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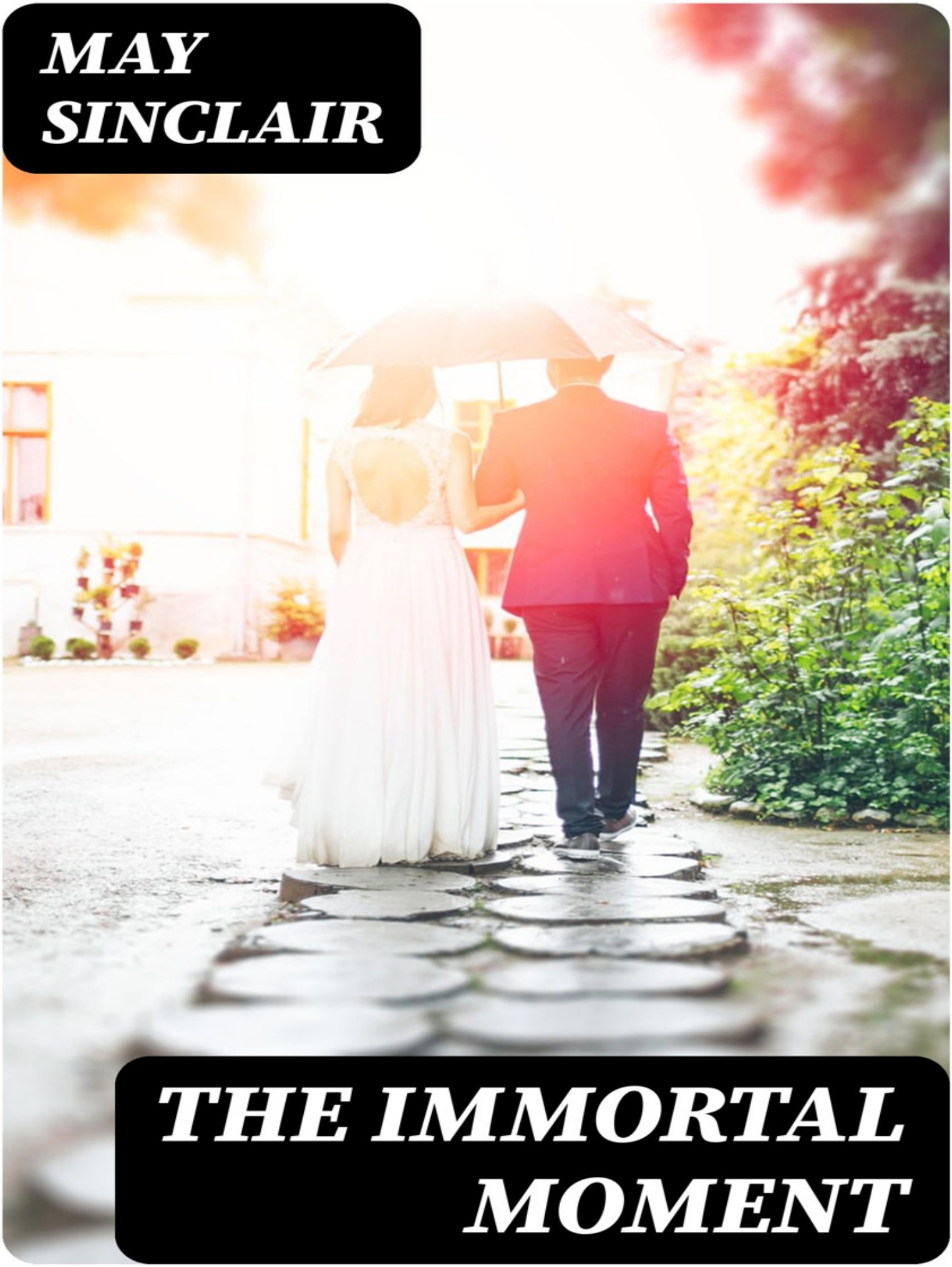

