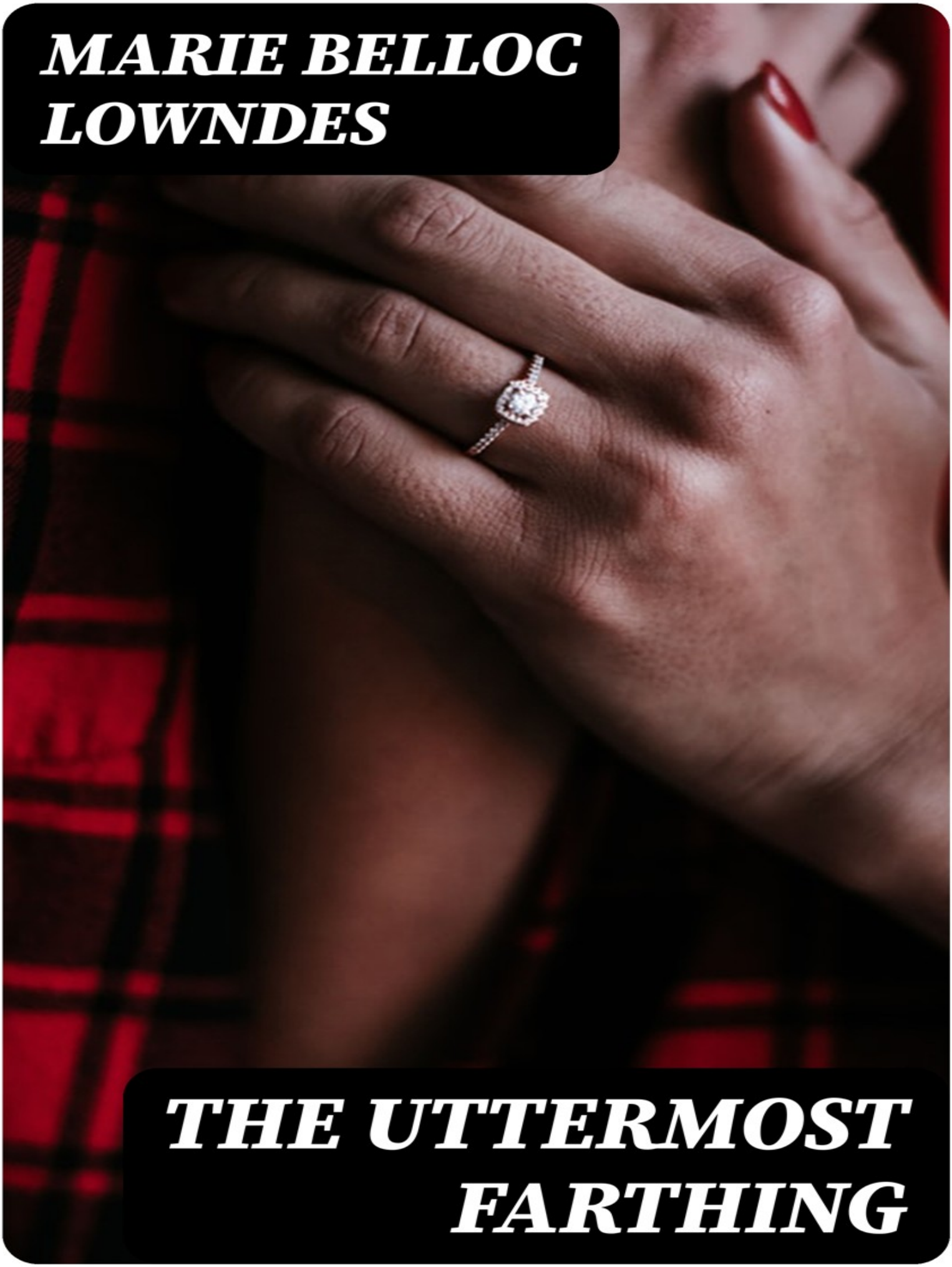
MARIE BELLOC LOWNDES
THE UTTERMOST FARTHING

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Laurence Vanderlyn, unpaid attaché at the American Embassy in Paris, strode down the long grey platform marked No. 5, of the Gare de Lyon. It was seven o'clock, the hour at which Paris is dining or is about to dine, and the huge station was almost deserted.

