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A Table of Contents has been added.

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS.

For Better, For Worse
Glamour
The Mirror and the Lamp
The Devil's Garden
General Mallock's Shadow
In Cotton Wool
Mrs. Thompson
The Rest Cure
Seymour Charlton
Hill Rise
The Guarded Flame
Vivien
The Ragged Messenger
The Countess of Maybury
A Little More

SHORT STORIES.

Life Can Never Be the Same
Odd Lengths
Fabulous Fancies

MRS. THOMPSON

A NOVEL

BY

W. B. MAXWELL

AUTHOR OF "THE GUARDED FLAME,"
"VIVIEN," ETC.

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"Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates."
—PROVERBS.

CONTENTS

MRS. THOMPSON

[Pg 1]

I

It was early-closing day in the town of Mallingbridge; and the Thompson's, "established 1813," had begun to hide its wares from the sunlight of High Street. Outside its windows the iron shutters were rolling down; inside its doors male and female assistants, eager for the weekly half-holiday, were despatching the last dilatory customers, packing their shelves, spreading their dust-sheets, and generally tidying up with anxious speed.

Mrs. Thompson, the sole proprietress, emerging from internal offices and passing through her prosperous realm, cast an attentive eye hither and thither; and, wherever she glanced, saw all things right, and nothing wrong. System, method, practised control visible in each department. Carpets, Bedding, Curtains, House Furnishings, all as they should be—no disturbing note, no hint of a dangerous element in the well-ordered working scheme of Thompson's.

Managerial Mr. Mears, a big elderly man, took his hands from beneath the skirts of his frock-coat; smiled and bowed; and spoke to the proprietress confidentially on one or two important matters.

"By the way," said Mr. Mears. "About Household Crockery—is it to be a promotion, or do you still think of getting someone in? Of course there's a lot of talk—must be while the appointment remains open. But you haven't made up your mind yet, have you?"

[Pg 2]

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Thompson, arranging her reticule, and not looking at Mr. Mears. "I shall appoint Mr. Marsden."

"Young Marsden? Never!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Thompson firmly.

"You surprise me. I admit it."

"You don't think," said Mrs. Thompson, "that he is old enough for the responsibility. But, Mr. Mears, he has *brains* and he likes *work*. Tell the others that the appointment is made."

And big Mr. Mears did then what everyone in Thompson's always did—that is to say, he immediately obeyed orders; and before the last shutter was down, the news had flashed all through the restricted space of the old-fashioned shop.

"Dicky Marsden! Oh, drop me off a roof.... Marsden up again! Well, I'm bust!" Thompson's young gentlemen murmuring their comments, expressed astonishment, and a certain amount of envy. "Marsden over all our heads! This is a rum go, if you like."

"Fancy! What next! Would you believe it?" Thompson's young ladies, after being breathless, became shrill. "Why, on'y six months ago he was Number Three in the Carpets."

"He'll be prouder than ever."

"I shan't dare so much as speak to him."

"He always treated one as dirt under his feet," said a dark-haired, anæmic young lady. "And *now*!"

"With the increased screw," said a pert, blond young lady, "he'll be able to buy more smart clothes, and he'll look more fetching than ever. Yes, and you'll all be more in love with him than you are a'ready."

"Speak for yourself."

"Well, say I'm as bad as you. We're all a lot of fools together."

[Pg 3]

Of course there must be talk. The Napoleonic rise of this fortunate shopman had been sufficiently rapid to stir the whole of his little shop-world. Starting thus, to what heights might he not attain in Thompson's? There would be talk and more talk.

But not within the hearing of Mr. Mears.

"Jabber, jabber," said Mr. Mears with unusual severity. "Less of it. You're like so many cackling hens in some back yard—instead of ladies who know how to behave themselves in a high-class emporium."

Evidently Mr. Mears was not pleased with the appointment. He stamped off; and the girls

observed the characteristic swish of the coat tails, the manner in which he puffed out his chest, and the faint flush upon his bearded face.

Meanwhile Mrs. Thompson had passed onward and upward, through many departments, to the door of communication on the first floor that led from her public shop to her private house.

Outwardly it was quite an old-fashioned shop, still encased with the red-brick fabric of Georgian days; but inwardly its structure had been almost entirely modernised. The bird-cage art of steel-girdering had swept away division-walls, opened out the department to the widest possible extent and given an unimpeded run of floor area where once the goods used to be stored in rooms the size of pigeon-holes. The best shop-architects had gutted the place, and, so far as they were permitted, had "brought it up to date"; but in all recent improvements the style of substantial, respectable grandeur was preserved. The new mahogany staircases were of a Georgian pattern; there were no fantastic white panellings, no coloured mosaics, no etagères of artificial flowers. Really the vast looking-glasses were the only decoration that one could condemn as altogether belonging to the vulgar new school. The mirrors were perhaps overdone. [Pg 4]

So, as Mrs. Thompson ascended the short flight of stairs out of Bedding, Etc., a pleasant, middle-aged woman in stately black with pendent chatelaine, climbed opposing steps to meet her face to face on the landing. As she moved on she was moving in many glasses, so that nearly all the assistants could see her or her reflected image: a procession of Mrs. Thompsons advancing from Woollens and Yarns, another converging column of Mrs. Thompsons from Cretonnes and Chintzes, reinforcements coming forward in the big glass opposite the entrance of Household Linen; while the young men behind the Blankets counter raised their eyes to watch the real Mrs. Thompson march by with a company of false Mrs. Thompsons stretching in perfect line from the right—innumerable Mrs. Thompsons shown by the glasses; some looking bigger, some looking slighter; but all the glasses showing a large-bosomed, broad-hipped woman of forty-five, with florid colouring and robust deportment; a valiant solid creature seeming, as indeed she was, well able to carry the burden of the whole shop on her firm shoulders.

Then the glasses were empty again: Mrs. Thompson had disappeared through the door of communication.

On this side of the door lay all her working life, the struggle, the fight, the courageous plans, and the unflagging labours; on the other side of the door lay the object for which she had toiled, the end and aim of every brave endeavour.

"Enid, my darling, are you there?... Yates, is Miss Enid in?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Enid has lunched, and is upstairs—dressing for the drive." [Pg 5]

Yates, the old servant, maid, housekeeper, and faithful friend, came bustling and smiling to the welcome sounds of her employer's kind voice.

Mrs. Thompson sat for a few minutes in the vacated dining-room, talking to Yates and hearing the domestic news.

The headache of Miss Enid, Yates reported, was much better; but she had not been out this morning. She seemed to be rather languid, and, as Yates guessed, perhaps felt a little dull and moped after the gaieties and excitements of the country-house visit from which she had just returned.

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Thompson cheerfully, "our drive will do her good. And now that the summer is coming on, she shall not want for occupation and amusement."

All through the snug little box of a house, filched out of the block of shop premises, there was evidence of the occupations and amusements of Miss Enid. Bookcases with choicely bound volumes of romance and poetry, elegant writing-desks, various musical instruments, materials for painting in oil or water colour, new inventions for the practice of miniature sculpture, the most costly photographic cameras, tennis rackets, hockey sticks, and other implements of sport and pastime—on this floor as on the upper floors, in dining-room, drawing-room, boudoir, as well as bedroom and dressing-room, were things that should provide a young lady with occupation and amusement.

The rooms were comfortably furnished and brightly ornamented, and all had a homelike soothing aspect to their busy owner. To other people they might seem lacking in the studious taste by which the rich and idle can make of each apartment a harmonious picture. Here money had been spent profusely but hurriedly, at odd times and not all together: whatever at the moment had [Pg 6] appeared to be desirable or necessary had been at once procured. So that comfort and luxury rather jostled each other; the Sheraton cabinets which were so charming to look at were apt to get hidden by the leather armchairs which were so soothing to have a nap in; and the Chelsea china in the glass-fronted corner cupboard completely lost itself behind the Japanese screen that guarded against draughts from the old sashed window.

"Enid, may I come in?" Mrs. Thompson tapped softly at the door of her daughter's dressing-room.

"Mother dear, is that you?" The door was opened, and the two women embraced affectionately.

Miss Thompson, in her fawn-coloured coat and skirt, feathered hat and spotted veil, was a tall,

slim, graceful figure, ready now to adorn the hired landau from Mr. Young's livery stables. Her hair was dark and her complexion naturally pallid; with a long straight nose in a narrow face, she resembled her dead father, but what was sheep-like and stupid in him was rather pretty in the girl;—altogether, a decent-looking, fairly attractive young woman of twenty-two, but not likely to obtain from the world at large the gaze of admiring satisfaction with which an adoring mother regarded her.

"The carriage isn't there yet," said Mrs. Thompson, "and I promise not to keep you waiting. I'll change my dress in a flash of lightning."

"What did you think of wearing this afternoon?"

Mrs. Thompson proposed to put on her new mauve gown and the hat with the lilac blossoms; but her daughter made alternative suggestions.

In the shop Mrs. Thompson carried a perpetual black; outside the shop she was perhaps unduly fond of vivid tints, and it was Enid's custom to check this rainbow tendency.

"Very well," said Mrs. Thompson, "it shall be the brown again;" and she laughed good-humouredly. "I bow to your judgment, my dear, if I don't endorse its correctness." [Pg 7]

"You look sweet in the brown, mother."

"Do I?... But remember what Miss Macdonald says. With my high complexion, I *need* colour."

Yates soon braced and laced her mistress into the sober brown cloth and velvet that Enid considered suitable for the occasion; a parlourmaid with light rugs went forward to the carriage; and mother and daughter came down the steep and narrow flight of stairs to their outer door.

There was no ground floor to the dwelling-house—or rather the ground floor formed an integral part of the shop. The street door stood in St. Saviour's Court—the paved footway that leads from High Street to the churchyard,—sandwiched with its staircase between the two side windows that contained basket chairs and garden requisites. The court was sufficiently wide and sufficiently pleasant: a quiet, dignified passage of entry, with the peaceful calm of the old church walls at one end, and the stir and bustle of the brilliant High Street at the other end.

Enid and her mamma, following the neat and mincing parlourmaid, made a stately procession to the main thoroughfare, where the really handsome equipage provided by Mr. Young was awaiting their pleasure.

The liveried coachman touched his hat, idle loungers touched their caps, prosperous citizens uncovered and bowed.

"There goes Mrs. Thompson." People ran to upper windows to see Mrs. Thompson start for her Thursday drive.

"There she goes."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Thompson."

"Oh!" [Pg 8]

The genial May sunshine flashed gaily, lighting up the whole street, making both ladies blink their eyes as the carriage rolled away.

"What a crowd there is outside Bence's," said Miss Enid. "How mean it is of him not to close!"

The first shop they passed was Bence's drapery stores, and Mrs. Thompson glanced carelessly at the thronged pavement in front of these improperly open windows.

"Mr. Bence's motto," said Mrs. Thompson, "is cheap and nasty," and she laughed with an amused scorn for so mean a trade rival. "His method of doing business is like the trumpery he offers to the public. I have a rather impudent letter from him in my pocket now, and I want—"

But then Mrs. Thompson's strong eyebrows contracted, and she shrugged her shoulders and looked away from Bence's. She had just noticed two of her own shop-girls going into Bence's to buy his trumpery. Something distinctly irritating in the thought that these feather-headed girls regularly carried half their wages across the road to Bence's!

Throughout the length of High Street there were too many of such signs of the vulgar times: the ever-changing trade, old shops giving place to new ones—an American boot-shop, a branch of the famous cash tobacconists, the nasty cheap restaurant opened by the great London caterers, Parisian jewellery absorbing one window of the historic clocksmiths,—everywhere indications of that love of tawdriness and glitter which slowly atrophies the sense of solid worth, of genuineness and durability.

Yet everywhere, also, signs of the old life of the town still vigorous—aldermen and councillors taking the air; Mr. Wiseman, the wealthy corn-merchant; Mr. Dempsey, the auctioneer-mayor; Mr. Young, owner of a hundred horses besides this pair of gallant greys that were drawing Mrs. Thompson. [Pg 9]

Everyone of the solid old townsfolk knew her; all that was respectably permanent bowed and smiled at her. The drive was like a royal progress when they swept through the market square, past the ancient town hall now a museum, under the shadows thrown by the new municipal buildings, and the other and bigger church of Holy Trinity, out beneath the noble gatehouse, and up into the sunlit slope of Hill Street. Hats off on either side, broad masculine faces smiling in the sunlight. All the best of the town knew her and was proud of her.

Her story was of the simplest, and all knew it. Mr. Thompson had been the last and most feeble representative of a powerful dynasty of shop-keepers; at his death it became at once apparent that the grand old shop was nothing but an effete, played out, and utterly exhausted possession; his widow was left practically penniless, with an insolvent business to wind up, and an orphaned little girl to support and rear. And young Mrs. Thompson was ignorant of all business matters, knew nothing more of shops than can be learned by any shop-customer. Nevertheless, with indomitable energy, she threw herself into business life. She did not shut up Thompson's; she kept it going. In two years it was again a paying concern; in a few more years it was a stronger and more flourishing enterprise than it had ever been since its establishment in 1813; now it was immensely prosperous and a credit to the town.

They all knew how she had toiled until the success came, how generously she had used the money that her own force and courage earned—a large-minded, open-handed, self-reliant worker, combining a woman's endurance with a man's strength,—and only one weakness: the pampering devotion to her girl. She was making her daughter too much of a fine lady; she had extravagantly worshipped this idol; she had *spoiled* the long-nosed Enid. The town knew all about that. [Pg 10]

Bowing to right and to left, Mrs. Thompson drove up Hill Street, and then stopped the carriage outside the offices of Mr. Prentice, solicitor and commissioner of oaths.

"Only two or three words with him, Enid. I promise not to be more than five minutes."

Mr. Prentice came to the carriage door; and was asked to read the letter from Mr. Bence the fancy draper.

"Don't you think it's rather impertinent?"

"Of course I do," said Mr. Prentice. "I wouldn't answer it. Throw it into the waste-paper basket."

"Oh, no, I shall answer it ... I can't allow Mr. Bence to suppose that I should ever be afraid of him."

"Afraid of him!" And Mr. Prentice laughed contemptuously. "*You* afraid of such a little bounder.... Look here. Shall I go round and kick the brute?"

Mrs. Thompson laughed, too. "No, no," she said, "that would scarcely be professional."

"I'll do it after office hours—in my private capacity—and of course without entering it to your account."

Mr. Prentice was a jolly red-faced man of fifty, with healthy clean-shaven cheeks, and small grey whiskers of a sporting cut. Altogether the most eminent solicitor in Mallingbridge, he had clients among all the country gentlefolk of the neighbourhood; he rode to hounds still, and kept his horses at Young's stables; he stood high in the Masonic craft and could sing an excellent comic song. He was at once Mrs. Thompson's trusted legal adviser, her staunch friend, and, as he himself declared, her admiring slave.

"One more word," said Mrs. Thompson. "It is time that I gave another dinner at the Dolphin. There are two new men on the Council—and there will be more new men next November. I shall want your help to act as deputy host for me. Will you think it out—draw up a list of guests—and arrange everything?" [Pg 11]

"It is for you to command, and for me to obey," said genial Mr. Prentice. "But, upon my word, I don't know why you should go on feasting people in this way."

"I like to stand well with the town."

"And so you do. So you would, if you never gave them another glass of champagne.... I think your mamma is far too generous."

But Miss Enid, who seemed unutterably bored, was staring out of the carriage in the other direction. She had not been listening to Mr. Prentice, and she did not hear him when he addressed her directly.

"Then good-bye. Drive on, coachman.... There," and Mrs. Thompson turned gaily to her daughter. "That's more than enough business for Thursday afternoon, isn't it, Enid?"

They drove along the London road, through the pretty village of Haggart's Cross, as far as the chalk cliffs beneath the broad downs; and then, descending again, through beech woods and fir plantations to the valley where the river Malling runs and twists beside the railway line all the way home to the town.

The world was fresh and bright, with the May wind blowing softly and the May flowers budding

sweetly. Cattle in the green fields, birds in the blue sky, pinafored children chanting a lesson behind the latticed panes of their schoolhouse, primroses peeping from grassy banks, and, far and near, the white hawthorn shedding its perfume, giving its fragrant message of spring, of hope, of life—plenty of things to look at with pleasure, plenty of things to talk about, though one might often have seen them before.

But Enid was somehow languid, listless, even lumpish, and Mrs. Thompson did nearly all the looking and talking. [Pg 12]

"I always think that is such an imposing place. The entrance seems to warn one off—to tell one not to forget what a tremendous swell the owner is."

They were passing the lodge-gates of a great nobleman's seat, and one had a rapid impression of much magnificence. Stone piers, sculptured urns, floreated iron, massive chains; and behind the forbidding barrier a vista of swept gravel and mown grass, with solemn conifers proudly ranked, and standard rhododendrons just beginning pompously to bloom—no glimpse of the mansion itself, but an intuitive perception of something vast, remote, unattainable.

Enid looked through the bars at my lord's gravel drive attentively, almost wistfully, perhaps thinking of the few and august people to whom these splendours would be familiar—of the lucky people who are brought up in palaces instead of in shops.

"It is a meet of hounds." Miss Enid broke a long silence to give her mother this information. "And when I was staying at Colonel Salter's, I met a man who had once been to a ball there."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Thompson, with cheerful briskness, "now you mention hunting, that reminds me. We must get you on horseback again.... You do like your riding, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Enid listlessly.

"Mr. Young said you were making such good progress. And," added Mrs. Thompson gently, "it is a pity to take up things and drop them. It is just wasted effort—if one stops before reaching the goal."

The road, turning and crossing the railway, gave them a well-known view of Mallingbridge—the town quite at its best, four miles away in the middle of the broad plain, smoke and haze hanging over it, but with tempered sunlight glistening on countless roofs, and the square tower of St. Saviour's and the tall spire of Holy Trinity rising proudly above the mass of lesser buildings. There, stretched at her feet, was Mrs. Thompson's world, the world that she had conquered. [Pg 13]

In another mile they passed a residence that to her mind formed a pleasant contrast with the oppressive splendour of the nobleman's domain. Here there were white gates between mellow brick walls, easy peeps into a terraced garden, stables and barns as at a farm, pigeons settling on some thatch, friendly English trees guarding but not hiding a dear old English country house.

"Look, Enid," and Mrs. Thompson pointed to the broad eaves, the white windows, and the solid chimney stacks, as they showed here and there between the branches of oak and maple. "There. That's a place I fell in love with the first time I saw it.... I would like a house just like that—for you and me to live in when I am able to give up my work...."

"What were you saying, mother?" Enid, not listening or absorbed by her own thoughts, had not heard.

"I was only saying, that's the sort of house I should like for us two—when I retire."

"Mother, I sometimes wish that you had retired years ago."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Thompson meekly, "retiring is all very well—but you and I wouldn't be sitting here driving so comfortably if I had been afraid of my work and in a hurry to get done with it."

II [Pg 14]

In her marriage she had sacrificed all the natural hopes and inclinations of a healthy young woman. She and her widowed mother were very poor, quite alone in the world; and it seemed a proper and a wise thing to marry Mr. Thompson for his money. No one could guess that the money was already a phantom and no longer a fact. The man was middle-aged, feeble of body and mind, a stupid and a selfish person; but it seemed that he would assure the future of his wife and provide a comfortable home for his mother-in-law.

Then after five years the man and his money were gone forever; the mother for whom the sacrifice had been made was herself dead; only the wife and her little child remained. Five years of dull submission to an unloved husband; five years spent in the nursing of two invalids, with the vapid meaningless monotony of wasted days broken sharply by the pains of child-birth, the agonized cares of early motherhood, and the shock of death;—and at the end of the years, a sudden call for limitless courage and almost impossible energy.

Quiet unobtrusive Mrs. Thompson answered the call fully. Deep-seated fighting instincts arose in

her; unsuspected powers were put forth to meet the exigencies of the occasion; the hero-spirit that lies buried in many natures sprang nobly upward.

At first she possessed only one commercial asset, the reputation of Thompson's. For so many years Thompson's had been known as a good shop that here was a legend which might counterbalance debts, exhausted credit, antiquated stock, and incompetent staff. [Pg 15]

The town and the country during generations had come to Thompson's for good things—not cheap things, but the things that last: dress fabrics that stand up by themselves, chairs and tables that you can leave intact to your grandchildren, carpets that unborn men will be beating when you yourself are dust.

Mrs. Thompson, in her widow's weeds, went round the big supply houses, telling the great trade chieftains that the legend was still alive, though the man who already owed them so much money was dead; saying in effect to all the people who held her fate in their hands, "Don't let old Thompson's go down. Don't smash me. Help me. Give me time to secure your twenty shillings in the pound, instead of the meagre seven and sixpence which you can get now."

The wholesale trade helped her. Little by little all the world came to her aid. Mr. Prentice the solicitor was a skilful ally. As soon as it could be seen locally that she was keeping her head above water, friends on the bank began to beckon to her. Rich aldermen, advised that there was now small risk, lent her money; and these loans rendered her independent of Trade assistance. Soon she could get whatever sums she required for the restoration and expansion of the business.

In all her dealings she won respect. The confidence that she inspired was her true commercial asset, her capital, her good-will, her everything; and it was always growing. "Very remarkable," said travellers, reporting at headquarters, "how that Mrs. Thompson has pulled the fat out of the fire at Mallingbridge. What she wants now is some sound business man for partner—and there's no knowing what she mightn't do."

Then some other and more philosophic traveller, impressed by the swift revivification of Thompson's, said enthusiastically, "The best business head in this town is on a woman's shoulders." The saying was quoted, misquoted, echoed and garbled, until it concreted itself into an easy popular formula which the whole town used freely. "The best man of business in Mallingbridge is a woman." Everyone knew who that woman was. Mrs. Thompson. And the town, speaking on important occasions through the mouth of its mayor, aldermen, and councillors, for the first time said that it was proud of her. [Pg 16]

And then the town began to ask her hand in wedlock.

In these days, at the dawn of her success, Mrs. Thompson was not without obvious personal attraction. She was fair and plump, with light wavy hair, kind grey eyes beneath well-marked eyebrows, and good colour warmly brightening a clean white skin;—she "looked nice" in her widow's black, smiling at a hard world and so bravely tackling her life problem. Quite a large number of well-to-do citizens were smilingly rejected by the buxom widow. Pretenders were slow to believe in the finality of her refusals; as the success became more patent, they tried their luck again, and again, but always with the same emptiness of result. Indeed it was a town joke, as well as an unquestionable fact, that old Chambers the wine-merchant regularly proposed three times a year to nice-looking Mrs. Thompson.

She wanted no second husband. The fight and the child were enough for her. Those deep and unsapped springs of love that might have gushed forth to make a fountain stream of happiness for Alderman Brown or Councillor Jones flowed calmly and steadfastly now in a concentrated channel of motherly affection. To work for the child, to love and tend the child—that was henceforth her destiny. And she felt strong enough to watch in her own face the blurring destructive print of time, if she might watch in her girl's face time's unfolding glories. [Pg 17]

For the cruel years took from her irrevocably those physical seductions of neatly rounded form and smooth pinkness and whiteness. The colour that had been sufficient became too much, plumpness changed to stoutness—once, for a year, she was fat. But she tackled this trouble too, bravely and unflinchingly,—went to London for Swedish exercises; banted; brought herself down, down, down, until Dr. Eldridge told her she must stop, or she would kill herself. After that she settled to a steady solidness, a well-maintained amplitude of contour; and the years seemed to leave her untouched as the wide-breasted, rotund-hipped, stalwart Mrs. Thompson of a decade—red-cheeked, bright-eyed, gallant and strong.

Yet still she had suitors. The physical charm was gone, but other charm was present—that blending of kindness and power which wins men's hearts, if it does not stir their pulses, gave her a dominating personality, and made the circle of her influence exactly as large as the circle of her acquaintance. People at the circumference of the circle seemed to be surely drawn, by a straight or vacillating radius, to its centre. The better you knew her, the more you thought about her. So that old friends after years of thought now and then surprised her by suggesting that friendship should be exchanged for a closer bond; pointing out the advantages of a common-sense union, the marriage of convenience, sympathy, and mutual regard, that becomes appropriate when the volcano glow of youth has faded; and inviting her to name an early day for going to St. Saviour's Church with them.

In the shop, among all grades of employees, there had ever been a dread of St. Saviour's Church

and wedding bells. They got on so well with their mistress that the idea of a master was extraordinarily abhorrent to them. But one day, a day now long past, Mrs. Thompson told Mr. Mears authoritatively that joy bells would never sound for her again; Mr. Mears, by permission, or in the exercise of his own discretion, passed on the glad tidings; and the only dark thought that could worry a contented staff was removed. [Pg 18]

"No, Mr. Mears, I don't say that I have never contemplated the possibility of such an event; but I can say emphatically I have decided that in my case it *is* impossible."

That was sufficient. What Mrs. Thompson said Mrs. Thompson meant. A decision with her was a decision.

Of all her trusty subordinates none had served her so loyally as big Mr. Mears. His whole life had been spent in Thompson's. Once he had been boy messenger, window-cleaner, boot-blacker; and now, at the age of sixty, he had risen to managerial rank. He was the acknowledged chief of the staff, Mrs. Thompson's right-hand man; and he was as proud of his position and the culminating grandeurs of his career as if he had been a successful general, a prime-minister, or a pope. Mrs. Thompson knew and openly told him that he was invaluable to her. Such words were like wine and music: they intoxicated and enchanted him. Truly he was whole-hearted, faithful, devoted, with a deep veneration for his mistress; with an intense and almost passionate esteem for her skill, her comprehension, her vigour, and for her herself—perhaps too with a love that he scarcely himself understood.

Anyhow this heavy grey-haired shopman and his employer were very close allies, generally thinking as one, and always acting as one, able to talk together with a nearly absolute freedom on any question, however intimately private in its character.

"You see, Mr. Mears, if I ever meant to do it, I should have done it ages ago. Now that my daughter is growing up, her claims for attention are becoming stronger every day." [Pg 19]

Mr. Mears and the rest of the staff were more than satisfied. Perhaps they blessed the idolized Enid for an increasing capacity to absorb every energy and volition that Mrs. Thompson could spare from the shop.

Whatever Enid wished for her mother provided. She racked her brains in order to forestall the child's wishes. But the difficulty always was this, one could not be quite sure what Enid really wished. She accepted the pretty gifts, the conditions of her life, the plans for her future, with a calm unruffled acquiescence.

When Mrs. Thompson regretfully decided that it would be advisable to dismiss the expensive governesses and send the home pupil to an expensive school, Enid placidly and immediately agreed. Mrs. Thompson thought that school would open Enid's mind, that school would give her an opportunity of making nice girl-friends. Enid at once thought so, too.

"But, oh, my darling, what a gap there will be in this house! You'll leave a sore and a sad heart behind you. I shall miss you woefully."

"And I shall miss you, mamma."

Then, when Enid had gone to the fashionable seminary at Eastbourne, with the faithful Yates as escort, with a wonderful luncheon-basket of delicacies in the first-class reserved compartment, with several huge boxes of school trousseau in the luggage van, Mrs. Thompson began to suffer torment. Was it not cruel to send the brave little thing away from her? Might not her darling be now a prey to similar yearnings and longings for a swift reunion? The torment became agony; and after two days Mrs. Thompson rushed down to see for herself if the new scholar was all right.

Enid was entirely all right—playing with the other girls at the bottom of the secluded garden. [Pg 20]

"Is that you, mummy?" This was a form of greeting peculiar to Enid from very early days. "I am so glad to see you," and she kissed mamma affectionately.

She was uniformly affectionate, whether at school or at home, but never explosive or demonstrative in the manifestations of her affection. There was more warmth in her letters than in her spoken words. "My own dearest mother," she used to write, "I am so looking forward to being with you again. Do meet me at the station." But when the train arrived and Mrs. Thompson, who had been pacing the Mallingbridge platform in a fever of expectation, clasped the beloved object to her heart, she experienced something akin to disappointment. It was a sedately composed young lady that offered a cool cheek to the mother's tremulous lips.

Now and then a school-friend came to stay with Enid. A Miss Salter, whose parents proved large-minded enough to overlook the glaring fact of the shop, was a fairly frequent visitor. During the visit one of Mr. Young's carriages stood at the disposal of the young hostess and her guest all day long; breakfasts were served in bed; a private box at the local theatre might be occupied any evening between the cosy dinner and the dainty little supper; and Mrs. Thompson arranged delightful expeditions to London, where, under the guardianship of Yates, larger sights and more exciting treats could be enjoyed than any attainable in Mallingbridge.

The condescending guest returned to her distinguished circle laden with presents, and frankly owned that she had been given a royal time at the queer shop-house in St. Saviour's Court.

Enid in her turn visited the houses of her friends, and came home to tell Mrs. Thompson of that [Pg 21]

pleasant gracious world in which people do not work for their living, but derive their ample means from splendidly interred ancestors. With satisfaction, if not with animation, she described how greatly butlers and footmen surpass the art of parlourmaids in waiting at table; how gay an effect is produced by young men dining in red coats, how baronets often shoot with three guns, how lords never use less than two horses in the hunting field, and so on. And Mrs. Thompson was happy in the thought that her daughter should be mingling with fine company and deriving pleasure from strange scenes.

She was careful to obliterate herself in all such social intercourse. Courteous letters were exchanged between her and Enid's hosts; but the girl and Yates were despatched together, and Mrs. Thompson refused even a glimpse of the Salters' mansion.

"Later on," she told Enid, "when we have done with the shop, I shall hope to take my place in society by my pretty daughter's side. But for the present I must just keep to myself.... The old prejudice against retail trade still lingers—more especially among the class that used to be termed *country* people."

Enid dutifully agreed. Indeed she told her mother that the old prejudice was much more active than anyone could guess who had not personally encountered it. The shop was, so to speak, a very large pill, and needed a considerable amount of swallowing.

"I found that out in my first term at school, mother dear."

"Mother dear" was now Enid's unvaried mode of address when talking to her mamma. All her friends addressed their mammas as mother dear. School was over in these days. Miss Thompson had been finished; she did her country-house visiting with a maid of her own, and no longer with [Pg 22] old Yates; as much as she appeared to like anything, she liked staying about at country-houses; she never refused an invitation—except when she was previously engaged.

Something perhaps wanting here in the finished article, as polished and pointed by Eastbourne school-mistresses; something not quite right in Enid's placid acquiescences and too rapid concurrences; something that suggested the smooth surface of a languid shallow stream, and not the broad calm that lies above deep strong currents! Perhaps Mrs. Thompson would have preferred a more exuberant reciprocity in her great love; perhaps she secretly yearned for a full response to the open appeal of her expansive, generous nature.

If so, she never said it. She was generous in thoughts as well as in deeds. In big things as in small things she seemed to think that it was for her to give and for others to receive. From the vicar craving funds for his new organ to the crossing sweeper who ostentatiously slapped his chest on cold mornings, all who asked for largesse received a handsome dole. At the railway-station, when she appeared, ticket-collectors and porters tumbled over one another in their rush to dance attendance—so solid was her reputation as a lavishly tremendous tipper.

"She is making so much money herself that she can afford to be free with it." That was the view of the town, and her own view, too. So all the tradesmen with whom she dealt flagrantly overcharged her—dressmakers, livery stable keepers, wine-merchants, florists, every one of them said it was a privilege to serve her, and then sent in an extortionate bill. And she paid and thanked with a genial smile.

Donations to the hospitals, subscriptions to the police concert, the watermen's regatta, the railway servants' sports—really there was no end to the demands that she met so cheerily. [Pg 23] Christmas turkeys for the Corporation underlings; cigars for the advertisement printers; small and big dinners, with salvos of champagne corks threatening the Dolphin ceilings, for aldermen, councillors, and all other urban magnates—really it was no wonder that the town had a good word for her.

Mr. Prentice, the solicitor, always tried and always failed to curb her liberality. Mr. Prentice kept himself outside of the Corporation's affairs, and expressed considerable contempt for the municipal representatives and the local tradesmen. When Mrs. Thompson spoke with gratitude of the kindness of friends who helped her by loans in her early struggle, Mr. Prentice mocked at these spurious benefactors.

"They did nothing for you," said Mr. Prentice.

"Oh, how can you pretend that?"

"They lent you money on excellent security and took high interest; and you have been feasting them and flattering them ever since."

"I do like to feel that I am on good terms with those about me."

Then Mr. Prentice would laugh. "Oh, well, you have certainly got the Corporation in your pocket. You make them your slaves—as you make me and everyone else. So I'll say no more. No doubt you know your own business best."

And she did. That well-used formula of the town might have been a high-flown compliment at the beginning, but it was sober truth now. No man in Mallingbridge could touch her. The years, taking so much from her, had also brought her much. With ripening judgment, widening knowledge, and the accumulated treasure of experience, her business faculty had developed into something very near the highest form of genius. She had insight, sense of organization, the

[Pg 24]

power of launching out boldly and accepting heavy risks to secure large gains; but she had also caution, concentration of purpose in minor aims, and rapid decision in facing a failure and cutting short consequent losses. In a word, she possessed all the best attributes of your good man of business, and the little more that makes up greatness.

She could always do that which very few men consistently achieve. She mastered the situation of the moment, struck directly at the root of the difficulty that confronted her, and, sweeping aside irrelevancies, non-essentials, and entanglements, saw in the cold bright light of logical thought the open road that leads from chaos to security.

And no man could have been a more absolute ruler. Every year of her success made her dominion more complete. Womanlike, she ruled her world by kindness; but man-like, she enforced her law by a show of strength, and weight, and even of mere noise. Not often, but whenever necessary, she acted a man's violence, and used bad language. When Mrs. Thompson swore the whole shop trembled.

The swearing was a purely histrionic effort, but she carried it through nobly.

"Have you heard?" A tremulous whisper ran along the counters. "Mrs. T. went out into the yard, and damned those carters into heaps.... Mrs. T. 'as just bin down into the packing room, and given 'em damson pie—and I'm sure they jolly well deserved it.... Look out. Here she comes!"

The brawny carters hung their heads, the hulking packers cleared their throats huskily, the timorous shop-hands looked at the floor. Mrs. Thompson passed like a silent whirlwind through the shop, and banged the counting-house door behind her.

When Enid was away from home the counting-house was sometimes occupied to a late hour. Staff long since gone, lights out everywhere; but light still shining in that inner room, fighting the [Pg 25] darkness above the glass partitions. The night watchman, pacing to and fro, kept himself alert—a real watchman, ready with his lantern to conduct Mrs. Thompson through the shrouded avenues of counter, and upstairs to the door of communication.

When Enid was away the house seemed empty; and the empty house, curiously enough, always seemed smaller. It was as though because the life of the house had contracted, the four walls had themselves drawn nearer together. Yet the little rooms were just big enough to hold ghosts and sad memories.

"You look thoroughly fagged out, ma'am. You overdo it. Let me open you a pint of champagne for your supper."

"No, thank you, Yates.... But sit down, and talk to me."

The old servant sat at the table, and kept her mistress company through what would otherwise have been a lonely meal. In Miss Enid's absence she had no house news to offer, so Mrs. Thompson gave her the shop news.

"I swore at them to-day, Yates."

"Did you indeed, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"What drove you to that, ma'am?"

"Oh, the packing-room again—and those carters. I informed Mr. Mears that I should do it; and he kept his eyes open, and came up quietly and told me when.... Mr. Mears was delighted with it. He told me at closing time that things had gone like clockwork ever since."

In her comfortable bedroom Mrs. Thompson shivered.

"Yates, I feel cold. I suppose it is because I'm tired."

"Shall I make you a glass of hot grog to drink in bed?"

"No.... But come in again when I ring—and stay with me for a few minutes, will you, Yates?"

The old servant sat by the bedside until her mistress became drowsy. [Pg 26]

"I'll leave you now, ma'am. Good-night, and pleasant dreams."

"Yates—kiss me."

Yates stooped over her lonely mistress, and kissed her. Then she softly switched off the light, and left Mrs. Thompson alone in the darkness.

III

[Pg 27]

When old employees looked out of Thompson's windows they sometimes had a queer impression that this side of the street was stationary, and that the other side of the street was moving. Six years ago Bence the fancy-draper had been eight doors off; but he had come nearer and nearer

as he absorbed his neighbours' premises one after another. Now the end of Bence's just overlapped Thompson's. For three or four feet he was fairly opposite.

Just as Thompson's represented all that was good and stable in the trade of Mallingbridge, Bence's stood for everything bad and evanescent. A horrid catch-penny shop, increasing its business rapidly, practising the odious modern methods of remorseless rivalry, Bence's was almost universally hated. They outraged the feelings of old established tradesmen by taking up lines which cut into one cruelly: they burst out into books, into trunks, into ironmongery; at Christmas, in what they called their grand annual bazaar, they had a cut at the trade of every shop throughout the length of High Street. But especially, at all seasons of the year, they cut into Thompson's. The marked deliberate attack was when they first regularly took up Manchester goods. Then came Carpets, then Crockery, and then Garden requisites.

But Bence, in the person of Mr. Archibald, the senior partner, always announced the coming attack to Mrs. Thompson. He said she was the superior of all the other traders; he could never forget that she was a lady, and that he himself was one of her most respectful yet most ardent admirers; he desired ever to treat her with the utmost chivalry. Thus now he came over, full of gallant compliments, to make a fresh announcement. [Pg 28]

Mrs. Thompson always treated Bence and his dirty little tricks as a joke. She used to laugh at him with a good-humoured tolerance.

"Of course, Mrs. Thompson, I don't like seeming to run you hard in any direction. But lor', how can *I* hurt you? You're big—you're right up there"—and Mr. Bence waved a thin hand above his bald head—"a colossal statue, made of granite. And *I*, why I'm just a poor little insect scrabbling about in the mud at your feet."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Thompson, smiling pleasantly, "you're nothing of the sort. You are a very clever enterprising gentleman. But I'm not in the least afraid of you, Mr. Bence."

"That's right," said Bence delightedly. "And always remember this. I am not *fighting* you. Any attempt at a real fight is simply foreign from my nature—that is, where you are concerned."

"Never mind me," said Mrs. Thompson once. "But take care on your own account. Vaulting ambition sometimes o'erleaps itself."

"Ah," said Bence. "There you show your marvellous power. You put your finger on the sore spot in a moment. I *am* ambitious. I might almost say my ambitions are boundless. Work is life to me—and if I was by myself, I don't believe anything would stop me. But," said Bence, with solemn self-pity, "as all the world knows, Mrs. Thompson, there's a *leak* in my business."

Mrs. Thompson perfectly understood what he meant. This working Bence was a sallow, prematurely bald man with a waxed moustache and a cracked voice, and he toiled incessantly; but there were two younger Bences, bluff, hearty, hirsute men, who were sleeping partners, and eating, drinking, and loose-living partners. While Mr. Archibald laboured in Mallingbridge, Mr. Charles and Mr. George idled and squandered in London. [Pg 29]

"That's the trouble with me," said Mr. Archibald sadly. "I'm the captain on his bridge, sending the ship full speed ahead, but knowing full well that there's a leak down below in the hold.... Never sufficient money behind me.... Oh, Mrs. Thompson," cried Bence, in a burst of enthusiasm, "if I only had the money behind me, I'd soon show you what's what and who's who. But I'm a man fighting with tied hands."

"Not fighting *me*, Mr. Bence. You said so yourself."

"No, no. Never *you*. I was thinking of the others."

Well then, Bence had come across the road once more. In the letter which Mrs. Thompson, when showing it to her solicitor, had described as impertinent, Bence presented his compliments and begged an early appointment for a communication of some importance. Mr. Bence added that "any hints from Mrs. Thompson in regard to his proposed new departure would be esteemed a privileged favour." Mrs. Thompson considered the suggestion that she should advise the rival in his attack as perhaps something beyond the limits of a joke. Nevertheless, she gave the appointment, and smilingly received the visitor in her own room behind the counting-house.

"May I begin by saying how splendidly well you are looking, Mrs. Thompson?... When I came in at that door, I thought there'd been a mistake. Seeing you sitting there at your desk, I thought, 'But this is *Miss* Thompson, and not my great friend *Mrs.* Thompson.' Mistook you for your own daughter, till you turned round and showed me that well-known respected countenance which—"

"Now Mr. Bence," said Mrs. Thompson, laughing, "I can't allow you to waste your valuable time in saying all these flattering things." [Pg 30]

"No flattery."

"Please sit down and tell me what new wickedness you are contemplating."

Then Mr. Bence made his announcement. It was Furniture this time. He had bought out two more neighbours—the old-fashioned sadler and the bookseller; and he proposed to convert these two shops into his new furniture department.

Mrs. Thompson's brows gathered in a stern frown; only by a visible effort could she wipe out the

aspect of displeasure, and speak with careless urbanity.

"Let me see exactly what it means, Mr. Bence.... I suppose you mean that your Furniture windows will be exactly opposite mine."

"Well, as near as makes no difference."

"That will be very convenient—for both of us, won't it? I think it is an excellent idea, Mr. Bence," and Mrs. Thompson laughed. "Customers who can't see what they want here, can step across and look for it with you."

"Oh, I daren't hope that we should ever draw anybody from your pavement, Mrs. Thompson."

"You are much too modest. But if it should ever happen that you fail to supply any customers with what they desire, you can send them across to us. You'd do that, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I will," said Bence heartily. "That's what I say. We don't clash. We *can't* clash."

Mrs. Thompson struck the bell on her desk, and summoned a secretary.

"Send Mr. Mears to me."

The sight of Bence always ruffled and disturbed old Mears. Seeing Bence complacently seated near the bureau in the proprietorial sanctum, his face flushed, his grey beard bristled, and his dark eyes rolled angrily. [Pg 31]

When Mrs. Thompson told him all about the furniture, he grunted, but did not at first trust himself to words.

"Well, Mr. Mears, what do you think about it?"

"I think," said Mears gruffly, "that it's *like* Mr. Bence."

"I was remarking," said Bence, nodding and grinning, "that we cannot possibly clash. Our customers are poor little people—not like your rich and influential clientele. Our whole scheme of business is totally different from yours."

"That's true," said Mears, and he gave another grunt.

"You know," said Mrs. Thompson, "Mr. Bence is not *fighting* us. He is only carrying out his own system."

"Yes," said Mears, "we are acquainted with his system, ma'am."

"Then I think that no more need be said. We are quite prepared for any opposition—or competition."

"Quite, ma'am."

"Then I won't detain you, Mr. Mears."

"Good morning, Mr. Mears," said Bence politely. But Mr. Mears only grunted at him.

"What a sterling character," said Bence, as soon as Mr. Mears had closed the glass door. "One of the good old school, isn't he? I do admire that sort of dignified trustworthy personage. Gives the grand air to an establishment.... But then if it comes to that, I admire all your people, Mrs. Thompson;" and he wound up this morning call with sycophantically profuse compliments. "Your staff strikes me as unique. I don't know where you get 'em from. You seem to spot merit in the twinkling of an eye.... But I have trespassed more than sufficient. I see you wish to get back to your desk. *Good* morning, Mrs. Thompson. Ever your humble servant;" and Mr. Bence bowed himself out.

IV

[Pg 32]

Certainly, if Mrs. Thompson could not accept the bulk of Archibald Bence's compliments, she might justly pride herself on being always anxious to spot merit among her people. Unaided by any advice, she had quickly spotted the young man in the Carpets department.

Making her tour of inspection one day, she was drawn towards the wide entrance of Carpets by the unseemly noise of a common female voice. Looking into Carpets, she found the shrewish wife of an old farmer raging and nagging at everybody, because she could not satisfy herself with what was being offered to her. Half the stock was already on the floor; Number One and Number Two were at their wits' ends, becoming idiotic, on the verge of collapse; Number Three had just come to their rescue.

"Oh, take it away.... No—not a bit like what I'm asking for." And the virago turned to her hen-pecked husband. "You were a fool to bring me here. I told you we ought to have gone to London."

"But madam knows the old saying. One may go farther and fare worse. I can assure you, madam, there's nothing in the London houses that we can't supply here."

"Oh, yes, you're glib enough—but if you've got it, why don't you bring it out?"

"If madam will have patience, I guarantee that we will suit her—yes, in less than three minutes."

The young man spoke firmly yet pleasantly; and he looked and smiled at this ugly vixenish customer as though she had been young, gracious, and beautiful.

Mrs. Thompson did not intervene: she stood near the entrance, watching and listening. [Pg 33]

"Now, madam, if you want value for your money, look at this.... No?... Very good. This is Axminster—genuine Axminster,—and very charming colouring.... No?... What does madam think of *this*?... No?"

He spun out the vast webs; with bowed back and quick movements of both hands he trundled the enormous rollers across the polished floor; he ran up the ladders and jerked the folded masses from the shelves; he flopped down the cut squares so fast that the piled heaps seemed to grow by magic before the customer's chair.

Doubtless he knew that he was being observed, but he showed no knowledge of the fact. As he hurried past Mrs. Thompson, she noticed that he was perspiring. He dabbed his white forehead with his handkerchief as he passed again, trundling a roll with one hand.

Mrs. Thompson felt astounded by his personal strength. Mr. Mears was strong, a man of comparatively huge girth and massive limbs; he could lift big weights; but Mears in his prime could not have shifted the carpet rolls as they were shifted by this slim-waisted stripling.

Two minutes gone, and the querulous, nagging tones were modulated to the note of vulgar affability. Two minutes—thirty seconds, and the customer had decided that her carpet should be one of the three which she was prodding at with her umbrella. She asked Mr. Marsden to help her in making the final selection.

Mr. Marsden was standing up now, Numbers One and Two clumsily hovering about him, while he talked easily and confidentially to the 'mollified customer. And while he talked, Mrs. Thompson scrutinized him carefully.

He could not be more than twenty-seven—possibly less. He was gracefully although so strongly [Pg 34] built, of medium height, with an excellent poise of the head. His hair was brownish, stiff, cut very short; his small stiff moustache was brushed up in the military fashion; his features were of the firmest masculine type—nose perhaps a shade too thick and not sufficiently well modelled. She could not see the colour of his eyes.

But his manner! It was the salesman's art in its highest and rarest form. He had charmed, fascinated, hypnotised the troublesome customer. She bought her carpets, and two door mats; she smiled and nodded and prattled; she seemed quite sorry to say good-bye to Mr. Marsden.

"I shall tell my friends to come here," and then she giggled stupidly. "And I shall tell them to ask for you."

Without entering Carpets, Mrs. Thompson walked away. She did not utter a word then; but she had determined to promote Number Three, to give him more scope, and to see what she could make of him.

She moved him through the Woollens, the Cretonnes; and then again, upstairs into Crockery.

Crockery, which had of late betrayed sluggishness, was one side of a large department. Beginning with common pots and pans, it shaded off into glass and china; and on this side ran up to the big money which was properly demanded for the most delicate porcelain and ornamental ware—such as best English dinner services and modern *Sèvres* candelabra. Young Marsden was given charge of the cheaper and quicker-selling stuff, while Miss Woolfrey, a freckled, sandy lady of forty, remained for the present in control of the expensive side. But she was not a titular head; Mears and Mrs. Thompson herself superintended her, allowing her little discretion, and instructing her from day to day.

After a week Marsden, the newcomer, got a distinct move on the sluggish earthenware; and, after three weeks, Mears rather grudgingly confessed that the whole department appeared to be [Pg 35] brisker, livelier, more what one would wish it to be.

On the whole, then, Mrs. Thompson was well pleased with her protégé. She spoke to him freely, encouraged him by carefully chosen words of approval.

One day, while talking to a desk-clerk, she saw him in an adjacent mirror that gave one a round-the-corner view of Glass and China. He was standing with a trade catalogue in his hands, surrounded by Miss Woolfrey and three girls. He seemed to be expounding the catalogue, and the women seemed to exhibit a docile attention.

Mrs. Thompson went in and talked to them.

There had been an accident, and Mr. Marsden was looking up the trade price of the destroyed article. Poor Miss Woolfrey had broken a cut-glass decanter—she got upon the steps to fetch it down, and it was heavier than she expected.

"Why," inquired Mrs. Thompson, "didn't you ask someone to help you?"

"I never thought till it was too late, and I'd found out my mistake."

There was no need to offer apologies to the proprietress, because all breakages of this character were made good out of an insurance fund to which all the employees subscribed. The whole shop was therefore interested in each smash, since everybody would pay a share of the damage.

"Mr. Marsden," said Miss Woolfrey, "has so very kindly priced it for me. He will send on the order at once. So it shall be replaced, ma'am, without delay."

The three interested girls lingered at Mr. Marsden's elbows; they watched his face; they hung upon his words. Miss Woolfrey continued to thank him for all the trouble he was taking.

Mrs. Thompson walked away, thinking about Mr. Marsden. These women were too obviously [Pg 36] subject to the young man's personal fascination; their silly glances were easy to interpret; and middle-aged Miss Woolfrey and the three immature underlings had all betrayed the same weakness. This implied a situation that must be thought out. Lady-killers, though useful with the customers, may cause a lot of trouble with the staff.

There was no indication of the professional heart-disturber in the young fellow's general air. Mrs. Thompson had found his manner scrupulously correct—except that, as she remembered now, there was perhaps something too hardy in the way he kept his eyes fixed on her face. She attributed this to sheer intentness, mingled with juvenile simplicity. Most of the older men instinctively dropped their eyes in her presence.

After a little thought she called Mears behind the glass, and interrogated him. "Behind the glass" was a shop term for all the sacred region masked by the glass partitions, and containing counting-house, clerks' and secretary's offices, managerial and the proprietorial departments.

"If you want the plain fact," said Mr. Mears, "there's little difference in the pack of 'em."

"Do you mean they are *silly* about him?"

"Yes," said Mears scornfully. "Spoony sentimental—talking ridiculous over him."

"But is *he* all right with the girls? What is *his* attitude?... Find out for me."

Mrs. Thompson was always wisely strict on this most important point of shop discipline. No playing the fool between the young ladies and young gentlemen under the care of Mrs. Thompson.

"I will not permit it," she said sternly; and she laid her open hand upon the desk, to give weightier emphasis to the words. "We must have no condoning of that sort of thing. If I catch him [Pg 37] at it—if I catch anyone, out he goes neck and crop."

In the course of a few days Mr. Mears reported, still grudgingly, that young Marsden's demeanour towards the young ladies was absolutely perfect. Stoical indifference, calm disregard, not even a trace of that flirting or innocently philandering tone which is so common, and to which one can scarcely object.

"Good," said Mrs. Thompson. "I'm glad to hear it—because now I shan't be afraid of advancing him."

"But," said Mears, "you *have* advanced him. You aren't thinking of putting him up again?"

"I am not sure. Something must be done about Miss Woolfrey. I will think about it."

It was not long before Mears, young Marsden and Miss Woolfrey were all summoned together behind the glass. The typewriting girl had been sent out of the room; Mrs. Thompson sat in front of her bureau, looking like a great general; Mr. Mears, at her side, looked like a glum aide-de-camp; the young man looked like a soldier who had been beckoned to step forward from the ranks. He stood at a respectful distance, and his bearing was quite soldierlike—heels together, head well up, the broad shoulders very square, and the muscular back straight and flat. His eyes were on the general's face.

Sandy, freckled Miss Woolfrey merely looked foolish and frightened. She caught her breath and coughed when Mrs. Thompson informed her that Mr. Marsden was to be put in charge of the whole department.

"Over my head, ma'am?"

"It will make no difference to you. Your salary will be no less. And yours, Mr. Marsden, will be no more. But you will have fuller scope."

Miss Woolfrey feebly protested. She had hoped,—she had naturally hoped;—in a customary shop- [Pg 38] succession the post should be hers.

"Miss Woolfrey, do you feel yourself competent to fill it? Hitherto you have been under the constant supervision of Mr. Mears. But do you honestly feel you could stand alone?"

"I'd do my best, ma'am."

"Yes," said Mrs. Thompson cordially, "I'm sure you would. But with the best will in the world, there are limits to one's capacity. I have come to the conclusion that this is a man's task;" and she

turned to the fortunate salesman. "Mr. Marsden, you will not in any way interfere with Miss Woolfrey—but you will remember that the department is now in your sole charge. If I have to complain, it will be to you. If things go wrong, it is you that I shall call to account."

Nothing went wrong in China and Glass. But sometimes Mrs. Thompson secretly asked herself if she or Mears had been right. Had she acted wisely when pushing an untried man so promptly to the front?

During these pleasant if enervating months of May and June she watched him closely.

Somehow he took liberties. It was difficult to define. He talked humbly. His voice was always humble, and his words too—but his eyes were bold. Something of aggressive virility seemed to meet and attempt to beat down that long-assumed mastership to which everyone else readily submitted. In the shop she was a man by courtesy—the boss, the cock of the walk; and she was never made to remember, when issuing orders to the men who served her, that she was not really and truly male.

All this might be fancy; but it made a slight want of ease and comfort in her intercourse with Mr. Marsden—a necessity felt only with him, an instinct telling her that here was a servant who must be kept in his place. [Pg 39]

Once or twice, when she was examining returns with him, his assiduous attention bothered her.

"Thank you, Mr. Marsden, I can see it for myself."

And there was a certain look in his eyes while he talked to her—respectfully admiring, pensively questioning, familiar,—no, not to be analysed. But nevertheless it was a look that she did not at all care about.

The eyes that he used so hardily were of a lightish brown, speckled with darker colour; and above them the dark eyebrows grew close together, making almost an unbroken line across his brow. She saw or guessed that his beard would be tawny, if he let it grow; but he was always beautifully shaved. High on his cheeks there were tiny russet hairs, like down, that he never touched with the razor.

All through May China and Glass did better and better. Miss Woolfrey, meekly submitting to fate, worked loyally under the new chief. "If anyone had to be put above me," said poor Miss Woolfrey, "I'd rather it was him."

When a truly excellent week's returns were shown in June, Mrs. Thompson took an opportunity of praising Mr. Marsden generously. And again, after he had bowed and expressed his gratification, she saw the look that she did not care about.

She read it differently now. It was probably directly traceable to the arrogance bred of youth and strength—and perhaps a fairly full measure of personal conceit. Although so circumspect with the other sex, he had a reliance on his handsome aspect. Perhaps unconsciously he was always falling back on this—because hitherto it might never have failed him.

It was Enid who made her think him handsome. Till Enid used the word, she would have thought it too big. [Pg 40]

One morning she had brought her daughter to the China department in order to select a wedding-present for a girlfriend. Miss Woolfrey was serving her, but Mr. Marsden came to assist. Then Mrs. Thompson saw how he looked at Enid.

Some sort of introduction had been made—"Enid, my dear, Mr. Marsden suggests this vase;" and the girl had immediately transferred her attention from the insipid serving woman to the resourceful serving-man. Mr. Marsden showed her more and more things—"This is good value. Two guineas—if that is not beyond your figure. Or this is a quaint notion—Parrots! They paint them so natural, don't they?" And Mrs. Thompson saw the look, and winced. With his eyes on the girl's face, he smiled—and Enid began to smile, too.

"What is the joke, Mr. Marsden?" Mrs. Thompson had spoken coldly and abruptly.

"Joke?" he echoed.

"You appear to be diverted by the idea of my daughter's purchase—when really it is simply a matter of business."

"Exactly—but if I can save you time by—"

"Thank you, Miss Woolfrey is quite competent to show us all that we require;" and Mrs. Thompson turned her broad back on the departmental manager.

Enid, when leaving China and Glass, glanced behind her, and nodded to Mr. Marsden.

"Mother," she whispered, "how handsome he is.... But how sharply you spoke to him. You quite dropped on him."

"Well, my dear, one has to drop on people sometimes; and Mr. Marsden is just a little disposed to be pushing."

"Oh," said Enid, "I thought he was such a favourite of yours." [Pg 41]

Alone in her room, Mrs. Thompson felt worried. A thought had made her wince. This young man carried about with him an element of vague danger. Of course Enid would never be foolish; and he would never dare to aspire to such a prize; still Enid should get her next wedding present in another department—or in another shop, if she must have china.

It was only a brief sense of annoyance or discomfort, say five minutes lost in a busy day. Mrs. Thompson dismissed it from her mind. But Mr. Marsden brought it back again.

Towards closing time, when she was signing letters at the big bureau, he came behind the glass and entered her room.

"What is it?" said Mrs. Thompson, without looking up.

"Mrs. Thompson, I want to make an apology and a request."

At the sound of his voice she perceptibly started. His presence down here was unusual and unexpected.

"I have been making myself rather unhappy about what happened when you and Miss Thompson were in my department."

"Nothing happened," said Mrs. Thompson decisively.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, and I offer an apology for my mistake."

"Mr. Marsden," said Mrs. Thompson, with dignity, "there is not the slightest occasion for an apology. Please don't make mountains out of molehills."

"No—but I am in earnest. It is your own great kindness that led me to forget. And I confess that I did for a moment forget the immense difference of social station that lies between us. A shopman should never speak to his employer—much less his employer's relatives—in a tone implying the least friendliness or equality."

"Mr. Marsden, you quite misunderstand." [Pg 42]

"You were angry with me?"

"No," said Mrs. Thompson firmly. "To be frank, I was not exactly pleased with you—and I took the liberty of showing it. That is a freedom to which I am accustomed."

"Then I humbly apologise."

"I have told you it is unnecessary.... That will do, Mr. Marsden;" and she took up her pen again.

"But may I make one request—that when I am unfortunate enough to deserve reproof, it may be administered privately and not in public?"

"Mr. Marsden, I make no conditions. If people are discontented with my methods—well, the remedy lies in their own hands."

"Isn't that just a little cruel?"

"It is my answer to your question."

"I don't think, ma'am, you know the chivalrous and devoted feeling that runs through this shop. There's not a man in it to whom your praise and your blame don't mean light and darkness."

Mrs. Thompson flushed.

"Mr. Marsden, you are all very good and loyal. I recognize that. But I don't care about compliments."

"Compliments!... When a person is feeling almost crushed with the burden of gratitude—"

"But, Mr. Marsden, gratitude should be shown and not talked about."

"And I'll show mine some day, please God."

Mrs. Thompson turned right round on her revolving chair, and spoke very gently. "I am sorry that you should have upset yourself about such a trifle."

Then Mr. Marsden asked if he might come down behind the glass for direction and orders when he felt in doubt or perplexity. A few words now and then would be helpful to him. [Pg 43]

Mrs. Thompson hesitated, and then answered kindly.

"Certainly. Why not? I am accessible here to any of the staff—from Mr. Mears to the door boy. That has always been a part of my system."

After this the young man appeared from time to time, craving a draught of wisdom at the fountain-head. The department was doing well, and he never brought bad news.

But he was a little too much inclined to begin talking about himself; telling his story—an orphan who had made his own way in the world; describing his efforts to improve a defective education,

his speaking at a debating society, his acting with the Kennington Thespian Troupe.

"Your elocution," said Mrs. Thompson, "no doubt profited by the pains you took.... But now, if you please—"

Mrs. Thompson, with business-like firmness, stopped all idle chatter. A hint was enough for him, and he promptly became intent on matters of business.

He worked hard upstairs. He was the first to come and the last to go. Once or twice he brought papers down to the dark ground floor when Mrs. Thompson was toiling late.

One night he showed her the coloured and beautifully printed pictures that had been sent with the new season's lists.

"There. This is my choice."

She laid her hand flat on a picture; and he, pushing about the other pictures and talking, put his hand against hers. He went on talking, as if unconscious that he had touched her, that he was now touching her.

She moved her hand away, and for a moment an angry flame of thought swept through her brain. Had it been an accident, or a monstrous impertinence? He went on talking without a tremor in his voice; and she understood that he was absolutely unconscious of what he had done. He was completely absorbed by consideration of the coloured prints of tea and dinner services. [Pg 44]

Mrs. Thompson abruptly struck the desk bell, drew back her chair, and rose.

"Davies," she called loudly, "bring your lantern. I am going through.... Don't bother me any more about all that, Mr. Marsden. Make your own selections—and get them passed by Mr. Mears. Good-night."

V [Pg 45]

Miss Enid had again taken up riding, and she seemed unusually energetic in her efforts to acquire a difficult art. During this hot dry weather the roads were too hard to permit of hacking with much pleasure; but Enid spent many afternoons in Mr. Young's fine riding school. She was having jumping lessons; and she threw out hints to Mrs. Thompson that next autumn she would be able not only to ride to meet, but even to follow hounds.

"Oh, my darling, I should never have a moment's peace of mind if I knew you were risking your pretty neck out hunting."

"I could easily get a good pilot," said Enid; "and then I should be quite safe."

One Thursday afternoon—early-closing day—Mr. Marsden, who happened to know that Enid would be at the school, went round to see his friend Mr. Whitehouse, the riding-master. He looked very smart in his blue serge suit, straw hat, and brown boots; and the clerk in Mr. Young's office quite thought he was one of the governor's toffs come to buy horses.