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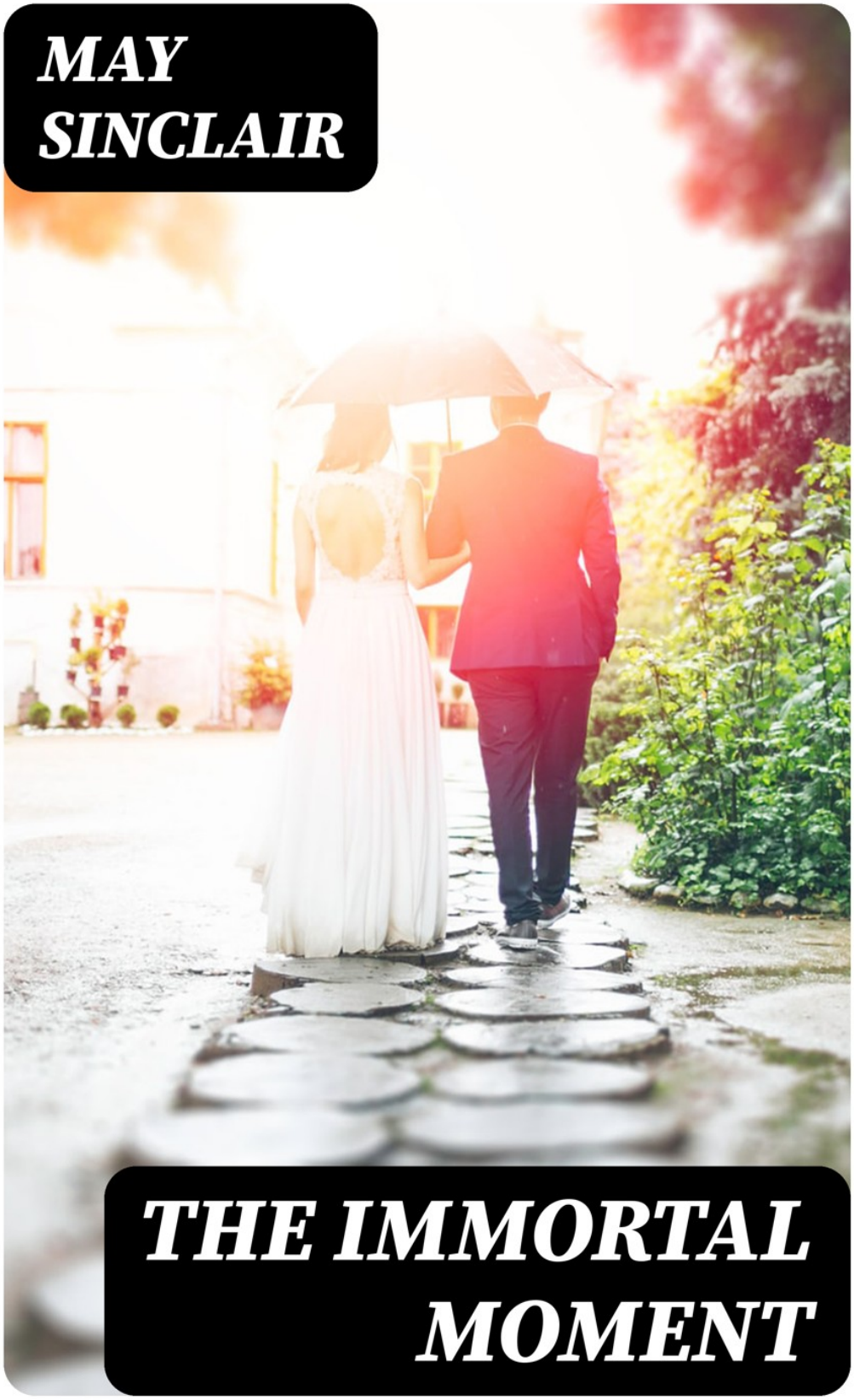

THE IMMORTAL MOMENT

May Sinclair

The Immortal Moment

The Story of Kitty Tailleur

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Table of Contents

THE IMMORTAL MOMENT

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

THEY came into the hotel dining-room like young persons making their first entry into life. They carried themselves with an air of subdued audacity, of innocent inquiry. When the great doors opened to them they stood still on the threshold, charmed, expectant. There was the magic of quest, of pure, unspoiled adventure in their very efforts to catch the head-waiter's eye. It was as if they called from its fantastic dwelling-place the attendant spirit of delight.

