

pull it will give me to have actual and personal experience—this is in one direction only, you see—of the way the poorer people in a great town live: how taxation affects them, how the hospitals treat them, their relations with the police, and a hundred other things. Shall I tell you a secret, Lady Sylvia?’

These were pretty secrets to be told on this beautiful evening: secrets not of lovers’ dreams and hopes, but secrets about Gas Bills and Water Bills.

‘I lived for a week in a court in Seven Dials, as a French polisher. Next week I am going to spend in a worse den—a haunt of thieves, tramps, and hawkers; a very pretty den, indeed, to be the property of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and almost under the shadow of Westminster Abbey.’

She uttered a slight exclamation—of deprecation and anxious fear. But he did not quite understand.

‘This time, however,’ he continued, ‘I shall not be so badly off; for I am going to live at a common lodging-house, and there the beds are pretty clean. I have been down and through the whole neighborhood, and have laid my plans. I find that by paying eighteenpence a night—instead of fourpence—I shall have one of the married people’s rooms to myself, instead of having to sleep in the common-room. There will be little trouble about it. I shall be a hawker, my stock in trade a basket; and if I disappear at three in the morning—going off to Covent Garden, you know—they won’t expect to see me again till nine or ten in the evening, when they meet me in the evening to smoke and drink beer. It is then I hope to get all the information I want. You see there will be no great hardship. I shall be able to slip home in the morning, get washed, and a sleep. The rooms in these common lodging-houses are very fairly clean; the police supervision is very strict.’

‘It is not the hardship,’ said Lady Sylvia to her companion, and her breath came and went somewhat more quickly, ‘it is the danger—you will be quite alone—among such people.’

‘Oh,’ said he, lightly, ‘there is no danger at all. Besides I have an ally—the great and powerful Mrs. Grace. Shall I tell you about Mrs. Grace, the owner of pretty nearly half of Happiness Alley?’

The Lady Sylvia would hear something of this person with the pretty name, who lived in that favoured alley.

‘I was wandering through the courts and lanes down there one day,’ said Balfour, ‘and I was having a bad time of it; for I had a tall hat on, which the people regarded as ludicrous, and they poured scorn and contempt on me, and one or two of the women at the windows above threw things at my hat. However, as I was passing one door, I saw a very strong-built woman suddenly come out, and she threw a basket into the middle of the lane. Then she went back, and presently she appeared again, simply shoving before her—her hand on his collar—a man who was certainly as big as herself. “You clear out,” she said; and then with one arm—it was bare and pretty muscular—she shot him straight after the basket. Well, the man was a meek man, and did not say a word. I said to her, “Is that your husband you are treating so badly?” Of course I kept out of the reach of her arm, for women who are quarrelling with their husbands are pretty free with their hands. But this woman, although she had a firm, resolute face and a grey mustache, was as cool and collected as a judge. “Oh, dear no,” she said; “that is one of my tenants. He can’t pay, so he’s got to get out.” On the strength of this introduction I made the acquaintance of Mrs. Grace, who is really a most remarkable woman. I suppose she is a widow, for she hasn’t a single relative in the world. She has gone on renting house after house, letting the rooms, collecting her rents and her nightly fees for lodgers, and looking after her property generally with a decision and ability quite out of the ordinary. I don’t suppose she loses a shilling in a month by bad debts. “Pay or you go,” is her motto with her tenants; “Pay first or you can’t come in,” she says to her lodgers. She has been an invaluable ally to me, that woman. I have gone through the most frightful dens with her, and there was scarcely a word said; she is not a woman to stand any nonsense. And then, of course, her having amassed this property, sixpence by sixpence, has made her anxious to know the conditions on which all the property around is held, and she has a remarkably quick and shrewd eye for things. Once, I remember, we had been exploring a number of houses that