

THE HILLMAN

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

LOUISE SEEMS TO HAVE REACHED THE POINT WHERE SHE DIDN'T CARE WHAT HAPPENED TO HER— AND THEN JOHN STRANGEWAY CAME INTO HER LIFE

Synopsis—On a trip through the English Cumberland country the breakdown of her motorcar forces Louise Maurel, famous London actress, to accept the overnight hospitality of Stephen and John Strangeway, reclusive woman haters, who own a great farm. Before she leaves she stirs the interest of John Strangeway and is in turn interested by him. Three months later John, on impulse, takes a train for London, and immediately renews his acquaintance with Louise. He is warned by her friend, Sophy, not to be puritanical in his regard for Louise.

CHAPTER VII.

The first few minutes that John spent in Louise's little house were full of acute and vivid interest. The room that he was so eagerly studying confirmed his cloudy impressions of its owner. There was, for a woman's apartment, a curious absence of ornamentation and knickknacks. The walls were black and white; the carpet was white; the furniture graceful in its outline, rather heavy in build, and covered with old-rose colored chintz. There were water-colors upon the wall, some small black-and-white fantasies, puzzling to John, who had never even heard the term futurist. A table, drawn up to the side of one of the easy chairs, was covered with books and magazines, some Italian, a few English, the greater part French; and upon a smaller one, close at hand, stood a white bowl full of pink roses. Their odor was somehow reminiscent of Louise, curiously sweet and wholesome—an odor which suddenly took him back to the morning when she had come to him from under the canopy of apple-blossom. His heart began to beat with pleasure even before the opening of the door announced her presence. She came in with Sophy, who at once seated herself by his side.

"We have been making plans," Louise declared, "for disposing of you for the rest of the day."

John smiled happily.

"You're not sending me away, then? You're not acting this evening?"

"Not until three weeks next Monday," she replied. "Then, if you are good, and the production is not postponed, you may seat yourself in a box and make all the noise you like after the fall of the curtain. These are real holidays for me, except for the nuisance of rehearsals. You couldn't have come at a better time."

Sophy glanced at the clock.

"Well," she said, "I must show my respect to that most ancient of adages by taking my departure. I feel—"

"You will do nothing of the sort, child," Louise interrupted. "I want to interest you in the evolution of Mr. Strangeway. We must remember that it is his first night in London. What aspect of it shall we attempt to show him? Don't say a word, Sophy. It is not for us to choose."

"I'm afraid there isn't any choice," John declared, his face falling. "I haven't any clothes except what you see me in."

"Hooray!" Sophy exclaimed. "Off with your smart gown, Louise! We'll be splendidly Bohemian. You shall put on your black frock and a black hat, and powder your nose, and we'll all go to Guido's first and drink vermuth. I can't look the part, but I can act it!"

"But tell me," Louise asked him, "did you lose your luggage?"

"I brought none," he answered.

They both looked at him—Sophy politely curious, Louise more deeply interested.

"You mean," Louise demanded, "that after waiting all these months you started away upon impulse like that—without even letting your brother know or bringing any luggage?"

"That's exactly what I did," John agreed, smiling. "I had a sovereign in my pocket when I had bought my ticket. The joke of it was," he went on, joining in the girls' laughter, "that Mr. Appleton has been worrying me for months to come up and talk over reinvestments, and take control of the money my uncle left me; and when I came at last, I arrived like a pauper. He went out himself and bought my shirt."

"And a very nice shirt, too," Sophy declared, glancing at the pattern. "Do tell us what else happened!"

"Well, not much more," John replied. "Mr. Appleton stuffed me full of money and made me take a little suite of rooms at what he called a more fashionable hotel. He stayed to lunch with me, and I have promised to see him on business tomorrow morning."

The two girls sat up and wiped their eyes.

"Oh, this is a wonderful adventure you have embarked upon!" Louise exclaimed. "You have come quite in the right spirit. It is your first night here, Mr. Strangeway, so I warn you that Sophy is the most irresponsible and capricious of all my friends."

Sophy made a grimace.