Mr. Marsden sent his card to Mr. Whitehouse; and then waited in a sloping sanded passage, obviously trodden by four-footed as well as two-footed people, from which he could peep into the dark office, a darker little dressing-room, and an open stable where the hind quarters of horses showed in stalls. There was a queer staircase without stairs, and he heard a sound of pawing over his head—horses upstairs as well as downstairs. The whole place looked and smelt very horsey. [Pg 46]

The riding-master's horse was presently led past him; the lesson was nearly over, and the young lady was about to take a few leaps. A groom told him that he might go in.

The vast hall had high and narrow double doors to admit the horses; and inside, beneath the dirty glass roof, it was always twilight, with strange echoes and reverberations issuing from the smooth plastered walls; at a considerable height in one of the walls there was a large window, opening out of a room that looked like the royal box of a theatre.

This hall had been the military school; it remained as a last evidence of the demolished barracks, and the town was proud of its noble dimensions—a building worthy of the metropolis.

"How d'ye do," said the riding-master, a slim, tall, elegant young man in check breeches and black boots. "Come and stand by us in the middle."

There was another tall young man, who wore drab breeches and brown gaiters on his long thin legs, and who was helping a stableman to drag the barred hurdle across the tan and put it in position against the wall.

"Now, Miss Thompson.... Steady. Steady. Let her go."

Enid on a heavily bandaged bay mare came slowly round, advanced in a scrambling canter, and hopped over the low obstacle.

"Very good."

She looked charming as she came round again—her usually cold pale face now warm and red, a wisp of her dark hair flying, the short habit showing her neatly booted legs.

"Very good."

"I am lost in admiration," said Marsden; and the strange young man stared hard at him.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Marsden," said Enid. "I didn't know I had an audience." [Pg 47]

Then she jumped again. This time, in obedience to the directions of Mr. Whitehouse, she rode at the hurdle much faster; the mare cocked her ears, charged, and she and Enid sailed over the white bar in grand style.

But the thud of hoofs, the tell-tale reverberations roused the invisible Mr. Young, and brought him to the window of the private box.

"Not so fast—not nearly so fast," shouted Mr. Young. "There's no skill or sense in that.... Mr. Whitehouse, I can't understand you. D'you want that mare over-reaching herself?" And Mr. Young's voice, dropping in tone, still betrayed his irritation. "Who are these gentlemen? We can't have people in the school during lessons."

"All right," said the young man in the brown gaiters. "I've come to look at the new horse—the one you bought from Griffin."

"Very good, Mr. Kenion. I didn't see who you were.... But who's the other gentleman?"

"He is a friend of mine," said Mr. Whitehouse.

"Well, that's against our rules—visitors in lessons. You know that as well as I do."

"I am quite aware of your rules," said Mr. Whitehouse curtly. "But the lesson is finished.... That will be sufficient, Miss Thompson. Three minutes over your hour—and we don't want to tire you."

Mr. Young snorted angrily, and disappeared. The strange young man assisted Miss Enid to dismount and went out with her, the bandaged mare following them with the helper.

"Who," asked Marsden, "was that spindle-shanked ass?"

"Oh, he's not a bad boy," said the riding-master patronisingly. "And he can ride, mind you—which is more than most hunting men can." [Pg 48]

"Is he a hunting man? What's his name?"

"Mr. Kenion.... Look here, don't hurry off. I want to have a yarn with you."

"But Mr. Young—"

"Oh, blast Mr. Young. I want to talk to you, my boy, about the ladies."

"Do you?" Marsden half closed his eyes, and showed his strong teeth in a lazy smile. "What do you think of our young lady?"

"Miss Thompson?" Mr. Whitehouse shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, not bad."

Then long thin Mr. Kenion returned.

"Let's try the new crock over your sticks," said Mr. Kenion languidly. "I suppose he *is* a crock—or he wouldn't be here?"

"I won't bias your judgment," said Mr. Whitehouse as he strolled across the tan. "See for yourself," and he rang a noisy bell. "But I must make you known to each other;" and he introduced Mr. Marsden as "one of the managers at Thompson's."

Mr. Young's new purchase was brought in, and Mr. Kenion rode it. The horse at first appeared to resent the silly jumping performance; but Marsden heard the work of the rider's unspurred heels on the animal's flanks, watched the effective use Mr. Whitehouse made of his whip as he ran behind, and soon saw the hurdle negotiated in flying fashion, again and again—and faster and faster.

"*Not* so fast! God bless my soul, I think you must all be mad this afternoon." Old Young had come to his window, furious. "Mr. Kenion, I'm surprised at you, yes, I am, sir."

"How can I judge of a horse without trying him?"

"Well, I don't want my horses tried like that. You may buy 'em or leave 'em." [Pg 49]

"All right," said Mr. Kenion, laughing. "Come out and have a drink. You've stood me a ride, and I'll stand you a drink."

Mr. Kenion, Mr. Young, and the jumping horse all disappeared, and Marsden and the riding-master were left together on the tan. Here, in the dim twilight that the glass roof made of this bright June day, they had a long quiet chat about women.

"Dicky," said the riding-master, "I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle."

"Fire away."

"All for your own good. See?... Now I suppose when you want a mash, you don't think of looking outside the shop."

"I never have a mash inside it."

"Is that so?" Mr. Whitehouse seemed astonished. "Why, I thought you smart managers with all those shop girls round you were like so many grand Turks with their serrallyhos."

"Not much. That's against etiquette—and a fool's game into the bargain. You're safe to be pinched—and, second, you get so jolly sick of being mewed up with 'em all day that you never want to speak to 'em out of hours."

"Then how do you get along? The customers?"

"Yes," said Marsden; and he stroked his moustache, and smiled. "Customers are often very kind."

"Not real ladies?"

"We don't ask their pedigrees. Go down St. Saviour's Court any fine evening, and see the domestic servants waiting in their best clothes. It'll remind you of Piccadilly Circus;" and both gentlemen laughed.

"There's a parlourmaid," continued Marsden, "out of Adelaide Crescent—who is simply a little lump of all right. Venetian red hair—a picture." [Pg 50]

"Red hair," said Mr. Whitehouse reflectively. "They say with us, a good horse has no colour. That means, if the horse is a good 'un, never mind his colour;—and I suppose it's true of women.... I don't object to chestnut horses—or red-haired gells.... But, look here, Master Dick, I tell you frank, you're wasting your opportunities."

"You can't teach me anything, old man."

"Can't I? Never turn a deaf ear to a friendly tip—a chance tip may alter a man's life. That's a motto with me—and I'm acting on it this moment, myself."

Then Mr. Whitehouse told his friend that he was about to leave Mallingbridge forever. Mallingbridge was too small; he intended to throw himself into the larger world of London. He had very nearly fixed up an engagement with the big Bayswater people; it was practically a settled thing.

"That's why I checked the old bloke like I done just now. Mr. Young he twigs there's something up; but he doesn't know what's in store for him. The minute I've got my job definite, I shall open my chest to him—tell him once for all what I think of him. 'E won't forget it;" and the riding-master laughed confidently.

"I'm sorry you're going."

"Thanks. But why am I lighting out so determined and sudden, instead of vegetating here half me life? Well—because I got a straight tip, and all by chance."

"How was that?"

"About a month ago a chap comes in here with a lady for a lesson. Captain Mellish—Meller—I forget the name. Anyhow, he was a son of a gun of a swell to look at—sploshing it about up at the Dolphin; and he brings in this actress from the theatre—not a chorus gell, mind you, but the [Pg 51] leading performer—who was drawing her hundred quid a week, so they said. Well, he evidently fancied he was a bit of a horseman himself, and he keeps chipping in. When I told her to get her hands back, and hold her reins long, he says, 'yes, but you'll want to hold a horse shorter by the head, if he balks at his fences.' I answered without hesitation, 'I'm very well aware of refusing horses,' I said, 'and also how easy it is to hang on by a horse's mouth when you land over a fence.... But,' I said, 'let me know who is giving the lesson—you or me. Wait, miss,' I said, 'if the Captain has other directions to give you.' She rounded on him at once, asking him to shut his head. He turned it off with a laugh, and gave me a slap on the back. 'Have it your own way, Mr. Riding-Master.' You'll understand, he said that sneering.

"But I believe he thought the more of me before the lesson was over. Anyhow, when his tart had gone to the dressing-room to change her things, he and I got yarning here—exactly as if it had been you and me—like we're doing now.

"Mind you, he was a wrong 'un. You couldn't talk friendly to him without twigging that. But, Holy Moses, he was fairly up to snuff.... We went yarning on, and presently he says, 'It beats me why a knowledgeable young chap like you should bury himself as a mere servant. Take my tip,' he says, 'Get hold of a bit of money, and light out on your own.'... 'And how am I to get the money?' I asked him.

"'Get it from the ladies,' he says. 'Take my tip. I suppose you make love to all your pupils—you fellows always do. Well, make 'em pay.' I'm giving you what he said, word for word. 'You're wasting yourself,' he says. 'See? You're only young once. You've got something to bring to [Pg 52] market, and you're letting it go stale every hour.'

"Then he run on about what women can do for a man nowadays—and he *knew*, mind you. He'd *been* there. Who makes the members of parliament, the bishops, the prime ministers? Why,

women. Leave them out of your plans—if you want to labour in the sweat of your brow till you drop. But if not, take the tip. It's the women that give a man his short-cut to ease and comfort. See?"

"Yes," said Mr. Marsden. "I see that—but I don't see anything new in it."

"Dicky," said Mr. Whitehouse solemnly, "it's a straight tip.... But you'll never profit by it, my boy, until you stop messing about with your dressed-up slaveys, and light out for something bigger."

"I have told you," said Marsden, smiling, "that you can't teach me anything."

"You're too cock-sure," said Mr. Whitehouse, almost sadly; "but you're just wasting yourself.... Here's the tip of a life-time. I've thought it all out, and I see my own line clear. Drop the gells—and go for the matrons. Pick your chance, and go for it hammer and tongs.... It's what I shall do meself. Bayswater is full of rich Jewesses—some of 'em fairly wallowing in it. And I shan't try to grab some budding beauty. I shall pick a ripe flower."

"I wish you luck."

"Same to you, old pal. But you won't find it the way you're trying just now;" and Mr. Whitehouse laughed enigmatically. "I can't teach you anything, but I can give you a parting warning.... D'you think I don't twig what you were after to-day—wanting to see me especial—and coming round here,—and losing yourself in admiration of Miss Thompson? And I don't say you mightn't have [Pg 53] pulled it off, if you'd started a bit earlier. But you're too late. Mr. Kenion has got there first."

"Is that true—bar larks?"

"You may bet your boots on it. He's here every time she comes. After the lessons he sees her home—by a round-about way. The only reason he didn't go with her this afternoon is because the shop is shut, and they're afraid of meeting the old lady.... No, my little boy, your Miss Enid is booked."

VI

[Pg 54]

Enid was away again, staying for a few days with some friends or friends of the Salters; and during her absence her mother suffered from an unusual depression of spirits. In the shop it was noticed that Mrs. Thompson seemed, if not irritable, at least rather difficult to please; but all understood that she felt lonely while deprived of the young woman's society, and all sympathised with her. Assistants, who happened to meet her after closing time, taking a solitary walk outside the boundaries of the town, were especially sympathetic, and perhaps ventured to think that fashionable Miss Enid left her too much alone.

One evening after a blazing airless day, Dick Marsden, very carefully dressed in his neat blue serge, with his straw hat jauntily cocked, came swaggering through St. Saviour's Court, and attracted, as he passed, many feminine glances of admiration. The pretty housemaid from Adelaide Crescent ogled and languished; but he merely bowed and passed by. He could not waste his time with her to-night. There was bigger game on foot.

At the bottom of Frederick Street he hurried down the walled passage that leads to the railway embankment; thence through the vaultlike tunnel under the line, past the gas-works; over the iron bridge that spans the black water of the canal, and out into the open meadows.

These meadows, a broad flat between the canal and the river, belonged to the railway company; and almost every gate and post reminded one of their legal owners. Notices in metal frames somewhat churlishly announced that, "This gate will be closed and locked on one day in each [Pg 55] year"; "There is no right of way here"; "The public, who are only admitted as visitors, will kindly act as visitors and refrain from damage, or the privilege will be withdrawn." The public, enjoying the privilege freely but not arrogantly, ranged about the pleasant fields, played foot-ball in winter, picked buttercups and daisies in spring, and even provided themselves with Corporation seats—to be removed at a moment's notice if the Corporation should be bidden to remove them. On warm summer evenings like this, the public were principally represented by lovers strolling in linked pairs, looking into each other's eyes, and making of the railway fields a road through dreamland to paradise.

Marsden walked swiftly across the parched grass, moving with strong light tread, and gazing here and there with clear keen vision. As he moved thus lightly and swiftly, looking so strong and yet so agile, he seemed a personification of masculine youth and vigour, the coarse male animal in its pride of brutal health. Or, if one merely noticed the catlike tread, so springy and easy in its muscular power, he might suggest the graceful yet fierce beast of prey who paces through failing sunlight and falling shadows in search of the inoffensive creature that he will surely destroy.

A solitary figure moving slowly between the trees by the river—Mr. Marsden hurried on.

"Good evening, Mrs. Thompson."—He took off his hat, and bowed very respectfully.

"Oh! Good evening, Mr. Marsden."

"You don't often come this way?"

"Oh, yes, I do," said Mrs. Thompson rather stiffly. "It is a favourite walk of mine."

"I venture to applaud your taste." And he pointed in the direction of the town. "Old Mallingbridge looks quite romantic from along here.... But the gas-works spoil the picture, don't they?" [Pg 56]

The town looked pretty enough in the mellow evening glow. Beyond the railway embankment, where signal lamps began to show as spots of faint red and green, the clustered roofs mingled into solid sharp-edged masses, and the two church towers appeared strangely high and ponderous against the infinitely pure depths of a cloudless sky. Soon a soft greyness would rise from the horizon; indistinctness, vagueness, mystery would creep over the town and the fields, blotting out the ugly gas-works, hiding the common works of men, giving the world back to nature; but there would be no real night. In these, the longest days of the year, the light never quite died.

The colour of her blue dress and of the pink roses in her toque was clearly visible, as Mrs. Thompson and the young man walked on side by side. For a minute she politely made conversation.

"I have often wondered," she said, with brisk business-like tones, "what use the railway company will eventually make of all this land."

"Ah! I wonder."

"They would not have bought it unless they had some remote object in view; and they would not have held it if the object had vanished. Sensible people don't keep two hundred acres of land lying idle unless they have a purpose."

"No."

"It has often occurred to me—from what I have heard—that they will one day convert it into some sort of depot. There is nothing in the levels to prevent their doing so. The embankment is no height."

"I should think you have made a very shrewd guess."

"If that were to happen, the question would arise, Will it prove an injury or a benefit to the town?"

Then Mrs. Thompson ceased to make conversation; her manner became very dignified and reserved; and she carried herself stiffly—perhaps wishing to indicate by the slight change of deportment that the interview was now at an end. [Pg 57]

But Marsden did not take the hint. He walked by her side, and soon began to talk about himself. An effort was made to check him when he entered on the subject of the great benefits that a kind hand had showered upon him, but presently Mrs. Thompson was listening without remonstrance to his voice. And her own voice, when in turn she spoke, was curiously soft and gentle.

"As this chance has come," he said humbly, "I avail myself of it. Though I could never thank you sufficiently, I have been longing for an opportunity to thank you *somehow* for the confidence you have reposed in me."

"I'm sure you'll justify it, Mr. Marsden."

"I don't know. I'm afraid you'll think not—when you hear the dreadful confession that I have to make."

Mrs. Thompson drew in her breath, and stopped short on the footpath.

"Mr. Marsden"—she spoke quite gently and kindly—"You really must not tell me about your private affairs. Unless your confession concerns business matters—something to do with the shop—I cannot listen to it."

"Oh, it only amounts to this—but I know it will sound ungrateful ... Mrs. Thompson, in spite of everything, of all you have done for me, I am not very happy down here."

"Indeed?" She had drawn in her breath again, and she walked on while she spoke. "Does that mean that you are thinking of leaving us?"

"Yes, I sometimes think of that."

"To better yourself?"

"Oh, no—I should never find such another situation." [Pg 58]

"Then why are you discontented in this one?"

With the permission conveyed by her question, he described at length his queer state of mind—a man on whom fortune had smiled, a man with work that he liked, yet feeling restless and unhappy, feeling alone in the midst of a crowd, longing for sympathy, yearning for companionship.

"That's how I feel," he said sadly, after a long explanation.

Mrs. Thompson had been looking away from him, staring across the river. She held herself rigidly erect, and she spoke now in another voice, with a tone of hardness and coldness.

"I think I recognize the symptoms, Mr. Marsden. When a young man talks like this, the riddle is easy to guess."

"Then guess it."

"Well," she said coldly, "you force me to the only supposition. You are telling me that you have fallen in love."

"Yes."

She winced almost as if he had struck her; and then the parted lips closed, her whole face assumed a stonelike dignity.

"Tell me all about it, Mr. Marsden—since you seem to wish to."

"Love is a great crisis in a man's life. It generally makes him or breaks him forever."

"I hope that fate will read kindly—in your case."

"He either fears his fate too much or his deserts are small—But, Mrs. Thompson, I do fear my fate. It isn't plain-sailing for me. There are difficulties, barriers—it's all darkness before me."

"I hope you haven't made an injudicious choice."

"Yes, I have—in one way. Shall we sit down here? It is still very warm." [Pg 59]

It was as though the heated earth panted for breath; no evening breeze stirred the leaves; the air was heavy and languorous. Mrs. Thompson seemed glad to sit upon the Corporation bench. She sank down wearily, leaned her back against the wooden support, and stared at the darkly flowing water.

"So difficult," he murmured. "So many difficulties." He looked behind him at the empty meadows, and up and down the empty path. Then he took off his hat, laid it on the seat beside him; and, bringing a silk handkerchief from his sleeve, wiped his forehead. "There are almost insurmountable barriers between us."

"Have you given your heart to some married woman? Is she not free to respond to your affections?"

"No, she was married, but she's free now.... And I think it amuses her to encourage me—and make me suffer." He had taken one of the hands that lay listlessly in the wide lap. "She is *you*."

Mrs. Thompson snatched her hand away, sprang up from the seat, and spoke indignantly.

"Mr. Marsden, have you gone out of your senses?"

"Yes, I think I have. And who's to blame? Who's driven me out of them?" He was standing close in front of her, barring the path. "Oh, I can't go on with all this deception. I lied to you just now. I knew you were coming here,—and I followed you. I felt I must once for all be with you alone."

"Not another word. I will not listen.... Oh!"

Suddenly he had seized her. Roughly and fiercely he flung his arms round her, forced her to him, and kissed her.

"Mr. Marsden!... Shame!... How dare you?... Let me go."

She was struggling in his arms, her head down, her two hands trying to keep him off. Her broad bosom panted, her big shoulders heaved; but with remorseless brutal use of his strength he held her tightly and closely against him. [Pg 60]

"There," he said. "Don't fight. You'll have to go through it now.... You women think you can play the fool with a man—set all his blood on fire, and then tell him to behave himself."

"Mr. Marsden, let me go—or I shall die of shame."

"No you won't. Rot. D'you hear? Rot. You're a woman all through: and that face was made to be kissed—like this—like this.... There, this is my hour—"

"Will you let me go?"

"Yes, in a minute.... You'll dismiss me to-morrow, won't you? I'd better pack to-night. But I shall always go on loving you.... Oh, my goodness, what is my life to be without you?"

And suddenly he released her, dropped upon the seat, and buried his face in his hands.

She walked fast away—and then slowly returned. He was still sitting, with his head down, motionless.

"Mr. Marsden!... You have insulted me in the most outrageous manner—and the only possible excuse would be the absolute sincerity of the feelings that you have expressed so brutally. If I could for a moment believe—"

"Why can't you believe?"

"Because it is too absurd. I am no longer young—the mother of a girl old enough herself to marry."

"I don't want any pasty-faced girls. I want *you*."

He spoke without looking up at her, and his face remained hidden by his hands.

"If I sit down and talk to you quietly, will you promise that you won't begin again?"

"Yes."

"You give me your word of honour that you won't—won't touch me?" [Pg 61]

"Oh, yes," he said dejectedly, "I promise."

"When you began just now, you implied—you accused me as if you thought I had been—encouraging you. But, Mr. Marsden, you must know that such an accusation is unjust and untrue."

"Is it? I don't think you women much care how you lead people on."

"But indeed I do care. I should be bitterly ashamed of myself if I was not certain that I had never given you the slightest encouragement."

"Oh, never mind. What does it matter? I have made a fool of myself—that's all. Love blinds a man to plain facts."

He had raised his head again, and was looking at her. They sat side by side, and the dusk began to envelope them so that their faces were white and vague.

"At the first," he went on, "I could see that it was hopeless. If social position didn't interfere, the money would prove a barrier there'd be no getting round. You are rich, and I am poor. At the first I saw how unhappy it was going to make me. I saw it was hopeless—most of all, because I'm not a man who could consent to pose as the pensioner of a rich wife.... But then I forgot—and I began to hope. Yes, I did really hope."

"What is it you hoped for?"

"Why, that chance would turn up lucky—that somehow I might be put more on an equality. Or that you would marry me in spite of all—that you'd come to think money isn't everything in this world, and love counts most of all."

"But, Mr. Marsden, how can I for one moment of time credit you with—with the love you will go on talking about?"

"Haven't I *shown* it to you?" [Pg 62]

"I think—I am quite sure you are deceiving yourself. But nothing can deceive me. You mistake the chivalrous romantic feelings of youth for something far different."

"No, I don't mistake."

"The disparity in our years renders such a thing impossible. Between you and me, love—the real love—is out of the question."

"Yes, you can say that easily—because no doubt it's true on your side. If you felt for me what I feel for you—then it would be another story."

"But suppose I had been foolish enough to be taken with you, to let myself be carried away by your eloquence—which I believe was all acting!"

"Acting? That's good—that's devilish good."

"I say, suppose I had believed you—and yielded one day, don't you know very well that all the world would laugh at me?"

"Why?"

"Why—because, my dear boy, I'm almost old enough to be your mother—and I have done with love, and all that sort of thing."

"No, you haven't. You're just ripe for love—I felt *that* when I was kissing you."

Mrs. Thompson rose abruptly.

"I must go home.... Come;" and they walked side by side through the summer dusk towards the lamp-light of the town.

"This must never be spoken of again," she said firmly; and before they reached the last field gate, she had told him many times that her rejection of his suit was final and irrevocable. Hers was a flat deliberate refusal, and nothing could ever modify it.

"Yes," he said sadly, "it's hopeless. I knew it all along, in my secret heart—quite hopeless." [Pg 63]

But she told him that if he promised never to think of it again, she would allow him to remain in the shop.

"Frankly, I would much rather you should go—But that would be a pity. It might break your career—or at least throw you too much on your own resources at a critical point. Stay—at any rate until you get a suitable opening."

"Your word is my law."

"Now leave me. I do not wish anyone to see us walking together."

He obeyed her; and she walked on without an escort, through the dark tunnel and into the lamp-light of Frederick Street.

VII

[Pg 64]

"You must 'a been a tremendous long walk," said Yates; "but you're looking all the better for it, ma'am—though you aren't brought back an appetite."

Mrs. Thompson was trifling with her supper—only pretending to eat. The electric light, shining on her hair, made the rounded coils and central mass bright, smooth, and glossy; the colour in her cheeks glowed vividly and faded quickly, and, as it came and went, the whole face seemed softened and yet unusually animated; the parted lips were slightly tremulous, and the eyes, with distended pupils, were darker and larger than they had been in the daylight. By a queer chance the old servant began to speak of her mistress's personal appearance.

"Yes," said Yates, "it's the fresh air you want.—Stands to reason you do, shut up in the shop all day. You look another woman to what you did when you went out;" and she studied Mrs. Thompson's face critically and admiringly.

Mrs. Thompson smiled, and her lips were quite tremulous.

"Another woman, Yates? What sort of woman do I look like now?"

"A very handsome one," said Yates affectionately. "And more like the girl Mr. Thompson led up the stairs such a long time ago—the first time I ever set eyes on her, and was thinking however she and I would get on together."

"We've got on well together, haven't we, Yates?"

"That we have," said Yates, with enthusiasm.

"Yates, don't stare so;" and Mrs. Thompson laughed. "You make me nervous. And I don't want you to flatter me.... But tell me, candidly, supposing you met me now as a stranger—how old would you guess I was?"

[Pg 65]

Yates, with her head slightly on one side, scrutinized her mistress very critically.

"Why, I don't believe that anyone seeing you as I do now would take you for more than forty-two—at the outside."

"Forty-two! Three years less than my real age. Thank you for nothing, Yates." Mrs. Thompson laughed, but with little merriment in her laugh. "You haven't joined my band of flatterers. You have given me an honest answer."

Perhaps, if some faint doubt was lingering in Mrs. Thompson's mind, Yates had provided an answer to that as well as to the direct question.

The mistress did not invite the servant to sit at table this evening and help her through the lonely meal. Her thoughts were sufficient company.

At night she could not sleep. The contact with the fierce strong male had completely upset her—never in all her life had she been so handled by a man. And the extent of the contact seemed mysteriously to have multiplied the effect of its local violences; the dreaded grip of the powerful arms, the resistless pressure of the forcing hands, and the cruel hot print of his kisses were the salient facts in her memory of the embrace; but it seemed that from every point of the surface of her body while compelled to touch him a nerve thrill had been sent vibrating in her brain, and the diffused nerve-messages, concentrating there, had produced overwhelmingly intense disturbance.

And memory gave her back these sensations—the wide thrilling wave from surface to brain, and the explosion of the central nerve-storm flashing its rapid recognition back to the outer boundaries. Lying in her dark room she lived through the experience again—was forced to suffer the embrace not once but again and again.

[Pg 66]

It was dreadful that a man, simply by reason of his sex, should have this power, dreadful that he should abuse his power in thus treating a woman,—and most dreadful that of all women in the

world the woman should be herself.

And she thought of the late Mr. Thompson's timid and maladroit caresses—inspired, monotonous, stereotyped endearments, totally devoid of nervous excitation, dutifully borne by her, day after day, month after month, throughout the long years.

But memory, doing its faithful and accurate work, failed to restore to her that glow of angry protest, that recoil of outraged dignity which she had felt when the young man took her in his arms. She could feel his arms about her still, but the sense of shame had gone.

Here in the darkened room she could see him—she could not help seeing him. Hot tears filled her eyes, she writhed and twisted, she tossed and turned, as the mental pictures came and went; but nothing could drive him away. He had taken possession of her thoughts; and she wept because she understood that he had not achieved this tyrannous rule to-day, or yesterday, but a long time ago, a disgracefully long time ago. In imagination she was watching him among the china and glass, when Woolfrey and the others showed her plainly how dangerous he really was—and it had begun then. Why else should she have felt such a wrathful discontent at the idea of his courting all the silly girls? In imagination, she could see him among the carpets, trundling the great rolls, fascinating, enthralling the rude customer,—and it seemed to her that it had begun even then. She and the shrew were one in their weakness; both had been hypnotised together. Mears said [Pg 67] all the women in the shop had submitted to the spell—but not the silliest, most feather-headed slut of them all had fallen into such idiotic depths as those in which their proud and stately chief lay weeping.

She dried her eyes, got out of bed and drank water, stood at the open window, turned on the light, turned off the light, lay down again and tried desperately to sleep.

In a moment her cheeks were burning.—She could feel the hot kisses; she could hear the hurried words. "A face made to be kissed—setting one's blood on fire.... You are a woman all through—you are ripe for love."

Ah, if only one could give way to such a dream of rapture; if one could believe that the lost years might be recovered, that all one has missed in life—its passionate sweetness and its satisfying fullness—might be won by a miraculous interposition of fate. Nothing less than a miracle can bring back the wasted past.

She did not sleep; but with the return of day she grew calmer. Thoughts of Enid helped her. A second marriage—even what the world would call a wise and fitting alliance—was utterly out of the question. It would be the death of her daughter's love; it would render the story of her own life meaningless; it would destroy all the results of twenty-two years' maternal devotion. Enid had been all in all to her: Enid must remain what she had always been. If on the mother's part there was a brave renunciation of self, it belonged to the dim past; it was over and done with—a solid fact, not to be modified, far less overturned.

Least of all by such a marriage as this—laughter mingling with the sound of bells, coarse jokes to be thrown after them instead of pretty confetti, even the sacred words of the priest at the altar echoed by derisive words of rabble in the porch! Enid would never forgive her—were she ever to [Pg 68] forgive herself.

In the broad light of day, in the cold light of logic, she saw that it was impossible. Her emotions might be roused, unsuspected sexual instincts might be partially awakened, beneath the matronly time-worn outer case a virginal mechanism might be stirring; but the whole intellectual side of her nature was strong enough to reinforce the special functions of her will. Too late to snatch at lost joys! Reason rejected the impossibility.

She was too old. The chance had gone years ago. The young man, even if she could believe that he loved her now—much as a romantic subject might fancy that he loved his queen,—would soon grow weary. Familiarity would rob her of all queenly attributes; at the best nothing would be left except disappointment, and at the worst disgust. And then she would suffer intolerable torment. She saw it quite clearly—the martyrdom of a middle-aged wife who cannot retain her young husband's love.

None of that. She rose after the sleepless night with her decision fortified.

VIII

[Pg 69]

But the fortifying of the decision had cost her much, and the after-effects of nerve-strain were easily to be perceived.

She was rather terrible in the shop, and all noticed a sudden and mysterious change. Of a morning she used to appear with dark circles round her eyes; her greetings, or acknowledgments of greetings, were less cordial; she moved more slowly; and in her stern glance it seemed that there was the certainty of finding something amiss, instead of the hope of seeing nothing wrong.

Rather terrible—easily irritated, impatient of argument, quick to resent advice: as the young ladies put it, ready to snap your head off at any minute. A whisper, somehow passing out of house

to shop, said she was suffering from continued sleeplessness; and the loyal staff were eager to make allowances. But they wondered how long the change would last; they hoped that she would soon get a comfortable night, and wake up again as their kind and considerate mistress.

In fact, many little things that once would not have worried her now jarred upon tired nerves. She felt worried by Bence's, by her husband's stupid relations, by Mr. Mears; and by Mr. Prentice, the solicitor, who took the liberties permitted to an old friend. He and all other old friends worried her.

She was altogether unable to laugh as of old at the impudence of Bence. She frowned and stamped her foot when, looking across the road, she first read the placard on the shuttered frontage of the ancient sadler and the bookseller. It was not in small print: you could read it from [Pg 70] Thompson's without a telescope. "These Premises," said the poster, "will shortly be opened as the new Furniture department of Bence Brothers, and a long-felt want will be supplied by an extensive stock of high-class goods at reasonable prices." And this, if you please, immediately facing the two windows that from immemorial time had exhibited Thompson's solid oak chairs and polished walnut tables! The gross, large-typed piece of impertinence annoyed her excessively.

She had always been extraordinarily good to old Thompson's relatives, who were common and troublesome. They all hung on to her, called her Cousin Jenny, boasted about their prosperous connection by marriage; they received benefits with scant thanks, grumbled when they fancied themselves neglected; and they were all extremely jealous and watchful of one another. Yet till now they had never exhausted her patience and magnanimity.

One of them, John Edward Thompson, a grocer in a small way of business at Haggart's Cross, had often drawn heavily upon her for financial aid. He was a short, squat, bearded man; and he used to come into the shop unexpectedly, and meander about it aimlessly, to the trouble and confusion of the shop-walkers.

"What department, sir?"

He did not answer.

"What can I have the pleasure of showing you, sir?"

"Don't mind me, young man. Go on with your work. I'm just looking round to find my cousin."

"May I be of assistance, sir? If you will be good enough to tell me your cousin's name?"

"My cousin's name," said John Edward shortly, "is *Mrs. Thompson*.... There. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

It nearly always happened that he found Mrs. Thompson with her back turned towards him. Then [Pg 71] he would put two somewhat grubby hands on her shoulders, with cousinly playfulness pull her round the right way, and publicly kiss her. This was an act of affection, and a triumphant assertion of the relationship—something more for those foppish shopwalkers to put in their pipes and smoke.

"Cousin Jenny, how goes it?"

Then, after the kiss, he would look at her reproachfully, and begin to grumble.

"Cousin Jenny, you drove through Haggart's Cross last Thursday in your carriage and pair. *I* saw you. But you didn't see *me*. No, you didn't think of stopping the horses for half a minute, and passing the time of day to your cousin."

Mrs. Thompson used smilingly to lead him into the counting-house, give him kind words, give him good money. He took the money grumblingly, as if it was the least that could be offered as atonement for the neglectfulness of last Thursday; but he went home very happy.

He had done all this scores of times, and Mrs. Thompson had borne it all with unflinching generosity. But now, on a broiling July day, he did it once too often. He got as far as the public salute, and no further.

She was upstairs, standing near a desk, with her back towards China and Glass. He came behind her, playfully laid hold of her, kissed her. She gave a cry, turned upon him in a white fury, and, seeing who he was, snapped his head off.

That day he did not go home happy.

Other cousins were old Mrs. Price and her two daughters, who would all three have been in the workhouse but for Mrs. Thompson. Thanks to her, they were living comfortably at Riverdale, with a pleasant rent-free cottage, garden, and orchard. The Miss Prices made jam and brought it as a [Pg 72] present to Mrs. Thompson, keeping up a baseless tradition that she loved their preserve—and taking immense gifts in exchange for it. They visited their cousin twice in July, first to say they would soon make the jam, secondly to bring the jam; and each time they spent a long day at Mallingbridge, coming in and out of house and shop, cackling and giggling, and almost driving Mrs. Thompson mad.

Then there was Gordon Thompson, a farmer at Linkfield, who sometimes came into town on market day, and ate his mid-day meal with his rich cousin in St. Saviour's Court. He used to open

the house door without ringing the bell, and whistle a few notes as a familiar signal. "Cousin Jenny! Cousin Jen-ny." He would shout this with an ascending intonation, and then come clambering up the steep staircase.

"Any dinner to-day for a poor relation?... Ah, my dear, you're not the sort to turn a hungry man away from your table. Garr—but I can tell you I'm sharp set."

He was a hale and hearty-looking fellow, full of noisy jests, with a great affectation of joviality; but in his twinkling eyes and about his pursed lips there was the peasant's wariness, astuteness, and greed. Truly he took all he could get from everybody, including his fortunate cousin. Enid said his hob-nailed boots were dirty as well as ugly, malodorous too; and she always fled at his approach, and did not reappear while Mrs. Thompson feasted him and made much of him.

Now, when Mrs. Thompson heard the well-known whistle in the hall, she followed her daughter's example; forsaking the luncheon-dishes, she fled back to the shop through the door of communication, and left Yates to entertain hungry Gordon.

[Pg 73] Enid was at home, but she failed as a soothing and calming influence. If her mother turned to her, endeavoured to lean upon her for support in an unexpected need, she found a blank void, a totally inadequate buttress. Enid was self-absorbed, busy with her own little affairs, taking lessons from the new riding-master at Young's school, spending long hours away from the house. She seemed like a person who really has no intuitive sympathy to offer: a person locking up her life against intruders, keeping close guard over secret emotions, and neither willing to share her own hopes and fears nor to comprehend those of others.

Perhaps Enid's coldness—so often felt, but never till now admitted in the mother's thoughts—added to the hidden trouble of Mrs. Thompson.

She entered the China department as rarely as possible, and her intercourse with its head was of the most formal and distant character. The conduct of Mr. Marsden was irreproachable: he was composed, polite, respectful; and he never came down behind the glass. But he used his eyes—a mute yet deadly attack, whenever she encountered them. She dreaded the attack, braced herself for it when it could no longer be avoided; and these meetings, however brief, had painful consequences. They enervated her, sapped her energy, and left her with an incredible sense of fatigue, so that after each of them she walked downstairs to her room heavily and wearily, sat at the big desk breathing fast and trembling, feeling for a little while quite unable to work—almost as if she had been worn out by another physical tussle, instead of by a mere exchange of glances.

She was sitting thus, breathless and perturbed, when Mr. Mears came bothering. Earlier in the day she had admonished the second in command very sharply, and it appeared that he could not bear her momentary censure. He said she had snapped at him as she had never, never snapped. [Pg 74] The vast ponderous man was completely overcome; his voice shook, his hands shook, and tears trickled down his cheeks while he solemnly tendered his resignation.

"Resign? What nonsense are you talking, Mr. Mears?"

But Mears said it was not nonsense: he meant every word of it. Rather than suffer here, he would go out and brave the world in his old age.

"Sit down, Mr. Mears—and don't be so foolish."

"I don't recognise you these last weeks," said Mears sadly; and he told her of how intensely he had always venerated her. "Everything you did was right—It is almost a religion with me. And now I couldn't bear it—it would break my heart if I was to be pushed aside."

"You won't be pushed aside. No fear of that."

"Or if there was to be any great changes in the shop."

"There will be no great changes in the shop."

"Nor in your private life?"

Then Mrs. Thompson snapped again.

"What do you mean by that? What is my private life to you—or anybody else? What are you insinuating?... Answer me. What do you mean?"

He would not, or he could not say. Perhaps he really did not know what he meant; or some subtle instinct, telling him that a great peril to his peace and comfort was drawing nearer and nearer, had enabled him to pierce the mystery and had prompted the words of the offending question. He sat gasping and gaping while she stormed at him.

"Understand once for all that I won't be watched and spied upon."

"I am no spy," he said huskily; "except when you've made me one."

The door was closed, but her angry voice rang out above the glass partitions. All through the offices it was known that the manager had put Mrs. T. into tantrums.

[Pg 75] Suddenly the storm blew itself out. Mrs. Thompson paced the room; then stopped near the empty fireplace, with her hands clasped behind her back. Her attitude was altogether manlike. It was the big man, sitting huddled on the chair, wiping his cheeks, and blowing his nose, who displayed

signs of womanish emotion.

"Mr. Mears, don't let's have any more of it. You and I must never quarrel. It would be too absurd. We are *friends*—we are *comrades*;" and she went over to the chair, and shook hands with her comrade. "That's right. You and I *know* each other; you and I can *trust* each other."

Then she again walked up and down the room, speaking as she moved.

"To show how absolutely I trust you, I'll say to you what I wouldn't say to anyone—no, not to my daughter. I am sorry if I have seemed fretful of late. But the reason is this. I have been passing through a mental struggle—a struggle that has tried me sorely." In her tone and the whole aspect of her face as she made this confession, there was something far above the narrow realm of sex, something that man or woman might be proud to show—a generous candour, a fearless truth, a noble simplicity. "A hard struggle, Mr. Mears—and I'm a little shaken, but quite victorious.... Now this is between ourselves—and it must go no further."

"It never shall," said Mr. Mears earnestly.

"And not a word either about our tiff, or your unkind threat to resign."

"No—er, no. I shan't say another word about that."

But unfortunately Mr. Mears had already said a word or two about it to Mr. Prentice the solicitor; and very soon Mr. Prentice came, tactlessly blundering, to see Mrs. Thompson.

No one could admire her more than Mr. Prentice—truly his admiration was so obviously genuine that people sometimes wondered what Mrs. Prentice thought about it. Staunch friendship, skilled service, as well as the admiration, had won him many privileges; but he overstepped their limits now. [Pg 76]

"I say. Is it all serene between you and Mears? Let me advise you—don't allow the breach to widen. I should consider it a great pity if you were to part with your right-hand man because of any trifling difference of—"

Mrs. Thompson cut him short.

"Mr. Prentice, there is one thing I cannot permit—even from you." She was dignified, but terrible. "I cannot, and I will not permit interference in what is my business, and my business only."

"Sorry—very sorry.... No idea I should put you out like this."

Mr. Prentice, with muttered apologies, hurried away, looking scared and abashed, carrying his square bowler all through the shop into the street, as if in his confusion he had forgotten that it belonged to his head.

IX

[Pg 77]

Shortly after this unlucky visit Mr. Prentice wanted to tell Mrs. Thompson some startling news, but he did not dare. He consulted Mr. Mears, and asked him to tell her; but Mears did not dare either. Mears advised the solicitor to take Yates into his confidence, and let Yates tell her.

So then at last Mrs. Thompson heard what so many people knew already—that Enid was carrying on with a young man in a very unbecoming fashion. Scandalized townsfolk had seen Enid at the school with him, in the museum with him, in the train with him;—they had met her at considerable distances from Mallingbridge, dressed for riding, with this groomlike attendant, but without a horse.

The news shocked and distressed Mrs. Thompson—during her first surprise and pain, it seemed to her as cruel as if Enid had driven a sharp knife into her heart. But was the thing true? Yates thought it was all true—none of it exaggerated.

Mrs. Thompson made a few discreet inquiries, ascertained the correctness of the facts, and then tackled Enid.

"Mother dear," said Enid, with self-possession but slightly ruffled, "no one could help liking Charles. I'm sure you'll like him when you see him."

"Why haven't I seen him? Why have you left me to learn his name from the lips of servants and busybodies? Oh, Enid," said Mrs. Thompson indignantly, yet very sadly, "didn't you ever think how deeply this would wound me?"

"But, mother dear, you must have known that it would happen some day—that sooner or later I should fall in love." [Pg 78]

"Yes, but I never guessed that, when the time came, or you fancied it had come, you would keep me in the dark—treat me as if I was a stranger, and not your best friend."

"Charlie didn't wish me to tell you about it just yet."

"And why not?"

"He said we were both old enough to know our own minds, and we ought to be quite sure that we really and truly suited each other before we talked about it. But we are both sure now."

"I think he has behaved very badly—almost wickedly."

"How can you say that, mother?"

"I say it emphatically. He is a man of the world—and he had no right to allow you to act so foolishly."

But Enid appeared not to understand her mother's meaning. She could not measure the enormity of her conduct when indulging in those train-journeys and museum-wanderings. She admitted everything; she was ashamed of nothing.

"Surely," said Mrs. Thompson, "you could see that a girl of your age cannot do such things without malicious people saying unkind things?"

"When one is in love, one cannot trouble to think what malicious people will say."

In fact Enid seemed to believe that she and Mr. Kenion had created a small universe of their own, into which no one else had a right to push themselves.

"Mother dear," and for the first time she spoke pleadingly and anxiously. "Please—please don't try to come between us. I could never give him up."

It was a turn of the knife with which she had stabbed her mother. The words of the appeal would have been appropriate in addressing a harsh and obdurate guardian, instead of an adoring parent. [Pg 79]

"If," said Mrs. Thompson sadly, "he is worthy of you, I shall be the last person in the world who will ask you to give him up."

Enid seemed delighted.

"Mother dear, he is more than worthy."

"We shall see.... But it all hangs on that *if*—a big *if*, I am much afraid.... You must pull yourself together, Enid, and be a good and brave girl—and you must prepare yourself for disappointment. So far, I do not receive satisfactory reports of him."

"No one on earth ought to be believed if they bring you tales against him."

And then little by little Enid told her mother of Mr. Kenion's many charms and virtues, and of how and why he had won her love so easily.

He came to dinner at the Salters, and he wore a red coat. She had never seen him till she saw him dining in pink, with brass buttons and white silk facings. He was a magnificent horseman—rode two winners at Cambridge undergraduate races;—had since ridden several seconds in point-to-points;—even Mr. Bedford, Young's new riding-master, confessed that he had a perfect seat on a horse. And he belonged to one of the oldest families in England. Although old Mr. Kenion was only a clergyman, he had a cousin who was an English marquis, and another cousin who was an Irish viscount—if six people had died, and a dozen people hadn't legally married, or hadn't been blessed with children, Charles himself would have been a lord.

Even if Mrs. Thompson had heard nothing to his disadvantage, the plain facts of the case would have convinced her that he was a bad lot. As a woman of business, she had little doubt that she was called upon to deal with a worthless unprincipled adventurer. His game had been to force her hand—by compromising the girl, insure the mother's consent to an engagement. If not interrupted in his plan, he would bring matters to a point where the choice lay between an imprudent marriage and the loss of reputation. When Mrs. Thompson thought of her cowardly adversary, anger made the blood beat at her temples. If she had been a father instead of a mother, she would have bought one of the implements of the chase to which he was so much addicted, and have given Mr. Kenion a wholesome horse-whipping. [Pg 80]

But when she thought of Enid all her pride smarted, and anger changed to dolorous regret. It was indescribably mortifying to think that Enid, the carefully brought up young lady, the highly finished pupil of sedate private governesses and a majestically fashionable school, should forget the ordinary rules of delicacy, modesty, propriety, and exhibit less reticence in her actions than might be expected from one of Bence's drapery girls. Enid had been pointed at, laughed at, talked about. It was horrible to Mrs. Thompson. It struck directly at her own sense of dignity and importance. In cheapening herself, Enid had lowered the value of everybody connected with her. Enid, slinking out of the house, furtively hurrying to her lover, clandestinely meeting him, and lingering at his side in unseemly obliviousness of the passing hours, had been not only jeopardising her own good fame, but robbing her mother of public esteem.

Yet far worse than the wound to her pride was the bitter blow to her affection. Half her life had been spent in proving that her greatest wish, her single aim was her child's happiness; but all the years counted for nothing. Trust and confidence extinguished; no natural impulse to pour out the heart's secrets to a mother's ear—"Charlie didn't wish me to tell you." Enid said this as if it formed a completely adequate explanation: she must of course implicitly obey the strange voice. [Pg 81]

The mother who worshipped her had sunk immediately to less than nothing. A man in a red coat, a man in gaiters, the first man who whistled to her—and Enid had gone freely and willingly to exchange the dull old love for the bright new one. There lay the stinging pain of it.

What to do? One must do something. Mrs. Thompson took up the business side of it, and determined as a first step to tackle the young man. Purchased horsewhips impossible; but carefully chosen words may produce some effect.

She told Enid—after several conversations on the disastrous subject—that she desired an interview with Mr. Charles Kenion. Enid might write, inviting him to call upon her mother, or Mrs. Thompson would herself write.

Enid said she would write to him without delay; but she begged that he might be received at the house, and not be asked to enter the shop. She seemed to dread the idea of bringing so fine a gentleman into close touch with the common aspects of mercantile existence.

"No," said Mrs. Thompson firmly. "Let him come to me in my shop. It is purely a business interview, and I prefer to hold it in a place of business."

It was a most unsatisfactory interview.

Mrs. Thompson hated the young man at the very first glimpse of him as he came lounging into her room. He was tall and skinny; his dark, straight hair was plastered back from a low forehead; he had no moustache; and his teeth, which showed too much in a narrow mouth, were ugly, set at a slightly projecting angle, as with parrots. No reasonable being could call him handsome; but of course his general air and manner were gentlemanlike—Mrs. Thompson admitted so much at once, and disliked him all the more for it. Gentlemanlikeness was his sole stock in trade: he would push that for all it was worth, and she was immediately conscious that in his easy tone and careless lounging attitude there was a quiet, steady assumption of his social value as the well-bred young gentleman whose father is related to the peerage. [Pg 82]

"Please be seated, Mr. Kenion."

"Thanks."

She had ignored his obvious intention of shaking hands, and he was not apparently in the least disconcerted by her refusal of the friendly overture.

"I feel sure, Mr. Kenion, that if we have a good talk, you and I will be able to understand each other."

"Er—yes, I hope so."

"I think it is important that you and I *should* understand each other as soon as possible."

"Thanks awfully. I'm sure it's very good of you to let me come. I know how busy you are."

He was looking at various objects in the room, and a slow smile flickered about his small mouth. He looked especially at some files on the desk, and at the massive door of one of the big safes standing ajar and displaying iron shelves. He looked at these things with childish interest; and Mrs. Thompson felt annoyance from the thought that the smile was intended to convey the inference of his never having seen such things before, and of his being rather amused by them.

But she permitted no indication of her thoughts to escape her. The governing powers of her mind were concentrated on the business in hand; her face was a solid mask, expressing quiet strength, firm resolution, worldly shrewdness, and it never changed except in colour, now getting a little redder, now a little paler; she sat squarely, so that her revolving chair did not turn an inch to one side or the other; and throughout the interview she seemed and was redoubtable. [Pg 83]

"My daughter tells me that you have proposed to her."

"Yes—I may as well say at once that I'm awfully in love.... And Enid has been good enough to—er—reciprocate. I'm sure I don't know what I've done to deserve such luck."

"Nor do I as yet, Mr. Kenion."

"Exactly. Of course Enid is a stunner."

"But it was about you, and not my daughter, that I wished to talk. Perhaps it will save time if I ask you a few questions. That is usual on these occasions, is it not?"

"Well, as to that, I can't say," and he laughed stupidly. "This is the first time I've been bowled over."

"As a question to begin with—what about your prospects, in whatever career you have planned?"

"My plans, don't you know, would depend more or less on Enid."

"But you can give me some account of your position in the world—and so forth."

"Oh, well, that's pretty well known—such as it is. Not brilliant, don't you know.... But I relied on Enid to tell you all that."

"No, please don't rely on her. Only rely on yourself, Mr. Kenion."

Something of the quiet swagger had evaporated. The sunshine came streaming down from a skylight and fell upon him. Mrs. Thompson had put him where he would get all the light, and she scrutinized him attentively.

His suit of grey flannels, although not of sporting cut or material, suggested nothing but a stable and horses; and beneath his casual air of gentlemanly ease there was raffishness, looseness, [Pg 84] disreputability. In the bright sunbeams he looked sallow and bilious; his eyelids drooped, an incipient yawn was lazily suppressed; and she thought that very likely he had been drinking last night and would soon be drinking again this morning.

Mentally she compared him with another young man. In her mind she carried now at all times the vividly detailed picture of a masculine type; and it was impossible not to use it as a standard or measure. Mr. Kenion seemed very weak and mean and valueless, when set beside her standard.

"What is your profession, Mr. Kenion?"

He had no profession: as she well knew, he was what is called a gentleman at large. With vague terms he conveyed the information to her again.

"Really? Not a professional man? Are you a man of property—landed estates, and so on?"

No, Mr. Kenion was acreless.

"But you are expecting property at your father's death? Is it entailed upon you? I mean, are you sure of the succession?"

Mr. Kenion smilingly confessed that his father's death would not bring him land.

"But you are assured that he can supply you with ample means during his lifetime?"

Oh, no. Mr. Kenion explained that the vicar of Chapel-Norton was in no sense a capitalist.

"My governor couldn't do anything more for me—and I shouldn't care to ask him. He has done a good deal for me already—it wouldn't be fair to my brothers and sisters to ask him to stump up again;" and he went on to hint plainly that in his opinion the fact of his being a gentleman—a real gentleman—should counterbalance such a trifle as the deficiency of material resources.

Mrs. Thompson refused to comprehend the hint.

"Surely, Mr. Kenion, if a young man proposes to a young lady—and asks her to engage herself to [Pg 85] him without her mother's knowledge, that should imply that he is prepared to take over all responsibilities?"

She had not uttered a single reproach, or even by innuendo upbraided him for the improper course that he had pursued when persuading Enid to defy the laws of chaperonage and go about with him alone. Her pride would not permit her to make the slightest allusion to the girl's folly. Besides, that would be to play his game for him. By her silence she intended to show him that he had not scored a point.

"Don't you admit as much as that, Mr. Kenion? If I were to countenance the suggested engagement, how do you propose to maintain such a wife suitably—in the manner in which she has been brought up?"

"Well, of course I couldn't promise to open a shop for her;" and he laughed with fatuous good-humour, as if what he had said was rather funny, and not an impertinence.

"There are worse things in the world than shops, Mr. Kenion."

"Exactly;" and he laughed again. "As to ways and means—of course I haven't made any inquiries of any sort. But Enid gave me to understand—or I gathered, don't you know, that money was no object."

"Indeed it is an object," said Mrs. Thompson warmly. "I might almost say it has been the object of my life. I know how difficult it is to earn, and how easy to waste.... But I doubt if anything can be gained by further discussion. Your answers to my questions have left me no alternative. I must altogether refuse my sanction to an engagement."

"You won't consent to it?"

"No, Mr. Kenion, the man who marries my daughter with my consent must first prove to me that [Pg 86] he is worthy of her."

"But of course as to that—well, Enid tells me she is over twenty-one."

"Oh, yes. I see what you mean. A man might marry her without my consent. But then he would get her—and not one penny with her.... That, Mr. Kenion, is quite final."

He seemed staggered by the downright weight of this final statement.

"Of course," he said, rather feebly, "we are desperately in love with one another."

Contempt flashed from her eyes as she asked him still another question or two.

"What did you expect—that I should welcome your proposal and thank you for it?"

"Well, Enid and I had made up our minds that you wouldn't thwart her wishes."

"But, Mr. Kenion, even if I had agreed and made everything easy and pleasant for you, surely you would not be content to live as a pensioner for the rest of your days?"

She was thinking of what Dick Marsden had said to her in the dusk by the river. "I could not pose as the pensioner of a rich wife." It seemed to her a natural and yet a noble sentiment; and she contrasted the proper manly frame of mind that found expression in such an utterance with the mean-spirited readiness to depend on others that Mr. Kenion confessed so shamelessly. Marsden was perhaps not a gentleman in the snobbish, conventional sense, but how much more a man than this Kenion!

"Don't you know," he was saying feebly; and, as he said it, he stifled another yawn; "I should certainly try to do something myself."

"What?"

"Well, perhaps a little farming. I think I could help to keep the pot on the boil by making and selling hunters—and a good deal can be done with poultry, if you set to work in the right way.... Enid seemed to like the notion of living in the country." [Pg 87]

Mrs. Thompson turned the revolving chair round a few inches towards the desk, and politely told Mr. Kenion that she need not detain him any further.

He had come in loungingly, and he went out loungingly; but he was limper after the interview than before it. He probably felt that the stuffing had been more or less knocked out of him; for he presently turned into a saloon bar, and sought to brace himself again with strong stimulants.

No doubt he complained bitterly enough to Enid of the severely chilling reception that he had met with in the queer back room behind the shop. Anyhow Enid complained with bitterness to her mother. Indeed at this crisis of her life Enid was horrid. Yates begged her to be more considerate, and committed a breach of confidence by telling her of how her unkind tone had twice made the mistress weep; but Enid could attend only to one thing at a time. She wanted her sweetheart, and she thought it very hard that anybody should attempt to deprive her of him.

"And it will all be no use, mother—because I never, never can give him up."

Thus the days passed miserably; and a sort of stalemate seemed to have occurred. Kenion had not retired, but he was not coming on; and Enid was horrid.

In her perplexity and distress Mrs. Thompson went to Mr. Prentice, and asked him for advice and aid.

Mr. Prentice, delighted to be restored to favour after his recent disgrace, was jovial and cheering. He pooh-poohed the notion that Enid had in the smallest degree compromised herself; he talked of the wide latitude given to modern girls, of their independence, their capacity to take care of themselves in all circumstances; and stoutly declared his belief that among fashionable people the chaperon had ceased to exist. [Pg 88]

"Don't you worry about that, my dear. No one is going to think any the worse of her for being seen with a cavalier dangling at her heels."

Nevertheless he heartily applauded Mrs. Thompson for her firm tackling of the indigent suitor; he offered to find out everything about Kenion and his family, and promised that he would render staunch aid in sending him "to the right-abouts."

When Mrs. Thompson called again Mr. Prentice had collected a formidable dossier, and he read out the damaging details of Mr. Kenion's history with triumphant relish.

"Now this is private detective work, not solicitors' work—and I expect a compliment for the quick way I've got the information.... Well then, there's only one word for Mr. Kenion—he's a thorough rotter."

And Mr. Prentice began to read his notes.

"Our friend," as he called the subject of the memoir, was sent down from Cambridge in dire disgrace. He had attempted an intricately dangerous transaction, with a credit-giving jeweller and three diamond rings at one end of it, and a pawnbroker at the other. The college authorities heard of it—from whom do you suppose? *The police!* Old Kenion paid the bill, to avoid something worse than the curtailment of the university curriculum. Since then "our friend" had been mixed up with horsedealers of ill repute—riding their horses, taking commissions when he could sell them.

"He gambles," said Mr. Prentice with gusto; "he drinks; he womani—I should say, his morals with the other sex are a minus quantity.... And last of all, I can tell you this. I've seen the fellow—got a man to point him out to me; and there's *blackguard* written all over him." [Pg 89]

"Then how *can* respectable people like the Salters entertain him?"

"Ah," said Mr. Prentice philosophically, "that's the way we live nowadays. The home is no longer sacred. People don't seem to care who they let into their houses. If a fellow can ride and can show a few decent relations, hunting folk forgive him a good deal. And the Salters very likely hadn't heard—or at any rate didn't *know* anything against him."

At his own suggestion, jumped at by his client, Mr. Prentice returned with Mrs. Thompson to St. Saviour's Court, and told Miss Enid that it would be madness for her any longer to encourage the attentions of such a ne'er-do-well.

"If you were my own daughter," said Mr. Prentice solemnly, "I should forbid your ever seeing him again. And I give you my word of honour I believe that before a year has past you'll thank Mrs. Thompson for standing firm now."

But Enid was still horrid. She seemed infatuated; she would not credit, she would not listen to, anything of detriment to her sweetheart's character. She spoke almost rudely to her mother; and when Mr. Prentice took it on himself to reprove her, she spoke quite rudely to him. Then she marched out of the room.

"I am afraid," said Mr. Prentice, "there'll be a certain amount of wretchedness before you bring her to reason."

There was wretchedness in the little house—Enid pining and moping, assuming the airs of a victim; her mother trying to soften the disappointment, arguing, consoling, promising better fish in the sea than as yet had come out of it. Enid refused to go away from Mallingbridge. Mrs. [Pg 90] Thompson herself longed for change, and the chance of forgetting all troubles; there was nothing to keep her here now, although her presence would be required in September; but Enid seemed tied by invisible strings to the home she was making so very uncomfortable.

She would not go away, and she would not undertake to refrain from seeing or writing to Mr. Kenion. She did give her word that she would not slink out and marry him on the sly. But she could safely promise that, because, under the existing conditions of stalemate, it was very doubtful if Mr. Kenion would abet her in so bold a measure. Probably she was aware that Mr. Kenion's courtship had been successfully checked; and the knowledge made her all the more difficult to deal with. Mr. Kenion was neither retiring, nor coming forward: he was just beating time; and perhaps Enid felt humiliated as well as angry when she observed his stationary position.

A pitiful state of affairs—mother and daughter separated in heart and mind; on one side increasing coldness, on the other lessening hope; an estrangement that widened every day.

Then at last Enid consented to start with her mother for a rapid tour in Switzerland. Mr. Kenion, it appeared, had crossed the Irish Channel on some kind of horse-business; and so Lucerne and Mallingbridge had become all one to Enid.

They stayed in many hotels, visited many new scenes; and Mrs. Thompson, looking at high mountains and broad lakes, was still vainly trying to recover her lost child. Enid was calm again, polite again, even conversational; but between herself and her mother she had made a wall as high as the loftiest mountain and a chasm as wide as the biggest of the lakes.

X

[Pg 91]

The books of Thompson's were made up and audited at the end of each summer season, and in accordance with an unbroken custom the proprietress immediately afterwards gave a dinner to the heads of departments. Printed invitations were invariably issued for this small annual banquet; the scene of the entertainment was the private house; and the highly glazed cards, with which Mrs. Thompson requested the honour of the company of Mr. Mears and the others in St. Saviour's Court at 6:45 for 7 o'clock, used to be boastfully shown along the counters by the eight or ten happy gentlemen who had received them.

During the course of the dinner—the very best that the Dolphin could send in—Mrs. Thompson would thank her loyal servants, give her views as to where the shop had failed to achieve the highest possible results, and discuss the plan of campaign for the next twelve months. The heads of departments, warmed with the generous food, cheered with the sparkling wine, charmed and almost overwhelmed by Mrs. Thompson's gracious condescension, said the same things every year, made the same suggestions, never by any chance contributed an original idea. But the dinner was doing them good; they would think better and work harder when it was only a memory. At the moment it was sufficient for them to realize that they were here, sitting at the same luxurious table with their venerated employer, revelling in her smiles, seeing her evening robe of splendour instead of the shop black; admiring her bare shoulders and her white gloves, her costly satin and lace, her glittering sequins or shimmering beads; and most of all admiring [Pg 92] her herself, the noble presiding spirit of Thompson's.

Jolly Mr. Prentice was always present—acting as a deputy-host; and at the end of dinner he always gave the traditional toast.

"Gentlemen, raise your glasses with me, and drink to the best man of business in Mallingbridge. That is, to Mrs. Thompson.... Mrs. Thompson.... Mrs. Thompson!"

Then little Mr. Ridgway of Silks used to start singing.

