

OCTOBER

VOL. 8 NO. 2

1902

PRICE 25 cts

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ESS ESS PUBLISHING COMPANY

NEW YORK  
452 Fifth Ave.

LONDON

PARIS

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# AN INCARNATION OF HELEN

By James Branch Cabell

"And memories of distant homes and wives."

"WHICH," murmured Townsend, "is an uncommonly good line." He chewed the end of his pencil, meditatively. "From present indications," said he, "that Russian countess is cooking something on her chafing-dish again. It usually affects them that way about dawn."

He began on the next verse viciously, and came a cropper over the clash of two sibilants as the distant clamor increased. "Brutes!" said he, disapprovingly. "Sere, clear, dear—Now they've finished, '*Jamais, monsieur*,' and begun crying, 'Fire!' Mere, near— By Jove! I do smell smoke!"

Wrapping his dressing-gown about him—he had afterward reason to thank the kindly fates that it was the green one with the white fleurs-de-lis, and not the wonted unspeakably disreputable bath-robe, scorched in various and unexpected places by the pipe-ashes of many years—Townsend went to the door and peered out into the empty hotel corridor. The incandescent lights glimmered mildly through a gray haze that was acrid and choking to breathe; little puffs of smoke crept lazily out of the lift-shaft just opposite; down-stairs all Breslau was shouting, "*Feuer!*" and dragging about the heavier and less valuable pieces of hotel furniture.

"By Jove!" said Townsend, and whistled disconsolately as he looked downward through the bars about the lift-shaft.

"Do you think," spoke a voice—a deep contralto voice—"that we are in—in any danger?"

The owner of the voice was very tall, and not even the agitation of the moment prevented Townsend's observing that her eyes were on a level with his own. They were not unpleasant eyes, and a stray dream or two yet lingered under their fringed lids. The owner of the voice wore a strange garment that was fluffy and pink—pale pink, like the lining of a sea-shell—and billows of white and the ends of various blue ribbons peeped out at the neck. Townsend made a mental note of the fact that disordered hair is not necessarily unbecoming; it sometimes has the effect of an unusually heavy halo set about the face of a half-awakened angel.

"It would appear," said he, meditatively, "that, in consideration of our being on the fifth floor, with the lift-shaft drawing splendidly, and the stairs winding about it—except the two lower flights, which have just fallen in—and in consideration of the fire department's recognized incompetence to extinguish anything more formidable than a tar-barrel—yes, it would appear, I think, that we might go farther than 'dangerous' and find a less appropriate adjective to describe the situation."

"You—you mean we can't get down?" The beautiful voice was tremulous.

Townsend's silence made conclusive reply.

"Well, then," she suggested, cheerfully, after due reflection, "since we can't go down, why not go up?"

As a matter of fact, nothing could be more simple. They were on the top floor of the hotel, and beside them, in the niche corresponding to the

stairs below, was an iron ladder that led to a neatly whitewashed trap-door in the roof. Adopting her suggestion, Townsend pushed against this and found that it yielded readily; then, standing at the top of the ladder, he looked about him on a dim expanse of tiles and chimneys; yet farther off were the peaked roofs and gables of Breslau; and above him brooded a clean sky and the naked glory of the moon. He lowered his head with a sigh of relief.

"I say," he called, cheerily, "it's much nicer up here—superb view of the city, and within a minute's drop of the square! Better come up."

"Go first," said she; and subsequently Townsend held for a moment a very slender hand—a ridiculously small hand for a woman whose eyes were on a level with his own—and the two stood together on the roof of the Hôtel Continental. They had, as Townsend had affirmed, an unobstructed view of Breslau and of its square, where two toy-like engines puffed viciously and threw impotent threads of water against the burning hotel and on the heads of an excited and erratically clad throng.

Townsend looked moodily down. "That's the café," said he, sulkily, as a series of small explosions popped like pistol shots. "Oh, Lord! there goes the only decent Scotch in all Breslau!"

"There's mamma!" she cried, excitedly; "there!" She pointed to a stout woman, who, with a purple shawl wrapped about her head, was wringing her hands as heartily as a birdcage held in one of them would permit. "And—and she's saved Jackie!"

