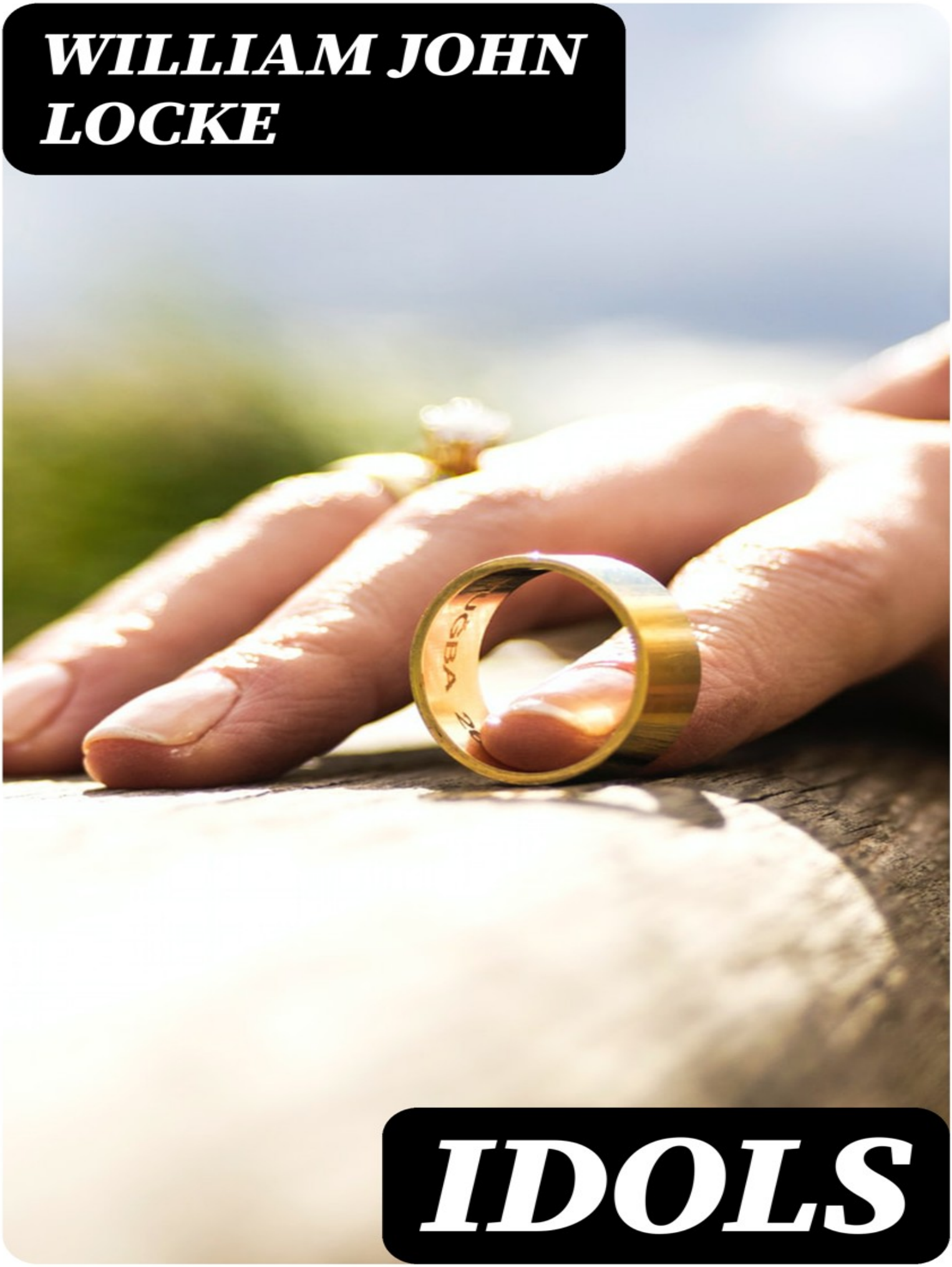
WILLIAM JOHN LOCKE



IDOLS

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Idols

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THE END.

CHAPTER I

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It was Irene Merriam's hour of greatest content when she looked into her heart for a fugitive desire and smiled at finding none. And this was a source of all the more comfort, because she was a woman who gave unsparingly of herself to life, and made large claims upon life in return. She sat in a leathern armchair by the fireplace, listening to the talk of her two companions, who were sitting by the dinner table over their coffee. Now and then she interposed a remark, but lazily, preferring to watch the play of expression on their faces, to dream dreams about them, and to realise her own happiness. This after-dinner scene was a familiar one; familiarity had made it dearer. She had grown to regard it as an essential in her scheme of life, like sleep and food and raiment.