"Mr. Strangeway," she begged earnestly, "you won't believe a word she says, will you? All my life I have been looking for a single and steadfast attachment. Of course, if Louise wants to monopolize you, I shall fall into the background, as I usually do; but if you think that I am going to accept hints and let you go to dinner alone, you are very much mistaken. Tonight, at any rate, I insist upon coming!"

Louise shook her head.

"We shall have to put up with her," she told John with a little grimace.

The door of the room was suddenly opened. The parlor maid stood at one side.

"The prince of Seyre, madam," she announced.

Louise nodded. She was evidently expecting the visit. She turned to John.

"Will you come back and call for us here—say at seven o'clock? Mind, you are not to bother about your clothes, but to come just as you are. I can't tell you," she added under her breath, "how much I am looking forward to our evening!"

Sophy sprang to her feet.

"Won't you drop me, please, Mr. Strangeway?" she asked. "Then, if you will be so kind, you can pick me up again on your way here. You'll have to pass where I live, if you are at the Milan. I must go home and do my little best to compete."

Louise's frown was so slight that even John failed to notice it. Upon the threshold they encountered the prince, who detained John for a moment.

"I was hoping that I might meet you here, Mr. Strangeway," he said. "If you are in town for long, it will give me a great pleasure if I can be of any service to you. You are staying at a hotel?"

"I am staying at the Milan," John replied.

"I will do myself the pleasure of calling upon you," the prince continued. "In the meantime, if you need

any service that a Londoner can offer you, be sure to let me know. You will easily find my house in Grosvenor square."

"It is very kind of you indeed," John said gratefully.

Sophy made a wry face as the prince entered the drawing-room.

"Didn't some old Roman once write something about being afraid of Greeks who brought gifts?" she asked, as they descended the stairs together.

"Quite right," John assented.

"Well, be careful!" she advised him. "That's all."

John handed Sophy into the taxi and took his place beside her.

"Where shall I put you down?" he asked.

"It's such a terribly low neighborhood! However, it's quite close to the Milan—10 Southampton street."

John gave the address to the man, and they started off. They were blocked in a stream of traffic almost as soon as they reached Hyde Park Corner. John leaned forward all the time,

immensely interested in the stream of passers-by.

"Your interest in your fellow creatures," she murmured demurely, "is wonderful, but couldn't you concentrate it just a little?"

He turned quickly around. She was smiling at him most alluringly. Unconsciously he found himself smiling back again. A wonderful light-heartedness seemed to have come to him during the last few hours.

"I suppose I am a perfect idiot," he admitted. "I cannot help it. I am used to seeing, at the most, three or four people together at a time. I can't understand these crowds. Where are they all going? Fancy every one of them having a home, every one of them struggling in some form or another toward happiness!"

"Do you know," she pronounced severely, "for a young man of your age you are much too serious? I am quite sure you could be nice if you wanted to," she continued. "How much are you in love with Louise?"

"How much am I what?"

"In love with Louise?" she repeated. "All the men are. It is a perfect cult with them. And here am I, her humble companion and friend, absolutely neglected!"

"I don't believe you are neglected at all," he replied. "You are much too—"

He turned his head to look at her. She was so close to him that their hats collided. He was profuse in his apologies.

"Too what?" she whispered.

"Too attractive," he ventured.

"It's nice to hear you say so," she sighed.

She was unlike any girl John had ever known. Her hair was almost golden, her eyes a distinct blue, yet some trick of the mouth saved her face from any suggestion of insipidity. She was looking straight into his eyes, and her lips were curled most invitingly.

"I wish I knew more about certain things," he said.

"Oh, why didn't you come before?" she exclaimed. "Fancy Louise never telling me about you. I hope you'll ask me to lunch some time."

"I'll have a luncheon party tomorrow, if you like—that is, if Louise will come."

She looked up at him quickly.

"Isn't Louise going to Paris?" she asked.

"Paris? I didn't hear her say anything about it."

"Perhaps it is my mistake, then," Sophy went on hastily. "I only fancied that I heard her say so."

There was a moment's silence. John had opened his lips to ask a question, but quickly closed them again. It was a question, he suddenly decided, which he had better ask of Louise herself.

"If Louise goes to Paris," Sophy whispered disconsolately, "I suppose there will be no luncheon-party?"

For a single moment he hesitated. She was very alluring, and the challenge in her eyes was unmistakable.

