The Gay Lord Quex

by Arthur Wing Pinero

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GAY LORD QUEX: A COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS ***

THE GAY LORD QUEX

A COMEDY

In Four Acts

By ARTHUR W. PINERO

[Transcriber's Notes: The following changes were made to the e-book edition of this book: potégée changed to protégée, and punctuation normalized]

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LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

THE GAY LORD QUEX

A COMEDY

In Four Acts

By ARTHUR W. PINERO

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MCM

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THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

The Marquess of Quex Sir Chichester Frayne (Governor of Uumbos, West Coast of Africa) Captain Bastling "Valma", otherwise Frank Pollitt (a Professional Palmist) The Duchess Of Strood Julia, Countess of Owbridge Mrs. Jack Eden Muriel Eden (her sister-in-law) Sophy Fullgarney (a Manicurist) Miss Moon} Miss Huddle} (her Assistants) Miss Claridge} Miss Limbird} A Young Lady and other Patrons of Miss Fullgarney Servants at Fauncey Court

This Play was first acted at the Globe Theatre, London, on Saturday, April 8, 1899

THE FIRST ACT

ESTABLISHMENT OF SOPHY FULLGARNEY, MANICURIST AND DISPENSER OF ARTICLES FOR THE TOILET, 185 NEW BOND STREET

(AFTERNOON)

THE SECOND ACT

AT LADY OWBRIDGE'S. THE "ITALIAN GARDEN," FAUNCEY COURT, RICHMOND

(EVENING)

THE THIRD ACT

A BOUDOIR AND BEDROOM AT FAUNCEY COURT

(NIGHT)

THE FOURTH ACT

IN BOND STREET AGAIN

(THE FOLLOWING DAY)

The action of the Play is comprised within the space of twenty-four hours

THE GAY LORD QUEX

THE FIRST ACT

The scene represents a manicure establishment in New Bond Street. It is a front room upon the first floor, with three french-windows affording a view of certain buildings on the east side of the street. On the left, furthest from the spectator, is a wide, arched opening, apparently leading to another apartment, in which is the door giving entrance to the rooms from the staircase. Nearer, there is another french-window, opening on to an expanse of "leads" and showing the exterior of the wall of the further room above-mentioned. From the right, above the middle window, runs an ornamental partition, about nine feet in height, with panels of opaque glass. This partition extends more than half-way across the room, then runs forward for some distance, turns off at a sharp angle, and terminates between the arched opening and the window on the left. That part of the partition running from right to left is closed on its left side and forms, therefore, a separate room or compartment. Facing the audience, on the right, is a door admitting to this compartment; and, on the left, also in the, partition opposite the windows on the right, is an opening with a looped-back portière. The space between this opening and the further room forms a narrow anteroom, containing articles of furniture visible through the opening. Mirrors are affixed to the right wall, between the lower and the middle window and between the middle window and the partition, while on the left, between the window and the partition, is another mirror. A number of business cards are stuck in the frames of the mirrors. On the right, before each of the two lower

windows, turned from the spectator, is a capacious arm-chair, made in cane open-work. Attached to the arms of these chairs are little screens—also made of cane—shielding in a measure the occupants of the chairs from observation. Upon both the right and left arms of these chairs are circular frames, in cane, shaped to receive bowls of water Above each of the screen-chairs stands a smaller chair, set to face the larger one; and beside the small chair, on its right hand, is a low table, upon which are arranged the instruments and toilet necessaries employed in the process of manicure On the right, between the window and the partition is a three-cornered what-not, on which are set out packets of soap and of powder and other articles of the toilet. At the further end of the room, in the centre, stands a desk laden with account-books; and above the desk, its back against the partition, is a chair. On the right is a hat-and-umbrella stand. Nearer, in the centre, is a large circular table on which are displayed bottles of scent and liquid soap, cases of instruments for manicure, and some wooden bowls of bath-soap with lather brushes. On the right and left are ordinary chairs. Placed against the partition on the left, and facing the audience, is a cabinet, making a display similar to that upon the what-not. Nearer, on the left, there is another screen-chair set to face the audience; below it is a smaller seat and, by the side of the smaller seat, another little table with manicure tools, &c. Some framed photographs of ladies hang against the wood-work of the partition and in the wall-spaces; and in the lower and middle windows, on the right, bird-cages are suspended.

The light is that of a bright day in June.

[On the right Miss Claridge and Miss Huddle are in the final stages of manicuring two smart-looking men. The men occupy the screen-chairs; the manicurists—comely girls in black frocks—sit, facing the men, upon the smaller seats. On the left Miss Moon is rougeing and varnishing the nails of a fashionably-dressed young lady, whose maid is seated at the table in the centre. Miss Limbird is at the desk, deep in accounts.

Miss Moon.

[To the young lady.] You won't have them too red, will you?

Young Lady.

Not too red—nicely flushed.

First Gentleman.

[Examining his nails critically as he rises.] I say though, that's a vast improvement!

Miss Claridge.

Getting more shapely, aren't they?

First Gentleman.

Thanks awfully.

[He pays Miss Limbird, stands talking to her for a while, and ultimately strolls away through the opening in the partition. After putting her table in order, Miss Claridge goes out the same way, carrying her bowl of water and towel.

Miss Moon.

[To the young lady.] Have you had your hand read yet, madam, by any of these palmists?

Young Lady.

Heavens, yes! I've been twice to that woman Bernstein, and I don't know how often to Chiron.

Miss Moon.

Ah, you ought to try Valma.

Young Lady.

Valma?

Miss Moon.

He's the latest. Ladies are flocking to him.

Young Lady.

Really?

Miss Moon.

Yes. Such taking manners.

Young Lady.

Where does he—?

Miss Moon.

186—next door. [Indicating the window on the left.] You can see his waiting-room from that window.

Young Lady.

Is he a guinea or half a guinea?

Miss Moon.

Oh, he's a guinea.

Young Lady.

That's a bore.

Miss Moon.

Ah, but consider, madam—his rooms are draped from ceiling to floor in blue velvet. Blue velvet! fancy! Not that I've had the privilege of viewing them myself; Miss F. is our authority.

Young Lady.

Miss F.?

Miss Moon.

I beg your pardon—Miss Fullgarney. Valma is quite neighbourly with Miss Fullgarney.

[A door-gong sounds—as it does every time any one enters or quits the

establishment—signifying that the first gentleman has departed.

Second Gentleman.

[Rising.] Much obliged. [Putting a tip into Miss Huddle's hand.] For yourself.

Miss Huddle.

Much obliged to you.

Second Gentleman.

You're a fresh face here?

Miss Huddle.

Yes; I used to be with Mossu and Madame Roget in Mortimer Street.

Second Gentleman.

I'll ask for you next time. What name?

Miss Huddle.

Miss Huddle.

Second Gentleman.

Huddle?

Miss Huddle.

Well, p'r'aps you'd better ask for Miss Hud-delle; I fancy Miss Fullgarney is going to alter me to that.

Second Gentleman.

[With a nod.] Goo'-bye.

Miss Huddle.

Good-day, sir.

[He pays Miss Limbird and goes out. The maid rises and hands the young lady her gloves.

Miss Moon.

[Taking a card from the mirror.] Would you like a card of Valma's, madam, just to remind you?

Young Lady.

[Accepting the card and reading it.] "Valma. Palmist. Professor of the Sciences of Chiromancy and Chirognomy. 186 New Bond Street." [Giving the card to her maid.] Keep that.

[The door-gong sounds.

Miss Moon.

[Opening a window.] Look, madam. That's one of his rooms; the window there—the open one—

Young Lady.

Yes, I see. Thanks. Good-morning.

Miss Moon.

Good morning.

[The young lady pays Miss Limbird and goes, followed by her maid.]

Miss Huddle.

[To Miss Moon] What time is it, dear?

Miss Moon.

[Putting her table in order.] Half-past one. Lunch-time.

Miss Huddle.

Thought so; I've sech a vacancy.

[Miss Huddle goes out, carrying her bowl and towel, as Frank Pollitt—"Valma"—appears at the window on the left—a well, if rather showily, dressed young fellow, wearing a frock coat, white waistcoat, and patent-leather

boots. He is handsome in a commonplace way, and, though stilted and self-conscious, earnest in speech and bearing.

Pollitt.

[Looking in.] Excuse me—

Miss Moon.

[Startled.] Oh! oh, Mr. Valma!

Pollitt.

[Entering.] Is Miss Fullgarney in the way?

Miss Moon.

[Gazing at him in modest admiration.] She's with a lady in the private room, Mr. Valma.

[The door in the partition opens.

Sophy.

[From the private room.] Oh, no, madam, I promise I won't forget. Certainly not, I take too much interest in your daughter's nails for that.

Miss Moon.

This is her.

[A middle-aged lady enters from the private room, followed by Sophy Fullgarney. The customer pays at the desk while Sophy rattles on. Sophy is a pretty, elegant, innocently vulgar, fascinating young woman of six-and-twenty.

Sophy.

[With the air of the proprietress of a prosperous establishment.] Oh, yes, it did slip my memory to come on Thursday, didn't it? The truth is I had a most racking head, a thing I never have—well, I oughtn't to say never have, ought I? [To Miss Limbird.] Now, Miss Limbird, see that two pots of Crème de Mimosa are posted to Mrs.

Arment, Carlos Place; and book me, please—me—you thoroughly understand?—to attend upon Miss Arment to-morrow evening at seven. [Accompanying the customer, who now withdraws.] To-morrow evening at seven—without fail. [Raising her voice.] The door, Miss Claridge. Good morning, madam. Good afternoon.

[The door-gong sounds.

Sophy.

Come, girls, you can get to your lunches.

[Miss Limbird leaves her desk and goes out.

Miss Moon.

Here's Mr. Valma, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

[With a little gasp.] Mr. Valma. [Approaching him.] How do you do?

Pollitt.

[Advancing.] Pardon me for the liberty I have taken in again crossing the leads.

Sophy.

[Looking away from him.] No liberty at all.

Pollitt.

I desire a few words with you, Miss Fullgarney, and it struck me that at this time of the day—

Sophy.

Yes, there's nothing doing here just at lunch-time.

Pollitt.

Perhaps you would graciously allow me to converse with you while you—

Sophy.

[Regaining her self-possession.] Oh, I had my lunch an hour ago; I came over so ravenous. [Going to Miss Moon, who is still lost in admiration of Pollitt—in a whisper.] Be off, child. Don't stand staring at Mr. Valma.

Miss Moon.

[In Sophy's ear.] I think I've got him another!

Sophy.

Shut up!

[Miss Moon withdraws, with her bowl and towel.

Sophy.

[To Pollitt.] Did you catch what she said? Oh, it doesn't matter if you did; you know we are all working for you, like niggers.

Pollitt.

[Tenderly.] Ah!

Sophy.

Not a customer leaves my place without having heard your name mentioned. My girls are regular bricks.

Pollitt.

[Approaching her.] And what are you?

Sophy.

[Looking away again.] Oh, I do no more than any of the others.

Pollitt.

Do you expect me to believe that? you, their queen! No, it is you who have helped me to steer my bark into the flowing waters of popularity.

Sophy.

[Nervously.] Extremely pleased, I—I'm sure. [He is close beside her; a cork is drawn

loudly. They part, startled and disturbed. She goes to the opening in the partition, raising her voice slightly.] Girls, can't you draw your corks a shade quieter? Nice if somebody was coming upstairs!

Miss Limbird.

[In the distance.] Very sorry, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

[To Pollitt, as she toys with the articles upon the circular table.] Everything is so up this weather. It's their lime-juice champagne.

Pollitt.

[By her side again—suddenly.] I love you!

Sophy.

Oh, Mr. Valma!

Pollitt.

I love you! Ever since I had the honour of being presented to you by Mr. Salmon, the picture-dealer next door, I have thought of you, dreamt of you, constantly. [She brushes past him; he follows her.] Miss Fullgarney, you will accord me permission to pay you my addresses?

Sophy.

[In a flutter.] I—I am highly flattered and complimented, Mr. Valma, by your proposal—

Pollitt.

[Taking her hand.] Flattered—no!

Sophy.

[Withdrawing her hand.] Oh, but please wait!

Pollitt.

Wait!

Sophy.

I mean, I certainly couldn't dream of accepting the attentions of any man until he fully understood—

Pollitt.

Understood what?

Sophy.

[Summoning all her dignity.] Oh, I'll be perfectly straight with you—until he fully understood that, whatever my station in life may be now, I have risen from rather—well, I may say very small beginnings.

Pollitt.

What matters that?

Sophy.

Oh, but I beg your pardon—it does. [Relaxing.] I am sure I can depend on you not to give me away all over the place?

Pollitt.

Miss Fullgarney—!

Sophy.

[After a cautious glance round.] You know, Mr. Valma, I was always a self-willed, independent sort of a girl—a handful, they used to call me; and when father died I determined to have done with my step-mother, and to come to London at any price. I was seventeen then.

Pollitt.

Yes?

Sophy.

Oh, it's nothing to be ashamed of, really; still, I did begin life in town—[with an uneasy little laugh and a toss of the head]—you'd hardly believe it!—as a nursery-maid.

Pollitt.

H'm! I am aware that is not considered—

Sophy.

I should think not! Oh, of course, in time I rose to be Useful Maid, and then Maid. I've been lady's-maid in some excellent houses. And when I got sick of maiding I went to Dundas's opposite, and served three years at the hairdressing; that's an extremely refined position, I needn't say. And then some kind friends routed me out, [surveying the room proudly] and put me into this.

Pollitt.

Then why bestow a second thought upon your beginnings?

Sophy.

No, I suppose I oughtn't to. Nobody can breathe a word against my respectability. All the same, I am quite aware that it mightn't be over pleasant for a gentleman to remember that his wife was once—[sitting in the screen-chair] well, a servant.

Pollitt.

[By her chair.] It would not weigh on my mind if you had been kitchen-maid [pointing out of the window] at Fletcher's Hotel. [Looking about him.] It's this business I don't care for.

Sophy.

This business!

Pollitt.

For you. If you did no more than glide about your rooms, superintending your young ladies! [Sitting, facing her.] But I hate the idea of your sitting here, or there, holding

some man's hand in yours!

Sophy.

[Suddenly ablaze.] Do you! [Pointing out of the window.] Yet you sit there, day after day, and hold women's hands in yours!

Pollitt.

[Eagerly.] You are jealous of me?

Sophy.

[Panting.] A little.

Pollitt.

[Going down upon one knee.] Ah, you do love me!

Sophy.

[Faintly.] Fondly.

Pollitt.

And you will be my wife?

Sophy.

Yes.

Pollitt.

[Embracing her.] My dearest!

Sophy.

Not yet! suppose the girls saw you!

Pollitt.

Let all the world see us!

Sophy.

[Submissively, laying her cheek upon his brow.] Oh, but I wish—and yet I don't

wish—

Pollitt.

What?

Sophy.

That you were not so much my superior in every way.

Pollitt.

[In an altered voice.] Sophy.

Sophy.

[In a murmur, her eyes closed.] Eh-h-h?

Pollitt.

I have had my early struggles too.

Sophy.

You, love?

Pollitt.

Yes. If you should ever hear—

Sophy.

Hear—?

Pollitt.

That until recently I was a solicitor's clerk—

Sophy.

[Slightly surprised.] A solicitor's clerk?

Pollitt.

You would not turn against me?

Sophy.

Ah, as if—!

Pollitt.

You know my real name is Pollitt—Frank Toleman Pollitt?

Sophy.

I've heard it isn't really Valma. [With a little shiver.] Never mind that.

Pollitt.

But I shall be Frank to you henceforth, shan't I?

Sophy.

Oh, no, no! always Valma to me—[dreamily] my Valma. [Their lips meet in a prolonged kiss. Then the door-gong sounds.] Get up! [They rise in a hurry. She holds his hand tightly.] Wait and see who it is. Oh, don't go for a minute! stay a minute!

[They separate; he stands looking out upon the leads. Miss Claridge enters, preceding the Marquess of Quex and Sir Chichester Frayne. Lord Quex is forty-eight, keen-faced and bright-eyed, faultless in dress, in manner debonair and charming. Frayne is a genial wreck of about five-and-forty—the lean and shrivelled remnant of a once good-looking man. His face is yellow and puckered, his hair prematurely silvered, his moustache palpably touched-up.

Quex.

[Perceiving Sophy and approaching her.] How are you, Miss Fullgarney?

Sophy.

[Respectfully, but icily.] Oh, how do you do, my lord?

[Miss Claridge withdraws. Frayne comes forward, eyeing Sophy with interest.

Quex.

My aunt—Lady Owbridge—has asked me to meet her here at two o'clock. Her

ladyship is lunching at a tea-shop close by—bunning is a more fitting expression—with Mrs. Eden and Miss Eden.

Sophy.

[Gladly.] Miss Muriel!

Quex.

Yes, I believe Miss Muriel will place her pretty finger-tips in your charge, [partly to Frayne] while I escort Lady Owbridge and Mrs. Jack to view this new biblical picture—[with a gesture] a few doors up. What is the subject?—Moses in the Bulrushes. [To Frayne.] Come with us, Chick.

Sophy.

It's not quite two, my lord; if you like, you've just time to run in next door and have your palm read.

Quex.

My palm—?

Sophy.

By this extraordinary palmist everybody is talking about—Valma.

Quex.

[Pleasantly.] One of these fortune-telling fellows, eh? [Shaking his head.] I prefer the gipsy on Epsom race-course.

Sophy.

[Under her breath.] Oh, indeed! [Curtly.] Please take a seat.

[She flounces up to the desk and busies herself there vindictively.

Frayne.

[To Quex.] Who's that gal? what's her name?

Quex.

Fullgarney; a protégée of the Edens. Her father was bailiff to old Mr. Eden, at their place in Norfolk.

Frayne.

Rather alluring—eh, what?

Quex.

[Wincing.] Don't, Chick!

Frayne.

My dear Harry, it is perfectly proper, now that you are affianced to Miss Eden, and have reformed all that sort of thing—it is perfectly proper that you should no longer observe pretty women too narrowly.

Quex.

Obviously.

Frayne.

But do bear in mind that your old friend is not so pledged. Recollect that I have been stuck for the last eight years, with intervals of leave, on the West Coast of Africa, nursing malaria—

Quex

[Severely.] Only malaria?

Frayne.

[Mournfully.] There is nothing else to nurse, dear Harry, on the West Coast of Africa. [Glancing at Sophy.] Yes, by gad, that gal is alluring!

Quex.

[Walking away.] Tssh! you're a bad companion, Chick!

[He goes to the window and looks into the street. Frayne joins him. Sophy, seizing her opportunity comes down to Pollitt.

Sophy.

[To Pollitt.] Valma dear, you see that man?

Pollitt.

Which of the two?

Sophy.

The dark one. That's Lord Quex—the wickedest man in London.

Pollitt.

He looks it. [Jealously.] Have you ever cut his nails?

Sophy.

No, love, no. Oh, I've heard such tales about him!

Pollitt.

What tales?

Sophy.

I'll tell you, [demurely] when we're married. And the worst of it is, he is engaged to Miss Eden.

Pollitt.

Who is she?

Sophy.

Miss Muriel Eden, my foster-sister; the dearest friend I have in the world—except you, sweetheart. It was Muriel and her brother Jack who put me into this business. And now my darling is to be sacrificed to that gay old thing—!

[The door-gong sounds; Quex turns expectantly.

Pollitt.

If Miss Eden is your foster-sister—

Sophy.

Yes, of course, she's six-and-twenty. But the poor girl has been worried into it by her sister-in-law, Mrs. Jack, whose one idea is Title and Position. Title and Position with that old rake by her side!

Miss Limbird enters, preceding Captain Bastling—a smart, soldierly-looking man of about eight-and-twenty. Miss Limbird returns to her seat at the desk.

Sophy.

[Seeing Bastling.] My gracious!

Pollitt.

What's the matter?

Quex.

[Recognising Bastling and greeting him.] Hallo, Napier! how are you?

Bastling.

[Shaking hands with Quex.] Hallo, Quex!

Quex.

What are you doing here?

Sophy.

[To Pollitt.] Phew! I hope to goodness Lord Quex won't tumble to anything.

Pollitt.

Tumble—to what?

[Quex introduces Bastling to Frayne.

Sophy.

You don't understand; it's Captain Bastling—the man Muriel is really fond of.

Pollitt.

What, while she's engaged—?

Sophy.

[With clenched hands.] Yes, and she shall marry him too, my darling shall, if I can help to bring it about.

Pollitt.

You?

Sophy.

Bless 'em, I don't know how they'd contrive without me!

Pollitt.

Contrive—?

Sophy.

[Fondly.] You old stupid! whenever Muriel is coming to be manicured she sends Captain Bastling a warning overnight; [squeezing Pollitt's arm, roguishly] this kind of thing—"My heart is heavy and my nails are long. To-morrow—three-thirty." Ha, ha, ha!

Pollitt.

Dearest, let me advise you—

Sophy.

[Her hand upon his lips.] Ah, don't lecture! [Bastling saunters forward to attract Sophy's attention.] Oh—! [To Pollitt, hurriedly.] Go now. Pop in again by-and-by. [Caressingly.] Um-m-m! my love!

[Pollitt goes out by the window.

Sophy.

[Joining Bastling—formally.] Good day, Captain Bastling.

Bastling.

Good afternoon, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

[Dropping her voice.] She'll be here in a minute.

Bastling.

[In low tones—making a show of examining the articles on the circular table.] Yes, I had a note from her this morning. [Glancing at Quex.] Confounded nuisance—!

Sophy.

[Pretending to display the articles.] It's all right; he's got to take Lady Owbridge and Mrs. Jack Eden to look at Moses in the Bulrushes—a picture—

Bastling.

Sophy—I've bad news.

Sophy.

No! what?

Bastling.

My regiment is ordered to Hong-Kong.

Sophy.

Great heavens! when are you off?

Bastling.

In a fortnight.

Sophy.

Oh, my poor darling!

Bastling.

I must see her again to-morrow. I've something serious to propose to her.

Sophy.

[Half in eagerness, half in fright.] Have you?

Bastling.

But to-morrow it must be alone, Sophy; I can't say what I have to say in a few hasty whispers, with all your girls flitting about—and perhaps a customer or two here. Alone!

Sophy.

Without me?

Bastling.

Surely you can trust us. To-morrow at twelve. You'll manage it?

Sophy.

How can I—alone?

Bastling.

You're our only friend. Think!

Sophy.

[Glancing suddenly towards the left.] Valma's rooms!

[Frayne has wandered to the back of the circular table, and, through his eyeglass, is again observing Sophy. Quex now joins him.

Bastling.

