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# THE
# YELLOW HOUSE

## MASTER OF MEN

BY
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

AUTHOR OF
"THE MISCHIEF-MAKER" "BERENICE" "HAVOC"
"THE LOST LEADER" "THE MALEFACTOR"

VOLUME ONE

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MASTER OF MEN

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UPWARD in long sinuous bends the road wound its way into the heart of the hills. The man, steadily climbing to the summit, changed hands upon the bicycle he was pushing, and wiped the sweat from his grimy forehead. It had been a gray morning when he had left, with no promise of this burst of streaming sunshine. Yet the steep hill troubled him but little—he stepped blithely forward with little sign of fatigue.

His workman’s clothes, open at the throat, showed him the possessor of a magnificent pair of shoulders; the suggestion of great physical strength was carried out also in his hard, clean-cut features and deep-set, piercing gray eyes. He passed a grove where the ground was blue with budding hyacinths, and he loitered for a moment, leaning upon the saddle of his bicycle, and gazing up the sunlit glade. A line or two of Keats sprang to his lips. As he uttered them a transfiguring change swept across his face, still black in patches, as though from grimy labor. His hard, straight mouth relaxed into a very pleasant curve, a softer light flashed in his steely eyes.

He reached a wooden gate at last on his right-hand side, and, pushing it open, skirted a stone wall until he came to a sudden dip in the field, and with its back against a rocky eminence, a tiny cottage built of the stones which lay in heaps about the turf. He leaned his bicycle against the wall, and, taking a key from his pocket, unlocked the door.

“Saturday at last,” he exclaimed aloud. “Thirty-six hours of freedom. Phew!”

He had plunged a basin into the soft-water tank outside and held his head in it for a moment. Then, all dripping, he carried a canful to a hollow bath ingeniously fixed among the rocks against which the cottage was built, and, throwing off his soiled clothes, jumped in. There was no longer any sign of the grease-stained mechanic when he emerged, and, with his towel wrapped lightly around him, stepped into the cottage.

He reappeared in a few minutes clad in a gray homespun suit, which showed many signs of wear, a pipe in his mouth, a book in his hand. Leisurely he filled a kettle from the well and thrust it into the centre of the small wood fire, which he had kindled. Then, with a sigh of relief, he threw himself upon the soft, mossy turf.

The book lay unheeded by his side. From his high vantage point he looked downward at the wide panorama which stretched to the horizon, faintly and mistily blue. The glorious spring sunshine lay like a quickening fire upon the land. The tree tops, moving lightly in the west wind, were budding into tender green; the dark pine groves were softened; the patches of rich brown soil, freshly turned by the plow, gleamed as though with promise of the crops to come.

Below him the dusty lane along which he had traveled stretched like a narrow white belt, vanishing here and there in the woods and disappearing at times between lichen-stained gray walls. He traced it backward across the silvery brook, back to the quaint village with its clustering gray stone houses, red-tiled roofs, and strange church tower, and watched for a moment the delicate wreaths of smoke curl upward, straight with the promise of fine weather. Farther still he followed it into the flat country past the reservoir, a brilliant streak of scintillating light, back into the heart of the town whence he had come, and which stretched there now in the middle distance a medley of factory chimneys and miles of houses —a great foul blot upon the fair landscape.

He remembered it as he had ridden out an hour or so ago, the outskirts with all their depressing ugliness, a cobbled road, a shabby tramcar with a tired horse creeping along a road where dirty children played weary games and shouted shrilly to one another. A miserable region of smoke-begrimed houses and small shops, an unattractive public house at every corner, round which loafed men with the white faces of tired animals, and women dragging babies and shouting abuse to their more venturesome offspring.

With painful distinctness he saw it all—the opened factory gates, the belching out of a slatternly mob of shrieking girls and ribald youths, the streets untidy with the refuse of the greengrocers’ shops, the hot, fetid atmosphere of the low-lying town. He closed his eyes—ah, how swiftly it all vanished! In his ears was the pleasant chirping of many insects, the glorious sunshine lay about him like wine, the west wind made music in the woods, one thrush in particular was singing to him blithely from the thatched roof of his cottage—a single throbbing note against a melodious background of the whole woodful of twittering birds. The man smiled to himself, well pleased.

Then his thoughts in relief slipped away from the present to the little perfumed garden of the vicarage across the hills. He was there in the deepening twilight listening in wonder to the song that floated on the still air. The voice was that of a woman such as Strone had never looked upon before. He closed his eyes with the memory—the night lived again for him as the song grew—and the air seemed suddenly sweet and vibrating with music. He was strangely, wonderfully thrilled, for that night from the lips of this tired woman of fashion,

there had come to him a new wonder in life. His pulses quivered with the memory of it, of the music that died away. As in a dream he saw her again upon the threshold of the French window looking listlessly out at them, her beautiful slim figure softly defined against the rose-shaded background. Every detail of that wonderful moment was stamped upon his mind forever. The gleam of the Reverend Martinghoe’s cigar shone softly in the silence—the eager words of the two men had long since died away, and Strone’s gaze went in thought from the man who had brought him there to the face of Lady Malingcourt who had come out to them in the darkness. With a rich voice that seemed still to hold the last note of her song, she had chided them for their lack of compliments. The Reverend Martinghoe had only laughed as he looked up at his sister, but Strone the mechanic, the laborer from Gascester, who had penetrated these precincts only on the older man’s kindness, had moved from out the shadows and with a few murmured words had ridden away as in a dream....

A carriage grated on the road beyond. Strone opened his eyes and saw a brougham and pair leisurely ascending the hill; he watched it with surprise for it was a rough road and seldom used.

It drew level with him, and he became aware of a brilliant vision, a Bond Street toilet, a woman fair and listless, leisurely extending a daintily shod foot to the step of the suddenly checked carriage. He was astonished to find himself the possessor of emotions more fierce and vivid than any he had ever imagined. He was suddenly shy and awkward.

She stepped across the road and held out a gray-gloved hand.

“How do you do, Mr. Strone? Are we really anywhere near this wonderful cottage of yours?”

He pointed to where the smoke crept up behind the hillock.

“You are very near, indeed, Lady Malingcourt,” he said.

She paused, suddenly embarrassed. How stupid the man was, standing there like an owl.

“I am curious to see the outside,” she said. “I cannot imagine what a home-made house looks like. It reminds one so much of the picture books of our youth. Can I see it from the other side of the field without climbing anything?”

Strone threw open the gate, and she passed through, her gray skirt trailing with a silken rustle across the short, green turf. She looked at him sideways languidly—how stupid the man was.

“I have been paying calls,” she said; “a dreary ordeal in the country. People expect you to play croquet or smell flowers, and have tea out of doors. So extraordinary. Life seems made up of people who live in London and have houses in the country, and people who live in the country and have houses in London. Such a wonderful difference, isn’t there?”

“I suppose so,” he answered.

Then there was a short silence. It was an event, this, so bewildering, so unexpected, that Strone was unable to recover himself. A new shyness held him speechless. Lady Malingcourt, who was wondering now if she rightly understood it, did nothing to help him.

Of the wonderful hour that followed Strone had a rather confused impression. Little by little his tongue became loosened, he initiated her into the mysteries of that very simple place his hermitage, and all unknown to himself, to that rather complex thing the man. She enthused over the one and affected to ignore the other, while with rare subtlety she threw into their talk a salt-like impetus in regard to his work that stung.

“I must go,” she said at last rising. “Remember that John is bringing me to have tea with you next Sunday. I have promised to take him to Lingford Grange to dine to-night.”

The man at her side stopped suddenly.

“Will you sing to them there?” he asked.

She did not answer at once. She was studying the picturesque incongruity of Strone with his surroundings, the contrast between his marvelous attire and his easy, fluent speech. Neither flustered nor assertive, he was unconscious of his quiet, strong mastery; encouraged to talk he talked; when opportunity came he was silent. She was filled with admiration of the man, the genius, the mechanic inventor who, his brother had told her, was to make a name that would live; and there stole to this blasé woman under the glancing sunlight a strange new feeling which she defined as interest.

“Why? You will not be there surely?”

He ignored the insolence of her question.

“If you mean that I shall not be one of Colonel Drevenhill’s guests—certainly not,” he rejoined. “Nevertheless if you are asked to sing, I hope that you will.”

He watched the carriage until it was out of sight.

All the rest of the afternoon he lay on the warm turf above the cottage smoking fiercely, and reading Heine. Then a gate slammed. The book slipped from his fingers. He sat up, listening, his heart beating thickly, his eyes ablaze. It was a woman who came into sight, but a woman in an ill-hanging skirt, pushing a cheap bicycle, a woman hot and dusty with riding. He ground his heel upon his feeling of sickly disappointment. This was better for him. He rose and went to meet her—took the bicycle; did his best to seem pleased.

“I didn’t know whether I oughter come again so soon,” she began doubtfully, watching him with anxious eyes.

"I am glad to see you," he said. "Have you come for more books? See, I will put the kettle on."

He took it to the well and filled it, made up the fire, and reached down some things from the cupboard. She watched him, drawing her gloves through her hand, anxious that he should notice her new hat. He looked at her furtively now and then, wondering whether white muslins and pink roses would have the power to transform her into a creature of that feminine world of which it seemed to him that there could be but one real habitant. Her thick stuff gown, her untidy skirt, and pitifully cheap little hat—he looked them all over mercilessly.

She felt vaguely that her appearance displeased him, yet he had seemed glad to see her. She made up her mind to believe he was glad. It had been so miserable a week—every morning she had woke up in her stuffy little room with only this thought to cheer her—that she was one day nearer Saturday. Much scheming—even a harmless little fib had gone to the buying of the new hat. She had earned it fairly enough. A record week's wages, a dizzy head, fingers and hands sore with labor. But her reward had come. She threw herself upon the turf by his side.

They talked very little. The birds were singing and the west wind blowing through the tree tops. Below them a wide stretch of country, blue-carpeted woods, brown and furrowed fields, fields green with sprouting corn. The girl spoke timidly of the books she had read; he listened, blowing out dense clouds of tobacco smoke. She talked, and every now and then she sighed.