"'For she's a jolly good fellow'"....

"Please, please," said Mrs. Thompson, picking up her fan, and rising. "*Without* musical honours, please;" and the chorus immediately stopped. "Gentlemen, I thank you;" and she sailed out of the room, always turning at the door for a last word. "Mr. Prentice, the cigars are on the side table. Don't let my guests want for anything."

Now once again the night of this annual feast had come round, the champagne corks were popping, the Dolphin waiters were carrying their dainty dishes; and Mrs. Thompson sat at the top of her table, like a kindly queen beaming on her devoted courtiers.

Yates, standing idle as a major-domo while the hirelings bustled to and fro, was ravished by the elegant appearance of the queen. Yates had braced her into some new tremendous fashionable stays from Paris, and she thought the effect of slimness was astonishing. Truly Mrs. Thompson had provided herself with a magnificent dress—a Paris model, of grey satin with lace and seed pearls all over the bodice; and her opulent shoulders, almost bursting from the pretty shoulder-straps, gleamed finely and whitely in the lamp-light. Her hair made a grand full coronet, low across the brow; her face seemed unusually pale; and there were dark shadows about her glowing eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Mears—as you say, travelling opens the mind. But I fear I have brought home no new information." [Pg 93]

"What you have brought home," said Mr. Ridgway, gallantly, "is a pleasure to see—and that is, if I may say so"— The little man had intended to pay a courageously direct compliment, by saying that Mrs. Thompson had never looked so attractive as she did now after the brief Continental tour; but suddenly his courage failed him, nervousness overcame him, and, floundering, he tailed off weakly. "You have, I hope, ma'am, brought home replenished health and renewed vigour."

"Thank you, Mr. Ridgway;" and the nervousness seemed to have communicated itself to Mrs. Thompson's voice. "A change of scene is certainly stimulating."

"I've always had a great ambition," said Mr. Fentiman of Woollens, "to get a peep at Switzerland before I die."

"Then you must arrange to do so," said Mrs. Thompson, with kindly significance. "Some autumn—I'm sure it would be easy to arrange."

"I figure it," said Mr. Fentiman sententiously, "as a gigantic panorama—stupefying in its magnitude—and, ah, in all respects unique."

"It is very beautiful," said Mrs. Thompson; and she glanced at Enid, who was pensively playing with her breadcrumbs.

"The Swiss," said Mr. Mears, "are reputed a thrifty race. Did you, madam, observe signs of economic prosperity among the people?"

Mr. Prentice chimed in boisterously from the bottom of the table.

"What no one will ever observe among the Swiss people is a pretty girl. Did you see a pretty girl on all your travels, Mrs. Thompson—except the one you took with you?" And Mr. Prentice bowed to Enid, and then laughed loudly and cheerfully. [Pg 94]

"Is that a fact?" asked Mr. Ridgway. "Are they really so ill-favoured?"

"Plainest-headed lot in Europe," shouted Mr. Prentice.

"And do you, madam, endorse the verdict?"

"Oh, no. Far too sweeping;" and Mrs. Thompson laughed nervously, and attempted to draw her daughter into the conversation. "Enid, Mr. Ridgway is asking if we saw no pretty girls in Switzerland."

But Enid was dull. She had volunteered to join the party, but she would not assist the hostess in making it a success. She need not have been here; and it was stupid or unkind of her to come, and yet not try to be pleasant.

"Didn't we, mother? I don't remember."

All this strained talk about Switzerland was heavy and spiritless. One heard the note of effort all through it. In the old days they would have been chattering freely of the shop and themselves. Mrs. Thompson felt painfully conscious that there was something wrong with the feast. No gaiety. Some influence in the air that proved alternately chilling and nerve-disturbing. She knew that Mr. Prentice felt it, too. He was endeavouring to make things go; and when he wanted things to go, he became noisy. He was growing noisier and noisier.

She looked at her guests while Mr. Prentice bellowed in monologue. They were eating and drinking, but somehow failing to enjoy themselves.

Big Mr. Mears, sitting beside her, ate enormously. He wore a black bow tie, with a low-cut black waistcoat and his voluminous frock-coat—he would not go nearer to the conventional dress-clothes, not judging the swallow-tail as befitting to his station in life, or his figure. Scrubby little Mr. Ridgway, on her other side, emptied his glass with surprising rapidity. Mr. Fentiman, a tall [Pg 95] skinny man, ate almost as much as Mr. Mears. He had cleared his plate and was looking at the ceiling, with his long neck saliently exposed above a turn-down collar, as he dreamed perhaps of next year's holiday and a foreign trip financed by a liberal patroness. Wherever she turned her eyes, she saw the familiar commonplace faces—bald heads glistening, jaws masticating, hands busy with knife and fork; but nowhere could she see any light-hearted jollity or genuine amusement and interest.

She looked at the head of China and Glass last of all. On this occasion Mr. Marsden made his initial appearance at her hospitable board. It was, of course, impossible to leave him out of the gathering; but great, very great trouble of mind had been aroused by the necessity to include him. She had feared the meeting under the relaxed conditions of friendly informal intercourse. Perhaps, so far as she was concerned, all the nerve-vibrating element in the atmosphere was caused by his quiet unobtrusive presence.

He wore faultless evening-dress, with a piqué shirt, a white waistcoat, and a flower in his button-hole; and, sitting at the other end of the table, near Mr. Prentice, he was very silent—almost as silent as Enid. Not quite, because he spoke easily and naturally when anybody addressed him. And his silence was smiling and gracious. Among the other men he seemed to be a creature from a different world—so firm in his quiet strength, so confident in his own power, so young, so self-possessed, and so extraordinarily, overbearingly handsome.

The dinner was more than half over; the Dolphin waiters were carving and serving some savoury game; Mrs. Thompson exerted herself as a watchful and attentive hostess.

"Mr. Greig, you mustn't refuse the grouse. It was specially sent from Scotland for us."

"Really, madam," said Mr. Greig, the obese chief of Cretonnes etc., "your menoo is that ample I [Pg 96] find it difficult not to shirk my duties to it. But still, since you're so kind as to mention it—yes, I thank you."

"That's right, Mr. Greig."

"Greig, my good friend," said Mr. Prentice, "you'd make a poor show at the Guildhall or the Mansion House, if you can't stay the course without all these protestations and excuses."

"I've never dined with the Lord Mayor," said Mr. Greig; "but I cannot believe his lordship offers the most distinguished company a more ample menoo than this."

"Enid," said Mrs. Thompson, "do have some grouse."

"No, thank you, mother."

It was Enid who cast a chill upon everything and everybody; all the cold and depressing influence issued from her. She looked pretty enough in her pink and silver frock, and she ought to have been a charming and welcome addition to the party; but she would not put herself to the trouble of talking and smiling. She made no slightest effort to set these more or less humble folk at their ease. She showed that she was absent-minded, and allowed people to guess that she was also bored. Now Mr. Prentice was rallying her with genial, paternal freedom—and she would not even answer his questions. He turned away, to bellow at Mr. Fentiman; and obviously felt crushed by his failure to make things go.

The point had been reached when it was customary to begin their friendly business talk; but to-night it seemed impossible for them to speak comfortably of the shop. The presence of the fashionable outsider tied all their tongues.

Old Mears ponderously started the ball; but no one could keep it rolling.

"Well, ma'am," said Mr. Mears. "Another year has come and gone. We are in a position to look [Pg 97] behind us; and, as usual, before we commence to look ahead of us, any words that fall from your lips will be esteemed a favour."

"Hear, hear," said Mr. Ridgway, shyly and feebly.

"Really, gentlemen," said Mrs. Thompson, "I don't know that I have any words likely to be of value."

"Always valuable—your words," said fat Mr. Greig.

"But I take this opportunity," and Mrs. Thompson looked nervously at her daughter—"this opportunity of thanking you for all you have done for me in the past, and of assuring you that I place the fullest confidence in you—in you all—for the future."

Enid had thrown a blight over the proceedings. She made them all shy and uneasy. Even Mrs. Thompson herself could not speak of the shop without hesitating and stammering.

"So, really," she went on, "that is all I need say, gentlemen. But, as always, I shall be—shall be glad—extremely glad if you will give me your candid views on any subjects—on all subjects.... Have you any suggestions to make, Mr. Mears?"

Mr. Mears coughed, and hummed and hawed before replying.

"We must adhere to our maxims—and not get slack, no matter how good business may be."

"That's it," said Mr. Ridgway. "Keep up the high standard of Thompson's, whatever else we do."

"Any suggestions from *you*, Mr. Greig?"

"No more," said Mr. Greig, "than the remarks which my confreers have passed. I say the same myself."

She asked them each in turn, hurrying through her questions, scarcely waiting to hear the unusually imbecile answers.

"Mr. Marsden—have you any suggestions to make?"

"None," said Marsden, firmly and unhesitatingly. "Unless, madam, you would authorise me to break the neck of Mr. Archibald Bence." [Pg 98]

This sally was received with universal applause and laughter.

"Bravo," cried Mr. Prentice. "Take me with you, my boy, when you go on that job."

"And me, too."

"And I must be there—if it's only to pick up the remains."

"And to bury 'em decently."

"Which is more than Master Bence deserves."

They were all laughing heartily and happily, all talking at once, gesticulating, pantomiming. Even old Mears beat upon the table with a fork to express his satisfaction, and his agreement with the general feeling.

All the tongues were untied by the seasonable facetiousness of Mr. Marsden. The hostess flashed a grateful glance at him; but he was not looking in her direction. He was courteously listening to Mr. Prentice, who had lowered his voice now that things had begun to go of their own accord.

And things continued to go well for the rest of the dinner. The name of Bence had acted like a charm; they all could find something to say about the hated and unworthy rival, and their hitherto frozen tongues now wagged unceasingly.

"Did you ever see such wretched little starveling girls as he puts into the bazaar at Christmas?"

"It's a disgrace to the town, importing such waifs and strays."

"They tell me he gets 'em out of a place in Whitechapel—and they're in charge of a couple of detectives all the time."

"Yes, you bet. Two upon ten, or the poor little beggars would prig his gimcracks as fast as he put them out." [Pg 99]

"I don't vouch for it—but I believe it myself: they had three cases of pocket-picking in an hour. And it was one of his shop-girls who done it."

"That's a nice way of doing business! 'Step this way, miss, and look at our twopenny 'a'penny toys'—and pick the customer's pocket as you are serving her."

While they talked so cheerily and pleasantly Mrs. Thompson several times glanced down the table at her youngest manager. She need not have dreaded the meeting. He had made it quite easy for her. He had proved that he possessed the instincts of a true gentleman—not a make-believe gentleman; he had displayed consideration, tact, good breeding; and by his ready wit he had come to her aid and dissipated the dullness of her guests. She sat smiling and nodding in the midst of their lively chatter, and looked at Mr. Marsden's strong, clear-cut profile. It seemed to her statuesque, noble, magnificent; and it did not once change into a full face during all the time she watched it.

Now the guests had eaten their dessert, and the hired waiters had gone from the room. The moment had come for the toast.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Prentice, "fill your glasses and drink a health. I give you two people rolled into one—that is, the best Man of business in Mallingbridge and Mrs. Thompson.... Mrs. Thompson!"

"Now, all together," said Mr. Ridgway; and he began to sing. "'For *she*'s a jolly good fel-low'"....

"Please, please," said Mrs. Thompson, getting up from her chair, and stopping the chorus. "No musical honours, *please*.... Gentlemen, I thank you.... And now my daughter and I will leave you to your coffee and cigars."

Then she followed Enid to the door, and turned on the threshold. [Pg 100]

"Mr. Prentice, don't let our guests want for anything.... Yates has put the cigars on the side-table."

In the other room Enid walked over to the piano, and, without uttering a word, began to play.

"After all," said Mrs. Thompson, with a sigh of relief, "it didn't go off so badly."

"No," said Enid, looking at her fingers as they slowly struck the notes, "I suppose not."

"What is it you are playing?" Mrs. Thompson asked the question abruptly.

"Chopin."

"Can't you play anything gayer? That's so sad."

"Is it?... I don't feel very gay."

The plaintive and depressing melody continued, while Mrs. Thompson walked about the room restlessly. Then she came to the side of the piano, and leaned her arm upon the folded lid.

"Enid. Stop playing." She spoke eagerly and appealingly; and Enid, looking up, saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

"Mother, what's the matter?"

"Everything is the matter;" and she stretched out her hand above the ivory keys. "Enid, are you purposely, wilfully unkind to me?... Where has my child gone?... It's wicked, and *stupid* of you. Because I am trying to save you from a great folly, you give me these cold tones; day after day, you—you treat me as a stranger and an enemy."

"Mother, I am sorry. But you must know what I feel about it.... Is it any good going over the ground again?"

"Yes, it *is* good," said Mrs. Thompson impetuously; and she withdrew the hand that had vainly [Pg 101] invited another hand to clasp it. "You and I must come to terms. This sort of thing is what I can't stand—what I *won't* stand." With a vigorous gesture she brushed away her tears, and began to walk about the room again.

Enid was looking down her long nose at the key-board; and her whole face expressed the sheep-like but unshakable obstinacy that she had inherited from her stupid father.

"Mother," she said slowly, "I told you at the very beginning that I could never give him up."

Then Yates brought in the coffee.

"Put it down there," said Mrs. Thompson, "and leave us."

And Yates, with shrewd and rather scared glances at mother and daughter, went out again.

"I don't believe—I *know* that this man is not worthy of you. I won't tell you how meanly I think of him."

"No, please don't speak against him any more. You have done that so often already."

"And haven't I the right to state my opinion—and to act on it, too? Am I not your mother? Can I forget that—even if you forget it?"

"Mother, I haven't forgotten. I remember all your goodness—up to now."

"Mr. Kenion simply wants the money that I could give you, if I pleased."

"He only wants us to have just sufficient to live on."

"The money is his first aim."

"Mother, if that were *true*, nothing would ever make me believe it."

"No doubt he is fond of you—in a way.... Enid, I implore you not to harden yourself against me.... Of course he is attracted by you. Who wouldn't be? You are young and charming—with every [Pg 102] grace and spell to win men's love. Any man should love you—and other men will.... Be reasonable—be brave. It isn't as if you could possibly feel that this was the last chance—the last offer of love in a woman's life."

"Mother, it must always be the last chance—the only chance, when one has set one's heart on it."

"Set your heart!" cried Mrs. Thompson, vehemently and passionately. "Your heart? You haven't got a heart—or you couldn't, you couldn't make me so miserably unhappy as you are doing now."

"I am very sorry—but I share the unhappiness, don't I? Mother, I, too, am most miserably unhappy."

Mrs. Thompson was pacing to and fro rapidly and excitedly; her bosom heaved, and the words were beginning to pour out with explosive force.

"He is everything then—the sun, moon, and stars to you; and I am a cipher. The mother who bore you counts for less than any Tom, Dick, or Harry who puts his arms round your waist and pulls your silly face towards him."

"Mother!"

"Yes, mother! That's my name still—and you use it from habit. Only the fact—the plain meaning of the word is gone."

"Mother, they'll hear you in the other room."

"But I'm not a woman to be ignored and slighted—and pushed aside. There's nothing of the patient Griselda in my nature. I am what I *am*—all alive still—not done for, and on the shelf. I have subordinated my life to yours—let you rule it how you chose. But you must rule it by kindness—not by cold looks and cutting words. I don't submit to that—I *won't* submit to it."

"Mother dear, I have told you how grateful I am."

"And gratitude—as you understand it—is no use to me. I've a *right*—yes, a right to your affection —the natural affection that I've striven to retain, that I've done nothing to forfeit." [Pg 103]

"No, no. Mother dear, you have my affection."

"Then what's it worth? Not much—no, not very much, if the first time I appeal to your sense of duty too, it isn't to be found. I tell you not to be a fool—and you swear I am wrecking your life. I'm the villain of your trumpery little drama—plotting and scheming to frustrate your love and spoil your life. That's too rich—that's too good, altogether too good."

The expression of Enid's face had changed from obstinacy to alarm. She watched her mother apprehensively, and stammered some calming phrases.

"Mother dear, I'm sorry. Don't, don't get excited—or I'm sure they'll hear us in the other room."

"Your life, yes. And what about *my* life?" The words were pouring out in an unchecked torrent. "Look back at my life and see what it has been. You're twenty-two, aren't you? And I was that age more than twenty-two years ago—and all the twenty-two years I've given you. Something for something—not something for nothing. We traders like fair exchange—but you've put yourself above all that.... No, leave me alone. Don't touch me, since you have ceased to care for me."

Enid had come from the piano, and was endeavouring to subdue the emotional explosion by a soothing caress.

"Leave me to myself—leave me alone. I'm nothing to you—and you know it."

Enid's caress was roughly repulsed; and Mrs. Thompson sat upon the sofa, hid her flushed face upon her arms, and burst into a fit of almost hysterical sobbing.

"Mother, mother—don't, please don't;" and Enid sat beside her, patted her shoulder, and begged her quickly to compose herself lest the gentlemen should come and see her in her distress. [Pg 104]

"It's so cruel," sobbed Mrs. Thompson. "And now—now of all times, I can't bear it.... But I mustn't let myself go like this. I daren't give way like this."

Then very soon her broad back ceased to shake; the convulsing gasping sobs were suppressed, and she sat up and dried her eyes.

"Enid, have I made a horrible fright of myself?" And she rose from the sofa, and went to look in the glass over the fireplace. The tears had left little trace; the reflection in the glass reassured her.

She was comparatively calm when she returned to the sofa and sat down again.

"Enid, my dear, I'm ashamed to have been betrayed into such weakness," and she smiled piteously. "But you have tested me too severely of late—since this unlucky affair began. I have thought myself strong enough; but the strongest things have their snapping point—even iron and steel;—and I am only flesh and blood.... You don't understand, but I warn you that I *need* the sympathy and the kindness which you withhold from me.... Be nice to me—be kind to me."

But Enid was crying now. Tears trickled down her narrow face. The strange sight of her mother's violent and explosive distress had quite overcome her.

"I do try to do what's right," she whimpered.

"Yes, my darling girl," said Mrs. Thompson tenderly. "And so do I. It's all summed up in that. We must do what's right and wise—not just what seems easy and delightful. There. There.... Use my handkerchief;" and in her turn she reminded Enid that the gentlemen would be with them at any minute.

"Mother, when you ask me to give him up, it's more than I *can* do." [Pg 105]

"But would I ask you if I wasn't certain—as certain as I can be of anything in the world—that you could never be happy with him? You'd be risking a lifetime's regret."

"I am ready to take the risk. Don't come between us."

"Enid, my dearest—my own Enid, trust me—trust the mother who has never, never thwarted you till now. You know I'm not selfish—not greedy of money. Truly I have only worked for you.... And think—though I hate to say it—of the many—the many, many things I have given up for your sake.

It wasn't difficult perhaps—because you were everything on earth to me. But any middle-aged woman who knew my life would tell you that I have made great sacrifices—and all for you."

"I know you have, mother. It's dreadful to think of how you have worked, year after year."

"Then can't you make this one sacrifice for me?"

"If it was anything else;" and Enid sniffed, and another tear or two began to trickle. "If it was anything else, I'd obey you implicitly—and know it was my duty."

"Why isn't it your duty now?"

"Because this is so different."

"Enid, stop. Don't say any more."

"But, mother dear, do understand what I mean."

"Yes, I understand too well."

"I'm not ungrateful. If you called on me to pay back some of my debt, I'd work for you till I dropped. I'd try to make every sort of sacrifice that you have made for me. But when it comes to a woman's love, she *can't* sacrifice herself."

"Then, by God, I'll take you at your word."

Mrs. Thompson had sprung up from the sofa; and once more she paced to and fro, a prey to an increasing excitement. [Pg 106]

"Mother? You'll consent?"

"Yes—I consent. A woman can't sacrifice her love! Very good. So be it. That's your law. Then obey it—and, as there's a God in Heaven, I'll obey it, too."

The gentlemen, leaving their dinner table, heard the raised voice, and paused in surprise outside the drawing-room door. When they entered the room, Mrs. Thompson, with blazing cheeks and flashing eyes, turned towards them and gazed eagerly through the open doorway.

"Mr. Marsden, where are you? Come here."

Marsden went to her quickly; and she drew him away to the curtained windows, and spoke in an eager whisper.

"Did you mean what you told me by the river?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean it still?"

"Yes."

"On your honour as a man, is that true?"

"Yes."

Then she took his right hand in her two hands, and held it tightly.

"Gentlemen—listen to me, please;" and she spoke with feverish resolution. "This is not perhaps an opportune moment for making the announcement—but I want you to know, I want all my friends to know without further delay that Mr. Marsden and I are engaged to be married."

Silence like a dead weight seemed to fall upon the room.

Enid had uttered a half-stifled exclamation of horror, but blank amazement rendered the guests dumb. Mr. Prentice, who had become apoplectically red, opened and shut his mouth; but no sound issued from it. Mr. Mears, with bowed head and heavily hanging arms, stared at the carpet. Gradually every eye sank, and all were staring downwards—as if unable to support the sight of the couple who stood hand in hand before them. [Pg 107]

At last Mr. Ridgway tried to say something; and then Mr. Fentiman feebly echoed his words.

"You have taken our breath away, madam. But it behoves us to—ah—congratu—to felicitate."

"Or to proffer our good wishes."

"And our best hopes."

But Mrs. Thompson did not look at them or listen to them. Marsden was speaking to her in a low voice.

"Yes, yes, yes. Every word. Every word. I meant all I said then—and I mean it a thousand times more now. You are making me the proudest of mortals—but don't forget one thing."

"What?"

"Why, all I said about the difficulties—the, the inequality of our position, which must somehow be got rid of. But of course you've thought it out."

"What do you mean?" She was gazing at him with love and admiration; but an intense anxiety came into her eyes.

"Well, I mean exactly what I said then. Nothing can change my mind. But, as I told you, I can't have all the world pointing at me as a penniless adventurer who has caught a rich wife.... But you've planned—you mean to prevent—"

His eyes did not meet hers. She dropped his hand, and looked at him now with a passionate, yearning intentness.

"Go on—quickly. Say what it is that you mean."

"I mean, it is to be a thorough partnership—husband and wife on an equal footing. You mean it, too, don't you? Partners in love and partners in everything else!"

"Yes," she said, after a scarcely perceptible hesitation. "I did mean that. You have anticipated what I intended." [Pg 108]

"My sweetheart and my wife." As he whispered the words, her whole face lit up with triumphant joy. "I knew that you meant it all along. And I'm the happiest proudest man that ever lived.... Now you'd better tell them. Let them know that, too."

Again she hesitated. She was in a fever of excitement, with all real thought obliterated by the flood of emotion; and yet perhaps already, though unconsciously to herself, she had attained a complete knowledge of the fatal nature of her mistake.

"Do you want me to tell them now—at once?"

"Yes," he said gaily. "No time like the present. Let them know how my dear wife and I mean to stand—and then there'll be nothing for anybody to chatter about."

"Very well."

"That's right;" and he gently drew her round towards her audience. "That's *our* way—side by side, shoulder to shoulder, you and I, facing the world."

"Gentlemen," said Mrs. Thompson firmly, "there's another thing that I must add to what I have said. Mr. Marsden, when he comes into this house as my husband, will come into the business as my partner."

Marsden, with his head raised and his shoulders squared, stood boldly smiling at the silent men.

XI

[Pg 109]

She was conscious that the whole world had turned against her; in every face she could read her condemnation; when she drove through High Street she felt like a deposed monarch—hats were still removed, but with pitying courtesy instead of with loyal fervour. Constraint and embarrassment sounded in every fresh voice to which she listened. Mr. Prentice, taking her instructions, assumed a ridiculously hollow cheerfulness, as if he had been speaking to somebody who had contracted an incurable disease. The shop staff dared not look at her, and yet could not look away from her with any air of naturalness; up and down the counters male and female assistants, so soon as she appeared, became preposterously busy; and she knew that they avoided meeting her eyes. She knew also that the moment she had passed, their eyes followed her—they were at once frightened and fascinated, as if she had been a person who had confessed to a great crime, who was still at large, but who would be arrested almost immediately.

During the first few days of her engagement she suffered under the heavy sense that every friend had abandoned her. In street, shop, or house, she could find no comforter. Even Yates was cruel.

"Why do you look so glum?" At last she roundly upbraided Yates. "Don't wait upon me at all, if you can only do it as though you were going to a funeral."

Yates, in sorrowful tones said that her glumness was caused by her thoughts.

Then Mrs. Thompson piteously prayed for support from the old servant. [Pg 110]

"Are you going to drive me mad among you—make me commit suicide? Oh, Yates, do stand by me."

And Yates wept, and swore that henceforth she would stand by her mistress.

"Say you think I'm right in what I'm doing."

"I'll say this, ma'am—that no one should be the judge except you of what's right. No one hasn't any qualification to interfere with you in what you please to do."

"But, Yates, say you approve of it."

"Well then, I do say it."

Yates said that she approved; but no one else said so. Enid did not pretend to approve—although she talked very little about her mother's plans. She had obtained the desire of her own heart; she and Mr. Kenion were to be made one as soon as possible; she was buying her trousseau, and Mr. Prentice was drawing the marriage settlement.

Both marriages were to be pushed on rapidly. No time like the present, as Marsden joyously declared. "What's the good of waiting, when you have made up your mind?" But Enid was to be cleared out of the way first; and not till Enid had left the little house could her mother throw herself completely into her own dream of bliss.

There were some trifling difficulties, some slight delays. Mr. Kenion, as one about to become a member of the family, frankly confessed that he viewed the Marsden alliance with repugnance. He told Mr. Prentice that it altered the whole condition of affairs, that his relatives begged him to stand out for a much more liberal settlement than would previously have appeared to be ample; and he hinted on his own account that if Mrs. Thompson didn't stump up, he would feel justified in withdrawing altogether. Mr. Prentice, however, made short work of this suitor's questionings and threatenings. He did not mention that, on the strong advice of Mr. Marsden, his client had largely cut down the proposed amount; but he said that in his own opinion the settlement was quite ample. [Pg 111]

"Of course," said Kenion, "what we get now is all we shall ever get. I don't value Enid's further expectations at a brass farthing."

"That's as it may be. Possibly you are wise in not building on the future. But my instructions merely concern the present. As to the amount decided on by my client, whether big or little—well, it is to take or leave."

Charlie Kenion, lounging deep in one of the solicitor's leather armchairs, said that he would take it.

At this period Mr. Prentice also received visits from the other suitor. Marsden called several times, to talk about the terms of his partnership, and to urge the importance of not overdoing it with regard to the provision for Enid. These marriage settlements, he reminded the solicitor, are irrevocable things—what you put into them you can't get out of them. Nothing ever comes back to you. A woman in Mrs. Thompson's position should therefore exercise some caution. She is rich now, but she may not always be so rich; she must not give away more than she can spare; it is folly not to keep a reserve fund.

Then, when paying his last call before his departure for London, he slid very naturally from the subject of Enid's settlement to a vague question about a settlement in his own case. Was there any idea of making a permanent provision for him?

"Of course there is. You are to be a partner."

That of course was understood, but Marsden had some doubt as to whether there were other intentions.

"I am only asking," he said pleasantly. "I leave myself entirely in your hands—and I'd like to say that I've the utmost confidence in *you*." [Pg 112]

"Thank you," said Mr. Prentice drily.

"These settlements seem the usual things in marriages—so I thought the rule would apply to my marriage."

"In *your* marriage, Mr. Marsden, there is very little that is usual—but, nevertheless, I think the usual rules should apply."

"You do? You think some moderate settlement would be proper."

"Very proper indeed—if you have anything to settle. By giving you a half share in her business Mrs. Thompson is treating you with a generosity—a munificence—an unprecedented munificence—"

"Oh, I know she is."

"And if therefore you on your side can make a settlement—however moderate—in her favour, it will be a graceful and a natural act."

Marsden laughed, and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's very funny—very neatly put. But I see what you mean. You think I ought not to have made the suggestion."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Prentice, obviously meaning, "Oh, yes."

"I fancied that she herself might wish it; but I haven't said a word about it to her.... Don't mention it to her.... Good morning."

Meanwhile Enid was collecting garments, hats, frills, and feathers. She had been given unlimited scope; prices need not be scrutinized; the best London shops, as well as Thompson's, were open

to her; and she went about her business in a commendably business-like fashion. She did not require Mrs. Thompson's advice—she knew exactly what she wanted.

When those few trickling tears had been dried and the bombshell-tidings of her mother's engagement had burst upon her with such appalling violence, she hardened and grew cold again. Nothing now would soften her. [Pg 113]

She calmly announced that Charles had been lucky enough to find just the house they wished for—a farmhouse recently converted into a gentleman's residence, with some land and excellent stabling, eight miles from Mallingbridge, between Haggart's Cross and Chapel-Norton; but she did not invite Mrs. Thompson to inspect the premises, or even to examine the patterns of the new wallpapers.

She disgusted Mr. Prentice by her obstinate support of her future husband in his final contention that the life interest given to him under the settlement should be absolute and inalienable. Mr. Prentice naturally desired to protect her from obvious dangers; but, instead of strengthening his hands, she idiotically declared her wish to compliment Kenion by an exhibition of blind confidence.

"It must be as Enid wishes," said Mrs. Thompson; and Mr. Prentice was forced to give way.

The days were racing by. Mornings had a snap of frost in the air; autumn rains brought the yellow leaves tumbling from the churchyard elms, and autumn winds sent them spinning and eddying over the iron railings into St. Saviour's Court. Very soon now October would be here—and on the first day of October the church bells were to ring for Enid Thompson, spinster, of this parish.

Mrs. Thompson heard the banns read; but she could not hear the other banns in which the name of Thompson was again mumbled. Her emotion made the sound of the parson's voice inaudible to her.

One afternoon she saw Yates carrying up a large cardboard box to Enid's dressing-room, and the printed label on the box gave her a stab of pain. *Bence Brothers!* Enid, pressed for time, or now careless of how often she wounded her mother's sensibilities, had gone across the road to buy her ultimate batch of fal-lals. [Pg 114]

Then one morning—a dull, grey first of October—Enid offered her cheek to her mother's lips.

"I hope you'll be very happy, mother." These were her last words.

The rooks, startled by the clashing bells, flew up from the tops of the churchyard trees; the misty air vibrated as the organ rolled out its voluminous music; the keen, sharp-edged wind blew the dead leaves down the court and past the house;—and Enid was blown away with them, into her lover's arms and out of her mother's life, as it seemed, forever.

The days were swinging in a mad whirl; Mrs. Thompson had entered upon her feverish dream; and nothing outside herself seemed of any consequence to her now—except the man who was to be her husband.

He was in London, well supplied with cash for his immediate necessities, and he would not return until he came to lead her to the altar. Several times she ran up to London with Yates, bought trousseau all the morning, and then, casting off Yates, had luncheon with him at some smart restaurant.

A first glance told her that he was more splendid than any other man in the building, and then everything about and beyond him became vague and dim and unsubstantial. She could see nothing else. Light and sound mingled; past and present fused, to make a panoramic changing background in front of which he could stand out more solidly and brilliantly. She heard the wheels of the train that had brought her to him, and at the same time she heard the waltz played by this restaurant band; she was surrounded by meaningless figures, from the field of vision and the fog of memory; close to her sat fashionable people at little tables;—but among them and through them moved the people she had seen in the open street, at the dressmaker's, to-day, yesterday, or a year ago. [Pg 115]

But there was nothing vague or uncertain about him: he was overpoweringly, gloriously distinct. She could see every thread in his lovely new clothes, every hair in his perfumed, carefully brushed moustache, each tiny speck of brown on the liquid amber of his eyes. From those eyes, as she knew so well, he could shoot the darts of flame that lodged a burning distress in one's breast, as easily as he could send forth the gentle caressing beams that made one slowly melt in ecstasy.

His glance was always softly caressing now, soothing her, calming her, filling her with joy.

She could not eat. She could only look at him while he ate, with hearty youthful vigour, quite enough for two. She drank a glassful out of his bottle of wine, and found an incredible delight in watching him drink the remainder. The waiter put the programme of the day's music by her side; but it did not matter what the band played. Her music—the only significant music—was in her sweetheart's voice. He called her Janey, Little woman, My kind fairy; and each time that he spoke to her thus endearingly she thrilled with rapture.

"Well, Janey, what do you think of my new coat? I look all right, don't I? You are not ashamed to be seen with me—eh, little woman?... And how's Mallingbridge? What do they say of me down there?...

"Oh, by the way, I haven't thanked my kind fairy for the present she sent me yesterday. It's a dressing-case fit for a king;" and then he laughed gaily. "Janey, take care. You are trying to spoil me." [Pg 116]

Sometimes for a moment he held her hand under the table-cloth, and pressed it lovingly.

When the luncheon was over she was glad to notice that he tipped the waiter liberally. It would have been irksome to her, as a prodigious tipper, to observe any economy—but Marsden gave almost as much as if she herself had taken the money out of the purse. She used to hand him her purse as they went into the restaurant, and he gave it back to her as they came out again.

Serving-girls at the fashionable London shops were inclined to smile while they waited upon Mrs. Thompson choosing her nuptial finery. She seemed to them so innocent—appealing to them with simple trustfulness, and begging them to show her not merely pretty things, but the things that gentlemen would think pretty.

In truth, all her business faculty had temporarily forsaken her; the strong will, the quick insight, the grit and the grip were gone; the experience of long years had been washed out: she was an inexperienced girl again, with all a girl's tremors, joyous hopes, and nameless fears for the future.

Her fingers shook as she smoothed and patted the wonderful underclothes offered by a famous lingerie establishment; and as old Yates, sitting by the side of her mistress, gave a casting vote for this or that daintily laced garment, the lingerie young woman was obliged to turn a slim back in order to conceal her mirth. Perhaps it would have made her cry if she could have understood. But no one could see the poignantly touching truth, that beneath the beaded mantle of this reddish, stoutish, middle-aged customer, a maiden's heart was fondly beating.

"You know, Yates, I'm not so stupid as to suppose that I shall always be able to keep him tied to my apron strings." This was in the train, when they were returning to Mallingbridge after an arduous day's shopping. They had the compartment to themselves, and they nearly filled it with their parcels. "Men must be allowed freedom and liberty." [Pg 117]

"Yes, ma'am, *bachelor* gentlemen. But I'm not so sure about too much liberty for *married* gentlemen."

"They can't be continually cooped up in their home—however comfortable you make it for them. No, many happy marriages are upset by the wife's silliness—in thinking that a husband is forever to be dancing attendance on her. I shan't commit that error."

"No, ma'am. Of course it isn't as if it was your first time."

Truly, however, it was her first time. The recollection of the dead husband and the loveless marriage made her wince.

"A little tact," she said hurriedly. "A wife—especially in the early days—is called on for a little tact."

"Oh, ma'am, you'll manage him all right—with your knowledge of the world."

But her knowledge of the world had gone, and she did not wish it back again. Each time that for a brief space she thought logically and clearly, doubt and fear tortured her.

In the night fear used to come. Suddenly her rainbow-tinted dream disintegrated, fell into shreds and patches of cloud with wisps of coloured light that gyrated and faded; and then she lay staring at the blank wall of hard facts. This thing was monstrous—no valid hope of permanent happiness in it.

And she thought with dreadful clearness that she was either not young enough or not old enough for such a marriage. If she had been ten years older, it would not have mattered—it would be just a legalized companionship—an easier arrangement, but essentially the same thing as though she had adopted him as her son. But now it must be a *real* marriage—or a most tragic failure. He had made her believe that the realm of passion and love was not closed to her; that he would give her back what the years had taken from her; that she might drink at the fountain of his youth and so renew her own. [Pg 118]

In the dark cold night when the dream vanished, fear ruled over her. The words of the marriage service—heard so lately—echoed in her ears. Solemnization or sacrament—it is impious, blasphemous to enter God's house and ask for a blessing on the bond, unless the marriage falls within the limits of nature's laws. She remembered what the priest says about the causes for which matrimony was ordained; she remembered what the woman has to say about God's holy ordinance; and best of all she remembered what the man, taught by the priest, says when he slips the ring on the woman's finger.

"With my body I thee worship!"... Could it be possible? "Taught by the Priest"—yes, but the man should need no teaching. The words on his lips should be the light rippling murmur above the strong-flowing stream of his secret thoughts, and the stream must be fed by deep springs of

perfectly normal love. Nothing less will satisfy, nothing less *can* satisfy the hungry heart that is surrendering itself to his power. Respect, esteem, steadfast affection—none of that will do. It must be love, or nothing.

Yet after each of these troubled nights the day brought back her dream.

Yates had promised to stand by her, and she faithfully kept the promise. She gave homely, well-meant advice; occasionally administered a little dose of pain in what was intended for a sedative or stimulant; but was always ready with sympathy, even when she failed to supply consolation and encouragement. Apparently forgetting in the excitement of the hour that she herself was an old spinster, she spoke with extreme confidence of all the mysteries of the marriage state. [Pg 119]

There was uneasiness about little secrets concerning Mrs. Thompson's toilet; but Yates made light of them.

"Oh, nonsense," said Yates. "It isn't as if you were like some of these meretrishis ladies with nothing genuine about 'em. You're all genuine—and not a grey hair on your head."

There was nothing very terrible in the secrets. The worst secret perhaps was the diminution in aspect, the shrinking of the coronet of hair, when the sustaining frame had been removed.

But Yates, the old spinster, speaking so wisely and confidently, said, "Don't tell me, ma'am. If he's fond of you, a little thing like that isn't going to put him off.... Besides, you must fluff it out big—like I'm doing;" and Yates worked on with brush and comb. "Now look at yourself."

And Mrs. Thompson peered at her reflection in the glass. The frame lay on the dressing-table. Still she seemed to have a fine tawny mane of her own, fluffed wide from her brows, and falling in respectably big masses.

"Show me, Yates, exactly how you get the effect."

And under the watchful tuition of Yates, Mrs. Thompson toiled at her lesson.

"Is that right?"

"Yes, that's pretty near as well as I can work it out, myself.... Yes, that'll do very nice.... You know, it'll only be at first that you need take so much trouble."

"Yates, I shall be nervous and clumsy—I shall forget, and make a mess of it." [Pg 120]

"Then take me with you," said Yates earnestly. "I can't think why you don't take me along with you."

"Oh, I couldn't," said Mrs. Thompson. "I *couldn't* have anyone with me—least of all, anyone who'd known me before."

It had come to be the day before the day of days, and St. Saviour's Court lay wrapped in drab-hued fog, so that from the windows of the house she could not see as far as the churchyard on one side or the street on the other; and all day long, behind the curtain of fog, the chilly autumn rain was falling.

Throughout the day she remained indoors, reviewing and arranging her trousseau, watching Yates pack the new trunks and bags, and learning how and where she was to find things when she and some strange hotel chambermaid hastily did the unpacking. Now, late at night, her bedroom was still in confusion—empty cardboard boxes littering the floor, dressing-gowns trailing across the backs of chairs, irrepressible silk skirts bulging from beneath trunk lids.

At last Yates finished the task, prepared her mistress for bed, and left her.

"Good-night, ma'am—and mind you sleep sound. Don't get thinking about to-morrow, and wearing yourself out instead of taking your rest."

Unfortunately Mrs. Thompson was not able to follow this sensible advice. A fire burned cheerfully in the grate, the room was warm and comfortable, and she wandered about aimlessly and musingly—picking up silver brushes and putting them down again, gently pressing the trunk tops, looking at the new initials that had been painted on the glazed leather. [Pg 121]

Presently she was stooping over one of the smaller trunks, smoothing and patting the folded night-dress that she and Yates had so carefully selected at the famous London shop. Her lips parted in a smile as she looked at its infinitely delicate tucks and frills, and she let her fingers play with the lace and feel the extraordinary lightness and softness of its texture.

Then, yielding to a sudden impulse, she pulled out the garment, carried it to the bed, and, hastily stripping, tried it on.

To-night Yates had done no fluffing-out of her hair. It was tightly screwed against her head, in the metal curling-clips that were to give it a pretty wave when pulled over the frame to-morrow; but it had a bald aspect now, with its queer little rolled excrescences protruding above the scalp, and two mean pigtails hanging limply behind the ears, and hiding their ends in the lace of the night-

dress collar.

The electric light was shining full into the cheval glass as she came and stood before it, with the smile of pleasure still on her lips. Then she saw herself in the glass, and began to tremble.

Through the diaphanous veil the strong light seemed to show her a grotesque and lamentable figure: heavy fullness instead of shapely slenderness, exaggerated curves, distorted outlines,—the pitiless ravages wrought by time.

With a sob of terror, she ran to the door, and again to the dressing-table, switching off the light, desperately seeking the kindly darkness. Her hands were shaking, she felt sick and faint, while she tore the nightgown from her shoulders and kicked it from her on the floor. Then she covered herself with a woollen dressing-gown and crept, sobbing, into bed.

The firelight flickered on the ceiling, but no heat was thrown by the yellow flames or the red coals; a deadly chill seemed to have issued from the polished surface of the big glass, striking at her heart, reaching and gripping her bones. She lay shivering and weeping. [Pg 122]

Outside the windows the cruel autumn rain pattered on the stone flags, the cruel autumn wind sighed and moaned and echoed from the cold brick walls. The year was dying; the fertile joyous months were dead; soon the barren hopeless winter would be here. And she felt that her own life was dead; warmth, colour, beauty, had gone from it; only ugliness, disfigurement, decay, were left. And she wept for her wasted youth, her vanished grace, for all that makes the summer in a woman's life.

But next day she woke in sunlight. White clouds raced across a blue sky; the air was warm and genial; and, as she walked up St. Saviour's Court, leaning on the kind arm of Mr. Prentice, she was a girl again.

There were many people in the church, but their curious glances did not trouble her. Sunbeams streaming through painted glass made a rainbow radiance on the chancel steps; and here she stood by her lover's side, feeling happy and at ease in the radiant heart of the glorious dream. Sweet music, sacred words—and then the sound of his voice, the pressure of his fingers. Nothing could touch her now—she was safe in the dream, beyond the reach of ridicule, high above the range of pity.

Solemnization or sacrament—now at the last it did not matter which; for she had brought to the rites all that priests can demand: pure and unselfish thoughts, guileless faith, and innocent hope.

The loud swelling pipes of the organ rolled forth their harmonious thunders, filling the air with waves, making the book on the vestry table throb beneath her hand. She was half laughing, half crying, and a shaft of sunlight danced about her head. [Pg 123]

"Happy is the bride that the sun shines on," said Mr. Prentice, very, very kindly. "God bless you, my dear."

Another day's sun was shining on the bride. This was the third day of the wonderful, miraculously blissful honeymoon; and, with windows wide open and the sweet clean air blowing in upon them, the husband and wife lingered over their breakfast in the private sitting-room of the tremendous and magnificent Brighton hotel.

Presently Mr. Marsden got up, stretched himself; and, going to one of the windows, looked down at the sparkling brightness and pleasant gaiety of the King's Road.

"Now, little woman, I'm going to smoke my cigar outside.... You can put on your hat, and join me whenever you please."

Mrs. Marsden followed him to the window, sat upon the arm of a large velvet chair, and leaned her face against his coat sleeve.

"Take care," he said, laughing, "or you'll find yourself on the floor."

The chair had in fact shown signs of overturning, and Mrs. Marsden playfully pretended that she could not retain her position, and allowed herself to flop down upon her knees.

"Isn't this my right place, Dick—kneeling on the ground at your feet?"

Then with a gesture that would have been infinitely graceful in quite a young girl, she took his hand and held it to her lips.

"You foolish Janey, get up," and he gave her cheek a friendly tap. [Pg 124]

"My own boy," she murmured, "why shouldn't I kneel? You have opened the gates of heaven for me."

After he had left the room she stood at the window, and watched until he reappeared on the broad pavement below.

People were walking, riding, spinning along in motor-cars; gulls hovered above the beach on lazy

wings; pebbles, boat gunwales, lamp-posts, every smooth hard surface, flashed in the sunlight; the gentle breeze smelt deliciously fresh and clean;—all was bright and gay and splendid, because so full of pulsing life. But the most splendid thing in sight was her husband. The man out there—that glorious creature, with his hat cocked and his stick twirling as he swaggered across the broad roadway—was her handsome, splendid husband.

The sun shone on her face, and the love shone out of it to meet the genial vivifying rays. "My husband;" and she murmured the words aloud. "My own darling boy. My strong, kind, noble husband."

It was a real marriage.

XII

[Pg 125]

The abnormally bright weather continued in an unbroken spell, and it seemed to her a part of the miracle that had been granted to her prayers—as if nature had suddenly abrogated all laws, and when giving her back love and youth, had given warmth and sunshine to the whole world.

One afternoon, as they were sauntering home to the hotel, he asked her if there was not some special name for this snatch of unseasonable autumn brightness.

"It's more than we had a right to expect, Janey, so late in the year. Here we are in the first week of November, and I'll swear to-day has been as warm as May or June."

"Yes, hasn't it?"

"But what do they call it when the weather plays tricks at this time of year? You know—not the Hunter's moon, but some name like that."

"Oh, yes, I know what you mean—St. Martin's summer."

"That's right—learned old girl! St. Martin's Summer."

Then they turned to the shop windows, and considered the window-dressing art as displayed by these Brighton tradesmen. All through their honeymoon the King's Road shops provided a source of unfailing entertainment.

"I don't see that they know much," he said patronisingly. "I think I could open their eyes. You wait, old girl, till we get back to Mallingbridge, and I'll astonish you. I'm bubbling over with ideas.... Halloa! That's rather tasty." [Pg 126]

They were looking into a jeweller's window, and his eye had been caught by a cigarette case.

"Now I wonder, Janey, what they'd have the cheek to ask for that."

"Let us go in and enquire."

"Oh, no. It's not worth while. Why, the gold alone, without the gems, would cost fifteen quid; and if the stones are as good as they look, I daresay this chap would expect a hundred guineas for it."

"Well, we might enquire."

"No, I mustn't think about it. Come on, old girl, or my mouth will begin to water for it;" and, laughing, he linked his arm in hers, and led her away from this too tempting shop. "Let 'em keep it till they can catch a millionaire."

They ordered tea in the great noisy hall of the hotel, which he preferred to the quiet grandeur of the private sitting-room; and she, pretending that she wished to go upstairs, hurried past the lift door, dodged round by a crowd of new arrivals, ran down the steps, and left the building.

She was hot and red and breathless when, after twenty minutes, she came bustling into the hall again. The tea-tray stood waiting for them; but he had moved away to another table, and was drinking a whisky and soda with some hotel acquaintances. These were a loud vulgar man and two over-dressed, giggling, free-and-easy daughters. Marsden for a little time did not see his wife: he was laughing and talking vivaciously; and the young women contorted themselves in shrill merriment, ogled and leered, and made chaffing, unbecomingly familiar interjections.

"That fellow," said Marsden presently, when he had returned to his wife's table, "is in a very big way of business—and he might be useful to us some day or other. That's why I do the civil to him." [Pg 127]

"Yes," said Mrs. Marsden.

"But where the dickens did you slip away to? Your tea must be cold. Shall I order a fresh pot?"

"Oh, no, this is quite right, thank you."

She drank a little of her tepid tea; and then, fumblingly, with fingers that were slightly trembling, she brought the little parcel out of her pocket and put it in his hand.

"What on earth is this?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No—I can't imagine—unless"— He was slowly unfolding the layers of tissue paper; and until the precious metal discovered itself, he did not raise his eyes. "Oh, I *say*! Janey! But you shouldn't have done it—you really shouldn't. It's too bad—altogether too bad of you."

"Dick!"

"Come upstairs and let me kiss you—or I shall have to kiss you here, with everybody looking at us."

Then Mrs. Marsden was well content with her little act of extravagance.

The culmination of the glorious weather came on Sunday. In the morning, when she emerged from the dim church where she had been pouring out her fervent gratitude for so much happiness, the glare of the sea-front almost blinded her. All the wide lawns by the sea were densely thronged with people, and amongst the moving crowd she searched in vain for her husband. He had said he would meet her for this church parade.

But at the hotel there was a note to explain his absence. "My friends," she read, "insist on carrying me off for a long run in their car. Shall try to be back for dinner. But don't wait."

While she was kneeling in the church, thanking God for having given him to her, he was rolling fast away—with that loud man and the two shrill young women. [Pg 128]

It was late in the afternoon—the close of the brilliant sun-lit day, and the Hove lawns were still crowded. The sky preserved its clear blue, unspoilt by the faint white stains of cloud; the sea sparkled; and the shadows thrown by the green chairs and the iron railings crept imperceptibly across the grass. Behind the railings the long façades of the white houses stretched westward like a perspective-drawing; and down the broad road a motor fizzed past every moment, changed to a black speck, and vanished. The gaiety and life of the hours was lasting bravely. Coloured flags floated above the pier; and from the monstrous protuberance at its far end, the glass and iron castle of the tourist mob, light flashed as though striking mirrors; a band was playing at a distance; and the Worthing steamboat, as it hurriedly approached, made a rhythmic beating on the water.

Mrs. Marsden, in possession of a penny chair, sat alone, and watched the crowd that had been walking all day long. She felt absolutely lost in the crowd; and it seemed to her, coming from her quiet country town, that the world could not contain so many people.

She watched them with tired eyes. All sorts: fine ladies and gentlemen; visitors and residents—down the scale to mere shopgirls and housemaids; pale men who toiled indoors, bronzed men who lived in the open air; Jews and Jewesses; smiling matrons, sour-visaged spinsters; girls with powdered faces and immense hats—whom she classed as actresses, and judged to be no better than they ought to be,—lounging and simpering beside sawny cavaliers.

She watched the various couples—boys and girls, men and women, young and old; and she saw that every couple was of corresponding, *suitable* age: tottering old men and white-haired wrinkled dames—thinking of their golden weddings; fat paunchy men in the prime of life with gorgeous mature consorts; lithe and athletic men with long-legged, striding, game-playing mates; and so on, like with like, or each the normal complement of the other. [Pg 129]

It happened that, while she watched with a growing intentness, there passed no Mays and Decembers. An old man and his daughter—or just possibly his wife! But no young man with a middle-aged woman. Not even a son escorting his mother. Age has no claim on youth.

Then she saw the roaming solitary men who were seeking love or adventure; saw how they stared at the girls,—stopped and turned,—with their eyes wistfully followed the graceful gracious forms.

And no man in all the vast crowd looked at her. Not even the purple-cheeked veterans. None gave her the aldermanic approving glance that might seem to say, "There's a well-preserved woman—not yet quite devoid of charm." Not even a glance of curiosity. It was as if for a penny the chair had rendered her invisible.

A cold air came off the sea, and she shivered. Looking round, she saw that the sun had just dipped behind the long white cornice of the stately houses. The wide lawn was in shadow.

She felt cold, and shivered several times as she walked home to the noisy hotel.

XIII [Pg 130]

They had been married nearly three months, and each month seemed longer to her than any year of her previous existence.

Many changes were visible at the shop. Indeed, from the back wall of the carters' yard to the sign-board over the front doors, nothing was quite as it used to be. The big white board, which told the world that the business "Established 1813" now belonged to Thompson & Marsden, was a makeshift affair; but the new partner had ordered a gigantic and artistic fascia, and this, he said, would be a real ornament to High Street.

He promised soon to inaugurate new departments, to introduce improvements in the old ones, to revolutionize old-fashioned time-wasting methods of book-keeping and all other office work; but so far he had only achieved something very like chaos.

"Don't fuss," he used to say. "I'll soon get to work; but I can't attend to it for the moment."

Thus the little realm behind the glass had been turned upside down and not yet replaced upon its feet again. The rooms were blocked with the opened and unopened packing-cases that contained the materials for Mr. Marsden's clever arrangement—innumerable desks and cabinets, immense index cupboards, racks and sideless stands, by the use of which weapons such antiquated devices as letter-presses, copying-machines, and pigeon-holes would be abolished. Every shred of paper would be filed flat; thousands of letters would lie in the space hitherto occupied by half a dozen; [Pg 131] each correspondent would be allotted a file to himself, letter and answer together; and this novel system would deprive clerks of the power of making mistakes; order would reign; confusion would be impossible. But at present, with the two systems inextricably mixed, the new system half started and the old system half discarded, confusion was not only possible but unavoidable.

"Let them rub along as they can pro tem. I'll straighten it out for them directly I settle down to it."

Just now he could throw himself into the business only by fits and starts, but he assured everybody that it should soon secure his undivided care.

"*I'll* wake 'em up;" and he tapped his forehead and laughed. "There's a reservoir of enterprise here—the ideas simply bubbling over." Then he would bring out his jewelled cigarette-case, light a cigarette, and swagger off to keep some pleasant appointment.

He was candidly enjoying the softer side of his new position, and postponing its arduous duties. He both looked and felt very jolly. Except when anyone accidentally made him angry, he was always ready to laugh and joke.

He had a small run-about car, and was rapidly learning to drive it while a much bigger car was being built for him. He was renewing old acquaintances and picking up fresh friends. He showed a fine catholic taste for amusement, and handsomely supported the theatre, the music-hall, the race-course. In the good company with which he was now able to surround himself he dashed to and fro all over England, to see the winter sport between the flags. He dressed grandly, drank bravely, spent freely—in a word, he was hastily completing his education as a gentleman.

"Must have my fling, old girl"—He was nearly always jolly about it to his wife. "But don't you fear that I'm turning into an idler. Not much. This is my holiday. And no one can say I haven't *earned* [Pg 132] a holiday. Ever since I was fourteen I've been putting my back into it like a good 'un."

He was especially genial when luck had been kind to him and he had won a few bets. Returning after a couple of fortunate days at Manchester or Wolverhampton, he jingled the sovereigns in his pockets and chattered gleefully.

"Rare fun up there—and little Dick came out on top. Cheer up, Jane. Give a chap a welcome. This doesn't cost one half what you might guess.... Besides, anyhow, I've got to do it—for a bit—not forever.... I'm young—don't forget that. Only one life to live—in this vale of tears."

He pleaded his youth, as if it must always prove a sufficient excuse for anything; but she never invited either excuses or apologies.

"Well, old girl, I'm leaving you to your own resources again—but, you understand, don't you? Boys will be boys;" and he laughed. "This isn't naughtiness—only what is called the levity of youth. Ta-ta—take care of yourself."

He liked to avail himself of a spare day between two race-meetings, and run up to London, make a swift tour of the wholesale houses, and do a little of that easiest and proudest sort of business which is known as "buying for a sound firm." His vanity was flattered by the outward show of respect with which these big London people received him. Managers fawned upon him; even principals begged him to join them at their luncheon table; and he described to his wife something of his satisfaction when he found himself seated with the bosses, at places that he used to enter a few years ago as a poor little devil trotting about the city to match a ribbon or a tape string.

He came home one night, when the rain was beating on the window-panes and sending a river [Pg 133] down St. Saviour's Court to swell the sea of mud in High Street, and told her he had heard big news while lunching with his silk merchants.

She was waiting for him by the dining-room fire, and when he first came in he displayed anger because the cabman had wanted more than his fare.

"But he didn't get it. I took his number—and threatened to report him.... It's infernally inconvenient not being able to drive up to your own door—it's like living in a back alley."

Then, with an air of rather surly importance, he told her his news about Bence.

"They're *afraid* of him. They gave me the straight tip that he's shaky. Mark my words, *that* bubble is going to be burst."

"But people have said so for so long." And she explained that the story of Bence's approaching destruction was really a very old one. "Year after year Mr. Prentice used to tell me the same thing—that Bence's were financially rotten, and couldn't last."

"Prentice is an old ass, and you're quite right not to believe all *he* tells you. Between you and me and the post, I reckon that Mr. P. wants a precious sharp eye kept on him—I don't trust him an inch farther than I can see him.... But what was I saying? Oh, yes, Bence's. Well, it is not what Prentice says now—it's what *I* say."

Then he asked if there was anything in the house to eat. Yes, the dinner that had been ready for him three hours ago was still being kept hot for him.

"I don't want any dinner. I dined in London.... But I think I could do with a snack of supper."

He went over to the sideboard, unlocked a lower division of it with his private key, and drew forth a half-bottle of champagne. [Pg 134]

"If you'll help me, I'll make it a whole bottle."

"No, thank you."

Before re-locking the cupboard, he peered into it suspiciously.

"I don't think my wine is any too safe in this cellaret. How do I know how many keys there aren't knocking about the house? I may be wrong, but I thought I counted three more bottles than what's left."

Then he rang the bell, and at the same time called loudly for the parlourmaid.

"Mary! Mary! Why the devil doesn't she come in and ask if anything's wanted?" He left the room, grumbling and fuming.

Mrs. Marsden heard his voice outside, and the voice of Yates timidly apologising.

Mary the parlourmaid had a very bad cold, and Yates had ventured to allow her to go to bed.

"Thank you for nothing.... Where's the cook? Cook—wake up, please;" and he went into the kitchen.

The servants feared him. They stammered and became stupid when he spoke to them crossly, but never failed to smile sycophantically when he expressed pleasure.

All that he required on this occasion from Cook was plenty of hot toast and cayenne pepper. But he sent Yates to buy some smoked salmon or herring at the restaurant in High Street.

"And sharp's the word.... What are you waiting for?"

"Oh, I don't mind going, sir—but I shall get wet to the skin."

"Take my umbreller," said the cook.

Yates went down the steep stairs, and the master looked in at the dining-room door. [Pg 135]

"That woman is like some old cat—afraid of a drop of rain on her mangy old fur."

Then Mrs. Marsden heard his footsteps overhead in the dressing-room. When he reappeared he had taken off his tie and collar, and was wearing a crimson velvet smoking jacket.

The toast sandwiches were promptly placed before him, and he sat eating and drinking,—not really hungry, but avidly gulping the wine; and rapidly becoming jolly again.

"What was I talking about?"

"Bence's."

"Oh, yes. I tell you, he has just about got to the end of his tether. All the best people funk having him on their books.... I give him two years from to-day."

"I wonder."

"Mind you, he has fairly smacked us in the eye with his furniture."

And it was unfortunately but too true that there had of late been an ugly drop in the sales of Thompson's solid, well-made chairs and tables.

"But," continued Marsden, "we aren't going to take it lying down any longer. He has got a *man* to reckon with henceforth. He'll learn what tit-for-tat means.... It was too late to attempt anything last Christmas. But let him wait till next December. Then it shall be, A very happy Christmas to you, Mr. Bence."

"What do you propose for Christmas?"

"You wait, too."

"Yes, but, Dick, you won't begin launching out without consulting me—allowing some weight to my opinion?"

"No, of course I shan't. We're partners, aren't we? I know what a partnership is. But you won't need persuading. You'll jump at my ideas when you hear them." [Pg 136]

"Why not let me hear them now? I could be thinking over them—I like to brood upon plans."

"Well, something is going to happen in our basement next Christmas, which will be tidings of peace and great joy to everybody but Bence;" and he laughed with riotous amusement. "Get me my pipe, old woman. I can't go into business matters now. You wait, and trust your Dickybird."

She brought him his pipe and tobacco; and he explained to her that he fancied a pipe because he had been smoking cigars ever since the morning, and the tip of his tongue felt sore.

He puffed at the pipe in silence, and luxuriously stretched his slippered feet towards the warmth of the fire.

"You best go to by-by, Jane. I'm too tired to talk. I've had a heavy day—one way and another; and a longish journey before me to-morrow.... Good-night. Tell 'em I must be called at eight-thirty sharp."

This was a typical evening. There were many evenings like it.

Frequently two or three days passed without her once entering the shop. Sometimes she could not brace herself sufficiently to go down and face the staff. They all saw her subjection to her husband; and although they endeavoured not to betray their thoughts, it was obvious that to almost all of them she appeared as the once absolute princess who had, in abdicating, sunk to a state of ignominious dependence. She walked among them with downcast eyes; for too often she had surprised their glances of pity.

But she saw that in the street also—pity or contempt. One or other each citizen's face seemed to show her plainly. She knew exactly what shop and town said and thought of her new partner. [Pg 137]

At dusk on these winter afternoons, when she had not lately used the door of communication, Miss Woolfrey or Mr. Mears would come through it and inform her of the day's affairs. Miss Woolfrey's reports consisted merely of vapid and irresponsible gossip, but Mrs. Marsden seemed to have discovered fresh merits in this sandy, freckled, commonplace chatter-box—perhaps for no other reason than because she belonged so entirely to the old régime and was intellectually incapable of absorbing unfamiliar ideas. But it was Mears who supplied any real instruction, and it was with him that Mrs. Marsden talked seriously.

One afternoon when he was about to leave her, she detained him.

"Mr. Mears—I've something to ask you."

"Yes, ma'am."

She had laid her hand upon his great fore-arm; she was gazing at him very earnestly; but she hesitated, with lips trembling nervously, and seemed for a few moments unable to say any more.

