

Presenting
Lily Mars

Booth
Tarkington

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THE WORLD DOES MOVE
WANTON MALLY WOMEN
YOUNG MRS. GREELEY

BOOTH TARKINGTON
PRESENTING LILY MARS

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TO
G. C. TYLER

PRESENTING LILY MARS

CHAPTER ONE

PEOPLE who have read “The Lost Theatre” by Owen Gilbert may recall his printed opinion that the heyday of the theatre and the best time to be young were in the days when the *dépôt* hack still struggled against the station taxicab and extinction. Intimate friends of Mr. Gilbert, reading this passage, have smiled, knowing that the celebrated gentleman was himself young in the favored period and guessing that he preferred a *dépôt* hack to a taxicab on the very day of his return to his native city for the visit that was to bring him his first acquaintance with Lily Mars.

The guess is accurate. Mr. Owen Gilbert, playwright, aged twenty-nine, comely, dark-eyed and of a reticent air, descended from the train that had borne him from New York to the heart of the midland plain; then, coming out of the station into September afternoon sunshine, he ignored the suggestions of several taxicab drivers and stepped into one of the two or three shabby old hacks that still competed with them.

The hackman, fat and red-faced, was pleased; a benevolent smile widened his dissipated old moustache. “Reckanize you, I guess,” he said. “Ain’t you the late Henry J. Gilbert of Gilbert and Company’s son, Owen? Thought so. Seen you many a time when you was growin’ up. I used to work for Foudray’s Livery and Undertaking, and I’ve drove you and your family I don’t know how often to funerals and parties when they wasn’t usin’ their own carriage. Guess you ’member my face, too, likely. Likely why you took my hack ’stead o’ one them automobile cabs.”

“Yes.”

The hackman sighed conversationally as he climbed to his seat. “Times all changin’. Goin’ to make a man scramble to git a livin’, it looks like. You rather have the top up?”

“No.”

“Thought not, account the nice warm fall weather.” He took up the reins and whip; the two flaccid old black horses walked a short distance, then conscientiously pushed themselves into a patient trot, and the hackman, turning his head a little for greater audibility, continued the conversation. “Ain’t seen you fer quite some time lately. Two or three years maybe. Ain’t been back here fer a good while, have you?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Seems like I heard somebody say you was livin’ in New York or Europe or somewheres nowadays. That right?”

“Yes.”

“Ain’t seen any your kinfolks all the time you been away?”

“Oh, yes. My mother comes to New York for a day or so sometimes.”

“I expect so.” The hackman, about to speak of his own beloved city, made wide gestures with his whip. “Well, sir, you’ll see big changes in this old burg, I guess. Bigger! Newhouse and Treadwell’s puttin’ up a ’leven-story building. Say the Chamber of Commerce is talkin’ about a skyscraper even higher’n that. Oh, we’re growin’! Say we’re goin’ to be ’way up over two-hundred thousand time o’ the next census. Guess you’ll find everything lookin’ natural up on Harrison Avenue, though, and all around through that neighborhood where your kin live. All them old fine big houses you’ll find them jest the same. Guess you ain’t found no place to live no better’n what we got here, have you?”

“No.”

“No, sir! Must feel mighty good to git back to God’s country when you’re able to!”

The old liveryman, pleased with himself, stopped talking and gave his attention to the guidance of his horses through a thickening traffic. His passenger, meanwhile, glancing with thoughtful eye at the thronged sidewalks of the “business section”, meditated upon an impression that to anybody fresh from New York, all these bustling honest people, their buildings and the broad irregular prospects of their streets must have an appearance of some rusticity. They had that appearance to him, a returned native; and, as it was his habit to observe professionally his own thoughts and sensations, he inquired of himself whether or not there was anything vivid enough in his feeling about the rusticity to be put into a play. He decided that there wasn’t, and then, annoyed by the persistence of his habit, “Good heavens!” he thought. “Can’t I even come home to see my mother without worrying at every tiny thing on earth to find if I can’t use it for the stage?”

The hack crossed a wide thoroughfare, climax spectacle of the city’s trade and tumultuous with people and vehicles; then, after another block, hoof-beats had a softer sound. The old hack-horses trotted now not upon asphalt but upon a more genially resonant pavement of cedar, and abruptly were beyond the crowded ways and in a quiet neighborhood of churches and old-fashioned houses. Farther on, they passed an open green square with a busily plashing fountain in the centre and benches where old men sat in revery, their beards upon their G. A. R. buttons, while along graveled paths nurses pushed baby-carriages and small children rode velocipedes and trundled hoops.

Beyond this, the wide sunny street seemed to wear a mildly prouder air; for now, with bordering shady sidewalks, it entered the purlieu of the city’s obvious grandees. Here, with simple enough architecture, yet a touch of Mansard, there was a spaciousness not lacking dignity; and the large brick houses, none of them new, rose from clipped green lawns and softened their outlines graciously among the foliage of tall trees. The hackman, driving placidly in the middle of the street, turned his head slightly to inquire, “Want me to drive up your driveway?”

“No; just let me out at the front gate.”

“Well, so-so—whoa up!”

The horses immediately stopped trotting, and, upon the signal of one slightly twitched rein, walked obliquely to the left and halted near the curbstone on the left side of the street, their noses in line with a horse-headed cast iron hitching post under a big elm. The

fat old hackman got down from his seat and glanced benevolently at the commodious stone-trimmed brick house of the Seventies, deep in its groomed lawn. "I guess you didn't need to tell me where to bring you," he said, smiling self-congratulation. "I'll carry them valises in fer you if you'd like me to."

The passenger rewarded the offer generously but carried the bags himself. He passed through the gateway of the tall iron fence, walked up the cement path, ascended white stone steps to the white stone verandah and pulled a bronze knob at the side of the carved walnut double front doors. A moment later a remote tinkling let him know that the bell at the end of the long wire was in operation; then there were faint sounds of movement within the house, and a middle-aged stout neat colored woman opened the door.

"Yes, suh, Mist' Owen," she said amiably. "I spectin' you."

"You were?" He was astonished. "Expecting me, Martha? Why, no; I'm a surprise. I wrote my mother I'd be here the last of next week."

"No, suh; she ain't spectin' you. I said I was. She ain't home an' nobody wasn't spectin' you till couple minutes ago when telephome rung an' says they want to speak to you. 'No, suh,' I says. 'Mist' Owen Gilbert in New York,' I says. 'No, ma'am, he ain't either,' telephome say. 'He right in this city,' telephome say. 'Ef he ain't home right now he goin' be in ve'y few minutes. You please ask him call number five-hundud soon's he git there,' it tell me."

"All right, Martha," Gilbert said, coming into the ample hallway that bisected the forward part of the house. "Where's my mother?"

"She out payin' calls. Nelson he drivin' her, so please res' them valises right on the flo' until they git back an' Nelson carry 'em to your room fer you. Your mamma goin' be mighty tickle' see you here when she git home from payin' them calls. Telephome on the wall behine stairway same's it use' to were, Mist' Owen. Ev'rything stay jes' the same in this house year in, year out, Mist' Owen."

Gilbert was already sure of that. At his left the doors stood open into the "reception room" whither formal callers had been shown, when they came, throughout his boyhood and youth. The stiff, gilded chairs and the brown velvet sofa were in their old accustomed places, and the oval portrait of his grandfather—side-burns, wavy black hair, velvet coat collar and all—hung coldly over the white marble mantelpiece where it had been in the grandson's babyhood. Revealed by open double doors on the other side of the hall was the "library", with the ponderous black grand piano near the bay-window. Fresh from New York he felt the size of this big room, like the width of the city's streets, as something astonishing; yet here, under that high, high ceiling, he had spent hours enough to be counted into years. Here were the same old rows of books on the same old polished brown shelves, and, on the walls above, the same old steel engravings of Lincoln and his Cabinet, of Anthony and Cleopatra, and of Rebecca and Ivanhoe, the same old watercolors of Amalfi, the Grand Canal and Pisa's tower. Upon the same old gayly floral Brussels carpet stood the same old Eastlake sofas and the same comfortable, unpleasantly carved old rosewood chairs in their old places precisely; and everything, including the almost imperceptible same old smell of cleanness, emanated to the young playwright the touching and reproachful eloquence of old familiar things half forgotten in long absence.

He went to the telephone instrument that was screwed to the yellow-papered wall

behind the wide black-walnut staircase, rang the bell, and, after a few moments of waiting, rang again, then gave to a languidly responsive voice the number five-hundred. Two or three minutes later, in reply to another languid voice, he mentioned his name, said that five-hundred had called him and was asked to wait. Then a brisker voice, a man's, said, "This is the Gazette. We heard from New York you'd be here to-day and I figured out you'd most likely get in on the four-twelve. We picked up a story you were intending to open a new play here under Adler and Company's management—going to use your own home town to 'try it on the dog' before opening in New York, what? I s'pose you know our old burg here takes quite some interest in your being a home town boy that's making his way in the world and's had successes on the New York stage. So if it's a fact you're going to put a play on here for its first première it'll be quite an event and we'd like to make a feature of it. Anything in it?"

"No. That is—" Gilbert hesitated; then explained. "It's true Adler and Company are going to put on a new play of mine; but it's not to open here. Probably some rehearsing will be done here; that's all."

"Rehearse here? Well, that sounds interesting," the voice returned ingratiatingly. "What's the name of your new play, Mr. Gilbert, and what's it about?"

"It's called 'Catalpa House' and it's about old times on the Mississippi River."

"Romantic and all that?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Good enough," the voice said. "How does it happen you're going to rehearse it here instead of in New York, Mr. Gilbert?"

"There'll be only a week of rehearsing here—week after next. Adler and Company's 'Skylark' will be playing here that week. It has quite a small cast and they're all engaged for my play, which requires a few more people; but they'll be brought here with the 'Skylark' company for rehearsal, because the Adler firm means to put my piece on rather soon."

"I see," the voice said. "The 'Skylark' company'll be rehearsing your play in its off hours. Very good. How about yourself, Mr. Gilbert? You're combining pleasure with business, I take it, and getting in a little visit with your relations here before your work on rehearsals begins?"

"Yes."

"Let's see, now, Mr. Gilbert; you've had three very successful plays up to the present, haven't you?"

"No. Only one. I've had only three plays produced altogether."

"Is that so?" the voice from the telephone said sympathetically. "But your last was a big hit, wasn't it?"

"No; not even a small one."

"Is that so? Well, better luck with this next one. I guess that's all, Mr. Gilbert; I'll probably be calling you up again for something on your rehearsals when the 'Skylark' company gets here. Thank you for the information, and good day."

Gilbert went out to the verandah and looked contemplatively at one of its wicker chairs, but did not sit down, for his ear caught a sound from a little distance down the

street—conglomerate hoof-beats that seemed familiar. “Jeff and Joey,” he said, half aloud. “It couldn’t be any other horses in the world!”

Then, dappled with disks of sunshine beneath the Gothic shade trees, there came trotting down the middle of the street his mother’s two fat bay steeds, drawing the black and shiny “family carriage” and driven by a proud-looking thin old black man undoubtedly certain of the lofty effect of his white cotton gloves, his glistening high white collar and ministerial white lawn necktie. Behind him, a graceful shape in the graceful vehicle, sat a dark haired lady of fifty in wine-colored silk and white lace. The top of the carriage was down, and in one white-gloved hand she held the coral handle of the white silk parasol that kept sunlight from her plumed black hat; her other hand, in her lap, negligently clasped an ivory card-case carved in Chinese filigree. Already this was a picture beginning to be a little old-fashioned, the adopted New Yorker on the white stone verandah thought, and liked it all the more for that. The midland lady, returning in style from “paying calls”—formal calls accumulated for months against her precisely kept accounts of social credits—seemed the eloquent symbol of a whole historical period now perhaps about to vanish.

Could such a picture and its significance be expressed in the theatre, he wondered. No; even if he went to the trouble and expense (expense for the manager) of putting an actress in wine-colored silk into just such a carriage, with just such a coachman as old Nelson, and just such fat, brisk bay horses, and should place the whole equipage upon the resounding boards of the stage, the audience might be too thick-headed. “Doubt if they’d get it,” he murmured. However, he wasn’t sure, and reminded himself that almost impossible things could be made into theatrical effects. Hadn’t Augustus Thomas used actual perfumes in the theatre to transport audiences into the blossoming sweetness of Alabama springtime? “I’d put the driveway gates extreme left, with a shrubbery and foliage back-drop,” Gilbert thought, and then, catching himself at his tricks again, felt shame. “Nice of me, isn’t it? Haven’t seen my mother for six months and at sight of her begin trying to dramatize her!”

But the carriage was now on the driveway, his mother saw him, and, as the expression of her handsome face changed from absent placidity to startled brightest happiness, “No,” he thought. “Couldn’t get that out of any actress on Adler and Company’s lists!”

The mutual greeting, caressive and gently exclamatory, brought them all the way from the driveway stone mounting-block to the library, where each found further delight in the other’s “looking so well” and the son explained his premature arrival. “There really isn’t anything more for me to do about the new play until the ‘Skylark’ company gets here and I begin watching rehearsals. It just struck me yesterday rather suddenly that if I didn’t give myself a recess from ‘theatrical atmosphere’ I’d go crazy, and in all the world there isn’t anything more untheatrical than home and you, Mother; so I made a hansom cab dash for the train.”

Mrs. Gilbert laughed. “That’s funny talk from anybody who was as wild to be in the ‘theatrical atmosphere’ as you were a few years ago, Owen.”

“Oh, I know, I know! Of course the thing’s my life; but, Mother, I’ve got so soaked with it that I can’t even breathe except in what’s odiously called ‘terms of the theatre’. I’m getting to be so lost to life and drowned in theatre I’m like Barrie’s journalist who’d become so horribly nothing else that he knew, himself, he’d get material for a paragraph

out of his own mother's funeral!"

Mrs. Gilbert wasn't alarmed; she laughed again and said, "You'd have a hard time to get a play out of mine, dear, and besides, it won't be ready for a long, long time. For me I'm afraid the main thing is that you're here, no matter what brought you." But her glance, thus reminded, went gently to two silver-framed photographs upon the piano. "We could drive out to the cemetery to-morrow morning with some flowers, do you think? I'd like you to see how nice the lot looks—it's so lovely out there—and——"

"Yes; of course, dear Mother."

"Then in the afternoon," she went on musingly, "of course we'll have to call on your Aunt Fanny and your poor old Uncle Harry and the Lord and Pennington cousins and all the rest of 'em. I suppose I'd better ask Cousin Jenny and the Whitlocks and some more in for dinner to-morrow evening. They're all so genuinely interested in your career, Owen, and——" She stopped speaking, looked thoughtful for a moment, and said, "Oh, that reminds me!"

"Of what, Mother?"

"There's a special reason I'm glad you'll have a little time here before your theatrical people arrive and begin their rehearsing. As a matter of fact, I've just come from their house. I was lucky and found a lot of people out this afternoon, so I had time and stopped in there on my way home."

"You stopped in where?" her son asked, and laughed affectionately at the characteristic, unconscious cart-before-the-horse method of narrative just displayed to him. Yet, before she answered, he had that rather infrequent sensation commonly described as the memory of a previous incarnation; it seemed to him that long ago he and his mother had said to each other what they were saying now and that he ought to remember, as it were, what she was going to say next. Moreover, in addition to this disturbing sense of echoing the past, he had a feeling that what she was about to say was portentous, that it was to prove of great moment to himself and that these very seconds before she spoke were the final ones before the rising of the curtain to begin a dramatic period in his life. "Could I use this?" he thought. "Young man feeling it's all happened before and having a premonition of something important and dangerous going to happen and—Oh, dear! There I go again! Shame on me!"

He broke off the thought despairingly, and, with a disappointed sense of anticlimax, looked plaintively at his mother as she said, "At that poor little place where they're living now. Such a beautiful woman she used to be, poor Mrs. Mars! They'd heard you were coming home and wrote me a note to ask about it. Really, Owen, I never knew a young girl who showed a greater talent for the stage."

They were still standing; but, at this, Owen Gilbert sat down heavily. "Mother! It's what I came home to get away from, and, of all things on earth, talented young girls who want to go on the stage! Besides, *I* can't put anybody on the stage; I'm only a playwright. Who is it?"

Mrs. Gilbert looked surprised. "Why, I just told you! You remember the Mars family, Owen."

"No, I don't."

"Why, yes, you do! All the time you were a little boy they lived in that big brown

brick house with the Mansard roof where the Hubbards do now, with a fountain in the front yard, only Mr. Hubbard's had the fountain taken out. They only had one child then and you used to play with him. Surely you remember little Willie Mars and his mother and father, too."

"Oh, vaguely, vaguely," the young man admitted. "What about Willie Mars? Seems to me I recall he died when he was a child."

"He did. I'm talking about the survivors! Really, they're in a pretty distressing situation, Owen. Mr. Mars failed in the Panic while you were in college. They dropped out of everything and he died, and Mrs. Mars and the two little girls that came after Willie's death were left with scarcely anything."

"I see, Mother, you want me to——"

"No!" Mrs. Gilbert exclaimed. "Not money! About that, Mrs. Mars has always had the pride of Satan. I tried once to lend her a little money myself in a tactful way; but she said that if I wished I could use it to bury her—while she lived she wasn't an object of charity! Finally she got something to do in the city library, and that kept them going; but she fell downstairs and hurt her spine and now she's a helpless invalid. I just don't know how they have lived, except that Clara, the older daughter, has been clerking in Vance's Dry Goods Store and that brings in a little something, I suppose. The younger daughter had to leave high school last winter without graduating, because Mrs. Mars can't do anything at all for herself and of course couldn't be left alone. It's been a constant sacrifice for both those poor girls, and if they hadn't been upheld by their absolute conviction that the younger one's a genius I don't know what they'd have done."

"A genius?" the young man asked, and added apprehensively, "Mother, if you don't mind I believe I'd rather not hear much about the kind of genius she is."

"Would you, poor lamb?" Mrs. Gilbert laughed, and again became solicitous. "Of course I could see they'd been looking forward desperately to your coming home, Owen—it's just life or death to them, and oh, I do hope you'll try your best to do something for them, dear! They feel if you could just get her started! Of course you can't do it the first day or two; but after you've got a little rested and seen all the relatives—I told them that of course you'll be glad to hear her recite and——"

"Recite?" Gilbert said. "Recite! Oh, Mother! Oh, my goodness! What's her name?"

"Owen! I've just been telling you! Lily Mars!"

CHAPTER TWO

IN the dusty little cross-street, far from Harrison Avenue, Gilbert stepped down from his mother's carriage, said ruefully to the proud black driver, "I hope I'll not keep you waiting long, Nelson", crossed the uneven brick sidewalk and entered the gate of the grey picket fence. The "double frame" house, close before him, stood in a small yard of mangy patches of grass, and the twin half-glass front doors of the dwelling were within ten feet of the sidewalk. Between these doors there was nothing to choose; but he turned the brass handle set into the middle of the one to the right and evoked a metallic clatter from just within.

A woman's voice a little tremulously called, "Please come in!"

There was neither vestibule nor hallway; he stepped straight into a brown room and saw first an invalid gentlewoman (so he defined her) lying upon a sofa beside the room's one window. Her hair, carefully coiled high in an extinct fashion, was little less white than the pillow supporting her head; but her thin eyebrows were black over sunken bright eyes, and the pallid, fine face was one Du Maurier would have drawn, the caller fancied, for a dying great lady's. To find such a face in the cheap ugliness of this room was to go beyond pathos and touch the grotesque, he thought. There was a repulsive little black fireplace, with paper flowers in two china vases on the mantel shelf, and Gilbert fastidiously suspected that the flowers, and the mantel shelf itself, were dusty.

"Mrs. Mars?" he began. "I'm——"

"You're Owen Gilbert, of course," the invalid said, with a perceptible eagerness. "I'm sure you couldn't think I've forgotten you, and your mother's been kind enough to say you remember me. Lily'll be down right away. She saw you drive up through the window and ran upstairs to see if her nose was shiny, I'm afraid. The poor thing's so terribly excited about your coming, and of course she's temperamental and feels she's got one of her off days and won't be at her best. Naturally, with so much depending on it, she's terribly afraid of the impression she'll make on you. You'll sit down, won't you?"

Somewhat heartsick, he sat in a rocking-chair, facing Mrs. Mars. Her phrase "so much depending on it" dismayed him and conscientiously he felt he must enlighten her. "I'm afraid I can't let you think that anything of importance could depend on me."

"Ah, you mustn't be modest!" she protested. "Of course we know all about the splendid career you're having and——"

“My dear Mrs. Mars!” Gilbert said compassionately. “I’m not modest. I’m only explaining that though you can count on my help I haven’t the powers I’m afraid you imagine. A few playwrights much better established than I am select the casts for their plays and are sometimes able to put young people of talent on the stage; but I don’t possess that importance. I’ve had one fair success and two failures and——”

“Oh, but everybody knows the great Adler and Company are going to put on your new play; it’s been announced in our papers time and again.” Mrs. Mars evidently still thought him merely modest. “If there could just be a good part in it for Lily, or if that isn’t possible, because of course we realize she’s just a beginner, why, even a rather small one! Your dear mother said she was sure——”

“I’m afraid she did,” Gilbert said. “I’m afraid she’s always been given to overestimating an only son. For that matter, I’m afraid I’ve had to learn, myself, that a new playwright, next to a new actor, is generally treated as the most negligible person about a theatre. Compared to a stage-hand, he’s a nonentity. He’s pleased if the very doorman speaks to him with a little condescending familiarity.”

Mrs. Mars, unimpressed, laughed gently. “Your dear mother says you’ve always underrated yourself, and I can well believe her!” Abruptly serious, she looked at him with a fervid anxiety. “If there weren’t just the right part for Lily in this new play of yours, couldn’t a good one be written into it? I’ve read of such things being done, especially when some new genius is being discovered and——” She lifted a thin hand from the old white shawl that covered her; she touched her pallid lips admonishingly. “Sh! You mustn’t tell her I said this, because it was something she wanted to suggest to you, herself, and she thought she could do it better. She’s coming!”

Footsteps were heard upon an uncarpeted stairway, and Owen Gilbert’s low spirits sank lower as an inner door opened and Lily Mars came into the room.

He rose, giving her a quick glance from eyes usually accurate in their estimations of people. Even to his own hearing, his greeting sounded plaintive, for his first impression of her was not favorable, and something startlingly personal and demanding in her reciprocal first glance at him shot into him a premonition that she was going to be a serious nuisance to him. “A girl in bad taste” was his too sweeping first thought; then he added, “Rather unusual type of good looks, though—and going to use them on me her darnedest!”

Within a moment, adding more to his observation, he somewhat modified his feeling of protest. Her brilliant eyes, like her mother’s, were warm hazel under black eyebrows; her hair was the deep tan of an oak leaf in late autumn. Altogether, at second glance, her features were “really not uninteresting” he thought, and he immediately admitted that her figure had a suave young symmetry out of the common. Moreover, he had never found himself in the presence of any person more exquisitely possessed of the very peach-bloom of youth, and this bloom and the lovely figure, too, were almost flagrantly revealed by the bad taste; for what she wore was a directoire ball gown of old yellow satin easily guessed to be a recently made-over relic of Mrs. Mars’s better days. Worst of all, it had probably been made over hurriedly for this very encounter and for the ampler display of the aspirant’s shapeliness, and, to the somewhat frayed, misplaced elegance of the costume, there had been added some jingling cheap bracelets and a necklace of false pearls execrably oversized.

She gave his hand a hasty but feverish clasp; then hurried at once to her mother and

began to make a tender little fuss over her, smoothing the pillow, Mrs. Mars's cheeks and the adjacent air. "Muddie, Muddie, Muddie!" she said, and the peculiar quality of her voice had its effect upon the caller in spite of his perception that it was intended to have an effect upon him. It was a slender voice yet a rich one and of a noticeable elasticity; even in the three utterances of the pet name it played up and down over a dozen tones, rang bell-like upon some of them, trembled either touchingly or playfully upon others, then sank to a husky gentle sweetness barely audible. "Muddie's been moving her head too much, to talk. Muddie knows she mustn't, mustn't!" She turned toward Gilbert almost tragically and flung out her slender pretty arms in a jingling gesture of appeal. "Ah, you tell her she mustn't! Whenever she moves her head it's likely to jar her spine, and she mustn't, she mustn't! We can't do anything with her; she's so reckless. If *you'd* tell her she must be careful I think she would!" But without waiting for a response she sank gracefully upon a stool beside the sofa and said cozily, "Now, let's all sit down and talk things over." She leaned back against her mother, crossed her knees with an elaboration that gave one of them to view and allowed it to remain there, then inquired, "What day does the company get here?"

"The company?" Gilbert said blankly, not at once comprehending. "The com——"

"*Your* company," she explained indulgently and too flatteringly. "This 'Skylark' company that's to begin rehearsing your play. What day will rehearsals commence?"

"Oh, that," he murmured, and replied with some coldness, "Possibly next Sunday."

"Five days!" She jumped up, smiling. "We have five days! What I'd like to do, I'd take your manuscript and learn whichever one of the women's parts you'd want me to by heart and then I'd play it for you; but we can take that up later. Just now I want to show you——" She turned toward her mother. "Muddie, which'll I do first? The balcony scene, don't you think?" She took a book from a battered little Eastlake table, gave it to her mother and smiled radiantly upon Gilbert. "Don't you adore the balcony scene? You probably know it by heart, yourself—I mean from *Romeo and Juliet*. Ah, if I ever get a chance to play *Juliet*! I mean in *New York*! Of course you think I'm perfectly crazy! Muddie, have you found the cue for me?"

Then, while Mrs. Mars read a dozen words from the book, her daughter advanced a dramatic step toward Gilbert, who sat helplessly in the rocking-chair before her; she clasped her hands against her cheek, looked upward tensely, became rigid in this attitude and began to speak in a high-pitched, wailing voice.

*"O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name. . ."*

She went on with the scene, changing the wailing voice to a startled one, then sinking it to caressive murmurs; altering her posture, too, almost constantly, and becoming so flutteringly gesticulative that the playwright shivered internally, thinking of what a stage director would say (if he could speak) to a performer so much too eloquently in motion. Obviously, she was graceful, knew it and knew, too, how every shifting glimmer of the old satin added another hint of the gracefulness beneath it. Gilbert had no doubt that every one of the multitude of movements had been practised before a mirror; but, for a theatre become as nearly gestureless as the new school of stage directors could make it, such a

volubility of pantomimic accompaniment was a disqualification. Too much expression was worse than too little, and overstatement had almost been banished from the stage; understatement was now the fashion. She played the scene through to the bitter end (he thought an audience would have been bitter) and he said to himself that she was worse than he had expected. Then she stopped and looked at him, and for some reason he decided that she was just the least bit better than he had expected.

She was flushed with exertion; the color glowing in her cheeks became her, and he observed with a slightly increased interest that her eyes could be rather dazzling. "There!" she said. "That's my Juliet!"

"I see," the embarrassed young man returned. "Ah—I'm glad you've learned not to use the half-gestures of the amateur. That's a very good sign. Nearly all amateurs begin gestures and then get too self-conscious to finish them; they just flop their arms a little way out from their sides and then give it up. It's quite an advantage that you're already beyond that phase. But perhaps—ah——"

Mrs. Mars intervened. "Amateurs! There's never been the slightest amateurishness about Lily's dramatic work—not from the time she first began to recite, when she was only five years old. She's always used the most natural, expressive gestures I've ever seen. Dr. Gordon, our family physician, is a great lover of the stage—he hardly ever misses any play that comes to town—and he's seen Mary Anderson's Juliet and Julia Marlowe's, and he declares he likes Lily's better." She laughed deprecatingly. "Of course he's an old friend of the family and prejudiced, but that's what he says, and he really does know the stage."

"From A to Z!" Lily added. "There've been times when if it hadn't been for Dr. Gordon I'd have given the whole thing up. Oh, yes, I get awfully down sometimes. If it hadn't been for Dr. Gordon's faith in me——" She painted the catastrophe with a gesture of falling hands, then was blithe. "What do you think I'd better show him next, Mother? Wait, I know! Lady Macbeth—the sleep-walking scene."

"Or else 'Roger and I,'" Mrs. Mars suggested, and explained eagerly to Gilbert, "I think 'Roger and I' and Lady Macbeth are almost the finest things she does, and they show her range so wonderfully, I think—such different kinds of emotion. Suppose you do 'Roger and I' first and then Lady Macbeth, Lily."

Lily did "Roger and I" first and then she did Lady Macbeth. Gilbert, conscious all the time of the mother's anxious gaze upon him, sat in pain, engaged in a continual struggle to prevent his emotional opinion of the performance from manifesting itself dreadfully upon his countenance. He had selfish unfilial thoughts reproachful of his mother for putting him in this impossible position—when he'd come home for change and rest! Lily's "Roger and I" was pseudo-pathos straight out of a School of Elocution; but Lady Macbeth, ranted at him at close quarters in that depressing small room, was sheer nightmare.

"Ah—very nice," he said in a sickly voice when she finished. "That is, I mean——" He stopped himself and repeated the two words in almost a whisper. "Very nice."

The invalid upon the sofa pathetically mistook his vocal inadequacy for the hush of appreciation. "That was magnificent, Lily! There's only one word for it—magnificent! You never did it better in your life!"

"No," Lily said judicially. "I did it better that night at the Auxiliary Supper. Anyhow, I

did 'Roger and I' better that night, Mother. I'm not at my best to-day and I know it, myself. I can always feel it. There are times when I absolutely know I've *got* it, and there are other times when I can hear myself missing little shades of meaning. Other people mightn't realize it; but *I* know!" She shook her head prettily in gloom, then clasped her hands impulsively. "Oh, Mother! Now shall I show him my dance?"

CHAPTER THREE

IF the unhappy young playwright in the rocking-chair could have spoken his mind he would have said, "For God's sake, no!" and he had not infrequently heard managers and stage directors speak with that much frankness; but he had been brought up to be a gentleman, couldn't get over it, and what he whispered was, "Interesting!"

"It's an interpretive dance I've created, myself," Lily explained. "Of course there isn't room for it here; but I can give you an idea of the movements. It's the joy of mankind in the springtime throughout all the ages. It begins with the savages and how they expressed themselves about the coming of the flowers and birds and bees, and then takes up how the nuns and monks hailed the going of winter in the middle ages, and then there's the English peasants' Maypole—folk-dancing, you know—then part of a minuet to show how people felt about it in Colonial times, and then just a touch of Cake Walk for modern expression, and it ends with my conception of the spring dancing of the future. I'll have to hum the accompaniment."

He produced a sound. "Interesting."

She looked upward mystically, extended her arms wide, then slowly brought her small hands together with a little slap. She did this several times, chanting, "Tum! Tum! Tum! Bom! Bom! Bom!" She glanced down at him and explained confidentially, "Tom-toms, you know." Then she hummed hoarsely, intending savage rhythms, and began to dance—principally with her shoulders.

She left in him no doubt of their graceful flexibility; but presently let them droop, and, to suggest a mediæval piety, made the sign of the cross upon her breast and forehead, hummed "Beulah Land" solemnly, and, with palms together prayerfully before her, walked a few slow steps forward and back several times. Then, with a startling generosity, she picked up her yellow satin skirt, held it high and began to skip round and round Gilbert's rocking-chair, singing in a joyous sweet voice "Ye lads and lassies on the green";—the incredulous young man could not but conclude that he represented a Maypole. After that, she trod minuetish measures recognizably, did Cake Walk steps flamboyantly, singing "Dinah, de moon am shinin'"; then, looking rapt, stood with her feet together and made fantastic gestures with her arms, the dancing of the future presumably. Finally, blushing resplendently but with downcast eyes, she sank to the floor in a deep curtsey close before the visitor.

“Bravo! Bravo, Lily!” Mrs. Mars cried tremulously from her sofa, and began to clap her fragile white hands.

Lily sprang up from the curtsey, rushed to her, caught the applauding hands and held them. “Muddie! Muddie, you mustn’t! You mustn’t jar! You mustn’t——”

“I just couldn’t help it! You were magnificent, Lily!” The mother appealed to Gilbert pleadingly. “Wasn’t she magnificent, Owen? You’ll let me call you Owen because I knew you when you were a little boy? Really and truly don’t you think she was magnificent?”

“Ah——” he began; but was spared a dishonest response. The front door was opened without prelude and a rather shabby boy of about eighteen walked brusquely into the room. A commonplace of lower-middle origin he was, in the instant classifying of the playwright, who recorded him as of the type “high school boy” and was somewhat astonished to see so bitter a sternness upon so youthful a brow. Lily was not pleased with the interruption.

“I can’t bother with you now, Charlie,” she said coldly. “Mr. Gilbert, this is Mr. Charlie Bright. We’re busy, Charlie!”

Young Mr. Bright remained where he was, in the centre of the room, looked fiercely from her to the surprised caller and then with increased anger back at her. “I see you are!” he said in a husky voice. “I know what kind of business it is, too! My mother told me it was going to happen, after she was here to see your mother yesterday. Mrs. Mars, are you going to let this thing go on? Are you going to lie there calmly and let your daughter’s life get wrecked the way it’s going to be if she——”

“You go straight out of that door!” Lily said in a low voice. “Go straight out of that door!”

“I won’t! I won’t go out of that door or any other door till I’ve done my duty. Do you s’pose I don’t know who this man is and what he’s here for?”

“You go straight out of that——”

“I won’t!” The boy turned rudely upon Gilbert. “You see here! You can’t come here and take this girl away into all that life of false glitter and dissipation without having a counting with me first! She’s just the same as engaged to be married to me——”

“What!” Lily shouted out a contemptuous laughter. “Of all the crazy insinuations! Why, you ought to be taken straight to the insane asylum!” She stopped laughing and appealed vehemently to her mother. “Mother, tell Mr. Gilbert you know it’s absolutely and utterly false! Tell Mr. Gilbert I never——”

“You did!” Charlie Bright interrupted. “You just as good as did! I’ve considered myself the same as engaged to you ever since what you said when we were watching the fireworks Fourth o’ July night. If you think I’m going to stand idly by and see this man lure you into the life of the stage, where your whole personality would be pulled down to a mere puppet for everybody that could pay fifty cents for a ticket to laugh and sneer at——”

“March straight out!” Lily cried. “You little idiot, how dare you presume to interfere in my——”

“You call it interference from—from the man you’re engaged to?”

“I’m no more engaged to you than I am to the man in the moon or to——”

“Or to F. Munson Lang?” the boy asked, with the air of one who delivers the stroke that kills. “How about F. Munson Lang? Doesn’t he kind of think he’s engaged to you, too, Lily, if he could only get a divorce from his wife and three children?”

“You——” Lily’s breast heaved with a tumultuous breathing. She pointed imperiously at the door. “You slanderer, associating my name with a married man’s! You see that door?”

“Me?” the boy cried. “Didn’t you tell me yourself Mrs. F. Munson Lang was so jealous of you you were scared of her? Look at the way you behave! Didn’t you get about half the men in our class mashed on you, all at the same time? You know you did! Look what you did to me and Minnie Bush. You knew Min and I were practic’ly engaged; but you went ahead and got me mashed on you, the way you do and——”

“I didn’t! Minnie Bush is my best friend and I tried my best to keep you loyal to her. I ——”

“You did?” young Charlie interrupted, with laughter as biting as he knew how to make it. “Min told my sister Fanny I’ve practic’ly ruined her life because how could she ever look at anybody else after me? She and everybody else knows it’s all on account of you! Then here now you just give us all the la-de-da because this man wants to put you on the stage, with all its tinsel and immorality, and you expect me to stand idly by with folded hands and——”

“You’re wrong!” Lily drew herself up grandly, threw back her head and spoke in a voice genuinely indignant yet of such a richness that the annoyed Gilbert suspected her of enjoying herself; indeed he was almost certain she was glad to make him a spectator of this scene that he felt might well have been seriously mortifying to her. “You’re wrong! I expect you to march out of that door!” Again she pointed to it regally. “Go!”

Charlie remained. “Everybody knows you always been stage-struck!” he said, and added passionately, “Just look at you now! I didn’t think I’d ever see you as low in the scale as this—exposing yourself dressed like that to an utter stranger, while he sits here and figures out just how many dollars and cents he’s going to make out of selling your looks on the stage to——”

The invalid on the sofa contrived to interrupt him. “That will do, Charlie,” she said quietly. “Your mother’s coming in this evening and I’ll tell her that when you’ve apologized to Lily and asked her to apologize for you to Mr. Gilbert I’ll think whether it’s best for me ever to allow you to come here again. You can’t stay now.”

“I can’t? Why, look here, Mrs. Mars——”

“No. That’s all, Charlie.”

The boy’s excitement departed out of him; his chest deflated and his shoulders drooped in gloom. “Oh—Gee,” he murmured in lamentable anticlimax, and turned toward the door. He had not reached it when it was opened and a thin and pallid blonde girl a little older than Lily came in.

Gilbert perceived that she was the older sister, the one who somehow meagrely supported the three of them by working at Vance’s. She was like Lily as a withering rosebud is like a fresh one. Lily was almost violently vivid; already Gilbert felt he had never in his life met anyone of such vividness, and this quality, which he knew not how otherwise to express, was lacking in the sister, as was Lily’s color, her delicate shapeliness

and a look she had of being incomparably more alive than other people. Clara Mars, not yet twenty-one, seemed dried, lifeless and hard driven; her pallor, moreover, as she came into the room, was noticeable and she walked limpingly.

At sight of her, the invalid and Lily uttered little outcries of surprise and solicitude; Lily also, scrupulous upon etiquette, pronounced her sister's name and Gilbert's in a presentation that covered young Mr. Bright's muttering, inglorious withdrawal from the house. "Nothing to worry about; I'm not dismissed," Clara explained, as she went lamely to the inner door of the room. "They just let me off for the rest of the afternoon; that's all. I'm all right."

"You didn't——" Mrs. Mars hesitated pathetically. "You didn't—have another fainting spell from standing so many hours?"

"No; not quite," Clara said wanly. "I don't know why it takes me so long to get used to it. There are girls down there that haven't been at it nearly as long as I have and they can stand all day without even seeming tired. I don't think it happens to me as often as it used to, Mother. Please sit down again, Mr. Gilbert. I guess—I guess if you'll excuse me perhaps I'd better go and lie down." She gave her sister an affectionate smile and forestalled Lily's impulsive movement to accompany her. "No, I don't need anything, Lily; I'll be perfectly all right in an hour or two. I know Mr. Gilbert's already seen what a wonderful actress you are; but I wish I could tell him what a darling sister you are!"

"Yes, and daughter," Mrs. Mars murmured, as Clara shut the door. The mother lay with eyes closed—closed tragically, it seemed to Gilbert—while Clara could be heard slowly ascending the uncarpeted stairway, coughing hard as she went. "They're both wonderful daughters to me, Owen. I've had to let them sacrifice their youth to me. I haven't seemed to have any choice but just to lie here and see their beautiful young lives wasted on me."

"Wasted!" Lily, with a lovely movement, flung herself upon one knee beside the sofa and clasped one of her mother's hands in both of hers. "Ah, you precious Muddie, do you think anything's wasted if it could be the least use in the world to you?"

Mrs. Mars's eyes opened, releasing great crystal drops upon her cheeks. "You see, Owen?" she asked. "You see what Lily's genius means to us? You see what our hopes in it must be?"

He saw indeed, and, in despair of what such wild hopes must lead to, again inwardly reproached his mother for letting him in for such an afternoon. Lily Mars was pretty; she was even what people call "striking" and he recognized the fact that she had exquisite and even beautiful moments—but, as a professional actress, "impossible." That was the only word he found for her, though no word at all was needed, because even if she had been an untrained young Bernhardt or Terry or Marlowe he had no power to put her upon the stage. More, he knew what George Hurley would say to him—or, rather, roar at him—in response to any proposal for an exhibition of aspiring "local talent" or even in response to a suggestion that a young lady desirous of going on the stage be presented for brief inspection and words of counsel. Hurley was the junior partner in the firm of Adler and Company and would come with the "Skylark" people to rehearse "Catalpa House" the next week; he was the most uneven-tempered man in the world, the busiest, ruinously eloquent in his furies and always furious with anything that wasted a moment of his time. If he could by any means be brought to let Lily waste a moment of it he would inevitably

destroy the hope that sustained these piteous women. "You learn to cook!" he would say, red-faced with indignation. "You learn to sew! You stay home and wash dishes! Get married!"

Gilbert, wrung with sympathy for Mrs. Mars and for the wan daughter, Clara, felt that there was nothing for it but to let them live on in their impossible hope. He had not the same feeling for Lily that he had for them; she roused in him not dislike at all, but a sense of protest—perhaps because he already felt her as a burden upon him and a little no doubt because of his continued suspicion that she was in some hidden way enjoying herself still, even when she gently and tenderly wiped her mother's cheeks with a handkerchief and then hurriedly brushed the handkerchief over her own eyes.

"Dear Mrs. Mars," he said, rising, "I'll do everything on earth I can, though I warn you not to count too much on my being able to accomplish what I'm afraid you think I could if I wished to. I assure you I do wish to give your daughter her opportunity."

But to his dismay Lily jumped up, radiant, and, what was worse, he saw that the mother was instantly radiant, too. "Oh, you heavenly angel!" Lily cried. "You lamb!" She seized his hands. "Oh, after all this long, long waiting and struggle—to get a hearing and to have it turn out like this!" She whirled from him to her mother. "Muddie! Muddie! Muddie! Can you believe it's actually happened at last? Isn't he an angel of a man, Muddie, to do this for me when he's only heard me once?"

"I think he is," Mrs. Mars said. "Owen, I know we owe it to the impression Lily's talent has made on you; but if you could know what gratitude——"

"No, no!" he protested unhappily. "I'm afraid you don't understand at all. You're mistaking the deed for the will. I——"

"And we'll just go on mistaking it!" Lily assured him, beaming upon him. She stepped close to him. "Oh, you shower golden happiness upon me! This is the most thrilling moment in my whole life—to think I've won your belief in my acting so instantly! I have the strangest, divinest feeling that this is the beginning of a great friendship—or something!" She laughed excitedly. "Oh, do you know, before you came this afternoon I was perfectly horribly frightened of you! I was! Since the world began, I don't believe any person was so afraid of what some other person would think of them. I thought at the best maybe you'd say I had a little something that promised rather well but was terribly untrained and advise me to go to a dramatic school for years and years before you'd feel like giving me an actual start. Oh, I didn't dream what you'd be like, and, oh, oh, oh, I never possibly could have dreamed you'd really commit yourself to me like this!"

Helplessly the young man made no effort to deny that he was committed to her. With envy he thought of old Nelson sitting in the free air and sunlight outside; for escape from this ugly little brown room and its confusions seemed the only desirable thing in the world. Moreover, a part of Gilbert's own confusion of mind rose from a curious new impression of Lily Mars, as she stood close to him, chattering out her raptures. Her eyes were warmly, lustrously and gratefully uplifted to his; she almost touched him and seemed to wish to touch him. She looked, in fact, as though she were in love with him; she gave him the incredible impression that she was suddenly falling in love with him. Her very voice seemed almost to say, "I love you!" A personal, mutual consciousness of possibly illimitable consequences seemed to establish itself between them; she seemed somehow to make it almost witless of him not to exclaim to himself, "Why, this girl loves me!"

He murmured feeble reassurances and farewells to Mrs. Mars, touched her hand in departure and found that Lily was accompanying him outdoors. Incongruous and more in bad taste than ever in the unmitigating sunshine, she was nevertheless all the more vivid and only gained color from the strong light. She put a hand softly upon his arm to retard his crossing of the brief space of scrubby front yard and prattled to him confidentially in a sweet, lowered voice. "You don't mind that crazy little Charlie Bright and what he said? I mean particularly what he said about that silly old Mr. F. Munson Lang. They're both too ridiculous to speak of! You won't think it possible for me to have ever done anything except try as decently as I could to stop them from being so silly? I really couldn't stand it to have you believe I'd been as foolish as he tried to make you think I was—and about such terribly ordinary men! Ah, truly, truly, all I've cared about throughout all these years has been the stage—the stage! You see it's my very life, don't you? You could almost tell that just by looking at me, couldn't you? Couldn't you?"

"Well, I—I suppose I——"

"Of course you could! The idea of that goose's saying I took him away from Minnie Bush! Minnie's a lovely girl, my most intimate friend and cares almost as much for the stage as I do. We've spent whole days reciting to each other and talking about how if I ever got to be a star I'd put her in my company and all that. I'll never speak to him again—as if I'd be flirting with mere high school boys and that silly old married F. Munson Lang! I know what I possess to give to any man who'd win me wholly; but I've put all that away until my dream comes true, my lifelong dream of being on the stage. You understand me! I know you do—I saw it in your eyes the instant I came into the room. I knew you were the man who brought me my great adventure. Do you see what it makes me feel about you?" She laughed emotionally. "To express it, would you let me lift you into your carriage?"

He laughed, too, but with no spontaneity. "I'm afraid you won't feel that way after I've proved of no benefit to you."

"You couldn't make me doubt you—now," she said, and, as he stepped through the gateway, seemed to have an afterthought. "Wait! Give me just one moment more. You wouldn't mind if you knew how much I'll treasure the memory of it. I've just thought——" She hesitated, frowning as in some perplexity. "I don't suppose—I mean, isn't something like this done sometimes with plays? If you thought—now after you've seen what I can do—if you thought one of the women's parts could be changed a little to get some of that into it—or perhaps if a new part could be written in, with a good deal of that in it—I mean of course if it wouldn't be any trouble. But isn't something of that sort done sometimes with plays?"

He had the impulse to tell her, even somewhat vindictively, that it wasn't done for girls just out of high school who recited; but she was looking at him with her remarkable eyes wistfully and in a bright confidence he could not shatter. Against his will, he said, "Sometimes", smiled more benevolently than he meant to; then got into his mother's carriage and drove away in a low state of mind. He was uncomfortably aware that she stood at her gate, gazing after him, and just before he reached the next corner he turned his head and looked back. She was there, and immediately raised her right arm high, a farewell symbol of their understanding. He lifted his hat and was sharply annoyed with himself for looking back, the more-so because he knew she had fully expected him to look

back.

CHAPTER FOUR

DRIVING homeward, he had an almost bodily sensation of having been pestered exhaustingly, and, at dinner that evening, he spoke of this feeling to his mother. He had not seen her after his call until they came to the table. "I went through it for you," he said. "I must say your young friend knows how to put herself on a person's hands! She's got at least one temperamental qualification for the stage, too—an hour or so with her certainly takes it out of you!"

Mrs. Gilbert smiled at him approvingly across the lace cloth and "best silver" with which she honored this visit, even when she and her son dined alone together as they did to-night. "You were an angel to go there, Owen."

"Not very," he said with some dryness. "I went there instead of letting her come here because I thought I could get away when I wanted to—a mistake of mine because I wanted to get away all the time I was there."

Mrs. Gilbert looked disturbed. "Oh, dear! Did you? Of course I understand what you mean by her taking it out of you. I'm afraid the poor child does, rather; but don't you think it's because all people of that abounding intense vitality do? Especially anybody with such great emotional volatility? They seem to feel everything so much more keenly than other people do, whether it's joy or unhappiness or——"

"Or just egoism?" her son suggested. "How can you tell whether they feel things more or only express them more? She's got that in common with quite a number of stage people of my acquaintance. They live by expressing feelings more eloquently than other people can, and when they're not on the stage they naturally go on doing that. An inexpressive person might be feeling infinitely more."

"Yes, but you did think she was expressive? You did see talent in her, didn't you?"

"Talent!" he said, and groaned. "Heaven knows! Mother, if you knew the long hard road—the hundreds of tiny things and large things, the unending technical things an actor has to know before he can even begin to act! Why, just the mere knowing how to come into a scene, just to walk on the stage——"

"But dear me!" she interrupted. "You might as well say you've got to learn to swim without going near the water."

"It's true," he returned despondently. "That's just about it! I don't mean there aren't people who seem to have a natural instinct for the stage and appear to know all such

things by intuition—at least, they seem to acquire 'em almost instantly——”

“But why couldn't Lily Mars be one of those people, Owen? Are you sure she isn't?”

“No, I'm not,” he admitted grudgingly. “I don't know what she is. She ranted Lady Macbeth at me terribly; but I don't know that she mightn't have done better if somebody'd given her a few hints.”

“What sort of hints?”

“Not to do Lady Macbeth!” he said grimly. “Not constantly to use theatrical gestures. In a word, not to 'act' at all but to try to speak and move and look like a human being, even during the deadliest declamation!”

“But dear boy, why didn't you tell her?”

“With her pathetic mother looking on who thinks she's perfect—and the girl herself obviously convinced of being a genius and knowing more than anybody else in the world? Besides, what would have been the use? The trouble with your plan for her is that so far as her chance to get on the stage is concerned it doesn't matter whether she's the genius they all three think she is or just a stage-struck high school girl. Do you suppose George Hurley'd be willing to put her into the cast of a play when by lifting his little finger he can get any one of a hundred trained actresses, specialists for any kind of part he wants?”

“But good gracious, people do get on the stage!”

“Not through me! If I ask George Hurley——”

“Ah, but you will ask him!” the mother said quickly. “Owen, it's just got to be accomplished somehow. You saw that poor dear broken woman on her sofa——”

“Yes, I saw her,” he returned, and shook his head pityingly. “I even saw the sister. She had to come home because she'd had some sort of fainting attack, standing on her noticeably small feet all day behind a counter, I suppose, and she seemed to have a pretty bad cough, too.”

“A pretty badly threatening one,” his mother said gravely. “Owen, I feel some sort of little protest or something in you against Lily, perhaps because she's so buoyant and perhaps a little, too, because she's not had any chance to cultivate much of what we think of as good taste. How could she? She was only a little girl when the family collapsed and she's had to grow up in such meagre surroundings, naturally drifting among some pretty ordinary people, no doubt, on account of that—but it's really touching to see such an attractive girl who loves life as she does giving up everything to take care of her mother. You see, one of them has to be near her all the time; Mrs. Mars told me Lily'd hardly been out of the house in months and months except a little in the evenings sometimes when Clara's home. Aren't actors rather well paid, even when they're playing rather minor rôles?”

“Fairly—while they're acting. Financially it's the most hazardous of professions, Mother. When a play fails, they're out of work, some of them for the rest of the year probably, and there are never any certainties. I understand what you want to know, though; a new girl engaged for a minor rôle might get thirty-five or fifty or seventy-five dollars a week, according to the size of the part and the manager's idea of her value to him. She'd have to pay all her own expenses, of course, except railroad fares.”

Mrs. Gilbert looked pleased. “But that would be splendid! Seventy-five dollars a week perhaps, and I suppose they're living on something like ten! I don't believe any of the

Vance clerks get over fifteen. Why, this would be—you see it would solve the whole terrible problem for them, Owen. They could have a servant and a nurse for Mrs. Mars, and Clara could get the long rest she needs so dreadfully, and oh, how that plucky devoted Lily deserves it, Owen! I don't doubt you discovered some of her youthful foolishnesses and, as you say, a funny girlish kind of egoism; but you've got to respect anybody who makes the sacrifice she does and if you could bring a little glory into her life—stage glory—you'd do more than that, you'd save the three of them, and you must have seen, yourself, how desperately they need saving.”

“Oh, murder, yes!” he said impatiently. “But you seem to be as sure as they were that I can do it, Mother. See here; I'd take the chance of her damaging my play in a small part if it were left to me. I need a success pretty badly just now, to keep the ear of the managers; but I'd do it. You can't see people in such a hole as that and not try to pull 'em out. I wish you'd tell me how to do it! There are just four women's parts in 'Catalpa House', and Hurley's got just the four actresses he wants for those parts; three of 'em are in the 'Skylark' company and he has the other one, Lena Hoyt, along with them and they're already rehearsing 'Catalpa House' in their spare time on the road.”

“I understand,” Mrs. Gilbert said musingly. “But sometimes, Owen, in case a great talent is discovered——”

“Mother! Stop!” He held up a protesting hand. “You're going to suggest that I could write a part into the play for Lily. Lily put that into her mother's head and her mother put it into yours.” He laughed feebly. “I'd like to see George Hurley's face if I proposed adding another salary to the list for the benefit of unknown genius and a suffering family, throwing the play out of balance, lengthening it when it's already too long and——”

“Oh, dear!” Mrs. Gilbert said blankly. “Is it as terribly discouraging as that? But, Owen, you *will* do something for her?”

“Yes, I will. It won't do her the slightest actual good and it'll make George Hurley think I'm a sentimental idiot and more of a stage greenhorn than he already does think I am; but I'll do it. I could get the President of the United States to stop a Cabinet meeting for the pleasure of hearing young Miss Mars recite a great deal more easily than I could get Hurley to listen to her. He simply won't do it, Mother, and by putting such a possibility out of our minds we'll save ourselves useless worry. The best thing and the only thing I can do is to help those three women to go on living in their poor impossible hope. Hurley's a good-hearted man inside, though he does his best not to let it interfere with his business, and I think he'll do this much for me if I ask it as a personal favor. He'll let me just barely introduce her to him, perhaps, and he'll take just long enough to tell her to quit thinking about the stage; but if I ask him beforehand, as I will, I think he'll 'take her name'. That means he'll pretend to write down her name and address in a notebook, as if maybe some day he'd have a part that looked her style and send for her. He'll never do any such thing of course and he wouldn't even be able to read what he pretends to scribble in his notebook; but she and her mother and sister'll have the chance to think that perhaps some time the part will turn up and he'll send for her—and they could add that hope to their other ones——”

“But none of them will ever be fulfilled?”

“No.”

“You’re sure there isn’t any chance of his being persuaded to give her a hearing—to let her recite——”

“Murder, no! But, Mother, those poor things will have their hope to go on with and it’s just possible that in two or three years I’ll be in a position to have something to say about the casting of my own plays and could let her try a small part. It might be——”

“In two or three years,” his mother said sorrowfully. “If their hope lasts that long, and if Mrs. Mars and Clara do!” Then she spoke in a brisker voice. “Your great Mr. Hurley and the company reach here next Sunday, do they?”

“Yes; in the morning, at ten. They’ll go at it at half-past ten and rehearse all day probably.”

“Wouldn’t you like me to ask them to dinner that evening?”