Of the two men, one was her husband, Gerard Merriam; the other, his life-long, intimate friend. They had chummed together at school, at the University; had joined the same Inn of Court, and had been called to the bar together; and in spite of wide divergence of taste and character, had remained in close relationship to the present day.

It was on the homeward voyage, after a Long Vacation trip to India, that they had met Irene, a lonely girl returning from the grave of a father whose deathbed she had gone out too late to witness. Both men fell in love with her. The rivalry becoming mutually obvious, each gave the other a fair field. The wooing continued in London till success fell upon Gerard. On his meeting with Irene after her marriage,

the other, Hugh Colman, bowed low over her hand, kissed it and put a loyal friendship at her service. A proud bearing, emphasised by steel-blue eyes and a supercilious up-sweep of a heavy auburn moustache, gave distinction to the action. He had rather a courtly way of doing things. The tears started to her eyes. She had been greatly drawn to him before, and pitied him out of her girlish heart for having lost in his rivalry; but from that moment she loved him with a pure friendship, and made it a dear object of her life to intensify the brotherly affection between the two men. In fact she had raised her conception of this Orestes and Pylades relationship to a kind of cult, of which she herself was the devoted and impassioned priestess. During the six years of her married life Hugh had dined with them at least once a week. Lately he had taken a flat in their immediate neighbourhood, and his visits had grown more frequent. Gerard, being a man of few words, had not said much to evince his gratification, but Irene had sounded the note of welcome loud enough for the two.

As she lay back in her chair watching them, a spice of admiration flavoured her thoughts. Both were men of fine physique. Gerard was six feet two, of huge frame, with deep, sloping shoulders indicative of great strength. Hugh, of somewhat slighter build, better proportioned, holding his head erect on square shoulders; finer, too, of face than Gerard, who had heavy features, eyes of uncertain blue and a reddish moustache cut short at the ends. The one face gave the impression of a man proudly scornful, quick in quarrel, with a Celtic strain of sensitiveness; the other that of a man slow in method, determined of purpose, shy of

demonstration—one suggesting rather than revealing strength—a dangerous face to trust. Of the two, Hugh was pre-eminently the man more likely, on first sight, to win a woman's heart in a joint contest. Even Gerard himself had wondered at his success. When he questioned his wife, she answered, lifting glorious eyes of faith, "Because you are you." And that was an end of the matter. But perhaps it was the suggestion of reserved strength in the man that had influenced her from the first in his favour, and an intuition, such as so many women have trusted like a divine revelation, that in a great crisis of life the one would be living rock and the other shifting sand.

A pause in the talk gradually lingered into silence. Gerard, at the head of the table, near Irene, manipulated his pipe, which had become choked and would not draw. Hugh, at the side, half turning towards the fire, leaned back in his chair, and, with hands clasped behind his head, stared at the ceiling. Irene suddenly spoke:

"How are the Harts?"

Hugh started into a more normal posture.

"The Harts? They flourish. Have you ever heard of a Jew money-lender who didn't?"

There was an unwonted touch of acerbity in his tone that brought a quick glance from Irene.

"They are not both money-lenders," she remarked.

"Oh, Minna—she is right enough."

"I'm sorry for the poor girl," said Irene. "I wish she would let me be a friend to her, but she won't. I wonder why."

"What do you want to worry about her for?" asked her husband, between the whiffs of his newly regulated pipe.

“I pity her so.”

“Some people don’t like being pitied. I don’t.”

“But you are not a pretty girl cut by society,” insisted Irene.

“She’s proud, you know,” said Hugh. He might have adduced a reason much nearer home. As it was, he gave a hint of it.

“The moon, Irene, pales as a matter of course before the sun; but it’s an open question whether the moon likes it.”

“You are talking rubbish,” said Irene, calmly.

Gerard broke into a laugh.

“Anyway, I’m glad she hasn’t cottoned to you. I don’t like Jews about the place. To your tents, O Israel!”

Irene flashed up. “You can’t object to the poor girl just because she is a Jewess!”

“Of course not, my dear,” replied her husband, with a curious change of tone. “I was only joking.”

Irene came behind his chair and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Forgive me, dear,” she said.

He nodded, and patted the back of her hand magnanimously; then pushed his chair away from the table and rose to his feet, stretching himself after the manner of burly men.

“I’m off to the smoking-room to make up some trout casts. You two can come when you’ve finished the discussion.”

When he had gone Irene took his vacated seat. “The girl seems so lonely. That’s why I take an interest in her.”

Hugh lit a cigarette and replied vaguely. Irene noticed a lack of enthusiasm, and attributed it to a lack of interest. There was a short silence.