[Perceiving them—to Sophy.] Look out!

Sophy.

[Taking a bottle from his hand—raising her voice.] You'll receive the perfume in the course of the afternoon. [Replacing the bottle upon the table.] Shall I do your nails?

Bastling.

Thanks.

[They move away. He takes his place in the screen-chair; she sits facing him. During

the process of manicuring they talk together earnestly.

Frayne.

[Eyeing Sophy.] Slim, but shapely. Slim, but shapely.

Miss Moon enters, with a bowl of water. Having adjusted the bowl upon the arm of the screen-chair, she retires.

Frayne.

There's another of 'em. Plain. [Watching MISS MOON as she goes out.] I don't know—rather alluring. [Finding Quex by his side.] Beg your pardon.

Quex.

Didn't hear you.

Frayne.

Glad of it. At the same time, old friend, you will forgive me for remarking that a man's virtuous resolutions must be—ha, ha!—somewhat feeble, hey?—when he flinches at the mere admiration of beauty on the part of a pal, connoisseur through that pal undoubtedly is.

Quex.

Oh, my dear Chick, my resolutions are firm enough.

Frayne.

[Dubiously.] H'm!

Quex.

And my prudery is consistent with the most laudable intentions, I assure you. But the fact is, dear chap, I go in fear and trembling—

Frayne.

Ah!

Quex.

No, no, not for my strength of mind—fear lest any trivial act of mine, however guileless; the most innocent glance in the direction of a decent-looking woman; should be misinterpreted by the good ladies in whose hands I have placed myself—especially aunt Julia. You remember Lady Owbridge?

Frayne.

Why did you intrust yourself—?

Quex.

My one chance! [Taking Frayne to the table, against which they both lean shoulder to shoulder—his voice falling into a strain of tenderness.] Chick, when I fell in love with Miss Eden—

Frayne.

[In sentimental retrospection.] Fell in love! what memories are awakened by the dear old phrase!

Quex.

[Dryly.] Yes. Will you talk about your love affairs, Chick, or shall I—?

Frayne.

Certainly—you. Go on, Harry.

Quex.

When I proposed marriage to Miss Eden—it was at the hunt-ball at Stanridge—

Frayne.

[His eyes sparkling.] Did you select a retired corner—with flowers—by any chance?

Quex.

There were flowers.

Frayne.

I know—I know! Nearly twenty years ago, and the faint scent of the Gardenia

Florida remains in my nostrils!

Quex.

Quite so. Would you like to—?

Frayne.

[Sitting.] No, no—you. Excuse me. You go on.

Quex.

[Sitting on the edge of the table, looking down upon Frayne.] When I proposed to Miss Eden I was certain—even while I was stammering it out—I was certain that my infernal evil character—

Frayne.

Ah, yes. I've always been a dooced deal more artful than you, Harry, over my little amours. [Chuckling.] Ha, ha! devilish cunning!

Quex.

And I was right. Her first words were, "Think of your life; how can you ask this of me?"—her first words and her last, that evening. I was desperate, Chick, for I—Well, I'm hit, you know.

Frayne.

What did you do?

Quex.

Came to town by the first train in the morning—drove straight off to Richmond, to my pious aunt. Found her in bed with asthma; I got her up. And I almost went down on my knees to her, Chick.

Frayne.

Not really?

Quex.

I did—old man as I am! no, I'm not old.

Frayne.

Forty-eight. Ha, ha! I'm only forty-five.

Quex.

But you've had malaria—

Frayne.

Dry up, Harry!

Quex.

So we're quits. Well, down on my marrow-bones I went, metaphorically, and there and then I made my vows to old aunt Julia, and craved her help; and she dropped tears on me, Chick, like a mother. And the result was that within a month I became engaged to Miss Eden.

Frayne.

The young lady soon waived her—

Quex.

[Getting off the table.] I beg your pardon—the young lady did nothing of the kind. But with aunt Julia's aid I showed 'em all that it was a genuine case of done with the old life—a real, genuine instance. [Balancing upon the back of the chair.] I've sold my house in Norfolk Street.

Frayne.

You'll want one.

Quex.

[Gravely.] Not that one—for Muriel. [Brightly.] And I'm living sedately at Richmond, under aunt Julia's wing. Muriel is staying at Fauncey Court too, just now; she's up from Norfolk for the Season, chaperoned by Mrs. Jack. [Sitting, nursing his

knee, with a sigh of content.] Ah! after all, it's very pleasant to be a good boy.

Frayne.

When is it to take place?

Quex.

At the end of the year; assuming, of course—

Frayne.

That you continue to behave prettily? [Quex assents, with a wave of the hand.] The slightest lapse on your part—?

Quex.

Impossible.

Frayne.

But it would—?

Quex.

[A little impatiently.] Naturally.

Frayne.

Well, six months pass quickly—everywhere but on the West Coast of Africa.

Quex.

And then—you shall be my best man, Chick, if you're still home.

Frayne.

[Rising.] Hah! I never thought—

Quex.

[Rising.] No; I who always laughed at marriage as a dull depravity permitted to the respectable classes! I who always maintained that man's whole duty to woman—meaning his mistresses—that a man's duty to a woman is liberally discharged when he has made a settlement on her, or stuck her into his will!

[Blowing the ideas from him.] Phugh!

[He goes to the little table, and examines the objects upon it.

Frayne.

[Following him.] Talking of—ah—mistresses I suppose you've—?

Quex.

Oh, yes, they're all—

Frayne.

Made happy and comfortable?

Quex.

I've done my utmost.

Frayne.

Mrs.—?

Quex.

[Rather irritably.] I say, all of them.

Frayne.

No trouble with Lady—?

Quex.

No, no, no, no.

Frayne.

What about the little Duchess? [Quex pauses in his examination of a nail-clipper.] Eh?

Quex.

[Turning to him, slightly embarrassed.] Odd that you should mention her.

Frayne.

Why?

Quex.

She's staying at Fauncey Court also.

Frayne.

The Duchess!

Quex.

She proposed herself for a visit. I dared not raise any objection, for her reputation's sake; the ladies would have suspected at once. You're one of the few, Chick, who ever got an inkling of that business.

Frayne.

Very awkward!

Quex.

No. She's behaving admirably. [Thoughtfully—with a wry face.] Of course she was always a little romantic and sentimental.

Frayne.

By gad though, what an alluring woman!

Quex.

[Shortly.] Perhaps.

Frayne.

Ho, come! you don't mean to tell me—?

Quex.

[With dignity.] Yes, I do—upon my honour, I've forgotten. [The door-gong sounds.] This must be the ladies.

Muriel Eden enters, followed by Miss Claridge. Muriel is a tall, fresh-looking, girlish young woman, prettily dressed. Sophy rises and meets her.

Muriel.

[Behind the circular table—to Sophy, breathlessly, as if from the exertion of running upstairs.] Well, Sophy! [Looking round.] Is Lord Quex—? [Sophy glances towards Quex, who advances.] Oh, yes. [To Quex.] Lady Owbridge and Mrs. Jack won't fag upstairs just now. They're waiting for you in the carriage, they asked me to say.

Quex.

[In tender solicitation.] Moses in the Bulrushes? You still elect to have your nails cut?

Muriel.

Thanks, I—[with an effort] I've already seen the picture.

Quex.

And its merits are not sufficient—?

Muriel.

[Guiltily.] I thought the bulrushes rather well done.

Quex.

May I present my old friend, Sir Chichester Frayne?

Muriel.

[To Frayne.] How do you do?

Quex.

[To Frayne.] Will you come, Chick? [To Muriel.] We shall be back very soon.

[Muriel nods to Quex and Frayne and turns away to the window, removing her gloves. Sophy joins her.

Frayne.

[To Quex.] As I suspected—the typical, creamy English girl. We all do it! we all come to that, sooner or later.

Quex.

[Looking from, Muriel to Frayne proudly.] Well—

Frayne.

[In answer, kissing his finger-tips to the air.] Alluring!

Quex.

Ha! [Hastily.] We're keeping the ladies waiting.

[He goes out. Frayne is following Quex, when he encounters Miss Claridge. He pauses, gazing at her admiringly. The door-gong sounds.

Miss Claridge.

[Surprised.] Do you wish anything, sir?

Frayne.

[With a little sigh of longing.] Ah—h!

Miss Claridge.

[Coldly.] Shall I cut your nails?

Frayne.

[Wofully.] That's it, dear young lady—you can't!

Miss Claridge.

[With hauteur.] Reely! Why not, sir?

Frayne.

I regret to say I bite 'em.

[He goes out. Miss Claridge titters loudly to Miss Limbird.

Sophy.

[To Miss Claridge, reprovingly.] Miss Claridge! I don't require you at present.

[Miss Claridge withdraws.

Sophy.

[Going to Miss Limbird.] Miss Limbird, will you oblige me? hot water, please.

[Miss Limbird goes out. At once Sophy gives a signal to Bastling and Muriel, and keeps guard. Bastling and Muriel talk in low, hurried tones.

Bastling.

[On the right of the circular table.] How are you?

Muriel.

[On the other side, giving him her hand across the table.] I don't know. [Withdrawing her hand.] I hate myself!

Bastling.

Hate yourself?

Muriel.

For this sort of thing. [Glancing round apprehensively.] Oh!

Bastling.

Don't be frightened. Sophy's there.

Muriel.

I'm nervous—shaky. When I wrote to you last night I thought I should be able to sneak up to town this morning only with a maid. And you've met Quex too!

Bastling.

None of them suspect—?

Muriel.

No. Oh, but go now!

Bastling.

Already! May I not sit and watch you?

Muriel.

Not to-day.

Bastling.

You must hear my news, then, from Sophy; she'll tell you—

Muriel.

News?

Sophy.

[Turning to them sharply.] Hsst!

Muriel.

Good-bye!

Bastling.

[Grasping her arm.] Haven't you one loving little speech for me?

Sophy.

[Behind the table.] Gar—r—rh!

[He releases Muriel and picks up a large wooden bowl of bath-soap, just as Miss Limbird re-enters with the hot water. Muriel moves away, hastily.

Sophy.

[To Bastling, taking the soap from him—raising her voice.] Thank you—much obliged. [Transferring the soap to Miss Limbird and relieving her of the bowl of water.] For Captain Bastling, with a bottle of Fleur de Lilas.

[Miss Limbird returns to her desk; Sophy deposits the bowl of water upon the arm of the screen-chair; Bastling fetches his hat, and gives some directions to Miss Limbird.

Muriel.

[To Sophy, in a whisper.] Sophy, these extravagances on his part! I am the cause of

them! he is not in the least well off!

Sophy.

Don't worry; it's all booked. Ha, ha! bless him, he'll never get his account from me! [Bastling, with a parting glance in the direction of Muriel and Sophy, goes out.] He's gone.

[Miss Limbird also goes out, carrying the bowl of bath-soap.

Muriel.

[With a sigh of relief.] Oh!

Sophy.

[Coming to her.] We're by ourselves for a minute. Give me a good hug. [Embracing her.] My dear! my darling! ha, ha, ha! you shall be the first to hear of it—I'm engaged.

Muriel.

Sophy! to whom?

Sophy.

To Mr. Valma, the great palmist.

Muriel.

What, the young man you've talked to me about—next door? [Kissing her.] I hope you are doing well for yourself, dear.

Sophy.

He's simply perfect! he's—! oh, how can I be such a brute, talking of my own happiness—! [In an altered tone.] Darling, Captain Bastling's regiment is going to be sent off to Hong-Kong.

Muriel.

[After a pause—commanding herself.] When?

Sophy.

In about a fortnight.

Muriel.

[Frigidly.] Is this what you had to tell me, from him?

Sophy.

Yes, and that he must see you to-morrow, alone. I'll arrange it. Can you manage to be here at twelve?

Muriel.

I daresay, somehow.

Sophy.

[Looking at her in surprise.] I thought you'd be more upset.

Muriel.

[Taking Sophy's hand.] The truth is, Sophy—I'm glad.

Sophy.

Glad!

Muriel.

Awfully glad the chance has come of putting an end to all this. Oh, I've been treating him shockingly!

Sophy.

Him?

Muriel.

Lord Quex!

Sophy.

[Impatiently.] Oh! pooh!

Muriel.

[Leaving Sophy.] Yes, after to-morrow he sha'n't find me looking a guilty fool whenever he speaks to me—by Jove, he sha'n't! I believe he guessed I haven't seen Moses in the Bulrushes!

Sophy.

But, dear, how do you know what Captain Bastling means to say to you to-morrow?

Muriel.

[Pausing in her walk.] To say?—good-bye.

Sophy.

Suppose he asks you to put him out of his misery—marry him directly, on the quiet?

Muriel.

[A little unsteadily.] Then I shall tell him finally—my word is given to Lord Quex.

Sophy.

[Coming to her again.] Given!—wrung out of you. And just for that you'll lose the chance of being happy—all your life—with the man you—

[She turns away, and sits, on the right of the circular table, blowing her nose.

Muriel.

[At Sophy's side, desperately.] But I tell you, Sophy, I love Lord Quex.

Sophy.

You may tell me.

Muriel.

I do—I mean, I'm getting to. [Defiantly.] At any rate, I am proud of him.

Sophy.

Proud!

Muriel.

Certainly—proud that he has mended his ways for my sake.

Sophy.

[Between tears and anger.] Mended his ways! with those eyes of his!

Muriel.

[Looking down upon Sophy, wonderingly.] His eyes? why, they are considered his best feature.

Sophy.

I never saw wickeder eyes. All my girls say the same.

Muriel.

[With rising indignation.] I am sure you have never detected Lord Quex looking at anybody in a way he should not.

Sophy.

Oh, I admit he has always behaved in a gentlemanly manner towards me and my girls.

Muriel.

[Haughtily. Towards you and your—! Sophy, pray remember Lord Quex's rank.

Sophy.

[In hot scorn.] His rank! ha! do you think his lordship has ever let that interfere—?

[She checks herself, finding Muriel staring at her.

Muriel.

[In horror.] Sophy!

Sophy.

[Discomposed—rising.] Er—if I'm to do anything to your nails—

[As Sophy is moving towards the manicure-table, Muriel intercepts her.

Muriel.

You are surely not suggesting that Lord Quex has ever descended—?

Sophy.

[Hastily.] No, no, no. [Brushing past Muriel and seating herself before the screen-chair.] Come; they'll all be here directly.

Muriel.

[Sitting in the screen-chair.] Sophy, you have heard some story—

Sophy.

[Examining Muriel's hands.] A little varnishing is all you need to-day.

Muriel.

You shall tell me!

Sophy.

[Proceeding with her work methodically.] It's nothing much; I'm sorry I—

Muriel.

[Imperatively.] Sophy!

Sophy.

[Reluctantly.] Oh, well—well, when I was at Mrs. Beaupoint's in Grosvenor Street—

Muriel.

Yes?

Sophy.

A Lady Pumphrey came to stay there with a goodish-looking maid—Edith Smith her name was—

Muriel.

Never mind her name!

Sophy.

And they'd lately met Lord Quex in a country house in Worcestershire. Well, he had kissed her—Smith admitted it.

Muriel.

Kissed whom—Lady Pumphrey?

Sophy.

Oh, of course he'd kissed Lady Pumphrey; but he kissed Smith afterwards, when he tipped her. She told me what he said.

Muriel.

What did he say?

Sophy.

He said, "There's a little something for yourself, my girl."

Muriel.

[Starting to her feet and walking away.] My heavens! a Maid! what next am I to hear—his blanchisseuse? [Sinking into a chair.] Oh! oh, dear!

Sophy.

[Turning in her chair to face Muriel.] It's one thing I always meant to keep to myself.

Muriel.

[Bitterly.] Still, I have promised to forgive him for so much already! And, after all, this occurred a long while ago.

Sophy.

[Thoughtfully.] Ye—e—es. I suppose if you did find him up to anything of that sort now, you'd—what would you do?

Muriel.

Do! [With all her heart.] Marry Napier Bastling.

Sophy.

[Rising—a mischievous light in her eyes.] Ah—! I almost wish it would happen!

Muriel.

Sophy!

Sophy.

[Leaning against the edge of the circular table, gripping Muriel's hand.] Just for your sake, darling. [In a low voice.] I almost wish I could come across him in some quiet little shady spot—

Muriel.

[Looking up at Sophy, horrified.] What!

Sophy.

In one of those greeny nooks you've told me of, at Fauncey Court. [Between her teeth.] If he ever tried to kiss me, and I told you of it, you'd take my word for it, wouldn't you?

Muriel.

[Starting to her feet.] For shame! how dare you let such an idea enter your head? you, a respectable girl, just engaged yourself—!

Sophy.

[With a quick look towards the window.] Oh, yes! hush! [Clapping her hand to her mouth.] Oh, what would Valma say if he knew I'd talked in this style!

[The door-gong sounds.

Muriel

Here they are.

Sophy.

[As they hastily return to their chairs.] Darling, I was only thinking of you and the poor Captain. [With another glance towards the window.] Phew! if my Valma knew!

[They resume their seats, and the manicuring is continued.

Miss Limbird enters, preceding Lord Quex and the Countess of Owbridge, Mrs. Jack Eden and Frayne. Miss Moon follows. Lady Owbridge is a very old lady in a mouse-coloured wig, with a pale, anxious face, watery eyes, and no eyebrows. Mrs. Eden is an ultra-fashionably-dressed woman of about thirty, shrill and maniéré.

Quex.

[To Lady Owbridge, who is upon his arm.] Yes, a curious phase of modern life. Many people come to these places for rest.

Lady Owbridge.

[Looking about her shrinkingly.] For rest, Henry?

Quex.

Certainly. I know a woman—I knew a woman who used to declare that her sole repose during the Season was the half-hour with the manicurist.

Mrs. Eden.

How are you, Sophy?

Sophy.

How are you to-day, Mrs. Eden?

Mrs. Eden.

Lady Owbridge, this is Miss Fullgarney, whom you've heard about.

[Sophy rises, makes a bob, and sits again.

Lady Owbridge.

[Seated.] I hope you're quite well, my dear.

Sophy.

[Busy over Muriel's nails.] Thanks, my lady; I hope you're the same.

Mrs. Eden.

[Sitting.] What is your opinion of the picture, Lady Owbridge?

Lady Owbridge.

[Not hearing.] Eh?

Quex.

Moses in the Bulrushes—what d'ye think of it?

Lady Owbridge.

[Tearfully.] They treat such subjects nowadays with too little reverence.

Frayne.

[Thoughtlessly.] Too much Pharaoh's daughter and too little Moses.

Quex.

[Frowning him down.] Phsst!

Mrs. Eden.

Certainly the handmaidens remind one of the young ladies in the ballet at the Empire.

Lady Owbridge.

The Empire?

Mrs. Eden.

[Checking herself.] Oh—!

Quex.

Popular place of entertainment.

Lady Owbridge.

Ah? The only place of that kind I have visited for some years is the Imperial Institute.

[Mrs. Eden rises, laughing to herself, and joins Sophy and Muriel. Frayne is now establishing cordial relations between himself and Miss Moon.

Mrs. Eden.

[To Sophy.] Well, Sophy, and how's your business getting along?

Lady Owbridge.

[To Quex, after ascertaining that Frayne is not near her.] Oh, Henry, I have asked Sir Chichester to drive down to us to-night, to dine.

Quex.

[Watching Frayne with apprehension.] Ah, yes, delightful. [Trying to gain Frayne's attention—warningly.] Phsst! phsst!

Lady Owbridge.

[Plucking at Quex's coat.] I feel that Sir Chichester is a very wholesome friend for you, Henry.

Quex.

Very. Phsst!

Lady Owbridge.

What is the name of the West African place?—Uumbos—Uumbos seems to have improved him vastly.

Quex.

[In a low voice.] Chichester!

Lady Owbridge.

And it is our wish that you should associate for the future only with grey-haired men.

[Miss Moon now withdraws, with Frayne at her heels.

Muriel.

[Rising and coming to Lady Owbridge.] I'm ready, dear Lady Owbridge. Look! you can see your face in them.

[Lady Owbridge rises; Muriel displays her nails. Lady Owbridge shakes her head gravely, while Quex bends over Muriel's hands gallantly.

Mrs. Eden.

[To Sophy.] My hands need trimming up desperately badly. That maid of mine is a fool at fingers.

Sophy.

Can't you stay now?

Mrs. Eden.

[With an impatient movement of the head towards Lady Owbridge.] Oh, lord, no. [Suddenly.] I say, I wish you'd run down to Richmond, to Fauncey Court, and do me. Could you?

Sophy.

[Innocently.] Oh, yes.

Mrs. Eden.

To-night, before dinner?

Sophy.

I think I can.

Mrs. Eden.

[To Lady Owbridge.] Lady Owbridge, Miss Fullgarney is coming down to Richmond this evening to manicure me. Do, do, do let her give your nails the fashionable cut. [Going to Quex and Muriel.] Everybody is wearing pointed nails

this Season.

Lady Owbridge.

[Advancing to Sophy.] Ah, no, no. These practices are somewhat shocking to an old woman. [To Sophy.] But I don't blame you. [Laying her hand upon Sophy's arm, kindly.] So you're Miss Eden's foster-sister, eh?

Sophy.

I've that honour, my lady.

Lady Owbridge.

You look a little thin. Come down to Fauncey Court to-day as soon as your duties will release you. Spend as many hours there as you can.

Sophy.

Oh, my lady!

Lady Owbridge.

Run about the grounds—go wherever you please; and get the air into your lungs. [With gracious formality.] Remember, I invite you.

Muriel.

[Innocently.] How good of you, Lady Owbridge!

Sophy.

Thank you, my lady.

[Frayne returns—accompanied by Miss Moon, who carries a neat package—and settles an account with Miss Limbird at the desk.

Lady Owbridge.

[To Sophy.] You shall be well looked after.

[She shakes hands with Frayne.

Muriel.

[Kissing Sophy.] We shall meet by-and-by.

Lady Owbridge.

Muriel—young people—

[Muriel joins Lady Owbridge; they go out together.

Mrs. Eden.

[Nodding to Sophy.] This evening, Sophy.

Sophy.

[In a flutter of simple pleasure.] Yes, Mrs. Eden.

Mrs. Eden.

[Shaking hands with Frayne.] Till dinner—

[She goes out.

Quex.

[To Sophy.] Good-bye, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

[Tripping across the room.] Good-day, my lord.

Quex.

[Joining Frayne.] Are you coming, Chick?

Frayne.

[Taking the parcel from Miss Moon, and turning to Quex, rather bitterly.] I say, that gal has made me buy something I don't want. They stick you here frightfully—

Quex.

Ha, ha, ha, ha!

[They go out together.

Sophy.