He laughed, inquired if she was sure she wanted a whole theatrical company in her house at once; but remembered that this one wasn’t overwhelmingly numerous. “Let’s see. The seven ‘Skylark’ people and the ingénue who’s to play in ‘Catalpa House’, Lena Hoyt, and the two bit-part actors Hurley has with them to fill out the ‘Catalpa House’ cast of ten, and Hurley himself and Pinkney Monk, the stage director—that’s only twelve.” He assured her that they’d all be delighted with the opportunity to dine in a house as a change from hotels and road-town restaurants and suggested as a pleasant possibility that she might enjoy them, especially as several of them were well equipped to be the life of any party. “But don’t try to talk to George Hurley about young Miss Mars,” he added, in warning. “He’s had that sort of thing practised on him so often in the hope of getting somebody on the stage that he’s infuriated by the slightest sniff of it in his nostrils.”

“No, no,” Mrs. Gilbert protested. “I understand what you mean—that it would only antagonize him against her—and I haven’t the slightest idea of making a plea to him. It’s curious,” she added smilingly, as she rose, observing that he had finished his coffee, “to be the mother of a playwright and know as little about the theatre as I do; but I suppose that’s what I ought to try to talk to them about, isn’t it—the stage?”

“You needn’t worry!” he told her, and laughed, following her toward the library, where by old custom they always sat after dinner. “Don’t bother about your share of the talking or about knowing little of the stage, either. They’ll attend to both those matters for you.”

In the library she occupied herself with a floral embroidery, while her son, taking a volume of Walpole’s Letters from a shelf, sat with the book in his lap, beneath the light of a bronze standing-lamp near the piano. He read for some time but so absently that now and then he turned back to a previous page to discover what he was reading; for his mind’s eye prevailed over the physical one discomfitingly and what he continually saw were the shimmering and changing folds of old yellow satin, a flying grace of gesturing young arms, shades of autumn leaf tan in soft hair on a little head, fitful hazel glances entreating his admiration, and long looks, also hazel, warmly hinting—almost promising—that a unique adoration of himself was far from impossible.

Against his will and almost to his chagrin, the image of Lily Mars had remained insistently with him ever since he had left her at her gate in the afternoon. His feeling about the girl herself was that she was a bother, a high school declaimer who was going to be a nuisance to him on account of his sympathies and also because he had to go to the

trouble of worrying the irascible and powerful George Hurley into “taking her name”. As for her devotion to her mother, he admitted it as admirable and even, as Mrs. Gilbert said, touching; but good heavens! daughters were supposed to sacrifice themselves for their mothers under such circumstances, weren’t they? He didn’t like the girl, neither did he dislike her; but he did indeed dislike what seemed to be her unremitting pursuit of him into his thoughts. With his annoyed eyes on his book, he read paragraphs of no meaning; old satin twinkled across the print, and Lily Mars seemed to sink to the floor in a curtsy before him, then to come close to him, tenderly, as if she half-offered a caress for which he had no desire. Her odd slender rich voice seemed to murmur, “I love you!”

In Taormina, a year past, he had completed a recovery from a severe love affair; he had no intention of being attacked by another, last of all by one concerned with such a person as Lily Mars. Then, “Rubbish!” he said contemptuously to himself for even mentioning Lily Mars in such a connection.

Across the room Mrs. Gilbert, apparently preoccupied with her embroidery, laughed softly aloud as if in preface to something she was going to say; but she did not say it and continued to ply her needle, though absentmindedly.

“Yes?” her son inquired. “You’ve thought of something funny but won’t share it?”

“Not funny precisely, I suppose,” she explained. “I was sitting here thinking I was embroidering, and in a way I suppose I have been—at least I haven’t made any mistakes—but what I’ve really been doing all the time was thinking about that poor dear child. I have a peculiar experience in connection with her; whenever I’ve been with her, or even when I’ve only been talking about her, I never can stop thinking about her for the longest time! Once I start thinking about her, I always keep on thinking about her for hours and hours! She has that odd effect, and to-night after we had that talk about her at the dinner-table—why, really it’s almost as if she were here in this very room with us. She’s so—so almost tragically vivid! Often it’s as if she absolutely makes me think about her whether I want to or not. Do you think she’d affect other people, too, that way, Owen—audiences perhaps? For instance, you’ve been reading and I suppose you’ve been busy with it; but hasn’t she come into your mind several times, for a moment or two, in spite of it?”

Her son’s response to this question was of a nature that might well have dismayed him had he perceived it to be what it actually was, a symptom that he wished to avoid admitting what was happening to him, and hence that something was indeed happening to him.

“Who?” he said coolly. “You’re speaking of——”

“Why, good heavens! Lily Mars!”

“Oh,” he said. “What about her?”

CHAPTER FIVE

ON SUNDAY evening, at the hour her son had advised her to set for dinner, the September twilight was still not so far advanced that Mrs. Gilbert, looking forth interestedly from the library bay-window, lacked a clear view of what was happening upon her driveway. Three closed automobiles had glided in and stood vibrating, a novel sight in that white lane. Owen had hired them from Foudray's Livery, an old establishment now transitional, half equine, half mechanical, where doomed cab-horses in their stalls breathed burnt oil and gasoline, and Owen himself was in the leading car, guide to his mother's guests after the long rigor of rehearsal he had shared with them. He sat forward with the driver, jumped lightly down, opened the door and at once received familiarly upon his shoulder the pressure of a slender hand in a grey suede glove. The owner of the hand, descending, was disclosed, a smiling, handsome, auburn-haired lady of thirty, of easy poise and carriage; and Mrs. Gilbert, at the window, instantly made the good guess, "Miss Hedrington, Isabelle Hedrington, the leading lady. And how lovely and what lovely Titian hair!" she thought. "I suppose probably they all put their hands on people's shoulders like that without meaning anything by it."

After Miss Hedrington there emerged a short and thick-waisted but active-looking man of about forty who was smoking a cigar, but, in spite of that and his clipped sandy hair, resembled Napoleon enough in profile for Mrs. Gilbert, recalling her son's description, to be sure of him. "That's the one," she thought with gravity. "That's the man we're after! That's the great Mr. George Hurley!" Then, following the manager from the dark interior, there emerged a tall fair young man of such comeliness, both of face and athletic figure, and so carefully exquisite in every point of haberdashery and tailoring that Mrs. Gilbert had no doubt whatever of him. "You handsome nice thing! You're Owen's great friend, Eugene Allan, and going to play the hero in 'Catalpa House'. You're perfect for it, too!"

Other members of the theatrical company were descending from the two other cars, and Mrs. Gilbert's first impression of them was that outwardly at least they were not theatrical at all and that seen thus in their street clothes they were like any other group of well dressed, pleasant-looking people anywhere. There were two middle-aged women with good-natured, intelligent faces, a slim, short girl of twenty, pretty and "bright-looking", as Mrs. Gilbert thought, and the rest were men of various ages who in her opinion might have belonged to almost any profession whatever. "Why, they don't look

like actors at all!" she thought, in surprise; but added, as the last of them emerged to her view, "Except that old fellow. Gracious me!"

The old fellow referred to was seventy probably, large all over, fat at the middle, yet plainly a person of high vigor; he had a great red old Roman face, and, fluffing out beneath the only silk hat in view, displayed a magnificent head of bushy white hair. Instantly upon setting foot on the lawn beside the driveway, he made himself audible over the voices of his colleagues who were all chatting and laughing cheerfully. "Green grass!" he bellowed, in a grand bass voice easily heard through the closed window. "Green grass to sport upon! Hark ye, hearties, demoiselles and lanzknechts, we'll romp it!"

He rushed upon the two middle-aged women, laid hold of them, and, capering himself, sought to make them caper with him. "Trip it! How often do you see green grass, troupers? Sing hey, nonny hey, nonny no!" Repulsed by the two, he seized upon the "bright-looking" small girl who, nothing loth, gayly joined in his cavortings. With an arm about her waist, and side by side with her, displaying high dance steps of astonishing agility and grace, he swept her across the lawn. Mrs. Gilbert gave a thought to a scandalized Sabbath-observing neighborhood as he sang lustily:

*"A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
But that's all one, our play is done,
And we'll strive to please you every day!"*

The others paid no attention, and Mrs. Gilbert had to leave the window, for already her son and several of her guests were in the house. The rest followed immediately, the boisterous old man and his lively young partner bringing a fragment of song with them to add to the effusion of talk and laughter in the hall—Mrs. Gilbert had the impression that never under her roof had there been such a resonance of rich and musical voices. Owen came into the room with Miss Hedrington, who maintained a comrade's affectionate clasp upon one of his arms, while the tall and elegant leading man, Mr. Eugene Allan, upon the other side, kept a white hand on the playwright's shoulder. Mrs. Gilbert was pleased to see these tokens of liking for her son and fondly thought him almost as handsome as the actor. Even Owen couldn't be quite that handsome, she realized, for she had never before seen any man so resplendently good-looking as Mr. Allan; but she made up to herself for this admission by thinking her son, in his dark, reticent way, much the more "distinguished".

The Napoleonic though sandy haired Hurley, with his cigar fuming between two negligent fingers, sauntered in with this group, which seemed naturally to take precedence; but the others came forward with a little eagerness and a great deal of cordiality as Owen began to speak their names to his mother. Upon closer view, she found them somewhat more like actors than she had thought at first, or at any rate they seemed not quite like the people to whom she was accustomed; these guests of hers had perhaps a little more manner, spoke more distinctly, were better poised and also more emphatic. Naturally she mislaid most of the names; but was able to remember that the boisterous old Roman was Mr. Ord, that the sprightly young lady who had capered with him was Miss Hoyt, and that a sallow and emaciated young man who looked like Edwin Booth in ill health was Mr. Monk, the stage director. She was impressed again with the quality of the voices as the company disposed itself easily about the big room; especially she felt the

beauty of the voice of Mr. Allan who remained beside her, talking of his admiration for her son. This deep and manly yet musical voice seemed to linger just detectably the slightest fraction of a second upon almost every word, as if to unite it the more suavely to the word that followed, and the effect of rhythmic cadence thus obtained hinted study—and almost that the speaker, with a little pardonable pleasure, joined his listener in listening.

Nelson and a temporary assistant of like age and color appeared with silver trays bearing small glasses of sherry, which were hospitably received by the company, emptied without exception, collected and borne away; then Nelson again made his appearance in the wide, open doorway into the hall and seemed content to stand there, doing nothing except to look important. Owen, near the doorway with Miss Lebrun, one of the two older ladies of the company, spoke to him aside. “If you want to tell my mother that dinner’s served, why don’t you?”

“No, suh,” Nelson said mysteriously. “She waitin’.”

“Waiting? What for?”

Nelson continued to be mysterious. “Doin’ jes’ like she tol’ me, Mist’ Owen. Supprise. You see in a minute.”

“Why, what——” The question was interrupted by an exclamation from Miss Lebrun. Standing in the doorway she had in view the broad staircase farther down the hall.

“What a lovely girl!” she cried.

“Girl? Where——” But then, following her glance, he saw Lily Mars in a black velvet evening dress that was beyond his fastidious criticism; she was coming slowly down the stairs, and he understood what his mother had done and how romantically—nay, how theatrically!—she had planned.

Nelson, in the doorway, thought fit to attract the general attention to himself with a gust of loud, pompous and artificial coughing; then, when talk naturally stopped and he held all eyes, he shouted solemnly, “Miss Lillian Mars!” and stepped aside.

Mrs. Gilbert had said she knew little of the theatre, yet she had devised and directed for her protégée an “entrance” that any stage star might have coveted, her son thought. Lily gave him one quick inscrutable look, as she approached in the hall; then, stepping to the centre of the bright doorway, she let herself be framed there for one instant, while an audible murmur came from every part of the room, and the over-bubbling old Ord was heard to exclaim, “Honorable Vera de Vere! Portrait by Gainsborough!” But Lily’s pause was so brief she could hardly have been caught at it; she went on quickly to Mrs. Gilbert, leaving behind her near the doorway a heart agitated by anxiety, admiration and another feeling not yet definite.

This worried heart was the playwright’s. The anxiety was for what the evening might bring—most probably a destructive outbreak on the part of the nearly absolute ruler over the destinies of most of the people in the house, the untamable Hurley—and the admiration was for what Mrs. Gilbert, untrained in such matters, had already accomplished as a “producer” and stage director. That black velvet evening gown must have been a hurry-order, yet it could have been Parisian; there was just one ornament, Owen’s grandmother’s diamond brooch, and in Lily’s left hand was the ivory handle of Mrs. Gilbert’s white ostrich feather fan—unquestionably, she was a picture of high

fashion and Owen perceived that somehow through his own talk his mother must have divined that stage people, after centuries of half exclusion, half adulation by such fashion, are often unreasonably impressed by it. When Lily Mars came into the room, the superb Allan tested with his fingers the adjustment of his neck-scarf and coat collar, began as soon as possible to talk to her and Mrs. Gilbert of some "hunting people" he knew in Maryland, and Miss Lebrun murmured despairingly to Owen, "Ah, if we could ever get just that on the stage! How seldom you see an actress who knows how to simply walk on with anything like the gracious quiet aplomb these real society girls possess!"

"Dear me!" he said, staring, and Miss Lebrun, after a moment's perplexity, decided that he hadn't listened to her but had been thinking, most likely, about his play. She was mistaken; moreover, the playwright was unaware of the significance of the fact that for days his habit of subjecting almost everything to the search for drama had been broken. He sought no "situation" now in the plight of a young man afraid that his philanthropic mother and a coached girl in desperate circumstances were about to bring embarrassment and mortification upon themselves, and upon himself, too. He was beyond dramatizing, being far too feelingly that very young man himself and too sickeningly assured that before the evening was over his mother and Lily Mars between them, in touching innocence, would perpetrate a horror. Before these long-experienced and seasoned experts and the deadly Hurley, Lily would recite "Roger and I"; she would do Juliet and Lady Macbeth, and it was not beyond the bounds of a terror-struck imagination to suppose that she would do the dance of the coming of springtime throughout all the ages.

He had a respite; it became evident that the performance was not planned to take place before dinner, and presently, at the table, he recovered enough presence of mind to do his duty by Isabelle Hedrington and the vivacious Miss Hoyt between whom he sat, at the foot of the lace-covered, glittering board. Both of them expressed an almost rapturous admiration for his mother, something he had rather dryly expected; for he knew that actors more than most other people are not only volatile in enthusiasms but sympathetically love to say the pleasing thing.

"And it's a privilege just to look at her!" Miss Hoyt exclaimed, concluding her tribute. "When I'm fifty I suppose George Hurley or that disgusting Adler'll have me playing comedy old women instead of *grande dame* parts; but if I ever have a chance to do a *grande dame* I'll remember your mother and try to play it like that. I'd remember her against the background of this grand serene old house of yours——"

"Now, now!" he protested. "I'm afraid that's a little extreme——about the house."

"Not at all!" Miss Hedrington assured him warmly. "Your mother would impart all that to it even if it weren't there intrinsically, Owen. So serene and yet so smilingly, graciously simple and friendly! With such a beautiful person at the head of the table, it seems almost sacrilege to think about anything else; but tell me, I suppose Miss Mars is a cousin or something of yours?"

"No; her mother's an old friend of my mother's. She's just——" He hesitated, then finished the sentence inadequately—"just a girl."

"I doubt if that's all she is," Miss Hoyt rejoined, glancing toward the head of the table. Then she looked roguishly at Miss Hedrington who had an emotional failing humorously but unfortunately known to her theatrical associates. "It may be a good thing we're to play here only a week, don't you think, Isabelle?"

Miss Hedrington laughed quickly. "If Eugene, poor dear, were as susceptible to everybody he meets as you try to goad me into thinking he is, Lena, I'd better step aside at once and give you your chance at him, hadn't I? Happily, I'm not of a jealous temperament."

The mischievous Miss Hoyt looked at the ceiling. "No, you don't know the meaning of the word," she said musingly. "And isn't that a good thing, too!"

In spite of herself, Miss Hedrington colored slightly and glanced again at Lily Mars to whom Mr. Eugene Allan was talking with a visible impressiveness. "Don't be vicious, Lena."

"Me? Why, you cat!"

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" the playwright said, with perfunctory humor, and was conscious himself of an inward objection to the warmly appreciative interest Allan appeared to be taking in Miss Mars. Actually to be sitting next to that romantic idol who looked, off the stage, all that on the stage he promised to be, and actually to have his musical voice doing its best to be fascinating to her—what could more demoralizingly fulfill the dream and turn the head of an obscure, stage-struck girl just out of high school? Moreover, it was ironically cruel that the philanthropy now providing her with the bright tinsel of these moments was in reality but the means to bring upon her a disappointment all the more crushing. At the head of the table his mother sat talking to George Hurley with the characteristic smiling unconcern of an impulsive good woman who, because of her ignorance of thunderbolts, believes she can play with them. Her son sent her a long, reproachful and significantly imploring glance.

Mrs. Gilbert did not see it. She had placed the manager upon her right, with Lily next to him and the leading man next beyond, and, although she had cautioned Lily not to talk a great deal, she wished her to talk more to Mr. Hurley than to Mr. Allan; but now, here was Lily speechless apparently, and with downcast eyes and heightened color, listening steadily to the richly toned murmuring of the actor. "I must let Miss Mars have a little chance at you," the hostess said to Hurley. "Of course she's interested in the stage, as everybody is, and to hear something of it from one of its fountain heads, so to speak——"

"Me?" he interrupted brusquely. "I'm a 'fountain head' of the stage all right, or maybe just a goat for having anything to do with it; but I'd certainly like to have a vacation from it sometimes. I can talk about other things when I try; I'm no actor." Suddenly he became passionate. "Good God; but I get sick of it! I wouldn't mind talking to this little girl if Allan'd ever shut off his tin horn voice and quit pushing his face at her to show how silly pretty it is; but I won't talk about the stage to her. If you think that'd be a pleasure to me, you're wrong! Isn't it enough that when you and Owen ask me to your house you have to go and bring along all these people I'm compelled to live with in order to get my living, and that I have to sit here and can't look anywhere around the room without seeing some actor's face nor for one single damn second let my ears get a rest from the horrible din of old Joe Ord's voice?" Abruptly, he gave a piercing tenor scream and leaned toward Ord who, upon Mrs. Gilbert's left, was talking noisily to Miss Lebrun. "Joel For God's sake!"

The outburst was so sudden and so vehement that Mrs. Gilbert gasped; Eugene Allan, reddening, laughed uneasily, and Lily turned open-eyed to Hurley. The elderly Ord, on the contrary, uttered a resounding laughter. "Bravo, George!" he said, in thunderous bass. "Gnat, thou sting'st me not!" He lifted a glass of claret from beside his plate. "Away slight

man! Your health, ladies!” He drank, set down the empty glass and beamed upon Mrs. Gilbert and Lily. “Ladies, that man should have been an actor; I refer to the so-called guest of honor upon the hostess’s right. Dauntless, I say it; he should have been not a manager but an actor.” Then, regardless of the fact that Hurley said, “Oh, for God’s sake!” again loudly, stopped eating and pushed back his chair as if to leave the table, he continued, “I flatter him less than others do, yet I insist he should have been an actor. What is an actor?” He looked fixedly at Lily. “Fair child, do you wish me to answer?”

“Yes,” she said softly and eagerly. “Oh, yes.”

“You’ll be sorry!” Hurley warned her, in a voice unexpectedly quiet and resigned. “He talks about ‘the actor’ in hotel bars until everybody cries—after three A. M.! I see what’s happened. There’s a saloon across the alley from the stage door. Soon as I noticed it this morning I knew that before the week was out I’d be cutting his salary for delaying rehearsal.”

“Cut my salary!” The old player again projected a reverberating laughter. “Sir, you threaten the infinitesimal! There are things too small to be halved; they must be enlarged before they can be sliced. Now I will tell you what is an actor. But first——” He again lifted his glass, which Nelson had replenished. “Fair child, your health!”

“Have you got a barrel of that wine or any other liquor, no matter what, in the cellar?” Hurley asked Mrs. Gilbert harshly. “If you have for God’s sake bring it up and give it to him and maybe we’ll get a little peace for half an hour or so.”

Ord set down his empty glass. “Speech!” he announced sonorously. “By Joseph Ord, sterling old Joe Ord, never in the whole history of trouping permitted to play a heart of gold but usually in youth First Murderers, Attendants or Second Heavies, and later Tybalt at the most; the King in Hamlet throughout middle-age, varied by some two thousand, seven hundred and sixty-one performances of Simon Legree, between the years Eighteen hundred and seventy-seven and Eighteen hundred and ninety-four, both dates of the genus Anno Domini absolutely, I give you my word. Subject: the actor. What is he? Don’t ask me!”

Lily leaned toward him eagerly; her eyes were brilliant with excitement. “Ah, but I do ask you!”

“So be it,” he said promptly. “The actor is any member of the theoretically human race who thinks somebody else is looking at him, or who is looking at himself. The professional actor is a person with an instinct to be more so. Sometimes he is a Narcissus beset by such a passionate sweetness of feeling for his fellow-man that he makes any sacrifice in order to give everybody in the world a chance to see how beautiful he is and hear how dulcet the sounds produced from his œsophagus, charging a slight honorarium for the benefit. He is all love, so loving he will play no part that does not make him love his audience the more for their greater love of him; his dramatists must have ink-pots full of noble deeds, great thoughts and boyish modesty. Ah, but this is no true actor, for your true fellow gives little thought to being watched from the stage door and perhaps snatched and kissed by uncontrollable middle-aged wives of road-town stove-store proprietors and absent traveling-men. We are not all of us Narcissi! Your true fellow has for God knows what reason a passion for making his body into the portraits of other people, changing his voice into the voice of others and making his eyes look forth from their sockets as others’ eyes look forth from theirs. He will stick glue on his brows, wax in his nostrils, plaster on

his teeth; he'll wear rags and heave up a hump on his back and whine in a cracked voice — What does he care, so he makes his picture? He would rather play a monster than a honey-hero and he adores his audience for hating him. Narcissus dies luxuriously in his suite at the Holland House; your true fellow gets hold of a little laudanum in jail."

Mr. Allan, slightly flushed, spoke in an annoyed voice. "Oh, I say! You're not going on any longer, are you?"

"Indubitably!" the old man returned, with elaborate distinctness. "You hear me pronounce the word? With that ejaculation, upon occasion, I have cleared away a false impression in the minds of the police. We return to our subject. Your true actor, then, is a person foolish enough to live in squalor and perish miserably for the sake of being allowed to make pictures of other people for brief intervals during six evenings and customarily two afternoons in the week. Why does he? What ecstasy rewards him? None. I can only tell you that you would be mad not to think him so. And under what horrid conditions does he make his pictures, in what shackles does he work! He may not utter a syllable not put in his mouth by an imperious playwright too often brainless. He may not take a step, may not wiggle a finger, cough, smile, stoop, lift ear or eyebrow unless so commanded by a stage director always hoarse and nine times out of ten insane. In Nuremberg they have the Iron Maiden. It is a steel box hollowed inside to the shape of a man; they would put a man inside it and close the ponderous horrible thing so that he was a man immovable in a ton of steel—and there's your actor, in a ton of dramatist and stage director. What! Can he work thus, can he shine through the metal? Why, he does! Come to the theatre and let the curtain go up; there he is, poor Tom o' Bedlam, all warm and glowing in the footlights, making elf-land pictures for you out of himself, draining out his life to make you see a life not his, breaking his heart in his passion to make you see a gnome or a miser, or maybe some such cheap thing as a cruel banker. And if you do see it and perhaps hiss him for the wickedness you hate in what he's made you see, is he happy, is he at last content? Never! He's saying to himself, 'I misplaced my emphasis on that word in the first act to-night. Ah, if I only hadn't, they'd be hissing me louder!'" The old trouper again lifted a refilled purple glass, and, with what seemed necromantic brevity, set it down glittering but colorless. "There, fair child! That's your actor."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Lily Mars cried, and she leaned toward him, her cheeks pale now in her excitement and her eyes alight with a hazel fire, while, at the other end of the table, Owen Gilbert held his breath. "It is! It is!" she cried. "I know! All my life I've understood! I feel it! I'm part of it!"

"You!" The barbaric Hurley turned upon her violently. "What do you understand? What are you part of?"

Lily caught a look from her coach and adviser at the head of the table; the color came into her cheeks again and she leaned back in her chair. "Of the audience," she said softly. "When you have a successful play, Mr. Hurley, don't you want the audience to feel it's part of it?"

Owen's breathing was resumed. He perceived that Lily was intended to protract the impression she was making as a "society girl"—at least she wasn't going to recite at the table. But his soul groaned within him; the catastrophe was only postponed to the library after dinner.

CHAPTER SIX

IN that spacious bright apartment, an hour later, with the laughter of his mother's guests merry in his ears, he reached the depth of his gloom, for he could no longer doubt that the moment was at hand. The four youngest men in the theatrical company, gathering at the piano, had burlesqued the sentimental quartet of vaudeville; then one of them, Harry Vokes, a fat young comedian with a face suggesting a dissipated baby's, had sung "Silver Threads Among the Gold" and "After the Ball" in a sobbing tenor, with similar satirical intent. After that, besought by her colleagues, Miss Lebrun had given her humorous imitations of Mme. Bernhardt, Mme. Rejane, Coquelin and the elder Salvini, and during this performance Owen entertained a momentary wild hope that when Lily did Juliet and Lady Macbeth her exhibition might be mistaken for an intentional satire. But the glimmer of optimism extinguished itself; these experts would know better.

Several times he tried to get near enough to his mother for a private imploring plea; she was too gayly surrounded, yet all the while he saw calculation in her smiling eyes and understood that she was only waiting to seize upon what she'd believe the most favorable juncture for Lily's exhibition. During Miss Lebrun's mimicry, he thought he saw the calculation intensify; but he had another respite, for Miss Lebrun, concluding, to great applause, rushed upon the sallow Mr. Monk, dragged him from his chair and loudly announced that Mrs. Gilbert and Miss Mars must see his imitation of a visit to a Nickel Theatre. The stage director assented, and, going to the piano, played noisily with one hand, while with his other and the rest of him he mimicked recognizably the jerky and flickeringly seen gestures and expressions of the moving pictures. Thus, to ludicrous effect, he enacted a condensed idiotic melodrama, and, during its progress, Owen with a sinking heart saw his mother make the slight preparatory movements significant of her intention to rise from her big chair at the conclusion of Monk's travesty.

Smoking a cigar unhappily in the wide doorway into the hall with his friend, Allan, the young playwright also saw Mrs. Gilbert glance covertly at Lily, who sat nearby with the quartet of young actors close about her, and he caught, too, the gleam of the girl's excited return glance, as if she said, "Yes! Oh, yes! I'm ready!"

Allan meanwhile was talking to him in a voice lowered out of deference to the stage director's performance. "Disagreeable old ass, Ord. You can't tell me the older generation doesn't hate us. All that tirade about the two kinds of actors—your 'true actor' playing heavies, low comedy and what not, and the other kind that just score by personality—

levelled straight at me! They hate us because this modern quiet realism that we've brought in makes their old mugging and bellowing and gesticulating and clowning and all their nonsense of wigs and false noses and gluey whiskers look silly. Their day's over; it went out with gas footlights, and they know it. Look at him, there by your mother, trying to look like a Doge or something talking to Queen Elizabeth! If you watch him closely, every now and then you'll see him sneak his hand up behind his head and twist one of those locks of his round his finger to keep it curly. And that monocle of his! For ten years I've never seen him without it and never once saw him put it in his eye, because he's afraid to. Thinks that would be just a little *too* much but believes it gets a fine effect dangling on a string and flopping about his monstrous waistcoat. If he cuts in on that third act speech of mine again with his roaring and snorting the way he did this afternoon I'm simply going to take him out in the alley and shoot him!" Allan laughed good-naturedly, drew reflectively upon his cigar and added with enthusiasm, "Alluring girl, your cousin Miss Mars. Wonderful!"

"What? She isn't my cousin."

"No? She spoke of your mother as 'dear blessed Aunt Anne'. Oh, I see, just affectionately—lifelong family friendship. Do you know, Owen, I got an idea while I was talking to her at the table."

"Did you?"

"Yes. In that second scene where I say to Isabelle, 'I love you. I've loved you ever since' so on, so on and so on, and she says, 'Don't tell me' so on and so on, and I say, 'I love you' again, so on, so on, I think if I used a different tone right there—a little more tensivity and yet more whispery; like this." He whispered huskily, "I love you! What you think?"

"I suppose so," Owen replied absently. "It might be better."

"I got it—well, it just seemed to come to me while I was talking to her. A marvellous girl—that peach-bloom exquisiteness and yet of course no end smart, to the manor born and all that." He laughed with the effect of explaining that his modesty was still to the fore. "Do you know, old fellow my lad, if I hadn't got a pretty steady head on my bally young shoulders I could almost believe myself girlhood's sweet dream come true!"

"You could?" Owen said with some blankness. He liked Allan, a generous, warm-hearted human being and a fine, quiet actor so shrewd in his handling of the materials given him that he sometimes had a startling emotional effect upon an audience in spite of his quiet. He was a good comrade, and now and then said something intelligent enough to be thought over later; but, after all, wasn't he rather fatuous—about women?

"I'm afraid I could be that much a gilly," the actor returned, "if I'd let myself." He laughed again, at the same time clapping his hands to show his approval of Mr. Monk, who was withdrawing from the piano. "Hello! Your mother's up and going to say something. Splendid!" Then, not noticing the spasmodic expression of his friend's face, he began to clap his hands again and to cry, "Hear! Hear! Hear!"

Mrs. Gilbert had risen; she went gayly to Lily, took the girl's hand and brought her forth from the quartet. "Come, dear," she said in a clear voice. "We must do our own poor best to show we're grateful. I want that charade you did for your mother when I was there on her birthday."

“Oh, no, no——” Lily protested, and seemed to struggle to regain her chair; but Owen thought her reluctance had little vigor. The other guests, meanwhile, were politely urgent, clapping their hands and with at least apparent earnestness entreating, “Please, Miss Mars! Please do!”

“She will!” Mrs. Gilbert announced, and, leaving the blushing girl alone in the centre of the room, returned to her own easy-chair in the semicircular group her guests had formed as spectators. Allan hurried conspicuously to make himself a member of the audience.

“Hear! Hear! Hear!” he exclaimed again, when he had seated himself; he clapped his hands. “Mars! Mars! Mars!”

“I wonder——” Lily said uncertainly. “It would be better if I had someone to act at.” She turned and spoke to the playwright, who had remained in the doorway and had the air of a lurking person about to disappear. “Will you help me?” she asked, smiling though there was a tremor in her voice.

“I?” he said incredulously. “What in the world do you want me to——”

“Won’t you? Just come and stand beside me here.”

Then, as in obviously dismal astonishment he did what she asked, both Allan and the vociferous Ord applauded, shouting loudly, “Author! Author! Author!”

Instantly the manager, sitting next to Ord, became red with rage. “Joe! What do you think human ears are made of? For God’s sake!” Moreover, he seemed to add, not orally yet all too plainly, by his expression and attitude, the intimation that it was bad enough to have to sit through the performance about to take place before him; he didn’t intend to bear any additional torture, especially not from his own people. Glancing at him pallidly, Owen felt that whatever the nature of Lily’s intended exhibition it couldn’t well begin under unhappier auspices. As for being forced to take part in it himself, he suffered but wasn’t a snob; he’d sink as calmly as he could with his mother and her stage-struck protégée.

Lily was explaining to the semicircle. “It’s the silliest little charade—‘a poor thing but mine own’—and made up one day when I was trying to amuse my mother, who’s an invalid; so don’t hate me too much for it! It’s two syllables and the whole word all in one scene, and really too dreadfully foolish!” She laughed deprecatingly and turned to Owen. “For the first part of it you must look mockingly imperious, if you don’t mind. Fold your arms as if you were terribly satisfied with yourself——”

“What? Oh—all right.” He folded his arms and so far as he was able complied with her instruction to look mockingly imperious.

“That’s it,” she said approvingly. “Now we’ll begin.” She turned her back to him, took two steps away, halted, gave him over her shoulder a sly estimating look, the glance of a dangerous shrew planning action, then abruptly turned upon him, frowning, pointed at him and spoke in a fierce voice. “‘Let him that moved you hither remove you hence! I am too light for such a swain as you to catch. If I be waspish, best beware my sting!’” She took a long stride that brought her close to him, and, with a sweeping arm, struck him upon the breast. “‘If you strike me, you are no gentleman!’” she cried sharply, as if in a little fear of his reprisal; then, breathless but reassured, she became mocking. “‘What is your crest? A coxcomb? This is my fashion, when I see a crab. Say you Sunday is our wedding-day?

I'll see thee hang'd on Sunday first!' ” She walked away from him, let her shoulders droop, put her hands against her cheeks, looked upward deploringly and spoke in a voice that quavered with pathos yet seemed to rail against herself.

*“He'll woo a thousand, 'point the day of marriage,
Make friends, invite them, and proclaim the banns;
Yet never means to wed where he hath wooed.
Now must the world point at poor Katherine,
And say,—‘Lo, there is mad Petruchio's wife,
If it would please him come and marry her.’”*

This seemed to end a phase in both her acting and the charade. She returned to Owen, who was still holding his posture, and said to him with a timid air, appealingly and as if aside, “Now, if you can, will you begin to look as if you approved of me and even—if it's possible—even as if you liked me a little?”

Suddenly and to his own surprise he found himself able to do both with a good grace. This dreaded philanthropic experiment of his mother's was strangely enough turning out not badly. Lily wasn't over-gesticulative; she was neither too much anything nor too little anything, and he was not ashamed of her, omitting to ask why he should have expected to be ashamed of her, since she was not his. He perceived that she must have taken readily to his mother's coaching and that the coaching must have been excellent. More, Lily had caught the genuine attention of her audience; that was plain. Of course these professional actors would show polite indulgence to a pretty girl who played a charade for them; but there was something like eagerness in their silence as they watched her.

Her manner changed. She stood beside him humbly, looked up at him timidly and spoke with an imploring gentleness.

*“And be it moon, or sun, or what you please:
And if you please to call it a rush candle,
Henceforth I vow it shall be so for me.”*

She came closer to him, put her fingers fearfully yet tenderly upon his arm and spoke with a placativeness so eloquently clear that he guessed her little charade—“placate” of course, he saw it was; she was playing Kate from *The Taming of the Shrew* and now wistfully placated him, a dumb Petruchio.

*“Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun:—
But sun it is not, when you say it is not,
And the moon changes even as your mind,
What you will have it named, even that it is;
And so, it shall be so for Katherine.”*

She lifted her head, bringing her face nearer to his, and, smiling ineffably, let her brown lashes cover the hazel eyes for a moment; then they rose, almost dazing him with the revelation of an unfathomably sweet meekness.

*“Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband. . .
And place your hand below your husband’s foot;
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease.”*

For a perceptible instant longer she held him in a spell, her ardent face close to his and that worshipping look still upon it, while all through him there seemed to tingle a strange exhilaration, a feeling not to be identified with his mere great relief that after all she hadn’t made herself and his mother and him ridiculous.

Suddenly she laughed, swept downward in a curtsey so deep it made her half his height, jumped up and ran to a vacant chair near Mrs. Gilbert.

Already old Ord was thundering, *“Bis! Bis! Bis!”* and there was lively applause from the whole company. Allan jovially pulled Lily out of her chair to “take the call,” he said; she made her curtsey again to freshened applause, and Miss Hoyt, guessing the charade, shouted, *“Placate! Placate! Why, it’s bully!”* Ord discovered that young Mr. Lancey, least in years of the “Skylark” cast, was still somewhat puzzled, not by the charade but because he had never before heard of the comedy upon which it was founded; whereupon the sardonic laughter of the vociferous relic once more became unbearable in the manager’s ear.

Hurley jumped up from his chair and uttered a scream of rage and pain. *“Joe! Will somebody block up that grotto! Nobody wants to see all your back teeth! My God!”* He pointed to a glisteningly laden table against the wall. *“Fill him! Drown him!”* Then, less vehement but apparently not less embittered, he addressed the company at large. *“I should think you’d all feel like a lot of cigar store Indians! On my soul, I should! Sit here and see an amateur with no pretensions to know anything about the calling you’re supposed to be following and she makes you all look like thirty cents! My God!”*

In seeming fury he strode to the table he had recommended for the suppression of Ord and filled an assuaging glass for himself; while talk and laughter, beginning apprehensively after his outburst, took courage and again became general in the room. Mrs. Gilbert, excited in her triumph, drew Owen aside for a moment as soon as she could. *“I didn’t tell you beforehand because you’d have been worried and——”*

“And because I’d have been afraid and would have tried to stop you,” he admitted. *“Of course I’m only a fool of a man. I ought to have remembered that women are always dashingly doing things that men won’t try because the things are impossible. I ought to have realized how much cleverer you are than I am and have seen what you could do with her—when all I did was just give up!”*

“No, no!” she said. *“What you can do comes now. You heard what he said. Wasn’t that really pretty tremendous—from a manager? Ah, look at her, dear! Isn’t it lovely—did you ever see a face so eager? Strike while the iron’s hot, Owen!”*

“You mean ask him to take her name now?”

“‘Take her name’! No!” Mrs. Gilbert exclaimed, though she kept her voice low. *“Good heavens, no! Tell him you want to write a part into your play for her!”*

Owen looked uncertain. *“You don’t know him; he’s incalculable. Of course I’ll try it,*

but——”

“I should think so!” she said. “Of course you will!”

He had misgivings, and also found it difficult to get a word apart with Hurley who had taken the stage director into a corner and begun a discussion of details for the production of “Catalpa House”. Owen made an effort to interrupt, but was waved away, and the discussion became more emphatic and exclusive, continued interminably. He did not find his opportunity until the radiant Lily had left the room (to be driven home by Nelson in her “dear blessed Aunt Anne’s” little brougham) and most of the grateful and exuberant theatrical party were surrounding Mrs. Gilbert before departure. Turning diplomatist, he scooped a handful of cigars from an open box on a table and pressed them upon the manager.

“What you trying to do, bribe me?” Hurley asked, staring angrily. “Want me to write Adler we ought to raise your royalty percentage?”

“You might find the cigar stand closed when you get back to the hotel, George. By the way—ah——”

Mr. Hurley accepted the gift. “By what way? What are you mumbling about?”

“I’ve been thinking about Miss Hoyt’s part in ‘Catalpa House’,” Owen said. “She’s going to play it well, I can see that, of course; but there’s something of a gap there somehow. I’ve thought it might be a good idea to write in a secondary ingénue part and _____”

“Secondary!” Hurley interrupted fiercely. “What do you mean, secondary?”

“Ah—supplementary. I could brace up a lot of weakish points with it.”

“What? You mean you want two ingénues, like a Tom-show with two Topsy’s?”

“Not precisely! Please listen, George. The play’d be richer for such a part, and just to-night it struck me I knew exactly where we could find the right girl to play it.”

“What!”

“Miss Mars,” Owen said hurriedly, yet trying to speak with an air of bright discovery. “She’d be precisely what I see in such a part. You know what you thought about her, yourself, and besides, she’s terribly eager to go on the stage and wants to act and——”

“Oh, she does!” Hurley said, in a dangerous tone. “She wants to go on the stage, does she? She wants to be a real live actress, does she?”

“Don’t get excited, George, please. Yes, she does, and you know what you said of her acting, yourself. Even in that little charade, you saw what she could do and you stood up and said——”

“Listen!” Hurley interrupted, and then spoke slowly, with an air of profound enmity, his facial expression being that of a naturally suspicious person who discovers that a dish of sweets, just offered him, contains poison. “Listen! When she did her little charade I gave it the praise a Sunday School child ought to get for speaking his little lesson nicely, according to his little lights. If you don’t know better than to think I’d put a Sunday School child into a company of mine on account of his doing some such little thing nicely, or that I’d allow a part to be written into a play I’m producing when the damn thing’s already too long, just for the benefit of a society débutante’s vanity and her perfectly sickening desire to show herself off on the stage, why, God help you!”

“But, George, you——”

“I praised her for her little two-minute peanut charade, so now she wants to go on the stage, does she? If I say a baby looks healthy the hell’s-imp stands right up in its perambulator and swears I’ve as good as promised him seventy-five dollars a week as a juvenile!” His voice became falsetto. “Wants to go on the stage, does she? By cripes, I might have known it! But if you think I wreck my business to please every stage-struck heiress that gets a crush on me for an evening, God help you!”

“Good heavens! She isn’t——”

“That’s all I have to say! God help you!”

“George, please——”

“God help you!” Truculent, the manager strode into the little group about the hostess and ended the sonorous farewells of Ord by interposing a sturdy shoulder and a brusque “Goodnight, ma’am!” Then, stamping into the hall, he snatched his hat from a table and betook himself to the night air and the waiting automobiles.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN the morning Mrs. Gilbert took a more temperate view of the manager than she had expressed the night before when her son told her of Hurley's disappointing explosion. "I believe he's the most terrible man I ever met," she said, at the breakfast-table. "Yet, in spite of me, I don't dislike him. But are all managers like that?"

"Gracious, no, Mother! Some of 'em are just business men who'll invest in whatever they think they can sell to the public, and they don't all care much what the goods are, so there's a market. Some of 'em are just showmen; but they do unbelievable things with a Trump of Fame made of paper—their actresses have the most jewel robberies. George Hurley's another type. Managing is really an art for him, not a business; he rages at the stage, wails that he hates it and all the time has a passion for it. That's why he's so difficult. After last night, I haven't the slightest hope of even getting him to take poor Lily's name."

"No—the brute," Mrs. Gilbert said; but though she used this term her tone was more musing than vindictive. "Except him, all those people were so likeable and amusing; I was delighted with them. Funny—I'd supposed the ladies of the company would be all paint and powder; but they weren't a bit. Except for a little rouge I thought I saw on Miss Hoyt's cheeks, there wasn't a trace of artificial color among them. I suppose they have to use so much professionally they're glad to get away from it. Such nice, light-hearted friendly people! They seem a little different, of course—a little set apart—but attractively so, I thought. I suppose they don't always seem light-hearted, do they?"

"Good heavens, no! When they're down, they proclaim the abyss."

Mrs. Gilbert looked more thoughtful. "Are there many love affairs in the companies, Owen?"

"Oh, I don't know. About as many as there'd be in any excursion party of the same size, or in classes at co-educational institutions, I suppose. Why?"

"I thought Miss Hedrington seemed very much taken with Mr. Allan."

"Did you?" her son asked, laughing. "I mean, did you only think so? I'd say it's fairly evident! Poor Eugene's had quite a surfeit of ladies' falling in love with him; but this is one of the times when he's been responsive. They've been playing opposite each other in the same companies for two years and would have married before now except that Hurley won't have married couples in any company of his; he thinks it causes complications."

Besides, both Eugene and Isabelle may be ‘starring’ before very long, and it’s usually a little better business for *matinée* idols, either male or female, to be thought avaiably single. They’re very devoted, however.”

“Yes; she seemed so,” Mrs. Gilbert said reflectively. “Miss Hedrington was the only one who didn’t appear to be genuinely enthusiastic about that poor child’s charade. She just said, ‘Quite extraordinary—for a society girl.’ Did you notice?”

“No, I didn’t happen to.”

“Perhaps under the circumstances it was natural, because Mr. Allan was so very applausive and because he seemed to be rather pointedly interested in Lily all evening.” Mrs. Gilbert sighed. “They were all really lovely to her, and you could see how strongly they felt her charm.”

“Her charm, Mother?”

“Dear me, yes!” Mrs. Gilbert returned, looking at him seriously. “I suppose that means you don’t feel it, yourself, and after all I think it’s just as well.” She laughed apologetically, and then, with a slight embarrassment, explained, “I mean—I mean of course that I want you to do all you can for her; but I—I mean she really has a tremendous charm—though I’m not quite sure that’s exactly the way to speak of it. It’s a kind of emanation—something that seems to radiate from her—and that she seems to be able to turn on and off at will, almost as one’s able to turn something on and off at a faucet. It’s like what people call a heady perfume, only this of hers reaches the heart. When she turns it on, it seems to beat upon the people within its radius, so to speak; they become intensely conscious of her to the exclusion of almost everything else and they feel she’s intensely conscious of them, too, as if she were saying to each of them, man or woman, ‘How adorable you are!’ ”

“Really?” Owen said, successfully appearing to be a little astonished. “You think so?”

“Think so? Why, I’ve seen it. Of course there must be individuals who’d be impervious to it, and, as your mother, I’m pleased that you’re one of them.” She smiled, looking at him with affectionate approbation. “That poor child is good, Owen, and in her sacrifice to her mother she’s shown a noble nature; but, though you may not have entirely realized it yet, she’s an artist and has rather an overwhelming amount of that unreasoning thing that seems to the rest of us to be sometimes angelic and sometimes destructive, both without reason, and always rather mad. I mean what we can’t define and helplessly call the ‘artistic temperament’. You’re an artist yourself, and of course you’ve got some of it; so you’re the last person in the world who should be subjected to too much of anybody else’s. I admire Lily and I care a great deal about her on her own account as well as her mother’s; but I’m glad you aren’t susceptible to that radiation of hers. She certainly did have it turned on last night, in spite of its not affecting that odious Mr. Hurley!”

“It did,” her son informed her, with some gravity. “His interpretation was that she had a ‘crush’ on him, and of course that set him twice as much against her. But she, poor thing, went away in the seventh heaven, not doubting it had all been absolutely accomplished for her.”

“No, Owen, I don’t think that she or her mother or sister have any of them had the slightest doubt since the day you went there.”

“But that’s awful!” he said. “Mother, I don’t think I could ever face that poor little

family again, the girl herself least of all, and I just can't bear the idea of your having to go there and face them, yourself, after last night. Of course they must be in a great state to-day—waiting for the news! What on earth's to be done about it?"

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Gilbert returned, with less gloom than he expected. She had become meditative. "I don't think I'll tell them anything at all for a while; I won't go there to-day. We'll just wait."

"Cruel to be kind?" he asked ruefully. "The longer they wait, the harder it'll hit them when it comes."

"But in the meantime we may think of something," she said. "Because you're immune, dear, I think you don't realize another pretty remarkable thing about Lily—something I spoke of the other night. Most people, after they've been with her when she's turned on her 'magnetism' or whatever it is, are rather poignantly haunted by her. Well, it might lead to something."

"With George Hurley?" he cried. "You don't know him!"

"But how about Mr. Allan? If he should bring some pressure to bear on Mr. Hurley _____"

"He? Not a feather's weight! I doubt if he'd count as much with Hurley as even I would." They had moved into the hall, and here he picked up a hat, turned toward the front door and sighed. "Well, Nelson's waiting with the carriage and I'm off to rehearsal. I suppose you're right about not telling those poor women now. We could give them one more day to live in their hope."

With that, he despondently took his leave, and then, behind the proud Nelson, drove down Harrison Avenue under a delicately hazy morning sky that did not brighten him. Moreover, he suffered a slight return of the ailment from which recent preoccupations had vouchsafed surcease; he wondered if a mystical or symbolic play couldn't be written that would deal with futile obsessions, such as that of a man unable to stop thinking uselessly about something he didn't wish to think about. Then another possible subject presented itself to him—the longing of the caged bird for the open heavens, of the square peg for the square hole, and of the misplaced human being for the right environs. Last night, among those actors his mother had felt to be different from other people, Lily was like a fish dropped into an aquarium after having grown up, through some blundering miracle, without ever seeing water. She was like them, and it had been instantly plain that she belonged among them. Ever since her early childhood she had "recited", had acted constantly; as she could not adjust herself to her surroundings, she strove always to adjust them to her, and so, with the theatre denied her, struggled to glamour that ugly little room in the double house into the semblance of a stage. Could a play show such a girl growing older, never relinquishing the struggle, yet always defeated in it—and yet not utterly defeated? For the final scene might show her as an old woman—dying perhaps—and then the small brown room would be transfigured into what her mind's eye had always made it, a brilliant and glowing stage of a great theatre where she stood, lovely and young again, in a rain of roses from a shouting audience!

Owen laughed sourly at himself and at Lily Mars, too; Nelson had just stopped the carriage at the curb before the big old "Metropolitan Theatre" wherein the playwright, at the age of seven, had first seen footlights and an enchantment called "The Mikado". He

went into the open, dark lobby, saw a gleam of inner light upon the opaque glass doors at the end of it and realized that the light came from the stage and that the day's rehearsing had begun. The only other person in the lobby was a thin middle-aged man, hollow-eyed and hollow-chested, in black clothes that were new but of no pretensions either to fashion or precise conformity to their wearer. He had been pacing the scuffed marble floor of the lobby restlessly; but when the playwright came in he halted abruptly, stared and then approached.

"Are you—are you Owen Gilbert?" he asked, in a voice somewhat noticeably husky.

"Yes. Are you from a newspaper or——"

"No," the stranger said. "I've been waiting for you. I thought of calling at your house; but I supposed you might come here. I—I have a personal matter to put before you—— That is, it isn't personal to me—— I mean it's a subject I'm interested in; but it has no personal bearing on myself. I—I take a particular interest for the reason that I don't wish to stand by and see a wrong done."

"A wrong?" Owen repeated mildly. "You think I have some connection with——"

"You have indeed!" the man returned, with sudden heat. "You have, Mr. Gilbert! I'm willing to think it may be unwitting on your part. For all I know, you may be congratulating yourself on conferring a benefit; but I want to assure you that you're mistaken. I know this girl better than you do; I understand her nature and I know that what you propose to do would not only wreck her physical health, with the late hours and high living, but would do her untold injury mentally and morally. The stage is no place for a girl of her subtle and delicate nature, and I protest with all my soul against your dragging her into it!"

"I beg your pardon. Would you mind letting me know what you're talking about?"

"Miss Lily Mars! I protest against your taking her from the quiet and wholesome neighborhood life she enjoys now, and from the loving care of her mother and her friends and former teachers and——"

"Dear me!" Owen said. "May I ask if your name happens to be Lang? I believe I recall the rest of it—You're Mr. F. Munson Lang, aren't you?"

"I am not!" the man replied hotly. "I don't happen to be engaged in the retail shoe business, thank you! My name is Reller and I'm an instructor in the English Department in the City high school. For over three years, up to the time Miss Mars was forced to leave the school on account of her mother's ill health, she was my pupil. I have never had a brighter one or one in whom I have taken more interest, and I feel it's only natural that a teacher should retain that interest in the career of a student even after the student has gone out from under his care. So far as circumstances have permitted, I've watched over Miss Mars since she had to leave the school, and I don't intend to see her led into a fatal misstep without protest."

"Quite right," Owen said. "What is it you want of me?"

Mr. Reller brought forth a white handkerchief from a hip pocket and wiped his forehead. "I want you to let her alone! I want this theatrical company of yours to give up the effort to take her away with them next Saturday night when they leave here!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I beg your pardon,” Owen said. “Where did you hear——”

“I protest against it and I denounce it!” Mr. Reller interrupted, again applying the handkerchief to a dampened brow. “I’ve watched over that girl as carefully as I have over my own daughter and I don’t want to have to curse the hours I spent in helping her with her declamations, since this is what they’ve led to!”

“Just a moment,” Owen said. “Where did you get the idea she might be going away with the company next Saturday night?”

“I’ve just come from their house.”

“You have?”

“I have!” Mr. Reller replied challengingly. “Do you see any objection to a teacher’s calling at intervals upon a former pupil and her family? I believe you’d scarcely go that far! Only last night I was warned by a former fellow-pupil of Lily’s, a young man named Bright, and I called there this morning. I saw her in the presence of her mother, as I virtually always do, and if any of those wagging tongues in the neighborhood——”

“Dear me!” Owen said again. “I just wanted to know——”

“Everybody knows it!” Mr. Reller interrupted, not abating his vehemence. “Do you suppose you can conceal such a matter when it concerns a girl like that? Her mother’s been very ill-advised, very ill-advised! When I went there this morning I found them in a state of mistaken excitement and unwilling to listen to a single word from me. I had to come away sick at heart—sick at heart, Mr. Gilbert!” His tone changed and became plaintive. “Mr. Gilbert, I’m cutting my classes this morning without notice; I’m neglecting my duties because my—my—because my conscience would not let me rest until I made this protest to you. Mr. Gilbert, you’re a member of a prominent and respected family in this community. You grew up in it, and I don’t believe that if you thought it over you’d want this community to think you’d take another member of it, a pure young girl whose father hasn’t lived to protect her—that you’d deliberately take a young girl out of your own community and put her into this gypsy life that you propose to. No; if you’ll think it over, Mr. Gilbert, I don’t believe you’ll want this community to think such a thing of you!”

Owen, looking upon the perturbed teacher with compassion, saw that he was tremulous, and understood that the man had sought this interview under the pressure of an

agitation too urgent to permit him to go about his usual business until he had done something to relieve himself. The playwright also began to understand, he thought, that a sponsorship of any kind for Lily Mars might involve the sponsor in somewhat elaborate responsibilities. "I think if you'd hurry, Mr. Reller," he said, "you might still reach your school in time for some of your classes this morning. The danger of the young lady's departure with this theatrical company next Saturday night isn't imminent. I'll be obliged to you if you won't speak of the matter to either her or her mother until after a day or two; but I'm sorry to say I'm afraid they're in for a pretty severe disappointment."

"Do you mean to say——" the schoolteacher began breathlessly. "Why, it can't be! I tell you they wouldn't talk of anything but her traveling clothes! Do you mean to say it's a mistake; she's not going?"

"I assure you I don't see the remotest chance of it."

"Thank you!" The impassioned face of the teacher cleared brilliantly; he seized the playwright's hand. "Thank you! I was sure a man the whole community admires as much as it does you wouldn't do such a thing! This'll be a great relief to many true friends, and you can trust me to make it widely known, and to your credit, Mr. Gilbert—to your credit!" He glanced at his watch and looked startled. "Good heavens, I'm afraid I must hurry!" With his head up, he departed briskly.

For several moments Owen stood ruminating; then he shook his head pensively, and, pushing open a reluctant glass door, entered the auditorium of the theatre. The stage was lighted coldly from above; but the rest of the vast hollow cavern was dim and the dark rows of seats were covered by long strips of cotton cloth. On the stage the fallow director, Pinkney Monk, was speaking in a whisper to young Vokes and Miss Hoyt, who stood before him, not listening apparently, for each of them held in one hand a square pamphlet bound in blue paper and seemed engrossed in the study of it. Miss Lebrun was visible in a chair in the wings, interested in a similar pamphlet, and Eugene Allan lounged in one of the dim proscenium boxes; but nobody else was in sight except the manager who faintly loomed as a threatening black lump in the dark midst of the house. With his arms folded and his black soft hat upon his head, he sat, silent, and did not turn his head when the young playwright, after tiptoeing down the aisle to a chair behind him, noiselessly let down the seat and slid into it; nevertheless, the manager proved aware of this new neighbor.

"Nice time to get here! S'pose you think there's nothing to do about a play except write it. Merely producing it no importance whatever!"

