

# GOSSIP.

*A Comedy,*

*IN TWO ACTS.*

BY  
AUGUSTUS HARRIS,  
AND  
THOMAS J. WILLIAMS.

(MEMBERS OF THE DRAMATIC AUTHORS' SOCIETY.)

THOMAS HAILES LACY  
89, STRAND, LONDON

## GOSSIP.

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*First performed at the Royal Princesses Theatre (under the management of Mr. Harris), on Wednesday, Nov. 23, 1859.*

### CHARACTERS.

MR. MARK BERESFORD ( <i>a West Indian</i> )	Mr. Ryder.
MR. ALFRED FORTESCUE . . . . .	Mr. H. Bland.
HORACE CLEVELAND . . . . .	Mr. J. G. Shore
MR. WILMINGTON.....	Mr. Meadows.
MR. ERASMUS PRIMLEY . . . . .	Mr. Garden.
BARNES . . . . .	Mr. J.W. Collier
MRS. CHATTERTON.....	Mrs. C. Young
MRS. FORTESCUE.....	Miss E. Wadham
MRS. PRIMLEY.....	Mrs. J.W. Collier

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Fashionable Modern Costume.

Place—London.

Time—Present Day.

# GOSSIP.



## ACT I.

SCENE.—A drawing-room, in Fortescue's house, door at back opening into a second saloon, a fireplace, L. 1 E., in front of which is a sofa (facing audience) R.—against wall another sofa, easy chair, ottomans, &c, MRS. FORTESCUE discovered asleep on sofa—enter MR. FORTESCUE, R.

FORTES. (*looking round*) Well, considering that this is my wife's "at home," this looks lively in the extreme! My wife fast asleep, while the prim state of the furniture indicates that not a soul has called yet. However, I'll soon destroy this undeniable testimony to our friends' desertion (*begins re-arranging chairs, sofas, &c.*)—this arm chair in the middle.

MRS. F. (*awaking and starting up*) Why, my dear Alfred, what's the matter?

FORTES. These two chairs in a conversational attitude—thus!

MRS. F. But you're entirely destroying the symmetry of the apartment.

FORTES. The artistic disorder which characterises our furniture, denotes prolonged and animated discussion. People will imagine that you have had a perfect *levee* here this morning, and will go away exclaiming, "what an immense circle of acquaintances these Fortescues have to be sure!"

MRS. F. Well, there's something in that, certainly; however, I give up all hope of any morning calls to-day, I rely only on the friends we have invited to dinner.

FORTES. Let's see now, whom do we expect?

MRS. F. There's Mr. and Mrs. Wilmington!

FORTES. Ah.

MRS. F. Then there's Mrs. Lauderdale-----

FORTES. A gentleman renowned for the keenness of his appetite.

MRS. F. There's Mrs. Chatterton-----

FORTES. A lady celebrated for the sharpness of her tongue; she'll save the mistress of the house all trouble as far as talking is concerned.

MRS. F. Mr. and Mrs. Primley-----

FORTES. Then there's young Horace Cleveland!

MRS. F. Let me see, that will make-----

FORTES. (*interrupting*) By Jove, I had quite forgotten my West Indian.

MRS. F. (*astonished*) Your West Indian ?

FORTES. An enormously wealthy planter.

MRS. F. (*seated, R.*) But what's his name ?

FORTES. (L.) Not for the life of me can I remember. He has most magnificent whiskers and moustachios, and that's all I know about him. I made his acquaintance last night at the Covent Garden Opera. I happened to go over to the Haywards' box to ask them what they thought of the performance, and there I find a remarkably grave but excessively gentlemanly individual—in short, the West Indian in question. The conversation continues—I hear that the West Indian—what the deuce was his name ? dear me, how very stupid of me to forget it—however, I ascertain that this tropical notability is in quest of a town residence somewhere near Sussex Gardens.

MRS. F. Why that house of ours, number twenty-seven, would have been the very thing for him.

FORTES. Precisely what I said to myself. I dexterously introduced an allusion to the tenement in question—Hayward took the hint, and favoured his friend with so eulogistic a description of its topographical peculiarities, that the bargain was positively struck whilst *Raoul* was jumping out of the window in the fourth act of the "Huguenots." Of course we straightway became the best friends in the world, and, under the circumstances, the very least I could do was to ask the man who had just rented a house of me, to our dinner party to-day—he accepted, we exchanged cards.

MRS. F. (*interrupting*) But if you have his card, you can easily ascertain his name.

FORTES. Ah, there's the rub. I've lost his card. I instituted a diligent search in every pocket this morning ; but no, it was gone.

MRS. F. That's very awkward—how am I to address this new acquaintance of yours ?

FORTES. By his name, of course—you'll hear it when the servants announce it.

MRS. F. Ah, to be sure. But (*looking at her watch*) it's time I went to superintend the laying of the tables (*Exit R.*)

*Enter* SERVANT, L. 2 E.

SERVANT. (*announcing*) Mr. Horace Cleveland.

*Enter* HORACE CLEVELAND, L. 2 E.

FORTES. Aha, my dear Horace, how are you? Come to dine with us, of course—how kind of you.

HORACE. I regret to say 'tis impossible. I have come to offer Mrs. Fortescue my apologies as regards her dinner party.

FORTES. Apologies! Nonsense—we'll take nothing of the sort!

HORACE. My dear Fortescue, when you've heard my reasons I am sure you will excuse me; but I warn you beforehand its rather a long story, and must be kept a profound secret.

FORTES. (*rising and opening doors at back*) Stay a moment.

HORACE. Why what are you doing?

FORTES. You said a *secret*. I'm just assuring myself that there's no butler, or lady's maid listening at the key-hole.

HORACE. Why, you don't mean to say that your servants----

FORTES. Yes I do, though. I'm surrounded by a pack of the most villainous spies that ever wore mob caps or plush breeches. My dear fellow, I assure you that the Inquisition was a common-place, straightforward institution compared to my house—everything *I* do, everything I say, upon my life I might almost add everything I *think* gets wind in the most surprising manner, and straightway is noised abroad all over London.

HORACE. That must be rather disagreeable.

FORTES. Disagreeable! it's frightful. To give you an idea now, I'll take one instance out of a hundred (*they go to sofa and sit—abruptly*) Do you wear nightcaps?

HORACE. (*laughing*) Not I.

FORTES. Then if you don't, I do. A nightcap is an extremely unpoetical attribute I know, but never mind, in this changeable climate it's uncommonly comfortable. However, it's not the sort of thing one expects to be taunted about by strangers, and therefore you may judge

of my amazement when last night at the opera young Walters — you know Walters ? — simply because I happened to say I had caught cold, expressed a fervent hope that I had not left off what he thought proper to call my "nocturnal appendage," and straightway commenced a series of attacks on what he was pleased to designate the "unromantic practice of wearing nightcaps."

HORACE. But how on earth came Walters to know anything about it?

FORTES. Ah, there's the question ! How came Walters to know anything about it, my dear boy ? He afterwards confessed that he had it from his wife, who had it from her lady's maid, who had it, of course, from our John, or our Susan, or our Betsy. The thing is clear enough. You laugh ! Let me tell you it's very disagreeable to have one's little peculiarities publicly discussed in this manner. But this is only a solitary proof. I could give you half-a-dozen instances of first-rate mercantile speculations, dead certainties, in which my intentions have been most unaccountably forestalled, and yet I can swear that my wife was the only soul to whom I have ever confided them. However, you now understand why I examined the keyholes before I allowed you to commence your story.

HORACE. A story, which you'll say begins like a modern fashionable novel, and ends like one of Miss Edgworth's moral tales.

FORTES. Flirtation terminating in matrimony. I see.

HORACE. About a year ago—you see I involuntary fall into the narrative style—I spent several weeks at a friend's country house. Among the guests was a very fascinating and extremely romantic young lady who excelled in private theatricals—a pastime which, by the way formed the stock recreation of our merry party. Our rehearsals, I should tell you, were very numerous.

FORTES. The love scenes especially. I perfectly understand.

HORACE. Precisely ! well, sir, the young lady was so charming in sentimental comedy, that I fell, or rather fancied I fell, violently in love with her. Our party broke up, but for a long time afterwards the fair Leonora and I kept up a most delightful correspondence on gilt-edged rose satin note-paper, overpoweringly scented with patchouli. In short, I had every reason to believe I had made a decidedly durable impression ; when on taking up the *Times* one morning at breakfast, what should I see but

this announcement of my Leonora's marriage with an excessively wealthy but totally unromantic stockbroker.

FORTES. You surprise me !

HORACE. Oh, bless you, these very romantic young ladies are the most heartless flirts imaginable. Well, sir, I was just beginning to recover from the shock, when I received a letter from the faithless Leonora herself, coolly informing me that Destiny had made her another's, that her husband, although of dove-like tranquility in every other respect, was a perfect *Othello* for jealousy, and calmly requesting me to return her forthwith the letters she had formerly written to me !

FORTES. Evidently taking it for granted that you had affectionately preserved them.

