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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK *THE TENTH MAN: A TRAGIC COMEDY IN THREE ACTS* ***



Characters
The First Act
The Second Act
The Third Act

THE TENTH MAN
PLAYS BY W. S. MAUGHAM
Uniform with this volume

JACK STRAW
PENELOPE
MRS. DOT
THE EXPLORER
A MAN OF HONOUR
LADY FREDERICK
SMITH
LANDED GENTRY

CHICAGO: THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

THE TENTH MAN

A TRAGIC COMEDY

In Three Acts

By W. S. MAUGHAM

CHICAGO:
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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This play was produced on the 24th February, 1910, with the following cast:

GEORGE WINTER	ARTHUR BOURCHIER
LORD FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM	EDMUND MAURICE
MR. PERIGAL	A. HOLMES GORE
JAMES FORD	A. E. GEORGE
ROBERT COLBY, M.P.	GODFREY TEARLE
FREDERICK BENNETT	MICHAEL SHERBROKE
COLONEL BOYCE	FRANK ATHERLEY
REV. WILLIAM SWALECLIFFE	GEORGE BEALLY
EDWARD O'DONNELL	DOUGLAS IMBERT
BUTLER	DALLAS CAIRNS
LADY FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM	KATE SERGEANTSON
CATHERINE WINTER	FRANCIS DILLON
ANNE	DAISY MARKHAM

THE TENTH MAN

CHARACTERS

GEORGE WINTER, M.P.
LORD FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM
ROBERT COLBY, M.P.
MR. PERIGAL
JAMES FORD
COLONEL BOYCE
REV. WILLIAM SWALECLIFFE
FREDERICK BENNETT
EDWARD O'DONNELL
BUTLER at Lord Francis Etchingham's
WAITER at the Great Northern Hotel
CATHERINE WINTER
LADY FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM
ANNE

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THE TENTH MAN

THE FIRST ACT

SCENE: *A drawing-room at LORD FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM'S house in Norfolk Street, Park Lane. An Adam room, with bright chintzes on the furniture, photographs on the chimney-piece and the piano, and a great many flowers. There is an archway at the back, leading into*

another drawing-room, and it is through this that visitors are introduced by the butler. On the left is a large bow window, and on the right a door leading into the library.

LORD and LADY FRANCIS.

LORD FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM *is a man of fifty, of the middle height, rather bald, with an amiable, weak face. He is a good-natured person, anxious to do his best in all things and to all people so long as he is not bored. He wants everything to go smoothly. He has a comfortable idea of his own capacity. Reduced circumstances have drawn him into affairs, and he regards himself as a fine man of business. LADY FRANCIS is a handsome and well-preserved woman of the same age as her husband, with dyed red hair; she has a massive, almost an imposing, presence, and she is admirably gowned. She treats her husband with good-humoured scorn, aware of his foibles, but amused rather than annoyed by them. When the curtain rises FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM is a prey to the liveliest vexation. He is walking nervously across the room, while his wife, with a thin smile, stands quietly watching him. With a gesture of irritation he flings himself into a chair.*

ETCHINGHAM.

Why the dickens didn't you tell me last night, Angela?

LADY FRANCIS.

[*Smiling.*] I had no wish to disturb my night's rest.

ETCHINGHAM.

Upon my soul, I don't know what you mean. It's incomprehensible to me that you should have slept like a top. I couldn't have closed my eyes the whole night.

LADY FRANCIS.

I know. And you would have taken excellent care that I shouldn't close mine either.

ETCHINGHAM.

I should have thought I had enough to do without being pestered with a foolish woman's matrimonial difficulties.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*With a laugh.*] You really have a very detached way of looking at things, Frank. No one would imagine, to hear you speak, that the foolish woman in question was your daughter.

ETCHINGHAM.

Really, Angela, I must beg you not to make this a subject of flippancy.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Well, what do you propose to do?

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Flying out of his chair.*] Do? What do you expect me to do? You tell me that Kate came home at twelve o'clock last night without a stitch of clothing....

LADY FRANCIS.

My dear, if I told you that I was most unwarrantably distorting the truth.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Irritably correcting himself.*] In a ball dress, with an opera cloak on—without her luggage, without even a dressing-case—and informs you that she's left her husband.... It's absurd.

LADY FRANCIS.

Quite absurd. And so unnecessarily dramatic.

ETCHINGHAM.

And when's she going home?

LADY FRANCIS.

She assures me that she's not going home.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Almost beside himself.*] She's not going to stay here?

LADY FRANCIS.

Those are her plans at the moment.

ETCHINGHAM.

And George?

LADY FRANCIS.

Well?

ETCHINGHAM.

You don't suppose her husband's going to put up with this nonsense? Has he made no sign?

LADY FRANCIS.

Ten minutes after she arrived he sent a messenger boy—with a toothbrush.

ETCHINGHAM.

Why a toothbrush?

LADY FRANCIS.

I don't know. Presumably to brush her teeth.

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, that shows he doesn't look upon the matter as serious. Of course, it was a whim on Kate's part. Luckily he's coming here this morning....

LADY FRANCIS.

[*Interrupting.*] Is he?

ETCHINGHAM.

Yes, he promised to fetch me in his car. We're going to drive down to the City together. I'll bring him in, and meanwhile you can talk to Kate. I dare say she's thought better of it already. It only wants a little tact, and we can settle the whole thing. George is clever enough to have given some plausible explanation to the servants.

LADY FRANCIS.

Are you really under the impression things are going to pass off in that way?

ETCHINGHAM.

Why not?

LADY FRANCIS.

They say it's a wise man who knows his own father, but it's apparently a wiser man still who knows his own daughter.

ETCHINGHAM.

Angela, for goodness' sake don't try to be bright and amusing.

LADY FRANCIS.

Do you know so little of Kate as to imagine she would have taken a step of this kind without having quite made up her mind?

ETCHINGHAM.

You don't mean to say you think Kate will refuse to go back to her husband?

LADY FRANCIS.

I do.

ETCHINGHAM.

But what reasons does she give? Why did she say she left him?

LADY FRANCIS.

She gave no reasons. She merely stated the fact and asked if I could put her up.

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, she must go back to her husband.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*As if it were the most innocent question.*] Why?

ETCHINGHAM.

Because a woman's place is by her husband's side, Angela. You know just as well as I do that I can't afford to quarrel with George Winter. I'm chairman of half a dozen of his companies. The position would be intolerable. I should be expected to take Kate's side if she were right or wrong.

LADY FRANCIS.

I suppose you owe him money?

ETCHINGHAM.

No, not exactly.

LADY FRANCIS.

Ah! [*With a shrewd look at him and a smile.*] And how much is it that you—don't exactly owe him?

ETCHINGHAM.

We're mixed up together in any number of business undertakings, and naturally we have a sort of running account. If we settled up I dare say I should have to find something like fifteen thousand pounds.

LADY FRANCIS.

Good heavens, I thought you'd been making money.

ETCHINGHAM.

Yes, I did, but the fact is, we've been very badly hit lately. Practically all our interests are in Central America, and we couldn't foresee that there'd be a revolution there.

LADY FRANCIS.

The possibility might have crossed your mind.

ETCHINGHAM.

Oh, I knew you'd blame me. And I suppose you'll blame me because a confounded earthquake smashed up one of our railways.

LADY FRANCIS.

And how d'you propose to raise fifteen thousand pounds?

ETCHINGHAM.

That's just it. It would be devilish awkward. And George is in a confounded tight place too.

LADY FRANCIS.

You'd better talk to Kate. I'll send for her.

[She touches a bell, and gives her order down a speaking tube.]

LADY FRANCIS.

Ask Mrs. Winter to be good enough to come to the drawing room.

ETCHINGHAM.

You must talk to her seriously, Angela. You must tell her that her behaviour is outrageous.

LADY FRANCIS.

[With a chuckle.] No, my dear. You are going to talk to her.

[CATHERINE WINTER comes in. She is a graceful woman, with a strong, passionate face; and her expression, rather tired but self-contained and resolute, suggests that she has endured great trouble and is now making a desperate effort to escape. She is very simply dressed and wears no jewellery but her wedding ring.]

CATHERINE.

Good-morning, father.

[She goes up to LORD FRANCIS and kisses his cheek.]

ETCHINGHAM.

[With elaborate politeness.] Be so good as to sit down, Catherine.

[CATHERINE exchanges with her mother a glance of faint amusement and takes a seat.]

ETCHINGHAM.

[With a fine assumption of paternal authority.] I want to talk to you. Your mother and I have sent for you.... *[Breaking out.]* Now what does all this mean? It's ridiculous nonsense. You're surely old enough to have learnt a little self-control.

CATHERINE.

[Calmly.] I've shown a good deal of self-control during the four years of my married life, father. I was afraid it was growing into a habit.

ETCHINGHAM.

Am I to understand that what your mother tells me is true?

CATHERINE.

[Quietly.] I lived with George as long as I could. I put up with more than any woman I know would have done. But there are some things no one should suffer who has any self-respect.

ETCHINGHAM.

You've never complained before of George's behaviour.

CATHERINE.

No.

ETCHINGHAM.

Why have you never said a word to your mother about it? I can't imagine why you shouldn't get on with George. I don't suppose you've ever expressed a whim that he hasn't gratified. Your allowance is princely. Your pearls are the envy of every woman in London.

CATHERINE.

Oh, yes, he's generous. My pearls have been a splendid advertisement.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Ignoring the second sentence and pouncing on the admission.*] Then what have you got to complain of?

CATHERINE.

I dare say my mother knows what half London is chattering about.

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, Angela?

LADY FRANCIS.

Oh, my dear, I hoped it was idle gossip. A man as much in the public eye as George Winter—the most prominent financier of the moment—is certain to be talked about.

ETCHINGHAM.

I suppose he's been flirting with two or three pretty women.

LADY FRANCIS.

I understand things are supposed to have gone rather further than that.

ETCHINGHAM.

That's the kind of thing a tactful woman must close her eyes to. You're a woman of the world, Kate. You know what men are. You must extend a certain degree of licence to a man of George Winter's temperament.

CATHERINE.

You don't understand, father. I bore my life till I couldn't bear it any longer. I'm not the sort of woman to make scenes. I held my tongue, I closed my eyes, till something happened which I couldn't endure. I've left him fully decided to divorce him. Nothing that you can say will move me.

ETCHINGHAM.

But you can't divorce him. You've accused him of nothing but infidelity. You can't be so ignorant of the law....

CATHERINE.

[*Interrupting.*] I'm not at all ignorant of the law. I assure you that he has complied fully with all the conditions which are needful.

LADY FRANCIS.

Kate.

CATHERINE.

Please don't ask me. I feel that my whole soul is foul with....

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, of course there are always two sides to every question.

CATHERINE.

Oh, father, you're not going to tell me that that, too, is usual in polite society, for a man to.... Oh!

[*She gives a gesture and a cry of disgust.*]

LADY FRANCIS.

I wonder if you'd go and read your *Times*, Frank. I should like to talk to Katie alone.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*With a look from his wife to his daughter.*] Eh, very well. Perhaps you can do something with her. Tell her what it means if she persists. I suppose I shall find the *Times* in the library.

[*He goes out.*]

LADY FRANCIS.

[*With a smile.*] Your father has such a power of delusion. He never looks at anything but the *Daily Mail*, but he's quite convinced that he reads nothing but the *Times*.

CATHERINE.

[*Passionately.*] Oh, mother, you'll stand by me, won't you? You know what I've gone through. If you care for me at all you must have some pity.

[LADY FRANCIS *looks at her coolly. She is quite unmoved by the vehemence of the appeal. She pauses for a moment before answering.*

LADY FRANCIS.

Why have you chosen this particular moment to leave your husband?

CATHERINE.

There are limits to human endurance.

LADY FRANCIS.

You've lived a good deal apart. Like civilized people you've made the best of a mutual want of sympathy. I should have thought George interfered with you very little. I have an idea that no woman would care to undergo the—inconvenience of proceedings for divorce without a very good reason. You've got a peculiarly fastidious taste, Katie. It must be something rather out of the way that induces you to expose your private life to all and sundry.

CATHERINE.

It's merely a choice of ignominies.

[LADY FRANCIS *pauses an instant, then raps out the question sharply.*

LADY FRANCIS.

Are you in love?

CATHERINE.

You have no right to ask me that, mother.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*With a slight smile.*] Your indignation is almost an answer in itself, isn't it? I suppose you want to marry.

[CATHERINE *does not answer. She takes a step or two impatiently.*

LADY FRANCIS.

Well?

CATHERINE.

I've got nothing to be ashamed of.

LADY FRANCIS.

In that case, I should have thought you had nothing to conceal.

CATHERINE.

[*Defiantly.*] I haven't. When I thought that everything was over for me and that life was meaningless, I found it was only just beginning. And I thanked God for all I'd gone through because perhaps it made me less unfit for the great love that descended upon me.

LADY FRANCIS.

It's Robert Colby, isn't it?

CATHERINE.

Yes.

LADY FRANCIS.

And you've made your arrangements, I suppose, to be married as soon as the decree is made absolute?

CATHERINE.

We haven't discussed the matter.

LADY FRANCIS.

But still, I may take it that is the intention?

CATHERINE.

Yes.

LADY FRANCIS.

Your father wishes me to tell you that if you quarrel with George it will ruin him. He could hardly keep the position that George has given him on his various boards.

CATHERINE.

You will be no worse off than before I married.

LADY FRANCIS.

Except that it appears your father owes George fifteen thousand pounds.

CATHERINE.

Do you want to cheat me again out of the little happiness that seems in store for me?

LADY FRANCIS.

I want you to do what is right in your own eyes.

CATHERINE.

How can you be so cruel?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Opening the door.*] May I come in?

[*He enters with FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM. GEORGE WINTER is a man of powerful build, with fine hair and fine eyes; he wears a short red beard. He is inclined to corpulence, but bears himself with an attractive swagger. He is a jovial, bland fellow. He appears to be the best-natured person in the world, and his great astuteness suggests itself only now and then in a look of his eyes. He has admirable control over an execrable temper. CATHERINE turns round with a startled cry at the sound of her husband's voice.*]

CATHERINE.

George!

GEORGE WINTER.

My dear, look pleased to see me. It's only decent.

CATHERINE.

It's infamous that you should come here. If you had any decent feeling....

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Blandly.*] My dear child, I had a business engagement with your father. It's unreasonable to expect me not to keep it because you have temporarily abandoned the conjugal roof.

CATHERINE.

[*To her father.*] You might have warned me.

ETCHINGHAM.

My dear, I was hoping that after a talk with your mother you'd have....

CATHERINE.

[*Interrupting.*] What can I do to show you that I've made up my mind for good and all?

GEORGE WINTER.

Even after one's made up one's mind, it's not too late to listen to reason.

LADY FRANCIS.

I think for all our sakes you should listen to anything that George has to say.

CATHERINE.

[*To GEORGE WINTER.*] Do you understand what my mother means?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a little chuckle.*] I dimly suspect.

CATHERINE.

My father owes you a lot of money. He's chairman of half your companies. He thinks that if I divorce you he'll have to pay that money....

GEORGE WINTER.

I'm sure his sense of delicacy would prevent him from remaining in my debt.

CATHERINE.

And you'll make him resign his directorships?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With his tongue in his cheek.*] I know him well enough to feel certain that he would never wish to retain them.

CATHERINE.

Oh, it's vile.

GEORGE WINTER.

Or is it common sense?

[There is a moment's pause, and when GEORGE WINTER speaks it is with great seriousness.]

GEORGE WINTER.

Now look here, Kate; listen to me carefully. You know that all our interests are in Central America. The Lewishams had it all their own way out there till I came along. They owned the railways and the mines and the trams—everything that was worth having. Well, I knew I couldn't oust them, but I thought I could make them take me in. I've been fighting them tooth and nail for ten years. They've done all they could to smash me by fair means and foul, but they haven't succeeded. And now I'm in sight of my goal. I can force them to come to terms.

CATHERINE.

All this is nothing to me.

GEORGE WINTER.

The Lewishams got on to a big thing—a mine called the Campo del Oro. But that earthquake the other day queered their pitch, and they offered bills when hard cash was the only thing to do the trick. I thought that what was good enough for the Lewishams was good enough for me. I knew that if I could get it they'd have to take me in. I had two hours to think it over. I found the cash and bought the mine last week.

CATHERINE.

It doesn't interest me.

GEORGE WINTER.

It will. I sent Macdonald out there.

ETCHINGHAM.

Macdonald is George's expert. He's the soundest man in the profession.

GEORGE WINTER.

And straight, straight as a die. I'm expecting his report every day. He may cable me at any moment. Then I shall get to work. I'm going to float the mine as a company with a capital of half a million. Your father will be chairman, and he ought to make close on fifty thousand out of it. For a reason I needn't tell you, we can't afford to wait. We must have ready money, and that means floating the company at once. My only chance is in Middlepool, where three parts of my backing have come from before. We shall soon be in the middle of a General Election. And you know how uncertain my seat in Middlepool is. I keep it only by my personal popularity. I'm at the mercy of the Nonconformists, and if there's talk of a divorce it's all U.P. with me. They'll make me retire before the election, and if that happens the new company won't stand a dog's chance.

LADY FRANCIS.

Why?

GEORGE WINTER.

Because with the general public nervous, I shall have to depend on Middlepool, and there I can only float it on my personal character.

CATHERINE.

I'm afraid you'll think it very selfish, but I haven't any more power of self-sacrifice in me.

GEORGE WINTER.

If the Campo del Oro is a failure, it'll knock down all the other companies I'm connected with. The Lewishams will seize the opportunity to make a raid on me. I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, and anyone who cares to give me a shove will send me over.... It'll mean your father's ruin and mine—I dare say you don't mind that—but it'll also mean the ruin of thousands of poor investors all over the country. Three-quarters of the population of Middlepool will lose their savings.

CATHERINE.

You've lied to me so often, George.

GEORGE WINTER.

I can show you by plain figures that every word I say is true.

CATHERINE.

I haven't much sympathy with the gamblers who want to make money without working for it. If they lose, it's their own look out.

[There is a pause. GEORGE WINTER looks at her and nods to himself.]

GEORGE WINTER.

[To ETCHINGHAM.] I think you'd better go now. The rest of our conversation doesn't need any listeners.

CATHERINE.

I have nothing more to say to you.

GEORGE WINTER.

Don't be a damned fool. It's a matter of life and death to me, and d'you think I'm going to ... [*He stops.*] Please, Lady Francis.

LADY FRANCIS.

Of course we'll leave you. Come, Frank.

[*LADY FRANCIS and her husband go out.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a twinkle in his eye.*] I don't think your elopement receives the unqualified approval of your parents.

CATHERINE.

D'you want to repeat that odious scene of last night? Surely we said all that we had to say to one another.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] You know, I wouldn't have played the fool with other women if you hadn't shown me very clearly that you didn't want to have anything to do with me.

CATHERINE.

I would rather not discuss that.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a chuckle.*] After all, it isn't as if I cared a tinker's cuss for the whole lot of them.

CATHERINE.

[*Flushing.*] And you think that makes it any better? I think I could have forgiven you if you'd had any love for those wretched women. But it wasn't even that. You exposed me to all that humiliation merely to gratify your vanity. When I've seen how you've treated those women I, even I, have been sorry for them.

GEORGE WINTER.

If you like I'll give you my solemn word of honour that you shall have no cause to complain in future.

CATHERINE.

It's too late. You've given me my chance of freedom and I mean to take it.

GEORGE WINTER.

You're not keeping your part of the bargain.

CATHERINE.

What d'you mean?

GEORGE WINTER.

You didn't marry me because you were in love with me....

CATHERINE.

[*Interrupting.*] That's not true.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a smile.*] Think.

CATHERINE.

[*Hesitating.*] A year ago I would have said again that it wasn't true. I didn't know what love was.

GEORGE WINTER.

You married me because I was rich.

CATHERINE.

[*Passionately.*] No, no.

GEORGE WINTER.

I'd just won a seat that they'd given me because they thought I hadn't a chance. I won it off my own bat, because I imposed myself on Middlepool and forced them to vote for me. I was in the public eye. I was a power already. The world seemed at my feet.

CATHERINE.

All that's very harmless. You flattered me. The life you offered me seemed so large, so full, and I was very young. I was dazzled by your brilliancy and your success. I mistook it for love.

GEORGE WINTER.

