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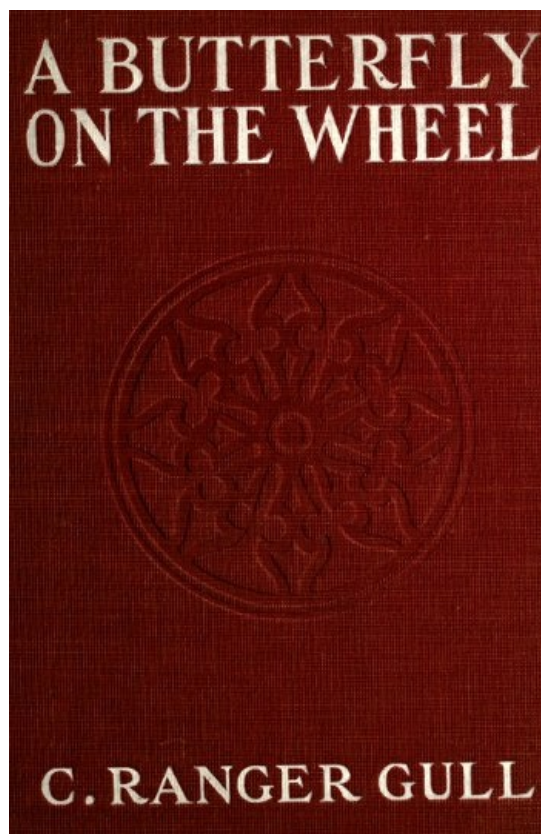
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL: A NOVEL



A BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL

A Novel

By C. RANGER GULL

Author of "A Woman in the Case," etc.

**Founded on the successful play by E. G. Hemmerde, K. C.,
M. P., and Francis Neilson, M. P.**

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE PLAY

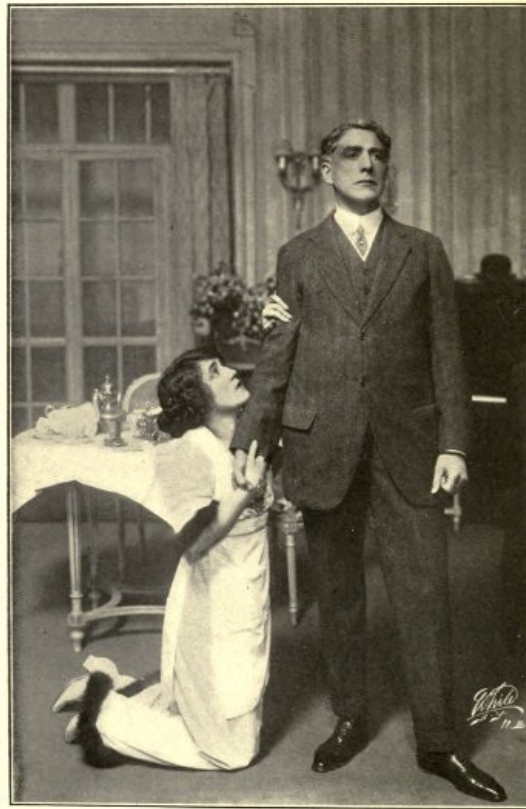
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1912

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"Forgive me, George," she sobbed, "forgive me."

ORIGINAL PROGRAM OF A BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL

Produced at the 39th Street Theatre, beginning Tuesday Evening, January 9th, 1912

MR. LEWIS WALLER
Has the Honor to Submit
A Butterfly on the Wheel

By **Edward G. Hemmerde, K. C., and Francis Neilson, M. P.**
Produced under the personal supervision of **Lewis Waller**

The Rt. Hon. George Admaston, M. P.

Roderick Collingwood

Lord Ellerdine

Sir John Burroughes, President of the Divorce Court,

Sir Robert Fyffe, K. C., M. P., Admaston's leading counsel,

Gervaise McArthur, K. C., Collingwood's leading counsel,

Stuart Menzies, K. C., Collingwood's leading

Eille Norwood

Charles
Quartermaine

Evelyn Beerbohm

Herbert Budd

Sidney Valentine

Lewis Broughton

Denis Cleugh

counsel,
Jacques, waiter at the Hôtel des Tuileries
Jean DuBois, detective
Foreman of the jury
Footman
Lady Attwill
Pauline, Miss Admaston's maid
Peggy, George Admaston's wife

Walter Cluxton
John Wilmer
James Stuart
Frank Dossert
Olive Temple
Loretta Wells
Madge Titheradge

General Manager
Business Manager
Stage Manager

Victor Lewis
John Wilmer
Lewis Broughton

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PREFACE

Of all the English plays that have come to this country none has created more of a sensation than "A BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL," and without question will be received the same by the public over the entire country as it has been received in New York. The play opened at the Thirty-ninth Street Theatre on Tuesday evening, January 9th, and has played to "standing room only" at every performance since.

The story in book form has been done by C. Ranger Gull (pen name), a writer who has already gained a big reputation as an author both in America and England, and the success of "A BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL" goes without saying.

THE PUBLISHER.

A BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL

CHAPTER I

It was shortly after midnight in the great Hôtel des Tuileries at Paris.

Beyond the façade of the hotel the gardens of the Tuileries were sleeping in the warm night. To

the left the Louvre etched itself in solid black against the sky, and all up and down the Rue de Rivoli carriages and automobiles were still moving.

But in the great thoroughfare the tide of vehicles and foot passengers was perceptibly thinning. Paris is a midnight city, it is true, and at this hour the heights of Montmartre were thronged with pleasure-seekers, dancing and supping till the pale dawn should come with its message of purity and reproach.

But down in the Rue de Rivoli even the great hotels were beginning to prepare for sleep.

One enters the Hôtel des Tuileries, as every one knows, through the revolving doors, passes into the entresol, and then into the huge glass-domed lounge with its comfortable fauteuils, its big settee, its little tables covered with beaten copper, and its great palms, which seem as if they had been cunningly enamelled jade-green by some jeweller.

The lounge was now almost empty of people, though the shaded electric light threw a topaz-coloured radiance over everything.

In one corner—just where the big marble stair-case springs upwards to the gilded gallery—two men in evening dress were sitting together.

They were obviously English, tall, thin, bronzed men, as obviously in the service. As a matter of fact, one was Colonel Adams, attached to the Viceroy's staff in India, the other a civilian's secretary—Henry Passhe.

They were both smoking briar pipes—delighted that the lateness of the hour allowed them to do so in the lounge; and before each man was a long glass full of crushed ice and some effervescing water innocent of whisky.

A man in black clothes, obviously a valet, came up to Colonel Adams.

"I've put everything ready in your room, sir," he said. "Is there anything else?"

"No, there is nothing else, Snell," the soldier answered. "You can go to bed now."

The man was moving away when Adams called him back.

"Oh, by the way, Snell, did you find out what I asked you? It is Mrs. Admaston who is staying here, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, she is here with her maid, and——"

"Well?"

The man seemed to hesitate slightly, but at length he spoke: "Mr. Roderick Collingwood is here too, sir."

"Is he, by Jove!" Adams said, more to his friend than to his servant. "Very well, Snell. Good night."

The valet withdrew, and Colonel Adams puffed vigorously at his pipe for a minute or two.

"*The*—the Mrs. Admaston?" the civilian asked.

Colonel Adams nodded. "The great, little Peggy herself," he said; "none other. Surely you've met her, Passhe?"

"I was introduced to her some months ago at a Foreign Office reception," the younger man answered; "but I really can't say that I know her. I've never been to any of the Admastons' parties. In fact, my dear Adams, I am a little bit out of things in town now. Ask me anything about any of the Indian set and I can tell you, but as far as society goes in London I am a back number. I won't say, though, that I haven't heard this and that about the Admastons. One can't go anywhere without hearing their names. However, I know nothing of the rights or wrongs of the story—if story there is at all. But certainly every one has heard this man Collingwood's name mentioned in connection with that of Mrs. Admaston. Who was she, any way? You know everything about everybody. Tell me all about them."

Colonel Adams sipped his Perrier quietly, and his brown, lean face became unusually meditative.

"Aren't you sleepy?" he said.

"Can't sleep, confound it!" Passhe replied. "Liver. Have lunch, take an afternoon nap, and then can't get to sleep at night for the Lord knows how long."

"I know," Adams said sympathetically. "Liver is the very devil. That's the worst of India. Now, there is nothing, my dear chap, that I should enjoy more at this moment than a two-finger peg of whisky. Can I take it? Damn it, no! I should have heartburn for hours—that's India! But since you are not sleepy, and I am sure I'm not, I will tell you about the Admastons."

The colonel's pipe had gone out. He relit it, pressed down the ashes with the head of a little silver pencil-case which he took from his waistcoat pocket, sent out a cloud of fragrant blue-grey smoke, leant back in his arm-chair, and began.

"Admaston," Colonel Adams began, "is one of the most hard-working Johnnies of the day. He's as rich as what-d'you-call-him, of course, but he hasn't used his wealth to make his position in

Parliament or to get him his place in the Cabinet. He's done it by sheer ability, by Jove! He's of an old family, but there haven't been any members of it in big political positions to help him over the heads of those who have to shift for themselves.

"He was at Harrow with me, though considerably my junior, and I remember he played cricket with an energy that deserved a much higher batting average than he got. He wasn't a studious youth by any means, though he learnt enough to know his way about. He was still at school and I had just passed into Sandhurst when his father died and left him a huge fortune. Then he went to Oxford—New College it may have been, or possibly the House. I don't think he did anything much at Oxford. I'm told by men who were up with him that the sense of the enormous responsibility which fell on him after his father's death, and the anxieties of having to manage a great estate and a huge business, spoilt him for the schools and rather put him off cricket. He might have got into the Eleven, but he didn't care enough about it to try hard."

"A bit phlegmatic in temperament?" Passhe asked.

"That's it," replied Colonel Adams. "Nothing seemed to move him much. If ever a man was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, George Admaston was the chap. But I don't believe he cared particularly whether his spoon was silver or pewter, by Jove! Just a plain fellow of frugal habits. I am told that when he met the deputation from the Northern Division of Lancashire, which went up to town to ask him to contest that constituency, after the interview one of the local Johnnies said, 'Mr. Admaston was so nice that he might be nobody.' At anyrate, George has found his *métier* in politics. Three years in opposition gave him a great reputation as a quick and ready debater. He is a great asset to his party now, and at by-elections he's the night-before-the-poll man."

"But what about his wife?" said the civilian.

"I'm coming to that, Henry," Adams answered. "And if I am a bit long-winded you've jolly well brought it on yourself. It's like this. George's father was the head of Admaston, Grainger & Co., the big City financiers. Old Grainger had a daughter, much younger than George Admaston. Peggy Grainger was only a tiny little girl when Admaston's father died. I'm told that the old men when they were together would chaff each other about their children. Old Grainger used to say that they must certainly marry—keep the firm together, and so on, don't you know. In fact, the last letter that George ever got from his father referred to old Grainger's notion that George should marry Peggy. Now, Peggy's mother was a Frenchwoman, a Mlle. Guillou, and the girl was educated in France. George hadn't been long in the Cabinet when old Grainger brought Peggy to London. She was about nineteen then, and the prettiest, most flirtatious, whimsical little butterfly of a thing that you could possibly imagine. Well, her father established Peggy in a big house in St. James's—huge retinue of servants and so forth. All London began to talk about the rich Miss Grainger. The girl spent just what she liked—her father encouraged her to do it; there was really nothing else to be done with the money. But whenever George came to the house—and he saw a lot of the Graingers the first year when Peggy came to London—the old boy was always hinting to him that he ought to marry Peggy."

"One evening Admaston was called off the Treasury Bench in the House to speak at the telephone. He thought it was Peggy, but it wasn't. It was her old maid, Pauline, who is here with her in this hotel to-night, and who has looked after her all her life nearly. Pauline said that old Grainger had just passed in his cheques, by Jove! He was a big fleshy fellow—always did himself top hole. He'd made a big dinner, laughed at a joke like anything with his daughter, had a stroke, and was cooling by ten o'clock."

"And then?" Henry Passhe asked.

"Well, of course, Peggy was left quite alone. There were no relatives. In fact, there was nobody except this old nurse, Pauline, a woman of about forty. Mrs. Grainger had been a chronic invalid, and she had left the girl in charge of the 'bonne.' Old Grainger often used to say that Pauline was more of a mother to Peggy than even his wife had been, and after his death Peggy relied upon the woman for almost everything. She's been with her ever since, and is more like a mother to her still than a servant. Pauline, in fact, took charge of the household, looked after the servants in every way, and controlled everything. It was a curious *ménage*."

"One day Peggy and Admaston met at a country house for a week-end party. Nobody knows exactly how it happened, but at anyrate George proposed and Peggy accepted him. I remember the fuss they made about it in the society papers—fulsome, sickenin' sort of hog-wash they wrote. 'Love at first sight,' and all that sort of thing. 'Little Peggy was to be the wife of a Prime Minister'—'they adored each other,' etc. But I'll eat my hand if they did anything of the kind. They simply remembered the wishes of their fathers and saw it was best to consolidate their huge commercial interests. I daresay Peggy felt very lonely and George felt very sorry for her. At anyrate, the engagement was announced."

"George had an aunt—has her still, I suppose—the rich Miss Admaston, a damned old cat who gives thousands to foreign missions. I've met some of the missionaries of her particular gospel-shop in India, and a nice lot of touts they are too. Well, the old cat was fearfully cut up by the news of the engagement. She thought Peggy was far too French and frivolous for George, and, of course, Peggy has always been rather go-ahead. For my part, I don't care what they are saying now, I don't think there is an ounce of vice in the girl."

"It's gettin' rather late, Henry, and I'm afraid I'm boring you?"

"Not a bit; go on, do," the secretary answered.

"Very well. George's engagement to Peggy seriously affected the lives of two people who are deucedly well known in society. One of them was Lady Attwill, widow of 'Clipper' Attwill, who scuppered his yacht and himself too somewhere in the Mediterranean—a thorough bad hat, Clipper was. Lady Attwill had been setting her cap at George for a long time. Every one knew it but George. It was a regular joke of one season. She couldn't get hold of him, though, despite everything she could do. George hadn't an idea of what the woman wanted. He was really fond of her. He looked on her as a very dear friend, and he took all her kindnesses and so forth just in that light, with a calm complacency that must have sent her raving at times. Of course, all Lady Attwill's friends did their very best to bring the two together upon every possible occasion; and when George steered clear and proposed to Peggy, every one said the poor, dear chap was one of the craftiest politicians on the Front Bench. And all the time, Henry, I'll lay you what you like that Admaston was as innocent as a canary.

"There were two people, I said, who were seriously affected by George's engagement. Well, the other was Roderick Collingwood, who's staying in the hotel now, as Snell has just told us.

"Colling—everybody calls him Colling—knew Peggy's governor. He's a bally millionaire also, and he used to have a good many dealings with the firm. Collingwood travels about a great deal—always has done,—and he first met Peggy when she was a flapper of fifteen at old Grainger's place near Chantilly—old Grainger used to run horses a lot in France.

"Collingwood has always been an extraordinary sort of chap; he was then, it appears. Like any other young man of great wealth, he found everything done for him, anything he liked ready to his hand, and simply let himself go. When Peggy's father died, Colling was going it hell-for-leather—just about as fast as they're made. Of course, Peggy knew nothing of the real facts. But she heard gossip and hints, and one night she taxed him with the way he was living, referring specially to one or two of his more recent escapades. He admitted there was some truth in what she said, and, if what they say is true, made her some sort of a promise of reformation. At anyrate, he pulled up; there's no doubt of that.

"Afterwards the two met fairly regularly, and I was staying at Lord Ellerdine's place in Yorkshire when I believe Collingwood told Peggy of the good influence she had been, and showed himself as a reformed rake, by Jove! I think there's no doubt at all that he would have proposed to the girl if George Admaston had not forestalled him. They say Collingwood was frightfully cut up. At anyrate, he wasn't in England when the marriage took place.

"It was a great wedding. Everybody who was anybody was there, only excepting Collingwood and Lady Attwill. In their case, I remember that people said they were falling back on their own reserves; but that was pure scandal, of course. When Collingwood was in Spain, Lady Attwill was in Switzerland. As a matter of fact, they were both great friends; and no doubt when Clipper went down in his yacht and left Lady Attwill very badly off, Collingwood was quite generous to her.

"Well, to cut a long story short—I see it's nearly one o'clock,—Admaston and his wife spent their honeymoon in Italy—Rome, I think it was, or Florence. Shortly after their return George introduced his long and complicated bill on National Roads. It had over a hundred clauses. Ill-natured people said that he married in order to have an excuse to get a holiday in which to draft his measure. At anyrate, after the introduction of the bill George became the absolute centre of the political strife of the day. He worked harder than ever. His party had been in office for three years, and their declining favour urged him on to rouse his followers in the House and in the country to tackle some necessary reforms before the ensuing General Election. In fact, for months after his marriage Admaston seemed to live for his Department and the Front Bench. He was hardly ever seen with Peggy.

"On her part, Peggy went everywhere, and soon the gossips had it that Admaston was disappointed, while his wife lived a really butterfly life.

"Mrs. Admaston's conduct certainly puzzled the gossips. No one could say with any sort of certainty that she did anything wrong. Even her best friends—generally the first persons to give one away—only laughed when they were questioned, and said, 'It's only Peggy.' She and Roderick Collingwood met again and again, renewing their old friendship. After the marriage it was said that Collingwood had a very bad time. There was a broad wicked streak in him, and everybody assumed that he had gone back to his old fast living. Well, at anyrate, Peggy took him up again. She was the kind that either had to be mothered or have someone she could mother herself. George, apparently, wasn't very much about, and so she started once more in the effort to exert a benign influence over an erratic chap like Collingwood. Of course, people said on all sides that it was a very dangerous game to play.

"Old-fashioned people shook their heads and fore-told all sorts of trouble for the little butterfly that fluttered so near to the flame which every one supposed was burning perpetually in Collingwood's heart.

"About this time Lady Attwill returned to England and sought out George Admaston. What she did quite upset the calculations of the people who talk. She became very attentive to George, and yet, at the same time, managed to get about a good bit with Peggy. In fact, she seemed in a sort of way to console Admaston and to be encouraging his wife. Society has been perplexed by the whole business for a considerable time. No one knows what to make of the position. They all met, for instance, at Ellerdine's for the shooting. Admaston ran down for a week-end only. Then during

the late winter, after a long autumn session, rumours flew thick and fast, and everybody seemed to be waiting for the storm to break. Why there should be a storm nobody really seemed to know. Collingwood and Peggy have been talked about to the exclusion of almost every other subject. They're talked about now. London and the Faubourg Saint Honoré is buzzing with them. And here, my dear Passhe, you and I away up at the Tuileries for a merry week of theatres in Paris, and we find Peggy staying here and Collingwood, too, by Jove!—what! what! Damn it, Passhe, you're asleep!"

A long-drawn and not entirely unmelodious snore proclaimed that Colonel Adams's long recital had somewhat wearied the civilian, who was not "in society."

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Admaston's sitting-room at the Hôtel des Tuileries was a large and beautiful apartment, one of the best in the hotel. Save for the long French windows, which were now, at midnight, covered with curtains of green tussore silk, there was nothing distinctively foreign about the room. The best French hotels nowadays have all adopted English and American standards of comfort. The stove, the uncarpeted and slippery parquet floor, the impossible chairs, and a ceiling painted to resemble a nightmare of a fruiterer's shop, are all things of the past.

Electric lights in softly shaded globes threw a pleasant yellow radiance over everything. A fire of cedarwood logs glowed on the tiled hearth, and a great bunch of lilac stood in a copper bowl upon a small mahogany table which was placed between two doors which faced the one leading to Mrs. Admaston's bedroom.

Some tall silver candlesticks stood upon the Broadwood piano; and there were others, in which the candles were not lit, upon brackets on either side of the telephone.

It was just upon midnight when the door of Mrs. Admaston's bedroom opened and her confidential maid and companion came into the room. Pauline Toché was a woman of some forty years of age. Her black hair streaked with grey was drawn tightly back from her forehead. The face, a little hard and watchful perhaps, nevertheless showed signs of marked intelligence. The eyes had something of the ferocity but also the fidelity of a well-trained watch-dog. She was dressed unassumingly enough in black, and she wore an apron also of some black material.

Such a face and figure may be seen a dozen times in any Breton village, and more than once her friends had said to Mrs. Admaston that Pauline seemed to require the coif of her country—the snowy white and goffered *col* which is worn over the shoulders; a pair of sabots even!

The maid was a Breton woman, a daughter of one of the millers of Pont-Aven, and preserved still all the characteristics of that hardy Celtic race.

As the maid entered the sitting-room there was a knock at the door, and in response to her "Entrez" a waiter came into the room. He was an odd-looking person with brilliant red hair—rather a rare thing in France, but cropped close to his head in the French manner, so that it seemed to be almost squirting out of his scalp. The man, with his napkin over his arm, his short Eton jacket, and boots soled with list, was dressed just like any other waiter in the hotel, but somehow or other there was something unusual in his aspect.

He carried a tray, and went up to a small round table, gleaming with cut-glass and silver, on which supper had been laid.

"Are you quite sure there is no train from Chalons before morning?" Pauline asked the man in French.

"No train before five o'clock, mademoiselle," the man replied. "The last fast train reaches Paris at eight-forty."

The Breton woman nodded.

"Thank you," she said, gazing at him rather keenly; and then suddenly—"You're not French, are you?"

With great precision, almost as if he was practising something learnt by rote and not entirely natural to him, the waiter clicked his heels together, spread out the palms of his hands, and bowed.

"Mais oui, mademoiselle," he said.

Pauline shook her head slightly.

"You do not deceive me," she said. "There is something about you—you *are* a Frenchman?"

The waiter had been piling plates up on a tray. He put the tray down on the table, smiled with a total change of manner, and answered her.

"No," he said with a grin.

"I knew it," Pauline said. "Is it then that you are Irish, M. Jacques?"

"Most certainly not," replied the waiter.

"I figure to myself that you are English?"

Jacques came up still closer to the maid, his voice dropped, and his manner became confidential. "Not even quite English, mademoiselle," he said. "I'm a Scotsman. I was born at Ecclefechan."

"Mon Dieu!" said Pauline; "Eccle—! What a name of barbarity! I did not know that there were such names. La! la! But your name, monsieur, your name—Jacques?"

"Mademoiselle speaks English?"

"Quite well," Pauline replied.

"Well, you see, miss, I've been here a long time, and I am a great favourite with the English visitors. It would never do to tell them that I'm a Scotsman, and that my real name is Jock. You see, they like to practise their French on me. The management always send me to wait upon English visitors. Of course, I can understand what they mean, and it flatters them to think that they're really speaking French. I heard an old lady the other day talking to her daughter. 'My dear,' she said, 'those extra French lessons at the High School have not been wasted. That nice, attentive French waiter understands you perfectly'; and so I did of course, miss, though when she wanted the mussels she said, 'Esker voos avvy des moulins?' And when she wanted the pastry she called it 'tapisserie' instead of 'patisserie.' So you see my French name is one of my great assets, though you, mademoiselle, saw through me very easily." Here the waiter once more relapsed into his best French manner and made a flourishing little bow. "Do you stay long in Paris, mademoiselle?" he asked, going back to the table and beginning to remove the dishes.

"I can't say," Pauline replied. "As a matter of fact, we are here quite by accident. We are really going to Switzerland."

"The wrong train?" inquired the waiter.

"Yes, that was it," Pauline answered. "We took the wrong train, and our party got divided somewhere."

"What bad luck!" Jacques answered. Then he gave a rather searching glance at Pauline. "But surely M. Collingwood knows the Continent?" he asked.

The maid gave an almost imperceptible start, and went up to the fireplace, where she began to pull about the flowers in one of the vases. "Oh yes, I think so," she answered, in a voice which strove to appear quite indifferent to the question.

"Well, I can tell you," the waiter went on—"I can tell you that M. Collingwood knows the Continent as well as a Cook's agent. He's always travelling about. You can see his name in the Riviera lists, in the Paris *Daily Mail* or the *New York Herald*. He's at Nice for the races. He's at Monte Carlo for the pigeon-shooting. He's at Marienbad for a cure, or climbing mountains in the Bernese Oberland. He is everywhere, is M. Collingwood. He was staying here last year, for instance."

The maid turned slowly from the fire and looked towards the supper-table.

"Yes, yes?" she said with some eagerness. "He is here often? At this hotel?"

"I can remember him being here three times," the man replied. And there was something rather furtive in his look, something which seemed to speak of a suppressed curiosity and watchfulness. Many waiters in smart hotels, both in London and in Paris, have this look—the veritable expression of Paul Pry. "Have you been long with Mr. and Mrs. Admaston?"

"I've been many years with madame," Pauline replied. And then, speaking rather suddenly, "You seem to have a very good memory, Mr. Jock Jacques."

"It is necessary," the man answered, with all the dryness of a Scotsman.

"And yet sometimes," Pauline replied, "it is necessary not to have a good memory."

"Perhaps," the waiter answered. "Certainly sometimes discretion is the better part of recollection," giving her a look of great slyness as he spoke.

Pauline shrugged her shoulders. There was a note of veiled contempt in her voice. "To forget easily is sometimes very convenient, n'est-ce pas?" she said.

"When it is worth more than a good memory," he answered.

"Doubtless you are very well off, Mr. Jock," Pauline continued, and this time the sneer in her voice was hardly veiled.

At this the waiter began brushing the crumbs from the table very vigorously. "I'm only a poor waiter," he said.

"Then surely that must be your own fault? There ought to be many opportunities in a hotel of this sort of making a good use of a convenient memory?"

"Well, yes, you're right there," came from the man, with a rather ill-favoured leer. "But, you see, I am too sentimental for that."

Pauline laughed in answer, and not very pleasantly. "Don't tell me," she said. "I've been in Scotland for the shooting of the grouse. There is no Scotsman too sentimental to make money. What part of Scotland did you say you came from? La! la! la! And at your age, too!"

"On the contrary, the older I grow the more sentimental I become."

Pauline shook her head. "Mon Dieu!" she said; "every one knows that sentiment ends at forty."

The waiter, a quick-witted rogue enough, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying this midnight conversation. He stood with one arm akimbo, the other resting on the table, and grinned like a vulgar Mephistopheles. "If sentiment ends at forty," he said, "you, mademoiselle, will suffer from it for a long time to come."

"Ma foi, no! No suffering for me," Pauline replied. "I'm a very practical person. It would take a great deal to make me sentimental."

"I wonder how much?" the man answered. "A nice little hotel with a good trade, say?"

Pauline shrugged her shoulders. "No, that would mean work. I am used to seeing a life of sentiment without work."

The waiter once more began to clear the table. "It is a pity we see so much of what we cannot have," he answered, rattling the coffee-cups and silver.

Pauline made no reply to this, but stood by the fireplace in silence watching the waiter, and showing plainly by her manner that the conversation was over and that she was waiting for him to go.

Suddenly she started violently, as Jacques did also.

The heavy mahogany door leading to the corridor outside was flung open, and a short, thick-set, bearded Frenchman came briskly into the room. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him. He might have been an ordinary commercial traveller, save for a pair of singularly alert eyes, which glanced rapidly hither and thither and took in the whole room in one comprehensive sweep. This was done with lightning-like rapidity, and then the fellow's face assumed an expression of great surprise—a little bit overdone and too forced to seem real.

"A thousand pardons!" he said, with a bow. "The wrong room! My mistake! I am very sorry. Accept my apologies."

With that he once more glanced round the room and left it, though with not quite the alacrity of his entrance, closing the door quietly behind him.

But into the quiet room something strangely disturbing had come.

It was no longer a confidential maid gossiping with the casual waiter of a smart hotel. The air, which had before been charged with little suspicions, toy fencings, as it were, between people of no great importance, was now informed with something more pressing, more imminent, more real.

Pauline herself positively staggered back from the fireplace towards the table, and nearer to the waiter. Her brown face became grey, she seemed for a moment to lose control of herself, while the ferret eyes of the waiter watched her with an excited glitter in them.

"That man!" ... The exclamation came from Pauline almost like a cry. "That man!"

Jacques was all bent to attention. He hurried up to the woman. "Yes, yes?" he said.

"Do you know who he is?" Pauline asked. "Have you seen him before, M. Jacques?"

The man watched her keenly. "I don't know, mademoiselle," he answered in a guarded voice.

"That man, I say—have you seen him before?... I remember."

The waiter hastened to agree, obviously wishing to discover the reason of Pauline's agitation.

"Yes," he said. "Now you mention it, mademoiselle, I remember too. He was outside—there—in the corridor—just after I had shown M. Collingwood and you and madame to your rooms."

"Was that when we arrived?" Pauline asked. Her brown hands were trembling, her eyes were informed with anxiety.

Jacques bent his head forward. The two were *vis-à-vis*—he watched her intently.

"Yes," he answered.

Then Pauline seemed to lose all her caution. She threw up her hands and her face became wrinkled with excitement.

"La! la!" she cried, "but he was looking at madame's boxes at Boulogne..."

With quiet but hurried steps she went up to the door leading to the corridor, turned the handle gently, flung it open and gazed out.

There was obviously nobody there, for in a moment she returned, closed the door, and once more

confronted the waiter with a grey and troubled face.

"Que diable fait-il?" she said in a frightened voice. "But M. Jacques, what *can* it mean?"

Again the ugly leer came over the *garçon's* face. "Sentiment," he said.

The middle-aged Breton woman pressed both hands to her heart with one of those wild and expressive Celtic gestures which seem so exaggerated to English folk, but which are, nevertheless, so truly expressive of emotion.

"Madame!" she cried.

"I was not thinking of madame," Jacques answered quickly.

As if clutching at a hope, Pauline made a tremendous effort to get in key with her tormentor.

"No, no!" she said with an affectation of brightness. "What? Is it that you were thinking of me? Merci!—that would be funny!"

