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CHAPTER XXVI.—(Continued)

Still, she cared. Staring out of her window upon the quay, she caught her breath at sight of every new passer-by, in fearful hope that it might prove to be Monte. She did this when she knew that Monte as hundreds of miles away. She did this in face of the fact that, if his coming depended upon her consent, she would have withheld that consent. If in truth he had suddenly appeared, she would have fled in terror. He must not come; he should not come—but, O God, if he would come!

Sometimes this thought held her for a moment before she realized it. Then for a space the sun appeared in the blue sky and the birds set up such a singing as Marie had never heard in all her life. Perhaps for a step or two she saw him striding toward her with his face aglow, his clear, blue eyes smiling, his tender man mouth open to greet her. So her heart leaped to her throat and her arms trembled. Then—the fall into the abyss as she caught herself. Then her head drooping upon her arm and the racking, dry sobs.

Something comes with love. It is that more than love itself which is the greatest thing in the world. Sitting by her window, watching the shadows pass, Marjory was sensing this. The knowledge was coming slowly, imperceptibly; but it was bringing her strength. It was steadying her nerves. It was preparing her for the supreme test.

Because that very day, toward sunset-time, as she still sat by her window, she saw a shadow that looked like Monte. She smiled a little, because she knew it would soon dissolve. Rapidly the shadow strode along the quay until opposite the hotel. Then, instead of vanishing, it came on—straight toward her. She sprang to her feet, leaning back against the wall, not daring to look again. So she stood, counting her heart-beats; for she was still certain that when a hundred or so of them had passed, the illusion also would fade.

Marjory did not have time to count a full hundred heart-beats before she heard a light rap at the door. For the fraction of a second she swayed in the fear that, taking the stairs three at a time, Monte might have ventured to her very room. But it would be with no such gentle tap that he would announce himself.

"Yes?" she called.

"A card for madame," came the voice of the garcon.

Her knees still weak, she crossed the room and took the card. There was no longer any hope left to her. Apparitions do not materialize to the point where they present their cards.

"Madame is in?" queried the boy.

"What else can I say?" she asked, as if, in her desperate need, seeking counsel of him.

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

"If madame desires, I can report madame is away," he offered.

It was all one to him. It was all one to every one else in the world but herself. No one was interested. She was done. Then why had not Monte himself let her alone? That was the point, but to determine that it was necessary to see him.

It was possible he had come to see Peter, not knowing that Peter had gone. It was possible he had returned this way in order to take the Mediterranean route home. On the face of it, anything was more probable than that he had come deliberately to see her.

"You will ask monsieur to wait, and I will be down in a few moments," she replied to the boy.

She called to Marie.

"I have a caller," she announced nervously. "You must make me look as young as possible."

Even if she has grown old inside, there was no reason why she should reveal her secret.

"I am glad," nodded Marie. "Madame should put on a white gown and wear a ribbon in her hair."

"A ribbon!" exclaimed madame. "That would look absurd."

"You shall see."

She was too weak to protest. She was glad enough to sit down and give herself up utterly to Marie.

"Only we must not keep him waiting too long," she said. "Monsieur

Covington does not like to be kept waiting."

"It is he?" exclaimed Marie.

"It—it is quite a surprise." She blushed. "I—I do not understand why he is here."

"It should not be difficult to understand," ventured Marie.

To that madame made no reply. It was clear enough what Marie meant. It was a natural enough mistake. To her, Monsieur Covington was still the husband of madame. She had stood in the little chapel in Paris when madame was married. When one was married, one was married; and that was all there was to it for all time. So, doubtless, Marie reasoned. It was the simple peasant way—the old, honest, woman way.

Madame folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes while Marie did her hair and adjusted the ribbon. Then Marie slipped a white gown over her head.

"There," concluded the maid, with satisfaction, as she fastened the last hook. "Madame looks as young as when she was married."

But the color that made her look young vanished the moment Marjory started down the stairs alone to meet him. Several times she paused to catch her breath; several times she was upon the point of turning back. Then she saw him coming up to meet her. She felt her hand in his.

"Jove!" he was saying, "but it's good to see you again."

"But I don't understand why you are here," she managed to gasp.

To him it was evidently as simple as to Marie.

"To see you," he answered promptly.

"If that is all, then you should not have come," she declared.

They were still on the stairs. She led the way down and into the lower reception-room. She did not care to go again into the sun parlor. She thought it would be easier to talk to him in surroundings not associated with anything in the past. They had the room to themselves. She sat down and motioned him to another chair at some little distance. He paid no attention to her implied request. With his feet planted firmly, his arms folded, he stood before her while she tried to find some way of avoiding his gaze.

"Peter Noyes has gone," he began.

"Yes," she nodded. "You heard about his eyes?"

"He wrote me."

She looked up swiftly.

"Peter wrote you?" she trembled.

"He told me he had recovered his sight. He told me he was going."

What else had he told? Dizzily she awaited. For the first time in her life, she felt as if she might faint. That would be such a silly thing to do!

