

WILLIAM MAUGHAM

PLAYS: LADY FREDERICK,
THE EXPLORER, A MAN
OF HONOUR

William Maugham
**Plays: Lady Frederick, The
Explorer, A Man of Honour**

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23147107
Plays: Lady Frederick, The Explorer, A Man of Honour:*

Содержание

LADY FREDERICK	4
THE FIRST ACT	6
THE SECOND ACT	100
THIRD ACT	200
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	206

William Somerset Maugham Plays: Lady Frederick, The Explorer, A Man of Honour

LADY FREDERICK

CHARACTERS

Lady Frederick Berolles

Sir Gerald O'Mara

Mr. Paradine Fouldes

Marchioness of Mereston

Marquess of Mereston

Admiral Carlisle

Rose

Lady Frederick's Dressmaker

Lady Frederick's Footman

Lady Frederick's Maid

Thompson

A Waiter at the Hotel Splendide

Time: *The Present Day*

Acts I and II —*Drawing-room at the Hotel Splendide, Monte Carlo.*

Act III —*Lady Frederick's Dressing-Room.*

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THE FIRST ACT

Scene: Drawing-room of the Hotel Splendide at Monte Carlo. A large, handsomely furnished room, with doors right and left, and French windows at the back leading to a terrace. Through these is seen the starry southern night. On one side is a piano, on the other a table with papers neatly laid out on it. There is a lighted stove.

Lady Mereston, in evening dress, rather magnificently attired, is reading the papers. She is a handsome woman of forty. She puts down the paper impatiently and rings the bell. A servant answers. He has a French accent.

Lady Mereston

Did Mr. Paradine Fouldes come this evening?

Servant

Yes, miladi.

Lady Mereston

Is he in the hotel now?

Servant

Yes, miladi.

Lady Mereston

Will you send some one up to his room to say I'm waiting to see him?

Servant

Pardon, miladi, but the gentleman say 'e was on no account to be disturbed.

Lady Mereston

Nonsense. Mr. Fouldes is my brother. You must go to him immediately.

Servant

Mr. Fouldes his valet is in the 'all. Will your ladyship speak with him?

Lady Mereston

Mr. Fouldes is more difficult to see than a cabinet minister.
Send his servant to me.

Servant

Very good, miladi.

[Exit Servant, and presently Thompson, Mr. Fouldes' man, comes in.]

Thompson

Your ladyship wished to see me.

Lady Mereston

Good evening, Thompson. I hope you had a comfortable journey.

Thompson

Yes, my lady. Mr. Fouldes always has a comfortable journey.

Lady Mereston

Was the sea calm when you crossed?

Thompson

Yes, my lady. Mr. Fouldes would look upon it as a great liberty if the sea was not calm.

Lady Mereston

Will you tell Mr. Fouldes that I should like to see him at once?

Thompson

[*Looking at his watch.*] Excuse me, my lady, but Mr. Fouldes said no one was to disturb him till ten o'clock. It's more than my place is worth to go to him at five minutes to.

Lady Mereston

But what on earth's he doing?

Thompson

I don't know at all, my lady.

Lady Mereston

How long have you been with Mr. Fouldes?

Thompson

Twenty-five years, my lady.

Lady Mereston

I should have thought you knew how he spent every minute of his day.

[Paradine comes in. He is a very well-dressed man of forty-odd. Self-possessed, worldly, urbane. He is never at a loss or put out of countenance. He overhears Lady Mereston's last words.]

Fouldes

When I engaged Thompson I told him the first thing he must

learn was the very difficult feat of keeping his eyes open and shut at one and the same time.

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, I've been waiting to see you for the last two hours. How tiresome you are.

Fouldes

You may give me a kiss, Maud, but don't be rough.

Lady Mereston

[*Kissing his cheek.*] You ridiculous creature. You really might have come to see me at once.

Fouldes

My dear, you cannot grudge me a little repose after a long and tedious journey. I had to repair the ravages to my person caused by twenty-seven hours in the train.

Lady Mereston

Don't be so absurd. I'm sure your person is never ravished.

Fouldes

Ravaged, my dear, ravaged. I should look upon it as an affectation at my age if I were not a little upset by the journey from London to Monte Carlo.

Lady Mereston

I'll be bound you ate a very hearty dinner.

Fouldes

Thompson, did I eat any dinner at all?

Thompson

[*Stolidly.*] Soup, sir.

Fouldes

I remember looking at it.

Thompson

Fish, sir.

Fouldes

I trifled with a fried sole.

Thompson

Bouchées à la Reine, sir.

Fouldes

They have left absolutely no impression upon me.

Thompson

Tournedos à la Splendide.

Fouldes

They were distinctly tough, Thompson. You must lodge a complaint in the proper quarter.

Thompson

Roast pheasant, sir.

Fouldes

Yes, yes, now you mention it, I do remember the pheasant.

Thompson

Chocolate ice, sir.

Fouldes

It was too cold, Thompson. It was distinctly too cold.

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, I think you dined uncommonly well.

Fouldes

I have reached an age when love, ambition and wealth pale into insignificance beside a really well-grilled steak. That'll do, Thompson.

Thompson

Very well, sir.

[He goes out.]

Lady Mereston

It's too bad of you, Paradine, to devour a substantial meal when I'm eating out my very heart with anxiety.

Fouldes

It seems to agree with you very well. I've not seen you look

better for years.

Lady Mereston

For heaven's sake be serious and listen to me.

Fouldes

I started immediately I got your telegram. Pray tell me what I can do for you?

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, Charlie's head over ears in love.

Fouldes

It's not altogether an unexpected condition for a young man of twenty-two. If the lady's respectable, marry him and resign yourself to being a dowager. If she's not, give her five hundred pounds and pack her off to Paris or London or wherever else she habitually practises her arts and graces.

Lady Mereston

I wish I could. But who d'you think it is?

Fouldes

My dear, there's nothing I detest more than riddles. I can imagine quite a number of fair ladies who would look without disdain upon a young marquess with fifty thousand a year.

Lady Mereston

Lady Frederick Berolles.

Fouldes

By Jupiter!

Lady Mereston

She's fifteen years older than he is.

Fouldes

Then she's not old enough to be his mother, which is a distinct advantage.

Lady Mereston

She dyes her hair.

Fouldes

She dyes it uncommonly well.

Lady Mereston

She paints.

Fouldes

Much better than a Royal Academician.

Lady Mereston

And poor Charlie's simply infatuated. He rides with her all the morning, motors with her all the afternoon, and gambles with her half the night. I never see him.

Fouldes

But why should you think Lady Frederick cares two straws for him?

Lady Mereston

Don't be ridiculous, Paradine. Every one knows she hasn't a penny, and she's crippled with debts.

Fouldes

One has to keep up appearances in this world. Life nowadays for the woman of fashion is a dilemma of which one horn is the Bankruptcy Court and the other – dear Sir Francis Jeune.

Lady Mereston

I wish I knew how she manages to dress so beautifully. It's one of the injustices of fate that clothes only hang on a woman really well when she's lost every shred of reputation.

Fouldes

My dear, you must console yourself with the thought that she'll probably frizzle for it hereafter.

Lady Mereston

I hope I'm not wicked, Paradine, but to wear draperies and wings in the next world offers me no compensation for looking dowdy in a Paquin gown in this.

Fouldes

I surmised she was on the verge of bankruptcy when I heard she'd bought a new motor. And you seriously think Charlie wants to marry her?

Lady Mereston

I'm sure of it.

Fouldes

And what d'you want me to do?

Lady Mereston

Good heavens, I want you to prevent it. After all he has a magnificent position; he's got every chance of making a career for himself. There's no reason why he shouldn't be Prime Minister – it's not fair to the boy to let him marry a woman like that.

Fouldes

Of course you know Lady Frederick?

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, we're the greatest friends. You don't suppose I'm going to give her the advantage of quarrelling with

me. I think I shall ask her to luncheon to meet you.

Fouldes

Women have such an advantage over men in affairs of this sort. They're troubled by no scruples, and, like George Washington, never hesitate to lie.

Lady Mereston

I look upon her as an abandoned creature, and I tell you frankly I shall stop at nothing to save my son from her clutches.

Fouldes

Only a thoroughly good woman could so calmly announce her intention of using the crookedest ways to gain her ends.

Lady Mereston

[*Looking at him.*] There must be some incident in her career which she wouldn't like raked up. If we could only get hold of that...

Fouldes

[*Blandly.*] How d'you imagine I can help you?

Lady Mereston

A reformed burglar is always the best detective.

Fouldes

My dear, I wish you could be frank without being sententious.

Lady Mereston

You've run through two fortunes, and if we all got our deserts you would be starving now instead of being richer than ever.

Fouldes

My second cousins have a knack of dying at the psychological moment.

Lady Mereston

You've been a horrid, dissipated wretch all your life, and heaven knows the disreputable people who've been your bosom friends.

Fouldes

With my knowledge of the world and your entire lack of scruple we should certainly be a match for one defenceless woman.

Lady Mereston

[*Looking at him sharply.*] Common report says that at one time you were very much in love with her.

Fouldes

Common report is an ass whose long ears only catch its own braying.

Lady Mereston

I was wondering how far things went. If you could tell Charlie of the relations between you...

Fouldes

My good Maud, there were no relations – unfortunately.

Lady Mereston

Poor George was very uneasy about you at the time.

Fouldes

Your deceased husband, being a strictly religious man, made a point of believing the worst about his neighbours.

Lady Mereston

Don't, Paradine; I know you didn't like one another, but remember that I loved him with all my heart. I shall never get over his death.

Fouldes

My dear girl, you know I didn't mean to wound you.

Lady Mereston

After all, it was largely your fault. He was deeply religious, and as the president of the Broad Church Union he couldn't countenance your mode of life.

Fouldes

[*With great unction.*] Thank God in my day I've been a miserable sinner!

Lady Mereston

[*Laughing.*] You're quite incurable, Paradine. But you will help me now. Since his father's death, the boy and I have lived a very retired life, and now we're quite helpless. It would break my heart if Charlie married that woman.

Fouldes

I'll do my best. I think I can promise you that nothing will come of it.

[The door is flung open, and Lady Frederick enters, followed by Mereston, a young boyish man of twenty-two; by her brother, Sir Gerald O'Mara, a handsome fellow of six-and-twenty; by Captain Montgomerie, Admiral Carlisle, and Rose, his daughter. Lady Frederick is a handsome Irish woman of thirty to thirty-five, beautifully dressed. She is very vivacious, and light-hearted. She has all the Irish recklessness and unconcern for the morrow. Whenever she wants to get round anybody she falls into an Irish brogue, and then, as she knows very well, she is quite irresistible. Captain Montgomerie is a polished, well-groomed man of thirty-five, with suave manners. The Admiral is bluff and downright. Rose is a pretty ingénue of nineteen.]

