to Clara. Meanwhile, if there was any one to whom she could turn now it would surely be Harry.

Yet, if she did, what a lot of awkward explanations! She could not return the sapphire



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without giving a reason, and what a thing to explain—that she had not only worn it, but, in a freak, shown it to the one of all people he most objected to.

Nevertheless the most sensible thing clearly was to go through with it and confess to Harry. Then she must communicate with him at once. No—she would wait until after breakfast. There was plenty of time. Kerr would not come until the afternoon. But after breakfast, she wondered if it wouldn't be as well to ring him up at luncheon time? Then she would be sure of finding him at the club.

Meanwhile she dared not let the sapphire out of her grasp; and yet she could not wear it on her hand. She had thought of the tear-shaped pouch of gold which it was her custom to wear; but the slender length of chain that linked it to her neck was too frail for such a precious weight. At last she had fastened it around her neck on the strongest chain she owned, and thus she carried it all the morning under her bodice with a quieter mind than had been hers on the first day



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she had worn it, when there had been nothing to explain her uneasiness.

She was quite sure she was going to give back the sapphire to Harry, yet she couldn't help picturing to herself what her meeting with Kerr would have been, supposing she had decided differently. As the morning slipped by she found herself doubting that he would come at all. Her attitude of the night before had surely been enough to discourage any one. Yet if he didn't come she knew that she would be disappointed.

She was alone at luncheon, and in a dream. She glanced now and then at the clock. She rose only ten minutes before the hour that Harry was in the habit of leaving the club. She went upstairs slowly and stopped in front of the telephone. She touched the receiver, drew her hand back and turned away. She shut the door of her own rooms smartly after her.

She did not try to—because she couldn't—understand her own proceeding. She merely sat, listening, as it seemed to her, for hours.

But when at last Kerr's card was handed in



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to her, it gave her a shock, as if something which couldn't happen, and yet which she had all along expected, had come to pass.

In her instant of indecision Marrika had got away from her, but she called the girl back from the door and told her to say to Mrs. Britton that Mr. Kerr had called, but that Miss Gilsey would see him herself.

She started with a rush. Half-way down the stairs she stopped, horrified to find what her fingers were doing. They were closed around the little lump that the ring made in the bosom of her gown, and she had not known it. What if she had rushed in to Kerr with this extraordinary manifestation? What if, while she was talking to him, her hand should continue to creep up again and yet again to that place, and close around the jewel, and make it evident, even in its hiding-place? The time had come when she must even hide it from herself. And yet, to creep back up the stair when she made sure Kerr must have heard her tumultuous downward rush! It would never do to soundlessly retreat. She must



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go back boldly, as if she had forgotten nothing more considerable than a pocket handkerchief.

Yet before she reached the top again she found herself going tiptoe, as if she were on an expedition so secret that her own ears should not hear her footsteps. But she went direct and unhesitating. It had come to her all in a flash where she would put the sapphire. The little buttoned pocket of her bath-robe. There it hung in the bath-room on one unvarying peg, the most immovable of all her garments, safe from the excursions of Marrika's needle or brushes, not to be disturbed for hours to come.

She passed through her bedroom, through her dressing-room into the bath-room. The robe was hanging behind the door. It took her a moment to draw out the ring and disentangle its chain, and while she was doing this she became aware of movings to and fro in her bedroom. She drew the door half open, the better to conceal herself behind it, and at the same time, through the widened crack of the jamb, to keep an eye on the dressing-room, and hurried lest



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Marrika should surprise her. But nevertheless she had barely slipped the ring into the little pocket and refastened the flap, when Clara opened the bedroom door and stood looking into the dressing-room.

Flora experienced a sharp start of surprise, and then of wonder. Here was Clara again seeking her out! Here she stood, brushed and polished, and finished to a pitch of virtue, again taking Flora at a disadvantage, hiding behind her own door. But at the least she was grateful that Clara had not seen her. She stood a minute collecting herself. She wasn't doing anything she need be ashamed of, or that she need explain, or that need even awaken suspicion. But before she could take her courage in both hands and come out of her retreat, Clara had reached the middle of the dressing-room, and stood still.

