



# THE HILLMAN

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "THE DOUBLE TRAITOR" and "THE MASTER MUMMER, ETC."

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

"It's wonderful!" Sophy declared. "Try and bear the thread of it all in your mind. For two acts you have been asked to focus your attention upon the increasing brutality of the marquis. Remember that, won't you?"

"Not likely to forget it," John replied. "How well they all act!" There was a quarter of an hour's interval before the curtain rose again. Rumors concerning the last act had been floating about for weeks, and the house was almost tense with excitement as the curtain went up. The scene was the country chateau of the "Marquis de Guy," who brought a noisy crowd of companions from Paris without any warning. His wife showed signs of dismay at his coming. He had brought with him women whom she declined to receive.

The great scene between her husband and herself took place in the square hall of the chateau, on the first floor. Louise reaffirms her intention of leaving the house. Her husband laughs at her. Her position is hopeless.

"What can you do?" he mocks. She shrugs her shoulders and passes into her room. The marquis sinks upon a settee, and presently is joined by one of the ladies who have traveled with him from Paris. He talks to her of the pictures upon the wall. She is impatient to meet the Marquis de Guy.

The marquis knocks at his wife's door. Her voice is heard clearly, after a moment's pause.

"In a few minutes!" she replies. The marquis resumes his flirtation. His companion becomes impatient—the marquis has pledged his word that she should be received by his wife. An ancient enemy against the Marquis de Guy prompts her to insist.

The marquis shrugs his shoulders and knocks more loudly than ever at his wife's door. She comes out dressed for travel and is met by Faraday, who suddenly appears.

"You asked me what I could do," she says, pointing to her lover. "You see now!"

There was a moment's breathless silence through the house. The scene in itself was a little beyond anything that the audience had expected. Sophy, who had been leaning over the edge of the box, turned around in no little anxiety. She heard the door slam. John had disappeared!

He left the theater with only his hat in his hand, turning up his coat by instinct as he passed through the driving rain. All his senses seemed tingling with some nameless horror. The brilliance of the language, the subtlety of the situation, seemed like some evil trail drawn across that one horrible climax. It was Louise who had come from that room and pointed to Faraday!

He reached his rooms—he scarcely knew how—and walked upstairs. There he threw off some of his dripping garments, opened the window wide, and stood there.

He looked out over the Thames, and there was a red flare before his eyes. Stephen was right, he told himself. There was nothing but evil to be found here, nothing but bitter disappointment, nothing but the pain which deepens into anguish. Better to remain like Stephen, unloving and unloved, to draw nearer to the mountains, to find joy in the crops and the rain and the sunshine, to listen stonily to the cry of human beings as if to some voice from an unknown world.

He leaned a little further from the window, and gazed into the court at a dizzy depth below. He had cut himself adrift from the peace which might have been his. He would never know again the joys of his earlier life. It was for this that he had fought so many battles, clung so tightly to one ideal—for Louise, who could show herself to anyone who cared to pay his shilling or his half-guinea, glorying in her dishonor; worse than glorying in it—finding some subtle humor in the little gesture with which she had pointed, unashamed, to her lover.

John bent a little lower from the window. A sudden dizziness seemed to have come over him. Then he was forced to turn around. His door had been quickly opened and shut. It was Sophy who was crossing toward him, the rain streaming from her ruined opera cloak.

"John!" she cried. "Oh, John!" She led him back to his chair and knelt by his side. She held his hands tightly.

"You mustn't feel like this," she sobbed; "you mustn't, John, really. You don't understand. It's all a play. Louise wouldn't really do anything like that!"

He shivered. Nevertheless, he clutched her hands and drew her closer to him.

"Do, please, listen to me," she begged. "It's all over. Louise is herself again—Louise Maurel. The Marquis de Guy never lived except upon those boards. It is simply a wonderful creation. Any one of the great actresses would play that part and glory in it—the very greatest, John. Oh, it's

so hard to make you understand! Louise is waiting for you. They are all waiting at the supper party. You are expected. You must go and tell her that you think it was wonderful!"

He rose slowly to his feet and caught at her hands roughly.

"Supposing I won't go?" he whispered hoarsely. "Supposing—I keep you here instead, Sophy?"

She swayed for a moment. Something flashed into her face and passed away. She was paler than ever.

"Dear John," she begged, "pull yourself together! Remember that Louise is waiting for you. It's Louise you want—not me. Nothing that she has done tonight should make her any the less worthy of you and your love."

