



***ETHEL
M. DELL***

***THE LAMP
IN THE DESERT***

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The Lamp in the Desert

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PART I

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CHAPTER I

BEGGAR'S CHOICE

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A great roar of British voices pierced the jewelled curtain of the Indian night. A toast with musical honours was being drunk in the sweltering dining-room of the officers' mess. The enthusiastic hubbub spread far, for every door and window was flung wide. Though the season was yet in its infancy, the heat was intense. Markestan had the reputation in the Indian Army for being one of the hottest corners in the Empire in more senses than one, and Kurrumpore, the military centre, had not been chosen for any especial advantages of climate. So few indeed did it possess in the eyes of Europeans that none ever went there save those whom an inexorable fate compelled. The rickety, wooden bungalows scattered about the cantonment were temporary lodgings, not abiding-places. The women of the community, like migratory birds, dwelt in them for barely four months in the year, flitting with the coming of the pitiless heat to Bhulwana, their little paradise in the Hills. But that was a twenty-four hours' journey away, and the men had to be content with an occasional week's leave from the depths of their inferno, unless, as Tommy Denvers put it, they were

lucky enough to go sick, in which case their sojourn in paradise was prolonged, much to the delight of the angels.

But on that hot night the annual flitting of the angels had not yet come to pass, and notwithstanding the heat the last dance of the season was to take place at the Club House. The occasion was an exceptional one, as the jovial sounds that issued from the officers' mess-house testified. Round after round of cheers followed the noisy toast, filling the night with the merry uproar that echoed far and wide. A confusion of voices succeeded these; and then by degrees the babel died down, and a single voice made itself heard. It spoke with easy fluency to the evident appreciation of its listeners, and when it ceased there came another hearty cheer. Then with jokes and careless laughter the little company of British officers began to disperse. They came forth in lounging groups on to the steps of the mess-house, the foremost of them—Tommy Denvers—holding the arm of his captain, who suffered the familiarity as he suffered most things, with the utmost indifference. None but Tommy ever attempted to get on familiar terms with Everard Monck. He was essentially a man who stood alone. But the slim, fair-haired young subaltern worshipped him openly and with reason. For Monck it was who, grimly resolute, had pulled him through the worst illness he had ever known, accomplishing by sheer force of will what Ralston, the doctor, had failed to accomplish by any other means. And in consequence and for all time the youngest subaltern in the mess had become Monck's devoted adherent.

They stood together for a moment at the top of the steps while Monck, his dark, lean face wholly unresponsive and

inscrutable, took out a cigar. The night was a wonderland of deep spaces and glittering stars. Somewhere far away a native *tom-tom* throbbed like the beating of a fevered pulse, quickening spasmodically at intervals and then dying away again into mere monotony. The air was scentless, still, and heavy.

"It's going to be deuced warm," said Tommy.

"Have a smoke?" said Monck, proffering his case.

The boy smiled with swift gratification. "Oh, thanks awfully! But it's a shame to hurry over a good cigar, and I promised Stella to go straight back."

"A promise is a promise," said Monck. "Have it later!" He added rather curtly, "I'm going your way myself."

"Good!" said Tommy heartily. "But aren't you going to show at the Club House? Aren't you going to dance?"

Monck tossed down his lighted match and set his heel on it. "I'm keeping my dancing for to-morrow," he said. "The best man always has more than enough of that."

Tommy made a gloomy sound that was like a groan and began to descend the steps by his side. They walked several paces along the dim road in silence; then quite suddenly he burst into impulsive speech.

"I'll tell you what it is, Monck!"

"I shouldn't," said Monck.

Tommy checked abruptly, looking at him oddly, uncertainly. "How do you know what I was going to say?" he demanded.

"I don't," said Monck.

"I believe you do," said Tommy, unconvinced.

Monck blew forth a cloud of smoke and laughed in his brief, rather grudging way. "You're getting quite clever for a child of your age," he observed. "But don't overdo it, my son! Don't get precocious!"

Tommy's hand grasped his arm confidentially. "Monck, if I don't speak out to someone, I shall bust! Surely you don't mind my speaking out to you!"

"Not if there's anything to be gained by it," said Monck.

He ignored the friendly, persuasive hand on his arm, but yet in some fashion Tommy knew that it was not unwelcome. He kept it there as he made reply.