Lady Mereston

Here they are.

Lady Frederick

[Enthusiastically going to him with open arms.] Paradine!
Paradine! Paradine!

Mererston

Oh, my prophetic soul, mine uncle!

Fouldes

[*Shaking hands with Lady Frederick.*] I heard you were at the Casino.

Lady Frederick

Charlie lost all his money, so I brought him away.

Lady Mereston

I wish you wouldn't gamble, Charlie dear.

Mererston

My dear mother, I've only lost ten thousand francs.

Lady Frederick

[*To Paradine Fouldes.*] I see you're in your usual robust health.

Fouldes

You needn't throw it in my face. I shall probably be very unwell to-morrow.

Lady Frederick

D'you know Admiral Carlisle? This is my brother Gerald.

Fouldes

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

Lady Frederick

[*Introducing.*] Captain Montgomerie.

Captain Montgomerie

I think we've met before.

Fouldes

I'm very pleased to hear it. How d'you do. [*To Mererston.*]
Are you having a good time in Monte Carlo, Charles?

Mererston

A 1, thanks.

Fouldes

And what do you do with yourself?

Mererston

Oh, hang about generally, you know – and there's always the tables.

Fouldes

That's right, my boy; I'm glad to see that you prepare yourself properly for your duties as a hereditary legislator.

Mererston

[*Laughing.*] Oh, shut it, Uncle Paradine.

Fouldes

I rejoice also to find that you have already a certain command of the vernacular.

Mererston

Well, if you can browbeat a London cabby and hold your own in repartee with a barmaid, it oughtn't to be difficult to get on all right in the House of Lords.

Fouldes

But let me give you a solemn warning. You have a magnificent chance, dear boy, with all the advantages of wealth and station. I

beseech you not to throw it away by any exhibition of talent. The field is clear and the British people are waiting for a leader. But remember that the British people like their leaders dull. Capacity they mistrust, versatility they cannot bear, and wit they utterly abhor. Look at the fate of poor Lord Parnaby. His urbanity gained him the premiership, but his brilliancy overthrew him. How could the fortunes of the nation be safe with a man whose speeches were pointed and sparkling, whose mind was so quick, so agile, that it reminded you of a fencer's play? Every one is agreed that Lord Parnaby is flippant and unsubstantial; we doubt his principles and we have grave fears about his morality. Take warning, my dear boy, take warning. Let the sprightly epigram never lighten the long periods of your speech nor the Attic salt flavour the roast beef of your conversation. Be careful that your metaphors show no imagination and conceal your brains as you would a discreditable secret. Above all, if you have a sense of humour, crush it. Crush it.

Mereston

My dear uncle, you move me very much. I will be as stupid as an owl.

Fouldes

There's a good, brave boy.

Mereston

I will be heavy and tedious.

Fouldes

I see already the riband of the Garter adorning your shirt-front. Remember, there's no damned merit about that.

Mereston

None shall listen to my speeches without falling into a profound sleep.

Fouldes

[*Seizing his hand.*] The premiership itself is within your grasp.

Lady Mereston

Dear Paradine, let us take a stroll on the terrace before we go to bed.

Fouldes

And you shall softly whisper all the latest scandal in my ear.

[He puts on her cloak and they go out.]

Lady Frederick

May I speak to you, Admiral?

Admiral

Certainly, certainly. What can I do for you?

[While Lady Frederick and the Admiral talk, the others go slowly out. Through the conversation she uses her Irish brogue.]

Lady Frederick

Are you in a good temper?

Admiral

Fairly, fairly.

Lady Frederick

I'm glad of that because I want to make you a proposal of marriage.

Admiral

My dear Lady Frederick, you take me entirely by surprise.

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Not on my own behalf, you know.

Admiral

Oh, I see.

Lady Frederick

The fact is, my brother Gerald has asked your daughter to marry him, and she has accepted.

Admiral

Rose is a minx, Lady Frederick, and she's much too young to marry.

Lady Frederick

Now don't fly into a passion. We're going to talk it over quite calmly.

Admiral

I tell you I won't hear of it. The boy's penniless.

Lady Frederick

That's why it's so lucky you're rich.

Admiral

Eh?

Lady Frederick

You've been talking of buying a place in Ireland. You couldn't want anything nicer than Gerald's – gravel soil, you know. And you simply dote on Elizabethan architecture.

Admiral

I can't bear it.

Lady Frederick

How fortunate, then, that the house was burnt down in the eighteenth century and rebuilt in the best Georgian style.

Admiral

Ugh.

Lady Frederick

And you'd love to have little grandsons to dandle on your knee.

Admiral

How do I know they wouldn't be girls?

Lady Frederick

Oh, it's most unusual in our family.

Admiral

I tell you I won't hear of it.

Lady Frederick

You know, it's not bad to have the oldest baronetcy in the country but one.

Admiral

I suppose I shall have to pack Rose off to England.

Lady Frederick

And break her heart?

Admiral

Women's hearts are like old china, none the worse for a break or two.

Lady Frederick

Did you ever know my husband, Admiral?

Admiral

Yes.

Lady Frederick

I was married to him at seventeen because my mother thought it a good match, and I was desperately in love with another man. Before we'd been married a fortnight he came home blind drunk, and I had never seen a drunken man before. Then I found out he was a confirmed tippler. I was so ashamed. If you only knew what my life was for the ten years I lived with him. I've done a lot of foolish things in my time, but, my God, I have suffered.

Admiral

Yes, I know, I know.

Lady Frederick

And believe me, when two young things love one another it's better to let them marry. Love is so very rare in this world. One really ought to make the most of it when it's there.

Admiral

I'm very sorry, but I've made up my mind.

Lady Frederick

Ah, but won't you alter it – like Nelson. Don't be hard on Rose. She's really in love with Gerald. Do give them a chance. Won't you? Ah, do – there's a dear.

Admiral

I don't want to hurt your feelings, but Sir Gerald is about the most ineligible young man that I've ever come across.

Lady Frederick

[*Triumphantly.*] There, I knew we should agree. That's precisely what I told him this morning.

Admiral

I understand his place is heavily mortgaged.

Lady Frederick

No one will lend a penny more on it. If they would Gerald would borrow it at once.

Admiral

He's got nothing but his pay to live upon.

Lady Frederick

And his tastes are very extravagant.

Admiral

He's a gambler.

Lady Frederick

Yes, but then he's so good looking.

Admiral

Eh?

Lady Frederick

I'm glad that we agree so entirely about him. Now there's

nothing left but to call the young things in, join their hands and give them our united blessing.

Admiral

Before I consent to this marriage, madam, I'll see your brother

Lady Frederick

Damned?

Admiral

Yes, madam, damned.

Lady Frederick

Now listen to me quietly, will you?

Admiral

I should warn you, Lady Frederick, that when I once make up my mind about a thing, I never change it.

Lady Frederick

Now that is what I really admire. I like a man of character. You know, I've always been impressed by your strength and determination.

Admiral

I don't know about that. But when I say a thing, I do it.

Lady Frederick

Yes, I know. And in five minutes you're going to say that Gerald may marry your pretty Rose.

Admiral

No, no, no.

Lady Frederick

Now look here, don't be obstinate, I don't like you when you're obstinate.

Admiral

I'm not obstinate. I'm firm.

Lady Frederick

After all, Gerald has lots of good qualities. He's simply devoted to your daughter. He's been a little wild, but you know you wouldn't give much for a young man who hadn't.

Admiral

[*Gruffly.*] I don't want a milksop for a son-in-law.

Lady Frederick

As soon as he's married, he'll settle into a model country squire.

Admiral

Well, he's a gambler, and I can't get over that.

Lady Frederick

Shall he promise you never to play cards again? Now, don't be horrid. You don't want to make me utterly wretched, do you?

Admiral

[*Unwillingly.*] Well, I'll tell you what I'll do – they shall marry if he doesn't gamble for a year.

Lady Frederick

Oh, you duck. [*She impulsively throws her arms round his neck and kisses him. He is a good deal taken aback.*] I beg your pardon, I couldn't help it.

Admiral

I don't altogether object, you know.

Lady Frederick

Upon my word, in some ways you're rather fascinating.

Admiral

D'you think so, really?

Lady Frederick

I do indeed.

Admiral

I rather wish that proposal of marriage had been on your own behalf.

Lady Frederick

Ah, with me, dear Admiral, experience triumphs over hope. I must tell the children. [*Calling.*] Gerald, come here. Rose.

[Gerald and Rose come in.]

Lady Frederick

I always knew your father was a perfect darling, Rose.

Rose

Oh, papa, you are a brick.

Admiral

I thoroughly disapprove of the marriage, my dear, but – it's not easy to say no to Lady Frederick.

Gerald

It's awfully good of you, Admiral, and I'll do my best to make Rose a ripping husband.

Admiral

Not so fast, young man, not so fast. There's a condition.

Rose

Oh, father!

Lady Frederick

Gerald is to behave himself for a year, and then you may marry.

Rose

But won't Gerald grow very dull if he behaves himself?

Lady Frederick

I have no doubt of it. But dullness is the first requisite of a good husband.

Admiral

Now you must pack off to bed, my dear. I'm going to smoke my pipe before turning in.

Rose

[*Kissing* Lady Frederick.] Good-night, dearest. I'll never forget your kindness.

Lady Frederick

You'd better not thank me till you've been married a few years.

Rose

[Holding out her hand to GERALD.] Good-night.

Gerald

[Taking it and looking at her.] Good-night.

Admiral

[Gruffly.] You may as well do it in front of my face as behind my back.

Rose

[Lifting up her lips.] Good-night.

[He kisses her, and the Admiral and Rose go out.]

Lady Frederick

Oh lord, I wish I were eighteen.

[She sinks into a chair, and an expression of utter weariness comes over her face.]

Gerald

I say, what's up?

Lady Frederick

[Starting.] I thought you'd gone. Nothing.

Gerald

Come, out with it.

Lady Frederick

Oh, my poor boy, if you only knew. I'm so worried that I don't know what on earth to do.

Gerald

Money?

Lady Frederick

Last year I made a solemn determination to be economical.
And it's ruined me.

Gerald

My dear, how could it?

Lady Frederick

I can't make it out. It seems very unfair. The more I tried not
to be extravagant, the more I spent.

Gerald

Can't you borrow?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] I have borrowed. That's just it.

Gerald

Well, borrow again.

Lady Frederick

I've tried to. But no one's such a fool as to lend me a penny.

Gerald

Did you say I'd sign anything they liked?

