

THE HILLMAN

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

JOHN HEARS MYSTERIOUS PHRASES WHICH TROUBLE HIM WITH GRAVE DOUBTS ABOUT LOUISE—AT TIMES HE WISHES HE WERE BACK IN THE HILLS.

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 Strangeway, 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 light-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. The prince tried to entice John into evil ways by sending fascinating women to charm and bedevil him.

CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

"Sometimes with Miss Maurel, sometimes with her little friend, Sophy Gerard, and sometimes alone," John replied. "I have bought a Baedeker, taken a taxicab by the day, and done all the sights. I've spent weeks in the National gallery, picture gazing, and I've done all those more modern shows up round Bond street. I have bought a racing car and learned to drive it. I have been to dinner parties that have bored me stiff. I have been introduced to crowds of people whom I never wish to see again, and made one or two friends," he added, smiling at his guest, "for whom I hope I am properly grateful."

"The prince has been showing you round a bit, hasn't he?" Grailiot grunted.

"The prince has been extraordinarily kind to me," John admitted slowly, "for what reason I don't know. He has introduced me to a great many pleasant and interesting people, and a great many whom I suppose a young



"There is no secret about it. It is Louise Maurel."

man in my position should be glad to know. He has shown me one side of London life pretty thoroughly.

"And what about it all?" Grailiot demanded. "You find yourself something more of a citizen of the world, eh?"

"Not a bit," John answered simply. "The more I see of the life up here, the smaller it seems to me. I mean, of course, the ordinary life of pleasure, the life to be lived by a young man like myself, who hasn't any profession or work upon which he can concentrate his thoughts."

"Then why do you stay?" John made no immediate reply. Instead, he walked to the window of his sitting room and stood looking across the Thames with a discontented frown upon his face. Between him and the Frenchman a curious friendship had sprung up during the last few months.

"I gather," Grailiot continued, "that you put it concisely and truthfully, you are the most bored man in London. There is something behind all this effort of yours, my friend, to fit yourself, the round human being, into the square place. Speak the truth, now! Treat me as a father confessor."

John swung round upon his heel. In the clear light it was obvious that he was a little thinner in the face and that some of the tan had gone from his complexion.

"I am staying up here, and going on, with it," he announced doggedly, "because of a woman."

Grailiot stopped eating, placed the remains of his cake in the saucer of his teacup, and laid it down. Then he opened his lips to speak and abruptly closed them. His face suddenly underwent an extraordinary change. A few seconds ago his attitude had been that of a professor examining some favorite object of study; now a more personal note had humanized his expression. Whatever thought or reflection it was that had come into his mind, it had plainly startled him.

"Who is the woman?" he asked breathlessly.

"There is no secret about it, so far as I am concerned," John answered. "It is Louise Maurel. I thought you must have guessed."

The two men looked at each other in silence for some moments. Out on the river a little tug was hooting vigorously. The roar of the Strand came faintly into the room. On the mantelpiece a very ornate French clock was ticking lightly. All these sounds seemed suddenly accentuated. They beat time to a silence almost tragical in its intensity.

Grailiot took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. He had written many plays, and the dramatic instinct was strongly developed in him. "Louise!" he muttered under his breath.

"She is very different, I know," John went on, after a moment's hesitation. "She is very clever and a great artist, and she lives in an atmosphere of which, a few months ago, I knew nothing. I have come up here to try to understand, to try to get a little nearer to her."

There was another silence, this time almost an awkward one. Then Grailiot rose suddenly to his feet.

"I will respect your confidence," he promised, holding out his hand. "Have no fear of that. I am due now at the theater. Your tea is excellent, and such little cakes I never tasted before."

"You will wish me good luck?"

"No!"

"Why not?" John demanded, a little startled.

"Because," Grailiot pronounced, "from what I have seen and know of you both, there are no two people in this world less suitable for each other."

"Look here," John expostulated, "I don't want you to go away thinking so. You don't understand what this means to me."

"Perhaps not, my friend," Grailiot replied, "but remember that it is at least my trade to understand men and women. I have known Louise Maurel since she was a child."

