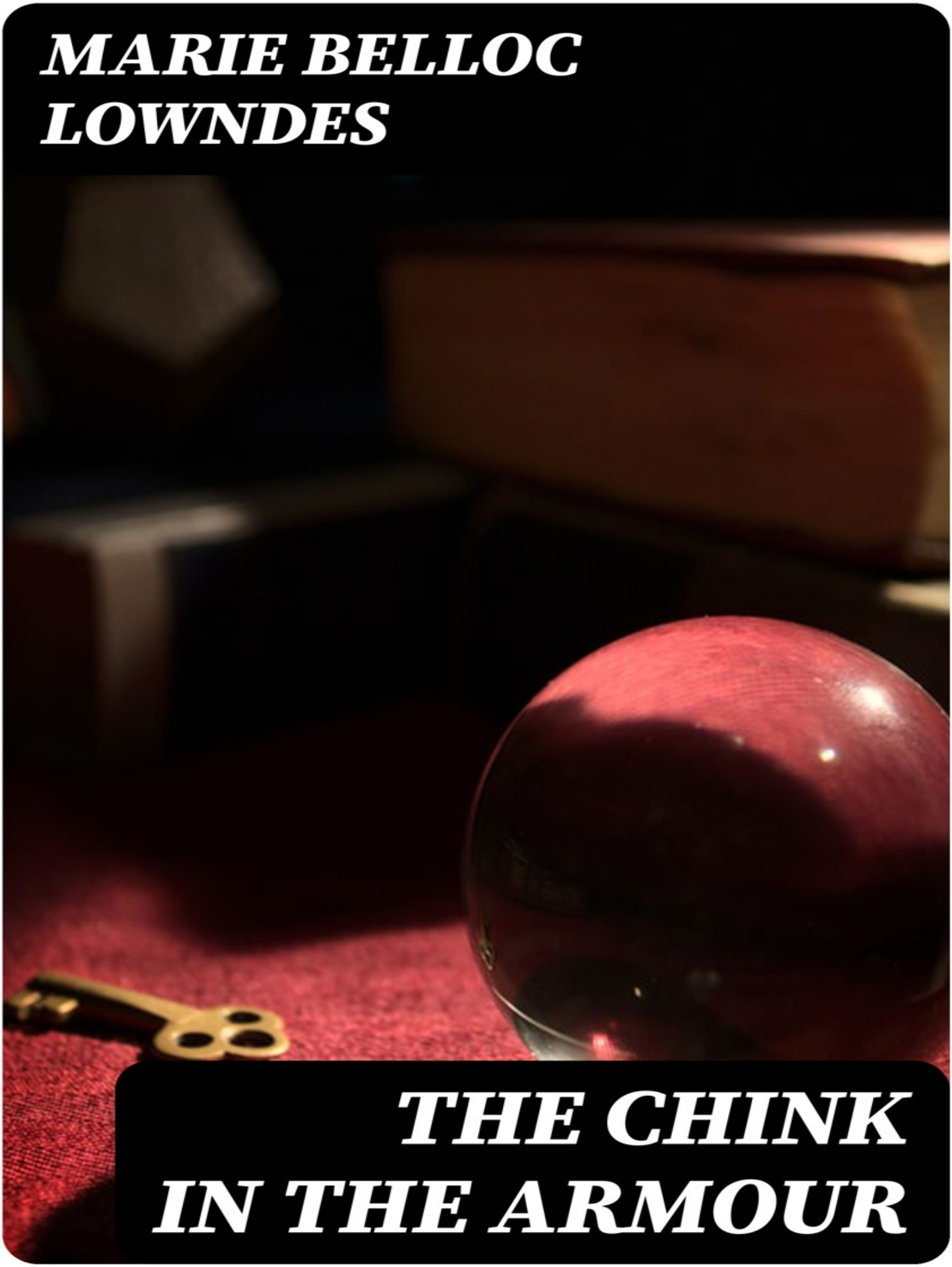
MARIE BELLOC LOWNDES



THE CHINK IN THE ARMOUR

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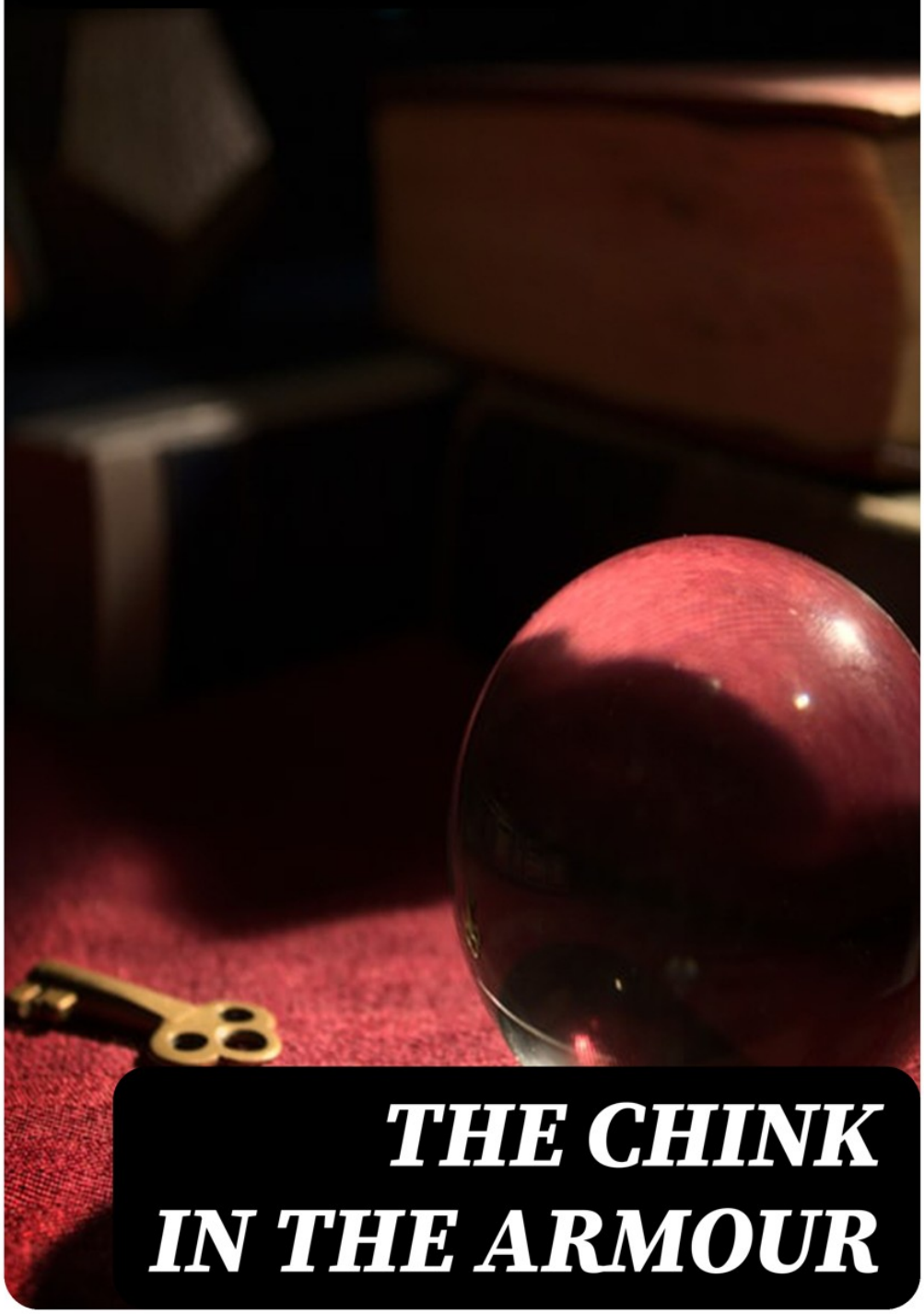

THE CHINK IN THE ARMOUR

Marie Belloc Lowndes

The Chink in the Armour

EAN 8596547067221

DigiCat, 2022
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CHAPTER I

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A small, shiny, pink card lay on the round table in Sylvia Bailey's sitting-room at the Hôtel de l'Horloge in Paris.

She had become quite accustomed to finding one or more cards—cards from dressmakers, cards from corset-makers, cards from hairdressers—lying on her sitting-room table, but there had never been a card quite like this card.

Although it was pink, it looked more like a visiting-card than a tradesman's advertisement, and she took it up with some curiosity. It was inscribed "Madame Cagliostra," and underneath the name were written the words "*Diseuse de la Bonne Aventure*," and then, in a corner, in very small black letters, the address, "5, Rue Jolie, Montmartre."

A fortune-teller's card? What an extraordinary thing!

Like many pretty, prosperous, idle women, Sylvia was rather superstitious. Not long before this, her first visit to Paris, a London acquaintance had taken her to see a noted palmist named "Pharaoh," in Bond Street. She had paid her guinea willingly enough, but the result had vaguely disappointed her, and she had had the feeling, all the time she was with him, that the man was not really reading her hand.

True, "Pharaoh" had told her she was going abroad, and at that time she had no intention of doing so. The palmist had also told her—and this was really rather curious—that she would meet, when abroad, a foreign woman who would have a considerable influence on her life. Well, in this very Hôtel de l'Horloge Mrs. Bailey had come across a Polish lady,

named Anna Wolsky, who was, like Sylvia herself, a young widow, and the two had taken a great fancy to one another.

It was most unlikely that Madame Wolsky would have the slightest influence on her, Sylvia Bailey's, life, but at any rate it was very curious coincidence. "Pharaoh" had proved to be right as to these two things—she had come abroad, and she had formed a friendship with a foreign woman.

Mrs. Bailey was still standing by the table, and still holding the pink card in her hand, when her new friend came into the room.

"Well?" said Anna Wolsky, speaking English with a strong foreign accent, but still speaking it remarkably well, "Have you yet decided, my dear, what we shall do this afternoon? There are a dozen things open to us, and I am absolutely at your service to do any one of them!"

Sylvia Bailey laughingly shook her head.

"I feel lazy," she said. "I've been at the Bon Marché ever since nine o'clock, and I feel more like having a rest than going out again, though it does seem a shame to stay in a day like this!"

