RED MASQUERADE

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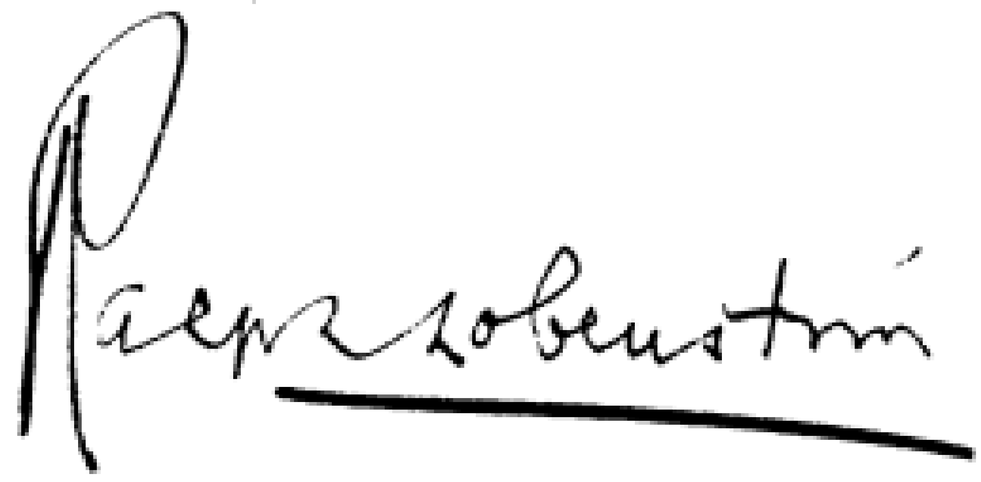

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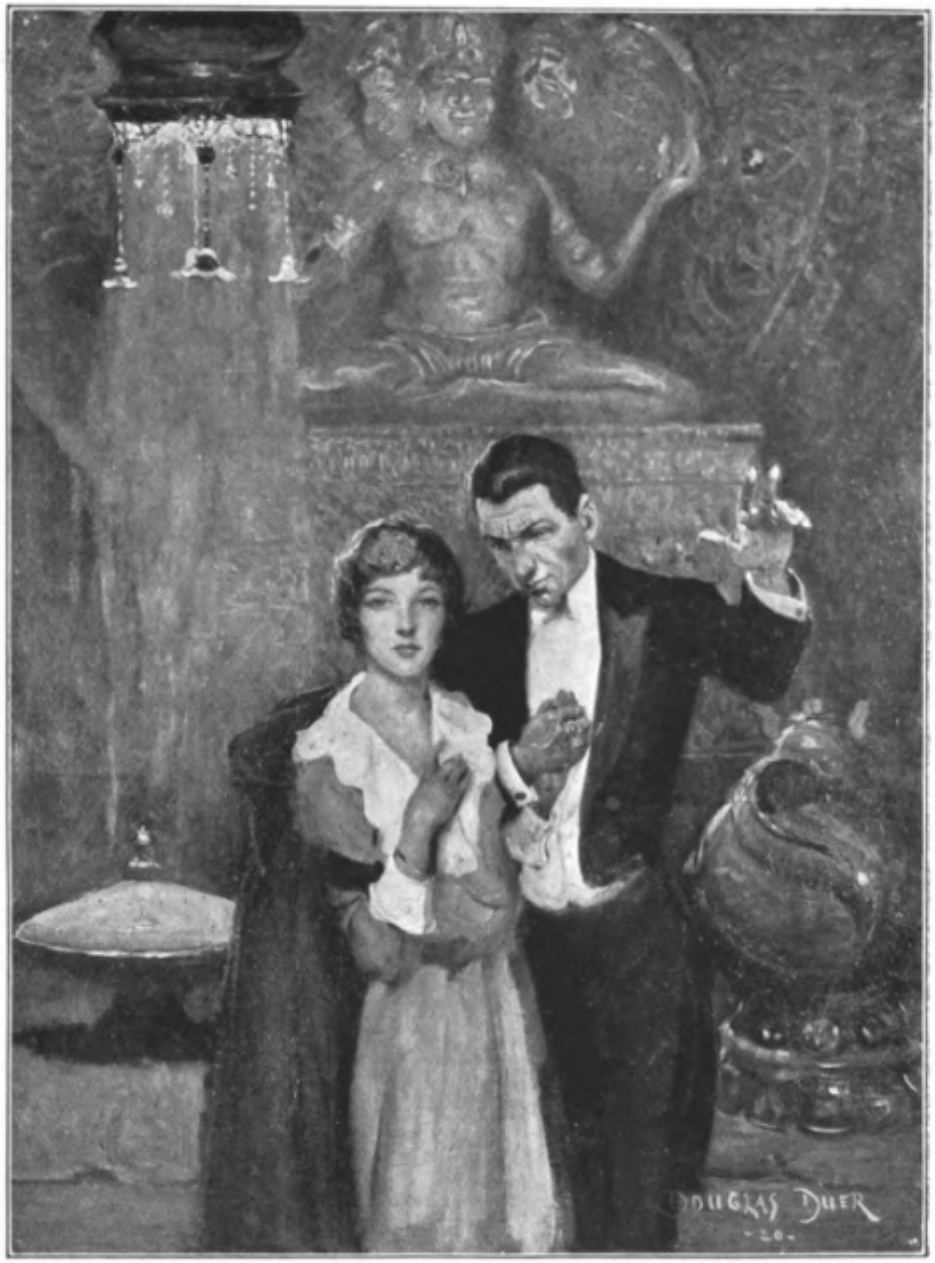

"Prince Victor gave a gesture of pain and reluctance. 'Must I tell you?'"

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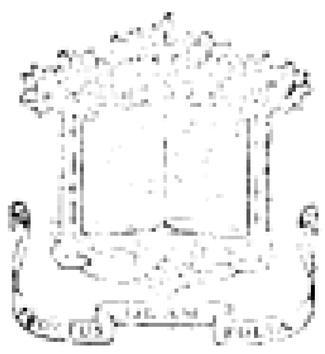
Being the Story of

THE LONE WOLF'S DAUGHTER

BY

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE



FRONTISPIECE

BY

DOUGLAS DUER

GARDEN CITY, N. Y., AND TORONTO
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1921

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UNITED STATES AND GREAT BRITAIN

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TO

J. PARKER READ, JR., ESQ.

THE CINEMA THAT WAS HIS

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APOLOGY

THIS tale quite brazenly derives from the author's invention for motion pictures which Mr. J. Parker Read, Jr., produced in the autumn of 1919 under the title of "The Lone Wolf's Daughter."

It is only fair to state, however, that the author has in this version taken as many high-handed liberties with the version used by the photoplay director as the latter took with the original.

The chance to get even for once was too tempting. . . .

Messrs. Doubleday, Page & Company in the first instance, and then Mr. Arthur T. Vance, editor of *The Pictorial Review*, in which the story was published as a serial, were equally guilty of the encouragement which results in its appearance in its present guise.

L. J. V.

Westport—31 December, 1920.

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Books by Louis Joseph Vance

CYNTHIA-OF-THE-MINUTE
JOAN THURSDAY
NOBODY
NO MAN'S LAND
POOL OF FLAME
PRIVATE WAR
SHEEP'S CLOTHING
THE BANDBOX
THE BLACK BAG
THE BRASS BOWL
THE BRONZE BELL
THE DARK MIRROR
THE DAY OF DAYS
THE DESTROYING ANGEL
THE FORTUNE HUNTER
THE ROMANCE OF TERENCE O'ROURKE
TREY O' HEARTS

Stories About "The Lone Wolf"

THE LONE WOLF
THE FALSE FACES
RED MASQUERADE
ALIAS THE LONE WOLF

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BOOK I

A CHAPTER FROM THE YOUTH OF MONSIEUR MICHAEL LANYARD

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RED MASQUERADE

I

PLEBEIAN AND PRINCE

THE gentleman was not in the least bored who might have been and was seen on that wintry afternoon in Nineteen hundred, lounging with one shoulder to a wall of the dingy salesroom and idly thumbing a catalogue of effects about to be put up at auction; but his insouciance was so unaffected that the inevitable innocent bystander might have been pardoned for perceiving in him a pitiable victim of the utterest ennui.

In point of fact, he was privately relishing life with enviable gusto. In those days he could and did: being alive was the most satisfying pastime he could imagine, or cared to, who was a thundering success in his own conceit and in fact as well; since all the world for whose regard he cared a twopenny-bit admired, respected, and esteemed him in his public status, and admired, respected, and feared him in his private capacity, and paid him heavy tribute to boot.

More than that, he was young, still very young indeed, barely beyond the threshold of his chosen

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career. To his eagerly exploring eye the future unrolled itself in the likeness of an endless scroll illuminated with adventures all piquant, picturesque, and profitable. With the happy assurance of lucky young impudence he figured the world to himself as his oyster; and if his method of helping himself to the succulent contents of its stubborn shell might have been thought questionable (as unquestionably it was) he was no more conscious of a conscience to give him qualms than he was of pangs of indigestion. Whereas his digestive powers were superb. . . .

