

"That might be possible."

"Might be," the tone expressive of indignation, her eyes flashing into mine. "Do these words imply doubt? If so there remains nothing more for me to relate."

"By no means; you misunderstand. I believe all you say, and merely questioned to better clear the affair up in my own mind. Odd as this meeting has been, we can be friends, can we not?" Impelled by some sudden impulse I held out my hand.

Her face was toward the light, and I could perceive the change of expression. There was an instant of hesitancy; then her gloved hand met mine firmly.

"I would be a brute not to say yes," she responded frankly. "Although I cannot let you dream that I ever contemplated such a thing. This is all an accident—a most unfortunate accident so far as it concerns me—yet I can congratulate myself that it is no worse. I have confidence that you are a gentleman."

I bowed, still retaining the small hand, and conscious of the almost wistful look as her eyes met mine.

"I am Philip Dessaud," I said simply, "an officer of the French army."

She drew a quick breath, apparently of surprise.

"Why, I have heard the name before; you—you are the aviator?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle," with a smile, "and it is surely something not to be entirely unknown."

"If all I have read be true it is much more than that," she responded quickly. "They say—the newspaper writers—that your discoveries will revolutionize flying. Of course," she added hastily, "as a woman I know about such things only in the most superficial way."

"And the suppositions of the newspaper men have yet to be proven by experiment," I confessed good humoredly. "The end of the week will tell the tale."

"And I shall be so interested now in your success—just from this little meeting, this brief acquaintance. What small happenings change our outlook on life."

"Do you call this small, Mademoiselle? I have begun to view it as of importance. Perhaps it is because you see it with other eyes—beautiful as I imagine them to be—that you still refrain from telling me whom I am addressing?"

She withdrew her hand, but with a gentleness that left no sting, stepping back a little, so as to come within the shade of the stone.

"You possess the French gift of compliment, Monsieur," and her voice had in it the old accent of laughter. "I am not sure it meets my approval. However, I shall be fair with you—I am Helen Probyn."

"Not of the English Probyns, in Kent? I have been at their manor-house."

"No such luck; while I may be a sixteenth cousin, who knows, the very best I can claim is an ancestral home on the coast of Maine. No, Monsieur, I abominate pretense, and if you accept me at all it will have to be as a very common individual—'unknown, unhonored, and unsung.'"

"Which statement I believe, or not, as I please."

"No," decisively. "You must accept my word. I am simply an atom in the great sea of life—a working girl."

"A working girl," I mocked. "Your language, your dress betrays you."

"You think so. That is because you judge from the viewpoint of the European rather than the American. Nevertheless it is true, Monsieur, for, although my work may be of the brain instead of the body, I am still under orders. If my task is not done I suffer, and am told to go and come, fetch and carry, just as though I was a serf in the fields. In other words I am an employee, dependent on the whim of my employer for my daily bread. This fact changes the whole aspect of affairs, does it not?"

"You mean my interest in you?"

"Certainly. That is why I have been so frank. I know your class prejudice, your point of view. Over there a great gulf is fixed between those who earn and those with nothing better to do than spend. Even in America it exists to some extent, but with you it is an inheritance of birth. Thinking me of your own class you became interested in my personality; but now that I have confessed the truth all your desire will be to politely say good night. I prefer to anticipate," and she extended her hand. "Good night, Monsieur."

I held it close, my heart beating more rapidly. "You think me a snob?"

"Oh, no, Monsieur; merely what birth and environment would naturally make you."

"But cannot a man, a cosmopolitan, overcome such prejudices?" I protested warmly. "Even if I admit being born into the class of idlers, yet my life since has thrown me much into the society of those who work. I have even learned to work myself beside them, and have turned toward them for instruction. I have mechanics with me here—common soldiers from the ranks—who are my friends."

"Not socially, Monsieur. That is the point I make."

"A distinction in your case I refuse to admit, Mademoiselle. I bow to your will—yes. If it is to be good-by, I submit, but never because I deem you not of my class, or beneath me in any way. You do insist?"

"It will be best. I am sorry, but I am sure it will be best."

Our eyes met, yet she stepped aside, and passed me. It was accomplished with such quiet decision that I failed for the instant to grasp the truth. But one fact impressed itself upon me—those eyes which had been lifted to mine were misty with tears. She was in trouble, in distress, and yet she was leaving me. In that second of time all suspicion, all doubt left my mind, and I became conscious of a new respect for this girl, a new desire to serve her. Whoever she was, however strange our meeting, I could not let her pass out of my life like this. In obedience to the first swift impulse, I crossed the broad walk, and touched her arm.

"You shall not disappear like that," I exclaimed. "I am enough of a fatalist to accept destiny. You will tell me all."

"All?"

"Yes, there were tears in your eyes as you turned away. You had held them back as long as it was possible. It was only because you could restrain yourself no longer that you left so hastily."

"Oh, please—"

"No. I am going to say what I think. You are in trouble, some real, desperate trouble. That was why you ventured to call upon this old-time acquaintance, Houser. Blindly seeking help, you had found his name on the hotel register, but at first lacked courage to approach him. When you finally did call up by telephone he had left the room, and you got me. Isn't this the truth?"

