BLACK OXEN

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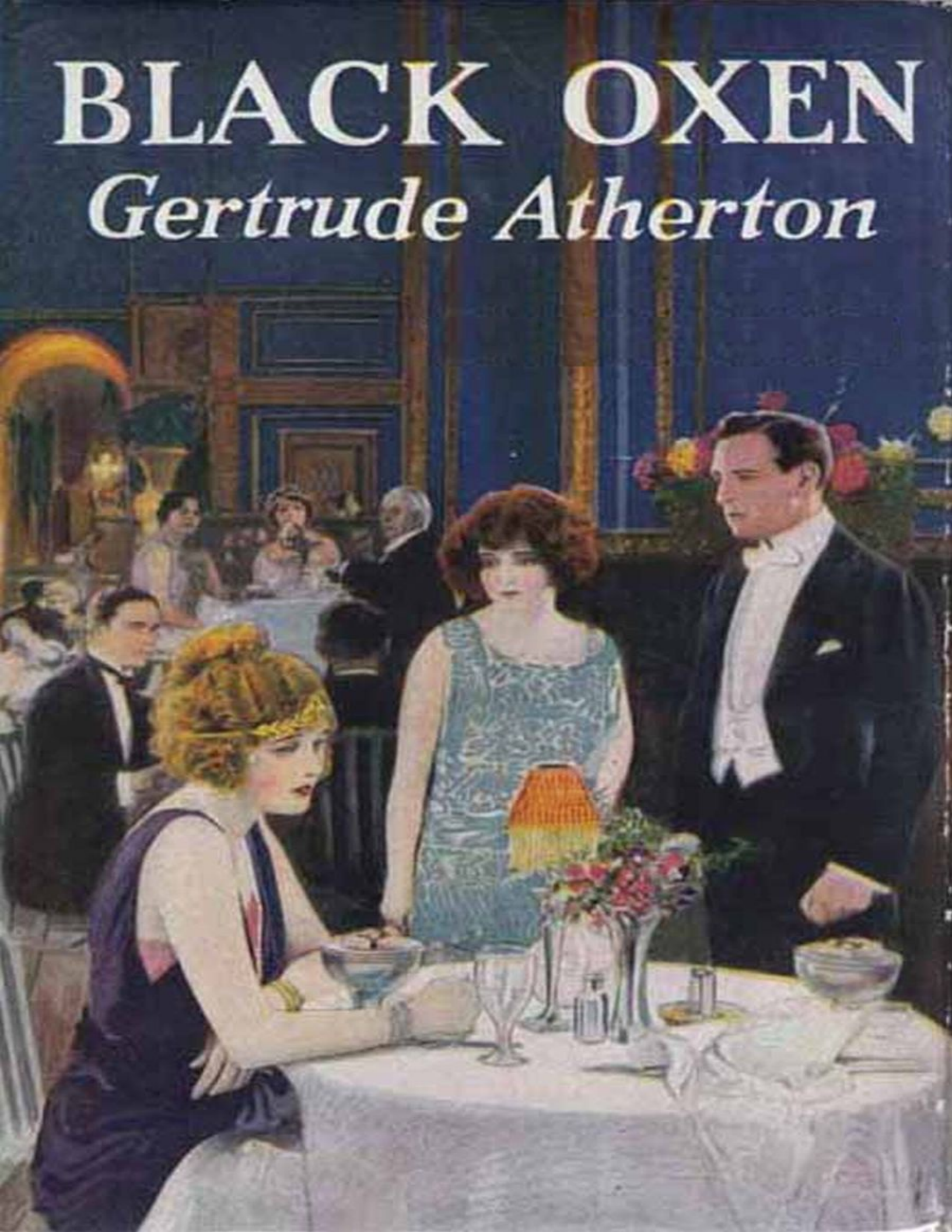

BLACK OXEN

BY GERTRUDE ATHERTON

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"Sisters-in-Law"

The years like Great Black Oxen tread the world
And God the herdsman goads them on behind.
—W. B. Yeats.