The windows were wide open, the June sun was streaming in, and on the light breeze was borne the murmur of the traffic in the Avenue de l'Opéra, within a few yards of the quiet street where the Hôtel de l'Horloge is situated.

The other woman—Anna Wolsky was some years older than Sylvia Bailey—smiled indulgently.

"*Tiens!*" she cried suddenly, "what have you got there?" and she took the pink card out of Sylvia's hand.

"Madame Cagliostra?" she repeated, musingly. "Now where did I hear that name? Yes, of course it was from our

chambermaid! Cagliostra is a friend of hers, and, according to her, a marvellous person—one from whom the devil keeps no secrets! She charges only five francs for a consultation, and it appears that all sorts of well-known people go to her, even those whom the Parisians call the *Gratin*, that is, the Upper Crust, from the Champs Elysées and the Faubourg St. Germain!"

"I don't think much of fortune-tellers," said Sylvia, thoughtfully. "I went to one last time I was in London and he really didn't tell me anything of the slightest interest."

Her conscience pricked her a little as she said this, for "Pharaoh" had certainly predicted a journey which she had then no intention of taking, and a meeting with a foreign woman. Yet here she was in Paris, and here was the foreign woman standing close to her!

Nay more, Anna Wolsky had become—it was really rather odd that it should be so—the first intimate friend of her own sex Sylvia had made since she was a grown-up woman.

"I do believe in fortune-tellers," said Madame Wolsky deliberately, "and that being so I shall spend my afternoon in going up to Montmartre, to the Rue Jolie, to hear what this Cagliostra has to say. It will be what you in England call 'a lark'! And I do not see why I should not give myself so cheap a lark as a five-franc lark!"

"Oh, if you really mean to go, I think I will go too!" cried Sylvia, gaily.

She was beginning to feel less tired, and the thought of a long lonely afternoon spent indoors and by herself lacked attraction.

Linking her arm through her friend's, she went downstairs and into the barely furnished dining-room, which was so very unlike an English hotel dining-room. In this dining-room the wallpaper simulated a vine-covered trellis, from out of which peeped blue-plumaged birds, and on each little table, covered by an unbleached table-cloth, stood an oil and vinegar cruet and a half-bottle of wine.

The Hôtel de l'Horloge was a typical French hotel, and foreigners very seldom stayed there. Sylvia had been told of the place by the old French lady who had been her governess, and who had taught her to speak French exceptionally well.

Several quiet Frenchmen, who had offices in the neighbourhood, were "*en pensio*n" at the Hôtel de l'Horloge, and as the two friends came in many were the steady, speculative glances cast in their direction.

To the average Frenchman every woman is interesting; for every Frenchman is in love with love, and in each fair stranger he sees the possible heroine of a romance in which he may play the agreeable part of hero. So it was that Sylvia Bailey and Anna Wolsky both had their silent admirers among those who lunched and dined in the narrow green and white dining-room of the Hôtel de l'Horloge.

Only a Frenchman would have given a second look at the Polish lady while Sylvia was by, but a Frenchman, being both a philosopher and a logician by nature, is very apt to content himself with the second-best when he knows the best is not for him.

The two friends were in entire contrast to one another. Madame Wolsky was tall, dark, almost swarthy; there was a

look of rather haughty pride and reserve on her strong-featured face. She dressed extremely plainly, the only ornament ever worn by her being a small gold horseshoe, in the centre of which was treasured—so, not long ago, she had confided to Sylvia, who had been at once horrified and thrilled—a piece of the rope with which a man had hanged himself at Monte Carlo two years before! For Madame Wolsky—and she made no secret of the fact to her new friend—was a gambler.

Anna Wolsky was never really happy, she did not feel more than half alive, when away from the green cloth. She had only left Monte Carlo when the heat began to make the place unbearable to one of her northern temperament, and she was soon moving on to one of the French watering-places, where gambling of sorts can be indulged in all the summer through.

Different in looks, in temperament, and in tastes were the two young widows, and this, perhaps, was why they got on so excellently well together.

Sylvia Bailey was the foreign ideal of a beautiful Englishwoman. Her hair was fair, and curled naturally. Her eyes were of that blue which looks violet in the sunlight; and she had a delicate, rose leaf complexion.

Married when only nineteen to a man much older than herself, she was now at twenty-five a widow, and one without any intimate duties or close ties to fill her existence. Though she had mourned George Bailey sincerely, she had soon recovered all her normal interest and pleasure in life.

Mrs. Bailey was fond of dress and able to indulge her taste; but, even so, good feeling and the standard of

propriety of the English country town of Market Dalling where she had spent most of her life, perhaps also a subtle instinct that nothing else would ever suit her so well, made her remain rigidly faithful to white and black, pale grey, and lavender. She also wore only one ornament, but it was a very becoming and an exceedingly costly ornament, for it consisted of a string of large and finely-matched pearls.

As the two friends went upstairs after luncheon Madame Wolsky said earnestly, "If I were you, Sylvia, I would certainly leave your pearls in the office this afternoon. Where is the use of wearing them on such an expedition as that to a fortune-teller?"

"But why shouldn't I wear them?" asked Sylvia, rather surprised.