And I married you because I wanted a wife. You happened to have an uncle who's a duke, and aristocratic connexions are devilish useful in England to a Radical politician.

CATHERINE.

[*Bitterly.*] Oh, yes, I found out soon enough why you married me.

GEORGE WINTER.

It was a business arrangement on both sides, and you've had your full share of the profits.

CATHERINE.

[*Outraged.*] Oh, how can you?

GEORGE WINTER.

You'd always lived in a pokey way and I gave you magnificence. I've kept even the spirit of my part of the bargain. Your father wasn't mentioned in the settlements. But every stick of furniture in this house has been bought with my money. The very clothes on your mother's back are paid for by me.

CATHERINE.

That's not true.

GEORGE WINTER.

You don't think your father is worth the money I give him. He's as incompetent as all the rest of these damned fools who come from the West-End and think they can make money in the City. The nincompoop thinks himself a financial authority. The charwoman of a bucket-shop could give him points.

CATHERINE.

He has his name and his position.

GEORGE WINTER.

Nowadays even a country curate will fight shy of a title on a prospectus. The salaries he gets are merely payments for you.

CATHERINE.

Oh, you've said all this so often. For years you've bullied me with your money. I was such a fool, because you said it was dishonest of me to go, rather than that even you should have the smallest cause to blame me, I bore everything. I clenched my hands and suffered.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a chuckle.*] In a diamond tiara and a Paquin dress.

CATHERINE.

I thought I should have the strength to suffer to the end. But I haven't. If you bought an article and it hasn't turned out worth the money you gave for it, that's your look out. You see, you've taught me something after all.

[*A very short pause. GEORGE WINTER makes up his mind to try compromise.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Now, look here; I'm willing to meet you half-way. I don't ask you to come back to me. You can live as you like and where you like. I'll give you five thousand a year. Your father can keep his directorships. The only thing I ask is that you shouldn't apply for a divorce and that you should appear with me at certain public functions.

CATHERINE.

[*Passionately.*] I want to be free. I've lived in an atmosphere of lies and hypocrisy till I can hardly breathe. Your good nature is merely a pose. Your generosity is merely an advertisement. You care for nothing but your own self-advancement. And I want to be rid of the horrible feeling that all sorts of shady things are going on around me that I don't know.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Sharply.*] What d'you mean?

CATHERINE.

I know that you're not honest.

[*With a cry of rage GEORGE WINTER seizes her by the shoulders violently. His passion for the moment is uncontrollable.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

What d'you mean? What d'you mean? What d'you mean?

CATHERINE.

You're hurting me.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*In his rage hardly able to articulate.*] Damn you, how dare you say that to me?

CATHERINE.

Let me go.

GEORGE WINTER.

Why don't you answer? What d'you mean?

CATHERINE.

[*Shaking herself free.*] I'll tell you what I mean. I know that if the occasion arose you wouldn't hesitate to steal.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a laugh of relief.*] Is that all?

CATHERINE.

For years I've been tortured by the horror of it. Each pearl you've given me—and you've thrust them upon me—I've asked myself if it was honestly come by. And that's why I want to escape from you—not only because you've been odiously cruel to me, even now when you're trying to persuade me to return to you, and because you've flaunted before me one vulgar intrigue after another—but because I feel that all this wealth rests on lying, and swindling, and roguery.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Banteringly.*] Well, you must confess that so far I've been eminently successful in not getting found out.

CATHERINE.

[*Taking no notice of his remark.*] And now surely you have nothing more to say to me.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a bland smile.*] My dear, knowing how important it is to me that you should return to the conjugal roof, you don't imagine I have come without some means to persuade you.

CATHERINE.

I assure you you're wasting your time. You've always told me it was valuable.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*In his most delightful manner.*] You seem to be under the delusion it rests with you to make conditions.

CATHERINE.

I make no conditions. I merely announce my decision.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Taking a letter from his pocket and quietly smoothing it out on a table.*] I've never suffered from that form of snobbishness which makes many self-made men hurl their origin in the face of a British public only too anxious to pretend it thinks them the scions of a noble house. But I have never concealed from you that mine was humble.

CATHERINE.

[*Suspiciously.*] What is that paper?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Ignoring the question.*] That is one of the pills you had to swallow when I married you and your excellent but impoverished family. I started life with neither friend nor money, but with exceptionally fine parts. I soon discovered that the simplest way to succeed is by blackmail. It is astonishing how many men keep a large-sized skeleton in their cupboards. If you only get a sight of those discreditable bones, you can often make a whole family your bosom friends. I'm not boring you, am I?

CATHERINE.

You're torturing me.

GEORGE WINTER.

This is a copy of a letter which you may remember. The original was so crumpled that I can't help thinking you were romantic enough to sleep with it under your pillow. It begins: My very dear friend....

CATHERINE.

[*Interrupting.*] How did you get that?

GEORGE WINTER.

I can never understand why people are such fools as to write love-letters. I never do. I only send telegrams.

CATHERINE.

[*With flashing eyes.*] You didn't go to my dressing-case?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Amused.*] I did indeed.

CATHERINE.

[*Looking at the Bramah-key on her bracelet.*] You broke it open?

GEORGE WINTER.

When I made you a present of your dressing-case, I kept the duplicate key in case you lost yours.

CATHERINE.

It's infamous. It's—it's just like you.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Smiling.*] Why on earth were you so incautious as to leave it behind?

CATHERINE.

[*Indignantly.*] I thought I could trust you. It never struck me that you'd pry into my private papers.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a chuckle.*] Nonsense. You were so taken with the dramatic gesture of leaving the house in a pink satin opera cloak that you forgot all about it.

CATHERINE.

There's nothing in any of my letters that I'm ashamed of.

GEORGE WINTER.

Would you like to look at this one?

CATHERINE.

[*Refusing to take it.*] I know that there can be absolutely no harm in it.

GEORGE WINTER.

I wonder what a clever counsel would make of it. I can imagine it read in such a manner that those vague words should gather form and substance. A little irony, a grotesque emphasis here and there, and I can see the junior bar rolling with laughter. I don't imagine a parliamentary light like your friend Robert Colby would take ridicule very well. It's only by his entire lack of humour that he's risen to the exalted position he now adorns.

CATHERINE.

[*Frightened.*] What d'you mean, George?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Good-humouredly.*] My dear, I'm going to bring a counter petition, that's all. You want to wash your dirty linen in public, let's have an entire spring cleaning.

CATHERINE.

[*Scornfully.*] Oh, my dear George, if you only knew how indifferent I am to such a threat! We haven't done anything with which we can reproach ourselves.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Banteringly.*] You astonish me, my dear Kate. Surely it can't have slipped your memory that Robert Colby, snatching a brief and well-earned holiday from affairs of state, made a tour of North Italy last Easter, and you accompanied him.

CATHERINE.

[*Flaring up.*] That's not true. You know it's not true. I went with Barbara Herbert....

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Interrupting, with a twinkle in his eye.*] And a maid. It's always a little unsafe to trust maids, especially Scotch maids with strongly religious principles.

CATHERINE.

What have you been doing?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Taking a paper out of his pocket.*] Here is another interesting little document that I've been at some pains to acquire. Being, alas! aware that the wife of my bosom might—turn troublesome one day or another, I thought it safe to have a weapon in my hand for future use. It is a list of the hotels at which you stayed. Shall I read it to you?

CATHERINE.

If you choose.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Hugely amused.*] At Milan you stayed at the *Palace*, and Robert Colby at the *Cavour*.

CATHERINE.

[*Sarcastically.*] Damning, isn't it?

GEORGE WINTER.

But perhaps finding the *Palace* noisy, and trusting in Mr. Robert Colby's better judgment, at Venice you both stayed at the *Danielli*.

CATHERINE.

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] Where else should one stay?

GEORGE WINTER.

I find in my Baedeker that there are twenty-seven hotels in Venice, but I daresay it was very natural that you should both hit upon the *Danielli*. And you took the precaution of arriving twenty hours after him. But at Ravenna, flinging prudence to the winds, you arrived on the same day, by the same train, and you put up at the same hotel.

CATHERINE.

There is only one.

GEORGE WINTER.

You had rooms seventeen and eighteen, and Barbara Herbert had room five.

CATHERINE.

There was only one vacant room on the first floor, and of course I insisted that Barbara should take it.

GEORGE WINTER.

Unselfish in the extreme, and just like you, my dear; but don't you think it was a little indiscreet?

CATHERINE.

We had nothing to be ashamed of, and therefore we had nothing to fear.

GEORGE WINTER.

I've often thought that was the greatest drawback of innocence. It makes one so devilish imprudent.

CATHERINE.

I went to Italy with your express consent. I wrote and told you that I'd met Robert Colby. Chance threw us together in Venice; we found we were making practically the same tour, and we joined forces. I saw no harm in it. I see no harm in it now. You can make what use of the admissions you like.

GEORGE WINTER.

And do you think you will be able to persuade a British jury that you and Robert Colby travelled through Italy together merely to look at churches and pictures?

CATHERINE.

George, I know now that I never cared for you, but I promise you on my word of honour that I've never been unfaithful to you.

GEORGE WINTER.

My dear, it's not a question of convincing me—I am the most trusting, the most credulous of mortals—but of convincing the twelve good men and true who form a British jury.

CATHERINE.

You're not a fool, George. You know people, and you know what I'm capable of and what I'm not. In your heart you're certain that I've done nothing that can give you any cause for complaint. I've suffered a great deal during these four years—I wouldn't wish my worst enemy to go through what I have—I implore you not to drag me through this horror.

GEORGE WINTER.

My dear, your simple-mindedness positively takes me aback.

CATHERINE.

[*Indignantly.*] How can you be so ignoble?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Dropping his bantering tone, quickly and sternly.*] You must know me very little, Kate. My whole life is at stake, and you think I'm going to be moved by entreaties or abuse? I'm at the most critical point of my career. Part of my strength is that I never deceive myself. I'm only an adventurer. My millions are paper millions, and I want to be in such a position that if I'm in need of half a million I can go to the big men and get it, and if one of them asks me for half a million I can afford to put it down. And now, if only I hold on, I shall get everything I want. And you come and whine before me and play the fool. What d'you think I care for your twopenny-halfpenny love-affairs? Do what you like. I don't care, so long as you're not flagrant.

CATHERINE.

[*Indignantly.*] Oh!

GEORGE WINTER.

That anyone can be such a fool as to let love interfere with his life! It's so unimportant.

CATHERINE.

To me it means the whole world.

GEORGE WINTER.

Well, I give you your choice. If you bring an action against me I bring a counter-petition.

CATHERINE.

[*Stung into defiance.*] My choice is made long ago. I'm strong in my innocence.

GEORGE WINTER.

You'll ruin me and ruin your father, but you'll ruin Robert Colby as well.

CATHERINE.

[*Quickly.*] What do you mean?

GEORGE WINTER.

You don't mean to say you're so simple-minded as to imagine he can do anything but resign his seat if he were made co-respondent in a divorce case? They say, if we get in again, he's to be given the Ministry of War. Humpty-Dumpty. It's the end of his political career.

CATHERINE.

[*Desperately.*] We have nothing to reproach ourselves with. Nothing.

GEORGE WINTER.

You sent a note to him last night. What did you say?

CATHERINE.

[*Defiantly.*] I asked him to come here at twelve o'clock.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Taking out his watch.*] It's nearly twelve now. I'll wait. And you shall talk to him.

[*Enter ANNE ETCHINGHAM and TEDDIE O'DONNELL. ANNE is like her sister CATHERINE, but smaller and slighter; she is brighter as well and more vivacious, with pretty caressing ways. EDWARD O'DONNELL is an insignificant, amiable, good-looking young man of three-and-twenty.*]

ANNE.

[*As she comes in.*] Good morning, good people.

CATHERINE.

[*With a pleasant, affectionate smile.*] Ah, Nan.

ANNE.

[*Going up to GEORGE WINTER.*] Well, how is my great brother-in-law?

GEORGE WINTER.

He's in his usual rude health, thank you.

ANNE.

I've brought Teddie to introduce him to you.

O'DONNELL.

How d'you do?

ANNE.

[*With a flourish.*] This is the Napoleon of Finance. He owns seventeen companies, five gold mines, two railways, a house in Portman Square, two places in the country, a yacht, five motor-cars, the family of Etchingham....

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Interrupting.*] Take a long breath and say ninety-nine.

ANNE.

[*Laughing.*] Don't be ridiculous.

GEORGE WINTER.

Now, what is it you want?

ANNE.

I? [*Coaxingly.*] You're an old dear, George.

GEORGE WINTER.

I thought so. Well, what is it?

ANNE.

I want you to give Mr. O'Donnell a job.

CATHERINE.

Anne!

O'DONNELL.

I say, Nan, you needn't put it so bluntly.

ANNE.

It's no good beating about the bush with George, is it?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Amused and pleased.*] Not much.

ANNE.

Now, sit down and let me talk sensibly to you.

CATHERINE.

Anne, I'd rather you didn't—just now. George and I are busy.

GEORGE WINTER.

Have they interrupted you, darling? I thought you had nothing more you wanted to say.

ANNE.

Is anything the matter?

GEORGE WINTER.

Nothing. Kate's a little under the weather this morning.

ANNE.

Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. What is it?

GEORGE WINTER.

I warned you not to eat that *pâté de foie gras* last night, my dear. It always disagrees with you.

CATHERINE.

Please don't worry about me.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*To ANNE.*] Why d'you want me to give Mr. O'Donnell a job?

ANNE.

Because he's my young man.

GEORGE WINTER.

Is he, by Jove!

O'DONNELL.

I offered her my hand and heart....

ANNE.

[*Interrupting.*] And being a practical person I promptly inquired what were his worldly possessions.

O'DONNELL.

They're not only nil, they're astonishingly nil. In point of fact, if you reckon debts they're positively minus.

ANNE.

So I fell into his arms and said, let us put up the banns at once.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Very jolly and affable.*] That's where I come in.

ANNE.

Well, I thought he might manage one of your railways or be your chauffeur, or if you didn't think he was good enough for that you might make him director of one of your companies.

CATHERINE.

Nan, you don't know what you're talking about.

ANNE.

Good heavens, if papa can direct companies surely Teddie can.

CATHERINE.

No, I didn't mean that. But there are circumstances that you don't understand. Mr. O'Donnell can't ask George to do anything for him. Mr. O'Donnell....

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Quite good-humouredly.*] Really, Kate, you might let me answer for myself.

ANNE.

George always said he'd help me when I wanted to marry.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*To O'DONNELL.*] I presume your idea is to go into the City?

O'DONNELL.

Yes, more or less.

GEORGE WINTER.

Educated at a public school, I suppose?

O'DONNELL.

Yes, I was at Harrow.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a twinkle in his eye.*] Then I may take it that you tried to get into the Army and failed?

O'DONNELL.

Yes, I suppose I did.

GEORGE WINTER.

And you hadn't got enough money to go into the diplomatic?

ANNE.

How on earth d'you know, George?

GEORGE WINTER.

When a young man of family and education tells me he wants to go into the City, I know it's because he's too incompetent to do anything else. Fifty years ago the fool of good family went into the Church, now he goes into the City.

O'DONNELL.

You're not very flattering.

GEORGE WINTER.

I dare say you'll suit me all right.

ANNE.

Oh, George, you are a brick.

GEORGE WINTER.

Give me a kiss and I'll find him a job.

ANNE.

I'll give you two.

[*She kisses him on both cheeks.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

I shan't find him two jobs.

ANNE.

I can't imagine why everybody's so afraid of you, George. You're an old dear.

GEORGE WINTER.

A heart of gold, that's what I always tell Kate. [*To O'DONNELL.*] Come and see me to-morrow morning, and we'll have a talk about things.

O'DONNELL.

It's awfully good of you.

GEORGE WINTER.

You know, you'll have to do as you're told if you come to me.

O'DONNELL.

I dare say I shan't mind that.

GEORGE WINTER.

It's not always pleasant being at the beck and call of a damned bounder.

O'DONNELL.

How d'you mean?

GEORGE WINTER.

Of course you look upon me as a damned bounder. I know that. I wasn't educated at Harrow. My father was a hatter at Middlepool, a Nonconformist, and an aitchless one at that. I went to sea when I was fourteen, and when I was your age I was earning twenty-five bob a week as clerk in a bucket shop. Of course I'm a damned bounder.

ANNE.

Now, George, don't be disagreeable.

GEORGE WINTER.

Well, run along, children.... Have you spoken to your father about this?

ANNE.

No, we're going to leave you to do that.

GEORGE WINTER.

Are you?

ANNE.

Well, you see, father's sure to kick up a bit of a row because Teddie's so absolutely stony, but if you say you've given him a job....

CATHERINE.

Father may object....

ANNE.

Oh, he wouldn't dare if George said it was all right.

[CATHERINE gives a slight gesture, partly of vexation and partly of dismay.

GEORGE WINTER.

[Kindly.] Are you really very keen on marrying?

ANNE.

Awfully.

GEORGE WINTER.

Well, I'll see what I can do. Good-bye.

[He nods to O'DONNELL. O'DONNELL and ANNE go out. As soon as they have gone, CATHERINE starts up.

CATHERINE.

George, you're not going to take Teddie O'Donnell in your service. You must understand it's impossible.

GEORGE WINTER.

[Coolly.] Why?

CATHERINE.

We can accept nothing from you.

GEORGE WINTER.

This disinterestedness is rather a new trait in your family, isn't it?

CATHERINE.

You're only wasting his time in making him come down to see you to-morrow.

GEORGE WINTER.

I don't suppose it's as valuable as all that.

CATHERINE.

Anne will have to be told the facts, and she'll see at once that it's out of the question for Teddie to accept favours from you.

GEORGE WINTER.

I wonder.

CATHERINE.

[Defiantly.] I have no doubt of it.

GEORGE WINTER.

Do you think she'll be pleased when she's told that, owing to your unreasonableness, her marriage can't take

place? Are you sure she won't say that she has no quarrel with me?

CATHERINE.

I should make her understand.

GEORGE WINTER.

It seems rather selfish on your part, doesn't it? If Anne's heart is set upon marrying this rather foolish boy, have you the heart to prevent her?

CATHERINE.

I've sacrificed myself long enough. It's Anne's turn now.

GEORGE WINTER.

You'll find self-sacrifice one of the forms of self-indulgence in which people are never wildly anxious to take turn and turn about.

CATHERINE.

What can you do with Teddie O'Donnell? He's no good to you.

GEORGE WINTER.

I'm not sure. I like dealing with gentlemen. When they go into the City they take to dirty work with an alacrity which you often don't find in the City man born and bred.

CATHERINE.

Even if there was nothing else, I would do all I could to prevent a decent boy from being exposed to your influence.

GEORGE WINTER.

Well, you may try yours on Anne. Tell her that I'll start her young man on four hundred a year, and I'll allow her a couple of hundred more, so that they can marry next week if they want to. And add that you are divorcing me, and it would be monstrous if either of them accepted my offer.

CATHERINE.

Oh, I know well enough that you didn't make him pretty speeches because you took any interest in doing a kindness. It was merely another coil of the chain you've twisted round me. Oh, it's fiendish. Each way I turn I find that you bar my way.

GEORGE WINTER.

In the agitation of the moment you seem to be mixing your metaphors, my dear.

[THOMPSON, *the butler, comes in.*

THOMPSON.

Mr. Robert Colby has come, madam.

GEORGE WINTER.

Is he waiting downstairs?

THOMPSON.

I've shown him in the morning-room. He said he would wait till you were disengaged, ma'am.

GEORGE WINTER.

Ask him to come up. [*To CATHERINE.*] I'll leave you—

THOMPSON.

Very good, sir.

[*Exit.*

GEORGE WINTER.

With my best wishes. I'll go and discuss the weather and the crops with your excellent father, and you shall discuss the situation with Robert Colby.

CATHERINE.

For goodness' sake leave me alone.

GEORGE WINTER.

Suggest a counter-petition and see how he takes it. My own impression is that he'll run like a rabbit.

[*GEORGE WINTER goes towards the door that leads into the library and stops.*

GEORGE WINTER.

And if he does, you know whose arms are open to receive you. Whose 60 Mercedes is panting to take you to whose sheltering roof.

[With a guffaw he goes out. CATHERINE gives a sigh of exhaustion and then braces herself for the coming interview.]

