

The HILLMAN

A Story About an Experiment With Life

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

THE PRINCE OF SEYRE AND CALAVERA, THE DANCER, CONSPIRE TO ENTICE JOHN STRANGEWEY FROM HIS HONORABLE LOVE OF DAINTY LOUISE MAUREL

Synopsis.—Louise Maurel, famous actress, making a motor tour of rural England, was obliged, when her car broke down, to spend the night at the ancestral home of Stephen and John Strangewey, bachelor woman-haters, in the Cumberland district. Before she left the next day she had captivated John. Three months later he went to London and looked her up. She introduced him to her friends, among them Grailiot, a playwright, and Sophy Gerard, a flight-hearted little actress. John, puritanical in his views, entered the gay bohemian life of the city with enthusiasm. It was soon seen that John and the prince of Seyre were rivals for the heart and hand of Louise. Sophy also loved John secretly.

CHAPTER XII.

Seyre House was one of the few mansions in London which boasted a banquet hall as well as a picture gallery. Although the long table was laid for forty guests, it still seemed, with its shaded lights and its profusion of flowers, like an oasis of color in the middle of the huge, somberly lighted apartment. Some of the faces of the guests were well-known to John through their published photographs; to others he had been presented by the prince upon their arrival. He was seated between a young American star of musical comedy and a lady who had only recently dropped from the social firmament through the medium of the divorce court, to return to the theater of her earlier fame. Both showed every desire to converse with him between the intervals of eating and drinking, but were constantly brought to a pause by John's lack of knowledge of current topics. After her third glass of champagne, the lady who had recently been a countess announced her intention of taking him under her wing.

"Someone must tell you all about things," she insisted. "What you need is a guide and a chaperon. Won't I do?"

"Fairly," he agreed. "But play!" protested the young lady on his left, whose name was Rosie Sharon. "I spoke to him first!"

"Jolly had luck!" Lord Amerton drawled from the other side of the table. "Neither of you have an earthly. He's booked. Saw him out with her the other evening."

"I shan't eat any more supper," Rosie Sharon pouted, pushing away her plate.

"You ought to have told us about her at once," the lady who had been a countess declared severely.

John preserved his equanimity. "It is to be presumed," he murmured, "that you ladies are both free from any present attachment?"

"Got you there?" Amerton chuckled. "What about Billy?"

Rosie Sharon sighed. "We don't come to the prince's supper parties to remember our ties," she declared. "Let's all go on talking nonsense, please. Even if my heart is broken, I could never resist the prince's pate!"

Apparently everyone was of the same mind. The hum of laughter steadily grew. Under shelter of the fire of conversation, the prince leaned toward his companion and reopened their previous discussion.

"Do you know," he began, "I am inclined to be somewhat disappointed by your lack of enthusiasm in a certain direction!"

"I have disappointed many men in my time," she replied. "Do you doubt my power, now that I have promised to exercise it?"

"Who could?" he replied courteously. "Yet this young man poses, I believe, as something of a St. Anthony. He may give you trouble."

"He is then, what you call a prig?" "A most complete and perfect specimen, even in this nation of pigs!"

"All that you tell me," she sighed, "makes the enterprise seem easier. It is, after all, rather like the hussar and the mouse, isn't it?"

The prince made no reply, but upon his lips there lingered a faintly incredulous smile. The woman by his side leaned back in her place. She had the air of accepting the challenge.

"After supper," she said, "we will see!"

A single chord of music in a minor key floated across the room, soft at first, swelling later into a volume of sound, then dying away and ceasing altogether. Every light in the place was suddenly extinguished. There remained only the shaded lamps overhanging the pictures.

Not a whisper was heard in the room. John, looking around him in astonishment, was conscious only of the half-suppressed breathing of the men and women who lined the walls, or were still standing in little groups at the end of the long hall. Again there came the music, this time merged in a low but insistent clamor of other instruments. Then, suddenly, through

the door at the farther end of the room came a dimly seen figure in white. The place seemed wrapp'd in a mystical twilight, with long black rays of deeper shadow lying across the floor. There was a little murmur of tense voices, and then again silence.

