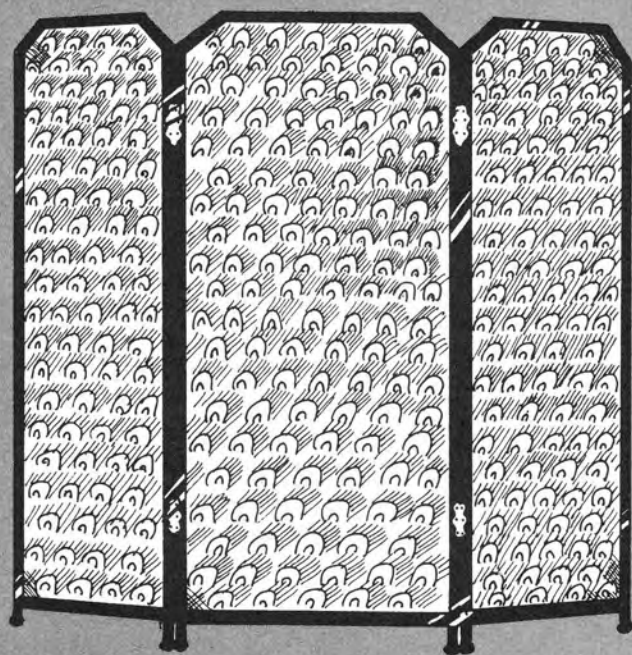




THE PEACOCK- FEATHER SCREEN

By CHARLES
HAMILTON

HER eyes turned upon the peacock-feather screen as she came into the room, and a slightly ironical smile curved her lips.

It was one more curio—and the room was stacked with curios already. Sir Paul was an indefatigable collector, and he was continually adding to his collection. Sometimes she thought that he lived for nothing else; and she was glad, in a cool scornful way, that he had an occupation. Certainly, he gave her little of his society, even if she had wanted it, which she did not. They dined together, with cool politeness on her side, grave courtesy on his: for the rest, they might almost have been the veriest strangers. She always knew when he was in the house: but he, she was quite sure, did not always know when she was at home, even for days or weeks at a time. Probably he did not care—charitably, she hoped that he did not. For if he had cared it would have made no difference.

She came in by the French windows from the balcony, her cloak draped about her tall graceful figure, her face, wonderfully beautiful, looking more beautiful than ever. Sir Paul Trench did not seem to hear her enter—he was seated before the peacock screen—the latest addition to the famous Trench collection—gazing at it, absorbed, as it seemed, in the contemplation of its gorgeous colouring. The screen stood before an alcove, in the wall opposite the windows: her husband's face was partly turned from her as he gazed at it, but she could see how fixed and rigid was his gaze.

The mocking curve of her red lip grew more pronounced.

The screen was a beautiful thing, doubtless—the work of patient dusky hands in Hindustan: the gorgeous colours of the

peacock-feathers glowed and gleamed in the shaded electric light. It was doubtless costly—Sir Paul Trench was rich, and could afford not to count the cost when his fancy was taken by anything. He was rich—if he had not been rich, Myra Mainwaring would never have become Lady Trench. She wondered sometimes whether he knew that. He could not have known it, could not have dreamed it, at the time of his earnest, impassioned courtship. Much water had passed under the bridges since that time—much had happened to open his eyes. Indeed, their drifting apart indicated that he understood the situation and accepted it. No word of reproach had ever passed his lips: not by word or look had he reproached her, or hinted that she had done him wrong. As she had drawn away from him, he had let her go—somewhat to her surprise, immensely to her relief. She was Lady Trench, and all that money could buy was hers for the asking, or without the asking: and on her side she gave—nothing. And he did not complain—he did not seem to think that he had any cause or right to complain.

But he had his collection, she told herself with ironic contempt. His manuscripts, his bronzes, his statues, his first editions, and now—his peacock screen! And her lip curved still more mockingly and contemptuously, as she gazed at his half-turned face. It was as if she looked at a child with a new toy, a child oblivious of all other things so long as the toy was novel. That was how she thought of him.