This way of killing an empty afternoon, too, was much to his taste. The man adored auctions. To his mind a most delectable flavour of discreet scandal inhered in such collections of shabby properties from anonymous homes. Nothing so piqued his imagination as some well-worn piece of furniture—say an ancient escritoire with ink stains on its green baize writing-bed (dried life-blood of love letters long since dead!) and all its pigeon-holes and little drawers empty of everything but dust and the seductive smell of secrets; or a dressing-table whose bewildered mirror, to-day reflecting surroundings cold and strange, had once been quick and warm to the beauty of eyes brilliant with delight or blurred with tears; or perchance a bed. . . .

And even aside from such stimuli to a lively and ingenious fancy, there was always the chance that one might pick up some priceless treasure at an auction sale, some rare work of art dim with desuetude

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and the disrespect of ignorance: jewellery of quaintest old-time artistry; a misprized bit of bronze; a book, it might be an overlooked copy of a first edition inscribed by some immortal author to a forgotten love; or even—if one were in rare luck—a picture, its pristine brilliance faded, the signature of the artist illegible beneath the grime of years, evidence of its origin perceptible only to the discerning eye—to such an eye, for instance, as Michael Lanyard boasted. For paintings were his passion.

Already, indeed, at this early age, he was by way of being something of a celebrity, in England and on the Continent, as a collector of the nicest discrimination.

And then he found unfailing human interest in the attendance attracted by auction sales; in the dealers, gentlemen generally of pronounced idiosyncrasies; in the auctioneers themselves, robust fellows, wielding a sort of rugged wit singular to their calling, masters of deep guile, endowed with intuitions which enabled them at a glance or from the mere intonation of a voice to discriminate between the serious-minded and those frivolous souls who bid without meaning to buy, but as a rule for nothing more than the curious satisfaction of being able to brag that they had been outbid.

But it was in the ranks of the general public that one found most amusement; seldom did a sale pass off undistinguished by at least one incident uniquely revealing or provocative. And for such moments

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Lanyard was always on the qui vive, but quietly, who knew that nothing so quickly stifles spontaneity as self-consciousness. So, if he studied his company closely, he was studious to do it covertly; as now, when he seemed altogether engrossed in the catalogue, whereas his gaze was freely roving.

Thus far to-day a mere handful of people other than dealers had drifted in to wait for the sale to begin —something for which the weather was largely to blame, for the day was dismal with a clammy drizzle settling from a low and leaden sky—and with a solitary exception these few were commonplace folk.

This one Lanyard had marked down midway across the room, in the foremost row of chairs beneath the salesman's pulpit: by his attire a person of fashion (though his taste might have been thought a trace florid) who carried himself with an air difficult of definition but distinctive enough in its way.

Whoever he was and what his quality, he was unmistakably somebody of consequence in his own reckoning, and sufficiently well-to-do to dress the part he chose to play in life. Certainly he had a conscientious tailor and a busy valet, both saturate with British tradition. Yet the man they served was no Englishman.

Aside from his clothing, everything about him had an exotic tang, though what precisely his racial antecedents might have been was rather a riddle; a habit so thoroughly European went oddly with the hints of Asiatic strain which one thought to detect in his

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lineaments. Nevertheless, it were difficult otherwise to account for the faintly indicated slant of those little black eyes, the blurred modelling of the nose, the high cheekbones, and the thin thatch of coarse black hair which was plastered down with abundant brilliantine above that mask of pallid features.

The grayish pallor of the man, indeed, was startling, so that Lanyard for some time sought an adjective to suit it, and was content only when he hit on the word *evil*. Indeed, evil seemed the inevitable and only word; none other could possibly so well fit that strange personality.

His interest thus fixed, he awaited confidently what could hardly fail to come, a moment of self-betrayal.

That fell more quickly than he had hoped. Of a sudden the decent quiet of King Street, thus far accentuated rather than disturbed by the routine grind of hansoms and four-wheelers, was enlivened by spirited hoofs whose clatter stilled abruptly in front of the auction room.

Turning a speciously languid eye toward the weeping window, Lanyard had a partial view of a handsomely appointed private equipage, a pair of spanking bays, a liveried coachman on the box.

The carriage door slammed with a hollow clap; a footman furled an umbrella and climbed to his place beside the driver. As the vehicle drew away, one caught a glimpse of a crest upon the panel.

Two women entered the auction room.

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II

THESE ladies were young, neither much older than Lanyard, both were very much alive, openly betraying an infatuation with existence very like his own, and both were lovely enough to excuse the exquisite insolence of their young vitality.

As is frequently the case in such associations, since a pretty woman seldom courts comparison with another of her own colouring, one was dark, the other fair.

With the first, Lanyard was, like all London, on terms of visual acquaintance. The reigning beauty of the hour, her portrait was enjoying a vogue of its own in the public prints. Furthermore, Lady Diantha Mainwaring was moderately the talk of the town, in those prim, remotely ante-bellum days—thanks to high spirits and a whimsical tendency to flout the late Victorian proprieties; something which, however, had yet to lead her into any prank perilous to her good repute.

The other, a girl whose hair of golden bronze was well set off by Russian sables, Lanyard did not know

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at all; but he knew at sight that she was far too charming a creature to be neglected if ever opportunity offered to be presented to her. And though the first article of his creed proscribed women of such disastrous attractions as deadly dangerous to his kind, he chose without hesitation to forget all that, and at once began to cudgel his wits for a way to scrape acquaintance with the companion of Lady Diantha.

Their arrival created an interesting bustle, a buzz of comment, a craning of necks—flattery accepted by the young women with ostensible unconcern, a cliché of their caste. As they had entered in a humour keyed to the highest pitch of gaiety consistent with good breeding, so with more half-stifled laughter they settled into chairs well apart from all others but, as it happened, in a direct line between Lanyard and the man whose repellent cast of countenance had first taken his interest.

Thus it was that Lanyard, after eyeing the young women unobserved as long as he liked, lifted his glance to discover upon that face a look that amazed him.

It wasn't too much to say (he thought) that the man was transfigured by malevolence, so that he blazed with it, so that hatred fairly flowed, an invisible yet manifest current of poisoned fire, between him and the girl with the hair of burnished bronze.

All the evil in him seemed to be concentrated in that glare. And yet its object remained unconscious of it or, if at all sensitive, dissembled superbly. The

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man was apparently no more present to her perceptions than any other person there, except her companion.

Presently, becoming sensible of Lanyard's intrigued regard, the man looked up, caught him in a stare and, mortally affronted, rewarded him with a look of virulent enmity.

Not to be outdone, Lanyard gave a fleeting smile, a bare curving of lips together with an almost imperceptible narrowing of amused eyes—goading the other to the last stage of exasperation—then calmly ignored the fellow, returning indifferent attention to the progress of the sale.

Since nothing was being offered at the moment to draw a bid from him, he maintained a semblance of interest solely to cover his thoughts, meanwhile lending a civil ear to the garrulous tongue of a dealer of his acquaintance who, having edged nearer to indulge a failing for gossip, found a ready auditor. For when Lanyard began to heed the sense of the other's words, their subject was the companion of Lady Diantha Mainwaring.

". . . Princess Sofia Vassilyevski, you know, the Russian beauty."

Lanyard lifted his eyebrows the fraction of an inch, meaning to say he didn't know but at the same time didn't object to enlightenment.

"But you must have heard of her! For weeks all London has been talking about her jewels, her escapades, her unhappy marriage."

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"Married?" Lanyard made a sympathetic mouth. "And so young! Quel dommage!"

"But separated from her husband."

"Ah!" Lanyard brightened up. "And who, may one ask, is the husband?"

"Why, he's here, too—over there in the front row—chap with the waxed moustache and putty-coloured face, staring at her now."

"Oh, that animal! And what right has he got to look like that?"

The buzz of the scandalmonger grew more confidential: "They say he's never forgiven her for leaving him—though the Lord knows she had every reason, if half they tell is true. They say he's mad about her still, gives her no rest, follows her everywhere, is all the time begging her to return to him——"

"But who the deuce is the beast?" Lanyard interrupted, impatiently. "You know, I don't like his face."

"Prince Victor," the whisper pursued with relish—"by-blow, they say, of a Russian grand duke and a Manchu princess—half Russian, half Chinese, all devil!"

Without looking, Lanyard felt that Prince Victor's stare had again shifted from the women, and that the mongrel son of the alleged grand duke was aware he had become a subject of comment. So the eminent collector of works of art elected to dismiss the subject with a negligent lift of one shoulder.

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"Ah, well! Daresay he can't help his ugly make-up. All the same, he's spoiling my afternoon. Be a good fellow, do, and put him out."

The Briton chuckled a deprecating chuckle; meaning to say, he hoped Lanyard was spoofing; but since one couldn't be sure, one's only wise course was to play safe.

"Really, Monsieur Lanyard! I'm afraid one couldn't quite do *that*, you know!"

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III

THE sale dragged monotonously. The paintings offered were mostly of mediocre value. The gathering was apathetic.

Lanyard bid in two or three sketches, more out of idleness than because he wanted them, and succeeded admirably in seeming ignorant of the existence of the Princess Sofia and the husband whose surface of a blackguard was so harmonious with his reputation.

