
WILLIAM JOHN
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Septimus

EAN 8596547123033

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I

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"I love Nunsmere," said the Literary Man from London. "It is a spot where faded lives are laid away in lavender."

"I'm not a faded life, and I'm not going to be laid away in lavender," retorted Zora Middlemist.

She turned from him and handed cakes to the Vicar. She had no desire to pet the Vicar, but he was less unbearable than the Literary Man from London whom he had brought to call on his parishioners. Zora disliked to be called a parishioner. She disliked many things in Nunsmere. Her mother, Mrs. Oldrieve, however, loved Nunsmere, adored the Vicar, and found awe-inspiring in his cleverness the Literary Man from London.

Nunsmere lies hidden among the oaks of Surrey, far from the busy ways of men. It is heaven knows how many miles from a highroad. You have to drive through lanes and climb right over a hill to get to it. Two old Georgian houses covered with creepers, a modern Gothic church, two much more venerable and pious-looking inns, and a few cottages settling peacefully around a common form the village. Here and there a cottage lurks up a lane. These cottages are mostly inhabited by the gentle classes. Some are really old, with great oak beams across the low ceilings, and stone-flagged kitchens furnished with great open fireplaces where you can sit and get scorched and covered with smoke. Some are new, built in imitation of the old, by a mute, inglorious Adam, the village carpenter. All have long casement windows, front gardens in which grow stocks and phlox and

sunflowers and hollyhocks and roses; and a red-tiled path leads from the front gate to the entrance porch. Nunsmere is very quiet and restful. Should a roisterer cross the common singing a song at half-past nine at night, all Nunsmere hears it and is shocked—if not frightened to the extent of bolting doors and windows, lest the dreadful drunken man should come in.

In a cottage on the common, an old one added to by the local architect, with a front garden and a red-tiled path, dwelt Mrs. Oldrieve in entire happiness, and her daughter in discontent. And this was through no peevish or disagreeable traits in Zora's nature. If we hear Guy Fawkes was fretful in the Little-Ease, we are not pained by Guy Fawkes's lack of Christian resignation.

When the Vicar and the Literary Man from London had gone, Zora threw open the window and let the soft autumn air flood the room. Mrs. Oldrieve drew her woolen shawl around her lean shoulders.

"I'm afraid you quite snubbed Mr. Rattenden, just when he was saying one of his cleverest things."

"He said it to the wrong person, mother. I'm neither a faded life nor am I going to be laid away in lavender. Do I look like it?"

She moved across the room, swiftly, and stood in the slanting light from the window, offering herself for inspection. Nothing could be less like a faded life than the magnificent, broad-hipped, full-bosomed woman that met her mother's gaze. Her hair was auburn, her eyes brown with gold flecks, her lips red, her cheeks clear and young. She was cast, physically, in heroic mold, a creature of

dancing blood and color and warmth. Disparaging tea-parties called her an Amazon. The Vicar's wife regarded her as too large and flaring and curvilinear for reputable good looks. She towered over Nunsmere. Her presence disturbed the sedateness of the place. She was a wrong note in its harmony.

Mrs. Oldrieve sighed. She was small and colorless. Her husband, a wild explorer, a tornado of a man, had been killed by a buffalo. She was afraid that Zora took after her father. Her younger daughter Emmy had also inherited some of the Oldrieve restlessness and had gone on the stage. She was playing now in musical comedy in London.

"I don't see why you should not be happy here, Zora," she remarked, "but if you want to go, you must. I used to say the same to your poor, dear father."

"I've been very good, haven't I?" said Zora. "I've been the model young widow and lived as demurely as if my heart were breaking with sorrow. But now, I can't stand it any longer. I'm going out to see the world."

"You'll soon marry again, dear, and that's one comfort."

Zora brought her hands down passionately to her sides.

"Never. Never—do you hear, mother? Never. I'm going out into the world, to get to the heart of the life I've never known. I'm going to live."

"I don't see how you are going to 'live,' dear, without a man to take care of you," said Mrs. Oldrieve, on whom there occasionally flashed an eternal verity.

