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THE VANISHING MEN

BY

RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD
AUTHOR OF "THE VELVET BLACK," ETC.

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

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THE VANISHING MEN

I

HE had gone to London the moment he was out of uniform, and he had gone there for a reason typical of him.

For most Americans a single track success is an inspiration of life; there is a raw meat satisfaction in hewing to the line until some tree falls and also an instinct for playing the latest game. If it is money making, or trade, or industrialism or production-efficiency, the rank and file go panting after it until some one rings for the undertaker. I have always thought that the source of the imagination which was responsible for Peter DeWolfe's tastes, policy and conduct was most difficult to uncover. The true sense of play, not only applied to play but to all the endeavors of life, even those which are

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usually accounted grim—like war and marriage—is a rare flower to bloom on the American soil; it is still more rare a blossom to find growing on a family tree rooted, as Peter's was rooted, in a bed of money and only fertilized by that humdrum conventional pretense of our large cities which at latest accounts is still giving many persons the same old pale glories.

This rare flower bloomed in Peter and saved him from doing the commonplaces with himself which rich young men who have become orphaned bachelors usually do. It made Peter a great deal more like those individuals, rare enough even abroad—the whimsical Englishman, the adventurous Frenchman, the humorous Spaniard and the practical Russian, who, though they be the white crows of their respective flocks, exceed in numbers the Americans who value full living above that rather uninteresting and easy prize which is called "Success."

Peter took an interest in living. The common run of bachelors who are provided amply with millions accept the alternative of going to hell or going to business; DeWolfe's imagination came to his

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rescue and provided him with a third choice which, in his quiet way, he seized about the time he left college. It was to live for the sake of living.

To some this might have meant self-indulgence; to Peter it meant an indulgence of mankind. To some it might have meant fads and whims, such as hunting big game from aeroplanes at the source of the Nile; Peter would do that very thing perhaps, but it was an incident not half as interesting to him as an oil field he developed in Texas or a settlement house he promoted in New York. He kept himself as a very neat, well-cleaned slate upon which life could write if it wished; if it failed to do so Peter wrote on it a little himself—enough to keep himself useful. The same man who invented the De-Wolfe milimeter also set down from time to time some charming verses, and the public knows at least one short lyric from the "Leaves of Argonne" which he wrote in the hospital before his promotion to Major.

Dark skin, blue eyes, thin sensitive lips, the appearance of one well bathed in ice cold water, the flexible lean waist of a good horseman, the long

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muscular fingers of a good tennis player who had not lost the delicacy of touch which made him something less than a distinguished performer upon a cello—these were the outward introductions which made that particularly admirable little group of British gentlemen officers find his acquaintance so quickly.

Eversby Benham of the R. A. F. must bear the blame for the months in which DeWolfe found his great adventure at a time when to Peter adventure had become dull beyond words and the mind-image of himself sitting on a New York park bench, surrounded by engaging little foreign brats, listening to a hurdy-gurdy in the summer dusk, was the most exciting and delicious picture conjurable from his resourceful imagination of what a wonderful moment of life after a whirl with war could be. For it was Benham, who only later went home to the office of the Air Ministry, and who has since distinguished himself in the development of civil-flying, who first steered the young American across the path of Brena Selcóss.

"Are you going back?" asked Benham.

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"Home," said DeWolfe, with an attempt to say the word without sentiment.

"Red Cross ladies, Waacs, beautiful high caste Parisiennes and even the charming daughter of your what's-his-name at the bloody Peace Conference—and still a bachelor! By the by, DeWolfe, what happened to your lady with the gorgeous arms at that flubby little café on the south bank of the Seine?"

"An engaging goddess," said DeWolfe. "She is, I believe, a petticoat buyer. She tried to convert me into the Methodist faith. Those beautiful arms are for the neck of some Y. M. C. A. man with glasses and a tickling cough. She borrowed thirty francs of me and then went off to see a daughter of hers who is driving an ambulance near Coblentz."

"You are well armored, Peter," Benham had said, gazing with a reflective and perhaps mischievous smile across the flat fields of France with their tilled squares and wisp-armed trees and thin mists of dusk. "By the by, I say, doesn't this landscape remind one of Corot's paintings?"

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DeWolfe grinned.

"What would make you fall in love with a woman?" asked Benham.

"Almost anything," Peter replied. "But that's not the problem; the problem is what will prevent a man falling out?"

"You're saying that any woman—that is, with the thing you Americans call a come-on, good or bad—may make a man fall in love with her?"

"I was saying that we are all hypocrites. Such a woman would touch us all—affect any of us—me, for instance. We are made ready by a wise nature. 'Stand by for love,' she says, and youth stands by, Benham. But what's the use, if that's all? Life is a long pull. No dimpled chin should be allowed to turn the tide. No discourse of brilliance chattered off like a disc record in a conservatory. No nose-full of the faint odor of violets nor moonlight on a bare shoulder nor a rating of the old man. That's what I mean. That's why most men marry; but I am hardened by too many inspections of dimpled chins."

"From a discreet distance?"

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"Exactly."

"You want more than that pull of the moment or the month."

"To make me give up my own quarters in New York where the sun comes in upon my bare ankles and my coffee, and my Jap brings the newspaper and the cigarettes? I should be glad to say so!"

"You should try Brena Selcoss."

"Who?"

"Brena Selcoss."

"Who is she?" asked Peter carelessly, as he tried his arm out of its bandage sling.

"You like the name?"

"I confess——"

"Of course—so many names of women—just the names—give a man a thrill. Most extraordinary! She's an American, and——"

He paused.

"Well, what?" asked DeWolfe.

"A puzzle," said Benham. "But then you are not interested in women."

"To tell the whole truth, they are my only interest except food," Peter said. "The devil of it is

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that if a man saw ten thousand of 'em he didn't want and couldn't love he'd always expect year after year until he was ninety that the first over the thousand would be the one. Well, that's what leads us on. We all say, 'No, thank you,' when the dish is passed, but we all look to see every last piece on the dish just the same."

"Brena Selcoss is a friend of my sister," said Benham. "I must say she takes the breath out of me. It's that queer combination of beautiful fresh youth with the flavor of all the guile and conspiracy of the ages. She's a Saint Cecilia or a Lucrezia Borgia. But that's not bothering my mother."

"What bothers her?"

"Funny thing. We don't know who she is. From Texas, I believe. With some money. But why does a girl from the United States come down to Beconshire Heath and buy a curate's cottage next to our place and live in a garden and stay out of London and read lying flat on the grass and see nobody and evade all questions? And the look in her eyes! I didn't see it at first because I was in a funk at the eyes themselves."

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"What look?" asked DeWolfe in the hush.

"Fear," said Benham.

"Fear?"

"Yes, fear. And besides there is something about her that tells a person that she is waiting—marking time—treading water—staring out over life—just like a watcher on the shore stares out across the empty sea."

"Maybe she's thinking of an ice cream soda."

"There's nothing of that kind of thing in her," the British officer replied with positiveness. "Your ice cream soda and millinery and looking-glass lady has a personality of a pink color. Brena Selcoss is the color of firelight on the walls of an old temple."

"You might go on to say that she gives the impression of an Inca princess. Some dried mummy from the sands of a prehistoric citadel. Bathed in some magic liquid, her limbs expanded to the lovely contour of girlhood, her face warmed with a renewed coursing of spirited blood."

"You've seen her!" exclaimed Benham.

"My dear fellow, I've never seen her; but I con-

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fess that as you talk about her I feel a little as if I had known her—long ago."

Benham said, "Perhaps you could lift the cover——"

He stopped suddenly.