"I—I—why do you insist upon my answering? You have no right to question me in this way."

"Not if it was idle curiosity; but I wish to assure you my motive is far higher than that. Forget how we have met—it was no fault of either of us—and believe me a gentleman. To my mind the first duty of gentleness is to relieve a woman in distress. I claim the privilege. Surely you will trust me? You will not refuse?"

She stood with head bowed, her face hidden in the shadows.

"You—you are too kind," she stammered. "I—I do not know what to say."

"Which is a confession itself. My guess then is not far wrong? It was because of trouble—your own trouble—that you sought an interview with Houser?"

"Yes."

"And when you discovered a mistake had been made you were desperate? You did not know what to do?"

"Yes."

"And you left me just now because you could stand the strain no longer? You realize that you must confess everything, or else go away?"

She lifted her eyes to mine.

"That is true—yes."

"Then that is what you are going to do," and I held out my hands.

"What?"

"Trust me as a friend, and make full confession."

She made no movement to give me her hands, but stood motionless with eyes on my face.

"But—but how can I?" she questioned doubtfully. "I—I do not know you."

"Years of acquaintance have little to do with friendship," I insisted. "I wish to serve you honestly, and in all kindness. Surely you will not refuse merely on the plea of our short acquaintance—you are far too sensible a girl."

I felt the warm clasp of her fingers, and knew she was crying softly.

"I would be idiotic if I did," she responded, her voice trembling in spite of every effort at control. "It is not because I am afraid of you; not because it is unconventional, Monsieur. I have advanced beyond that stage in life. I do what I deem to be right without being troubled by the opinion of others. There were two reasons which have kept me from confiding in you—pride, and a hesitancy to involve a stranger in my trouble."

"Forget the word stranger."

"You compel me to; I will not use it again. Shall I tell you everything?"

"That will be best; then no fresh mistake is possible."

She drew a deep breath, the heavy lashes hiding her eyes.

"I—I am hungry," she confessed, almost in a whisper. "That is the bitter truth, Monsieur; I have not eaten since yesterday."

I stared at her, too surprised for immediate speech. "You do not believe?"

"Yes, but it is so strange; I can hardly realize the possibility. You must go with me to some restaurant at once," and my eyes searched the electric signs opposite. The story can wait. Where shall we go?"

She tried to smile, yet trembled so that her fingers clasped my sleeve. The slight pressure appealed even more strongly than her words.

"That—that is good of you. I cannot talk until I have food; it is the reaction which makes me so weak; the—the knowledge that I have found a friend."

CAPTER IV

UNCOVERING A CONSPIRACY

I HAVE small recollection of where we went, only it was not far, but involved a ride in an elevator.

Not until we were seated opposite each other at a small table did I really have intelligent view of my companion. As I glanced across at her, while ordering from the extensive bill of fare, I was conscious of a newly awakened interest. Not beautiful, perhaps not even pretty, if judged by accepted standards, my vis-a-vis was certainly most attractive, a slender girl of medium height, with dark eyes and hair, the former thoughtful and a bit dreamy; the latter most abundant and glossy. Her face was white, but the skin clear, and, as she turned her head to look at the occupants of the other tables, I could but observe the well-modeled features, expressive of character and high breeding. Whatever she might claim to be—child of the farm, girl of the working class—her appearance, as well as her language, bespoke ancestry and social standing. I confess this discovery was to me a relief, and I must have exhibited my feeling by some unconscious outward sign, for the lady glanced across at me questioningly.

"What is it, Monsieur?"

"You will laugh if I tell you," I replied uneasily.

"Then tell me, pray, for I want an excuse."

"I have been looking at you for the first time in the light, and approve wholly."

"Indeed," her eyes dancing. "That is nice, but a confession that previously you were somewhat doubtful."

"Why, yes; you see you—"

"Oh, I know," leaning forward, so to speak more softly. "You have been troubled by my humble origin; my confession of having to work for a living. You began to fear you were in contact with one of the lower classes. And now?"

"The thought will never again occur, Mademoiselle. I am convinced, converted. In America it is not as in France, in Europe; or is it that you work from love of art? because the soul aspires?"

She laughed at this heartily, with white teeth gleaming between red lips, and eyes dancing.

"Not so poetical; no! no!" a little gesticulation of the hands, now ungloved, but showing white and ringless. "It is very prosaic, my work, and its main purpose is the purchase of bread and butter. Were you ever in need, Monsieur?"

"Not as you mean—what you call 'broke'; I have been hungry—yes; and thirsty. On campaign one suffers often, and I have also been lost in African forests, and nearly perished. But money! 'tis true I have always possessed that."

"Then you know nothing of what it really means to be born poor; to have to struggle from early childhood for every luxury, almost every necessity; to have to earn your own schooling, working while your classmates play, and then, at graduation, accepting the first offer of employment. That has been my life, Monsieur, and it is not an uncommon one. It does not seem to me I was ever a little girl, for I can scarcely remember back to a time when I was not burdened by responsibilities." She paused, leaning her head on her hands, but still with eyes on my face. "It is all right to talk of art and ambition, but some lives must learn early to put such dreams aside, and front the stern realities of existence, thankfully accepting what the gods send."

"You have dreamed, however; it is written in your face."

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