"I hate men. I hate the touch of them—the very sight of them. I'm going to have nothing more to do with them for

the rest of my natural life. My dear mother!" and her voice broke, "haven't I had enough to do with men and marriage?"

"All men aren't like Edward Middlemist," Mrs. Oldrieve argued as she counted the rows of her knitting.

"How am I to know that? How could anyone have told that he was what he was? For heaven's sake don't talk of it. I had almost forgotten it all in this place."

She shuddered and, turning to the window, stared into the sunset.

"Lavender has its uses," said Mrs. Oldrieve.

Here again it must be urged on Zora's behalf that she had reason for her misanthropy. It is not cheerful for a girl to discover within twenty-four hours of her wedding that her husband is a hopeless drunkard, and to see him die of delirium tremens within six weeks. An experience so vivid, like lightning must blast something in a woman's conception of life. Because one man's kisses reeked of whisky the kisses of all male humanity were anathema.

After a long spell of silence she came and laid her cheek against her mother's.

"This is the very last time we'll speak of it, dear. I'll lock the skeleton in its cupboard and throw away the key."

She went upstairs to dress and came down radiant. At dinner she spoke exultingly of her approaching freedom. She would tear off her widow's weeds and deck herself in the flower of youth. She would plunge into the great swelling sea of Life. She would drink sunshine and fill her soul with laughter. She would do a million hyperbolic things, the mention of which mightily confused her mother. "I, my dear," said the hen in the fairy tale, "never had the faintest

desire to get into water." So, more or less, said Mrs. Oldrieve.

"Will you miss me very dreadfully?" asked Zora.

"Of course," but her tone was so lacking in conviction that Zora laughed.

"Mother, you know very well that Cousin Jane will be a more sympathetic companion. You've been pining for her all this time."

Cousin Jane held distinct views on the cut of under-clothes for the deserving poor, and as clouds disperse before the sun so did household dust before her presence. Untidiness followed in Zora's steps, as it does in those of the physically large, and Cousin Jane disapproved of her thoroughly. But Mrs. Oldrieve often sighed for Cousin Jane as she had never sighed for Zora, Emily, or her husband. She was more than content with the prospect of her companionship.

"At any rate, my dear," she said that evening, as she paused, candle in hand, by her bedroom door, "at any rate I hope you'll do nothing that is unbecoming to a gentlewoman."

Such was her benison.

Zora bumped her head against the oak beam that ran across her bedroom ceiling.

"It's quite true," she said to herself, "the place is too small for me, I don't fit."

What she was going to do in this wide world into whose glories she was about to enter she had but the vaguest notion. All to her was the Beautiful Unknown. Narrow means

had kept her at Cheltenham and afterwards at Nunsmere, all her life. She had met her husband in Ipswich while she was paying a polite visit to some distant cousins. She had married him offhand, in a whirl of the senses. He was a handsome blackguard, of independent means, and she had spent her nightmare of a honeymoon at Brighton. On three occasions, during her five-and-twenty years of existence, she had spent a golden week in London. That was all she knew of the wide world. It was not very much. Reading had given her a second-hand acquaintance with the doings of various classes of mankind, and such pictures as she had seen had filled her head with dreams of strange and wonderful places. But otherwise she was ignorant, beautifully, childishly ignorant—and undismayed.

What was she going to do? Sensitive and responsive to beauty, filled with artistic impulses, she could neither paint, act, sing, nor write pretty little stories for the magazines. She had no special gift to develop. To earn her living in a humdrum way she had no need. She had no high Ibsenite notions of working out her own individuality. She had no consuming passion for reforming any section of the universe. She had no mission—that she knew of—to accomplish. Unlike so many of her sex who yearn to be as men and go out into the world she had no inner mandate to do anything, no ambition to be anything. She was simply a great, rich flower, struggling through the shade to the sunlight, plenty of sunlight, as much sunlight as the heavens could give her.