He strode away into the farther room. He reappeared in a moment or two, his hair smoothly brushed, his tie newly arranged.

"I'll come, little girl," he promised. "I don't know what I'll say to her, but I'll come. There can't be any harm in that!"

"Of course not," she answered cheerfully. "You're the most terrible goose, John," she added, as they walked down the corridor. "Do, please, lose your tragical air. The whole world is at Louise's feet tonight. You mustn't let her know how absurdly you have been feeling. Tomorrow you will find that every paper in London will be acclaiming her genius."

John squared his shoulders. "All the same," he declared grimly, "if I could burn the theater and the play, and lock up Galliot for a month, tonight, I'd do it!"

## CHAPTER XVI.

The days and weeks drifted into months, and John remained in London. His circle of friends and his interests had widened. It was only his relations with Louise which remained still unchanged. Always charming to him, giving him much of her time, favoring him, beyond a doubt, more than any of her admirers, there was yet about her something elusive, something which seemed intended to keep him so far as possible at arm's length.

There was nothing tangible of which he could complain, and this probationary period was of his own suggestion. He bore it grimly, holding his place, whenever it was possible, by her side with dogged persistence. Then one evening there was a knock at his door, and Stephen Strangeway walked in.

Stephen, although he seemed a little taller and gaunter than ever, though he seemed to bring into the perhaps overwarmed atmosphere of John's little sitting room something of the cold austerity of his own domain, had evidently come in no unfriendly spirit. He took both his brother's hands in his and gripped them warmly.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Stephen!" John declared.

"It has been an effort to me to come," Stephen admitted. "I am one of the old-fashioned Strangeways. What I feel is pretty well locked up inside. The last time you and I met perhaps I spoke too much; so here I am!"

"It's fine of you," John declared. "I remember nothing of that day. We will

"Do you mind?" John asked.

"No," she assented resignedly. "That play will end by making a driving idiot of me. If Louise is tired tonight, though, I warn you that I shall insist upon supper."

"It's a bargain!" John promised. "We'll drive Louise home, and then I'll take you back to Luigi's. We haven't been out together for some time, have we?"

She looked up at him with a little grimace and patted his hand.

"You have neglected me," she said. "I think all these fine ladies have turned your head."

She drew a little closer to him and passed her arm through his. John made no responsive movement. He was filled with resentment at the sensation of pleasure that her affectionate gesture gave him.

The curtain was up and the play in progress when they reached the box that John had taken for the season.

The spell of it all, against which he had so often fought, came over John anew. He set his chair back against the wall and watched and listened, a veritable sense of hypnotism creeping over his senses. Presently the same impulse which had come to him so many times before induced him to turn his head, to read in the faces of the audience the reflection of her genius. He had often watched those long lines of faces changing, each in its own way, under the magic of her art. Tonight he looked beyond. He knew very well that his search had a special object. Suddenly he gripped the arms of his chair. In the front row of the pit, sitting head and shoulders taller than the men and women who lounged over the wooden rest in front of them, was Stephen. More than ever, among these unappropriate surroundings, he seemed to represent something almost patriarchal, a forbidding and disapproving spirit sitting in judgment upon some modern and unworthy wantonness. His

face, stern and grave, showed little sign of approval or disapproval, but to John's apprehending eyes the critical sense was there, the verdict foredoomed. He understood as in a flash that Stephen had come there to judge once more the woman whom his brother desired.

The curtain went up again and the play moved on, with subtle yet inevitable dramatic power, toward the hated and dreaded crisis.

The play came to an end presently, amid a storm of applause. The grim figure in the front of the pit remained motionless and silent. He was one of the last to leave, and John watched his retreating figure with a sigh. Sophy drew him away.

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They found her, as a matter of fact, in the act of leaving. She welcomed them naturally enough, but John fancied that her greeting showed some signs of embarrassment.

"You knew that I was going out to supper tonight?" she asked. "Oh didn't I tell you? The prince has asked the

"I think I can," John replied, smiling. "Say you will, there's a dear," she begged. "I am not playing tonight. May Enser is going on in my place. We arranged it a week ago. I had two fines to pay on Saturday, and I haven't had a decent meal this week. But I had forgotten," she broke off, with a sudden note of disappointment in her tone. "There's your brother. I mustn't take you away from him."

"We'll all have dinner together," John suggested. "You'll come, of course, Stephen?"

Stephen shook his head. "Thank you," he said. "I am due at my hotel. I'm going back to Cumberland tomorrow morning, and my errand is already done."

"You will do nothing of the sort!" John declared.