Owen laughed placatively. "Well, as I don't seem to have any particular usefulness in connection with producing it—except to get sat on whenever I make a suggestion——"

"For God's sake!" Hurley interrupted, still not turning. "What do you think this is, a conversation tea? How do you expect these people to do any rehearsing if you come here just to talk?"

Owen sighed and held his peace. On the stage the director took several steps backward, clapped his hands together sharply and said with entreaty, "Now please! Please now! Let's have it again. Let's see if we can't do it without the sides. Put your sides in your pocket, Harry. Do please put your sides in your pocket. Put yours on the table, Miss Hoyt; you don't need it, dear." Young Vokes obediently placed his pamphlet in his coat

pocket and Miss Hoyt, after a lingering last glance at hers, tossed it upon a deal table at the front of the stage. "There, that's better. Please now! Now please! We don't need our sides any longer. Now, dear, so and so, and so and so, and so and so, 'Happens I'm not Hester Blake but Myra'. That's your cue for business and look, Harry. Then so and so, and so and so, and so and so, 'Hand the letter to my father'. Then, Harry, you—so on, so on—'Get a handsome officer exterminated, would you?' Then the silly smile and hold for laugh. Then you, 'Myra', coughing over shoulder to hide smile and so on, so on. Don't forget the shoulder, dear. Please now and let's get a little life into it! Please now!"

He stepped backward from them and Miss Hoyt, placing her arms akimbo, looked flippantly at Mr. Vokes and spoke, in character, "No? You're sure you couldn't mistake 'those auburn tresses'? I'm afraid your cardplaying friend didn't know there were two red-headed girls at Catalpa House. It just happens I'm not Hester Blake but Myra. However, as you've rather impulsively insisted upon my taking his letter——"

"Watch it!" the director interrupted warningly. "Watch it! That's the turn up, dear. You go up, there, because you want him to think you're going to go off. Now again. Please now! So and so, so on, so on, 'Not Hester Blake but Myra'——"

Miss Hoyt came to the table, looked at the pamphlet she had left there and said thoughtfully, "Oh, yes; that is the turn up, isn't it? I do go up, there." She moved back to the central part of the stage. "However, as you've rather impulsively insisted upon my taking his letter——"

"Go back!" Hurley shouted suddenly and fiercely from his seat. He jumped up, strode down the aisle to the orchestra rail and stood there. "Go back! 'Couldn't mistake those auburn tresses'. Let's have it."

Miss Hoyt resumed the attitude she had relinquished and became arch. "No? You're sure you couldn't mistake those auburn——"

"Listen!" Hurley shouted. "Pink! Pink Monk!"

"Yes, sir," the director said apprehensively.

"Is there anything in the script about her standing with her elbows sticking out like that? Is she supposed to——"

"No, sir."

"Then what do you let her do it for?"

Miss Hoyt looked disappointed. "I shouldn't? I only thought——"

"Listen!" the manager commanded her. "Don't argue with me! Think I'm traveling with this company all over the godforsaken country for the privilege of arguing with an ingénue? Listen! When your sides instruct you to stand like that, do it; when they don't don't. Pink didn't tell you to stand like that, did he? You know he didn't! What are you supposed to be doing with your arms during this scene, anyhow?"

"Why—why, nothing."

"What! Oh, for God's sake! Pink!"

"Yes, sir." Monk began to rummage in the breast of his coat. "Of course she's supposed to have the letter in her hand that Harry's just given her; but I didn't think we'd begin to use the props until we'd got all through with the sides." He produced an envelope and thrust it upon Miss Hoyt. "Here, dear. You know you're supposed to be holding this."

You——”

“Listen!” Hurley interrupted. “What are you going to do, stand there and talk it over with her? Will you give me a chance to speak or have I got to stand here waiting while you and she gabble your heads off over social matters? Listen, Missus! You’re supposed to be playing the part of this younger sister, ‘Myra’. Harry’s supposed to have sneaked into the plantation to slip a letter from the gambler to your sister, and by mistake you get it. You understand that?”

“Why, of course, Mr. Hurley,” Miss Hoyt said, with some dignity. “I naturally——”

“Listen! I’m not trying to talk it over with you. Is this a rehearsal or is it a discussion? Argue with Adler when he’s rehearsing you. He likes it; but I haven’t time for it. Listen! You’ve got the letter, and you know Harry’ll try to get it back from you as soon as you’ve told him you’re the wrong girl; but you intend to keep it and give it to your father. Where would you be holding it?”

“Where? Why, in my hand.”

“Oh, sweetheart!” Hurley cried, in a climax of irascibility. “In your hand!” He lifted his arms as if in invocation, shouted, “Give me patience!” and let them drop; then he said wonderingly, “She knows she’d hold it in her hand. She wouldn’t hold it in her teeth. She knows she wouldn’t put it in her ear. She’d have it in her hand—clever!” He pointed at Miss Hoyt and asked her bitterly, “Where would your hand be? The letter’d be in your hand, as you say; but if you know Harry wants it back, where would you put your hand?”

Miss Hoyt, confused and beginning to display symptoms of an irritability restrained only by a strong effort, replied in a tone somewhat tart, “I’d put it where it naturally would be. I’d just let it hang down naturally.”

“You would? You would not! Not while you’re in this company! While you’re under contract to me you’ll put it where the script tells you to put it. Where does the script tell you to put it and where would you put it anyhow if a man was trying to get it away from you? My soul and liver! Behind your back! Behind your back! You’ve got the letter and the letter’s in your hand; put your hand behind your back and as God hears me I swear the letter will go with it! Now begin the scene over.”

Owen Gilbert, a lover of peace, knew by experience that the manager’s exasperation would increase before it subsided, and that at any moment it might irresponsibly include whoever remained within range. Already Miss Lebrun’s chair in the wings was vacant, left so by her thoughtfully imperceptible withdrawal from sight; the leading man was no longer visible in the box where he had lounged, and the playwright, without making a sound, rose from his chair and stole up the aisle to the concealing thicker darkness at the back of the auditorium. Here, in the semicircular vague avenue behind the seats, a big form loomed dimly, a large old hand took lodgment upon his shoulder amiably, a faintly alcoholic aroma found his nose, an unctuous chuckle sounded in his ear, and a husky voice whispered, “Got a new Patsy!”

“Who, Joe?”

“Hoyt; can’t you see?” old Joe Ord whispered. “He went for her four times before you got here; now he’s started it, he’ll be after her all day. She doesn’t know what to make of it; she’s Adler’s pet. Listen to George going for her again! I don’t mind his changing off from me; I’ve been his Patsy ever since we started on your play—rehearsals and

everywhere else. You heard him going for me every chance he got at your house last evening. Beautiful woman, your mother, beautiful! George always has to have a Patsy. Most of 'em do; it relaxes their nerves. Monday morning rehearsals are always the devil anyhow. Lord! Listen to him!"

Hurley had scrambled up into a proscenium box and stepped from one of its chairs to the stage. He snatched up the manuscript of the play from the table, shook it violently, slapped it with his hand and implored Miss Hoyt to abide by its directions. Stung by a response of hers inaudible to the observers in the rear aisle, he compared the manuscript with her "sides", the blue-covered pamphlet containing "Myra's" speeches and cues, became infuriated by an error therein discovered—one that seemed to substantiate her defense—and shouted loudly for the playwright.

"Don't say a word," Ord whispered. "He can't see you from there. Don't give him any encouragement to change the Patsy to you. If you keep quiet, he'll go on going for her."

The prophecy was correct. Hurley swept the vacant seats with an indignant eye. "Not there!" he wailed. "When you don't want an author you can't step for tripping on 'em, and when you do want one he's out buying a new cane. That's where he's gone, I'll bet a hundred thousand dollars; gone to buy a cane!" He turned again to the three people with him on the stage. "Begin over. Go back to your entrance. Back to your entrance!" Then, as Miss Hoyt turned away from him, "No!" he stormed. "Not yours, Harry's! You're on. If we had to go back to your entrance I'd die right where I'm standing. I would! What's more, I'd rather!"

For some ten minutes more, he continued to be irked by everything Miss Hoyt did; then, at the top of his irritation, turned upon the young comedian who played the scene with her, scathed him with sarcasm for a misplaced emphasis, and suddenly and astonishingly spoke in a quiet, mild voice. "Let it go till to-morrow. Take up the next scene, Pink."

Thereupon he stepped back into the box, dropped to the floor, and, with a cigar in his mouth, walked up the aisle. Old Ord vanished knowingly; but Owen waited, and Hurley, peering through the dimness, saw him, came to him and took him by the arm. "Let's get out a while. That girl! Drive a man crazy if he hoped for anything like what that 'Myra' part ought to have. It's a beautiful little part, got all sorts of little subtleties and undercurrents. Butchery! Well, well—got a match?"

They went into the lobby, Hurley leaned against the wall and smoked in silence for a time; then he laughed gruntingly, as if stimulated by a thought that made him scornful. "Adler! Begged me to give her this part and now for the last two days been telegraphing me he wants her for a musical piece he's putting on. Trying to get her away from me when he knows I haven't got anybody else! Like him. Wants to send me Mabel Meadows instead. Not me!"

"You'll keep Miss Hoyt of course?"

"If it's a choice between her and that Meadows girl I certainly will; this one's wood but the other's tin." He sighed, then went on despondently, "This Hoyt girl belongs in a musical piece; she certainly doesn't know what to do with a part like 'Myra'. Thinks archness and cuteness and jumping around and old trick side-glances to show she doesn't mean what she's saying—thinks all that old stock stuff from the shelf is the way to play

such a part. Of course she hasn't got anything else—so, my Lord! what else could you expect.”

“But I don't think she's so bad; in fact, I thought she was rather——”

“Don't talk flooey!” Hurley put his hand under his soft hat and rubbed his head, uptilted his cigar and stared meditatively at its ash. “I was thinking. You know that little girl what's-her-name at your house last night, she wasn't half bad. Really not half bad. Something about her a person'd remember. Got to thinking about her after I came back to the hotel; got something about her. If she only had a little training——”

Owen stood open-mouthed. “You don't mean you'd——”

“Listen,” Hurley said. “Adler'll never quit pestering me till he gets this Hoyt girl for his musical piece. He wants her right away and, for that matter, I've decided this morning I don't want her at all. Got no charm and never will have. If we had somebody else we could try out in the part Pink could run over it with her this evening and we could let her read it for us to-morrow at the regular rehearsal. Now this little girl last night—how long would it take you to get hold of her?”

CHAPTER NINE

IN the autumnal thick dusk of that week's Friday evening, Owen drove to the shabby double house, twisted the handle of the instantly clanging doorbell, was bidden to enter and found Mrs. Mars alone and smiling in the gas-lighted room. She moved a frail hand toward him and he took it for a moment as he sat down beside her sofa. "Angel!" she said happily.

"Oh, dear me, no!"

She gave an upward glance at the thin ceiling, which sounded lightly with an irregular but quick movement of footsteps. "She'll be down in a minute; you can be sure you'll not be late. Clara's helping her into that black velvet dress your darling mother had made over for her so wonderfully. The child thought she couldn't wear less for such an immense occasion. Don't mind my calling you an angel. What a week!"

"Yes," he agreed, and seemed to include experiences of his own in the rueful thought. "A pretty fairly trying one."

"That terrible man!" Mrs. Mars said. "When he told Lily she wouldn't do and sent her home on Wednesday morning—after letting her think all day Tuesday that everything was settled!—I never heard such tragic sobbing—I thought the child would die. Oh, it was a black, black hour! If you hadn't come after her and taken her back, that afternoon——"

"Of course you know I couldn't have done it," the playwright reminded her, "unless he'd agreed to it. If he hadn't finally consented——"

"Oh, no," Mrs. Mars interrupted, persisting in her illusion. "I kept telling Lily all the time I knew you'd overrule him. Of course I understood there'd be argument——"

"If it could be called that!" Owen said, with a slight shiver of reminiscence. "He did more than dismiss Lily, you know; a little while after he sent her home, he dismissed the whole rehearsal, dismissed the company and dismissed my play, too!" He laughed. "Three hours later, after he'd had his lunch and worn all the rest of us out and had us in utter despair, he was just as enthusiastic as ever, only he didn't want to show it and had to pretend to be talked into going on with the play and with Lily, too."

"Angel!" she said again. "No, you can't stop me! Do you know what we've dared to do at last? I'm actually a borrower from a bank—Dr. Gordon kindly arranged it for me—and I'm afraid poor Lily won't be able to spend much out of her salary when it commences! Clara's out of Vance's for good, thank heaven, and she's going to get a rest

even from me, because a trained nurse'll be here." From overhead there came the sound of a sharp fit of coughing, and Mrs. Mars winced but looked all the more gratefully at the young man by her side. "She'll get over that, with rest, and that's one more thing we owe to your giving Lily her start."

"But I didn't," he said feebly, knowing the uselessness of his protest. To no effect he had already insistently disclaimed her praise of him, and what his conscience urged him to add now was a warning. Undeniably Lily had become an actress, an actress in rehearsal and with an engagement; but she certainly hadn't either been given or achieved a "start" that warranted this burning of ships behind her. Clara's recovery, a nurse's pay and a note in the bank oughtn't to depend upon such precariously uncertain quantities as George Hurley, Lily herself and the success of a play. As for this one item of peril alone, the chances against any play's success were two or three to one, never to be counted upon, and people oughtn't to be allowed to stake their lives on such hazards. He wanted to say this to the stricken lady upon the sofa; but with the permanent motionlessness of her long figure before him he was unable, and held his peace.

"I'll try not to make my gratitude a burden to you," she said;—"especially as I've got to increase it. You're going to leave with the rest of them to-morrow night, aren't you, and stay with the company all the time from now on?"

"Yes, until after 'Catalpa House' opens in New York. I'm going back there with them now for the last week of rehearsal; then we have a terrible little period of half-week engagements and 'one-night-stands' to test the play upon audiences and make alterations before the New York opening. At least that's the program so far as I know it; with Mr. Hurley anything's subject to change."

She was thoughtful. "It's everything to me that you're going to be with them—near her. She'll need guidance, and I know you'll give it. She's so young, and she's subject to change, too, Owen. Something different was born in her; it isn't just because I was her mother that I saw she wasn't like other people, even in her childhood. The more you know her, the more perplexing you'll think her, I foresee, and there'll be times when she'll seem to you hopelessly inexplicable. Sometimes she'll appear to be an experienced, mature woman of penetrating intelligence, and within half an hour you might think her somewhere between nine and thirteen; she's not to be counted upon in mind or mood. But always there's a precious essence—it may need protection——"

Rapid feet were heard upon the stairway; Mrs. Mars gave Owen a gentle glance that appealed to him to understand everything, and Lily came into the room. She was so vivid—so almost glitteringly alive, as the playwright thought—that she seemed to freshen the place and its occupants and to brighten the gas-light. "Only to think!" she said softly. "Already I've begun to keep great men waiting!"

She came to her mother; but Mrs. Mars continued to look at Owen. "I may not see you again," she said. "I know you aren't afraid to write sentimentally sometimes; but of course I understand you're going to hate taking part in a sentimental scene yourself." He stood close beside her; she took his hand and placed it upon Lily's. "I trust her to you. You'll be an older brother to her, won't you?" She laughed faintly, to minimize the size of her request and to mitigate the romanticism of her gesture. "Or at least a young uncle," she added, but capped this with an almost ceremonial whisper, "I place her in your hands."

The young man's inner objection to feeling and making an appropriately emotional

response, though he did both feel and make it, was less disturbing to him than the repetition of a thought sharpened in portent since his interview with the agitated schoolteacher, Reller: a guardianship of Lily Mars promised the guardian somewhat intricate responsibilities. Driving away from the double house with her, in the dim enclosure of Mrs. Gilbert's brougham, he referred dryly to a matter pertinent in this connection.

"When I got home from rehearsal this evening I found that a letter had been left at the door for me by the writer of it, in person. From its tone I think I'm to be congratulated for not being there to receive it, myself. He finds me guilty of your going on the stage and intends to make my character known to my fellow-citizens."

"That idiot!" she said petulantly. "I thought I was through with him and his crazy nonsense! I told him weeks ago that if he didn't stop bothering me I'd absolutely have to appeal to his family. I never did anything to get him into such a horrible state; I didn't even start him."

"No?" Owen said with some grimness. "You didn't even start him?"

"Not in the slightest!" She spoke in a grieved tone. "I just happened to go in there, a year ago, because the shoes in the window were marked lower prices than they were at other shops. I tried on a high pair for winter that I needed, and he waited on me. I didn't even know he was the proprietor. Of course I wanted him to like me, because I thought maybe he'd give me a better pair for the same money than he would if he didn't; but that was absolutely all I did. He kept trying on more and more pairs till there weren't any left in the place, and he acted so queerly I was almost frightened. A few days afterwards he sent me three pairs of party slippers, two with rhinestone buckles, as a present, and kept sending more and more shoes and slippers, and even silk stockings, that all had to be returned of course, and he made his family change to our church and would insist on walking home with me, after, and got his poor wife so upset it got to be horribly embarrassing, and I simply didn't have any way to stop it until I thought of telling him if he didn't I'd appeal to her. To think of his having the impertinence to write you a——"

"No," Owen said. "The letter wasn't from Mr. Lang."

"No?" She caught her breath audibly. "If it was from that Wilfred Thomas——"

"No; it was from a Mr. Reller."

"Oh, *that* old goose," Lily said, and laughed nervously. "He's been making himself as annoying as he could—coming to the house and fussing and lurking outside—he's been worse than that silly child, Charlie Bright—all just to keep me from going away! Thank heaven, they won't be able to bother me any more after to-morrow night, none of 'em! Only to-morrow night!" Abruptly she struck his shoulder an ecstatic smart blow with a small, strong fist. "Oh! Oh! Oh! I'll be on the way to rehearse in New York! And you'll be there—and everybody! Oh, at last, at last! Oh, how I love this world, this divine world! Don't you see what a heavenly romance I'm living in?"

"Because to-morrow midnight we pile into a smoky, jolty train——"

"Because of every minute!" she cried. "Because of now! Because I'm driving with you in this shiny, private coupé to the theatre, to sit in a box—good heavens! just to think of sitting in a box, and all of it for the two of us because we're stage people! I never sat in a box before in my life, and mostly in the balcony except when your mother's taken me to

matinées sometimes. Here I am, with you; I'm an actress and you're a playwright. I am! I'm a professional actress, as I always knew I would be; but I seemed to be waiting forever and ever. The only time I ever doubted it was Wednesday when he got furious because of those gestures and did that awful thing to me; but I knew the instant you came in the house that it had been just a bad dream. Before you said a word I knew you'd come to take me back." She seized his hand, pressed it rapturously to her cheek and released it as if she playfully flung it back to him. "There! How bold I am to be so familiar with a playwright, a great man who lives apart with managers and directors, high above us poor actors and actresses!"

She chattered on, childlike in the joy she found in calling herself an actress, and so liberal in giving herself this pleasure that he marvelled she had not already worn it out. In their box next to the curtained stage, he perceived that she played a variation upon the theme. She stood for a moment close to the red velvet rail, looking about familiarly; then with slow grace took her seat and said, loudly enough to be heard by people in the chairs just below, "I'm afraid all the poor dears must be no end tired after our long rehearsal today."

Owen recognized "no end" as a frequent part of the vocabulary of Eugene Allan, and "poor dears" as a similar unconscious borrowing from Miss Hedrington, and at the same time observed that a great part of the rather sparse audience looked at Lily. This was natural, with the opposite box vacant and the romantic Venetians in high color upon the curtain no strangers, these dozen years, to the theatre-goers; but Lily continued to hold the general attention, which as a rule would have distributed itself variously after a first glance or two. She did nothing to encourage such a dispersal; on the contrary, with an appearance of aristocratic unconsciousness and not for an instant seeming to pose, she let her light wrap slide away from a pretty shoulder, looked slowly and estimatingly over the house and leaned as conspicuously as confidentially toward Owen to whisper behind her hand, "Less than a thousand dollars, I'll bet; Mr. Hurley'll be furious!" Then, turning again to the house and seeing someone she knew, she played a little scene of recognition, appearing incredulous at first, then doubtful, with eyebrows raised and lips parted, and finally, becoming certain, nodding delightedly as a climax. She did more for this friend; she made a gesture of her pretty head toward the curtain, then nodded to him again quickly and reassuringly, making the message clear: "Don't be impatient; they're going to begin soon. I know, you see!"

Owen watched her and marvelled. He comprehended that she was playing at being an actress; that in fact she was acting the part of an actress—she was acting an actress sitting in a box. But that was what she actually was! She was an actress, and she was an actress sitting in a box; then what in the world made her want to act an actress sitting in a box? Why should she play she was what she was? Moreover, old Ord, always the actor, would have done the same thing in his own way, and, for that matter, so would Eugene Allan, though with a much less obviously picturesque technique. "These people!" the playwright said to himself, in despair of ever understanding them completely. Then he laughed at himself for not remembering that all the world's a stage. Had he never seen artists not of the theatre who wore their calling in their hair as well as in their manners? Had he never seen senators being senatorial out of Washington? Had he never met a clergyman somewhat emphatically gracious in display of the cloth on weekdays?

Musicians came up, stooping, through a short door beneath the apron of the stage, settled themselves in their long pit and began the suggestive tuning of their instruments. "Oh!" Lily gasped, forgot to act, and, turning to Owen with the impulse of an excited child, seized his hand. "I can't bear it! Sitting up in that balcony I've wondered a thousand times how the actors in the dressing-rooms must feel when they hear the orchestra before the play begins. Like gods! Now it's going to happen to me! Oh, just a little while—just mere days—and it'll be happening to me. To me, myself, Lily Mars! Oh, they're going to begin—there, they're playing—it's the overture! I can't stand it!"

She sat clutching his fingers throughout the operatic medley the orchestra played, and not until the musicians were tentatively resting did she seem aware of the contact. "Why, you'll think I'm shocking!" she said, releasing his hand. "I hardly knew it; I just had to hold onto somebody—you! You don't mind?" She leaned toward him, wistfully. "I'm afraid you'll have to stand all sorts of things from me. Can you? Mother gave me to you, you know. People have to put up with all sorts of nuisances from what they own, don't they?"

He made no response; but, after looking at him searchingly, she seemed satisfied. "Dear man!" she said softly; then gave a little jump as darkness suddenly increased about them and an amber glow appeared along the base of the curtain. The orchestra played a snatch from "La Boheme", the great painted canvas rose mysteriously, disclosing Eugene Allan, himself becomingly painted, painting at an easel in a brilliantly painted woodland glade. Lily leaned forward, watching him and the scene with an intense concentration, while her escort, not at all interested in the "Skylark", proved able to take a protracted interest in nothing more dramatic than her profile. Some moments before the close of the act, however, he discovered that he had been joined by a companion in this occupation; the manager had come into the shadowy rear of the box and also sat looking at Lily's profile.

CHAPTER TEN

UPON the fall of the act-drop, she applauded longer than anybody else; then, turning, saw Hurley and cried out in startled pleasure, "You! Oh! Mr. Hurley, I think this is the divinest play——"

"Oh, you do, do you?" he returned satirically. "I wish it had divinity enough to pay salaries and railroad fares after the house takes its share! Did a gross of twenty-six hundred last week, every cent! Might have known the road wouldn't show independence enough to take it after those Broadway chimpanzees used it as a trapeze to show their comical tricks from. It's a fine life, a manager's! If he doesn't please all the chimpanzees in New York and tries the road, he runs into a herd of sheep that want to think they're chimpanzees, too! Sheep! Might have thought they'd have come in anyhow to see Eugene Allan and Isabelle Hedrington; they don't get them every day on the road."

"Or anywhere else!" Lily cried, clasping her hands. "Mr. Allan's simply magnificent; seeing him in rehearsal I didn't dream he'd be like this!"

"No," Hurley said. "He's one of those stingy rehearsers; wouldn't let himself out to save your life, blast him!"

"Ah, but when he does—like this to-night——"

"Yes, I noticed," Hurley interrupted. "He certainly hasn't been doing it up to now. If he'd exerted himself a little more, earlier, we might have had better business for the end of the week. So you think he's magnificent, do you?"

"Oh, but everything is!" she cried, and gave a quick side-glance to Owen. "Of course I like our own play infinitely better, 'Catalpa House'—it's perfect—but to me there isn't any such thing as a bad play. I mean, just to be in the theatre is heaven enough, no matter what goes on. The theatre! Just the word itself is riches and it oughtn't ever to be said except with a joyous kind of reverence. Those terrible little places they call the 'Nickel Theatres'—some of 'em are beginning to have the impudence to charge more—they oughtn't to be allowed to use the word 'theatre'. It's an outrage and a blasphemy! How can any place be a theatre where there isn't a stage and a lovely invisible communion between the actors and the audience? A place isn't a theatre if you just hang up a sheet and turn a cheap little magic-lantern on it. They ought to be stopped by law!"

"From giving their shows?"

"No. Who cares about that? I mean a law to keep them from using the word 'theatre'!"

“So that’s how you feel about it, is it? The theatre’s all beauty and glamour, is it?” Hurley said, implying that he sneered at her. His tone was both mocking and intolerant; yet the playwright smiled privately, knowing that in reality the manager was engaged in a sentimental pursuit;—in order to hear praise of what he secretly loved, he railed at it.

“Glamour!” Lily exclaimed. “Ah, more than that!”

“Indeed? The theatre’s rapturous and sacred, Mr. Allan’s magnificent, Mr. Gilbert’s play’s perfect—and how about an ingénue we’re trying out in it? I suppose she’s perfect, too—even when she waggles her feet around while the leading woman’s trying to put over a line?”

Lily blushed, but spoke up bravely. “People do show their feelings with their feet. They show their feelings all over, sometimes, with every part of them. Oh, I’ve learned my lesson!—I won’t move my feet again, or anything, unless you or Mr. Monk tell me to; but why shouldn’t——”

“Listen!” Hurley said sternly. “Forty years from now if you get to be a star in spite of a billion chances against it, you can act with your feet and make the rest of the company stand around frozen stiff till you get through doing it. They’ll be hired for that, and everybody’ll think you’re great and you’ll get big notices from the critics; but right now, don’t try it. In the first place, I’ll send you back to your family if you do, and in the second, if I’d let you do it I’d have a hysterical leading woman on my hands, an experience I swear I’ve endured for the last time! You keep your feet still and your hands and face, too, while Isabelle’s speaking, and while anybody else is, unless I or Pink Monk or the script tell you otherwise. Where’d you get all this ten-year-old idea about the theatre being such a sublime place, anyhow?”

“Ah, it isn’t an idea at all, Mr. Hurley. What anybody merely thinks about the theatre doesn’t make any difference, because the theatre is what it is. It’s—it’s——”

“Well, well!” Hurley said, with apparent hostility. “Go ahead! What is it?”

“It’s——” She hesitated, blushing with her own knowledge that she exposed girlishness and enthusiasm. “It’s a temple of art.”

Then, as Hurley uttered a muttering, sardonic laughter, she laughed, too, complaisantly at herself, and, with the briefest possible turn of the head, flickered over her shoulder a half instant’s upward glance at the balcony, then began to prattle out more of her delight in the “Skylark” and the acting of Eugene Allan. Owen, quick of eye, caught that over-shoulder glance of hers flung out at the audience, and understood it. She was spiritedly in earnest in what she had said about the theatre; yet she was acting that, too, and never for a moment ceasing to act an actress. Now she was acting an actress sitting in a box not only with a playwright but with a distinguished and powerful manager; that glance had hoped that the audience, or at least some of them, recognized the portent. More, it might be guessed as having hoped that a person or persons whom she knew, sitting in the balcony, beheld her as she sat, an actress in a box, gayly intimate with a great manager and a playwright, and, beholding her thus, were too awed for envy. Later, when Hurley had gone and just as the houselights dimmed, Owen saw her glance upward over her shoulder again, and this time perceived that the look went to a point just above the balcony rail not far from the central aisle; but already faces were indistinguishable there, in the quick darkness, and the orchestra was playing up the curtain.

He had a slight, annoyed curiosity to know who had this much interest from her and wondered whether possibly Mr. Reller or Mr. F. Munson Lang sat in the front row of the balcony—perhaps accompanied by disturbed Mrs. Lang or Mrs. Reller. It was Lily herself who enlightened him, at the end of the act. “Don’t look now,” she said confidentially, “but right in the middle of the balcony my best friend’s sitting—at least she was my best friend until a little while ago. Heavens! All that seems to me like something that happened in another life—millions and millions of years ago. She’s with that idiotic boy who made such a spectacle of himself the first time you came. He got those seats for ’em this afternoon—on purpose, I know absolutely! He was over early this morning and I wouldn’t see him; but he hung around pumping Clara. Poor Minnie Bush! She must think some fairy’s given me a wishing-ring; she’s been wild about Charlie for years and all her life simply crazy to go on the stage. Goodness knows, I never wished for Charlie, though! I suppose it seems to her I’ve got everything on earth she wants, while she’s simply starving. They’ve spent the whole evening staring down at us just tragically. Now if you’ll look up, just casually, you’ll see ’em.”

Owen looked and saw young Mr. Bright’s face, recognizably reproachful even at the distance, and beside it another reproachful face, this one with sad blue eyes and aureoled with almost albino blonde hair. Unsympathetic, he thought Miss Bush a silly-looking rather pretty girl; but he said nothing and Lily prattled on in an excited confidential undertone.

“She tried to be loyal to me until it just got too much for her. She kept on being my friend, or at least saying she was, a long while after that little goose had to go and make an idiot of himself telling her he cared for me instead; but this last thing has simply killed her. I mean my getting on the stage when now she’ll never have the slightest chance herself. She wrote me the most dreadful note yesterday, simply harrowing! First, she charged, I’d taken the only man she could ever care for away from her and now, what hurt her the worst, I’d given her ambition a death-blow by not having you hear her recite, too. Said my treachery had given her a stab and she didn’t think she’d live long. Pooh! She’d never thought of going on the stage until she got intimate with me, first year in high school, and thought she had to do every single thing I did! I suppose you think I’m absolutely heartless?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “The other way. Sparing me from Miss Bush’s recitations——”

“Too late now!” Lily shrugged one shoulder, laughed with a light recklessness and assumed the air of a woman who laughs like that no matter how many lives she wrecks. “Only to-morrow night! They’re sure to wait in the lobby after the play to see us pass, or maybe on the sidewalk when we get into the coupé. Then when we don’t come they’ll realize that we’ve gone round behind to congratulate the company and I suppose that’ll make ’em bitterer than ever.”

“We needn’t, you know,” he said. “We could go out through the lobby and spare them that.”

“What!” she cried dismally. “Not go behind after?” Then, comprehending his intention, she laughed and beamed upon him. “I love to be teased like that—by you! Of course everybody’ll be expecting us to come round to the dressing-rooms and tell them how wonderful they’ve been to-night.”

“No doubt some of them will,” he admitted, and did not make more definite his

impression that the leading man, after an unusually earnest performance of his rôle, might be expecting a particular enthusiasm from the company's new ingénue. The surmise was not a mistaken one; after the final descent of the curtain, when the playwright and his charge passed through a door behind the box and came upon the stage, Allan was waiting for them near the door and already wearing a handsome brown velvet dressing-robe. Lily seized both his hands.

“Ah, if you knew how you'd made me cry! Oh, I never dreamed——”

Owen heard no more of the eulogy; a mulatto girl, the leading woman's “dresser”, was speaking to him. “Miss Hedrington sent me to ask you if you'd please come to her dressing-room right away for a moment, Mr. Gilbert.”

He crossed the stage, dodging men in overalls who were re-setting the scene for the morrow's matinée and hurriedly bearing great oblongs of painted canvas to and from the vast rear wall of naked brick. Beyond this confusion he found Miss Hedrington in her dressing-room, staring at the brightly lighted mirror above the long littered shelf before which she sat. Her brilliantly lovely auburn hair, loose, rippled down beautifully upon shoulders and back covered with a green wrapper; and her face was serious beneath a coating of transparent grease. “Close the door, Owen, please,” she said. “Just a minute.” She applied a towel to her glistening face, rubbed delicately for some moments, tossed the gayly stained towel into a basket, and, looking seriously solicitous, turned to face the playwright. “I know you won't tell George and you won't think, either, that I'm intruding in your affairs. You must know by this time, Owen, I take a warmly affectionate interest in whatever concerns you, and I can't help being worried by something that might do you a serious harm. I mean it's solely on your account that I sent Ernestine to bring you here. I don't want to see you make a mistake that would injure your career. On your own account I believe you ought to stop and think this matter over before you go ahead with it. Seriously, do you want to take the chance of ‘Catalpa House's’ failing, after all the work you've put into it, simply because you and George Hurley have impulsively put an important minor rôle into incompetent hands? You may think an inexperienced amateur in such a rôle can't ruin a play; but oh, dear me, you poor boy, I've seen it happen time and again! Time and again!”

“You think the part of ‘Myra’——”

“Oh, dear me, yes!” she said. “When you look at a fine oil painting with a hole in it, Owen, can you see anything but the hole? What's more, you've no idea how nervous it makes the whole company to have to depend upon an amateur for business and cues. You don't want to risk our all getting upset; I'm sure you don't. Listen, Owen, for your own sake—because personally I could spare myself the trouble of warning you, because I'll lose nothing if your play fails; I'd be rehearsing another part the next day. What I mean: George Hurley pretends he doesn't listen to you; but he does, and if you want to avoid this really absurdly needless risk to your whole future all you've got to do is to use your influence with him to wire New York for Mabel Meadows. She'd do ‘Myra’ to the life.”

“You think so?”

“To the life!” Miss Hedrington exclaimed, and became more urgent. “Listen! On this girl's own account do you want to expose her, untrained and awkward and amateurish as she is, to a New York first-night audience? Have you stopped to think what the newspaper wise guys would do to her? You know how they leap at such a chance—like tigers! Do

you want this little girl to have to undergo such a horrible, such a crushing experience? Really, Owen, I'm speaking to you on her own account. It's easy to see what an interest your dear mother took in her, and how it would hurt her, too, to feel responsible for such a thing's happening. There, that's all I wanted to say; but for the girl's own sake, you'll surely think it over, won't you?"

Owen looked at her thoughtfully; then turned to the door. "Don't worry, Isabelle," he said good-naturedly. "She knows better now than to cut in on you again; she won't give you any more trouble."

"If that isn't like a man!" The actress swung round to face the mirror again and began to brush her splendid auburn hair. "What's the use? Send Ernestine in to me, will you?"

He found the mulatto girl on the other side of the door, and presently detached Lily from Mr. Allan and several other members of the "Skylark" cast who had formed a group about her and were all flushed with received appreciation. "Happiness is as unbearable as grief sometimes," she said, in the brougham driving home. "Through you I've found that out; I'll never forget it's through you. By this time day after to-morrow, we'll be in New York; I've never been there but once—when I was fifteen on a two weeks' excursion with Minnie Bush and her aunt. New York! I'll be an actress in New York! Can I call you Owen? All the rest of them do. Ah, you'll let me! Owen, Owen, I don't know how to bear such joy! I just want to scream with it. Oh, this golden evening! Owen, have you ever seen a human being perfectly happy before—happy in every cell and fibre?"

It was in this mood that she said good night at the twin door of the double house and disappeared within as if she bobbed out of sight on a dancing wave of joy. The next morning, as he finished his breakfast, he was therefore sharply surprised when Nelson informed him that she was in the library accompanied by another young lady and weeping. "Yes, suh," the old servitor said. "I tol' 'em the Madam gone over to your Aunt Fanny's; but they di'n' ask fer her—say they want to see you. Yes, suh, look to me like they both been cryin' some, an' Miss Lily she cryin' right now like she can't he'p it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN the library he found Lily seated upon a sofa beside Miss Bush and clutching this betrayed friend's hand. Beneath the lower eyelids of Miss Bush were semicircular violet hints of a recent emotional vigil; yet upon a face Owen thought somewhat insipid, she had demurely the expression of a person modestly but righteously triumphant after long oppression. Lily, though wearing a sprightly blue hat and a new traveling-suit of the same hue, was nevertheless tragedy from head to foot. Her eyelashes seemed jewelled; a loose lock of her tan hair hung against a wet cheek, and she sat humped but flaccid, as if some deathly weight had crumpled the youth and almost the life out of her. She spoke in what seemed the last remaining shred of a voice. "Mr. Gilbert, this is my friend Miss Bush."

"How do you do," Owen said blankly, and Miss Bush nodded to him with the reserve and gravity of a person who self-respectingly suits the manner to the occasion.

Lily rose and stood stooped before him. "I've come," she said, in the thread-like voice. "I've come to do——" She sniffled, brought forth a sodden handkerchief and looked at it helplessly, but still had intelligence enough to see that it was too thoroughly saturated for use; whereupon her trembling fingers of their own volition began to twiddle with it, and she seemed to watch them. "I've come to do—I've come to do justice upon myself."

"See here," he said. "What on earth's the matter? Does the doctor think your mother _____"

Upon this, Lily sobbed aloud. "My mother! This will just break her heart—when she knows it. Oh, I can't tell her! Owen—Owen, you'll tell her for me? You'll do that for me? Not till this afternoon! Don't tell her till this afternoon, Owen. It'll all be settled and over and done with by then, and then I want you to go to her and tell her—tell her——"

"Good heavens! Tell her what?"

"Tell her——" Lily's stooped shoulders were pathetically convulsive; her shaking fingers picked crazily at the wet handkerchief. "Tell her I wasn't unworthy—tell her I did justice on myself. Tell her at least I had the—the moral courage—to pay with my career and my life for the awful thing I've done. Tell her she mustn't be ashamed of me for sacrificing myself and everything I've lived for—to atone. Tell her—tell her——"

"Lily!" he said sharply. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"My—my guilt," she said brokenly. "My treachery! My ruining two lives to gratify a whim! My cruelty! My baseness! My unspeakable selfishness! My——"

“Oh, see here, what——”

“Be patient,” she sobbed. “Ah, be patient with me. If you turn against me now—you! Ah, what shall I do, what shall I do?”

Sobbing aloud, she clutched both hands, and the handkerchief with them, to her eyes, and her grief was so poignant, so despairing that the perplexed young man was sharply troubled for her. “Lily, dear, please, please! If you’d only tell me what in the world——”

“I will, I will! I’ll try, I’ll try; but it’s such a frightful humiliation—before you——” Suddenly, with a jerk of her whole body, she stood erect, her head up proudly, and, although the rapid tears still coursed, “No!” she cried. “Why should I call it a humiliation? I can look you in the face, Owen, because I pay for what I’ve done. The bitterness of this renunciation is past now, and I’m calm. I promise you to go through this calmly. Look! I can even smile!” The smile was a wavering one; but it seemed to suffice her, and she followed it with a sorrowful gesture toward Miss Bush. “Owen, I’ve told you that this was my best friend; but I never told you all I owed to her. Even before she and I made our compact to be best friends and never let anything come between us, she worked to get me elected vice-president of our class in the first year of high school and got me voted the most popular girl in senior year, even after I’d left, and always worked against all my enemies. That’s just the least of it, because it was she and her aunt that invited me on that two weeks’ excursion to New York in vacation time two years ago. She did all this for me because she was true to our friendship, and what have I done to her in return? She’d told me herself the only man she could ever care for was Charlie Bright, and I didn’t want him to be in love with me; but just to feed my vanity I couldn’t help starting him. I’ve confessed to her that I started him. Afterward I tried to get him swung back to her; but it hasn’t been any use. Oh, I’m making a clean breast of it at last, Owen!”

“But why?” he remonstrated. “Why make it to me?”

Her throat showed a momentary undulation. “Because I’ve come to give up my place to her. I told you she and I had the same hopes and ambitions. Her whole guiding-star was the stage and she loved Charlie Bright. Well—I’ve taken both from her and after taking them what have I been doing? I knew she was suffering and yet I was hard-hearted enough just to put her out of my mind as much as I could. Shall I tell you what’s changed me? It was when she told me, not more than an hour ago, that after all I owed to her, what she’d have done if she’d been in my place when you came to our house that first time, she’d have said, ‘No! I’ve taken away the only man she can care for from my best friend; but I’ll give her the reward of her ambition and send for her right now to recite for you, and you can put her in your company instead of me.’ That’s what she said—and suddenly, suddenly, I saw it, and saw what I’d become. Minnie would have done that, too, Owen, if she’d been me; but I wasn’t noble enough. I didn’t even have justice enough in me to do that—but I do it now. Before it’s too late and I’ve lost my soul, I do it—I do it now!”

“You do what now?” he asked, frowning at her. “What is all this, Lily?”

She looked at him piteously; her lip began to tremble and her attitude to change into that crumpled aspect she had worn. “I give it all up,” she said faintly. “I’ve brought her to you for you to take her with you to this morning’s rehearsal instead of me. I’m going down to Vance’s to try and get Clara’s place there. Don’t you understand? I’ve come to ask you to put Minnie in the company and let her—let her play ‘Myra’ instead of me.”

“Why, certainly,” he said, after staring at her for a long moment. “What could be simpler?”

In her agitation Lily failed to perceive the satirical significance of what he said and took his words at their face-value. She gasped, gulped and began to laugh hysterically. “I think I have the funniest life! Right in the midst of when I got to be happy at last, this had to happen!” She turned to her friend upon the sofa. “There! Fix your hat on straight, Minnie; it looks awful, and he’s going to take you to Mr. Allan and Mr. Hurley and all of ’em at the theatre, probably in the coupé. You’ll be riding where I was riding last night, and to-night—to-night you’ll be on the train to New York.” She turned again to face the playwright, made a visible effort to look uplifted by sacrifice. “Be—be kind——” She spoke with difficulty, but contrived to finish the noble speech she had in mind. “Be kind—to her.” Then he saw real fright in her eyes. “Why, what’ll I do?” she asked almost quietly. Suddenly she flung herself upon his breast and clung to him, sobbing desperately, “Oh, what’ll I do? What’ll I do? What’ll I do?”

He put her into a chair, where she sat rocking the upper part of her body from side to side, shivering and whispering, “What’ll I do? What’ll I do? What’ll I do?”

“I think perhaps you’d better stop being such an idiot,” he said. “There’s only a short rehearsal this morning; but you’d better save your strength for it because it’s going to take up the parts of the play in which you appear and you’re to go over it without using your sides. We’ll have to start in a few minutes and you’d better stop your nonsense. You can go and wash your face in my mother’s bathroom.”

She leaned back and stared up at him. “You won’t put her in the company instead of me?”

“Perhaps you haven’t realized it,” he said with a pained irony; “but it’s cost some slight effort and anxiety to get you into the company yourself and keep you in it after you got there. Also, I might remind you that your mother’s incurring certain expenses depending on a salary that’ll begin when the play opens, and, additionally, that Mr. Hurley’s attitude would be that you’re still on trial in the part, Lily. Miss Bush no doubt has talent; but managers aren’t precisely in the habit of——”

Miss Bush interrupted him crisply. “Never mind, thank you!” Then she rose, came to Lily and stood before her. “I guess you can quit taking on, Lily,” she said, with a dismal kind of dignity. “I knew he wasn’t going to do it soon as I had one look at him after you began talking.” She laughed gloomily. “I guess I mean after you began acting. I don’t mean you didn’t mean it; you always do. But I’ve seen you carrying-on too often not to know it’s just where you’re in your element. Oh, yes, you were making a big sacrifice and you really thought you were doing it; but all the same you were having a big time over it and kind of believed, somewhere in your head, it wasn’t going to happen, and you were right. So you can be satisfied now, because you’ve made your sacrifice and it hasn’t cost you anything.”

Lily began to cry again. “Oh, Minnie——”

“Don’t ‘oh, Minnie’ me!” Miss Bush said. “I certainly wouldn’t have let you drag me here with you if I’d known this was the way you were going to behave—making all this and that about Charlie Bright practi’ly public, and yowling and throwing yourself around instead of what I’d have done if I’d been in your place.”

"Tell me," Lily whimpered. "Minnie, tell me what you'd have done and I'll do it."

"Yes, you will!" Miss Bush returned, with a short laugh, and gave the playwright a cold glance. "I'd just have walked in here and told your high and mighty friend sensibly that I was going to stay home and take care of my mother like I ought to, and here was a girl I owed a great deal to and could play this part in his show anyhow as well as I could, because there were experienced judges that had heard both and thought at least that much, so please be fair enough to give her a chance to show what she can do and if she's satisfactory let her take my part. Trust you to do anything like that, Lily Mars! All you did was come here and show off and leave me sitting there like a fool to be your audience, the way you have a thousand times before!"

"But I will, Minnie. I'll ask Mr. Gilbert right now to listen to——"

"Thank you so much!" Miss Bush interrupted, and laughed with a mockery somewhat shrewish. "I believe I've had enough of this farce. I'll simply ask to be excused because I'm going home!"

Lily cried out and made sounds and gestures of protest; but Miss Bush was gone before these manifestations became coherent; she went with such indignant speed that the front door loudly closed behind her while the courteous Owen, muttering hospitably, was following with the intention of opening it for her. When he returned to Lily she was prostrate, face downward, upon a sofa. "Well—how about getting your face washed, Lily?"

"I can't! I don't care! Things like that don't matter now. I want to know what you think of me."

"That this is one of the times when you've been between nine and thirteen years old."

"No; I want to know if you think I'm like what she said. Am I like that?" She swung her feet down to the floor and sat up; her eyes, now dry, were intensely preoccupied. "Minnie couldn't be right, could she? After all, what am I? I don't seem to know. I did mean it. Anyhow I thought I did. But did I? I always say what I mean; I always say what I feel—and then somehow I hear myself saying it and it doesn't seem as if I did mean it—and yet I do! It seems to me I'm two persons or, sometimes, even three! Are we all like that, Owen? I don't think we can be, because I feel so different from anybody else. Or maybe I've just got more of something that other people have a little of, and that's what makes me like this. I don't seem to be able to help what I do. Other people can, I know; you can, for instance. You're so quiet and non-committal and steady and reserved; anybody can see you know what you're doing and somehow manage what you're doing so that it's all right and everybody respects you. I'd ask you to teach me to be like that; but I know I never could. I know that all my life I'll just be doing things and see myself doing them without being able to do anything about it. But that's terrible, isn't it?"

"Terrible? Why?"

"Because——" She stood and confronted him gravely. "Because I might do anything—anything. It's like being an automobile that hasn't a driver."

"No," he said. "Not quite."

"But it is! And just listen to me now—I never seem to be interested in anything except myself. Why, you must be horribly disgusted with me! Are you?"

"No!" he said angrily. "Go upstairs and wash your face, and hurry. You know what'll

happen if you're late."

She looked at him timidly, seemed pleased and went meekly upon the errand, quickening her steps as she passed through the doorway. As for Owen Gilbert, he listened to the sound of her rushing ascent of the stairs, sighed heavily and drooped into a chair, wondering if his sense of exhaustion wasn't another token that Lily Mars was indeed truly an actress. Everywhere, he knew, there were people whose emotional disturbances left their friends exhausted and themselves refreshed; but in his few years of the theatre he had known more such people than in all his life before. "She's certainly got that!" he thought, not for the first time. "Whether they live every moment more intensely than other people do—who knows? But they certainly take it out of the rest of us!"

Lily returned briskly, beaming upon him confidently and extending her hand in a new glove she wished him to button at the wrist. On the way down town in the open carriage she chattered gayly about Harry Vokes, Miss Lebrun and other members of the theatrical company, and then, when they were near the theatre, she interrupted herself abruptly and said, "Do you know, something's just come to me. I don't believe she really cares one bit about that moony little old Charlie Bright any more. He hasn't got a sign of a chin and she knows what a simp he is, perfectly as well as I do; she couldn't help it. I believe absolutely she just used all that broken-heart stuff on me this morning to get me worked up so't I'd bring her over and get you to let her play 'Myra' instead of me." Lily laughed airily, so light was her heart. "Well, wasn't I a ninny? I just know that was it!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE carriage stopped at the curb; Lily skipped into the theatre and went through her scenes in the play without her “sides” and without being prompted. Moreover, though the patient Monk gave her minor instructions from time to time, she was not once interrupted by the manager who sat in an apparently glum silence, watching her, until the brief rehearsal ended. Then he rubbed his chin, sighed thoughtfully and turned his Napoleonic profile toward the playwright who, as usual, sat behind him. “Looks as if she might be going to get something out of that part. I let her alone to-day to see if she’d got the lines set; but I’ll go at her in New York. Kind of looks as if she had something. It may be, it may be—I suppose not; they nearly always disappoint you or do something impossible. Let’s get out.” Then, as they walked up the dark aisle together, he laughed gloomily. “Tell your mother she’s cost me this girl’s fare to New York anyhow and if I have to send her back I’m going to deduct the bill from your royalties. I’ve got an idea your mother helped to put this over on me, and I don’t know yet whether I ought to sue her for it or send her a basket of orchids. You tell her that’s my farewell word to her.”

Owen delivered the message late that evening; he had come downstairs in grey, after removing and packing the ceremonial clothes in which it was his gallant habit to dine with his mother, and she had told him fondly that he looked “more distinguished than ever” in grey. “Mr. Hurley seems to like grey, too,” she added absently. “At least, that’s what he’s worn the few times I’ve seen him. He’s a fine-looking man, I think, and in spite of his reddish hair he does look like Napoleon—though of course he doesn’t compare to you, dear.”

Owen laughed, and, thus reminded, told her what Hurley had said; whereupon Mrs. Gilbert nodded amiably. “He’s a curiously interesting person, Owen. One never sees him or even hears of him when he isn’t barking loudly at somebody. I wonder if he doesn’t do it with the idea that if he barks fiercely all the time he won’t have to bite so often.” Then she smiled, as if a thought of hers had been confirmed. “So he sends me a farewell message about Lily Mars, does he? I really wonder how much he’s thought of anything else since that night here.”

“Hurley? Good heavens! He has a thousand things on his mind all the time.”

“Yes, but I think Lily’d be there, too. I don’t mean she’s in his mind alone. Don’t you realize that this whole fandango—all these rehearsals and the company’s week here, and most of everything you and I say to each other and probably quite a good deal of what

most of them say to one another—yes, and even your play itself—that it all now somehow seems to be about Lily Mars? Where she’s concerned in anything it all seems to revolve about her. Dear me, but I am glad you’re immune from the spell she casts!”

“Yes, it seems to be fortunate,” he said, and, with an apparently unconcerned shift of subject, began to talk intelligibly of his aunts, uncles and cousins in the town. That he was intelligible was a credit to his mental ambidexterity, so to speak; for he was all the while disquietingly engaged with the realization that since his first meeting with Lily Mars he had almost continuously thought of her, even though he thought of other things at the same time. What did it mean, this obsession? The question rather painfully alarmed him, and for the moment he did not care to press it upon himself.

Later, in the lighted sleeping-car set apart in the station for the theatrical company, the question seemed inclined to do its own pressing. Lily had not arrived; but she had twenty minutes grace, and, though he thought of the possibility, he was not really apprehensive that in her stead Miss Bush would appear at the last minute with a commission, signed by Lily, entitling the bearer to the rôle of “Myra” in “Catalpa House”. The porter was making seats into sleeping-berths; but the two older ladies of the company were playing cribbage in one of the open sections, while elsewhere old Briggs, the stage manager, and other minor necessary people of the organization sat relaxed yet talking briskly, refreshed with the prospect of New York. Through the open door of the “drawing-room” Miss Hedrington, Hurley and Allan were seen to be engaged with newspapers, and from the smoking-compartment at the end of the car came sounds of revelry—the ponderous basso of old Ord and the high, too sweet tenor of young Harry Vokes syncopating.

*“When I—I danced with Sammy
Down in—in Alabammy,
Where the—the bull—the bull-frogs play,
In their plunk—plunk-plunking way—”*

Owen went behind the “drawing-room” to the compartment he was to share with the manager and smoked an inch of cigar there; then he looked nervously at his watch, got up, frowning, and walked through the car to the rear platform. She was not yet in sight and for a moment he looked in upon the blithe spirits of the smoking-room, where drifted with the smoke an aerial suggestion of whisky. Ord and Vokes had stopped singing and were listening to Pinkney Monk who had been washing his face and hands in the bright metal basin in the corner and talked, partly through a towel. “No; I never acted again from that day to this, and I never will. It was six years ago the last Fourth of February; I’d never thought of such a thing before in my life. I’d just sat down at my dressing-table after the play and looked at myself in the mirror and saw my face all made-up pretty with grease-paint, and my lips red and my eyebrows and eyelids pencilled, and all at once I said to myself without knowing why, ‘I’m no woman! This may be all right for a woman; but it isn’t a man’s business and, so help me, I’ll never do it again!’ And I didn’t! It may be all right for you boys, but——”

“Boys?” Ord rumbled dangerously. “Stripling, do you boy me? Me centre stage playing heavies in ‘Two Orphans’, ‘Celebrated Case’, ‘Sea of Ice’, ‘Round the World in Eighty Days’; your father out front half weaned in your grandmother’s lap and spoiling big effect by squawking and puling in fear of me! The cask, Harry, the cask of old

Marsala!" Vokes handed him a silver flask and he drank from it hurriedly. "Gave up acting because it shamed him, and now makes his living by your shame and mine, Harry. There's a man!"

The fat young comedian made his infantile and ludicrously debauched face into a grimace that burlesqued martyrdom. "They all do," he said. "Managers, producers, theatre syndicates, stage-hands, critics, advance men, press agents, scene painters, doormen, electricians and ushers, they all live off the shame of you and me, Joe, and a few other really good actors. They all do it, especially authors," he added, for the entertainment of Owen. "Authors are the worst of all the gazabos that exploit us. You and I produce the wealth, authors and harpies that play the bass viol in theatre orchestras get all the money. Let's be socialists." He smiled graciously upon the playwright, and asked, "You see Tom-Jim-Jack anywhere around outside?"

"Who?"

"Tom-Jim-Jack. Thomas Worthington, James Morton and John Lancey. I allude to the three serious young troupers of this company who sometimes join me in song, to form what is loosely spoken of as a quartet. Thomas, James and John always go to the same hotel, always eat together, always tittle together, always love together. Having a keen sense of fitness, I lump them into one person and call them or it Tom-Jim-Jack. You, being such a scholar, or something, remember of course that Victor Hugo, the old copy-cat, imitated this thought of mine in 'L'homme Qui Rit', which was just wonderful of him because he did it long before I was born. Don't think I've been drinking or anything much; but have you noticed Tom-Jim-Jack, I pause to ask, anywhere around, in or near this almost private car?"

"No."

