



THE HILLMAN

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM Author of "THE DOUBLE TRAITOR" "THE MASTER MURDERER," Etc.

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

"It's wonderful!" Sophy declared. "Try and bear the thread of it all in your mind. For two acts you have been asked to focus your attention upon the increasing brutality of the marquis. Remember that, won't you?"

"Not likely to forget it," John replied. "How well they all act!"

There was a quarter of an hour's interval before the curtain rose again. Rumors concerning the last act had been floating about for weeks, and the house was almost tense with excitement as the curtain went up. The scene was the country chateau of the "Marquis de Guy," who brought a noisy crowd of companions from Paris without any warning. His wife showed signs of dismay at his coming. He had brought with him women whom she declined to receive.

The great scene between her husband and herself took place in the square hall of the chateau, on the first floor. Louise reaffirms her intention of leaving the house. Her husband laughs at her. Her position is hopeless.

"What can you do?" he mocks. She shrugs her shoulders and passes into her room. The marquis sinks upon a settee, and presently is joined by one of the ladies who have traveled with him from Paris. He talks to her of the pictures upon the wall. She is impatient to meet the Marquise de Guy.

The marquis knocks at his wife's door. Her voice is heard clearly, after a moment's pause.

"In a few minutes!" she replies. The marquis resumes his flirtation. His companion becomes impatient—the marquis has pledged his word—that she should be received by his wife. An ancient enmity against the Marquise de Guy prompts her to insist.

The marquis shrugs his shoulders and knocks more loudly than ever at his wife's door. She comes out dressed for travel and is met by Faraday, who suddenly appears.

"You asked me what I could do," she says, pointing to her lover. "You see now!"

There was a moment's breathless silence through the house. The scene in itself was a little beyond anything that the audience had expected. Sophy, who had been leaning over the edge of the box, turned around in no little anxiety. She heard the door slam. John had disappeared!

He left the theater with only his hat in his hand, turning up his coat by instinct as he passed through the driving rain. All his senses seemed tingling with some nameless horror. The brilliance of the language, the subtlety of the situation, seemed like some evil trail drawn across that one horrible climax. It was Louise who had come from that room and pointed to Faraday!

He reached his rooms—he scarcely knew how—and walked upstairs. There he threw off some of his dripping garments, opened the window wide, and stood there.

He looked out over the Thames, and there was a red flare before his eyes. Stephen was right, he told himself. There was nothing but evil to be found here, nothing but bitter disappointment, nothing but the pain which deepens into anguish. Better to remain like Stephen, unloving and unloved, to draw nearer to the mountains, to find joy in the crops and the rain and the sunshine, to listen stonily to the cry of human beings as if to some voice from an unknown world.

He leaned a little further from the window, and gazed into the court at a dizzy depth below. He had cut himself adrift from the peace which might have been his. He would never know again the joys of his earlier life. It was for this that he had fought so many battles, clung so tightly to one ideal—for Louise, who could show herself to anyone who cared to pay his shilling or his half-guinea, glorying in her dishonor; worse than glorying in it—finding some subtle humor in the little gesture with which she had pointed, unashamed, to her lover.

John bent a little lower from the window. A sudden dizziness seemed to have come over him. Then he was forced to turn around. His door had been quickly opened and shut. It was Sophy who was crossing toward him, the rain streaming from her ruined opera cloak.

"John!" she cried. "Oh, John!" She led him back to his chair and knelt by his side. She held his hands tightly.

"You mustn't feel like this," she sobbed; "you mustn't, John, really! You don't understand. It's all a play. Louise wouldn't really do anything like that!"

He shivered. Nevertheless, he clutched her hands and drew her closer to him.

"Do, please, listen to me," she begged. "It's all over. Louise is herself again—Louise Maurel. The Marquise de Guy never lived except upon those boards. It is simply a wonderful creation. Any one of the great actresses would play that part and glory in it—the very greatest, John. Oh, it's

so hard to make you understand! Louise is waiting for you. They are all waiting at the supper party. You are expected. You must go and tell her that you think it was wonderful!"