"It is so beautiful here," she murmured. "If only there was no going back."

He was silent. His eyes were fixed upon the tall chimneys and smoky clouds which hung over the city. The girl was picking grass and throwing it away. Her hand met his, sought his touch—and Strone, so unused to anything of the sort, was embarrassed, and clumsily removed it.

She rose up at once.

"You don't want me here any longer," she said. "I'm off."

He stopped her.

"Why, what's the matter, Milly?" he exclaimed. "You have not had your tea yet."

"I don't want any tea."

She stood with her back turned to him. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that she was crying.

"What nonsense," he said. "Sit down while I see about it."

"I don't want any," she repeated. "I'm sorry I came. I'm sorry I ever saw you. I'm off!"

She started down the turf walk, pushing her dusty old bicycle. Strone groaned to himself as he followed in pursuit. He caught her by the gate, touched her arm. She shook herself free.

"Let me be," she said, keeping her face averted.

He saw the gleam of tears in her eyes, and felt himself a brute. Then, somehow, he scarcely knew how it happened, his arm was around her waist and he had kissed her. After that there was no more talk of her going. She sobbed herself into an ecstasy. They returned together.

"I thought that you wanted me gone," she said, in a broken tone, mopping her eyes with her handkerchief. "I was so miserable."

Strone was very uncomfortable. He almost wished that he had let her go. However, he made the best of it, hurried on the tea, and ignored sundry affectionate little overtures on her part. Afterward he chose for his seat an isolated rock, and pointed out to her a place beneath. However, he couldn't avoid her resting her head upon his knee. She began to talk—volubly. It wasn't very interesting—a long tirade—a record of her woes, fascinating to him, for it was a page from the life of one of his kind. What a bringing up! A father who drank, a mother to be passed over in dark silence, a squalid home, children unwholesome and unmanageable. What a struggle for respectability, and what would be the end of it, he wondered, as the light grew dimmer, the evening insects buzzed around them, and far down in the valley little yellow dots of light leaped into life. Then he rose up, and she sadly followed his example.

"I suppose I must go," she said doubtfully.

"I am quite sure of it, if you want to get home to-night," he answered. "I'll carry your bicycle to the gate and light your lamp. You'll remember what we've been talking about. You'll read the books and be brave?"

"Yes."

"Life isn't always black. There's a time when the clouds lift."

"When may I come again?" she asked bluntly.

He took her hand gravely.

"Next Saturday, Milly. If I am not here, you know where the key is. Stop and make yourself some tea."

"If you're away I'll wait," she answered. "I shan't want any tea."

He started her off, and trudged homeward with a sense of unaccountable relief. He felt

stifled, vaguely troubled by the memory of the girl’s white face and pleading brown eyes. Then a nightingale sang to him. At once his mind was swept bare of all such thoughts. Once more the pine and the clover-scented air around him seemed quivering with strange and passionate music.

That night in the grounds of Lingford Grange the man stood like a statue, half invisible among the shadows. Only his face, wrung with emotion, gleamed pale through the darkness. Out from the window, ablaze with much illumination, out into the cool, still night came the wonderful music tugging at his heartstrings, sending the blood rushing through his veins at fever heat.

The song swelled and the music grew, and with it his impotence. Then came the end—the dying away of that long sustained, melodious note, the crash of chords on the piano, the buzz of applause, merging into conversation.

And all these things Strone heard, for Lingford Grange, with its magnificent front and groves of poplars, stood with its back sheer upon a country road, and the newly built music room almost overhung the pathway. He heard, and he listened for more. They would make her sing again! Soon a silence, the silence of expectation—a note or two upon the piano—and again her voice. More wonderful than ever. It was a fantasy of music, elusive, capricious, delightful. The song ended with the woman’s laughter. Strone groaned where he stood, under the rustling leaves. It was like an omen, a chill forewarning of his own certain fate.

Shadows passed backward and forward across the window, and Strone waited, drunk for the moment with his stupendous folly. The music had crept into his brain; a new force was alive within him. He stood there rigid, immovable.

“She will come to the window,” he said to himself.

And she came. He knew her at once, as she came slowly into sight, leaning on the arm of Colonel Devenhill. A diamond star burned in her hair, a great bunch of white roses were clustering loosely at her bosom. She walked straight to the window and looked out. The spirit of the song seemed still to linger in her face, her eyelids dropped a little, her lips were parted in the faintest of smiles! Against the lamplit background she formed perhaps the fairest image of a woman Strone had ever gazed upon. Her bare arms and neck shone like alabaster, her black net gown glittered all over with some marvelous trimming traced in a strange design about her skirt. She stood there looking out, and Strone lifted his eyes to hers. It was like fire flashing through the summer darkness. Then he heard her voice.

“How delicious this air is. Could I trouble you to fetch my fan, Colonel Devenhill? It is on the piano.”

The man disappeared. Then Strone’s heart throbbed. Though he dared not speak or move toward her it seemed to him that they were alone. He watched her breathlessly. A white jeweled hand played for a moment with the ornament which held her roses—then they came dropping into the darkness, a little shower of white blossoms. Almost immediately the young man rejoined her, the fan in his hand. With a single bound Strone cleared the road, picked up the roses one by one with hot, dry fingers, and regained his shelter with the echo of a woman’s soft laugh ringing in his ears.

He chose a safe place and watched her go by an hour or so later, leaning back in the carriage with half-closed eyes, as though asleep, and a cloud of drooping white lace around her shoulders. It was only a glimpse. Then he lit his pipe and trudged homeward across the hills. With the gray dawn he turned upon his madness and fought it.

Day by day he rode backward and forward from his hillside cottage to Gascester, through the misty dawn and the white moonlight. Like a man at bay he fought his madness—he, the grimy mechanic in grease-stained clothing, who had drawn an evil poison into his veins. Heart and soul he flung himself with grim determination into his great work. The wheels of his models whirred and the great pistons throbbed with life. Out of chaos there resolved itself before him a problem to be solved—beyond was fortune immeasurable. So he toiled, not discouraged by many failures, grim and unswerving in his resolve to struggle through into the light.

It was in those days that Strone’s ambition, kindled long enough ago, burst suddenly into full flame. He neglected his reading and his solitary country rambles for a spell of downright hard work. Many nights he remained at the works long after the workpeople had left, locked in his shed, with a single light burning—laboring always at the same apparently confused collection of wheels and strangely shaped pieces of metal which were to do the work of ten machines or a hundred men. His progress was slow, and a less forceful man would long ago have been discouraged. There was a point beyond which movement seemed impossible. Ever he was hammering away, as many others had done before him, at a problem which seemed insoluble.

He rode backward and forward like a man in a dream. Ever those wheels seemed flying round before his eyes, and somewhere between them and the piston rod there was a link—but where? He told himself plainly that the thing was possible. Some day it would come to him. He had always told himself that. Only whereas a few months ago he had contemplated the end with a sort of leisurely curiosity, he felt himself impelled to work now with a feverish haste, as though time had suddenly closed in upon him.

At last the day came when Strone lay on the short turf, smoking quietly, looking out upon the glimmering world with new eyes. Sphinxlike he gazed with an impassivity somewhat to be wondered at, for an hour ago he had finished his task. Those silent days, those long spells of work, when day had become fused into night and night into day, had left their mark upon him. His face was thinner, his eyes almost brilliant, a slight feverishness had flushed his cheeks. The man's sense of power had grown and deepened. For he had faced great problems, he had bent great forces to his will. He had succeeded where other men had failed.

He looked out into the world and tried to apprise himself rightly. He wanted to know where he stood. There was a place which he could claim. Where? How high up, how low down? How far could wealth take him? What was the value of his brains in the world's esteem? He tried to reckon these things up, and he found it difficult. It was a kaleidoscopic, misty wilderness into which he looked. He was trying to deal with his future from a wholly new point of view, and felt very much at sea.

Those moments of introspective thought became moments of self-confession. He realized, and admitted, the change in himself. The old ideals were unshaken, but they no longer held paramount sway. The gift of his brains to humanity, the betterment of his fellows, the inauguration of certain carefully conceived labor schemes no longer appealed to him with that wonderful enthusiasm which seemed to have almost sanctified his work. They were still dear to him, the end and aim of his practical efforts, but they were no longer all-controlling. A new thing had come to him, a new emotion, quickening, irresistible, delirious! He was no longer completely master of himself—a stray memory could set his heart thumping, could scatter his thoughts to the four winds of heaven. A touch of madness, this, yet sweeter even than his sense of triumph. Such madness, too! What had he, Enoch Strone, to do with fair women and white roses, though the woman had smiled for a moment upon him, and the perfume of the roses still hung about his little room. Yet—wealth was transfiguring—omnipotent. The words were her own. And in his hand was the golden key.

During the weeks that followed, the great change in Strone's temporal fortunes which as yet he had only dreamed of actually came to pass. The model spoke for itself and patents had been applied for in every country of the world. Already an offer was forthcoming for the American rights the amount of which sounded to Strone like a fairy tale. It was a hundred thousand pounds and the syndicate would resell for a quarter of a million—but it was cash and the miracle crane would make his fortune. With the offer for the first time he realized in some measure his altered position in life. A golden key had come into his hands, many doors in the pleasure house of the world would fly open now at his touch. Pictures, statuary, a library, travel—these things for which he had always craved were now within his reach. It had come with a magical suddenness—it was hard even now to realize. Where was he to draw the line? Where were the limits of the things which he might set himself to win?

Then the four walls of his room fell away. He stretched out his arms, his eyes kindled, he tore away the bandage from before them. No more hypocrisy! The madness which had become the joy of his life was stealing through all his veins, his heart beat fiercely with the delight of it. He pitted his common sense against what he had deemed a fantasy, and his common sense vanished like smoke, and the fantasy became a real living thing. She was as far above him as the stars—a delicately nurtured woman, with all the grace and beauty of her order—he was a mechanic of humble origin, ignorant of the ways of her world, of the world to which she must forever belong. What matter?