"I see," Vokes said. "I see. There is a peculiar dulcimer voice I've lately learned to know, and my dust would hear it and beat had I lain for a century dead, and it is not yet one of those percolating to this sanctuary. Grog and song delight Tom-Jim-Jack, yet it or they is or are waiting outside the station in the hope of getting next to said dulcimer with winning ways connected with bag-carrying. Tom-Jim-Jack——" The car jolted with a heavy impact at the other end and interrupted him; he clapped upon his abdomen a pudgy hand that shot a tiny dart of light from a diamond upon the little finger. "My heart! They're coupling us up, Tom-Jim-Jack aren't or isn't here; but what's terrifying to me the dulcimer isn't here!"

Owen looked again at his watch, and Hurley, pushing aside the curtain of the narrow doorway, thrust his head and black soft hat into the little room. "Where's your ingénue?" he asked angrily. "Taking another train she likes better? Maybe she's decided to retire from the stage; maybe she thinks it'd be more fun after all to just stay here and dance with the home town boys. Making a good beginning, isn't she, missing the train and——"

"Hark, the dulcimer!" Harry Vokes exclaimed, and moved his head close to Ord's. "Eugene Cowles, Pol Plançon, Edouard de Reszke, we'll greet her! Vamp me this! Oh, prom—oh, prom—oh, prom, prom, prom—Oh, promise me that some day you and I will *take our love together*——"

Hurley gave the singers an enigmatic look, withdrew to the main part of the car, and Owen followed him. Lily rushed in, chattering and laughing, and the three young actors

hurried noisily with her, carrying two shabby old valises for her with their own more modish equipment. In one hand she held a bouquet of clustered pink rosebuds evidently designed for the corsage; but there its intended place was occupied by a floral ornament, gardenias based in purple tin-foil; and Owen, seeing this, was disquieted by the sharpness of the twinge he felt. Thinking to please Mrs. Mars, so he believed, he had gone to a florist's that afternoon, and the rosebuds Lily now waved in excited greeting to him and Hurley and the others were of his sending. Who had sent her the gardenias she wore upon her breast?

He discovered that someone else was interested in the gardenias. Hurley shouted savagely, "What do you think this is—a trip to a college prom?" But Miss Hedrington, coming from the "drawing-room", paused by Owen and laughed too loudly in applause of the manager. "I suppose some local swain provided her with the rosebuds," she said, and Owen perceived that she was contemptuously at no loss to divine the sender of the gardenias. Indeed the flushed and exhilarated Lily was bending her head to them to prove her appreciation as the tall Allan hurried to join the group about her. "My word!" the leading lady exclaimed, and returned to the "drawing-room", while the playwright meditatively went back to the compartment behind it.

He found the two berths prepared for slumber, but took a book from his traveling-bag and sat down in the compartment's one chair, to read. The car was heavily jolted again, then began to glide forward, and the manager came in, fuming. "Candy, too! Candy in pale pink satin ribbons! That's the way it goes; work your heart out trying to make a feather-head into an actress and pretty soon what you'll get's a batch of shirtfronts and crush-hats hanging around the stage door, thinking a manager's business is digging up girls for them. Crowd you right out of a dressing-room in your own theatre; I give you my word they will! Lord, what a life!" He groaned angrily and began to undress. "I'll take the upper; I always do—better air. Read as long as you like; the light won't keep me awake. Wire from Adler; says 'Blue Monday' is a hit and did sixteen thousand at the Twenty-ninth Street this week. That's the Brangin piece. Didn't have a third act curtain when they tried it out in Atlantic City and looked like the soup. Sim Brangin had the author write a dope fiend into it and gave him the third act curtain line—calls his sister three dirty names in succession, each one worse. Now they've got all New York and all the shirtfront and pearl necklace visiting rubbernecks from out here, your intellectual part of the country, Owen, all pouring out money to the speculators to hear a hundred-dollar-a-week actor say three words on the stage that'd only make 'em think 'rather disgusting' if they heard 'em up an alley. If business drops, all Sim Brangin has to do is put in one more name for this boy to call his sister; that'd make four and be worth thousands and thousands of dollars to Sim and Steenie. Tip for you on how to write big box-office plays."

"I doubt it. You see, after they've used the four words, they'd have to use five, and then six, and then seven and eight, until finally you wouldn't have any other words in your whole manuscript, and I should think it might be rather cloying."

"They'll do it," Hurley said, though he laughed sourly at himself for the prediction. "The day'll come when you'll hear everything on the stage that you would in a saloon. Of course there'll have to be some other words in between to shape up the story and make the shocks fatter by the feed-lines that lead up to 'em; but now that the Brangins have pulled this off and'll make a fortune out of it you'll hear five barrel-house words on the stage

next year for every one you hear this. The biggest class of suckers in the United States is the one that'll pay money to dress up and sit with a lot of other dressed-up suckers and either get shocked or be proud they're too smart to get shocked. Well, God help the stage; I can't!" He grumbled himself into his pajamas, climbed up into the higher berth, settled himself for slumber with his face away from the light; then rolled over and looked down sardonically. "I've got a great idea."

"I hope not, George; that usually means you want something changed in the script of 'Catalpa House'."

"Wait! This girl of your mother's, for instance; she's young and she has a look sometimes that has a kind of wondering, trusting, flower-like innocence—you know, like one of Sir Joshua Reynolds's children. How about our giving her the climax curtain speech?"

Owen looked up, astounded. "What!"

"Why, certainly!" Hurley grinned to find his satire taken seriously. "If we let Isabelle do it, there'd only be the ordinary shock of hearing a woman who looks like a lady saying something indecent; but this girl of your mother's, now, if we gave a child like that a line that'd make a gorilla blush, there'd be a fortune in it."

"I think there would," Owen agreed. "What's more, I'm afraid there are one or two people in your business, George, who'd almost do it."

"They would if they thought of it," Hurley said. "And if the police'd let 'em. On my soul, I believe the stage'll go to hell some day. On my soul, I do!" He turned his face to the wall, sighed, murmured, "Some day" indistinctly and was silent.

Owen read vaguely for an hour and more without achieving the inclination to sleep that he sought. The pounding rumble of the heavy train at times became insistently rhythmic in his ears and seemed to repeat the syncopations of Harry Vokes and old Ord.

*"When I—I danced with Sammy,
Down in—in Alabammy,
Where the—the bull—the bull-frogs play—"*

He closed the book and, listening, let it rest in his lap, for it seemed to him that faintly, faintly mingling with the roar of the train through the night were distant human voices. The sound was so eerily slender that for a time he thought it probably an illusion; then he realized that by some freak of acoustics he was actually hearing a waft of revelry that still must be continuing in the smoking-compartment. The hints of song, now just audible, now wholly lost in the noise of the train, produced in him a slight uneasiness—he could not have said why—and he finally yielded to an impulse to look in again upon the revellers. As he came from the narrow passage outside the compartment and the "drawing-room", and stepped into the now shrouded aisle through the car, he saw coming toward him a tall and manly figure in a girdled robe of Chinese scarlet silk. The gorgeous apparition, dimmed by the meagre night-light of the sleeper, halted and awaited his approach.

"Still up, 'Gene," the playwright said in a lowered voice, when he reached him. "Have you been singing with——"

"Not precisely!" the leading man replied with feeling. "I've been to bed two or three times; but I couldn't sleep. There's a section that hasn't been made up down at the end of

the car and we can talk there.”

“I suppose the noise in the smoking-compartment kept you awake,” Owen said, as they seated themselves in the open section. “Curious, I could hear it in the compartment at the other end of the car; but I can’t hear it here.”

“No, they’re not singing just now,” his friend informed him. “When they do, it doesn’t sound loud enough out here to keep anybody awake necessarily. They’re telling stories now, anyhow, old Joe Ord especially, of course. I’ve been listening in the passage and so far the songs and stories seem to have been printable. The thing that worries me most is what the women of the company’ll think about it and—and the use Isabelle may make of it.”

“Isabelle?” the playwright asked; but his heart sank. “Why, what would she care how late those boys——”

“Those boys! Hark!”

They heard an applausive chorus of laughter, muffled by the partitions, and the voices were not all those of men; then there followed a burst of song, over which there rippled and trilled the single sweet soprano that had run its silver thread through the heavy laughter.

*“Then we—we went out mooning,
While they—they did their crooning
In their plunk—plunk-plunking way—”*

“There!” Allan said angrily. “She told me this morning you were virtually her guardian. I don’t mind saying you seem to me a pretty poor one!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE troubled playwright did not argue the point. Instead, he asked, “Have you been in there?”

“No!” the actor returned with subdued violence. “How could I? If I’d gone in I’d have either had to look genial and approving or glowered at them, and if I glowered I was open to disagreeable interpretations. All I could do was to fret. I suppose you know that George assigned the drawing-room to Isabelle and Miss Mars together, do you?”

“Yes; it struck me as very thoughtful of him and——”

“Wasn’t it!” Allan exclaimed satirically. “Tactful! With Isabelle getting herself every day more and more into a state of mind about her, he thoughtfully ups and puts them in the drawing-room together! You don’t suppose Isabelle’s going to miss a chance like this, do you? She knows where the girl is and she’ll know what time she gets in, won’t she? It’s going on three in the morning right now! Puts me in a pleasant position, doesn’t it?”

“You? I don’t just see how you——”

“No, I suppose not,” Allan said moodily. “I might as well tell you; I wouldn’t confide in anybody but you, though. Just lately I’ve been wondering if I could ever come to doubt my feeling for Isabelle. What I mean, I’ve wondered if some day I’d question myself about it’s being the real thing—I mean the thing that can only come once to anybody. What I mean, some time after it’s too late maybe, mightn’t I perhaps be startled by finding I had a deeper feeling for somebody else who would be really the one? I tell you, old boy, I’ve had moments lately when I’ve almost been shaken and it’s seemed to me that practically without knowing it I might contain possibilities of a passion I hardly suspected, myself, I had the capacity for. Well, if that happened to me I mightn’t have any power over it—it might get beyond me. Of course I’d strive with every ounce of strength within me to be loyal to Isabelle; but I know the spiritual struggle would be something frightful. I don’t believe you know how these things can tear and rend a man, Owen.”

“No,” Owen said. “I don’t suppose I do—at least not as you describe them.”

“You couldn’t! I don’t believe another living soul could be torn and rent as I could be. Nobody could help me; I’d just have to fight it out with myself. The question I keep asking and asking myself is simply this: What’s fair to Isabelle? The trouble is, she cares for me so frightfully I just don’t dare to let her dream I could ever give a thought to anybody else—I don’t know what she’d do! You see, she doesn’t really dream that I ever

could; she makes scenes when she merely dreams that she dreams I could—I mean just on the breath of a suspicion. If she ever really does think it, then heaven help me! You see what a position I'm in. Just suppose I'd gone into the smoking-room and made myself disagreeable enough to get Lily out of there, and somebody told Isabelle. God!"

Another burst of laughter was heard, and the gayest and lightest of the voices rang reproachfully in the heart of the young man to whom a stricken mother had lately confided her daughter. "It's all unknown country for her," he said. "Of course she doesn't understand anything. I supposed Jennie Lebrun would at least tell her things; she's going to look after her in New York and have her with her at her Madison Avenue boarding-house. I suppose Jennie just went to sleep. There's only one thing for us to do, 'Gene, of course; we'll have to get her out of there somehow."

"We? After what I've just been saying to you? Don't you suppose that if I'd dared, I'd have done it an hour ago? No, my boy; that's your affair!"

"Very well." Owen rose decisively and strode into the passage that led to the curtained doorway of the smoking-room; but there, out of sight of his friend, walked more hesitantly and came to a dubious halt. The sonorous voice of old Ord was holding forth.

"What is an actor? Fair child, shall I tell you?"

Lily could be heard laughing eagerly as she cried, "Yes, Joe! Yes! Yes! Yes!" But her encouragement was almost smothered under a protestive booing.

"Not so!" Ord rumbled triumphantly. "She knows me but this hour, Thespians, yet knows me better than you would in cycles of Cathay! She knows I never repeat myself. She, this fair butterfly just from the dreary cocoon, this novice just fled out into life from the dark convent grille, she, this opening sweet bud, she sees upon that monument, my forehead, the surge of a new thought. She bids me say what is an actor, and I reply he is an artist. But what, then, is art? Art is what the lily-maid and I make when out of ourselves we make new worlds to show the old one what itself is made of. This is a magnificent saying; I couldn't have done it without a clink of the cup and a lily-maid to glow upon me. What is it an actor holds up to nature? You've heard from a fine mind a mirror; but I say it is the cipher key to the secrets of Olympus. He-trouper, you can't possibly understand such talk; the hazel-haired Athenian child alone comprehends me and that's my reward for staying sober. What! I'm doubted? Sober I am indubiter—I mean indubitably. Do, mi, sol, do, 'No word of mine'! Sound the chord."

Unanimously sentimental, five male voices began to sing, with Lily's soprano trilling high over them, even above the unctuous falsetto of the fat young comedian.

*"No word of mine shall mar, shall mar thy joy,
Nor dim one smile of thine so bright—"*

Something in the absurd, old-fashioned words, and more in the girl's appealing young voice, touched the listener, as he stood, uncertain, in the passageway. All at once he found himself sentimental, too; he frowned and went slowly back to his waiting friend.

"Well! Well!" Allan said. "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"What? You haven't even been in there and——"

“No, confound it, how could I? I’m not equipped with papers of guardianship and if I presume to interfere in what they have a perfect right to think isn’t my business——”

“What!” Allan exclaimed hotly. “You’re only afraid of what they’d say to you. You’re afraid to go in there because you’re afraid of looking ridiculous!”

“Well—aren’t you?”

“No!” Allan exclaimed with increasing fervor. “You know why I can’t do it; I’ve just told you. It’s your business because you’re responsible for her being here and because she calls your mother ‘Aunt Anne’. You know your duty as well as I do. What, you mean to say you’d let a girl who’s a friend of your family’s spend the night in an orgy led by Harry Vokes—with his reputation known through the whole profession! Look here! Either you go in there and stop it or I do, and you know what interpretation Isabelle will put on that. All right, let her! I don’t care what, I’m not going to stand for a thing like this happening to a young girl in a profession I have some ideals about. I tell you——”

His rising voice was interrupted by a heavy groan from the opposite section. The lower half of the curtains were parted and a dishevelled head and sallow face appeared wanly in the opening. “*Would* you fellows go and discuss everything somewhere else?” Pinkney Monk said pleadingly. “I don’t mind hearing the singing a little, occasionally; it’s more or less soothing—but this political argument of yours is keeping me awake.”

Allan muttered incoherently under his breath and the two withdrew to the vestibule at the other end of the car. There, the actor ruffled his fair hair with a nervous white hand. “Fool that I am! The truth is, I’m upset; I’m not myself or I wouldn’t have been so careless. I can only hope he didn’t hear what I said about Isabelle; but, after all, what’s that matter compared to the thing that’s happening? See here; you know how dangerous this is. We can’t simply stand here and let it go on. How much chance is there George Hurley won’t hear of it? He talks like a cynic; but you know his ideals for the profession and that they’re as high as my own. I never in my life knew of a girl’s being in a Pullman men’s-room before! Are you going to let her stay there or what are you going to do? Answer me, Owen! What do you intend to do about it? Answer me!”

“I don’t know. That’s a scapegrace lot, of course; but old Ord’s with them and when I listened she seemed to be just young and excited and happy.”

Allan stamped his foot. “Happy! See here; this is sheer torture to me. You don’t understand that, because you may be an artist in your own way but it’s a cold thing you do, sitting alone in a room with paper and a pot of ink—that’s your material. An actor’s material is his own body—ah, and his own soul! Do you think any other kind of living creature could have his terrific sensitiveness or suffer half as sharply? What’s a little thing to other people might be agony to me. You’re a little worried; but you don’t really care whether or not this girl destroys herself being ‘happy’—God save the mark!—with that mugger of a Harry Vokes. He’s had his eye on her from the first, I tell you! Oh, you can smile if you like! Laugh at me, why don’t you! Laugh!”

“No,” Owen said. “I don’t feel in the least like it.”

“You do! You don’t care anything about this girl personally. I’ve seen that, too. Your mother’s fond of her; but she bores you and so you won’t help her—or help me. You won’t help me get her out of there. I take an interest in her, I tell you, and I loathe and detest the world’s old snobbish ignorance of my profession, thinking it means

unconventional living a few shades better than gypsying, and I don't want to see this girl getting that way. I don't want to see her cheapening herself with Harry Vokes and Jack Lancey! I tell you she's making herself cheap and that's anguish to me! But you—you don't care. You shirk your duty and excuse yourself by saying everything's all right because old Joe Ord is there. Old Joe Ord! My soul and body!"

He elaborated the theme. Old Joe Ord, he explained, was nothing—thistledown turned fossil but still weightless. Old Joe Ord was the unfortunate survival of a period in art that should have become extinct without leaving such traces; he belonged to the ancient bellowing Bohemians, rightly outcasts, who could not be asked to a gentleman's house, since they would less probably tip the butler than attempt to borrow from him. Yet here was this pagan relic, this obsolete vacuum, cited as a chaperon for a young girl who caroused all night with a lower sort of players in a Pullman washroom! The agitated Eugene, before his protracted eloquence abated, gripped his friend fiercely by the shoulders, talked closely in his face, and was incomparably more vehement in voice and vigorous in action than ever he was in scenes of passion played upon the stage. In the theatre, indeed, his vogue rested heavily upon his power to express with quiet and reserve such feeling as possessed him now, and the playwright, in the midst of perturbations, recalled curiously that he had seen old Joe Ord pass through a moment of real emotion in such quiet he was almost dumb, whereas old Joe's acting in the theatre knew no reservations at all.

This bit of Owen's observation of contradictory phenomena was only a preoccupied flip with the tail of his mind. Time was passing; Eugene raved on—and here they both continued to stand, wavering with the train's changing flight and with indecision. It was Eugene who finally ended the indecision. "All right," he said desperately. "You won't do it and I can't stand it. I'll go back there myself and tell her Isabelle wants to see her in the drawing-room and——"

"Eugene! Don't do that, because she'll naturally tell Isabelle that you——"

"I don't care! I will, and when she's gone I'll stay there and give them a bit of my mind!" As he pushed open the door of the car, he felt Owen's hand upon his shoulder. "Don't try to stop me. I——"

"No, I see I can't. I'll go with you."

They strode through the dim car, and, assisted by a curve in the railway track, made a dramatic but plunging entrance into the smoking-room. Pinkney Monk, in his pajamas and slippers and an old brown dressing-robe was seated there, alone, smoking a cigarette and looking out reflectively at the dark, receding landscape.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“THEY’RE all gone to bed,” he said, in a casual tone. “You fellows got me so wide awake I couldn’t sleep, so I got up and came in and told ’em all to get the hell out of here because it was time for little girls to be in bed and they’d get the devil from George for keeping everybody awake if they didn’t. Sit down a while?”

“Thank you,” Eugene said coldly, inhaled and exhaled one long breath audibly, and withdrew. Owen hesitated, glanced at the stage director, who was still looking out of the window; then sat down and lighted a cigar. Several minutes passed; Monk smoked contemplatively, and when he finally broke the noisy silence it was in that same manner, as if he spoke of something in which both he and his companion took but a remote and academic interest.

“’Gene gets it when he gets it. Never stopped to think carrying-on up and down the car might make her even more talked about in the company and get her in a worse mess than what went on in here. Funny thing about her. Did you ever happen to be walking in the country at night and see what you thought was a nice bright little star go out because it was only a farmhouse light up on a slope and somebody turned it off? Personally I don’t care whether that’s what’s going to happen to her or not; but I did think it was about time for anybody to be getting to bed who’s expected to keep in shape to act in a play pretty soon. Purely business with me. I don’t care what they do, so it doesn’t touch box-office. Run loose and go without sleep till they die if it doesn’t hurt that; no affair of mine.” Then, as there was no response, he gave the playwright a slightly suspicious and challenging side-glance before repeating himself with a defensive emphasis. “Personally, as I say, I don’t take any special interest in her. Personally, I mean, if she runs wild what business is it of mine? It’s nothing to me, because personally I don’t care. See what I mean?”

“Yes,” Owen said, looking at him gravely. “I think I do.”

In this reply the director perceived no undercurrent; he spoke on. “Been watching her. I mean professionally at rehearsals. Outside, of course, I don’t care and wouldn’t take the trouble. It’s all a question of whether she’ll ever pick up a bag o’ tricks. She might; you can’t tell. God knows any actor learns easily enough how to crab some other actor’s line or kill his laugh, if he wants to, though it takes some brains to do it and not get caught at it by the fellow that’s crabbed. Golly, if the audience and critics only knew, sometimes, what they’re looking straight at and not seeing! What I mean about her, it looks a little as

if she had a natural eye for picking up the right sort of tricks. For instance, only this morning she picked up old Joe's back step. You notice it?"

"No. I didn't even know he had a back step."

"Old-fashioned trouper stuff, but good sometimes," Monk explained. "When he's going to cross the stage or even got a short cross to make, Joe puts one foot behind him before he steps out, balances himself just the least part of a second, then gives himself a swing forward by pushing himself with the foot that's behind him. It gives him a decisive movement and makes them notice him from out front without knowing why or having any idea that he's working a little technique on 'em. Well, she caught it—I think she hardly knew, herself, that she was picking it up from him—and she saw the right place to use it and put it in. It's a pretty small thing; but my idea of a big performance of a part is one that's made up of about a thousand little things. When an actor gets a fat bagful o' tricks and can take out the right ones to use for any part he gets, he has a chance to see his name in electric lights some day—that is, if he's got that other thing along with his bag o' tricks. Of course that other thing gets it for some of 'em a while; but it don't last long unless they've got the bag o' tricks, too. What do you think yourself about that other thing? Think she's got some?"

"Yes," Owen said slowly, and was unaware that he also spoke sadly, "I think she has."

"Looks like it, maybe. But an actress with that other thing is just like any girl that has it. Take any girl like that in any town; she'll have all the boys on the hop, and then after a year or two she'll get married and pretty soon she'll lose that other thing, and if that's all she had and she didn't bother to collect anything with her brains, her husband'll feel like a cross widower, because he certainly hasn't got what he married; outside the home he's liable to behave like a widower that isn't cross. No, sir, this Lily Mars of yours is just the same as a million other women, past, present and future, only it's more life and death to her because she wants to be an actress. While it lasts they think they're always going to have it, and a girl on the stage that's got it gets big hands and big notices and thinks she'll always go great because she's a great actress. Then it's gone—flooy!—and if she hasn't got a bagful o' tricks her audience'll walk out on her the way a husband would wish he knew how to, and she might as well be Friday's flowers on the Monday morning ash barrel." He laughed indifferently, then added in a sprightlier tone, "As far as I'm concerned myself, though, as I say, I don't care how late she sits up or who she makes jealous or how much trouble she gets herself and other people into. Personally that's all your business, not mine."

"Is it?" Owen said quietly; but his dark eyes were haggard, and his mother would have caught the bitterness in his tone. He rose abruptly and went to the doorway. "Well, if it's my business to look after her, I certainly am a failure at it. I suppose I—I think I ought to thank you for——"

"For to-night? Me? Certainly not! Personally I wouldn't lift my little finger——"

"I see," Owen said, turning into the passageway. "Then I'll only say good night."

The obscure green aisle of the car, mysterious between curtained files of prostrate bodies each engaged in its own mystery, was not all voiceless as he passed through it. From a lower berth upon the right came a hurried babbling in a monotone—"You up stage, me down, you on blue horse, fine prop, business of clasping me in your arms—me

business of laughing in your face”—the fleshy and fleshly Vokes talking in his sleep, and still a comedian. Slumbers across the aisle were not disturbed, for here the dead air shook with the impact of such snorts, cluckings, gulplings and mighty outpuffings as may be heard in windy caverns that receive the ocean surf; thus any wakeful altruist had the happy assurance that Joseph Ord slept.

Owen Gilbert found himself indifferent upon the point; he was angry with both the old actor and the young comedian, and later, in his own berth, was kept awake by his complaint against them, against Eugene Allan, against Lily Mars and against himself.

The faults in himself that he found most shameful were ineptitude and helplessness; both seemed to spring from a lifelong personal reticence that was apparently part of the character with which he had been born. It had always been natural to him to write freely and sometimes easily upon any subject except himself; but when he mingled with his fellow-creatures and spoke to them there was a weight upon his tongue. Now here he was, habitually speechless and his lot cast by ironical destiny among the most expressive people of the world! Moreover, here was that same sly destiny playing tricks upon him because of his helpless moral passivity, saddling him with the care of an irresponsible girl upon whose safety and achievement hung two lives besides her own. He had this night proved that he had neither the wit nor the decisiveness to preserve her, just as he had earlier shown nothing but incapacity when he had wished to help her.

Most ironical of all, he objected on grounds of taste to almost everything she did. For but one single quality of hers he had an admiration, and that tempered by protest; she was evidently capable of emotional reckless self-sacrifice. As for the rest of her, seen from his plane, she apparently lacked even the vital necessities of a woman to be considered; she had no discrimination, too many men fell in love with her, she had no discretion and only desultory flickerings of common sense. She was all flaws, ignorances and an accidental talent of a scope yet unknown. Properly he should have felt no more than a slightly amused disapproval of her when he thought of her—if he thought of her at all! Yet here he was, witch-ridden and unable to think of anything else.

Her odd sweet voice was incessant in his ears, his mind's eye was only a lively storehouse continually being stocked with new pictures of her. She was before him in every posture he had seen her assume; her face wore every expression he had beheld upon it. She wept before him, smiled, laughed—and came close, her hand light upon his arm and her timid look worshipping him ineffably, to say, “Such duty as the subject owes the prince, even such a woman oweth to her husband.” Then, with that strange word “husband” troubling his heart, he saw her bend her head to Eugene's gardenias, and winced again with the same hot twinge in his breast.

He saw her in the theatre, in his mother's house, in the ugly little brown room where her mother lay; he saw Lily as she sought to detain him by the picket gate before the shabby double house. He saw her in fine black velvet, in the cheap street-dress she had worn at her first rehearsal, in blue cloth and in ancient satin; he saw her sit and stand and walk and dance—most recurrently of all he saw her dance and watched the fast shifting twinkle of yellowed old satin moving upon the flying gracefulness beneath it.

“Let me alone! Let me alone!” he mumbled, in his berth. “What are you to my mind or to my spirit?” Then beneath him tons of steel whizzing on other steel would ruthlessly chant and chant and chant a mocking rhythm.

*“When I—I danced with Sammy,
Down in—in Alabammy—”*

At last full knowledge of his plight came upon him, saddened and humiliated him. Near daylight he understood that Lily was never to be banished, and gave up; for good and ill he was in love with her, and so closed tired eyes and slept.

He woke after noon, found he was alone in the compartment, had breakfast brought to him there and did not come forth into the main part of the car until three o’clock. The place was dazzling with rhomboids of sunshine from the windows where autumnal trees and fields incessantly swept backward out of sight; and beside Miss Lebrun, at about the middle of the car, Lily sat, brightly sunlit and facing him but not looking at him, for her lowered eyelids were dark in a pale and tragic face. “Yes—and ought to look that way, too!” he thought vindictively; but she was avenged by the pang that went through him to see her so downcast.

Old Briggs, the stage manager, sat facing her, talking animatedly to her and Miss Lebrun. Ord and Monk were seated together near the end of the car, and across the aisle from them Rita Carlin, Miss Lebrun’s contemporary, worked at an embroidery; but the “drawing-room” door was closed and no other members of the company were in sight. Briggs explained the greater part of this absence as Owen passed in the aisle.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Gilbert,” he said, with a characteristic officious courtesy. “There was a Pullman smoker hitched on forward, this morning, and if you’re hunting for Mr. Hurley or Mr. Allan——”

“I’m not, thank you,” Owen said, looking at Lily.

She turned her head slowly and lifted a wounded, pleading gaze to his face. Her quick and tremulous breathing was visible, almost audible, and the plea she made was plain—“Ah, stay! Talk to me! Be kind to me! Help me!” But he was cold and more than formal, gave her the briefest nod, passed on and sat down in the next section on the other side of the aisle.

From there Briggs was within his view, showing a pathetic powdered old face brightened with his own talk and the possession of listeners. Once a leading man of some consequence, he was now the least of mortals and virtually a pensioner upon Hurley; but Owen stared at him angrily, hating every inoffensive thing about the man, his unwiped eyeglasses on a heavy black cord, his dapper, stiff, winged collar, his inappropriate white waistcoat with a puffed out fold like a little shelf across his stomach, and a fine sprinkling of cinders along this shelf. “Ass!” the playwright thought. “Can’t you see her nerves are on edge and let her alone?”

Old Briggs smiled fatuously, touched his waxed white moustache and resumed an interrupted narrative. “Of course that was years and years before this specialist warned me about my heart, see, and stopped my acting—except bits of course. I played a season with Sol Smith Russell, see, and three with Nat Goodwin before I ever met Dick Mansfield at all, see. I saw right away that we two would never get on, see, though he was a good actor—mind you, I don’t say he wasn’t—but I saw from the first that the day would come when I and he were going to clash, and sure enough it did. You understand in my old Joe Jefferson days I’d caught the trick of knowing just exactly when they wanted a laugh out front, see, and when they weren’t ready for it. But you see Mansfield never caught on to

how long you can hold them without a laugh and, see, I knew he was weak there, see, so I just quietly waited my opportunity——”

From behind the playwright came the resounding voice of Ord. “Nine hours more and I’ll be eating rarebit and drinking beer with my old Becky, praise the Lord! She’s at the Empire, playing the grandmother in the ‘Puppet Show’, and she’ll have six scraggly yellow chrysanthemums on the dining-room table of the little old flat to show she’s glad I’m home. Yes, sir, forty-eight years married, never one single season in the same company and never either of us gave the wink of an eyelash at anyone else, so help me God. Never wanted to—never thought of such a thing, because I tell you my old Becky _____”

Owen closed the book he had begun to pretend to read, got up and went forward to the Pullman smoking-car. There was but one vacant chair; he seated himself in it, and, glancing about, saw that a game of cards and iced amber glasses engrossed the quartet at the forward end of the car’s seating space, and that Hurley and Eugene Allan were sitting almost opposite to him. They were neither talking nor smoking; they were not reading nor engaged in any occupation apparently except that of thinking uncomfortable thoughts. Eugene gave the playwright a disturbed glance, not unfriendly, and a preoccupied nod; but the manager, red-faced and seeming to lurk angrily beneath the downbent brim of his soft hat, made no acknowledgment that he was aware of the presence of any person known to him.

After a time, however, he lighted a cigar, and, during this slight process, the fluctuation of the match’s flame alternately glistened and dimmed in reflection upon threatening eyes sidelong for the moment upon the poker party. More, it was observable that Harry Vokes, serious to-day, was aware of the deadly glance, wished to appear unconscious of it and that it increased his gravity. Upon its removal from him he drank hurriedly, with the air of one released only temporarily from a sinister pressure, and continued his game in a manner both chastened and apprehensive. Owen looked about no more but opened the book he had brought and read doggedly until the outdoor light was wanly golden and a pompous but amiable voice urged a summons upon all occupants of the car. “First call for dinner! Dining-car three cars in the rear.”

Hurley stood up, said brusquely to Eugene, “Come on!” and then, as he passed by the playwright, bent down for a moment and spoke with strong resentment. “*Fine* job you’ve put on my shoulders! *Nice* ingénue you stuck me with!” Hostile, he stayed to hear no retort, permitted no questioning but stalked fiercely and rapidly out of the car, followed by the troubled Allan.

On this train Owen had no further speech with the manager or with any other person connected with the theatre, nor did he desire it. When he went to the dining-car himself, upon the “last call”, no member of the company was there. Afterwards he returned to his compartment; Hurley was not in it and the porter had already carried the traveling-bags to the platform, for the windows of the train now looked forth upon other lighted windows and gave flitting glimpses, of a somewhat dingy apartment life in the upper reaches of Manhattan Island. Upon the station platform, where apparently not one of a horde of travelers was content merely to walk out into New York or to immerse himself in the city in any manner except that of plunging into it, the young man had one distant glimpse of Lily Mars. She was far before him; he had the impression that she walked stumbingly and

her head inclined toward Miss Lebrun, who had an arm about her and hurried her along. The crowd blurred them out and he drove to the Players', where he had a room engaged and meant to stay until "Catalpa House" set forth to test its first fortune upon "the road".

In the genially splendid warm interior of that talented but friendly club he found acquaintances at ease, two black bearded painters, a sculptor with a face like a faun's and a short haired poet in evening clothes; and he sat with them, listening mainly, until near midnight. Then a boy from the office brought him two notes just delivered by a messenger. The first was from Lily.

"Owen, he's discharged me. He's engaged an actress named Mabel Meadows to play my part. He talked to me terribly this morning and this afternoon he telegraphed to her from the train to play Myra. I can't face it—I've killed my mother and I've killed my sister—I can't—I can't—and you didn't come near me. I don't know what's going to become of me or anything."

The other note was from Miss Lebrun.

"If you possibly can, please come here to-morrow morning before rehearsal. I can't do anything with her to-night at all and I don't believe I'll be able to manage it alone to-morrow. Please, please! JEANNE LEBRUN."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IN the Eastlake parlor of the Madison Avenue boarding-house, the next morning, however, Lily proved to be anything but unmanageable. She sat limply in a brown mohair-covered chair, wept quietly and steadily and began by saying she'd do whatever Owen commanded. "Anything—anything at all. The only thing I can't do is to stop crying. I'll try to do that if you tell me to; but it won't be any good. You wouldn't come near me all day yesterday—I don't know why—I hadn't done anything to you, had I? No, I guess I had, because you thought I'd disgraced you. That's why you treated me the way you did, wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't."

"Oh, yes, I guess it was! You felt that way and just barely spoke to me and wouldn't give me a chance to tell you anything, because you knew——"

"I knew very little," he interrupted with some sharpness. "I didn't talk to Mr. Hurley or to anybody else yesterday."

"But you knew about my being in the smoking-room the night before," she said bleakly. "Isabelle Hedrington told me you did and said you despised me for it. She was awake when I went to bed and she must have been listening at a crack in the drawing-room door, because she knew everything that'd happened. I never had anybody talk to me like that before—nobody ever in my whole life. Minnie Bush said pretty mean things to me three different times about Charlie, and they hurt me, but she didn't talk like that! She wouldn't have known how; and I didn't know there could be a woman in the world who could say things like that to any other woman. Then this morning she sent me out of the drawing-room and got Mr. Hurley to come in there, and afterwhile she came out and made me go in and talk to him and he was—he was—he was terrible!"

"What did he say to you?"

"He said—he said he'd had people like me in companies of his before this but life was too short and he didn't intend to have any more. He—he said I was a company trouble-maker."

"What?"

"He did," Lily said, and with a simplicity that touched him she brought forth from a skirt pocket a fresh necessary handkerchief. "He said I'd been with this company of his just a few hours but I'd kept them awake the whole night and—and made myself cheap—"

and that I'd insulted his leading lady when she tried to exercise a little care over me. He said I'd spoken to her in a way no woman would bear, and he—he couldn't and wouldn't ask her to stay in the same company with me after what I'd said to her and—and the way I'd behaved all night—so he told me—he told me——”

Owen stopped her. “What was it you said to her?”

“Nothing. I never said anything insulting to anybody in my life; I wouldn't know how. But when—when she began saying such horrible things to me, it shocked me and I couldn't help thinking how strange it was for a person who could talk like that to have such a great friendship with anyone as fine and high-minded as Mr. Allan, so I——” The tokens of Lily's emotion increased with this recollection and for a moment she could not continue. “Wait. I can't—she was so awful.”

“Don't tell me unless you——”

“No, no; I'll be all right. I—I only asked her what Mr. Allan would think of her if he could hear her. That's all I said—I didn't say another thing to her—not anything else at all. But oh, she frightened me! I just felt I was in there with a crazy woman. I don't mean she shouted or screamed—it was almost all in a dreadful kind of husky whispering—and she said I'd find out pretty early in the morning which one of us two Mr. Hurley needed more in the company—oh, and I did, I did!”

A painful enlightenment came upon the playwright and he sighed heavily. “I'm afraid you said the one thing to her she'll never forgive.”

“She?” Lily cried, and stared with wet astonished eyes. “Don't you even consider what I'd have to forgive?”

“Yes, I do,” he said. “I'm not the Adler office. Up there they settle things according to what's the best business and I'm afraid they'd never——”

Lily disregarded him. “Ah, there's one thing I couldn't forgive her! She said they'd all hate me because I'd made myself an outcast in the company. She said I'd see how they'd despise me. They didn't! They all knew, and they were gentle and sweet to me and did everything they could. I think actors are the kindest people in the world to anybody in trouble. Even that poor Mr. Briggs came and talked to me and tried to keep my mind off myself. They were all heavenly kind to me except—except you—you didn't care——”

“Lily!” he said sharply. “I seem to be here now.”

“Ah, yes—when I sent for you! Because my mother put me in your hands and you can't get out of it! You don't care what becomes of me—not for my own sake. You don't——”

“I do—unfortunately,” he interrupted. “I——”

She caught shrewdly at his qualifying word. “Yes—‘unfortunately!’” she exclaimed. “Don't you suppose I understand? You're my friend and it's a curse to you and you know it always will be. Do you think I blame you for feeling like that when I've been such a fool? I told you I might do anything—anything—and you've seen for yourself I don't *know* anything—not even enough to keep away from men when they're drinking and singing in a sleeping-car smoking-room! I didn't think it'd be any harm with old Joe there, and it wouldn't have been, either, except for her. Ah, and this is the way I've come to New York—to New York!—to be an actress. Oh, what I thought. Do you know what I thought my first night here would be like? I thought you and I and maybe Jennie Lebrun

and Mr. Allan and some of the others would be going gayly out to supper at some bright place with music, where I'd see people I've read about and—Oh, what I thought!" Her voice had risen a little with this outburst; she touched her mouth with her finger, desolately warning it to be more decorous, then said meekly in a tired voice, "You see I'm done for, and my mother and sister with me. Why don't you tell me what to do?"

For the moment he did not reply; he was uncertain of the steadiness of his voice. This was an emotional scene in which Lily did no acting and had no hidden enjoyment of herself whatever, and, as she sat looking at him with the eyes of a sorely hurt child in despair, he felt that for the first time he saw her in her reality. Her eyelids were reddened; so was her nose, and her wet face had so gaunt a moulding by its desperation that she was not even pretty. More, she had nothing "turned on", emanated no charm; what his mother had spoken of as her "magnetism" and what Pinkney Monk had called "that other thing" was gone. She sat before him no more than a stricken being of his own species, pathetic only because life shouldn't crush creatures so young. Seeing her thus, he nevertheless knew a deeper feeling for her than had been his at any time since their first meeting—a feeling he could respect in himself and that let him know, not unhappily, that he cared more for her to-day than when he had first bitterly submitted to be in love with her.

He rose and found himself but the more deeply touched; her gaze, fixed upon his face, followed his movement and questioned him with the upward look that sometimes haunts a surgeon. "My—my dear," he stammered. "Dear——"

She sprang up. "What's that? What did you call me? You called me that once before. Can you still?"

"You ask me what to do and you say you'll do it," he said. "You can't do anything and I don't know that I can, either; but you'll have to leave it to me to see what's possible. In the meantime, I don't think you've slept for two nights. Go up to your room and go to bed, stay there and sleep until I come back and send word for you to come down."

She drew back from him, stared incredulously, then cast herself upon him and threw her arms about his neck. "Angel! Angel! Guardian angel!"

"No, no! Don't hope! It's even a worse mess than you know and I'll do what I can; but I don't see any way out. You mustn't hope for anything."

"Angel!" she cried again, kissed his cheek, and sprang back from him. "I'll go to bed. I'll sleep in an instant! I'll obey you now and I'll obey you all my life. I adore you!"

She ran out of the room and he heard her in flight up the stairs. Then, after touching his cheek with his fingers as if something upon it puzzled him, he went forth and drove to the Netherlands Theatre Building. In a corridor of the ninth floor of that honeycombed theatric pile Eugene Allan, emerging nervously and hurriedly from an open doorway, almost walked against him, then caught him by the arm.

"I've got to talk to you, Owen. Rehearsal's on downstairs; but I can't help it. Wait a moment until these people pass, poor souls."

Within the doorway a voice announced mechanically, "Very sorry, ladies and gentlemen. It won't do any good to wait or to come again. Mr. Hurley hasn't any additional productions in view this season. No more engagements in this office this season, ladies and gentlemen. No use to come again, if you please. Very sorry, ladies and gentlemen."

Seven or eight people, most of them middle-aged, came out into the corridor and walked resignedly toward the elevator shafts. They were followed by a jaunty little elderly man with a large head almost grotesque in feature and conspicuously ornamented with a silk hat remindful of the boulevards under the Second Empire. Otherwise he was somewhat noticeably provided with a skirted coat shiny at the seams, striped trousers, white spats, shoes of cracked patent-leather, and a malacca walking-stick. He made play with the stick as he passed, flourishing it at Eugene and saluting him gayly. "Eh, Eugene, bon camarade! Fine autumn weather, my boy, fine autumn weather for a stroll round the old purlieus and calling on an old friend or two! I like to look in on 'em now and then for old time's sake. Au 'voir, laddie, au 'voir!"

"It's old Tom Cameron," Eugene explained compassionately, when the jaunty figure had passed out of hearing. "Made a terrific hit in 'The Queen's Jester' twenty years ago. It ran a whole season and then four years on the road; but they say he hasn't had more than two or three engagements since and none at all in the last ten years, because it was the only part that ever fitted his nose, except 'Cyrano' and Mansfield had that. Still spruces himself up, the way they all do, to show he's a 'good dresser on and off' and goes the rounds of the agents and managers. Always tries to make everybody think he's just been dropping around socially. After all, it's a life that scares one, isn't it?"

Owen did not respond immediately; the mechanical voice inside the room was speaking again. "No, no; no use at all—no use at all. Sorry, but you can't see him. No use to wait or to come again. No more engagements this season, please. We've taken your name and we'll let you know if we have anything. No use to wait now, please." Upon this, though with reluctance and drooping shoulders, a comely pale young woman stepped forth into the corridor; but when she saw the two young men near the door she straightened her back, lifted her chin and passed them humming carelessly a snatch from Pagliacci, a musical suggestion more pathetically appropriate than she intended. She went toward the elevator shafts; but before she reached them her head and shoulders abruptly drooped again and she turned quickly into a passageway.

"Yes," Owen said, and knew that the pale girl had sought a moment's shelter to control herself before she faced the descent in a crowded elevator. "Yes, it's a life to scare anybody. I'm feeling rather that way myself this morning; I've just seen that poor child."

Agitation became manifest in the actor's handsome face. "I'm in torture," he said. "In torture! Isabelle's treatment of me—you couldn't believe it! You'd think the worst sin in the calendar was to worry about a fellow-being's misfortune. She knew everything, partly because she was listening and partly because in every company there's always somebody who sympathizes with both parties enough to carry tales. No matter! It's all on my shoulders and I'm in agony; yet my hands are tied. Every minute I'm late at rehearsal makes it worse; she'll suspect I've been up here arguing with George for Lily's sake. Tell me—I suppose the child's heartbroken?"

"Yes, I think so, unless——"

Eugene struck his clenched right fist into his open left palm. "I wish I'd never been born! I do truly wish that sometimes, Owen. I want people to be happy, do you understand? I want everybody to be happy! That's my nature and it's one reason why they like me out front. If I ever lose it I won't be able to hold them. But how can I keep it if I cause nothing but suffering and if all I can think of is one woman's tears and another

woman's accusations of me? Oh, Isabelle's in triumph this morning; but she finds room for side-stabs! And that child's hurt, hurt face in my mind every instant! You won't be able to do anything with George, not a thing; you'll only waste your breath."

"Well—I'd better go in and begin wasting it."

"I'm in torture!" Eugene said in an agonized whisper, and strode away down the corridor.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN the outermost room of the series of offices a middle-aged woman at a desk looked amiably at the playwright and spoke the name "Freddie!" A melancholy old man in black appeared in the inner doorway, nodded sadly to Owen, disappeared, came back and said, "You can go right in."

Owen walked through three small rooms, of which the partitions were well-covered with photographs and framed old theatrical programs; but the severe wallpaper of the innermost office, where the manager sat at a desk, had no adornment whatever. The desk was a commonplace of mahogany and except Hurley himself and a small marble bust of Poe upon a book-case there was nothing in the room that mightn't have been seen in any ordinary commercial office.

Hurley looked tired and serious; he gave the caller a glance and said quietly, "Sit down a minute; then we'll go downstairs to rehearsal. I can tell you beforehand it's no use, Owen."

"Why not?" Owen asked, and sat, facing him. "She's something of an asset for the play, isn't she?"

Hurley frowned and avoided meeting the young man's too forthright gaze. "I don't know about that; I don't know about that at all. Anyhow, we're trying this Meadows girl to-day and if she won't do we'll get somebody else." Abruptly he became more emphatic and struck the top of the desk resoundingly with his fist. "Listen! I'm not going to have this sort of thing in any company of mine. Life's too short; it's too short, I tell you! Your mother's a fine lady and I'd like to please her; but when it comes to disorganizing a company and ruining a piece of property like 'Catalpa House' and disrupting my peace of mind—no! I tell you I won't do it! No! I'm willing to wear my soul out working actors into shape on the stage; but when it comes to handling their squabbles and quarrels and personal hell-raising, no! She's out of the cast, I won't hear a single damn otherwise word and that's all there is to it! D'y' understand me?"

"Now just a moment, George——"

"Oh, Lord!" Hurley threw himself back in his chair, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and looked at the ceiling. "What you got to say?"

"That the poor young thing's done nothing of any consequence, one way or the other, and that you can't treat her like this and call yourself a just man, George."

“What!” The manager fairly leaped out of his attitude of resignation and again thumped the desk. “Done nothing of any consequence, hasn’t she? She——”

“Certainly she hasn’t. She’s very young and she’s had no experience; that isn’t a fault. It was light-heartedness and maybe light-headedness, too, that made her sit up and sing with——”

“Listen!” Hurley shouted. “Listen! I’m not talking about that. She ought to know better and I won’t have it; but that’s not what I fired her for. Listen! I’m featuring Eugene Allan and Isabelle Hedrington in this piece—featuring ’em, d’y’ understand? That’s been given to the press and it goes on our posters and programs, ‘“Catalpa House” with Eugene Allan and Isabelle Hedrington’. That settles it, doesn’t it? When Isabelle can’t keep her self-respect and play in the same company with a little ingénue on trial who walks into the drawing-room and insults her and threatens to——”

“George! You don’t know what you’re——”

“Don’t know what I’m talking about?” Hurley cried. “I don’t? Listen! When she came in that drawing-room—about three o’clock in the morning!—Isabelle tried to give her a few words of warning and advice, the way any older woman would if she had any conscience at all and wanted to show true kindness. The girl wouldn’t hear a word of it—no, sir!—flew into a fury, used vulgar language——”

“What! Why, she didn’t——”

“Listen, will you? Isabelle told me every single thing that happened. She felt shocked and hurt, naturally, and maybe spoke a little sharply in reprimand and the girl flew out at her and threatened to make trouble between her and Allan, told her she’d better not be so sure of ’Gene and declared she’d make up a story to tell him, in the morning, that it was Isabelle herself who’d used the vulgar language.”

“But that’s merely atrocious!” the startled Owen protested. “I’ve just come from Lily and know I had the truth from her. A jealous woman’ll say or do anything of course; but for Isabelle to tell you that——”

“There!” Hurley interrupted sharply. “You admit yourself the girl’s made her jealous, and that’s what I won’t have. Haven’t I seen her myself looking at ’Gene with those eyes of hers? Came on the train covered with flowers he’d sent her! Then when she goes so crazy over him she threatens my leading lady——”

“Complete nonsense! Unfortunately your leading lady constructed that ‘threat’ out of whole cloth, George. If you’ll just hear me with a moment’s patience——”

“I won’t!” the manager assured him passionately. “Not a moment’s or half a moment’s or any damn bit of a moment’s! Think I’m going to let you drive me crazy among you, listening to seven different sides of a story nobody’d ever know the truth about anyhow if he lived a thousand years? How much time would I have left for my business if I listened to all the cacklings you all try to deafen me with? Listen! Not ten minutes ago, right here in this office, ’Gene Allan was begging me not to tell Isabelle he’d come here to plead for the girl. *That* looks like peace and quiet in the company if I took her back, doesn’t it? What’s more, you can save your strength by not talking to me about it, because Isabelle gave me the choice between herself and the girl, and, no matter what the row was, that settles it!” His soft hat was on the desk before him; he jumped up, put the hat on his head and strode to the door. “Come on down to rehearsal!”

Owen could find no option but to follow him. They descended to the ground floor, went through the long, tiled lobby and entered the enormous dark auditorium of the Netherlands Theatre. Rehearsal was in progress, and Hurley went to his customary watcher's position; but Owen paused, and, leaning upon the top of the partition behind the rear seats, stared sadly at the stage. Isabelle Hedrington played a scene with old Ord and Eugene, who was unusually mechanical; whereas she, on the contrary, was unusually spirited, playing her part with gusto and a light in her eye. Then, as the action of the play proceeded and other scenes followed, it became apparent that she was the only member of the company to be so animated, with the exception of the new "Myra". The animation of Miss Meadows, unfortunately, was visibly artificial; at first sight of this professional ingénue, indeed, the sunken heart of the playwright found depths below depths.

She was a small brunette, and, without make-up, appeared something mature. Her expression was assured, even complacent; it was plain that she had no doubt of her ability to play the part competently and, in truth, her competence was obvious even though she read from her "sides". Moreover, she bade fair to be an improvement upon Lena Hoyt, the first of the play's three "Myras", and it needed not much more than a glance to see that Miss Meadows familiarly knew what was required of her and how easily to produce several effects that Lily had fumbled. Yet something seemed to be strangely and dismally the matter with the rehearsal, with the company of actors, with the big hollow stage, with its lighting, with the play, with the hard-working stage director, Pinkney Monk, and even with the vast emptiness of the baroque Netherlands Theatre itself.

An odd sweet voice was missing. "Catalpa House" seemed to have lost eloquence and even coherent meaning. Lacking that one vivid presence, the play was like a mechanism that imitated the motions of life, and its prophetic author saw no future for it. The prediction did not spring wholly from his love for what had been taken away, he was sure, and he presently had a confirmation of this certainty. Harry Vokes came beside him in the gloom, leaned upon the partition and whispered, "Great show you've got now, what? Reminds you some of one of those locust's shells, or whatever bug it was, you used to find on a tree when you were a boy? You know, one of those outsides of a bug when the little animal itself has gone out walking and left its dead hide behind."

"Yes—it does."

"Quite some," Vokes assented huskily. "Rehearsing up there, it kind of feels like walking around in the dark after somebody's taken the light into another room. Funny. You wouldn't think a part with not a dozen sides could make the difference. They all feel it up there." He laughed in a whisper. "Except the Titian Venus, of course. She's sweet as sody and having a great big morning. Of course you can't blame her."

"No?"

"Why, no," the comedian said reasonably. "Isabelle's got to protect herself, like anybody else. She can't give a good performance if she's all upset about 'Gene and a new young member of the company finding the good old starlight in each other's eyes, can she? Heigh-ho! Nobody loves a fat man; that's a mean gag but true when there's a golden haired, wasp-waisted Apollo they got the chance to look at instead of a half-souse Cupid like me! George's press agents are getting Isabelle the big stuff. See it this morning? 'Isabelle Hedrington tells what the young actress should know—how to care for the hair, figure and nails.' Kind of good right now, her telling what the young actress should know,

what? You talked to George?"

"Yes."

"I see. No use." Vokes sighed and shook his head. "Me, fat little Harry Brightface, never discourages anybody, always silver lining, sweet summer days will soon come again, so on, so on; but it looks like the loss of a good property to me, so to speak right out from the inner thought. Tricky business. Suppose Hoyt had stayed right on as 'Myra' and we'd never seen the little girl from your town, we might have put this piece over for you—kind o' think we would 'a'. But no; Hoyt out, effulgent new maiden in—something different, what? Listen hard. Me telling you; you absorbing thought, what? It ain't exactly she's so much better in the part than Hoyt or Meadows either, though she is some better, at that, and would get more-so soon; but the trouble with us up there is we had somebody to play up to when she was in. Difference between having a sweetheart all covered with rhinestones and one that wears diamonds. Make myself clear?"

"Yes, and so does the rehearsal," Owen said. "So does——"

He spoke in a whisper; but Vokes nudged him sharply, muttered, "Look out!" and suddenly sat upon the floor behind the partition. Forty feet away, in the midst of the orchestra chairs, George Hurley had leaped to his feet and was waving his arms.

"Oh, for God's sake! Now for God's sake!" he screamed fiercely. "How can any human being expect to rehearse these people with all that talking and squawking going on back there? For God's sake, can't you give us a little quiet? Who is it making all that noise? Who is it has to come in here and gibble-gabble like a female suffrage convention? What do you think my nerves are made of? *Who* is that, back there?"

Owen came down the aisle. "Never mind, George; it's only I."

"Only you!" Hurley cried, wailing resentfully. "You! What do you care what happens to your play? Back there telling one of the scrubwomen you're too great a dramatist to pay any attention to a mere rehearsal, I suppose! For heaven's sake, will you sit down here and _____"

"Suppose we both do, George," the playwright suggested, and added significantly in a lowered voice, "I don't expect the rehearsal to be much the better for it, though."

"No? What do you call that, repartee?" Hurley asked angrily, and obviously understood the reference. He slumped back into his seat, muttered, "For God's sake!" and said no more. The playwright sat behind him, silent, too, and the interrupted actors upon the stage resumed their work.

They were not stopped again by the manager. For an hour the large head, black soft hat and sturdy shoulders just before Owen were motionless as if with a spell of surly brooding; then, with an abrupt and startling snort, the head turned and the Napoleonic profile emitted disgusted speech in half-voice. "See what they're doing, the quitters? Laying down on me! Taking the life out o' the piece! Acting their parts just up to the point where you can't call 'em for it—and killing it. Listen to Joe Ord talking dead. God, the tricks they can play a man!"

"I don't think so," Owen said. "I think they're doing it as well as they can and as well as they usually do. I think it's something else."

Hurley turned full about and glared at him. "So! Joining them and laying down on me, too, are you?"

On the stage Pinkney Monk made arresting gestures. "Stop! Wait a minute! Hold up, please, ladies and gentlemen!" Then he turned a discouraged face toward the auditorium. "Yes, Mr. Hurley?"

"I'm not talking to you!" the manager shouted. "I'm talking to myself. Can't I even talk to myself in my own theatre without stopping a whole damn rehearsal? Go on! Go on! For God's sake go on!" Then, as the actors again began to find voice, his tone abruptly became confidential and friendly. "Listen," he said to the playwright. "I got an idea."