For a few moments the figure in white was motionless. Then, without any visible commencement, she seemed suddenly to blend into the waves of low, passionate music. The dance itself was without form or definite movement. She seemed at first like some white, limber spirit, floating here and there across the dark bars of shadow at the calling of the melody. There was no apparent effort of the body. She was merely a beautiful, unearthly shape. It was like the flitting of a white moth through the blackness of a moonless summer night.

But her motions grew more animated, more human. With feet which seemed never to meet the earth, she glided toward the corner where John was standing. He caught the smoldering fire in her eyes as she danced within a few feet of him. He felt a catch in his breath. Some subtle and only half-expressed emotion shook his whole being, seemed to tear at the locked chamber of his soul.

She had flung her arms forward, so near that they almost touched him. He could have sworn that her lips had called his name. He felt himself bewitched, filled with an insane longing to throw out his arms in response to her passionate, unspoken invitation, in obedience to the clamoring of his seething senses. He had forgotten, even, that anyone else was in the room.

Then, suddenly, the music stopped. The lights flared out from the ceiling and from every corner of the apartment. Slender and erect, her arms hanging limply at her sides, without a sign of heat or disturbance or passion in her face, John found Aida Calavera standing within a few feet of him, her eyes seeking for his. She laid her fingers upon his arm. The room was ringing with shouts of applause, in which John unconsciously joined. Everyone was trying to press forward toward her. With her left hand she waved them back.

"If I have pleased you," she said, "I am so glad! I go now to rest for a little time."

She tightened her clasp upon her companion's arm, and they passed out of the picture gallery and down a long

corridor. John felt as if he were walking in a dream. Volition seemed to have left him. He only knew that the still, white hand upon his arm seemed like a vise burning into his flesh.

She led him to the end of the corridor, through another door, into a small room furnished in plain but comfortable fashion.

"We will invade the prince's own sanctum," she murmured. "Before I dance, I drink nothing but water. Now I want some champagne. Will you

fetch me some, and bring it to me yourself?"

She sank back upon a divan as she spoke. John turned to leave the room, but she called him back.

"Come here," she invited, "close to my side! I can wait for the champagne. Tell me, why you are so silent? And my dancing—that pleased you?"

He felt the words stick in his throat. "Your dancing was indeed wonderful," he stammered.

"It was for you!" she whispered, her voice growing softer and lower. "It was for you I danced. Did you not feel it?"

Her arms stole toward him. The unnatural calm with which she had finished her dance seemed suddenly to pass. Her bosom was rising and falling more quickly. There was a faint spot of color in her cheek.

"It was wonderful," he told her. "I will get you the champagne."

Her lips were parted. She smiled up at him.

"Go quickly, and come back quickly. I wait for you."

John looked at the clock. There was an hour to wait. He wandered about the station, gloomy, child, deserted. The place sickened him, and he strolled out into the streets again. By chance he left the station by the same exit as on the day of his arrival in London. He stopped short.

How could he have forgotten, even for a moment? This was not the world which he had come to discover. This was just some plague-spot upon which he had stumbled. Through the murky dawn and across the ugly streets he looked into Louise's drawing-room. She would be there waiting for him on the morrow!

Louise! The thought of her was like a sweet, purifying stimulant. He felt the throbbing of his nerves soothed. He felt himself growing calm. The terror of the last few hours was like a nightmare which had passed. He summoned a taxicab and was driven to the Milan. His wanderings for the night were over.

CHAPTER XIII.

Sophy Gerard sat in the little back room of Louise's house, which the latter called her den, but which she seldom entered. The little actress was looking very trim and neat in a simple blue serge costume which fitted her to perfection, her hair very prettily arranged and tied up with a bow. She had a pen in her mouth, there was a sheet of bills before her, and an open housekeeping book lay on her knee. She had been busy for the last half hour making calculations, the result

of which had brought a frown to her face.

"There is no doubt about it," she decided. "Louise is extravagant!"

The door opened, and Louise herself, in a gray morning gown of some soft material, with a bunch of deep-red roses at her waist, looked into the room.

"Why, little girl," she exclaimed, "how long have you been here?"

"All the morning," Sophy replied. "I took the dogs out, and then I started on your housekeeping book and the bills. Your checks will have to be larger than ever this month, Louise, and I don't see how you can possibly draw them unless you go and see your bankers first."

Louise threw herself into an easy chair.