"Yes, ma'am."

Then she spoke quickly and eagerly.

"Stick to me, Mr. Mears. Whatever happens, don't give me up. I should be truly lost without you. Even if it's difficult, stick to me."

"As long as he lets me," said Mears huskily.

"He's going to talk to you. Humour him. He has a great respect for you, really."

"He hasn't shown it so far."

"Make allowances. It's his way. He has such notions about the new style—which we—which you and I mayn't always approve. But he knows your value. He has said so again and again."

It was not long after this secret appeal—one morning that Marsden spent in Mallingbridge—when the shop heard "the Guv'nor begin on Mr. M." [Pg 138]

"Look here, my friend," said Mr. Marsden loudly, "it's about time that we took each other's measure. Is it you or I who is to be cock of the walk? Just step in here, please."

This was said outside the counting-house. The proprietor and the manager at once disappeared; and the news flew far and wide, downstairs and upstairs. "He has got old Mears behind the glass.... He is giving old Mears a dressing-down." All had known that the thing was infallibly coming; the encounter between the greater and the lesser force had been unaccountably delayed; every man and woman in the building now trembled for the result.

"You want to put your authority up against mine. That won't do. One boss is enough in a larger establishment than this."

But behind the glass old Mears was very firm. He made himself as big as possible, standing at his

full height, seeming to imitate Marsden's trick of squaring the shoulders and throwing back the head.

"*I* am the boss. And what I say *goes*."

"And your partner, sir? Mrs. Thompson, I should say Mrs. Marsden—are we to disregard her?"

"No. But I speak for self and partner. Please make a note of that."

"Very good, sir."

"Then that's all right. It was a case of '*Twiggez-vous?*' But I think you twig now that I don't stand nonsense—or go on paying salaries in exchange for bounce and impudence."

"May I ask if you think I am not earning my salary, sir?"

"I haven't said you aren't."

"Or do you think, sir, if you hunted the country, you'd find a man who'd give the same service for the same money?" [Pg 139]

"Oh, if you want to blow your trumpet—"

"No, sir, I want to find my bearings—to learn where I am—if I *can*. It isn't boasting, it's only business. I've a value here, or I haven't. I've been under the impression I was valuable. You know that, don't you, sir?"

"Oh, I've no quarrel with you—if you'll go on serving me faithfully."

"I'll serve the firm faithfully, sir—with the uttermost best that's in me."

"All right then."

"Because that's *my* way, sir—the old-fashioned style I took up as a boy—and couldn't change now, sir, if I wanted to."

When Mears came from behind the glass his face was flushed; he breathed stertorously; and he held his hands beneath the wide skirts of his frock coat to conceal the fact that they were shaking. But he kept the coat-tails swishing bravely, and he marched up and down between two counters with so grand a tramp that no one dared look at him closely.

Then, after a few minutes, Marsden came swaggering, with his hat cocked and a lighted cigar in his mouth. Before going out into the street, he ostentatiously paused; and spoke to Mr. Mears amicably, even jovially.

And the shop comprehended that the battle was over, and that there was to be a truce between the two men.

On some days when Mrs. Marsden would probably have come down from the house into the counting-house she was prevented from doing so by a grievous headache.

These headaches attacked her suddenly and with appalling force. At first the pain was like toothache; then it was like earache, and then the whole head seemed to be rent as if struck with an axe—and afterwards for several hours there was a dull numbing discomfort, with occasional neuralgic twinges and throbbings. [Pg 140]

Resting in her bedroom after such an attack, she was surprised by receiving a visit from Enid. She was lying on a sofa that Yates had pushed before the fire, and at the sound of voices outside the door she started up and hastily scrambled to her feet.

"Mother dear, may I come in? I'm so sorry you're ill."

Since their parting last autumn they had not set eyes on each other, and for a little while they talked almost as strangers.

"Yates, bring up the tea."

"Oh, but isn't it too early for tea?"

"No. Get it as quickly as you can, Yates. Mrs. Kenion must be ready for tea—after her long drive."

"I came by train. Thank you—I own I should like a cup, if it isn't really troubling you."

"Of course not.... Do take the easy chair."

"This is very comfortable.... But won't you lie down again? I have disturbed you."

"Not in the least. I think it will do me good to sit up. Won't you take off your coat?"

Enid let the fur boa fall back from her slender neck, and undid two buttons of her long grey coat.

"Really," she said, with a little laugh, "it's so cold that I haven't properly thawed yet."

She was charmingly dressed, and she looked very graceful and well-bred—but not at all plump; in fact rather too thin. While they drank their tea, she told her mother of the kindness of her husband's relatives—a sister-in-law was a particular favourite; but everybody was nice and kind;

there were many pleasant neighbours, and all had called and paid friendly attentions to the young couple.

"I am so glad to hear that," said Mrs. Marsden. "My only fear of the country was that you might [Pg 141] sometimes feel yourself too much isolated."

"Oh, I'm never in the least lonely. There's so much to do—and even if there weren't people coming in and out perpetually, the house would take up all my time."

"Ah yes.... I suppose you are quite settled down by now."

"No, I wish we were. Things are still rather at sixes and sevens. Otherwise I should have begged you to come and see for yourself. We are both so anxious to get you out there."

"I shall be delighted to come, my dear. But I myself have been rather rushed of late."

"Of course you have.... Er—Mr. Marsden is away, Yates told me."

"Yes, but only for a few days. I get him back to-morrow night;" and Mrs. Marsden laughed cheerfully. "Do you know, he has taken a leaf out of Mr. Kenion's book. He is quite mad about racing."

"Is he? How amusing!"

"These violent delights have violent ends. He says it is only a passing fancy; and I suppose he'll be taking up something else directly—golf perhaps—and going mad about that."

"No doubt. Men all seem alike, don't they?" And Enid smiled and nodded her head. "Though I must say, Charles is very true to his hunting. I mean to wean him from steeple-chasing; but I like him to hunt. It keeps him in such splendid health."

"Yes, dear. It must be tremendous exercise. Do you ride to the meets with him?"

"No, I never seem to have time—and for the moment, though we've six horses in the stable, there's not one that I quite see myself on." And Enid laughed again, gaily. "Good enough for [Pg 142] Charles, you know—but *he* can ride anything. He wants to get me a pony-cart, and I shall be safer in that."

The constraint was wearing off. While they talked, each availed herself of any chance of investigating the other's face—a shy swift glance, instantaneously deflected to the teacups or the mantelpiece, if a head turned to meet it. At first there had been difficulty in speaking of the husbands, but now it was quite easy; and it all sounded fairly natural.

"Oh, but that is just the sort of thing Charlie says." The daughter helped the mother. "Men always think they can manage things better than we can—and they're *always* troublesome about the servants. The only occasions on which Charles makes one *really* angry are when he upsets the servants."

And Mrs. Marsden helped Enid.

"You must employ all your tact—men are so easily led, though they won't be driven."

"No, they must be led," said Enid, with a return to complete artificiality of manner. "How true that is!"

But there was a very subtle alteration in Enid. Beneath the artificial manner gradually there became perceptible something altogether new and strange. This was another Enid—not the old Enid. She had evidently caught the peculiar tone of bucolic gentility and covert-side fashion common to most of her new associates, and this had slightly altered her; but deeper than the surface change lay the changes slowly manifesting themselves to the instinctive penetration of her mother. Enid was softer, more gentle, a thousand times more capable of sympathy.

"Dick," Mrs. Marsden was saying, "is fearfully ambitious."

"That's a good fault, mother."

"He even talks of—of going into Parliament." [Pg 143]

"And why not?"

"He belongs to the Conservative Club here—but he wants," and Mrs. Marsden showed embarrassment,—"he would like to join the County Club."

"Oh!"

"Do you think Mr. Charles—or his family—would be kind enough to use influence?"

"Yes, mother dear, I'll make them—if possible." Enid had leant forward; and she shyly took her mother's hand, and gently squeezed it. "But now I must go. I do hope I haven't increased your headache."

"No, my dear, you have done me good."

Enid rose, buttoned her coat, and began to pull on her grey reindeer gloves.

"Mother! My old room—is it empty, or are you using it for anything?"

"Oh, Dick uses that, dear."

"And the dressing-room?"

"He uses that, too."

"Would you mind—would he mind if I went in and looked round?"

"No.... Of course not."

"Only for a peep. Then I'll come back—and say good-bye."

But she was a long time in the other rooms; and when she returned Mrs. Marsden saw and affected not to see that she had been crying.

The warmth of the fire after the cold of the street, or the sight of her old home after a few months in her new one, had properly thawed elegant, long-nosed Enid. She sank on her knees by the sofa, flung her arms round the neck of her mother, and kissed her again and again; and Mrs. Marsden felt what in vain she had waited for during so many years—her child's heart beating with expansive sympathy against her breast. [Pg 144]

"Mother, how good you were—oh, how good you were to me!" And she clung and pressed and kissed as in all her life she had never done till now.

"Enid—my darling."

When she had gone, Mrs. Marsden lay musing by the fire. It was impossible not to divine the very simple cause of this immense alteration in Enid. Already poor Enid had learnt her lesson—she knew what it was to have a rotten bad husband.

XIV [Pg 145]

But not so bad as her own husband. No, that would be an impossibility.

She did not want to think about it; but just now her control over her thoughts had weakened, while the thoughts themselves were growing stronger. She was subject to rapid ups and downs of health, the victim of an astounding crisis of nerves, so that one hour she experienced a queer longing for muscular fatigue, and the next hour laughed and wept in full hysteria. At other times she felt so weak that she believed she might sink fainting to the ground if she attempted to go for the shortest walk.

Generally on days when Marsden was away from Mallingbridge she crept to bed at dusk. Yates used to aid her as of old, sit by the bed-side talking to her; and then leave her in the fire-glow, to watch the dancing shadows or listen to the whispering wind.

She did not wish to think; but in spite of all efforts to forget facts and to hold firmly to delusions, her old power of logical thought was remorselessly returning to her. In defiance of her enfeebled will, the past reconstituted itself, events grouped themselves in sequence; hitherto undetected connections linked up, and made the solid chain that dragged her from vague surmise to definite conclusions. Then with the full vigour of the old penetrative faculties she thought of her mistake.

He did not care for her. He had never cared for her. It was all acting. All that she relied on was false; all that had been real was the steadfast sordid purpose sustaining him throughout his odious dissimulation. [Pg 146]

His marriage was a brutal male prostitution, in which he had sold his favours for her gold. And shame overwhelmed her as she thought of how easily she had been trapped. While he was coldly calculating, she was endowing him with every attribute of warm-blooded generosity; when her fine protective instincts made her yearn over him, longing to give him happiness, comfort, security, he was in truth playing with her as a cat plays with a wounded mouse—no hurry, no excitement, but steel-bright eyes watching, retracted claws waiting. And she remembered his studied phrases that rang so true to the ear, till too late she discovered their miserable falsity. With what art he had prepared the way for the final disclosure of his effrontery! He could not brook the sense of dependence, his manly spirit would not allow him to pose as the pensioner of a rich wife, and so on—and then, even at the last, how he waited until she had completely betrayed her secret, and he could be certain that her pride as a woman would infallibly prevent her from drawing back. Not till then, when she had taken the world into her confidence, when escape had become impossible, did he drive his bargain.

While the honeymoon was not yet over she imagined she could understand the pain that lay before her. But in these three months she had suffered more than she had conceived to be endurable by any living creature. If pain can kill, she should be dead.

Her punishment had been like the fabled torture of the Chinese—hundreds of small lacerations, a

thousand slicing cuts of the executioner's sword, and the kind death-stroke craftily withheld. But the swordsman of the East does not laugh while he mutilates. And *he* struck at her with a smiling face.

She thought of how in every hour of their companionship he had wounded her; with what unutterable baseness he had used his power over her—the power given to him by her love. The love stripped her of every weapon of defence; she was tied, naked, with not a guarding rag to shelter her against the blows—and the pitiless blows fell upon her from her gagged mouth to her pinioned feet. [Pg 147]

Daily he attacked her pride, her self-respect, her bodily health and her mental equipoise; but most of all she suffered in her love—that terrible flower of passion that refuses to die. Torn up by its bleeding roots, it replants itself—and will thrive on the barren rock as well as in life's richest garden. Robbed of light, air, sustenance, it will cling to the dungeon wall, and bud and burst again for the prisoner to touch its blossoms in his darkness. Its flame-petals can be seen by the glazing eyes that have lost sight of all else, and its burning poisonous fruit is still tasted in the earth of our graves.

She thought of what he had said to her when they first came back to the house that she had decorated and made luxurious for him. A laugh, a nudge of the elbow—"This is the beginning of Chapter Two, Janey. We can't be honeymooning forever, old girl;" and then some more unforgettable words, to formulate the request that they might occupy different rooms; and so, in the home-coming hour, he had struck a deadly blow at her pride by the brutally direct implication that what she most desired was that which every woman craves for least. As if the grosser manifestations could satisfy, when all the spiritual joys are denied!

But he judged her nature by his own. He was common as dirt. He was savage as a beast of the forest, a creature of fierce strong appetites that believes the appeasement of any physical craving —to drink deeply, to eat greedily, to sleep heavily—is the highest pleasure open to the animal kingdom; and that man the king is no higher than the dog, his servant. [Pg 148]

He knew only worthless women, and he supposed that all women were alike. Undoubtedly he remembered the innumerable conquests won simply by his handsome face, the ready and absolute surrender to a sensual thraldom that had made other women his abject slaves; and he dared to think that his wife was as impotent as they to resist the viler impulses of the ungoverned flesh.

He dared to think it.—But was he wrong? And she recalled the episodic renewal of their embraces during these last months. Once after high words; once after he had found her weeping; once for no reason at all that she knew of—except a carelessly systematic desire on his part to keep her in good temper—or perhaps merely because he had the prostitute's point of honour. A bargain is a bargain. He had been paid his price without haggling, and he intended to fulfil the conditions of the contract—so far as certain limits fixed by himself.

Horrible scenes to look back at—when the cruelly bright light of reason flashes upon the decorously obscured past and shows the ignominious secrets of a life: blind instincts moving us, all that is high beaten down by all that is low, the soul held in fetters by the flesh.

Much of her slow agony had come from the stinging pricks of jealousy. He was unfaithful—he was notoriously unfaithful. Already, after three months, everyone in the shop knew that he frequently broke the marriage vow. She would have known it anyhow—even if one of his vulgar friends, turning to a more vulgar enemy, had not troubled to tell her in an ill-spelt series of anonymous letters. She remembered how he once used to look at her, and she saw how in her presence he now looked at other women. Each look was an insult to her. Each word was an outrage. "There's a pert little minx;" and he would smile as he watched some passer-by. "Young hussy! Dressed up to the nines—wasn't she?" And he swelled out his chest, and swaggered more arrogantly by the side of his wife, unconscious of the swift completeness with which she could interpret the thoughts behind his bold eyes and his lazily lascivious smile. [Pg 149]

And she thought of how he harped upon the over-tightened string of youth, making every fibre of her tired brain vibrate to the discord of the jarring note. It was melody to him. Youth was his own paramount merit, and he praised it as the only merit that he could admit of in others. He had forgotten half the lies of his courtship. Age was contemptible—the thing one should hide, or excuse, or ransom. "Only one life! Remember, I'm young—I am not old." But her friends, the people she trusted, were shamefully old, even a few years older than herself. Old Prentice, Old Yates, Old Mears; and he never spoke of them without the scornful epithet.

But the jingling coin that she had put in his pockets would procure him the solace to be derived from youthful companions. With the money she had paid for all the love that he could give, he bought from loose women all the love that he cared for. Of course when he stayed in London he was carrying on his promiscuous amours.... Perhaps, too, here in Mallingbridge.

Yet when he came back to her, she had failed to resist him. She knew the reflective air with which he considered her face when he proposed to exercise his sway. She trembled when he lightly slapped her on the shoulder, or took her chin in his hand, and spoke with caressing tones. He was beginning to act the lover. He had made up his mind to wipe out the past, to subjugate her afresh, to assure himself that his poor slave was not slipping away.

"Janey—dear old Janey.... I leave you alone, don't I?" And with an arm round her waist, he would [Pg 150]

pull her to him, and hold her closer and closer. "Have you missed me? Eh? Have you missed your Dickybird?"

And she could not resist him. There was the abominable basis of the tragedy—worse, infinitely worse than the imagined horrors that had troubled her before the marriage. Love dies so slowly.

But the night spent in the same room with him was like a fatal abandonment to some degrading habit—as if in despair she had taken a heavy dose of laudanum,—knowing that the drug is deadly, yet seeking once more to stupefy herself, impelled at all hazards to pass again through the gates of delirium into the vast blank halls of unconsciousness. Next day she felt sick, broken, shattered—like the drug-taker after his debauch. Each relapse seemed now an immeasurably lower fall. Each awakening brought with it a sharper pang of despair: as when a wrecked man on a raft, who in his madness of thirst has drunk at the salt spray, wakes from frenzied dreams to see the wide immensity of ocean mocking him with space great enough to hold all things except one—hope.

Such thoughts as these came sweeping upon her like waves of light, illuminating the darkest recesses of her mind, showing the innermost meaning of every cruel mystery, forcing her to see and to know herself as she was, and not as she wished to be.

Then the light would suddenly fade. The stress of emotion had relaxed, and she could consider her circumstances calmly—could try to make the best of him.

A difficult task—a poor best.

She thought of his varied meannesses. In only one direction was he ever really generous. He grudged nothing to himself—he could be lavish when pandering to his own inclinations, reckless [Pg 151] when gratifying the moment's whim, and retrospectively liberal when counting the cost of past amusements; but in his dealings with the rest of the world he was cautious, watchful, tenaciously close-fisted. She felt a vicarious humiliation in hearing him thank instead of tip; or seeing him, when he had failed to dodge the necessity of a gift, make the gift so small as to be ludicrous. Not since he carried her purse at the London restaurants had he ever exhibited a large-handed kindness to subordinates.

He never alluded to the household expenses—had accepted as quite natural the fact that the female partner should defray the expenses of the household. Without a Please or a Thank-you he took board and lodging free of charge; but he bought for himself cigars, liqueurs, and wine, and he always spoke of my brandy, my champagne, etc. It was *our* house, but *my* wine. Nevertheless, the habitual use in the singular of the personal pronoun did not render him egotistically anxious to pay his own bills.

Once, when after delay a tobacconist addressed an account to her care, and she timidly reproached the cigar-smoker for a lapse of memory that might almost seem undignified, she was answered with chaffing, laughing, joviality.

"Well, my dear, if you're so afraid of our credit going down, there's an easy way out of the difficulty. Write a cheque yourself, and clean the slate for me."

But one must make allowances. This was a favourite phrase of hers, and it helped the drift of her calmer thoughts. As he said so often, youth has its characteristic faults. Want of thought is not necessarily want of heart.

Perhaps when he began to work, he might improve. There was no doubt that he possessed the capacity for work. He *had* worked, hard and well. Many a good horse that has not shied or swerved when kept into its collar will, if given too much stable and too many beans, show [Pg 152] unsuspected vice and kick the cart to pieces. And the cure for your horse, the medicine for your man, is work.

Of course he had many redeeming traits. One was his jollity—not often disturbed, if people would humour him. Comfort, too, in the recollection that he treated her with respect—never consciously insulted her—in public.

Sometimes when the shadows and the flickering glow drowsily slackened in their dance, and sleep with soft yet heavy fingers at last pressed upon her eyelids, she was willing to believe that all her fiery thought and shadowy dread was but morbid nonsense occasioned by the queer state of her nerves, and by nothing else.

Truly, during this period of her extreme weakness, she was physically incapable of standing up to him; there was no fight left in her. For a time at least, she could not attempt to protect herself, or anyone else who looked to her for protection.

It pained her, but she was unable to interfere, when he roughly repulsed Gordon Thompson.

They were sitting at luncheon, with the servant going in and out of the room; she heard the street door open and shut; there was a sound of hob-nailed boots, and then came the familiar whistle—like a ghostly echo from the past.

"Who the devil's that?"

"I—I think it must be my Linkfield cousin."

"Oh, is it?" And Marsden jumped up, and went out to the landing.

"Jen-ny! Jen-ny! You up there?"

The farmer stood at the bottom of the steep stairs, and Marsden was at the top, looking down at him. Mrs. Marsden heard nearly the whole of the conversation, but dared not, could not interfere.

"Any dinner for a hungry wayfarer?" [Pg 153]

Gordon Thompson, furious at the marriage, had missed many mid-day meals; but now he came to pick up the severed thread of kindness. However, he was not confident; his whistle had been feeble, tentative, and the ascending note of his voice quavered. In order to propitiate, he had brought from Linkfield a market-gardener's basket with celery and winter cabbages. The present would surely make them glad to see him.

"What do you want here? No orders are given at the door. We buy our vegetables at Rogers's in High Street. Don't come cadging here. Get out."

Marsden wickedly pretended to mistake him for an itinerant greengrocer.

"Mayn't I go up?... Is it to be cuts? Am I not to call on my cousin?"

"Who's your cousin, I'd like to know."

"Jen-ny Thompson."

"No one of that name lives here."

"Jen-ny Marsden then. I say—it's all right. You're him, I suppose. Well, I'm Gordon Thompson—your wife's cousin."

"My wife never had a cousin of that name. Before she married me, she married a man called Thompson—though she didn't marry all his humbugging beggarly relations."

"Oh, I say—don't go on like that. Don't make it cuts."

"Thompson—your cousin—is in the cemetery, if you wish to call on him. He has been there a long time—waiting for you;" and Marsden laughed. "The sexton will tell you where to find him.... Go and plant your cabbages out there. We don't want 'em here."

He returned to the luncheon table in the highest good-humour.

"There, old girl, I've ridded you of *that* nuisance. You won't be bothered with *him* any more." [Pg 154]

Mrs. Marsden could not answer. She could not even raise her eyes from the table-cloth. But when her husband offered to give her a rare afternoon treat by taking her for a run in his small two-seated car, she looked up; and, meekly thanking him, accepted the invitation.

As the car carried them slowly through the market-place, neatly threading its way among laden carts and emptied stalls, she saw cousin Gordon standing, rueful and disconsolate, outside the humble tavern at which it was the custom of the lesser sort of farmers to dine together on market-day. Had Gordon dined, or had anger and resentment deprived him of appetite and spared his ill-filled purse?

She would not think of it. She turned, and watched her husband's face. It was hard as granite while with concentrated attention he manipulated the steering wheel, moved a lever, or sounded his brazen-tongued horn—the signal of danger to anyone who refused to get out of his road.

Almost immediately, they were in the open country, whirling past bare fields and leafless copses, leaping fiercely at each hill that opposed them, and swooping with a shrill, buzzing triumph down the long slopes of the valleys.

"Now we are travelling," said Marsden joyously.

She nodded her head, although she had not caught the words; and presently he shouted close to her ear.

"Moving now, aren't we? Doesn't she run smooth?"

"Yes, yes. Capital."

The wind, breaking on the glass screen, sang as it swept over them; hedge-rows, telegraph poles, and wayside cottages hurried towards them, rising and growing as they came; long stretches of straight road, along which Mr. Young's horses used to plod for half an hour, were snatched at, conquered, and contemptuously thrown behind, almost before one could recognize them. [Pg 155]

That pretty country-house which she had always admired passed her; and, passing, seemed like a faintly tinted picture in a book whose pages are turned too fast by careless hands. Naked branches of high trees, broad eaves and nestling windows, weak sunlight upon latticed glass, and pale smoke rising from clustered chimneys—that was all she saw. A few dead leaves pretended to be live things, scampered beside the long wall; a few dead thoughts revived in her mind, and

swiftly she recalled her old fancies, the dream of the future, Enid and herself living together so quietly beneath the grey roof;—and then the pretty house with its pretty grounds had been left far behind. It had lost its brief aspect of reality as completely as a half-forgotten dream.

"There, we'll go easy now." They were approaching a village, and he reduced the speed. "You're a good plucked 'un, Jane;" and he glanced at her approvingly. "You don't funk a little bit of pace."

They stopped at an inn, thirty miles from Mallingbridge, and drank tea—that is to say, Mrs. Marsden drank tea and Mr. Marsden drank something else, for the good of the house.

Then, after a cigar, he lighted his lamps, and drove her home through the greyness, the dusk, and the dark. And for the three hours or so that she was with him, for the whole time that this outing lasted, she was almost happy.

XV

[Pg 156]

The nervous distress had gone—with extraordinary suddenness; and a curiously unruffled calm filled her mind. Nothing matters. This is not *all*.

She was a deeply religious woman, but quite unorthodox in the letter of her faith. There might be as many rituals as there are social communities, a different altar for every day of the year; but, however you dressed the eternal glory and the limitless power in garments taken from the poor wardrobe of man's imagination, the veritable God was unchanged, unchanging. And her toleration of the diverse opinions of others enabled her to worship as comfortably under the high-vaulted magnificence of a Catholic cathedral as within the narrow shabbiness of a Wesleyan chapel. The perfume of swinging censers did not cloud her brain, nor the ugliness of white-washed walls grieve her eyes—any consecrated place of prayer was good enough to pray in.

But for the sake of old associations, by reason of its familiar homeliness, its air of solidity without pomp, and a simplicity that yet is not undignified, she loved this parish church of St. Saviour's; and it was here, sitting through the long undecorated service, that mental equanimity was most strangely if temporarily restored to her. Although not participating, she stayed for the celebration of the communion; and while the mystic, symbolic rites were performed, she neither prayed nor meditated. For her it was a blank pause,—no thought,—nothing; but nevertheless she became aware of a deepening perception of rest and peace, and the feeling that she had been uplifted—raised to a spiritual height from which she could look down on the common pains of earth, and [Pg 157] see their intrinsically trivial character.

Our life, be it what it may, does not end here. This is not all. Something wider, more massive, infinitely grander, is coming to us, if we will wait patiently.

She sat motionless until all the congregation had dispersed; and when she left the church, there was an expression of gravity on her face and a sense of contentment in her heart. At the sight of some children romping by the church-yard railings, she smiled. A boy pushed a girl with mirthful vigorousness, and she spoke to him gently.

"Don't be rough, little boy. Take care, and don't hurt her—even in play."

Then she gave the children "silver sixpences to buy sweeties," and went slowly down the court. She could think kindly and benignantly of all the world. There was not a tinge of bitterness remaining when she thought of her husband.

As she lay in bed one morning after a night of dreamless sleep, a chance word dropped by Yates set her lazily thinking of the last date on which she had suffered from those normal and not accidental fluctuations of energy that are produced by periodically recurrent causes. Beginning to count the weeks, she fancied that some error of memory was confusing her—time of late had moved with such heavy feet; what seemed long was really short in the story of her days. Then she began to count the days, trying to make fixed points, and laboriously filling the gaps that intervened. Then she stopped counting and thinking.

Yates had gone out of the room, and she lay quite still, with relaxed limbs and slackened respiration.

And her mind seemed dull and void, though wonder stirred and thrilled. It was like dawn in a hill-girt valley—black darkness mingling with silver mist; shadows growing thin, but not retreating; [Pg 158] the ribbed sides of the mountains very slowly becoming more and more solidly stupendous, but refusing to disclose the details of their form or colour, although, beyond the vast ramparts with which they aid the night, the sun is surely rising. Not till the sun bursts in fire above the eastern wall does the day begin.

So, with flooding golden light, the splendid hope came to her.

She waited for a few more days. There was no mistake; she knew that she had counted correctly;

but she pretended to herself that she must allow a wide margin to cover the contingency of miscalculation.

Then she spoke of the facts to Yates, after extracting a solemn vow of secrecy. Yates said they could draw only one conclusion from the facts; it was impossible to doubt—but they would know for certain next time. They must count again; and, after allowing another wide margin, settle the approaching date which would infallibly confirm their hopes or cruelly dissipate them.

For a little while longer, then, she must keep her splendid secret.

Her heart was overflowing with a joy such as she had thought she could never feel again. And with the warm stream of bliss there were gushing fountains of gratitude. She will forgive her husband everything, because he has crowned her life with this ineffable glory.

It justifies her marriage; in a manner more perfect than she had dared to imagine, it gives her back her youth. All mothers at the cradle have one age—the age of motherhood. And irresistibly it will win his respect and love—some love must come for the mother of his babe.

Although she was waiting with so much anxiety until the second significant epoch should be passed, she found that time glided by her now easily and swiftly. Yates—the wise old spinster—assuming in a more marked degree that air of matronly authority that she had worn before the wedding, told her of the vital importance of taking good rest, good nourishment, and good cheerful views regarding the future. [Pg 159]

So she often lay upon the sofa in her room—resting,—smiling and dreaming. She had no real doubt now. It was miraculous, glorious, true. She thought of the many symptoms that she had noticed but never considered, so that the revelation of their meaning brought the same glad surprise as to a young and innocent bride. She might have guessed.—The dreadful instability of nerves; longings for the widest outlet of physical effort, alternating with weak horrors of the slightest task; and, above all, the facile tears always springing to her eyes—these things, in one who by habit was firm of purpose and who wept with difficulty, should have been promptly recognized as unfailing signs of her condition. Lesser signs, too, had not been wanting—the vagrant fancies, the mental ups and downs which correspond with the changed states of the body; and she groped in the dim past, comparing her recent sensations and reveries with those experienced twenty-three years ago, before the birth of Enid. She might have guessed.—But truly perhaps she had been too humble of spirit ever to prepare herself for the admission of so proud a thought. Even in the brightly coloured dreams from which realities had so rudely awakened her, she was not advancing towards so triumphant an apotheosis.

But no morning sickness! Not yet. It will begin later this time—for the second child; and it will not be so bad. That first time—when poor Enid was coming into the world—she was but a slip of a girl; depressed by heavy care; worn out by the watchings and nursings of her mother's illness. [Pg 160] But now everything was and would be different. She possessed robust and long-established health; her husband was a magnificently strong man; their child would be a most noble gorgeous creature.

And each time that she thought thus of the child's father, the fountain springs of her intense gratitude rose and gushed higher and broader. She was only vaguely conscious of the extent of the revulsion of her feelings where he was concerned. The change seemed so natural and so little mysterious that she did not measure it. With the awakening of the new hopes, there had arisen a new love for him—a love purged of all impurities.

This was the real love—wide-reaching sympathy, infinite tenderness; the love that can understand all and forgive all; the instinct of protection blending with the instinct of submission; the maternal feeling extending beyond the unborn child to its creator—making them both her children.

One day when he said he wanted to ask her a favour, she told him, before he added another word, that she felt sure she would grant the favour. She was reading, in the drawing-room; and she slipped the book under the cushion of the sofa, and looked up at him with an expectant smile.

Then, showing some slight embarrassment, he explained that he had been "outrunning the constable."

All the arrangements of the partnership were formally settled; nothing had been overlooked by clever Mr. Prentice; everything was cut and dried; certain proportionately fixed sums were to be passed from time to time to the private credit of each partner; and then at the appointed seasons, when the true profits of the firm had been ascertained, amounts making up the balance of earned income would be paid over. All the usual precautions, and some that perhaps were rather unusual, had been adopted in order to prevent the partners from anticipating profits by premature drafts upon the funds of the firm. But now, as Marsden explained, he had exhausted his private account and was in sad need of a little ready to keep him going. [Pg 161]

She instantly agreed to give him the money—with the pleasure a too indulgent mother might feel in giving to a spendthrift son. Extravagance—what is it? Only one of those faults of youth by which the thoughtless young culprits endear themselves to their elderly guardians.

"Yes, Dick, I'll write the cheque at once. My chequebook is over there."

She rose slowly from the sofa, and slowly moved across the room to the Sheraton desk near the

window. Yates had begged her to beware of abrupt and hasty movements, and she walked about the house now with careful, well-considered footsteps.

"Of course, old girl, if you can see your way to making the amount for a little *more*?"

And she made it for a little more.

He was delighted. "Upon my word, Jane, you're a trump. No rot about you. When you see anyone in a hole, you don't badger him with a pack of questions—you just pull him out of the hole...."

He thanked her and praised her so much that she melted in tenderness, and almost told him her secret. She looked at him fondly and admiringly. He seemed so strong and so brave—with his stiff close-cropped hair and his white evenly-shaped teeth,—laughing gleefully as he pocketed his present,—like a great happy schoolboy. While she looked at him, the secret was trying to escape, was burning her lips, and knocking at her breast with each quickened heartbeat.

She succeeded, however, in restraining the expansive impulse. The delay can but heighten the triumph—it is so much grander to be able to say, not "I *think*," but "I *know*." [Pg 162]

When he had hurried away to cash his cheque, she took out the Book that she had been reading and had shyly concealed under the cushion. It was the Bible. Reverently reopening it and musingly turning the leaves, she glanced at those chapters of Genesis that tell of the first gift of human life.... "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband; and he shall rule over thee."

The softness and the exaltation of her mood showed very plainly in the expression of her face as she read the nobly fabled origin of love and marriage. While reading she made vows to God and to herself. If all went well, she would cheerfully bear the hardest usage, at her husband's hands. She would never reproach him, she would ever be a comfort to him. And so long as their child lived, the torch-bearer carrying the fire of life kindled from their joint lives should guide her steps through the darkest places towards the distant glimmer of eternal light.

That night she was roused from her first sleep by the sound of heavily blundering footsteps. Mr. Marsden had come home in an unusually jolly state. His wife heard him stumbling about the adjacent room, knocking over a chair, laughing, and singing drunken snatches of song.

He had never before been quite so jolly. For a minute the hilarious music saddened her; but then she felt quite happy again. He was not really drunk—merely excited, elated. And besides, this sort of thing would not occur in the future: a generous fear of the questioning eyes of an innocent child would help to keep him straight.

And she fell to thinking of domestic arrangements that would be necessary before the great event. His bedroom and the dressing-room used to be the day and night nursery when Enid was a [Pg 163] baby. The grandmother slept in the room at present occupied by Yates, and Yates slept in a smaller room. How would they manage now? This room should be the night nursery—she herself could sleep anywhere. Probably Yates would have to give up her nice room—but Yates would not mind. And, yes—the difficulty must be confronted—Dick must give up his dressing-room. Would he mind?

No. Every difficulty would be surmounted. All would be smoothly and easily arranged in the end. Dreamily sweeping away the difficulties, she sank again into restful sleep.

That important second date was drawing near, and Yates was becoming more and more fussily attentive. It taxed all her strength of mind to keep the secret to herself; she longed for the time when it might be made public property.

"Look here, ma'am," she said mysteriously, "don't let anyone see us opening this parcel. Let's go upstairs and open it there, quiet and comfortable."

"What is it, Yates?"

Upstairs in the bedroom, Yates, with many shrewd nods and meaning smiles, untied her parcel, and displayed to Mrs. Marsden its entrancingly fascinating contents.

"Oh, Yates!"

They were the prettiest imaginable little baby-things—woollen socks, flannel robes, etc., articles of costume suitable to the very earliest stage; together with materials for binders, wrappers, and so on, that would require cutting, stitching, *making*.

"The work will do you good," said Yates. "Just to amuse yourself, when you're sitting all alone up here—and to keep your mind off the strain."

"Oh, Yates, they are lovely. Where did you get them?"

"Don't you bother where I got them," said Yates, looking shame-faced all at once. "I don't intend [Pg 164] to tell you." But then she went on defiantly: "Well, if you *must* know, I got them in the children's outfitting department—over at Bence's."

Her mistress was not in the least angry. She smiled at the sound of the rival's name;—and, of

course, in this particular department there was no rivalry between the two shops.

Yates was particular that her interesting patient should enjoy a moderate amount of fresh air, and advised that in these cases gentle carriage exercise is distinctly beneficial.

Several times therefore a brougham was procured from Mr. Young's stables, and mistress and maid went for a quiet afternoon drive. Yates would have preferred to enjoy these airings earlier in the day, but she agreed with Mrs. Marsden that a morning drive might appear "conspicuous." As it was, Yates made the excursion quite sufficiently remarkable—hot-water bottle for the patient's feet, rugs for her legs, three or four shawls for her shoulders.

"And don't you drive too fast," said Yates sternly to Mr. Young's coachman. "Take us along quiet.... And if you meet any of those great engines on the road, just turn round and go the other way."

"I don't want you frightened," she told Mrs. Marsden, "if only for half a minute."

Mr. Young's horses, at an easy jog trot, took them along very, very quietly; some air, but not too much, blew in upon them pleasantly; and throughout the drive the two women talked unceasingly of the same engrossing subject.

"Which do you hope for, yourself, ma'am?"

"Yates, I scarcely know."

"Well, ma'am, I'll tell you candid, it's a girl *I* am hoping for."

"But whichever it is—boy or girl—you'll love it just the same, won't you, Yates?" [Pg 165]

"Indeed I shall, ma'am."

And they discussed christian names.

"If it is a boy, of course I shall wish him to have his father's name for one."

"Yes, I suppose so, ma'am."

"Richard for his first name; and, if Mr. Marsden approves, I shall call him Martin. I should like him to bear the name of Saint Martin—for a little romantic reason of my own. And I also like the name of Roderick—if that isn't too grand."

"I like the plain names best," said Yates. "If it's a girl, I do hope and trust you'll give her your own name, ma'am. You can never get a better name than Jane. Let her be Miss Jane."

They met no ugly traction engines to upset the horses, and disturb the patient's composure. They chose the level sheltered roads, and avoided the dangerous windy hills; and Mrs. Marsden looked through the half-shut window at the featureless landscape, and thought it almost beautiful, even at this dead time of the year. It was bare and nearly colourless,—all the hedgerows of a dull brown, the far-off woods a misty grey, and here and there, seen through the black field-gates, patches of snow faintly sparkling beneath the feeble light. The tardy spring as yet showed scarce a sign of nascent energy. But the winter had no terrors for her now. There was summer in her heart.

The date had passed; and, passing, had left apparent certainty.

Yates was wildly excited, irrepressibly jubilant.

"You'll tell him now, won't you, ma'am?"

"Yes, I can tell him now."

"Everybody may know it now, ma'am—And, oh, won't they be glad to hear the news in the shop." [Pg 166]

But naturally Mr. Marsden must hear the news before anybody else; and unluckily Mr. Marsden was not in Mallingbridge to hear it. He had been expected home two days ago, but something was detaining him in London.

This final useless delay, after the long unavoidable delay, seemed more than Mrs. Marsden could support.

"Oh, why is he away? Oh, Yates, I want him—I want him with me. Oh, oh!" She burst into a sobbing fit, and rung her hands piteously. "Yates, fetch him. Bring my husband back to me. Don't let him leave me now—of all times."

This was in the morning, before Mrs. Marsden had got up. After sobbing for a little while, she became suddenly faint and breathless, and sank back upon her pillow. Yates, scared by her faintness and whiteness, ran out of the room and despatched a hasty messenger.

She could not fetch the husband; so the good soul did the next best thing, and sent for the doctor.

When she returned to the bedroom Mrs. Marsden seemed all right again.

"Doctor Eldridge is coming to see you, ma'am."

"Is he?"

"It's only wise," said Yates authoritatively, "that he should take charge of the case now. It's full time we had him in. He knows your constitution—and you can trust him, and feel quite safe to go on just as he advises you."

Dr. Eldridge was a long time alone with the patient. After Yates had been told to leave them, he talked gently and gravely to his old friend. He confessed to being rather sceptical by habit of mind; in forming a diagnosis he was perhaps always disposed to err on the side of caution, and [Pg 167] thus he often declined to accept what at first sight seemed an obvious inference until it had been corroborated by indisputable evidence;—but then again, all his experience had shown him how prudent, how necessary it is to prepare oneself for disappointment.... He thought that Mrs. Marsden should, if possible, prepare herself for disappointment.

Outside the room, he spoke to Yates with a severity that was only mitigated by contempt.

"What nonsense have you been stuffing her up with? It's too bad of you." And then the professional contempt for amateur doctors sounded in the severe tone of his voice. "You ought to know better at your time of life."

He came again next day, and told Mrs. Marsden the bitter truth. The correct interpretation of the symptoms was far, very far different from that which she had imagined. And then he pronounced the words of doom. It was not the birth of hope, but the death of hope. Somewhat earlier than one would have predicted as likely, she had passed the turning-point in the cyclic history of her existence.

A deadly, numbing apathy descended upon her. She was not ill; but in order to escape the infinitely oppressive duties of dressing, sitting at meals, walking up and down stairs, listening to voices and answering questions, she pretended illness; and, to cover the pretence, Dr. Eldridge frequently visited her.

Day after day she lay upon her sofa, watching the feeble daylight turn to dusk, staring at the red glow of the coals or the golden flicker of burning wood—feeling too sad to reproach, too weak to curse the inexorable laws of destiny.

Her husband used to enter the room noisily and jovially, with a cigar in his mouth and a shining silk hat on the back of his head.

"What the dickens is the matter with you, Jane?" [Pg 168]

He did not guess. He could never read her thoughts.

"I believe you ought to rouse yourself, old girl. I suppose old Eldridge sees a chance of running up a nice little bill—and Yates will have her bit out of it. Between them, they'll persuade you you're going to kick the bucket."

"I feel so tired, Dick."

"Then go on taking it easy," said Marsden genially. "But here's my tip—look out for another doctor, and another maid. I wouldn't bid twopence, if both of them were put up to auction."

Another time he said, "Jane, do you twig why I am wearing my topper? That means *business*. Yes, I'm going to throw myself into my work now, heart and soul. Buck up as soon as you can, and come and see how I'm setting about me."

While he stood by the door, talking and smoking, she looked at him with dull but kind eyes.

Some of the glamour of that vanished hope still hung about him; and the sense of gratitude, although now meaningless, lingered for a long while. But for herself, it would have been a fact instead of an hysterical fancy. It was her fault, not his.

When he had shut the door, she thought of herself dully, without pity, in stupid wonder.

This is the end. The heats of summer gone; the mimic warmth of autumn gone, too; nothing left but the cold, dead winter—the end of all.

XVI

[Pg 169]

The state of apathetic indifference continued; the slow months dragged by, and still she could not shake off her invincible weariness and spur herself to resume activity.

Once or twice Enid invited her to pay the long-postponed visit of inspection; and, when these invitations were refused, she offered to come to see her mother. But she was put off with vague excuses. The weather seemed so doubtful this week; later in the year Mrs. Marsden would certainly make the eight-mile journey, and examine the charming home of her daughter and her

son-in-law.

It was an effort even to write a letter; nothing really interested her; her highest wish was to be left alone.

She heard and occasionally saw what was happening in the shop; but the old keen delight in business had faded with all other delights. She was not wanted down there behind the glass. Her husband was master there now, and he did not require her assistance. He was pushing on with his programme of change and innovation; he brought her architects' drawings and builders' plans to sign, and she signed them without questioning; he jauntily told her about his new Japanese department, his new agency trade, his revolutionised carpet store, and she listened meekly to everything, appeared willing to concur in anything.

He was inordinately pleased with himself, and his boastful self-confidence brimmed over in noisy chatter. He had declared war against Bence; henceforth, he vowed, the tit-for-tat policy should be pursued with implacable thoroughness.

"Look out for yourself, Mr. Bence," he said vaingloriously. "It has been very nice for you up to now. Because you saw a naked face, you smacked it. But now you're smacked back—as you'll jolly well find. I expect my new fascia has opened your eyes to what's coming." [Pg 170]

The new fascia had been erected. It was made of chestnut wood—a most artistic up-to-date piece of work, with the names Thompson & Marsden alternating in carved lozenges over all the windows, with linked festoons of flowers, with high relief and intaglio cutting—with what not decorative and grand. It ran the whole length of the street frontage and round the corner up St. Saviour's Court, and it cost £750.

But that expense was a fleabite when compared with the cost of the structural alterations that were now fairly in hand.

The yard was being completely covered. The carts would drive into what would be the ground floor; and above this there would be three floors of packing rooms, with every imaginable convenience of lifts, slides, and shoots, for manipulating the goods and discharging them at the public. Meanwhile, the old packing rooms had been huddled into unused cellars, and the space that they had occupied in the basement, indeed the entire basement, was being excavated to an astounding depth. Soon an immense subterranean area would be scooped out; vast halls with wide staircases would be constructed; a shop below a shop would be ready for Mr. Marsden's use.

But what he proposed to do with it he had not as yet disclosed. He was feverishly anxious to get all the work finished, but the new basement especially occupied his ambitious dreams.

"Mears, old buck," he said often, "I'm itching to get down there. And how damn slow they are, aren't they?"

Having had his fling as a gentleman at large, he seemed to enjoy for a little while the quieter but more massive importance derived from his position as the proprietor of a successful business, the employer of labour, the patron of art and manufacture. He paid handsomely for the insertion of his portrait in the local newspaper, and arranged with the editor that paragraphs about himself and his operations should appear amongst news items without the objectionable word Advertisement. On early closing day he swaggered about the town, feeling that he was one of its most prominent citizens, and proving himself always ready to stand a drink to anyone who would say so. [Pg 171]

When his architect came down from London to go over the works with the contractor, he carried them off to the Dolphin, before anything had been done, and gave them a sumptuous luncheon—sat bragging and drinking with them for hours. When at dusk they returned to the shop, Marsden was red and noisy, the architect was in a fuddled state, and the contractor frankly hiccoughed.

"Down with you, old boy," said Marsden jovially. "And buck 'em up—the lazy bounders. Get a move on. I want this job finished; and it seems to me you're all playing with it."

After the governor had been lunching he lost that sense of decorum which from long habit should make it almost as impossible to speak loudly in a shop as in a church. All the assistants and several customers were scandalized by the noisy tongues of Mr. Marsden and his architect.

"And you jolly well remember that everything's to be done without interference to my business. It's in the contract—and don't you forget it. Start to finish—that was the bargain—business to be carried on as usual."

"Oh, we don't forget, Mist' Marsd—— No interferens. Bizniz muz go on zactly as usual."

But did it? Mears was appalled by the disturbance and confusion. Outside in the street a long line of builders' carts blocked the approach of carriage-folk; from beneath the windows, through the opened gratings, earth and gravel and lumps of broken concrete were being painfully hauled out; the pavement was covered with mud, obstructed with débris, so that foot-people could not pass in comfort, and the Borough Surveyor had sent three notices urgently requesting the abatement of what was a public as well as a private nuisance. Inside the shop one heard growling thunders from the depths below one's feet, and sudden explosions as if one were walking over a volcano, while from every entrance to the dark vaults there issued clouds of destructive lime dust. [Pg 172]

Sometimes a department was shut up for an hour while a steel girder was rolled along the floor by twenty perspiring men; processions of bucket-bearers emerged unexpectedly; and one saw in every mirror a grimy face or a plaster-stained back.

What was the use of asking ladies to step upstairs and view our Oriental novelties, when the nearest staircase was temporarily converted into a slide for roped planks?

Ladies said No, thank you; they would call again.

"This is going to hit us, sir," said Mr. Mears gloomily. "It is going to hit us hard if it continues much longer."

"But it won't continue," said Marsden irritably. "They're bound by contract to finish before the twentieth of next month. Besides, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

There could be no doubt, thought Mears, as to the broken eggs; but the question was, Would Mr. Marsden's omelette ever come to table, or would it get tossed into the fire with so much else that seemed finding an end there?

Towards the completion of the contract time, Marsden more than once forced his wife to come through the door of communication, and have a look round the altered shop. She was admittedly convalescent now. She had not demurred when the master of the house gave Dr. Eldridge what he called "a straight tip" to cease paying professional visits. She had not protested when, in her presence, an almost straighter tip was given to Yates that the boring fuss about a malady of the imagination must cease. In fact she herself had said that there was nothing the matter with her. [Pg 173]

She could not therefore refuse to show herself when he explicitly commanded her to do so.

Many changes—as she passed by Woollens and China and Glass, it was like walking in a dream, among the distorted shadows of familiar objects. Miss Woolfrey ran out of China and Glass to welcome her; but the other assistants, male and female, seemed shy of attracting her attention. Changes on all sides, which she looked at with indifferent eyes—but one change that slowly compelled a more careful observation. Perhaps downstairs this, the greatest of the changes, would not be observable? But no, it was noticed as plainly downstairs as upstairs.

There were fewer customers.

She glanced at the clock outside the counting-house. Three-twenty! In the middle of the afternoon, at this season of the year, the shop should be thronged with customers; and it appeared to be, comparatively speaking, empty.

Marsden was waiting to receive her behind the glass, in her old sanctum.

"Come in, Jane. Here I am—hard at it."

Her bureau had disappeared. Where it used to stand there was a large but compact American desk; and in front of this Mr. Marsden sat enthroned. She glanced round the room, and saw a small new writing-table in the space between the second safe and the wall.

"I thought you could sit over there, Jane," said Marsden, pointing with his patent self-feeding pen. "You'd be out of the draught—for one thing." [Pg 174]

She was to be pushed into a corner, to be made to understand her insignificant position under the new order of things,—but she did not protest.

"Now then. Come along."

He took her first of all through the Furniture, and showed her his sub-department for the sale of desks and all other office requisites similar to those which he had purchased for his own use. This was what he called agency work.

"No risk, don't you see, old girl! Doing the trick with other people's capital." And he explained how the German firm that supplied England with these American goods had given him most advantageous terms. "A splendid agreement for *us*! If the things don't go off quick, we just shovel the lot back at them—and try something else. That's *trade*. Keep a move on—don't go to sleep."

Then presently he took her upstairs, to what he called his Japan Exhibition.

The Cretonne Department had been compressed and curtailed to make room for this new feature, and she passed through the archway of an ornate partition in order to admire and wonder at the Oriental novelties.

"Now, Jane, this is what I'm really proud of."

There was plenty to see and to think about—Marsden made her handle carved and tinted ivory warriors with glittering swords and tiny burnished helmets, dragons with jewelled eyes and enamelled jaws, exquisite little cloisonne boxes; made her stoop to look at the malachite plinths of huge squat vases; and made her stretch her neck to look at gold-embossed friezes of great tall screens.

All these goods were very expensive; and she asked if any of them had been introduced, like the Yankee furniture, on sale or return.

[Pg 175]

"No, these are our own racket—and tip-top stuff, the best of its kind, never brought to Europe till last summer.... The stock stands us in close on four thousand pounds. You wouldn't think it, would you? But it's *art*. It's an education to possess such things."

She hazarded another question. Did he think Mallingbridge would consent to pay for such high-class education?

"It'll be a great disappointment to me if they don't clear us out in three months from now. Of course they haven't discovered yet what we're offering them. But they *will*. I go on the double policy—play down to your public in one department, but try to lift your public in another. That's the way to keep alive."

And, as they left the Japanese treasures and strolled about the upper floor, he rattled off his glib catch-words.

"These are hustling times. Get a move on somehow. That's what I tell them—They'll soon tumble to it."

He parted from her near the door of communication.

"Ta-ta, old girl.... Oh, by the way, I shan't be in to dinner to-night—or to-morrow either. I'm off to London. I'm wanted there about my Christmas Baz——" And he checked himself. "But I'll ask old Mears to tell you all about that."

Then he ran downstairs, two steps at a time, and swaggered here and there between the counters to impress the assistants with his hustlingly Napoleonic air.

Occasionally he loved to step forward, wave aside the assistant, and himself serve a customer. He thoroughly enjoyed the awe-struck admiration of the shop when he thus granted it a display of his skill. It was his only real gift—the salesman art; and it never failed him.

But it was something that he could not impart. Assistants who imitated his method—trying to catch the smiling, almost chaffing manner that could immediately convert a grumpy lethargic critic into a prompt and cheerful buyer—were merely familiar and impudent, and ended by huffing the customer. [Pg 176]

And the governor, when he happened to detect want of success in one of his young gentlemen or young ladies, came down like a hundred of bricks.

He treated the two sexes quite impartially, and the women could not say that he bullied the men worse than he bullied them. But he had a deadly sort of satire that the younger girls dreaded more than the angriest storm of abuse. Thus if he saw one of them sitting down, he would address her with apparently amiable solicitude.

"Is that ledge hard, Miss Vincent? Couldn't someone get her a cushion? Make yourself at home. Why don't you come round the counter and sit on the customers' laps?... We must find you a comfortable seat *somewhere*—and change of air, too. Mallingbridge isn't agreeing with your constitution, if you feel as slack as all this."

Like the people of his house, these people of his shop feared him, and, perhaps without putting the thoughts into words, or troubling to quote adages, understood that beggars on horseback always ride with reckless disregard of the safety and comfort of the humble companions with whom they were recently tramping along the hard road, and that no master is so tyrannical as a promoted servant. In the opinion of the shop-assistants, he could not go to London too often or stay there too long.

While he was away this time, Mears came to Mrs. Marsden with a long face and a gloomy voice, and gave her the delayed information as to her husband's Christmas programme.

The new underground floor was to be used for a grand Bazaar, and Mears had been told to win her round to the idea.

Mears himself hated the idea. He thought the bazaar a brainless plagiarism of Bence's, and altogether unworthy of Thompson's. It would be exactly like Bence's, but on a much larger scale —beneath the good respectable shop, a cheap and nasty shop, in which catchpenny travesties of decent articles would be the only wares; fancy stationery, sham jewellery, spurious metals; horrid little clocks that won't go, knives and scissors that won't cut, collar-boxes more flimsy than the collars they are intended to hold—everything beastly that crumples, bends, or breaks before you can get home with it. [Pg 177]

"But he won't abandon the idea," said Mears. "That's a certainty. He's mad keen on it. The only thing is for you to use your influence—and I'll back you up solid—to persuade him to modify it."

And Mears strongly advocated modification on these lines: make the bazaar a fitting annex,—substitute boots and shoes for the sixpenny toys, good leather trunks for the paper boxes, nice engravings for the coloured photographs,—offer the public genuine stuff and not trash.

Accordingly, Mr. Marsden, as soon as he returned, was begged by his partner and his manager to grant their joint petition for a slightly modified Christmas carnival. But he said it was too late. They ought to have gone into the matter earlier.

He had bought the trash,—had engaged his London girls,—was ready; and like a general on the

eve of campaign, he could not be bothered with advice from subordinate officers.

When discussing this horrible innovation, Mears had extracted from Mrs. Marsden a distinct show of interest; several times afterwards he had endeavoured to stimulate and increase the interest; and now, just before Christmas, he earnestly implored her to rouse herself.

"We miss you, ma'am, worse every day. It isn't *safe* to let things drift. We can't get on without you." [Pg 178]

Then one morning she had an early breakfast, dressed herself in her shop black, came down behind the glass, took her seat at the little corner table of her old room, and unobtrusively began working.

Marsden, when he came in two or three hours later, was surprised to see her.

"Hullo, Jane, what do you think you are doing?"

"Well, Dick," she said submissively, "I should like to help in the shop—as I used to, you know."

"Bravo. Excellent! I want all the help that anyone can give me;" and he seated himself in the chair of honour. "But look here. Don't mess about with the papers on this desk. I work after a system—and if my papers are muddled, it simply upsets me and wastes my time."

XVII [Pg 179]

It had been a fearful year for Thompson & Marsden's. From the moment that the grand fascia permanently recorded the new style of the firm, money had flowed out of the business like water—and like big water, like mountain torrents or sea waves; while the feeding-stream of money that flowed into the business was obstructed, deflected, and plainly lessened in volume. And now, when all the immense outlay should begin to prove remunerative, even Marsden himself confessed that results were inadequate and unsatisfactory.

The Bazaar was a disastrous fiasco. The builders had broken their contract; the basement had not been completed on the stipulated date, and a law-suit was pending. Marsden swore that he would recover damages for the loss entailed by his builders' wickedness; but Mr. Prentice advised that he had a weak case.

When, to the strains of a Viennese orchestra, the public were invited to go down and enjoy themselves underground, they flatly declined the invitation. A peep into the brilliantly lighted depths was sufficient for them. Damp exhaled from the plastered walls; the few adventurous customers shivered and the girls sneezed in their faces. An epidemic of sore throat, engendered down there, rose and spread through the upper shop. After three weeks, Marsden's grand Christmas entertainment was withdrawn—like a pantomime that is too stupid to attract the children; the regiment of sneezing girls was disbanded; the mass of unsold rubbish was sent to London, to be disposed of for what it would fetch. And that, as the whole shop knew, was half nothing.

The Japanese department was almost as bad a bargain; the little ivory warriors terrified cautious citizens with their high prices; no one would come to buy and be educated. But Marsden for a long time was obstinate about his Oriental goods. He would not face the loss, and cut it short. [Pg 180]

He seemed to have forgotten his American office equipments; but this feature had also failed to fulfil expectations. Only three small articles had been sold. However, as there was no risk here, the want of success did not much matter; but still it must be counted as one more of the governor's false moves. Indeed, as all now saw, everything attempted by the governor during this period of his energetic efforts had gone hopelessly wrong.

But he himself could not brook the disappointment caused by his failures. He was disgusted when he thought of what had happened since his pompous declaration of war. Although he would not admit that so far Bence was beating him, he inveighed against fate, against Mallingbridge, against all the world.

"What the devil can you do when you're buried in a dead and alive hole like this, surrounded by idiotic prejudices, and dependent on a lot of old fossils to carry out your ideas?"

The fitful energy that had occasioned so much trouble was now quite exhausted. He seemed to have entered another phase. He was never jolly now, but always discontented, and generally querulous, morose, or violently angry.

One after another the old shop chieftains succumbed beneath his bullying attacks. Mr. Ridgway and Mr. Fentiman had gone. Mr. Greig was going.

Mrs. Marsden always recognized the beginning of his onslaught upon anybody to whom in the old days she had been strongly attached. A few sneering words—lightly and carelessly; and then, when he returned to the charge, gross abuse of the doomed thing. She knew that it was doomed. [Pg 181] In the wreck of her life this too must go. Then very soon there were insults and violences that rendered the position of the victim untenable, unendurable. Thus he had forced Mr. Ridgway and

the others to resign.

Yates, the servant and friend that she loved, was also doomed. She was struggling to avert the stroke of doom, but she knew that sooner or later it must fall.

And during all this time his demands for cash were increasingly frequent. By his colossal outlay he had mortgaged the profits of years, and it was essential that the partners should wait patiently until they came into their own again. But he would not wait, and vowed that he could not further retrench his personal expenses. How was he to live without *some* ready cash? And if the firm could not furnish it, she must.

"I *am* trying to sell my big car," he told her. "And I suppose you will ask me to sell the little one next—and paddle about in the mud again. But, no, thank you, that doesn't suit my book at all."

At last she summoned to her aid something of that old resolution that seemed to have left her forever, and refused to comply with his request.

"No, Dick, I can't. It isn't fair. I can't."

"You mean, you *won't*."

"Well, if you force me to use that word, I shall use it."

Then there was a terrible quarrel—or rather he abused her meanness and selfishness with brutal violence, and she protested against his injustice and cruelty with all the strength that she possessed.

After this he absented himself for a fortnight. He sent no messages; he left the business to take care of itself, or be run by the other partner; nobody knew where he was.

When he reappeared he showed a perceptible deterioration of aspect, as if the vicious orgies [Pg 182]
through which probably he had been passing had set their ugly print upon his mouth, and had tarnished the healthy brightness of his eyes. Henceforth the evidences of his increasing dissipation became more and more obvious. He had abandoned himself to the influences of this second phase. He drank heavily. He was careless about his clothes; never looked spick and span and well-groomed; often looked quite seedy and shabby, lounging in and out of the Dolphin Hotel, with cheeks unshaven, and an unbrushed pot hat on the back of his head.

But although he neglected his work, he made people understand that he still considered himself the boss, and whenever he came into the shop he asserted his authority. After lying in bed sometimes till late in the afternoon, he would come down and upset everybody just when the day's work was drawing to a close.

At the sight of him all eyes were lowered, and many hands began to tremble behind the counters. Before he had progressed from the door of communication to the top of the staircase, somebody, it was certain, would be dropped on. But on whom would he drop?

Once it was his ancient admirer and ally, Miss Woolfrey. Outside China & Glass, she spoke to him pleasantly if nervously.

"Good evening, sir. You'll find Mrs. Thompson downstairs in the office."

"Who the devil are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Thompson, sir—Oh, lor, how silly of me! Mrs. *Marsden*, sir."

"Yes, that's the name; and I'll be obliged if you won't forget it." He was always exceedingly angry if, as still often happened, the old assistants accidentally used the name that from long habit sprang so easily to their lips.

"Mrs. Marsden, if you please. And not too much of that." He looked about him wrathfully, [Pg 183]
involving half the upper floor in his displeasure. "I wish you'd all learnt manners before you got yourselves taken on here. 'Yes, Mrs. Marsden. No, Mrs. Marsden'—that's the way I hear you. Don't any of you know that Madam is the proper form of address when you're speaking to your employer's wife?"