Lady Frederick

I was so desperate I said we'd both sign anything. It was Dick Cohen.

Gerald

Oh lord, what did he say?

Lady Frederick

[*Imitating a Jewish accent.*] What's the good of wathing a nithe clean sheet of paper, my dear lady?

Gerald

[*Shouting with laughter.*] By George, don't I know it.

Lady Frederick

For heaven's sake don't let's talk of my affairs. They're in such a state that if I think of them at all I shall have a violent fit of hysterics.

Gerald

But look here, what d'you really mean?

Lady Frederick

Well, if you want it – I owe my dressmaker seven hundred pounds, and last year I signed two horrid bills, one for fifteen hundred and the other for two thousand. They fall due the day after to-morrow, and if I can't raise the money I shall have to go through the Bankruptcy Court.

Gerald

By George, that's serious.

Lady Frederick

It's so serious that I can't help thinking something will happen. Whenever I've got in a really tight fix something has turned up and put me on my legs again. Last time, Aunt Elizabeth had an apoplectic fit. But of course it wasn't really very profitable because mourning is so desperately expensive.

Gerald

Why don't you marry?

Lady Frederick

Oh, my dear Gerald, you know I'm always unlucky at games of chance.

Gerald

Charlie Mereston's awfully gone on you.

Lady Frederick

That must be obvious to the meanest intelligence.

Gerald

Well, why don't you have him?

Lady Frederick

Good heavens, I'm old enough to be his mother.

Gerald

Nonsense. You're only ten years older than he is, and nowadays no nice young man marries a woman younger than himself.

Lady Frederick

He's such a good fellow. I couldn't do him a nasty turn like that.

Gerald

How about Montgomerie? He simply stinks of money, and he's not a bad sort.

Lady Frederick

[*Surprised.*] My dear boy, I hardly know him.

Gerald

Well, I'm afraid it means marriage or bankruptcy.

Lady Frederick

Here's Charlie. Take him away, there's a dear. I want to talk to Paradine.

Enter Paradine Fouldes with Mereston.

Fouldes

What, still here, Lady Frederick?

Lady Frederick

As large as life.

Fouldes

We've been taking a turn on the terrace.

Lady Frederick

[*To Mereston.*] And has your astute uncle been pumping you, Charlie?

Fouldes

Eh, what?

Mereston

I don't think he got much out of me.

Fouldes

[*Good-naturedly.*] All I wanted, dear boy. There's no one so transparent as the person who thinks he's devilish deep. By the way, what's the time?

Gerald

About eleven, isn't it?

Fouldes

Ah! How old are you, Charlie?

Mereston

Twenty-two.

Fouldes

Then it's high time you went to bed.

Lady Frederick

Charlie's not going to bed till I tell him. Are you?

Mereston

Of course not.

Fouldes

Has it escaped your acute intelligence, my friend, that I want to talk to Lady Frederick?

Mereston

Not at all. But I have no reason to believe that Lady Frederick wants to talk to you.

Gerald

Let's go and have a game of pills, Charlie.

Mereston

D'you want to be left alone with the old villain?

Fouldes

You show no respect for my dyed hairs, young man.

Lady Frederick

I've not seen him for years, you know.

Mereston

Oh, all right. I say, you're coming for a ride to-morrow, aren't you?

Lady Frederick

Certainly. But it must be in the afternoon.

Fouldes

I'm sorry, but Charles has arranged to motor me over to Nice in the afternoon.

Mereston

[*To Lady Frederick.*] That'll suit me A 1. I had an engagement, but it was quite unimportant.

Lady Frederick

Then that's settled. Good-night.

Mereston

Good-night.

[He goes out with Gerald. Lady Frederick turns and good-humouredly scrutinises Paradise Fouldes.]

Lady Frederick

Well?

Fouldes

Well?

Lady Frederick

You wear excellently, Paradine.

Fouldes

Thanks.

Lady Frederick

How do you manage it?

Fouldes

By getting up late and never going to bed early, by eating whatever I like and drinking whenever I'm thirsty, by smoking strong cigars, taking no exercise, and refusing under any circumstances to be bored.

Lady Frederick

I'm sorry you had to leave town in such a hurry. Were you amusing yourself?

Fouldes

I come to the Riviera every year.

Lady Frederick

I daresay, but not so early.

Fouldes

I've never surrendered so far to middle age as to make habits.

Lady Frederick

My dear Paradine, the day before yesterday, Lady Mereston, quite distracted, went to the post office and sent you the following wire: "Come at once, your help urgently needed. Charlie in toils designing female, Maud." Am I right?

Fouldes

I never admit even to myself that a well-dressed woman is mistaken.

Lady Frederick

So you started post-haste, bent upon protecting your nephew, and were infinitely surprised to learn that the designing female was no other than your humble servant.

Fouldes

You'd be irresistible, Lady Frederick, if you didn't know you were so clever.

Lady Frederick

And now what are you going to do?

Fouldes

My dear lady, I'm not a police officer, but a very harmless, inoffensive old bachelor.

Lady Frederick

With more wiles than the mother of many daughters and the subtlety of a company promoter.

Fouldes

Maud seems to think that as I've racketted about a little in my time, I'm just the sort of man to deal with you. Set a thief to catch a thief, don't you know? She's rather fond of proverbs.

Lady Frederick

She should have thought rather of: When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war. I hear Lady Mereston has been saying the most agreeable things about me.

Fouldes

Ah, that's women's fault; they always show their hand. You're the only woman I ever knew who didn't.

Lady Frederick

[*With a brogue.*] You should have avoided the Blarney Stone when you went to Ireland.

Fouldes

Look here, d'you want to marry Charlie?

Lady Frederick

Why should I?

Fouldes

Because he's got fifty thousand a year, and you're head over ears in debt. You've got to raise something like four thousand pounds at once, or you go under. You've got yourself a good deal talked about during the last ten years, but people have stood you because you had plenty of money. If you go broke they'll drop you like a hot potato. And I daresay it wouldn't be inconvenient to change Lady Frederick Berolles into Lady Mereston. My sister has always led me to believe that it is rather attractive to be a Marchioness.

Lady Frederick

Unlike a duchess, its cheap without being gaudy.

Fouldes

You asked me why you might want to marry a boy from ten to fifteen years younger than yourself, and I've told you.

Lady Frederick

And now perhaps you'll tell me why you're going to interfere

in my private concerns?

Fouldes

Well, you see his mother happens to be my sister, and I'm rather fond of her. It's true her husband was the most sanctimonious prig I've ever met in my life.

Lady Frederick

I remember him well. He was president of the Broad Church Union and wore side-whiskers.

Fouldes

But she stuck to me through thick and thin. I've been in some pretty tight places in my day, and she's always given me a leg up when I wanted it. I've got an idea it would just about break her heart if Charlie married you.

Lady Frederick

Thanks.

Fouldes

You know, I don't want to be offensive, but I think it would be a pity myself. And besides, unless I'm much mistaken, I've got a little score of my own that I want to pay off.

Lady Frederick

Have you?

Fouldes

You've got a good enough memory not to have forgotten that you made a blithering fool of me once. I swore I'd get even with you, and by George, I mean to do it.

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] And how do you propose to stop me if I make up my mind that I'm going to accept Charlie?

Fouldes

Well, he's not proposed yet, has he?

Lady Frederick

Not yet, but I've had to use every trick and device I can think of to prevent him.

Fouldes

Look here, I'm going to play this game with my cards on the table.

Lady Frederick

Then I shall be on my guard. You're never so dangerous as when you pretend to be frank.

Fouldes

I'm sorry you should think so badly of me.

Lady Frederick

I don't. Only it was a stroke of genius when Nature put the soul of a Jesuit priest into the body of a Yorkshire squire.

Fouldes

I wonder what you're paying me compliments for. You must be rather afraid of me.

[They look at one another for a moment.]

Lady Frederick

Well, let's look at these cards.

Fouldes

First of all, there's this money you've got to raise.

Lady Frederick

Well?

Fouldes

This is my sister's suggestion.

Lady Frederick

That means you don't much like it.

Fouldes

If you'll refuse the boy and clear out – we'll give you forty thousand pounds.

Lady Frederick

I suppose you'd be rather surprised if I boxed your ears.

Fouldes

Now, look here, between you and me high falutin's rather absurd, don't you think so? You're in desperate want of money, and I don't suppose it would amuse you much to have a young hobbledohoy hanging about your skirts for the rest of your life.

Lady Frederick

Very well, we'll have no high falutin! You may tell Lady Mereston that if I really wanted the money I shouldn't be such

an idiot as to take forty thousand down when I can have fifty thousand a year for the asking.

Fouldes

I told her that.

Lady Frederick

You showed great perspicacity. Now for the second card.

Fouldes

My dear, it's no good getting into a paddy over it.

Lady Frederick

I've never been calmer in my life.

Fouldes

You always had the very deuce of a temper. I suppose you've not given Charlie a sample of it yet, have you?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Not yet.

Fouldes

Well, the second card's your reputation.

Lady Frederick

But I haven't got any. I thought that such an advantage.

Fouldes

You see Charlie is a young fool. He thinks you a paragon of all the virtues, and it's never occurred to him that you've rather gone the pace in your time.

Lady Frederick

It's one of my greatest consolations to think that even a hundred horse-power racing motor couldn't be more rapid than I've been.

Fouldes

Still it'll be rather a shock to Charlie when he hears that this modest flower whom he trembles to adore has...

Lady Frederick

Very nearly eloped with his own uncle. But you won't tell him that story because you hate looking a perfect ass.

Fouldes

Madam, when duty calls, Paradine Fouldes consents even to look ridiculous. But I was thinking of the Bellingham affair.

Lady Frederick

Ah, of course, there's the Bellingham affair. I'd forgotten it.

Fouldes

Nasty little business that, eh?

Lady Frederick

Horrid.

Fouldes

Don't you think it would choke him off?

Lady Frederick

I think it very probable.

Fouldes

Well, hadn't you better cave in?

Lady Frederick

[*Ringing the bell.*] Ah, but you've not seen my cards yet. [*A servant enters.*] Tell my servant to bring down the despatch-box which is on my writing-table.

SERVANT.

Yes, miladi.

[Exit.

Fouldes

What's up now?

Lady Frederick

Well, four or five years ago I was staying at this hotel, and Mimi la Bretonne had rooms here.

Fouldes

I never heard of the lady, but her name suggests that she had an affectionate nature.

Lady Frederick

She was a little singer at the Folies Bergères, and she had the loveliest emeralds I ever saw.

Fouldes

But you don't know Maud's.

Lady Frederick

The late Lord Mereston had a passion for emeralds. He always thought they were such pure stones.