"For a change in the play?"

"Yes. It's just struck me and I believe it's what the piece needs. I believe it'd pull us out of a big hole. I've got the man for it, too; he was up in the office this morning, though I didn't see him—I can get hold of him in half an hour. It might be a good thing for you to look him over and study how to get a big effect with him. Used to be a star and bringing him back to the stage would make pretty good publicity and just about save his life, too. Before your time, but he did a wonderful piece of work in 'The Queen's Jester'—Thomas Cameron."

"Yes, I saw him in the corridor."

"Listen," Hurley said, becoming enthusiastic. "He looks very good for us—very good indeed! There's always been a hole in this piece and watching it this morning I see what a bad one it is. It could be filled with a strong eccentric character. Cameron's exactly it, absolutely! You see, we've got one strong beautiful emotional woman's part, 'Hester', and Isabelle fills it to the queen's taste. Well, what you wrote as a contrast was this lighter part of 'Myra', the sister; but, follow me now, because here's the idea. Instead of a secondary female part—you see, you don't really need an ingénue at all—how about it now if we threw that 'Myra' part out head and heels and instead put in this strong eccentric character rôle I've been talking about? What I mean, he wouldn't be a sister, he'd be an uncle or maybe the family lawyer, an old Southern lawyer, with a different kind of comedy touch running toward the grotesque and fantastic, full of contrast and putting life into all this flat, weak 'Myra' part of the play. As for the plot, you could tie all that up to a strong personality like Cameron's and get something rather startling and original. Understand what I mean?"

"Yes." Owen nodded gravely. "But there's a simpler way, George. You'd get your startling and original effect without my having to do any work on the script at all."

"How's that?"

"Just engage Cameron to play the part of 'Myra' and let it go as it stands."

Hurley got up, stepped into the aisle, thrust an unlighted cigar deep into his mouth and walked to the rear of the auditorium. Then he returned to his seat, with his hat pulled farther down upon his forehead than it had been when he departed. As he sat down, he said listlessly, "Comic talkers, playwrights!" and for another hour spoke no more.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AT intervals, however, he grunted, making slight vocal complaints such as may escape involuntarily from even the manliest bosom if the pain be sufficient. On the stage Eugene, old Joe, Harry Vokes and young Lancey played the long, melodramatic suspensive scene of the second act to the distaste of the stage director. "Now, gentlemen," he said, stopping them, "we've been over this scene before and seemed to get the right effect; but now it lets down. It might be the better for some cutting—I'll take that up with Mr. Hurley and Mr. Gilbert—but anyhow it's got to be lifted. The whole thing turns on the point of the entrance of 'Myra' just ahead of this and 'Hester' after her, and you've got to lift it so that they can lift it higher still when they come on. Really, it all seems very spiritless—very spiritless indeed. Perhaps I seem that way myself; but it shouldn't have any effect on you. Now, gentlemen, please, let's take it up where we were and give this entrance a proper value. Stand by, Miss Meadows, please. Now, 'Gene, please, 'I did if Miss Myra says I did, Colonel, but' so on, so on. Let's have it, 'Gene, and please, please lift it!"

The leading man, thus exhorted, made an unquestionably conscientious effort to do the desired lifting and his colleagues seemed as earnest as he, yet it was evident that they were merely talking louder and faster than usual; drama, that slippery magic, was not evoked. Miss Meadows, sprightly and noisy, came into the scene and, after her, Isabelle, richly emotional and making her fine voice tense with feeling as she played the climax of the act. Nothing of consequence seemed to be happening.

"Well, well," Monk said patiently. "Third act, ladies and gentlemen, and please try to get a little life into it. All right, Joe. 'Colonel' up centre, 'Myra' down left. Let's have it, please."

In the body of the house a portent of despondency became more and more ominous; slowly the manager slumped, with his knees against the back of the chair before him, so that to the view of the playwright little more than an ill-defined black hat was evidence of any nearby human presence. Experience warned that this attitude was alarming, that it was the limpness of air about to swirl in typhoon, and that the life or death of "Catalpa House" hung on the next half hour. Owen had an imaginative glimpse of theatrical columns in the morrow's newspapers. "Rehearsals called off. Adler and Company withdraw from new venture. 'Catalpa House' abandoned. . ."

A waft of sachet powder, scented like mignonette, ascended the playwright's nostrils with so much pungency that in ungallant distaste he almost shivered. Isabelle had no part

in the scene being played; she had come down the aisle, and now, assuming the privilege of a leading lady who was “featured”, she joined the manager and the playwright. She took the seat next to Owen, gave his shoulder a soft pat that seemed to him to express more her content with herself than with him; then leaned forward, and, combining her mignonette with an equally detectable exhilaration, whispered to Hurley, “Isn’t it splendid! Best rehearsal we’ve had since we started—Mabel absolutely it—and the whole thing looking like a sure-fire hit, don’t you think, George?”

Hurley rose, sighed, leaned toward her and took her by the arm. “Come here a minute, Isabelle; I want to talk to you.”

She stood up, and her voice, but a moment ago too complacent, had fright in it. “Why, but everything’s settled, George—it’s all settled and——”

“Just come along a minute,” he said gently. “I’ve got to talk to you.”

They walked slowly up the aisle together, and Owen heard fragments of their talk as they went, Hurley saying, “It’s a question of business—this won’t do——” and Isabelle protesting, “It’s all going splendidly and I refuse to consider——” A moment later he heard the manager say decisively, “No, this is business. I gave you your way until I saw it interfered with that. We’ve got to get every bit of value into this piece we can——” There was a half-suppressed outcry from Isabelle, “No! No! I gave you your choice and you made it. You can’t talk me into——”

They reached the broad passage behind the rows of seats and their words became indistinguishable to the playwright. He could still hear tones, however—Hurley’s urgent, positive and kind; Isabelle’s vehement, hurried and angry. This perturbed talk lasted until the work on the stage stopped for lack of the leading lady, and Pinkney Monk stood, clapping his hands and calling: “Now Miss Hedrington! Miss Hedrington! Where’s Miss Hedrington?”

Owen heard Isabelle say desperately, from the darkness behind him, “Oh, go ahead then, ruin it, ruin it!” She rushed down the side aisle, disappeared behind the boxes and came out upon the stage, pallid and apparently controlling an impulse toward hysteria. The speech from the play with which she made this entrance seemed appropriate, and she delivered it with a moving genuineness, “Now you’ve taken everything from me I lived for, what have you got left to reward or punish me with when I do as I will?”

Hurley came back to Owen but did not sit down. “Oh, it’s the life, a manager’s!” he said. “Give one of ’em candy and it’s another one’s poison; then give the poisoned one the candy and the first one screams you’ve killed her. There’ll be the devil to pay from now on; but I’m going to give a play and not a morgue exhibition if it kills ’em all and me too! Go tell her to be here this afternoon at two o’clock.”

Owen was already upon his feet. “Ah, I thought you’d see——”

“You did not! Going to be one o’ these I-told-you-so hellions are you? Listen! It’s stipulated she’s to apologize to Isabelle in your presence and mine before she comes back into the piece. And you tell her to keep her back turned to ’Gene Allan from now on when she’s not acting. I’ll talk to him on the subject myself this morning and I’ll say plenty if God lets me live! You have her here sharp at two.”

He walked down the aisle, calling out to the stage director, “Stop it, Pink. That’ll do. Let ’em go; tell Allan and Miss Meadows to wait. Call afternoon rehearsal for two-fifteen.

Two-fifteen, d’you hear me?” The question seemed more rhetorical emphasis than genuine interrogation; Owen Gilbert, passing out into the theatre lobby, heard him easily and perceived that a quarter of an hour was the precise Napoleonic allowance for what might be anticipated as a somewhat harrowing scene of apology.

. . . Lily, in her new blue dress and wearing her hat, was waiting for him in the boarding-house parlor, waiting with a confidence in him that was touchingly and absurdly unshatterable, it seemed. She insisted that she had slept “hours and hours” and indeed looked as refreshed as if this were the truth. All her young bloom was upon her again, and, in the welcoming joy with which she ran to him and seized his hands, her vividness seemed but the brighter after its eclipse.

“I always knew an actress’s life was going to be marvellous,” she cried;—“but really I never dreamed how deliriously exciting it would be! These ups and downs! I thought I was lost! That was because I thought I’d lost you; but oh, I hadn’t, had I? No, you didn’t throw me away; you’ve kept the poor waif that was given to you, you blessed Guardian Angel! I love you forever! What did they all say? Are they waiting for us now? Were they all talking about it? How did Mr. Allan look?”

Owen smiled faintly and with some pathos—if she had perceived it, as she didn’t. “We’ll sit down a few moments, Lily, and then I’ll take you out to lunch. We’re to be at the theatre at two for a ceremonial purpose I’ll explain; but first I’m afraid you mustn’t wonder how Mr. Allan looks.”

“Oh, no!” she said eagerly, as they sat. “I understand perfectly. Gracious, I should think I’d know a little of how frenzied she is about him—after what I’ve been through! I know you think I’m an utter fool, you dear Owen; but really I have got a few perceptions. For instance, you don’t need to tell me it was Mr. Hurley who asked you to make me understand I mustn’t wonder out loud how Mr. Allan looks—I know a company can’t work properly with that woman’s frantic goings-on in the midst of it. Don’t worry. I’ll never let her *dream* I’m doing any wondering how he looks. She’s simply not sane in her infatuation and all I’ll do is to merely ignore her utterly and never——”

“I’m afraid not,” Owen said, with a rueful laugh, and explained Miss Hedrington’s stipulation.

“What?” Lily cried. “Apologize to that woman? But I thought—Why, I supposed of course by this time Mr. Hurley’d see, himself, it ought to be the other way round; she’d apologize to me and I’d accept it and after that simply have nothing more to do with her. Why, if Mr. Hurley were a judge trying somebody that’d shot somebody else, he wouldn’t make the one that’d been shot apologize to the murderer, would he?”

“Yes, he would, if it were the only——”

“I decline!” Lily said haughtily. “I couldn’t keep my self-respect if I put myself in such a false position. If he wants me back in his company he can make that woman do the apologizing. I won’t. It would be an absolute farce.”

“So it would,” her friend agreed. “That’s why it wouldn’t matter. I’ll tell you a curious secret, Lily; it usually doesn’t matter at all which one makes the apology; but if it’s made by the person who ought instead to receive it, she certainly appears to better advantage in the eyes of spectators.”

“I won’t——” Lily began sturdily; then all at once beamed upon him, and laughed.

“You and Mr. Hurley have to be witnesses? I’ll do it! Of course I’ll do it! I’ll apologize to her utterly.” She jumped up, and her feet seemed to wish to dance; the sympathetic Owen would have described her eyes as dancing. “I’ll apologize her head off! Come on; I’m going out to lunch in New York with Owen Gilbert the dramatist, and then I’m going to apologize to another actress in a New York theatre! Oh, let’s run!”

Her exuberance only increased as they sat at a window table in the elaborately Renaissance restaurant to which he brought her, and after a few minutes there he understood that patrons at neighboring tables were to be permitted little doubt that he was lunching with an actress. Lily talked gayly and distinctly of rehearsals, of “sides”, of entrances, of exits, of “business”, of “props”, of “the script” and of what the newspapers said about present “runs” in New York. “They say ‘The Paradox’ has turned out to be a colossal hit,” she said. “You’ll take me to that? We might go to-night, mightn’t we? George Hurley could arrange seats for us, couldn’t he? Pinkney Monk said there wouldn’t be any night rehearsals; we could see something different every night, couldn’t we?”

She chattered on, not too loudly, all the while sparkingly aware that her appearance and animation drew a polite, covert interest from other tables. She spoke of Hurley and laughed with a full forgivingness. “Of course you do have to get used to him; then you begin to see how remarkable he is. He’s the most wonderful coach and when he comes up on the stage himself and shows you how to do something—does it for you the way it ought to be done—it’s better acting than anybody’s. Oh, I do think we have the most adorable company, Owen!—except that one, of course. It’s a far, far greater experience to be with them than I dreamed.”

“Is it, Lily?”

“Oh, it exhilarates me and enchants me and makes me want to be noble and only do fine, high things.” She looked at him with a half-timid trustfulness and became confidential. “Ah, you won’t think I’m too schoolgirlish? But I feel my whole being’s been altered—oh, transfigured!—not only by my going on the stage but by what seems to me more and more a sacred association. Don’t laugh at me for sentimental hero-worship—it’s more than that, Owen. What I mean, I feel every hour I’m one hour richer and must be that much nobler for another hour’s precious association with a great man.”

“A great man?” he murmured, mystified and also inclined to be a little disconcerted. Her hazel gaze was so warmly, so earnestly and so directly into his eyes that there seemed small doubt of her preposterous serious meaning or that the only course open to him was to become self-deprecatory and laughingly disclaim his greatness. But a moment ago she had been speaking of George Hurley, and, if she meant George, a waiver of claims to grandeur on his own account would be strikingly misplaced. Lily settled the matter for him.

“It does make me feel that way,” she said. “Every hour of being in the same company with Eugene Allan does that for me.”

“With——” the playwright began; but checked himself before he added the amazed word “whom”. He beckoned mournfully to a waiter and asked for his bill.

Lily went on talking busily. “More than anyone I’ve ever known he’s made me feel what the ideals of our art ought to be. Our glorious art! I’ve been thinking so intensely about art, Owen—what it really is. Art is a new world we actors make out of ourselves to

show the old world what itself is made of. Shakespeare says the actor holds the mirror up to nature; but what he really holds up is a cipher key to the secrets of the gods. You see what I mean; when I play a new part like 'Myra' I show the audience a truth about womanhood—something that was hidden in the minds of the gods on Olympus when they created woman. You see what I mean?"

"I think I do," he replied uncertainly and with no great enthusiasm. A part of what she said seemed familiar to his ear, and, groping among recent memories, he found the picture of a narrow passage outside the smoking-room of a sleeping-car and heard old Joe Ord discoursing sonorously upon art. Yet it was obvious that Lily's ready absorption of the Ordian thought and even the Ordian phrasing left her no doubt that both were original with herself. "You say it's Eugene who's made you think so deeply upon art, Lily?" he asked.

"Oh, I'd have done it anyway," she said quickly. "What I mean, he stimulates me. Besides, he has all this adulation and everything, yet nobody's ever sympathized with his ideals just exactly as I do—I've found that out. Mentally he's always had a kind of loneliness; we've both always had that, you see." She looked at Owen wistfully. "I suppose there isn't any chance of his being there, too, for the apology?"

"No, there certainly isn't!" the playwright replied with impulsive gruffness, as he rose. "We won't be there ourselves if we don't hurry."

They entered the lobby of the Netherlands Theatre within a minute of the appointed hour, however, and a suavely handsome dark man, coming from a door beyond the box-office window, stopped them for a moment. He seemed engaged with an interior amusement, but gave Lily a lazily interested glance as he spoke to her escort. "How's your show coming on, Mr. Gilbert? You've got me turned out of my own office now; it ought to be good. What a partner!" Evidently he had little interest in a response; for, after a less languid second glance at Lily, he sauntered on.

"That's Adler," Owen explained, as they went toward the door from which this personage had emerged. "He means the ceremony's to take place in there. He's supposedly the senior partner; but you won't see anything of him at all, except when we open here, and even then Mr. Hurley won't pay any attention to him. He never does; but apparently indulges him sometimes by letting him produce a musical piece. He has only this one room for an office. Well—let's get through with it. You aren't frightened, are you, Lily?"

She had taken his arm and now gave it a reassuring pressure but said nothing; they went into the room, and Owen closed the door. Hurley, solemn, stood with his hands in his pockets. Isabelle, statuesque, was standing, too; her hands were clasped behind her and her air was challenging, not to say repellent, as Lily advanced toward her meekly and with bowed head.

"You couldn't forgive me?" the girl said with a tremulous exquisite pathos that dumfounded Owen. "I think you would if you knew what I've suffered for making you suffer. You were just trying to be kind to me and watch over me. I—I ought to be whipped for not appreciating your goodness."

"Yes," Isabelle said. "I think you ought."

"I know it!" Lily's breathing deepened and quickened visibly, and the startled

playwright saw large actual tears collect upon her eyelashes and glisten down her cheeks as she put her hands out pleadingly toward Isabelle. "I—oh, pardon——" she said falteringly. "I didn't mean—anything—that would hurt you. You couldn't just forgive me and let—let me love you?"

Isabelle became less statuesque. Her lower lip quivered in slight distortions and her softened gaze betokened a change of feeling.

Lily bent before her, penitential and imploring. "Forgive—ah—couldn't—couldn't you——"

Isabelle too began to weep. All at once she advanced a step, stretched forth her arms and enfolded the sobbing girl. "You poor darling! I do forgive you—yes, yes! Don't cry! Don't cry! I'll love you, too!"

They wept together. Lily sobbed, "Oh, oh, Miss Hedrington!" and Isabelle begged moistly, "No, no! Always call me Isabelle!" while Owen Gilbert, regarding them, added another "These people!" to his collection of internal astonishments. He knew Lily had told him the truth; Isabelle had committed the offense for which Lily had just asked pardon, and both of them knew it. Yet here they were, sobbing in each other's arms with emotions largely genuine roused in them because Isabelle had forgiven Lily. Then the bemused observer's decorum was endangered by an impulse to open laughter; George Hurley's eyes had begun to blink and he stepped forward, put an arm about each of the weeping ladies, separating them, sniffled suddenly and spoke in a husky voice.

"There! You're both sweet dear children; don't make me cry, too. There, there!"

Lily clung to him. "You're so good to me!"

"There, there!" He bestowed upon each of them an encouraging lively slap upon the back, beamed upon them both and said briskly, "There, you dear things! Now we'll go in to rehearsal."

Owen went with Lily, who hung droopingly upon his arm, and, in the dimness of a side aisle as they walked toward the passage behind the boxes, detained him. "Just a moment." She leaned against him while she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. "I don't want the company to think I've been crying, when we go behind."

For once he let his curiosity get the better of his reticence. "Lily, would you mind telling me how you do it?"

"How I do what? You mustn't think I didn't mean I'll try to love her. Of course it did hurt her—what I said in the drawing-room about if Mr. Allan could hear her. I do think she's sweet. I think it's very touching how sweet she's just been to me in there."

"Yes, but you began to cry before she began to be 'sweet'. I saw real tears——"

"Oh, that?" she said. "Yes, I can always cry when I want to. I haven't done it at rehearsal yet, because it seemed better to save it. You see, all I have to do when I want to cry—I just think of Mother."

"You mean in there just now——"

"Why, yes," she said, and seemed a little surprised at his tone of astonishment. "But of course afterwards it was easy to go on, because Isabelle was so sweet." She put her handkerchief away, smiled and patted his arm. "Now I'm ready. Let's go."

He took her to the stage, then went to his usual seat in the body of the house. The

rehearsal was encouraging; life seemed restored to the play and light to the stage. Moreover, in none of the groupings of the actors not “on” and during none of the intervals of consultation between Hurley and Monk, were the ingénue and the leading man seen to approach each other or even to appear aware of each other’s presence. At five, when the rehearsal was over, Lily went away with Miss Lebrun without having spoken a word to Eugene Allan during the whole afternoon; Isabelle looked sweetly benevolent and Owen felt a warm approval of his ward’s discretion.

This feeling, glowing pleasantly in his breast, lasted until after he had finished an early dinner at the Players’ and was wondering what theatre would most enrapture her that evening; then he was called to the telephone and the voice of Eugene said urgently, “Old boy; do get this straight, will you? If Isabelle talks to you to-morrow be sure to remember I came down to the club, had dinner with you and then we went to your room and sat up till all hours going over the play together. Isabelle or George Hurley either. In heaven’s name don’t fail me, old boy!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE man-for-man loyalty thus invoked, however, was not put to trial the next day. Isabelle, serene, made no inquiries, but chided the playwright amiably, on the stage, before Pinkney Monk began the morning's rehearsal. "You authors! Making your actors rewrite your plays for you nowadays, are you? What are you trying to do, wear 'Gene out? You look something in that line yourself this morning, by the way. What's the matter?" She laughed with pointed archness. "Worrying too much over your play—or too much over your girl?"

"I'd never worry over anything if you'd be that," he contrived to say; but to his dismay felt his face growing warm and then growing warmer as Isabelle tapped his cheek with a too humorous finger.

"I thought so," she said, as she turned away. "You'll have your hands full!"

Lily came to him, put a gentle hand upon his arm. "You aren't speaking to me this morning? I've been sitting over there the longest time, waiting for you to look at me. You've talked to almost all the others and never came near me. What have I done? It couldn't be about last night because I knew you wouldn't mind——"

"No? But I do."

"Oh, no," she said hurriedly. "He told me she wouldn't get upset, because if she spoke to you about it you'd tell her——"

"Lily! It won't do."

She seemed gently surprised. "But if we're careful not to let her get upset again? Of course I knew you didn't mind on your own account—we'd said something about going somewhere last night, hadn't we? but not definitely—because I'd told you how I felt about him and you were so darlingsly sympathetic. I knew you had almost that same feeling about him, Owen. Oh, everybody would! And you knew how happy I'd be. You and I could go somewhere to-night, though? I'd love to see 'The Paradox'. He thought we'd better not try it again to-night and he's going to take her there. We could ask them to supper with us, after?"

"No, we couldn't," Owen said, and, in a necessarily lowered voice but with as much severity as he could command, gave her a brief lecture upon what he felt should be her proper conduct under the circumstances. "You can use your mother to cry about when you have occasion," he said, concluding. "Perhaps you'd better give a thought now and then to

what would happen to her in case next time Mr. Hurley doesn't change his mind."

She gave him a troubled look of inquiry. "You think I shouldn't do that? I shouldn't think of Mother when I want to bring tears into my eyes?"

"Oh, murder!" he groaned. "I'm not talking about that. I do the same thing myself in a manner; I've used hints for plays out of my own mother's emotions. It's a dreadful business and we violate all that's sacred and dearest for it. I'm not in a position to blame you. Can't you understand I'm not blaming you for anything? I'm warning you, warning you as seriously and earnestly as——"

"Oh, no; you're blaming me, too—in your heart." Her look became a softly reproachful one. "But I told you. I told you I might do anything—anything. You knew that. I told you I was like an automobile that didn't have any driver and couldn't know, itself, where it was going."

"You'd better!" he advised her sharply. "If you want to keep your sick sister out of Vance's——"

Lily put a frightened hand to her cheek. "Ah, I didn't know you could be cruel!"

Pinkney Monk rapped upon a table at the front of the stage. "First act, ladies and gentlemen, please. Let's put all we can into it to-day, if you please. Mr. Hurley asks me to announce that we open this play next Monday evening at Somerville, New York, and that means stepping lively from now on for all of us. First act, ladies and gentlemen, please."

Lily's saddened eyes glowed instantly. "Somerville! Where is it?"

"I don't think that matters," Owen said angrily. "Have you listened to me at all?"

"Ord! Joe Ord!" Monk called. "Ord on; Tom and Jack up left. Stand by, Miss Hedrington, please. 'Myra' ready for entrance."

"Somerville! Heavenly Somerville wherever it is!" Lily whispered, and, clutching Owen's arm, delayed yet another moment before going to her place. "Ah, if you'd climb up into the driver's seat the poor little car would go wherever you liked. I love to have you rough with me!"

Monk was rapping upon the table. "'Myra'! Where's Miss——"

"I'm there!" Lily cried, and, laughing excitedly, ran across the stage to her post.

In the free and graceful action of this short flight she was all lovely in the playwright's eyes, and, despite his better reason, his spirits rose once more in a familiar exhilaration. Naturally there was also some effervescence of remorse; he was not a man to speak harshly to anyone, least of all to his best loved, without subsequent self-reproach. It seemed to him that he was always critical of her and, worse, always pecking at her, sometimes even sneering at her, and it hurt him to realize that she had never an ungentle word for him in return. Nay, she had no really ungentle words at all for anybody, and under sharpest punishment would weep yet still was unresentful. For the rest, had she no right to be young and girlish and foolish?

Moved by the mere justice done her in this thought, he vowed to himself that he would pester her no more with either advice or sarcasm, and for three days and evenings with her kept his word. He had his reward; she was like a tremulous ecstatic worshipful new little slave of the seraglio to whom the great Sultan displays the opened coffers of his treasure room, letting her play with huge rubies, carved emeralds, and diamonds beyond price. Her

impression seemed to be that he was the proprietor of New York and in particular of its theatres and restaurants wherein she gloriously moved and shone, an actress about to “open” a new play in the celebrated city of Somerville somewhere in the State of New York. It was not indeed until the day before the “Catalpa House” company left town that uneasiness beset him again and ended this happy interval.

On Friday afternoon Lily had told him reluctantly that she felt anticipatory qualms of stage-fright and dared not trifle with them; she would remain in her room that evening to go over and over her “lines” until no possible tremors could shake them out of her head. He assented approvingly; but in the morning, on the stage of the Netherlands just before the last rehearsal in that theatre, Isabelle Hedrington drew him aside and asked him sharply and unexpectedly where he had spent the previous evening.

Her brow was dark; foreboding smote him. “I, Isabelle?”

“Yes. Where were you and who was with you?”

“If you’ll tell me why you want to know——”

“I see!” She became contemptuous. “You’ll tell me after you find out whether you’d be giving ’em away or not. Very well; I know I can’t get anything out of you. Eugene’s got an old aunt in Bronxville and said he had to go out there and dine and spend the evening with her before he left town. I know her very well and it just happens she called me up this morning and said she’s seen in a paper that our company was leaving for Somerville immediately and wanted me to use my influence with Eugene to be nicer to her when we came back, because she knew he’d been here all this week and he hadn’t been to see her or paid her the slightest attention. You see?”

“Then why don’t you ask Eugene——”

“Oh, I will! If he tells me again that he was working on the play with you, I suppose you’ll back him up.” She laughed bitterly. “You don’t seem to care as much about what happens to your girl as I do about my man.”

“I’m afraid I must ask you not to speak like that again,” Owen said. “You know that Miss Mars isn’t my ‘girl’.”

Isabelle laughed a little more loudly. “No! I suspect she isn’t! That’s why you’d better tell her to look out!”

She left him and Owen turned toward Lily; but she was talking merrily with old Ord, Vokes and young Jack Lancey, and in a moment the rehearsal began. With a fresh sting in his heart and a renewed fear upon his shoulders he had to go out to his watcher’s post in the house, and later he found no opportunity to be alone with Lily or to draw her aside for even a moment. “Ah, let it go,” he said to himself with a sad pride; and then, ruefully logical, he added, “Since that’s all the weight I have with her what else is there to do but let it go?”

Half an hour before the morning’s rehearsal closed he drove away from the theatre with Hurley just in time for their train to Somerville. The actors of the company were to remain for a final session with the costumers and Pinkney Monk in the afternoon and would not leave New York until the following morning; but the manager and the playwright preceded them to “rehearse the scenery” for “Catalpa House” in the theatre at Somerville, and with these two went the designer of the “sets” and a crew of electricians, carpenters and stage-hands.

It was a journey of five hours. Hurley roamed restlessly up and down the train; but at times stopped and sat beside Owen in the smoking-car. "Getting the fidgets," he explained, during one of these nervous intervals. "If I sit down I keep tapping my foot and if I walk round I want to sit down. If I smoke a cigar I want to throw it away and if I'm not smoking I want to light one. Can't help it. Getting near an opening'll always do that to me if I live a thousand years! We'll be lucky if we're not up half the night getting the sets into working shape and straightening out the lighting. Company'll reach Somerville at noon to-morrow. Won't rehearse 'em in the theatre. Just let 'em rest and run over their lines in one of the hotel parlors for their Sunday afternoon job. Dress rehearsal'll probably last all Sunday night, so there's two nights up for you and me. For my part I couldn't sleep anyhow. Nice town, Somerville."

"Is it? I've never——"

"Ninety or a hundred thousand maybe. Good hotel, too. It's a nice natural town; get a nice natural audience. They'll laugh when they feel like it, not when they think it's the wise guy thing to do. I'll sit back Monday night, you watch from the balcony, and we can locate the spots in the script that ought to be cut or changed. It'll be easy enough to see where we don't hold 'em; you can tell by the coughs. One good thing; it isn't a soft-coal town and you won't get so many laughs killed by the big horse-cough. There are more laughs in the piece than I expected when I read it. More than I thought when we began rehearsing it." He paused, then went on in a thoughtful tone, "Another thing about this girl, talking to her ordinarily you wouldn't suspect she had any special sense of humor, yet I'm pretty sure she's going to get three or four laughs that nobody else saw were in the script. At that, I've got a suspicion she's misplaced as an ingénue."

"Misplaced?" Owen said. "But I think she——"

"Certainly she does," Hurley agreed. "Even as an ingénue she's rather a find, I think, and I suspect Monday night'll show I owe your mother those orchids. What I mean, I've kind of an idea she might have more than ingénue parts call for. We'll know better about it after we see her with an audience; but it's struck me lately we might have something there really rather important. See what I mean? I mean really rather important." His tone was becoming enthusiastic and he modified it, with the air of a man pleased by a rosy prospect but determined not to be foolish about it. "Well, maybe; you can't tell. You're going to get a fine performance from Joe Ord Monday night and from Vokes and Rita Carlin. Joe Ord'll be colossal as the father. Colossal. One of those old-timers you can always depend on, drunk or sober."

"More than on the new-timers—like Eugene?" the nervous playwright asked. "You think——"

"Listen! Madeleine Ord was the best low-comedy woman on the stage, bar none, Joe's sister and he thought the world of her. She was playing the slavey and Joe the cockney thief in 'The Yellow Slum'. She got despondent and called it all off with laudanum on a Friday night. They put the understudy in for the Saturday matinée and old Will Hatch, their company manager, told me he never saw a better performance than Joe gave. An old story; but how are you going to get that from an actor who just plays himself? If he feels limp, he acts limp. Joe ought to've been a star years ago; but he never will."

"Why not?"

Hurley laughed musingly. "I don't know. Probably because he's just old Joe Ord. Everybody's always known he's good and lets it go at that. Got a big mind, too. Maybe he isn't up higher because he'd always take any part you'd give him, no matter what, and of course all that's going out now. If I want a man in a play who's to be seven feet tall and's got one green eye and the other glass I call up an agent and he'll send me one. Ten years from now you won't have a real actor on the stage; they'll all be just people that won't even change the way they part their hair. Look at 'Gene Allan; he's that way now. If he's too much upset about anything, he just walks through his part. Old Joe could be dying but he'd *play* his. If we'd had to put your play on the first of this week God knows what would have happened to it!"

Owen sighed heavily, not in reminiscence but with apprehension. "Then if 'Gene's mood——"

"Both of 'em, both of 'em!" Hurley interrupted impatiently. "If Isabelle lets down, the whole play goes down maybe even more than if 'Gene does it. Lucky she had her tantrum and got over it last Monday instead of next. She'll give you a good performance now and so'll 'Gene; he's really shown sense since that talk I had with him. Lord, what a play's life hangs on! What a gamble!"

"Yes—for all of us."

Hurley seemed to become reflective as he lighted a fresh cigar. "Another thing about her. I never rehearsed anybody that caught what you wanted of 'em in rehearsal quicker. For acting, she's got a mind like lightning."

"Isabelle? But I thought she——"

"No," Hurley said absently. "This girl of your mother's. Start up to the stage to show her something and half the time she's got it before you can get up there." His reflectiveness vanished under a renewed pressure of enthusiasm. "No, sir! Never in my whole life did I see anybody who'd get it so quickly and on top of that give you better than what you meant, yourself. She knows every word of your play, too—heard her giving Jack Lancey his line this morning when he slipped up, and she wasn't even on in that scene. Well—we'll see, we'll see. Won't even know whether we've got a play or anything else until Monday night." He slapped his knee; then rose abruptly. "Hi-yi! Got the fidgets till we pass that bridge! I'll be calmer to-night when we can get down to work on those sets in the theatre."

The prediction failed to convince his colleague, however, and later proved to have been unwarranted. After dining together in the small, pleasant and surprisingly expensive hotel, they had no more than fifty yards to go to reach the theatre, and that distance the manager traversed with a leisurely step and the appearance of serenity; but upon the sidewalk as they were about to enter the lobby he halted abruptly, stamped his foot and began to swear.

"What's the matter, George?"

"Look at that billboard!"

Owen looked at the billboard and found nothing amiss; though when he saw one name upon it his heart quickened. For the first time seeing this name upon a theatrical billboard he was queerly startled and had a confused impression that something portentous impended.

Mon. Tues. Wed. and Wed. Matinée

ADLER AND COMPANY

Present

CATALPA HOUSE

*A Romantic Comedy by Owen Gilbert
with*

EUGENE ALLAN AND ISABELLE HEDRINGTON

and a Distinguished Cast Including

| | |
|---------------|-------------------|
| Joseph Ord | Rita Carlin |
| Jeanne Lebrun | T. R. Worthington |
| John Lancey | Harry Vokes |
| James Morton | Lily Mars |

“What’s the matter with it?” the playwright asked, a little breathlessly.

“Matter! Where’s Pink? That’s it, leave one doggone thing to anybody else and it’s always done wrong. Then if you want to do anything about it your hands are tied. I’d throw Frank Williams out of my office to-morrow for this; but how can you do it when a man’s got a fool wife who keeps him head over heels in debt, with one boy in college and the other one just barely out on bail for embezzlement? All I can do’s give him the devil for not having sense enough to put in ‘Under the direction of Pinkney Monk’. Fine! Everything’s wrong right from the start! Let’s get in and see what else is bungled. Come on! Come on!”

He stamped into the theatre, walked down to the orchestra rail and began to shout at the expert artisans who were already busily at work on the stage. They responded interrogatively; he replied with exasperation, and for hours he alternately walked, brooding, up and down the aisles and returned to the rail to renew the high-pitched dialogue.

Oft-repeated phrases, sometimes bellowed in fury and sometimes wailed in agony, the playwright felt would ring in his ears in sleep, if indeed he ever slept again. “Lower your borders! Lower your borders! How many thousand times have I got to crack my voice telling you to lower your borders? You, up there! *Where’s your borders?*” A voice from invisible heights would reply “Got ’em lowered, sir!” and Hurley would remain unconvinced. “Lower your borders! Lower those borders! Aren’t you *ever* going to lower those borders?”

Frequently he became impassioned upon a necessity for amber. “Where’s the amber? Who cut out the amber? Give us that amber! Amber! Amber! Amber! *Am* I going to ruin my larynx again to get that amber? For the two-hundredth time where’s that amber? Hell and whiskers, *will* you give us that amber!”

Meanwhile there slowly appeared upon the stage the fresh-colored semblance of a sub-tropical landscape. Moss hung from trees, shrubberies hinted the South, the pillared verandah of a plantation house grew into being upon the right, and, to the left, were glimpses of a mighty river winding through a rosy sunset. By no means were the

manager's sufferings abated. "Where are those mats? Take up that green carpet! Take it up! Who said to put that carpet on the stage? Get out the mats! Green grass mats! Four hundred dollars' worth of green grass mats! Think I paid four hundred dollars for green grass mats and then going to use a carpet? Oh, my cripes, *will* somebody get out those green grass mats and put 'em down there! Green grass mats! For God's sake!"

Pinkney Monk came in, at eleven, just off the train, and sat down by the playwright in the rear row of seats. "I'll go at it in a minute," he explained. "Tired. Long siege with those costumes this afternoon. Guv'ner been like this all evening?"

"Yes. His worries began when he saw your name had been left off the billboard. I suppose you noticed it when you came in?"

Monk laughed absently. "Yes; he'll straighten that out, and besides, I don't think I need bother about it, since he doesn't put his own name on at all. Never does. Curious man, George; and I'd rather work for him than anybody in the world. I'll get his mats out for him in a minute or two. My, what a day!"

The exclamation, one of weariness, had no reassuring sound in anxious ears. "Was it?" Owen said. "Ah—nothing wrong? All the company'll be here on the morning train, won't they? All of them—ah—they're all right, aren't they?"

"All right?" Monk made sounds intended to convey the impression of hollow laughter. "Did anybody ever see a theatrical company that was all right? Tom Worthington's got a cold and'll probably be whispering by Monday night; but that's nothing. These leading ladies with tempers!"

"Isabelle? What did she——"

"Oh, Lord, her costumes! They couldn't possibly be better; but I thought she'd murder old Ségur and me too before I got away. Whew, she's in a state!"

"She is?" Owen said in a sickly voice. "But how about—how about——"

"Your little girl? She's a treat; the one bright spot. Happy as a lark and flying over the top of the world!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SOMERVILLE was a quiet town upon Sunday; the playwright woke late in the morning and heard no sound but the nasal piping of a newsboy upon the sunny pavement far below the open windows of the hotel bedroom. Then presently, when a waiter had brought breakfast, there were church bells and after the chiming there was silence again. Looking forth from a window upon a town apparently drowsing under the noon-day sun, Owen saw clean straight streets between long rows of shade trees that were now crimson and brown and yellow with autumn; but these prosperous neat vistas and the houses, the business buildings, the lawns, church spires, stables, garages, sheds, shrubberies, alleys and all that he saw were concentrated, to his view, into a single inscrutable personality. "What are you going to do to 'Catalpa House'?" he asked this town of Somerville. "What are you going to do to 'Catalpa House'—and to Lily Mars?"

He was summoned down to the lobby of the hotel. O'Mahoney, the lively "advance man" for "Catalpa House", waited there, and, with a wink of a twinkling eye, presented Mr. Leland, a blond shy spectacled boy apparently twenty, dramatic critic of the Somerville Times. Young Mr. Leland timidly asked questions and the interview was as long as it was vague and ineffective. To the playwright, indeed, it seemed to be lasting all afternoon; but finally, seeing old Briggs going toward the elevator, he jumped up from the leather divan he occupied with the critic. "Man I've got to see," he said hurriedly, and strode across the lobby to join the stage manager.

"Briggs! The cast—they're all right and all here?"

"Yes, of course all here, Mr. Gilbert. Got in at noon. Just going up now to hold the book on them while they run through their lines in the mezzanine parlor."

"I suppose some of them are staying here in this hotel?"

"Well, I'm not, myself," Briggs said apologetically. "Of course Mr. Allan and Miss Hedrington are here, and Mr. Vokes. Miss Lebrun and Miss Carlin and the three boys and Joe Ord and I, and Miss Bement, the understudy, are at 'The National', a very good place, rather more moderate—ah—I had meant to take the liberty of advising Miss Mars—ah——" He hesitated uneasily, then went on, "I think probably Miss Lebrun already had spoken to her on the subject, and perhaps I should have done so, too, in view of the expense here and Miss Mars's rather limited salary. But of course it wasn't my affair, really. Yes, she's staying here, too."

Owen made a hasty mental computation. Hurley had been liberal, he knew, in setting the novice's pay at seventy-five dollars a week, to begin on the morrow; but four days at five dollars a day for her room, and, on top of that, the charges of the surprisingly expensive restaurant—half the week bade fair to consume half the salary. The prospects, then, for a cook's wages, a trained nurse's pay, the rent of half of a double house, heat, light, sustenance and, above all, the redemption of a note at the bank, appeared to be bleak and Lily's arithmetic feeble.

However, he was to have no chance that day to give her a hint in the matter, or in other matters that troubled him more. He did not see her until she came upon the stage in the dress rehearsal late in the evening, and, during the harrowing hours that followed, he was never near her. Amber and the lowering of borders still irked the manager; he was not appeased upon these subjects until almost ten o'clock, when he at last permitted the curtain to be lowered, then raised again to begin the dress rehearsal.

Within the minute he was at the orchestra rail, shouting, "Where's that carafe? Where's Smith? Bring Smith out here! Good heavens, Pink, where's Smith? Props! Where's the carafe that ought to be on that table on the verandah? Oh, my cripes, how's Joe going to pour liquor out of a carafe if there isn't any and no carafe in the first place to pour it out of? Expect him to pour nothing out of nothing? He's a good man; but I give you my word he can't do it! *Oh, my cripes!*"

The property man disappeared to search for the carafe, returned to report that it had been left in New York, sought again meekly after receiving virulent instructions so to do, returned with it, set it in place and came forward with voluble apologies, which were ill received. Altogether, the matter of the carafe was to the fore during half an hour, after which the curtain was lowered, then raised, and the rehearsal began again. It moved smoothly for five minutes; then Lily made her entrance and the playwright, suddenly breathless, was preoccupied with the altering yet curiously becoming effect of her gorgeous auburn wig, with its flowing tubular curls curved upon fine white shoulders above a satin bodice of the year Eighteen-thirty.

She had just begun to speak when Pinkney Monk stepped forth from painted shrubberies and said, "One minute, dear!" He advanced toward the footlights, holding his open hand across his nose to shield his eyes as he peered into the dark auditorium. "George——"

"Oh, for God's sake! What's the matter now? What are you stopping it for, Pink?"

Monk looked distressed. "Ah—she—if you'd come up here a minute, George——"

"Come up there? What for?"

It was Isabelle who answered. "I'll show you!" she cried, and came rushing from the wings to display herself in an elaborate pale green silk dress of the period of the play. "Look at me!"

"I am!" Hurley responded testily. "You couldn't look better. You're beautiful! Go back there and make your entrance."

"I won't!" she said emotionally. "Ségur promised to make this dress over for me and he's just got it here and you see what it looks like! Anybody could see what it looks like! If Ségur thinks I'm going to look like——"

"Listen!" Hurley shouted. "Wait!" Then he muttered, "Now they're beginning to go

hysterical on me!” climbed up to the stage, went to Isabelle, put an arm about her benevolently and led her out of sight in the wings. Pinkney Monk followed them and there was a wait of three quarters of an hour. At the end of that time Hurley reappeared, sighing, descended to his post by the orchestra rail, the curtain was lowered, raised once more, and the rehearsal recommenced.

Dispirited, the actors fumbled for their “lines”, stammered, lost cues and bungled “stage business”—all except Lily, who was mechanically correct, going through her part with precision, though with a blithe kind of absent-mindedness. Eugene fumbled most of all, Isabelle was resentful, melancholy and careless; Monk begged them and the others despairingly and in vain for “Just a little more life!” Hurley alternately thundered and wailed; he made them go over one scene “nine times by actual count”, as O’Mahoney whispered to the crushed Owen. For crushed indeed he was, long before the miserable process closed at five in the morning. By that time he had written new “lines” into the play, upon passionate appeal from Hurley, had “cut” and altered scenes, though Monk protested that this, the eleventh hour, was too late; and all seemed confusion.

To the wearied head of the playwright, jerking upon the pillow even after daylight came, there appeared no future for “Catalpa House”. The play was a thing so nearly dead that this town of Somerville, unaided, would easily kill it; and even without the help of hotel bills Mrs. Mars and Clara would perish with it. Heaven alone knew what was in store for a girl who might do anything—anything!

Purposely, during all the sunlight hours of this disheartening Monday, he had speech with no one connected with the theatrical professions. In the afternoon he walked drearily about the town, and, when he passed by the houses of the more affluent citizens, became more despondent. Glancing sidelong at such a house, a big one of hard grey stone set in a deep lawn and glistening coldly from many plate-glass windows, he even shivered. Hard grey glistening people who lived there would probably be in the theatre to-night, staring icily at “Catalpa House”, withholding all applause and perhaps going home before the play was done. They wouldn’t care what destruction they wrought; the shattered career of a playwright wouldn’t mean anything to them, nor would the loss of Hurley’s money, nor the waste of all the excruciating thought and labor put into the building of every detail of the play.

Those people wouldn’t clap their palms together once to keep old Joe Ord, Jennie Lebrun and the rest from being out of work. Fat, cold, plate-glass people, they’d eat heavily at dinner, sit sluggishly in the theatre, and even if they knew that what they did there was in reality not merely to damn a play but to sign the death-warrants of two women who deserved to live, would they cheer “Catalpa House”? Not they! “Serve ’em right!” they’d say. “Serve the whole bunch of ’em right for coming here and expecting to entertain us two dollars’ worth with a show like this!”

A more hopeful view was expressed to him, however, during the hurried meal he had in the hotel restaurant just after dark. Ord came in, sat at his table and turned upon him the rosy light of a grand red old Roman countenance. “One dozen oysters simply,” the veteran explained. “Came over from ‘The National’ because the oysters are safe here and I thought maybe I’d run into someone like you that’d pay for ’em. Fine to lose a play because of one bad oyster. One could do it. All I ever eat before a performance, a dozen half-shell. Midnight’s the actor’s hour. I’ll trencher and flagon me then, what? Good

house to-night; not much paper, either. Somerville pleased to be the dog we try it on; but don't worry, they're play-goers not First Nighters. They can eat apple pie without announcing it was no way to cook onion soup. They won't shoot us cooks; they'll like us."

"What! You think——"

"My boy! Do I think? I know!"

"But that awful thing last night——"

"Awful?" Ord said, and laughed. "Best thing that could happen. Puts 'em all on their toes. Got to buck it up after that! You'll see a great performance. Never knew it to fail. Watch Isabelle, for instance. She'll put everything in to-night because she's scared and knows she's got to fight for it. Fine for to-night; but afterwards, look out! Tantrum last night over costume all plain scare. Couldn't looked better, herself—eh, but maybe somebody else did. Lawsy, lawsy, how many times I've seen it!"

"Ah, but if she's worried and—and jealous——"

"Jealousy?" Ord swallowed an oyster with gusto. "Hah! My boy, we live by it! We stand up there in competition, face to face with those who deal us life or death. They ring the welkin for my rival, a slob with a fat part; so be it, I'll feed him so well that at least they'll remember me as a part of his triumph—and if I see but one slender little chance let him beware of me, for I'll steal the scene from him! No, you'll see a good house and a good performance to-night, no such horrible thing as'll be before us when we open in New York to the peacocks and harpies. There they'll drain your blood and mine to grow one extra green feather on a tail. No, no; no fear about to-night. Later——" He paused and devoted himself to his oysters for a time; then he said quietly, "I don't like double jealousies, though, Owen. When you add a professional one to a personal one bad harm can be done. Anything you can do to stop that—well, it might be advisable for you to come out of your shell and be a peacemaker."

"Thank you, Joe," Owen said. "I understand what you mean. So far I—I haven't seemed to be up to it."

"No," the old actor agreed gravely. "Apparently not. Better keep trying, though, if our little troupe's to reach New York undecimated." He shook his head, swallowed the last of his oysters, slapped his chest briskly and rose. "Hah! Me the stag at eve that had drunk his fill—not, what? Leave that for after. Now for the buskins! My boy, you've written a good play; fear nothing from Somerville—we'll dazzle these simple hinds for you. *Courage mon ami, le diable est mort!*"

His silk hat and walking-stick were upon a vacant chair at the table; he received them from the waiter, upon whom he bestowed a stately, negligent nod; then, with a grand air, he placed the hat upon his head a little to one side, glanced absently over the half dozen people at other tables, bowed ceremoniously to Owen, and, loudly humming "Fair eyes behold thee, Toreador!" strode magnificently out of the restaurant.

The playwright, whose depression was much increased, drank several cups of coffee, and, having eaten almost nothing, left the hotel and walked for an hour up and down Somerville's short stretches that were bordered by lighted shop-windows. Then he turned into an alley, found the stage door of the theatre and entered it slinkingly, with the look and manner of that supposititious criminal who must ever return to the scene of his

misdeed. He went to Eugene's dressing-room, where the handsome actor, superb as a dandified gambler of the Old South, was just being completed by his "dresser".

"Owen, what's the matter?"

" 'Gene, are you—are you all right?"

"Am I? Are *you*? What's wrong, old boy? You look like the devil."

Owen laughed feebly. "Oh, no—just stage-fright on behalf of the rest of you, I suppose. I do hope you——"

"Don't worry about my performance. I was rotten last night; but I've got hold of myself." He drew Owen to the doorway and spoke in a low tone. "I'm in torture! Listen. If Isabelle asks you where I was either Friday or Saturday nights, you don't know. Of course you naturally wouldn't know about Saturday because you'd left New York; but about Friday you don't know either. I thought I'd better not use last Monday night's alibi again. She doesn't know anything; but she ferrets. She gives me no rest. I'm in torture, I tell you, in torture! I'll play this part, though; I'll make them like me—you'll see! There. I've got to run over my first act lines with Tommy here. Go along—and good luck to us all!"

They shook hands feverishly; Owen climbed an open iron stairway, knocked upon a dressing-room door above Eugene's, and, bidden to enter, stepped within. Lily and Miss Lebrun sat before their wall-mirrors, deeply engaged in "making-up" their brilliantly illuminated faces. They were in costume; but Lily had not yet put on her wig, and her tan-colored hair was twisted and pinned as closely as possible to her head. Her face was coated with pink grease-paint, her lips were stained scarlet and her eyelashes gummed into black spikes; and, thus besmeared and seen at close range, with her lovely hair made into a disadvantage, she was a test for a lover's heart. Owen's responded with a thrilled palpitation that permitted no doubt of her possession of it. She could look her worst and he cared for her only the more.

"You're—you're all right—both of you?" he asked.

Miss Lebrun said, "Indeed we are!" reassuringly; but Lily, just glancing at him, gave him a preoccupied nod and returned her studious attention to the bright mirror before her.

He had no place in her thoughts; nothing had place there except the business in hand. Tense, concentrated and yet cool, she was like some watchful chemist in a laboratory compounding a prescription that must be accurate to the infinitesimal point, lest death come of it instead of health renewed. She was intent not only upon her "make-up", he saw, but upon the part she was to play, keeping the whole of her mind and mood upon "Myra"; and this was a new Lily Mars to him, the actress in her dressing-room before the play. He doubted that she would even hear the overture by the orchestra, those strains she'd once thought would make the actors feel "like gods".

He said "Good!" faintly, stepped out to the iron landing and closed the door behind him, knowing that she was no more aware of his departure than of his coming. He descended to the silent stage where no one was to be seen except old Briggs whispering to an electrician, tiptoed behind the set scene, passed out to the house and went to a seat in the balcony. The ushers were busy, Somerville's play-goers were coming in, encouragingly numerous, and on the floor below and in the boxes he saw parties of people who evidently felt it due to a première, their city and themselves to make an agreeable display of evening dress. They looked self-satisfied, the playwright thought, and as if

they'd be hard to satisfy with anything else. Heaven help "Catalpa House"! He and Hurley and Pinkney Monk could do no more now; fate rested with the actors making ready in their dressing-rooms to come down into the arena and fight for the life of the play.

O'Mahoney, prowling, saw him and came to sit beside him for a time. "Looks very good," he said. "Both the Somerville papers'll give us good notices. Leland'll be all right, of course."

"Leland? Who's Leland?"

"The young feller I got to interview you Sunday. The other paper doesn't keep a critic—they'll just send a woman reporter who'll give us a general puff—but Leland takes himself solemnly. Nice young lad but of course he'll feel it's due to himself to show some writery writing—real two-dollar-a-yard near-silks to prove that our smaller city retailers can handle the same line of goods you see on the New York counters. He'll work 'em in somehow—patterns like 'Gallic lucidity' and 'biting irony' and 'pellucid' something or other. Probably say your play hasn't got 'em and isn't hot stuff for the 'discerning' but on the whole may prove quite a popular entertainment, though of course it'll need some remodelling before New York. They always say that so they'll be safe whichever way it goes in the big city. He'll praise the acting to the skies of course, because he knows the New York Death Watch usually let that get by. No, Leland'll be all right for us and if the house like us to-night they'll all go out and say so and get us business for to-morrow night and Wednesday. Of course the gals'll all be daffy over Eugene. I was around behind and he certainly looks a picture. So does old Joe as the father; grand old ante-bellum Colonel—marvellous. They'll all have to look out, though, or this new ingénue'll steal the show from 'em." O'Mahoney laughed, as he rose. "Guv'ner'll be fuming; wants me to sit by him with a pad and pencil and take notes of the points he'll see to change. Bon voyage!"

The orchestra came up from under the stage, plunked and tuned, played the overture, and Owen thought that probably, after all, she heard it; for she would be coming down from the dressing-room now and taking her place in the wings for her entrance. Perhaps she even felt like a god; a playwright certainly didn't. The curtain rose, there was a flutter of applause approving the scenery, and, in the balcony, a human spine knew the sensation of being stroked with an icicle.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THIS chilled spine presently slumped from its rigidity. Lily came upon the scene and Owen drooped, giving up all for lost because she received a greeting round of applause, being mistaken for the “featured” leading lady. When the audience discovered its error it would be ashamed of itself, he thought, and would therefore detest the play. However, when Isabelle made her entrance, a few moments later, the hand-clapping was repeated, though somewhat uncertainly, and he felt a little less surely doomed; at least a part of the audience could retain enough self-esteem to give the play a chance.

So far as the playwright’s own consciousness was concerned no drama at all was being presented down there on the warmly lighted vari-colored stage; the words he had written were long since dulled in meaning by their repetition in rehearsal, and, uttered now by the actors, seemed sounds without sense. It was impossible to believe that blank sound carried any meaning to all these people seduced by Hurley into paying honest money to listen to it. Hurley himself must have been caught in delusion to produce such a play; its author, sunk in humility, wondered how anybody could bear its empty babbling.

True, there was something picturesque and alluring down there for the eye; and for the ear there was at times one unusual and lovely sound—the voice of Lily Mars. Eugene was debonair in a brass-buttoned green coat, high white stock, grey beaver hat, flowered waistcoat and strapped pantaloons of exquisite pearl; his resplendent good looks and the masterful quiet of his attitudes might do something to placate Somerville. So might the swaggering postures and sonorous perfection of Joseph Ord, who, as the hard-drinking, ominous father of Hester, the heroine, provided the play with the element of physical danger that carried its suspense. Indeed, it appeared vaguely to Owen that these two were making an impression upon the audience, and even that the dark house sat with an incredible breathlessness through the scene in which the duelling old Colonel slowly recognizes the fêted young Duc d’Alençon, self-styled royal exile in Louisiana, as the notorious Sam Hawkins, professional gambler, whom the Colonel has once had the misfortune to encounter at a faro table on a river steamboat. Moreover, when it became clear that Hester was none the less in love with the impostor even after his exposure, there was an unmistakable flurry of approval in the audience, who seemed to be surprised and pleased by the breaking of the tradition that a heroine must at least for a time refuse to adore a hero who has included her in a deception. After all, those worn out words of the “script” miraculously seemed to be carrying significances to these new listeners.

