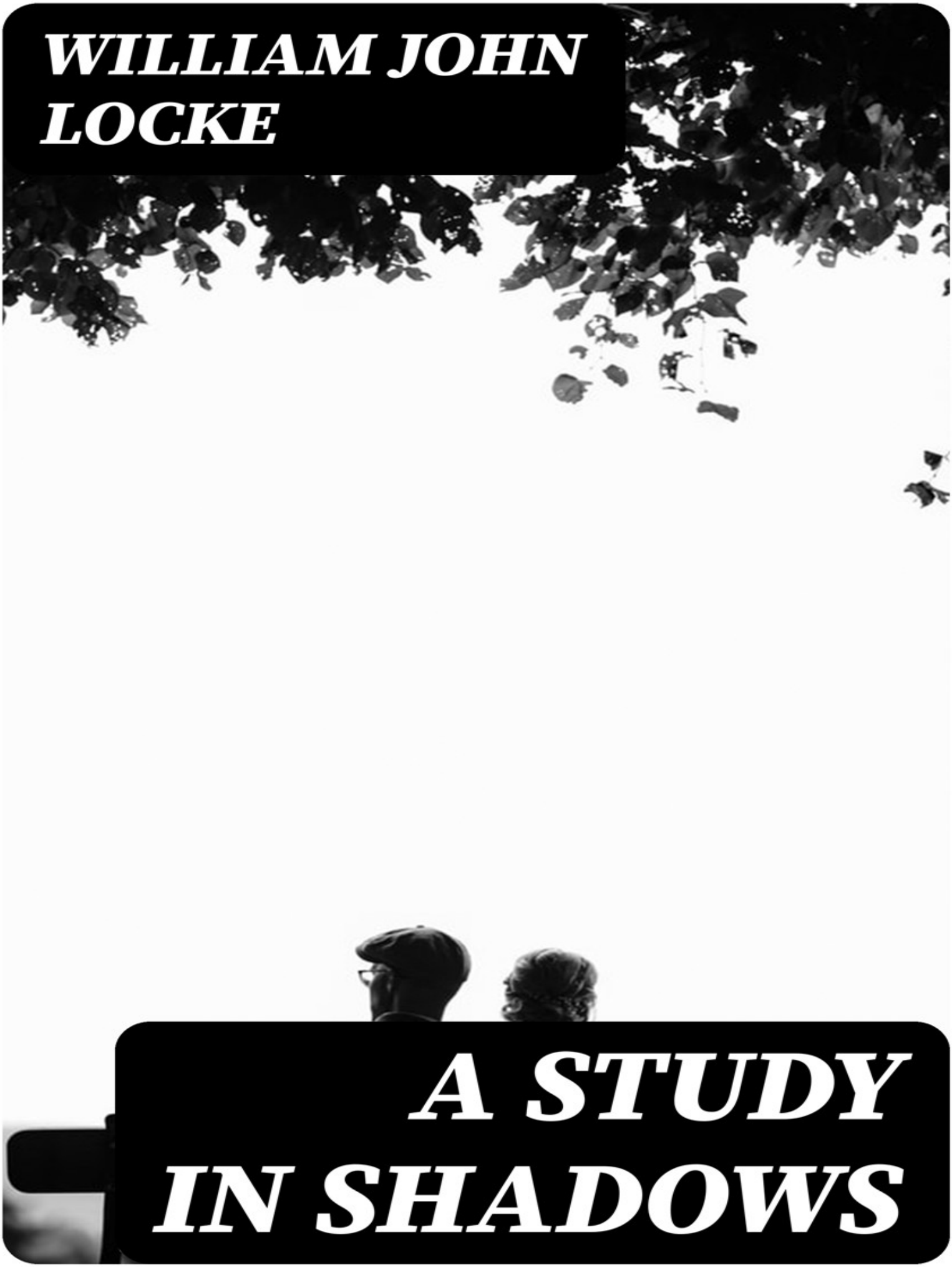
WILLIAM JOHN LOCKE



A STUDY IN SHADOWS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BY

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CHAPTER I.—THE LONE WOMEN.

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Felicia Graves was puzzled. The six weeks she had spent at the Pension Boccard had confused many of her conceptions and brought things before her judgment for which her standards were inadequate. Not that a girl who had passed the few years of her young womanhood in the bubbling life of a garrison town could be as unsophisticated as village innocence in the play; but her fresh, virginal experience had been limited to what was seemly, orthodox, and comfortable. She was shrewd enough in the appreciation of superficial vanities, rightly esteeming their value as permanent elements; but the baser follies of human nature had not been reached by her young eyes. Her whole philosophy of life had been bound up in well-ordered family systems, in which the men were honest and well-bred, and the women either comfortable matrons or fresh-minded, companionable girls like herself. She knew vaguely that sorrows and bitterness and broken lives existed in the world, but hitherto she had never reckoned upon coming into contact with them. They all lay in the dim sphere where crime and immorality held sway, whose internal upheavals affected her as little as dynastic commotions in China. The lives and habits and opinions therefore of the six lonely women who, with one old gentleman, formed her sole daily companions in the Pension Boccard, were a subject of much puzzled and half-frightened speculation on the part of the young English girl.

