

He was immediately afterwards aware that he ought not to have made that remark, for Mrs. Smith's face showed instant appreciation of his praise. He therefore went on hurriedly—

"You have not seen him then, Mrs. Smith?"

"No, sir, I have not. He is very anxious to have a conversation with me, but I thought—well, talking's easy, and writing seems to come natural to some people, but the clergyman of a parish generally knows how much faith should be put in people's talking or writing, so I'll consult him before I do anything decided."

"Do you mean to say, Mrs. Smith, that you have actually ever thought of marrying this man?"

Mrs. Smith did not appear to like his tone. She turned over the photograph and the advertisement slip before she answered—as it were, indifferently:

"That's what he's been asking me to do, sir."

Mr. Charteris was struck dumb with amaze. This woman was really so much superior to Kelly that he did not know what to advise. She had the air of a person who was rather proud of her respectability, and Kelly—mean, cringing or bullying and blustering, as he was by turns—did not seem at all a suitable husband for such a woman. His doubtful looks caused her to ask a question.

"Is there anything against Kelly, sir?"

"Well—no, not exactly. But he does not bear a high character. I may as well tell you that very plainly. He drinks now and then—not, I believe, continuously; and without committing acts of downright dishonesty—well, his character is not good in the neighbourhood. He is said to be hard and grasping, and also very bad tempered. I am sorry to say this to you; but you have asked my advice, and it is such a very serious thing to enter upon matrimonial bonds with a man of whose character you have so little knowledge."

"Yes, it's always a serious thing to get married," said Mrs. Smith, dispassionately. "I don't know that I would have thought of it but for this advertisement—and feeling so lonesome down at Little Waltham as I do."

"Have you no relations with whom you could take up your abode?"

Mrs. Smith obstinately shook her head. "Most of 'em are dead," she said, "and the rest I can't abide."

"It would be worse if you couldn't abide the man whom you had married," said the Rector, trying to make a little joke of it. But Mrs. Smith's rosy face looked desperately solemn.

"So it would, sir. Not but what I've always kept every man belonging to me in his proper place. I ain't afraid of men's tempers. And when a wife has a little money of her own, it keeps a man wonderful quiet. I never saw a more personable looking man than Kelly—if he's like his photograph at all."

Mr. Charteris, though loath to take away a man's reputation behind his back, felt that the occasion demanded truth. Mrs. Smith's heart did not seem to be so invulnerable as one would have guessed from her shrewd and sensible face; there was evidently a weak spot somewhere, and the Rector set to work to fortify it by all the arguments in his power. When he had finished she said, dubiously:

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to you, sir. What you say is all very true, I'm sure." Then she put the photograph and the advertisement away, adding with a sigh, "But as you yourself can't deny, sir, he is a very handsome man."

"I hope you will have nothing to do with him, Mrs. Smith," said the rector; "I assure you he is not worthy of you."

But the good woman would give no promise—no absolute assurance of what she meant to do. She rose from her seat, thanked Mr. Charteris again and again for his advice, and took her departure for Liverpool-St. railway station, while the Rector proceeded by way of Charing Cross to Underwood.

"Now I do hope and trust that that poor woman will not throw herself away on Kelly," Mr. Charteris said to himself several times during the next few weeks; but as he did not hear from Mrs. Smith again, and as he was not told that Kelly was going to be married, he began to believe that his expostulations had had some effect, and that Mrs. Smith had been wise in time.

He met Michael Kelly sometimes as he was walking or riding about the parish, and looked at him on these occasions with considerable attention. The man was certainly good-looking in a rough and unfinished sort of way; he was tall, broad-shouldered, spare and muscular; he had a thick neck and a bull-dog head, flat at the top, with hair cut so

short that the ears stood out very prominently. There was rather the look of a Roman gladiator about his head and face; a type which one sees every now and then among people of Milesian descent. He had strong, rugged features, no beard or moustache, dark eyes and beetling eyebrows. It was not an attractive face, and Mr. Charteris, as he looked at it, wondered why Mrs. Smith had thought it so handsome in the photograph. Its expression of reckless yet sullen defiance had perhaps pleased her: women like, reflected the Rector, to feel that they have a master.