HORACE. Of course. Well, sir, her letter went on to say that to avoid all possibility of a mistake, I must deliver the epistles to none other but herself in person. For this purpose she requested me to meet her with the whole series at a remarkably secluded spot, in the midst of a clump of trees, in a remote part of Kensington Gardens.

FORTES. How deliciously romantic! (*laughing*)

HORACE. Well, sir, the assignation came off, with all due mystery and formality we exchanged our gilt-edged, rose-satin sentimentalities with all the solemnity usual on such occasions.

FORTES. I can see no great romance here. (FORTESCUE *X's to L.*)

HORACE. But the climax of the story is yet to come—a few days after the mysterious *rencontre* I have just described, my father writes to me from the country, enclosing a letter of introduction—now to whom of all men in the world should you think ?

FORTES. 'Pon my life I've no idea.

HORACE. To no less a person than the husband of the little flirt in question, Mr.-----

FORTES. (*interrupting and pointing to door*) Hush ! this is a delicate affair, no names—call him the unromantic stock broker.

HORACE. Well, it had suddenly occurred to my father, that Mr.----- the unromantic stock-broker, I mean, had a niece who, of all the girls he had ever known, would be the very wife for *me*.

FORTES. What an unheard of coincidence.

HORACE. Isn't it ? However, to cut my story short, the niece in question turns out to be a beautiful, amiable, talented young lady, who, I am delighted to say, hasn't the

remotest notion of private theatricals. So, a week ago I popped the question, was accepted in due form, and am off this afternoon to the country on a visit to my future bride's relations!

FORTES. Wish you joy, then, old fellow; see, here come my wife, who, I am sure, will re-echo my congratulations

*Enter MRS. FORTESCUE, with ivory tablets in her hand, R.*

My dear, I am very sorry to inform you that you must erase from to-day's dinner-list, the name of Cleveland.

MES. F. (*expostulatingly*) Mr. Cleveland!

FORTES. Don't scold him, poor fellow, his excuse is a substantial one—matrimony!

HORACE. Yes, and you are the first of my friends to whom I have revealed my good fortune—for the present, I must tell you, it's a bit of a secret.

FORTES. Then be upon your guard, my dear—Mrs. Chatterton dines with us to-day!

HORACE. Mrs. Chatterton, I surely know that name—she's a friend of my future wife's family, a very agreeable person I'm told.

FORTES. Oh, yes, vastly agreeable, but like many other agreeable things, rather dangerous; you never heard such a talker, once she's started it's just like the express train, you must stand clear, or take the consequences.

HORACE. (*laughing*) Indeed!

FORTES. None of your quiet little gossips in a corner, for Mrs. Chatterton; no! she delights in grand orchestral conversation, in which she represents the kettle drum and cymbals! The Derby Galop is a mere fool to her; in short, my dear fellow, the woman's a torrent of talk, a whirlwind of words, and when the steam gun of her conversation has fairly exhausted its ammunition, away she goes, leaving behind her a hectacomb of reputations ruined, and fair names mortally wounded, and all with the very best intentions. If you wish to keep your marriage a secret, take my advice—don't tell her anything about it until your first christening.

HORACE. You alarm me.

MRS. F. Now my dear Alfred you are really too severe, I assure you, Mr. Cleveland, Mrs. Chatterton is by no means-----

*Enter SERVANT, L. 2 E.*

SERVANT. (*announces*) Mrs. Chatterton!

FORTES. (*affecting alarm*) Then I'm off till dinner time. (*fetches his hat*) I've a call to make in the neighbourhood.

HORACE. I'll follow you. Mrs. Fortescue, I wish you good morning, I know you'll forgive my precipitate retreat, (*they hurry towards door, L. 2 E.*)

*Enter* MRS. CHATTERTON, L. 2 E.—HORACE *meets her in the doorway makes way for her as she enters, then exit hastily.*

MRS. C. (*rapidly to FORTESCUE, looking after HORACE*) Who is that gentleman ?

FORTES. (*bowing*) My dear Mrs. Chatterton, how do you do?

MRS. C. (*still at back, turning to MRS. FORTESCUE*) His name you were going to say, is-----

MRS. F. Mr. Horace Cleveland.

MRS. C. (*coming down*) Ah, Cleveland of Cleveland Hall, he's a friend of the Wilmington's, they do say he's going to marry their niece. (*x's to MRS. FORTESCUE.*)

FORTES. There ! I'll wager she knew all about it before he did. (*suddenly recollecting*) Wilmington! by Jupiter, then Wilmington must be the unromantic stock-broker!

MRS. C. (*who has taken off her bonnet and shawl*) So you're quite well, my dear ? that's right, so am I, and so I hope, is my irreconcilable enemy yonder. (*pointing to FORTESCUE*) Yes, these Wilmingtons are very good sort of folks, but their niece is as stiff and formal as a kitchen poker, and about as graceful—not a bad looking girl, though ; but how are you ? by the bye, I rather think I asked you that before, (*to FORTESCUE*) Hat, I see—going out ? don't mind me, I beg—no ceremony between enemies, you know. There, there, go, go—we shall have plenty of time to quarrel after dinner.

FORTES. *Au revoir*, then—we'll suspend hostilities until the evening. (*Exit, L. 2 E.*)

MRS. C. (*sitting down on sofa, R.*) I see that husband of yours continues to detest me as much as ever.

MRS. F. (*R. corner*) My dear Caroline, I'm sure he entertains the greatest friendship for you, and that's why-----

MRS. C. (*interrupting*) He always speaks so ill of me I suppose—ha, ha, ha! I know he calls me the most inveterate gossip that ever presided at tea table.

MRS. F. (*goes and sits on R. of sofa, R.*) No, no, it is not that ; Alfred is merely apprehensive lest, carried, away by the impetuosity of your conversational powers, you

should now and then unintentionally wound the feelings of certain over-susceptible individuals.

MRS. C. My dear, the over-susceptible individuals must take their chance; now only just listen to reason—is it possible to move about in a crowded ball-room without elbowing somebody ? of course it isn't! Well then, it's equally impossible to converse on a large scale without saying something at which *somebody* must be offended. It isn't my fault if people will be so absurdly sensitive, and I don't see why *I* should not indulge in a little innocent criticism even on *you* my dear friend!

MRS. F. (*laughing*) Oh ! Let us have it by all means.

MRS. C. (*with affected gravity, they rise and come down L.*) My dear Mrs. Fortescue, I admit that it is perfectly allowable in a wife to be very fond of her husband, she may even admire him a little if she pleases, there's no harm in that—but I maintain that she has no right to make that husband the eternal and invariable subject of conversation.

MRS. F. (*R. naively*) Now do you know I never thought of that.

MRS. C. You never hear *me* speak of Mr. Chatterton, never! and yet I have the greatest affection for him—at home ; and revere him amazingly—in the chimney corner; but I should never think of expatiating upon his perfections before strangers, I should never carry my enthusiasm to such an extravagant pitch as to inform the public that the object of my adoration, among other interesting peculiarities—wore a night-cap !

MRS. F. (*R.*) Good heavens, did I ever say that?

MRS. F. Most distinctly, in my presence at the Haywards!

MRS. F. Dear me. Yes, I almost think I remember the circumstance.

MRS. C. (*continuing*) I don't go frustrating my husband's plans by letting out that he expects to make no end of money by a certain investment, thereby enabling all the world to anticipate his intentions. *I* don't go telling people that I'm dreadfully jealous about Mr. Fortescue—Mr. Chatterton, I mean, and that I turn pale with anxiety at the very sight of a letter addressed to him.

MRS. F. But if such *is* the case ?

MRS. C. Well then, my dear, instead of making yourself wretched as to what the letter might be about, you should set your mind at rest by examining the contents—that's my plan!

MRS. F. Oh, but that's dreadful.

MRS. C. Dreadful, there you go again; now answer me one question—does your husband open *your* letters?

MRS. F. Yes.

MRS. C. Well then, you owe him a similar proof of confidence.

MRS. F. You're quite right, (*runs to window.*)

*Enter* SERVANT, L. 2 E.

SERVANT. (*announces*) Mr. and Mrs. Primley.

MRS. C. (*hastily*) Oh, my dear, let me beg of you not to place Mr. Primley next to me.

MRS. F. Why not? He's without exception the politest man I know.

MRS. C. And that's precisely it; he's *too* polite, he positively overwhelms you with his assiduous enquiries after your health, all couched in pedantically elaborate phrases, which he always winds up like the concluding paragraph to some old-fashioned epistle, (*imitating*) "Permit me, my dear madam, to assure you of the gratification I derive from the agreeable intelligence that you continue to enjoy your wonted health and spirits," and then comes a stately old comedy bow.

*Enter* SERVANT, L. 2 E.

SERV. Mr. and Mrs. Primley.

MRS. C. Good! here he is! now just observe the majestic entrance of this highly-starched solemnity.

*Enter* MR. and MRS. PRIMLEY, L. 2 E.

