The Fire of London

Arnold Bennett

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  Pensa, lettor, se quel che qui s'inizia
non procedesse, come tu avresti
di piu sapere angosciosa carizia.

DANTE.
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"YOU'RE wanted on the telephone, sir."

Mr. Bruce Bowring, managing director of the Consolidated Mining and Investment Corporation, Limited (capital two millions, in one−pound shares, which stood at twenty−seven−and−six), turned and gazed querulously across the electric−lit spaces of his superb private office at the confidential clerk who addressed him. Mr. Bowring, in shirt−sleeves before a Florentine mirror, was brushing his hair with the solicitude of a mother who has failed to rear most of a large family.

"Who is it?" he asked, as if that demand for him were the last straw but one. "Nearly seven on Friday evening!" he added, martyrised.

"I think a friend, sir."

The middle−aged financier dropped his gold−mounted brush and, wading through the deep pile of the Oriental carpet, passed into the telephone−cabinet and shut the door.

"Hallo!" he accosted the transmitter, resolved not to be angry with it. "Hallo! Are you there? Yes, I'm Bowring. Who are you?"

"Nrrrr," the faint, unhuman voice of the receiver whispered in his ear. "Nrrrr. Cluck. I'm a friend."

"What name?"

"No name. I thought you might like to know that a determined robbery is going to be attempted to−night at your house in Lowndes Square, a robbery of cash and before nine o'clock. Nrrrr. I thought you might like to know."

"Ah!" said Mr. Bowring to the transmitter.

The feeble exclamation was all he could achieve at first. In the confined, hot silence of the telephone−cabinet this message, coming to him mysteriously out of the vast unknown of London, struck him with a sudden sick fear that perhaps his wondrously organised scheme might yet miscarry, even at the final moment. Why that night of all nights? And why before nine o'clock? Could it be that the secret was out, then?

"Any further interesting details?" he inquired, bracing himself to an assumption of imperturbable and gay coolness.

But there was no answer. And when after some difficulty he got the exchange−girl to disclose the number which had rung him up, he found that his interlocutor had been using a public call−office in Oxford Street. He returned to his room, donned his frock−coat, took a large envelope from a locked drawer and put it in his pocket, and sat down to think a little.

At that time Mr. Bruce Bowring was one of the most famous conjurers in the City. He had begun, ten years earlier, with nothing but a silk hat; and out of that empty hat had been produced, first the Hoop−La Limited, a South African gold−mine of numerous stamps and frequent dividends, then the Hoop−La No. 2 Limited, a mine with as many reincarnations as Buddha, and then a dazzling succession of mines and combination of mines. The more the hat emptied itself, the more it was full; and the emerging objects (which now included the house in Lowndes Square and a perfect dream of a place in Hampshire) grew constantly larger, and the conjurer more impressive and persuasive, and the audience more enthusiastic in its applause. At last, with a unique flourish, and a new turning−up of sleeves to prove that there was no deception, had come out of the hat the C.M.I.C., a sort of incredibly enormous Union Jack, which enwrapped all the other objects in its splendid folds. The shares of the C.M.I.C. were affectionately known in the Kaffir circus as "Solids"; they yielded handsome though irregular dividends, earned chiefly by flotation and speculation; the circus believed in them. And in view of the annual meeting of shareholders to be held on the following Tuesday afternoon (the conjurer in the chair and his hat on the table), the market price, after a period of depression, had stiffened.

Mr. Bowring's meditations were soon interrupted by a telegram. He opened it and read: "Cook drunk again. Will dine with you Devonshire, seven−thirty. Impossible here. Have arranged about luggage. Marie." Marie was Mr. Bowring's wife. He told himself that he felt greatly relieved by that telegram; he clutched at it; and his spirits seemed to rise. At any rate, since he would not now go near Lowndes Square, he could certainly laugh at the threatened robbery. He thought what a wonderful thing Providence was, after all.

"Just look at that," he said to his clerk, showing the telegram with a humorous affectation of dismay.

"Tut, tut," said the clerk, discreetly sympathetic towards his employer thug victimised by debauched cooks. "I suppose you're going down to Hampshire to−night as usual, sir?"

Mr. Bowring replied that he was, and that everything appeared to be in order for the meeting, and that he should be back on Monday afternoon or at the latest very early on Tuesday.

Then, with a few parting instructions, and with that eagle glance round his own room and into circumjacent rooms which a truly efficient head of affairs never omits on leaving business for the week−end, Mr. Bowring sedately, yet magnificently, departed from the noble registered offices of the C.M.I.C.