"There isn't. Only, you know, old chap, it does a fellow good to unburden himself. And I'm bothered to death about this business."

"A bit late in the day, isn't it?" suggested Monck.

"Oh yes, I know; too late to do anything. But," Tommy spoke with force, "the nearer it gets, the worse I feel. I'm downright sick about it, and that's the truth. How would you feel, I wonder, if you knew your one and only sister was going to marry a rotter? Would you be satisfied to let things drift?"

Monck was silent for a space. They walked on over the dusty road with the free swing of the conquering race. One or two 'rickshaws met them as they went, and a woman's voice called a greeting; but though they both responded, it scarcely served as a diversion. The silence between them remained.

Monck spoke at last, briefly, with grim restraint. "That's rather a sweeping assertion of yours. I shouldn't repeat it if I were you."

"It's true all the same," maintained Tommy. "You know it's true."

"I know nothing," said Monck. "I've nothing whatever against Dacre."

"You've nothing in favour of him anyway," growled Tommy.

"Nothing particular; but I presume your sister has." There was just a hint of irony in the quiet rejoinder.

Tommy winced. "Stella! Great Scott, no! She doesn't care the toss of a halfpenny for him. I know that now. She only accepted him because she found herself in such a beastly anomalous position, with all the spiteful cats of the regiment arrayed against her, treating her like a pariah."

"Did she tell you so?" There was no irony in Monck's tone this time. It fell short and stern.

Again Tommy glanced at him as one uncertain. "Not likely," he said.

"Then why do you make the assertion? What grounds have you for making the assertion?" Monck spoke with insistence as one who meant to have an answer.

And the boy answered him, albeit shamefacedly. "I really can't say, Monck. I'm the sort of fool that sees things without being able to explain how. But that Stella has the faintest spark of real love for that fellow Dacre,—well, I'd take my dying oath that she hasn't."

"Some women don't go in for that sort of thing," commented Monck dryly.

"Stella isn't that sort of woman." Hotly came Tommy's defence. "You don't know her. She's a lot deeper than I am."

Monck laughed a little. "Oh, you're deep enough, Tommy. But you're transparent as well. Now your sister on the other hand is quite inscrutable. But it is not for us to interfere. She probably knows what she is doing—very well indeed."

"That's just it. Does she know? Isn't she taking a most awful leap in the dark?" Keen anxiety sounded in Tommy's voice. "It's been such horribly quick work, you know. Why, she hasn't been out here six weeks. It's a shame for any girl to marry on such short notice as that. I said so to her, and she—she laughed and said, 'Oh, that's beggar's choice! Do you think I could enjoy life with your angels in paradise in unmarried bliss? I'd sooner stay down in hell with you.' And she'd have done it too, Monck. And it would probably have killed her. That's partly how I came to know."

"Haven't the women been decent to her?" Monck's question fell curtly, as if the subject were one which he was reluctant to discuss.

Tommy looked at him through the starlight. "You know what they are," he said bluntly. "They'd hunt anybody if once Lady Harriet gave tongue. She chose to eye Stella askance from the very outset, and of course all the rest followed suit. Mrs. Ralston is the only one in the whole crowd who has ever treated her decently, but of course she's nobody. Everyone sits on her. As if," he spoke with heat, "Stella weren't as good as the best of 'em—and better! What right have they to treat her like a social outcast just because she came out here to me on her own? It's hateful! It's iniquitous! What else could she have done?"

"It seems reasonable—from a man's point of view," said Monck.

"It was reasonable. It was the only thing possible. And just for that they chose to turn the cold shoulder on her,—to ostracize her practically. What had she done to them? What right had they to treat her like that?" Fierce resentment sounded in Tommy's voice.

"I'll tell you if you want to know," said Monck abruptly. "It's the law of the pack to rend an outsider. And your sister will always be that—married or otherwise. They may fawn upon her later, Dacre being one to hold his own with women. But they will always hate her in their hearts. You see, she is beautiful."

"Is she?" said Tommy in surprise. "Do you know, I never thought of that!"

Monck laughed—a cold, sardonic laugh. "Quite so! You wouldn't! But Dacre has—and a few more of us."

"Oh, confound Dacre!" Tommy's irritation returned with a rush. "I detest the man! He behaves as if he were conferring a favour. When he was making that speech to-night, I wanted to fling my glass at him."