"In that case," said Townsend, "I suppose it's clearly my duty to rescue the remaining member of the family. You see," he continued, bending over the trap-door and tugging at the ladder, "this thing is only about twenty feet long, but the kitchen wing of the hotel is a little less than that from the rear of the house behind it, and with this as a bridge I

think we might make it. At any rate, the roof will be done for in a half-hour, and it's worth trying." He drew the ladder up slowly. "You'll have to help," said he. "Think you're up to carrying your end?"

"My muscles—!" she began, indignantly; then she put aside the subject with a flush, and lifted one end of the ladder with ostentatious ease. They carried it between them down the gentle slant of the roof, through a maze of ghostly chimneys and dim skylights, to the kitchen wing, which was a few feet lower than the main body of the building. Townsend skirted a chimney and stepped lightly over the eaves, calling, "Now, then!" when a little cry, followed by a crash in the yard beneath, shook his heart into his mouth. He turned gasping, and found the girl lying safe but terrified, on the verge of the roof.

"It—it was a bucket," she sobbed, "and I stumbled over it—and it fell—and—and I nearly did—and I'm so frightened!"

"Little girl! little girl!" cried he. Somehow he was holding her hand in his and his mouth was making foolish sounds and he was trembling in every limb. "It—it was close; but—but, look here, you must pull yourself together!" he pleaded, piteously.

"I can't," she cried, hysterically. "Oh, I'm so frightened! I can't!"

"You see," said Townsend, with careful patience, "we must go on—*must*, do you understand?" He waved his hand toward the east, helplessly. "Look!" said he, as a thin tongue of flame leaped through the open trap-door and flickered wickedly for a moment against the darkness.

She saw and shuddered. "I'll come," she murmured, listlessly, and rose to her feet.

Townsend heaved a sigh of relief, and, waving her aside from the ladder, dragged it after him to the eaves of the rear wing. As he had foreseen, it reached easily to the eaves of the house behind it, which was fortunately of the same height, and formed a passable,



though unsubstantial-looking, bridge. He regarded it disapprovingly.

"It will only bear one," said he; "and—and we'll have to crawl over separately. Are you up to it?"

"Please go first," said she, very quietly. And Townsend, after gazing into her face for a moment, crept over gingerly, not caring to look down into the abyss beneath.

Then he spent an apparent century in silent impotence, watching a fluffy, pink figure that swayed over a bottomless space and moved forward a hair's breadth each year. He made no sound during this interval. In fact, he did not subsequently remember drawing a really satisfactory breath from the time he left the hotel roof, until he lifted a soft, faint-scented, panting bundle to the roof of the Councillor von Hellwig.

"You are," he cried, with conviction, "the bravest, the most—er—the bravest woman I ever knew!" He heaved a little sigh of content. "I wonder," said Townsend, in his soul, "if you have any idea what a beauty you are! what a wonderful, unspeakable beauty you are! You are everything that men ever dreamed of in dreams that left them weeping for sheer happiness—and more! You are—you are *you*, and I have held you in my arms for a moment; and, before high heaven, to do that again I'd burn countless cities!" But aloud he only said, "We're quite safe now, you know."

She laughed, bewilderingly. "I suppose," said she, "the next thing is to find a trap-door."

But there were, so far as they could find, no trap-doors in the roof of the Councillor von Hellwig, or in the neighboring roofs; and, after searching three of them carefully, Townsend, apologetic but not ill-pleased, suggested the propriety of waiting till dawn to be rescued.

"You see," he pointed out, "everybody's at the fire over yonder. But we're quite safe, I should say, with the whole block of houses to walk on; and we have cheerful company, eligible

central location in the heart of the city, and the superb spectacle of a big fire at exactly the proper distance. Therefore," he continued, severely, "you will instantly have the kindness to explain exactly what your motives were in wandering about the corridors of a burning hotel at four o'clock in the morning."

She sat down against a chimney and wrapped her gown about her. "I sleep very soundly," said she, meekly, "and the cries awakened me—and I suppose mamma lost her head."