And he was her husband, and had loved her, and fancied once that she loved him! Now as she stood in his room, tall, graceful, beautiful, her lovely face circled by costly furs, he did not heed her presence—his gaze was fixed on the gorgeous, glowing screen of

peacock-feathers. Well, it was better so—if he had thought less of his curios, he might have thought more of other things—he might have suspected—he might have known—It came into her mind, with a dim wonder, to imagine what he would have thought, had he known of Eustace. Had he known that that very night she was to meet Eustace Tracey, as she had met him many times—that her husband's message had called her there, only a few minutes before she had intended to leave—that if his message had not interrupted her, by this time she would have been in Eustace Tracey's arms, feeling his kisses upon her lips...

She tried to imagine it, but she could not. Would such a discovery have disturbed his grave calmness? Would it have brought upon her a storm of angry reproaches? Or would he have dismissed the matter and turned again to his collection—to his illuminated missals—to his peacock-feather screen? She did not know—she could not even guess, so much was the man she had married a secret to her.

At all events, he suspected nothing: his manner to Eustace Tracey, when her lover came to the house, was irreproachable. Indeed, when she had seen the two men together, she had felt something like pang of shame—not for her husband. Whether it was blind faith or indifference, he trusted her—it did not seem to enter his thoughts that she could be false, that his friend could be false. She hated to see them together—it made Eustace seem false in her eyes. It perplexed her that Eustace was willing to meet him, to come under his roof, to speak to him in cordial tones... the man whose confidence he betrayed. Eustace did not seem to think that it mattered, and she tried to think that it did not, for she loved him, and she would believe nothing less than the best of the man she loved.

That evening, she knew, Eustace had accepted an invitation to look at Trench's collection: to be shown the latest addition to it—the peacock-feather screen. She had been dining out, and had not seen him—but she knew that he had been there. Only an hour ago he had stood in that room, where she now stood, and the thought troubled her.

But Eustace, after all, was not rich like her husband: he had his way to make in the world, and he could not afford to abandon the friendship of a man in the position of Sir Paul Trench. But it troubled her.

The silence in the room was oppressive.

Sir Paul did not move: his strange, intent gaze was fixed on the peacock-feather screen as if it fascinated him. Myra tapped with her foot on the parquet: and still he did not turn his head. It seemed almost as if he were in a trance.

She spoke at last; her impatience growing. Eustace would be waiting—the minutes—the precious stolen minutes—were fleeting away. Why had her husband sent for her to come—did he imagine that she was interested in an addition to his collection?

"Paul!"

He started, and turned his head.

She saw that his face was pale, as he rose to his feet. He seemed to draw himself with a palpable effort from deep reverie.

"My dear! I did not hear you," he said, "You came in very quietly."

She looked at him.

It was months—or was it years?—since he had used any endearing word in speaking to her. Sir Paul Trench was not himself to-night.

"I have disturbed you," she said.

"No! no."

"You sent a message that you wished to see me, Paul. What is it?"

He drew out a chair for her.

"Will you sit down, Myra?"

She shook her head.

"I have something to tell you," he said, gravely.

"Will it take long?"

"I am afraid so."

She made a movement of impatience. By this time, Eustace would be in the garden-house, waiting, wondering why she did not come. But she repressed her impatience as she felt her husband's eyes upon her face, gravely searching.

"Had you any important engagement for this evening?" he asked.

She felt a slight tremor: there was something new in his tone. Did he, after all,

suspect? Certainly his manner was not as usual.

"Nothing," she answered. "Nothing—at this hour! But—I have a slight head-ache—I was going to bed early—"

"I will try not to keep you long."

She forced a smile.

"Is it something important that you have to tell me?"

"Very."

"Well, I am here," she said.

"You will be seated?"

She sat down at last.

He crossed to the French windows, closed them, and drew back the dark hangings across. The stars—the stars that glimmered down on the garden-house where Eustace Tracey was to wait for her—were shut out.

She tapped her foot impatiently on the parquet, her irritation growing, and with it a faint sense of uneasiness.

If he knew—if he had been told—But his manner was calm, sedate; it might have been thought affectionate. He was changed from his usual self: but she could hardly tell in what the change consisted.

He came back towards her, and sat down, in a chair facing her, by the Indian table. She leaned her elbow on the table, her cheek on her hand, keeping her face in shadow. Opposite her, across the great room, the colours of the peacock-feather screen glowed and gleamed.

"I have much to say to you, Myra," Sir Paul said, gravely, "I hope I shall not tire you. I do not often take up your time, my dear, and you must forgive me for once."