"Ah, but you mustn't do those things." Monck spoke reprovingly. "You may be young, but you're past the schoolboy stage. Dacre is more of a woman's favourite than a man's, you must remember. If your sister is not in love with him, she is about the only woman in the station who isn't."

"That's the disgusting part of it," fumed Tommy. "He makes love to every woman he meets."

They had reached a shadowy compound that bordered the dusty road for a few yards. A little eddying wind made a mysterious whisper among its thirsty shrubs. The bungalow

it surrounded showed dimly in the starlight, a wooden structure with a raised verandah and a flight of steps leading up to it. A light thrown by a red-shaded lamp shone out from one of the rooms, casting a shaft of ruddy brilliance into the night as though it defied the splendour without. It shone upon Tommy's face as he paused, showing it troubled and anxious.

"You may as well come in," he said. "She is sure to be ready. Come in and have a drink!"

Monck stood still. His dark face was in shadow. He seemed to be debating some point with himself.

Finally, "All right. Just for a minute," he said. "But, look here, Tommy! Don't you let your sister suspect that you've been making a confidant of me! I don't fancy it would please her. Put on a grin, man! Don't look bowed down with family cares! She is probably quite capable of looking after herself—like the rest of 'em."

He clapped a careless hand on the lad's shoulder as they turned up the path together towards the streaming red light.

"You're a bit of a woman-hater, aren't you?" said Tommy.

And Monck laughed again his short, rather bitter laugh; but he said no word in answer.

CHAPTER II

THE PRISONER AT THE BAR

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In the room with the crimson-shaded lamp Stella Denvers sat waiting. The red glow compassed her warmly, striking wonderful copper gleams in the burnished coils of her hair. Her face was bent over the long white gloves that she was pulling over her wrists, a pale face that yet was extraordinarily vivid, with features that were delicate and proud, and lips that had the exquisite softness and purity of a flower.

She raised her eyes from her task at sound of the steps below the window, and their starry brightness under her straight black brows gave her an infinite allurements. Certainly a beautiful woman, as Monck had said, and possessing the brilliance and the wonder of youth to an almost dazzling degree! Perhaps it was not altogether surprising that the ladies of the regiment had not been too enthusiastic in their welcome of this sister of Tommy's who had come so suddenly into their midst, defying convention. Her advent had been utterly unexpected—a total surprise even to Tommy, who, returning one day from the polo-ground, had found her awaiting him in the bachelor quarters which he had shared with three other subalterns. And her arrival had set the whole station buzzing.

Led by the Colonel's wife, Lady Harriet Mansfield, the women of the regiment had—with the single exception of Mrs. Ralston whose opinion was of no account—risen and condemned the splendid stranger who had come amongst them with such supreme audacity and eclipsed the fairest of them. Stella's own simple explanation that she had, upon attaining her majority and fifty pounds a year, decided to quit the home of some distant relatives who did not want

her and join Tommy who was the only near relation she had, had satisfied no one. She was an interloper, and as such they united to treat her. As Lady Harriet said, no nice girl would have dreamed of taking such an extraordinary step, and she had not the smallest intention of offering her the chaperonage that she so conspicuously lacked. If Mrs. Ralston chose to do so, that was her own affair. Such action on the part of the surgeon's very ordinary wife would make no difference to any one. She was glad to think that all the other ladies were too well-bred to accept without reservation so unconventional a type.

The fact that she was Tommy's sister was the only consideration in her favour. Tommy was quite a nice boy, and they could not for his sake entirely exclude her from the regimental society, but to no intimate gathering was she ever invited, nor from the female portion of the community was there any welcome for her at the Club.

The attitude of the officers of the regiment was of a totally different nature. They had accepted her with enthusiasm, possibly all the more marked on account of the aloofness of their women folk, and in a very short time they were paying her homage as one man. The subalterns who had shared their quarters with Tommy turned out to make room for her, treating her like a queen suddenly come into her own, and like a queen she entered into possession, accepting all courtesy just as she ignored all slights with a delicate self-possession that yet knew how to be gracious when occasion demanded.

Mrs. Ralston would have offered her harbourage had she desired it, but there was pride in Stella—a pride that surged

and rebelled very far below her serenity. She received favours from none.