To the trembling mind of the playwright, however, Isabelle appeared to lack something vital as she played that ardent love scene and the violent clash with the "Colonel" just after it. The audience evidently found her at least satisfactory—it could be felt that they were interested and sympathetic—but to Owen's view, though it was clear she worked her hardest, she showed almost flaccidity in a rôle that called for fire. Her contralto voice was of a rich quality; but there were detectable rhythms and cadences in her utterance, so that an acute ear heard suave elocution rather than truth, the practised lamentations of Isabelle rather than the wails of "Hester". Owen had thought Isabelle beautiful in the "Skylark"; now she was no more than rather ineffectively handsome. She was like a painting originally brilliant in color but dimmed by time and dust. For she oddly seemed not quite young enough for the part she played, which needed the sparkle of a youthful vividness apparently withdrawn from her.

These impressions of his were hazy; thoughts about Eugene and Isabelle and Ord flitted but glimpsingly through his mind. He had a faint and wondering pleasure in the multitudinous honest laughter that rewarded Harry Vokes as the maladroit rascally friend of the princely impostor; yet the significance of this hopeful token was almost lost upon the bemused young man who had written what excited the risibility. To his gaze, as he stared and stared, all of the color and life down there upon the stage seemed to be losing brightness and even light itself—all except the one bright figure of Lily Mars, a new Lily Mars face to face with her audience at last.

He recalled a sculptor's saying that the clay is life, plaster of Paris death, and the ultimate marble or bronze the resurrection. The dress rehearsal of the night before had been Lily in plaster of Paris; but now, in sensitive and delicate communion with every person who saw and heard her, she made "Myra" every moment more poignantly alive. Like a singer whose voice strikes the very middle of the note, she spoke with the apparently easy naturalness that makes the uttered word seem never to have been written but to be an act of human spontaneity. Where had been his wits when he sat in the ugly room in the "double house" listening to Lady Macbeth and "Roger and I"? All she had needed then was Hurley—Hurley and the faithful Monk. Her miraculous plasticity had answered every touch of theirs; and here was an audience caught in delight, laughing in pleasure when she chose and serious when she wished it, yet not made impatiently aware that she played but a minor rôle.

The other actors, the play, the new-painted scenery and the voluminous dark presence of the audience seemed to merge in a monochrome background. To Owen Gilbert it was as if the one figure, continuously in a "spotlight", moved among fainter illuminations that left everything else almost shadowy. When Lily was off the stage, the scene became a daytime moon; she came on, glowing, and the spell she cast came with her. Her gorgeous little head shone in a ruby aureole; with every tone in her voice and every movement of young white shoulders, fair arms and even of her twinkling feet, she seemed to hint to everyone—alas! to everyone—"Ah, if you and I loved each other!" Lily had it all "turned on".

Before the end of the first act the play had become irretrievably nothing but Lily to the watcher in the balcony. He remained dreamily in his place through the interval between the first and second acts, and through that between the second and the third; but, when the "climax curtain" began its slow fall, he made his way to the stairs and descended to the

lower floor. There, in the vacant lobby, he hesitated; then, hearing the muffled but stirring sound of persistent applause, he opened a door and stepped into the auditorium, which was still dark, except for footlights, and still resounding with clapped palms. The curtain had been up and down half a dozen times and now the actors were “taking their calls”.

Eugene was revealed alone upon the stage, bowing gravely to strong applause; then Isabelle, apparently faint with left-over emotion yet gracious and tenderly appreciative of plaudits just detectably less vigorous. After her, Ord, Harry Vokes and Miss Carlin, together, were treated as heartily well. Hands still pattering brought the curtain up again to show Lily standing between Miss Lebrun and young Lancey; the applause suddenly possessed a solidity of sound that stirred the heart.

It continued until the descending curtain touched the boards of the stage; but Owen did not hear the last of it. The lower floor ushers and the manager of the theatre and O’Mahoney and Paradene, the “company manager” for the Adler firm, stood in the passage behind the seats, leading the applause under cover of the darkness, and now they raised a scattering cry of “Author! Author!” which was echoed feebly from various parts of the house, though somewhat more lustily from the balcony ushers overhead. The alarmed playwright went out hastily and walked for ten minutes in the alley behind the theatre. When he returned to his seat in the balcony all gratuitous danger was over for him; the final act of his play was in motion.

There came the scene in which Myra comprehends the catastrophe caused by her youthful light-mindedness and asks pardon from Hester. In the second act, mistaken for her sister because of the auburn hair, Myra has been handed a letter meant for Hester and has half dutifully, half mischievously given it instead to her father, who thus discovers the continuance of his older daughter’s forbidden love affair with the outcast impostor and, in the third act, shoots him. In the fourth, as a preliminary step-up to the emotional heights of the final scene of parting between Hester and the convalescent but broken Hawkins, the remorseful Myra begs for forgiveness from her sister. Isabelle and Lily were alone in view, Isabelle seated in a symmetrical posture of grief near the footlights while Lily stood pleading, faltering, weeping, a stooped and humble figure at the centre of the stage.

The girl’s sweet contrite voice, hesitating and even stammering, carried an almost unbearable pathos through the silent house, where sporadic sniffings began to be faintly audible, and, even from the upper row of the balcony where the playwright sat, the glistening of actual tears was seen upon her cheeks. “Making herself think of her mother now,” he said to himself, but was not critical of this bit of mechanics, which against all reason had the same effect upon his own eyes that it had upon those of uninformed people about him.

When she left the scene, and Eugene, feeble upon a cane, came on, Owen’s eyes dried, though the sniffing here and there in the audience continued and even increased during the farewell speeches of the lovers. Indeed, no “try-out” audience could have wept more promisingly than this one did when Eugene, still handsome but shattered out of all resplendency, limped slowly to the open door, loving his lady too well to take her with him, and going back alone to his old crooked ways on the river.

That was the end of the play, and, while the house was still dark and the audience applauded thinly, Owen hurried out of the theatre and returned to his alley, where he again walked nervously, this time for a somewhat longer period. Then, downhearted but with a

dogged air, he opened the stage door and encountered O'Mahoney just on the other side of it.

"Author! Author!" O'Mahoney cried, at sight of him. "Congratulations! New York may kill us but we've certainly got by dear old Somerville."

"What!" Owen was incredulous. "But the applause after the curtain——"

"They never do," O'Mahoney explained, laughing. "Not after crying on the last curtain; anyway not on the road. Did all their applauding after the big third act curtain, though maybe you thought they didn't take up the 'Author! Author!' stuff loud enough. That's because this Somerville class o' people doesn't really want to know a play's got an author at all—or even a wonderful publicity man! They just come and enjoy it as if it was happening."

"Then you really think——"

"Golly! It's unanimous. As they went out, didn't we have all the ushers rubbering around among 'em in the lobby? Wasn't I there myself? Couldn't have asked 'em to say more. All the gals, young and old, going it over 'Gene; didn't I tell you? Harry Vokes and Joe Ord fine, too, and they liked Isabelle all right. As for the little friend from your home town, she's a comer if she keeps her head. Scored one of the neatest little hits I ever saw. Promising thing about her, the women like her as much as the boys do. Myself I heard a mighty pretty girl say, 'I bet she'd be awful cute off the stage, too!' Really the piece looks good for New York to me. Guv'ner's tickled to death. Needn't try to get into 'Gene's room to congratulate him. It's full of local millionairesses going to take him out for a party; he knows people in all these towns. Bye-bye! Probably see you in Binghamton Thursday and Easton Monday. Guv'ner wants you; he's got a nasty sheaf of notes for you to work on. He's in Isabelle's dressing-room."

Owen said hurriedly, "Yes, yes; I'll go there"; but what he did was to ascend, almost tremblingly, the iron stairway that led to the door above Eugene's. He opened it and saw Lily standing before him, still in the costume she had worn in the last act, and with the auburn wig upon her head and none of her "make-up" removed. Miss Lebrun, who did not appear in the last act, was gone, and the playwright had the impression that Lily had been standing there alone, just as she was, ever since she had made her final exit from the stage. Moreover, she did not move now when he came in; she stood and looked at him, and, startled, he realized that it was for him she had been waiting and that he was now indeed in her thoughts. She did not speak at all; but her eyes glowed—every inch of her seemed to glow—with such a passion of gratitude as he had never seen; he knew it was that.

Suddenly she flung herself upon him, threw her arms about his neck, clung to him and kissed him. Then she pushed him away, pushed him affectionately out of the door, in fact, laughed ringingly, cried, "I'll black your boots forever!" and slammed the door rapturously after him.

Upon this, the fond young man was almost as grateful as she. "Whatever you do to me," he said to her in his mind, as he went down the metal steps, "I'll never fail you—not after that!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HE crossed the stage to the leading lady's dressing-room, found Ernestine lounging resignedly outside the door, and before he went in heard the manager's voice high-pitched in argument. Owen entered, however, during a brief interval of silence; and that he intervened in a scene of no slight tensity was made clear by the fact that he received neither a word nor a gesture of greeting. Isabelle, in a rose-colored wrapper and with her splendid hair down, sat before her mirror, removing with apparently close attention the final traces of "make-up"; but her eyes were both fierce and hurt, and her handsome profile was stubborn. Hurley, red-faced, sat in a chair beside hers, staring at her frowningly, and Pinkney Monk stood in the background, leaning against the wall and looking serious.

"Ah—I beg pardon——" Owen murmured, and turned to go.

"No," Isabelle said crisply. "We want you. Sit down."

"I say we don't!" Hurley exclaimed testily. "We don't want him for the reason you mean." He gave a worried side-glance to the playwright. "Oh, sit down! Sit down! Your play's going to be all right if we don't get it into a snarl before the Death Watch has a chance at it. Got a colossal reception to-night—colossal. Now, Isabelle——"

"Going to be all right, is it?" Her lips gave forth the vocal part of laughter without forming the contours that should accompany such sounds, and she did not look at Owen, though she addressed him. "Mr. Gilbert, just what was your idea in writing a part like 'Hester' and then writing in a piffling secondary part that was sure to kill it?"

Hurley leaned toward her and slapped her shoulder with a sheaf of papers he held in his hand. "Now for God's sake! Talking about being killed again, are you? Have we got to go over all that? You were a hit, I tell you, a hit! Didn't you hear 'em? How many times do you want Pink and me to tell you? Don't you know when they like you and when they don't?"

"I do."

"Well, then, I dare you to sit there and tell me again you weren't a hit! Were you or weren't you?"

"Certainly I was," Isabelle said, and her nostrils and her eyes dilated as she spoke. "You don't suppose I don't know my business, do you? But that doesn't mean I'm going to stand being crabbed or made to work every second I'm out there to keep all my scenes

from being stolen from me and get half a hand for breaking my heart over a part that was written wrong in the first place!" Suddenly she swung round from her mirror and sat facing Hurley angrily. "'Society girl', is she? Bosh! Everybody in the company knows better by this time. Got a sister behind the counter in a dry goods store in that jay town of Owen Gilbert's where we picked her up!"

Monk intervened. "What's that got to do with it? The point I was making, it's that the scene you're fretting about only helps you; it makes 'em love you all the better. They love you to start with, Isabelle; but they love you all the more when they see how much your sister loves you, don't they? Why, certainly! It's you she's talking about, isn't it? Besides that, it's good box-office for her to cry so they can see the tears; that's always good box-office and everybody knows it is. Out front they always think they're seeing wonderful acting—Fanny LeGarde worked up to two-hundred and fifty a week on it and it was the only thing she could do; but it got the big notices. She had some kind of eye trouble and all she had to do was blink a little and out they'd come, big as berries. What I mean, 'Myra' starts 'em crying out front; but it's all about *you*, Isabelle. You're the one they're crying *about* and really it only makes it fatter for you. They love you, see, and it's all the time *you* that they're crying *about*——"

"Certainly it is!" Hurley interrupted, taking up the theme urgently. "It's all you, Isabelle. You're the one they're crying about; they aren't crying about 'Myra'. Myself I think that's one of the finest little scenes in the play, because you see what it does; it puts them in just the mood and leads up to your big scene with Eugene where you cry, yourself, later——"

"Later!" Isabelle said, with a hard laugh. "Yes, I should think so! Crabbed again! All through the damn play! First she comes on and gets my hand with that frowsy wig and, after that, I have to come on just anyhow, with even my hair crabbed; then she gets feed-laughs right straight on to the fourth act and then she's handed a crying scene centre, with me down stage sitting there without a hell's-fire thing to do till she gets through!" She turned upon Owen. "That the way you write plays? Wait till you do one for a star and ask him to sit through a scene with his face in his hands down near the foots while some little shop-girl's sister in his company gets up stage of him and does school dramatics for fifteen or twenty minutes! Can you see Sothern or Forbes-Robertson or——"

"'Fifteen or twenty minutes!'" Hurley interrupted. "Listen! It runs exactly four and a half, because I timed it. That scene lasts just four and a half minutes, and there's one of the reasons it's so——"

Isabelle swung back to her mirror. "You make me sick, all of you," she said quietly. "Either that scene's cut entirely before to-morrow night or else she'll play it in the chair down stage—or I won't play it at all."

Hurley looked dangerous. "Listen! The parts of this play that we know are right, because we proved it to-night, we're not going to tamper with. I've had plays ruined like this before; but I swear I——"

"Wait a minute, George," Monk said placatingly. "We can do that all right; we can put 'Myra' in the chair down by the foots and give Isabelle the stage. That'll make things all right, won't it, Isabelle?"

"It will not!" she answered fiercely. "If you think I'm going to break my heart playing

a whole evening against a frowsy red wig—well, just think again, because I’m not going to do it!”

“Well, but Great Scott!” Monk protested. “We can’t change the wig! That’s plot.”

“I don’t care; you either change it or——”

Hurley broke out at her violently. “How the devil’s a letter going to be given to her on account of Harry Vokes’s mistaking her for you because of her auburn hair unless she’s got auburn hair? You’re crazy! How do you expect——”

She turned upon Owen. “I won’t play against a wig! You’ll have to change it.”

“What!” he cried. “It’s utterly impossible to change that. As it stands, it’s tricky but it’s plausible. ‘Catalpa House’ isn’t farce; you can’t have a man told to hand a letter to a lady in a green shawl and make him give it to the wrong one because she’s borrowed the shawl. The mistake’s just barely credible, as it is. I can’t——”

“Oh, can’t you?” she said. “You like her in the wig, do you?” She added three words intrinsically harmless but made them both derisive and insulting, “I guess so!”

Hurley was indignant. “That’ll do, Isabelle! Spiteful feminine implications’ll be omitted if you please. This is a matter of business.”

“You bet your life it is!” she said. “Going to talk contract to me now, are you? Go ahead and talk it till you foam at the mouth, only don’t forget I’ve got a right to be sick. Just think that over a minute, will you, instead of getting your eyes all bloodshot staring at me because it makes you so mad you can’t talk! Listen! She plays that last act scene down stage and sitting in the chair; that’s settled. Also, she doesn’t wear the wig. I don’t care how lovesick your mamma’s-boy author is over it, she doesn’t wear it, George. Not to-morrow night or any other night while I play ‘Hester’. I don’t care how he fixes the script, just so he fixes it.”

“Now for God’s sake!” Hurley shouted at her. “Will you use just a little sense? Just a little; I don’t ask for more. That wig’s *plot*, I tell you, and there isn’t any way on God’s green earth——”

“No?” Isabelle said, and, turning to her mirror, again took an apparent interest in the cleansing of her face. “All right. Try not to have a stroke in my dressing-room; I want to get into my clothes and it’d delay me. Don’t forget I could go to the Brangins to-morrow if I wanted to. Sim could do the worrying about contracts, and I think—I really think, George—that ‘Gene would come with me. Maybe he wouldn’t; but I think so. Either there’s only one head of auburn hair on the stage to-morrow night or I know I’ll have such a throat I can’t whisper and you can put in the understudy. I mean from now on. What do you think you’ll do about it?”

Hurley looked at her steadily for some moments; then abruptly he rose, and, glancing at Owen, made a slight movement of his head toward the door. “Come on.”

Isabelle spoke again as they left the room together and just before they had quite closed the door.

“‘Society girl’, hell!”

They heard Pinkney Monk beginning to talk to her cozeningly, as a grown person does to an embittered child. “Now, Isabelle, dearie, they’re going to do it. They’ll make it all right for you. He’ll fix it in the script and we’ll rehearse the change to-morrow morning

and——”

“Listen,” Hurley said, took Owen by the arm, and, sighing, drew him a little distance away from the door. “Makes a man feel sometimes as if he’s living among children about four years old, doesn’t it? Well, well, you can’t altogether blame her, though; you and I might do the same in her place. I know when I can control her and when I can’t; got to give in on these minor points sometimes. I’m afraid it’ll be pretty hard on Lily; but she’ll have to stand it. She was rather remarkable this evening—rather remarkable, you know. Lord! Isn’t that always the way? Put a play over with everything just about right, except a few details, and then—Whoof! there goes one o’ your best scenes! Of course she can’t do anything with it sitting in a chair and with Isabelle up of her, taking it all. You’ll have to tell her she’s got to do it.”

“I? I think it’d better come from you—if she’s got to.”

“Don’t bother me! Tell her about the wig, too.”

“What!” Owen gasped. “But that we absolutely can’t——”

“Yes, you can. Wiggle out the change in the script to-night and I’ll call rehearsal for it at eleven to-morrow morning. That green shawl idea of yours won’t do; it’s too comic opera. Think up something better.”

“George! I only spoke of the green shawl to——”

“It’s obsolete, I tell you!” Hurley said, annoyed. “For God’s sake don’t argue with me!” He sighed and rubbed his head. “Another thing I’m afraid of—if the morning paper to-morrow says too much about Lily—Hi-yi! more tantrum! They’ve got a young boy named Leland writes it and I’d send Paradene to see him to-night and try to get him to tone down on Lily and compare Isabelle to Mrs. Fiske; but he’s the kind that’d be insulted. Don’t dare ask a favor of ’em when they’re like that. They talk about their responsibility to their public as if they were Presidents of the United States. Only people on earth it makes any difference to, of course, just Isabelle and Lily; but no—’responsibility to my readers’! Hi-yi! If he does give her a good notice it’ll be the last she’ll get as long as she plays ‘Myra’.”

“But it’s outrageously unfair and——”

“Unfair? What do you think the theatre is, the United States Supreme Court? Here!” Hurley pushed his sheaf of papers into the playwright’s hand. “Here are the notes I made for changes—a lot of ’em but mostly small. Don’t put in any time on them to-night; we’ll stick ’em in Thursday in Binghamton. To-night you just work out the change for getting off the wig. Better get over to your room right away and be at it. What did you ever want to be a playwright for, anyhow? God knows why I’m a manager! Tell her about it in the morning; let her have this one night to dream she’s going to be a great big actress.”

He shook his head, gave Owen a sour but compassionate smile, and they parted. Downcast again, the playwright returned to the hotel, and, as he passed through the lobby, heard Lily laughing excitedly, a sound that made him pause for a moment and glance through the broad open doorway that gave access to the restaurant. People who had been to the theatre were supping there, and, at one of the tables, sat Lily, Harry Vokes, old Ord and young Lancey, making merry.

Two waiters attended them, one placing covered dishes upon the white cloth and the other filling tall glasses with whisky and effervescent water. Lily was radiant, the two

younger actors, their heads in juxtaposition, were already murmurous with subdued chords of song, which old Joe seemed desirous of smothering under a gesticulative oratory, and, thus occupied in gay celebration, they did not see the playwright. He passed on, sent a telegram to his mother, informing her that the play had opened rather promisingly and that Lily's acting had been "delightful"; and then, repressing a tendency to return to the restaurant doorway, he went to the elevator instead, and ascended to his room.

There, for two hours, he alternately paced the floor and tried to work. "Crazy! Crazy!" he muttered, at two o'clock, for the twentieth time. "Everything's crazy!" In this thought, moreover, he included himself for spinelessly consenting to make his play crazy; but his inclusion of Lily was even more emphatic. True, a hotel restaurant wasn't a Pullman smoking-room; but, good heavens, why couldn't she have sense enough to drink a glass of milk and go to bed? Why couldn't she——

There was a gentle knock upon his door; but before he spoke in response, the glass knob turned and Lily, coming in quickly, closed the door behind her and stood looking at him as if she said joyously, "Behold me!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IN her eyes the night's triumph still sparkled, her pretty chin was up jauntily, and, to complete the somewhat startling informality of the visit, she wore a green and gold wrapper of Chinese silk and a pair of scarlet Morocco slippers embroidered with gilt thread.

"Lily!"

"Nonsense!" she said airily, and laughed. "I knew you'd be horrified but that's just because you'll never get over the way your mother brought you up. You'll never really get used to the theatre, Owen dear. When a company's in a hotel they're always flying round in each other's rooms and nobody thinks anything of it at all, because they have to, a good deal of the time, on business. Everybody knows that."

"Perhaps; but I doubt if this quiet hotel——"

"Pooh! You don't seem to realize I've become a Somebody and can do pretty much as I please. Anyhow, I'm going to stay!" Her laughter continued as she went to a velvet-covered easy-chair, sat and disposed herself at ease. "I've given up quite a party because I wanted more to do this, and besides, to show you how good I'm being. They closed up the restaurant downstairs——"

"Yes, I saw you."

"Did you?" She looked at him earnestly. "Ah, you're angry! But I had to, don't you see? I bet Harry last night he wouldn't get a laugh when he hands me the letter, and he did; so of course I had to pay. It was supper for the six of us; but poor Tom had a temperature and Jimmy went with him to his room to read him to sleep—he was so heroic and they're all perfectly angelic to each other——"

"You don't mean——" Owen sat down, facing her. "You paid for that supper to-night?"

"Why, I had to! I'd lost the bet, don't you see? Besides, I was the only one that had a week's salary in advance. I don't believe any of 'em'll have much in their poor pockets until Saturday night, except enough to pay for their rooms before we go to Binghamton on Thursday. It was only fourteen dollars, so please don't—Ah, you are worried, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, please not to-night!" she begged him eagerly. "Just this one night when everything's fairyland! You wouldn't be jealous of Harry and Jack, would you? I do adore

them; they're so perfectly angelic. I like Jack because he's so easy-going and reckless and generous, and because he has such funny kinky dark hair you always want to run your hand through it. Did you know Harry has to pay alimony every month to two different wives he's had, and, besides that, he takes care of an old sister of his and her four children and keeps a broken-down old actor friend of his in an expensive sanitarium? He's kept him there four years, Joe told me. When the restaurant closed, they wanted me to go on with them to a chop-suey joint that stays open all night; but I wouldn't because I haven't had a chance really to talk to you since last Thursday in New York, and there was something I was afraid you'd be thinking about me. I mean about Friday night. You remember on Friday afternoon I told you I thought I'd better not go out that evening, I'd better stay home and study?"

"Yes, I remember that rather well."

"Ah, I was afraid so! Of course I knew if she suspected anything she'd run to you with it! I suppose she tried to find out from you if you knew where 'Gene had been. Didn't she?"

"Yes."

"Of course she would!" Lily exclaimed. "But I want you to know the truth; I did mean to stay home and study. He hadn't said anything about coming for me; but he did, just before dinner-time, and I'd got all over my nervousness and decided to go. Next morning I didn't have any chance to tell you; but I wanted to, because truly and truly you're the last person in the world I'd ever deceive, Owen. You believe me, don't you?"

"I'm afraid we'd both better consider that a matter of minor importance, Lily."

"Oh, dear!" She lifted both hands, then dropped them deplorably to the violent embroideries of her lap. "You're such a professor! I do just worship you; but you'll have to admit yourself you behave terribly like the faculty and parents and guardians and probation officers. Don't you see I'm not the little girl any more that I was those ages and ages ago at home? We have to measure by experience, not by time, don't we? I've lived a hundred years in these few weeks and a thousand in this one night. Experiences! I had one to-night you wouldn't believe. Want me to prove it?" She laughed gayly, and, without either self-consciousness or coquetry, slid the wrapper down from her left shoulder and gave to view some discolorations upon the whiteness of the upper part of her arm. "That's what she did in the sisterly embrace when Hester forgives Myra at the end of our scene in the last act!"

He was horrified. "Isabelle! Why, good heavens——"

"I don't mind a bit," Lily said cheerfully. "Of course her explanation would be that she was so tense in her acting she didn't know what she was doing; but she's done it once or twice at rehearsal, too, though not so hard. To-night I think she seriously tried to make me yelp, or at any rate get out of the character. I'm pretty sure she'll do it every night from now on; but I don't care. The top of my arm doesn't show in the costume and she can pinch me as black and blue as she pleases." Lily paused, laughed light-heartedly again, pulled the silk back in place over her shoulder; then put her head on one side winningly. "Well——would you like to say a few things now about how good I was to-night, or was I? You may have been disappointed."

At that, he laughed, too. "I think we covered the point in your dressing-room."

“Yes,” she agreed gravely. “Do you know, I think that was the greatest moment in my life up to now—waiting for you. For once I wasn’t thinking of myself—I really wasn’t thinking of anything in the world but you—and of what I had through you. Yet maybe I did think of just one other thing—of the promise I made your mother just before we left home.”

He was surprised. “You made her a promise?”

“She asked me not to fall in love with you.”

“She didn’t!”

The seriousness of his exclamation amused Lily. “The dear angel, she was so cute about it! Made a great joke of it; but she meant it and so did I when I promised her. Of course what she really meant was that if I fell in love with you it might do something toward getting you that way about me; and what *I* really meant was that I owed her too much to let myself hope for any such calamity, and so I never would. I’ve got an idea you think I’m too feather-brained to be conscientious; but I am about some things, you’ll find out. Besides, it was an easy promise to make. I care too much about you to fall in love with you. The people I care about are my mother and Clara and your mother and you and—and Mr. Hurley—and old Joe and Jennie and Rita, and Pinkney Monk and the three boys and Harry Vokes and—Oh, there’s quite a list! Oh, and that audience to-night, the precious lambs!”

It seemed to Owen that she had made an omission that was strikingly significant, and, in a voice not entirely steady, he called it to her attention. “You don’t mention Mr. Allan.”

Lily’s gaze moved from his and fixed itself moodily upon the wall. “You men are queer—a great deal queerer than we women are. Do you think a woman of any spirit would let herself be treated absolutely as the property of every man that happened to be in love with her? But that’s just what you men do. If some woman falls in love with you she keeps you scared out of your wits for fear something you do won’t look as if you were as slavishly one of her possessions as her powder-puff is! What’s more, all your men-friends’ll be in a panic of exertion to keep her thinking you haven’t got any rights that she doesn’t allow you. Some friends of his that live here are giving him a party to-night and told him to bring along anybody in the company he chose, so of course he had to take Isabelle. Imagine if he hadn’t! Just suppose he’d asked me, what a state you and Mr. Hurley would have been in by this time over it!”

Owen glanced at his watch, and rose. “It’s time for you to be in bed, I have work to do and it isn’t safe for you to be here, anyhow, even if what you say is true about some theatrical people running in and out of each other’s rooms. You mustn’t do it again, especially not in this sort of hotel.”

She jumped up and put a hand on his arm. “I thought so. Now you’re really angry. I see! Keep off the grass! You two policemen are duty bound to see to it that her private property’s protected and that he doesn’t get one instant’s escape from being nagged and badgered and bored to death! That’s his reward for being magnificent in his part to-night—and oh, wasn’t he, though! And I couldn’t dare to tell him so in anything except the hastiest whisper!” Her voice trembled and so did the fingers upon Owen’s sleeve. “Yet I think that whisper may have meant something to the poor slave she and all the rest of you make of him. Ah, now you do hate me, don’t you?” She stepped back from him, and tears

seemed imminent in her eyes; but suddenly she tossed her head, smiled and became radiant once more. "Silly! On such a night and just after I'd been saying we wouldn't spoil it because it's a night out of fairyland. Oh, help me to keep it so, Owen! I do so want to remember it as all perfect. Don't you think it's just about perfect, Owen, yourself?"

"Well, well; I hope so," he said. "Just run along now, dear, and——"

"I will." She went toward the door, but stopped. "Owen, when we think of what this means at home—of my precious, precious mother and my precious, precious sister, and the light it brings into their lives!" She faltered, and then the tears did come. "I didn't mean to cry; but they're so—so dear to me."

"I know, Lily. There's something I think I'd better speak to you about. I think it was perfectly natural of you to want to give that little party to-night. Of course you would. Why not? And of course you'd want to be at this hotel; it's a pretty special occasion. It seems to me, though, that you might run a little short of funds before the end of the week, and Mr. Paradene might make some fuss about additional advances; so if you'd let me ——"

"No, no!" She shook her head gayly, bright again. "Like you, I've had a bringing-up by a mother, and though most of her teaching doesn't show, I'm afraid, there are one or two things I'd never be able to do. I just couldn't borrow. I know it's untheatrical of me, because Joe and Harry and Tom-Jim-Jack don't really seem to know which is which about money—if one has some they all have, apparently. But I couldn't do it. Don't worry; I'll get along all right."

"But about—about your mother and sister——"

Lily clasped her hands upon her breast impulsively. "Oh, Owen, if they could have been here to-night! If they could have seen it! If some miracle could only have transported them to-night into that heavenly, heavenly audience, that darling audience! And to think there'll be another to-morrow night—really to-night, because it's already morning. Oh, I couldn't sleep! I don't want to sleep. I couldn't! I can't wait! I want to be into my costume and that glorious wig. I just want to act and act and act and act! And I shall! To-night and to-morrow night and the night after, and oh, every night! They'll all be gloriously just like to-night! Won't they, Owen?"

"Oh, I—I do hope so," he said uncertainly.

Upon a thought she had, Lily uttered an urchin laugh. "You know something I've been more than half expecting? After the dress rehearsal everybody in the company believed she'd do it, too. They were all sure she'd try to get that wig away from me. Golly! The only reason in the world she didn't must be because she hasn't had sense enough to think of it!"

"Oh, no!" The playwright could not repress the impulse to lament. "Dear me! She's thought of it, Lily!"

"What! You don't mean——"

"Yes, you poor child," he said, and it seemed to him that it would be best to complete at once the unkind task to which he had been appointed. "She's got her way. You're not to wear the wig again and you're to play your last act scene giving her the stage, with you in the chair down near the footlights where she was to-night."

Lily was incredulous. "But it can't be done! In the first place, Harry gives me the letter

because——”

“Because of ‘Myra’s’ auburn hair, certainly! But you see such trifles as the structure of a play don’t matter at all sometimes, my dear. At least you have a companion in misfortune; I’m hit too, you see. Somehow between now and to-morrow morning I have to scratch, twist and blister that manuscript on the table into giving Vokes another reason for handing you the letter, because you’re going to rehearse the new version at eleven in the morning.”

“But what possible other reason could there be?”

“You’re quite right,” he said. “But it has to be done. I’m afraid there are even more ups and downs in the life than you thought, Lily.”

“Well, but——” She paused, and, to his astonishment, her expression was not one of consternation; she was suddenly profoundly thoughtful. “Play that scene down stage—in the chair?” she murmured, and added, looking at him absently, “My own hair mightn’t be so bad, you know. She’s a fighter, isn’t she? You poor man, caught in a ladies’ battle.” Her manner changed; her expression became that of a person who pathetically does not reproach another who has failed to defend her. “You want me to go, I know,” she said sadly, and pointed to the manuscript upon the table, “so you can begin the work of destroying me.”

“Lily! Lily!” he broke out, groaning. “I don’t want you to go and you know I’ll make this change in the script do you as little harm as I possibly can. It does pretty well knock ‘Myra’s’ eye out—Hurley knew that as well as we do and the sacrifice hurt him, too; but he made it to save the play and it’s got to be done. The theatre’s the devil and you’re just beginning to understand that. Isabelle herself can’t help doing what she’s doing; she’s worked hard all her life getting up to where she is, and of course she’ll fight—fight every way she knows how—to hold what she’s got. You might destroy it, you see. There! Go to bed! We’ll all just do what we can.”

“I—I know,” she said slowly, and sighed quaveringly on an indrawn breath, like a hurt child. “So this was my one night out of—out of fairyland. Just one.” Her head drooped; she went to the door and stood there for a last moment, a crushed, delicate figure infinitely touching in this loss of all the gay triumphancy so lately animating it. “I know—dear Owen. I’ll—I’ll be good. Good night.”

Not altering that attitude of desolation, she opened the door and went out slowly and so softly that the closing of the door made no sound. His heart was wrung for her and to brighten her he would have given whatever he had in the world, just then; nevertheless, somewhere in a remoteness of his mind there came into renewed vague life a small old suspicion of his. She had been all reality during the murmured expression of her thoughts about her own hair; but there seemed to be just a possibility that since then she had somewhat pressed her hurt meekness—in fact, that though unquestionably she had suffered a shock and was genuinely hurt, she had been acting a little, too, and, somewhere within her, had a little enjoyment of the scene she played.

The thought just peeped into view and withdrew entirely as he sat down to attempt a revision of his manuscript that would eliminate the wig. Tinkering dismally, he tried many devices, only to find them not plausible, and finally came to the conclusion that no device at all was better than a bad one. In the original manuscript of the play “Captain Feenix”,

fat, wicked, inept henchman of the glittering “Hawkins”, is told to deliver secretly a letter to a lovely young auburn-haired lady at “Catalpa House” plantation;—at five in the morning the author decided that it would henceforth be best for “Captain Feenix” (Harry Vokes) to deliver the letter to the wrong lovely young lady at “Catalpa House” plantation without any mention of hair. Since neither “Hawkins” nor “Captain Feenix” knew that the auburn-haired “Hester’s” younger sister also had auburn hair, why could they not equally as well be ignorant that she had a sister at all? Fatigued, the playwright was conscious of an inner dissatisfaction with the subterfuge; but wrote the necessary rather slight alterations upon the pages before him, read them over, shook his head forebodingly and went to bed to dream a dream of being an actor playing a scene with Lily Mars before a gigantic audience that rose and drove them both screaming from the stage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HE slept three hours and had breakfast in his room, accompanying it with a reading of the theatrical column of the Somerville morning newspaper. As O'Mahoney had foretold, young Mr. Leland was benign; he wrote at the outset that "'Catalpa House', though more an entertaining stratagem in picaresque romance than a drama of deeps and human agonies portrayed by the mordant penetration of a genius" was nevertheless "distinctly worthwhile as a *tour de force* in lighter vein." Continuing, after a synopsis of the plot, he remarked that Owen Gilbert was "neither Strindberg nor Shaw nor Pinero"; that a lack of "the more mature sort of thinking" was obvious in the play; that the theme would have been "the better expounded by the Gallic touch of Bernstein" and that those who sought for "Attic pellucid clarity of motivation sounding the robust profundities of nether human outcries in the formless passion of humanity's agonized surge and struggle in the realities of life magnificent and terrible would be disappointed." On the other hand, the play offered the spectator a "consummated suspensiveness and interludes of quaint comedy"; the audience had made manifest their "symptomatic delight" and when some of the more "glaring crudities" had been "lopped off" and the play "generally revised by an adroiter hand which it might possibly be advisable for the management to call in from outside" it would be not too much to hope that the "lavish and colorful production accorded to this undeniably meager and youthful but promising effort of the dramatist" would be granted the "guerdon of life by the Imperiali who rule Broadway."

Concerning the actors and the "production", however, the critic had written wholeheartedly and at times with an enthusiastically hurrying alliterative pen. "Seldom has Somerville seen scenery more satisfying and never has the able Adler more adroitly cast the characters of a drama." As for Eugene, the reviewer felt that "words could not well be too warm for such wedding of manly beauty to masterly art", a union "satisfactorily sustained and supported by the talented emotional acting of Isabelle Hedrington." Owen read with anxiety what was said of Isabelle and came upon a word that worried him. "Mature" the thoughtless young Leland had written, possessing little mordant penetration of his own. "Mature in art and mind as well as in her tall, well-rounded pulchritude, this talented and conscientious actress is always excellent and dependable and will still be seen in leading rôles for many years to come."

The review's approval of Ord, Vokes and Rita Carlin was gracious; but when it came to Lily the playwright's anxiety increased, though he was pleased, too, when he thought of

what the printed scribblings would mean to Lily's mother. "Here is a young actress we confess previously unknown to our orbit, and we would feel the more ashamed by the confession had we not heard a whisper that her advent upon the stage is a recent shift from the mere contentment with high social standing to the inevitable climax of a career as a brilliant society amateur with the adoption of professional footlights. Nothing could more lucidly illuminate the genius of Felix Adler as a producer than his discovery of this young artist, and we dare to asseverate that neither Frohman nor Belasco himself could have found two such red-haired examples of pulchritude and art in combination to present in one and the same play.

"Miss Mars has a piquante personality, lips of rose leaf, a dainty profile, eyes that kindle, eyes that beam and sparkle, eyes that grow tawnily soft, an aristocratic hand, a pretty foot, winsome symmetry of line and limb, and a head crowned with an auburn glory that would be the despair of a Parisian coiffeuse. Her voice has a singular quality. Like an evanescent perfume it is sweet and penetrant yet never for an instant saccharine and fails to cloy. Isabelle Hedrington with her mature methods and hair of almost exactly the same shade as this younger artist's ardent ringlets is no fortuitous foil but a tributary illustration of the art of Felix Adler in selection. We recommend to our readers," the review said in conclusion, "a remembrance of the name of Lily Mars henceforth. Beauty, attractiveness, scintillant wit and creative intellect are not often so combined. It is to be hoped and we venture the prophecy that Miss Mars will climb high. Lovers of the drama should attend this play in numbers and we advise that they will find ample reward for eye and ear in the perfect acting of Eugene Allan and in Miss Mars's pluperfect portrayal of the character of 'Myra.'"

Owen finished his reading of the last sentence with an actual gasp. "Oh dear!" he murmured just afterward, and was conscious that as an expression of his feeling the exclamation was ludicrously futile. "But the infernal thing's printed," he added more philosophically. "It can't be helped now." Then with a loudly blown "Whew!" he rose, put the manuscript of his play under his arm and set forth for the morning's rehearsal; but in the corridor outside his door he encountered a youth in a jaunty uniform who brought him a telegram. It was from Mrs. Gilbert.

DELIGHTED WITH YOUR GOOD NEWS OF PLAY NO MATTER HOW GREAT
ITS SUCCESS YOU DESERVE MORE I CANNOT WITHHOLD TOLD YOU SO
ABOUT HER AND IT IS SPLENDID NEWS BUT PLEASE ASK HER TO WRITE
HER MOTHER WHO IS VERY ANXIOUS AND I AM AFRAID WORRIES FOR
MORE THAN ONE REASON WHICH I IMAGINE YOU WILL UNDERSTAND
THEY HAVE HEARD FROM HER ONLY ONCE SINCE SHE LEFT HOME A
SHORT EXCITED NOTE UPON REACHING NEW YORK THEY KNOW SHE IS
VERY BUSY BUT NATURALLY ARE MUCH TROUBLED SO DO URGE HER
PLEASE PLEASE WRITE THEM

Owen put the telegram in his pocket, and, recalling certain tears recently seen, smiled a lopsided smile as he went on his way to the theatre. There, as he came in from the lobby, he saw Hurley and Pinkney Monk waiting for him near the orchestra rail, while the members of the company stood chatting in pairs and groups upon the stage. Several of the actors held folded newspapers in their hands; young Lancey was one of these, and a tiny episode that resulted flickered for a moment across the playwright's vision as he walked

down the aisle. Lancey was talking to Eugene and Isabelle; he was cheerful and a lively gesture of his brought the newspaper near Isabelle's face. There was no possibility that it would touch her; but her head jerked back and there was a glance from her eye that gave the playwright a curious brief impression. He thought she was like a fastidious woman tourist among tribesmen who carelessly handle snakes; that glance was like such a tourist's for a savage who brings poison fangs close to her head.

This resemblance, not altogether fantastic, appeared and was gone in the same instant. Owen called to Lily, handed her the telegram across the footlights without a word, and, turning at once to Hurley and Monk, opened his manuscript before them and explained the alterations he had made. Hurley accepted these dubiously; but, as neither he nor the stage director proved able to think of anything better, he presently dismissed all of the company except Lily, Isabelle and Harry Vokes, the three whose "lines" were affected by the alterations. The rehearsal was short.

Lily went through her part in a defeated manner that brought no chiding from the sympathetic Monk; but, having concluded the listless business, he detained her until after Isabelle and Vokes had gone. "Brace it up as much as you can to-night, dear," he said. "You can still get some nice little effects with this part, so don't be discouraged. Anyhow, do the best you can with it."

"I'll try," Lily said meekly, with quivering lips, as she turned away. She came through the passage behind the proscenium boxes at the right of the stage and called softly to Owen from the dark side aisle. "May I speak to you a moment?" Then, as he joined her, "You despise me again," she said huskily. "You always think the worst of me, don't you?" She laughed plaintively. "Ah, yes, whether it's true or not! I wrote Mother a long letter just before we left New York. I don't know why in the world she hasn't got it yet. And of course I wired her last night about how the audience had treated me. I guess it's a good thing I wired her then, before *this* happened to me."

He was remorseful instantly. "Ah, Lily, please——"

"No," she said, with a smothered half-sob. "You always do. I'll go now, please." She put her handkerchief to her lips and went hurriedly up the aisle.

Hurley, busy with Monk and Briggs and the manuscript, at the foot of the centre aisle, was shouting for Owen. "For God's sake! Where is he? Gone out to buy a cane again?" He caught sight of the playwright and also of the disappearing stricken figure of Lily. "My cripes!" he said irascibly yet in a lowered tone, as Owen approached. "Some time before I die I hope to see just one single solitary soul around a theatre that shows a glimmer of common sense. That's all I ask, just one glimmer, as God lets me live! Here's Monk had to go and sympathize with her, and now *you*! Isn't the part ruined enough on us already without that? If you *show* her you think it's so damned damaged that she's got to be *sympathized* with over it, she'll let it die deader'n a canned crab instead of trying to do the little she still might with it! Never saw an actor or anybody else that didn't wilt the minute you pity 'em. Think they got a *right* to, then. My God! Here! Keep your sympathies for playwrights and managers and producers with plays that get the hits kicked out of 'em by too much temperament. Yes, and for stage managers that can't read your handwriting, by cripes!"

"What? Isn't it——"

“No, it isn’t. In my whole life I never saw rottener poultry-scratching on a piece of paper—not in my whole life, I give you my solemn word! Never! I swear by every saint and symbol that’s called holy in this universe I never saw anything even *like* it! I’ll take any oath you can think of I never did!” The manager’s irritation had appeared to increase, swelling anew after every outburst; but unexpectedly and all at once he fell into a quiet melancholy. “There. Explain it to Briggs so he can read it and get it typewritten, will you? After lunch you’d better get to work on those detail changes I gave you last night and any you’ve thought of, yourself. It’ll take you the rest of the day and probably most of the night. I’ll watch in the house to-night and have Pink sitting out front, too. You’d better stick in your room till the job’s done so we can have a fresh script typed and ready for the rehearsal in Binghamton day after to-morrow. I’ll come up to your room to-night after the play and bring you notes of whatever other changes I notice. We may be able to think of something that’d brace the ‘Myra’ part up and keep it from being a dead loss somehow. I don’t know. Go along!”

Owen returned to the hotel and by chance, just as he was stepping into the elevator, saw Lily coming from a passageway over the entrance of which was a neat small sign “Telegrams”. He felt another pang of remorse, for he thought that she had probably telegraphed to Mrs. Mars a reassuring message in addition to the letter and the previous telegram mentioned to him; but Lily, catching sight of him, betrayed just the slightest hesitation in her movements, as if perhaps she hoped she was not seen and had a momentary impulse to retreat. He was already in the elevator and the metal door closed across the picture of her immediately recovered indifference after this barely perceptible change; nevertheless, as he sped upward, reason and intuition both informed him that neither any letter nor any previous telegram had been sent. The revelation seemed to be accompanied by the descent of a weight upon the back of his neck.

“Ah, Lily, Lily!”

In his room he worked all the afternoon upon the notes Hurley had given him, and, when evening came, was glad that he had not finished the task; he felt no desire to be a witness of Lily’s struggle with the botched “Myra” or to behold the weakened effect of his marred play. Near midnight he was still sitting at his strewn table when there was a brisk and sturdy step in the corridor; the door flung open under a decisive hand and Hurley came in.

“Well—George?”

The manager’s eyes were bright beneath the black brim of his soft hat; his face shone rosilily and the fuming cigar in his mouth waggled—with emotion, apparently. He strode to the seated playwright, smote him powerfully upon the back, sat down opposite him, with the table between them, removed his cigar and spoke loudly.

“Your mother’s certainly raised hell with the theatrical business!”

“What’s happened?”

“Happened? You write and tell her she’s fixed *my* business good and plenty! Nice thing she did, hi-yi! Went up to dinner at her house with a good quiet capable harmonious theatrical company, everything all set for a success with your play, and she slipped that girl of hers over on me whereby there’s been hell to pay ever since. Never knew anything like it in my whole life; I’ll take any oath you can possibly think of it’s the damnedest

thing I ever saw and I've seen a good deal. My cripes! I swear——”

“George! Will you kindly tell me——”

“Listen!” Hurley slapped his open hand resoundingly down upon the papers on the table, beamed, chuckled, laughed with delight. “Looks like we've got something! Came on without that wig and for a minute or two maybe I thought it wasn't so good. Just because she'd got me thinking of her in the wig; that was all the matter. Same with Pink—I had him out front with me and he caught it just the same way. Her own hair—it was just as if she'd been freed of something that had been muffling her looks and her expression, too. I'd never have had that wig on her, not for a minute, if I'd known how much more she could get without it and her own hair curled. Whoosh! She seemed about ten times more alive! Looks to me like she might turn out to be something rather remarkable, rather remarkable!”

“She's that,” Owen said. “I haven't doubted her remarkableness.”

“You mean you think *I* have? I see. Authors are the only people in the world with a single spark of intelligence. Why, certainly; of course they are! What do you think I've worried my head off over her for? What was I doing up there on the stage at rehearsals day after day, pecking at her with Pink? Why do you s'pose I kept her on when she was disrupting my company? I give you my word you make me sick; I give you my absolute word you do!” Hurley returned the cigar to his mouth, drew upon it deeply and with gusto. “I knew she had something; but I'll admit I didn't know how much till I saw her play that last act scene down stage and in a chair to-night.”

“You don't mean she was really effective?”

“Effective? I give you my word—I give you my solemn word—I simply and absolutely never saw such a performance in my whole life. Listen!” The manager's sensitive complexion became ruddy and his eyes shone; he set his cigar upon an ash-tray and rose to his feet, unable to suppress strong evidences of an interior excitement. “She sat down near the foots in that stiff little chair and never once turned her face toward the audience. From out front you could just get one or two glimpses of her profile during the whole scene. Isabelle had the stage just the way she asked for it and was giving 'em everything with her face. By cripes, you hardly knew she was there! Lily Mars sat with her back toward the audience; but it looked like a back that was just about broken. I never in my whole life saw such a figure of pain. Then she did all the rest with just her voice and one or two little half-gestures, as if she wanted to put her hand out to plead with Isabelle but was ashamed to. All you got was just that kind of terrible bend in her back—after always seeing her jaunty and graceful in the first three acts—just that and a voice you could just barely hear but never missed a syllable of. I give you my word it was like seeing and hearing a fresh pink rosebud crinkling and making a tiny little sizzling noise when somebody'd put it on a red hot stove. Cry out front? About five times as much as they did last night! Whereby you might wonder why Pink and I never thought of putting her down there in the first place. But as heaven is my witness it doesn't make any difference where you put her, and the worst of it is she knows it, herself! She's going to be a fine one to handle from now on, isn't she? Watch her get the big head! Never knew it to fail, as heaven is my witness! The younger they are, the worse they are; I've seen it a thousand times. Find out they're a hit and in about four hours you wouldn't know it's the same person. You'll see!”

He laughed with a rueful delight; but Owen looked grave. "What about handling Isabelle, George?"

"Whew! *There's* a grand barrel o' pickles! One thing, though; she won't talk any more about quitting me now and going over to the Brangins."

"Why won't she?"

"Because she'd be afraid I'd laugh in her face! She's had her way; we did exactly what she asked us to—threw out the wig and gave her the stage in that fourth act scene. She *daren't* quit now, because she knows if she did it would get around that she was out-acted and laid down because she'd let the play be stolen from her. Damaging! Don't worry about her quitting; she knows now she's got to stay and fight, and that's what we've got to expect. Oh, she knows, she knows! I went around, after, and asked her if she didn't think it went better to-night on account of the changes and felt satisfied. I hoped maybe she'd think she was the one that had got all that crying in the scene with 'Myra'; but she knew, she knew. She just gave me a look. Hi-yi! That young boy on the Somerville Times did *his* little best to help matters along this morning, too, didn't he? Eugene Allan and Lily Mars! My cripes! Pretty good analysis of your play, though, he wrote. Don't you think so, yourself?"

The manager made the inquiry so seriously that Owen looked somewhat plaintive. "Then you feel that the play's hardly worth——"

Hurley slapped him again upon the back and laughed in high good humor. "Oh, it might be worth something if we got this boy, Leland, to rewrite it. It's a great business! Put in your whole life in the theatre, work your heart out and your head off night and day over a play, and then any semi-adolescent schoolboy that sits around a newspaper office walks up and tells you all about it in two minutes! Tells you what's wrong, what you ought to have done in the first place and what you'll have to do to be saved. Here!" He placed a memorandum book upon the table. "There are the notes Pink and I made to-night. Nothing much. Get 'em in and we'll rehearse 'em in Binghamton and after that maybe we can let it get set for the one-night-stands next week—Easton, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre; then Rochester, Syracuse, Albany, before we go into New York to find out whether we've got half a million dollars or go to jail. Hi-yi, I'm dog-tired and going to bed! You sit up and work because you deserve to for not being Strindberg and everybody. It's what you get for trying to be a little subtle with your picaresque stratagems and serves you right. Work hard, because you may run into a Leland again in Binghamton or Easton. Write your mother I owe her the orchids with dynamite under 'em because that's what she's handed me! Good night."

He yawned loudly and went forth whistling "Ach, du lieber Augustin"; but the playwright, after a negligent glance at the memorandum book, looked at his watch, rose and began to pace the floor. He was beginning to have an understanding of a phase of Lily Mars and he was sure that before she went to bed that night she would come to find out whether or not he had perceived that she hadn't told him the truth about the telegram to her mother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SHE astonished him by appearing not two minutes after the manager's departure. Without knocking, she scurried noiselessly into the room, closed the door and stood laughing, like a prankish boarding-school girl in triumph. She was delighted to astonish him, as he perceived, and he also had the impression that she was pleased to add to his surprise by evidence that she had been enlarging her wardrobe; to-night her wrapper was again Oriental but of black and gold, though she wore the same gilt and scarlet slippers. "I've been waiting for him to go," she explained gleefully. "Don't you dare scold me—not to-night—I won't have it! I'm just across the hall, two doors down, and you can't possibly make me believe there's any risk. I've come to make you admit how good I am—no party for me to-night, just milk and bread in my room. You needn't tell me any more it's important for me to take care of myself—not after the answer I got from this audience to-night! Of course he told you about it?"

"Yes."

"I thought he would!" She laughed, and in the light sound, as well as in every other token of her elation, it seemed to him that he caught a hint of something new in her—a self-assurance that appeared to spring from a consciousness of being valuable, perhaps even of being precious. With this new confidence in herself, moreover, she seemed to have become a little less gentle; he was daunted by the thought that he glimpsed in her a touch of self-importance. Certainly she showed him a new sauciness, for she straightway flung a flippant challenge to one of his anxieties about her. With her wide-sleeved arms outstretched, she looked at him mockingly, glanced down at her oriental black and gold, asked, "Do you like me in this?" and then, laughing, twirled like a ballet-dancer. "Surprisingly good shops here," she said airily, as she went to the easy-chair and sat. "I mean for a small town, of course."

"You went shopping this afternoon?" he asked dryly. "That was the effect of reading young Mr. Leland's encomium?"

"Leland?" She looked innocently inquiring for a moment, then nodded. "Oh, yes; the critic. They say he has immense influence; someone told me to-day he has offers to go on one of the New York newspapers. I believe he's to be brought around behind after to-morrow's matinée. I'll be glad to meet him; he was rather nice about my acting. I wish he hadn't written his notice until after to-night, though." She paused and her expression became judicial. "They say everybody admires his writing tremendously; but I hope you

don't mind what he said about the play itself, because, though I suppose he felt he'd have to be severely honest with his readers, I think some of it was really very uncalled-for." She paused again, glanced sympathetically at Owen and added with unmistakable loyalty, "I think he's a better critic of acting than he is of writing."

"Yes, naturally; since he's a writer, not an actor."

She failed to perceive the slight bitterness of this comment; she was thinking of something else. "You're sure he told you quite all about this evening?"

"Mr. Hurley? Yes, I think so."

"He's really quite a marvellous man," Lily said, paying this tribute with an air somewhat absent. "I'm just beginning to appreciate him more. He seems to carry the whole thing in his head—the play and all of us, and the scenery and the lights and everything—and he never stops tinkering at us. Sometimes it's as if you and I and all the rest of us were just colors on a palette he's using to paint a picture. Then he has such tremendous ideals about the theatre—wanting to make it so fine and all of its people so worthy of it, so noble and high-minded and so serious about their work. He's given me several quite wonderful little talks; showed a side of him I wouldn't have suspected he had. He gets very gentle and yet so glowing with enthusiasm he looks immensely distinguished and inspired and really quite handsome." She laughed suddenly. "Then he's so terribly funny, too!"

"He is? Just how, Lily?"

"Poor George!" she said. "He tries so hard to keep from showing it when he's excited about me; but to-night he simply couldn't help it. He's adorable; but so funny when he thinks he's concealing his feelings that time and again I almost laugh out loud. Poor George."

"You call him 'George' now, Lily?"

"Why, everybody does, don't they? You do, yourself. Even old Joe calls him 'George'."

"Yes. I believe they've known each other about twenty years."

"Owen Gilbert," she said crisply, though her voice did not lack an indulgent kind of affection. "I believe you're the priggishest man I ever knew in my life. I really do! You're a dear and I love you for all your imaginative worryings about me; but——"

"Imaginative?" he interrupted. "You mean my imagination conjures up unreal dangers for you, Lily?"

"Oh, so did mine!" she admitted, laughing; then became eagerly confidential. "Don't think I'll ever forget you're the best friend I have—nothing'll ever make me forget that, Owen; and I want you always to know you can count on it absolutely. I'd really always tell you anything of my innermost nature and thoughts. For instance, listen. Last night was simply great; but to-night, when she thought she had 'Myra' practically out of the piece and I felt how I was holding 'em out front—oh, absolutely in the hollow of my hand!—I had the strangest psychic exaltation. Listen, I'm going to tell you something I've never even told Clara. The only person I ever spoke of it to was Mother—and Minnie Bush, once when she doubted my friendship and I felt I had to prove it to her. It's about a dream."