He rose slowly to his feet and caught at her hands roughly.

"Supposing I won't go?" he whispered hoarsely. "Supposing—I keep you here instead, Sophy?"

She hesitated for a moment. Something flashed into her face and passed away. She was paler than ever.

"Dear John," she begged, "pull yourself together! Remember that Louise is waiting for you. It's Louise you want—not me. Nothing that she has done tonight should make her any the less worthy of you and your love."

He strode away into the further room. He reappeared in a moment or two, his hair smoothly brushed, his tie newly arranged.

"I'll come, little girl," he promised. "I don't know what I'll say to her, but I'll come. There can't be any harm in that!"

"Of course not," she answered cheerfully. "You're the most terrible goose, John," she added, as they walked down the corridor. "Do, please, lose your tragical air. The whole world is at Louise's feet tonight. You mustn't let her know how absurdly you have been feeling. Tomorrow you will find that every paper in London will be acclaiming her genius."

John squared his shoulders. "All the same," he declared grimly, "if I could burn the theater and the play, and lock up Grailot for a month, tonight, I'd do it!"

CHAPTER XVI.

The days and weeks drifted into months, and John remained in London. His circle of friends and his interests had widened. It was only his relations with Louise which remained still unchanged. Always charming to him, giving him much of her time, favoring him, beyond a doubt, more than any of her admirers, there was yet about her something elusive, something which seemed intended to keep him so far as possible at arm's length.

There was nothing tangible of which he could complain, and this probationary period was of his own suggestion. He bore it grimly, holding his place, whenever it was possible, by her side with dogged persistence. Then one evening there was a knock at his door, and Stephen Strangeway walked in.

Stephen, although he seemed a little taller and gaunter than ever, though he seemed to bring into the perhaps overworn atmosphere of John's little sitting room something of the cold austerity of his own domain, had evidently come in on an unfriendly spirit. He took both his brother's hands in his and gripped them warmly.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Stephen!" John declared.

"It has been an effort to me to come," Stephen admitted. "I am one of the old-fashioned Strangeways. What I feel is pretty well locked up inside. The last time you and I met perhaps I spoke too much; so here I am!"

"It's fine of you," John declared. "I remember nothing of that day. We will



"It's Louise You Want—Not Me."

look at things squarely together, even when we differ. I'm—"

He broke off in the middle of his sentence. The door had been suddenly opened, and Sophy Gerard made a somewhat impetuous entrance.

"I'm absolutely sick of ringing, John," she exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon! I hadn't the least idea you had anyone with you."

She stood still in surprise, a little apologetic smile upon her lips. John hastened forward and welcomed her.

"It's all right, Sophy," he declared. "Let me introduce my brother, may I? My brother Stephen—Miss Sophy Gerard."

Stephen rose slowly from his place, laid down his pipe, and bowed stiffly to

Sophy. She held out her hand, however, and smiled at him delightedly. "How nice of you to come and see your poor, lonely brother!" she said. "We have done our best to spoil him, but I'm afraid he is very homesick sometimes. I hope you've come to stay a long time and to learn all about London, as John is doing. If you are half as nice as he is, we'll give you such a good time!"

From his great height, Stephen looked down upon the girl's upturned face a little astutely. She chattered away, entirely unabashed.

"I do hope you're not shocked at my bursting in upon your brother like this! We really are great pals, and I live only just across the way. We are much less formal up here, you know, than you are in the country. John, I've brought you a message from Louise."

"About tonight?"

She nodded. "Louise is most frightfully sorry," she explained, "but she has to go down to Streatham to open a bazaar, and she can't possibly be back in time to dine before the theater. Can you guess what she dared to suggest?"

