Theodora

A Fragment

By Victoria Cross

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I DID not turn out of bed till ten o'clock the next morning, and I was still in dressing-gown and slippers, sitting by the fire, looking over a map, when Digby came in upon me.

"Hullo, Ray, only just up, eh? as usual?" was his first exclamation as he entered, his ulster buttoned to his chin, and the snow thick upon his boots. "What a fellow you are! I can't understand anybody lying in bed till ten o'clock in the morning."

"And I can't understand anybody driving up at seven," I said, smiling, and stirring my coffee idly. I had laid down the map with resignation. I knew Digby had come round to jaw for the next hour at least. "Can I offer you some breakfast?"

"Breakfast!" returned Digby contemptuously. "No, thanks. I had mine hours ago. Well, what do you think of her?"

"Of whom?—this Theodora?"

"Oh, it's Theodora already, is it?" said Digby, looking at me. "Well, never mind: go on. Yes, what do you think of her?"

"She seems rather clever, I think."

"Do

"Do you?" returned Digby, with a distinct accent of regret, as if I had told him I thought she squinted. "I never noticed it. But her looks, I mean?"

"She is very peculiar," I said, merely.

"But you like everything extraordinary. I should have thought her very peculiarity was just what would have attracted you."

"So it does," I admitted; "so much so, that I am going to take the trouble of calling this afternoon expressly to see her again."

Digby stared hard at me for a minute, and then burst out laughing. "By Jove! You've made good use of your time. Did she ask you?"

"She did," I said.

"This looks as if it would be a case," remarked Digby lightly, and then added, "I'd have given anything to have had her myself. But if it's not to be for me, I'd rather you should be the lucky man than any one else."

"Don't you think all that is a little 'previous'?" I asked satirically, looking at him over the coffee, which stood on the map of Mesopotamia.

"Well, I don't know. You must marry some time, Cecil."

"Really!" I said, raising my eyebrows and regarding him with increased amusement. "I think I have heard of men remaining celibates before now, especially men with my tastes."

"Yes," said Digby, becoming suddenly as serious and thoughtful as if he were being called upon to consider some weighty problem, and of which the solution must be found in the next ten minutes. "I don't know how you would agree. She is an awfully religious girl."

"Indeed?" I said with a laugh. "How do you know?"

Digby thought hard.

"She

"She is," he said with conviction, at last. "I see her at church every Sunday."

"Oh then, of course she must be—proof conclusive," I answered.

Digby looked at me and then grumbled, "Confounded sneering fellow you are. Has she been telling you she is not?"

I remembered suddenly that I had promised Theodora not to repeat her opinions, so I only said, "I really don't know what she is; she may be most devout for all I know—or care."

"Of course you can profess to be quite indifferent," said Digby ungraciously. "But all I can say is, it doesn't look like it—your going there this afternoon; and anyway, she is not indifferent to you. She said all sorts of flattering things about you."

"Very kind, I am sure," I murmured derisively.

"And she sent round to my rooms this morning a thundering box of Havannahs in recognition of my having won the bet about your looks."

I laughed outright. "That's rather good biz for you! The least you can do is to let me help in the smoking of them, I think."

"Of course I will. But it shows what she thinks of you, doesn't it?"

"Oh, most convincingly," I said with mock earnestness. "Havannahs are expensive things."

"But you know how awfully rich she is, don't you?" asked Digby, looking at me as if he wanted to find out whether I were really ignorant or affecting to be so.

"My dear Charlie, you know I know nothing whatever about her except what you tell me—or do you suppose she showed me her banking account between the dances?"

"Don't know, I am sure," Digby grumbled back. "You sat in

in that passage long enough to be going through a banking account, and balancing it too, for that matter! However, the point is, she is rich—tons of money, over six thousand a year."

"Really?" I said, to say something.

"Yes, but she loses every penny on her marriage. Seems such a funny way to leave money to a girl, doesn't it? Some old pig of a maiden aunt tied it up in that way. Nasty thing to do, I think; don't you?"

"Very immoral of the old lady, it seems. A girl like that, if she can't marry, will probably forego nothing but the ceremony."

"She runs the risk of losing her money, though, if anything were known. She only has it *dum casta manet*, just like a separation allowance."

"Hard lines," I murmured sympathetically.

"And so of course her people are anxious she should make a good match—take some man, I mean, with an income equal to what she has now of her own, so that she would not feel any loss. Otherwise, you see, if she married a poor man, it would be rather a severe drop for her."

"Conditions calculated to prevent any fellow but a millionaire proposing to her, I should think," I said.

"Yes, except that she is a girl who does not care about money. She has been out now three seasons, and had one or two good chances and not taken them. Now myself, for instance, if she wanted money and position and so on, she could hardly do better, could she? And my family and the rest of it are all right; but she couldn't get over my red hair—I know it was that. She's mad upon looks—I know she is; she let it out to me once, and I bet you anything, she'd take you and chuck over her money and everything else, if you gave her the chance."

"I am

"I am certainly not likely to," I answered. "All this you've just told me alone would be enough to choke me off. I have always thought I could never love a decent woman unselfishly enough, even if she gave up nothing for me; and, great heavens! I should be sorry to value myself, at—what do you say she has?—six thousand a year?"

"Leave the woman who falls in love with the cut of your nose to do the valuation. You'll be surprised at the figure!" said Digby with a touch of resentful bitterness, and getting up abruptly. "I'll look round in the evening," he added, buttoning up his overcoat. "Going to be in?"

"As far as I know," I answered, and he left.

I got up and dressed leisurely, thinking over what he had said, and those words "six thousand" repeating themselves unpleasantly in my brain.