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Their tete-e-tete ended, Clavering (Conway Tearle) was about to make his departure when Judge Trent (Tom Guise), who held buried in his mind the secret of the charming Madame Zattiany's (Corinne Griffith), entered.
(Screen version of "The Black Oxen.")

BLACK OXEN

I

"Talk. Talk. Talk.… Good lines and no action … said all … not even promising first act … eighth failure and season more than half over … rather be a playwright and fail than a critic compelled to listen to has-beens and would-bes trying to put over bad plays.… Oh, for just one more great first-night … if there's a spirit world why don't the ghosts of dead artists get together and inhibit bad playwrights from tormenting first-nighters?… Astral board of Immortals sitting in Unconscious tweaking strings until gobbets and sclerotics become gibbering idiots every time they put pen to paper?… Fewer first-nights but more joy … also joy of sending producers back to cigar stands.… Thank God, no longer a critic … don't need to come to first-nights unless I want … can't keep away … habit too strong … poor devil of a colyumist must forage … why did I become a columnist? More money. Money! And I once a rubescent socialist … best parlor type … Lord! I wish some one would die and leave me a million!"

Clavering opened his weary eyes and glanced over the darkened auditorium, visualizing a mass of bored resentful disks: a few hopeful, perhaps, the greater number too educated in the theatre not to have recognized the heavy note of incompetence that had boomed like a muffled fog-horn since the rise of the curtain.

It was a typical first-night audience, assembled to welcome a favorite actress in a new play. All the Sophisticates (as Clavering had named them, abandoning "Intellectuals" and "Intelligentsia" to the Parlor Socialists) were present: authors, playwrights, editors and young editors, columnists, dramatic critics, young publishers, the fashionable illustrators and cartoonists, a few actors, artists, sculptors, hostesses of the eminent, and a sprinkling of Greenwich Village to give a touch of old Bohemia to what was otherwise almost as brilliant and standardized as a Monday night at the opera. Twelve

years ago, Clavering, impelled irresistibly from a dilapidated colonial mansion in Louisiana to the cerebrum of the Western World, had arrived in New York; and run the usual gamut of the high-powered man from reporter to special writer, although youth rose to eminence less rapidly then than now. Dramatic critic of his newspaper for three years (two years at the war), an envied, quoted and omniscient columnist since his return from France. Journalistically he could rise no higher, and none of the frequent distinguished parties given by the Sophisticates was complete without the long lounging body and saturnine countenance of Mr. Lee Clavering. As soon as he had set foot upon the ladder of prominence Mr. Clavering had realized the value of dramatizing himself, and although he was as active of body as of mind and of an amiable and genial disposition, as his friends sometimes angrily protested, his world, that world of increasing importance in New York, knew him as a cynical, morose, mysterious creature, who, at a party, transferred himself from one woman's side to another's by sheer effort of will spurred by boredom. The unmarried women had given him up as a confirmed bachelor, but a few still followed his dark face with longing eyes. (He sometimes wondered what rôle he would have adopted if he had been a blond.) As a matter of fact, he was intensely romantic, even after ten years of newspaper work in New York and two of war; and when his steel-blue half-closed eyes roved over a gathering at the moment of entrance it was with the evergreen hope of discovering the consummate woman.

There was no affectation in his idealistic fastidiousness. Nor, of late, in his general boredom. Not that he did not still like his work, or possibly pontificating every morning over his famous name to an admiring public, but he was tired of "the crowd," the same old faces, tired of the steady grind, of bad plays—he, who had such a passionate love of the drama—somewhat tired of himself. He would have liked to tramp the world for a year. But although he had money enough saved he dared not drop out of New York. One was forgotten overnight, and fashions, especially since the war, changed so quickly and yet so subtly that he might be another year readjusting himself on his return. Or find himself supplanted by some man younger than himself whose cursed audacity and dramatized youthfulness would have accustomed the facile public to some new brand of pap flavored with red pepper. The world was marching to the tune of youth, damn it (Mr. Clavering was

