

# THE HILLMAN

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

## JOHN HEARS MYSTERIOUS PHRASES WHICH TROUBLE HIM WITH GRAVE DOUBTS ABOUT LOUISE—AT TIMES HE WISHES HE WERE BACK IN THE HILLS.

**Synopsis.**—Louise Maurel, famous actress, making a motor tour of rural England, was obliged, when her car broke down, to spend the night at the ancestral home of Stephen and John Strangeway, bachelor woman-haters, in the Cumberland district. Before she left the next day she had captivated John. Three months later he went to London and looked her up. She introduced him to her friends, among them Grailiot, a playwright, and Sophy Gerard, a light-hearted little actress. John, puritanical in his views, entered the gay bohemian life of the city with enthusiasm. It was soon seen that John and the prince of Seyre were rivals for the heart and hand of Louise. Sophy also loved John secretly. The prince tried to entice John into evil ways by sending fascinating women to charm and bedevil him.

### CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

"Sometimes with Miss Maurel, sometimes with her little friend, Sophy Gerard, and sometimes alone," John replied. "I have bought a Baedeker, taken a taxicab by the day, and done all the sights. I've spent weeks in the National Gallery, picture gazing, and I've done all those more modern shows up round Bond street. I have bought a racing car and learned to drive it. I have been to dinner parties that I have hated me stiff. I have been introduced to crowds of people whom I never wish to see again, and made one or two friends," he added, smiling at his guest, "for whom I hope I am properly grateful."

"The prince has been showing you a bit, hasn't he?" Grailiot grunted.

"The prince has been extraordinarily kind to me," John admitted slowly. "I introduced me to a great many pleasant and interesting people, and a great many whom I suppose a young

"There is no secret about it, so far as I am concerned," John answered. "It is Louise Maurel. I thought you must have guessed."

"The two men looked at each other in silence for some moments. Out on the river a little tug was hooting vigorously. The roar of the Strand came faintly into the room. On the mantelpiece a very ornate French clock was ticking lightly. All these sounds seemed suddenly accentuated. They beat time to a silence almost tragical in its intensity."

Grailiot took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. He had written many plays, and the dramatic instinct was strongly developed in him. "Louise!" he muttered under his breath.

"She is very different, I know," John went on, after a moment's hesitation. "She is very clever and a great artist, and she lives in an atmosphere of which, a few months ago, I knew nothing. I have come up here to try to understand, to try to get a little nearer to her."

There was another silence, this time almost an awkward one. Then Grailiot rose suddenly to his feet. "I will respect your confidence," he promised, holding out his hand. "Have no fear of that. I am due now at the theater. Your tea is excellent, and such little cakes I never tasted before."

"You will wish me good luck?" "No!" "Why not?" John demanded, a little startled.

"Because," Grailiot pronounced, "from what I have seen and know of you both, there are no two people in this world less suitable for each other." "Look here," John expostulated, "I don't want you to go away thinking so. You don't understand what this means to me."

"Perhaps not, my friend," Grailiot replied, "but remember that it is at least my trade to understand men and women. I have known Louise Maurel since she was a child."

"Then it is I whom you don't understand?" "That may be so," Grailiot confessed. "One makes mistakes. Let us leave it at that. You are a young man of undeveloped temperament. You may be capable of much which at present I do not find in you."

"Tell me the one quality in which you consider me most lacking," John begged. "I want you on my side, Grailiot."

"And I," Grailiot replied, as he shook his friend's hand and hurried off, "want only to be on the side that will mean happiness for you both."

He left the room a little abruptly. John walked back to the window, oppressed with a sense of something almost ominous in the Frenchman's manner, something which he could not fathom, against which he struggled in vain. Side by side with it, there surged into his memory the disquietude which his present relations with Louise had developed. She was always charming when she had any time to spare—sometimes almost affectionate.

On the other hand, he was profoundly conscious of her desire to keep him at arm's length for the present. He had accepted her decision without a murmur. He made but few efforts to see her alone, and when they met he made no special claim upon her notice. He was serving his apprenticeship doggedly and faithfully. Yet there were times like the present when he found his task both hateful and difficult.

He walked aimlessly backward and forward, chafing against the restraint of the narrow walls and the low ceiling. A sudden desire had seized him to go back to the hills, wretched, but at least a little more air than when you are in town. Are you quite sure you haven't made up your mind to get this woman in a hurry?"

"Quite sure," John laughed. "I suppose I am rather an idiot, but I am inclined to the view of which you were speaking."

"I should imagine," she said, "that you were not an adept in the art of flirtation. Is it true that the woman is Louise Maurel?"

"Quite true," John replied. "But don't you know—"

"She broke off abruptly. She saw the face of the man by her side suddenly

"Who is it?" he asked. "Lady Hilda Mulloch is asking for you, sir," the hall porter announced.

Lady Hilda peered around John's room through her lorgnette, and did not hesitate to express her dissatisfaction.

"What makes you live in a hotel? Why don't you take rooms of your own and furnish them? Surroundings like these are destructive to one's individuality."