The Literary Man from London happened to be returning to town by the train that carried Zora on the first stage of

her pilgrimage. He obtained her consent to travel up in the same carriage. He asked her to what branch of human activity she intended to devote herself. She answered that she was going to lie, anyhow, among the leaves. He rebuked her.

"We ought," said he, "to justify our existence."

She drew herself up and flashed an indignant glance at him.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized. "You do justify yours."

"How?"

"You decorate the world. I was wrong. That is the true function of a beautiful woman, and you fulfill it."

"I have in my bag," replied Zora slowly, and looking at him steady-eyed, "a preventive against sea-sickness; I have a waterproof to shelter me from rain; but what can I do to shield myself against silly compliments?"

"Adopt the costume of the ladies of the Orient," said the Literary Man from London, unabashed.

She laughed, although she detested him. He bent forward with humorous earnestness. He had written some novels, and now edited a weekly of precious tendencies and cynical flavor.

"I am a battered old man of thirty-five," said he, "and I know what I am talking about. If you think you are going to wander at a loose end about Europe without men paying you compliments and falling in love with you and making themselves generally delightful, you're traveling under a grievous hallucination."

"What you say," retorted Zora, "confirms me in my opinion that men are an abominable nuisance. Why can't they let a poor woman go about in peace?"

The train happened to be waiting at Clapham Junction. A spruce young man, passing by on the platform, made a perceptible pause by the window, his eyes full on her. She turned her head impatiently. Rattenden laughed.

"Dear lady," said he, "I must impart to you the elements of wisdom. Miss Keziah Skaffles, with brain cordage for hair, and monoliths for teeth, and a box of dominoes for a body, can fool about unmolested among the tribes of Crim Tartary. She doesn't worry the Tartars. But, permit me to say it, as you are for the moment my disciple, a beautiful woman like yourself, radiating feminine magnetism, worries a man exceedingly. You don't let him go about in peace, so why should he let you?"

"I think," said Zora, as the train moved on, "that Miss Keziah Skaffles is very much to be envied, and that this is a very horrid conversation."

She was offended in her provincial-bred delicacy. It was enough to make her regard herself with repulsion. She took up the fashion paper she had bought at the station—was she not intending to run delicious riot among the dressmakers and milliners of London?—and regarding blankly the ungodly waisted ladies in the illustrations, determined to wear a wig and paint her face yellow, and black out one of her front teeth, so that she should not worry the Tartars.

"I am only warning you against possible dangers," said Rattenden stiffly. He did not like his conversation to be

called horrid.

"To the race of men?"

"No, to yourself."

She laughed scornfully. "No fear of that. Why does every man think himself irresistible?"

"Because he generally is—if he wants to be," said the Literary Man from London.

Zora caught her breath. "Well of all—" she began.

"Yes, I know what you're going to say. Millions of women have said it and eaten their words. Why should you—beautiful as you are—be an exception to the law of life? You're going out to suck the honey of the world, and men's hearts will be your flowers. Instinct will drive you. You won't be able to get away from it. You think you're going to be thrilled into passionate raptures by cathedrals and expensive restaurants and the set pieces of fashionable scenery. You're not. Your store of honey will consist of emotional experiences of a primitive order. If not, I know nothing at all about women."

"Do you know anything about them?" she asked sweetly.

"More than would be becoming of me to tell," he replied. "Anyhow," he added, "that doesn't matter. I've made my prophecy. You'll tell me afterwards, if I have the pleasure of seeing you again, whether it has come true."

"It won't come true," said Zora.

"We shall see," said the wise man.

She dashed, that afternoon, into her sister's tiny flat in Chelsea. Emily, taken by surprise, hastily stuffed to the bottom of her work-basket a man's silk tie which she was knitting, and then greeted Zora affectionately.

She was shorter, slimmer, paler than her sister: of a certain babyish prettiness. She had Mrs. Oldrieve's weak mouth and gentle ways.

"Why, Zora, who would have thought of seeing you? What are you doing in town?"

"Getting hats and frocks—a trousseau of freedom. I've left Nunsmere. I'm on my own."

Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were flushed. She caught Emily to her bosom.

"Oh, darling! I'm so happy—a bird let out of a cage."

