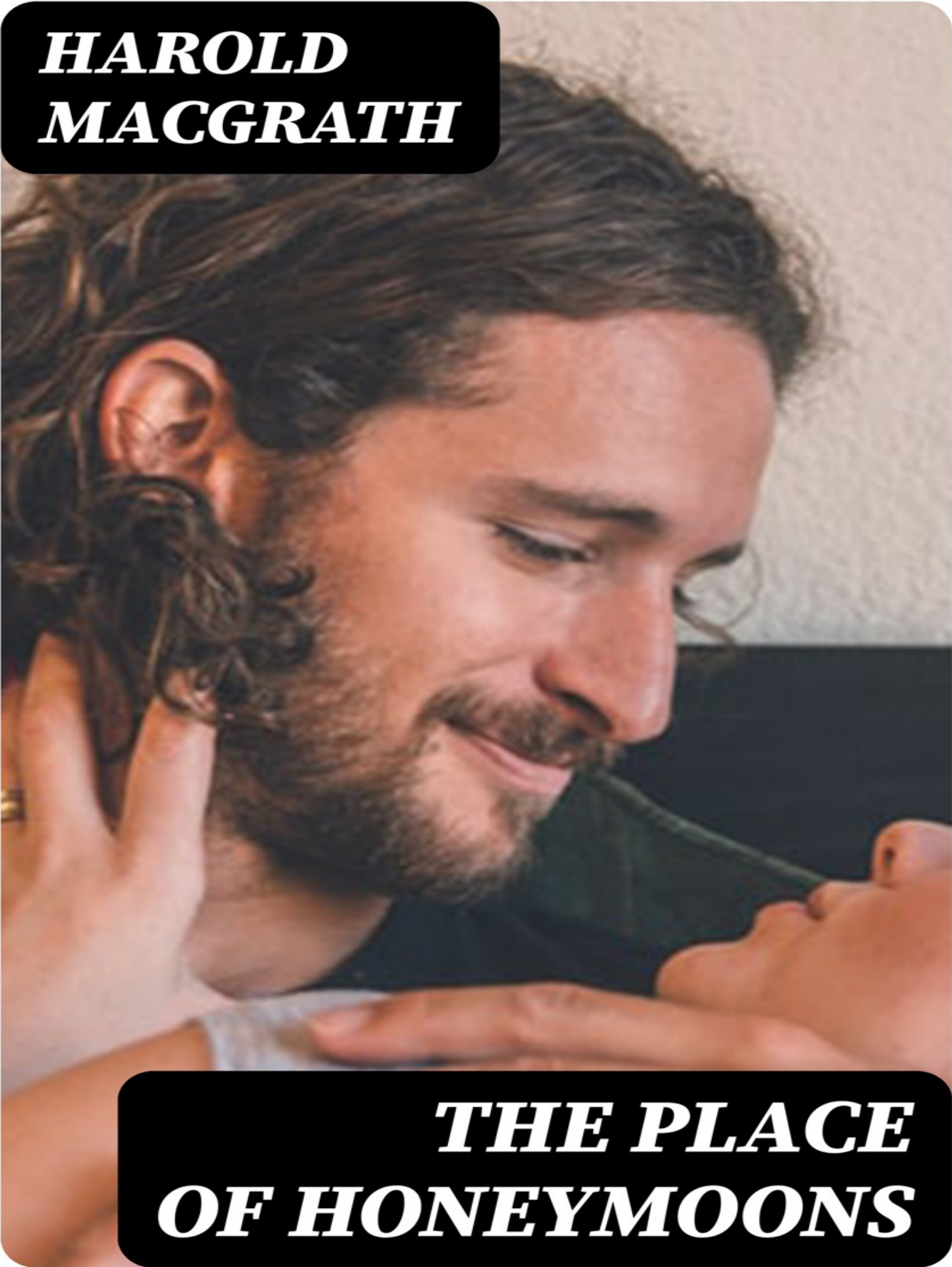


***HAROLD
MACGRATH***



***THE PLACE
OF HONEYMOONS***

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Harold MacGrath

The Place of Honeymoons

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

AT THE STAGE DOOR

CHAPTER II

THERE IS A WOMAN?