"Well, you see," John explained, as he drew an easy chair up to the fire for his guest, "my stay in London is only a temporary one, and it hasn't seemed worth while to settle anywhere."

She stretched out her graceful body in front of the fire and raised her veil. She was very smartly dressed, as usual. Her white silk stockings, which she seemed to have no objection to displaying, were of the latest vogue. The chinchilla around her neck and in her little toque was most becoming. She seemed to bring with her an atmosphere indefinable, in its way, but distinctly attractive. Brisk in her speech, a little commanding in her manner, she was still essentially feminine.

John, at her direct invitation, had called upon her once or twice since their meeting at the opera, and he had found her, from the first, more attractive than any other society woman of his acquaintance. None the less, he was a little taken aback at her present visit.

"Exactly why are you here, anyhow?" she demanded. "I feel sure that Eugene told me the reason which had brought you from your wilds, but I have forgotten it."

"For one thing," John replied, "I have come because I don't want to appear prejudiced, and the fact that I never spent a month in London, or even a week, seemed a little narrow-minded."

"What's the real attraction?" Lady Hilda asked. "It is a woman, isn't it?" "I am very fond of a woman who is in London," John admitted. "Perhaps it is true that I am here on her account."

Lady Hilda withdrew from her muff a gold cigarette case and a little box of matches. "Order some mixed vermouth with lemon for me, please," she begged. "I have been shopping, and I hate tea. I don't know why I came to see you. I suddenly thought of it when I was in Bond street."

"It was very kind of you," John said. "If I had known that you cared about seeing me, I would have come to you with pleasure."

"What does it matter?" she answered. "You are thinking, perhaps, that I risk my reputation in coming to a young man's rooms? Those things do not count for me. Ever since I was a child I have done exactly as I liked, and people have shrugged their shoulders and said, 'Ah, well, it is only Lady Hilda!' I am quite convinced that if I chose to take you off to Monte Carlo with me next week and spend a month with you there, I should get my pass to the royal inclosure at Ascot when I returned, and my invitation to the next court ball, even in this era of starch. You see, they would say, 'It is only Lady Hilda!'"

The waiter brought the vermouth, which his visitor sipped contentedly. "So there is a woman, is there?" she went on, looking across the room at her companion. "Have you committed yourself already, then? Don't you remember what I told you—the first night we met after the opera—that it is well to wait?"

"Yes, I remember," John admitted. "I meant it."

He laughed good-humoredly, yet not without some trace of self-consciousness. "The mischief was done then," he said.

"Couldn't it be undone?" she asked lazily. "Or are you one of those tedious people who are faithful forever? Fidelity," she continued, knocking the ash from her cigarette, "is really, to my mind, the most bourgeois of vices. It comes from a want of elasticity in the emotional fibers. Nothing in life has bored me so much as the faithfulness of my lovers."

"You ought to put all this into one of your books," John suggested. "I probably shall, when I write my reminiscences," she replied. "Tell me about this woman. And don't stand about in that restless way at the other end of the room. Bring a chair close to me—there, close to my side!"

John obeyed, and his visitor contemplated him thoughtfully through a little cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Yes," she decided, "there is no use denying it. You are hatefully good-looking, and somehow or other I think your clothes have improved you. You look a little more air than when you are in town. Are you quite sure you haven't made up your mind to get this woman in a hurry?"

"Quite sure," John laughed. "I suppose I am rather an idiot, but I am inclined to the view of which you were speaking."

"I should imagine," she said, "that you were not an adept in the art of flirtation. Is it true that the woman is Louise Maurel?"

"Quite true," John replied. "But don't you know—"

"She broke off abruptly. She saw the face of the man by her side suddenly

"Oh, it isn't interesting," she said. "It's just a young man in Bath. He is a lawyer and moderately well off. He has wanted me to marry him for years. He was a friend of my brother's. Lately he has been bothering a little more than usual—in fact, I suppose I have received what might be called an ultimatum. He came up yesterday, and I went out with him last night. He has gone back to Bath this morning, and I have promised to let him know in a month. I think that is why I went out to Waterloo bridge in a mackintosh and got wet."

"Do you like him?" John asked practically.

"I like him, I suppose," Sophy sighed. "That's the worst of it. If I didn't like him, there might be some chance. I can't realize myself ever doing more than liking him in a mild sort of way; and if he expected more, as of course he would, then I should probably hate him. He tried to kiss me on the way to the station, and I nearly scratched him. That isn't like me, you know. I rather like being kissed sometimes."

John buried himself in the wine-list. "Well," he admitted, "it doesn't sound very hopeful. I'm no sort of judge in these matters, but I have heard lots of people say that one gets on all right after marriage without caring very much before. You don't seem to have a very comfortable life now, do you?"

"Comfortable? No, but I am free," Sophy replied quickly. "I can come in and go out when I please, choose my own friends. It's rather fine to be here, you know—to be in the atmosphere, even if the limelight misses one."