"He said he was going home—out of your life."

Peter had told Monte that! What else had he told?

He paused a moment, as if expecting her to make some reply. There was nothing she could say.

"It wasn't what I expected," he went on.

What else had Peter told him?

"Wasn't there any other way?" he asked.

"I didn't send him home. He—he chose to go," she said.

"Because it wasn't any use for him to remain?"

"I told him the truth," she nodded.

"And he took it like a man!" exclaimed Monte enthusiastically. "I'd like to show you his letter, only I don't know that it would be quite fair to him."

"I don't want to see it," she cut in.

"I—I know I shouldn't."

What else besides his going had Peter told Monte?

"It was his letter that brought me back," he said.

She held her breath. She had warned Peter that if he as much as hinted at anything that she had confessed to him, she would lie to Monte. So she should—but God forbid that this added humiliation be brought upon her.

"You see when I went I expected that he would be left to care for you. With him and his sister here, I knew you wouldn't be alone. I thought they'd stay, or if they went—you'd go with them."

"But why shouldn't I be alone?" she gathered strength to ask.

"Because," he answered quickly, "it isn't good for you. It isn't good for any one. Besides, it isn't right. When we were married I made certain promises, and those hold good until we're unmarried."

"Monte!" she cried.

"As long as Peter was around, that was one thing; now that he's gone—"

"It throws me back on your hands," she interrupted, in an attempt to assert herself. "Please to sit down. You're making your old mistake of trying to be serious. There's not the slightest reason in the world why you should bother about me like this."

She ventured to look at him again. His brows were drawn together in a puzzled frown. Dear Monte—it was cruel of her to confuse him like this, when he was trying to see straight. He looked so very woe-begone when he looked troubled at all.

"It—it isn't any bother," he stammered.

"I should think it was a good deal," she answered, feeling for a moment that she had the upper hand. "Where did you come from to here?"

"Paris."

"You didn't go on to England at all?"

"No."

"Then you didn't get back to your schedule. If you had done that, you wouldn't have had any time left to think about other things."

"I didn't get beyond the Normandie," he answered. "My schedule stopped short right there."

He was still standing before her. Apparently he intended to remain. So she rose and crossed to another chair. He followed.

"You should have gone on," she insisted.

"I had my old room—next to yours," he said.

She must trouble him still more. There was no other way.

"That was rather sentimental of you, Monte, wasn't it?" she asked lightly.

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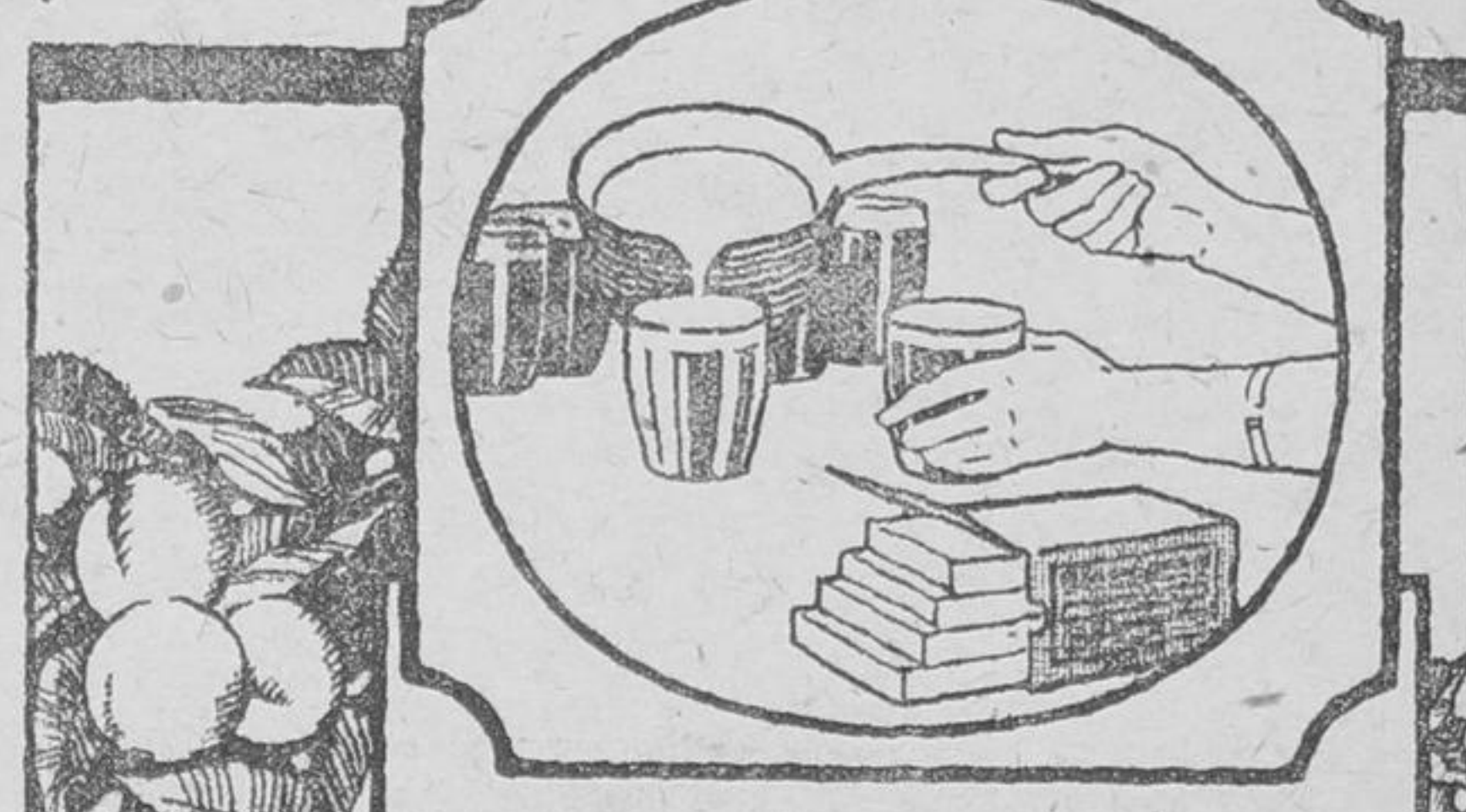
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"I went there as a man goes home," he answered softly.