beginning to feel elderly at thirty-four), but it was hard to shake out the entrenched. He had his public hypnotized. He could sell ten copies of a book where a reviewer could sell one. His word on a play was final—or almost. Personal mention of any of the Sophisticates added a cubit to reputation. Three mentions made them household words. Neglect caused agonies and visions of extinction. Disparagement was preferable. By publicity shall ye know them. Even public men with rhinocerene hides had been seen to shiver. Cause women courted him. Prize fighters on the dour morn after a triumphant night had howled between fury and tears as Mr. Lee Clavering (once crack reporter of the gentle art) wrote sadly of greater warriors. Lenin had mentioned him as an enemy of the new religion, who dealt not with the truth. Until he grew dull—no grinning skeleton as yet—his public, after hasty or solemn digestion of the news, would turn over to his column with a sigh of relief. But he must hang on, no doubt of that. Fatal to give the public even a hint that it might learn to do without him.

He sighed and closed his eyes again. It was not unpleasant to feel himself a slave, a slave who had forged his own gilded chains. But he sighed again for his lost simplicities, for his day-dreams under the magnolias when he had believed that if women of his class were not obliged to do their own housework they would all be young and beautiful and talk only of romance; when he had thought upon the intellectual woman and the woman who "did things" as an anomaly and a horror. Well, the reality was more companionable, he would say that for them.… Then he grinned as he recalled the days of his passionate socialism, when he had taken pains, like every socialist he had ever met, to let it be understood that he had been born in the best society. Well, so he had, and he was glad of it, even if the best society of his small southern town had little to live on but its vanished past. He never alluded to his distinguished ancestry now that he was eminent and comfortable, and he looked back with uneasy scorn upon his former breaches of taste, but he never quite forgot it. No Southerner ever does.

The play droned on to the end of the interminable first act. Talk. Talk. Talk. He'd go to sleep, but would be sure to get a crick in his neck. Then he remembered a woman who had come down the aisle just as the lights were lowering and passed his seat. He had not seen her face, but her graceful

figure had attracted his attention, and the peculiar shade of her hair: the color of warm ashes. There was no woman of his acquaintance with that rare shade of blonde hair.

He opened his eyes. She was sitting two seats ahead of him and the lights of the stage gave a faint halo to a small well-shaped head defined by the low coil of hair. She had a long throat apparently, but although she had dropped her wrap over the back of the seat he had no more than a glimpse of a white neck and a suggestion of sloping shoulders. Rather rare those, nowadays. They reminded him, together with the haughty poise of the head, of the family portraits in the old gallery at home. Being dark himself, he admired fair women, although since they had taken to bobbing their hair they looked as much alike as magazine covers. This woman wore her hair in no particular fashion. It was soft and abundant, brushed back from her face, and drawn merely over the tips of the ears. At least so he inferred. He had not seen even her profile as she passed. Profiles were out of date, but in an old-fashioned corner of his soul he admired them, and he was idly convinced that a woman with so perfectly shaped a head, long and narrow, but not too narrow, must have a profile. Probably her full face would not be so attractive. Women with *cendré* hair generally had light brows and lashes, and her eyes might be a washed-out blue. Or prominent. Or her mouth too small. He would bet on the profile, however, and instead of rushing out when that blessed curtain went down he would wait and look for it.

Then he closed his eyes again and forgot her until he was roused by the clapping of many hands. First-nighters always applaud, no matter how perfunctorily. Noblesse oblige. But the difference between the applause of the bored but loyal and that of the enchanted and quickened is as the difference between a rising breeze and a hurricane.

The actors bowed en masse, in threes, in twos, singly. The curtain descended, the lights rose, the audience heaved. Men hurried up the aisle and climbed over patient women. People began to visit. And then the woman two seats ahead of Clavering did a singular thing.

She rose slowly to her feet, turned her back to the stage, raised her opera

glasses and leisurely surveyed the audience.

"I knew it!" Clavering's tongue clicked. "European. No American woman ever did that—unless, to be sure, she has lived too long abroad to remember our customs."