Her lifted veil made a fine mist above the luster of her eyes. She was perfect to the tips of her immaculate white gloves, and she wore the simple, sober look of a person who thinks himself alone. Then it wasn't Flora, Clara was



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looking for! She was looking all around—over the surface of every object in the room. Presently she went up to the dressing-table. She laid her gloved hands upon it, and looked at the small objects strewn over its top. She took a step backward and opened the top drawer. She reached into it, and delicately explored.

Flora could see the white gloves going to and fro among her white handkerchiefs, could see them find, open and examine the contents of her jewel-box. And the only thing that kept her from shrieking out was the feeling that this abominable thing which was being enacted before her eyes couldn't be a fact at all.

Clara took out an old pocket-book, shiny with years, shook from it a shower of receipts, newspaper clippings, verses. She let them lie. She took out a long violet box with a perfumer's seal upon it. It held a bunch of dried violets. She took out a bonbonnière of gold filigree. It was empty. A powder box, a glove box, a froth of lace, a handful of jewelers' boxes, a jewel flung loose into the drawer. This she pounced upon.



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It was a brooch! She let it fall—turned to the chiffonier; upended the two vases of Venetian glass, lifted the lids of jars and boxes, finally came to the drawers. One by one she took them out, turned the contents of each rapidly over, and left them standing, gaping white ruffles and lace upon the floor. She took up daintily, in her white kid fingers, slippers, shook them upside down. She opened the door of the closet, and disappeared within. There was audible the flutterings of all the distressed garments, with little busy pauses. Then Clara came out, with her hat a little crooked; and stood in the middle of the room still with her absorbed and sober face, looking over the gaping drawers, pulled out and rifled, with their contents heaped up and streaming over the floor.

Her eye fell upon the waste basket. She turned it upside down, and stooped over the litter. She gathered it up in her white gloves and dropped it back. Then, for the first time, she glanced at the bath-room door; stood looking at it, as if it had occurred to her to look in the



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soap dish. Then she turned again to the room, to the dressing-table. She put back the pasteboard jewelers' boxes, the jeweled pin, the laces, which she shook out and folded daintily, the glove and powder boxes, the gold bonbonnière, the long violet box, the leather pocket-book,—each deftly and unhesitatingly in the place from which she had taken it, and all the heaps of white handkerchiefs.

One by one she laid back in the chiffonier drawers, the garments, properly and neatly folded, that she had so hastily snatched out of them. The sun, streaming full into the room, caught gleams in her pale hair, and struck blindingly upon the heaps of white around her, and made two dazzling points of her gloved hands that moved as deftly as hands uncovered. She slid back the last drawer into the chiffonier, and rose from her knees, lightly dusting off the front of her gown; went to the closet door and closed it. She stood before it a moment with a face perplexed and thoughtful, then turned alertly toward the outer door. As she passed the



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mirror she looked into it, and touched her hat straight again, but the action was subconscious. Clara wasn't thinking of it.

Flora stood as if she were afraid to move, while Clara crossed her bedroom, stopped, went on and closed the outer door behind her. And even after that soft little concussion she stood still, burning, choking, struggling with the overwhelming force of an affront whose import she did not yet realize. Out in her sunny dressing-room all the outraged furniture stood meek and in order, frauding the eye to believe that nothing had happened! She felt she couldn't look things in the face a moment longer. She hid her face in the folds of her dressing-gown.

Why, she had thought that such things couldn't happen! She had thought that people's private belongings, like their persons, were inviolable. They all always talked, she had talked, about such things as if they were mere nothings. They had talked about the very taking of the Crew Idol as if it were a splendid joke! But she had not dreamed what such things were like



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when they were near. When they were held up to you naked they were like this! In the shame of it she could no more have faced Clara than if she had surprised Clara naked.

She snatched the ring out of the pocket of her gown and clutched it in her hand. Was there no place in the world where she could be sure of safety for this?

With trembling fingers she fastened it again to the chain about her neck. She thought of Kerr down-stairs waiting for her. Well, she would rather keep it with her. Then, at least, she would know when it was taken from her. Still in the fury of her outraged faith, she passed through her violated rooms, and slowly along the hall and down the stairs.



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# XI

## THE MYSTERY TAKES HUMAN FORM

HE turned from the window where he had presented a long, drooping, patient back, and his warm, ironic mirth —the same that had played with her the first night—flashed out at sight of her. But after a moment another expression mixed with it, sharpened it, and fastened upon her with an incredulous intentness.