In time, however, a change was presaged by an abrupt muting of that murmured conversation between the beautiful Russian and the almost equally beautiful Englishwoman. An inquisitive look discovered the princess sitting slightly forward and intently watching the auctioneer.

The pose of an animated, delightful child, hanging breathlessly upon the progress of some fascinating game: one's gaze lingered approvingly upon a bewitching profile with half-parted lips, saw that excitement was faintly colouring the cheeks beneath shadowy and enigmatic eyes, remarked the sweet spirit that poised that lovely head.

And then one looked farther, and saw the prince,

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like the princess, absorbed in the business at the auction block, his slack elegance of the raffish aristocrat forgotten, all his being tense with purpose, strung taut—as taut at least as that soft body, only half-masculine in mould and enervated by loose living, could ever be. One thought of a rather elderly and unfit snake, stirred by the sting of some long-buried passion out of the lassitude of years of slothful self-indulgence, poising to strike. . . .

At the elbow of the auctioneer an attendant was placing on exhibition a landscape that was either an excellent example of the work of Corot or an imitation no less excellent. At that distance Lanyard felt inclined to dub it genuine, though he knew well that Europe was sown thick with spurious Corots, and would never have risked his judgment without closer inspection.

He was accordingly perplexed when, after a brief exhortation by the auctioneer, discreetly non-committal as to the antecedents of the canvas—"attributed to Corot"—Prince Victor, who had been straining forward like a hound in leash, half rose in his eagerness to offer:

"One thousand guineas!"

The entire company stirred as one and sat up sharply. Even the auctioneer was momentarily stricken dumb. And for the first time the Princess Sofia acknowledged the presence of her husband, and got from him that look of white hatred with a sneer of triumph thrown in for good measure.

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Though she affected indifference, Lanyard saw her slender body transiently shaken by a shudder, it might have been of dread. But she was quick to pull herself together, and the auctioneer had scarcely found his tongue—"One thousand guineas for this magnificent canvas attributed to Corot"—when her clear and youthful voice cut in:

"Two thousand guineas!"

This the prince capped with a monosyllable:

"Three!"

Stupefaction settled upon the audience. The auctioneer hesitated, blinked astonished eyes, framed unspoken phrases with halting lips. Prince Victor again gave his wife the full value of his vindictive snarl. She would not see, but it was plain that she was cruelly dismayed, that it cost her an effort to rise to the topping bid:

"Thirty-five hundred guineas!"

"Four thousand!"

"Four thousand I am offered . . ."

The auctioneer faltered, a spasm of honesty shook him, he proceeded:

"It is only fair, ladies and gentlemen, that I should state that this canvas is not put up as an authentic Corot. It very possibly is such, in fact"—the seizure was passing swiftly—"it bears every evidence of having come from the brush of the master. But we cannot guarantee it. There is, however, a gentleman present who is amply qualified to pass upon the merits of this work. With his permission"—his eye sought

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Lanyard's—"I venture to request the opinion of Monsieur Michael Lanyard, the noted connoisseur!"

Lanyard detached a deprecating smile from the pages of his catalogue, but his contemplated response was cut short by Prince Victor.

"I am not aware," that one said, icily, "that the authenticity of this painting is a material question. Nor have I any need of the opinion of this gentleman, whatever his qualifications. I have bid four thousand guineas, and insist that the sale proceed. If there are no further bids, the canvas is mine."

The auctioneer shrugged, and offered Lanyard an apologetic bow. "I am sorry——" he began.

"Four thousand guineas!" snapped the prince.

Resigned, the auctioneer resumed:

"Four thousand guineas offered. Are there any more bids? Going——"

"Forty-five hundred!"

Beyond reasonable doubt the princess had spurred herself mercilessly to find sufficient courage to make this latest bid. Lanyard saw her in a rigour of despair, hoping against hope. Only too surely something in the picture, some association—heaven knew what!—was more precious to her, almost, than life, though she had gone already to the limit of her means and perhaps a bit beyond. If this bid failed, she was lost. Her anxiety was pitiful.

"Five thousand!"

In the princess something snapped: she recoiled upon herself, sat crushed, head drooping, white-

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gloved hands working in her lap. One detected an appealing quiver on her lips, and noted, or imagined, a suspicious brightness beneath the long dark lashes that swiftly screened her eyes. Her young bosom moved convulsively. She was beaten, near to tears.

"Five thousand guineas . . . going . . . going . . ."

The face of the prince was a mocking devil-mask in gray and black. Lanyard found himself loathing it. Impossible to stand idle and see the creature get the better of an unhappy girl . . .

"Five thousand one hundred guineas!"

With his wits in a blur of amaze, Lanyard knew the echo of his own voice.

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IV

THE FOOL AND HIS MONEY

ONE reflected rather bitterly on the many and obvious oversights of a putatively all-wise Providence, in especial on its failure so to fashion the body of man as to enable him on occasion to discipline his own flesh in the most ignominious manner imaginable.

Lanyard could have kicked himself; that is to say, he wanted to, and thought it rather a pity he couldn't, and publicly, at that. For the freak he had just indulged was rank quixotism, something which had as much place in the code of a man of his calling as milk of human kindness in the management of a pawnshop.

On second thought, he wasn't so sure. It might have been that quixotism had inspired his infatuate gesture, but it might quite as conceivably have been every-day vanity or plain cussedness: a noble impulse to servea pretty lady in distress, a spontaneous device to engage her interest, or a low desire to plague a personality as antipathetic to his own as that of a rattlesnake.

In point of simple fact (he decided), his impelling motive had been a mixture of all three.

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In all three respects, furthermore, it proved notably successful; in the two last named without delay.

The Princess Sofia at once took note of Lanyard, with wonder, some misgivings, and a hint of admiration. For he was not only a personable person in those days, with a suggestion of devil-may-care in his air that measurably lifted the curse of his superficial foppishness, but he was putting a spoke in Prince Victor's wheel. And whosoever did that, by chance, out of sheer voluptuousness, or with malice prepense, won immediate title to Sofia's favourable regard. If she couldn't thwart Victor herself, she would be much obliged to anybody who could and did; and she was nothing loath to betray her bias by looking kindly upon her self-appointed champion.

A whispered communication from Lady Diantha did nothing to abate her overt approbation.

As for Victor, his face of leaden gray took on a tinge of green; he quaked with rage, and the glare he loosed on Lanyard made that young man wonder if he were mistaken in believing that the eyes of the prince shone in that dusky room with something nearly akin to the phosphorescence to be seen in the eyes of an animal at night.

The notion was amusing: Lanyard paid it the tribute of a quiet smile, in direct acknowledgment of which Prince Victor snarled:

"Six thousand guineas!"

"And a hundred," Lanyard added.

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Brief pause prefaced a bid designed to squelch him completely:

"Ten thousand!"

In a fatigued voice he uttered: "One hundred more."

"Fifteen——!"

This time Lanyard contented himself with nodding to the auctioneer; and the lips of the latter had barely parted to parrot the bid when Victor sprang to his feet, his features working, his limbs shaking so that the legs of the chair beside him, whose back he seized, chattered on the floor, while the high-pitched voice broke into a screech:

"Twenty!"

And Lanyard said: "And one."

"Twenty thousand one hundred guineas!" chanted the auctioneer. "Are there any more bids? You, sir——?" He aimed a respectful bow at Prince Victor, who snubbed him with a sign of fury. "Going—going—gone! Sold to Monsieur Lanyard for twenty thousand and one hundred guineas!"

And Lanyard had the satisfaction of seeing Prince Victor, after a vain effort to master his emotion, snatch up his topper, clap it on his head, and make for the door with footsteps whose stuttering haste was in poor accord with the dignity of his exalted station.

But it was debatable whether this satisfaction plus the possession of a questionable Corot was worth its cost. And Lanyard wasn't in the humour, now that

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the heat of contest began to abate, to look to Princess Sofia for promise of further reward. Even if he could have been guilty of such impertinence, indeed, he must have forborne for very shame. After all (he told himself) he hadn't figured very creditably, permitting petty prejudice to sway him as it had. He felt singularly sure he had played the gratuitous ass in this affair, and he didn't in the least desire to see the reflection of a like conviction in the eyes of a pretty young woman with a flair for the ridiculous.

He dissembled his diminished self-esteem, however, most successfully, as he proceeded to the desk of the auctioneer's clerk, filled in a cheque for the amount of his purchase, and gave instructions for its delivery.

Whether by intention or inadvertence, he was followed from the auction room by the Princess Sofia and Lady Diantha Mainwaring; and just outside the entrance he found Prince Victor waiting with all the air of a gentleman impatient for a cab to happen along and pick him up out of the drizzle.

But in view of the fact that he made no overtures to a passing hansom, which swerved in to the curb in response to a signal of Lanyard's cane, this last concluded that the prince was up to his reputedly favourite game of waylaying his rebel wife.

If such were the case, Lanyard had no wish to witness a public wrangle between the two. So he stepped briskly up on the carriage-block, and only hesitated when he saw that the prince, utterly ignoring the presence of the princess and Lady Diantha,

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was edging forward and cocking an alert ear to catch the address which Lanyard was on the point of giving the cabby.

