

**HAROLD
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ENCHANTMENT

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Enchantment

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So much depended upon every one's utter lack of nervousness and embarrassment that Shaw, the stage manager, decided that my presence at the final rehearsal would only add to the tension, and was therefore unnecessary. The "star" complained that her efforts to interpret my lines to my satisfaction were wearing her thin, while the "leading man" declared that he could not enter naturally into the spirit of the comedy so long as he knew I was watching from across the front.

To tell the truth, I was not unagreeable. There were many things I wanted to change, and I knew that if I once got headway I should have to write the play all over; and that was not in the contract. My room was better than my company. So Shaw gave me a card to The Players and left me there in the care of a distinguished fellow dramatist.

We had a capital dinner, and our exchange of experiences would have made a book equal in length to *Revelation*. What a time a fellow has to get a manager to listen to a better play than he has yet produced! I'm afraid that we said many uncomplimentary things about actors in general and managers in particular. The actor always has his own idea, the manager has his, and between them the man who wrote the play is pretty well knocked about. But when the play is produced every one's idea proves of some use, so I find.

In spite of the good dinner and the interesting conversation, I found myself glancing constantly at my

watch or at the clock, thinking that at such and such a time to-morrow night my puppets would be uttering such and such a line, perhaps as I wanted them to utter it, perhaps as they wanted to utter it. It did not matter that I had written two successful novels and a popular comedy; I was still subject to spells of diffidence and greenness. Much depended upon this second effort; it was, or it was not, to establish me in New York as a playwright of the first order.

I played a game of billiards indifferently well, peered into Booth's room and evoked his kindly spirit to watch over my future, smoked incessantly, and waited impatiently for Shaw's promised telephone call. The call came at ten-thirty, and Shaw said that three acts had gone off superbly and that everything pointed to a big success. My spirits rose wonderfully. I had as yet never experienced the thrill of a curtain call, my first play having been produced while I was abroad. If they called me before the curtain my cup was full; there was nothing left in the world but to make money, all other thrills having come and departed. All at once I determined to run up town to the theater and steal in to see the last act. So I called for my hat and coat, apologized to my friend, and went forth into the night—and romance!

Gramercy Park is always still at night, quiet even in the very heart of turmoil. Only an indefinable murmur drifted over from the crowded life of Broadway. I was conning over some lines I thought fine, epigrams and fragmentary philosophy.

"Hurry! We have only half an hour!"

The voice, soft and musical, broke the silence ere my foot had left the last step. Amazed, I looked in the direction

whence came this symphony of vocal allurements. A handsome coupé, with groom and footman, stood at the curb. A woman in evening gown leaned out. I stopped and stared. The footman at the door touched his hat. I gazed over my shoulder to see if any one had come out of the club at the same time as myself. I was alone.

"Hurry! I have waited at least half an hour. We haven't a moment to waste."

Some one in the upper rooms of the club lifted a shade to open a window, and the light illuminated her features. She was young and very handsome. A French wit once said that the whisper of a beautiful woman can be heard farther than the loudest call of duty. Now, I honestly confess that if she had been homely, or even moderately good-looking, I should have politely explained to her that she had made a peculiar mistake. I was somebody else. As it was, with scarce any hesitation I stepped into the carriage, and the footman closed the door. To this day I can not analyze the impulse that led me into that carriage: Fate in the guise of mischief, Destiny in the motley and out for a lark, I know not which, nor care.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," said I.

"I thought you would never come."

Thought I would never come? The coupé started off at a rate likely to bring us under the vigilant eyes of the police. We pared the corner neatly and swung into Broadway, going up town. The theaters were emptying, and here and there the way was choked with struggling cabs; but our driver knew his business, and we were never delayed more than a moment. Not another word was spoken till we reached

Thirty-fourth Street. I was silent because I had nothing to say.

"One after another they came out. I thought you would never, never come. I had all I could do to keep from going into the club after you!" She tore off her long, white gloves and flung them (savagely, I thought) into her lap.

Going into the club after me? Heavens! What a scandal I had escaped! What the deuce was it all about, anyway? Who was I? What was expected of me? My nerve lost a particle of its strength, but I could not back out now. It was too late. I was in for some sort of excitement. I had always been skeptical about mistaken identity. This was to be my conversion.

"You will never forgive me, I know, for waiting outside a club for you." She snuggled over to her side of the carriage.

"Yes, I will!" I replied with alacrity. Who wouldn't forgive her? I moved closer.

The blue light of the arc-lamps flashed into the window at frequent intervals. Each time I noted her face as best I could. It was as beautifully cut as a Cellini cameo, and as pale as ivory under friction. You will laugh. "They are always beautiful," you will say. Well, who ever heard of a homely woman going a-venturing? Besides, as I remarked, it wouldn't have been an adventure if she had been homely, for I shouldn't have entered the carriage. To be sure, I was proving myself a cad for not enlightening her as to her error in the matter of identification; but I was human and young, and rather fond of my Stevenson, and this had all the charm and quality of the New Arabian Nights.

"It is all so terrible!" Her voice was tense; there was a note of agony in it that was real. She was balling her handkerchief, and I could see that her fingers were long and white and without jewels, though I caught the intermittent glimmer of a fine necklace circling an adorable throat. What a fine chance for a rascal!

I wondered if she would have me arrested when she found out? Was I married, single, a brother, a near friend? What the deuce was her trouble? Ought I to kiss her? My double was a fortunate duffer. How I envied him!

"Women are so silly sometimes. I do not know why I was dragged into this," she said.