[Enter ROBERT COLBY. He is a handsome man of forty, spare and active, with a refined face and good features. He is clean shaven. His hair is grey. He has charming manners and an air of slightly old-fashioned courtesy. His voice is soft and pleasant.]

THOMPSON.

Mr. Robert Colby.

[CATHERINE goes to him with both hands out-stretched. Her manner becomes brighter and more joyous. She seems to throw off the load of wretchedness which had oppressed her. The BUTLER goes out.]

CATHERINE.

How good of you to come.

COLBY.

[Taking her hands.] You look as if you were surprised to see me.

CATHERINE.

You must be frantically busy. I thought you might not be able to manage it.

COLBY.

You know very well wild labour leaders couldn't have prevented me.

CATHERINE.

Of course I know you wouldn't really let me interfere with anything serious, but it's very pleasant to flatter myself that the whole country is waiting while you're wasting your time with me. D'you know what I've done?

COLBY.

I suspected what your note meant, but I'm anxious to hear it from your own lips.

CATHERINE.

I've crossed the Rubicon. I'm seeing my solicitor to-day, and the petition will be filed as soon as ever it's possible.

COLBY.

I'm so glad. You had no right to go on with that degrading life.

CATHERINE.

I want you to assure me again that I'm right. I'm so weak. I feel so utterly defenceless.

COLBY.

It won't be very long now before....

CATHERINE.

[Interrupting.] No, not yet, Robert.

COLBY.

I want to tell you at once how passionately I love you.

CATHERINE.

[With the tenderest of smiles.] D'you think it's needful? I'm so glad to think you've never made love to me. There was all the love I wanted in the look of your eyes, and your voice, though you said quite commonplace things, told me that you cared for me.

COLBY.

I've never even kissed your hand, Kate.

CATHERINE.

I'm very grateful to you. Now more than ever I want to feel quite sure that we have nothing to reproach ourselves with.

COLBY.

It's rather hard on me.

CATHERINE.

Do you think I find it any easier? Sometimes when I've been dreadfully lonely, dreadfully wretched, I've longed to be able to rest my head on your shoulder, and I've thought I might have loved my tears if you could have kissed them away.

COLBY.

Were you angry with me when I wrote to you? The one foolish letter?

CATHERINE.

How could I be?

COLBY.

I was dreadfully unhappy then. Everything I tried seemed to go wrong. I was utterly dispirited, and I couldn't help writing.

CATHERINE.

I read the letter till I knew every word by heart. Sometimes I wonder how I could have borne my life at all except for the knowledge that you cared for me.

COLBY.

You've never once told me that you love me, Kate.

CATHERINE.

D'you want me to say it in so many words? Why else d'you think I'm exposing myself to all the humiliation, all the horrors that are before me? Yes, I love you with all my heart and soul.

COLBY.

And after it's all over?

CATHERINE.

It shall be as you wish.

COLBY.

You've meant so much to me, Kate. All the success I've had I feel that I owe to you. Sometimes I've hated the intrigues and the littleness of politics. I've been tempted to give the whole thing up. But you put fresh courage into me. It's because of you that I've been able to ignore the rest and just keep my eyes fixed always on the greatness of the aim.

CATHERINE.

[*Smiling.*] It makes me so proud to hear you say that.

COLBY.

[*Lightly.*] Did you read the speech I made yesterday?

CATHERINE.

No, I'm afraid I haven't yet.

Colby.

[*Gaily.*] Wretched woman! And every jack one of the papers has given a leader on it.

CATHERINE.

I'm so sorry. It's horrid of me.

COLBY.

[*Laughing.*] What nonsense! Of course you've had much more important things to think about.

CATHERINE.

Tell me all about it. I suppose it was the Army debate.

COLBY.

Yes, I burnt my ships behind me. I said I thought some form of compulsory service was essential. Perigal's going to the country at once. I think we shall get in. And if we do ... I wish to goodness they'd give me the War Office. Of course, after six years in office we can only hope for a small majority, and every seat will count. I wonder what will happen at Middlepool.

CATHERINE.

George is very popular.

COLBY.

Yes, that's just it. As long as he was there the seat was safe. I wonder if anyone else will be able to hold it.

CATHERINE.

Do you think it will be impossible for him to stand again?

COLBY.

Quite. And rightly. No man's obliged to go into Parliament. If he does it's his duty to keep clear of scandal.

[*CATHERINE gives a very slight start, and when she speaks her voice is not quite steady.*]

CATHERINE.

That might be very difficult. A man might be an object of scandal, and yet be perfectly innocent. Supposing—a malicious person brought an action for divorce against him. It might be merely an attempt at blackmail. It would be

monstrous to punish him for something that wasn't his fault.

COLBY.

D'you honestly think that's a possible case? If a man is shot at—it's true he may not be technically guilty—but he can hardly be blameless. If a case can be made out at all against him he must have done something very foolish.

[CATHERINE *does not answer. She is terrified at what he says.*

COLBY.

George Winter only went into the House for his private ambition. He contested a seat in order to give himself a stronger financial position, and now he wants to use his money to force himself into some sort of job. We've got no use for people like that.

CATHERINE.

[*As if she were changing the conversation.*] I wonder what you'd do if you were beaten at the General Election?

COLBY.

[*With a laugh.*] I don't think my constituents will throw me out as long as I behave myself.

CATHERINE.

[*Smiling.*] And if they did?

COLBY.

[*After a little pause.*] It would just about break me up. Politics are my whole life. I can't imagine existence without the House of Commons. And I have so much to do. If they'll only give me a chance I want to.... [*Suddenly stopping himself.*] But, good heavens, I'm just going to make a speech.

CATHERINE.

Oh, my dear, I'm so proud of you. I admire you so enormously.

COLBY.

[*Gaily.*] Not yet. Hang it all, wait to admire me till I'm Minister of War.

CATHERINE.

[*With an affectionate smile.*] You dear.... Now you must go. I've got ever so much to do, and I'm sure you ought to have.

COLBY.

Good-bye, then. God bless you.... Say something nice to me before I leave you.

CATHERINE.

I shall think of you all day long.

COLBY.

Thank you. Good-bye.

[*He goes out. CATHERINE sinks exhausted into a chair, but she hears GEORGE WINTER approach and pulls herself together. He comes in with ETCHINGHAM.*

GEORGE WINTER.

The great man has taken his hook?

[CATHERINE *acknowledges his remark with a look, but does not answer.*

GEORGE WINTER.

I heard his fairy footsteps on the stairs.

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, Catherine, I hope you've thought better of things.

GEORGE WINTER.

Well?

[*He looks at her with malicious amusement, and she, her head thrown back, stares at him with hatred and anger.*

CATHERINE.

You think every man is a rogue, don't you?

GEORGE WINTER.

Certainly not. I think nine men out of ten are rogues or fools. That's why I make money.

CATHERINE.

And what'll you do when you come across the tenth man, who's neither rogue nor fool?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Flippantly.*] Put him under a glass case.

CATHERINE.

You may find him awkward to deal with. Take care.

GEORGE WINTER.

I shall. But I've looked for him so long that I can't help thinking he doesn't move in my set.... Now and then I've thought I'd really got him. But while I was scratching my head and wondering how the deuce I was going to manage, I've seen an itching palm steal softly out, and I knew it wasn't the tenth man after all.

The BUTLER comes in.

THOMPSON.

[*To GEORGE WINTER.*] Mr. Bennett would like to speak to you, sir.

GEORGE WINTER.

Is he on the telephone?

THOMPSON.

No, sir. He's here.

ETCHINGHAM.

What the deuce can he want?

GEORGE WINTER.

I'll come down to him.

ETCHINGHAM.

No, let him come up. Perhaps it's something important, and he'll want to see me too.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Drily.*] Perhaps. Tell him to come up.

THOMPSON.

Very good, sir.

[*Exit.*

CATHERINE.

Who is Mr. Bennett?

ETCHINGHAM.

He's the secretary of two or three of our companies. He manages the office and that sort of thing.

GEORGE WINTER.

He does all the work for which your father gets fees.

ETCHINGHAM.

I don't know about that. I flatter myself I'm worth my salt.

[*The BUTLER shows in FREDERICK BENNETT. He is a little man, thin, middle-aged, clean shaven, with a sharp face, and an extremely respectable appearance. He wears gold spectacles. He is in a tail coat and carries a tall hat in his hand. The BUTLER goes out after announcing him.*

GEORGE WINTER.

What's the matter, Fred?

BENNETT.

I went round to Portman Square, Governor, and they told me you were here; I thought I'd better come on at once.

ETCHINGHAM.

Nothing has happened, Mr. Bennett?

BENNETT.

No, my lord. [*To GEORGE WINTER.*] May I speak to you for a moment, Governor?

GEORGE WINTER.

Yes. Etchingham, d'you mind ...?

ETCHINGHAM.

Of course not.

[*He goes up to CATHERINE, who is standing at the window, and begins talking to her. The conversation between GEORGE WINTER and BENNETT proceeds in a lower tone, sinking almost to a whisper as it goes on.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

What the devil's the matter, Fred? You're looking like a dying duck in a thunderstorm.

BENNETT.

There's been a cable from Macdonald, Governor.

GEORGE WINTER.

Good business. And when's the report due? I suppose it's following.

BENNETT.

Yes.

GEORGE WINTER.

Why the deuce didn't you ring me up? I'd have come down to the office at once. Now we've got that we can fire away.

BENNETT.

I wouldn't risk it on the phone. You never know who's listening.

GEORGE WINTER.

Drivel. You're an old woman, Fred. Have you got it on you?

BENNETT.

It's not what you expect, Governor.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Seizing his wrist.*] What the hell d'you mean?

BENNETT.

It's rotten. It's....

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Interrupting violently.*] You filthy liar, what are you talking about?

BENNETT.

Take care, they'll hear you.

GEORGE WINTER.

Where is it?

BENNETT.

I've got it in my pocket.

GEORGE WINTER.

If you've been playing the fool with me, Fred....

BENNETT.

[*Taking out the cable.*] I'm in it as deep as you are.

[*GEORGE WINTER takes the cable, is just going to unfold it, when, sick with apprehension, he hesitates. He is too terrified to read it.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

What does it say, Fred?

BENNETT.

Why, there's nothing there. We've been done in the eye. The mine's worthless.

[*GEORGE WINTER turns away from him, a look of fear and bewilderment on his face. For a moment he hesitates uncertain what to do, then quickly makes up his mind and clenches his teeth.*]

BENNETT.

[*Going up to him.*] Governor.

GEORGE WINTER.

If that's true, the hundred thousand we paid for it might as well have been thrown down a drain-pipe.

BENNETT.

What are you going to do?

GEORGE WINTER.

Do? Fight it out.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Coming forward.*] Nothing serious, I hope, George?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Over his shoulder.*] Nothing.

BENNETT.

[*In a whisper.*] You know what it means if you fail?

GEORGE WINTER.

The Old Bailey. But I shan't fail.

The BUTLER comes in.

THOMPSON.

Luncheon is ready, my lord.

END OF THE FIRST ACT.

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is the same as in the preceding act, the drawing room of LORD FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM'S house in Norfolk Street.

It is afternoon. LADY FRANCIS is seated, working at embroidery on a drum. CATHERINE stands at the window, looking out into the street.

LADY FRANCIS.

Aren't you tired, Kate?

CATHERINE.

[*Still looking out of the window.*] No, mother.

LADY FRANCIS.

You were out all the morning.

CATHERINE.

I went to see my lawyers.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*With a sigh.*] I can't understand that with such a father and such a mother, you should be such a monster of determination.

[*CATHERINE neither answers nor turns.*

LADY FRANCIS.

[*After a quick look at her.*] Dr. O'Farrell says your father will be well enough to come downstairs to-morrow.

CATHERINE.

I'm glad of that.

LADY FRANCIS.

This is the second attack of gout he's had this year.

CATHERINE.

Poor old thing!

LADY FRANCIS.

Aren't you tired of staring at the house opposite? You're not expecting anyone, are you?

CATHERINE.

No.

LADY FRANCIS.

You're dreadfully restless. [*With a faint smile.*] I'm growing quite exhausted.

[*CATHERINE gives a little cry of astonishment and alarm.*

LADY FRANCIS.

What's the matter?

CATHERINE.

[*Turning round and coming forward.*] George has just driven up.

LADY FRANCIS.

I suppose he's come to see your father.

CATHERINE.

They mustn't let him up. I won't see him. It's monstrous that I should have to put up with this.

LADY FRANCIS.

My dear, don't worry. George hasn't made any attempt to see you for a fortnight.

[GEORGE WINTER *comes in hurriedly, unannounced; he shuts the door behind him.*

CATHERINE.

[*Indignantly.*] What d'you want? You've got no right to force yourself upon me.

[*She makes a movement to leave the room, but he intercepts her. He takes a paper out of his pocket.*

GEORGE WINTER.

I've just been served with this.

CATHERINE.

What else did you expect?

GEORGE WINTER.

Your father told me that nothing was going to be done for the moment.

CATHERINE.

I can't help what father said. It's my business. I can allow no one to interfere with me.

LADY FRANCIS.

What is that, George?

GEORGE WINTER.

Would you like to look at it? It's an interesting document.

CATHERINE.

It's the petition, mother.

LADY FRANCIS.

I wish I had my glasses. I've never seen one before.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Grimly.*] You've been lucky.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*With an acid smile.*] Or virtuous.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*To Catherine.*] You've got to withdraw this.

CATHERINE.

Surely you must see that from now all communications between us must pass through our lawyers.

GEORGE WINTER.

Rats!

[CATHERINE *crosses the room and rings the bell at the side of the fireplace.*

GEORGE WINTER.

What are you ringing for?

CATHERINE.

For Thompson to open the door for you.

GEORGE WINTER.

That's excessively thoughtful of you.

CATHERINE.

Mother, can't you protect me from this?

LADY FRANCIS.

My dear, your husband is six feet high, and broad in proportion. I'll tell Thompson to kick him downstairs if you like....

GEORGE WINTER.

But it's not a job that any well-regulated butler would enjoy.

[*The BUTLER comes in, and waits for an order.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, Thompson, I'm expecting three gentlemen here at five o'clock. You'll show them into the library, and let me know the moment they come.

THOMPSON.

Very good, sir.

[*He goes out.*]

CATHERINE.

What do you mean by this?

GEORGE WINTER.

That's precisely what I came to tell you.... I suppose you've been talking. There've been references to a dispute between us in the Middlepool papers, and the *Herald*, the Conservative rag, has stated in the current issue that you are divorcing me.

CATHERINE.

The Middlepool papers are singularly well-informed.

GEORGE WINTER.

That's where you're mistaken. The *Argus* is printing a special edition with a complete and authoritative denial of the whole story. I've issued a writ for libel against the *Herald*.

CATHERINE.

One lie more or less on your conscience can make no great difference to you.

GEORGE WINTER.

I've explained your presence here by your susceptibility to fresh paint.

LADY FRANCIS.

What do you mean?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a chuckle.*] The day after Kate left Portman Square I came to the conclusion that the house needed re-decorating. I'm having it papered and painted from cellar to attic. When it's finished I shall start again.

LADY FRANCIS.

Fortunately the British workman takes his time.

GEORGE WINTER.

But that's not enough. The Middlepool people are nervous about the whole thing. You know Swalecliffe—he's the Nonconformist minister—one of those confounded busybodies who go poking their noses into everybody's private life. He's on my committee. He and Ford control the dissenting interest between them.... They've got it into their heads that they want the truth from you.

CATHERINE.

Me?

LADY FRANCIS.

Who is Ford?

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, he's the richest man in Middlepool. He's one of my directors on the Middlepool Investment Trust. Hard as nails! Shrewd as they make 'em! But a Nonconformist to the tips of his fingers. He's just built a Congregational church out of his own pocket. He's a corker to deal with.

LADY FRANCIS.

But I don't understand. What do these men want Kate to do?

GEORGE WINTER.

They're coming here at five o'clock with Boyce, my agent, to ask Kate if there's any truth in the rumours.

LADY FRANCIS.

But it's outrageous!

GEORGE WINTER.

Of course it's outrageous! But what d'you expect from a parcel of sneaking Middlepool dissenters?

LADY FRANCIS.

And what do you expect Kate to say?

GEORGE WINTER.

She's going to say it's the first she's heard of it. Then they're going to ask her if she's divorcing me, and she's going to—repudiate the suggestion with all the scorn at her command.

CATHERINE.

I refuse to see these people.

GEORGE WINTER.

Do you?

CATHERINE.

[*Satirically.*] Or do you want me to tell them before your face that every word they've heard is true? Yes, I'll see them. I'll settle the whole thing. And then I shall be rid of this persecution. But I shall tell them the exact truth.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Grimly humorous.*] It's not five o'clock yet.

[*The BUTLER comes in, followed by MR. PERIGAL. This is the Prime Minister. He is a stoutish man of middle height, clean-shaven, with abundant grey hair worn long. His face is sensual, shrewd and bland; his manner is kindly and restrained.*]

THOMPSON.

Mr. Perigal.

[*Exit.*]

LADY FRANCIS.

[*Cordially.*] My dear Bob, this is kind of you.

PERIGAL.

How d'you do? Well, Kate?

CATHERINE.

You never come and see us now you're Prime Minister.

PERIGAL.

It's a delusion of the public that the Prime Minister has nothing to do but pay afternoon calls. [*He turns to GEORGE WINTER.*] I'm very glad to see you here.

GEORGE WINTER.

On the best possible terms with my mother-in-law.

LADY FRANCIS.

Well, when are you going to dissolve Parliament?

PERIGAL.

[*Making himself comfortable in an arm-chair.*] I've been so busy, I haven't had time to read the papers for some days. What do they say about it?

LADY FRANCIS.

Don't be irritating, Bob.

PERIGAL.

My dear, a wise Prime Minister looks upon it as a privilege to fulfil the intelligent anticipations of the press.

LADY FRANCIS.

I hope it's not true that you're going to give Emily Lascelles the Home Office?

PERIGAL.

Good heavens, you talk as if your sex were already comfortably installed in the House.

LADY FRANCIS.

You know perfectly what I mean. It doesn't matter about the men, because all the work is done by the permanent officials. But their wives are quite another matter. I tell you frankly it will be a great mistake if Emily Lascelles goes to the Home Office.

PERIGAL.

Why?

LADY FRANCIS.

She can't entertain. She doesn't know a word of French. She dresses abominably.

PERIGAL.

[*Ironically.*] That settles it. Emily Lascelles shall not go to the Home Office.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a smile.*] That is how history is made.

LADY FRANCIS.

Oh, George, Frank bought a print of Napoleon the other day that he wants to show you. Do come up, will you?

GEORGE WINTER.

Of course.

LADY FRANCIS.

George collects things about Napoleon, you know.

PERIGAL.

Ah, the Napoleon of Finance.... I'm sorry to hear that Frank is laid up.

LADY FRANCIS.

Oh, he's much better to-day. We shall only be five minutes.

[*She goes out with* GEORGE WINTER.

PERIGAL.

How naturally your mother did that! It almost took me in.

CATHERINE.

[*Gravely.*] Have you come to see me by arrangement?

PERIGAL.

I'm up to my eyes in work! I'm afraid I could hardly find time for a chat in the middle of the afternoon without a rather special object.

CATHERINE.

I suppose not.

PERIGAL.

But your husband's presence leads me to suppose that your common sense has made my errand unnecessary.

CATHERINE.

Haven't you heard of the life we led together?

PERIGAL.

I make a point of never believing the disagreeable things that are said about a man who subscribes so handsomely to the Party funds as your husband.

CATHERINE.

Then I have you against me too?

PERIGAL.

My dear child, I've known you all your life. Your mother is my first cousin. We all desire nothing more than your happiness.

CATHERINE.

George was served with the petition this morning.

PERIGAL.

Ah!... It appears that two prominent supporters of your husband are coming up from Middlepool this afternoon to get from your own lips a denial of the rumours that have been circulating in the constituency.

CATHERINE.

I can promise you that they're not going to get it.

PERIGAL.

I wish I could persuade you to pause before you take such an irrevocable step.

CATHERINE.

But why should you care?

PERIGAL.

We've been in for six years. We're dissolving Parliament at once. I don't know if we shall get in again. It'll be a very close shave. We can't afford to risk a couple of seats....

CATHERINE.

A couple?

PERIGAL.

The Chief Whip tells me that your husband proposes to lodge a counter petition.

CATHERINE.