CHAPTER III

THE BEAUTIFUL TIGRESS

CHAPTER IV

THE JOKE OF MONSIEUR

CHAPTER V

CAPTIVE OR RUNAWAY

CHAPTER VI

THE BIRD BEHIND BARS

CHAPTER VII

BATTLING JIMMIE

CHAPTER VIII

MOONLIGHT AND A PRINCE

CHAPTER IX

COLONEL CAXLEY-WEBSTER

CHAPTER X

MARGUERITES AND EMERALDS

CHAPTER XI

AT THE CRATER'S EDGE

CHAPTER XII

DICK COURTLANDT'S BOY

CHAPTER XIII

EVERYTHING BUT THE TRUTH

CHAPTER XIV

A COMEDY WITH MUSIC

CHAPTER XV

HERR ROSEN'S REGRETS

CHAPTER XVI

THE APPLE OF DISCORD

CHAPTER XVII

THE BALL AT THE VILLA

CHAPTER XVIII

PISTOLS FOR TWO

CHAPTER XIX

COURTLANDT TELLS A STORY

CHAPTER XX

JOURNEY'S END

CHAPTER I

[Table of Contents](#)

AT THE STAGE DOOR

[Table of Contents](#)

Courtlandt sat perfectly straight; his ample shoulders did not touch the back of his chair; and his arms were folded tightly across his chest. The characteristic of his attitude was tenseness. The nostrils were well defined, as in one who sets the upper jaw hard upon the nether. His brown eyes—their gaze directed toward the stage whence came the voice of the prima donna—epitomized the tension, expressed the whole as in a word.

Just now the voice was pathetically subdued, yet reached every part of the auditorium, kindling the ear with its singularly mellowing sweetness. To Courtlandt it resembled, as no other sound, the note of a muffled Burmese gong, struck in the dim incensed cavern of a temple. A Burmese gong: briefly and magically the stage, the audience, the amazing gleam and scintillation of the Opera, faded. He heard only the voice and saw only the purple shadows in the temple at Rangoon, the oriental sunset splashing the golden dome, the wavering lights of the dripping candles, the dead flowers, the kneeling devotees, the yellow-robed priests, the tatters of gold-leaf, fresh and old, upon the rows of placid grinning Buddhas. The vision was of short duration. The sigh, which had been so long repressed, escaped; his shoulders sank a little, and the angle of his chin became less resolute; but only for a moment. Tension gave place to

an ironical grimness. The brows relaxed, but the lips became firmer. He listened, with this new expression unchanging, to the high note that soared above all others. The French horns blared and the timpani crashed. The curtain sank slowly. The audience rustled, stood up, sought its wraps, and pressed toward the exits and the grand staircase. It was all over.

Courtlandt took his leave in leisure. Here and there he saw familiar faces, but these, after the finding glance, he studiously avoided. He wanted to be alone. For while the music was still echoing in his ears, in a subtone, his brain was afire with keen activity; but unfortunately for the going forward of things, this mental state was divided into so many battalions, led by so many generals, indirectly and indecisively, nowhere. This plan had no beginning, that one had no ending, and the other neither beginning nor ending. Outside he lighted a cigar, not because at that moment he possessed a craving for nicotine, but because like all inveterate smokers he believed that tobacco conduced to clarity of thought. And mayhap it did. At least, there presently followed a mental calm that expelled all this confusion. The goal waxed and waned as he gazed down the great avenue with its precise rows of lamps. Far away he could discern the outline of the brooding Louvre.

