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[Authors](#)
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[The Yellow Crayon](#)

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This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 20

Mr. Sabin from his seat behind a gigantic palm watched her egress from the supper-room with a little group of friends.

They came to a halt in the broad carpeted way only a few feet from him. Lady Carey, in a wonderful green gown, her neck and bosom ablaze with jewels, seemed to be making her farewells.

"I must go in and see the De Lausanacs," she exclaimed. "They are in the blue room supping with the Portuguese Ambassador. I shall be at Carmarthen House within half an hour - unless my headache becomes unbearable. Au revoir, all of you. Good-bye, Laura!"

Her friends passed on towards the great swing doors. Lady Carey retraced her steps slowly towards the supper-room, and made some languid inquiries of the head waiter as to a missing handkerchief. Then she came again slowly down the broad way and reached Mr. Sabin. He rose to his feet.

"I thank you very much for your note," he said. "You have something, I believe, to say to me."

She stood before him for a moment in silence, as though not unwilling that he should appreciate the soft splendour of her toilette. The jewels which encircled her neck were priceless and dazzling; the soft material of her gown, the most delicate shade of sea green, seemed to foam about her feet, a wonderful triumph of allegoric dressmaking. She saw that he was studying her, and she laughed a little uneasily, looking all the time into his eyes.

"Shockingly overdressed, ain't I?" she said. "We were going straight to Carmarthen House, you know. Come and sit in this corner for a moment, and order me some coffee. I suppose there isn't any less public place!"

"I fear not," he answered. "You will perhaps be unobserved behind this palm."

She sank into a low chair, and he seated himself beside her. She sighed contentedly.

"Dear me!" she said. "Do men like being run after like this?"

Mr. Sabin raised his eyebrows.

"I understood," he said, "that you had something to say to me of importance."

She shot a quick look up at him.

"Don't be horrid," she said in a low tone. "Of course I wanted to see you. I wanted to explain. Give me one of your cigarettes."

He laid his case silently before her. She took one and lit it, watching him furtively all the time. The man brought their coffee. The place was almost empty now, and some of the lights were turned down.

"It is very kind of you," he said slowly, "to honour me by so much consideration, but if you have much to say perhaps it would be better if you permitted me to call upon you to-morrow. I am afraid of depriving you of your ball - and your friends will be getting impatient."

"Bother the ball - and my friends," she exclaimed, a certain strained note in her tone which puzzled him. "I'm not obliged to go to the thing, and I don't want to. I've invented a headache, and they won't even expect me. They know my headaches."

"In that case," Mr. Sabin said, "I am entirely at your service."

She sighed, and looked up at him through a little cloud of tobacco smoke.

"What a wonderful man you are," she said softly. "You accept defeat with the grace of a victor. I believe that you would triumph as easily with a shrug of the shoulders. Haven't you any feeling at all? Don't you know what it is like to feel?"

He smiled.

"We both come," he said, "of a historic race. If ancestry is worth anything it should at least teach us to go about without pinning our hearts upon our sleeves."

"But you," she murmured, "you have no heart."

He looked down upon her then with still cold face and steady eyes.

"Indeed," he said, "you are mistaken."

She moved uneasily in her chair. She was very pale, except for a faint spot of pink colour in her cheeks.

"It is very hard to find, then," she said, speaking quickly, her bosom rising and falling, her eyes always seeking to hold his. "To-night you see what I have done - I have, sent away my friends - and my carriage. They may know me here - you see what I have risked. And I don't care. You thought to-night that I was your enemy - and I am not. I am

not your enemy at all."

Her hand fell as though by accident upon his, and remained there. Mr. Sabin was very nearly embarrassed. He knew quite well that if she were not his enemy at that moment she would be very shortly.

"Lucille," she continued, "will blame me too. I cannot help it. I want to tell you that for the present your separation from her is a certain thing. She acquiesces. You heard her. She is quite happy. She is at the ball to-night, and she has friends there who will make it pleasant for her. Won't you understand?"

"No," Mr. Sabin answered.

She beat the ground with her foot.

"You must understand," she murmured. "You are not like these fools of Englishmen who go to sleep when they are married, and wake in the divorce court. For the present at least you have lost Lucille. You heard her choose. She's at the ball to-night - and I have come here to be with you. Won't you, please," she added, with a little nervous laugh, "show some gratitude?"

The interruption which Mr. Sabin had prayed for came at last. The musicians had left, and many of the lights had been turned down. An official came across to them.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Sabin, "but we are closing now, unless you are a guest in the hotel."

"I am staying here," Mr. Sabin answered, rising, "but the lady -"

Lady Carey interrupted him.

"I am staying here also," she said to the man.

He bowed at once and withdrew. She rose slowly to her feet and laid her fingers upon his arm. He looked steadily away from her.

"Fortunately," he said, "I have not yet dismissed my own carriage. Permit me."

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Mr. Sabin leaned heavily upon his stick as he slowly made his way along the corridor to his rooms. Things were going ill with him indeed. He was not used to the fear of an enemy, but the memory of Lady Carey's white cheeks and indrawn lips as she had entered his carriage chilled him. Her one look, too, was a threat worse than any which her lips could have uttered. He was getting old indeed, he thought, wearily, when disappointment weighed so heavily upon him. And Lucille? Had he any real fears of her? He felt a little catch in his throat at the bare thought - in a moment's singular clearness of perception he realised that if Lucille were indeed lost the world was no longer a place for him. So his feet fell wearily upon the thickly carpeted floor of the corridor, and his face was unusually drawn and haggard as he opened the door of his sitting-room.

And then - a transformation, amazing, stupefying. It was Lucille who was smiling a welcome upon him from the depths of his favourite easy-chair - Lucille sitting over his fire, a novel in her hand, and wearing a delightful rose-pink dressing-gown. Some of her belongings were scattered about his room, giving it a delicate air of femininity. The faint odour of her favourite and only perfume gave to her undoubted presence a wonderful sense of reality.

She held out her hands to him, and the broad sleeves of her dressing-gown fell away from her white rounded arms. Her eyes were wonderfully soft, the pink upon her cheeks was the blush of a girl.

"Victor," she murmured, "do not look so stupefied. Did you not believe that I would risk at least a little for you, who have risked so much for me? Only come to me! Make the most of me. All sorts of things are sure to happen directly I am found out."

He took her into his arms. It was one of the moments of his lifetime.

"Tell me," he murmured, "how have you dared to do this?"

She laughed.

"You know the Prince and his set. You know the way they bribe. Intrigues everywhere, new and old overlapping. They have really some reason for keeping you and me apart, but as regards my other movements, I am free enough. And they thought, Victor - don't be angry - but I let them think it was some one else. And I stole away from the ball, and they think - never mind what they think. But you, Victor, are my intrigue, you, my love, my husband!"

Then all the fatigue and all the weariness, died away from Mr. Sabin's face. Once more the fire of youth burned in his heart. And Lucille laughed softly as her lips met his, and her head sank upon his shoulder.