

THE INVASION OF REALITY

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PICTURE BY HARRY TOWNSEND

MME. DE VANNOZ closed her lorgnon with a snap, and her eyelids drooped with an obvious ballast of disapproval. To the uninitiated observer, Mme. de Vannoz might have seemed rash in assuming the seat of the scornful. At certain hours of the day she was accustomed to surrender her person to the hands of her maid with an unfeigned indifference as to the result. Nise, conventionally Parisian to the finger-tips, reproduced in this delightfully plastic material her ideal of a lady of the great world. To a Puritan eye, the result at first glance savored somewhat more of the half-world. Only at first glance, however; there was an austere quality about the woman herself, an almost disembodied impersonality, that nullified all the elaborate armor of coquetry. She was a writer of international reputation, a mind honored by the most brilliant minds of her acquaintance; not all the labors of Nise could make her a woman to be regarded by other women with suspicion and a touch of envy, by men with a smirk and a furtive interchange of glances. The girl at whom the lorgnon had been leveled was as natural of coloring as a flower, and would have felt it as reprehensible to show a powdery nose as a shiny one. Nevertheless, Mme. de Vannoz, gazing at her, settled herself in the Siege Perilous with a judicial composure. She lifted her brows, puffing out a sharp breath like a reversed sniff—the kind of sound that challenges an answer. The answer came from the young man beside her. He, too, was looking at the girl, but with eyes very different from those of his companion.

"Please don't!" he remonstrated involuntarily. "You don't understand. That's only thoughtlessness."

Mme. de Vannoz looked at him, but not through the lorgnon; her eye in a state of nature had a whimsical twinkle.

"Why do you not ascribe it to the American manner, my child?" she inquired pleasantly, thereby checking an incipient mumble to that effect. She shook her head and smiled at his confusion, and he felt, as usual, much younger than he did in any other circumstances—younger even than before his mirror.

It seemed to Seymour that one could call it by no harsher name than thoughtlessness, the thing that the older woman disparaged. The girl was pretty, and more than pretty; her guileless intensity radiated life and love and joy. It seemed to him that her spontaneous little caresses of hand and voice were as innocent in their exuberance as were the clinging tendrils of a vine. She sent them out freely, heedless of where they clung; it was the lavishness of her own nature spending itself in endearments upon the world at large. She walked now along the terrace, with her arm about the waist of another girl. One could see the ingenuous little squeeze with which she occasionally emphasized a word of her chatter. At the end of the terrace, toward the lake, a young man was kneeling, teaching a dog to shake hands. He held up a lump of sugar as an inducement to obedience. He called over his shoulder a laughing greeting to the two girls, the taller of whom was his bride. They stopped beside him, and, still enlaced, stooped to encourage the pupil; the little girl whom they were watching bent the closer of the two, her hand outstretched to fondle the dog's curly head. That brought the soft curve of her bosom very near the young man's shoulder; a strand of her wind-ruffled hair might have brushed his cheek. He dropped the sugar, and the dog eagerly appropriated it. It was at this point that Mme. de Vannoz closed her lorgnon.

"The dog had not given his paw," she said. "Do you know why he got the

sugar? Ah, yes, you know." Seymour bit his lip, aware with keen resentment of a rich suffusion about the ears. "It was last night, was it not?" she went on. "From my little garden one sees much. You were on the terrace—" She took his arm and drew him toward the nook by the lake; the other party had gone on into the hotel garden, the dog leaping and barking about them. Mme. de Vannoz paused at the stone balcony overhanging the water.

"Here," she said. Seymour flushed again.

"You must n't blame her for that," he protested. "It was all my fault. She had no idea—"

"Thoughtless, in a word—your own word," returned Mme. de Vannoz. "It may be. She is still very young, like yourself, and at first one does not think; one only feels. But one thing I tell you, my child: it is not well to be thoughtless with the husband of a friend."

Seymour winced as if she had struck him; she drew away a little, and her hand fell from his arm.

"Do you think you love her?" she asked, and there was a hoarse tenderness in her voice like the lower notes of a cello. Behind her, far up the lake, the Dent du Midi rose inconceivably white against the darkening blue; despite the cynicism from which he had shrunk, despite the painted mask and the clinging draperies that betrayed an all-too-perfect corseting, she seemed to Seymour as aloof from human weakness and even from human feeling as those pinnacles of snow. Had she been always the unmoved analyst, he wondered; and for the first time in their acquaintance he thought of M. de Vannoz, and wondered what he had been like.