When he went behind the glass all the clerks began to blunder and to get confused. He called for day-books, ledgers, and cash-books, and glanced at them with lordly superciliousness while the poor clerks humbly held them open before him. Nothing was ever quite right—he blamed somebody for illegible hand-writing, someone else for a blot, someone else for the dog's ear of a page.

As promised by Miss Woolfrey, he found the late Mrs. Thompson quietly working at the little corner table in his room. Then he stood before the fire warming his legs, and haranguing about shop-etiquette, up-to-date methods, time-saving systems, and complaining of the many faults that he had discovered.

His wife listened without discontinuing the work.

Gradually, in spite of all his dictatorial interferences, he was allowing her to do more and more work. He told the heads of the staff that when he was out of the way, they were to take their instructions from Mrs. Marsden. Then, when underlings came to him, obsequiously asking for his orders in regard to small matters, he said he could not be worried about trifles. Mrs. Marsden

would direct them. He had more than enough important things to think of, and could not descend to petty details.

One afternoon he came in from the street, turned the type-writing girl out of the room, and told his wife to give him all her attention.

"Attend to me, old girl. News. Great news."

He slapped his legs, and laughed. He was elated and excited. It was a flash of jollity after months of gloom. [Pg 184]

"Do you remember what I told you eighteen months ago?"

"What did you tell me, Dick?"

"I asked you to mark my words—and I said, that little bounder over there wasn't going to last much longer."

The old story of Bence's approaching bankruptcy had been revived again. Marsden had heard it once more, at the Dolphin bar or in the Conservative Club billiard room, and he greedily swallowed every word of it.

He said it was a hard-boiled fact this time. One of the profligate brothers had died; the widow was taking his money out of the business; and Archibald Bence, deprived of capital without which he could not scrape along, would go phutt at any minute.

"There, old girl, I thought it would buck you up to hear such news, so I ran in to tell you. But now I must be off."

And then, in his unusual good temper, he noticed the difficulties under which she was labouring.

"I say, you don't seem very comfortable with all your papers spread out on chairs like that. It looks so infernally messy—but I suppose you haven't space for them on your table."

"I could do with more space, certainly."

"Very well. You can sit at my desk—when I am not here. But don't fiddle about with anything in the drawers;" and he laughed. "You'd better not pry among my papers, or you may get your fingers snapped off. The whole damned thing shut up with a bang when I was looking for something in a hurry the other day."

She wondered if there could be any valid reason for the persistent recurrence of these stories of financial shakiness behind their rival's outward show of prosperity. Were these little puffs of smoke, appearing and disappearing so frequently, indicative of latent fire? She asked Mr. Mears what he thought about the gossip carried in such triumph by her credulous husband. [Pg 185]

Mears did not believe a word of it.

"We've heard such yarns for ten years, haven't we?" And Mears nodded his head in the direction of the street. "I've used my eyes, and I don't see any signs of it—and I think Mr. Marsden shouldn't reckon on it."

"No, I quite agree with you."

"Although," said Mears, "it would be very convenient to us, if it *did* happen—and if it *is* going to happen, the sooner it happens the better."

"It won't happen," said Mrs. Marsden, sadly and wearily. "The wish is father to the thought—there's no real sense in it."

At this time she often thought of Archibald Bence; and of how, when alluding to his idle spendthrift brothers, he used to say with quaintly candid self-pity, "There's a leak in my shop."

Well, there was a leak on each side of the street, now.

Availing herself of her husband's permission, she came out of the corner, and was generally to be seen seated in the chair of honour at the tricky American desk.

Little by little she was resuming control over the ordinary routine management of the shop; and, although in its greater and more momentous affairs she remained practically impotent, she was allowed full opportunities to supervise and encourage its daily traffic.

Once or twice as Mears stood by her chair in the office and watched her knitted brows while she considered the questions of the hour, he thought and felt that it was quite like old times.

But this was a transient thought. Old times could never really come again. Stooping to take the papers on which she had scrawled her brief and rapid directions, he noticed the coarse grey strands in the hair that such a little while ago used to be so smooth, so glossy, and to his mind so pretty. He could see, too, the differences in her whole face. The face was slightly smaller; the florid colours were fading so fast that occasionally she seemed sallow; the lines of the kind mouth had grown harder; and there was a curious, passive, subdued look where once there had been outpouring vitality. And the bodice of the black dress hung loose, in small folds and creases, on the shoulders that used to fill it with such handsome thoroughness. [Pg 186]

But instinctively Mears understood that behind the narrower and less glowing mask the inward force was not extinguished—the indomitable spirit was there still, not yet quenched, and perhaps unquenchable.

He watched her—with a veneration deeper than he had ever felt in the easy prosperous past—while she went on quietly, bravely working, day by day, week after week.

One Saturday evening, after an uneventful but laborious week, when she had supped alone and was reading by the dining-room fire, Marsden came in and abruptly asked her for money.

"This is serious, Jane—no rot about it. I'm stuck for a couple of hundred, and I must have it."

"Really, Dick, I cannot—"

"I don't ask it as a gift. Of course I meant to pay you back the other advances, but everything's been against me. I *will* try to pay you. Anyhow, this is a bona fide loan. It's only to tide me over."

"But you said that last time."

"Last time you refused—and I had to chuck away my little run-about—simply chuck it away. And I wanted to keep that car as much for your sake as for mine. I knew you enjoyed a ride in it." [Pg 187]

She had ridden in the car once, and once only.

"Look here, old girl." And he removed his hat, and sat down on the other side of the dinner-table. Perhaps he had hoped that she would give him a cheque and let him go out again in two or three minutes; but now he saw it would take longer. "I must have the money by Monday morning—or I shall be in a devil of a hole. More or less a matter of honour.... Don't be nasty. Help a pal. It's not *like* you to refuse—when I tell you I'm in earnest."

"But, Dick, I am in earnest, too. Truly I can't do it."

"Rot. You can do it without feeling it." And he assumed a facetious air. "Just your autograph—that's all I ask for. I'll write out the cheque myself—save you all trouble. Just sign your name."

"No, I'm very sorry; but it's impossible."

He got up, and began to walk about the room, fuming angrily.

"Then I shall draw on the firm."

"Then I shall have to call in Mr. Prentice, and ask him to protect the firm—to go to the law courts if necessary."

"Oh, that's all my aunt. I've had enough of Mr. Prentice—Mr. Prentice isn't my wet nurse."

"Dick, be reasonable. Be kind to me. Don't you see, yourself, that—"

"I'm not going to have you and old Prentice treating me as if I was a baby in arms—lecturing, and preaching to me about the firm. You and Prentice aren't the firm. I'm just as much the firm as you are."

"Have I put myself forward? Do I ever deny your rights?"

"Be damned to Prentice." He took his hands out of his overcoat pockets, and brandished them furiously. "Prentice was my enemy from the very beginning;" and he raised his voice. It seemed as if he was purposely working himself into a passion. "I was a fool to submit to his bounce. I ought to have had a marriage settlement—money properly settled on me—and I was a fool to let him jew me out of it." [Pg 188]

"I gave you a half share."

"Yes, in the business—but *only* the business."

"Wasn't that enough for you?"

"Yes, in good times, no doubt. But what about bad times? And what the devil did I know of the business before I came into it? Nothing was explained to me. I came in blindfold. I took everything on trust."

"Oh, I think you understood it was a paying concern."

"It wasn't *proved* to me, anyhow. No one took the trouble to let me see the books—and give me the plain figures. Oh, no, that would have been beneath your dignity."

"Or beneath yours, Dick?"

"Yes, and I was a fool to consider my dignity. That was old Prentice again. I suppose he took his cue from you. You had put your heads together, and decided that I was to behave like the good boy in the copy-books. Open your mouth and shut your eyes, and see what God will send you."

"Dick, please—please don't go on."

Suddenly he stopped walking about, leaned his hands on the table, and stared across at her.

"Suppose the entire business goes to pot. What then?"

"The business will recover, and continue—if it isn't drained to death."

"Yes, but it's all mighty fine for *you*. You can afford to take a lofty tone. Fat years are followed by lean years—We must wait for the fat years again. I know all that cut and dried cackle—it's the [Pg 189] way people of property always talk. I came in with nothing—please to remember that. I'm absolutely dependent on the business—if the profits go down to nothing, am I to starve?"

"You shan't starve;" and she looked round the comfortable, well-furnished room.

"*You* had your private fortune—all that you'd put by,—and I suppose you have got all of it still."

"How can I have it all—when you know what I gave to Enid?"

"You gave Enid a dashed sight too much—but you had plenty left, in spite of that."

"Dick, on my honour, I hadn't a large amount left. I used to count myself a rich woman, but I was only relying on the business. What I took out one year I put back into it another year. I was always trying to improve it."

"I'll swear you haven't put any back since you married me."

"No, I haven't."

"No, that I'll swear." He had lowered his voice, and he was speaking with a scornful intensity. "No, good times or bad times in the shop, you are content to pouch your dividends from all your stocks and shares, and sit watching your nest-egg grow bigger and bigger, while—"

"Dick! You are tiring me out. Don't go on."

"Yes, I will go on. You started it—and now I mean to get to the bottom of things. Let's get to plain figures at last. What are you worth now—of your very own—apart from the firm?"

"Not one penny more than I need—for my own safety."

"Ha-ha! You're afraid to tell me."

"Why should I tell you? Dick, don't go on. It's cruel of you to bully me—when I'm so tired."

"Twenty thousand? Thirty thousand? How much? Oh, I dare say I can figure it out for myself— [Pg 190] without your help. Say twelve or fifteen hundred a year, coming in like clockwork. Why I saved you two-fifty a year myself, by cutting down what you intended to settle on Enid and that skinny rascal of a horse-coper."

"Dick—for pity's sake—"

"Then answer me." And he raised his voice louder than before. "What are you doing with your private income?"

"This house costs *something*."

"Oh, this house can't stand you in much. Where does the rest go—if you aren't saving it? Are you giving it to Enid?... That's it, I suppose. If that lazy swine wants two hundred to buy himself another thoroughbred hunter, I suppose he sends Enid sneaking over here—when my back's turned—and just taps you for it. You don't refuse *him*. But if *I* come to you, it's 'No, certainly not. Do you want to ruin me?'"

"Dick!"

"Then, will you let me have it?"

Her face was drawn and haggard; she looked at him with piteous, imploring eyes; and she hesitated. But the hesitation was caused by dread of his wrath, and not by doubt as to her reply.

"Dick. I am sorry. But I cannot do it."

"Is that your answer?"

"Yes, that is my answer."

"Very good." He snatched up his hat, clapped it on the back of his head, and stood for a few moments staring at her vindictively. Then, clenching his fist and striking the table, he burst into a storm of abuse....

"But you'll be sorry for this, my grand lady. I'll make you pay for it before I've done with you." This was after he had been raving at her for a couple of minutes, and his voice had become [Pg 191] hoarse. "You'll learn better—or I'll know the reason why."

Then he turned, flung open the door, and stamped out of the room.

"What do you want here—you prying old hag? Stand on one side, unless you wish me to pitch you down the stairs."

Outside on the landing he had found Yates hastily moving away from the dining-room door. Terrified by the noise, she had been irresistibly drawn towards the room where her mistress was

suffering. She longed to aid, but did not dare.

She came into the room now, and saw Mrs. Marsden leaning back in her chair, white and nearly breathless, looking half dead.

"Oh, ma'am—oh, ma'am! Whatever are we to do?"

"It's all right, Yates. Don't distress yourself. It's nothing.... Mr. Marsden lost his temper for the moment—but I assure you, it's all right."

"Let me get you upstairs to bed."

"No, leave me alone, please. I am quite all right—but I'll stay here quietly for a little while.... Go to bed, yourself. Don't sit up for me."

And her mistress was so firm that Yates felt reluctantly compelled to obey orders.

An hour passed; and Mrs. Marsden still sat before the fire, alone with her thoughts in the silent house. And then a totally unexpected sound startled her. The front door had been opened and shut; there were footsteps on the stairs: the master of the house had returned, to resume the conversation.

But to resume it in a very different tone.—He took off his hat and coat, came to the fire, warmed his hands; and then, resting an elbow on the mantelpiece, smilingly looked down at his wife.

"Jane, I'm penitent.... Really and truly, I'm ashamed of myself for letting fly at you just now. But you did rile me awfully by saying you hadn't *got* the money. Anyhow, I've come back to ask for pardon." [Pg 192]

"Or have you come back to ask for the money again?"

"No, no. Wash that out. If you don't want to part, there's no more to be said. Forget all about it. Wash it all out. The word is, As you were—eh?... Old Girl?"

He was leaning down towards her, putting out his hand; and she was shrinking away from him, watching him with terror in her eyes. Before the hand could touch her face, she sprang from the chair and threw it over, to make a barrier against his movement.

"Janey! What's the matter with you? You naughty girl— I've apologised, haven't I? Let bygones be bygones—won't you?"

She had run round the table, and was standing where he had stood an hour ago. As he advanced she dodged away from him, keeping the length or the breadth of the table between them.

"Janey? What are you playing at? Hide and Seek—Catch who, Catch can? How silly you are!"

"Then stop. Don't touch me."

"Well, I never!" He had stopped, and he laughed gaily. "What next? This is a funny way to treat your lord and master. Janey, dear, you are forgetting your duties. You're very, very naughty."

He laughed again, and joined his hands in an attitude of devotion.

"There, I'm praying to you—like a repulsed sweetheart, and not like a husband who is being set at defiance. Dicky prays you to make it up. Janey, be nice—be good.... Dear old Janey—don't you know what this means?"

"Yes—it means that you want the money very badly."

Her face, that till now was so white, had flushed to a bright crimson. [Pg 193]

"What a horrid thing to say! I'd forgotten all about the money. Why can't *you* forget it?... No, hang the money. Money isn't everything.... But, Jane, I've been thinking—for a long time—about the way you and I are going on together." And he changed his tone again, and spoke with affected solemnity. "It isn't *right*, you know. It has been going on a good deal too long, Janey—and it's just how real estrangements begin.... I don't know which of us is to blame—but I want to get back into our jolly old ways."

"That's impossible. We can never get back."

"Oh, rot, my dear. Skittles to that. When we used to have a tiff—well, we always made it up soon. It was like a lovers' squabble, and it only made us fonder of each other.... Janey, I want to make it up."

And with outstretched arms he advanced a step or two, pausing as she retreated.

"Oh, Janey—how can you?"

Then he brought out all the old seductions—the half-closed eyes, from which the simulated light of love was glittering; the half-opened lips, that trembled with a mimic passion; the soft caressing tones, made to vibrate with echoes of a feigned desire. To her it was all horrible—the most miserable of failures, an effort to charm that merely produces disgust. But he never was able to read her thoughts. He acted his little comedy to the end—like the cockbird who has started his amatory dance to fascinate the timid hen, he was perhaps too busy to observe results till the dance had finished.

"Dick—I implore you. Stop this hideous pretence."

Then he saw how entirely he had failed.

"All that is done with forever." Her face had become livid; she shivered, and her mouth twitched, as if a wave of nausea had come sweeping upward to her brain. "On my side it is dead—utterly dead;" and she struck her breast with a closed hand. "On your side it never existed.... So don't—don't think I can ever be deceived again." And she spoke with a concentrated force that completely staggered him. "If you didn't understand it—if you attempted to compel me, I believe—before God—that I should go out and buy a revolver, and kill myself—or kill you." [Pg 194]

"I say. Steady."

He shrugged his shoulders, and turned away. Before he spoke again, he had picked up the overturned chair and seated himself by the fire.

"Very well, Jane. I twig;" and he laughed languidly.

"I'm not such a cad as to make love to a lady against her will. I'm all obedience. The next overture must come from you."

She could read his thoughts always, though he could never read hers. Moreover, he had ceased to act, and perhaps made no attempt to conceal the sense of relief that sounded with such a brutal plainness.

"But we can be friends, Dick—if you don't make it impossible. There must be shreds of our self-respect left. We can patch them together—if you don't tear them into smaller pieces."

"Oh, you're having it all your own way now."

"I'm bound to you; and I won't rebel—unless you drive me to despair. I'm your wife still." As she said it, a sob choked the last words, and tears suddenly filled her eyes. "I'm your wife still. I'll carry the chain—until you consent to break it."

"By Jove, you *are* on the high rope to-night."

"Now, about this money?" And she wiped her eyes, and blew her nose. "You've proved to me that you must have it. You've shown that you wouldn't shrink from any—from any ordeal in order to get it." [Pg 195]

He looked round with reawakened interest.

"I do want it most damnably, or of course I wouldn't have asked you for it."

"Then for this once I suppose I must give it to you."

"Jane! Do you really mean it?"

"Yes. I'll give it you, if you'll tell me that you understand—if you'll promise that this shall be the very last time.... But with or without the promise, it will be useless to apply to me again."

"There's my hand on it."

He promised freely and readily.

XVIII

[Pg 196]

Next day she was too tired to get up for the morning service, but she went to St. Saviour's church in the evening.

More and more she loved the quiet hours spent in church. Here, and only here, she was safely shut up in the world of her own thoughts, and could feel certain that the thread of ideas would not be snapped by a rough voice, or her nerves be shaken by the unanticipated violence of some fresh misfortune. And St. Saviour's was even more restful at night than in the daytime.

She listened automatically to the beautiful opening prayer; and then she retired deep into herself.

Except for the chancel, the building was dimly lighted. The roof and the empty galleries were almost hidden by shadows; lamps reflected themselves feebly from the dark wood-work; and the people, sitting wide apart from one another in the sparsely occupied pews, seemed vague black figures and not strong living men and women.

Each time that she rose, she looked from the semi-darkness towards the brilliant light of the chancel—at the white surplices and the shining faces of the choir, the golden tubes of the organ, and the soft radiance that flashed from the brass of the altar rails. But all the while, whether she sat down or stood up, her thoughts were struggling in darkness and vainly seeking for the faintest glimmer of light.

She thought of her husband and of the shop. He was holding her, would hold her as a tied and gagged prisoner surrounded with the dark chaos that he had caused. How could she save herself

—or him? He concealed facts from her; he told her lies; he never let her hear of a difficulty until it was too late to find any means of escape. [Pg 197]

And she thought of the destruction of her whole lifework. She saw it certainly approaching—the only possible end to such a partnership. All that she had laboriously constructed was to be stupidly beaten down.

The splendid old business would infallibly be ruined. No business, however firmly established, can withstand the double attack of gross mismanagement and reckless depletion of its funds. As she thought of it, those words of her inveterately active rival echoed and re-echoed. A leak, and no chance of stopping the leak—disaster foreseen, but not to be averted. The leak was too great. All hands at the pumps would not save the ship.

A new and if possible more poignant bitterness filled her mind. It was another long-drawn agony that lay before her; and it seemed to her, looking back at the older pain, that this was almost worse. Confusion, entanglement, darkness—no light, no hope, no chance of opening the track that leads from chaos to security. Bitter, oh, most bitter—to taste the failure one has not deserved, to work wisely and be frustrated by folly, to watch passively while all that one has created and believed to be permanent is slowly demolished and obliterated.

Quite automatically, she had stood up again, and was looking towards the brightly illuminated choir. They were singing the appointed psalms now; and, as half consciously she listened to each chanted verse, the words wove themselves into the burden of her thoughts....

... "They have compassed me about also

... and fought against me without cause."

Altogether without cause. There was the pity of it. If only he would curb his insensate greed, put some check or limit to his excesses, the business would soon recover from the shaking he had given it; and then there would be enough to maintain him in idleness for the rest of his days. She would work for him, if he would but let her. [Pg 198]

... "For the love that I had unto them, lo, they take now my contrary part."

Yes, in all things he would frustrate her efforts.

... "Thus have they rewarded me evil for good; and hatred for my good will."

The good will! How much value had he knocked off the good will already? If they tried to turn themselves into a company to-morrow, what price could they put down for it? Soon there would be no good will left.

"Set thou an ungodly man to be ruler over him; and let Satan stand at his right hand."

Ah! There spoke the implacable voice of the Hebrew king. No mercy for the ungodly.

"When sentence is given upon him, let him be condemned, and let his prayer be turned into sin."

Ah! There again.

"Let his days be few; and let another take his office."

She listened now fully, as the verses of condemnation followed one another in a dreadful sequence. That was the spirit of the Old Testament. The God of those days was anthropomorphic, a god of battles, a leader, a fighter: the friend of our friends, but the foe to our foes. He taught one to fight against the most desperate odds—and not to forgive enemies, but to punish them.

And to-night the spirit in her own breast responded to the ancient barbarity of creed. That softer doctrine of the Gospel, with its soothingly mystical miracles of forgiveness, was not substantial enough for the stern facts of life. She felt too sore and too sick for the aid that comes veiled with inscrutable symbolism, and seems to martyrize when it seeks to save. All that faith was beautiful but dim, like the unsubstantiality of these church columns ascending through the shadows to the darkness that hid the roof. The reality was before her eyes, where in the strong light those men stood firmly on their own feet, and, singing the grand old psalm, craved swift retribution for the ungodly. [Pg 199]

These harder thoughts soon faded. As always happened, the hour in church did her good. Self-pity, except as the most transient emotion, was well nigh impossible to her. Courage was always renewing itself, and she could not long retard the heightening glow that succeeded each fit of depression.

After all, she was in no worse a fix than when her first husband threw a ruined business on her hands. While there's life there's hope.

To her surprise she found Mr. Prentice waiting for her outside the church porch.

"Good evening, Mr. Prentice;" and she looked at him anxiously. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No, no," said Mr. Prentice jovially. "The fact is, my wife is on the sick list again; and as I'm at a loose end, I've come round to ask if you could give me a bit of supper."

The real fact was that earlier in the day he had seen Mr. Marsden driving to the railway station

with a valise and dressing-case on the box of the fly. He knew that this gentleman was by now safe in London, and he had grasped an opportunity of seeing his old friend alone. He desired, and intended if possible, to cheer her up and put new heart into her.

"Come along then." She was obviously pleased to accept his company. "But I'm afraid there won't be much supper—because Richard is away to-night."

"I'm not hungry. I over-ate myself at dinner—I always over-eat on Sundays. Bread and cheese will do me grandly."

"We'll try to produce something better than that"; and Mrs. Marsden bustled up the stairs, calling loudly for Yates. [Pg 200]

Yates produced some cold meat; and Mr. Prentice said he thought it delicious. Yates herself waited upon them. The cupboard that contained the master's strong drink was of course locked; but there was a supply of good soda water accessible, and Yates ran out and bought some doubtful whisky. Mr. Prentice, however, declared that the whisky was excellent. His kind face beamed; he chaffed Yates, and made her toss her head and giggle as she filled his glass; he chatted gaily and easily with his hostess;—he was so friendly, so genial, so thoroughly welcome, that this was the happiest supper seen in St. Saviour's Court for a very long time.

No fire had been lighted in the drawing-room, so when their meal was done they sat together by the dining-room fire.

"What pleasant hours," said Mr. Prentice, looking round at the familiar walls, "what pleasant, pleasant hours I've spent in this room. Those autumn dinners—with Mears and the rest! How I used to enjoy them!"

"You helped us to enjoy them."

"You've discontinued them altogether—haven't you?"

"Yes. Not without regret, both my husband and I decided that we could not keep up that little festival. Of course you know, we have been obliged to cut down expenses wherever possible. The times are not very good."

Of course he knew very well all about her difficulties in the house and in the shop.

"Better times are coming," he said cheerily. "I hear on all sides of the low ebb of trade. It's a regular commercial crisis. But things are going to improve. The rotten enterprises will go down, and the really sound ones will come out stronger than ever." [Pg 201]

"Oh, I forgot. You like to smoke—but I'm afraid the cigars are locked up, too."

"I've plenty in my pocket—if you're sure you don't mind."

She laughed amiably. "How can you ask? I'm quite smoke-dried. I let Richard smoke all over the house."

While he cut his cigar and lit it, he thought how wonderful she was—with the mingled pride and courage that allowed her always to speak of her Richard as if he had been everything that a husband should be.

He sat smoking for a few minutes in a comfortable silence, while she, with her hands placidly clasped upon her lap, gazed reflectively at the fire.

"Now," he said, holding his cigar over the fender and gently tapping it until the whitened ash fell, "there are one or two little things that I'd like to talk to you about."

She raised her eyes, and looked at him attentively.

"Nothing really worrying," he said quickly. "And something which you'll consider very much the reverse. But I'll keep that for the last.... I had a call the other day from your son-in-law, Mr. Kenion."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Amongst other matters, he went for me about the marriage settlement;" and Mr. Prentice laughed and nodded his head. "You know, he says that Enid ought to have been given power to raise money for his advancement in life. His friends had told him it is always done, when the wife has the money; and he thought that the trustees ought to manage it somehow—because he has been offered a great opening. You'll smile when you hear what it was."

"What was it?"

"There was a fellow called Whitehouse who used to be Young's riding-master; and it seems he has made some money in London, and set up a smart livery stable—and he proposed that Mr. Kenion should join forces with him. Mr. Kenion was to go about the country, buying horses—and so on.... But I only mentioned this to amuse you. Of course I said Bosh—not to be thought of." [Pg 202]

"It does not sound very promising, or very reputable."

"Besides, where did Enid come in? Was she to accompany him, or to stay moping at home by herself?... Do you see much of them out there?"

Mrs. Marsden confessed that she had not as yet ever seen the Kenions in their home.

"It isn't that there's the least bad blood between us," she hastened to add. "No, dear Enid and I are now the best of friends. Ever since her marriage she has been sweet to me. But life rushes on so fast—and married women are not free agents. When Richard is away, I consider myself responsible in the shop."

"Just so." And Mr. Prentice, puffing out some smoke, looked at the ceiling. "By the by, that's rather an awkward dispute that Mr. Marsden has let himself into with those German people."

"What is the dispute?"

"Hasn't he told you about it?"

"I don't seem to remember—but no doubt he told me."

"Well, if he hasn't it's a good sign: because it probably means that he intends to act on my advice after all."

Then he explained the odious mess that Marsden had made of his American office equipments. It appeared that, when arranging to sell these wretched things for a handsome commission, he had undertaken to send his principals accurate monthly reports and immediately account for all moneys received; and had further bound himself, in default of carrying out the precise provisions [Pg 203] of the agreement, to take over at catalogue price the entire stock that had been entrusted to his care. But he had sent no reports; he had forgotten all his undertakings; he had received cash for three small articles and had never furnished any account; and the Germans said the goods now belonged to him, and not to them.

Mr. Prentice declared that it was the most imprudent agreement he had ever read; and, although speaking guardedly, he implied that in his opinion no one but a fool would have signed it. But there it was, signed and stamped; and he did not see how you could wriggle out of it.

"Your husband vowed that he wouldn't give in to them. But I told him, from the first, that he hadn't a leg to stand on."

"I'll persuade him not to go to law about it."

"Yes, I'm sure it will be best to settle the wrangle. You see, he took such a high tone with them that they've turned nasty—talk big about obtaining goods under false pretences, and so on. But that's bluster—they'll be glad enough to get their money."

She remembered her thoughts in church. It was hopeless. He kept her in the dark. No business could stand it—the double attack: bleeding and buffeting at the same time. He would destroy their credit too; these continual blunders and the attempts to repudiate obligations would become known; and the firm would acquire a bad name.

"Don't look so grave, my dear. Your husband must pay up, and make the best of it.... And now for my *bonne bouche*." Mr. Prentice's eyes twinkled with kindly merriment; and he spoke slowly, in immense enjoyment of his words. "This is something from which you cannot fail to derive benefit. It is what I have always been hoping for. It will altogether relieve the pressure."

"What is it?"

"Well—immediately facing you there is a large and flourishing organization, known to the world [Pg 204] as—"

"O, Mr. Prentice!" Her face had brightened, but now it clouded once more. "Don't say you are going to tell me again that Bence is smashing."

"Yes, my dear, I am. A most tremendous smash!"

And Mr. Prentice repeated the old story in a slightly altered form. According to his certain knowledge, Archibald Bence was vainly striving to raise money—was moving heaven and earth to obtain even a comparatively small sum. About a year ago, one of Bence's bad brothers had been bought out of the business; then the other brother died, and Bence was compelled to satisfy the claims of the widow and children; and since that period he had been drawing nearer and nearer to his catastrophe. Now he was done for, unless he could get some capital to replace what had been taken from him. For years he had been working with the finest possible margin of cash to support his credit. At last he had cut it too fine. The wholesale trade were tired of the risk they had run in dealing with him. They would not supply him any further, unless he showed them first his penny for each reel of cotton or yard of tape.

"But what makes you believe all this?"

"I am not free to mention the sources of my information. There is such a thing as backstairs knowledge."

Mr. Prentice nodded his head, and smiled enigmatically, as he said this. Then he went on to speak of the solicitors who acted for Bence. Messrs. Hyde & Collins were held in supreme contempt by old-fashioned Mr. Prentice. They were—as he never scrupled to say—sharp practitioners, shady beggars, dirty dogs; and at the offices in the side street that gives entrance to Trinity Square, they looked after the dubious affairs of a lot of shabby clients. It was a bad sign

when a Mallingbridge citizen went to Hyde & Collins: it meant that his finances were shaky, or that he had become involved in some disreputable transaction. [Pg 205]

"It was enough for me," said Mr. Prentice, "to know that Bence was in their hands. I guessed six years ago what would come of it."

"Yes, but guesses, guesses! What are guesses?"

"My dear, you have only to *look* at Bence now. It is written in his face—a desperate man."

And Mr. Prentice reminded Mrs. Marsden of the fact that from his office windows he had an uninterrupted view down the side street to the front door of Hyde & Collins. Well, every day, and two or three times a day, Archibald Bence could be seen hurrying to his solicitors—a man driven by despair, a gold-seeker amidst unyielding rocks, a poor famished little rat scampering to and fro in quest of food.

"Of course," said Mr. Prentice, with a touch of pity in his voice, "it's his brothers who have done for him. They have literally sucked him dry. Really, if it wasn't for *you*, I could almost feel sorry for him. But the dirty tricks he has played you put him out of court."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Marsden, thoughtfully looking into the fire.

"Don't wonder," said Mr. Prentice jovially. "Just wait and see. You won't have long to wait."

"I wish you could find out for certain."

"I *am* certain.... Well, you always get one's little secrets out of one. I've no right to mention this. But Hyde & Collins recently approached one of my own clients—to find out if he had more money than brains. Coupled with the other information, that clinches it.... I stake my reputation—for what it's worth—that unless Mr. Archibald procures help within the next fortnight, he will have to put up his shutters."

"A fortnight," said Mrs. Marsden absently. [Pg 206]

Then they talked of something else, and soon Mr. Prentice bade his hostess good-night.

It had been a pleasant evening for her—a respite from the storm and stress of the days. But when she slept, the respite was immediately over; in dreams she fell back upon doubt and difficulty; in troubled and confused dreams she was desperately fighting for life.

XIX

[Pg 207]

At last Mrs. Marsden went to see her daughter, and in the next few months she paid many visits.

Enid had written, asking her to come as soon as possible, and giving her a reason why she must not refuse this invitation. Enid had just discovered that she was going to have a baby. The happy event was not expected until the spring; but Enid said she longed to see her mother without an hour's avoidable delay.

Mrs. Marsden telegraphed her reply. She would come out to-morrow, Thursday—early closing day—directly after luncheon.

In the old days she would have driven in one of Mr. Young's luxurious landaus; but now she travelled by train, in a second class carriage, and walked the mile and a half from Haggart's Road station to the Kenions' converted farmhouse. The day was bright and fine; and the air felt quite mild, although there had been a sharp frost overnight.

She had hoped that Enid might feel up to walking, and perhaps meet her at the station—or somewhere on the road, if the station was too far. But she saw no friendly face on the straight road, along which she plodded with resolute vigour.

Two road-menders near a quaint little stone church directed her to the house. It was situated on sufficiently high ground, at the end of an accommodation lane; and, as she passed through the gate and walked up the little carriage drive, she thought it all looked very nice and comfortable. The house itself seemed old and rather humble—less attractive than she had anticipated; but the [Pg 208] large outbuildings gave the place a certain air of importance and gentility. She caught a glimpse of the capacious stableyard, saw a groom crossing it, and heard voices from an invisible saddle-room—Mr. Kenion's voice, as she believed among the rest. The thick-growing ivy on the walls was pretty, but it would have been the better for cutting; and the garden, on this side of the house, appeared to be sadly neglected.

The front door stood open; and while she waited for somebody to answer the bell, she had an opportunity of glancing at the decorations of the hall. They had all been paid for by her purse, so she was fairly entitled to look at them critically if she pleased. She liked the appearance of the painted ceiling-beams, the panelled dado, the modern basket grate with the blue and white tiles; but she did not so much like the sporting prints, the heads and tails of foxes, the hats and coats lying so untidily on all the chairs, the immense number of whips and sticks, and the ugly glass case that held horses' bits and men's spurs and stirrups. *That* was a decoration more suitable to

Mr. Kenion's harness room than to Mrs. Kenion's hall. She could hear the servants talking somewhere quite near; and yet they could not hear the bell, although she had rung it loudly enough three times.

Presently, as if by chance, a maid showed herself.

"Not at home," said the maid briskly.

Mrs. Marsden gave her name, and explained that the mistress of the house would certainly be at home to her.

"Very good, ma'am," said the maid, doubtfully. "Step this way, and I'll tell her. She's upstairs, lying down, I think."

Then Mrs. Marsden was shown into what she supposed to be the drawing-room, and left waiting there. There was something rather chilling and disappointing in the whole manner of her reception at the home that she had provided for Enid and her husband. [Pg 209]

She was allowed plenty of time to examine more ceiling beams and blue tiles, to admire photographs in silver frames, or to read the sporting newspapers and magazines that littered every table. The room was pretty—but dreadfully untidy. She walked over to one of the windows, and looked out. There had been no greater attempt at gardening on this side of the house than on the other: the few shrubs were overgrown; the gravel paths had almost disappeared under moss and weeds.

Beyond iron railings she saw the grass fields that Enid had said were like a park. As a park they were completely disfigured by some ugly buildings with corrugated iron roofs—really hideous erections, which she guessed to be horseboxes. In each meadow there was an artificially made jump for the horses; and, looking farther away, she saw that these sham obstacles together with the natural banks and hedges formed a miniature steeplechase course.

With a sigh she turned from the windows. Indoors and out of doors there was too much evidence of the husband's amusements, and not enough evidence of the wife's tastes and occupations. The whole place was altogether too much like a bachelor's home to please Enid's mother.

Suddenly the door opened, and Kenion slouched in. He had his hands in the pockets of his riding breeches; and he looked gloomy, worried, anything but glad to see the visitor. It was the first time that they had met since the wedding, and it proved rather an unfortunate meeting.

"How do you do—Mr. Charles?"

"Oh, you've come after all. You got the news, I suppose?"

"Yes, indeed I have."

"Beastly unlucky, isn't it?"

"What's that?" [Pg 210]

"But I *am* unlucky."

"*Unlucky*, Mr. Kenion!" Mrs. Marsden had flushed; and her face plainly expressed the anger and contempt that she felt.

"No one can say I'm to blame," Kenion went on gloomily and grumblingly. "I'd have given fifty pounds to prevent its happening. It wasn't *my* fault. I knew she was as clever as a cat. I thought she *couldn't* make a mistake."

"Mr. Kenion," said Mrs. Marsden hotly, "if you aren't ashamed to speak like this, I am ashamed to listen to you."

"Eh—what?"

"Where is Enid?" And she moved towards the door. "I think your attitude is unmanly—mean—and *despicable*; and I wish—yes, I wish Enid's child was going to have a better father."

"Eh—what?"

"If you had a spark of proper feeling, you'd rejoice, you'd thank God that this—this great blessing was coming to her."

Kenion suddenly bent his thin back, and became completely doubled up with a fit of cackling laughter.

"It's too comic," he spluttered. "Best thing I ever heard—Ought to be sent to *Punch*!"

"If you are joking, Mr. Kenion, I'm sorry for your ideas of fun."

"No. No—don't be angry. You'll laugh when you see the joke. Of course you"—and again his own laughter interrupted him—"you—you were talking about Enid's baby.... Well, *I* was talking about Mrs. Bulford's mare."

Then he explained the disaster that had befallen them. A very valuable animal, the property of a friend, had been placed in his charge to train it for a point-to-point race; and this morning it had broken its back over one of the artificial jumps. [Pg 211]

"And we were all so upset—Enid has been crying about it—that I sent you a telegram, telling you what had happened, and asking you not to come out to-day. But you never got it really?"

"No, it must have arrived after I started."

"Well, I'm glad you've come—for you have given me a good laugh. Though Heaven knows"—and he became gloomy again—"it isn't a laughing matter. I wonder I was able to laugh."

Then Enid came into the room. There were red rims round her eyes, and her nose seemed swollen; evidently she had shed many tears.

"Mother dear, isn't this dreadful?"

"Yes, dear."

"I'm so sorry for poor Charles."

"So am I, dear," said Mrs. Marsden. "But we must be glad that he himself escaped without injury."

"Oh, I wasn't riding her," said Charles.

"No," said Enid. "Tom was riding her—and he has broken his collar bone."

"Yes," said Charles, plunging his hands deep in his pockets and hunching his shoulders. "That's another bit of luck. My second-horseman laid up, just when I most wanted him."

"It was the frost in the ground," said Enid sadly. "All the frost seemed to be gone;" and she turned to her husband. "Charlie, it wasn't your fault. Mrs. Bulford *can't* blame you."

"No, I don't believe she will. She's a stunner—but Bulford may kick up a fuss."

"Oh, how can he? He knew that the mare had to be trained."

Mrs. Marsden made this first visit a very short one. The host and hostess were too much perturbed and agitated to entertain visitors. [Pg 212]

Next time she came out, Enid was less preoccupied with her husband's affairs, and able to talk freely of her own hopes. She clung to her mother affectionately, and once again was the new Enid who had knelt by the sofa and sobbed her gratitude for past kindness.

Each kept up the pretence of being satisfied and contented in her married life. Enid never had a bad word to say of Charles; and Mrs. Marsden spoke of Richard with as yet unabated courage. In fact there was probably no one with whom she was so very careful to maintain a decorous appearance of connubial happiness as with the daughter who, by the light of her own experience, would most surely detect the imposture.

But behind the dual reticences there was an ever increasing sympathy. The hard facts which neither would admit were drawing them nearer and nearer together. So that it seemed sometimes that on all subjects except the two forbidden subjects they were now absolutely of the same mind.

When Enid noticed the careworn, harassed look in her mother's face, she used at once to think, "That brute has committed some fresh villainy during the week."

But what she said was something after this style: "Mother dear, I'm afraid you have been working too hard"; or "Mother dear, you ought to have had a fly from the station. I am afraid the walk has fatigued you."

And when Mrs. Marsden saw Enid's worried, nervous manner, the traces of more tears about the pretty grey eyes, she thought, "This selfish beast has been tormenting her again. I suppose he does everything short of beating her; and perhaps he'll do that before very long."

But she merely said, "Enid, my dear, I hope you have had no more bother about the horses. You mustn't let Charles' worries set you fretting—especially *now*." [Pg 213]

The indications of Mr. Kenion's selfishness were so painfully plain that little penetration was required to understand the discomfort that they caused. No wife, however loyal, could feel any peace or comfort with such a self-centred, insensible, shallow-pated companion.

Whenever he appeared he made Mrs. Marsden supremely uncomfortable. When indoors he was always restless. He wandered aimlessly about the house, coming in and out of rooms, fidgetting and bothering about trifles—behaving generally like the spoilt and rather vicious child who on wet days renders existence intolerable to all the grown-up people compelled to remain under the same roof with him.

"Hullo! More tea!" And he would come lounging after the maid who was bringing in the tea-things. "It seems as if you are having tea from morning to night. What? I tell Enid she drinks a lot too much tea—and it only makes her jumpy and peevish."

He himself drank very little tea; and Mrs. Marsden gathered that not the least of Enid's anxieties

was occasioned by his intemperance. But this was a summer trouble. In the hunting season men who regularly ride hard can also regularly drink hard without apparently hurting themselves.

Once when Mrs. Marsden was about to set out for her lonely tramp to the station, Enid with some very pretty words asked her for a photograph.

"There's not one of you in all the house, mother—and I want one now badly.... If it is to be a girl, I want her to be like you—in all things, mother—and not like me."

Mrs. Marsden was more deeply touched by this request than she cared to show. She kissed Enid smilingly, patted her hand, and promised to send out a portrait. [Pg 214]

There was one in the drawing-room at home, which no doubt Mr. Marsden could spare.

Then, while putting on her gloves and talking cheerfully, she glanced at Enid's collection of photographs in the silver frames.

"Who is that lady, Enid?"

"Oh, that's Mamie Bulford."

Several of the frames contained pictures of this important personage, who appeared to be a hard-visaged but rather handsome woman of thirty or thirty-five. She was enormously rich, Enid said, and madly keen about hunting; and she and her husband lived at a beautiful place called Widmore Towers, two miles the other side of Linkfield village. This year Charlie was acting as her pilot in the hunting field; and four horses were kept at the Towers solely for the pilot's use.

"Charlie," said Enid, "is such a magnificent pilot—for anyone who means going. And Mamie *will* be there, or thereabouts, don't you know, all the time."

"Does not Mr. Bulford go out hunting?"

"Major Bulford! Yes, but he's crocked—stiff leg—so he hunts on wheels—follows in a dog-cart. That's rather fun, you know. You see a lot of sport that way."

"Yes, dear, I remember you said you were going to do that, yourself."

And Mrs. Marsden asked about the pony-cart that was to have been procured for Enid.

But the pony-cart had become impossible—and Enid vaguely hinted at hard times, difficulty of finding spare cash for expenses that were not urgently necessary, and so on. Besides, it was a perambulator and not a pony carriage that Mr. Kenion must now buy. [Pg 215]

The baby—a girl—was born early in April.

Mrs. Marsden tried but failed to get a fly at Haggart's Road station, and almost ran for the mile and a half that still separated her from her daughter.

Everything was all right; mother and child were doing well; it was the finest and most beautiful infant that had ever been seen. The grandmother, eagerly scanning its tiny features, was gratified by recognizing the mother's grey eyes and what might be taken for the first immature sketch of her long nose. She was, if possible, more pleased by her inability to trace the faintest resemblance to the father.

When in a few days she came again, it was to find Enid radiantly happy and picking up strength delightfully. And at this visit Mrs. Marsden's heart was made to overflow by the things that Enid said to her.

Amongst the things was the emphatic statement that the child should be called Jane, and that her grandmother should also be her godmother.

Mr. Kenion accepted his blessing phlegmatically.

"Pity it isn't a boy," he said to Mrs. Marsden.

Enid said he hid his delight. It was a pose. He was really revelling in the joy of being a father.

But he had not yet bought the perambulator. He asked his mother-in-law's advice—because, as he said, she was "up in that sort of thing." Did people hire perambulators, or buy them right out? Could one get a decent perambulator in Mallingbridge, or would one have to go fagging up to London?

Mrs. Marsden bought the perambulator, and sent it with her love in the carrier's cart; and Mr. Kenion told Enid that he hoped her mother hadn't given much for it, because it didn't look worth much. [Pg 216]

Once, before the christening, Enid slightly attacked those diplomatic barriers of reserve that had been established by tacit consent between her and her mother.

She nervously and timidly asked if Mr. Marsden would mind not coming to the little feast.

But Mrs. Marsden was on the defensive in a moment. Even at this auspicious and sentimental time she could not permit any breach in her barrier. She said that her husband was generally

considered very good company, and he would have no wish to go where he was not wanted.

"It is only," said Enid, "because I should be afraid of Charles and him not getting on well together—and I do so want everything to go off happily. You know, he wrote Charles a very indignant letter about the County Club."

"He felt rather sore on that subject, dear—and so did I."

"Really, mother, Charles did all he could; but they made him withdraw the candidature. Of course it's absurd—but they are so severe with regard to retail trade."

"Well, be all that as it may," said Mrs. Marsden, "you need not disturb your mind about Richard. He could not have come in any case. I told him the date—and he is not free on that day."

But for Mr. Charles, it might have been a satisfactory christening.

He was a most uncomfortable host; continually getting up from the luncheon table, walking about the room, worrying the maid-servants; and wounding Enid by his facetiously disparaging remarks about the food.

"Our meals are always rather a picnic," he told the guests; "so you must look out for yourselves.... I say, how am I supposed to carve this? What? A pudding! What's the good of dabbing a lot of sweets in front of people, before they've had any meat? Enid, isn't there any fish? I thought you said there was curried sole;" and he got up, and rambled away to the sideboard. [Pg 217]

"Charles," said Enid plaintively, "this is the curry—here."

"What? Then fire ahead with it.... But where's Harriet disappeared to?"

"She is fetching the cutlets—and the other things. Do sit down."

"Oh, Harriet, here you are.... Where the dickens have you hidden the wine? This seems to be a very *dry* party;" and he gave his stupid cackling laugh just behind Mrs. Marsden's back. "Oh, here we are. Now then, ladies and gentlemen, hock, claret, whisky and soda? Name your tipple. And please excuse short-comings."

But in truth there were no short-comings. Poor Enid had tried so hard to have everything really nice—the best glass and china, pretty flowers, and dainty appetising food, sufficient for twenty people and good enough for princes. And she looked so charming at the head of the table—her face rounder and plumper than it used to be, her figure fuller, her complexion delicately glowing, her eyes shining softly,—the young mother, in what should have been the hour of her undimmed glory. Mrs. Marsden, as she listened to the cackling fool behind her chair and saw the shadow of pain take the brightness from Enid's face, bridled and grew warm.

"Whisky and soda, Mrs. B?... Father, put a name to it."

Mrs. Bulford—a hardy brunette, richly attired, and undoubtedly handsome, but older than she looked in her photographs—was to be the other godmother. She and the host were evidently on excellent terms, understanding each other's form of humour, possessing little secret jokes of their own—so that every time Charles cackled she had a suffocating laugh ready. The hostess called her "Mamie," and even "Mamie dear"; but Mrs. Marsden surmised that Enid did not really like her, and had not wanted her for a godmother. [Pg 218]

Old Mr. Kenion—the vicar of Chapel Norton—was white-haired, thin, and fragile; and Mrs. Marsden thought he seemed to be a good, weak, over-burdened man. His manner was mild, courteous, kindly. Mrs. Kenion was shabbily pretentious, with faded airs of fashion and dull echoes of distinguished voices. They had brought one of their daughters with them—a spinster of uncertain age in a tailor-made gown and a masculine collar. The curate of the small stone church made up the party.

But old Mr. Kenion would read the christening service, and not this local clergyman.

"Yes," he said, mildly beaming across the table at Mrs. Marsden, "I am to have the privilege to hold my grandchild at the font."

And then presently, when the servant had poured out some hock for him, he addressed Mrs. Marsden again.

"May I advert to a practice that has fallen into disuse, and drink a glass of wine with you?... To our better acquaintance, Mrs. Marsden;" and he bowed in quite a pleasant old-world style.

"Bravo, governor," said Charles. "Fill, and fill again. Nothing like toasts to keep the bottle moving."

"Yes, I'm sure," said the vicar's wife, with patronising urbanity; "so very pleased to make your acquaintance—at *last*, don't you know. We only *saw* one another at the wedding." And while Charles and Mrs. Bulford took alternate parts in the telling of an anecdote, she continued to talk to Mrs. Marsden. "Of course I have known you in your *public* capacity for years. My girls and I have always been devoted to Thompson's. 'Get it at Thompson's'—that's what they always said." [Pg 219] She was honestly trying to be agreeable. Indeed she particularly wished to please. "All my girls

said it. Is it not so, Emily?... She does not hear. She is too much amused by her brother's story.... But that was always the cry. 'Get it at Thompson's!' And I'm sure we never failed at Thompson's."

"Oh, shut up, Pontius," said Mrs. Bulford, loudly. "You're spoiling the point. Let me go on by myself."

"Yes, that's what you often say—but you're glad to have me ahead of you when you think there's wire about."

"Will you be quiet, Pontius?"

And Mrs. Bulford was allowed to finish the anecdote in her own way. Then she suffocated, and Charles cackled; but no one else, not even Mrs. Kenion, could see the point of the little tale.

The local curate, a shy, pink-complexioned young man, had scarcely talked at all; but now he was endeavouring to make a little polite conversation with Enid. He said he hoped the church would be found quite warm; he had given orders that the hot-water apparatus should be set working in good time; and he thought they were, moreover, fortunate to have such genial bright weather. Sometimes April days proved treacherously cold. Then he inquired if the godfather was to be present at the ceremony.

"No," said Charles, answering for his wife. "I am to be proctor—proxy—what d'ye call it?—for Jack Gascoigne, a pal of mine.... You must teach me the business, Mrs. B."

"All right, Pontius," said Mrs. Bulford gaily. "Copy me."

"You will not come to the church in that costume," said old Kenion, with sudden gravity.

"Why not? Ain't I smart enough? These are a new pair of breeches." [Pg 220]

"Of course you must change your clothes, Pontius," said Mrs. Bulford. "I wouldn't be seen in church with you like that."

Then old Kenion asked a question which Mrs. Marsden would herself have wished to ask.

"Why do you call my son Pontius?"

"You'd better not ask her to tell you, father. She has been very badly brought up—and she'll shock you."

But Mrs. Bulford insisted upon telling the old vicar.

"I call him Pontius because he is my *pilot*.... Don't you see? Pontius Pilot!... There, I *have* shocked him;" and she gave her suffocating laugh and Charles began to cackle.

His father looked distressed and confused; the curate, with the pink of his complexion greatly intensified, examined the design on a dessert plate; Mrs. Marsden frowned and bit her lip; old Mrs. Kenion opened a voluble discourse on the virtues of fresh air for young children.

"I hope, Enid, that you will bring up the little one as a hardy plant. Windows wide—floods of air! I beg of you not to coddle her. I never would allow any of my children to be coddled...."

Charles sat dilatorily drinking port after luncheon; and, while he changed his clothes, everybody was kept waiting with the baby at the church.

That is to say, everybody except Mrs. Bulford. She stayed at the house, having promised to hustle Charles along as quickly as possible. But a shower of rain detained them; and it seemed an immense time before they finally appeared on the church path, walking arm in arm, under one umbrella.

When the service was over, and a group had assembled round the perambulator at the church gate, and all were offering congratulations to the proud mother, old Mrs. Kenion gently drew Mrs. Marsden aside and spoke to her in urgent entreaty. [Pg 221]

"Now that they've given you a dear little granddaughter, you *will* do something for them, won't you?"

"But I think," said Mrs. Marsden, rather grimly, "that I *have* done something for them."

"Yes, but you'll do a little *more* now, won't you?"

"I fear that your son must not rely on me for further aid."

"Oh, *do*," said Mrs. Kenion earnestly. "Poor Charles would not care to ask you himself. So I determined to take my courage in both hands, and speak to you with absolute candour. It *is* such a tight fit for him—and *now*, with nurses and all the rest of it! We would come to the rescue so gladly, if we could—but, alas, how can we? You do know that we would, don't you, dear Mrs. Marsden?... No, please, not a definite answer now. Only think about it. Your kind heart will plead for them more eloquently than any words of mine."...

Mrs. Marsden had given the nurse a sovereign. She hurried back to the church, and tipped the clerk and the pew-owner. Then she trudged off to the railway station; and went home, like Sisyphus or the Danaides, to take up her apparently impossible task.

XX

[Pg 222]

Two years had passed, and the grand old shop was plainly going down.

It could not satisfy chance customers; it had begun to lose its staunchest supporters. Gradually and fatally, cruel words were going round the town and far out into the country villages. "It isn't what it used to be.... It has had its day.... Nothing lasts forever."

Fewer and fewer carriages of the local gentry were to be seen standing outside its doors. Farmers' wives, who for more than a decade had driven into Mallingbridge and spent Saturday afternoons picking and choosing at Thompson's, now did all their shopping somewhere else. The whole world seemed to be discovering that you could get whatever you wanted quite as well and more cheaply somewhere else. And from somewhere else, your goods—no matter where you lived, whether far or near—were delivered free of charge, with marvellous celerity, and "returnable if damaged."

Inside the sinking shop every assistant too well knew that horrid expression, "Somewhere else."

It paralysed the tongues of the shop girls; it struck them stupid. Each time they heard it, their courage waned, their hopes drooped; they gave up struggling.

"Thank you, I won't trouble you any more."

"Not the least trouble, I assure you."

"No, you're very good—but I'm in a hurry. I'll try somewhere else."

"Very well, madam."

A lost customer—no more to be done.

[Pg 223]

Yet the assistants had before their eyes a fine example of unflagging courage. Of one of the partners at least, it could not be said that there was supineness, neglect, or bungling practices to account for the long-continued and increasing depression that all the employees were feeling so severely.

Of the other partner, the less said the better. They could not indeed find words adequate for the expression of their opinions in regard to *him*.

When Mrs. Marsden, bravely facing the situation and calmly acknowledging the logic of facts, had declared that it was imperatively necessary to reduce what in railway management are called running expenses, and at all hazards bring expenditure and receipts again to a proper working ratio, the dominant partner selfishly jumped at the idea, converted it into a fresh weapon of destruction, and used it with wicked force.

Cut down the staff? Yes, this is a luminous notion. Where there have been five assistants at a counter, let us have three—or only two. "We must weed 'em out, Mears. No more cats than can catch mice! I'll soon weed 'em out."

It seemed to the people behind the counters that he took a diabolical pleasure in the weeding-out process. Instead of getting through his dismissals as quickly as possible, he kept the poor souls in suspense—giving the sack to two or three every day; so that these black weeks were a reign of terror, during which one rose each morning with the dreadful doubt whether one would survive till night.

When at last the executions ceased, almost every one of the important heads had fallen. Why pay high wages for subordinate chieftains when the over-lords can supervise for nothing? Mrs. Marsden received instructions to keep an eye on all departments; shop-walkers were made by giving counter-hands additional duties without additional pay; and Mr. Mears and Miss Woolfrey could respectively be considered as remaining in managerial charge of the whole ground floor and the whole first floor.

[Pg 224]

The gigantic basement was in charge of darkness, damp, and the cold spirit of failure. Marsden never spoke of it himself, and might not be reminded about it by others. He wished to forget the deep hole into which he had poured so much irretrievable gold.

Miss Woolfrey could not boast of having been promoted: she had merely survived: she obtained neither recompense nor praise for doing the extra work that a stern master had pushed into her way. If Mr. Mears had not been driven out into the street, it was because Marsden, whose selfish folly was sometimes tempered by a certain shrewd cunning, had definitely come to the conclusion that, bad as things were, they would be worse if he deprived himself of the help of this faithful servant. Mears had stood up to him; Mears had convinced him; Mears would never be dismissed, because Mears could never be replaced.

It was perhaps some slight comfort to Mrs. Marsden to know now that her oldest shop friend would be allowed to keep his promise, and to stick to her as long as he cared to do so.

Soon after the reduction of the staff, Marsden introduced another economy. Without warning he started an entirely new system of payment. Hitherto all wages had been at fixed rates, with

progressive rises; and the staff, feeling security in their situations and able to look to an assured future, had worked loyally without the stimulus of commission. But Marsden said these methods were antiquated, exploded; they did very well before Noah's flood, but they wouldn't do nowadays. Henceforth everybody's screw must depend upon the commissions earned: in other words, the basis for the calculation of wages must be the amount of the shop's receipts. [Pg 225]

Mears, protesting but submitting, carried the new order into effect.

"I've no objection on principle," said Mears heavily; "but you have chosen a queer time to do it, sir—just when takings have dropped to their lowest, and there's no movement in any line."

Resentment, murmuring, discontent followed; half a dozen sufferers went into voluntary exile; then there was silence.

And then Marsden thought of a third economy. Thompson's had ever been famed for keeping a generous table. You were sure of good sound grub, and as much of it as you could stow away, to sustain you in your toil. The kitchens and dining-rooms were controlled by a man and his wife, with four cook-maids and three waitresses; and for many years these people had given the utmost satisfaction, both to their employer and her daily guests. Now Mr. Marsden swept the lot of them out of doors. He had entered into an agreement with the cheap and nasty restaurant in High Street; and henceforth the staff would be catered for at starvation prices—so much, or rather so little, per head per meal.

This was a fresh and a great misery—short commons bang on top of mutilated salaries,—almost more than one could bear.

Marsden, however, felt thoroughly pleased; and was willing to believe that by the aid of his drastic remedies he had cured the evil which afflicted him. For the end of each of these two years showed a substantial profit.

It was quite useless for Mrs. Marsden and Mears to point out the dangers that lay ahead, to hint that profits now were essentially fictitious, to warn him that what he had grasped at as income should more properly be described as realisation of capital, to sigh and shake their heads, and to plead for prompt renewal of diminished stock. He was too well contented with immediate results. To-day is to-day; to-morrow can take care of itself. He had given the business another ferocious squeeze; and, under the pressure, it had yielded what he wanted—some cash to keep him going. [Pg 226]

The turf was again engaging his attention; but he pursued his amusement in a far less splendid manner than during those glorious days of fine clothes and full pockets after the honey-moon.

His nose had thickened, his whole face had become coarser and grosser; and flesh round his eyes showed an unhealthy puffiness, and his neck bulged large above an often dirty collar. He wore a brown bowler hat, a weather-proof overcoat, and heavy field boots; crumpled newspapers protruded from his breast, and a glass in a soiled and battered leather case was negligently slung over his shoulders. In fact he looked now like the typical racing man of the third or fourth class; and directly he reached London he mingled with and was lost in a crowd of exactly similar ruffians, hurrying together to make a train-load of disreputability and scoundrelism for Hurst Park or Kempton. But at Mallingbridge he was always noticeable. He produced a wretched impression in the shop each time that, dressed for sport, he passed through it; he was its secret destroyer and its visible disgrace; his mere appearance was sufficient to send thousands of customers somewhere else.

While the cash lasted, the house saw little of him. As soon as the cash gave out, the house again groaned under his presence. Till he could set his hands on more cash, he must be lodged and boarded by the stay-at-home partner.

Many were the dark and dismal days to be remembered, if his wife ever made a retrospect of two years' suffering; humiliations, griefs—darkness with but few gleams of light. Visits from Enid with the child and her nurse—an hour rescued from a long month—formed spots of brightness to look back at. But, for the rest, there was black gloom, as of moonless, starless nights. [Pg 227]

Perhaps his most malignant cruelty was the driving away of Yates. The doomed wretch struggled so hard not to be torn from the side of her beloved mistress. Mrs. Marsden knew that the struggle was futile, begged her to go; but still she tried to stay—accepting insults and abuse, and only piteously smiling at her persecutor.

A cruel, most cruel hour, when one evening the shabby old trunks stood corded and waiting at the foot of the stairs, and Yates in her bonnet and shawl came into the drawing-room to say good-bye. That was the final smashing of a home, for the mistress as well as for the maid. All that made the house endurable to Mrs. Marsden had now gone from it—no sound of a friendly voice to welcome her as she came through the door of communication; no solace after the exhausting day; a strange face to meet her, unfamiliar, clumsy hands to wait upon her at the lonely supper.

She never really learned to know the faces of her new servants. They changed so often. No servant would stop with them for long. The work was heavier than it used to be; after Yates had gone the mistress could not afford to keep a maid-housekeeper; in these hard times a cook and a housemaid must suffice for the establishment. Departing servants said the mistress gave little trouble; she was patient and kind; they had no fault to find with her—but the master was "a fair terror."

Yet he had promised, when consummating the sacrifice of Yates, that he would refrain from again upsetting the domestic arrangements. But what promises would he not make? What promise had he ever failed to break? [Pg 228]

Once he promised not to parade his infidelity in Mallingbridge. This was after the scandal he had caused by taking a set of bachelor rooms in the new flats near the railway station, and bringing down a London woman to occupy them from Saturdays to Mondays. Every Sunday he made himself conspicuous by flaunting about the town with this brazen creature.

Probably he was tired of his Sabbath promenades by the time that Mrs. Marsden resolutely declared that, for the sake of the business as well as for her own sake, she would not support so glaring an outrage. Anyhow he said it should cease, and swore that he would for the future be more circumspect.

But he pretended to believe that his wife had given him a letter of license, full authority to resume the habits of bachelorhood, the freedom of manners that naturally accompanies a release from the closer bonds of the marriage state. He had never for a moment thought she would mind; but he vowed that what she was pleased to consider offensive and derogatory to the reputation of herself and the shop should never occur again.

