

wife that he should go to see a customer at Blackpool about a contract, and probably remain at the seaside for the week-end. Accustomed to these sudden movements, she packed his bag without questioning, and he set off for Knype station in the dogcart. Once behind the horse he felt safe, he could breathe again. The customer at Blackpool was merely an excuse to enable him to escape from the circle of undue influence. Ardently desiring to be in the train and on the other side of Crewe, he pulled up at his little order-office in the market-place to give some instructions. As he did so his clerk, Vodrey, came rushing out and saw him.

"I have just telephoned to your house, sir," the clerk said excitedly. "They told me you were driving to Knype and so I was coming after you in a cab."

"Why, what's up now?"

"Eardley Brothers have called their creditors together."

"What?"

"I've just had a circular-letter from them, sir."

Peake stared at Vodrey, and then took two steps forward, stamping his feet.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, with passionate ferocity. "The devil!"

Other men of business, besides James Peake, made similar exclamations that morning; for the collapse of Eardley Brothers, the great earthenware manufacturers, who were chiefly responsible for the ruinous cutting of prices in the American and Colonial markets, was no ordinary trade fiasco. Bursley was staggered, especially when it learnt that the Bank, the inaccessible and autocratic Bank, was an unsecured creditor for twelve thousand pounds.

Peake abandoned the Blackpool customer and drove off to consult his lawyer at Hanbridge; he stood to lose three hundred and fifty pounds, a matter suffi-