"And left you," thought Townsend, "left you—to save a canary bird! Good Lord!"

"And you?" she asked.

"Oh—oh, yes, me!" He awoke sharply from wondering how she would disentangle her lashes when she looked up; it seemed impossible without assistance. "I was writing—and I thought that Russian woman had a few friends to supper—and I was looking for a rhyme when I found you," he concluded, incoherently.

She looked up. It was incredible, but the lashes disentangled quite easily. Townsend was seized with a strong desire to see her perform this interesting feat again. "Verses?" said she, considering his slippers in a new light.

"Yes," he admitted, guiltily, "of Helen."

She echoed the name. It is an unusually beautiful name when properly spoken.

"Late of Troy town," said he, in explanation.

"Oh!" The lashes fell into their former state. It was hopeless this time; help would be required, inevitably. "I should think," said she, judicially, "that—that live women would be more—inspiring."

"Surely," assented Townsend. He drew his gown about him and sat down. "But, you see, she is alive—to me." He dwelt lingeringly on the last words.

"One would gather," said she, meditatively, "that you have an unrequited attachment for Helen of Troy."

A sudden idea came to Townsend, and he sighed a melancholy assent. The great eyes opened to their utmost extent. The effect was that of a ship firing a broadside at you. "Tell me all about it," said she, coaxingly.

"I have always loved her," said Townsend, with gravity. "Long ago, when I was a little chap, I had a book, 'Stories of the Trojan War,' or something of the sort. And there I first read of Helen—and remembered. There were pictures—outline pictures—of phenomenally straight-nosed warriors, with flat draperies which demonstrated that the laws of gravity were not yet discovered; pictures of slender goddesses, who had done their hair up carefully and gone no further in their dressing; all sorts of pictures—and Helen's was the most manifestly impossible of them all. But I knew—I knew of her beauty, that wonderful beauty which made men's hearts as water and drew the bearded kings to Ilium to die for her, having put away all memories of distant homes and wives; that flawless beauty which buoyed the Trojans through ten years of fighting and starvation, just with pure delight in gazing upon it day by day, and with the joy of seeing her going about their streets. For I remembered!" He sighed effectively, as he ended.

"I know," said she, softly.

"Or ever the knightly years had gone  
With the old world to the grave,  
I was a king in Babylon  
And you were a Christian slave."

"Yes; only, I was the slave, I think, and you—er—I mean, there goes the roof, and it's an uncommonly good thing you thought of the trap-door. Good thing the wind's veering, too. By Jove! look at those flames!" he cried, as the main body of the Continental toppled inward like a house of cards; "they're splashing, actually splashing, like waves over a breakwater!" He drew a deep breath and turned from the conflagration, only to catch its leaping reflection in her eyes. "I was a Trojan warrior," he resumed, simply, "one of the

many unknown men who sought and found death beside Scamander, trodden down by Achilles or Diomedes, and died knowing they fought in a bad cause, but all wrapt in a mad, wild joy, remembering the desire o' the world and her perfect loveliness. She scarce knew that I existed; but I had loved her; I had caught some scant laughing words from her in passing and I treasured them as men treasure gold; or she had spoken, perhaps—oh, day of days!—to me, in a low, courteous voice that came straight from the back of the throat and blundered deliciously over the harshness of our alien speech. I remembered—even as a boy, I remembered."

She cast back her head and laughed, merrily. "I—I think," said she, "you are the most amusing madman I ever encountered."

"No," murmured Townsend; "she never dies. She is the spirit of beauty that never dies, but ever draws men onward through the world with visions of the heart's desire. She is to each man the one woman that he may love perfectly; and to no two is her face the same. She is sister to the old centuries; but she never dies. Her soul has known many fleshly coverings; and through countless ages I have followed her and fought for her and won her and lost her, but always loving her as all men must do. And some day—" His voice died into a whisper that was partly due to emotion and partly to an inability to finish the sentence satisfactorily. The logic of his verses, when thus hastily paraphrased, seemed vague.

