

The Invisible Prince

By Henry Harland

AT a masked ball given by the Countess Wohenhoffen, in Vienna, during carnival week, a year ago, a man draped in the embroidered silks of a Chinese mandarin, his features entirely concealed by an enormous Chinese head in cardboard, was standing in the Wintergarten, the big, dimly lighted conservatory, near the door of one of the gilt-and-white reception rooms, rather a stolid-seeming witness of the multi-coloured romp within, when a voice behind him said, "How do you do, Mr. Field?"—a woman's voice, an English voice.

The mandarin turned round.

From a black mask, a pair of blue-grey eyes looked into his broad, bland Chinese visage; and a black domino dropped him an extravagant little courtesy.

"How do you do?" he responded. "I'm afraid I'm not Mr. Field; but I'll gladly pretend I am, if you'll stop and talk with me. I was dying for a little human conversation."

"Oh, you're afraid you're not Mr. Field, are you?" the mask replied derisively. "Then why did you turn when I called his name?"

"You mustn't hope to disconcert me with questions like that," said he. "I turned because I liked your voice."

He

He might quite reasonably have liked her voice, a delicate, clear, soft voice, somewhat high in register, with an accent, crisp, chiselled, concise, that suggested wit as well as distinction. She was rather tall, for a woman; one could divine her slender and graceful, under the voluminous folds of her domino.

She moved a little away from the door, deeper into the conservatory. The mandarin kept beside her. There, amongst the palms, a *fontaine lumineuse* was playing, rhythmically changing colour. Now it was a shower of rubies; now of emeralds or amethysts, of sapphires, topazes, or opals.

"How pretty," she said, "and how frightfully ingenious. I am wondering whether this wouldn't be a good place to sit down. What do *you* think?" And she pointed with her fan to a rustic bench.

"I think it would be no more than fair to give it a trial," he assented.

So they sat down on the rustic bench, by the *fontaine lumineuse*.

"In view of your fear that you're not Mr. Field, it's rather a coincidence that at a masked ball in Vienna you should just happen to be English, isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, everybody's more or less English, in these days, you know," said he.

"There's some truth in that," she admitted, with a laugh. "What a diverting piece of artifice this Wintergarten is, to be sure. Fancy arranging the electric lights to shine through a dome of purple glass, and look like stars. They do look like stars, don't they? Slightly over-dressed, showy stars, indeed; stars in the German taste; but stars, all the same. Then, by day, you know, the purple glass is removed, and you get the sun—the real sun. Do you notice the delicious fragrance of lilac? If one
hadn't

hadn't too exacting an imagination, one might almost persuade oneself that one was in a proper open-air garden, on a night in May. . . . Yes, everybody is more or less English, in these days. That's precisely the sort of thing I should have expected Victor Field to say."

"By-the-bye," questioned the mandarin, "if you don't mind increasing my stores of knowledge, who *is* this fellow Field?"

"This fellow Field? Ah, who indeed?" said she. "That's just what I wish you'd tell me."

"I'll tell you with pleasure, after you've supplied me with the necessary data."

"Well, by some accounts, he's a little literary man in London."

"Oh, come! You never imagined that I was a little literary man in London."

"You might be worse. However, if the phrase offends you, I'll say a rising young literary man, instead. He writes things, you know."

"Poor chap, does he? But then, that's a way they have, rising young literary persons?"

"Doubtless. Poems and stories and things. And book reviews, I suspect. And even, perhaps, leading articles in the newspapers."

"*Toute la lyre enfin?* What they call a penny-a-liner?"

"I'm sure I don't know what he's paid. I should think he'd get rather more than a penny. He's fairly successful. The things he does aren't bad."

"I must look 'em up. But meantime, will you tell me how you came to mistake me for him? Has he the Chinese type? Besides, what on earth should a little London literary man be doing at the Countess Wohenhoffen's?"

"He was standing near the door, over there, dying for a little human

human conversation, till I took pity on him. No, he hasn't exactly the Chinese type, but he's wearing a Chinese costume, and I should suppose he'd feel uncommonly hot in that exasperatingly placid Chinese head. *I'm* nearly suffocated, and I'm only wearing a *loup*. For the rest, why *shouldn't* he be here?"

"If your *loup* bothers you, pray take it off. Don't mind me."

"You're extremely good. But if I should take off my *loup*, you'd be sorry. Of course, manlike, you're hoping that I'm young and pretty."

"Well, and aren't you?"

"I'm a perfect fright. I'm an old maid."

"Thank you. Manlike, I confess, I *was* hoping you'd be young and pretty. Now my hope has received the strongest confirmation. I'm sure you are."

"Your argument, with a meretricious air of subtlety, is facile and superficial. Don't pin your faith to it. Why *shouldn't* Victor Field be here?"

"The Countess only receives tremendous swells. It's the most exclusive house in Europe."

"Are you a tremendous swell?"

"Rather! Aren't you?"

She laughed a little, and stroked her fan, a big fan of fluffy black feathers.

"That's very jolly," said he.

"What?" said she.

"That thing in your lap."