Fouldes

[*Quickly.*] I beg your pardon?

Lady Frederick

Well, Mimi fell desperately ill, and there was no one to look after her. Of course the pious English ladies in the hotel wouldn't go within a mile of her, so I went and did the usual thing, don't you know.

[Lady Frederick's man comes in with a small despatch-box which he places on a table. He goes out. Lady Frederick as she talks, unlocks it.]

Fouldes

Thank God I'm a bachelor, and no ministering angel ever smooths my pillow when I particularly want to be left alone.

Lady Frederick

I nursed her more or less through the whole illness, and afterwards she fancied she owed me her worthless little life. She wanted to give me the precious emeralds, and when I refused was so heart-broken that I said I'd take one thing if I might.

Fouldes

And what was that?

Lady Frederick

A bundle of letters. I'd seen the address on the back of the envelope, and then I recognised the writing. I thought they'd be much safer in my hands than in hers. [*She takes them out of the box and hands them to Paradine.*] Here they are.

[He looks and starts violently.]

Fouldes

89 Grosvenor Square. It's Mereston's writing. You don't mean? What! Ah, ah, ah. [*He bursts into a shout of laughter.*]

The old sinner. And Mereston wouldn't have me in the house, if you please, because I was a dissolute libertine. And he was the president of the Broad Church Union. Good Lord, how often have I heard him say: "Gentlemen, I take my stand on the morality, the cleanliness and the purity of English Family Life." Oh, oh, oh.

Lady Frederick

I've often noticed that the religious temperament is very susceptible to the charms of my sex.

Fouldes

May I look?

Lady Frederick

Well, I don't know. I suppose so.

Fouldes

[*Reading.*] "Heart's delight"... And he signs himself, "your darling chickabiddy." The old ruffian.

Lady Frederick

She was a very pretty little thing.

Fouldes

I daresay, but thank heaven, I have some sense of decency left, and it outrages all my susceptibilities that a man in side-whiskers should call himself anybody's chickabiddy.

Lady Frederick

Protestations of undying affection are never ridiculous when they are accompanied by such splendid emeralds.

Fouldes

[*Starting and growing suddenly serious.*] And what about Maud?

Lady Frederick

Well?

Fouldes

Poor girl, it'd simply break her heart. He preached at her steadily for twenty years, and she worshipped the very ground he trod on. She'd have died of grief at his death except she felt it her duty to go on with his work.

Lady Frederick

I know.

Fouldes

By Jove, it's a good card. You were quite right to refuse the emeralds: these letters are twice as valuable.

Lady Frederick

Would you like to burn them?

Fouldes

Betsy!

Lady Frederick

There's the stove. Put them in.

[He takes them up in both hands and hurries to the stove. But he stops and brings them back, he throws them on the sofa.]

Fouldes

No, I won't.

Lady Frederick

Why not?

Fouldes

It's too dooced generous. I'll fight you tooth and nail, but it's not fair to take an advantage over me like that. You'll bind my hands with fetters.

Lady Frederick

Very well. You've had your chance.

Fouldes

But, by Jove, you must have a good hand to throw away a card like that. What have you got – a straight flush?

Lady Frederick

I may be only bluffing, you know.

Fouldes

Lord, it does me good to hear your nice old Irish brogue again.

Lady Frederick

Faith, and does it?

Fouldes

I believe you only put it on to get over people.

Lady Frederick

[*Smiling.*] Begorrah, it's not easy to get over you.

Fouldes

Lord, I was in love with you once, wasn't I?

Lady Frederick

Not more than lots of other people have been.

Fouldes

And you did treat me abominably.

Lady Frederick

Ah, that's what they all said. But you got over it very well.

Fouldes

I didn't. My digestion was permanently impaired by your

brutal treatment.

Lady Frederick

Is that why you went to Carlsbad afterwards instead of the Rocky Mountains?

Fouldes

You may laugh, but the fact remains that I've only been in love once, and that was with you.

Lady Frederick

[Smiling as she holds out her hand.] Good-night.

Fouldes

For all that I'm going to fight you now for all I'm worth.

Lady Frederick

I'm not frightened of you, Paradine.

Fouldes

Good-night.

[As he goes out, Captain Montgomerie enters.]

Lady Frederick

[Yawning and stretching her arms.] Oh I'm so sleepy.

Captain Montgomerie

I'm sorry for that. I wanted to have a talk with you.

Lady Frederick

[Smiling.] I daresay I can keep awake for five minutes, you know – especially if you offer me a cigarette.

Captain Montgomerie

Here you are.

[He hands her his case and lights her cigarette.]

Lady Frederick

[*With a sigh.*] Oh, what a comfort.

Captain Montgomerie

I wanted to tell you, I had a letter this morning from my solicitor to say that he's just bought Crowley Castle on my behalf.

Lady Frederick

Really. But it's a lovely place. You must ask me to come and stay.

Captain Montgomerie

I should like you to stay there indefinitely.

Lady Frederick

[*With a quick look.*] That's charming of you, but I never desert my London long.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Smiling.*] I have a very nice house in Portman Square.

Lady Frederick

[*Surprised.*] Really?

Captain Montgomerie

And I'm thinking of going into Parliament at the next election.

Lady Frederick

It appears to be a very delightful pastime to govern the British nation, dignified without being laborious.

Captain Montgomerie

Lady Frederick, although I've been in the service I have rather a good head for business, and I hate beating about the bush. I wanted to ask you to marry me.

Lady Frederick

It's nice of you not to make a fuss about it. I'm very much obliged but I'm afraid I can't.

Captain Montgomerie

Why not?

Lady Frederick

Well, you see, I don't know you.

Captain Montgomerie

We could spend the beginning of our married life so usefully in making one another's acquaintance.

Lady Frederick

It would be rather late in the day then to come to the conclusion that we couldn't bear the sight of one another.

Captain Montgomerie

Shall I send my banker's book so that you may see that my antecedents are respectable and my circumstances – such as to inspire affection.

Lady Frederick

I have no doubt it would be very interesting – but not to me.

[She makes as if to go.]

Captain Montgomerie

Ah, don't go yet. Won't you give me some reason?

Lady Frederick

If you insist. I'm not in the least in love with you.

Captain Montgomerie

D'you think that much matters?

Lady Frederick

You're a friend of Gerald's, and he says you're a very good sort. But I really can't marry every one that Gerald rather likes.

Captain Montgomerie

He said he'd put in a good word for me.

Lady Frederick

If I ever marry again it shall be to please myself, not to please my brother.

Captain Montgomerie

I hope I shall induce you to alter your mind.

Lady Frederick

I'm afraid I can give you no hope of that.

Captain Montgomerie

You know, when I determine to do a thing, I generally do it.

Lady Frederick

That sounds very like a threat.

Captain Montgomerie

You may take it as such if you please.

Lady Frederick

And you've made up your mind that you're going to marry me?

Captain Montgomerie

Quite.

Lady Frederick

Well, I've made up mine that you shan't. So we're quits.

Captain Montgomerie

Why don't you talk to your brother about it?

Lady Frederick

Because it's no business of his.

Captain Montgomerie

Isn't it? Ask him!

Lady Frederick

What do you mean by that?

Captain Montgomerie

Ask him? Good-night.

Lady Frederick

Good-night. [*He goes out. Lady Frederick goes to the French*

window that leads to the terrace and calls.] Gerald!

Gerald

Hulloa!

[He appears and comes into the room.]

Lady Frederick

Did you know that Captain Montgomerie was going to propose to me?

Gerald

Yes.

Lady Frederick

Is there any reason why I should marry him?

Gerald

Only that I owe him nine hundred pounds.

Lady Frederick

[*Aghast.*] Oh, why didn't you tell me?

Gerald

You were so worried, I couldn't. Oh, I've been such a fool. I tried to make a *coup* for Rose's sake.

Lady Frederick

Is it a gambling debt?

Gerald

Yes.

Lady Frederick

[*Ironically.*] What they call a debt of honour?

Gerald

I must pay it the day after to-morrow without fail.

Lady Frederick

But that's the day my two bills fall due. And if you don't?

Gerald

I shall have to send in my papers, and I shall lose Rosie. And then I shall blow out my silly brains.

Lady Frederick

But who is the man?

Gerald

He's the son of Aaron Levitzki, the money-lender.

Lady Frederick

[*Half-comic, half-aghast.*] Oh lord!

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is the same as in Act I. Admiral Carlisle is sleeping in an armchair with a handkerchief over his face. Rose is sitting on a grandfather's chair, and Gerald is leaning over the back.

Rose

Isn't papa a perfectly adorable chaperon?

[The Admiral snores.]

Gerald

Perfectly.

[A pause.]

Rose

I've started fifteen topics of conversation in the last quarter of an hour, Gerald.

Gerald

[*Smiling.*] Have you?

Rose

You always agree with me, and there's an end of it. So I have to rack my brains again.

Gerald

All you say is so very wise and sensible. Of course I agree.

Rose

I wonder if you'll think me sensible and wise in ten years.

Gerald

I'm quite sure I shall.

Rose

Why, then, I'm afraid we shan't cultivate any great brilliancy of repartee.

Gerald

Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.

Rose

Oh, don't say that. When a man's in love, he at once makes a pedestal of the Ten Commandments and stands on the top of them with his arms akimbo. When a woman's in love she doesn't care two straws for Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not.

Gerald

When a woman's in love she can put her heart on the slide of a microscope and examine how it beats. When a man's in love, what do you think he cares for science and philosophy and all the rest of it!

Rose

When a man's in love he can only write sonnets to the moon.
When a woman's in love she can still cook his dinner and darn
her own stockings.

Gerald

I wish you wouldn't cap all my observations.

[She lifts up her face, and he kisses her lips.]

Rose

I'm beginning to think you're rather nice, you know.

Gerald

That's reassuring, at all events.

Rose

But no one could accuse you of being a scintillating talker.

Gerald

Have you ever watched the lovers in the Park sitting on the benches hour after hour without saying a word?

Rose

Why?

Gerald

Because I've always thought that they must be bored to the verge of tears. Now I know they're only happy.

Rose

You're certainly my soldier, so I suppose I'm your nursery-maid.

Gerald

You know, when I was at Trinity College, Dublin —

Rose

[*Interrupting.*] Were you there? I thought you went to Oxford.

Gerald

No, why?

Rose

Only all my people go to Magdalen.

Gerald

Yes.

Rose

And I've decided that if I ever have a son he shall go there too.

[The Admiral starts and pulls the handkerchief off his face. The others do not notice him. He is aghast and astounded at the conversation. Lady Frederick comes in later and stands smiling as she listens.]

