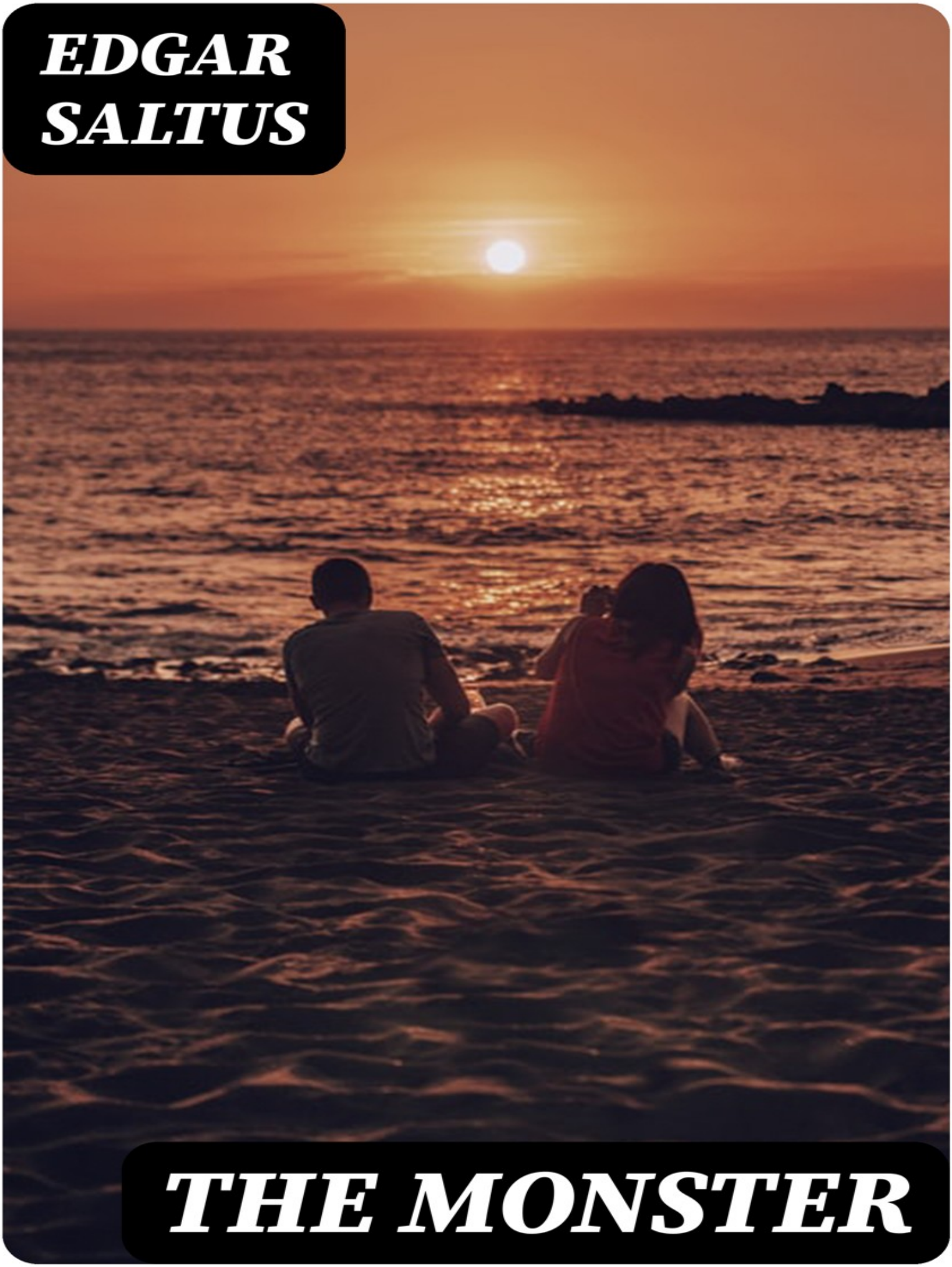
EDGAR SALTUS



THE MONSTER

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Table of Contents

CHAPTERS

Table of Contents

The Monster

I

Table of Contents

When the clergyman had gone, the bride turned.