"An awful big bird," laughed Emily.

"Yes, let out of an awful small cage. I'm going to see the world, for the first time in my life. I'm going to get out of the cold and wet—going South—to Italy—Sicily—Egypt—anywhere."

"All by yourself?"

"There'll be Turner."

"Turner?"

"Ah, you don't know her. My new maid. But isn't it glorious? Why shouldn't you come with me, darling? Do. Come."

"And throw up my engagement? I couldn't. I should love it, but you don't know how hard engagements are to get."

"Never mind. I'll pay for everything."

But Emily shook her fluffy head. She had a good part, a few lines to speak and a bit of a song to sing in a successful musical comedy. She looked back on the two years' price she had paid for that little bit of a song. It was dearer to her than anything—save one thing—in life.

"I can't. Besides, don't you think a couple of girls fooling about alone look rather silly? It wouldn't really be very funny without a man."

Zora rose in protest. "The whole human race is man-mad! Even mother. I think everybody is detestable!"

The maid announced "Mr. Mordaunt Prince," and a handsome man with finely cut, dark features and black hair parted in the middle and brushed tightly back over the head, entered the room. Emmy presented him to Zora, who recognized him as the leading man at the theater where Emmy was playing. Zora exchanged a few polite commonplaces with the visitor and then took her leave. Emmy accompanied her to the front door of the flat.

"Isn't he charming?"

"That creature?" asked Zora.

Emmy laughed. "In your present mood you would find fault with an archangel. Good-bye, darling, and take care of yourself."

She bore no malice, having a kind heart and being foolishly happy. When she returned to the drawing-room the man took both her hands.

"Well, sweetheart?"

"My sister wanted to carry me off to Italy."

"What did you say?"

"Guess," said the girl, lifting starry eyes.

The man guessed, after the manner of men, and for a moment Emmy forgot Zora, who went her own way in pursuit of happiness, heedless of the wisdom of the wise and of the foolish.

CHAPTER II

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For five months Zora wandered over the world—chiefly Italy—without an experience which might be called an adventure. When the Literary Man from London crossed her mind she laughed him to scorn for a prophetic popinjay. She had broken no man's heart, and her own was whole. The tribes of Crim Tartary had exhibited no signs of worry and had left her unmolested. She had furthermore taken rapturous delight in cathedrals, expensive restaurants, and the set pieces of fashionable scenery. Rattenden had not a prophetic leg to stand on.

Yet she longed for the unattainable—for the elusive something of which these felicities were but symbols. Now the wanderer with a haunting sense of the Beyond, but without the true vagabond's divine gift of piercing the veil, can only follow the obvious; and there are seasons when the obvious fails to satisfy. When such a mood overcame her mistress, Turner railed at the upsetting quality of foreign food, and presented bicarbonate of soda. She arrived by a different path at the unsatisfactory nature of the obvious. Sometimes, too, the pleasant acquaintances of travel were lacking, and loneliness upset the nice balance of Zora's nerves. Then, more than ever, did she pine for the Beyond.

Yet youth, receptivity, imagination kept her buoyant. Hope lured her on with renewed promises from city to city. At last, on her homeward journey, he whispered the magic name of Monte Carlo, and her heart was aflutter in anticipation of wonderland.

She stood bewildered, lonely, and dismayed in the first row behind the chairs, fingering an empty purse. She had been in the rooms ten minutes, and she had lost twenty louis. Her last coup had been successful, but a bland old lady, with the white hair and waxen face of sainted motherhood, had swept up her winnings so unconcernedly that Zora's brain began to swim. As she felt too strange and shy to expostulate she stood fingering her empty purse.

The scene was utterly different from what she had expected. She had imagined a gay, crowded room, wild gamblers shouting in their excitement, a band playing delirious waltz music, champagne corks popping merrily, painted women laughing, jesting loudly, all kinds of revelry and devilry and Bacchic things undreamed of. This was silly of her, no doubt, but the silliness of inexperienced young women is a matter for the pity, not the reprobation, of the judicious. If they take the world for their oyster and think, when they open it, they are going to find pearl necklaces ready-made, we must not blame them. Rather let hoary-headed sinners envy them their imaginings.

