



"'I KNOW YOU WILL,' SAID MRS. MERTON."

"That bit of a girl!" exclaimed the old man contemptuously. "How's she to get through the work o' that big place? I wanted a woman, Mrs. Buckle, and not a child."

"Ruth March is no child, Mr. Choules. She's eighteen; and you may hear her character all over Skirley, and a good one it is. She's clean and steady, and she can cook and wait, and knows how to manage without a mistress always at her heels. Why, she has lived for the last six years with our dear good Mr. Merton, that's gone; and when Mrs. Merton was laid up for the matter of six months and over, this girl kept everything going, looked after the house, and managed the children, and nursed her mistress; and if that isn't character enough for you, why, you'd better go round to Mrs. Merton herself, and see what she's got to say about it."

"Ah! lived at Parson Merton's, did she?" said the old man, stroking his chin reflectively. "Well, she'll be none the worse for that, nor none the better, that I knows, only she'll be thought none the better of up there," jerking his thumb vaguely in the direction of Old Hall. "But then, if she only fits in, and will do her work, they'll ask no questions; so upon your recommendation, ma'am,

I'll take the girl. You'd better," turning to Ruth, "just get your things put up, and I'll come round to Mrs. Merton's in about half an hour."

"But," said Ruth, "I didn't think of going to-day. Mrs. Merton isn't leaving till to-morrow, and I can't let her do without me."

"You must choose 'twixt the new missus and the old," said the old man somewhat roughly. "You've got to leave Mrs. Merton, and, I takes it, you ain't a lady of fortune. You've got to earn your

living; so it's take it or leave it. Either you get ready and come right along with me now, or I'll look after some one else."

"Go round and ask Mrs. Merton about it, Ruth. She's a sensible woman as ever lived, and she'll soon see what's best for you," suggested Mrs. Buckle.

"Ay, do that, and I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll put off my start a bit; I'll say five o'clock, and I'll be round as the church bell strikes, so don't you be a minute late," said Choules. "Looks as though she might do. She's got a sensible little face when you come to have a look at her," he added, as Ruth closed the shop door behind her. "Only it ain't any good to let women fancy you think too much of them. She'll be all the better for my pulling her up a bit sharper."

"Ah, Mr. Choules! you ain't over complimentary to us poor women," said Mrs. Buckle. "But you take my word for it, Ruth March is something like a treasure, and you give her a help, if 'tis only a kind word now and then. All the world knows your influence up at the Old Hall, and what you can do."

The old man sighed heavily, and shook his head. "'Tis little enough