

True, as time went on, ugly rumours began to circulate about Frank Jessop; but they never reached his wife's ears. People said that Frank was too fond of pleasure, and his best friends regretted that, with advancing years, he showed no signs of "settling down." Business was often neglected, or, when attended to, it was in a reckless and speculative fashion. Men of experience shook their heads, and began to give Frank a wide berth. Mrs. Jessop wondered vaguely why so many of Frank's old chums seemed to have fallen away from him. It used to be the regular thing for a friend or two to drop in for dinner, or later on a Sunday, but by degrees company became the exception rather than the rule. And the husband's explanations were not satisfying. Now it was that he didn't feel well, now that he liked to be quiet with his family, now that he had fallen out with such and such a one. Well, easy-going Mrs. Jessop didn't trouble much. What pleased Frank would please her; and she professed to be glad, now that the children were older, to be able to go to church with them sometimes.

At last the end came. It came suddenly, a sad and bitter ending to a careless unsanctified life. Frank Jessop had gradually become enslaved by the fatal passion for strong drink. Always a self-indulgent, free-living man, the habit had got a grip of him without his being aware of it, and before his heedless wife had come to suspect any danger. When at last the poor woman's eyes were opened it was too late: as for the man, his eyes were never opened at all. He went rapidly from bad to worse. The very men who had led him on now shunned his company. They "liked a fellow who knew when to stop, but Jessop was a fool."

The end, as we have said, came quickly. After one scene, when he had disgraced himself at his club, poor Jessop broke up completely. For days at a time he did not go to business; there was trouble, alarm and scandal in what had been hitherto an outwardly well-ordered and happy home. An influenza epidemic was at its height, and Frank Jessop, while justifying his drunkenness on the plea of warding off infection, was stricken down. He got better in a few days, went out, took cold, and was dead in a week.

It was a terrible blow to the poor wife. With all his faults, she loved her

husband; indeed, she was not the sort of woman to judge severely so long as no discomfort was felt by herself. She had not had time to appreciate the bitterness of the cup that the drunkard's wife is oft compelled to drain to the dregs through years of shame and sorrow. As it was, the anxieties of a few months were easily forgotten, and their true origin ignored.

But there were other things that could not be ignored. Frank Jessop's affairs were in a dreadful state of confusion, a confusion out of which one fact loomed clear—namely, that his widow and children were left well-nigh penniless. For many a day poor Mrs. Jessop could not realise the truth. She had lived from childhood a sheltered, selfish life. She had always had money enough, and she had generally had her own way. She had never been in the house with death till she saw her husband dead. She had never been obliged to assume any responsibility till she found herself the widow of an intestate bankrupt.

Mrs. Jessop accepted her fate with a dull, silent submission. She was not a religious woman; for though she had, in her prosperous days, cherished a somewhat ostentatious form of godliness, she had been a stranger to the power thereof. Her submission then was not resignation; nor did her trouble, in those first years of her widowhood, have the effect of teaching her to know more either of God or of herself. She pitied herself a good deal, but for the most part in silence. To do her justice, she was not one to make a parade of her sorrow, nor—as the manner of some is—to weary friends and neighbours with tales of bygone splendour, and of luxuries lost for ever.

Indeed, the poor woman's first instinct was to creep away and hide herself from all who had been the associates of her former life. Fortunately, the pretty suburban villa in which her children had been born, and in which she had spent so many happy years, was her own. It had been secured to her in the marriage settlement, and she would now have the rent to live on, and very little else. So Mrs. Jessop vanished out of the circle in which she had moved. The old neighbours soon forgot her, and ceased to talk about Frank Jessop, his failings, his follies, his family, and their fallen fortunes.

It was thus that the Jessops had gone to live in Leafy Lane. The neighbour-