[Adjusting her hair at the mirror.] Come, girls! look alive! no more work for me to-day! I'm off home to change my frock. I've got an invite down to Richmond. My hat and coat!

[The door-gong sounds. Miss Moon disappears at the door in the partition. Miss Huddle enters.

Sophy.

Miss Hud-delle, please run next door, and ask Mr. Valma to step this way for a moment.

Miss Huddle.

He's on the leads, Miss Fullgarney, smoking a cigarette.

Sophy.

[Running across to the window.] Get my bag of tools ready! sharp! [Miss Huddle and Miss Limbird go out; Sophy opens the window and calls.] Valma! Valma! Valma!

[Miss Moon returns with Sophy's hat, coat, gloves and umbrella.

Miss Moon.

Your things, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

[Taking them from her.] Send for a hansom—a smart one.

[Miss Moon runs out as Valma enters at the window.

Sophy.

[Breathlessly.] Valma—Valma, love! I've got an invite down to Richmond—Lady Owbridge—she's asked me specially! I'm going home to my place to smarten-up. Isn't it jolly? [In an outburst.] Oh, love, you might give-up for to-day, and take me down!

Valma.

May I?

Sophy.

May you! Your hat—get your hat! you'll find me outside in a cab.

[He hurries away.

Miss Limbird, carrying a leather bag, enters, followed by Miss Claridge and Miss Huddle.

Sophy.

[As she, with the aid of her girls, pins on her hat and scrambles into her coat.] You know, girls, many a silly person's head would be turned at being asked to a place like Fauncey Court—as a guest, bear in mind. But there, the houses I've been in!—it's nothing to me. Still, specially invited by the Countess of Owbridge herself—! [Putting her feet in turn upon a chair and hitching up her stockings.] I shall just make rather a favour of manicuring Mrs. Jack. One doesn't go visiting to cut Mrs. Jack's claws. Gloves! Thank goodness, the evenings are long! they say it's simply heavenly at Fauncey Court—simply heaven— [She breaks off abruptly, staring straight before her. Under her breath.] Oh—! Fauncey Court—Lord Quex—!

Miss Claridge.

What's the matter, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

N—n—nothing.

Miss Moon.

[Entering.] Cab, Miss Fullgarney!

Sophy.

[In an altered voice.] Bag. [She takes her bag from Miss Limbird and walks away,

rather slowly, with her head down. Quietly, without turning.] See you in the morning, girls.

The Four Girls.

Good afternoon, Miss Fullgarney.

[Sophy goes out.

end of the first act.

THE SECOND ACT

The scene represents a portion of an English garden laid out in Italian fashion. At the extreme back—upon ground slightly raised—two dense cypress-hedges, about sixteen feet high, form an alley running from right to left. In the centre of the hedge which is nearer the spectator there is an opening, and at this opening are three or four steps connecting the higher with the lower level. Beyond the alley nothing is seen but the sky and some tree-tops. In advance is an enclosure formed by a dwarf cypress-hedge, about four feet in height, also broken in the centre by an opening, and running off right and left at a sharp angle. On the outside of the dwarf hedge is a walk; and beyond, on the right and left, are trees. Within the enclosure, on the left, is a small fountain; facing the fountain, on the right, a piece of old, broken sculpture. Other bits of antique sculpture are placed in different parts of the garden. In the foreground, on the right towards the centre, stands a stone bench, on the left of which is a table upon which are the remains of "afternoon tea," with a garden chair. A similar stone bench stands opposite.

The light is that of a very fine evening.

[Lady Owbridge is in the garden-chair, asleep, an open book in her lap. Quex and Muriel stand, talking together, by the fountain. On the right-hand stone bench the Duchess of Strood and Mrs. Eden are seated. The Duchess is a daintily beautiful doll

of about seven-and-thirty—a poseuse, outwardly dignified and stately when upon her guard, really a frail, shallow little creature full of extravagant sentimentality. Until Lady Owbridge wakes, the conversation is carried on in subdued tones.

Mrs. Eden.

[Indicating Muriel and Quex.] They make a fascinating couple, don't they, Duchess?

Duchess.

[With placid melancholy.] To see two people on the threshold of wedlock is always painfully interesting.

Mrs. Eden.

I am quite triumphant about it. It is such a delightful engagement, now that the horrid difficulties are smoothed away.

Duchess.

Yes, you were telling me of some sad obstacles—

Mrs. Eden.

I nearly perished of them! [Very confidentially.] There's no doubt, you know, that his past has been exceptionally naughty.

Duchess.

Really? Ah! don't be surprised that I am not more deeply shocked. In these surroundings it is hard to realise that every aspect of life is not as lovely as—[pointing to the foliage] the tones of those exquisite, deep greens, for example.

Mrs. Eden.

However, the dear thing is going to be so good in the future. [Turning to the Duchess.] I keep forgetting—Lord Quex is a very old friend of yours?

Duchess.

[Serenely.] An acquaintance of many years' standing. But since his Grace has been

an invalid we have lived much abroad, or in seclusion, and gossip has not reached us. Alas, you find me a ready subject à désillusionner! [Rising.] We are in the sun. Shall we walk?

Mrs. Eden.

[Sympathetically, as they walk.] Is his Grace still very unwell?

Duchess.

[Smiling sadly upon Mrs. Eden.] He is still over seventy.

[They wander away, through the trees, as Quex and Muriel leave the fountain.

Quex.

[With tender playfulness, first glancing at the sleeping Lady Owbridge.] And so all these good things are to befall me after to-morrow?

Muriel.

[In a low voice.] After to-morrow.

Quex.

When I approach, I shall no longer see you skim away into the far vista of these alleys, or shrink back into the shadows of the corridors—[prosaically] after to-morrow.

Muriel.

No—not after to-morrow.

Quex.

In place of a cold word, a chilling phrase, a warm one—after to-morrow.

Muriel.

I am going to try.

Quex.

If I touch your hand, you'll not slip it behind your back in a hurry [touching her

hand]—?

Muriel.

[Withdrawing it.] Not after to-morrow.

[She sits; he stands behind the stone bench, leaning over the back of it.

Quex.

But why, may I ask, is this bliss reserved till after to-morrow?

Muriel.

I had rather you did not ask me, Quex.

Quex.

No? I see, I am a day too soon in putting even that little question.

Muriel.

Ah, I'll tell you this—I am going to turn over a new leaf, after to-morrow.

Quex.

You! your pages are all milk-white. What can you detect upon one of them to induce you to turn it?

Muriel.

[Gazing into space.] I—I've been scribbling there—scrawling—drawing pictures—

Quex.

Pictures—of what?

Muriel.

You shall know, perhaps, some day.

Quex.

After to-morrow?

Muriel.

Yes, Quex, but—after many to-morrows.

[Two Men-Servants—an old man and a young one—descend the steps and proceed to remove the tea-things.

Lady Owbridge.

[Waking.] Eh—? [Seeing Muriel and Quex.] Ah, my dears—! I am reading such an absorbing book.

Muriel.

[By her side, taking the book.] May I—?

Lady Owbridge.

You should study the Dean of St. Olpherts' sermons—and you, Henry.

Quex.

[Taking the book from Muriel and turning its pages.] Yes, I must—I must—

Lady Owbridge.

By the way, has anything been seen of that nice young manicure girl, Miss Sophy—something—?

Muriel.

Sophy Fullgarney—she arrived at about half-past four, and I asked Mrs. Gregory to show her over the house. I thought you would not object.

Lady Owbridge.

Object! it pleases me.

Muriel.

She is roving about the grounds now.

Lady Owbridge.

An exceedingly prepossessing young woman, of her class.

[The Servants have gone up the steps, carrying the tea-things.

The Elder Servant.

[Looking down the alley towards the left.] I see the young person, my lady.

Lady Owbridge.

I'll speak to her, Bristow.

[The Elder Servant goes off towards the left; the younger one, bearing the tray, to the right. The Duchess and Mrs. Eden return, above the low cypress-hedge; Quex meets them.

Muriel.

I would not have left her, but the young man she is engaged to brought her down, and I took it upon myself to give him permission to remain.

Lady Owbridge.

Oh, is Miss Fullgarney engaged?

Muriel.

To Mr. Valma, the palmist.

Mrs. Eden.

[Approaching.] Valma, the palmist!

Lady Owbridge.

What is a palmist, pray?

Muriel.

He reads your past and your future in the lines of your hands. It's his profession, dear Lady Owbridge.

Mrs. Eden.

Oh, do let us have him into the drawing-room after dinner! I hear he is simply charming.

Lady Owbridge.

Charming! [Rising.] What are our ladies coming to! Dear, dear me! in my day such follies and superstitions were entirely restricted to the kitchen.

[Muriel joins the Duchess. Quex is dutifully looking into the book of sermons. The servant returns, followed by Sophy, and then retires; Sophy comes forward, beamingly. She is prettily dressed, but in sober colours.

Sophy.

[To Lady Owbridge.] Here I am, my lady. I'm having such a good time!

Lady Owbridge.

That's right.

Sophy.

Oh, this garden! they may well call it heavenly.

Lady Owbridge.

They ought not to call it that, my dear. But it is indeed full of earthly solace.

Sophy.

It must be. And what a place for a bicycle!

Muriel.

[Reprovingly.] Bicycles are not allowed to enter these grounds, Sophy.

Sophy.

[Sobered.] Oh—!

Lady Owbridge.

Miss Eden tells me you are accompanied by the young man to whom you are engaged to be married.

Sophy.

I hope I haven't taken too great a liberty—

Lady Owbridge.

[Looking round.] I don't see him.

Sophy.

He has run back to the station. I've just found out I left my bag in the fly that brought us here. So stupid of me!

Lady Owbridge.

Mrs. Gregory will give you, both, dinner.

Sophy.

Thank you, my lady.

[The Duchess is now seated in the garden-chair. The younger of the two servants enters, carrying Sophy's bag and the evening papers.

Servant.

[Handing the bag to Sophy.] The cabman has brought your bag back, miss.

Sophy.

There now! Much obliged. [To Mrs. Eden.] Poor Mr. Valma will have his tramp for nothing, won't he?

[Sophy and Mrs. Eden talk together.

Lady Owbridge.

The evening papers, Morgan?

Servant.

[Who has laid the papers upon the table.] Yes, my lady.

[The Servant retires.

Lady Owbridge.

So late? we must go in and dress.

Duchess.

[Who has been occupied in observing Quex.] I'll follow you, dear Lady Owbridge.

[Lady Owbridge moves away and is joined by Mrs. Eden.

Mrs. Eden.

[As she ascends the steps with Lady Owbridge.] Sophy, I shall be ready for you in a quarter of an hour.

Sophy.

All right, Mrs. Eden.

[Lady Owbridge and Mrs. Eden disappear.

Muriel.

[Crossing to Sophy.] Wouldn't you like to walk to the gates to meet Mr. Valma?

Sophy.

Thanks, dear, I think I would.

Muriel.

I can show you a nearer way than by going back to the house. [Pointing into the distance.] Follow this hedge and take the second alley—not the first—on your left. When you reach the big fountain—

[Quex, still dipping into the sermons, has come down to the back of the table. He now throws the book upon the table and picks up a newspaper.

Quex.

I beg your pardon, Duchess—I didn't see you.

Duchess.

[In a whisper.] Harry—

Quex.

[Startled.] Eh?

Duchess.

I will hurry into my gown and return. Be here in a quarter of an hour.

Quex.

May I ask—the reason?

Duchess.

[A newspaper in her hand—talking to him, in undertones, over the top of it.] For a week, only the merest commonplaces have passed between us. I must relieve my heart; it is bursting!

Quex.

I entreat you to consider my position.

Duchess.

Yours! have I no reputation to endanger? [Rising—laying the paper aside.] What a pitiably small request! you will grant it?

Quex.

If you could see your way to excuse me—

Duchess.

In memory of the past—! I demand it!

Quex.

[With a stiff bow.] Oh—oh, certainly.

Duchess.

[Leaving him.] Thank you.

Quex.

[To himself.] Damn!

[He turns on his heel and walks away.

Duchess.

[Joining Muriel.] You are coming to dress?

Muriel.

[After smiling assent, presenting Sophy.] Miss Fullgarney was my first playmate, Duchess.

Duchess.

[Looking upon Sophy graciously.] Ah? [To Muriel.] The souvenirs of childhood are sweet, are they not?

[She slips her arm through Muriel's, and they ascend the steps and go away together. Sophy comes to the stone bench on the left, upon which she deposits her bag. She opens the bag, produces a little mirror and a comb, and puts her "fringe" in order—humming as she does so an air from the latest comic opera. Then she returns the comb and mirror to the bag and—bag in hand—prepares to depart. While this is going on Quex returns, above the low hedge. He ascends the steps and looks off into the distance, watching the retreating figure of the Duchess. After a moment or two he shrugs his shoulders in a perplexed, troubled way, and, coming down the steps, encounters Sophy.

Sophy.

[Innocently.] Lovely evening, my lord.

Quex.

[Passing her, with a nod and a smile.] Very—very.

[At the table, he exchanges the newspaper he carries for another. She is going in the direction indicated by Muriel. Suddenly she pauses, above the dwarf cypress-hedge, and stands looking at Quex with an expression in which fear and determination are mingled. Having selected his newspaper, Quex crosses to the left and sits, reading.

Sophy.

[Coming to him.] I don't think I shall go, after all.

Quex.

[Lowering his paper.] Eh?

Sophy.

I was just starting off down to the gates, you know, to meet Mr. Valma.

Quex.

[With amiable indifference.] Oh?

Sophy.

[Her head upon one side, smiling.] But it's too hot for walking, isn't it?

Quex.

[Resuming his reading.] It is warm.

Sophy.

[Putting her bag upon the table and removing her gloves.] Phew!

[She eyes him askance, undecided, as to a plan of action. He lowers his paper again, disconcerting her.

Quex.

You don't feel you ought to go and meet your—Mr. Valma?

Sophy.

[Edging towards him.] I might miss him—mightn't I?

Quex.

Certainly—you might.

Sophy.

Besides, it wouldn't do for me to attend upon Mrs. Jack—Mrs. Eden—all puffing and towzelled; [archly] now, would it?

Quex.

[Resuming his reading.] You're the best judge.

Sophy.

So I've a quarter of an hour to fill in somehow. [A pause.] I've a quarter of an hour to fill in somehow.

Quex.

[Behind his paper, beginning to be extremely bored.] Indeed?

Sophy.

[Quaking.] I—I wish there were some quiet little shady places to ramble about in, here at Fauncey Court.

Quex.

There are several.

Sophy.

Are there?... are there?

Quex.

[Turning his paper.] Oh, yes, a great many.

Sophy.

You see, I'm a stranger—

Quex.

[Kindly.] Well, you run along; you'll find 'em. [She walks away slowly, baffled. He glances at her over his paper, slightly puzzled.] Have you seen the grotto?

Sophy.

[Turning sharply.] No.

Quex.

[Pointing towards the right.] It's in that direction.

Sophy.

Grotto? Dark, I suppose, and lonelyish?

Quex.

You said you desired shade and quiet.

Sophy.

Yes, but not darkness. Fancy me in a grotto all by myself ... by myself...!

Quex.

[Behind his paper again.] I'm afraid I have no further suggestion to offer.

[There is another pause; then her face lights up, and she comes down to him swiftly.

Sophy.

[Close to him.] Show me your nails, my lord.

Quex.

[Lowering his paper.] My nails?

Sophy.

[Taking his hand and examining it.] Excuse me. Oh, my lord, for shame!

Quex.

You take exception to them?

Sophy.

This is hacking, not cutting. You ought never to be allowed within a mile of a pair of scissors.

Quex.

[Looking at his other hand.] Oh, come! they're hardly as bad as all that.

Sophy

[Examining that hand also.] Ha, ha, ha!

Quex.

[Rising, somewhat abashed.] Ha! I confess I am a little unskilful at such operations.

Sophy.

No gentleman should trust to himself where his nails are concerned. Why, a man's hand has lost him a young lady's affections before this! I've heard of heaps of cases where matches have been broken off—

Quex.

[Putting his hands behind him, smiling.] Really? the results of manicure are more far-reaching than I had imagined.

Sophy.

You, see, my lord, when a man's courting he is free to look his young lady in the face for as long as he chooses; it's considered proper and attentive. But the girl is expected to drop her eyes, and then—what has she to look at? Why, a well-trimmed hand or an ugly one. [Taking off her rings.] Now then, I'll do wonders for you in ten minutes.

Quex.

Thank you; I am not going indoors just yet.

Sophy.

No need to go indoors. [Depositing her rings upon the table and opening her bag.] I've got my bag here, with all my tools—see!

Quex.

Ah, but I won't trouble you this evening. Another occasion—

Sophy.

[Arranging her manicure instruments, &c., upon the table.] No trouble at all, my lord—quite an honour. [Indicating the stone bench.] Please sit down there.

[Producing a little brass bowl.] Water—?

[She runs to the fountain and fills her bowl from its basin.

Quex.

[Crossing, hesitatingly, to the right—looking at his nails and speaking in a formal manner.] You have been bidden to Fauncey Court for rest and relaxation, Miss Fullgarney; it is most obliging of you to allow your pleasure to be disturbed in this way.

Sophy.

[Returning to him.] Oh, don't say that, my lord. [Putting the bowl on the table and dragging the garden-chair forward to face him.] Business is a pleasure, sometimes.

[Her close proximity to him forces him back upon the bench.

Quex.

[Seated—stiffly.] You must, at least, let me open an account at your excellent establishment.

Sophy.

Not I. [Seated—taking his right hand.] One may work occasionally for love, I should hope? [archly] ha, ha! just for love, eh?

Quex

[Uncomfortably.] No, no, I couldn't permit it—I couldn't permit it.

Sophy.

[Holding his hand almost caressingly.] Well, well! we'll see—we'll see. [She clips his nails briskly and methodically. While she does so she again hums a song, looking up at him at intervals enticingly, under her lashes. Breaking off in her song.] My goodness! what a smooth, young hand you have!

Quex.

[His discomfort increasing.] Er—indeed?

Sophy.

Many a man of six-and-twenty would be glad to own such hands, I can tell you. [Patting his hand reprovingly.] Keep still! [It is now his turn to hum a song, which he does, under his breath, to disguise his embarrassment. She looks up at him.] But then, you're an awfully young man for your age, in every way, aren't you?

Quex.

[Gazing at the sky.] Oh, I don't know about that.

Sophy.

[Slyly.] You do know. [Wagging her head at him.] You do know.

Quex.

[Relaxing slightly.] It may be so, of course, without one's being conscious of it.

Sophy.

May be so! ah, ha! not conscious of it! ho! [Slapping his hand again, soundly.] Artful!

Quex.

[Flattered and amused.] No, no, I assure you! ha, ha!

[They laugh together. His constraint gradually diminishes. After shaking some liquid soap from a bottle into the bowl, she places the bowl beside him on the bench.

Sophy.

[While doing this.] My young ladies at a-hundred-and-eighty-five all agree with me about you.

Quex.

Do they?

Sophy.

Yes, do they!

Quex.

Your young ladies?

Sophy.

My girls.

Quex.

Ha, ha, ha! And what terrible pronouncement has a-hundred-and-eighty-five to pass upon me?

Sophy.

Seven-and-thirty, you look—not a day older; that's what we say. There, dip your fingers in that, do!

Quex.

Into this?

Sophy.

[Thrusting his fingers into the bowl.] Baby! [The water splashes over her dress and his coat.] Oh!

Quex.

I beg your pardon.

Sophy.

Now what have you done? [Wiping the water from his coat.] You clumsy boy!

Quex.

Thanks, thanks.

[She commences operations upon his left hand. He is now thoroughly entertained by her freedom and audacity.

Sophy.

Ha, ha! do you know what I maintain?

Quex.

[Laughing.] Upon my word, I dread to think.

Sophy.

Why, that every man who looks younger than his years should be watched by the police.

Quex.

Good heavens, Sophy—Miss Fullgarney!

Sophy.

Yes—as a dangerous person.

Quex.

Dangerous! ho, come!

Sophy.

[With the suggestion of a wink.] Dangerous. The man who is younger than he ought to be is always no better than he should be.

Quex.

Ha, ha, ha!

Sophy.

Am I right? am I right, eh? [Putting her cheek near his lips—speaking in a low voice, breathlessly, her eyes averted.] Tell me whether I'm right, my lord.

[For the first time, a suspicion of her designs crosses his mind. He draws back slowly, eyeing her. There is a pause.

Quex.

[In an altered tone, but keeping her in play.] Ha, ha, ha, ha! [Looking at his watch.] I—I am afraid I shall have to run away to dress for dinner very soon.

Sophy.

[Resuming her work, disappointed.] Not yet; you've plenty of time. But there, dangerous or not dangerous, in my heart I can't help holding with what my lady-customers are continually saying.

Quex.

[Watching her keenly.] No? and what are your lady-customers continually saying?

Sophy.

Why, that the young fellows of the day are such conceited, apish creatures; no man under forty-five is worth wasting a minute's time over.

Quex.

Ho! they say that, your lady-customers?

Sophy.

Yes; and they're good judges, they are.

Quex.

Good judges! none better—none better.

Sophy.

[Laying her clipper aside suddenly, and putting her hand to her eyes with a cry of pain.] Oh!

Quex.

[Coolly.] What's the matter?

Sophy.

[Rising.] A little splinter has flown into my eye It often happens.

Quex.

[Rising.] Extremely painful, I expect?

Sophy.

[Producing her handkerchief.] Very. [Giving him her handkerchief.] Do you think you could find it?

Quex.

Certainly, if it's to be found.

Sophy.

[Holding the lapels of his coat, her head almost upon his shoulder, her eyes closed.] Ah! please make haste and look for it!

Quex.

Right or left?

Sophy.

The ri—the left.

Quex.

[Sharply.] Raise your head. Stand up.

Sophy.

[Releasing his coat and raising her head.] Eh?

Quex.

[Sternly.] Open your eyes. Both of them. [She opens her eyes and stares at him. He returns her handkerchief.] There! I have removed the splinter. [She slowly backs away like a whipped child. He follows her.] Miss Fullgarney, I understand you are engaged to be married—to this young man, Valma?

Sophy.

[Tremblingly.] Yes, my lord.

Quex.

Do you care for him?

Sophy.

[Faintly.] Yes.

Quex.

In love with him?

Sophy.

Oh, yes, my lord, indeed.

Quex.

And yet you still flirt?

Sophy.

Y—es.

Quex.

Take my advice—be satisfied with the kisses your sweetheart gives you. Don't try to get them from other men, old or young.

Sophy.

No—no—

Quex.

[Sternly, but kindly.] You little fool!

Pollitt enters, wearing a tall hat and lemon-coloured gloves.