"And I'd like to have you meet Muriel too. She's a very decent sort of sister. I've a mind to give you a letter to my mother and send you over the Channel to loaf around in flannels at our place in the country."

"I'm leaving Brest to-morrow night on a transport. Sorry."

"Oh."

"Well, I said nothing about it."

"Afraid of farewell dinners?"

Peter smiled.

"Home," said he. "Bring your sister over to America. She'll probably think it a jolly little unfinished country."

Benham clasped DeWolfe's hand and yawned; he had seen the American covered from head to foot with blood out of his own arteries when Peter had brought him in with the aid of an artillery horse.

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It was an intimacy not to be befouled with demonstrations.

"So long," said DeWolfe.

He climbed down from the broken wall of the house where the Englishman had been billeted and with a nod of farewell walked away, leaving Benham perched up there—a black figure as if cut out of black cardboard pasted on the sunset glories of the sky-line.

He walked a hundred paces and stopped. He looked at a group of peasant children bringing in fagots, but laughing and jostling each other as if it were a game. Childhood had been untouched. In one of the little rubble and plaster sheds a newborn calf was bawling, and yet in Paris, as he reflected, serious men were discussing the future of the world exactly as if they could touch or affect its fundamental nature.

He walked on. The trees trained against the high wall spread their branches like fans, edged at the tips with the pink blossoms of a new year, symbolic of the eternal round of promise, fruit and decay.

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"It goes so soon," said DeWolfe aloud, and this voice which spoke was just as if some old friend had given him counsel as they strolled together in the dusk. He turned.

The Englishman waved to him from the wall and held one arm aloft in a gesture of farewell; Peter could see every finger on his hand as if they all were painted in sepia on the velvety gold of the sky.

"By the by," called Benham, "the strange lady is half a Greek. I say! Can you hear? Her father was a banished patriot—a fighting professor of chemistry or something."

Peter smiled and waved his hand. He turned the corner of the wall and stepped into the cobbled street where the endless wagons of some French artillery maneuver were rumbling deeper into the ruts of War worn in the ancient stones.

Only at nine that evening did he hear more. Benham called him by the service wire of the Signal Corps.

"Saying good-by, that's all," said the Englishman lying glibly. "Good luck. And I forgot to say that her mother was Irish."

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"Send me that letter to your family care of the American port officer at Boulogne," said Peter calmly after a moment in which Benham wondered whether the line had been cut off. "I'm off for England to-morrow."

He put his cigarette down and allowed it to burn the edge of the table, staring at the wall with its maps and blue-prints, his eyes full of wonder.

This explains, in part, why the reason for his going to London was typical of Peter DeWolfe.

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II

MURIEL BENHAM was savagely a woman. She conceived woman as a species as distinct from males as flora is distinct from fauna. The acquisition by women of the right to vote had been the occasion for mourning, as Peter found out before Mrs. Austin Benham had beamed through two meals first upon her guest and then upon her lovely daughter.

The widow of Austin, as DeWolfe discovered after a week of agreeable neglect of the calendar, was a true beamer. She did not beam with the insincere beam of affectation, but with the beam of an expansive nature oozing good will and demonstrativeness through the crevices it could find in the walls of a life which was like a vessel of conventionality, containing, according to all the traditions of her husband's family, a liquor of precious quality, not to be spent freely. She believed in new things and in a new world, but she beamed upon Muriel not because she agreed with her but because, not

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daring to voice an opinion, she could still love her daughter for being so healthy and so irreproachable.

Muriel considered herself as dedicated by duty and adaptability to being a woman, and being a woman meant that her brown hair must be made attractive and stable for tennis—a game which she executed with a good deal of dash, in a costume designed to keep freckles off a milk white skin. Even her forearms were covered in the game she took from DeWolfe, who made rather a botch of his unpracticed play, because just as it was a womanly woman's duty to be well exercised and in fine condition for the market, so also was it her duty to be milk white in an evening dress. The same thought made her appear before Peter in the hedge-walled garden before breakfast clad in a part wispy and part fluffy gown with a basket of roses hung on one elbow and flower scissors in the other hand.

"You do all things so well," said Peter with a great delight filling his being. "There is a thoroughness in your method which positively upsets me. I looked at the library in your study and as far as I can see you have spent your twenty years

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collecting, among others, books on how to do things —how to ride a horse, how to play golf, how to knit, how to cast a fly, how to speak Italian, how to grow roses and who knows what else."

The English girl was sincerely grateful to Peter. She said, "To know the way, to practice the methods—these are the sure steps toward results; but you must not think I take myself too seriously, as my brother probably told you. I think it is all as nothing compared to the skill of being a woman—a fit woman—a woman whose one aim is to be a woman."

"You have attained it," said Peter, a little light dancing in his eyes under his heavy brows as fireflies sparkle behind a hedge.

The girl tossed the ball up and caught it in her white skirt spread from knee to knee as she sat cross-legged upon the edge of the Benhams' lawn. This lawn began again after the interruption of the square of tennis court and rolled gently down to a line of trees at the bottom of the hill that half hides the little town of Becon with its nestling red brick houses with their chimney pots and roofs

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tempered by the smoke of coals on home fires. They lived peaceably together without any bold assertions of individuality, none of them doing any outrage to the countryside, as Peter, contrasting it with an American town, had said. Beyond the village were the chalk downs where grass was light green and the heather a deeper color, and narrow roads were as white as marks of crayon, and trees standing alone were like feathery plumes stuck here and there into the rolling country by some giant hand. Somewhere, still further on, was the sea into which the bright sky fell like a blue back curtain flecked with clouds of feathery white.

Peter, with half-closed eyes, gazed out across this magnificence of quiet space toward the distant backbone of a chalk ridge where ancient Britons once drove their cattle into caves and Druid priests had once held solemn rites. He was quite unconscious of Muriel's attention fixed upon him somewhat as a faithful dog watches a master; he had been in many of his own dreams in these ten days and might well be forgiven for failing to notice that something of violence was going on within this

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English girl whose outlines, like those of a volcano, were still clear and cold against the sky, exposing nothing of the fires and steam which may blow their surroundings into fragments.

The most that Muriel had ever said was that Peter was one of the "nice Americans," a patronizing compliment which had made him tell the girl and her mother that he was gratified at that judgment expressed by "the better type of English." He did not know that by the processes within the Benham sister's lovely head, she had weighed carefully his physical appearance, noting his high bronzed forehead, his straight nose, his lean hard cheeks and the thin judicial lips which had been an inheritance of the family ever since Justice DeWolfe had been painted by Copley. She had judged him as one would judge an animal, and satisfied, had methodically passed on to his clothes.

Peter's clothes are famous for their charming incorrectness. No one quite knows how he succeeds in expressing through some expensively fashionable and unimaginative tailor so much of his own brand of distinction in dress. Evening clothes or bath-

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wrap, major's uniform or lounging flannels, it is always the same; Peter's clothes and Peter are one. An envious broker in New York named Moore once said that Peter's clothes even expressed Peter's moods—they could be limp, soft and contented in his idleness; they could stiffen into fine dignity with a turn of his thought. Muriel's father had given attention to clothes; the hunter's-pink riding coat that still hangs in the hall closet in Beconshire Heath reminds his successors of the dominant, rare roast beef personality of Sir Austin. His daughter, like other women who are in the profession of being women, gave importance to the decorative qualities of a male; she only forgot about Peter's face and figure and clothes when they had been swallowed by his complete whole—a whole which defied her methodical judgment and made her eyes swim and began to turn within her heart and body the elementary machinery that two hundred years of Benham tradition had kept locked in neutral.