The corners of Zora Middlemist's ripe lips drooped with a child's pathos of disillusionment. Her nose delicately marked disgust at the heavy air and the discord of scents around her. Having lost her money she could afford to survey with scorn the decorous yet sordid greed of the crowded table. There was not a gleam of gaiety about it. The people behaved with the correct impassiveness of an Anglican congregation. She had heard of more jocular funerals.

She forgot the intoxication of her first gold and turquoise day at Monte Carlo. A sense of loneliness—such as a solitary

dove might feel in a wilderness of evil bats—oppressed her. Had she not been aware that she was a remarkably attractive woman and the object of innumerable glances, she would have cried. And twenty louis pitched into unprofitable space! Yet she stood half fascinated by the rattle of the marble on the revolving disc, the glitter of the gold, the soft pat of the coins on the green cloth as they were thrown by the croupier. She began to make imaginary stakes. For five coups in succession she would have won. It was exasperating. There she stood, having pierced the innermost mystery of chance, without even a five-franc piece in her purse.

A man's black sleeve pushed past her shoulder, and she saw a hand in front of her holding a louis. Instinctively she took it.

"Thanks," said a tired voice. "I can't reach the table. She threw it, *en plein*, on Number Seventeen; and then with a start, realizing what she had done, she turned with burning cheeks.

"I *am* so sorry."

Her glance met a pair of unspeculative blue eyes, belonging to the owner of the tired voice. She noted that he had a sallow face, a little brown mustache, and a shock of brown hair, curiously upstanding, like Struwel Peter's.

"I am *so* sorry," she repeated. "Please ask for it back. What did you want me to play?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter, so long as you've put it somewhere."

"But I've put it *en plein* on Seventeen," she urged. "I ought to have thought what I was doing."

"Why think?" he murmured.

Mrs. Middlemist turned square to the table and fixed her eyes on the staked louis. In spite of the blue-eyed man's implied acquiescence she felt qualms of responsibility. Why had she not played on an even chance, or one of the dozens, or even a *transversale*? To add to her discomfort no one else played the full seventeen. The whole table seemed silently jeering at her inexperience.

The croupiers had completed the payments of the last coup. The marble fell with its sharp click and whizzed and rattled around the disc. Zora held her breath. The marble found its compartment at last, and the croupier announced:

"Dix-sept, noir, impair et manque."

She had won. A sigh of relief shook her bosom. Not only had she not lost a stranger's money, but she had won for him thirty-five times his stake. She watched the louis greedily lest it should be swept away by a careless croupier —perhaps the only impossible thing that could not happen at Monte Carlo—and stretched out her arm past the bland old lady in tense determination to frustrate further felonious proceedings. The croupier pitched seven large gold coins across the table. She clutched them feverishly and turned to deliver them to their owner. He was nowhere to be seen. She broke through the ring, and with her hands full of gold scanned the room in dismayed perplexity.

At last she espied him standing dejectedly by another table. She rushed across the intervening space and held out the money.

"See, you have won!"

"Oh, Lord!" murmured the man, removing his hands from his dinner-jacket pockets, but not offering to take his winnings. "What a lot of trouble I have given you."

"Of course you have," she said tartly. "Why didn't you stay?"

"I don't know," he replied. "How can one tell why one doesn't do things?"

"Well, please take the money now and let me get rid of it. There are seven pieces of five louis each."

She counted the coins into his hand, and then suddenly flushed scarlet. She had forgotten to claim the original louis which she had staked. Where was it? What had become of it? As well try, she thought, to fish up a coin thrown into the sea. She felt like a thief.

"There ought to be another louis," she stammered.

"It doesn't matter," said the man.

"But it does matter. You might think that I—I kept it."

"That's too absurd," he answered. "Are you interested in guns?"

"Guns?"

She stared at him. He appeared quite sane.

"I remember now I was thinking of guns when I went away," he explained. "They're interesting things to think about."