"Then it is I whom you don't understand."

"That may be so," Grailiot confessed. "One makes mistakes. Let us leave it at that. You are a young man of undeveloped temperament. You may be capable of much which at present I do not find in you."

"Tell me the one quality in which you consider me most lacking," John begged. "I want you on my side, Grailiot."

"And I," Grailiot replied, as he shook his friend's hand and hurried off, "want only to be on the side that will mean happiness for you both."

He left the room a little abruptly. John walked back to the window, oppressed with a sense of something almost ominous in the Frenchman's manner, something which he could not fathom, against which he struggled in vain. Side by side with it, there surged into his memory the disquietude which his present relations with Louise had developed. She was always charming when she had any time to spare—sometimes almost affectionate. On the other hand, he was profoundly conscious of her desire to keep him at arm's length for the present.

He had accepted her decision without a murmur. He made but few efforts to see her alone, and when they met he made no special claim upon her notice. He was serving his apprenticeship doggedly and faithfully. Yet there were times like the present when he found his task both hateful and difficult.

He walked aimlessly backward and forward, chafing against the restraint of the narrow walls and the low ceiling. A sudden desire had seized him to fly back to the hills, wreathed in mist though they might be; to struggle on his way through the blinding rain, to drink down long gulps of his own purer, less civilized atmosphere.

The telephone bell rang. He placed the receiver to his ear almost mechanically.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Lady Hilda Mulloch is asking for you, sir," the hall porter announced. Lady Hilda peered around John's room through her lorgnette, and did not hesitate to express her dissatisfaction.

"My dear man," she exclaimed,

"what makes you live in a hotel? Why don't you take rooms of your own and furnish them? Surroundings like these are destructive to one's individuality."

"Well, you see," John explained, as he drew an easy chair up to the fire for his guest, "my stay in London is only a temporary one, and it hasn't seemed worth while to settle anywhere."

She stretched out her graceful body in front of the fire and raised her veil. She was very smartly dressed, as usual. Her white silk stockings, which she seemed to have no objection to displaying, were of the latest vogue. The chinchilla around her neck and in her little toque was most becoming. She seemed to bring with her an atmosphere indefinable, in its way, but distinctly attractive. Brisk in her speech, a little commanding in her manner, she was still essentially feminine.

John, at her direct invitation, had called upon her once or twice since their meeting at the opera, and he had found her, from the first, more attractive than any other society woman of his acquaintance. None the less, he was a little taken aback at her present visit.

"Exactly why are you here, anyhow?" she demanded. "I feel sure that Eugene told me the reason which had brought you from your wilds, but I have forgotten it."

"For one thing," John replied, "I have come because I don't want to appear prejudiced, and the fact that I never spent a month in London, or even a week, seemed a little narrow-minded."

"What's the real attraction?" Lady Hilda asked. "It is a woman, isn't it?"

"I am very fond of a woman who is in London," John admitted. "Perhaps it is true that I am here on her account."

Lady Hilda withdrew from her muf a gold cigarette case and a little box of matches.

"Order some mixed vermouth with lemon for me, please," she begged. "I have been shopping, and I hate tea. I don't know why I came to see you. I suddenly thought of it when I was in Bond street."

"It was very kind of you," John said. "If I had known that you cared about seeing me, I would have come to you with pleasure."

"What does it matter?" she answered. "You are thinking, perhaps, that I risk my reputation in coming to a young man's rooms? Those things do not count for me. Ever since I was a child I have done exactly as I liked, and people have shrugged their shoulders and said, 'Ah, well, it is only Lady Hilda.' I am quite convinced that if I chose to take you off to Monte Carlo with me next week and spend a month with you there, I should get my pass to the royal inclosure at Ascot when I returned, and my invitation to the next court ball, even in this era of starch. You see, they would say, 'It is only Lady Hilda.'"

The waiter brought the vermouth, which his visitor sipped contentedly. "So there is a woman, is there?" she went on, looking across the room at her companion. "Have you committed yourself already, then? Don't you remember what I told you the first night we met after the opera—that it is well to wait?"