"Please be amiable," Sophy begged. "If you won't come with us, I shall simply run away and leave you with John. You needn't look at your clothes," she went on. "We can go to a grillroom. John sha'n't dress, either. I want you to tell me all about Cumberland, where this brother of yours lives. He doesn't tell us half enough!"

John passed his arm through his brother's and led him away.

"Come and have a wash, old chap," he said.

They dined together at Luigi's, a curiously assorted trio—Sophy, a distinctly alien note. She was always gay, always amusing, but although she addressed most of her remarks to Stephen, he never once unbent. He ate and drank simply, seldom speaking of himself or his plans, and firmly negating all their suggestions for the remainder of the evening. Occasionally he glanced at the clock. John became conscious of a certain feeling of curiosity, which in a sense Sophy shared.

"Your brother seems to me like a man with a purpose," she said, as they stood in the entrance hall on their way out of the restaurant. "Like a prophet with a mission, perhaps I should say."

John nodded. In the little passage where they stood, he and Stephen seemed to dwarf the passers-by. The men, in their evening clothes and pallid faces, seemed suddenly insignificant, and the women like dolls.

"For the last time, Stephen," John said, "won't you come to a music hall with us?"

"I have made my plans for the evening, thank you," Stephen replied, holding out his hand. "Good night!"

He left them standing there and walked off down the Strand, John, looking after him, frowned. He was conscious of a certain foreboding.

"I suppose," Sophy sighed, as they waited for a taxicab, "we shall spend the remainder of the evening in the usual fashion!"

"Do you mind?" John asked.

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Louise dressed herself simply but carefully. She could conceive of but one reason for Stephen's presence in her house, and it rather amused her. It was, of course, no friendly visit. He had come either to threaten or to cajole. Yet what could he do? What had she to fear? She went over the interview in her mind, imagining him crushed and subdued by her superior subtlety and finesse.

With a little smile of coming triumph upon her lips she descended the stairs and swept into her pleasantly warmed and perfumed little drawing-room. She even held out her hand cordially to the dark, grim figure whose outline against the dainty white wall seemed so inappropriate.

"This is very nice of you indeed, Mr. Strangeway," she began. "I had no idea that you had followed your brother's example and come to town."

She told herself once more that her slight instinct of uneasiness had been absurd. Stephen's bow, although a little formal and austere, was still an acknowledgment of her welcome. The shadows of the room, perhaps, had prevented him from seeing her outstretched hand.

"Mine is a very short visit, Miss Maurel," he said. "I had no other reason for coming but to see John and to pay this call upon you."

"I am greatly flattered," she told him. "You must please sit down and make yourself comfortable while we talk. See, this is my favorite place," she added, dropping into a corner of her lounge. "Will you sit beside me? Or, if you prefer, draw up that chair."

"My preference," he replied, "is to remain standing."

She raised her eyebrows. Her tone altered.

"It must be as you wish, of course," she continued; "only I have such pleasant recollections of your hospitality at Peak Hall that I should like, if there was any possible way in which I could return it—"

"Madam," he interrupted, "you must admit that the hospitality of Peak Hall was not willingly offered to you. Save for the force of circumstances, you would never have crossed our threshold."

She shrugged her shoulders. She was adapting her tone and manner to the belligerency of his attitude.

"Well?"

"You want to know why I have found my way to London?" he went on. "I came to find out a little more about you."

"About me?"

"To discover if there was anything about you," he proceeded deliberately, "concerning which report had lied. I do not place my faith in newspapers and gossip. There was always a chance that you might have been an honest woman. That is why I came to London, and why I went to see your play last night."

She was speechless. It was as if he were speaking to her in some foreign tongue.

"I have struggled," he continued, "to adopt a charitable view of your profession. I know that the world changes quickly, while we, who prefer to remain outside its orbit, of necessity less touch with its new ideas and new fashions. So I said to myself that there should be no mistake. For that reason I sat in a theater last night al most for the first time in my life. I saw you act."

"Well?" she asked almost defiantly.

He looked down at her. All splendid self-assurance seemed ebbing away. She felt a sudden depression of spirit, a sudden strange sense of insignificance.

"I have come," he said, "if I can, to buy my brother's freedom."

"To buy your brother's freedom?" she repeated, in a dazed tone.

"My brother is infatuated with you," Stephen declared. "I wish to save him."

The woman's courage began to assert itself. She raised her eyes to his.