Hugely diverted, the adventurer looked round with a quirk of his brows, and amiably commented:

"Monsieur's interest is so flattering! If he really must know, I'm going home now, to my rooms in Halfmoon Street. Au revoir, monsieur le prince!"

He beamed benignly upon that convulsed countenance, and saw crestfallen Prince Victor slink away, to the music of smothered laughter from the ladies in the doorway—toward which Lanyard was careful not to look.

Then, in high feather with himself, he chirped to the driver and hopped into the hansom.

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V

AS LANYARD'S cab swung away, the carriage wheeled in to take up the Princess Sofia and Lady Diantha Mainwaring. Observing this, Lanyard poked his stick through the little trap in the roof of the hansom and suggested that the driver pull up, climb down, adjust some imaginary fault with the harness and, when the carriage had passed, follow it with discretion.

Enchanted by sight of a half-sóvereign in the palm of his fare, the cabby executed this manœuvre to admiration; with the upshot that Lanyard got home half an hour later than he would have had he proceeded to his rooms direct, but with information of value to recompense him.

It wasn't his habit to lose time in those days of his youth. And lest his character be misconstrued (which would be deplorable) it may as well be stated now that he had not laid down upward of twenty thousand good golden guineas for a colourable Corot without having a tolerably clear notion of how he meant to reimburse himself if it should turn out that he had paid too dear for his whistle.

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The hint imparted by his garrulous acquaintance of the auction room—to the effect that the Princess Sofia was famous, among other things, for the magnificence of her personal jewellery—had found a good home where it wasn't in danger of suffering for want of doting interest.

And now one knew where their owner lived, and in what state . . .

Alighting at his own door, the adventurer surprised Prince Victor, morosely ambling by, in his vast fatuity no doubt imagining that his passage through Halfmoon Street would go unremarked in the dusk of that early winter evening. He wasn't at all pleased to find himself mistaken; and though Lanyard did his best with his blandest smile to make amends for having discomfited the prince by getting home later than he had promised to, his good-natured effort was repaid only by a spiteful scowl.

So he laughed aloud, and went indoors rejoicing.

An hour or so later the painting was delivered by a porter from the auction room. But Lanyard was in his bath at the time and postponed examining his doubtful prize till he had dressed for dinner. For, though it was his whim to dine in his rooms alone, and though he had no fixed plans for the evening, Lanyard was too thoroughly cosmopolitan not to do in Cockaigne as the Cockneys do.

Besides, in this uncertain life one never knows what the next hour will bring forth; whereas if one is in

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evening dress after six o'clock, one is armoured against every emergency.

At seven he sat down to the morbid sort of a meal one gets in London lodgings: a calm soup; a segment of vague fish smothered painlessly in a pale pink blanket of sauce; a cut from the joint, rare and lukewarm; potatoes boiled dead; sad sea-kale; nonconformist pudding; conservative biscuit, and radical cheese.

With the aid and abetment of a bottle of excellent Montrachet, however, one contrived to worry through.

Meanwhile, Lanyard inspected his recent purchase, which occupied a place of honour, propped up on the arms of the chair on his right.

It was seldom that Lanyard entertained a guest of such equivocal character. Wagging a reproving head—"My friend," he harangued the canvas, "you are lucky to have been sold. Sorry I can't say as much for myself."

It was really too bad it wasn't a bit better. It wasn't often that one encountered so genuine a counterfeit. The hand of an artist had painted it, but never the hand of Corot. Everything Corot was accustomed to put into his painting was there, except himself. The abode had been prepared in all respects as the master would have had it, but his spirit had not entered into it, it remained without life.

Still, Lanyard concluded, surveying his prize through the illusioning fumes of his cigar, while the

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waiter cleared away, it wasn't so bad after all, it wouldn't be in the end a total loss. He could afford to cart the thing back to Paris with him and give it room in his private gallery; and some day, doubtless, some rich American would pay a handsome price for it on the strength of its having found place in the collection of Michael Lanyard, even though it lacked the cachet of his guarantee.

But what the devil had made it so precious to the soi-disant Prince Victor and his charming wife?

But for a single circumstance Lanyard would have been tempted to believe he had been craftily rooked by an accomplished chevalier d'industrie and his female confederate; but too much and too real passion had been betrayed in the auction room to countenance that suspicion.

No: he hadn't been rigged; at least, not by design. Something more than its intrinsic value had rendered the canvas priceless in the esteem of those two, something had been at stake more than mere possession of what they might have believed to be a real Corot.

But what?

Perplexed, Lanyard took the picture in his hands—it was not too unwieldy, even in its frame—and examined it with nose so close to the painted surface that he seemed to be smelling it. Then he turned it over and scowled at its reverse. And shook a baffled head.

But when he tapped the face of the picture smartly

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with a finger-nail, he gave a slight start, passed a hand over it with the palm pressed flat, and suddenly assumed the humanly intelligent expression of a hunting-dog that has hit on a warm scent.

Strong fingers and a fruit knife quickly extracted the painting from its frame and loosened the canvas from its stretcher, proving that the latter held in fact two canvases instead of one. Between these had been secreted several sheets of notepaper of two kinds, stamped with two crests, all black with closely penned handwriting.

Lanyard gathered them into a sheaf and scanned them cursorily, even with distaste. True enough, it might be argued that he had bought and paid for the right to pry into the secrets they betrayed; but it was not a right he enjoyed exercising. A fairly thoroughgoing state of sophistication, together with some innate instincts of delicacy, worked to render him to a degree immune to such gratification as others might derive from being made privy to an exotic affair of the heart. Revelation of human weakness was no special treat to him. And if his eyebrows mounted as he read, if the corners of his mouth drew down, if once and again he uttered an "*Oh! oh!*" of shocked expostulation, he was (like most of us, incurably an actor in private as well as in public life) merely running through business which convention has designated as appropriate to such circumstances. At bottom he was being stimulated to thought more than to derision.

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Putting the letters aside, he bowed his head upon a hand and reflected sagely that love was the very deuce.

He wondered if he could or ever would love or be loved so madly.

He rather hoped not . . .

Here, if you please, was the scion of a reigning royal family risking as pretty a scandal as one could well imagine—and all for love! Given a few more days of life, and he would have jeopardized his right of succession and set half-a-dozen European chancelleries by the ears—and all for love! But for his untimely end, that poor, pretty creature would have joined her life to his, consummating at one stroke her freedom from the intolerable conditions of existence with Victor and a diplomatic convulsion which might only too easily have precipitated all Europe into a great war—and all for lawless love!

So once more in history Death had served well the interests of public morality.

After a year these letters alone survived . . .

How they had survived, what hands had collected and secreted them, and for what purpose, intrigued the imagination no end. Lanyard inclined to credit Princess Sofia with the indiscretion of saving these souvenirs of a grande passion that had almost made history. There was the sentimental motive to account for such action, and another: the satisfaction of knowing she had concrete proof of her intention to treat Victor as he had treated her.

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Then somehow the painting must have passed out of her possession; and in all likelihood she had made frantic and awkward efforts to regain it which had aroused the suspicions of Victor; with the sequel of that afternoon. . . .

Lanyard's speculations were interrupted by the peremptory telephone. Without premonition he picked up the combination receiver and transmitter. But his memory was still so haunted by echoes of that delightful voice which he had heard in the auction room, he couldn't entertain any doubt that he heard it now.

"Are you there?" it said "Will you be good enough to put me through to Monsieur Lanyard?"

The inspiration to mischief was instantaneous: Lanyard replied promptly in accents as much unlike his own as he could manage:

"Sorry, ma'am; Mister Lanyard dined hout to-night. Would there be any message, ma'am?"

"Oh, how annoying!"

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Do you know when he will be home?"

"If this is the lidy 'e was expectin' to call this evenin'——"

"Yes?" the dulcet voice said, encouragingly.

"—Mister Lanyard sed as 'ow 'e might be quite lite, but 'e'd 'urry all 'e could, ma'am, and would the lidy please wite."

"Thank you *so* much."

"'Nk-you, ma'am."

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Smiling, Lanyard replaced the receiver and rang for the waiter.

When that one answered, the adventurer was hatted and coated and opening his door.

"I'm called out," he said—"can't quite say when I'll be back. But I'm expecting a lady to call. Will you tell the doorman to show her into my rooms, please, and ask her to wait."

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VI

THÉRÈSE

POSED in a blaze of lights, the Princess Sofia contemplated captiously the charming image reflected in her cheval-glass. One little wrinkle, not precisely of dissatisfaction, rather of enquiry, nestled between her delicately arched brows. A look of misgiving clouded her wide eyes of a wondering child. The bow of an exquisitely modelled mouth, whose single fault lay in its being perhaps a trace too wide, described a shadowy pout.

She was beautiful: yes. Nobody could question that. La beauté du diable, no doubt, to Anglo-Saxon eyes, with that skin of incomparable texture and whiteness relieved by a heavily coiled crown of living bronze, the crimson insolence of that matchless mouth, those luminous and changeable eyes so like the sea, whose green melted into blue with the swiftness of thought, whose blue at times as swiftly shaded into stormy purple-black: but however bizarre and barbaric, beauty none the less, and under the most meticulous examination indisputable.