"My fan?"

"I expect you'd call it a fan."

"For goodness' sake, what would *you* call it?"

"I should call it a fan."

She

She gave another little laugh. "You have a nice instinct for the *mot juste*," she informed him.

"Oh, no," he disclaimed, modestly. "But I can call a fan a fan, when I think it won't shock the sensibilities of my hearer."

"If the Countess only receives tremendous swells," said she, "you must remember that Victor Field belongs to the Aristocracy of Talent."

"Oh, *quant à ça*, so, from the Wohenhoffsens' point of view, do the barber and the horse-leech. In this house, the Aristocracy of Talent dines with the butler."

"Is the Countess such a snob?"

"No; she's an Austrian. They draw the line so absurdly tight in Austria."

"Well, then, you leave me no alternative but to conclude that Victor Field is a tremendous swell. Didn't you notice, I bobbed him a courtesy?"

"I took the courtesy as a tribute to my Oriental magnificence. Field doesn't sound like an especially patrician name. I'd give anything to discover who you are. Can't you be induced to tell me? I'll bribe, entreat, threaten—I'll do anything you think might persuade you."

"I'll tell you at once, if you'll own up that you're Victor Field."

"Oh, I'll own up that I'm Queen Elizabeth if you'll tell me who you are. The end justifies the means."

"Then you *are* Victor Field?"

"If you don't mind suborning perjury, why should I mind committing it? Yes. And now, who are you?"

"No; I must have an unequivocal avowal. Are you or are you not Victor Field?"

"Let

"Let us put it at this, that I'm a good serviceable imitation ; an excellent substitute when the genuine article is not procurable."

"Of course, your real name isn't anything like Victor Field," she declared pensively.

"I never said it was. But I admire the way in which you give with one hand and take back with the other."

"Your real name is Wait a moment Yes, now I have it. Your real name It's rather long. You don't think it will bore you ?"

"Oh, if it's really my real name, I daresay I'm hardened to it."

"Your real name is Louis Charles Ferdinand Stanislas John Joseph Emmanuel Maria Anna."

"Mercy upon me," he cried, "what a name ! You ought to have broken it to me in instalments. And it's all Christian name at that. Can't you spare me just a little rag of a surname, for decency's sake ?"

"The surnames of royalties don't matter, Monseigneur."

"Royalties ? What ? Dear me, here's rapid promotion ! I am royal now ? And a moment ago I was a little penny-a-liner in London."

"*L'un n'empêche pas l'autre.* Have you never heard the story of the Invisible Prince ?"

"I adore irrelevancy. I seem to have read something about an invisible prince when I was young. A fairy tale, wasn't it ?"

"The irrelevancy is only apparent. The story I mean is a story of real life. Have you ever heard of the Duke of Zeln ?"

"Zeln ? Zeln ?" he repeated, reflectively. "No, I don't think so."

She clapped her hands. "Really, you do it admirably. If I weren't perfectly sure of my facts, I believe I should be taken in.

Zeln,

Zeln, as any history would tell you, as any old atlas would show you, was a little independent duchy in the centre of Germany."

"Poor, dear thing! Like Jonah in the centre of the whale," he murmured, sympathetically.

"Hush. Don't interrupt. Zeln was a little independent German duchy, and the Duke of Zeln was its sovereign. After the war with France it was absorbed by Prussia. But the ducal family still rank as royal highnesses. Of course, you've heard of the Leczinskis?"

"Lecz—— what?"

"Leczinski."

"How do you spell it?"

"L—e—c—z—i—n—s—k—i."

"Good. Capital. You have a real gift for spelling."

"Will you be quiet," she said, severely, "and answer my question? Are you familiar with the name?"

"I should never venture to be familiar with a name I didn't know."

"Ah, you don't know it? You have never heard of Stanislas Leczinski, who was king of Poland? Of Marie Leczinska, who married Louis XV.?"

"Oh, to be sure. I remember. The lady whose portrait one sees at Versailles."

"Quite so. Very well; the last representative of the Leczinskis, in the elder line, was the Princess Anna Leczinska, who, in 1858, married the Duke of Zeln. She was the daughter of John Leczinski, Duke of Grodnia, and governor of Galicia, and of the Archduchess Henrietta d'Este, a cousin of the Emperor of Austria. She was also a great heiress, and an extremely handsome woman. But the Duke of Zeln was a bad lot, a viveur, a gambler, a spendthrift. His wife, like a fool, made her entire
fortune

fortune over to him, and he proceeded to play ducks and drakes with it. By the time their son was born he'd got rid of the last farthing. Their son wasn't born till '63, five years after their marriage. Well, and then, what do you suppose the duke did?"

"Reformed, of course. The wicked husband always reforms when a child is born—and there's no more money."

"You know perfectly well what he did. He petitioned the German Diet to annul the marriage. You see, having exhausted the dowry of the Princess Anna, it occurred to him that if she could only be got out of the way, he might marry another heiress, and have the spending of another fortune."

"Clever dodge. Did it come off?"