Nevertheless, it was soon known to everybody but Mrs. Marsden that he was committing more local breaches of etiquette. On idle evenings he would prowl about the streets, accosting servant girls and shop girls, loitering at corners, and laughing and chaffing with any little sluts who consented to entertain his badinage. Sense of shame and the last remembrances of shop-propriety seemed to be deserting him. Soon his own young ladies met him talking to the girls that belonged to his great trade rival. That tow-haired huzzy who regularly came mincing up St. Saviour's Court to wait for the guv'nor, was—and the thing seemed so monstrous that it was recorded in an awed whisper—neither more nor less than *a ribbon girl from Bence's*! [Pg 229]

Then, after a little while, the governor told Mears that he had engaged a new hand for the upper floor. She would come in on Monday morning, and Miss Woolfrey had better put her into China and Glass, and see how she got on there. She was good at anything, and would soon pick up the hang of everything.

But what a whisper ran round the shop when the newcomer was seen by the horror-struck assistants! The tow-haired minx from over the road!

It was an open and egregious scandal, shocking everybody except the unsuspecting female partner. The shop spoke of the new girl as "Miss Bence." The governor was always trotting upstairs to murmur and chuckle with Miss Bence. Someone saw him pinching Miss Bence's ear—and so on. It was another outrage that could not be permitted to continue.

Sadly and heavily old Mears told Mrs. Marsden all about it.

The disclosure threw her into a quite unusual agitation. She seemed to be more terrified than disgusted. It was as if, in spite of all attempts to keep a bold front before the world, the mere name of their remorseless and overwhelming rival now had power to set her apprehensively trembling.

"I don't want any communications passing between Bence's and us"—And she showed that this idea was sufficient in itself to frighten her. "The girl may be a spy. She may go back there."

"She won't do that," said Mears. "She was dismissed for misconduct."

Mrs. Marsden seemed relieved rather than shocked by hearing this.

"Besides," added Mears, "Bence never takes anyone back." [Pg 230]

"I don't want people passing backwards and forwards—on any pretext. We mustn't allow communications.... Where is Mr. Marsden? I must speak to Mr. Marsden."

There was a terrific scene behind the glass, with Marsden, his wife, and Mears shut in together. Presently the cashier was summoned; books were fetched; accounts were examined. That afternoon Mrs. Marsden went round to the bank; and next day the tow-haired girl had disappeared.

In the evening Mr. Marsden left Mallingbridge. It was understood that he had gone to Monte Carlo. He would not be back for a fortnight at least.

Mears had said that Bence never allowed a discharged servant to return to him, and it was equally true that he never gave back a stolen customer. Bence's was the "somewhere else" to which Thompson & Marsden's customers had nearly all repaired; and of the dozens, the hundreds, who, throwing off their old allegiance, crossed the road to the opposite pavement, not one was ever seen again.

Evidently the claims of those two bad brothers had somehow been satisfied. The leak was stopped; Bence had weathered the storm, and was going full speed ahead.

If there was any truth in the last story of the desperate plight to which he had been reduced, the crisis had long since passed and he had emerged from his difficulties stronger than ever. If one

could attach any importance to the firm belief of that sagacious solicitor, Mr. Prentice, Bence must have found the money necessary to save him. Either he had discovered a backer, or he had never needed one. Who could say what was true or false in this connection? Sometimes of course a very little money boldly hazarded will decide the fate of the very largest enterprise; but in the business world it is precisely at such times that it is almost impossible to meet with anyone shrewd enough and courageous enough to risk a small loan on the off chance of making a splendid investment. Therefore Bence had been lucky, or had not really wanted luck.

[Pg 231]

He was safe now—obviously, too obviously safe, with money behind him and success before him. Employees at Thompson & Marsden's, with little else to do, watched him arrive of a morning. His twelve-year-old daughter drove him to business in a pretty basket car with a high-stepping, long-tailed pony; a smart groom who had been waiting on the pavement ascended the car in the place of the happy father, and Mr. Archibald stood smiling and kissing the tips of his fingers as the car drove away. It was a symbol of his greatness: a triumphal car. He himself was neat and natty, perfumed and oiled, smelling of success—with a flower in his coat, new wash-leather gloves on his industrious hands and a shining topper upon his clever bald head.

On window-dressing days he was up and down the street half the morning. He stood with his back to Thompson's, studying the glorious effect of his displays; ran quickly from window to window, and made imperative signs to those within. He put his head one side, twirled his moustaches, rubbed his small face with a rapidly moving paw—and looked now like a sleek, well-fed little rat who meant to nibble away all the cake that the town of Mallingbridge could provide.

And the windows when done—who could resist them? Is it straw hats for ladies? Do you wish one of the new fashionable Leghorns?... Two windows have turned yellow; from ceiling to floor nothing but the finest straw; here are more Leghorns than you would expect to see at a big London warehouse, more than an ignorant person would have supposed that the city of Leghorn could manufacture in a year.... See! Already his Leghorns have caught the eye of the public; young women are bustling; nursemaids with their perambulators have stopped—there is a block on the pavement, and a constable has courteously requested people to keep moving.

[Pg 232]

There again, the constable is busy outside another window. Do you wish a blouse of the prevailing tint? Mauve blouses, nothing except mauve, all blouses, a window full of them—hardly to be described as for sale, almost literally to be given away.

On advertised bargain-days four policemen are required to regulate the traffic; for Bence opens his doors and locks them—you must wait your turn to get inside. But on all days there is more or less of a crowd outside and inside the triumphant shop.

At eleven A.M. the first batch of red carts go whirling away, round the town and far out on the country roads. This is what Bence calls his mid-day delivery. There will be two more deliveries before the day is done.

If the afternoon proves foggy and dull, there comes a tremendous lightning flash along the extended frontage of Bence; and for a moment you are blinded, as you look towards his windows. Bence has turned on the electric. He makes no appointed hour for lighting up. He will have light whenever he desires it. With his outside arcs and his inside incandescents he makes a light strong enough to throw the shadows of Thompson & Marsden's window columns straight backward across the floor, even when their poor lamps are burning at their brightest.

And no longer can one say that all the goods of Bence are rubbish. High-class expensive articles are mingled with the cheap trash; solidity and lasting value have now a place in his programme; he caters for the large country house as well as for the restricted villa; he invites patronage from prince and peasant: it is his aim to be a universal provider.

[Pg 233]

Truly it was an appalling competition; and if it was dangerous to so big a rival as Thompson's, it was deadly to all the lesser powers. No small shop could live beside Bence; and it seemed that he could kill even at a considerable distance.

After the collapse of the sadler and the bookseller, their next-door neighbour, the ironmonger, failed; and the shell of him Bence also swallowed. The man now next to Bence was Mr. Bennett, the old-established butcher; beyond him was Mr. Adcock, the dispensing chemist, and beyond him there were the baker and the auctioneer. Then came Mr. Newall, the greengrocer, whose shop faced the far corner of Thompson's.

One morning the greengrocer did not take down his shutters. He had flitted in the night.

"Well," said Mr. Mears, looking sadly at the shop, "it's fortunate it isn't alongside of Bence, or I suppose he'd grab that too."

Next day workmen erected a hoarding outside the derelict shop. Soon the boards were painted white, and curious saunterers lingered to read the black-lettered notice.

> "*These premises are being fitted, regardless of expense, in a thoroughly up-to-date manner.*
>
> "*They will shortly be opened again.*
>
> "*But as what?*
>
> "*Why, just what you want.*"

"That's a catchpenny vulgar dodge," said Mears, "if ever I saw one."

"I wonder what it is to be," said Miss Woolfrey. "I guess sweetstuff. It can't be a shooting-gallery. It isn't deep enough."

In a few weeks all knew what it was. Mr. Archibald himself came to see the last boards of the hoarding removed, and to watch the first customers troop into Bence's Fruit & Vegetable Market! [Pg 234]

But for a gap of seventy feet made by four ancient traders, Bence now faced Marsden & Thompson for its whole length from end to end. Bence was irresistible, overpowering, deadly. The hearts of many people opposite sank into their boots.

XXI [Pg 235]

Late one evening, when Marsden was taking what he called his night-cap in the drawing-room, he began to ask questions about the Sheraton desk and cabinets.

"Those things are not at all bad—but they aren't genuine, I suppose?"

"The desk is genuine," said Mrs. Marsden; "but the other things are modern."

"They are uncommonly good imitations," said Marsden; and he knelt in front of one of the cabinets and studied it carefully. "This is an excellently made piece—tip-top workmanship. Why, it must be worth twenty or thirty guineas."

"Yes, it cost something like that."

"Where did you get it?"

"It came out of the shop."

"Ah. Exactly what I supposed;" and he got up from his knees, and stood looking at her thoughtfully. "Out of the shop. Just so.... I must think this out."

But his train of thought was interrupted by a timid knock at the door. It was their last new housemaid, come to ask if the master and the mistress required anything further to-night. She remained on the threshold, breathing hard, and staring shyly, while she waited for an answer—a bouncing, apple-cheeked, country bumpkin of a girl, who had accepted very modest wages for this her first place.

"No," said Marsden shortly, "I don't want anything more—What's your name?"

"Susan, sir."

"All right. Then shut the door, Susan." [Pg 236]

"Good night, Susan," said Mrs. Marsden kindly.

"Where did you pick *her* up?" asked Marsden, when the girl had gone. "She's healthy enough and plump enough—but she looks half-baked."

"She will do very well, if you give her time to learn."

"Oh, *I*'ll let her learn, if *you* can teach her.... But what was I saying? Oh, yes—about the furniture!"

Then he walked round the room, pointing at different things, and continuing his questions.

"Did this come out of the shop?"

"Yes."

"And this?... And those chairs?... And the sofa?"

She did not understand why he asked. But he soon explained himself. He said that all this furniture was taken out of the shop, and it therefore belonged to the firm—or at any rate could not be considered as her private property.

"A partnership is a partnership," he added sententiously.

"But it was ages before the partnership. And all the things were paid for by me."

"No, not paid for," he said quickly. "Not paid for in *cash*—just a matter of writing down a debit somewhere and a credit somewhere else, and saying it was accounted for. But from the point of view of the shop, that's a bogus transaction."

"How absurd!"

"No, *not* absurd—common sense. The shop never got a penny profit, and it seems to me that—"

"Oh, I won't dispute it with you. What is it that you want done?"

"I want the *right* thing to be done," he replied slowly, as if deliberating on a knotty point. "And it

isn't easy to say off-hand what that is."

"Do you want me to send the things back into the department?" [Pg 237]

"No.... No, the time has passed for doing that. It would muddle the accounts. Come into the dining-room, and show me the shop things in there."

She obeyed him; and then he asked if there were any shop things upstairs.

"Yes, several."

"Well, you can show me those to-morrow morning.... I begin to see my way. Yes, I think I see now what's fair and proper."

"Do you?"

He said emphatically that in justice and equity he possessed a half share of all goods taken out of his shop, no matter how long ago. And he insisted on having his share. He would obtain a valuation of the goods, and Mrs. Marsden could pay him cash for half the amount, and retain the goods. Or he would send the goods to London and sell them by auction; and they would each take half the proceeds.

Mrs. Marsden chose the second method of dealing with the problem.

"All right," said Marsden. "So be it. I dare say they'll fetch a tidy sum—and it's share and share alike, of course, for the two of us."

Two days after this the house was stripped of nearly all that had given it an air of opulent comfort and decorative luxury. Mrs. Marsden went to the department of the firm, and bought the cheapest bedroom things she could find to fill the blank spaces and ugly gaps upstairs, and paid for everything with her private purse.

In a fortnight the furniture auctioneers wrote to inform Mr. Marsden that the goods under the hammer had brought the respectable sum of one hundred and thirty pounds. Account for [Pg 238] commission, etc., with cheque to balance, should follow shortly. And before long he duly received the balancing cheque.

But the loss of the cabinets and sofas made the living rooms seem bare and forlorn. The house and the shop had become alike: in each one could now see the empty, cheerless aspect of impending ruin.

Enid, when next she brought her child to call on granny, uttered an exclamation of surprise and distress.

"Mother! What has happened? Where has everything gone?"

"To London—to be sold."

"Oh, mother. Has he obliged you to do this?"

"Yes."

The barrier of reserve so long maintained by Mrs. Marsden had worn very thin. It gave small shelter now; and the brave defender seemed to be growing careless of exposure. And Enid too was losing the power to protect herself from pity and commiseration. The misery caused by both husbands could not much longer be concealed. Yet Enid's state was surely a happy one, when compared with the prevailing gloom in which her mother vainly laboured. Enid had a child to console her.

Weeks passed; but Marsden said nothing of the "share and share alike" settlement that was to clear up that little difficulty of the furniture. At last his wife asked him if he had heard from the auctioneers.

"Oh, yes. Didn't I tell you? The things went pretty well."

"What did they bring?"

"Oh, about a hundred quid."

"Then when may I have my share?"

"Oh, you shall have your share all right—but you can't have it now."

"Dick, have you spent it—have you spent what belonged to me?" [Pg 239]

"Who says I have spent it?" And he turned on her angrily. "If it isn't convenient to me to square up at the moment, why can't you wait? What does it matter to you when you get it? Why should you pretend to be in such a deuce of a hurry?"

This again was late at night. They were alone together in the dismantled drawing-room.

"Dick," she said quietly but resolutely, "I must have my share."

"Then you'll jolly well wait for it.... Look here. Shut up. I'm not going to be nagged at. Be damned to your share. You don't want it."

"Yes, I do want it—I have relied on it."

"Oh, *you*'re all right. You've plenty of money stowed away *somewhere*."

"On my honour, I have no money available."

"Available! That's a good word. That means funds that you don't intend to touch. Prices on change are down, are they?—and you don't care to realise just now?"

She looked at him steadily and unflinchingly. Her eyebrows were contracted; her face had hardened.

"Dick, this isn't fair. It is something that I can't allow," and she spoke slowly and significantly. "Please pull yourself together. You can't go on doing things of this sort. They are dangerous."

"Will you shut up, and stop nagging?"

It was by no means the first time that he had stuck to money when it should have passed through his hands to hers. Indeed in all their private transactions, whenever a chance offered, he had promptly cheated her. But during the last six months it had come to her knowledge that he was not confining his trickery to transactions which could be considered as outside the business. [Pg 240]

"Dick, I *must* go on. It is for your sake as well as mine. There is a principle at stake."

"Rot."

"What you are doing is dishonest. It is embezzlement!" and she turned from him, and looked at the empty fireplace.

With an oath he seized her arm, and swung her round till she faced him again.

"Take that back—or you'll be sorry for it. Do you dare to say that word again? Now we'll see." Holding her with one hand, he swayed her to and fro, as if to force her down to her knees; and his other hand was raised threateningly on a level with her face.

"Are you going to strike me?" And she looked at him with still unflinching eyes. "Why don't you do it? Why are you hesitating? Oh, my God—it only wanted this to justify everything."

Her courage seemed to increase his hesitation. He lowered the threatening hand, but continued to hold her tightly.

"Say what you mean. Out with it."

"Dick, you know very well what I mean.... It must be stopped."

"What must be stopped?"

"Your dangerous irregularities."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Someone has been telling you a pack of lies. You're ready to believe any lie against *me*."

"There was a cheque of the firm—made out to bearer—on the third of last month."

"I know nothing about it."

"No more did I. They sent for me to the bank—to look at the signatures and the initials."

"Well?" [Pg 241]

"I told them it was all right."

"Well, what about it?"

"There was the hundred pounds that was to be paid Osborn & Gibbs on account—to keep them quiet. It was written off in the books—you showed their acknowledgment for it.... But what's the use of going on? Dick, pull yourself together. I hold the *proof* of your folly."

He had let her go, and was walking about the room with his hands in his pockets. When he spoke again, it was sullenly and grumblingly.

"I know nothing whatever about it. I can keep accounts in my head just as well as in the books.... If I seem unbusinesslike—it is because I'm called away so often; and those fools don't understand my system.... I go for facts, and don't bother about all the fuss of book-keeping—which is generally in a muddle whenever I ask for plain statements.... No, you've got on to a wrong track. But I'll go to the bottom of the matter to-morrow—or the day after. I'm busy with other things to-morrow."

"Never mind what's past, Dick; but go into matters for the future."

"All right. Then say no more. Don't nag me.... And look here. Of course I fully intend to pay you your share. I admit the debt. I owe you fifty pounds."

He had been cowed for a few moments; but now he was recovering his angry bluster.

"That's enough," he went on. "I'll settle as soon as I can. But, upon my word, you *are* turning into

a harpy for ready money. What have you done with all your own? How have you dribbled it away—and let yourself get so low that you have to come howling for a beggarly fifty pounds?"

Mrs. Marsden raised her hands to her forehead, with a gesture that he might interpret as expressive of hopeless despair; but she did not answer him in words. [Pg 242]

"Oh, all right," he growled, to himself rather than to her. "The old explanation, I suppose. I'm to be the scapegoat! But I know jolly well where your money has gone. Enid and that squalling brat have pretty near cleared you out. Nothing's too much for Enid to ask.... If I wasn't a fool, I should forbid her the house.... And I will too, if you drive me to it."

It maddened him to think of all the sovereigns that might have chinked in his pocket, if Enid had not rapaciously intervened.

But in fact Mrs. Marsden had given her daughter no money. And this was not because Enid had refrained from asking for it. Compelled to do so by Kenion, she had more than once reluctantly sued for substantial assistance.

"Enid dear, don't ask me again. Truly, it is impossible."

Mrs. Marsden stood firm in the attitude that she had adopted when pestered by old Mrs. Kenion at the christening. Of course she gave presents to little Jane. The trifling aid that a young mother needs in rearing a beloved child Enid might be sure of obtaining; but the source of supply for a husband's selfish extravagance had run dry.

"Enid, my darling, I can't do it—I simply *can't*. He should not send you to me. I told his mother that it was useless to expect more from me."

Enid hugged Mrs. Marsden, said she felt a wretch, begged for forgiveness; but soon she had to confess that Charles bore these rebuffs very badly, and that it would be better for Mrs. Marsden never to come any more to the farmhouse. If she came, Charles might insult her.

And now Richard had hinted that he would not allow Enid to come to St. Saviour's Court. It seemed that soon the mother and daughter would be able to meet only by stealth and on rare occasions. [Pg 243]

If the barrier was shattered and broken in front of Enid, it was completely down between Mrs. Marsden and Mr. Prentice. No further pretence was possible to either of them: the strenuous pressure of open facts had forced both to speak more or less plainly when they spoke of Marsden.

Although Marsden always abused the solicitor behind his back, he ran to him for help every time he got into a scrape; and during the last year one might almost say that he had kept Mr. Prentice busily employed. A horrid mess with London book-makers; two rows with the railway company, about cards in a third-class carriage, and no ticket in a first-class carriage; a fracas with the billiard-marker at his club—one after another, stupid and disgraceful scrapes. Mr. Prentice, doing his best for the culprit, each time found it necessary to obtain Mrs. Marsden's instructions, and to put things before her plainly.

The club committee had eventually desired their obstreperous member to forward a resignation; and, on his refusal to do so, had removed his name from their list. Mr. Marsden, who in his boastful pride once considered himself eligible for the select company of the County gentlemen, had thus been ignominiously expelled from the large society of petty tradesmen, clerks, tag, rag, and bobtail, known as the Mallingbridge Conservative.

At last, after a discussion concerning one of these scrapes, Mr. Prentice abandoned the slightest shadow of pretence, and gave his old client the plainest conceivable advice.

"Screw yourself up to strong measures," said Mr. Prentice, "and get rid of him."

"How could I—even if I were willing?"

"Go for a divorce."

"I shouldn't be given one."

"I think you would." [Pg 244]

They were in Mr. Prentice's room—the fine panelled room with the two tall Queen Anne windows, and the pleasant view up Hill Street, and through the side street into Trinity Square. Mrs. Marsden sat facing the light, her back towards the big safe and the racks of tin boxes; and Mr. Prentice, seated by his table, looked at her gravely and watched her changing expression while he spoke.

"I think that you would obtain your divorce," he repeated.

Then he got up, and opened and closed the door. The passage to the clerks' office was empty. He came back to his table, and sat down again.

"Don't give him any more chances. Take it from me—he'll never reform. Get rid of him now."

"Oh no—quite impossible."

"I had a talk the other day with Yates," said Mr. Prentice quietly. "Yates is prepared to give

evidence that he knocked you about."

"But it's not true," said Mrs. Marsden hotly.

The blood rose to her cheeks, and her lips trembled; but Mr. Prentice had ceased to watch her face. He was playing with an inkless pen and some white blotting-paper.

"Yates is ready to go into the box and swear it."

"Then she would be swearing an untruth."

"Yates would be a very good witness. Really I don't see how anybody could shake her.... I asked her a few questions.... She impressed me as being just the right sort of witness."

"Please don't say any more."

"Honestly, I believe we should pull it off. And why not? If ever a woman deserved—"

But Mrs. Marsden would hear no more of this kind of advice.

"I see no reason against it," said Mr. Prentice, persisting. [Pg 245]

"No, no," said Mrs. Marsden sadly.

"It's the only thing to do."

"You don't understand me." And as she said it, there was dignity as well as sadness in her voice. "Even if it were all easy and straightforward, I could never consent to allow the story of my married life to be told in Court—to the public. I could not bear it. I simply could not bear the shame of it."

"Oh!... Well, it would be like having a tooth out. Soon over."

"But that is only one reason. There are many others."

"Are there?"

"You shouldn't—you mustn't assume that he only is to blame. There are faults on both sides. And I have this on my conscience—that perhaps he would have done very well, if I hadn't married him."

"My dear—forgive my saying so—that is magnanimous, but nonsense."

"No," she said firmly, "it is the truth. He had some good qualities. He was a worker. Idleness—with more money than he was accustomed to—brought temptations;—and he was very young. If he had remained poor, he might have developed into a better man."

"I won't contradict you.... Only it isn't what he might have developed into, but what he has developed into; and what fresh developments we can reasonably expect.... I see no hope. Really, I must say it. I believe, as sure as I sit here, that he'll eat you up—he'll ruin you, if you let him—he'll land you in the workhouse before you've done with him. That's why I say, get rid of him—at all costs."

But Mrs. Marsden only shook her head sadly and wearily.

Mr. Prentice stood at his window, looking down into the street, and mournfully watching her as she walked away. [Pg 246]

She was dressed in black—she who had been so fond of bright colours never wore anything but black now; and the black was growing shabby and rusty. She seemed taller, now that she had become so much thinner; the grey hair at the sides of her forehead and the unfashionable bonnet tied with ribbons under her chin made her appear old; the florid complexion had changed to a dull white—as she turned her face, and hurried across the road, he thought that it showed almost a ghostly whiteness. And truly she was the ghost of the prosperous, radiant, richly-clothed woman that he remembered.

She had been so strong, and now she had become so weak—so pitiably weak; with a weakness that rendered it impossible to save her. His heart ached as he thought of her weakness.

She would be eaten up—soul and body. Secret information made him aware that she had sold the various stocks that she held at her marriage. The manager of the bank had regretfully told him so, at a meeting of the Masonic lodge—a secret between tried friends and trusted Masons, to go no further. She had employed the bank to sell these securities for her. In the old days she would have come to him for advice, and he would have sent the order direct to the stock-brokers; but now she was weakly afraid of his knowing anything about her suicidal transactions.

He was looking out from the same window one afternoon a few weeks later, and he saw something that really horrified him. He could scarcely believe his eyes.

Mrs. Marsden had gone swiftly down the side street, and had vanished through the front door of those shady, wicked solicitors, Hyde & Collins.

He felt so greatly discomposed that he snatched up his hat, ran down into the side street, and stood waiting for her outside the hated and ominous doorway. [Pg 247]

When after half an hour she emerged from the clutch of his unworthy confrères, he took her arm

and led her into Trinity Square; and, walking with her round and round the small enclosure, reproached her for deserting him in favour of such people.

"But I haven't deserted you," she said meekly bearing the reproaches. "This is only some private business that they are attending to."

"But is it kind to me? You know what I think of them. I ask you, is it kind to me?"

"I meant no unkindness," she said earnestly.

And she offered apologies based on vague generalities. Life is complex and difficult. One is forced out of one's path by unusual circumstances. Sometimes one is driven to do things of so private a nature that one cannot speak about them to one's oldest and best friends.

"Very well. But if you feel disinclined to confide everything to me—there are other men that you could depend on. Go to Dickinson—he's a thorough good sort. Or Loder—or Selby! Go to any one of them. But don't—for mercy's sake—mix yourself up with these brutes."

In order to defend herself, Mrs. Marsden was obliged to defend Hyde & Collins.

"They are quick to understand one. Really they seem sharp—"

"*Sharp!* Yes—too sharp—a thousand times too sharp. But ask anybody's opinion of them. Look at their clients. They haven't got a single solid client."

"But they still act for Bence's—they do everything for Mr. Bence."

"Yes," said Mr. Prentice contemptuously, "but who's Bence, when all's said and done?"

"Ah!" And Mrs. Marsden drew in her breath, as if she felt incapable of continuing the conversation. [Pg 248]

"I grant you that Bence has done wonders—and proved me a bad prophet. But we haven't got to the last chapter of Bence yet. I don't believe Bence is really solid—and I never shall do, while I see him going in and out of Hyde & Collins's."

Mrs. Marsden meekly bore all reproaches; but she showed a stubbornness that no warnings could shake. She met direct questions with generalized vagueness. What is unwise in some circumstances may be not unwise in other circumstances. Life is complex—and so on.

When Mr. Prentice left her, he went back to his office full of the most dismal forebodings. She had placed herself in the hands of Hyde & Collins. She was indisputably done for.

XXII

[Pg 249]

Time was passing. One Sunday morning in November, while the vicar of St. Saviour's preached a sermon about immortality, she looked at the familiar faces of the congregation and thought sadly of the impermanence of all earthly things.

So many of the people she had known were gone; so few remained, and these each showed so plainly the havoc and the change wrought by the flying years. She glanced at the card in the metal frame that was half hidden by her prayer-books—"Mrs. Marsden, two seats." Once the writing on the card read "Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, three seats," and she had sat there with her husband and mother. Then the writing changed again—"Mrs. Thompson, two seats." How many years she and Enid had been here together!

And the other people in the pew—a man and a wife, with little children who had slowly grown into men and women; two elderly ladies; a widower and his sister—all had gone. She glanced across the side aisle at a white-haired feeble old man, and a wizened monkey-like old dame who nodded and shook unceasingly—Mr. Bennett, the High Street butcher, and his palsied helpmate; —and she thought of what they were when first she came to St. Saviour's: a hearty vigorous couple in the prime of life, the man seeming big enough to knock down one of his bullocks, and the woman singing the hymns so loudly that her neighbours could not hear the choir. Now they had dwindled and shrunk to this—nerveless arms, bloodless hues, and frozen silence.

Wherever she turned her eyes, she saw the same signs and could read the same story—bowed backs, bald heads, blue-veined hands. Everyone had grown old, everyone had grown feeble, of those who had seen her as a young bride, as a young mother. And no new faces seemed to have replaced the faces that had vanished. Fashion in recent years had leaned steadily towards the other church. Holy Trinity possessed lighted candles on its altars, embroidered copes on its priests, stringed instruments in its organ loft: it was there that all the young people went—to be thrilled with strange music, to be charmed with smart hats, to be set throbbing with irrelevant dreams of courtship and love. Only the old and the worn out had been true to quiet peaceful St. Saviour's. [Pg 250]

She herself was absolutely faithful to the church that she had used and loved for so long. It had become her place of rest, her harbour of refuge. It was only here that she ever felt quite at peace. She knew that here she was safe for an hour at least; while the service lasted no one could molest

her; no one could even speak to her: during this brief hour she belonged to herself.

She could not forget the outside world, but she resolutely tried not to think of it. Just now she had driven away a thought of Marsden. He was lying in bed; perhaps he would sleep till late afternoon; perhaps he would be lazily getting ready for his food when she returned to the house; —but she need not think of him. He would not join her here. She folded her hands, and listened to the kind old vicar as he told her of things that are incomprehensible, immutable, and everlasting.

A man had come up the side aisle, and was stupidly staring at the people in the pews. Mrs. Marsden, glancing at him inattentively, vaguely wondered why he didn't take one of the many empty seats and sit down. She knew him very well. He was a loafer of the better class; and on Sundays he regularly made his beat up and down St. Saviour's Court, picking up odd six-pences by running off to fetch cabs, bringing forgotten umbrellas, or retailing second-hand newspapers to laggards who had missed the paper-boy. [Pg 251]

Presently he discovered Mrs. Marsden's pew, entered it, and whispered hoarsely.

"You're wanted at the house. The gentleman said you was to come at once."

Followed by this seedy messenger, she hastened from the church.

"What is it?" she asked him when they got outside.

"I dunno. The gentleman hollered to me from the door, and sent me to fetch you."

The house door stood ajar; and her husband, in his dressing-gown and slippers, was anxiously waiting for her and guarding the foot of the stairs.

"All right," he said to the loafer. "I'll remember you another time;" and he shut the door and bolted it.

From the top of the stairs there came a sound of wailing and lamentation.

"Jane, look here. I want you to stop this fool's mouth—what's her name—Susan. I've somehow upset her. And that infernal cook is encouraging her to squall the house down."

Without a word Mrs. Marsden hurried upstairs. The cook, a sour-visaged woman of thirty-five, was on the threshold of the kitchen; and Susan, the apple-cheeked housemaid, was clinging to cook's arm, and sobbing and howling.

"Emily—Susan," said Mrs. Marsden quietly, "what *is* all this noise and fuss about?"

"The master frightened her," said the cook, very sourly, "and she wishes to go to the police." [Pg 252]

"The police! What nonsense! Why?"

"The master rang, and she took up his shaving water—and what happened frightened her."

"Where's father and mother?" cried Susan. "I want my mother. Take me home to tell father. Or let me go to the police station, and I'll tell them."

Marsden had followed his wife upstairs, and he showed himself at the kitchen door. At sight of him, Susan ceased talking and began to howl again.

"She's frightened to death," said the cook.

Mrs. Marsden was patting the girl's shoulder, studying her tear-stained face eagerly and intently.

"There, there," she said gently, as if reassured by all that the red cheeks and streaming eyes had told her. "I think this is a great noise about nothing at all."

"Of course it is," said Marsden, at the door.

"Don't leave me alone with him," bellowed Susan. "I won't be kep' a prisoner. I want to see my mother—and my father."

"Hush—Susan," said Mrs. Marsden, soothingly. "Compose yourself. There is no need to cry any more."

"No need to have cried at all," said Marsden.

Obviously he was afraid: he alternately blustered and cringed.

"You silly girl," he said cringingly, "what rubbish have you got into your head? I pass a few chaffing remarks—and you suddenly behave like a raving lunatic." And then he went on blusteringly. "Talk about going! It's *us* who ought to dismiss you for your impudence, and your disrespect."

"You did something to frighten her, sir," said the cook.

"It's a lie—a damned lie."

"If so," said the cook, with concentrated sourness, "why not let her go to the police, as she wishes?" [Pg 253]

"No," shouted Marsden. "I can't have my servants libelling and scandalizing me. I've a public position in this town—and I won't have people sneaking out of my house to spread a lot of innuendos against their employers."

Then he beckoned his wife, and spoke to her in a whisper. "For God's sake, shut her up. Give her a present—square her. Shut her mouth somehow.... It's all right, you know—but we mustn't give her the chance of slandering me;" and he went out of the kitchen.

But he returned almost immediately, to beckon and whisper again.

"Jane. Don't let her out of your sight."

So this was her task for the remainder of the day of rest—to sit and chat with a blubbering housemaid until a pacification of nerves and mind had been achieved.

She performed the task, but found it a fatiguing one. Susan made her labours arduous by returning to the starting point every time that any progress had been made.

"I'd sooner go back 'ome at once, ma'am."

"I think that would be a pity, Susan. If you leave me like this, I may not be able to get you another place. Why should you throw up a comfortable situation?"

"It isn't comfortable."

"Susan, you shouldn't say that. Haven't I treated you kindly?"

"Yes, *you* have."

"And haven't I taken trouble in teaching you your duties? You are getting on very nicely; and if you stay with me a little longer, I shall be able to recommend you as competent."

But this servant said what all other servants had said to Mrs. Marsden. Susan had no fault to find with her mistress. [Pg 254]

"I should be comfortable, if it wasn't for *him*. But I've never been comfortable with him."

And then she went back to her starting point.

"I'd rather go 'ome. I must ask mother's advice—and tell father too. I don't believe father would wish it 'ushed up."

However, Mrs. Marsden finally succeeded. By bedtime Susan was pacified.

"Yes, I'll stay, ma'am. I'd like to stay with you—but may I sleep in Em'ly's room?"

"Of course you may."

Next morning no one came to call Mrs. Marsden; no fires were lighted; no breakfast was being prepared. Both the servants had gone. In the night cook had persuaded the girl to change her mind.

A letter from cook, conspicuously displayed on the dining-room mantelpiece, explained matters.

> "*Dear Madame,—*
>
> "We are sorry to leave you but feel we cannot stay in this house. I have advised Susan to go to her Home and she has gone there.
>
> "Yours respectfully,
> "Miss Emily Howard."

Mrs. Marsden went to her husband's room, woke him, and repeated the substance of Miss Howard's note.

He was dreadful to see, in the cold morning light—unshaven, white and puffy; sitting up in bed, biting his coarse fingers, and looking at her with cowardly blood-shot eyes.

"Where is her home?" [Pg 255]

Mrs. Marsden said that Susan's parents lived somewhere on the other side of Linkfield.

"Twelve miles away! She's gone out by train. She has got there by now. What are we to do?"

"I scarcely know."

"Let me think a minute.... Yes, look here. Get hold of old Prentice—He's a man of the world. He'll help you. He'll be able to shut them up."

And with terrified haste he gave her his directions. She was to run to Mr. Prentice's private house, and catch him before he started for his office. Then she was to run to Cartwright's garage and hire a motor-car for the day; and then she and Mr. Prentice were to go scouring out into the country, to silence Susan and all her relatives.

"Tell Prentice to take plenty of money with him. And don't forget—ask for Cartwright's open car. It's faster. And don't waste a minute—don't wait for breakfast or anything—and don't let Prentice wait either."

In an hour she and her old friend were spinning along the Linkfield road in the hired motor-car. The east wind cut their faces, dirt sprinkled their arms, gloomy thoughts filled their minds.

This, then, was her Monday's task—to begin Sunday's toil, on a larger scale, all over again.

With some difficulty they found the cottage for which they were seeking. Susan's mother opened the door in response to prolonged tappings. Susan had safely reached home.

"Oh, come inside," said the mother; and she pretended to shed tears. "Oh dear, oh dear. Who could of believed such a thing 'appening?"

"Nothing has happened," said Mr. Prentice, confidently and jovially; "except that your daughter has left her situation without warning, and we want to know what she means by it." [Pg 256]

"Oh, she's told me everything," said the mother, dolefully shaking her head. "Everything."

"There was nothing to tell," said Mr. Prentice; "beyond the fact that she has behaved in a very stupid manner. Where is she?"

The mother indicated a door behind her. "Poor dear, she's so exhausted, I've been trying to persuade her to eat a morsel of something."

Mr. Prentice lifted a latch, opened the inner door, and disclosed the humble home-picture—Susan, with her mouth full of bacon and bread, stretching a hearty hand towards the metal tea-pot.

"Ah, thank goodness," said the mother, "she *'as* bin able to pick a bit. Don't be afraid, Susan—you're 'ome now, along of your own mother and father;" and she addressed Mrs. Marsden. "'Er father 'as 'eard everything, too."

Mr. Prentice was laughing gaily.

"Well done, Susan. Don't be afraid of another slice of bacon. Don't be afraid of a fourth cup of tea."

"No, sir," said Susan shyly.

"Where *is* her father?" asked Mr. Prentice. "I'd like to have a few words with him."

But father, having heard his daughter's tale, had started on a long journey with an empty waggon. He would return with it full of manure any time this afternoon. And going, and loading, and returning, he would be thinking over everything, and deciding what he and Susan should next do.

Mr. Prentice, considering that even a hired motor-car ought to be able to overtake a manure waggon though empty, started in pursuit of father; and Mrs. Marsden was left to conduct the pacific negotiations at the cottage.

It was a long and weary day, full of small difficulties—father, when recovered, not a free man, unable to talk, compelled to attend to his master's business; mother unable to express any opinion without previous discussion with father; empty fruitless hours slowly dragging away; meals at a public-house; a walk with Susan;—then darkness, and father talking to Mr. Prentice in the parlour; and, finally, mother and Mrs. Marsden summoned from the kitchen to assist at ratification of peace proposals. [Pg 257]

It was late at night when Mrs. Marsden got back to St. Saviour's Court. Her husband had not been out all day. He was sitting by the dining-room fire, with his slippered feet on the fender, and a nearly emptied whisky bottle on the corner of the table near his elbow.

"Well?" He looked round anxiously and apprehensively.

"It is over. There will be no trouble—not even a scandal."

She was blue with cold; her hands were numbed, and hung limply at her sides; her voice had become husky.

"Bravo! Well done!" He stood up, and stretched and straightened himself, as if throwing off the heavy load that had kept him crouched and bent in the armchair. "Excellent! I knew you'd do it all right;" and he drew a deep breath, and then began to chuckle. "And, by Jove, old girl, I'm grateful to you.... Look here. Have you had your grub? Don't you want some supper?"

"No."

"Well, understand—my best thanks;" and really he seemed to feel some little gratitude as well as great satisfaction. "Jane, you're a brick. You never show malice. You've a large heart."

"No," she said huskily; and with a curious slow gesture, she raised her numbed hands and pressed them against her breast. "I had a large heart once; but it has grown smaller and smaller, and harder and harder—till now it is a lump of stone." [Pg 258]

"No, no. Rot."

"Yes. And that's lucky—or before this you would have broken it."

He stood staring at the door when it had closed behind her. Then he shrugged his shoulders, turned to the table, and replenished his glass with whisky.

XXIII

[Pg 259]

It was immediately after this fatiguing episode that Mr. Prentice made his last urgent prayer to Mrs. Marsden. Complying with his request for an interview, she had come again to the panelled room in Hill Street. But on this occasion she chose a different chair, and sat with her back to the windows and her face in shadow.

"You see for yourself," said Mr. Prentice, with culminating plainness: "he is an unmitigated blackguard. Get rid of him."

"I can't."

"You can. Yates is still game—I mean, Yates has not forgotten anything. Yates will swear to everything that she remembers.... So far as Yates goes, her evidence may be all the better for the delay. It will be all the more difficult to shake it after the lapse of time.... Of course we shall be asked, 'Why have you sat down on your wrongs for so long?' But we have our answer now. This is the answer. You put up with his ill-usage and infidelities until he befouled your home. A disgraceful affair with a servant girl under your own roof! That was the last straw—and it has driven you to the Court, to ask for the relief to which you have been entitled for years."

"Oh, no—impossible."

"I pledge you my word, we shan't fail. We shall pull it off to a certainty."

"No, I can't do it. And even if we succeeded, it would be only a half relief. Divorce wouldn't end the business partnership."

[Pg 260]

"No. But when once your marriage is dissolved, we shall be able to make terms with him. Wipe him out as your husband, and he loses the tremendous hold he has on you. Get rid of your incubus. Think what it would mean to you. He would be gone—you would be alone again; able to pull things together, work up the business, nurse it back to life. On my honour, I think you are capable of restoring your fortunes even at this late day."

But Mrs. Marsden only shook her head, while Mr. Prentice continued to entreat her to act on his advice.

"Suppose you always have to go on paying him half of all you can make by your industry? Never mind. What does it matter? You'll pay it to him at a distance—you'll never have to see him—you will have swept him out of your life. My dear, the years will roll off your back; you'll be able to breathe, to *live*—you'll feel that you are your own self again."

"No—impossible."

"Yes. Leave it to me. I answer for everything, before and afterwards. I'll manage my fine gentleman—I'll cut his claws so that he'll be a very quiet sort of partner in the years to come. I'll work at it till I drop—but I swear I'll put you on safe ground, if only you'll trust me and let me tackle the job."

And Mr. Prentice, leaning forward in his chair, took her hand and pressed it imploringly.

"You are what you have always been to me, Mr. Prentice,—the best, the kindest of friends." She allowed him to retain her hand for a few moments, and then gently withdrew it. "But it is difficult for me to explain—so that you would understand me."

"I shall understand any explanation."

[Pg 261]

"I took him for better for worse. And once I promised him that I would hold to him until he set me free." She paused, as if carefully putting her thought into appropriate words. "It may come to it.... Yes, it is what I hope for—that he himself may give me back my freedom."

"But how?"

"He might consent to a separation—without scandal, without publicity."

"Why should he do that? While you've a shot in the locker, he'll stick to you."

Mr. Prentice's voice conveyed his sense of despair. She would not be convinced. He got up, sat down again, and vigorously resumed his appeal.

"Can't you see now the force of what I have told you so often? He will not only disgrace you, he will eat you up. It is what he is doing—has almost done. And when you have let him squander your last farthing, he'll desert you—but he won't desert you till then."

But Mrs. Marsden again shook her head, and once more fell back upon the vagueness that baffles argument if it cannot refute it.

"No—dear Mr. Prentice, I feel that I couldn't make any move now. Life is so complicated—there are difficulties on all sides—my hands are tied.... Perhaps I will ask you for your aid—but not now—and not for a divorce."

"But if you wait, no one will be able to aid you. The hour for aid will have passed forever." And Mr. Prentice brought out all his eloquence in vain. "Try to recover your old attitude of mind. Consider the thing as a business woman. Tear away sentiment and feminine fancies. Make this effort of mind—you would have been strong enough to do it a little while ago,—and consider yourself and him as if you were different people. Now—from the business point of view—and no sentiment! He is an undeserving blackguard."

"No. I can't do anything now.... I *have* considered it as a business woman. I have looked at it from every point of view. Believe me, I must go my own way." [Pg 262]

This was the final appeal of Mr. Prentice. He said no more on the subject then, or afterwards. He had shot his bolt.

XXIV [Pg 263]

Early in the new year Marsden had a serious illness. He caught a chill on a suburban racecourse, came home to shiver and groan and curse, and two days afterwards was down with double pneumonia.

He kept the hospital nurses, his wife, and the doctor busy for three weeks; and throughout this time there was no point at which it could be said that he was not in imminent danger of death.

Then the shop assistants heard, with properly concealed feelings of exultation, that a devoted wife, a clever doctor, and two skilled nurses had saved the governor's life. The governor had pulled through. Dr. Eldridge, as the shop understood, was able to make the gratifying pronouncement that the patient possessed a naturally magnificent frame and constitution, which had been but partially weakened or impaired by carelessness and imprudence. They need not entertain any further fear. The dear governor will last for a splendidly long time yet.

But his convalescence was slow; and after the recovery of normal health he passed swiftly into a third phase. He showed no inclination to rush about; his mental indolence had become so great that the mere notion of a train-journey fatigued him; he did his betting locally, and spent his days with the red-haired barmaid in the Dolphin bar.

At the Dolphin Hotel he had slid down a descending scale of importance which emblematized, with a strange accurateness, his descent in the town of Mallingbridge and in the world generally. Once he used to come swaggering into the noble coffee room, and be flattered by the landlord and fawned on by the manager while he gave his orders for sumptuous luncheons and dinners à la carte, with champagne of the choicest brands, and the oldest and costliest of liqueurs. After that, a period arrived when the restaurant and a table-d'hôte repast, washed down with any cheap but strong wine, were good enough for him. Then he was seen only in the billiard room; or in the small grill-room, where he would sit drinking for hours while relays of commercial travellers and minor tradesmen bolted their chops and steaks. Now he had descended to what was called the saloon bar; and here, since he had lost his club, he made himself quite at ease, and was listened to with some semblance of respect by the shabby frequenters, and always smiled upon by the barmaid—who was an old, and of late a very intimate friend. He could not drop any lower at the Dolphin, unless he went out to the stable yard and sat with ostlers and fly-drivers in the taproom beneath the arch. [Pg 264]

At mid-day there were eatables of a light sort on the saloon counter; but, rejecting such scratchy fare, Mr. Marsden regularly came home for his solid luncheon. After lunching heavily he went back to the saloon, stayed there through the tea hour, and returned to St. Saviour's Court for dinner. He was regular in his attendance at meals, but except for meal-time the house never saw him. In fact he was settling down into stereotyped habits. When dinner was over he retired again—to take his grog in the saloon, to help the barmaid close the saloon, and to escort her thence to her modest little dwelling-house.

Mrs. Marsden knew all about this barmaid, with her fascinating smiles and her Venetian red hair—and indeed about her dwelling-house also. It was common knowledge that a few years ago she had been a parlourmaid in Adelaide Crescent; had somehow got into trouble; and somehow getting out of it, had risen to the surface as a saloon siren, and proved herself attractive to more persons than one. As to her place of residence, an illuminating letter had reached Marsden & Thompson and been duly opened behind the glass—"re No. 16 New Bridge Road. We beg to remind you that your firm have guaranteed Miss Ingram's rent, and the same being now nearly a quarter in arrear, we beg, etc., etc...." [Pg 265]

Then it was to Number Sixteen that Mr. Marsden walked every evening, wet or fine. No one knew when he returned home again. But he was always ready for his late breakfast in his own bed.

Thanks to the regularity of these habits, Enid could now come and see her mother without risk of encountering her stepfather. That cruel threat of his had been often repeated, but never converted into an explicit order; he disapproved of Mrs. Kenion's visits, and if they were brought to his notice he would certainly prohibit them. But now the house was safe ground between luncheon and dinner; and there were few Thursday afternoons on which Enid did not come with her child to share Mrs. Marsden's weekly half holiday.

Little Jane was old enough to do without the constant vigilance of a nurse; and almost old enough, it sometimes seemed, to understand that she was her mother's only joy and consolation.

"You must always be a good little girl," Mrs. Marsden used to say, "and make mummy happy, and very proud of you."

And the child, looking at granny with such wise eyes, said she was always good, and never disturbed mummy in her room, or asked to be read to when mummy was crying. Really, as she said this sort of thing, she seemed to comprehend as clearly as her grandmother that there was misery, deepening misery, in the ivy-clad farmhouse. [Pg 266]

"Mummy mustn't cry," said Mrs. Marsden tenderly. "Mummy must remember that while she has you, she has everything.... Enid, don't give way."

For mummy was there and then beginning to do just what she mustn't do.

"Mother, I can't help it;" and Enid wiped her eyes. "I'm not brave like you. And I feel now and then that I can't go on with it."

Enid's barrier had fallen; she, too, abandoned the defence of an impossible position. Often she showed a disposition to plunge into open confidence, and tell the long tale of her trials and sorrows; but Mrs. Marsden did not encourage a confidential outbreak, indeed checked all tendencies in this direction.

She used to take the child on her lap; and, after a little fondling and whispering, Jane always fell asleep. Then, with the small flaxen head nestled against her bosom, she talked quietly to her daughter, endeavouring to put forward cheerful optimistic views, and providing the philosophic generalities from which in troublous hours one should derive stimulation and support.

"She's tired from the journey. How pretty she is growing, Enid. She will be extraordinarily pretty when she is grown-up. She will be exactly what you were."

"No one ever thought me pretty, except you, mother."

"Nonsense, dear. Everyone admired you. You were enormously admired."

"Then there was something wanting," said Enid bitterly. "I hadn't the charms that have lasting power."

But Mrs. Marsden would not allow the conversation to take an awkward turn.

"And Jane looks so well," she went on cheerfully. "Such limbs—and such a *weight*! She is a glorious child. She does you credit, dear. You have every reason to be proud of her—and you will be prouder and prouder, in the time to come." [Pg 267]

"I hope so—I pray so. I shall have nothing else to be proud of."

Once or twice, while the child was sleeping, Enid glided from obvious hints to a bald statement, in spite of all Mrs. Marsden's endeavours to restrain her.

"Mother, my life is insupportable;" and tears began to flow. "Mother dear, can't you help me?"

"My darling, how can I? I have told you of my difficulties—but you don't dream, you would never guess what they are."

"It isn't money now," sobbed Enid. "I'd never again ask you for money—and money, if you had thousands to give, would do me no good.... Oh, I'm so wretched—so utterly wretched."

"My dearest girl," and Mrs. Marsden, in the agitation caused by this statement, moved uneasily and woke the little girl. "You tear me to pieces when you ask me to help you. My own Enid, I can't help you. I can't help you now. You must be brave, and carry your burdens by yourself.... You say I am brave. Then be like me. I'm in the midst of perils and fears—my hands are tied; yet I go on fighting. I swear to you I am fighting hard. I've not given up hope. No, no. Don't think that I'm not wanting to help you—longing to help you—*meaning* to help you, when the chance comes."

Jane had extricated herself from the arms that held her; and, sliding to the floor, she went to her mother's side. The energy of granny's voice frightened her.

"I'll do my best," said Enid. "I'll try to bear things submissively, as you do."

"And don't lose hope in the future," said Mrs. Marsden, dropping her voice, and summoning every cheerful generality she could remember. "Be patient. Wait—and clouds will pass. You are young—with more than half your life before you. You have your sweet child. Go on hoping for happy days. The clouds will pass. The sun will shine again." [Pg 268]

But before any gleam of sunshine appeared, the sombre clouds that lowered over Enid's head burst into a heavy storm.

One morning Mrs. Marsden was engaged with Mears on what had become a painful duty. They were stock-taking in the silk department; and, as the empty shelves sadly confronted them, Mears looked at her with dull eyes, opened and shut his mouth, but could not speak. He thought of what this particular department had once been, and of his own delight in especially fostering and tending it; of how it had improved under his care; of how he and Mr. Ridgway had built up quite a respectable little wholesale trade, as adjunct to the ordinary retail business, supplying the smaller shops and steadily extending the connection. When he thought of these things, it was no wonder that he could not speak.

"Never mind, Mr. Mears," said Mrs. Marsden, in a whisper. Intuitively she knew what was passing in his mind. "It's no good looking backwards. We must look ahead."

"Yes, no doubt," said Mears blankly.

"I see what you mean. But we'll get an order through—before very long. Meanwhile, you must do some more of your clever dressing."

And it was just then—before Mr. Mears could promise to dress the empty shelves—that the house servant appeared, and told her mistress of the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Kenion. [Pg 269]

It was not a Thursday; and Enid came only on Thursdays, and never before luncheon. Mrs. Marsden knew at once that something remarkable had occurred.

"Is Miss Jane with her?"

"Yes, ma'am. They're waiting for you upstairs in the drawing-room."

Mrs. Marsden hurried up to the first floor, and rushed through the door of communication.

"Enid, my dearest child."

"Oh, mother, mother! It's all over."

Enid was in a pitiable state of distress; the red circles round her eyes were absolutely disfiguring; she wrung her hands, and contorted her whole body.

"Enid dear—tell me. Don't keep me in suspense."

"He has gone—went to London this morning."

"Who went? Charles? Do you mean Charles?"

"Yes—and I don't believe he will ever come back to me."

"Wait a moment, my love," said Mrs. Marsden. "Jane shall have a treat. Jane, you shall come and play in the pantry. Won't that be nice?"

And she took her grandchild by the hand, and led her from the room. Outside in the passage she smiled at the little girl, patted her cheek, stooped to hug and kiss her. Then she gave her over to the charge of the housemaid—an elderly woman with an ugly face and an austere manner—and walked briskly back to the dining-room.

"Eliza will amuse Jane," she said cheerfully. "Eliza is kind, although she seems so forbidding.... And now, my dear, you can tell me all about this news—this great news—this *astonishing* news of yours."

Enid told her tale confusedly. She was too much distressed to record events in their logical sequence. She worked backwards and forwards, breaking the thread with ejaculations, laments, and sad reflections, mixing yesterday with days that belonged to last year and the year before last year. But Mrs. Marsden soon grasped the import of the tale. [Pg 270]

Mr. Kenion was the lover as well as the pilot of that rich hunting lady. Enid had suspected the truth for a long time, had been certain of the truth and suffered under the certainty for another long time—all that, however, belonged to the past days and was quite unimportant. Yesterday was the important day.

Yesterday there had been a lawn meet—whether at Widmore Towers or somewhere else, Mrs. Marsden did not gather. Mrs. Bulford's horse was there; but as yet Mrs. Bulford had not shown herself. Charles was there, dismounted for the moment, walking about among the gentlemen in front of the house, taking nips of cherry brandy and nibbling biscuits offered by the footmen with the trays. All was jollity and animation—promise of fine sport; dull sky, gentle westerly breeze, dew-sprinkled earth; kindly nature seemed to proclaim a good scenting day.

And somebody, who has proved a very dull-nosed hound, is on the scent at last. Here comes stiff-legged Major Bulford, armed with a hunting crop although he only hunts on wheels, hobbling over the lawn among the gentlemen.

Hullo! What's up? Look! Bulford is wanging into Charlie, calling him names as he slashes him across the face with stick and thong, using a fist now,—hobbling after Charlie when Charlie has had enough, trying with his uninjured leg to kick behind Charlie's back,—and tumbling at full

length on the damp grass.

Mr. Kenion took his bleeding face home to be patched; and early this morning he had gone to London—where Mrs. Bulford was waiting for him. [Pg 271]

"And, mother, he as good as said that I should never see him again. He confessed that he and Mamie had been very imprudent—and Major Bulford has discovered everything."

"But, my darling, why do you cry? Why aren't you rejoicing—singing your song of joy?"

"Mother!"

"All this is splendid good news—not bad news."

"Mother, don't say it."

"But I do say it. I say, Thank God—if this is going to give my girl release from her slavery." Mrs. Marsden had spoken in a tone of exaltation; but now her brows contracted, and her voice became grave. "Enid, we mustn't run on so fast. To me it seems almost too good to be true."

"To me it seems dreadful."

"Yes, at the moment. But later, you will know it is emancipation, *life*. Only, let us keep calm. This man—Bulford—may not intend to divorce her."

"Oh, he *will*."

"You think he will wish to cast her off?"

"Yes. Charlie as good as said so."

"But tell me this—You say they are very rich. Which of them has the money—the husband or the wife?"

"Oh, it is all Mrs. Bulford's—her very own."

"Ah! The man may not divorce her—but if he does, there is one thing of which you can be absolutely certain. Kenion will stick to her, and give you your freedom."

It was nearly one o'clock. Mrs. Marsden, glancing at the mantlepiece, started. Her husband would soon return for his substantial mid-day meal.

"Enid dear, I must take you and Jane out to lunch. I know you won't care to meet Richard. Come! I shan't be a minute putting on my bonnet;" and she hurried from the room. "Eliza! If Mr. Marsden asks for me, tell him I shall not be in to luncheon.... That is all that you need say." [Pg 272]

To avoid the chance of being seen by her husband in High Street, she led Enid and the little girl up the court instead of down it, round the church-yard, and through devious ways to Gordon's, the confectioner's. Here, at a small table in the back room, she gave them a comfortable and sufficient repast—chicken for Enid, and nice soup and milk pudding for Jane. She herself was unable to eat: excitement had banished all appetite. She cut up toast for the soup, carved the chicken, dusted the pudding with sugar; and smilingly watched over her guests.

But every now and then she frowned, and became lost in deep thought. Once, after a frowning pause, she leaned across the table and clutched Enid's arm.

"Enid," she whispered, with intense anxiety, "is this Bulford really an upright honourable man who will do the right thing, and cast her off; or is he a mean-spirited cur who will support his disgrace for the sake of the cash?"

They remained at the confectioner's until Mrs. Marsden could feel no doubt that her husband was now safe in his saloon; and then she took them back to the house.

She sent Mears a message to say that he and the shop must do without her this afternoon, and she sat for a couple of quiet hours hearing the remainder of Enid's grievous tale. Plainly it did Enid good to talk about her troubles; the longer she talked the calmer she grew; and while stage by stage she traced the history of her unhappy married life, Mrs. Marsden thought very often of her own experiences.

Jane, contented and replete, had fallen asleep upon granny's lap; and Mrs. Marsden softly rocked her to and fro, to make the sleep sweeter and easier.

Unhappy Enid! She recited all her pains and pangs and torments. She had loved the man, had thought him a fine gentleman, and had found him a cruel beast. She had dreamed and awakened. She had tried to reconstitute the dream, to shut her eyes to realities, and live in the dream that she knew to be unreal. But he would not let her. She had forgiven misdeeds, and even forgotten them; he had hurt her again and again and again; and each time she had healed her wounds, and presented herself to him whole and loyal once more. [Pg 273]

While Mrs. Marsden listened, she was thinking, "Yes, that is the keynote, the apology, and the explanation. Love dies so slowly."

Now Enid had come to the end of her tale.

"Mother," she was saying, "I know I shall never see him any more;" and, saying it, she began to cry again. "He spoke to me so kindly when he was going from me.... And I looked at his poor face, all striped with the sticking-plaster, and I thought of what he had been to me. It all came back to me in a rush—the old feelings, mother,—and I begged him not to go. And I asked him at least to kiss me—and he did it—and I knew that he was sorry."

Very quietly and carefully Mrs. Marsden got up, and placed the sleeping child on her mother's lap.

"Enid, take what is left to you. Put your arms round her, and hold her against your heart. Hold her safe, and hold her close—for you are holding all the world."

Then, in great agitation, she walked up and down the room; and when she stopped, and stood by Enid's chair, her eyes were streaming.

"Never mind, my darling." An extraordinary exaltation sounded in her voice; and, as she struggled to moderate its tone, there came a queer vibration and huskiness. It seemed that but for dread of waking the little girl, she would have shouted her words. "Never mind. You have [Pg 274] your child. Think of that. Nothing else matters. *I* have suffered; *you* have suffered—never mind. Perhaps we women were intended to suffer—and we have to bear some things so cruel that they must be borne in silence. If we spoke of them, they might kill. But it is all nothing compared with *this*;" and she stooped to kiss Enid's forehead, and very gently and softly stroked the child's hair. "You and I have both made our link in the wonderful chain of life. We have given what God gave us. We carried the torch, and it has not been struck out of our hands and extinguished.... We will rear your child; and I shall see you in her; and she will grow tall and strong; and she will love—you most—the mother,—but me too, when she understands that you came to her from me.... And the sun shall shine again, and you shall be happy again—for God is kind, and God is *just*.... And then there will be no more tears—and a touch of your child's lips will destroy the memory of tears."

XXV

[Pg 275]

Another year had slowly dragged by.

Enid was still living with her child at the farmhouse; but all the personal property of the child's father, all those numerous signs of too engrossing amusements, had disappeared. Horses and grooms, brushes and boots, spurs and bridles—all were gone. In the suit of Bulford vs. Bulford and Kenion, the petitioner obtained a decree nisi; and soon the decree will be made absolute. Another undefended suit—that of Kenion vs. Kenion—is down for hearing. Very soon now Enid will be free.

Meanwhile the big looking-glasses on the stairs and at department entrances of Thompson & Marsden's shop had been growing tarnished, dull, and spotted. They showed nothing new in their misty depths—emptiness and desolation; unused space so great that it was not necessary to multiply it by reflection; and a grey-haired black-robed woman passing and repassing through the faint bluish fog, with shadowy, ghostly lines of such sad figures marching and wheeling at her side.

But there was no space for fog in the establishment across the road. During these twelve slow months the visible, unmistakable prosperity of Bence had been stupendous.

He had bought out Mr. Bennett, the butcher. He would buy the whole street. He had enlarged his popular market, adding Flowers to Fruit and Vegetables. The old auctioneer had retired, in order to make room for this addition; and where for a half a century there had been no objects more interesting than sale bills and house registers and dangling bunches of keys, beautiful [Pg 276] unseasonable blossoms now shed their fragrance throughout the year. Plainly there was nothing too old, or too hard, or too large for Bence to swallow.

And the reputation of Bence's, as well as its mere success, had steadily been rising. It seemed as if the remorseless and triumphant Archibald had not only stolen the entire trade of his principal rival, but had also borrowed all the methods that in the old time built up the trade. In his best departments the goods were now as solid and as real as those which had made the glory of Thompson's at its zenith. But beyond this laudable improvement of stock—a matter that no one could complain of,—Bence betrayed a cruel persistence in imitating subsidiary characteristics of Mrs. Thompson's tactical campaign.

Gradually Bence had won the town. It was Bence who now feasted and flattered the municipal authorities, exactly as Mrs. Thompson had done years ago. Dinners to aldermen and councillors; soirées and receptions for their wives; compliments, largesse, confidential attention flowing out in a generous stream for the benefit of all—high and low—who could possibly assist or hinder the welfare of Bence! Last Christmas—by way of inaugurating his twentieth grand annual bazaar—he gave a ball to four hundred people, with a military band and a champagne sit-down supper.

The ancient aldermen were nearly all gone; the council nowadays professed themselves to be

advocates of modern ideas; they said the conditions of life are always changing; and they were ready to admit the new style of trade as fundamentally correct. Then, making speeches after snug Bence-provided banquets, they said that their host represented in himself and his career the Spirit of the Age. They raised their glasses in a toast which all would honour. "Mr. Archibald Bence, you are a credit to the town of Mallingbridge; and speaking for the town, I say the town is proud of you, sir.... Now, gentlemen, give him a chorus—'For he's a jolly good fellow'"....