She stood on the threshold, pale, and brilliant still in her blaze of anger, equal, at last, to anything. Kerr, as he signaled to her with every lineament of his enlivened face, his interest, his defiance, his uncontrollability, was not the man of her imaginary conversations. He was not here to be used and disposed of; but, as he came



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toward her, the new admiration in his face was bringing her reassurance that neither was she. The thought that her moment of bitter incredulity had made her formidable gave her courage to fight even him, of whom she was so much in awe; gave her courage even to smile, though she grew hot at the first words he spoke.

"You should not be brave and then run away, you know."

She thought of her rush up the stairs again. "I had to go back to see Mrs. Britton." (Oh, how she had seen her!)

It seemed to Flora that everything she had been through in the last few moments was blazoned on her face. But he only looked a little more gravely at her, though his sardonic eyebrow twitched.

"Ah, I thought you only ran back to hide in your doll's house."

She laughed. Such a picture of her!

"Well, at any rate, now I've come out, what have you to say to me?"

"Now you've come out," he repeated, and



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looked at her this time with full gravity, as if he realized finally how far she'd come.

She had taken the chair in the light of the eastern windows. She lay back in the cushions, her head a little bent, her hands interlaced with a perfect imitation of quietude. The dull satin of her slender foot was the only motion about her, but the long, slow rise and fall of her breath was just too deep-drawn for repose.

He looked down upon her from his height.

"I'm sorry I frightened you last night," he said, "but I'm not sorry I came, since you've seen me. You needn't have, you know, if you didn't want to. You could have stayed in the doll's house; and there, I suppose, you think I should never have found you—or *it* again?"

He was silent a moment, leaning on the chair opposite, watching her with knitted forehead, while her apprehension fluttered for what he should do next. He had done away with all the amenities of meeting and attacked his point with a directness that took her breath.

"You know what I've come for," he said, "but



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now I'm here, now that I see you, I wonder if there's something I haven't reckoned on." He looked at her earnestly. "If you think I've taken advantage of you—if you say so—I'll go away, and give you a chance to think it over."

It would have been so easy to have nodded him out, but instead she half put out her hand toward him. "No; stay."

He gave her a quick look—surprise and approbation at her courage. He dropped into a chair. "Then tell me about it."

Flora's heart went quick and little. She held herself very still, afraid in her intense consciousness lest her slightest movement might betray her. She only moved her eyes to look up at him questioningly, suspending acknowledgment of what he meant until he should further commit himself.

"I mean the sapphire," he said. He waited.

"Yes," she answered coolly. "I saw that it interested you last night, but I couldn't think especially why. It's a beautiful stone."

He laughed without a sound—shook noise-



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lessly for a minute. "Meaning that a gentleman shouldn't pounce upon any beautiful stone he may happen to see?" He got up and moved about restlessly in the little space between their two chairs. "Quite so; lay it to my being more than a gentleman; lay it to my being a crack-brained enthusiast, a confounded beauty worshiper, a vicious curio dealer, an ill-mannered ass! But"—and he flashed around at her with a snap of his nervous fingers—"where did you get it?"

For the life of her she couldn't help her wave of color, but through it all she clung to her festal smile. Sheer nervousness made it easy.

"Well, suppose it was begged, borrowed, or—given to me? Suppose it came from here or far away yonder? What's that to do with its beauty?" She gave him question for question. "Did you ever see it before?"

He never left off looking at her, looking at her with a hard inquiry, as if she were some simple puzzle that he unaccountably failed to solve.



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"That's rather neat, the way you dodge me," he said, dodging in his turn. "But I don't see it *now*. You're not wearing it?"

She played indifference with what a beating heart! "Oh, I only wear it off and on."

"Off and on!" His voice suddenly rang at her. "Off and on! Why, my good woman, it's just two days you could have worn it at all!"

She stood up—stood facing him. For a moment she knew nothing except that her horrible idea was a fact. She had the eye of the Crew Idol, and this man knew it! Yet the fact declared gave her courage. She could face his accusal if only he could give the reason for it. But after a moment, while they looked silently at each other, she saw he was not accusing her. He was threatening her and beseeching her indulgence in the same look. He opened his lips, hesitated, turned sharp about and walked away from her.

She watched him with increasing doubt. After saying so much, was he going to say nothing more? She had a feeling that she had not heard



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the worst yet, and when he turned back to her from the other end of the room there was something so haggard, so harassed, so fairly guilty about him that if she had ever thought of telling him the truth of how she came by the ring she put it away from her now.

