

"I declare if I ain't ready to drop. I've been that busy, you'd never believe, since nine o'clock this morning. 'Tis half-past two now, and not a bit of dinner have one of us been able to get—nothing but just a bite at a bun, when we could turn our heads away from the customers for half a minute. Ah well! 'tis all good for trade. But I wish I could spread the business out over the week, instead of squeezing it into one day. But what I want you for, Ruth March, is this; and what made me think you walked in like a Providence is that I've got a place for you, a nice genteel place, too, made a-purpose, I might say. When that groom from Old Hall came in this morning and said he must take a servant back for Madam this very day, I was a'most driven crazy, for nothing but that sort," nodding to the girls still standing waiting, "had come in, and that wouldn't do at any price. Madam Atherfield was brought up quite the lady, and used to keep a lot of servants, but now she's come down to one, but that one must be the right sort,—pleasant-like to look at and to speak to, and able to cook a bit, for Madam don't do anything herself. I won't deny that it's an out-of-the-world sort of place, with a big house half shut up; and most of the girls I send come back at the end of a month, some of them before, say 'tis too lonesome; but you ain't one of that sort. You've been trained to know what's right and proper, thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Merton. Ah! 'twas an evil day for Skirley when we lost that good man; and I think you'd feel 'twas your duty to stay and give the place a trial if you once went there. People do say that girls brought up in a workhouse ain't never any good; but you're an exception, Ruth March, and sometimes I'd have had as many as half-a-dozen places I could have popped you into, but you've come upon me all in a hurry, and now this seems the only thing to offer unless you can wait."

"Mrs. Merton offered to pay for me to board with Mrs. Blake, the milkman's wife, till I could hear of something to suit me," answered Ruth, "but I do not want to put her to that expense; and if you think I should be able to manage for this lady, and do the work, I shall be glad to go. Are there many in family?"

"Only three. Mr. Atherfield—and he's more than often away—and Madam, and a little miss about twelve, I should think. And if you ask me if I think you can manage I say yes. That's just what you want;—to manage a bit, to do the work yourself without bothering Madam at all, and the wages is twelve pounds. That's a nice rise for you all at one jump, and they do say that Mr. Atherfield is free with his money when he's got it, and thinks nothing of tossing the maid half-a-sovereign if she'll cook him a dinner or supper to his mind."

"And when must I go? How can I get there? I have only heard of Old Hall. I don't quite know where it is."

"Go? Why, this very afternoon," answered Mrs. Buckle. "The old groom—and a surly, crusty old fellow he is—says he's got to take a maid back, and he means to do it. He'll be looking in here in a few minutes to see what I've got for him."

"I should like to have seen Mrs. Merton and all of them off. They leave to-morrow, and I think I must help them to the last. I don't know how I'm going to get on without them," and the tears rose in the young girl's eyes.

"Well, well! It does seem hard for you now, but law! you'll get used to it in time; and if here isn't the old man himself. Just speak to him, and ask if you can't stay for another day or two. Well, Mr. Choules," turning to an elderly man who entered at the moment, "I've been as good as my word, and got a young woman to suit you at Old Hall."