If it weren't so odious, the idea would be laughable. I promise you that....

PERIGAL.

Yes, yes, of course. Neither you nor Robert Colby has anything to reproach himself with. That is obvious. But ... well, I gather that the evidence is such that a *prima facie* case could be made out. It would be awkward just at this moment, for all of us—I myself could wish that my relationship to your dear mother weren't quite so close. The British people for some reason always judge moral delinquencies on the Radical side with great severity. I have always thought it a hardship that the Tories should have a sort of prescriptive right to the more amusing forms of immorality.

CATHERINE.

Let us understand one another plainly. Do you mean that if my husband drags Robert Colby through the Divorce Court, you'll throw Robert overboard, even if his innocence is proved through and through?

PERIGAL.

My dear, no one is so innocent that there's not occasion for many people to shake their heads and say: One never knows. I don't suppose any Prime Minister would invite a man to enter his cabinet who'd been co-respondent in a divorce suit.

CATHERINE.

It's nothing short of blackmail. George makes no concealment of the fact.

PERIGAL.

He has a brutal frankness which is sometimes rather engaging.

CATHERINE.

Oh, you drive me mad. My whole happiness is at stake, and you can pause to smile at that odious cynicism.... You've known Robert and me all our lives. Won't you believe in us? Won't you stand by us?

PERIGAL.

[*Very kindly.*] My dear, in the position entrusted to me I can't take risks.... I dare say you know that one of the items in our programme is a modified form of compulsory service. I don't know that I altogether like it myself, but it'll take the wind out of the Tory sails, and we've got to do something. Robert has enthusiasm and he believes in the measure. He's just the man to pilot it through the House.

CATHERINE.

He's set his heart on getting the War Office.

PERIGAL.

[*Smiling.*] Well, you have it in your hands to give it him.

CATHERINE.

I? Does he know that George Winter has made certain threats?

PERIGAL.

I think not.

CATHERINE.

Oh, what a responsibility you put upon me.

PERIGAL.

That generally goes with power, and at the moment you have that too.

CATHERINE.

[*After a moment's reflection.*] Robert and I have never hidden anything from one another. He wouldn't wish me to decide on a matter that concerns us both so nearly without consulting him. Do you object to my putting the whole thing before him?

PERIGAL.

Not a bit! But I can tell you at once what his answer will be. He'll say that he loves you, and if he must choose between you and everything that has seemed to make his life worth living, he chooses you without a moment's hesitation.

[*CATHERINE gives a little sigh of relief and delight.*]

PERIGAL.

But while he's in the very act of renouncing the world for your sake, look into his eyes, and perhaps you'll see in them—oh, only for a moment, and you'll have to look sharply—the shadow, the merest shadow of regret.... And

perhaps in ten years, when I bring an ill-spent life to a close, you'll say to yourself: If I hadn't sacrificed him, he might be standing now in the shoes of that poor old incompetent Perigal.

CATHERINE.

[*Hoarsely, more moved than she wishes to show.*] I don't believe Robert is ambitious.

PERIGAL.

You have to be a shrewd observer always to know the difference between ambition and patriotism.

CATHERINE.

I could think the world well lost for love.

PERIGAL.

Yes, but you're a woman. D'you think a man can?

[*CATHERINE does not answer. Her face expresses the agony of her spirit as PERIGAL'S words sink in.*

PERIGAL.

May I ring and ask if my carriage has come back?

CATHERINE.

Let me!

[*She rings the bell.*

PERIGAL.

I asked Colby to fetch me in it so that we might run down to the House together.

[*The BUTLER enters to announce ROBERT COLBY, and goes out.*

THOMPSON.

Mr. Colby.

COLBY.

I thought I'd come up for one moment just to say how d'you do.

CATHERINE.

[*Forcing some gaiety of manner.*] I should have been furious if you hadn't.

PERIGAL.

Of course!... I'll just go up and see your father.

CATHERINE.

He will be so pleased. I'll take you up.

PERIGAL.

No, no, no, no! I couldn't hear of it. I can easily find my way.

COLBY.

I'll do my best to entertain you while Mr. Perigal is gone. [Mr. PERIGAL *leaves them, and COLBY goes up to her gaily.*] I jumped for joy when he sent me a note asking me to call for him here.

CATHERINE.

[*Smiling.*] You might have come of your own accord.

COLBY.

I'm always afraid that I shall bore you if I come too often. I rack my brains for plausible excuses to present myself at your front door.... What's the matter, Kate?

CATHERINE.

With me? Nothing.

COLBY.

I thought you seemed worried.

CATHERINE.

D'you know that you haven't shown the least desire to kiss me?

COLBY.

I? My dear, I was obeying your strict commands.

CATHERINE.

If you really wanted to, you wouldn't have cared two straws for my commands.

COLBY.

[*Going towards her.*] My darling!

CATHERINE.

Oh no, don't. I don't beg for.... [*She breaks off.*] If you didn't think of it of your own accord, it's too late.

COLBY.

What on earth's the matter with you?

CATHERINE.

If you love me why don't you say so sometimes?

COLBY.

Good heavens, it's on the tip of my tongue every moment of the day! I have to hold myself in to prevent falling at your feet and telling you how much I care.

CATHERINE.

Oh, forgive me! If you knew how dreadfully sometimes I long for a word of love!

COLBY.

[*Taking her in his arms.*] Darling!

CATHERINE.

Oh, it's too hard to restrain myself always. Have I been peevish and horrible?

COLBY.

[*Smiling tenderly.*] Of course not.

CATHERINE.

But I want to know you love me.

COLBY.

Kate!

[*He turns her face to him and kisses her on the lips.*]

CATHERINE.

[*Hiding her face and beginning to cry on his shoulder.*] You're all I have in the world. I don't know what I should do if I lost you.

COLBY.

In a very little while now we shall belong to one another for good and all.

CATHERINE.

[*Looking up, withdrawing herself a little and looking into his eyes.*] I wonder how much you love me?

COLBY.

With all my heart, with all my soul!

CATHERINE.

D'you love me enough to....

[*She breaks off and turns away from him.*]

COLBY.

What?

CATHERINE.

Nothing. I'm being silly and sentimental. [*Smiling.*] Let's be wise and as well behaved as we generally are.

COLBY.

I can't understand you this afternoon, Kate. You're so different.

CATHERINE.

I shall frighten you. You've never realized that I'm a creature of moods. Are you sure it's wise to link your life to a woman who's capable of making almost a scene without any provocation?

COLBY.

If you had a bad temper I think I should love it.

CATHERINE.

[*Chaffing him.*] Oh!

COLBY.

[*Stretching out his hands.*] Kate!

CATHERINE.

[*Quite cheerfully, as if she were bantering.*] I want to put a purely hypothetical case to you. Supposing you had to choose between me and your career—which would you choose?

COLBY.

[*Smiling.*] You, of course.

CATHERINE.

How glibly you say it!

COLBY.

Fortunately I shall never be forced to make such a tremendous choice.

CATHERINE.

Of course not.

COLBY.

Then why the dickens do you suggest it?

CATHERINE.

Because I'm nervous and restless and rather bored. I wanted to hear you say that you wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice the world for my sake.

COLBY.

You absurd, delightful creature!

[*She is all smiles and coquetry. Suddenly the tears force themselves into her eyes and her voice breaks.*

CATHERINE.

Bob!

[*She stretches out her hands and he takes her in his arms and kisses her passionately; she breaks away from him and stands panting. MR. PERIGAL comes in followed by FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM, who wears on one foot a large felt slipper, and walks with a stick.*

PERIGAL.

Your father insisted on coming downstairs.

ETCHINGHAM.

I really can't stand my room any longer. And I can walk quite well now.

CATHERINE.

I thought Dr. O'Farrell said you were to stay upstairs till to-morrow, father.

ETCHINGHAM.

O'Farrell's an idiot.

COLBY.

[*Smiling.*] It certainly looks as if you were better when you start abusing your doctor.

PERIGAL.

[*To COLBY.*] I hope I haven't kept you waiting?

COLBY.

Not a bit!

PERIGAL.

[*Very amiably.*] Lady Francis has been showing me an old photograph.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Settling himself heavily into an armchair.*] That little joke of Angela's didn't quite come off.

[*CATHERINE gives him a footstool and puts his foot on it.*

PERIGAL.

I looked at it blankly, and then she said: Don't you remember? It's so-and-so. It gave me quite a start. It was the photograph of a young lady I'd been so madly in love with that I asked her to bolt with me—married woman and all that sort of thing—and, would you believe it? thirty years have passed since then, and upon my soul I didn't know her from Adam!

ETCHINGHAM.

Or Eve!

[*CATHERINE looks at him gravely, seeing the application to herself of*

his story.

COLBY.

You must congratulate yourself.

PERIGAL.

Well, my friends, I do. I'm not a high-minded, quixotic fellow like you, and I don't mind telling you that I find it very agreeable to be Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister. And yet, at the time, if anyone had given me the choice between my present position and a trip across Europe with the object of my affections, I wouldn't have hesitated.

COLBY.

A merciful providence evidently had you under its care.

[*CATHERINE gives a slight start and rises as she hears these words, and looks at him steadily.*]

PERIGAL.

Well, we must be off. We mustn't let even this charming lady interfere too much with the working of the British Empire.

CATHERINE.

Good-bye.

PERIGAL.

You must get your mother to show you that photograph. Thirty years ago I thought the little hussy much more attractive than that. [*Turning to* **ETCHINGHAM.**] Good-bye, Frank. I hope your foot'll be all right in a day or two.

[*PERIGAL and COLBY go out.*]

ETCHINGHAM.

I remember that little woman quite well. Not much to look at. I wondered at the time what Perigal saw in her.

CATHERINE.

You don't want me just now, father, do you?

ETCHINGHAM.

No, dear. Are you going out?

CATHERINE.

I'm only going to my room. I want—I want to be alone for a little bit.

ETCHINGHAM.

Oh!

[*Before she can give any explanation, the BUTLER comes in to announce BENNETT, and she takes advantage of this to make her escape.*]

THOMPSON.

Mr. Bennett.

[*Exit.*]

ETCHINGHAM.

Ah, Mr. Bennett, forgive me if I don't get up.

BENNETT.

I'm glad to see you're better, my lord.

ETCHINGHAM.

Is anything the matter?

BENNETT.

[*Surprised.*] I thought your lordship expected me. You telephoned?

ETCHINGHAM.

I?

BENNETT.

Perhaps the Governor....

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Interrupting.*] Ah yes, of course. George didn't mention it. I suppose he wants me to sign cheques. I can do it just as well here as at the office. I expect Mr. Winter is in. Would you mind ringing?

BENNETT.

Certainly.

[*Before he can ring, GEORGE WINTER comes in.*

GEORGE WINTER.

I've given orders that no one is to be let up until those people arrive from Middlepool.

ETCHINGHAM.

By Jove, I'd forgotten all about them. I say, George, you made a mistake in letting them come.

GEORGE WINTER.

And I've told Lady Francis that we shall want this room to ourselves, and no one's to come in without knocking at the door.

ETCHINGHAM.

By the way, was it you who sent for Bennett?

GEORGE WINTER.

It was. Your gout has come in very handy. Sit down, Fred. We'd better make ourselves cosy. Quite comfortable, Etchingham?

ETCHINGHAM.

Quite, thank you.

GEORGE WINTER.

Foot all right?

ETCHINGHAM.

I don't feel it at the moment.

[*Throughout the next scene GEORGE WINTER is as gay and jovial as possible. He is thoroughly amused by the torture he is inflicting. He plays with FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM as a cat would with a mouse.*

GEORGE WINTER.

I thought you might like to know at once that Macdonald's report on the mine has come.

ETCHINGHAM.

Ah, that's good news. Now we can get to work at once.

GEORGE WINTER.

Have you got it with you, Fred?

BENNETT.

Yes, sir.

GEORGE WINTER.

I'm sure his lordship would like to have a look at it.

ETCHINGHAM.

Yes, hand it over, Bennett. This is really a thrilling moment. I believe I'm going to make my fortune at last.

GEORGE WINTER.

As you justly remark, it's a thrilling moment.

[*BENNETT takes the report out of a despatch-case and hands it to ETCHINGHAM.*

ETCHINGHAM.

Impressive document, isn't it?

[*He smoothes it out and begins to read. GEORGE WINTER watches him with a certain amusement.*

GEORGE WINTER.

Rather technical, isn't it?

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Somewhat irritably.*] Upon my soul, I don't know why Macdonald can't put it into plain English?

GEORGE WINTER.

I'm thankful he didn't put it any plainer.

ETCHINGHAM.

I must honestly confess that I don't quite grasp what he means.

GEORGE WINTER.

I thought you wouldn't. The long and the short of it can be told in two words.

ETCHINGHAM.

[Putting down the report with a slight sigh of relief.] Ah!

GEORGE WINTER.

The mine was practically worked out when we bought it. There's no gold there worth speaking of. We've been done in the eye, and we're eighty thousand pounds to the bad.

[There is a moment's pause. ETCHINGHAM looks at GEORGE WINTER blankly. BENNETT glances nervously from one to the other.]

ETCHINGHAM.

[Hardly able to speak, his tongue sticking to his throat.] You're—you're joking!

GEORGE WINTER.

Read the report.

ETCHINGHAM.

[Looking at it helplessly.] Then....

GEORGE WINTER.

Your fortune is beginning to look rather silly, isn't it? So's mine.

ETCHINGHAM.

Is this true, Mr. Bennett?

BENNETT.

I'm afraid it is, my lord.

ETCHINGHAM.

My God! What's to be done now?

GEORGE WINTER.

What do you think ought to be done?

ETCHINGHAM.

I?

GEORGE WINTER.

You're chairman of the Syndicate. Your opinion can't fail to be valuable.

ETCHINGHAM.

[Hesitatingly.] We must just pocket our loss.

GEORGE WINTER.

H'm!

BENNETT.

With things in their present state a loss like that is about as much as we can stand.

ETCHINGHAM.

The slump must come to an end soon.

GEORGE WINTER.

We've been saying that for the last two months.

ETCHINGHAM.

Then what the deuce is to be done?

GEORGE WINTER.

That's what we're asking you.

BENNETT.

We've got the Lewishams to reckon with.

GEORGE WINTER.

Now's their time to make a raid on us.

ETCHINGHAM.

[Hoarsely.] It doesn't mean that we smash up, George?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Taking out his watch.*] Boyce will be here in a quarter of an hour.

ETCHINGHAM.

George, don't play the fool now. I've put all my eggs in this basket. I thought I was going to be rich at last. I wanted to get out of the whole thing. I wanted to live quietly and comfortably.

BENNETT.

What are you going to do, Governor?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Looking at* **ETCHINGHAM.**] Suppress the report.

[*BENNETT gives a start, but does not speak.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Go ahead as if we believed in the mine. We've got the Government expert's report on which we bought the thing. We'll put that in the prospectus.

ETCHINGHAM.

But isn't that dishonest?

GEORGE WINTER.

Very.

ETCHINGHAM.

George!

GEORGE WINTER.

It's an axiom in mining circles that when you've got hold of a rotten thing the proper course is to pass it on to the British public.

ETCHINGHAM.

The public will find out there's no gold there when you pay no dividends.

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, we'll pay dividends for a year or two. By then we shall have turned the corner, and we'll find another carrot for the British public.

ETCHINGHAM.

But you say yourself it's dishonest.

GEORGE WINTER.

There's another point you seem to have forgotten.

ETCHINGHAM.

What is that?

[*GEORGE WINTER pauses and looks at him for an instant reflectively.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

We paid for the mine with money that didn't belong to us.

ETCHINGHAM.

What d'you mean?

GEORGE WINTER.

We're in exactly the same position as the shop-boy who sneaks five bob from his master's till to put it on a horse. If the horse comes in he puts it back, and if it doesn't, he gets a month's hard labour.... We shall get seven years.

ETCHINGHAM.

What are you talking about, George?

GEORGE WINTER.

Has it escaped your memory that you and I are Directors of the Middlepool Investment Trust?

ETCHINGHAM.

Well?

GEORGE WINTER.

We had to plank down eighty thousand pounds within twenty-four hours or lose the mine.

BENNETT.

It looked like a certainty.

GEORGE WINTER.

At that moment it was impossible for us to raise anything like that sum. The bank held a hundred thousand pounds of bearer bonds for the Middlepool Investment Trust. They delivered them on an order signed by you, me, and Bennett. We borrowed on them and completed the purchase of a worthless mine.

ETCHINGHAM.

But I've never signed anything.

BENNETT.

Yes, you did, my lord. They wouldn't have delivered the bonds without.

ETCHINGHAM.

Then my signature's been forged.

GEORGE WINTER.

Don't you remember one day, after an excellent luncheon at Pym's, you were just off to a wedding, and I asked you to come up into the office and sign some papers?

ETCHINGHAM.

But I never looked at them. I didn't know....

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Interrupting blandly.*] Ah, that's your affair.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Indignantly.*] I shall go to the police.

GEORGE WINTER.

D'you think you've got a plausible story to tell them? It sounds devilish improbable that a business man, a chairman of half a dozen companies, should sign documents without looking at them. Bennett and I will swear that you carefully read everything that was put before you—as, indeed, was your duty, my dear friend—and fully understood the nature of your act.

ETCHINGHAM.

Mr. Bennett, you'll testify that I never realized for a moment what I was doing. You told me they were purely formal documents. I saw George sign them. I added my signature without hesitation.

GEORGE WINTER.

I think Mr. Bennett would be more than human if he cleared you at his own expense.

BENNETT.

If there were any trouble, my lord, I should have to tell the truth.

ETCHINGHAM.

That's just what I want you to do.

BENNETT.

I should have to say that you agreed with us in the necessity of borrowing the bonds with the idea of putting them back as soon as we'd floated the company, and that you signed the order to the bank with full knowledge of the seriousness of your act.

GEORGE WINTER.

What is truth, said jesting Pilate.

BENNETT.

You're just as deep in it as we are, my lord.

ETCHINGHAM.

Oh, my God!

GEORGE WINTER.

It's no use losing one's head because one's in a tight place.

ETCHINGHAM.

You've tricked me. You're a common swindler. In a month we may all be in prison.

GEORGE WINTER.

I hear they make you very comfortable there nowadays.

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, I see my duty before me. I didn't know, but now there can be no excuse for me. I must go to Scotland Yard at once. I shall make a clean breast of the whole thing.

GEORGE WINTER.

D'you think that'll help you? It may mean five years instead of seven.

ETCHINGHAM.

Every one will know that I'm incapable of such an act.

GEORGE WINTER.

Don't be a silly fool. Listen to me. We've got you tight. If we go under, you go under too. Let there be no doubt in your mind about that.

ETCHINGHAM.

I must do my duty.

GEORGE WINTER.

Your duty is to keep your head and help us out of the mess as best you can.

ETCHINGHAM.

But nothing can be done. The mine's worthless. How are we to raise eighty thousand pounds?

GEORGE WINTER.

We've got six weeks before we need replace the bonds. If we can do it by then no one will ever know they've left the cellars of the bank.

ETCHINGHAM.

There's no more chance of replacing them in six weeks than there is the day after to-morrow.

GEORGE WINTER.

Yes, there is, if we can float the company. That's where you come in. I've got to keep my seat. I want all my prestige. I can't have a divorce. You must go to Kate at once, and tell her that the only way she can save you from prison is by telling these men who are coming from Middlepool that she has no cause for complaint against me.

ETCHINGHAM.

Good God! I'd forgotten Kate.

BENNETT.

It's only by going on now that we can save ourselves and the money that's invested in our companies.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Irritably.*] You wouldn't have got into such a mess with Kate if you hadn't made such a damned fool of yourself. Why couldn't you leave these women alone?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a chuckle.*] My dear fellow, you speak as if I were to blame. They simply flung themselves into my arms. It would have been very rude if I hadn't occasionally pressed them to my bosom.

BENNETT.

It's not much the Governor asks you, my lord.

ETCHINGHAM.

To go and tell my daughter that I'm a thief and a swindler, and throw myself on her mercy!

GEORGE WINTER.

That's it.

ETCHINGHAM.

I'll see you damned first!

GEORGE WINTER.

The alternative is prison.... It's not very nice, penal servitude—is it, Fred? You know all about it. You can tell him.

BENNETT.

[*With a gasp.*] Governor!

ETCHINGHAM.

What does he mean?

GEORGE WINTER.