"But don't you understand that I owe you a louis? I forgot all about it. If my purse weren't empty I would repay you. Will you stay here till I can get some money from my hotel—the Hôtel de Paris?"

She spoke with some vehemence. How could the creature expect her to remain in his debt? But the creature

only passed his fingers through his upstanding hair and smiled wanly.

"Please don't say anything more about it. It distresses me. The croupiers don't return the stake, as a general rule, unless you ask for it. They assume you want to back your luck. Perhaps it has won again. For goodness' sake don't bother about it—and thank you very, very much."

He bowed politely and moved a step or two away. But Zora, struck by a solution of the mystery which had not occurred to her, as one cannot grasp all the ways and customs of gaming establishments in ten minutes, rushed back to the other table. She arrived just in time to hear the croupier asking whom the louis on seventeen belonged to. The number had turned up again.

This time she brought the thirty-six louis to the stranger.

"Dear me," said he, taking the money. "It is very astonishing. But why did you trouble?"

"Because I'm a woman of common sense, I suppose."

He looked at the coins in his hand as if they were shells which a child at the seaside might have brought him, and then raised his eyes slowly to hers.

"You are a very gracious lady." His glance and tone checked an impulse of exasperation. She smiled.

"At any rate, I've won fifty-six pounds for you, and you ought to be grateful."

He made a little gesture of acknowledgement. Had he been a more dashing gentleman he might have expressed his gratitude for the mere privilege of conversing with a gracious lady so beautiful. They had drifted from the outskirts of the crowded table and found themselves in the

thinner crowd of saunterers. It was the height of the Monte Carlo season and the feathers and diamonds and rouge and greedy eyes and rusty bonnets of all nations confused the sight and paralyzed thought. Yet among all the women of both worlds Zora Middlemist stood out remarkable. As Septimus Dix afterwards explained, the rooms that evening contained a vague kind of conglomerate woman and Zora Middlemist. And the herd of men envied the creature on whom she smiled so graciously.

She was dressed in black, as became a young widow, but it was a black which bore no sign of mourning. The black, sweeping ostrich plume of a picture hat gave her an air of triumph. Black gloves reaching more than halfway up shapely arms and a gleam of snowy neck above a black chiffon bodice disquieted the imagination. She towered over her present companion, who was five foot seven and slimly built.

"You've brought me all this stuff, but what am I to do with it?" he asked helplessly.

"Perhaps I had better take care of it for you."

It was a relief from the oppressive loneliness to talk to a human being; so she lingered wistfully in conversation. A pathetic eagerness came into the man's face.

"I wish you would," said he, drawing a handful from his jacket pocket. "I should be so much happier."

"You can hardly be such a gambler," she laughed.

"Oh, no! It's not that at all. Gambling bores me."

"Why do you play, then?"

"I don't. I staked that louis because I wanted to see whether I should be interested. I wasn't, as I began to think

about the guns. Have you had breakfast?"

Again Zora was startled. A sane man does not talk of breakfasting at nine o'clock in the evening. But if he were a lunatic perhaps it were wise to humor him.

"Yes," she said. "Have you?"

"No. I've only just got up."

"Do you mean to say you've been asleep all day?"

"What's the noisy day made for?"

"Let us sit down," said Zora.

They found one of the crimson couches by the wall vacant, and sat down. Zora regarded him curiously.

"Why should you be happier if I took care of your money?"

"I shouldn't spend it. I might meet a man who wanted to sell me a gas-engine."

"But you needn't buy it."

"These fellows are so persuasive, you see. At Rotterdam last year, a man made me buy a second-hand dentist's chair."

"Are you a dentist?" asked Zora.

"Lord, no! If I were I could have used the horrible chair."

"What did you do with it?"

"I had it packed up and despatched, carriage paid, to an imaginary person at Singapore."

He made this announcement in his tired, gentle manner, without the flicker of a smile. He added, reflectively—

"That sort of thing becomes expensive. Don't you find it so?"

"I would defy anybody to sell me a thing I didn't want," she replied.