MRS. F. (*advancing to meet* MRS. PRIMLEY) My dear Mrs. Primley how delighted I am to see you.

MRS. P. We have come early you see, that we may have as much as possible of your delightful society. (*MRS. FORTESCUE and MRS. PRIMLEY sit down on sofa—meanwhile, MR. PRIMLEY makes a stately bow to MRS. CHATTERTON.*)

MRS. C. (*aside*) Here it comes, (*aloud*) You are quite well I hope, Mr. Primley.

PRIM. (*very ceremoniously*) Perfectly so, I thank you, madam. Allow me, my dear Mrs. Chatterton, to return you my most sincere thanks for the interest you evince as to my sanitary condition, and permit me at the same time to assure you of the unfeigned gratitude----

MRS. C. (*aside—imitating*) With which I have the honour to remain &c., &c., &c.

MRS. F. (*shaking hands with PRIMLEY*) How kind of you to accept our invitation at so short a notice.

PRIM. Believe me, my dear Mrs. Fortescue, I am ever your most obedient-----

MRS. C. (*continuing aside*) Very humble and obedient servant to command—Erasmus Primley, with a dash! (*imitating with her finger a grand flourish at the bottom of a letter*) Why the man's a walking extract from the "Complete Letter Writer." (*seats herself next to MRS. FORTESCUE*) (*double knock heard.*)

MRS. F. This may be Alfred's West Indian. I'll listen for the name.

*Enter MR. FORTESCUE and MR. BERESFORD, L. 2 E.*

FORTES. Walk in, my dear sir, I beg ; my dear (*to MRS. FORTESCUE*) allow me to present to you our new tenant. (*ceremoniously bowing and introducing him*) Ah, Primley, my dear fellow, how are you?

PRIM. (*holding out his hand*) Permit me, my dear Mr. Fortescue to----- (*remains with extended hand, MRS. FORTESCUE having meanwhile drawn her husband aside.*)

MRS. F. (*hastily to her husband*) Well, what's his name?

FORT. I'm sorry to say, my dear. I'm just as wise as ever; I relied upon the servants announcing him, and it has most provokingly happened that I met him on the staircase. You must call him, *sir*—plain *sir*, there's no help for it.

MRS. F. Dear me, how very provoking.

PRIM. (*following up FORTESCUE*) My dear sir, permit me-----

FORTES. (*not seeing PRIMLEY, and introducing BERESFORD to MRS CHATTERTON*) Mrs. Chatterton, the eloquent wife of one of our most eloquent barristers.

MRS. C. (*eagerly to FORTESCUE*) Who is this gentleman ?

FORTES. Who is he ? (*mysteriously*) Oh, he's a—an illustrious stranger.

MRS. C. (*curiously*) An illustrious stranger ! You must tell me all about him.

PRIM. (*coming at last in contact with FORTESCUE*) My dear Mr. Fortescue, let me seize this opportunity of reiterating my anxious enquiries as to-----

FORTES. (*taking him up, and shaking hands with him*) My dear Mr. Primley, let this shake of the hands assure you how deeply I feel, and how highly I appreciate, your amiable anxiety and sympathetic solicitude on my behalf.

MRS. F. (*to BERESFORD*) You were at the opera last night I understand, sir.

BERES. I was, madam.

MRS. F. I hear the audience took far less interest in the performance than in the contemplation of the new constellation, whose beams shone forth from a box on the grand tier.

MRS. C. The new constellation—who's that ?

FORTES. Why the beautiful Mrs. Beresford to be sure—the belle of the season—the culminating point of every fashionable soiree.

MRS. C. (*carelessly*) Ah, yes, the tropical beauty—too dark for my taste—always reminds me of Uncle Tom's Cabin. I remember I met her not long ago in Kensington Gardens, (*laughs significantly.*)

MRS. F. (*crossing and seating herself next to MRS. CHATERTON in the place just occupied by BERESFORD, who has offered her his chair*) I long to see this Mrs. Beresford, they say that she is, without exception, the prettiest woman now in London.

MRS. C. (*laughing*) The prettiest woman in London ! Ah ! that's another of those diplomas which ladies are so fond of conferring upon themselves !

FORTES. I can only say she has most magnificent eyes—the largest I ever saw.

MRS. C. Size does not always constitute beauty—eyes may be too large just as mouths may be too small.

PRIM. (*R. sentimentally*) Her silken tresses outvie the darkness of the raven's wing.

MRS. C. Dear, dear! in other words you mean the lady's hair is *black*. How very wonderful in a lady from Jamaica,—why they're *all* black—they can't help it! Besides the lady evidently possesses a constitution of the most robust description—you understand me—there's *too much* of her !

FORTES. (*aside*) Now she's off.

MRS. C. I'll wager now her husband is uncommonly slim—it's invariably the case. I do believe that Nature assigns a given amount of volume to every married couple, and yet you'll always find one of the two mean enough to infringe on the other's share. However, let her be as beautiful as she pleases, it's uncommonly strange that a lady who was never heard of until lately, should be at once admitted into the very best society, run after, feted—*raffled* for, I might almost say.

BERES. (*with great politeness*) But, madam, before closing one's doors against the fair foreigner, ought you not to be provided with some weightier objection than the mere fact of the lady's eyes being too large, or her hair too black ?

MRS. C. (*significantly*) As for objections, I've no doubt

they're to be had for the seeking; I know *I* accidentally stumbled upon a very unmistakable one.

BERES. You, madam.

MRS. C. I, sir, I.

MRs. F. (*drawing up her chair*) Oh, do tell us all about it.

FORTES. (*aside*) By Jupiter—the steam's up now, and no mistake.

MRS. C. I'm sure you'll all acquit me of any wish to divulge this lady's secrets.

FORTES. (*sarcastically*) That we certainly will.

MRS. C. Besides, there can be no harm in alluding to the occurrence, as I am quite convinced that you will none of you mention it again.

MRs. F. Of course, of course, (*turning to the rest*) You'll not mention it.

ALL. Oh, of course, not!

FORTES. (*aside*) My little wife's decidedly improving. (ALL assume attitudes of eager attention.)

MRS. C. I have already told you that it was in Kensington Gardens I met our heroine. I take so little interest in other people's affairs that I should not have recognized her myself, had I not heard two gentlemen, as they passed, exclaim, "There's Mrs. Beresford, the belle of the season;" looking round, I beheld a lady alighting from her carriage. Having heard a great deal of this eighth wonder of the world, I naturally scrutinized her with some attention. After giving her coachman orders to await her, she walked on for a little distance alone, and then turned off among the trees; this proceeding somewhat excited my curiosity; not, I beg you'll understand me, that I am capable of acting as spy upon any one's movements.

ALL. Oh! no, no, certainly not!

MRS. C. Merely then, for the sake of a little pedestrian exercise, I followed this paragon of loveliness through a somewhat secluded part of the gardens. I lost her for a few moments, but of a sudden, through a clump of leafless trees, I saw a gentleman.

MRs. F. How interesting!

MRS. C. Now this struck me as a most ill-advised proceeding—if ladies *will* make appointments with young men in parks and gardens, and do not wish to be recognized, they should surely wait till the trees are in full foliage; don't you think so Mr. Fortescue?

FORTES. Most certainly, this sort of thing should never be perpetrated before the month of July.

BERES. (*who has paid marked attention*) My dear madam, this narrative of yours is fascinating in the extreme, but it leaves off like a story in a monthly magazine, just at the most interesting portion. You are quite sure it was Mrs. Beresford ?

MRS. C. Certain.

BERES. And the gentleman ?

FORTES. Ah, to be sure, the hero of the adventure! We must be introduced to him.

MRS. C. I deeply regret to say that I couldn't make him out at all.

BERES. But how is it that the clump of trees was sufficiently denuded of leaves to enable you to recognize the lady, and yet was too dense to admit of your identifying the gentleman?

MRS. C. Simply because I had already seen the lady alighting from her carriage, and it was her dress which enabled me to recognize her.

BERES. (*incredulously*) Ah!

MRS. C. But mind, gentlemen, you have promised, not a word of all this must ever escape your lips.

ALL. Oh, certainly not—certainly not!

FORTES. (*with affected gravity*) Under the circumstances it would be the very height of indiscretion (*door opens*) and so hush, for here come some fresh arrivals.

(*Enter Guests, four ladies and gentlemen, L.—MR. and MRS.*

*FORTESCUE receive them—MR. FORTESCUE ushers one of the ladies into the adjoining apartment, c., where the rest are now seen—just as MRS. CHATTERTON, who is talking to MR. and MRS. PRIMLEY, is turning round to accompany them into next room, she finds herself opposite to MR. BERESFORD, who politely motions her to stop.*)

BERES. (*in a low tone*) One word, my dear madam, if you will allow me. I have a little exchange to propose to you.

MRS. C. (*astonished*) An exchange ?

BERES. Yes, but, first of all, permit me to ask you one question—look at me well now !

MRS. C. (*surprised*) Sir?

BERES. Have you ever seen me before ?

MRS. C. No, sir, never.