Pollitt.

[Jealously.] Sophy!

[Quex walks away.

Sophy.

[Falteringly.] The fly-man brought back the bag, Valma dear.

Pollitt.

I am aware of that. [Lowering his voice.] What are you doing here with Lord Quex?

Sophy.

I—I've been manicuring him.

The Younger Servant comes down the steps.

Servant.

[To Sophy.] Mrs. Eden is quite ready for you, miss.

[She hurriedly replaces her manicure instruments, &c., in the bag, hands the bowl to the Servant, and, without looking at Pollitt or Quex, goes swiftly up the steps and disappears. The Servant follows her, carrying the bowl.

Pollitt.

[To Quex.] Excuse me, my lord—

Quex.

[Coming forward, and picking up his newspaper.] Eh?

Pollitt.

That young lady and I are engaged to be married.

Quex.

Mr.—Valma?

Pollitt.

Yes, my lord. [Hotly.] And I very much object to her manicuring gentlemen.

Quex.

[Dryly.] Well, there you have a little something to discuss at home—before, and, perhaps, after marriage.

Pollitt.

I consider the custom of ladies manicuring gentlemen one that may occasionally lead to undue familiarity, my lord.

Quex.

I am inclined to agree with you, sir.

Pollitt.

And I shall do all I can to persuade Miss Fullgarney to relinquish active participation in the business.

Quex.

The palmistry profession is a flourishing one at present, eh, Mr. Valma?

Pollitt.

[Loftily.] My engagement-book is always full. I have disappointed several ladies by coming here this afternoon.

Quex.

Poor women! Nevertheless, pray be careful how you slight the manicure trade. Crazes die, you know—nails grow.

Pollitt.

[Tapping his breast.] I think we have come to stay, my lord.

Quex.

[Lightly.] Well, you're sailing pretty close to the wind, remember, you fellows.

Pollitt.

My lord!

Quex.

[Replacing his newspaper upon the table.] And if some day you should find yourselves in the police-court, alongside a poor old woman whose hand has been crossed with a threepenny-bit down an area—

The Duchess appears on the further side of the low cypress-hedge. She is dressed for dinner. The sky is now faintly rosy, and during the ensuing scene it deepens into a rich sunset.

Quex.

We are going to have a flaming sunset, Duchess.

Duchess.

Superb.

Pollitt.

[Haughtily.] I wish you good evening, my lord.

Quex.

Oh, good evening, Mr. Valma. [To himself.] Impudent beggar!

[Pollitt walks away. After watching his going, the Duchess comes eagerly forward.

Duchess.

[Her hand upon her heart.] Oh! I am here, Harry!

Quex.

[In delicate protest.] Ah, my dear Duchess!

Duchess.

Fortunately I have been able to dress quickly without exciting curiosity. My maid was summoned away this afternoon, to her father who is sick. [Sinking on to the bench.] Still, these risks are considerable enough.

Quex.

And yet you deliberately court them!

Duchess.

Great passions involve great dangers. The history of the world shows that.

Quex.

But why now—now that circumstances are altered between us? why, on earth, do you play these hazardous tricks now?

Duchess.

I was determined to meet, to know, the girl with whom you are about to ranger yourself, Harry.

Quex.

Even that could have been arrived at in some safer way.

Duchess.

Ah, but you fail to see; it was the daring of this proceeding that attracted me—the romance of it!

Quex.

[Raising his hands.] Romance! still!

Duchess.

Always. It is the very blood in my veins. It keeps me young. I shall die a romantic girl, however old I may be.

Quex.

You ought, you really ought, to have flourished in the Middle Ages.

Duchess.

You have frequently made that observation. [Rising.] I do live in the Middle Ages, in my imagination. I live in every age in which Love was not a cool, level emotion, but a fierce, all-conquering flame—a flame that grew in the heart of a woman, that of a sudden spread through her whole organism, that lit up her eyes with a light more refulgent than the light of sun or moon! [Laying her hand upon his arm.] Oh, oh, this poor, thin, modern sentiment miscalled Love—!

Quex.

[Edging away.] Sssh! pray be careful!

Duchess.

Ah, yes. But, dear Harry, I cannot endure the ordeal any longer.

Quex.

The ordeal?

Duchess.

The prolonged discomfort, to which I have subjected myself, of watching your wooing of Miss Eden. I must go.

Quex.

[With ill-concealed relief.] Go! leave us?

Duchess.

I recognise how fitting it is that you should bring your wild, irregular career to a close; but after to-morrow I shall cease to be a spectator of these preliminaries.

Quex.

[His eyes sparkling.] After to-morrow!

Duchess.

Yes, I rejoin poor dear Strood on Friday. True, he has four nurses—he always had four nurses, if you remember?

Quex.

[Sympathetically.] Three or four.

Duchess.

But then, nurses are but nurses. [Nobly.] I must not forget that I am a wife, Harry.

Quex.

No, no—you mustn't forget that.

Duchess.

[Gazing into his eyes.] And so, between you and me, [placing her hands upon his shoulders] it is over.

Quex.

[Promptly.] Over.

Duchess.

Finally, irrevocably over.

Quex.

[Freeing himself.] Absolutely over. [Taking her hand and bowing over it solemnly.] Done with.

[He walks away.

Duchess.

[Moving slowly.] That is—almost over.

Quex.

[Turning sharply.] Almost?

Duchess.

We have yet to say good-bye, you know.

Quex.

[Returning to her, apprehensively.] We—we have said good-bye.

Duchess.

Ah, no, no!

Quex.

[Again bowing over her hand—with simulated feeling.] Good-bye.

Duchess.

[Looking round.] What! here?

Quex.

[Humouring her.] This romantic old garden! [pointing to the statuary] these silent

witnesses—beholders, it is likely, of many similar scenes! the—the—setting sun! Could any situation be more appropriate?

Duchess.

But we are liable to be interrupted at any moment. The joint romance of our lives, Harry, ought not to end with a curt word and formal hand-shake in an exposed spot of this kind. [Sitting in the garden chair.] Oh, it cannot, must not, end so!

Quex.

[Eyeing her uneasily.] Frankly, I see nothing else for it.

Duchess.

I can't credit it. Why, what was the second reason for my coming here?

Quex.

Second reason?

Duchess.

That our parting might be in keeping with our great attachment!

Quex.

Impossible.

Duchess.

Impracticable?

Quex.

In every way, impossible.

Duchess.

[Taking his hand.] Oh, don't say that, dear Harry! Ah, the auguries tell me that what I ask will be.

Quex.

[Omitting, in his anxiety, to withdraw his hand.] The auguries?

Duchess.

Fate—coincidence—call it what you please—foreshadows one more meeting between us.

Quex.

Coincidence?

Duchess.

[Intensely, in a low voice.] Harry, do you remember a particular evening at Stockholm?

Quex.

[Hazily.] Stockholm?

Duchess.

That evening upon which we discovered how much our society meant to each other!

Quex.

[Vaguely, while he hastily recovers possession of his hand.] At Stockholm was it—?

Duchess.

You were sailing with us in the Baltic—you must recollect? Our yacht had put in at Stockholm; we had come to the Grand Hotel. Strood had retired, and you and I were sitting out upon the balcony watching the lights of the café on the Norrbro and the tiny steamboats that stole to and fro across the harbour. Surely you recollect?

Quex.

Yes, yes, of course.

Duchess.

Well, do you remember the brand of the champagne you sipped while you and I sat smoking?

Quex.

Good lord, no!

Duchess.

"Félix Poubelle, Carte d'Or." You remarked that it was a brand unknown to you. Have you ever met it since, Harry?

Quex.

Not that I—

Duchess.

Nor I till last night, at dinner. [Impressively.] It is in this very house.

Quex.

[With a slight shrug of the shoulders.] Extremely probable.

Duchess.

And do you remember how I was clad, that evening at Stockholm?

Quex.

I am afraid I don't.

Duchess.

Couleur de rose garnie de vert. I have just such another garment with me.

Quex.

Really?

Duchess.

Do you remember in what month we were at Stockholm?

Quex.

No.

Duchess.

June—this month. Nor the day of the week?

Quex.

It must be ten years ago!

Duchess.

Wednesday. There stands the record in my diary.

Quex.

Diary! good heavens, you are not so indiscreet—!

Duchess.

No, no—only the words, "warm evening." Yes, it was upon a Wednesday. What is to-day?

Quex.

Wednesday.

Duchess.

[Rising.] Harry, I want to see you sipping that brand of champagne once more, while you and I sit facing one another, silently, dreamily smoking Argyropulos.

Quex.

[Negatively.] Duchess—

Duchess.

To end as we began! you have not the heart to refuse?

Quex.

I—

Duchess.

You do refuse?

Quex.

I do.

[She passes him, and again sinks upon the bench.

Duchess.

[Her back towards him, her shoulders heaving.] Oh! oh!

Quex.

I—I am profoundly sorry to be obliged to speak to you in this fashion.

Duchess.

Oh, then I cannot go on Friday!

Quex.

Not!

Duchess.

No! no! no!

Quex.

Believe me, it would be better for you, for me, for everybody—

Duchess.

I cannot! [Producing a diminutive lace handkerchief.] In the first shock of the news of your engagement—for it was a shock—one thought consoled me; throughout the time that has elapsed since then I have fed upon this same thought—there will be a parting in keeping with our great attachment! And now, you would rob me even of that!

Quex.

But—but—but—a solemn, deliberate leave-taking! the ceremony, of all others, to be carefully avoided!

Duchess.

Not by me, Harry—not by me. I wish to carry, in my breast, from this house the numb despair of a piteous climax. I cannot drive away smugly from these gates with

the simple feelings of a woman who has been paying a mere visit—I cannot!

Quex.

My dear Sidonia—!

Duchess.

[Decidedly.] I say I cannot!

Quex.

[To himself, with a little groan.] Oh! phew!

[He walks to and fro impatiently, reflecting. Sophy, without her hat, comes quickly down the steps as if making for the table. Seeing Quex and the Duchess, she draws back, inquisitively.

Quex.

[By the Duchess's side again, helplessly.] Well, I—ha!—I—

Duchess.

[Rising eagerly, laying a hand upon his arm.] You will?

[Sophy stoops down behind the dwarf cypress-hedge.

Quex.

You are certain—certain that this would effectually remove the obstacle to your rejoining—[with a wave of the hand] on Friday?

Duchess.

Why, do you think I would risk an anticlimax? [In an intense whisper.] To-night! [Louder.] To-night? [He hesitates a little longer—then bows in assent, stiffly and coldly. She gives an ardent sigh.] Ah—! [He retreats a step or two. She draws herself up with dignity.] To-night then—

[She turns from him and glides away through the trees. He stands for a moment, a frown upon his face, in thought.

Quex.

[Suddenly, moving in the direction she has taken.] No, no! Duchess—! [A gong sounds in the distance, he pauses, looking at his watch, angrily.] Ptshah! [He turns up the stage and discovers Sophy, who is now standing behind the hedge.] Hallo! [Sophy advances, laughing rather foolishly.] What are you doing here?

Sophy.

Looking for my rings. I took them off before I began manicuring you.

Quex.

[Pointing to the hedge.] You didn't drop them there, did you?

Sophy.

No, I left them on the table.

Quex.

[Looking towards the table.] There's the table.

Sophy.

[Coming to the table and putting on her rings.] Yes, I know.

Quex.

[After a short pause.] How long have you been here?

Sophy.

I? Oh, I'd just come as you spoke to me.

Quex.

[Half-satisfied.] Oh—?

[He goes up the steps, gives her a parting look, and, disappears. It is now twilight. Mrs. Eden, Frayne, and Muriel—all dressed for dinner—appear on the other side of the low hedge.

Mrs. Eden.

[To Frayne, walking with him above the hedge.] Delightful, isn't it? It was planted by the late Lord Owbridge's father a hundred years ago.

Frayne.

[Seeing Sophy.] Why, isn't that the young manicure lady?

Mrs. Eden.

Yes. All these pieces of sculpture are genuine old Italian. This quaint little fountain came from the Villa Marchotti—

Frayne.

[Edging towards Sophy.] Alluring.

Mrs. Eden.

This is the fountain.

Frayne.

[Returning to her.] Quaint old fountain.

Sophy.

[To Muriel, across the hedge in a whisper.] Darling!

Mrs. Eden.

[Looking into the distance.] I think I see the dear Duchess.

Frayne.

[Alertly.] Where?

Mrs. Eden.

There.

Frayne.

I have the honour of knowing her Grace slightly.

Mrs. Eden.

[Moving away.] What a sweet woman!

Frayne.

[Following her.] Alluring!

[They disappear through the trees as Muriel, coming from below the hedge, joins Sophy.

Sophy.

Darling!

Muriel.

What is it, Sophy?

Sophy.

Lord Quex and this—this Duchess—they know each other very well, of course?

Muriel.

They are old acquaintances, I understand.

Sophy.

Ah!

Muriel.

Why do you ask?

Sophy.

I've just seen them together, talking.

Muriel.

Talking? why not?

Sophy.

Yes, but how?

Muriel.

How?

Sophy.

I'll tell you. After you went indoors to dress, I took off my rings and put them on that table. [Looking away rather guiltily.] Rings fidget me, this hot weather—don't they you? Well, just as I'd finished with Mrs. Jack, it suddenly struck me—my rings!—and I hurried back to fetch them. When I got here, I came across Lord Quex and the Duchess.

Muriel.

[Calmly.] Yes?

Sophy.

I stooped down behind that hedge there.

Muriel.

You did not!

Sophy.

Oh, I suppose you consider it mean!

Muriel.

Despicable!

Sophy.

Despicable, is it! I don't care! My goodness, I'd do the shabbiest thing a woman could do to save you from him!

Muriel.

[Peering among the trees.] Hush, hush, hush!

Sophy.

[On the verge of tears.] Perhaps you fancy I'm mean from choice? Perhaps you imagine—?

Muriel.

Be quiet, Sophy!

Sophy.

[Giving a sniff and lowering her voice.] Well, here they were, standing exactly where you are, close to each other. [Muriel changes her position.] I saw her touch his arm. Oh, I'm positive there's something between those two! "You will?" I heard her say. And then he made a remark about Friday—Friday—

Muriel.

The Duchess goes on Friday.

Sophy.

That was it, of course! And then she mumbled something I couldn't catch; and then—listen to this!—then she said "to-night," quite plainly. To-night! and in such a tone of voice! And then he bowed, and out she came with "to-night" again—"to-night," for the second time—and away she went. Now, what do you think that "to-night" of hers means?

Muriel.

[Coldly, seating herself upon the bench.] Nothing—anything.

Sophy.

Nothing!

Muriel.

A hundred topics of conversation would lead to such an expression. [Looking at Sophy steadily.] You are mistaken in the construction you put upon it.

Sophy.

[Quietly.] Mistaken, am I?

Muriel.

[With clenched hands.] The Duchess of Strood is a most immaculate woman. [Suddenly.] Oh, it would be too infamous!

[The Duchess and Frayne, followed by Mrs. Eden, reappear behind the low hedge. Sophy retreats to the back of the bench upon which Muriel is sitting. The Duchess and Frayne approach, talking, while Mrs. Eden chats to Sophy across the hedge.

Frayne.

[To the Duchess, gallantly.] I am flattered by your remembrance of me, Duchess. When we last met I had hardly a grey hair in my head. [Running his hand through his hair.] Ha! The West Coast—!

Duchess.

Is the climate so terrible?

Frayne.

Deadly. But the worst of it is, [with a bow and a sigh] we have no European ladies.

[Muriel—eyeing the Duchess—rises, shrinkingly, and steals away.

Frayne.

[Looking after Muriel.] Quex! ha, there's a lucky dog, now!

Duchess.

[Sweetly.] You are delighted, naturally, at your old friend's approaching marriage?

Frayne.

[Kissing his finger-tips towards the left.] Miss Eden—! [Inquisitively.] And—and you, Duchess?

Duchess.

[Raising her eyebrows.] I?

Frayne.

You also approve his choice?

Duchess.

[Blandly.] Approve? I am scarcely sufficiently intimate with either party to express approval or disapproval.

Frayne.

[Eyeing her askance.] Pardon. I thought you had known Quex for—ah—some years.

Duchess.

Quite superficially. I should describe him rather as a great friend of his Grace.

Lady Owbridge appears on the top of the steps.

Lady Owbridge.

Are you here, Duchess?

Duchess.

[Turning to her.] Yes.

Lady Owbridge.

[Coming down the steps.] Oh, I am really very upset!

Duchess.

Upset?

Lady Owbridge.

About your maid. The circumstance has only just been reported to me—you have lost your maid. [Seeing Frayne.] Is that Sir Chichester? [Frayne advances and shakes hands.] I didn't observe you, in the dusk. Have you seen Henry? I wonder if he is waiting for us in the drawing-room?

Frayne.

May I go and hunt for him?

Lady Owbridge.

It would be kind of you.

[Frayne goes up the steps and away. Mrs. Eden comes to the stone bench. Muriel returns slowly, coming from among the trees and appearing on the further side of the low hedge.

Duchess.

[To Lady Owbridge.] Pray don't be in the least concerned for me, dear Lady Owbridge; the absence of my maid is quite a temporary matter. Poor Watson's father is unwell and I packed her off to him this afternoon. She will be back by mid-day to-morrow, she promises me.

Lady Owbridge.

But, dear me! in the meantime my own woman shall wait upon you.

Duchess.

I couldn't dream of it.

Mrs. Eden.

Why not my Gilchrist—or let us share her?

Duchess.

No, no; the housemaid who assisted me into this gown—

Lady Owbridge.

Chalmers? well, there's Chalmers, certainly. But I fear that Chalmers has hot hands. Or Denham—no, Denham is suffering from a bad knee. Of course, there's Bruce! Bruce is painfully near-sighted—- but would Bruce do? Or little Atkins—?

Sophy.

[Stepping from behind the bench, and confronting Lady Owbridge—in a quiet voice.] Or I, my lady?

Lady Owbridge.

You, my dear?

Sophy.

Why shouldn't I attend upon her Grace to-night and in the morning? [With half a courtesy to the Duchess.] I should dearly like to have the honour.

Muriel comes forward, staring at Sophy.

Mrs. Eden.

Now, that's very proper and good-natured of you, Sophy.

Lady Owbridge.

But, Miss Fullgarney—

Sophy.

[Modestly.] Oh, I never feel like Miss Fullgarney out of my business, my lady. You see, I was maid for years, and it's second nature to me. Do let me, my lady—do, your Grace!

Lady Owbridge.

Duchess—?

Duchess.

[Hesitatingly.] Oh—oh, by all means. [To Sophy.] Thank you.

[The gong sounds in the distance again, as Quex—now in evening-dress—and Frayne return together, above the hedge.

Lady Owbridge.

Here is Quex.

[The ladies, except Muriel, join Frayne and Quex.

Muriel.

[To Sophy.] What are you doing?

Sophy.

[Breathlessly.] The housekeeper showed me over the house. I remember—her maid's

room is at the end of a passage leading from the boudoir!

Muriel.

Sophy, you must not! you sha'n't!

Sophy.

Why, isn't it for the best? If I was mistaken over what I heard just now, I sha'n't see or hear anything wicked to-night; and that will satisfy both of us—!

Lady Owbridge.

[Calling.] Muriel—

[Muriel joins the group; Sophy slips away and disappears.

Lady Owbridge.

[To the Duchess.] Shall we go in?

[Lady Owbridge and the Duchess, and Mrs. Eden and Muriel, ascend the steps and go towards the house. Instead, of following the ladies, Quex turns sharply and comes forward with an angry, sullen look upon his face.

Frayne.

[Looking round for Quex.] Hallo, Harry! [Coming to Quex.] Aren't you—?

Quex.

Hang dinner! I don't want to eat.

Frayne.

Anything wrong, old man? anything I—?

Quex.

[Shaking himself up.] No, no; nothing—the hot weather. Come along; we mustn't be late for grace. [Boisterously.] At any rate, a glass of champagne—[slapping Frayne on the back] a glass or two of Félix Poubelle, hey? Félix Poubelle, Carte d'Or! ha, ha, ha!

[As they turn to go, they see Sophy on the other side of the low hedge, looking at them steadily.

Quex.

[To Frayne, quietly.] Wait!

[They stand still, while Sophy very demurely walks to the steps, ascends them, and disappears.

Quex.

[In an altered tone.] Chick—you see that hussy?

Frayne.

Miss Fullgarney?

Quex.

I can't make her out. I believe she wants to play some trick on me.

Frayne.

Trick?

Quex.

'Pon my soul, I believe she's prying—spying on me.

Frayne.

That nice gal!

Quex.

Oh, I daresay I'm wrong. But if I found it so, I—- I'd wring her neck.

Frayne.

[Wistfully.] It's an alluring neck.

Quex.

Possibly. But I'd wring it—!

[They go up the steps together.

end of the second act.

THE THIRD ACT

The scene represents two rooms—a bedroom and a boudoir—separated by an arched opening across which a portière is hung. The portière is, however, drawn aside, and the bedroom, in which is a bed with an elaborate canopy, is partly revealed. The boudoir is nearest to the spectator. Above the fireplace, with bare hearth, on the right, is a broad window running obliquely towards the centre, concealed by heavy curtains. On the left of the window, facing the audience, is a door admitting to a long, narrow passage in which a hanging lamp is burning; and on the left of this door is the arched opening dividing the bedroom from the boudoir. Another door opens into the boudoir on the opposite side from a corridor or landing. Beyond this door, against the wall, is a cabinet, on the top of which is a clock. A chair stands at each end of this cabinet. On the left of the arched opening—placed obliquely, the mirror turned from the audience—is a cheval-glass; and on the right is a sculptured figure or ornamental pillar supporting a lighted lamp. Before the window stands a large dressing-table. On the table are a pair of candelabra with lighted candles, a looking-glass, toilet-bottles, and a hand-mirror. A chair faces the dressing-table. Nearer to the spectator are a writing-table, with a heap of French novels on it, and an arm-chair. Opposite stand a circular table, an arm-chair, and a settee. A silver box containing cigarettes, an ash-tray, a match-stand, and a lighted spirit-lamp are on this table.

The rooms are richly furnished and decorated, but in an old-fashioned and formal manner. Everything is subdued and faded in tone. There are no pillows upon the chairs, nor on the settee, nor any other signs of ease and comfort. Keys are in the locks of both the doors.

[The Duchess and Mrs. Eden are seated—the Duchess in the arm-chair, Mrs. Eden upon the settee—smoking cigarettes. Mrs. Eden is wearing a smart dressing-jacket; the Duchess is still fully dressed. Sophy, who has assumed an apron, is engaged in bringing hair-brushes and some toilet bottles from the bedroom and in arranging them upon the dressing-table. Her eyes are constantly upon the Duchess.

