

THE HILLMAN

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

AN UNUSUAL LOVE STORY

THE PRINCE OF SEYRE PLOTS JOHN'S DOWNFALL THROUGH FASCINATING WOMEN, AND INTRODUCES HIM TO MADAME CALAVERA, FAMOUS RUSSIAN DANCER

Synopsis.—Louise Maurel, famous actress, was making a motor tour of the English Cumberland district, when her car broke down late one evening and she was forced to accept the overnight hospitality of Stephen and John Strangewey, reclusive woman haters living in a splendid old mansion on a great farm. Before she left next day she had captivated John and he had fascinated her. Three months later John, on a sudden impulse, went to London and looked up Louise. She was delighted to see him and introduced him to her friends of the artistic and dramatic world, among them Sophie, a light-hearted little actress, and Grailot, a playwright of remarkable mental gifts. The prince of Seyre, a wealthy French noble, whom he already knew, became his guide, and he entered the gay bohemian life of the city. Grailot warned Louise not to toy with her two ardent lovers, John and the prince, and told her the prince was dangerous for John.

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

"Ah, no, dear lady," he insisted. "I am not talking wildly. I am Grailot, who for thirty years have written dramas on one subject and one subject only—men and women. It has been given to me to study many varying types of the human race, to watch the outcome of many strange situations. I have watched the prince draw you nearer and nearer to him. What there is or may be between you I do not know. It is not for me to know. But if not now, some day Eugene of Seyre means you to be his, and he is not a person to be lightly resisted. Now from the skies there looms up this sudden obstacle."

"You do not realize," Louise protested, almost eagerly, "how slight is my acquaintance with Mr. Strangewey. I once spent the night and a few hours of the next morning at his house in Cumberland, and that is all I have ever seen of him. How can his presence here be of any serious import to Eugene?"

"As to that," Grailot replied, "I say nothing. If what I have suggested does not exist, then for the first time in my life I have made a mistake; but I do not think I have. You may not realize it, but there is before you one of those struggles that make or mar the life of women of every age. As for the men, I will only say this, and it is because of it that I have spoken at all—I am a lover of fair play, and the struggle is not even. The younger man may hold every card in the pack, but Eugene of Seyre has learned how to win tricks without aces. I stayed behind to say this to you, Louise. You know the young man, and I do not. It is you who must warn him."

"Warn him?" Louise repeated, with upraised eyebrows. "Dear master, aren't we just a little—do you mind if I use that word so hateful to you—melodramatic? The age of duels is past, also the age of hired bravos and assassins."

"Agreed," Grailot interrupted, "but the weapons of today are more dangerous. It is the souls of their enemies that men attack. If I were a friend of that young man's, I would say to him: 'Beware, not of the enmity of Eugene of Seyre, but of his friendship!' And now, dear lady, I have finished. I lingered behind because the world holds no more sincere admirer of yourself and your genius than I. Don't ring. May I not let myself out?"

He looked steadfastly into her eyes. His plain, bearded face was heavy-browed, lined, tired a little with the coming of age.

"You are not going?" she asked him. "Dear Louise," he said, "I am going, because the time when I can help is not yet. Listen! More harm has been done in this world by advice than in any other way. I have no advice to give you. You have one sure and certain guide, and that is your own heart, your own instincts, your own sweet consciousness of what is best. I leave you to that. If trouble comes, I am always ready!"

CHAPTER X.

During the remainder of that afternoon and evening John was oppressed by a vague sense of the splendor of his surroundings and his companion's mysterious capacity for achieving impossibilities. Their visits to the tailors, the shirtmakers, the hosiers and the bootmakers almost resembled a royal progress. All difficulties were waved aside. That night he dined, clothed like other men from head to foot, in the lofty dining room of one of the most exclusive clubs in London. The prince proved an agreeable if somewhat reticent companion. He introduced John to many well-known people, always with that little note of personal interest in his few words of presentation which gave a certain significance to the ceremony.