BERES. You are quite certain?

MRS. C. Most positive.

BERES. Well then, now for our exchange. Do you make known to me this young man, this friend of Mrs. Beresford's, and I will introduce you to her husband !

MRS. C. What a very strange proposal!

BERES. 'Tis a fair bargain in every sense of the word, and to prove to you how trustworthy I am in business matters, I'll discharge my share of the contract first—I, madam, am the lady's husband.

MRS. C. What! (*excessively confused*) You—you Mr. Beresford?

BERES. I, madam, I.

MRS. C. But really, sir, your behaviour is scandalous, unheard of—you should have warned me, have stopped me in time!

BERES. (*with extreme severity of manner*) Will you oblige me with the gentleman's name?

MRS. C. I really do not know it, sir.

BERES. Will you favour me with a description of his features?

MRS. C. I did not see them.

BERES. With any peculiarity, then, by which I may identify him.

MRS. C. I assure you, sir, 'tis quite out of my power. I sincerely regret what has occurred, but----

BERES. Of course. I knew I should get no information from you here, (*bowing*) I shall have the pleasure of seeing you to-morrow, madam.

MRS. C. Eh! to-morrow?

BERES. And also on the following day.

MRS. C. (*alarmed*) Dear me, am I then to expect the honour of your society every day?

BERES. (*with perfect calmness*) Every day, madam, until further notice.

MRS. C. But what can be your object, sir. If I were a man----

BERES. I could but challenge and shoot you, which perhaps would be a bad method of wresting from you your secret; having however to deal with a pretty and highly accomplished lady, I have surer weapons at my disposal.

MRS. C. (*alarmed*) Weapons, sir! you threaten me then?

BERES. (*quietly*) His name, madam!

MRS. C. I don't know it, sir.

BERES. (*producing pocket book and writing*) Let me see, Mrs. Chatterton, I think.

MRS. C. I tell you, sir, I do not know his name, (*rapidly*) and if I did, I would never tell it you!

BERES. (*smiling*) Never! (*bowing*) 'I'll bide my time,' madam.

*Enter SERVANT C, who announces, "Dinner."*

MRS. C. Dinner! really I'm in no humour for dinner now, I'll go home—I don't like this mysterious West Indian at all, I'm half afraid of him! I'll tell them I've a headache, a—a-----

*Enter MRS. FORTESCUE, C.*

MRS. F. We are waiting for you, dear sir.

BERES, (*languidly applying his hand to his brow*) I entreat your pardon for remaining behind, my dear madam, but a violent headache which has suddenly seized me-----

MRS. C. (*aside*) There, the man has actually anticipated my excuse!

BERES. (*offering his arm to MRS. FORTESCUE*) But pray permit me—(*then approaching MRS. CHATTERTON*) May I have the pleasure.

MRS. C. (*taking his arm—aside*) I'll not say a single word all dinner time, and I'll faint at the dessert!

*As they proceed towards c. doors, the drop descends.*

END OF ACT I.

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ACT II.

SCENE.—*Mr. Wilmington's Country Seat. A circular pavilion opening on each side upon a park—R., of pavilion the commencement of a hot-house—L., the first steps of a staircase communicating with the house—R., inside pavilion a circular sofa, with garden flower stand, chairs, &c., L. a bench. MR. and MRS. PRIMLEY are discovered seated near table, reading, the one a book, the other a newspaper.*

*Enter HORACE CLEVELAND from garden.*

HORACE. Ah, Mr. Primley, I've just come back from the station. Bella and Mrs. Wilmington have gone up to town to make sundry purchases in connection with the approaching ceremony—the wedding as you know is fixed for the twenty-fifth.

PRIM. (*rising gravely*) A solemn and momentous event, my dear young friend, in the life of man, respecting which you must permit me to offer you my most cordial congratulations combined with the expression of my most unfeigned anxiety as to your future beatitude.

HORACE. Thank you, my dear sir; (*to MR. PRIMLEY*) the

ladies have a good day's work before them ; Mrs. Fortescue is also one of the shopping party, but she has promised her husband to return by the two o'clock train.

MRS. P. But where is Mr. Fortescue this morning?

HORACE. Poor fellow! Wilmington has him in his relentless grasp, and is at this moment showing him all over his park, his orchard, his fish ponds, his aquariums, his poultry yards, &c, &c, &c,—he has had to bear up against at least three miles of curiosities! Ah, here they come!

*Enter WILMINGTON with a flower-pot in one hand and FORTESCUE L. 2 E.*

WILM. (*earnestly*) Next year, I mean to build a hot-house exclusively for my new specimens of the polyanthus leviathanicus!

FORTES. (*feigning interest*) A very good plan, (*aside*) Oh dear, oh dear! what the deuce is a polyanthus leviathanicus!

WILM. But come, I must show you my new basin for breeding gold fish on an extensive scale.

FORTES. (*hastily*) Oh, I've seen it. (*aside*) I wouldn't for worlds undergo another lecture on any branch of natural history whatever!

WILM. You haven't seen it, Primley.

PRIM. (*comes down*) No, dear sir.

WILM. (*c.*) Then you have a most interesting sight in store, (*offering his arm to MRS. PRIMLEY*) Come, my dear madam, (*as they are going*)

*Enter BARNES C. from, L.*

BARNES. Please sir, here be card as I was to gi' you.

WILM. (*to MRS. PRIMLEY*) One moment, my dear madam.

FORTES. (*to WILMINGTON*) What you still keep that fellow—is he as stupid as he used to be?

WILM. His obtuseness increases every hour—his mistakes are incessant; he confuses everything and everybody.

FORTES. Then why do you retain him in your service.

WILM. I've often wished to get rid of the fellow, but then you see, he is so very tranquil and-----

FORTES. Ah, you keep him as a *sedative*—that's another thing.

WILM. (*to BARNES after examining card*) I certainly do not recognize this name.

BARNES. Please sir, it's a gentleman from Lunnon—he says he should like to see the conservatories, because as

how he had read all about 'em in the Horticultural Magazine or summat.

WILM. (*delighted*) Aha, my botanical grounds—he had read of them had he?—shew the gentleman into the parlour, I'll join him immediately. (*Exit BARNES, C. to L.*) Horace, my dear boy, do you take my place and do the honours of the gold fish pond to our friends here. (*HORACE offers his arm to MRS. PRIMLEY.*)

MRS. P. (*as they go*) My dear young friend, I am somewhat versed in the theory of ichthyologic incubation, and will take this opportunity of expounding its intricacies to you.

HORACE. (*to FORTESCUE as they pass*) What a delightful treat! (*Exeunt HORACE and MR. and MRS. PRIMLEY C. to R.*)

WILM. (*delighted*) And so the fame of my botanical grounds has got into the papers! people positively come from town to pay them a visit—but this gentleman's waiting for me all the time, (*just as he is going out* MRS. CHATTERTON *enters hastily, c. from L.*)

MRS. C. (*rapidly*) Here I am, good morning! you invited me for the twenty-fifth, and I'm come on the eighteenth; I'm rather before time I know, but I solemnly assure you that if I had remained another hour in town, Mr. Chatterton would now have been a sorrowing widower, (*still more rapidly*) I conjure you by all the laws of hospitality, ask for no explanation. In the violence of my agitation I was about to betake myself to the first terminus that came to hand, no matter which, with the intention of journeying on, on, on, till I arrived at the remotest station in the kingdom, no matter where, when I accidentally met Mrs. Wilmington in St. James's Street. I throw myself into her arms, implored her to grant me an asylum, a refuge, a shelter, she readily consents—and here I am! (*MRS. CHATTERTON perceives FORTESCUE and bestows a look of intense hatred upon him.*)

WILM. (*slightly bewildered*) Welcome my dear madam, thrice welcome. I do not exactly catch the purport of your very eloquent explanation, but I'll order a room to be prepared for you this moment. I'll just get rid of a gentleman who is now waiting for me, and I'll be with you immediately. (*Exit c. to L., running.*)

FORTES. There! see how you are agitating the tranquil Mr. Wilmington—I never saw him so flurried in all my life.

MRS. C. And do you *dare* address me, sir, after the infamous trick you played me! Was it not shameful of you, to allow me to go on telling everything before that horrible

West Indian without informing me, by word or sign, that he was the husband ?

FORTES. I solemnly assure you I no more knew it than you did. I give you my word that the next day, when the gentleman and I were signing the lease of the house, no sooner did he affix the name "Beresford" to the document, than the pen fell from my hand in amazement !

MRS. C. I tell you Mr. Fortescue, the man's a monster, a demon—he is positively driving me from my home, my friends, my husband ! I assure you I have been in a fever of agitation for the last fortnight.

FORTES. Bless my soul—what then has happened ?

MRS. C. You little know the life I have led since that unfortunate blunder of mine. Every morning I receive a letter penned each time in a different handwriting, but invariably containing the same three diabolical words— " His name, madam ! (*signed*) Beresford ! "

FORTES. What every morning ?