And so, unshackled and unchaperoned, she had gone her way among her critics, and no one—not even Tommy—suspected how deep was the wound that their barely-veiled hostility had inflicted. In bitterness of soul she hid it from all the world, and only her brother and her brother's grim and somewhat unapproachable captain were even vaguely aware of its existence.

Everard Monck was one of the very few men who had not laid themselves down before her dainty feet, and she had gradually come to believe that this man shared the silent, side-long disapproval manifested by the women. Very strangely that belief hurt her even more deeply, in a subtle, incomprehensible fashion, than any slights inflicted by her own sex. Possibly Tommy's warm enthusiasm for the man had made her more sensitive regarding his good opinion. And possibly she was over ready to read condemnation in his grave eyes. But—whatever the reason—she would have given much to have had him on her side. Somehow it mattered to her, and mattered vitally.

But Monck had never joined her retinue of courtiers. He was never other than courteous to her, but he did not seek her out. Perhaps he had better things to do. Aloof, impenetrable, cold, he passed her by, and she would have been even more amazed than Tommy had she heard him describe her as beautiful, so convinced was she that he saw in her no charm.

It had been a disheartening struggle, this hewing for herself a way along the rocky paths of prejudice, and many

had been the thorns under her feet. Though she kept a brave heart and never faltered, she had tired inevitably of the perpetual effort it entailed. Three weeks after her arrival, when the annual exodus of the ladies of the regiment to the Hills was drawing near, she became engaged to Ralph Dacre, the handsomest and most irresponsible man in the mess.

With him at least her power to attract was paramount. He was blindly, almost fulsomely, in love. Her beauty went to his head from the outset; it fired his blood. He worshipped her hotly, and pursued her untiringly, caring little whether she returned his devotion so long as he ultimately took possession. And when finally, half-disdainfully, she yielded to his insistence, his one all-mastering thought became to clinch the bargain before she could repent of it. It was a mad and headlong passion that drove him—not for the first time in his life; and the subtle pride of her and the soft reserve made her all the more desirable in his eyes.

He had won her; he did not stop to ask himself how. The women said that the luck was all on her side. The men forebore to express an opinion. Dacre had attained his captaincy, but he was not regarded with great respect by any one. His fellow-officers shrugged their shoulders over him, and the commanding officer, Colonel Mansfield, had been heard to call him "the craziest madman it had ever been his fate to meet." No one, except Tommy, actively disliked him, and he had no grounds for so doing, as Monck had pointed out. Monck, who till then had occupied the same bungalow, declared he had nothing against him, and he was surely in a position to form a very shrewd opinion.

For Monck was neither fool nor madman, and there was very little that escaped his silent observation.

He was acting as best man at the morrow's ceremony, the function having been almost thrust upon him by Dacre who, oddly enough, shared something of Tommy's veneration for his very reticent brother-officer. There was scant friendship between them. Each had been accustomed to go his own way wholly independent of the other. They were no more than casual acquaintances, and they were content to remain such. But undoubtedly Dacre entertained a certain respect for Monck and observed a wariness of behaviour in his presence that he never troubled to assume for any other man. He was careful in his dealings with him, being at all times not wholly certain of his ground.

Other men felt the same uncertainty in connection with Monck. None—save Tommy—was sure what manner of man he was. Tommy alone took him for granted with whole-hearted admiration, and at his earnest wish it had been arranged between them that Monck should take up his abode with him when the forthcoming marriage had deprived each of a companion. Tommy was delighted with the idea, and he had a gratifying suspicion that Monck himself was inclined to be pleased with it also.

The Green Bungalow had become considerably more homelike since Stella's arrival, and Tommy meant to keep it so. He was sure that Monck and he would have the same tastes.

And so on that eve of his sister's wedding, the thought of their coming companionship was the sole redeeming feature

of the whole affair, and he turned in his impulsive fashion to say so just as they reached the verandah steps.

But the words did not leave his lips, for the red glow flung from the lamp had found Monck's upturned face, and something—something about it—checked all speech for the moment. He was looking straight up at the lighted window and the face of a beautiful woman who gazed forth into the night. And his eyes were no longer cold and unresponsive, but burning, ardent, intensely alive. Tommy forgot what he was going to say and only stared.

The moment passed; it was scarcely so much as a moment. And Monck moved on in his calm, unfaltering way.

"Your sister is ready and waiting," he said.

They ascended the steps together, and the girl who sat by the open window rose with a stately movement and stepped forward to meet them.