The time was in accordance with strict formality when I found myself on her steps. The room I was shown into was large, much too large to be comfortable on such a day; and I had to thread my way through a perfect maze of gilt-legged tables and statuette-bearing tripods before I reached the hearth. Here burnt a small, quiet, chaste-looking fire, a sort of Vestal flame, whose heat was lost upon the tesselated tiles, white marble, and polished brass about it. I stood looking down at it absently for a few minutes, and then Theodora came in.

She was very simply dressed in some dark stuff that fitted closely to her, and let me see the harmonious lines of her figure as she came up to me. The plain, small collar of the dress opened at the neck, and a delicious, solid, white throat rose from the dull stuff like an almond bursting from its husk. On the pale, well-cut face and small head great care had evidently been bestowed. The eyes were darkened, as last night, and the hair arranged with infinite

infinite pains on the forehead and rolled into one massive coil at the back of her neck.

She shook hands with a smile—a smile that failed to dispel the air of fatigue and fashionable dissipation that seemed to cling to her; and then wheeled a chair as near to the fender as she could get it.

As she sat down, I thought I had never seen such splendid shoulders combined with so slight a hip before.

"Now I hope no one else will come to interrupt us," she said simply. "And don't let's bother to exchange comments on the weather nor last night's dance. I have done that six times over this morning with other callers. Don't let's talk for the sake of getting through a certain number of words. Let us talk because we are interested in what we are saying."

"I should be interested in anything if you said it," I answered.

Theodora laughed. "Tell me something about the East, will you? That is a nice warm subject, and I feel so cold."

And she shot out towards the blaze two well-made feet and ankles.

"Yes, in three weeks' time I shall be in a considerably warmer climate than this," I answered, drawing my chair as close to hers as fashion permits.

Theodora looked at me with a perceptibly startled expression as I spoke.

"Are you really going out so soon?" she said.

"I am, really," I said with a smile.

"Oh, I am so sorry!"

"Why?" I asked merely.

"Because I was thinking I should have the pleasure of meeting you lots more times at different functions."

"And would that be a pleasure?"

"Yes, very great," said Theodora, with a smile lighting her eyes and parting faintly the soft scarlet lips.

She looked at me, a seducing softness melting all her face and swimming in the liquid darkness of the eyes she raised to mine. A delicious intimacy seemed established between us by that smile. We seemed nearer to each other after it than before, by many degrees. A month or two of time and ordinary intercourse may be balanced against the seconds of such a smile as this.

A faint feeling of surprise mingled with my thoughts, that she should show her own attitude of mind so clearly, but I believe she felt instinctively my attraction towards her, and also undoubtedly she belonged, and had always been accustomed, to a fast set. I was not the sort of man to find fault with her for that, and probably she had already been conscious of this, and felt all the more at ease with me. The opening-primrose type of woman, the girl who does or wishes to suggest the modest violet unfolding beneath the rural hedge, had never had a charm for me. I do not profess to admire the simple violet; I infinitely prefer a well-trained hothouse gardenia. And this girl, about whom there was nothing of the humble, crooked-neck violet—in whom there was a dash of virility, a hint at dissipation, a suggestion of a certain decorous looseness of morals and fastness of manners—could stimulate me with a keen sense of pleasure, as our eyes or hands met.

"Why would it be a pleasure to meet me?" I asked, holding her eyes with mine, and wondering whether things would so turn out that I should ever kiss those parting lips before me.

Theodora laughed gently.

"For a good many reasons that it would make you too conceited to hear," she answered. "But one is because you are more interesting

interesting to talk to than the majority of people I meet every day. The castor of your chair has come upon my dress. Will you move it back a little, please?"

I pushed my chair back immediately and apologised.

"Are you going alone?" resumed Theodora.

"Quite alone."

"Is that nice?"

"No. I should have been very glad to find some fellow to go with me, but it's rather difficult. It is not everybody that one meets whom one would care to make such an exclusive companion of, as a life like that out there necessitates. Still, there's no doubt I shall be dull unless I can find some chum there."

"Some Englishman, I suppose?"

"Possibly; but they are mostly snobs who are out there."

Theodora made a faint sign of assent, and we both sat silent, staring into the fire.

"Does the heat suit you?" Theodora asked, after a pause.

"Yes, I like it."

"So do I."

"I don't think any woman would like the climate I am going to now, or could stand it," I said.

Theodora said nothing, but I had my eyes on her face, which was turned towards the light of the fire, and I saw a tinge of mockery come over it.

We had neither said anything farther, when the sound of a knock reached us, muffled, owing to the distance the sound had to travel to reach us by the drawing-room fire at all, but distinct in the silence between us.

Theodora looked at me sharply.

"There is somebody else. Do you want to leave yet?" she asked, and then added in a persuasive tone, "Come into my own study,

study, where we shan't be disturbed, and stay and have tea with me, will you?"

She got up as she spoke.

The room had darkened considerably while we had been sitting there, and only a dull light came from the leaden, snow-laden sky beyond the panes, but the firelight fell strongly across her figure as she stood, glancing and playing up it towards the slight waist, and throwing scarlet upon the white throat and under-part of the full chin. In the strong shadow on her face I could see merely the two seducing eyes. Easily excitable where once a usually hypercritical or rather hyperfanciful eye has been attracted, I felt a keen sense of pleasure stir me as I watched her rise and stand, that sense of pleasure which is nothing more than an assurance to the roused and unquiet instincts within one, of future satisfaction or gratification, with, from, or at the expense of the object creating the sensation. Unconsciously a certainty of possession of Theodora to-day, to-morrow, or next year, filled me for the moment as completely as if I had just made her my wife. The instinct that demanded her was immediately answered by a mechanical process of the brain, not with doubt or fear, but simple confidence. "This is a pleasant and delightful object to you—as others have been. Later it will be a source of enjoyment to you—as others have been." And the lulling of this painful instinct is what we know as pleasure. And this instinct and its answer are exactly that which we should not feel within us for any beloved object. It is this that tends inevitably to degrade the loved one, and to debase our own passion. If the object is worthy and lovely in any sense, we should be ready to love it as being such, for itself, as moralists preach to us of Virtue, as theologians preach to us of the Deity. To love or at least to strive to love an object for the object's sake, and not our own sake,

sake, to love it in its relation to *its* pleasure and not in its relation to our own pleasure, is to feel the only love which is worthy of offering to a fellow human being, the one which elevates—and the only one—both giver and receiver. If we ever learn this lesson, we learn it late. I had not learnt it yet.