The train de luxe had gone more than an hour ago, the Riviera rapide would not start till ten, but one of those trains bound for the South, curiously named demi-rapides, was timed to leave in twenty minutes.

Foreigners, especially Englishmen and Americans, avoid these trains, and this was why Laurence Vanderlyn had chosen it as the starting point of what was to be a great adventure, an adventure which must for ever be concealed, obliterated as much as may be from his own memory—do not men babble in delirium?—once life had again become the rather grey thing he had found it to be.

In the domain of the emotions it is the unexpected which generally happens, and now it was not only the unexpected but the incredible which had happened to this American diplomatist. He and Margaret Pargeter, the Englishwoman whom he had loved with an absorbing, unsatisfied passion, and an ever-increasing concentration and selfless devotion, for seven years, were about to do that which each had sworn, together and separately, should never come to pass, —that is, they were about to snatch from Fate a few days of such free happiness and communion as during their long years of intimacy they had never enjoyed. In order to secure

these fleeting moments of joy, she, the woman in the case, was about to run the greatest risk which can in these days be incurred by civilised woman.

Margaret Pargeter was not free as Vanderlyn was free; she was a wife,—not a happy wife, but one on whose reputation no shadow had ever rested,—and further, she was the mother of a child, a son, whom she loved with an anxious tenderness.... It was these two facts which made what she was going to do a matter of such moment not only to herself, but to the man to whom she was now about to commit her honour.

Striding up and down the platform to which he had bought early access by one of those large fees for which the travelling American of a certain type is famed, Vanderlyn, with his long lean figure, and stern pre-occupied face, did not suggest, to the French eyes idly watching him, a lover,—still less the happy third in one of those conjugal comedies which play so much greater a part in French literature and in French drama than they do in French life. He had thrust far back into his heart the leaping knowledge of what was about to befall him, and he was bending the whole strength of his mind to avert any possible danger of ignoble catastrophe to the woman whom he was awaiting, and whose sudden surrender was becoming more, instead of less, amazing as the long minutes dragged by.

Vanderlyn's mind went back to the moment, four short days ago, when this journey had been suddenly arranged. Mrs. Pargeter had just come back from England, where she had gone to pay some family visits and to see her little son, who was at a preparatory school; and the American

diplomatist, as was so often his wont, had come to escort her to one of those picture club shows in which Parisian society delights.

Then, after a quarter of an hour spent by them at the exhibition, the two friends had slipped away, and had done a thing which was perhaps imprudent. But each longed, with an unspoken eager craving, to be alone with the other; the beauty of Paris in springtime tempted them, and it was the woman who had proposed to the man that they should spend a quiet hour walking through one of those quarters of old Paris unknown to the travelling foreigner.

Eagerly Vanderlyn had assented, and so they had driven quickly down the Rue de Rivoli, right into the heart of that commercial quarter which was the Paris of Madame de Sévigné, of the bitter witty dwarf, Scarron, of Ninon de l'Enclos, and, more lately, of Victor Hugo. There, dismissing their cab, they had turned into that still, stately square, once the old Place Royale, now the Place des Vosges, of which each arcaded house garners memories of passionate romance.

Walking slowly up and down the solitary garden there, the two had discussed the coming August, and Margaret Pargeter had admitted, with a rather weary sigh, that she was as yet quite ignorant whether her husband intended to yacht, to shoot, or to travel,—whether he meant to take her with him, or to leave her at some seaside place with the boy.

As she spoke, in the low melodious voice which still had the power to thrill the man by her side as it had had in the earlier days of their acquaintance, Mrs. Pargeter said no word that all the world might not have heard, yet,

underlying all she said, his questions and her answers, was the mute interrogation—which of the alternatives discussed held out the best chance, to Vanderlyn and herself, of being together?

At last, quite suddenly, Mrs. Pargeter, turning and looking up into her companion's face, had said something which Laurence Vanderlyn had felt to be strangely disconcerting; for a brief moment she lifted the veil which she had herself so deliberately and for so long thrown over their ambiguous relation—"Ah! Laurence," she exclaimed with a sigh, "the way of the transgressor is hard!"