"Hullo, Stella!" was Tommy's greeting. "Hope I'm not awfully late. They wasted such a confounded time over toasts at mess to-night. Yours was one of 'em, and I had to reply. I hadn't a notion what to say. Captain Monck thinks I made an awful hash of it though he is too considerate to say so."

"On the contrary I said 'Hear, hear!' to every stutter," said Monck, bowing slightly as he took the hand she offered.

She was wearing a black lace dress with a glittering spangled scarf of Indian gauze floating about her. Her neck and shoulders gleamed in the soft red glow. She was superb that night.

She smiled at Monck, and her smile was as a shining cloak hiding her soul. "So you have started upon your

official duties already!" she said. "It is the best man's business to encourage and console everyone concerned, isn't it?"

The faint cynicism of her speech was like her smile. It held back all intrusive curiosity. And the man's answering smile had something of the same quality. Reserve met reserve.

"I hope I shall not find it very arduous in that respect," he said. "I did not come here in that capacity."

"I am glad of that," she said. "Won't you come in and sit down?"

She motioned him within with a queenly gesture, but her invitation was wholly lacking in warmth. It was Tommy who pressed forward with eager hospitality.

"Yes, and have a drink! It's a thirsty right. It's getting infernally hot. Stella, you're lucky to be going out of it."

"Oh, I am very lucky," Stella said.

They entered the lighted room, and Tommy went in search of refreshment.

"Won't you sit down?" said Stella.

Her voice was deep and pure, and the music in it made him wonder if she sang. He sat facing her while she returned with apparent absorption to the fastening of her gloves. She spoke again after a moment without raising her eyes. "Are you proposing to take up your abode here tomorrow?"

"That's the idea," said Monck.

"I hope you and Tommy will be quite comfortable," she said. "No doubt he will be a good deal happier with you than he has been for the past few weeks with me."

"I don't know why he should be," said Monck.

"No?" She was frowning slightly over her glove. "You see, my sojourn here has not been—a great success. I think poor Tommy has felt it rather badly. He likes a genial atmosphere."

"He won't get much of that in my company," observed Monck.

She smiled momentarily. "Perhaps not. But I think he will not be sorry to be relieved of family cares. They have weighed rather heavily upon him."

"He will be sorry to lose you," said Monck.

"Oh, of course, in a way. But he will soon get over that." She looked up at him suddenly. "You will all be rather thankful when I am safely married, Captain Monck," she said.

There was a second or two of silence. Monck's eyes looked straight back into hers while it lasted, but they held no warmth, scarcely even interest.

"I really don't know why you should say that, Miss Denvers," he said stiffly at length.

Stella's gloved hands clasped each other. She was breathing somewhat hard, yet her bearing was wholly regal, even disdainful.

"Only because I realize that I have been a great anxiety to all the respectable portion of the community," she made careless reply. "I think I am right in classing you under that heading, am I not?"

He heard the challenge in her tone, delicately though she presented it, and something in him that was fierce and

unrestrained sprang up to meet it. But he forced it back. His expression remained wholly inscrutable.

"I don't think I can claim to be anything else," he said. "But that fact scarcely makes me in any sense one of a community. I think I prefer to stand alone."

Her blue eyes sparkled a little. "Strangely, I have the same preference," she said. "It has never appealed to me to be one of a crowd. I like independence—whatever the crowd may say. But I am quite aware that in a woman that is considered a dangerous taste. A woman should always conform to rule."

"I have never studied the subject," said Monck.

He spoke briefly. Tommy's confidences had stirred within him that which could not be expressed. The whole soul of him shrank with an almost angry repugnance from discussing the matter with her. No discussion could make any difference at this stage.

Again for a second he saw her slight frown. Then she leaned back in her chair, stretching up her arms as if weary of the matter. "In fact you avoid all things feminine," she said. "How discreet of you!"

A large white moth floated suddenly in and began to beat itself against the lamp-shade. Monck's eyes watched it with a grim concentration. Stella's were half-closed. She seemed to have dismissed him from her mind as an unimportant detail. The silence widened between them.

Suddenly there was a movement. The fluttering creature had found the flame and fallen dazed upon the table. Almost in the same second Monck stooped forward swiftly and silently, and crushed the thing with his closed fist.

Stella drew a quick breath. Her eyes were wide open again. She sat up.