I murmured a prescribed "I shall be delighted," and followed Theodora behind a huge red tapestry screen that reached half-way up to the ceiling.

We were then face to face with a door which she opened, and we both passed over the threshold together.

She had called the room her own, so I glanced round it with a certain curiosity. A room is always some faint index to the character of its occupier, and as I looked a smile came to my face. This room suggested everywhere, as I should have expected, an intellectual but careless and independent spirit. There were two or three tables, in the window, heaped up with books and strewn over with papers. The centre-table had been pushed away, to leave a clearer space by the grate, and an armchair, seemingly of unfathomable depths, and a sofa, dragged forward in its place. Within the grate roared a tremendous fire, banked up half-way to the chimney, and a short poker was thrust into it between the bars. The red light leapt over the whole room and made it brilliant, and glanced over a rug, and some tumbled cushions on the floor in front of the fender, evidently where she had been lying. Now, however, she picked up the cushions, and tossed them into the corner of the couch, and sat down herself in the other corner.

"Do you prefer the floor generally?" I asked, taking the armchair as she indicated it to me.

"Yes, one feels quite free and at ease lying on the floor, whereas on a couch its limits are narrow, and one has the constraint

straint and bother of taking care one does not go to sleep and roll off."

"But suppose you did, you would then but be upon the floor."

"Quite so; but I should have the pain of falling."

Our eyes met across the red flare of the firelight.

Theodora went on jestingly: "Now, these are the ethics of the couch and the floor. I lay myself voluntarily on the floor, knowing it thoroughly as a trifle low, but undeceptive and favourable to the condition of sleep which will probably arise, and suitable to my requirements of ease and space. I avoid the restricted and uncertain couch, recognising that if I fall to sleep on that raised level, and the desire to stretch myself should come, I shall awake with pain and shock to feel the ground, and see above me the couch from which I fell—do you see?"

She spoke lightly, and with a smile, and I listened with one. But her eyes told me that these ethics of the couch and floor covered the ethics of life.

"No, you must accept the necessity of the floor, I think, unless you like to forego your sleep and have the trouble of taking care to stick upon your couch; and for me the difference of level between the two is not worth the additional bother."

She laughed, and I joined her.

"What do you think?" she asked.

I looked at her as she sat opposite me, the firelight playing all over her, from the turn of her knee just marked beneath her skirt to her splendid shoulders, and the smooth soft hand and wrist supporting the distinguished little head. I did not tell her what I was thinking; what I said was: "You are very logical. I am quite convinced there's no place like the ground for a siesta."

Theodora laughed, and laid her hand on the bell.

A second

A second or two after, a door, other than the one we had entered by, opened, and a maid appeared.

"Bring tea and pegs," said Theodora, and the door shut again.

"I ordered pegs for you because I know men hate tea," she said. "That's my own maid. I never let any of the servants answer this bell except her; she has my confidence, as far as one ever gives confidence to a servant. I think she likes me. I like making myself loved," she added impulsively.

"You've never found the least difficulty in it, I should think," I answered, perhaps a shade more warmly than I ought, for the colour came into her cheek and a slight confusion into her eyes.

The servant's re-entry saved her from replying.

"Now tell me how you like your peg made, and I'll make it," said Theodora, getting up and crossing to the table when the servant had gone.

I got up, too, and protested against this arrangement.

Theodora turned round and looked up at me, leaning one hand on the table.

"Now, how ridiculous and conventional you are!" she said. "You would think nothing of letting me make you a cup of tea, and yet I must by no means mix you a peg!"

She looked so like a young fellow of nineteen as she spoke that half the sense of informality between us was lost, and there was a keen, subtle pleasure in this superficial familiarity with her that I had never felt with far prettier women. The half of nearly every desire is curiosity, a vague, undefined curiosity, of which we are hardly conscious; and it was this that Theodora so violently stimulated, while her beauty was sufficient to nurse the other half. This feeling of curiosity arises, of course, for any woman who may be new to us, and who has the power to move us at all. But generally, if it cannot be gratified for the particular one, it is more

or

or less satisfied by the general knowledge applying to them all; but here, as Theodora differed so much from the ordinary feminine type, even this instinctive sort of consolation was denied me. I looked down at her with a smile.

"We shan't be able to reconcile Fashion and Logic, so it's no use," I said. "Make the peg, then, and I'll try and remain in the fashion by assuming it's tea."

"Great Scott! I hope you won't fancy it's tea while you are drinking it!" returned Theodora laughing.

She handed me the glass, and I declared nectar wasn't in it with that peg, and then she made her own tea and came and sat down to drink it, in not at all an indecorous, but still informal proximity.

"Did you collect anything in the East?" she asked me, after a minute or two.

"Yes; a good many idols and relics and curiosities of sorts," I answered. "Would you like to see them?"

"Very much," Theodora answered. "Where are they?"

"Well, not in my pocket," I said smiling. "At my chambers. Could you and Mrs. Long spare an afternoon and honour me with a visit there?"

"I should like it immensely. I know Helen will come if I ask her."