"Ah, that," said he with a glance of wistful admiration, "that is because you have red hair."

If any other strange male had talked about her hair, Zora Middlemist would have drawn herself up in Junoesque majesty and blighted him with a glance. She had done with men and their compliments forever. In that she prided herself on her Amazonianism. But she could not be angry with the inconclusive being to whom she was talking. As well resent the ingenuous remarks of a four-year-old child.

"What has my red hair to do with it?" she asked pleasantly.

"It was a red-haired man who sold me the dentist's chair."

"Oh!" said Zora, nonplussed.

There was a pause. The man leaned back, embracing one knee with both hands. They were nerveless, indeterminate hands, with long fingers, such as are in the habit of dropping things. Zora wondered how they supported his knee. For some time he stared into vacancy, his pale-blue eyes adream. Zora laughed.

"Guns?" she asked.

"No," said he, awaking to her presence. "Perambulators."

She rose. "I thought you might be thinking of breakfast. I must be going back to my hotel. These rooms are too hot and horrible. Good night."

"I will see you to the lift, if you'll allow me," he said politely.

She graciously assented and they left the rooms together. In the atrium she changed her mind about the lift. She would leave the Casino by the main entrance and walk

over to the Hôtel de Paris for the sake of a breath of fresh air. At the top of the steps she paused and filled her lungs. It was a still, moonless night, and the stars hung low down, like diamonds on a canopy of black velvet. They made the flaring lights of the terrace of the Hôtel and Café de Paris look tawdry and meretricious.

"I hate them," she said, pointing to the latter.

"Stars are better," said her companion.

She turned on him swiftly.

"How did you know I was making comparisons?"

"I felt it," he murmured.

They walked slowly down the steps. At the bottom a carriage and pair seemed to rise mysteriously out of the earth.

"'Ave a drive? Ver' good carriage," said a voice out of the dimness. Monte Carlo cabmen are unerring in their divination of the Anglo-Saxon.

Why not? The suggestion awoke in her an instant craving for the true beauty of the land. It was unconventional, audacious, crazy. But, again, why not? Zora Middlemist was answerable for her actions to no man or woman alive. Why not drink a great draught of the freedom that was hers? What did it matter that the man was a stranger? All the more daring the adventure. Her heart beat gladly. But chaste women, like children, know instinctively the man they can trust.

"Shall we?"

"Drive?"

"Yes—unless—" a thought suddenly striking her—"unless you want to go back to your friends."

"Good Lord!" said he, aghast, as if she were accusing him of criminal associations. "I have no friends."

"Then come."

She entered the carriage. He followed meekly and sat beside her. Where should they drive? The cabman suggested the coast road to Mentone. She agreed. On the point of starting she observed that her companion was bare-headed.

"You've forgotten your hat."

She spoke to him as she would have done to a child.

"Why bother about hats?"

"You'll catch your death of cold. Go and get it at once."

He obeyed with a docility which sent a little tingle of exaltation through Mrs. Middlemist. A woman may have an inordinate antipathy to men, but she loves them to do her bidding. Zora was a woman; she was also young.

He returned. The cabman whipped up his strong pair of horses, and they started through the town towards Mentone.

Zora lay back on the cushions and drank in the sensuous loveliness of the night—the warm, scented air, the velvet and diamond sky, the fragrant orange groves—the dim, mysterious olive trees, the looming hills, the wine-colored, silken sea, with its faint edging of lace on the dusky sweep of the bay. The spirit of the South overspread her with its wings and took her amorously in its arms.

After a long, long silence she sighed, remembering her companion.

"Thank you for not talking," she said softly.

"Don't," he replied. "I had nothing to say. I never talk. I've scarcely talked for a year."

She laughed idly.

"Why?"

"No one to talk to. Except my man," he added conscientiously. "His name is Wiggleswick."

"I hope he looks after you well," said Zora, with a touch of maternal instinct.

"He wants training. That's what I am always telling him. But he can't hear. He's seventy and stone-deaf. But he's interesting. He tells me about jails and things."

"Jails?"

