

CHAPTER XI

SHADOWS

THE dinner, which Marjorie Ferrar had so suddenly recollected, was MacGown's, and when she reached the appointed restaurant, he was waiting in the hall.

"Where are the others, Alec?"

"There are no others," said MacGown.

Marjorie Ferrar reined back. "I can't dine with you alone in a place like this!"

"I had the Ppynrryrs, but they fell through."

"Then I shall go to my Club."

"For God's sake, no, Marjorie. We'll have a private room. Go and wait in there, while I arrange it."

With a shrug she passed into a little 'lounge.' A young woman whose face seemed familiar idled in, looked at her, and idled out again, the ormolu clock ticked, the walls of striped pale grey stared blankly in the brilliant light, and Marjorie Ferrar stared blankly back—she was still seeing Francis Wilmot's ecstatic face.

"Now!" said MacGown. "Up those stairs, and third on the right. I'll follow in a minute."

She had acted in a play, she had passed an emotional hour, and she was hungry. At least she could dine before making the necessary scene. And while she drank the best champagne MacGown could buy, she talked and watched the burning eyes of her adorer. That red-brown visage, square, stiff-haired head, and powerful frame—what a contrast to the pale, slim face and form of Francis! This was a man, and when he liked, agree-

able. With him she would have everything she wanted except—what Francis could give her. And it was one or the other—not both, as she had thought it might be. She had once crossed the ‘striding edge’ on Helvellyn, with a precipice on one side and a precipice on the other, and herself, doubting down which to fall, in the middle. She hadn’t fallen, and—she supposed—she wouldn’t now! One didn’t, if one kept one’s head!

Coffee was brought; and she sat, smoking, on the sofa. Her knowledge of private rooms taught her that she was now as alone with her betrothed as money could make them. How would he behave?

He threw his cigar away, and sat down by her side. This was the moment to rise and tell him that he was no longer her betrothed. His arm went round her, his lips sought her face. “Mind my dress; it’s the only decent one I’ve got.”

And, suddenly, not because she heard a noise, but because her senses were not absorbed like his, she perceived a figure in the open doorway. A woman’s voice said: “Oh! I beg your pardon; I thought——” Gone!

Marjorie Ferrar started up.

“Did you see that young woman?”

“Yes. Damn her!”

“She’s shadowing me.”

“What?”

“I don’t know her, and yet I know her perfectly. She had a good look at me down-stairs, when I was waiting.”

MacGown dashed to the door and flung it open. Nobody was there! He shut it, and came back.

“By heaven! Those people, I’ll—! Well, that ends it! Marjorie, I shall send our engagement to the papers tomorrow.”

Marjorie Ferrar, leaning her elbows on the mantel-

piece, stared at her own face in the glass above it. 'Not a moral about her!' What did it matter? If only she could decide to marry Francis out of hand, slide away from them all—debts, lawyers, Alec! And then the 'You be damned' spirit in her blood revolted. The impudence of it! Shadowing her! No! She was not going to leave Miss Fleur triumphant—the little snob; and that old party with the chin!

MacGown raised her hand to his lips; and, somehow, the caress touched her.

"Oh! well," she said, "I suppose you'd better."

"Thank God!"

"Do you really think that to get me is a cause for gratitude?"

"I would go through Hell to get you."

"And after? Well, as we're public property, let's go down and dance."

For an hour she danced. She would not let him take her home, and in her cab she cried. She wrote to Francis when she got in. She went out again to post it. The bitter stars, the bitter wind, the bitter night! At the little slurred thump of her letter dropping, she laughed. To have played at children! It was too funny! So that was done with! 'On with the dance!'

Extraordinary, the effect of a little paragraph in the papers! Credit, like new-struck oil, spurted sky-high. Her post contained, not bills for dresses, but solicitations to feed, frizz, fur, flower, feather, furbelow, and photograph her. London offered itself. To escape that cynical avalanche she borrowed a hundred pounds and flew to Paris. There, every night, she went to the theatre. She had her hair done in a new style, she ordered dresses, ate at places known to the few—living up to Michael's nickname for her; and her heart was heavy.

She returned after a week, and burned the avalanche—fortunately all letters of congratulation contained the phrase ‘of course you won’t think of answering this.’ She didn’t. The weather was mild; she rode in the Row; she prepared to hunt. On the eve of departure, she received an anonymous communication.

“Francis Wilmot is very ill with pneumonia at the Cosmopolis Hotel. He is not expected to live.”

Her heart flurried round within her breast and flumped; her knees felt weak; her hand holding the note shook; only her head stayed steady. The handwriting was ‘that little snob’s.’ Had Francis caused this message to be sent? Was it his appeal? Poor boy! And must she go and see him if he were going to die? She so hated death. Did this mean that it was up to her to save him? What did it mean? But indecision was not her strong point. In ten minutes she was in a cab, in twenty at the Hotel. Handing her card, she said:

“You have a Mr. Wilmot here—a relative of mine. I’ve just heard of his serious illness. Can I go up and see the nurse?”

The Management looked at the card, inquisitively at her face, touched a bell, and said:

“Certainly, madam. . . . Here, you—take this lady up to Room—er—209.”

Led by what poor Francis called a ‘bell-boy’ into the lift, she walked behind his buttons along a pale-grey river of corridor carpet, between pale-grey walls, past cream-coloured after cream-coloured door in the bright electric light, with her head a little down.

The ‘bell-boy’ knocked ruthlessly on a door.

It was opened, and in the lobby of the suite stood Fleur. . . .