But beneath his distress she recognized a desperate earnestness. There was something he wanted at any cost, but he was going to be gentle with her. She had felt before the potentiality of his gentleness, and she doubted her power to resist it. She fanned up all the flame of anger that had swept her into the room. She reminded herself that the greatest gentleness might only be a blind; that there was nothing stronger than wanting something very much, and that the protection of the jewel was very thin. But when he stood beside her she realized he held a stronger weapon against her than his gentleness, something apart from his intention. She felt that in whatever circumstance, at whatever time she should meet him he would make her feel thus—hot and cold, and happy for the



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mere presence of his body beside her. In a confusion she heard what he was saying.

He was speaking, almost coaxingly, as if to a child. "I understand," he was saying. "I know all about it. It's a mistake. But surely you don't expect to keep it now. It will only be an annoyance to you."

She turned on him. "What could it be to you?"

Kerr, planted before her, with his head dropped, looked, looked, looked, as if he gave silence leave to answer for him what it would. It answered with a hundred echoes ringing up to her from long corridors of conjecture, half-articulated words breathing of how extraordinary the answer must be that he did not dare to make. He looked her up and down carefully, impersonally, with that air he had of regarding a rare specimen, thoughtfully; as if he weighed such ephemeral substance as chance.

"What will you take for it?" he said at last.

She was silent. With a sick distrust it came



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to her that it was the very worst thing he could have said after that speaking silence.

She stepped away from him. "This thing is not for sale."

He stared at her with amazement; then threw back his head and laughed as if something had amused him above all tragedy.

"You are an extraordinary creature," he said, "but really I must have it. I can't explain the why of it; only give the sapphire to me, and you'll never be sorry for having done that for me. Whatever happens, you may be sure I won't talk. Even if the thing comes out, you shan't be mixed up in it." He had come near her again, and the point of his long forefinger rested on her arm. She was motionless, overwhelmed with pure terror, with despair. He was smiling, but there was a desperate something about him, stronger than the common desire of possession, terrifying in its intensity. She looked behind her. The thick glass of the window was there, a glimpse of the empty street and the figure of a



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woman in a blowing green veil turning the corner.

"Why not give it to me now," he urged, "since, of course, you can't keep it? I could have it now in spite of you."

Everything in her sprang up in antagonism to meet him. "I know what you are," she cried, "but you shan't have it. You have no more right to it than I. You can't get it away from me, and I shan't give it to you."

He had grown suddenly paler; his eyes were dancing, fastened upon her breast. His long hands closed and opened. She looked down, arrested at the sight of her hand clenched just where her breath was shortest, over the sapphire's hiding-place.

He smiled. How easily she had betrayed herself! But she abated not a jot of her defiance, challenging him, now he knew its hiding-place, to take the sapphire if he could. But he did not move. And it came to her then that she had been ridiculous to think for an instant that this man would take anything from her by



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force. What she had to fear was his will at work upon hers, his persuasion, his ingenuity. She thought of the purple irises, and how he had drawn them toward him in the crook of his cane—and her dread was lest he meant to overcome her with some subtlety she could not combat. For that he was secret, that he was daring, that he was fearless beyond belief, he showed her all too plainly, since here he stood, condemned by his own evidence, alone, in the midst of her household, within call of her servants, and had the sublime effrontery to look at her with admiration, and, it occurred to her, even with a little pity.

The click of a moving latch brought his eyes from hers to the door.

"Some one is coming in," he said in a guarded voice. It warned her that her face showed too much, but she could not hope to recover her composure. She hardly wanted to. She was in a state to fancy that a secret could be kept by main force; and she turned without abatement of her reckless mood and took her hand from



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where she had held it clenched upon her breast and stretched it out to Mrs. Herrick.

The lady had stood in the doorway a moment—a long-featured, whitish, modeled face, draped in a dull green veil, a tall figure whose flowing skirts of black melted away into the background of the hall—before she came forward and met her hostess' hand with a clasp firm and ready.

"I'm so glad to find you here," she said. She looked directly into Flora's eyes, into the very center of her agitation. She held her tremulous hand as if neither of these manifestations surprised her; as if a young woman and a young man in colloquy might often be found in such a state of mind.

