

I am in impatience to see the lettres ; so please give me the key."

"You mustn't let out to Higgs, then," said the enraptured footman, clasping his beloved's hands, "and you must give me a kiss."

"If you give me the key," said Ernestine, who had been prepared to use bribery and corruption.

The kiss was submitted to, and Ernestine walked off triumphantly with the key in her pocket.

"Qu'ils sont donc bêtes, ces hommes ! Mon Dieu ! qu'ils sont niais !" she muttered to herself as she went upstairs ; and it must be confessed that, as far as James was concerned, she had some cause for her sweeping condemnation of the male sex.

The following morning Ernestine entered Mrs. Blair's bedroom soon after eight o'clock, triumphantly bearing the letter-bag and the key. That she had previously opened it and carefully looked over the contents herself, and then locked it up again, was of course a proceeding to which, under the circumstances, she considered that she had a perfect right, but which she did not think it necessary to impart to her mistress.

Mrs. Blair eagerly turned the key and tumbled out all the letters over the bed-clothes.

But there was nothing whatever to reward her curiosity ; her own letters were only bills, and there were three for Juliet—one from Mr. Bruce, one from Georgie Travers (an answer probably to an invitation to lunch, which she knew Juliet to have sent to her), and the third was either a bill or a circular ; there was certainly nothing from Colonel Fleming. She replaced all the letters, and Ernestine gravely took the bag from her hand, and carried it downstairs to James, who proceeded to distribute the contents as usual, and who was brought to acknowledge that it certainly made no difference who fetched it, and that he much enjoyed eating his breakfast undisturbed. A second and third morning Ernestine, undaunted by the wind and rain, sallied forth wrapped in her waterproof cloak down to the lodge, and still there had been nothing to reward her energy nor satisfy her mistress's curiosity. But on the fourth day, when the girl brought in the bag, she knew perfectly well, by a previous inspection, that there was a letter from Colonel Fleming to Miss Blair inside it. Mrs.

Blair saw it, and pounced upon it the instant she opened the bag ; it was impossible to mistake the large bold handwriting with which she was perfectly familiar, even had the crest and monogram on the seal been wanting to make assurance doubly sure.

She hastily slipped the letter under her pillow, waiting till Ernestine's back was turned towards her whilst she was pulling up the blinds and arranging the window curtains, to do so ; then taking out her own letters, she gave the bag back into her hand, and sent her away.

The instant she was alone, Mrs. Blair sprang out of bed, and, wrapping her dressing-gown around her, carried her prize to the light of the window.

Without a moment's hesitation she broke the seal, unfolded the letter, and began hastily reading through all poor Hugh's passionate love-words. She had but just finished it when she heard Ernestine coming along the passage with her hot water. She had only time to tear the letter once across, and throw it hastily on to the fire, when the door opened. The envelope and one torn half fell on to the blazing coals, and were rapidly consumed : but the other half, unseen by Mrs. Blair, fluttered aside, and slipped down behind the coalscuttle, where it remained between that household article and the wainscot, completely hidden.

"I did not ring," said Mrs. Blair sharply to Ernestine, for she was angry at her untimely entrance.

"N'est-ce pas, madame ? Ah, I beg pardon, I heard a bell : it must have been Mademoiselle Blair's bell ; and I thought it was yours. Will you wait madame, or shall I bring you your bath, as the hot water is here ?"

Ernestine was not unmindful of the blazing papers on the fire, upon which she kept one eye whilst she spoke. Her entrance, it is needless to say, was not in the very least accidental ; but had been, on the contrary, very carefully planned by her from the moment when she had ascertained that the letter for which her mistress was on the look-out had arrived.

She set about her duties of dressing and waiting upon Mrs. Blair with alacrity, and it was whilst bustling actively about the room that she caught sight of a small corner of white paper sticking out behind the coalscuttle.