But was she as radiant as she had been?

On this her birthday she was twenty-five. Ap-

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palling age! Five years hence she would be thirty, in ten more—forty! And woman's beauty fades so swiftly: everybody said so. Was the shadow of to-morrow already dimming her loveliness? How could it be otherwise? She had lived so long and so fully, she had begun to live so young. Six years of marriage to Victor—that alone should have been enough, one would think, to metamorphose the fairest face into a blasted battlefield of passions.

She had a little shiver of voluptuous horror, remembering what she had endured and escaped. The sweet, true lines of her flawlessly made body were transiently undulant within a sheath of shimmering sequins: a daring gown, by British standards of that day, but permissible because she was Russian; foreigners, you know, are so frightfully weird even when they're quite all right.

And yet she was growing old, she was twenty-five! Though she didn't feel in the least like one on the threshold of middle age. Indeed, she had never felt younger, more thrillingly instinct with the power and the will to live extravagantly in one endless riot of youth unquenchable. . . .

Reaction, of course: the swing of the pendulum to its farthest extreme. It was now two years since she had been forced to separate from Victor, finding herself unable longer to countenance and suffer his many-sided beastliness; and a year since the hand of Death had penned an inexorable finis to the too-brief chapter of her one great romance.

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For there had never been love in her life with Victor. She had been too young at first to appreciate what love and marriage meant, she had been led to the altar and sacrificed upon it as an animal is led in sacrificial rites—without premonition or understanding, only wondering (perhaps) to find itself so groomed and garlanded, so flattered and adored. She had hardly known Victor before she was given to him in marriage by Imperial ukase . . . to get rid of her, probably, for some inscrutable reason related to the mysterious circumstances of her parentage.

And now after six years of hell with her husband and one of mourning in solitude for her love that was lost, she was coming back to life again . . . at last!

She lifted up arms that might have been a dream of Phidias chiselled in Parian marble, and stretched them luxuriously. She was superbly alive, indeed—and henceforth she meant to live. Only she must be careful to retain her looks . . . If Youth must surely go, Beauty must linger and reign long in its stead.

A maid, a comely creature, trim and smart in black and white, with that vividly coloured prettiness which is too often the omen of premature decline into the fat and florid thirties, fetched a wrap and settled it upon Sofia's shoulders.

Long and dark, it disguised her figure as completely as it covered her toilette. She nodded her satisfaction, and accepted the veil which she had

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desired to complete her disguise, a thing of Spanish lace, black and ample, like a mantilla. But before donning it she delayed one minute more before the mirror.

"Thérèse! Am I still beautiful?'

"Madame la princesse is always beautiful."

"As beautiful as I used to be?"

"But madame la princesse grows more lovely every day."

"Beautiful enough to-night, to keep out of jail, do you think?"

To the mirth in the voice of her mistress the maid responded with a smile demure and discreet.

"Oh, madame!" was all she said; but the manner of her saying it was rarely eloquent.

Sofia laughed lightly, and affectionately pinched the cheek of the maid.

"And you, my little one," she said in liquid French—"you yourself are too ravishingly pretty to keep out of trouble. Do you know that?"

Her little one looked more than ever demure as she enquired after the hidden meaning of madame la princesse.

"Because you will marry too soon, Thérèse—too soon some worthless man will persuade you to dedicate all those charms to him alone."

"Oh, madame!"

"Is it not so?"

"Who knows, madame?" said Thérèse, as who should say: "What must be, must."

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"Then there is a man! I suspected as much."

"But, madame la princesse, is there not always a man?"

"Then beware!"

"Madame la princesse need not fear for me," Thérèse replied. "Me, my head is not so easily turned. There is always some man, naturally—there are so many men!—but when I marry, rest assured, it will be for something more."

With the compressed lips of self-approbation she deftly assisted her mistress to swathe her head in the mantilla-like veil.

"Something more than a man?" Sofia enquired through its folds. "What then?"

"Independence, madame la princesse."

"What an idea! Marriage and independence: how do you reconcile that paradox?"

"Madame la princesse means love, I think, when she speaks of marriage. But love—that is all. over and done with when one marries. One is then ready to settle down; one has put by one's dot, and marries a worthy, industrious man with a little fortune of his own. With such a husband one collaborates in the maintenance of the ménage and the management of a small business, something substantial if small. And so one ends one's days in comfortable companionship. That, madame la princesse, is the marriage for Thérèse! It may not sound romantic, madame, but it has this rare virtue—it lasts!"

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VII

FAMILY REUNION

THE London night was normal: that is to say, wet. Darkness had transformed the streets into vast sheets of black satin shot with golden strands and studded with lamp-posts like sturdy stems for ethereal blooms of golden haze. Within their areas of glow the air teemed with atoms of liquid gold. The ring of hoofs on wet pavements was at once disturbing and inspiriting.

Alone in her hired hansom the Princess Sofia sat with the window raised, drinking deep of the soft damp air, finding it as heady as strange wine. Under cover of the veil her eyes were brilliant with awareness of her audacity, her lips were parted with the promise of a smile.

She loved it all, she adored this mood of London: its nights of rain were sheer enchantment, arabesque, nights of secrecy and stealth, mystery, and romance under the rose. On nights such as this lovers prospered, adventures were to the venturesome, brave rewards to the bold.

For herself she was unafraid, she foretasted entire success. How should it be otherwise? Consider

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how famously chance had prospered her designs, playing into her hands the information that this Monsieur Lanyard was not at home, might not return till very late, and was expecting a call from somebody whom he desired to await his return in his rooms!

With such an open occasion, how could one fail?

Sofia asked only three minutes alone with the painting. . . .

And if by any mishap she were caught, still she would not be dismayed. The letters were hers, were they not? They had been stolen from her, he had no right title to them who had purchased only the picture which had served as their hiding-place. By all means, let him keep that stupid canvas; he could hardly refuse to let her have her letters, not if she pleaded her prettiest. And even if he should prove obtuse, ungenerous . . .

Her smile was definite and confident. She was beautiful—and Monsieur Lanyard was aware of that. Had she not, that afternoon, in the auction room, without his knowledge detected admiration in his eyes, a look warm with something more than admiration only?

He was impressionable, then. And it would be no distasteful task to play upon his susceptibilities. He was not only personally attractive ("magnetic" was the catch-word of the period), but if half that Lady Diantha had hinted concerning him were true, to make a conquest of Michael Lanyard would be a

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feather in the cap of any woman, to attempt it a temptation all but irresistible to one—like Sofia—in whose veins ran the ichor of progenitors to whom the scent of danger had been as breath of life itself.

It was hardly conceivable; even now Sofia must smile at her friend's amiable endeavours to identify this mysterious monsieur with a celebrated and preposterous criminal.

It might be true that, as Lady Diantha had declared, wherever Michael Lanyard showed himself in open pursuit of his avowed avocation as a collector of rare works of art—in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, or where-not—there in due sequence the Lone Wolf would consummate one of his fantastic coups.

And it was indisputable that Lanyard was at present living in London, where for some time past the Lone Wolf had been perniciously busy; or else his bad name had been taken in vain by a baffled and exasperated Scotland Yard.

Again: Diantha had insisted that the Lone Wolf was by every evidence completely woman-proof; and there might be something in her contention that such an elusive yet spectacularly successful thief could hardly have won the high place he held in the annals of criminology and in the esteem of the sensation-loving public, if he were one who maintained normal relations with his kind.

Sooner or later (so ran Diantha's borrowed reasoning) the criminal who has close friends, a wife, a

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mistress, children, family ties of any sort, or even body-servants, must willy-nilly repose confidence in one of these, and then inevitably will be betrayed. Depend upon envy, jealousy, spite, or plain venal disloyalty, if accident or inadvertence fail, to lay the law-breaker by the heels.

Therefore (Diantha argued) the Lone Wolf must be a confirmed solitary and misogynist—very much like this Monsieur Lanyard, according to reports which declared the latter to be a man who kept to himself, had many acquaintances and not one intimate, and was positively insulated against wiles of woman.

But—granting all this—it was none the less true that the utmost diligence, spurred by the pique, ill-will, and ambition of the police of all Europe, had failed as yet to forge any link between the supercriminal of the age and the distinguished connoisseur of art. Other than Lady Diantha and the gossips whose arguments she was retailing, never a soul (so far as Sofia knew) had ventured to breathe a breath of suspicion upon the good repute of Monsieur Lanyard.

In short, Diantha's conjectures had been entirely second-hand, and not even meant to be taken seriously.

And yet the suggestion had fastened firm hold upon the imagination of the Princess Sofia.

If it were true . . . what an adventure!

There was unaccustomed light of daring in the

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eyes of the princess, unwonted colour tinted her cheeks.

The hansom stopped, discharged the fairest fare it had ever carried, and rattled off, leaving Sofia just a trifle daunted and dubious, the animation of her anticipations something dashed by the uncompromising respectability, the self-conscious worthiness of Halfmoon Street.