"I think I can," John replied, smiling. "Say you will, there's a dear," she begged. "I am not playing tonight. May Enser is going on in my place. We arranged it a week ago. I had two lines to pay on Saturday, and I haven't had a decent meal this week. But I had forgotten," she broke off, with a sudden note of disappointment in her tone. "There's your brother. I wasn't take you away from him."

"We'll all have dinner together," John suggested. "You'll come, of course, Stephen?"

Stephen shook his head.

"Thank you," he said. "I am due at my hotel. I'm going back to Cumberland tomorrow morning, and my errand is already done."

"You will do nothing of the sort!" John declared.

"Please be amiable," Sophy begged. "If you won't come with us, I shall simply run away and leave you with John. You needn't look at your clothes," she went on. "We can go to a grillroom. John shan't dress, either. I want you to tell me all about Cumberland, where this brother of yours lives. He doesn't tell us half enough!"

John passed his arm through his brother's and led him away.

"Come and have a wash, old chap," he said.

They dined together at Luigi's, a curiously assorted trio—Sophy, between the two men, supplying a distinctly alien note. She was always gay, always amusing, but although she addressed most of her remarks to Stephen, he never once smiled. He ate and drank simply, seldom speaking of himself or his plans, and firmly negating all their suggestions for the remainder of the evening. Occasionally he glanced at the clock. John became conscious of a certain feeling of curiosity, which in a sense Sophy shared.

"Your brother seems to me like a man with a purpose," she said, as they stood in the entrance hall on their way out of the restaurant. "Like a prophet with a mission, perhaps I should say."

John nodded. In the little passage where they stood, he and Stephen seemed to dwarf the passers-by. The men, in their evening clothes and pallid faces, seemed suddenly insignificant, and the women like dolls.

"For the last time, Stephen," John said, "won't you come to a music hall with us?"

"I have made my plans for the evening, thank you," Stephen replied, holding out his hand. "Good night!"

He left them standing there and walked off down the Strand. John, looking after him, frowned. He was conscious of a certain foreboding.

"I suppose," Sophy sighed, as they waited for a taxi, "we shall spend the remainder of the evening in the usual fashion?"

"Do you mind?" John asked.

"No," she assented resignedly. "That play will end by making a driving idiot of me. If Louise is tired tonight, though, I warn you that I shall insist upon supper."

"It's a bargain," John promised. "We'll drive home, and then I'll take you back to Luigi's. We haven't been out together for some time, have we?"

She looked up at him with a little grimace and patted his hand.

"You have neglected me," she said. "I think all these fine ladies have turned your head."

She drew a little closer to him and passed her arm through his. John made no responsive movement. He was filled with resentment at the sensation of pleasure that her affectionate gesture gave him.

The curtain was up and the play in progress when they reached the box that John had taken for the season.

The spell of it all, against which he had so often fought, came over John anew. He set his chair back against the wall and watched and listened, a veritable sense of hypnotism creeping over his senses. Presently the same impulse which had come to him so many times before induced him to turn his head, to read in the faces of the audience the reflection of her genius. He had often watched those long lines of faces changing, each in its own way, under the magic of her art. Tonight he looked beyond. He knew very well that his search had a special object. Suddenly he gripped the arms of his chair. In the front row of the pit, sitting head and shoulders taller than the men and women who lounged over the wooden rest in front of them, was Stephen. More than ever, among these inappropriate surroundings, he seemed to represent something almost patriarchal, a forbidding and disapproving spirit sitting in judgment upon some modern and unworthy wantonness. His

face, stern and grave, showed little sign of approval or disapproval, but to John's apprehending eyes the critical sense was there, the verdict foredoomed. He understood as in a flash that Stephen had come there to judge once more the woman whom his brother desired.

The curtain went up again and the play moved on, with subtle yet inevitable dramatic power, toward the hated and dreaded crisis.

The play came to an end presently, amid a storm of applause. The grim figure in the front of the pit remained motionless and silent. He was one of the last to leave, and John watched his retreating figure with a sigh. Sophy drew him away.