Three or four months passed by, and Easter was close at hand, when Mr. Charteris received a shock in the shape of a message from Kelly himself. Perhaps it was not intended as a message; it came, at least, with the force of one.

"If you please, sir, Mr. Kelly's been married this three weeks, and he'd be main pleased if you'd go and see Mrs. Kelly one o' these days."

The saying came from a woman who lived near Kelly's cottage, but when questioned she could only reply that was what Kelly had told her to say, and that she had not heard where Mrs. Kelly came from, but she seemed a nice, neighbourly body, and people did say that she had got a bit of money of her own. "It surely can't be Mrs. Smith!" said the Rector in dismay.

No, he certainly could not believe it to be Mrs. Smith, and yet he felt so curious as to the kind of woman whom Kelly had married that he took the earliest opportunity of paying that bridal call which Mr. Kelly seemed to expect. He had not been inside Kelly's house for nearly a year.

He set off on the following afternoon. The house that Kelly had recently taken stood by itself in a narrow lane off the main road. It was rather a picturesque little place; low, white-walled, thatched, and surrounded by a garden which in spring and summer-time was gay with flowers. Even in winter it looked snug and cosy, for there were evergreen trees at the back of the building, and part of the wall was covered with thickly-clustering ivy. Here, if anywhere, the Rector thought to himself, you might expect simplicity, innocence, unsophistication—but those, alack! were not the words by which you could indicate the character of Mr. Michael Kelly.

He knocked with his knuckles at the door, and it was promptly opened to him by the mistress of the house. And then Mr. Charteris gazed for a minute, open-mouthed. Mr. Kelly had succeeded, after all. His wife was the buxom, rosy-cheeked woman whom the Rector had so carefully warned against the matrimonial advertiser.

"Mrs. Smith!" He could not restrain the ejaculation.

"Mrs. Kelly, sir, if you please." She grew a little redder in the face, and smiled in a half embarrassed manner as she let him in. "I'm very glad to see you, sir, and I hope you'll have a cup of tea with me—not for the first time," she added, in a rather sly tone. "Molly, see that the kettle's boiling. Do you hear?"

Mr. Charteris followed his hostess across the kitchen or living room into a prim little parlour, which struck cold to the very marrow of his bones, although a prim little fire was crackling in the grate.

"You have such a splendid blaze here, Mrs. Kelly," he said, turning his back to the living room, "that I don't see why I should take you away from it. Suppose you let me sit down here on the settle, and have a chat."

"Well, I do think that the kitchen's more comfortable," said Mrs. Kelly, "but of course the parlour's more suitable for you, sir. However, if you like it better—Here, Molly, bring the tray here, and look sharp, there's a good soul."

As Molly advanced with the tea tray the Rector happened to glance at her; and this glance, accidental as it was, seemed to cover Molly with confusion. She tripped with her foot, and bungled with her hands, and finally came to the floor with her burden—a frightful crash of crockery ensuing. Mr. Charteris and Mrs. Kelly both rushed to the rescue—of the girl in the Rector's case, and of the china in that of Mrs. Kelly. "Are you hurt, my girl?" inquired the Rector. "Oh, dear! my cups and saucers!" moaned Mrs. Kelly. "How could you be so stupid, Molly—so clumsy?" But her voice was not very sharp, even in her anger; its accents were naturally so rounded and mellow that it did not seem possible for them to become harsh or shrill. Molly began to sob and to wring her hands, and then, curiously enough, it was Mrs. Kelly who tried to comfort her.

"There, there; never mind. Pick up the pieces, and bring out some more cups; but be careful another time," she said. And then, as Molly left the room, she turned to Mr. Charteris with a half-apologetic air. "She's very ner-

vous, and I don't like to be hard on her, seeing that she's a sort of relative of Kelly's, and has kept house for him so long."