MRS. C. Every morning regularly—this, in itself, is aggravation enough, but 'tis a trifle to what follows. I breakfast-----

FORTES. Well ?

MRS. C. No, not by any means *well*—I've entirely lost my appetite—as I step into my carriage for my morning drive, I find standing before my door, a man, tall, erect, stately as the statue of the Commendatore in Don Giovanni, the figure respectfully offers me his arm, and murmurs in my ear—" his name, madam ! "

FORTES. How aggravating !

MRS. C. If I alight at a shop, 'tis he who opens the carriage door—with hat in hand and a derisive smile on his lips he accosts me with the odious phrase, " his name, madam." The last time he did this, in the height of my exasperation, I pretended to mistake him for a beggar and dropped a sixpence into his hat—will you believe me—the monster not only pocketed the coin, but actually returned me his grateful thanks !

FORTES. 'Pon my life—that's carrying the joke too far.

MRS. C. But wait, my dear sir, that's nothing. Last Saturday I was at Brighton staying at a friend's; just as we were sitting down to dinner a telegraphic despatch arrives for me; I open it in all haste and behold the words-----

MRS. C. }  
*and* } (*together, laughing*) " His name, madam ! "  
 FORTES. }

MRS. C. I have sought safety in flight, (*seating herself near table*) and since I have reached this peaceful abode, where no tropical monsters can possibly penetrate, my mind seems calmer. I'll remain here months, years—in fact, I'll never leave these tranquil scenes till my persecutor dies!

FORTES. (*L. aside*) Which I trust he'll not think of doing, being a tenant of mine, till the expiration of his lease.

MRS. C. (*R.*) Yes! my troubled spirit needs the society of real friends, (*holding out her hand to FORTESCUE*) Ah, I forgot, you are my enemy, but dear Mrs. Fortescue, where is she?

FORTES. She's gone up to town, (*looking at his watch*) By the bye, she's almost due by this time. I promised I would meet her at the station.

MRS. C. Go—go, bring her to me with all possible speed! meanwhile, I'll place myself under the protection of Mr. Wilmington—there's a tranquillity about him which acts like balm upon my harrassed mind!

FORTES. Do so my dear madam. Keep up your spirits till we return, and think no more of this phantom foreigner.

(*Exit c. to R.*)

MRS. C. (*alone*) I feel rather better—yes, decidedly better, (*laughing spitefully*) Ha, ha, ha! that poor Sepoy! I've no doubt he's waiting outside my door at this very moment—how disappointed the monster will be, he'll be hunting for me everywhere! (*looking round*) This really is a very pretty little country house—a conservatory I see. (*approaches hot-house, as she does so, the door opens, and she finds herself face to face with BERESFORD, L. 2 E., she falls overcome in a chair.*)

BERES. (*advances towards her, and after contemplating her for a few moments, enquires with extreme politeness*) His name, madam?

MRS. C. (*rising indignantly*) What right—what business have you here, sir?

BERES. I am visiting, with Mr. Wilmington's permission, his magnificent botanical collection, (*offering his arm*) and if you will do me the honour-----

MRS. C. When is the persecution to cease, sir?

BERES. Whenever you think proper to reveal to me----

MRS. C. (*angrily*) "His name, madam." I know the phrase, (*x's to L.*)

BERES. Aha, I shall gain my end—you already begin to lose temper—the fiery glances which dart from your eyes, the convulsive twitchings of those taper fingers, all reveal

one of those highly nervous organisations which defy threats, but yield infallibly to a slow, wearying, protracted series of petty annoyances.

MRS. C. Then, sir, allow me to assure you that you have lost the game by showing me your hand—for the future, sir, I shall receive your visits with positive pleasure. I will listen to you calmly and patiently, but shall not answer a single word, which will be the more easy as I haven't anything to answer, (*sits L. of L. table.*)

BERES. (*smiling*) You will find my process a tedious one.

MRS. C. I'll take my chance.

BERES. Be it so, then, (*bows, and is about to withdraw, but returns and sits R. of c. table*) I beg pardon. (MRS. CHATTERTON *starts and turns sharply round*) I have another observation to make which I'm sure you will excuse. I am still a young man—the place I occupy in society is a distinguished one — the opinion entertained of me by the fair sex is by no means unfavourable ; it will not be my fault, remember, should the world misinterpret the motive for assiduities, which scandalous tongues may think proper to represent as tolerated, if not encouraged, by you—the world is so very wicked !

MRS. C. (*beside herself with rage*) The man's a fiend—a demon ! I had often read in novels of deliberate, systematic vengeance, but little thought I should ever live to be its victim!

BERES. For the moment, then, madam, I take my leave, but I cannot quit the house without again enquiring ——

MRS. C. (*impatiently*) What—what, sir ?

BERES. The merest trifle—his name, madam ! (*bows and exits c.*)

MRS. C. What is to become of me ? The monster's pertinacity is likely to be attended with even more dangerous results than I had anticipated—poor dear Mr. Chatterton ! what would he say ? an immediate stop must be put to all this ! (*walking to and fro*) But how ? if I only knew the hateful name I'd tell it to him this instant, but, unluckily, I am as ignorant in the matter as he is himself!

*Enter* MRS. FORTESCUE, R. 2 E.

MRS. F. My dear Caroline, Alfred has just told me all, how sorry I am to hear of the persecution to which you are subjected—but heaven be praised, you have escaped your tormentor.

MRS. C. (*tragically*) There's *no* escaping him—he's here!

MRS. F. Here—Mr. Beresford !

MRS. C. Yes, to fulfil his mission—to torture me, it's all he has to do!

MRS. F. This is really terrible for you, but, after all he has some reason to feel annoyed; and, I confess, I am at a loss to understand why you do not tell him this gentleman's name, and so put an end to the matter.

MRS. C. (*impatently*) But when I solemnly assure you I don't know it.

MRS. F. You don't know it. (*as if struck by a sudden recollection*) Then I do!

MRS. C. (*rapidly*) You know it—who is he? what is he?—where does he live, tell me all about him!

MRS. F. (*slowly*) Now, you know, I'm rather of a jealous disposition.

MRS. C. (*impatently*) Yes, yes, yes; I know all about that—make haste.

MRS. F. Well, the other day; just before we left town, I entered Alfred's room in his absence; several newly-arrived letters were laying on his desk, one of which, addressed in a small minute character, immediately struck me as having come from a lady. To give you an idea of my emotion at that moment----

MRS. C. (*impatently*) No, don't, don't—it will take too

MRS. F. Fortunately, however, I remembered the excellent advice you had given me.

MRS. C. You opened the letter? Perfectly right—go on, go on!

MRS. F. I *did* open it—the letter was not from a lady, it was from some gentleman who had had an assignation with some anonymous young married woman in the middle of a clump of trees in Kensington Gardens!

MRS. C. Precisely!

MRS. F. The letter went on to say that the young lady had all of a sudden been seized with a paroxysm of terror, lest she should have been seen and recognised—that's all I read, for I was so delighted at finding my suspicions groundless ----

MRS. C. But the gentleman's name.

MRS. F. I really don't know whether I ought-----

MRS. C. Ought—ought—you *must!* I'm eagerly awaiting it, that I may exorcise this boa constrictor—this demon of the jungle—with its magic sound—who was it?

HORACE. (*without*) Not a bad idea that.

MRS. F. Hush, here he comes—'twas he.

MRS. C. Mr. Cleveland, good Heavens!

MRS. F. Yes, be cautious I implore you!

*Enter HORACE CLEVELAND and MR. and MRS. PRIMLEY,  
c. from R.*

HORACE. (*gaily*) Aha, my dear Mrs. Chatterton, what an unexpected pleasure. I give you fair notice we shall not allow you to escape until after the happy day—the glorious twenty-fifth-----

MRS. C. (*aside*) Unhappy young man ! I quite feel for him. (*drawing HORACE CLEVELAND aside, in a hollow whisper*) Sir, I have ruined you.

HORACE. (*laughing*) Ruined *me*, may I enquire *how*.

MRS. C. (*pointing to PRIMLEY*) Hush, they must not hear. That assignation in Kensington Gardens—the lady feared she had been seen, she was right—I saw all!

HORACE. You don't mean to say-----

MRS. C. Yes I do, and worse than that—I've told it all.

HORACE, (*alarmed*) Told it all! to whom ?

MRS. C. To the husband !

HORACE. (*horrified*) To the husband, the devil you have.

MRS. F. (*who has meanwhile approached*) 'Tis alas but too true, I heard her tell him the whole story. Oh, you impudent young man!

HORACE. (*in great consternation*) But I solemnly swear I—horrible thought! appearances are against us. Mr. Wilmington will conceive the most terrible suspicions.

MRS. C. Ill fated youth ! my heart bleeds for you, I'll hasten to get rid of these Primleys, and then do my utmost to get out of this terrible dilemma.

HORACE. (*somewhat sternly*) Pray don't trouble yourself madam.

MRS. C. (to MR. and MRS. PRIMLEY.) Now then, I am with you!