You could never have guessed how old they were. He, at thirty-five, had preserved, by some miracle, his alert and slender adolescence. In his brown, clean-shaven face, keen with pleasure, you saw the clear, serious eyes and the adorable smile of seventeen. She, at thirty, had kept the wide eyes and tender mouth of childhood. Her face had a child's immortal, spiritual appeal.

They were charming with each other. You might have taken them for bride and bridegroom, his absorption in her was so unimpaired. But their names in the visitors' book stood as Mr. Robert Lucy and Miss Jane Lucy. They were brother and sister. You gathered it from something absurdly alike in their faces, something profound and racial and enduring.

For they combined it all, the youth, the abandonment, the innocence, with an indomitable distinction.

They made their way with easy, unembarrassed movements, and seated themselves at a table by an open window. They bent their brows together over the menu. The

head-waiter (who had flown at last to their high summons) made them his peculiar care, and they turned to him with the helplessness of children. He told them what things they would like, what things (he seemed to say) would be good for them. And when he went away with their order they looked at each other and laughed, softly and instantaneously.

They had done the right thing. They both said it at the same moment, smiling triumphantly into each other's face. Southbourne was exquisite in young June, at the dawn of its season. And the Cliff Hotel promised what they wanted, a gay seclusion, a refined publicity.

If you were grossly rich, you went to the big Hôtel Métropole, opposite. If you were a person of fastidious tastes and an attenuated income, you felt the superior charm of the Cliff Hotel. The little house, the joy of its proprietor, was hidden in the privacy of its own beautiful grounds, having its back to the high road and its face to the open sea. They had taken stock of it that morning, with its clean walls, white as the Cliff it stood on; its bay windows, its long, green-roofed veranda, looking south; its sharp, slated roofs and gables, all sheltered by the folding Downs.

They did not know which of them had first suggested Southbourne. Probably they had both thought of it at the same moment, as they were thinking now. But it was she who had voted for the Cliff Hotel, in preference to lodgings. She thought that in an hotel there would be more scope, more chance of things happening.

Jane was always on the look-out for things happening. He saw her now, with her happy eyes, and her little, tilted nose,

sniffing the air, scanning the horizon.

He knew Jane and her adventures well. They were purely, pathetically vicarious. Jane was the thrall of her own sympathy. So was he. At a hint she was off, and he after her, on wild paths of inference, on perilous oceans of conjecture. Only he moved more slowly, and he knew the end of it. He had seen, before now, her joyous leap to land, on shores of manifest disaster. He protested against that jumping to conclusions. He, for his part, took conclusions in his stride.

But Jane was always listening for a call from some foreign country of the soul. She was always entering surreptitiously into other people's feelings. They never caught her at it, never suspected her soft-footed, innocent intrusions.

She was wondering now whether they would have to make friends with any of the visitors. She hoped not, because that would spoil it, the adventure. People had a way of telling her their secrets, and Jane preferred not to be told. All she wanted was an inkling, a clue; the slenderer the better.

The guests as yet assembled were not conspicuously interesting.

There was a clergyman dining gloomily at a table by himself. There was a gray group of middle-aged ladies next to him. There was Colonel Hankin and his wife. They had arrived with the Lucys in the hotel 'bus, and their names were entered above Robert's in the visitors' book. They marked him with manifest approval as one of themselves, and they looked all pink perfection and silver white propriety. There was the old lady who did nothing but knit. She had arrived in a fly, knitting. She was knitting now,

between the courses. When she caught sight of the Lucys she smiled at them over her knitting. They had found her, before dinner, with her feet entangled in a skein of worsted. Jane had shown tenderness in disentangling her.

It was almost as if they had made friends already.

Jane's eyes roamed and lighted on a fat, wine-faced man. Lucy saw them. He teased her, challenged her. She didn't think, did she, she could do anything with him?

No. Jane thought not. He wasn't interesting. There was nothing that you could take hold of, except that he seemed to be very fond of wine, poor old thing. But then, you had to be fond of something, and perhaps it was his only weakness. What did Robert think?