"Yes. He spent most of his time in prison. He was a professional burglar—but then he got on in years. Besides, the younger generation was knocking at the door."

"I thought that was the last thing a burglar would do," said Zora.

"They generally use jemmies," he said gravely. "Wiggleswick has given me his collection. They're very useful."

"What for?" she asked.

"To kill moths with," he replied dreamily.

"But what made you take a superannuated burglar for a valet?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it was Wiggleswick himself. He came up to me one day as I was sitting in Kensington Gardens, and somehow followed me home."

"But, good gracious," cried Zora—forgetful for the moment of stars and sea—"aren't you afraid that he will rob you?"

"No. I asked him, and he explained. You see, it would be out of his line. A forger only forges, a pickpocket only snatches chains and purses, and a burglar only burgles. Now, he couldn't burgle the place in which he was living himself, so I am safe."

Zora gave him sage counsel.

"I'd get rid of him if I were you."

"If I were you, I would—but I can't," he replied. "If I told him to go he wouldn't. I go instead sometimes. That's why I'm here."

"If you go on talking like that, you'll make my brain reel," said Zora laughing. "Do tell me something about yourself. What is your name?"

"Septimus Dix. I've got another name—Ajax—Septimus Ajax Dix—but I never use it."

"That's a pity," said Zora. "Ajax is a lovely name."

He dissented in his vague fashion. "Ajax suggests somebody who defies lightning and fools about with a spear. It's a silly name. A maiden aunt persuaded my mother to give it to me. I think she mixed it up with Achilles. She admired the statue in Hyde Park. She got run over by a milkcart."

"When was that?" she inquired, more out of politeness than interest in the career of Mr. Dix's maiden aunt.

"A minute before she died."

"Oh," said Zora, taken aback by the emotionless manner in which he mentioned the tragedy. Then, by way of continuing the conversation:—

"Why are you called Septimus?"

"I'm the seventh son. All the others died young. I never could make out why I didn't."

"Perhaps," said Zora with a laugh, "you were thinking of something else at the time and lost the opportunity."

"It must have been that," said he. "I lose opportunities just as I always lose trains."

"How do you manage to get anywhere?"

"I wait for the next train. That's easy. But there's never another opportunity."

He drew a cigarette from his case, put it in his mouth, and fumbled in his pockets for matches. Finding none, he threw the cigarette into the road.

"That's just like you," cried Zora. "Why didn't you ask the cabman for a light?"

She laughed at him with an odd sense of intimacy, though she had known him for scarcely an hour. He seemed rather a stray child than a man. She longed to befriend him—to do something for him, motherwise—she knew not what. Her adventure by now had failed to be adventurous. The spice of danger had vanished. She knew she could sit beside this helpless being till the day of doom without fear of molestation by word or act.

He obtained a light for his cigarette from the cabman and smoked in silence. Gradually the languor of the night again stole over her senses, and she forgot his existence. The carriage had turned homeward, and at a bend of the road, high up above the sea, Monte Carlo came into view, gleaming white far away below, like a group of fairy palaces lit by fairy lamps, sheltered by the great black promontory of Monaco. From the gorge on the left, the terraced rock on

the right, came the smell of the wild thyme and rosemary and the perfume of pale flowers. The touch of the air on her cheek was a warm and scented kiss. The diamond stars drooped towards her like a Danaë shower. Like Danaë's, her lips were parted. Her eyes strained far beyond the stars into an unknown glory, and her heart throbbed with a passionate desire for unknown things. Of what nature they might be she did not dream. Not love. Zora Middlemist had forsworn it. Not the worship of a man. She had vowed by all the saints in her hierarchy that no man should ever again enter her life. Her soul revolted against the unutterable sex.

As soon as one realizes the exquisite humbug of sublunary existence he must weep for the pity of it.

The warm and scented air was a kiss, too, on the cheek of Septimus Dix; and his senses, too, were enthralled by the witchery of the night. But for him stars and scented air and the magic beauty of the sea were incarnate in the woman by his side.

Zora, as I have said, had forgotten the poor devil's existence.