Before her was an open window before which was the open sea. In the air was a tropical languor, a savour of brine, the scent of lilies, the sound of mandolins that are far away. Below, in the garden, were masses of scarlet, high heaps of geranium blooms. A bit beyond was the Caprian blue of the San Diego Bay. There, a yacht rode, white and spacious. The yacht belonged to her husband who was beside her. She turned again and as passionately he embraced her; she coloured.

For the moment, as they stood there, they seemed so sheerly dissimilar that they might have come of alien races, from different zones. He, with his fair hair, his fair skin, his resolute and aggressive face, was typically Anglo-Saxon. She, with her delicate features, her dense black hair, and disquieting eyes, looked like a Madrilene Madonna—one of those fascinating and slightly shocking creations of seventeenth-century art that more nearly resemble infantas serenaded by caballeros than queens of the sky. There was a deeper contrast. He appeared frankly material; she, all soul.

Leisurely she freed herself.

“One might know,” she began, then paused. A smile completed the sentence.

He smiled too.

“Yes, Leilah, one might know that however I hold you to me, I never can hold you enough.”

“And I! I could be held by you forever.”

On the door came a tap, rapid and assured. A page entered, the preoccupation of the tip in his face, in his hand a platter of letters.

The man, taking the letters, dismissed him.

“Miss Ogston,” he continued. “From your father, confound him. It is the last time he will address you in that fashion. Miss Ogston,” he repeated. “From the Silverstairs, I fancy. Gulian Verplank. There is but one for me.”

He looked at his watch. “The launch from the yacht will be here shortly.”

“When do we start?”

“Whenever you like. The Marquesas will keep. Bora-Bora will be the same whenever we get there. Only——”

“Only what?”

“I am in love with you, not with hotels.”

“Let us go then. There will be a moon to-night?”

“A new one, a honeymoon, a honeymoon begun.”

“Gulian! As if it could end!”

In pronouncing the “u” in his name her mouth made the sketch of a kiss.

“You would not wish it to?” he asked.

“When I die, perhaps, and even then only to be continued hereafter. Heaven would not be heaven without you.”

She spoke slowly, with little pauses, in a manner that differed from his own mode of speech, which was quick and forceful.

Verplank turned to the letter that had been addressed to him, and which he still held. Without opening it, he tore it

into long, thin strips. It was, he knew from the imprint, a communication of no importance; but, at the moment, the action seemed a reply to her remark. It served to indicate his complete indifference to everything and everyone save her only. Afterward, with a regret that was to be eternal, she wished he had done the same with hers.

Yet, pleased at the time, she smiled.

“Gulian, you do love me, but I wonder do you love me as absolutely as I love you?”

Verplank, with a gesture that was familiar to him, closed and opened a hand.

“I do not know. But while I think you cannot love me more wholly than I love you, I do know that to me you are the unique.”

Leilah moved to where he stood.

“Gulian, and you to me. You are the only one.” She moved closer. Raising her hands, she put them on his shoulders. “Tell me, shall you be long away?”

“An hour or two. Apropos, would you care to leave before dinner?”

“Yes.”

“We will dine on board, then. Is there anything in particular you would like?”

“Yes, lilies, plenty of lilies; and pineapples; and the sound of your voice.”

Lifting her hands from his shoulders to his face, she drew it to her own. Their lips met longly. With the savour of her about him, Verplank passed out.

Idly Leilah turned. Before her the sea lay, a desert of blue. Below, on the beach, it broke with a boom in high

white waves which, in retreating, became faintly mauve. The spectacle charmed her. But other scenes effaced it; sudden pictures of the Marquesas; the long flight southward; the brief, bright days; the nights that would be briefer still. Pleasurably for a while these things detained her. Idly again she turned.

On the table were the letters. One was from an intimate friend, Violet Silverstairs, a New York girl who had married an Englishman, and who since then had resided abroad. The other was—or appeared to be—from Matlack Ogston.

Matlack Ogston was Leilah's father. That a father should write to a daughter is only natural. But that this father should write surprised her, as already it had surprised Verplank. When he mentioned whom the letter was from she had thought he must be in error. Now, as she opened it, she found that he had been. Her father had not written. The envelope contained a second envelope addressed to another person. This envelope had formerly been sealed and since been opened. It held three letters in an unknown hand.

