

dered pleasant and easy by the unfailing kindness and consideration of this man, who had been her master.

"You kin stop, of course. I don't want to know any more, please, not ter tell me another think. I honly want to ast one question. Is it safe, for yerself, I means?"

"I think it will be safe. You have known me well, you did not recognise me, Mary Anne, you look at me now as if I were a stranger."

"Yer own wife wouldn't know yer, sir, I never seed such a chinge. But fer how long? What'll be the hend of it, sir?"

"The end will justify the means, Mary Anne. I have been cast outside the pale; I will find my way back again. And that money will be honestly earned and refunded, do you understand? If I live, I will do that."

She regarded him doubtfully, yet with a certain admiration. She was only an ignorant woman, but she knew that the task of which he spoke with such a desperate confidence was a superhuman one. In her reminiscent moments she was fond of railing against the inexorableness of London life, and of alluding to the city itself as a huge monster without bowels of compassion.

She knew little about business, but her eyes filed with an immense compassion as she looked and listened to Reedham in that desperate hour of his downfall and disgrace. Help him she would, however, to the very best of her ability, and he read it in her eyes.

"I don't want much, and for that little I can pay," he said feverishly. "Some small back room which would serve as a respectable address; silence and peace to go in and out, but above all the feeling that you are in the background, a friend to whom I may speak when life becomes unendurable, these are the things I have come to ask, Mary Anne. It is a great deal, but—but by granting them you may save a soul."

"Yer kin 'ave the room, an' has fer pay, we shan't quarrel abart thet. Many's the sovring hover an above I got at Norwood from yerself, an' from the Missus. Is she ter know you are 'ere?"

"No, no; nobody must know," he answered feverishly. "Henceforth I am dead, do you understand, dead to the old life and the old name; I shall be Thomas Charlton, of St. Paul's-crescent, Camden Town. That is all you need know concerning me."

"But the missus?" faltered Mary Anne, going back in memory to the love which had been the mainspring of the Norwood home, illumining life for all its inmates.

"If my wife believes me dead it is the best that can happen," he said gloomily.

Mary Anne shook her head.

"It'll break her heart, sir, maybe hafter things as bin forgot a while you or I could let her know, quiet like, that you're 'ere."

"No, no, that could never happen. I must work out my own salvation alone. If it so be that fortune attends me, and I am able to reinstate myself before it is too late, so be it. But I understand that I have to pay the price."

"But sir, they're mighty clever, them 'tecs now. Supposin' they tracks you 'ere?"

"They shall not take me alive, but I think my disguise is complete. I have been back to our very own premises and spoken to the porter who has seen me every day of his life for the last twenty years, and he did not recognise me. If my wife should communicate with you in any way you will promise to hold your tongue?"

"I will, but I ain't 'eard from the missus for over a year," she said regretfully. "I've bin ailus goin' to run over to Norwood ov a Sunday, but it ain't never come hoff, so much the better as it turns out. Well, will yer 'ave a bit of bread an' cheese, sir? It's werry 'umble fare, an' the honly bite I gits in peace an' quiet, hafter they're hall a-bed."

"I am afraid I have disturbed you woefully. No, I will not eat anything. If you can show me to the room, a back room for preference, I'll go to bed. I've slept on some strange beds the last week, I tell you. It will seem like paradise tonight."