He was a man, after all, and she was a woman—and there was the golden key. It was in his hands, and who in the universe had ever been able to set a limit upon its powers? With her own lips he had heard her murmur, half in jest and half in earnest, her adoration of it. His common sense mocked at him but the madness was there like a thrall.

He walked over to the vicarage, where he had spent so many hours of late. She was out. He waited. When he heard her carriage stop, the trailing of her skirt as she crossed the lawn, he rose up and went to meet her.

"John leads a lonely life out here," she said presently. "I hope you will remember that, and come and see him often when I am gone."

He looked up at her quickly. His heart had stopped beating.

"Are you going away?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Don't you think that I have paid rather a long visit as it is?" she asked. "I have two houses of my own I am supposed to look after, and I had no end of engagements for last month and this. As a matter of fact, this is the longest visit I have ever paid here in my life."

"The longest visit you have ever paid here?" he repeated. "Perhaps that is because you have had more friends staying near?"

She looked into his eyes and laughed softly. Strone felt the hot color burn his cheeks. Something had happened! She was changed. The tired woman of the world had gone. She was not bored, she was not listless any longer. She was looking at him very kindly, and her eyes were wonderfully soft.

"Perhaps I have found one more," she said, smiling, "and have been content to be without

the others. Let go my hands, sir, at once."

She drew a little away from him. His brain was in a whirl. He was scarcely sure of his sanity. Then:

"Will you sit down for a few minutes?" he asked. "There is something I want to say to you."

She paused.

"I am a little tired," she said. "Will another time do?"

"No," he answered. "I am going away early to-morrow."

She followed him without comment to the seat under the cedar tree. She leaned back and half closed her eyes. She was certainly a little pale.

"Well?"

"I have seen Dobell to-day."

"Your employer?"

"Yes. At least he was my employer. He is to be my partner."

She opened her eyes and looked at him now with languid curiosity.

"Is that not rather a sudden rise in the world?" she asked carelessly.

"It is very sudden," he answered. "It is the miracle crane. Mr. Dobell has had it patented, and we have been offered one hundred thousand pounds for the American rights alone. Mr. Dobell says that there is a great fortune in it."

She looked at him with wide-open eyes, eyes full of an expression which baffled him, which, if he had been a wiser man and more versed in woman's ways, should also have been a warning to him.

"I congratulate you," she said quietly. "You are wonderfully fortunate to become rich so suddenly, at your age."

Her tone was altogether emotionless, her lack of enthusiasm too obvious to be ignored. He was puzzled. He became nervous.

"You know that it isn't the money I care about," he said. "You yourself have always admitted that to be a power in the world wealth is a necessity. I only care for money for what it may bring me. You once said that the millionaire is all-powerful."

"Did I?" she answered. "That, of course, was an exaggeration."

He rose suddenly to his feet, a flush in his cheeks, his tone husky. He stood over her, his hand on the back of her seat, his eyes seeking to penetrate the graceful nonchalance of her tone and manner.

"Lady Malingcourt," he said, "there is one thing in the world—perhaps I am mad to dream of it—I know I am, but if ever I had the smallest chance of gaining it, there is nothing I would not attempt, nothing I would not do."

There was a sharp break in his voice, a mist before his eyes. Lady Malingcourt was studying the pattern of her lace parasol. Suddenly she closed it and looked up at him.

"Don't you think you had better postpone the rest—until after dinner?" she said quietly.

"No," he answered. "You and your brother, Lady Malingcourt, have been very kind to me. You have made me sometimes almost forget the difference between a mechanic such as I am and gentle people such as you. So I have dared to wonder whether that difference must be forever."

"You are really rather foolish to talk like this," she remarked, smiling placidly at him. "I do not know quite what difference you mean. There is no difference between your world and mine whatever, except that a mechanic is often a gentleman, and gentle people are often snobs. You are wonderfully modest to-day, Mr. Strone. I had an idea that people with brains like yours considered themselves very superior to the mere butterflies of life."

"I am speaking as I feel," he answered. "I have tried to make myself think differently, but it is impossible. One can't ignore facts, Lady Malingcourt, and when I am with you I feel rough, and coarse, and ignorant; I feel that even to think of what I want to say to you is gross presumption."

She rose slowly to her feet.

"Then do not say it, Mr. Strone," she said quietly, "and leave off thinking about it."

His eyes sought hers eagerly, passionately. There was no sign in her face of the woman from whose hands had fluttered those white roses through the darkness into his keeping. Her head was uplifted, her eyes cold—even it seemed to him that her delicate lips were slightly curled. His heart sank like lead.

"You see, after all, I am right," he cried bitterly. "You are angry with me, you will not let me speak. You think I am mad because I have dared to dream of you as the one hope of my life."

"No," she answered, "I am not angry with you. I hope that you will never allude to this again, so I will tell you something. The difference of rank between us counts for nothing. You are young, and you have gifts which will make you, when you choose, willingly accepted among any class of people with whom you care to spend your days. But, nevertheless, I consider what you were about to say to me presumption."

He started quickly. They were face to face now upon the edge of the lawn. Lady Malingcourt had drawn herself up, and a bright spot of color burned in her cheeks.

"That you are a mechanic," she said, "makes you, to be candid, more interesting to me.

Nothing in your circumstances would have made your feeling toward me anything but an honor. It is as a man that you fail. Your standard of life is one which I could not possibly accept. I presume that it comes from your bringing up, so I do not wish to say anything more about it. Only I beg you to consider what I have said as final, and to do me the favor of thinking no longer of what must remain forever absolutely—impossible."

She swept past him and entered the house. He remained for a moment nerveless and tongue-tied. The lash of her bitter words stupefied him. What had he done?—wherein had he so greatly failed? After all, what did it matter? About him lay the fragments of that wonderful dream which had made life so sweet to him. Nothing could ever reëstablish it. He staggered out of the gate, and walked blindly away.

The man's passion found kinship with the storm which broke suddenly over his head. The thunder clouds rolled up from the horizon, and the lightning shone around him with a yellow glare. Below him the tree tops and the young corn were bent by a rushing wind—even the cattle in the fields crept away to shelter. The sky above grew black, forked lightning now glittered from east to west, writing its lurid message to the trembling earth. He sat on a high rock bareheaded, and the rain, falling now in sheets, drenched him through and through.

He had lost all control of himself. The passion which had been his sole inheritance from his drink-sodden parents mastered him easily. At that moment he was almost a savage. He cursed John Martinghoe and the moment when he had been lured into the belief that his self-education and mastery of self had made him the equal of those who were divided from him only by the accident of birth. He cursed the woman whose kindness had led him into a fool's paradise, the sudden change in his position which seemed now only a mockery to him. The fit passed with a little outburst of shame. Nevertheless, it was with bent head and gray-lined face that he crept downward to his cottage, drenched to the skin.

He heaped wood upon the embers of a fire and sat over it, shivering. Almost a stupor came over him as he sat there, weak, numbed to the bone with the clinging dampness of his clothes. If this thing had happened to him in full health, he would have met it more bravely. After all, it was the end which he had always told himself was inevitable. A sense of bitter shame was mingled with his dejection. He had built up his life so carefully, only to see it sent crashing about his ears at a woman's light touch. So he sat brooding among the fragments, while the rain beat fiercely against his window pane and the wind howled in the wood.

He came to himself suddenly, awakened by the opening of the door. He looked around. Milly stood there, her pale cheeks glowing with the sting of the rain and the wind, her hair in disorder, her eyes alight with the joy of seeing him. She dropped a heap of parcels and fell on her knees by his side.

"Oh, thank God!" she sobbed. "Oh, I am so glad to see you, so glad!"

Her streaming eyes, the warm touch of her hands, pierced his insensibility. He even smiled faintly.

"What are you doing here, child?" he asked, "on such a night, too. Why, you are wet through."

She evaded his question, horror-stricken at his own state.

"You're fair soaked," she cried. "Mercy me!"

She brought out his gray homespun clothes from the chest, and with deft fingers removed his coat and waistcoat, talking all the while.

"Well, I never," she exclaimed. "The rain's gone through the lining. It's a mercy you've had sense to keep the fire in. I'll make you a hot drink directly."

He submitted himself to her care. After the agony of the last few hours the sound of her shrill, but not unpleasant, voice and her breathless anxiety on his behalf seemed almost grateful. He was hustled into dry clothes, and his feet and hands were rubbed into a state of glowing warmth. Fresh logs were thrown upon the fire, a kettle boiled, and some tea deftly prepared. From one of her parcels came bread and meat. He ate at her bidding. Outside the storm grew in violence.

She sat crouched almost at his feet, the firelight playing on her brown hair, her eyes wet with tears.

A clearer sense of what was happening came to him. He sat up suddenly.

"How did you come here?" he asked.

"I haven't a home," she said. "Mother died last Thursday, Nancy's taken the kids, father's in jail—he's got six months."

His old pity was revived. He smoothed her hair.

"Poor child!"

At his touch the sobs came. Her head drooped upon his knee.

"Nancy wouldn't have me in the house; her husband thinks he likes me, and I am afraid of him. I'd nowhere to sleep, so I walked out here, meaning to sleep in the woods. Don't turn me out, oh, don't! I'm all alone in the world, and I don't want to be like the others. Let me stay. I'll do everything for you. I won't speak when you don't want me to. You'll never know I'm here, except when you want anything done. Oh, please, please be kind to me. If you don't, I shall go and drown myself. I've been miserable so long."

Her cry went to his heart, pierced even the dull lethargy of his own despair. The rain was dashing against the window. He glanced at the clock—it was nearly midnight.

"Poor little waif," he murmured, "and there are so many like you."

She crept, sobbing, into his arms; her hands were clasped around his neck. For her it was happiness immeasurable; for him, too, there was a certain solace in the thought that this lone creature loved him and was dependent upon him. He sat with wide-open eyes, gazing into the fire all the night long.

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They were married the next day.