Robert did not hear her. He was bending forward, looking beyond her, across the room toward the great doors. They had swung open again, with a flash of their glass panels, to give passage to a lady.

She came slowly, with the irresistible motion of creatures that divide and trouble the medium in which they move. The white, painted wainscot behind her showed her small, eager head, its waving rolls and crowning heights of hair, black as her gown. She had a sweet face, curiously foreshortened by a low forehead and the briefest of chins. It was white with the same whiteness as her neck, her shoulders, her arms—a whiteness pure and profound. This face she kept thrust a little forward, while her eyes looked round, steadily, deliberately, for the place where she desired to be. She carried on her arm a long tippet of brown fur. It slipped, and her effort to recover it brought her to a standstill.

The large, white room, half empty at this season, gave her up bodily to what seemed to Lucy the intolerable impudence of the public gaze.

She was followed by an older lady who had the air of making her way with difficulty and vexation through an unpleasantly crowded space. This lady was somewhat oddly attired in a white dress cut high with a Puritan intention, but otherwise indiscreetly youthful. She kept close to the tail of her companion's gown, and tracked its charming evolutions with an irritated eye. Her whole aspect was evidently a protest against the publicity she was compelled to share.

"She stood there, strangely still ... before the pitiless stare that went up to her appealing face."

Lucy was not interested in her. He was watching the lady in black who was now standing in the middle of the room. Her elbow touched the shoulder of a young man on her left. The fur tippet slipped again and lay at the young man's feet. He picked it up, and as he handed it to her he stared into her face, and sleeked his little moustache above a furtive, objectionable smile. His companion (Jane's uninteresting

man), roused from communion with the spirit of Veuve Cliquot, fixed on the lady a pair of blood-shot eyes in a brutal, wine-dark face.

She stood there, strangely still, it seemed to Lucy, before the pitiless stare that went up, right and left, to her appealing face. She was looking, it seemed to him, for her refuge.

She moved forward. The Colonel, pinker than ever in his perfection, lowered his eyes as she approached. She paused again in her progress beside the clergyman on her right. He looked severely at her, as much as to say, "Madam, if you drop that thing in *my* neighbourhood, I shall not attempt to pick it up."

An obsequious waiter pointed out a table next to the middle-aged ladies. She shook her head at the middle-aged ladies. She turned in her course, and her eyes met Lucy's. He said something to his sister. Jane rose and changed her seat, thus clearing the way to a table that stood beside theirs, empty, secluded in the bay of the window.

The lady in black came swiftly, as if to the place of her desire. The glance that expressed her gratitude went from Lucy to Jane and from Jane to Lucy, and rested on him for a moment.

As the four grouped themselves at their respective tables, the lady in white, seated with her back to the window, commanded a front and side view of Jane. The lady in black sat facing Lucy.

She put her elbows on the table and turned her face (her profile was remarkably pretty) to her companion.

"Well," said she, "don't you want to sit here?"

"Oh," said the older woman, "what does it matter where we sit?"

She spoke in a small, crowing voice, the voice, Lucy said to himself, of a rather terrible person. She shivered.

"Poor lamb, does it feel a draught down its little back?"

The lady rose and put her fur tippet on the shivering shoulders. They shrank from her, and she drew it closer and fastened it with caressing and cajoling fingers. There was about her something impetuous and perverse, a wilful, ungovernable tenderness. Her hands had the swiftness of things moved by sweet, disastrous impulses.

The white person (she was quite terrible) undid the fastening and shook her shoulders free of the fur. It slid to the floor for the third time.

Lucy rose from his place, picked up the fur and restored it to its owner.

The quite terrible person flushed with vexation.

"You see," said the lady, "the trouble you've given that nice man."

"Oh don't! he'll hear you."

"If he does, he won't mind," said the lady.

He did hear her. It was difficult not to hear, not to look at her, not to be interested in every movement that she made. Her charm, however, was powerless over her companion.

Their voices, to Lucy's relief, sank low. Then suddenly the companion spoke.

"Of course," said she, "if you *want* all the men to look at you——"

Lucy looked no more. He heard the lady draw in her breath with a soft, sharp sound, and he felt his blood

running scarlet to the roots of his hair.