"You hope to meet her in this matter-of-fact day?"

"Why not?" His voice was earnest. "She always comes. Is it madness?" Townsend spread out his hands in a helpless little gesture. "I do not know. But she will come."

"You will know her?" she queried, softly.

Townsend had reached firm ground at last. "She will be very tall," said



he, "like a young birch tree when its leaves whisper over to one another the songs of Spring in the heart of the woods. Her hair will be a miser's dream of gold; and it will hang heavily about a face that will be—will be quite indescribable, just as the dawn yonder is past the utmost preciousness of speech; but it will flush tenderly, like the first anemone of Spring peeping coyly through the black, good-smelling earth; and her eyes will be deep, shaded wells where truth lurks. When men talk to her as they cannot but talk to her, her face will flush dull red, like smouldering wood; and she will smile a little, and look out over a great fire such as that she saw on the night when Ilium was sacked and the slain bodies were soft under her feet as she fled through flaming Troy Town. And then—then I shall know her."

His companion sighed, wearily; the woes of centuries weighed down her eyelids for a moment. "It is bad enough," she lamented, "to have lost all one's wardrobe—that blue organdie was a dream and I had never worn it—but to find one's self—in a dressing-gown—at daybreak—on a strange roof—with a strange madman—it is terrible!"

Townsend rose to his feet and waved his hand toward the east. The dawn was breaking in angry scarlet and gold that spread like fire over half the visible horizon; the burning hotel shut out the remaining half with tall flames that shouldered one another monotonously and seemed dull and faded against the pure radiance of the sky. Chill daylight showed in melting patches through the clouds of black smoke overhead. It was a world of fire, transfigured by the austere magnificence of dawn and the grim splendor of the shifting, roaring conflagration; and at their feet lay the orchard of the Councillor von Hellwig, and the awakened birds piped querulously, and the sparks fell crackling among the apple-blossoms.

"Ilium!" he cried.

She inspected the scene, critically. "It does look like Ilium," she admitted. "And that," peering over the eaves into the deserted by-street, "that looks like the milkman."

Townsend was unable to deny this, though an angry idea crossed his mind that any milkman with proper tastes and feelings would at this moment be gaping at the fire at the other end of the block, rather than prosaically measuring quarts at the side-entrance just below. But there was no help for it, when chance thus unblushingly favored the proprieties, and he clung to a water-pipe and explained the situation with a vexed mind and doubtful German.

He turned to his companion. She was regarding the burning hotel with a curiously impersonal expression.

"Now, I'd give a good deal," thought Townsend, "to know just how long you'd like that milkman to take in coming back."

## II

"Do you know," said Townsend, subsequently—it was a little more than five years later—"that I didn't quite catch your name?"

She took a liberal supply of lemon juice. "The oysters," she murmured, "are delicious."

Townsend noted with approval that her gown was pink and fluffy; it had also the advantage of displaying shoulders that were incredibly white and a throat that was little short of marvelous. "I am glad," he whispered, confidentially, "that you are still wearing that faint vein about your temple; I approve of it." She raised her eyebrows slightly and selected a biscuit. "You see," said Townsend, "I was horribly late. And when Lady Pevensey said, 'Allow me,' and I saw—well, I didn't care," he concluded, lucidly.

"How curious!" she confided to a spoonful of *consommé à la Julienne*.

"After five years!" sighed Town-

send, happily. But he continued, with unutterable reproach, "To go without a word—that very day——"

"Mamma——" she began.

Townsend recalled the canary-bird and groaned. "I sought wildly," said he; "you were flown. The *propriétaire* was tearing his hair—no insurance—he knew nothing. I tore my hair, metaphorically; I said things. There was a row. He, too, said things: 'Figure to yourselves, *messieurs!* I lose the Continental—two ladies come and go, I know not who—I am ruined, desolated, is it not?—and this pig of an Englishman blusters—ah, my new carpets, just down, what horror! Ah, perfidious Albion!'—Yes," concluded Townsend, into the Duchess of Drummington's ear-trumpet; "only in town for a few days."

There was an interval and an *entrée*.