Dragged into what? Had a crime been committed, or had some one run away with another man's wife? Heavens! we might be eloping and I not know anything about it! I shivered, not with fear, but with a strange elation.

"How could I have done it? How could I? Terrible!"

"It must be," I admitted readily. No, a woman does not elope in her ball-gown. Perhaps we were going after the trunks.

"To think that he would force me into a thing like this!"—vehemently.

"I see that there is nothing left for me to do but to punch his head." I thought I was getting on famously.

She gave me a swift, curious glance.

"Oh, I am brave enough," said I. I wondered if she had noticed that I was a passably good-looking man, as men go.

"What is done is done,"—wearily. "Retrospection will do us no good."

"What do you wish me to do?" I asked presently.

It was like writing a composite novel, no one knowing what the other chapters were about. I had already forgotten that I had written a play which was to be produced the following night; I forgot everything but the potent charm of the mystery which sat beside me and which I was determined to unravel, as they say in detective stories.

"What do you wish me to do?" I repeated.

"I will tell you when the time comes. For your own sake, be advised by me and do nothing rash. You are so impulsive."

For my own sake do nothing rash: I was so impulsive! My hand wandered toward the door-latch, and fell. No! I would stick it out, whatever happened.

"You are not afraid, are you?" she asked.

"Afraid of what?"—adroitly.

"I was right in waiting for you,"—simply.

Maybe; that remained to be seen.

We crossed under the Sixth Avenue "L," and the roar of a passing train silenced us for a time. Who was I, anyway? Where were we going? Why didn't she call me by some first name? So far she hadn't given me a clue to anything. An idea came to me.

"Are you wise in taking me there to-night?" I asked. This was very cunning of me.

She coughed slightly and peered from the window. "Ten blocks more! Oh, if only we dared go faster, faster, and have it all over with!"

"A policeman would delay us no inconsiderable time," I cautioned. "And think of its being reported in the papers!"

That wouldn't help matters. They are bad enough as they are." Doubtless they were!

She said nothing.

"Courage, courage!" I said; "all will end well." At least I sincerely hoped it would end well. I reached over and touched her hand. She withdrew that member of an exquisite anatomy as suddenly as if my touch had stung her. Once more I found myself in a maze. Evidently, whoever I was, I did not stand on such terms with her as to be allowed the happiness of holding her hand. And I had almost kissed her!

Then a horrible thought scorched me. I had more than a thousand dollars in my wallet. I snuggled over to my side of the carriage. The newspapers were teeming with stories of new bunko-games, and this might be one of the classics of getting-rich-quick on other people's money. I slyly buttoned up my coat. Anyhow, it was chilly.

On, on we rolled; light after light flashed into the window, gloom followed gloom.

More than a thousand dollars was a large sum for an author to be carrying about; and if the exploit turned out to be a police affair I might be seriously questioned as to how an author came by so large a sum. Yet, as I thought of her necklace, I felt my cheeks grow red with shame. It's so hard to doubt a beautiful young woman! Still, the jewels might not be real. There were many false gems in New York, animate and inanimate. If her jewels were genuine, two years' royalties would not have purchased the pear-shaped pearl pendant that gleamed at her throat. If she was really an adventuress she was of a new type, and worth studying

from the dramatist's point of view. Had she really mistaken me? Quite accidentally I touched her cloak. It was of Persian lamb. Hang it, adventuresses don't go around in Persian lamb: not in New York. Ha! I had it. I would find out what she was.

I leaned over quickly and kissed her cheek. There was not a sound, only I felt her shudder. She wiped with her handkerchief the spot my lips had touched. I was a cad and a wretch. When she did speak her tones were even and low.

"I did not quite believe that of you."

"I could not help it!" I declared, ready to confess that I was an impostor; and as I look back I know that I told the truth when I said I could not help it. I didn't care where the carriage went, nor what the end would be.

"And I trusted you!" The reproach was genuine.

I had nothing to say. My edifice of suspicions had suddenly tumbled about my ears.

"I am sorry; I have acted like a cad. I am one," I said finally.

"I was helpless. One after another the men we trust fail us."

"Madam, I am a wretch. I am not the gentleman you have taken me for. I have had the misfortune to resemble another gentleman."

"I never saw you before in all my life, nor any person that resembles you."

I gasped. This was what the old dramatists called a thunderbolt from heaven. I felt for my wallet; it was still in my pocket. Inconsistently, I grew angry.

"Then, what the devil—!"

"Do not add profanity to ill-manners," she interposed. "Perhaps I have no right to complain. There is the door, sir; you have but to press the button, stop the driver, and get out. I am in a terribly embarrassing position to-night, one which my own folly has brought me to. It was absolutely necessary that a gentleman should accompany me in this carriage to my destination. When you came forth from your club—the only club the exact location of which I am familiar with—you appeared to be a gentleman, one I could trust to accompany me. To attract your attention, and at the same time arouse your curiosity, I had to resort to equivocal methods. It is an adventure, sir. Will you see it to the end, or shall I press the button?"

"Permit me to ask a question or two!" I was mightily confused at the turn of things.

"Perfect confidence in me, or I shall open the door."

"In any other city but New York—"

"Yes or no!"—imperiously.

"Hang it, madam!"

Her hand went toward the electric button.

"To the end of the world, and no questions asked."

Her hand dropped. "Thank you,"—gently.

"Curiosity is something we can't help; otherwise I should not be here, ass that I am! Chivalry isn't all dead. If you are in trouble depend upon me; only I must be back in New York by to-morrow night."

"You will not leave the city. You have no fear?"

"I should not be here else."

"Oh, but you must be imagining all sorts of terrible things."