"Do you think that you love her?" she repeated.

"I don't know—what else can it be?" he blurted boyishly.

"No, you would not know," said Mme. de Vannoz, slowly. "There is a sort of sacred imbecility that goes with innocence; because your head swims at a woman's touch, you think she is your mate, soul and body." Her shoulders contracted in a shrug that was half a shiver. "If you only knew! And yet I would not have you like some of my own kindred, who are imbeciles without the innocence."

A sudden fierceness flamed through the careful art of her face. "Is your mother alive? No? And if she were, she could give you no help in this; she would be as innocent as you. See, my child, I understand that girl—me; she is what we call a *flammeuse*. She is the type that drives our boys to absinthe and *cocottes*; she lights the fire, but she never means to be burned in it. And seldom is; it is the others who suffer. The worst of it is, that if you ask her to marry you, she will do it, that one. I know. And not for love; do not cheat yourself. The *flammeuse* does not love; she drives a shrewd bargain; and she is always cold—cold at the heart."

"Stop!" cried Seymour. "You are cruel, and—you don't understand."

The savage earnestness went out of her eyes, leaving the twinkle somewhat sadder, but more whimsical than ever.

"And I am only a clumsy old woman who treads upon the toes of your illusions," she said. "Forgive me; *je vous aime—d'amitié, bien entendu*, and I spoke as I would have spoken to a son of my own. But—one cannot save others from pain. I know that so well in my mind; but, see, I have not yet learned it with my heart. One can help only when the harm has been done. I have told that in so many stories—besides my own." She flung back her head with a short laugh. "And you are thinking only that I do not understand!" She turned away abruptly, and went toward the cottage, trailing her delicate embroideries along the path with a superb negligence. The shrubs of the miniature garden hid her from him, and she had not looked back.

Seymour stood where she had left him, bewildered and disturbed. All day he had been obsessed by vague and whirling memories of the evening before; somehow the girl had been so near, so unconsciously alluring, that before he had known what was coming he had caught her in his arms, and his lips had found hers. It did not occur to him that the finding had been easy. Then she had freed herself, and run into the house, but not in anger, evidently, for all day her glances had been graciously forgiving and—he flung the door of his mind violently shut in the face of the thought that there had been an invitation in her eyes. As he did so, he felt

a childish hatred for Mme. de Vannoz, without whom that thought would never have intruded. She had caught the butterfly of his romance in her strong, ruthless hand, and now that she had released it, its frail wings fluttered only feebly, and showed the disfiguring prints of her fingers. He resented it like a sacrilege, for to him this experience was holy. Younger lads than he might have laughed at his unsophistication. The lovely ladies of the classics had engrossed his attention to the exclusion of their flesh-and-blood prototypes; and since men are not wont to desire a woman who has ceased to beckon to that desire, his devotion to Mme. de Vannoz from the moment of his arrival had marked no deviation from his custom. Often and deeply as he looked into her eyes unshielded by the lorgnon, it was as a young seer might study the crystal; and she knew, with a deep gladness in the knowledge, that the touch of her hand or even of her lips would no more perturb him than the touch of a page of Dante.

Now his calm world was convulsed by a sudden invasion of reality; for the first time he found himself made aware of his youth and his manhood by a woman's presence. He repeated as in a dream:

"I thrilled to feel her influence near;
I struck my flag at sight.
Her starry silence smote my ear
Like sudden guns at night."

The fact that the girl was not greatly addicted to silence did not impress him; he whispered the words to himself now, as he stood on the terrace, and the memory of the evening before quickened to a foreshadowing of the evening that was to come, which was at that moment flushing the white peaks with its rosy beginning. Unsuspected pulses hammered tumultuously in his temples. If this sweet tempest of body and spirit was not love, of what had all the poets sung?

The evening came; but not the moment he hoped for, and yet feared in some remote corner of his subconsciousness. She stayed so near the others that they were never alone together; and yet, somehow, they were always side by side, their hands continually chancing to meet, the warmth and fragrance of her so shaking him that he held his teeth set for fear of their chat-

tering. It was like an hour of delirium, wildly painful and as wildly delicious, wholly unreal. She bade him good night with the rest; it was his habit to stay alone on the terrace till late. Musing happily on her swift, backward smile, he saw neither the hand she laid carelessly on the shoulder of her friend's husband, nor the white scarf she had left lying near his own hand. He turned toward the lake, as the door closed on the gay company, without a glance toward the bench whence they had risen; and presently he realized that he was staring at the serene inaccessibility of the Dent du Midi. Eager pity took him by the throat at the thought of Mme. de Vannoz. How cruelly life must have dealt with her to make her see its lovely miracles with such darkened eyes! He felt sure that her husband had been unworthy; only a broken heart, he thought, could speak so bitterly, and he, her friend, had given her nothing better than blind anger! He turned quickly toward her cottage; the windows were still glowing warmly, and a glance at his watch told him it was not yet eleven. She had not dined at the hotel; perhaps she had been dining out, perhaps—perhaps she had been hurt by his resentment, for, after all, she had meant to be kind. Spurred by penitent tenderness, he entered the little garden.