She was forced to speculate, not only because she was brought into intimate touch with the unfamiliar, but also because there was little else to do. The Pension Boccard was neither gay nor stimulating in winter. Its life was dependent, first upon the ever-changing current of guests, and secondly upon such public distractions as Geneva offers. In the summer it was bright enough. The house was full from top to bottom with eager, laughing holiday-makers, bringing with them the vitality and freshness of the outside world. There were dances, flirtations, picnics. New ideas, scraps of gossip and song from London, Paris, St. Petersburg filled dining-room and salons. The pleasant friction of nationalities alone was stimulating. The town, too, was gay. The streets were bright with the cosmopolitan crowd of pleasure-seekers, the *cafés* alive with customers, the shop windows gay with jewellery and quaint curios to dazzle the eyes of the reckless tourist. At the Kursaal were weekly balls, entertainments, *petits chevaux*. Bands played in the public gardens, and all the *cafés* offered evening concerts gratis to their customers. There were pleasant trips to be made on the lake to Nyon, Lausanne, Montreux, Chillon. No one need be dull in summer time at Geneva. But in the winter, when all the public festivities were over and week after week passed without a stranger bringing a fresh personality to the dinner-table, the Pension Boccard was an abode of drear depression. If it had been chipped off from the earth's surface by the tail of a careless comet and sent whirling through space on an ecliptic of its own, it could not have been less in relation with external influences. It was thrown

entirely on its own resources, which only too often gave way, as it were, beneath it.

There was nothing to do save reading and needlework and gossip. It was while pursuing the last avocation that Felicia gathered her chief materials for speculation. These women, what were they? Their names were Mrs. Stapleton, Miss Bunter, Frau Schultz, Frâulein Klinkhardt, and Madame Popea. American, English, German, Roumanian respectively. Yet in spite of wide divergencies in creed, nationality, and character, they all seemed strangely to belong to one class. They were apparently isolated, selfcentred, without ties or aims or hopes. Each had travelled through Europe from pension to pension—a weary pilgrimage. Their lives were for the most part spent in listless idleness, only saved now and then from inanition by the nerving influences of petty bickerings, violent intimacies, sordid jealousies. All had moods of kindness alternating with moods of cynical disregard of susceptibilities. Now and then a wave of hysteria would pass through the atmosphere of depression, when feminine velvet would be rudely thrust back and spiteful claws exposed to view. Even Mrs. Stapleton would occasionally break through her habitual restraint and be goaded into mordant expression. It was the isolation of these women, their vague references to the sheltering home of years ago, their cynical exposition and criticism of undreamed of facts, that made Felicia look upon her surroundings with a child's alarm at the unfamiliar.

Sometimes she felt home-sick and miserable, wished that her uncle and aunt, with whom her home had been for many years since the death of her parents, had taken her

out with them to Bermuda. But they, worthy souls, when Colonel Graves was ordered abroad with the regiment, had thought that a year's continental life would be a treat for the girl, and had sent her, in consequence, to the care of Mme. Boccard, a distant kinswoman, whose prospectus read like a synopsis of Eden. They had so set their hearts upon her enjoyment, that, now they were thousands of miles away, she felt it would be ungracious to complain. But she was very unhappy.

“Mon Dieu! This is getting terrible!” said Mme. Popea, one evening.

Dinner was over, and some of the ladies were passing the usual dreary evening in the salon.

“It is enough to drive you mad. It would be livelier in a convent. One would have Matins and Vespers and Compline—a heap of little duties. One could go to one's bed tired, and sleep. Here one sleeps all day, so that when night comes, one can't shut an eye.”

“Why don't you go to the convent, Mme. Popea?” asked Mrs. Stapleton, mildly, looking up from her needlework.

“Ah! one cannot always choose,” replied Mme. Popea, with a sigh. “Besides,” she added, “one would have to be so good!”

“Yes; there is some truth in that,” said Mrs. Stapleton. “It is better to be a serene sinner than a depressed saint! And sometimes we sinners have our hours of serenity.”

“Not after such a dinner as we had tonight,” remarked Frau Schultz, in German, with strident irritability. “The food is getting dreadful—and the wine! It is not good for the health. My stomach—”

“You should drink water, as Miss Graves and I do,” said Mrs. Stapleton.