"It came off, all too well. He based his petition on the ground that the marriage had never been—I forget what the technical term is. Anyhow, he pretended that the princess had never been his wife except in name, and that the child couldn't possibly be his. The Emperor of Austria stood by his connection, like the loyal gentleman he is; used every scrap of influence he possessed to help her. But the duke, who was a Protestant (the princess was of course a Catholic), persuaded all the Protestant States in the Diet to vote in his favour. The Emperor of Austria was powerless, the Pope was powerless. And the Diet annulled the marriage."

"Ah," said the mandarin.

"Yes. The marriage was annulled, and the child declared illegitimate. Ernest Augustus, as the duke was somewhat inconsequently named, married again, and had other children, the eldest of whom is the present bearer of the title—the same Duke of Zeln one hears of, quarrelling with the croupiers at Monte Carlo. The Princess Anna, with her baby, came to Austria. The Emperor gave her a pension, and lent her one of his country houses

houses to live in—Schloss Sanct Andreas. Our hostess, by-the-by, the Countess Wohenhoffen, was her intimate friend and her *première dame d'honneur*."

"Ah," said the mandarin.

"But the poor princess had suffered more than she could bear. She died when her child was four years old. The Countess Wohenhoffen took the infant, by the Emperor's desire, and brought him up with her own son Peter. He was called Prince Louis Leczinski. Of course, in all moral right, he was the Hereditary Prince of Zeln. His legitimacy, for the rest, and his mother's innocence, are perfectly well established, in every sense but a legal sense, by the fact that he has all the physical characteristics of the Zeln stock. He has the Zeln nose and the Zeln chin, which are as distinctive as the Hapsburg lip."

"I hope, for the poor young man's sake, though, that they're not so unbecoming?"

"They're not exactly pretty. The nose is a thought too long, the chin is a trifle short. However, I daresay the poor young man is satisfied. As I was about to tell you, the Countess Wohenhoffen brought him up, and the Emperor destined him for the Church. He even went to Rome and entered the Austrian College. He'd have been on the high road to a cardinalate by this time, if he'd stuck to the priesthood, for he had strong interest. But, lo and behold, when he was about twenty, he chucked the whole thing up."

"Ah? *Histoire de femme?*"

"Very likely, though I've never heard any one say so. At all events, he left Rome, and started upon his travels. He had no money of his own, but the Emperor made him an allowance. He started upon his travels, and he went to India, and he went to America, and he went to South Africa, and then, finally, in '87

or

or '88, he went—no one knows where. He totally disappeared, vanished into space. He's not been heard of since. Some people think he's dead. But the greater number suppose that he tired of his false position in the world, and one fine day determined to escape from it, by sinking his identity, changing his name, and going in for a new life under new conditions. They call him the Invisible Prince. His position *was* rather an ambiguous one, wasn't it? You see, he was neither one thing nor the other. He had no *état-civil*. In the eyes of the law he was a bastard, yet he knew himself to be the legitimate son of the Duke of Zeln. He was a citizen of no country, yet he was the rightful heir to a throne. He was the last descendant of Stanislas Leczinski, yet it was without authority that he bore his name. And then, of course, the rights and wrongs of the matter were only known to a few. The majority of people simply remembered that there had been a scandal. And (as a wag once said of him) wherever he went, he left his mother's reputation behind him. No wonder he found the situation irksome. Well, there is the story of the Invisible Prince."

"And a very exciting, melodramatic little story, too. For my part, I suspect your Prince met a boojum. I love to listen to stories. Won't you tell me another? Do, please."

"No, he didn't meet a boojum. He went to England, and set up for an author. The Invisible Prince and Victor Field are one and the same person."

"Oh, I say! Not really?"

"Yes, really."

"What makes you think so?"

"I'm sure of it. To begin with, I must confide to you that Victor Field is a man I've never met."

"Never met . . . ? But, by the blithe way in which you
were

were laying his sins at my door, a little while ago, I supposed you were sworn confederates."

"What's the good of masked balls, if you can't talk to people you've never met? I've never met him, but I'm one of his admirers. I like his little poems. And I'm the happy possessor of a portrait of him. It's a print after a photograph. I cut it from an illustrated paper."

"I really almost wish I *was* Victor Field. I should feel such a glow of gratified vanity."

"And the Countess Wohenhoffen has at least twenty portraits of the Invisible Prince—photographs, miniatures, life-size paintings, taken from the time he was born, almost, to the time of his disappearance. Victor Field and Louis Leczinski have countenances as like each other as two halfpence."

"An accidental resemblance, doubtless."

"No, it isn't an accidental resemblance."

"Oh, then you think it's intentional?"

"Don't be absurd. I might have thought it accidental, except for one or two odd little circumstances. *Primo*, Victor Field is a guest at the Wohenhoffens' ball."

"Oh, he *is* a guest here?"