“Is anything the matter?” she said at last.

“Why should there be?”

“You are not yourself to-night. You have been working too hard and want a change. Why not go down to Weston’s to-morrow with Gerard to fish?”

“Gerard hasn’t asked me.”

“As if that were necessary. I’ll tell him at once you are going.”

“Oh, no,” he laughed. “I’m not to be regulated in that fashion. I’m not overworked. I’m as strong as a horse. If you want to know what I was thinking about, I’ll tell you—more or less. I remembered it was just six years ago to-day when I first saw you after your marriage.”

She looked meditatively towards the fire, a smile upon her lips.

“And I had just been thinking how happy these six years had been and how peaceful and sweet these evenings were, the three of us together. Perhaps I have been selfish.”

He caught the implication, and broke into protest.

“You know very well they are the happiest times of my life,” he said. “Where else could I get what I have here?”

“I sometimes think it would be better for you if you could find a nice woman to give you something better,” she said, somewhat timorously.

“Oh, don’t talk like that, Renie,” he cried, impetuously, throwing his cigarette into the fire. “The more I see of other women, the more I despair. I see a lot of them. I’ve been

married to a half a dozen already, by popular rumour. I suppose I shall end one of these days by marrying one in grim earnest. I'm a fool, Renie, I know. But *que veux-tu?* My temperament is not that of an anchorite. I know how it will be. A whirl of the senses—and after that the deluge. And then I'll come back here and sit in this room and wonder how the devil I could have thought of another woman. You've spoiled me for the common run of women. I haven't met one yet that is fit to black your shoes. The man that worships the sun doesn't give his allegiance to a bonfire."

"But he can warm himself by the bonfire," replied Irene, laughing.

"Until the thing goes out. Then he's got to light another. But the sun is eternal."

She was accustomed to his hyperbole. The woman in her loved the praise. It supplemented Gerard's rarer tributes to her worth, effectually prevented her from feeling a lack in her husband's lesser demonstrativeness. Again, she was enlightened enough to allow relief to overburdened feelings. A man of his type could not love her to-day and cast her out of his heart to-morrow. She never had a moment's doubt that she was throned there as the love of his life. But a magnanimous scorn of thoughts of disloyalty on his part triumphed supremely over a false position.

In Hugh's present outburst, however, she detected some special determining cause.

"I'm a very limited being, my dear Hugh," she said quickly, "whatever exaggerations I let you use. But you know how deep my interest in your welfare is, and life could not go wrong with you without causing me—and Gerard—

pain and anxiety. That was why I spoke. Whatever it is, I am sorry."

Sympathy could not have been more delicately conveyed than it was by her tone and look. But there are times when sympathy stings. He remained silent for a moment, then shifted his position, threw back his head and twirled his great moustache.

"You are everything that is sweet, Renie," said he. "But I was telling you general truths—not posing as *un homme manqué*. I hate the kind of fellows that are forever mewing about for women's sympathy. It's despicable!"

He rose, and, with two arms held out, took her hands and raised her from her chair.

"There. Don't be hurt. Everything's going on swimmingly, I assure you. The world at my feet, and heaven at my finger tips. Let us go to Gerard." The smoking-room was a nondescript apartment, half library, half gun-room, suggestive more of the country squire than the London barrister. Gerard, with a glass of water on a little table by his side, was engaged upon his casts, screwing up his eyes, so as both to avoid the smoke of his pipe and to see the delicate involutions of his knots. He looked up, with a nod, when his wife and friend entered. Irene turned to a desk to scribble a note. The men's talk turned upon fishing. Weston had killed a two-pound trout the day before. They discussed the chances of a similar prize for Gerard. Then came the question of flies. Gerard waxed learned. Irene, having written her note and finding herself out of the conversation, took up a book. Gerard's love of sport she indulgently allowed, but in her heart she could not sympathise with it.

The wilful infliction of pain passed her comprehension. There was so much of it in the world already.

She was glad when she became aware of a change of topic, and drew her chair nearer the fire. But Hugh, looking at his watch, rose to depart. Irene protested.

“So early? It is not ten o’clock yet.”

There was a touch of dismay in her tone. Gerard, too, bade him sit down again. But he pleaded work. He had been briefed in a hurry, had not a notion yet of the case which was coming on immediately.