There was not the least hope in the world for him to proceed toward his goal this night. He realized this clearly, now that he was face to face with actualities. It required more than the chaotic impulses that had brought him back from the jungles of the Orient. He must reason out a plan that should be like a straight line, the shortest distance between two given points. How then should he pass the

night, since none of his schemes could possibly be put into operation? Return to his hotel and smoke himself headachy? Try to become interested in a novel? Go to bed, to turn and roll till dawn? A wild desire seized him to make a night of it, —Maxim's, the cabarets; riot and wine. Who cared? But the desire burnt itself out between two puffs of his cigar. Ten years ago, perhaps, this particular brand of amusement might have urged him successfully. But not now; he was done with tomfool nights. Indeed, his dissipations had been whimsical rather than banal; and retrospection never aroused a furtive sense of shame.

He was young, but not so young as an idle glance might conjecture in passing. To such casual reckoning he appeared to be in the early twenties; but scrutiny, more or less infallible, noting a line here or an angle there, was disposed to add ten years to the score. There was in the nose and chin a certain decisiveness which in true youth is rarely developed. This characteristic arrives only with manhood, manhood that has been tried and perhaps buffeted and perchance a little disillusioned. To state that one is young does not necessarily imply youth; for youth is something that is truly green and tender, not rounded out, aimless, light-hearted and desultory, charming and inconsequent. If man regrets his youth it is not for the passing of these pleasing, though tangled attributes, but rather because there exists between the two periods of progression a series of irremediable mistakes. And the subject of this brief commentary could look back on many a grievous one brought about by pride or carelessness rather than by intent.

But what was one to do who had both money and leisure linked to an irresistible desire to leave behind one place or thing in pursuit of another, indeterminately? At one time he wanted to be an artist, but his evenly balanced self-criticism had forced him to fling his daubs into the ash-heap. They were good daubs in a way, but were laid on without fire; such work as any respectable schoolmarm might have equaled if not surpassed. Then he had gone in for engineering; but precise and intricate mathematics required patience of a quality not at his command.

The inherent ambition was to make money; but recognizing the absurdity of adding to his income, which even in his extravagance he could not spend, he gave himself over into the hands of grasping railroad and steamship companies, or their agencies, and became for a time the slave of guide and dragoman and carrier. And then the wanderlust, descended to him from the blood of his roving Dutch ancestors, which had lain dormant in the several generations following, sprang into active life again. He became known in every port of call. He became known also in the wildernesses. He had climbed almost inaccessible mountains, in Europe, in Asia; he had fished and hunted north, east, south and west; he had fitted out polar expeditions; he had raided the pearl markets; he had made astonishing gifts to women who had pleased his fancy, but whom he did not know or seek to know; he had kept some of his intimate friends out of bankruptcy; he had given the most extravagant dinners at one season and, unknown, had supported a bread-line at another; he had even financed a musical comedy.

Whatever had for the moment appealed to his fancy, that he had done. That the world—his world—threw up its hands in wonder and despair neither disturbed him nor swerved him in the least. He was alone, absolute master of his millions. Mamas with marriageable daughters declared that he was impossible; the marriageable daughters never had a chance to decide one way or the other; and men called him a fool. He had promoted elephant fights which had stirred the Indian princes out of their melancholy indifference, and tiger hunts which had, by their duration and magnificence, threatened to disrupt the efficiency of the British military service,—whimsical excesses, not understandable by his intimate acquaintances who cynically arraigned him as the fool and his money.

But, like the villain in the play, his income still pursued him. Certain scandals inevitably followed, scandals he was the last to hear about and the last to deny when he heard them. Many persons, not being able to take into the mind and analyze a character like Courtlandt's, sought the line of least resistance for their understanding, and built some precious exploits which included dusky island-princesses, diaphanous dancers, and comic-opera stars.

Simply, he was without direction; a thousand goals surrounded him and none burned with that brightness which draws a man toward his destiny: until one day. Personally, he possessed graces of form and feature, and was keener mentally than most young men who inherit great fortunes and distinguished names.

Automobiles of all kinds panted hither and thither. An occasional smart coupé went by as if to prove that prancing horses were still necessary to the dignity of the old aristocracy. Courtlandt made up his mind suddenly. He laughed with bitterness. He knew now that to loiter near the stage entrance had been his real purpose all along, and persistent lying to himself had not prevailed. In due time he took his stand among the gilded youth who were not privileged (like their more prosperous elders) to wait outside the dressing-rooms for their particular ballerina. By and by there was a little respectful commotion. Courtlandt's hand went instinctively to his collar, not to ascertain if it were properly adjusted, but rather to relieve the sudden pressure. He was enraged at his weakness. He wanted to turn away, but he could not.