"Yes, he is. You are wondering how I know. Nothing simpler. The same costumier who made my domino, supplied his Chinese dress. I noticed it at his shop. It struck me as rather nice, and I asked whom it was for. The costumier said, for an Englishman at the Hôtel de Bade. Then he looked in his book, and told me the Englishman's name. It was Victor Field. So, when I saw the same Chinese dress here to-night, I knew it covered the person of one of my favourite authors. But I own, like you, I was a good deal surprised. What on earth should a little London literary man be doing at the Countess Wohenhoffen's?"

hoffen's? And then I remembered the astonishing resemblance between Victor Field and Louis Leczinski; and I remembered that to Louis Leczinski the Countess Wohenhoffen had been a second mother; and I reflected that though he chose to be as one dead and buried for the rest of the world, Louis Leczinski might very probably keep up private relations with the Countess. He might very probably come to her ball, incognito, and safely masked. I observed also that the Countess's rooms were decorated throughout with *white lilac*. But the white lilac is the emblematic flower of the Leczinskis; green and white are their family colours. Wasn't the choice of white lilac on this occasion perhaps designed as a secret compliment to the Prince? I was taught in the schoolroom that two and two make four."

"Oh, one can see that you've enjoyed a liberal education. But where were you taught to jump to conclusions? You do it with a grace, an assurance. I too have heard that two and two make four; but first you must catch your two and two. Really, as if there couldn't be more than one Chinese costume knocking about Vienna, during carnival week! Dear, good, sweet lady, it's of all disguises the disguise they're driving hardest, this particular season. And then to build up an elaborate theory of identities upon the mere chance resemblance of a pair of photographs! Photographs indeed! Photographs don't give the complexion. Say that your Invisible Prince is dark, what's to prevent your literary man from being fair or sandy? Or *vice versa*? And then, how is a little German Polish princeling to write poems and things in English? No, no, no; your reasoning hasn't a leg to stand on."

"Oh, I don't mind its not having legs, so long as it convinces me. As for writing poems and things in English, you yourself said that everybody is more or less English, in these days.

German

German princes are especially so. They all learn English, as a second mother-tongue. You see, like Circassian beauties, they are mostly bred up for the marriage market ; and nothing is a greater help towards a good sound remunerative English marriage, than a knowledge of the language. However, don't be frightened. I must take it for granted that Victor Field would prefer not to let the world know who he is. I happen to have discovered his secret. He may trust to my discretion."

"You still persist in imagining that I'm Victor Field?"

"I should have to be extremely simple-minded to imagine anything else. You wouldn't be a male human being if you had sat here for half an hour patiently talking about another man."

"Your argument, with a meretricious air of subtlety, is facile and superficial. I thank you for teaching me that word. I'd sit here till doomsday talking about my worst enemy, for the pleasure of talking with you."

"Perhaps we have been talking of your worst enemy. Whom do the moralists pretend a man's worst enemy is wont to be?"

"I wish you would tell me the name of the person the moralists would consider *your* worst enemy."

"I'll tell you directly, as I said before, if you'll own up."

"Your price is prohibitive. I've nothing to own up to."

"Well then—good night."

Lightly, swiftly, she fled from the conservatory, and was soon irrecoverable in the crowd.

* * *

The next morning Victor Field left Vienna for London ; but before he left he wrote a letter to Peter Wohenhoffen. In the course of it he said : "There was an Englishwoman at your ball last night with the reasoning powers of a detective in a novel.

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By divers processes of elimination and induction, she had formed all sorts of theories about no end of things. Among others, for instance, she was willing to bet her halidome that a certain Prince Louis Leczinski, who seems to have gone on the spree some years ago, and never to have come home again—she was willing to bet anything you like that Leczinski and I—*moi qui vous parle*—were to all intents and purposes the same. Who was she, please? Rather a tall woman, in a black domino, with grey eyes, or greyish blue, and a nice voice.”

In the answer which he received from Peter Wohenhoffen towards the end of the week, Peter said: “There were nineteen Englishwomen at my mother’s party, all of them rather tall, with nice voices, and grey or blue-grey eyes. I don’t know what colours their dominoes were. Here is a list of them.”

The names that followed were names of people whom Victor Field almost certainly would never meet. The people Victor knew in London were the sort of people a little literary man might be expected to know. Most of them were respectable; some of them even deemed themselves rather smart—and patronised him right Britishly. But the nineteen names in Peter Wohenhoffen’s list (“Oh, me! Oh, my!” cried Victor) were names to make you gasp.

All the same, he went a good deal to Hyde Park during the season, and watched the driving.

“Which of all those haughty high-born beauties is she?” he wondered futilely.

And then the season passed, and then the year; and little by little, of course, he ceased to think about her.

* * *

One afternoon last May, a man habited in accordance with
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the fashion of the period, stopped before a hairdresser's shop in Knightsbridge somewhere, and, raising his hat, bowed to the three waxen ladies who simpered from the window.

"Oh! It's Mr. Field!" a voice behind him cried. "What are these cryptic rites that you're performing? What on earth are you bowing into a hairdresser's window for?"—a smooth, melodious voice, tinged by an inflection that was half ironical, half bewildered.

"I was saluting the type of English beauty," he answered, turning. "Fortunately, there are divergencies from it," he added, as he met the puzzled smile of his interlocutrice; a puzzled smile indeed, but, like the voice, by no means without its touch of irony.