"I believe" (the older lady spoke almost vindictively) "you like it."

The head-waiter, opportune in all his approaches, brought coffee at that moment. Lucy turned his chair slightly, so that he presented his back to the speaker, and to the lady in black his side-face, shaded by his hand, conspicuously penitential.

Jane tried to set everybody at their ease by talking in a clear, cool voice about the beautiful decorations, the perfect management of the hotel. The two drank their coffee hastily and left the table. In the doorway Lucy drew the head-waiter aside.

"Who," said he, "is that lady in the window?"

"The lady in the window, sir? Miss Keating, sir."

"I mean—the other lady."

The head-waiter looked reproachfully at Lucy and apologetically at Jane.

"The lady in black, sir? You want to know her name?"

"Yes."

"Her *name*, sir, is Mrs. Tailleur."

His manner intimated respectfully that Lucy would not like Mrs. Tailleur, and that, if he did, she would not be good for him.

The brother and sister went out into the hotel garden. They strolled up and down the cool, green lawns that overhung the beach.

Lucy smoked and was silent.

"Jane," he said presently, "could *you* see what she did?"

"I was just going," said Jane, "to ask you that."

"Upon my soul, I can't see it," said he.

"Nor I," said Jane.

"Could you see what *I* did?"

"What you did?"

"Yes, I. *Did* I look at her?"

"Well, yes; certainly you looked at her."

"And you think she minded?"

"No; I don't think she minded very much."

"Come, she couldn't have liked it, could she?"

"I don't know. I don't think she noticed it. You see" (Jane was off on the adventure) "she's in mourning for her husband. He has been dead about two years. He wasn't very kind to her, and she doesn't know whether to be glad or sorry he's dead. She's unhappy and afraid."

"I say, how do you know all that?"

"I know," said Jane, "because I see it in her face; and in her clothes. I always see things."

He laughed at that.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

THEY talked a long time as they paced the green lawns, linked arm in arm, keeping their own path fastidiously.

Miss Keating, Mrs. Tailleur's companion, watched them from her seat on the veranda.

She had made her escape from the great, lighted lounge behind her where the men were sitting. She had found a corner out of sight of its wide windows. She knew that Kitty Tailleur was in there somewhere. She could hear her talking to the men. At the other end of the veranda the old lady sat with her knitting. From time to time she looked up over her needles and glanced curiously at Miss Keating.

On the lawn below, Colonel Hankin walked with his wife. They kept the same line as the Lucys, so that, in rhythmic instants, the couples made one group. There was an affinity, a harmony in their movements as they approached each other. They were all obviously nice people, people who belonged by right to the same group, who might approach each other without any impropriety.

Miss Keating wondered how long it would be before Kitty Tailleur would approach Mr. Lucy. That afternoon, on her arrival, she had approached the Colonel, and the Colonel had got up and gone away. Kitty had then laughed. Miss Keating suspected her of a similar social intention with regard to the younger man. She knew his name. She had looked it up in the visitors' book. (She was always looking up people's names.) She had made with determination for the table next to him. Miss Keating, in the dawn of their

acquaintance, had prayed that Mrs. Tailleur might not elect to sit next anybody who was not nice. Latterly she had found herself hoping that their place might not be in view of anybody who was.

For three months they had been living in hotels, in horrifying publicity. Miss Keating dreaded most the hour they had just passed through. There was something terrible to her in their entry, in their passage down the great, white, palm-shaded, exotic room, their threading of the ways between the tables, with all the men turning round to stare at Kitty Tailleur. It was all very well for Kitty to pretend that she saved her by thus diverting and holding fast the public eye. Miss Keating felt that the tail of it flicked her unpleasantly as she followed in that troubled, luminous wake.

It had not been quite so unbearable in Brighton, at Easter, when the big hotels were crowded, and Mrs. Tailleur was not so indomitably conspicuous. Or else Miss Keating had not been so painfully alive to her. But Southbourne was half empty in early June, and the Cliff Hotel, small as it was, had room for the perfect exhibition of Mrs. Tailleur. It gave her wide, polished spaces and clean, brilliant backgrounds, yards of parquetry for the gliding of her feet, and monstrous mirrors for reflecting her face at unexpected angles. These distances fined her grace still finer, and lent her a certain pathos, the charm of figures vanishing and remote.