Through the weeks that followed things remained the same at Strone's cottage yet different. Everything was spotlessly clean, but somehow the atmosphere was altered. The chairs were ranged in order against the wall. There were enormities in the shape of woolen antimacassars, a flimsy curtain hung before the small window.

A table on which had lain a *Spectator* and *Fortnightly Review* was littered over now with copies of the *Young Ladies' Journal*, some cheap and highly colored sweets, an untidy workbasket.

In Strone himself the change was wonderful. Life had narrowed in upon him; he looked forward with a shudder, the past was as a sealed book. Only some days there came little flashes of memory. He found himself suddenly recalling those wonderfully sweet days of his freedom, when every shadow of care seemed to pass away as he rode out from Gascester, when the wind and the sun and the song of the birds had been his companions. That was all over now. He climbed the steep hill with listless footsteps, no longer full of anticipation of those long hours of exquisite solitude which had become so dear to him. Those days had gone by—forever.

Milly would be waiting at the door, would shower upon him caresses which long ago had palled, would chatter emptily, and dwell peevishly on the long day's solitude. He found himself thinking with a shiver of the interminable evening. There was no escape. If he went out she would follow him; if he read, she sulked. He groaned to himself as he turned the last corner and caught a glimpse of the gray smoke curling upward.

Then he stopped short in the middle of the lane. What little color the heat had brought into his cheeks died away. He looked wildly around, as though half inclined to leap the gray-stone wall and vanish in the tangled wilderness beyond. Yet there was nothing more alarming in the way than a smartly turned-out victoria descending the hill toward him, and, leaning back among the cushions, a tired-looking woman in a white dress and hat with pink roses. Almost at the same moment she saw him, and, leaning forward, she stopped the carriage. To his amazement she stepped lightly out, gave the man an order, and waited for him in the shade of a great oak tree which overhung the road.

He ground his teeth together and advanced to meet her steadily. She greeted him with her old quiet smile. She, too, he thought, was looking pale and listless.

"I'm so glad to see you. Do you mind resting your bicycle somewhere and coming into the shade? I will not keep you very long."

He obeyed her in silence. Words seemed difficult to him just then. They stood in the shadow of the trees which hung over from the wood. She lowered her parasol and seemed for a moment intent upon studying the pattern of the filmy lace. The man's heart beat out like a sledge hammer. Yet he stood there, slowly mastering his emotion, and it was the woman who found speech so difficult.

"I am going to tell you something," she said at last, "which a few days ago I was very sure that I would never tell you."

She pauses. He remains speechless, his eyes fastened upon her.

"Go on."

"One afternoon when you were away I had a fancy to look at your cottage. I came—and found someone there. I questioned the girl. She was a friend of yours, she said. She was confused; what she said seemed incapable of bearing more than one interpretation. I accepted the inference—and that afternoon there was plain speaking—on the lawn."

He was no longer steady on his feet, and in his ears was the rushing of strange sounds, trees and sky were mixed up together.

"You believed—that?" he gasped.

"I judged you," she answered, "by the standard of a world which I believed to be lower than yours. Remember, too, that in many ways I knew so little of you. Different classes of society regard the same thing from such different points of view. Yes, I judged you. I want your forgiveness."

He looked at her wildly.

"What infernal sophistry," he cried. "What is sin in your world is sin in mine!"

"Mind," she continued drearily, "I do not say that even without this I could have answered you differently."

"Don't you know why I came," she said at last impulsively—"It is because you are a man—because you have power and a great future. I want you to rouse yourself—I want you to make a stir in the world. This is what I have come to say to you—to preach a very simple doctrine. Make the best of things. There is room for you in great places, Enoch Strone. This

generation is empty of strong men. Fill your life with ambitions and remember all those wonderful dreams of yours. Strive to realize them. Tell Milly about them; let her know each day how you are getting on. Come out of the crowd, Enoch, and let me feel that I have known one man in my life, at least, who was strong enough to climb to the hilltop with another's burden upon his shoulders."

Under the spell of her words his apathy and indifference gave way. Life was there in her face—in her voice. He listened to her with kindling eyes, conscious that the old passion for life was moving once more in his veins—conscious, too, with a certain sense of wonder at the transformation, that this woman, who was pleading with him so earnestly, stood revealed in a wholly new light. The delicate vein of mockery, which sometimes gave to her most serious sayings an air of insincerity, as though conversation were a mere juggling with words, seemed to have passed away. She spoke without languor or weariness, and her words touched his heart—stirred his brain.

The man in him leaped up, vigorous and eager. He faced her with glowing eyes.

"If the burden had been twice as heavy," he cried, "I would bear it cheerfully now. Forever—"

He stopped short. Some instinct told him that any further words were unnecessary. As she had spoken and looked, so would she remain to him forever. So he called her carriage, and once more her fingers rested in his great work-hardened hand.

"Good-bye," she said, "and good fortune."

When he reached the cottage Milly brought tea out to him, waited upon him breathlessly. The terrible gloom which had oppressed her so much had passed away. He was dressed in new and well-fitting clothes. Even to her untrained eye there was a wonderful change in his bearing and demeanor.

"Milly," he said, "would you like to live in London?"

The thought was like paradise. She strove to contain herself.

"With you, Enoch—anywhere."

"With me, certainly," he answered. "We shall go there next week. You will be able to have a decent house and servants. Dobell's are opening a London branch, and I shall have to manage it. I ought to have told you some of these things before. I had no right to keep them to myself. You will never be poor again, Milly. It seems as though we were going to be very rich."

"Enoch! Enoch!"

He smiled at the excitement which baffled speech.

Later he walked out by himself, crossed the field, and entered the deep, cool shade of the wood. It was significant that he passed the spot where he had first met Milly with a little shudder, and hurried away, as though even the memory of that night pursued him. All the while a subtle sense of excitement was in his veins, mingled with a strange, haunting sadness. For him the life in quiet places was over. This was his farewell pilgrimage. Henceforth his place was in the stress of life, in the great passion-riven heart of the world. His days of contemplation were over. There had come Milly, and he very well knew that the old life here, where the singing of every wind, the music of the birds, thrilled him with early memories, was impossible.

After all, good might come of it. The sweetness of solitude, of crowding the brain with delicate fancies, of basking in the joy of beautiful places, was in many senses a paralyzing sweetness. Man was made for creation, not contemplation. So he turned his eyes upon the new world, and there were big things there to wrestle with. The cry of his fellows was in his ears, the cry of those to whom life was a desert place, the long-drawn-out murmur of the great nether world. Life would be good there where the giants fought. Perhaps some day he might even win forgetfulness.

There followed for Enoch Strone during the three succeeding years all the varied lights that shine on a quick success. Not long after his arrival in London he was elected to Parliament, and the ringing maiden speech and rapid progress in the House of the new Labor member were the talk of political circles for a long time. During this period the calls of home and friendship were many, yet he moved through it all singularly unspoilt, impersonally attending in an official capacity only the brilliant dinners and social gathering where he found himself a man among men, but which threw into cruel relief the atmosphere of his own home. Wherever he went Strone was treated with much deference, for he was without doubt in the political world a person of some importance. The balance of parties being fairly even, the government was dependent upon the support of the Labor men to neutralize the Irish faction. And of late Strone had been pushing his claims with calm but significant persistence. The government was pledged to his "Better Housing of the Poor" bill, and he had firmly refused to have it shelved any longer.

This fact he made plain among the men gathered at Lord Sydenham's one evening.

"You don't let the grass grow beneath your feet, my friend," remarked his host, "and your bill on Thursday is going to hit the landlords very hard, you know."

"There are a good many landlords whom I would rather see hanged than merely hit," Strone answered.

The Duke of Massingham moved across to them.

“Come, come, Strone. What’s this I hear—you want to hang the landlords?”

“Not all, your grace,” Strone answered, with a gleam in his eye. “Only those who house men and women like rats, who let their property tumble to ruin while they drag the last shilling of their rents from starving men and women. To such as these I would make the criminal laws apply. They are responsible for many human lives—for the lower physique of our race.”

Lord Sydenham turned round and touched him upon the shoulder.

“Strone,” he said, “I want to introduce you to my cousin. Beatrice, allow me to present Mr. Strone—Lady Malingcourt.”

Under the fire of dinner-table talk they relapsed easily enough into more familiar relations.

“I am not at all sure that I like you,” she said, looking at him critically. “Your dress coat came evidently from Saville Row and your tie is perfection. You are not in character at all. I expected a homespun suit, hobnailed boots, and a flannel shirt. I wasn’t sure about the collar, but I counted upon a red tie. Please don’t tell me that you are a club man, and that you go to afternoon teas.”

He laughed. Even his voice was subdued.

“No fear of that,” he declared. “When I go out it is generally to meat teas in the suburbs or midday dinners with my constituents in Gascester. I have even a red tie of which I am very fond.”

She stole another glance at him. There were streaks of gray in his black hair, deep lines in his hard, clean-shaven face. If a dinner such as this was a rare event to him, he showed no signs of awkwardness. He joined now and then in the conversation around. Most of the men seemed known to him.

“I have read of you,” she said abruptly, “of your maiden speech and rapid progress in the House.”

He lowered his voice.

“It was what you wished?”

“Nothing has ever given me more pleasure,” she said simply. “You got my cable?”

He nodded.

“Two words only—‘Well done.’ I have it in my pocket to-night.”

She abandoned the subject precipitately.

“And your social schemes?”

“They progress,” he answered thoughtfully. “I have had disappointments, but on the whole—yes, I am satisfied. When you are at Gascester, I should like to show you some of my experiments.”

She talked for a few minutes to her neighbor on the other side. Then she turned to him and smiled.

“This is the second time we have met at dinner,” she said.

“I do not need to be reminded of it,” he answered quietly. “Your brother asked me to stay to supper—I think he had forgotten that you were there. I was in my working clothes, and I am afraid that the flannel shirt was a fact.”

She smiled.

“Yes, and you laid down the law upon Ruskin, criticised ‘Sesame and Lilies,’ and talked of Walter Pater as though you had known him all your life. You were a revelation and a puzzle to me. I was so weary of life just then. I believe you were the first living person who had interested me for many months.”