[Pg 277]

Bence never stopped their music. He sat at the head of the table, twirling his waxed moustache, fingering his jewelled studs, and smiling enigmatically—as if he considered the adulation of his guests quite natural and proper, or as if he felt amused by vulgar praise and a homage which could be purchased with a little meat and drink.

"Gentlemen," said Bence, rising to return thanks, and addressing the assemblage in the usual tone of mock modesty, "I am overwhelmed by your good-nature. I lay no claim to merit. The most I ever say of myself is that I do work hard, and try my best. But I have been very lucky. Anybody could have done what I have done, if they had been given the same opportunity—and the same support."

"No, no," cried the noisy guests. "Not one in a million. No one but yourself, Mr. Bence. That's why we're so proud of you."

And just as the town had turned towards Bence in his prosperity, so it had turned away from Mrs. Marsden in her adversity. These people worshipped success, and nothing else. The old shop was dying fast; its legend was already dead. The ancient triumph of the brave young widow was thus in a few years almost totally forgotten. It was a fabled greatness that faded before her present insignificance. There were of course some who still remembered; but they did not trouble to sustain or revive her name and fame.

Did she know how they spoke of her—these few who remembered?

A pitiful story: a poor wretch who posed for a little while as a good woman of business, and got absurd kudos for what was sheer luck. Just clever enough to make a little money in propitious times; but without staying power, unable to adapt herself to new methods—a *stupid* woman, really! That was the kindest talk. Others, who should have been grateful and did not care to pay their debts, spoke of her as a criminal. "I never forgave her that disgraceful marriage. I endeavoured to prevent it, and warned her what would be the consequence of her—say her folly; but I think one would be justified in using a stronger word. Well, she has made her bed; and she must lie upon it."

[Pg 278]

On a cold winter evening, when she had walked to the railway station with Enid and was finding her a seat in the local train, a porter officiously pointed out Bence.

"There! That's Mr. Bence, ma'am. Mr. Bence—the small gentleman!"

The local train was on one side of the platform, and on the other stood the London express. And Bence, in fur coat and glossy topper, surrounded with sycophantic inspectors and ticket-collectors, was approaching the Pullman car. He was off to London, to buy fresh cargos of Leghorn hats or whole warehouses of mauve blouses.

The local train, with Enid in it, rolled away; and Mrs. Marsden, a shabby insignificant black figure, remained motionless, waving a pocket handkerchief and staring wistfully at the receding train. Then, as Bence came bustling from the Pullman door to the book-stall at the end of the platform, he and Mrs. Marsden met face to face.

It was a strange encounter. Intelligent onlookers, if there had been any on the platform, might have found food for much thought in studying this chance meeting between the Spirit of the age and the Ghost of the past.

There was nothing of the conqueror's exultant air in Bence's low bow. He uncovered his bald head and bowed deeply, with ostentatious humbleness and almost excessive respect—as if magnanimously determined to show that greatness though fallen was still greatness to him.

And there was nothing of the conquered in Mrs. Marsden's dignified acknowledgment of the passing courtesy. Bowing, she looked at Bence and through Bence; and her face seemed calm, cold, dispassionate: as absolutely devoid of trouble or resentment as if one of the ticket-collectors whom she used to tip had touched his hat to her.

[Pg 279]

None of these greedy ruffians did salute her. In all the station, through which she used to pass as a queen, only little Bence showed her a sign of respect to-night.

In her deserted shop there were still faithful hearts; outside the shop, in all Mallingbridge, it seemed as if she could not count more than one true friend.

Prentice was true as the magnet to the pole. For a long time he had asked her no questions, given her no advice; and she told him nothing of her affairs, either commercial or domestic. But he guessed that things were going from bad to worse. He knew that she was more and more frequently at the offices of Hyde & Collins. He saw her entering their front door almost as often as he saw Bence entering it; and he interpreted these visits as a certain indication that they were still raising money for her. She had probably sold the last of her stocks and shares, and now they

were helping her to get rid of the small remainder of her possessions. He knew of two or three houses in River Street, and of a moderate mortgage on this property. Hyde & Collins might effect a second mortgage perhaps; and then the houses would be practically gone, as everything else had gone—into the bottomless pit. They would not care how quickly she beggared herself. When she was squeezed dry, they would just shut the door in her face. Insolent, unscrupulous brutes! And he thought with anger of how cavalierly they would treat her even now, before the end: breaking their appointments, telling her to call again, leaving her to wait in outer rooms while [Pg 280] they kow-towed to their best client, their only prosperous client, the omnipotent Bence.

To the mind of loyal Prentice the utter downfall of Mrs. Marsden was abominable and intolerable. He could not bear it—this wreck of a life that had been so noble. His hope of saving something from the wreck was cruelly frustrated. He had tried again and again; but she would not listen, she would not be guided.

He thought sadly of the bright past, of her talent and genius; and, above all, of her tremendous intellectual strength. In those days, when he began to unfold a matter of business, she stopped him before he had completed half a dozen sentences. It was enough—she had grasped the whole position, sent beams from the search-light of her intelligence flashing all round it, shown him essential points that he had not seen himself. Difficulties never frightened her; she was subtle in defence, swift in attack. Give her but a hint of danger, and in a moment she was armed and ready. Before you knew what she would be at, she had sprung into decisive action; and before you could hurry up with your feeble reinforcements, the danger was over, the battle had been gained.

But now she was weak as water—helpless, yet refusing help, hopeless and making hope impossible, just drifting to her fate. At night Mr. Prentice sometimes could not sleep. He lay awake, thinking of what it would come to in the end—bankruptcy, her little hoard squandered, her last penny gone in the futile effort to satisfy her husband and sustain the shop.

And then? She was so proud that perhaps she might not allow Enid to supply her simplest daily needs. He tossed and turned restlessly as he thought of Enid's marriage settlement; and, remembering some of its ill-advised clauses, he felt stung by remorse. He had bungled the [Pg 281] settlement. He ought to have stood firm, and not have permitted himself to be overruled by the idiotic whims of a love-sick girl who was being generous at another person's expense. He blamed himself bitterly now for the manner in which funds had been permanently secured to Enid's worthless husband. Of course the Divorce Court, exercising its statutory powers, might wipe out the entire blunder, and handsomely punish the offender by handsomely benefiting the wife; but he had small hope that this would happen. No, the rascal Charles Kenion, when disposed of, will still enjoy his life interest. The money that should come back now to the hand that gave it is gone. Enid will not have more than she wants for herself and her child.

He could not sleep. The thought of Mrs. Marsden's pride made him shiver. No prouder woman ever lived: famine and cold would not break her pride. He had thought of her in the workhouse, or an almshouse, finishing her days on the bread of charity. But no—great Heaven!—she would never consent to do that. She would rather sell matches in the street. And he imagined her appearance. An old woman in rags—creeping at dusk with bent back,—pausing on a country road to hold her side and cough,—lying down on the frozen ground beneath a haystack, and dying in the winter storm.

He knew—only too well—that these are the things that happen: the inexorable facts of the world. But never should they happen in this case—not while he had one sixpence to rub against another.

He could not go on thinking about it without doing something. So he woke up his invalid wife. That seemed the only thing he could do just then;—and he told Mrs. Prentice that she must be kind to Mrs. Marsden; she must begin being kind the first thing in the morning; she must write a [Pg 282] letter, pay a call, do *something* to cheer and gladden his poor old friend.

Mrs. Prentice, an amiable nondescript woman, readily obeyed her husband; and after this nocturnal conversation she used frequently to wait upon Mrs. Marsden, often persuade her to go out for a drive, and now and then entice her to come and dine in a quiet friendly fashion without any fuss or ceremony. These pleasant evenings must have made bright and warm spots amidst the cold dark gloom that now surrounded Mrs. Marsden. At Mr. Prentice's comfortable private house she was treated with an honour to which she had been long unaccustomed; there was nothing here to remind her of her troubles; and she really appeared to forget them when chatting freely with her kind host and hostess.

"My dear Mrs. Prentice, it is too good of you to let me drop in on you like this."

"No, it is so good of you," said Mrs. Prentice, "to give us the pleasure of your company."

"It is a great pleasure to *me*," said Mrs. Marsden; "and I always thoroughly enjoy myself."

Mrs. Prentice liked her better in her adversity than in her prosperity. She found it easy to join her husband in his admiration of the fortitude and dignity of Mrs. Marsden as an ill-used wife and a broken-down shopkeeper—now that the fable of her colossal brain-power was finally shattered. Perhaps Mrs. Prentice's naturally kind heart had never opened to Mrs. Marsden till the day when Mr. Prentice said that his idol was acting like a fool.

Their guest used to eat sparingly, although the hostess pressed her to taste of every dish; and she

scarcely drank more than half a glass of wine, although the host had brought out his most highly prized vintage; but she talked so cheerfully, so calmly, and so wisely, that her society was as [Pg 283] charming as it was welcome. Mr. Prentice, beaming on her and listening with deference to her lightest words, was especially delighted each time that he recognized something like a flash of the old light.

Once they were discussing a rumour that had just reached Mallingbridge. It was said that the War Office had purchased a tract of land on the downs, and proposed to establish a large permanent camp up there.

"Half a dozen regiments, with all their followers—an invasion!"

"It will be dreadful for the town," said Mrs. Prentice. "Utterly destroy its character."

"That's what I think," said Mr. Prentice. "Do no good to anybody."

"Do you know," said Mrs. Marsden, "I am inclined to disagree. Since the soldiers came to Ellerford, trade—I am told—has picked up wonderfully."

"Ah, yes," said Prentice. "But that's a trifling affair—a very small camp, compared with what this would be."

"But, Mr. Prentice," and Mrs. Marsden smiled; "if a small camp does a little good, why shouldn't a large camp do a lot of good?"

It sounded quite simple, and yet only she would have said it. Mr. Prentice laughed. It reminded him of the old way she had of going straight to the point, and flooring you by a question that seemed childishly naïve until all at once you found you could not answer it.

Mrs. Prentice continued to lament the many degradations that Mallingbridge had already undergone.

"The Theatre Royal turned into a music hall! The Royal! That is the last blow. *Three* music halls in the place, and not one theatre where you can go and see a real play.... I used to love the Royal. It seemed a *part* of Mallingbridge."

"My dear Mrs. Prentice," said the guest, calmly and philosophically, "the town that you and I [Pg 284] loved has gone. It was inevitable—one can't put back the clock. Time won't stand still for us."

"No, but they're making the new town so ugly, so vulgar. Whenever they pull down one of the dear old houses, they do build such gimcrack monstrosities."

"I fancy," said Mrs. Marsden, "that the distance from London decided our destiny. It was just far enough off to reproduce and copy the metropolis. Nowadays, the little places that remain unchanged are all close to the suburban boundary."

When she talked in this style, Prentice thought how effectually she gave the lie to people who said of her, that she had failed because she lacked the faculty of appreciating altered conditions.

"Did you happen," she asked him, "to read the report of the general meeting of the railway company?"

"No—I don't think I did."

"The chairman mentioned Mallingbridge."

"What did he say about it?"

"He said that they might before long have to consider the propriety of building a new station, and putting it on another site."

"Why should they do that?"

"Why?" And again Mrs. Marsden smiled. "Why indeed? It set me thinking—and I read the speech carefully. Later on, the chairman spoke of the scheme for moving their carriage and engine works out of the London area. Well, I put those two hints together; and this is what I made of them. I believe that the company intend at last to develop all that land of theirs—the fields by the river,—and I prophesy that within three years they'll have built the new carriage works there."

She said this exactly as she used to say those luminously clever things that he remembered in the [Pg 285] past. He listened wonderingly and admiringly.

But when the ladies left him alone to smoke his cigar or finish the wine that the guest had neglected, he sighed. She could give these flashes of the old logic and insight; she could talk so wisely about matters that in no way concerned her; but in the one great matter of her own life, where common sense was most desperately required, she had behaved like a lunatic.

He let his cigar go out, and he could not drink any more wine. Rain was pattering on the windows, and the wind moaned round the house—a sad dark night. He rang the bell, and told the servant to order a fly for Mrs. Marsden at a quarter to ten.

The fly took her home comfortably; and when she alighted at the bottom of St. Saviour's Court and offered the driver something more than his fare, he refused it.

"Mr. Prentice paid me, ma'am."

"Oh!... Then you must accept this shilling for yourself."

"No, ma'am. Mr. Prentice tipped me. Good-night, ma'am."

XXVI

[Pg 286]

Enid was free. The farmhouse stood empty, with the ivy hanging in festoons and long streamers about the windows, the grass growing rank and strong over the carriage drive, and a board at the gate offering this eligible modernised residence to be let on lease. Its sometime mistress had gone with her little daughter to the seaside for eight or ten months. After her stay at Eastbourne she would return to Mallingbridge, and take furnished apartments—or perhaps rent one of the tiny new villas on the Linkfield Road. She wished to be near her mother, and she apologized now for leaving Mrs. Marsden quite alone during so many months; but, as she explained, Jane needed sea air.

"Never mind about me," said Mrs. Marsden. "Only the child matters. Build up her health. Make her strong. I shall do very well—though of course I shall miss you both."

She was getting accustomed to solitude and silence. Truly she had never been so entirely isolated and lonely as now. In the far-off days when Enid used by her absence to produce a wide-spreading sense of loss, there had been the work and bustle of the thriving shop to counteract the void and quiet of the house. And there had been Yates. Now there was nobody but the plain-faced grim-mannered Eliza, who had become the one general-servant of the broken home.

Mr. Marsden still lunched and dined at the house, but he was never there for breakfast. He did not go upstairs to his bedroom and dressing-room once in a week. Sometimes for a fortnight he and his wife did not meet at meals. His voracious appetite manifested itself intermittently; there [Pg 287] were days on which he gorged like a boa-constrictor, and others on which he felt disinclined to eat at all. Then he required Eliza to tempt him with savoury highly-spiced food, or to devise some dainty surprise which would stimulate his jaded fancy and woo him to a condescending patronage. He would toy with a bird—or a couple of dozen oysters—or a bit of pickled mackerel. Now and then, after he had been drinking more heavily than usual, he would himself inspire Eliza.

"Eliza, I can't touch all that muck;" and he pointed with a slightly tremulous hand at the dinner table. "But I believe I could do with just a simple hunk of bread and cheese, and a quart of stout. Run out and get some stout—get two or three bottles, with the screw tops. You know, the large bottles."

Then perhaps he would find eventually that this queer dinner-menu was a false inspiration. The bread and cheese were more than he could grapple with—and he asked for something else to assist the stout.

In a word, he was rather troublesome about his meals; and Mrs. Marsden fell into the habit of taking her scanty refreshment at irregular hours. He did not upbraid her for keeping out of his way. Eliza looked after him in a satisfactory manner; and he never upset or frightened Eliza. Grim Eliza ran no risk of receiving undesired attentions.

Everybody knew that Mr. Marsden often drank too much. One night when he failed to appear at dinner time, he was found—not by Eliza but by the Borough constabulary—in a state of total intoxication on the pavement outside the Dolphin.

After this regrettable incident the Dolphin dismissed him and his barmaid together. The attendance at the saloon had been dropping off. A siren cannot draw custom, when you have a [Pg 288] great hulking bully who sits in the corner and threatens to punch the head of every inoffensive moderate-sized gentleman upon whom the siren begins to exert her spell. The Dolphin was very glad to see the backs of Miss Ingram and her friend.

Miss Ingram secured an engagement at the bar of the Red Cow, and Mr. Marsden faithfully followed her thither. The Red Cow was the disreputable betting public-house of which the town council were so much ashamed; people went there to bet, and it was likely to lose its license; but Marsden was content to make it his temporary club, and indeed seemed to settle down there comfortably enough.

He still occasionally came to the shop. All eyes were averted when he swung one of the street doors and slouched in. He seemed to know and almost to admit that he was a disgrace and an eyesore, and though he scowled at the shop-walker swiftly dodging away and diving into the next department, he did not bellow a reprimand. He hurried up the shop; and it was only when he got behind the glass that he attempted to display anything like the old swagger and bluster.

"Well, Mears, what's the best news with you?... You all look as if you were starting for a funeral—as black as a lot of mutes. How's business?" And he began to whistle, or to rattle the bunch of duplicate shop-keys that he carried in his trousers pocket. "I say, Mears, old pal—I'm run dry. Can't you and the missus do an advance—something on account—however small—to keep me

going?"

A few shillings were generally produced, and the advance was solemnly entered in the books, to the governor's name.

Then he nearly always announced that he had come to the shop for the purpose of keeping a business appointment.

"Look here. I'm expecting a gentleman. Show him straight in." [Pg 289]

These gentlemen were more dreadful to look at than the governor himself. He gave appointments to most terrific blacklegs—the unwashed rabble of the Red Cow, book-makers and their clerks, race-course touts,—inviting them to the shop in order to establish his credit, and prove to these seedy wretches that he was veritably the Marsden of Thompson & Marsden's.

For such interviews he used to turn his wife out of the room. At a word she meekly left the American desk and walked out.

"That you, Rooney? Come into my office. Here I am, you see. Sit down."

The Red Cow gentlemen were overcome by the grandeur of Mr. Marsden in his own office; the size and magnificence of the establishment filled them with awe and envy; it surpassed belief.

"Blow me, but it's true," they said afterwards. "Every word what he told us is the Gospel truth. He's the boss of the whole show. I witnessed it with my own eyes."

Yet if his visitors had possessed real business acumen, the shop would have impressed them with anything but confidence.

To a trade expert one glance would have sufficed. The forlorn aspect of the ruined shop told the gloomy facts with unmistakable clearness. So few assistants, so pitiably few customers, such a beggarly array of goods! Those shelves have all been dressed with dummies; those rolls of rich silk are composed of a wooden block, some paper, and half a yard of soiled material; within those huge presses you will find only darkness. Emptiness, desolation, death!

And what could not be seen could readily be guessed. Behind the glass only two people—a man laboriously muddling with unfilled ledgers, a girl at a type-writing machine—only one type-writer, [Pg 290] a sadly feeble clicking in the midst of vast unoccupied space; not a sound in the covered yard; no horses, no carts; no purchased goods to be handled in the immense packing rooms; no stock, no cash, no credit, no nothing!

When a customer appeared, the shop seemed to stir uneasily in the sleep that was so like death; a faint vibration disturbed the heavy atmosphere; shop-walkers flitted to and fro; assistants yawned and stretched themselves. What is it? Yes, it *is* another customer.

"What can we show madam?"

"Well, I wanted—but really I think I've made a mistake—" and the stranger looked about her, and seemed perplexed. "My friends said it was in High Street—but I see this isn't it. Yes, I've made a mistake. Good morning."

"*Good* morning, madam."

The bright spring sunshine pouring in at the windows lit up the threadbare, colourless matting, showed the dust that danced above the parquet after each footfall; but it could not reach the great mirror on the stairs. The mirrors were growing dimmer and dimmer. As the black figure passed and repassed, the first reflected Mrs. Marsden was scarcely less vague and unsubstantial than the line of Mrs. Marsdens walking by her side.

Mr. Mears and Miss Woolfrey, disconsolately pacing the lower and the upper floor, seemed like captains of a ship becalmed—like honest captains of a water-logged ship, feeling it tremble and shiver as it settled down beneath their feet, knowing that it was soon to sink, and thinking that they were ready to go down with it. When they paused in their rounds of inspection, it was because really there was nothing to inspect. They turned their heads and looked, from behind the dusty piles of carpets or the trays of fly-blown china, at the establishment over the way—looked [Pg 291] from death to life; and for a few minutes watched the jostling crowd and the brilliant range of colours on the other side of the road.

No dust there. Here, it was impossible to prevent the dust. The dust-sheets were in tatters; the brooms and sprinklers were worn out; there were not enough hands to sweep and rub. Mears himself looked dusty.

And when the sunlight fell upon him, he looked very old, very grey, and rather shaky. He never blew out his cheeks or swished his coat-tails now. The voluminous frock-coat seemed several sizes too large for him; it was greasy at the elbows, and frayed at the cuffs. The salary of Mears was hopelessly in arrear. For a long time Mears, like the governor, had found himself obliged to crave for something on account—just to keep going with.

One sunny April day Marsden entered the shop about noon, went into the office; and, not discovering his wife there, ordered the type-writing girl to fetch her immediately.

"What is it, Richard?" said Mrs. Marsden, presently appearing.

"Oh, there you are—at last. You never seem to be in your right place when you're wanted. I've been waiting here five minutes—and not a soul on the lookout to receive people."

"I am sorry."

"Anybody could walk in from the street and march slap into this room, without being asked who he was and what his business was. And a nice idea it would give a stranger of our management."

"I am sorry. But was that all you had to say to me?"

"No. Look here," he went on grumblingly. "Bence, if you please, has asked me for an appointment."

"Will you see him?" [Pg 292]

"Yes—I think so."

"Very good."

"Yes, I've told the little bounder I'll see him."

"Do you wish me to be present at the interview?"

"No—better not."

A quarter of an hour afterwards Mr. Archibald Bence was coming up the empty shop. It was years since he had crossed the threshold; and certainly his eyes were expert enough to see now, if he cared to look about him, the dire results of his implacable rivalry. But he showed nothing in his face: smugly self-possessed, smilingly imperturbable, he followed the shop-walker straight to the counting-house.

The shop-walker announced him at the door of the inner room, and he marched in. He bowed low, as Mrs. Marsden, with a slight inclination of the head, passed out. Then Marsden shut the door.

But upstairs and downstairs the dull air vibrated as if electric discharges were passing through it in all directions; the whole shop stirred and throbbed; the whispering assistants quivered. "Did you see him?" "I couldn't get a peep at him." "I just saw the top of his hat." Bence had come to call upon the governor. Bence was in the shop. That great man was behind their glass.

Soon they heard sounds of the noisy interview—at least, Marsden was making a lot of noise. The minutes seemed long; but there were only five or six of them before the counting-house doors opened and Bence reappeared. He was perfectly calm, talking quietly and politely, though the governor bellowed.

"All right, Mr. Marsden, don't excite yourself. I only asked a question."

"Yes, a blasted impertinent one."

"Well, no bones broken, anyhow," and Bence smiled.

"If you should ever change your mind—come over the road, and let me know." [Pg 293]

"I'll see you damned first."

Nothing, however, could ruffle Bence.

"Just so. But, as I was saying, if you ever *should* care to do business—well, I'm not far off. Good morning to you."

Mrs. Marsden, when she returned to the inner room, found her husband standing near the desk, sullenly scowling at the floor.

"I was a fool to swear at him. I ought to have kicked him down the shop.... Can you guess what he came about?"

"I'm not clever at guessing. I'll wait till you tell me."

"He wanted us to close more than half the shop, and sublet it to him for the remainder of the lease." And Marsden sullenly and growlingly described the details of this impudent proposal. Bence suggested that the yard and the new packing rooms could be used by him as a warehouse; that all departments to the west of the silk counter might be transferred to the eastern side; that he would build a party wall at his own expense, and use all this western block "for one thing or another." Bence's question in plain words therefore was, Would they now confess to the universe that their premises were about four times too big for their trade?

"Not to be thought of," said Mrs. Marsden.

"No. I suppose not;" and Marsden glanced at her furtively, and then rattled the keys in his pocket. "We won't think of it."

XXVII

[Pg 294]

Another month had gone, and the end of all things was approaching.

"Jane," said Marsden, "we're beat. We'd better own it. We are beat to the world. It's no good going on."

"What do you mean?"

It was a dull and depressing afternoon—the sky obscured by heavy clouds, a little rain falling at intervals,—so dark in the room behind the glass that Mrs. Marsden was compelled to switch on the electric light above the American desk. She had turned in her chair, and was watching her husband's face intently; and the light from the lamp showed that her own face had become extraordinarily pale.

"It's no good, Jane. You must see it just the same as I do. We're done—and the only thing is to consider how we are to escape a smash."

Then he told her that Bence had offered to buy them out. Bence was ready to swallow them whole. Bence was prepared to give them a fair price for their entire property—long lease of the premises, stock, fittings, assets, the complete bag of tricks. He would take it over as a still going concern, with all its debts and liabilities. If they accepted Bence's offer, they would merely have to put the money in their pockets, and could wash their hands of a bitterly bad job.

"Don't talk so loud. Someone may hear you."

"No," he said, "there's no one outside, except Miss O'Donnell; and you can hear her machine—so she can't be eavesdropping.... I'll give you my reasons for saying it's a fair price." [Pg 295]

"Yes, please do.... You haven't mentioned the amount yet."

"I'm coming to it. I want to prepare your mind. Of course I don't know how it will strike you."...

"Go on, please."

"First of all, I'll say I'm certain it's more than we should get from anyone else. I've gone to the root of everything. I have worked it out with plain figures.... Well, then—Bence will give six thousand pounds."

"No, I won't accept the offer."

"It would be three thousand apiece."

"I refuse to agree to the sale."

"It will be ready money, you know—paid on the nail."

"Richard, I can't agree to it."

"Why not? Of course I know I can't jump you into it. I don't want to do so. I simply want to persuade you that it's our only course."

Then he began to argue and plead with her. He said that he considered it would be madness obstinately to decline such an opportunity, and she ought really to be grateful to him for cutting the knot of their difficulties. He explained that only two days after Bence's memorable visit, he had gone across the road and reopened negotiations on a wider scale. He owned that he had at first resented the approach of Bence as a gross insult; he had felt disposed to kick Bence; but *afterwards*, calmly thinking it over, he had come to the conclusion that Bence—"if properly, handled"—might eventually prove their best friend. In this softer, calmer mood, he had made a return call on Bence—had handled him magnificently, had bluffed him and jollied him, had slowly but surely screwed him up to make a splendid and a firm offer.

"But, Richard, supposing that we were to sell the business, what would happen to you?" [Pg 296]

"I should go away—to California. I'm sick of this stinking town. It's played out for me. At Mallingbridge I'm a dead-beat—people don't believe in me—I've no real friends. But I should do all right out West—and I want a decent climate. Between you and me and the post, I funk another English winter."

"Do you mean that you want to desert me altogether?"

"Jane, what's the use of asking me that? You and I have got to the end of our tether, haven't we? What good can I do sticking here any longer? I can't help you—I can't help myself. We're done. You'd far wiser divide what we can grab from Bence, and let me go."

"But to a person of your tastes and habits, three thousand pounds is not an inexhaustible sum. Do you think that, as your entire capital, it would be enough for you?"

"Yes, I do," he said eagerly. "Life is cheaper out there. In that lovely climate one doesn't want to binge up. There aren't the same temptations. I should turn over a new leaf—put the brake on—make a fresh start."

"And should I never see you again?"

"Oh, I don't say that. No—of course I should come back. I don't see what real difference it would make to you. We're a semi-detached couple, as it is."

"Yes, but not quite detached."

"Well, you'd let me go on a little longer string. That's all about it;" and he laughed good-humouredly. He believed that he would soon overcome her opposition. "I never meant any total severance, you know. We should be like the swells—Mrs. Marsden is residing at Mallingbridge; Mr. Marsden has gone to the Pacific Coast for the winter. We'd put it in the paper, if you liked."

"I see that you are very keen to close with—with Mr. Bence's proposal." [Pg 297]

"Yes, I am—and I honestly believe you ought to be just as keen."

And again he extolled his personal merit in screwing up the proposer. Bence had pointed out that if he quietly waited until Thompson & Marsden were forced as bankrupts to put up their shutters, he would buy all he wanted at a much lower price. The premises, and the premises only, were what Bence wanted. After a bankruptcy he could buy the lease at the market price, and not have to give a penny for anything else. Bence said his offer was extravagantly liberal; but he frankly admitted that he felt in a hurry to clear up the street, and make it neat and tidy. He would therefore fork out thus handsomely to avoid delay.

"He said we were doing the street *harm*, Jane. And, upon my word, I couldn't deny that. I've often told Mears we have got to look more like a funeral than anything else."

"And you wish us to be decently buried?"

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders in the utmost good-humour. He felt sure now that she would yield; and with increasing eagerness he urged her to adopt his views.

"Very well," she said at last. "It is your wish?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then on one condition," and she spoke in a hard, matter-of-fact voice,—"on *one* condition, I'll consent."

"What's your condition?"

"When we wind up our business relations, we must wind up all our other relations.... It must be a total severance—I am using your own word—and no half measures. When you leave Mallingbridge you must leave it forever. You must undertake—bind yourself never to set foot in it again."

"Oh, I say." [Pg 298]

"You must execute a deed of separation."

He seemed greatly surprised; and for a little while hesitated, as if unable to express his thoughts.

"Look here, Jane.... You're talking big, old lady. What next?... Deed of separation! That's a very large order."

"You are taking freedom for yourself. You must give me freedom."

"Oh, no, you overdo that line," he said slowly. "I told you I would come back—some day or other. Yet now you take up this high and mighty tone—as though I had given you the right to cut me adrift altogether."

"Ah! I understand. You thought you'd have *your* three thousand to spend, and *my* three thousand to fall back upon. Then again I refuse the offer."

"Don't be hasty—and don't impute bad motives where none exist. No, you have struck me all of a heap by what you demand. I wasn't prepared for it—and it wants a bit of thought, before I can say yes or no."

And he began to bargain about the deed of separation. He had seen an unexpected chance, and he meant to make the most of it.

"Let's be business-like, Jane. If I renounce all claims on you forever—if I agree to make a formal renunciation,—well, surely that's worth *something* to you?"

"Do you mean, worth money? Are you asking me to pay you?"

"I want to start a new life out there—and I shall need all the money I can get. You told me so, yourself—three thou. is devilish little to face the world on."

"Yes," she said quietly, "and with another person dependent on you."

"What do you say?"

"I say, you are not going alone.... We must think of your companion, as well as of yourself." [Pg 299]

"Jane, you're hard on me."

"Am I?"

And the bargaining went on.

Finally they came to terms. She was to give him half her share, in exchange for absolute freedom. He would thus have four thousand five hundred pounds as initial impetus for his new career.

"Do you say *done* to that?"

"Yes," she replied coldly and firmly, "I say done."

He sat down, drew out a dirty handkerchief, and wiped his forehead. His argumentative efforts had made him warm; but he smiled contentedly. He considered that "in the circs." it was a jolly good bargain.

"Dick," and her voice suddenly softened. "Have you thought what *I* am to do? Fifteen hundred pounds isn't much for *me*—to start a new life with."

"You have money of your own.... I am certain that you have a tidy nest-egg still."

"If I were to tell you that I hadn't another penny in the world?"

"I shouldn't believe it."

"If I convinced you that it was literally true, would it make any difference to you?"

"I don't follow."

"Would you still take half my share from me?"

"What's the good of talking about it?" And he looked at her thoughtfully. "Jane, the devil is driving me. I'm not the man I was. I funk dangers. My health is broken.... You'll be all right. You have friends. I have none. It's vital to me to know that we—that I shall have enough to rub along with out there."

Mrs. Marsden said no more.

"Yes, you'll be all right, old girl. Never fear!" And he got up, and stretched himself. "But I say! [Pg 300] We've been jawing such a deuce of a time that it'll be too late to do anything to-day, unless we look sharp.... Will you give me a letter to Hyde & Collins, saying you accept?"

"No, I'll go there, and tell them by word of mouth."

"May I go with you?"

"No, that's unnecessary."

"But you *will* go, Jane? I mean, at once. You do intend to go—and no rot?"

"I have told you I am going."

"Yes, but hurry up then. They don't keep open all night."

"I'll tell them within an hour."

Within an hour she had spoken to Mr. Bence's solicitors and gone on to the office of Mr. Prentice.

"Now," she said to her old friend, "you see me in my need. The time has come. Help me with all your power."

Then very rapidly she told him all that had happened.

"So there goes the end of an old song," said Mr. Prentice. "Mind you, I don't tell you that you are doing wrong. It may be—probably it *is*—the only thing to do.... Six thousand pounds!" It was obvious that Mr. Prentice had been astonished by the largeness of this sum. But he would not admit the fact. He spoke cautiously.

"It is more than anyone else would have given."

"Possibly! But I might have got you better terms from Bence. Let me take up the negotiations now. If he will give as much as six thousand, he may give more."

"No, I have told Hyde & Collins that we accept."

"That was premature. But you referred them to me?"

"No. I told them to prepare the conveyance at once."

"But—good gracious—they can't act for both sides."

"Of course they can. It will save time—it will save money. There is no difficulty *there*. We sell all [Pg 301] we have. A child could carry it through."

"Oh, but really, I don't know. Your interests must be guarded."

"No, no." She was nervous and excited, and she spoke piteously and yet irritably. "I have instructed them. They must attend to the sale. And *you* must attend to the deed of separation.

Concentrate your mind—all your mind on it.... Don't you understand, don't you see that this is everything and the sale is nothing?"

"No, I don't see that at all."

"It is what I have been praying for night and day—it is my escape. And he is granting it to me of his own consent—he consents to give me unmolested freedom."

And she implored Mr. Prentice to use his skill and sagacity to their uttermost extent.

"I want it to be a renunciation of all possible claims. It must be absolutely clear that this is the end of our partnership."

"Oh, as to that," said Mr. Prentice, "the partnership ends automatically with the sale of the business."

"But put it in the deed—explicitly. Make him surrender every claim—even if it seems to you only the shadow of a claim."

Then, without saying that she was to pay a price for Marsden's acquiescence, she repeated the agreed conditions of the separation. She became agitated when Mr. Prentice assured her that he would easily draft the deed.

"No, don't treat it as an easy task. Get counsel's opinion—the best counsel. Spare no expense—in this case. It is life and death to me.... Oh, Mr. Prentice, don't fail me *now*. Make the deed strong—make it so binding that he can never slip out of it."

"I won't fail you," said Mr. Prentice earnestly. "We'll make your deed as strong—as effective—as is humanly possible—a deed that the Courts will be far more inclined to support than to upset." [Pg 302]

"Yes, yes," she said, as if now satisfied. "That's all I ask for—as strong as is humanly possible."

XXVIII [Pg 303]

It was a bright May morning and the sunshine streamed into Mr. Prentice's room gaily and warmly, lighting up the old panelled walls, flickering on the bunch of keys that hung from the lock of the open safe, and making the tin boxes show queer reflections of the windows, the tops of houses on the other side of Hill Street, and even of the blue sky above the chimney-pots.

A large table had been brought in for the occasion; a clerk had furnished it with newly-filled ink-stands and nice clean blotting paper; another clerk was ready to receive the visitors as they came upstairs. Mr. Prentice moved his armchair to the head of the table. He would sit here, and preside over the meeting. He glanced at the clock.—A quarter to twelve!

At noon Mr. Archibald Bence or his representative was to complete the purchase of Marsden & Thompson's by handing over cash; and at the same time the domestic affairs of Mrs. Marsden were to be wound up forever.

Mrs. Marsden was the first of the interested parties to arrive on the scene. She looked careworn and nervous; and, as she shook hands, Mr. Prentice noticed that her fingers trembled.

"Now, my dear," he said kindly, "there's nothing to worry about. You sit by my side here, and take things quietly."

Mrs. Marsden, however, preferred to sit away from the table, on a chair between the windows, with her back to the light.

"Nothing to worry about now," repeated Mr. Prentice, confidently and cheerily. "It'll soon be over." [Pg 304]

"But it won't be over without some unpleasantness."

"Why? Mr. Marsden has been quite pleasant so far—really quite easy to deal with."

"But he won't be to-day—I know it." And she showed great anxiety. "You say he has made all arrangements for his voyage?"

"Yes. He tells me he sails on Thursday. And he goes to London to-night."

"I wonder if he truly means it."

"Of course he means it."

"I suppose he does. The things he packed at our house went straight to Liverpool. But—even now—he may change his mind."

"How can he?... Hush!"

There was a heavy footstep in the passage. The clerk opened the door, and announced Mr. Marsden.

"Am I late?"

"No, you are in excellent time," said Prentice; and, looking at him, he endeavoured not to manifest the thoughts aroused by his appearance.

It seemed that Marsden, bracing himself for the day, was trying to maintain a sort of buccaneering joviality. Evidently, too, he had made some attempts to render himself presentable in general company. He had visited the barber, and his bloated face was smooth and glistening after a close shave; a neatly cut piece of plaster covered an eruption on the back of his neck; he wore a clean collar, and the cheap violet satin neck-tie conveyed the idea that it had been chosen by feminine taste. Probably his travelling companion had assisted in brushing and cleaning him, and sending him forth as nice as possible.

Yet, in spite of this unusual care, he looked most ruffianly as he lolled in a chair near the open safe, with the bright sunlight full upon him. His eyes were slightly bloodshot; and the gross, overfed frame suggested the characteristics of a beast of prey who for a long time has ceased to undergo the invigorating activities of the chase and been enabled without effort to gorge at will. Now he had come for his last greedy and unearned meal. [Pg 305]

Mrs. Marsden, on the other side of the room, lowered her eyes, folded her hands, sat silent and motionless.

Mr. Collins of Hyde & Collins, followed by his own clerk, was the next to arrive. He came bustling into the room, and immediately seemed to take possession of it.

"Good morning. Good morning. Here we are. Put my bag on the table.... Where are you sitting, Prentice.... Over there? All right. Then I'll sit here;" and he took the chair at the end of the table, opposite to Mr. Prentice. "You sit there, Fielding;" and he waved to his clerk. "Sit down. Don't stand."

Mr. Prentice disliked Collins rather more than he disliked Hyde. To his mind, Collins was everything that a solicitor should not be—impudent, unscrupulous, vulgar; a discredit to the profession. His ragged beard, his snout of a nose, his little ferret-eyes, shifting so rapidly behind steel-rimmed spectacles, were all obnoxious; but what made Mr. Prentice really angry was his irrepressible familiarity, with the odious facetious manner that accompanied it. He said Prentice instead of *Mister* Prentice; and, refusing to recognize snubs, always pretended that they were on the best of terms with each other.

"Well," asked Marsden, "why don't we begin?"

"No hurry, is there?" said Collins. He was busy with his ugly black bag, getting out the important document, and unfolding some memorandum papers.

"Oh, *I*'m in no particular hurry," said Marsden. "But twelve o'clock was the hour named." [Pg 306]

"Is it twelve.... Can you hear Holy Trinity clock from here, Prentice? We hear it plainly at our place."

Then dapper, smiling Mr. Archibald Bence was announced.

"Come in," said Collins patronisingly. "Here we are, all assembled. Be seated. Fielding, put a chair for Mr. Bence."

Mr. Archibald looked splendid in the sunlight. He shone all over, from his bald head to his patent leather boots. His black coat was beautifully braided, elegantly padded on the shoulders, tightly pulled in at the waist; his buff waistcoat exactly matched his wash-leather gloves; and with him there entered the room a pleasing fragrance shed by the moss roses in his button-hole. He bowed gallantly to the only lady present, had an affable word for Prentice and Collins, and nodded rather contemptuously to Marsden.

"Gentlemen," he said blandly, "it is the sort of day on which one is glad to be alive;" and he turned about, with a dandified air, to find a vacant spot for his brand-new topper.

"Take Mr. Bence's hat," said Collins; and his clerk did as he was bid.

Bence, declining a chair, went and leaned against the wall near Mrs. Marsden, and twirled his moustache.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Marsden.

"Only for one small trifle," said Mr. Collins facetiously. "But I don't suppose you'd dispense with it. Not quite a matter of form."

"What is it?"

"The money—the purchase money, my dear sir."

"What? Haven't you got it with you?"

"Oh, dear me, no," said Mr. Collins. "But it's coming—oh, yes, it's coming."

"I understand that a clerk is bringing it from the bank," said Mr. Prentice. He found the facetious manner of Mr. Collins utterly insufferable. [Pg 307]

Marsden shrugged his shoulders, and crossed his legs. Archibald Bence was looking at him; Collins looked at him; old Prentice looked at him; and all at once he seemed to feel the necessity of asserting himself.

"I never understood the use of appointments unless they are punctually attended. It's waste of time asking people for twelve, if you don't intend to get to work till half an hour later."

Bence moved to the window, and looked out.

"A thousand apologies for keeping you waiting, Mr. Marsden." He spoke over his shoulder. "Ah, here the man comes;" and he pulled out his grand gold watch. "Then I've really only wasted three minutes of your valuable time."

"All right," said Marsden sulkily.

The bank clerk came in, and bowed to the company as he went to Mr. Collins's side at the table. Then he opened his wallet and brought out the white sheaves of bank-notes.

"Will you go through them, sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Collins. "Will you kindly check them with me, Prentice?"

"I'll count them after you," said Mr. Prentice. It did not suit his dignity to leave his chair and go round the table to stand at Collins's elbow.

Mr. Collins found the total of the notes correct, pushed them across to Prentice, and signed the bank receipt.

"Then you won't want me any more," said the bank clerk.

"Wait," said Collins pompously, as if the bank, as well as Mr. Prentice's room, belonged to him. "Stand over there—or sit down, if you please. My clerk will go back with you." [Pg 308]

Marsden had risen and approached the table. It was as if the bank-notes had irresistibly drawn him. Perhaps, though in his career he had dissipated so many notes singly or by small batches, he had never yet seen such a good show of them, all together, at one time. And such noble denominations!

"Twice three thousand," said Prentice. "Quite right." While counting, he had divided the notes into two piles; and now he slid them towards the middle of the table, and put an ink-stand on top to prevent their blowing away.

Marsden stood over them. He could not leave the table now.

"Then here we are. All in order," said Collins, as he spread out his parchment and glanced at Mrs. Marsden. "I suppose, strictly speaking, it should be ladies first. But as the pen is close to your hand, Mr. Marsden—will you, sir, open the ball?"

"Oh, that's the conveyance for the sale, eh? Where do I sign?"

"There—against the seal—over the pencil marks.... And I'll witness your signature."

Then Mr. Marsden duly signed his name, and repeated the formula as prompted by Collins.

"I deliver it as my act and deed.... Now, Jane!"

Mrs. Marsden had not stirred from her seat.

"Don't put down your pen, Richard. There's the other deed to sign. Mr. Prentice is ready for you."

"All right—but you come and sign the conveyance;" and he moved to Mr. Prentice's end of the table. "I ought to read this—but I suppose I may take it as read."

"Oh, yes, I think so," said Mr. Prentice.

"It's exactly the same as the draft that I passed?"

"Yes, of course." [Pg 309]

"I may trust you not to have dabbed in something artful that I'd never heard of?"

"You had better read it," said Prentice curtly, "if you *can't* trust me."

"Oh, that's all right;" and Marsden laughed. "Now then—where do you want my autograph?"

Still chuckling, he affixed his signature; and, he smiled good-humouredly while the witness filled the attestation space.

Mrs. Marsden had come to the table, and was pulling off a rusty black glove.

"There you are," said her husband. "The conveyance first, Jane."

"No," said Mrs. Marsden, looking at him resolutely. "I'll sign this deed first. It's the one I'm most interested in;" and she turned to Mr. Prentice. "But I must try the pen. Kindly let me have a bit of paper."

Mr. Prentice fetched a half sheet of note-paper from his desk, and handed it to her.

"Thank you." Stooping over the table, she tested the pen by scribbling a few words. Then she executed the deed; and, while Mr. Fielding was being good enough to write his name and address as witness, she gave the half-leaf of paper to Mr. Prentice.

"Now then," said Marsden. "Look sharp. Don't be all night about it." He had gone to the other end of the table, and he waited anxiously to see the conveyance completed.

Mr. Prentice was reading Mrs. Marsden's scribbled words. He looked at her, and she pointed with her pen. She had written: "Lock the deed in your safe, and put the keys in your pocket."

"Now I am ready, Richard."

But still she did not sign. She was watching Mr. Prentice. The door of the safe shut with a faint, dull clank, and Mr. Prentice locked the door and took out the keys. [Pg 310]

Then Mrs. Marsden signed the conveyance, and Fielding obligingly witnessed her signature.

"Thank you," she said; and, returning to her chair between the windows, she sat down again.

"That's done," said Collins; and he called to the bank clerk, who had been patiently waiting in a corner of the room. "Mr. Fielding will go back with you. This document is to be put away with Mr. Bence's papers. My compliments to the manager. He knows all about it."

"But," said Marsden, "doesn't Mr. Bence sign it?"

"It isn't necessary," said Collins.

"Are you sure?" And Marsden looked at Bence suspiciously.

"He can sign it at his convenience," said Collins, "if he ever wishes to do so.... Run along, young fellows. My compliments to the manager;" and he addressed Marsden with extreme facetiousness. "We pay on this—so you can be quite sure we are not deceiving you. The money *talks*. You can take it whenever you please.... Ah! I see—you're not slow about that."

And in fact, without waiting for Mr. Collins to conclude his invitation, Marsden had pushed aside the ink-stand and picked up the notes. One bundle he unceremoniously thrust into the breast pocket of his coat; and now with a licked finger he was separating the edges of the other bundle.

"Stop," said Mr. Prentice. "What are you doing? Allow me, please;" and he held out his hand. "I will attend to this."

Marsden, without surrendering the notes, explained matters in a confidential whisper.

"Fifteen hundred goes to her, and the rest to me."

"Indeed it doesn't," said Prentice warmly.

"It's all right," said Marsden. "It was arranged between her and me." [Pg 311]

"But I know nothing of any such arrangement. I can't permit it for a moment."

"*You* can't permit it!" said Marsden indignantly. "What the dickens has it got to do with you?"

Mr. Collins, with an assumption of tactful delicacy, had pushed back his chair. "Excuse me. This is a private conversation. I hasten to withdraw." And he went across to Archibald Bence and Mrs. Marsden, and talked to them in a rapid undertone.

Mr. Prentice went on protesting; and Marsden, cutting him short, called loudly to his wife.

"Jane, tell him that it is all right."

"Yes," she said. "Quite all right, Mr. Prentice."

"Oh, you mean that you are giving him a present of fifteen hundred pounds?"

"It's not a present," said Marsden.

"No," said Mrs. Marsden, "it was a bargain."

"Between ourselves, and concerning nobody else;" and Marsden glared at Mr. Prentice.

Nevertheless Mr. Prentice still expostulated. "I think it is highly improper. I would never have consented to—"

"Pardon me," said Collins, "if I intrude—but it has been impossible not to catch the gist of your discussion. Really it seems to me that it is too late for you, Prentice, to tender advice on the point—and that the lady's wish must decide the matter. If Mrs. Marsden announces that she wishes—"

"Just so, Mr. Collins;" and Marsden looked at him gratefully.

"Exactly," said Bence soothingly. "That's how it strikes me, too."

Marsden looked at Bence with surprise and pleasure.

They all seemed to be on his side. He appealed to his wife with a rather boisterous joviality. [Pg 312]

"Jane, speak up for me. Tell them that you did wish it."

"Yes, I did wish it."

"Then there is no more to be said," continued Bence, smoothly and glibly. "On an occasion like this, one naturally wishes to avoid any acrimonious talk. Especially in a peculiar case like the present—when a gentleman and a lady are parting,—there's no need for them to part other than as good friends. That, madam, I feel certain is also your wish."

"Yes," said Mrs. Marsden in a low voice, "I do greatly wish it."

"Thank you, Jane. I'm sure I do. But I don't know why we should make speeches about it, or get Mr. Bence to expound our sentiments."

"Forgive me," said Bence, "if I trespass. You are leaving us, Mr. Marsden—and I share Mrs. Marsden's desire that you should not leave us with any feeling of ill-will."

"Precisely," said Collins, picking up the word, almost as if taking his cue in a rehearsed dialogue. "That is what everyone must feel." He had reseated himself at the table; and he looked round with a comprehensive smile, as if assuming sole charge of everything and everybody. "Mr. Bence has touched the point very gracefully.... Pray be seated, Mr. Marsden."

"What, aren't we done?"

"Yes, yes, my dear sir," said Collins with consequential urbanity. "Our business is done. But spare us one minute for friendly chat. Do sit down.... Thank you. As I was about to say, following the line of our friend Bence: In the hour of separation, when two parties by mutual agreement are saying good-bye, it is always well that they should thoroughly understand the future situation."

"What's all this gas about?" said Marsden. "Are you trying to pull my leg? What are you getting at?" [Pg 313]

"Mr. Marsden, you are retiring from trade, you are going to the other side of the world—I wish you health and prosperity."

"And I, too," said Bence. "The best of luck, Mr. Marsden."

Marsden got up again. "Thank you for nothing, Mr. Archibald Bence. You're both trying to be funny, I suppose. Only I fail to see the joke.... Good morning;" and he moved towards the door. "Jane, good-bye."

"But," said Mr. Archibald, "we've wished you luck. Don't go without wishing us luck."

"Yes," said Collins, "don't go without wishing your wife luck."

"Then here's luck, Jane;" and Marsden laughed.

"And luck to Bence's," said Collins blandly. "Wish luck to Bence's."

"No, I'll be damned if I do."

"But that," said Collins, with a grin, "invalidates your other good wish. You can't wish luck to your wife without wishing luck to Bence's;" and he bowed to Mrs. Marsden. "I think you should now explain. He will take it better from you."

"Richard," said Mrs. Marsden quietly and firmly, "*I* am Bence's."

For a few moments there was silence. Then Marsden came slowly to the table, leaned both hands on it, and stared across at his wife.

"What do you mean by that, Jane? Is this another joke?"

"Oh, no," said Mr. Archibald. "It is strictly accurate. Bence's, with all that's in it—including your humble servant—practically belongs to this lady."

"And we all felt," said Collins, "that you ought to know the facts before you started on your journey. We didn't want you coming back again to inquire—don't you know." [Pg 314]

Marsden seemed not to hear. He stared at his wife, with his blood-shot eyes widely distended; and he spoke only to her.

"Jane, answer me. Is it true?"

"Yes, Richard."

"But *how*?"

"You asked me what I did with my money—the remainder of my own money. You were always asking me. Well, I gave it to Mr. Bence."

"How much was it?"

"Not very much," said Mrs. Marsden deprecatingly; "but he has done very well with it."

"But that was treachery—a damnable betrayal."

"Richard, don't use strong words. It was no betrayal. It was common sense. Remember, desperate diseases need desperate remedies."

"You went over to my enemy. You helped him to destroy our business."

"I didn't," said Mrs. Marsden earnestly. "I gave him my money; but I gave you my work. I never ceased fighting him. Isn't that true, Mr. Bence?"

"Strictly accurate," said Bence. "She fought gamely to the bitter end."

"You shut your head," said Marsden fiercely. "Don't interfere between me and my wife. I must have this out with her first. I'll talk to you directly."

"I'll be ready for you," said Bence. "But till then, please moderate your language;" and he moved to a window, and looked down into the street.

"So that's what you did, Jane, eh? Sneaked off behind my back, and sold yourself to the enemy!"

"I continued to serve you faithfully. Success or failure lay in your hands, not mine. I never ceased working for the firm." [Pg 315]

"Oh, that's easy to say, isn't it?"

"It's the truth."

"It's a lie—and you know it."

"Will you moderate your language?" said Bence. "Gentlemen, I beg your support. This lady must be protected from insult."

But the attention of Marsden and his wife was so entirely concentrated on each other that neither of them seemed to hear the interruption.

"Richard, don't go on like this—don't force me to say unkind things which I shall regret later."

"I knew there was some infernal mystery at the bottom of our troubles. But, by Jove, I never guessed that it was *you* who'd played false."

"Richard, don't abuse me."

"Abuse you? I shan't waste breath on abusing you. You have cheated me—or you've *tried* to cheat me. For I'm not going to let you;" and he turned towards the others. "Take notice, all of you, that I shan't submit to this. Prentice, do you understand? You were always hostile to me. I suppose you helped to hatch this plot."

Mr. Prentice was looking so absolutely bewildered that his face should have been sufficient proof of his innocence.

"No," he said feebly. "All this has come upon me as a complete surprise."

"Then you, Mr. Collins—understand it's all mighty fine, but it won't wash."

"Won't it?" said Collins.

"No, I don't allow myself to be cheated—even by my wife."

"Richard," said Mrs. Marsden, "don't call me a cheat again." [Pg 316]

"You there—Bence—take notice. I'll bring you to account for this. I'm not the sort to be tricked and fooled by any little swine that gets plotting with my wife. No, not if I know it. Cheating people is very clever, but—"

Mrs. Marsden sprang up from her chair by the wall.

"How dare you call me a cheat?"

Her eyes were blazing. She had clenched her fists; and, trembling with passion, she came to the table and faced her husband.

"What have you ever given me in exchange for all I gave you—except shame and sorrow?"

"I'm not going to listen to your yelling and—"

"I gave you my love, and you trampled on it—I gave you my home, and you polluted it—I gave you the work of my life, and you pulled it to pieces before my eyes. Yet still I was true and loyal to you. I could have divorced you, and I wouldn't do it. I promised you that I'd hold to you till you yourself consented to set me free; and I kept my promise. You were a liar—but I respected your words. You were a thief—but I dealt with you as if you had been an honest man. I fed and clothed you when you were well, I nursed you when you were sick—I hid your crimes, I sheltered you from their consequences. At this minute I am keeping you out of the prison that is your only proper place.... And yet—great God—he has the audacity to say that I am cheating him!"

And then Mrs. Marsden, shaking in excitement and anger, went back to her chair and sat down.

"You asked for that," said Collins, with renewed facetiousness, "and you got it."

Bence was looking out of the window; and he whistled and gently clapped his hands, as if applauding the passionate force of Mrs. Marsden's unexpected tirade. [Pg 317]

"I don't know what she means," said Marsden hoarsely. "And I dare say she doesn't know, herself." He had been staggered by his wife's attack; and at her last words he recoiled from the table, as if suddenly daunted, almost cowed. Now he was pulling himself together again. "Who cares what a woman says?" And he cleared his throat, and spoke loudly and defiantly. "I don't, for one."

"Richard," murmured Mrs. Marsden, in a still tremulous voice. "I'm sorry I said it."

"All right. That's enough.... But now, if you please, we men will talk;" and he looked from one to another. The veins showed redly on his forehead; his glistening jaw was protruded; and he squared his huge shoulders pugnaciously. "I tell you, once for all, I'm not going to stand any damned rot. As to the sale—Mr. Clever Bence,—I repudiate it utterly. It was obtained under false pretences, and I'll have it set aside. As to the separation—I'm speaking to you, Prentice,—that bargain falls through with the other.... And to show you what I think of it—I am now going to tear up the deed."

"Oh no, you're not," said Collins.

"I warn you all," said Marsden furiously: "if anyone touches me, he'll be sorry for it. Now, Prentice, fetch out your deed again. You shoved it away in that safe, didn't you? Well, out with it." And he moved to the side of Mr. Prentice, and stood over him threateningly. "Out with it—d'you hear?"

Bence and Collins had both begun to clap their hands loudly. And with this noisy applause other sounds were mingling. Mr. Prentice, as he rose to confront Marsden, heard quick footsteps in the passage. The door was abruptly opened, and two policemen came into the room.

"This way, officers," said Collins pompously. "You are just in time to prevent a breach of the peace. There's your man—keep your eyes on him." [Pg 318]

Marsden, turning hurriedly, saw the two uniforms and helmets solemnly advance, and showed a craven dissatisfaction at the sight.

"What are you up to now?" he asked glumly.

But Collins, ignoring the question, continued to talk pompously to the new arrivals.

"As I told your superintendent, he is a dangerous character. He has been threatening us with assault and battery—but we do not wish to give him in charge, if we can help it. Your presence will probably be sufficient to restrain him."

"Very good, sir."

"He is the same man who made the disturbance at the Red Cow—and I think he has been charged once or twice as a drunk and disorderly."

"You needn't introduce him so carefully," said Bence, with a snigger. "Mr. Marsden is already well known to the police."

"Yes, Mr. Bence," said one of the policemen, "*we* know the gent."

"Very well," continued Collins, with the air of a magistrate presiding over a crowded court. "He is leaving the town to-night—forever,—and I shall ask for a constable to see him off. From the mayor down to the humblest citizen, Mallingbridge is tired of him—so he is going to the western states of America. He will be more at home among the desperados of some mining camp than he can be in a peaceful hum-drum town like this." And Mr. Collins turned to Marsden, as though haranguing the prisoner. "Now, sir, will you behave yourself, and let us finish our conversation quietly and decently?"

"Oh, you can finish your chin-music in any tune you like." Marsden growled this out; but the voice was heavy and dejected, altogether lacking in animation. Very obviously the arrival of the police had crushed his spirit. [Pg 319]

"So be it," said Collins. "Then I think, officers, that will do. You may safely leave us for the moment. But please wait outside the door, to protect us if necessary."

"Yes," said Bence, "we'll give you the same signal, if you're wanted again."

"All right, Mr. Bence."

And the policemen left the room. To their eyes the famous Mr. Bence was the natural chieftain of any assemblage, no matter how pompously anybody else talked. Here, they were at his service, detailed for Bence's just as much as if it had been a sale day and they and their mates were regulating the traffic in front of the shop.

"Now," said Collins, with a change of manner, and speaking in a conciliatory if argumentative tone, "we can pick up our little debate. Mr. Marsden, come now, after all, what is this fuss about?"

Marsden laughed; but his laughter was dull and spiritless.

"Go on—jabber, jabber."

"Really now. What is the grievance? You have sold your business and been paid for it. Of your own free will, you have parted with your interests. You have renounced all claims upon your wife."

"Yes—but I've been tricked into doing it."

"Where's the trick?"

"She made me think we were done."

"So you were. You came to her and told her so. You prevailed on her to agree to the sale. It wasn't her proposition, but yours."

"I shouldn't have made it if I had known."

"You thought you had got all you could out of her—and that was the fact. You thought she was poor; and you find that she has made a good investment—with her own private funds, mark you, —and she is therefore not poor, but rather the reverse. Where's your quarrel with that?" [Pg 320]

"I am entitled to my share in her investment."

"Oh, bosh! That's simply absurd."

Marsden was standing up, resting his red hands on the back of a chair. Now he moved the chair to Mr. Prentice's end of the table, sat down, and spoke in an eager whisper.

"Prentice, hostile or not, you *are* honest. I call on you to see fair play. She can't do this, can she?"

"She *has* done it," said Prentice feebly.

"But tell her it isn't fair. She knows you're straight, and above board. It's all mighty fine to bowl me out—and perhaps you don't think I deserve any pity. But still, speak for me. She can't round on me like this—she can't say 'Your firm is killed, and I've transferred myself across the road to the firm that killed it.' Surely the law wouldn't allow her to spoof me like that?"

But sharp-eared Mr. Collins had heard the whisper.

"Prentice, don't answer him. Mr. Marsden, I'll answer that question. I answer for the law. I am your wife's legal adviser in all this. Please address me, sir."

Marsden turned with a final burst of fierce rage.

"Then I say, curse you, I'll have the law on it."

"Now look here, Marsden," and Mr. Collins's voice changed once more—to an uncompromisingly ugly tone. "If you want the law, we'll give you your bellyful of the law."

"A good deal more than you'll like," said Bence, failing to ask for moderation of language.

"Your wife," Collins went on, "dropped a plain hint just now; and I was very pleased to hear it, because I thought you'd understand. But I see I must amplify it for you. Mrs. Marsden has been good enough to entrust to my care all her private papers—that is, papers she has kept private to oblige you." [Pg 321]

"I—I don't in the least follow—what you're driving at."

"Oh, you know what I'm talking about. Specimens of your handwriting, and so on—papers that the law would call incriminating documents,—papers that the law would call conclusive evidence, —papers that the law would call forgeries."

"Prentice! Don't believe him."

"Never mind Mr. Prentice. Attend to me.... Ah-ha,—you're beginning to look rather foolish.... Now, how much law do you want?"

"I think," said Bence, "if he has time to get safely out of the country, that's all the law he ought to ask for."

Marsden was cowed and beaten. He sat heavily and limply on his chair, sprawling one red hand across the table, and nervously fingering his lips with the other hand.

"Well," said Collins mockingly, "what are you going to do—keep your bargain, or go to law with us?"

Marsden was thoroughly cowed and beaten. He cleared his throat several times, and even then spoke huskily.

"I must say a word or two to my wife;" and he rose from his chair slowly.... "Of course, when a man's down, everyone can jump on him."

And he went over to Mrs. Marsden, stooped, and whispered.

Collins tapped his nose jocosely, and smiled at Mr. Prentice—seeming to say without words, "What do you think of that, old boy? That's the way Hyde & Collins tackle this sort of troublesome customer."

Little Bence, resuming his dandified air and ostentatiously leaving Mrs. Marsden and her husband to whisper together, picked up his glossy hat, and dusted it with a neatly folded silk handkerchief. [Pg 322]

"Jane," said Marsden pleadingly, almost whimperingly, "you come out on top—and I mustn't bear malice. But you *have* been hard—cruelly hard."