Enfolded in the very heart of Mayfair, its brief length bounded on the north by Curzon Street (its name alone sufficient voucher for its character), on the south by Piccadilly (hereabouts somewhat oppressive with its hedge of stately clubs, membership in any one of which is equivalent to two years' unchallenged credit) Halfmoon Street is largely given over to furnished lodgings. But it doesn't advertise the fact, its landlords are apt to be retired butlers to the nobility and gentry, its lodgers English gentlemen who have brought home livers from India, or assorted disabilities from all known quarters of the globe, and who desire nothing better than to lead steady-paced lives within walking distance of their favourite clubs. So Halfmoon Street remains quietly estimable, a desirable address, and knows it, and doggedly means to hold fast to that repute.

A strange environment (Sofia thought) for an adventurer like the Lone Wolf.

But then—of course!—Diantha's innuendoes had been based on flimsiest hearsay. The chances were

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that Michael Lanyard was an utterly uninteresting person of blameless life.

So thinking, the Princess Sofia was sensible of a pang of regret, and tried to be prepared against bitter disappointment as she rang the bell. Either she would fail to obtain admittance (perhaps the lady whom he was really expecting had forestalled her) or else Lanyard would fail to come home in time to catch her! Quite probably it would turn out to be a dull and depressing evening, after all. . . .

The servant who admitted her in manner and appearance lent colour to these forebodings. A creature hopelessly commonplace, resigned, and unemotional, to her enquiry for Monsieur Lanyard he returned the discounted response: Mister Lanyard was hout, 'e might not be 'ome till quite lite, but 'ad left word that if a lidy called she was to be awsked to wite. The princess indicating her desire to wite, the man turned to the nearest door (Lanyard's rooms were on the street level), opened it with a pass-key, stepped inside to make a light, and when Sofia entered silently bowed himself out.

Now when the latch clicked behind him, the Princess Sofia forgot that the simplicity of her success thus far was almost discouraging. Her heart began to beat more quickly, and a little tremor shook the hands that lifted and threw back her veil. After all, she was committing an act of lawless trespass, she was on the errand of a thief;

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if caught the penalty might prove most painful and humiliating.

Of a sudden she lost appetite entirely for a piquant encounter with the prepossessing tenant of these rooms. Now she desired nothing so dearly as to consummate her business and escape with all possible expedition.

A swift and searching survey of the living-room descried nothing that seemed apt to hinder or detain her. A large room, unusually wide and deep, it had two windows overlooking the street, with a curtained doorway at the back that led (one surmised) to a bedchamber. It was furnished in such excellent taste that one suspected Monsieur Lanyard must have brought in his own belongings on taking possession. The handsome rug, the well-chosen draperies, the several excellent pictures and bronzes, were little in character with the furnished lodgings of the London average, even with those of the better sort.

She had no time, however, to squander on appreciation of artistic atmosphere, however pleasing, and needed to waste none searching for the object of her desires. It faced her, distant not six paces from the door—that shameless little "Corot"!—resting on the arms of a straight-backed chair.

A low laugh of delight on her lips, she went swiftly to the chair and laid hold of the picture by its frame. In that act she checked, startled, transfixed, the laugh freezing into a gasp of alarm.

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Brass rings slithered on a pole supporting the portières at the back of the room. These parted. Through them a man emerged.

Her grasp on the picture relaxed. It struck a corner against the chair and clattered on the floor—the canvas on its stretcher simultaneously flying out of the frame.

"Victor!"

"Sweet of you to remember me!"

He advanced slowly with that noiseless, cat-like tread of his which she had always hated, perceiving in it a true index to his character: the prowl of a beast of prey, furtive, cowardly, cruel. It was so: Victor was as feline and as vicious as a jungle-cat. Watching him with this thought in mind, one could almost credit old tales of beasts bewitched and walking in human guise.

Near by he paused, alertly poised, prepared to spring. The slotted black eyes glimmered malignantly. His lips drew back in mockery from his teeth. His hands were hidden in the pockets of his dinner-coat; but she could guess how they were held, like claws, in that concealment, claws itching for her throat. She dared not stir lest she feel them there, digging deep into her soft white flesh.

Witless, in the extremity of her terror, she stammered: "What do you want?"

A nod indicated the picture that lay between them, at their feet.

"My errand," the man said in a silken tone that

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gloved grimmest menace, "is much the same as yours—quite naturally—but more fortunate; for I shall get not only what I came for, but something more."

"What——?"

"The opportunity to plead with you, face to face. I think you will hardly refuse to listen to me now."

"How—how did you get in?"

"Oh, secretly! By the window, if you must know; but quite unseen. You see, *I* had no invitation."

"I never thought you had——"

"Nor did I think you had—till now."

Puzzled, she faltered: "I don't understand——"

"Surely you don't wish me to believe my pretty Sofia has turned thief?"

That stung her pride. She drew upon an unsuspected store of spirit, confronting him bravely.

"What is it to me, what you choose to think?"

"I refuse to think that of you. My reason will not let me believe it."

She saw that he was shaking with rage; so she shrugged and drawled: "Oh, your *reason*——!"

"It tells me you for one did not come here to-night uninvited." He was rapidly losing grip on his temper. "Oh, it's plain enough! I was a fool not to understand, there in the auction room, when my face was slapped with proof of your liaison with this Lanyard!"

She said in mild expostulation: "But you are quite mad."

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"Perhaps—but not so as to be blind to the truth. You had him there this afternoon to bid that picture in for you if your own means failed. Why else should the man, who knows pictures as I know you, pay twenty thousand guineas for a footling copy of a Corot that wouldn't deceive a—a Royal Academician! Yes: he bid it in for you—the sorry fool!—bought with his own money the evidence of your infatuation for his predecessor in your affections—and expects you here to-night to receive it from him and—pay him *his* price! Ah, don't try to deny it!"

He growled like a very animal, beside himself. "Why else should you be admitted to these rooms without question in his absence?"

Without visible resentment, the Princess Sofia nodded thoughtfully into those distorted features. "Yes," she commented: "quite, quite mad."

As if she had offered without warning to strike him, Victor recoiled and for an instant stood gibbering. And she took advantage of this moment in one lithe bound to put the table between them.

The manœuvre sobered him. He did not move, but in two breaths forced himself to cease to tremble, and subdued every symptom of his passion. Only his face remained sinister.

"Graceful creature!" he observed, sardonic. "Such agility! But what good will that do you, do you think? Eh? Tell me that!"

It was her turn to shiver, and inwardly she did, who was never quite able to combat the fear which

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Victor could inspire in her by such demonstrations of the power of his will. The self-control which he had always at his command was something that passed her understanding; it seemed inhuman, it terrified her.

Nevertheless, so exigent was this strait, she continued to confront him with a face of unflinching defiance.

In a voice whose steadiness surprised her she declared: "The letters are mine. You shan't have them."

"Undeceive yourself: I'll have them though you never leave this room alive."

More to give herself time to think than in any hope of moving him, she began to plead:

"Let me have them, Victor—let me go."

Smiling darkly, he shook his head.

"The letters mean nothing to you. What good——?"

He interrupted impatiently: "I shall publish them."

"Impossible——!"

"But I shall."

Aghast, she protested: "You can't mean that!"

"Why not? The world shall know your true reason for leaving me—that you were the mistress of another man—and who that man was!"

Staring, she uttered in a low voice: "Never!"

"Or," he amended, deliberately, "you may keep them, burn them, do what you will with them—on fair terms—*my* terms."

She said nothing, but her dilate eyes held fixedly

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to his. He moved a pace or two nearer, his voice dropped to a lower key, the light she had learned to loathe flickered in the depths of his eyes.

"Come back to me, Sofia! I can't live without you . . ."

Her lips moved to deny him, but made no sound. Now it was revealed to her, the way.

"Come back to me, Sofia!"

His hand crept along the edge of the table and lifted, quivering, to capture hers. She steeled herself to endure its touch, against sickening repulsion she fought to achieve a smile that would carry a suggestion of at least forgetfulness.

"And if I do——?" she murmured.

He gave a violent start, blood suffused his face darkly, his arms leapt out to enfold her. She stepped back, evading him with a movement of coquetry that served, as it was intended, to inflame him the more.

"Wait!" she insisted. "Answer me first: If I return to you—then what?"

"Everything shall be as you wish—everything forgotten—I will think of nothing but how to make you happy——"

"And I may have my letters?"

He nodded, swallowing hard, as if the concession wellnigh choked him.

Under his gloating gaze her flesh crawled. Only by supreme effort did she succeed in resisting a mad impulse to risk a rush for door or windows, and

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whipped her will into maintaining what seemed to be frank response.

"Very well," she said; "I agree."

Again he offered to touch her, again she moved slightly, eluding him.

"No," she stipulated with an arch glance—"not yet! First prove you mean to make good your word."

"How?"

"Let me go—with my letters—and call on me to-morrow."

His look clouded. "Can I trust you?" He was putting the question to himself more than to her. "Dare I?" He added in a tone colourless and flat: "I've half a mind to take you at your word. Only—forgive my doubts—appearances are against you—you seem almost too keen for the bargain. How can I know——?"

"What proof do you want?"