"When you have seen them I must pack them up, and send them to my agents. One can't travel about with those things."

A sort of tremor passed over Theodora's face as I spoke, and her glance met mine, full of demands and questionings, and a very distinct assertion of distress. It said distinctly, "I am so sorry you are going." The sorrow in her eyes touched my vanity deeply, which is the most responsive quality we have. It is difficult to reach our hearts or our sympathies, but our vanity is always

always available. I felt inclined to throw my arm round that supple-looking waist—and it was close to me—and say, "Don't be sorry; come too." I don't know whether my looks were as plain as hers, but Theodora rose carelessly, apparently to set her teacup down, and then did not resume her seat by me, but went back to the sofa on the other side of the rug. This, in the state of feeling into which I had drifted, produced an irritated sensation, and I was rather pleased than not when a gong sounded somewhere in the house and gave me a graceful opening to rise.

"May I hope to hear from you, then, which day you will like to come?" I asked, as I held out my hand.

Now this was the moment I had been expecting, practically, ever since her hand had left mine last night, the moment when it should touch it again. I do not mean consciously, but there are a million slight, vague physical experiences and sensations within us of which the mind remains unconscious. Theodora's white right hand rested on her hip, the light from above struck upon it, and I noted that all the rings had been stripped from it; her left was crowded with them, so that the hand sparkled at each movement, but not one remained on her right. I coloured violently for the minute as I recollected my last night's pressure, and the idea flashed upon me at once that she had removed them expressly to avoid the pain of having them ground into her flesh.

The next second Theodora had laid her hand confidently in mine. My mind, annoyed at the thought that had just shot through it, bade me take her hand loosely and let it go, but Theodora raised her eyes to me, full of a soft disappointment which seemed to say, "Are you not going to press it, then, after all, when I have taken off all the rings entirely that you may?" That look seemed to push away, walk over, ignore my reason, and appeal directly to the eager physical nerves and muscles. Spontaneously,

Spontaneously, whether I would or not, they responded to it, and my fingers laced themselves tightly round this morsel of velvet-covered fire.

We forgot in those few seconds to say the orthodox good-byes; she forgot to answer my question. That which we were both saying to each other, though our lips did not open, was, "So I should like to hold and embrace you;" and she, "So I should like to be held and embraced."

Then she withdrew her hand, and I went out by way of the drawing-room where we had entered.

In the hall her footman showed me out with extra obsequiousness. My three-hours' stay raised me, I suppose, to the rank of more than an ordinary caller.

It was dark now in the streets, and the temperature must have been somewhere about zero. I turned my collar up and started to walk sharply in the direction of my chambers. Walking always induces in me a tendency to reflection and retrospection, and now, removed from the excitement of Theodora's actual presence, my thoughts lapped quietly over the whole interview, going through it backwards, like the calming waves of a receding tide, leaving lingeringly the sand. There was no doubt that this girl attracted me very strongly, that the passion born yesterday was nearing adolescence; and there was no doubt, either, that I ought to strangle it now before it reached maturity. My thoughts, however, turned impatiently from this question, and kept closing and centring round the object itself, with maddening persistency. I laughed to myself as Schopenhauer's theory shot across me that all impulse to love is merely the impulse of the genius of the genus to select a fitting object which will help in producing a Third Life. Certainly the genius of the genus in me was weaker than the genius of my own individuality, in this instance, for Theodora was as unfitted, according

according to the philosopher's views, to become a co-worker with me in carrying out Nature's aim, as she was fitted to give me as an individual the strongest personal pleasure.

I remember Schopenhauer does admit that this instinct in man to choose some object which will best fulfil the duty of the race, is apt to be led astray, and it is fortunate he did not forget to make this admission, if his theory is to be generally applied, considering how very particularly often we are led astray, and that our strongest, fiercest passions and keenest pleasures are constantly not those suitable to, nor in accordance with, the ends of Nature. The sharpest, most violent stimulus, we may say, the true essence of pleasure, lies in some gratification which has no claim whatever, in any sense, to be beneficial or useful, or to have any ulterior motive, conscious or instinctive, or any lasting result, or any fulfilment of any object, but which is simple gratification and dies naturally in its own excess.

As we admit of works of pure genius that they cannot claim utility, or motive, or purpose, but simply that they exist as joy-giving and beautiful objects of delight, so must we have done with utility, motive, purpose, and the aims of Nature, before we can reach the most absolute degree of positive pleasure. To choose an admissible instance, a naturally hungry man, given a slice of bread, will he or will he not devour it with as great a pleasure as the craving drunkard feels in swallowing a draught of raw brandy?

In the first case a simple natural desire is gratified, and the aim of Nature satisfied; but the individual's longing and subsequent pleasure cannot be said to equal the furious craving of the drunkard, and his delirious sense of gratification as the brandy burns his throat.

My inclination towards Theodora could hardly be the simple, natural instinct, guided by natural selection, for then surely I should

should have been swayed towards some more womanly individual, some more vigorous and at the same time more feminine physique. In me, it was the mind that had first suggested to the senses, and the senses that had answered in a dizzy pleasure, that this passionate, sensitive frame, with its tensely-strung nerves and excitable pulses, promised the height of satisfaction to a lover. Surely to Nature it promised a poor if possible mother, and a still poorer nurse. And these desires and passions that spring from that border-land between mind and sense, and are nourished by the suggestions of the one and the stimulus of the other, have a stronger grip upon our organisation, because they offer an acuter pleasure, than those simple and purely physical ones in which Nature is striving after her own ends and using us simply as her instruments.

I thought on in a desultory sort of way, more or less about Theodora, and mostly about the state of my own feelings, until I reached my chambers. There I found Digby, and in his society, with his chaff and gabble in my ears, all reflection and philosophy fled, without leaving me any definite decision made.