"We had better hurry round," she said. "Louise is always very quick getting ready."

They found her, as a matter of fact, in the act of leaving. She welcomed them naturally enough, but John fancied that her greeting showed some signs of embarrassment.

"You knew that I was going out to supper tonight?" she asked. "Oh didn't I tell you? The prince has asked the



"My Preference Is to Remain Standing."

French people from His Majesty's to meet Mr. Grailot at supper. I am hurrying home to dress."

John handed her into her waiting automobile in silence. She glanced into his face.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "The prince would have asked you, without a doubt," Louise continued, "but he knows that you are not really interested in the stage, and this party is entirely French—they do not speak a word of English. Au revoir! Sophy, take care of him, and mind you behave yourselves!"

She waved her hand to them both and threw herself back among the cushions as the car glided off. John walked to the corner of the street in gloomy silence. Then he remembered his companion. He stopped short.

"Sophy," he begged, "don't hold me to my promise. I don't want to take you out to supper tonight. I am not in the humor for it."

"Don't be foolish!" she replied. "If you stay alone, you will only imagine things and be miserable. We needn't have any supper, unless you like. Let me come and sit in your rooms with you."

"No!" he decided, almost roughly. "I am losing myself, Sophy. I am losing something of my strength every day. Louise doesn't help as she might. Don't stay with me, please. I am beginning to have moods, and when they come on I want to be alone."

She drew a little closer to him. "Let me come, please!" she begged, with a pathetic, almost childlike quiver at the corner of her lips.

He looked down at her. A sudden wave of tenderness swept every other thought from his mind. His mental balance seemed suddenly restored. He hailed a passing taxi and handed Sophy into it.

"What a selfish pig I am!" he exclaimed. "Anyhow, it's all over now. We'll go back to Luigi's to supper, by all means. I am going to make you tell me all about that young man from Bath!"

CHAPTER XVII.

Louise glanced at her watch, sat up in bed, and turned reproachfully toward Aline.

"Aline, do you know it is only eleven o'clock," she exclaimed.

"I am very sorry, madame," the latter hastened to explain, "but there is a gentleman downstairs who wishes to see you. He says he will wait until you can receive him. I thought you would like to know."

"A gentleman at this hour of the morning?" Louise yawned. "How absurd! Anyhow, you ought to know better than to wake me up before the proper time."

"I am very sorry, madame," Aline replied. "I hesitated for some time, but I thought you would like to know that the gentleman was here. It is Mr. Stephen Strangeway—Mr. John's brother."

Louise clasped her knees with her fingers and sat thinking. She was wide awake now.

"He has been here some time already, madame," Aline continued. "I did not wish to disturb you, but I thought perhaps it was better for you to know that he was here."

"Quite right, Aline," Louise decided. "Go down and tell him that I will see him in half an hour, and get my bath ready at once."

Louise dressed herself simply but carefully. She could conceive of but one reason for Stephen's presence in her house, and it rather amused her. It was, of course, no friendly visit. He had come either to threaten or to cajole. Yet what could he do? What madness, as he was assailed by a certain madness, are best left alone with it. That is why I came to you to bargain, if I could. Is there anything that you lack—anything which your own success and your lover, or lovers, have failed to provide for you?"

It was useless to try to rise; she was powerless in all her limbs. Side by side with the anger and horror that his words aroused was a sense of something almost grotesque, something which seemed to force an unnatural laugh from her lips.

"So you want to buy me off?" "I should be glad to believe that it was within my power to do so. I have not John's great fortune, but I have money, the accumulated savings of a lifetime, for which I have no better purpose. There is one more thing, too, to be said."

"Another charge?"

"Not that," he told her; "only it is better for you to understand that if you turn me from your house this morning, I shall still feel the necessity of saving my brother from you."