"Peter, I saw you before breakfast," she said.

"From my window."

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"You saw me?" he said. "Why didn't you call to me and say one of your cheery good mornings?"

She leaned so close that he could catch the faint aroma of the lavender which Mrs. Benham, with a beaming face, sprinkled in the drawers. She said, "Because I was waiting to see what you were doing."

"What was I doing?" said Peter.

"The telescope—father's telescope."

"Oh yes—the telescope," repeated Peter, as if he had been accused of stealing the squeaky old glass. "I did have the telescope, didn't I?"

He was thinking that one could not very well tell hosts like these two women who had treated him as if he were the owner of the estate and of the old stone house and even quaint Spode coffee cups which came on at breakfast, that he had come to Beconshire not to see them. He was thinking that if they had not chosen to mention an acquaintance other than the rather stiff and dull and correct persons who had come to tea almost every afternoon and three or four times to dinners, saved by the Château Yquem graciously left by Sir Austin as a legacy in

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the wine cellar, he could not very well mention this acquaintance. Furthermore he had begun to feel that Muriel in some strange manner of her own had created an atmosphere of a proprietress without any other intimacy than calling him Peter and, upon one occasion, dressing a cut of a hawthorn on the back of his hand with a peculiar tenderness mixed with all the care of procedure that one can find in "What to Do in an Emergency." He shrank from making the one inquiry he would have wished to make.

He now had a chance to make this inquiry, because Muriel said, "You were standing there under that beech tree. I thought——"

"What did you think?"

"That you were looking through the glass across the fields toward that place under the big trees—the place we call the Curate's because one used to live there."

Peter might have spoken then to ask who now occupied the little gabled house with its guardian trees. It was the opportunity to hear a name he had not heard since he had heard it from Colonel

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Benham's lips; Peter's characteristic perversity that often made him allow life to set its own pace and bring events at its own whim, added at this moment to his disinclination to disclose one of his reasons for idling under the Benhams' roof. It prevented him from speaking. The sun was warm, there was a fatalistic assurance that he would hear the name soon enough, and there was the possibility that a look of pain would come into Muriel's face and he would hurt a girl for whom he had acquired a good natured, companionable and almost paternal affection.

He only smiled, and Muriel's pink fingers being near upon the grass, he touched them lightly. After a long pause, he said, "I was looking around the country."

"I do not believe you," the girl said, jumping up with startling suddenness.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Into the house. I have a—headache."

She had often insisted that she never had headaches, as if not having headaches was a part of a proper program for a woman who intends to marry

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correctly, have children correctly and be correctly buried with a correct husband's tears. Perhaps this came into her mind, for at the vine-covered portico she turned, put her arm against one of the ancient stone pillars and, making a pretty picture with her high color and her lean young body, she called out, "Do you want a walk this afternoon—to Besman Wood?"

Peter nodded his assent vigorously, and when she ran into the house he threw himself back into the grass and through half-closed eyelids watched the ever-changing patterns in cottony clouds and the flight of wheeling martins.

Muriel began that afternoon walk with great gayety of spirits, as if, perhaps, she had found a triumph over some difficulty, a victory at the end of twenty-one years of preparation for victory. As soon as they had struck off across the downs she threw her arms toward the sky and sang into the wind an old hunting song of quaint and engaging melody.

"Let's learn the song together," she said to Peter. "Look over there on the edge of the horizon. That

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square tower. That's Saint Dunstan's—the very tower in which the fox sought sanctuary in the song—the old song, written six hundred years ago, they say."

Peter, with his usual adaptability, acquired both words and music. He sang. He danced upon the rolling green plain. And at last seizing Muriel's waist around the belt of her sporting coat, he swung her almost off her feet and together they whirled merrily—two tiny tops spinning upon the vast expanse. When they stopped, the girl, almost dizzy, and breathless, clung for a moment to his coat and looked up into Peter's eyes. He could feel her warm breath upon his chin.

Peter was not lacking in perception; he knew at once that his visit at the Benhams' must come to an end. All the cold assurance in Muriel's face, all the steady, stable English look had gone. No refusal of hers to vote or smoke a cigarette or adopt an article of clothing which in any way might have unsexed her could have proclaimed her as a woman rather than as a companionable playmate as completely as

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did this searching, half-troubled, hungry look in her swimming, brimming eyes.

"Come on now," he said as if to a private soldier who had disobeyed orders. "Let's walk. Let's walk hard and fast and long."

He was wondering now whether he had made his journey to Beconshire in vain, whether indeed his willingness to solve the puzzle that Benham had told him was waiting for him there had not been a piece of folly leading to nothing. When he and the girl had dipped down the slope into the single track path that led across the moor he nearly walked blindly into the silver stream through the rushes that grew at the water's edge.

"You are not vexed?" asked Miss Benham invitingly.

"Vexed!" exclaimed DeWolfe. "With you? God bless you, dear, no!"

She looked up at him gratefully, watching him as she walked by his side a good deal as a setter might look up to catch a glance of approval from a man. Peter expected no storm from her. He knew he must pack up his things and go back to London.

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This was only fair to Benham and certainly fair to Benham's sister who had let herself imagine so much from an acquaintance with a stray American who inwardly believed that to live a lifetime of Muriel's program of days and years would be a close second to a term in jail or to having a berth in a Wall Street broker's office. He supposed, however, that if not actually, at least metaphorically Muriel had read a book on "How to Keep One's Balance." He did not figure upon the explosive forces which can be generated in a conservative family, as if occasionally the fundamentals of mankind liked to show their half-concealed existence of which all are aware, each for himself, but never as to our armored neighbor. Muriel, in fact, was just the person the fundamental human forces would pick out to give a glorious exhibition of blowing up the crusts of restraint. Peter, like most of us, had heard a slight crack in her cover, but like most of us he had endless faith in the strength of habit and conventions.

The depression which fell upon the girl, as if a shadow cast by the dusk, gathering about

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them as they came back from Saint Dunstan's tower after ten miles in the wind, gave no warning of crisis to him. And certainly he was under no obligation to foresee that which the night would bring forth.

At dinner he discovered that he could talk to Mrs. Benham; to his astonishment he found that behind her beam there were a great many years of orderly thinking whose product, not consumed by her family, had been put up onto the shelf in many careful layers like bolts of cloth with an unfashionable pattern. It was almost worth while to have Muriel so silent; it was almost a relief to turn away from her long Byrne-Jones face with its sensitive lips contrasting with her stern eyes and be beamed upon sunnily by the broad strong face of her mother. Peter took a delight in making this beam expand into a laugh. He was never so whimsical. Each time he leaned forward toward the white-haired widow who, with her middle-Victorian figure, weighed at least two hundred pounds, Muriel stared at her mother with a look which might have been the expression of jealousy.

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Peter, as he chatted with Mrs. Benham, faced the long French windows in a curved bay at the end of the dining-room. The floor was covered with ferns and flowery plants in pots, giving forth to the room at all meals that smell of warm dark earth which fills greenhouses; but just outside the reflection of his own dinner coat on the long panes of the doors, there was the blue stone driveway of the house and the path to the side door. Upon this path Peter thought he had seen a flash of white. It might have been a reflection of his own white linen; he had only seen this flick of movement out of the corner of his eye as he put down his gilt coffee cup.

"What did you see?" asked Muriel suddenly.

"I? Why I thought I saw a white spot in the dark out there—like a person's face."

Muriel stiffened. "I don't know who it could be," she said. "Lucy, turn on the light outside the North door."

Peter smiled, but only because he had thought of how red English maids could be—just as red as valets were white.