The next afternoon but one found myself and Digby standing at the windows of my chambers awaiting Theodora's arrival. I had invited him to help me entertain the two women, and also to help me unearth and dust my store of idols and curiosities, and range them on the tables for inspection. There were crowds of knick-knacks picked up in the crooked streets and odd corners of Benares, presents made to me, trifles bought in the Cairo bazaars, and vases and coins discovered below the soil in the regions of the Tigris. Concerning several of the most typical objects Digby and I had had considerable difference of opinion. One highly interesting bronze model of the monkey-god at Benares he had declared I could not exhibit on account of its too pronounced realism and insufficient attention to the sartorial art. I had insisted

insisted that the god's deficiencies in this respect were not more striking than the objects in flesh-tints, hung at the Academy, that Theodora viewed every season.

"Perhaps not," he answered. "But this is *not* in pink and white, and hung on the Academy walls for the public to stare at, and therefore you can't let her see it."

This was unanswerable. I yielded, and the monkey-god was wheeled under a side-table out of view.

Every shelf and stand and table had been pressed into the service, and my rooms had the appearance of a corner in an Egyptian bazaar, now when we had finished our preparations.

"There they are," said Digby, as Mrs. Long's victoria came in sight.

Theodora was leaning back beside her sister, and it struck me then how representative she looked, as it were, of herself and her position. From where we stood we could see down into the victoria, as it drew up at our door. Her knees were crossed under the blue carriage-rug, on the edge of which rested her two small pale-gloved hands. A velvet jacket, that fitted her as its skin fits the grape, showed us her magnificent shoulders, and the long easy slope of her figure to the small waist. On her head, in the least turn of which lay the acme of distinction, amongst the black glossy masses of her hair, sat a small hat in vermilion velvet, made to resemble the Turkish fez. As the carriage stopped, she glanced up; and a brilliant smile swept over her face, as she bowed slightly to us at the window. The handsome painted eyes, the naturally scarlet lips, the pallor of the oval face, and each well-trained movement of the distinguished figure, as she rose and stepped from the carriage, were noted and watched by our four critical eyes.

"A typical product of our nineteenth-century civilisation," I said,

said, with a faint smile, as Theodora let her fur-edged skirt draw over the snowy pavement, and we heard her clear cultivated tones, with the fashionable drag in them, ordering the coachman not to let the horses get cold.

"But she's a splendid sort of creature, don't you think?" asked Digby. "Happy the man who——eh?"

I nodded. "Yes," I assented. "But how much that man should have to offer, old chap, that's the point; that six thousand of hers seems an invulnerable protection."

"I suppose so," said Digby with a nervous yawn. "And to think I have more than double that and yet—— It's a pity. Funny it will be if my looks and your poverty prevent either of us having her."

"My own case is settled," I said decisively. "My position and hers decide it for me."

"I'd change places with you this minute if I could," muttered Digby moodily, as steps came down to our door, and we went forward to meet the women as they entered.

It seemed to arrange itself naturally that Digby should be occupied in the first few seconds with Mrs. Long, and that I should be free to receive Theodora.

Of all the lesser emotions, there is hardly any one greater than that subtle sense of pleasure felt when a woman we love crosses for the first time our own threshold. We may have met her a hundred times in her house, or on public ground, but the sensation her presence then creates is altogether different from that instinctive, involuntary, momentary and delightful sense of ownership that rises when she enters any room essentially our own.

It is the very illusion of possession.

With this hatefully egoistic satisfaction infused through me, I drew

drew forward for her my own favourite chair, and Theodora sank into it, and her tiny, exquisitely-formed feet sought my fender-rail. At a murmured invitation from me, she unfastened and laid aside her jacket. Beneath, she revealed some purplish, silk-like material, that seemed shot with different colours as the firelight fell upon it. It was strained tight and smooth upon her, and the swell of a low bosom was distinctly defined below it. There was no excessive development, quite the contrary, but in the very slightness there was an indescribably sensuous curve, and a depression, rising and falling, that seemed as if it might be the very home itself of passion. It was a breast with little suggestion of the duties or powers of Nature, but with infinite seduction for a lover.

"What a marvellous collection you have here," she said throwing her glance round the room. "What made you bring home all these things?"

"The majority were gifts to me—presents made by the different natives whom I visited or came into connection with in various ways. A native is never happy, if he likes you at all, until he has made you some valuable present."

"You must be very popular with them indeed," returned Theodora, glancing from a brilliant Persian carpet, suspended on the wall, to a gold and ivory model of a temple, on the console by her side.

"Well, when one stays with a fellow as his guest, as I have done with some of these small rajahs and people, of course one tries to make oneself amiable."

"The fact is, Miss Dudley," interrupted Digby, "Ray admires these fellows, and that is why they like him. Just look at this sketch-book of his—what trouble he has taken to make portraits of them."

And

And he stretched out a limp-covered pocket-album of mine.

I reddened slightly and tried to intercept his hand.

"Nonsense, Digby. Give the book to me," I said; but Theodora had already taken it, and she looked at me as I spoke with one of those delicious looks of hers that could speak so clearly. Now it seemed to say, "If you are going to love me, you must have no secrets from me." She opened the book and I was subdued and let her. I did not much care, except that it was some time now since I had looked at it, and I did not know what she might find in it. However, Theodora was so different from girls generally, that it did not greatly matter.

"Perhaps these are portraits of your different conquests amongst the Ranees, are they?" she said. "I don't see 'my victims,' though, written across the outside as the Frenchmen write on their albums."

"No," I said, with a smile, "I think these are only portraits of men whose appearance struck me. The great difficulty is to persuade any Mohammedan to let you draw him."