Mrs. Eden.

These are awfully pleasant cigarettes. I didn't know you—

Duchess.

[Plaintively.] My doctor insists—for my nerves.

Mrs. Eden.

[Blowing rings.] I love smoking. Such a bore, because women are rather dropping it. [Examining her cigarette.] What are these?

Duchess

I forget.

Mrs. Eden.

I see—Argyropulos.

[There is a knock at the door. Sophy goes to the door and opens it slightly; a note is handed to her.

Sophy.

[Looking at the note.] Oh, thanks. [Closing the door.] I beg your pardon, your Grace—it's for me.

[She returns to the dressing-table, reading the note.

Mrs. Eden.

[Jestingly.] Ah, Sophy! you must encourage no more sweethearts now, remember.

Sophy.

This is from him, Mrs. Eden—from Mr. Valma, saying good-night. He's gone to bed.

Mrs. Eden.

Good gracious! how do you know?

Sophy.

Mrs. Gregory, the housekeeper, has allowed him to sleep here to-night, so that we may go back together in the morning.

Mrs. Eden.

Ah, yes.

Duchess.

[Taking off her bracelets.] My jewel-case, Sophy.

[Sophy puts the note to her lips, slips it into the bodice of her dress, and re-enters the bedroom.

Mrs. Eden.

[To the Duchess.] By-the-by, what did Valma see in your hand, Duchess, after dinner? Why wouldn't you tell us?

Duchess.

I was too vexed at the moment. [With downcast eyes.] He professed to discover that a number of men are in love with me.

Mrs. Eden.

Yes, but what made you angry?

Duchess.

Why, that.

Mrs. Eden.

That!

Duchess.

They were shocking words to listen to, even when spoken by a mere fortune-teller. And you—why did you not confide to us the result of Mr. Valma's reading of your palm?

[Sophy comes from the bedroom carrying a jewel-case, which she deposits upon the dressing-table.

Mrs. Eden.

I was in a rage too. Ha! there's only one man in love with me, it appears.

Duchess.

[With a shudder.] One is sufficiently dreadful.

Mrs. Eden.

Horrid! [Making a moue.] It's Jack—my husband!

Duchess.

[Reprovingly.] Hush, dear Mrs. Eden! Sophy— [Sophy comes to the Duchess. Languidly.] I shall read for half-an-hour before attempting to sleep. Put me into something loose.

Sophy.

Yes, your Grace.

[Sophy again retires to the bedroom.

Mrs. Eden.

[Rising.] May I look at your literature?

[Mrs. Eden goes to the writing-table and turns over the books she finds there. The Duchess glances at the clock, and eyes Mrs. Eden with impatience.

Mrs. Eden.

"Le Calvaire d'une vierge." "Lune de Miel." "Les Aventures de Madame Plon." Oh,

I've heard of this! this is a little—h'm!—isn't it?

Duchess.

I read those things for the sake of their exquisitely polished style; the subjects escape me.

Mrs. Eden.

[Seating herself by the writing-table and dipping into "Madame Plon."] Ah yes, the style—the style. [Absorbed.] We haven't much real literary style in England, have we?

[Sophy returns, carrying a pink tea-gown trimmed with green ribbons, and a richly embroidered Mandarin's robe.

Sophy.

Will your Grace put on one of these? [With a curl of the lip.] They're both very becoming, I should think.

Duchess.

[Smiling sadly.] Becoming! as if that mattered, child!

Sophy.

Which will your Grace—?

Duchess.

[To herself, closing her eyes.] Couleur de rose—[to Sophy] er—that pink rag. Take off my collarette.

[Sophy lays the tea-gown and the robe over the back of the settee and proceeds to unfasten the Duchess's pearl collarette.

Mrs. Eden.

[Startled, by some passage in the book she is reading.] Oh, I say!

Duchess.

What, dear Mrs. Eden?

Mrs. Eden.

[Bethinking herself—soberly.] Ah, yes, the style is excellent, isn't it?

Duchess.

[To Sophy, while the collarette is in process of removal.] Have you everything you require for the night, child?

Sophy.

Yes, thank you, your Grace. Miss Gilchrist, Mrs. Eden's maid, has lent me a night-gown and a pair of slippers.

Duchess.

[Handing her bracelets to Sophy.] Drop them into the case.

[Sophy puts the collarette and bracelets in the jewel-case. The Duchess, rising, again looks at the clock and at Mrs. Eden. Sophy returns to the Duchess, who is now behind the settee.

Duchess.

[To Sophy.] It is very good of you, Sophy, to attend upon me.

Sophy.

[Averting her head.] Not at all, your Grace.

Duchess.

[Taking up the Mandarin's robe.] Here is a pretty thing for you. [Giving the robe to Sophy.] Wear it to dress your hair in, in the morning.

Sophy.

[Breathing shortly.] Oh, no, your Grace—please—!

Duchess.

Nonsense, child; take it.

[Sophy, somewhat out of countenance, lays the robe over the back of the chair.

Mrs. Eden.

[Looking up.] Well, you are a lucky girl, Sophy!

Sophy.

Yes, I know it's very beautiful; [returning to the Duchess] but I—I think I'd rather not—

Duchess.

Tsch, tsch! help me. [The Duchess is standing before the cheval-glass, which conceals her from the audience. With Sophy's aid, she slips out of her dress and puts herself into the tea-gown, while she talks to Mrs. Eden.] Miss Eden is not well to-night, I am afraid. She didn't come into the drawing-room.

[Mrs. Eden rises and goes to the settee, upon which she partly kneels while she chatters to the Duchess.

Mrs. Eden.

She complained of headache and bolted upstairs. Muriel is such an odd girl at times.

Duchess.

A sweet one.

Mrs. Eden.

Perfectly adorable. Only I wish she wasn't so moody and uncertain.

Duchess.

But a headache—[sympathetically] dear child!

Mrs. Eden.

An engaged girl ought not to have a headache—no girl ought. It's just one of those things that makes a man ponder.

Duchess.

Ponder?

Mrs. Eden.

Reflect. A man loves to think a girl is like an angel—beautiful pink and white right through, with no clockwork. The moment she complains of headache, or toothache, or a chilblain on the heel, the angel game is off, and she's got to try and hold her own as a simple mortal. And as a mortal she's not in it with a man. No, it's angel or nothing with us women. I remember my Mater saying to me when I was engaged to Jack, "Sybil, now mind! enjoy the very best of health till you have been married at least ten years; and then be sure you have an excellent motive for cracking-up." [The clock tinkles out the half-hour. She glances at the clock.] Half-past-eleven! the dead of night for this house! [Rising.] I'll be off to my cot.

[Sophy carries the Duchess's dress into the bedroom.

Duchess.

[Coming to Mrs. Eden.] Must you? Good-night.

Mrs. Eden.

So nice of you to allow me this gossip.

Duchess.

Delighted.

[They kiss affectionately.

Mrs. Eden.

We go shopping together to-morrow, do we not?

Duchess.

Yes, yes.

Mrs. Eden.

[With exaggerated regret.] To-morrow! your last day here! misery! [At the door,

finding she still has "Madame Plon" in her hand.] Oh! do you happen to be on this one?

Duchess.

Not that one.

Mrs. Eden.

I wonder whether you'd lend it to me?

Duchess.

Gladly.

Mrs. Eden.

As you say, there is something about these French writers—

Duchess.

Style.

Mrs. Eden.

That's it—style. [Opening the door.] Ah! lights out.

Duchess.

Can you see?

Mrs. Eden.

[Going out.] There's just a glimmer—

[She disappears.

Duchess.

I'll keep the door open till you have turned the corner.

[Sophy comes back and stands watching the Duchess. The Duchess remains at the open door for a little, while, then kisses her hand to Mrs. Eden and closes the door.

Sophy.

Shall I brush your Grace's hair now?

Duchess.

[Going to the writing-table and taking up a book.] No. I will do it. The exertion of brushing my hair, I often find, encourages sleep. I'll put myself to bed. Run away. Don't let me see or hear anything of you till the morning. Eight o'clock. [She reclines upon the settee and opens her book. Sophy, eyeing her keenly, is about to withdraw.] Oh—Sophy! [Sophy returns.] Do you—believe in Mr. Valma?

Sophy.

Believe in him, your Grace?

Duchess.

Believe that when he reads a woman's hand he has really the power of divination—the power he professes?

Sophy.

Oh, yes.

Duchess.

[Looking away.] Then if he tells a woman that a great many men are deeply in love with her, you—you—?

Sophy.

I'm sure he knows what he's talking about.

Duchess.

[With a little purr of contentment.] Ah! [Assuming indifference.] I heard recently of an instance of his having conjectured such a state of affairs from the lines of a woman's hand. [Severely.] I could only hope that his surmise was an incorrect one.

Sophy.

[Her eyes flashing scornfully.] You see, your Grace, if a woman is pretty, and

Valma finds Venus's girdle well marked in her palm; and if he concludes from other signs that she's vain and light and loose; it isn't much to suppose that there are a few horrid men licking their lips at the thought of her.

Duchess.

[Shocked.] My good girl! what curious expressions you make use of! [Resuming her reading.] That's all.

[Sophy goes to the door and opens it.

Sophy.

I wish your Grace good-night.

Duchess.

[Raising her head for a moment.] Good-night. You are not taking your robe.

[Sophy looks at the robe and hesitates; in the end she gathers it up uneasily.

Sophy.

I—I am very much obliged to your Grace—

Duchess.

Yes, you have thanked me enough. Turn out the lamp in that passage.

Sophy.

Certainly, your Grace.

[Sophy disappears, shutting the door after her. The Duchess remains quite still for a moment, then rises promptly, replaces her book, and—seating herself at the dressing-table—puts her hair in order. This done, she takes up the hand-mirror and smiles, frowns, and looks caressingly at herself. Then she lays the hand-mirror aside, blows out the candles upon the dressing-table, and poses before the cheval-glass. Ultimately, completely assured as to her appearance, she cautiously opens the door at which Sophy has departed, and, going a few steps along the passage, listens with

strained ears. The passage is now in darkness. Apparently satisfied, the Duchess returns, and, closing the door gently, turns the key in the lock. Her next proceeding is to attempt to tear one of the ribbons from her tea-gown. Failing in this, she detaches it with the aid of a pair of scissors, and, opening the door leading from the corridor, ties the ribbon to the outer door-handle. Whereupon she closes the door and walks about the room contentedly. Suddenly she pauses, and, going to the cabinet, produces a small tray on which are a bottle of champagne and a champagne glass. Placing the tray on the circular table, she regards the single glass thoughtfully. Then, as if struck by an idea, she disappears into the bedroom. After a brief interval, the door opens softly and Quex enters, carrying a lighted wax match. Being in, he shuts the door silently and looks about the room. Hearing the Duchess in the adjoining apartment, he frowns and blows out the match. Coming to the circular table, he contemplates the preparation for his reception with distaste; then, flinging the match into the ash-tray, he sits, with a set, determined look upon his face. After another short pause, the Duchess returns, polishing a tumbler with a cambric handkerchief. Quex rises.

Duchess.

[Under her breath.] Ah! [He bows stiffly. She places the tumbler on the tray, tosses the handkerchief aside, and—first motioning him to stand away from the line of the door—opens the door, removes the ribbon from the handle, closes and locks it. Then she turns to him with a long-drawn sigh.] Ah—h—h!

Quex.

[Coming down gloomily.] Is it all right?

Duchess.

Quite. [Advancing to him with outstretched hands.] Welcome, Harry! oh, welcome!

Quex.

[Retreating a few steps—firmly.] One moment. I have something to ask of you,

Sidonia. [Looking round.] You are sure—?

Duchess.

Yes, yes. Only don't raise your voice; [glancing towards the door] my maid sleeps in a room at the end of that passage. [Gracefully seating herself upon the settee and motioning him to sit beside her.] Sit down. Oh, the woe of this final meeting! the pathos of it!

Quex.

[Bitterly, withdrawing the chair a little further from the table.] Yes, I agree with you—there is an element of wofulness in this meeting; it is not altogether without pathos.

Duchess.

Not altogether!

Quex.

[Sitting, facing her.] But, for yourself, my dear Sidonia—well, I have the consolation of believing that directly you turn your back upon Fauncey Court much of the wofulness of your position will evaporate.

Duchess.

Harry!

Quex.

Forgive me—you admit that you delight in colouring even the most ordinary events of life rather highly. If I may put it more roughly, you are disposed, my dear Sidonia—at times, perhaps, a little inopportunely—to burn a good deal of red fire. [Leaning forward.] At any rate, I beg an especial favour of you to-night.

Duchess.

What—?

Quex.

[Distinctly.] No red fire.

Duchess.

[Chilled.] Is this the something you had to ask of me? [He bows in assent.] I cannot remember ever having seen you in this mood.

Quex.

This is our first actual tête-à-tête since my engagement to Miss Eden.

Duchess.

Oh, I understand.

Quex.

And now shall I tell you where the wofulness and the pathos most conspicuously display themselves on this occasion?

Duchess.

If you wish to.

Quex.

In the confounded treachery of my being here at all.

Duchess.

Treachery?

Quex.

You know I am under a bond of good behaviour to my old aunt and to the Edens.

Duchess.

[With a slight shrug of the shoulders.] Really?

Quex.

Yes. [Clenching his teeth.] And this is how I observe it. After all my resolutions,

this—this is how I observe it.

[He rises and paces up and down the room.

Duchess.

[Fretfully.] I am bound to remark that your present behaviour appears quite unimpeachable.

Quex.

Unimpeachable! here—alone—in your company!

Duchess.

[Covering her eyes with her hand.] Oh, cruel, cruel!

Quex.

[Pausing.] Cruel—?

Duchess.

[With heaving bosom.] But there! if you deny me the possession of real feeling, why should you hesitate to rain blows on me?

Quex.

[Softening, coming to her.] My dear Sidonia, I don't—I don't mean to—

Duchess.

[Rising, and grasping his hands.] Oh, Harry!

Quex.

Tsch! please! [He releases himself and she sinks back upon the settee, her eyes closed. He regards her uncomfortably for a moment; then, with some hesitation, he produces from his coat-tail pocket a small box covered with a pretty brocade, with which he toys uneasily.] You expressed a wish to leave here on Friday with a sensation of despair at your heart, Sidonia. If your feeling about our parting is really a deep one, heaven knows I have no desire to make it more acute—

Duchess.

[Partly opening her eyes.] What is in that box, Harry?

Quex.

That is just what I was about to—to—[Lifting the lid and closing it.] These are the little souvenirs which have passed from you to me at odd times.

Duchess.

[With reviving interest.] Ah, yes.

Quex.

I have had no other opportunity—[Looking about him awkwardly for a place to deposit the box.] Will you—? shall I—? what the devil's to become of 'em?

Duchess.

[Sitting upright and passing her hand over her back hair.] Were there a fire, we could crouch over it and watch the flames consume them one by one.

Quex.

But there isn't a fire.

Duchess.

[Rising, and taking the box from him.] Let us examine them.

Quex.

No, no, no.

Duchess.

Yes, yes. [Opening the box and gazing into it.] Ah, poor little objects! dead, yet animate; silent, yet, oh, how eloquent! Don't go away— [She overturns the contents of the box on to the table. They stand opposite each other, looking down upon the litter. She picks up a ring.] A ring—[thoughtfully] turquoise and pearl. [Recollecting.] Stockholm! You remember—that night you and I sat watching the

lights of the café on the Norrbro—!

Quex.

[Hastily.] Yes, yes; you've recalled it already to-day.

Duchess.

[Picking up a scarf-pin.] A scarf-pin. Copenhagen! Ah, that pretty state-room of mine on the Irene!

Quex.

Yes, yes, charming.

Duchess.

[Taking up a locket.] A locket—my name in brilliants. Genoa! Look, it still contains my hair.

Quex.

[Nodding.] H'm, um.

Duchess.

[Taking up a white shoe.] My shoe. Where—?

Quex.

[Shaking his head.] I don't—

Duchess.

Mentone!

Quex.

Of course—Mentone.

Duchess.

[Discovering some object in the shoe.] What is this? [Producing a garter of pale-blue silk, with a diamond buckle.] A—a—where—? ah, yes. [Replacing the things in the box.] Oh, the poor little objects! dead, yet animate; silent, yet, oh, how eloquent!

[She passes him and slips the box into the drawer of the writing-table. The clock strikes a quarter to twelve.

Quex.

[Glancing at the clock.] By Jove, it's late! I—I'll leave you now, Sidonia.

Duchess.

[Turning.] No, no—not yet, Harry. [Coming to the table and taking up the box of cigarettes.] Why, you forget—[offering him the box] Argyropulos!

Quex.

[Accepting a cigarette reluctantly.] Thanks. [Again looking at the clock.] Well—three minutes.

Duchess.

[Taking a cigarette, replacing the box, and holding the spirit lamp while he lights his cigarette from it.] You were not always so impatient. [In lighting his cigarette, the flame of the lamp is blown out.] Ah! [After replacing the lamp, she lights her cigarette from his, gazing into his eyes.] Argyropulos. [Dreamily.] Once more—Argyropulos.

Quex.

Yes, yes—capital tobacco.

[He gets away from her.

Duchess.

And look! you see, Harry?

Quex.

[Turning.] Eh?

Duchess.

[Pointing to the bottle of champagne.] "Félix Poubelle, Carte d'Or"! [Taking up the

scissors which she has left upon the table.] The wire is already severed.

[She commences to cut the string. He comes to her.

Quex.

[Taking the scissors from her.] Oh, permit me.

[Always intent upon avoiding her, he moves away, the bottle in his hand, cutting the string.

Duchess.

[Following him.] Is it likely to make a loud report?

Quex.

Hardly.

Duchess.

[Frowning censoriously.] One doesn't want a sound of that sort to ring through the corridors. [Looking about her impatiently.] These formal, frigid rooms!

[She runs lightly into the bedroom, snatches a pillow from the bed, and returns to him.

Quex.

[His hand upon the cork.] What is that for?

Duchess.

[Enveloping his hand and the bottle in the pillow—calmly.] It is wiser to muffle it.

[He pauses, looking at her fixedly.

Quex.

[In a low, grave voice.] Dolly—

Duchess.

Dolly! [Closing her eyes.] You give me my pet name again!

Quex.

Ah, Dolly, if only there wasn't quite so much in one's life—to muffle! [He pulls the cork. She tosses the pillow on to the settee, a little irritably.] May I—?

[She inclines her head. He pours wine into the glasses; she takes the champagne glass, he the tumbler.

Duchess.

[Sentimentally.] Félix Poubelle, Carte d'Or! [Looking at him over the brim of her glass.] Eh bien! au joyeux passé!

Quex.

Non, non—à un avenir meilleur!

Duchess.

Que vous êtes prosaïque! soit! [They drink. She sits, with a sigh of dissatisfaction.] Ah!

Quex.

[Leaning against the table, drinking his wine.] Wonderful wine—really exceptional. [Struck by a thought, turning to her.] Forgive me—you must have found some difficulty in introducing Monsieur Félix Poubelle into this hallowed apartment.

Duchess.

No. [Sipping her wine.] My maid thinks it is by my doctor's orders.

Quex.

Your maid, yes—[sipping his wine; then sitting upon the settee, glass in hand] but my poor aunt must be highly scandalised.

Duchess.

[Her glass at her lips.] Dear Lady Owbridge will not know. I told the girl to coax it out of the butler, as if it were for herself. These women have a way of doing such

things.

Quex.

[Laughing rather sadly.] Ha, ha, ha! who is beyond temptation? Not even old Bristow—sixty if he's a day.

Duchess.

[Shrugging her shoulders.] Sixty or sixteen—when a girl is fascinating—

Quex.

Fascinating! your woman, Watson!

Duchess.

No, no—Watson has left me for a few hours. I am speaking of Sophy.

[There is a brief silence. Quex, surprised in the act of drinking, lowers his glass slowly.

Quex.

[In a queer voice.] Sophy?

Duchess.

Miss Fullgarney, the manicurist. She was so good as to offer to take Watson's place for to-night.

Quex.

[Looking steadily before him.] Oh?

[There is another pause. The Duchess puts down her glass and, with her foot, pushes the footstool towards Quex.

Duchess.

[Sliding from her chair on to the footstool.] Oh, Harry, the bitterness of this final meeting! the dull agony of it!

[He gets rid of his tumbler and touches her arm.

Quex.

[Quietly.] Duchess—

Duchess.

[Surprised.] Eh?

Quex.

I am sorry to alarm you, but this girl—Miss Eden's foster-sister—

Duchess.

What about her?

Quex.

She's a cat.

Duchess.

Cat!

Quex.

[Gathering his ideas as he proceeds.] A common hussy, not above playing tricks—spying—

Duchess.

Spying!

Quex.

I caught her behind the hedge this evening, in the Italian garden, after you and I had been talking together.

Duchess.

Behind the hedge!

Quex.

She had previously done her best to make an ass of me, while you were dressing for

dinner—! [Looking towards the passage-door.] Where do you say her room is?

Duchess.

At the end of that passage. [They rise together, with very little movement.] Oh, but she is in bed, and asleep!

Quex.

Is she?

Duchess.

Harry!

Quex.

Wait—! [He goes to the door, and examines the key-hole. Then he turns to the Duchess and beckons to her. She joins him. He says, in a whisper, pointing to the key-hole.] Do you notice—?

Duchess.

What?

Quex.

The key is in the lock horizontally.

Duchess.

She may have been peeping at us? [He nods. She is sick at the thought.] How inexcusably careless of me!

Quex.

[At her elbow.] Listen. I'll keep out of sight. Open the door boldly and walk along the passage. See if there is any sign of movement—

Duchess.

Yes, yes. [Steadying herself.] Perhaps we are disturbing ourselves unnecessarily.

Quex.

[Nodding reassuringly.] Perhaps so.

[He draws back into the bedroom, but so that he can put his head out at the opening, and watch the Duchess's proceedings. She goes to the door and lays her hand upon the key.

Duchess.

[Faltering.] Oh! oh, great heavens!

Quex.

[Encouragingly.] It's all right—it's all right. Very likely I am mistaken. Now!

[The Duchess opens the door suddenly, and Sophy, who is kneeling at the key-hole, lurches forward.

Duchess.

Ah!

[Sophy, enveloped in the Mandarin's robe, gathers herself up and, without a word, flies away along the passage. The Duchess shuts the door and walks unsteadily to the settee. Quex comes down, his mouth set hard.

Quex.

I was sure of it.

Duchess.

[Aghast.] What will she do? will she tell?

Quex.

Yes—she'll tell.