She began at one of them. More exactly, she began, as some women do begin, at the end. The signature startled. At once, as she turned to the initial sentences, she experienced the curious and unenviable sensation of falling from an inordinate height, and it was not with any idea that the sensation would cease, but rather with the craving to know, which in certain crises of the emotions becomes more unendurable than any uncertainty can be, that she read the rest of the first letter; after it, the second letter, and the third.

Then, as truth stared at her and she at truth, so monstrous was its aspect that, with one shuddering intake of the breath, life withered within her, light vanished without.

When ultimately, without knowing who she was; when, conscious only of an objective self struggling in darkness with the intangible and the void, when then life and light returned, she was on the floor, the monster peering at her.

She disowned it, disavowed it. But beside her on the floor the letters lay. There was its lair. It had sprung from them, and always from them it would be peering at her, driving her mad with its blighting eyes, unless——

She got on her hands and knees, and from them to her feet. Her body ached from the fall, and her head was throbbing. With the idea that smelling salts, or some cologne water which she had, might help her, she went and fetched them from an adjoining room. They were not of much use, she found, though presently she could think more clearly, and in a little while she was considering the possibility that had loomed.

In certain conditions the soul gets used to monsters. It makes itself at home with what it must. Her soul, she thought, might also. But even as she thought it, she knew she never could. She knew that even were she able to succeed in blinding herself to this thing by day, at night it would crawl to her, sit at her side, pluck at her sleeve, wake her, and cry: “Behold me!”

It would cry it at her until she cried it at him. Then inevitably it would kill her.

She had been seated, bathing her head with cologne. Now fear, helplessness, the consciousness of both possessed her. They impelled her to act. She stood up. She looked about the room. Filled with flowers and sunshine, it said nothing. Beyond was the sea. It called to her. It told her that in a rowboat she could drift and be lost. It told her that that night she could throw herself from the yacht. The blue expanse, the high white waves, the little mauve ripples invited.

The room, though, with its flowers and sunshine, deterred. To throw herself from the yacht meant that she would have to wait. It meant more. It meant that she would have to see him. It meant that she would have to feign and pretend. These things she could not do.

There remained the rowboat. Yet, in some way, now, the sea seemed less inviting. At the thought of its embrace and of its depths she shrank. To die, to cease any more to be, to succumb like the heroines of the old tragedies to fate, at the idea of that, her young soul revolted. There must be some other course.

She looked from the window. Beneath, before the ocean, a motor was passing. The whirr of it prompting, flight occurred to her, an escape to some spot that would engulf her as surely as the waves. Hesitatingly she considered it. But there was nothing else. Moreover, if she were to go, she must go at once.

She turned, crossed the room, stooped, gathered the letters, and seated herself at the table. There she put the letters in another envelope which she addressed to Verplank. While writing his name, her hand trembled, it

shook on the paper drops of ink. These she tried to blot, and made a smear.

Trembling still, she got up, went to the telephone, and attempted to speak. At first, too overcome to do so, she leaned against the wall. It did not seem possible that she could do this thing. But she must, she knew. At last, with an effort, she spoke.

“When does the next train leave San Diego? One moment. Have my servants sent to me; my servants, yes, and—and order a motor.”

Again she leaned against the wall. The room had become intolerable. Into the languors of the air a suffocation had entered, and it was unconsciously, in a condition semi-somnambulistic that she found herself considering the pink of the ceiling, then the rose-leaves woven in the green of the carpet, the dull red of the table-cover, the darker red of a tassel, the tall vase that stood on the table and in which were taller lilies.

There, beneath them was the monster. Its vibrations, disseminating through the room, were silhouetted on the walls. She could not see them, but she could feel them. They choked her.

But now her servants appeared. Nervously, with an irritability so foreign to her, that they eyed each other uncertainly, she gave them hurried commands. These obeyed and the porters summoned, she passed, choking still, from this room, the secrets of which the walls detained.

It was perhaps preordered that they should do so. Long later, in looking back, she realised that destiny then was having its say with her, and realised also why. At the time,

however, she was ignorant of two incidents, which, after the fashion of the apparently insignificant, subsequently became the reverse.

One incident had the porters for agent; the other was effected by a maid who supervened. The porters, in removing the luggage, collided with the table. The inkstand, the tall vase with the taller lilies, were upset; the vase, spilling water and flowers, fell broken on the floor; from the stand, ink rippled on the red of the cloth, on the darker red of the tassels, on the envelope which Leilah had directed to Verplank. These things, a maid, summoned by the crash, removed.

