

she said brokenly. "I—I dare not interfere, even though I approved of what you say, which I do not."

"Some one must act, and speedily too, or the resultant mischief cannot be undone. I appeal to you because you are a woman, and we men are prone to bungle in these matters."

"But what do you want of me?" wailed the tortured Princess. "Michael protested against the marriage—"

"I am thinking of Alec's welfare now," said Stamp-off gruffly. "You are his mother, and you and I can save him. In a word, that girl must go, to-night if possible, to-morrow without fail. The talk of marriage must be dropped, and revived only when a Serb is the prospective bride."

"You say she must go. What does that imply? It is not in my power to send her away, even if I would."

"It is, Princess," was the grim answer. "If she loves Alec, she will save him by leaving him. I am told women do these things occasionally. Perhaps she is one of the self-sacrificing sort. At any rate, she must be given the chance, and by you. She must go away, and in going tell the King she will never marry him. It is hard. Both will suffer; but in the long run Alec will come to see that by no other means can he retain his Kingdom."

## CHAPTER XI.

### Joan Decides

AN odd element of fatality seemed to attach itself to the Byzantine Saint Peter in the cathedral of Delgratz. Joan nearly lost her life within a few hours of the time when she first saw that remarkable work of art, and it was ordained that one of the last clear memories of her checkered life in Kosnovia should be its round staring eyes, its stiffly modeled right hand, uplifted, it might be, in reproof or exhortation, the ornate pastoral staff, and the emblem of the crossed keys that labeled the artist's intent to portray the chief apostle. Poor Joan had already conceived a violent dislike of the reputed Giotto. It was no longing to complete her work that drove her at the end to the solemn cathedral, but the compelling need of confiding in Felix. For it had come to this: she must fly from Delgratz, at once and forever.

It chanced that morning that Alec had taken a holiday. He appeared unexpectedly at breakfast and sat by Joan's side, and his lover's eyes had detected a pallor, a certain strained and wistful tension of the lips, signs of mental storm and stress that she hoped would not be noticeable.

"Sweetheart," he whispered in quick alarm, "you are not well. You are feeling this wretched climate. I am minded to throw sentiment aside and send my mother and you to the New Konak to-day."

"I am quite well," she said, with a forced composure that she felt did not deceive him. It was necessary to invent some explanation, and she continued hurriedly, "I did not sleep soundly last night. Some wandering night bird flew in through my open window and startled me with its frantic efforts to escape from the room. That is all. After a little rest I shall be myself again."

"That gloomy old cathedral is not a healthy place, I am inclined to think," he said, scanning her face again with the anxious gaze of one who could not endure even a momentary eclipse of its bright vivacity. "You go there too often, and now that we know from whom your commission was received it is straining a point of etiquette to continue your work. It will relieve any scruples you may have on that head if I tell you that I paid Monsieur Beliani yesterday every farthing of the money that was advanced to you by his agent in Paris."

"I am glad of that," she said simply. "I did not like the idea of being indebted to him. Though he is a very clever man, I regard him as a good deal of a rogue."

Alec was not to be switched off personal issues because Joan expressed her opinions in this matter of fact manner. "I am quite sure you are ill, or at any rate run down," he persisted. "What you need is a change of air. I think I can allow myself a few hours' respite from affairs of state to-day. What say you if the two of us drive to our country house this morning and find out for ourselves the progress made by the workmen? I seem to remember that the contractor named a date, not far distant now, when the place would be habitable."

"There is nothing in the world that I should like better," said Joan.

Again Alec detected a strange undercurrent of emotion in her voice; but he attributed it to the lack of sleep she had complained of, and with his cus-

tomary tact forbore from pressing her for any further explanation.

THEY took their drive, and to all outward semblance Joan enjoyed it thoroughly. Her drooping spirits revived long before the last straggling houses of Delgratz were left behind. She exhibited the keenest interest in the house and gardens. Although their inspection did not end until the sun was high in the heavens, she insisted upon entering every room and traversing many of the paths in the spacious grounds. She talked, too, with a fluency that in any other woman would have aroused a suspicion of effort; but Alec was too glad that the marked depression of the morning had passed to give heed to her half-hysterical mood. He entered with zest into her eager scrutiny of their future home, sought her advice on every little detail, and grew enthusiastic himself at the prospect of a speedy removal from the barnlike presidential palace to that leafy paradise. He remembered afterward how Joan's

again attributed it to the reaction that comes to highly strung natures after a surfeit of excitement in the midst of a new and difficult environment.

