

THE LIFTED VEIL

"Was this one?"

He thought of what Mrs. Palliser had been saying and laughed. "I almost think it was—if rightly understood."

"Then before I offer you the sympathy I must have the right understanding."

"Ah, that's not so easy," he was able to say before a new revolution in the crowd carried him away from her and he turned to take leave of his hostess.

But he was asking himself if, after all, Mrs. Palliser might not be right. He was not in love with Mary Galloway—not as yet—but if he could be—and he ever meant to marry at all. . . .

He was in the gloomy little outside hall, waiting for the lift, as he began making these reflections, but he was destined not to pursue them. The lift came to a sudden stop within its grille and the door was slid open.

The next two minutes remained in Bainbridge's mind as a period of impressions so rapid, so sharp, and so definite as to obliterate the sense of time and make him feel that he had lived through an experience.

A woman who had been sitting on the lift's little red-cushioned bench rose and made the one step necessary to reach the door. She was a tall, slender woman, richly dressed. Dark-brown plumes and velvet, against which a row of great pearls caught the eye strikingly, were but details in a picture vividly imprinted on his mind as one of extraordinary distinction. His memory would have recorded it if she had merely passed him in the street; but, as it was, what happened within the next few seconds burned it in as something he could not forget.

On the threshold of the lift, before she had stepped out of it, the woman raised her eyes, which he could see were dark and curiously deep—started—drew back—turned