Fred's a solicitor who was struck off the rolls. He was sentenced to three years for misappropriating a client's money.

ETCHINGHAM.

Good God! Is that true, Mr. Bennett?

BENNETT.

[*Ashamed.*] Yes, my lord.

ETCHINGHAM.

I never knew.

GEORGE WINTER.

Of course you didn't. It's not the kind of thing you'd expect him to brag about, is it? But it'll go worse with him if we're found out, because he's been at it before. Tell him what it's like, Fred.

BENNETT.

[*With agony.*] Oh, Governor, don't!

GEORGE WINTER.

I knew him before he went in. His name was Feltman then. And when they let him out I took him because I felt sure he had everything to gain by sticking to me, and everything to lose by giving me away.

ETCHINGHAM.

My God!

GEORGE WINTER.

He can tell you what you're in for. What the broad arrow's like to wear, and what the food's like to eat. And the work—it's a healthy life, regular hours—you're strong for your age. I don't see why you shouldn't break stones in the quarries with the rest of us. Hour after hour with your back feeling as if it were going to break, and your arms aching, aching, but not so badly as your heart.

[*BENNETT breaks down and sobs, difficultly trying to restrain himself.*

GEORGE WINTER.

And you count the days, three hundred and sixty-five in a year, and you wonder if they'll ever come to an end. And your mind keeps on working. It wouldn't be so bad if you were a brainless hulk like the man who's sweating away beside you; but you think, and you can't help thinking. And you curse yourself. And you think of the people outside who are free to do as they like, and you think of the spring-time and the flowers, and you think of the pleasant streets of London. And then there's the regret which wrings your heart day after day, and you wish—you wish a thousand times you were dead. You sleep, you're too tired not to, even though you've got hunger gnawing at your vitals, for you're hungry, always hungry—and in your sleep you dream that you're back again in your home, happy and comfortable; and when you wake up and feel your hard prison bed, you cry like a child.

BENNETT.

Oh, my God! My God!

GEORGE WINTER.

And then when you come out, it's not over. You slink along the streets, feeling that it's written on your forehead for every one to see, and your heart beats when you catch sight of a policeman. And at night it all comes back to you. You see it again, the warders, the convict gang, the prison food, and your back aches with the labour. And you wake shrieking with terror, shrieking, shrieking!

[*There is a pause. ETCHINGHAM looks straight in front of him with chill, stony eyes. BENNETT cowers brokenly, trembling in every limb. There is a knock at the door. Tap, tap, tap. Even GEORGE WINTER starts and a shiver runs through him. The knocking is repeated.*

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Angry with his own nervousness.*] Who the devil's that? Come in!

The BUTLER enters.

GEORGE WINTER.

What is it? I told you we weren't to be disturbed.

THOMPSON.

The gentlemen have come, sir.

[*GEORGE WINTER reflects for an instant, and gives ETCHINGHAM a rapid glance.*

GEORGE WINTER.

I'll ring when you can show them up.

THOMPSON.

Very good, sir.

[*Exit.*

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Abruptly.*] Now go to Kate, tell her what I've told you, and say the only way she can save you is by giving in.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Hoarsely.*] I'll see you damned first.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Astounded.*] What!

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Gathering strength and courage.*] I tell you I won't. And you can go to Hell!

BENNETT.

My lord, you don't know what you're doing.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Hardly able to believe his ears.*] D'you mean to say you refuse to speak to Kate?

ETCHINGHAM.

If I speak to her it'll only be to tell her that you're a rotten scoundrel, and it's worth her while to put up with anything to be rid of you.

GEORGE WINTER.

It means seven years, you know that, don't you?

ETCHINGHAM.

For you and that dirty convict there.

GEORGE WINTER.

You think you can get off by turning on us, but you can't. We've got you tight.

ETCHINGHAM.

You miserable fellow, d'you think I shall try to escape my penalty?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With angry impatience.*] It's tomfoolery. We haven't got time for highfalutin now. Those fellows can't be kept waiting all night. Kate's the only person who can save us, and you....

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Throwing the words at him.*] I tell you I won't. You've made a catspaw of me. And you thought you'd only got to say the word and I'd come to heel.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Contemptuously.*] You've done it often enough before.

BENNETT.

Don't expect any mercy from him, my lord. He'll do you in as sure as eggs is eggs.

ETCHINGHAM.

I don't want any mercy. You think you've got me tight. Don't you know that I've got a way of escape whenever I choose to take it.

GEORGE WINTER.

What are you going to do?

ETCHINGHAM.

That's my business.

[*GEORGE WINTER understands; he drains a long breath.*]

BENNETT.

[*In a whisper.*] What does he mean, Governor?

GEORGE WINTER.

D'you think you'd have the courage?

BENNETT.

[*Understanding.*] Ah!... I tried it once, but I couldn't do it. My hand shook. I let them take me.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Reflectively.*] I hadn't thought of that. You can shoot yourself.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Bitterly sarcastic.*] I'm obliged to you for the permission.

GEORGE WINTER.

We drove him too far, Fred. We've made a mess of it.

ETCHINGHAM.

You have, a confounded mess.

[He gets up and hobbles across the room towards the door. GEORGE WINTER intercepts him.]

GEORGE WINTER.

Where are you going?

ETCHINGHAM.

[Insolently.] Get out of my way, you damned bounder.

[GEORGE WINTER looks at him for a moment and steps aside.]

GEORGE WINTER.

[With a grim smile.] It is plain that you don't think there's anything more to be got out of me.

ETCHINGHAM.

[With a wave of the hand.] I wish you a pleasant time at Portland, gentlemen.

GEORGE WINTER.

Ring the bell, Fred.

[ETCHINGHAM stops as he hears the order and turns round.]

BENNETT.

That'll bring those men up. Don't you remember you told....

GEORGE WINTER.

[Interrupting.] Ring the bell, damn you!

[BENNETT, without a word, presses the button. ETCHINGHAM comes back into the middle of the room.]

ETCHINGHAM.

What are you going to do?

GEORGE WINTER.

Hulloa, I thought you were routing out your pistols by now.

ETCHINGHAM.

You're not going to see those fellows?

BENNETT.

They'll insist on seeing Mrs. Winter.

GEORGE WINTER.

Then I shall send for her.

ETCHINGHAM.

Oh, you needn't think she'll back you up in your confounded lies.

GEORGE WINTER.

[Blandly.] Anyhow, I dare say you'd like to wait and see.

ETCHINGHAM.

[Suspiciously.] Have you got something up your sleeve?

GEORGE WINTER.

My dear fellow, our sex would be at an impossible disadvantage in its dealings with the other, if it were not for the most obstinate of all their passions.... Self-sacrifice.

ETCHINGHAM.

You're counting on that?

GEORGE WINTER.

You've given Kate such a training in it that I can't help thinking it has become a habit.

ETCHINGHAM.

I won't say a word to move her.

[He flings himself heavily into a chair. Already half his heroic resolutions have evaporated. GEORGE WINTER watches him with cynical amusement.]

GEORGE WINTER.

Like all great men I leave as little as possible to chance.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*With a start.*] Perigal?

GEORGE WINTER.

That's it.

BENNETT.

D'you think there's a chance, Governor?

GEORGE WINTER.

We must risk it. It's the last fling.

[*The BUTLER ushers in MR. SWALECLIFFE, JAMES FORD and COLONEL BOYCE. MR. SWALECLIFFE is a Nonconformist Minister, clean shaven, with a fallow grave face. JAMES FORD is a wealthy man, a pillar of the Nonconformist church in Middlepool and a local politician of importance; he is a large man, stout, oldish, badly dressed, with a slight North Country accent; he gives the impression of shrewdness, but also of complete honesty and straightforwardness. COLONEL BOYCE, who is GEORGE WINTER'S agent, is spare and tall, bronzed, with grey hair and a grey waxed moustache; alert, neatly dressed and dapper. He is the kind of retired military man who may be seen by the score in Bath, Tunbridge Wells or Cheltenham.*]

THOMPSON.

Mr. Swalecliffe, Mr. James Ford, Colonel Boyce.

[*Exit.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

How d'you do? I'm delighted to see you! I hope I haven't kept you waiting?

JAMES FORD.

Not a bit! It's of no consequence.

GEORGE WINTER.

Let me introduce you to my father-in-law. Mr. Swalecliffe—Lord Francis Etchingham.

[*MR. SWALECLIFFE bows stiffly. He is not going to open his mouth if he can help it.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Mr. James Ford.

JAMES FORD.

Pleased to meet you, Lord Francis.

ETCHINGHAM.

It's very kind of you to say so.

GEORGE WINTER.

When I suggested to Lord Francis that it would be more convenient for you to come here, he put his house at my disposal. My wife is staying here, you know. We're doing up the house in Portman Square, and she can't stand the smell of paint.

BOYCE.

[*Anxious to make things easy.*] Naturally. I don't like it myself.

GEORGE WINTER.

How is your wife, Mr. Swalecliffe? Well, I trust.

SWALECLIFFE.

Thank you.

GEORGE WINTER.

And the children?

SWALECLIFFE.

Yes, thank you.

GEORGE WINTER.

Now sit down and make yourselves comfortable, won't you? Have you had tea?

JAMES FORD.

Yes, thank you.

BOYCE.

[*Rather pompously.*] I took them into my club.

GEORGE WINTER.

Will you have a drink? I can recommend my father-in-law's whisky. I know it's no good offering you one, Mr. Swalecliffe?

JAMES FORD.

Boyce and I had a little drop of Scotch to our tea.

GEORGE WINTER.

Then we'll get to business at once, shall we?

SWALECLIFFE.

[*Clearing his throat.*] I should like to say, before we go any further, that it is with the greatest regret that Mr. Ford and I have come up to London on such an errand.

JAMES FORD.

There's been a lot of gossip in Middlepool, and, well, we thought the shortest way to settle it was....

BOYCE.

I personally don't think this is a matter of which the committee ought to take any notice. A man's private life is his private life, and....

JAMES FORD.

That's all very well, Colonel. Winter's an old friend of mine. We've had business dealings together for the past twenty years. But ... well, it's a question of winning the election or losing it. There's never been much in it one way or another, and fifty votes more or less will make all the difference.

SWALECLIFFE.

I want to tell you frankly, Mr. Winter, that I should feel it my duty to vote against you, if there were any truth in the reports that have been going about. And I should feel it my duty to advise my congregation to follow my example.

GEORGE WINTER.

That's clear enough in all conscience. Gentlemen, the best answer I can make to you is that I receive you in my father-in-law's house. My wife is upstairs in her mother's boudoir. I give you my word of honour that there is not the smallest shadow of truth in any single syllable that you have heard. I have issued a writ for libel against the *Herald*, and....

BOYCE.

Surely that ought to satisfy anyone.

JAMES FORD.

Well, it doesn't satisfy me.

GEORGE WINTER.

Perhaps you would like my father-in-law to tell you that every word I say is scrupulously true?

SWALECLIFFE.

We don't doubt your word, Mr. Winter, but we came to London with a particular object.

BOYCE.

I must say I thought from the beginning it was open to the gravest question.

JAMES FORD.

The committee discussed it at length, and the majority agreed that....

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Rising.*] Of course, of course, Etchingam, will you give these gentlemen the assurance?

ETCHINGHAM.

[*After a moment's hesitation.*] I think the whole thing's damned impertinent.

BOYCE.

That's exactly what I said.

JAMES FORD.

[*Quietly.*] You're only wasting time, Winter.

SWALECLIFFE.

We made up our minds that we must have a certain assurance from the lips of Mrs. Winter. Then we can go

back to Middlepool with comfortable minds.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Trying bluster.*] D'you mean to say you wish to cross-examine my wife?

SWALECLIFFE.

I merely wish her to answer the questions that were put to you in Colonel Boyce's letter on behalf of the committee.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Pretending to fly into a violent passion.*] No decent woman would stand it. I refuse to ask my wife to expose herself to such a degradation.

JAMES FORD.

That means that you don't represent Middlepool in the next Parliament, George Winter.

GEORGE WINTER.

I'd sooner lose my seat than expose a defenceless woman to such humiliation. You can go and tell that to your committee and be damned to you!

SWALECLIFFE.

But we came up from Middlepool on the understanding that we were to see your wife, Mr. Winter.

GEORGE WINTER.

My wife is in very delicate health.

JAMES FORD.

We shan't keep her more than five minutes. You'd be wise to let common sense get the better of your pretty sentiments.

[*There is a slight pause. GEORGE WINTER realizes that he cannot bluff them out of their determination: he goes over silently and rings the bell.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Very well.

JAMES FORD.

I think it's the best thing, you know.

GEORGE WINTER.

But if my wife refuses to answer I warn you that I shall not say a word to persuade her. I think the whole thing's a perfect scandal.

[*The BUTLER enters.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Tell Mrs. Winter that Lord Francis and I would be very much obliged if she'd come to the drawing-room for one moment.

THOMPSON.

Very good, sir.

[*Exit.*]

BOYCE.

I wish you to know that I have expressed myself very strongly all through against this proceeding.

JAMES FORD.

Shut up, Boyce. When we want your opinion we'll ask for it.

[*They wait in silence. In a moment CATHERINE comes in.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

These are the gentlemen of whom I spoke to you. Gentlemen, here is my wife.

JAMES FORD.

[*Cordially.*] How d'you do, Mrs. Winter? Pleased to see you.

CATHERINE.

[*With a smile.*] How d'you do?

JAMES FORD.

We've not had the pleasure of welcoming you in Middlepool for some time.

CATHERINE.

I've not been very well lately.

SWALECLIFFE.

[*To* GEORGE WINTER.] Will you put the question to Mrs. Winter that we set in our letter to you of the day before yesterday?

GEORGE WINTER.

No, sir. If you're not ashamed to ask the question you may ask it yourself.

SWALECLIFFE.

I am a stranger to Mrs. Winter. The matter requires some explanation.

JAMES FORD.

It's no use making any bones about it, Swalecliffe. Mrs. Winter, I'm sorry to put you in this position, but there it is, and it can't be helped. There are busybodies everywhere, and Middlepool has its fair share of them. There's been a lot of gossip about you and your good man, and if we don't look out it'll lose him the election.

CATHERINE.

What do you want me to say to you?

JAMES FORD.

Well, we want to be able to go back to Middlepool and tell them we've had it from your own lips that there's no truth in these reports.

[*There is a pause. ETCHINGHAM can hardly bear his anxiety. BENNETT is trying to hide his agitation. GEORGE WINTER looks at her with a smile. CATHERINE and JAMES FORD confront one another, and she looks at him steadily.*]

CATHERINE.

That you may do.

[*ETCHINGHAM cannot prevent a little gasp of relief, but GEORGE WINTER makes no sign.*]

SWALECLIFFE.

You have no intention of divorcing your husband?

CATHERINE.

None whatever.

SWALECLIFFE.

You've never had any intention?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Impatiently.*] Good lord, isn't that enough for you?

JAMES FORD.

[*Kindly.*] Yes, yes, we won't bother you any more. Thank you, very much! And I'm glad that you've put our minds at rest. George Winter, shake hands.

GEORGE WINTER.

I'll shake hands with you, but I can't help saying that I could have expected more charity, more confidence in me from men who make a practice of belief in the Christian Church.

JAMES FORD.

[*Unmoved by the rebuke.*] That's all right.

SWALECLIFFE.

I can understand your vexation, Mr. Winter. But we were in a very difficult position.

JAMES FORD.

Anyhow, we must get along, and if we look sharp we'll catch the 5.40 back to Middlepool. Good afternoon to you, Mrs. Winter. Good afternoon, gentlemen.

GEORGE WINTER.

Mr. Bennett will show you out. Good-bye. Good-bye, Boyce. I shall be up at Middlepool in a day or two.... [*As they are going out.*] Oh, by the way, Boyce, a little bit of information for you—Robert Colby's going to the War Office in the New Cabinet.

END OF THE SECOND ACT.

THE THIRD ACT

The scene is a spacious sitting-room in the Palace Hotel at

Middlepool. It is sumptuously furnished with the lack of taste peculiar to such apartments. Everything is large and rich and rather stiff. It is obvious that the decorations have been carried out on contract by a first-rate firm. They are calculated to give the business man who engages the room the impression that he is getting his money's worth.

On the left is a large French window, opening to the floor and looking on the square in front of the hotel. At the back is a door leading into GEORGE WINTER'S bedroom. On the right are two doors; one leads into the passage, and the other is that of CATHERINE'S room. There is a telephone on the table.

It is some weeks later, between ten and eleven on the morning of the election.

LORD FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM, FRED BENNETT, JAMES FORD, COLONEL BOYCE, and MR. SWALECLIFFE. MR. SWALECLIFFE *is standing at the window.*

When the curtain rises there is an excited buzz of conversation. BOYCE is at the telephone.

BOYCE.

[*Speaking into the receiver.*] Yes, Colonel Boyce. Be sure you don't make a mistake.

SWALECLIFFE.

I can't imagine what's become of him. One would have thought....

ETCHINGHAM.

[*To COLONEL BOYCE.*] If he's not there, you'd better try somewhere else.

JAMES FORD.

[*Shouting.*] For goodness' sake let me hear myself speak.

[These speeches are said simultaneously, and immediately afterwards is heard the dull roar of a train passing through the station, and a long, shrill whistle. ETCHINGHAM starts nervously.]

ETCHINGHAM.

Oh, confound those trains.

JAMES FORD.

[*Impatiently.*] I should have thought you'd got used to them by now.

ETCHINGHAM.

Good Lord, I've not slept for a week. They go on all night.

BENNETT.

They worried me a bit last night. And when I did get to sleep I heard them whistling away through my dreams.

BOYCE.

They don't seem to trouble Winter.

ETCHINGHAM.

If they did I suppose he wouldn't come to this hotel.

JAMES FORD.

[*Nodding in the direction of GEORGE WINTER'S room.*] He sleeps next door, doesn't he?

BOYCE.

He told me he slept like a top last night.

BENNETT.

[*Simultaneously.*] He looked as fresh as paint this morning.

ETCHINGHAM.

And his room's practically on the line.

JAMES FORD.

Oh, nonsense.

ETCHINGHAM.

Yes, it is. You just walk down a flight of steps into the garden, and there you are within twenty feet of the line.

JAMES FORD.

Worst place in Middlepool for a hotel. I told them so when they came to me about it. Wanted me to put money in it. Not me.

SWALECLIFFE.

[*Breaking in before* JAMES FORD *has finished.*] Surely Mr. Winter ought to be here by now.

JAMES FORD.

You won't make him come any quicker by looking out of the window.

BOYCE.

Every moment's valuable. Something ought to be done at once.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Interrupting.*] Don't you know where he is, Colonel?

BOYCE.

He was booked to speak to the men at Parker and Gibbons at 10.30. But you know what he is. Half a dozen places at once. He's about the most difficult person to catch I know.

SWALECLIFFE.

Have you sent down to Parker and Gibbons?

BOYCE.

Yes, of course I have; I've sent a dozen fellows after him to tell him to come to the hotel at once.

BENNETT.

[*Talking through.*] You've been careful? You've not ...?

BOYCE.

You don't think I'm a beginner at this game, do you?

BENNETT.

Well, I didn't know how you'd made him understand what had happened.

JAMES FORD.

He's not made him understand. When Winter's told he's expected at the Palace at once he'll guess something's in the wind.

SWALECLIFFE.

You're sure he won't go to the Committee Rooms?

BOYCE.

If he does he'll be sent on. I thought it would cause a lot of gossip if we had a meeting there. That's why I suggested the hotel.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Interrupting.*] I wish to goodness you wouldn't look so depressed, Mr. Swalecliffe.

SWALECLIFFE.

You're a business man, Mr. Ford. D'you think there's any truth in this article?

JAMES FORD.

You'd better ask Lord Francis. He's chairman of the new company; I'm only an investor.

BENNETT.

Of course there's nothing in it. The whole thing's a malicious libel.

JAMES FORD.

Well, we'll hear what Winter's got to say about it.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Simultaneously.*] My Lord, I wish he'd come.

BENNETT.

[*To* JAMES FORD.] You don't mean to say you think there's anything in it?

JAMES FORD.

I've applied for ten thousand shares. You don't suppose I like it when an article comes out in a financial paper on the day of issue that the mine's practically worked out, and Winter's expert has reported that the ore's not worth the cost of crushing.

BOYCE.