From the club, where the question of John's proposed membership, the prince acting as his sponsor, was favorably discussed with several members of the committee, they drove to Covent Garden, and for the first time

in his life John entered the famous opera house. The prince, preceded by an attendant, led the way to a box upon the second tier. A woman turned her head as they entered and stretched out her hand, which the prince raised to his lips.

"You see, I have taken you at your word, Eugene," she remarked. "You give me double pleasure, dear lady," the prince declared. "Not only is it a joy to be your host, but you give me also the opportunity of presenting to you my friend, John Strangewey. Strangewey, this is my very distant relative and very dear friend, Lady Hilda Mulloch."

Lady Hilda smiled graciously at John. She was apparently of a little less than middle age, with dark bands of chestnut hair surmounted by a tiara. Her face was the face of a clever and still beautiful woman; her figure slender and dignified; her voice low and delightful.

"Are you paying your nightly homage to Calavera, Mr. Strangewey, or are you only an occasional visitor?" she asked.

"This is my first visit of any sort to Covent Garden," John told her. She looked at him with as much surprise as good breeding permitted. John, who had not as yet sat down, seemed almost preternaturally tall in that small box, with its low ceiling. He was looking around the house with the enthusiasm of a boy. Lady Hilda glanced away from him toward the prince, and smiled; then she looked back at John. There was something like admiration in her face.

"Do you live abroad?" she asked.

John shook his head. "I live in Cumberland," he said. "Many people here seem to think that that is the same thing. My brother and I have a farm there."

"But you visit London occasionally, surely?"

"I have not been in London," John told her, "since I passed through it on my way home from Oxford, eight years ago."

"I have never heard anything so extraordinary in my life!" the woman declared frankly. "Is it the prince who has induced you to break out of your seclusion?"

"Our young friend," the prince explained, "finds himself suddenly in altered circumstances. He has been left a large fortune, and has come to spend it. Incidentally, I hope, he has come to see something more of your sex than is possible among his mountain wilds. He has come, in short, to look a little way into life."

Lady Hilda leaned back in her chair. "How romantic!"

"The prince amuses himself," John assured her. "I don't suppose I shall stay very long in London. I want just to try it for a time."

She looked at him almost wistfully. She was a woman with brains; a woman notorious for the freedom of her life, for her intellectual gifts, for her

almost brutal disregard of the conventions of her class. The psychological interest of John Strangewey's situation appealed to her powerfully. Besides, she had a weakness for handsome men.

"At any rate," said Lady Hilda, "I am glad to think that I shall be able to watch you when you see Calavera in her dances for your first time."

The curtain rang up upon one of the most gorgeous and sensuous of the Russian ballets. John, who by their joint insistence was occupying the front chair in the box, leaned forward in his place, his eyes steadfastly fixed upon the stage. Both the prince and Lady Hilda, in the background, although they occasionally glanced at the performance, devoted most of their attention to watching him.

As the story progressed and the music grew in passion and voluptuousness, they distinctly saw his almost militant protest. They saw the knitting of his firm mouth and the slight contraction of his eyebrows. The prince and his friend exchanged glances. She drew her chair a little farther back, and he followed her example.

"Where did you find anything so wonderful as this?" she murmured. "Lost among the hills of Cumberland," the prince replied. "I have an estate up there—in fact, he and I are joint lords of the manor of the village in which he has lived."

"And you?" she whispered, glancing at John to be sure that she was not overheard. "Where do you come in? As educator of the young? I don't seem to see you in that role!"

A very rare and by no means pleasant smile twisted the corners of his lips for a moment.

"It is a long story."

"Can I be brought in?" she asked.

He nodded.

"It rests with you. It would suit my plans."

She toyed with her fan for a moment, looked restlessly at the stage and back again at John. Then she rose from her place and stood before the lookingglass. From the greater obscurity of the box she motioned to the prince.

John remained entirely heedless of their movements. His eyes were still riveted upon the stage, fascinated with the wonderful coloring, the realization of a new art.