A woman issued forth, muffled in silks and light furs. She was followed by another, quite possibly her maid. One may observe very well at times from the corner of the eye; that is, objects at which one is not looking come within the range of vision. The woman paused, her foot upon the step of the modest limousine. She whispered something hurriedly into her companion's ear, something evidently to the puzzlement of the latter, who looked around irresolutely. She obeyed, however, and retreated to the stage entrance. A man, quite as tall as Courtlandt, his face shaded carefully, intentionally perhaps, by one of those soft Bavarian hats that are worn successfully only by Germans, stepped out of the gathering to proffer his assistance. Courtlandt pushed him aside calmly, lifted his hat, and smiling ironically, closed the door behind the singer. The step which the other man

made toward Courtlandt was unequivocal in its meaning. But even as Courtlandt squared himself to meet the coming outburst, the stranger paused, shrugged his shoulders, turned and made off.

The lady in the limousine—very pale could any have looked closely into her face—was whirled away into the night. Courtlandt did not stir from the curb. The limousine dwindled, once it flashed under a light, and then vanished.

“It is the American,” said one of the waiting dandies.

“The icicle!”

“The volcano, rather, which fools believe extinct.”

“Probably sent back her maid for her Bible. Ah, these Americans; they are very amusing.”

“She was in magnificent voice to-night. I wonder why she never sings *Carmen*?”

“Have I not said that she is too cold? What! would you see frost grow upon the toreador’s mustache? And what a name, what a name! Eleonora da Toscana!”

Courtlandt was not in the most amiable condition of mind, and a hint of the ribald would have instantly transformed a passive anger into a blind fury. Thus, a scene hung precariously; but its potentialities became as nothing on the appearance of another woman.

This woman was richly dressed, too richly. Apparently she had trusted her modiste not wisely but too well: there was the strange and unaccountable inherent love of fine feathers and warm colors which is invariably the mute utterance of peasant blood. She was followed by a Russian, huge of body, Jovian of countenance. An expensive car rolled up to the curb. A liveried footman jumped down from

beside the chauffeur and opened the door. The diva turned her head this way and that, a thin smile of satisfaction stirring her lips. For Flora Desimone loved the human eye whenever it stared admiration into her own; and she spent half her days setting traps and lures, rather successfully. She and her formidable escort got into the car which immediately went away with a soft purring sound. There was breeding in the engine, anyhow, thought Courtlandt, who longed to put his strong fingers around that luxurious throat which had, but a second gone, passed him so closely.

"We shall never have war with Russia," said some one; "her dukes love Paris too well."

Light careless laughter followed this cynical observation. Another time Courtlandt might have smiled. He pushed his way into the passage leading to the dressing-rooms, and followed its windings until he met a human barrier. To his inquiry the answer was abrupt and perfectly clear in its meaning: La Signorina da Toscana had given most emphatic orders not to disclose her address to any one. Monsieur might, if he pleased, make further inquiries of the directors; the answer there would be the same. Presently he found himself gazing down the avenue once more. There were a thousand places to go to, a thousand pleasant things to do; yet he doddered, full of ill-temper, dissatisfaction, and self-contempt. He was weak, damnably weak; and for years he had admired himself, detachedly, as a man of pride. He started forward, neither sensing his direction nor the perfected flavor of his Habana.

Opera singers were truly a race apart. They lived in the world but were not a part of it, and when they died, left only

a memory which faded in one generation and became totally forgotten in another. What jealousies, what petty bickerings, what extravagances! With fancy and desire unchecked, what ingenious tricks they used to keep themselves in the public mind,—tricks begot of fickleness and fickleness begetting. And yet, it was a curious phase: their influence was generally found when history untangled for posterity some Gordian knot. In old times they had sung the *Marseillaise* and danced the *carmagnole* and indirectly plied the guillotine. And to-day they smashed prime ministers, petty kings, and bankers, and created fashions for the ruin of husbands and fathers of modest means. Devil take them! And Courtlandt flung his cigar into the street.