"And so——?"

"And so I knocked about the world in various places, hoping against hope that at last——"

"Your voice carries frightfully."

Townsend glanced toward her grace of Drummington, who, as a dining dowager of many years' experience, was engrossed in the contents of her plate. "She's as hard of hearing as a telephone-girl; and your neighbor—his neighbor is Lady Allonby. We might as well be on a desert island, desire o' the world." The term slipped out so carelessly as to appear almost accidental.

"Sir!" said she, with proper indignation; "after so short an acquaintance——"

"Centuries," he suggested, meekly.

She frowned—an untrustworthy frown that was tinged with laughter. "One meets so many people! Yes, it is frightfully warm, Colonel Grimshaw; they really ought to open some of the windows."

"Er—haw—hum! Didn't see you at the Anchesters'."

"No; I am usually lucky enough to be in bed with a sick headache when Mrs. Anchester entertains. Of two

evils one should choose the lesser, you know."

"Er—haw—hum!" Colonel Grimshaw retired with a reassuring air of having done his duty, once and for all.

"I never," she suggested, tentatively, "heard any more of your poem about——about——"

"Oh, I finished it; every magazine in England knows it. It's poor stuff," sighed Townsend, "but how could I write of Helen when Helen had disappeared?"

The lashes tangled. "I looked her up," confessed their owner, guiltily, "in the encyclopedia. It was very instructive—about sun-myths and bronzes and the growth of the epic, you know. Of course"—there was a flush and a hiatus—"it is nonsense."

"Nonsense?" His voice sank tenderly. "Is it nonsense that for five years I have remembered a woman whose soft body I held—for a moment—in my arms? nonsense that I have fought all this time against—against the temptations every man has—that I might ask her at last—some day when she would come, as I knew she would—to share a fairly clean life? nonsense that I have dreamed, waking and sleeping, of a wondrous face I knew in Ilium—in old Rome—in France when the Valois were kings—a face whose least feature is stamped on my heart unalterably, which floated before me in the dusk of the Canada woods, and beckoned through the haze of the white African sands where we potted the Boers and the Boers potted us? Nonsense? Well," sighed Townsend, vainly racking his brain for a fragment of the five-year-old rhyme, "I suppose it is!"

"The salt, please," quoth she. Then, after a pause: "Canada?"

"Big moose," said he.

"Africa?"

Townsend flushed guiltily. "The V. C.," he admitted.

She flashed a broadside at him. "Oh! Then you——?"

"Dear me, yes!" said Townsend—to the ear-trumpet; "domesticity came in with ping-pong. Divorces are going



out, you know, and *divorcées* aren't allowed to. Quite modish women are seen in public with their husbands nowadays."

"Heavens!" lamented her grace of Drummington. "What a disagreeable fad!"

Townsend ate his portion of duck abstractedly. "Do you know—I wish——"

"Yes?"

"I hardly dare ask——"

"If I were the traditional fairy," said she, meditatively, "I could not, of course, refuse a—a hero. You should have the usual three wishes."

"Two," he declared, "would be sufficient."

"First?"

"That you tell me your name."

"I adore orange ices. Second?"

"That you let me measure your finger—any finger—say the third on the left hand."

"Absurd!" said she, decisively. "You really talk to me as if—" This non-existent state of affairs proved indescribable, the unreal condition lapsing into a pout.

"Possibly," he conceded, with caution; "the way in which a man talks to a woman—to the woman—depends largely upon the depth of——"

"The depth of his devotion?" she queried, helpfully. "Of course!"

Townsend faced the broadside bravely. "No," said he, critically; "the depth of her dimples."

"Nonsense!" Nevertheless the dimples deepened.