"Why didn't Marie telephone instead of wiring?" he mused, as his pair of greys whirled him and his coachman and his footman off to the Devonshire.

II. The Devonshire Mansion, a bright edifice of eleven storeys in the Foster and Dicksee style, constructional ironwork by Homan, lifts by Waygood, decorations by Waring, and terra−cotta by the rood, is situate on the edge of Hyde Park. It is a composite building. Its foundations are firmly fixed in the Tube railway; above that comes the wine cellarage, then the vast laundry, and then (a row of windows scarcely level with the street) a sporting club, a billiard−room, a grill−room, and a cigarette−merchant whose name ends in "opoulos." On the first floor is the renowned Devonshire Mansion Restaurant. Always, in London, there is just one restaurant where, if you are an entirely correct person, "you can get a decent meal." The place changes from season to season, but there is never more than one of it at a time. That season it happened to be the Devonshire. (The chef of the Devonshire had invented tripe suppers, tripes à la mode de Caen, and these suppers seven−and−six had been the rage.) Consequently all entirely correct people fed as a matter of course at the Devonshire, since there was no other place fit to go to. The vogue of the restaurant favourably affected the vogue of the nine floors of furnished suites

above the restaurant; they were always full; and the heavenward attics, where the servants took off their smart liveries and became human, held much wealth. The vogue of the restaurant also exercised a beneficial influence over the status of the Kitcat Club, which was a cock−and−hen club of the latest pattern and had its "house" on the third floor.

It was a little after half−past seven when Mr. Bruce Bowring haughtily ascended the grand staircase of this resort of opulence, and paused for an instant near the immense fireplace at the summit (September was inclement, and a fire burned nicely) to inquire from the head−waiter whether Mrs. Bowring had secured a table. But Marie had not arrived Marie, who was never late! Uneasy and chagrined, he proceeded, under the escort of the head−waiter, to the glittering Salle Louis Quatorze and selected, because of his morning attire, a table half−hidden behind an onyx pillar. The great room was moderately full of fair women and possessive men, despite the month. Immediately afterwards a youngish couple (the man handsomer and better dressed than the woman) took the table on the other side of the pillar. Mr. Bowring waited five minutes, then he ordered Sole Mornay and a bottle of Romanee−Conti, and then he waited another five minutes. He went somewhat in fear of his wife, and did not care to begin without her.

"Can't you read?" It was the youngish man at the next table speaking in a raised voice to a squinting lackey with a telegraph form in his hand. "'Solids! Solids,' my friend. 'Sell Solids to any amount to−morrow and Monday.' Got it? Well, send it off at once."

"Quite clear, my lord," said the lackey, and fled. The youngish man gazed fixedly but absently at Mr. Bowring and seemed to see through him to the tapestry behind. Mr. Bowring, to his own keen annoyance, reddened. Partly to conceal the blush, and partly because it was a quarter to eight and there was the train to catch, he lowered his face, and began upon the sole. A few minutes later the lackey returned, gave some change to the youngish man, and surprised Mr. Bowring by advancing towards him and handing him an envelope an envelope which bore on its flap the legend "Kitcat Club." The note within was scribbled in pencil in his wife's handwriting, and ran: "Just arrived. Delayed by luggage. I'm too nervous to face the restaurant, and am eating a chop here alone. The place is fortunately empty. Come and fetch me as soon as you're ready."

Mr. Bowring sighed angrily. He hated his wife's club, and this succession of messages telephonic, telegraphic, and caligraphic was exasperating him.

"No answer!" he ejaculated, and then he beckoned the lackey closer. "Who's that gentleman at the next table with the lady?" he murmured.

"I'm not rightly sure, sir," was the whispered reply. "Some authorities say he's the strong man at the Hippodrome, while others affirm he's a sort of American millionaire."

"But you addressed him as 'my lord.'"

"Just then I thought he was the strong man, sir," said the lackey, retiring.

"My bill!" Mr. Bowring demanded fiercely of the waiter, and at the same time the youngish gentleman and his companion rose and departed.

At the lift Mr. Bowring found the squinting lackey in charge.

"You're the liftman, too?"

"To−night, sir, I am many things. The fact is, the regular liftman has got a couple of hours off being the recent father of twins."

"Well Kitcat Club."

The lift seemed to shoot far upwards, and Mr. Bowring thought the lackey had mistaken the floor, but on gaining the corridor he saw across the portals in front of him the remembered gold sign, "Kitcat Club. Members only." He Pushed the door open and went in.

