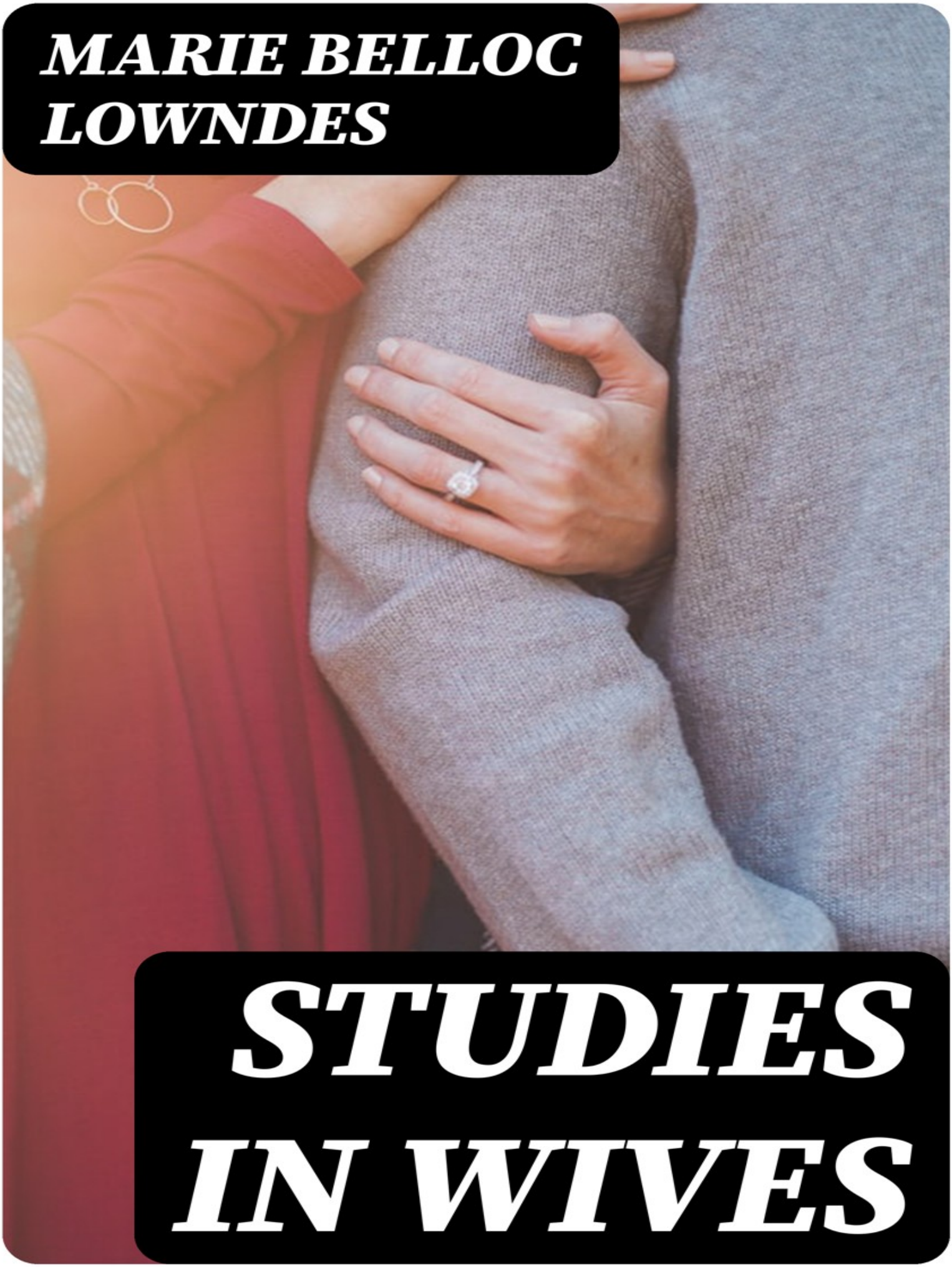
MARIE BELLOC LOWNDES



# STUDIES IN WIVES

**Marie Belloc Lowndes**

# Studies in Wives

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# ALTHEA'S OPPORTUNITY

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"His confidence shall be rooted out of his tabernacle, and it shall bring him to the king of terrors."—JOB xviii. 14.