They had to let him go, and when he had gone, fell to discussing him as they had done a thousand times before. Irene idealised and worshipped her husband, but her feelings towards Hugh were composed of conflicting and of somewhat delicate elements. The man’s history, mode of life and diversity of character, appealed by turns to her sense of romance, of trust, of protection. He had squandered a pretty patrimony in his early days. A diamond brooch still glittered before the footlights on an oblivious bosom. He had lived open-handedly, benefiting more by his vices than many of the austere do by their virtues. Even now, with modest income at the criminal bar, small thrift was incomprehensible to him, in spite of Irene’s periodical expositions. On such occasions she looked serenely down upon him from immeasurable heights. But in this man of so many simplicities, seemed to lie a baffling fund of reserve, which both compelled her respect and kept her intellectual interest in him upon the alert. The paradox fascinated her especially in its extension to achievement. For with a habit of glowing speech he combined a severe literary taste. A

reputation of some standing had been made and was upheld by poems wrought with crystalline coldness. On the other hand, a recent and sudden opening at the bar was chiefly due to tempestuous advocacy.

“You seem to be worrying your head over everybody to-night,” said Gerard at last. “First it was Israel Hart’s daughter and now it’s Hugh. Whence this violent attack of altruism?”

“I have everything that life can give me, and I should like others to have the same. Now, there’s something wrong with Hugh.”

“There always is. A man can’t have the temperament of an Ajax and expect to go through life smoothly.”

“His friends can help him,” said Irene.

“My dear, good Renie,” said Gerard, slipping the last cast into his fly-book, which he strapped deliberately, “if there is one cry bitterer than another that goes up to heaven it is ‘Save us from our friends!’”

CHAPTER II

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The Merriams lived in a comfortable detached house on Sunnington Heath, most convenient and pleasant of London suburbs. A year or so before they had persuaded Hugh Colman to leave his somewhat dismal chambers in the Temple and take a flat in a block of red-brick mansions that had just arisen to glorify the end of the High Street of Sunnington proper. Irene, with a woman's eye to economy, had picked out for him a commodious little set on the fourth floor. But Hugh put aside her choice and rented a sumptuous flat lower down, which he furnished in expensive style. When Irene reproved him he laughed, with a grand-signorial wave of the hand. His pigsty and husk days were over. He was going to take advantage of the fatted calves and other resources of rehabilitated prodigals. Was not his income going up by leaps and bounds? Besides, there was his uncle, Geoffrey Colman, of Brantfield Park. He had more than expectations. Irene lectured him on the vanity of human expectations.

"Your uncle may marry again and have a family," she said, sagely.

Hugh snapped his fingers. It would be indecent. Geoffrey Colman had ever been the correctest of livers. He dressed for his solitary dinner every night of his life, on account of his butler. His marriage would convulse a whole neighbourhood. He would just as soon think of throwing a nitro-glycerine bomb into the parish church.

Irene yielded with a pitying shrug of the shoulders. She had not lived six and twenty years for nothing. She knew that in every man lurks something of Voltaire's droll of a Habbakuk. About eighteen months later her prognostications were fulfilled. Geoffrey Colman showed himself capable of anything by marrying a young wife. Quite recent rumours hinted at the probable arrival of an heir. All Hugh's expectations came to a ghastly end. Irene sympathised with him, made elaborate calculations as to means for reducing his expenditure. He listened with pathetic admiration—she had a regal way of taking impossible things for granted—acquiesced silently in her schemes and then went out and cursed himself.

To-night, after leaving the Merriams, he walked along in the same self-reproaching temper. The March wind, coming keenly across the heath, blew a small drizzle into his face, causing him to pull up his coat collar and step out briskly. He swung his stick with an irritation which, however, had nothing to do with the weather. If only the past had been different—if only Irene had loved him instead of Gerard! He would have husbanded his life, instead of playing ducks and drakes with it as he was doing. What business had he along this road? Had he not better retrace his steps past the Merriams' house and go to his own study fire and his imaginary brief? Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of impatience, drew himself up and called himself a fool. A familiar recklessness of mood gained gradual hold upon him. He laughed, gratified at the possession of a sense of humour that could look mockingly upon the portentous seriousness of this ridiculous world.

He turned his thoughts to the cases he had in hand, went off at a tangent to the points he had made in an emotional address to the jury the day before. The success was sweet—sweeter because he was conscious that the secret of it lay within himself. He had the gift of eloquent speech—pathos, persuasion, invective. It had brought him suddenly, when his chance came, from the obscurest ranks of the junior bar, into public light. A pittance had leaped into a competence, which in its turn might rise to the dignity of an income. His temperament had done for him, a young and struggling man, what legal learning and acumen had not done for hundreds many years his senior. When he realised this, he felt grateful to his temperament, and granted it indulgence for the many scurvy tricks it had played him.