His eyes were looking into vacancy. His words were spoken in the slightest of whispers. Yet she heard.

“And afterward you sang to us. It was wonderful.”

Then the talk buzzed round them, but they were silent. The woman who had represented her queen in a great country and the man who had been climbing with steady feet the ladder of fame were both thinking of that little country vicarage among the hills. She saw him, the first of his type she had ever met, reserved, forceful, at times strangely eloquent, in soiled clothes and brusque manner, yet speaking of the great things of life as one who understood—who meant to conquer. And he remembered her, the first woman of her order with whom he had ever spoken, the first beautiful woman whose hand he had ever touched. He remembered her soft voice, her lazy, musical laugh, her toilet and her jewels, which, though simple enough, were a revelation to him. She represented to him from that moment a new world of delight. All those forgotten love verses whose form alone he had been able to appreciate, welled up in his heart, sang in his blood, filled for him with glorious color the whole literature of love and passion. Her coming had given him understanding. He looked back upon those days as he had done many a time during the last few years—but to-night there was a difference. Like a flash he realized what her coming back meant to him. The old madness was unquenched—unquenchable. He had thought himself cured! What folly! The battle was before him yet.

He was roused from his abstraction by a word from her, and found himself apologizing to his left-hand neighbor for a twice-asked question. The conversation became political. A moment later he was again gravely discussing the prospects of the “Better Housing of the

Poor" bill. Amid a rustling of laces and swish of silk, which sounded to him like the winged flight of many tropical birds, the women passed out. Strone noticed that Lady Malingcourt avoided his eager gaze as she followed her hostess from the room.

A couple of hours later Strone pushed his way through the little crowd of servants, who were waiting about the entrance to Sydenham House, and turned westward on foot. This meeting, always looked forward to, always counted upon as a certain part of his future, had taken place at last. She was unchanged, as beautiful as ever, and her old power over him was not one whit lessened. More vividly than ever he realized how his present position was almost wholly owing to the stimulus of her appeal to him. Step by step he had fought his way doggedly onward. Difficulties had been brushed away, obstacles surmounted. He had kept his word, he had justified her belief in him. He had taken his place, if not in her world, at least among those who had the right to enter it. Henceforth they might meet often. Surely the summer of his life had come.

And as he walked through the quieter streets, more daring thoughts even came to him. He dreamed of a friendship which should become the backbone of his life, which should bring him into constant association with her, which should give him the right to offer at her feet the honors he might win—she, the woman who had first inspired him. He saw nothing of the passers-by; the faint importunities of the waifs who floated out from the shadows and vanished again like moths were unheard. The old music was singing in his blood; he walked as one whose footsteps fell upon the air. And then—crash down to earth again. He was in front of his house in Kensington, unlit and gloomy. He made his way quietly in with the aid of a latchkey, and stood for a moment in the hall, hesitating.

From a room on the ground floor came the glimmer of a light. He made his way there softly and opened the door. A woman was stretched upon an easy-chair, asleep. He stood over her with darkening face.

Milly had not improved. Her prettiness had vanished before a coarsening of features; she was stouter and untidy even to slatternliness. Her cheeks just now were flushed and she was breathing heavily. On the table by her side was a tumbler. He took it up, smelled it, and set it down with a little gesture of disgust.

She showed no signs of waking. After a moment's hesitation he ensconced himself in a neighboring easy-chair, and, taking a roll of papers from his pocket, began to read, pencil in hand. For some time he worked; then the manuscript slipped from his hand. He sank a little down in his chair. With wide-open eyes he sat watching the extinct gray ashes on the hearth. The clock ticked and the woman's breathing grew louder. There was no other sound in the house. He was alone with his fate.

Something woke her at last. She sat up and looked at him.

"Hello!" she exclaimed. "How long have you been there?"

"An hour—perhaps more," he answered. "You were asleep."

"No wonder," she grumbled. "Enough to make one sleepy to sit here hour after hour alone, with you at your everlasting Parliament work."

It struck him that there were several empty glasses about and the room smelled of tobacco smoke.

"Have you had visitors?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Yes. Mr. Fagan and his wife."

He frowned.

"I don't see why Fagan should come when he knew I was out," he remarked.

She laughed hardly.

"You'd grudge me even their company, would you? Well, they came in to sit with me, and Fagan let a hint or two drop. You better look out, my man."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"They ain't none too well pleased with you, these Labor chaps aren't, and I don't wonder at it. What do you want going to lords' dinner parties dressed up like one of them? Fagan says that ain't what you were sent to Parliament for."

"Fagan is an ignorant ass," Strone exclaimed passionately. "I am doing my best for the cause, and my way is the right way. My presence at Lord Sydenham's to-night was no personal matter. It was a recognition of our party, and a valuable recognition. I am surprised that you should listen to such rubbish, Milly."

"Fagan may be right and he may be wrong," she answered, "but he reckons that you're getting too big for your boots. It don't want fine gentlemen to speak for workingmen. Were there any women at your party to-night?"

"Yes," Strone answered, "there were women there."

"Then why wasn't I asked?" she demanded, setting down her empty glass.

"It is so hard to make you understand, Milly," he said. "I was not there as a private guest at all. Socially every one was of a different rank. I was there as a man who could command votes. You would not have been comfortable, and I am sure that you would not have enjoyed it."

Always these scenes wrought themselves into a quarrel and ended by Milly's dissolving

into tears and their planning a gala day on the morrow, when Milly would have her fill of delight at some cheap little theatre her taste had prompted for their holiday.

But there were other and more painful occasions when Strone, returning home, found his house brilliantly lighted—while strains of ribald song floated out into the streets—and he knew that Milly was entertaining her friends from Gascester.

Strone had never ranked as an orator even among his own party. He was looked upon as a keen and skillful debater, a man of sturdy common sense, marvelously clear-headed and thoroughly earnest. On the night of his great speech, however, he made a new reputation. His opening phrases scarcely gave promise of anything of the sort. He was unaccountably nervous, overanxious to do justice to the cause which was so dear to him, and at the same time horribly aware that he was not succeeding. Suddenly, however, after a somewhat prolonged pause, a wave of memory swept in upon him.

He remembered what he himself had passed through, the underworld of the great cities was laid bare before him. It stretched away before him, a ghostly panorama, its wailing rang in his ears, the death-cries of its children shook his heart. Then, indeed, he straightened to his task. His speech was stilted no longer, his deep voice shook with passion. These rows of unemotional men, some sorting papers, some whispering, some giving him a labored attention—they, too, must see and hear. And they did! It was as though a great canvas were stretched before them, and Strone, with the lightning brush of a great master, was painting with lurid touches a terrible picture, a picture growing every moment in horror, yet from the sight of which there was no escape.

There were statistics, a plain statement of the practical measures necessary, and a brief but passionate peroration. A thrill went through the House when Strone spoke of himself, only newly come from that world for whose salvation he pleaded. All the sins of the universe, all that was ugly and vicious and detestable sprang from that pestilential undercurrent down which were ever drifting the great stream of lost humanity. Drink was an effect, not a cause. A miserable existence begat despair, despair drink, and drink crime. Let them awake from their indifference, their cynicism, or false philosophies, and strike a mighty blow at the great heart of the hideous monster. Life and freedom were gifts common to all. Those who sought to make them a monopoly for the rich must pass through life to the shadow of death with an appalling burden upon their shoulders. And more than any in the world, those men to whom he then spoke must face this responsibility.

So he pleaded, no longer at a loss for words, passionate, forceful, touched for those few minutes, at any rate, with a spark of that divine fire which carries words straight to the hearts of men, the gift of true eloquence. When at last, and with a certain abruptness, he resumed his seat, there reigned for several moments a respectful and marvelous silence. Then a storm of cheering broke the tension, cheering from all parts of the House, led by the prime minister, joined in by the leader of the opposition. Strone gained much for his cause that night—his own reputation he made forever. He had become a power among strong men. He was henceforth a factor to be reckoned with. During the debate which followed, pitifully tame it seemed, men craned their heads to look at him, reporters eagerly collected such crumbs of information as they could gather concerning his history, his past, and his future. And Strone himself sat with impassive features but beating heart, for up in the wire-covered gallery he had seen a pale, beautiful face, whose eyes were fixed upon his, who seemed to be sending a message to him through the great sea of space. Presently, indeed as he passed from the body of the House, a note was thrust into his hand, hastily written in pencil:

"Well done, my friend. Some people are having supper with me at the Milan Restaurant. Will you come on there as soon as you can? Do give me the pleasure of telling you what I think of your speech."

Strone crumpled the note up in his hand, hesitated for a moment, and turned toward the exit. But he was not to escape so easily. His way was besieged and his hand shaken by many whose faces were strange to him. The leader of the House spoke a few courteous words, Lord Sydenham patted him on the back. He passed out into the cool night air with burning cheeks and eyes bright with the joy of life. Yet even then the man was true to himself, steadfast to his great aims. It was the triumph of his cause which delighted him, his personal laurels were to him a matter of secondary importance. He had made people feel, if only for a moment, the things which he felt. He had pierced, if only for a short time and for a little way, beneath the surface that marvelous cast-iron indifference with which nineteen-twentieths of the world regard the agony of the submerged twentieth. Good must come of it. Not only was his bill safe, but the way was paved for other and more drastic measures. The work of his life stretched out before him. It seemed to him then a fair prospect.

He passed through the streets with a wonderful sense of light-heartedness. His own troubles were for the moment small things. He had found the panacea for all sorrow. At the Milan he handed his coat and hat to a liveried servant, and was ushered to a table brilliant with flowers and lights at the head of the room. Lady Malingcourt rose to receive him and held out both her hands.

"Welcome, master of men," she exclaimed, with a gayety which seemed intended to hide the deep feeling which shone in her eyes and even shook a little her voice. "You have given us a new sensation. We are deeply and humbly grateful."

The Duke of Massingham patted him good-naturedly upon the shoulder.