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There came the sound of a discreet, embarrassed cough, and Althea Scrope turned quickly round from the window by which she had been standing still dressed in her outdoor things.

She had heard the door open, the unfolding of the tea-table, the setting down of the tea-tray, but her thoughts had been far away from the old house in Westminster which was now her home; her thoughts had been in Newcastle, dwelling for a moment among the friends of her girlhood, for whom she had been buying Christmas gifts that afternoon.

The footman's cough recalled her to herself, and to the present.

"Am I to say that you are at home this afternoon, ma'am?"

Althea's thoughtful, clear eyes rested full on the youth's anxious face. He had not been long in the Scropes' service, and this was the first time he had been left in such a position of responsibility, but Dockett, the butler, was out, a rare event, for Dockett liked to be master in his master's

house. Before the marriage of Perceval Scrope, Dockett had been Scrope's valet, and, as Althea was well aware, the man still regarded her as an interloper. Althea did not like Dockett, but Perceval was very fond of him, and generally spoke of him to his friends as "Trip." Althea had never been able to discover the reason of the nickname, and she had not liked to ask; her husband often spoke a language strange to her.

"I will see Mr. Bustard if he comes," she said gently.

Dockett would not have disturbed her by asking the question, for Dockett always knew, by a sort of instinct, whom his master and mistress wished to see or to avoid seeing.

Again she turned and stared out of the high, narrow, curtainless windows. Perceval Scrope did not like curtains, and so of course there were no curtains in his wife's drawing-room.

Snow powdered the ground. It blew in light eddies about the bare branches of the trees marking the carriage road through St. James's Park, and was caught in whirling drifts on the frozen sheet of water which reflected the lights on the bridge spanning the little lake. Even at this dreary time of the year it was a charming outlook, and one which most of Althea's many acquaintances envied her.

And yet the quietude of the scene at which she was gazing so intently oppressed her, and, suddenly, from having felt warm after her walk across the park, Althea Scrope felt cold.

She moved towards the fireplace, and the flames threw a red glow on her tall, rounded figure, creeping up from the

strong serviceable boots to the short brown skirt, and so to the sable cape which had been one of her husband's wedding gifts, but which now looked a little antiquated in cut and style.

It is a bad thing—a sign that all is not right with her—when a beautiful young woman becomes indifferent to how she looks. This was the case with Althea, and yet she was only twenty-two, and looked even younger; no one meeting her by chance would have taken her to be a married woman, still less the wife of a noted politician.

She took off her fur cape and put it on a chair. She might have sent for her maid, but before her marriage she had always waited on herself, and she was not very tidy—one of her few points of resemblance with her husband, and not one which made for harmony. But Mrs. Scrope, if untidy, was also conscientious, and as she looked at the damp fur cloak her conscience began to trouble her.

She rang the bell. "Take my cloak and hang it up carefully in the hall," she said to the footman. And now the room was once more neat and tidy as she knew her friend, Mr. Bustard, would like to see it.

It was a curious and delightful room, but it resembled and reflected the woman who had to spend so much of her life there as little as did her quaint and fanciful name of Althea. Her husband, in a fit of petulance at some exceptional density of vision, had once told her that her name should have been Jane—Jane, Maud, Amy, any of those old-fashioned, early Victorian names would have suited Althea, and Althea's outlook on life when she had married Perceval Scrope.

Althea's drawing-room attained beauty, not only because of its proportions, and its delightful outlook on St. James's Park, but also because quite a number of highly intelligent people had seen to it that it should be beautiful.

Although Scrope, who thought he knew his young wife so well, would have been surprised and perhaps a little piqued if he had been told it, Althea preferred the house as it had been before her marriage, in the days when it was scarcely furnished, when this room, for instance, had been the library-smoking-room of its owner, an owner too poor to offer himself any of the luxurious fitments which had been added to make it suitable for his rich bride.

As soon as Scrope's engagement to the provincial heiress Althea then was had been announced, his friends—and he was a man of many friends—had delighted to render him the service of making the pleasant old house in Delahay Street look as it perchance had looked eighty or a hundred years ago. The illusion was almost perfect, so cleverly had the flotsam of Perceval Scrope's ancestral possessions been wedded to the jetsam gathered in curiosity shops and at country auctions—for the devotion of Scrope's friends had gone even to that length.