Mme. de Vannoz had not dined out, nor had the memory of Seymour's resentment remained with her long enough to hurt. As she left him, a new idea suddenly unfolded before her in a dazzling completeness; and when she swept into the cottage, her head high, her eyes wide and shining, Nise immediately savored the pleasures of a free evening. Swiftly, expertly, she undid her elaborate work, with only one remark from her mistress: "My warm dressing-gown; I shall work late." It was quite another Mme. de Vannoz about whom the robe of crimson velvet was wrapped; but Nise did not object to that. Different standards of beauty were permissible for the day and for the night. As she sat now at her writing-table, her flushed cheeks and parted lips glowing in the warm light, her white throat softened by the veil of her unbound hair, her shadowy eyes searching far depths, she seemed a girl about to write her first love-letter, thought Nise, not a widow who lived like



Drawn by Harry Townsend. Half-tone plate engraved by H. C. Merrill

"HE DREW BACK HALF AFRAID FROM THE INTIMATE BEAUTY
OF THIS UNACCUSTOMED FACE"

the saint over an altar. Never had M. de Vannoz seen her look like that, so happy, so tender, and all for an empty room and an ink-pot! The maid lifted rebellious hands to heaven with one irrepressible outburst, "*Mon Dieu, et Madame si ravissante en chemise!*" Mme. de Vannoz heard the voice, but not the words, and nodded with an unseeing smile and an automatic: "Good night, Nise. Amuse yourself." With a shrug and a sigh, Nise closed the door.

MME. DE VANNOZ stretched her arms, moving her long, supple fingers, cramped by their tense grasp of the pen. What she had written would come to barely three pages of the "*Revue*," but every word would etch itself on the reader's memory. She drew a sharp breath of conscious triumph, and taking up her pen, she kissed the smooth tortoise-shell, still warm from her hand. She kissed it at once reverently and passionately, as a conqueror might embrace his proved sword. Her clock struck eleven; she yawned, and went to the French window, pausing a moment before closing the shutters to look into the shining night. Suddenly she bent forward, narrowing her eyes; there unmistakable in the moonlight the girl was fluttering down the steps of the hotel toward the terrace. Mme. de Vannoz's lip curled back unpleasantly.

"It was a fan that we left behind in my day," she thought. "Well, it is not my affair." She was fond of the boy, and sorry for him; but "it is not my affair," she repeated insistently, and laid hold of the shutter with a hand that was not quite steady. Let him make his own mistakes, and pay for them, as others had done. At that moment she was aware of a movement in the garden. The habit of living alone had made her fearless; drawing the velvet robe more closely about her, she stepped out unhesitatingly among the clipped myrtles of her tiny terrace.

"Who is there?" she demanded.

"It's only Seymour," came the answer.

"Seymour?" she was brusque with amazement. "Why are you here?"

"To ask you to forgive me."

"What! Have you found I was right, then?"

"No,"—he laughed joyously, with a little gulp like a sob,—"*but now I am*

sure that I love her, and that I can make you understand. I know I can."

To him she was only a dark figure, mysterious and immovable, against the lighted window; but she could see him now, his lifted face radiant in the moonlight, beautiful with the purity of unconscious passion. She leaned back against the window-casing, suddenly faint, closing her eyes in a vain effort to shut out that look; but the face that burned through her lids was the face of Julien de Vannoz. Twenty years ago he had lifted such a face to her in the moonlight—to her, such a girl as the one who waited now for Seymour on the terrace, just such a girl as that.

"You know you love her?" she repeated. "Have you told her so?"

"Not yet. I have not been able to see her alone all the evening,"—Mme. de Vannoz smiled grimly,—"*but to-morrow*"—his sudden silence throbbed with masterful promise; then he was the boy again—"I saw your lights, and I could not sleep, wondering if I had hurt you—you who have been so divinely kind to me! And I know that now I can make you understand her."