He bent forward; there was a little catch in his voice. "You must know that I love you," he said, simply. "I have always loved you, I think, since the moment my eyes first fell on you in that—that other pink thing. Of course, I realize the absurdity of my talking in this way to a woman whose name even I don't know; but I realize more strongly that I love you. Why, there isn't a pulse in my body that isn't throbbing and tingling and beating contentedly just from pure joy of being with you, desire o' the world! And, in time, you will love me a little,

simply because I want you to—isn't that always a woman's main reason for caring for a man?" She considered this dubious and flushed. "I won't insist," said Townsend, with a hurried, contented little laugh, "that you were formerly an Argive queen, if you don't like. That was a paraphrase of my verses, I confess—but—but Helen has always been to me the symbol of perfect loveliness, and it was not unnatural that I should identify you with her."

"Thank you, sir," said she, demurely.

"I half-believe it is true even now; and if not—well, Helen was well enough in her day, desire o' the world, but I have seen you and loved you, and Helen is forgot. It isn't exactly the orthodox way of falling in love," he added, with cheerful candor; "but—but it's very real to me."

"You—you couldn't have fallen in love, really," said she, unconvincingly.

"It was not in the least difficult," he protested.

"You don't even know my name."

Townsend laughed easily. "I know what it's going to be," said he, with conviction.

"No!" Common courtesy naturally demanded that this should not be spoken with undue harshness. "Never, under any conceivable circumstances!" Courtesy, perhaps, prompted the little sigh, which Townsend noted with approval.

"And after dinner—in an hour?"

"In the Winter Garden," she conceded; "I—I might decline you, with thanks."

"Rejection not implying any lack of merit," quoth Townsend, grimly. "Thanks; I'm accustomed to it."

Lady Pevensey was gathering eyes around the table, and her guests rose with the usual outburst of conversation and swishing of dresses and dropping of handkerchiefs and fans. The Duchess of Drummington bore down upon them, a determined and generously proportioned figure in black silk.

"Really," said she, aggressively, "I never saw two people more engrossed.



My dear Mrs. Barry-Smith, you've been so taken up with Bob Townsend, I haven't had a chance to ask after your dear husband, or get in a word. It's scandalous! Why isn't he here?"

"Dear Lady Drummington—" said she.

"In fact," broke in Townsend, smiling, "Mrs. Barry-Smith and I have been discussing very—very interesting subjects." His manner was perfection; but, as he stood aside to let them pass, he gripped the back of his chair somewhat more firmly than was absolutely necessary.

### III

"AND so," said Townsend, in his soul, as the men redistributed themselves, "she's married—married while you were pottering with big moose and battles and such trifles—oh, you ass! And to a man named Barry-Smith—Manchester and cotton goods, most likely—and—and Jimmy Travis is telling a funny story—laugh, you ass! No, I won't laugh—it's disgusting. Why isn't he at home—with a wife and carpet slippers—instead of here, grinning like a fool over some blatant indecency? He ought to marry; every young man ought to marry. Oh, you futile, abject, burbling ass! Why aren't you married—married years ago—with a home of your own and a brougham and—and bills from the kindergarten every quarter? Oh, you ass!" He snapped the stem of his glass carefully, and scowled with morose disapproval at the unconscious Mr. Travis.

He found her subsequently, inspecting a bulky folio with remarkable interest. There was a lamp with a red shade that cast a glow over her, such as one sometimes sees reflected from a great fire. The people about them were chattering idiotically, and something inside his throat prevented his breathing properly, and he was very miserable.

"Mrs. Barry-Smith," said he, gravely, "if you have any grace in your

heart for a very presumptuous, blundering, unhappy man, I pray you to forgive and forget all that I have said to you. I spoke, as I thought, to a free woman, who had the right to listen to my wild talk, even though she might elect to laugh at it. And now—now I hardly dare ask forgiveness."

Mrs. Barry-Smith inspected a view of the Matterhorn with careful deliberation. "Forgiveness?" said she, doubtfully.

"Indeed," said Townsend, "I do not deserve it." He smiled resolutely. "I had always known that somewhere, somehow, you would come into my life again. It has been my dream all these five years; but I dream carelessly. My visions had not included this—this obstacle."

She made wide eyes at him. "What?" said she.

"Your husband," he suggested, delicately.

The eyes flashed. There was an interval. A view of Monaco, to all appearances, awoke pleasing recollections. "I confess," said Mrs. Barry-Smith, "that—for the time—I had quite forgotten him."