"I can congratulate you with a whole heart," he said, "for you have spared me. Your cause will not be the loser, Mr. Strone. If it costs me a year's income, I will mend my ways."

Strone had embarked upon a career in which reputations are swiftly made and lost. His own never wavered from the night of his first great speech. Chance made his little party a very important factor in the political history of the next few months. Chance also made his own share in the struggle a great and arduous one. For this little handful of men sent to represent the vast interests of the democracy were mostly of the type of Fagan and his class. Earnest enough and steeped with the justice of their cause, they were yet in many ways marvelously narrow-minded. Obstruction and clamor seemed to them their most natural and reasonable weapons.

They did not understand Strone's methods, his broader views, his growing friendship with Lord Sydenham and the more enlightened members of the government. To them he seemed always to be losing golden opportunities. More than once he helped the government out of a tight corner without demanding anything in the shape of a recompense. They failed altogether to understand how Strone was building up in the regard of thoughtful men both in the House and throughout the country an immensely increased respect for the new social doctrines of which he was the exponent and the little party of which he was the recognized leader.

Strone himself knew that the thing could not last. Nothing but sheer force of will and the expenditure of much persuasive eloquence kept his followers faithful to him. Day by day the tension grew more acute. He was never actually sure of their allegiance until the division bell had rung. One or two waverers had already taken up an independent attitude. Fagan himself seemed to be contemplating something of the sort.

Strone knew the men and their natures—small, jealous, suspicious. He recognized their point of view, and despised it. He knew in his heart that if these were the prophets whom the great cities had sent to be his coadjutors that the time must come before long when he must choose another party or form one of his own. They were honest men, most of them, but ignorant and prejudiced. They would never prevail against men of trained reasoning power, men of acumen and intelligence.

A rough sort of eloquence to which most of them owed their election went for nothing in the House. Strone knew that certain lofty dreams of his, as yet but dimly conceived, but gaining for themselves power and reality every day, could never be realized with the aid of such as these. The crusade must be among the thinking men and women of the world. Hyde Park oratory and all akin to it was a useless power. Personal influence, the reviews, the conversion, one by one, of those who led the world in thought, these must be the means whereby his cause would be won. These men only cumbered the way, brought disrepute upon a glorious cause. Yet for the moment they were necessary. Before long they would be calling him apostate. In years to come they would deem him their enemy.

No wonder that in those exciting times he reverted to his old attitude toward Milly. There were no more shopping excursions or visits to music halls. Dimly he began to realize what the future might have held for him. In those days he set his heel grimly upon all the poetry and the sweeter things of life. He refused numerous political and general invitations. He avoided every place as much as possible where he was likely to meet Lady Malingcourt.

One night he was walking home earlier than usual when he caught a glimpse of her in Piccadilly. A brougham passed by, and he saw her leaning back with pale face and listless eyes. He bent forward eagerly, and a moment afterward regretted it. For she saw him and immediately pulled the checkstring.

He threaded his way among the stream of vehicles to where her carriage remained on the other side of the road. A footman opened the door for him. She gathered up a snowy profusion of white satin skirt and made room for him by her side.

"You are my salvation," she murmured, with a faint smile. "Please hurry."

He hesitated.

"But——"

An imperious little gesture. He was by her side, and the door was softly closed.

"To Amberley House, your ladyship?" the man asked, glancing discreetly at Strone's gray clothes and soft hat.

"Home."

The carriage stopped before the corner house of a handsome square. They passed up the steps together.

"This is your first visit to me," she remarked, "and you have had to be dragged here. We will go upstairs."

They passed through a dimly lighted drawing-room, the air of which seemed to Strone faint and sweet with the perfume of many flowers, out onto a shaded balcony, over which was a long, striped awning. In the corner were two low basket chairs. She sank into one and motioned him to take the other.

"This," she murmured, "is luxury. Smoke, if you will—and talk to me. Tell me how you are getting on in the House."

"None too well," he answered gloomily. "I am all the while upon the brink of a volcano—

and somehow I do not fancy that it will be long before the eruption comes."

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning her pale face toward him. "I do not understand. I cannot believe that there is any one in the House whose position is more secure than yours."

He smiled grimly.

"My party," he said, "are thinking of dropping me!"

"Well," she said, "let them throw you over. Who but themselves would suffer! Personally, I believe that your association with them is only a drag upon you."

"That is all very well," he answered. "They are a rough lot, I know, and most of them fatally ignorant. I do not believe that any class of men in the world are so girt about with prejudices as those whose eyes have been opened a little way. But, after all, they each have a vote, and as parties are at present they are an immensely powerful factor in the situation."

"That," she said, "is only a temporary matter, a matter of weeks or months. After all, you must remember they are an isolated body of men in the House. Your place is with the only great party of progress. You are moving toward them day by day. Your joining them sooner or later is inevitable."

He smiled.

"Lord Sydenham has been very kind to me," he said, "but I fancy I should be a sort of ugly duckling among the Conservatives."

"You would be in office in less than twelve months," she declared. "Do let me tell Sydenham that he may talk to you about this."

He shook his head.

"I came into the House as a Labor member," he said, "and unless something unforeseen happens, a Labor member I must remain. Besides, I hate to think of myself as a party man. The rank and file remind me most unpleasantly of a flock of geese. They must follow their leaders blindly; their personal opinions go for nothing."

Her eyelids quivered—the merest flicker of a smile passed across her face.

"But how nice not to be obliged to have personal opinions! Think what a delightfully restful state."

"It would not suit me," he declared bluntly.

She laughed, very softly and very musically.

There was a short silence. A breath of the west wind bent the lilac boughs toward them, a wave of delicate perfume floated in the air. Strone half closed his eyes. Their thoughts went backward together.

"Tell me," she murmured, "how does this life compare to you with the old days at Bangdon Wood? You were a man of contemplation—you have become a man of action. Go on, my friend. There is a kingdom before you."

He turned a weary face upon her.

"These are the things," he said, "which I have told myself. But, Lady Malingcourt, life has another side, and to go through life without once glancing upon it——"

"Ah, is it worth while?" she interrupted. "What is greater than power?"

"It is a joy for heroes, but even heroes are sometimes men."

They were silent for a moment. From beyond the square came the tinkle of bells, the low roar of traffic surging westward. Near at hand was the rustling of the evening wind in the large-leafed lime trees, the faintly drawn-out music of a violin from one of the adjoining houses.

"Tell me," she asked suddenly—"about your wife. Does she like London? Is she interested in your work?"

A curious restraint—almost a nervousness—fell upon them both.

"I do not think that she is," he answered. "London does not suit her very well. She is not quick at making acquaintances."

He did not allude to her again, nor did she. The vision of Milly rose up before him as he had seen her last. He sat looking out in the twilight with stern, set face. Lady Malingcourt watched him. Perhaps they both saw in the soft darkness some faint picture of those wonderful things which might in time have come to pass between them. For when Lady Malingcourt spoke again there was a sweetness in her voice which was strange to him.

She leaned forward eagerly. The cloud of weariness had passed from her face. Her white, bejeweled fingers touched his coat sleeve.

"My friend," she said, "you are making a rare but a fatal mistake. You undervalue yourself. Do not shake your head, for I know what I am talking about. Lord Sydenham has spoken to me; there have been others, too. There are many people who are watching you. You must not disappoint them."

He gazed into her intent face and sighed.

"Sometimes," he said, in a low tone, "I think that it is my fate to disappoint myself and all other people. Lady Malingcourt, can you tell me why it is that now when many of the things I have dreamed of are becoming realities, my desire for them seems sometimes honeycombed with weakness? Often lately I have wished myself back at my cottage; I have closed my eyes, and the old days of poverty, of freedom, have seemed wonderfully sweet. It is weakness," he went on, a sudden hoarse passion in his voice, "cursed weakness. I will stamp it down. I

shall outgrow it. But it's there, and it's a live thing."

Afterward he liked to think of her as she had seemed that night. The weariness, the flippancy of her outlook upon life seemed for the moment to have fallen away like a mask. The woman shone out—flamed in her eyes, was manifest in her softened tone.

"It is the toll we all have to pay," she said. "We expect too much of life. The things which look so beautiful to us when we are hammering at the gates crumble into dust when we have passed through into their midst, and seek to grasp them."

"Is there nothing in life," he said, "which is real—which remains?"

She did not answer him, her silence was surely purposeful. She sat with half-closed eyes, as though listening to the music of the breeze-shaken limes, and Strone felt his heart beating madly. The significance of his question and her silence were suddenly revealed to him. A mad desire possessed him to seize her hands, to force her to look at him. Instinct told him that the moment was propitious, that the great gulf between them was bridged over by a sudden emotional crisis, which might never occur again.

She raised her eyes to his, and he was amazed at their wonderful depth and color. The change came home to him, and his own pulses beat fiercely.

"Let us talk about Bangdon," she said. "Do you remember the first time I saw you? John brought you into dinner."

"If I had known," he remarked, smiling, "that there was a woman there, I should have run for my life."

"Yet I do not think that you were shy. What a surprise you were to me. You wore the clothes of a mechanic, and you talked—as even John could never have talked. Do you know, I think that you are a very wonderful person. It is so short a time ago."

He turned toward her, and his face was suddenly haggard.

"It is a lifetime—a chaos of months and years. Let us talk of something else."

"No! Why?"

"Don't you understand?" he asked fiercely.

There was a short, tense silence. The diamond star upon her bosom rose and fell. Lady Malingcourt did not recognize herself in the least. Only she knew that he at any rate had been swift to recognize the wonderful transfiguring change which that moment of self-revelation had wrought in her life. But for that she knew that his self-control would not have precipitated the crisis. A sort of glad recklessness possessed her. At least, she had found, if only for a moment, something which filled to the brim the great empty cup of life.

"You are so enigmatic," she murmured.

"You had better not tempt me to be otherwise," he answered.

The delight of it carried her away. Their eyes met, and the memory of that moment went with him through life—to be cherished jealously, even when death came.

"Why not?"