Flora's first emotion was a guilty relief that, after all, her face had not betrayed Kerr. But she had no sooner murmured his name to Mrs. Herrick, no sooner had that lady's gray eyes lighted upon him, than they altered their clear confidence. The situation as reflected in Flora looked naïve enough, but there was nothing



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naïve about Kerr. The very perfection of his coolness, there in the face of her burning agitation, was appalling. Oh, why couldn't he see, Flora thought wildly, how it was damning him —how it was showing him so practised, so marvelously equal to any emergency, that his presence here among fleeces could be nothing less than wolfish?

Mrs. Herrick's face was taking on an expression no less than wary. What he was, Mrs. Herrick could not dream. She could not even suspect what Flora believed. But in the light of her terrible discovery Flora dared not have him suspected at all. The chasms of distrust and suspicion that had been opening between them she forgot. In a flash she was ready to throw herself in front of this man, to cover him from suspicion, even though by so doing she took it upon herself.

Now, if she had ever in her life, she talked over the top of her feelings; and though at first to her ears her voice rang out horribly alone, presently Mrs. Herrick was helping her,



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adding words to words. It was the house they spoke of, the San Mateo house, the subject about which Flora knew Mrs. Herrick had come to talk; but to Flora it was no longer a subject. It was a barrier, a shield. In this emergency it was the only subject large enough to fill the gap, and much as Flora had liked the idea of it, she had never built the house so large, so vivid, so wonderfully towering to please her fancy as she was doing now to cover Kerr. With questions she led Mrs. Herrick on to spin out the subject, to play it over with lights and shades, to beat all around it. And all the while she knew that Kerr was watching her; watching her once again in dubious admiration. It was a look that made Mrs. Herrick seem ready at a movement of his to lay her hand on Flora in protection.

The lady's clear gray eyes traveled between Flora's face and his. Under their steady light there was a strange alertness, as if she sat there ready enough to avert whatever threatened, but anxious to draw her skirts aside from it, dis-



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trusting the quality, hating to have come in upon anything so dubious. When the hall door opened and closed she listened as if for a deliverer; and when Clara appeared between the portières she turned to her and met her with a flash of relief, as if here at last was a safe quantity. Clara was still wearing her hat, with the veil pushed up in a little mist above her eyes, and still had her white gloves on. The sight of Mrs. Herrick's hand soliciting the clasp of those gave Flora a curious sensation.

She looked from one face to another, and last at Kerr's. She shut her eyes an instant. Here was a thief. He was standing in her drawing-room now. She had been talking with him. She opened her eyes. The fact acknowledged had not altered the color of daylight. It was strange that things—furniture and walls and landscape—should remain so stolidly the same when such a thing had happened to her! For she had not only spoken with a thief, but she had shielded him. It struck her grotesquely that perhaps Mrs. Herrick's instinct was right,



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after all. Wasn't Clara the safest of the lot? Clara at least kept her gloves on, while she herself was shamelessly arrayed on the side of disorder. She was clinging to a piece of property that wasn't hers, and whatever way she dressed her motives they looked too much of a piece with the operations of the original miscreant.

Flora saw the evil spirit of tragic-comedy. He fairly grinned at her.



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# XII

## DISENCHANTMENT

THEN this was the end of all romance? She must turn her back on the charm, the power, the spell that had been wrought around her, and, horror-struck, pry into her own mind to discover what lawless thing could be in her to have drawn her to such a person, and to keep her, even now that she knew the worst, unwilling to relinquish the thought of him. His depravity loomed to her enormous; but was that all there was to be said of him? Did his delicacy, his insight, his tempered fineness, count for nothing beside it? Must their talks, their walking through the trees, the very memory of his voice, be lost inspiration?

She couldn't believe that this one spot could



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make him rotten throughout. Her mind ran back into the past. She could not recall a word, an action, or a glance of his that had shown the color of decay. He had not even been insincere with her. He had come out with his convictions so flatly that when she thought of it his nonchalance appalled her. He had been the same then that he was now. But the thing that was natural for him was impossible for her, and she had found it out—that was all.

Yet the mere consideration of him and his obsession as one thing was intolerable. She curiously separated his act from himself. She thought of it, not as a part of him, but as something that had invaded him—a disease —something inimical to himself and others, that mixed the thought of him with terrors, and filled her way with difficulties. Now it was no longer a question of how to meet him, but of how she was not to. It was not his strength she feared, but her own weakness where he was concerned. Her tendency to shield him—she must guard against that—and that disturbing



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influence he exercised over her, too evidently without intention. But he would be hard to avoid. This way and that she looked for a way out of her danger, yet all the while she was conscious that there was but one plain way of escape open to her. She could give the sapphire back to Harry within the twenty-four hours.