This being so, it really seemed a pity that these same kind folk had not been able to—oh! no, not *buy*, that is an ugly word, and besides it had been Perceval who had been bought, not Althea—to acquire for Scrope a wife who would have suited the house as well as the house suited Scrope.

But that had not been possible.

Even as it was, the matter of marrying their friend had not been easy. Scrope was so wilful—that was why they

loved him! He had barred—absolutely barred—Americans, and that although everybody knows how useful an American heiress can be, not only with her money, but with her brightness and her wits, to an English politician. He had also stipulated for a country girl, and he would have preferred one straight out of the school-room.

Almost all his conditions had been fulfilled. Althea was nineteen at the time of her marriage, and, if not exactly country-bred—she was the only child of a Newcastle magnate—she had seen nothing of the world to which Scrope and Scrope's Egeria, the woman who had actually picked out Althea to be Scrope's wife, had introduced her.

Scrope's Egeria? At the time my little story opens, Althea had long given up being jealous—jealous, that is, in the intolerant, passionate sense of the word; in fact, she was ashamed that she had ever been so, for she now felt sure that Perceval would not have liked her, Althea, any better, even if there had not been another woman to whom he turned for flattery and sympathy.

The old ambiguous term was, in this case, no pseudonym for another and more natural, if uglier, relationship on the part of a married man, and of a man whom the careless public believed to be on exceptionally good terms with his young wife.

Scrope's Egeria was twenty-four years older than Althea, and nine years older than Scrope himself. Unfortunately she had a husband who, unlike Althea, had the bad taste, the foolishness, to be jealous of her close friendship with Perceval Scrope. And yet, while admitting to herself the man's folly, Althea had a curious liking for Egeria's husband.

There was, in fact, more between them than their common interest in the other couple; for he, like Althea, provided what old-fashioned people used to call the wherewithal; he, like Althea, had been married because of the gifts he had brought in his hands, the gifts not only of that material comfort which counts for so much nowadays, but those which, to Scrope's Egeria, counted far more than luxury, that is, beauty of surroundings and refinement of living.

Mr. and Mrs. Panfillen—to give Egeria and her husband their proper names—lived quite close to Althea and Perceval Scrope, for they dwelt in Old Queen Street, within little more than a stone's throw of Delahay Street.

Joan Panfillen, unlike Althea Scrope, was exquisitely suited to her curious, old-world dwelling. She had about her small, graceful person, her picturesque and dateless dress, even in her low melodious voice, that harmony which is, to the man capable of appreciating it, the most desirable and perhaps the rarest of feminine attributes.

There was one thing which Althea greatly envied Mrs. Panfillen, and that was nothing personal to herself; it was simply the tiny formal garden which divided the house in Old Queen Street from Birdcage Walk. This garden looked fresher and greener than its fellows because, by Mrs. Panfillen's care, the miniature parterres were constantly tended and watered, while the shrubs both summer and winter were washed and cleansed as carefully as was everything else likely to be brought in contact with their owner's wife.

In spite of the fact that they lived so very near to one another, the two women were not much together, and as a

rule they only met, but that was, of course, very often, when out in the political and social worlds to which they both belonged.

Althea had a curious shrinking from the Panfillens' charming house. It was there, within a very few weeks of her father's death, that she had first met Perceval Scrope—and there that he had conducted his careless wooing. It was in Mrs. Panfillen's boudoir, an octagon-shaped room on the park side of the house, that he had actually made his proposal, and that Althea, believing herself to be "in love," and uplifted by the solemn and yet joyful thought of how happy such a marriage—her marriage to a member of the first Fair Food Cabinet—would have made her father, had accepted him.

From Old Queen Street also had taken place her wedding, which, if nominally quiet, because the bride still chose to consider herself in deep mourning, had filled St. Margaret's with one of those gatherings only brought together on such an occasion—a gathering in which the foemen of yesterday, and the enemies of to-morrow, unite with the friends of to-day in order to do honour to a fellow-politician.