"Why did you do that?"

He looked at her again, a smouldering gleam in his eyes. "It was on its way to destruction," he said.

"And so you helped it!"

He nodded. "Yes. Long-drawn-out agonies don't attract me."

Stella laughed softly, yet with a touch of mockery. "Oh, it was an act of mercy, was it? You didn't look particularly merciful. In fact, that is about the last quality I should have attributed to you."

"I don't think," Monck said very quietly, "that you are in a position to judge me." She leaned forward. He saw that her bosom was heaving. "That is your prerogative, isn't it?" she said. "I—I am just the prisoner at the bar, and—like the moth—I have been condemned—without mercy."

He raised his brows sharply. For a second he had the look of a man who has been stabbed in the back. Then with a swift effort he pulled himself together.

In the same moment Stella rose. She was smiling, and there was a red flush in her cheeks. She took her fan from the table.

"And now," she said, "I am going to dance—all night long. Every officer in the mess—save one—has asked me for a dance."

He was on his feet in an instant. He had checked one impulse, but even to his endurance there were limits. He spoke as one goaded.

"Will you give me one?"

She looked him squarely in the eyes. "No, Captain Monck."

His dark face looked suddenly stubborn. "I don't often dance," he said. "I wasn't going to dance to-night. But—I will have one—I must have one—with you."

"Why?" Her question fell with a crystal clearness. There was something of crystal hardness in her eyes.

But the man was undaunted. "Because you have wronged me, and you owe me reparation."

"I—have wronged—you!" She spoke the words slowly, still looking him in the eyes.

He made an abrupt gesture as of holding back some inner force that strongly urged him. "I am not one of your persecutors," he said. "I have never in my life presumed to judge you—far less condemn you."

His voice vibrated as though some emotion fought fiercely for the mastery. They stood facing each other in what might have been open antagonism but for that deep quiver in the man's voice.

Stella spoke after the lapse of seconds. She had begun to tremble.

"Then why—why did you let me think so? Why did you always stand aloof?"

There was a tremor in her voice also, but her eyes were shining with the light half-eager, half-anxious, of one who seeks for buried treasure.

Monck's answer was pitched very low. It was as if the soul of him gave utterance to the words. "It is my nature to stand aloof. I was waiting."

"Waiting?" Her two hands gripped suddenly hard upon her fan, but still her shining eyes did not flinch from his. Still with a quivering heart she searched.

Almost in a whisper came his reply. "I was waiting—till my turn should come."

"Ah!" The fan snapped between her hands; she cast it from her with a movement that was almost violent.

Monck drew back sharply. With a smile that was grimly cynical he veiled his soul. "I was a fool, of course, and I am quite aware that my foolishness is nothing to you. But at least you know now how little cause you have to hate me."

She had turned from him and gone to the open window. She stood there bending slightly forward, as one who strains for a last glimpse of something that has passed from sight.

Monck remained motionless, watching her. From another room near by there came the sound of Tommy's humming and the cheery pop of a withdrawn cork.

Stella spoke at last, in a whisper, and as she spoke the strain went out of her attitude and she drooped against the wood-work of the window as if spent. "Yes; but I know—too late."

The words reached him though he scarcely felt that they were intended to do so. He suffered them to go into silence; the time for speech was past.

The seconds throbbed away between them. Stella did not move or speak again, and at last Monck turned from her. He picked up the broken fan, and with a curious reverence he laid it out of sight among some books on the table.

Then he stood immovable as granite and waited.

There came the sound of Tommy's footsteps, and in a moment the door was flung open. Tommy advanced with all a host's solicitude.

"Oh, I say, I'm awfully sorry to have kept you waiting so long. That silly ass of a *khit* had cleared off and left us nothing to drink. Stella, we shall miss all the fun if we don't hurry up. Come on, Monck, old chap, say when!"

He stopped at the table, and Stella turned from the window and moved forward. Her face was pale, but she was smiling.

"Captain Monck is coming with us, Tommy," she said.

"What?" Tommy looked up sharply. "Really? I say, Monck, I'm pleased. It'll do you good."

Monck was smiling also, faintly, grimly. "Don't mix any strong waters for me, Tommy!" he said. "And you had better not be too generous to yourself! Remember, you will have to dance with Lady Harriet!"