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# XIII

## THRUST AND PARRY

My Dear Flora—I am going out early and shall not be back to dinner. Clara.

FLORA let the little note fall as if she disliked the touch of it. She was relieved to think she would not have to see Clara that day. It was her desire never to see Clara again. If only they could part here and now! How she wanted to shake the whole thing off her shoulders! How foolish not to have gone to Harry when she had first made up her mind to! For why, after all, make him any explanations? Suppose she should just take the ring to him and say: "It gives me the shivers, Harry. Let's take it back and get something else." If he didn't suspect the sapphire already, he would never suspect it



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from that. The worst he could do would be to laugh, to tease, to tell her she could not live up to her own romantic notions, since, after all, she had weakened and was wanting the usual thing.

But there had been times when she had thought that he did suspect the sapphire. Well, if he did, giving it back to him would practically be giving it back into public custody in the most decorous manner for a properly bred young woman. And how beautifully it would extricate her from her wretched situation! Logically, there was no fault to be found with such a course. It was eminently sane and safe. Yet it still appeared to her as if she were acting a coward's part. She was neither frankly giving the jewel to the authorities with the proper information, nor frankly handing it over to Kerr. But she was trying to slip it back into the questionable nook from which it had been taken, and she grew hot at the thought of how Kerr would despise her if he knew the craven course she was meditating. She seemed to hear



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him saying, "I had thought braver things of you."

Of course, that was his way of expecting that she would give him the ring. And she felt a sort of rage against him that he should want that, and only that, so very much. Yet she didn't know what else she wanted him to want. Every time she thought of Kerr she found herself growing unreasonable; and she had to whip up her resolution with the hard facts of the case to prevent herself from drifting over on to his side completely.

But did she really want Harry to rid her of the ring? She would get hold of him first and then she would see what she would do.

She stepped into the hall with all the confidence of one who has fully made up her mind to carry matters with a high hand; but at the telephone she hesitated. Calling him up at such an hour of the morning demanding his attendance on such a fanciful errand—wouldn't he think it odd? No, he would think it the most natural thing in the world for her to be so



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flighty. Reassured, she gave the club number and stood waiting, listening to the half-syllables of switched-off voices and the crossing click, click, that was bringing her fate nearer to her. She heard some one coming up the stairs and down the hall toward her. Marrika stood stolid at her elbow.

"Mr. Cressy," she pronounced.

"Yes, yes," said Flora, with the club clamoring in her left ear.

"He is down-stairs," said Marrika.

Flora nearly let the receiver fall. Harry here? What a piece of luck! But here on his own account, at such an hour—how extraordinary!

"Hello, hello," persisted the club. "What's wanted?"

"Why, I—" Flora stammered. "It's a mistake; never mind. I don't want him now." She hoped that Harry had not heard her as he came in, since it was his informal fashion to await her in the large entrance hall. She didn't want to spoil the chance he had given her of



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seeming offhand about the ring. But the hall was empty, and as she descended the stairs she amused herself with the fancy that Shima had had a vision, and that she would still have to ring up the club and explain to the attendant that, after all, she wanted Mr. Cressy.

Then from the drawing-room threshold she caught sight of Harry standing in the big bay window of the drawing-room, in the same spot where Kerr had awaited her the afternoon before. Harry was tall and large and freshly colored, and yet he did not fill the room to her as the other man had done. He met her, kissed her, and she turned her head so that his lips met her cheek close beside her ear. She did not positively object to his kissing her on the lips, but her instinct was strong to offer him her cheek. He had sometimes laughed at this, but now he resented it. He insisted on his privilege, and she was passive to him, conscious of less love in this than assertion of possession.

"You are not going to Burlingame, are you?" she asked him with her first breath.



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He looked down at her with a flushed and sulky air. "What difference would that make to you? I am, as it happens, but I suppose you think that's no reason for disturbing you so early." He was angry, but at what, she wondered, with creeping uneasiness. He held her and caressed her with a morose satisfaction, as if he had to make sure to himself that she was really his, and she permitted it and abetted it with a guile that astonished her.