"You and I," Lady Hilda whispered, "do not need to play about with the truth, Eugene. What are you doing this for?"

"The idliest whim," the prince assured her quietly. "Look at him. Think for a moment of his position—absolutely without experience, entirely ignorant about women, with a fortune only dreams of, and probably the handsomest animal in London. What is going to become of him?"

"I think I understand a little," she confessed.

"I think you do," the prince assented. "He has views, this young man. It is my humor to see them dissipated. The modern Sir Galahad always irritated me a little."

She shrugged her shoulders. "They'll never give him a chance, these women," she said. "Much better hand him over to me."

The prince smiled enigmatically, and Lady Hilda returned to her seat. John was still leaning forward with his eyes fixed upon Calavera, who was dancing alone now. The ballet was drawing toward the end. The music had reached its climax of wild and passionate sensuousness, dominated and inspired by the woman whose every movement and every glance seemed part of some occult, dimly understood language.

When the curtain rang down, John, like many others, was confused. Nevertheless, after that first breathless pause, he stood up and joined in the tumultuous applause.

"Well?" the prince asked.

John shook his head.

"I don't know," he answered.

"Neither does anyone else," Lady Hilda said. "Don't try to analyze your impressions for our benefit, Mr. Strangewey. I am exactly in your position, and I have been here a dozen times. Even to us hardened men and women of the world, this Russian music came as a surprise. There were parts of it you did not like, though, weren't there?"

"There were parts of it I hated," John agreed. "There were passages that seemed to aim at discord in every sense of the word."

She nodded sympathetically. They were on their way down the broad staircase.

"I wonder," she murmured, "whether I am going to be asked out to supper?"

"Alas, not tonight, dear lady," the prince regretted. "I am having a few friends at Seyre House."

She shot a glance at him and shrugged her shoulders. She was evidently displeased.

"How much too bad!" she exclaimed. "I am not at all sure that it is right of you to invite Mr. Strangewey to one of your orgies. A respectable little

supper at the Carlton, and a cigarette in my library afterward, would have been a great deal better for both of you—certainly for Mr. Strangewey. I think I shall run away with him, as it is!"

The prince shrugged his shoulders. "It is unfortunate," he sighed, "but we are both engaged. If you will give us the opportunity some other evening—"

"I am not at all sure that I shall have anything more to do with you, Eugene," she declared. "You are not being nicely. Will you come and see me while you are in town. Mr. Strangewey?" she added, turning to John.

"I should like to very much," he replied. "I think," he added, a little hesitatingly, "that I have read one of your books of travel. It is very interesting to meet you."

"So my fame has really reached Cumberland!" she laughed. "You must

come and talk to me one afternoon quite soon. Will you?"

"I will come with pleasure," John promised.

They stood for a few moments in the crowded vestibule until Lady Hilda Mulloch's car was called. The prince stood back, allowing John to escort her to the door. She detained him for a moment after she had taken her seat, and leaned out of the window, her fingers still in his hand.

"Be careful!" she whispered. "The prince's supper parties are just a little—shall I say banal? There are better things if one waits!"

CHAPTER XI.

The reception rooms of Seyre House, by some people considered the finest in London, were crowded that night by a brilliant and cosmopolitan assembly.

For some time John stood by the prince's side and was introduced to more people than he had ever met before in his life. Presently, however, he was discovered by his friend Amer-ton.

"Queer thing your being here, a friend of the prince and all that!" the young man remarked. "Where's Miss Sophie this evening?"

"I haven't seen her," John replied. "I don't believe she is invited."

"Like to be introduced to some of the girls, or shall we go and have a drink?"

John was hesitating when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. The prince's voice sounded in his ear.

"Strangewey," he said, "I am privileged to present you to Mme. Aida Calavera. Madame, this is my friend of whom I spoke to you."