Gerald

My darling, you know I hate to thwart you in any way, but I've quite made up my mind that my son shall go to Dublin as I did.

Rose

I'm awfully sorry, Gerald, but the boy must be educated like a gentleman.

Gerald

There I quite agree, Rose, but first of all he's an Irishman, and it's right that he should be educated in Ireland.

Rose

Darling Gerald, a mother's love is naturally the safest guide in these things.

Gerald

Dearest Rose, a father's wisdom is always the most reliable.

Lady Frederick

Pardon my interfering, but – aren't you just a little previous?

Admiral

[*Bursting out.*] Did you ever hear such a conversation in your life between a young unmarried couple?

Rose

My dear papa, we must be prepared for everything.

Admiral

In my youth young ladies did not refer to things of that sort.

Lady Frederick

Well, I don't suppose they're any the worse for having an elementary knowledge of natural history. Personally I doubt whether ignorance is quite the same thing as virtue, and I'm not quite sure that a girl makes a better wife because she's been brought up like a perfect fool.

Admiral

I am old-fashioned, Lady Frederick; and my idea of a modest girl is that when certain topics are mentioned she should swoon. Swoon, madam, swoon. They always did it when I was a lad.

Rose

Well, father, I've often tried to faint when I wanted something that you wouldn't give me, and I've never been able to manage it. So I'm sure I couldn't swoon.

Admiral

And with regard to this ridiculous discussion as to which University your son is to be sent, you seem to forget that I have the right to be consulted.

Gerald

My dear Admiral, I don't see how it can possibly matter to you.

Admiral

And before we go any further I should like you to know that the very day Rose was born I determined that her son should go to Cambridge.

Rose

My dear papa, I think Gerald and I are far and away the best judges of our son's welfare.

Admiral

The boy must work, Rose. I will have no good-for-nothing as my grandson.

Gerald

Exactly. And that is why I'm resolved he shall go to Dublin.

Rose

The important thing is that he should have really nice manners, and that they teach at Oxford if they teach nothing else.

Lady Frederick

Well, don't you think you'd better wait another twenty years or so before you discuss this?

Admiral

There are some matters which must be settled at once, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

You know, young things are fairly independent nowadays. I don't know what they'll be in twenty years' time.

Gerald

The first thing the boy shall learn is obedience.

Rose. Certainly. There's nothing so hateful as a disobedient child.

Admiral

I can't see my grandson venturing to disobey me.

Lady Frederick

Then you're all agreed. So that's settled. I came to tell you your carriage was ready.

Admiral

Go and put on your bonnet, Rose. [*To Lady Frederick.*] Are you coming with us?

Lady Frederick

I'm afraid I can't. Au revoir.

Admiral

A tout à l'heure.

[He and Rose go out.]

Gerald

Have you ever seen in your life any one so entirely delightful as Rose?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Only when I've looked in the glass.

Gerald

My dear Elizabeth, how vain you are.

Lady Frederick

You're very happy, my Gerald.

Gerald

It's such a relief to have got over all the difficulties. I thought it never would come right. You are a brick, Elizabeth.

Lady Frederick

I really think I am rather.

Gerald

The moment you promised to arrange things I felt as safe as a house.

Lady Frederick

I said I'd do my best, didn't I? And I told you not to worry.

Gerald

[Turning round suddenly.] Isn't it all right?

Lady Frederick

No, it's about as wrong as it can possibly be. I knew Cohen was staying here, and I thought I could get him to hold the bills over for a few days.

Gerald

And won't he?

Lady Frederick

He hasn't got them any more.

Gerald

[*Startled.*] What!

Lady Frederick

They've been negotiated, and he swears he doesn't know who has them.

Gerald

But who could have been such a fool?

Lady Frederick

I don't know, that's just the awful part of it. It was bad enough before. I knew the worst Cohen could do, but now... It couldn't be Paradine.

Gerald

And then there's Montgomerie.

Lady Frederick

I shall see him to-day.

Gerald

What are you going to say to him?

Lady Frederick

I haven't an idea. I'm rather frightened of him.

Gerald

You know, dear, if the worst comes to the worst...

Lady Frederick

Whatever happens you shall marry Rose. I promise you that.

[Paradine Fouldes appears.]

Fouldes

May I come in?

Lady Frederick

[Gaily.] It's a public room. I don't see how we can possibly prevent you.

Gerald

I'm just going to take a stroll.

Lady Frederick

Do.

[He goes out.]

Fouldes

Well? How are things going?

Lady Frederick

Quite well, thank you.

Fouldes

I've left Charlie with his mother. I hope you can spare him for a couple of hours.

Lady Frederick

I told him he must spend the afternoon with her. I don't approve of his neglecting his filial duty.

Fouldes

Ah!.. I saw Dick Cohen this morning.

Lady Frederick

[*Quickly.*] Did you?

Fouldes

It seems to interest you?

Lady Frederick

Not at all. Why should it?

Fouldes

[*Smiling.*] Nice little man, isn't he?

Lady Frederick

[*Good humouredly.*] I wish I had something to throw at you.

Fouldes

[*With a laugh.*] Well, I haven't got the confounded bills. I was too late.

Lady Frederick

Did you try?

Fouldes

Oh – yes, I thought it would interest Charlie to know how extremely needful it was for you to marry him.

Lady Frederick

Then who on earth has got them?

Fouldes

I haven't an idea, but they must make you very uncomfortable. Three thousand five hundred, eh?

Lady Frederick

Don't say it all at once. It sounds so much.

Fouldes

You wouldn't like to exchange those letters of Mereston's for seven thousand pounds, would you?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] No.

Fouldes

Ah... By the way, d'you mind if I tell Charlie the full story of your – relations with me?

Lady Frederick

Why should I? It's not I who'll look ridiculous.

Fouldes

Thanks. I may avail myself of your permission.

Lady Frederick

I daresay you've noticed that Charlie has a very keen sense of humour.

Fouldes

If you're going to be disagreeable to me I shall go. [*He stops.*] I say, are you quite sure there's nothing else that can be brought up against you?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Quite sure, thanks.

Fouldes

My sister's very jubilant to-day. What about the Bellingham affair?

Lady Frederick

Merely scandal, my friend.

Fouldes

Well, look out. She's a woman, and she'll stick at nothing.

Lady Frederick

I wonder why you warn me.

Fouldes

For the sake of old times, my dear.

Lady Frederick

You're growing sentimental, Paradine. It's the punishment which the gods inflict on a cynic when he grows old.

Fouldes

It may be, but for the life of me I can't forget that once —

Lady Frederick

[*Interrupting.*] My dear friend, don't rake up my lamentable past.

Fouldes

I don't think I've met any one so entirely devoid of sentiment as you are.

Lady Frederick

Let us agree that I have every vice under the sun and have done with it.

[*A Servant comes in.*]

Servant

Madame Claude wishes to see your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

Oh, my dressmaker.

Fouldes

Another bill?

Lady Frederick

That's the worst of Monte. One meets as many creditors as in Bond Street. Say I'm engaged.

Servant

Madame Claude says she will wait till miladi is free.

Fouldes

You make a mistake. One should always be polite to people whose bills one can't pay.

Lady Frederick

Show her in.

Servant

Yes, miladi.

[Exit Servant.]

Fouldes

Is it a big one?

Lady Frederick

Oh, no; only seven hundred pounds.

Fouldes

By Jove.

Lady Frederick

My dear friend, one must dress. I can't go about in fig-leaves.

Fouldes

One can dress simply.

Lady Frederick

I do. That's why it costs so much.

Fouldes

You know, you're devilish extravagant.

Lady Frederick

I'm not. I'm content with the barest necessities of existence.

Fouldes

You've got a maid.

Lady Frederick

Of course I've got a maid. I was never taught to dress myself.

Fouldes

And you've got a footman.

Lady Frederick

I've always had a footman. And my mother always had a footman. I couldn't live a day without him.

Fouldes

What does he do for you?

Lady Frederick

He inspires confidence in tradesmen.

Fouldes

And you have the most expensive suite of rooms in the hotel.

Lady Frederick

I'm in such a dreadful mess. If I hadn't got nice rooms I should brood over it.

Fouldes

Then, as if that weren't enough, you fling your money away at the tables.

Lady Frederick

When you're as poor as I am, a few louis more or less can make absolutely no difference.

Fouldes

[*With a laugh.*] You're quite incorrigible.

Lady Frederick

It's really not my fault. I do try to be economical, but money slips through my fingers like water. I can't help it.

Fouldes

You want a sensible sort of a man to look after you.

Lady Frederick

I want a very rich sort of a man to look after me.

Fouldes

If you were my wife, I should advertise in the papers that I wasn't responsible for your debts.

Lady Frederick

If you were my husband, I'd advertise immediately underneath that I wasn't responsible for your manners.

Fouldes

I wonder why you're so reckless.

Lady Frederick

When my husband was alive I was so utterly wretched. And afterwards, when I looked forward to a little happiness, my boy died. Then I didn't care any more. I did everything I could to stupefy myself. I squandered money as other women take morphia – that's all.

Fouldes

It's the same dear scatter-brained, good-hearted Betsy that I used to know.

Lady Frederick

You're the only person who calls me Betsy now. To all the others I'm only Elizabeth.

Fouldes

Look here, what are you going to do with this dressmaker?

Lady Frederick

I don't know. I always trust to the inspiration of the moment.

Fouldes

She'll make a devil of a fuss, won't she?

Lady Frederick

Oh, no; I shall be quite nice to her.

Fouldes

I daresay. But won't she be very disagreeable to you?

Lady Frederick

You don't know what a way I have with my creditors.

Fouldes

I know it's not a paying way.

Lady Frederick

Isn't it? I bet you a hundred louis that I offer her the money and she refuses it.

Fouldes

I'll take that.

Lady Frederick

Here she is.

[Madame Claude enters, ushered in by the Servant. She is a stout, genteel person, very splendidly gowned, with a Cockney accent. Her face is set to sternness, decision to make a scene, and general sourness.]

Servant

Madame Claude.

[Exit Servant. Lady Frederick goes up to her enthusiastically and takes both her hands.]

Lady Frederick

Best of women. This is a joyful surprise.

Madame Claude

[*Drawing herself up.*] I 'eard quite by chance that your ladyship was at Monte.

Lady Frederick

So you came to see me at once. That was nice of you. You're the very person I wanted to see.

Madame Claude

[*Significantly.*] I'm glad of that, my lady, I must confess.

Lady Frederick

You dear creature. That's one advantage of Monte Carlo, one meets all one's friends. Do you know Mr. Fouldes? This is Madame Claude, an artist, my dear Paradine, a real artist.

