

on that account. You stood before him as a ministering angel—but he died. That was God's will, I say again ; not yours."

"What harm then——"

"I think it was arranged that all business was at an end," said Brian rising.

"You have no more to tell me ?"

"No."

"You imply I have done harm to you," said Mabel, still persistently.

"You have given me much extra trouble," answered Brian ; "but I am not quite certain I was altogether in the right as regards my mode of action."

"Indeed !"

"And I shall not mind the trouble," he added. "On second thoughts, it is even probable I shall like it."

"You are speaking in riddles again, Mr. Halfday."

"Am I ?"

He looked intently at her once more, and then broke into a hearty little laugh that was pleasant to hear. Mabel regarded him with astonishment.

"These are scarcely laughing days yet," he said by way of half apology ; "but I am lighter of heart than I have been for weeks. True, there is an old man to bury ; but I cannot say I mourn for him, despite the closeness of my kinship. My respect for him died out on the day the truth showed me what he was, and there was only duty left me. And duty without love is hard work."

He took one more turn the full length of the room before he came back to his place on the hearth-rug. It was very odd that he could not stand still for a few minutes, thought Mabel.

"The inquest is to-morrow, Miss Westbrook," he said suddenly ; "and you will not be asked many questions. It is a mere formality, for the doctor has already explained the cause of death."

"I shall be ready to-morrow. But you will remain in Penton ?"

"Till after the funeral."

Mabel felt relieved in mind. She seemed to want this strong man's support and presence ; and yet it was only a day or two ago that she had been afraid of him, and almost hated him.

"And now concerning Dorcas?" she said.

"No, no," he replied very gently ; "con-

cerning no one else to-night, if you please, Miss Westbrook. You are paler than when I entered this room, and the business of the day is ended."

"Still I wish you to consider one thing before you go," she urged ; "to reflect upon it, and let me know the result."

"I would prefer not reflecting upon anything more at present," said Brian ; "but if you wish it, I am at your service."

"Concerning Dorcas, then. It is my wish to take care of one who has been a faithful nurse to me ; to constitute her my friend and companion from this time," said Mabel.

"To adopt her?" he asked.

"If you like the phrase."

"To take her from me, her natural guardian?"

"You and Dorcas are scarcely happy together—at all times."

"Neither will you and she be—or Dorcas and any living man or woman," was his uncomfortable answer.

"Will you let me try what I can do with her?"

"I am to think of this," he replied cautiously ; "not answer at once, if you remember."

"Yes, but it would please me very much if you would answer now."

"If I were to answer to-night, I should say No," he said very sternly again. "No, to a heart-weary, profitless task which you would take upon yourself. No, to all the bitterness of disappointment which you accept with Dorcas Halfday. No, to the spasmodic affection you might gain, and the ingratitude which would follow, unless a miracle change her."

"You are uncharitable," said Mabel.

"I am a hard man. I have owned it already," he replied sorrowfully.

"We will speak of this again."

"If you please," he said, bowing over the hand extended to him. "Good night."

"Good night," said Mabel. "Do you remain at the inn this evening?"

"No ; it is a mile to my home."

"To—to the cottage on the Downs?" she said, turning pale at all that it suggested.

"It is my own place, and I must get all out of it that I can," he said lightly. "I rent it for three months."

"But——"