Not that you could think of Kitty Tailleur as in the least remote or vanishing. She seemed to be always approaching, to hover imminently and dangerously near.

Mr. Lucy looked fairly unapproachable. His niceness, Miss Keating imagined, would keep him linked arm in arm with his sister, maintaining, unconsciously, inoffensively, his distance and distinction. He would manage better than the Colonel. He would not have to get up and go away. So Miss Keating thought.

From the lounge behind the veranda, Kitty's voice came to her again. Kitty was excited and her voice went winged. It flew upward, touched a perilous height and shook there. It hung, on its delicate, feminine wings, dominating the male voices that contended, brutally, below. Now and then it found its lyric mate, a high, adolescent voice that followed it with frenzy, that broke, pitifully, in sharp, abominable laughter, like a cry of pain.

Miss Keating shut her eyes to keep out her vision of Kitty's face with the look it wore when her voice went high.

She was roused by the waiter bringing coffee. Kitty Tailleur had come out on to the veranda. She was pouring out Grace Keating's coffee, and talking to her in another voice, the one that she kept for children and for animals, and for all diminutive and helpless things. She was saying that Miss Keating (whom she called Bunny) was a dear little white rabbit, and she wanted to stroke her.

"You see, you are so very small," said Kitty, as she dropped sugar into Miss Keating's cup. She had ordered cigarettes and a liqueur for herself.

Miss Keating said nothing. She drank her coffee with a distasteful movement of her lips.

Kitty Tailleur stretched herself at full length on a garden chair. She watched her companion with eyes secretly,

profoundly intent under lowered lids.

"Do you mind my smoking?" she said presently.

"No," said Miss Keating.

"Do you mind my drinking Kümmel?"

"No."

"Do you mind my showing seven inches of stocking?"

"No."

"What do you mind, then?"

"I mind your making yourself so very conspicuous."

"I don't make myself conspicuous. I was born so."

"You make me conspicuous. Goodness knows what all these people take us for!"

"Holy Innocent! As long as you sit tight and do your hair like that, nobody could take you for anything but a dear little bunny with its ears laid back. But if you get palpitations in your little nose, and turn up your little white tail at people, and scuttle away when they look at you, you can't blame them if they wonder what's the matter with you."

"With *me*?"

"Yes; it's you who give the show away." Kitty smiled into her liqueur glass. "It doesn't seem to strike you that your behaviour compromises me."

Miss Keating's mouth twitched. Her narrow, rather prominent front teeth lifted an instant, and then closed sharply on her lower lip. Her throat trembled as if she were swallowing some bitter thing that had been on the tip of her tongue.

"If you think that," she said, and her voice crowed no longer, "wouldn't it be better for us not to be together?"

Kitty shook her meditative head. "Poor Bunny," said she, "why can't you be honest? Why don't you say plump out that you're sick and tired of me? *I* should be. I couldn't stand another woman lugging me about as I lug you."

"It isn't *that*. Only—everywhere we go—there's always some horrible man."

"Everywhere you go, dear lamb, there always will be."

"Yes; but one doesn't have anything to do with them."

"I don't have anything to do with them."

"You talk to them."

"Of course I do," said Kitty. "Why not?"

"You don't know them."

"H'm! If you never talk to people you don't know, pray how do you get to know them?"

Kitty sat up and began playing with the matches till she held a bunch of them blazing in her hand. She was blowing out the flame as the Hankins came up the steps of the veranda. They had a smile for the old lady in her corner, and for Miss Keating a look of wonder and curiosity and pity; but they turned from Mrs. Tailleur with guarded eyes.

"What do you bet," said Kitty, "that I don't make that long man there come and talk to me?"

"If you do——"

"I'll do it before you count ten. One, two, three, four. I shall ask him for a light——"

"Sh-sh! He's coming."

Kitty slid her feet to the floor and covered them with her skirt. Then she looked down, fascinated, apparently, by the shining tips of her shoes. You could have drawn a straight