Althea had darker memories connected with Mrs. Panfillen's house. She had spent there, immediately after her honeymoon, an unhappy fortnight, waiting for the workpeople to leave her future home in Delahay Street. It was during that fortnight that for the first time her girlish complacency had forsaken her, and she had been made to understand how inadequate her husband found her to the position she was now called upon to fill. It was then that there had first come to her the humiliating suspicion that

her bridegroom could not forgive her his own sale of himself. Scrope and Joan Panfillen were subtle people, living in a world of subtleties, yet in this subtle, unspoken matter of Scrope's self-contempt concerning his marriage, the simple Althea's knowledge far preceded theirs.

In those days Joan Panfillen, kindest, most loyal of hostesses, had always been taking the bride's part, but how unkind—yes, unkind was the word—Perceval was, even then!

Althea had never forgotten one little incident connected with that time, and this afternoon she suddenly remembered it with singular vividness. Scrope had been caricatured in *Punch* as Scrooge; and—well—Althea had not quite understood.

"Good Lord!" he had exclaimed, turning to the older woman, "Althea doesn't know who Scrooge was!" and quickly he had proceeded to put his young wife through a sharp, and to her a very bewildering examination, concerning people and places some of whom she had never heard of, while others seemed vaguely, worryingly familiar. He had ended up with the words, "And I suppose you consider yourself educated!" A chance muttered word had then told her that none of these places were real—that none of these people Perceval had spoken of with such intimate knowledge, had ever lived!

Althea had felt bitterly angered as well as hurt. Tears had welled up into her brown eyes; and Mrs. Panfillen, intervening with far more eager decision than she generally showed about even important matters, had cried, "That's not fair! In fact you are being quite absurd, Perceval! I've

never cared for Dickens, and I'm sure most people, at any rate most women, who say they like him are pretending—pretending all the time! I don't believe there's a girl in London who could answer the questions you put to Althea just now, and if there is such a girl then she's a literary monster, and I for one don't want to know her."

As only answer Scrope had turned and put a thin brown finger under Althea's chin. "Crying?" he had said, "Baby! She shan't be made to learn her Dickens if she doesn't want to, so there!"

At the time Althea had tried to smile, but the words her husband had used had hurt her, horribly, for they had seemed to cast a reflection on her father—the father who thought so much of education, and who had been at such pains to obtain for his motherless only child an ideal chaperon-governess, a lady who had always lived with the best families in Newcastle. Miss Burt would certainly have made her pupil read Dickens if Dickens were in any real sense an educating influence, instead of writing, as Althea had always understood he did, only about queer and vulgar people.

Not educated? Why, her father had sent her away from him for a whole year to Dresden, in order that she might learn German and study music to the best possible advantage! True, she had not learnt her French in France, for her father had a prejudice against the French; he belonged to a generation which admired Germany, and disliked and distrusted the French. She had, however, been taught French by an excellent teacher, a French Protestant lady who had lived all her life in England. Of course Althea had

never read a French novel, but she could recite, even now, whole pages of Racine and Corneille by heart.

And yet, even in this matter of languages, Perceval was unfair, for some weeks after he had said that cruel thing to her about education, and when they were at last settling down in their own house, arranging the details of their first dinner party, he had said to her with a certain abrupt ill-humour, "The one language I thought you *did* know was menu-French!"

Joan Panfillen was also disappointed in Althea. Scrope's Egeria had hoped to convert Scrope's wife, not into a likeness of herself—she was far too clever a woman to hope to do that—but into a bright, cheerful companion for Perceval Scrope's lighter hours. She had always vaguely supposed that this was the rôle reserved to pretty, healthy young women possessed of regular features, wavy brown hair, and good teeth....

But Mrs. Panfillen had soon realised, and the knowledge brought with it much unease and pain, that she had made a serious mistake in bringing about the marriage. And yet it had been necessary to do something; there had come a moment when not only she, but even Scrope himself, had felt that he must be lifted out of the class—always distrusted and despised in England—of political adventurers. Scrope required, more than most men, the solid platform, nay, the pedestal, of wealth, and accordingly his Egeria had sacrificed herself and, incidentally, the heiress, Althea.

But, as so often happens to those who make the great renouncement, Joan Panfillen found that after all no such thing as true sacrifice was to be required of her.

After his marriage, Scrope was more often with her than he had ever been, and far more willing, not only to ask but to take, his Egeria's advice on all that concerned his brilliant, meteoric career. He seldom mentioned his wife, but Mrs. Panfillen knew her friend far too well not to know how it was with him; Althea fretted his nerves, offended his taste, jarred his conscience, at every turn of their joint life.