"H'm!" said Townsend.

"I suppose," she hazarded, softly, "you think me very—very horrid?" She accompanied this query with a broadside that rendered such a supposition unthinkable.

"I think you—" His speech was hushed and breathless, and ended in a little click of the teeth. "Don't let's go into details," he pleaded, desperately.

Mrs. Barry-Smith descended to a truism. "It is usually unwise," said she, with the air of an authority. Then, addressing the façade of Notre Dame, "He is much—much older than I."

"I should prefer that. Of course it's none of my business," said Townsend, hastily.

"You—you see, you came and went so suddenly that—of course I never thought to see you again—not that I ever thought of it, of course." Her candor would have been cruel

had it not been suspiciously earnest. "And—and he was very pressing."

"He would be," assented Townsend, after consideration, "naturally."

"And he was a great friend of my father's, and I liked him."

"So you married him and lived happily ever afterward. Quite so!"

She smiled, inscrutably, a sphinx in Dresden china. "And yet," she murmured, plaintively, "I *should* like to know what you think of me."

"Now, in any other woman," thought Townsend, "that would have been vulgar." He set his teeth and faced the imminent danger bravely. "Prefacing my remarks," said he, in a level voice, "with the announcement that I pray God I may never see you after to-night, I think you the most adorable creature He ever made. What matter now? I have lost you. I think—ah, desire o' the world, what can I think of you? The thought of you dazzles me like flame—I do not think of you. I love you."

"Yes?" she queried, sweetly.

"I am going away," groaned Townsend, miserably, "for a long time."

"They always do," she lamented; "always."

"They?"

"Yes," she explained, lucidly; "when I—when I don't." She smiled reminiscently as Townsend rose.

"Think well of me," he pleaded.

"I will," she promised, with a swift, bewildering smile. Then she sighed.

She turned to a view of Capri. "It was very embarrassing," she murmured, "when that—that absent-minded Duchess of Drummington asked after him."

"H'm!" said Townsend, drily.

"You see," she explained, "he died three years ago."

Townsend sat down with startling abruptness. "Desire o' the world!" said he.

"Really," said she, tossing her head, and moving swiftly, "one would think we were on a desert island!"

"Or a strange roof," laughed Townsend, contentedly. "Of course," he

continued, wrapt in meditation, "we'll spend the honeymoon in Breslau. Yes—say three days in Paris—there's a piece at the Palais Royal they tell me isn't half bad—and then to Breslau." He caught his breath joyously. "Meanwhile, a ring—a heavy, Byzantine ring, with the stones sunk deep in the dull gold—five stones—R, a ruby—O, an opal—B, a beryl—E, emerald—R, ruby again—and T, a topaz. A sign that I possess you, desire o' the world—a badge of slavery that will weigh down your slender fingers!"

Very calmly she regarded the Bay of Naples; very calmly she turned to the Taj Mahal. "A strange man," she reflected aloud, "who has seen me twice, unblushingly assumes he is about to marry me! Of course," she sighed, tolerantly, "I know he's only an irresponsible maniac; otherwise——"

"Otherwise?"

"He would never ask me to wear an opal. Why," she cried, in horror, "I—I couldn't think of it!"

"You mean—?" said Townsend.

She closed the album, sadly, but firmly. "Dear boy," said Mrs. Barry-Smith, "we are utter strangers to each other. Why, I may have an unbridled temper, or an imported complexion, or a liking for Ibsen, for all you know. What you ask is preposterous. After a while, perhaps—besides, opals are unlucky," she concluded, decisively.

"Desire o' the world," said Townsend, in dolorous wise, "you are frightfully reasonable."

For a moment Mrs. Barry-Smith regarded him, critically. Then she shook her head, frowned, reopened the album, inspected the crater of Vesuvius, and sighed. A tender, pink-tipped hand rested on Townsend's arm for an instant—a very brief instant, yet one pulsing with a sense of many lights and of music playing somewhere, and of a certain man's heart keeping time to it.

"If you were to make it an onyx—" said Mrs. Barry-Smith.