

employer and eyeing it with the self-same feelings begotten of the self-same nature. "What wonderful changes the years make," we often say, but once in a while we wake up to the realization that years do not make so very much difference after all.

Fortunately or unfortunately, all of these natural interests in an employer's affairs and worldly state were denied the clerks of Angers & Son. They read daily in the papers of the things which Mr. Adam Torrance (and particularly Mrs. Adam Torrance) did and left undone, but they did not gasp or thrill or care a penny about it because the link which united all their little interests to the big interests of the Torrance family was invisible. So that when, just a week before the ribbon bargain sale, a terrible blow fell upon Adam Torrance and his wife in the kidnapping of their six-months' old baby, Elice, the case as reported by the papers was read and forgotten by the stores in an hour. There are so many sensations in the papers nowadays. Of course, if the stores had known that the lost baby belonged to the stores things would have been different. In that case the stores would have hummed and thrilled with interest and sympathy; every clerk worth his salt would have turned immediately into an amateur detective, and it is just possible that—but there is nothing more futile than discussing things that are just possible!

As a matter of fact Adam Torrance and his poor little wife did not think of the stores at all when the agony of their great loss came upon them. They thought of nothing day or night except Elice, little baby Elice, who had just begun to be troubled by a first tooth. The circumstances of the kidnapping were, according to the newspapers, "shrouded in impenetrable mystery." They, the papers, decided that the crime was "another of those base and cruel reprisals of the poor upon the rich which defy our methods of detection, and remain a blot upon the fair name of our country." Apparently it was not a case of capture for ransom. Eagerly the frantic parents waited for some word from the kidnapers, and as the suspense grew more terrible Adam Torrance let it be publicly known that he would pay. In spite of the fact that he was bound to a league of millionaires who had sworn (for the better protection of their children) that no ransoms would be paid to kidnapers, he let it be known that he would pay, nor indeed did those others seek to dissuade him. Human nature, touched in a vulnerable place, is apt to make light of contracts. In a week, to be exact, upon the day after the bargain sale, Mr. Torrance capitulated entirely, sent a notice to the papers begging for news of his lost daughter, and offering to pay anything in any way the kidnapers might demand.

"Make it as broad and as strong as possible," the white-faced young father told the silent reporters. "I'll do anything to get the baby back. I think my wife is dying. The baby will certainly die if it is not getting good care—what can these dastardly villains know about a baby? The police tell me to wait—wait—I'll not wait—the child may die while I'm waiting. Tell them to bring her back and I'll give them anything."

More than one of the reporters turned away and fumbled with the leaves of his notebook so that he might not see the agony on the poor fellow's face, and when they were in the street again they exploded into lurid comments upon the cowardly miscreants who had caused such misery.

The stores read all about it in the evening papers and also made comments, warm, but more detached, and wanted to know what our boasted civilization is coming to anyway if a man's own children aren't safe in their own nurse's arms.

"It seems to me to be a pretty lame story put up by that nurse," remarked Mr. Harcourt Flynn (otherwise Slippers) as he washed his nice white hands preparatory to sitting down to dinner in his apartments.

"Yes," said Miss Flynn. "Yes, it's lame, but if she had known more about it she would probably have had a better story."

"H'm! perhaps."

"So the paper says, anyway. They say she wept and wrung her hands and said that she had nursed babies for twenty-five years and such a thing had never happened before."

"Well, she'll have some fun getting another baby to nurse," said Mr. Flynn, grimly. "She left that child longer than she admits, depend on it. What puzzles me is why they don't come out after their money? Says he's willing to pay, doesn't he?"

"Rather."

"It's queer," continued Mr. Flynn, "that there should be such a fuss about some babies when there're so many lying around that no one has any use for. In a big store like Angers one see things."

"What things?" asked his sister curiously.

"Oh, things. Human nature, you know. Some women seem just to hate their children."

"Oh, I guess they don't mean it."

"Don't they? Well, there was a case of desertion yesterday at the ribbon counter."

Miss Flynn glanced quickly at the paper.

"Oh, it didn't get in the paper. Trust your brother for that!" Mr. Flynn smiled easily. "I wouldn't do me any good to have that kind of thing happen in my department. 'Gainst the rules (he pronounced it "rulls"), you know. So I was glad enough when one of the girls said that she knew the woman who left it and offered to take it home."

"But if the baby was really deserted, how could the girl have known the mother?"

"I thought of that myself," admitted Mr. Flynn, reflectively, "but she said she recognized her, and she ought to know. It isn't necessary to go behind that."

"Well, it seemed very queer."

"Lots of things are queer. Did you say dinner was ready, Amelia?"