"I think," he said quietly, "that if Miss Maurel goes to Paris, I shall return to Cumberland tomorrow."

For a time there was a significant silence. Then Sophy raised her veil once more and looked toward John.

"Mr. Strangeway," she began, "you won't mind if I give you just a little word of advice? You are such a big, strong person, but you are rather a child, you know, in some things."

"This place does make me feel ignorant," he admitted.

"Don't idealize anyone here," she begged. "Don't concentrate all your hopes upon one object. Love is wonderful and life is wonderful, but there is only one life, and there are many loves before one reaches the end. People do such silly things sometimes," she wound up, "just because of a little disappointment. There are many disappointments to be met with here."

He took her hand in his.

"Little girl," he said, "you are very good to me, and I think you understand. Are you going to let me feel that I have found a friend on my first evening in London?"

"If you want me," she answered simply. "I like you, and I want you to be happy here; and because I want you to be happy, I want you to come down from the clouds and remember that you have left your hills behind and that we walk on the pavements here."

not a more dignified form of entertainment for his first evening?"

"The poor man has no clothes," Louise explained. "He came to London quite unexpectedly."

"No clothes?" the prince repeated. "It is a long journey to take in such a fashion. A matter of urgent business, perhaps?"

Louise had risen to her feet and was busy rearranging some roses in the bowl by her side. She crushed one of the roses to pieces suddenly in her hands and shook the petals from her long, nervous fingers.

"Today," she said, "this afternoon—now—you have come to me with something in your mind, something you wish to say, something you are not sure how to say. That is, you see, what Henri Graillet calls my intuition. Even you, who keep all your feelings under a mask, can conceal very little from me."

"My present feelings," the prince declared, "I do not wish to conceal. I would like you to know them. But as words are sometimes clumsy, I would like, if it were possible, to let you see into my heart."

She came over and seated herself by his side on the divan. She even laid her hand upon his arm.

"Eugene," she expostulated, "we are too old friends to talk always in veiled phrases. There is something you have



"Eugene," She expostulated, "We Are Too Old Friends to Talk Always in Veiled Phrases."

to say to me. You are displeased because I have changed my mind—because I feel that I cannot take that little journey of ours?"

"You mean that you cannot now, or that you cannot at any time?"

"I do not know," she answered. "You ask me more than I can tell you. Sometimes life seems so stable, a thing one can make a little chart of and hang up on the wall, and put one's finger here and there—Today I will do this, tomorrow I will feel that—and the next morning comes and the chart is in the fire. I wish I understood myself a little better, Eugene."

"I believe that I understand you better, far better, than you understand yourself," he declared. "That is why I also believe that I am necessary to you. I can prevent your making mistakes."

"Then prevent me," she begged. "Something has happened, and the chart is in the fire today."

"You have only," he said, "to give me this little hand, and I will draw out a fresh one which shall direct to the place in life which is best for you. It is not too late."

She rose from beside him and walked toward the fireplace, as if to touch the bell. He watched her with steady eyes but expressionless face. There was something curious about her walk. The spring had gone from her feet, her shoulders were a little hunched. It was the walk of a woman who goes toward the things she fears.

"Stop!" he bade her.

She turned and faced him, quickly, almost eagerly. There was a look in her face of the prisoner who finds respite.

"Leave the bell alone," he directed. "My own plans are changed. I do not wish to leave London this week."

Her face was suddenly brilliant, her eyes shone. Something electric seemed to quiver through her frame. She almost danced back to her place by his side.

"How foolish!" she murmured. "Why didn't you say so at once?"

"Because," he replied, "they have only been changed during the last few seconds. I wanted to discover something which I have discovered."

"To discover something?"

"That my time has not yet come."

She turned away from him. She was oppressed with a sense almost of fear, a feeling that he was able to read the very thoughts forming in her brain; to understand, as no one else in the world could understand, the things that lived in her heart.

"I must not keep you," he remarked, "at the clock. It was very kind of me to call, and you will be glad to join your friends."

"They are coming here for me," she said. "There is really no hurry. We are not changing anything, to be quite a simple evening. Times I wish, that you cared about me as that sort, Eugene."