(*Exeunt MRS. CHATTERTON and MR. and MRS. PRIMLEY,*

*C. to L.*  
MRS. F. All this comes of gossiping. How thankful I am that I am not like Mrs. Chatterton. (*Exit c. to L.*)

HORACE. (*despondingly*) She was right; that tongue of hers has ruined me—my marriage, my hopes are blighted! To think that she, of all people in the world, should have discovered that most unlucky interview. Wilmington will never believe in the innocence of the motives which led to my meeting his wife in that infernal clump of trees—he'll tell Bella, our marriage will be broken off, the happiness of my life destroyed ! but Mrs. Wilmington must not remain under the odium of these unjust suspicions—let her husband believe me, or not, as he pleases ; I'll write and explain to him the whole truth ! (*sits down at table to write.*)

*Enter FORTESCUE, crossing at back.*

FORTES. (*looking off*) Hallo! who's that slipping along by the shrubbery yonder. Impossible, it surely can't be—and yet it is by Jupiter, it *is* our mysterious West Indian—it must be he whose card was delivered to Wilmington just now; the gentleman, forsooth, came down from town to inspect the conservatories—ha, ha, ha! he has evidently pursued Mrs. Chatterton—the hunter has tracked his prey, ha, ha, ha! what a persevering dog it is, at all events he's a rare practical cure for gossips! (*perceiving HORACE writing*) Hallo! Horace my boy, what are you concocting?

HORACE. (*rising after folding letter*) Fortescue my friend, farewell!

FORTES. What the deuce do you mean by "Farewell!"

HORACE. Wilmington has been told all about that infernal assignation.

FORTES. You don't mean that!

HORACE. (*hurriedly*) He will, of course, put the very worst construction upon it, and therefore, until my innocence in the matter is thoroughly established, my remaining here, under his roof, would only look like an intentional insult. I have written to him explaining everything!

FORTES. (*puzzled*) You've written-----

HORACE. Yes, these few lines, which I shall at once forward him by Barnes, his servant. I shall start for town immediately, and await his answer there—farewell!

FORTES. (*puzzled*) Stop a bit, my dear fellow, hang me if I can make head or tail of all this. (*WILMINGTON appears in garden, c.*) Now, just begin all over again, will you? Who the devil could have told Wilmington?

HORACE. Hush, here he comes—as matters stand 'tis better he should not see me. I'll step into this conservatory—do what you can to pacify him, and, whatever you do, get him out of the way as soon as you can. (*enters conservatory hastily.*)

FORTES. (*alone*) A pleasant position this to be left in. (*seals himself near table, and takes up newspaper*) I'll take deuced good care I don't open the case.

*WILMINGTON coming down gaily.*

WILM. (*slapping FORTESCUE on the back*) I say, Fortescue, that gentleman from town is a first-rate fellow!

FORTES. (*looking up at him in surprise*) Well, for a jealous man he takes it very coolly.

WILM. I have been showing him my gold fish pond, and my tropical plants—bless you he appears to be more deeply versed in the matter than I am !

FORTES. (*aside*) Horace must be mistaken, he surely cannot know anything about it.

WILM. He has just given me an excellent idea—only fancy now-----

*Enter BARNES, L. 2.*

FORTES. (*alarmed*) Confound it all, here he comes with Horace's letter—if I could only prevent him from delivering it. (*makes signs to BARNES not to give letter,*)

BARNES. (*not understanding*) Yes, sir, directly, sir. (*runs to WILMINGTON with letter.*)

FORTES. The dolt—the idiot!

WILM. A letter! (*takes it—FORTESCUE in his agitation, mechanically advances and withdraws his hand, as though to snatch the letter away—WILMINGTON carelessly takes off envelope without looking at the address, crumples it up and throws it on the ground—continuing*) Yes, a most excellent idea! I—I'll tell it you as soon as I have read my letter.

FORTES. (*stammering with earnestness*) N—o—o ! tell it me now ! I'm longing to hear it—you can read your letter presently, (*to BARNES making signs*) It isn't immediate, is it.

BARNES. Please, sir, the gentleman said as how it was werry immediate.

FORTES. (*aside*) The miserable booby !

WILM. (*reading*) " Sir, I hasten to-----"

FORTES. (*trying to prevent him from reading*) You were giving that—a—a—canary birds-----

WILM. No, no, we were talking of gold fish.

FORTES. Ah, yes to be sure, gold fish, (*tries to get letter out of WILMINGTON'S hand—aside*) I feel strangely inclined to cry fire !

WILM. (*reading, earnestly*) What's this, my wife, " romantic disposition—innocent flirtation — assignation." Good heavens! how frightful.

FORTES. (*hurriedly*) Don't believe it—it isn't true.!

WILM. What isn't true ?

FORTES. (*bawling*) Haven't the remotest idea—but its every word of it false !

WILM. (*overcome with emotion*) My dear friend, read this. Horace and my wife, assignation—Kensington Gardens—the villainous young man has actually the barefaced audacity to write and tell me all about it.

FORTES. (*aside*) The cat is now indeed out of the bag !

WILM. Just as he was going to marry my niece—the thing's frightful, shocking, awful!

FORTES. My dear friend, it's all a mistake ; be tranquil!

WILM. Tranquil! I—I can't—I shall never be tranquil again ! (*rushes off, R. U. E.*)

*Re-enter* HORACE, L. 2 E.

HORACE. (*anxious*) Well!

FORTES. You're a clever fellow you are ; do you know what you've done ?

HORACE. What do you mean ?

FORTES. Wilmington knew nothing about the matter, and you in the kindest manner have favoured him with, all the particulars!

HORACE. Knew nothing about it—impossible. I was only just now informed by that dreadful woman who has made all the mischief, that odious Mrs. Chatterton-----

FORTES. (*hastily*) Mrs. Chatterton! I thought that inveterate chatterbox must have had a finger in all this.

*Enter* MRS. CHATTERTON, *hastily*, L. 2 E.

MRS. C. I've got rid of those Primleys at last, and hasten to repair this most unfortunate mistake. Surely, between the three of us we shall be able to think of something.

HORACE. (*scarcely able to restrain his anger*) One moment, madam, what was it you told me just now ?

MRS. C. Let us not waste time in useless reminiscences, —it appears-----

HORACE. (*angrily*) It appears, madam, that Mr. Wilmington knew nothing whatever of the matter!

MRS. C. Mr. Wilmington—who said he did ? I never even mentioned his name, but as I said before, we've no time to lose.

HORACE. (*in a passion*) Did you, or did you not tell me here on this spot that you saw me in Kensington Gardens with-----

MRS. C. With Mrs. Beresford, to be sure I did.

HORACE. (*utterly astonished*) Mrs. Beresford, I—I don't even know her!

MRS. C. You don't know her ?

HORACE. I give you my word of honour I've never seen the woman in all my life.

MRS. C. (*turning to* MRS. FORTESCUE) Now Julia, what was it that you told me just now ?

FORTES. What! my wife in the conspiracy ? Upon my word!

MRS. F. But, my dear Caroline, when I told you, I had no idea you would repeat it.

MRS. C. And if I did repeat it, Julia, 'twas for Mr. Cleveland's good.

FORTES. There! d'ye hear Horace ? it was for your good, what an ungrateful fellow you are !

MRS. C. It's no fault of mine. How was I to know that that identical clump of trees in Kensington Gardens was the universal place of assignation for the whole fashionable world ? (*to HORACE*) Now, only remember what you said in your letter to Mr. Fortescue !

FORTES. His letter to me!

HORACE. What sir ! do you reveal the contents of my letters ?

FORTES. Letters! what letters, I've received none from you.

HORACE. Yes, I wrote to you the other day.

FORTES. (*angrily*) Ah, those rascally servants ! the Inquisition has been at it again! They actually read my letters now—I—I'll discharge every one of them!

MRS. F. (*timidly*) It wasn't the servants my dear, a—a—it was I who opened the letter, but it's the very first time, I assure you.

FORTES. The first time ! Aha! a light breaks in upon me. (*aside*) Then I shouldn't wonder if it wasn't my wife who----(*aloud*) Who was it that divulged my project about that new line of rail and thereby prevented me from realizing three hundred per cent ?

MRS. F. (*timidly*) My dear, I—I accidentally allowed it to escape me.

FORTES. (*angrily*) You did! who was it then let out that I wore night----

MRS. F. (*timidly*) I happened by the merest chance to mention it at Mr. Hayward's—but I assure you I would never have opened your letters if it hadn't been for—  
for----

FORTES. For what?

MRS. F. (*to MRS. CHATTERTON*) For the advice you gave me.

FORTES. What, her fault again !

MRS. C. (*with an air of injured innocence*) Oh, of course it's my fault—I'm to bear the blame, of course !