"Yes, I remember," John admitted. "I meant it."

He laughed good-humoredly, yet not without some trace of self-consciousness.

"The mischief was done then," he said. "Couldn't it be undone?" she asked lazily. "Or are you one of those tedious people who are faithful forever? Fidelity," she continued, knocking the ash from her cigarette. "Is really, to my mind, the most bourgeois of virtues. It comes from a want of elasticity in the emotional fibers. Nothing in life has bored me so much as the faithfulness of my lovers."

"You ought to put all this into one of your books," John suggested.

"I probably shall, when I write my reminiscences," she replied. "Tell me about this woman. And don't stand about in that restless way at the other end of the room. Bring a chair close to me—there, close to my side!"

John obeyed, and his visitor contemplated him thoughtfully through a little cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Yes," she decided, "there is no use denying it. You are hatefully good-looking, and somehow or other I think your clothes have improved you. You have a little more air than when you first came to town. Are you quite sure that you haven't made up your mind about this woman in a hurry?"

"Quite sure," John laughed. "I suppose I am rather an idiot, but I am addicted to the vice of which you were speaking."

She nodded.

"I should imagine," she said, "that you were not an adept in the art of flirtation. Is it true that the woman is Louise Maurel?"

"Quite true," John replied.

"But don't you know—"

She broke off abruptly. She saw the face of the man by her side suddenly

change, and her instinct warned her of the danger into which she was rushing.

"You surprise me very much," she said. "Louise Maurel is a very wonderful woman, but she seems to spend the whole of her time with my cousin, the prince."

"They are, without doubt, very friendly," John assented. "They have a good many interests in common, and the prince is connected with the syndicate which finances the theater. I do not imagine, however, that the prince wishes to marry her, or she him."

Lady Hilda began to laugh, softly, but as if genuinely amused. John sat and watched her in ominous silence. Not the flicker of a smile parted his lips. His visitor, however, was undisturbed. She leaned over and patted his hand.

"Simple Simon!" she murmured, leaning a little toward him. "If you go on looking like that, I shall pat your cheeks, too. You are really much too nice looking to wear such thunder clouds!"

"Perhaps if we chose some other subject of conversation—" John said stiffly.

"Oh, dear me!" she interrupted. "Very well! You really are a most trying person, you know. I put up with a great deal from you."

John was silent. Her face darkened a little, and an angry light flashed in her eyes.

"Well, I'll leave you alone if you like," she decided, tossing her cigarette into the grate. "If my friendship isn't worth having, let it go. It hasn't often been offered in vain. There are more men in London than I could count who would go down on their knees for such a visit as I am paying you. And you—you," she added, with a little tremble of real anger in her tone, "you're too hatefully polite and priggish! Come and ring the bell for the lift. I am going!"

She slid gracefully to her feet, shook the cigarette ash from her clothes, and picked up her muf.

"You are really an egregious, thick-headed, obstinate countryman," she declared, as she moved toward the door. "You haven't either manners or sensibility. I am a perfect idiot to waste my time upon you. I wouldn't have done it," she added, as he followed her dumbly down the corridor, "if I hadn't rather liked you!"

"I am very sorry," he declared. "I don't know quite what I have done. I do appreciate your friendship. You have been very kind to me indeed."

She hesitated as his finger touched the bell of the lift, and glanced at the watch on her wrist. She sighed, and watched the top of the lift as it came up. Then she dropped her veil.

CHAPTER XV.

"This is very nearly my idea of perfect happiness," Sophy murmured, as she leaned across the table and listened idly while John ordered the dinner. "Give me very little to eat, John, and talk a great deal to me. I am depressed about myself and worried about everything!"

"And I," he declared, "am just beginning to breathe again. I don't think I understand women, Sophy."

"Wasn't your week-end party a success?" she asked.

"Not altogether," he confessed; "but don't let's talk about it. Tell me what is depressing you."

"About myself, or things generally?"

"Yourself first."