"I am waiting."

"It is two years since you married me, Myra—a man fifteen years older than yourself, unworthy of you and your great beauty. My only claim was that I loved you—loved you as I verily believe no woman ever was loved before. I loved you so much that I was ready to deceive myself, to believe that you loved me, and when you accepted me, I was the happiest man in the earth. I vowed that I would make you happy—that no thought of self should ever enter my mind—that I would live only for your happiness. It was little enough—when I would willingly have died for it."

He paused for a moment.

"I am tiring you," he said, "But be patient with me, Myra; what I have to say must be said."

She did not answer: she remained without movement. If he chose to talk sentiment, she could not prevent him. She only wished that he would have done.

"When I found that you did not care for me," he resumed, "it was a great blow to me. I do not charge you with deceiving me—I deceived myself. It was my own folly, and my great love for you, that led me into self-deception. For you, my dear, I felt only sorrow. Had it been possible, I would have undone what had been done, for your sake. But that was not possible—and all that I could do, was to let you go your own way, to relieve you of a presence you found irksome, of attentions that bored you, of caresses that you shrank from and detested. That much I could do, and that much I did—and only sorrowed that I could do no more. Was there more that I could have done, Myra?"

She did not speak.

"To me, loving you as I did, loving you as I do, Myra, it was hard . . . hard! Many times I hoped that you would change, that you would turn to me, that you would value my love, as I should have valued yours could I have obtained it. These hopes died away in time—the gulf between us grew deeper and wider with every passing day. I knew that it was for ever: and I was content, so long as what I could give you made you happy. Only one black thought haunted me: that you, so beautiful, made for love as you are; would love some day—you, who had never loved, would some day give your heart, which was never given to me, to another. That possibility, or rather that certainty, was always in my mind: and I had thought out the position, Myra, and decided what I would do if, and when, the time came."

She made a slight movement.

He *knew*!

She knew now that he knew! But she knew, too, that she had nothing to fear, not even a reproach, from this grave, quiet man, who loved her, and to whom she was the beginning and end of all things. Yet she shivered, and drew her furs a little more

closely about her.

"I had decided, before it happened," said Sir Paul, in the same quiet, gentle voice, almost affectionate in its tones, "I will tell you what was my decision, Myra. I observed you—while you fancied me buried in my collection,—even when we met but seldom, and after your long absences, I observed you, and when the time came, I knew when your step became lighter, when a new light that I had never seen before dawned in your eyes, Myra—I knew that you loved, and it only remained to learn who had gained your love. If he was worthy of you, Myra, if he was to be trusted with your happiness, my dear child, the man whom you did not love would not stand in your way. All my plans had been thought out—all was definitely arranged: a mountaineering accident in the Alps was to be the means, and you would be left free to marry the man you loved."

She started violently.

For a moment she looked at him: and then her face was shaded again by her hand.

"When Eustace Tracey came, I knew who the man was," he went on, "My friend, whom I had not seen since my marriage—he was the man. You had met him at a country-house—your heart was his when you returned to me. When he came, I knew, and my heart ached, Myra. Not for myself—for you! For he was not worthy of you—he was unworthy, of you or of any other woman."

She caught her breath.

"I will not say, that only a base man could enter, as a friend, the house of a man he betrayed. For that, you will deem his love an excuse. It was more than that. You knew—you must have heard—that he was long my friend—and you knew that since my marriage I had not seen him. You did not know the cause—that it was his base, heartless betrayal of a woman who trusted him, that turned me from him, that made me erase his name from the list of my friends. But that was the cause, Myra."

She panted.

"It is false—false—When he came, you received him as a friend—he is your friend still—till you found out—"

"Till I found out, Myra?" Sir Paul Trench

smiled sadly, "Have I not said that I knew whom you loved, the first time I saw you in Eustace Tracey's presence?"

"If you knew—why—"

"You would not have believed me, Myra, if I had told you that the man you loved was a scoundrel, that he would take all that you had to give, and abandon you as he has abandoned others. That he is a scheming wastrel, who depends on his good looks to marry money. That you were, to him, one more trusting victim in a long list of victims, to be thrown aside as soon as some other fancy seized his mind—and still more certainly, as soon as the opportunity of a wealthy marriage came his way. You would not have believed it, Myra. You do not believe it now."