"Sans doute. That's what they say in England when they advertise 'No followers.'"

The woman caught the last word. Her face had been strained in anxious thought.

"Followers!" she said. "Even the English do not expect followers from London to Paris."

By this time Jacques had filled his tray, had folded up the shining white table-cloth and placed it over his pyramid of plates.

"Mademoiselle is too modest," he said, moving towards the door, but still watching Pauline intently.

The creature's ears seemed literally to twitch with greed of news as he crossed the great quiet room.

Pauline was speaking to herself. "It's queer," she said. "I do not like that. Everything has gone wrong to-day. First we nearly missed the train. Then on the boat we were all seasick. Then the douanier was a suspicious fool. Then at Boulogne we got on the wrong train and lost Lord Ellerdine and Lady Attwill—"

A little hard chuckle of amusement came from the retiring waiter, and as Pauline turned to him in indignation a distant voice called her name:

"Pauline!"

"Madame!"

"Good night, mademoiselle," the waiter said, one hand supporting the heavy tray, the other upon the handle of the door. "Good night, mademoiselle. Remember that Jock from Ecclefechan has a good memory."

Pauline was trembling, but she turned to the fellow. "Good night, Jock from——" She spluttered in her throat, laughed artificially, shut the door after the man, and then turned eagerly towards the door which led to Mrs. Admaston's bedroom.

There was a note of tremendous relief in her voice as she cried out "Madame!" once more.

The door from the bedroom opened and Mrs. Admaston entered.

She was a slim, girlish-looking woman, with a cascade of long dark hair falling over her shoulders.

The face was small, the complexion of it rose-brown, the eyes dark wells of laughing light, the lips twin rosebuds with a sense of humour.

She was wearing a long wrap, half tea-gown, half dressing-gown, of topaz-coloured silk, and round her slender waist was a cord of light-blue and gold threads ending in two large tassels of gold.

Now there was something half tired, half petulant, and wholly puzzled about her face as she swept into the room.

"It's no use," she said in a rippling musical voice; "it isn't a bit of use, Pauline! I can't go to sleep. In fact, I'm not in the least sleepy."

She looked round the room and sighed.

"What a barn of a place this is!" she said. "I hate those green curtains. They're so horribly conscious of the colour scheme. And then the topaz-shaded lights over the lamps—it's all so dreadfully wearing. And in my room, too, Pauline, it's simply horrid. It reminds me of a sarcophagus, or a mausoleum, or some appalling place like that. And the bed is too low! I don't think much of this room, but after all it's nicer in here."

She sank down with a sigh into an arm-chair.

"Yes," she said once more, "it really is much nicer in here. Make me cosy, Pauline, and do my hair."

She had brought two ivory brushes into the room, and placed them on the table. Now she pointed to them with a little hand as sweetly, faintly pink as the inside of a sea-shell. The light caught the broad wedding ring of dull gold as she did so.

Pauline took up the brushes and went up to her mistress. "I thought you wouldn't like the bed," she said, with the brusque familiarity of an old servant and friend. "In fact, I knew you wouldn't like it directly we arrived. You always wanted to sleep up in the air."

"Tiens, Pauline! I don't want to sleep anywhere to-night. Soothe me, make me comfortable. Be a good Pauline!"

The elder woman took up the brushes and stroked the shining hair with tender, loving hand. "It's been an upsetting day," she said.

Mrs. Admaston gave a sigh of relief as the kind hands busied themselves about her hair.

"Upsetting!" she cried; "that's it—just the word. I am upset. Everything has been upset. Lord Ellerdine will be fearfully upset. Oh, Pauline, just fancy our getting into the wrong train!"

The maid did not answer anything, but went on with her work.

"It was all owing to that fool of a Customs officer," the girl continued in a less strained voice. "And turning my things upside down! The way he upset my clothes was perfectly disgraceful. And before Mr. Collingwood, too! And all for half a dozen boxes of cigarettes! Keeping us there, paying their beastly tariff, until the last moment!"

Pauline put the brushes down upon the table and came round to the front of the chair. She looked critically at her mistress's hair. "Yes," she said; "but, after all, it was very lucky the porters put the boxes in the Paris train."

"Wasn't it?"

"Yes, madame."

"What a bit of luck!"

Pauline left her mistress for a moment and went into the bedroom. She returned with a bottle of eau-de-cologne and a handkerchief. Sprinkling some of the spirit upon it, she held it to Mrs. Admaston's forehead.

"There!" she said. "You seem tired, my dear; that will do you good. It was very clever of Mr. Collingwood not to have your boxes registered at Charing Cross."

For a moment or two Peggy Admaston leant back in the arm-chair with closed eyes. "Yes, wasn't it?" she said drowsily. There was a pause for a moment or two, and then suddenly the girl twisted round in her chair, caught hold of the elder woman's arm and looked at her searchingly.

"Pauline! what did you mean then?" she said.

"What did I mean, madame?" Pauline asked.

Peggy nodded. "Do you think—well, I suppose he forgot?"

Pauline raised her eyebrows. "Eh, bien," she said, "they do not as a rule let you forget to register at Charing Cross."

Peggy rose from the chair and began to walk up and down the sitting-room. Her little bronze bedroom slippers peeped in and out from her trailing draperies of topaz-coloured silk. One slender wrist was clasped by an old Moorish bracelet of dull silver, the intricate filigree work studded here and there with Balas rubies. With her long hair coiled loosely in a shining coronet upon her head, her whole expression—an atmosphere she exhaled—of sprightly innocence, she seemed indeed a fragile little butterfly. Something of the sort crossed the mind of the faithful Breton woman. She sighed, and unperceived her hand went up to her bodice, where she wore a little silver cross.

Suddenly Peggy stopped and turned towards the maid.

"Pauline," she said, "you naughty old thing! I do believe you suspect something."

"No, madame," Pauline answered quickly, and there was something almost sulky in her tone.

Peggy went up to her and put her bare white arm upon her shoulder, leaning upon her caressingly.

"You do," she said. "Oh, but I know you do! When you say 'No, madame,' like that, I always know that there's something wrong."

"I only think of you, chérie," Pauline said, holding the little hand, which was like a thing of carved ivory.

Peggy gave a half-sigh and once more began to walk up and down the room.

"You old silly, I know well that you only think of me," she said; "but tell me, what is it?"

"What is what?"

Peggy smiled mischievously. "There again!" she said. "That's just the way you do when you want me to coax you. Pauline, be nice to me! Now, what is it? Tell me what you suspect. What about the boxes?"

"Well, I do not like Lady Attwill," Pauline replied slowly.

"Oh, but Pauline!" she said.

"It is no use, madame; I cannot be two-faced with you. I am not able to conceal anything. I must speak straight out. I never could hide anything from you, and now it is no use trying. I really can't do it."

Her voice had risen towards that high and almost whining note of excitement and protest which is so peculiarly characteristic of the Bretons.

"Good gracious! what an outburst for you! What has Lady Attwill done? What on earth has she to do with the boxes?"

Pauline made a gesture with her hands. "But what an innocent!" she said, in half-humorous despair. "You never see things. You are just as confiding—I mean ignorant of people—as you were when you were twelve years old. Madame, Lady Attwill is no friend of yours."

"But that is absurd, Pauline," Peggy answered. "Lady Attwill is devoted to me. I am certain of it."

The maid wrinkled up her face, pushed out her lips, and nodded her head to emphasise her words. "Indeed! indeed, madame! Well, tell me this. Would she have kept dodging Lord Ellerdine out of the way at Charing Cross and afterwards at Boulogne if she was your friend?"

Peggy pouted. "I suppose she wanted to be alone with Lord Ellerdine," she said.

"Jamais! she can be alone with him at her flat—she need not wait to be alone with him at a public railway station."

Peggy laughed mischievously. "I suppose, Pauline, you think that's one to you," she said.

"Tais-toi!" said the old woman, both voice and manner growing more serious every moment.

"Well, go on," Peggy replied petulantly.

Pauline's voice became as impressive as she knew how to make it.

"I am sure Lady Attwill knew that Mr. Collingwood did not want Lord Ellerdine in the way. At Boulogne it was just the same. Lady Attwill's things were examined quickly, and then off she went with Lord Ellerdine in the Swiss express, and we didn't see them again. She went out of sight. Now, tell me, was not that strange?"

"Heavens! how hot it is!" Peggy said. "Shall I have a cigarette? Yes, I really think I will. Fetch me my cigarette-case, Pauline. It is on the dressing-table in my bedroom."

In a moment the Breton woman returned with a dainty little case of gold with a monogram of sapphires in one corner. Peggy took a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled a breath of the fragrant smoke with great satisfaction. Then she began her noiseless walk up and down the room again.

"Certainly," she said suddenly, "Lady Attwill is not a person to go out of sight for nothing."

Pauline sneered. "Oh, miladi is a convenience," she said. "M. Collingwood has only to raise his little finger and she will do anything."

"You mean that she is fond of him?"

"Of his money, rather."

"Pauline, that is really perfectly awful of you."

Again Pauline sneered. "She's a poor widow, madame. Lord Attwill left her nothing. Oh, I know! I always find out. She has a flat at three hundred pounds, an electric brougham, a box at the opera, and a little place at Henley. Lord Ellerdine is not so rich as that. M. Collingwood is very rich—very—very—very."

Peggy stopped in her walk now and faced Pauline, who had been sitting upon the settee. "You mean she gets money from Mr. Collingwood?" she asked.

The maid rose and came up to her mistress, touching her arm imploringly. "Oh, madame," she said with deep feeling, "do be careful. I think only of you. Don't trust Lady Attwill. She is no friend of yours. She has never forgiven you for marrying M. Admaston, and she would bring mischief between you both if she could."

"Pauline, you mustn't say that," Peggy replied gently.

"But, madame, it is true. She wanted to marry monsieur herself, and she is mad because you came in her way. And if she can get you out of her way she will."

"Pauline, you are terrible," Peggy said, still in the same light voice, and with a half-pitying, half-humorous smile such as one gives to an importunate child.

The maid took no notice. "Remember, madame," she went on, "it was Lady Attwill who planned this trip to the Engadine. It was her idea to go with Lord Ellerdine and M. Collingwood. And now where are we? I ask you, where are we? In Paris, and she and Lord Ellerdine in the express near Switzerland by now. Madame, listen to me! Let us go home to-morrow; make some excuse to M. Collingwood—any will do."

At last the Butterfly seemed a little impressed. There was such real earnestness, so much underlying meaning, in Pauline's voice that she paused and her eyes became thoughtful.

"It does seem strange," she said.

Pauline nodded. "N'est-ce pas? I feel as if you were in a trap."

The girl shivered, and her voice became pleading. "Oh, Pauline, do watch me! Look after me! I have no one now but you!"

The old *bonne* kissed the delicate, shrinking little figure. "La! la!" she said. "With my last breath I will shield you! Nevertheless, you are a mischief and make some men mad. Oh, the things they say about you! But it is only play."

"Only play?"

"That is all, *chérie*; I am sure of it."

Peggy went up to the fireplace. "Sometimes," she said, "I think it is very foolish play. I only hope that it won't end in tears." She looked down at the logs—smouldering now and with no more flame of rose-pink and amethyst.

"Tears? For you? Never!"

Peggy turned half round. "Pauline—I am going to be sensible. I shall turn over a new leaf. I shall become a *grande dame*, give great entertainments, hold court at Admaston House in Hampshire, and at Castle Netherby—then I shall not have time to make men mad!"

Pauline clapped her hands. "That will be splendid!" she said. "That will make him so happy!"

"Who, my husband?"

"Exactement. Monsieur adores you."

"I wonder?" Peggy said slowly, more to herself than to Pauline.

The maid nodded. "Madame," she went on, "he is a great big dog. You can do anything with him. He will never bite nor snarl, nor show even a little bit of his teeth."

"Perhaps it would be better if he would," Peggy replied in a rather broken voice. "I am so lonely, Pauline. Sometimes I think that his politics don't leave even a little corner for me."

"Bien!" said Pauline with a chuckle. "You would not feel lonely, madame, unless you loved him."

Peggy went up to the piano, which was open, and struck two or three resonant chords. "Certainly there is something in that," she said musingly.

"Yes, madame," Pauline replied, "he is a man, and you are proud of him. He is so different from all the others."

Peggy's idle fingers rattled out a little trilling catch from the *Chanson Florian*. Suddenly she stopped and turned her head swiftly. "You do not like Mr. Collingwood?" she asked, watching Pauline's face intently.

"Ma Doue!" Pauline answered in her native Breton, "but I like M. Collingwood well enough. All the women that there are like M. Collingwood. He is a terrible flirt, but he is not wicked. But madame must be careful, that is all. He loves madame not as he loves the others."

Peggy closed the lid of the piano with a bang. "Now, Pauline," she said, "don't be silly. Off you go to bed. I feel ever so much better now."

The maid gathered up the brushes and the bottle of eau-de-cologne from the table and took them into Mrs. Admaston's room. Then she returned. "Good night, madame," she said. "If you want me, that little bell there rings in my room. *Boone nuit. Dormez bien, chérie.*"

She kissed her mistress and left the room.

Peggy remained alone.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Admaston pulled aside the long curtains of green silk. She turned the oblong handle which released two of the windows, pulled it towards her, and drank in the fresh night air.

How fragrant and stimulating it was. How pure, and how different from the horrid, scented air of

the sitting-room!

"From the cool cisterns of the midnight air my spirit drinks repose," Peggy quoted to herself; and she did, indeed, seem to be bathed by a sweet and delicate refreshment, a cleansing, reviving air, which washed all hot and feverish thoughts away and made her one with the stainless spirit of the night.

The black masses—the black, blotted masses—of the trees in the Tuileries gardens cut into the sky-line. But even now, late as it was, innumerable lights twinkled over Paris, and a big honey-coloured moon, which shamed the firefly lights below, and seemed almost like a harvest moon, had risen and was staring down upon the City of Pleasure.

In front of the window was a balcony, and, lightly clad as she was, the girl went out upon it and with an impulsive gesture stretched out her arms to where the Lamp of the night, depended from a little drift of fleecy-white and amber-coloured clouds, swung over Paris.

"O moon," she said, "dear, round, red moon, I am going to be good! I really, really am. I am going to turn over a new leaf; I am going...."

There was a sharp whirr, hard, metallic, and insistent, from the room behind.

The telephone bell was ringing.

Peggy started—the world called her back. In her mind, as it were, she put down her good resolutions on the balcony and hurried in to see who had rung her up.

She fluttered up to the telephone, caught the receiver to her ear, and spoke breathlessly:

"Well, who is it? What? Yes. Who is it? Oh! Where are you? Chalons! You have arrived, then? What?"

A voice, not over the telephone wire, but behind her and in the room, came to Peggy's disengaged ear.

She started violently and turned round as if upon a pivot.

She saw standing before her a slim, tall, clean-shaved man, anywhere between thirty and forty. He was in evening clothes—that is to say, he wore a dinner jacket and black tie. His hair was dark and curly and grew low upon his forehead; his eyebrows were beautifully pencilled; and below them two shrewd, mocking, and yet somehow simple and merry eyes of a brilliant grey looked out upon Mrs. Admaston. The nose was aquiline; the lips, a trifle full, were nevertheless beautifully shaped. They were parted now in a smile.

"Who is it? Let me speak, Peggy?" Collingwood said.

Peggy looked at him. "Oh, how you startled me!" she cried, with a little shriek of alarm and embarrassment. Then without a further word she fluttered towards the door of her bedroom, dropping the receiver of the telephone, which hung by its twisted cord and swung this way and that.

Roderick Collingwood took a couple of quick, decisive steps to the wall. He caught up the receiver.

"Hello! That you, Ellerdine? Yes, just finished supper. What? What? 2.34 to-night—I mean this morning? What time do you reach Paris? What?—five o'clock?"

He turned round to Peggy, who was standing by her bedroom door. "They are coming on here," he said.

"Now?" the girl asked.

"Yes! they get here at five." He caught up the receiver again and pressed it to his ear, leaning forward to the mouthpiece.

"I say, Ellerdine—I say, why not wait for us at Chalons? What? You have decided not to go on? Very well. We will wait for you."

He placed the receiver of the telephone back upon its rest, and turned the handle to ring off. Then he looked at Peggy, walking slowly towards her as he spoke.

"Ellerdine is vexed," he said.

Peggy's face was the most alluring pink, her eyes looked angry.

"Please leave the room," she said.

Collingwood stopped. "I am sorry," he said. "I heard the telephone ring, and before I knew where I was...."

Peggy cut him short, pointing to the door on the left-hand side of the room, the door not far from that which led into the corridor. "Is that your room?" taking a couple of steps towards him.

"Yes," the dark man answered; "the hotel was full—it was the only room left. Don't be vexed, Peggy."

The girl's face had a sort of hard impatience in it, though mingled with something else also—something very difficult to define. "Wait," she said. "That door was locked when I tried it before you came in to supper. Did you unlock it?"

Mr. Collingwood laughed a pleasant, musical laugh, which seemed to resolve the somewhat tragic note of Mrs. Admaston's voice into nothing—to make it seem rather unnecessary and absurd. It was a thoroughly boyish laugh.

"Why, Peggy," he said, "what a very serious mood you are in! Unlock it? Of course I unlocked it, when I heard you at the telephone. I thought you would not mind. Besides, I wanted to know what Ellerdine was up to. Come, come, Peggy; this is not the first time we have been together so late."

Peggy looked at him with wide eyes. "Oh, but it is different," she said; "we are in a strange hotel—by accident. Colling, it was by accident, wasn't it?"

He started, bent forward a little, and answered her with great eagerness.

"Of course, of course; surely you did not think——"

"Oh, I don't know what I thought; but I feel so funny, so nervous."

Collingwood laughed again—really, it was the most reassuring and musical laugh. "Peggy nervous?"

"Well, it is rather alarming," Peggy replied.

Collingwood laughed once more, and stepped up towards her. "But rather nice—isn't it rather nice?—what, Peggy?"

There was something so irresistibly amusing in his voice and smile that Mrs. Admaston began to bubble over with laughter.

"Isn't it rather nice?" he went on, crossing over to the little switch-board and putting out the big central light which depended from the roof. "Isn't it rather nice?"

Peggy had entrenched herself behind the little table on which supper had been laid. She was obviously tremendously amused, but she made a great effort to be serious. "Colling!" she said, "it is mad. Supposing anybody knew!"

Collingwood was quite calm. He treated the whole thing as if it were the most ordinary occasion. He strolled lazily over to the fireplace, took a cigarette-case from his pocket, a cigarette from it, and struck a light.

"How can anyone know?" he asked.

Peggy seemed alarmed once more.

"No! Colling, please don't light a cigarette. It is too late. I must go to bed."

Collingwood's only answer was to blow out a cloud of smoke, to cross over to the sofa and throw himself upon it.

"Not yet," he said. "Don't be unkind, Peggy. Just one cigarette. Just one, in front of the fire—which, by the way, is out,—and then bye-byes."

"Well, one cigarette, but only one," Peggy said.

Collingwood sat up. "Good little Peggy," he said in a low, quiet voice; and then, raising his head, he looked at her intently with his brilliant grey eyes.

Peggy looked him straight in the face also, and then the spirit of mischief, the excitement of this odd meeting, got the better of her prudence. She came to the back of the sofa and leant over it. "Isn't Peggy going to have one?" she said.

The man took his cigarette-case from his waistcoat pocket, opened it, and gave her a cigarette. Her face was tantalisingly close to his, and she noticed, well enough, that his hand was trembling as he did so. She kept her face close to his just half a moment longer than the situation required.

Collingwood's voice began to shake also. "Now, Peggy, you little devil," he said.

"Why is Peggy a little devil?"

With a slim brown hand, which, despite all the man's *sang-froid*, still shook like a leaf in the wind, he lit the cigarette for the girl, looking up into her face as he did so.

"Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Called Robin Goodfellow."

There came a little bubble of laughter from Peggy, which seemed to remove all diffidence from Collingwood. "How are you, my friend Puck?" he said.

Peggy perched herself upon the head of the sofa. "Oh, Puck was an imp of mischief," she said.

"Well?" he asked.

The girl puffed her cigarette contentedly for a few seconds; then she bent towards him, swinging her little brown-shoed foot. "Tell me, Colling," she asked: "why weren't my boxes registered?"

"Well—of all the suspicious little demons I ever came across! Registered?"

"Yes, registered."

"Well, I suppose that fool of a porter at Charing Cross forgot to do it," Collingwood replied.

"It was a bit of luck, wasn't it?" Peggy said.

Collingwood seemed to be thinking of something else. He was gazing at the end of his cigarette and not looking at her at all. "Yes," he said in an absent-minded voice.

"I wonder——" Peggy went on; and then suddenly she stopped, and Collingwood looked up with a start.

"I wonder," Peggy continued, "what the Attwill will think?"

"Think?" he answered. "She can jolly well think what she likes."

"I don't much mind what she thinks," Peggy said; "but I'll bet she's put some rotten idea into Ellerdine's head. Colling, I don't like her—really I don't."

Although Peggy did not notice it, the man's voice became slightly strained. The lips assumed an appearance of somewhat exaggerated indifference, but there was a glint of watchfulness in the eyes.

"You don't like Lady Attwill?" he said.

"That's it," Peggy replied. "Where does she get her money from?"

Collingwood started slightly. The girl did not notice it. "I don't know," he said a little uneasily.

"Is that true, Colling?" Peggy asked, with mischief in her eyes.

"By the way, has she any?" Collingwood asked.

"Well, if she hasn't, how does she do it?"

"By her wits, my dear."

"Ellerdine doesn't go in for wits," Peggy remarked.

"Poor, dear Dicky! he is the diplomatic failure of the century."

"I suppose he is, but it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. The Empire's loss is Attwill's gain."

Collingwood laughed. "Well," he said, "she's the only post he has been able to keep."

"I don't know that he can afford to keep anything. Can he be in love with her, do you think?"

Collingwood puffed slowly at his cigarette.

"My dear Peggy," he said, looking her up and down with a curious meditative gaze—"my dear Peggy, if a man loves a woman he doesn't leave a comfortable hotel to travel all night in a slow train with her. Ellerdine is as likely to spend his money on a home for lost cats as on the Attwill."

"She's a very attractive cat," Peggy said.

"He doesn't care two straws about her," Collingwood replied quite definitely.

"Then why did he come?"

"To please you—for no other reason."

"Anyway, I don't like her," Peggy said. "Do you? I believe you do, Colling."

Collingwood jumped up from the sofa. "Now, stop that, Peggy," he said.

The glint of mischief in Peggy's eyes glowed more strongly. "She's a very attractive woman," she said.

"Well, she's not the sort of woman who attracts me," Collingwood replied, sitting down again upon the couch and tapping impatiently with his foot upon the carpet. He seemed disturbed, uneasy, under the influence of some suppressed emotion.

Peggy stroked her nose with one little finger, and then she leant down towards Collingwood. "What sort of woman attracts you?" she said in a low voice.

Again the man jumped up, and a keen observer would have noticed that tiny beads of perspiration had come out upon his forehead like seed pearls.

"Peggy," he cried, "you are a tantalising little fiend!"

Peggy shook with laughter. She was absolutely happy. "I suppose I ought not to have said that,"

she bubbled.

"Why not?" he asked, and into his voice came something of deep yearning, and the note of passion restrained till now, broke through all reserves and all defences at last.

"Why not?" he said. Again his voice grew in emotional force and power. "Why not, Peggy? I love you when you are in this mood. I love you in all your moods, dear."

Peggy slid down from the end of the sofa and moved a little way towards the door of her bedroom. "What about that cigarette?" she asked, and there was a distinct note of nervousness in her voice.

She had provoked the beginnings of passion, and, having done so, womanlike, she was startled and afraid.

"Cigarette," he said. "Oh, I haven't finished it yet. But listen! Peggy darling, you must listen!"

She was really startled now. "Not to-night, Colling; you promised," she said. "Now, Colling, go—please go!"

"I can't go, Peggy; I love you so!" he answered.

"Please, Colling, don't talk like that!"

Now his voice became almost dogged, though it lost nothing of its power. "I can't help it," he said; "I love you!"

The girl clutched nervously at her tea-gown and shrank back nearer yet to the door.

"Don't talk of love," she said in a low voice.

He took three quick steps up to her, and again she shrank away, not this time into the sure defence of her bedroom, but towards the window.

"Don't talk of love?" he said, and his voice reverberated and rang with feeling. "Why not? It is in the air—the very night is charged with love. You cannot look out on a night like this and not think of love."

"Don't, Colling; you frighten me," she said.

"Oh, but why should my love frighten you, my Peggy? My darling, it is brightness, tenderness, and love that you want. I know how monotonous and dull your life must be. Good God! don't I know it? Am I not always thinking of it? Poor little Butterfly! What a flutter you make to be free, to warm your dainty wings in sunny places! Peggy, sweetheart, I want to show you the sunny places."

"Please go, Colling!" she said, and her flute-like voice was tremulous with fear. "Please go, Colling! It isn't fair. I am afraid. You see, I am so fond of you, and I am such a *little* Butterfly!"

He held out his hands towards her, palms upwards, with a curious foreign gesture which showed how greatly he was moved. "I can't go, Peggy," he said. "I want you so badly—want you for my own—to-night—to-morrow, all the nights and all the days. I have been very good. I have always done what you have told me. I have come and gone just exactly as the whim has struck you. Ah! you know how deeply, how dearly I love you!"

She moved past him with a sudden, gliding step, and placed the settee between them.

"I only know you are my friend, my very dear friend," she said.

"No! no! no!" he cried, coming after her.

"Yes—only that friend!"

"Lover! Peggy," he said passionately. "I am a man—devoured by love of you. I have waited for you—longed for you—and now—" With a sudden movement he caught her in his arms, straining her to him wildly, showering kisses upon the shining coronet of her hair. "We're alone, Peggy," he cried, "just you and I!" and his voice rang with triumph. "We're alone! There are no others in the world—no others! You are mine, Peggy, mine at last!"

She struggled in his arms, her face pale as linen, her voice with a note of almost shrill alarm.

"Colling, I can't bear it—you will spoil everything. Do help me, Colling! I don't love you like that. I'm sorry if it hurts you. I'd rather die."

There was a note in her voice of such absolute sincerity, mingled with fear, that he opened his arms and let her flutter away.

The passion upon his face changed and melted into something else.

"My God!" he cried. "You would rather die—"

He stumbled rather than walked towards the sofa and sat down upon it, burying his face in his long lean hands, that trembled exceedingly.

"My God!" she heard him whisper to himself; "she would rather die!..."

Peggy had followed him, and she stood at the end of the sofa, aghast at what she had done. She began to speak slowly and nervously.

"Colling, don't do that. I really can't bear that you should think me unkind. I like you too well to let you do anything that would spoil our happiness. I am not unkind—really I am not. Have not I shown how fond of you I am? We have been such good friends!"

"Friends!" he said bitterly, without looking up from his hands.

His voice was so cold, so charged with misery and sudden realisation, that it cut the girl to the heart. She went round from the back of the sofa and knelt at his feet, stretching out her hand timidly, and touching the sleeve of his coat.

"Colling, dear, what else can we be?" she said.

He looked down at her, and for a moment his voice did not soften. There was a quiet, dogged misery in it.

"We have passed the merely friendship line," he said; "and you know that well enough, Peggy. That has been passed a long time. You would not have left London with me if we had only been friends and nothing more. Were we only friends when we used to sit up together night after night at Ellerdine's house? Do 'friends' speak to each other as we have spoken? Why, you have only to touch my hand to know that I burn with longing."

"Colling, you mustn't say such things!"

He jumped up roughly, leaving her kneeling upon the floor, and passed with rapid steps to the window.

"Friends!" he cried, and his voice had a razor edge to it. "Friends! It's not true! Do friends run the risks that we have run? For God's sake, here and now let us be honest with each other. Why, we haven't even tried to fool society! For Heaven's sake, Peggy, don't let's try to fool ourselves!"

Peggy rose slowly to her feet, trembling all over. "Colling! oh, Colling!" she said in a piteous voice, "surely people don't think we are——"

"People don't think! People are only too glad to think. You know well enough what is said about others——"

Her face grew paler still, her eyes were wide with fear and slowly dawning realisation. She clasped both hands to her breast, and the light shone upon the rubies set in the old Moorish bracelets that she was wearing.

"Oh!" she said.

He came up to her again.

"Peggy, you don't care, do you?"

"Don't care, Colling!" she gasped. "Tell me, do people think we are——"

"Think!—how can they help thinking it? Haven't we given them every reason?"

"No, no, no! Oh! I hate to think of that! We have only been very fond friends. Why should they think otherwise?"

There were tears of agony in her voice. She kept clasping and unclasping her hands.

"Oh! I suppose it is all my fault," she said brokenly—"all my fault. I don't think ungenerous things of others. I have been too trusting—too confiding. Why should people think such things? I only wanted a good friend, a companion."

He still stood by her, looking at her keenly, and the bitterness in his voice did not die away. "Friends! Oh yes, I know! You wanted someone to pet you, to pamper you. What you wanted was someone to satisfy all your vanities—your yearning for devotion, for adulation, for sense of power. I know! You wanted all the joys and none of the risks. That sums up the whole thing in a nutshell. There are lots of women like you. They drive men mad—make drunkards, gamblers, swindlers of them. I have seen it often enough. I have seen men fall out and lose themselves among the army of crooks that throng the second-rate shows. But I won't let you drive me mad."

The bitterness in his voice was terrible. His words seemed to scourge her, to lash her like a whip. She stared at him in helpless amazement and misery. He had paused in his rapid torrent of speech, and as he saw her distress he seemed to be a little touched.

"Peggy!" he said, and once more the note of passion came into his voice, while the anger died out of it—"Peggy! I mean you to be mine. There will be a crash soon—that is certain. Admaston will take notice of what everybody is saying about us. He will come out of his political shell, wake up, do things, put an end to it at once and for ever!"