Duchess.

Why do you speak so positively?

Quex.

She is in Miss Eden's confidence—the trull. And she has always shown her teeth at

me, now I remember. [Drawing a deep breath.] Oh, yes, I see—Miss Fullgarney has meant mischief throughout.

Duchess.

[Sinking upon the settee.] Oh!

Quex.

[Quietly.] Well—I'm done.

Duchess.

Oh, my reputation!

Quex.

I'm—done.

Duchess.

My reputation! I have never ceased to guard that, as you know.

Quex.

I've lost her.

Duchess.

My reputation!

Quex.

Of course, I deserve it. But—

[He sits, his head bowed.

Duchess.

[Looking up.] To think—to think that I allowed this plausible creature to thrust herself upon me! [He raises his head, glaring fiercely. She beats the pillow.] Oh! oh! my reputation in the hands of this low creature!

Quex.

Ah—! [With a half-smothered cry he goes to the door and pulls it open. The Duchess runs after him and seizes his arm.] I said I'd wring her damned neck—I told Frayne so.

Duchess.

[Pushing him away from the door.] Don't! don't! violence will not help us. [She closes the door; he stands clutching the chair by the writing-table. The clock strikes twelve.] Midnight. [Leaning upon a chair.] At any rate, you had better go now.

Quex.

[Turning to her.] I beg your pardon; I regret having lost control of myself.

Duchess.

[Miserably.] It has been a wretchedly disappointing meeting.

Quex.

[Heavily.] Let us see each other in the morning. [She nods.] Be walking in the grounds by nine.

Duchess.

Yes. [Rallying.] After all, Harry, there may be nothing behind this woman's behaviour. It may have been only the vulgarest curiosity on her part.

Quex.

[Incredulously.] Ha! However, in that case—

Duchess.

Money.

Quex.

Money.

Duchess.

I ought to sound her directly she presents herself at my bedside, ought I not?

Quex.

Earlier—before she has had time to get about the house. Stand at nothing. If she's to be bought, she shall have whatever she demands—any sum!

Duchess.

How liberal of you!

[Quex walks towards the door, then turns to her.

Quex.

One thing I hope I need hardly say, Duchess?

Duchess.

What—?

Quex.

[With dignity.] Worst come to the worst, I shall defend you by every means in my power. I'm done, I feel sure; [drawing himself up] but, of course, I shall lie for you like the devil.

Duchess.

[Plaintively.] Thanks. And I have dragged you into it all.

Quex.

Tsch! [Bowing stiffly.] Good-night.

Duchess.

Good-night. [She goes to the table and prepares to remove the tray. Having turned the key of the door, Quex pauses. She says fretfully.] Oh, why don't you go, Harry?

Quex.

[Facing her sharply, a new light in his eyes.] No! you go.

Duchess.

[In astonishment.] I!

Quex.

[Returning to her excitedly.] I tell you I can't wait through a night of suspense! Quick! [Facing the room.] Leave me to deal with her here, at once.

Duchess.

You!

Quex.

[Snapping his fingers.] By Jove, yes!

Duchess.

What are you going to do?

Quex.

Give her a fair chance, and then spoil her tale against you, in any event.

Duchess.

How?

Quex.

Trust to me. [Impatiently.] Go, Duchess.

Duchess.

But where? where can I—?

Quex.

Run away to Mrs. Jack—ask her to let you share her room to-night. [Pointing to the writing-table.] Ah—! scribble a message—

[The Duchess seats herself at the writing-table and writes agitatedly at his dictation.

Quex.

[Dictating.] "The Duchess of Strood has been seized with a dreadful fit of nerves and has gone to Mrs. Eden's room. Come to her there at eight." Lay that upon the bed. [Indicating the bedroom.] Is there a door in there?

Duchess.

[Rising breathlessly.] Yes.

Quex.

Locked?

Duchess.

Yes.

Quex.

The key. [Imperatively.] Give me the key. [She runs into the bedroom and, having laid the written message upon the bed, disappears for a moment. He refills his tumbler and drinks, chuckling sardonically as he does so.] Ha, ha, ha! [She returns with the key, which he pockets.] The bell that rings in your maid's room—? [She points to the bell-rope hanging beside the passage-door.] Good. [Motioning to her to go.] Now— [She is going towards the other door; he detains her.] Hist! [Thoughtfully.] If anything unusual should occur, remember that we were simply discussing books and pictures in the Italian garden before dinner.

Duchess.

[Intently.] Books and pictures—of course. [In an outburst.] Oh, you are certain you can save my reputation?

Quex.

[Politely.] Yours at least, my dear Duchess. Sleep well.

[She is about to open the door when a thought strikes her and she again runs up to the bed.

Duchess.

Ah—!

Quex.

Hey?

[She returns, carrying her night-dress case—a thing of white satin with a monogram and coronet embroidered upon it. She holds it up to him in explanation; he nods, and she lets herself out. He immediately locks the door at which she has departed and slips the key into his waistcoat pocket. This done, he pulls the bell-rope communicating with the maid's room and takes up a position against the wall so that the opening of the passage door conceals him from the view of the person entering. After a pause the door is opened and Sophy appears. The frills of her night-dress peep out from under the Mandarin's robe, and she is wearing a pair of scarlet cloth slippers; altogether she presents an odd, fantastic figure. She pauses in the doorway hesitatingly, then steadies herself and, with a defiant air, stalks into the bedroom. Directly she has moved away, Quex softly closes the door, locks it, and pockets the key. Meanwhile Sophy, looking about the bedroom for the Duchess, discovers the paper upon the bed. She picks it up, reads it and replaces it, and, coming back into the boudoir, encounters Quex.

Sophy.

Oh!

Quex.

[With a careless nod.] Ah?

Sophy.

[Recovering herself, and speaking with a contemptuous smile.] So her Grace has packed herself off to Mrs. Eden's room. [Firmly.] Who rang for me, please?

Quex.

I rang.

Sophy.

You? what for?

Quex.

Oh, you and I are going to have a cosy little chat together.

Sophy.

[Haughtily.] I don't understand you.

Quex.

We'll understand one another well enough, in a minute.

[He lights another cigarette and seats himself upon the settee. She moves to the back of a chair, eyeing him distrustfully.

Quex.

Now then! You've been at the key-hole, have you?

Sophy.

[Slightly embarrassed.] Y—yes.

Quex.

[Sharply.] Eh?

Sophy.

[Defiantly.] Yes; you know I have.

Quex.

Ah. And I should like to know a little more, while we are upon the delicate subject of spying. When I found you behind the cypress-hedge this evening before dinner—

Sophy.

Well?

Quex.

You had just at that moment returned to the Italian garden, you said.

Sophy.

Yes, so I said.

Quex.

As a matter of fact, you had been there some time, I presume?

Sophy.

A minute or two.

Quex.

Heard anything?

Sophy.

[Laughing maliciously.] Ha, ha, ha! I heard her Grace say, "to-night"—[faintly mimicking the Duchess] "to-night!" [With a curl of the lip.] That was enough for me.

Quex.

Quite so. You told a deliberate lie, then, when I questioned you?

Sophy.

Yes.

Quex.

Earlier in the evening, that manicure game of yours—nothing but a damned cunning trick, eh?

Sophy.

I beg you won't use such language.

Quex.

A trick, eh?

Sophy.

Certainly.

Quex.

You wanted—what did you want?

Sophy.

[Disdainfully.] A kiss, or a squeeze of the waist—anything of that sort would have done.

Quex.

Oh, would it? You didn't get what you wanted, though.

Sophy.

No; I suppose you were frightened.

Quex.

[Angrily.] What!

Sophy.

Too many people about for you.

Quex.

[Stifling his annoyance.] Tsch! If I had—[with a wave of the hand] what course would you have taken, pray?

Sophy.

[With an air of great propriety.] Complained at once to Lady Owbridge.

Quex.

As it is—what do you think of doing now?

Sophy.

About you and her Grace?

Quex.

[Scowling.] Yes.

Sophy.

Oh, tell the ladies in the morning, first thing.

Quex.

[Again putting a check upon himself.] Ha, ha! Why do you behave in this contemptible way?

Sophy.

It isn't contemptible.

Quex.

Isn't it?

Sophy.

Not under the circumstances.

Quex.

What circumstances?

Sophy.

[Hotly.] A wicked man like you engaged to a sweet girl like Miss Muriel!

Quex.

I see. [Politely.] You don't approve of the engagement?

Sophy.

Should think not!

Quex.

Always done your best to poison Miss Eden's mind against me, I expect?

Sophy.

Always let her know my opinion of you. And I was right!

Quex.

Right?

Sophy.

This very day, poor thing, she was saying how proud she is of you because you've turned over a new leaf for her sake; and I told her what your promises are worth. Yes, I was right! And now I can prove it!

[He rises; she hastily places herself on the other side of the chair.

Quex.

Look here! [Leaning against the table, the chair being between him and Sophy.] What will you take to hold your tongue?

Sophy.

Nothing.

Quex.

Oh, but wait. This isn't a matter of a handful of sovereigns. I'll give you a couple of thousand pounds to keep quiet about this.

Sophy.

No, thank you, my lord.

Quex.

Four thousand.

Sophy.

[Shaking her head.] No.

Quex.

Five.

Sophy.

No.

Quex.

How much?

Sophy.

Not twenty thousand. I'm extremely comfortably off, my lord, but if I wasn't I wouldn't accept a penny of your money. All I wish is to save Miss Muriel from marrying a—a gentleman who isn't fit for her. And that's what I intend doing.

[They stand looking at each other for a moment, silently; then he walks away, thoughtfully.

Quex.

[In an altered tone.] Come here.

Sophy.

[With an eye on the door.] Certainly not.

Quex.

As you please. Miss Fullgarney—

Sophy.

I hear you.

Quex.

I should like to settle this business with you pleasantly—if possible. Allow me to say this. I don't think I am quite such an atrocious person as you appear to believe; in fact I can assure you I am not.

Sophy.

[Gathering her robe about her and advancing a few steps.] You must excuse me, my lord, but—[glancing round the room] you evidently forget where you are.

Quex.

No, I don't; but I tell you—I tell you sincerely—that my visit to her Grace to-night was an innocent one.

Sophy.

[Turning her head away, in great disdain.] Really!

Quex.

Really. You won't accept money?

Sophy.

No, indeed, I will not.

Quex.

Very well. Ha! it's an odd attitude for a man like myself to adopt towards—[indicating Sophy by a motion of the hand.] But I make an appeal to you.

Sophy.

[Elevating her eyebrows.] Appeal?

Quex.

[With simple feeling and dignity.] I love Miss Eden. I would be a good husband to that young lady. Let me off.

Sophy.

Let you off?

Quex.

Don't tell on me. Don't try to rob me of Miss Eden. Let me off.

Sophy.

I'm sorry to say I can't, my lord.

Quex

You won't?

Sophy.

I won't. [With a slight inclination of the head Quex turns away and stands leaning

against the settee with his back towards Sophy. The clock strikes the quarter-of-an-hour. There is a short silence.] If your lordship has quite done with me—? [He makes no response. She tosses her head.] I wish you good-night, my lord. [She goes to the passage-door and turns the handle.] It's locked. This door's locked. [Looking at him.] The door's locked. [Rattling at the door-handle.] Where's the key? [Searching about on the floor near the door.] Where's the—? [Coming forward a step or two.] Has your lordship got the key of this door? [Still obtaining no answer, she stands staring at him for a moment; then she goes quickly to the other door and tries the handle. As she does so, Quex turns sharply and, leaning upon the back of the settee, watches her. After shaking the door-handle vigorously, she wheels round and faces him, indignantly.] What's the meaning of this?

Quex.

[Grimly.] Ah!

Sophy.

Oh—! [She sweeps round to avoid him, and then runs into the bedroom. When she has gone he seats himself in the chair by the writing-table in a lazy attitude, his legs stretched out, his hands in his pockets. After a moment or two she returns breathlessly.] I'm locked in!

Quex.

Yes.

Sophy.

You have locked me in!

Quex.

Yes.

Sophy.

How dare you!

Quex.

Why, you didn't think you were going to have it all your own way, did you, Sophy?

Sophy.

I'll thank you to be less familiar. Let me out.

Quex.

Not I.

Sophy.

You let me out directly.

Quex.

[Pointing a finger at her.] You'll gain nothing by raging, my good girl. Ha! now you appreciate the curiously awkward position in which you have placed yourself.

Sophy.

I've placed myself in no—

Quex.

Oh, come, come! Taking me at my blackest, I'm not quite the kind of man that a young woman who prides herself upon her respectability desires to be mixed up with in this fashion.

Sophy.

Mixed up with!

Quex.

Well—[stretching out his arms] here we are, you know.

Sophy.

Here we are!

Quex.

You and I, dear Sophy. [Putting his leg over the arm of his chair.] Now just sit down—

Sophy.

I sha'n't.

Quex.

While I picture to you what will happen in the morning.

Sophy.

In the morning?

Quex.

In a few hours' time. In the first place, you will be called in your room. You won't be there.

Sophy.

Won't I!

Quex.

No. You won't be there. A little later my man will come to my room. I sha'n't be there. At about the same hour, her Grace will require your attendance. Where will you be? She will then, naturally, desire to return to her own apartments. You are intelligent enough, I fancy, to imagine the rest. [After a brief pause, she breaks into a peal of soft, derisive laughter.] I am deeply flattered by your enjoyment of the prospect.

Sophy.

Ha, ha, ha! why, you must take me for a fool!

Quex.

Why?

Sophy.

Why, can't you see that our being found together like this, here or anywhere, would do for you as well as for me?

Quex.

[Rising.] Of course I see it. [Advancing to her.] But, my dear Sophy, I am already done for. You provide for that. And so, if I have to part with my last shred of character, I will lose it in association with a woman of your class rather than with a lady whom I, with the rest of the world, hold in the highest esteem.

Sophy.

[After a pause.] Ho! oh, indeed?

Quex.

Yes. Yes, indeed.

Sophy.

[With a shade less confidence.] Ha, ha! if your lordship thinks to frighten me, you've got hold of the wrong customer. Ha, ha, ha! two or three things you haven't reckoned for, I can assure you. Here's one—I told Miss Muriel exactly what I heard, between you and your Duchess, in the garden this evening.

Quex.

[Grinding his teeth.] You did! [Involuntarily making a threatening movement towards her.] You did, you—!

Sophy.

[Cowering over the settee.] Oh!

Quex.

[Recovering himself.] Oh, you did, did you?

Sophy.

[Facing him defiantly.] Yes, I did.

Quex.

[Coolly.] Well? and what then? You listen to a conversation carried on in an open spot, from which your mischievous ears manage to detach the phrase "to-night." My explanation, if I am called upon to make one, will be absurdly simple.

Sophy.

[Derisively.] Ha, ha! will it! ha, ha, ha! I daresay!

Quex.

Yes. You see, I promised her Grace that I would send a book to her room to-night—to-night. My man had gone to bed; I brought it myself, intending to hand it to Mrs. Watson, her maid. In the meantime, the Duchess had joined Mrs. Eden and I found you here.

Sophy.

You couldn't tell such an abominable lie!

Quex.

[Imperturbably.] I found you here. And then—what is the obvious sequel to the story? [Shrugging his shoulders.] I'm a wicked man, Sophy, and you're an undeniably pretty girl—and the devil dared me.

Sophy.

Oh—!

Quex.

[Taking up the bottle of champagne.] And an excellent banquet you had chanced to provide for the occasion. [Reading the label.] "Félix Poubelle, Carte d'Or." It will appear, I am afraid, that you had been preparing for the entertainment of some amorous footman.

Sophy.

[Snapping her fingers at him.] Puh! bah! Oh, the whole house shall know that that is your Duchess's champagne.

Quex.

Excuse me—Mr. Brewster, the butler, will disprove that tale. You wheedled this out of him on your own account, remember.

Sophy.

[Disconcerted.] Oh—ah, yes—but—

Quex.

For yourself, my dear Sophy.

Sophy.

[Falteringly.] Yes, but—but she made me do it.

Quex.

She made you do it! [Replacing the bottle, sternly.] And who, pray, will accept your word, upon this or any other point, against that of a lady of the position of the Duchess of Strood?

[He walks away from her and examines the books upon the writing-table. She sits on the settee, a blank expression upon her face.

Sophy.

[After a little consideration, wiping her brow with the back of her hand.] At any rate, my darling—Miss Muriel—would quickly see through a horrid trick of this sort.

Quex.

I bet you a dozen boxes of gloves to a case of your manicure instruments that she doesn't.

Sophy.

I said to her to-day, at my place, that I was certain, if I could meet you alone in some

quiet spot I could get a kiss out of you.

Quex.

[Under his breath, glaring at her.] You—! [Coolly.] Oh, now I understand. Yes, my dear, but Miss Eden is scarcely likely to believe that a modest girl would carry her devotion to this extent. Good heavens! why, your attire—! [She pulls her robe about her sharply.] And a woman who compromises herself, recollect, is never measured by her own character, always by her companion's.

[She starts to her feet and paces the room, uttering cries of anger and indignation. He continues to interest himself in the books.

Sophy.

Oh! no, no! my darling wouldn't think it of me! when I've abused you so continually! she surely couldn't! oh! oh! [With flashing eyes.] Now, look here, my lord! you don't really imagine that I'm going to stick in this room with you patiently all through the night, do you?

Quex.

How do you propose to avoid it?

Sophy.

[Pointing to the passage-door.] As true as I'm alive, if you don't unlock that door, I—I—I'll scream the place down!

Quex.

Why scream? [Pointing to the bell-rope which hangs beside the door.] There's the bell. I daresay a servant or two is still up and about. You'd rouse the house quicker in that way.

Sophy.

Much obliged to you for the hint. I will—I will— [She goes to the bell-rope and grasps it; then she looks round and sees him calmly turning the leaves of a book he

has selected. She stares at him, with sudden misgiving.] Ha, now we shall see how much your grand scheme amounts to!

Quex.

We shall. Ring the bell.

Sophy.

[Blankly.] What do you mean?

Quex.

Pooh, my dear! ring, ring, ring! or yell! You won't be the first semi-circumspect young person who has got herself into a scrape and then endeavoured to save herself by raising a hullabaloo.

[She slowly takes her hand from the bell-rope and moves a step or two towards him.

Sophy.

Oh, that's what you'd try to make out, is it? [He raises his eyes from his book and gives her a significant look. Leaning upon the arm of the settee, she says faintly.] You—you—!

Quex.

Yes, I tell you again, my dear, you have got yourself into a shocking mess. You've got me into a mess, and you've got yourself in a mess.

Sophy.

[Pulling herself up and advancing to him till she faces him.] You—you are an awful blackguard, my lord.

Quex.

Thank you, my dear. But you're not far wrong—I was a blackguard till I met Miss Eden; and now, losing Miss Eden, perhaps I'm going to be a bigger blackguard than before. At the same time, you know, there's not much to choose between us; for

you're a low spy, an impudent, bare-faced liar, a common kitchen-cat who wriggles into the best rooms, gets herself fondled, and then spits. [Passing her and throwing himself, full-length, upon the settee and settling himself to read.] Therefore I've no compunction in making you pay your share of this score, my dear Sophy—none whatever.

[She walks feebly to the passage-door and stands rattling the handle in an uncertain way. At last she breaks down and cries a little.

Sophy.

Oh! oh! oh! let me go, my lord. [He makes no response.] Do let me go—please! will you? [Approaching him and wiping her eyes upon the sleeve of her night-dress.] I hope your lordship will kindly let me go.

Quex.

[Shortly.] No.

Sophy.

[Steadying herself.] I don't want to rouse the house at this time o' night if I can help it—

Quex.

Don't you?

Sophy.

Though I am certain I can make my story good anyway. But I'd rather your lordship let me out without the bother—[Piteously.] Do! [He turns a leaf of his book. She speaks defiantly.] Very well! very well! here I sit then! [Seating herself.] We'll see who tires first, you or I! you or I! [Again snapping her fingers at him.] Bah! you horror! you—horror!

Quex.

[Raising himself on his elbow.] Will you have this sofa? [She gives him a fierce

look.] A glass of your wine?

[She rises, with a stamp of the foot, and once more paces the room. He sips his wine and re-settles himself. She goes distractedly from one object to another, now leaning upon a chair, then against the pillar of the cheval-glass. Ultimately she comes to the bell-rope and fingers it again irresolutely.

Sophy.

[Faintly.] My lord—! [He remains silent. She releases the bell-rope.] Oh—h—h! [She pauses by the settee, looking down upon him as though she would strike him; then she walks away, and, seating herself in the chair by the bedside, drops her head upon the bed. The clock tinkles the half-hour. There is a short silence. Suddenly she rises, uttering a sharp cry, with her hand to her heart.] Oh! [panting] oh! oh!

Quex.

[Looking at her.] What now?

Sophy.

Valma!

Quex.

Valma?

Sophy.

Mr. Valma! oh, you know he is in the house!

Quex.

He! what's he doing here?

Sophy.

The housekeeper gave him permission to sleep here. You know! [Stamping her foot.] Don't you know?

Quex.

[Sitting up, alertly.] Ho! my jealous friend, the palmist. He is on the premises, hey?

Sophy.

[Distractedly.] Let me out! oh, yes, he is jealous of me; he is jealous of me, and we've had a few words about you as it is—

Quex.

Ah!

Sophy.

Oh, this would ruin me with Valma! oh, if your lordship hasn't any feeling for me, don't let Valma think that I'm a—that I'm—! [Going down on her knees before him.] Oh, I won't tell on you! I promise I won't, if you'll only let me go! I will hold my tongue about you and the Duchess! I take my solemn oath I'll hold my tongue!

Quex.

[Rising.] Ha! [Calmly.] No, my dear Sophy, I wasn't aware that your fiancé is in the house. So the situation comes home to you a little more poignantly now, does it?

Sophy.

[Rising and going to the passage-door.] Unlock the door! where's the key?

Quex.

Wait, wait, wait! And you're going to keep your mouth shut after all, are you?

Sophy.

[Rattling the door-handle.] Yes, yes, Unlock it!

Quex.

Don't be in such a hurry.

Sophy.

I give you my sacred word—

Quex.

[Thoughtfully.] Tsch, tsch, tsch! [Sharply, with a snap of the fingers.] Yes—by Jove—! [Pointing to the chair by the writing-table.] Sit down. [Imperatively.] Sit down. [She sits, wonderingly. He goes to the table, selects a plain sheet of paper and lays it before her. Then he hands her a pen.] Write as I tell you.

Sophy.

[Tremblingly.] What?

Quex.

[Pointing to the ink.] Ink. [Dictating.] "My lord." [She writes; he walks about as he dictates.] "My lord. I am truly obliged to you—"

Sophy

Yes.