(To be continued.)

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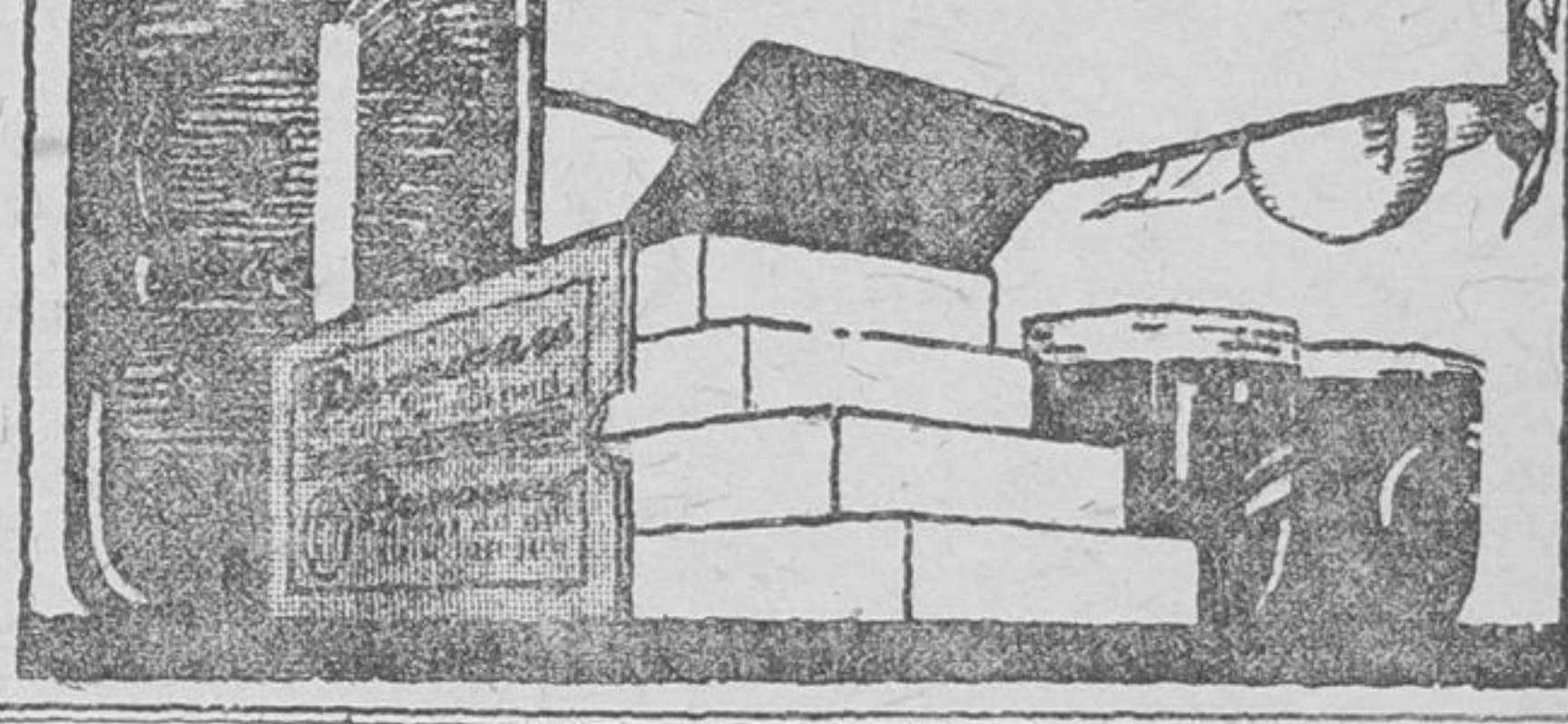
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