"Well, in your place I should certainly leave anything as valuable as your pearls in safe keeping. After all, we know nothing of this Madame Cagliostra, and Montmartre is what Parisians call an eccentric quarter."

Sylvia Bailey disliked very much taking off her pearls. Though she could not have put the fact into words, this string of pearls was to her a symbol of her freedom, almost of her womanhood.

As a child and young girl she had been under the close guardianship of a stern father, and it was to please him that she had married the rich, middle-aged man at Market Dalling whose adoration she had endured rather than reciprocated. George Bailey also had been a determined man—determined that his young wife should live his way, not hers. During their brief married life he had heaped on

her showy, rather than beautiful, jewels; nothing of great value, nothing she could wear when in mourning.

And then, four months after her husband's death, Sylvia's own aunt had died and left her a thousand pounds. It was this legacy—which her trustee, a young solicitor named William Chester, who was also a friend and an admirer of hers, as well as her trustee, had been proposing to invest in what he called "a remarkably good thing"—Mrs. Bailey had insisted on squandering on a string of pearls!

Sylvia had become aware, in the subtle way in which Women become aware of such things, that pearls were the fashion—in fact, in one sense, "the only wear." She had noticed that most of the great ladies of the neighbourhood of Market Dalling, those whom she saw on those occasions when town and county meet, each wore a string of pearls. She had also come to know that pearls seem to be the only gems which can be worn with absolute propriety by a widow, and so, suddenly, she had made up her mind to invest—she called it an "investment," while Chester called it an "absurd extravagance"—in a string of pearls.

Bill Chester had done his very best to persuade her to give up her silly notion, but she had held good; she had shown herself, at any rate on this one occasion, and in spite of her kindly, yielding nature, obstinate.

This was why her beautiful pearls had become to Sylvia Bailey a symbol of her freedom. The thousand pounds, invested as Bill Chester had meant to invest it, would have brought her in £55 a year, so he had told her in a grave, disapproving tone.

In return she had told him, the colour rushing into her pretty face, that after all she had the right to do what she chose with her legacy, the more so that this thousand pounds was in a peculiar sense her own money, as the woman who had left it her was her mother's sister, having nothing to do either with her father or with the late George Bailey!

And so she had had her way—nay, more; Chester, at the very last, had gone to great trouble in order that she might not be cheated over her purchase. Best of all, Bill—Sylvia always called the serious-minded young lawyer "Bill"—had lived to admit that Mrs. Bailey had made a good investment after all, for her pearls had increased in value in the two years she had had them.

Be that as it may, the young widow often reminded herself that nothing she had ever bought, and nothing that had ever been given her, had caused her such lasting pleasure as her beloved string of pearls!

But on this pleasant June afternoon, in deference to her determined friend's advice, she took off her pearls before starting out for Montmartre, leaving the case in the charge of M. Girard, the genial proprietor of the Hôtel de l'Horloge.

CHAPTER II

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With easy, leisurely steps, constantly stopping to look into the windows of the quaint shops they passed on the way, Sylvia Bailey and Anna Wolsky walked up the steep, the almost mountainous byways and narrow streets which lead to the top of Montmartre.

The whole population seemed to have poured itself out in the open air on this sunny day; even the shopkeepers had brought chairs out of their shops and sat on the pavement, gaily laughing and gossiping together in the eager way Parisians have. As the two foreign ladies, both young, both in their very different fashion good-looking, walked past the sitting groups of neighbours—men, women, and children would stop talking and stare intently at them, as is also a Parisian way.

At first Sylvia had disliked the manner in which she was stared at in Paris, and she had been much embarrassed as well as a little amused by the very frank remarks called forth in omnibuses as well as in the street by the brilliancy of her complexion and the bright beauty of her fair hair. But now she was almost used to this odd form of homage, which came quite as often from women as from men.

"The Rue Jolie?" answered a cheerful-looking man in answer to a question. "Why, it's ever so much further up!" and he vaguely pointed skywards.

And it was much further up, close to the very top of the great hill! In fact, it took the two ladies a long time to find it, for the Rue Jolie was the funniest, tiniest little street,

perched high up on what might almost have been a mountain side.

As for No. 5, Rue Jolie, it was a queer miniature house more like a Swiss châlet than anything else, and surrounded by a gay, untidy little garden full of flowers, the kind of half-wild, shy, and yet hardy flowers that come up, year after year, without being tended or watered.

"Surely a fortune-teller can't live here?" exclaimed Sylvia Bailey, remembering the stately, awe-inspiring rooms in which "Pharaoh" received his clients in Bond Street.

"Oh, yes, this is evidently the place!"

Anna Wolsky smiled good-humouredly; she had become extremely fond of the young Englishwoman; she delighted in Sylvia's radiant prettiness, her kindly good-temper, and her eager pleasure in everything.

A large iron gate gave access to the courtyard which was so much larger than the house built round it. But the gate was locked, and a pull at the rusty bell-wire produced no result.

They waited a while. "She must have gone out," said Sylvia, rather disappointed.

But Madame Wolsky, without speaking, again pulled at the rusty wire, and then one of the châlet windows was suddenly flung open from above, and a woman—a dark, middle-aged Frenchwoman—leant out.