Tommy grimaced above the glasses. "All right. Have some lime-juice! You will have to dance with her too. That's some consolation!"

"I?" said Monck. He took the glass and handed it to Stella, then as she shook her head he put it to his own lips and drank as a man drinks to a memory. "No," he said then. "I am dancing only one dance to-night, and that will not be with Lady Harriet Mansfield."

"Who then?" questioned Tommy.

It was Stella who answered him, in her voice a note that sounded half-reckless, half-defiant. "It isn't given to every woman to dance at her own funeral," she said: "Captain Monck has kindly consented to assist at the orgy of mine."

"Stella!" protested Tommy, flushing. "I hate to hear you talking like that!"

Stella laughed a little, softly, as though at the vagaries of a child. "Poor Tommy!" she said. "What it is to be so young!"

"I'd sooner be a babe in arms than a cynic," said Tommy bluntly.

CHAPTER III

THE TRIUMPH

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Lady Harriet's lorgnettes were brought piercingly to bear upon the bride-elect that night, and her thin, refined features never relaxed during the operation. She was looking upon such youth and loveliness as seldom came her way; but the sight gave her no pleasure. She deemed it extremely unsuitable that Stella should dance at all on the eve of her wedding, and when she realized that nearly every man in the room was having his turn, her disapproval by no means diminished. She wondered audibly to one after another of her followers what Captain Dacre was about to permit such a thing. And when Monck—Everard Monck of all people who usually avoided all gatherings at the Club and had never been known to dance if he could find any legitimate means of excusing himself—waltzed Stella through the throng, her indignation amounted almost to anger. The mess had yielded to the last man.

"I call it almost brazen," she said to Mrs. Burton, the Major's wife. "She flaunts her unconventionality in our faces."

"A grave mistake," agreed Mrs. Burton. "It will not make us think any the more highly of her when she is married."

"I am in two minds about calling on her," declared Lady Harriet. "I am very doubtful as to the advisability of inviting any one so obviously unsuitable into our inner circle. Of course Mrs. Ralston," she raised her long pointed chin upon the name, "will please herself in the matter. She will probably be the first to try and draw her in, but what Mrs. Ralston does and what I do are two very different things. She is not particular as to the society she keeps, and the result is that her opinion is very justly regarded as worthless."

"Oh, quite," agreed Mrs. Burton, sending an obviously false smile in the direction of the lady last named who was approaching them in the company of Mrs. Ermsted, the Adjutant's wife, a little smart woman whom Tommy had long since surnamed "The Lizard."

Mrs. Ralston, the surgeon's wife, had once been a pretty girl, and there were occasions still on which her prettiness lingered like the gleams of a fading sunset. She had a diffident manner in society, but yet she was the only woman in the station who refused to follow Lady Harriet's lead. As Tommy had said, she was a nobody. Her influence was of no account, but yet with unobtrusive insistence she took her own way, and none could turn her therefrom.

Mrs. Ermsted held her up to ridicule openly, and yet very strangely she did not seem to dislike the Adjutant's sharp-

tongued little wife. She had been very good to her on more than one occasion, and the most appreciative remark that Mrs. Ermsted had ever found to make regarding her was that the poor thing was so fond of drudging for somebody that it was a real kindness to let her. Mrs. Ermsted was quite willing to be kind to any one in that respect.

They approached now, and Lady Harriet gave to each her distinctive smile of royal condescension.

"I expected to see you dancing, Mrs. Ermsted," she said.

"Oh, it's too hot," declared Mrs. Ermsted. "You want the temperament of a salamander to dance on a night like this."

She cast a barbed glance towards Stella as she spoke as Monck guided her to the least crowded corner of the ball-room. Stella's delicate face was flushed, but it was the exquisite flush of a blush-rose. Her eyes were of a starry brightness; she had the radiant look of one who has achieved her heart's desire.

"What a vision of triumph!" commented Mrs. Ermsted. "It's soothing anyway to know that that wild-rose complexion won't survive the summer. Captain Monck looks curiously out of his element. No doubt he prefers the bazaars."

"But Stella Denvers is enchanting to-night," murmured Mrs. Ralston.

Lady Harriet overheard the murmur, and her aquiline nose was instantly elevated a little higher. "So many people never see beyond the outer husk," she said.

Mrs. Burton smiled out of her slitty eyes. "I should scarcely imagine Captain Monck to be one of them," she