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The smile disappeared the moment the electric lamp above the outer door just behind the French windows threw down its light like an overturned bucket of yellow liquid. A woman was standing there, and Peter believed that as she had stood in the dark, unseen, she had been looking straight into his face. She wore no hat and her hair piled up in immense snake-like coils was the color of certain frost-turned leaves of Autumn which are neither red nor gold, but both colors at once.

"Her Irish mother!" he almost said aloud. He knew at once who she was. He knew by her hair and her great dark eyes in which, even from a distance, there appeared the expectancy or fear described by young Benham. The British officer had not overdrawn her beauty. There was a still grandeur about it, a permanence, a thing making it awful as well as alluring; it was like the beauty of Grecian sculpture dug from the dust and transformed by miracle into living warmth glowing through a skin which compared to Muriel's fine cold white was as heavy cream is to skimmed milk.

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She stood in the posture which Peter learned later to know was characteristic—a posture of one who waits with resignation. For what? Heaven knows. Perhaps for a reincarnation into a life less troubled, less besmirched with small affairs.

That she wore a white draped gown over which a wrap of flame color hung from her half bare shoulders DeWolfe did not notice. She was one who cannot be described in detail, and her clothes made no impress though their illuminated colors and contrast in any other case might have left a vivid picture. One never saw her except as a whole—a woman too short of stature, if one measured, but the height of a goddess if one only looked; a girl whose face, though capable of a great range of expression, nevertheless changed its moods as slowly as the clouds in the sky change their contours; a human being whose personality belonged, it appeared, to the kind of personalities which are found usually only in a deep forest, or belong to a pinnacled mountain range. Any detail was nothing.

"She has come to see my mother," said Muriel.

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"So she has!" admitted Mrs. Benham, beaming out through the window.

"I might have known who it was. I heard a high-powered car. But she doesn't like to be driven almost into our dining-room, so she stopped on the South Wing. Let's go into father's den, Peter. Bring the cigars in there, Lucy."

No protest appeared possible. Mrs. Benham had beamed and nodded, and the American could not very graciously say, "Oh, no. I want to stay."

He turned once as he left the dining-room. The woman outside was still waiting at the door for Mrs. Benham to waddle to the latch, the waterfall of light still covering her, still looking in, apparently at Peter, and with a smile and warmth thrown toward him like a message from her great dark eyes.

He could not wipe away the impression of that look. In it there had been a call, an understanding, a password, a magic formula. To shake it off he walked nervously about Sir Austin's old study, stopping before the photographs of members of the House of Commons who had been Benham's friends, but were like the ends of so many empty

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spools to Peter's eyes at this moment. He read an inscription on a portrait of General Wolseley, he touched an ivory idol from Benares.

"Let's light the fire," suggested Muriel in a weak and trembling voice.

"All right," said Peter, and struck a match.

He did not smoke.

"Why not?" asked the girl.

"I have a—headache," he said with a laugh.

"Come here then. Lie down on father's sofa. I don't mind. Be comfortable, Peter."

He stretched out upon the springs bent and sagged by years of pressure of the fox-hunting banker's solid weight, and closed his eyes.

Muriel, who had drawn up a stool, sat down upon it, staring into the firelight. There in the study behind the heavy door which she had closed, the two seemed suddenly very remote.

"I had a wonderful time—this afternoon," she said in a tense and trembling voice which made a struggle to appear normal.

"Good!" said DeWolfe.

Her hand moved timidly forth and her soft fin-

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gers touched his forehead, brushing back the hair.

Peter closed his eyes.

She leaned over quietly and with a little cry hardly audible pressed her lips to his.

He knew what had happened—the real Muriel had come up through layer on layer of tradition, training, pride, habit, restraint. He only was confused by his own stupidity in allowing this to happen.

He sprang up.

"I never did that before. I never—by any one," she said clenching her hands.

"Oh, I say, I'm sorry——" he began.

"Sorry!" she said.

"Of course," he replied with unnecessary coldness. "Of course I'm sorry. I've allowed you to think——"

Muriel's eyes were wide and blazing. She threw her clenched hands apart until her arms were outstretched to their utmost. The firelight was upon her face and Peter could see elementary passions enough upon it.

"You needn't say more," she almost screamed, so

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that suddenly Peter had a great distaste for the exposure of things he did not know had lived in her. "You needn't say more because I know."

"Kno[redacted] said Peter in a low tone, as if inviting her to speak more quietly.

"Yes—know. It's her!" she said, pointing toward the wall where the deer's heads were hung. "I know it's my brother Eversby. He told you about her. That's why you came. That's what you've been thinking about. My brother was a fool!"

Peter raised his hand.

"I kissed you and I'm glad," she went on furiously. "Yes, I am. I'm glad. It has brought out the truth. I never did it before. I'm glad. The truth."

"Yes," said Peter sternly. "It has brought out the truth."

"You came here to see her. I know. I guessed. I knew Eversby told you about her, but you never asked. And I knew why. I didn't want to know. I wanted——"

"I'm sorry," Peter said again.

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The girl came on several paces and leaned forward toward him.

"For God's sake, Peter, keep away from her. She might like you. Of course she'd like you. And if she liked you——"

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I know. I can't tell. It's a matter of honor, a matter of confidence—her confidence—something I learned. I wish I didn't know. But I warn you."

She moved toward the door.

"Wait a moment," he said.

"No. I want to go. I hate you now, Peter. Yes, I do. It has been awful enough. I never want to see you again. If you will only go while I hate you!"

"Of course," he said.

"But she is——"

Muriel stopped aghast.

"Well?" he asked.

"I can't tell you. But I warn you. It is too awful to believe. If she takes you in, you will—— This is all I can tell."

"What?"

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"Vanish," she whispered, "—like the others."

The door closed after her.

"Too late to go to London to-night," he said, looking at his watch. He listened for a moment. There was rain upon the window panes. "Vanish? Vanish—like the others? Oh, it's absurd. A piece of jealous outburst. Vanish? Nonsense!"

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III

THE name of Peter DeWolfe, U. S. A., was upon the register of the Carleton Hotel written in a hand purposely scrawled and blotched to prevent any one in the flux of diplomats, army officers, correspondents and gentlemen adventurers, the classes from which this rich New York bachelor drew a large and almost affectionate acquaintance, from bellowing through his door to come down to the bar.

He was waiting for a steamer that had made up her mind frequently not to leave Liverpool for another five days. Two nights he had spent already in London where, if he had wished, he might have dined at at least one of half a dozen recognized homes, had luncheons with a Russian ex-ambassador or Tommy Caminthorn of the War Office or Boleby Broke, the critic who writes the reviews for the *International Gazette*, or taken breakfast with Mrs. Holderee Rabb, the widow of a certain Maharajah's son who had gone wrong at Oxford. He

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had an inclination, however, to write verses and wander by himself through the naughty jam of soldiers and yellow-haired girls in Leicester Square and the Circus. He ate his meals in lonely state.

Unfortunately the unpleasant flavor which had attached itself to the memory of his visit to Beconshire Heath still clung. He could see Lady Benham—that good old soul who had insisted that she never be addressed by her title—beaming at him as she told him how sorry she was that business had called him away so suddenly. He felt guilty of the polite lie he had told to make his exit from the lives of the Benhams. He could see Muriel's cold, hard expression when, having pressed her lips to his, she found no response and told him at once that she hated him. He would never see her again, and though it had been none of his fault, or at least not in large measure, there would be a certain impression in her mind that he had willfully dislodged her from her correct and virtuous pedestal and Colonel Eversby Benham—a good friend, provided with a sense of humor—could not fail to see the affair through his beloved sister's unimaginative eyes.