Then, speaking so quietly that for a moment he did not fully understand the amazing nature of the proposal she was making to him, she had deliberately offered to go away with him—for a week. The way in which this had come about had been strangely simple; looking back, Vanderlyn could scarcely believe that his memory was playing him true....

From the uncertain future they had come back to the immediate present, and Mrs. Pargeter said something of having promised her only intimate friend, a Frenchwoman much older than herself, a certain Madame de Léra, to go and spend a few days in a villa near Paris—"If you do that," he said, "then I think I may as well go down to Orange and see the house I've just bought there."

She had turned on him with a certain excitement in her manner. "You've bought it? That strange, beautiful place near Orange where you used to stay when you were studying in Paris? Oh, Laurence, I'd no idea that you really meant to buy it!"

A little surprised at the keenness of her interest, he had answered quietly, "Yes, when the owner was going through Paris last week, I found he wanted the money, so—so the house is mine, though none of the legal formalities have yet been complied with. I'm told that the old woman who was caretaker there can make me comfortable enough for the few days I can be away." He added in a different, a lower tone, "Ah! Peggy, if only it were possible for us to go there together—how you would delight in the place!"

"Would you like me to come with you? I will if you like, Laurence." She had asked the question very simply—but Vanderlyn, looking at her quickly, had seen that her hand was trembling, her eyes brimming with tears. Then she had spoken gently, deliberately—seeming to plead with herself, rather than with him, for a few days of such dual loneliness for which all lovers long and which during their long years of intimacy they had never once, even innocently, enjoyed. And he had grasped with exultant gratitude—what man would have done otherwise?—at what she herself came and offered him.

Walking up and down the solitary platform, Vanderlyn lived over again each instant of that strange momentous conversation uttered four days ago in the stately sunlit square which forms the heart of old Paris. How the merry ghost of Marion Delorme, peeping out of one of the long narrow casements of the corner house which was once hers, must have smiled to hear this virtuous Englishwoman cast virtue to the light Parisian winds!

Vanderlyn also recalled, with almost the same surprise and discomfort as he had experienced at the time itself, the

way in which Margaret Pargeter, so refined and so delicately bred, had discussed all the material details connected with their coming adventure—details from which the American diplomatist himself had shrunk, and which he would have done almost anything to spare her.

"There is one person, and one alone," she had said with some decision, "who must know. I must tell Adèle de Léra—she must have my address, for I cannot remain without news of my boy a whole week. As for Tom"—she had flushed, and then gone on steadily—"Tom will believe that I am going to stay with Adèle at Marly-le-Roi, and my letters will be sent to her house. Besides," she had added, "Tom himself is going away, to England, for a fortnight."

To the man then walking by her side, and even now, as he was remembering it all, the discussion was inexpressibly odious. "But do you think," he had ventured to ask, "that Madame de Léra will consent? Remember, Peggy, she is Catholic, and what is more, a pious Catholic."

"Of course she won't like it—of course she won't approve! But I'm sure—in fact, Laurence, I *know*—that she will consent to forward my letters. She understands that it would make no difference—that I should think of some other plan for getting them. Should she refuse at the last moment—but—but she will not refuse—" and her face—the fair, delicately-moulded little face Vanderlyn loved—had become flooded with colour.

For the first time since he had known her, he had realised that there was a side to her character of which he was ignorant, and yet?—and yet Laurence Vanderlyn knew Margaret Pargeter too well, his love of her implied too

intimate a knowledge, for him not to perceive that something lay behind her secession from an ideal of conduct to which she had clung so unswervingly and for such long years.

During the four days which had elapsed between then and now,—days of agitation, of excitement, and of suspense,—he had more than once asked himself whether it were possible that certain things which all the world had long known concerning Tom Pargeter had only just become revealed to Tom Pargeter's wife. He hoped, he trusted, this was not so; he had no desire to owe her surrender to any ignoble longing for reprisal.

The world, especially that corner of Vanity Fair which takes a frankly materialistic view of life and of life's responsibilities, is shrewder than we generally credit, and the diplomatist's intimacy with the Pargeter household had aroused but small comment in the strange polyglot society in which lived, by choice, Tom Pargeter, the cosmopolitan millionaire who was far more of a personage in Paris and in the French sporting world than he could ever have hoped to be in England.