"Dear me!" she sighed. "I thought I had been so careful!"

"How can you talk about being careful?" Sophy protested, tapping the pile of bills with her forefinger. "You seem to be overdrawn already."

"I will see to that," Louise promised. "The bank manager is such a charming person. Besides, what are banks for but to oblige their clients? How pale you look, little girl! Were you out late last night?"

Sophy swung around in her place. "I am all right. I spent the evening in my rooms and went to bed at eleven o'clock. Who's lunching with you? I see the table is laid for two."

Louise glanced at the clock upon the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Strangewey," she replied. "I suppose he will be here in a minute or two."

Sophy dropped the housekeeping book and jumped up.

"I'd better go, then."

"Of course not," Louise answered. "You must stay to lunch. Ring the bell and tell them to lay a place for you. Afterward, if you like, you may come in here and finish brooding over these wretched bills while Mr. Strangewey talks to me."

Sophy came suddenly across the room and sank on the floor at Louise's feet.

"What are you going to do about Mr. Strangewey, Louise?" she asked wistfully.

"He is in love with you," Sophy continued. "I am sure—I am almost sure of it."

Louise's laugh was unconvincing.

"You foolish child!" she exclaimed. "I believe that you have been worrying. Why do you think so much about other people?"

"Please tell me," Sophy begged. "I want to understand how things really are between you and John Strangewey. Are you in love with him?"

Louise's eyes were soft and dreamy. "I wish I knew," she answered. "If I am, then there are things in life more wonderful than I have ever dreamed of. He doesn't live in his world—and our world, as you know, has its grip. He knows nothing about my art, and you can guess what life would be to me without that. What future could there be for him and for me together? I cannot remake myself."

There was something in Sophy's face that was almost like wonder.

"So this is the meaning of the change in you, Louise! I knew that something had happened. You have seemed so different for the last few months."

Louise nodded.

"London has never been the same place to me since I first met him in Cumberland," she admitted. "Sometimes I think I am—to use your own words—in love with John. Sometimes I feel it is just a queer, indistinct, but passionate appreciation of the abstract beauty of the life he seems to stand for."

"Is he really so good, I wonder?" Sophy asked pensively.

"I do not know," Louise sighed. "I only know that when I first talked to him, he seemed different from any man I have ever spoken with in my life. I suppose there are few temptations up there, and they keep nearer to the big things. Sometimes I wonder, Sophy, if it was not very wrong of me to draw him away from it all!"

"Rubbish!" Sophy declared. "If he is good, he can prove it and know it here. He will come to know the truth about himself. Besides, it isn't everything to possess the standard virtues. Louise, he will be here in a minute. You want to be left alone with him. What are you going to say when he asks you what you know he will ask you?"

Louise looked down at her.

"Dear," she said. "I wish I could tell you. I do not know. That is the strange, troublesome part of it—I do not know!"

"Will you promise me something?" Sophy begged. "Promise me that if I stay in here quietly until after he has gone, you will come and tell me!"

Louise leaned a little downward as if to look into her friend's face. Sophy suddenly dropped her eyes, and the color rose to the roots of her hair.

There was a knock at the door, and the parlor maid entered.

"Mr. Strangewey, madam," she announced.

Louise looked at John curiously as she greeted him. His face showed few signs of the struggle through which he had passed, but the grim setting of his lips reminded her a little of his brother. He had lost, too, something of the boyishness of the day before. Instinctively she felt that the battle had begun. She asked him nothing about the supper party, and Sophy, quick to follow her lead, also avoided the subject.

Luncheon was not a lengthy meal, and immediately its service was concluded, Sophy rose to her feet with a sigh.

"I must go and finish my work," she declared. "Let me have the den to myself for at least an hour, please, Louise. It will take me longer than that to muddle through your books."

Louise led the way upstairs into the cool, white drawing room, with its flower-perfumed atmosphere and its delicate, shadowy air of repose. She curled herself up in a corner of the divan and gave John his coffee. Then she leaned back and looked at him.

"So you have really come to London, Mr. Countryman!"

"I have followed you," he answered. "I think you knew that I would. I tried not to," he went on, after a moment's pause. "I fought against it as hard as I could; but in the end I had to give in. I came for you."

Louise's capacity for fencing seemed suddenly enfeebled. A frontal attack of such directness was irresistible.