"Oh, my God! What have I done!" the girl cried.

"Done! What have you done to deserve your husband's neglect? Why, he doesn't even know that you exist. His heart beats by Act of Parliament. He'd a thousand times rather address a village meeting than spend an hour in your company. Are you to pass your youth in the company of——"

"Stop! stop!" she cried. "Say what you like about me—scold me if you like, but say nothing against him. You do not know my husband. We are neither of us fit to mention his name. He is a big man, and he loves me."

"But, Peggy, you won't say that you love him?" Collingwood said, with a curious note of perplexity in his voice. The situation, tragic as it was, got a little bit beyond him.

"Love him?" she answered. "I don't know. I have had no chance to love anyone the way you regard love."

Collingwood put his hands into his pockets, swung round upon his heels and swung back again. "I see," he said; "you mean you don't love Admaston, and won't love anybody else?"

"Oh, I don't know," Peggy replied; "but I certainly don't love anybody else. You think I am neglected. That is absurd. It was my father's wish that we should marry. George knew that I did not love him. He trusts me fully. There will be no crash."

He heard the note in her voice which told him that she was trying to persuade herself that her fears were groundless, and smiled rather grimly.

"There will be," he said. "You take my word for it. No man—not even Admaston—can stand *ridicule* for long. Remember, I mean to win you. I shall marry no one if I don't marry you."

She tried to speak lightly.

"Colling, don't be so silly! You are one of the best matches in England. You will marry a beautiful girl who will lead society and make you a very proud and ambitious man. Don't shake your head—that's only because you want to be gallant. Heavens! how I would do things if I were a man! You, with all your talents and your money, ought to rise to any position."

"You are mad about position," he said impatiently.

"Yes," Peggy answered. "I like men who have some big purpose in life and who fight the world and win."

"Like George Admaston!" Collingwood answered, and now for the first time there came a glint of malicious and real ill-humour over his face. It came and passed in a second, but it had been there.

"Yes," Peggy replied; "like George Admaston! He is a fighter, Colling. I think many women would love George. He is not the butterfly type—but—"

"But he has all the luck," Collingwood broke in fiercely. "I could do anything if you were with me. I must have something—or someone—to fight for. My nature must be baffled. There must be obstacles in the way for me. I have a wicked streak in me somewhere that turns red when I can't get what I want. Peggy, you must let Admaston get a divorce."

The words seemed to strike her dumb. All colour had left her face long since, but now almost all expression went from it also for a moment. It was as if she had been struck some paralysing blow.

He was watching her keenly, and as he noted the effect of his words a spasm of pain went through him, though he showed nothing of it in his face or manner. He loved her, he loved her dearly; there was no doubt about that. He hated to give her pain, yet he felt he was being cruel only to be kind. She must face the situation once and for all, and then perhaps everything might be right. The situation, serious as it was, was very largely of his own creation. Seeing no other way, he had deliberately endeavoured to compromise Mrs. Admaston. All his plans, all his ideas, had been directed to this end. He wanted to force her husband's hand and to marry Peggy after the divorce. He loved her wildly, madly, passionately. He would have been a perfect husband to her—there can be no doubt of that.

But his love was selfish. In order to win this woman for his own he was ready to subject her to all the indignities and all the shame of a process in the courts. In his overmastering desire, her reputation, her honour, mattered nothing to him. It was she that he wanted, and any means should be taken to achieve that end.

Men like Roderick Collingwood have few guiding principles in life, save only those of their own appetites. Of course, the public school and the university have given them a certain code. They must pay their gambling debts, they must do various other things of that sort; but as far as any conception of the morality and decency, which have made England what it is, is concerned, they are absolutely without it.

He nodded at Peggy, driving home the words.

"Divorce! Oh, you mustn't talk like that. You know how it hurts me," she said at last, when she had recovered a little. "Really, really, you are mistaken. I am quite satisfied with my life—only, sometimes when I am foolish I feel just a bit lonely and neglected."

He turned on her almost with a sneer. He was bitterly hurt and angry, and there is no doubt that, from his point of view, he had reason for complaint. She had led him on. She had flirted outrageously with him. She had deliberately done her best to be provocative. Her intentions, doubtless, were innocent enough as far as any dishonour to her husband entered into the question. But her love of adulation, her vanity, her desire of power, were all gratified by her

conquest of him; while at the same time she still had a real and genuine friendship for a man who, with all his faults, was essentially charming, good-natured, and kind.

"Then you have deceived me!" he cried.

"Colling, don't say that. I never meant——"

"Never meant? Good heavens! I told you six months ago that I loved you, and ever since then you have let me go here and there with you, and I have told you of my love again and again."

"But you have always been so good. You have never been unkind to me before to-night."

"Good God! Unkind! Why, most men would have divorced their wives on far less evidence than we have furnished. And all the while you have accepted the position without a murmur. You don't know what you have done."

"Colling, what do you mean?"

"Mean?" he answered. "I mean that you have led me to believe that you didn't care what we did—what people said about us. Mean? I mean that the call of love is in the spring, Peggy, whispering to you and me. Mean? I mean that I am a man and you are a woman—our souls stand bare to one another—that I love you and that you love me."

He sprang at her and caught her up in his arms once more.

"I don't love you, Colling! Let me go!" she cried.

"I can't let you go! It is my hour! It is your fault as well as mine! Kiss me, Peggy! You have tortured me long enough! Kiss me!"

He held her tight, tight! His face blazed. There was a fury in his voice.

At that very moment when he stopped speaking and was gazing down at her, while she lay for a moment almost passive in his arms after her first fight and struggle, a loud, sharp, clear sound rang out in the room. It was the bell of the telephone upon the wall.

"Ellerdine!" Peggy said.

"Let him ring," Collingwood answered.

They stood there for another moment clasped together, and once more the insistent summons of the bell came.

"No, no," Peggy cried; "answer him, please!"

With an odd, instinctive gesture Collingwood put his arm right round her. Before he had been straining her to him passionately. Now there was something protective in his attitude.

And again the bell whirred.

At last with great reluctance Collingwood stepped up to the wall and caught up the receiver.

"Well, well!" he said. "Who is it? What! Ad——Admaston!"

A voice which was robbed of all ordinary qualities shivered out into the room.

"My husband!" said Peggy.

Collingwood made a warning gesture with his left hand, telling her to keep quiet.

"Yes," he said; "we took the wrong train. Yes, Collingwood. Yes, it is he speaking."

"Where is he?" came hissing to the ears of the man at the telephone. Again he motioned her to silence, giving a slight impatient tap with his foot upon the carpet.

"Oh yes. We have just finished supper. What? I can't hear you distinctly. You want to speak to Ellerdine? Hold the line a moment; I'll call him."

He put down the receiver upon the table and ran up to Peggy, who was shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"He wants to speak to you, too, I think," Collingwood said in a low, fierce whisper; "but perhaps you had better not."

"I can't," Peggy answered, swaying this way and that as if about to fall. He put out his arm and steadied her.

"All right, darling," he said; "it is all right!"

"Where is he? London?" she said.

"I didn't ask," he replied. "Wait a minute!"

He hurried to the telephone again. "Hello! Ellerdine has just gone out. Hello! Where are you speaking from? Damn! We're cut off. Hello! Hello!"

He listened for nearly half a minute, taut and strained as a greyhound on the leash; then he flung

the receiver angrily upon the bracket.

"We're cut off," he repeated, looking at her almost stupidly, as if the situation was beyond him.

Collingwood said nothing for a little time. At last he spoke. "I didn't think of that," he said. "Can he have had us——"

"What? What?" she almost shrieked.

"Followed?"

He plunged his hands into the pockets of his dinner-jacket and bent his head, thinking deeply. Then he looked up at Peggy. "Peggy," he said at length, "rumour—he has been ridiculed into action—the crash has come."

The girl held out both hands towards him as if warding off a blow. "Go, go!" she cried; "please go! I sha'n't speak another word to you to-night. Go at once!"

"I can't leave you now, Peggy. I just worship you."

"I shall ring for my maid," she said, and moved towards the bell-push.

"No, don't do that. Don't be cruel, Peggy!" he said, in a voice instinct with agonised pleading. "Don't be cruel, Peggy! No, no! Don't ring!"

"I shall," she said firmly, and stretched out her hand.

"Peggy, trust me. I love you better than anything in the world—better than myself. For you I will sacrifice wealth, honour."

"Honour!" she cried.

"I'll do anything to win you. Everything I have done has been to win you—to have you for my own. You know it is true. Peggy, before God, I believed that you loved me too. Don't judge me harshly—oh, don't do that!"

Peggy put out her hand and pressed the bell-push.

"I must be alone," she said in a dull, muffled voice.

He saw that it was useless, that he had failed, that the plans of months had all miscarried, that everything was over for him as far as she was concerned. Undisciplined as his nature was, baffled and disowned as he felt, he nevertheless showed himself rather fine in that moment. He made an almost superhuman effort at self-control—and succeeded.

"All right, Peggy dear," he said. "Don't be afraid. Everything will come right. Good night." With one last lingering look at her he left the room, closing the door which led into his own.

Peggy sank down upon the sofa almost over-mastered by her rising hysteria, limp and half unconscious.

She lay there breathing hurriedly, and with her eyes closed, when the corridor door opened and Pauline came rapidly into the room.

"Madame!" she cried.

Peggy gave one great sob of relief.

"Pauline!—you have not gone to bed?"

"No, madame! I was so anxious about you I could not sleep."

"Oh, my head is bursting!" the girl cried; "there is a pain like the thrust of a sword in my head."

"Poor darling!" Pauline said, her voice guttural with excitement, her trembling hands passing over the young girl's form with loving, frightened caresses. "Poor darling! There is something altogether wrong. Just now, when I came down, I saw a man standing at your door listening."

"At that door?"

"Yes. Twice I have seen him to-day. He was at Boulogne; I saw him looking at your boxes. Then just after supper he came in—when I was speaking to the waiter."

"Then we have been followed," Peggy answered, breaking down utterly. "Pauline, I feel that something dreadful is going to happen. Stay with me—don't go back to your room. Soothe me, Pauline, as you used to when I was little and afraid of the dark."

CHAPTER IV

It was about nine o'clock the next morning. The heat of the night before had given place to that incomparable freshness which spring mornings have in Paris.

The windows of Mrs. Admaston's sitting-room were open, and a delightfully scented air, from the lilac blossoms and all the flowers of the gardens in the Tuileries, flooded and floated into the room.

Rooms have an aspect of this or that emotion according to the hour in which the events of the soul have taken place within them.

There are some rooms which always have the same mood. When one goes into them one doesn't impose one's mood, one's fancy, or one's ideas upon the place, but is dominated by one lasting personality—of furniture, of aspect, of general *mise en scène*.

It would be impossible, for example, to have a merry breakfast-party in the hangman's ante-room to the gallows; and one has known rooms in hotels which one enters gladly, unconscious of the pervading gloom which seems to cling to floor and ceiling and rises up like a spectre into the heart and brain after a few minutes' sojourn there.

The sitting-room in the Hôtel des Tuileries, which had been the theatre of such tragic emotions on the last spring midnight, was now ordinary and comfortable enough.

The chairs and settees were all in their proper places. The carpet had been brushed, and its dull blues, greys, and brick-dust reds were all essentially artistic.

And they had brought new flowers there also. The bowls and vases were filled with fresh purple and white lilac. The silver candlesticks had been polished—there were no drippings of wax upon them any more. Tall white candles, fresh, virginal, and unfired, filled all the candlesticks.

In the middle of all this freshness two people were—a man and a woman.

One, Lord Ellerdine, was very tall and lean. He was dressed in a suit of very immaculate grey flannel—not the greyish-green which the ordinary person who wears flannels imagines to be the right thing, but the real grey-grey which costs a good deal of money; if the tailors in Sackville Street and Waterloo Place, from whom we suffer, are to be believed.

Lord Ellerdine's hair—and he hadn't much of it—was what he himself would have described as "the same old dust-colour." He wore a stiff double collar with blue lines upon it, a tie of China silk, and a big black pearl, stuck right down at the bottom, so that it only peeped out from the opening of his waistcoat now and again.

Lord Ellerdine had red eyes—that is to say, that there was a sort of red glint in them. The brows which overhung them were straight and dark, and contradicted with an odd grotesquerie the flickering attempt to really be at home and happy with the world. The face itself was rather tanned and brown, lean in contour and suggesting the explorer and the travelled man; and all this was oddly contradicted by an engaging little button of a mouth, which twitched and lisped and was always rather more jolly than the occasion warranted.

By the side of Lord Ellerdine—or rather standing in the middle of the room and looking down upon him, for he had thrown himself upon the sofa—was a tall, slim, and gracious woman, perfectly dressed in a travelling coat and skirt of tweed. She looked round her rather fretfully.

Her face was radiant—there is no other word for it. Although she had been travelling all night, she appeared to be as fresh as paint—and that exactly describes her.

The complexion was perfect. It had that creamy *morbidezza* one sees in a furled magnolia bud. Two straight, decisive lips seemed like a "band of scarlet upon a tower of ivory." Lady Attwill's eyes were sapphire-blue and suspicious, but entirely charming. She was, in short, a thoroughly handsome woman, and the sunlight struck curious radiances from the little pearls she wore in the shell-like lobes of her ears.

"Tell madame, will you, Pauline?" she said.

"I'll tell madame that you have arrived," the maid said with a little bow. She crossed the room, knocked, opened the door leading into Mrs. Admaston's bedroom, and disappeared.

Almost immediately Lady Attwill's face changed from its quiet calm and became vivid.

"Cheer up, Dicky!" she said to Lord Ellerdine; "you've been in many a worse fix than this."

The diplomatist looked at her for a moment, his whole silly—but somehow distinguished—face covered with a sort of desperate cheerfulness.

"Worse!" he said. "I should say so. I don't mind gettin' into a 'fix,' as you call it."

"Then what in the world are you grumbling about?" Lady Attwill asked.

"Why, how am I going to get *out* of it? Any fool can get into a fix—any time. It's gettin' out—what? That's the bally riddle, Alice—gettin' out of it. What?"

Lady Attwill went up to him and dug him confidentially in the shoulder with one pretty gloved thumb.

"Look here, Dicky," she said; "now, did I ever fail you?"

"Oh no, no. You've always been pretty good."

"Now, haven't I got you out of many a scrape?"

Lord Ellerdine seemed to think—that is to say, call upon the resources of a somewhat attenuated memory. "Yes," he replied; "not so confounded many—only two; and—yes—well, of course, that other one was rather awkward."

He chuckled to himself. "But, after all, this is different," he continued. "I am not in this one, exactly. No more are you. It's Peggy's fix. And we don't *quite* know how she's got into it. I don't like the look of it."

Lady Attwill listened to him with an aspect of particular attention. But if the man had been able to realise it he would have seen the flash of contempt which came and went over her face. He did not, however, and she replied in her ordinary tones:

"Look of it! It's merely a frolic—nothing serious. Collingwood is not the man to run risks. He believes in the simple life."

"Does he, by Jove!" Lord Ellerdine said. "He's not so simple as that, Alice."

"He is not so simple as to get into a complication with Admaston," she answered. "He's no fool—you take my word for it."

Lord Ellerdine grinned his fatuous little grin.

"Seems I have to take your word for everything," he said.

"All right, Dicky," she answered; "just you leave all the thinking to me."

"You don't give me time to think," he answered. "I know I am deuced slow at it. But tell me this. How did Peggy and Collingwood get to my place last autumn before ten o'clock in the morning? Tell me that—what?"

"They motored through the night, of course."

"They jolly well didn't," replied his lordship.

"But Colling told us he did," said Lady Attwill.

"I knew he did. But they didn't."

Lady Attwill had been glancing over the *Matin* of that day, which had been laid upon the breakfast table. At these words of her companion's she put down the paper rather hurriedly and looked up.

"Dicky," she said, "I believe you know something."

"I know I do."

"What is it, then?"

"Bad breakdown at Selby overnight. They came on to my place in a hired motor next morning. I heard all about it from the man who drove them down from Selby."

Lady Attwill was very genuinely interested, or achieved a fair assumption of interest. "Dicky!" she cried.

Lord Ellerdine nodded his thin head vigorously. "It's a fact," he replied triumphantly. "The fellow is now my second chauffeur. So you see I can find out things if I have time enough. Alice, I don't like this fix Peggy's in. Staying at Selby with Collingwood all night was bad enough, but——"

"Good gracious!" Lady Attwill answered, "can't a woman stay at the same hotel with a man she knows without scandal?"

"Scandal!" Lord Ellerdine replied. "Damn the scandal! It's what folks think. It's who you are. Lots of women wouldn't mind staying at the same hotel I was staying at, and nobody would dream that there was anything wrong—you wouldn't, Alice. But Peggy and Collingwood *make* people suspect them."

Lady Attwill went up to Lord Ellerdine and pinched his arm playfully. "You silly old Dicky," she said, "you've been listening to a lot of stupid twaddle at your clubs."

"Well," he answered, "they know pretty well what's going on."

"Yes, I suppose *they* do," she said. "Talk about women and their gossip! Why, Dicky, they're not in it with your smoke-room gang."

At that moment Pauline entered from Mrs. Admaston's bedroom. There was a hardly veiled hostility in her face as she spoke, though her manner was civil enough. "Madame will see Lady Attwill," she said.

Lady Attwill swept across the room, flashing a somewhat curious glance at the old maidservant as she passed her, and entered the bedroom.

Lord Ellerdine had strolled up to the fireplace. "Tell Peggy I am waiting," he called out.

"All right," Lady Attwill said. "You amuse yourself for a few minutes."

Lord Ellerdine began to hum a little tune; then he noticed Pauline, who was arranging some violets upon a side table. "Morning, Pauline," he said. "How's madame?"

"She has a headache," the maid replied; "just a little nervous. Is your lordship well?"

"No, I am not well, Pauline, I am sorry to say. I feel very groggy. I have been all night in a confounded slow train."

Pauline said nothing, but left the room just as the third door opened and Collingwood came briskly into the room.

He was wearing a lounge suit of dark blue. The air of poise and easy carriage which was so marked a part of his personality was very much in evidence now. There was a quiet spring in his step, a brisk and cheery purpose in his movements, and he seemed singularly alert and *débonnaire*; perfectly dressed, a very proper man to look at, but somehow or other without a suggestion of foppishness, which Lord Ellerdine always managed to convey. His face was calm and composed, but a close observer would have noticed that there were dark rings under the eyes and that the face was slightly paler than its wont.

"Oh, there you are!" Lord Ellerdine said.

"Hello, Ellerdine!" Collingwood replied. "Bright and early as usual?"

"Early, yes," said the other; "but not so deuced bright, old chap."

"When did you get here?"

"About five o'clock."

"Had breakfast?"

"No," said Lord Ellerdine. "I had a bath, a shave, a change, and a brandy-and-soda."

Collingwood went up to the window and sat looking idly down into the Rue de Rivoli.

"Refreshing, but not very filling," he said. "Staying here?"

"No," Lord Ellerdine replied; "they would not let us in. It's race-week, you know. They are packed out. The place is full of big bookies and racing fellows. We had to go to the St. Denis. A nice fix you've got us all in, Collingwood!"

Collingwood turned away from the window.

"Fix? I've got you in? How do you mean?"

Lord Ellerdine struggled to find words in which to express his meaning.

"I'm blowed if I know—quite. Anyway, we're in it."

"I don't understand," Collingwood answered.

"Oh, come on!" replied Lord Ellerdine. "Chuck that business, Colling! I know your beastly way of putting a fellow off, but you can't leave me out of this."

Collingwood lit a cigarette very deliberately. "Leave you out?" he said.

"Wish to heavens you could!" was the rejoinder.

Collingwood perched himself on the end of the sofa, swinging his legs. "Look here, what's up?"

"Are we at St. Moritz?" Lord Ellerdine asked.

"No," Collingwood answered coolly.

"Are we in Switzerland?"

"No."

"Well, where are we?"

"I make a good guess," Collingwood said, "that we are in Paris."

Lord Ellerdine flushed up and began to get angry.

"Well, there you are!" he said. "Damn it, there you are! And you have got the sublime cheek to ask me what's up."

Collingwood smiled. "Now, don't get ratty, Dicky," he said. "It's all right. Only a trifling contretemps. We got on the wrong train—by mistake."

Lord Ellerdine began to stroll up and down the room. He tried to be judicial in his manner. "Now, are you telling me that for a fact or for a joke?" he asked.

"Fact—absolute fact. We were kept until the last moment paying duty on Peggy's cigarettes, and had to rush for the train—"

He had been going to say something further, but Lord Ellerdine interrupted him. "I saw you," he

said.

Here Collingwood cut in suddenly: "Yes, getting into the train that was on the move."

"Yes," Lord Ellerdine said, "the Paris express. You jumped Peggy on and sprang after her, dragging her maid with you. A clever bit of work, my friend."

Collingwood shrugged his shoulders. "Well, where were you?" he replied.

"In the other train—the right one. With Alice. It was a rotten thing for you to do."

"What, leave you with Alice?"

Lord Ellerdine shook his head impatiently. "No, no," he said irritably; "to leave us in the lurch like that."

"But I telegraphed to you to Chalons that we had got on the wrong train."

"Yes, you wired to Chalons right enough, but that didn't make it true. I would not have gone if Alice had not persuaded me that the train was running in two parts, and that you would be sure to join us at Chalons."

"Well, it's all right now," Collingwood replied, still preserving the perfect *sang-froid* with which he had listened to all the other's remarks. "It's all right now, so don't let's say any more about it."

"All right now, by Jove!" Ellerdine replied. "Is it? Suppose Admaston hears about it—what?"

"Of course," Collingwood said, "if you think it is absolutely necessary, we'll invent some yarn that will satisfy him."

"I do think it necessary. But *you'll* have to do it. I never could invent—never. No good at it. Confound you, Colling, leaving us...."

Collingwood's manner changed from coolness to something more intimate. "Now, look here, Dicky," he said persuasively. "I didn't think you'd cut up rough about it. I thought Alice possibly might, but not you."

"Oh, she doesn't mind," Ellerdine answered. "She never believes that people get on the wrong train, or have motor accidents so that they can have a night off."

Collingwood put his feet down to the floor and threw the end of his cigarette into the fireplace. "Now, look here," he said; "do you mean that you think that I——" He hesitated for a moment.

"No, I don't," Lord Ellerdine answered; "but what will Admaston think? He is sure to hear of it. I'll bet you a fiver it's known in London to-night. There is always someone on the spot to notice things that go wrong, and this is so suspicious—so damned suspicious, mind you. Why, *I* don't like the look of it—mind, the look of it—myself."

"Then we must set your conscience at rest, that's all," Collingwood replied.

"How?"

"Well, we must all have a proper, coherent, connected yarn to tell. That's quite simple."

Ellerdine shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't think it will work," he said. "You can't get four people to tell the same yarn without variation. There's sure to be one let it down just where it ought to be kept up."

"If it were a long, complicated yarn, perhaps," said Collingwood; "but I don't mean that at all. Just a plain, unvarnished tale."

"Unvarnished!" the peer replied. "Well, it'll take a deuce of a lot of paint to make this one look all right."

"Not a bit of it," Collingwood replied. "Easy as anything."

Lord Ellerdine went to the fireplace once more and stood with his back to the flames. "Right ho," he said; "go ahead."

"Here you are, then," Collingwood began. "We all got on the wrong train."

"But we didn't."

"Damn it!" Collingwood said, "of course we didn't; but we'll say we did."

Lord Ellerdine began to check the points upon the fingers of one hand, as if anxious to commit them to memory even at this early stage. "Am I to say we did?" he asked.

"We will all say we did," Collingwood replied.

"I shall never be able to," Lord Ellerdine remarked hopelessly.

"Confound it, Dicky! Are you the George Washington of the lot?"

The peer shook his head more vigorously. That imputation, at anyrate, he was anxious to avoid. "No, no," he said quickly; "it's not the truth that bothers me. It's getting the blooming fib to sound

all right."

Collingwood repeated his instruction as if he were teaching a lesson to a child, speaking slowly and impressively. "We all got on the wrong train.' There's nothing difficult about saying that."

Lord Ellerdine repeated the sentence in exactly the same voice.

"We all got on the wrong train."

"Bravo, Dicky!" said Collingwood. "Now then, don't relax your attention, old chap. The next is that we all stayed the night at this hotel."

The index finger of Lord Ellerdine's right hand moved from the thumb to the first finger of his left. He appeared to have got it all right, when suddenly a doubt seemed to enter the vacant spaces of his mind.

"What, here?" he asked.

"Yes, here; at this hotel."

"Oh! Come, old chap! Doesn't that look like a bally lie? Now think it over for yourself. Listen. 'We all stayed the night at this hotel.'"

Collingwood was a patient man, and he listened without any betrayal of what he really felt in dealing with this pleasant fool.

"Well," he said, "what's wrong with it?"

"Oh! it lacks something," was the reply; and though the speaker did not amplify his statement, his voice was full of doubt and hesitation.

"Oh, rot!" Collingwood answered. "It's only wrong because we didn't stay here. If you can say, 'We all got on the wrong train,' surely to goodness you can say that we all stayed the night at this hotel?"

"Yes," Ellerdine answered slowly. "I suppose it ought to be easy enough."

"No wonder you chucked diplomacy," Collingwood said.

"Oh! I didn't mind a fib or two for international reasons."

"I see," Collingwood rejoined. "Your conscience begins to prick you only when fibs are told for domestic purposes."

"Well, you see, you run much greater risks of being found out. It's awful to be found out in an *ordinary* lie—people make such a *fuss* of other people's lies."

"Do you mean to tell me that national lies are never found out?"

"Well, you see," Ellerdine replied—the discussion was getting a little bit beyond him, and again he struggled to find words,—“you see, national lies are not about persons." Then he shook his head. "I'm damned bad at it, Collingwood," he said in a final sort of voice. "I can't rely on my memory. I suppose there's no other way out of it?"

"My dear chap, none whatever," Collingwood said.

"We all got on the wrong train," Ellerdine repeated to himself slowly in a sing-song voice; and then, looking up brightly, "Does seem easy, doesn't it?"

"Top hole," said Collingwood.

Thus encouraged, Lord Ellerdine began to repeat the second half of his lesson. "We all stayed the night at this hotel.' There's something wrong with that."

"It's only your sense of the scrupulous," Collingwood replied. "Only say it often enough. Say it thirty or forty times; then it will sound all right."

At this moment the door opened and Lady Attwill came in. She looked quickly at Collingwood and he at her.

"Good morning," he said. "Well, how is Peggy?"

"She has a bad headache," Lady Attwill replied. "She's coming in in a minute or two. I have had a warm quarter of an hour, I can tell you, though I am sure I don't know what *I* have done...."

If the woman was acting she was acting supremely, for there seemed genuine disgust in her voice.

"Is she much cut up?" Lord Ellerdine asked.

"I should think she is! She's dreadfully cut up! I don't know what we are to do," Lady Attwill said.

Lord Ellerdine suddenly became important; his little mouth smiled brightly. He was the bearer of good news. "Oh, that's all settled," he said, rubbing his hands briskly together. "I and Collingwood have arranged it all."

"Arranged what?" Lady Attwill asked.

"Well, do you see, we all——"

The bright expression faded from the ex-diplomatist's face. "Tell her, Collingwood," he said. "My head won't work. I've forgotten everything already."

"You've never given Dicky anything to think about?" Lady Attwill said in mock alarm.

"Not much," Collingwood answered.

Ellerdine flushed up angrily. "Not much!" he cried. "He gets on the wrong train. He leaves us standing at the post like a couple of sublime martyrs. Goes off to Paris and leaves us kicking our confounded heels at Chalons. We come here after them—find the hotel full of bookies—travel all night in a beastly slow train—no sleep, no food, no Switzerland. Not much to think about! I shall have an attack of brain fever after this affair."

Lady Attwill went up to the enraged gentleman. "Poor Dicky!" she said soothingly. "He's had a bad night. Dicky is no good unless he gets his proper sleep. Now sit down, there's a good boy, and let's talk it over properly."

She led him to a chair with a radiant smile, and then turned to Collingwood. "Now tell me, what is it that you have arranged?" As she said this she felt in the side pocket of his coat and drew out his cigarette case. Opening it, she gave him one and took one for herself, struck a match and lit it.

"Well," Collingwood answered, leaning over the back of the sofa on which his friend had seated herself. "A short, straight tale—simple, to the point, and easy to tell."

"The truth?" Lady Attwill asked.

"The truth! Never! Who's going to tell Admaston the truth?" Lord Ellerdine burst out.

"How's *he* to know?" Lady Attwill said.

"Know!" Ellerdine retorted. "I'll bet Collingwood a fiver all *London* knows to-night."

He looked anxiously at the other man, unable to understand how he could take things so easily, absolutely unconscious of anything underlying this unfortunate occurrence, absolutely unsuspecting of the sinister forces at work around him.

"Oh, bosh!" Collingwood answered. "Anyway, we can say we all got on the wrong train."

"That we all got on the wrong train," came with parrot-like precision from the diplomatist.

"But we didn't," Lady Attwill said, looking from one to the other.

Lord Ellerdine jumped up from his chair, his face radiant with triumph. "There you are!" he said to Collingwood. "Just what I told you!"

Lady Attwill became alive to the situation. "Oh, I see," she said; "that is the short, straight, simple tale. I see. 'We all got on the wrong train.'"

"You see, Dicky!" Collingwood said with a smile. "See how quickly Alice picks it up."

"Oh, she's used to it," said Ellerdine. "She picks up things very quickly. But tell her the sequel—that's the water-jump for me."

"Come on; let's have a look at it," said Lady Attwill.

Collingwood seemed vastly amused. He assumed the air of a comedian. His hands fluttered before him in pantomime. His handsome face became droll and merry.

"We all stayed the night at this hotel," he said.

Lord Ellerdine nodded with an anxious look in his eyes towards Lady Attwill. "Now try that," he said.