"How big was it?" asked Miss Flynn abruptly.

"How big was what?"

"The baby, of course."

"How in the world should I know how big it was?"

Miss Flynn sighted. "Poor mite!" she said. "But if the young girl knew the mother perhaps it wasn't deserted after all."

"Perhaps it wasn't."

"Was it a boy or a girl?"

"Really, Amelia, what do you think I am?"

"Just a man, I suppose," said Miss Flynn, crossly. "You are thinking now twice as much about your dinner as you are about that poor deserted child."

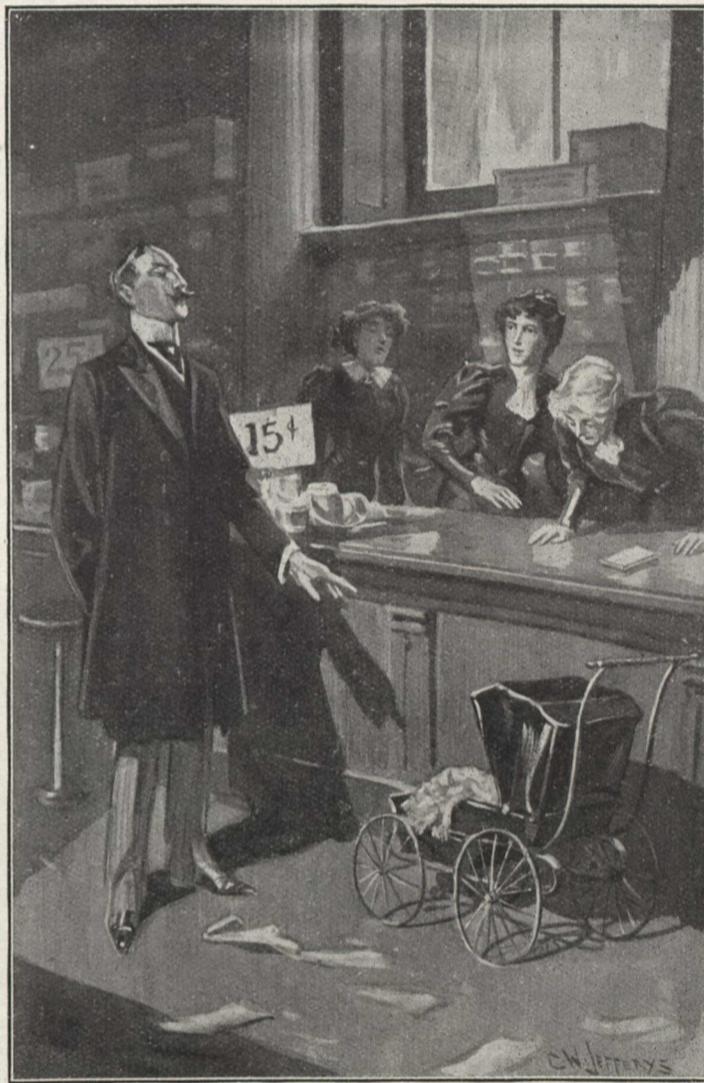
"If you would do the same, my dear, the potatoes might not be quite stone cold!"

"Miss Flynn lifted the covers from the tureens. "If I did not know better, Sam," said she, "I would think that you were absolutely the most heartless—"

CHAPTER III.

MR. THOMAS ALEXANDER BURNS had already walked up and down Brook Street thrice, and was walking down for the fourth time when, about the middle of a block, he almost ran over Miss Eden, walking up.

"Well, I declare, it's Mr. Burns!" said Miss



"Miss Twiss, why is the baby carriage here?"

Eden, using the pleasant formula, which always implies that one might possibly be someone else.

Mr. Burns, thus convinced of his own identity, lifted his hat, and for no apparent reason, blushed.

"I am trying to find a number," went on Miss Eden, drawing a slip of paper from her purse. "It is number 1620 Brook Street; Miss Brown's lodgings, you know. This is Brook Street, isn't it? I don't suppose you can tell me where she lives?"

"Oh, it ought to be quite easy to find the number," evaded the astute Mr. Burns. "It is not quite dark yet. Wonderful how these autumn evenings linger." He cleared his throat. "Number 1620, you say? It ought to be somewhere hereabouts, a few doors farther east, I fancy." All this with such a fine air of detachment that one must have been sharp indeed to have guessed that he had already passed number 1620 six times (three times up and three times down), and knew to a yard exactly how far they were from it at the present moment.

"I am going to call to see the baby, you know," said Miss Eden, confidentially. "Of course, as you are a friend of Miss Brown's, you have heard about the baby? Most of the girls have called already, but this is my first free evening, not that one can help much, but it is a friendly thing to do."