"Is she a relative?" said Mr. Charteris, with surprise. "I don't remember hearing that he had a relation living with him."

"Kelly's not one to talk about his affairs," said Mrs. Kelly, with a certain pride of bearing. "And Molly's only a far-away cousin, and has passed just as a servant. She don't hold herself up nor make the most of herself, Molly don't."

Mr. Charteris looked with interest at Molly when she returned. She was not quite so young as he had at first supposed; she must have been five or six-and-twenty. She was pale, small and sickly, with the undefinable air of having once been pretty, which one finds sometimes in a very plain woman. At present, her only beauty lay in her eyes, which were finely-shaped and coloured, but looked too large for her thin, pointed face. Her hands shook as she put the tea-things on the table, and she took the first opportunity of slipping away into the scullery.

"I must have seen her once or twice," said the Rector, thoughtfully, "but I don't know that I ever noticed—"

"It's not very likely you would, sir. Michael always kept his concerns pretty much to himself, and the girl just drudges about like any other. She's been here five years, however; since Kelly first took a place at Farmer Jessop's."

"Ah, well—perhaps you can spare her sometimes to go to Church or the Bible Class, Mrs. Kelly. Now that you have come, I suppose you are making a few changes. You look very comfortable here." And he glanced round the kitchen as he spoke. It was a good-sized room, and it contained several articles of furniture that had once been costly: an antique clock, an oak cabinet, a solid-looking table also made of oak and somewhat elaborately carved.

"Yes, sir, I've made some changes, and I should like to make some more," said Mrs. Kelly, with a little smile. "Oh, it's a nice enough place, but I didn't think it was quite so countryfied, I must say. There isn't room for all my furniture. It has to go into the garrets. But Kelly thinks that maybe he would build another room on, and then we could entertain visitor's properly."

"Well, I must wish you every prosperity," said Mr. Charteris, smiling over his cup of tea.

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Kelly, as demurely as if she had never received any warning from the Rector's lips against her marriage, and then they talked on other subjects for a few minutes, until at last Mr. Charteris got up to go.

"I'm sorry not to have seen Kelly, to-day," he said, pleasantly. "You must give him my congratulations for me. I thought that perhaps he would have been in."

"Mrs. Kelly's eyes dropped. "I hope you'll forgive me for naming it, sir; but if you should meet Kelly—and if he should happen to seem a bit short—"

"Oh, you betrayed me, did you?" said the Rector, still good humouredly. "Well, you were quite right; I said nothing but what I am prepared to stand to. I've talked to Kelly myself before now. At the same time, I hope he has turned over a new leaf and is going to make you a good husband."

"Thank you, sir; yes, I think he will." And the poor woman looked quite satisfied and complacent.

Mr. Charteris was just leaving the house when she spoke again:

"I believe there's Michael coming up the lane. No—I'm not sure. You'll maybe meet him, sir. Of course, you wouldn't be likely to mention it, but—I don't care about him hearing that Molly's broken the cups—"

"My good woman, as if I were likely to speak of it!" said Mr. Charteris, with an irresistible burst of laughter; and then he was sorry, for he felt sure that he had hurt her feelings. "I'll not mention crockery in his hearing; don't be afraid."

"He would be vexed with Molly, and I don't like him to be vexed," said Mrs. Kelly, and it struck the Rector that she was a woman of strong motherly feeling and a warm heart.

He did not meet Kelly, as it happened, and had no opportunity of exchanging many words with him when the meeting was effected. Kelly seemed taciturn, but not exactly sullen. And the Rector saw with surprise and pleasure that both Mr. and Mrs. Kelly attended church on Sundays with regularity, and that Mrs. Kelly's blooming face was as cheerful as ever. Kelly had plenty of employment, and his wife's money seemed to be largely expended on her house, which she was making thoroughly comfortable.