Accordingly, he was fairly satisfied with himself when, after a quarter of an hour's walk, he opened the garden gate of a large house standing in its own grounds. He walked up the drive humming an air. He rang, was admitted, conducted across a luxuriously carpeted hall, up a broad staircase, into the drawing-room.

"Mr. Colman, miss."

The servant withdrew and shut the door. A girl rose from a low chair by the fire and advanced with quick steps to meet him.

"Oh, how late you are—no, you couldn't help it. You told me. But the evening has been so long—waiting for you."

"I got away as soon as I could. You see, I had promised. If your note had come yesterday, instead of this morning——-"

"I only knew last night that father was going out of town. It seemed too good a chance of having you all to myself. Oh,

I am so glad you've come. It was good of you."

"By no means," he said, with a mock bow. "Don't you think it's a pleasure I've been looking forward to all day long?"

"I don't—if you express yourself in that sarcastic way," she answered, reseating herself.

Her voice was deep and rich, and she affected a lazy utterance—half aware that it might warm the blood of the man she was addressing. It did. He had been irritably conscious of its seductiveness in Irene's dining-room; of the seductiveness, too, of her sensuous grace that had first caught his imagination. "You are a witch, Minna," he said, admiringly.

The echo in his ear of the threadbare commonplace sounded an ironical note. It pleased the girl, however.

"I have been longing for a little compliment for a week."

"Why, I saw you the day before yesterday."

"*Cela n'empeche pas.*"

"Did I behave badly to you?"

"No—but I might just as well have been selling you postage-stamps behind a counter."

"Forgive me. But, you see, we met in the street."

"You were ashamed of being seen with me, I suppose."

"Minna!" he exclaimed, flushing into quick earnest.

She laughed softly. "I thought I should get something genuine out of you—you walked into the trap beautifully. Do you like my new tea-gown? I had it made because you admired one something like it in a shop window."

She rose and stood before him. She was undeniably beautiful, with warm, southern beauty. From her mother,

long since dead, whom chance had brought from Smyrna to the tender keeping of Israel Hart and the fogs of London, she inherited the languor of expression that was her charm. Yet her features, more mutinous than regular, bore little or no trace of the Jewess—none, save that almost imperceptible, strange contour of flesh beneath the eyes, from cheekbone to cheekbone, which is the eternal mark of her race. The soft crepon of the garment clung to her figure, showing its young and supple curves. Its pale yellow shade heightened the richness of her colouring.

Hugh expressed unreserved admiration. He had the power of a nice extravagance in praise. The glow deepened on the girl’s face and her eyes lit with gratification. After a quick glance at herself in the mirror of the over-mantel, she sat down again. Her heart had thirsted for his homage, and had drunk it in greedily.

“Now tell me all that you have seen and done lately,” she said.

An easy task. He had seen no one lovelier than herself. He had sketched her portrait on brief-paper to bring a breath of sweetness into the evil-smelling court. He had the scrap in his letter case. Minna took possession of it, burst into roulades of delighted thanks. He laughed. Compared her murmurings to the low notes of the nightingale. The matter threshed out, Minna reverted to her original demand. He complied, touched on the gossip of the day, spoke lightly of his forthcoming volume of poems. Would he write a poem to her? He tried to explain the severity of his style. Not flesh and blood. Perhaps on the tea-gown. Thus the talk was brought round again to the bewitching garment.

“And this—creation—was really to please me?” he asked.

“It’s a godsend to have someone to think of pleasing,” she cried, with sudden petulance. “Whom have I else? Papa and papa’s friends? They never look at me unless I put on something barbaric—gold and silver and precious stones. Then they can reckon me up in pounds, shillings and pence. One grows weary of dressing for one’s own pleasure. Life gets on one’s nerves like a chapter out of the Book of Ecclesiastes—I don’t suppose you ever feel like that—because you’re a man.”

“I wish I could make life less lonely for you,” he said, kindly.

“I wish you could.”

“Why do you keep Mrs. Merriam so at arm’s length? She would do a great deal for you, if you would let her.”

“I can’t,” said the girl. “I don’t know why. Why do you think so much of her?”

“Because she is the finest woman I know.”

“Or simply because——” she checked herself—“No, I didn’t mean that—but——”

“But what?”

“Oh, can’t you guess? I want you to estimate me a little, by myself—not measure me by a standard—as you do—there!”

She leant forward, with one hand drooping over her knee, and looked up at him with moist eyes, and behind the moisture burned the longing folly of a woman.

“I don’t want anybody else to please. You are enough for me. All the world.”