"Dick," said Mrs. Marsden, in a shaky whisper, "don't reproach me."

"But don't you think you have been a *little* hard."

"No. Or it is *you* who have made me hard. I wasn't hard—once. And remember this, Dick. Even at the end, I tried to get one word of tenderness from you—to make you say you cared just a little for what happened to me. But no—"

"I *did* care."

"No. You hadn't one kind word—or one kind thought. You and your—your companion were going to new scenes, new hopes; and I might be left to starve."

"Jane, I swear I thought you were all right. I said so, again and again. And now, you're rich—you're really rolling in money; and it is I who may starve. Jane—for auld lang syne—do a bit more for me."

"No;" and she shook her head resolutely.

"Jane! Be like yourself.... I'm not grasping or avaricious. But at least I ought to get as much as the business fetched. Let me have that extra fifteen hundred."

"Well—perhaps. I'll think about it."

"Do it now—hand over now, or they'll only persuade you not to."

"No—but I'll give it you later. I promise. I'll send it to your address in California—as soon as I am sure that you have really arrived there."

"All right. Thanks. Jane—I'll say it once again. I wish you luck. You're a good plucked 'un—I always knew that."

Then the meeting broke up. [Pg 323]

Marsden was the first to go. His wife watched him as he went slouching down the street. When he disappeared she did not immediately turn from the window. She had furtively produced her pocket handkerchief, and the gentlemen heard her blow her nose loudly and strenuously; but no one saw her wipe the tears from her eyes.

Mr. Collins, on the threshold of the room, was dismissing the policemen with pompous thanks, and promising to drop in upon their superintendent shortly.

"By the way," he said, looking round; "shall we let them escort Mrs. Marsden home?"

"No," said Mr. Archibald gallantly. "That shall be my honour and pleasure. And there's no danger of his molesting her now."

"I agree with you," said Collins. "We've fairly knocked the bounce out of *him*." And he spoke to Mrs. Marsden with sentimental solicitude. "There will be a plain-clothes constable in St. Saviour's Court, watching your door till the evening. But you needn't be afraid. Our friend won't venture to go there."

Mr. Prentice sat at the head of his table, looking dazed and confused. He and his whole house were taken possession of by Collins; policemen walked in and out; astounding things happened—the morning's work had been almost too much for him.

With an effort he got upon his legs to bow and smile at Mrs. Marsden, as she and Bence went out.

"Well now," said Collins; and he shut his black bag. "I don't think that, under the peculiar conditions of the case, anything could have been more satisfactory—do you?"

"Of course," said Mr. Prentice, sitting down again "you know, as well as I do, that what Marsden said was true. He could make her account to the firm for all her profits in Bence's. Such an investment isn't allowed—it isn't lawful." [Pg 324]

"I'll tell you what it is," said Collins, enthusiastically blinking behind his spectacles. "It's *great*—that's what it is; and I'm proud to have carried it through for her."

Mr. Prentice really did not know what to say.

"And I'll tell you something more. If it isn't law, it's *justice*. I've never been such a stickler as you for mere outward form. Here were two people in terrible difficulty—Bence and Mrs. Marsden. She saw the way to save them both, and had the grit to take all risks and do it. That was good enough for me. As I say, I'm not so formal as you. I don't let a string of red tape trip up a brave woman when she's running for her life—that is, if I can prevent it.... Good morning, Prentice. Good morning to you."

XXIX

[Pg 325]

However he might demur at first, Mr. Prentice soon came to the conclusion that it was truly great.

Perhaps at first he was so completely flabbergasted by the surprise of the thing that he could not really take it all in; his numbed brain, only partially working, fixed upon technical objections to the conduct of affairs by Hyde & Collins; and then, with awakening comprehension of a masterly coup, the sense of having been left out in the cold diminished his delight. But this soon passed, and he began to glow joyously.

Yes, *great*! No other word for it! Magnificent justification of all that he had ever said and thought of her!

Not weak, but strong—as strong as she used to be; no, stronger than at any time. And he thought of her, overwhelmed with misfortunes, hemmed round by insurmountable difficulties, brought lower and lower, until she was apparently so impotent and negligible a unit in the town's life that she had become an object of contemptuous pity to the very crossing-sweepers. He thought of what the scientists say about the conservation of energy and the indestructibility of matter. Great natural forces cannot be wiped out. Just when they seem gone, you get a fresh manifestation—the same force in another form. And so it was here. Mrs. Marsden, seemingly abolished, bursts out in another place, explodes the debris of ruin that was holding her down, changes direction, and rises in blazing triumph on the other side of the street.

[Pg 326]

Wonderful! "Not now; but perhaps later, when the time comes"—he remembered her words. "I must do things my own way." Yes, her own way was right—because her way is the way of genius. A veritable stroke of genius—no lesser term will do,—seeming so simple to look back at, although so impenetrable till it was explained! She had seen the only means by which she could successfully extricate herself from an impossible situation. Only she could have escaped the imminent disaster. Only she could have turned an overwhelming defeat into a transcendent victory.

"Talk about giving women the vote," cried Mr. Prentice noisily. "That woman ought to be prime minister."

Mrs. Prentice, rejoicing at the good news, wished that her husband could have told it less vociferously. It happened that this evening she was the victim of a bilious headache, and she lay supine on a sofa, unable to sit up for dinner. The slightest noise made her headache worse, and the mere smell of food was distressing.

Mr. Prentice, banging in and out of the room, let savoury odours reach her; and his exultant voice set up a painful throbbing. "I told you so all along.... What did I say from the beginning?... Colossal brain power! No one like her!"

This really was the substance of all that he had to say, and he had already said it; yet he kept running in from the dinner table to say it again.

A bottle of the very best champagne was opened; and he brought the invalid a glass of it, to drink Mrs. Marsden's health. Mrs. Prentice, staunchly obeying, drank the old, still wine, and immediately felt as if she had stepped from an ocean-going liner into a dancing row-boat.

In the exuberance of his rapture, Mr. Prentice also invited the parlourmaid to drink Mrs. Marsden's health.

[Pg 327]

"There, toss that off—to the most remarkable lady *you*'ve ever seen."

"Yes, sir. She *is* a nice lady, sir—and always speaks so sensible."

"*Sensible!* Why, bless my soul, there's no one in the length and breadth of England that can hold a candle to her for sheer—" But he could not of course talk freely of these high matters to a parlourmaid. So he trotted off to the other room, to tell Mrs. Prentice once again.

As he walked to the office next morning, he hummed one of the comic songs that he had not sung for years, and snapped his fingers by way of castanet accompaniment. He felt so light-hearted and joyous that he would have willingly thrown his square hat in the air, and cut capers on the pavement.

He could not work. For two or three days he was quite unable to attend to ordinary business. When clients came to talk about themselves, he scarcely listened; but, giving the conversation a violent wrench, began talking to them about Mrs. Marsden.

Then one afternoon he was taken with a burning desire for a quiet chat with Archibald Bence. If he could get hold of little Archibald and ply him with questions, he would obtain all sorts of delightful explanatory details concerning Mrs. Marsden's splendid mystery.

He hurried down High Street, and, approaching the old shop, was puzzled by a strange phenomenon.

The pavement in front of Marsden & Thompson's seemed to be blocked by a dense crowd. The

blinds were drawn on the upper floor; the iron shutters masked the windows and doors on the ground floor: the whole shop was closed—and yet there were infinitely more people lingering outside it than when it had been open.

White bills on all the shutters showed the cause of the phenomenon. "Astonishing Bargains"— [Pg 328] these two portentous words headed each white placard in monstrous red capitals;—"Bence Brothers, having acquired this old-established business, will clear the entire stock, together with surplus and slightly soiled goods from their own house, at heart-breaking reductions on cost;"—"Opening 9 A.M. Monday next. Come early. This is not an ordinary bargain sale, but a forced sacrifice by which only the public can benefit." And the public, eager for the benefit, wishing that it was already Monday, pressed and strove to read and reread the white and red notices on the iron shutters.

"Don't push," said one nursemaid to another. "Take your turn. I've just as much right to see as you have."

Mr. Prentice laughed heartily and happily. He thought as he crossed the road and entered Bence's, "What a dog this Archibald is—to be sure!"

He found the grand little man in his private room, and was affably received by him.

"Oh, yes," said Archibald, sniggering modestly. "We hope to make rather a big thing of our clearance sale.... How long shall we keep it going? Well, that depends. It wouldn't last long, if we'd nothing to dispose of beyond what's left over there; but we shall clear this side at the same time."

And Bence rattled on glibly, as though Mr. Prentice had come to interview him for an article in an important newspaper.

"The ancient notion was that this kind of special selling took the cream off one's ordinary trade. But experience has taught us that such is not the case. We find that trade breeds trade. And you can't *tire* your public—you can't over-stimulate them. It is the excited public that is your best *buying* public."

Mr. Prentice listened respectfully; and then, after the manner of a good interviewer, begged the [Pg 329] host to pass from general views to personal reminiscences.

"What is it you wish to know?"

"About you and her," said Prentice. "I should enormously like to know the inward history of it."

"Well, now that the secret's out," said Archibald, rubbing his chin, and wrinkling the flesh round his bright little eyes, "I suppose there's no harm in speaking about it."

"Certainly not to me," said Prentice. "Although I wasn't in her confidence about this, I am a real true friend of hers."

"I know you are," said Bence cordially. "She has said so a hundred times."

"Tell me how it began—the very beginning of things."

A gloomy cloud passed over Bence's animated face.

"Upon my word, I don't care to look back upon those days. I *was* in such bitter trouble, Mr. Prentice."

"When did you think of going to her?"

"I never thought of it. *She* came to me. I couldn't believe my ears when she opened the matter."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, she didn't beat about the bush. She said, if it was really true that I wanted money, she might supply it—on certain terms."

"Yes, yes—and tell me, my dear fellow, what were her terms?"

"Mr. Prentice," said Bence solemnly, "her terms were terrible—it was just buying me at a knock-out price."

"You don't say so?"

"The fact.... This is as between Masons, isn't it?... I may consider that we are tiled in."

"Yes, yes—as brother to brother."

And then Bence, who was never averse to hearing the sound of his own voice when safe and [Pg 330] suitable occasions offered, talked with unchecked freedom and confidence.

"You know, I'd always entertained the highest and most genuine respect for her. When they used to say she was the best man of business in Mallingbridge, there was no one more ready to admit it than I was. I regarded her as right up there," and he waved his hand towards the ceiling. "Right up—one of the largest and most comprehensive int'lects of the age."

"Just so—just so."

"And I don't mind confessing I was always a bit afraid of her. Years ago—oh, I don't know how many years ago—when I was passing compliments to her, she'd look at me, not a bit unkind, but inscrutable—yes, that's it—inscrutable, and say, 'You take care, Mr. Bence. Don't jump too big, or one day you'll jump over yourself.'"

"Meaning your various extensions?"

"Yes. It always made me uncomfortable when she spoke like that—though I just laughed it off. Anyhow, it seemed to show how clear she saw through one."

"Yes, nothing escaped her."

"So I thought I knew what she was—but I never did really know what she was, till we came to fair handy grips over this.... Mr. Prentice, I flattered her—no go. I tried to bluff her—ditto. Then I sued to her for mercy. I said, 'Madam, I'm like a wounded man on a field of battle asking for a cup of water.' But she said, 'If I understand the position correctly, Mr. Bence, you are more like a dead man; and you ask to be brought to life again.'... And it was true. I was dead—down—done for....

"It was my brothers—God forgive them—who had frustrated me—not bad luck—or any faults of mine. Take, take, take—whatever my work produced, out it went.... Well then, I was what she described—lying at her feet, and praying for life. So I said I'd take it—on her own terms.... [Pg 331]

"But when it was over, oh, Mr. Prentice the relief! I had lit'rally come to life again. I was *safe*—with money behind me,—with *driving* power behind me. I went home that night to Mrs. Bence and cried as if I'd been a baby—and after I'd had my cry, I *slept*. What's that proverb? Sleep, it is a blessed thing! I hadn't slept sound for years. Don't you see? I was certain we should go on all right now—now that the burden was on *her* shoulders."

And then Bence had his idiosyncratic touch of self-pity.

"I don't know whether you were aware of it, Mr. Prentice—these things get about when one is more or less a public man,—but the incessant worry had given me kidney disease. Well,—will you believe it?—from that hour I got better. The doctors reported less,—less again,—and at last, not a trace of it. I was simply another man."

"But, Bence, my dear fellow, what fills me with such amazement and admiration is the rapidity of your success from that point. You seemed to be on the crest of the wave instantaneously."

"Ah! That was the magician's wand. Instead of having our earnings snatched out the moment they reached the till, the profits were being put back into the concern. I was working on a salary—a very handsome one—with my commission; and she never took out a penny more than was absolutely necessary. There was the whole difference—and it's magic in trade. I was given scope, capital, an easy road—with no blind turnings."

"But I suppose you did it all under her direction?"

"Well, I don't know how to answer that;" and Bence grinned, and twirled his moustache. "No. I suppose I ought to say no. I had full scope—and was never interfered with.... We used to meet at Hyde & Collins's; and I reported things—just reported them. She used to look at me in that inscrutable way of hers, and say, 'I can't advise. I have nothing to do with your business—beyond having my money in it: just as I might have it in any other form of investment. But speaking merely as an outsider, I think you are going on very nice. Go on just the same, Mr. Bence.' Sometimes she did drop a word. It was always light.... Oh, she's unique, Mr. Prentice—quite unique." [Pg 332]

Bence grinned more broadly as he went on.

"Of course it was by her orders—or I ought to say, it was acting on a hint she let fall, that I made myself so popular with the authorities. You never came to one of my dinner-parties?... No, I did ask you; but you wouldn't come.... Well, you're acquainted with Mallingbridge oratory. After dinner, when the speeches began, they used to butter me up to the skies; and I used to tell them straight—though of course they couldn't see it—that I was only a figure-head, a dummy. 'Don't praise *me*,' I told 'em, 'I'm nobody—just the outward sign of the enterprise and spirit that lays behind me.' Yes, and I put it straighter than that sometimes—it tickled me to give 'em the truth almost in the plainest words.... And I knew there was no risk. *They*'d never tumble to it."

After this delightful conversation, Mr. Prentice went across the road again. He felt that he could not any longer refrain from calling upon Mrs. Marsden; and, as the afternoon was now well advanced, he thought that she might perhaps invite him to drink a cup of tea with her.

In St. Saviour's Court the house door stood open; men from Bence's Furniture department were busily delivering chairs and sofas; and the narrow passage was obstructed by further goods. Mr. Prentice heard a familiar voice issuing instructions with a sharp tone of command. [Pg 333]

"This is for the top floor. Front bedroom. Take this up too—same room.... Who's that out there? Oh, is it you, Mr. Prentice?"

"What, Yates, you are soon on duty again."

Old Yates laughed and tossed her head. "Yes, sir, here I am.... That's for the top floor—back. Take it up steady, now."

"You seem to be refurnishing—and on a large scale."

"Oh, no," said Yates. "We're only putting things straight. We're expecting Mrs. Kenion and the young lady up from Eastbourne to-night—and it's a job to get the house ready in the time."

"Ah, then I am afraid visitors will hardly be welcome just now."

"No, sir, not ordinary visitors—but Mrs. Thompson never counted you as an ordinary visitor—did she, sir? I'll take on me to say *you*'ll be welcome to Mrs. Thompson. Please go upstairs, sir. She's in the dining-room."

And truly this visitor was welcomed most cordially.

"My *dear* Mr. Prentice. How kind of you—how very kind of you to come! I have been wishing so to see you."

Yates without delay disengaged herself from the furniture men, and brought in tea. Then the hostess seated herself at the table, and insisted that the visitor should occupy the easiest of the new armchairs—and she smiled at him, she waited upon him, she made much of him; she lulled and soothed and charmed him, until he felt as if twenty years had rolled away, and he and she were back again in the happiest of the happy old days.

"I trust that dear Mrs. Prentice is well.... Ah, yes, it *is* headachy weather, isn't it. I have ventured to send her a few flowers—and some peaches and grapes."

It seemed incredible. But she *looked* younger—many years younger than when he had seen her in [Pg 334] the shadow cast by his office wall less than a week ago. Her voice had something of the old resonance; she sat more upright; she carried her head better. She was still dressed in black; but this new costume was of fine material, fashionable cut, very becoming pattern; and it gave to its wearer a quiet importance and a sedate but opulent pomp. Very curious! It was as if all that impression of shabbiness, insignificance, and poverty had been caused merely by the shadow; and that as soon as she came out of the shadow into the sunlight, one saw her as she really was, and not as one had foolishly imagined her to be.

This thought was in the mind of Mr. Prentice while he listened to her pleasantly firm voice, and watched the play of light and life about her kind and friendly eyes. The shadow that had lain so heavy upon her was mercifully lifted. She had been a prisoner to the powers of darkness, and now the sunshine had set her free. This was really all that had happened.

"I am so particularly glad," she was saying, "that you came to-day, because I want your advice badly."

"It is very much at your service."

"Then do you think there would be any objection—would you consider it might seem bad taste if henceforth I were to resume my old name? I have an affection for the name of Thompson—though it isn't a very high-sounding one."

"I noticed that Yates called you Mrs. Thompson."

"Yes, I mentioned my idea to Yates; but I told her I shouldn't do it without consulting you. I did not think of dropping my real name altogether, but I thought I might perhaps call myself Mrs. Marsden-Thompson—with or without a hyphen."

And she went on to explain that she was doubtful as to the legal aspects of the case. She did not [Pg 335] wish to advertise the change of name, or to make it a formal and binding change. She just wished to call herself Mrs. Marsden-Thompson.

"Very well, Mrs. Marsden-Thompson, consider it done. For there's nothing to prevent your doing it. Your friends will call you by any name you tell them to use—with or without a hyphen."

"Oh, I'm so glad you say that. I was afraid you might not approve.... And now I want your advice about something else. It is a house with a little land that I am most anxious to buy, if I can possibly manage it—and I want you to find out if the owners would be inclined to sell."

Mr. Prentice advised her on this and several other little matters. Indeed, before his third cup of tea was finished, he had made enlightening replies to questions that related to half a dozen different subjects.

"Thank you. A thousand thanks. Some more tea, Mr. Prentice?"

But Mr. Prentice did not answer this last question. He put down his empty cup, and began to laugh heartily.

"Why are you laughing like that?"

"Mrs. Marsden-Thompson," he said jovially. "For once I have seen through you. All things are permissible to your sex; but if you were a man, I should be tempted to say you are an impostor—an arch-impostor."

"Oh, Mr. Prentice! Why?"

"Because you don't really think my advice worth a straw. You don't want my advice, or anybody

else's. No one is capable of advising you. You just do things in your own way—and a very remarkable way it is."

"But really and truly I—"

"No. Not a bit of it. You fancied that my feathers might have been rubbed the wrong way by recent surprises; and ever since I came into this room, you have been most delicately smoothing my ruffled plumage." [Pg 336]

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Marsden-Thompson demurely, "I assure you—"

"Yes, yes. But, my dear, it wasn't in the least necessary. I am just as pleased as Punch, and I have quite forgiven you for keeping me so long in the dark."

"On my honour," she said earnestly, "I wouldn't have kept you in the dark for *one* day, if I could have avoided doing so. It was most painful to me, dear Mr. Prentice, to practice—or rather, to allow of any deception where *you* were concerned.... But my course was so difficult to steer."

"You steered it splendidly."

"But I do want you to understand. I shall be miserable if I think that you could ever harbour the slightest feeling of resentment."

"Of course I shan't."

"Or if you don't believe that I trust you absolutely, and have the greatest possible regard for your professional skill.... You may remember how I *almost* told you about it."

"No, I'll be hanged if I remember that."

"Well, I tried to explain—indirectly—that the whole affair was so complicated.... There were so many things to be thought of. There was Enid. I had to think of *her* all the time.... Honestly, I put her before myself. Until Enid could get rid of Kenion, it didn't seem much use for me to get rid of poor Richard.... And if either of them had guessed, everything might have gone wrong—I mean, might have worked out differently. And of course it made *secrecy* of such vital importance. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Mr. Prentice, laughing contentedly, "I do understand. But now I wonder—would you mind telling me when it was that you first thought of the Bence coup?" [Pg 337]

"Well, I fancy that the germ of the idea came to me in church;" and Mrs. Marsden-Thompson folded her hands, and looked reflectively at the tea-cups. "I was thinking of Richard, and of Mr. Bence—and then some verses in a psalm struck me most forcibly. One verse especially—I shall never forget it. 'Let his days be few; and let another take his office.'"

"How did that apply?"

"Well, I suppose I thought vaguely—quite vaguely—that if Richard was bad at managing a business, Mr. Bence was rather good at it.... Then, that very evening, you so kindly came in to supper, and told me as a positive fact that Bence was nearly done for. And then it struck me at once that, in the long run, Bence's failure could prove of advantage to nobody, and that it ought to be prevented;" and she looked up brightly, and smiled at Mr. Prentice. "So really and truly, it is *you* that I have to thank. You brought me that *invaluable* information. *You* inspired me to do it."

Mr. Prentice got up from the easy chair, and playfully shook a forefinger at his hostess.

"Now—now. Don't drag *me* into it. I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff."

"But I am truly forgiven?" And she stretched out her hand towards him. "Not the smallest soreness left? You will still be what you have always been—my best and kindest friend?"

Mr. Prentice took her hand; and, with a graceful old-world air of gallantry that perhaps the headachy lady at home had never seen, he raised it to his lips.

"I shall be what I have always been—your humble, admiring slave."

XXX [Pg 338]

One of the oldest of her dreams had become partially true. She had bought that pretty country-house, and was living in it with Enid. Not the total fulfilment of the dream, because she had not retired from business. She was busier than ever.

Many things foretold by her had now come to pass. The military camp on the downs, with its twenty thousand armed men and half as many thousand followers, had brought increased prosperity to the neighbourhood; the carriage and locomotive works established by the railway company had added to the old town another town that by itself would have been big enough to sustain a mayor and corporation; builders could not build fast enough to house the rapidly swelling population; the well-filled suburbs stretched for two long miles in all directions from the ancient town boundaries; and by platform lecturers, by members of parliament, by writers of

statistical reviews, the growth of Mallingbridge was cited as one of the most remarkable and gratifying achievements of the last decade.

In a word—the cant word—Mallingbridge had boomed. And right at the top of the boom, rolling on to glory, was Bence's.

The prodigious success of Bence's made the world gasp. Nothing could hinder it. People fancied that the rebuilding might prove a dangerous, if not a fatal crisis in its affairs; but the proprietress accomplished the colossal operation without even a temporary set-back. She moved Bence's bodily across the road, squashed it into the confines of old Thompson's, and left it there for [Pg 339] eighteen months while the new Bence palace was being erected. The magnificence of these modern up-to-date premises surpassed belief—facade of pure white stone; gigantic caryatids, bearing on their heads the projected ledge of the second floor, and holding in their hands the sculptured brackets of the monstrous arc lamps; fluted columns from the second floor to the fourth; and above the deep cornice, just visible from the street, the cupola on top of the vast dome that was the crowning splendour of the whole.

Then directly the shop had been moved back into this ornate frame, down went the old red-brick block of Thompson's; and on the site still another palace for Bence began to rise. It seemed no less magnificent than the other; and it was finished off—by way of balance to the dome—with a stupendous clock-tower. The local press, in a series of articles describing this useful monument, said that the four-faced time-piece was an exact replica of Big Ben at Westminster; the base of the numeral twelve was one hundred and thirty-two feet above the pavement; the small hand was as long as a short man, and the long hand was longer than an excessively tall man;—and so on. The author of the articles also stated that the architectural effect of Bence on both sides of the street was very similar to the *coup d'œil* offered by the dome and tower of the cathedral at Florence.

Customers scarcely knew on which side of the street they were doing their shopping: they went into one of the two palaces, and surprised themselves by emerging from the other. You entered a lift, and, as it swooped, the crowded floors flashed upward. "Which department, madam? Parisian Jewellery?... Boots and Shoes! Step this way." You passed through a long, narrow and brilliantly illuminated department, such as Sham Diamonds or Opera Cloaks, where artificial light is a [Pg 340] necessity for correct selection; you went up a broad flight of shallow stairs; and there you were, in Boots and Shoes. But the thing you didn't know, the funny thing, was that all unconsciously you had been through a sub-way under the road. Just when you stood to gape at the sparkling ear-rings or to finger the rich soft cloaks, the heavy traffic of High Street was bang over your head.

And truly there was nothing that you could not buy now at Bence's—on one side of the road or the other. Ball dresses for as much as fifty guineas, tailor-made walking costumes for as little as eighteen shillings, a thousand pound coat of Russian sable, or a farthing packet of pins, palm trees for the conservatory or Brussels sprouts for the kitchen—whatever the varied wants of the universe, it was Bence's proud boast that they could be supplied here without failure or delay.

Sometimes when business had taken Mrs. Marsden to London and she and Yates were driving through the streets in a four-wheeled cab, she studied the appearance of the great metropolitan shops, and mentally compared them with what she had left behind her at Mallingbridge. Once, when the dusk of an autumn day was falling and she chanced to pass the most world-famous of all emporiums, she told the cabman to let his horse walk; then, as they crawled by the endless frontage, she measured the glare of the electric lamps, counted the big commissionaires, estimated the volume of the crowd outside the glittering windows; and, critically examining the thing in its entirety, she felt a supreme satisfaction. To her eye and judgment it was no bigger, brighter, or more impressive than Bence's. In all respects Bence's was every bit as good.

Each morning, fair or foul, at nine-thirty sharp, she left her charming and luxurious home, and came spinning in her small motor-car down the three-mile slope that now divided house from [Pg 341] shop. The car, avoiding High Street, wheeled round through Trinity Square, worked its swift way to the back of Bence's, swept into a quiet, stately court-yard, and delivered her at the perron of a noble architraved doorway. This was the private or business entrance to the domed palace.

A porter in sombre livery was waiting on the marble steps to receive her, to carry her shawl or reticule, to usher her to the golden gates of the private lift.

In a minute she had majestically soared to an upper floor.

This managerial side of the building would not unworthily have formed a portion of a public department, such as the Treasury or India Office: it was all spacious, silent, grand. She passed through a wide and lofty corridor, with mahogany doors on either hand—the closed doors of the managers' rooms; and no sound of the shop was audible, no sign of it visible.

Her own room, at the end of the corridor, was very large, very high, very plainly decorated. Mahogany book-cases, with a few busts on top of them; one table with newspapers of all countries, another table with four or five telephonic instruments—but absolutely no office equipment of any sort: not so much as a writing desk, Yankee or British. She scarcely ever writes a letter now; even marginal notes are dictated. Time is too precious to be wasted on manual labour, however rapid. Time is capital; and it must be invested in the way that will yield the highest interest.

"What is the time?" and she glanced at the clock on the carved stone mantelpiece.

"It wants seven minutes of ten."

All clocks are correct, because they are carefully synchronized with the clock in the tower; and that *must* be correct, because time-signals from Greenwich are continually instructing it—and the whole town works by Bence time. [Pg 342]

"Good. Then I am not late."

"No, madam."

She came earlier now than she used to do a little while ago. But since Mr. Archibald finally withdrew from affairs, she has been in sole charge of the mighty organization. She could not refuse to let Archibald enjoy his well-earned rest. Though still under fifty years of age, he was a tired man, worn out by the battle, needing repose. And why should he go on working? Thanks to the liberality of his patron, he possessed ample means—almost one might say he was opulent.

"I am ready."

"Yes, madam."

Then the day's toil begins.

First it is the solemn entry of the managers, one after another succinctly presenting his report. Then it is the turn of head clerks and secretaries, who have gathered and are silently waiting outside the door. After that, audience is given to buyers who have returned from or are about to leave for the marts of the world.

And with the fewest possible words she issues her commands. She sits with folded hands, or paces to and fro with hands clasped behind her back, or stands and knits her brows; but not a word, not a moment is squandered. She says, Do this; but very rarely explains how it is to be done. It is their duty to know how. If they don't know, they are inefficient. It is for her to give orders: it is for subordinates to carry them into effect. The general of an army must be something more than a good regimental officer; the admiral of the fleet cannot teach common sailors the best way to polish the brass on the binnacle.

With surprising rapidity these opening labours are completed. Well before noon the last of the clerks has gone, and Mrs. Marsden-Thompson stands in an empty room—may take a breathing-pause, or, if she pleases, fill it with tasks of light weight. [Pg 343]

Perhaps now an old friend is announced. It is Miss Woolfrey from China and Glass. May she come in? Or shall she call again? No, ask Miss Woolfrey to come in.

And then time is flagrantly wasted. Miss Woolfrey has nothing to say, can put forward no valid reason for bothering the commander-in-chief. Miss Woolfrey giggles foolishly, gossips inanely, meanders with a stream of senseless twaddle; but she is gratified by smiles and nods and handshakings.

"Well, now, really—my dear Miss Woolfrey—you cheer me with your excellent account of this little storm in a tea-cup.... Yes, I'll remember all you say.... How kind of you to ask! Yes, my daughter is very well."

And Miss Woolfrey goes away happy. She is a licensed offender—has been accorded unlimited privilege to waste time. Incompetent as ever, and totally unable to adapt herself to modern conditions, she enjoys a splendid sinecure in the new China and Glass. She has clever people over her to keep her straight, and will never be deprived of her salary until she accepts a pension in exchange.

Sooner or later during the forenoon, Mrs. Marsden-Thompson rings her bell and asks for Mr. Mears.

"Is Mr. Mears in his room?"

"I believe so, madam."

"Then give Mr. Mears my compliments, and say I shall be glad to see him if it is convenient to him—only if convenient, not if he is occupied."

It was always convenient to Mr. Mears. His convenience is her convenience. Almost immediately the door opens, and he appears—and very grand he looks, bowing on the threshold; massive and strong again; no shaky dotard, but a vigorous elderly man, who might be mistaken for a partner in a bank, a president of a chamber of commerce, a member of the Privy Council, or anybody eminently prosperous and respectable. [Pg 344]

"Good morning, Mr. Mears. Please be seated."

And then she discusses with him all those matters of which she can speak to no one else. Mears is never a time-waster; he, too, makes few words suffice; long practice has given him quickness in catching her thought.

"Mr. Mears, what are we to do about Mr. Greig? Frankly, he is getting past his work."

"I admit it," says Mears.

"It will be better for all parties if he retires."

"He won't like the idea."

Mr. Greig, the obese chieftain of Cretonnes in the days of old Thompson's, is threatened with no real peril. If he ceases working to-morrow, he will continue to receive his working wage till death; but the difficulty is to remove him from the sphere of action without a wound to his feelings.

"Will you talk to him—introduce the idea to him gradually, bring him to it little by little, so that if possible he may come to think that it is his own idea, and that he himself wants to retire?"

And Mears promises that he will deal thus diplomatically with the faithful old servant.

They are nearly all here—the old servants; from chieftains like Greig and Ridgway to lieutenants like Davies the night watchman, each has found his snug billet. All who shivered with her in the cold are welcome to warmth and sunshine. She has forgotten no one: she could not forget old friends.

Sometimes, of course, her bounteous intentions have been rendered nugatory by fate. A few friends are gone beyond the reach of help; others it has been impossible to discover. Even now Mears has occasionally to tell her of someone raked out of the past. For instance, this morning he brings with him a small bundle of papers, and speaks to her of such an one. [Pg 345]

They have only now found Mr. Fentiman, the lanky and sententious lord of Thompson's Woollens.

Mr. Fentiman had sunk very low—never knew that she was Bence's, never saw her advertisements in agony columns, never guessed year after year that a munificent protector was seeking him. But he has been found at last, in a wretched little hosier's at Portsmouth—ill and weak and pitifully poor.

"Are you quite sure that he is our Fentiman?"

"Quite," said Mears; and he laid the Fentiman dossier on the table.

When Mears had left her she fetched an ink-pot from the mantelpiece, opened a drawer, and extracted pens and note-paper. This morning it was necessary to write a letter in her own hand. Secretaries could not assist her with the task, and time must no longer be nicely measured.

"My dear Mr. Fentiman, I am so glad to hear of you again, and so sorry to learn that your health is not what it should be." Then she invited him to resign his present situation and come to Mallingbridge, where it would doubtless be easy to offer him an opening more suited to his experience and capacity. If he would kindly advise Mr. Mears as to the arrival of his train, Mr. Mears would meet him at the railway station and conduct him to apartments. "Before you plunge into work again, I must beg you to take a complete rest; and as soon as you feel strong enough, I particularly wish you to spend a holiday in Switzerland. I expressed this wish many years ago, one night when you had kindly given me your company at dinner; but although you tacitly [Pg 346] allowed me to understand that you would comply with it, circumstances prevented its fulfilment. If you are still of the same mind, it will afford me the utmost pleasure to arrange for your Swiss tour."

Having written so far, she laid down her pen, picked up a telephone receiver, and spoke to the counting-house.

She was writing again, and did not raise her eyes, when a clerk came into the room.

"Put them down."

And the clerk placed the bank-notes on the table, and silently retired.

"Meanwhile," she was writing, "I must ask you to accept my small enclosure, and to believe me to be, Yours with sincere regard, Jane Marsden-Thompson."

Then she sealed the envelope, rang a bell, and told someone to despatch her letter by registered post.

Fentiman had mopped up a lot of time—but no matter. Nevertheless, she moved with quick footsteps as she went from the room, and passed along the lofty, silent corridors. Presently using a master-key, she opened a fire-proof door, and entered a narrow passage. In this passage the silence was broken by a vague murmuring sound—like the ripple of sea waves heard echoing in a shell.

She opened another door, and immediately the sound swelled to a confused roar. Through this second door she had come out into a circular gallery just beneath the huge concave of the dome. Looking downward, she could see the extraordinary inverted perspective of circles, floor below floor, each circle apparently smaller than the one above; she could see long strands of gauze and lace, artfully festooned in void space from the gilt rails of the Curtain department, like streamers of white cloud; and beneath the pretty cloud she could see the rainbow colours of delicate satins and silks; and still lower she could see the stir of multitudinous life concentrating at this focal [Pg 347] point of the busy shop.

But she scarcely looked: she listened. Perched high in her dome, solitary, motionless, august, she was like the queen-bee in the upper part of a hive attentively listening to the buzz of industry. And it seemed that the sound was sufficient: her instinct was so fine—she knew by the quality of the humming note that Bence's was working well.

XXXI

[Pg 348]

All well at Bence's; and all well at home.

It was pleasant to her, returning from her work on summer evenings, to see the white gates and long wall speed towards her: as if coming once again out of the land of dreams into the realm of facts, because she called them to her. She had wished for them, and they were hers. While her car glided from the gates to the porch, she enjoyed the full sight of the things that, seen in glimpses, soothed her eyes so many years ago—the comfortable eaves and latticed windows, the dark masses of foliage casting restful shadows on the sun-lit lawns, the steps and brickwork of the terraced garden giving value and form to the gay exuberance of the summer flowers.

"Are the ladies in?"

When the footman said that the ladies were out, she gave a little sigh. It was only a moment's disappointment. By the time that the butler had come forward and was telling her where the ladies had gone, the faint sense of emptiness and disillusionment had vanished. Really she liked the ladies to be out and about as much as possible. There was a big motor-car to take them far from home, and there were horses and carriages to take them on quiet little journeys; for, pleasant as home might be, they must not be allowed to feel themselves prisoners in it. All this side of her life belonged to them: they ruled the world that lay outside her work.

When the footman told her that the ladies were to be found somewhere beneath the eaves or within the walls of the garden, she sprang out of the car as lightly as a girl.

"I think Miss Jane is in the music room, ma'am."

Her face lit up; she smiled contentedly, and hurried through the porch to search for Miss Jane. [Pg 349]

The house was bigger in fact than it had been in the dream. She had tacked on a new wing at each end of it; and her architect had so cleverly preserved the external style that no one outside the building could guess which was the old part and which the new. Inside, you might guess by the size of the rooms. In one wing there was a large dining-room, and in the other wing there was Miss Jane's school-room, play-room, or music-room.

This was an unexpectedly noble hall, containing an organ, a minstrel gallery, and a raised stage for dramatic entertainment; here the young lady had obtained much instruction and amusement; here she learned to sing and dance, to fence and do Swedish exercises, to know the kings of England and to spin tops, to talk French and to play badminton.

Her grandmother, bustling to it, sometimes heard and always loved to hear the music of organ or piano; sometimes all she heard was a young voice talking or laughing—but that was the music that she loved best.

"Granny dear!"

"Mother dear!"

The double welcome was her daily reward, the handsome payment that made her think the long day's toil so light.

A certain pomp was maintained in their manner of living: meals were served with adequate ceremony; butler and footmen instead of parlourmaids waited at table; the family wore rich dresses of an evening;—but all this was to please Enid. Everything that Enid once had seemed to care for must be provided now—the stateliness of liveried men, the grandeur of formal dinner-parties, the small or big extravagances that come with complete immunity from any thought of cost. And on the little girl's account, too. It was essential that Enid should be able to bring up her [Pg 350] child in the midst of fitting, proper, even fashionable surroundings.

Enid took all these benefits placidly and naturally: very much as of old, when she had been an unmarried girl receiving benefits from the same source in St. Saviour's Court. Indeed she had insensibly dropped back into her old way. Except for the one great permanent change that sprang from a dual cause—her deepened affection for her mother and her idolizing devotion to her daughter,—she was strikingly similar to the graceful long-nosed Miss Thompson who went with a smile to meet her fate at Mr. Young's riding-school.

She looked scarcely a day older. She was neither thinner nor fatter; her face, after being pinched by misfortune, had exactly filled out again to the elegant oval of careless youth. The bad time with all its hard lessons was almost obliterated by present ease and comfort: certainly it did not seem to have left indelible marks. She could speak of it—did often speak of it—without wincing, and in the even, unemotional tone that she habitually used.

Only when Jane was ill, she altogether burst through the smooth outer surface of calm propriety, and showed that, if they could be reached, there were some really strong feelings underneath. When Jane was ill, no matter how slightly, Mrs. Kenion became almost demented.

To some juvenile ailments the most jealously guarded child must submit sooner or later. Jane has a sore throat and a cold in the head; Jane slept badly last night; and, oh—merciful powers,—Jane exhibits red spots on her little white chest.

Dr. Eldridge says—now, don't be frightened by a word;—Dr. Eldridge says he believes that, well, ah, yes—it is measles. But there is nothing in that to distress or alarm; rather one might say it is a very good thing. One cannot reasonably hope that Miss Jane will escape measles all her life; and [Pg 351] one may be glad that she has this propitious chance to do her measling under practically ideal conditions.

Yet, late in the afternoon, when wise Eldridge has gone, here is Enid with fear-distended eyes and grief-stricken face, white, shaking, absolutely frantic, as she clings to her mother's arm.

"Mother, don't let her die. Oh, don't let her die."

"She shall not die."

In these emergencies Mrs. Marsden-Thompson is solid as her clock-tower.

"But Dr. Eldridge mayn't be right—perhaps it's something a thousand times worse than measles.... Oh, oh. What *can* we do? It may be some virulent fever—and when she drops off to sleep, she may never wake."

What Mrs. Marsden-Thompson can do to allay Enid's anxiety, she does do, and at once. She telephones to London, to the most famous physician of the period.

"There, my darling," she says presently; "now keep calm. Sir John is coming—by the evening express."

"Mother dear, how can I thank you enough?"

"My own Enid, there's nothing to thank me for. It will relieve all our minds to have the very highest opinion.... And Sir John will spend the night here—that will be nice for you, to know that he is remaining on the spot."

Then in due course the illustrious Sir John arrives, and confirms the diagnosis of Dr. Eldridge. It *is* measles—and a very mild case of it.

Jane grew up strong and hearty, none the worse for childish ailments, and uninjured by the idolatry of her two nearest female relatives. As Yates said, it was a miracle that Jane didn't get absolutely spoilt by so much fussing care and loving worship. But Yates stoutly declared that the young lady was not spoilt up to now; and attributed her escape from spoiling to the fortunate [Pg 352] circumstance that she took after her grandmother.

Outwardly she was like her mother, but perhaps inwardly she did somewhat resemble her granny. At fourteen she was certainly more enthusiastic, vivacious, and expansive than Enid had been at that age. And, unlike the young Enid, she could not readily take the impress of other people's minds and manners. Governesses said she was *very* clever, but too much disposed to rely on conclusions reached by trains of thought set in motion by herself and running on lines of her own construction. Governesses would not say she was obstinate—oh, no, far from it—but perhaps guilty now and then of a certain intellectual arrogance that was unbecoming in one so young.

Fourteen—fifteen—past her sixteenth birthday! Jane is really growing up; and nearer and nearer draws the time when mother and grandmother will be confronted with the awful problem of finding her a suitable husband—a *good* husband, if such a thing exists on the broad surface of the earth. It is appalling to think about; but it cannot be blinked or evaded. The fiery chain of life must have its new link of flame: Jane must carry the torch, and give it safely to the small hands that are waiting somewhere in immeasurable darkness to grasp it and bear it still onward.

Once when Enid lightly hinted at this terrifying matter, Jane caught the hint that was not intended for her ears, and replied very shrewdly.

"It strikes me, mummy, that most likely you'll be married before I shall."

Mrs. Kenion laughed and flushed, and seemed rather gratified by this compliment; but she promised never to introduce Jane to a stepfather. No, she will never marry again—has no faintest inclination for further experiments of that sort. Once bit, twice shy. She will act on the adage; [Pg 353] although, when she speaks so blandly of the bad ungrateful dog that bit her, one might almost suppose that she had forgotten nearly all the pain of the bite.

"Mother dear, isn't it wonderful? He is riding again;" and Enid looks up from the morning newspaper, sips her breakfast coffee, and speaks with calm admiration. She always reads the sporting news, and never misses an entry of Charlie's name in minor steeplechase meetings.

Here it is:—Mrs. Charles Kenion's Dreadnought; Trainer, private; Jockey, Mr. Kenion.

"And Charles is over forty-five. Really, I do think it's wonderful," says Enid calmly and admiringly.

"But he shouldn't go on riding races. She oughtn't to let him. It can only end"—and Enid says this with unruffled calm—"in his breaking his neck."

But it seems that Charlie's neck is charmed: that it cannot be broken over the sticks, or—sinister thought!—that it is being preserved for another and more formal method of dislocation.

Nearer than the necessity of discovering a worthy mate for Jane, there looms the smaller necessity of presenting her at Court, giving her a London season, and so forth. As to the presentation, a very obliging offer has been tendered by the great lady of the county—wife of that local potentate who lives in the sheltered magnificence behind the awe-inspiring iron gates. Her ladyship has voluntarily suggested that she should take Miss Kenion, when properly feathered and betrained, into the effulgent presence of her sovereign.

Naturally, since those tremendous iron gates have opened to Mrs. Marsden-Thompson, no lesser entrances are closed against her. Success, if it is big enough, condones most offences; and the prejudiced objection to retail trade, under which Enid once suffered, has been generously waived. What she used artlessly to call county people make much of her and her daughter. [Pg 354]

They are bidden to the very best houses; they may consort on equal terms with the highest quality; there is no one so fine that he or she will resent an invitation to dinner.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Marsden-Thompson is an old dear. And her daughter is quite charming. I don't know what to make of the girl—but of course you know, she is going to be an immense heiress."

Mrs. Marsden-Thompson, presiding at a banquet to the county, perhaps was pleased to think that this, too, she had at last been able to give her Enid. Really tip-top society—social concert-pitch, if compared with the flat tinkling that Enid used to hear at Colonel Salter's.

Gold plate on the table; liveried home-retainers, with soberly-clad aids from Bence's refreshment departments; a white waistcoat or silver buttons behind every chair; and, seated on the chairs, a most select and notable company of guests, gracious smiling ladies and grandiosely urbane lords; pink and white faces of candid young girls and sun-burnt faces of gallant young soldiers; shimmer of pearls, glitter of diamonds, flash of bright eyes, and a polite murmur of well-bred voices—surely this is all that Enid could possibly desire.

But it was not the society that the hostess really cared about. The dinner-parties that she enjoyed were far different from this. She gave this sort of feast to please Enid; but at certain seasons—at Christmas especially—she gave a feast to please herself.

Then the old friends came. The two motor-cars and the large landau went to fetch some of the guests. Few of them were carriage-folk. Mr. and Mrs. Archibald Bence had their own brougham of course; Mr. and Mrs. Prentice used one of Young's flies; but most of the others were very glad to accept a lift out and home. By special request they all came early, and in morning-dress. [Pg 355]

"We dine at seven," wrote the hostess in her invitations; "but please come early, so that we can have a chat before dinner. And as it is to be just a friendly unceremonious gathering, do you mind wearing morning dress?"

Did they mind? What a thoughtless question, when she might have known that some of them had nothing but morning dress! Mr. Mears, in spite of his rise in the world, rigidly adhered to the frock coat, as the garment most suitable to his years and his figure. Cousin Thompson—the ex-grocer of Haggart's Cross—considered swallow-tails and white chokers to be fanciful nonsense: he would not make a merry-andrew of himself to please anybody. Neither of the two Miss Prices had ever possessed a low-cut bodice—old Mrs. Price would probably have whipped her for her immodesty if she had ever been caught in one.

Then buttoned coats and no spreading shirt fronts, high-necked blouses and no bare shoulders; but in other respects full pomp for this humbler banquet: home-servants and Bence-servants; the electric light blazing on the splendid epergnes, the exquisite Bohemian glass, and the piled fruit in the Wedgewood china; the long table stretched to its last leaf; more than thirty people eating, drinking, talking, laughing, shining with satisfaction—and Mrs. Marsden-Thompson at the head of the sumptuous board, shedding quick glances, kind smiles, friendly nods, making the wine taste better and the lamps glow brighter, gladdening and cheering every man and woman there.

"Cousin Jenny!" It is our farmer cousin shouting from the end of the table. "You're so far off that I shall have to whistle to you. You haven't forgotten my whistle?"

"No, that I haven't, cousin Gordon."

And radiant cousin Gordon turns to tell Miss Jane the story of the Welshman, the Irishman, and the Scotsman who met on London Bridge; and Miss Jane is good enough to be amused. [Pg 356]

"Lord, how often I've told that story to your grandmother! I'll tell it her again when we get back into the music-room. 'Tis a favourite of hers."

Jane and Enid are both very sweet on these occasions, loyally assisting the hostess, and winning the hearts of the humblest guests. There is perhaps a just perceptible effort in Enid's pretty manner; but with Jane it is all entirely natural.

"Mr. Prentice," says Jane impudently, "you mayn't know it, but you are going to sing us a comic song after dinner."

Mr. Prentice is delighted yet coy.

"No, no—certainly not."

"Oh yes, you will. Won't he, Mrs. Prentice?"

"I'm sure he will, if you wish it, Miss Jane."

Mr. Archibald Bence, looking rather wizened and wan, is just off to the South of France for the remainder of the winter; and Mr. Fentiman, talking across the table, urges him to see the falls of the Rhine on his return journey.

"When I was touring in Switzerland last autumn," says Fentiman sententiously, "I gave one whole day to Schaffhausen, and it amply repaid me for the time and trouble."

Wherever the hostess turns her kind eyes, she can see someone looking at her gratefully and affectionately. There is our grumbling cousin who once was a poor little grocer. She has done so much for him that he has almost entirely ceased to grumble. There is noisy, would-be-facetious cousin Gordon, once a little struggling tenant, now a landlord successfully farming his own land. There is corpulent Greig, on the retired list, but jovial and contented, with his pride unwounded, revelling in high-paid tranquillity. There are the cackling, stupid Miss Prices and their greedy old [Pg 357] mother. They have looked at workhouse doors and shivered apprehensively; but now they chide the maid when she fails to make up the drawing-room fire, and bully the butcher if he sends them a scraggy joint for Sunday. There is faithful Mears in his newest frock-coat, close beside her, as of right, very close to her heart. And there, behind her chair, is faithful Yates—in rustling black silk, with kerchief of real point lace. She does not of course appear when the county dines with us; but to-night Yates stands an honorary major-domo at the Christmas dinner—because she exactly understands the spirit of the feast, and knows how her mistress wishes things to be done.

"And now," says Mr. Prentice, "I'm not going to break the rule. No speeches. But just one toast.... Our hostess!"

The faces of the guests all turn towards her; and the lamp-light, flashing here and there, shows her gleams of gold. The golden shower that falls so freely has left some drops on each of them. Her small gifts are visible—the rings on their fingers, the brooches at their necks; but the lamp-light cannot reach her greater gifts—the soft beds, the warm fires, the money in their banks, the comfort in their breasts.

XXXII

[Pg 358]

Of course she had sent her husband money. Only Mears knew how much. Mears acted as intermediary, conducted the correspondence; and in despatching the doles, whether much or little, he rarely failed to reiterate the proviso that the recipient was not to set foot in England. That was the irrepealable condition under which aid from time to time was granted.

But of late it had become plain that no attempt would be made to set the prohibition at defiance: Mr. Marsden would never revisit his native land. During the last year his wife had written to him twice or thrice, supplementing the communications of Mears with extra bounties and some hopeful, cheering words. Mr. Marsden was begged to employ these additional drafts in defraying the expenses of illness, to take care of himself, and to fight against desponding thoughts.

Now, one summer morning, when she entered her room at Bence's, Mr. Mears stood by a window waiting for her arrival.

"Good morning, Mr. Mears;" and she looked at his solemn face. "Anything out of the way?"

"Yes. Some news from California."

"Ah!" And she pointed to the letter in his hand. "Is it the news that we had reason to expect?"

"Yes.... It's all over;" and Mr. Mears placed a chair for her, near the newspaper table.

She sat down, took the letter, spread it open on the table; and, shading her eyes with a hand, began to read it.

"Mr. Mears!" She spoke without looking up. "I shall do no work to-day. Tell them all that I cannot [Pg 359] see them."

In the lofty corridor the doors of the managers' rooms were opening; the chieftains were bringing their reports; secretaries and clerks were silently assembling.

Mr. Mears left the room, whisperingly dismissed everybody; and with closed lips and noiseless footsteps, the little crowd dispersed.

When he returned to the room she spoke to him again, still without raising her eyes.

"The car has gone home, of course. Please telephone to the house, and tell them to send it back for me at once."

He transmitted her order, and then went to a window and looked down into the court-yard.

"Mr. Mears!"

She had finished the letter, and was carefully folding it. "There. You had better keep it—with the other papers.... Sit down, please. Stay with me till the car comes."

Mr. Mears sat down, put the folded letter in his pocket, but did not speak. He noticed that her eyes were free from moisture, and her quiet voice betrayed no emotion of any sort.

"Ah, well;" and she gave a little sigh. "He wanted for nothing. His friend says so explicitly.... Mr. Mears, she cannot have been a bad woman—according to her lights. You see, she has stuck to him faithfully."

Then, after a long pause, she spoke very kindly of the dead man; and Mears noticed the pitying tenderness that had come into her voice. But it could not have been called emotion: it was a benign, comprehensive pity, a ready sympathy for weakness and misfortune, and no deep disturbance of personal feeling. Mears had heard her talk in just such a tone when she had been told about the sad end of a total stranger.

"Poor fellow! A wasted life, Mr. Mears!... And he had many good points. He was naturally a *worker*. Considerable capacity—he seemed to promise great things in the beginning.... You know, *you* thought well of him at first." [Pg 360]

"At first," said Mears. "I admit it. He was a good salesman."

"He was a *grand* salesman, Mr. Mears.... I have never met a better one."

Enid was waiting for her at the white gates, when the car brought her home.

"Mother dear, is anything wrong? Are you ill?"

The car had stopped; and Enid, clambering on the step, showed a white, scared face.

"No, my dear. I am quite all right. I'll get out here, and stroll in the garden with you.... My sweet Enid, did the message frighten you?"

"Yes, dreadfully."

"It was inconsiderate of me not to say I wasn't ill.... I am taking the day off. That is all."

"But what has happened? Something has upset you. I can see it in your face."

Then, as they walked slowly to and fro along a terrace between bright and perfumed flowers, Mrs. Marsden-Thompson quietly told her daughter the news.

"I am a widow, Enid dear.... No, it did not upset me. Mr. Mears and I were both prepared to hear it.... But of course it takes one back into the past; it sets one thinking—and I felt at once that I ought not to attend to ordinary business, that it would be only proper to take the day off....

"And I think, Enid, that henceforth I shall call myself Mrs. Thompson—plain Mrs. Thompson, dropping the other name altogether."... She had paused on the path, to pick a sprig of verbena; and she gently crushed a thin leaf, and inhaled its perfume. "Yes, dear. I always liked the old name best. But I felt that while he was living, it might seem unkind, and in bad taste, if I altogether refused to bear his name. Now, however, it cannot matter;" and she opened her hand and let the crushed leaf fall. "He has gone. And he is quite forgotten. There is nobody who can think it unkind if his name dies, too." [Pg 361]

XXXIII [Pg 362]

The pleasant years were slipping away, and Mrs. Thompson was just as busy as she had ever been. She had long ago ceased to speak of retiring, and now she did not even think of it. The success of Bence's had continued to swell larger and larger; its trade grew steadily and surely; its financial position was so strong that nothing could shake it.

Prentice and Archibald Bence often advised the proprietress to turn herself into a company, and she was more or less disposed to adopt their suggestion. Some day or other she might do it. But it would be a big job—the promotion of a company on the grandest scale, with enormous capital involved, wants careful consideration. Perhaps she was a little inclined to shrink the preliminary labours of the scheme—and in any event the flotation could not bring her more leisure, because she would certainly be obliged to remain at Bence's as managing director.

In these years Jane had made her bow at the Court of St. James's, and had experienced the excitement of a London season; but as yet her guardians had found her no suitable sweetheart. They were difficult to please; and she herself appeared to be in no hurry. However, Jane at twenty-two was so good-looking, so vivaciously amiable, so altogether charming, that Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Kenion knew well that they would not be able to put off the heavy day much longer. The right man, though still unseen, must have drawn very near by now.

On Thursday afternoons, weather permitting, Mrs. Thompson liked to drive in the carriage; and it was always an especial treat when the social engagements of her ladies allowed them to accompany her. As the big bay horses trotted along the smooth roads she leaned back in her seat with luxurious contentment and beamed at Jane, at Enid, at all the world. [Pg 363]

"Now is not this much nicer—the air, the quiet enjoyment, the gentle motion—than if we were being whirled past everything in a motor-car?"

"Yes, granny, it *is* very nice."

"I fear that you would have preferred the car, Enid?"

"Oh no, mother dear. I think horses are delightful when you don't want to go far, and time is no object."

"That's just it," said Mrs. Thompson. "Time is no object. The horses help me to remember that; and I like to remember it—because it gives one the holiday feeling."

"Poor granny!" Jane had taken one of grandmamma's hands, and was squeezing it affectionately. "And it's only a *half*-holiday. You don't get enough of the holiday feeling.... Oh, where's my Kodak? I must snap those children."

The carriage was stopped; Jane sprang out, and ran back to photograph three little girls in a cottage garden.

"There," said Mrs. Thompson triumphantly. "If we had been in the car, she wouldn't have seen them. We should have passed too quickly."

Jane stopped the carriage again, when they came to a point where the road turns abruptly to cross a high bridge above the railway.

"Here we are, granny. Here's your favourite view."

Mrs. Thompson had always been fond of this view of Mallingbridge; and though it was much too large for a snapshot photograph, Jane liked it, too.

Looking down from the bridge you have Mallingbridge, stretched as a map, at your feet. Once the clustered roofs made a large spot four miles away in the middle of the plain. Now the roofs had encroached until very little plain was left. The town and its suburbs had rolled out in all directions, burying green meadows beneath warehouses and factories, stifling the copses with red-brick villas, planting the flowery slopes with tram-lines and iron standards. To-day the light was bad; the sun only here and there could pierce the drab clouds of smoke that rose from countless chimneys, and drifted and hung over the central part of the town; but the three big towers showed plainly enough—the square tower of St. Saviour's, the steeple of Holy Trinity, and the pinnacled monument of Bence's clock. And very plainly, with the sunshine suddenly striking it, one saw the huge dome of Bence. [Pg 364]

A changed view, a widely extended map, since Mrs. Thompson first looked at it. But there at her feet lay the world that she had conquered and held.

Perhaps, while the horses stood champing their bits and the coachman and footman stifled yawns of ennui, Mrs. Thompson extracted from the wide view a warm and comfortable sensation of happiness and pride. She was quite happy, with every fierce passion burnt out, with the disturbing energy of the emotions nearly all gone; but with the full and satisfying work still left to her, and the zest for the work growing always keener, keeping her young of spirit, defying the years. And she was proud—very proud in her undiminished power of protecting those she loved. She had never failed to protect. Her mother,—her dull old husband,—her daughter,—her daughter's daughter: all who had touched the orbit of her strength with love had found security. And she had been able to break as well as to make. All who had served her were guarded and safe: all who had opposed her were crushed and done for.

"Shall I drive on, ma'am?" [Pg 365]

"Yes, drive on."

The coachman and footman in their black liveries and white gloves had a grand air; the bay horses were large highly-bred beasts; the carriage was one of those four-seated victorias which are much affected by royal persons—the whole equipage offered a majestic appearance. If the route of the excursion led them by the avenues of new villas and through some of the crowded streets of the town, Mrs. Thompson's weekly outing became exactly like a queen's procession.

Hats off on either side; continuous bowing to right and left; men and women staring from open doors, running to upper windows, bumping into one another on the pavement.

"Who is it?"

"Mrs. Thompson."

"Oh!"

"What is it? I couldn't see. Was it the fire-engine?"

"No. Mrs. Thompson—taking her Thursday drive. Just gone round the corner to Bridge Street."

In Bridge Street, people on the top of trams stood up to stare at her; and if it chanced that there rode on the car some stranger to Mallingbridge, the conductor and all the passengers volubly instructed him.

"Who did you say it was?"

"Mrs. Thompson!... She's *Bence's*; she is ... Mrs. Thompson, don't I tell you? But Bence's is all hers.... She built that tower what you're looking at now.... She gave the money to build the new hospital that we're coming to presently.... Mrs. Thompson! They say she's rich enough to buy the blooming town."

When she got home she thanked her companions for giving her the treat.

"It is sweet of you both—and I hope you haven't been bored. It has been the greatest treat for me." [Pg 366]

Another of her great treats—enjoyed more rarely than the carriage drive—was on a Sunday night, when she and her granddaughter went in to Mallingbridge for the evening service at St. Saviour's Church.

"We won't ask your mother to come, because I fancy she is a little tired. But if you feel up to it?"

"*Rather*," said Jane.

"Really and truly, you won't mind?"

"I shall love it, granny."

Then, time being an object, the small car was ordered, and the chauffeur jumped gleefully to obey the sabbath-infringing order. He knew that he would receive a thumping tip as guerdon for his extra pains.

She sat in the old pew, with Jane by her side. She had retained the places, although she could so infrequently use them; and the card in the metal frame once again read, "Mrs. Thompson, two seats."

The dim light fell softly on her white hair and pale face, on her ermine fur and the purple velvet of her mantle; and the congregation, sparse rows of vague, meaningless figures, sent shadowy glances at her back and at her sides. There was no one here now who had seen her as a bride, with her pretty hair and fresh, vividly coloured complexion; but all knew who she was, and everybody seemed to be stirred by her dignified presence. At her entrance a whisper and a movement had run along the pews. "Look! Mrs. Thompson!"

A young curate conducted the service with a kind of languid hurry. The old broad church vicar was dead, and a low church vicar had obtained the living. So there was less singing and chanting than of past days; and the choir boys, standing or sitting in the brightly illuminated chancel, had not so much work to do. It was all one to Mrs. Thompson—the old way or the new way. The sensible view, the *business* view of the matter remained unaltered. Given a consecrated house of prayer, anyone who isn't a faddist ought to be able to pray in it. [Pg 367]

The congregation had stood up, to recite the evening psalms in alternate verses with the curate; and Mrs. Thompson, standing very erect, looked from the darkness towards the light.

... "The Lord is with them that uphold my soul;" and then the congregation recited their verse.

Jane glanced at granny's face—so fine, so strong, so brave; and listened to her firm, resolute voice.

"He shall reward evil until mine enemies: destroy thou them in thy truth."

While the curate read the next verse, Jane was still watching her granny's face.

"For," answered Mrs. Thompson, "he hath delivered me out of all my trouble; and mine eye hath seen his desire upon mine enemies."

"Glory be to the Father," said the curate, in a perfunctory tone, "and to the Son: and to the Holy Ghost;"

"As it was in the beginning," said Mrs. Thompson, firmly and fervently, "is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen."

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