HORACE. (*goes down L. corner*) Yes, madam, it is your fault; thanks to you, my marriage is broken off—thanks

to you, madam, I am now compelled to leave this house.  
(*falls into a chair, L.*)

MRS. F. Thanks to you, I've deserved the anger of my husband, (*falls weeping on chair at back, c. L.*)

MRS. C. (*with assumed calmness*) Go on, go on! has no one else anything to thank me for? (*sits in chair, R.C, at back.*)

FORTES. (*impetuously*) Oh, gossip, gossip ! to think that our penal code should include a " silent system," and yet gossips are allowed to go unpunished! (*throws himself angrily into a chair, R.*)

*Enter BARNES, L. 2 E.*

BARNES. (*to HORACE*) Please, sir, you said as how you should want me in five minutes or so.

HORACE. (*starting*) Yes! get out the gig, put my trunk and carpet bag into it, and wait for me at the garden gate.

BARNES. Ees, your honour.

MRS. C. (*starting from her chair*) Barnes!

BARNES. Ees, marm.

MRS. C. Get out whatever you please, put my boxes into it, and wait for me at the garden gate.

FORTES. What are you going, too ?

MRS. C. I am.

FORTES. 'Pon my word this is pleasant! here are the two principals in the affair coolly walking off, while I, who have nothing whatever to do with the matter, am to be left here to appease two exasperated husbands. (*bawling*) Here, Barnes!

BARNES. (*returning, L.*) Ees, sir.

FORTES. Get me whatever species of conveyance first comes to hand, a truck or a wheelbarrow if you like—and wait for me at the-----

BARNES. (*interrupting*) Garden gate, ees sir !

FORTES. (*coming back and offering both arms*) Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to offer you my arm; we'll all start together.

MRS. C. What do you mean ?

FORTES. (*severely*) I mean, madam, that Horace is perfectly right in leaving a house in which you have rendered it impossible for him to remain; but that *you*, the cause of all this disturbance, should coolly walk off just as the storm is at its height, is really worthy of no one but Mrs. Chatterton !

MRS. C. (*after a moment's reflection*) Mr. Fortescue, you

are right. I—I'll stand my ground—we'll put our heads together and see if we can't extricate poor Mr. Cleveland from the terrible dilemma in which we have placed him !

FORTES. *We—you, if you please.*

MRS. C. Well then, I—I—I—if you *insist* upon it, since I'm to bear the blame of everything!—let us now reflect calmly and quietly.

FORTES. Ah, if that idiot Barnes who's constantly making mistakes when they are of no earthly use, could only have delivered this unfortunate letter to anybody but the person to whom it was addressed! (*struck as if by a sudden idea*) Ah!

ALL. What?

FORTES. (*excited*) A magnificent idea is now fermenting in my brain! Stop! yes, yes, I have it. (*they all surround him*) Let me see—Wilmington and I were standing on this very spot when the letter was delivered to him—he was so absorbed in his gold fish that he mechanically opened the envelope, and threw it away, without even looking at the address ! Yes, there it lays crumpled up, I'm morally certain he never once glanced at it.

MRS. C. Well.

FORTES. Well, don't you see that we can now turn the worthy Barnes's character for stupidity to excellent advantage. It's the simplest thing in the world. Barnes has delivered the letter to the wrong man, that's all. (*tearing envelope into small pieces*) Here ! burn every atom of this tell tale document.

MRS. C. Aha, a most splendid idea of ours!

FORTES. *Ours!* well, never mind! (*pushing HORACE towards table*) Quick, here's another envelope—address it in bold, legible characters to Mark Beresford, Esq.

HORACE. Mark Beresford-----

FORTES. Most certainly.

MRS. C. Most certainly.

MRS. F. Most certainly, (*aside*) I can't say I exactly understand why, but I've no doubt the plan's excellent.

HORACE. But-----

FORTES. There's no time for bute—you've not a moment to lose.

HORACE. (*sits and addresses envelope*) And I say, Julia, (*to MRS. FORTESCUE*) do you keep sentinel !

MRS. C. Excellent—it's all Barnes !

FORTES. Now, then, Horace, give me the envelope, and make yourself scarce.

HORACE. (*reluctantly giving envelope*) But-----

FORTES. As I told you before, there's no time for butts, be off with you! (*pushes him out.*)

MRS. F. (*who is looking out*) Mr. Wilmington is coming this way.

FORTES. (*handing envelope to MRS. C.*) Quick ! crumple up the envelope and throw it wherever the other lay. (MRS. C. *does so*) Now, madam (*to MRS. F.*) do you leave us for awhile.

MRS. F. (*reluctantly*) But you'll tell me all about it afterwards. (*Exit.*)

*Enter WILMINGTON, he appears sorrowful and dejected, he shakes his head mournfully first at FORTESCUE, and then at MRS. CHATTERTON—they both shake their heads with burlesque solemnity—they then advance and shake him by the hand—all three heave a deep sigh.*

FORTES. My dear sir, how do you find yourself now—more tranquil I hope.

WILM. (*in an intensely melancholy tone*) Tranquil, my dear sir! how can I be tranquil ? My tranquility is ruffled for ever.

FORTES. Come, come, my dear sir, you must not give way to such gloomy ideas.

WILM. (*hearing a deep sigh*) What o'clock is it?

FORTES. (*sighing in imitation, and looking at his watch*) A quarter past five.

MRS. C. (*ditto*) Half-past, you're slow.

WILM. Half-past ? then *she* will soon be here.

MRS. C. Who?

WILM. My wife. I shall require an instant explanation. (*endeavouring to assume a terrific attitude*) I shall put myself in a passion, a violent passion, I—I know I shall, and I'm terrible when I'm in a passion—not that I ever was in a passion, but I—I, feel that when I am, I'm—I'm awful!

MRS. C. I can readily imagine it.

WILM. But he, the perfidious youth will not be here to witness the tragic scene. Barnes tells me he has ordered the gig, it's evident he dreads my wrath—he's going!

FORTES. He ! who!

WILM. The treacherous Cleveland.

FORTES. Cleveland going? he hasn't a notion of such a thing. (*makes signs to MRS. CHATTERTON.*)

WILM. Why then has he ordered the gig ?

FORTES. Oh, to—to fetch the ladies from the station, of course.

WILM. (*starting*) To fetch my wife and Bella ? how dare he think of such a thing.

MRS. C. Precisely what Mr. Fortescue and I were saying, how dare he think of such a thing, and yet he alluded to the circumstance with such light-hearted gaiety-----

WILM. Gaiety! (*groaning*) The heartless villain!

FORTES. That I am convinced you are mistaken.

MRS. C. But alas, (*looks significantly at FORTESCUE*) How can Mr. Wilmington be mistaken when in the letter he has received, the thoughtless youth himself acknowledges-----

WILM. Yes, here it is. (*producing his letter*) You see madam, this is his signature.

MRS. C. Horace Cleveland, (*sighing*) Yes.

WILM. (*passing letter to FORTESCUE*) You know his handwriting.

FORTES. Yes, I can swear to that " H " of his ! alas there can no longer be a doubt about the matter, (*pretending to examine letter*) It's true, I don't see any address attached to it, but that makes no difference.

WILM. The address ? there it lays.

FORTES. (*pretending to look round*) Where ?

WILM. There—where I threw it just now. (*stoops to pick it up.*)

FORTES, (*withholding his arm*) Don't trouble yourself, 'tis alas ! needless.

WILM. But still I may as well show you. (*stooping*)

MRS. C. (*withholding his other arm*) Pray don't stoop, your proofs are already but too strong.

WILM. (*after picking up envelope*) You shall now see for yourselves, there—look ! (*uttering a cry*) Hallo !

FORTES. What's the matter ?

WILM. (*delighted*) Why, it isn't addressed to me at all! Fortescue, my dear friend, look here, it's addressed to Mark Beresford!

FORTES. (*incredulously pushing away the envelope*) Impossible !

WILM. (*running across to MRS. CHATTERTON*) To Mark Beresford Esq., my dear madam.

MRS. C. My poor friend you must be out of your mind.

WILM. They *won't* believe me. (*bawling*) Will you oblige me by looking yourself, I say.

FORTES, (*examining envelope*) 'Pon my life, so it is—Mark Beresford.

MRS. C. (*ditto*) It really is—but how can this terrible mistake have occurred ?

WILM. Can't you guess, it's that abominable Barnes, the

rascal! (*angrily*) What anxiety he has caused me, I—I'll discharge him. (*laughing hysterically*) Ha, ha, ha! I'll discharge him, I will, ha, ha, ha! (*sits down and rubs his face with his pocket handkerchief*) How hot it is to be sure?

FORTES. Now if I were not morally certain as to Horace's innocence in this matter, I should feel some compunction at duping the poor man in this way; however, it is for his own good—besides a ruse must surely be excuseable when perpetrated in the cause of truth!

WILM. (*suddenly jumping up*) I say Fortescue, this Mr. Beresford must be the very identical individual-----

FORTES. Who is now inspecting your conservatories.

WILM. Ha, ha, ha! Then — (*attempting to fain regret*) Dear, dear me! what a pity—such an uncommonly nice fellow, too—ha, ha, ha! and such a judge of gold fish and tropical plants—ha, ha, ha! It's very wrong of me to laugh, but I can't help it. A sentimental assignation in Kensington Gardens—there's something so very absurd in the idea, ha, ha, ha!