There were, however, two meagre things to the good—Althea's fortune, the five thousand a year, which now, after four years, did not seem so large an income as it had seemed at first; and the fact that Scrope's marriage had extinguished the odious, and, what was much more unpleasant to such a woman as was Joan Panfillen, the ridiculous, jealousy of Joan's husband.

Thomas Panfillen greatly admired Althea; he thought her what she was—a very lovely young woman, and the fact that he had known her father made him complacently suppose that he had brought about her marriage to the peculiar, he was told the remarkably clever, if rather odd, Perceval Scrope.

Baulked of certain instinctive rights, the human heart seeks compensation as surely as water seeks its level. Althea, unknown to herself, had a compensation. His name was John Bustard. He was in a public office—to be precise, the Privy Council Office. He lived in rooms not far from his work, that is, not far from Delahay Street, and he had got into the way of dropping in to tea two, three, sometimes even four times a week.

The fact that Bustard was an old schoolfellow of Scrope's had been his introduction to Althea in the early days when

she had been conscientiously anxious to associate herself with her husband's interests past and present. But of the innumerable people with whom Scrope had brought her into temporary contact, Mr. Bustard—she always called him Mr. Bustard, as did most other people—was the one human being who, being the fittest as regarded herself, survived.

And yet never had there been a man less suited to play the part of hero, or even of consoler. Mr. Bustard was short, and his figure was many years older than his age, which was thirty-four. While forcing himself to take two constitutionals a day, he indulged in no other manlier form of exercise, and his contempt for golf was the only thing that tended to a lack of perfect understanding between his colleagues and himself. He was interested in his work, but he tried to forget it when he was not at the office. Bustard was a simple soul, but blessed with an unformulated, though none the less real, philosophy of life.

Of the matter nearest his heart he scarcely ever spoke, partly because he had always supposed it to be uninteresting to anyone but himself, and also on account of a certain thorny pride which prevented his being willing to ask favours from the indifferent.

This matter nearest Mr. Bustard's heart concerned his two younger brothers and an orphan sister whom he supremely desired to do the best for, and to set well forward in life.

It was of these three young people that he and Althea almost always talked, and if Althea allowed herself to have an ardent wish, it was that her husband would permit her to invite Mr. Bustard's sister for a few weeks when the girl left

the German finishing school which she and Mr. Bustard had chosen, after much anxious deliberation, a year before.

It soothed Althea's sore heart to know that there was at least one person in her husband's circle who thought well of her judgment, who trusted in her discretion, and who did her the compliment of not only asking, but also of taking her advice.

John Bustard had formed a very good opinion of Althea, and, constitutionally incapable of divining the causes which had determined the choice of Scrope's wife, he considered Mrs. Scrope a further proof, if indeed proof were needed, of his brilliant schoolfellow's acute intelligence. He had ventured to say as much to Scrope's late official chief, one of the few men to whom Mr. Bustard, without a sufficient cause, would have mentioned a lady's name. But he had been taken aback, rather disturbed, by the old statesman's dry comment: "Ay, there's always been method in Scrope's madness. I agree that he has made, from his own point of view, a very good marriage."

His wife's friendship with Mr. Bustard did not escape Perceval Scrope's ironic notice. He affected to think his old schoolfellow a typical member of the British public, and he had nicknamed him "the Bullometer," but, finding that his little joke vexed Althea, he had, with unusual consideration, dropped it.

Unfortunately the one offensive epithet was soon exchanged for another; in allusion doubtless to some historical personage of whom Althea had no knowledge, Scrope began to call Bustard her fat friend. "How's your fat friend?" he would ask, and a feeling of resentment filled

Althea's breast. It was not John Bustard's fault that he had a bad figure; it was caused by the sedentary nature of his work, and because, instead of spending his salary in the way most civil servants spend theirs, that is in selfish amusements, he spent it on his younger brothers, and on his little sister's education.

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Althea again went over to the window and looked out. It had now left off snowing, and the mists were gathering over the park. Soon a veil of fog would shut out the still landscape. If Mr. Bustard were coming this afternoon she hoped he would come soon, and so be gone before Perceval came in.