Hugh had come prepared. Her sensuous charm had long woven itself around him. He had long known that a touch from him could awaken slumbering volcanoes; that in a moment of madness he would one day give that touch. Even now his pulses beat fast. He was flesh and blood, though his verse was marble. Yet he kept a curb upon himself. He reached out his hand and took her fingers.

“You mustn’t look at me like that. I am not a bad man. But you will make me say things both of us may be sorry for.”

“I don’t care,” she whispered. “Say anything.” The moment had come. In a fraction of a second he could have her youth throbbing in his arms. With an effort of will he threw back her hand and started to his feet. She shrank away frightened.

“Listen, Minna, before we make fools of ourselves. Where is this going to end? Have you thought of it? Use your intelligence instead of your passions. I am speaking brutally to you. I know it. It’s our only chance of salvation. You are throwing yourself away—into perdition perhaps. Do you know that?”

He stood, regarding her sternly; resolved to set her upon his own intellectual plane; to put before her serious issues; at the least, to throw open the floodgates for her pride. Her face paled slightly, and she asked, with quivering lip: “Don’t you care for me—a little?”

He swung his arm in earnest gesture. “Care for you? Of course I care for you. Do you suppose I should be here to-night if I didn’t—not being a scoundrel?”

“Then why are you so unkind?”

“Because, though I love you in one way—there is only one woman whom I could love in all ways, and the woman isn’t you. Simply that. If we let this go on, you would be giving all; I, a part. This can’t be news to you. I love you because your beauty and charm fire my blood. It’s Oriental in its simplicity. Have you thought of what the end of it might possibly be?”

The higher man suddenly had revolted against the readiness to seize the too willing prey, and had grown reckless in use of devastating weapons. He expected to see her facile southern nature rise in passionate anger—or her womanliness shrink in tears of disgust from the insult. He would have acted a brute part. But in either case he would have laid her love dead at her feet. He waited. The unexpected happened. She looked at him doggedly out of hardened eyes from which all the languor had faded. And then she said, in her deep voice:

“I would sooner have a part of any kind of love from you than all the best love of any other man.” He remained for a moment amazed at her strength. Had he conceived an insultingly wrong impression of her?

“Do you mean that you love me, in spite of the words I have just used?”

“Yes, I do,” she replied.

“I humbly beg your forgiveness,” he said in a low voice.

There was a long silence, broken only by the ticking of the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. The apparent vastness of the great drawing-room, stiffly furnished with its cold Louis XV. furniture, increased the impression of stillness. Hugh glanced at Minna from time to time, hesitating to

speak. She had changed utterly from the glowing girl who had stood up before him an hour ago to coax his admiration for her finery. Her face was set with lines of determination and stubborn character. The riddle of the woman lay open to him who could read it. The false light of the eternal, unutterably tragic missolution dawned upon the man.

“I have made a horrible mistake,” he said at last.

“You have—in misjudging me.”

“I meant that I have used cruel words. My justification was my intention. I wish I could make you some reparation.”

“That is easy,” she murmured.

“Name it.”

“Ask me to marry you.”

Marriage! At last he was brought brutally face to face with the problem that he had hitherto left, unconsidered, to fortuity. Indeed he grew conscious that marriage had been but vaguely contemplated. He had persuaded himself into a belief in his own honour. The rottenness of the belief stared at him hideously. The nakedness of his desire appeared before him, stripped of its glamour.

He despised himself, put her on moral heights beyond his reach. To ask her in marriage would be an added insult. And her money! A queen’s dowry. The very temptation to retrieve his fortunes therewith was an ugly and abhorrent thing. He ran the gauntlet of all these thoughts. Emerged with rebellion in his soul; seized angrily at the first unhonoured standard to his hand. Marriage—with the daughter of Israel Hart, the Jew money-lender. It was impossible.

Half divining this last mood, she came to where he sat, knelt down and placed her clasped hands on his knee. Her eyes dwelt upon him, softening adorably. Andrea del Sarto might have painted her.

“Why don’t you speak? I have offended you? Asked for too much? Indeed, I didn’t expect it. I am a Jewess and your people will despise me—and my father’s a money-lender—it would be a disgrace to you. I was willing—ready—only——”

The standard fell from the man’s hand. He yielded, utterly disarmed. The woman conquered as she surrendered to his embrace.

“If I took your love and the gift of yourself,” he said, “and did not marry you—just because you were Israel Hart’s daughter—I should loathe myself. My child, I thought you a toy—I find you a woman—worthy to be any man’s wife.”

“It would be sweet to be only yours,” she murmured. He kissed her again, then released her gently.

