

THE THREAD OF FLAME

let my saying so convince you. I'll be quite frank with you and say that I thought so once myself. I'll even go so far as to say that at one time, if everything had been different, it might have happened. But—but everything was as it was, and so— Well, the long and short of it is that there's nothing in it, and I must beg you to take that as decisive."

"Then—then, who is it?"

"No one. I've found my work, a very humble work, as you've just seen."

"A very fine and useful work."

"I hope so; and I'm not—not unhappy, specially."

She moved along the line of cases, as if carelessly examining the contents.

"What's that?" she asked, coming to a pause.

Obliged to go close to her, I was careful not to touch so much as the surface of her clothes.

"It's just a cup and saucer, Ludwigsburg, an old Rhine valley factory now extinct. They liked those little fancy scenes."

"It seems to be a woman pleading with a man, doesn't it?"

"It looks like that. It probably means nothing beyond a bit of decoration."

"And he seems so implacable, while she's down on her knees, poor thing!" She looked round at me. "Are you busy here still?"

"Oh, there are always things to do. Why?"

"I thought you might walk back to—to the hotel with me."