"We all stayed the night at this hotel," said Lady Attwill with perfect naturalness and ease.

"There you are!" said Collingwood.

The middle-aged fool in the arm-chair was quite interested and pleased. He saw nothing of the grimness which underlay this gay, light-hearted chatter, in this gay and brilliant room. The other two, man and woman, were playing their parts most skilfully—not so much to deceive Ellerdine, but to trick themselves into the belief that they were not engaged in a very dirty, ugly business.

It's an extraordinary thing, but nevertheless perfectly true, that people who are able to infuse a sinister and tragic moment with mocking gaiety certainly provide for themselves an anodyne to the pain and fear it would otherwise bring them.

No doubt that is why the devil is generally represented as smirking or leering.

The door opened and the Scotch-French waiter with a large tray entered, followed by another also carrying a tray, but whose swarthy features and thick purple lips proclaimed him no hybrid, but a true son of the Côte d'Azur.

Lord Ellerdine jumped up. "Food!" he said. "I am starving."

Lady Attwill rose also. "Poor Dicky must always have his food," she said. "I always think he never seems quite human till he has had his breakfast. When we were down at his place together——"

Collingwood nudged her with a warning look. "Piano!" he said.

"What about?" she whispered, with a rather sardonic grin. "I don't want to play."

"The waiter, I mean," Collingwood replied.

"Bien!" she answered, seating herself in front of the cafetière and pouring out the hot brown coffee.

Lord Ellerdine had also sat down. He looked at his as yet empty plate and drummed with his fingers upon the table-cloth. "We all stayed the night at this hotel," he said in a perfectly audible voice.

"Oui, monsieur," said Jacques of Ecclefechan suddenly.

Ellerdine started and looked up, his face expressing great surprise. "Get away," he said. "I wasn't speaking to you."

Collingwood frowned. His nerves, now, didn't seem quite under the same control as they had been before. "Laissez les autres choses, garçon. Nous nous servirons."

"Bien, monsieur," said the waiter, with an ugly and furtive smile upon his face, which nobody noticed, as he left the room.

"Come on, Alice. Where's my coffee?" said Lord Ellerdine.

"There you are," she answered. "Coffee, Colling?"

Collingwood nodded. "What is there?" he asked.

Lady Attwill lifted the covers. "Omelette, bacon, sole, mushrooms."

"Sole for me."

"Bacon and mushrooms, Alice," Ellerdine remarked, quite himself again at the thought of breakfast.

"You have no idea how I buck up after a cup of coffee," he continued; "but, upon my soul, I feel like a fried flounder this morning. I don't think I shall ever be in a hotter place than that confounded train from Chalons."

"Yes, you will, Dicky," Lady Attwill remarked, taking a piece of toast from the rack.

"Oh yes, you will, Dicky," Collingwood echoed; "don't make any mistake about that."

"After all," Lady Attwill went on, "it wasn't so bad. You worried; that was what made you hot."

"You don't know anything about it. You slept like a log all the way," Ellerdine said.

"Easy conscience," answered the lady, beginning her breakfast with great satisfaction.

"You didn't get on the wrong train," said Ellerdine meaningly.

Collingwood put down his fish-fork. The long strain to which his nerves had been subjected, the irritation which he had so well suppressed until now, had its way with him and burst out.

"Oh, damn it!" he said, "you two make me tired. Do shut up about the wrong train. Let's have our breakfast in peace."

Lord Ellerdine busied himself with his mushrooms. "I wish I had a hide as thick as yours, Colling, old man," he said. "You do take things smoothly. Look at him, Alice—eating away as if he was on his honeymoon!"

Collingwood glared at his *vis-à-vis*. "Honeymoon!" he said.

"He doesn't care a fig about getting us into this mess. What excellent bacon they have here!" Lord Ellerdine went on.

Again Collingwood got the better of his rising temper. "Oh, you'll be all right, Dicky," he said, "when we get to St. Moritz to-morrow."

"We're not going," Lady Attwill said shortly.

Collingwood started. "We are," he said.

"Wrong, my boy," said Lady Attwill again. "Peggy is going back."

"Back! Back where?"

"To London."

"She doesn't mean it?" Collingwood said, putting down his fork and looking straight at Lady

Attwill.

She nodded at him, and he knew that what she said was true.

"There you are!" piped out in Lord Ellerdine's voice. "I knew it; I felt it in my bones all the time I was in that beastly train. Peggy's got the hump. You have spoilt the whole show, Colling. I can't eat any more."

He pushed his chair away from the table with a perplexed and angry face, and began to walk up and down the room.

"Hang it!" Collingwood said, "is this the first time that anyone got on the wrong train?"

"No, it is not," Ellerdine answered shortly. "But it is the first time it has happened to *Peggy*. Anybody but *Peggy*."

"It seems to me," Collingwood said, "that we are making a lot of unnecessary fuss."

"Yes; let's drop it," came from Lady Attwill.

"Alice," Lord Ellerdine persisted, "don't you agree with me?"

She sighed, but it was necessary to preserve appearances. "Well, Dicky," she said, "Peggy has not shown a tenacious desire to observe the strict letter of every propriety. I know that there has been nothing wrong. Absolutely nothing but little frisks and frolics now and then—quite all right actually—looking perhaps worse than they were—nothing else. But, after all, it is not what you do; the trouble of it is what other folks say you do."

The persistent moralist was not to be put off. "The married woman," he said, in a voice as near to a pulpit manner as he could get, "cannot afford to have anyone say a word. Look at Alice. Before Attwill kicked the bucket she lived in a glass case. Didn't you, Alice?"

Collingwood chuckled: not merrily at all, but with a rather nasty cynicism—a snigger, in fact.

"Look here, Dicky," he said, "if you don't stop your sickening habit of preaching left-handed morality at me I'll give you up. I can't stand it. I am *not* moral—don't know the first thing about it—never met anybody who did. Man is not moral; environment makes it impossible. You're not moral, Dicky, although you may think you are. And as for society, it is absolutely unmoral."

"I say! I say! I say! Listen to our future Home Secretary!" said Lord Ellerdine.

"No fear," Collingwood answered. "I leave that field to Admaston and the other cackling crew of humbugs."

Lady Attwill laughed amusedly, and Ellerdine was about to say something else, when the door opened and Peggy entered.

She was very simply but very expensively dressed in an exquisite walking-dress of a colour which was neither grey nor amethyst, but a cunning blend of both. At her breast she wore a little sprig of white lilac. There was a sudden silence as she entered, a silence almost as if the three people were conspirators.

Peggy walked briskly up to the table, nodding and smiling. "Well, you're a nice lot," she said. "Why didn't you tell me breakfast was ready? I have been dying for a cup of coffee. Anything good in the food line? Something smells good. What is it? Mushrooms—just the very thing! I like mushrooms. Remind one of early risings and misty mornings. How are you, Dicky? Alice, give me some coffee, there's a dear. Hello, Colling! any news?"

Her chatter was more general than addressed to any particular person, and she didn't seem to require any answer to her questions. At anyrate, nobody made any answer, and there was an uncomfortable silence as Peggy began her breakfast.

"You're a jolly lot," she said after a minute or so. "What's up with you all? These mushrooms are nice. Dicky, pass the toast. What? I thought you said something, Alice."

Lady Attwill shook her head. "No," she answered in a rather strained voice.

There was another silence. Suddenly Peggy put down her knife and fork with a little clatter and rose from her chair. "This room is horribly stuffy," she said, going to the window. "There, that's better. Oh! what a lovely morning! Dear old Paris! how I do love it!"

She seemed restless and unable to remain long in one position, and soon she had fluttered back to the breakfast-table.

"Alice," she said, "please pour me out another cup of coffee.—Well, Dicky, I put my foot into it nicely last night, didn't I?"

"Yes, you jolly well did," Lord Ellerdine answered shortly.

"I knew what you wanted to talk about, Dicky," she said.

Collingwood interposed. "Peggy, don't go on like that. I have explained it to Dicky."

"Were you quite the one to explain?" she asked.

"Well," Collingwood replied, "it was my fault I rushed you into the train."

Lord Ellerdine started. Something already beginning to be familiar had penetrated his consciousness. "We all got on the wrong train," he said.

"Oh! All?" Peggy asked.

"Yes," said the diplomatist—"yes—no—that's what we're going to say."

"To whom?" asked Peggy.

"Well—well—to—well, to anyone who wants to know."

"Who should want to know?" Peggy asked.

"Oh, no one, Peggy," said Lady Attwill; "but it's best to be prepared, you know."

"But I don't know. Why should I know? Be prepared for what?"

"Nothing, dear, absolutely nothing. Only, some chatty fool might ask."

"Ask what?"

"Well—awkward questions."

"About getting on the wrong train?"



"We all got on the wrong train and we all stayed the night at this hotel"

"Yes—and—"

Peggy pressed home her questions. She would not understand. "What else?" she said.

"We all stayed the night at this hotel," Lord Ellerdine remarked.

"Did we?" Peggy asked.

"Yes," he said—"no! Oh! But it is best to be prepared."

"I see," Peggy said at last. "What a dull creature I am! Dear me! how stupid I didn't see it before! You have all made it up to put me right. You and Alice didn't go to Switzerland—you came on to Paris. You and Alice didn't get to Chalons and come on here by the slow train—you stayed here *all* night. I see. Now, that's so kind and thoughtful of you all! But for whom is this delightful story?"

"Dicky's scruples," Collingwood said hurriedly.

"I see. Dicky wanted it, did he?" Peggy replied. "Well, Dicky, I hope your moral sensibilities are quite satisfied. We all got on the wrong train and we all stayed the night at this hotel."

"Quite so," Ellerdine said quickly; "just a short, straight, simple tale, ready for any emergency."

"And what emergency do you *expect*?"

"Dearest Peggy, none at all," Lady Attwill said, with a note of anxious affection in her voice.

"I see. I understand. But don't you think the tale will need a lot of corroboration?"

"But only if someone questions it."

"Oh!" Peggy said, and there was a world of meaning in the exclamation.

"You see," Lord Ellerdine went on anxiously—"you see, it's all right, Peggy. We have left nothing to chance."

Lady Attwill nodded. "Nothing at all," she said, echoing her friend.

Peggy looked at them each in turn. Her sweet and youthful face bore little trace of what she had gone through the night before; and though her head was throbbing and her nerves were all jangling and raw, her freshness and purity of countenance remained absolutely unimpaired. Beside her Alice Attwill suddenly seemed to have grown old.

She looked at them each in turn with grave contemplation—lastly at Collingwood. "And what do you think about it, Colling?" she asked at length. "Don't you think that we are a precious set of fools? No—that's unkind of me. Not you, Alice. Not you, Dicky. I am the precious fool. Fool! Why, I should have been in cap and bells! A thing to make the whole world laugh. For only the fool will ask for an explanation—the wise, if they ask, will look on the explanation as the better part of the joke. But tell me, Dicky, why is the explanation necessary?"

"Oh! Come, Peggy, come. Confound it!" Lord Ellerdine blundered out. "It *looks* so deuced bad."

Peggy made a grimace at him. "Candid!" she said. "Now that was frank. 'It *looks* so deuced bad.' That's it. Looks! But only *looks*. What do you think, Colling? Can't we tell the truth? Is there anything to hide?"

"Nothing," Collingwood said.

"There," Peggy went on; "there's nothing to hide."

"Oh, we all know that," Lord Ellerdine said hastily.

Peggy's rising temper almost got the better of her. "Then why the explanation—the 'short, straight, simple tale'? Why not the truth?"

She clenched her hands, and an angry light burned in her eyes. "Oh! I'll leave you for a moment. I must go out. This place is stifling! We ought all to be out in the air. We'll grow mouldy in here—plotting. Alice, I'll put on my hat. Colling, you must invent another tale to satisfy Dicky's scruples. Think it over."

She tore out of the room into her own and shut the door with a rather vicious slam.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" Lord Ellerdine said.

Lady Attwill nodded with a slight tightening of the lips. "I told you she was upset," she answered.

Collingwood rose from the table and went towards his own room.

"Well, Dicky," he said, "I have done the best I can to satisfy you. I'll get my hat and take Peggy for a walk and talk it over." And he also left the room.

"Well," Ellerdine remarked, "this comes of thinking of your friends." He went to the fireplace and gazed rather gloomily at the glowing logs. "May the devil take me if I ever care a damn again what folks think of 'em," he went on.

Alice Attwill went up to the window. "Dicky, it is very strange," she said. "I have never seen Peggy in that nasty mood before."

"I've a jolly good mind to think the worst has happened," the man remarked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, anyway, Colling is not in Peggy's good books," she said, and, pulling one of the large windows open, she stepped out upon the balcony.

Lord Ellerdine was left alone. His face was grave and perplexed; but seeing the *Matin* lying on the sofa, where Lady Attwill had dropped it before breakfast, he went up, sat down, and was soon immersed in the news of the day.

There came a light tap upon the door leading into the corridor, which was flung open immediately afterwards. Jacques stood there holding the door open.

"Mr. Admaston," he said in a loud, clear voice.

CHAPTER V

A Thunderbolt crashing through the roof of the hotel could not have startled Lord Ellerdine more than the waiter's announcement:

"Mr. Admaston."

He dropped the paper, sprang to his feet as if someone had struck him, while his face grew

absolutely white and the little mouth became a round "O" of consternation and alarm.

George Admaston walked slowly into the room.

He was a big man of about forty years of age, very quiet in manner, and with a strong, resolute face. The eyes were grey and steadfast, and wore that look which some people mistake for abstraction, but which is anything but that. They had the expression of one who thinks often and much. The finely chiselled mouth was set somewhat grimly, and there was great force and assertiveness about the slightly forward thrust of the massive chin. He was dressed in quiet grey tweeds, carried a bowler hat in his hand and a light coat over his arm.

"Hello, Ellerdine!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

The voice was deep and mellow, informed with weight and gravity, though pleasantly musical.

Lord Ellerdine looked hurriedly round the room. It might have been thought he was seeking an avenue of escape.

There was no one to help him, however, and he began to stutter horribly, while his eyes wore the look of a startled hare. "Here?" he gasped out. "Oh!" His eyes fell upon the breakfast-table, and an inspiration came to him. "Oh," he stuttered, "just had breakfast, don't you know."

"Early for you, isn't it?" said the big man, looking the wretched object before him full in the face.

"It is rather early," Lord Ellerdine replied. "Been travelling all——"

"All what?" Admaston asked quickly.

The other was in despair. He realised what he had done. He looked hopelessly round the room for Alice Attwill.

"Where's Lady Attwill gone?" he gasped.

Never relaxing his gaze for a single instant, and standing in the middle of the room without advancing further, Admaston continued: "Is she here?"

"Oh yes," replied Lord Ellerdine. "She's here. In fact, we're all here."

"Where's my wife?"

"In her room. Changing her gown. She's going for a walk."

"But I thought you went to Switzerland," Admaston went on.

"Did you really?" Ellerdine answered, with a ghastly assumption of ingratiating affability, though his hands were shaking, his mouth worked, and beads of perspiration were plainly rolling down his face.

Again came the grave, persistent voice: "Yes. That was the plan, wasn't it?"

"Oh! Yes—of course. But we all got on the wrong train."

"What?" Admaston said sharply, and a new note in his voice made the ex-diplomatist jump from the floor.

"We all got on the wrong train," he repeated.

"Who are we?"

"Collingwood and Peggy——"

"And what train did you and Lady Attwill get on?"

"The wrong one. Stupid mistake, wasn't it?"

"Very," Admaston answered.

Lord Ellerdine brightened a little. He thought he was carrying things very well now. "Yes," he said, "and so we all stayed the night at this hotel."

"Indeed!" Admaston replied.

The other put his shaking hands into his trousers pockets. "Oh yes! all," he said. "The proprieties were most carefully observed, Admaston."

"Now, that is very interesting," Admaston remarked; and if the other had been a member of the Lower House instead of the Upper, which he never entered, he would have known what that bland suavity of voice portended when the Cabinet Minister rose to speak.

Lord Ellerdine nodded. "Yes," he said. "But what the deuce are you doing here in Paris?"

"Oh! a whim."

"Didn't expect to find us here," the wretched fool continued—"did you?"

"There's something on?" Admaston answered, going towards the window and talking as he went. "Racing or something, isn't there?"

"Yes," Lord Ellerdine said. "Auteuil. Going out?"

Lady Attwill appeared at the window. "Oh! Alice," Admaston said.

She smiled brightly, extending her little manicured hand, upon which diamonds and sapphires flashed and sparkled in the brilliant light of the sun. "How do you do, George?" she said. "Who ever expected to see you here?"

"I don't run over often," Admaston answered, just taking her hand and no more. "But I thought you were at St. Moritz?"

"St. Moritz? Oh!—no. We changed our minds and came on to Paris."

"Then *you* didn't get on the wrong train?" Admaston said with grim politeness.

The wretched Ellerdine, who had retreated to the breakfast-table and sank down upon a chair, heard this, and was about to lay his head in the bacon dish with alarm, when Lady Attwill's next words did a little to reassure him.

"Oh yes," she said easily, going into the centre of the room; "we all got on the wrong train, but we changed our minds when we discovered our mistake."

"Good thing you did it before it was too late."

"Did what?" she asked in a flat voice.

"Why, changed your minds before you could change on to the right train."

"Wasn't it!" she replied. "And, by the way, I saw an old friend of yours on the train, George."

"And who was that?" Admaston asked.

"Sir Peter Stoke," she answered.

"Really! But he must have been on the right train. He was going to the Conference at Geneva."

"Oh!" she replied, "I met him at Boulogne."

There was a pause, and when he spoke again Admaston's voice grew colder and colder with every sentence.

"Strange," he said, nodding his head with an appearance of thoughtfulness. "He wrote to me from Amiens, where he has been staying for the past week, that he was joining the train there; and Amiens is the first stop on the Swiss express, isn't it?"

Lady Attwill almost whispered her assent.

"And the Paris express doesn't stop at Amiens?"

It suddenly occurred to Lord Ellerdine that he was being left out of the conversation.

"No," he said brightly.

Admaston turned round to him.

"Funny that, being already at Amiens, where the Swiss express does stop, he should have gone to Boulogne to catch it!"

Even the diplomatist, who had imagined that things were going better, began to realise the game was almost up.

"Yes, damned funny of him, wasn't it?" he said feebly.

For a few moments there was an absolute silence in the room. Outside, the roar of the morning traffic, the tooting of motor horns, and all the gay welter of things which marks a Parisian morning in fine weather, only accentuated the silence in the richly furnished salon.

Admaston turned and walked twice up and down the room. Lord Ellerdine was still sitting, guilty and miserable of aspect, in his chair at the breakfast table. Lady Attwill stood quite still where she was, near the window. They were both waiting to hear what should come next. Suddenly Admaston spoke.

"You found Paris very full?" he said in his icy voice.

"Very," Alice Attwill replied; "so we were lucky to get *in* here."

"Here?" the big man asked.

"Yes; we all stayed the night at this hotel."

"You used to have a very fine old parrot," Admaston said.

There was spirit in the woman. She gave a little toss of her head. "Er—I have her still," she replied.

"Not stuffed, I hope," he said.

"No, indeed. Alive and kicking."

There was a rattle of a handle, and the door of Collingwood's room opened and he came into the room.

He gave one slight start, no more, and his manner immediately became easy and natural. "Hallo!" he said. "Admaston!"

The big man regarded him gravely, showing no emotion whatever.

"Well, Collingwood," he said very slowly and distinctly, "I thought I would just run over and see ——" Then he stopped speaking.

"How did you know that we were here?" Collingwood said.

"From a friend," Admaston answered.

The fool had to have his say. "That's very funny, Admaston," he said. "We didn't know ourselves."

"You surprise me. Didn't you know you were going to St. Moritz?"

"Of course we didn't know," Lady Attwill said quickly.

"Then how on earth could your friend know?" Lord Ellerdine asked.

There was a complete pause. Nobody said a word, but Admaston was the centre and focus of the place. All eyes went to him, and then back and round to each other's. He stood there, however, calm and imperturbable, radiating, as it were, not only quiet strength and absolute determination, but also sending out rays of fear, of uneasiness and disturbance.

Lord Ellerdine broke the silence with his plaintive bleat, repeating his former sentence: "Then how on earth could your friend know?"

"That's what I want to know," said Admaston. "But why on earth are you all up so early?"

Collingwood's face had been growing sharp and hostile, his nostrils twitched a little; he seemed now to be definitely on the defensive, ready for the attack. What he said was this: "Mrs. Admaston wanted to go out early to see the people *en route* to Auteuil."

Admaston raised one firm, shapely hand and brought it down upon the back of the other with a slow movement that ended in a little "click" of noise. "Mrs.?" he said. "Why Mrs. Admaston? Why are you so ceremonious, Colling? Why not Peggy?"

Collingwood looked dangerous, sulky and dangerous.

"Don't know," he said shortly. "I thought perhaps you were offended."

"Offended?" the relentless voice continued—so cold, relentless, and full of purpose that it chilled them all as it echoed out into the room. "Is there any reason why I should be offended?"

"Certainly not," said Lord Ellerdine in a staccato bleat.

"Good gracious! What an idea!" Alice Attwill chimed in.

Admaston turned to the ex-diplomatist. "Ellerdine," he said, "you ought not to sit up so late. You look very shaky this morning, and your voice has a peculiarly uncertain sound."

"Do I look shaky, old man? That damned journey——"

"To Paris," Admaston said quickly.

"Yes, yes, to Paris."

Admaston went up to him, gazing down at him with calm, reflective eyes as a mastiff regards some terrified small dog. "Late suppers don't agree with you," he said.

"With me?" asked the fool, perplexed.

"With Dicky? Late suppers?" Lady Attwill interrupted.

There was again a momentary pause.

The thing was closing in. The conspirators knew well enough that they were being played with, with the cold ferocity of a cat with a mouse. They were brave still. They preserved their pitiful pretences, but to the heart of each of them a little icicle had come.

"It was after midnight before he had finished his supper?" Admaston said.

"When?" Ellerdine inquired.

"Last night," Admaston rapped out.

"Dicky?" Lady Attwill said. "Why, he didn't have *any* supper last night."

"Not a bally mouthful," said Lord Ellerdine, shaking his head mournfully.

"Collingwood told me," Admaston remarked, "that you had just finished supper, well after

midnight."

"Well, that was a whopper," said Lady Attwill.

"He didn't know," Ellerdine spluttered in.

"Oh! I thought not," Admaston said. "But you all stayed here last night."

At that moment the sun, which had been filling the room with radiance, had become obscured by a floating cloud. The place was informed by a momentary greyness. It was only early spring, after all, and summer with its perpetual radiance, its perpetual heat, its *air* of summer, which will always make a room cheerful even when a thunderstorm approaches, had not yet arrived.

The room became as grey as the faces of the people who were in it, as grey and cold as the accusing voice which could not be silenced, which continued remorselessly. "But you all stayed here last night," Admaston repeated slowly, clearly, and with a definite, staccato voice.

Then there was an odd chiming of tone. The anxious musical contralto of Lady Attwill mingled with the more anxious, and definitely tremulous, bleat of the diplomatist.

"Oh yes. We were all here," they said together.

"But no supper?"

"No supper, George," Ellerdine said in a faint voice....

The door opened and Jacques of Ecclefechan entered.

He looked towards Lord Ellerdine. "Your man, my lord, to see you," he said in excellent Scotch-English.

A little wizened, elderly man with grey hair closely cropped to his head, and dressed in a decorous lounge suit of black, came drooping into the room.

His face was anxious, and at the same time pleased.

"I telephoned to Chalons, my lord," he said.

Lord Ellerdine jumped up as if he had suddenly sat down upon a pin.

"What?" he said.

"The railway people are sure they put your dispatch-box on the 2.43 with you and Lady Attwill."

Lord Ellerdine's face became the colour of brick. If his mouth had been larger it would have foamed at the corners. "Get out!" he spluttered.

The little man started back a step, his arms shot out in amazement, his face a mere mask of one.

"My lord!" he said.

"Get out!"

The poor fellow realised that there was obviously something very wrong. It was a situation he could only deal with in one way, and that was by being thoroughly polite.

"Yes, my lord," he said, in a voice from which he vainly tried to eliminate the amazement he felt.

Admaston turned sharply to the peer.

"What, Ellerdine?" he said. "Has your dispatch-box got on the wrong train, too? What a chapter of accidents!"

Again there was a horrible silence in the place.

It was broken by a sudden, loud cry.

Peggy had entered from her room, and had seen them all standing there—like figures in a tableau in the big hall at Madame Tussaud's.

"George!" she cried.

At that moment there was a singular change of poise among the tense, strained people who were there.

Lady Attwill, radiant and beautiful, strolled up to the piano.

Admaston remained where he was. Collingwood bent forward, almost in the attitude of a man about to spring.

"Well, Peggy. Going out?" Admaston asked.

"I was," Peggy answered; and if ever guilty fear was manifested in a human voice, the people in that room heard it now. It must be remembered that to people who have been upon the brink of crime or misbehaviour—even though they may have escaped it—the suspicion, when they are confronted with it, has much the same effect upon their attitude as if the thing had already been done. The nerves of the innocent have often proclaimed them guilty to the most indulgent eyes.

"I was going out," Peggy faltered.

"Wait a moment," Admaston said.

Peggy almost drooped together.

She was like an early lily of the valley suddenly withered by a sharp, cold wind—and all gardeners will tell one how sudden and complete that withering and collapse can be.

"Very well," the girl answered.

Admaston raised his right hand a little, while he was looking at her, grave and straight. Then his arm dropped to his side.

"Ellerdine tells me that you all got on the wrong train at Boulogne."

"Yes," Peggy answered. She looked anxiously, and indeed piteously, at the others, wondering what they had been saying, longing to be adequate, conscious of her own innocence, but dreadfully conscious of the appearance of her guilt.

Admaston—and nothing escaped him—saw the way her look flickered round the salon.

"You did?" he said in a voice of doom.

She did the fatal thing; she answered "Yes."

"Ellerdine also says," Admaston continued, "that he and Lady Attwill stayed here last night?"

The ex-diplomatist, who, though he was a perfect fool, was also a thorough gentleman, flushed up and spoke in a voice from which all the fear and bleating noise had gone.

"Of course we did, Admaston," he barked. "Why the devil—don't you believe us?"

But it was of no use; the resolute, ice-cold voice went on.

"And were you all at supper at midnight?"

Peggy broke in. "Why do you ask?" she said—and if ever there was pain and yearning in a human voice it was in hers at that moment.

"Because Collingwood told me that you were," Admaston answered, "and Ellerdine says he didn't have any supper. Lady Attwill corroborates Ellerdine's statement."

"Then why ask me? Don't you believe Colling?" Peggy said with a wail of despair.

"No, I don't," Admaston said shortly.

Collingwood drummed upon the carpet with his left foot.

"Admaston!" he said.

Admaston turned round to him, and his face became, for the first time, suffused with blood.

The quiet grey eyes blazed with anger; the big, capable face was transformed into a single accusation. The voice, at last, was directly accusing. It was wonderful in its pain, its suppressed horror, its certain purpose.

"I don't believe a single word I have heard since I have come into this room," he said.

Lord Ellerdine took a step towards the Minister. "By God! Admaston," he said.

Lady Attwill ran up to Lord Ellerdine and caught him by the arm.

"Dicky, keep quiet," she said in a frightened but very decisive voice.

"You have lied—you lied to me on the telephone last night."

Collingwood glared at him.

"Telephone!" Lord Ellerdine said, also turning to Collingwood. "Did Admaston speak to you last night—on the telephone?"

"Yes," Collingwood answered.

The diplomatist was genuinely distressed. "My dear fellow," he said, "why *didn't* you tell us?"

"Would that have saved you from saying that you all got on to the wrong train? Collingwood lied to me. You have lied to me. Lady Attwill—well—I beg your pardon...."

Collingwood took two steps towards Peggy.

"Why should you come catechising us?" he said to Admaston, and then he stepped up to him.

The two men stood in front of each other. Admaston, with a white fire of enragement in his face, still preserved his absolute calm of poise. His hands were clasped behind his back, his whole forceful personality seemed whetted for the aggression of the other.

Collingwood, on the other hand, was panther-like and alert. He almost crouched to spring at the

other. He was a little younger, infinitely more *débonnaire*—probably not really so physically powerful, but at least lithe, brave, and ready for anything.

The two men stood there for a moment, when Peggy ran between them. "Oh! don't!" she cried, spreading out her arms—in front of Collingwood. She seemed to fear her husband's heavy and certain onslaught.

She protected Collingwood, not George Admaston. Doubtless her action showed her knowledge of the stronger man, her wish to protect the weaker from his attack. But it was certainly most unfortunate.

"Go!" she cried. "Please go!" And then, turning rapidly to Lord Ellerdine, "Dicky, take Alice away."

Lord Ellerdine was trembling exceedingly. He was not trembling from any physical fear. He would have joined in the row with perfect happiness. It would have suited him very well. He knew that he had cut a sorry figure on this occasion—and he was not accustomed to cutting sorry figures. He was not a clever man; nobody knew it better than himself. But he had always considered himself to be an honourable one.

Lady Attwill seemed perfectly composed. Her face did not alter in expression at all, but she caught hold of her friend by the arm and led him out of the room.

The last thing that was heard as the two departed was the plaintive voice of the ex-diplomatist: "I knew it—I knew it."

Admaston waited until the door was closed, and then he turned to Collingwood. "Why don't you go?" he said.

"What are you going to do?" Collingwood asked, facing him.

The two men were white with passion. "What the devil has that got to do with you?" Admaston said.

"A great deal. If you loved your wife as I love her you would understand what it has to do with me."

"I loved her—and trusted her implicitly," Admaston answered, and even in his passion his wife could detect a note of sorrow.

"Your presence here looks like it," Collingwood said quickly. "Why, how did you know she was here unless you had her watched? Loved and trusted her! Good God! man, you never knew she existed until another man wanted her!"