He blew through his lips a little of smoke from the cigarette he had just lit.

"Does it?" he answered. "You should read my family history, read of the men and women of my race who were butchered at the hands of that drunken, lustful mob whom lying historians have glorified. I am one of those who do not forget injuries. My estates are administered more severely than any others in France. No penny of my money has ever been spent in charity. I neither forget nor forgive."

She laughed a little nervously.

"What an unsympathetic person you can be, Eugene!"

"And for that very reason," he replied, "I can be sympathetic. Because I hate some people, I have the power of loving others. Because it pleases me to deal severely with my enemies, it gives me joy to deal generously with my friends. That is my conception of life. May I wish you a pleasant evening?"

"You are going now?" she asked, a little surprised. "When shall I see you again?"

"A telephone message from your maid, a line written with your own fingers," he said, "will bring me to you within a few minutes. If I hear nothing, I may come uninvited, but it will be when the fancy takes me. Once more, Louise, a pleasant evening!"

He passed out of the door, which the parlor maid was holding open for him. Crossing to the window, Louise watched him leave the house and enter his waiting automobile. He gave no sign of haste or disappointment. He lit another cigarette deliberately upon the pavement and gave his orders to the chauffeur with some care.

As the car drove off without his having once glanced up at the window, she shivered a little. There was a silence which, it seemed to her, could be more minatory even than accusation.

CHAPTER VIII.

The little room was gaudily decorated and redolent with the lingering odors of many dinners. Yet Louise, who had dined on the preceding evening at the Ritz and been bored, whose taste in food and environment was almost hypercritical, was perfectly happy. She found the cuisine and the Chianti excellent.

"We are outstaying everyone else," she declared; "and I don't even mind their awful legacy of tobacco smoke. Do you see that the waiter has brought you the bill, Mr. Strangeway? Prepare for a shock. It is fortunate that you are a millionaire!"

John laughed as he paid the bill and ludicrously overtopped the waiter.

"You are so convincing!" Sophy murmured. "But remember that your future entertainment is in the hands of two women, one of whom is a deserving but struggling young artist without the means of gratifying her expensive tastes."

"My children," said Louise, rising, "we must remember that we are going to the Palace. It is quite time we started."

They made their way down two flights of narrow stairs into the street. The commissionaire raised his whistle to his lips, but Louise stopped him.

"We will walk," she suggested. "This way, Mr. Strangeway!"

They passed down the long, narrow street, with its dingy foreign cafes and shops, scarcely one of which seemed to be English. The people who thronged the pavement were of a new race to John, swarthy, a little furtive, a class of foreigner seldom seen except in alien lands. Men and women in all stages of dishabille were leaning out of the windows or standing on the door steps. The girls whom they met occasionally—young women of all ages, walking arm in arm, with shawls on their heads in place of hats—laughed openly in John's face.

"Conquests everywhere he goes!" Louise sighed. "We shall never keep him, Sophy!"

"We have him for this evening, at any rate," Sophy replied contentedly; "and he hasn't spent all his fortune yet. I am not at all sure that I shall not hint at supper when we come out of the Palace."

"A pity he fell into bad hands so quickly," Louise laughed. "Here we are! Stalls, please, Mr. Millionaire. I wouldn't be seen tonight in the seats of the mighty."

John risked a reproof, however, and was fortunate enough to find a disengaged box. They devoted their attention to the show, Louise and Sophy at first with only a moderate amount of interest, John with the real enthusiasm of one to whom everything is new. His laughter was so hearty, his appreciation so sincere, that his companions found it infectious, and began to applaud everything.

"The bioscope," Louise at last decided firmly, "I refuse to have anything to do with. You have had all the entertainment you are going to have this evening, Mr. Countryman."

"Now for supper, then," he proposed.

"Luigi's," Sophy declared firmly. "The only place in London."

They drove toward the Strand, looked around him with interest as they entered the restaurant.

John came forward to welcome them, escorted them to one of the best tables.

"You must be very nice to the man, Luigi," she said. "He is a great friend of mine, just arrived from London. He has come up on purpose to see me, and we shall probably decide to make this our favorite restaurant."

"I shall be very happy," Luigi declared, with a bow.