When Verplank returned, the table was bare.

He did not notice. What he alone noticed was Leilah's absence. She is below, he told himself. Then precisely as she had summoned her servants, he summoned his.

"Roberts," he said presently to a man. "Find Mrs. Verplank. Then get my things together. We start at once."

For a moment the man considered the master. At once civilly but stolidly he spoke:

"Mrs. Verplank has gone, sir."

Verplank, who had turned on his heel, turned back.

"What?"

"The hotel is full of it, sir. When I found that Mrs. Verplank was leaving, I——"

"What!" Verplank, in angry amazement, repeated.

"Mrs. Verplank is taking the limited, sir. It was the clerk who told me."

Then, for a moment, the master considered the man. At the simple statement his mind had become like a sea in a

storm. A whirlwind tossed his thoughts.

But Leilah was still too near, her caresses were too recent for him to be able to realise that she had actually gone, and the fact that he could not realise it disclosed itself in those words which all have uttered, all at least before whom the inexplicable has sprung:

“It is impossible!”

“Yes, sir, it does seem most unusual.”

Verplank had spoken less to the man than to himself, and for a moment stood engrossed in that futilest of human endeavours, the effort to read a riddle of which the only Œdipus is time.

At once all the imaginable causes that could have contributed to it danced before him and vanished. He told himself that Leilah’s disappearance might be an attempt at some hide-and-go-seek which shortly would end. But he knew her to be incapable of such nonsense. Immediately he decided that his servant was in error, and that she was then on the yacht. If not, then, clearly she had gone mad, or else ——

But there are certain hypotheses which certain intellects decline to stomach. Yet the letter from her father recurring to him, he did consider the possibility that she might have gone because of some secret of his bachelor life. Anything may be distorted. Unfolded by her father, these secrets, which in themselves were not very dark, might be made to look infernal, and could readily be so made by this man who was not only just the one to do it, but who would have an object in so doing. Always he had been inimical to Verplank,

and this, the abandoned bridegroom then felt, not on his account, but because of his father.

The latter, Effingham Verplank, had been a great catch, and a great beau. His charm had been myrrh and cassia—and nightshade, as well—to many women, among others to an aunt of Leilah, Hilda Hemingway, whose husband had called him out, called him abroad, rather, where the too charming Verplank waited until Hemingway fired, and then shot in the air. He considered that the gentlemanly thing to do. He was, perhaps, correct. But perhaps, too, it was hardly worth while to go abroad to do it. Yet, however that may be, the attitude of the injured husband, while no doubt equally correct, was less debonair. He obtained a divorce.

The matter created an enormous scandal, in the sedater days when New York society was a small and early family party and scandals were passing rare. But, like everything else, it was forgotten, even, and perhaps particularly by the parties directly concerned. Hemingway married again; the precarious Hilda married also; the too charming Verplank vacated the planet, and his widow went a great deal into the world.

This lady had accepted the scandal, as she had accepted many another, with a serenity that was really beautiful. But, then, her seductive husband had always seemed to her so perfectly irresistible, so created to conquer, that—as their son afterward found it necessary to explain—it no more occurred to her to sit in judgment on his victims, than it occurred to her to sit on him. With not only philosophic wisdom, but in the true spirit of Christian charity, she overlooked it all.

The culminant episode in the matter—the death of the volatile Verplank—took place at an hour when his son was too young to be more than aware that his father had been taken away in a box. Leilah was even less advanced. It was years before she learned of her aunt's delinquencies. When she did, that lady had also passed away, as had previously passed a child of hers, one that, perhaps, did not belong to her first husband, and, certainly not to her second, the result being that, in default of other heirs, she left a fortune to Leilah, whose mother had left her another.

When her mother died, Leilah was in the nursery. Her father, who thereafter abandoned her to servants and governesses, she seldom saw. When she did see him, he ignored her completely. It was a way he had. He ignored also and quite as completely the son of the deadly Verplank.

To make up for it, or it may be to make trouble, the boy's mother never regarded Leilah otherwise than with that smile of sweet approbation with which she gratified all the world—all the world, that is, save those only who were not in hers. Among the gratified were the Arlington girls, two beauties, of whom the elder, Violet, was Leilah's closest friend.