"Do it, then," she said. She came down the steps to where he stood and laid her hand on his arm. "Make me understand, my friend."

Bewildered, he looked at her. This was the voice he knew, hoarsely tender like the lower notes of a cello; but there was a new and strangely troubling quality in its music, as if a devil and an angel together were drawing the bow across the strings. He drew back half afraid from the intimate beauty of this unaccustomed face, the scent of this loosened hair. Her eyes were deep; he had a fancy that a man might drown in them.

"We have shared so many thoughts, you and I," she went on, with a sudden deepening to tenderness. "Share this also with me, this most wonderful thought of all."

A sudden joyous intoxication of completeness caught him; her words had joined for him, with one exquisite touch, his present and his past. It seemed to him that she held out to him the graven cup of his studious dreams, foaming and sparkling with the heady wine of youth. Truly the elixir of life, he thought. To what a miracle it had unsealed his vision!

How had he drawn so near this radiant presence, and remained unaware of all but the calm fellowship of minds? How had he so long conceived her only as a keen, impersonal intellect—this woman, an incarnate perfume among the flowers of the garden, such a passionately human goddess as might have stooped to Endymion in the fragrance of the Latmian night?

She moved as if to rise, and somehow he found her hand crushed between his own. In the hush she heard the steps of the girl on the terrace, but he heard only the beating of his own heart. The steps receded; the girl was going back to the hotel. Now there was silence, and in the silence she, too, heard his heart beating. So she had heard Julien's heart twenty years ago. She caught her breath as with a sob; her eyes drew his; she swayed toward him as if the sheer force of his will compelled her; then she was in his arms.

A hot saltiness of tears stung his lips, and suddenly, sick with shame, he slipped to his knees at her feet, hiding his face in the folds of her robe. Silently she drew away from him and stood erect.

"It's you that I love!" he blurted, breathless, desperate. "You understand that—you must understand that! You—there's nothing but you in the world—will you marry me?"

"No," she said.

"I know," he whispered brokenly. "You must despise me. What faith could you have in me? And yet can't I prove—"

"That is not why," she said. "Listen to me. You can listen now."

Amazed, he looked up at her. He could still taste the bitter sweetness of the tears that were shining on her cheeks, and yet now he could as readily have kissed the summit of the Dent du Midi as that calm, weary mouth.

"Can you say that you love me now?" she asked, with a touch of irony.

"I—" he choked; and there was a silence.

"You came here to make me understand how you loved her," she went on quietly. "Do not you yourself understand a little better now?"

"You were playing with me, then?" he asked after a moment.

"If you call it that," she answered.

He stood up, staggering a little, and sketched an unsuccessful laugh.

"Well, I congratulate you; you have won your point," he began gallantly, but ended in a cry of frank misery: "Why did you do it? How could you do it? You have killed my faith—"

"My friend," she interrupted sternly, "you know as little what you say now as you did when you spoke of love a while ago. What love is, I do not know, unless it be like what I feel for my work; but I do know, and so henceforth do you, what it is not. As for faith—it is not thus that faith dies; it must be starved to death day by day, hour by hour. I tell you I have made many men suffer as you are suffering now, but I killed the faith of only one. That was my husband."

THE clock struck twelve as Nise opened the door with circumspection and peeped in; then she crossed to the writing-table and touched her mistress gently. Mme. de Vannoz lifted her face from her folded arms, shaking back her hair, and Nise recoiled with a cry of dismay.

"Madame has overtired herself!" she protested.

Mme. de Vannoz's brow contracted with a twitch like pain; then she laid her hand caressingly on the litter of scribbled sheets, and the whimsical twinkle came back to her eyes.

"Tired?" she said. "*Par exemple*, how should I not be tired? In one hour I have lived twenty years, and written a thing to make the world blink. Do you think that costs nothing? It is not so that one grows younger. Now get me to bed quickly and rub my head. It aches."



Decoration by W. M. Berger

To a Lady on the Eve of Easter

BY JULIAN STREET

MAY fairies fashion frocks for you
From sunbeam, shadow, dawn, and dew ;
May elfin milliners devise
Your hat from wings of butterflies ;
May goblin gardeners pluck a pair
Of lady's-slippers for your wear ;
And may some swift, audacious sprite
Wing up and up into the night

And filch for you, howe'er he may,
A fragment of the Milky Way
To scarf you, and bright stars to deck
The slender softness of your neck.

And then, when you are all arrayed
As doth befit so fair a maid,
O gods and fairies, grant that I
May glimpse you, lovely, passing by !