III. Instead of the familiar vestibule of his wife's club, Mr. Bowring discovered a small antechamber, and beyond, through a doorway half−screened by a portière he had glimpses of a rich, rose−lit drawing−room. In the doorway, with one hand raised to the portière, stood the youngish man who had forced him to blush in the restaurant.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Bowring, stiffly "is this the Kitcat Club?"

The other man advanced to the outer door, his brilliant eyes fixed on Mr. Bowring's; his arm crept round the cheek of the door and came back bearing the gold sign; then he shut the door and locked it. "No, this isn't the Kitcat Club at all," he replied. "It is my flat. Come and sit down. I was expecting you."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Mr. Bowring disdainfully.

"But when I tell you that I know you are going to decamp to−night, Mr. Bowring "

The youngish man smiled affably.

"Decamp?" The spine of the financier suddenly grew flaccid.

"I used the word."

"Who the devil are you?" snapped the financier, forcing his spine to rigidity.

"I am the 'friend' on the telephone. I specially wanted you at the Devonshire to−night, and I thought that the fear of a robbery at Lowndes Square might make your arrival here more certain. I am he who devised the story of the inebriated cook and favoured you with a telegram signed 'Marie.' I am the humorist who pretended in a loud voice to send off telegraphic instructions to sell 'Solids,' in order to watch your demeanour under the test. I am the expert who forged your wife's handwriting in a note from the Kitcat. I am the patron of the cross−eyed menial who gave you the note and who afterwards raised you too high in the lift. I am the artificer of this gold sign, an exact duplicate of the genuine one two floors below, which induced you to visit me. The sign alone cost me nine−and−six; the servant's livery came to two pounds fifteen. But I never consider expense when, by dint of a generous outlay, I can avoid violence. I hate violence." He gently waved the sign to and fro.

"Then my wife " Mr. Bowring stammered in a panic rage.

"Is probably at Lowndes Square, wondering what on earth has happened to you."

Mr. Bowring took breath, remembered that he was a great man, and steadied himself.

"You must be mad," he remarked quietly. "Open this door at once."

"Perhaps," the stranger judicially admitted. "Perhaps a sort of madness. But do come and sit down. We have no time to lose."

Mr. Bowring gazed at that handsome face, with the fine nostrils, large mouth, and square, clean chin, and the dark eyes, the black hair, and long, black moustache; and he noticed the long, thin hands. "Decadent!" he decided.

Nevertheless, and though it was with the air of indulging the caprice of a lunatic, he did in fact obey the stranger's request.

It was a beautiful Chippendale drawing−room that he entered. Near the hearth, to which a morsel of fire gave cheerfulness, were two easy−chairs, and between them a small table. Behind was extended a fourfold draught−screen.

"I can give you just five minutes," said Mr. Bowring, magisterially sitting down.

"They will suffice," the stranger responded, sitting down also. " You have in your pocket, Mr. Bowring probably your breast−pocket fifty Bank of England notes for a thousand pounds each, and a number of smaller notes amounting to another ten thousand."

"Well?"

"I must demand from you the first−named fifty."

Mr. Bowring, in the silence of the rose−lit drawing−room, thought of all the Devonshire Mansion, with its endless corridors and innumerable rooms, its acres of carpets, its forests of furniture, its gold and silver, and its jewels and its wines, its pretty women and possessive men the whole humming microcosm founded on a unanimous pretence that the sacredness of property was a natural law. And he thought how disconcerting it was that he should be trapped there, helpless, in the very middle of the vast pretence, and forced to admit that the sacredness of property was a purely artificial convention.

"By what right do you make this demand?" he inquired, bravely sarcastic.

"By the right of my unique knowledge," said the stranger, with a bright smile. "Listen to what you and I alone know. You are at the end of the tether. The Consolidated is at the same spot. You have a past consisting chiefly of nineteen fraudulent flotations. You have paid dividends out of capital till there is no capital left. You have speculated and lost. You have cooked balance−sheets to a turn and ruined the eyesight of auditors with dust. You have lived like ten lords. Your houses are mortgaged. You own an unrivalled collection of unreceipted bills. You are worse than a common thief. (Excuse these personalities.)"

"My dear, good sir " Mr. Bowring interrupted, grandly.