Madame Claude

[*Grimly.*] I'm pleased that your ladyship should think so.

Fouldes

How d'you do.

Lady Frederick

Now, this gown. Look, look, look. In this skirt there's genius, *mon cher*. In the way it hangs my whole character is expressed. Observe the fullness of it, that indicates those admirable virtues which make me an ornament to Society, while the frill at the bottom just suggests those foibles – you can hardly call them faults – which add a certain grace and interest to my personality. And the flounce. Paradine, I beseech you to look at it carefully. I would sooner have designed this flounce than won the Battle of Waterloo.

Madame Claude

Your ladyship is very kind.

Lady Frederick

Not at all, not at all. You remember that rose chiffon. I wore it the other day, and the dear Archduchess came up to me and said: "My dear, my dear." I thought she was going to have a fit. But when she recovered she kissed me on both cheeks and said: "Lady Frederick, you have a dressmaker worth her weight in gold." You heard her, Paradine, didn't you?

Fouldes

You forget that I only arrived last night.

Lady Frederick

Of course. How stupid of me. She'll be perfectly delighted to hear that you're in Monte Carlo. But I shall have to break it to her gently.

Madame Claude

[*Unmoved.*] I'm sorry to intrude upon your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

Now what are you talking about? If you hadn't come to see me I should never have forgiven you.

Madame Claude

I wanted to have a little talk with your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

Oh, but I hope we shall have many little talks. Have you brought your motor down?

Madame Claude

Yes.

Lady Frederick

That's charming. You shall take me for a drive in it every day. I hope you're going to stay some time.

Madame Claude

That depends on circumstances, Lady Frederick. I 'ave a little business to do here.

Lady Frederick

Then let me give you one warning – don't gamble.

Madame Claude

Oh, no, my lady. I gamble quite enough in my business as it is. I never know when my customers will pay their bills – if ever.

Lady Frederick

[*Slightly taken aback.*] Ha, ha, ha.

Fouldes

[*With a deep guffaw.*] Ho, ho, ho.

Lady Frederick

Isn't she clever? I must tell that to the Archduchess. She'll be so amused. Ha, ha, ha, ha. The dear Archduchess, you know she loves a little joke. You must really meet her. Will you come and lunch? I know you'd hit it off together.

Madame Claude

[*More genially.*] That's very kind of your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

My dear, you know perfectly well that I've always looked upon you as one of my best friends. Now who shall we have? There's you and me and the Archduchess. Then I'll ask Lord Mereston.

Madame Claude

The Marquess of Mereston, Lady Frederick?

Lady Frederick

Yes. And Mr. Fouldes, his uncle.

Madame Claude

Excuse me, are you the Mr. Paradine Fouldes?

Fouldes

[*Bowing.*] At your service, madam.

Madame Claude

I'm so glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Fouldes.
[*Unctuously.*] I've always heard you're such a bad man.

Fouldes

Madam, you overwhelm me with confusion.

Madame Claude

Believe me, Mr. Fouldes, it's not the ladies that are married to saints who take the trouble to dress well.

Lady Frederick

Now we want a third man. Shall we ask my brother – you know Sir Gerald O'Mara, don't you? Or shall we ask Prince Doniani? Yes, I think we'll ask the Prince. I'm sure you'd like him. Such a handsome man! That'll make six.

Madame Claude

It's very kind of you, Lady Frederick, but – well, I'm only a tradeswoman, you know.

Lady Frederick

A tradeswoman? How can you talk such nonsense. You are an artist – a real artist, my dear. And an artist is fit to meet a king.

Madame Claude

Well, I don't deny that I'd be ashamed to dress my customers in the gowns I see painted at the Royal Academy.

Lady Frederick

Then it's quite settled, isn't it, Madame Claude – oh, may I call you Ada?

Madame Claude

Oh, Lady Frederick, I should be very much flattered. But how did you know that was my name?

Lady Frederick

Why you wrote me a letter only the other day.

Madame Claude

Did I?

Lady Frederick

And such a cross letter too.

Madame Claude

[*Apologetically.*] Oh, but Lady Frederick, that was only in the way of business. I don't exactly remember what expressions I may have made use of —

Lady Frederick

[*Interrupting, as if the truth had suddenly flashed across her.*]
Ada! I do believe you came here to-day about my account.

Madame Claude

Oh, no, my lady, I promise you.

Lady Frederick

You did; I know you did. I see it in your face. Now that really wasn't nice of you. I thought you came as a friend.

Madame Claude

I did, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

No, you wanted to dun me. I'm disappointed in you. I did think, after all the things I've had from you, you wouldn't treat me like that.

Madame Claude

But I assure your ladyship...

Lady Frederick

Not another word. You came to ask for a cheque. You shall have it.

Madame Claude

No, Lady Frederick, I wouldn't take it.

Lady Frederick

What is the exact figure, Madame Claude?

Madame Claude

I – I don't remember.

Lady Frederick

Seven hundred and fifty pounds, seventeen and ninepence. You see, I remember. You came for your cheque and you shall have it.

[She sits down and takes a pen.]

Madame Claude

Now, Lady Frederick, I should look upon that as most unkind. It's treating me like a very second-rate establishment.

Lady Frederick

I'm sorry, but you should have thought of that before. Now I haven't got a cheque; how tiresome.

Madame Claude

Oh, it doesn't matter, Lady Frederick. I promise you it never entered my 'ead.

Lady Frederick

What shall I do?

Fouldes

You can write it on a sheet of paper, you know.

Lady Frederick

[*With a look, aside to him.*] Monster! [*Aloud.*] Of course I can. I hadn't thought of that. [*She takes a sheet of paper.*] But how on earth am I to get a stamp?

Fouldes

[*Much amused.*] I happen to have one on me.

Lady Frederick

I wonder why on earth you should have English stamps in Monte Carlo?

Fouldes

[*Handing her one.*] A penny stamp may sometimes save one a hundred louis.

Lady Frederick

[*Ironically.*] Thanks so much. I write the name of my bank on the top, don't I? Pay Madame Claude...

Madame Claude

Now, it's no good, Lady Frederick, I won't take it. After all I 'ave my self-respect to think of.

Lady Frederick

It's too late now.

Madame Claude

[*Sniffing a little.*] No, no, Lady Frederick. Don't be too 'ard on me. As one lady to another I ask you to forgive me. I did come about my account, but – well, I don't want the money.

Lady Frederick

[*Looking up good-humouredly.*] Well, well. [*She looks at the cheque.*] It shall be as you wish. There. [*She tears it up.*]

Madame Claude

Oh, thank you, Lady Frederick. I look upon that as a real favour. And now I really must be getting off.

Lady Frederick

Must you go? Well, good-bye. Paradine, take Madame Claude to her motor. Ada!

[*She kisses her on the cheek.*]

Madame Claude

[*Going.*] I am pleased to have seen you.

[Paradine offers his arm and goes out with Madame Claude. Lady Frederick goes to the window, stands on a chair and waves her handkerchief. While she is doing this Captain Montgomerie enters.]

Captain Montgomerie

How d'you do?

Lady Frederick

[*Getting down.*] How nice of you to come. I wanted to see you.

Captain Montgomerie

May I sit down?

Lady Frederick

Of course. There are one or two things I'd like to talk to you about.

Captain Montgomerie

Yes?

Lady Frederick

First I must thank you for your great kindness to Gerald. I didn't know last night that he owed you a good deal of money.

Captain Montgomerie

It's a mere trifle.

Lady Frederick

You must be very rich to call nine hundred pounds that?

Captain Montgomerie

I am.

Lady Frederick

[*With a laugh.*] All the same it's extremely good of you to give him plenty of time.

Captain Montgomerie

I told Gerald he could have till to-morrow.

Lady Frederick

Obviously he wants to settle with you as soon as ever he can.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Quietly.*] I often wonder why gambling debts are known as debts of honour.

Lady Frederick

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Of course I realise that if you choose to press for the money and Gerald can't pay – he'll have to send in his papers.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Lightly.*] You may be quite sure I have no wish to bring about such a calamity. By the way, have you thought over our little talk of last night?

Lady Frederick

No.

Captain Montgomerie

You would have been wise to do so.

Lady Frederick

My dear Captain Montgomerie, you really can't expect me to marry you because my brother has been so foolish as to lose more money at poker than he can afford.

Captain Montgomerie

Did you ever hear that my father was a money-lender?

Lady Frederick

A lucrative profession, I believe.

Captain Montgomerie

He found it so. He was a Polish Jew called Aaron Levitzki. He came to this country with three shillings in his pocket. He lent half-a-crown of it to a friend on the condition that he should be paid back seven and six in three days.

Lady Frederick

I'm not good at figures, but the interest sounds rather high.

Captain Montgomerie

It is. That was one of my father's specialities. From these humble beginnings his business grew to such proportions that at his death he was able to leave me the name and arms of the great family of Montgomerie and something over a million of money.

Lady Frederick

The result of thrift, industry, and good fortune.

Captain Montgomerie

My father was able to gratify all his ambitions but one. He was eaten up with the desire to move in good society, and this he was never able to achieve. His dying wish was that I should live in those circles which he knew only...

Lady Frederick

Across the counter?

Captain Montgomerie

Precisely. But my poor father was a little ignorant in these matters. To him one lord was as good as another. He thought a Marquess a finer man than an Earl, and a Viscount than a Baron. He would never have understood that a penniless Irish baronet might go into better society than many a belted earl.

Lady Frederick

And what is the application of this?

Captain Montgomerie

I wanted to explain to you one of the reasons which emboldened me last night to make you a proposal of marriage.

Lady Frederick

But surely you know some very nice people. I saw you luncheon the other day with the widow of a city knight.

Captain Montgomerie

Many very excellent persons are glad to have me to dine with them. But I know quite well that they're not the real article. I'm as far off as ever from getting into those houses which you have been used to all your life. I'm not content with third-rate earls and rather seedy dowagers.

Lady Frederick

Forgive my frankness, but – aren't you rather a snob?

Captain Montgomerie

My father, Aaron Levitzki, married an English woman, and I have all the English virtues.

Lady Frederick

But I'm not quite sure that people would swallow you even as my husband.

Captain Montgomerie

They'd make a face, but they'd swallow me right enough. And when I asked them down to the best shoot in England they'd come to the conclusion that I agreed with them very well.

Lady Frederick

[*Still rather amused.*] Your offer is eminently businesslike, but you see I'm not a business woman. It doesn't appeal to me.

Captain Montgomerie

I only ask you to perform such of the duties of a wife as are required by Society. They are few enough in all conscience. I should wish you to entertain largely and receive my guests, be polite to me, at least in public, and go with me to the various places people go to. Otherwise I leave you entire freedom. You will find me generous and heedful to all your wishes.