Everybody who's got a penny to spare in Middlepool has applied for shares.

JAMES FORD.

George Winter told me it was the biggest thing he'd ever had.

BENNETT.

He's never let you down before. Why should he let you down now?

JAMES FORD.

I don't say he's let me down. But he told me to put my shirt on it, and ... I don't want ten thousand worthless shares.

BOYCE.

The damnable thing is that it should happen on the day of the election.

ETCHINGHAM.

It would be monstrous if people didn't vote for him because of an article in a London newspaper.

BOYCE.

You know what people are. They lose their heads. The seat has always been won and lost on the wobblers.

JAMES FORD.

Oh, the first thing is to win the seat.

SWALECLIFFE.

Well, we shan't do that unless Mr. Winter comes at once and we make up our minds what to do.

ETCHINGHAM.

Ring up the Committee Rooms, Boyce, and ask if anything's been heard of him.

BOYCE.

All right. I'll do that.

SWALECLIFFE.

I was never so taken aback as when Boyce showed me the telephone message from London.

ETCHINGHAM.

When do the London papers get here, Mr. Ford?

JAMES FORD.

They ought to be here by half-past ten.

BOYCE.

[*Speaking into the receiver.*] Put me on 78, will you?

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Simultaneously.*] Why the devil don't they bring them in?

BENNETT.

Don't worry. I've told a waiter to bring them as soon as they arrive.

BOYCE.

[*At the telephone.*] I say, is that you, Masters? Has Mr. Winter been there? Well, send Rogers. Here. No, here, confound you! The Palace. [*Putting down the receiver.*] No, nothing's been seen of him since early this morning.

ETCHINGHAM.

I wonder what the other side are going to do when they hear this.

JAMES FORD.

Oh, don't you be afraid. They heard about the attack as soon as ever we did.

BENNETT.

You ought to have held the line and prevented them from getting on to London.

BOYCE.

Good God, one can't think of everything at once.

ETCHINGHAM.

It seems to me the whole thing has been about as disgracefully mismanaged as it could be.

BOYCE.

If you'd ever tried to run an election you'd know it wasn't so easy as all that.

ETCHINGHAM.

I'm not an election agent. It's not my business.

JAMES FORD.

Come, come, gentlemen, it's no good quarrelling about it.

[*These three speeches are spoken at once.*]

SWALECLIFFE.

How is the polling going on?

BOYCE.

Oh, I think we shall have the heaviest poll we've ever had.

JAMES FORD.

Of course there'll be some slackening off just now. A lot of working men voted when the polling stations opened.

BOYCE.

There'll be twice as many at the dinner-hour.

SWALECLIFFE.

You don't know what the Tories are doing, Colonel?

BOYCE.

I should think I did know. They're going to set up the article as soon as it comes in.

ETCHINGHAM.

The whole article?

BOYCE.

The whole confounded thing.

JAMES FORD.

And placard the streets with it. They've made arrangements to print off a thousand, and they've got their bill stickers all ready and waiting.

ETCHINGHAM.

It's infamous.

JAMES FORD.

Nonsense! It's business. We'd have done the same if we'd had the luck to get such a stick as this to beat Morrison with the very morning of the election.

SWALECLIFFE.

The comfort is, they don't know Morrison and they do know Winter.

JAMES FORD.

That's the danger, too. They may know him too well.

ETCHINGHAM.

I don't know what the devil you mean by that. You seem to forget that you're speaking of my son-in-law.

JAMES FORD.

Oh, we're not here to pay one another compliments.

BENNETT.

If you'll wait a minute or two he'll be here himself and you can say to him anything you want to.

BOYCE.

What I can't make out is why he chose this particular day to bring out his company.

BENNETT.

He didn't think the election would take place just yet.

JAMES FORD.

Every one's been talking of a general election for the last two months.

BENNETT.

You know it was sprung upon us at the end.

SWALECLIFFE.

Couldn't he have kept the issue back?

ETCHINGHAM.

He'd got everything fixed up by then.

JAMES FORD.

[*Speaking through.*] Of course he could. It was only his obstinacy. I told him it was a bad time to give an American issue to the public.

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, you weren't obliged to apply for shares, were you?

JAMES FORD.

Tell me something I don't know next, will you?

ETCHINGHAM.

I can tell you there's no harm in keeping a civil tongue in your head.

JAMES FORD.

Thank you, I don't want lessons in manners from you.

BENNETT.

You won't do yourselves much good by losing your tempers.

SWALECLIFFE.

Why doesn't Mr. Winter come?

BOYCE.

I dare say he's sent his car to take some one to the poll and he's had to walk.

ETCHINGHAM.

It seems to me that you've bungled everything you could.

BOYCE.

I don't know why the devil you should blame me.

[A waiter comes in with newspapers on a tray.]

BENNETT.

Here they are at last.

[They crowd round the waiter and take the papers from him. The waiter goes out.]

ETCHINGHAM.

Thank God, now we shall know the worst.

BOYCE.

The Financial News.

JAMES FORD.

No, that's got nothing.

BENNETT.

Here it is. *The Financial Standard.*

JAMES FORD.

Give it me.

[He takes the paper from BENNETT and opens it. ETCHINGHAM watches him anxiously.]

SWALECLIFFE.

I wish to goodness I'd never thought of stocks and shares. I knew it was wrong. Oh, what a punishment!

JAMES FORD.

[Impatiently.] We can't all read the paper at once.

BENNETT.

Spread it out on the table. That's the best way.

[BENNETT and FORD rapidly run their eyes down the article.]

BENNETT.

Steep, isn't it?

JAMES FORD.

If the Tories print this it'll about bust us.

ETCHINGHAM.

The whole thing's a pack of lies. It's scandalous that such methods should be used to influence an election.

JAMES FORD.

[To SWALECLIFFE.] D'you want to read it?

SWALECLIFFE.

What does it say?

BENNETT.

Merely what they phoned down from London.

JAMES FORD.

But it puts it about as hot as I've ever seen a financial article.

ETCHINGHAM.

D'you think it'll interfere with the issue?

JAMES FORD.

It'll bust it.

ETCHINGHAM.

Can't something be done to find Winter?

BOYCE.

All we can do is to wait.

ETCHINGHAM.

Hang it all, we can't go on waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Isn't there one of you who can do something?

JAMES FORD.

Keep your head, man, that's about the best thing you can do.

[EDWARD O'DONNELL *hurries in.*

O'DONNELL.

It's all right. I've got him.

ETCHINGHAM.

Thank God.

O'DONNELL.

I told him to hurry up. He was just going to speak to some fellows in a factory.

SWALECLIFFE.

He's coming?

O'DONNELL.

Yes, rather. He said he'd be here in a jiffy.

JAMES FORD.

Did he want to know what it was about?

O'DONNELL.

There was no time for him to ask. And he was talking to a whole crowd when I found him.

SWALECLIFFE.

He knows it's important?

BENNETT.

Don't be afraid about that. If he says he'll come at once, he'll come.

BOYCE.

Here he is.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*At the same time.*] At last.

[GEORGE WINTER *comes in and surveys them for a moment. He smiles sardonically.*

GEORGE WINTER.

Quite a party.

ETCHINGHAM.

We thought you were never coming.

GEORGE WINTER.

What's the trouble?

JAMES FORD.

[*Pointing to the paper.*] That's the trouble.

BENNETT.

The Financial Standard has got an attack on the Campo del Oro.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Calmly.*] Is that all?

JAMES FORD.

It's a good deal.

GEORGE WINTER.

The Lewishams have got *The Financial Standard* in their pockets.

JAMES FORD.

You read it.

SWALECLIFFE.

They say there's no gold in the mine.

GEORGE WINTER.

What do they know about it? They've not been there and my expert has.

JAMES FORD.

That's just it. They say you're floating it on the report the owners gave you when you bought it, and you're holding back Macdonald's.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Looking over the article.*] It's extraordinary what a lot the papers know. [*The telephone rings.*] What is it? [*He listens for a moment.*] London call. You'd better go and speak to them, Fred. [*Down the receiver.*] No, don't connect with me. Mr. Bennett will come along. [*BENNETT goes out.*] It's one of my brokers. Now let's go on. As abuse I don't really think very much of it. I could have said much unpleasanter things about myself.

SWALECLIFFE.

You seem to take it very calmly.

GEORGE WINTER.

I've not been fighting the Lewishams for ten years without getting some pretty hard words broken on my back.

JAMES FORD.

D'you see that bit about where the money came from?

ETCHINGHAM.

I didn't see that.

GEORGE WINTER.

I'll read it you, shall I? [*Reading.*] "It is stated that Mr. Winter paid eighty thousand pounds for this precious mine. It would perhaps be interesting to inquire how he was able to raise such a sum at a time not only of general stringency, but of peculiar difficulty in the Central American market. Perhaps Mr. Winter, like King Midas, is able to turn into gold everything he touches and he may have been able to change his office furniture into precious metal. Perhaps not." Childish, isn't it? Do they think I'm going to let out my little trade secrets to please them?

JAMES FORD.

But where did you get the money?

[*ETCHINGHAM gives a slight start, but GEORGE WINTER remains perfectly cool.*

GEORGE WINTER.

My dear fellow, you don't suppose I stole it, do you? That's where the born financier comes in. He makes money as a conjurer makes a white rabbit appear out of a silk handkerchief.

JAMES FORD.

[*Drily.*] A very satisfactory explanation.

[*For an instant, hardly perceptible to the others, the eyes of GEORGE WINTER and JAMES FORD meet.*

GEORGE WINTER.

But that's hardly the point, is it?

[*During the rest of the scene JAMES FORD is thinking the matter over. His eyes rest on GEORGE WINTER as if he were trying to guess something.*

BOYCE.

Something must be done at once.

GEORGE WINTER.

Have the Tories got hold of it?

BOYCE.

They're printing the article on posters.

GEORGE WINTER.

Nuisance, isn't it?

[He pauses to reflect for a moment. MR. SWALECLIFFE breaks in upon his thoughts.]

SWALECLIFFE.

Is there any truth at all in that article, Mr. Winter?

GEORGE WINTER.

Not a word.

SWALECLIFFE.

It puts me in a very awkward position.

GEORGE WINTER.

What's the matter with you?

SWALECLIFFE.

I thought the shares would go to a premium before they were issued.

GEORGE WINTER.

[Smiling.] Like the San José tramways, eh?

SWALECLIFFE.

Mr. Ford says this will—bust the issue.

GEORGE WINTER.

Nice of him.... Been having a little gamble, have you?

SWALECLIFFE.

If it was a certainty I didn't see there could be any harm in it.

GEORGE WINTER.

[With a chuckle.] Like playing with loaded dice? How many shares have you applied for?

SWALECLIFFE.

Five hundred.

GEORGE WINTER.

Sporting of you.

SWALECLIFFE.

I didn't mean to take them up, you understand. I haven't got more than five hundred pounds in the world. I thought they were bound to go up half a crown and....

GEORGE WINTER.

Five hundred half crowns are quite worth having, aren't they?

SWALECLIFFE.

It's been a lesson to me. I'll never do anything like it again. I shan't have the chance. If I have to pay for the shares....

GEORGE WINTER.

Get my cheque book, Teddie.

O'DONNELL.

Yes, sir.

SWALECLIFFE.

What are you going to do?

GEORGE WINTER.

I don't want anyone to come into this concern who doesn't believe in it. Make out a cheque for five hundred pounds to Mr. Swalecliffe.

[O'DONNELL writes out a cheque during the next speeches.]

SWALECLIFFE.

That's very generous of you.

GEORGE WINTER.

Generous? Not a bit of it. You don't think I mind having five hundred shares more, do you?

SWALECLIFFE.

D'you think they're worth it?

GEORGE WINTER.

They'll be worth ten pounds a piece in six months, or I'm a Dutchman.

[O'DONNELL *hands him the cheque-book and a pen.* GEORGE WINTER *signs his name and tears out a cheque.*

JAMES FORD.

[*While he is doing this.*] That looks as if you had confidence in the mine.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Handing the cheque to SWALECLIFFE.*] Here you are. [*To JAMES FORD.*] D'you want me to buy your shares off you?

JAMES FORD.

[*With a quiet smile.*] Not just yet, thank you.

SWALECLIFFE.

But what's the meaning of the article, then?

GEORGE WINTER.

Why, it's as plain as a pikestaff. The Lewishams were willing to give their eyes for the mine, but I was too much for them. Now they're crabbing it. That's all.

[*He says this with great assurance, as if it thoroughly explained the whole thing.*

SWALECLIFFE.

But then....

GEORGE WINTER.

Pay that into your bank and hand over the certificate to me when you get it.

SWALECLIFFE.

D'you think they'll go to a premium?

GEORGE WINTER.

I've no doubt of it. I dare say the five hundred half-crowns will be just as useful to me as to you. But I shall hold on. I want a bigger profit than that.

SWALECLIFFE.

But if they're good enough for you, they're good enough for me.

GEORGE WINTER.

No, you've taken my cheque now. It's too late.

SWALECLIFFE.

There's your cheque. You can have it back again. I'm going to keep the shares.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Well, I don't mind. It won't make much difference to me. But don't sell them, whatever you read in the papers. What's a profit of half a crown? Wait till you've got a profit of five pounds, and then you can think of selling them.

SWALECLIFFE.

[*With a gasp.*] Five pounds? That would be two thousand five hundred.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Turning to COLONEL BOYCE.*] Wait a minute. Get on to Bishop and Jones.

BOYCE.

The printers?

GEORGE WINTER.

We must answer this article. I've just been thinking what we'd better say.

[*He sits down and begins to write, while COLONEL BOYCE goes to the telephone.*

BOYCE.

What's their number, d'you know?

JAMES FORD.

703, I think.

BOYCE.

Is that the Exchange? Give me 703, will you? That is Bishop and Jones, the printers, isn't it?

GEORGE WINTER.

I'm going to make it hot and strong.

O'DONNELL.

Isn't there anything I can do?

BOYCE.

Are you Bishop and Jones?

GEORGE WINTER.

Tell them to have everything ready to print off a couple of thousand posters at once. You're just coming round in the car.

BOYCE.

Hulloa? Will you get everything ready to print off a couple of thousand posters at once. I'm just coming round. Colonel Boyce. Yes. That's it.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Speaking through COLONEL BOYCE'S instructions to the printers.*] What d'you think of this, Ford?

JAMES FORD.

Let's have a look.

GEORGE WINTER.

You see we've got the advantage that they have to print a whole article. And we only need a couple of sentences.

JAMES FORD.

Yes, that seems all right.

ETCHINGHAM.

Couldn't be better.

GEORGE WINTER.

Make a copy of it, Teddie. Hurry up.

BOYCE.

We haven't got any time to lose.

GEORGE WINTER.

The car's at the door.

O'DONNELL.

I shan't be a minute.

GEORGE WINTER.

You can get hold of the bill-posters, can't you?

BOYCE.

Oh, yes, there'll be no bother about that.

O'DONNELL.

Here you are. That's done.

GEORGE WINTER.

Take it, Boyce. And hurry up.

BOYCE.

[*Taking a copy of the reply.*] Trust me.

[*He goes out.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Handing O'DONNELL a second copy.*] Teddie, jump into a cab and go round to the newspaper offices. And tell them to put that in their next edition. Biggest type they've got. Then go to the Committee Rooms and wait. I'll ring you up there or come round.

O'DONNELL.

All right.

GEORGE WINTER.

And hustle, or I'll sack you.

[He goes out, and as he does so BENNETT comes in.]

JAMES FORD.

You're taking it better than I expected.

GEORGE WINTER.

What do you expect me to do; bang my head on the floor and tear out my hair? Can't afford it. Takes me all my time to keep my hair on.

ETCHINGHAM.

Here's Bennett.

GEORGE WINTER.

Well?

BENNETT.

Nothing much has happened. They're a bit excited in the City.

JAMES FORD.

No bad drop in anything?

BENNETT.

Nothing to speak of.

JAMES FORD.

That's a relief.

GEORGE WINTER.

Everything is sound. No one would be such a fool as to do a bear.

BENNETT.

I'm getting on to MacLaren and Hewitt.

GEORGE WINTER.

That's all right. I wanted them.

JAMES FORD.

Are they brokers?

GEORGE WINTER.

Yes. Look here, Ford. I'm due to speak in the Cattle Market now. I wish you'd go down and keep them going till I turn up. I shall only be ten minutes. You've got the line all right, Fred?

BENNETT.

Yes.

JAMES FORD.

Well, I don't mind if I do that. There's nothing I can do here, is there?

GEORGE WINTER.

No, leave it all to me. Your interests are my interests.

JAMES FORD.

I'll make tracks.

GEORGE WINTER.

That's good.

[JAMES FORD goes out.]

BENNETT.

Governor, I thought I'd better not say too much while he was there.

GEORGE WINTER.

I saw something was up. That's why I got rid of him.

BENNETT.

Things are rotten.

ETCHINGHAM.

Good Lord.

BENNETT.

The Lewishams are going for us.

GEORGE WINTER.

I thought they would as soon as I saw the article.

BENNETT.

Who's given it away, d'you think?

GEORGE WINTER.

How do I know? That doesn't matter. The only thing is to face it.

ETCHINGHAM.

D'you mean our shares are falling, Mr. Bennett?

BENNETT.

There's a lot of selling.

GEORGE WINTER.

I wish we could corner them. I'd like to give the bears a lesson.

BENNETT.

If it goes on there'll be a panic.

GEORGE WINTER.

You've told the brokers to do all they can to prevent its going too far?

BENNETT.

I've told them to buy, but carefully.

GEORGE WINTER.

You must go up to London, Fred. There's no one there with a head on his shoulders.

BENNETT.

I thought that was the best thing myself. I've looked out the trains. I can just catch the express. I shall be there soon after one.

GEORGE WINTER.

Then bolt at once. I give you a free hand.

BENNETT.

If the slump can be stopped, I'll stop it.

GEORGE WINTER.

It's not a matter of can. It must be stopped. And wire reassuring messages. We must hang on to the telephone for all we're worth.

BENNETT.

Good-bye.

GEORGE WINTER.

And come back when the House closes. We must talk over things.

BENNETT.

All right. Good luck.

[He goes out.]

ETCHINGHAM.

Is it all up with us, George?

GEORGE WINTER.

What the dickens are you talking about?

ETCHINGHAM.

They've found out the truth. It's there in black and white that the wretched mine's worthless.

GEORGE WINTER.

They can't prove anything.

ETCHINGHAM.

Ever since I knew I've scarcely closed my eyes at night. I wish I'd shot myself when you first told me.

GEORGE WINTER.

My dear fellow, you're much more comfortable here than you would be at Kensal Green.

ETCHINGHAM.

And the worst of it is.... [*He breaks off.*] At first I was overcome with the horror of it. But little by little I've got used to it, used to your being a thief and a swindler.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a chuckle.*] You put things rather bluntly, don't you?

ETCHINGHAM.

And Bennett was a convict. It all seems quite natural now. And I can talk and laugh with you. And I eat by your side every day.

GEORGE WINTER.

One can't make a fortune without taking risks.

ETCHINGHAM.

There are always those missing bonds. They're in my thoughts day and night.

GEORGE WINTER.

No one can make inquiries for three weeks. By that time we shall have gone to allotment, and the bonds will be safely back in the black box.

ETCHINGHAM.

But will you be able to go to allotment?

GEORGE WINTER.

Of course we shall. This article isn't going to do us any harm. I shall win the seat. That'll give these Middlepool people confidence.

ETCHINGHAM.

George, I believe Ford is uneasy. I don't trust him. Supposing he found out about the bonds?

GEORGE WINTER.

It might be devilish expensive.

ETCHINGHAM.

You'll never buy him.

GEORGE WINTER.

I never met the man yet who hadn't his price. Flattery if he's a fool, hard cash if he's a wise man. But a price of some sort. There's always a price.

ETCHINGHAM.

Take care of Ford, George.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a smile.*] I'm not frightened.

ETCHINGHAM.

Sometimes I'm afraid, you're so confident. It's impossible a thing like this can end well.

GEORGE WINTER.

I believe in my star. I've been in tight corners before, but I've wriggled out of them. I'm stronger than ever I was. I've got ten times more brains than any of my competitors. The ball is at my feet and I've only got to set it rolling. What d'you think difficulties are to me? I've never been in better spirits, so alert, so buoyant, as during these last weeks when my neck has been in a noose and every policeman I passed might have a warrant in his pocket for my arrest. If there were ten times more difficulties I'd overcome them all. In ten years I shall be the richest man in London. In fifteen I shall be a peer. My God, I feel as if the world were an orange and I'd got my teeth into it, and I shall suck it dry.