"You admit that you wanted her!" Admaston snarled out.

"Yes," the other answered, standing well up; "and much good may the admission do you. I wanted her, and I fought with all the weapons I dared employ, and I have failed. What fight have you made for her? It was her own purity that kept her sweet. It was that purity that I wanted, but I have lost her." He made a passionate gesture with his hands which showed how deeply he was moved—a gesture quite unlike the ordinary English habit.

"If you have any instincts of a gentleman, you have won," Admaston answered.

"What do you mean?"

Peggy, who stood there trembling, gave a wail of despair.

"George, you cannot mean——"

Admaston took no notice of her.

"Your methods have not been over nice," he said with biting scorn: "to betray your friend—to seduce his wife."

"That's a lie! I don't defend myself—but don't you dare to say a word against her. We were great friends. I loved her, and thought she loved me. But she doesn't; she loves you."

"Pretty love!" the big man said. "I have finished with it and with her."

Again there came a wild cry from the trembling woman. "George, for God's sake!"

Now for the first time a look of fear came into Collingwood's eyes. "You mean to cast her off?" he said—"to break her spirit? No—no—you dare not do it. You don't know what you are saying—you have no right...."

"That's for the court to decide," Admaston answered.

Peggy tried to step up to him, but he motioned her not to advance further.

"Court!" she wailed. "No, George, not that! I have done nothing, George, to forfeit your love!"

"Stop! You don't realise how much I know. I saw a letter at the house yesterday before four o'clock. It told me everything you intended to do—everything you have done. That letter brought me over after you. I sent a detective to Boulogne to meet you."

Peggy shook with fear. "That man?" she whispered to herself, with a light of horror in her eyes.

"Yes," Admaston said. "I sent him. He followed you to this hotel. He was here last night. He is in the hotel now. He has given me this report, and it leaves no doubt as to your guilt."

"My guilt! It is not true, George—I swear to you it is not true. I don't care what you have done, or what letters or reports you have received. I am your wife. I didn't love you at first—you knew that—I was honest, I told you all—but now...."

"You blind fool!" Collingwood snarled out in a fury of indignation, "don't you see what you are doing? You are playing my game, not your own. I have tried to win, I have treated her pretty badly, but I don't want to win her now. Don't you see, man, if you call in the court to break her wings you'll only drive her to me?"



"Don't you see, man, if you call in the court to break her wings, you'll only drive her to me!"

"Yes," Admaston answered with a bitter sneer, "I see—and you don't seem very anxious to go through with it."

Collingwood looked at him for a moment, trembling with the desire to fly at his throat. He restrained himself, however, with a tremendous effort, and with an inarticulate growl of rage turned and left the room.

Peggy came timidly towards her husband. "George, you are not going to send me away?" she said.

Admaston covered his face with his hands. "My God! Peggy, you lied to me," he said in a broken voice. "A lie—a lie on your lips! Oh, Peggy, Peggy, what have I done to you?"

"George, I did lie," she wailed—"yes, I did; but only that, only that! I am your wife! Believe me! believe me!"

"My wife! No—no! How am I to believe you? How am I to tell whether that's a lie or not?"

"It's the truth!" she reiterated, her voice shrill with pain. "I swear it! I am as much your wife as I was the day you married me."

Unable to stand longer, she sank down upon the sofa, sobbing terribly.

"You have broken me," the man said—"crushed me. Oh! I was mad to let you do it! I was a fool to leave you alone! But I trusted you. I laughed at the gossip. The ridicule only made my trust in you the greater. I worshipped you, adored you! My whole life was a prayer to you, my ambition to make you proud of me. My whole aim in life was to win you, by doing big things—for you. And now it is all turned to desecration—to be the mock of the crowd!"

"Forgive me, George," she sobbed, "forgive me! I'll come to you. I am humble, not you. I am struck down, crushed. But I'll be your slave. I am still your wife. I am still—"

He gazed at her searchingly. "You love Collingwood," he said in a hollow, empty voice.

"No, no! There was a time when I thought I did."

"You thought you did! When did you think it? Last night?"

"No, George, no! I love you! I knew that last night, if I never knew it before. I love you, George!"

"I don't believe you," he answered coldly. "You and he were together alone when I telephoned."

He spoke very deliberately now. "Was he," he asked—"was he with you when I telephoned at one o'clock?"

"Yes," Peggy answered, knowing well what the admission must convey. "Yes—but...."

"Alone together from ten o'clock?..."

"Yes," she said, still more faintly; "but...."

"Alone together from the time I telephoned?"

"No, no, George!—not after that; I swear it!"

"I know far too much to believe a word you say," he replied, and there was a note of absolute finality in his voice.

She saw that he had made up his mind—that she was doomed.

"I know too much to believe a word you say," he repeated. "You were alone with him. My God! Alone with him!"

In a moment or two Peggy looked up through a mist of tears. The room was empty.

Peggy was left alone.

CHAPTER VI

One morning upon a dull day in the late summer of the same year in which Mrs. Admaston had stayed at the Hôtel des Tuileries in Paris, Colonel Adams came down to breakfast at the Cocoa Tree Club. He ordered his grilled kidneys in the quaint, old-fashioned dining-room, with its rare sporting prints and air of sober comfort, and took up his morning paper. His eyes fell upon the cause list of the Royal Courts of Justice, and he sighed.

A few minutes afterwards Henry Passhe, whose leave from India had been extended for reasons of health, and who was also a member of the famous club in St. James's Street, entered and sat down by his friend.

"Well," he said, "do you still hold to your resolution, Adams?"

The colonel sighed, and put down his knife and fork. "I don't know, old chap," he said doubtfully. "It's different for you. You see, you don't know Mrs. Admaston. I know her quite well, and I really doubt whether it is the chivalrous thing to do, to go and stare at her, as if she was a sort of show. She'll be undergoing tortures all day, poor little thing!"

"Just as you like," Passhe answered. "I confess to great curiosity myself, and of course everyone who can possibly get in will be going, whether they are friends of Mrs. Admaston or of her husband. It's great good luck, my getting two seats like this; but don't come unless you like. I can easily find someone else who will be only too glad to drop in for an hour or two. That's all I want to do—just to see what's going on. You see it is the case of the century almost. I am not up in the statistics of this sort of thing, but I doubt if a Cabinet Minister, who is also one of the wealthiest men in England, has ever brought an action for divorce against his wife, who is not only as rich as he in her own right, but also is co-partner in one of the biggest financial houses in Europe. That's the way I look at it."

"Well, I'll come," the colonel said suddenly. "It can't do any harm, after all; and I am sure all my sympathies are with Mrs. Admaston, though of course...."

Passhe nodded. "But there is absolutely no doubt about it," he said, "of course. But naturally, old chap, the fact of our both being in the hotel in Paris at the very time it all happened gives the thing a special interest for us. When I go back to India everybody will be wanting to know all about it; and as I have got a chance to be present at part of the trial, I really can't forego it."

"That's settled, then," Adams replied, as the two men strolled into the big smoke-room, where the brown-cased Cocoa Tree is put with all its old associations of the past. They fidgeted about a little, smoked a cigarette, while they looked down into the busy St. James's Street from the great Georgian windows, looked at their watches, and then hailed a taxi-cab and were driven to the Law Courts.

Court II. in the Probate, Divorce, and Admiralty Division of the High Court of Justice was crowded almost to suffocation as the two men entered and found, with some difficulty, the seats which had been allotted to them. They settled themselves quietly in their places in the well of the court.

The President was writing something in the book before him, and seated below the judge was the associate, while the usher stood a few yards away.

Lots of people—and these the most fortunate—have never had occasion to visit a law court. It was so with Colonel Adams. This was the first time he had ever entered the great building at the junction of Fleet Street and the Strand, and he gazed round him with great interest.

He saw many faces that he knew. Immediately around him were the privileged of society sitting behind the solicitors; Admaston, Roderick Collingwood, the maid Pauline, and Lord Ellerdine.

In the second row the leading counsel sat.

Mr. Menzies, hawk-faced and saturnine of aspect, the horse-hair wig which framed his face only accentuating the hatchet-like alertness of his countenance. Sir Robert Fyffe, huge-framed, and with a face like the risen moon. Mr. M'Arthur, a youthful-looking man, handsome and *débonnaire*, but with something rather dangerous and threatening in his face.

Behind the leaders sat a row of junior counsel; and then Lady Attwill, other members of society, and the two friends who had driven from the Cocoa Tree Club.

The gallery at the back of the court was packed with people, and there was a curious hush and stillness over everything.

All eyes were directed to one point—to the witness-box, where Mrs. Admaston was standing.

At the moment when the two men entered both Mr. M'Arthur and Sir Robert Fyffe were standing up.

"I have noted your question, Mr. M'Arthur, and do not think it is admissible at this stage," the President was saying. "No doubt, if Sir Robert's cross-examination follows a certain line, you can return to the matter when you re-examine your witness."

Sir Robert Fyffe sat down.

"If your lordship pleases," he said

Mr. M'Arthur turned over the leaves of a notebook. He was Mrs. Admaston's leading counsel, and his examination continued:

"Now, Mrs. Admaston, let me be quite sure that you clearly understand the charges you have to meet. It is alleged that you arranged to miss the train at Boulogne in order to spend the evening in Paris with the co-respondent."

"That is not true," pierced through the dull, blanket-like silence of the court.

Few people enough have any experience of a court. They read long and large accounts of what goes on in the daily papers. Well-known descriptive writers endeavour to present a true picture of what they themselves have witnessed. And in the result almost every one whose experience of trials is taken almost entirely from the newspapers imagines that the scene of justice is some vast hall. It is all magnified and splendid in their thoughts. The reality is quite different.

A quite small room, panelled, badly lighted, thronged with people—this is the real theatre where the dramas of society are played in London town....

"It is alleged," Mr. M'Arthur, Peggy's own counsel, continued, "that, having reached Paris, you permitted Mr. Collingwood to engage rooms—connected the one with the other."

"I did not know that Mr. Collingwood's room opened out of mine," Mrs. Admaston said. "It seems the hotel was full."

Everyone in the court—one person only excepted—was looking at the slim young woman in the witness-box. She was very simply dressed. Her face was perfectly pale, but her self-possession was marvellous.

From their seats behind the junior counsel, Colonel Adams and Henry Passhe looked on with sympathetic interest.

Passhe—who was somewhat of a psychologist—remarked upon the extreme simplicity of Mrs. Admaston's dress to his friend. "I call it ostentatious," he said, "or something of a trick. When a woman has an income of eighty thousand pounds a year quite apart from her husband, it seems to me exaggerated humility to appear in the clothes that any little milliner might wear."

Colonel Adams shrugged his shoulders. He didn't in the least understand his friend's point of view....

"After you went to bed"—the handsome young-elderly Mr. M'Arthur continued,—"it is said that you permitted Mr. Collingwood to enter your room—you being at the time undressed—and to stay there a considerable time."

Peggy's little white-gloved hands rested upon the rail of the witness-box.

"I don't know about permitting," she said in a clear voice. "He came in because he heard the telephone. I think he thought that I had gone to bed, and that the call might be from our friends."

"At anyrate, he came in, and you permitted him to stay?"

"Yes, I suppose I did. I asked him to go, but we were great friends, and—well—I let him stay and smoke a cigarette."

The court was dead silent now; the keen face of the President regarded counsel and witness with an intent scrutiny.

The society people who were there looked at each other and held their breath. The junior counsel leant forward from their benches, keenly attentive to the efforts of the respondent's friend.

"It is alleged," Mr. M'Arthur continued, "that while you were alone together you were unfaithful to your husband."

"That is a lie." The voice was so poignant, so ringing, so instinct with indignation, that even the President looked up and watched the witness keenly. Mr. M'Arthur nodded to himself as if very pleased with the response he had elicited. He put his hands together and made a motion as though he was congratulating himself.

When he looked up again his face was perfectly bright and cheerful.

"I will put this generally," he said. "Have you ever, Mrs. Admaston—ever, on any occasion or in any place—been unfaithful to your husband?"

"Never—never—never!" Peggy replied....

She seemed no more the young and frivolous person she had been. Tense and strung up, her personality had become arresting and real—her voice seemed to carry conviction.

Mr. M'Arthur looked round the court—with a half glance at the President—and sat down.

As a matter of fact, he had the very gravest doubt as to the possible success of his case. That sleuth-hound, Sir Robert Fyffe, was against him, and the case itself was a thoroughly weak one. He, accomplished barrister, actor, and man of the world as he was, sat down with a quietly suggested air of triumph that impressed every one.

Sir Robert Fyffe rose.

Sir Robert Fyffe was the absolute leader in his own particular line. There was something so red-faced and jolly about him—such a suggestion of friendliness even when he was most deadly,—that the eminence he enjoyed was very well deserved. His voice was mellow; indeed, it was more than that, and had a suggestion of treacle.

He looked at Mrs. Admaston with a bland smile.

"You will, I am sure, admit, Mrs. Admaston, that the events of the 23rd March give ground for very grave suspicion."

Peggy Admaston did not seem at all distressed by this question. Her voice showed the pain that she was enduring, but all her answers to counsel were delivered clearly and openly. They had either a frank innocence about them, or else she was certainly one of the most accomplished actresses and liars of her time.

"Some persons are more suspicious than others," Peggy answered.

"And one would be more justly suspicious of some persons than of others?"

"Yes, perhaps so."

"And may I take it that you class yourself among those persons upon whom suspicion should not readily fall?"

Peggy nodded vigorously. "I think so," she said.

The great, round, red face of Sir Robert beamed upon her in the kindest way. His voice—which carried right through the court—was still ingratiating and honey-sweet.

"You say," he said, "that your husband ought not to have allowed even these circumstances to make him suspect you?"

"He had always trusted me implicitly," she replied.

The accomplished counsel made a remark *sotto voce*. "Perhaps too implicitly," he said.

Mr. M'Arthur jumped up in a second and looked at the judge.

"My learned friend has no right to say that," he said.

The President, with his air of taking very little interest at all in the proceedings, raised his eyelids.

"I did not hear what he said," he remarked blandly.

"Never mind, Mr. M'Arthur; I don't mind Sir Robert," Peggy said from the witness-box very sweetly.

"I am sure we shall get on very well," Sir Robert replied. "Now, Mrs. Admaston, I suppose you were very annoyed at finding you were in the wrong train?"

"I was annoyed, I suppose," Peggy answered; "but not very seriously. You see, it really didn't matter very much."

Sir Robert nodded his great bewigged head. "I suppose not," he said. "Was it your fault?"

The girl's clear accents rang out into the court. "I don't think it was anybody's fault, except the fussy customs officer's."

"This fussiness could have been avoided by registering the luggage through—yes?"

"I suppose so," Peggy answered Sir Robert.

The big man leant forward with the most ingratiating face. "Can you," he asked, "suggest any reason why the luggage was not registered?"

"I believe it was the mistake of a porter at Charing Cross."

"The mistake of a porter, the fussiness of a custom-house officer—quite a chapter of accidents!" Sir Robert continued blandly.

Mrs. Admaston seemed to find something consoling in the voice of the great K.C.

"Wasn't it!" she said brightly.

There was no response in the manner or in the voice of Mr. Admaston's counsel.

"Was your luggage with Mr. Collingwood's at Charing Cross?" he asked—blandly still, but with a threatening hint of what was to come in his voice.

"All the luggage was together when I saw it."

"All? The luggage of the whole party?"

"Yes," Peggy replied.

"Was it labelled, Mrs. Admaston? I mean, apart from the railway labels?"

"Mine wasn't."

"Don't you generally label your luggage when you go abroad?" Sir Robert continued.

"I always do."

"Well, Mrs. Admaston, why did you not do so this time?"

"Well, you see," Peggy answered, "Mr. Collingwood, who is a great traveller, chaffed me about being such an old maid. He said it was quite unnecessary."

The big moon-faced counsel almost jumped—experienced as he was—at this remark.

"Oh!" he said, "Mr. Collingwood said *that*, did he?"

"It was lucky," Peggy replied; "wasn't it?"

Suddenly the President looked up. His kindly but austere face became surprised.

"Lucky?" he said.

Peggy turned towards the judge. "Yes, my lord," she said; "otherwise I should have reached Paris without any clothes."

The President nodded gravely. "Yes, I see," he said. "The boxes fortunately made the same mistake as you did."

Peggy laughed. "Yes, Sir John," she said, and as she did it there was a little ripple of amusement round the crowded court.

Of course, everybody knew that the judge who was trying this case had met the Admastons over and over again.

Every one there, with the exception of the people in the gallery, was a member of what is called society. Peggy, in her innocent simplicity, could not quite differentiate between Sir John Burroughes, who was trying the case of her innocence or guilt, and Mr. M'Arthur or Sir Robert Fyffe, K.C., M.P. She was bewildered. She had met all these men at dinner-parties or receptions. She still thought that this was all a kind of weird game. She did not realise that Sir Robert Fyffe was about to hunt her to the death of her reputation, or that Sir John Burroughes—the President—would give his judgment without fear or favour.

As a matter of fact, there was a little ripple of laughter right through the court when she addressed the President as "Sir John."

Sir Robert Fyffe continued his examination. "Very lucky, Mrs. Admaston," he said grimly. "And did Mr. Collingwood's luggage make the same mistake as yours?"

"Yes," Peggy answered.

"And the luggage belonging to Lord Ellerdine and Lady Attwill had the intelligence to go straight to Chalons?"

"Yes," Peggy answered again.

"Didn't it strike you as rather odd that your luggage should not have been registered?"

Peggy tried to recollect. "No, it didn't," she said. "It struck my maid as odd, I remember."

A keen note came into Sir Robert Fyffe's voice. The blandness and suavity seemed to have left it.

"It struck your maid as odd?" he said sharply.

"Maids who are devoted to us are often more suspicious than we are," Peggy answered. "Don't you think so, Sir Robert?"

The big red face turned full upon her for a moment. People who watched it carefully might have discerned a slight expression of compunction. He had known this little butterfly in private life, but now professional considerations overbore everything. He was Sir Robert Fyffe because he did his job—had always done his job.

"I am afraid I am not here to say what I think," he answered quickly.

Peggy realised the situation in a moment. She was fighting desperately, but nothing gave an index to the fact.

"Oh, we all know that, Sir Robert!" she said, and there was a slight murmur and ripple of laughter through the court.

The President raised his eyes above his glasses and stared gravely round.

Silence was restored.

"Your maid's luggage," said Sir Robert, "had the good fortune to reach Paris too?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Collingwood attend to the luggage at Charing Cross—the luggage of the whole party, I mean?"

"Yes, I think he did."

"Do you think, Mrs. Admaston, that you would remember the porter who made the mistake?"

Peggy seemed to be trying to remember something. "No," she said doubtfully. "I don't think I could."

"Do you remember having a conversation with him?" Sir Robert continued, his face as bland and confidential as any face could be.

"No, I don't remember."

"Your name was on your boxes in full, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mrs. Admaston, don't you remember having a talk with him about your husband?"

Peggy looked up brightly. Something seemed to have struck her.

"Oh yes," she said quickly. "Wasn't he a constituent?"

Sir Robert bowed sweetly. "I think he was," he said. "At anyrate, a great admirer." Then he turned round. "Will Mr. Stevens please stand up?"

Just behind the barristers and the seats in which the society people were sitting, a broad, short, and sturdy man rose from the pit of the court.

"Now," Sir Robert said to Mrs. Admaston, "do you recognise him?"

Peggy leant over the rail of the box with real interest—if it was not affectation.

"No," she said doubtfully; "I could not say for certain."

"But if Mr. Stevens can swear that he is the man with whom you had the conversation?"

"Oh! then he must be right, Sir Robert," Peggy answered.

Mr. Menzies rose in his place. "My client, Mr. Collingwood, recognises the man, m'lud—there is no doubt about it."

"Very well," the President answered quietly. "We shall have that later."

"So that is the porter who made the mistake," Sir Robert resumed in a voice full of meaning. "You can sit down, Mr. Stevens. Would you be surprised to hear that your luggage and Mr. Collingwood's was not registered, upon the express instructions of Mr. Collingwood, and that

Lord Ellerdine's and Lady Attwill's luggage was registered through, also upon his instructions?"

Mr. M'Arthur rose. "My lord," he said, "this cannot be evidence against my client. Even if Mr. Collingwood was acting as her agent, such instructions were clearly outside his authority."

Sir Robert glanced round quickly. "One moment, Mr. M'Arthur," he said, in a voice full of meaning. "If it should turn out, Mrs. Admaston, that Mr. Collingwood gave express instructions that your luggage should not be registered—that, you say, was not according to your instructions?"

"It is incredible that he *should* have given such instructions," Peggy said.

"Incredible!" said Sir Robert Fyffe.

"Unless——" Peggy replied, then stopped short and bit her lip.

Every one in the court noticed that the judge had lifted his head and was looking keenly at her.

"Well? Unless what, Mrs. Admaston?" Sir Robert Fyffe asked quickly.

Peggy did not answer at all.

"Shall I finish it for you?" Sir Robert continued, with his famous little menacing gesture of the right hand. "Unless he had intended to give his friends the slip at Boulogne, and stay the night in Paris with you. Is that what you were going to say?"

"Yes, it was, for a moment," the girl answered, "until it struck me how absurd it was."

"It strikes you as absurd, does it?"

"Yes, it does rather," she replied.

"I suppose it would strike you as equally absurd that Mr. Collingwood had already engaged rooms at the Hôtel des Tuileries for himself and a lady, two days before you left London? Or do you think the rooms were engaged for some other lady?"

"I don't believe they were engaged at all before we arrived," came the answer quickly.

Sir Robert nodded his big head. "We shall hear, no doubt, from Mr. Collingwood. Am I to take it, then, that you had no knowledge of the fact that your luggage was not registered, and that you had no knowledge of the fact that Mr. Collingwood had already taken rooms for himself and a lady before you left London?"

"I had no knowledge whatever—none at all," Peggy replied with great emphasis.

"And I think you told my learned friend in examination-in-chief that you had no knowledge of the fact that both your bedroom and Mr. Collingwood's opened out of the same sitting-room?"

"That is so, Sir Robert."

"I think you telegraphed to Chalons when you got to Paris to tell Lord Ellerdine of your mistake?"

"Mr. Collingwood did so for me."

"And to your husband?"

"No; that was not necessary."

In some subtle, but very real fashion, the atmosphere of the court was becoming more and more charged with excitement. Everybody was sitting perfectly still. All eyes were directed to the slim figure of the girl in the witness-box. The hush was not broken by any sounds, save only that of the great counsel's voice with its deadly innuendo, its remorseless logic of fact, and the replies of the sweet-voiced girl.

"Why not?" Sir Robert asked, with a deep note of suggestion.

"I did not want to worry him with our silly mistakes," was the answer; and even as she gave it Peggy's heart sank like lead within her, realising how inadequate and feeble it sounded.

"Did you think that it would annoy your husband to think that you and Mr. Collingwood were alone in Paris?"

"Not a bit," she replied.

"Then why didn't you tell him? You had nothing to hide?"

"Nothing whatever."

There was a pause. Sir Robert's face still wore an expectant look. He was obviously waiting for a reply.

It came at length, and every person in the court as they heard it smiled, frowned, or sighed according to their several temperaments.

"I really don't know why I didn't tell him."

"Let me suggest a reason. You didn't tell because you didn't want him to know?"

"I don't think that is true," Peggy answered.

"Come, Mrs. Admaston; you heard the evidence of the detective?"

"Yes, I did."

"He has told the jury that when the telephone message came through from your husband you were in the room; that you stayed by and heard the co-respondent tell your husband that Lord Ellerdine was staying at the hotel—a deliberate lie; and that you refused to speak to your husband. Is that true?"

The answer, the miserable answer, came in the faintest of voices from the box:

"Yes."

And now there was every sign of what the newspapers call a "sensation" in court. Colonel Adams and Henry Passhe looked at each other significantly. "That's done for her," Passhe whispered to his friend. Ladies nudged each other. The reporters wrote furiously. The judge leaned forward a little more over his desk.

"Why did you connive at this lie?"

"I don't know. Really, I don't know."

"Why did you refuse to speak to your husband?"

Peggy was silently gazing downwards.

"You have told us that it would not have annoyed your husband to think that you and Mr. Collingwood were alone in Paris."

"Why should it have annoyed him," Peggy answered, "if it were an accident?"

"Exactly!" Sir Robert continued—"if it were an accident. I put it to you that the only fact which made you afraid to speak to your husband was because you knew it was not an accident, and that he had just cause for resentment."

"That is not true," Peggy said, with a little flicker of the spirit she had shown at first.

"I don't wish to be unfair," said Sir Robert Fyffe—and no man at the Bar was fairer than the famous counsel in his cross-examinations.

"You are not unfair, Sir Robert," Peggy said; "but, oh! it is all unfair."

Sir Robert gave a little sigh, which may or may not have been a genuine expression of feeling, but was probably sincere enough. His duty lay before him, however, and, like some sworn torturer of the Middle Ages, he must pursue it to the end.

"I must press you upon this point," he said. "What made you afraid to tell your husband that you were alone in Paris? What made you agree with Mr. Collingwood, Lord Ellerdine, and Lady Attwill to say that you had not been alone with Mr. Collingwood in Paris?"

"I cannot tell you," Peggy answered. "I was very upset, and really not quite myself."

"Not quite yourself?" followed upon the heels of her answer with lightning rapidity. "Very upset? What had happened to upset you?"

Peggy made a motion—an instinctive motion—as if to free herself from something, something that was slowly but surely tightening round her. Every one noticed it, every one understood it.

"Nothing," she said at length.

At this there was a ripple of laughter through the court, and cutting in upon it, before it had quite died away, the accusing voice was heard: "Nothing? If that is so, can you give any reason why Lord Ellerdine and Lady Attwill should have connived at this deception?"

"I suppose they thought they were shielding me."

"Shielding you!" Sir Robert cried in mock surprise. "From what? Tell me, Mrs. Admaston," he continued, as Peggy looked round the court helplessly—"tell me, do you think that Lord Ellerdine—he is an old friend?"

"Yes, a dear old friend," Peggy said, glad to be able to say something for a moment which did not tell against her.

"Do you think that Lord Ellerdine and Lady Attwill believed that you were in Paris, by accident?"

"How can I tell?" Peggy replied, not in the least seeing to what this was leading.

"Have you any doubt? Why do you think that Lord Ellerdine returned to Paris by the night train instead of letting you join them at Chalons, except that he thought something was very seriously wrong?"

"I have told you," Peggy replied, "that he thought he was shielding me."

"But you have not told me from what he thought he was shielding you. What was he to shield you

from?"

"Nothing," Peggy said once more. And again there was a ripple of laughter throughout the court.

At this Sir Robert Fyffe allowed himself his first look at the jury, and a most significant one it was. Then he turned quickly to the witness-box. "Nothing!" he cried. "Then why did you invent—or connive at the invention of—this story?"

"Why did I?" the girl said helplessly. "I don't know. I thought it foolish. I saw that they had told a lying story to my husband, thinking to serve me, and I didn't want to give them away."

"You lied to your husband because you didn't wish to give your good-natured friends away. Is that really your reason, Mrs. Admaston?"

"Yes," she answered, "and I loathed myself for it."

"It was perhaps the first time that you had deceived your husband?" Sir Robert said blandly.

"Yes," came the answer with a pause, and very faintly given.

"You arrived at the hotel under the impression that your presence in Paris was due to a mistake?"

"Yes."

"You supped in your room with Mr. Collingwood?"

"Yes."

"And what time did you sup?"

"About 10 or 10.15."

"What did you do after supper? I suppose you finished about 11?"

"I suppose so," Peggy replied.

"Well—what did you do? The table, I think, was not cleared before you retired to bed—that is so, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How did you spend the time between 11 and 12.30?"

"We were talking."

"No doubt you told the waiter not to clear away so that you should not be disturbed?"

"I really forget," Peggy said.

"At anyrate, you were not disturbed?"

"No."

"And spent a charming evening?"

"Yes."

"Unspoilt by any idea that your presence there was due to a deliberate and successful device to give your companions the slip?"

Helpless as she was in those skilled, remorseless hands, Peggy nevertheless flared up at this.

"To have had such an idea," she said, with a dignity which was strangely piteous under the circumstances, "would have been an insult to Mr. Collingwood."

"Always assuming," said Sir Robert, "that Mr. Collingwood made his plans without your knowledge."

"I don't believe that Mr. Collingwood made the plans you suggest."

"And nothing will shake your faith in Mr. Collingwood?" said Sir Robert with great suavity.

"My faith in him is not likely to be shaken by the hired evidence of detectives, railway porters, or hotel servants."

"You mustn't talk like that, Mrs. Admaston," the judge said gravely.

"When did it first seem to you that your presence in Paris was not due to a mistake?" Sir Robert went on.

"My maid hinted it to me while she was doing my hair before I went to bed."

"Your maid is an old and privileged servant?"

"She is far more than a servant. She is a devoted friend."

"You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely."

Sir Robert nodded to himself, and his nod sent a shiver of apprehension through the girl in the witness-box.

"The subject admits of no discussion?" he asked, and there was a suppressed eagerness in his voice.

"None," Peggy answered.

Sir Robert nodded again. "Very well," he said *sotto voce*. "You have told me that you were annoyed, but not seriously, at missing the train, and I suppose, Mrs. Admaston, I may add at finding yourself in Paris?"

The examination seemed to have fallen a little from its strained note.

"That is so," Peggy replied, slightly relieved.

"Did Mr. Collingwood seem much distressed at the turn of events?" asked Sir Robert.

And then—it might have been rising hysteria, or it might have been a totally innocent misapprehension of what was going on, but Peggy laughed.

Her laugh went rippling out into the court.

"He did not seem inconsolable," she said.

Her laughter was echoed by that of every one in the court; even Sir Robert's red and genial face relaxed into a smile.

"And I daresay," he said in quite a kindly voice,— "I daresay you would as soon be stranded in Paris with Mr. Collingwood as with any one?"