"*Qui est là?*" and then before either of them could answer, the woman had drawn back: a moment later they heard her heavy progress down the creaky stairs of her dwelling.

At last she came out into the courtyard, unlocked the iron gate, and curtly motioned to the two ladies to follow her.

"We have come to see Madame Cagliostra," said Sylvia timidly. She took this stout, untidily-dressed woman for the fortune-teller's servant.

"Madame Cagliostra, at your service!" The woman turned round, her face breaking into a broad smile. She evidently liked the sound of her peculiar name.

They followed her up a dark staircase into a curious little sitting-room. It was scrupulously clean, but about it hung the faint odour which the French eloquently describe as "shut in," and even on this beautiful hot day the windows were tightly closed.

On the red walls hung various drawings of hands, of hearts, and of heads, and over the plain mantelpiece was a really fine pastel portrait of a man, in eighteenth century dress and powdered hair.

"My ancestor, Count Cagliostro, ladies!" exclaimed the fat little woman proudly. "As you will soon see, if you have, as I venture to suppose, come to consult me, I have inherited the great gifts which made Count Cagliostro famous." She waited a moment. "What is it you desire of me? Do you wish for the Grand Jeu? Or do you prefer the Crystal?"

Madame Cagliostra gave a shrewd, measuring glance at the two young women standing before her. She was wondering how much they were good for.

"No doubt you have been told," she said suddenly, "that my fee is five francs. But if you require the Grand Jeu it will be ten francs. Come, ladies, make up your minds; I will give you both the Grand Jeu for fifteen francs!"

Sylvia Bailey's lip quivered; she felt a wild wish to burst out laughing. It was all so absurd; this funny queer house; this odd, stuffy, empty-looking room; and this vulgar, common-looking woman asserting that she was descended from the famous Count Cagliostro! And then, to crown everything, the naïve, rather pathetic, attempt to get an extra five francs out of them.

But Sylvia was a very kindly, happy-natured creature, and she would not have hurt the feelings of even a Madame Cagliostra for the world.

She looked at her friend questioningly. Would it not be better just to give the woman five francs and go away? They surely could not expect to hear anything of any value from such a person. She was evidently a fraud!

But Anna Wolsky was staring at Madame Cagliostra with a serious look.

"Very well," she exclaimed, in her rather indifferent French. "Very well! We will both take the Grand Jeu at fifteen francs the two."

She turned and smiled at Sylvia. "It will be," she said, quaintly, and in English, "my 'treat,' dear friend." And then, as Sylvia shook her head decidedly—there were often these little contests of generosity between the two women—she added rather sharply,

"Yes, yes! It shall be so. I insist! I see you do not believe in our hostess's gift. There are, however, one or two questions I must ask, and to which I fancy she can give me an answer. I am anxious, too, to hear what she will say about *you*."

Sylvia smiled, and gave way.

Like most prosperous people who have not made the money they are able to spend, Mrs. Bailey did not attach any undue importance to wealth. But she knew that her friend was not as well off as herself, and therefore she was always trying to pay a little more of her share than was fair. Thanks to Madame Wolsky's stronger will, she very seldom succeeded in doing so.

"We might at least ask her to open the window," she said rather plaintively. It really was dreadfully stuffy!

Madame Cagliostra had gone to a sideboard from which she was taking two packs of exceedingly dirty, queer-looking cards. They were the famous Taro cards, but Sylvia did not know that.

When the fortune-teller was asked to open the window, she shook her head decidedly.

"No, no!" she said. "It would dissipate the influences. I cannot do that! On the contrary, the curtains should be drawn close, and if the ladies will permit of it I will light my lamp."

Even as she spoke she was jerking the thick curtains closely together; she even pinned them across so that no ray of the bright sunlight outside could penetrate into the room.

For a few moments they were in complete darkness, and Sylvia felt a queer, eerie sensation of fear, but this soon passed away as the lamp—the "*Suspension*," as Madame Cagliostra proudly called it—was lit.

When her lamp was well alight, the soothsayer drew three chairs up to the round table, and motioned the two strangers to sit down.

"You will take my friend first," said Anna Wolsky, imperiously; and then, to Sylvia, she said, in English, "Would you rather I went away, dear? I could wait on the staircase till you were ready for me to come back. It is not very pleasant to have one's fortune told when one is as young and as pretty as you are, before other people."

"Of course I don't mind your being here!" cried Sylvia Bailey, laughing—then, looking doubtfully at Madame Cagliostra, though it was obvious the Frenchwoman did not understand English, "The truth is that I should feel rather frightened if you were to leave me here all by myself. So please stay."

Madame Cagliostra began dealing out the cards on the table. First slowly, then quickly, she laid them out in a queer pattern; and as she did so she muttered and murmured to herself. Then a frown came over her face; she began to look disturbed, anxious, almost angry.

Sylvia, in spite of herself, grew interested and excited. She was sorry she had not taken off her wedding-ring. In England the wise woman always takes off her wedding-ring on going to see a fortune-teller. She was also rather glad that she had left her pearls in the safe custody of M. Girard. This little house in the Rue Jolie was a strange, lonely place.

Suddenly Madame Cagliostra began to speak in a quick, clear, monotonous voice.