"Because I love you. Because you know it! You have filled my life. You have made everything else of no account. I love you!"

He had found her the victim of a mood, marvelously plastic, marvelously alluring. He drew nearer to her. Then from the street below came an interruption. A furiously driven hansom was pulled up, a man sprang out, glanced upward, and waved his hand. A curse trembled upon Strone's lips. Lady Malingcourt sat up and returned his greeting.

"So like Sydenham," she murmured. "However he may have loitered on the way, he always arrives in a desperate hurry."

Strone and Lord Sydenham came face to face in the hall—the latter recognized him with amazement.

"Was it you whom I saw with my cousin?" he asked.

"Yes," Strone answered. "I was just leaving. Good night."

"Wait a moment," Lord Sydenham exclaimed. "I wanted to see you particularly. Come upstairs again."

"All right at the House?" Strone asked.

Lord Sydenham laughed curiously.

"That depends on how you look at it," he answered. "The division came off, after all."

"I was paired," Strone said quickly.

"I know! But your men went solid with the opposition."

Strone stood still in blank amazement. It had come, then—already. Lord Sydenham watched him and was satisfied. He led the way into the drawing-room. Strone followed like a man in a dream. He heard a greeting pass between the two. Their first few sentences were unintelligible to him.

It had come and sooner than Strone had expected. His men went with the opposition as a result of their bickerings and mistrust. Lord Sydenham contentedly lit a cigarette. Strone stood with clinched hands, his head thrown back, his eyes ablaze with anger. He had been deceived and tricked, and by the very men whose cause in his hands was becoming a religion. It was ignoble. The man and woman watched him curiously.

"My opportunity is gone," Strone said at last. "They have thrown me over."

"It is a proof," Lord Sydenham answered, "of their colossal folly. As for you, Strone, it will

be the making of your political career. Come, we are perhaps keeping Lady Malingcourt up. I will walk a little way with you and explain what I mean."

They passed out into the cool night. Lord Sydenham removed his hat and walked for some distance, carrying it in his hand. Suddenly he turned to his companion.

"Strone," he said, "you must join us."

Strone laughed—enigmatically.

"I am handicapped," he remarked, "with principles. Besides, imagine the horror with which your old-fashioned Conservatives would regard my social schemes. It is impossible."

"I hope to convince you," Lord Sydenham said earnestly, "that it is nothing of the sort. In the first place, I want you to remember that during the last ten years a marvelous change has transformed the relative positions of the two great political parties. The advent of the Liberal Unionists into our ranks was the consummation of what was fast becoming inevitable. To-day it is the Conservative party who are the party of progress. It is the party to which you must naturally belong."

"In the event of your refusal, let me ask you seriously whether you realize what you are doing. You have rare gifts—you have all the qualities of the successful politician. I offer you a firm footing upon the ladder—your ascent is a certainty. I will not appeal to your personal ambition. I appeal to your religion."

Strone looked up with a queer smile.

"My religion?"

"Yes! I use the word in the broadest sense. Consciously or unconsciously, you have proclaimed it in your conversation—the House—the reviews. If you are not one of those who love their fellow-men, you, at least, have a pity for them so profound that it has become the *motif* of your life. It is a great cause, yours, Strone. You have made it your own. None but you can do it justice. Think of the submerged millions who have been waiting many years for a prophet to call them up from the depths. You have put on the mantle. Dare you cast it away?"

"Never in your life," he said, "will there come to you such an opportunity as this. I offer you a place in the party which will be in the majority next session—the lawmakers. I offer you also my own personal support of the Labor measures we have discussed. It must be yes or no by to-morrow."

When Strone let himself into his house a few moments later the room on the ground floor was almost in total darkness.

"Milly!"

No answer. Yet she was in the room, for he could hear her heavy breathing and trace the dim outline of her form upon the sofa. An ugly suspicion seized him. He turned up the gas and groaned.

An empty tumbler lay on the ground beside her. Strone bent over her. This was the woman to whom he was chained for all his days, whom he had pledged himself to love and cherish, the woman who bore his name, and who must rise with him to whatever heights his ambition and genius might command. There was no escape—there never could be any escape. He walked restlessly up and down the room. The woman slept on.

Presently he saw that she had been writing—a proceeding so unusual that he came to a standstill before the table. An envelope and a letter lay open there; the first words of the latter, easily legible in Milly's round characters, startled him. He glanced at the address. It was to Mr. Richard Mason, Fairbanks, Gascester. Without any further hesitation, he took the letter into his hand and read it.

"Dear Dick: The last time I saw you I turned you out of this house because you asked me something as you didn't ought. I am writing these few lines to know if you are still in the same mind. I don't want you to make a mistake. I don't care one brass button for you—never shall. But things have turned out so that I ain't happy here. I never ought to have married Enoch, that's sure. He ain't the same class as you and me. He don't care for me, and he never will. That's why I reckon I'm going to leave him. Now if you want me to go to Ireland with you next journey, say so, and I'll go. If I try to live here any longer, I shall go mad. You ain't to think that it's because I like you better than him, because I don't, and no born woman in her right sense would. What I'm looking at is, that if I go away with you, he'll be free. That's all. There's no other way that I can think of, except for me to do away with myself and that I dursn't do. So if you say come, I shall be ready. Yours, Milly."

The sheet of paper fluttered from his fingers. He turned to find her sitting up—watching him.

"You've been reading my letter," she cried, with a little gasp.

"Yes," he answered. "I have read it."

She stared at him, heavy-eyed, still dull of apprehension. There was a short silence. She struggled into a sitting posture; by degrees her memory and consciousness returned.

"I don't care if you have," she declared. "Put it in the envelope and post it. It would have been on the way now if Mary hadn't brought in the whisky. It's what you want, ain't it? You'll be quit of me then, and you can go to her."

He tore the letter across and flung it into the fire. She watched it burn idly.

"I don't know why you've done that," she said wearily. "You know you want to be free. I don't know as I blame you. I saw you with her to-night."

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"Just that. I took Mary to the St. James', and coming back we stopped to watch the people driving by. She's very beautiful, Enoch, and she's your sort. I ain't."

There was a silence. Their eyes met, and the hopeless misery in her face went to his heart like a knife. In that moment he realized how only salvation could come to her. He saw her suddenly with a great pity and beyond her all the great underneath millions he wanted to help. The moment was like a flash of light. He crossed the room and sat down by her side.

"Milly," he said gently, "let us try and talk like sensible people. I am afraid I haven't been a very good husband to you, and this sort of thing"—he touched the decanter—"has got to be stopped. Now tell me how we are to turn over a new leaf. What would you like to do?"

She drew a little breath which became a sob.

"It's me," she exclaimed passionately. "I'm a beast. I ain't fit to be your wife, Enoch. Let me go my way. I'll never interfere with you. You've been too good to me already. You can't care for me! Why should you?"

He took her hand in his.

"Milly," he said, "we are husband and wife, and we've got to make the best of it. Now I want you to promise to give up that stuff, and, in return, I will do anything you ask."

"Then care for me a little," she cried; "or if you can't, pretend to. If you'd only kiss me now and then without me asking, act as though I were flesh and blood—treat me as a woman instead of a ghost—I'd be easily satisfied! Can't you pretend just a little, Enoch? Maybe you won't mean it a bit—I don't care. I'd close my eyes and think it was all real."

Her voice broke down, her eyes were wet and shining with tears. He kissed her on the lips.

"I will do more than pretend, Milly," he said.

She came close to him—almost shyly. A look of ineffable content shone in her face.

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Ever the same deep stillness, a sort of brooding calm as though the land slept, the faint rustling of a west wind, the slighter murmuring of insects. And, save for these things, silence. Strone stood on the threshold of the empty cottage, which as yet he had not unlocked, looking down upon the familiar patchwork of fields and woods, looking away, indeed, through the blue filmy light with unseeing eyes, for a whole flood of old memories were tugging at his heartstrings. A curious sense of detachment from himself and his surroundings possessed him. Milly, his house at Gascester, his shattered political career, were like dreams, something chimerical, burdens which had fallen away. A rare sense of freedom was upon him. He took long breaths of the clear, bracing air. The place had its old delight for him. He threw himself upon the turf, and closed his eyes. Here at last was peace.

Then the old madness again, burning in his brain, hot in his blood, driving him across the hills, stirring up again the old recklessness, the old wild delight. She was going to marry Lord Sydenham. She was passing forever out of his reach, and once she had been very near. His heart shook with passionate recollections. With every step he took, his fierce unrest became a more ungovernable thing. What a farce it all was—his stern attempt at self-control, his life shut off now from everything worth having, a commonplace, dronelike existence. After all, what folly! The cup of life had been offered to him, his lips had touched the brim. Was it poison, after all, which he had seen among the dregs? Yet what poison could be worse than this?

Past the Devenhills' house, whence the music of her voice beat the air around him, filled his ears with longing, brought almost the tears to his eyes. Had he lived, indeed, through such delights as these mocking memories would have him believe, when he had watched the roses fluttering through the darkness, elf flowers, yet warm and fragrant enough when he had snatched them from the dusty road, and crept away with them into the shadows! Oh, what manner of man had he become to be the slave of such memories? He was ashamed, yet drunk with the madness of it.

Nowhere in this strange country of flowers and sweet odors, of singing birds and delicate breezes, could he hope to escape from the old thrall. The dreary machinery of life seemed no longer possible to him. Milly and her unconquerable vulgarity, his narrowing career, even his work, mocked him with their emptiness. He turned backward, but he did not go home.

Twilight came on and the gray stillness slept softly on hill and valley. Night crept apace and brought no abatement in the struggle of the man. Again and again with cameo distinctness he saw Lord Sydenham's face with its queer incredulous smile when Strone told him of his decision to leave London, and he heard again as though they were there spoken the older man's reply uttered with a note of anger in his thin well-modulated voice.

"The thing is absurd," he had declared.