Lady Frederick

Captain Montgomerie, I don't know how much of all that you have said is meant seriously. But, surely you're not choosing the right time to make such a proposal when my brother owes you so much money that if you care to be hard you can ruin him.

Captain Montgomerie

Why not?

Lady Frederick

D'you mean to say...?

Captain Montgomerie

I will be quite frank with you. I should never have allowed Gerald to lose so much money which there was no likelihood of his being able to pay, if I had not thought it earned me some claim upon your gratitude.

Lady Frederick

[*Shortly.*] Gerald will pay every penny he owes you to-morrow.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Blandly.*] Where d'you suppose he'll get it?

Lady Frederick

I have no doubt I shall be able to manage something.

Captain Montgomerie

Have you not tried this morning, entirely without success?

Lady Frederick

[*Startled.*] What?

Captain Montgomerie

You do not forget that you have sundry moneys of your own which are payable to-morrow?

Lady Frederick

How d'you know that?

Captain Montgomerie

I told you that when I took a thing in hand I carried it through. You went to Dick Cohen, and he told you he'd parted with the bills. Didn't you guess that only one man could have the least interest in taking them over?

Lady Frederick

You?

Captain Montgomerie

Yes.

Lady Frederick

Oh, God.

Captain Montgomerie

Come, come, don't be worried over it. There's nothing to be alarmed about. I'm a very decent chap – if you'd accepted me right away you would never have known that those bills were in my possession. Think it over once more. I'm sure we should get on well together. I can give you what you most need, money and the liberty to fling it away as recklessly as you choose; you can give me the assured and fixed position on which – my father's heart was set.

Lady Frederick

And if I don't accept, you'll make me a bankrupt and you'll ruin Gerald?

Captain Montgomerie

I refuse to consider that very unpleasant alternative.

Lady Frederick

Oh! I can't, I can't.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Laughing.*] But you must, you must. When shall I come for your answer? To-morrow? I'll come with the bills and Gerald's I.O.U. in my pocket, and you shall burn them yourself. Good-bye.

[He kisses her hand and goes out. Lady Frederick remains staring in front of her. Mereston enters, followed by Lady Mereston and Paradine.]

Mereston

[*Going to her eagerly.*] Hulloo! I wondered what on earth had become of you.

Lady Frederick

[*With a laugh.*] It's only two hours since I chased you away from me.

Mereston

I'm afraid I bore you to death.

Lady Frederick

Don't be so silly. You know you don't.

Mereston

Where are you going now?

Lady Frederick

I have rather a headache. I'm going to lie down.

Mereston

I'm so sorry.

[Lady Frederick goes out. Mereston stares after her anxiously, and makes a step towards the door.]

Lady Mereston

[Sharply.] Where are you going, Charlie?

Mereston

I never asked Lady Frederick if I could do anything.

Lady Mereston

Good heavens, there are surely plenty of servants in the hotel to get her anything she wants.

Mereston

Don't you think a drive in the motor would do her good?

Lady Mereston

[*Unable to control herself.*] Oh, I have no patience with you. I never saw such a ridiculous infatuation in my life.

Paradine

Steady, old girl, steady.

Mereston

What on earth d'you mean, mother?

Lady Mereston

Presumably you're not going to deny that you're in love with that woman.

Mereston

[*Growing pale.*] Would you mind speaking of her as Lady Frederick?

Lady Mereston

You try me very much, Charlie. Please answer my question.

Mereston

I don't want to seem unkind to you, mother, but I think you have no right to ask about my private affairs.

Fouldes

If you're going to talk this matter over you're more likely to come to an understanding if you both keep your tempers.

Mereston

There's nothing I wish to discuss.

Lady Mereston

Don't be absurd, Charlie. You're with Lady Frederick morning, noon and night. She can never stir a yard from the hotel but you go flying after. You pester her with your ridiculous attentions.

Fouldes

[*Blandly.*] One's relations have always such an engaging frankness. Like a bad looking-glass, they always represent you with a crooked nose and a cast in your eye.

Lady Mereston

[*To Mereston.*] I have certainly a right to know what you mean by all this and what is going to come of it.

Mereston

I don't know what will come of it.

Fouldes

The question that excites our curiosity is this: are you going to ask Lady Frederick to marry you?

Mereston

I refuse to answer that. It seems to me excessively impertinent.

Fouldes

Come, come, my boy, you're too young to play the heavy father. We're both your friends. Hadn't you better make a clean breast of it? After all, your mother and I are interested in nothing so much as your welfare.

Lady Mereston

[*Imploring.*] Charlie!

Mereston

Of course I'd ask her to marry me if I thought for a moment that she'd accept. But I'm so terrified that she'll refuse, and then perhaps I shall never see her again.

Lady Mereston

The boy's stark, staring mad.

Mereston

I don't know what I should do if she sent me about my

business. I'd rather continue in this awful uncertainty than lose all hope for ever.

Fouldes

By George. You're pretty far gone, my son. The lover who's diffident is in a much worse way than the lover who protests.

Lady Mereston

[*With a little laugh.*] I must say it amuses me that Lady Frederick should have had both my brother and my son dangling at her skirts. Your respective passions are separated by quite a number of years.

Mereston

Lady Frederick has already told me of that incident.

Fouldes

With the usual indiscretion of her sex.

Mereston

It appears that she was very unhappy and you, with questionable taste, made love to her.

Fouldes

Do your best not to preach at me, dear boy. It reminds me of your lamented father.

Mereston

And at last she promised to go away with you. You were to meet at Waterloo Station.

Fouldes

Such a draughty place for an assignation.

Mereston

Your train was to start at nine, and you were going to take the boat over to the Channel Isles.

Fouldes

Lady Frederick has a very remarkable memory. I remember hoping the sea wouldn't be rough.

Mereston

And just as the train was starting her eye fell on the clock. At that moment her child was coming down to breakfast and would ask for her. Before you could stop her she'd jumped out of the carriage. The train was moving, and you couldn't get out, so you were taken on to Weymouth – alone.

Lady Mereston

You must have felt a quite egregious ass, Paradine.

Fouldes

I did, but you need not rub it in.

Lady Mereston

Doesn't it occur to you, Charlie, that a woman who loves so

easily can't be very worthy of your affection?

Mereston

But, my dear mother, d'you think she cared for my uncle?

Fouldes

What the dickens d'you mean?

Mereston

D'you suppose if she loved you she would have hesitated to come? D'you know her so little as that? She thought of her child only because she was quite indifferent to you.

Fouldes

[*Crossly.*] You know nothing about it, and you're an impertinent young jackanapes.

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, what can it matter if Lady Frederick was in love with you or not?

Fouldes

[*Calming down.*] Of course it doesn't matter a bit.

Lady Mereston

I have no doubt you mistook wounded vanity for a broken heart.

Fouldes

[*Acidly.*] My dear, you sometimes say things which explain to me why my brother-in-law so frequently abandoned his own fireside for the platform of Exeter Hall.

Mereston

It may also interest you to learn that I am perfectly aware of Lady Frederick's financial difficulties. I know she has two bills falling due to-morrow.

Fouldes

She's a very clever woman.

Mereston

I've implored her to let me lend her the money, and she absolutely refuses. You see, she's kept nothing from me at all.

Lady Mereston

My dear Charlie, it's a very old dodge to confess what doesn't matter in order to conceal what does.

Mereston

What do you mean, mother?

Lady Mereston

Lady Frederick has told you nothing of the Bellingham affair?

Mereston

Why should she?

Lady Mereston

It is surely expedient you should know that the woman you have some idea of marrying escaped the divorce court only by the skin of her teeth.

Mereston

I don't believe that, mother.

Fouldes

Remember that you're talking to your respected parent, my boy.

Mereston

I'm sorry that my mother should utter base and contemptible libels on – my greatest friend.

Lady Mereston

You may be quite sure that I say nothing which I can't prove.

Mereston

I won't listen to anything against Lady Frederick.

Lady Mereston

But you must.

Mereston

Are you quite indifferent to the great pain you cause me?

Lady Mereston

I can't allow you to marry a woman who's hopelessly immoral.

Mereston

Mother, how dare you say that?

Fouldes

This isn't the sort of thing I much like, but hadn't you better

hear the worst at once?

Mereston

Very well. But if my mother insists on saying things, she must say them in Lady Frederick's presence.

Lady Mereston

That I'm quite willing to do.

Mereston

Good.

[He rings the bell. A servant enters.]

Fouldes

You'd better take care, Maudie. Lady Frederick's a dangerous woman to play the fool with.

Mereston

[To the servant.] Go to Lady Frederick Berolles and say Lord

Mereston is extremely sorry to trouble her ladyship, but would be very much obliged if she'd come to the drawing-room for two minutes.

Servant

Very well, my lord.

[Exit.]

Fouldes

What are you going to do, Maud?

Lady Mereston

I knew there was a letter in existence in Lady Frederick's handwriting which proved all I've said about her. I've moved heaven and earth to get hold of it, and it came this morning.

Fouldes

Don't be such a fool. You're not going to use that?

Lady Mereston

I am indeed.

Fouldes

Your blood be upon your own head. Unless I'm vastly mistaken you'll suffer the greatest humiliation that you can imagine.

Lady Mereston

That's absurd. I have nothing to fear.

Lady Frederick. *comes in*

Mereston

I'm so sorry to disturb you. I hope you don't mind?

Lady Frederick

Not at all. I knew you wouldn't have sent for me in that fashion without good cause.

Mereston

I'm afraid you'll think me dreadfully impertinent.

Lady Mereston

Really you need not apologise so much, Charlie.

Mereston

My mother has something to say against you, and I think it right that she should say it in your presence.

Lady Frederick

That's very nice of you, Charlie – though I confess I prefer people to say horrid things of me only behind my back. Especially if they're true.

Fouldes

Look here, I think all this is rather nonsense. We've most of us got something in our past history that we don't want raked up, and we'd all better let bygones be bygones.

Lady Frederick

I'm waiting, Lady Mereston.

Lady Mereston

It's merely that I thought my son should know that Lady Frederick had been the mistress of Roger Bellingham. [Lady Frederick *turns quickly and looks at her; then bursts into a peal of laughter.* Lady Mereston *springs up angrily and hands her a letter.*] Is this in your handwriting?

Lady Frederick

[*Not at all disconcerted.*] Dear me, how did you get hold of this?

Lady Mereston

You see that I have ample proof, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

[*Handing the letter to Mereston.*] Would you like to read it? You know my writing well enough to be able to answer Lady Mereston's question.

[He reads it through and looks at her in dismay.]

Mereston

Good God!.. What does it mean?