"Well, the most respectable young man you ever knew in your life, who lives in Bath, wants me to marry him. I don't think I could. I don't think I could live in Bath, and I don't think I could marry anyone. And I've just thirteen shillings and fourpence left. I haven't paid my rent, and my dressmaker is calling for something on account on Monday morning."

"There's only one thing to answer to that," John insisted cheerfully. "I



"You Really Are an Egregious, Thick-Headed, Obstinate Country Man."

am going to lend you fifty pounds while you make your mind up about the young man."

She made a face at him.

"I couldn't borrow money from a strange gentleman," she protested.

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed. "If you begin calling me a stranger—but there, never mind! We'll see about that dinner. Tell me more about your love affair, Sophy."

"It isn't a love affair at all!" she exclaimed, almost indignantly.

"Why, I am sorry. Your prospective alliance, then, shall I call it?"

"Oh, it isn't interesting," she said. "It's just a young man in Bath. He is a lawyer and moderately well off. He has wanted me to marry him for years. He was a friend of my brother's. Lately he has been bothering a little more than usual—in fact, I suppose I have received what might be called an ultimatum. He came up yesterday, and I went out with him last night. He has gone back to Bath this morning, and I have promised to let him know in a month. I think that is why I went out to Waterloo bridge in a mackintosh and got wet."

"Do you like him?" John asked practically.

"I like him, I suppose," Sophy sighed. "That's the worst of it. If I didn't like him, there might be some chance. I can't realize myself ever doing more than liking him in a mild sort of way; and if he expected more, as of course he would, then I should probably hate him. He tried to kiss me on the way to the station, and I nearly scratched him. That isn't like me, you know. I rather like being kissed sometimes."

John buried himself in the wine-list.

"Well," he admitted, "it doesn't sound very hopeful. I'm no sort of judge in these matters, but I have heard lots of people say that one gets on all right after marriage without caring very much before. You don't seem to have a very comfortable life now, do you?"

"Comfortable? No, but I am free," Sophy replied quickly. "I can come in and go out when I please, choose my own friends. It's rather fine to be here, you know—to be in the atmosphere, even if the limelight misses one."

John sighed, and regarded her thoughtfully. "You're a queer little girl, Sophy," he said. "I don't know how to advise you."

"Of course you don't," she answered. "No one could. As for you, I suppose you will marry Louise. What will happen to you after that, I don't know. Perhaps I shan't care so much about London then. You've made it very nice for me, you know."

"You've made it bearable even for me," he told her. "I often think how lonely I should have been without you to talk to. Louise sometimes is delightfully companionable, and kind enough to turn one's head. Other days I scarcely understand her; everything we say to one another seems wrong. I come away and leave her simply because I feel that there is a wall between us that I can't get over."

"There isn't really," Sophy sighed. "Louise is a dear. Considering everything, I think she is wonderful. But you are utterly different. She is very complex, very emotional, and she has her own standards of life. You, on the other hand, are very simple, very faithful and honest, and you accept the standards which have been made for you—very, very rigidly, John. What are you looking at?"

John's whole expression had suddenly changed. His eyes were fixed upon the door, his face was stern as a granite block. Sophy turned quickly around. The maître d'hotel, with another satellite in his rear, was welcoming with much ceremony two lately arrived guests. Sophy clutched at the tablecloth. The newcomers were Louise and the prince of Seyre.

"I don't understand this!" John muttered, his lips twitching.

Sophy Gerard said nothing. Her cheeks were pink with excitement.

Suddenly Louise saw John and Sophy. She stood quite still for a moment; then she came toward them, slowly and a little languidly. The prince was still studying through his eyeglasses the various tables which the head waiter was offering for his consideration.

"What an astonishing meeting!" Louise remarked, as she laid her hand for a moment on Sophy's shoulder. "What is going on behind my back?"

John rose very slowly to his feet. He seemed taller than ever, and Louise's smile remained unanswered.

"The rain broke up my week-end party," he explained, "and I met Sophy in the Strand. In any case, I intended returning tonight. I understood that you would not be here until tomorrow about eleven o'clock."

"Those were my plans," Louise replied; "but, as you see, other things have intervened. Our little house party, too, was broken up by this abominable weather, and we all motored to town. The Faradays have gone home. The prince heard from Miles that I was at home, and telephoned me to dine. Me voici!"