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Peter had tried to reach him through the Air Ministry and found that on forty-eight hours' notice he had gone to Mesopotamia.

Above all, Peter had gone to England to do a certain thing—to meet the strange Brena Selcoss and at Benham's challenge dissolve the mystery which surrounded her. All that he had accomplished so far had been to look once into her wonderful eyes from a distance and hear from Muriel that terrible and unspeakable and undisclosed horrors awaited the man upon whom this extraordinary young woman, with her mixture of Grecian and Irish blood, her gorgeous hair and jersey cream skin, her American origin and her inexplicable English isolation, bestowed her favor.

Peter had always said that many men were really two persons—one, the actor in life, clothed with a body of flesh and bone; the other, a second personality without tangible reality, but who, as a counselor possessed of a voice almost audible, often advised caution, sometimes played the rôle of conscience, was always a friend, but sometimes took on a damnable, patronizing manner. It was this in-

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visible friend who had advised Peter to shut himself up with his attempts at verse writing and had led him to procure a passage home; it was Peter himself who knew very well that he would not go on board the *Aquitania*, that he had come to England to meet some kind of a witch woman, that he had seen her great dark eyes once and saw them gazing at him out of every corner now, that he had committed himself to finding out all that was to be known of her and that in the end he would do some unconservative, break-neck thing to throw himself with a crash of conventions into her lap and note what happened afterward.

Peter's determination, making ready to reject every advice of his counseling and invisible second personality, was completely wasted. Brena Selcoss acted first.

On the third afternoon of his restlessness, when the night was falling and the fog leaned on the exterior of the window panes of his room like a pile of wet sheep's wool, he had started a lyric twenty-two times and twenty-two times balked for meter or expressive word, had crumpled up the sheet

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of paper and thrown it at a wastebasket. His pencil was blunt; the crumpled sheets, in the evil gray light of late afternoon, having missed their receptacle, lay around the floor as if DeWolfe's product were not poetry but snowballs.

"I'm a nice chump to be writing verses," he said to himself in the mirror. "You look less of a poet than a lion-tamer."

Some of Peter's friends who are able to realize that this man who can play polo like a centaur actually is the author of the lines beginning, "Call ye to the souls of shadows," would have agreed with him. There were strips of interwoven muscle upon his bare brown forearms and a firmness about his mouth, both tightened a little by his service with the Army, and if there is a poet in him it is as a Virginia farmer once told him, "a streak of something," perhaps indeed a part of that fundamental essence of Peter which calls him to a many-sided life.

As he looked at his own troubled face in the mirror the telephone bell rang.

"Are you there?" inquired the operator, using

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the conventional London phrase. "Right! Wait, please."

He heard a voice which came out of distance like a voice which comes nearer through a damp grove of dark green trees, like an aroma which comes forward on the wind, until it rose slowly to its full power. When the words were distinguishable he knew that some one was asking for him.

"Yes," said he, for the moment held enthralled by the warmth and rhythm of that voice.

"I must see you."

Brena Selcoss had come to find him. She had taken the initiative; she had come to London. He did not have to say, "Who is this?" She had come.

Something, however, in that phrase, "I must see you," said with intensity by that extraordinary woman, about whom the Benhams knew so little and perhaps Muriel so much, filled Peter for the moment with an inexplicable dread. This sudden chill of self-preservation was not founded upon the repulsion of that telephonic, "I must see you," uttered by a female and always the forerunner of

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the unpleasant, nor was it based upon the suspicion which he had always had when, to use one of his own phrases, "a man ought to know that no woman who comes toward one is safe," nor indeed did it rise from the fact that he gave new credit to Muriel's absurd warning that men who knew Brena Selcoss disappeared like broken soap bubbles. The dread that Peter felt was like a dread communicated by some subtle message in a human voice which expressed some eternal fear. It came, perched upon his soul for a second, and then was gone.

He became at once the usual Peter, thinking quickly, alive to the dangers of a woman who would follow a stranger to London, suspicious of her and above all thoroughly delighted to risk himself in any tangle she cared to weave for him.

"Where are you?" he said genially.

"At Mulberry's," she said.

"The tea room?"

"Yes."

"Will you wait for me there?" asked Peter.

"Please." His voice sounded very young—com-

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pounded of the breathless expectancy and spontaneous pleading of little boys.

He found her sitting at a table beside a window overlooking Bond Street where the fog was like a gray stew and passersby hurrying home were like solids stirred up to the surface from the bottom of some kettle. She greeted him with a quiet smile and pointed to the empty chair.

Peter, conscious of his shrewdness, said exactly what she had said—nothing. He sat down across from her, and for the benefit of the waitress whom he could see out of the corner of his eye as a black dress and white apron, he pointed to Brena's steaming chocolate and nodded. He did not take his gaze from his companion's large dark eyes which had in them the same look he had seen once before and which had made him think of eyes which knew no death but had been looking out upon the world for centuries and centuries. A friend of his had once advanced the idea, at a dinner party in New York, that men and women's souls were new or old, that some of those present had been aged through countless residence in human form back through eras of

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history, that others had been created only a few hundred years ago and that still others were new souls just out of the wrapping. Peter recognized as he looked into this young woman's eyes that if he, in worldly terms, were a half a dozen years older than she, in fact, she had outlived him in rounds and rounds of ages.

Her eyes were so compelling that it was difficult to give attention to the fact that her countenance had in it a baffling riddle. Her face was long with a straight and perfect nose below a forehead which might be considered by a classicist lacking a good fraction of an inch in height. She had a full rounded chin below lips so flexible and of so warm and rich a moist color that their thinness was scarcely noticeable. But there was combined in her features, which taken together were by no means perfect, a still beauty which represented the Greek in her, with some undercurrent of shimmering chameleon elusiveness.

"You are shocked at my behavior," she said at last, arranging the white ruffling at her throat as if

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she preferred to treat Peter's state of mind casually. "Perhaps you are pleased."

"The two go together," he said quickly.

"You did not ask me who I was. Yet, you had never heard my voice before."

"That struck you forcibly after you left the telephone," Peter told her with authority. "It was not surprising. I had never heard your vóice. But I had seen you. It was only necessary to look at each other——"

"Yes, that was memorable," she said solemnly, and looked far away. "But unfortunately the tempo of this meeting does not warrant that little laugh of yours," she went on in reproval. "I came to London to see you, but I came because of Muriel Benham."

Peter looked up in dismay. He said, "You don't mean that she told you——?"

"No one told me," said Brena Selcoss. "You were there. I heard scraps of conversation. Once I heard my own name. It was no fault of mine. Nor is it a fault of mine that with Mrs. Benham's word or two about Muriel's desire to go away, after

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your sudden departure for London, that I can see what has happened. I have come down from the country to beg you to go back."

Peter shook his head from side to side.

"In some way—some mysterious way—just such a thing as this involves me always. I have been, unwittingly, the cause of——"

"Oh, no you haven't," said he, with vigor.

Apparently she did not hear; she leaned forward and said with great earnestness, "It touched me deeply—not because Muriel was once a great friend to me—but because I cannot bear——"

He interrupted her again by saying, "The whole thing is nonsense, Miss Selcoss. I am sorry that the only way I can put an end to it is to be ungallant. The plain truth is that I do not have the slightest emotion of any kind about Miss Benham. No doubt she is a very admirable English girl—she is healthy, lovely and correct. No doubt there was an unfortunate misunderstanding, but it was not because of any inclination of mine, and nothing need be said about it. I left Beconshire Heath because of it."