“Ah, you American and English women can drink water. We are not accustomed to it. In my home I never drank wine that cost less than four marks a bottle. I am not used to this. I shall complain to Mme. Boccard.”

“It is bad,” said Mme. Popea, “but it isn't as bad as it might be. At the Pension Schmidt we couldn't drink it without sugar.” She was a plump little woman, with a predisposition to cheerfulness. Besides, as she owed Mme. Boccard some two months' board and lodging, she could afford a little magnanimity. But Frau Schultz, who was conscious of scrupulous payment up to date, had no such delicacy of feeling. She pursued the subject from her own standpoint, that of her own physiological peculiarities. By the time her tirade was ended, she had worked herself up into a fit state to give battle to Mme. Boccard, on which errand she incontinently proceeded.

“What a dreadful woman!” said Mrs. Stapleton, as the door slammed behind her.

“Ah, yes. Those Germans,” said Mme. Popea, “they are always so unrefined. They think of nothing but eating and drinking. Herr Schleiermacher came to see me this afternoon. He has been to Hanover to see his *fiancée*, whom he can't marry. He was telling me about it. 'Ach!' he said, 'the last evening it was so grievous. She did hang round my neck for dree hours, so that I could not go out to drink beer with my vriendts!' Animal! All men are bad. But I think German men—ugh!”

She gave her shoulders' an expressive shrug, and resumed her reading of an old copy of *Le Journal Amusant*, which she had brought down from her room.

“Where are the others?” asked Felicia, dropping her book wearily on to her lap. It was a much-thumbed French translation of “The Chaplet of Pearls,” which Mme. Boccard had procured for her from the circulating library in the Rue du Rhone. Felicia found it languid reading.

“Miss Bunter is tending her canary, which is moulting, or else she is writing to her *fiance* in Burmah,” replied Mrs. Stapleton.

“Is she *engaged*?”

Miss Bunter was some seven and thirty, thin and faded, the last person in the world, according to Felicia's ideas, to have a lover. Both ladies laughed at her astonishment.

“Yes. Hasn't she told you?” cried Mme. Popea. “She tells everyone—in confidence. They have been engaged for fifteen years. And they write each other letters—such fat packages—thick as that—every mail. Ah, *mon Dieu!* If a man treated me in that way—kept me waiting, waiting—”

She threw up her plump little hands with a half-threatening gesture.

“What would you have done?” asked Mrs. Stapleton.

“I should have consoled myself—*en attendant*. Oh, yes, I should have gone on writing; but I would not have let myself become a poor old maid for any man in the world. That is one thing I admire about Frâulein Klinkhardt. You were asking where she was to-night. I know, but I won't be indiscreet. She is *fiancee* too. She is not getting less young *—mais elle s'amuse, elle—en attendant*.”

Felicia did not grasp the full significance of Mme. Popea's insinuations, but she caught enough to set her cheeks burning, and she cast an appealing glance at Mrs. Stapleton.

“Won't you play us something?” said the latter, kindly, in response to the appeal.

“Ah, do!” said Mme. Popea, serenely. “You play so charmingly.”

Felicia went to the piano, and ran her fingers over the keys. She did not feel in a mood for playing; music with her was an accomplishment, not an art to which she could instinctively bring bruised and quivering fibres to be soothed. She played mechanically, thinking of other things.

Once she struck a false note, and her ear caught a little indrawn hiss from Madame Popea, which brought her wandering attention sharply back. But her heart was not in it. She was thinking of poor little Miss Bunter, and the weary years of waiting, and how sad she must have been as, year by year, she had seen the youth dying out of her eyes and the bloom fading from her cheek. Frâulein Klinkhardt, too, who was amusing herself—*en attendant*; she felt as if something impure had touched her.

At the next false note, Mme. Popea rose softly, and went to Mrs. Stapleton.

“I am going to bed,” she whispered. “These English girls are charming; but they should have dumb pianos made for them, that would speak only to their own souls.”

When Felicia heard the click of the closing door, she started round on the music-stool.

“I hope I haven't driven Mme. Popea away with my strumming,” she said, guiltily.

“Oh, no, dear,” replied Mrs. Stapleton, with cheerful assurance. “She is a lazy little body that always goes to bed early.”

Felicia rose, took up *Le Journal Amusant*, which Mme. Popea had left behind, and sitting down, began to look through it. A few seconds later, however, she crumpled it fiercely, and threw it on the ground with a cry of disgust.

“How can ladies read such things?” she exclaimed.

She had never seen such a picture before, never conceived that the like could even have been visualized by the imagination. Its cynical immodesty, its obscene suggestion, gave her a sickening sensation of loathing.

Mrs. Stapleton picked up the offending journal, and skimmed over its pages with calm eyes and a contemptuous curl of the lip.

