



ing my various impediments, on the platform of St. Pancras, prepared to take my journey down to Leicester by the 3.30 Manchester and Liverpool express. The Pullman was crowded with a pack of noisy schoolboys, so I eschewed it and selected an empty first-class carriage. I took possession of my favorite corner seat, with my back to the engine, and wrapping my rug round my knees and unfolding the *Times* glided away from the city of smoke in a remarkably good humor, partly inspired, no doubt, by a capital lunch, and partly by pleasurable anticipation of my forthcoming visit.

Fred met me at Leicester station, and I saw with regret that he was looking pale and ill and much thinner than when I had seen him last. He seemed pleased to see me, however, and greeted me warmly.

During our drive to Gaulby, I hazarded a few remarks, with a view to ascertaining what sort of a party there was collected at the Hall, but I got nothing definite out of him. He was quite unlike his old self, and I came to the conclusion that he must be ill. As we drove up the avenue I leaned out of the window to gaze at the fine old mansion, and it struck me at once as looking cold and uninviting, while the grounds were certainly very much neglected. Something seemed wrong all round, and I began to feel almost sorry I had come. We overtook Mrs. Hallaton at the Hall door, just returned from a walk. She was as gracious and as pleasant as she had ever been to me; but I fancied I could detect in her manner something of the ill-being which seemed to exist around her.

We all three entered together, and the moment we passed through the door I felt convinced that my expectations of a jolly Christmas party were

doomed to disappointment. There were no decorations about, only one doleful-looking servant, and apparently nothing stirring. I felt sure something was wrong, but at any rate I consoled myself with the reflection that I had lost little by coming, as it had been a choice between this and an hotel. But, all the same, I did not feel particularly cheerful as I followed the doleful-looking servant upstairs, along wide corridors, across passages, upstairs again, and then down a long corridor, until at last I reached my room in the west wing. My surmises were correct. When I

descended, after a prolonged and careful toilet, my host was lounging about in a smoking-jacket, and he and his wife were the only occupants of the room. I was the only guest.

"I've something very serious to say to you, Neillson," he said slowly (Neillson is my name). "I'm going to make a confidant of you, if I may, old man."

I bowed my head and listened. "You haven't noticed anything particular about my wife, I don't suppose, have you?" he asked, with a searching glance.

I admitted that I had thought her

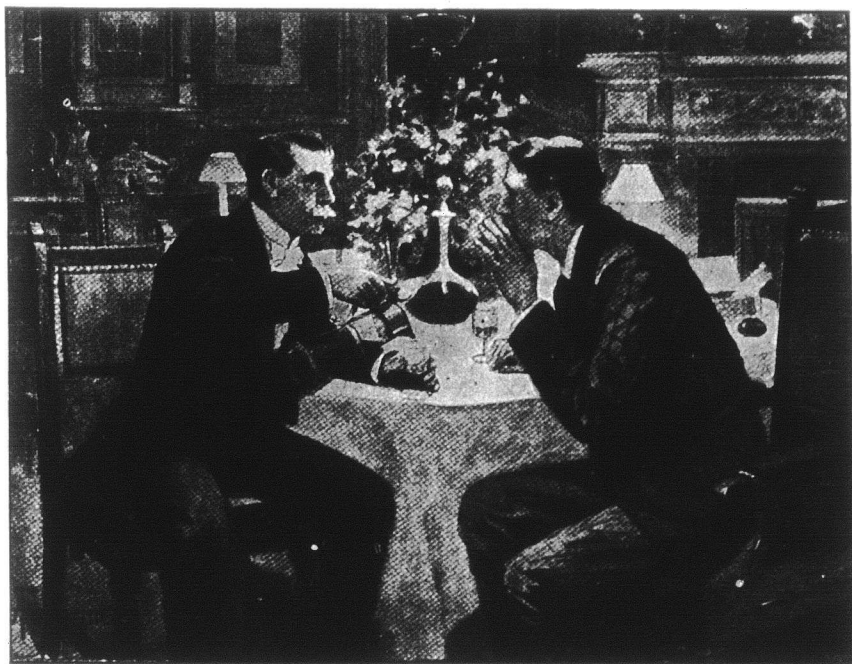
strangely silent and apparently having some anxiety weighing on her mind.

He laughed—a short uncertain laugh—and leaned over to me confidentially. "I rely upon your discretion, you know, Neillson. I wouldn't have it known for the world—but my wife is mad."

"Mad?" I put down the claret jug and stared at him incredulously.

"Yes, mad!" he repeated, impatiently. "It was the sun in India last year that did the mischief. She would expose herself to it. The doctor whom I have consulted advised me to send her to a private asylum, but I haven't the heart to do it. She's perfectly harmless, you know; but, of course, it's an awful trial to me."

I stammered out an expression of sympathy. To tell the truth, I scarcely knew what to say. I was bewildered at this painful explanation of the gloom which reigned over the house. Presently Fred closed his eyes and left me to digest this strange and unwelcome piece of news. I am naturally somewhat selfish, and before very long my sympathy was diverted in some measure from my host to myself. It occurred to me that it was by no means a pleasant prospect to be a guest in a house the mistress of which was mad. It was not altogether kind of Fred to invite me, I thought, under the circumstances, without some explanation of his wife's state. I began to feel quite an injured man. The only consolation was the claret, and there was no telling how long that would last out. It struck me that Burditt had been a long time bringing up the last bottle. By the by, Burditt was an old friend of mine. Why shouldn't I look him up and have a chat? I was quite tired of my own company, and Fred was fast asleep. So I opened the door softly and made my



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