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Brena sat back in her chair with a sigh which appeared to Peter to state, sincerely, relief from a great anxiety. She folded her expressive hands, interlocking her fingers, free of all rings, and allowed her eyelids to almost close.

"I would have liked to stay longer," he said.

"Why?"

"To see you."

"You did not know of me."

"I had seen you."

"But I would not care much for that kind of judgment," she said. "It is man's great delusion to base inclinations on a glance."

"Women do it too," said Peter. "I admit—we both admit—that it is a mistake, don't we?"

"Yes—perhaps. I am not sure."

"Then you too hoped that I would stay?"

She neglected his question completely, but she did not rebuke him for that smile of pleasure that had arisen with the idea that she too had a belief that upon a rare occasion the exceptional first exchange of the eyes is a true and a wise guide to the

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importance of the future. Peter felt a glowing sense of understanding and of companionship.

Suddenly, with a quick tensity that startled Peter, she looked swiftly about from face to face of the persons, men and women, who sat at the other tables. He saw in her eyes at that moment the look which Benham had described so vividly—that expression of fear of some unknown peril.

"You have been in the country a long time," he said as promptly as he could. "You do not like London."

She smiled rather sadly. "I love London. But I choose to stay at my little retreat among the old beech trees. I have not come to London since last summer."

"And you have no inclination to play in London —to forget Beconshire for a day?" he asked. "Of course, now you are here."

"I do not know any one in London now," she said. "I have an apartment here—one which I had when I first came to England."

"Came to England?" He inquired when, without using the words.

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"Yes, three years ago. I think it must have been three centuries."

She sat for a long time thinking, and the coming and going of the waitress with check and change did not interrupt her thought. Peter believed that she was debating something; therefore he said, "Life—even little life—the pleasures—the decent pleasures—well, they ought to be seized."

"You have a sentient mind," she said, awakened.

"Then do it, whatever it is," he said. "There are two kinds of persons in the world—the minus persons and the plus persons, negative folks and positive folks. You notice I say folks; I am from America."

"So am I," she said.

"Well, do it!" said Peter, referring to the undisclosed problem.

"Perhaps I have shut myself up too much," she said reflectively. "I did not know how much I loved to see human beings—just see them sitting here and there, walking in the street, jostling each other, so various, so like——"

"Unsolved riddles."

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She looked into his face long and as if conducting a search.

"I want to stay in London for a few days," she said at last, shaking her gloves as if to express the thrill it would give her.

"Why not?" asked Peter. "Even if staying in London is the hazardous business which you seem to think it is, no one will know."

He waited.

"Except me," he said.

Her eyelids narrowed almost imperceptibly as she answered. "But doubtless dozens of persons claim your time here. It is, to use your expression, known that you are in London."

"No, no, no," protested DeWolfe impulsively. "Not a soul."

She drew on her gloves.

"I think I will stay in London," she said, and Peter thought he heard her murmur under her breath, "God forgive me."

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IV

He was reckoned a shrewd player of life. Men who knew Peter DeWolfe best say that if he left his traveling bag on the sidewalk on Fifth Avenue while he did his shopping within some store, it was only because he had estimated carefully the psychology of any thief and concluded that one could depend upon human nature to believe that luggage sitting alone on the pavement was placed there as a trap. Peter always found his bag where he had left it.

This is said because, unless some complex reasoning and calculation of the same kind can be applied to his conduct, it is necessary to say he went blind into love of woman.

"A few—a very few—men—and fewer women," Peter said once in a letter, "know just how near the top of the world can be reached by the adventure of free days together where there are no hours, and

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time springs in magic jumps from noon to next daylight perhaps, and the world is a playground and a city is your toy and mankind is the ultimate friend of both of you. Unfortunately," he added, "the men who have the quality of greatness to see that such a companionship over a span of hours is a greater accomplishment than a life in a law office or the presidency of some blooming bank, are few. Those who ever find the girl are fewer. And those who can prove some essential quality of a gentleman and a whole man needed to walk that delicious tight-rope up above the moon, without taking a vulgar step into space with a nasty crash on landing, are fewest of all."

He may have been demonstrating these words. But apparently he had abandoned his inquiry into the mystery of past and future. He had abandoned suspicion of her or curiosity about her life, though ever and again he found her glancing around with the unexplained fear in her dark eyes, as if she expected to meet the eyes of recognition or find some fiend walking softly along behind. Outwardly he had given over all but one inquiry, and that was the

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exploration of the heart and mind and soul of Brena Selcoss as they met his companionship.

Just when he had shelved his first purpose, awakened by Benham's challenge, and when he wiped from his mind the memory of his one moment of dread of this girl, which of course might be traceable to Muriel's extraordinary and tragic warning, perhaps Peter himself could not have told. It might have been at the moment when, after their first evening of strolling aimlessly through the mystery of the symbolic fog with their selves reaching toward one another, they had perched like two ravens on the pediment of Trafalgar Monument, supperless, content, and watching the blurred lights of one motor omnibus after another move like luminous fish in cloudy water.

"What time is it?" Peter had asked, listening in vain for the great bell of St. Paul's.

Brena Selcoss, sitting on her own coat, drew back the loose sleeve of her white silk waist from her rounded cream-colored wrist, and after a glance at her watch, had said, "It is after two. I am hungry and I am cold."

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Peter had said quickly, "Perhaps it is my fault. But you wouldn't go to the theater or the cafés. How could I deal with any one who stubbornly insists upon exploring alleys and arcades and the banking district and Hyde Park until an old campaigner's legs are almost worn out?"

"You couldn't."

"I shall find a place now and I shall like to see you eat," he had said, jumping up. "There are some persons, after all, who give us delight when they eat. Did you ever see an old French peasant woman who was really fond of animals feeding them? Why, her brown wrinkled old face has a smile like a lighthouse! And I can imagine wearing that smile when one's own children are over their bowls of gruel. Yes, I shall like to see you eat. I am sure. I would like it still better if I had planted and harvested or caught everything which was put before you. But that cannot very well be because I'm not a farmer or a trapper or Isaac Walton—only a New York idler. Besides Trafalgar Square has no soil for turnips, no brook trout, no pheasants."

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She had looked up with a wistful smile. "Who is pleased when you eat?"

"Nobody," he said. "You see I am an orphan. There is an old waiter at the Club. I forgot him. He rubs his hands when I am hungry, but for all I know it is because the palms itch. He waited on my father—the banker—and he looks like a shaven Mephistopheles. That's all I can remember."

"You may come with me then to my chambers," she had said. "We can stop on the way—goodness knows where—but somewhere and get eggs and butter and cheese and milk. We'll go there."

"Can you cook!" he had exclaimed.

"Oh, no. Not at all. Does that make any difference?"

"Why should it?" Peter had inquired with sincerity. He had come to the point of departure from his first ideas of his destined relationship with Brena Selcoss.

In the days which had flowed on, Peter's coming and going at the new hotel to which he had moved so that no one might attach themselves to him, attracted the attention of the doorman with the worn

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livery, brass buttons and chronic apoplexy. "A wery peculiar young 'un," he had said to the porter. "A wery odd 'airpin! 'E's in an' hout at hall hours. I think 'e's gaming."

Perhaps he was. That might have been how he began. But the delight of a concentrated nothing-to-do settled over the two and Peter's steamer at last left the dock at Liverpool with American soldiers blaspheming between decks like a swarm of hornets returning to their hive and a purser scratching his head over the name of one DeWolfe, who was printed on the passenger list but did not claim his telegram. Peter had lost himself, and like a runaway child he was glad of it. There was only this difference—for Peter no one but his lawyers would make a search.