"I am beginning to regret, Mr. Strangeway, that I ever introduced you to Sophy," Louise remarked, as she sank back into her chair. "You won't believe that all my friends are as frivolous as this, will you?"

"They aren't," Sophy proclaimed confidently. "I am the one person who

succeeds in keeping Louise with her feet upon the earth. She has never had supper here before. Dry biscuits, hot milk, and a volume of poems are her relaxation after the theater. She takes herself too seriously."

"I wonder if I do!" Louise murmured, as she helped herself to caviar.

She was suddenly pensive. Her eyes seemed to be looking out of the restaurant. Sophy was exchanging amenities with a little party of friends at the next table.

"One must sometimes be serious," John remarked, "or life would have no poise at all."

"I have a friend who scolds me," she confided. "Sometimes he almost loses patience with me. He declares that my attitude toward life is too analytical. When happiness comes my way, I shrink back. I keep my emotions in the background, while my brain works, dissecting, wondering, speculating. Perhaps what he says is true. I believe that if one gets into the habit of analyzing too much, one loses all elasticity of emotion, the capacity to recognize and embrace the great things when they come."

"I think you have been right," John declared earnestly. "If the great things come as they should come, they are overwhelming, they will carry you off your feet. You will forget to speculate and to analyze. Therefore, I think you have been wise and right to wait. You have run no risk of having to put up with the lesser things."

She leaned toward him across the rose-shaded table. For those few seconds they seemed to have been brought into a wonderfully intimate communion of thought. A wave of her hair almost touched his forehead. His hand boldly rested upon her fingers.

"You talk," she whispered, "as if we were back upon your hilltop once more!"

He turned his head toward the little orchestra, which was playing a low and tremulous waltz tune.

"I want to believe," he said, "that you can listen to the music here and yet live upon the hilltops."

"You believe that it is possible?"

"I do indeed," he assured her. "Although my heart was almost sick with loneliness, I do not think that I should be here if I did not believe it. I have not come for anything else, for any lesser things, but to find—"

For once his courage failed him. For once, too, he failed to understand her expression. She had drawn back a little, her lips were quivering. Sophy broke suddenly in upon that moment of suspended speech.

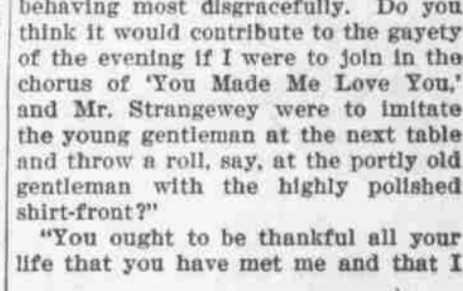
"I knew how it would be!" she exclaimed. "I leave you both alone for less than a minute, and there you sit, as grave as two owls. I ask you, now, is this the place to wander off into the clouds? When two people sit looking at each other as you were doing a minute ago, here in Luigi's, and a supper, ordered regardless of expense, on the table before them, they are either without the least sense of the fitness of things, or else—"

"Or else what?" Louise asked.

"Or else they are head over heels in love with each other!" Sophy concluded.

"Perhaps the child is right," Louise assented tolerantly, taking a peach from the basket by her side. "Evidently it is our duty to abandon ourselves to the frivolity of the moment. What shall we do to bring ourselves into accord with it? Everybody seems to be behaving most disgracefully. Do you think it would contribute to the gaiety of the evening if I were to join in the chorus of 'You Made Me Love You,' and Mr. Strangeway were to imitate the young gentleman at the next table and throw a roll, say, at the portly old gentleman with the highly polished shirt-front?"

"You ought to be thankful all your life that you have met me and that I



"You Talk," She Whispered, "as if We Were Back Upon Your Hilltops Once More!"

disposed to take an interest in you," she remarked, as she moved her chair a little nearer to John's. "I am sure that in a very short time you would have become—well, almost a friend of mine, just arrived from London. He has come up on purpose to see me, and we shall probably decide to make this our favorite restaurant."

"I hope you mean it," she returned. "You ought to, if you only understood the importance of light-heartedness."

John finds himself in love with the actress and discovers that he has a powerful rival in the prince of Seyre.

(TO BE CONTINUED)