"Your refusal I must accept if you insist. I should do so with less regret, perhaps, because sooner or later you must come to us. The step may seem a bold one to you to-day. In a year or so it will become inevitable. I might be content to wait, although you will be wasting some

of the best years of your life. But when you tell me that you are giving up your career—leaving Parliament—going back to your manufacturing—oh, rubbish! I haven't the patience to argue with you."

Strone's face was haggard and his lips were dry as he walked on. There was a subtle witchery in the night that closed in on him overpoweringly. Memories crowded with startling vividness—parties of bejeweled and bedecked women—the soft hum of laughter and pleasant voices mingled with the music of the violins. The air seemed suddenly heavy with the odor of flowers and cigarettes and many strange perfumes, and through it all came a frail exquisite face and voice that said:

"My friend, it is you yourself who are responsible for our unlived lives. You hold the gates open before you—you——"

He started back and closed his eyes. The past had him in its grip....

Nowhere in this strange country of flowers and sweet odors, of singing birds and delicate breezes, could he hope to escape from the old thrall. The dreary machinery of life seemed no longer possible to him. Milly and her unconquerable vulgarity, his narrowing career, even his work, mocked him with their emptiness. He caught the evening express with a moment to spare, flung himself, breathless, among the cushions of an empty carriage just as the train glided from the station. Without any clear purpose in his mind, he obeyed an impulse which seemed irresistible. He must go to her.

At St. Pancras he remembered for a moment that he was wearing his ordinary homespun clothes, disordered, too, with his long walk and race for the train. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate. He called for a hansom, and drove to her house. The servant who admitted him looked him over with surprise, but believed that Lady Malingcourt was within. She was even then dressing for the opera. Strone was shown into her study—and waited.

It was nearly half an hour before she came to him, and whatever feelings his sudden arrival had excited she had had time to conceal them. She came to him buttoning her gloves, and followed by her maid carrying her opera cloak. The latter withdrew discreetly. Strone rose up—a strange figure enough, with his wind-tossed hair and burning eyes.

"You?" she exclaimed, with raised eyebrows. "How wonderful!"

The sight of her, the sound of her voice, were fuel to his smoldering passion. His heart was hot with the love of her.

"Is it true?" he asked fiercely. "I have seen your brother. He says that you are going to marry Lord Sydenham."

She looked at him in faint surprise.

"And why on earth should I not marry Lord Sydenham?" she asked.

It was like a sudden chill. She was angry, then, or she did not care. Yet there had been times when she had looked at him indifferently. He made an effort at repression.

"There is no reason why you should not," he admitted. "There is no reason why you should not tell me—if it be true. For God's sake, tell me!"

"It is perfectly true," she answered.

"Lord Sydenham is nothing to you," he cried.

"Well, he soon will be—my husband."

"You do not care for him."

"An excellent reason to marry him, then. I shall have no disenchantment to fear."

"Oh, this is mockery!" he cried. "You can juggle with words, I know. I am no match for you at that. Don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Marry Lord Sydenham."

She nodded her head thoughtfully.

"On certain conditions," she answered, "I will not."

"What are they?" he asked hoarsely.

"You accept the place in the government which was offered to you and reënter political life."

"Well?"

"You never ask more of my friendship than I am willing to give."

"Well?"

"You leave your wife altogether."

He started and shook his head slowly.

"You don't understand. Milly has—a weakness. Even now I have to be always watching."

"I know more of your wife than you think," she answered. "I know the circumstances of your marriage, and something of her life since. My condition must stand."

"Do you know," he said, "that it would mean ruin to her—body and soul?"

"She is not fit to be your wife," Lady Malingcourt said coldly. "You can never make her fit. I think that you would be justified in ignoring her claim upon you. There are limits to one's responsibility."

"These," he said, "are your conditions?"

"Yes."

He drew near to her. The struggle of the last few months seemed lined into his face.

"Listen," he said. "I want to be honest—to you. I can't see it any way but this. There's the woman and all the great underneath millions I wanted to help on one side—and on the other —you."

"No," she interrupted. "Your life's work was never meant to be in Gascester. It is your domestic duty, or what you imagine to be your domestic duty, against your duty to your fellow-creatures. You can leave me out. Be a man. Free yourself—make use of your powers. The world is a great place for such as you. Strike off your shackles."

"There will be no more—Lord Sydenhams?" he asked breathlessly.

She smiled upon him—a transforming, transfiguring smile. It was the woman who looked out upon him from those soft, clear eyes.

"I am not anxious," she said, "to be married at all. Only, one must do something. And lately London has been very dull. Is that you, Sydenham? I am quite ready. I am afraid that you must be tired of waiting."

Lord Sydenham had entered almost noiselessly. He looked from one to the other doubtfully.

"I am not interrupting anything in the nature of a conspiracy, I trust?" he inquired, with a faint note of sarcasm.

Lady Malingcourt smiled.

"I am endeavoring to make Mr. Strone repent of his hasty decision," she said. "I believe that I have succeeded."

The next morning Strone walked in his grounds before breakfast, his hands behind his back, his face anxious with thought. He had all the sensations of an executioner. Milly had to be faced—his decision made known to her. All through the night this thing had been before him, had hung around his pillow like an ugly nightmare. Now, in the clear morning sunlight, the brutality of it seemed to be staring him in the face. She was settling down so eagerly into this new life, so proud of her home and belongings, so timidly anxious to avoid any of those small lapses which kindled Strone's irritability.

Of course she could continue exactly as she was. There would be no difficulty about her income—she could go on her way making friends, become even a power in the small social world whose recognition had given her such unqualified delight. But Strone was not a man to deceive himself, and he knew very well that under the good-natured, vulgar exterior there remained the woman, passionate, jealous, hypersensitive. He remembered that last night in Marlow Crescent. He had saved her then, only to fling her back into the abyss! He tried hard to reason with himself. There was a world open to him of which she could not possibly become a denizen. Her presence by his side would hamper his career—would place him continually in a false position, would be a serious drawback to him in the great struggle on behalf of those suffering millions into which he was longing to throw himself. For Strone, at least, was honest in this. His personal ambition was a small thing. He was an enthusiast in a great and unselfish cause. The favor of Lord Sydenham, the social recognition which Lady Malingcourt was able to secure for him, he welcomed only as important means toward his great end. He was shrewd enough to see their importance, but for society as a thing by itself he had no predilection whatever.

"Enoch!"

She came out to him across the lawn. He turned and watched her thoughtfully. She wore a loose, white morning wrapper, simply made and absolutely inoffensive, and he noticed, too, that the fringe against which he had made several ineffectual protests was brushed back, greatly to the improvement of her appearance. She was pale, and her eyes watched him anxiously. Almost it seemed to him that she might in some way have divined what was in store for her.

"Enoch," she exclaimed. "You are home, then?"

"Yes," he answered. "I came in so late last night that I did not disturb you. Is breakfast ready?"

"Waiting."

She led the way, and he followed her. She asked him no questions as to his unexplained absence yesterday, and she made several attempts at conversation, to which he returned only vague answers. Toward the close of the meal, he looked up at her.

"I want to have a few words with you, Milly, before I go," he said. "Will you come into the study when we have finished?"

She nodded.

"Come into my workroom," she said. "I've got something to say to you. I—I had a visitor yesterday."

Even when they were alone and the door was shut, he shrank from his task. He looked around, surprised at the evidences of industry.

"Are you making your own dresses?" he asked. "I didn't think that was in your line."

"No, but there is plenty of work to do," she answered hurriedly. "Enoch, I had a visitor yesterday."

"You get a good many, don't you?" he answered indifferently.

“This one was different. It was Mr. Martinghoe.” He was surprised.

“Did he come to see you?”

“No, he came to see you,” she answered. “He had been to the works, but you were not there. He stayed for a long time, and we had a talk.”

“Well?”

She got up, and stood leaning with her elbow on the mantelpiece. For the first time a certain fragility in her appearance struck him. He had always considered her the personification of coarse, good health. She spoke, too, without her usual bluntness, with unusual choice of words, and some nervousness. Strone awoke to the fact that there was a change in her.

“Enoch,” she said, “Mr. Martinghoe brought some news. You’ll hear it when you get to the works, for he will be there to meet you. Somehow, though, I’m glad to be the first to tell you. They want you to stand for Parliament for the Northern Division of Gascestershire.” He stared at her.

“What?”

“It is the Conservatives. There’s a deputation of ’em coming. Mr. Martinghoe doesn’t say much, but I think it’s through him.” Strone was amazed.

“A rural constituency,” he remarked, half to himself. “It wouldn’t do at all. Besides——”

“Please, I want to go on,” Milly interrupted. “Enoch, there’s Mellborough in the division. That’s quite a large town now.” He nodded.

“Well?”

“Enoch, I want you to do me a great, great favor,” she said earnestly. “I want you to accept this offer. Don’t interrupt. I know that it will take you back into the life you gave up for me. I don’t care. I’ve been thinking about that lately, and I reckon I’ve been a selfish beast. I made you give up the things you liked, and you might have become a great man but for me. Enoch, I’m all right now. I’ll swear it. There’s never no more fear about me. I’ll live in London with you, or here, and you can come down when you can spare a bit of time. I ain’t going to be a bit jealous of anything or anybody. I ain’t, indeed. And, Enoch, I want to be a better wife to you,” she added, with a little tearful break in her tone, “if I can. I ain’t the wife you ought to have married, dear. I know that. I ought to have been clever, and known how to dress and talk nicely, and all sorts of things. I’m going to try and improve. It’s too late for you to choose again, Enoch, but you’ve been real good to me, and I ain’t going to give you any more trouble.”

A transformation. Something had found its way into Milly’s heart and stirred up all the good that was there into vigorous life. In her eager, tear-dimmed eyes he saw something shining which altered forever his point of view. He was bewildered. What was this thing which he had had in his mind! Yesterday seemed far away; the thought of it made him shudder. But what had come to Milly? He reached out his hand. Their eyes met, and he understood. A new sense of humanity brought man and woman into a wonderful kinship. He opened his arms, and Milly crept into them with a little sob of content.

* * *

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MASTER OF MEN ***

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