If one desires to know how far the breaking down of conventions had gone, it is only necessary to point out that upon one occasion where a laughing Sunday crowd had gathered about a hectic man preaching revolution from a stepladder in Hyde Park, Peter had sat down with the girl to listen. The sunlight was comfortable, the voice of the

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orator rose and broke with the regularity of waves upon a long warm beach, and Peter, dropping back with his head on the grass, watched a silvery airplane up from Hendon wheel about like a gray beetle who couldn't decide where to light, until he fell asleep.

When he awoke he was generating apologies. He intended to say that Brena and he, like fairy folk, had acquired the magic exemption from sleep but that, of course, occasionally——

None of his embarrassment was negotiable; she too was asleep; her hair, with its red-brown variations of autumn leaves, was alive with the sheen of the sunlight, her arm was under her forehead. The orator had spun his web to the end and all the crowd had buzzed away like escaping flies; but a little stray dog, with a face badly needing soap and water, had gone to sleep at her feet with its face on its paws, whining over a dream of a piece of meat with legs which could run faster than he.

To them life had become abundant with those unnoticed values, neglected by the commiserable blind beings who run along the ruts of unimaginative

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existence with their hands put into the coarse fist of some conventional, vulgar purpose. Together they went to the docks at night and listened to Chinese coolies in the galley of a tramp steamer from Hong Kong, where up from the yellow smoking interior as from a yellow smoking volcanic crater arose the strange crooning, bubbling, wailing songs of the Far East. They went to Hampstead and laughed at the smug little houses with their washed, respectable faces. They strolled through the National Gallery where they found a room of portraits of men of the time of Pitt, all of whom, as if by a manner of the time, had their hands thrust palm down into their buttoned coats; they called it the Stomach-ache Gallery. They sat on strange doorsteps while Peter wrote verses to the unknown inmates behind the barrier. They invited a match woman to dine with them and were well repaid by hearing from her lips a discourse upon the conceit of each age which always flatters itself into the belief that it is the world's crisis. They said good-night at all hours, they ate when hungry, and were as skillfully silent when the mood came as they were

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spontaneously chattering when their minds danced together.

Peter might have guessed, but he could not have known to what crisis this would lead.

"We have not forgotten how to play," he said to her.

A look of pain had come into her face, and into her eyes the old look of fear.

"I don't like it when you look like that," he had said.

"How?"

"Afraid."

"I'm afraid of nothing, Peter—nothing which makes ordinary fear in ordinary hearts, Peter. You will see some time that I am not afraid."

She had laughed at his perplexed expression, but without joy.

"Don't you bother about me," she told him. "You've promised that you wouldn't, you know."

He nodded. "I've kept my word."

"Perhaps——"

"What?"

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"Perhaps I'd better go back to-morrow—back to Beconshire."

It was the first word suggesting the end of their holiday. Both knew that this word must finally be spoken, but Peter had not expected to see quite the quick pallor which came into Brena's face as she forced out the sentence.

"We agreed, Peter, didn't we? And the time has come, I think."

DeWolfe felt as one who had been touched suddenly and unexpectedly upon the elbow by the dank, bony fingers of a corpse.

"There is one evil passion which I think does more harm than all the others," he said, clasping his strong hands over one knee. "It's fear. It ought to be made a crime."

"You know nothing of fear," she replied quietly. "You have not lived with fear day in and day out —year after year."

"No, I have not lived with fear at all," he went on, looking straight into her eyes. "I have not lived with it because it is a parasite. I have been wounded, but I learned that five-eighths of the pain

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was fear. I have been apprehensive of some terrible calamity and the fear was the major part of the calamity. There are men in the world in myriads who fear that they may lose their money. Fear is worse than poverty, Brena. For God's sake, let's not fear!"

"I did not say that I had fear," she said. "I only said I had lived with fear."

"The world is a fool about fear," Peter drove on. "It makes cowards, but it is also the mother——"

"Of what?"

"Of murderers," he said.

Brena was silent.

To Peter, as the day came to an end, it became more and more plain that she had indeed decided to go from London. She spoke of it as if it were a flight from some kind of danger. Once she said, "You are much too nice to take any risks, Peter." He had asked her about these risks, but she said, "Among other risks, that of wasting your energies on something which leads nowhere." When they had dined at a little café on Jermyn Street, she said, "Come home with me. No one sees us go in and

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out. It is like a nest hidden in an old stump. We can talk and then——"

"What?"

"Good-by. Good-night. Good-by."

All the way up Regent Street she kept her arm through his as if she feared that suddenly the mortal part of him would melt away, as if this contact might be made so real that it would live on in memory, and sometimes the illusion of this strong forearm, warm through its sleeve, might return to her.

The apartment, which she had retained without occupancy for some unexplained cause, was on a street of colorless brick houses where three street lamps, spaced with irritating precision, spread their radiance on the front walls in a fan-shaped insolence. It was in a house at the far end of this street—modest quarters for one who appeared to have plenty of money at her command; two flights of carpeted stairs led up to a little landing and her door.

She lit the lamp in the corner while Peter took the key from the hole, and the expanding light

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showed again the gray and gold room with its chintz curtains and its old English mahogany and the carved desk with its burly-maple panels and the hangings woven in Java at the windows. But Peter closed the door gently with his foot because he saw none of the room where the light was dim. Once more, as when he had seen her first, she stood beneath a light which poured down upon her its flood, emphasizing her as if she, of all the universe, had the quality of radiance and life. She had thrown aside her cloak; she stood with an aura of eternal youth about her, a girl who had come out of the ages and would live on without end, the center of all things. She gazed back at Peter from her dark eyes, wondering, waiting for him to move.

He walked toward her slowly, but without hesitation. In his face there was a square look—the look of a fixed will that has come into its own at last.

"Brena, I'm going to break my promise."

"Yes, dear, I understand. I can resist you, Peter. It would be hard, but I could do it. I do not want to do it. The promise was for your sake, Peter. Not for mine alone."

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"I've asked you nothing—no questions," he said, putting his hands upon each of her shoulders and holding her at arm's length.

"No, Peter—none."

"Because I did not care," said he.

"No matter what might come?"

"No matter what might come."

He drew her toward him and took a breath of the unperfumed fragrance of Brena Selcoss. And then with eager, hungry yearning, expressed only through the restraints of tenderness and profound respect, as if indeed he had some ancient deity in his arms, he kissed her lips, he pressed his cheek into her hair, he touched the back of her neck with his fingers.

"I love you," he said. "Can you understand all I mean by those plain words—I love you?"

"I love you, Peter."

"You must never leave me now."

She sprang back, tearing herself from him as if he had treacherously plunged a knife into her.

"Not that, Peter. Not that! I thought you knew. I thought this was—good-by."

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Like one in great pain which must be borne in silence, she threw back her head and stood quivering and tense.

"You can't have misunderstood!" she said in a breaking voice. "Is this my punishment—that you have misunderstood?"

"I want you, Brena—forever. I could have sworn I never would want any one—like this."

"Peter, it cannot be."

She seized his hand and, leaning over, pressed her wet cheek upon his wrist.

"It cannot be, Peter. It happened when I was no more myself—the one you know—than I am Muriel Benham. It happened when I was less than eighteen—seven years ago. I am married."

"Married?" he gasped, putting his other hand lightly upon her cheek. "Where, then, is he? How long ago did he——"

"Go?"

"Yes."

"Three years. I loathed him. I loathed his eternal fright."

"And where is he now?" he asked.

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"I do not know."

She shuddered.

"He——"

"Vanished."

Peter was white. Breathing hard, he said, "You —Brena—will you tell me everything?"

"Yes, Peter—before I go. I will tell you everything. It will show you why I am afraid—for you."