"Oh, much sooner," Peggy said. "He is a very charming companion."

"Perhaps," Sir Robert Fyffe answered, "I may allow myself to say the same of his companion?"

Peggy smiled brightly. "Well," she said, "it would not be the first time you had said so, Sir Robert."

"Nor will it be the last, Mrs. Admaston," the K.C. replied with a courtly bow, and a really charming smile upon his face.

Then suddenly he stood a little more upright, shifted the gown upon his shoulders, touched his wig, and looked at Peggy keenly. He was once more the keen advocate doing his duty, whatever it might cost him in personal emotion.

"But we must pass on," he said. "Very well. You finished supper at last, and about 12.30 you went to bed. Your maid joined you and you got undressed." Here Sir Robert put his pince-nez upon his nose, and leant over to see the ground-plan of the rooms of the Hôtel des Tuileries, which the solicitor on the bench before him held up for his inspection.

Sir Robert looked at the coloured plan for a moment with intense scrutiny. Then, having refreshed his memory, he turned his face once more to the witness-box.

"Mr. Collingwood," he continued, "had left you by the door leading into the passage, I suppose?"

"Yes," Peggy replied.

"You had no idea that he was occupying the room communicating with yours?"

"None."

"You then sent your maid to bed?"

"Yes."

"And it was shortly after that that the telephone bell rang—the call from Chalons?"

"Very shortly after," Peggy replied.

She seemed to be extremely interested in this conversation between herself and Sir Robert Fyffe—interested in it as if she were playing some game of which the issue would not matter. At this period of the famous cross-examination she seemed to be perfectly bright and unconcerned.

"And you went to answer it?" Sir Robert went on.

"Yes," she said.

Sir Robert clutched the bands of his gown and looked at her with the very keenest scrutiny.

"And will you tell my lord and the jury what happened?" he said.

"While I was speaking—I had my back to the door—I suddenly heard Mr. Collingwood's voice behind me."

Sir Robert started. "You were surprised—startled?" he said in an eager voice.

"I was," Peggy answered—"very."

The K.C.'s head was bent forward and was swaying slightly from side to side, as the head of a snake sways before it strikes. He was quite unconscious of the marked hostility of his attitude, but the game, the big, exciting game which he was playing, which he was paid so highly to play, and which had become the chief excitement of his life, had caught hold of him in all his nerves.

"Had he knocked?" he said.

"I didn't hear him," Peggy replied, "or of course I should not have let him come in."

"I see," Sir Robert replied. "You were hardly dressed to receive gentlemen visitors?"

"Well, hardly."

"You were angry, Mrs. Admaston?"

"I *was* angry," Peggy replied.

"Now! how did you show your anger?"

"By telling him to go back to his room."

"Did he go?"

"No."

And now laughter, loud and almost inextinguishable, filled the court. Every one was enjoying himself or herself enormously. There was a sort of atmosphere of French farce about the sombre court. Every one had, by now, forgotten that they had lunched and dined at the hospitable tables of Mr. and Mrs. Admaston. They were there for a show—they were out for blood—it was a bull-fight to these pleasant ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. Henry Passhe was obviously enjoying himself. He laughed as loudly as any one, until the warning "Hush!" of the usher suppressed the merriment. He looked towards his friend, but he saw that Colonel Adams's lean brown face was drawn and wrinkled up with pain. Then he himself—for he was a decent-minded man enough—felt a little ashamed of his jocularities, and he turned once more to an intent watching of this tragic spectacle.

"No doubt," Sir Robert said, "that made you more angry—yes?"

Mrs. Admaston did not answer, but Sir Robert persisted.

"*Didn't* it make you more angry?" he said.

Suddenly Peggy looked up, and her voice rippled with laughter—she was a butterfly, a thing of sunshine and shadow, but shadow never distressed her for very long.

"I never remain angry very long," she said.

Sir Robert took no notice of the way in which she answered. His big voice went on, tolling quietly like a distant bell.

"But you were angry?"

"I wanted him to go," Peggy replied impatiently.

"Quite so," said Sir Robert. "But you allowed him to stay?"

She heard once more that inexorable persistence, that bland, passionless, but remorseless voice.

The little flicker of gaiety and of respite was over. She braced herself once more to stand up against this relentless onslaught, and clutched the rail of the witness-box before her.

"We are very old friends, Sir Robert," she answered. "I saw no particular harm in it."

"If you saw no particular harm in it, why did you not care to speak to your husband when he rang up?"

"One may do perfectly harmless things," she replied, "and yet not care to tell every one about them."

"And this was one of those perfectly harmless things which you didn't care to tell every one, or even your husband, about?"

"There was no harm in it," Peggy replied, and her voice rang out with a dreadful sense of suppressed irritation and pain.

"So little that you permitted Mr. Collingwood to stay with you—for quite a long time?"

"Not very long," she answered.

"Until the telephone call from your husband?"

"I suppose so."

Sir Robert Fyffe began to seem very pleased with himself. There was no bitterness in his voice—only an extreme politeness. But by now he kept glancing carefully at the jury, watching them with lightning glances, and gathering all the information he possibly could from the expressions on

their faces—their immobility or movements of interest.

"Up to that time," Sir Robert remarked—and his question had really the note of a casual inquiry—"up to that time had he shown any sign of going?"

"I don't think so."

The next query startled the whole court, not so much from its directness—though that was patent enough,—but by reason of the way in which it was rapped out.

It was said in a hard, threatening, staccato voice: "What were you both doing?"

The answer was rather reflective than otherwise. It showed no apprehension of the intention of the examiner.

"Sitting on the sofa—he was smoking, I think," Peggy said.

"Should I be right in saying that during most of this time he was making passionate love to you?"

All the reporters looked up, their pencils poised, their eyes avid of sensation.

"He was very fond of me," Mrs. Admaston replied.

"Passionately in love with you?"

There was a perceptible hesitation. "I think he was very fond of me."

Sir Robert's words came from him like the blows of a hammer upon a nail: "Have you any doubt that he was passionately in love with you?"

"He told me so."

"I put it to you that you knew it, and had known it for months?"

It was an odd contrast between the triumphant note which had crept into the great barrister's voice and the diminuendo of Peggy's.

There was no gaiety now. The forces were joined. The battle, which had been an affair of skirmishes before, was now in full cry.

"I only knew what he told me." The voice was quite desperate now.

"And when did he first tell you? The night you were in Paris? Is that when you say?"

"Yes," the answer came, and the President leant forward to be sure that he heard the admission aright.

The big, round, red face of Sir Robert Fyffe was now redder than ever. His eyes blinked as if the lids could hardly veil the silent fire which peered out from them.

"Do you swear that? Please be careful...."

"I think that was the first time."

"I suggest to you," said Sir Robert, turning towards the jury, the President, and then to Peggy—"I suggest to you, Mrs. Admaston, that he had been making passionate love to you for months."

There was an intense silence in the court.

The members of the jury were obviously excited. Different members showed it in different ways. There were men who struggled to give no indication of their feelings, and made effort at an entire lack of expression. Others showed evident and lively interest.

"I knew for some months that he was very fond of me."

"And did your husband know?" echoed out into the court.

"I suppose so," was the faint answer.

"Do you suggest that your husband would ever have permitted you to go away, even in the company of friends, with a man who had been abusing his friendship by making passionate love to his wife?"

There was no answer to that. No sound came from the witness-box—the whole court waited for the response.

Sir Robert was leaning forward now, his head shaking from side to side, his blood-hound face, his extremely vivid eyes, fixed upon Peggy's face. "Do you really ask the jury to believe that?" he said.

Still Peggy was silent. She seemed to have drooped into something like a faded flower. She said nothing. There was nothing for her to say.

And in the silence the calm, judicial voice of the President, full of commiseration—without prejudice one way or the other, nevertheless,—made its demand. "You must answer, Mrs. Admaston," said the judge.

"I don't think my husband knew *how* fond of me he was," Peggy said.

"If he had known," Sir Robert said, very gently now, and with a little quiver in his voice—"if he had known, don't you think, Mrs. Admaston, he would have been very angry to know how you were situated in Paris?"

Sentence after sentence was wrung from her by torture.

"I think perhaps he might not have liked it," she said in a fainting voice.

The bully came out in Sir Robert's voice. All along the line he was being tremendously successful....

"Perhaps! Would *any* man like it? Do you think, madam, that you were treating your husband fairly in encouraging this very charming gentleman's attentions?"

Very faint, very slow, very hesitating, and extremely weary, "I did not encourage them," the answer came.

"We shall see. Didn't it make you feel very embarrassed to find yourself sitting up in a strange hotel into the small hours of the morning, with this man making passionate love to you?"

There was a dead silence in the court. Once more the person on the rack had nothing to say.

"Or had this *liaison* gone too far by this time for you to feel embarrassed?"

Mr. M'Arthur jumped up.

His face blazed with simulated fury. "My lord," he barked, "I protest against these insulting suggestions."

The excited voice of the counsel rather failed of its effect as the judge looked down upon him. "Sir Robert is within his rights, Mr. M'Arthur," he said. "He would not ask these questions without good reason."

Sir Robert Fyffe saw his chance at once. He glanced at the jury; he made a little deprecating motion of his head to the President. "Too good reason, my lord! My duty is not a pleasant one.... Was this the first time, Mrs. Admaston, that you had received Mr. Collingwood in this state of undress—when the rest of the household was asleep?"

Peggy had clasped her hands. She threw them apart with a wild gesture and clutched the rail of the witness-box. "My lord!" she said, "I assure you that nothing has ever taken place between us."

The President gazed at her with calm compassion.

He had heard appeals like this one too often. He was not there to be influenced by emotions, or to be prejudiced by his natural kindness of heart.

He was there to judge.

"You must answer Sir Robert, Mrs. Admaston," he said quietly.

"We used to sit up late sometimes at Lord Ellerdine's and talk," Peggy admitted.

There were murmurs all over the court. Society was interested.

Sir Robert Fyffe leant forward to the solicitor in front of him, said something in an undertone, and then looked up.

"Was that at Lord Ellerdine's place in Yorkshire?"

"Yes."

"When were you last there?"

"About a year ago," Peggy replied.

"Indeed! About a year ago——"

"Hardly a year."

"At anyrate, several months before the Paris trip Mr. Collingwood was sitting up in your room into the small hours of the morning making passionate love to you?"

Mrs. Admaston said nothing at all.

"Is not that so?" the insistent voice inquired.

"There was no harm, Sir Robert," was the hesitating answer.

"No harm! Did Lord Ellerdine know?"

"No."

"Did your husband know?"

"No."

And now into the voice of the great counsel began to creep a note of contempt, which was doubtless perfectly genuine. He had met the woman he was cross-examining in society. He had liked her. But, as every one knew, Sir Robert's own domestic life was one of singular happiness and accord.

It is pretty certain that—having known Admaston and his wife—he was becoming genuinely indignant at what he thought the treachery of the girl.

"Was this another of those perfectly harmless things which you didn't care to tell your husband about?" he said.

"I saw no harm in it," Peggy replied, and in answer to the colder note in Sir Robert's voice her own became stubborn.

"But you would not have liked him to know? Well! You have now admitted that Mr. Collingwood had been making passionate love to you for months before the trip to Paris. We are getting at the truth gradually. I suppose that he made these declarations of love several times at Lord Ellerdine's?"

"I think he spoke to me on two or three occasions," Peggy almost murmured.

"And was this really the first time he declared his love for you?"

"Yes, the first time."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"And you still went about everywhere with him—but you were careful not to tell your husband the truth?"

"My husband trusted me. I never abused his trust."

As Peggy said this, the foreman of the jury, a plump, shortish, clean-shaved gentleman who in private life was a chemist, looked up with a puzzled expression upon his face.

He thought he detected a ring of real sincerity in the witness's voice which the facts did not seem to justify.

"Was not this an abuse of his trust?" Sir Robert said—perhaps more gravely than he had spoken yet.

"Oh! we can't all be perfect! I don't deny that I flirted," Peggy answered.

Her affectation of lightness went very ill with the weighty, measured accusations of Sir Robert Fyffe.

It struck a jarring note in the court. It did her harm.

"You do not deny that you flirted," Sir Robert said, with a little nod of his head—"and encouraged this man, this very charming companion, to flirt with you?"

"And if I did," she replied, still defiant, "my husband trusted me, and knew that there was nothing in it."

"Mrs. Admaston, if that is true, why were you afraid to talk to him upon the night of the 23rd March, and why did you connive at a deliberate lie on the following day?"

There was a cold and deliberate disgust in Sir Robert's voice, and almost every person there gave a little sympathetic shudder.

But Peggy, brave to the last, still fought on. "I was a fool," she said, with a little shrug of the shoulders, as if the question was of no great moment. "I was a fool. The others thought the thing much worse than it was, and that frightened me. I have told you already that I loathed myself for lying as I did."

Sir Robert knitted his brows for a moment, and then decided on his course of action.

That brilliant brain was never at a loss. Again, after a second's hesitation, the deadly thrust was delivered. It was delivered with such apparent suavity and innocence, with such a relaxation of the hard, accusing note, that the girl in the witness-box was utterly deceived.

"You mean," said Sir Robert, "that though you did not tell your husband everything about your harmless flirtations—your peccadilloes—you never before deliberately lied to shield yourself?"

"Yes," Peggy replied eagerly; "that is what I mean."

"Does it not strike you, Mrs. Admaston, that any one who knew of your previous adventures with Mr. Collingwood, the pleasure you obviously find in his society, and the methods you have adopted to blind your husband to the progress of this innocent friendship, would have good ground for supposing that the accident which brought about the last of this series of innocent and pleasant reunions was in reality not accident, but deliberate design?"

"I see what you mean," she answered; "but whatever any one thought, it *was* an accident!"

"An accident! Oh, just consider this chapter of accidents! By *accident*, you and Mr. Collingwood got on to the wrong train at Boulogne; by *accident*, although the luggage of the whole party was together at Charing Cross Station and Mr. Collingwood was instructed to register it all through to St. Moritz, your luggage and Mr. Collingwood's was not registered—an *accident* which enabled you to take it on with you upon the Paris train, which you only entered by *accident*. By *accident*, Mr. Collingwood seems to have taken for himself and a lady rooms at an hotel in Paris which, but for the *accident* which took you and him to Paris, could have been of no possible use to him. Do you still ask the jury to believe that your visit to Paris was an accident?"

Sir Robert had a little over-emphasised himself—that is, as far as the witness was concerned,—though his accentuated speech had its effect upon the jury. Peggy herself recognised artifice. When there *had* been a real note of sincerity in the counsel's voice it had frightened her far more than any rhetoric could.

"Certainly I do," she answered with spirit.

The barrister recognised in a moment that, while he had made an effect upon the court, he had at the same time given new courage to the witness. He was, as all great counsel are, a psychologist of the first order. He responded instantly, and in this duel of two minds—his and Mrs. Admaston's—his keener and more trained intelligence realised exactly what was passing in her thoughts.

"I suggest to you, Mrs. Admaston," he said very briskly, "that you and Mr. Collingwood had planned this trip to Paris—that he took the rooms with your knowledge—that you both missed the train deliberately, and reached Paris in accordance with your preconceived design?"

"And I tell you," Peggy replied, "that all these suggestions are absolutely false."

"Absolutely false?"

Her voice rang out into the court shrill with the long torture of her examination, but passionate with her own certainty of her innocence. "There's not a rag of truth in any of them. You may think you can make black white, and white black, you may hire spies, tamper with railway servants and waiters...."

An instant reproof came from the judge—two words: "Mrs. Admaston!" he said.

She looked up, but hardly heard him.

"... And do all the rest of the degrading work which seems inseparable from this court."

"Mrs. Admaston," the President said again, "you must not speak like that."

All men, even judges, are influenced by circumstance. It is probable that the President would have been far more severe at such an outburst as this, if Mrs. Admaston had not been a millionairess in her own right and the wife of a prominent Cabinet Minister. And it is sure also that, under such circumstances as these, an ordinary woman, without the unconscious consciousness of her financial and social position, would not have dared to do as Peggy did.

Despite the President's admonition, a torrent of half hysterical, wholly indignant words poured from the witness-box.

"And what right have they to treat me like this?" Peggy cried. "Am I to be treated as guilty, merely because I have foolishly courted temptation? I don't know what I have said, I don't know what I shall say before this torture is completed; but I am sensible enough to know that I have no chance in all this farrago of horrible insinuation which twists every little piece of harmless and girlish folly into some vicious and debasing form. I cannot keep quiet under it. I tell you it is all—all—lies—nothing but lies!"

"Now, Mrs. Admaston," Sir Robert said, apparently unmoved by this tirade, "I must ask you to give me your very close attention."

"You must try to be more composed," the President said kindly to Peggy, "if you wish to do yourself justice."

Peggy's white, set face looked straight out before her. She summoned up all her courage to bear the remainder of her torture.

"You still persist," said Sir Robert, "in saying that your trip to Paris resulted from an accident?"

"Emphatically I do," she answered.

Sir Robert looked towards the judge.

"Has your lordship got that document," he said, "which Mr. Admaston identified when he was in the witness-box?"

The President nodded. "That was the anonymous letter received by Miss Admaston—Mr. Admaston's aunt,—was it not, and produced by her on subpoena yesterday? Yes. I have it here in the envelope."

"Perhaps your lordship will allow the witness to look at the envelope."

Mr. M'Arthur jumped up. "My lord," he said, "I submit again that nothing can make this letter

evidence."

"And you are quite right, Mr. M'Arthur," the judge answered. "But at present Sir Robert is not suggesting that it is evidence—Usher," he continued, "please hand this to the witness."

"Look at that envelope," Sir Robert continued. "You will see that it is dated March 23rd, and the postmark shows that it was collected at 10.30 a.m. Now, you persist in saying that at the time that letter was posted nothing was further from your mind than that you would be staying the night in Paris."

"I have already said so," Peggy answered.

"And do you say so still?"

"Of course I do," she answered tartly.

"We shall see," Sir Robert Fyffe rapped out. "The letter is addressed to Miss Admaston—is it not? And Mr. Admaston has sworn that she brought it to him to the House of Commons just after three o'clock on the same day. Is Miss Admaston a friend of yours?"

"I don't think she altogether approves of me," Peggy answered.

"You know that Mr. Admaston has sworn that it was the information contained in that letter which determined him to have you watched in Boulogne and in Paris?"

"Yes, I know."

"And at the time that letter was written, no one could possibly have known that you were going to spend the night in Paris or miss the train at Boulogne?"

"Of course they couldn't."

"May I take it, therefore," Sir Robert continued, "that you believed your husband when he says that that letter was in his hands soon after three o'clock—long before you even reach Folkestone?"

"I believe my husband implicitly," Peggy said, and there was a little quaver in her voice.

"Do you recognise the handwriting?" Sir Robert asked.

"I have never seen it before," she answered.

The judge looked intently at the K.C. "I don't want to interrupt you, Sir Robert," he said; "but do you know whose handwriting it is?"

"No, my lord," Sir Robert replied. "I am really asking for information."

"It is very curious," said the judge.

"It is, my lord," said Sir Robert. "My learned friend, Mr. Carteret, who is watching the case on behalf of Miss Admaston, informs me that he has had it submitted to every well-known handwriting expert in the United Kingdom, and indeed in Europe."

"And compared with the writing of every person however remotely connected with the parties concerned in this case?"

"He has even had it compared with Mrs. Admaston's, my lord."

"And no doubt with Mr. Collingwood's?" the judge continued.

"Yes," Sir Robert said, "and with Mr. Collingwood's too, my lord—though, I regret to say, with no result."

He turned from the judge to Peggy. "And can't you help us, Mrs. Admaston?" he concluded.

"No, not from the envelope," Peggy answered.

"It is a most peculiar handwriting," the judge observed, leaning back in his seat.

Sir Robert continued his cross-examination. "Now, Mrs. Admaston," he said, "remember that that letter was in the hands of your husband just after three o'clock on 23rd March. Now, will you be so good as to read it?"

"Out loud?"

"Oh no. Read it to yourself."

There was dead silence in the court as with trembling hands the girl took the letter from the envelope and began to read it. All the spectators, those engaged in the case, and several members of the jury knew that the dramatic moment of all had arrived. There had been many dramatic moments, but this was to be the culminating one.

The excitement was intense, and, when Peggy suddenly gave a little cry, there was a low murmur of sound. She cried out loudly, sharply, as if in pain, while the judge and jury regarded her intently. Then she bent forward over the letter again and appeared to re-read it.

Suddenly she lifted her head and turned desperately to the President. "Oh! my lord, this is infamous!" she cried.

Without any hesitation at all Sir Robert made his point.

"Do you still persist, Mrs. Admaston, in your statement that your trip to Paris was the result of an accident?"

Peggy was desperate. "My lord—this letter—it is a trap—it must be—a trap——" she wailed.

"Come, Mrs. Admaston," Sir Robert said very sternly; "can you still keep up this farce, this hypocritical farce?"

Suddenly Collingwood jumped up from his place. "My lord, I protest!" he said, in a voice which trembled with indignation.

The judge gave him a keen look as he subsided, muttering to himself.

"You will have an opportunity to-morrow," the judge said, "of showing your sympathy."

"Now, madam, having read that letter——" Sir Robert resumed.

The foreman of the jury rose. "My lord," he said, "the jury would like to see that letter."

"What do you say, Mr. M'Arthur and Mr. Menzies?" asked the judge.

"I can see no purpose in keeping it out any longer, my lord," Mr. M'Arthur answered, while Mr. Menzies said that any mischief which it might do had been done already.

The President seemed to approve. "I think you are right," he said. "Usher, give me the letter."

The letter was handed up again to the bench, and, adjusting his pince-nez, the judge proceeded to read it.

"Listen, gentlemen," he said, "and I will read it to you. The importance of this letter, gentlemen, which, as you have seen, has so terribly upset this poor lady, is that it was clearly written before 10.30 on the morning of the 23rd March, and was in the hands of Mr. Admaston long before Mrs. Admaston and her friends reached Folkestone—let alone Boulogne. The letter is dated March 23rd, and it is unsigned. Now, gentlemen, an anonymous letter is open to grave suspicion, but in the peculiar circumstances of this case the fact of its being anonymous makes no difference. If any one, other than the respondent and co-respondent, knew that they were going to stay in Paris on the night of the 23rd, and knew that before they started, it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the fact. I will now read the letter:—

"Mrs. Admaston will be staying at Paris to-night alone with Mr. Collingwood. They have arranged to get separated from Lord Ellerdine and Lady Attwill at Boulogne and to stay the night together at the Hôtel des Tuileries. If Mr. Admaston does not believe this, let him telephone the hotel to-night."

Mr. Carteret," the judge concluded, "were any other letters in this strange handwriting received by Miss Admaston?"

"One other, my lord, three days ago," said Mr. Carteret.

"I should like to see it," said the President.

The second letter was handed up to him, and he read it through carefully.

"It is all very mysterious," he said, shaking his head. "I think, gentlemen, that you had better hear it. It is as follows:—

"Please destroy the other letter and this, and save an old servant who honours the family from the anger of Mrs. Admaston."

The judge paused, carefully scrutinising the letter; then he took up an ivory reading-glass and looked at the letter through the magnifying lens.

"Am I right, Mr. Carteret," he said, "in my view that this letter has been blotted and not allowed to dry?"

Mr. Carteret leant over and had a hurried conversation with his handwriting expert. "I am instructed that there is no doubt as to that, my lord," he said, looking up.

"I should much like to see that blotting-paper," the President remarked.

"Blotting-paper!" said Sir Robert Fyffe. "So should we all, my lord." Then he rose to his feet. "Now, Mrs. Admaston, having read this letter, do you still dare to repeat that until you had the misfortune to miss the train at Boulogne you had no intention of spending the night in Paris with Mr. Collingwood?"

Peggy did not answer.

She stared at the letter upon the judge's desk as if fascinated by it.

"My lord and the jury are waiting for an answer," Sir Robert repeated. "Come, madam."

"And what answer can I give?" the tortured girl said faintly.

Sir Robert was showing her no mercy now. "The truth, madam, if you can," he said.

"The truth!" she answered. "What is the truth to you? It's not the truth you want. It's me—my very soul—that's what you want! Not to wring the truth out of me, but just so much of it as will serve your ends!"

"Mrs. Admaston," the President said compassionately, but with emphasis, "these outbursts do not assist your case."

"My case!" Peggy cried helplessly. "My lord, who will believe me in the face of this lying letter? It is a trap—a trap, I say! I have been hunted and hounded into it. I am not surprised now that innocent women in hundreds let their cases go by default rather than face the humiliation and torture of this awful place."

"Madam, I must insist upon an answer," Sir Robert said relentlessly.

"What am I to answer?" she cried again, wringing her hands with a terribly piteous gesture.

"If you ask me, Mrs. Admaston, let me advise you to answer the truth."

"The truth?"

"Yes, the truth—that this trip to Paris was all arranged between you and your lover"—his voice sank and became deeply impressive; "that at the very moment in which your husband was trying to reach you upon the telephone you were in that lover's arms?"

"It is a lie!" she said despairingly.

"The telephone bell rang several times before it was answered, did it not?"

"Yes, but——"

Sir Robert cut her short. "I suggest to you that even then you were in your lover's arms?" he said with bitter scorn.

"It is a lie!" Peggy answered once more.

"Then, Mrs. Admaston, and for the last time, I press for an answer. Do you still insist that you and your lover——"

She didn't allow him to finish his sentence. Desperate as she was, the hot words poured from her in a cataract of sound.

"How dare you suggest that he is my lover!" she cried. "I tell you that I have never loved him!—never—never—never—never! If I had loved him do you think that I would be here now? For months and months he has begged and entreated me to let my husband divorce me so that I could marry him. If I had loved him, do you think that I would have faced this horrible place? I have never loved him. I have been foolish—I have played with fire—I have loved his admiration. I did not know that the law—man's law—made no difference between the opportunity to do wrong and the wrong itself. I know now. Some day men who know women will make other laws—some of us must have our lives broken first. In the face of that letter and the evidence, no man would ever believe me, whatever I say; but I swear before God that it was all an accident—our being in Paris. I swear that I meant no harm by all my little lies. I swear I have done nothing wrong—nothing; but no one will believe me now—no one." Her voice sank and dropped, and she ended her outburst with a deep moan of pain.

"I think we will adjourn now," said the President, and there was pain in his voice also.

He gathered up the papers before him on his desk and rose. The court rose also.

There was an immediate hum and bustle, which broke out into the loud murmurs of subdued conversation as the judge left his seat and disappeared through the door at the back.

Peggy Admaston, wringing her hands, her face a white wedge of anguish, the pallor dreadfully accentuated by the burnished masses of her dark hair, almost stumbled down the steps of the witness-box. Mr. M'Arthur and her solicitor—a little confused knot of people, indeed—hastened up to her, and with a grim face Sir Robert Fyffe, not looking in the girl's direction, arranged his papers and spoke earnestly to his junior.

The scene was one of indescribable excitement.

It was as though a thunderbolt had fallen, and people looked at each other with pale, questioning faces.

The hum died down for an instant, as the weeping woman was led gently from the court.

Then it recommenced louder than ever, mingled with the shuffling of innumerable feet.

CHAPTER VII

Directly the President had risen, Society streamed out into the great hall of the Law Courts.

Innumerable motor broughams and private carriages were waiting in Fleet Street, and despite the dullness of the afternoon the eager photographers of the illustrated papers were waiting to get snap-shots of celebrated people as they passed from the sordid theatre of Court No. II. *en route* for afternoon tea and scandal.

Henry Passhe had an engagement, and, saying good-bye to Colonel Adams, hurried away. The other remained in the big central hall for a moment or two looking round to see if he could find an acquaintance.

To him, as he stood there, came Lord Ellerdine and struck him on the shoulder.

"Hullo, Adams!" he said, in a voice which was very subdued. "Thought I saw you in court. Been watching this dreadful business?"

Colonel Adams nodded. "Yes, Ellerdine," he said. "Henry Passhe brought me. He much wanted to come. I hesitated whether I should go or not, and now I am very sorry I did. To see a charming little woman like Mrs. Admaston tortured—that isn't very pleasant."

The other thrust his arm into the colonel's. "Damned dreadful, isn't it?" he said in an agitated voice. "Well, look here, let's get out of this. What are you going to do?"

"I have nothing particular to do at present; but why do you ask, Ellerdine?"

"Look here," Lord Ellerdine replied—"we can't talk here, but I have got an idea." His voice glowed with pride as he said it. "I haven't mentioned it to a soul, and I don't want to mention it to any one concerned in the case. Upon my soul, Adams, it is a godsend to have met you. I want to hear what you think. Are you game to listen?"

Adams nodded. He liked Lord Ellerdine, as everybody did, though he had no higher opinion of that gentleman's intelligence than the rest of the world.

"Quite at your service, Ellerdine," he answered; "and if your idea is one that may possibly help Mrs. Admaston, I shall be more pleased still."

"Of course it is," Lord Ellerdine answered. "Well, let's go and talk it over. It is impossible in this infernal rush."

"All right," Colonel Adams replied, "Come to the Cocoa Tree, or, if you like, I will come with you to White's."

Lord Ellerdine shook his head. "We will have some tea," he said. "But I don't want to go west now until I have talked this idea of mine over with you. If you agree that there is anything in it, then we should only have to come back to this part of the world again. Can't we get a cup of tea somewhere about here?"

By this time the two men had walked outside the Law Courts and were standing among the motley crowd which was pouring out of the great central doorway and also the side approaches to the public galleries and courts.

They looked around them. Both of them were absolutely at sea in this part of London.

"Tell you what," Ellerdine said suddenly: "I have got another idea. Let's go to an A.B.C.—what?"

"What do you mean?" Adams replied.

"Why," Lord Ellerdine answered, "the A.B.C. you know, where clerks and people have tea. There are always lots of them in every street, I believe."