Quex.

"For your great liberality—"

Sophy.

[Turning.] Eh?

Quex.

[Sternly.] Go on. [She writes.] "For your great liberality, and in once more availing myself of it I quite understand—"

Sophy.

[Weakly.] Oh! [After writing.] Yes.

Quex.

"I quite understand that our friendship comes to an end." [She rises and faces him.] Go on.

Sophy.

Our friendship!

Quex.

Yes.

Sophy.

Our—friendship!

Quex.

Yes.

Sophy.

I won't.

Quex.

Very well.

Sophy.

How dare you try to make me write such a thing! [He turns from her and, book in hand, resumes his recumbent position on the sofa. She approaches him, falteringly.] What would you do with that, if I did write it?

Quex.

Simply hold it in my possession, as security for your silence, until after my marriage with Miss Eden; then return it to you.

Sophy.

Oh, won't your lordship trust me?

Quex.

[Contemptuously.] Trust you! [After a pause, she returns to the writing-table and takes up her pen again.] Where were we?

Sophy.

[Feebly.] "I quite understand—"

Quex.

"That our friendship comes to an end." [She writes. He rises and looks over her shoulder.] "While thanking you again for past and present favours—"

Sophy.

[Groaning as she writes.] Oh! oh!

Quex.

"I undertake not to approach or annoy you in the future—"

Sophy.

Oh!

Quex.

"Upon any pretext whatsoever. Yours respectfully—" [After watching the completion of the letter.] Date it vaguely—[with a wave of the hand] "Monday afternoon." Blot it. [Moving away.] That's right. [She rises, reading the letter with staring eyes. Then she comes to him and yields the letter, and he folds it neatly and puts it into his breast-pocket.] Thank you. I think I need detain you no longer.

Sophy.

[With a gasp.] Ah! stop a bit! no, I won't!

Quex.

What's the matter with you?

Sophy.

[Wildly.] Why, it's like selling Muriel! Just to get myself out of this, I'm simply handing her over to you! I won't do it! I won't! [She rushes to the bell-rope and tugs at it again and again.] She sha'n't marry you! she sha'n't! I've said she sha'n't, and she sha'n't! [Leaving the bell-rope and facing him fiercely.] Oh, let your precious Duchess go scot-free! After all, what does it matter who the woman is you've been sporting with, so that Miss Muriel is kept from falling into your clutches! Yes, I'll make short work of you, my lord. The ladies shall hear from my mouth of the lively

half-hour I've spent with you, and how I've suddenly funked the consequences and raised a hullabaloo! Now, my lord! now then! now then!

[His astonishment has given way to admiration; he gazes at her as if spell-bound.

Quex.

[After a pause, during which she stands before him panting.] By God, you're a fine plucked 'un! I've never known a better. [Resolutely.] No, my girl, I'm damned if you shall suffer! Quick! listen! pull yourself together!

Sophy.

[Hysterically.] Eh? eh?

Quex.

[Taking her letter from his pocket and thrusting it into her hand.] Here's your letter! take it—I won't have it. [Going quickly to the passage-door, unlocking it, and throwing the door open.] There you are!

Sophy.

[Sobbing.] Oh! oh!

[There is a hurried, irregular knocking at the door.

Quex.

[Gripping her arm.] Hush! [In a whisper.] Call out—wait!

Sophy.

[Raising her voice—unsteadily.] Wait—one moment!

Quex.

[In her ear, as he gives her the key of the door.] Say the Duchess is with Mrs. Jack; say she wants her letters brought to her in the morning; say anything—

Sophy.

Yes, yes. [Weeping and shaking and gasping, she goes to the door and unlocks it. He

tip-toes into the bedroom and turns out the light there. She opens the door an inch or two.] Yes?

Two Voices.

[A mans and a woman's.] What is it? what's the matter?

Sophy.

[Steadying herself, with an effort.] Nothing. Only her Grace has gone to Mrs. Eden's room and wishes her letters taken there in the morning most particularly—see?

The Voices.

What did you ring like that for? Thought the place was afire!

Sophy.

Oh, don't make a fuss about nothing. You servants are an old-fashioned lot. Bong swor!

The Voices.

[Angrily.] Oh, good-night.

Sophy.

Ha, ha, ha!

[She closes the door and totters away from it, sobbing hysterically, as Quex comes to her.

Quex.

[Kindly.] Be off. Go to bed. Serve me how you please. Miss Fullgarney, upon my soul, I—I humbly beg your pardon.

Sophy.

[Passing him.] Oh! oh! oh! [Turning to him.] Oh, God bless you! You—you—you're a gentleman! I'll do what I can for you!

[She staggers to the passage-door and disappears, closing the door behind her. Then

he extinguishes the remaining light, and cautiously lets himself out at the other door.

end of the third act.

THE FOURTH ACT

The scene is the same, in every respect, as that of the First Act.

[On the right Miss Claridge is manicuring a young gentleman. On the left Miss Moon is putting her manicure-table in order, as if she has recently disposed of a customer. Miss Limbird is again at her desk, busy over accounts. The door-gong sounds and, after a short interval, Quex and Frayne enter, preceded by Miss Huddle. Frayne appears particularly depressed and unwell.

Quex.

[Nodding to Miss Limbird.] Good morning.

Miss Limbird.

Morning.

Quex.

[To Miss Huddle.] Miss Fullgarney has not yet arrived, you say?

Miss Huddle.

Not yet.

Quex.

[Looking at his watch.] Twenty minutes to twelve.

Miss Moon.

Yes, we've never known Miss Fullgarney to be so late at her business. I do hope she hasn't been run over and injured.

Miss Huddle.

Or murdered by tramps.

Quex.

My dear young lady!

Miss Moon.

Well, one does read such things in the ha'penny papers.

Miss Huddle.

And she went down to Richmond yesterday afternoon, you know—to Fauncey Court.

Quex.

Of course I know—and slept there.

Miss Moon.

Oh, did she?

Quex.

And has come up to town this morning.

Miss Huddle.

Then she'll have gone home, I expect, to change.

Miss Moon.

That's what she's done. [Slightly disappointed.] Well, I should have been sorry if anything had happened to her.

Quex.

Naturally.

Miss Huddle.

So should I, though I'm quite new here.

Miss Moon.

It never gives me any pleasure to hear of people having their limbs crushed.

Miss Huddle.

Or being murdered by tramps.

Miss Moon.

Won't your lordship take a chair? [To Frayne, who has wandered down to the window.] And you, sir?

[The young gentleman, his manicuring being finished, has risen, paid Miss Limbird and departed, followed by Miss Claridge carrying her bowl and towel. The door-gong sounds.

Quex.

Is that she?

Miss Moon.

No; that young gentleman leaving.

[Miss Moon, carrying her bowl and towel, and Miss Huddle, after exchanging a few words with Miss Limbird, withdraw.

Frayne.

[To Quex, biliously.] How revoltingly hideous these gals look this morning!

Quex.

Same as yesterday. You're seedy.

Frayne.

[Closing his eyes.] Oh, shockingly seedy. [Sitting.] I'm in for a go of malaria, I fear.

Quex.

Shame of me to have routed you out of bed and bothered you with my affairs. [Sitting.] But you can quite understand, Chick, how confoundedly anxious I am as to the attitude Miss Fullgarney will adopt towards me to-day.

Frayne.

Quite, quite. Harry—

Quex.

Yes?

Frayne.

What champagne was it we drank last night at Richmond?

Quex.

[With some bitterness.] Ha! Félix Poubelle, Carte d'Or.

Frayne.

[Shaking his head.] I can't take champagne.

Quex.

Can't you!

Frayne.

I mean I oughtn't to.

Quex.

Oh. [Referring to his watch again.] I've given you a pretty minute account of last night's tragedy, Chick. "I'll do what I can for you"—those were the Fullgarney's words. Good lord, they came at me like a bolt from the blue! Does she intend to act up to them, eh?—that's the question. Surely she'll act up to them, Chick?

Frayne.

Have you met the ladies this morning?

Quex.

Yes—except Muriel, who didn't show at breakfast.

Frayne.

How did you find 'em?

Quex.

Amiability itself; they know nothing. [Rising and looking down upon Frayne.] You see, Chick, all that Miss Fullgarney has to do—if she hasn't already done it—is to tell a trifling taradiddle to Muriel concerning the events of last night. Well, in effect, she has promised to do that, hasn't she? [Impatiently.] Eh?

Frayne.

[Gloomily.] Frankly, Harry, I shouldn't be in the least surprised if the jade sold you.

Quex.

[His jaw falling.] You wouldn't?

Frayne.

No.

Quex.

Phew! I should. [Warmly.] By Jove, I should!

Frayne.

I have conceived a great aversion to her—a long, scraggy gal.

Quex.

[With enthusiasm.] As full of courage as a thoroughbred!

Frayne.

[Closing his eyes.] I can picture her elbows; sharp, pointed elbows—the barbed fence of the spiteful woman.

Quex.

Pooh! yesterday she was alluring.

Frayne.

[Rising painfully.] Yesterday—! [Gravely.] Harry, do you know there are moments when I feel that I am changing towards the sex; when I fancy I can discern the

skeleton, as it were, through the rounded cheek?

Quex.

You!

Frayne.

Yes, this novel sentiment is undoubtedly gaining possession of your old friend—gradually, perhaps, but surely.

Quex.

[Regarding him searchingly.] Excuse me, Chick—did you turn into the Beefsteak when you got back from Richmond last night?

Frayne.

For an hour. Oh, a great mistake.

Quex.

What, a little whisky on the top of champagne?

Frayne.

[Gazing pathetically at Quex with watery eyes.] A good deal of champagne underneath a lot of whisky.

[The door-gong sounds.

Quex.

Who's this? [He walks to the entrance, and looks into the further room.] The Fullgarney.

[He returns to his former position, as Sophy enters quickly followed by Miss Claridge, Miss Moon, and Miss Huddle. Sophy—dressed as at the end of the First Act—is pale, red-eyed, and generally unstrung. She comes to Quex, disconcerted by his presence.

Sophy.

[Confronting him.] Oh, good morning.

Quex.

May I beg a few moments—?

Sophy.

Er—certainly. I'll just take off my things—

[He joins Frayne. She goes across the room where she is surrounded by her girls.]

Miss Claridge.

Oh, Miss Fullgarney, how ill you look!

Miss Moon.

You do seem queer!

Miss Huddle.

Just as if you were sickening for something.

Miss Limbird.

[Coming between Miss Claridge and Sophy.] Quite ghostly!

Sophy.

I'm all right, girls; I've had a bad night, that's all. [Giving her umbrella to Miss Claridge and her bag to Miss Moon, who passes it to Miss Huddle.] Here! hi! take that beastly bag. [To Miss Limbird, who is removing her hat.] Oh, don't waggle my head, whatever you do! [To Miss Moon, who is pulling at her jacket.] Tear the thing off. [Stripping off her gloves, and speaking in a whisper.] Girls, I don't want to be disturbed for five minutes.

Miss Limbird.

Very well, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

[Glancing at Quex and Frayne, who are now looking out of the window, with their

backs towards her.] If Miss Eden should happen to turn up before I'm free, just mention who I'm engaged with, will you?

Miss Moon.

Yes, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

That'll do. [With sudden fierceness.] What are you all staring at? Haven't any of you ever slept in a strange bed?

[The girls retreat hastily, each carrying an article belonging to Sophy.

Quex.

[Advancing a step or two.] I am exceedingly sorry to see you looking so fatigued.

Sophy.

[Faintly.] Didn't close my eyes the whole night. [She drops the portière over the entrance, and approaches Quex.] Well, my lord?

Quex.

I have ventured to call upon you, Miss Fullgarney, in the hope of ratifying the excellent understanding with which we parted last night.

Sophy.

[Pointing to Frayne.] Well, but—er—

Quex.

Oh—oh, yes— [To Frayne, who has turned away.] Frayne— [To Sophy.] I have taken my old and trusted friend, Sir Chichester Frayne, into my confidence in this regrettable business.

Sophy.

[Dubiously.] Indeed?

Quex.

I thought it desirable there should be a third party—

Sophy.

P'r'aps you're right. [Cuttingly.] One needs a third party when one has the honour of meeting your lordship—[Checking herself.] Excuse me.

Quex.

[Pleasantly, with a slight bow of acknowledgment.] Before we go further, I may tell you that her Grace has informed me of what passed between you this morning.

Sophy.

Nothing passed.

Quex.

Precisely.

Sophy.

The lady beamed upon me, for all the world as if she was an angel spending a Saturday-to-Monday here below; and I dressed her hair for her just as if I didn't want to tear it out by the roots. And then she turned up her eyes and said she hoped every happiness would attend me, and went downstairs to prayers.

Quex.

Will you allow me to—to thank you?

Sophy.

[Frigidly.] You needn't. [Abruptly.] Oh, by-the-by, the lady gave me a—a keepsake, she called it. [Endeavouring to extract some bulky object from her pocket.] I mean to burn the thing, once I've found out what's inside it. But I can't get it open. Here it is.

[She exhibits the little box, covered with brocade, which Quex has returned to the Duchess in the previous Act.

Quex.

[Surprised.] By Jove!

Sophy.

[Simply.] Eh?

Quex.

Er—I was wondering what she can have put in that little box.

Sophy.

Yes, I wonder. [Pulling at the lid.] It's locked.

Quex.

I fancy it has one of those Bramah locks which snap. I may have a key— [He produces his key-ring and, promptly selecting a key, unlocks the box.] Fortunate coincidence.

[She opens the box and takes out the first thing that presents itself—the blue silk garter with the diamond buckle.

Sophy.

[Scandalised.] Oh, my gracious! I beg your pardon.

[She leaves him hurriedly and hides the box in the cabinet.

Quex.

[Quietly to Frayne.] Chick, she has passed the souvenirs on to Miss Fullgarney!

Frayne.

[Bitterly.] How like a woman!

Quex.

Some women.

Frayne.

[In disgust.] Pah!

Quex.

Yesterday she was alluring.

Frayne.

[Waving the past from him.] Yesterday—[with a slight hiccup] hic! [Turning away apologetically.] The heat in this room—

[He walks away, as Sophy returns to Quex.

Quex.

[To Sophy.] Well, I must not detain you longer, Miss Fullgarney. But there is, of course, one point upon which I should like to feel completely assured. You have seen Miss Eden—?

Sophy.

No; not since last evening.

Quex.

[Anxiously.] When do you—?

Sophy.

[Looking away.] I'm rather expecting her to pop in here during the day.

Quex.

Quite so. And—and then—?

Sophy.

[Facing him candidly.] Your lordship told me last night that your little visit to the Duchess was a perfectly innocent one?

Quex.

Absolutely innocent. [Hesitatingly.] I fear I cannot go further than that.

Frayne.

[Fanning himself with his handkerchief.] By gad, why not, Harry? We are in Miss Fullgarney's hands. [To Sophy.] His lordship went to her Grace's apartment solely to return some gifts which he had accepted from her in the—ah—dim, distant past, and to say adieu.

Sophy.

[Witheringly.] Ah, I knew she was a double-faced thing; [looking at Quex relentingly] but p'r'aps one has been a little down on you.

Quex.

[Meekly.] You have it in your power to atone for that amply.

Sophy.

[Half-feelingly, half-sullenly.] At any rate, you behaved, in the end, like a gentleman to me last night. And so—when I see Miss Muriel—

Quex.

Yes?

Sophy.

[Deliberately.] I am going to tell her a lie.

Quex.

[With some emotion.] Miss Fullgarney, I—I—

Sophy.

Oh, I said I'd do what I can for you. [Uncomfortably.] And this is all I can do.

Quex.

[Light-heartedly.] All!

Sophy.

Just to give you a chance.

Quex.

Chance! [Drawing a deep breath.] You place my happiness beyond danger.

Sophy.

[Impulsively, offering him her hand.] I wish you luck, my lord.

[He takes her hand and wrings it.

Frayne.

[Who has opened the window for air.] Hallo!

Sophy.

[Turning nervously.] What—?

Frayne.

[Looking out.] Isn't this your friend, Captain Bastling?

Quex.

Bastling?

Frayne.

At that window?

[Frayne moves away to the circular table and sniffs at a bottle of scent. Quex goes to the window.

Quex.

[Looking out.] Yes. What's old Napier up to there?

Sophy.

[Guiltily.] I—I heard Captain Bastling mention that he was thinking of having his hand read by Mr. Valma some time or other.

Quex.

No! ha, ha, ha! [Leaving the window.] He doesn't see me; I won't disturb him. [To Sophy, jocularly.] A convenient arrangement—it is possible to transfer oneself from the manicurist to the palmist without the trouble of putting on one's gloves.

Sophy.

Ha, ha! y—yes.

Quex.

[Pausing on his way to the entrance.] Miss Fullgarney, may I ask if you and Mr. Valma have fixed upon the date of your marriage?

Sophy.

Oh, we sha'n't get married yet awhile—not for a year or more, I fancy.

Quex.

[Graciously.] In that case, I shall hope to have the pleasure, and the privilege, of being present at your wedding—with my wife.

Sophy.

[Hanging her head.] Thank you.

Quex.

Chick—

[He goes out.

Frayne.

[Turning to Sophy with dignity.] Miss Fullgarney, one thing I desire to say. It is that your behaviour this morning completely obliterates—the—

[He is cut short by another hiccup and, with a bow, withdraws. Pollitt appears at the window. Sophy goes to the entrance, and watches the departure of Quex and Frayne. Pollitt enters the room. The door-gong sounds.

Pollitt.

Sophy.

Sophy.

[Turning.] Oh! Valma, dear?

Pollitt.

[With a heavy brow.] Captain Bastling is waiting at my place, for Miss Eden.

Sophy.

[Subdued.] Is he?

Pollitt.

Dearest, during my brief but, I pride myself, honourable association with palmistry, this is the first time my rooms have been used for this sort of game.

Sophy.

This sort of game?

Pollitt.

Other Professors have stooped to it, but I—oh, no, it is playing palmistry a little bit too low down.

Sophy.

[Unhappily.] Surely it's quite harmless, love—a couple of young people meeting to say good-bye.

Pollitt.

From what you've told me, I greatly doubt that it will be good-bye.

Sophy.

D—d—do you?

Pollitt.

[Hotly.] Anyhow I resent your being the go-between of this gallant captain and a girl betrothed to another man—you who are naturally such a thorough lady!

Sophy.

Oh—oh, Valma—!

[She drops her head upon his shoulder and whimpers.

Pollitt.

Dearest, what have I said?

Sophy.

Valma, I've made up my mind. I intend to do exactly what you wish, in the future, in everything. I'm going to give up squatting down here manicuring gentlemen—

Pollitt.

Sophy!

Sophy.

And shall simply sail about these rooms, overlooking my girls in the plainest of silks. And never again will I interfere in an underhand way in other people's affairs on any account whatever. [Putting her arms round his neck.] Yes, you shall find me a lady—a lady—

Pollitt.

[Tenderly.] Ah—! [The door-gong sounds. She raises her head and dries her eyes hurriedly.] Is that Miss Eden?

[He crosses to the window as she goes to the entrance. Miss Limbird appears.

Miss Limbird.

[To Sophy.] Here's Miss Eden.

Sophy.

[With a nod.] Give me half a minute with her; then I'm at liberty. [Miss Limbird disappears. Sophy comes to Pollitt.] I'll send Muriel across directly.

[He departs. Miss Limbird returns and, holding the portière aside, admits Muriel. Muriel is wearing a veil. Miss Limbird withdraws. Sophy meets Muriel; they kiss each other undemonstratively.

Sophy.

[Constrainedly.] Well, darling?

Muriel.

[In the same way.] Well, Sophy?

Sophy.

You're here then?

Muriel.

As you see.

Sophy.

Any difficulty?

Muriel.

[In a hard voice.] No. The Duchess and Mrs. Jack were coming to town shopping, and Lady Owbridge proposed that she and I should tack ourselves on to them.

Sophy.

How have you got rid of 'em?

Muriel.

Spoken the truth, for once—my head really does throb terribly. They think I've run in here to sit quietly with you while they—[Suddenly.] Oh, be quick, Sophy!

Sophy.

Quick, dear?

Muriel.

Why don't you tell me?

Sophy.

Tell you—?

Muriel.

About last night—this woman—

Sophy.

Her Grace?

Muriel.

Yes, yes.

Sophy.

Oh, why, I haven't anything to tell, darling.

Muriel.

Haven't anything to—?

Sophy.

You see, I couldn't help remembering what you'd called me—mean, and despicable, and all the rest of it; and the feeling came over me that you were right, that I had been sneaky. And so, after I'd attended to her Grace, I—I went straight to bed.

Muriel.

[Sitting.] Oh, yes. Then you didn't attempt to—to watch?

Sophy.

No.

Muriel.

[Faintly.] Oh!

Sophy.

Aren't you glad?

Muriel.

Glad!

Sophy.

Why, you were certain that the word or two I'd overheard meant nothing wrong.

Muriel.

I said so.

Sophy.

Said so!

Muriel.

[Turning to her with clenched hands.] Yes, but at the same time you put the dreadful idea into my head, Sophy, and I've not been able to dismiss it for one moment since.

Sophy.

[Under her breath.] Oh!

[Sitting.

Muriel.

[Lifting her veil.] There! you can see what I've been going through.

Sophy.

[Looking at her.] I'm so sorry.

Muriel.

[Looking at Sophy.] You look rather washed out too. Haven't you slept, either?

Sophy.

[Turning her head away.] Not over well. [Falteringly.] Then, after all, it would have been better if I had spied on her?

Muriel.

Anything—even that—would have been preferable to this uncertainty.

Sophy.

[To herself, her jaw falling.] Oh—!

Muriel.

[Looking towards the window.] Has he arrived?

Sophy.

Yes.

[Muriel rises, then Sophy.

Muriel.

[Producing, from her pocket, a jeweller's case and showing it to Sophy.] Do you like this? I've just bought it, over the way, at Gressier's.

Sophy.

For Captain Bastling?

Muriel.

[With a nod, opening the box.] A solitaire shirt-stud.

[She retains a neatly-folded piece of paper which is enclosed in the box and hands the box to Sophy.

Sophy.

Beautiful. [Glancing at the piece of paper in Muriel's hand.] What's that?

Muriel.

[Unfolding the paper carefully.] This goes with it.

[She holds the paper before Sophy.

Sophy.

[Reading.] "To Napier—"

Muriel.

[Withdrawing the paper.] Ah, no.

Sophy.

Mayn't I?

Muriel.

[Yielding the paper impulsively.] Yes, you may.