"Saving him from me?" she exclaimed, rising suddenly and throwing out her arms. "Do you know what you are talking about? Do you know that if I consented to think of your brother as my husband, there is not a man in London who would not envy him? Look at me! I am beautiful, am I not? I am a great artist. I am Louise Maurel, and I have made myself famous by my own work and my own genius. What has your brother done in life to render him worthy of the sacrifice I should make if I chose to give him my hand? You had better go back to Cumberland, Mr. Strangeway. You do not see life as we see it up here!"

"And what about John?" he asked, without moving. "You tempted him away. Was it from wantonness, or do you love him?"

"Love him?" she laughed. "I hate you both! You are bores—you are ignorant people. I hate the moment I ever saw either of you. Take John back with you. Take him out of my life. There is no place there for him!"

Stephen picked up his hat from the sofa where it lay. Louise remained perfectly still, her breath coming quickly, her eyes lit with passion.

"Madam," he said, "I am sorry to have distressed you, but the truth sometimes hurts the most callous of us. You have heard the truth from me. I will take John back to Cumberland with me, if he will come. If he will not—"

"Take him with you!" she broke in fiercely. "He will do as I bid him—do you hear? If I lift my little finger, he will stay. It will be I who decide, I—"

"But you will not lift your little finger," he interrupted grimly.

"Why shouldn't I, just to punish you?" she demanded. "There are scores of men who fancy themselves in love with me. If I choose, I can keep them all their lives hanging to the hem of my skirt, praying for a word, a touch. I can make them furious one day and penitent the next—wretched always, perhaps, but I can keep them there. Why should I not treat your brother in the same way?"

He seemed suddenly to dilate. She was overcome with a sense of some latent power in the man, some commanding influence.

"Because," he declared, "I am the guardian of my brother's happiness. Whoever trifles with it shall in the future reckon with me!"

His eyes were fixed upon her soft, white throat. His long, lean fingers seemed suddenly to be drawing near to her. She watched him, fascinated. She was trying to scream. Even after

"I have come," he said, "if I can, to buy your brother's freedom."

"To buy your brother's freedom?" she repeated, in a dazed tone.

"My brother is infatuated with you," Stephen declared. "I wish to save him."

The woman's courage began to assert itself. She raised her eyes to his. "Exactly what do you mean?" she asked calmly. "In what way is any man to be saved from me? If your brother should care for me, and I, by any chance, should happen to care for him, in what respect would that be a state from which he would require salvation?"

"You make my task more difficult," he observed deliberately. "Does it amuse you to practice your profession before one so ignorant and so unappreciative as myself? If my brother should ever marry, it is my firm intention that he shall marry an honest woman."

Louise sat quite still for a moment. A flash of lightning had glittered before her eyes, and in her ears was the crash of thunder. Her face was suddenly strained. She saw nothing but the stern, forbidding expression of the man who looked down at her.

"You dare to say this to me, here in my own house?"

"Dare? Why not? Don't people tell you the truth here in London, then?"

She rose a little unsteadily to her feet, motioning him toward the door, and moving toward the bell. Suddenly she sank back into her former place, breathless and helpless.

"Why do you waste your breath?" he asked calmly. "We are alone here, you and I—we know the truth!"

She sat quite still, shivering a little. "Do we? Tell me, then, because I am curious—tell me why you are so sure of what you say."

"The world has it," he replied, "that you are the mistress of the prince of Seyre. I came to London to satisfy myself as to the truth of that report. Do you believe that any man living, among that audience last night, could watch the play—although you are a clever actress, madam—and believe that you were a woman who was living an honest life?"

"That seems impossible to you?" she demanded.

"Utterly impossible!"

"And to John?"

"I am speaking for myself and not for my brother," Stephen replied. "Men like him, who are assailed by a certain madness, are best left alone with it. That is why I came to you to bargain, if I could. Is there anything that you lack—anything which your own success and your lover, or lovers, have failed to provide for you?"

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