John sighed, and regarded her thoughtfully. "You're a queer little girl, Sophy," he said. "I don't know how to advise you."

"Of course you don't," she answered. "No one could. As for you, I suppose you will marry Louise. What will happen to you after that, I don't know. Perhaps I sha'n't care so much about London then. You've made it very nice for me, you know."

"You've made it bearable even for me," he told her. "I often think how lonely I should have been without you to talk to. Louise sometimes is delightfully companionable, and kind enough to turn one's head. Other days I scarcely understand her; everything we say to one another seems wrong. I come away and leave her simply because I feel that there is a wall between us that I can't get over."

"There isn't really," Sophy sighed. "Louise is a dear. Considering everything, I think she is wonderful. But you are utterly different. She is very complex, very emotional, and she has her own standards of life. You, on the other hand, are very simple, very faithful and honest, and you accept the standards which have been made for you—very, very rigidly, John. What are you looking at?"

John's whole expression had suddenly changed. His eyes were fixed upon the door, his face was stern as a granite block. Sophy turned quickly around. The maitre d'hotel, with another satellite in his rear, was welcoming with much ceremony two lately arrived guests. Sophy clutched at the tablecloth. The newcomers were Louise and the prince of Seyre.

"I don't understand this!" John muttered, his lips twitching.

Sophy Gerard said nothing. Her cheeks were pink with excitement.

Suddenly Louise saw John and Sophy. She stood quite still for a moment; then she came toward them, slowly and a little languidly. The prince was still studying through his eyeglass the various tables which the head waiter was offering for his consideration.

"What an astonishing meeting!" Louise remarked, as she laid her hand for a moment on Sophy's shoulder.

"What is going on behind my back?" John rose very slowly to his feet. He seemed taller than ever, and Louise's smile remained unanswerable.

"The rain broke up my week-end party," he explained, "and I met Sophy in the Strand. In any case, I intended returning tonight. I understood that you would not be here until tomorrow about eleven o'clock."

"Those were my plans," Louise replied; "but, as you see, other things have intervened. Our little house party, too, was broken up by this abominable weather, and we all motored up to town. The Faradays have gone home. The prince heard from Miles that I was at home, and telephoned me to dine. Me voel!"

John was struggling with a crowd of hateful thoughts. Louise was wearing a wonderful gown; her hair was beautifully arranged; she had the air of a woman whose toilet was complete and perfect down to the slightest detail. The prince's slow drawl reached them distinctly.

"It was my servant's fault, I suppose," he said. "I told him to ring up last night and order the table for two in that corner. However, we will take the vacant one near your desk."

He looked around and, as if for the first time, missed Louise. He came toward them at once.

"The prince seems to have ordered his table last night," John remarked, his tone, even to himself, sounding queer and strained.

Louise made no reply. The prince was already shaking hands with Sophy.

"I thought you were spending the week-end with my cousin, Strangeway," he remarked, turning to John.

"We did spend part of it together," John replied. "The weather drove us back this afternoon."

"I congratulate you both on your good taste," said the prince. "There is nothing more abominable than a riverside retreat out of season. We are taking the table on the left, Louise."

He led her away, and they passed down the row. John slowly resumed his seat.

"Sophy," he demanded hoarsely, "tell me the truth. Is there anything between the prince and Louise?"

Sophy nervously crumbled up the toast by her side.

"The prince admires Louise, and has done so for many years," she answered. "No one knows anything else. Louise never speaks of him to me. I cannot tell you."

"But you must know," he persisted, with a little break in his voice. "Forgive me, Sophy, if I made an ass of myself. First Lady Hilda, and then Grailiot, and then—well, I thought Louise might have rung up to see whether I was at home, if she came back sooner than she expected; and the prince took the table last night!"

She leaned over and patted him on the hand.

"Don't worry," she begged. "If Louise has to choose some day between him and you, I don't think she'll hesi-

tate very long. Don't look so stern, please. You look very statuesque and perfect, but I don't want to dine with a piece of sculpture. Remember that I am finding you too attractive for my peace of mind. There's your text!"

He poured a glass of wine and drank it off.

"I'll do my best," he agreed. "If it sounds like rubbish, you can still believe that I appreciate everything you've told me. You are pretty, and I am lucky to have you here. Now I'll try to make you believe that I think so."

She leaned over so that her head almost touched his.

"Go on, please!" she murmured. "Even if it hurts afterward, it will be heavenly to listen to!"

The next night Sophy acted as showman at the first production of the play, so long delayed because of Grailiot's insistence on a scene that promised to be startling to English playgoers. Her part was over at the end of the first act, and a few minutes later she slipped into a seat by John's side behind the curtain.

"What do you think of it so far?" she asked a little anxiously.

"It seems quite good," John replied cheerfully. "Some very clever lines, and all that sort of thing; but I can't quite see what it's all leading to."

Sophy peered around the house from behind the curtain.



She Leaned Over and Patted Him on the Hand.



You Really Are an Egregious, Thick-Headed, Obstinate Country Man.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)