Lady Frederick

Pray read it aloud.

Mereston

I can't.

Lady Frederick

Then give it to me. [*She takes it from him.*] It's addressed to my brother-in-law, Peter Berolles. The Kate to whom it refers was his wife. [*Reads.*] Dear Peter: I'm sorry you should have had a row with Kate about Roger Bellingham. You are quite wrong in all you thought. There is absolutely nothing between them. I don't know where Kate was on Tuesday night, but certainly she was not within a hundred miles of Roger. This I know because...

Mereston

[*Interrupting.*] For God's sake don't go on.

[*Lady Frederick looks at him and shrugs her shoulders.*]

Lady Frederick

It's signed Elizabeth Berolles. And there's a postscript: You may make what use of this letter you like.

Mereston

What does it mean? What does it mean?

Lady Mereston

Surely it's very clear? You can't want a more explicit confession of guilt.

Lady Frederick

I tried to make it as explicit as possible.

Lady Mereston

Won't you say something? I'm sure there must be some explanation.

Lady Frederick

I don't know how you got hold of this letter, Lady Mereston. I agree with you, it is compromising. But Kate and Peter are dead now, and there's nothing to prevent me from telling the truth.

[Paradine Fouldes takes a step forward and watches her.]

Lady Frederick

My sister-in-law was a meek and mild little person, as demure as you can imagine, and no one would have suspected her for a moment of kicking over the traces. Well, one morning she came to me in floods of tears and confessed that she and Roger Bellingham [*with a shrug*] had been foolish. Her husband suspected that something was wrong and had kicked up a row.

Fouldes

[*Drily.*] There are men who will make a scene on the smallest provocation.

Lady Frederick

To shield herself she told the first lie that came into her head. She said to Peter that Roger Bellingham was my lover – and she threw herself on my mercy. She was a poor, weak little creature, and if there'd been a scandal she'd have gone to the dogs altogether. It had only been a momentary infatuation for Roger, and the scare had cured her. At the bottom of her heart she loved her husband still. I was desperately unhappy, and I didn't care much what became of me. She promised to turn over a new leaf

and all that sort of thing. I thought I'd better give her another chance of going straight. I did what she wanted. I wrote that letter taking all the blame on myself, and Kate lived happily with her husband till she died.

Mereston

It was just like you.

Lady Mereston

But Lord and Lady Peter are dead?

Lady Frederick

Yes.

Lady Mereston

And Roger Bellingham?

Lady Frederick

He's dead too.

Lady Mereston

Then how can you prove your account of this affair?

Lady Frederick

I can't.

Lady Mereston

And does this convince you, Charlie?

Mereston

Of course.

Lady Mereston

[*Impatiently.*] Good heavens, the boy's out of his senses. Paradine, for Heaven's sake say something.

Fouldes

Well, much as it may displease you, my dear, I'm afraid I agree with Charlie.

Lady Mereston

You don't mean to say you believe this cock-and-bull story?

Fouldes

I do.

Lady Mereston

Why?

Fouldes

Well, you see, Lady Frederick's a very clever woman. She would never have invented such an utterly improbable tale, which can't possibly be proved. If she'd been guilty, she'd have had ready at least a dozen proofs of her innocence.

Lady Mereston

But that's absurd.

Fouldes

Besides, I've known Lady Frederick a long time, and she has at least a thousand faults.

Lady Frederick

[*With flashing eyes.*] Thanks.

Fouldes

But there's something I will say for her. She's not a liar. If she tells me a thing, I don't hesitate for a moment to believe it.

Lady Frederick

It's not a matter of the smallest importance if any of you believe me or not. Be so good as to ring, Charlie.

Mereston

Certainly.

[He rings, and a Servant immediately comes in.]

Lady Frederick

Tell my servant that he's to come here at once and bring the despatch-box which is in my dressing-room.

Servant

Yes, miladi.

[Exit.]

Fouldes

[Quickly.] I say, what are you going to do?

Lady Frederick

That is absolutely no business of yours.

Fouldes

Be a brick, Betsy, and don't give her those letters.

Lady Frederick

I think I've had enough of this business. I'm proposing to finish with it.

Fouldes

Temper, temper.

Lady Frederick

[*Stamping her foot.*] Don't say temper to me, Paradine.

[She walks up and down angrily. Paradine sits at the piano and with one finger strums "Rule Britannia."]

Mereston

Shut up.

[He takes a book, flings it at his head and misses.]

Fouldes

Good shot, sir.

Lady Frederick

I often wonder how you got your reputation for wit, Paradine.

Fouldes

By making a point of laughing heartily at other people's jokes.

[The Footman enters with the despatch-box, which Lady Frederick opens. She takes a bundle of letters from it.]

Fouldes

Betsy, Betsy, for heaven's sake don't! Have mercy.

Lady Frederick

Was mercy shown to me? Albert!

Footman

Yes, miladi.

Lady Frederick

You'll go to the proprietor of the hotel and tell him that I propose to leave Monte Carlo to-morrow.

Mereston

[*Aghast.*] Are you going?

Footman

Very well, my lady.

Lady Frederick

Have you a good memory for faces?

Footman

Yes, my lady.

Lady Frederick

You're not likely to forget Lord Mereston?

Footman

No, my lady.

Lady Frederick

Then please take note that if his lordship calls upon me in London I'm not at home.

Mereston

Lady Frederick!

Lady Frederick

[To Footman.] Go.

[Exit Footman.]

Mereston

What d'you mean? What have I done?

[Without answering Lady Frederick takes the letters. Paradine is watching her anxiously. She goes up to the stove and throws them in one by one.]

Lady Mereston

What on earth is she doing?

Lady Frederick

I have some letters here which would ruin the happiness of a very worthless woman I know. I'm burning them so that I may never have the temptation to use them.

Fouldes

I never saw anything so melodramatic.

Lady Frederick

Hold your tongue, Paradine. [*Turning to Mereston.*] My dear Charlie, I came to Monte Carlo to be amused. Your mother has persecuted me incessantly. Your uncle – is too well-bred to talk to his servants as he has talked to me. I've been pestered in one way and another, and insulted till my blood boiled, because apparently they're afraid you may want to marry me. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm not used to treatment of this sort; my patience is quite exhausted. And since you are the cause of the whole thing I have an obvious remedy. I would much rather not have anything more to do with you. If we meet one another in the street you need not trouble to look my way because I shall cut you dead.

Lady Mereston

[*In an undertone.*] Thank God for that.

Mereston

Mother, mother. [*To Lady Frederick.*] I'm awfully sorry. I feel that you have a right to be angry. For all that you've suffered I beg your pardon most humbly. My mother has said and done things which I regret to say are quite unjustifiable.

Lady Mereston

Charlie!

Mereston

On her behalf and on mine I apologise with all my heart.

Lady Frederick

[*Smiling.*] Don't take it too seriously. It really doesn't matter. But I think it's far wiser that we shouldn't see one another again.

Mereston

But I can't live without you.

Lady Mereston

[*With a gasp.*] Ah!

Mereston

Don't you know that my whole happiness is wrapped up in you? I love you with all my heart and soul. I can never love any one but you.

Fouldes

[*To Lady Mereston.*] Now you've done it. You've done it very neatly.

Mereston

Don't think me a presumptuous fool. I've been wanting to say this ever since I knew you, but I haven't dared. You're brilliant and charming and fascinating, but I have nothing whatever to offer you.

Lady Frederick

[*Gently.*] My dear Charlie.

Mereston

But if you can overlook my faults, I daresay you could make something of me. Won't you marry me? I should look upon it as a great honour, and I would love you always to the end of my life. I'd try to be worthy of my great happiness and you.

Lady Frederick

You're very much too modest, Charlie. I'm enormously flattered and grateful. You must give me time to think it over.

Lady Mereston

Time?

Mereston

But I can't wait. Don't you see how I love you? You'll never meet any one who'll care for you as I do.

Lady Frederick

I think you can wait a little. Come and see me to-morrow morning at ten, and I'll give you an answer.

Mereston

Very well, if I must.

Lady Frederick

[*Smiling.*] I'm afraid so.

Fouldes

[*To Lady Frederick.*] I wonder what the deuce your little game is now.

[She smiles triumphantly and gives him a deep, ironical curtsy.]

Lady Frederick

Sir, your much obliged and very obedient, humble servant.

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THIRD ACT

Scene: Lady Frederick's *dressing-room*. At the back is a large opening, curtained, which leads to the bedroom; on the right a door leading to the passage; on the left a window. In front of the window, of which the blind is drawn, is a dressing-table. Lady Frederick's maid is in the room, a very neat pretty Frenchwoman. She speaks with a slight accent. She rings the bell, and the Footman enters.

Maid

As soon as Lord Mereston arrives he is to be shown in.

Footman

[*Surprised.*] Here?

Maid

Where else?

[The Footman winks significantly. The Maid draws herself up with dignity, and with a dramatic gesture points to the door.]

Maid

Depart.

[The Footman goes out.]

Lady Frederick

[From the bedroom.] Have you drawn the blind, Angélique?

Maid

I will do so, miladi. *[She draws the blind, and the light falls brightly on the dressing-table.]* But miladi will never be able to stand it. *[She looks at herself in the glass.]* Oh, the light of the sun in the morning! I cannot look at myself.

Lady Frederick

[As before.] There's no reason that you should – especially in my glass.

Maid

But if 'is lordship is coming, miladi must let me draw the blind. Oh, it is impossible.

Lady Frederick

Do as you're told and don't interfere.

[The Footman enters to announce Mereston. The Maid goes out.]

Footman

Lord Mereston.

Lady Frederick

[As before.] Is that you, Charlie? You're very punctual.

Mereston

I've been walking about outside till the clock struck.

Lady Frederick

I'm not nearly dressed, you know. I've only just had my bath.

Mereston

Must I go?

Lady Frederick

No, of course not. You can talk to me while I'm finishing.

Mereston

All right. How are you this morning?

Lady Frederick

I don't know. I haven't looked at myself in the glass yet. How are you?

Mereston

A 1, thanks.

Lady Frederick

Are you looking nice?

Mereston

[Going to the glass.] I hope so. By Jove, what a strong light. You must be pretty sure of your complexion to be able to stand that.

Lady Frederick

[Appearing.] I am.

Mereston

[Going forward eagerly.] Ah.

[She comes through the curtains. She wears a kimono, her hair is all dishevelled, hanging about her head in a tangled mop. She is not made up and looks haggard and yellow and lined. When

Mereston sees her he gives a slight start of surprise. She plays the scene throughout with her broadest brogue.

Lady Frederick

Good-morning.

Mereston

[Staring at her in dismay.] Good-morning.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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