He gazed at her eagerly, and felt a slight sensation of annoyance that the entire house was following his example. The opera glasses concealed her eyes, but they rested upon the bridge of an indubitably straight nose. Her forehead was perhaps too high, but it was full, and the thick hair was brushed back from a sharp point. Her eyebrows, thank Heaven, were many shades darker than her hair. They were also narrow and glossy. Decidedly they received attention. Possibly they were plucked and darkened—life had made him skeptical of "points." However, Clavering was no lover of unamended nature, holding nature, except in rare moments of inspiration, a bungler of the first water.

In spite of its smooth white skin and rounded contours above an undamaged throat, it was, subtly, not a young face. The mouth, rather large, although fresh and red (possibly they had lip sticks in Europe that approximated nature) had none of the girl's soft flexibility. It was full in the center and the red of the underlip was more than a visible line, but it was straight at the corners, ending in an almost abrupt sternness. Once she smiled, but it was little more than an amused flicker; the mouth did not relax. The shape of the face bore out the promise of the head, but deflected from its oval at the chin, which was almost square, and indented. The figure was very slight, but as subtly mature as the face, possibly because she held it uncompromisingly erect; apparently she had made no concession to the democratic absence of "carriage," the indifferent almost apologetic mien that had succeeded the limp curves of a few years ago.

She wore a dress of white jet made with the long lines of the present fashion —in dress she was evidently a stickler. The neck was cut in a low square, showing the rise of the bust. Her own lines were long, the arms and hands very slender in the long white gloves. Probably she was the only woman in the house who wore gloves. Life was freer since the war. She wore a triple

string of pearls.

He waited eagerly until she should drop her glasses.… He heard two girls gasping and muttering behind him.… There was a titter across the house.

She lowered the opera glasses and glanced over the rows of upturned faces immediately before her, scrutinizing them casually, as if they were fish in an aquarium. She had dropped her lids slightly before her eyes came to rest on Clavering. He was leaning forward, his eyes hard and focal, doing his best to compel her notice. Her glance did linger on his for a moment before it moved on indifferently, but in that brief interval he experienced a curious ripple along his nerves … almost a note of warning.… They were very dark gray eyes, Greek in the curve of the lid, and inconceivably wise, cold, disillusioned. She did not look a day over twenty-eight. There were no marks of dissipation on her face. But for its cold regularity she would have looked younger—with her eyes closed. The eyes seemed to gaze down out of an infinitely remote past.

Suddenly she seemed to sense the concentrated attention of the audience. She swept it with a hasty glance, evidently appreciated the fact that she alone was standing and facing it, colored slightly and sat down. But her repose was absolute. She made no little embarrassed gestures as another woman would have done. She did not even affect to read her program.

II

Clavering left his chair and wandered up the aisle. He felt none of his usual impatience for the beneficent cigarette. Was he hit? Hardly. Inquisitive, certainly. But he had seen so many provocative shells. Vile trick of nature, that—poverty-stricken unoriginal creature that she was.

He glanced over the rows of people as he passed. It was not the play that was animating them. The woman was a godsend.

His gaze paused abruptly on the face of Mr. Charles Dinwiddie. Clavering's grand-aunt had married Mr. Dinwiddie's father and the two men, so far apart in years, were more or less intimate; the older man's inexhaustible gossip of New York Society amused Clavering, who in turn had initiated Mr. Dinwiddie into new and strange pleasures, including literary parties and first nights—ignored by the world of fashion.

All New York men of the old régime, no matter what their individuality may have been twenty years earlier, look so much alike as they approach sixty, and more particularly after they have passed it, that they might be brothers in blood as in caste. Their moustaches and what little hair they have left turns the same shade of well-bred white. Their fine old Nordic faces are generally lean and flat of cheek, their expression calm, assured, not always smug. They are impeccably groomed and erect. Stout they may be, but seldom fat, and if not always handsome, they are polished, distinguished, aloof. They no longer wear side-whiskers and look younger than their fathers did at the same age.

Mr. Dinwiddie's countenance as a rule was as formal and politely expressionless as became his dignified status, but tonight it was not. It was pallid. The rather prominent eyes were staring, the mouth was relaxed. He was seated next the aisle and Clavering hastened toward him in alarm.