They turned eastwards and began to walk slowly down Fleet Street.

"Ellerdine," Colonel Adams exclaimed bitterly, "look at this!"

The pavements were lined with news-venders displaying great contents bills of the evening papers:

"MRS. ADMASTON ON THE RACK"; "SOCIETY LADY'S ADMISSIONS"; and in a violently Radical sheet, "SOCIETY BUTTERFLY EXAMINED."

Lord Ellerdine saw the placards also. "Sickening, isn't it?" he said, with a real note of pain in his voice. "Poor little Peggy! Poor little girl! I would have done anything to stop it, Adams; and in half an hour—these newspaper fellows are so damned clever—in half an hour there'll be all about the last scene, the letter and all that. By the time we get back to town"—Lord Ellerdine didn't imagine that he was really in London at the moment,—"*by the time we get back to town it will be in all the clubs just as it has come over the tape machines for the last two hours, only with further details—how Peggy looked and all that. Sickening!*"

Colonel Adams agreed. He did not in the least know what his rather fatuous friend was about to propose or had in his mind; but he was, at anyrate, glad of his companionship, weary and unhappy as he felt at the terrible spectacle which he had found almost impossible to endure.

"I could kill that man Robert Fyffe," he said savagely as they walked slowly eastwards. "Great, big, damned bully, I call him."

"Well, I know him," Ellerdine replied; "and really, Adams, he is quite a decent chap in private life. It is his job, you know, and he has got to do it as well as he can. I believe he gets about a hundred a day or more for a case like this."

"Filthy cruelty, I call it," Adams answered, "whether he is a decent chap or not. To be paid—to earn your living, by Gad!—to torture men and women like that seems to me a low way of earning your bread-and-butter."

"Perhaps it is," the other replied. "At the same time, Adams, it might be said of your job too. That Afghan business, when there was no quarter, that you were in: there were a whole lot of sentimentalists in the Radical press that howled and held you up to execration as a sort of Pontius Pilate with a flavour of Nero, at home. You were out there doing the work. I was home and read the papers—you didn't. Bally monster, they called you—what?"

"Damn all newspaper writers!" the old white-haired colonel growled. "But I say, Ellerdine, what about this cup of tea?"

Lord Ellerdine looked round anxiously, and then his face lighted up. "Here's an A.B.C.," he said, pointing to some adjacent windows covered with letters in white enamel and displaying buns and pastry.

"How will this do, old chap?"

The soldier nodded, and together the two men entered the shop.

"What do we do now?" Ellerdine said, looking round him with some perplexity. "By Jove! there's a pretty girl."

One of the waitresses, realising suddenly that the two gentlemen who had just entered were quite unaccustomed to the ways of the establishment, and having one of her tables vacant, hurried up to them.

"Tea?" she said engagingly.

"That's just it, my dear," said Lord Ellerdine, with a pleased smile. "Now, you show us all the ropes, will you?"

"Come this way," said the pretty waitress, with an engaging little toss of her head and a consciousness of something pleasantly unusual. She led them to a little round-topped marble table where two cheap cane chairs were waiting, upon which Lord Ellerdine and Colonel Adams seated themselves.

"Tea, I think you said?" said the waitress to Lord Ellerdine, whom she obviously found the most sympathetic of the pair.

The ex-diplomatist nodded. "But we must have something to eat—what? Well, my dear, we will leave it to you. *Carte blanche*—what?"

"Now look here, Adams," Lord Ellerdine said, "what I want to tell you is this. Of course, I am tremendously interested in this case. I am mixed up in it considerably, and also I am a great friend of Peggy's—one of her oldest friends. You know her too, though not as well as I do, and you know what a charming little woman she is. I would do anything to save her if I could, and I have got an idea! Now, some time ago," Lord Ellerdine continued, "a silly Johnny—a secretary it was—forged my name. It was on a cheque. There was considerable difficulty in finding out who was the actual culprit, as owing to the circumstances there were several people who might have done it. My solicitors told me that the only way to really find out was to go to a handwriting expert. I didn't know what that was until they explained, but it seems there are Johnnies who make a regular profession of studying people's writing."

"Are there, by Jove!" said the colonel, much interested.

"Yes; and just at that time—it was some two years ago—the king and skipper of the whole lot had come over from America and established a branch in London. His name is William Q. Devereux."

"Is it, by Jove!" said the colonel again.

Ellerdine nodded. "Odd," he said, "but true, *parole d'honneur*. He started an office in London to help all the commercial Johnnies in the city, and so I went to him with my papers; and I am damned if the chap didn't find out who forged my name in about an hour, and we had him nailed that same evening. Cost me a tenner, that's all."

Colonel Adams nodded, looking with some trepidation at the pile of rather too luscious-looking pastry which had by now been set upon the table.

"I don't think I will venture," he said to himself; and then to Ellerdine, "Well, go on, Ellerdine."

"Now, in my pocket," Lord Ellerdine continued, "I have got exact photographs and tracings of the letters which have made such a fuss this afternoon. My idea, Adams, is that you and I—if you have time, that is—should go down into the City and see this expert chap and see if he can throw some light on the situation. They have tried all the experts in London on Peggy's case, but they

don't seem to know about my American friend. I believe in him. He is one of the most astute people going. What do you say to trying him—for poor little Peggy's sake?"

"Excellent idea, by Jove!" the other answered. "You've got his address, of course?"

"Oh yes," Lord Ellerdine replied; "it's in Coleman Street, E.C. Now, I wonder if you would mind going down with me and seeing what he has got to say?"

"Not in the least," Colonel Adams answered. "In fact, I shall be tremendously interested. I'd do a good deal more than that, my dear Ellerdine, if I could, to help Mrs. Admaston in any way."

"Very well, then," said the peer. "We'll just finish our tea, and pay that pretty-looking girl and take a taxi at once."

In five minutes they had dismissed the cab and were being carried in a lift to the third floor of a big block of buildings in Coleman Street.

The door of Mr. Devereux's office was marked "Enter," and the newcomers found themselves in a small but comfortably furnished room. At a round polished table, on which there was a typewriting machine, sat a young lady, who was reading a novel of Miss Marie Corelli's.

"Mr. Devereux is in," she said in answer to their queries, "but he is just about to leave. However, I will take your name and see if he can see you."

Some people would have been annoyed at this fashion of greeting, but to the two simple gentlemen in question it seemed quite right and proper that such a rare bird as an American handwriting expert should be fenced round with a certain ritual.

"Tell Mr. Devereux," said Lord Ellerdine, "that Lord Ellerdine is here. Mr. Devereux knows me."

Unlike the young person in the café, the young lady in the office did not seem at all impressed, but languidly sauntered through the door which led to the inner room. She came back much more quickly than she had entered. "Mr. Devereux begs that you will step in," she said, and once more fell to her enthralling romance as the door closed behind the visitors.

Mr. Devereux was a well-dressed, trim young American with a hard, clean-shaved face. His manner was brisk, business-like, and deferential, and his whole appearance suggested energy and capability.

Upon his large leather-covered writing-table were various appliances used in his business.

One saw a microscope of some peculiar construction. There were a variety of small lenses and reading-glasses, together with various instruments of shining steel for measuring, with extreme accuracy, the length of a letter or a line.

There was also an enlarging camera upon a shelf by the window, and a door in one corner of the place was marked "Dark room."

"Glad to see you again, my lord," said Mr. Devereux. "Not a forgery case this time, I hope?"

"Not a bit of it," Lord Ellerdine replied, shaking hands with the expert. "Glad to see you, Mr. Devereux. No; it is something far more important than a cheque for fifty pounds. It is to do with the Admaston divorce case."

Mr. Devereux started. His face became almost ferret-like in its intentness, while he said nasally, but with suppressed eagerness in his voice, "I guess this is a bit of luck. I have just seen this evening's paper, and of course I have followed the case with great interest from first to last. I know without any possibility of doubt that all my brother experts in London have been consulted. And from the first it has rather hurt me that nobody had come to me, because I do claim——"

Lord Ellerdine interrupted him. "I know, I know," he said; "there is no one that can touch you, Mr. Devereux. But probably, you see——" He hesitated in his effort to soothe the somewhat wounded feelings of the expert.

Colonel Adams came to the rescue. "Well, Mr. Devereux," he said, "here we are, and we have got something very important on which to ask your opinion."

The expert became all attention once more. "What is it?" he said briefly.

Lord Ellerdine put his hand in the breast-pocket of his coat and withdrew a long envelope full of papers.

"I have here," he said, "exact photographs and tracings—everything that you will probably find needful, in fact—of the two letters which you have just been reading about in the evening paper, and which have caused such a tremendous sensation this afternoon. It seems at the moment that Mrs. Admaston has absolutely lost her case. To all outward appearances these letters have ruined her. At the same time, I am certain that she knew nothing about them, and that Mr. Collingwood knew nothing about them either. You follow me?"

Lord Ellerdine had never been so concise and explanatory before, but the occasion had come, and he had risen to it.

"I follow you perfectly," said the expert.

"Very well, then," Lord Ellerdine said; "here are the letters, and I want you to tell me what you think about them."

He gave the envelope to the expert, who withdrew the papers it contained and spread them upon the table.

He began to study them with grave attention. The two men sat in the comfortable chairs he had indicated to them.

"My lord," said the expert, looking up suddenly, "I guess you won't realise the necessity of it, but I should very much like to be left alone for say twenty minutes. I can think better when I am alone, and I gather you want an immediate opinion?"

"We do," Lord Ellerdine replied. "All right; we will go, and come back in half an hour or so."

The two gentlemen re-entered the waiting-room.

"Well, my dear," said Lord Ellerdine briskly to the young lady, "we are put out here while Mr. Devereux examines some papers I have brought in; and he tells us that we are to talk to you—what?"

The young lady put down her volume. "Frightfully cold," she said, "isn't it?" And for the next half-hour Lord Ellerdine and Colonel Adams and this very superior young lady conversed with a studied propriety which certainly did not obtain in the drawing-rooms where the two gentlemen were accustomed to visit.

At the end of that time the door opened and the keen-faced American came out.

He was rubbing his hands briskly as though pleased with himself. "Guess I have got something for you, at anyrate," he said, "if you will come in here."

They re-entered the inner room, and Devereux began. "I can tell you one thing," he said, "and one thing only."

Lord Ellerdine was trembling with excitement. "What is it?" he said breathlessly. "Will it help?"

"It may," the expert replied; "but at anyrate it is this. Those two letters were written by some one who can write with the left hand as well as with the right. There is not the slightest doubt about it, and I don't care what any of your darned English experts may say."

Lord Ellerdine's face fell. "With the left hand?" he asked vaguely.

The expert nodded. "I will explain to you," he said, pulling a large book of manuscripts towards him; and illustrating his theory with swift, decisive movements upon a blank sheet of paper, he showed the two men exactly the reasons for his diagnosis.

"Now, my lord," he said, when he had finished and made certain that both of them thoroughly understood—"now, my lord, all you have to do is to find the person who writes with his or her left hand and could have possibly been sufficiently acquainted with the facts to produce those two letters. When that is done you will have the person."

Lord Ellerdine was considerably disappointed. He had imagined that by some occult means the expert would have been immediately able to name the writer of the letters. He strove to conceal what he felt, however; and after paying Mr. Devereux's fee the two men left the building.

"It isn't much," Lord Ellerdine said, as they got into a cab and drove rapidly towards the West End. "It isn't much, but it is something. I will drop you at your club—Cocoa Tree, isn't it?—and then drive straight to Collingwood's solicitors to find out where he is. It is not much, but it is something," he repeated rather vaguely to himself; and then both men became occupied with their own thoughts and were silent.

CHAPTER VIII

The drawing-room of Mrs. Admaston's house in St. James's was thought by many people to be one of the most delightful rooms in town.

The Morris and æsthetic conventions were entirely ignored in it. There were no soft greys or greens, no patterns of pomegranates, no brown and pleasing sombreness. The room expressed Peggy herself, and was designed entirely by her.

It was large, panelled entirely in white with sparse gilding, and the ceiling was white also, though slightly different in tone. The very few pictures which hung upon the walls were all of the gay Watteau school, and there were some fans painted on silk and framed by Charles Conder.

The furniture was not obtrusive. It was in the light style of the Second Empire, fragile and delicate in appearance, but strong and comfortable enough in experience.

The room was essentially a summer room, and yet one could see that even in winter time it would strike a note of warmth, hospitality, and comfort.

For, with great wisdom, Peggy had made concessions. While the drawing-room still preserved its gay French air, there was, nevertheless, a huge open hearth on which, in winter, logs and coal glowed redly. Now, it was filled with great bunches of the simple pink foxglove.

Standing out from the fireplace, at right angles to the wall, was a large sofa of blue linen; and there was also a big writing-table with a pleasant furniture of chased silver upon it.

This room in the luxurious house was called the "drawing-room," but it was not really that. It was, in fact, Mrs. Admaston's own particular room—she hated the word *boudoir*. The big reception-rooms had no such intimate and pleasant aspect—splendid as they were—as this.

The flowers bloomed on the hearth, the long dull-green curtains had not yet veiled the warm outside evening, when a footman entered and flung open the two big doors which led into this delightful place.

The man stood waiting with one arm stretched out upon one leaf of the door.

Mrs. Admaston and Lady Attwill entered, and Pauline followed them.

"Bring some tea at once," Pauline said in a low voice to the footman.

Then she turned to Peggy. "Madame," she said in a voice full of pain, "do compose yourself. You will be very ill if you go on like this."

Peggy's face was dangerously flushed. Her eyes glittered, her hands clasped and unclasped themselves.

"That letter!" she cried. "That fiendish letter! Who could have sent it? What *devil* planned that trap?"

Lady Attwill shrugged her shoulders. "Anonymous—take no notice," she said.

Peggy turned on her like a whirlwind. "Don't be absurd, Alice!" she cried. "It was sent before we left London. Who knew we should go to Paris? Who knew that we should stay at the Tuileries?"

Pauline was hovering round her mistress with a face that was all anxiety, with hands that trembled to touch and soothe. "Remember, madame," she said, "it was sent to your aunt. Very funny that! She has never liked you, that grim old lady!"

"Why did she dislike me?" Peggy said petulantly.

"Madame, you were gay, happy—like sunbeams. Your old aunt lived in the shadows. She is a dour old maid."

"I don't see what she has to do with it," Peggy answered. "The letter was written by some one who knew that we were going to stay in Paris, and even where we were going to stay."

Lady Attwill went up to the fireplace and sank down upon the sofa of blue linen.

In her smart afternoon costume of grey silk, and a large straw hat upon which the flowers were amethyst and purple, she made a perfect colour-harmony as she sat.

"Why was it sent to her?" Lady Attwill asked.

Peggy sighed. "I don't know, except that she was the one to poison George's mind. Without her he would probably have ignored it. But who was it who *knew* that we should be in Paris that night? No one imagines that I knew or—Pauline. Then there's Dicky—that's absurd."

Peggy's face seemed to have grown older. The terrible ordeal that she had undergone had left vivid traces upon it. It was not a frightened face—it was the face of one who had been agonised, but it was also a face of great perplexity.

Pauline interposed. "Madame," she said, "if you did not know that you would be staying at Paris that night, the writer of that letter must be some one who did know, and who planned this trick to compromise you. There are only two who could have known. Madame—I do not like...."

In the maid's voice the old, harsh Breton determination had flashed out. She turned towards Lady Attwill, and her whole voice and bearing were a challenge.

Her head was pushed a little forward, moving from side to side like a snake about to strike; unconsciously her arms were set akimbo.

Lady Attwill looked languidly at the angry woman. "You need have no delicacy, Pauline," she said. "Ca fait rien, expliquez-vous. Tiens! What you want to say is that the letter was written by Mr. Collingwood or by myself—or by somebody or other procured by us to do it. C'est votre idée, n'est-ce pas?"

The woman, in her way—in her languid way—was defiant as the old Breton *bonne* herself.

Peggy rose and began to walk up and down the room. She had been sitting almost opposite Lady Attwill, but now there seemed to be hesitation and perplexity, not only in her voice, but in her whole attitude.

"But you could not have done it, Alice," she said. "The luggage, don't you know—it was Colling who saw that it was not registered."

"That is only what the porter says," Alice Attwill answered grimly.

"Oh, my dear," Peggy replied, "it is only too obviously true. Pauline saw through it the same night. Didn't you think it was very funny?"

Lady Attwill fell immediately into the suggestion.

"Well, dear," she said, "Dicky and I were a little bit suspicious, since you put it to me; but I hardly liked to suggest——"

Peggy turned from both of them and went up to the piano, standing by it and drumming upon it with her gloved fingers. "Colling!" she muttered. "It's impossible! And yet just now when I left the court I could not think how else it could have been done."

She wheeled round. "Alice," she said, "do you think it *could* have been Colling? Do you? What reason could he have had?"

Alice Attwill's hands were clasped upon her knee. She was bending forward, nodding her head slightly from time to time, and had an almost judicial pose.

She appeared to be thinking. "My dear Peggy," she said at length, "I can see plenty of reasons. After all, we know that Colling won't be sorry if Admaston gets his divorce."

"I beg miladi's pardon," Pauline broke in, "but I do not think that is so."

"C'est bien possible," Lady Attwill replied to the maid. And then, looking at Peggy, "I am sure I can't imagine Mr. Collingwood doing such a thing. I am the last person to make mischief."

She rose as she spoke and walked towards the door. "Come along, Peggy," she said; "you must get your things off—you've had such a horrible day."

Peggy looked at her wildly. She hardly seemed to hear what she was saying.

"No—no—let me think—I must think!" she cried, and there was a rising note of hysteria in her voice.

"Well," Lady Attwill said calmly, "I must get out of my things, at anyrate." Then she spoke with something which sounded like affection in her voice.

"Peggy," she said, "you really must lie down and rest—I shall be down in a few minutes."

With a bright smile she took her parasol and left the room.

Then Peggy let herself go.

"Oh! How cruel it is!" she cried, raging up and down the drawing-room. "They have taken all the joy out of my life! I feel as if they had burnt the damning letter in scarlet upon my breast—branded by law, divorce-court law! Oh, the ignominy, the shame of it all—the shame! It is barbarous! To hold a woman up and torture her before a pruriently minded crowd whether she is guilty or not! Am I guilty because I can't prove that I am innocent?"

The old maid ran up to Peggy and caught her firmly by the arms, pressing her down into a chair.

"Rest! rest!" she said, with the tears rolling down her cheeks. "Mignon, you will break my heart if you go on like this. You are innocent; I stake my soul on that. Wait—wait till to-morrow when I am witness. I will tell them!"

Peggy's arms went round the old maid's neck and she drew the gnarled face to hers. "Pauline," she said, "dear Pauline! They will torture you as they did me. It is useless. Sir Robert Fyffe will make you say just what he wants. It is not justice that triumphs in the end—it is intellect that damns. Pauline, do you think that Mr. Collingwood knew that we should be in Paris that night, and that he wrote the letter?"

Pauline kissed her. "I think, madame," she said, "that M. Collingwood knew that we should be in Paris. But I am certain he did not write that letter. M. Collingwood might have done a very foolish thing, thinking that you loved him—but he is a gentleman."

"But if he did not write it—then you think that Lady Attwill?..."

"Comme vous voulez? If it is not M. Collingwood, madame, it must be Lady Attwill."

"But why should she have done such a fiendish thing?"

"She has never forgiven you for marrying Mr. Admaston. Did I not tell you, madame? Did I not say that to you in Paris?"

Peggy nodded. "Yes, Pauline," she replied; "but I can't believe you. She has seen my misery. No, Pauline, it is impossible!"

"Madame, it is not impossible. She can only conquer by your misery."

Peggy jumped up from the sofa, her whole body shaking, her face aflame with righteous anger. "Pauline!" she said in a shrill voice, "I *must* find out who wrote that letter."

"Yes, madame," the old maid replied, with a despairing gesture of her hands; "but how will you do

it?"

"I shall employ the same weapons to find out that as they have brought against me. The law, the officers, the craft and cunning of the whole machine. I am very rich, Pauline, quite apart from my husband—as you know very well; but, if it cost me every penny I had, I would spend it all, if necessary, to find out who wrote that letter."

The door opened and two footmen came in with the tea equipage. Peggy looked up at them, annoyed at the interruption; then her eye fell upon the windows at the end of the room which led upon a long, secluded terrace outside the drawing-room. It was called the "terrace lounge."

"Not here," she said impatiently; "on the terrace."

The men took the table through the windows, pulling aside the curtains which half veiled the view beyond.

"I'll rest and think, Pauline," Peggy said. "I can always think in that old Sheraton chair on the terrace."

"But if M. Collingwood calls?" Pauline asked.

"Why should he call?" Peggy said. "I see no reason."

"He telephoned asking if you would see him," the maid replied.

"Ah!" Peggy said, with a sudden note of resolve.

It frightened the faithful Breton maid. "Don't see him, madame!" she cried. "Rest!"

"No rest for us yet, Pauline.... I will see him. I *must* see him. Let him be shown in here. Tell me as soon as he comes."

She turned and went through one of the windows just as the two men-servants came out of the other, having arranged the things for tea.

"When M. Collingwood comes," Pauline said, "show him in here."

The first footman bowed. Pauline's word was law in this house; and, though it was bitterly resented below-stairs that she, a servant herself, should have such authority, no one ventured to dispute it.

At the far end of the drawing-room—not the end where the curtained windows led out on to the terrace lounge—there was a tall screen of carved teakwood from Benares. Behind it upon a little table stood a telephone. The Admastons—husband and wife—had always made a great point of using the telephone. Peggy herself, with her impulsive moods, found it most convenient, and insisted upon having one in any room that she habitually used.

Pauline, her face wrinkled in thought, strolled mechanically to this corner of the room and gazed down upon the glittering little machine of ebony and silver with a frown of dislike. She was thinking of Collingwood and his message, and a dull resentment glowed in her brain at these mechanical facilities of life.

There were no telephones in Pont-Aven when she was a girl in the ancient Breton town, and these things seemed to her part and parcel of the hot, feverish, and hurried life in which her beloved mistress was suffering so greatly.

The old *bonne's* face, kindly and sweet enough when it wore its ordinary expression, was now mocking and malevolent as she stared at the table. Suddenly she stiffened, raised her head, and listened intently.

She had heard the door of the drawing-room open and close quietly, and there came a rustle of silk skirts.

Lady Attwill had glided quietly into the room and stepped up to the big writing-table at which Peggy conducted most of her correspondence.

The maid stepped out from behind the screen, her eyes shining curiously. "Can I do anything for madame?" she asked. "Miladi a oublié quelque chose, n'est-ce pas?"

The tall, slim woman seemed strangely confused. Her face was a little flushed, her glance at Pauline distinctly uneasy.

She made an exclamation in French, paused to think, and then answered Pauline in English.

"I thought I left my bag down here," she said lamely.

Without troubling to disguise the suspicion and hostility in her voice, and with a slightly sneering note of triumph in it, as if she was pleased at Alice Attwill's confusion, Pauline made a little mocking bow.

"Madame had her bag in her hand when she went upstairs. But I will ring and ask." She went towards the nearest bell-push.

"No! no!" Lady Attwill answered; "please don't trouble. I must be mistaken."

Without a backward glance she almost hurried from the room.

Pauline's face was now extraordinarily watchful and alert. All the peasant cunning flashed out upon it. Any one who has seen the wives and daughters of the small Breton farmers selling a cow or a pony on market-day in some old-world town has seen this cautious, watchful look. One can see it even on the face and in the eyes of a pointer when birds are near: it is of the soil, primeval, part of the eternal hidden warfare of life.

"Yes, perhaps madame *is* mistaken," the woman said to herself with an ugly grin.

She walked up to the writing-table and looked down upon it thoughtfully.

Suddenly something seemed to strike her and she stretched out her hand to open the great blotter of Nile-green leather, bordered with silver, when the telephone bell rang sharply out into the drawing-room.

She hurried to the telephone. "Who is it?" she said. "What? Yes, this is Admaston House—yes. She is in. Who is it? Yes, sir."

Still holding the receiver in her hand, the woman staggered back from the mouthpiece. She began to tremble violently. Her face became crimson with excitement.

"Oh, sir! she is...."

And now Pauline burst out crying. The tears ran down her cheeks, her old mouth trembled, she seemed upon the point of a breakdown.

"Oh, sir!" she cried again, "she has gone out upon the terrace, and is resting. Monsieur, I can hardly speak to you! Your wife is nearly mad, monsieur! Monsieur, she is innocent—on my soul!"

Her face became intensely eager. "Yes," she sobbed, "come. Yes, by the gate leading from the Park. You have the key. No. Yes, come; I will promise."

With hands that shook terribly, Pauline replaced the receiver on the bracket and came round from behind the Indian screen, walking towards the door. She had not got within three paces of it when it was flung open and the footman announced "Mr. Collingwood."

Roderick Collingwood entered, spruce, *débonnaire* as ever, but showing in his face traces of the ordeal he was passing through.

"Hullo, Pauline; where is madame?" he said.

"Madame is resting," the maid said, with distinct hostility.

"Out upon the terrace?" he answered, moving towards the windows.

Pauline made a swift movement and placed herself between him and the curtains.

"No; I think she is in her room, monsieur. Please wait here."

Collingwood looked at Pauline in some surprise. He seemed hurt. "What is the matter, Pauline?" he said.

"Nothing is the matter, sir. Would you like to see the news?"

She handed him the evening paper from the writing-table. "I will tell madame," she said, and hurried from the room—well knowing that there was another door from the hall by which the terrace could be reached.

Collingwood picked up the paper, opened it, and eagerly scanned the report of the day's proceedings. Then he flung it down with an oath just as a footman entered the room. "Lord Ellerdine wishes to speak to you, sir," said the footman.

"Is he here?" Collingwood replied.

"Yes, sir."

"Show him up at once."

In a moment or two more Lord Ellerdine, looking flurried and hot, entered the drawing-room.

His hat was in his hand, and he was wearing a light grey overcoat.

"My dear Dicky," Collingwood said, "what on earth brings you here?"

Collingwood had risen and strolled over to the big settee of blue linen. He sat down upon it calmly.

"I wanted to ask you something," Lord Ellerdine said in a rather unsteady voice; "so I went round to your solicitors' office, and they told me that I should find you here."

"Well, what is it?" Collingwood asked imperturbably.

"I say, Colling—do you write with your left hand?"

The other made a movement of impatience. "My dear Dicky," he said irritably, "what the devil?..."

"But do you?" Ellerdine insisted.

"Of course I don't," Collingwood answered shortly.

"I thought as much," said Lord Ellerdine, with a sigh of relief.

"You did, did you?" Collingwood replied, with a slight smile. "What is the game, Dicky?"

"It's not a game, Colling; it's dead serious," said the ex-diplomatist.

"Why, Dicky, what's up?"

"You remember some time ago when some silly ass forged my name on a cheque?" Lord Ellerdine asked, still flurried and ill at ease.

"Well?"

"Well, I got to know a handwriting expert—an American—a devilish smart fellow. When we left the court just now, and Peggy was thinking pretty rotten things about you, I thought I would go and have a word with him."

Collingwood's languid manner entirely disappeared. He bent forward with a keen, searching look at his friend. "You found him?" he asked.

Ellerdine nodded.

"Well, what does he say?"

"I showed him the photos of the letters," Lord Ellerdine continued, "and then the originals, and he says that they are written by some one who writes easily and fluently with his left hand."

"Left hand! Great Scott! Is he sure?"

"As sure as an American expert can be of anything," the peer returned.

"That's sure enough," Collingwood replied, shrugging his shoulders and rising up from the sofa.

He began to walk up and down the room. "That clears me, at anyrate," he said. "But what the devil can it all mean, Ellerdine?"

Lord Ellerdine had been looking at his friend, pathetically waiting for a word of praise. Now he ventured upon a little fishing remark:

"Mighty good thing I thought of that American chap—don't you think so, Colling?"

Collingwood hardly seemed to hear him. His head was bent forward and he was deep in thought.

"Yes, Dicky, yes. Left hand, eh?"

"Yes," Lord Ellerdine answered, with a plaintive note in his voice. "I think, Colling, I've handled this business with some skill—what?"

"Left hand," the other repeated, in a brown study.

"With some skill, Colling—what? Skill—what?" Lord Ellerdine bleated.

Collingwood looked up at this note in the other's voice. He suddenly realised that the poor gentleman was pining for praise, and began to administer it in the heartiest possible fashion.

He smacked him on the shoulder and his voice became absolutely jovial. "Skill!" he said. "My dear Dicky, it's splendid! Really, you missed your vocation. Diplomacy! Never! You're a detective, Dicky! A sleuth-hound! A regular Sherlock Holmes, don't you know!"

Lord Ellerdine was the happiest man in the three kingdoms at that moment. His little mouth twitched with pleasure. His face beamed like the rising sun. "I say, Colling, do you think so—do you really think so, Colling?"

"Think so!" Collingwood answered, laughing. "I'm sure of it, old chap"; and then, with a sudden, swift transition of manner, "Dicky, look here—have you told Admaston?"

"Not yet," Lord Ellerdine replied. "George Admaston is hard hit, devilish hard hit. He doesn't believe Peggy's guilty—he'd chuck the case if it wasn't for Fyffe."

"Chuck the case!" Collingwood said eagerly.

"I honestly believe he would," Lord Ellerdine answered. "It's the letter which sticks with Fyffe, and I don't understand it—we come against the beastly thing all the time."

Collingwood nodded. "Yes," he said; "that letter's hell."

He suddenly raised his head. "Look here, Dicky," he said, "I think I hear Peggy coming; so off you go, please. Get your American expert to dine with us to-night at your place, at eight o'clock. Run along."

Ellerdine went to the door. "All right, old chap," he said; "that is what I'll do. Eight o'clock. I'm so glad it wasn't you, old chap—such a dirty business!"

He went out of the room, not noticing that he had left his hat and gloves upon the writing-table.