It was at Newport, at Violet's wedding to Silverstairs, a young Englishman who had followed her from Europe, and who at once took her back there; it was at this ceremony, in which Leilah participated as bridesmaid, and Verplank as best man, it was then that both became aware of a joint desire. It seemed to them that they were born to love each other, to love always, forever. Forever!—in a world where all things must end, and do. But the eagerness of it was upon them. Leilah wrote to her father. Verplank wrote to him also.

Matlack Ogston ignored Verplank's letter as invariably he had ignored Verplank. His daughter's he promptly returned. Across it was scrawled one word. That word was No.

Interests more commonplace had meanwhile transported Verplank from Newport to San Francisco. Informed of the veto, which to Leilah was an incentive and to him an affront, he had wired her to meet him at Coronado, this resort in Southern California which together they had been preparing to leave.

The night previous, on a yacht chartered at the Golden Gate, Verplank had arrived. It was by train, the next morning, that Leilah had come. The wedding followed. Before them lay a world of delight.

This was hardly an hour since. Now, like a bubble, abruptly that world had burst.

Yet why?

In that query was the riddle which impotently Verplank was trying to solve. With a clutch at a possible solution, he turned to his servant:

"Roberts, get a motor. If Mrs. Verplank is not on the yacht, I will take a special, and follow her."

"Yes, sir. Shall you wish me to go with you?"

"No, stay here until you hear from me. At any moment Mrs. Verplank may return."

But Leilah did not return. Nor did the special, in which Verplank followed, overtake her. The first intelligence of her that reached him was the announcement of her engagement to another man.

II

Table of Contents

In Paris, many moons later, an Englishman, Howard Tempest, looked in, at the Opéra, on his cousin, Camille de Joyeuse. This lady, connected by birth with Britannia's best, and, through her husband, with the Bourbons, delighted the eye, the ear, and the palate. In appearance, she suggested certain designs of Boucher; in colouring and in manner, the Pompadour. Admirable in these respects, she was admired also, for her gayety, her tireless smile, and her chef. She had one of the best cooks in Paris—that is to say, in the world. Her husband, the Duc de Joyeuse, harmonised very perfectly with her. He had a head, empty, but noble, an air vaguely Régence. A year younger than herself, Time had had the impertinence to whiten his hair. The duchess was forty-two. Those unaware of the fact fancied her twenty-eight. The error greatly gratified this lady, who, familiarly, was known as Muffins.

One evening in May, Tempest entered her box, saluted her, examined the house, and, as, in a crash of the orchestra, the curtain fell, seated himself, in response to a gesture, beside her.

Camille de Joyeuse turned to him, and with that smile of hers, said: "Do not fail to come on Sunday, Howard. There is to be a Madame Barouffska, whom I want you to meet. She was formerly a Mrs. Verplank. Barouffski is Number Two."

"Verplank! Barouffski! What barbarous names!" Tempest exclaimed. He had vivid red hair, violent blue eyes, and a great scarlet cicatrix that tore one side of his face. In spite

of the severity of his evening clothes, he looked rather barbarous himself. “What was she, a widow?”

“Yes, but with no tombstone to show. It appears that she was in love with Verplank for years, married him one minute and left him the next.”

Tempest stifled a yawn. “How extremely fastidious!”

“She ran away, got a divorce, met Barouffski and married him.”

“Very honourable of her, certainly. From what pond did you fish her?”

“The Silverstairs’. Violet Silverstairs is an American you know——”

“Know! I should say I did know. Though, if I did not, I would take my oath to it. It’s got so a fellow can’t stir without running into one of them. How does Louis like her?”

Louis was the duke.

The duchess displayed her beautiful false teeth. “Oddly enough, when he was in the States, he went hunting with her Number One.”

“In the Rockies?” Tempest, with sudden interest, inquired. “In the Dakotas?”

“I fancy so. It was a place called, let me see; yes, Long Island, I think. I remember, he said it was very jolly.”

Tempest tossed his red head. “Her Number Two, I suppose, is that chap I have seen at the Little Club. The Lord knows how he got there. He looks like a thimblerigger.”

The duchess raised her opera-glass. “Possibly. Nowadays, so many men do, don’t you think? There is Marie de Fresnoy with the Helley-Quetgens! You will have her next to you on Sunday, Howard. Do not lacerate her tender heart.”