"Ill, old chap?" he asked. "Better come out."

Mr. Dinwiddie focussed his eyes, then stumbled to his feet and caught Clavering by the arm. "Yes," he muttered. "Get me out of this and take me where I can get a drink. Seen a ghost."

Clavering guided him up the aisle, then out of a side exit into an alley and produced a flask from his hip-pocket. Mr. Dinwiddie without ceremony raised it to his lips and swallowed twice, gasping a little. He had reached the age of the mild whiskey and soda. Then he stood erect and passed his hand over the shining curve of his head.

"Ever seen a ghost, Lee?" he asked. "That woman was there, wasn't she?"

"She was there, all right." Clavering's face was no longer cynical and mysterious; it was alive with curiosity. "D'you know who she is?"

"Thirty-odd years ago any one of us old chaps would have told you she was Mary Ogden, and like as not raised his hat. She was the beauty and the belle of her day. But she married a Hungarian diplomat, Count Zattiany, when she was twenty-four, and deserted us. Never been in the country since. I never wanted to see her again. Too hard hit. But I caught a glimpse of her at the opera in Paris about ten years ago—faded! Always striking of course with that style, but withered, changed, skinny where she had been slim, her throat concealed by a dog collar a yard long—her expression sad and apathetic—the dethroned idol of men. God! Mary Ogden! I left the house."

"It is her daughter, of course——"

"Never had a child—positive of it. Zattiany title went to a nephew who was killed in the war.… No … it must be … must be …" His eyes began to glitter. Clavering knew the symptom. His relative was about to impart interesting gossip.

"Well?" he asked impatiently.

"There were many stories about Mary Ogden—Mary Zattiany—always a notable figure in the capitals of Europe. Her husband was in the diplomatic service until he died—some years before I saw her in Paris. She was far too

clever—damnably clever, Mary Ogden, and had a reputation for it in European Society as well as for beauty—to get herself compromised. But there were stories—that must be it! She had a daughter and stowed her away somewhere. No two women could be as alike as that except mother and daughter—don't see it too often at that. Why, the very way she carries her head—her *style* … wonder where she kept her? That girl has been educated and has all the air of the best society. Must have got friends to adopt her. Gad! What a secret chapter. But why on earth does she let the girl run round loose?"

"I shouldn't say she was a day under twenty-eight. No doubt she looked younger from where you were sitting."

"Twenty-eight! Mary must have begun sooner than we heard. But—well, we never felt that we knew Mary—that was one of her charms. She kept us guessing, as you young fellows say, and she had the devil's own light in her eyes sometimes." His own orb lit up again. "Wonder if Mary is here? No doubt she's come over to get her property back—she never transferred her investments and of course it was alienated during the war. But not a soul has heard from her. I am sure of that. We were discussing her the other night at dinner and wondering if her fortune had been turned over. It was at Jane Oglethorpe's. Jane and a good many of the other women have seen her from time to time abroad—stayed at her castle in Hungary during the first years of her marriage; but they drifted apart as friends do.… She must be a wreck, poor thing. She ran a hospital during the war and was in Buda Pesth for some time after the revolution broke out. I hope she had the girl well hidden away."

"Perhaps she sent the girl over to look after her affairs."

"That's it. Beyond a doubt. And I'll find out. Trent is Mary's attorney and trustee. I'll make him open up."

"And you'll call on her?"

"Won't I? That is, I'll make Trent take me. I never want to look at poor Mary again, but I'd feel young—— Hello! I believe you're hit!" Mr. Dinwiddie, having solved his problems, was quite himself again and alert for one of the

little dramas that savored his rather tasteless days. "I'd like that. I'll introduce you and give you my blessing. Wrong side of the blanket, though."

"Don't care a hang."

"That's right. Who cares about anything these days? And you can only be young once." He sighed. "And if she's like her mother—only halfway like her inside—she'll be worth it."

"Is that a promise?"

"We'll shake on it. I'll see Trent in the morning. Dine with me at the club at eight?"

"Rather!"