FORTES. }  
and } There is indeed, ha, ha, ha! (*all three laugh*).  
MRS. C. }

*Enter* MRS. FORTESCUE, cautiously, R., she gradually advances.

MRS. F. (*aside*) I'm dying to know how they're getting on!

*Enter* HORACE, L.

HORACE. Why they are laughing—Fortescue's stratagem has evidently succeeded.

FORTES. (*perceiving* HORACE) Aha, Horace! there now, who said he was going?

WILM. (*running up to HORACE and taking his hand*) My dear young friend, now don't look so uneasy, he knows nothing about it!

HORACE. He—who?—oh, ah—*he*, yes, yes!

WILM. I've got the letter, but what an absurd idea it was of yours to favour the gentleman with such a very gratuitous explanation. I say, if Bella only knew the contents—sly young dog, ha, ha, ha!

HORACE. (*confused*) I assure you, my dear sir, if you only knew-----

WILM. (*chuckling*) Don't be alarmed, it's only my joke. I won't tell her, and to put you out of your misery I'll run and burn it this very instant, (*going*) After a brief period

of stormy agitation, how delightful it is to relapse into a state of calm, serene tranquility ! *(Exit R.*

MRS. C. *(hastening up to HORACE)* My dear Mr. Cleveland, let me congratulate you—we've got you out of it splendidly!

MRS. F. *(complacently)* Haven't we?

FORTES. *(severely)* Say rather *I* have fortunately succeeded in averting the consequences of your thoughtless and indiscriminate gossip—and let our friend Cleveland's narrow escape teach you both to *think* a little more and *talk* a little less for the future; *(to CLEVELAND)* for it is really difficult to say which does the more harm, a timid little tell-tale like my wife, or a grand conversational improvisatrice like Mrs. Chatterton. *(to MRS. CHATTERTON)* But I say, Mrs. Chatterton, above all beware how you allow Beresford's pertinacity to wring from you the real truth of the whole matter.

MRS. C. Beresford, I defy Beresford ! Let Beresford employ whatever form of persecution Beresford pleases—Beresford shall never get a word out of me !

FORTES. Then place yourself at once on the defensive, for here Beresford comes !

*Enter BERESFORD, during last words, with MR. PRIMLEY, C.*

BERES. A very sensible remark Mr. Primley. *(seeing MRS. CHATTERTON)* Aha, my dear Mrs. Chatterton—talking about me ? evidently just making up your mind to favour me with—the gentleman's name !

MRS. C. *(drawing back)* Quite a mistake, sir; I am now more than ever determined never to breath a syllable of it.

BERES. Am I really to look upon this as your final, irrevocable resolve ?

MRS. C. *(emphatically)* As my final, irrevocable resolve.

BERES. *(with extreme politeness)* That being the case, my dear madam, will you do me the favour to inform me at what hour I am likely to find Mr. Chatterton at home ?

MRS. C. *(alarmed)* Mr. Chatterton! what has Mr. Chatterton to do with tho matter ?

BERES. He will merely have to answer me with his life for his wife's former loquacity, and present taciturnity; if, therefore, you will kindly inform me at what hour Mr. Chatterton is visible, my second shall wait on him without loss of time.

MRS. C. Second! a duel! merciful powers, the tiger is going to slaughter my unoffending husband!

BERES. You have thought proper to relate in my hearing

a highly interesting little narrative respecting a clandestine interview between my wife and some mysterious gentleman—that gentleman's name you obstinately refuse to reveal; instead, therefore, of shedding his blood I am now compelled to sacrifice the nearest substitute, your husband. You see the laws of honour absolutely require that I should kill somebody!

*Enter WILMINGTON*

WILM. (alarmed) Bless me! he says he must kill somebody!

MRS. C. (*handkerchief to her face*) Monster! (to FORTESCUE, *greatly agitated*) What's to be done? I can't allow my husband to be quietly murdered by this ferocious Sepoy—I shall be obliged to tell him the whole story!

FORTES. You must do nothing of the sort. For Cleveland's, for Wilmington's sake, you must not allow a word to escape you.

WILM. Why, dear me, what can be going on?

BEKES. (*producing pocket book*) Let me see Mrs. Chatterton's address is-----

MRS. C. What an awful situation, (*to BERESEORD, imploringly*) Ruthless vampire, inflict what punishment you please on me; but spare my unoffending Arthur! (*throws herself in a half kneeling position before BERESFORD*) Spare him! pitiless monster, spare him!

BERES. (*smiling*) My dear madam, your anxiety for Mr. Chatterton's safety proves to me that although that remarkably fluent tongue of yours is a most dangerous member, its errors are not dictated by the heart! Be not alarmed—your dismay on Mr. Chatterton's account, shall protect him from my just indignation, but the very affection you evince for your *own* husband, should have taught you a little more regard for the feelings of others (*smiling*) You still perversely refuse to reveal the gentleman's name? (MRS. CHATTERTON *makes a gesture of combined refusal and supplication*) Well, then, as I see assembled round me the same party in whose presence you made all the mischief, I'll be more obliging—I'll tell it *you*!

MRS. C. Eh?

BERES. The name of the gentleman whom you saw with my wife in that ever memorable clump of trees in Kensington Gardens, was Mark Beresford—the individual who has now the honour of standing before you!

MRS. C. }  
and } You!!!  
FORTES. }

MRS. C. (*incredulously*) Do you mean to tell me, sir, that you had an assignation in the middle of a clump of trees with your own wife?

BERES. For "assignation" substitute "appointment," and you will have faithfully described the situation. It really is the simplest thing in the world; there is a little of the recluse in my nature, and since my arrival in London, I have made it my practice daily to escape for a few hours from the hollow, artificial excitement of what is called fashionable life, and with some favourite author for a companion, have frequently bent my steps towards the agreeable, but somewhat transparent reclusion, which should henceforth be designated, "Mrs. Chatterton's clump." On one of these occasions it had been arranged that my wife, as soon as her morning calls were over, should drive to the gardens, join me at my favourite haunt, and that we should then stroll through the gardens together. On that identical day was it that Mrs. Chatterton beheld my wife alighting from her carriage, and fired with the hope of collecting materials for an intensely exciting anecdote, the inquisitive lady gave chase with all the vigilance of a female detective, and actually succeeded in convicting Mrs. Beresford of the monstrous impropriety of a stolen interview with her own husband!

FORTES. Ha, ha, ha! well this is an unexpected denouement!

PRIM. Most satisfactory solution of a hitherto unfathomable enigma!

MRS. C. (*aside to FORTESCUE*) But what then becomes of Mr. Cleveland?

FORTES. Hush, there are more clumps of trees than one in Kensington Gardens—bless you there's accommodation for all Belgravia!

HORACE. (*to FORTESCUE*) I say, then nobody knows anything about my rendezvous after all.

FORTES. Bless you, no—a mere coincidence of platonic assignations, that's all!

WILM. (*aside—excessively puzzled*) How was it then? nobody seems to have met nobody else.—No, I mean somebody must have met nobody.—No, I can't make it out! (*walks up.*)

MRS. C. (*to BERESFORD vexed*) But may I enquire, sir, why you did not correct my error at the time I told the story, and why you have relentlessly persecuted me night and day, for the last fortnight, for the sole purpose of enquiring after what now proves to be *your own name!*

BERES. Simply, madam, because I considered it my duty to society to read you a lesson, a severe, practical, and not easily forgotten lesson, which will, I trust, teach you and other ladies (*glancing at MRS. FORTESCUE*) of your highly fascinating, but dreadfully dangerous class, to be careful how you peril an innocent lady's spotless reputation for the sole purpose of affording a little extra scope to your own conversational powers!

MRS. F. (*with a deeply injured air*) To think now my dear Constance that all this fuss should have arisen out of----

MRS. C. A little friendly gossip!

BERES. Friendly gossip—the mistake lies in that phrase! words must be judged by their consequences, as well as by the speaker's actual intentions, in which case it strikes me that the noun substantive "gossip" and the epithet "friendly," will be found to possess marvellously little in common!

MRS. C. I see how it is, they'll compel me at last to give up talking entirely, and to renounce conversation altogether! Yes! Henceforth I shall rigidly restrain myself to monosyllables, eked out when absolutely necessary by an occasional nod, or supplementary wink, or should I ever be tempted into an entire sentence, it shall relate exclusively to the weather, that being the only topic about which one may express one's candid opinion, without fear of offending any one! (*changing her manner*) Seriously though, you will find Mr. Beresford, that your practical lesson has not been thrown away—for the future I'll think twice before I tell an anecdote: however, my worst enemies must admit that my failings have sprung from an amiable motive, that of amusing my friends, and should I, (to AUDIENCE) have only been fortunate enough in the present instance, to attain this much-desired end, 'tis for *you* to decide how long I may be permitted to indulge in my favorite pastime—GOSSIP!

CURTAIN.