"Exactly what do you mean?" she asked calmly. "In what way is any man to be saved from me? If your brother should care for me, and I, by any chance, should happen to care for him, in what respect would that be a state from which he would require salvation?"

"You made my task more difficult," he observed deliberately. "Does it amuse you to practice your profession before one so ignorant and so unappreciative as myself? If my brother should ever marry, it is my firm intention that he shall marry an honest woman."

Louise sat quite still for a moment. A flash of lightning had glittered before her eyes, and in her ears was the crash of thunder. Her face was suddenly strained. She saw nothing but the stern, forbidding expression of the man who looked down at her.

"You dare to say this to me, here in my own house?"

"Dare? Why not? Don't people tell you the truth here in London, then?" She rose a little unsteadily to her feet, motioning him toward the door, and moving toward the bell. Suddenly she sank back into her former place, breathless and helpless.

"Why do you waste your breath?" he asked calmly. "We are alone here, you and I—we know the truth!"

She sat quite still, shivering a little. "Do we? Tell me, then, because I am curious—tell me why you are so sure of what you say."

"That seems impossible to you?" she demanded.

"Utterly impossible!"

"And to John?"

"I am speaking for myself and not for my brother," Stephen replied. "Men like him, who are assailed by a certain madness, are best left alone with it. That is why I came to you to bargain, if I could. Is there anything that you lack—anything which your own success and your lover, or lovers, have failed to provide for you?"

It was useless to try to rise; she was powerless in all her limbs. Side by side with the anger and horror that his words aroused was a sense of something almost grotesque, something which seemed to force an unnatural laugh from her lips.

"So you want to buy me off?"

"I should be glad to believe that it was within my power to do so. I have not John's great fortune, but I have money, the accumulated savings of a lifetime, for which I have no better purpose. There is one more thing, too, to be said."

"Another charge?"

"Not that," he told her; "only it is better for you to understand that if you turn me from your house this morning, I shall still feel the necessity of saving my brother from you."

"Saving him from me?" she exclaimed, rising suddenly and throwing out her arms. "Do you know what you are talking about? Do you know that if I consented to think of your brother as my husband, there is not a man in London who would not envy him? Look at me! I am beautiful, am I not? I am a great artist. I am Louise Maurel, and I have made myself famous by my own work and my own genius. What has your brother done in life to render him worthy of the sacrifice I should make if I chose to give him my hand? You had better go back to Cumberland, Mr. Strangeway. You do not see life as we see it up here!"

"And what about John?" he asked, without moving. "You tempted him away. Was it from wantonness, or do you love him?"

"Love him?" she laughed. "I hate you both! You are bores—you are ignorant people. I hate the moment I ever saw either of you. Take John back with you. Take him out of my life. There is no place there for him!"

Stephen picked up his hat from the sofa where it lay. Louise remained perfectly still, her breath coming quickly, her eyes lit with passion.

"Madam," he said, "I am sorry to have distressed you, but the truth sometimes hurts the most callous of us. You have heard the truth from me. I will take John back to Cumberland with me, if he will come. If he will not—"

"Take him with you!" she broke in fiercely. "He will do as I bid him—do you hear? If I lift my little finger, he will stay. It will be I who decide, I—"

"But you will not lift your little finger," he interrupted grimly.

"Why shouldn't I, just to punish you?" she demanded. "There are scores of men who fancy themselves in love with me. If I choose, I can keep them all their lives hanging to the hem of my skirt, praying for a word, a touch. I can make them furious one day and penitent the next—wretched always, perhaps, but I can keep them there. Why should I not treat your brother in the same way?"

He seemed suddenly to dilate. She was overcome with a sense of some latent power in the man, some commanding influence.

"Because," he declared, "I am the guardian of my brother's happiness. Whoever trifles with it shall in the future reckon with me!"

His eyes were fixed upon her soft, white throat. His long, lean fingers seemed suddenly to be drawing near to her. She watched him, fascinated. She was trying to scream. Even after



"It's Louise You Want—Not Me."

look at things squarely together, even where we differ. I'm—"  
"The door had been suddenly opened and Sophy Gerard made a most impetuous entrance.  
"I'm absolutely sick of ringing, John," she exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon! I hadn't the least idea you had anyone with you."  
She stood still in surprise, a little apologetic smile upon her lips. John hastened forward and welcomed her.  
"It's all right, Sophy," he declared. "Let me introduce my brother, may I? My brother Stephen—Miss Sophy Gerard."  
Stephen rose slowly from his place, laid down his pipe, and bowed stiffly to



"My Preference Is to Remain Standing."