He halted. The Madeleine was not exactly the goal for a man who had, half an hour before, contemplated a rout at Maxim's. His glance described a half-circle. There was Durand's; but Durand's on opera nights entertained many Americans, and he did not care to meet any of his compatriots to-night. So he turned down the Rue Royale, on the opposite side, and went into the Taverne Royale, where the patrons were not over particular in regard to the laws of fashion, and where certain ladies with light histories sought further adventures to add to their heptamérons. Now, Courtlandt thought neither of the one nor of the other. He desired isolation, safety from intrusion; and here, did he so signify, he could find it. Women gazed up at him and smiled, with interest as much as with invitation. He was brown from long exposure to the wind and the sun, that golden brown which is the gift of the sun-glitter on rocking seas. A traveler is generally indicated by this artistry of the sun, and once

noted instantly creates a speculative interest. Even his light brown hair had faded at the temples, and straw-colored was the slender mustache, the ends of which had a cavalier twist. He ignored the lips which smiled and the eyes which invited, and nothing more was necessary. One is not importuned at the Taverne Royale. He sat down at a vacant table and ordered a pint of champagne, drinking hastily rather than thirstily.

Would Monsieur like anything to eat?

No, the wine was sufficient.

Courtlandt poured out a second glass slowly. The wine bubbled up to the brim and overflowed. He had been looking at the glass with unseeing eyes. He set the bottle down impatiently. Fool! To have gone to Burma, simply to stand in the golden temple once more, in vain, to recall that other time: the starving kitten held tenderly in a woman's arms, his own scurry among the booths to find the milk so peremptorily ordered, and the smile of thanks that had been his reward! He had run away when he should have hung on. He should have fought every inch of the way....

"Monsieur is lonely?"

A pretty young woman sat down before him in the vacant chair.



CHAPTER II

[Table of Contents](#)

THERE IS A WOMAN?

[Table of Contents](#)

Anger, curiosity, interest; these sensations blanketed one another quickly, leaving only interest, which was Courtlandt's normal state of mind when he saw a pretty woman. It did not require very keen scrutiny on his part to arrive swiftly at the conclusion that this one was not quite in the picture. Her cheeks were not red with that redness which has a permanency of tone, neither waxing nor waning, abashed in daylight. Nor had her lips found their scarlet moisture from out the depths of certain little porcelain boxes. Decidedly she was out of place here, yet she evinced no embarrassment; she was cool, at ease. Courtlandt's interest strengthened.

"Why do you think I am lonely, Mademoiselle?" he asked, without smiling.

"Oh, when one talks to one's self, strikes the table, wastes good wine, the inference is but natural. So, Monsieur is lonely."

Her lips and eyes, as grave and smileless as his own, puzzled him. An adventure? He looked at some of the other women. Those he could understand, but this one, no. At all times he was willing to smile, yet to draw her out he realized that he must preserve his gravity unbroken. The situation was not usual. His gaze came back to her.

"Is the comparison favorable to me?" she asked.

"It is. What is loneliness?" he demanded cynically.

"Ah, I could tell you," she answered. "It is the longing to be with the one we love; it is the hate of the wicked things we have done; it is remorse."

"That echoes of the Ambigu-Comique." He leaned upon his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"I?"

"Yes. You do not talk like the other girls who come here."

"Monsieur comes here frequently, then?"

"This is the first time in five years. I came here to-night because I wanted to be alone, because I did not wish to meet any one I knew. I have scowled at every girl in the room, and they have wisely left me alone. I haven't scowled at you because I do not know what to make of you. That's frankness. Now, you answer my question."

"Would you spare me a glass of wine? I am thirsty."

He struck his hands together, a bit of orientalism he had brought back with him. The observant waiter instantly came forward with a glass.