The very first leaf she turned seemed to give the lie to my words. Against a background of yellow sand and blue sky, stood out a slight figure in white, bending a little backward, and holding in its hands, extended on either side, the masses of its black hair that fell through them, till they touched the sand by its feet. Theodora threw a side-glance full of derision on me, as she raised her eyes from the page.

"I swear it isn't," I said hastily, colouring, for I saw she thought it was a woman. "It's a young Sikh I bribed to let me paint him."

"Oh, a young Sikh, is it?" said Theodora, bending over the book again. "Well it's a lovely face; and what beautiful hair!"

"Yes, almost as beautiful as yours," I murmured, in safety, for the

the others were wholly occupied in testing the limits of the flexibility of the soapstone.

Not for any consideration in this world could I have restrained the irresistible desire to say the words, looking at her sitting sideways to me, noting that shining weight of hair lying on the white neck, and that curious masculine shade upon the upper lip. A faint liquid smile came to her face.

"Mine is not so long as that when you see it undone," she said, looking at me.

"How long is it?" I asked mechanically, turning over the leaves of the sketch-book, and thinking in a crazy sort of way what I would not give to see her with that hair unloosed, and have the right to lift a single strand of it.

"It would not touch the ground," she answered, "it must be about eight inches off it, I think."

"A marvellous length for a European," I answered in a conventional tone, though it was a difficulty to summon it.

Within my brain all the dizzy thoughts seemed reeling together till they left me hardly conscious of anything but an acute painful sense of her proximity.

"Find me the head of a Persian, will you?" came her voice next.

"A Persian?" I repeated mechanically.

Theodora looked at me wonderingly and I recalled myself.

"Oh, yes," I answered, "I'll find you one. Give me the book."

I took the book and turned over the leaves towards the end. As I did so, some of the intermediate pages caught her eye, and she tried to arrest the turning leaves.

"What is that? Let me see."

"It is nothing," I said, passing them over. "Allow me to find you the one you want."

Theodora did not insist, but her glance said: "I will be revenged for this resistance to my wishes!"

When I had found her the portrait, I laid the open book back upon her knees. Theodora bent over it with an unaffected exclamation of delight. "How exquisite! and how well you have done it! What a talent you must have!"

"Oh no, no talent," I said hastily. "It's easy to do a thing like that when your heart is in it."

Theodora looked up at me and said simply, "This is a woman."

And I looked back in her eyes and said as simply, "Yes, it is a woman."

Theodora was silent, gazing at the open leaf, absorbed. And half-unconsciously my eyes followed hers and rested with hers on the page.

Many months had gone by since I had opened the book; and many, many cigars, that according to Tolstoi deaden every mental feeling, and many, many pints of brandy that do the same thing, only more so, had been consumed, since I had last looked upon that face. And now I saw it over the shoulder of this woman. And the old pain revived and surged through me, but it was dull—dull as every emotion must be in the near neighbourhood of a new object of desire—every emotion except one.

"Really it is a very beautiful face, isn't it?" she said at last, with a tender and sympathetic accent, and as she raised her head our eyes met.

I looked at her and answered, "I should say yes, if we were not looking at it together, but you know beauty is entirely a question of comparison."

Her face was really not one-tenth so handsome as the mere shadowed, inanimate representation of the Persian girl, beneath our

our hands. I knew it and so did she. Theodora herself would have been the first to admit it. But nevertheless the words were ethically true. True in the sense that underlay the society compliment, for no beauty of the dead can compare with that of the living. Such are we, that as we love all objects in their relation to our own pleasure from them, so even in our admiration, the greatest beauty, when absolutely useless to us, cannot move us as a far lesser degree has power to do, from which it is possible to hope, however vaguely, for some personal gratification. And to this my words would come if translated. And I think Theodora understood the translation rather than the conventional form of them, for she did not take the trouble to deprecate the flattery.

I got up, and, to change the subject, said, "Let me wheel up that little table of idols. Some of them are rather curious."

I moved the tripod up to the arm of her chair.

Theodora closed the sketch-book and put it beside her, and looked over the miniature bronze gods with interest. Then she stretched out her arm to lift and move several of them, and her soft fingers seemed to lie caressingly—as they did on everything they touched—on the heads and shoulders of the images. I watched her, envying those senseless little blocks of brass.

"This is the Hindu equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite," I said, lifting forward a small, unutterably hideous, squat female figure, with the face of a monkey, and two closed wings of a dragon on its shoulders.

"Oh, Venus," said Theodora. "We must certainly crown her amongst them, though hardly, I think, in this particular case, for her beauty!"

And she laughingly slipped off a diamond half-hoop from her middle finger, and slipped the ring on to the model's head. It fitted exactly round the repulsive brows of the deformed and

stunted

stunted image, and the goddess stood crowned in the centre of the table, amongst the other figures, with the circlet of brilliants, flashing brightly in the firelight, on her head. As Theodora passed the ring from her own warm white finger on to the forehead of the misshapen idol, she looked at me. The look, coupled with the action, in my state, went home to those very inner cells of the brain where are the springs themselves of passion. At the same instant the laughter and irresponsible gaiety and light pleasure on the face before me, the contrast between the delicate hand and the repellent monstrosity it had crowned—the sinister, allegorical significance—struck me like a blow. An unexplained feeling of rage filled me. Was it against her, myself, her action, or my own desires? It seemed for the moment to burn against them all. On the spur of it, I dragged forward to myself another of the images from behind the Astarte, slipped off my own signet-ring, and put it on the head of the idol.

"This is the only one for me to crown," I said bitterly, with a laugh, feeling myself whiten with the stress and strain of a host of inexplicable sensations that crowded in upon me, as I met Theodora's lovely inquiring glance.