ETCHINGHAM.

I wonder how many ruined lives will be sacrificed to give you all you want. You walk over dead bodies and broken hearts.

GEORGE WINTER.

Rot! I flutter the will-o'-the-wisp of gain before the covetous, and they follow. They want to make money without working for it. Well, I'm cleverer than they are. Swalecliffe gambles with his five hundred pounds. His five hundred pounds will find its way into my pocket. It's his own look out. Each for himself and the devil take the hindmost. [*With a start.*] By George, I've got an idea.... The Lewishams can't attack my stocks without weakening their own. We're in

the same boat, and if one of us shakes it both'll topple out.

ETCHINGHAM.

What d'you mean?

GEORGE WINTER.

Well, we'll attack the Lewishams. I'll get on to MacLaren's at once. Go to the post office and wire to Bennett. He's sure to call at the office. *Sell Lewishams.* He'll twig. By George, that's the ticket. Why didn't I think of it before? We'll make the Lewishams sorry they started this game.

ETCHINGHAM.

But supposing ...?

GEORGE WINTER.

Good God, man, don't suppose, do as I tell you. Don't you see we've got nothing to lose and everything to gain? I know my luck's in. And I follow my luck. That's genius.

[ETCHINGHAM *with a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders goes out to send the telegram.* GEORGE WINTER *begins to walk excitedly up and down.*

CURTAIN.

SCENE II

The scene takes place in the sitting-room of the Palace Hotel, but it is eleven o'clock at night. Only a reading lamp is lit, the light of which falls on CATHERINE and LADY FRANCIS. CATHERINE is working at some embroidery.

LADY FRANCIS.

Can you see, dear? Wouldn't you like some more light?

CATHERINE.

[*With an affectionate smile.*] No, the light hurts my eyes.

LADY FRANCIS.

You're looking very pale, darling.

CATHERINE.

I haven't been sleeping very well here. We're so near the trains, and they seem to run all night.

LADY FRANCIS.

I wonder how George can stand it. His room is practically on the railway.

CATHERINE.

Thank heaven, it's over. We shall know the result in half an hour, and to-morrow we can go.

LADY FRANCIS.

What are you going to do?

CATHERINE.

What can I do? Nothing.

LADY FRANCIS.

I'm afraid you're very unhappy, Kate.

CATHERINE.

[*Smiling.*] Please don't think that, mother.

LADY FRANCIS.

You've given up everything for our sake.

CATHERINE.

I wish I could think so. I gave up my divorce because—because I was afraid. I couldn't risk the regret that Robert might feel later. I should always have been looking for it... One must never forget that love is a woman's whole life, but it's never more than part of a man's, never.

LADY FRANCIS.

What did you tell him?

CATHERINE.

I wrote and said I found it impossible to go on with my action. I begged him not to try to move me. I told him I was very unhappy.

LADY FRANCIS.

Poor child.

CATHERINE.

He wrote very kindly. He made it as easy for me as he could. And now it's all over. I've lost my last chance of happiness. I'm bound to my husband for the rest of my life.

LADY FRANCIS.

And do you still love Robert?

CATHERINE.

[*Smiling.*] Yes. And I'm glad of what I've done. The only thing that helps me is the pride I take in all the great things he's going to do. And it will have been me. I gave him the opportunity.

[*ANNE comes in. She is wearing a coat and skirt and a hat.*

ANNE.

Well! You are strange people. How on earth can you sit there and sew while the counting's going on? I've never been so excited in my life.

CATHERINE.

Why have you come back?

ANNE.

Well, it's nearly finished now. Teddie said there'd be rather a scrummage when the result was known, and I'd better get out of the way.

CATHERINE.

[*Smiling.*] Obedient creature.

ANNE.

It rather amuses me to be ordered about. Besides, I couldn't help seeing that nobody wanted me. Teddie promised he'd bolt round as soon as the result was out. I say, let's have some light, shall we?

[*She turns on the electricity, and the room is suddenly a glare of light.*

LADY FRANCIS.

You'll blind us.

ANNE.

I love an election. I've never had such a time in my life. I've enjoyed every minute of these three weeks. I hope Teddie'll go into Parliament.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] On four hundred a year?

ANNE.

Oh, George will give us a rise. He says Teddie's awfully useful. George *is* good, isn't he?

CATHERINE.

I'm glad you're so happy, darling.

ANNE.

[*Abruptly, after a little, quick look at her.*] You're not angry with us, Kate?

CATHERINE.

Good heavens, why should I be?

ANNE.

You know, it's so dreadfully hard to pretend I haven't got eyes in my head.... Why don't you make it up with George, Katie?

CATHERINE.

I don't know what makes you think there's anything to make up.

ANNE.

Oh, my dear, what I didn't guess for myself Teddie told me.

CATHERINE.

He would have been wiser to mind his own business.

ANNE.

It was rather....

CATHERINE.

If you knew how things were between George and myself, and you were willing to accept his favours what do you expect me to say? I didn't ask you not to. I knew if I had you would only have refused. I'm cynical enough to know that in this world each of us takes care of his own interests.

LADY FRANCIS.

My dear, don't be so bitter.

ANNE.

One has to take people as one finds them; George has always been charming to me. If you'd only make allowances for him....

CATHERINE.

[*Interrupting vehemently.*] Oh, my dear, don't. I'm not in the humour to stand that. Leave me to lead my own life without interference. Surely it's enough that to bind me to him George should give you an income to marry on. You can't want more from me than that.

ANNE.

Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say anything that would hurt you.

CATHERINE.

[*Recovering herself.*] You haven't. Forgive me. I didn't mean to make a scene, but my nerves are a little upset. I'm a very weak, selfish woman, and it's dreadfully hard to be half as angelic as you think me. I'm very glad that you're going to marry Teddie. You're in love with one another, and if you haven't much money, what does it matter? I'm sure you'll be tremendously happy.

ANNE.

You are a dear.

[FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM *comes in. He is wearing a dinner jacket and a black tie. ANNE springs up impulsively.*

ANNE.

Is it over?

ETCHINGHAM.

No, I was too anxious to stay any longer.

LADY FRANCIS.

But George is going to get in?

ETCHINGHAM.

Who can tell? The seat has always been lost or held by a handful of votes.

ANNE.

But how did it seem to be going?

ETCHINGHAM.

Winter, Morrison, Winter, Morrison. One vote on one side, one vote on the other. It seemed interminable.

LADY FRANCIS.

He won by seventy-five last time.

ETCHINGHAM.

Who can tell the effect of all these rumours and suspicions and attacks? They may just have made the difference. Oh, it's maddening.

CATHERINE.

Sit down, father, and rest. You look quite done up.

ETCHINGHAM.

Even George is anxious. I know his face so well. He's trying to appear as if he were certain.

ANNE.

No human being could help being anxious.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*With a sudden start.*] I thought I heard some shouting.

ANNE.

Oh, I wish I hadn't come away.

LADY FRANCIS.

Let's open the window. Perhaps we shall hear something.

[LADY FRANCIS *and* ANNE *go to the window and open it.*

LADY FRANCIS.

No, I was mistaken.

ANNE.

Listen. I'm sure I hear cheering.

[She goes out on to the balcony. She and LADY FRANCIS are half hidden from view, so that it may be supposed the following scene between CATHERINE and LORD FRANCIS is not heard by them.]

ETCHINGHAM.

[In a low voice to CATHERINE.] Oh, my dear, will you ever forgive me?

CATHERINE.

Oh, father, don't. It was very noble of you not to tell me anything before I decided. Now that I know the whole truth....

ETCHINGHAM.

The only hope we've got is to go on. If he gets in, if we can pull things together, we may get out of the muddle. He's positive of it. The only thing that held me up was the thought of all of you. If I'd gone to the police there and then—or made away with myself, it would have meant the ruin of all of you.

CATHERINE.

And of all the unhappy people who've trusted everything they had to George.

ETCHINGHAM.

You think I was right, Kate, don't you? It wasn't just cowardice on my part?

CATHERINE.

I hope you were right.

ETCHINGHAM.

But if it was all in vain? If he's not able to float the company and the truth comes out, then I shall have sacrificed you for nothing.

CATHERINE.

Oh, don't think of it.

ETCHINGHAM.

I believe if he wins the election he'll be strong enough to force the issue on them.

CATHERINE.

But if the mine's worthless?

ETCHINGHAM.

We're going to buy the shares in when the tide turns in Central America. Things are looking brighter already. He's promised me that no one shall lose a farthing. When that's done I go. Oh, how thankful I shall be!

CATHERINE.

Oh, I know, I know.

ETCHINGHAM.

I had to tell some one, and I couldn't tell your mother.

CATHERINE.

I'm glad you told me. It makes it easier to bear now we both know.

ANNE.

At last!... Father, father.

[She comes back into the room, excitedly, and at the same time a vague, muffled shouting is heard in the distance. ETCHINGHAM springs to his feet.]

ETCHINGHAM.

Thank God. The suspense was awful.

LADY FRANCIS.

There's no mistaking it this time.

ETCHINGHAM.

Is he in? Is he in?

ANNE.

Of course he's in. I've never felt so confident in my life.

ETCHINGHAM.

If it's all right, then we're safe. I'm sure it's the beginning of the turn.

LADY FRANCIS.

Why doesn't Teddie make haste?

ANNE.

Listen to the shouting. Isn't it splendid?

[More shouting is heard, this time a little louder.]

ETCHINGHAM.

I expect they're reading out the figures.

[TEDDIE O'DONNELL rushes in, rather dishevelled, with his hat on the back of his head.]

O'DONNELL.

He's in!

ANNE.

How ripping!

[FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM sinks into a chair, too overcome to speak, trying to compose himself. CATHERINE puts her hand on his shoulder to show her sympathy.]

LADY FRANCIS.

What's the majority?

O'DONNELL.

Twenty-seven.

ANNE.

I say, what a squeak!

O'DONNELL.

Just at the end I thought we were beaten. It was Morrison, Morrison, Morrison, until I almost screamed.

ETCHINGHAM.

Well, he's in at all events.

ANNE.

I am glad.

[She throws her arms impulsively round O'DONNELL'S neck and kisses him.]

O'DONNELL.

By Jove, it was a moment to live for when the figures were read out. You never heard such shouting.

CATHERINE.

Where is he now?

O'DONNELL.

When I left he was making a speech to the crowd. But one couldn't hear a word, because every one was shouting at the top of his voice. I simply bellowed.

ANNE.

[Enthusiastically.] Aren't you glad, Kate?

CATHERINE.

[Smiling.] Yes, very glad.

ANNE.

How can you take it so quietly!

LADY FRANCIS.

Is he coming here?

O'DONNELL.

Yes. I forgot to give you his message. He sent his love to Kate, and said he'd be here in two twos.

ANNE.

I wish he'd hurry up. Isn't he a darling?

O'DONNELL.

He's the greatest man I've ever known. He's a perfect stunner. I don't know what there is about him, but you can't help believing in him. And he was so splendid this morning about those confounded lies in the paper. All the rest of them were as frightened as rabbits, but he never turned a hair.

ANNE.

[*Excitedly.*] There's a car.

O'DONNELL.

That's it, I bet you anything you like.

ANNE.

How jolly of him to come quickly! [*She runs to the door and opens it.*] George, George!

[*GEORGE WINTER comes in boisterously and clasps ANNE in his arms.*]

ANNE.

Isn't it splendid!

GEORGE WINTER.

Glorious victory, what!

[*He is followed by COLONEL BOYCE, JAMES FORD, MR. SWALECLIFFE, and two other men.*]

ETCHINGHAM.

Thank God!

GEORGE WINTER.

You haven't been worried about it? I knew I'd get in. I never had a moment's doubt about it.

JAMES FORD.

[*Drily.*] No one can say you don't believe in yourself.

GEORGE WINTER.

Hang it all, if you don't believe in yourself, how can you expect other people to believe in you? Drinks, gentlemen!

O'DONNELL.

Shall I ring?

GEORGE WINTER.

I told the waiter on my way up. Here they are. [*A couple of waiters come in with glasses and bottles of champagne.*] No teetotalism to-night, Mr. Swalecliffe. By Jove, I'm thirsty. Pour it out. Pour it out.

SWALECLIFFE.

I never touch alcohol, Mr. Winter.

GEORGE WINTER.

Poor is the heart that never rejoices. Have you all got glasses, gentlemen? Come on, Lady Francis. Don't be backward, Anne.

ANNE.

Yes, please.

GEORGE WINTER.

That's right. Now then, Teddie. All ready? Gentlemen, I give you my wife, to whom this glorious victory is due.

ALL.

Mrs. Winter, Mrs. Winter. Catherine.

CATHERINE.

[*Embarrassed and shy.*] Thank you very much.

[*There are shouts outside, cheers: WINTER, WINTER, For he's a jolly good fellow.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Hulloa, they've come round to the hotel.

ANNE.

Just look at the crowd.

O'DONNELL.

Shall I open the window?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Stepping forward.*] Yes.

[*At his appearance the shouts break out more tumultuously. Cheer upon cheer is heard. GEORGE WINTER puts up his hand for silence.*

GEORGE WINTER.

Gentlemen, we've won a great fight. We've won in face of a campaign of lies, of misrepresentation, and of scandal. Truth always prevails. Honesty is the best policy. A glorious victory, gentlemen, and a triumph for English honesty, English plain dealing, and English integrity. Gentlemen, I drink your health.

[*He drinks his glass of champagne before the crowd. The cheering which has been going on all through the speech now grows louder and louder. There are shouts of*MRS. WINTER.

GEORGE WINTER.

Kate, they want you.

CATHERINE.

No. Please not.

GEORGE WINTER.

Come. No false modesty. Give them a bow, that won't hurt you.

[*He takes her hand and draws her to the window. The crowd bursts out again into cheering. GEORGE WINTER comes back into the room.*

GEORGE WINTER.

My word, what a moment!

BOYCE.

You must be dead beat.

GEORGE WINTER.

I? Fresh as a daisy. Nothing can beat me.

O'DONNELL.

[*Taking out his watch.*] By Jove, I had no idea it was so late.

BOYCE.

I think I'll be getting along.

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, nonsense! Why, the evening's only just beginning.

BOYCE.

I'm dog tired.

SWALECLIFFE.

I must be getting away, too. My wife will be wanting to know all about it.

GEORGE WINTER.

Well, if I can't persuade you, I suppose I can't. I hope you'll all have as good a night as I mean to.

SWALECLIFFE.

You think it's all right about—about that matter?

GEORGE WINTER.

Don't you worry your head. It's as right as rain. I tell you that nothing I touch can fail.

SWALECLIFFE.

Then good-night.

GEORGE WINTER.

Good-night.

[*COLONEL BOYCE, SWALECLIFFE, and the other two men who came in with them, go out.*

GEORGE WINTER.

You're not going yet, Ford?

JAMES FORD.

No. If you don't mind I'd like to have a word with you when you can spare me a few minutes.

GEORGE WINTER.

As many as you like. I'm ready now.

LADY FRANCIS.

If you're going to talk business, we'd better leave you.

JAMES FORD.

I'm in no hurry, my lady.

LADY FRANCIS.

It really is getting very late.

O'DONNELL.

Aren't you too tired for business now?

GEORGE WINTER.

Tired? I don't know what it is to be tired. When you write my biography, young man, you can say that after the hardest fought battle of the election, when the cheers of the multitude were still ringing in his ears, he sat down at midnight, fresh as paint, and talked business with the shrewdest man in Middlepool till break of day.

JAMES FORD.

[*Drily.*] It'll be more accurate if you say for ten minutes.

GEORGE WINTER.

But so much less effective.

ANNE.

I'm sure you've been drinking too much champagne, George.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Laughing.*] Nonsense. I could drink a gallon, and be as sober as a judge at the end of it.

ANNE.

Well, good-night.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Kissing her.*] Good-night, my chick. Have you named the happy day yet?

LADY FRANCIS.

Good-night.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*To O'Donnell.*] And you can add that I enveloped my mother-in-law in my arms.

LADY FRANCIS.

[*With a smile, warding off his attempt to embrace her.*] I congratulate you. It's been a great triumph.

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, it's only the beginning. I've got the world at my feet. In ten years I shall be crying like Alexander because there are no more worlds to conquer.

O'DONNELL.

You don't want me any more, do you?

[LADY FRANCIS *and* ANNE *go out.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

No, go to bed. You're young, and you want your beauty sleep. I'll be bound you're not worried by the trains. Where's your room?

O'DONNELL.

It's just above yours. But I sleep like a top.

GEORGE WINTER.

That's a good sign. You'll be as great a man as I am one of these days.

O'DONNELL.

[*With a laugh.*] Good-night.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*To ETCHINGHAM.*] And you'd better go off too, old man. You look tired out.

ETCHINGHAM.

[*Wearily.*] It's been an exciting day for all of us.

GEORGE WINTER.

It's been one of the days that make life worth living.

ETCHINGHAM.

Good-night.

[*As they go out CATHERINE comes forward.*

CATHERINE.

I won't say good-night to you just yet. If Mr. Ford is not going to keep you long I should like to speak to you afterwards.

JAMES FORD.

It'll be ten minutes at the utmost, Mrs. Winter.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With exaggerated gallantry.*] I'm at your disposal, darling, now and always.

[*With a slight bow to JAMES FORD, CATHERINE goes out.*

GEORGE WINTER.

I told you I was justified in trusting my luck. Everything is coming out right. The Lewishams won't be able to stand against me much longer. They'll have to take me in. We'll combine our interests, and then we shall hold Central America in the hollow of our hands. You'll be in it too, James. You're going to be a richer man than you guess. And when I'm in with the Lewishams I shall bide my time. Manny Lewisham can't last much longer, and his sons are fools. When he's gone I shall get the whole business in my hands. I've got ten times more brains than anyone in that market. There's no one who can stand against me.

JAMES FORD.

[*Quietly.*] You haven't forgotten that article in *The Financial Standard*?

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Gaily.*] Oh, is that what you want to talk to me about? I tell you that shan't disturb my night's rest. By the way, that reminds me: if I have won the election it was through no help of yours. I asked you to go down and speak in the Cattle Market, and when I got there I found there'd been no sign of you. It might have been devilish awkward.

JAMES FORD.

Well, it so happens it didn't matter.

GEORGE WINTER.

Where did you get to after all?

JAMES FORD.

[*Looking at him.*] I went up to London!

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Indifferently, doing all he can to hide his suspicion.*] Did you?

JAMES FORD.

[*Very quietly, almost diffidently.*] I was struck by one of the paragraphs in the article. The one about where you got the money from.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a smile.*] I noticed that seemed to bother you a bit.

JAMES FORD.

Things were pretty tight at that time.

GEORGE WINTER.

A man in my position can always lay his hands on money.

JAMES FORD.

It was a big sum.

GEORGE WINTER.

Fair to moderate.

[*There is a very short pause. The two men, both shrewd, hard and keen, face one another like two duellists.*

JAMES FORD.

It struck me that the Middlepool Investment Trust had got a large batch of bonds lying in the bank.

[*He watches* GEORGE WINTER *for the effect of this statement.*

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a smile.*] Well, they're lying there still.

JAMES FORD.

Will you take your oath on that?

GEORGE WINTER.

Yes.

JAMES FORD.

The more I thought of it, the more nervous I was. I went to the bank.

[GEORGE WINTER *gives him a rapid look, but otherwise makes no sign that he realizes his theft is discovered.*

JAMES FORD.

They showed me an order for delivery of the bonds signed by you, Etchingam, and Bennett.

GEORGE WINTER.

Have a cigar, will you?

JAMES FORD.

No.... What have you done with those bonds?

GEORGE WINTER.

If they're in their place when the auditor makes his examination no one has any question to ask.

JAMES FORD.

[*More sternly.*] You had no more right to touch them than my office boy has the right to take a sovereign from the petty cash.

GEORGE WINTER.

What the devil d'you mean by that?

JAMES FORD.

I'm a director of the Middlepool Investment Trust. I insist on the bonds being produced at once.

GEORGE WINTER.

They shall be produced in a fortnight.

JAMES FORD.

No, no, my friend, that won't do.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Impatiently.*] Don't be a fool, James, you know as well as I do that business is business.