A moment afterwards Peggy entered, pulling aside the curtains of the terrace window. She started violently when she saw Collingwood. "You here!" she said, and there was an ugly note of apprehension and even of anger in her voice. "You——"

Collingwood went up to her. "Peggy!" he said.

"Wasn't that Dicky I heard?"

"Yes."

Collingwood had hardly said it, and the two were looking at each other strangely enough, when the door leading into the hall opened and Lord Ellerdine came back. "Forgot my hat, old chap," he said, going up to the table. Then he saw Peggy.

"Peggy!" he cried, going up to her and taking one of her hands in both of his. "Buck up, little woman! It'll be all right—we'll pull you through!"

Then he began to hesitate and stammer, while his cheeks flushed and he showed every possible sign of embarrassment.

"Yes," he continued, "we'll pull you through. Won't we, Colling?"

He hesitated, at a loss for words; and then his eye fell upon the table. "Ah!" he said. "My hat—yes—good-bye. Buck up, little woman! And, Colling, don't forget eight o'clock to-night."

Red and shy as a schoolgirl, Lord Ellerdine somehow got himself out of the room.

"Poor, dear old Dicky!" Peggy said with a sigh, more to herself than to her companion; and then, turning, "Colling, why have you come?"

Collingwood held out both his hands. "Peggy—dear little Peggy!" he said. "My heart bleeds for you!"

Peggy stepped back. "Don't let's talk about that," she said swiftly.

"But, Peggy——"

"It is rather late," the girl returned in the same cold voice; "the time for sympathy is long past. Why did you ask to see me?"

There was a deep note of passion in Collingwood's voice as he answered. "I could not let you think what I could see you were thinking," he said.

Peggy did not appear moved in any way. "You promised," she said, "neither to come nor to ask to see me."

"I could not stay away any longer," he answered; and if ever a man had tears in his voice, Collingwood had then.

"Have you come to tell me that the man Stevens is telling a lie, and that our trip to Paris was only accident?"

"No," the man replied. "Peggy dear, can you ever——"

"Colling! Colling! why did you do it?" she wailed.

His body went back suddenly as if he had received an actual blow in the chest.

"Oh, Peggy—for God's sake!..."

"You have thought neither of God nor me," she answered bitterly.

"Of you," he cried—"always of you, Peggy!"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Thought of me would have made you think of all I have had to suffer. Did you think of *me* when you planned to go to Paris? When did you ever think of me—my being—my life—my soul? What excuse can you offer?"

His arms fell to his side, his face was pale and passionate. "Only my love," he answered—"my fierce, burning love. The mad desire to have you for my own. I have thought of nothing else since I met you."

She bent forward and threw out her arm. The little ivory-white hand was palm upwards, and it shook in dreadful accusation.

"Thought of me?" she cried. "Was it thought of me that drove me under the lash of that man's scourge to-day? Was it thought of me that placed me like a criminal in that court to-day? How could you have thought of me and not foreseen the shame, the misery, and the torture to which I have been subjected? Where was your love for me when you were conscious of the mass of evidence these creatures were piling up against me? Did your love of me foresee newsboys rushing about the streets with placards blazing out like letters of fire, 'MRS. ADMASTON ON THE RACK'? Rack, Colling!"

He shook his head with a terrible gesture of sadness.

"No. I did not foresee it," he said, "because you made me believe that you were in earnest—that you loved me. If you had loved me you wouldn't have cared."

"I liked you, Colling, I liked you," she said; and now all the fire had gone from her voice.

"Liked me! Was it mere liking that made you take all those risks? You knew my intention. I told you again and again I wanted him to divorce you."

"I never realised——" the girl said hopelessly.

His voice as he answered her was very soft and tender.

"No, dear; you played with me. I am not blaming you, but don't be too harsh in judging me. I know the torture you are suffering now, Peggy, and I would give my right hand to save you from it. But don't you ever think of the torture you have given me? All the pain, the longing of months and months—is it all to be forgotten? Oh, I know it is no excuse to the others; but you, dear, will know in your heart that I did it because I loved you, thinking to make you happy."

"I think I understand, Colling," Peggy said; "but the letter——"

Collingwood appeared dazed. "The letter!" he murmured.

"Oh, Colling," she answered, "I'll forgive you anything you have done because you loved me; but the letter—you will own up, Colling?"

"Own up?"

"Yes, dear," Peggy said; "my life depends on it. You are a man. You can begin again. Don't see me go under. There is no hope for a woman. Don't stand there and watch me struggle while there is a chance to save me. I'll forgive everything—yes, everything—but the letter."

Collingwood seemed genuinely surprised. His face, which at first appeared perplexed, now showed nothing but astonishment as he realised what she meant. "Peggy—little Peggy," he said, "surely you don't judge me as harshly as that, do you? No, dear; I have done much that I am sorry for—that I shall never be able to forgive myself for as long as I live, but not that. The letter is the work of some one else. I never wrote it."

"Oh, Colling," she replied, "I am so glad—so very glad! But the letter—the letter is everything after all. It means everything to me. Then, if you didn't write it—there is only one other person who could possibly have done so."

"Exactly," Collingwood answered. "Lady Attwill and I were the only two people who knew anything about the Paris trip, who could know anything about it. But the question is, how on earth are we going to prove that she wrote that letter? I do not see any possible way in which it can be done, and I am sure you don't."

"If we prove it," Peggy answered, "do you think it will satisfy George, Colling?"

"Satisfy?" Collingwood replied, seating himself on the edge of the writing-table. "I should think so—he is satisfied already. But still, you know, Peggy, the letter sticks. Why, even Lady Attwill knew that there was nothing between us. It was only the appearance of guilt which she schemed for, and that letter gives it."

"And if we can't prove it, and the worst happens, she hopes to marry George," Peggy said despairingly.

The bitterness of the thought was terrible. It seemed as she sat there that such treachery and black-heartedness were almost incredible. Could the woman who had been her constant friend, who had stayed with her for months at a time, on whom she had lavished innumerable favours, be so base and despicable of soul as this?

Collingwood saw what was passing in her mind, and nodded.

"That is her game without a doubt, Peggy," he said earnestly.

"Then why has she stood by me all these months? Why? Why? That is what I want to know," Peggy said.

Collingwood smiled bitterly. "Why, don't you see?" he said. "Because her devotion to you will touch George, who still loves you."

Peggy's face changed in a moment. "Oh, Colling!" she said, and her voice was inexpressibly pathetic—"oh, Colling, do you think George does love me still?"

"I know he does, and that you love him. My dear, if I could have won you I should not have stayed away all these months; but I owed you that—and I tried to play the game."

"Colling," she answered, in a burst of warmth and kindness, "I never liked you so much as I do now, Colling. I think it is because I feel I can lean upon you and trust you——"

"Poor little Butterfly!" he answered; and there were tears in the eyes of this hardened man of fashion, tears which sprang to his eyes in spite of himself and showed the deep tenderness beneath.

"But, Colling," Peggy went on anxiously, "have we any chance at all of proving it against her? She has been awfully clever about it all, hasn't she?"

Collingwood shook his head rather hopelessly. "I doubt if we have any chance at all," he said. "But there is just one thing—I have just remembered it. I have a sort of clue, and that is one which Dicky has just given me when he was here a few minutes ago."

"Oh! Dicky!" Peggy said, with a wan little smile.

"Well," Collingwood resumed, "of course no one would call Dicky intellectual and that, but I really think there is something in what he said this time. I'll tell you. He has consulted an American handwriting expert about the letters, and he says that they are the work of some one who can write with the left hand. I know that I can't write with my left hand. But what about Alice?"

"I don't know," Peggy answered slowly; "I have never heard of her doing so."

"Or using it more than the ordinary?" Collingwood continued.

"Yes—stay," Peggy replied eagerly. "She is ever so good with it at billiards."

Collingwood laughed.

"Oh, don't laugh, Colling!" she continued—"please don't laugh at me—but I remember she did tell me—yes—that she broke her right arm sleighing when she was a girl, and that she is almost ambidextrous. It has only just come back to me. She told me many years ago."

Collingwood jumped up from the table alert and excited.

"That is something—by Jove! it is," he cried. "Tell me, where is she?"

"She has only gone upstairs for a moment," Peggy said. "I am expecting her down every moment."

"By the way, Peggy," Collingwood asked, "where does she write her letters and things when she is here with you?"

"She always writes there," Peggy answered, pointing to the table, "where you have been sitting."

"Look here," Collingwood said decisively, "when she comes, leave her alone with me. I'll do what I can. I'll tackle her. You had better not be here at all."

"But, Colling, can't I help?" Peggy asked. "I think I might be of use, though of course it will be dreadfully unpleasant. But, for my own sake, I must stick at nothing now."

"No, Peggy," he replied firmly. "I feel I can manage this much better myself. Look here—you go out upon the terrace again. I will just come with you and settle you in your chair—how tired you look!—and then a *mauvais quart d'heure* for Alice, if she ever had one in her life."

"But it may not be true after all," Peggy said, as they walked together towards the long windows.

He shook his head at that. "It must be true," he said; "no one else could have done it; and what you have just told me, and what Dicky said, make it conclusive to my mind."

They passed behind the curtains together, and there was the sound of a chair being moved over the tessellated floor.

THE LAST CHAPTER

Lady Attwill was upstairs in her bedroom.

It was very large, and luxuriously furnished, with Chippendale chairs and Adams ceiling, while the walls were covered with a paper of white upon which, here and there, tiny apple blossoms of pink and grass-green were indicated.

Despite its size, the room felt close, and Alice Attwill had thrown open all the windows to the summer afternoon.

The cooler air, scented with flowers, poured into the place, but she seemed to notice nothing of it.

She walked up and down the room with her feline grace—for this was natural to her, and no careful pose or cultivated mannerism. Her lovely head was bent a little forward as she walked, and the hands which were clasped behind her slim waist folded and unfolded themselves nervously.

The face itself was very white, the eyes glistened, the lips twitched nervously, and there was about her an atmosphere of terror.

She made it herself, this beautiful woman walking up and down a beautiful room; but fear there was in that quiet place, and it did not come in there from the open windows, but radiated out from a guilty mind and a wildly pulsating heart. Every now and again, as she walked up and

down, Alice Attwill moistened her lips with her tongue and glanced at the travelling-clock covered with red leather which stood upon the mantelpiece.

At last she stopped with one thoughtful glance at the clock.

"It'll be all right now," she said to herself. "I am sure they must be beginning to suspect me. Fool that I was! Why, every novel and almost every play has this question of the blotting-book in it. It is such a simple device, and yet in real life how often it *does* happen! Here am I confronted with the worst crisis in my whole life, simply because I forgot the blotting-book."

Clenching her teeth she quietly left the room, descended the wide Georgian stairs into the hall, and opened the door of the drawing-room.

She peered cautiously into the room, now lit up by clusters of electric lights.

Satisfied that no one was there, she closed the door very quietly, and with silent, cat-like steps walked up to the writing-table.

Again, as her hand fell upon the blotting-book, she looked round in an agony of apprehension. Then, opening it hurriedly, she searched among the leaves with a puzzled brow.

Some of the leaves were heavily blotted and no writing upon them was wholly distinguishable, while others only bore a few well-defined imprints.

Her slender, trembling fingers turned over the leaves in an agony of anxiety, but—either she was too agitated or too inexperienced—she was unable to find what she sought.

Suddenly a thought came to her.

The mirror!—yes, that was the thing. By the aid of the mirror she would be able to identify the sheet she wanted at once. She hurried up to the fireplace.

Above it was an oval mirror framed in wood which had been painted white, and, shaking exceedingly, hardly knowing what she did, she held up the heavy blotter with the paper facing the mirror, and slowly turned over the thick white sheets.

While she was doing this, with a perfectly livid face, she heard the faint sound of an advancing footstep.

It was at the very moment when she thought she had discovered what she wanted, and with twitching fingers was about to tear it out from the book.

The sound of the step came from behind the curtains which hung over the windows leading to the terrace.

Lady Attwill almost bounded back to the writing-table and put down the blotter upon it.

She had hardly done so, and was actually closing the book, when the curtains parted with a soft swish and Collingwood came into the room.

He came in jauntily and easily enough, but there was something in his face which made Alice Attwill give a little startled gasp of alarm and despair.

"Writing letters, Alice?" Collingwood said easily, though there was a chill in his voice which sounded like the note of doom in the miserable woman's ears.

"I have finished writing," she said, stammering—"just finished."

Collingwood came up to her without removing his eyes from hers. He came slowly up, with a steady, persistent stare, magnetic, horrible.

"Just got up from writing, eh? That's lucky!" he said. "I want to have a talk with you, Alice—by the way, let me post your letters."

"Please don't trouble," she faltered.

"No trouble, I assure you," he answered, his voice becoming more cold, dangerous, and menacing than ever. "I assure you it is no trouble, Alice. There can't even be a great weight of letters for me to take to the post—because, you see, Peggy and I were here until about two minutes ago."

There was a revolving chair of green leather in front of the writing-table. Lady Attwill sank into it. She felt as if the whole room, with all its contents, was spinning round her with horrible rapidity. She sank into the chair, unable to stand longer; but, even as she did so, one last despairing gleam of hope prompted her to make an effort to show that she was still unconcerned and sitting down in a natural way.

"I hardly expected to see you here," she said in a rather high, staccato voice, the words coming from her one by one as if each separate word was produced with great difficulty.

"Indeed?" Collingwood asked. "And why not?"

The fact that she was sitting down, that she had the arms of the chair to hold, that she was *somewhere*, seemed to give Alice Attwill more courage.

In a voice which was still tremulous, but in which an ugly note of temper was beginning to

displace the abject indications of fear, she answered him.

She pushed her head a little forward, and her eyes shone with malice.

"I should have thought that the revelations of this afternoon would have——"

Collingwood recognised the change of attitude in a moment.

"Closed these doors to those who planned the trip to Paris—yes?"

"I was not thinking of the trip to Paris," she said.

Collingwood shrugged his shoulders. "Because we were partners in that, of course," he replied.

"Partners!" she cried shrilly. "I knew nothing about it. It was you who gave the orders to the porter and booked the rooms—I don't come in anywhere!"

Collingwood folded his arms and stood with his feet somewhat apart, looking down upon her with a face which, in its contempt and strength, once more drove her into an extremity of fear.

When he spoke again his voice had lost its bitterness and contempt, but it had become harsh and imperative. It was the voice of a bullying counsel in the courts—the voice in which a low man speaks to a servant.

"That is your game, is it?" he said. "You never knew of the trip to Paris?"

The woman was spurred up to answer. She met his voice with one precisely in the same key; it was a voice a succession of unfortunate lady's-maids knew very well.

"Absolutely nothing," she said; "where as you—your guilt, my friend, is clear, transparently clear."

She nodded two or three times to emphasise her assertion, and by this time her composure had returned to her and she was ready for anything.

Collingwood, who had been watching her with the most intense scrutiny, had followed with perfect clearness the changes in her voice and attitude. He now knew where he was. The bluff was over, he was about to play his hand.

More particularly than anything else his mind, intensely alert and active at this supreme moment, noticed that Alice Attwill had wheeled round upon her chair and seemed in a most marked way to be interposing herself between him and the writing-table.

It was as though some precious possession lay there of which she feared she would be robbed.

Feeling certain now of the woman's guilt, he said: "Perhaps you are also going to suggest that I wrote that dastardly letter?"

Lady Attwill sneered. "One of us obviously must have written it," she said, "and your motive—well, it is pretty clear, isn't it?"

"And yours," he said—"and isn't yours clear also?"

"Do you think so?" she asked, with a toss of her head.

He bent forward, gazing at her with an almost deadly look of hate.

"Look here," he said: "don't you hope to marry Admaston if Peggy loses this case?"

She was frightened—obviously very frightened; but she did her best to throw it off.

"My dear Colling," she said in a light and airy manner, "you are so imbued with the remarkable excellence of Sir Robert Fyffe's methods that you are imitating him. But you are doing it so badly, Colling—so extremely badly!"

His face did not change in the slightest. It remained as set and firm as before, absolutely uninfluenced by what she was saying.

"Isn't it true that you hope to marry George Admaston?" he repeated in exactly the same tone.

She lifted her pretty left hand in the air and snapped her fingers in a gesture full of mingled insolence and provocation.

"Why should I satisfy your curiosity?" she said.

Again the man, intent upon one great purpose, absolutely not to be deterred from it or to be influenced in any way by what she was saying, repeated his query.

"How can you explain that letter?" he said, in the insistent tone of a judge. "Who else could have written it except you or me?"

Her eyelids fluttered. She looked up at him quickly. "I don't attempt to explain it," she said; "but I certainly agree with you that one of us must have written it—any fool can see that; but which of us?"

She paused for a moment, and then looked him straightly in the face, defiant and at bay at last.

"But which of us?" she repeated. "That's the point upon which we shall differ, Colling."

"I see," he said. "You mean that you will endeavour to father this cowardly trick upon me?"

Alice Attwill smiled bitterly. "The public will judge," she said. "Ever since that night have I not been in constant attendance here, her devoted and trusted friend?—while you—I thought you had been forbidden the house."

"That's a lie," Collingwood said sharply.

"It is quite unnecessary to become abusive," she went on, her voice gaining confidence for a moment and her manner becoming infinitely more assured. "You are in a very tight corner, and the sooner you recognise the fact the better it will be for you."

"You think you can threaten me?" Collingwood asked quietly.

"I know my cards," she replied, "and what I can do with them. You needn't try to bluff me, Colling, for I know your cards too. Even if I did write that letter—how can you ever prove it? You can assert it, but who will believe you—you who stand convicted of decoying your friend's wife to Paris to attempt her seduction?..."

He winced at that. Even in his present mood of penitence and help, it was a palpable hit.

"With your assistance," he said, and that was all.

She pressed her momentary triumph. "So you will assert," she said.... "But I shall deny it—and there is nothing but your word. It will be suggested to you—by Peggy's counsel, if not by Admaston's—that you wrote the letter which has caused all the bother. You will try to put it on to me——"

He interrupted her quickly. "You will never dare to deny it," he said in a voice of conviction.

"My dear, simple friend," she answered, "why not? I loved George Admaston, as you have said. Do you think I shall sacrifice myself and save you? You can make your mind easy on that score. No, my dear Colling, there is only one way out. To-morrow your counsel will have to say that in the face of the evidence to-day he can contest the case no further. Then you will not go into the witness-box."

"Not go into the witness-box?" he asked.

"Admaston will get his divorce," she went on in a final voice, but one in which a note of conciliation had crept. "You will marry Peggy—I shall marry Admaston—and no one will know about the letters. But if you dare to fight, you will leave the court dishonoured. Peggy will never look at you. You take my advice, Colling, and marry the girl you love, and don't try to interfere with my plans, just when victory is assured."

The note of conciliation in her voice stung every fibre of decency, every sense of honour in him. He raised his eyebrows in extreme contempt and surprise. "You must have a pretty poor opinion of me," he said.

"The highest, my dear Colling," she replied; "but the situation is just a little too big for you."

"We shall see," he answered. "You have been very frank with me. I gather that you don't deny your authorship of that infamous letter."

Her face, and indeed her whole manner, had by now become almost indifferent. "I am not called upon to deny anything that cannot be proved," she said. "You have heard this afternoon that the experts have entirely failed to identify the writing. How did you manage to deceive them, Colling? Still, I suppose it is not very difficult to trick a handwriting expert."

"Don't be too disrespectful to experts yet, my lady. I have a notion that a report I have just received from an American expert may give you food for thought. After all, if you hadn't been afraid of these experts you wouldn't have written that second letter three days ago."

She glared at him. "Well, what does your Yankee say?" she asked.

"He has proved conclusively that I could not have written the letter."

At that she jumped up from her seat, still keeping herself between the writing-table and him. "What do you mean?" she said.

Collingwood dealt his trump card. "I mean," he said, "that since you have finished writing your own letters, you will have no objection to my writing there for a moment."

His voice was so pregnant with meaning, so fraught with decision, that Alice Attwill slunk away from the table, trembling, as Collingwood seated himself in the writing-chair.

"Writing what?" she asked almost in a whisper.

"A confession——" he said.

"A confession?"

"—Which you will sign. I intend before I leave this room to have from you a signed confession that you wrote that letter."

"You are proposing to make a long stay," she said, slowly and venomously.

Collingwood did not answer her at all. He took a sheet of paper and wrote a few sentences upon it in a firm, bold handwriting.

When he had finished he held it up to her. "Will you read it through?" he said.

With the utmost carelessness she bent forward over the writing-table. Her manner was that of one who was reading some casual note.

"I have done so," she said at length.

Collingwood fell into her mood. "Now," he said, "if I had your signature to that, *par exemple*, there would be an end of Admaston *versus* Admaston and Collingwood, wouldn't there?"

Alice Attwill smiled. "That is obvious enough," she said.

Collingwood took the paper and opened the blotting-book, while Lady Attwill walked towards the fireplace.

She walked away with the same assumed air of indifference, but, when she heard the heavy leather-and-silver cover fall upon the table, she looked round and watched the man intently.

She saw him blot the confession upon a blank sheet at the beginning of the book, and then with the utmost care and deliberation turn over each separate leaf, scrutinising it like a man who looks at something through a microscope.

Suddenly one page seemed to strike his attention. He smoothed it out, pulled the blotter closer towards him, and took from his pocket photographs of the famous letters in the case.

He put one of the photographs upon a leaf of the blotter and compared them carefully. Then he took a small glass from his pocket and examined the photograph and the page of the blotter with that.

When he had, apparently, satisfied himself, he looked round with a white, stern face to where the defiant but trembling woman was standing by the fireplace.

There was a silence for a moment. It was broken by Lady Attwill saying, "Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes," Collingwood replied; "you can bring me that looking-glass from that small table there."

She looked at him without saying a word.

"You don't seem very eager," he said. "But there is an excellent mirror over the fireplace."

At that, as if hypnotised, she went up to the little table by the piano and took up a small Italian mirror framed in ivory and silver.

She gave it to him. "Well," she asked, "have you solved the mystery?"

"Wait!" he replied. He took the mirror in one hand, propping up the blotter with its back towards him, and looking intently into the glass.

After a moment or two he looked up. "You should be more careful where you blot your letters," he said simply. "You will notice that the impression upon the blotting-paper is not complete—though they obviously tally."

Speechless with terror, she made a sudden snatch at the sheet in the blotter which she had already begun to tear out when his entrance disturbed her.

He caught her by the wrist. "No," he said, very quietly and sternly. "I thought you would do that. I saw you trying to do it when I came in just now. Now, look here—look at the photograph and at the representation of your writing in the mirror. Have you any doubt that the impression upon the blotting-paper is the impression made by the blotting of that letter?"

"And if it is," she said, in one last faint effort, "what does that prove? Why should not you have written it and blotted it?"

"Because, my dear Alice," he replied, "I have not been in this house until this afternoon for six months. Listen! To-day the judge dropped a remark about the importance of finding the paper on which this letter was blotted. You alone knew where it was. Very well, in the sequence of events, Pauline found you here—the first moment the room was empty—with a cock-and-bull story about your bag. A few minutes later I, having heard this from Pauline, find you in the act of destroying this damning evidence—see, it's half torn out already. Come, the game's up."

Aristocrat as she was, something low, vulgar, and malignantly mocking came out upon Lady Attwill's face as Collingwood said this.

"Is it?" she said. "Do you think I am afraid of you and your game of bluff? You have forgotten the important link in your chain. How do you explain the discrepancy in the writing? That writing is not mine."

"Isn't it?" he asked quietly.

"No!" she almost shouted. "A pretty conspiracy!—to damn me and save Peggy Admaston. Why shouldn't Pauline have written it?"

Up to this he had listened to her with some patience. Now his face blazed at her for a moment. He sat down in the writing-chair, pulling it up to the table as he did so. "I'll show you," he said. "Sit down there."

She looked at him defiantly.

"Sit down there," he said again, and she did so. "Now take the pen and write what I dictate," he went on.

He began to dictate, "'Please destroy the other letter....'"

He leant over the table, tapping gently upon it with his knuckles.

"No! the other hand, please," he said.

The woman almost fell over the table.

"With my left hand?" she gasped. "What on earth do you mean? I can't write with my left hand."

"My expert thinks you can," he said sternly. "Come—write; or would you prefer to write to-morrow in court?"

She jumped up, and hysteria mastered her.

"I won't write!" she cried, in a voice which was hardly human. "Neither here nor in court! You can't make me ... the judge can't make me!"

Collingwood punctuated her shrill remarks with gentle taps of his firm hand upon the table. "You shall write to-morrow with all London looking on; they'll know I could not have done it—this book shows that. They'll hear how you tried to tear out the page."

"They won't believe you!" she gasped.

"They'll believe the evidence of Pauline," he went on calmly. "They'll hear from Peggy how you broke your arm and learnt to use your left hand. Every newspaper in England will be full of it. *This* is not the first time you've written with your left hand; there'll be other specimens somewhere—some other witness will be forthcoming. You have been very clever, but the cleverest of people like you bungle in the end. You've got to do it, Alice!"

Once more she sank down in the chair.

Her face was ghastly. "No!" was all that she could say.

"Believe me," he went on more calmly and more kindly—"believe me, you had better write now! Society may never know—Admaston may be generous. Come! Write! And do it quickly."

Absolutely broken and submissive, Lady Attwill took up the pen in her left hand and began to write to Collingwood's dictation.

"Please destroy the other letter...." he began.

She wrote the first word, and then looked up at him with a face which was a white wedge of hate.

"Quickly, please," he said, tapping his foot upon the carpet. "Now, or to-morrow with all London."

The wretched woman bent down once more to her shameful task.

"... and this," he went on, "'and save an old servant who honours the family....'"

Again she looked up at him.

"Quickly!" he said imperatively, rapping his knuckles upon the table. "Quickly!—or—"

Cowed and subdued, she wrote again. "... from the anger of Mrs. Admaston," came the cool, dictating voice.

She finished, and as she did so her head fell upon her arms and she burst into a fit of hysterical sobs—shaking, convulsed, in a terrible downfall of remorse and shame.

Suddenly—as Collingwood held the precious paper in his hand and looked with a certain compassion at his old friend and companion of so many years, whom he had tortured so dreadfully—a high, joyous voice burst into the room.

It was Peggy calling.

The curtains which led to the terrace were pulled aside and she ran into the drawing-room.

Her face was radiant.

"Colling! Colling!" she cried. "George is here!" She hurried up to Collingwood, looking for a moment rather strangely at Alice Attwill.

George Admaston, big, burly, and with all the weariness of the past weeks sponged and smoothed from his face, followed her into the drawing-room.

"Hullo, Colling," he said rather shyly, but with real geniality in his voice.

Collingwood ignored the outstretched hand. "Wait first, please," he said. "Lady Attwill has written you another copy of the letter she wrote three days ago." He handed the confession to Admaston.

There was a dead silence in the room as Admaston scrutinised the confession.

Then he went up to Lady Attwill, crouching over the table as she was, and put his hand not unkindly on her shoulder. "Good God!" he said. "Alice—why did you?"

A lovely tear-stained face looked up into the room.

A broken and unhappy voice sobbed out into the silence, "Let me go; let me go, I say!"

Admaston gently removed his hand. There was a swish of skirts, one deep sob, and then the door closed behind Alice Attwill.

Peggy went up to her husband and clung lovingly to his arm.

She looked at Collingwood. "Colling," she said, "how on earth did you find out?"

Collingwood pointed to the blotter. "Look there," he said.

Peggy and Admaston, still clinging together, went up to the writing-table and stared as if fascinated at the fatal and decisive page.

"Poor Alice!" Collingwood said. "I suppose it is because I have been a bit of a blackguard myself that I can't help feeling sorry for her. Perhaps, Admaston, you will find it in your heart, when the great case is withdrawn to-morrow, to let her down as lightly as possible."

He hesitated for a moment, and then he said in a quiet voice, "I think in her heart she really loved you, don't you know."

Admaston nodded.

"Yes, yes; I see," he said. "I will do what I can."

Collingwood, realising that he had been emotional, pulled himself together with immense aplomb. "It must be a comforting and flattering reflection that, but for the fit of nerves which caused Alice to write that second letter three days ago, there is probably not a judge nor jury in the world which would have refused to make you miserable for life, Admaston."

"You are right, Colling," he said; "but at the moment when no judge nor jury would have doubted her guilt—then, for the first time, I knew in my heart she was innocent."

Collingwood had listened to this, but had also been moving slowly towards the door of the drawing-room.

"But you, Colling——" Peggy said.

Collingwood's hand was upon the door. "Never mind about me," he said. "Peggy, I did a rotten thing because I cared for you, but I've tried to play the game since for the same reason; and if George can really forgive me for just the same reason——"

He stopped, looking with a wan, pathetic, but very tender face at the two who stood there clinging to each other.

Peggy looked up into her husband's face. "George!" she said quietly.

"—I think I'll go on playing it," Collingwood ended.

Admaston did not look at Collingwood, but he looked down at his wife. Then he lifted his head and smiled with a sort of grave kindness at the man by the door.

"I think I can forgive you anything to-day, Colling," he said.

Collingwood half turned the handle. "Good-bye, then, little Butterfly," he said, and there was a dreadful pain in his voice.

Peggy looked up into her husband's face.

What she saw there satisfied her.

She left him and walked shyly towards Collingwood and held out her hand.

He took it, bowed over it as if to kiss it, refrained, and then opened the door.

"Your wings are not really broken—not really," he said in a voice which was absolutely broken.

There was a sound of the soft closing of a door—a little click as it fell into place.

Peggy ran back to her husband and put her hands upon his shoulders.

"My husband!" she said.

He caught her in his arms—in his strong arms.



"He caught her in his arms—in his strong arms."

"Little Peggy!" he answered.

"George!" she said. "I have wanted you so!"

But both Mr. Roderick Collingwood and Lady Alice Attwill dined alone with their thoughts that night.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BUTTERFLY ON THE WHEEL: A NOVEL ***

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