[Muriel turns away and stands leaning upon the back of the screen-chair on the left, with her face in her hands. Sophy places the jeweller's case upon the circular table.

Sophy.

[Reading with difficulty.] "To Napier from Muriel. I only—" what? You have blotted it.

Muriel.

[With a sob.] Have I?

Sophy.

You've been crying over it.

Muriel.

Yes.

Sophy.

"I only—" I can't read it.

Muriel.

[Through her tears.]

"I only know—we loved in vain: I only feel—Farewell!—Farewell!"

Sophy.

[In a low voice.] Very nice, darling. [She lays the paper tenderly upon the box and goes to Muriel. Eyeing her keenly.] You really are determined, then, to wish him good-bye?

Muriel.

[Turning to her and weeping upon her shoulder.] Oh, Sophy! Sophy!

Sophy.

There, there! it'll soon be over.

Muriel.

[Raising her head.] Over! yes, yes! over!

Sophy.

And—p'r'aps it's all for the best, you know.

Muriel.

For the best!

Sophy.

What I mean is, that very likely we've both of us been a little cruel to poor Lord Quex—hard on him—

Muriel.

[Indignantly.] You say this to me! [Distractedly.] You say this, after having poisoned my mind and given me an awful night of sleeplessness and doubt. Yesterday I was as firm as a rock; to-day I'm as weak as water again. [Facing Sophy with flashing eyes.] Ah, I tell you honestly you'd better not let me meet Captain Bastling this morning! you'd better not let me see him!

[The door-gong sounds. Bastling appears at the window, and looks into the room.

Sophy.

[Whose back is towards the window, soothingly.] No, no, you sha'n't go across to Valma's while you're like this. I'll make an excuse for you to Captain Bastling—

Bastling.

[At the window.] Muriel!

Muriel.

[Passing Sophy swiftly.] Napier!

Sophy.

[Holding her arm.] Darling—

Muriel.

[Freeing herself.] Release me, Sophy! release me! ah—!

[She joins Bastling and they disappear. As Sophy goes to the window and looks out after them, Quex enters, followed by Frayne.

Quex.

[Glancing round the room.] Miss Fullgarney—

Sophy.

[Turning sharply.] Hey? [Blankly.] Oh—my lord—!

Quex.

I am compelled to intrude upon you again. I have just met Lady Owbridge, with her Grace and Mrs. Eden in Sackville Street. My aunt sends me with a message to Miss Eden.

Sophy.

[Confused.] M—m—Miss Eden?

Quex.

Mrs. Eden has proposed a lunch at Prince's, provided that Miss Eden feels equal to— [Looking about him again.] Where is Miss Eden?

Sophy.

Where?

Quex.

She is here—with you.

Sophy.

N—no.

Quex.

No?

Sophy.

[With a gulp.] I haven't seen anything of her.

Quex.

[In an altered tone.] Really?

Sophy.

No.

Quex.

[Calmly.] Strange.

[He walks away and joins Frayne. Sophy stealthily closes and fastens the window.

Quex.

[In a low voice, to Frayne.] Chick—

Frayne.

Eh?

Quex.

Miss Eden is here. Why is the Fullgarney telling me this falsehood?

Frayne.

You will remember I was positive she would sell you before she'd done with you.

Quex.

[Gripping Frayne's arm.] Don't! [Advancing to Sophy—politely.] I understood from my aunt, Miss Fullgarney, that her ladyship left Miss Eden at Gressier's, the jeweller's, less than half an hour ago.

Sophy.

[Fussing with the objects upon the cabinet and the manicure-table.] Oh?

Quex.

Miss Eden had some little commission to discharge at Gressier's, and intended coming across to you immediately afterwards.

Sophy.

[Quickly.] Ah, then she hasn't finished her business at Gressier's yet.

Quex.

Yes, because I looked in at the shop on my way here.

Sophy.

Funny. I can't imagine where she's taken herself to.

Quex.

[Earnestly.] Miss Fullgarney—

Sophy.

My lord?

Quex.

I thought we had become good friends, you and I—?

Sophy.

So we have, I hope.

Quex.

And that you were desirous of rendering me a service?

Sophy.

Well, aren't I, my lord?

Quex.

Are you? You know that Miss Eden came to you directly she left Gressier's. You

know she did.

Sophy.

[After a pause—drawing a deep breath.] Yes, I—I own it.

Quex.

[Reproachfully.] Ah, Miss Fullgarney!

Sophy.

She has been in, and I have done you the service I promised.

Quex.

[Calmly.] You have?

Sophy.

Indeed I have, as true as I stand here. [Steadying herself.] But the fact is—the fact is Miss Eden had a purchase to make that she didn't wish the ladies to interfere over, and—and she has run out for ten minutes. If your lordship must know where she is, she's in the Burlington.

Quex.

[Very quietly.] Oh, she has run out for a few minutes?

Sophy.

She might be a quarter of an hour.

Quex.

Not run out; flown out, at one of these windows.

Sophy.

[Faintly.] One of these windows?

Quex.

[Pointing to the entrance.] She has not gone out by the door.

Sophy.

What do you mean?

Quex.

Your young ladies assured me just now that Miss Eden was in this room with you. [Frayne, possessed of an idea, has gone to the door in the partition. He now raps at the door gently.] No, no, Chick—please! we are not policemen.

Frayne.

[Opening the door a few inches.] Miss Eden, I regret to learn you are suffering from headache.

Sophy.

[Indignantly.] Well, of all the liberties—!

Quex.

[Angrily.] Frayne!

Frayne.

May I tell you of an unfailing remedy—? [He peeps into the private room, then withdraws his head, and says to Quex.] No.

Sophy.

[Flouncing up to Frayne, and speaking volubly and violently.] Now, look here, sir, I'm a busy woman—as busy and as hard-working a woman as any in London. Because you see things a bit slack Ascot week, it doesn't follow that my books, and a hundred little matters, don't want attending to. [Sitting at the desk and opening and closing the books noisily.] And I'm certainly not going to have gentlemen, whoever they may be, marching into my place, and taking possession of it, and doubting my word, and opening and shutting doors, exactly as if they were staying in a common hotel. I'd have you to know that my establishment isn't conducted on that principle.

[Quex has been standing, with compressed lips and a frown upon his face, leaning

upon the back of the chair near the circular table. During Sophy's harangue his eyes fall upon the jeweller's case and the scrap of paper lying open upon it. He stares at the writing for a moment, then comes to the table and picks up both the case and the paper.

Frayne.

[To Sophy, while this is going on.] My good lady, a little candour on your part—

Sophy.

I don't understand what you're hinting at by "a little candour." You've already been told where Miss Eden is, and anybody who knows me knows that if I say a thing—

Frayne.

But when your young ladies declare—

Sophy.

I'm really not responsible for the sayings and doings of a parcel of stupid girls. If they didn't see Miss Eden go out they were asleep, and if they weren't asleep they're blind; and as I've explained till I'm hoarse, I'm very busy this morning, and I should be extremely obliged to you two gentlemen if you'd kindly go away and call again a little later.

Quex.

Chick.

Frayne.

Eh?

Quex.

I want you.

[Frayne comes to Quex, who hands him the jeweller's case and the slip of paper.

Sophy.

[Fussing over her books, oblivious of what is transpiring.] As if the difficulty of conducting a business of this kind isn't sufficient without extra bothers and worries being brought down on one's head! What with one's enormous rent, and rotten debts, it's heartbreaking! Here's a woman here, on my books, who runs an account for fifteen months, with the face of an angel, and no more intends to pay me than to jump over St. Paul's—

Quex.

[Who again has possession of the jeweller's case and the paper.] Miss Fullgarney—

Sophy.

What now, my lord? Upon my word, it is too bad—!

Quex.

Please come here.

Sophy.

[Coming forward—now on the verge of tears.] After such a night as I've had, too. I never could do without my full eight hours—

Quex.

Be silent!

Sophy.

What!

Quex.

Miss Eden and Captain Bastling—

Sophy.

Eh?

Quex.

They are acquaintances—friends. [With a stamp of the foot.] They are on terms of—

Sophy.

[Faintly.] Oh!

Quex.

[Pointing to the window.] She is with him at this moment—there.

Sophy.

[Unsteadily.] Whatever are you saying, my lord? [Discovering that he has the jeweller's case and the paper.] Ah—!

Quex.

Yes, I found these upon the table. [She advances, to take them from him.] Miss Eden left them here—forgot them!

Sophy.

[In a murmur.] Yes.

[He gives them to her. She puts them into her pocket and sits.

Quex.

Come! tell me.

Sophy.

You—you are not the only one in the field, my lord.

Quex.

So I conclude.

Sophy.

Have pity on her!

Quex.

[Sternly.] How dare you!

Sophy.

It's more my fault than hers.

Quex.

Continue.

Sophy.

She has wanted to stop it, hating herself for being deceitful, but I—I've encouraged her, egged her on.

Quex.

Yes.

Sophy.

They've been in the habit of meeting here at my place.

Quex.

[Again pointing to the window.] In this fellow's rooms—Mr. Valma's—

Sophy.

[Rising.] No, no. They've never met there, till this morning. But he—young Bastling—he's going away, abroad, in a fortnight or so, and he wished to say good-bye to her quietly.

Quex.

[Turning towards the window fiercely.] Ah—!

Sophy.

[Laying her hand upon his arm.] Be careful, my lord!

Quex.

[Looking at her.] Careful?

Sophy.

[Significantly.] I know how she feels to-day. If you want to send her to Hong-Kong with Captain Bastling—

[Quex hesitates for a moment, then crosses to Frayne, to whom he speaks apart.

Quex.

Chick! how shall I act?

Frayne.

[Dismally.] Dear old chap, to be quite honest with you, I was not wholly captivated by Miss Eden when you presented me yesterday.

Quex.

Tshah! What shall I do? wait?

Frayne.

In any event, of course, the man's head has to be punched. But it might be wise to delay doing it until—

Quex.

[To Sophy.] You spoke, a little while ago, of giving me "a chance." I see now what was in your mind. There's a risk, then, that this good-bye may not be final?

Sophy.

[Stammeringly.] W—well, I—

Quex.

[Sharply.] Eh?

Sophy.

[Breaking down.] Oh, my lord, recollect, she's not much more than a girl!

Quex.

No, she is not much more than a girl; but you—though you and she are of the same age—you are a woman. You know your world, upstairs and downstairs, boudoir and kitchen. Yet you own you have encouraged her in this, made her clandestine meetings with this penniless beggar possible. You—! you deserve to be whipped,

Miss Fullgarney—whipped!

Sophy.

[Facing him.] Come, my lord! not so fast! After all, remember, Captain Bastling may be poor, but he's Miss Eden's match in other ways.

Quex.

Match?

Sophy.

Young, and good-looking. Oh, and isn't it natural—?

Quex.

Quite natural—quite. [Turning to Frayne.] Chick, what an ass I've been; what fools we old chaps are, all of us! Why, if I had led the life of a saint, it would only be necessary for a man like this Bastling to come along, to knock me out. Good lord, how clear it is, when it's brought home to you in this fashion! It isn't the scamp, the roué, a girl shies at; it's the old scamp, the old roué. She'll take the young one, the blackguard with a smooth skin and a bright eye, directly he raises a hand—take him without a murmur, money-hunter though he may be. Take him! by Jove, she leaps into his arms!

Frayne.

D'ye mean that Bastling—?

Quex.

Napier Bastling! [Breaking into a prolonged peal of laughter.] Ha, ha, ha, ha! Chick, he's just what I was at eight-and-twenty. Ha, ha, ha! what I was—and worse, damn him!—and she loves him.

Sophy.

[Who has been listening with wide-open eyes and parted lips.] It's not true! it isn't true!

Quex.

[Turning to her.] Isn't it! You think so, hey? No, I suppose you haven't experimentalised upon him; you haven't spied on him, and tempted him as you tempted me. You have never got him into a quiet corner and stuck your impudent face in his. If you had—

Sophy.

Oh! he wouldn't—!

[Frayne has walked away; Quex now joins him.

Quex.

[As he goes.] Wouldn't he! ha, ha, ha! [To Frayne, fiercely.] What the devil am I to do, Chick?

Frayne.

Punch his head.

Sophy.

[Panting.] Oh! oh! [Bastling, indistinctly seen through the muslin blinds, appears at the window. He raps gently upon the window frame. Sophy glances at the window.] Eh—? [Under her breath.] Oh! [She goes swiftly to Quex and Frayne, seizes them by the arms, and pushes them towards the door in the partition, saying agitatedly.] Wait there! don't come out, or make a noise—

Quex.

What are you up to now?

Sophy.

Stay here till I find out what's happened. Oh, I'll do what I can for you!

[They enter the private room and she closes the door. Then she returns to the window, unfastens it, and retreats. Bastling pushes open the window and comes in.

Bastling.

[Advancing to her excitedly.] Ah, Sophy! [Looking round.] Any one about?

Sophy.

[Pointing to the left.] All my girls are in there. Where is she?

Bastling.

Next door. She's sitting down, calming herself—having her cry out.

Sophy.

Crying!

Bastling.

She's all right—awfully happy. I told her I'd come and tell you.

Sophy.

Tell me—!

Bastling.

It's settled.

Sophy.

Settled!

Bastling.

She's mine, Sophy.

Sophy.

[With a gasp.] Yours!

Bastling.

We're going to be married at once—next week. We shall need your help still. Of course, it must be a secret marriage. She will follow me out by-and-by.

Sophy.

[Nodding, dully.] Oh, yes.

Bastling.

Why, aren't you glad about it? [Smilingly.] Don't you congratulate us?

Sophy.

C—certainly.

Bastling.

Good. And—[shaking hands with her] thanks to you. [Releasing her hand.] Thanks.

Sophy.

[Nerving herself for her task.] Thanks!

Bastling.

A million of 'em; What's the matter?

Sophy.

Oh, nothing.

Bastling.

Yes, there is. Come, out with it.

Sophy.

Well—thanks! [Tossing her head.] There isn't much in thanks.

Bastling.

[Puzzled.] Not much in thanks?

Sophy.

[Turning away, pouting.] I think not.

Bastling.

[Smiling.] Oh, I know I owe a tremendous deal to the pretty manicurist, and I don't intend to forget it. Just now I'm rather hard-up, [glancing towards the window] but I

shall be in funds before long—

Sophy.

[Turning to him with genuine indignation.] Oh!

Bastling.

What do you want, then?

Sophy.

[After a moment's hesitation, sidling up to him.] Not money.

Bastling.

Not?

Sophy.

A little more than plain thanks though.

Bastling.

[Looking into her eyes, laughing softly.] Ha, ha, ha!

Sophy.

[Slyly.] Ha, ha, ha!

Bastling.

Thanks—differently expressed—? [She plays with the lapel of his coat and giggles. He takes her chin in his hand.] Ha, ha, ha! Sophy!

Sophy.

Ha, ha!

[Muriel appears at the open window and enters the room noiselessly. Seeing Bastling and Sophy together, she halts in surprise.

Bastling.

[Whose back is to the window.] I say—mind, no tales.

Sophy.

[Looking at Muriel steadily over Bastling's shoulder.] Likely I'd split on you, isn't it?

Bastling.

Honour bright?

Sophy.

Oh, if you've any doubt—

[He raises her face to his and kisses her upon the lips warmly and lingeringly. She goes back a step or two, still gazing fixedly at Muriel.

Bastling.

Eh—?

[Following the direction of her eyes, he turns and encounters Muriel. The three stand for a moment or two without movement.

Bastling.

[After the pause, speaking in a low voice, his eyes avoiding Muriel's.] Well—ha!—I suppose every man makes a big mistake at least once in his life. I've made mine. At the same time, I—I—[hurriedly] oh, I'll write.

[With a slight, quick bow to Muriel, he wheels round sharply and goes out.

Sophy.

[Wiping his kiss from her lips.] The wretch! the wretch!

[The door-gong sounds.

Muriel.

[Covering her eyes with her hand and uttering a low moan.] Oh—!

Sophy.

[Hanging her head.] You see, darling, yesterday at Fauncey Court, I—I tried it on with Lord Quex, and he behaved like a gentleman. So the notion struck me that I'd

treat the young man in the same way, just to see what he was made of, and—well, I'm glad you came in. You might never have believed me.

Muriel.

[In a hard voice.] The shirt-stud—the stuff I wrote—I left them with you—

Sophy.

[Producing them.] I found them after you'd gone.

[Muriel takes the piece of paper and tears it into small pieces. Sophy offers her the jeweller's case.

Muriel.

[Haughtily.] Take that back to Gressier's this afternoon, please, and tell them I've changed my mind. Say I'll have a little silver collar for my dog, in its place.

[She sinks into the screen-chair, with her eyes closed. Slipping the case into her pocket, Sophy tip-toes up to the door in the partition; she opens it and beckons to Quex, who appears with Frayne.

Sophy.

[To Quex, in a whisper.] Phsst! It's all nicely settled. She's said good-bye to him for good. What a fuss you made about nothing!

[She points to the screen-chair; he approaches Muriel. Sophy and Frayne talk together.

Quex.

[Softly.] Muriel—

Muriel.

[Opening her eyes, startled.] Quex!

Quex.

[Brightly.] I came up to town this morning with Sir Chichester. We've just met aunt

Julia, and the rest of 'em, in Sackville Street. Mrs. Jack clamours for lunch at Prince's. What do you say?

Muriel.

[Passing her hand across her eyes.] Thanks. It'll be jolly.

Quex.

[Gaily.] Ah!

Muriel.

[Laying her hand upon his sleeve.] Quex—

Quex.

Eh?

Muriel.

[Rising, and speaking in a low, appealing voice.] Give me your word you have been loyal to me, down to your very thought, since our engagement.

Quex.

[Earnestly.] Muriel, I—

Muriel.

Hush! [Giving him her hand.] I believe you. [The door-gong sounds.] And, look here! I haven't been quite fair, or generous, to you, I am afraid. But I am going to be different—

Quex.

After to-day!

Muriel.

From this moment. Harry—

Quex.

Hey?

Muriel.

I won't keep you till the end of the year. Marry me, and have done with it, directly the Season is over, and take me away.

Quex.

[Bending over her hand.] Good heavens—! [Miss Limbird holds the portière aside and admits Lady Owbridge, the Duchess of Strood, and Mrs. Eden. Miss Limbird then returns to her desk. Quex goes to Lady Owbridge, takes her arm, and leads her forward.] Aunt Julia! aunt! my dear aunt Julia!

[The Duchess joins Frayne. Mrs. Eden comes to Muriel and receives the news of the hastened marriage. Sophy moves away to the window.

Quex.

[Excitedly, to Lady Owbridge.] Oh, my dear aunt!

Lady Owbridge.

What ails you, Henry?

Quex.

Muriel! she—she—she's going to marry me!

Lady Owbridge.

I hope so.

Quex.

But at the end of the Season! a month hence! a month, a month, a month!

Lady Owbridge.

My dear boy! Heaven prosper your union! Muriel—

Mrs. Eden.

[To Lady Owbridge.] Isn't this glorious news, Lady Owbridge? But I always thought it unwise to protract the engagement. You never know what may happen, do you? I

must tell the dear Duchess—

[She joins the Duchess and Frayne, and chatters to them.

Lady Owbridge.

[To Muriel, in a low voice.] Muriel, you are right. In this life, if you have anything to pardon, pardon quickly. Slow forgiveness is little better than no forgiveness.

Mrs. Eden.

[Coming to Quex.] Congratulate you.

Quex.

Thanks.

[Lady Owbridge moves away, joining the Duchess, as Mrs. Eden returns to Muriel.

Mrs. Eden.

[Kissing Muriel.] You sensible girl!

[Frayne comes to Quex.

Frayne.

[To Quex, mournfully.] Old chap, this is shockingly sudden.

Quex.

Ha, ha!

Frayne.

However, we must contrive, you and I, to pass one more evening together before the event.

Quex.

One! many!

Frayne.

No, no, I mean a buster, Harry; a regular night of it—

Quex.

Good lord! go away!

[Mrs. Eden joins Lady Owbridge as Frayne advances to Muriel.

Frayne.

[Taking Muriel's hand.] Dear young lady, you are about to become the wife of one of the best. There are not many of us left; we are a dwindling band, Miss Eden—

[The Duchess comes to Quex.

Duchess.

[To Quex, softly.] Sincere congratulations. [He bows stiffly.] At any time, you know, when you return to England—

Quex.

[Eyeing her sternly.] Yes?

Duchess.

After your honeymoon—

Quex.

Yes?

Duchess.

Should you feel ennuyé—

Quex.

I!

Duchess.

The air at Burwarton never failed to exhilarate you. So pray do not forget—

Quex.

[Indignantly.] Duchess!

Duchess.

[Sweetly.] That poor dear Strood would be pleased to see you. [Frayne joins Lady Owbridge and MRS. EDEN as the Duchess advances to Muriel.] Dear Miss Eden, may your married life be as beautiful, as serene, as my own!

Muriel.

[Frankly.] Thank you, Duchess.

Lady Owbridge.

We shall be a happy party at luncheon. Shall we go, Duchess? Muriel—Henry—[Quex joins Muriel. Sophy is eyeing Muriel wistfully. Miss Limbird holds the portière aside, to allow the visitors to pass out.] Good morning, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

Good morning, my lady.

Duchess.

Miss Fullgarney—

Sophy.

Good-bye, your Grace.

[The Duchess and Lady Owbridge go out.

Frayne.

[Following them with Mrs. Eden.] Good-day, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

Good-day, sir.

Mrs. Eden.

Morning, Sophy.

Sophy.

Morning, Mrs. Eden.

[Frayne and Mrs. Eden go out.

Quex.

[Following them with Muriel.] Good morning, Miss Fullgarney.

Sophy.

[Blankly.] G—good morning, my lord. [Quex and Muriel go out, followed by Miss Limbird. Sophy stands aghast, her bosom heaving.] Oh! oh! oh! [The door-gong sounds. Pollitt appears at the window. Sophy is wringing her hands.] Oh—!

Pollitt.

[Entering.] My love! what's the matter?

Sophy.

She—she's left me, without a word!

Pollitt.

She?

Sophy.

Muriel—without so much as wishing me good-morning. [With a sob.] Oh! when I've done what I can for everybody!

[The portière is pulled aside and Muriel returns, unaccompanied, and comes to Sophy's side swiftly.

Muriel.

[To Sophy.] Forgive me. You did it for the best. [Kissing her.] I'm sorry—

Sophy.

[Throwing her arms round Muriel's neck.] Oh! my darling—! [Muriel runs out. Sophy goes to Pollitt and drops her head upon his breast, restfully.] Ah! that's all right.

[The door-gong sounds finally.

THE END.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GAY LORD QUEX: A COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS ***

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