

THE GUARDED FLAME

In the drawing-room after dinner, Mr Burgoyne lay upon a sofa again. He would not go to bed before his usual hour—he never would. Mr Stone sat reading near the cheerful wood fire. The nights were turning chilly: fires were becoming useful as well as ornamental. Effie, in a circle of lamplight, sat plying her embroidery needle. Close to her husband's couch Mrs Burgoyne sat musing, book in hand, waiting to read aloud should any more of the foolish novel be required.

When the maid came in to take away the coffee, signals were exchanged between one and another, and then the maid, moving cautiously on tiptoe, carried off the lamps. He was dozing: the lamplight might hurt his eyes. Mr Stone and Effie, abandoning book and work, both understood, both nodded their approval. Then the warm firelight alone showed the silent group in the pleasant, homey room. It was a pleasant picture, thus, of the great man wrapped round with love, solicitude, and veneration.

"Will it tire you to read to me a little more?"

Then Mr Stone, with silent footfall, brought from the mantelpiece a pair of silver candlesticks and placed them on the little table at Mrs Burgoyne's elbow. But the candles were only candle-ends: one of them was almost lost in its silver socket. To summon the maid or go oneself to fetch new candles would be disturbing: by signs Mr Stone was instructed to light the higger of the candle-ends. Silently he obeyed. Then with dexterous fingers he extracted the other waxen stump, put a penny across the socket, put the stump on the coin, and lit it also. Then the reading began.

Presently Miss Effie and Mr Stone stole away through the open door into the next room, where the lamps were burning, to whisper together while they played some childish card game; and husband and wife were alone.

Was he asleep? She had been reading for a quarter of an hour, and the flame from the guttering stump had begun to leap and flicker. Leaning forward, she was about to blow out the flame when her husband's hand upon her arm checked her. He was not asleep: he had been watching the candle.