The young woman sipped the wine, gazing into the glass as she did so. "Perhaps a whim brought me here. But I repeat, Monsieur is lonely."

"So lonely that I am almost tempted to put you into a taxicab and run away with you."

She set down the glass.

"But I sha'n't," he added.

The spark of eagerness in her eyes was instantly curtailed. "There is a woman?" tentatively.

"Is there not always a woman?"

"And she has disappointed Monsieur?" There was no marked sympathy in the tone.

“Since Eve, has that not been woman’s part in the human comedy?” He was almost certain that her lips became firmer. “Smile, if you wish. It is not prohibitory here.”

It was evident that the smile had been struggling for existence, for it endured to the fulness of half a minute. She had fine teeth. He scrutinized her more closely, and she bore it well. The forehead did not make for beauty; it was too broad and high, intellectual. Her eyes were splendid. There was nothing at all ordinary about her. His sense of puzzlement renewed itself and deepened. What did she want of him? There were other men, other vacant chairs.

“Monsieur is certain about the taxicab?”

“Absolutely.”

“Ah, it is to emulate Saint Anthony!”

“There are several saints of that name. To which do you refer?”

“Positively not to him of Padua.”

Courtlandt laughed. “No, I can not fancy myself being particularly concerned about bambini. No, my model is Noah.”

“Noah?” dubiously.

“Yes. At the time of the flood there was only one woman in the world.”

“I am afraid that your knowledge of that event is somewhat obscured. Still, I understand.”

She lifted the wine-glass again, and then he noticed her hand. It was large, white and strong; it was not the hand of a woman who dallied, who idled in primrose paths.

"Tell me, what is it you wish? You interest me, at a moment, too, when I do not want to be interested. Are you really in trouble? Is there anything I can do ... barring the taxicab?"

She twirled the glass, uneasily. "I am not in actual need of assistance."

"But you spoke peculiarly regarding loneliness."

"Perhaps I like the melodrama. You spoke of the Ambigu-Comique."

"You are on the stage?"

"Perhaps."

"The Opera?"

"Again perhaps."

He laughed once more, and drew his chair closer to the table.

"Monsieur in other moods must have a pleasant laughter."

"I haven't laughed from the heart in a very long time," he said, returning to his former gravity, this time unassumed.

"And I have accomplished this amazing thing?"

"No. You followed me here. But from where?"

"Followed you?" The effort to give a mocking accent to her voice was a failure.

"Yes. The idea just occurred to me. There were other vacant chairs, and there was nothing inviting in my facial expression. Come, let me have the truth."

"I have a friend who knows Flora Desimone."

"Ah!" As if this information was a direct visitation of kindness from the gods. "Then you know where the Calabrian lives? Give me her address."

There was a minute wrinkle above the unknown's nose; the shadow of a frown. "She is very beautiful."

"Bah! Did she send you after me? Give me her address. I have come all the way from Burma to see Flora Desimone."

"To see her?" She unguardedly clothed the question with contempt, but she instantly forced a smile to neutralize the effect. Concerned with her own defined conclusions, she lost the fine ironic bitterness that was in the man's voice.

"Aye, indeed, to see her! Beautiful as Venus, as alluring as Phryne, I want nothing so much as to see her, to look into her eyes, to hear her voice!"

"Is it jealousy? I hear the tragic note." The certainty of her ground became as morass again. In his turn he was puzzling her.

"Tragedy? I am an American. We do not kill opera singers. We turn them over to the critics. I wish to see the beautiful Flora, to ask her a few questions. If she has sent you after me, her address, my dear young lady, her address." His eyes burned.

"I am afraid." And she was so. This wasn't the tone of a man madly in love. It was wild anger.

"Afraid of what?"

"You."

"I will give you a hundred francs." He watched her closely and shrewdly.

Came the little wrinkle again, but this time urged in perplexity. "A hundred francs, for something I was sent to tell you?"

"And now refuse."

"It is very generous. She has a heart of flint, Monsieur."

“Well I know it. Perhaps now I have one of steel.”