She gave a little laugh; and then, examining the models critically, "Oh?" she questioned. "Would you call that the type? You place the type high. Their features are quite faultless, and who ever saw such complexions?"

"It's the type, all the same," said he. "Just as the imitation marionette is the type of English breeding."

"The imitation marionette? I'm afraid I don't follow," she confessed.

"The imitation marionettes. You've seen them at little theatres in Italy. They're actors who imitate puppets. Men and women who try to behave as if they weren't human, as if they were made of starch and whalebone instead of flesh and blood."

"Ah, yes," she assented, with another little laugh. "That *would* be rather typical of our insular methods. But do you know what an engaging, what a reviving spectacle you presented, as you stood there flourishing your hat? What do you imagine people thought? And what would have happened to you if I had just chanced to be a policeman, instead of a friend?"

"Would

"Would you have clapped your handcuffs on me? I suppose my conduct did seem rather suspicious. I was in the deepest depths of dejection. One must give some expression to one's sorrow."

"Are you going towards Kensington?" she asked, preparing to move on.

"Before I commit myself, I should like to be sure whether you are," he replied.

"You can easily discover with a little perseverance."

He placed himself beside her, and together they walked towards Kensington.

She was rather taller than the usual woman, and slender. She was exceedingly well-dressed; smartly, becomingly: a jaunty little hat of strangely twisted straw, with an aigrette springing defiantly from it; a jacket covered with mazes and labyrinths of embroidery; at her throat a big knot of white lace, the ends of which fell winding in a creamy cascade to her waist (do they call the thing a *jabot*?); and then. . . . But what can a man trust himself to write of these esoteric matters? She carried herself extremely well, too: with grace, with distinction, her head held high, even thrown back a little, superciliously. She had an immense quantity of very lovely hair. Red hair? Yellow hair? Red hair with yellow lights burning in it? Yellow hair with red fires shimmering through it? In a single loose, full billow it swept away from her forehead, and then flowed into half-a-thousand rippling, crinkling, capricious undulations. And her skin had the sensitive colouring, the fineness of texture, that are apt to accompany red hair when it's yellow, yellow hair when it's red. Her face, with its pensive, quizzical eyes, its tip-tilted nose, its rather large mouth, and the little mocking quirks and curves the lips took, was an alert, arch, witty face, a delicate high-bred

high-bred face, and withal a somewhat sensuous, emotional face ; the face of a woman with a vast deal of humour in her soul, a vast deal of mischief, of a woman who would love to tease you and mystify you, and lead you on, and put you off, and yet who, in her own way, at her own time, would know supremely well how to be kind.

But it was mischief rather than kindness that glimmered in her eyes at present, as she asked, "You were in the deepest depths of dejection? Poor man! Why?"

"I can't precisely determine," said he, "whether the sympathy that seems to vibrate in your voice is genuine or counterfeit."

"Perhaps it's half and half. But my curiosity is unmixed. Tell me your troubles."

"The catalogue is long. I've sixteen hundred million. The weather, for example. The shameless beauty of this radiant spring day. It's enough to stir all manner of wild pangs and longings in the heart of an octogenarian. But, anyhow, when one's life is passed in a dungeon, one can't perpetually be singing and dancing from mere exuberance of joy, can one?"

"Is your life passed in a dungeon?"

"Indeed, indeed, it is. Isn't yours?"

"It had never occurred to me that it was."

"You're lucky. Mine is passed in the dungeons of Castle Ennui."

"Oh, Castle Ennui. Ah, yes. You mean you're bored?"

"At this particular moment I'm savouring the most exquisite excitement. But in general, when I am not working or sleeping, I'm bored to extermination—incomparably bored. If only one could work and sleep alternately, twenty-four hours a day, the year round! There's no use trying to play in London. It's so hard

hard to find a playmate. The English people take their pleasures without salt."

"The dungeons of Castle Ennui," she repeated meditatively. "Yes, we are fellow-prisoners. I'm bored to extermination too. Still," she added, "one is allowed out on parole, now and again. And sometimes one has really quite delightful little experiences."

"It would ill become me, in the present circumstances, to dispute that."

"But the Castle waits to reclaim us afterwards, doesn't it? That's rather a happy image, Castle Ennui."

"I'm extremely glad you approve of it; Castle Ennui is the Bastille of modern life. It is built of prunes and prisms; it has its outer court of Convention, and its inner court of Propriety; it is moated round by Respectability; and the shackles its inmates wear are forged of dull little duties and arbitrary little rules. You can only escape from it at the risk of breaking your social neck, or remaining a fugitive from social justice to the end of your days. Yes, it *is* a fairly decent little image."

"A bit out of something you're preparing for the press?" she suggested.

"Oh, how unkind of you!" he cried. "It was absolutely extemporaneous."

"One can never tell, with *vous autres gens-de-lettres*."

"It would be friendlier to say *nous autres gens d'esprit*."