There was a shade of apprehensiveness in her voice as she said, "What is that one?"

"Shiva," I said curtly, looking her straight in the eyes. "The god of self-denial."

I saw the colour die suddenly out of her face, and I knew I had hurt her. But I could not help it. With her glance she had summoned me to approve or second her jesting act. It was a challenge I could not pass over. I must in some correspondingly joking way either accept or reject her coronation. And to reject it was all I could do, since this woman must be nothing to me. There was a second's blank pause of strained silence. But, superficially

ficially, we had not strayed off the legitimate ground of mere society nothings, whatever we might feel lay beneath them. And Theodora was trained thoroughly in the ways of fashion.

The next second she leant back in her chair, saying lightly, "A false, absurd, and unnatural god; it is the greatest error to strive after the impossible; it merely prevents you accomplishing the possible. Gods like these," and she indicated the abominable squint-eyed Venus, "are merely natural instincts personified, and one may well call them gods since they are invincible. Don't you remember the fearful punishments that the Greeks represented as overtaking mortals who dared to resist nature's laws, that they chose to individualise as their gods? You remember the fate of Hippolytus who tried to disdain Venus, of Pentheus who tried to subdue Bacchus? These two plays teach the immortal lesson that if you have the presumption to try to be greater than nature she will in the end take a terrible revenge. The most we can do is to guide her. You can never be her conqueror. Consider yourself fortunate if she allows you to be her charioteer."

It was all said very lightly and jestingly, but at the last phrase there was a flash in her eye, directed upon me—yes, me—as if she read down into my inner soul, and it sent the blood to my face.

As the last word left her lips, she stretched out her hand and deliberately took my ring from the head of Shiva, put it above her own diamonds on the other idol, and laid the god I had chosen, the god of austerity and mortification, prostrate on its face, at the feet of the leering Venus.

Then, without troubling to find a transition phrase, she got up and said, "I am going to look at that Persian carpet."

It had all taken but a few seconds; the next minute we were over by the carpet, standing in front of it and admiring its hues in the

the most orthodox terms. The images were left as she had placed them. I could do nothing less, of course, than yield to a woman and my guest. The jest had not gone towards calming my feelings, nor had those two glances of hers—the first so tender and appealing as she had crowned the Venus, the second so virile and mocking as she had discrowned the Shiva. There was a strange mingling of extremes in her. At one moment she seemed will-less, deliciously weak, a thing only made to be taken in one's arms and kissed. The next, she was full of independent uncontrollable determination and opinion. Most men would have found it hard to be indifferent to her. When beside her you must either have been attracted or repelled. For me, she was the very worst woman that could have crossed my path.

As I stood beside her now, her shoulder only a little below my own, her neck and the line of her breast just visible to the side vision of my eye, and heard her talking of the carpet, I felt there was no price I would not have paid to have stood for one half-hour in intimate confidence with her, and been able to tear the veils from this irritating character.

From the carpet we passed on to a table of Cashmere work and next to a pile of Mohammedan garments. These had been packed with my own personal luggage, and I should not have thought of bringing them forth for inspection. It was Digby who, having seen them by chance in my portmanteau, had insisted that they would add interest to the general collection of Eastern trifles. "Clothes, my dear fellow, clothes; why, they will probably please her more than anything else."

Theodora advanced to the heap of stuffs and lifted them.

"What is the history of these?" she said laughing. "These were not presents to you!"

"No," I murmured. "Bought in the native bazaars."

"Some

"Some perhaps," returned Theodora, throwing her glance over them. "But a great many are not new."

It struck me that she would not be a woman very easy to deceive. Some men value a woman in proportion to the ease with which they can impose upon her, but to me it is too much trouble to deceive at all, so that the absence of that amiable quality did not disquiet me. On the contrary, the comprehensive, cynical, and at the same time indulgent smile that came so readily to Theodora's lips charmed me more, because it was the promise of even less trouble than a real or professed obtuseness.

"No," I assented merely.

"Well, then?" asked Theodora, but without troubling to seek a reply. "How pretty they are and how curious! this one, for instance." And she took up a blue silk zouave, covered with gold embroidery, and worth perhaps about thirty pounds. "This has been a good deal worn. It is a souvenir, I suppose?"

I nodded. With any other woman I was similarly anxious to please I should have denied it, but with her I felt it did not matter.

"Too sacred perhaps, then, for me to put on?" she asked with her hand in the collar, and smiling derisively.

"Oh dear no!" I said, "not at all. Put it on by all means."

"Nothing is sacred to you, eh? I see. Hold it then."

She gave me the zouave and turned for me to put it on her. A glimpse of the back of her white neck, as she bent her head forward, a convulsion of her adorable shoulders as she drew on the jacket, and the zouave was fitted on. Two seconds perhaps, but my self-control wrapped round me had lost one of its skins.

"Now I must find a turban or fez," she said, turning over gently, but without any ceremony, the pile. "Oh, here's one!" She drew out a white fez, also embroidered in gold, and, removing

her

her hat, put it on very much to one side, amongst her black hair, with evident care lest one of those silken inflected waves should be disturbed; and then affecting an undulating gait, she walked over to the fire.

"How do you like me in Eastern dress, Helen?" she said, addressing her sister, for whom Digby was deciphering some old coins. Digby and I confessed afterwards to each other the impulse that moved us both to suggest it was not at all complete without the trousers. I did offer her a cigarette, to enhance the effect.

"Quite passable, really," said Mrs. Long, leaning back and surveying her languidly.

Theodora took the cigarette with a laugh, lighted and smoked it, and it was then, as she leant against the mantel-piece with her eyes full of laughter, a glow on her pale skin, and an indolent relaxation in the long, supple figure, that I first said, or rather an involuntary, unrecognised voice within me said, "It is no good; whatever happens I must have you."