To all appearance Laurence Vanderlyn was as intimate with the husband as with the wife, for he had tastes in common with them both, his interest in sport and in horseflesh being a strong link with Tom Pargeter, while his love of art, and his dilettante literary tastes, bound him to Peggy. Also, and perhaps above all, he was an American—and Europeans cherish strange and sometimes fond illusions as to your American's lack of capacity for ordinary human emotion.

He alone knew that his tie with Mrs. Pargeter grew, if not more passionate, then more absorbing and intimate as time went on, and he was sometimes, even now, at considerable pains to put the busybodies of their circle off the scent.

But indeed it would have required a very sharp, a very keen, human hound to find the scent of what had been so singular and so innocent a tie. Each had schooled the other to accept all that she would admit was possible. True, Vanderlyn saw Margaret Pargeter almost every day, but more often than not in the presence of acquaintances. She never came to his rooms, and she had never seemed tempted to do any of the imprudent things which many a woman, secure of her own virtue, will sometimes do as if to prove the temper of her honour's blade.

So it was that Mrs. Pargeter had never fallen into the ranks of those women who become the occasion for even good-natured gossip. The very way in which they had, till to-night, conducted what she, the woman, was pleased to call their friendship, made this which was now happening seem, even now, to the man who was actually waiting for her to join him, as unsubstantial, as likely to vanish, mirage-wise, as a dream.

And yet Vanderlyn passionately loved this woman whom most men would have thought too cold to love, and who had known how to repress and tutor, not only her own, but also his emotions. He loved her, too, so foolishly and fondly that he had fashioned the whole of his life so that it should be in harmony with hers, making sacrifices of which he had told her nothing in order that he might surround her—an ill-mated, neglected wife—with a wordless atmosphere of

devotion which had become to her as vital, as necessary, as is that of domestic peace and happiness to the average woman. But for Laurence Vanderlyn and his "friendship," Mrs. Pargeter's existence would have been lacking in all human savour, and that from ironic circumstance rather than from any fault of her own.

Vanderlyn had spent the day in a fever of emotion and suspense, and he had arrived at the Gare de Lyon a good hour before the time the train for Orange was due to leave.

At first he had wandered about the great railway-station aimlessly, avoiding the platform whence he knew he and his companion were to start. Then, with relief, he had hailed the moment for securing coming privacy in the unreserved railway carriage; this had not been quite an easy matter to compass, for he desired to avoid above all any appearance of secrecy.

But he need not have felt any anxiety, for whereas in an English railway-station his large "tip" to the guard, carrying with it significant promise of final largesse, would have spelt but one thing, and that thing love, the French railway employé accepted without question the information that the lady the foreign gentleman was expecting was his sister. Such a statement to the English mind would have suggested the hero of an innocent elopement, but as regards family relations the French are curiously Eastern, and then it may be said again that the American's stern, pre-occupied face and cold manner were not those which to a Parisian could suggest a happy lover.

As he walked up and down with long, even strides, his arms laden with papers and novels, it would have been difficult for anyone seeing him there to suppose that Vanderlyn was starting on anything but a solitary journey. Indeed, for the moment he felt horribly alone. He began to experience the need of human companionship. She had said she would be there at seven; it was now a quarter-past the hour. In ten minutes the train would be gone——

Then came to him a thought which made him unconsciously clench his hands. Was it not possible, nay, even likely, that Margaret Pargeter, like many another woman before her, had found her courage fail her at the last moment—that Heaven, stooping to her feeble virtue, had come to save her in spite of herself?

Vanderlyn's steps unconsciously quickened. They bore him on and on, to the extreme end of the platform. He stood there a moment staring out into the red-starred darkness: how could he have ever thought that Margaret Pargeter—his timid, scrupulous little Peggy—would embark on so high and dangerous an adventure?

There had been a moment, during that springtime of passion which returns no more, when Vanderlyn had for a wild instant hoped that he would be able to take her away from the life in which he had felt her to be playing the terrible rôle of an innocent and yet degraded victim.

Even to an old-fashioned American the word divorce does not carry with it the odious significance it bears to the most careless Englishwoman. He had envisaged a short scandal, and then his and Peggy's marriage. But he had been