“If I asked you to marry me now, I should be committing a base action—for other reasons. Try to understand them. I am very badly off for money. You are an heiress. And I owe your father £5,000 on a reversion, which no longer exists. I scrape together the interest. It is not heavy—your father has treated me as a friend and not as a client. But he has been reproaching me with the rottenness of the security. Until I am clear of him, at least, I can’t ask you to marry me.”

Minna broke into happy laughter.

“You foolish fellow! Don’t you see the obvious way of settling it? If you married me, the debt would be dissolved—in its own juice, so to speak.” His pride revolted. Impossible!

It was mere trickery. Any honest man would cry out upon him.

She could not see the point of honour. Her training had not sensitised her perceptions in such things.

“What is to be done then?” she asked. “You won’t take me without making me your wife—and you won’t make me your wife on account of my money. I don’t believe you want me at all.”

After what had passed there was but one answer to be given. At the end she smiled up at him and whispered: “That was very sweet; but it doesn’t tell us what is to be done.”

He glanced at the clock. “The thing to be done is to say ‘Good-night’—and for you to go to sleep happy. I will find some way out of it. And I will bind myself to you forever, by this kiss. There.”

So they parted; and he walked home with the softness of her young lips upon his, wondering what the devil was going to happen next. On the whole, happy. Quite unconscious that he had been fooled to the top of his bent by the instinctive wiles of a woman, herself merely carried away by an unregulated, headlong passion.

CHAPTER III

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Meanwhile a problem of some complexity remained to be solved. Hugh devoted the morning's clear-headedness to vain attempts at solution. From the position in which he found himself there was no issue without a loss of honour. The prospect chafed him like a hair-shirt. If he had erred, in times past, far from the paths of the homely virtuous, he had at least despised the crooked ways of the smugly vicious. He had been the thief of no woman's virtue. Such remnants of it as had come into his possession he had paid for right royally. There is a difference between sinning *en prince* and sinning *en voyou*, in spite of the moralist. Hugh was an honourable man. At least, he desperately clung to such a conception of himself. Three courses lay open. To abandon Minna altogether, to make her his mistress, to make her his wife. By adopting any one of these, he would find himself forsworn.

He journeyed up to his chambers in a denunciatory attitude of mind. Subjects for anathema were plentiful. His own folly in borrowing the £5,000 from Israel Hart; his greater folly in incurring the debts towards the payment of which that sum had been mainly devoted; his uncle for having played this April fool's trick upon him, and, lastly, the fate that had robbed him of Irene—a clause that invariably terminated his commination. Three solid, middle-aged city men were travelling in his compartment. They appealed to his fancy as potential Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. If he had lifted up his voice like Job, they would obviously have told

him that it served him right. The parallel put him into a good humour.

Shortly after his arrival, a telegram came from Minna. Could she see him for a minute to-day? And if so, where? She could meet him at any place and at any hour. It was only to see that he was not vexed with her. She had passed a wretched night and was depressed. It was a long, impulsive message, regardless of the principles of condensation, and couched in German, so as not to become the common property of the young ladies at the Sunnington telegraph office. Hugh despatched an answer, making an appointment at three o'clock, in his chambers. At a quarter past, Minna appeared, blushing, introduced by the clerk. Her pretty apologetic air compelled reassuring endearments. Of course she was dearly welcome. The whole of the dingy room was lit up with her charms. The very wig-block was beaming at her. She laughed happily, turned towards the object indicated, and seized the wig. Would he put it on for her to see? She would fix it herself. No, she didn't like him in it. He looked too wise.

They had a lover's hour, vowed they would conjure light out of darkness and be each other's before long. A formal demand in marriage was out of the question. Israel Hart would not give his daughter to a penniless barrister and starveling poet, who owed him money. And Hugh's soul sickened at the thought of asking him. Besides he had expressed his desire that Minna should marry a friend of his, appropriately named Goldberg, who kept an extensive bucket-shop in Gracechurch Street. To inform her father would put an end to everything. He would carry her off and

shut her up like Danaë in a brazen tower, into which Goldberg would Zeus-wise insinuate himself—this time at Aczisius's invitation. Hugh proposed a two years' private engagement, during which period he would bestir himself strenuously to make his fortune. Minna acquiesced, but only with the outside of her lips. She was not accustomed to wait for what she desired. And, for the matter of that, neither was Hugh. At any rate, things were moved a stage further during the visit. Before she departed, she desired of him perfect secrecy. He was to keep it from everybody—and Mrs. Merriam. He agreed.

"I shall certainly not tell Mrs. Merriam," he replied, dryly.

She cast him a quick, suspicious glance out of otherwise glowing eyes. Then she bade him farewell, and tripped through the door that he held open for her.