He kissed her tenderly, and Joan seemed to be on the verge of tears. He was puzzled; but thought it best to refrain from comment. "Poor girl!" he said to himself. "She feels it hard to be surrounded by people who are all strangers and mostly shut off by the barrier of language."

But he was in no sense alarmed. He left the palace convinced that a few hours of repose would bring back the color to her cheeks and the natural buoyancy to her manner. Then he meant to chaff her about her distracted air; for Joan was no neurotic subject, and she herself would be the first to laugh at the nervous fit of the morning.

POLUSKI, hard at work at his frescos since an early hour, and grudgingly snatching a hasty meal at midday, was surprised when Joan came to him after the King's departure and told him that she meant to finish her picture that afternoon. He made no comment, however; indeed, he was glad of her company, and the two drove away together in the capacious closed carriage that brought them to and from cathedral and palace. During their working hours they refused to be hampered by the presence of servants. An old Greek, who acted as caretaker, took charge of canvases, easels, paint boxes, and other utensils of the painter's craft, and he came out gleefully from his lodge as soon as their vehicle rumbled under the deep arch of the outer porch.

Usually Joan had a word and a smile for him, though the extent of her Greek conversation was a phrase or two learned from Felix; but to-day she hardly seemed to see him, and lost not a moment in settling down to work. She had not much to do; in fact, so far as Felix took note of her actions, after adjusting the canvas and mixing some colors on the palette, she sat idle for a long time, and even then occupied herself with an unnecessary deepening of tints in the picture, which already displayed an amazing resemblance to its stilted and highly colored prototype.

At last she spoke, and Felix, perched on a platform above her head, was almost startled by the sorrow laden cadence of her voice.

"I did not really come here to-day to paint," she said. "The picture is finished; my work in Delgratz is ended. You and Pauline are the only two people in the world whom I can trust, and I have brought you here, Felix, to tell you that I am leaving Delgratz to-night."

THE hunchback slid down from the little scaffolding he had constructed to enable him to survey the large area covered by the frescos. "I suppose I have understood what you said," he cried. "It is impossible to focus one's thoughts properly on the spoken word when a huge dome adds vibrations of its own, and I admit that I am invariably irritated myself when I state a remarkable fact with the utmost plainness and people pretend to be either deaf or dull of comprehension."

That was Poluski's way,—he never would take one seriously,—but Joan merely sighed and bent her head.

"You say you are leaving Delgratz to-night! May one ask why?" he went on, dropping his bantering manner at once.

"No," she said. Felix bassooned a few deep notes between his lips. "You have some good reason for telling me that, I presume?" he muttered, uttering the first words that occurred to his perplexed brain.

"Yes, the very best of reasons, or at least the most convincing. I cannot remain here unless I marry Alec, and, as I have absolutely determined not to marry him, it follows that I must go."

"Ah, you are willing to give some sort of reason, then," he said. "At present I am muddled. One grasps that unless you marry Alec you must go; but why not marry Alec? It sounds like a proposition of Euclid with the main clauses omitted."

"I am sorry, Felix, but I cannot explain myself further. You came to Delgratz with me; will you return with me to Paris? If not, will you at least promise to help me get away and keep secret the fact that I am going?"

Felix grew round eyed with amazement; but he managed to control his tongue. "You are asking a good deal, dear," he said. "Do you know what you are doing? Do you realize what your action will mean to Alec? What has happened, some lover's tiff? That is unlike you, Joan. If you run off in this fashion, you will be trying most deliberately to break poor Alec's heart."

Joan uttered a queer little choking sob; yet recov-

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"I Have Brought You Here to Tell You I Am Leaving Delgratz To-Night," Said Joan.

eyes dwelt longingly on an Italian garden that had always attracted her; but it was impossible that he should read the farewell in them.

They returned to the city in time for luncheon; then the King had to hurry away to try and overtake the day's engagements.

His parting words were an injunction to Joan that she should not go out again during the hot hours, but endeavor to obtain the rest of which she had been deprived during the night.

"Goodby, dear," she said. "You may feel quite certain that when next we meet I shall be a different person altogether from the pallid creature whom you met at breakfast this morning."

Alec was still conscious of some strange detachment in her words. His earlier feeling that she was acting a part came back with renewed force; but he