



The Alternative

"May I come in and get warm?" he pleaded. She saw that he was shivering. With a quick glance over her shoulder she stood aside and allowed him to pass.

"You *are* cold," she said. "Sit down by the fire. I'll poke it up a bit. Just for a few minutes, and then you must go. I wonder if the racket alarmed the servants. You see, I am the only person in this part of the house, Mr. Van Pycke."

He looked up from the grate, over which he was holding his hands. "By the way, why are you not in bed? I distinctly remember you said good night — and started."

She hesitated. "I was n't sleepy," she said.

"On the other hand, I slept very soundly," he said. "Have you been down here all this time?"

"Since twelve o'clock. I love a grate fire."

"Won't you sit down? Do."

"No, thank you. I'll wait till you have gone. If I sit down now, you'll stay, I'm afraid."

He moved the big chair and drew up another for himself beside it. She watched the proceedings without approval or resentment. When the two chairs stood side by side before the fender, he motioned for her to sit down. She was now gazing at him fixedly, a somewhat detached smile on her lips. After a moment she shrugged her shoulders and sat down. He promptly dropped into the other chair and stretched out his feet to the fire.

"You said something that surprised me, just as you left me — two hours ago," he remarked, after a long silence. "A year's vacation on full pay," he repeated.