Perceval was going to make a great speech in the House to-night, and Althea was rather ashamed that she did not care more. He had been put up to speak against those who had once been of his own political household and who now regarded him as a renegade, but the subject was one sure to inspire him, for it was that which he had made his own, and which had led to his secession from his party. Althea and Mrs. Panfillen were going together to hear the speech, but, to his wife's surprise, Scrope had refused to dine with the Panfillens that same evening.

Perceval Scrope had not been well. To his vexation the fact had been mentioned in the papers. The intense cold had tried him—the cold, and a sudden visit to his constituency.

Althea could not help feeling slightly contemptuous of Perceval's physical delicacy. Her husband had often looked ill lately, not as ill as people told her he looked, but still very

far from well. Only to herself did Althea say what she felt sure was the truth, namely that Perceval's state was due to himself, due to his constant rushing about, to the way in which he persistently over-excited himself; last, but by no means least, to the way he ate and drank when the food and drink pleased him.

Althea judged her husband with the clear, pitiless eyes of youth, but none of those about her knew that she so judged him. Indeed, there were some in her circle, kindly amiable folk, who believed, and said perhaps a little too loudly, that Althea was devoted to Perceval, and that their marriage was one of those delightful unions which are indeed made in Heaven....

From the further corner of the room there came the sharp ring of the telephone bell. No doubt a message saying that Perceval had altered his plans and was dining out, alone.

Insensibly Althea's lips tightened. She thought she knew what her husband was about to suggest. She felt sure that he would tell her, as he had told her so many times before when he had failed her, to offer herself to Mrs. Panfillen for dinner.

But no—the voice she heard calling her by name was not that of Perceval Scrope. It was a woman's voice, and it seemed to float towards her from a far distance. "Althea," called the strange voice, "Althea."

"Yes?" she said, "who is it? I can hardly hear you," and then, with startling closeness and clearness—the telephone plays one such tricks—came the answer in a voice she knew well, "It is I—Joan Panfillen! Are you alone, Althea? Yes? Ah! that's good! I want you to do me a kindness, dear. I want

you to come round here now—at once. Don't tell anyone you are coming to me. I have a reason for this. Can you hear what I say, Althea?"

"Yes," said the listener hesitatingly, "yes, I hear you quite well now, Joan."

"Come in by the park side, I mean through the garden—the gate is unlocked, and I will let you in by the window. Be careful as you walk across the flags, it's very slippery to-night. Can you come now, at once?"

Althea hesitated a moment. Then she answered, in her low, even voice, "Yes, I'll come now, at once."

A kindness? What kindness could she, Althea Scrope, do Joan Panfillen? The fear of the other woman, the hidden distrust with which she regarded her, gathered sudden force. Not lately, but in the early days of Scrope's marriage, Mrs. Panfillen had more than once tried to use her friend's wife, believing—strange that she should have made such a mistake—that Althea might succeed where she herself had failed in persuading Scrope for his own good. Althea now told herself that no doubt Joan wished to see her on some matter connected with Perceval's coming speech.

As this thought came to her Althea's white forehead wrinkled in vexed thought. It was too bad that she should have to go out now, when she was expecting Mr. Bustard, to whom she had one or two rather important things to say about his sister——But stay, why should he be told that she was out? Why indeed should she be still out when Mr. Bustard did come? It was not yet five o'clock, and he seldom came before a quarter past. With luck she might easily go over to Joan Panfillen's house and be back before he came.

Althea walked quickly out of the drawing-room and down into the hall. Her fur cloak had been carefully hung up as she had directed. Perceval always said Luke was a stupid servant, but she liked Luke; he was careful, honest, conscientious, a very different type of man from the butler, Dockett.

Althea passed out into the chilly, foggy air. Delahay Street, composed of a few high houses, looked dark, forbidding, deserted. She had often secretly wondered why her husband chose to live in such a place. Of course she knew that their friends raved about the park side of the house, but the wife of Perceval Scrope scarcely ever went in or out of her own door without remembering a dictum of her father's: "Nothing makes up for a good front entrance."

Althea walked quickly towards Great George Street; to the left she passed Boar's Head Yard, where lived an old cabman in whom she took an interest, and whose cab generally stood at Storey's Gate.