Keeping her eyes fixed on the cards, which now and again she touched with a fat finger, and without looking at Sylvia, she said:

"Madame has led a very placid, quiet life. Her existence has been a boat that has always lain in harbour—" She

suddenly looked up: "I spent my childhood at Dieppe, and that often suggests images to me," she observed complacently, and then she went on in quite another tone of voice:—

"To return to Madame and her fate! The boat has always been in harbour, but now it is about to put out to sea. It will meet there another craft. This other craft is, to Madame, a foreign craft, and I grieve to say it, rather battered. But its timbers are sound, and that is well, for it looks to me as if the sails of Madame's boat would mingle, at any rate for a time with this battered craft."

"I don't understand what she means," said Sylvia, in a whisper. "Do ask her to explain, Anna!"

"My friend asks you to drop metaphor," said the older woman, drily.

The soothsayer fixed her bright, beady little eyes on Sylvia's flushed face.

"Well," she said deliberately, "I see you falling in love, and I also see that falling in love is quite a new experience. It burns, it scorches you, does love, Madame. And for awhile you do not know what it means, for love has never yet touched you with his red-hot finger."

"How absurd!" thought Sylvia to herself. "She actually takes me for a young girl! What ridiculous mistakes fortune-tellers do make, to be sure!"

"—But you cannot escape love," went on Madame Cagliostra, eagerly. "Your fate is a fair man, which is strange considering that you also are a fair woman; and I see that there is already a dark man in your life."

Sylvia blushed. Bill Chester, just now the only man in her life, was a very dark man.

"But this fair man knows all the arts of love." Madame Cagliostra sighed, her voice softened, it became strangely low and sweet. "He will love you tenderly as well as passionately. And as for you, Madame—but no, for me to tell you what you will feel *and what you will do* would not be delicate on my part!"

Sylvia grew redder and redder. She tried to laugh, but failed. She felt angry, and not a little disgusted.

"You are a foreigner," went on Madame Cagliostra. Her voice had grown hard and expressionless again.

Sylvia smiled a little satiric smile.

"But though you are a foreigner," cried the fortune-teller with sudden energy, "it is quite possible that you will never go back to your own country! Stop—or, perhaps, I shall say too much! Still if you ever do go back, it will be as a stranger. That I say with certainty. And I add that I hope with all my heart that you will live to go back to your own country, Madame!"

Sylvia felt a vague, uneasy feeling of oppression, almost of fear, steal over her. It seemed to her that Madame Cagliostra was looking at her with puzzled, pitying eyes.

The soothsayer again put a fat and not too clean finger down on the upturned face of a card.

"There is something here I do not understand; something which I miss when I look at you as I am now looking at you. It is something you always wear—"

She gazed searchingly at Sylvia, and her eyes travelled over Mrs. Bailey's neck and bosom.

"I see them and yet they are not there! They appear like little balls of light. Surely it is a necklace?"

Sylvia looked extremely surprised. Now, at last, Madame Cagliostra was justifying her claim to a supernatural gift!

"These balls of light are also your Fate!" exclaimed the woman impetuously. "If you had them here—I care not what they be—I should entreat you to give them to me to throw away."

Madame Wolsky began to laugh. "I don't think you would do that," she observed drily.

But Madame Cagliostra did not seem to hear the interruption.

"Have you heard of a mascot?" she said abruptly. "Of a mascot which brings good fortune to its wearer?"

Sylvia bent her head. Of course she had heard of mascots.

"Well, if so, you have, of course, heard of objects which bring misfortune to their wearers—which are, so to speak, unlucky mascots?"

And this time it was Anna Wolsky who, leaning forward, nodded gravely. She attributed a run of bad luck she had had the year before to a trifling gift, twin cherries made of enamel, which a friend had given her, in her old home, on her birthday. Till she had thrown that little brooch into the sea, she had been persistently unlucky at play.

"Your friend," murmured Madame Cagliostra, now addressing herself to Anna and not to Sylvia, "should dispossess herself as quickly as possible of her necklace, of these round balls. They have already brought her ill-fortune in the past, they have lowered her in the estimation of an

estimable person—in fact, if she is not very careful, indeed, even if she be very careful—it looks to me, Madame, as if they would end by strangling her!"

Sylvia became very uncomfortable. "Of course she means my pearls," she whispered. "But how absurd to say they could ever do me harm."

"Look here," said Anna Wolsky earnestly, "you are quite right, Madame; my friend has a necklace which has already played a certain part in her life. But is it not just because of this fact that you feel the influence of this necklace so strongly? I entreat you to speak frankly. You are really distressing me very much!"

Madame Cagliostra looked very seriously at the speaker.

"Well, perhaps it is so," she said at last. "Of course, we are sometimes wrong in our premonitions. And I confess that I feel puzzled—exceedingly puzzled—to-day. I do not know that I have ever had so strange a case as that of this English lady before me! I see so many roads stretching before her—I also see her going along more than one road. As a rule, one does not see this in the cards."

She looked really harassed, really distressed, and was still conning her cards anxiously.