John turned away from the little group of girls and young men toward whom Amer-ton had been leading him. The woman was different from anything he had imagined, from anything he had ever seen. In the ballet a writhing, sensuous figure with every gesture a note in the octave of passion, here she seemed the very personification of a negative and striking immobility. She was slender, not so tall as she had seemed upon the stage, dressed in white from head to foot. Her face was almost marblelike in its pallor, her smooth, black hair was drawn tightly over her ears, and her eyes were of the deepest shade of blue. She raised her hand, as he bowed, with a gesture almost royal in its condescension. The prince, with quiet tact, bridged over the moment during which John struggled in vain for something to say.

"Mr. Strangewey," he remarked, "paid his first visit to Covent Garden tonight. He has seen his first ballet, as we moderns understand the term. I cannot help envying him that delight. He naturally finds it difficult to realize this additional good fortune. Will you excuse me for one moment?"

The prince departed to welcome some later arrivals. The noisy little group standing close at hand, from which John had been diverted, passed on into the refreshment room, and the two were, for a few moments, almost isolated.

"You were pleased with the performance, I hope?"

Her voice was in character with her personality. It was extremely low, scarcely louder than a whisper. To his surprise, it was almost wholly free from any foreign accent.

"It was very wonderful," John answered.

"The prince tells me," she continued, "that you are a stranger in London. Give me your arm. We will walk to a quieter place. In a few moments we are to be disturbed for supper. One eats so often and so much in this country. Why do I say that, though? It is not so bad as in Russia."

They passed across the polished wood floor into a little room with oriental fittings, where a lamp was swinging from the ceiling, giving out a dim but pleasant light. The place was empty, and the sound of the music and voices seemed to come from a distance. She sank down upon a divan back among the shadows, and motioned John to sit by her side.

"You have come to find out, to understand—is that not so?" she inquired. "What you know of life, the prince tells me, you have learned from books. Now you have come to discover what more there is to be learned in the world of men and women."

"The prince has been very kind," John said.

She turned her head slowly and looked at him.

"A young man to whom the prince chooses to be kind is, in a way, fortunate," she said. "There is very little in life, in men or in women, which he does not understand. Let us return to what we were speaking about. I find it very interesting."

"You are very kind," John declared. "What you will learn here," she went on, "depends very much upon yourself. Are you intelligent? Perhaps not very," she added, looking at him critically. "You have brains, however, without a doubt. You have also what places you at once en rapport with the cult of the moment—you are wonderfully good-looking."

John moved a little uneasily in his place. He felt that the dancer's eyes were fixed upon him, and he was feverishly anxious not to respond to the invitation of their gaze. He was conscious, too, of the queer, indefinable fascination of her near presence in the dimly-lighted room.

"What you will learn," she proceeded, "depends very much upon your desires. If you seek for the best, and are content with nothing else, you will find it. But so few men are content to wait!"

"I intend to," John said simply. "Look at me, please," she ordered. Once more he was compelled to look into her deep-blue eyes. The incomprehensible smile was still upon her lips.

"You have loved?"

"No," he answered, taken a little aback by the abruptness of the question.

"You grow more wonderful! You are free from any distracting thoughts about women? You have no entanglements?"

"I have nothing of the sort," John declared, almost irritably. "There is one person who has made a wonderful change in my life. I believe I could say that I am absolutely certain of my feelings for her, but so far she has not given me much encouragement. Tell me, madame, why do you ask me these questions?"

"Because it interests me," she replied. "Why do you not insist that this lady should tell you the truth?"

"I have come to London to insist," he told her, "but I have been here only forty-eight hours. I am waiting."

"So many people spend their lives doing that," she went on presently. "It does not appeal to me. The moment I make up my mind that I want a thing, I take it. The moment I make up my mind to give, I give."

John was suddenly conscious of the closeness of the atmosphere. The fingers of his hands were clenched tightly together. He swore to himself that he would not look into this woman's face. He listened to the band which was playing in the balcony of the great hall, to the murmur of the voices, the shouts of laughter. He told himself that Mme. Calavera was amusing herself with him.