How strange to think that here had once stood Oliver Cromwell's house! Her husband had told her this fact very soon after their marriage; it had seemed to please him very much that they lived so near the spot where Cromwell had once lived. Althea even at the time had thought this pleasure odd, in fact affected, on Perceval's part.

If the great Protector's house stood there *now*, filled with interesting little relics of the man, she could have understood, perhaps to a certain extent sympathised with, Perceval's feeling, for Cromwell had been one of her father's heroes. But to care or pretend to care for a vanished association——!

But Perceval was like that. No man living—or so Althea believed—was so full of strange whimsies and fads as was Perceval Scrope! And so thinking of him she suddenly remembered, with a tightening of the heart, how often her husband's feet had trodden the way she was now treading, hastening from the house which she had just left to the house to which she was now going.

Jealous of Joan Panfillen? Nay, Althea assured herself that there was no room in her heart for jealousy, but it was painful, even more, it was hateful, to know that there were people who pitied her because of this peculiar intimacy between Perceval and Joan. Why, quite lately, there had been a recrudescence of talk about their friendship, so an ill-bred busybody had hinted to Althea only the day before.

The wife was dimly aware that there had been a time when Mrs. Panfillen had hoped to form with her an unspoken compact; each would have helped the other, that is, to "manage" Perceval; but the moment when such an alliance would have been possible had now gone for ever—even if it had ever existed. Althea would have had to have been a different woman,—older, cleverer, less scrupulous, more indifferent than she was, even now, to the man she had married, to make such a compact possible.

When about to cross Great George Street she stopped and hesitated. Why should she do this thing, why leave her house at Joan Panfillen's bidding? But Althea, even as she hesitated, knew that she would go on. She had said that she was coming, and she was not one to break lightly even a light word.

As she crossed Storey's Gate, she noticed the stationary cab of the old man who lived in Boar's Head Yard. It had been standing there when she had come in from her walk, and she felt a thrill of pity—the old man made a gallant fight against misfortune. She and Joan Panfillen were both very kind to him.

Althea told herself that this sad world is full of real trouble, and the thought made her ashamed of the feelings which she had just allowed to possess and shake her with jealous pain. And yet—yet, though many people envied her, how far from happy Althea knew herself to be, and how terribly grey her life now looked, stretching out in front of her.

As she passed into Birdcage Walk, and came close to the little iron gate which Mrs. Panfillen had told her was unlocked, she saw that a woman stood on the path of the tiny garden behind the railings.

Of course it was not Joan herself; the thought that Joan, delicate, fragile as she was, would come out into the cold, foggy air was unthinkable; scarcely less strange was it to see standing there, cloakless and hatless, Joan's maid, a tall, gaunt, grey-haired woman named Bolt, who in the long ago had been nurse to the Panfillens' dead child. Scrope had told Althea the story of the brief tragedy very early in his acquaintance with her; he had spoken with strong feeling, and that although the child had been born, had lived, and had died before he himself had known Joan.

In the days when she had been Mrs. Panfillen's guest, that is before her marriage, Althea had known the maid well, known and liked her grim honesty of manner, but since

Althea's marriage to Perceval Scrope there had come a change over Bolt's manner. She also had made Althea feel that she was an interloper, and now the sight of the woman standing waiting in the cold mist disturbed her.

Bolt looked as if she had been there a very long time, and yet Althea had hurried; she was even a little breathless. As she touched the gate, she saw that it swung loosely. Everything had been done to make her coming easy; how urgent must be Joan's need of her!

Althea became oppressed with a vague fear. She looked at the maid questioningly. "Is Mrs. Panfillen ill?" she asked. The other shook her head. "There's nothing ailing Mrs. Panfillen," she said in a low voice.

Together, quite silently, they traversed the flagged path, and then Bolt did a curious thing. She preceded her mistress's visitor up the iron steps leading to the boudoir window, and leaving her there, on the little balcony, went down again into the garden, and once more took up her station near the gate as if mounting guard.

The long French window giving access to the boudoir was closed, and in the moment that elapsed before it was opened from within Althea Scrope took unconscious note of the room she knew so well, and of everything in it, including the figure of the woman she had come to see.

It was a panelled octagon, the panels painted a pale Wedgwood blue, while just below the ceiling concave medallions were embossed with flower garlands and amorini.

A curious change had been made since Althea had last seen the room. An old six-leaved screen, of gold so faded as