"Never! Never!" She choked, "It is false—false—it is your jealousy and cruelty that speak, It is false—false! You have brought me here to taunt and torture me because I love him."

He looked at her, and his look was only grave and pitying.

"Have I taunted you, Myra—all this time, when you fancied that I knew nothing, and I knew all? Have I even betrayed my knowledge? Have I not received Eustace Tracey as a friend—have I not hidden the loathing with which he filled me, and allowed him to meet me on the old friendly footing, and for what reason, do you think? I would not shatter your dreams—so long as it would last. That he would be as false to you as to others, I knew—but so long as you believed in him, you were happy. And it was of your happiness I thought. Not till the time came when his falsity must be evident to you, would I have uttered one word."

She gave him a scared look.

"I loved you," said Trench, "I loved you, and I hated him—I hated him so much that my hands ached to be upon his throat. And yet I could meet him with an unmoved face, Myra—so long as it lasted. So long as your happiness was possible, I would not shatter it. So long as it was possible, my dear! I speak now because—"

"Because—?" she whispered.

"Because your belief in him is no longer possible—because he has betrayed you in

your turn: because you will not be able to doubt the proof of it."

She shook her head incredulously.

Eustace loved her—loved her! Was he not waiting, at this very moment, in the shadowy garden-house—waiting with his burning kisses to press upon her lips? At the thought, she smiled.

"No!" said Sir Paul. Did he read her thoughts? "No, Myra—he is not there. My dear, you believed I knew nothing of the garden-house—."

She gave a faint cry.

"My dear, the garden-house was so secure a trysting-place, because I had given orders that it should never be approached," said Trench. "So long as your dream could last, my poor darling, I was determined that it should last—that no rude hand should disturb it. But Eustace Tracey will never wait again in the garden-house. I am not keeping you from meeting your lover, my dear—your lover is not there."

She gazed at him in terror.

"You—you knew?"

"I knew."

"My God!"

"He was here this evening," said Sir Paul, "He came to see my collection. I asked him, Myra, because—I knew that the end had come. He has been watched—and I knew. I knew that he would not have the courage to break with you personally—and I knew that in to-morrow's *Morning Post* his engagement to Miss Vanderhagen would be announced. That is why I asked him here."

She choked.

"His—his engagement."

Sir Paul Trench nodded.

"It is false!" she said, in a dry voice.

"It is true, my dear—he has not told you—but it is known to others, and to-morrow the official announcement will be in the papers. You will read it yourself—and then you would have known that he had deserted you, if I had not told you."

Her fingers were tearing at the costly furs of her cloak.

"It is false—false—false!" she repeated.

But she knew that it was true.

"Miss Vanderhagen is rich—a millionaire's daughter," said Sir Paul, "A

great match for an almost penniless fortune-hunter. I knew that he would throw you over, if such a chance came his way—it came. It is three days since I knew the certainty:—."

"Three days!" she breathed.

"But I would not speak, till the knowledge could be kept from you no longer. To-morrow all the world will know of the engagement between Eustace Tracey and Miss Vanderhagen. That is why I have told you to-night."

She rose unsteadily from the chair.

She stood, her hand resting on the edge of the Indian table, her face white and strained. The glowing colours of the peacock-feather screen danced before her eyes. The room was swimming.

A strong hand caught her.

She came to herself, and threw Trench's hand aside.

"Do not touch me!"

Her voice was shrill and broken.

"You can spare me that, at least. And I do not believe you—I do not believe—and if it is true, I still love him. I love him—and I shall see him—I shall see him—and then—."

"You shall see him!" said Trench, and his face was strange and sombre. He made a gesture towards the peacock-feather screen.

Her white face grew like marble.

"What—!" Her voice failed.

"You shall see him!" he repeated, and he stepped towards the peacock-feather screen, and laid his hand on it.

"He was here!" she breathed, "He was here—and you—."

"While he loved you, he lived!" said Trench, "So long as he was true to you, Myra—he lived. And now—you shall see him."

With a swing of his arm, he threw the peacock-feather screen aside. The light streamed into the hidden alcove.

It streamed upon a huddled form—a form that did not stir, that never would stir again.

A cry broke the silence: and Sir Paul Trench caught his wife in his arms as she fell fainting.