John was struggling with a crowd of hateful thoughts. Louise was wearing a wonderful gown; her hair was beautifully arranged; she had the air of a woman whose toilet was complete and perfect down to the slightest detail. The prince's slow drawl reached them distinctly.

"It was my servant's fault, I suppose," he said. "I told him to ring up last night and order the table for two in that corner. However, we will take the vacant one near your desk."

He looked around, as if for the first time, missed Louise. He came toward them at once.

"The prince seems to have ordered his table last night," John remarked, his tone, even to himself, sounding queer and strained.

Louise made no reply. The prince was already shaking hands with Sophy. "I thought you were spending the week-end with my cousin, Strangeway," he remarked, turning to John.

"We did spend part of it together," John replied. "The weather drove us back this afternoon."

"I congratulate you both on your good taste," said the prince. "There is nothing more abominable than a riverside retreat out of season. We are taking the table on the left, Louise."

He led her away, and they passed down the room. John slowly resumed his seat.

"Sophy," he demanded hoarsely, "tell me the truth. Is there anything between the prince and Louise?"

Sophy nervously crumpled up the toast by her side.

"The prince admires Louise, and has done so for many years," she answered. "No one knows anything else. Louise never speaks of him to me. I cannot tell you."

"But you must know," he persisted, with a little break in his voice. "Forgive me, Sophy, if I made an ass of myself. First Lady Hilda, and then Grailiot, and then—well, I thought Louise might have rung up to see whether I was at home, if she came back sooner than she expected; and the prince took the table last night!"

She leaned over and patted him on the hand.

"Don't worry," she begged. "If Louise has to choose some day between him and you, I don't think she'll hesi-



She Leaned Over and Patted Him on the Hand.

tate very long. Don't look so stern, please. You look very statuesque and perfect, but I don't want to dine with a piece of sculpture. Remember that I am finding you too attractive for my peace of mind. There's your text!"

He poured a glass of wine and drank it off.

"I'll do my best," he agreed. "If it sounds like rubbish, you can still believe that I appreciate everything you've told me. You are pretty, and I am lucky to have you here. Now I'll try to make you believe that I think so."

She leaned over so that her head almost touched his.

"Go on, please!" she murmured. "Even if it hurts afterward, it will be heavenly to listen to!"

The next night Sophy acted as showman at the first production of the play, so long delayed because of Grailiot's insistence on a scene that promised to be startling to English playgoers. Her part was over at the end of the first act, and a few minutes later she slipped into a seat by John's side behind the curtain.

"What do you think of it so far?" she asked a little anxiously.

"It seems quite good," John replied cheerfully. "Some very clever lines, and all that sort of thing; but I can't quite see what it's all leading to."

Sophy peered around the house from behind the curtain.

"There isn't standing room anywhere," she declared. "I don't suppose there ever was a play in London that was more talked about; and then putting it off for more than three months—why, there have been all sorts of rumors about. Do you want to know who the people in the audience are?"

"Not particularly," John answered. "I shouldn't know them, if you told me. There are just a few familiar faces. I see the prince in the box opposite."

"Did you telephone to Louise today?" Sophy asked.

John shook his head.

"No. I thought it better to leave her alone until after tonight."

"You are going to the supper, of course?"

"I have been asked," John replied, a little doubtfully. "I don't quite know whether I want to. Is it being given by the prince or by the management?"

"The management," Sophy assured him. "Do you come and take me! It's going to be rather fun."

The curtain went up upon the second act. John, from the shadows of the box, listened attentively. The subject was not a particularly new one, but the writing was brilliant. There was the old "Marquis de Guy," a ruse, a degenerate, but still overbearing and full of personality, from whose lips came some of Grailiot's most brilliant sayings; Louise, his wife; and Faraday, a friend of the old marquis, and obviously the intended lover of his wife.

"I don't see anything so terrible in this," John remarked, as the curtain went down once more and thunders of applause greeted some wonderful lines of Grailiot's.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)