“Many sparks do not make a fire. Do you know that your French is very good?”

“I spent my boyhood in Paris; some of it. Her address, if you please.” He produced a crisp note for a hundred francs. “Do you want it?”

She did not answer at once. Presently she opened her purse, found a stubby pencil and a slip of paper, and wrote. “There it is, Monsieur.” She held out her hand for the bank-note which, with a sense of bafflement, he gave her. She folded the note and stowed it away with the pencil.

“Thank you,” said Courtlandt. “Odd paper, though.” He turned it over. “Ah, I understand. You copy music.”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

This time the nervous flicker of her eyes did not escape him. “You are studying for the opera, perhaps?”

“Yes, that is it.”

The eagerness of the admission convinced him that she was not. Who she was or whence she had come no longer excited his interest. He had the Calabrian’s address and he was impatient to be off.

“Good night.” He rose.

“Monsieur is not gallant.”

“I was in my youth,” he replied, putting on his hat.

The bald rudeness of his departure did not disturb her. She laughed softly and relievedly. Indeed, there was in the laughter an essence of mischief. However, if he carried away a mystery, he left one behind.

As he was hunting for a taxicab, the waiter ran out and told him that he had forgotten to settle for the wine. The

lady had refused to do so. Courtlandt chuckled and gave him a ten-franc piece. In other days, in other circumstances, he would have liked to know more about the unknown who scribbled notes on composition paper. She was not an idler in the Rue Royale, and it did not require that indefinable intuition which comes of worldly-wiseness to discover this fact. She might be a friend of the Desimone woman, but she had stepped out of another sphere to become so. He recognized the quality that could adjust itself to any environment and come out scatheless. This was undeniably an American accomplishment; and yet she was distinctly a Frenchwoman. He dismissed the problem from his mind and bade the driver go as fast as the police would permit.

Meanwhile the young woman waited five or ten minutes, and, making sure that Courtlandt had been driven off, left the restaurant. Round the corner she engaged a carriage. So that was Edward Courtlandt? She liked his face; there was not a weak line in it, unless stubbornness could be called such. But to stay away for two years! To hide himself in jungles, to be heard of only by his harebrained exploits! "Follow him; see where he goes," had been the command. For a moment she had rebelled, but her curiosity was not to be denied. Besides, of what use was friendship if not to be tried? She knew nothing of the riddle, she had never asked a question openly. She had accidentally seen a photograph one day, in a trunk tray, with this man's name scrawled across it, and upon this flimsy base she had builded a dozen romances, each of which she had ruthlessly torn down to make room for another; but still the riddle lay unsolved. She had thrown the name into the conversation many a time, as

one might throw a bomb into a crowd which had no chance to escape. Fizzles! The man had been calmly discussed and calmly dismissed. At odd times an article in the newspapers gave her an opportunity; still the frank discussion, still the calm dismissal. She had learned that the man was rich, irresponsible, vacillating, a picturesque sort of fool. But two years? What had kept him away that long? A weak man, in love, would not have made so tame a surrender. Perhaps he had not surrendered; perhaps neither of them had.

And yet, he sought the Calabrian. Here was another blind alley out of which she had to retrace her steps. Bother! That Puck of Shakespeare was right: What fools these mortals be! She was very glad that she possessed a true sense of humor, spiced with harmless audacity. What a dreary world it must be to those who did not know how and when to laugh! They talked of the daring of the American woman: who but a Frenchwoman would have dared what she had this night? The taxicab! She laughed. And this man was wax in the hands of any pretty woman who came along! So rumor had it. But she knew that rumor was only the attenuated ghost of Ananias, doomed forever to remain on earth for the propagation of inaccurate whispers. Wax! Why, she would have trusted herself in any situation with a man with those eyes and that angle of jaw. It was all very mystifying. "Follow him; see where he goes." The frank discussion, then, and the calm dismissal were but a woman's dissimulation. And he had gone to Flora Desimone's.

The carriage stopped before a handsome apartment-house in the Avenue de Wagram. The unknown got out,