"Permit me. What is more serious, your self−confidence has been gradually deserting you. At last, perceiving that some blundering person was bound soon to put his foot through the brittle shell of your ostentation and tread on nothing, and foreseeing for yourself an immediate future consisting chiefly of Holloway, you have by a supreme effort of your genius, borrowed £60,000 from a bank on C.M.I.C. scrip, for a week (eh?), and you have arranged, you and your wife, to melt into thin air. You will affect to set out as usual for your country place in Hampshire, but it is Southampton that will see you to−night, and Havre will see you to−morrow. You may run over to Paris to change some notes, but by Monday you will be on your way to frankly, I don't know where; perhaps Monte Video. Of course you take the risk of extradition, but the risk is preferable to the certainty that awaits you in England. I think you will elude extradition. If I thought otherwise, I should not have had you here to−night, because, once extradited, you might begin to amuse yourself by talking about me."

"So it's blackmail," said Mr. Bowring, grim.

The dark eyes opposite to him sparkled gaily.

"It desolates me," the youngish man observed, "to have to commit you to the deep with only ten thousand. But, really, not less than fifty thousand will requite me for the brain−tissue which I have expended in the study of your interesting situation."

Mr. Bowring consulted his watch.

"Come, now," he said, huskily; "I'll give you ten thousand. I flatter myself I can look facts in the face, and so I'll give you ten thousand."

"My friend," answered the spider, "you are a judge of character. Do you honestly think I don't mean precisely what I say to sixpence? It is eight−thirty. You are, if I may be allowed the remark, running it rather fine."

"And suppose I refuse to part?" said Mr. Bowring, after reflection. "What then?"

"I have confessed to you that I hate violence. You would therefore leave this room unmolested, but you wouldn't step off the island."

Mr. Bowring scanned the agreeable features of the stranger. Then, while the lifts were ascending and descending, and the wine was sparkling, and the jewels flashing, and the gold chinking, and the pretty women being pretty, in all the four quarters of the Devonshire, Mr. Bruce Bowring in the silent parlour counted out fifty notes on to the table. After all, it was a fortune, that little pile of white on the crimson polished wood.

"Bon voyage!" said the stranger. "Don't imagine that I am not full of sympathy for you. I am. You have only been unfortunate. Bon voyage!"

"No! By Heaven!" Mr. Bowring almost shouted, rushing back from the door, and drawing a revolver from his hip pocket. "It's too much! I didn't mean to but confound it! what's a revolver for?"

The youngish man jumped up quickly and put his hands on the notes.

"Violence is always foolish, Mr. Bowring," he murmured.

"Will you give them up, or won't you?"

"I won't."

The stranger's fine eyes seemed to glint with joy in the drama.

"Then "

The revolver was raised, but in the same instant a tiny hand snatched it from the hand of Mr. Bowring, who turned and beheld by his side a woman. The huge screen sank slowly and noiselessly to the floor in the surprising manner peculiar to screens that have been overset.

Mr. Bowring cursed. "An accomplice! I might have guessed!" he grumbled in final disgust.

He ran to the door, unlocked it, and was no more seen.

IV. The lady was aged twenty−seven or so; of medium height, and slim, with a plain, very intelligent and expressive face, lighted by courageous, grey eyes and crowned with loose, abundant, fluffy hair. Perhaps it was the fluffy hair, perhaps it was the mouth that twitched as she dropped the revolver who can say? but the whole

atmosphere of the rose−lit chamber was suddenly changed. The incalculable had invaded it.

"You seem surprised, Miss Fincastle," said the possessor of the bank−notes, laughing gaily.

"Surprised!" echoed the lady, controlling that mouth. "My dear Mr. Thorold, when, strictly as a journalist, I accepted your invitation, I did not anticipate this sequel; fþrankly I did not."

She tried to speak coldly and evenly, on the assumption that a journalist has no sex during business hours. But just then she happened to be neither less nor more a woman than a woman always is.

"If I have had the misfortune to annoy you !" Thorold threw up his arms in gallant despair.

"Annoy is not the word," said Miss Fincastle, nervously smiling. "May I sit down? Thanks. Let us recount. You arrive in England, from somewhere, as the son and heir of the late Ahasuerus Thorold, the New York operator, who died worth six million dollars. It becomes known that while in Algiers in the spring you stayed at the Hôtel St. James, famous as the scene of what is called the 'Algiers Mystery,' familiar to English newspaper−readers since last April. The editor of my journal therefore instructs me to obtain an interview with you. I do so. The first thing I discover is that, though an American, you have no American accent. You explain this by saying that since infancy you have always lived in Europe with your mother."