"Oh—is it?" he responded, with but the simulation of interest; for even a lover is

seldom eager to hear of his lady's dreams unless he is to cut some figure in them. "A dream of yours, Lily?"

"A repeated one. I've had it over and over since I was about fourteen. Over and over!" she said impressively. "Listen! I'd find myself high, high up in the crystal blue sky, riding two snow white horses with beautiful waving white manes bareback and I standing up, riding them easily—miles up in the sky with a great city far, far below and all the multitudes and multitudes of people looking up at me in wonder. Yet it would always be absolutely real, just as if it were actually happening; I could feel the warm, flowing backs of the horses under my bare feet and all I'd have on would be just a gauzy scarf that blew out behind me." She looked at him wistfully. "I suppose you think I'm awfully bold?"

"No, Lily."

Her eyes glowed again. "We'd be flying like the wind—oh, swift as light!—and all the air would be full of music, like a thousand orchestras playing, only you couldn't see them, and you could hear the horses' running hoof-beats, though it was only the air they were running upon. From 'way, 'way up there and almost out of sight of the city, we'd swoop down in an enormous curve until we were skimming just above the house-tops, and then sweep upward again toward the sun—and I'd hear an enormous, enormous shout of transport from the multitudes of people as they watched me turning golden and getting smaller and smaller in the high distance; and I'd be 'way, 'way up there, transfigured and flying into the very face of the dazzling, blazing sun itself. Oh, the ecstasy! I'd feel it for hours after I woke up. Well, that's how I felt after I began to play that scene to-night and knew I'd got them. Do you understand?"

"I think so. Perhaps you're still feeling that way?"

"Well—some," she said gravely, and returned to her confidential manner. "Another thing I'll tell you—it's about your having imagined I was in trouble and my having imagined it, too, at the time. When you were so frightened, that first day in New York, I was frightened, too—oh, out of my wits! I thought he really meant it and that I was dropped and had lost my chance. Of course later I saw that George himself thought he meant to drop me then—but not permanently. You see he was really furious because he thought that row with Isabelle on the train meant something that upset him terribly. Don't you see, it looked as if I was getting terribly interested in someone else—and of course I was!"

Owen was perplexed; she seemed to mean something incredible, and he sought for a more reasonable interpretation of her words. "I don't quite understand. Of course you don't mean that Mr. Hurley became personally jealous of Mr. Allan and——"

Her excited laughter, interrupting him, had the tone of an increasingly confidential gay roguery. "You see, that night at your mother's when I met them all, he kept looking at me and of course I really knew he'd be thinking of me afterwards and——"

"Lily! Do you always know that people will be 'thinking of you afterwards'?"

"Oh—well." She became serious, looked reticent for a moment, then said, "You can't help knowing sometimes, you see. Anyhow, of course I understand now there wasn't any real danger; he just wanted to be soothed down and persuaded into giving me the part again. That apology! Oh, dear me, wasn't it funny? She did some fancy pinching to-night, I can tell you, when she was forgiving me in the last act! I don't think she will again."

“Won’t she?”

“I don’t *think* she will again! While she was doing it I just whispered to her, ‘Isabelle, if you do this once more I’ll show Eugene how black and blue you’ve made me.’ No, I don’t think she will. Well, she’s had her way—got me out of that wig and put me down stage in the chair with my back to the audience for my best scene. Murder! What she does to that beautiful part of ‘Hester’! It’d be magnificent if she only knew how. Really, that woman’s terribly dumb. If I get just one chance to play ‘Hester’ some night, what I’ll do with it——”

“Lily! I don’t think——”

“Oh, I know!” Lily said. “She’ll stick as long as she can. She’d rather die a thousand times than give me that chance, now. But oh, it is a beautiful part—beautiful, if it could ever be really played!” She became thoughtful. “You do write character into parts wonderfully well, Owen. I wish you’d be thinking of a play that’d have a really great woman’s part in it—I mean something, for instance, that’d combine everything that’s in ‘Hester’ with what’s in ‘Myra’. All the laughs ‘Myra’ gets, you know, and the powerful emotional appeal that’s in ‘Hester’, and then put something on top of both that’d really reach the heights. I mean a play that’d be all about a woman—a woman that’d have great passions and make sublime self-sacrifices, and yet have a sense of humor, too, and say and do lots of amusing things; but in the end would be tragic. It ought to have a tragic ending where she could reach out and up, and yet there’d be a stony nothingness she’d seem to beat herself against. Do you know what I admire most in the world? It’s some stupendous act of gorgeous self-immolation—one vast stroke that shows the heights a woman’s soul can reach. I can see a last act curtain with her giving one long last look straight out front and maybe dying in a chair, or, if she didn’t die, just going back into the house; so the last you’d see of her would be just her back all bent and crushed. You see what I mean? I don’t mean for this year; but——”

He stared at her with both amazement and compassion. “No,” he said. “I don’t think it’d be for this year, Lily.”

“I don’t suppose so,” she said dreamily, unaware of any undertone in his voice. “Ah, but if I *do* get the chance to play ‘Hester’, and Eugene and I——”

“Lily!” he exclaimed; but this repetition of her name held a sharpness. “You plan a double displacement of that unfortunate woman?”

He was standing before her, and she looked up at him with eyes enlarged. “Plan? Good gracious, I’m not planning anything! She does the planning. Look what she planned to do to me to-night! Think of the stories she told about me—said *I* was the one who used vulgar language!—trying to ruin me from the start. It’s she you’d better talk to about ‘planning’, I think! I haven’t ‘planned’ anything, and I won’t. Whatever happens to her’ll be her own fault and just because she plans and plots things that fail. If she wants to ruin herself that way I don’t think I can be accused of doing it for her!”

“‘Accused’? I didn’t put it as an accusation.”

“Oh, didn’t you?” For the first time since he had known her Lily showed irritation with him. “You’re her champion but without accusing me; is that it? You think she needs a defender? It isn’t enough that she dictates what I shall wear and where I must play my scenes—ah, and that he and I must live on stolen moments and hasty whispers, with just

the touch of a hand or a brushed shoulder once or twice a day to cherish! He had to take her to another party to-night. What's more atrocious than such a dictatorship? With all his beauty and his greatness, how's he better than a slave and how am I better than another one when I sit here letting you accuse me of 'planning' to 'displace' her?" Lily jumped up and faced her grave friend angrily. "Don't you know you're always accusing me of something? Only this morning you brought me that telegram from your mother. Wasn't that an accusation?"

He looked at her scrutinizingly. "You told me you'd already both written and telegraphed your mother. Had you?"

"Oh!" she cried, as if she disbelieved her ears. "You don't trust me!"

"Lily, I asked you——"

"You don't trust me! When you saw me coming out of the telegraph office this morning you thought——"

"Yes," he said. "That was the first news of you that your mother's had since just after we reached New York, wasn't it?"

"What? Do you realize that now you're accusing me of an untruth?"

"But it isn't an accusation."

"Then just what is it, if you please?"

She faced him proudly, holding her pretty head high and her figure straight. He was in distress and angry, too; but the feeling of exhaustion he often had when he was with her came upon him. He sat down in the chair at the table where he had worked so many hours, and, resting his chin upon his hand, spoke in a weary voice.

"Lily, last night you played a touching scene in this room after I'd told you what Isabelle had exacted from Hurley. You were very pathetic about the wig's being taken from you along with your last act scene. You were again pathetic upon the same points at the rehearsal this morning. Yet I know now that last night you knew exactly what you were going to do and didn't feel pathetic yourself at all. Every moment while you were making me suffer for the blow that had been dealt you, you were thinking of what a chance you had to turn that blow to your advantage—you were thinking of what you'd do to your hair and of how you'd play that last act scene. You——"

"So! You charge me with being a natural-born, thoroughgoing hypocrite, do you? Will you please explain what possible object I could have had in pretending to be pathetic last night?"

"I don't know," he said sadly. "I think it was just to be more picturesque. It seems to me you'll do anything at any time, Lily, to be more picturesque; but I admit I don't know. I don't know you. When I try to understand why you told me you'd written and telegraphed home when you hadn't——"

"That's kind of you!" she interrupted sharply. "I suppose if I deny it you'll write to your mother and prove it. All right; don't take the trouble—I admit it. I suppose you think that because I was too excited and too busy to write every day it shows I don't love my mother and sister!"

"No, no; I understand that. But why didn't you——"

"Why didn't I tell you the truth about it? Because I cared for your good opinion; that's

all. That's a crime, isn't it? I'm a liar and a hypocrite because I want you to think well of me! You confess that you don't know me and yet you——"

"I don't indeed!" he said, with the vehemence of despair, and, rising, again confronted her. "Lily, Lily, what are you? Who are you? That day at home when you came with Minnie Bush you said you didn't know; but I think you must. There must be a real you somewhere within you; but to save my soul I can't find that reality. There's never even anything that stays the same for twenty-four hours together—unless it's the one thing, that you're always an actress! There must be something underneath that; but who is it and what is it? How is it ever to be found? *Who is Lily Mars?*"

He stared at her haggardly in this desperate inquiry; but though she looked shocked she was only the angrier and her proud chin was held all the higher. "So now I'm unreal, too, am I? Besides all the other awful things I am, I'm unreal! I don't suffer, I don't rejoice, I haven't a soul, I'm not a human being—I'm not a playwright, I'm just an actress! I'm never the same for twenty-four hours together! May I ask when you've seen any change in me since you've known me?"

"What!" he cried. "You don't realize it? Why, good heavens, look at this very day! Just before noon, in the theatre, you were a plaintive, weeping girl with a career destroyed at its outset. On my soul, I believe you were acting then, because you wanted the hit you knew you were going to make to-night to be more startlingly picturesque. But there it was, since we're speaking of change. To-night, because you've held an audience from a difficult position, and because an almost feeble-minded boy on a newspaper went into raptures over you, you're exultant over a beaten rival, dreaming of 'starring' with her affianced lover as your support, and expecting plays to be written for you! Everybody knows how steady must be the head that isn't unsettled by a hit in the theatre; but in my short experience I've never seen——"

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cried, and at last, so marked indeed was the change in her, she was openly furious with him. "How horrible of you! Oh, I'd heard what unthinkable jealousies and littlenesses an actress had to expect—always some poison in her greatest hour—but I couldn't have believed *this!* Oh, least of all of you! And you're Owen Gilbert, the playwright! Just because he was critical of your play and found a few faults in it—ah, and didn't with me!—you call him 'feeble-minded' and try to belittle what he said of me and to make me feel that it was silly and doesn't count! Oh, and I'd looked up to you so! I'd thought you were everything that was large-minded and noble and generous and incapable of pettiness. Oh, that you and I should come to an open quarrel—and for such a reason!"

He was as horrified as she was hotly scornful. "Lily——"

But her expression as she stared at him was genuine now, unbelievably so; it was the look of a dainty woman who turns on the light and finds a centipede upon her pillow. "No; no! So this is how my first great friendship ends! 'Feeble-minded' because he praised *me* and was severe with *you!*" She swept to the door. "I could have borne your not trusting me; but there are things that can never be explained and never, never forgotten. 'Feeble-minded'! At least I know one thing; you're out in the open and Eugene and I won't count on you. Hereafter what you can count on from *me* is a strictly business relation in the theatre. Goodbye!"

To-night she was at no great pains to make the closing of the door noiseless.

The gentleman left staring at its varnished panels was unfortunately still young enough to feel insulted, still young enough to be indignant on his own behalf, young enough indeed to be as proud as she. "Certainly!" he said in a hot voice, apparently to the door. "Strictly business relations in the theatre henceforth, and nothing more!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BY no means was he prepared to agree with the author of Ecclesiastes that all is vanity, for the ancient deduction sweepingly includes mere self-respect, or necessary honorable pride, under the head of vanity. The distinction Owen made was that Lily, in the new outrageous vanity puffed into her by two Somerville audiences and the egregious Leland, had wounded his pride beyond all bearing; thus he was sure that her feeling was vanity and his own no more than a decent pride. Keeping it unhealed in his bosom he sat in the theatre through two performances of “Catalpa House” on the day after the wounding and marvelled sorely in half-dazzled, half-grudging admiration as he watched her. He had no speech with her on the train to Binghamton, nor any during the three days of his play’s presentation there, and, so far as his distant observation went, Lily was both haughtily and cheerfully indifferent to her loss. On the morning after the conclusion of the company’s engagement in Binghamton he discovered that not he alone had become aware of a change in her.

The players, their leader, their assistants and their author were again upon the road, traveling in a train of day-coaches and scattered through it casually; but in the smoking-car Owen found Ord, Harry Vokes and Morton sitting together, and he joined them. They had reversed the back of one of the seats and thus made a vis-a-vis for four; he asked if the vacant place was pre-empted, the three urged him to occupy it, and he did. “Thank heaven!” the fat young comedian said, as the playwright sat down beside him. “That’ll keep Jack from sitting here again if he comes back. He was up and down so many times while he was here he got that side of my clothes all ragged. Bad night. Drank the ice-water-cooler in this car empty and gone back to see what he can do towards vacuumizing the others. My, my! These restless Romeos!”

Young Morton shook his head gloomily. “Oh, well—he has his reasons. I don’t blame him for splashing a little red over yon village last night. It’s the devil to be on a train and feel like that.” He sighed aloud. “Week of one-night-stands! New York looks a thousand years away.”

“Let it!” old Joe said loudly, set his high hat a little more to one side upon his venerable bush of hair and laughed so sonorously that several of the passengers turned to stare at him with interest. “Present my compliments to the City of New York and inform it that Joseph Ord begs as a slight favor that it will slide over into Hell Gate and stay there until further notice from said Joseph. Give me the road, laddie, the road! I love it!”

“Me? No,” Harry Vokes said. “The only road that I adore is Forty-fourth Street, walking west. Poetry, see? Improvisation. The only road that I adore is walking west on Forty-four. Metre kind o’ rotten, what? Anyhow, me holding with Jimmy in respect unto the tanks, one-night-stands and the road generally. Sweet life, not! Pack grips, cab, rattling train, hotel, theatre, bar-room! next day pack grips, cab, rattling train, hotel, theatre, bar-room; day after that, pack grips, cab, rattling train, hotel, theatre, bar-room some more, so on and so on. Nothing different except the bartender in one town’s name’s Mike and the one in the next’s name’s Heinie, but both got the same moustache. One week of it and me asking, ‘Say, what town’s this we’re in now?’ Not that I care, but so as never to go there again if avoidable. Two weeks of it and me asking, ‘What State do we seem to find ourselves in modernly? Are we down South among the cotton where my dear old Mammy, colored but just like one of the family, brought me up on Bourbon; or are we ’way up North among the cold bankers and evergreens and pinched-bottle Scotch? Or maybe in the soft-coal cough-belt where every night the old horse-cough blobs out your big laugh for you?’ Insides chugged with hotel food out of canary bird bathtubs, head dizzy, cold on chest from damp sheets, cinders in both eyes, same cutie at the hotel newsstand asking, ‘Say, what does it feel like to be an actor?’ Me answering in nasty voice, ‘Like hell!’”

“And calls himself a trouper!” Ord exclaimed. “Harky now, chop-house cockney! Never was nor shall be any great player or true fellow of the stage that hates the road; the road’s in his blood from ancient strolling and if he doesn’t love it better than he loves his Broadway finnan-haddie, why, then he’s a renegade. The road’s our home and I’ll pay you this compliment: there never was a fat man that wasn’t a good or goodish actor and never a good actor that didn’t love the road. Ergo, you lie in your teeth when you say you hate it. For a’ that and a’ that an actor’s a man and it’s a man’s nature to love his home. When actors become citizens and are no more on the road, or if the road should perish, look out! They’ll be business men, or servants of business men, not actors. Booth, Forrest, MacCullough, Jefferson, the Florences, where have they best lived but on the road? Look at John Drew; look at Otis Skinner—do they hate the road? Why, look at our own chief, the Guv’ner, himself nine-parts artist to one-part manager. Do you think George hates the road?”

Vokes put a fat white hand upon the top of his head, and, pretending to push downward, sank his chin into his striped collar as far as the fatness of his neck permitted. “Danger!” he said. “Back into the carapace, turtle-head! Liable to get stepped on and squashed into being a millionaire business man instead of a comical actor. Guv’ner likes the road, does he? Enough to be on this jolty train with us poor serfs of his? Me, if I’d been in his place and had a choice I’d have waited for the two-twenty which sports a parlor-car and a buffet.”

“No, he’s on the rear car,” Morton said, and smiled broodingly. “More honors for the new Grand Duchess. Guv’ner drove her and duenna to station in two-horse hack. Sitting with her now in last car, she becoming more up-stage every minute. Poor Jack, he got his, last night, and took it hard. Tried to be hail-fellow-well-met, like last week. Zowie! Right in the face! Chisel ‘Slain by a Snub’ on his headstone, and he hoping maybe he was high man with her! Anyhow he went out and got spifflo. Too bad.”

“Take some thought, Jimmy.” Harry Vokes looked uncomfortable. “Adoptive uncle or

something of party mentioned sitting right here amidst us, you know.”

“I beg your pardon,” Morton said to the playwright. “I didn’t mean——”

“Not at all,” Owen interrupted. “I’ll only say that I believe the phenomenon’s not wholly unprecedented.”

“No, not wholly,” Vokes agreed good-naturedly. “Pausing only to admire polished authorish expressions such as ‘not wholly unprecedented phenomenon’ so on and so on, would state I’ve been considerable of such a phenomenon myself, historically speaking. Springing from maternal lap, all fresh and everything, played ‘Zuzu’ in the ‘Little Wizard’, Chicago opening. ‘Zuzu’ one loud long scream—Chicago blushing at my feet—me the first big laughing event since the Great Fire. Enlarged myself from rooming-house to Florentine Suite in costly caravanserai on account of head no longer able to be pushed through rooming-house door. Associate with humble former confrères of the company? Me? ‘Untouch me that shoulder, fellow! What, wist you not said shoulder personal part of Henri Vokes, heir-apparent of Michigan Avenue and Sim Brangin’s fair pet princeling? Untouch me, scullion!’ Heigh-ho! Also hélas! After three weeks business not so good—not so good, what! Choo-sizz-poo! Slight noise of ‘Little Wizard’ blowing up. Me back across the river from Jersey City trying to work fascinating fat personality over on agents and managers that hadn’t heard the Brangins telling how rotten everybody was in the ‘Little Wizard’. Head all depreciated down to where I could get it right under my bureau when I lost a collar-button. No, not wholly unprecedented; but all the same——” He paused, looked doubtfully though genially at Owen, and went on, “Well, all the same I’m afraid I never did see quite as big a painful change as the one that’s come over the little lady since Somerville.”

“No,” Morton agreed, shaking his head gloomily. “Neither did I. I don’t mean to say it hits the rest of us as hard as it does Jack; but—well, it does hit. It’s worse because—oh, I don’t know. I just know it hurts rather worse than it usually does when such things happen.”

“That’s good,” old Ord said quietly and seriously. “You boys’ll have scars for souvenirs and so you’ll never forget you were present at the opening of a true artist’s career. You’ve just been seeing something important, you lads—like the unveiling of a statue by a fine sculptor, only this statue’s the sculptor, too, and so is mortal and can’t live, except presently as a name on a yellow old program on the shelf of some collector of theatre rubbish. Oh, I’ll be solemn for you on this subject; damn me for it if you like! I tell you we work in such perishable goods it’s as if we made wax flowers in a hot oven; but when I see one of our bouquets glorious for an instant before it vanishes, off goes my hat! Well, that’s what she’s done and you saw it. That little scene in a stiff chair and the exit with their never getting more than a hint of her face from out front—ah, not so often, friends, not so often! A true daughter of the theatre—and the young sprig-players pout because they’re daft about her as a pretty girl that’s been kind to them but now grows too earnest in her work to have time for them. Let her be! What if she does feel she’s a little important? It’s the truth; she is. Just remember she’s been your comrade for a while, and that’s an honor. Haven’t we grace enough to stand back and bow when a new priestess comes into the temple?”

Young Morton’s face flushed; he turned and stared at the old man; Harry Vokes sat open-mouthed. Then Morton coughed and said in a low voice, “Glad you did that, Joe. I’ll

try to remember it and pass it on to Jack and Tom.” He laughed a little emotionally. “Us younger geniuses maybe need a bad old example like you to set us straight on certain matters sometimes.”

“Yes, the old soak!” Harry Vokes assented huskily. “We get you, Joe. ’Nough said. You’ve seen a good many and when you say, ‘Hats off!’ we don’t wear any. Besides that, you’re right about it. ‘Not so often, friends, not so often’, indeed! We’ll quit beefing and just say hurrah for her.” He made a gesture toward Ord, and, with a childlike and dissolute smile of singular sweetness, turned to the playwright. “Sentimental old mugger, isn’t he? Couldn’t get him to bed at three o’clock this morning because he was telling the night clerk all about a twin brother he lost in Eighteen Seventy-two through eating green apples, and said he couldn’t leave till he’d got the night clerk to crying. Let’s sing ‘Ever of Thee’.”

He began to hum and immediately Ord and Morton, leaning forward with their heads close to his, joined voices with him softly in a trio. Traces of emotion were visible upon the faces of all three of the actors, and, as for the playwright, he felt himself not entirely unmoved by what had touched them. He liked these players, and liked them all the better for the generosity of spirit that made them sensitive and volatile. He was glad that he had no superiority, himself, to the quality in them that made them readily susceptible to sentiment; but, reticent and inexpressive as he was, he felt himself privileged to know and share their feeling and to be their comrade.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WHEN the journey ended and the playwright was about to step into a horse-drawn old coupé at the station, he caught a glimpse of Isabelle and Eugene getting into another at a little distance from him. He had only a momentary glimpse of them; but there was a bleakness in Isabelle's face that shocked him. Eugene wore the acutely annoyed yet brooding expression of a man apprehensive that the emotions of a woman companion may at any instant make them both publicly conspicuous, and he seemed anxious to get the door of their vehicle closed upon them as quickly as possible. Nearby, at the same time, the playwright saw Hurley putting Lily and Miss Lebrun into a motor taxicab. The manager's face was beaming ruddily; he was in high content and waved a hand to Owen detainingly as Lily and the older actress drove away.

"Here!" he said to Owen, joining him briskly. "Pink'll take your grips up to the hotel in his cab. You and I'll walk. I want to talk to you. I've got an idea."

"Yet another?" the playwright asked dismally, as they set forth. "One you'll want me to write into the script so we can rehearse it before to-morrow night's performance?"

"Part of it, maybe," Hurley answered cheerfully. "Might get some in we could run over to-night with the company, and some more to-morrow and during the rest of the week. Might be quite a good deal of it before we get as much worked in as we can." He glanced about him with an approving eye. "Nice place, this. Always did like these moderately prosperous smaller American cities where you see the young couples all dressed up on Sunday and pushing the baby-carriages back home from having Sunday afternoon dinner with the old folks. Pleasant sight, don't you think so?"

"No; peculiarly repellent. What sort of an idea, George?"

"Well, it may require some thinking on your part," Hurley admitted. "Watching the performance this week I can't help believing this play's got a weaker backbone than I thought."

"Oh, murder! Its whole backbone, George?"

"Don't get jumpy. 'Hawkins' and 'Hester' are the backbone of your play. 'Hester's' half of it and there simply isn't enough life and vigor to that part."

"No? Not in the part itself as written, you mean?"

"Listen!" Hurley said. "I don't care whether it's in the part or in the woman who plays it; something's got to be done. If we go into New York a week from to-night with the part

of 'Hester' flivvering out on us the way it's been doing this past week, I know what we'll get! The Death Watch——”

“Ah, that First Night Juggernaut again! Not to speak of trying to practise an art, must our life's work be done to please one single handful of crotchety people, outsiders who've appointed themselves to talk noisily about the theatre?”

“There you go, hi-yi! Be a little practical, will you? Take a statue some fellow makes and exhibits, it's got a chance against the lads that get up on a soap-box and begin telling everybody whether it's a good or bad statue. If they say it's bad it doesn't vanish; ten years later it may just suit the fashion a new crowd of soap-boxers are telling everybody is a good fashion, so it can be brought out and all the sheep'll go around bleating 'Good! Good!' because they've heard the soap-boxers say so. Ten years after that, it'll likely be a 'bad' statue again; but anyhow it's still a statue. A play's different. Every night we make a pie; on the road the people come in and eat it and like it, and that's all there is to it. Trouble is, New York's the fashionable pie-eating centre and we can't get enough pie-eaters in on the road until after they hear that everybody in New York's rushing to eat our pie. Well, if we can put a little fresh flavor into our pie without getting clear out of the fashion in pies that the Death Watch understand this year they'll get up on the soap-boxes and recite enthusiastically all the declamations that have ever been written about nice-tasting pies. If they don't do that for us, all we'll have is a pie recipe in the waste-basket. What I'm trying to do——”

“Pie!” Owen exclaimed bitterly. “A painter or a novelist isn't bound down to flour and blueberries to suit this year's taste of a few——”

“Now for God's sake!” Hurley cried. “Try not to interrupt me, will you? The way it stands, I can't get another ounce out of Isabelle; every time I try it at rehearsal I get less from her. She simply hasn't got it left in her. When we get to the hotel just take the script and look over that part and see if you can't find some places where you could make it more interesting and more alive. Give her something more important to do wherever you can and try to get a little more vitality into her lines. Just take a few hours on it to——”

“I've spent some hundreds of hours trying to do that, I should say, since I first began writing the play, George.”

“There you go!” the manager said with prompt irritation. “The minute I begin trying to save a play they commence telling me how good they are and how much harder they work than anybody else ever did! Now for God's sake can't you simply——”

“Oh, of course I'll try. Is that the idea you——”

“Part of it, part of it,” Hurley said, and again became cheerful. “Listen! I've been working it out in my mind and it's a good deal like this. Suppose you were drowning and had two ropes to hold to and it took both of 'em to keep you up, and one was a slim little new rope and the other a good deal thicker and more important-looking but getting worn out and not dependable, you'd put all the weight you dared on the new little one, wouldn't you? That's what I mean. We'll do all we can to brace up the part of 'Hester'; but in the meantime we'll build up the part of 'Myra' so that——”

“So that it enfeebles 'Hester' more and more?” Owen asked, interrupting with some sharpness. “Don't you see that's precisely what's the matter with 'Hester' already?”

“Listen!” Hurley said. “Don't tell me the play's out of balance; I know it is and I'm

trying to deal with that. Just forget your script for a while, will you, and realize we're working now in what values we can get out of a certain few human beings at our disposal. If I can't get one value, I've got to have another to take its place. Well, I've got that other and it's a gold mine." His tone had become enthusiastic and now he spoke eagerly. "Listen! That part of 'Myra' runs through the play like a vein of pure gold. They want more of it, more of it, I tell you! If other parts let down, more of 'Myra' is our chance to carry the play. When you wrote that part of 'Myra' you did better than you knew. It's _____"

"Thank you, George."

Hurley disregarded the interruption. "It's like some lovely melody that rings out over a lot of discords and carries people's hearts away. What I mean, you take the script and wherever you get a chance give her another telling line or two. She'll make it count; you can depend on that! See if you can't work in another scene between her and Ord, played for drama and suspense—something rather tense with a lift up in it, and I think you could give her a new short one with Harry, for comedy."

"But, George, if I——"

"Ah, God, he's going to argue with me!" the manager said despairingly. "All right. Let the play flatten out and——"

"Oh, no; of course I'll do what I can. I don't see any other remedy myself for the slumping poor Isabelle's been——"

"That's right!" Hurley beamed again, paused to light a cigar, drew upon it with satisfaction, and, as they walked on, resumed his theme. "Lily'll play it, whatever you give her. You'll get a performance. A manager makes a little money sometimes, and about five times as often he loses his shirt; but when he gets a performance he has a reward. I give you my word I'd have gone to shovelling coal long ago if it hadn't been for that's happening every once in a long while. Somebody surprises you. Gives you something to remember. Maybe even something to look forward to. It's like struggling along, mile after mile, on a dusty hot road till you're half dead, and then, when you aren't looking for it and don't expect it, you find a diamond—and then another, and then another, so you know somebody's walking ahead of you and putting 'em there for you and going to put more. That's what her performances have been every night since we opened; every one just a little finer and brighter than the night before. You noticed how she's worked with that part? Just to get one more word a little truer and with a little more meaning in it, yet never the least shade exaggerated or artificial. She never stops, and that's because she never stops thinking. What's rather remarkable to me is the wonderful character that's behind it all; I mean the girl herself."

"You think——"

"Rather remarkable, rather remarkable to find a girl of as noble and self-sacrificing a character and with all the qualities that go to make up a fine, old-fashioned, well-bred *lady*, and yet with actual genius. Don't see that combination often." His manner became confidential yet remained enthusiastic. "I didn't really know her story till to-day. Got her to talking about herself; usually I won't listen to that, but there are exceptions. She's modest about it, too; no self-puffery—told it in a pretty wonderful sort of way, I thought, a pretty wonderful sort of way. It was rather extraordinary."

“Was it? I thought I’d given you an outline of her history, myself, some time ago; but _____”

“So you did, so you did; but not like this. I mean not like hearing it from the child herself. Not that she gilded it or made herself out a heroine—not in the slightest. All the more touching for that. I don’t think she had the slightest idea herself of what a picture of nobility and self-sacrifice she was painting. Those years of shut-in girlhood—no young friends, nothing but devotion to the invalid mother, and then her struggle to get on the stage so that she could take care of the mother and sister—and to think that at first I was stupid enough to take her for nothing better than just another ‘society amateur’! Something rather grand about a life like that, even though there’ve been only these few years of it, rather grand! It isn’t usual for youth to be self-sacrificing—rather touching, rather touching. I’ll give her a little surprise in the way of a contract with a real salary some time during the first week in New York. Some of ‘em’ll be nosing around trying to get her away from me before long; but she strikes me as a loyal little thing. Notice how she works for the play as well as for just ‘Myra’? Coöperates to get Joe’s points over in that scene with him and helps Harry build up his laughs. Rather extraordinary, her teamwork.” He mused for a moment and then, uttering a meditative chuckle, astonished the young man at his side. “Lord! What a ‘Hester’ she’d make if she ever played that part!”

“If she ever did!” Owen exclaimed. “But you’ve ‘featured’ Isabelle!”

“Oh, of course it’s not to be thought of; I was only imagining. Eugene’s letting it down, too; not so much but nevertheless a shade more every night, confound him! He tries not to; but he doesn’t seem to be able to help it, and the reason’s pretty apparent. Isabelle doesn’t play up to him and so he can’t get the lift out of her that he needs. I was only thinking that if he had somebody like Lily Mars opposite him in that part he’d be rather wonderful, because if he didn’t look out he’d find himself playing up to her, not she to him. Altogether it might be rather colossal; but of course it’s not to be thought of. We might talk of it for another play, though, some day. You could just bear it in mind if an idea strikes you. There; that’s all,” he said, for now they were entering the hotel’s principal outer doorway. “Get your script out of your grip and try to do something really a little interesting with it, while I ruin my œsophagus over at the theatre trying to get that change in the second act lighting right. Hi-yi, it’s the life! Go to it now!”

In his room Owen went to it as well as he was able, in spite of a dismal conviction that he was not able at all. By this time the mere sight of his manuscript lying open on a table, like some invalid survivor of a thousand operations still miraculously just alive and awaiting more knifings in the operating-room, had become repulsive to him. He worked, sighing with repugnance, paced the floor and sighed again, then worked again, then paced again. Striving for coherent thought, he found Lily continually defeating him.

Still proud, still angry with her, he became dizzy when he asked himself if he had so much as done her justice. Had she indeed been presumptuous when she assumed the air of being a great person, talked of playing “Hester”, graciously bade him count upon her friendship, airily commissioned him to write a play for her and contemplated Eugene as her own leading man? After all, hadn’t Hurley, a powerful manager, just been warranting all these presumptions of hers? If she was, as she indeed seemed to be, a very genius of the theatre, are geniuses vainglorious when they perceive their own quality? Ah, but her interpretation of himself—that he chided her because of a jealousy roused in him by the

mouthings of the unspeakable Leland! Owen could have forgiven her except for that. The sting was as sharp as ever and smarted with every word he wrote emphasizing and enhancing the mischief-making part of "Myra".

Eugene came in, looking hag-ridden, and threw himself down in a chair, with his long legs extended drearily. "What's it all mean?" he said. "What's it all about? Life, I mean. Why were we sent to this earth and made to live, anyhow? Do you see anything in it, yourself, Owen?"

"I don't know." For some moments the two successful young men looked at each other morbidly; then the playwright added, "I don't see anything before me just now except about seven more days of play-surgery and then a short ride to the morgue. What's been happening to you?"

"George—among other things. Giving me the devil again for letting it down; yet he knows as well as I do I can't help it. Those scenes with Isabelle! Night after night I try and try to keep from getting flatter and flatter; but good God! I can hear myself, can't I? All I do is just talk faster and louder. Speed and noise! They never put anything over—never! It can't be done, I tell you! You can't be out there with somebody going dead on you, deader and deader every minute, and not die, yourself. I beg and beg her to lift it; but what's the use? Maybe she couldn't if she would; but certainly now she wouldn't if she could." He laughed deploringly. "All my spirited scenes with her are off the stage, not on. Plenty of them, I can tell you! I'm at the end of my string."

"That's pleasant news," the playwright said. "I'm glad you came in to tell me. Really, it's all I needed to help me go at another mutilating of this manuscript with a fresh inspiration. Any other jolly thing on your mind, Eugene?"

Eugene paid no attention to the satiric inquiry. "It's such a devilish good part, too!" he groaned. "Exactly what I needed for a step up. I'm at a crisis in my career—oh, I realize that!—if I stay where I am, merely 'featured', it's ominous; but with a really solid hit in this piece the next thing I play would put my name into electric lights on top of the theatre. George knows he'd have to do it or somebody else would. If it's a flivver—God knows! Might be the beginning of the down grade for me. Probably would, I should think. Here's a curious thing; I believe, on my soul, that a woman who loves me wants just that to happen to me—the down grade! I do believe that, Owen; on my soul I do! Yes, and what's more hideous to contemplate, I believe she's trying to make it happen. Which is it, comedy or tragedy, when the woman you've loved tries to pull you down—you and herself together? In all my life I've never done or wished to do a single thing to injure anybody; I've always wanted to help everybody. Why do such things have to happen to *me*?"

"To you?" Owen laughed; but the sounds he uttered were more rueful than sympathetic. "Death loves a shining mark, and so does misfortune; but don't be vain over being struck, because it doesn't prove you glitter, since both of 'em hit everybody, 'Gene. You might observe that if you're pulled down now the whole structure falls with you—'Catalpa House' and all its parts—Ord, Lily, Vokes and all the rest of us, including me, the distracted architect, and possibly even the burly owner and builder, Hurley himself—nobody knows what his stake in it is or how hard the loss might hit him. Doesn't it cheer you to know you won't be alone among the ruins?"

Eugene jumped up and struck the palms of his hands together in a smack of

desperation. "Ruin!" He began to pace the floor, striding rapidly. "That's the one thing I could never forgive a woman—never! That she'd ruin the career of the man she loves! God, what irony—to be ruined by a woman's loving you! I'm at my wit's end, I tell you! She harries me without rest. You can't care for a woman as I did for Isabelle, so long and so devotedly, without its becoming an attachment. Of course I'm attached to her! I may not be in love with her any more, but I can't help being attached to her, can I? She can't be in anguish without that's agonizing me, you see. Yes, and she counts on it. Every instant I'm with her she suffers at me incessantly! Tears my heartstrings because of this attachment to her that I can't get over. A thousand hints that she'll do away with herself—horrible! Every night out there with her on the stage, every dead line she gives me is one more agony of reproach at me. George asks me to act? Good God! Always, always until now, she's built me up, worked for my career; we've worked for each other. For an artist, the unforgivable thing is an injury to his art. Do you understand that? Do you understand that at all, Owen?" He came to a halt before the table where sat his friend and struck his fist upon its littered top. "Ah, let me play that part just once with a woman who'd lift it and give it back to me and inspire me! I'd show you something!"

Owen stared up at him. "You mean with Lily Mars?"

"Ah, how she'd play it! What we two, together, could do with this play! I'd show you something you've never seen in your life, I tell you! I'm not bragging; I know what I could do with it—they'd go out crying their eyes out for 'Sam Hawkins' and remember him the rest of their lives! Let me play it with Lily in New York and you'd see a First Night you'd never forget! Let me play it with Lily just once——" He flung out his arms, uttered a laughter so high-pitched it was almost falsetto and struck himself upon the forehead with an open palm. "Insanity! Can't be done! I wonder I don't really go crazy! Oh, the irony of it, the irony—here's the material for a great success—Lily—and it can't be used. Or even if Isabelle could play it as she's shown she could in those earliest rehearsals—she was going to be good; she *gave* it to me then, showed she could lift it to me! Now that's gone and can't come back and she wouldn't let it if it could. I've got to get some peace of mind before I can act, I tell you! How can I, between two women who hate each other and love me? Two women who——"

Owen interrupted in a lifeless voice. "You're sure they both——"

"Love me? Sure?" Eugene laughed again. "All I dare give Lily now is a hidden glance sometimes; but do you think that contents her? Not since she discovered what she could do with 'em out front and that now she's George's pet child. She's sweet—oh, she's angelic, she's my life!—and what I feel for her rends and tears me—I want to worship her openly, to take her and to love her. And it's what she wants, too; I'm her life and she'd die if I changed—die! Hasn't she showed me? Hasn't she as much as told me so time and again? She knows as I do it can't be—daren't be—not yet! But she can't help being a woman, can she? No woman can help that, I tell you, no woman at all! They can't, can't help it, Owen; they just can't! She doesn't intend to goad Isabelle; but sometimes she says something to me at rehearsal, or in passing, where Isabelle can hear, and there's proprietorship in the very way she speaks my name. Isabelle writhes—and then it falls on me! On me! On me! I swear to you, all my life I've been paying that penalty!"

"Penalty?"

"For mere responsiveness!" Eugene explained with a bitter emphasis. "For liking

people, for caring about them, for wanting them to be happy—for being interested in women and showing that I want them to be happy! Never,” he went on, with increased feeling, “never since I was fourteen years old have I had a moment of real peace, I swear to you! Not one! Sometimes I think the worst curse the gods can lay upon a man is to create him with——” Again he flung out his hands but this time let them fall despairingly and turned toward the door. “Well, I’ll let you alone; you want to work. Doing this cry-baby act on you won’t help things any and I daresay you may have burdens of your own.”

“I may,” Owen admitted. “It’s just possible.”

Eugene glanced at the manuscript and the scribbled sheets of paper beside it, smiled sadly and shook his head. “That’s it! We all think our own bothers are the worst things that can happen, I suppose, and you probably feel that putting us through some fresh tortures at rehearsal is a great weight on your shoulders.” His smile became mournfully superior, as he opened the door and passed out to the corridor. “Go ahead with your terrible sufferings. It’s the life!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE playwright returned sadly to his task, finished the enlargements of the part of “Myra” by nightfall; then began a struggle to invigorate Isabelle by scribbling. At best, all that he did with “Hester”, writing and rewriting in hotel bedrooms and on trains for the next four days, was paraphrase; and it proved ineffective. Hurley delivered this verdict upon it after a spiritless rehearsal in Rochester on Thursday afternoon.

“No, you haven’t got it,” he said, in private conference with Owen. “Weakened it if anything. Doesn’t get anywhere. There’s nothing to be done but to go back to the original ‘Hester’. Sent Pink to tell her so. Of course now she’s learned a good deal of this new stuff she’ll feel around for her lines and mix up the cues and play hob generally, trying to get back to the old version; but it can’t be helped. Best we can hope is that she won’t get the rest of ’em rattled up there Monday night. Monday night, the Forty-first Street Theatre and the Death Watch! Hi-yi!”

Upon the subject of the elaboration of the part of “Myra”, however, he spoke with a different air. He brightened warmly, growing ruddier; the handsome Napoleonic profile was suddenly benign. “Extraordinary! Rather remarkable, rather remarkable, what you did with that. You’ll see, when we put it in on Saturday night. She wanted me to let her do it in the full company rehearsal to-day; but not for me, thank you! I don’t care for any more interviews with Isabelle than I’ve absolutely got to have, these days; and if she doesn’t find out how we’ve built ‘Myra’ up until Saturday night she’ll only have the one day, Sunday, to have a fit in before the New York opening, Monday night, and she’ll simply have to be good. Neat job, not having the new stuff for ‘Myra’ change any of Isabelle’s cues—you show symptoms of something almost like penetration sometimes! Lengthens the play four or five minutes; but we can work in a few cuts—one or two on Isabelle she won’t notice maybe—and trim down that carafe scene and Worthington. He’s so hoarse they don’t get half of what he says, anyhow. Of course Harry and Joe just eat their new stuff alive. Pink and I rehearsed ’em with Lily privately this morning, and really they get some rather wonderful effects. Really rather wonderful, what she does, rather wonderful! You watch it from out front Saturday night in Albany when we put the new stuff in and see what you’ll see. I’ve got an idea you’re going to feel rather pleased and rather proud of that little girl of your mother’s.” He laughed aloud in sheer exhilaration; then twitched down the soft brim of his hat and up-slanted his unlighted cigar till the two almost touched, and said in a reflective tone, “Yes, sir. Rather proud—rather proud of Lily

Mars!”

This enthusiasm of his, more deep-seated every day, though he sometimes strove hard to modify his expression of it, nevertheless led him into an inaccuracy as a prophet. Pride of any kind held no part in the playwright's emotions that Saturday evening as he sat in the theatre and watched the last performance of his play before it went to its mortal ordeal in the theatrical metropolis. He was not proud of Lily nor proud for her; though she dazzled him and he watched her in wonder and sometimes in amazement. Under her touch the new scenes became triumphant comedy; she brought the new words to life, kept the old ones alive and made both brilliant as she herself was brilliant. The spell she cast was so strong that he found himself leaning forward tensely toward the stage whenever she was upon it. When she was not there, he slid into a dull relaxation, and at such times the play, now indeed out of balance, seemed given over entirely to interludes so perfunctory that they should have been omitted altogether.

“Catalpa House” had become not like the forest one cannot see for the trees but like a dead orchard that should have been cut away behind the one glorious young tree in roseate blossom. More, he had smarting twinges of impression that Lily knew all this, herself. On the stage before him there seemed to be a bright cruelty, lovely and heartlessly triumphant in its merry consciousness that Isabelle of all dead trees in the orchard was the deadest and most deserving of the axe. Moreover, with Lily Mars as a person he seemed never to have had any real acquaintanceship at all. As an actress she was close to his eyes and shining upon him dazingly yet intimately; but as a person she appeared to him as a strange being never to be known or by any means comprehended—only to be glimpsed vaguely and from a remote and hazy distance.

After the descent of the final curtain he sat in his place until the audience had gone; then made his way slowly through the empty house, went behind the scenes and encountered a jovial Hurley who seized him by the arm. “Go and tell her! Go and tell her about it! Guess she deserves it from her playwright, doesn't she? Take off that long face! What are you looking like that for, anyhow?”

“George, this play's now so out of balance I know the audience feel it. It's damaging for a minor part to stand out like that, beyond all the others; it confuses them out front, and to-night I could tell that they——”

“Idiot!” Hurley almost shouted. “Did you ever hear of a play called ‘Parisian Romance’ when a minor part did that? It made Richard Mansfield, didn't it? Take off that long face and go and tell her what you ought to tell her. She told me to send you. Go and tell her!”

In her dressing-room Lily had another amazement waiting for the worried young man; again she stood facing the door, still wearing her costume and with her “make-up” unremoved. “Owen Gilbert!” she cried, flung herself upon him impetuously, kissed him repeatedly, clung to him almost violently, laughed and was at the same time near sobbing in the extremity of her happiness and gratitude. “You darling, darling angel! Oh, you precious Guardian Angel! Oh, the beautiful, beautiful life you've given me to-night! Angel, angel, angel!”

He extricated himself as soon as he could and stepped back from her angrily. “Lily, why do you do that?”

“Kiss you? Why, I could kiss everybody in this world! But you—after you’ve written so divinely for me? After you’ve given me this——”

“No! After what you said to me in Somerville the last time we had speech together!”

“What?” She was genuinely unaware of his meaning. “What did I say to you then?”

In his incredulity, Owen without knowing it echoed a frequent outcry of Hurley’s. “For God’s sake! You don’t remember that? You don’t remember accusing me of being jealous of you because the Somerville critic, Leland, had panegyricized you and wrote pompous nonsense about the play itself?”

“No. Did I?” She seemed lightly to search her memory, then laughed affectionately and gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Yes, I remember I did say something nasty, you foolish old thing. But then *you’d* said things that made me cross, you know, so I——”

“What? Is this all you have felt about——”

“Nonsense!” she said, still laughing. “Don’t you know me well enough yet to understand you mustn’t pay any attention to things I say when I get cross? I remember all about it—we did have a ridiculous little quarrel, didn’t we? You mustn’t mind, of course. I’ve said things like that to Mother and Clara and everybody a thousand times; but they know I never mean anything and don’t pay any attention. You poor lamb, you’ve been moping over it, haven’t you? Answer me! You’ve really been taking that little pouting of mine seriously?”

“Yes, I have; but you——”

“I? I didn’t even know you were moping, poor darling, because you see I’ve never been so busy every instant and so excited and so happy in my whole life! I’ll make it up to you, you’ll see! Ah, now you’re cross because you think I ought to’ve realized you were upset about it. You must never take anything I say seriously; don’t you know that? Just think of what I do, not of what I say, and you’ll always know I love you. I do, really, Owen. Of course I’m *in* love with Eugene—oh, wildly! he’s my life; I’d die for him!—but really, with my spirit, I love you better than anybody. Oh, better than anybody at all; I know I do! You and George. You two are my gods!”

“Are we?” he said, and against his will laughed dolorously. “George and I——”

“You two above all! Don’t you see what raptures you and he are showering upon me? Did you ever see anybody caught up in such enchantments as you and George are making for me? Ah, don’t you want my adoration, you poor dear darling?”

He had no response ready for this, and, before he was able to form a verbal one, there came a sharp rap upon the door, Lily cried “Entrez!” and Isabelle’s mulatto “dresser” appeared. Lily became serious. “You wish to speak to me, Ernestine?”

“Message,” Ernestine replied. “Mr. Hurley wants Mr. Gilbert to come to Miss Hedrington’s dressing-room immediately. Mr. Hurley asks Miss Mars not to leave the theatre until he’s seen her.”

“Not until he’s seen me?” Lily said slowly, and found the request significant of high import, for she turned upon Owen the wide-eyed, questioning look of one who divines the impending of almost incredible good fortune. “Why, he might mean—might mean that she’s not—he might mean that—that ‘Hester’—he might mean——”

“He means something’s the matter,” Owen said shortly, striding by Ernestine in the

doorway.

“Yes, sir,” the mulatto girl assented. “Something is.”

Something was indeed grievously the matter; so much so that he went no farther than the threshold of Isabelle’s dressing-room before he stopped and stood aghast. Isabelle, half-dressed, lay flat upon the floor, and Hurley knelt beside her, fanning her face with his soft hat. Pinkney Monk stood looking down upon them, and nearby, upon the floor, was a wreck of torn and crumpled silk, the costume Isabelle had worn in the last act.

Hurley gave Owen a brief glance. “Shut that door!”

It was Monk who obeyed the command. “Fainted,” he whispered to Owen. “We came in to soothe her down and she went entirely wild. Said she wanted you—something about knowing you were suffering, too; I don’t know what. George sent Ernestine for you, to humor her; but it didn’t do any good. Said the costume she wore in the last act was poisoning her, burning her, because it had touched Lily Mars in their stage embrace. Screamed it was scorching her, tore it off and tried to tear it to pieces, then keeled over. George just barely caught her. She’s coming out of it; eyelids been flickering. Her heart’s good, too; but this is bad—nerves gone too queer. I don’t think she can play the part Monday night, myself.”

Isabelle opened her eyes. “What’s all this?” she asked feebly, and muttered, “I see. Must have fainted.” Then she saw Owen, lifted a shaking hand and pointed at him. “Look at his cheek! Smear on it.” She uttered weak sounds of hysterical laughter. “Kissed *him*, too!”

Hurley continued to fan her. “Look here!” he said. “Listen! We’ve told you all about that, Isabelle. What’s it matter if you saw her kiss Eugene, since she’s just been kissing everybody in sight? That’s exactly what makes it all right. She couldn’t help herself, I tell you! You saw her kiss me, too, right afterward. Didn’t she even kiss Pink Monk? Why, she’d have kissed you yourself if you hadn’t run to your dressing-room; she was so excited I swear she’d have kissed the stage-hands if they’d been standing there with the rest of us, after all those calls! You just quiet down now. I’ve seen you do almost the same thing. Be a little reasonable, can’t you, dearie?”

Isabelle paid no attention to him; her heavy gaze remained upon the playwright. “I’m sorry for you, Owen,” she said, little better than whispering. “It’s because you’re going through just a shadow of the suffering that’s finished me. I’ve lost my career, my art, my love and maybe my life. You’ve lost your play and your love, so we’re something alike. The difference is that you’ll get over it and write new plays; but I—I——” Her glance moved vaguely from him to Hurley and to Monk. “You all see now that I’m finished, don’t you? Yes, you know it’s the end of me, I see. You know now I can’t play the part Monday night.” Then she closed her eyes, sighed and whispered, “Thank God I can’t!”

Hurley looked solemnly at Monk as if for confirmation of a thought; Monk shook his head, and Hurley said softly, “No; she can’t.” He made a swift gesture that sent the stage director to open the door, and Ernestine came in; whereupon Hurley got to his feet and spoke in a low voice. “Let her lie flat on her back for a few minutes more and then give her some aromatic ammonia and get her into a chair and dress her.” He sighed, looking down pityingly upon the stricken figure at his feet, muttered, “Hi-yi, it’s the life!” then said, “Come on!” in a sharp undertone, and, stepping noiselessly, led the way out of the

tragic little room.

The stage was already bare. A high and wide doorway in the rear brick wall stood open, and through it stage-hands and teamsters were passing great forms of painted canvas, placing the scenery for "Catalpa House" upon trucks that waited in a drizzle of rain outside in the midnight darkness of the alley. Across the stage Paradene and Briggs and Smith, the property man, conferred seriously; from upper dressing-rooms old Ord, Vokes and one or two others of the company were seen descending, bringing their traveling-bags with them and turning up the collars of their overcoats as they heard the falling rain. Young Lancey had an umbrella, and, as he came near the stage door, prepared to unfurl it; but was stopped instantly by an appalling roar from old Joe. "Out, Murderer! What! Open an umbrella in the theatre? Sure death for us all on Monday night. Out, blasphemer, tempter of destiny, out!"

Hurley called loudly, "Paradene!"

"Yes, sir!" the company manager shouted instantly, and, in response to a sharpness in the commanding voice, came hurrying across the stage.

"Paradene, get a carriage for Miss Hedrington and her maid. Have it at the stage door in twenty minutes. Ask Miss Carlin to come to Miss Hedrington's dressing-room and go with them in the carriage. Call rehearsal for the whole company, except Miss Hedrington, at noon to-morrow at the Forty-first Street Theatre. Tell 'em on the train we'll be rehearsing all to-morrow and all day Monday. Get hold of O'Mahoney the first thing to-morrow morning in New York and tell him to see me at once. There's a change in the cast. I'll have Adler announce it in front of the curtain Monday night; but I don't want the papers to get it until after the opening. T's all!"

"Yes, sir," Paradene said, and departed.

Hurley turned to Monk. "Is the understudy up in her lines? How good is she?"

"Bement? I've been over the part of 'Myra' with her this afternoon; she's all right. Better than either Meadows or Hoyt."

"Take her right from the train to the theatre to-morrow morning and run over it with her before the company rehearsal. Get every ounce you can out of her. Go back to the original version. We play 'Myra' as it was in the first place without the new scenes we put in to-night. That's all out. We——"

"All out?" Owen said, weakly intervening. "You're cutting——"

Hurley turned upon him imperiously. "I was coming to you. All that new stuff's out. Make the cuts on the train but don't go back to the original version wherever it deals with any auburn hair. No more wigs. Fix that all up and to-morrow morning get three or four stenographers from Roselle's at work on it. Get Briggs a fresh script of the whole book of the play by to-morrow afternoon; the book he's holding on 'em now'll drive him crazy if you try to fiddle these cuts into all the other mixed-up fussing you been doing with the script. It's a horrible sight, horrible!" Abruptly his manner changed; he smiled, and a rosiness benevolently tinged his complexion. "Now, do you want to tell Lily Mars she's to play 'Hester' before a New York First Night audience Monday night, or shall I?"

"You," Owen said, spared a sick glance for the closed door of Isabelle Hedrington's dressing-room, and added an implication that was lost upon the enthusiastically brightening manager. "I doubt if she needs anybody to tell her, though."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HURLEY had not exaggerated the fact when he said that Lily knew by heart every word of “Catalpa House”; though old Briggs expressed a foreboding upon this point when the tired playwright handed him a new copy of the play on the stage of the Forty-first Street Theatre just before noon.

“Puts a terrific responsibility upon me,” Briggs said importantly but privately, behind his hand. “Terrific! Hope I won’t be the Patsy to get picked on every time I have to give her a line if she fluffs. She’s wonderful, wonderful; but I regard it as a very dangerous experiment, a very dangerous experiment. Too young and too inexperienced, Mr. Gilbert.” Then he giggled confidentially. “What can you expect? I’ve seen good properties like this go to pieces often and often, in my time, for the same reason.”

“For the same reason?”

“Ah, we have an old saying in the profession, Mr. Gilbert. ‘When the manager falls in love——’”

The repetition of the old saying, however, was not completed. Pinkney Monk was rapping sharply upon the table, and Briggs, obediently calling, “Yes, sir! Yes, sir!” hastily returned to his post in the wings.

His responsibility was far lighter than he expected it to be. During the whole rehearsal of the play, that Sunday afternoon, Lily was prompted twice only, and then not because her memory failed her but because of a nervousness among her colleagues that confused the cues she received. A tensivity in the company was perceptible, for, with the ordeal so close upon them, the actors naturally found a change of leading ladies unsettling—Lily alone had lost no whit of poise. Instead, she seemed to have gained in poise as she had gained in everything. Although she had the slightly preoccupied and mechanical manner customary with her at rehearsal, her adequacy in presenting the emotionalism of “Hester” made the light comedy scenes she had acted as “Myra” seem comparatively child’s-play, almost unworthy of such an actress’s power. In the house Hurley sat motionless and silent through scene after scene; nothing could more eloquently have proved his anxious concentration.