"Aren't we proving to what degree *nous autres gens d'esprit sont bêtes*," she remarked, "by continuing to walk along this narrow pavement, when we can get into Kensington Gardens by merely crossing the street? Would it take you out of your way?"

"I have no way. I was sauntering for pleasure, if you can believe me. I wish I could hope that you have no way either.

Then

Then we could stop here, and crack little jokes together the livelong afternoon," he said, as they entered the Gardens.

"Alas, my way leads straight back to the Castle. I've promised to call on an old woman in Campden Hill."

"Disappoint her. It's good for old women to be disappointed. It whips up their circulation."

"I shouldn't much regret disappointing the old woman, and I should rather like an hour or two of stolen freedom. I don't mind owning that I've generally found you, as men go, a moderately interesting man to talk with. But the deuce of it is. . . . You permit the expression?"

"I'm devoted to the expression."

"The deuce of it is, I'm supposed to be driving."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. So many suppositions in this world are baseless."

"But there's the prison-van. It's one of the tiresome rules in the female wing of Castle Ennui that you're always supposed, more or less, to be driving. And though you may cheat the authorities by slipping out of the prison-van directly it's turned the corner, and sending it on ahead, there it remains, a factor that can't be eliminated. The prison-van will relentlessly await my arrival in the old woman's street."

"That only adds to the sport. Let it wait. When a factor can't be eliminated, it should be haughtily ignored. Besides, there are higher considerations. If you leave me, what shall I do with the rest of this weary day?"

"You can go to your club."

"Merciful lady! What sin have I committed? I never go to my club, except when I've been wicked, as a penance. If you will permit me to employ a metaphor—oh, but a tried and trusty metaphor—when one ship on the sea meets another in distress, it

stops

stops and comforts it, and forgets all about its previous engagements and the prison-van and everything. Shall we cross to the north, and see whether the Serpentine is in its place? Or would you prefer to inspect the eastern front of the Palace? Or may I offer you a penny chair?"

"I think a penny chair would be the maddest of the three dissipations."

And they sat down in penny chairs.

"It's rather jolly here, isn't it?" said he. "The trees, with their black trunks, and their leaves, and things. Have you ever seen such sumptuous foliage? And the greensward, and the shadows, and the sunlight, and the atmosphere, and the mistiness—isn't it like pearl-dust and gold-dust floating in the air? It's all got up to imitate the background of a Watteau. We must do our best to be frivolous and ribald, and supply a proper foreground. How big and fleecy and white the clouds are. Do you think they're made of cotton-wool? And what do you suppose they paint the sky with? There never was such a brilliant, breath-taking blue. It's much too nice to be natural. And they've sprinkled the whole place with scent, haven't they? You notice how fresh and sweet it smells. If only one could get rid of the sparrows—the cynical little beasts! hear how they're chortling—and the people, and the nursemaids and children. I have never been able to understand why they admit the public to the parks."

"Go on," she encouraged him. "You're succeeding admirably in your effort to be ribald."

"But that last remark wasn't ribald in the least—it was desperately sincere. I do think it's inconsiderate of them to admit the public to the parks. They ought to exclude all the lower classes, the People, at one fell swoop, and then to discriminate tremendously amongst the others."

"Mercy,

"Mercy, what undemocratic sentiments! The People, the poor dear People—what have they done?"

"Everything. What haven't they done? One could forgive their being dirty and stupid and noisy and rude; one could forgive their ugliness, the ineffable banality of their faces, their goggle-eyes, their protruding teeth, their ungainly motions; but the trait one can't forgive is their venality. They're so mercenary. They're always thinking how much they can get out of you—everlastingly touching their hats and expecting you to put your hand in your pocket. Oh, no, believe me, there's no health in the People. Ground down under the iron heel of despotism, reduced to a condition of hopeless serfdom, I don't say that they might not develop redeeming virtues. But free, but sovereign, as they are in these days, they're everything that is squalid and sordid and offensive. Besides, they read such abominably bad literature."

"In that particular they're curiously like the aristocracy, aren't they?" said she. "By-the-bye, when are you going to publish another book of poems?"

"Apropos of bad literature?"

"Not altogether bad. I rather like your poems."

"So do I," said he. "It's useless to pretend that we haven't tastes in common."

They were both silent for a bit. She looked at him oddly, an inscrutable little light flickering in her eyes. All at once she broke out with a merry trill of laughter.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded.

"I'm hugely amused," she answered.

"I wasn't aware that I'd said anything especially good."

"You're building better than you know. But if I am amused, *you* look ripe for tears. What is the matter?"

"Every heart knows its own bitterness. Don't pay the least attention

attention to me. You mustn't let moodiness of mine cast a blight upon your high spirits."

"No fear. There are pleasures that nothing can rob of their sweetness. Life is not all dust and ashes. There are bright spots."

"Yes, I've no doubt there are."

"And thrilling little adventures—no?"

"For the bold, I dare say."

"None but the bold deserve them. Sometimes it's one thing, and sometimes it's another."

"That's very certain."

"Sometimes, for instance, one meets a man one knows, and speaks to him. And he answers with a glibness! And then, almost directly, what do you suppose one discovers?"