"But surely you do not doubt that I am Cecil Thorold!" said the man. Their faces were approximate over the table.

"Of course not. I merely recount. To continue. I interview you as to the Algerian mystery, and get some new items concerning it. Then you regale me with tea and your opinions, and my questions grow more personal. So it comes about that, strictly on behalf of my paper, I inquire what your recreations are. And suddenly you answer: 'Ah! My recreations! Come to dinner to−night, quite informally, and I will show you how I amuse myself!' I come. I dine. I am stuck behind that screen and told to listen. And and the millionaire proves to be nothing but a blackmailer."

"You must understand, my dear lady "

"I understand everything, Mr. Thorold, except your object in admitting me to the scene."

"A whim!" cried Thorold vivaciously, "a freak of mine! Possibly due to the eternal and universal desire of man to show off before woman!"

The journalist tried to smile, but something in her face caused Thorold to run to a chiffonier.

"Drink this," he said, returning with a glass.

"I need nothing." The voice was a whisper.

"Oblige me."

Miss Fincastle drank and coughed.

"Why did you do it?" she asked sadly, looking at the notes.

"You don't mean to say," Thorold burst out, "that you are feeling sorry for Mr. Bruce Bowring? He has merely parted with what he stole. And the people from whom he stole, stole. All the activities which centre about the Stock Exchange are simply various manifestations of one primeval instinct. Suppose I had not had not

interfered. No one would have been a penny the better off except Mr. Bruce Bowring. Whereas "

"You intend to restore this money to the Consolidated?" said Miss Fincastle eagerly.

"Not quite! The Consolidated doesn't deserve it. You must not regard its shareholders as a set of innocent shorn lambs. They knew the game. They went in for what they could get. Besides, how could I restore the money without giving myself away? I want thetle, nervously smiling. "May I sit down? Thanks. Let us recount. You arrive in England, from somewhere, as the son and heir of the late Ahasuerus Thorold, the New York operator, who died worth six million dollars. It becomes known that while in Algiers in the spring you stayed at the Hôtel St. James, famous as the scene of what is called the 'Algiers Mystery,' familiar to English newspaper−readers since last April. The editor of my journal therefore instructs me to obtain an interview with you. I do so. The first thing I discover is that, though an American, you have no American accent. You explain this by saying that since infancy you have always lived in Europe with your mother."

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"Not quite! The Consolidated doesn't deserve it. You must not regard its shareholders as a set of innocent shorn lambs. They knew the game. They went in for what they could get. Besides, how could I restore the money without giving myself away? I want the money myself."

"But you are a millionaire."

"It is precisely because I am a millionaire that I want more. All millionaires are like that."

"I am sorry to find you a thief, Mr. Thorold."

"A thief! No. I am only direct, I only avoid the middleman. At dinner, Miss Fincastle, you displayed somewhat advanced views about property, marriage, and the aristocracy of brains. You said that labels were for the stupid majority, and that the wise minority examined the ideas behind the labels. You label me a thief, but examine the idea, and you will perceive that you might as well call yourself a thief. Your newspaper every day suppresses the truth about the City, and it does so in order to live. In other words, it touches the pitch, it participates in the game. To−day it has a fifty−line advertisement of a false balance−sheet of the Consolidated, at two shillings a line. That five pounds, part of the loot of a great city, will help to pay for your account of our interview this afternoon."

"Our interview to−night," Miss Fincastle corrected him stiffly, "and all that I have seen and heard."

At these words she stood up, and as Cecil Thorold gazed at her his face changed.

"I shall begin to wish," he said slowly, " that I had deprived myself of the pleasure of your company this evening."

"You might have been a dead man had you done so," Miss Fincastle retorted, and observing his blank countenance she touched the revolver. "Have you forgotten already?" she asked tartly.

"Of course it wasn't loaded," he remarked. "Of course I had seen to that earlier in the day. I am not such a bungler ——"

"Then I didn't save your life?"

"You force me to say that you did not, and to remind you that you gave me your word not to emerge from behind the screen. However, seeing the motive, I can only thank you for that lapse. The pity is that it hopelessly compromises you."

"Me?" exclaimed Miss Fincastle.

"You. Can't you see that you are in it, in this robbery, to give the thing a label. You were alone with the robber. You succoured the robber at a critical moment ... 'Accomplice,' Mr. Bowring himself said. My dear journalist, the episode of the revolver, empty though the revolver was, seals your lips."

Miss Fincastle laughed rather hysterically, leaning over the table with her hands on it.