JAMES FORD.

Yes, and not theft.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Apparently flying into a passion.*] How dare you speak to me like that!

JAMES FORD.

It's no good trying to bluster with me, George. I've seen you do it at shareholders' meetings and very effective it is sometimes, but this isn't the time for it.

[*There is a pause. GEORGE WINTER considers the position and determines to face it.*

GEORGE WINTER.

All right then.... I knew the mine was a good thing. I pledged the bonds to pay for it. I shall get them back as soon as the money comes in from the issue. Now you've got it.

JAMES FORD.

It's theft pure and simple.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Insolently.*] I suppose you want to come in with me. [*He does not notice* JAMES FORD's *instinctive movement of repulsion.*] I'll give you your shares for nothing. That means ten thousand pounds, and if you hold on to them they'll be worth fifty thousand in a year.

JAMES FORD.

Thank you. I'm not going to risk a lifetime's honest work for a few thousand pounds.

GEORGE WINTER.

Then what do you want?

JAMES FORD.

Nothing.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a slight smile.*] You've been Mayor of Middlepool twice, and you've done a lot of work for the party. I can't help thinking it's almost time the Government showed some appreciation of your services.

JAMES FORD.

You've mistaken your man, George Winter. I've worked like a nigger for thirty years. I've not let any chance slip by me, but I've never done anything that a man need be ashamed of. I've built up an honest business to leave to my sons, and an honest name. I'm too old to start being a rogue now.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Impatiently.*] I thought you wanted to talk business.

JAMES FORD.

Right's right, and wrong's wrong. You can't get over that. I couldn't rest for a moment if I thought any act of mine wasn't above board. It's no credit of mine, I'm just made that way.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*As if he were talking to a child.*] Come, James, we've been good friends for twenty years.

JAMES FORD.

[*In a low voice.*] This afternoon, when I found out what you'd done—well, I could have cried.

[*There is a real anguish in his tone which startles GEORGE WINTER. For the first time he realizes that the affair is serious. He begins to get frightened.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Quickly, hoarsely.*] But you don't mean seriously....

JAMES FORD.

[*Desperately.*] How can I make you understand? You don't seem to see that now I know what you've done I'm just filled with horror and loathing. If you've done this God knows what else you haven't done. I don't want to be hard on you. I must do my duty. I'm a director of the company. I put all my friends in it. I put my sister into it. And this mine. Is it true what that paper says? For all I know that's a swindle too.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With sudden anxiety.*] You're not going to push me down now that I'm almost at the top of the tree? I've got the world at my feet. If you'll only give me a month I can put everything straight.

JAMES FORD.

Five minutes ago it was a fortnight. I don't believe it. These things don't come right. When a man has crossed the line that separates honesty from dishonesty he never gets back.

GEORGE WINTER.

If you give me away now it'll mean a general smash. The only chance of saving things is to go on. The money's gone. You won't get it back by giving me up to the police.

JAMES FORD.

I must take my chance of that. After all, if I don't speak it makes me a party to the crime. It can be proved that I went to the bank to-day.

GEORGE WINTER.

Now you're saying something I can understand. If I show you by plain figures that I can put everything right if you'll only give me time....

JAMES FORD.

I tell you I can't. I've got my wife to think of, and my boys. It's theft, it's the money of orphans and widows that you've taken, and there's only one course open to me.

GEORGE WINTER.

What are you going to do?

JAMES FORD.

[*Brokenly.*] My God, what can I do? I trusted you as I would have trusted my sons.

GEORGE WINTER.

Out with it!

JAMES FORD.

I must—I must consult the Chief Constable.

GEORGE WINTER.

You wouldn't do that? You don't seriously mean that you'd go to the police? It's madness. It's so impractical. It's stupid.

JAMES FORD.

I could never respect myself again if I... It's a matter between my conscience and myself... Oh, George, why have you put me in this position?

GEORGE WINTER.

Look here, old man, I've done wrong. I admit it. I've done something that other men have done before me and it's come out all right. At the time I thought the slump would only last a few days, and I thought I should be able to replace the bonds in a week. It's the only slip I've made. Don't be too hard on me... [*With a break in his voice.*] Have mercy as you hope in your turn to have mercy shown to you. Don't ruin me for this one mistake. Let it mean something to you that I'm humiliating myself before you... It wasn't a crime. It was only thoughtlessness. Give me another chance.

[*JAMES FORD, with his face between his hands, thinks it over. He is deeply moved by GEORGE WINTER'S appeal. GEORGE, watching him keenly, thinks he is going to yield.*

GEORGE WINTER.

We've gone through bad times and good together. I've been a good friend to you. You've never had anything to reproach me with till now.

JAMES FORD.

[*Brokenly.*] I can't risk the money of all these poor people again.

GEORGE WINTER.

Will it satisfy you if I give up the directorship of the Middlepool Trust? Give me six months to save my face and I'll resign.

[*JAMES FORD looks up at him, wondering if he can put any trust in GEORGE WINTER. GEORGE waits for the decision with beating heart. He feels almost sick with fear.*

JAMES FORD.

I'll tell you what I'll do. If the bonds are in their place by four o'clock to-morrow I'll say nothing.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Astounded.*] To-morrow? It can't be done. It's impossible.

JAMES FORD.

That's all I can do for you.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Hardly knowing what he is saying.*] But no one could get it. You know it's impossible. Even if you gave me a week I couldn't do it. I can't, I can't, I can't. With the attack on us to-day we're—we're tottering. It's as much as we shall be able to do to hold out till the tide turns. That's not giving me a chance. Not a chance. To-morrow! It's absurd!

JAMES FORD.

That's my last word.

GEORGE WINTER.

You might as well send for the police at once. Oh, my God! It's impossible.

JAMES FORD.

If the money is not there by the time the bank closes I shall apply for a warrant.

GEORGE WINTER.

D'you know what that means? It means a trial, and then—and then prison.

JAMES FORD.

I can't do more for you than I've offered.

[*The finality of this, the deep regret and the decision in FORD'S tone, are like a blow in the face to GEORGE WINTER. He gives a sudden start, and throwing off his humbleness, flies into ungovernable passion. He whips himself into a rage as he flings the scornful invective at JAMES FORD and ends up on the last words in a positive scream of fury.*

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, it's infamous. It's damned hypocrisy. You don't care if I've taken the money or not. You're afraid of your own skin. And you're jealous of me. It's envy. I knew you envied me all the time. D'you think I've been taken in by you? You were a little tin god in Middlepool till I came along. You didn't fight me like a man. You just sided with me, waiting for your chance to trip me up. You think when I'm gone you'll have the field to yourself. Why shouldn't you be the member as well as I? It's mean. It's mean. You with your damned Christianity, your parrot cries of honesty. Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!

JAMES FORD.

[*Quietly.*] You see, you've gone too far. I shall never make you understand. You can't realize that a man may be honest, even if he loses by it, just because he can't help it, because he's made straight as some men are made crooked.

GEORGE WINTER.

It's childish.

JAMES FORD.

You've got through the world by knowing that nine men out of ten are rascals. You've forgotten that the tenth man must cross your path at last.

[*When he hears these words GEORGE WINTER gives a start, and he looks at FORD with staring, terrified eyes. He passes his hand over his forehead, trying to recall.*

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Almost to himself.*] Who said that to me before?

[*There is a pause.*

JAMES FORD.

Good-bye, George. My promise holds.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Bitterly.*] It's no good to me. I'm like a rat in a trap. You can get what fun you like out of seeing me wriggle.

[*For a moment JAMES FORD looks at him, then silently goes out. GEORGE WINTER is seized with a horrible, convulsive trembling. He shakes as a man might shake in an ague. With his quick mind he sees that no subtlety will save him now; he is up against the blank wall of a character as strong as his own. In a moment CATHERINE enters the room.*

GEORGE WINTER.

What the devil d'you want?

CATHERINE.

I heard Mr. Ford go. May I speak to you now?

[*GEORGE WINTER makes an effort to appear composed.*

GEORGE WINTER.

Well?

CATHERINE.

Now that the election is over you can have no further use for me. I've carried out my part of the bargain scrupulously.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*Putting his hand in a dazed way to his head.*] I don't know what you're talking about.

CATHERINE.

I understand that I've condoned all your offences towards me, and I'm helpless now to do anything. So you need have no fear that I shall interfere with you in any way. [*He turns round and looks at her. He takes in at last what she is saying.*] But there's no reason that I should expose myself any longer to a humiliation that I found unbearable. I've come to tell you that now I've done all you exacted I'm going to leave you, this time for good. I'm starting early tomorrow morning for the Continent with my friend Barbara Herbert, and I shall not return. You can devise whatever explanation you think necessary, and you may be quite sure I shan't contradict it. I shall be gone by the time you get up. You will find in my room all the trinkets you've given me. I wish to take nothing with me that I have received from you.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With clenched teeth.*] Are you leaving your clothes?

CATHERINE.

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] I think there is nothing more to be said. Good-bye. I trust you to leave me in peace. I promise on my side to do nothing that can inconvenience you.

[*She waits for a moment to see if he has anything further to say, but*

as he remains silent she goes towards the door. As she is about to go out he bursts into a peal of laughter. She stops with a start and looks at him. His laughter grows, peal upon peal. It becomes wild and shrill and hysterical. He bellows with laughter. Already half frightened, not understanding, CATHERINE makes a step or two back into the room.

CATHERINE.

What's the matter? George, George!

[He laughs still, and then suddenly breaks into a sob. He gives way entirely, and bursts into uncontrolled weeping.]

CATHERINE.

[Coming down to him.] George, what is it?

GEORGE WINTER.

For God's sake give me a drink.

[She hurries to the half-empty bottle of champagne on the table and pours out a glass of wine. He drinks it at a gulp.]

GEORGE WINTER.

[Recovering himself.] That's rich, that is. Rich.

[Again he bursts into laughter.]

CATHERINE.

What is it, George? It's not because I'm going away?

GEORGE WINTER.

Your going away doesn't matter a damn to me. It means that I've been done in the eye. Those swindling rogues, the Lewishams, have got me at last. That article's done the trick and I'm dished. You can go your own way now, Kate. You've got the better of me after all.

CATHERINE.

I don't understand.

GEORGE WINTER.

James Ford knows that the bonds have gone. And he's going to Scotland Yard.

CATHERINE.

Oh! And father?

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, I can't worry about your father now. He must look after his own skin. I've got enough to do to think of myself.

CATHERINE.

What shall I do?

GEORGE WINTER.

He'll give me till to-morrow to replace them, but I can't. It's impossible. And he knows I can't. Damned hypocrite! I shouldn't complain if I'd been beaten fairly; but it's so childish. And just when I'd got the reins in my hand. He can't countenance dishonesty. It's childish. I always distrusted him. Sanctimonious prig! He's jealous of me. He wants to kick me off my perch, so that he can take my place. And I know him. I know him inside out. He'll do what he says. *[With angry scorn.]* It's his duty.

CATHERINE.

Can't we sell things? There's my jewellery.

GEORGE WINTER.

A drop in the ocean. How can I get eighty thousand pounds in a falling market.

CATHERINE.

[Horrified.] D'you mean to say they'll arrest you?

GEORGE WINTER.

[With a dull roar, like a wild beast at bay.] No. D'you think I'm going to stand that, and a trial, and—and all the rest?

CATHERINE.

[Wringing her hands.] Is there no chance that you may get off?

GEORGE WINTER.

Bennett would give me away to save himself. I know him. There's not a man I can trust. The only thing's to have

done with it at once. I must get out of it while I have the chance.

CATHERINE.

D'you think there's any hope of your getting away?

GEORGE WINTER.

My way. Yes.

CATHERINE.

[*Understanding.*] Oh, George, you wouldn't do that.

GEORGE WINTER.

What else d'you expect me to do? D'you think I'm going to bolt to America, to be brought back in six months by a couple of detectives? Not much.

CATHERINE.

Wouldn't it be better to stay and face it? If you've done wrong, can't you accept your punishment? You're young still.

GEORGE WINTER.

They won't have mercy on me. It'll mean ten years. And when I come out, it'll mean hiding, doing odd jobs, like Bennett, dirty work for other men who won't risk their own skins. And what d'you suppose a life like that is worth to me? I want the power, and the notoriety, and the glamour. I wanted men to point me out in the street. I've aimed too high to be content with anything but the highest.

CATHERINE.

Oh, it's horrible.

GEORGE WINTER.

Come, Kate—honestly—if you loved me, wouldn't you wish me to make an end of it?

CATHERINE.

[*After a long look at him.*] Oh, don't ask me.

GEORGE WINTER.

Will you do something for me? It's the last thing I'll ever ask you.

CATHERINE.

I'll do anything I can.

GEORGE WINTER.

I want half an hour to myself. You must let no one come to me under any pretext whatever.

CATHERINE.

[*With a cry of horror.*] You're not going to do it now?

GEORGE WINTER.

I don't trust James Ford. He may have gone to Scotland Yard already. Perhaps the detectives are already on their way.

CATHERINE.

You've said yourself that he's to be relied on.

GEORGE WINTER.

Oh, I'm frightened. And what's the good? I'm dead beat. Perhaps to-morrow I shouldn't have the nerve.

CATHERINE.

Oh, it's awful.

GEORGE WINTER.

[*With a laugh.*] Why, it's your freedom.

[*He goes to the table and pours himself out a glass of brandy.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

I'm mixing my liquors. Bad habit, isn't it? You'll be ravishing in black, darling. It always suited you.

[*CATHERINE gives an inarticulate sob. GEORGE WINTER, shrugging his shoulders, goes towards the door.*]

GEORGE WINTER.

Will you promise to prevent anyone from disturbing me?

CATHERINE.

Yes.

GEORGE WINTER.

In half an hour you can go to bed.... I hope you'll sleep as soundly as I shall.

[He goes out and locks the door behind him. CATHERINE hides her face in her hands and moans with fright and horror. In a moment O'DONNELL comes in. CATHERINE starts as she hears him.]

CATHERINE.

I thought you'd gone to bed.

O'DONNELL.

I feel so awfully wide awake. I came in to see if I could find a book.

CATHERINE.

[Pointing to a table.] There are some over there.

O'DONNELL.

You're looking dreadfully done up. Why don't you turn in?

[At that moment shouts are heard in the square below, cheers and cries of WINTER.]

CATHERINE.

[Frightened.] What's that?

O'DONNELL.

[Going to the window.] Oh, it's closing time. Enthusiastic politicians who've been turned out of the public-houses.

[Cries of WINTER, WINTER.]

CATHERINE.

Oh, send them away, I can't bear it.

O'DONNELL.

[Opening the window and calling out.] Mr. Winter has gone to bed, gentlemen, and I strongly recommend you to follow his example.

[He shuts the window, amid the laughter and cheers of the roisterers. They go away singing. CATHERINE clenches her hands to prevent herself from screaming.]

O'DONNELL.

[With a laugh.] Splendid, aren't they?

CATHERINE.

Now, you really must go to bed.

O'DONNELL.

[Taking a book from the table.] All right. I dare say we shall have a busy day to-morrow.... I really think this is the happiest day I've ever had. Life is jolly, isn't it?

CATHERINE.

[With a strange look at him.] Yes.

O'DONNELL.

Good-night.

CATHERINE.

[With a sudden start.] Oh!

O'DONNELL.

What's the matter?

CATHERINE.

I thought I heard a sound.

O'DONNELL.

I didn't. The hotel's as still as death, for a wonder. I hope the trains won't disturb you to-night.

CATHERINE.

Good-night.

[He goes out. CATHERINE turns and looks at the door of GEORGE WINTER'S room. She takes a step towards it.]

CATHERINE.

George!

[*She listens, but there is no answer. With a gesture of horror she turns away.* FRED BENNETT *bursts into the room.*

BENNETT.

I beg your pardon. I didn't expect to find any one here. Where's the Governor?

CATHERINE.

I don't know.

BENNETT.

I want to see him at once.

CATHERINE.

He can't see any one to-night.

BENNETT.

He'll see me.

CATHERINE.

He left instructions that no one was to bother him.

BENNETT.

It's a matter of life and death.

CATHERINE.

[*With a shiver of apprehension.*] I tell you, you can't see him.

BENNETT.

Isn't he in his room?

CATHERINE.

No.

BENNETT.

[*Going towards the door.*] Are you sure?

CATHERINE.

[*Getting in his way.*] He's tired out. Can't you let him rest?

BENNETT.

Oh, but you don't know what's happened. The mine's all right. For goodness' sake, let me go to him.

CATHERINE.

[*Quickly.*] What do you mean?

BENNETT.

[*The words tumbling over one another in his hurry.*] The manager had taken Macdonald in, hadn't shown him a new shaft they'd sunk. The place is crammed full of gold. It was only a dodge of the Lewishams. I did what the Governor told me. I just flooded the market with selling orders of their stocks, and at closing time Manny Lewisham sent for me. I smelt a rat. I was too clever for him. He's offered to take the Governor in. He'll buy a huge block of shares to-morrow at par. He's going to pay on the nail. And we're safe, we're safe, we're safe.

CATHERINE.

D'you mean to say....

BENNETT.

[*Interrupting.*] It's what the Governor's been fighting for for ten years. At last he's got there. The shares'll be worth anything you like in a month. It means wealth, safety, everything.

CATHERINE.

Then George is....

BENNETT.

He's at the top of the tree. He's where he ought to be. In ten years he'll be in the House of Lords. Would you like to tell him yourself?

[*CATHERINE hesitates for a moment. She sees her chance of freedom slipping away from her once more. For a moment she struggles with herself. All her life, past and future, comes before her in a flash.*

CATHERINE.

I don't know where he is.

BENNETT.

You don't know?

CATHERINE.

He went down to the smoking-room.

BENNETT.

I must find him.

[He runs towards the door, but before he can get out CATHERINE has a revulsion of feeling. She gives a cry.]

CATHERINE.

No, stop. He's in his bedroom. Oh, be quick! Be quick!

[BENNETT stops and looks at her with surprise. She runs to the door and beats against it with her hands.]

CATHERINE.

George, George, George! Open the door! George, George!

BENNETT.

What's the matter? What d'you mean?

CATHERINE.

George! It's all right. Open the door, for God's sake. *[To BENNETT.]* Oh, can't you open the door?

BENNETT.

Good God, what's he doing?

CATHERINE.

George, George!

[BENNETT puts his shoulder against it and tries to burst the door open. It does not yield.]

BENNETT.

Governor. It's me.

CATHERINE.

He locked it. Break the glass.

[She gives him a bronze ornament which is at her hand, and he breaks it against the pane of glass which is above the lock. The glass splinters. He puts his hand in and turns the key. Then he opens the door and bursts in.]

BENNETT.

He's not there.

CATHERINE.

He must be. He must be.

BENNETT.

The windows are wide open. He must have gone out.

CATHERINE.

There's nowhere to go. There's only about two yards of garden and then the line. Call out.

BENNETT.

Perhaps he's in the garden.

[BENNETT runs out through the door of GEORGE WINTER'S room. As he does this, FRANCIS ETCHINGHAM comes in from the left, in his pyjamas and a dressing-gown.]

ETCHINGHAM.

I say, what the devil's all this row? It's bad enough to have the trains banging under one's window all night long. Upon my soul.

CATHERINE.

Where's George? Father, father!

ETCHINGHAM.

How the deuce should I know?

[BENNETT comes back.]

BENNETT.

He's not in the garden anywhere.

CATHERINE.

Oh, I'm so frightened!

ETCHINGHAM.

What on earth's the matter with you, Kate?

CATHERINE.

Oh, my God, my God!

BENNETT.

We can't find the Governor.

ETCHINGHAM.

Perhaps he's gone for a walk.

CATHERINE.

Along the line?

[TEDDIE O'DONNELL *comes running in. He has taken his coat and waistcoat off.*

O'DONNELL.

I say, I've just seen a most awful accident. A man's been run over on the line.

[CATHERINE *gives a shrill scream of horror, and, falling on her knees, hides her face.*

THE END.

Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:

seizes her her by the shoulders=> seizes her by the shoulders {pg 27}
he get's a month's hard labour=> he gets a month's hard labour {pg 101}
rapidily run their eyes=> rapidly run their eyes {pg 141}
He say's Teddie's awfully useful=> He says Teddie's awfully useful {pg 167}

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TENTH MAN: A TRAGIC COMEDY IN THREE ACTS ***

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