"What?"

"One discovers that the wretch hasn't the ghost of a notion who one is—that he's totally and absolutely forgotten one!"

"Oh, I say! Really?"

"Yes, really. You can't deny that *that's* an exhilarating little adventure."

"I should think it might be. One could enjoy the man's embarrassment."

"Or his lack of embarrassment. Some men are of an assurance, of a *sang froid!* They'll place themselves beside you, and walk with you, and talk with you, and even propose that you should pass the livelong afternoon cracking jokes with them in a garden, and never breathe a hint of their perplexity. They'll brazen it out."

"That's distinctly heroic, Spartan, of them, don't you think? Internally, poor dears, they're very likely suffering agonies of discomfiture."

"We'll

"We'll hope they are. Could they decently do less?"

"And fancy the mental struggles that must be going on in their brains. If I were a man in such a situation I'd throw myself upon the woman's mercy. I'd say, 'Beautiful, sweet lady, I know I know you. Your name, your entirely charming and appropriate name, is trembling on the tip of my tongue. But, for some unaccountable reason, my brute of a memory chooses to play the fool. If you've a spark of Christian kindness in your soul, you'll come to my rescue with a little clue.'"

"If the woman had a Christian sense of the ridiculous in her soul, I fear you'd throw yourself on her mercy in vain."

"What *is* the good of tantalising people?"

"Besides, the woman might reasonably feel slightly humiliated to find herself forgotten in that bare-faced manner."

"The humiliation surely would be all the man's. Have you heard from the Wohenhoffs lately?"

"The—what? The—who?"

"The Wohenhoffs."

"What are the Wohenhoffs? Are they persons? Are they things?"

"Oh, nothing. My enquiry was merely dictated by a thirst for knowledge. It occurred to me vaguely that you might have worn a black domino at a masked ball they gave, the Wohenhoffs. Are you sure you didn't."

"I've a great mind to punish your forgetfulness by pretending that I did."

"She was rather tall, like you, and she had grey eyes, and a nice voice, and a laugh that was sweeter than the singing of nightingales. She was monstrously clever, too, with a flow of language that would have made her a leader in any sphere. She was also a perfect fiend. I have always been anxious to meet her
again,

again, in order that I might ask her to marry me. I'm strongly disposed to believe that she was you. Was she?"

"If I say yes, will you at once proceed to ask me to marry you?"

"Try it and see."

"*Ce n'est pas la peine.* It occasionally happens that a woman's already got a husband."

"She said she was an old maid."

"Do you dare to insinuate that I look like an old maid?"

"Yes."

"Upon my word!"

"Would you wish me to insinuate that you look like anything so insipid as a young girl? *Were* you the woman of the black domino?"

"I should need further information, before being able to make up my mind. Are the—what's their name?—Wohenheimer?—are the Wohenheimers people one can safely confess to knowing? Oh, you're a man, and don't count. But a woman? It sounds a trifle Jewish, Wohenheimer. But of course there are Jews and Jews."

"You're playing with me like the cat in the adage. It's too cruel. No one is responsible for his memory."

"And to think that this man took me down to dinner not two months ago!" she murmured in her veil.

"You're as hard as nails. In whose house? Or—stay. Prompt me a little. Tell me the first syllable of your name. Then the rest will come with a rush."

"My name is Matilda Muggins."

"I've a great mind to punish your untruthfulness by pretending to believe you," said he. "Have you really got a husband?"

"Why do you doubt it?"

"I don't

"I don't doubt it. Have you?"

"I don't know what to answer."

"Don't you know whether you've got a husband?"

"I don't know what I'd better let you believe. Yes, on the whole, I think you may as well assume that I've got a husband."

"And a lover, too?"

"Really! I like your impertinence!"

"I only asked to show a polite interest. I knew the answer would be an indignant negative. You're an Englishwoman, and you're *nice*. Oh, one can see with half an eye that you're *nice*. But that a nice Englishwoman should have a lover is as inconceivable as that she should smoke a pipe. It's only the reg'lar bad-uns in England who have lovers. There's nothing between the family pew and the divorce court. One nice Englishwoman is a match for the whole Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne."

"To hear you talk, one might fancy you were not English yourself. For a man of the name of Field, you're uncommonly foreign. You *look* rather foreign too, you know, by-the-bye. You haven't at all an English cast of countenance."

"I've enjoyed the advantages of a foreign education. I was brought up abroad."

"Where your features unconsciously assimilated themselves to a foreign type? Where you learned a hundred thousand strange little foreign things, no doubt? And imbibed a hundred thousand unprincipled little foreign notions? And all the ingenuous little foreign prejudices and misconceptions concerning England?"

"Most of them."

"*Perfide Albion?* English hypocrisy?"

"Oh, yes, the English are consummate hypocrites. But there's
only

only one objection to their hypocrisy—it so rarely covers any wickedness. It's such a disappointment to see a creature stalking towards you, laboriously draped in sheep's clothing, and then to discover that it's only a sheep. You, for instance, as I took the liberty of intimating a moment ago, in spite of your perfectly respectable appearance, are a perfectly respectable woman. If you weren't, wouldn't I be making furious love to you, though!"