"And yet after all," she cried suddenly, "I may be wrong! Perhaps the necklace has less to do with it than I thought! I do not know whether the necklace would make any real difference! If she takes one of the roads open to her, then I see no danger at all attaching to the preservation of this necklace. But the other road leads straight to the House of Peril."

"The House of Peril?" echoed Sylvia Bailey.

"Yes, Madame. Do you not know that all men and women have their House of Peril—the house whose threshold they should never cross—behind whose door lies misery, sometimes dishonour?"

"Yes," said Anna Wolsky, "that is true, quite true! There has been, alas! more than one House of Peril in my life." She added, "But what kind of place is my friend's House of Peril?"

"It is not a large house," said the fortune-teller, staring down at the shining surface of her table. "It is a gay, delightful little place, ladies—quite my idea of a pretty dwelling. But it is filled with horror unutterable to Madame. Ah! I entreat you"—she stared sadly at Sylvia—"to beware of unknown buildings, especially if you persist in keeping and in wearing your necklace."

"Do tell us, Madame, something more about my friend's necklace. Is it, for instance, of great value, and is it its value that makes it a source of danger?"

Anna Wolsky wondered very much what would be the answer to this question. She had had her doubts as to the genuineness of the pearls her friend wore. Pearls are so exquisitely imitated nowadays, and these pearls, if genuine, were of such great value!

At first she had not believed them to be real, then gradually she had become convinced of Sylvia's good faith. If the pearls were false, Sylvia did not know it.

But Madame Cagliostra's answer was disappointing—or prudent.

"I cannot tell you that," she said. "I cannot even tell you of what the necklace is composed. It may be of gold, of

silver, of diamonds, of pearls—it may be, I'm inclined to think it is, composed of Egyptian scarabei. They, as you know, often bring terrible ill-fortune in their train, especially when they have been taken from the bodies of mummies. But the necklace has already caused this lady to quarrel with a very good and sure friend of hers—of that I am sure. And, as I tell you, I see in the future that this necklace may cause her very serious trouble—indeed, I see it wound like a serpent round her neck, pressing ever tighter and tighter—"

She suddenly began shuffling the cards. "And now," she said in a tone of relief, "I will deal with you, Madame," and she turned to Anna with a smile.

Sylvia drew her chair a little away from the table.

She felt depressed and uncomfortable. What an odd queer kind of fortune had been told her! And then it had all been so muddled. She could scarcely remember what it was that *had* been told her.

Two things, however, remained very clear in her mind: The one was the absurd prediction that she might never go back to her own country; the second was all that extraordinary talk about her pearls. As to the promised lover, the memory of the soothsayer's words made her feel very angry. No doubt Frenchwomen liked that sort of innuendo, but it only disgusted her.

Yet it was really very strange that Madame Cagliostra had known, or rather had divined, that she possessed a necklace by which she laid great store. But wasn't there such a thing as telepathy? Isn't it supposed by some people that fortune-tellers simply see into the minds of those who

come to them, and then arrange what they see there according to their fancy?

That, of course, would entirely account for all that the fortune-teller had said about her pearls.

Sylvia always felt a little uncomfortable when her pearls were not lying round her pretty neck. The first time she had left them in the hotel bureau, at her new friend's request, was when they had been together to some place of amusement at night, and she had felt quite miserable, quite lost without them. She had even caught herself wondering whether M. Girard was perfectly honest, whether she could trust him not to have her dear pearls changed by some clever jeweller, though, to be sure, she felt she would have known her string of pearls anywhere!

But what was this that was going on between the other two?

Madame Cagliostra dealt out the pack of cards in a slow, deliberate fashion—and then she uttered a kind of low hoarse cry, and mixed the cards all together, hurriedly.

Getting up from the table, she exclaimed, "I regret, Madame, that I can tell you nothing—nothing at all! I feel ill—very ill!" and, indeed, she had turned, even to Sylvia's young and unobservant eyes, terribly pale.

For some moments the soothsayer stood staring into Anna Wolsky's astonished face.

"I know I've disappointed you, Mesdames, but I hope this will not prevent your telling your friends of my powers. Allow me to assure you that it is not often that I am taken in this way!"

Her voice had dropped to a whisper. She was now gazing down at the pack of cards which lay on the table with a look of horror and oppression on her face.

"I will only charge five francs," she muttered at last, "for I know that I have not satisfied you."

Sylvia sprang to the window. She tore apart the curtains and pulled up the sash.

"No wonder the poor woman feels faint," she said quickly. "It's absurd to sit with a window tight shut in this kind of room, which is little more than a box with three people in it!"

Madame Cagliostra had sunk down into her chair again.

"I must beg you to go away, Mesdames," she muttered, faintly. "Five francs is all I ask of you."

But Anna Wolsky was behaving in what appeared to Sylvia a very strange manner. She walked round to where the fortune-teller was sitting.

"You saw something in the cards which you do not wish to tell me?" she said imperiously. "I do not mind being told the truth. I am not a child."

"I swear I saw nothing!" cried the Frenchwoman angrily. "I am too ill to see anything. The cards were to me perfectly blank!"

In the bright sunlight now pouring into the little room the soothsayer looked ghastly, her skin had turned a greenish white.

"Mesdames, I beg you to excuse me," she said again. "If you do not wish to give me the five francs, I will not exact any fee."