"The prince's party," she continued, after a long pause, "seems to be a great success, to judge by the noise they are making. So many people shout and laugh when they are happy. I myself find a more perfect expression of happiness in silence."

She was leaning a little back in her place. One arm was resting upon a pile of cushions, the other hung loosely over the side of the divan. John felt a sudden desire to rise to his feet, and a simultaneous consciousness that his feet seemed to be made of lead.

"You may hold my fingers," she said;

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"You may hold my fingers," she said;

"and please keep your face turned toward me. Why are you nervous? I am not very formidable."

He took her fingers, very much as the prince had done upon her arrival, and pressed them formally to his lips. Then he released them and rose.

"You know," he confessed, "I am very stupid at this sort of thing. Shall we go back to the reception rooms? I shall be the most unpopular man here if I keep you any longer."

The smile deepened slightly. Little lines appeared at the sides of her eyes. So far from being annoyed, he could see that she was laughing.

"Joseph," she mocked, "I am not tempting you, really! Do sit down. I have met men in many countries, but none like you. Don't you realize that your love for one woman should make you kind to all?"

"No, I don't," he answered bluntly. She patted his hand gently.

"Come," she said, "do not be afraid of me. I will not make love to you—seriously. You must be kind to me because everybody spoils me. After supper there are one or two more questions I must ask you. Do you know that I am going to dance here? Never before have I danced in a private house in England. Except upon the stage, I like to dance only to those whom I love."

The little space between the curtains was suddenly darkened. John turned eagerly around, and to his immense relief, recognized the prince. Their host came forward to where they were sitting, and held out his arm to Calavera.

"Dear lady," he announced, "supper is served. Will you do me this great honor?"

She rose to her feet. The prince turned to John.

"This is my privilege as host," he explained; "but if you will follow us, you will find some consolation in store for you."

"Well?" the prince asked, as he handed Aida Calavera to her place at his right hand.

"I think not," she replied.

He raised his eyebrows slightly. For a moment he glanced down the supper table with the care of a punctilious host, to see that his guests were properly seated. He addressed a few trivialities to the musical-comedy star who was sitting on his left. Then he leaned once more toward the great dancer.

"You surprise me," he said. "I should have thought that the enterprise would have commended itself to you. You do not doubt the facts?"

"They are obvious enough," she replied. "The young man tried to tell me that he was in love with another woman, and I felt suddenly powerless. I think I must be getting to that age when one prefers to achieve one's conquests with the lifting of a finger."

The prince sighed.

"I shall never understand your sex!" he declared. "I should have supposed that the slight effort of resistance would have provided just the necessary stimulus."

She turned her beautiful head and looked at the prince through narrowed eyes.

"After all," she asked, "what should I gain? The young man is, in his way, a splendid work of art. Why should I be vandal enough to destroy it? I shall ask you another question."

The prince slowly sipped the wine from the glass that he was holding to his lips. Then he set it down deliberately.

"Why not?"

"What is your interest? Is it a bet, a whim, or—enmity?"

"You may count on the latter," the prince replied deliberately.

Calavera laughed softly to herself.

"Now, for the first time," she confessed, "I feel interest. This is where one realizes that we live in the most impossible age of all history. The great noble who seeks to destroy the poor young man from the country is powerless to wreak harm upon him. You can neither make him a pauper nor have him beaten to death. Why are there princes any longer, I wonder? You are only as other men."

"It is an unhappy reflection, but it is the truth," the prince admitted. "My ancestors would have disposed of this young man as I should a troublesome fly, and it would have cost them no more than a few silver pieces and a sack of wine. Today, alas, conditions are different. It will cost me more."

She trifled for a moment with the salad upon her plate, which as yet she had scarcely tasted.

"I am feeling," she remarked, "magically oriental—like Cleopatra. The sensation pleases me. We are bargaining, are we not?"

"We shall not bargain," the prince interrupted softly. "It is you who shall name your price."

She raised her eyes and dropped them again.

"The prince has spoken," she murmured.

He