"As I am, I can see no reason why you shouldn't make furious love to me, if it would amuse you. There's no harm in firing your pistol at a person who's bullet-proof."

"No; it's merely a wanton waste of powder and shot. However, I shouldn't stick at that. The deuce of it is. . . . You permit the expression?"

"I'm devoted to the expression."

"The deuce of it is, you profess to be married."

"Do you mean to say that you, with your unprincipled foreign notions, would be restrained by any such consideration as that?"

"I shouldn't be for an instant—if I weren't in love with you."

"*Comment donc? Déjà?*" she cried with a laugh.

"Oh, *déjà!* Why not? Consider the weather—consider the scene. Is the air soft, is it fragrant? Look at the sky—good heavens!—and the clouds, and the shadows on the grass, and the sunshine between the trees. The world is made of light to-day, of light and colour, and perfume and music. *Tutt' intorno canta amor, amor, amore!* What would you have? One recognises one's affinity. One doesn't need a lifetime. You began the business at the Wohenhoffs' ball. To-day you've merely put on the finishing touches."

"Oh, then I *am* the woman you met at the masked ball?"

"Look me in the eye, and tell me you're not."

"I haven't

"I haven't the faintest interest in telling you I'm not. On the contrary, it rather pleases me to let you imagine that I am."

"She owed me a grudge, you know. I hoodwinked her like everything."

"Oh, did you? Then, as a sister woman, I should be glad to serve as her instrument of vengeance. Do you happen to have such a thing as a watch about you?"

"Yes."

"Will you be good enough to tell me what o'clock it is?"

"What are your motives for asking?"

"I'm expected at home at five."

"Where do you live?"

"What are your motives for asking?"

"I want to call upon you."

"You might wait till you're invited."

"Well, invite me—quick!"

"Never."

"Never?"

"Never, never, never. A man who's forgotten me as you have!"

"But if I've only met you once at a masked ball. . . ."

"Can't you be brought to realise that every time you mistake me for that woman of the masked ball you turn the dagger in the wound?"

"But if you won't invite me to call upon you, how and when am I to see you again?"

"I haven't an idea," she answered, cheerfully. "I must go now. Good bye." She rose.

"One moment. Before you go will you allow me to look at the palm of your left hand?"

"What for?"

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"I can

"I can tell fortunes. I'm extremely good at it. I'll tell you yours."

"Oh, very well," she assented, sitting down again: and guilelessly she pulled off her glove.

He took her hand, a beautifully slender, nervous hand, warm and soft, with rosy, tapering fingers.

"Oho! you *are* an old maid after all," he cried. "There's no wedding ring."

"You villain!" she gasped, snatching the hand away.

"I promised to tell your fortune. Haven't I told it correctly?"

"You needn't rub it in, though. Eccentric old maids don't like to be reminded of their condition."

"Will you marry *me*?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Partly from curiosity. Partly because it's the only way I can think of, to make sure of seeing you again. And then, I like your hair. Will you?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"The stars forbid. And I'm ambitious. In my horoscope it is written that I shall either never marry at all, or—marry royalty."

"Oh, bother ambition! Cheat your horoscope. Marry me. Will you?"

"If you care to follow me," she said, rising again, "you can come and help me to commit a little theft."

He followed her to an obscure and sheltered corner of a flowery path, where she stopped before a bush of white lilac.

"There are no keepers in sight, are there?" she questioned.

"I don't see any," said he.

"Then allow me to make you a receiver of stolen goods," said she, breaking off a spray, and handing it to him.

"Thank

"Thank you. But I'd rather have an answer to my question."

"Isn't that an answer?"

"Is it?"

"White lilac—to the Invisible Prince?"

"The Invisible Prince . . . Then you *are* the black domino!"

"Oh, I suppose so."

"And you *will* marry me?"

"I'll tell the aunt I live with to ask you to dinner."

"But will you marry me?"

"I thought you wished me to cheat my horoscope?"

"How could you find a better means of doing so?"

"What! if I should marry Louis Leczinski . . .?"

"Oh, to be sure. You would have it that I was Louis Leczinski. But, on that subject, I must warn you seriously——"

"One instant," she interrupted. "People must look other people straight in the face when they're giving serious warnings. Look straight into my eyes, and continue your serious warning."

"I must really warn you seriously," said he, biting his lip, "that if you persist in that preposterous delusion about my being Louis Leczinski, you'll be most awfully sold. I have nothing on earth to do with Louis Leczinski. Your ingenious little theories, as I tried to convince you at the time, were absolute romance."

Her eyebrows raised a little, she kept her eyes fixed steadily on his—oh, in the drollest fashion, with a gaze that seemed to say "How admirably you do it! I wonder whether you imagine I believe you. Oh, you fibber! Aren't you ashamed to tell me such abominable fibs?" . . .

They stood still, eyeing each other thus, for something like twenty seconds, and then they both laughed and walked on.