"Most kind, I am sure," agreed Mr. Burns, and then, as if upon sudden impulse, "I wonder, now, if it would be the friendly thing for me to call too?"

Miss Eden, who was really a rather stupid girl, looked surprised, but murmured that she was sure that Mr. Burns' call would be appreciated.

"Seeing that I am so close," added Mr. Burns.

"Why, yes."

"And as I happen to be going in that direction in any case?"

"I am sure it would be very nice," said Miss Eden. She had had the impression that Mr. Burns had been going in exactly the opposite direction when he had met her, but that was his business; nevertheless, it seemed to her, not knowing Mr. Burns' peculiar state of mind, that he was making a lot of fuss about a very little thing.

It was quite dusk when they reached the house which they sought. So dark that the facility with which Mr. Burns deciphered the number was little short of miraculous. Miss Eden, who had good eyes also could not see it at all.

"But I am sure it is the right house," she told him. "See all the windows. It is a regular house of windows! I recognize it from the description Miss Twiss gave me. Do you know Miss Twiss, the tall, dark girl with the big mouth? You'd like her! I'll introduce you some time. Say, isn't this a funny house?"

"Does Miss Twiss know Miss Brown well?"

"Not what you would call well. You see, Miss Brown is new. But she called to see how the baby was getting on. That's how she knew about the house. We can't see very well now, it is so dark, but Miss Twiss thinks Miss Brown is lucky to live in such rooms. It used to be quite a swell place when this part of the city was fashionable. Then it was a girl's school, until all the land around it was built up. That accounts for the number of windows."

"By Jove, it looks as if it were nearly all windows."

"Yes, bay windows. The idea was to give the school-girls lots of light, I suppose. Miss Brown told Miss Twiss that they make it very cold in winter, and ordinary curtains never look right, they are so high. Hist! someone's coming."

The door before them opened with a jerk, disclosing a bare-looking hall and a forbidding-looking personage with a large nose.

"Who do you want?" asked the personage abruptly.

"Do the Misses Brown live here?" asked Miss Eden, politely.

"Third-floor-back, on the left. You don't need to ring at this door. This hall's for everybody. The names are pasted on the wall." She pointed to a framed cardboard which was covered with names to which certain directions were attached.

The callers, however, did not wait to fathom its mysteries. Third-floor-back-to-the-left was sufficiently explicit, and they found their way easily to a door which bore upon a neat white card, "The Misses Brown."

At their knock there was a slight commotion behind the door, a laugh, and the noise of something being hurriedly pushed away. Then the door opened a trifle and Miss Brown's face appeared.

"Oh, Miss Eden, come in! We are just—Oh, Mr. Burns, I didn't—excuse me a moment."

In a sudden panic she partly closed the door again, and more sounds of confusion added to the red upon Mr. Burns' already embarrassed countenance. It was only a moment, however, and then the door was thrown hospitably open.

"Do come in!" said Miss Brown. "It was the baby's bath that was in the way. We had it on two chairs, and one of the chairs was against the door, and it nearly tipped. You needn't be afraid to sit on the chairs; they are quite dry."

"We thought," began Mr. Burns, "that we would call in to see how the baby was."

"I just couldn't sleep for thinking of that baby," declared Miss Eden. "I think it is the most romantic thing! But Mr. Burns needn't pretend that he was thinking about it, he just happened to meet me in the street and I reminded him."

Mr. Burns was gallantly understood to murmur "Not at all." (Luckily the windows of the Misses Brown did not look directly out upon Brook Street.)

Celia Brown smiled brightly at her visitors. Here in her room she seemed very different from the pale, quiet-looking girl of the ribbon counter at Angers. True, even there she had a certain attraction, else why the effect already produced upon the susceptible nature of Mr. Burns, but here one noticed for the first time that her hair was wavy and soft, her eyes were clean and pleasantly serious, and her lips no longer pinched and blue-looking. Her expression, too, was different; more alert, humorous, changeable, more human, in fact. Behind the counter she had a certain tired and anxious prettiness, and looked perhaps twenty-five, if not more. At home her prettiness glowed and blossomed, and one saw that she was certainly not yet twenty. This transformation bewildered while it enchanted Mr. Burns, but Miss Eden took it as a matter of course.

What did surprise Miss Eden was the wonderful comfort of the little room. Here at least the high narrow casements if the old-fashioned bay window had been manager successfully for the curtains which were of some dainty figured stuff, had been made to fit, and were surmounted by a graceful valance of the same material. This and a covered window seat with cushions, took away from the excessive height, and made what in most of the rooms was an eyesore into a pleasing lounging