“Rehearsal’s the devil,” he said to Owen, during an interlude between Monk and Miss Bement on the stage. “It’s like a band serenading a Deaf and Dumb Asylum. When an actor’s got something to give he’s got to have someone to give it to. Adler’s all worked up

about these moving pictures—getting bigger audiences, stealing our business—thinks we ought to get into it. Not me! Not for all the money there is! It'd be like never producing anything but rehearsals. You see how remarkably she's doing it to-day; but wait till to-morrow night when she's got them out there to give it to—ah, that'll be different! I know what we'll get from her. As sure as God made little apples she'll give us a magnificent performance, the kind that makes my life worth living. Don't you see she will?"

"Yes; I don't doubt it, George. Nobody will question her extraordinariness."

"Nobody in the world! She just happens to be one of those three or four unaccountably gifted people that get born in a generation, and it's your good fortune and mine that we've somehow stumbled into getting her into this play." Hurley chuckled wonderingly, and added, "Another thing. You notice how the whole play pulls together now and falls into its proper proportions?"

"Yes, George, I've been noticing that."

"Why, absolutely," Hurley said, unaware of any dryness in his friend's response. "The part of 'Myra' is exactly the way it ought to be, now. This little Bement girl's very good, very good indeed; but with her in the part it's merely a pleasant, amusing, interesting minor rôle, the way it should be. Notice the difference in Eugene? Of course he's uneven to-day; that's natural. He's up and down in his performance; he's got a fine, sensitive nature and of course there's a wringing of his heartstrings at times when he can't keep himself from thinking about poor Isabelle. Other times, with Lily lifting him, you can see him getting the inspiration and playing 'Hawkins' as splendidly as the early rehearsals of the play showed he could. He'll play it all that way to-morrow night; you'll see."

"I hope so, George."

"You needn't worry; I know him. With an audience in front of him and an actress opposite him that lifts it up to him, he'll be enormous. Of course she's going to get the piece away from him before she's through with it. She'll be a sensation; that's all there is to it—and when he sees that, he'll let it down again; but by then it won't matter so much, because we'll be established as a hit and they'll all be coming in to see Lily, anyhow." He sighed. "Poor Isabelle. I sent Dr. Coombs to see her—nerve specialist—and he told me to get a trained nurse for her; so I did. Said not to put her to bed but just let this nurse go round with her and let her do whatever she wanted to for a while. The nurse is supposed to keep her mind off the theatre as much as she can, take her out walking—and talk about botany and astronomy to her, I suppose! Hi-yi, I don't blame 'Gene for having the poor creature on his mind. Can't get her out o' my own whenever I dare let myself think of it!"

"No," Owen said; and the monosyllable, though spoken unemotionally, was in reality a profound groan of his spirit. Isabelle was in his mind all the time, haunting him avengingly; for was it not through his agency that her ruin had been wrought? Hurley had spoken of Eugene as "sensitive"; but this vocally inexpressive playwright was more acutely so and Isabelle's haunting of him carried with it a pressure of questioning. Was this, then, the theatre? Must there always be a torture-chamber below stairs where someone moaned while the dance went on above? What would mean the triumphal progress of a play that left a crushed woman twitching in the dust behind it? Up there on the stage before him Lily, as "Hester", was playing the last act scene with "Myra", and Hurley whispered excitedly, "Watch that! Nobody out front'll look at 'Myra' to-morrow night! They'll never look an instant at anything but Lily. She's got it!"

Owen saw and knew that Lily had it. Yes, she would be the forefront figure in a triumph and, radiant, would be crowned with laurel. Had she no thought at all of Isabelle? So far as he could discern, she had none and seemed concentrated upon the task in hand, all that critical afternoon; but when it was done and the rehearsal ended, Owen discovered that the displaced leading lady was indeed in the mind of Lily Mars. Hurley called to the actors, "Very good, thank you! Let you rest to-night. Once more, to-morrow morning at ten, and after that I don't think any of us need worry, ladies and gentlemen. T's all!" He waved a cordial dismissing hand, strode up the aisle, departing; the players dispersed, moving toward the stage door, and the brooding playwright, after sitting alone a moment or two longer in the body of the house, rose and walked slowly toward the doors that opened upon the lobby. Just before he reached them Lily came from the deeper shadows of the side aisle and spoke to him in a hushed voice that betrayed some perturbation.

"Owen?"

"Yes."

"I was afraid you'd gone. I'm so glad you hadn't. I——" She laughed nervously. "I'm—I'm afraid I'm a little frightened!"

"What's the matter?"

"It's Isabelle," she said tremulously. "Of course I've been so terribly sorry about her. I couldn't help anything that's happened, of course—it hasn't been my fault in any way, I know. Everything just happened. Of course I couldn't help being terribly happy for myself that it did happen, could I? But all the same it isn't pleasant that it's happened at someone else's expense. I had to keep her out of my mind while I was working this afternoon; but it was hard to do it. You see, last night I had a note from her."

"She wrote you——"

"Nothing. She didn't say anything in it at all except that she wanted to see me again before we opened. She didn't say anything else; but of course it couldn't help making me rather nervous because—Well, it would be pretty awkward and it wouldn't do any good, and I'd told Rita Carlin to tell her how sorry I was and everything. There couldn't be anything for either of us to say, really. Things just are as they are, and you can't alter them by talking, can you?"

"No; I think not."

Seeming to have become all at once dependent and timid, she put a hand upon his sleeve appealingly. "You'll stay with me, won't you? George went out so quickly I couldn't get round in front in time to——" She paused, then repeated her appeal. "You won't leave me alone, will you?"

Mystified, he understood that for some reason she thought she needed a protector and, with a twinge, he understood that she had first sought Hurley. "No, I'll not leave you," he said, and could not forbear adding, "I'm sorry I don't look enough like Napoleon to inspire complete trust in an emergency. What's wrong?"

Lily shivered perceptibly. "A little while ago when I wasn't on the scene a young woman came behind and spoke to me. She said she was a trained nurse in attendance on Miss Hedrington and was very much puzzled because she couldn't see anything the matter with her except she seemed to be sad. Said she didn't understand the case at all and her instructions were to just be around with Isabelle and let her do as she pleased but try to

keep her from talking about the theatre as much as she could. Then she said Isabelle had insisted on walking here to the Forty-first Street Theatre and the nurse didn't know what to do about it, because of course she had to humor her and didn't know how to stop her anyhow. So they'd come in from the street and Isabelle had told her to go behind and ask me to come out and speak to her. She's in the theatre manager's room right next to the box-office, now, waiting for me."

Owen was startled. "She is? You told the nurse you'd come there?"

"I didn't know what else to say. It'd look dreadful if I didn't, wouldn't it? If I let her say that I wouldn't even see her when she was in such a state and asked me to—it'd look as if I was either heartless—or afraid. She—she could tell people——"

"It doesn't matter what she could tell people, Lily. I think what matters is whether the effect on her would be——"

"But there's the effect on me to be considered, too," Lily urged with some pathos. "I've got this part to play to-morrow night, haven't I? The trouble is, I know I've got to go in there and see her. I just don't dare not to, because it would look perfectly horrible if I didn't. But, Owen, I don't want to. I——" She hesitated, greatly disturbed. "I—I don't know what to do. I've got to go in there; but I'm—Owen, do you think she might do something queer? I don't know what she might do—I really don't."

He was grave. "Of course I'll go with you and the nurse'll be there. I don't think you need apprehend anything except that it mayn't do Isabelle any good to see you. For yourself you needn't be afraid, certainly."

"Well—but I am. I am afraid. Owen, I'm terribly afraid! Suppose—suppose she did something to me that would keep me from playing 'Hester' to-morrow night!"

"Nonsense!" He took her hand, steadying the delicate fingers that twitched in his clasp, and now his interpretation of her agitation was that it came from a fanciful but actual fear of physical danger. "Steady, Lily! There's absolutely no——"

"But there is!" she said piteously. "You don't understand. You don't know what an effect on me it might—on *me*—oh, I know I've got to go through with it. I've got to! I've got to!"

"Well, then, we'd better——"

"Better get it over!" she gasped. "Come on!" She took his arm closely and they passed out into the short lobby of the theatre, where a cold late afternoon light came faintly through the opaque glass of closed outer doors. "How queer it is in here," she said. "How lonely a theatre is on Sunday when there's no rehearsal going on! I don't suppose there's a soul in the whole place except that one old man back there, and now he's turned out the lights on the stage." She glanced behind her. "Yes, it's all dark back there. It'll be dark outdoors, too, very soon, won't it? It's near evening, and twenty-four hours from now I ought to be getting ready to come to the theatre to play 'Hester'. Ah, these ups and downs; they could be tragic, couldn't they? Owen, do you think she——"

"See here!" he said. "I think Isabelle has a right to ask to see you, though I wish she hadn't wanted it. But if it's going to unnerve you like this you'd better go straight home and let me tell her you couldn't do it. I'll speak to her."

"No," Lily whispered desperately. "It's got to be done!"

"Very well." He opened a door near the closed box-office window and they went into

the small room where Isabelle waited. A lamp with a green porcelain shade stood upon a table and had been lighted; Isabelle sat beside the table, and the nurse, a jolly-looking fat girl modishly dressed, rose from a chair near her as the door opened.

“I’ll be just in the lobby,” she said tentatively, “if you——”

Isabelle spoke to her but looked at Lily. “Yes, if you please, Miss Knowles. I’ll keep you waiting only a few minutes.” She did not rise, herself, but nodded gravely, as the nurse went out to the lobby and closed the door. “Thank you for coming, Lily, and I’m glad you brought Owen with you.”

“Isabelle——” he began.

“No,” she said in a gentle voice, and looked up at him with a smile that wrung his heart. She sat in a stooping posture, as if bending her back and shoulders somewhat eased an incessant pain; but she was quiet, collected and haggardly sweet. “Let me do the talking—while I can. Curious.” She looked about her musingly. “It was in the room like this, over at the Netherlands, that we played our great apology scene, wasn’t it, Lily? How long ago that was! Does it seem as long ago to you, I wonder, as it does to me?”

Lily’s hands clasped themselves tightly together upon her breast and trembled there. “Isabelle, if I could only tell you how my heart aches for you! If I could only——”

“No, dear,” Isabelle said in the same small, sweet voice. “Let me speak—I’m not very strong. I’ll never see you again and there’s something I must tell you before I go where I’m going.”

“Where you’re going? Isabelle, you——”

“No, Lily, please. Just let me say it.” With her hand Isabelle made toward Lily a pleading slight movement that oddly recalled to Owen gestures Lily had used, night after night, when these two had played their last scene together in his play. “I want you to know something and I can’t go where I’m going until you do know it.”

“Don’t talk that way!” Lily gasped in a whispering violent protest. “I can’t bear it! Don’t you see I can’t bear it? Isabelle, you know I can’t bear it! You shan’t——”

“Wait, dear! Just hear me. You think I’ve hated you, and I did; but not now. Nothing that’s happened has been your fault at all. There’s even nothing for me to forgive you. I’ve tried to fight against youth and genius—and I have neither. I’m just a used-up woman, Lily. It’s all been inevitable—inevitable. Nothing’s left but to get out of the way. ‘Hester’s’ yours and he’s yours, too—a used-up woman couldn’t keep either.”

“A ‘used-up woman’? You’ve no right to call yourself that to me! You mustn’t——”

“Hush, dear. May I tell you a funny little thought I’ve been having lately, Lily? Such a funny little thought, dear. My father was an old-fashioned evangelistic preacher and I was brought up to believe that when we die, if we’ve done wrong, we go into hell; but lately it’s seemed to me that when we were born we’d really died out of a better life and come into hell, so that perhaps when we die out of this life we’re really escaping from hell. Don’t you think maybe I’m right, dear, and that this life is really the hell we’ve been sent into for doing something wrong before we were born? I’m almost sure of it, myself, and that I——”

“No! No! You mustn’t say such things!”

“Not even if they’re true, Lily? But you’ll understand, won’t you, that I must find

peace? Before peace comes to me—when I go away—I must know that you believe there's no hate in my heart for you. I want you to say of me, instead, 'She had good will toward me.' You'll believe it, won't you, Lily?"

Lily began to cry passionately. "Isabelle! Don't you see what you're doing to me? I can't stand it! You mustn't——"

"Ah, please, please, dear!" Isabelle rose, and, though she still stooped, there was a strange brightness upon her face; a ghostly sweetness seemed all about her. "I'm just telling you goodbye and giving Eugene to you forever. I want you both to remember that what I wanted most, now at the end, was that you both should be happy. To-morrow night in the triumph that you and he will have together I want you to spare just a single little thought to me. You'll have such a wealth of flowers—toss just one tiny spray of rosemary to me and say, 'Perhaps she knows this and is glad for us.' "

"You mustn't do this to me!" Lily sobbed. "You can't——"

"Now will you let me kiss you goodbye, Lily?" Isabelle stepped close to her and kissed her upon the cheek; but, upon this, Lily uttered a loud cry of sharpest lamentation, and, as Isabelle moved on toward the door, sought to detain her.

"No, no, you shan't do it! You shan't go like this! You shan't——"

But Isabelle was already at the door and had opened it. "Yes, Miss Knowles," she said quietly; the nurse came to her and the two disappeared in the darkened lobby.

Lily flung herself upon Owen, and he could not comfort or quiet her. "Don't you see what she's *done* to me?" she cried over and over. An agony of self-reproach had seized her. "Who am I?" she sobbed. "What am I? You asked me—but nobody knows! I'm poison—I bring a curse on everything I touch! I ruined Minnie Bush and now I've ruined Isabelle. You heard what she said—she'll kill herself! I don't want Eugene! I don't want anything! Mother—Clara—I haven't sent them a penny—I haven't even written them a decent letter! Somebody ought to put me to torture—somebody ought to kill me—I'm a thousand times more unfit to live than Isabelle is! I despise myself! Oh, oh, oh, everybody'll despise me! I ought to be working at Vance's—dying at Vance's—at Vance's—at Vance's!"

"You'll be all right to-morrow," he told her again and again, and once, when she heeded him enough to cry out that she'd never be all right again, he stormed at her. "You've *got* to be, Lily! You've got to make up to your mother and Clara now at last for how you've treated them! You'll get hold of yourself and be in shape for to-morrow morning's rehearsal or you'll botch to-morrow night, and that *will* ruin them and yourself, too, and all the rest of us! Do you hear me?"

"To-morrow night!" she cried, in a voice grown hoarse. "You don't see! You don't see! You don't see!"

She became incoherent and was not able to explain to him what it was that he didn't see. He had ado to quiet her enough to get her out to the dark street and into a cab, within the half hour. She cried steadily and incoherently, and was incoherent still as he drove with her to Madison Avenue and left her sobbing in the arms of Jennie Lebrun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DINING alone at a corner table in the Sunday evening quiet of the Players' grill-room, he thought appreciatively of Jennie Lebrun, of her easy competence on the stage and her calmness off of it. The passage of "Catalpa House" to this final phase had been like that of a vessel through cyclonic waters; typhoons had struck, the Captain had worked resourcefully, but even now at the harbor mouth two of those upon whom the safety of the ship depended seemed distractedly about to sink her. Ah, if all the crew had half the cheerful steadiness of Jennie Lebrun and Rita Carlin! Then, to be no more than just, he thought that poor Isabelle herself might have been as steady and cheerfully dependable as Jennie and Rita if wild young genius hadn't thrust among the company.

He had done his best to assuage Lily's fear that Isabelle intended to make away with herself, though Lily had paid no heed to him and much of her choking and sobbing incoherence had seemed to revert to this theme. Owen's own apprehension upon the point was slight; he had the impression that people who plan self-destruction do not speak of it beforehand with the insistent almost poetic pathos that Isabelle had used. It seemed to him that she had been as pathetic as she possibly could be, so much so, indeed, that she had been almost deliberately pathetic. This did not mean, of course, that her suffering was not heart-rendingly actual; nevertheless, it appeared that the evidences of her true anguish had been unable to resist being put forth with an artistic touch. He was sympathetic and understood that Isabelle had sought relief in expression and in wringing a rival's heart; she had followed a pressing impulse to ease her unbearable misery a little by playing a scene of abnegation, and playing it well—even so well that she had unconsciously borrowed from Lily herself small half-gestures and a broken-looking back, that posture in the stiff little chair!

"These people!" he said once more to himself; but he said it now sadly and with a larger and more indulgent comprehension than he had been wont to say it. After all, too, even if Isabelle had been acting when she spoke of suicide, wasn't it possible that she had meant what she said? He thought not; yet the possibility troubled him, bothered him the more, the more he thought of it, and finally, late in the evening, worried him into going to the telephone and calling Hurley.

The manager's voice sounded wearily irritated. "Well, what's the matter now? What's on *your* mind?"

"Isabelle. I'm afraid she——"

“Oh, my cripes! *You’re* going to tell me not to let her jump off a dock, now, are you? Listen! She isn’t——”

“Suppose you listen, yourself, George!” Owen interrupted, nettled and puzzled, too. “How the devil did you know that was what I was going to talk to you about?”

“Oh, Lord! Lily’s been calling me up, having spasms about it. Told me you were there when Isabelle talked to her. What the devil’d you let it happen for, anyhow? Why didn’t you send Lily home and tell Isabelle you’d taken the responsibility, on account of not wanting the child to get in the state of mind she is in with a First Night hanging over her?”

“But, George, I felt that Isabelle had a right to——”

“Fiddlededee! If I can ever find just one single grain of common sense in anybody connected with the theatre I give you my solemn word—I’ll take any oath you can think of—I’ll——”

“You’re wasting time,” the annoyed playwright said sharply. “What I want to——”

“I know! I know! Listen! Listen and don’t make me yell my head off into this instrument. Isabelle isn’t the type that does it and isn’t in that condition of mind, either. Understand me? She isn’t. I’ve just had Dr. Coombs call Lily up to tell her so. Lily’s been at me every fifteen minutes on the telephone. I had to make Coombs go around and see Isabelle again and he says it’s damn nonsense to anticipate any such thing and besides he’s instructed the nurse to look out, though he knows it isn’t going to occur. *I* knew it wasn’t, of course; but I did it to try and calm Lily down, and a whole lot of calming it’s done! Sounds like a five-year-old child with its doll’s head off! Says she knows Isabelle’s going to do it just about the time the curtain goes up to-morrow night! My cripes! Told Jennie Lebrun to put her to bed and sit by her till she gets to sleep—if she does! Fine condition you’ve let your leading lady get into, with her opening night right——”

Owen interrupted again and spoke with an increased sharpness. “I won’t discuss the question of responsibility. I don’t think you perceive that it involves a question of ethics that——”

“Ethics? My cripes!” The telephonic instrument at the playwright’s ear seemed to tingle and its sound became tinny. “Now, for God’s sake! Don’t you realize that the child’s nerves were already like fiddle strings tuned up too high and in danger of breaking, because of playing a colossal part in a New York opening on a few hours’ notice? Think she’s made of iron? Then on top of that, you had to let her walk into a scene with a wild woman that would get anybody’s nerve, even without being all worked up over an opening—and now you want to tell me all about ethics! For God’s *sake*! As sure as God made little apples and lets me live, I give you my solemn word and I’ll take any oath the meanest lawyer on earth ever thought of or ever *will* think of, I’ll give a million dollars if I ever find one single infinitesimal morsel of common sense in anybody connected with ——”

“Goodnight, George!”

Thus the unamiable interview closed with the click of a metal prong. Owen Gilbert went to an uneasy bed and woke in the morning to a conviction of calamity. In dreams already forgotten he had been a witness of disasters that left their shadows in his mood; he seemed possessed of foreknowledge that “Catalpa House” was to be murdered and that when evening came the stage of the Forty-first Street Theatre would be as dark as his own

depression. He had coffee sent to his room and partook of it hurriedly, for with it was brought a written message from the clerk in the office downstairs. "Mr. Hurley just telephoned saying he wouldn't wait for you to answer but to ask you please come to his office in the Netherlands Theatre Building as soon as you can get there."

"Ah, what now, what now?" the playwright groaned; but increased his haste.

In Hurley's office he found Pinkney Monk and Eugene; they stood confronting the manager, who sat at his desk, and their backs were toward the door. But they turned as Owen came in, and Eugene's face was paler than he had ever seen it. "You're in at the death," the actor said bitterly. "I hope you'll enjoy my last throes; I'm through with the stage forever!"

"Oh, you are, are you?" Monk asked satirically, and for the first time in Owen's acquaintance with him showed irritation. "Seems to me I've heard actors say that before—just a few times! Haven't we got enough on our hands, damn it! without your wasting our time talking balderdash?"

Eugene became tragic. "Balderdash! All I want to do now is to go straight to the devil! Is it balderdash when an actor does that? Ah, yes! He's only an actor, so what does it matter? Only an actor! Who cares when he goes to the dogs? Only an——"

"Listen!" Hurley shouted, and, glowering, struck the desk powerfully with his fist. "Quiet down, will you? You've got about twenty-five minutes to get your nerve in shape before the last rehearsal of this play."

"Rehearsal?" Eugene laughed wildly. "Rehearsal? Who'll I rehearse *with*? How do I rehearse with nobody opposite? Do I play 'Hawkins' and 'Hester' too? Both parts? Do I _____"

Owen interrupted him. "Is Lily ill?"

"Ill?" Eugene laughed again. "Ill? No, she isn't ill! Do you want to know what she's done?"

"I believe that would be the inference," Owen said, with grimness; but before the response came he knew what it would be. He had a flash of revelation and reminiscence mingled together, and his mind's eye saw Lily dancing gayly into the front door of the "double house" at night, saw her agonizing over Minnie Bush in his mother's library the next morning, saw swift-flitting pictures of the scene of renunciation and atonement Lily had played so ardently and irresponsibly then; he knew that now she had done the same thing again, this time upon a grander and more dazzling and destructive scale.

"She's gone!" Eugene cried. "She's struck me down; she's struck me down to the very gutter! She's where we can't get hold of her—can't, can't, can't! She's at least four hundred miles away by this time! She couldn't get back if she wanted to, herself! She's on a train! On a train, do you hear me? On a train! On a train! On a *train*! On a——"

"Hush up!" Hurley said quietly, and spoke to Owen. "Jennie thought she'd got her quieted down and almost asleep a little after eleven. About half-past twelve she went into her room again and she wasn't there. The landlady was sitting up, reading, downstairs in the parlor and said Lily'd come down with her grips, borrowed a railroad time-table, paid her bill, got a cab and gone. Left a letter on her pillow for Jennie to hand to me. Here it is."

Owen read it.

“For hours I’ve known I must do this thing—there’s no other way out of it all—no other way—no other way George dear, no other way—it’s the only way. When you read these words it will all be over and I’ll be far far away from you on the train. What is left of my shattered life must be given to making-up to my mother and sister for my heartless neglect of even writing to them in this brief span of glory that has been so absorbing I was thoughtless of them but now I go in shame and remorse to atone to them by giving them what is left of my life and the labor of my hands.

“I lay down this jewelled happy life you have given me like a glittering garment I am not fit to wear for if I kept it upon me it would be at the cost of another’s life because I am sure she would go that far—no matter what the doctor says. So I must do this thing to keep from going crazy—I must save her and give her back all I have taken from her.

“My tears have dried and a kind of paralysis of calmness has come upon me. I do the thing that I must do and they will be brought together again by it and she will shine in the triumph that was to have been mine. Her despair will turn to joy when she hears that I am gone and though she is a few years beyond her first youth and perhaps would not have either as keen suffering or happiness such as younger people feel I hope and believe this act of mine will bring her true and great happiness. Tell her this for me George dear and oh please say farewell for me to all the others—to dear Owen and Pink and Joe and Harry and Jennie and Rita and Eugene and dear Tom-Jim-Jack and poor old Mr. Briggs for I love them all so. Ask them to spare me one thought sometimes when I shall be standing all day at work where my darling sister used to stand until the work ruined her health.

“All the dear faces of the company come before me as I write Goodbye and yours dear George so kind and so great it is hard to believe I shall not see it any more. Oh goodbye George dear—goodbye—goodbye—goodbye from

“Your grateful broken Lily”

CHAPTER THIRTY

“**A**AGAIN!” was Owen’s sickened thought as he read.

The difference was that when the remorseful Lily had made her great renunciation for Minnie Bush no damage had been done, though that was not much to her credit; but this time she had really accomplished a catastrophe and pulled the house down with her. Mere wreckage was left—Mrs. Mars, Clara, himself, his play and all the actors who were to have played their parts in it eleven hours hence.

Eugene made a gesture bitterly futile, a slap of his fingers upon the open sheet of paper in Owen’s hand. “That’s how it ends!” he cried. “That’s what comes of trusting a big property to a giddy-headed little girl that knows no more of the traditions of the stage or its responsibilities than I do of Euclid! I blame you, George! I blame you, Pink, and I blame you, Owen! Damn it, I blame everybody! My God, I think we’ve all been crazy! On my soul, I believe we’ve been bewitched! That we’d let an inexperienced, unknown amateur turn our heads, tear the play to pieces, step into the shoes of a tried and true and capable leading woman—thrown out with her health wrecked to make room for a totally irresponsible, unknown, hare-brained child who can’t be relied on for two minutes and doesn’t care enough for anybody not to blast his career in a crisis—why, damn it, George, you talk about common sense, I’d like to ask you what’s become of your own! If you think you’ve shown any——”

“Hush up!” Hurley said again, took the letter from Owen and placed it in a breast-pocket. “You and Pink get on over to the Forty-first Street Theatre, will you?”

“I?” Eugene struck himself upon the breast. “What for?”

“For rehearsal. Don’t keep the company waiting.”

“No? Who’ve you got for ‘Hester’? Bement?”

Eugene made the room noisy with satiric laughter; but Hurley merely sighed. “I’ve got Isabelle, of course.”

“Isabelle? My God! Don’t you know she’s under the care of a nerve specialist? Don’t you know she’s got a breakdown, shot to pieces and can’t even talk connectedly? Don’t you know she’s watched every minute by a trained nurse? Do you think Isabelle can *act*? My God! What do you expect of her?”

Hurley looked at him with a tired eye. “What would you expect of Tantalus if somebody offered him a magnum of champagne? Do you think de Soto would have taken

a bath if he'd discovered his Fountain of Youth? Isabelle's got both and she's over there waiting for you to rehearse. Go along with him, will you, Monk."

Eugene said "My God!" again, stared protuberantly, seized Monk's arm and strode with him from the room; but the playwright was almost unaware of their departure. Preoccupied, he was looking doubtfully yet with a profound respect at Hurley; the doubt was of the manager's intelligence; the respect was for his indomitableness.

"What's the use, George?" he asked, when they were alone. "Just to die game? Of course the whole thing's gone, so why——"

"Gone? I don't know; I don't know. Your play's been polished up on the road; but otherwise it's just where it was before Lily came into it, and it looked fairly good then."

"Yes, perhaps—before it became the mess it is now!"

"Mess?" Hurley repeated, oddly remaining mild. "Think I've made a mess of it?"

"You? I mean without Lily——"

"Without Lily? Out front to-night they won't know what she'd have done with it; people that haven't been to Switzerland think the White Mountains are pretty high mountains. We'll go over to the theatre in a little while and see what it looks like. Let's talk about something else a minute." A railway time-table lay unfolded on the desk before the manager; he studied it and made a dot upon it with a pencil. "She must have got a train out at twelve-twenty; that'd bring her into Cleveland this morning. She'd have to lay over there until afternoon—leave there at four-fifty and get home to-night at one fifty-five. Two o'clock to-morrow morning. Here's the fast through train; it leaves here at three-twenty this afternoon and gets there at noon to-morrow—only about ten hours after her." He looked up at Owen speculatively. "I was just wondering——"

"Wondering if you couldn't get her back to take Isabelle's place—again—by Wednesday or Thursday night?" Owen asked, with a piteous spurt of mockery.

The manager's face flushed; but he was in a strange mood and made no retort. On the contrary he spoke musingly in a gentle tone. "You see what she's done is rather magnificent, rather magnificent."

"Is it? Magnificently considerate of all of the rest of us, would you call it, George? Considerate of her mother and her sister, too—going back to save them by getting ten dollars a week at a department store—if she can get even that!—after she's involved them in debts that nothing except her success here could possibly have paid? And all for a gesture!"

"Gesture?"

"One of execrable, ruthless vanity!" the playwright cried, vehement in this release of pent indignation. "The one thing on earth she can't bear is not to be picturesque. Oh, she must be not only that; she must at all times be the very most picturesque person in sight—she'd give her life and everybody else's for that!"

"What! You're out of your head! She——"

"Hark to me, will you? I think I know her at last; this act reveals her. Yesterday Isabelle became the more picturesque of the two. She'd lost the rôle of leading lady on the stage; but she got it back in the 'real life' scene she played with Lily. She was the heroine, the spiritual superior, the great romantic sufferer and self-sacrificer—put Lily in a hole

and made her look like a little pig. Unendurable! Lily *had* to get back the rôle of heroine! I don't mean she didn't have any genuine remorse for what she'd inevitably done to Isabelle. She did—she really suffered horribly, of course; but what impelled her to action was the necessity to make a great romantic gesture. It's the breath of her life to hold the centre of the stage—to make the centre wherever *she* is!"

Hurley interrupted him. "But for an actor, that's only——"

"Listen to me, will you?" Owen stormed. "She wanted me to write a play for her about a woman's great self-immolation. That's her foremost artistic admiration, and I tell you she's so incarnately an actress she hardly knows when she's on the stage and when she's off it! She can hardly distinguish between being that woman and playing that woman! She doesn't know where reality ends and unreality begins in herself! So, to take it away from Isabelle again and to hold the stage as the heroic abnegator, she sends herself and everybody else to the devil in this one supreme 'magnificent' gesture! A gesture, I tell you—nothing on earth but a gesture!"

Hurley's thoughtfulness was not altered by his friend's outburst. "That's not such a bad idea, you know. You might think it over, Owen."

"Think what over?"

"That idea for a play," Hurley said. "A woman's self-sacrifice. Old theme, of course; but I mean if you treated it in a new way—gave her some lightness and comedy but with an underlying capacity for heroic sacrifice that would come out on her at a crisis and give her a rather enormous last act climax. Take what you just said about reality and unreality. Who does know where one ends and the other begins in himself? I mean in any act of self-sacrifice people don't have to be actors to be doing such a thing partly as a gesture. The important thing about Sydney Carton on the scaffold isn't that he sees something of the picturesqueness of what he's doing; the important thing is that he's *on* the scaffold. Suppose you treated such a supreme act that way, in a play. What I mean, let her see herself it's partly gesture, but nevertheless does it; and the big thing is that she does do it. See what I mean? It might be rather fresh. Might turn out to be rather an extraordinary part, rather extraordinary!"

"George! If you're crazy enough to think I'll ever write another play——"

"Listen," Hurley said, and now looked at him with a peculiar, appealing earnestness. "What I was wondering—I was thinking the child'll be in pretty complete misery out there when she gets home. However much truth there may be in what you've been saying, however much gesture and picturesqueness there may have been in what she's done, and however much harm comes of it, the act itself is noble. If she did it as an actress, a lesser one couldn't have done it. Only a really great actress could have done it. You understand? She did go to the scaffold. Well, I was just wondering—— If ever anybody in the world needed a friend to be with her and do a little admiring and cheering up, she does now—I was just wondering whether you wouldn't like to get off on that three-twenty this afternoon and be there to-morrow only ten hours after she's home and see what you can do about it."

Owen was incredulous. "What? With this half-dead play staggering toward to-night and the rocks and——"

"But why not?" Hurley asked, with a friendly urgency. "Somebody ought to stand by

her. I was thinking that if you'd go out there and kind of get it into her mind that you might develop a play on these self-sacrifice lines for her and that it wouldn't necessarily be too much to hope that Adler and Company might present her in it——”

“I think you're insane!”

“I don't know about that,” Hurley said mildly. “I don't know about that at all. You've had a lot of experience lately and I think you might get rather a good play out of it; really something rather remarkable. Anyhow, *she'd* think you could and you'd get her mind off her misery. Listen. Why don't you take the three-twenty? There isn't anything you can do here; there isn't another thing on earth either you or I can do to help ‘Catalpa House’ now. We'll go round and just look at it presently; but our work's done—it's out of our hands now and up to the people that are going to play it.” His earnestness increased. “I never go to the theatre myself on a New York First Night—all there is to do is to suffer. You don't want to hang around there to-night, do you, and hide somewhere when the ushers start the ‘Author! Author!’ shenanigan?”

“No, I don't!”

“All right. Then why don't you take the three-twenty and go out there? Wouldn't you like to?”

“No! I would not!”

Hurley made a gesture of philosophic acceptance. “All right,” he said abruptly, folded the time-table, placed it in a pocket, put on his hat and rose. “Let's get over to the Forty-first Street Theatre.”

. . . To the author of “Catalpa House” its last rehearsal was a jumble of unmeaning sights and sounds accompanied by a memorable pain in that symbol of the emotions we call the heart and also in his physical head. From eyebrows to spine he developed a headache so acute that he was almost indifferent to the hints of nausea that now and then added themselves to it; but he sat in a back row chair until the work was over, being too miserable to move except of necessity. During the progress of the last act Harry Vokes sat beside him for a time and was voluble.

“Don't take it so hard,” the comedian said. “We could all feel like that if we'd let ourselves; but we've got a First Night to play. If it weren't for that—zowie! You remember that second time George pretended to fire her, and me telling you how we didn't have anything to play up to? Everybody all let down, what? Light gone out of the room, see? Might as well give up the silly old play and all such and such, so on and so on. Not to-day, though. ‘Don't give up the ship’, see? She's out of it—vacated—took all the nice pictures and furniture out of the house. Us up there making empty reverberations, what? *But* high degree of stimulus from old Joe and other parties involved. Everybody slapping everybody else on the back, see? First Night! On your toes, no matter what! What, isn't an actor an actor for a' that and a' that? Toot, lad! Toot, lass! Save the day! Save friendly author and best of managers! Save our own bacon, what? Brighten up, ye heroes! Maybe we'll put it over for you, anyhow.”

Owen could only murmur, “You think so?”

“Oh, there's a chance! Might.” Vokes chuckled confidentially. “Get Isabelle? Grand

performance off. Plays all her scenes firm on feet but slight stagger indicating diseased feebleness or something immediately upon exit. Rush of stout nurse to assist. Broken reed business of leaning on plump shoulder, and oh, such faint, brave sweetness! Strong as an ox, see; but preserving attitude of having been out of company a few passing hours on account of accidental illness, which caused Lily Mars to be rehearsed yesterday as desperate last-chance substitute in case leading lady not recovered in time to play to-night as per schedule. Kissed half the company in enthusiastic greeting, though leaning on nurse during osculation. Now get this, because it's good. Appears to notice absence of Mars with slight surprise and inquires with sweet languor; then pulled this line to Rita, 'Gone home? I'm so sorry! I suppose George knows what he's doing; but *I* think she was the best of all the Myras we've tried, next to Mabel Meadows.' Now you tell me one as good as that."

"I can't!" Owen groaned. "I don't know any!"

"No, it's a prize. Anybody told you about great emotional reconciliation scene in star's dressing-room, just before Pink hammered for school to take up? No spectators, see; but fine effect of fat nurse waiting outside door and spoiling everything by giggling. Us lounging about—business of showing indifference and not rubbering, just had to go and catch flies or something in that region of theatre, but ears extended and groping the way a crab does with his eyes. Rewarded by sound of loud manly sobs. 'Gene doing his big act of Grateful Gabriel getting taken back on old footing by Faithful Fanny. Fat nurse busting with snickers and trying to make believe she's only laughing at me, the funny man—then having the nerve to give me the eye! 'Fie, hussy!' I told her. Heigh-ho!" Vokes became serious and rose from his seat beside the playwright. "Cue coming. Don't be too downhearted. We're all sure she'll come back in something else some day and be It. She didn't lay down on us, you see; Jennie's got the dope. An actor takes another's place every day; but this—well, she got the big head for a while but she's a good-hearted girl, and she knew she'd have to play the part if she stayed. She couldn't do it. Knew she'd feel like hell from now on if she gave Isabelle the big knock-out. Couldn't do it! Couldn't do it, God bless her! G'bye."

Owen, sitting with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, presently grew aware that the actors' voices were no longer heard. He sat up painfully and saw nobody on the stage except Pinkney Monk talking to an electrician; the players had gone and so had Hurley. In the dazed, hot eyes of the playwright the dimly revealed rows of vacant seats appeared as a wavering, choppy sea ominously glimpsed before the storm. "To-night will engulf—engulf what is left," he thought, crept out, feebly signalled a hansom cab and drove to the Players'. There, in the fine old bedroom that had once been Lawrence Barrett's, he drooped into an easy-chair and gave himself up to a torpor that took little account of anything except physical anguish. He had nausea, was fevered, then damply cold, then was hot again, and his cephalic pain was like a sharp toothache enlarged into a headache. When he thought that the afternoon must surely be gone and nightfall approaching he looked at his watch and it astoundingly informed him that the time was not quite three o'clock.

"Lily's half way home now," he thought vaguely. "In the morning she'll be down town applying at Vance's."

He got himself out of the chair, into a dressing-gown and lay upon the canopied bed.

The dreadful afternoon somehow wore itself out; the light through the windows waned at last; but before it was quite gone he had to make himself rise in answer to a knocking. When he opened the door he confronted a tall, dark, middle-aged man whose manner and thoughtful look were of a fine, unobtrusive distinction.

“I thought you mightn’t mind my bringing up a telegram that’s just come for you, Mr. Gilbert. If I may say so, when you entered the club it struck me you weren’t feeling very well, possibly, and now that I’m here might I inquire if you wouldn’t wish to have dinner brought up to your room for you, Mr. Gilbert? Perhaps you’d prefer a pot of tea and——”

“No, Walter, thank you. Nothing at all.”

“Very well, sir. Perhaps if there are telephone calls or messages you’d prefer not to be disturbed?”

“I won’t come down again to-night or answer the telephone; but if there are any messages please send them up.”

“Yes, Mr. Gilbert.” Walter withdrew, closing the door gently, and Owen lighted the lamp on the table and read the telegram. It was from Mrs. Gilbert.

HER MOTHER HAS JUST RECEIVED TELEGRAM FROM CLEVELAND SHE IS ON WAY HOME TO OBTAIN POSITION VANCE AND NEVER LEAVE HER AGAIN EVERYTHING UPSET AT THEIR HOUSE IN CONSEQUENCE HER TELEGRAM MAKES NO MENTION WHY SHE HAS DONE THIS AND AS I CLEARLY FORESEE HER ACCOUNT ON ARRIVAL WILL BE EMOTIONAL AND CONFUSING WILL YOU PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY CLARIFYING CAUSE OF SUCH A TERRIFIC PROCEEDING AND WHAT ON EARTH IS HAPPENING TO YOUR PLAY.

“Write immediately?” Owen groaned. “I wish I could!” He placed a hot hand upon his hotter forehead as if in explanation of his inability, dragged himself to the bed and again reclined upon it. At midnight, when a second communication was brought up to him, he had found no surcease from his torment, though he had helplessly tried a series of wet towels as palliatives. It was with one of these mere adornments about his head that he read the note from O’Mahoney.

MANAGER’S OFFICE
FORTY-FIRST STREET THEATRE

Monday night about 11:25.

“Dear Mr. G.

“George left word to keep you informed, so tried to telephone you after third act curtain but they wouldn’t call you. Final curtain about 11:05 but the piece will run shorter after this. A good deal of the loss of time was due to calls after all the acts—fourteen after the third act and even five after the last curtain. Of course First Night calls don’t mean much; but nevertheless congratulations! We all feel that the piece is put over and has a fine chance for a pretty good run. I circulated among the critics high and low, old and young, as much as possible to get the drift and really they were nearly all quite well pleased and positively we are going to get a good press to-morrow. You needn’t worry at all, because the audience genuinely liked it—the suspense held and the comedy went over to a lot of laughs, and really the play is mighty interesting itself—so with them rooting for

it and a good press we're sure to do box-office.

"The company did their darnedest and went over strong. 'Gene really outdid himself and was the Big Boy. They got him out after the climax curtain and he made a lovely speech with strong compliments for you and George and Isabelle. She was really bully in the part and looked about ten years younger. Could hardly get in her dressing-room for the bouquets—mainly, I gather, from 'Gene. Myself, I liked old Joe's work best of the bunch; but they were all good and without being over-optimistic I'm sure I can give you my solemn word and take any oath, as the Governor says, you can now go out and celebrate the victory or turn in and dream sweet dreams of ducats in your purse, just as you choose.

"Scrawlingly yours

"O'M."

Owen read incredulously, re-read with bewilderment; then read once more and found that he was no longer feverish; miraculously, the pain in his head seemed bearable. He freshened a towel with cold water, got himself into bed and felt that his headache had almost worn itself out. At least, it had lost the acuteness that interferes with coherent thinking, and his thoughts were crowding, as were his feelings.

He thought of old Joe Ord, of Harry Vokes, of Eugene and Isabelle, and of all the players who had bravely given to "Catalpa House" the span of life that now seemed assured for it. More, he thought of all actors and of one for whom the room next to that wherein he lay was kept as a memorial shrine ever to be reverently visited by the "profession". The princely, gentle player who had died there had given this splendid house, his home, to his fellow-actors, keeping only the one room for himself; a few steps through the hallway would have brought Owen to that shrine, where lay the last book Edwin Booth read, with the book-mark in its place where he had left it when he read no more. "These people", practicing, through lives often hand-to-mouth, the most personal and the most perishable of all the arts, following it with ever in their ears the noise of public criticism of what they did and of themselves, and continually subjected to a thousand incitements to cherish vanity and vanity's deadly twin, jealousy—ah, they were a great people, after all!

Thus he came to the thought of that most characteristic of all their qualities, their generosity. Even Isabelle in her writhing had made the gesture of abnegation for another's sake, and what indeed is a pose but a poor human creature's attempt to seem what he yearns to be. Isabelle had yearned to be like that. Lily had gone further; so much further that hadn't she indeed gone higher? She had not only yearned to be like that; she had actually been like that, and suddenly her flight shone upon him with the brightness of a broken star crossing the sky. Such a star goes into the darkness; so had she done that—and her mother had put her into his hands. Worse, he had refused when even Hurley had asked him to go and comfort her.

Owen found himself made up of littlenesses. One of them was the smart he had felt because her despairing letter had been written to the manager, not to himself, and another was the prickling within him because she had sought Hurley first when she knew that she had to face Isabelle and was rightly frightened. She had turned first to Hurley because she had thought he would more powerfully protect her, would indeed actually save her. Moreover, that was what Hurley would have done, no question, and, if he had happened to

remain in the theatre fifteen minutes longer on Sunday afternoon, Lily would have been the heart of a triumph to-night.

Owen Gilbert remembered the vow he had taken after the first time she had waited for him and kissed him for writing the part of "Myra". "Whatever you do to me, I'll never fail you—not after that!" So he had promised and had failed her continuously ever since. No wonder she had turned to the sturdy Hurley who failed nobody! In him she had recognized not only the artist whose materials were actors, playwrights, directors, scene painters, electricians and even property men; she had perceived the masterly man who would preserve her if for no other reason than that he intended to use her. But there were other reasons; for obviously Hurley found in her not only his finest, most exquisite material but a nobility of spirit that satisfied his passion to make the theatre noble.

Owen knew what was the matter with himself. He had been a lover, but a lover "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought", a lover all scrutinies and analyses—and in the name of heaven what sort of a lover was that!

In the morning, sound in head though possessing a low opinion of himself, he telephoned to the manager's office and was told that Mr. Hurley had not come in. "When he comes, give him this message," Owen said. "Tell him that Mr. Gilbert has decided to do what he wished him to do, is taking the afternoon train and will be there to-morrow at noon."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE red-faced fat old *dépôt* hackman was delighted to see him, and, in a blackly glistening rubber overcoat under a copious autumnal drizzle, kept the door of the hack open for a moment's conversation after the young playwright was seated upon the mouldy green cushion within.

"Glad to get back in God's country, I guess! Ain't been so well since you been away, have you? Well, sir, this climate we got out here'll fix you all right. Feel better a'ready, I expect. Saw your mother out ridin' couple days ago with them two fat old bays and that white-necktie old darkey; she was lookin' well—yes, sir, lookin' first rate! Newhouse and Treadwell's up to ten stories and I hear they expect to have the roof on by Thanksgiving. Yes, sir, a lively old burg we got here, a mighty lively old burg! Well—on account the rain expect I better take you right into the driveway when we get there. Land you right up close to the front porch. Goin' to be with us some time, I guess?"

"I don't know."

"Expect you'll make it as long as you can. Yes, sir, it's a great place to be, a great place to be!"

The hackman laughed as an expression of good will, closed the door, passed a shining wet fat finger across his wet moustache, dislodging drops of water, then climbed to his box. Inside there was green dimness, a musty smell never smelled elsewhere, and a rumbling that became heavier as the horses changed from a walk to their patient trot. Looking out at the umbrellas and rain-coats of the hurrying midland people on the sidewalks, a picture a little contorted by the running water upon the hack's windows, the pale young passenger felt that an abrupt, vast transportation of himself had taken place; all at once he seemed to be at an immense distance from the theatre—from all its life, from old Joe Ord and Eugene and Isabelle and Harry Vokes, from Hurley and the "Players' ", and from "laughs" and "sides" and "scripts" and "sets" and "foots" and "borders" and "amber" and grease-paint and stage doors and bright dressing-rooms. Yet (and his breath came quicker) he was in the same town with Lily Mars!

After the hack had crossed the broadest and most turbulent of the town's commercial avenues and as it joggled by the open square where the fountain competed sadly with the rain and falling, brown leaves, he had a momentary experience that startled him. A closed, large automobile, passing the hack and like it going north, faintly seemed to be familiar,

possibly one of the three, all alike, he had hired from Foudray's to carry the "Skylark" company to dine at his mother's upon an evening a long, long time ago. Then suddenly his heart was in his throat. The profile and figure of a lady sheltered in the passing car seemed to be Lily's; there was a glimpse of a bouquet of violets upon a dark fur coat. "Illusion!" he thought, as the quick picture fled by; Lily couldn't be hiring automobiles at Foudray's nor wearing furs or violets. "Ah, me! Now I'm near her, I'll be seeing her everywhere! Every girl in the distance will be Lily—till she comes closer. But will she ever come close to anybody, or will anybody in the world ever come close to her?"

The eight hoofs plod-plod-plodded upon the wet cedar blocks, the iron tires of the four wheels deepened the rumble in the playwright's ears, and his heart was wistful with the memory of Lily's odd, sweet voice speaking a thrilling, queer word, that evening so long ago.

*"And place your hand below your husband's foot;
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease."*

"Husband!" He could conjure up no vision of Lily's hand ready to be placed beneath a husband's foot, and he laughed at the preposterous idea. "If I should ask to be that husband—" he thought, and was frightened. He would and he would not!—and thus he knew the truth of the trouble that had been in his breast from the first. He would and he would not; yet he couldn't bear the prospect of a life without her.

The iron tires left the wooden pavement, crunched the gravel of his mother's driveway and he heard a hoarse voice bellowing harshly at somebody; then more moderately calling, "Whoa!" The hack stopped and the red-faced hackman opened the door. "One o' them hiring automobiles from Foudray's standin' here by the path to the porch," he explained. "Had to make him drive on down towards the stable. Lemme help you in with them bags; I'll be glad to." They divided the burden between them; the hackman set the bag he carried beside its fellow on the stone floor of the verandah, departed gratefully, and Owen, after a tentative glance at the bell handle, thought better of it and tried the bronze knob of one of the carved walnut doors. The knob turned, the door opened and immediately he breathed a varied perfume of flowers.

When he came into the hall he stopped and stared. There were flowers in vases on the mahogany console-table near the door; to the left, he saw vases of flowers on the mantel in the "reception room" and vases of flowers on the two tables within his view in that room; he saw vases and bowls of flowers through the open doors of the "library" on his right; there was a great jar of white chrysanthemums on the floor beside the newel of the stairway—roses, chrysanthemums, lilies, dahlias, pansies, gardenias, orchids in great quantity—he was struck with astonishment and dismay. So many flowers were like a wedding—or a funeral!

Mrs. Gilbert, crying out happily, came rushing from the library to embrace him. "Owen! Dearest! Had your telegram only an hour ago and didn't know what train to meet. Ah, poor boy, you look so tired! But you'll——"

"Mother!" he said, stepping back from her. "What's it all about? Are you having a party? I never saw so many flowers in my life! Are you——"

“No; nothing. Not going to have any party and haven’t had any. The flowers are just—just a token. They came this morning and were intended to convey a message—of gratitude. A gratitude of considerable vehemence, shouldn’t you say? They came from Mr. Hurley.”

“From Hurley! From New York——”

“No,” she said. “He’s here. I don’t mean here in the house, but here in town. He got here yesterday on the same train that you just——”

“Hurley? Yesterday? Hurley came out here——”

Mrs. Gilbert laughed and nodded gayly; then put a hand upon his shoulder and turned him toward the open doorway of the library. “She’s there. I sent her word you were coming and she came to—to tell you goodbye for a little while.”

“What!” He strode into the library, saw more flowers and Lily—Lily, with a bunch of violets upon her dark fur coat—Lily, radiant, extending her arms to him. She did more than extend her arms; she threw them about his neck, kissed him, left tears upon his cheek, laughed, and began to chatter.

“You darling! You darling precious Guardian Angel! Oh, you’ll be a thousand times my Guardian Angel when you bring me that beautiful play you’re going to write for me! He said you would. He came yesterday. He said there was only one way to manage me! He said he could only control me this way! What can anybody say to such a man? You know what he’s like; I won’t tell you. I’ve only just this minute to look at you and tell you I love you—he’s waiting for me at Mother’s and we’ve got to catch a train. He said it’d be too embarrassing if he came, too; he said he’d take any oath I could think of he wasn’t going to come and hear you laughing at him, and there was so much he hadn’t said to Mother, anyhow, he didn’t have time. He wants to know if you can have that play before March—ready for rehearsal, he meant. He says he’ll engage that wonderful Hugh Picard for leading man. He’ll write you about it next week. Oh, we both will! Say you’ll do it!”

“Lily!” he gasped. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but if you think I’ll ever again write another play as long as I live——”

She kissed him again. “Yes, you will! Think what you’ll have from ‘Catalpa House’! He said to tell you he’s had a wire this morning it’s picked up a lovely advance. You’ll always write plays, and ‘I swear if God lets me live’ I’ll never play in any but yours!” She laughed and wept together as she quoted the managerial oath; but, not pausing, went on breathlessly, “You hated my silliness about Eugene—you’ll find out some day that such nonsense really means just nothing to me. Eugene’s a man of great talent of course; but *really* all that was just the same as Charlie Bright to me. Of course I was in love with him—but not *really*, I mean! You’ll understand some day.”

He cried out, protesting. “I? I never shall! I don’t understand now what you’re saying!”

“Yes, you do! It’s that I’ll always love you; you’ll always be my one dearest, dearest best friend.” For an instant—only for an instant—she was wistful and gave him a richly hazel, glamouring, deep look of infinite sadness, to mean: “Ah, it might have been!” Evidently, she couldn’t help doing this or prevent herself from adding, in the tone of one who bravely does not reproach, “I’ve known all along that’s how you’d rather have it, Owen.”

"I!" he cried. "No! No, you mustn't say that to me! I know now that all I want in this world is——"

"Goodbye!" she said suddenly. "Oh, I must run, run, run!" With that, suiting the action to the word, she ran half way to the door, swung face about with a beautiful impetuosity and ran back to him. "Ah, kiss me goodbye, can't you?" He could, and did; again she left tears upon his face and again laughed. "It isn't for long! Stay here and write the play for me, angel? Goodbye!"

This time she ran all the way to the front door and opened it. Mrs. Gilbert brightly appeared near it, offering an umbrella, which Lily seized. "No! No!" the radiant girl cried, and pushed Owen back as he pressed to go with her. "You shan't get wet! Your mother'll tell you everything about me. You shan't come out! It's only a step to the car. Hold him, Aunt Anne! I love you both! Goodbye!"

She ran out, slammed the door behind her to prevent his following her, and was gone. Mrs. Gilbert, laughing, had obediently clutched her son's sleeve. "Don't go. It's only a step, as she said. You don't look well enough to be running out in the rain!"

"Mother! She said you'd tell me 'everything' about her. What did she mean?"

Mrs. Gilbert looked at him solicitously but nevertheless merrily. "I think you'd better sit down before I tell you. I had to, myself, when I heard it was going to happen!" They went into the library and sat, facing each other. "Dear boy," she said, "this is to be the most confidential information you've ever had. It's a secret known to only five people in the world, and you're to be the sixth. The first five are Lily and Mr. Hurley and Mrs. Mars and Clara and I, because we were there." She paused, then added reflectively, "Dear me, though, five? No; there were six, of course—no; there were more than that, because in the first place there was the Reverend old Doctor Burgess of their church, and then of course somebody down at the court house would have to know about it. But anyhow, it's a terrific secret and——"

"George Hurley?" Owen asked in a faint voice, as he grew paler. "She—and—and George——"

"Yes." Mrs. Gilbert leaned forward and patted his hand. "Married last night at her mother's. Oh, oh, oh, but isn't he the man for her!" She jumped up briskly, smiling brilliantly. "I'm going to tell Martha to make some coffee for you before lunch. Nelson'll bring it in here. She'll have corn-fritters for you for lunch; your favorite. You dear thing—only to think you're here with me again! This time you'll stay, won't you?"

"I—I think so."

"What happiness!" She gave him a lively tap upon the shoulder, and, looking dumbly up at her, he had the strange impression that radiant as Lily had been, his mother was even more radiant. She beamed down upon him joyously. "All the uncles and aunts and cousins'll be so glad! Such a nice band of cousins; you've never half appreciated 'em. Of course you'll stay—you'll stay here and write that beautiful play they want——"

"They——" he half-whispered, when she had left him alone in the big, fragrant room. "That beautiful play they want? They?" Thus he must think of her, then, in the plural, for the rest of his life? No—it couldn't be done. With wan eyes he looked about him, and everything was touched with exquisite color by George Hurley's flowers; yet the room had the bereft air of vacancy felt in every place where that glowing presence had been and

had been withdrawn.

He got up and went to his dead father's desk, near a window that looked out upon the big yard where wet leaves lay under old beech trees that grew bare in the rain. No, he couldn't think of her as "they". If he was ever indeed to make a play beautiful with the heart-breaking beauty he saw at last in her and must impart to it, he must always and always, like the world that was to be hers, think of her longingly and adoringly as Lily Mars.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Presenting Lily Mars* by Booth Tarkington]