The following day was Sunday. Although the season was the end of March, there had been a sudden cold snap. In the night the temperature had fallen and the wind risen. The morning gave the spectacle of a blizzard, driving sleet and snow. Hugh laid down the rough pencilled scraps of the verses he had been polishing, and went to look disconsolately out of the window. The prospect was uninviting; scarcely anything visible through the vibrating screen of swift, horizontal grey lines. He had agreed to meet Minna at noon, weather permitting, in the little patch of wood that stretched behind The Lindens, her father's house, to more or less open country. The weather was hardly in a permissive mood. He felt that he could annul the engagement with a free conscience. It would be madness of Minna to expect its fulfilment. But knowing that a woman in

love is capable of many madnesses, he resolved to keep his tryst on the chance of being able to despatch her summarily home again. He started out, with ulster collar drawn up to his ears, and thick gloves, and strode fast through the gale along the deserted pavements. At the appointed spot in the wood he waited for a quarter of an hour. Minna did not come. He congratulated her on her common sense, greater than his own, and retraced his steps. As he emerged from the branch lane leading from the wood on to the heath road, and meeting the latter at a point somewhat nearer the Merriams' house than The Lindens, he was passed by a hansom cab, the window of which was down. After a few yards, the trap door in the roof was pushed open and the cabman drew up. Hugh approached, and perceived through the side glass Irene's expectant face. On the window being pulled up, he saw her sitting in the chilliness of an indoor silk blouse, while by her side, huddled up in her sealskin jacket, was a dirty, emaciated, shivering little girl.

"What a lucky chance to have passed you!" cried Irene; "will you do something real kind for me?"

"Anything in the world. I suppose I'm to fetch a doctor," he replied, with an eye on her new protégée.

"No. I'll send Jane, if necessary. Go round to this little creature's home and tell them she is ill and that I'll take care of her for to-day, and if they like I'll find a decent place for her. She lives with an uncle and aunt, who beat her. Fancy sending out a child, with nothing on, to sell violets on a day like this!"

"Where do they live?"

“At 24 George Street—in the slums at the back of the station. Their name is Jackson. Come back and tell me. I’ll give you some lunch.”

Hugh nodded, stepped back, gave the word to the driver and the cab started off. He trudged along in its wake, amused and touched by the little scene. He could imagine Irene first catching sight of the child, her indignant whipping off of her sealskin, putting the child into the cab, arranging everything off-hand, in her undoubting, imperial fashion. He smiled, too, at her unhesitating anticipation of his immediate acceptance of his mission. It was well that there was a woman like Irene in the world. As he passed by the house, he saw her figure flit quickly across an upper window. He pictured her stirring up the maids, getting a hot bath ready, and kneeling before the fire with a roll of flannel in her hands—the light playing in her fair hair and illuminating her face. He dwelt upon the picture until he had reached his destination.

He found Mrs. Jackson. Her husband was not in. If one judged from his home, he was certainly at that moment hugging the lee-side of a public-house doorway, waiting for opening time. The room was filthy. Mrs. Jackson, if possible, filthier. Her habitual speech, as Hugh shortly discovered, was filthy in the superlative degree. She was also perceptibly drunk. There was an apology for a bed in the room; but in a corner lay some sacking and a bundle of rags, evidently the child’s sleeping place. Hugh explained his mission; to his surprise, met with instant success. Mrs. Jackson did not see why she should support a child that was nothing to her. She was expecting a sanguinary one of her

own shortly. If anyone else cared to support her, they were welcome.

For all she cared, they could take her to a much warmer place than Irene's fireside.

"It's all right," he said to Irene, when she came down to the hall to meet him.

"Good," she said. "Come upstairs for a moment."

She turned abruptly and he followed. He knew the signs of Irene's indignation.

Snugly in bed, in the room that former tenants had fitted as a nursery—but unused now for that purpose, to Irene's wistful regret—her one sadness—lay the little girl. Irene went up to her, drew back the bedclothes and tenderly exposed her shoulders and bosom.

"Look," she said.

He bent over; the flesh was livid with bruises.

"I should like to go among them with a flaming sword," she cried, "and sweep them off the face of the earth."

"I wish you could, before the child they are expecting is born to them," he said, grimly.

He sketched his visit. Irene gave but half heed. His first remark had struck a strongly vibrating chord.

"Let us pray to God that it is never born alive," she said. "To think that such brute-beasts can have a child and—oh, why are they allowed to bring them into the world, and given the most glorious privilege of humanity?"

"The next best privilege is to be able to do what you're doing now," said Hugh, consolingly.

"But what is it, after all? It is like trying to stop an avalanche and just getting hold of a handful of snow."