"My dear millionaire," she said rapidly, "you don't know the new journalism, to which I have the honour to belong. You would know it better had you lived more in New York. All I have to announce is that, compromised or not, a full account of this affair will appear in my paper to−morrow morning. No, I shall not inform the police. I am a journalist simply, but a journalist I am."

"And your promise, which you gave me before going behind the screen, your solemn promise that you would reveal nothing? I was loth to mention it."

"Some promises, Mr. Thorold, it is a duty to break, and it is my duty to break this one. I should never have given it had I had the slightest idea of the nature of your recreations."

Thorold still smiled, though faintly.

"Really, you know,"' he murmured, "this is getting just a little serious."

"It is very serious," she stammered.

And then Thorold noticed that the new journalist was softly weeping.

V. The door opened.

"Miss Kitty Sartorius," said the erstwhile liftman, who was now in plain clothes and had mysteriously ceased to squint.

A beautiful girl, a girl who had remarkable loveliness and was aware of it (one of the prettiest women of the Devonshire), ran impulsively into the room and caught Miss Fincastle by the hand.

"My dearest Eve, you're crying. What's the matter?"

"Lecky," said Thorold aside to the servant. "I told you to admit no one."

The beautiful blonde turned sharply to Thorold.

"I told him I wished to enter," she said imperiously, half closing her eyes.

"Yes, sir," said Lecky. "That was it. The lady wished to enter."

Thorold bowed.

"It was sufficient," he said. "That will do, Lecky."

"Yes, sir."

"But I say, Lecky, when next you address me publicly, try to remember that I am not in the peerage."

The servant squinted.

"Certainly, sir." And he retired.

"Now we are alone," said Miss Sartorius. "Introduce us, Eve, and explain."

Miss Fincastle, having regained self−control, introduced her dear friend the radiant star of the Regency Theatre, and her acquaintance the millionaire.

"Eve didn't feel quite sure of you," the actress stated; "and so we arranged that if she wasn't up at my flat by nine o'clock, I was to come down and reconnoitre. What have you been doing to make Eve cry?"

"Unintentional, I assure you ——" Thorold began.

"There's something between you two," said Kitty Sartorius sagaciously, in significant accents. "What is it?"

She sat down, touched her picture hat, smoothed her white gown, and tapped her foot. "What is it, now? Mr. Thorold, I think you had better tell me."

Thorold raised his eyebrows and obediently commenced the narration, standing with his back to the fire.

"How perfectly splendid!" Kitty exclaimed. "I'm so glad you cornered Mr. Bowring. I met him one night and I thought he was horrid. And these are the notes? Well, of all the ——!"

Thorold proceeded with his story.

"Oh, but you can't do that, Eve!" said Kitty, suddenly serious. "You can't go and split! It would mean all sorts of bother; your wretched newspaper would be sure to keep you hanging about in London, and we shouldn't be able to start on our holiday to−morrow. Eve and I are starting on quite a long tour to−morrow, Mr. Thorold; we begin with Ostend."

"Indeed!" said Thorold. "I, too, am going in that direction soon. Perhaps we may meet."

"I hope so," Kitty smiled, and then she looked at Eve Fincastle. "You really mustn't do that, Eve," she said.

"I must, I must!" Miss Fincastle insisted, clenching her hands.

"And she will," said Kitty tragically, after considering her friend's face. "She will, and our holiday's ruined. I see it — I see it plainly. She's in one of her stupid conscientious moods. She's fearfully advanced and careless and unconventional in theory, Eve is; but when it comes to practice! Mr. Thorold, you have just got everything into a dreadful knot. Why did you want those notes so very particularly?"

"I don't want them so very particularly."

"Well, anyhow, it's a most peculiar predicament. Mr. Bowring doesn't count, and this Consolidated thingummy isn't any the worse off. Nobody suffers who oughtn't to suffer. It's your unlawful gain that's wrong. Why not pitch the wretched notes in the fire?" Kitty laughed at her own playful humour.

"Certainly," said Thorold. And with a quick movement he put the fifty trifles in the grate, where they made a bluish yellow flame.

Both the women screamed and sprang up.

"Mr. Thorold!"

"Mr. Thorold!" ("He's adorable!" Kitty breathed.)

"The incident, I venture to hope, is now closed," said Thorold calmly, but with his dark eyes sparkling. "I must thank you both for a very enjoyable evening. Some day, perhaps, I may have an opportunity of further explaining my philosophy to you."