"Do you know that it is past six, Theo?" said Mrs. Long.

"You will let me give you a cup of tea before you go?" I said.

"Tea!" repeated Theodora, "I thought you were going to say haschisch or opium, at the least, after such an Indian afternoon."

"I have both," I answered, "would you like some?" thinking, "By Jove, I should like to see you after the haschisch."

"No," replied Theodora, "I make it a rule not to get intoxicated in public."

When the women rose to go, Theodora, to my regret, divested herself of the zouave without my aid, and declined it also for putting on her own cloak. As they stood drawing on their gloves I asked if they thought there was anything worthy of their acceptance

acceptance amongst these curiosities. Mrs. Long chose from the table near her an ivory model of the Taj, and Digby took it up to carry for her to the door. As he did so his eye caught the table of images.

"This is your ring, Miss Dudley, I believe," he said.

I saw him grin horridly as he noted the arrangement of the figures. Doubtless he thought it was mine.

I took up my signet-ring again, and Theodora said carelessly, without the faintest tinge of colour rising in her cheek, "Oh, yes, I had forgotten it. Thanks."

She took it from him and replaced it.

I asked her if she would honour me as her sister had done.

"There is one thing in this room that I covet immensely," she said, meeting my gaze.

"It is yours, of course, then," I answered. "What is it?"

Theodora stretched out her open hand. "Your sketch-book."

For a second I felt the blood dye suddenly all my face. The request took me by surprise, for one thing; and immediately after the surprise followed the vexatious and embarrassing thought that she had asked for the one thing in the room that I certainly did not wish her to have. The book contained a hundred thousand memories, embodied in writing, sketching, and painting, of those years in the East. There was not a page in it that did not reflect the emotions of the time when it had been filled in, and give a chronicle of the life lived at the date inscribed on it. It was a sort of diary in cipher, and to turn over its leaves was to re-live the hours they represented. For my own personal pleasure I liked the book and wanted to keep it, but there were other reasons too why I disliked the idea of surrendering it. It flashed through me, the question as to what her object was in possessing herself of it. Was it jealousy of the faces or any face within it that prompted her, and

and would she amuse herself, when she had it, by tearing out the leaves or burning it? To give over these portraits merely to be sacrificed to a petty feminine spite and malice, jarred upon me. Involuntarily I looked hard into her eyes to try and read her intentions, and I felt I had wronged her. The eyes were full of the softest, tenderest light. It was impossible to imagine them vindictive. She had seen my hesitation and she smiled faintly.

"Poor Herod with your daughter of Herodias," she said, softly. "Never mind, I will not take it."

The others who had been standing with her saw there was some embarrassment that they did not understand, and Mrs. Long turned to go slowly down the corridor. Digby had to follow. Theodora was left standing alone before me, her seductive figure framed in the open doorway. Of course she was irresistible. Was she not the new object of my desires?

I seized the sketch-book from the chair. What did anything matter?

"Yes," I said hastily, putting it into that soft, small hand before it could draw back. "Forgive me the hesitation. You know I would give you anything."

If she answered or thanked me, I forget it. I was sensible of nothing at the moment but that the blood seemed flowing to my brain, and thundering through it, in ponderous waves. Then I knew we were walking down the passage, and in a few minutes more we should have said good-bye, and she would be gone.

An acute and yet vague realisation came upon me that the corridor was dark, and that the others had gone on in front, a confused recollection of the way she had lauded Nature and its domination a short time back, and then all these were lost again in the eddying torrent of an overwhelming desire to take her in my arms and hold her, control her, assert my will over hers, this exasperating

exasperating object who had been pleasing and seducing every sense for the last three hours, and now was leaving them all unsatisfied. That impulse towards some physical demonstration, that craving for physical contact, which attacks us suddenly with its terrific impetus, and chokes and stifles us, ourselves, beneath it, blinding us to all except itself, rushed upon me then, walking beside her in the dark passage; and at that instant Theodora sighed.

"I am tired," she said languidly. "May I take your arm?" and her hand touched me.

I did not offer her my arm, I flung it round her neck, bending back her head upon it, so that her lips were just beneath my own as I leant over her, and I pressed mine on them in a delirium of passion.

Everything that should have been remembered I forgot.

Knowledge was lost of all, except those passive, burning lips under my own. As I touched them, a current of madness seemed to mingle with my blood, and pass flaming through all my veins.

I heard her moan, but for that instant I was beyond the reach of pity or reason, I only leant harder on her lips in a wild, unheeding, unsparing frenzy. It was a moment of ecstasy that I would have bought with years of my life. One moment, the next I released her, and so suddenly, that she reeled against the wall of the passage. I caught her wrist to steady her. We dared neither of us speak, for the others were but little ahead of us; but I sought her eyes in the dusk.

They met mine, and rested on them, gleaming through the darkness. There was no confusion nor embarrassment in them, they were full of the hot, clear, blinding light of passion; and I knew there would be no need to crave forgiveness.

The

The next moment had brought us up to the others, and to the end of the passage.

Mrs. Long turned round, and held out her hand to me.

"Good-bye," she said. "We have had a most interesting afternoon."

It was with an effort that I made some conventional remark.

Theodora, with perfect outward calm, shook hands with myself and Digby, with her sweetest smile, and passed out.

I lingered some few minutes with Digby, talking; and then he went off to his own diggings, and I returned slowly down the passage to my rooms.

My blood and pulses seemed beating as they do in fever, my ears seemed full of sounds, and that kiss burnt like the brand of hot iron on my lips. When I reached my rooms, I locked the door and flung both the windows open to the snowy night. The white powder on the ledge crumbled and drifted in.

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