"Something definite. . . . You pledge yourself to me?" A movement of her head assented. "You will give yourself back to me?" He came nearer, but she contrived to repeat the sign of assent. "Wholly, without reserve?"

An invincible disgust shook her as the full sense of his insistence struck home. Still she whipped herself to play out the scene—and win!

"As you say, Victor, as you will. . . ."

He moved still nearer. She became conscious of his nearness as if a palpable aura of vileness emanated from his person.

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"Then give me proof—here and now."

"How?"

He laughed a throaty, evil laugh. "Need you ask? Not much, my Sofia . . . only a little . . . something on account . . ."

Suddenly she could no more: memories unspeakable rose like disturbed dregs to the surface of her consciousness. Involuntarily, not knowing what she did, she flung out an arm and struck down his hands.

"You—leper!"

The epithet was like a knout cutting through the decayed fibre of the man and raising a livid welt on his diseased soul. Galled beyond endurance, his countenance convulsed with fury, he struck wickedly; and the vicious b ow of his open palm across her mouth brought flecks of blood to the lips as her teeth cut into the tender flesh.

It did far more, it shattered at one stroke the brittle casing of self-command with which centuries of civilization had sought to veneer the Slav. In a trice a woman whose existence neither of them had suspected was revealed, a fury incarnate flew at the dismayed prince, clawing, tearing, raining blows upon his face and bosom. Overcome by surprise, blinded, dazed, staggered, he gave ground, stumbled, caught at a chair to steady himself.

As abruptly as it had begun, the assault ceased. Panting and frantic, the girl fell back, paused, renewed her grasp upon herself, gazed momentarily in contempt on that dashed and quaking figure, then

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swiftly swooped down to retrieve the picture, and madly pelted toward the door.

In an instant, Victor was after her. His clutching fingers barely missed her shoulder but caught a flying end of the veil that swathed her throat and head. With finger-tips touching the doorknob Sofia was checked and twitched back so violently that she was all but thrown off her feet.

She tried desperately to regain her balance, but the pressure round her throat, tightening, bade fair to suffocate her; and reeling, while her hands tore ineffectually at the folds of the veil, she was drawn back and back, and tripped, falling half on, half off the table.

Already her vision was darkening, her lungs were labouring painfully, her head throbbed with the revolt of strangulated arteries as if sledge hammers were seeking to smash through her skull.

Through closing shadows she saw that savage mask which hovered over her, moping and mowing, as Victor twisted and drew ever more tight the murderous bindings round her throat.

A groping hand encountered something on the table, a lump of metal, cold and heavy. She seized and dashed it brutally into that hateful face, saw his head jerk back and heard him grunt with pain, and struck again, blindly, with all her might.

Instantly the pressure upon her throat was eased. She heard a groan, a fall . . .

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VIII

SHE found herself standing, partly resting upon the table. Great, tearing sobs racked her slight young body—but at least she was breathing, there was no more constriction of her windpipe. Her head still ached, however, her neck felt stiff and sore, and she remained somewhat giddy and confused.

She eyed rather wildly her hands. One held torn and ragged folds of the veil ripped from her throat, the other the weapon with which she had cheated death: a bronze paperweight, probably a miniature copy of a Barye, an elephant trumpeting. The upflung trunk was darkly stained and sticky . . .

With a shudder she dropped the bronze, and looked down. Victor lay at her feet, supine, grotesquely asprawl. His face was bruised and livid; the cheek laid open by the bronze was smeared with scarlet, accentuating the leaden colour of his skin. His mouth was ajar; his eyes, half closed, hideously revealed slender slits of white. More blood discoloured his right temple, welling from under the matted, coarse black hair.

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He was terribly motionless. If he breathed, Sofia could detect no sign of it.

In panic she knelt beside the body, threw back Victor's dinner-coat, and laid an ear above his heart.

At first, in her mad anxiety, she could hear nothing. But presently a beating registered, slow and harsh but steady-paced.

With a sob of relief she sat back on her heels, and after a little while got unsteadily to her feet.

The house door closed with a dull bang, and from the entrance hallway came a sound of voices. She stood petrified in dread till the voices fell and she heard stairs creak under an ascending tread.

Thus reminded that Lanyard's return might occur at any moment, she made all haste to patch up the disarray of veil and coiffure. Fortunately her costume, protected by the cloak of heavy and sturdy stuff, was quite undamaged.

Not till on the point of leaving did she remember the painting. It lay unharmed where it had fallen when Victor seized her veil. She was calm enough now to consider herself fortunate in finding it so poorly secured in its frame; without the latter it would be far easier to smuggle the canvas away under her cloak.

In the final glance she bent upon Victor's beaten and insensible body there was no pity, no regret, no trace of compunction. What he had suffered he had ten times—no, a hundred, a thousand—earned.

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Long before she left him Sofia had lost count of the blows she had taken at his hands, the insults worse than blows, the lesser indignities innumerable.

But in those abolished days she had never once struck back, she had been faint of heart, cowed and terrified, and had lacked what two years of separation had given her, that spiritual independence which never before had been able to realize itself, lift up its head, and grow strong in the assurance of its own integrity.

Two years ago she would not have dared to lift a hand to Victor, no matter how sore the provocation. To-night—if she had one regret it was that she had struck so feebly: not that she desired his death, but that she knew it was now her life or his. She knew the man too well to flatter herself that he would rest before he had compassed such revenge as the baseness of his degenerate soul would deem adequate. Half the world were not too much to put between them if she were now to sleep of nights in comfortable consciousness of security from his quenchless hatred.

Callously enough she switched off the lights and left him lying there, in darkness but for the ash-dimmed glimmer of a dying fire.

In the entrance hallway she hesitated, coldly composed and alert. But seemingly the noise of their struggle had not carried beyond the door. There was no one about.

With neither haste nor faltering, without the least

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misadventure, she let herself quietly out into the empty, silent, rain-swept street, and scurried toward the lights of Piccadilly.

Before long a cruising four-wheeler overhauled her. In its obscure and stuffy refuge she sat hugging her precious canvas and pondering her plight.

It was borne in upon her that she would do well to leave London, yes, and England, too, before Victor recovered sufficiently to scheme and put a watch upon her movements.

She had need henceforth to be swift and wary and shrewd . . .

A singular elation began to colour her temper, a quickening sense of emancipation. Necessity at a stroke had set her free. Because she must fly and hide to save her life, society had no more hold upon her, she need no longer fight to keep up appearances in spite of her status as a woman living apart from her husband, little better than a divorcée—an estate anathema to the English of those days.

She experienced, through the play of her imagination upon this new and startling conception of life, an intoxicating prelibation of freedom such as she had never dreamed to savour.

That waywardness which was a legitimate inheritance from generations of wilful forebears, impatient of all those restraints which a fixed environment imposes upon the individual, an impatience which had always been hers though it slumbered in unsuspected latency, asserted itself of a

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sudden, possessed her wholly, and warmed her being like forbidden wine.

In this humour she was set down at her door.

None saw her enter. In a moment of vaguely prophetic foresight she had bidden Thérèse not to wait up for her and to tell the other servants there was no necessity for their doing so. She might be detained, Heaven alone knew how late she might be; but she had her latch-key and was quite competent to undress and put herself to bed.

And Thérèse had taken her at her word.

She was glad of that. In event that anything should leak out and be printed by the newspapers concerning the theft of Monsieur Lanyard's famous "Corot" by a strange, closely veiled woman, it was just as well that none of the servants was about to see her come in with the canvas clumsily hidden under her cloak.

So she exercised much circumspection in shutting and bolting the door, mounted the stairs without making any unnecessary stir, and at the door of her boudoir waited, listening, for several moments, in the course of which she heard, or fancied she heard, a slight noise on the far side of the door which made her suspect Thérèse might after all still be up and about.

The sound was not repeated, but to make sure Sofia slipped out of her cloak and wrapped it round the canvas before she went in; which last she did sharply, with head up and eyes flashing ominously

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beneath scowling brows—prepared to give Thérèse a rare taste of temper if she found she had been disobeyed.

But though the maid had left the lights on, she was nowhere to be seen. Nor did she answer from the bedchamber when the princess called her.

With a sigh of relief that ran into the chuckle of a child absorbed in mischief, Sofia threw the cloak across a chaise-longue, and bore her prize in triumph to the escritoire.

It was her intention to rip the canvas off with a knife, to get at the letters; and a long, thin-bladed Spanish dagger that now did service as a paper-knife was actually in her hand when she noticed how slightly the painting was tacked to its stretcher, and for the first time was visited by premonition.

Dropping the knife, she caught a loose edge of the canvas and with one swift tug stripped it clear of the unpainted fabric beneath.

The cry that disappointment wrung from her was bitter with protest and chagrin.

Fortune had failed her, then, the jade had tricked her heartlessly. With success within her grasp, it had trickled like quicksilver through her fingers. Victor had been beforehand with her, had purloined the letters and restored the canvas to its frame. She might have suspected as much if she had only had the wit to draw a natural inference from the way the painting had parted company with its frame when she dropped it.

