

figure darkly outlined against the blaze. She held the poker in her hand, and she was stooping over the fire, and something in her pose, something in the tense atmosphere of the room, drew his gaze—he never knew why—to the table on which he had left the papers. It was bare. He looked round, he could not see them, a cry broke from him. "Mary!"

"They don't burn easily," she said, a quaver of exultation and defiance in her tone. "Parchment is so hard to burn. It burns slowly, though I made a good fire on purpose!"

"D—n!" he cried, and he sprang forward to seize, he tried to seize her arm. But the next moment he saw that it was useless, he saw that it was too late. "Are you mad? Are you mad?" he cried, and frantically, he went down on his knees, he raked among the embers. But he knew that it was futile, he had known it before he knelt, and he stood up again with a gesture of despair. "My G—d!" he said. "Do you know what you have done? You have destroyed what cannot be replaced! You have ruined your claim! You must have been mad! Mad, to do it!"

"Mad? Because I do not wish to be Lady Audley?" she asked, facing him calmly, with her hands behind her.

"Yes, mad!" he repeated, bitter self-reproach in his voice. For he felt himself to blame, he felt the full burden of his responsibility. He had left the papers with her, the true value of which she might not have known! And she had done this dreadful, this fatal, this irreparable thing!

She faced his anger without a quiver. "Why mad?" she repeated. She was quite at her ease now. "Because, having been jilted by my cousin, I do not wish for this common, vulgar, poor revenge? Because I will not stoop to the game he plays and has played? Because I will not take from him what is little to me who have not had it, but much, nay all, to him who has?"

"But your uncle?" he cried. He was striving desperately to collect himself, trying to see the thing all round, and not only as she saw it, but in its consequences. "Your uncle, whose one aim, whose one object in life——"