"For me!" she repeated weakly.

"Of course," he replied. "None of your arguments would have brought me here. If I have desired to understand this world at all, it is because it

dared not analyze. Perhaps, after all her self-dissection, there were still secret chambers. She thought almost with fear of what they might contain. Her sense of superiority was vanishing. She was, after all, like other women.

"Yes," she promised, "I will help. We will leave it at that. Some day you shall talk to me again, if you like. In the meantime, remember we are both free. You have not known many women, and you may change your mind when you have been longer in London. Perhaps it will be better for you if you do!"

"That is quite impossible," John said firmly. "You see," he went on, looking at her with shining eyes, "I know now what I half believed from the first moment that I saw you. I love you!"

Springing restlessly to her feet, she walked across the room and back again. Action of some sort seemed imperative. A curious hypnotic feeling seemed to be dulling all her powers of resistance. She looked into her life and she was terrified. Everything had grown insignificant. It couldn't really be possible that with her brains, her experience, this man who had dwelt all his life in the simple ways had yet the power to show her the path toward the greater things! She felt like a child again. She trembled a little as she sat down by his side. It was not in this fashion that she had intended to hear what he had to say.

"I don't know what is the matter with me today," she murmured distractedly. "I think I must send you away. You disturb my thoughts. I can't see life clearly. Don't hope for too much from me," she begged. "But don't go away," she added, with a sudden irresistible impulse of anxiety. "Oh, I wish—I wish you understood me and everything about me, without my having to say a word!"

"I feel what you are," he answered, "and that is sufficient."

Once more she rose to her feet and walked across to the window. An automobile had stopped in the street below. She looked down upon it with a sudden frozen feeling of apprehension.

John moved to her side, and for him, too, the joy of those few moments was clouded. A little shiver of presentiment took its place. He recognized the footman whom he saw standing upon the pavement.

"It is the prince of Seyre," Louise faltered.

"Send him away," John begged. "We haven't finished yet. I won't say anything more to upset you. What I want now is some practical guidance."

"I cannot send him away!" John glanced toward her and hated himself for his fierce jealousy. She was looking very white and very pathetic. The light had gone from her eyes. He felt suddenly dominant, and, with that feeling, there came all the generosity of the conqueror.

"Good-by!" he said. "Perhaps I can see you sometime tomorrow."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers, one by one. Then he left the room. She listened to his footsteps descending the stairs, firm, resolute, deliberate. They paused, there was the sound of voices—the prince and he were exchanging greetings; then she heard other footsteps ascending, lighter, smoother, yet just as deliberate.

Her face grew paler as she listened. There was something which sounded to her almost like the beating of fate in the slow, inevitable approach of this unseen visitor.

CHAPTER XIV.

Henri Grailiot had made himself thoroughly comfortable. He was ensconced in the largest of John's easy chairs, his pipe in his mouth, a recently refilled tumbler—Grailiot was English in nothing except his predilection for tea—on the small table by his side. Through a little cloud of tobacco smoke he was studying his host.

"So you call yourself a Londoner now, my young friend, I suppose," he remarked, taking pensive note of John's fashionable clothes. "It is a transformation, beyond a doubt! Is it, I wonder, upon the surface only, or have you indeed become heart and soul a son of this corrupt city?"

"Whatever I may have become," John grumbled. "It's meant three months of the hardest work I've ever done!"

Grailiot held out his pipe in front of him and blew away a dense cloud of smoke.

"Explain yourself," he insisted. John stood on the hearth-rug, with his hands in his pockets. His morning clothes were exceedingly well cut, his tie and collar unexceptionable, his hair closely cropped according to the fashion of the moment. He had an extremely civilized air.

"Look here, Grailiot," he said, "I'll tell you what I've done, although I don't suppose you would understand what it means to me. I've visited practically every theater in London."

"Alone?"

"Alone comes to have a secret horror of the prince. Grailiot gives John some very sensible advice. The next installment brings important developments."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Baby Was Developing.

Johnny was a small boy of about five years, and he had a baby sister who was just learning to walk. One day Johnny saw his little sister stand alone and take a few steps for the first time. Johnny ran hurriedly to his mother and said, "Oh, mamma, come here quick! Baby's walkin' on her hind legs."

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