"What is the matter?" she urged. "Are things going crookedly at Burlingame?"

"Things are going as crooked as you please, but not at Burlingame. Sit over there," he said, nodding toward the window-bench; "I want to talk to you."

Harry had the air of one about to scold, and certainly Flora thought if anybody was carrying matters with a high hand, it wasn't herself; but she didn't follow his direction. She continued to stand, while he, sitting on the table's edge, drumming the top of his hat, gloomily regarded her.



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"Well?" she persisted, troubled by this look of his, and this silence.

"Look here," he began, "I have to be away a couple of days and I wish you'd do me a favor."

Flora's thought flew to the ring. Was he going to ask for it back, to have it reset, as he had promised on the threshold of the goldsmith's shop? Here might be the chance she had hoped for of getting rid of it. She grasped at it before she had time to waver.

"I wonder if it's the very favor I was going to ask of you."

But he didn't take it up. He seemed hardly to hear her, as if his mind was too much absorbed with quite another question—a question that the next moment came out flat. "What was that Kerr doing here yesterday?"

She was taken aback, so far had her apprehension of Harry's jealousy slipped into the background in the last twenty-four hours. But her consciousness that Harry was not behaving



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well, even for a jealous man, made her take it up all the more lightly.

"Why, he was calling, chatting, taking tea —what anybody else would do from four to six. What in the world gave you the idea that he was doing anything extraordinary?"

"Well," he said, "you shouldn't do the sort of thing that makes you talked about."

"'That makes me talked about'?" It made her pause in front of him.

"Why, yes, it isn't like you. It's never happened before. Look here. I drop into the Bullers' yesterday; find Clara sidled up to the judge; look around for you. 'Hello,' I say, 'where's Flora?' 'Oh,' says she, 'Flora's at home amusing Mr. Kerr.' 'Amusing Mr. Kerr!'" he repeated. "That's a nice thing to hear."

Flora went red. She walked down the room from him to give her suddenly tumultuous heart time. However little he might guess the real trend of her interview with Kerr, she couldn't hear him come near it without appre-



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hension. She was angry, helplessly angry at Harry that he had taken this moment for his stupid jealousy. But she was more angry at Clara, since such a speech on Clara's part wasn't carelessness. She had meant it to work upon him, and here he stood, like the fine animal that he was, smoldering with the suspicion of encroachment on his prey.

She tried to laugh him out of it.

"Why, Harry, I never saw you jealous before!"

"It's all very well to say that—and you know I've never made a row about the other Johnnies. I knew you didn't care for any of *them*."

Her eyes narrowed and darkened.

"And you take it for granted I care for Mr. Kerr?"

"Oh, no, no!" He pushed his hand through his hair with an irascible gesture. "But it's plain enough you like him—you women always like a fellow that flourishes—but that's not the sort of man I care to see hanging around my girl."



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Flora stood leaning on the table, breathing a little hurriedly, feeling rather as if she had been shaken. Harry, standing with his hands in his pockets, looked not unlike the threatening image he had appeared in the back of the goldsmith's shop.

"Of course, the fellow can talk," he admitted, "and he has a manner. But Lord knows where he comes from or who he is. Why, even the Bullers don't know."

Flora turned sharply on him. "Who told you that?"

"The judge. He picked him up at the club."

"Well," she kept it up, "some one had to introduce him there."

Harry smiled. "You wouldn't care to bow to some of those club members."

"Harry, do you know how you sound to me?" She was trembling at the daring of what she was going to say. "You talk as if you knew something against him."

Her statement seemed to bring him up short. "No, no, I don't," he said hastily.



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She made a little gesture of despair. How was she to count on Harry if he was going to behave like this? How trust him when he was shuffling so?

She made one more bold stroke to make him speak out.

"Harry, you *do* know something about him! I know you have seen him before."

"Why, yes, I've seen him before. But that's got nothing to do with it."

He looked surprised that she should seem to accuse him of it, and she wondered if he could have forgotten how he had denied it before.

"And that isn't why you distrust him?"

The devil's tattoo that he beat on his hat stopped.

"I don't distrust him."

"Well, dislike him, then. When was it that you saw him before?"

"Isn't it enough for me to tell you that I don't want *you* to see him?"

"Oh!" She turned away from him. Every nerve in her was in revolt. Then he really



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