“Oh, how can you?” cried Felicia, writhing.

The other smiled, and, opening the door of the great porcelain stove, thrust the paper in amongst the glowing coals, and closed the door again. Then she came quickly up to the couch where Felicia was, and sitting down by her side, took her hand.

“My poor child,” she said, “I hope you are not too unhappy here.”

The elder woman's voice was so soft, her manner was so gentle and feminine, that the girl's heart, that had been longing for six weeks, with a greater hunger day after day, for womanly sympathy, leapt towards her, and her eyes filled with tears.

“It is so strange here,” she said, piteously, “and I feel so lost, without my friends and occupations, and—and—”

“Well? Tell me. Perhaps I may be able to help you.”

The girl turned away her head.

“Other things. Sometimes I feel frightened. To-night—that newspaper—what Mme. Popea was saying—it seemed to scorch me.”

Mrs. Stapleton registered a mental resolution to talk pointedly to Mme. Popea on the morrow. If English girls should have dumb pianos, it was only fair that Roumanian widows should have invisible indecent pictures.

She smoothed the back of Felicia's hot hands. Her own were cool and soft, and their touch was very grateful to Felicia.

“My poor child,” she said, “my poor child.”

She herself had suffered. She knew from sad tasting the bitterness of many fruits that grow in the garden of life. Like many women, she judged the flavour of another's future experiences by the aftertaste of her own past. There were many, many Dead Sea apples that a woman had to eat before the grave closed over her. The sight of the young soul shrinking at the foretaste filled her with a sense of infinite pathos.

“I wonder if you would let me call you by your name sometimes when we are alone,” she said, gently.

The girl flashed a grateful glance.

“Would you really? It is Felicia.”

“And mine is Katherine. I wonder how it would sound?”

“Katherine?” echoed Felicia, with a puzzled smile. “What do you mean?”

“I have not heard it for very many years. To everybody I have known I have been Mrs. Stapleton. I should like to be

called by my own name once again. Would you do so?”

“Oh! yes—gladly. But how sad! How very, very lonely you must be. I think I should pine away with loneliness. There must be quite a hundred people who call me Felicia.”

“Then you must give us poor forlorn creatures some of your happiness,” said Katherine, with a smile. “You must make allowances for us. Do not judge us too harshly.”

“Oh! you must not compare yourself with the others,” said Felicia; “you are quite different from—Mme. Popea, for instance.”

“Ah, no, not very much,” said Katherine, with a touch of bitterness. “We only differ a little through the circumstances of our upbringing, nationality, and so on. We are all the same at heart, weary of ourselves, of life, of each other. Most women have their homes, their children, their pleasant circle of friends. None of us has. We are failures. Either we have sought to get too much from life and heaven has punished us for presumption, or circumstance has been against us—we have been too poor to conquer it. Ah, no, my dear child, don't think that we are merely a set of selfish, coarse, ill-tempered women. Each of us knows in her own heart that she is a failure, and she knows that all the others know it.”

A flush of colour bad come into her delicate cheek as she said this, and her lips closed rather tightly, showing fine, almost imperceptible vertical lines. Yet her eyes looked kindly at Felicia and smoothed any rough impression her words may have made.

The other's eyes met hers rather wonderingly. The tragedy that underlay this commonplace pension life was a

new conception.

“I'll try to think more kindly of them,” she said.

“And what about poor me?”

“Ah, you! I have never thought unkindly about you. In fact, I have wanted to know you, but you have always been so distant and reserved, until this evening; you and Mr. Chetwynd. He is so clever, and so old—and I am only a girl—that I am afraid of boring him.”

Katherine laughed at her naïve confusion. “Why, Mr. Chetwynd is the kindest and most courteous old man in the world! I'll tell you what we'll do. I will get your seat moved up to our end of the table—away from Mme. Boccard, who has had you long enough—and then you can sit next to him. Would you like that?”

Felicia assented gladly. Mme. Boccard was a rather oppressive neighbour. Her conversation was as chaff before the wind, both in substance and utterance; and the few straws that Felicia, with her schoolgirl's knowledge of French, was able to seize, did not afford her much satisfaction.

“How can I thank you for being so kind to me?” she said, a little later, before they parted for the night.

“By calling me Katherine sometimes,” said the other. “I am not so very, very old, you know; and, my dear child, it would comfort me.”

Felicia went to sleep that night happier than she had done since her arrival in Geneva. But she pondered many things before her eyes closed. She was ready to pity Mme. Popea for being a failure, but Mrs. Stapleton had failed to explain to her the necessary connection between an

unhappy life and *Le Journal Amusant*. If the latter was a necessary solace, it brought fresh terrors to the anticipation of sorrow.