She pointed with a shaking finger to the door, and Sylvia put a five-franc piece down on the table.

But before her visitors had quite groped their way to the end of the short, steep staircase, they heard a cry.

"Mesdames!" then after a moment's pause, "Mesdames, I implore you to come back!"

They looked at one another, and then Anna, putting her finger to her lips, went back up the stairs, alone.

"Well," she said, briefly, "I knew you had something to tell me. What is it?"

"No," said Madame Cagliostra dully. "I must have the other lady here, too. You must both be present to hear what I have to say."

Anna went to the door and called out, "Come up Sylvia! She wants to see us both together."

There was a thrill of excitement, of eager expectancy in Madame Wolsky's voice; and Sylvia, surprised, ran up again into the little room, now full of light, sun, and air.

"Stand side by side," ordered the soothsayer shortly. She stared at them for a moment, and then she said with extreme earnestness:—

"I dare not let you go away without giving you a warning. Your two fates are closely intertwined. Do not leave Paris for awhile, especially do not leave Paris together. I see you both running into terrible danger! If you do go away—and I greatly fear that you will do so—then I advise you, together and separately, to return to Paris as soon as possible."

"One question I must ask of you," said Anna Wolsky urgently. "How goes my luck? You know what I mean? I play!"

"It is not your luck that is threatened," replied the fortune-teller, solemnly; "on the contrary, I see wonderful luck; packets of bank-notes and rouleaux of gold! It is not your luck—it is something far, far more important that is in peril. Something which means far more to you even than your luck!"

The Polish woman smiled rather sadly.

"I wonder what that can be?" she exclaimed.

"It is your life!"

"My life?" echoed Anna. "I do not know that I value my life as much as you think I do."

"The English have a proverb, Madame, which says: 'A short life and a merry one.'"

"Can you predict that I shall have, if a short life, then a merry one?"

"Yes," said Madame Cagliostra, "that I can promise you." But there was no smile on her pale face. "And more, I can predict—if you will only follow my advice, if you do not leave Paris for, say"—she hesitated a moment, as if making a silent calculation—"twelve weeks, I can predict you, if not so happy a life, then a long life and a fairly merry one. Will you take my advice, Madame?" she went on, almost threateningly. "Believe me, I do not often offer advice to my clients. It is not my business to do so. But I should have been a wicked woman had I not done so this time. That is why I called you back."

"Is it because of something you have seen in the cards that you tender us this advice?" asked Anna curiously.

But Madame Cagliostra again looked strangely frightened.

"No, no!" she said hastily. "I repeat that the cards told me nothing. The cards were a blank. I could see nothing in them. But, of course, we do not only tell fortunes by cards"—she spoke very quickly and rather confusedly. "There is such a thing as a premonition."

She waited a moment, and then, in a business-like tone, added, "And now I leave the question of the fee to the generosity of these ladies!"

Madame Wolsky smiled a little grimly, and pulled out a twenty-franc piece.

The woman bowed, and murmured her thanks.

When they were out again into the roughly paved little street, Anna suddenly began to laugh.

"Now, isn't that a typical Frenchwoman? She really did feel ill, she really saw nothing in my cards, and, being an honest woman, she did not feel that she could ask us to pay! Then, when we had gone away, leaving only five francs, her thrift got the better of her honesty; she felt she had thrown away ten good francs! She therefore called us back, and gave us what she took to be very excellent advice. You see, I had told her that I am a gambler. She knows, as we all know, that to play for money is a foolish thing to do. She is aware that in Paris it is not very easy for a stranger to obtain admittance—especially if that stranger be a respectable woman—to a gambling club. She therefore said to herself, 'I will give this lady far more than ten francs' worth of advice. I will tell her not to go away! As long as she remains in Paris she cannot lose her money. If she goes to Dieppe, Trouville, any place where there is a Casino, she will lose her money. Therefore I am giving her invaluable advice

—worth far more than the ten francs which she ought to be made to give me, and which she shall be made to give me!'"

"I suppose you are right," said Sylvia thoughtfully. "And yet—and yet—she certainly spoke very seriously, did she not, Anna? She seemed quite honestly—in fact, terribly afraid that we should go away together."

"But there is no idea of our going away together," said Madame Wolsky, rather crossly. "I only wish there were! You are going on to Switzerland to join your friends, and as for me, in spite of Madame Cagliostra's mysterious predictions, I shall, of course, go to some place—I think it will be Dieppe (I like the Dieppe Casino the best)—where I can play. And the memory of you, my dear little English friend, will be my mascot. You heard her say that I should be fortunate—that I should have an extraordinary run of good fortune?"

"Yes," said Sylvia, "but do not forget"—she spoke with a certain gravity; death was a very real thing to her, for she had seen in the last two years two deathbeds, that of her father, that of her husband—"do not forget, Anna, that she told you you would not live long if you went away."

"She was quite safe in saying that to me," replied the other hastily. "People who play—those who get the gambling fever into their system when they are still young—do not, as a rule, live very long. Their emotions are too strong, too often excited! Play should be reserved for the old—the old get so quickly deadened, they do not go through the terrible moments younger people do!"