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V.

BRENA SELCOSS had been born on American soil.

One of her most vivid memories was that of her father, an austere man, who all his life long had carried about in the great and muscular body with its slow movements and its suggestion of latent giant power, a restless soul, ever seeking to find its way hither and thither like a strong giant ant of unceasing activity looking for new work.

She could remember dimly that her mother, whose hair never lost the red-gold Celtic glory until she and her second child died together when she was forty-two, had referred with whispered awe to the turbulent career of her husband, Demetrius. There were vague recollections of the mother's pride in the fact that he had risked and lost his career, begun so early in life and so brilliantly in chemical research and in a professorship in Athens, that he had tossed aside all consideration for himself to labor for a

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constitutional Greece and to risk his life in a conspiracy for freedom.

Mary Vaughn, as her name had been before her marriage, knew something of insurrection herself; she had had the ill fortune to be the daughter of the famous Tom Vaughn who was forced to flee Ireland with his family after the unsuccessful and forgotten "Secession Plot" of the 50's. Mary, from the time she was a child, sang like a bird. She might have become a famous contralto, for her voice had that same warm, rich quality inherited by her bewitched daughter, but like a bird her true home was upon the open moors with their free spaces and the shadows of the clouds passing over the grass; New York, of adamant and rectangles, was as good for the joy of her voice as it would have been for that of a wild nightingale. She never spoke harshly of that "turrible Babylon," however, without adding, "But 'twas there I met your father, Brena, and I'll speak no ill of it."

So, with some of her sparkling self dimmed, she gave all her expression of loyalty to her husband; her flight upon gauzy, unsubstantial wings was al-

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ways a circle about his head, as if she were a brilliant moth hovering about the top of a grim mountain which always quivered, threatening volcanic disasters. Something had died within her when they took her from the moors and the open places, and that which was left was an Irish beauty and a bottomless well of affection for her man and her Brena.

"It is from her that I have a legacy," said Brena. "It is a storehouse of unspent passion and tenderness. And it is still mine—to do with as I please."

She did not go on to say that those to whom it would be opened might enter to be destroyed.

Brena could not recall the details of her mother's accounts of the part her father had played in the disturbed period of Greece. There were vague impressions of a secret organization under the "Council of Twelve" to which he had sworn devotion, of a problem of honor which he had decided by following a course of conduct that had brought down upon him the penalty of assassination. A sharply defined portrait of this young patriot, a member of the Salamis Deputation of 1862 informing King Otho, the last of the Bavarian alien monarchs, that the

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throne of Greece was vacant, remained in Brena's mind. She confessed to a thrill of pride that upon an occasion, historic and momentous, her father, then only twenty-eight, had been present in a major rôle. This had been the top moment of his life; those whom he had aided turned upon him. The strength of a powerful secret organization, gradually falling into unscrupulous hands after its true functions were over, had been turned against him. His name became a traditional center of oaths of vengeance; with knife wounds upon his great arms and thighs and an unremoved bullet in his shoulder, he came to America. He was a man who had lived one life, and expected the world to recognize him as an important being. It saw in him only a silent, learned man, inventing a thousand ambitions and from them choosing no fixed purpose, disregarding money in a land where money, for the time, was the fetich, careless of poverty but humiliated periodically by debt, discoursing upon biological chemistry years before the scientific world had the imagination to listen—a giant, with dark haunting eyes, long Homeric hair and beard, always brushed back

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as if he were eternally facing a hurricane, and a voice and presence as mysteriously impressive as that of some Elijah. Even Brena remembered his affection for her, profound as it was, as being like the affection of some god of mythology directed down upon a beautiful but mortal child.

Between the frivolous sunlight of her mother and the magnificent shadow of her father, Brena grew, acquiring from one a whimsical humor and from the other a calm of high cliffs and of a Parthenon.

According to Brena's own phrase, she "had no childhood and all childhood." She had none because her father, after a month or two of concentrated application of his mind upon studies of similarities in the architecture of ancient Mexico and prehistoric Greece, would find the butcher, landlord and grocer at his door, and then as if awakened he would take his little family and board the train for some minor university where he would teach himself out of debt and into a period of bitterness of heart because neither his learning nor his important place in history were given recognition. With a great sigh from his expansive chest, he would move

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on again in pursuit of some inquiry, some research, some new application of his heroic, impractical head. In consequence, the little girl, red of cheeks, with spindling legs and great wondering brown eyes, never stayed long enough anywhere for acquaintance with children and for play. Tutored by her mother and by the booming, terrifying voice of Demetrius Selcoss when he, as he said, could spare time for it, she learned a taste for books and consumed them according to her own story "like a hungry little pig regardless of the wisdom of a diet and eating all that was within reach." The books served to give her a fake veneer of experience and maturity.

This outer covering was fake because it failed to represent the truth that Brena had reached sixteen, with physical attributes which made men turn as she passed but without any consciousness of having approached womanhood. Without contacts with childhood, ever on the move, living in hotels, in boarding houses, in suburban cottages, ever dependent upon one rickety patched old trunk and her two parents, she had acquired the habits of child-

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like dependence. Like a child she found that life was shaped without intervention of her own. She allowed herself to be dragged along with her mixed load of conceptions drawn from a helter-skelter reading. Among other conceptions was that eternal fiction of the gallant and perfect fairy story prince whose bride she would one day be. To be a bride meant little more in terms of real life than to become an angel.

"If I ever have a daughter," said Brena Selcoss, "I will never allow her to have this dangerous dream of a Prince Charming. It is the common foundation upon which girls throw sensible judgment to the four winds and come to critical moments without a thought of the flowing years of real life which are to come. It might have wrecked me when I was seventeen."

While Brena was seventeen, indeed, many landmarks had been set up in her development. Her mother had died quietly in bed the year before without a gasp of warning, without a murmur, a smile upon her engaging lips. Brena had been asleep in the next room, and Demetrius, having one

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of his spells of insomnia, sat almost all night long on the porch of their cottage in Dallas, Texas, in a rocker which squeaked a little as his bulk moved. He had come up at dawn to find his wife, with the first rays of summer sun thrown through the shutters and onto the happy, lifeless figure in bars of gold. It shimmered on her lovely hair; in all the red-gold mass there was not one strand of gray.

"This is the time for great calm," he had said to Brena, as he woke her with his giant's hand upon her shoulder. "The life has gone from your mother's beautiful body, my daughter, but she will live always with us because she was a brave and tender soul which endures forever."

"I thought that she had endless life," he said after a pause, burying his bearded face in his sun-browned hands. "It is the way with me always—I am unprepared—always unprepared."

This was the only flinching brought out in him by the death of the Irish girl he had adored so completely, to whose songs he had listened while his life went askew and in whose smiles he had warmed the chills of bitterness and whose arms had

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stilled the restlessness behind his great dark glowing eyes. He went on his way unchanged, but no doubt making new attempts to reach across the chasm which separated him from the yearning heart of his daughter.

These attempts were failures. Beside each other, when he was home, they were as persons alone; the one reminiscent, living in a past where great figures of history stalked majestically; the other expectant, with the eyes of youth turned away from the shadows and toward the glints of the future.

For three or more years before Mary Vaughn Selcoss had died, she had been alarmed by a new characteristic of her husband. In Dallas when he, who once had known the tang of great deeds done in a setting of romantic grandeur, came out through the hot streets on a common electric car and walked up a suburban avenue with its cheap bungalows and its phonographs, its lawn sprinklers trying to raise the sun-baked grass from the dead, and its concrete sidewalks, Brena's mother had noticed a look in his eyes of a haunting fear.

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