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So the letters for which she had risked and suffered so much must be back there, in Lanyard's lodgings, in Victor's possession—lost irretrievably, since she would never find the courage to go back for them, even if she dared assume that Victor had not yet recovered and escaped or that Lanyard had not yet come home.

If only she had thought to rifle Victor's pockets . . .

"Too late," she uttered in despair.

"Ah, madame, never say that!"

She swung round but, shocked as she was to the verge of stupefaction, made no outcry.

The intruder stood within arm's-length, collected, amiable, debonair, nothing threatening in his attitude, merely an easy and at the same time quite respectful suggestion of interest.

"Monsieur Lanyard!"

His bow was humorous without mockery: "Madame la princesse does me much honour."

She was silent another instant, in a wide stare comprehending the incredible, the utterly impossible fact of his presence there. The one conceivable explanation voiced itself without her volition:

"The Lone Wolf!"

"Oh, come now!" he remonstrated, indulgently—"that's downright flattery."

She moved aside, lifting a hand toward the bell-cord.

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"Wait!"

Involuntarily she deferred, her arm dropped. Then, appreciating that she had yielded where he had no right to command, she mutinied.

"Why?" she demanded, resentfully.

"Why ring?" he countered, smiling.

"To call my servants—to have them call in the police."

"But surely madame la princesse must appreciate the police might be at a loss to know which housebreaker to arrest."

He cocked an eye of mocking significance toward the purloined "Corot," and in sharp revulsion of feeling Sofia had need to bite her lip to keep from laughing. She hesitated. He was right and reasonable enough, this impudent and imperturbable young elegant. Yet she could not afford to concede so much to him. She was quick to accept his gage.

"Who knows," she enquired, obliquely, "why Monsieur the Lone Wolf brought with him this counterfeit Corot when he broke in to steal——"

"The counterfeit jewels of a titled adventuress!"

An interruption brusque enough to silence her; or else it was its innuendo that struck the princess dumb with indignation. Lanyard's laugh offered amends for the rudeness, as if he said: "Sorry—but you asked for it, you know." He stepped aside, caught up a handful of her jewels that had been left, a tempting heap, openly exposed on her dressing-table (as much her own carelessness as anybody's, Sofia

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admitted) and tossed them lightly upon the face of the fraudulent canvas.

"Birds of a feather," was his comment, whimsical; "coals to Newcastle!"

"My jewels!"

The princess gathered them up tenderly and faced him, blazing with resentment. He returned a twisted smile, an apologetic shrug.

"Madame la princesse didn't know? I'm so sorry."

"How dare you say they're paste?"

"I'm sorry," he repeated; "but somebody seems to have taken advantage of madame's confidence. Excellent imitations, I grant you, but articles de Paris none the less."

"It isn't true!" she stormed, near to tears.

"But really, you must believe me. A knowledge of jewels is one of my hobbies: I *know!*"

She looked down in consternation at the exquisite trinkets he had condemned so bluntly. Then in a fit of temper she flung them from her with all her might, threw herself upon the chaise-longue, and wept passionately into its cushions.

Then the young man proved himself tolerably instructed in the ways of womankind. He said nothing more, made no offer to comfort her by those futile and empty pats on the shoulder which are instinctive with man on such occasions, but simply sat him down and waited.

In time the tempest passed, Sofia sat up and

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dabbled her eyes with a web of lace and linen. Then she looked round with a tentative smile that was wholly captivating. She was one of those rare women who can afford to cry.

"It's so humiliating!" she protested with racial ingenuousness—one of her most compelling charms. "But it's ridiculous, too. I was so sure no one would ever know."

"No one but an expert ever would, madame."

"You see"—apparently she had forgotten that Lanyard was anything but a lifelong friend—"I needed money so badly, I had them reproduced and sold the originals."

"Madame la princesse—if she will permit—commands my profound sympathy."

"But," she remembered, drying her eyes, "you called me an adventuress, too!"

"But," he contended, gravely, "you had already called me the Lone Wolf."

"But what do you expect, monsieur, when I find you in my rooms——?"

"But what does madame la princesse expect when I find she had been to mine—and brought something valuable away with her, too!"

"I had a reason——"

"So had I."

"What was it?"

"Perhaps it was to see madame la princesse alone —secretly—without exciting the jealousy, which I understand is supernormal, of monsieur le prince."

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"But why should you wish to see me alone?" she demanded, with widening eyes.

"Perhaps to beg madame's permission to offer her what may possibly prove some slight consolation."

She weighed his words in dark distrust. What was this consolation? What his game? His attitude remained consistently too deferential and punctilious for one to suspect that by consolation he meant love-making.

"But how did you get in?"

"By the front door, madame. I find it ajar—one assumes, through oversight on the part of one of the servants—it opens to a touch, I walk in—et voila!"

His levity was infectious. In spite of herself, she smiled in sympathy.

"And what, pray, is this wonderful consolation you would offer me?"

He produced from a pocket a packet of papers.

"I think madame la princesse is interested in these," he said. "If she will be so amiable as to accept them from me, with my compliments and one little word of advice. . . ."

"Ah, monsieur!" Look and tone thanked him more than words could ever. "You are too kind! And your advice——?"

"They tell too much, madame, those letters. And I see you have a fire in the grate . . ."

"Monsieur has reason. . . ."

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She rose, went to the fireplace and, half kneeling, thrust the letters one by one into the incandescent bed of coals. A ceremony of sentiment at any other time, but not now: her thoughts were far from the man with whose memory these letters were linked, they were in fact not wholly articulate. Just what was passing through her mind she herself would have found it hard to define; she was mainly conscious of a flooding emotion of gratitude to Lanyard; but there was something more, a feeling not unakin to tenderness. . . .

The reaction of her vital young body from a desperate physical conflict, the rapid play of her passions from anger and despair through triumph and delight to gratification and content, from the bitterest sense of frustration and peril to one of security; the uprush of those strange instincts which had lain dormant till roused by the knowledge that she was free at length from the maddening stupidity of social life, together with her recent, implicit self-dedication to a life in all things its converse: these influences were working upon her so strongly as to render her mood more dangerous than she guessed.

Disturbed in her formless reverie, an aimless groping through a bewildering maze of emotions but vaguely apprehended, she started up, faced round and saw Lanyard, topcoat over arm and hat in hand, about to open the door.

"Monsieur!"

He looked back, coolly quizzical. "Madame?"

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"What are you doing?"

"Taking my unobtrusive departure, madame la princesse, by the way I came."

"But—wait—come back!"

He shrugged agreeably, released the door-knob, and stood before her, or rather over her—for he was the taller by a good five inches—looking down, quietly at her service.

"I haven't thanked you."

"For what, madame? For treating myself to an amusing adventure?"

"It has cost you dear!"

"The fortunes of war . . ."

Her hands rose unconsciously, with an uncertain movement. Her face was soft with an elusive bloom of unwonted feeling. Her eyes held a puzzled look, as if she did not quite understand what was moving her so deeply.

"You are a strange man, monsieur. . . ."

"And what shall one say of madame la princesse?"

She could but laugh; and laughter rings the death-knell of constraint.

But Lanyard remembered uneasily that somebody—Solomon or some other who must have led an interesting life—had remarked that the lips of a strange woman are smoother than oil.

"None the less, monsieur, I am deeply in your debt."

His smile of impersonal courtesy failed. He was becoming more sensitive than he liked to her charm

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and the warm sentiment she was giving out to him. This strange access in her of haunting loveliness, the gentle shadows that lay beneath her wide-yet languorous eyes, the almost imperceptible tremor of her sweetly fashioned lips, all troubled him profoundly. He exerted himself to break the spell upon his senses which this woman, wittingly or not, was weaving. But the effort was at best half-hearted.

"I am well repaid," he said a bit stiffly, "by the knowledge that the honour of madame la princesse is safe."

Sofia laughed breathlessly. Somehow her hands had found the way to his. Her glance wavered and fell.

"But is it?" she asked in a tone so intimate that it was barely audible. And she laughed once more. "I am not so sure . . . as long as monsieur is here."

Lanyard's mouth twitched, slow colour mounted in his face, the light in his eyes was lambent. He found himself looking deep into other eyes that were like pools of violet shadow troubled by a deep surge and resurge of feeling for which there was no name. Aware that they revealed more than he ought to know, he sought to escape them by bending his lips to Sofia's hands.

Sighing softly, she resigned them to his kisses.

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IX

PAID IN FULL

IT WAS late when Lanyard got home, but not too late: when he entered his living-room enough life lingered in the embers in the grate to betray to him a feline shape on all-fours creeping toward his bedchamber door. As he switched up the lights it bounded to its feet and dived through the portières with such celerity that he saw little more of it than coat-tails level on the wind.

Dropping hat and canvas, Lanyard gave chase and overhauled the marauder as he was clambering out through the open window, where a firm hand on his collar checked his preparations to drop half a dozen feet to the flagged court.

Victor swore fretfully and lashed out a random fist, which struck Lanyard's cheek a glancing blow that carried just enough sting to kindle resentment. So the virtuous householder was rather more than unceremonious about yanking the princely housebreaker inside and lending him a foot to accelerate his return to the living-room; where Victor brought up, on all-fours again, in almost precisely the spot from which he had risen.

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